

Two Islands in the Pacific

Reyn T. Seki

University of Hawaii

COM 369: Esports & Society

Professor Nyle S. Kauwelo

December 3, 2021

Esports has taken the world by storm, becoming a dominant entertainment industry. While some countries are only beginning to recognize the potential esports holds, others adopted it early and are now at the forefront of the industry. Most notably are China and Korea (Jin, 2010), with the United States and select countries in Europe strong contenders. However, aside from world championship tournaments, international collaboration through esports is rare. Vast distances serve as walls between regions. In addition, traveling back and forth hundreds to thousands of miles is taxing, to say the least. The Hawaiian Islands and Guam can be at the forefront in terms of changing that. The development of esports in Guam and Hawai'i can bridge the gap between regions and countries where competition and collaboration was thought to be impossible.

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic sent normal day-to-day life into disarray, but esports was able to show that it can adapt to unexpected situations. Despite the pandemic, esports stood afloat on a regional level, although many international events were put on pause. However, the Overwatch League (OWL), the professional esports league for the game Overwatch, came up with a unique solution to that. Unlike what has traditionally transpired between universities and esports (Kauwelo, 2021) OWL partnered with the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, utilizing an underwater sea cable for Asia-Pacific competition. The OWL was able to resume consistent international competition before many, if not all, other esports titles. The UHM and OWL partnership was built to accommodate one thing: online latency. Latency is one of, if not the most important variable when it comes to online competition in gaming. It is the key factor in how equal the playing field is between one player and the next. According to Andrew Webster (2021) from The Verge, a major factor in why Hawai'i was chosen as a location for the OWL was because:

Crucially, it's also much closer to Asia, reducing latency concerns. Spector says that the league studied maps of undersea cables in search of an ideal location, and it also developed a minimum latency tool to ensure that teams will be competing on an even playing field. Spector says that the aim is to have matches running at 90 milliseconds. "That's well within the bounds, from what our pro players have told us," he explains, "so they're going to have a great experience competing."

Utilizing this blueprint for hosting international competition between Asia and North America unlocks numerous opportunities for international leagues in not only *Overwatch*, but esports in general, and Hawai'i can be the key variable to make this happen.

Hawaii's unique position in the middle of the Pacific Ocean allows for this type of cross-region play that cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world. The big accomplishment being made is not the fact that teams can play each other from across the ocean, but that they can do so fairly. Some esports titles require very low latency levels to be played at a competitive level such as *Valorant* and *League of Legends* and cannot take advantage of Hawai'i in this regard.

However, some games such as *Overwatch* can be played competitively despite being at a higher latency. These games should consider utilizing Hawaii's unique location for more consistent international competition while also eliminating the need for constant travel at the same time.

Hawai'i collaborating with the OWL should not be seen as a onetime occurrence but rather the start of more collaborations, development, and professionalization of esports between Asia and North America (Tylor, 2012). Another development that has slowly been progressing but has gone rather unnoticed is the implementation of a "super server" of sorts in Guam. This server allows for multiple different regions in Asia to connect to a centralized server in Guam rather than players having to choose to connect to one region at the sacrifice of forcing certain

regions to play on high latency. The masterminds behind this, OneQode (2021), had this to say about their achievement in the Asia region, “Guam is a brand new hub for cross-regional gaming. It reaches players across 3 continents, introducing completely new strategies and levels of competition that haven’t been possible until now”. This was showcased in a small tournament put on by OneQode which allowed for these different continents to come together and compete.

The defining moment of the tournament was when two teams just over three thousand miles away competed against each other on lower than ninety ping. This was an unprecedented accomplishment in esports because now competition is potentially possible between teams that can be thousands of miles away from each other. Asia has also seen some of the fastest growth in terms of esports in recent years, one example being Japan. A few years ago, it was almost unheard of to see “esports” and “Japan” in the same sentence. Now, titles such as *Apex Legends* and *Valorant* show off substantial viewership numbers, with Japan even becoming *Apex Legends* second largest market in the world just behind North America. The combination of this recent esports growth in Asia as well as the development of this new super server in Guam benefits the region as a whole and allows for endless possibilities of collaboration between countries once thought to be too far apart.

The Hawaiian Islands and Guam can utilize their unique locations to allow for esports competitions to take place across numerous locations. The OWL has shown how flexible esports can be during times of uncertainty, while also bringing a once overlooked location in esports, that being Hawai‘i, onto the map. Now Guam also seeks to show how important a small island in the Asia region can be in connecting its region together in terms of esports. For almost the entirety of esports, places like Guam and Hawaii have been left out of global esports discussions because of their notoriety for having high latency. That and due to their location being so out of

the way from everything, there was no reason to include them in discussions. Now they look to enter talks as key players in bridging regions together. They were able to find their own niche and build upon it rather than wait years and years until technology and infrastructure allowed them to partake in the esports industry.

So far, this past OWL is the only situation where players from East Asia and North America were able to compete against each other online from their respective regions, which would not have been able to happen without Hawaii. The tournament put on by OneQode was also able to showcase cross region/country competition to a similar degree. Although the technology to allow competition like this to take place is still developing, the OWL has shown us just one possibility of the future of esports at a distance. With more time and talks with developers, it is exciting to think about how interconnected the Pacific region can be in the future. Places located in unique areas such as Guam and Hawai'i will only become more important to esports as online competition continues to grow and more esports titles expand on the accessibility of who can compete in their tournaments and leagues.

References

- Jin, D. Y. (2010). *Korea's online gaming empire*. MIT Press.
- OneQode™ Published Nov 21. (2021, November 21). *Installing a game server on a Pacific Island... how hard could it be?* LinkedIn. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/installing-game-server-pacific-island-how-hard-could-oneqode/>.
- Kauwelo, N. S. (2021). The Emergence of College Esports in North America. *Global esports: Transformation of Cultural Perceptions of Competitive Gaming*, 262.
- Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Raising the stakes: E-sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. MIT Press.
- Webster, A. (2021, April 15). *The key to the Overwatch League's 2021 season is a trip to Hawaii*. The Verge. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.theverge.com/22383975/overwatch-league-2021-season-hawaii>.