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To cite this article: Laura D. Swettenham, Jonathan Brain, Matthew Watson, Alessandro Quartiroli & Angela Beggan (04 May 2026): Shouldering the burden: how stories shape esports coaching careers, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, DOI: [10.1080/2159676X.2026.2667236](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2026.2667236)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2026.2667236>



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Published online: 04 May 2026.



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Shouldering the burden: how stories shape esports coaching careers

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ABSTRACT

Esports coaches have become a prominent feature of the esports landscape, yet currently not much is known about esports coaching practices, research, and education. Consequently, esports coaches have had to navigate their development in the absence of standardised pathways and a context-specific research base. There is much we can learn from the organic evolution of esports coaching practice, so we used narrative inquiry to understand the processes and resources esports coaches' employ in shaping their careers and development. Narrative interviews were conducted to collect the stories from 11 professional esports coaches (10 men, 1 woman) and were analysed using creative analytic practices (CAP). Thematic narrative analysis informed our construction of four creative non-fiction vignettes that portrayed the current sociocultural performance of the role, 'esports coach', and highlighted the (un)available resources affording personal and professional development. We reflect on our CAP by offering a response to the stories that are situated within existing literature on esports and traditional sports coaching, with implications for coach education in esports and the wider esports industry. To our knowledge, this study was the first to apply a creative-non-fiction approach to the experience of esports coaching.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 February 2025
Accepted 27 April 2026

KEYWORDS

Professional development;
video games; narrative
inquiry; creative non-fiction;
coach education

Introduction

Esports, defined as the competitive and organised play of video games (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020), is an industry in which coaches play a significant and increasingly influential role (Watson et al., 2022). The responsibilities of an esports coach have been described as including recruiting and managing players, evaluating player performance, organising and delivering training, and providing holistic player support (Sabtan et al., 2022). To succeed in this role, coaches must remain informed about a global player base and the constantly shifting tactics within their respective games (Watson et al., 2022), while also collaborating with stakeholders and multidisciplinary staff (Swettenham et al., 2024). Beyond the persistent myth that a high-level playing background is essential (Watson et al., 2025), little is known about how esports coaches initiate, navigate, and sustain their careers, or the factors that facilitate or impede these processes.

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In contrast to esports, coaching in traditional sports has received substantial research attention over several decades, leading to the development of valuable insights into coaching practice, philosophy, and psychology (Thelwell et al., 2016). These insights have contributed to widely adopted applied frameworks, such as the International Council for Coaching Excellence International Coaching Framework (ICCE, 2013). This level of examination is unsurprising given that coaching is a complex, social activity where coaches hold significant influence (Cronin, 2023) but is subject to numerous implicit and explicit expectations as performers in their own right. Accordingly, research has increasingly extended into emerging sporting contexts, emphasising the need for context-specific inquiries to support coach development and athlete support (Cushion et al., 2006). Despite this, esports, as a newly established coaching context, has received comparatively limited research attention thus far. As a result, there is a risk that coaches operating in esports are insufficiently supported, potentially constraining their capacity to meet the demands of a global player base and to sustain their own professional development.

The development of esports coaching cannot be understood in isolation from the broader patterns and sociocultural resources that shape its emergence (Ryou et al., 2025). Esports, grounded in sport, entertainment, and technology, has evolved into a volatile industry marked by high staff turnover, short-term contracts, and pressure for immediate performance and financial results (Scholz et al. 2019). Although coaching is now widely recognised as vital to competitive success, structured career pathways for esports coaches remain underdeveloped. Coaches are often expected to produce rapid results, leading to long, irregular hours and emotional strain (Watson et al., 2022). These pressures raise concerns for coach well-being, yet professional development remains undervalued, with industry experience seen as the main route to advancement (Watson et al., 2025).

Esports has historically faced challenges in gaining legitimacy as a high-performance domain, often marginalised in mainstream sports discourse and shaped by persistent stereotypes (Swettenham et al., 2024). Misconceptions include beliefs that coaching is unnecessary and that players are undisciplined or sedentary. These narratives intersect with gendered dynamics in the field, where women and gender-diverse individuals face heightened scrutiny, underrepresentation, and exclusion from leadership (Piggott & Tjønndal, 2024). Such challenges may mirror broader inequalities in sport, including constrained career pathways and rigid gender norms (McGinty-Minister et al., 2024). While there are efforts being made for esports tournaments to be inclusive, such as introducing single-gendered tournaments (e.g. Game Changers), they remain limited in scope, frequency, representation of and opportunities for men at elite levels of esports are still dominant (Crothers et al., 2024). These intersecting issues may further undermine the legitimacy and inclusivity of esports coaching, particularly for those from underrepresented groups.

