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Esports’ popularity has surged in recent years. The International, the end-of-year competition in DOTA 2, had a prize pool of $25.5 million. Global viewership consistently grows at double-digit rates, topping 380 million viewers in 2018, according to the research firm NewZoo. This same firm expects the North American audience alone to grow from 52 million viewers in 2018 to 64 million in 2021. In fact, more men ages 21-35 prefer to watch esports than baseball or hockey. Companies have begun to take notice. Professional leagues in different titles are starting to appear. Just recently, the NBA announced a $1 billion partnership with publisher Take 2 Interactive to create an NBA2K esports league. Each pro basketball team now can field its own corresponding esports team. Overwatch, a popular first-person-shooter game created by Blizzard, is rumored to cost prospective buyers $40 million for a franchise. The 2019 Overwatch League Championship, held at the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia, sold out within days.

This trend of professionalization has begun to trickle down to universities, high schools, and middle schools. It feels like each day brings a new esports-related announcement by a high school or university as they race to meet this new student trend. Universities are creating innovative academic programs to meet the demands of current and future esports-related careers. States such as California, Arizona, New Mexico, Alabama, Kentucky and many others have launched esports leagues for their high schools.

How to Use This Guide
This guide is intended to be an introductory resource on esports and building an esports facility. It covers current esports titles, hardware equipment, and a mock facility build-out. I encourage you to skip to the section most relevant to your current needs as there is a lot of information packed into this guide. Each high school and middle school esports program will have its own unique needs, but hopefully this guide can serve as a starting point to inform your own decision-making. The information presented here comes from my extensive experience working with universities, K-12 schools, and industry groups to build facilities and leagues across the U.S. as an esports specialist for HP Inc. The information presented in this guide is solely my opinion; it does not reflect any official opinion of HP Inc.
Esports Titles

In this section, I will cover the top esports titles and briefly introduce the various high school leagues with which you can register your school. Also, I will outline some trends at the professional level and how they may impact trends at the college and high school levels. One difficult challenge for high school administrators will be reading the competitive esports tea leaves. Games such as Fortnite can become overnight sensations. There are a multitude of current esports titles played on consoles and PCs, cooperatively or solo. High schools will have to look at professional and university trends to see which titles are likely to endure while being agile enough to adopt up-and-coming titles. For example, Overwatch and League of Legends have professional franchises, high-level sponsorships, and broadcasting deals. The producers must ensure these titles stay relevant for a long time and continually increase their audience to pay off their investment. Thus, a high school or university could safely create a team in either of these titles with confidence that they still will be played several years down the road. I recommend picking several core titles with staying power, as well as several experimental titles with significant student interest.

Another part of a high school’s decision criteria will be what level of game violence is acceptable. Some titles do involve shooting human avatars. Others may have limited blood and gore, but the violence is done to fantasy characters rather than people. Most esports titles have an Everyone or Teen rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). Titles rated Everyone may contain minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence. Titles rated Teen may contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, and/or infrequent use of strong language. Although I personally find current esports titles to be less violent than the collisions of football and hockey, the violence in popular action films, or real-life historical events, school districts have a diverse set of stakeholders to satisfy. I encourage you to speak with a wide group of district stakeholders and your administration, decide what is acceptable, and create a clear, communicable rationale for relevant third parties.

Esports titles generally fall under five categories: first-person shooters (FPS), multiplayer-online battle arenas (MOBAs), real-time strategy (RTS), sports, and fighting games. There is also a miscellaneous category of games such as World of Warcraft, Hearthstone, and Tetris. There are too many games to cover within this guide. For example, Collegiate Starleague, just one college esports organization, runs leagues in 13 different titles. Therefore, I will give a brief overview of two of the popular PC esports titles: Overwatch and League of Legends. Many schools also field Hearthstone, DOTA 2, Super Smash Bros. and Counter Strike:GO teams. I encourage you to be responsive to your athletes’ desires on competitive titles within the confines of your budget. Some of the following information is pulled from the ESRB.

Overwatch

Overwatch is a competitive online 6 vs. 6 team-based first-person shooter, which was released in May 2016. Players choose a character with unique characteristics, style (gameplay and cosmetic), futuristic weapons, abilities, and roles. Then, players work together to accomplish various objec-
tives across various maps. Players can switch characters at specific points in the match. There are four main map modes: assault, control, hybrid, and escort. Assault and control are variations on the classic “king of the hill” idea. Teams fight for control of specific points on the map. Hybrid and escort maps are variations on escorting a payload along a pre-determined route, while the other tries to stop them. There is significant variation in map and character design and a complex set of interactions between the two. Before the match, successful teams must design strategies and team compositions that balance the strengths and weaknesses of their individual characters and resulting team to achieve a specific objective on a given map. Then, athletes will have to execute their strategy through communication, quick reactions, and adaptability. Matches are generally a best of a variable maps and can take anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 hours, depending on the league’s rules. Lastly, Overwatch is rated Teen by the ESRB for frenetic combat with realistic gunfire, cries of pain, explosions, and splashes of blood briefly appearing with each successful hit.

League of Legends

League of Legends is a 5 vs. 5 team MOBA, which was released in October 2009. It combines strategy and role-playing elements. Players control fantasy and human characters who use swords, arrows, guns, and magic attacks to defeat other players, destroy non-player combatants, and take objectives. Characters gain power, abilities, and items over time as they accomplish objectives. Players can choose how they level their characters and what items they purchase. Player-controlled characters are set for the duration of the match. Battles are accompanied by slashing sounds, colorful projectiles, and red blood splashes. The match takes place on only one map and is played from an overhead 3/4 perspective. Each of the 143 champions have their own strengths and weaknesses, but generally fall into five different roles. How the heroes, their skills, items, game rules, etc., interact with each other creates significant complexity and a lot for your players to memorize.

Equipment

It comes as no surprise that gaming technology changes often. For example, new graphics cards are released about every two years and new processors yearly, with 240hz displays now becoming affordable. There have been advances in peripherals and chairs, as well. For instance, I might have recommended Nvidia’s GTX 1070 graphics card had this been written six months ago. Fast forward to today and Nvidia no longer produces the GTX 1070. However, this isn’t necessarily a scary prospect. Different original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) offer various levels of upgradability built into their systems. This could mean you only need to upgrade one or two components of your setup three years down the line. Also, OEMs are beginning to offer innovative models to continuously supply up-to-date equipment to their customers. I encourage you to consult with your equipment partners.
Thus, I will provide a framework for making equipment purchases instead of recommending specific components. I will detail how different components impact performance in different ways and what questions you should be asking. For example, a pure gaming desktop's performance is driven by the graphics card, whereas a shoutcasting station needs more processor cores to quickly encode video. Then, I’ll apply this framework to a few test case facilities in the next section. Hopefully, this will keep the information relevant for a longer time and give you effective decision-making information.

Esports Station
The fundamental building block of any esports facility is the station. The station has everything an athlete needs to play. It consists of the PC, display, keyboard, mouse, mousepad, headset with microphone, desk, chair, and appropriate cables. The picture above is an example of this concept. The number of stations and quality of components can be scaled up or down to match your needs and available budget. For example, a private practice facility may only need 20 high-end stations, whereas a public gaming center may use a combination of high-end stations for the team and mid-tier stations for the general population. Some portions of the station, such as the specifications of competition PCs, should be standardized. This allows you to provide for players equally, host other schools for live matches, and diagnose potential maintenance issues. Other parts, such as the keyboard and mice, are much more about the athlete’s comfort. They can be as personal and inspire as much loyalty as a basketball player’s favorite brand of shoe.

This section will focus on desktops with attached peripherals because that’s the current standard. Generally, desktops provide better value because they are cheaper to produce, maintain, and upgrade. Also, it is more comfortable to look straight ahead at an external display and use external peripherals than to look down at a laptop screen and use a cramped keyboard. However, some schools are experimenting with using laptops as mobile desktop replacements. These are moved via a standard laptop cart and then connected to external displays and peripherals. I imagine heat buildup during long sessions could degrade performance in that setup. This could be advantageous if space is limited or no permanent space currently exists.

Displays
Displays have a dizzying number of characteristics. A quick look at any display advertisement will show panel type, pixel pitch, contrast ratio, brightness, response time, size, G-Sync, FreeSync, Ultra-light motion blur, etc. For competitive purposes, speed and clarity are vital. We want to maximize the number of frames while minimizing image distortions. A group of players will have an advantage over another if information is presented to them more quickly. However, displays for non-competitive use can sacrifice speed for better looks. In fact, it might be preferable to do so.
will focus on size, resolution, and refresh rate to achieve the ideal mix of speed and clarity. I recommend purchasing a gaming display over a regular display because it emphasizes speed. Traditional displays are generally not able to change images quickly enough for competitive purposes.

Professionals generally play on 24"-25" displays. This provides the right balance between individual screen elements being large enough while not being lost in a player’s periphery. These displays usually have a resolution of 1920x1080 or 2560x1440. Larger displays have higher resolutions, but higher resolutions reduce frame rates because more graphics power is needed to draw more pixels. Next are refresh rates. These indicate how many frames per second your monitor can display. Displays of 240hz are becoming the industry standard. They tend to be more expensive than similar-sized monitors at lower refresh rates; however, you must make sure your graphics card can produce enough frames per second to match your display’s refresh rate. For instance, if your display is refreshing 240 times per second, but your graphics card can only draw 100 frames per second, the same frame is going to be drawn multiple times. Lastly, gaming displays either have AMD’s FreeSync or Nvidia’s G-Sync technology. FreeSync is open source, available on all AMD graphics cards, and beginning to be supported on Nvidia cards, whereas G-Sync is only supported by Nvidia. These two technologies help sync displays and graphics cards to reduce visual distortions. I recommend ensuring your monitor’s Sync technology matches the graphics card you have. In conclusion, choose the fastest 24”-25” display within your budget for your competitive play, and consider larger displays with greater visual fidelity for non-competitive play.

**Desktop**

The PC is the main part of the station. The main decision-making criterion is getting the best value for the current games while balancing the potential higher demands of future games. Equally important to performance, the PC also must be visually appealing to students. Coaches will need equipment that is easy to market to prospective athletes, just as football coaches market their weightlifting facilities. Gaming desktops bundle powerful components inside a design matching the aesthetic tastes of high school students. They generally have clear side panels (tempered-glass or plastic) showing the guts of the PC. There are also a variety of options for internal lighting that often can be controlled through software. A gaming PC and workstation are shown here to illustrate this point.

Furthermore, PCs designed for gaming are generally easier to upgrade than workstation PCs. This could allow you to extend the desktop’s lifespan by only upgrading the graphics processing unit (GPU), resulting in cost savings. Gaming towers come in a variety of sizes and weights. Most are rectangular, though there are some experimental designs out there. Larger facilities will be able to hold larger towers. Below are some average case sizes in height, width, depth, and weight:

- **Mini Tower**: 12 x 5 x 8 inches; 10 pounds
- **Mid Tower**: 18 x 7.5 x 14 inches; 25 pounds
- **Full Tower**: 24 x 11 x 23 inches; 40 pounds

The good news is today’s esports titles are not particularly demanding. Esports titles’ success relies on having a large fan base. So, developers design games for mid-range systems. The main goal for competitive play is to maximize frames per second within the budget while leaving some headroom for potential future titles. As explained earlier in the display section, more frames per second means more information on the screen and a generally smoother experience. Ideally, the PC should generate as many frames per second as your display’s refresh rate or more. The best value for components is found in the mid-tiers. However, performance value must be balanced with marketability to students and potential future needs.
Graphics cards are the primary drivers of performance. The mid-level and above of Nvidia’s and AMD’s latest-generation cards should perform well for any esports title. High-end cards provide incredible performance, but at quickly decreasing value propositions. The most powerful cards may be a waste of money in some cases. For example, Nvidia’s RTX 2080 can average 300 frames per second in Overwatch on high settings, which is the game’s maximum frames per second. Buying the more expensive RTX 2080 Ti wouldn’t improve performance in this case. Nvidia currently holds the performance crown at the top end and is generally what professionals use to compete. The next largest impact on gaming performance is the central processing unit (CPU). Both Intel and AMD offer great value at the mid-tier level. Lower-end CPUs effectively bottle cap higher-end graphics cards, whereas high-end processors may not have any impact on gaming performance because the GPU is handling the load. However, higher-end processors make general computer use better and are a must for PCs doing streaming and shoutcasting.

There is also the choice to cool both components with liquid or air coolers. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. Air cooling is cheaper and easier to repair or replace. It will work for stock components running at stock speeds. However, it can get loud depending on usage. Liquid cooling is quieter and more efficient, but much more expensive and harder to maintain. The lower temperatures allow the user to wring more performance out of the system via “overclocking.” And it looks very cool. It is something to spring for if the budget allows, but it’s not a must by any means. Lastly, RAM and storage have minimal impacts on match performance, but they do improve the general PC use. 8GB is the minimum amount of RAM for a current gaming system. It will work if there aren’t other processes running in the background. 16GB of RAM would allow your athletes to game comfortably while having multiple web tabs and other applications running. Solid-state drives (SSDs) are also becoming the industry standard. They don’t necessarily impact frame rates. However, PCs will boot and load game assets faster when loaded onto an SSD vs. an HDD (spin drive). Most needs can be met with a moderately sized SSD for games and secondary HDD for multimedia data. The requisite drive size will depend on how many games and other programs will be installed on it. Windows 10 with Microsoft Office can take upward of 30GB; Overwatch is 18GB; League of Legends is 12GB; StarCraft II is 27GB; Hearthstone is 8.5GB; and Rocket League is 8GB, for example. The minimum 128GB SSD size is quickly surpassed with a few titles, drivers, and related programs.

**Peripherals**

Keyboards, mice, mousepads, and headsets are how the athletes interact with the game. Their impact on gameplay is largely subjective. High school and college athletes may already have strong peripheral brand preferences. Many will bring their own. However, it’s still a good idea to purchase them. Students may forget, lose, or break their own, wasting valuable practice time while waiting for a new set. Also, some students may not be able to afford their own or haven’t had much experience with gaming-quality peripherals. I’ll outline some basic characteristics each peripheral should have. But consult your athletes on their preferences.

Gaming keyboards should always have mechanical switches. On traditional keyboards (such as the ones that come in the boxes of most PCs), the key passes through a plastic layer with electrical contacts and then through a hole to a second layer that connects a circuit to register the stroke. This can cause some key presses not to be registered by the keyboard when multiple keys are pressed at once or keys are pressed to quickly. Missing a key could be the difference between success or failure. They also have shorter life spans at 10 million clicks on average. Quality mechanical keyboards eliminate this problem by using a mechanical switch to register key presses. Pressing the key trips a metal contact, while a spring resets the key position. There are many kinds of mechanical switches. Some require a lot of force; some have a loud click; some have no click. Each athlete will have their own preference.

A six-button optical wired mouse with adjustable DPI settings will work for most use cases. The six buttons are the right and left click, scroll wheel, scroll wheel click, and two thumb buttons. Adjusting the mouse’s DPI determines how quickly the cursor will move across the screen. Athletes may have to experiment with a few different mice to find the one that’s most comfortable. These will rest on a hard or soft mousepad. They range in size from 12” x 12” to 36” x 16.” When in doubt, get a medium-sized soft mousepad as they are easier to transport. There aren’t any performance differences
here. Headsets should be comfortable to wear and have a microphone attached. Some extra features of USB headsets can be manually controlling headset and microphone volume.

Networking

Gaming is not particularly demanding on a network. Bandwidth use is minimal, more comparable to web browsing than video streaming. Over an hour of play, Overwatch averages 27.7 kb/s, League of Legends averages 35.2 kb/s, and DOTA 2 averages 26.6 kb/s. Even multiplied by 60 concurrent users, this is a negligible amount, compared with existing network traffic. However, a high school’s firewall may take some modification to allow the games through. I do recommend that each PC have a wired network connection instead of wireless. Even the best Wi-Fi signals can be unreliable. Sometimes they suddenly slow down or drop out due to interference. This could cost your team the match if it happens at a critical point. A gigabit network switch could make connecting all the machines easier.

Office Equipment

Any desk at least 45 inches wide should accommodate your athletes comfortably. This allows the athlete to have adequate room for their feet even with the desktop placed underneath. Wider desks will be necessary if the desktop is placed on top of the desk. Look for chairs with adjustable height, lean, pitch, and adequate lumbar support. There are gaming chairs on the market with a distinctive look and feel. These racer-style chairs may have greater aesthetic appeal to your students, especially if they match your school’s colors. Whether they are more comfortable than standard ergonomic chairs for long periods is up for debate. Some people swear by them; others feel they are overpriced. Either way, I recommend having students test out a few chair designs before making a bulk purchase. I recommend buying quality chairs over cheap ones; students’ health depends on it. Poor quality chairs can cause pain, back issues, and decreased performance. A good chair can help students maintain a healthy posture through long practice sessions. They also last many years, with some brands featuring a 12-year warranty. The pictures here show the two styles.

Building an Esports Facility

I’ve seen three main types of esports facilities: private practice facility, public gaming center, and an arena for live matches. Each satisfies a different purpose. Although I always lean to building a large public space to create an inclusive community for your students, it can be expensive and procedurally difficult. A good strategy could be to start small with a practice facility, build the team’s popularity on campus, and demonstrate its success to administrators. Then, if there is enough student interest and administrator buy-in, build a coalition of school district funds, donors, and businesses to support the cost of a 60-plus seat gaming center for your student body. Large splashy facilities with quality equipment will be more marketable. Some schools are taking this a step further by building arenas for live matches. These have a raised stage, trusses, custom lighting and sound, projectors, etc. In this section, I will run through the hardware portion of building out a mock practice facility with 24 seats. This can be scaled up or down to match to your budget. I’ll explain my thought process and provide pictures and estimated hardware costs. These prices are for illustrative purposes only and do not reflect the prices of any particular manufacturer. Please work with technology providers for accurate pricing. I won’t cover construction costs or personnel costs because they are too variable and not in my area of expertise.
Practice Facility

After gauging student interest, surveying current campus gaming groups, and having a successful recruitment period, your high school could have the following teams:

- Overwatch Varsity Squad – 6 players
- Overwatch Junior Varsity Squad – 6 players
- League of Legends – 5 players
- Hearthstone – 3 players

Athletes will have to practice in the same time block because the facility also will be used for a high school computer science course. I am also looking to create a Rocket League team (three players) and/or bringing on a couple of development players in the near future. So, I’ll need 24 complete stations (including desks and chairs) to accommodate this plan. The current extra capacity also can be used by coaches and as a backup in case a machine needs repairs. I’ll be repurposing an existing underused 21’ x 30’ space to save on construction costs.

The room can fit four rows of six stations with 48” desks and still have space for a coaches’ area on the left. Admittedly it’s not the coolest space yet, but I’m prioritizing getting the program running first. I can have student groups create wall decals to enhance the space’s school spirit. Half of my students already have peripherals, so I only need to buy 12 sets. I have not included game costs in this breakdown because all competitive players will already own the game. Today’s PC games operate as a license tied to a user’s account after a one-time fee. Games are freely downloaded from a publisher’s portal and played with valid user credentials. However, you may wish to create official team accounts owned by the school district by purchasing separate licenses. Athletes could then separate their personal play from official team play.
Below are sample budgets for entry, mid-level, and top-end setups based on this information.

