Chapter 1

Connecting Students to School Culture and Career Opportunities Through Broad Access to Esports and Gaming:
So All Can Learn Through Play

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ABSTRACT

It is important to offer students an esports program that maximizes participation by the large potential pool of gamers. Such inclusive programs include clubs, intramurals, and/or courses in addition to a varsity team that competes with other schools. The benefits of such programs include building skills in digital citizenship and global professional skills (GPS) such as collaboration, communication, problem solving, and creativity. Areas in social emotional learning (SEL) can be well served through esports programs as there are many students who build positive relationships with peers, adults, and with their academics as studies have shown. This chapter explores three areas regarding esports: building a sense of belonging in school culture, developing digital citizenship skills through esports, and focusing on esports programs not esports teams.

THE POPULARITY OF ESPORTS

In the summer of 2019, the first international Fortnite tournament that offered a major monetary prize for the winner was held. After months of regional competitions, 100 of the best professional gamers in the world gathered to compete for the top prize in a three-day tournament. These participants were guaranteed $50,000USD. The final ten would earn $225,000. When the gaming pixel dust had settled, the winner was crowned, Kyle Giersdorf, aka Bugha. He earned the prize of three million dollars USD at the age of 16 (Bryson and Chokshi, 2019).

Fortnite in March of 2019 had 250 million registered gamers. By May of 2020, the number rose to 350 million users, which is a 40% increase in one year (Statista, 2021). The player-base of some other games that include professional play include League of Legends at 115 million users, DOTA 2 at 11 million users, CS:GO at 26 million users, and Minecraft with 125 million users (Clement, 2021). Twitch is one of several sites where viewers can watch streamers play games, both casual and competitive play. Viewers can donate money to their favorite content creators to encourage more live streaming of their content. Content program has expanded to live shows that analyze professional games as they are played, esports talk shows similar to talk radio, gaming tutorials, challenges such as speedrunning, and many more. According to Twitch data as of November 2020, there were over 9.2 million active streamers of games on a monthly basis.

These numbers show a large interest in playing and watching competitive games. With several gaming publishers earning over a billion dollars annually (ie. Fortnite and League of Legends), the opportunities for competitive play and the many careers that provide wrap around support should continue to grow for potential opportunities of current and future students.

BUILDING A SENSE OF BELONGING IN SCHOOL CULTURE

There are children and teens spending hours shooting baskets at a playground court or hitting a ball against a wall with a racket. There are many who sit behind a computer, game console, or mobile device practicing skills in the esport they love. Both groups share the same dream. Someday they are going to play professionally or working in the related field.

Esports and competitive casual gaming are appearing in mostly middle and high schools, with elementary schools starting to lay the groundwork to provide opportunities for their students. Many middle and high schools establish an esports teams that are like traditional sports in purpose, which is to represent their school through competing with other schools in tournaments, leagues, and state titles. These experiences can have positive benefits for students through building community, networking with players from other teams, developing a consistent work ethic, and building opportunities for college recruitment and related scholarships.

Some schools seek to expand access to a larger community of gamers through clubs and intramural programs. A survey of teens in a Pew Research Center study (Anderson and Jiang, 2018) found that 97% of boys and 83% of girls play video games. One teacher, who sponsors a gamer club in Philadelphia, shared on a panel discussion at the ISTE conference (2019) that he received over a hundred respondents for just an information session about the "possibility" of launching a club. Educators at other schools across the United States echo similar experiences of receiving higher than expected interest in a competitive gaming club. In hindsight, these educators would realize that the demand should not be surprising.

High school esports can be found in some structure in many countries. In the United States alone, there are active high school teams or intramural in every state. Grassroot organizations continue to grow as many see the demand for access to competitive play. National organizations such as NACEF, HSEL, and PlayVS claim to support middle and high schools across the United States. Other countries such as Sweden are actively growing programs.

Universities and colleges got a head start on building programs, which has helped create a need by high schools to provide esports experiences, which could become a potential pipeline to post-secondary opportunities. The esports experience at DePaul University in Chicago offers insights into the benefits

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