Although existing research has addressed topics such as current coaching practices (Sabtan et al., 2022), talent development (Bubna et al., 2023), and stress and coping in esports (Leis et al., 2026), literature exploring esports coaching careers and development remains limited. Notably, we lack insight into the processes and resources that esports coaches draw upon to make sense of their work, including the sociocultural storylines that shape careers, roles, and identities (McGannon & Smith, 2015). Narrative theory facilitates simultaneous inquiry not only of personal meaning-making but also of sociocultural processes that generate and sustain storylines (Smith & Monforte, 2020). Creative forms, such as creative analytic practices (CAP), are particularly sensitive to patterns of difference generated through the 'living out' of lives (Harris & Rousell, 2022). Gaining a more fulsome understanding of esports coaches' stories enables a more nuanced conceptualisation of the work of esports coaching,

Using narrative inquiry to understand esports coaches' stories

To understand esports coaching more fully, we must look beyond existing frameworks and consider the stories coaches tell about their careers. Stories do not merely reflect personal experience; to tell a story, the speaker must draw on narrative resources or templates that are embedded within their

specific cultural context (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Working within a high-performance environment may influence the types of stories told by those operating within it. In traditional sports coaching research, particular narratives are well established and circulate widely to shape coaching practices, such as those relating to job insecurity (Purdy & Potrac, 2016). By contrast, esports coaches may draw upon a more limited or distinct set of narrative resources.

Narrative inquiry is both a theory and methodology that considers stories as cultural sites of analysis, drawing on the tenets that identities, experiences, and behaviours are fluid and dependent upon the language practices available to individuals in a given sociocultural context (McGannon & Smith, 2015). 'Storying' is the primary way in which people make sense of themselves and the world around them (McGannon & McMahon, 2022). People tell stories to articulate who they are becoming, to justify choices, and navigate uncertainty (McGannon et al., 2024). Esports coaches, like other practitioners working in emerging performance domains, rely on stories to make sense of their identities, their practices, and their pursuit of coaching as a viable career path (cf Leeder & Beaumont, 2024).

Narratives operate as socio-cultural plotlines, shared ways of thinking that teach individuals what to pay attention to and how to respond to life events. This has been demonstrated across coaching research using narrative and story-based approaches. For example, research with lesbian coaches shows how broader social meanings shape coaching practice. Krane and Barber (2005) and Norman (2012) illustrate how coaches' stories involved navigating expectations around sexuality and professionalism. Similarly, in emerging sports, Leeder and Beaumont's (2024) story-completion study with mountain-bike coaches highlighted informal learning, access to development and tensions around professionalisation. In the same way, esports' limited developmental structures may leave coaches drawing on informal or pre-existing narratives from other coaching contexts.

Narrative resources function as templates for building meaning, purpose, and motivation (Smith, 2016). Having access to a range of narrative resources offers individuals greater flexibility in how they understand themselves. Conversely, if a particular narrative becomes dominant, it can constrain alternative ways of being and silence identities that fall outside its boundaries (Zamora-Solé et al., 2024). For esports coaches, this dynamic is particularly relevant because the narrative landscape surrounding coaching is still forming. Within this developing narrative landscape, certain dominant storylines appear to have gained traction. One example is 'grind culture', a wider esports narrative that rewards constant work and personal sacrifice. While this narrative has been explored in relation to players' well-being (Abbott, Watson and Birch 2023) its influence on coaches has received little attention. Additionally, broader sporting narratives, such as narratives relating to emotional labour (Hings et al., 2018) and identity (Purdy & Potrac, 2016) may shape how esports coaches understand their professional role and sense making. However, because research on esports coaching remains limited, little is known about the narrative resources available to esports coaches or how these resources shape identity, well-being, and career sustainability.

Therefore, our study aims to: (1) understand the evolving professional identity of esports coaches and (2) explore the narrative resources available to esports coaches. We present our results using creative analytical practices (CAP) to feature the 'crystallisation' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963) of a 'professional esports coach' with the esports ecosystem (Vera et al., 2019). Using creative non-fiction, we hope the stories will increase awareness, open space for new conversations and expand possibilities for individual and social change within the esports ecosystem (McMahon & McGannon, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

Methodology

Philosophical positioning

Our study focuses on the evolving narrative resources available to esports coaches because we hold that narratives are socio-cultural constructions involved in the formation of identities and both

language and material practices (McGannon & Smith, 2015). These resources gain their meaning and force within stories, such as the personal accounts people tell about their lives and work (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). This position is afforded by a relativistic ontology and social constructionist epistemology, whereby reality is multiple and context-dependent, and to our knowledge as socially constructed and relationally negotiated (McGannon et al., 2019). On these terms, our inquiry is a work of narrative constructionism in that human beings are meaning-makers who draw upon inherited narratives (e.g. general properties of a tellable story) to interpret and direct the storied lives they inhabit (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

While the distinction between narrative and story is useful and considered by some as a hallmark of good narrative inquiry (Book et al., 2024), making the distinction is not so simple and ignores the reciprocal and dialectical movement by which personal, public, collective, specialist, etc., stories return to become narratives themselves (Bruner, 1986). In narrative constructionism, it is erroneous to regard narratives as fixed and persistent; for in story, narratives have the curious capacity to simultaneously persist and change (Joseph, 2024). This dynamism was of particular interest given our aims, so we designed our study to focus on the 'crystallisation' of nascent esports coaching narratives via creative analytic practices (CAP). Inspired by Richardson and St. Pierre's (2005) use of the term, CAP is a method of knowing that reflexively intertwines the writing process and the writing product (e.g. stories, poetry, fiction, etc.), and crystallisation is its 'central imaginary' (963). Just as crystal prisms grow, change and refract within themselves creating perspectival colours and patterns, we produce creative non-fiction pieces that present a partial, situated representation intertwining coaches' stories, ourselves as researchers, and the developing esports narratives as known through each other in the writing.

