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Callum Fletcher

Dania De La Hoya
WGLT, Illinois State University

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WGLT Interview with Callum Fletcher, October 13th, 2017

Charlie Schlenker: Illinois Wesleyan University has a new sports coach but it's not the kind of sports you're thinking of. Callum Fletcher is the new Head Coach of Wesleyan's E-sports program – a form of competitive online gaming. GLT student reporter Dania Delahoya visited Wesleyan's recent E-sports tryout. She talked to Fletcher about the growth of E-sports and how he plans on building Wesleyan's new program up.

Callum Fletcher: E-sports is – is – is simply competitive video games. It started in early 2000s- I mean it can be traced back even further than that with your first Space Invaders tournament. But it truly kind of took its roots with Quakecon which is a first person shooter and then games-tournament organizers like major league gaming came into play and world cyber games and it – it kind of took off in the early 2000s. And then in the late 2000s, it kind of started skyrocketing and you started seeing bigger sponsorship deals, bigger price tournaments and it's kind of just gradually evolved into this behemoth, that is a huge player in the entertainment industry and it's – it's only getting bigger as you're seeing now with the collegiate E-sports scene growing, which really has only been around for about two years now. So, at its core, it's competitive video games.

Dania Delahoya: And how did you find about Illinois Wesleyan's new program?

Fletcher: Sure. I was actually just looking for new opportunity and I came across it online and it's one of those things where you kind of see it and say, "Oh my god, that's perfect for me." I have a background in event management, community management and then I personally have been a competitor, I've ran tournaments, I've helped manage large-scale events that revolved around gaming so I've – I've kind of got this smorgasbord of opportunities that I've had in the past that have all kind of funneled into making this a perfect opportunity for me. I jumped on it the second I saw it and I was fortunate enough to secure the role. I started law enforcement and homeland security in university and, and I've always been passionate about gaming and kind of growing up. There was – I mean, there's no- when I was going to school, there was no video game business- I mean. You had your typical level design and multi-player leads and stuff like that for video game studios but there was really no path that you followed to get into e-sports and stay in e-sports. So I took it upon myself to create opportunities – so I would volunteer at events- I mean, I – I flew myself out to Toronto and I put myself up to help run an event that didn't pay or anything but it was just a good resume builder. It's those things like that is why I love e-sports, because anybody who is passionate about it, who is dedicated to it, who loves it can do anything with it. They just have to go out and do it.

Delahoya: And so how did you go from graduating with a degree in law enforcement to having a career based on video games?

Fletcher: Yeah. So yeah I was an intern. I got a- my first job at the (out of??) university, I was an intern at an arcade studio in the Chicago suburbs. Basically came in and they said, "Tell us what

you wanna do and if we like you, we'll bring you on full-time." I spent the next few months kind of building out proposals and plans and projects and fortunately was lucky enough that they liked what I said and brought me on full-time and then over the next two and a half years, I went and did everything from helping set up and organize the Big Buck World championship to working with twitch over at TwitchCon and doing all these really cool events, and I – I literally just soaked in everything I could, and after 2-and-a-half years I said, okay I'm ready for that next step and – and I've always wanted to get back into more mainstream games. Arcade was never really my first love. It wasn't where I wanted to spend my life in a career so I always had the idea of, okay—the next job is back into mainstream, it's going to be something that I really, really want to do, and this is exactly that.

Delahoya: So what got you into e-sports in the first place? Can you trace it back to a certain time, a certain age or anything?

Fletcher: Yeah, yeah, I can actually. Back in the glory days, this must have been – I don't even know how long ago but I used to play Halo One at my buddy's house. And this was back when you would have to instead of Xbox live you would have to tether all of the Xboxes together and we would all be in separate rooms of the house and we'd have eight to sixteen people over there, all shouting at each other from different rooms and that was my first taste of competitive video games. Then in 2000 and- I think it was 2008, I had the opportunity to go to New Jersey and play in a tournament with some friends, and we got destroyed. We got absolutely whooped. But, the weekend...I mean, I was – I was probably 14 or 15 at the time... that weekend was kind of just this catalyst that made me go – this is where I belong. This is what I wanna do. So I went home and I practiced and I got as good as I could and kept on competing and it evolved from being competitor to 'Ok, I don't really have time to compete in practice anymore, so I'm gonna get into the administrative side of things' and then...here I am today.

Delahoya: So what would you be doing as the Head Coach of the program here?

Fletcher: Yeah, so, my biggest responsibility is recruiting the team for next year. The program is being built up from scratch, so we – we don't currently have a varsity level team, that starts in 2019... sorry, 2018. My biggest responsibility will be recruiting. The second is, we're actually building an e-sports arena on campus. State-of-the-art facility that students, faculties and outsiders alike can all come and kind of congregate around something that they're passionate about, which is games. And then also, I think one of the biggest responsibilities is building this e-sports community on campus that everyone can come. We have a really diverse student population at Illinois Wesleyan so the fact that students can come from China or Europe or anywhere in the United States and come to Illinois Wesleyan and instantly have people that they're passionate... people that they share the same passions with... it naturally creates connections, which I think is incredibly important when you're gone away to school, especially some people as far as Europe and China.

Delahoya: And how many other colleges or universities are doing e-sports?

