Chapter 12
Perspectives on Middle School Esports

Melissa Burns
Canadian Middle School Esport Association, Canada

ABSTRACT

Competitive video games, or esports, have been making their way into high schools across Canada, though most middle school students have been left out of the game. This chapter will examine the identity and role of the various shared stakeholders at the middle years level, highlight the benefits of scholastic esports for middle school learners, and examine obstacles that may hinder the implementation of such programming, leaning on the experience of one such program in central Canada. The author will examine data collected over a span of four years on the impact of both coed and girls-only gaming environments in middle schools and how to support young female learners through gaming. Finally, this chapter will highlight the current landscape of K-12 scholastic esports with recommendations on how and why scholastic esports should have a place in Canadian schools.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of professional esports in North America and the rapid growth of its viewership has had a profound impact on the development of scholastic esports over the past decade. In Canada, there has been a gradual shift in culture from individual high schools engaged in league play through organizations founded in the US, such as the High School Esports League, Star League, and the North American Scholastic Esports Federation, among others, to the formation of the first provincial league founded by educators, Manitoba High School eSports Association (Manitoba High School eSports Association, 2021), the first esports academy school, Académie Esports de Montréal (Académie Esports de Montréal, 2021), and more recently the emergence of esports companies angling to establish a foothold in the scholastic field.

Though traditional sports are introduced in most Canadian public schools around grade 6, esports are left largely unexplored until students move on to their local high school, save for casual in-school gaming that may be introduced as a lunch time activity during the colder months. The field of scholastic esports, with a focus on skill development and competition, has been severely overlooked due to a lack of

knowledge, exposure, and understanding within the larger school community and its shared stakeholders. The possibilities of curricular content have yet to be explored at a provincial level, leaving programs such as the Académie Esports de Montréal and the occasional school-initiated course (SIC) as outliers, with courses often monetized through esports companies that have capitalized on this gap in the market (Esports Academics, 2021). Insufficient infrastructure, lack of access to training on the implementation of esports programming, and inadequate data to support its practice in publicly funded schools have negatively impacted esports programming growth and stakeholders' attitudes towards esports.

Scholastic esports at the middle school level (grades 6-8) comes ripe with its own unique set of successes and challenges, but the potential for cross-curricular 21st Century skill development and connections in Social Emotional Learning and digital citizenship have yet to be fully unlocked at the school-based level. "Deep learning is not about one particular model of teaching but is fostered by a wide range of learning practices" (Fullan et al., 2018, p. 46). This chapter will explore the identity and roles of shared stakeholders in scholastic esports, the landscape of middle school gaming in Canadian schools, identify some of the challenges in establishing such programs, the benefits esports provide middle school learners, and the possibilities for growth in esports as both an extra-curricular and curricular option in Canadian middle schools.

The Identity and Role of Stakeholders in Esports Programming

School programming, both curricular and extra-curricular begins with its shared stakeholders. Identifying who those stakeholders are (the students, parents, teachers, and administrators, among others) is critical to understanding some of the opinions and oppositions that currently face scholastic esports in Canada, as well as how to target training and marketing to support future growth of esports programing in schools.

Education in Canada is regulated at the provincial level of government; while vocabulary may vary across the country, students in grade 6-8 (11-14 years old) are generally considered middle school aged. Though this label may help identify the age range for these students, the inconsistency within the education system itself has left them with a crisis of identity. Within the province of Manitoba alone, students aged 11-14 can be found in schools that are kindergarten-grade 8, grade 5-8, grade 6-9, or grade 7-12. In Québec students enter "high school" at the age of 11 or 12 (depending on where their birthday falls within the school year) for 5 years of study before entering cégep for a year of preparation and transition into college, university, or career/work force (Les Cégep du Québec, 2021). The priorities, culture, focus, and funding of a k-8 school are vastly different than those specialized in grades 5-8, and even more so when compared to a grade 7-12 building, which in turn impacts student life and experience. Students in grades 6-8 may occupy their school as the oldest, only, or youngest members of the community, inadvertently creating a sort of "middle child syndrome" effect within the education system through this lack of consistency. Despite the differences in their educational experience, this group of students is marked by biological change, cognitive development, and a shift in social development with both family and friends (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Each student will experience these changes at a slightly different rate and time, but this age demographic is collectively impacted by these developmental and biological shifts, though personal experiences can and will vary greatly based on external factors.

Students in this age demographic are also on the cusp of increased independence. Most Canadian social services suggest that children 12+ can stay home alone for short periods of time, though only 3 provinces (Ontario, Manitoba, and New Brunswick) regulate the exact age in which this can happen by law (Ruiz-Casares & Radic, 2015). In terms of online safety, the Children's Online Privacy Protection

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