Participants

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling, personal networks, and snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria required participants to be 18 years or older, a professional esports coach at the time of the study and working with a professional team. The sample consisted of 11 esports coaches (10 men, 1 woman) ranging from 20 to 35 years of age ($M = 27.2$; $SD = 4.7$ years) who coached in Rocket League ($n = 3$), League of Legends ($n = 3$), Valorant ($n = 1$), Fortnite ($n = 1$) and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive ($n = 3$). Participants' coaching experience ranged from 2.6 to 10 years ($M = 4.2$; $SD = 2.3$ years). Participants were actively coaching in S-tier, A-tier, B-tier, or C-tier¹ competitions. The coaches came from three continents (i.e. Europe, North America, and Oceania) and eight different countries.

Data collection

Our research team includes UK–Belgium and US-based sport and exercise psychologists and researchers with applied experience in both traditional sport and esports, including coaching and sport psychology roles. We bring perspectives as practitioners, fans, coaches and critical friends, and as such, form a critical part of data collection and analysis. Following ethical approvals, narrative interviews were conducted with each participant ($M = 1$ hr 5 min, $SD = 18$ min). Interviews, which took place via Zoom, were independently conducted by three members of our research team due to the existing trusting relationships between certain coaches and researchers. One interview took place in French due to participant preference, with [Author 2] who has native proficiency in both French and English and was able to conduct and translate the interview.

The day before each interview, we sent participants a generative narrative question to stimulate their narrative and discussion of their coaching journeys by encouraging proactive reflection on their careers and making it easier for them to provide detailed responses during the interview (Flick, 2009). The generative narrative question starts by inviting participants to 'Tell me the story of your journey as an esports coach from the early moments of your journey until now' before inviting them to be as

in depth or as broad as they like when talking about their coaching career. Narrative interviews are distinct from other forms (e.g. structured, semi-structured, etc.) in that they actively invite stories. Each interviewer appreciatively (e.g. without critique) oriented themselves to the participant-as-storyteller mindful that the telling of a story is a relationship implicating the interviewer and the storyteller (Smith & Andrew, 2016). We developed an interview guide informed by esports and traditional coaching literature, and each began by reading out the narrative question to the participant. Example probes and exploratory questions included, 'What are some of the highlights and lowlights of your coaching career?' and 'What moments have been important to you along your esports coaching journey?'. These questions were used at the discretion of the interviewer, allowing them to move on with the story as it was being told rather than being directed by the interview guide (Smith & Andrew, 2016).

Data analysis and presentation

Our analysis was not restricted to a particular research phase, even though we undertook formalised activities that can be reported as such. Our orientation to CAP sensitised us to 'data' from the outset of the project such that the crystallisation we represent herein is an account not of 'givens' (e.g. data we took from interviews), but of surprises we stumbled upon while fashioning and conducting the study. This 'collection of materials', to use Brinkmann's (2020, p. 7) term, began when the topic was selected and the study designed. It continued throughout our conduct of the study as we encountered situations and contradictions that caused us to stop and think (Zittoun, 2022). For example, the lack of formal support and development pathways struck us as an ethical dilemma, and we could not help but ask why a profession carrying such significant responsibility for player care and development remained so structurally undervalued. This is an example of 'stumble data' (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 723): a sensitivity to strangeness relative to the research endeavour that causes us to 'stumble' thereby *becoming* data. Stumble data can come from anywhere, and that we can stumble on such conversations, situations, etc. signifies their objectivity and that the mechanisms of their production are culturally available (ibid.). Our early discussions about esports coaches repeatedly took the form of stories rather than abstract descriptions, shaped by our own experiences of working with esports coaches in dual roles and noticing recurring narratives of limited support, burnout, and the role of luck in coaching careers. These early conversations then led us to the decision to use narrative interviews.

We added to our ongoing collection of materials by using thematic narrative analysis (TNA; e.g. Smith, 2016) of the interviews to explore esports coaching culture and how members used the narrative resources currently available to them. TNA is concerned with content or the 'what's' of stories, identifying common patterns across each story as well as the whole data set (Riessman, 2008). We were inspired by Smith's (2016) guidance on TNA which involves seven cyclical, iterative steps, the first of which is writing. This aligns with our use of CAP and focus on crystallisation because writing is analytic when it uses concepts to unpack lives, situations, events, and processes (Brinkmann, 2020). We transcribed all interviews verbatim and shared these among the research team, who undertook cycles of narrative indwelling and writing with each individual transcript. As this process repeated, we began to identify narrative themes running through and across the participants' stories of their esports coaching careers. A key feature of TNA is that it is an analysis of an intact story; the stories do not get broken-up into codes and subthemes the way a typical thematic analysis would do. We identified patterns by treating each interview as a story and asking questions like, 'What are common threads within each story and across all stories; what recurs repeatedly within each and across all stories?' and then writing extended notes in response. Once each analyst had done this, the co-authors met as critical friends to discuss and challenge interpretations (Smith & McGannon, 2018). In these discussions, we posed further questions such as, 'what narratives resources seem to be the pursuit of esports coaching careers?; how are these

contributing to the coaches' development; and how are narrative resources influencing the stories told?

