

Football, basketball ... esports? The newest team at high schools

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The audience watches a match between the University of Maryland (left) and the University of Illinois in the Big Ten Network "League of Legends" championship in the Battle Theater at North American League Championship Arena at Riot Games on March 28, 2017, in Los Angeles, California. Photo by: Mel Melcon/Los Angeles Times/TNS

HARTLAND, Wisconsin — Recently, Arrowhead High School students filled the tennis courts and the track for conference meets. They toiled away under the late afternoon sun.

Another team — playing in Arrowhead's newest competitive club — was in a lab down the hall from the cafeteria.

Five boys on the esports team sat shoulder to shoulder, shouting moves to one another as their computers connected in real time to five players from Reavis High School in suburban Chicago. In both cities, which are about two hours away by car, the students activated characters in an animated medieval landscape, essentially trying to win an online version of capture the flag.

The competitive gaming world known as esports is starting to make inroads in high schools. Advocates say it requires the same skills as real-life sports: teamwork, collaboration, handling victory and defeat, setting goals, practicing, traveling to competitions and managing schoolwork.

“Just like in the athletic program, you have to make your grades to be able to compete and represent the school,” said Mike Dahle, a business teacher at Arrowhead and coach of the esports and gaming club.

Competition From High School, College, To The Pros

More than 30 colleges now offer video-game scholarships, and some of the country’s best players now earn salaries to game professionally.

The pro sports industry is bringing attention to competitive gaming as well. Adidas and Nike have signed apparel agreements with esports organizations. The parent company of the Boston Bruins hockey team recently bought an esports franchise. And 17 teams in the National Basketball Association (NBA) have purchased esports teams to compete in an online basketball league set to debut in 2018.

“The enthusiasm and passion are equal to traditional sports, 100 percent,” said Kurt Melcher, the executive director of Intersport, a marketing agency in Chicago. Melcher also directs the esports program at Robert Morris University, which became the first college to offer video game scholarships starting in 2014.

Brands and investors are turning to esports because they see a group to sell to — a group that is overwhelmingly young and male. But corralling the wild west of online gaming into something organized enough to one day be recognized by state high school sports associations will take time. Most insiders believe that kind of organizing will start in colleges first, then trickle down to high schools.

“To me, the shortcoming is finding that one educator or teacher who is able to provide value or instruction or organization,” Melcher said.

Melcher, who is 45 years old and a former college soccer player, was the athletic director for 15 years at Robert Morris, which is based in Chicago. He always had a side interest in video games, and he approached Robert Morris about establishing an esports presence. The college spent \$120,000 on a gaming arena and setting aside money for scholarships. It attracted national attention — and new students — in the process.

Melcher said the university realized if it was going to lead the way on esports, it needed to treat it like traditional sports. Today, students can receive gaming scholarships that cover either 75 percent or 35 percent of their tuition. By next year, Robert Morris expects to have 90 students who specialize in different games.

"League Of Legends" Is A Hot Ticket

The most widely known game in the industry is “League of Legends,” the same game the Arrowhead students were playing. It’s the top-grossing video game in the world with more than \$1.6 billion in annual profits, according to reports.

When the Staples Center in Los Angeles hosted the League of Legends World Championship final in 2013, tickets sold out in about an hour. Top players compete for millions of dollars in prize money.

“League of Legends” pits five-person teams in matches, and the goal is to take over the other team’s control tower. Strategy comes from picking the right assortment of fighting characters and running plays that look similar to the strategies employed in football or basketball. If teammates can’t physically be in the same room to talk through strategy, they usually don headsets to talk remotely.

“League of Legends” is free for anyone to download. The company that owns it, Riot Games, charges small fees to trick out virtual characters with clothes or gear.

Esports Gaining A Fan Base

Advances in technology have helped swell the esports fan base online. Players also like to watch other people play. Much of this happens on the game-streaming website Twitch — bought by Amazon for \$970 million in 2014. It allows viewers to watch what’s happening in a game while hearing the running commentary from the players.

For more important games, professional announcers in suits and ties keep up an ESPN-style running chat. Live comments from viewers scroll on the side of the screen, and advertisements regularly interrupt the feeds.

Many educators are wary about the commercialization of esports, since its fans are young. But they also see new competitive opportunities in gaming for the types of students who are not typical jocks. Many schools host after-school gaming clubs, but on a school-recognized esports team, students work together more formally and can represent the school in tournaments.

Teacher Organizes Team Of Gamers

Three years ago, Dahle, the teacher at Arrowhead, started an after-school gaming club where students came to his computer lab to play everything from computer to board games. A gamer himself, Dahle started to help organize twice-a-week practices for a half-dozen of Arrowhead’s most ardent League of Legends gamers. He got permission from the district to support the team.

By next summer, Dahle hopes to develop a state esports conference that will connect schools with teams all over Wisconsin.

Earlier this month Dahle drove his League of Legends players to their first tournament. It was the second annual High School Esports Invitational, hosted at Robert Morris.

“It’s so fun to be able to play with your friends competitively,” said Cameron Carr, a sophomore on the league.