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There are a couple of key differences among the three setups. At roughly $44,000, the entry level version has lower-performing desktops than the mid-tier. The entry specs are playable, but athletes could be at a meaningful disadvantage if playing better-equipped teams. The team will be in a tough spot if a new, more demanding title catches fire next year. Also, there is no budget for coaching workstations. Players will have to use their own laptops. For $61,000, athletes will have a high-performing PC that is adequately future-proofed. This funding level provides for a three-year on-site service agreement in case something needs repairing. (Unlike commercial workstations, gaming PCs only come with a limited one-year warranty. Longer commercial-style service agreements are extra). Mid-level PCs will perform well for today's esports titles and could last three to four years before needing an equipment refresh. I could probably get by with only upgrading the GPU in a few years if I really need to extend the lifespan. Although having top-end specs and 240hz displays would be fantastic, it is only attainable through private partnerships, excellent fundraising programs, or generous donors at $87,500.

Quick Note on Funding
School districts are constantly coming up with innovative funding streams to help with costs: advertising revenue through Twitch partnerships, charging a nominal hourly use fee, live events, apparel and equipment sales, etc. School districts are also creating more value by using the space for academic purposes during non-practice hours. The hardware is powerful enough to be used in graphic design, game design, video processing, and the new crop of esports-related courses. Creating additional uses will make it easier to secure buy-in from administrators and sustainable funding. Corporate sponsorships are difficult, but not impossible to obtain. It may be more realistic and sustainable to plan without them, but it doesn't hurt to try.

Conclusion
High school programs and facilities are incredibly varied. One of the main selling points of esports is the potential for innovation. It has been a joy to see all the different kinds of facilities being built and the new esports programs being launched. It’s something I wish my high school had when I was earning my high school diploma. Feel free to contact me at joshua.pann@hp.com about building your program.

About the Author:
JOSHUA PANN is the college esports specialist for HP Inc. Since joining HP Inc., Joshua has led the charge into collegiate and K-12 esports. He is an avid lifelong gamer and hobbyist PC builder since the early days of Quake and Pentiums. He holds undergraduate degrees in Economics and International Relations from UC Davis and a Master of Arts in teaching from Relay Graduate School of Education. He combines his experience as an educator with his knowledge of esports to help universities support new vibrant student communities on campus. He can be reached at joshua.pann@hp.com.
Since the introduction of Atari, gaming continues to gain popularity, so much that formalized esports programs have entered the high school and collegiate scene. Although many gamers play in the confines of their homes, many are finding that when structured under the school umbrella, tremendous benefits occur, such as community building and sense of belonging.

Although some organizations fully embrace and utilize various stakeholders from the beginning, most have taken a grassroots approach in which interested students join forces and form club teams. Many esports club teams are now making the transition to formalized programs because esports is becoming a sanctioned sport, which creates opportunities for additional stakeholders to be involved. It is helpful to understand how potential stakeholders can contribute to a program and serve in the greater context of the esports ecosystem.

Departments

FACILITIES MANAGEMENT
Creating a welcoming space that builds community does not necessarily have to include the bells and whistles. Although some programs are fortunate to have arenas decked out in LED lighting and graphics covering the walls, the majority are working with refurbished rooms that have turned into glorified computer labs. No matter the scenario, it is important to involve the facilities staff in selecting the best possible space. With their knowledge and expertise, a facilities management representative could suggest minor changes to the room aesthetics to enhance the space and make it more welcoming. Creating an arena in which student-athletes take pride in their space can help with community building and attract potential gamers.

INFORMATIONAL TECHNOLOGY
Although there may be an upfront technology cost to add esports, there are minimal additional costs to support the program—unlike with traditional sports—because teams do not have to travel to compete. Other than playing for prize money, most competitions occur remotely. Yet, nothing can frustrate an esports player more than a poor internet connection. When identifying a space on campus, it is important to involve the IT department to ensure that there are adequate connections to support the intended stations and that proper bandwidth is specifically designated to the arena. Bringing an IT representative into initial conversations regarding space likely will provide an additional perspective and further insight on best utilization of resources. It is likely that someone within the IT department is an experienced gamer and may be a natural fit to lead the esports program.

ATHLETICS
From a macro level, there are stakeholders still trying to make the determination on how esports fits into the sports world. What began as playing in a basement for pure entertainment has quickly evolved into a team sport and playing in front of an audience. Involving athletics helps legitimize the sport, not only for the esports athletes, but also for the portion of the population that is unaware of the evolution. Running an esports program is similar to running other sports programs and should be treated and viewed as such. There is also a great deal that can be learned from the athletic department when it comes to administrative tasks outside of the games themselves. Running tournaments, purchasing gear and equipment, travel arrangements, budgeting, recruiting, compliance with governing bodies, sponsors, and fundraising are just a few areas the athletic department of your school can assist in providing valuable resources and knowledge.
STUDENT AFFAIRS
At the collegiate level, approximately 60% of programs are under the umbrella of athletics and 40% under student affairs. With esports being new to the scene, some athletic departments are not convinced that gaming is an official sport. Another dilemma is that some esports athletes already have won money competing in tournaments or streaming, which would compromise their amateur status in traditional sports. The benefit of including student affairs at the collegiate level is that their focus and experience lies with inclusivity, a sense of belonging, and community building. Both options have seen success at the collegiate level so high schools may need that same innovation when it comes to oversight.

ADMINISTRATION
Based on their own experience, many administrators did not grow up gaming and have limited exposure to esports, which means education and awareness becomes the first step. If you are fortunate to have top-level administration supporting the creation of an esports program, do everything you can to build on that support by including them in the program’s development, giving them visibility at special events, and making sure everyone you talk with knows how supportive your administration has been in developing the esports program at your school.

If your administration is new to esports, then education and awareness need to happen. The intention is not to convert them as No. 1 esports fans, but to allow them to see the value esports brings to the school and the students. An administrator’s support likely leads to the necessary resources to build and maintain a program. Encourage those involved in esports to educate and update administrators by inviting them to practices and events, and possibly sharing personal success stories from within the program. Understand that administrators’ schedules are typically full, so make it worth their time.

Roles Within Esports
DIRECTOR
This position is responsible for overseeing the esports program. In a club program, a director simply could be the sponsor or advisor, and is typically a person in IT, a faculty member, or someone who has a passion for gaming. The director may begin with minimal responsibilities such as making sure the computer lab is unlocked and notifying players of available times to practice and compete, but as the program grows so do the responsibilities.

Common responsibilities include arranging practice schedules, lining up scrimmages and competitions, coordinating team-bonding activities, communicating work orders, ordering team apparel, and helping with academic and personal issues. They can also include developing a program budget, ordering equipment, maintaining equipment, and securing program sponsors and fundraising activities. In some programs, interest in participating on an esports team has outpaced space and computer availability, forcing the director to maximize time and space so that everyone is having a positive experience.

COACH
An esports coach is the individual who is highly knowledgeable and skilled at a specific game. The focus is placed on individual and team development. Although there are drills specific to eye-hand coordination and in-game strategy, team development might require teaching skills such as game planning, healthy communication, and sportsmanship. Since gaming is a sedentary sport, a coach should communicate the importance of proper exercise, diet, and rest.
Structured esports programs have formed on high school and college campuses because of the increased benefits of student engagement and community building. The coach must remain committed to academic success and creating a positive gaming experience for the participants. Since esports is new to the competitive scene, players typically understand the game better than older adults, so a program must resort to hiring a student coach. To increase the chance for success, the expectations of a student serving in a coach's role should be condensed, but understand that having a student coach creates its own set of challenges. Some of the initial concerns are: hiring because of limited leadership training and experience, as well as the challenge of coaching peers in a highly competitive environment. It takes a special depth of maturity and skill to be able to coach student-athletes who are the same age as the coach.

COMPETITIVE PLAYERS
Although most individuals enjoy playing several games, a player will generally specialize and compete in one game. Depending on the games' objectives and the personalities of the individuals, players have the option to play solo or in a team format. This flexibility allows more people to participate in esports. Unique to esports, one must not ignore the challenge of a player honing his or her skills specific to one game, and then being forced to transition to another game when the larger esports population loses interest.

STREAMERS
Streamers are valuable to a program and recruited by universities. A streamer plays online, typically on Twitch, for others to watch in an attempt to gain a following. Fans are able to watch their favorite player practice, but unlike any other sport, viewers are able to communicate with him or her in real time. It is common for each streamer to create a personality that is entertaining and attracts a larger audience, and at times trumps focus and competitiveness that other gamers must maintain for optimal performance. Streamers can help build branding for a program within the esports community. For streamers who have large followings, players and the program can receive financial compensation.

CASTERS
There continues to be an increase in spectators watching esports, creating opportunities for a caster, short for broadcaster and also known as a shoutcaster. Much like other spectator sports, this position enhances the viewer experience when watching on television, online, or in person. The addition of a caster not only adds an excitement factor, but also provides understanding of the game to an audience who may have limited exposure to the sport. Similar to other sports, players will review their game to improve performance, especially in a team-oriented game, and the caster's acknowledgment of a great play adds to the overall player experience.

Because of the various roles, there are opportunities for individuals to contribute and showcase their talents and gifts within an esports program. The integration of new roles should be intentional and likely involve an experimental phase, requiring patience and necessary adjustments. When all roles are functioning effectively, students become empowered by their own contributions, while also respecting and appreciating the roles others play for the collective good.

The landscape of esports is constantly evolving, which will likely lead to additional key stakeholders not mentioned here. At this time, these are the current stakeholders involved in a complete program, but understand that not all are necessary to run a successful program. A positive experience for students can be created simply by providing a space to game. Involving others can change that positive experience into a transformational experience that provides lifelong memories. Never miss the opportunity to do something spectacular that will make a difference in the lives of young people.
About the Authors:

DR. JASON BAUER is associate vice president for student affairs/director of analytics and assistant executive director of the esports program at Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa. Jason brings an excellent combination of educational leadership, professional development, and coaching experience to the National Association of Esports Coaches and Directors (NAECAD). As a former Division I basketball player and coach, Jason has served in varying capacities developing athletes and coaching staffs. He has a great passion for training and development. He has been part of a team that develops mobile platforms to enhance teaching and learning in higher education and now brings that expertise to competitive esports. He is the associate executive director of the NAECAD and the founder of Go Live Competition.

DR. JAY PRESCOTT is the vice president for student affairs and executive director of the esports program at Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa. He helped launch the varsity esports program at Grand View in fall 2016. Jay is also the executive director of the National Association of Esports Coaches and Directors (NAECAD). NAECAD’s mission is to serve, legitimize, and advance competitive esports at all levels with NAECAD members at the epicenter of leadership, advocacy, and professional development. Jay has spent the past 30 years in education. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree in secondary education from Westmar College, a Master of Science in education from Drake University, and his doctorate degree in educational leadership from Drake University. Jay also attended the Harvard Institute for Educational Management, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Harvard Institute for Graduate Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Jay spent 10 years as a high school teacher, guidance counselor and coach; eight years as a high school principal; and the last 14 years at Grand View University.
This chapter will discuss specific duties of the directors and coaches of competitive esports programs. It will highlight the depth of knowledge needed to recruit and lead a team; manage a budget; schedule, prepare, and run practice sessions; host live tournaments; oversee equipment; and many more responsibilities beyond the games.

The field of esports is rapidly expanding, both in constant updates to game titles and in the international arena of popularity and media. Coaches are on the front end of this need, which necessitates that they be flexible, responsive, and innovative to create a successful program. In this chapter, we will discuss the major duties required of an esports coach and/or director to assist future coaches and directors as they enter into the world of esports.

For the sake of the usefulness of this chapter, we have decided to separate an esports coach and director as two distinct positions, despite the fact that in many programs, there is only one person occupying both roles. In a perfect world, programs would be able to have a coach for each esports title and an additional director to manage cross-title items, but for a myriad of reasons, not all universities or high schools can make that work. We will first address the roles of a coach in an esports program by discussing recruitment, managing a team, and preparing meaningful practices, and community involvement. Next, we will lead into the director’s role and the importance of hosting events, having sponsorships and partnerships, and managing a budget.

The role of an esports coach
Recruiting, managing a team and practices, and community involvement

Though it may well be the most fun part of the job, there’s more to being a coach than working with your team to hone their craft and develop strategy. At the high school level, recruiting student-athletes to the program is much easier and less time-consuming than at the university level. Using communication channels that the school and school district provide, and working with the athletic department, parent organizations, and booster clubs are all traditional ways to get the word out. Creating social media accounts and connecting with gamers in your school are also effective ways to invite high school and middle school students to the esports program.

At the university level, recruiting and talent-scouting are necessary elements of forming a successful team and overall program. But where do you find players when games take place in a virtual space? The four major ways to recruit players are: Discord, high school visits and relationships, social media, and recruiting services.

Discord, a free VoIP digital communication application, serves as the central network of communication for gaming and esports. This platform is where you can find scrimmages, tournaments, professional development opportunities, general points of contact, and recruiting channels. It is entirely possible that a Discord server for tournament organization also has “Looking for scrim” and “Looking for team” sections. As a side note, it’s important to know that not all Discord servers are interested or willing to have an official college or high school team recruiting from those servers, so be sure to ask for permission before advertising your school’s team.
The other bread-and-butter recruiting resource for esports is through good old-fashioned high school visits. As more high schools and local organizers adopt esports and play in or host tournaments, scouting talent is becoming easier for schools. Similar to traditional sports, with enough support and structure, esports will someday offer the opportunity for in-person recruiting at state championships to check out the talented players vying for a state title.

Outside of this dynamic, setting up time to speak with members of a high school gaming club, team, or program is a large part of recruiting. Together with high school visits, hosting and/or attending esports “camps,” and setting up campus visits with local-area high schools or community colleges will help build your recruitment pool. If your school is privileged enough to have its own esports facility or arena, this is a great opportunity to bring in students to see what being an esports athlete can look like, or to let them get a taste of the experience through camps.

Social media also offers great recruiting potential. A lot of casual, and even professional, conversation occurs over Twitter, Instagram, and even Facebook. Having a consistent and strong social media presence that you build over time will allow you to gain traction and recruit players.

The last recruiting resource is recruiting services such as Next College Student Athlete (NCSA) and BeRecruited. Be aware that not all recruiting services are optimized for esports, though more are choosing to incorporate the sport as the field continues to grow. Services such as these are easy to navigate and understand for student-athletes, parents, coaches, and directors. It’s simple to create your own recruiting profile, and each site’s search engine allows you to search for specific terms, and players to search for specific schools. Depending on the site, you can search for items such as names, game titles, graduating year, GPA, and more. These services will also have email push notifications regarding a new student-athlete’s interest in your program and might send you recommendations for students that meet your criteria.

Recruiting is a time-consuming process, but with careful planning and strategy, each of these methods can easily harmonize with the others to maximize efficiency. Thanks to automation and the overlap between these methods, you’ll be able to find great players.

Once you have invited and/or recruited players, you’ll need to manage your team. Sports management is a massive topic within itself, but in the case of this chapter, we will only focus on key points related to managing an esports team and what that entails.

One of the best things about coaching an esports team in a high school or university environment is its security and stability. This is a huge boon and draw for talented and driven players. Though there is a lack of specific data to point to, it is common knowledge that the average, privately created team for an esport (i.e., one that isn’t officially sponsored by a professional organization) will have a lifespan of only between three weeks and two months. Knowing that you may have two to four years with your players, and that your players have this much time to develop with the same teammates, gives a lot of room for players to grow, adapt, and become great, both in their game titles and as individuals.

As a coach, you are tasked with aiding young people in developing as individuals as well as developing as players on a team. Students learn a lot about life from a coach: how to cooperate, how to manage their time, how to empathize, and how to respond to disappointment and success with grace. It’s important to be knowledgeable on the game you coach and work toward developing a successful team, but not every player is looking to become a professional gamer, and not every player can become a professional in their game.
This is why it is important to coach students in life skills as well as team skills as they pursue their academic and personal goals. This is not meant to play into the old adage of the difficulty of actually achieving success on the professional scene, but more as a call to action to ensure that you, as a coach, know that your student-athletes should have multiple goals, and remind them that those other goals can and likely will assist them in a path to professionalism.

Since esports are unlike traditional sports in that they are not always physically taxing, players occasionally can become too invested, which causes other elements of their lives and identities to suffer. When players’ identities are tied exclusively to their performance, they are more likely to experience negative consequences to their mental health and academic success. Be sure to help build up your players by instilling a confidence that they are more than just athletes. Check in with your players regularly in a one-on-one fashion, making sure to teach your players skills in balancing work and sports. You can even involve them in elements of your role, such as fundraising, running drills/practices, and more, which will help them develop a stronger sense of connection and involvement in the team. This will help to ensure that they continue to go to class, do homework, and engage in healthy hobbies.

Academic success naturally segues into questions of player eligibility standards and adhering to these standards. Most schools have their own academic eligibility standards by which they will hold program directors and coaches accountable. Star players will not get much play time if they are failing classes and can no longer compete. It is imperative that as leaders in our roles, we ensure students are not neglecting their academics.

At this point, you have invited and recruited players and, to the best of your ability, you have a functioning, healthy team. Now, you will need to design smart and useful practices to improve their skill sets. Developing a well-rounded practice for the team is a challenge in esports, in that there are not always simple drills or plays as there are in more traditional sports. Instead, practices in esports boil down to two main activities: VOD (Video on Demand) reviews and scrimmages.

The easiest form of practice is to have a scrimmage with another team. Typically, a team will set up scrims with another team and try to optimize their custom game settings so that the scrim can maximize time spent testing new heroes, champions, strategies, and/or maps—whatever the game demands. All practices should be recorded in full.

The next practice should set aside time for a VOD review of a previous match to study opponents and work on gameplay. It is important to put what was learned into action if at all possible. There will be a lot of different learning styles present on teams. Some players adapt really well to audio-visual learning methods, while others will absorb the information and lose a portion of what was discussed by the next day.

Scrimmages are far from consistent as teams may not run plays and strategies that you were poised to practice against or for. For reasons like this, it is important to get creative on top of focusing attention on setting up scrimmages by occasionally using native practice software within your game title. VOD review can also make for an excellent opportunity to break up the constant grind of scrimmaging other teams and create space for players to have lighter practice days. You can even get creative and have the occasional VOD review at someone’s home, including dinner or snack foods.

It’s important to keep practices concise so as to avoid diminishing returns. Just as a traditional athlete can tire from physical exhaustion, an esports athlete can tire from mental and emotional exhaustion. When a bad day at practice looks like losing eight or more whole matches in a row to your scrim partners, players can get emotionally drained. It’s good to practice what you preach and make sure to be respectful of your players’ time and schedules so that they can balance their lives accordingly.
The final element of coaching that this chapter will cover is community involvement. Esports is new, and in many ways, it can make a name for itself simply by existing. But esports should not settle when it can become so much more of a positive force on campus, in classrooms, or in the community at large. We have not hurdled over all of the stigmas and stereotypes surrounding gaming and esports; the onus is on us to properly represent what it is that we do and the benefits we provide for our communities. Engaging local businesses, hosting events, and volunteering are key. The more we can shine a light on our positive impacts by bringing people together and promoting healthy competition, the more esports will grow into a powerful and significant force for our players and our communities.

The role of the esports director
Sponsorships, partnerships, and budgeting
A director for esports plays an integral role in the overall sustainability and success for collegiate esports. Part of that recipe is in the community involvement and developing a community in which esports can thrive. To aid in that, a director should work with whatever preexisting esports communities there are and host or coordinate events. If your audience, your community, and your future prospects are all actively involved in events and tournaments that your program hosts, it’s likely your program will attract more attention.

However, there may be some costs associated with hosting or coordinating events. This is where a symbiotic relationship with sponsor and partnership acquisition comes into play. Similar to developing practices, when creating partnerships and finding sponsors, it is important to stay creative. Every school wants to land a stellar deal with a major tech company or hardware reseller, but the weight behind local involvement is gargantuan in how it can positively impact a community and your program.