The development of the TNA themes was iterative. Initial themes constructed from early cycles of narrative indwelling included broader conceptual categories, such as 'transitions and new identities', 'coach development through conflict and trial and error', and 'gendered expectations and covert sexism'. Through subsequent cycles of analysis, critical friend discussions, and writing, these themes were refined and consolidated. For example, 'transitions and new identities' became 'caught between player, peer, coach, and reality', highlighting the specific tensions of role ambiguity in esports coaching rather than transition in a general sense. Similarly, 'gendered expectations and covert sexism' were integrated into a broader theme of 'precarious legitimacy in an undervalued field', reflecting our recognition that gendered barriers were one expression of a wider cultural devaluation of esports coaching. The next step involved working back-and-forth between stories, notes, and discussions to ensure the analysis both described the themes of the stories as well as the relationships between themes and offered interpretations enriched by insights from theory or other research (Smith, 2016). The working themes produced from this stage were: Caught between player, coach, and reality; learning alone, without a safety net; being everything for everyone apart from myself; the struggle to legitimacy in an undervalued role; and building a family in the team.

TNA concludes by representing the results, often as a realist tale (Sparkes, 2002); however, our commitment to CAP led us to *show* rather than tell us what we found. *Showing* aims to create affects and images in an audience's body and imagination (Smith and Sparkes 2009), and given what we learned about the esports coaching profession from the TNA, we wanted to communicate coaches' experiences in an evocative way because the meaning of esports coaching was produced not only through what coaches did but through how they lived, felt, and endured the contradictions of their work. For example, the care and passion for the relationships they built (i.e. building a family in the team) coupled with the isolation and volatility of their coaching careers (i.e. learning alone, without a safety net; the struggle for legitimacy in an undervalued role). CAP, in its various forms, can show the variability within complex phenomena and create deeper connections with research findings (Middleton et al., 2025). We wanted esports coaches and their wider professional community to recognise themselves and their practices as they are being shaped by the narrative resources currently available, so we presented our findings through creative non-fiction (CNF). CNF are stories created using techniques of fiction but grounded in research data (McMahon, 2016). CNF can act as a mirror for audiences to become more aware of their beliefs, detect the paths to which they lead, and amplify resources that enable adaptive paths (Zamora-Solé et al., 2024). We experienced an example of this in writing Rosie's vignette, when we had robust discussions about whether or to what degree, the struggle for legitimacy portrayed was gendered. We did not wholly resolve this issue, so we tried to leave the tension visible in Rosie's questioning.

While there are many genres of CNF (Cavallerio, 2022), we chose to create composite vignettes that set character(s) within a moment or happening through brief, vivid imagery. Each vignette shows a portrayal of the TNA themes. The themes were recurring across multiple experiences, creating a complexity within the vignette beyond the themes themselves. While some themes are more prominent within each vignette, the same themes can still be seen at play in other vignettes in various ways; again, accounting for the complexity and nuance of how narrative resources shape esports coaching.

For example, Theo's story was made from key narrative themes including 'Caught between player, coach, and reality' and 'building a family in the team'. During our critical friend discussions, we repeatedly returned to accounts of abrupt player-to-coach transitions that were experienced as loss *and* as relational continuity, with coaches describing their teams as 'family' even as their own role within that family was under threat. To create Rosie's vignette required the most substantial team discussion, considering how explicitly to portray gender within the vignette. Our TNA identified legitimacy struggles across multiple participants, but, for Rosie, this intersected with gendered dynamics that were clearly present but also ambiguous, meaning these gendered dynamics were

interpreted differently by different members of the research team. We chose to leave this tension unresolved within the vignette itself, showing Rosie questioning her own interpretation within the vignette. This irresolution was authentic to the data and to the broader literature on the 'unnoticed' nature of sexism in sport (Fink, 2016).

Data rigour and authenticity

We adopted a relativistic stance to rigour by selecting criteria that fit our research aims and context while maintaining the study's methodological and philosophical coherence (Smith and McGannon 2018). CAP is diverse by nature, so judging its quality requires some connoisseurship (Middleton et al., 2025). Richardson and RichPierre's and St. Pierre (2005, p. 964) criteria resonated with us, and we were guided by them throughout our work. We account for our application of them here so that our readers may judge for themselves.

In terms of substantive contributions, we returned repeatedly to the transcripts during vignette construction to ensure creative choices remained accountable to the data. For example, Tom's reflection that he was unsure if he could 'make it work forever' while simultaneously recognising his own strengths (e.g. helping players settle, building strong bonds) and the need for 'a bit of luck' was drawn closely from participants' accounts. Allowing us to show the contradiction and the coexistence of self-belief and uncertainty. Aesthetic merit required close attention across multiple drafts, with early versions of the vignettes being overly descriptive and not successfully *showing* the reader through a sensory scene setting. For example, feedback between the research team and during the review process helped us to add sensory specificity, such as the glowing Discord ring, and the weight on the chest as a way of drawing the reader inside the experience, inviting them to take the journey with the participants, living and feeling the participants' stories.

