

Lead in: Colleges support a lot of official programs under them, from football and athletics to some lesser known ones. Reported John Eckstrom gives us an inside look at professional Esports at the University of Utah.

((Nat. Sounds: Audio from Utah VAL Lan))

Eckstrom: Far on the southwest side of the campus of the University of Utah, almost in the parking lot for the looming Rice Eccles stadium, stands an unassuming building. Building 72 used to be the library for the adjacent College of Law, but nowadays it plays host to the Department of Games at the University of Utah. Deep in the bowels of the building, where there is little natural light or air conditioning, there sit about forty high school and college students staring at screens, shouting, and jeering at one another.

Brock Allen #1: "I felt really proud about what we were able to pull out there. It was definitely a super rewarding and super interesting experience."

Eckstrom: Utah's professional Valorant team has been hosting what they call the Wasatch Clash for the past five years, and this year, it is bigger than ever.

Allen #2: "The fact that we had school, like teams coming out from three hours away by car to come participate in our event with bragging rights, especially on the line, um, was a super cool experience, and it was nice to meet other, uh, schools that play in our state and compete with them. Definitely something I want to see happen again in the future. Continue doing that in the future."

Eckstrom: Valorant is one of the four video games that the University of Utah has as part of its official esports program. Not club, not recreational, professional. Students are able to get scholarships for playing video games.

Allen #3: "I had seen previously during student orientation and online, just like, um, that there was, like, in the division of games, there was an esports program."

Eckstrom: That's Brock Allen, better known as "Kalamari," the coach of the University of Utah's Valorant team.

Allen #4: "I played on a JV roster as an IGL, and then when the next year came around, coach slots, a coach slot for the team was open. I was like, I kind of like how the macro, the game is

planned out and done, and I feel like I could fill that role. So I applied, and I've been coaching ever since."

Eckstrom: The U's teams have been around for almost ten years now, starting in the fall of 2017, and they're headlined by one man, AJ Dimick, the director of Esports at the U.

AJ Dimick #1: "That's its charm, but also its challenge in that, in that we the Esports program at the University of Utah isn't one team, it's five. And that, in some ways that makes it one community, one school, one thing. And in some ways, that makes it five communities and five different things that function independent of each other."

Eckstrom: Ask anyone who works in esports, and they will all tell you the same thing. Esports is just not profitable. There are only a handful of professional teams that make any money whatsoever, and none of them are at the collegiate level. In fact, some mainstays in the collegiate esports ecosystem, like Miami of Ohio, are cutting their Esports programs altogether.

Dimick #2: "They were the first Division I school to, to institutionalize collegiate esports."

Eckstrom: The lack of a centralized governing body like the NCAA can be partially to blame. Schools are left to themselves to join independent leagues and play certain games, none of which are mandated by an oversight committee. The programs function more like a club, with things like tournaments and national championships getting backing from the schools rather than an established organization.

Dimick #3 "We create governing bodies, and with those governing bodies, we determine what, what, what titles we are supporting as a collegiate ecosystem. We determine what tournaments and what things are our recognized national championships. Because currently, sometimes it's four or five different things that want to call themselves those things. We decide when is the start of the season and when is the end of the season, because currently we don't have that. Uh, we decide, uh, uh, what is eligibility, and what are the criteria to be eligible to do this? We decide do non-accredited schools and for-profit schools get to participate in this collegiate ecosystem? You lock down things like that or rules around scheduling, around eligibility, around marketing, and you have so much more than you have that. And then locally, you are safe investing more in this than you were before, because you have the tools now to try to get things out of it that you couldn't get out of before. That's the kind of thing that the national governing body can. One can retain the interest and get more people into it, but also be able to be able to compete at the highest level."

Eckstrom: But there is still another player on the field. The games that the schools play are not created by people who have no interest in them. These games have been around for only about 15 years at most, meaning their creators still have a say in how they are used. They are constantly getting updates and patches, and developers might take them offline at any moment. Unlike physical sports, like football or baseball, which have no centralized owner, esports and video games have individual companies trying to determine the future of their products.

Dimick #4: "You can't eliminate not being at their mercy to some extent. And they are a partner. They are somebody that owns the IP for these things. And your participation in them means that you are subject to their whims and will."

Eckstrom: But maybe that is something that the industry will just have to overcome. In any scenario, people still seem to enjoy playing the games and watching people play them. That is the appeal of not only college sports, but collegiate esports as well. It is supported by already established brands, like the University of Utah, that can get supporters not necessarily of the video game, but of the institution.

Henry Meads #1: "I think it really does help in the collegiate landscape, at least to give people a base to support. Like, hey, I went to the University of Utah. I see that they're playing esports. I'm going to root for them. It's kind of easy, you know?"

Eckstrom: That's Henry Meads, better known as Rei, a support player for the University's Overwatch team. They just got back from a tournament in Las Vegas, where they won first place in the PEC conference, the largest conference of Power Five schools in the nation.

Meads #2: "I think it just kind of gives people like a base to start with. Like, I feel like when you think of like competitive, like professional esports, like a lot of the teams, because esports is still so new. Uh, it's kind of hard to like, feel like, like an actual, like attraction or like a connection to a team like you would with like a traditional sports like soccer, football, basketball, baseball, any of that stuff. For my parents, I mean, I know they support me with whatever college I was competing for, but I think just because they are like, particularly because they are alumni, it kind of just, I feel like it just makes them a little bit, you know, extra into it. And I think they just kind of wanted to support me in, uh, in what I was doing."

Eckstrom: And maybe that's it. Maybe the support that the players get, and the joy from just playing the game is enough. Almost all the players on the Valorant team are graduating, so Coach Kalamari has to find a whole new roster, but there's excitement in that, Coach K says.

Allen #5: "It's also really exciting because it means that we get to work with new students who are passionate about the game, that want to compete on a collegiate level, and have that fresh spark that you see with a lot of freshmen and sophomores that come through."

Eckstrom: Nobody knows whether collegiate esports, and the esports industry as a whole, is going to get bigger and bigger with more and more fans, or if it's going to fade away and be a flash in the pan moment in history. But there is a future that people want to see happen, and that people want to be a part of.

Allen #6: "I would love to see more people come and try out this coming season and support us and join production, and come see what the world Esports has to offer here at the U."

Eckstrom: From the Wasatch Clash in Building 72, I'm John Eckstrom

((Nat. Sounds: Utah Valorant LAN))