It is also typically far easier to walk down to your local coffee shop to meet about working together than getting in touch with worldwide brands. The relationships built within the community will create a positive feedback loop, including advertising for one another. The revenue brought in from the community and local business partnerships can enable future events and tournaments that can then become greater through production quality, prizing, and other activities. Financial acquisitions and event planning ultimately lead to the final consideration for esports professionals: budgeting.

Managing an esports budget is never going to have a blanket formula, but there are a few key points to consider when discussing budgets for an esports program: travel costs, equipment replacement and purchase costs, and operating costs. By virtue of the uniqueness of esports, it is possible to save money in certain respects, but esports and traditional sports still share many of the same financial burdens.

For most schools, and most students, it won’t be enough to merely have computers to run the games. Operation costs, such as subscriptions to Hootsuite or Discord Nitro, should be tracked year to year. For directors who are not particularly tech-savvy, try speaking with the IT department to plan for and track the inevitable costs of failing, worn, or broken equipment. There are shelf lives for hardware components to all computers, and every so often, it will be necessary to replace chairs, desks, and tables, along with computer parts and accessories.

It should also be on every director’s radar to provide teams with the opportunity to receive the same experience that other sports have in traveling to meets, exhibition matches, and tournaments. This is something that programs should strive for; it is an important part of legitimizing esports in the broader sense, and in providing esports student-athletes with the exciting competitive experience shared by other sports. Whatever the budget looks like, it should be implemented with the intent to achieve the goals of the coaches and/or director as well as the school as a whole.
At the end of the day, students who love esports want to be involved in meaningful ways, to engage their competitive sides, to feel the thrill of victory on stage, to develop strong friendships, and to see esports become the household name that they know it should be. As leaders in the industry, it is imperative we do all that we can to make that a reality. Each coach and director will learn how they must navigate this hyper-fluid and ever-evolving esports industry in their own way. These guidelines should serve as a springboard toward a long and successful career in esports.

About the Author:
NATHAN RAGSDELL is the head coach for Midland University eSports. His background is in FPS game titles and has specialized in Overwatch for the past three years. Coming from a military background of traveling a lot and majoring in international studies, Nathan has always been interested in learning about other cultures and languages as well as teaching. His travels and field of study taught him a lot about the world and how to communicate and be patient with different types of people. Everything was immediately applied on a daily basis once he began working as a head coach for esports.
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At first glance, esports, or competitive video gaming (for the uninitiated), can seem confusing. The desire to play video games as a hobby to derive pleasure was once hard to comprehend for some, but it’s now widely accepted and understood. According to Newzoo, in 2018 there were more than 2.3 billion gamers in the world, which is just under 30% of the global population. In America, the percentage is much higher, at nearly 70%, according to a study by Electronic Entertainment Design and Research.

More than 200 postsecondary institutions and more than 1,500 secondary schools are officially supporting esports with varsity programs. PlayVS, a California-based company focused on developing the high school esports space, has raised $96 million through investment. Some colleges have even begun offering esports-focused academic programs. This is just the beginning. Esports industry insiders agree that it’s only a matter of time before esports is adopted and officially supported on the same level as traditional athletics. Getting started now will still put your school ahead of the curve. Let’s explore seven things to understand about esports athletes, fans, and gaming culture.

1. Are esports considered sports?
Are participants considered athletes? Debate has raged for years and it will likely be many more years before we see any sort of consensus. The Oxford Dictionary definition states that sport is: “An activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment.” By that definition, most people are quick to point out that esports do not involve physical exertion and therefore are not sports. There are many counter-arguments to this, however. ESPN, a network focused on sports broadcasting, promotes poker, cup stacking, and speed pool, as well as many other activities that don’t quite fit the definition of sport either. So why not esports? Recently, a gamer who learned to race through simulator esports racing took on a professional Formula 1 driver in a real race car and won! The reality is that it doesn’t matter. Regardless of whether it becomes widely accepted as sport will not slow down its tremendous growth. The only important thing to understand is the opportunities surrounding esports, rather than the semantics of sport.

2. Speaking of semantics: Is it “esports” or “eSports” or “e-gaming”?
While it may not make a difference whether esports are considered sports, the lingo you use to talk about esports does matter. For many years, people fought over the spelling, but in 2017 the Associated Press settled the debate. The decision was made that “esports” is the proper spelling. Using anything else is a quick way to show that you are not well informed. To a millennial or post-millennial, someone using a word like “e-games” clearly signifies that the person in question is out of touch. Similarly, the term “esports athlete(s)” can be used in certain situations, but “gamers” or “competitors” are much more widely accepted terms. Understanding this very basic lingo can prevent you from making some early missteps that could discredit what you’re trying to do in the eyes of your target audience. Gamers place a high value on authenticity. Rather than pretending to understand the space, you’re better off admitting your ignorance and leaning on your students for advice. Esports on the high school and college levels to date have been built primarily by passionate students. Empower your students with the tools, resources, and guidance to build a program, and then step out of the way. The authenticity will shine through and create a much stronger program, and your students will benefit from experiential learning.
3. So I’m supposed to just give my students a Tetris game and that’s going to somehow be valuable for them?

Another important distinction to make is that not all video games can be esports and therefore not all gamers are interested in esports. Most esports are purpose-built to be played competitively. Taking the time to learn which games are esports and which ones are not will further help you connect with this demographic. While exploring this topic fully would require a chapter of its own, an example may at least begin to explain this idea. Just as working out at the gym does not mean someone is competing in a sport, playing Super Mario Bros. does not mean someone is competing in esports. The most popular esports are team games that require cooperation, strategy, and execution by a group. They are not solo activities. Supporting an environment that allows students to learn these games can create immense value in terms of learning teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills.

4. Are there any other similarities with traditional sports that make this easier to understand?

Definitely, and probably many more than you think. First of all, a similarity that many people learning about esports for the first time have a hard time grasping is that just like in athletics where you have separate teams for different sports, such as basketball and volleyball, in esports there are separate teams for different games. For example, in esports there may be a League of Legends team, an Overwatch team, and a Rocket League team. Further to that point, competitors for a particular game may not necessarily be interested in or may not be any good at another game. In traditional athletics, especially once athletes reach the collegiate level, athletes tend to specialize in one sport. The same is mostly true for esports competitors. Therefore, an esports program is structured very similarly to an athletics program—often with a director overseeing a staff of coaches who each work with individual teams, each of which are comprised of multiple players who compete in a single game. In high school, students likely will still be experimenting with many games, so the structure can be a little more free-form to allow for flexibility. The similarities don't stop there. Training schedules can be almost identical with designated practice times, film review sessions, strategy meetings to review playbooks, game times, travel to tournaments, and even team workouts. Yes, gamers hit the gym just like their traditional athlete counterparts. As the adage goes: “healthy body, healthy mind.” Competitors in esports may not display the same athletic abilities while competing as athletes in traditional sports, but they require strong mental fortitude. High-level gamers are tasked with executing hundreds of actions per minute, with near-perfect accuracy and precision, for long periods of time, which requires top-notch mental stamina. To accomplish this with consistency, a healthy lifestyle is essential. Building health and fitness requirements into your program not only will help your players perform better in games, but it also will help shake some of the negative gamer stereotypes.

5. That’s not what I imagine when I think of gamers. What are they like?

For decades, the media has presented video game enthusiasts as unhealthy, antisocial, and lacking ambition. Even today as the number of gamers in North America outnumbers nongamers, these stereotypes continue to be perpetuated through film and television. In reality, the average modern gamer doesn’t quite fit this narrow definition. Gamers come from all walks of life and come in every shape and size. In many ways, the accessibility of video games means more people have the opportunity to participate than in traditional athletics. We see band geeks, jocks, rockers, and straight-A high achievers competing shoulder to shoulder. Although the number of women involved is still relatively low, we are beginning to see gender barriers in esports disappear with many women filling roles on high school, collegiate varsity, and professional-level teams. The accessibility and welcoming community in esports has resulted in a sizable number of participants from the LGBTQ community as well. Ask any high school program faculty lead and they will tell you that the esports club has given many students who previously didn't have anywhere to belong, a home on campus to call their
own. In addition, many esports competitors take their craft just as seriously, if not more seriously than traditional athletes. Stop into the training facilities on a varsity campus and you'll see gamers demonstrating extreme focus and dedication to their game, along with an intense emotional connection to their results. In the world of esports, it's not all fun and games. Competitors take esports seriously, and so should you.

6. Why should I take this so seriously? Is it really that big?
The short answer is yes. In North America, the first collegiate varsity team appeared in 2014. Five years later, there are more than 200 postsecondary institutions offering varsity esports, which easily represent more than 2,000 student-athletes, and new schools are launching programs just about every week. This represents millions of dollars in new scholarships for high school students looking to pursue a position on a collegiate roster after graduation. For those not interested in competing, many colleges are beginning to offer esports academic programs to help students learn the business and content creation skills necessary to work in the esports industry. On the professional level, investors are purchasing franchises for millions of dollars, some players are earning six-figure salaries, and hundreds of millions of dollars in prizes are up for grabs. According to Statista, revenues in the esports industry eclipsed $1 billion in 2019. The interest for esports has created viewership numbers that rival some of the biggest traditional sporting events in the world. The world championships for League of Legends in 2018 reached a peak of 99.6 million viewers, up from 57.6 million in 2017.

7. The interest is there. How can schools benefit?
As mentioned previously, esports is very accessible. In addition, it appeals to a segment of the student population that isn't often reached through traditional student-life programming. Together, these factors mean that a well-implemented esports strategy will improve student life on campus for a large segment of the student population. The idea that gamers are antisocial is a myth. The reality is that very few opportunities to socialize while enjoying activities catered to this demographic have been explored. Firsthand experience has demonstrated that by creating a space and activities for gamers, you create opportunities for positive social interaction that can often result in the formation of strong friendships. This, in turn, has a positive effect on mental health. If this benefit alone is not enough, there is another area where esports can create big opportunities for high school students and that's as a pathway to a postsecondary education. More than 200 colleges now support varsity-level esports competition. This is still only a fraction of the more than 4,500 postsecondary institutions in North America, but all indications suggest that it's not a matter of if esports is adopted in schools, but when. This means that thousands of scholarship opportunities will become available over the next few years. Launching a program can give your students an edge when it comes to pursuing those opportunities. Luckily, another major benefit is that the startup cost is fairly low in comparison with traditional athletics. To get started on a basic level, all that is required are six gaming computers and a small amount of space. Most competitions take place online so there is no need for travel.

The idea of bringing esports to your school may seem overwhelming. Many of you may finish reading and immediately move on to something else. However, the most important thing to understand is that esports is coming, whether you embrace it or not. Students took the initiative and started hundreds of clubs and competitive teams at schools all around North America long before the first officially sanctioned program was established. That being said, the potential to create improvements to student life can lead to immensely positive benefits for students and schools alike. Although the task may seem daunting, the time to get involved is now.
About the Author:
SHAUN BYRNE is the esports director for Saints Gaming (SaintsGaming.ca), the varsity esports program at St. Clair College in Windsor, Ontario. St. Clair College was the first postsecondary institution in Canada to fully embrace varsity esports. Starting in January 2019, he also began serving as program coordinator and faculty lead for the Esports Administration and Entrepreneurship academic program, one of only a handful of programs in the world that train students for careers in the esports industry. Prior to his positions at the college, Shaun founded and served as CEO for Esport Gaming Events, Inc. (EGE.gg) from 2012 until 2017. EGE hosted more than 100 successful esports events during that five-year span throughout Ontario, Quebec, and Michigan, including Good Game Con in 2016 (the largest, with more than 3,000 live participants) and Saints Gaming Live in 2017 (which served as proof of concept for the esports programs at St. Clair College). Although Shaun doesn’t have as much time to play games these days, when he gets the opportunity, his favorites are Super Smash Bros. and Fortnite.
This section will cover all aspects of the technology needed to equip a high school or university esports program and the cost associated with dedicated space and equipment. Topics covered will be types of gaming stations available; network switches; arena layouts; and gaming desks, chairs, and peripherals to enhance the level of play of the esports athlete and team. Discussion on how to design a practice and competition space that can easily expand as the esports program grows will be included. What games to play, how to purchase them, and the support needed will be covered.

The cost of esports can be estimated by identifying the main drivers of any esports program. Technology, equipment, and space are all required markers that must have a dedicated budget and have existing associated costs. Each program can have unique and incredible opportunities that will drive its own cost and expectations. Of course, with expenditures comes different opportunities, alongside traditional funding. Unique opportunities include ad revenue, sponsorships, and gaming events. Using these, along with budgeting, grants, and student fees, can fund a program and cover the expected costs.

Often, esports is compared to the Wild West because of its rapidly changing landscapes and relatively open future. It is important to develop an esports program with the intent of sustainability in all aspects of technology: software, hardware and infrastructure. This is how your program prevents itself from becoming the pony express. We must build our programs with the ever-changing industry in mind. This will greatly aid in providing improved performance and healthy practices for your students.

Esports has the advantage of sharing technologies over various video games, which is a benefit over traditional sports. Baseball stadiums can’t really be used for football or soccer, but League of Legends, Counter Strike:GO, Overwatch and many other video games can be played on the same machines. There are only a few key physical differences needed. We can divide gaming hardware and software into two main categories: console and PC gaming. Console gaming has not been widely established in competitive esports. Most of the top popular esports tournaments use PCs: League of Legends, Counter Strike and Overwatch.

Technology
League of Legends is by far the most popular collegiate video game and most structured for all colleges. League of Legends has shared common traits with the top-rated video games over the past couple of decades. It has been a game-changer, with a unique model and game type. It defines multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBA), a video game genre that defied other video games. It is accessible on almost any computer and playable even on limited budget machines. It is very easy to learn the basics of the title, yet still has a very high skill curve in terms of mastery. Most importantly, it is free to play. Ultimately, this means League of Legends has a very low barrier of entry compared with other games. High school programs should consider League of Legends because of its high volume of collegiate teams and low equipment requirements.

For prospective programs looking to choose the video games for their program, I would recommend networking with the local communities, nearby universities, nearby high schools, sports commissions and visitors bureaus. That along with what is nationally popular and has a strong collegiate ecosystem and structure make for perfect choices in video games. I would suggest League of Legends, Overwatch and Rocket League. These games are three of the top team-based video games with strong communities, and even stronger professional leagues. These professional leagues are import-
ant because they provide support for the ecosystem, allowing for high school teams to flourish. Video games are intellectual property. Almost all games require individual players to have a license that they must agree to in order to play the game. With each company presenting different terms and agreements, it is important to ensure that esports programs stay up to date and know exactly what they can and can’t do with the intellectual property they are using. Even League of Legends, which is free to play, only provides a license to the players who create accounts on the system. In some cases, the only option may be to require players to have their own accounts. Since the accounts may house private information anyway, this may be the better option.

Software
Open Broadcaster Software (OBS) and other streaming software provide free solutions to broadcasting, with options to create unique productions. Giving the opportunity to stream can offer more media and production roles to the students, as well.

Video Games

**LEAGUE OF LEGENDS**
League of Legends is the largest game available, with the most opportunities currently for students looking for scholarships. Five players are required. League of Legends is free. It should be required that each student have their own account and/or school account. League of Legends does not require high-end computers.

**OVERWATCH**
Traditionally, competitions are played on computers. Overwatch requires six players and is $19.99 for each account. It can be used to create school accounts that the team will use or require students to get their own. It does require high-end computers.

**ROCKET LEAGUE**
Rocket League can be purchased on Steam for $19.99 per Steam account. Traditionally, it is played on PC for standard play. There are three players on a team. It does require high-end computers.

**SUPER SMASH BROTHERS**
It can be played as singles or doubles. Super Smash Brothers requires a Nintendo Switch and game to be purchased, as well as all downloadable content that is released regularly. The game is $59.99 new, and characters must be unlocked for competitions.

**SPORTS GAMES**
FIFA, Madden NFL, and NBA 2K are sports games that are commonly played and supported on the professional level. PS4 is the system of choice for play. Currently, the games come out regularly and are $59.99 new.

**CS:GO AND RAINBOW SIX SIEGE**
Mature-rated games for 17 and up, CS:GO and Rainbow Six Siege may not be acceptable for every program, but they are options. CS:GO is now free, and Rainbow Six Siege can be purchased for $15.

**TWITCH & STREAMING**
Streaming on Twitch regularly and growing an audience can result in an additional revenue source. Hitting goals, you can achieve the ability for subscriptions and donations to be given to the stream. With an audience, it can be a great tool for marketing and an extra stream of funds.
Equipment
Any game title will impact the physical layout and requirements of a practice or competition room. Generally, esports teams consist of four to six players playing at the same time. Orientation and close proximity of the players is important to consider when constructing your space. Having the flexibility to reposition computers as needed can overcome the potential changes in the industry and the growth of your program. It is also important to choose equipment that can be ergonomically adjusted to each individual. Choosing specific gaming chairs, tables, and monitors can allow for full customization to satisfy every player’s needs, and provide a safe and healthy environment to foster growth.

There are many specifications when it comes to computers that will change drastically every two to three years. Planning for the cost of hardware improvements in the coming years can save programs from budget nightmares down the road. Games have ever-increasing minimum requirements to operate at a minimal level. As an example, fast-paced games such as first-person shooters require high frames per second and must be in tune with the refresh rate of the monitor. There is a noticeable difference or delay when they are not synced properly, and the performance will be limited by the hardware you purchase.

Monitors are generally 60hz, 144hz, or 240hz, and more than likely the average person wouldn’t notice a difference; however experienced gamers will. Simply, there are a lot of nuances to building a gaming computer. Most video games offer reasonable minimum requirements, but for a competitive video game team, you must reevaluate the minimum requirements and look toward competitive requirements. Based on your programs needs, you can identify minimum competitive requirements and purchase PCs built to those standards.

Complete High School Maize (CHSM) identified they would need 15 PCs for their high school program, with Overwatch being their main game. Midwest Esports researched the current competitive requirement for Overwatch and listed minimum hardware that was required. The administration defined a budget that would be appropriate and worked with computer companies to find a relative fit. We considered immediate costs, possibility of upgrades, and upcoming hardware releases. Desks were chosen so that the students could adjust the height as needed, even allowing them to stand and play. Chairs were picked that were adjustable and ergonomic. Monitors were chosen based on recommended requirements. Overwatch is a fast-paced game, so the ideal monitor had a refresh rate of 240hz (which was not available and was cost prohibitive at the time) and 1ms delay.

There were many styles of headsets, mice, keyboards, and mouse pads to choose from (players typically decide on these—similar to a baseball player choosing his own bat, ball, and glove). Keyboards offer different types, sizes, and layouts. Headsets are even more personal, but they are important to have. Having a few choice options for students, CHSM received its quotes. With those quotes, funding was secured for the PCs, monitors, peripherals, desks, chairs, and other equipment in the new esports lab.

Some extra equipment to think about would be projectors, screens, TVs, whiteboards, and other items that may be unique to the esports experience. Extra chairs, couches, and tables can allow for breakout spaces, watching replays as a team and much more. Specialized companies like Zowie & Benq educate on their esports equipment, including mice and monitors. This website tool can also be valuable in choosing and pricing relevant PC equipment: pcpartpicker.com.
Basic Equipment Needed
All specs are changing rapidly and there are drastic improvements throughout each game title. Systems are constantly outdated and must be updated to accommodate for technological advancements. To have a sustainable program, wise choices must be made on equipment, knowing there will be additional costs in maintaining and upgrading equipment.

PC GAMING
Monitor
144hz monitors are standard for high-performing gaming, which can range about $175 each.

Mouse and Keyboard
Currently, the mouse and keyboard are unique to each player’s style of play and grip. Ask for players’ input, or require them to bring their own, so they become comfortable with the tools they will regularly use.