Reflexivity was incorporated through moments of subjectivity and self-exposure, taking care to authentically engage with our participants' stories. For example, being transparently reflexive about theme and vignette construction so as to be held accountable to each other and to the reader. Such as during the development of Rosie's vignette, we returned to the original transcripts to ensure the portrayal remained authentic to participants' accounts. Considering the original transcripts and our reflexive discussions as a team, we decided to remain open to holding the tension rather than creating a resolution (e.g. 'maybe my voice just annoys them, maybe it's just their ego and not that I'm a woman'). Finally, the impact motivated our choice of CNF over a realist tale from the outset as we wanted esports coaches to recognise themselves and their practices as being shaped by the narrative resources currently available, rather than to receive a report about themselves. We experienced evidence of this impact in our own writing process, where constructing the vignettes repeatedly caused us to stop, reconsider, and see the coaches' experiences differently.

Results

Four composite vignettes are presented below. Each vignette blends selected themes in portraying the unique narrative resources functioning within the participant's stories. To protect the anonymity of the participants, contextual details, such as the type of sport, nationality and age were altered or omitted.

Theo's story: they told me I was done

It felt like a normal enough day, apart from management tiptoeing around me. I tried to make a joke out of it but deep down I felt like I'd missed something, like I was still in the gaming house, only I'd slipped into the Matrix version of it. Everything looked the same, but it didn't quite behave the way it used to. Taking comfort in the familiar, I strode over to my bean bag of choice, pleasantly accepting the secure hold it had around me as the ones and zeros scrolled through the matrix gaming house.

'Theo, in here for a minute?' A firm but careful voice came out of the meeting room, my manager pulling me away from the mould of myself the bean bag had held in time.

In the seemingly clinical feel of the meeting room, I sat in an overly formal position opposite my manager. The words sat between us, like something shameful that no one wanted to touch. And there it was. The glitch in the matrix. They told me I was done. The manager's voice was stiff with a rehearsed sympathy. 'Theo, your reaction time's dropping. The game's changing fast. We think it's time'.

Time. As if all I had done, years of shot-calling, mentoring, and showing up, had simply expired.

My chest got tighter and my breaths shorter as they told me the news. Panic. That's what this was. Panic. I was discarded, past my sell-by date, glory days over, history. They said my reaction times were slower; an easy excuse to bring in fresh blood. And I just sat and nodded like everything made sense.

I left, stunned and disconnected. I looked over to the mould of myself in the bean bag across the room. A different self perhaps left behind in the old version of the matrix.

I walked outside to get some air, leaving my past self behind. Amid the panic I didn't quite process the coaching role they offered me. They said they saw leadership potential, but it felt like scraps. Like they were trying to humour me and sooth my wounds, but it felt empty. They were my family and this felt like a betrayal. They had already written me out of the story without letting me finish the chapter.

Grief of that past self is a strange thing, especially when I wasn't trying to get away from it in the first place. You don't expect to grieve the loss of a version of yourself. But I certainly did. For weeks, I felt like I wasn't there, couldn't ground myself, floating with no purpose. But something changed when I started to think differently about the coaching role I had been offered. I remembered the rookies who'd come to me for advice, the ones who trusted my calls. Maybe I wasn't done, just different. Maybe I'd give this coaching thing a shot. Maybe I was just taking a new role in this family, perhaps I wasn't really done.

Tom's story: against the grain

The light of my monitor lit up the dorm room like a stage. I sat hunched over replays of a tournament I wasn't playing in; just analysing, for fun. Somewhere behind me, a chemistry textbook sat untouched, accusing me silently. I was 20, halfway through a chemistry degree. But my thoughts weren't about enzymes or molecules. They were about rotations, draft picks and scrim strategy.

'You ever sleep?' Alex, my flatmate, said, leaning against the doorway with a smirk.

'Only when the servers are down!' I replied without looking up, eyes wide, ignorant to the 24 hr a day holds.

'So, what happened with that job you got offered? Esports coaching, right?' Alex asked curiously. 'Man, I can't believe that's a thing'. Alex straightened up before leaping onto my unmade bed for a conversation I would prefer not to have. 'Er yeah ... it was a bootcamp trial. It went well. They said it could turn into something, the coaching I mean'

Alex nodded. 'That's good though, right?' 'Yeah. I think so'. Tom shrugged. 'It's just ... it's not a real contract yet'.

Alex glanced at the posters on the wall of Half Life and Halo. 'What do your parents think?'

I paused. Looks like this conversation is happening whether I want it or not. I swivelled around in my worn out chair, pulled out from the mesmerism of the monitor light, sighing myself back into reality. 'They keep asking when I'm going to get a proper job'. I smiled slightly when I said it, mockingly. 'Mum says she's proud. Dad just asks how long it'll last. He wants me to prove that I can make a living from it before I throw my life away. He doesn't seem to think dropping out of university to coach esports full time is the best life decision. Shocker'. 'Man, that's rough. You feel like you can make it work though? This coaching gig?'

I sat in silence for longer than I meant to, staring at the empty corridor past my dorm room door, trying to think of a response that wasn't as contradictory as moving into the fog of war,² direction uncertain, but the path already chosen.

Alex looked at me like I'd grown another head. 'Tom ... ?' 'I don't know ... this path feels destined for me ... but I don't know if I can make it work forever', I said. 'I just know this makes sense to me in a way nothing else does. I'm good at this stuff, you know? I see things other people don't, I help players settle, I can make sense of the mess, me and the players we create really strong bonds. I think I just need a bit of luck'.

Alex didn't say anything. The monitor hummed and somewhere behind me, the chemistry textbook stayed shut.

Sam's story: the fire I chose

They say if you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life. I don't know who said that. But I'd like to sit them down and tell them what burnout feels like.