Fletcher: There are approximately 40 collegiate varsity level programs currently. So it's still incredibly young. There are about just over a hundred test-bud chapters and then there are, I think ... I heard a number around 600 clubs throughout the United States. So it really depends on what level you're trying to understand, but it could be anywhere from 600 to 40. But it's growing – I mean, it's ... it's growing fast. I'll be astonished that... if by the end of next year there's not 75-100 varsity programs throughout the United States and then the following year will be in the hundreds, and at some point it will get to the point where most universities have an e-sports team.

Delahoya: So what kind of games do you guys play here then?

Fletcher: Sure. So Illinois Wesleyan is focusing exclusively on League of Legends currently. There are other collegiate titles, such as Overwatch, Rocket League, Heart Stone, Heroes of the Storm, Super Smash Bros so it- it kind of varies but as of now, we're just focusing on League of Legends. Personally, I'd love to see it expand into other games in the future, but that will all ultimately depend on the success of the program.

Delahoya: And what is League of Legends for those who don't know?

Fletcher: Yeah, so League of Legends is a 5 vs 5 online battle arena. So essentially, a player will go in with a team of 5 and they will choose a champion and the objective is to destroy the other team's base before they destroy yours. It's a lot more complex than that. I've been playing for about 6 years and there are still things that I'm kind of picking up and going, 'What! I didn't know that.' And – and fortunately, that's my role as the coach...is to make sure that my players do know that. And, fortunately, I think I'm an excellent candidate for the job. Obviously, the school did too, but yeah, it's a battle arena... it's intense. Games can last anywhere from 15 to an hour.

Delahoya: This is GLT Sound Ideas. I'm Dania Delahoya. Today we're meeting the new head coach of Illinois Wesleyan's e-sports program Callum Fletcher. I visited Wesleyan last week for e-sports tryouts. One of the students who showed up was senior Computer Science major, Drew Litherland. He has never played competitive League of Legends before but he was still excited.

Drew Litherland: I've always liked video games on a very technical level and you can definitely see like those like technical corks of the game shine through whenever there's like really high level competitive play...like people are gonna try to push these video games to a limit, you know... and try to, you know, beat the other guy like by any means and so you see like a lot of cheap stuff and like it's still really interesting to me—just what people come up with and how these meta-games evolve and ... yeah, and I – and I really like that.

Delahoya: - Do you have to be super experienced to join these things on campus or what's the experience level here?

Litherland: I would say if you have a prior interest in the game and you played a lot in your spare time then it wouldn't be too hard to adapt a more competitive environment, but if you're completely new, it could be really intimidating experience 'cause these players put so much time into it and they're just so much better and it seems like man, I don't... like a lot of times people would be like, "Oh, I don't think I'll ever get that good," you know, and like, for me I'm a very new League of Legends player so if I see somebody who's you know, been playing 7 years and I'm just starting out and he's got a really high rank and like he's being really fast on the keyboard... like, it seems like, oh, I'm so far behind. I – I doubt I'd catch up in any like, reasonable amount of time. But it's still fun, like, for Smash Bros, I'm kind of the same way, but you know, just through hard work you can keep up with the really good people. So...

Delahoya: So how long have you been playing?

Litherland: League or Smash?

Delahoya: Both.

Litherland: Well I've been playing Smash bros. since I was a kid, technically. But I didn't get like into it like very competitively until about three years ago. When I saw online that there's a huge scene for it and there is a lot of resources. For League of Legends I started playing actually about... I was really late to the party. I started playing it this summer in May just 'cause my friends were playing it over the summer and they'd always be in the discord chats like talking to each other and I just kind of didn't want to be left out, so...[giggles]

Delahoya: I asked Fletcher how the competitions work, especially at the varsity level where he hopes to take Wesleyan's e-sports program.

Fletcher: Yeah, so the beauty of e-sports is it can be typically done electronically and online. So we don't have to travel around for tournaments often. So typically, leagues would run like a standard league. You play everyone and then the best teams will move into a playoff and then after playoffs the top two teams will play in the championship, similar to everything from March Madness to a standard league for a soccer team or a football team or anything like that. It's really no different. It's just we're replacing the physical sports aspect of it to a video game e-sport. There's a couple leagues that we're looking at competing in over the next year or two. We'll see where our team ends up this semester and next semester.

Delahoya: So you're the first ever head coach of the e-sports program here. So where do you hope to take the program during your time here and what do you hope to see come of the e-sports program?

Fletcher: Yeah, I really, really, really would love to see this program succeed, and to me succeeding is expending into other titles, having teams in every single game, having a community on campus that is attractive to students all over the world... don't even need to be our competitive players but they're still interested in coming on campus and being a part of the community. I don't think there is an end goal. There is no end goal with e-sports because it is growing. It's constantly growing and there's ... there's no, 'okay, we're gonna have this, this and this, this, and then we're gonna stop.' The goal is always to get bigger and better and to me that means inclusivity. It means diversity. It means growing in numbers consistently and it's a safe place for our students to come and have connections with people and be a part of something bigger than them.

Schlenker: That's Callum Fletcher, the new head coach of Illinois Wesleyan's e-sports program speaking with GLT's student reporter Dania Delahoya. Fletcher is also a part of a committee at Wesleyan spear-heading creation of an e-sports arena on the 2nd floor of Hansen Student Center. This is Sound Ideas. I'm Charlie Schlenker.