Mouse pad
Large mouse pads with low drag that work for all video games are important for consistent play and expected for high-level play.

Headset
In-game audio and clear communication is crucial to any esports team looking to compete at peak performance. Wired headsets are recommended to limit the chance of malfunction and loss of wireless USB dongles while traveling or moving equipment.

Tower
Key components in building any esports-ready computer is the CPU, GPU, RAM and hard drive. High clock rates for the CPU, GPU and RAM are necessary to providing a competitive, fast-paced environment. In terms of hard drive, a solid-state drive should be the minimum that is considered; most teams are moving toward NVME drives that connect directly to the motherboard. Working with a gaming vendor can be extremely useful, such as HP Omen, Origin, CLX or others that are commonly helping schools get the right fit for their program.

CONSOLE GAMING
Console gaming requires significantly less power, and the internet is not required for each game.

Switch
Switch is used for Super Smash Brothers. GameCube controllers and adapters may be the preferred controller choice.

PS4
PS4 is used for all fighting games and sporting games. Generally, all console games are played on PS4s, the standard. This may change over time as new technology becomes available.

Xbox
Currently, Xbox does not have any games that are commonly used in collegiate or amateur esports.

FURNITURE
Chair
Gaming or office chairs should provide height and arm adjustments, as well as ergonomic support.

Tables
Standard 8-foot tables are the suggested length. This will provide the standard of 4-foot width for each computer station that professional Overwatch requires in competitive play.
INTERNET SWITCH
Having a dedicated port in your esports space is recommended to ensure competitive integrity of every title. Any IT department will be able to configure an ethernet switch that can provide a dedicated ethernet line for each PC.

HARDLINE INTERNET
Do not plan to use wireless internet and expect to install hardlines to each system to ensure stable connections. This will require an IT specialist on-site to manage or contracted worker to set up correctly. Each stream requires 25MB up and down for consistent stream. Each game should have minimum 10MB dedicated to providing stable game play.

Space
Different areas can be dedicated for space in an esports program, such as practice areas, arenas, control rooms, and team rooms. Each has new experiences to offer students. Generally, the biggest constraint in repurposing an existing room for esports is a lack of internet and power. The required power can be determined from the number of machines in the area. If the area was not intended to be a computer lab, it may require power upgrades to handle it. Internet bandwidth can be determined with respect to the video games, number of machines and streaming needs. Switches and ethernet must be in place to connect the machines by hardline, and generally internet bandwidth is not an issue in a well-managed environment with IT staff.

Many security systems in place on the internet, such as firewalls and blacklisted IPs, may prevent video games from working properly. Each video game has clear steps to properly set up the network and support the system, if needed.

An optimal solution is to provide enough flexibility to change the floor plan when needed to accommodate the changing industry. Robert Morris University has a perfect example of a flexible practice room and varsity room. Leaders chose to outfit the computers and tables with wheels. Based on the video game they’re playing or the needed format for that day, they can move the desks, machines, and chairs into a suitable layout. This allows flexibility for multiple games and types. Complete High School Maize did the same with their equipment.

Practice Areas
Space for the team to practice and to have league or tournament matches is a must for any program. An ideal starting point is with 12 or more computers. This will allow on-site skirmishes in all current video game titles. Dedicate a 4-foot width of table space for every computer. Correctly building a versatile space while accommodating the most games possible will provide more flexibility as games evolve. As a best practice, investing in ergonomic chairs, tables, and monitors can greatly help teach students at a younger age to learn proper posture. This could help save them from injuries now and in the future.

Consoles have now joined many universities programs, offering opportunities to high school students as well. Switches and PlayStations are the leaders in video game competitions on consoles.

Arenas
Currently, high schools are not regularly hosting large-scale events and do not require stadium seating; they opt into using existing spaces such as auditoriums to host large events. Soon, just as football and basketball requires stadium seating, so will esports teams. Planning to use existing spaces will alleviate the need for renting larger venues. When testing existing space, power is usually the biggest limiting factor. Investing in electrical updates and internet may be required to effectively run the experience.
Team Rooms
Athletes and coaches need space to watch game film (VODs), discuss and grow as a team, and store their personal items. It can be in the same room as the practice area, but in a separate, dedicated space. Typically, it includes the coach’s desk, casual seating furniture, and a large screen or projector. Having lockers for the team also would allow them to store equipment.

Control Rooms
Control rooms can be dedicated to stream and broadcast productions related to esports matches and online shows in general. With YouTube streaming and esports providing regular content and potential careers, a control room is the perfect addition to any esports program.

Conclusion
Hopefully this chapter gives you the basic cost of esports and helps you identify the main expense drivers in any esports program. As you can see, space, technology and equipment are all required markers that must have a dedicated budget and plan to maintain a quality program over time. Each program will have unique needs and wants that will drive its own costs and expectations. Flexibility, sustainability and adaptability should be a part of the design conversation to keep pace with the ever-changing competitive esports landscape and gain the maximum return on the initial investment in the program.

About the Author:
RAMSEY JAMOUL is an avid entrepreneur, programmer, and gamer. Ramsey was one of founders for the Wichita State University Esports team and helped build the infrastructure for esports in the Midwest. He established Wichita Esports and grew it into Midwest Esports by building a path for amateur players to become the next Michael Jordan of esports. As CEO of Midwest Esports, he now has set his sights on professionalizing amateur, collegiate and high school esports around the United States. He can be reached at ramsey@midwestesports.com.
Esports provides a fantastic environment for connecting play and learning. For example, participating in a scholastic esports program, such as the North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF), offers all the benefits of the esports experience, plus state-approved curriculum that puts the fun back into learning. Many organizations run tournaments for high schoolers, but lasting education demands an intentional framework, and one that is evidence-based and Department of Education-approved. By tapping into students’ love of esports and related components of the ecosystem, it is possible to genuinely engage youth in the meaningful learning of life and career skills. Scholastic esports, not just esports, is the key.

NASEF has developed an evidence- and research-based program that incorporates state education standards into league play of popular video games while maintaining an authentic gamer experience. Similarly, esports-centric classes impart time-tested principles with illustrations from the games, community, and the ecosystem to make the lessons fun and memorable.

“Online platforms like esports are the new social gathering places for kids,” said Gerald Solomon, executive director of the Samueli Foundation and founder of NASEF. “We believe the platform, when infused with state-credentialed curriculum, can be leveraged for an even greater benefit to help them grow their STEM interests and develop valued skills that will be needed for success in the future workforce.”

NASEF’s foundation is based upon several principles: First, it is a scholastic platform that uses esports as the Trojan Horse to get kids excited about learning. Second, it is free because education is a fundamental right. And lastly, it is evidence- and research-based, assessing the nexus between the curriculum and the play of esports.

“Millions of teenagers are playing esports, leading many parents and educators to wonder how to infuse positive elements into the outrageously popular video game community and culture,” said Dr. Constance Steinkuehler, professor of informatics at UC Irvine and NASEF’s education and research lead. “NASEF provides schools with the tools they need to give teens a complete experience that combines the fun of gaming with deeply embedded education on relevant real-world skills.”

How NASEF’s Education Permeates Esports

IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL LEARNING

Renowned education experts from the Orange County Department of Education and researchers from the University of California, Irvine, and UCI Esports (the 2018 College League of Legends National Champion) carefully examined the esports ecosystem to create what is currently the only state-approved, full four-year high school and CTE track curriculum connecting education to esports. They were able to integrate education into esports clubs:

- An environment was created to nurture collaboration, communication, and school pride.
- Near-peer professional coaches guide students to develop social-emotional skills and to build a positive gaming culture, as well as to improve their gameplay.
- Professionals lead career-focused workshops, clinics, and mentoring sessions incorporating engineering, technology, and entrepreneurship principles.
- Students are mentored to build crucial 21st-century skills.
School clubs gain access to dozens of toolkits that help members with important tasks, such as creating a club charter and code of conduct, fundraising, and building an online presence.

And an entire state-approved curriculum for high school and CTE was developed that can be used as a framework for connecting learning and play in any school or out-of-school program.

High school students interested in a variety of STEM and creative careers should have the opportunity for real-world experience in those areas. NASEF offers recognition and mentorship opportunities in “Beyond the Game” challenges in 17 categories of competition, such as:

- Ready, Set, Draw: Create Fan Art
- Making Money Moves: Host a Fundraiser
- Let’s Get Hype: Create a Club or Team Video
- Adopt a Bot: Upgrade Your Discord Server
- Surf’s Up: Design Your Club Website

Aaron Teats, vice president and chief marketing officer for the National Hockey League’s Anaheim Ducks, said, “In every sport, for every professional player, hundreds or even thousands of professionals work to support the gameplay in marketing, content creation, data analysis, communications, and more. These challenges bring high school scholastic esports clubs the same reality that exists in the professional sports world. NASEF’s work to help students prepare for the real world is impressive.”

1STEM = Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
CLASSROOM OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING
The rapidly growing esports video game ecosystem provides a unique wealth of material for education around mythology, plot, and character, as well as business-centric principles such as critical thinking, ethics, persuasive writing, collaboration, and developing and making professional presentations, when properly designed and implemented by credentialed educators and when approved by state curriculum decision-makers.

“We shouldn’t be afraid to leverage esports for learning just because it is a sport or, for some, viewed simply as a business venture,” said Solomon. “The ability to go to where the students are, and capture their attention, offers a rare opportunity. The combined enthusiasm of students and teachers for play and classroom study tells us we are on to something big. We have introduced a disruptive and innovative way to reengage kids in education.”

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS (ELA) PLATFORM
NASEF’s ELA Integrated Courses for grades 9 through 12 were designed by a team of professors and researchers as referenced above. The courses are California-approved for “b” designation (meeting graduation requirements as core classes, not electives, which is an important distinction). They are open-sourced and modifiable for state-specific standards throughout the country.

Direct connections are made between esports and content standards (NGSS, ISTE, SEL, CTE, and Common Core).

Courses include:
- English 9 + Game Design
- English 10 + Entrepreneurship
- English 11 + Marketing
- English 12 + Organizers

CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION
Following state approval of the high school ELA curriculum, these same educators designed a CTE state-approved curriculum, which is also available for free to all schools and students. It sets forth a multiyear sequence of courses for students in grades 8 through 12 that integrate core academic and technical knowledge with 25 courses. The curriculum is designed around the four major esports sectors:
- Strategists
- Organizers
- Content Creators
- Entrepreneurs

The curriculum will provide pathways to all 15 careers, including but not limited to:
- Event Planner
- Analyst
- Fandom Art
- Marketing
- Theory Crafter
- Shoutcaster
- Streamer
- Journalist
- Web Developer
MIDDLE SCHOOL COURSES
Because esports offers such an innovative and unique experiential opportunity for learning, middle school administrators and teachers asked NASEF to extend its curriculum to the middle school platform. NASEF complied and also offers a field-tested curriculum for middle school students, as well. As with the high school and CTE curriculum, it integrates standards-based academic and technical knowledge within the field of esports.

LASTING IMPACT
Researchers at UC Irvine secured IRB approval to study NASEF’s curriculum in esports and found students improved in nearly every outcome variable measured, including STEM career interest, school engagement, relationships with both peers and adults, critical thinking, and many others.

Locations
Just as education happens in a variety of environments, so can scholastic esports. Although many are formed in schools, community-based organizations have the opportunity to participate, as well.

AFTER-SCHOOL CLUBS
Jeff Davis, executive director of the California Afterschool Network, recognizes great learning benefits that are wrapped into scholastic esports. “Today’s students will have the opportunity to solve critical issues and participate in a workforce that is nearly unrecognizable to us today. After-school providers understand the importance of offering hands-on STEM learning opportunities to prepare students for the evolving future. Esports offers a way to engage students through gaming while teaching them skills that will be important to their future success.”

“Today’s students enjoy gaming, but few may understand the career opportunities gaming represents, from professional gameplay to coding and engineering the next wave of innovative video games. Beyond those industry-specific careers, a wealth of opportunities will be available to students who have developed esports skills such as data analysis, digital imaging, web development, journalism, event management, and more,” Davis continued.

LOCAL LIBRARIES
Libraries have discovered a renewed relevance through scholastic esports. The Pottsboro, Texas, library recently launched an esports club with an enthusiastic community response. Librarian Diane Connery said, “We couldn’t be more thrilled to get started building a NASEF club and introducing our local kids to this positive developmental environment. Libraries are important centers of learning that can bring relevant technology and programs to their communities. I’m confident that the esports community we build will help our local kids develop technology, STEM, and life skills. This will help us equip them to leave high school with applicable knowledge, putting them on a level playing field with students from big cities with more options.”

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS
Other local organizations such as the Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCA are also implementing scholastic esports clubs. In fact, the YMCA of Orange County, California, started more than 40 NASEF clubs. Called Esports at the Y, it uses NASEF materials to provide gaming clubs in a safe, educational and fun environment facilitated through organized, multiplayer video game competitions.

The YMCA Scholastic Esports program serves today’s youth by providing opportunities for all students to use esports as a platform to acquire the critical communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills needed to thrive in work and in life. Rather than solely focusing on competition, they are introducing students to a wide variety of roles, and allowing them to expand their skills and gain experience for future careers.
ENCOURAGING POSITIVE BEHAVIORS AND DIVERSITY

To provide an environment to help students learn, grow and thrive, scholastic-based esports clubs and teams require a code of conduct. Diversity doesn’t just happen. To achieve it requires intentionality. NASEF has developed such a document that serves as the foundation for participation. All clubs review, personalize, and adopt it. All are expected to adhere to the same standard: to ensure that the esports environment is inclusive, supportive and respectful.

Esports are for everyone, and NASEF stands with AnyKey in asking students to commit to a high standard of personal character and behavior, rising above the negativity, toxic behavior, and discrimination that exist in many gaming communities. NASEF and AnyKey are focused on creating a gaming ecosystem that welcomes everyone and includes all, no matter their shape, size, color, gender, background, disability, or beliefs.

AnyKey is intent on transforming esports into a better place for all. NASEF has partnered with AnyKey on that mission. As such, all participating students are expected to adhere to a formalized code of conduct.

Playing Games

With a learning lens, the play of the game becomes even more exciting and fun. Tournaments are offered in popular game titles. As with many esports leagues, NASEF offers a number of tournaments each season, carefully selecting titles that meet the rigorous standards of its academic partners.

Learning Must Be Free

Education, as mentioned, is a fundamental right, and no one should have to pay to become educated. Thus, NASEF does not charge any fees for participation. Everything is free, a unique characteristic of NASEF. There is nothing wrong with playing in leagues that charge a fee, but to be true to the educational experience and mission, NASEF chooses to be free.

Evaluation Overview

As esports continues to grow, so do the number of opportunities to participate. Here are some questions and factors to consider when evaluating how to adopt an esports program for your school or community organization:

• Is it a nonprofit organization?
• What are the motives of the program?
• Are there costs for schools and students to participate?
• Does it offer mentorship to students by legally screened professionals?
• Are the professional coaches skilled and trained? If so, by whom and to what standards?
• Is education and learning an important factor? If so, is the curriculum state-approved?
• What is the cost, if any, of curriculum and other educational materials?
• Is there intentionality on diversity and equity through a formalized code of conduct?
• What types of game titles and tournaments are you comfortable with (i.e., first-person shooter vs. others)?

“We’re approaching esports through the lens of learning … personal growth and career preparation. Our No. 1 objective is to help teens learn, grow, and thrive,” concluded Solomon.
About the Authors:

MARK DEPPE led the effort to create the award-winning esports program at UCI that boasts a 100% graduation rate. Working closely with student leaders, administrators, faculty, and industry partners, Mark built a business plan that is cost-neutral to the university and that broadly approaches the world of esports through the five pillars of competition, research, community, entertainment, and careers. Mark was selected to serve as the inaugural commissioner for the North American Scholastic Esports Federation, helping connect learning to student interests.

In June 2018, UCI’s League of Legends team won the College League of Legends Championship. In October 2018, UCI’s esports program was awarded “Most Outstanding Collegiate Program” by the esports industry at the Tempest Awards. At UCI, Mark has coordinated many campus traditions, including helping break Guinness World Records. Mark has a Bachelor of Science degree in psychobiology from UCLA and an MBA from Cal State Fullerton’s Mihaylo College of Business and Economics.

GERALD SOLOMON has served as the executive director of the Samueli Foundation since 2008, overseeing the family’s global philanthropic activities. The foundation was formed when Henry Samueli took Broadcom public, and since his hire has provided grants in excess of $510 million. The foundation’s focus is on STEM education, youth development, integrative health, and Jewish leadership. Gerald has demonstrated an acute ability to be innovative and collaborative, building national and global networks impacting hundreds of thousands of children and young adults. His current initiative is connecting “play and passion with purpose.” He is integrating esports and gaming with a scholastic platform approved by the state of California, and especially focused on underserved and disenfranchised youth, through the North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF). In just eight months, NASEF has grown to 35 states with more than 5,000 students connecting esports play with learning and workforce skill development.
This chapter will discuss how to develop a solid foundation for an esports program and give concrete examples of creating a code of conduct and developing structures that welcome diversity and include all who want to participate. Tips on how to create a positive and supportive practice and competition culture that improves the talent level of all involved are also included.

First, let’s get this out of the way. There is not one right way to build an esports program. Throughout the past few years, we’ve seen programs pop up across the United States, ranging from multi-million-dollar departments to budget renovations in old PC labs. We’ve seen schools competing in massive tournaments hosted by developers, and teams competing in small-time leagues with nearly no audience. Programs such as these can create new opportunities for students, ranging from competition to employment and student work to internships. Some programs are diving into esports and hiring full-time industry professionals, and others are tacking on responsibilities to existing faculty and staff. We sometimes joke about esports being the Wild West, but there are a handful of things you can implement and execute early in the conception of your program that will set you up for success and stability as you continue to grow.

**Philosophy**

Let’s start at the beginning. You’ve got your program supported and funded by the school district and the high school. You’ve got your staff in place and your facility locked down. Now you’re left wondering, what’s next? Before we get to that, let’s step back and evaluate your high school’s mission. How does esports fall into that? How are you able to support the high school mission through your program? Whatever your high school’s mission is, it’s now the mission of the high school esports program.

Your program should consistently push to be a part of the high school, not a stand-alone product. This ultimately will lead to one clear and supported mission, but also will promote support from your administration as you continue to grow your program. With the high school mission in mind, start to draft your esports program mission. Involve anyone in the school district and the high school whom you want to be part of supporting the success of the esports program. Consider school administration, athletic directors, recreation directors, guidance counselors, teachers, parents, students, and district-level administration who can help with marketing and fundraising. Typically, you’re going to need to run these sorts of things through those departments, so bring them into the picture now.
How to Define a Program Philosophy in 5 Steps

1. Establish a philosophy committee.
   • Reach out to a variety of different faculty, staff, and administration from each area of your campus and district community that are invested in the success of your program.

2. Establish the type of program you’d like to build.
   • Competitive vs. casual, opportunistic vs. admissions or academic driven

3. Define key areas of focus.
   • Diversity and inclusivity, STEM, toxic behavior, Title IX, education, community service, academic performance, opportunities for students

4. Draft a short statement about each area of focus.

5. Write a philosophy built out of each area of focus.

Code of Conduct
Once you’ve had the opportunity to build a program philosophy, you’ll move on to create a code of conduct for your players, faculty, and staff. Before we dive into the creation of the code of conduct, I think this is a valuable opportunity to define what we really mean by an esports code of conduct and what the purpose of this document should be.

First and foremost, the code of conduct will be utilized to set expectations on day one for your community. This should be one of the first things players learn as they walk through the door, and it should live through each of your players every day. This is the definition of your program and the essentials of being you, the heart and soul of your team. Program philosophy and a code of conduct might seem as if they are two individual pieces of “identity,” but I believe they’re cohesive and supportive of one another and ultimately should loop back around to support the high school mission.