I adjust my headset and glance at my second monitor, Discord³ open, the little green ring pulsing next to Elanor's name. She's new to esports coaching and is about to sign with her first team. She messaged me asking to talk about how I've found coaching esports.

'Sorry', I say. 'What were you asking?'

There's a pause. A bit of static. 'So ... is it worth it?' she says, hesitation in her voice. 'Coaching esports. Am I making the wrong choice here?'

I lean back in the chair, the room dark around me apart from the monitors. One shows scrim notes I haven't closed yet. 'I mean', I say, slowly, trying to figure out how to explain the paradoxical reality of coaching esports. All I come up with is, 'yeah. And no'.

She laughs, nervous. 'That's reassuring'.

I was 23 when I got my first head coach role with a major org. A long-term contract. Absolute gold dust. The kind of thing I used to daydream about. I don't tell her about the uncertainty before that. The unpaid prep, the trials that went nowhere. I just say, 'At first, it feels slow, but then it somehow hits you all at once. It's ... heavy. But it also feels right. I don't know how to explain it. I couldn't live without it, but I can't live for it either. Does that make sense?'

'Kind of, I guess. What do you mean you can't live for it?' 'Like', I pause, searching, trying to pull all the threads in my mind together 'I was obsessed with being the best, not failing, supporting my team, travelling *constantly*, maintaining relationships ... it took over everything. I felt like I couldn't breathe outside of esports. But without it, I felt lost'.

'Wow, Sam ... I'm so sorry'

'No, don't apologise. I loved it, I LOVE it. Still do. That's the weird thing'

'Sounds like a *pr-e-e-tt-y* complicated relationship to me!' Elanor said, eyes wide.

I laugh 'you've got that right ... it wasn't the coaching itself; it was how the job was structured and grew over time. It was like a snowball rolling down a hill, gathering unwanted speed and collecting more and more snow as it went. Before I knew it, I was wearing every hat. I was the psychologist, the coach, the analyst, the damager controller, conflict resolutioner, even the travel agent. You answer one message at 2 am and suddenly that becomes the rule, not the exception ... '.

I think about one of those 2 am messages. One player had a panic attack and decided to message me. I knocked on his door in the gaming house, frozen in place as I saw him sitting on the floor. I sat with him for a while, arm around him in silence. That's when I realised, I wasn't equipped for everything this job had become.

'I guess that's just the job now though, isn't it?' Elanor asked, carefully. 'With some orgs, sure. Of course, not everyone has the same experience, but it seems to be becoming the norm. Getting one person in to do it all. But no one really talks about the burnout, what it really *feels* like'.

'What does it *feel* like?' she asks.

'You keep going, but everything feels heavier. Like something's sitting on your chest and you've just . . . agreed to live with it. Sometimes you can move around with that weight, but sometimes you can't even take one step'.

There's another pause. I wonder if I've said too much.

'You still love it though, right?' she asks, searching for a reason to still coach.

I think about my best friend's message after I skipped his birthday. '*Don't forget who you are outside of this*'. About not being able to leave my room for weeks. I don't tell her all of that. I tell her this instead:

'Yeah', I say. 'I do. That's the problem'.

She laughs again. This time softer, but she doesn't seem sure if she's responded the right way.

'So you'd do it again?' she asks, hopeful.

I look at the screen. At the notes. At the green ring still glowing.

'Yeah', I say. 'I would'.

Then, quieter, almost to myself:

'I just wouldn't do it the same way'.

Rosie's story: a voice they didn't expect

The hotel room is quiet in that anonymous way they all are. Curtains are half-drawn with the city noise muffled somewhere below. My laptop hums on the too small desk, whining a little louder than I would like it to as I miss my home set up. I've got three tabs open: my notes from yesterday's match and a PDF of a sport coaching autobiography I downloaded for free last night. The book is written by a football manager, and he keeps talking about dressing rooms and trust and knowing when not to speak. None of it is about esports, not really. But I read it anyway. I highlight sentences and translate them in my head and into my world. What does this look like at the tournament today?

This is always how I've learned, not from a professional pathway or a senior coach pulling me aside to impart wisdom from their years of getting it wrong. There was no roadmap or support system to draw on. Just me, the internet, some *finely* tuned motor skills, and a quiet voice reminding me that leading players wasn't the same as calling strats. So I learned at night. Podcasts on 1.5x speed. Borrowing frameworks and philosophies from traditional sports coaching, reading sport psychology blog posts and articles until they burnt my eyes. Reading about coaches from other sports and trying to make their worlds fit mine as I trial-and-errored my way into my current contract. Quickly realising that knowing the theories from sport wasn't the same as getting buy in from the players.

My phone lights up on the desk:

Discord: *You coming down?*

I ignore it for a moment and skim my notes from yesterday, trying to find something I've missed. But I start thinking about the first time the players really heard my voice in a Discord lobby, months ago:

"Wait . . . our coach is a *girl*? How did I miss this?!" There was no edge in his voice. Just the blunt confusion of someone encountering something outside of the norm.

I noticed the reactions, the surprise. But it wasn't because I'm a woman. Was it? Surely, the same happened for men. Right?

Somewhere along the way, trust started to settle into the cracks. It was a place to offload, a trusted sounding board. Sometimes a stand-in parent. One of them once told me I sounded like his mum when I gave feedback.