How to Write a Code of Conduct

1. Determine the beliefs, values, and expectations of your program.
   • Understand what’s important and draw the line in the sand.

2. Keep it simple.
   • Don’t create complex loopholes with passive statements.

3. Write to your reader.
   • Write to your audience and ensure they’re capable of understanding the code.

4. Consult coworkers.
   • As with the philosophy, involve your co-workers. Involve your students. Find out what they believe a code of conduct should look like. This also will make them stakeholders in the code of conduct, which will ensure enforceability.

5. Don’t sweat the tiny details.
   • Don’t look to impose restrictions on all facets of your program. You’re trying to set a standard here, not become a dictator.

If you’re struggling to establish some code of conduct “must haves,” this list of ideas should serve as a loose inspiration:

1. Diversity and inclusivity
2. Respecting students, staff, and facilities
3. Toxicity (gender-based, skill-based, and everything in between)
4. Foul language
5. Drugs and alcohol
6. In-game behavior
After you have had the opportunity to create a code of conduct, it’s important that you have the team read, understand, and sign it. I would also advise creating a structured system of rewards and consequences to create a system of enforcement. This document needs to be something that not only you as an administrator believe in, but also your students believe in. Creating a rewards and consequences system with defined boundaries allows you as an administrator to not only reward good behavior, but also fairly discipline those who are violating the code of conduct they agreed to uphold. As this document evolves, ensure your students have the opportunity to grow with it. Make the code of conduct visible, accessible, and easily readable. Share it with your students, have them sign a copy, and then send another copy home with them to share with their parents. Be as thorough as possible here in sharing this document.

Goals
Alongside your philosophy and code of conduct, you are going to want to define the goals of your program. Are you looking to attract more students to your high school? Win a state championship? Create a large student experience club? Create opportunities for students to network? This doesn’t necessarily need to relate to your philosophy or code of conduct, but it will help you as you build your program. Once you’ve identified the goals of your program, you will have a clear vision of how you will want to build it out.

Developing Your Practice Structure
This one might get a little tricky. Before we tackle how to develop a practice schedule, I want you to consider what type of coach you are. Are you an expert in one game? Do you dabble in a variety of games? Are you a better mentor and guide than you are a game coach? Are you more of a faculty advisor than a coach? I think this is an important step in the process, as you will become an influential role model for each of these students.

I have found that students, especially in the esports world, are able to see through impostors pretty quickly. I’ve also found that players respect and learn better when their mentor doesn’t try to pretend to be something they’re not. If you’re not a League of Legends coach, don’t try to coach League of Legends. If you’ve never touched Overwatch, don’t tell students how to play Overwatch. It is important to understand that with or without game expertise, you can still provide a structured, learning-enriched environment in which these students will flourish. Rather than focus on game sense, focus on communication. Instead of mechanics, focus on leadership. Instead of building strategies, teach them how to analyze.

Once you have had the opportunity to evaluate yourself, it is important to evaluate your players. What are they looking to get out of your program? Are they looking for direct coaching? Are there students who are interested in coaching (and have the credibility to do so)? Are they super competitive or is this a casual, community club? What role do they need you to play? After evaluating both your skills and capabilities and the players’ needs and desires, you’ll be able to develop your practice schedule.

We have established what sort of mentor your students will have, so let’s talk practice. There are a few sides to this discussion, but they mostly fall under your program goal, students’ commitment, and facilities. If your team is hyper-competitive and you are looking to bring home championships, you will likely practice more than once or twice a week.

If your program is more of a casual club, then once a week should suffice. Are your students involved in other clubs and activities? How often do you plan on practicing on a weekly basis? You are also going to need to evaluate what your teams are doing during practice sessions. If your students are not competitive, then let them come in and game with friends. If you are trying to be competitive, you likely will want to include more structure such as scrimmages, film review, and analysis.

Check out the list of high school resources that follows to help define your program. It is important to note that there are dozens of state associations, Discord servers, and everything in-between to help out, too. Just look around and you’ll find something!
Some High School Resources to Consider

HSEL: highschoolesportsleague.com
PlayVS: playvs.com
NFHS: nfhs.org/sports-resource-content/esports
ViewSonic: viewsonic.com/library/education/how-to-start-high-school-esports-team

In conclusion, I want to echo the words of the introduction. The world of high school and collegiate esports is genuinely the Wild West. I understand how intimidating and even scary that can be for high school administrators. Educational facilities often exist in a world of routine, where the concept of competitive video games sounds so out of the ordinary that it’s almost laughable. Sure, it might be intimidating and scary, but I want to encourage you to explore the new frontier. Create opportunities for your students, build a structure that supports your students, develop a sustainable program that will last for generations, and be creative! I often get asked, “If you could give us any piece of advice on how to start an esports program, what would you say?” I say the same thing every time. “Esports isn’t going anywhere. If you are going to jump in, jump in with both feet.” Don’t steer clear because you are uncomfortable. Dive in because your students are passionate.

About the Author

CALLUM FLETCHER is the Esports Director at Illinois Wesleyan University. Launched in 2017, the program has earned national recognition as one of the best esports programs in the United States, with one of the strongest League of Legends rosters. Going into the new academic year, IWU Esports will massively expand, bringing four new esports titles and a new training facility to campus. Callum has been involved with esports for nearly 15 years, with a background as a competitor, event manager, content creator, and community manager before joining IWU to build its esports program. Callum was born and raised in England, but has spent most of his life in the United States with his parents and sister. Callum currently lives near IWU with his partner, Abigail.
This chapter will review all the esports games that are currently being played and give an overview of appropriateness for junior high and high school students. Discussions will revolve around what counts as an esports game. For example: Are robotics competitions considered esports? Readers will walk away with knowledge on how to discuss games with school administrators, parents, students and other stakeholders.

The core of esports is the focus on teamwork, strategy, and sportsmanship that is shared by traditional sports. To understand why a game is considered an esport you look at it with the mindset: Can it be used to create teaching moments that will help to further develop a student? Games that are considered esports also will provide opportunities at the high school, collegiate, and professional levels, and offer opportunities to students to compete and be a part of a community.

The field of esports also provides many job opportunities for video editing, IT, play-by-play casting, and many others that students may embrace if they enjoy gaming. We will discuss the cores of esports for the games League of Legends, Overwatch, Rocket League, Super Smash Bros., and StarCraft II. Another honorable mention is Fortnite. We will wrap up by discussing how to select games that fit your students and some games that require more caution.

All of the games have an ESRB rating, similar to how movies are rated for viewers, and these span from E for everyone, E+10 for everyone 10 and up, and T for teens or 13 and up. None of the recommended games have a rating higher than T for teen, and we will explain why some of them have their respective ratings.

**League of Legends**
League of Legends (LoL) is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game, where teams of five players control champions against the opposing team in an effort to destroy the enemy base. This game heavily depends on players working together and benefits from players queuing up together for communication. At the high school level, this game can teach players how to communicate effectively and fosters quick decision-making. LoL has many strategic levels, and while not being a beginner-friendly game, it offers lots of tools for players to improve.

LoL has a popular and growing college competitive scene, with many schools handing out scholarships for their teams. The professional scene for LoL is massive with the North America finals rivaling the Super Bowl in global viewership. This game has many themes and character models that are suggestive, but since this game camera is top-down MOBA style, it is not noticeable. Riot, League of Legends’ game studio, has removed several references to alcohol and tobacco in the character models, but most of its T rating for Teen comes from the characters’ back stories, not the gameplay itself. Because of the difficulty of this game for beginners, this game is much more suited to high school students as they will pick up the mechanics and strategy.
**Overwatch**

Overwatch is a first-person-shooter (FPS) game that consists of six-player teams pushing an objective. The objective is either to capture and hold a point or to push a payload to the end of the map. Part of the strategy in this game is the different maps that are available and the different game modes. Teams will either be attacking or defending, and switch places between rounds. This game relies on team communication to move onto the objective and knowledge of where the best points on the map are to hold off the opposing team.

Overwatch is picking up speed in college while having a popular professional scene with the most-recent season finals being aired on ABC. Although most FPS games are considered violent, Overwatch has cartoon artwork with fantasy characters. Blizzard, the game developer, has also taken strides to make it friendlier to keep its rating appropriate for junior high and high school students with an ESRB rating of T. Overwatch offers simple game mechanics with strategy being much simpler to grasp but hard to master. This game is a best fit for high school students, but junior high students will find it easy and fun to play.

**Rocket League**

Rocket League is best described as soccer with remote control cars. Players control their cars on a field that is boxed in on all sides with NASCAR-like fencing. Players drive their cars and attempt to hit a large ball into the opposing team's goal. Cars have a boost that can be activated to allow them to drive faster or maneuver through the air. This game is professionally a 3v3, but also has 4v4, 2v2, and 1v1 game modes. Teams play for five minutes, and the team with the most points wins.

Rocket League requires good team communication to call out the location of the ball, as well as who is chasing it out of the corner and who is taking the place of goalie. While strategy is simple in this game, players still need to master controlling their car on the ground and in the air. This game has a growing competitive scene on the college and professional levels, and while not yet comparable to LoL or Overwatch, it may be soon. This game is rated by the ESRB with E for everyone. Rocket League is a good fit for any student with its simple mechanics, and it’s easy for beginners to pick up. At the higher ranks it can become more complicated, but this allows longtime players to continue learning about the game.

**Super Smash Bros.**

Super Smash Bros. is a brawler or a fighter game in which players control a character and fight other characters on maps, otherwise known as stages. Characters have different abilities and stats that are used in the fights to rack up an opposing player’s percentage. The higher the character’s percentage, the easier it is for them to be hit off the stage and lose a stock. Although this game is mostly played 1v1, many high schools leagues play it as a 2v2. This not only affects the strategy of the game, but also gives a different feeling of teamwork than the previous games listed.

When playing Smash Bros. competitively, you are not in a separate room playing with your teammates. Instead, you sit right next to your opponent playing on the same screen, unless you play it online. This means instead of talking to your teammates directly you have to read their movements and have discussed beforehand what your strategy is going into the game. This requires players to really know their partner and understand which character they play as well as their own. The quick reactions and understanding is what makes this game a fantastic esport and is very easy to pick up for beginners.
The competitive scene for professional Smash is very large and most of the events take place in massive tournaments held across the country. Nintendo produces many family friendly titles and works hard to make sure that Smash remains at an ESRB of E10+. Smash Bros. is by far the simplest game to pick up and master for anyone, and offers a good learning curve for new players.

**StarCraft II**

StarCraft II is a real-time strategy (RTS) game, in which a player commands several units to build a base, manage resources, and attack and destroy the enemy base. There are three different factions to play: Terran, Protoss, and Zerg. Each faction has different units and special abilities to use in forming a strategy. Professionally, the game is played 1v1 but has the option to play up to 4v4. RTS games depend on the abilities of the players to make quick decisions and plan ahead to best counter the opposing players’ strategy. Players can spend a lot of time out of the game planning out their beginning build.

The professional scene for StarCraft II is one of the oldest in gaming history. While not as big on the college scene, the move to make StarCraft II free to play may help it rise in popularity. The game was developed by Blizzard, same as Overwatch, and is rated T for teen, mostly for references to alcohol and tobacco in the campaign mode of the game. Starcraft is a very complex game of chess packed into an RTS game, and is better suited for high school students or the more advanced junior high player.

**Fortnite**

Fortnite has become a pop culture hit and has been thrust into the spotlight, but it is yet to be seen if it is esports material. Fortnite is a battle royal, which means it is a fight to the last player standing on a map that grows smaller as the game goes on. Players must eliminate all other players until only one is left, giving them the victory. Strategy in this game involves collecting weapons and other tactical collectibles to get the advantage against others and to move around the map quicker. However, loot is randomly spawned into the level, which means some group could hit the jackpot of good weapons while others go without finding anything useful. This makes it difficult to see a skill match-up between players, especially at the very start of the game.

Fortnite poses a difficult problem with esports as this can lead to a single player carrying the game without needing teammates. Many professional teams have Fortnite players/streamers, but there is no secure place for players on a roster at the moment, and colleges are not yet reacting to the craze, except in local tournaments. There may also be issues with the objective being to eliminate all other players, while other games have an objective that can be achieved in different strategic ways and not just by aiming. Fortnite is rated T for teen due to cartoon fantasy violence. Fortnite is simple for everyone to pick up and start playing, but does offer a decent learning curve for better players to learn building mechanics.

**Choosing Games**

When choosing games to participate in, the most important aspect is to see what the students are interested in trying. Interest in games such as League of Legends will be higher with high school students than junior high students, but Overwatch will be popular at all levels. Some may like the team-oriented games and fast-paced gameplay, while others may prefer a solo game or a smaller team in which communication is simple or strategy is most important. From my experience, I have found offering a variety of games offers students a chance to be on the same team with different people from one season to the next. It also helps prevent students from getting burned out at the end of the season, since they move on to a different game and focus on a new set of skills.
Many leagues offer two or more games in the same season, but it is a good idea to just focus on one at a time when starting a competitive esports program. There are several other games that are considered esports that have ratings higher than T for teen. Games such as Rainbow Six Siege, Counter Strike, The Halo series, and Call of Duty have an M for mature rating otherwise known as 17+. These games are just not appropriate for junior high and lower high school students because of a more realistic design. They have popular esports scenes, but for high schools looking to get into these games, much should be reviewed and talked about with the players.

Esports games offer a wide range of different team communication, strategy, and career and potential scholarship opportunities. With ESRB ratings and the moves by developers to keep games esports appropriate and public broadcast-friendly, these games are appropriate for junior high to high school students. It is always important to keep at the front of the conversation the importance of sportsmanship and good digital citizenship. Each game has a different level of complexity that may be difficult for some younger players to understand. Knowing your students is important, as kids sometimes just having the knack for some games. Knowing about the games will help in navigating the esports scene, and I hope this chapter has given good insight into the games currently being played, and what games to get started playing at the junior high and high school levels.

About the Author:
RYAN HINDS is head esports coach at Elm Creek High School and president of the Nebraska Schools Esport Association (NSeSA). He has been playing video games since he was in middle school: first playing Halo, Star Wars Battlefront, and NCAA Football. In college, he first learned about the professional esports scene and really got into watching, analyzing, and playing League of Legends. In 2017, he and his wife started a gaming club in Elm Creek and reached out to other schools to set up local competitions. Now, he is helping to lead esports in Nebraska and to offer students an opportunity to use video games in their future college and career fields. His goal is to get esports recognized as a viable sport in Nebraska, and to help inform others about esports and the things students can achieve with gaming.
This chapter will go in-depth on competitions. What are the options for league play, how to schedule scrimmages, how to get access to competition platforms. What tournaments can we register to play in? Should we be streaming individual or team play? All of these topics and many others will be discussed.

Solving the Puzzle: Esports Competition
The landscape of esports competition has been something of a Rubik’s Cube that coaches and directors have had to solve for as long as esports has existed. Whether it was the early days of LAN tournaments literally run in someone’s house for a weekend, or the online nationwide leagues of today – there have always been places to play and competitions to enter. For a new coach, navigating this complex and often-shifting environment can be a pretty daunting task, but by breaking things down into bite-size segments we can start to understand more of what opportunities are out there for students and programs.

Who is Playing? Clubs and Teams
Before we talk about where we compete, we need to answer another question: “Who is actually competing?” Often times when it comes to the collegiate space, and more and more in the high school sector, we see programs as a blend between two distinct groups: clubs and varsity-style teams.

Clubs are often larger groups of students with the common interest in playing the titles found in the world of esports. Skill range varies greatly, and the students usually are involved with the program to be involved with their school, be part of a social group, and generally just feel like they belong. The varsity-style teams operate very similar to traditional athletics: they have structured practices, review sessions, dedicated coaching staffs, and generally more outward facing resources than club teams do.

Both play an extremely important role in building the different levels and groups within a school’s program.

In the early days of collegiate esports – and high school to an extent – schools either had one of these styles of teams or another. However, in the past two years or so, we have seen larger efforts to integrate these two different styles of programs into one – partly because numbers have been increasing to where not all students can be involved with the highest-performing teams, but also because getting more students involved with a team and opening the doors for more opportunity across the board is a win for schools everywhere.
Where Do We Play? Leagues, Conferences, and Tournaments

One of the single-most complicated parts of participating in esports – high school or college – is where the competition actually exists. Depending on the level of competition, time of year, geographic location, and even game, there are multiple leagues and tournaments that a program can join and play in. We’ll focus mainly on opportunities in the high school space for this chapter and briefly mention the collegiate landscape from a top-down perspective.

High schools have a unique opportunity and challenge when it comes to competitions. The space itself is broken up across four main segments: PlayVS, High School Esports League, the North American Scholastic Esports Federation, and independent state associations. Each plays an important part in the overall scope of developing the high school esports space, and each operates slightly different than each other.

PlayVS was founded in 2017 and has made its name by partnering directly with the National Federation of High Schools (NFHS) and working directly with each state’s activities association (NDH-SAA for example). PlayVS and the Activities Association work together to create a sanctioned “State Championship” season that schools within that state may join and compete in. Currently, PlayVS states have championships in League of Legends, Smite, and Rocket League. Competition is held online throughout the course of a semester.

The High School Esports League (HSEL) was founded in 2012 and operates at a regional and nationwide level. They have 2,100-plus partnered high schools and more than 60,000 students involved with those teams. HSEL has seasons broken up into Fall, Winter, and Spring majors supporting Overwatch, CSGO, Rocket League, Fortnite, Super Smash Bros: Ultimate, Rainbow Six Siege, Hearthstone, NBA 2K20, Madden NFL 20, Minecraft Survival Games, and Smite. Competition is held online and reported through the HSEL portal on its website.

The North American Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF) is another nationwide group that organizes competition alongside a large focus on developing learning in the classroom to teach digital citizenship, critical communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. It ensures all students have an opportunity to use esports as a vehicle for learning. It offers online seasons in a number of titles and operate in the fall and spring.

Just as important are the independent organizations in some states that have chosen to create seasons on their own: organizations such as Esports Ohio that are made up of volunteer educators from around the state who have made the commitment to organizing and supporting each other throughout the year, offering tournaments in many different games and often promoting supportive, educational communities at the same time.

Through these types of groups, whether they are state-specific or nationwide, there is a multitude of opportunities at the high school level for students to find places to play. However, these groups just touch the teams that compete externally – the “varsity” sport style of program. The club teams also participate in these leagues, but also compete internally, almost like an intramural approach. This gives a larger number of students the opportunity to play and learn in that same constructive environment that “varsity-style” teams have access to. These intramural competitions could be one-off tournaments over the course of a day/week, or even a semester-long season. These types of competitions are great for students to get an introduction to esports, learn the games in a safe and constructive environment, and help foster the esports community at a school in great ways.

While high school esports is often segmented by scope (state vs national), collegiate esports is essentially divided by which title you wish to play. The developers of each game typically are in charge of running that game’s particular collegiate season, and in some cases, large conferences or associations may play a part in that operation. The two largest of these collegiate tournament organizers are the
Riot Scholastic Association of America (RSAA), which operates the Collegiate League of Legends season, and TESPA, which operates all Blizzard Entertainment titles (Overwatch, Hearthstone, Heroes of the Storm, StarCraft II). These two governing bodies often split their regular seasons into geographically based conferences that play among themselves in the regular season before qualifying for the nationwide playoffs.

Finally, we should mention the traditional LAN tournaments that esports was founded on – in-person tournaments in which teams either are invited to or pay an entry fee to compete in and often has some sort of prizing, either monetary or merchandise. These are the events that the sport was founded on and happen all over the country in varying size and scope. The common denominator with these types of events is that they are attractive for esports teams to compete in because they offer the “traditional sport” experience of traveling to a game, possibly staying overnight in a hotel, going out to meals, and interacting with the team outside of the normal school environment.

**What Do We Do Now That We Are Playing?**

**Streaming, Marketing, and Education**

After a school has found the appropriate place to compete, it can focus on the intangibles that go along with actually running an esports program. During a game, there are only so many players that can be actively competing, but there is a wide range of other opportunities to be involved for the students who may not be the ones in a game.

One of the biggest opportunities adjacent to competing is streaming. As long as websites such as YouTube and Twitch have been around, there have been individuals and organizations, such as esports teams, that have been uploading content for others to view. Streaming is part of the esports culture and offers a number of ways for students to take part in a broadcast.

Streaming takes a lot of coordination and cooperation among a group of people sometimes as large as the team actually competing. If schools make broadcasting part of their program, common jobs within a broadcast could be camera operators – both in-game and in the booth – shoutcasters, stream engineers actually running the streaming software, audio engineers, chat moderators, and even directors and producers. You might also see students serving as graphic designers to create images and other content that will appear on screen during a broadcast. All together, a high-end stream could look very similar to how a television station operates during a news broadcast. All of these jobs are opportunities for students to learn new skills, follow their own passions, and be a very involved part of an esports program, even if they aren’t in the starting lineup.

Alongside the streaming aspect of esports is also the marketing and publicizing of competition results and of the programs in general. Video editors, graphic designers, photographers, and social media specialists are just a few of the different roles that can emerge alongside a program. Much like streaming, this offers a chance for more students to get involved and be exposed to new careers, skills, and passions that they can carry with them beyond being on the team.

Finally, one of the biggest intangibles that comes alongside competition is education. One of the largest impacts that esports is having on students today is that it is helping to teach them skills that they may not be exposed to in their normal daily routines. Being on a team is proven to teach critical thinking, communication techniques, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and so much more. Giving a student the structure of esports impacts them in many other ways than just getting good at the game as well. Almost universally, we are seeing grades increase because students are invested in staying eligible to be a part of the team and contribute. Students are beginning to have better attendance in school as well because they feel a part of a community that matters to them. Interpersonal relationships are being formed because of shared interest and safe spaces to interact with others, and much more.
More Than Competing
Esports is so much more than just competition. Once schools find their way through the maze that is the high school and college landscape and understand how they and their students fit in that ecosystem, they can begin to really leverage that competition to give their students a truly unique opportunity to grow as student-athletes, scholars, and people.

About the Author:
JOSH KNUTSON is the Esports and Virtual Reality Solutions Director for ByteSpeed, LLC. Josh got his start in esports in 2016 as the Program Director and Head Coach of the University of Jamestown’s esports team and served in that role until May of 2019 when he joined ByteSpeed. In his new position, Knutson serves as a technical expert and resource for schools that are operating their own esports programs, offering advice and first-hand knowledge of the space to help in any way possible. He is the host of ByteSpeed’s podcast “Esports Ed”, is an Advisory Committee Member of the National Association of Esports Coaches and Directors, and is a State Board Member of the North Dakota Leadership Seminar.
The rise of esports has been remarkable. Beginning with the formation of esports clubs around 2010, to Chicago's Robert Morris University pioneering the first collegiate esports varsity team in 2014, to nearly 200 universities with collegiate varsity esports programs heading into 2020, the industry is growing at a breakneck pace. This growth rate likely will become even more intense as esports provide a unique and low-cost opportunity for high schools to provide a new opportunity for students who do not typically participate in traditional sports, as well as for universities and colleges at all levels to enhance their enrollment pipelines in a higher education market that is increasingly desperate to attract and recruit new students.

As with all trends and activities, esports presents potential benefits and harms depending on how the gaming environment is engaged and coached. Online gaming has been shown to help improve memory, concentration, and analytical development, as players must remain alert and perceptive to the people, personalities, and actions that evolve during the games. It also provides opportunity for social development, particularly through multiplayer games, that require teamwork and communication.

Many players report their gaming participation has helped them with issues of social isolation and anxiety by giving them a more comfortable and structured means to interact and develop relationships. Financial opportunity via gaming prizes, personal mastery, complex problem-solving, and the resiliency to deal with unexpected circumstances are a few other potential benefits worth noting.

It also provides high school gamers opportunities for face-to-face interaction and participation in a community of a structured team, guided instruction and personal mentoring from a coach, leadership and program development opportunities, academic growth, access to fitness facilities and training, and the ability to participate in broader student development activities that exist within the high school environment. It also provides the student-athletes with the opportunity to earn college scholarships and continue to play competitively at the university level.

Fears and potential harms associated with online gaming are nothing new, and center around concerns of social isolation and escapism, inordinate hours spent gaming and the potential of addiction, negative mental health effects, and the physiological impact of gaming on the brain. Although these worries are not new, the explosive growth of esports has often left the medical and mental health community in a position of playing catch-up when it comes to the study and verification of potential concerns associated with gaming. Rappler, an online news site, identifies what it considers to be the five most common concerns for esports athletes:

1. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome and wrist injuries because of repetitive motion
2. Collapsed lung due to poor posture, inactive lifestyle
3. Performance-enhancing drugs
4. Mental fatigue and early burnout
5. Poor nutrition and lack of exercise

The focus of this writing is to explore potential mental health concerns associated with gaming and the protective factors that undergird one's emotional well-being. The fast-growing realm of competitive esports presents administrators and esports coaches and directors a unique opportunity, and responsibility, to support the well-being and growth of their players. Understanding the mental health implications of the sport is a key aspect in fostering student development and helping each gamer to achieve their personal best.
Video Games and Addiction

Perhaps the biggest mental health concern as it relates to gaming is addiction. In recent years, concern about “gaming addiction” and excessive play has received increased attention from the media, medical and mental health professionals, and even gamers themselves. The concern is legitimate, given video game developers design the games to entice longer and more frequent play. They utilize many well-established psychological principles built into internet games to accomplish this task: 4, 5

• Completing a mission, beating a high score, or reaching a preset standard

• Rewarding the player more frequently in the early stages of gameplay, and increasing the time and effort to receive a reward as the game progresses

• Making the game “just in reach” by keeping it challenging enough that the player wants to come back for more, but not so difficult that the player gives up

• Giving rewards at random intervals, and establishing a connection between effort and reward

• Constructing games with no end, meaning the person could play forever without “beating the game”

• Creating the experience of gaming communities where players feel accepted and can build relationships4, 5

There is currently no universally accepted definition or established number of gaming hours to categorize video game addiction. Experts argue among themselves whether there is sufficient research and evidence to appropriately classify extreme gaming behavior as an addiction or a disorder. It is evident, however, as articulated by clinical psychologist Dr. Brent Conrad, that there are clearly some gamers who “struggle to keep their gaming habits under control and may place greater importance on their gaming accomplishments than their happiness and success in the real world (e.g., academic achievement, friendships, relationships, career advancement, and health).” 6

Despite the lack of clear consensus of what defines pathological gaming, the World Health Organization (WHO) chose to recognize “gaming disorder” as a diagnosable condition in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) in June 2018. Their definition for a gaming disorder provides some framework to evaluate concerning behavior:

• A pattern of behavior that has been evident for at least 12 months

• Impaired control that is characterized by an “increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities”

• A continuation of the behavior, despite “significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning”7

In the United States, the American Psychological Association (APA) has also proposed adding gaming disorder to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). Although it is yet to be classified as an official condition, the association has put forth the following symptoms that give further definition to the concern:

• Heavy focus on internet gaming

• Withdrawal symptoms when Internet gaming is taken away (sadness, anxiety, and irritability)

• Tolerance, and the need to spend more time gaming

• Not being able to play less, and unsuccessful attempts to quit playing

• Giving up other activities, and loss of interest in activities that were once enjoyed

• Continuing to play despite problems

• Deceiving family members or others about the amount of time spent on internet gaming
• The use of internet gaming to relieve negative moods, such as guilt or hopelessness
• Risk, having jeopardized or lost a job or relationship due to internet gaming
  * Under APA guidelines the individual must have at least five of the listed symptoms to be diagnosed with gaming disorder

These definitions provide administrators, esports coaches, and directors, direction and support in assessing potential concerns with their players. Although behavior descriptions alone should never be the final determination of a problem, they do offer guidance for caring conversations with players to further evaluate their overall gaming health.

Gaming Addiction Prevalence
Research studies regarding the prevalence of a gaming disorder vary. In a 2017 study done with close to 19,000 gamers in the U.S., United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany, 65% did not report any symptoms of gaming disorder associated with the criteria suggested by the APA, and only 2.4% of the respondents reported five or more of the symptoms needed to be diagnosed.9 Studies cited by The University of New Mexico purport higher numbers of prevalence, suggesting 6%-15% of all gamers exhibit signs that could be characterized as addiction.10 Dr. Douglas Gentile, a psychologist at Iowa State University who has been researching video game addiction since 1999, reports that although researchers across the world define and study the problem differently, the range of findings is similar. He suggests it is appropriate to assume that between 4%-10% of gamers can be classified as addicted.11

While these results show that gaming disorder affects a limited percentage of players, the numbers are significant enough to alert people engaged in gaming or supervising players to be cognizant of the amount of time given to gaming activities. This is particularly true if gaming behavior appears to be impeding a good balance in one's daily activities and social functioning.

Warning Signs and Risk Factors for Video Gaming Addiction
Warning signs and potential risk factors for addiction are important for esports coaches and directors to understand and look for as they seek to protect and support the health of their players. If potential concerns are identified, it is best to simply ask about the concern in a nonjudgmental and direct fashion. The manner in which the student responds (e.g., defensive, open, avoidant, grateful, dismissive, etc.) is itself telling in assessing the potential degree of concern.

**Warning signs for video game addiction include:**
• Playing for increasing amounts of time
• Thinking about gaming during other activities
• Gaming to escape from real-life problems, anxiety, or depression
• Lying to friends and family to conceal gaming
• Feeling irritable when trying to cut down on gaming12

**Common risk factors for video game addiction also include:**
• Being male
• Having higher levels of aggression and neuroticism (moodiness and experiencing higher levels of anxiety, worry, fear, frustration, jealousy, and loneliness)
• Positively evaluating one’s personal intelligence and negatively evaluating one’s social skills
• Favoring online role-playing games
• Having a greater degree of impulsivity and limited ability to regulate emotions
• Having a lot of free time and little involvement in structured activities outside of work or school13
Gaming Excess vs. Gaming Addiction

Although gaming addiction is a concern, it should be noted that it is important to differentiate between excessive gaming and gaming addiction. Player behavior needs to be understood by context and consequences. Mark D. Griffiths, in his article in the *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, argues that “online gaming addiction should be characterized by the extent to which excessive gaming impacts negatively on other areas of the ‘gamers’ lives rather than the amount of time spent playing.”14 His study suggests that gaming cannot be described as addictive if it is not showing significant negative consequences in the player's life, even if they are playing an exorbitant number of hours per day.

Esports coaches can better differentiate between gaming excess and addiction by understanding that addiction is typically defined as:

1. The individual is needing more and more of a substance or behavior to keep them going.
2. The individual is becoming irritable and agitated if they are not able to get more of the substance or behavior. Although most people associate addiction with substance use, it is clear to see that compulsive gaming could meet this criterion. Some gamers actually report withdrawal symptoms from discontinuing gaming.

Other Mental Health Concerns

Two notable studies in the past decade indicate a high correlation between video game addiction and depression. A two-year longitudinal study followed more than 3,000 students in Singapore and found that greater amounts of time spent gaming, lower social competence, and impulsiveness were risk factors for developing a gaming disorder. Heavy gamers, those who played an average of 31 hours per week, were found more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, social phobia, and lower school performance.15

The other study followed 1,000 healthy Chinese teenagers ages 13-18 and found that those who used the internet excessively, primarily for video games, were two times more likely to be depressed nine months later.16

Dr. Gentile, the Iowa State University professor earlier referenced, argues that his research doesn't prove playing video games causes depression. He proposes that mental health issues and “pathological gaming” may develop in tandem. A young person who already suffers from depression and anxiety, and who is more socially inept and isolated, may withdrawal into gaming, and gaming, in turn, may worsen these symptoms.17

Regardless of the argument of whether one causes the other, meta-analysis of several studies has shown depression and anxiety to be particularly prominent among high-use gamers. Other detrimental health-related outcomes associated with excessive gaming can be fatigue from lack of sleep, diet-related concerns due to not eating properly, and social avoidance—all of which have corollary mental health implications.18 Esports coaches, directors, and administrators must take this into account while working with players and supporting the overall health of the individual and the team.

Understanding and Assessing Mental Health Protective Factors

Protective factors are attributes that help individuals deal more effectively with stressful events. They are resources that exist within and outside ourselves that we do, develop, and pursue to help us productively engage in life. The esports coaches’ understanding of and attention to developing these factors in student-athletes is extremely valuable.

KNOWING WHAT TO OBSERVE

One of the most significant studies to come out of mental health research in the past 25 years has been the extensive longitudinal study of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs are 8-10
identified factors (3 for abuse, 2 for neglect, and 5 for household dysfunction) in childhood that create traumatic and high-stress experiences that upset a child’s sense of safety and well-being. Examples of ACEs include one's parents divorcing or separating, having a family member incarcerated, experiencing physical abuse, and not feeling loved. ACEs were found to be common across the general population, and shown to lead to a host of negative health and social consequences throughout a lifetime.19

Astoundingly, adults who experienced six or more ACEs in childhood have, on average, a shortened life expectancy of 20 years. They are also 4,600% more likely to become an IV drug user than a person with zero ACEs. Additional findings show that people with four-plus ACEs compared to people with zero are:

- 6 times more likely to have been diagnosed with depression
- 2.5 times more likely to have absenteeism
- 3.3 times more likely to smoke
- 2.2 times more likely to have a heart attack
- 2.3 times more likely to report serious financial problems20

Though these findings are both sad and alarming, they provide a window for esports coaches, educators, and other individuals to better understand, assess, and facilitate protective factors for the young people they engage. Contrary to the popular medical (disease) model of cause, the ACEs study shows that emotional and social factors have a greater influence on addictive behavior (even with alcohol or substance abuse) and most mental health concerns. This does not dismiss the high importance of our medical understandings and intervention, but it does suggest that concerns with online gaming addiction and other potential mental health conditions are more experience dependent than disease dependent.

The function of addiction and other maladaptive coping behaviors, in other words, are more psychological in nature and, consciously or unconsciously, aim at escaping or managing emotional and environmental distress. This understanding raises the ability of the esports coach and director to better predict and evaluate a player’s well-being, and alert them to potential concerns for gaming addiction and other mental health concerns. It also gives guidance to how to better promote mental health and influence a positive gaming culture.

Esports athletes who have had a high number of ACEs present a greater risk for addictions and mental health concerns. An individual’s number of ACEs, however, should never be used as a determining factor or a reason not to recruit or accept a student for the team. Instead, the function for assessment that is most helpful to explore with student-athletes, ACES or not, is the story of their lives and how they have been affected by potentially difficult and stressful experiences. The brief 8-10 yes or no questions of the ACEs assessment can provide guidance for areas to understand about a person’s history and story; however, the ethics of using the ACEs questionnaire, or certainly requiring a student to take it, must strongly be evaluated. The key is understanding how students interact with difficult events that have occurred in their lives and assessing their propensity for resilience.

RESILIENCE
Resilience is the ability to overcome adversity, to be able to bounce back from hardship. In a world filled with experiences of stress, trauma, and struggle, it is important for us to understand what enables some people to be resilient and move forward through adversity, while others remain stuck and deeply impacted.
Social work professor and researcher Dr. Brené Brown offers insight to this question in her book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*. She summarizes the five most common factors of resilient people found in the research:

1. They are resourceful and have good problem-solving skills
2. They are more likely to seek help
3. They hold the belief that they can do something that will help them manage their feelings to cope
4. They have social support available to them
5. They are connected with others such as family or friends

As we listen to and understand students’ stories, these are the vital factors to look for in assessing emotional health and well-being. The concern with addiction and maladaptive coping behaviors is not as much about “what the person is doing,” as it is about “what the person is not doing” because of these behaviors.

Some of the critical questions we can consider and ask the student are:

• Is the student avoiding interpersonal interactions and relationships through excessive time spent gaming?
• Is the student escaping or numbing from difficult emotions through gaming?
• Is the student substituting real life for virtual life?
• Is the student goal-oriented, and do they exhibit effort toward their goals?
• Is the student able to be vulnerable, and do they pursue help when needed?

Spirituality and hope have also been identified as two very important aspects of resilience. Spirituality can include one’s faith in God, but in the broader sense, it is about resilience that comes from a belief that we are all interconnected; that there is power and purpose greater than ourselves; and that goodness, love, and compassion are virtues that should guide us.

Hope pertains to an expectation and desire for something to happen. Research by C.R. Snyder suggests that hope is more about a way of thinking than an emotion we feel. It involves the ability to tolerate disappointment, effect change by working toward realistic goals, and believe in our potential to reach our goals. Both spirituality and hope guide and ground us. Without them, we lose perspective and meaning which makes it difficult to persevere and remain resilient when faced with challenging emotions and experiences.

Questions about spirituality and hope we can consider and ask the student are:

• What gives you a sense of purpose to your life?
• What keeps you grounded and persevering when you encounter difficulties?
• What personal goals do you have, and how do you work to achieve them?
• What degree of belief in yourself do you have that you can achieve your goals?
• Have you ever had a time in your life where you have given up that you feel comfortable sharing with me?

Angela Duckworth dedicates an entire *New York Times* bestselling book *Grit* to further our understanding of resilience. What her research reveals is that although talent and noble ideas are valuable, it is actually dogged determination, or grit (“resilience”), that is the greatest predictor of one’s success. She developed the 10-question Grit Scale that is easily found on the internet. When answered honestly, the Grit Scale is highly predictive of resilience, and offers an esports coach a very easy and practical assessment tool.
WELLNESS WHEEL

Another simple tool to help evaluate an individual’s overall health is the Wellness Wheel. The Wellness Wheel is a visual guide that helps the athlete and coach better understand the player’s overall health in relation to the seven dimensions of wellness. Each dimension is comprised of common characteristics and behaviors that contribute to one’s wellness and quality of life. There are times when one aspect of wellness may be more pronounced than others, but a neglect of any one dimension or a lack of balance over time can have adverse effects on one’s physical and mental health. In addition to assessing an athlete’s balance of health, the seven dimensions of wellness give insight into potential programming areas coaches can develop to benefit player health and success. Free paper and electronic assessments can be accessed online to use.25
HIGH SCHOOL AS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR
The high school environment itself can be very beneficial to a player’s personal mental health and well-being. Many of the concerns associated with online gamers is their potential isolation and escape into the virtual world of gaming. Being part of an “in-person team,” receiving guidance from a coach, and having the ability to be engaged in the activities of a high school community are incredible assets that support overall student development. The value of the high school environment should be communicated to prospective athletes and their parents, as they make important decisions about their paths and pursuits.

Building Protective Factors to Support Player Mental Health
Time given to developing the whole person, in addition to gaming talent and skill, benefits not only the individual player, but also the team. Greater personal and team health also has payoffs for overall team and program success. Although not exhaustive, here are nine suggested protective factors coaches can facilitate with their team:

CRITICAL AWARENESS
Critical awareness is the ability to be aware of one’s self and the messages that drive us. This means being aware of our personal story and how it has shaped our behavior and style of relating, particularly with regard to how we manage pain and disappointment. It also involves reality-checking our negative self-talk such as: “I can never do things right.” “I’m not good enough.” “Nobody loves me.” “I am all alone.” “I have to be perfect.” “I’m a failure.” As we increase our awareness, we are better able to see and change the thoughts and behaviors that often unconsciously direct us.