'Maybe', I said. 'But your mum doesn't know your drop pattern. I do'.

He laughed. But I saw the pause as his mind recalibrated. Maybe authority is harder to accept when it comes from someone you don't expect to have it. But maybe not.

Not everyone has recalibrated though. One player straight up rejected my offer to review his VOD.⁴ 'Nah', he said. 'I don't really need coaching. Especially from someone I don't know'. He didn't say from a woman. But I wondered if that was lingering in the gaps between words. I pretended like it didn't bother me. Maybe my voice just annoys them. Maybe it's just their ego and not that I'm a woman.

My phone buzzes on the too small desk again. I look at this time. The players are ready to go to the arena. I close the laptop and shove it into my bag. I checked the time, twice, even though it hasn't changed. The hallway smells faintly of coffee and carpet cleaner as I help the heavy door shut behind me. As the lift carries me down to the lobby, I catch my reflection in the distorted mirror, looking steadier than I feel. I step into the lobby and find the players sitting in the corner, kitted in their team hoodies and headphones. Legs bouncing, fuelled by familiar nerves. We exchange nods and a few quiet jokes. Nothing theoretical or tactical now.

Later, I take my seat behind them in the arena. The lights dim as their faces are lit up by the glow of their screens. The game loads in as the crowd noise rises around us, for them.

Discussion

We gathered stories from our participants to create CNF vignettes that vividly illustrate the narrative resources available to esports coaches, providing an understanding of the pursuit of a contemporary coaching career in esports. As the first study to explore narrative resources in esports coaching through CNF, we considered how coaches make sense of themselves and their work through culturally shared stories, and how these stories both reflect and shape what coaching can be in esports. In a field with minimal formal guidance, coaches' development is shaped less by professional frameworks and more by the narrative resources available to them. While not the only interpretation, we offer our understanding of the narrative resources shaping coach development.

The narrative resources available to the esports coaches contain several parallels with coaching experiences in traditional sports. For example, coaches in our study utilised tactical knowledge (e.g. 'rotations'), pedagogical methods (e.g. reviews) and interpersonal skills to build relationships (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). They spoke of a high level of emotional labour inherent in their roles, managing both their players' emotions and their own. They also faced dilemmas and instability akin to sports coaches (Bowes & Jones, 2006), like Theo's abrupt transition from player to coach.

These coaches' stories also illuminate the value placed on self-directed learning undertaken outside formal structures, often through webinars, mentorship, and informal communities of practice (Stodter & Cushion, 2017). These practices mirror traditional sport coaching, suggesting esports coaches draw upon existing narratives from conventional sporting contexts. What is particularly striking, however, is the extent to which esports coaches cultivate comparable methods and forms of knowledge despite having limited experience, scarce formal development pathways, and little access to context-specific empirical research (Watson et al., 2022). This suggests that dominant narratives from traditional sport, especially those related to the professional identity and emotional labour of coaching, are not only transferred into esports but also serve to legitimise coaching roles and practices within this emerging performance domain.

A central narrative is the persistent devaluation of esports coaching. This is evident in several ways. First, societal perceptions of esports as an illegitimate career are deeply embedded in Tom's story, specifically in his parents' views about esports, which are disapproving of his pursuit of esports coaching. This reflects broader cultural narratives that question the legitimacy of esports. The absence of external validation for esports careers appears to sustain a narrative of self-directed development and 'grind' culture (Abbott et al., 2023). Second, devaluation is visible within the esports ecosystem itself, where there is a lack of formalised learning pathways and professional

development requirements. As illustrated by Theo, coaching expertise is often assumed to derive from prior playing experience, with minimal emphasis placed on formal training or education (Watson et al., 2025). This assumption contributes to the practice of ‘fast-tracking’ individuals into coaching roles based on in-game performance rather than coaching competence, a pattern that ultimately undermines the value of coach development (Rynne, 2014).

The absence of structured development is compounded by the lack of role clarity afforded to coaches, as exemplified by Sam, who juggled multiple roles and responsibilities. This ambiguity suggests that both coaches and the broader practice of coaching in esports are undervalued by the industry and its key decision makers, thereby allowing the narrative that coaches do not require professional development to persist unchallenged (Watson et al., 2025). The devaluation of coaching, along with the lack of formal support structures, may also reflect a deeper scepticism within the esports ecosystem towards formal governance and regulation (Scholz 2019). Yet, the continued reliance on informal practices simultaneously sustains a powerful counter-narrative that a coach’s ‘big break’ may be just around the corner. This narrative, however precarious, may help explain why coaches like Sam remain committed despite career uncertainty, personal risk and not feeling equipped to support one of his players who has experienced a panic attack.