VULNERABILITY AND SEEKING SUPPORT
Many people avoid vulnerability, and therefore support, because they perceive it as weakness and fear that opening up will lead to rejection. Vulnerability isn't good or bad; it is who we are. It is the source of our connection with others, our feelings of love and belonging, and our basis for hope and joy. Vulnerability is a risk we take with others, and far from weakness, it is an exercise of courage. We were not made to go it alone or to individually be able to handle all that life brings us. We need the support of others, and the behavior of help-seeking is shown to be a component of resiliency and strength. Any effort that mentors and coaches make to communicate and encourage students to seek help and to connect with supportive resources is a plus.

LEARNING TO LEAN INTO DISCOMFORT
Although it can seem counterintuitive, our healthiest response to negative and uncomfortable emotions is to “lean into them.” This means being willing to feel these emotions, understand where they are coming from, discern the beliefs they generate, ascertain how they direct your behavior, and consider how you can thoughtfully redirect them. When we numb or avoid our negative emotions, we lose our capacity for joy. When we engage with our negative emotions productively, we can learn a great deal about ourselves and we become able to apply new meaning to the narratives that influence how we see and behave.

LISTENING
Although it sounds simple, listening is a skill that must not be overlooked or underestimated. In one of the studies regarding the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) mentioned earlier, 130,000 patients upon coming to a doctor for a visit were given 10 childhood trauma-oriented questions in their intake paperwork. They could respond yes or no to questions such as: “Were your parents ever separated or divorced?” or “Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker, alcoholic, or use street drugs?” Upon meeting with the doctor, the patient was asked how they felt any of their identified trauma affected them. The doctors simply listened with care to their answers. The addition of this modest intervention created a 35% decrease in future doctor visits and reduced emergency room visits by 11%. The most significant conclusion of the study was that “listening was found to be a profound form of doing.” It should be stated, therefore, that any opportunity to enhance and put into practice one’s listening skills is an advantage well taken and a gift to be given.
BALANCE
The Wellness Wheel mentioned earlier is an effective tool to help individuals assess the balance of one's overall health. Efforts coaches can make to support health and balance in their players’ lives pays multiple dividends. Potential ideas to consider include team exercise/workout programs, study table participation, social and spiritual development activities, personal awareness and growth seminars, and financial planning guidance and resources.

DEVELOPING PERSONAL GRIT (RESILIENCE)
Today’s common message of “follow your passion” that is often exclaimed is a good one. Research shows that people who are doing something that fits with their personal interests are more satisfied with their work and display better performance. What is problematic is the lack of messaging regarding the amount of work it takes to develop our passion. Few good and satisfying achievements come fast and easy, and rarely are they attained without setbacks and disappointments. Grit involves dogged determination in working toward our passions, and it sees setback and struggle as necessary ingredients to sharpen our skills and perseverance. Ideas such as “honing a craft” and “deliberate practice” go with grit. Grit is not just about more time practicing, but better time practicing. Again, read Angela Duckworth’s book, Grit, which is an excellent resource for coaches to consider how to develop the mindset and behaviors of resilience in their players.

CREATING A GRIT CULTURE
Culture consists of the shared values and norms of a group of people. As a coach, creating a culture has a great deal to do with continuous communication and messaging around a core set of values, as well as modeling these values by leading with words and actions. For it to be a grit culture, more than half of the vision and messaging must revolve around ideas of teamwork, perseverance, continuous effort, and push. Solid and concise sayings or mantras are key in helping players build identity and shape behavior. Forming mantras such as “The Championship Lifestyle” or basketball legend John Wooden’s “Success is never final, and failure is never fatal” help sustain focus and provide a common language to challenge one another and hold each other accountable.

UTILIZING HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY RESOURCES
There may be no other place where the multiple resources that are available to support and strengthen a person all exist in one setting as they do in high school and college. Resources include academic support, counseling, career services, disability services, multicultural engagement, spiritual development, leadership training, health resources, campus activities and programming, clubs and organizations, etc. The value of taking advantage of the important resources available to the students must be emphasized. Coaches and directors can play a significant role in helping their players understand, assess, and pursue them.

BUILDING A SUPPORTIVE TEAM
Building a sense of community and connection is important to engagement. The esports coach is part of the player’s community and can evaluate the level of each player’s engagement. Coaches have an opportunity to build real-life relationships among the team through facilitating trust, encouraging social interaction and interdependence between players, and establishing team culture and values.

A Gamer’s Perspective
As a self-professed nongamer who was alive when the very first video game, Pong, was introduced in 1972, I would also like to offer Zolton Andrejkovic’s book, The Invisible Game: Mindset of a Winning Team, as a reference. I recommend it because, as an insider to the online gaming world, he upholds values for esports players and programs that are consistent with the mental health directions I offer in this writing. He also provides sound ideas specific for esports team and player development. He emphasizes patience and practice while working with new esports teams, the importance of players setting goals that are attractive and enduring, creating a common team goal, stubborn perseverance (resilience), mental preparation and effective practicing, tactics and strategies to win a match, and attention to self.
Conclusion
The expansion of esports into the high school and college realm presents an exciting opportunity for players and schools alike. It recognizes and advances the skills of these gifted players, and provides them an opportunity to further grow and develop through all the academic community has to offer. The unique relationships of player, coach, and team gives further ascent to personal development, leadership and followership skills, and growth through mentoring. The esports director and coach are in a great position to help guide these young men and women, and help each one advance toward their personal best during their academic years.

About the Author:
KENT SCHORNACK is the director of leadership and counseling at Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa. He also maintains a small private counseling practice, and provides leadership education and consultation to various constituents. Kent is a Licensed Independent Social Worker (LISW) with more than 30 years of experience. He is also a certified facilitator for Everything DISC and Five Behaviors of Cohesive Teams trainings and assessment. Kent deeply believes that relationships provide the most significant understanding of who we are and how we grow, and he uses this lens in addressing the role of esports and mental health. Contact him for comments and training opportunities at kschornack@grandview.edu.
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As a chiropractor with 20 years of experience helping people improve their health and posture, I have seen an increase over the past 10 years in people with health problems because of prolonged sitting and poor posture. More frequently, the X-rays of younger people who spend an increased amount of time gaming, or on electronics, develop a hunched over spine with a forward head carriage. These individuals show up in my office because they have symptoms that range from headaches, back pain, and breathing problems, to aching necks and carpal tunnel syndrome. My goal is to help gamers understand what they can do to eliminate negative health issues and maximize their gaming skills.

Chiropractic care is the perfect pairing for gamers who spend a large portion of their time in seated positions in front of screens. The average age of an esports athlete is 18-25. Although there are opportunities to compete at younger ages, most of the highest tiers of competition and major tournaments are limited to those who are 18-plus years old. It is uncommon for gamers to sustain a top level of play beyond this age range as their reflexes usually begin to get slower and their reaction times begin to decrease.

High school gamers can spend two to four (or more) hours per day practicing, and professionals can have intense training sessions of up to 12 hours for several days in a row in preparation for a competition. Along with the intense training comes the high stress and extreme fatigue on their bodies that can cause lifelong symptoms and issues. A knowledgeable and experienced chiropractor can help treat and improve a wide variety of issues that can cause a decrease in the quality of one’s life. A chiropractor will take X-rays of the neck and spine, review these X-rays for subluxations, and perform a detailed exam and evaluation.

Subluxations are spinal bones that are out of place in the spine and that place pressure on a nerve. This pressure on nerves can wreak havoc on the nervous system, overall health, and the ability to meet the demands placed on high-level gamers. Identifying subluxations and creating a detailed care plan to address spinal issues is the key to improved health, peak performance, and endurance.

What We Know
The worst thing a person can do when it comes to spine health is to sit. We don’t think about the amount of compression and degeneration our spine is dealing with. As a gamer, many hours each day are spent sitting. Let’s talk about what improper sitting posture does to the body. How you sit while gaming plays a large part in health. Leaning toward the screen puts the body into a bad position: shoulders are hunched, the neck is hyper-extended, and back muscles are stretched out. Sitting in this posture for long periods of time causes neck-flexor muscles and mid-back muscles to become stretched out and weakened, while the chest (pectoralis) muscles and upper back (trapezius) muscles tighten and shorten.
Long-term muscle imbalances can develop, which result in pulling the head forward. An average head weighs 10-12 pounds. When there is forward head posture, this can increase the pressure on the neck by as much as 50-60 pounds because of gravity. This increased pressure causes long-term damage to the spine, as well as to the surrounding nerves, muscles, and ligaments. These tight muscles and poor posture cause joints to become misaligned. A misaligned joint puts pressure on the nerves, which causes pain in the neck, back, shoulders, hips, and wrists, and other symptoms.

**Side Effects of Prolonged Sitting and Poor Posture**
Side effects of these imbalances start small with things such as an achy neck, a burning sensation between the shoulders, general discomfort, and headaches. When these symptoms are prolonged, larger symptoms can begin to develop, such as breathing problems, carpal tunnel syndrome, sciatica, posture syndrome (also called upper crossed syndrome), early degeneration of the spine, and disc bulges and herniations.

**5 Tips to Reduce the Risk of Prolonged Injury From Esports**

**POSTURE**
The better the posture becomes, the longer muscles will take to fatigue and the lower the risk of injury will be.

- Keep the head back and chin tucked so the ears are directly above the shoulders.
- Sit back in the seat, resting the back against the backrest of the chair.
- Allow shoulders to relax instead of shrugging them or pulling them forward toward the monitor in a rounded position. These things keep the muscles in the neck and shoulders relaxed and take the pressure off the discs in the neck.
- Focus on keeping the chest up. Imagine that someone is pulling up a string that is attached to the sternum.
- Roll hips into a neutral position. Hips should not be too far forward or too far backward. This keeps the hips parallel with the floor.
- Keep feet flat on the floor rather than crossing the legs or shifting to one side of the seat. This will keep the lower back more balanced, avoiding conditions such as sciatica and lower back pain.

**EQUIPMENT**
Having your equipment in the right position will alleviate stress on the joints.

- The top third of the monitor should be at eye level. Also, the size of the screen in inches is the distance the eyes should be from the screen (20 inches minimum).
- The height of the desk should be low enough that the forearms are resting parallel with the floor. This reduces the strain that causes carpal tunnel syndrome.
- The armrests are just high enough so that the elbows are bent 90 degrees.
- The chair should be high enough so that the feet rest flat on the floor and that knees are bent at a 90-degree angle.
- Sit with the back all the way against the backrest to avoid slouching or hunching toward the screen. Using a chair that has the option to recline slightly reduces the pressure on the discs in the lower back.

**STRETCHING**
In addition to a warmup stretch before gaming, these stretches will help athletes loosen tight muscles and become more mobile.

- Chest Stretch: Athletes can lay on a foam roller that is placed parallel with the spine. Stretch the arms out away from the body, allowing the pectoralis muscles to stretch out.
- Overhead Stretch: Lie on the back on an exercise ball and extend the arms up and over the
head, reaching for the floor behind the body. This will stretch out hip flexors, pectoralis and neck flexors. Proper stretching of the neck is essential.

- **Towel Pulls**: In a seated position, place a rolled-up towel behind the neck. Grasp the ends of the towel and extend the head all the way back to stretch out the front of the neck. Slowly repeat this stretch eight times.
- **Chin Tucks**: Place a finger on the chin. Without moving the finger, pull the chin and head straight back until a good stretch is felt at the base of the head and top of the neck. Hold for five seconds.
- **Shoulder Squeezes**: Pull the shoulders back and down as if squeezing an orange between the shoulder blades. Hold for five seconds and repeat 10 times.

**PHYSICAL THERAPY AND TRAINING**

With the help of a physical therapist, or a certified trainer, muscle strength and posture for athletes will improve:

- Bench press can strengthen the pectoralis muscles.
- Seated row can strengthen the latissimus dorsi (lats) muscles.
- Dead lifts and planks can strengthen the core.
- Always have athletes consult a certified trainer or physical therapist before starting a training program.

**CHIROPRACTIC CARE**

The healthier the spine and nervous system, the healthier the athlete will be.

The most important system in the body is the nervous system. The nervous system consists of the brain, spinal cord, and nerves throughout the entire body. Everything in the body is controlled by the nervous system, including muscles, organs, and even the skin cells. Nerve messages travel through the nerves from the brain to every part of the body and back up to the brain. It’s how our body regulates all of our systems.

The nervous system is so important that it is covered by bone. The brain is protected by the skull, and the spinal cord is protected by the spinal bones. As long as all the bones are in place, the nerve messages travel at 100%, and everything works perfectly. When posture is poor or there are repetitive motions, the spinal bones move out of place and put pressure on the nerves. This is called a spinal subluxation. A subluxation, put simply, is a bone out of place putting pressure on a nerve. When that occurs, the nerve messages become distorted. If left untreated, these distortions cause symptoms in the body.

Symptoms for a gamer can include headaches, neck pain, pain between the shoulders, lower back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, sciatica, and jaw pain. Chiropractic adjustments put the spinal bones back where they belong. When the spinal bone is no longer putting pressure on the nerve, the brain and the parts of the body once again can communicate at 100%, and health is restored. In addition to removing the pressure on nerves, chiropractic care has added benefits for gamers, including:

- Chiropractic adjustments help correct postural syndrome. If the syndrome is not corrected at a young age, there is an increased risk for hunchback and other issues in the future.
- Adjustments help create a sound body and relaxed mind that is necessary for a high-level gamer.
- Adjustments aid in better muscle control and faster reflexes.

It is pretty amazing how a few simple things and some help from experienced professionals can improve your athletes’ gaming performance and improve their health. Their health and well-being are important issues, and you should take all precautions to ensure they are performing at their maximum level.
As with any recommendations, the results of these can vary depending on how dedicated they are to the protocols that have been laid out in this chapter. In my opinion, if possible, gamers should have a team consisting of a chiropractor and either a trainer or physical therapist, who can implement these five key things that they can do to improve their gaming and overall health. They have to live in their bodies for the rest of their lives. It’s definitely much better to fix smaller problems now than to have much bigger health concerns down the road.

About the Author:

**DR. SHERRY CHRISTENSEN SMITH** is a chiropractor with 20 years of experience helping young adults improve their health and posture through chiropractic adjustments. Over the past decade, Sherry has seen an increase in symptoms and health concerns due primarily to an increase in sitting for young adults, both those in an office setting and those who are gaming. This increase has led her to do specific case studies with high-level competitive gamers to show how certain behaviors and activities by gamers can decrease risk of injury and increase performance. She has combined chiropractic adjustments and posture therapy to normalize the spines and health of those who come to her for help, and has had excellent results working with a wide range of athletes, including gamers. For more information you can connect with Sherry at drsherry06@gmail.com and on Facebook at The Body Shoppe.
A considerable amount of time is given to individual play to become a high-level esports player. Time demands within the sport only increase when given the opportunity to participate on an organized team at the high school, collegiate, semi-pro, or professional level. How can one continue to improve as a player when balancing team scrimmages, events, relationships, schoolwork, jobs, etc.?

One solution is powering the human brain through physical activity. Exercise improves brain cognition, increases focus, releases the “feel good” hormones and endorphins, promotes clarity, helps de-stress, and improves physique. Incorporating an exercise program seems imperative for a top athlete and program, as excessive screen time plays a negative role when attempting to achieve a high level of mental focus, problem-solving skills, and dexterity reflexes.

An esports athlete needs to be mentally tough. Similar to a race car driver, the ability to sit for an extended period of time and perform at a high level is not just a rite of passage; it is a mandate. High school players are asked to have extreme focus on esports, but their participation is dependent on academic success and personal well-being. Learning to be mentally tough during team workouts not only correlates to healthier bodies and bonded teams, but also teaches the athletes how to grind through matches and find their “second gear.” Many high school and university esports programs have incorporated team fitness classes into their weekly schedules, allowing concentrated time away from school and gaming. The workouts have resulted in improved gaming performance and healthier bodies.

Although each individual is impacted by exercise differently, research has shown that some benefits are consistent across the spectrum. Exercise strengthens the heart and body musculature, strengthens bone density, improves the cardiorespiratory system, regulates blood sugars, flushes out toxins, regulates blood pressure, and prevents diseases. After signing a major contract, many professional athletes from the major sports hire two people: a personal chef and a personal trainer. Those who are serious about their sport are looking to gain that competitive edge, and overall health is often the missing ingredient.

This is especially vital in a sport where you spend large amounts of time sitting, which causes some of the body’s musculature to shorten. One area in particular is the hip flexors, which leads to problems in other joints in the body such as the hips, knees, ankles, wrists, and spine. These need to stay in proper alignment in order for the body to function properly. Sitting plays a significant role in decreased energy, slowing metabolism, elevated cholesterol levels, poor posture, increased blood pressure, and higher risk for developing diseases.
The Answer Is Exercise

Exercise will have a reverse effect on all of the factors mentioned earlier. A program targeting areas specific to an esports athlete can provide the greatest results. In esports fitness classes, the emphasis has been lengthening the muscles, correcting posture, increasing range of motion within joints, relieving stress, strengthening muscles, increasing the brain-body connection, and the best part: building team cohesiveness.

In each class, at least one team-building activity is incorporated. Having a scheduled workout time to socialize with peers can be fun, but adding games involving physical activity becomes challenging and builds unity. A special bond is formed when a difficult workout or task is completed together as a group. Playing exercise tic-tac-toe has definitely become a favorite among many esports teams across the country.

An exercise program for esports athletes should be flexible and coordinate with their unique schedules, such as a big tournament or finals week. In such cases, it might be more productive to have a meditative yoga class rather than an intense muscle-building workout. Varying the workout schedule from week to week incorporating yoga, Pilates, strength training, or cardiovascular training is important and impactful. The exercise regimen should depend on the needs of the athletes, which is why it is beneficial to utilize an experienced trainer who understands all divisions of wellness. Whether a team participates in strength, cardio, or yoga sessions, mind-body connection activities always should be integrated. Often, this will include hand-eye coordination by doing movements that train the brain’s reaction time.

For the general population, and especially with gamers, daily consumption consists mainly of processed foods because of the convenience of “grab-and-go” packaged foods. Some might question the value of nutrition for an esports athlete, but food is what fuels our body. The fuel a race car uses has a tremendous impact on performance, and it is no different with the body. Consuming healthy foods will directly impact one’s ability to perform at a high level. When designing an exercise program, a discussion on the effects of food choices should occur.

Strict meal plans, counting calories, or monitoring macronutrients are not necessary; rather, discussing healthy food options is likely more effective. Any program is only as effective as the individual, so this approach allows each person to determine their commitment level to fueling their body so customized programs can be created. The importance of staying hydrated and consuming water throughout the day should be emphasized, especially when workouts have been incorporated into the routine.

Workouts combining strength and cardiovascular fitness appear to have a greater impact on the esports athlete, stretching the mental and physical capacities of the individual. Repeating such a rigorous activity builds endurance and directly impacts the drive and focus when gaming. There is a unique sense of accomplishment is felt after a hard, strenuous workout that is not experienced elsewhere. Athletes can improve their moods and gain confidence when pushing their bodies to the limits. A drop in blood pressure and heart rate naturally de-stresses the body and improves mental focus. This is necessary when an athlete is dealing with the tensions of school and any personal issues that exist. The student-athlete’s attention span will likely increase in the classroom and while doing homework, resulting in improved academic success. Academic success can play a significant role in a player’s confidence and in eliminating stress.