In the absence of formal learning, esports coaches appear to have internalised the belief that their growth and effectiveness are solely their own responsibility. This self-directed approach is consistent with the broader ‘grind culture’ prevalent in esports, where players often strive to improve by playing intensively and frequently (Abbott et al. 2022). However, for coaches, this trial-and-error model of development can lead to ineffective or misaligned practices. For example, using frameworks before building relationships (Rosie) or trying to support well-being and feeling out of depth (Sam). Such practices and responsibilities may have adverse effects on both player performance and wellbeing (Erikson et al. 2008). More concerningly, the individualised focus on performance, combined with limited systemic support, appears to foster maladaptive behaviours and precursors to burnout (Olusoga & Kenttä, 2017). In Sam’s case, the intense personal investment in pursuing a coaching career in esports contributed to isolation, work-home conflict, and eventual burnout. This aligns with current research, highlighting stressors in esports coaching, including the boundaries of personal and professional life, including work–life balance (Leis et al., 2026). In the absence of alternative narratives that challenge this model of self-reliance, coaches are left to ‘shoulder the burden’ of their development, accepting the associated risks as an inevitable part of coaching in the esports context.

Alongside relational challenges like isolation and lack of help-seeking, the vignettes show how invaluable support networks can help coaches navigate their context. These networks include other coaches, families, and the esports team itself. Since many esports are team-based, relational aspects are crucial for player development and success (Salo, 2021), while also supporting coach well-being through dyadic coping, where two people manage stress together (Staff et al., 2020). This support is particularly salient in esports, where many coaches work in isolated digital environments (Watson et al., 2022). Without formal support, coaches rely on these networks but must be mindful of the power dynamics and potential impact on player autonomy (Cronin, 2023). Dyadic coping can also negatively affect mental health (Staff et al., 2017), so exploring new narrative resources may be beneficial for expanding support options.

Narratives of legitimacy and a ‘grind’ culture may be amplified further for Rosie, who, as a woman, faced the internal labour and the struggle of recognising and making sense of implicit sexism within a broader patriarchal context. While Rosie’s story reflects some of the challenges faced by women coaches in traditional sport, such as sexist microaggressions and implicit sexism (Norman & Simpson, 2023), it did not fully capture the breadth of gendered experiences in esports such as women facing overt forms of exclusions such as gender-based exclusion, online toxicity, and sexual objectification (Crothers et al., 2024). This seems similar to sport, where sexism is ‘commonly overt yet simultaneously unnoticed’ (Fink, 2016, p. 2) and suggests a lack of narrative templates in esports coaching for women, forcing them to

navigate their development with templates from sports and esports, both environments made by men for men. Increasing the visibility of women's stories in esports, to make the 'unnoticed' noticed, is crucial to increase the narrative resources available, influencing women in future generations.

While some narrative parallels with traditional sport exist, the patterns of difference discussed show that esports coaching is evolving in distinct and context-specific ways. To support current and future coaches, it is vital to share and amplify the stories of those working in esports, particularly narratives that showcase successful development and inclusion initiatives. Promoting these accounts can introduce more diverse resources and displace dominant yet limiting cultural scripts.

Limitations and future research

Our study has several limitations. First, we acknowledge the absence of voices, such as coaches who left the industry, as well as the gender imbalance in our sample, limiting insight into the experiences of coaches across different gender identities. This, unfortunately, reflects broader patterns in esports, where cisgender men are overrepresented in research (DiNicola et al., 2024) and women face persistent barriers including stereotyping and biased evaluation (Trepanowski et al., 2024), highlighting the need for future research to focus on women's experiences in esports coaching.

In the future, researchers may use methodologies that complement narrative, such as ethnographic approaches, to deepen understanding of how coaching identities are negotiated across time (e.g. career stages, transitions), space (e.g. physical and cultural) and platforms (e.g. digital and hybrid). In addition, video-based and visual elicitation methods may offer further resonance for esports coaches by aligning with their digital fluency. From a pedagogical perspective, CNF may support coach development through emotional engagement, reflection, and narrative sense-making (Allan et al., 2023). Sharing vignettes with diverse coaches could reveal missing narrative templates and inform more inclusive developmental resources. As esports coaching evolves, expanding these narrative resources is critical to building more reflexive and sustainable pathways.

Conclusion

Our study explored how esports coaches draw on narrative resources available to them. Using CNF vignettes, we captured how stories shape coaches' development within esports, enabling us to highlight the relational, contextual, and affective dimensions of coaching in a space where professional legitimacy remains contested and institutional support is limited. While some narrative resources mirror those found in traditional sport, they coexist in esports alongside a vacuum of formal guidance. Esports coaches face role ambiguity, precarious contracts, and low legitimacy, yet persist through passion and a culture that normalises personal sacrifice. 'Shouldering the burden' in this way raises important concerns for coach wellbeing and long-term sustainability.

This paper contributes to the growing body of qualitative inquiry using CNF vignettes to bridge research, reflection, and practice within emerging domains. We aimed to show how CNF can be a rigorous and reflexive method for evoking esports coaches' narratives. In a volatile landscape with limited developmental pathways, CNF offers a powerful tool for capturing and communicating coaching complexity, supporting methodological innovation and applied impact. As esports coaching continues to evolve, we call for methodological innovation that expands the narrative resources available to esports coaches where traditional coaching narratives may be limited or misaligned.

Notes

1. In esports, tier lists are used to rank the quality of teams. S-tier represents the best teams in the game, followed by A-tier, B-tier, and C-tier.
2. Fog of war, commonly used in strategy and tactical games, is a game mechanic that obscures unexplored or unseen areas of the map, hiding terrain, resources, and enemy units.
3. Discord is a free-to-use digital communication platform that supports text, voice, and video interaction and was originally developed for esports and gaming communities.
4. 'VOD' is a common abbreviation used in esports for Video on Demand.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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