It is fascinating how exercise can affect the brain in such a way to impact the mental health of the individual. When fitness classes are first introduced to an esports team, anxiety and uncertainty typically become apparent as many of the team members are entering unknown territory. There is soreness and complaining, but after just a few sessions, attitudes visibly change. Players are encouraging one another as they experience intense challenges. The sense of accomplishment at the end of each session provides an exhilarating feeling. Weekly schedules soon introduce exercise classes. Providing
a space to socialize with teammates away from the game, while being able to improve skills that will directly impact player performance, is a perfect combination.

Once a routine of making healthy decisions is formed, motivation and self-esteem are natural byproducts, especially when one experiences a physical change. Once the team has had a couple of months under their belts, exercising becomes addictive. Team members may even begin doing extra workouts in their free time. Exercise does wonders for the team’s attitude, focus, and ambition.

It is no secret that anyone who exercises will experience health benefits, but the opportunity to improve one’s gaming performance should be an added incentive. The ability to handle stress and high-tension situations are skills essential to the gamer’s DNA. As an esports fitness coach, I intentionally design exercises that use fast-twitch muscle fibers, more specifically known as type two muscle fibers. The purpose is to make the athlete’s mind-body connection become significantly quicker. By increasing the mind-body muscular connection, athletes will have faster reaction times—an advantage when gaming.

Like many of the major sports, fitness and strength training for athletes have become an expectation rather than an exception. Since esports is still in its infancy stage, it has yet to become an expectation, giving opportunities for athletes to see tremendous growth over their opponents. Recent research reveals elite gamers are transitioning much like the major sports, practicing an average of 5.28 hours, and 1.08 hours of that is exercising (Acer, 2019). The elite level player understands that a healthier body creates a clearer mind. It has become so popular that many elite esports athletes have become trainers themselves. Now, collegiate and high school levels are following the idea that esports teams should exercise regularly.

As programs look to maximize their potential and gain an advantage against their competition, a fitness program should be incorporated into the weekly routine. If done correctly, emphasis should be placed on training the fast-twitch muscle fibers that can increase brain-body connection. The athletes should see an improvement in brain cognition, focus, reaction time, and team cohesiveness. Clearly, the impact goes far beyond the gamer life and into the overall well-being of the individual. If nothing else, establishing an expectation and routine now will plant a seed for individuals to live a healthy and productive life. When it comes to fitness programs, if you are not an early adopter, you will just be trying to catch up.

About the Author:
ASHLEY VAN GORP is an energetic and passionate wellness professional who loves to share knowledge about health and wellness. She is a wellness coach in Des Moines, Iowa, and works with high school and university esports programs around the country. Ashley has led fitness training for collegiate esports, volleyball, and golf athletes, and teaches group fitness classes, as well. She is also a personal trainer and a certified Pilates instructor. She grew up in Iowa on a farm, in a very small town of 100 people. Ashley’s involvement in volleyball, basketball, and track sparked her interest in exercise science at an early age. Her entrepreneurial spirit and commitment to wellness has generated a booming following of athletes across the country that credit her with gains in their performance, strength, and overall health. Contact Ashley with comments and for training opportunities at avangorp9@gmail.com.
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Dear High School Esports Participant,

You play video games, competitively or recreationally, but I assume you see the exponential growth of the space and wonder how you can be part of it. How do you inform or convince your parents of the potential opportunity ahead of you? Can you really get a scholarship? What expectations do you have ahead of you? Let me help you and your parents understand.

Athletes and Adversity

An esports athlete is a special type of recruit, one who needs to balance the demands of their sport, academics and the social aspects of the collegiate environment. Unfortunately, many fail. Often, when one area of a student’s life isn’t going well, it seems to seep into all other areas, and the individual becomes overwhelmed. We all face adversity at some point in our lives, but how we handle it determines our success. An esports coach or director is asked not only to navigate through their own adversity, but also to add each player’s problems and the challenges of running a new program to the mix. It can be challenging.

Before you decide to jump into the collegiate scene, ask yourself these questions:

1. Do I intend to play competitively or recreationally?
2. Am I ready to commit to being my best academically while competing at the collegiate level? You are not just playing video games; you are getting your degree, and then playing your respective game. Remember that.
3. Am I willing to be my best self, give my best effort, and work with a team even if I am not getting a full-ride scholarship? Am I willing to be a team player?

What to Look for in a Collegiate Program

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

You want to get a good idea of the strength and stability of each university’s esports program that you are considering. Here are some good questions to ask to gain that understanding:

1. How long has the university esports program been in existence?
2. How long has the coaching staff been at the program?
3. How does the program develop its athletes as players and people?
4. Does the school offer academic support?
5. How does the coaching staff coach and support players during and outside of games?
6. How does the university administration support the esports program?
7. What is the graduation rate of student-athletes in the program?

GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

1. Does the institution have the capacity or willingness to support additional space, staffing and budget needs should the program grow?
2. Is a plan in place to sustain rapid growth with needed resources (equipment, budget and staff) while maintaining a quality experience?
Your Role

RECRUITMENT

There are a variety of recruiting strategies that most coaches follow. Some of the more obvious are:

1. Word-of-mouth (heavily used)
2. Live tournament events and tryouts (There is nothing wrong with asking for a tryout. Worst-case scenario is you get a “no,” and you can find another place that may suit you better.)
3. BeRecruited.com or other recruiting platforms
4. Discord channels, media presence, and highlight clips

The nature and structure of gaming allows for communication and relationship development that enhances the word-of-mouth approach. Also, social media outlets and Discord channels allow instant and direct communication to potential recruits. There isn’t one right way to recruit at the collegiate level. I have a traditional sports background, and I apply my experiences to esports recruiting. My colleagues and I have different recruiting styles.

I would describe my recruiting style as a vested, personalized approach. I am naturally suited to acting as a parent to my student-athletes, as I know that many may come from broken or unsupported homes, and I understand how each area of their lives impacts their development and performance. Each program is attempting to establish a unique culture implemented through team standards, values and goals. Developing relationships with each student helps create the best collegiate experience and is vital to the success of the program, on and off screen. If a student feels welcomed and valued from their first visit, they will leave with confidence in your program and university.

For an early collegiate program, it is natural to search for the key to success, but unfortunately there is not a concrete answer. In many cases, a strategy that focuses solely on recruiting the best gaming talent only leads to frustration, with the likely outcome being a player’s early departure from the institution. A better approach is to think more holistically about each student, and how to build up their time-management skills, work ethic, attitude, character, mental stability and academic success, for instance.

When recruiting prospective esports candidates at the collegiate level, I ask the following questions:

1. Will the student be able to handle the academic load of college, as well as the time commitment of playing competitive esports?
2. Will our institution provide the educational opportunities that are the best fit for this student’s passions and future endeavors?
3. Is our program able to fulfill the student’s competitive needs and desires?
4. What skill level can I afford? In other words, some students may expect a full-ride scholarship offer because they have put a price on their skill level. Realistically, most schools cannot provide this unless they have a cost-effective scholarship structure. Deciding how you can match a player’s skill set with worthy “compensation” becomes a challenge.

THE CAMPUS VISIT

Prospect visits play a critical role in helping players select an institution that is best suited for them. Being intentional about the campus appearance (cleanliness), the people they encounter (friendly and welcoming), and the overall ambiance (positive vibes) throughout prospective student visits is important because each plays a role in helping students decide between schools.

A successful prospect visit at my institution will (theoretically) follow these steps:

1. Students will meet with their dedicated first-year or transfer admissions counselor.
   • This visit entails discussing their projected academic progression and succession plan to graduate from the institution.
2. Students and/or family will discuss financial aid, grants and scholarships.
   • This time allows the student to discuss available institutional aid, grants, any outside scholar-
     ship funding, student loan options and payment plans, and FAFSA questions.

3. Students will meet with a faculty member from an academic major of interest.
   • Meeting faculty and staff from their projected major of interest allows the student to gain a
     better understanding of their academic journey as well as the potential opportunities at the
     institution and beyond.

4. Students will visit the esports arena with the director, coach and a player from their prospec-
   tive team.
   • I sit down with students and/or parents to address any questions, comments or concerns. I
     have found that parents can be leery of letting their children attend college for competitive
     video gaming, so this is important.
   • Emphasizing that the success of players is dependent on their academic progress can be re-
     assuring to parents. As student-athletes, it is mandatory that players in our program main-
     tain a 2.0 GPA. Implementing mandatory weekly study tables has proven to be beneficial in
     our program. In our first semester after implementation, there was a notable improvement
     in academic success, with seven students earning a 4.0 GPA and 15 earning above a 3.0
     GPA.

SCHOLARSHIPS
Yes, esports scholarships are a very real thing. Parents and administrators, this is not the time to
mock a student or be in total disbelief that your child or student is receiving a scholarship for
esports. Take the time to sit down and learn about what they are doing and how skilled they have
to be in hand-eye coordination, critical thinking and problem-solving. The skills they must have to
play these games cross over into work and day-to-day life.

These students are working just as hard as basketball or volleyball players who are mastering their
crafts, continuing to adapt, coping with adversity and making an impact on the playing field (or
screen in our case). Do not shame them for their talents and passions! I see far too often high
school players’ messaging that they are “so good” at Fortnite or another game, directly followed by:
“How much of a scholarship can I get?” Hold up there, and consider the following.

Scholarships can be awarded in several different ways and will vary by institution. You will want
to discuss the potential for a starting scholarship amount and the ability to earn more throughout
your time in collegiate esports. Here are some existing structures common in esports programs.

1. Universities have designated scholarship dollars to draw from (e.g., $50,000 of designated es-
   ports dollars) that can be allocated to the esports roster of players until exhausted.

2. Depending on the caliber of the institution, a varied scholarship structure may be offered,
such as: five full-ride scholarships and five partial scholarships, and then eight to 10 or more
walk-on players. The structure will vary by institution and revenue levels.

3. Scholarships may be awarded on a case-by-case basis, with an average level of student aid
derived from a calculated algorithm. In this scenario, the institution could award the average
level of aid per student, or go above and beyond with justification. The institutional aid could
include academic scholarships, grants, outside scholarships and extracurricular scholarships.
Depending on how many students are in a program, the algorithm is used to determine a
justifiable average level of student aid.

Scholarships are generally offered after the player is accepted to the institution and the player’s skill
level has been fully evaluated by staff.

RETENTION
The first semester of college is crucial to retention, whether or not students participate in extra-
curricular activities or sports. The first six weeks are extremely important to their psychological,
emotional and mental states, as students attempt to answer questions such as: “Do I belong here?”
and “How do I fit in to this new community?” The camaraderie and success of a team often play bigger roles than academic success in terms of student retention.

Unlike traditional sports, esports athletes can spend five to eight hours per day honing their gaming skills, and unfortunately, this means that some may neglect their academic studies. This is true at both the high school and collegiate levels. The esports staff must pay close attention to each aspect contributing to the overall institutional experience of each player, so an intervention can take place immediately if any aspect suffers. It is vital for students to feel engaged, supported and encouraged by peers, coaches and faculty.

Retention can be improved by implementing structures outside of team practices and competition, such as creating a routine for players. At Grand View, we have found success with mandatory study tables for all students, and each lasts for one hour. They emphasize the importance of education, and helps athletes to hold each other accountable while building time-management skills. We also have implemented weekly team workouts to build physical health. Surprisingly, this unfamiliar setting for many has resulted in enhanced camaraderie and team cohesiveness. Explore similar opportunities for teamwork and be prepared to participate as an incoming player.

THE EXPERIENCE
Think back on your collegiate experience and identify the most positive aspects. I was a college athlete, so my approach to esports is influenced by the most positive elements of my own college experience, including:

• Coaches and staff
• Knowledge shared and gained
• Community and inclusiveness
• Pride in identity (school and self)

I highly recommend that prospective esports players define their own criteria of needs and categorize them by importance:

• Will I have a developmental program to continue striving for excellence?
• Will I be supported academically to be my best?
• Will I have the proper equipment, tools and structure to become the best version of myself?

The answer to these questions needs to be “yes,” as student-athletes research the best fit for themselves and a university esports program.

The beauty of esports is that it brings together people from all backgrounds, ages and skill levels. Esports is a tight knit community. Its rapid growth, including the sheer number of players and spectators today, proves it is a global sport that will only continue to grow. Let’s do our part in making esports prevalent and relevant.

About the Author:
DANA HUSTEDT is the director of the esports program at Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa. She is responsible for the day-to-day operations, mission and program development of Grand View esports. Dana brings a wealth of gaming and athletic management experience to this position. She is the first woman in the nation to direct a university esports program. Dana’s journey to becoming an esports director was documented by ESPN.com in November 2018.
Esports is taking off across the globe. Is your campus ready? This chapter will describe the evolution of esports in a school district, including lessons learned about what it takes to develop, grow, and manage a program, and the “gotchas” and “wish-I’d-have-knowns” from experience with esports.

Origin Story
In 1998, Blizzard released StarCraft. StarCraft was my introduction to esports. My friends and I loved StarCraft a lot. We would bring our computers to each other’s houses and play after school or after sports practices. It wasn’t long before StarCraft blew up around town, and the local computer store started to host Starcraft LAN tournaments. My friends and I would play in as many tournaments as we could. Even when we didn’t win, we still loved the competition and cheering for each other.

In 2011, I went to my first professional esports tournament. There was a StarCraft II tournament at Caesars Atlantic City casino. My friends and I, the same friends I have been playing games with since 1998, decided to check it out. The tournament had light effects, smoke machines, entrance music, walkouts, Jumbotrons, and livecasting. The capacity crowd knew every player by name and would chant and cheer for their favorite players. It was awesome. I never knew esports existed on that level. By 2011, I’d already been teaching for five years. I’d been coaching varsity football, wrestling, and track for five years, too. As someone who has a foot in both the esports and traditional sports worlds, Atlantic City was a wake-up call: We need esports in education.

I have played video games competitively since 1998. I was a three-sport athlete in high school and played sports in college, and I have more than a decade of varsity coaching experience. I feel qualified to say that esports can be as valuable for our students as “real” sports are. After that trip to Atlantic City, I was determined to help bring esports to education. Seven years later, I finally got the chance.

In September 2018, after six months of planning, my school district approved the creation of the FH Knights esports team. It is the first middle school esports team in the country. We take on all comers in Rocket League. I say “all comers” because as the first middle school esports team in the country, there were no other middle schools to play at first, so I scheduled colleges. For our first match, I reached out to Rutgers University to see if they would play. To my surprise, they agreed. The first middle school esports match ever was actually against a college. We got our doors blown off.

Even though we got trounced, the fact that a middle school team took on a college team got a lot of coverage in the press. My kids and I did some interviews, including spots for NBC and PBS. Flying high after the coverage, I reached out to a friend, Steve Issacs, who had a video game club at his middle school. I asked him if he could put together a Rocket League team to play against my kids. A couple of weeks later, the first true middle school vs. middle school match happened. We played each other a few more times that year and even played another middle school from Pennsylvania, whom we inspired to start their own team. Although we didn’t play many matches that first year, I learned a lot as a coach. We will be even better this year. Most importantly, though, over the last 18-plus months running an esports team, I learned the three reasons why every school should have an esports team.
1. Esports is a great way to teach the soft stuff and the hard stuff

Esports is a great place to teach students the soft stuff. Leadership, communication, teamwork, and how to win and lose with class are just some of the soft skills that can be taught through esports. The value of teaching social and emotional learning (SEL) through esports is proven, but it isn’t new. Mindfulness and SEL training is being done at the collegiate and pro levels, so it is only natural that it is trickling down to the high school and middle school levels.

Some of the more advanced K-12 esports programs are starting to teach how nutrition and exercise can improve performance and how players can avoid being triggered, playing tilted, or handle toxicity when gaming. There is no doubt that esports is a great way to build students’ skill sets and SEL. Although we should continue to teach and grow the soft stuff, it is important, maybe more so, that we are teaching the hard stuff at the middle school and high school levels.

We as adults have done a terrible job teaching kids how to navigate internet culture. An overwhelming majority of what gets posted on social media is fine, including the comment sections of websites, and forums such as Reddit. However, there is a subsection of the internet that can be a toxic place filled with racism, misogyny, and homophobia—spaces that try to use meme culture to recruit kids into white supremacist groups and those that celebrate school shooters and other acts of terror.

It is our duty as teachers to keep students safe. Having an esports team, which is likely to be full of internet-savvy students, is a great place to tackle the tough but important cultural issues our students face on a regular basis that fly under most adults’ radar. The usual digital citizenship curriculum is not enough for some students. We need to be there to unpack their experiences on the internet and model behavior so they remain safe. Esports is also a way to educate our most vulnerable students.

2. Esports builds a sense of belonging

When I first started my esports team, I was surprised to see who came out. Many students had IEPs, 504s, or were on the spectrum. Not one student was playing a sport, and they did not have any home/school connection. They weren’t involved in any clubs, either. Mostly, my kids went home after school every day and played video games by themselves. The best part about starting my esports team is watching my kids develop a sense of belonging. The community that we have built around esports at my school has given them a new social group. Instead of playing alone, my kids generally game together outside of school. After our matches, they often go out for a slice of pizza together. It is the sense of community and belonging that is esports’ greatest strength, since these kids who may need it most probably aren’t getting it anywhere else.

I helped facilitate this sense of community in a few key ways. The first was making sure we had a code of conduct. Your esports team has to be a safe place for everyone. Laying out how we are going to treat each other is an important first step to building a community of caring.

Second, one of the first things I did as coach was to purchase team jerseys. Watching my kids walk down the halls collecting high-fives in their sweet-looking esports jerseys is a thing of beauty.

Finally, I’m tough on them. I’m tough in two ways. I’m tough because I have tied team eligibility to grades, attendance, and behavior. If students don’t show up or act appropriately, they could be benched, suspended, or removed from the team. I’m also tough in what I expect. Similar to coaching my traditional athletes, I am all over my kids. I’m always telling them they can work harder or that they can be better.
Being tough on them is a way of showing how much you care about them and believe in them. Having tough team rules around attendance and behavior shows them you take esports and their presence on the team seriously. It lets them know you value them and you will only accept their best. Esports lets you set high expectations that your students can live up to.

3. Esports is great for creating the pipeline
Having an esports team presents a great opportunity to empower students’ career and technical education. Since esports is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world, it is important that students know they can turn their love of video games into careers, especially STEM careers. I call this the pipeline. We need to create and then show kids the pipeline they can follow to get from middle school through college and into a career if they harness their love of video games.

To do this, I have a team behind my esports team to help build out my esports ecosystem. I don’t have just players on my team, I have players and other support staff members who fill vital roles on the esports team, such as a shoutcaster, IT specialist, scout, statistician, graphic designer, video editor, event planner, journalist, accountant, marketer, and many more.

By giving students the jobs that need to be done to run a successful esports team, they are getting hands-on experience with possible careers they might want to explore as they get older. To further support this notion, besides the competition, the main reason my middle schoolers play college students is because afterward I have the college players talk about what they are majoring in and how their passion for gaming plays a role in their choices. My students leave feeling inspired after talking with the college students about their shared passions. My kids who may not think college is an option for them are realizing that maybe they want to go to college because they can continue to pursue esports at the college level and then graduate into a career, traditional or otherwise, that lets them continue to be involved in gaming. The esports pipeline we build can carry our kids through college and beyond.

Every school should have an esports team.

**About the Author:**
**CHRIS AVILES** is a teacher at Knollwood Middle School in Fair Haven, New Jersey. There, he runs the renowned Fair Haven Innovates program that he created in 2015. Part of his program includes the FH Knights, the first middle school esports team in the country. Aviles and his FH Knights players take on all comers from around the country, including those from other middle schools, high schools, and even colleges. Chris has been involved in esports since 1998, and he is passionate about growing the esportsedu movement. He has authored “The Guide to Esports in Education” to help other educators start esports teams, and he travels around the country speaking about why every school should have an esports team.
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