Juggernaut: Esports on Campus

Why students and gamers are smiting foes and gaining territory at a college near you.

2018’S SUPERBOWL AVERAGED 103 million viewers, down 7 percent from the previous year. Compare that to the League of Legends World Championship video game tournament in December, which had 100 million unique viewers — up 20 percent from the year before. With that kind of growth, is it any wonder that esports is getting similar levels of attention from some colleges and universities as basketball and football programs do?

The term “esports” describes competitive video gaming, often team-based and multiplayer. Proponents of college esports advance several factors in its favor:

- Maintaining an edge on the video field takes just as much prowess as any other kind of athletic endeavor;
- There’s a healthy future in myriad fields — not just gaming — for those who participate, including coding, game design and cybersecurity (fields that deliver higher pay for those with degrees);
- Fans can’t get enough; competitions among collegiate teams and professionals take place in arenas in front of massive audiences, both physical and virtual, raising the profile of winning colleges; and
- The scale of investment required to sustain esports is exponentially smaller and the active participation much higher than traditional varsity sports programs.

The importance of that last item deserves particular scrutiny. Take Clemson University’s much-heralded football operations complex, which was built specifically to house its players. The facility boasts an outdoor living room, beach volleyball court, miniature golf, bowling alley, barbershop, indoor slide, team auditorium and team meeting room, strength and conditioning facility (with an “iFuelBar” for quick snack breaks), hydrotherapy pools, and a full-sized indoor practice field. It cost $55 million to build and furnish.

In comparison, when the University of Akron announced its plans last fall to open the world’s largest university-based esports facility,
Esports brings a democratic flavor to campus sports that no other athletic endeavor has yet emulated.
Counter Strike: Two teams compete in multiple rounds of objective-based game modes with the goal of winning enough rounds to win the match.

Hearthstone: Players build digital card decks and duel each other head-to-head or play through one of several different card-based “Solo Adventures”; all player communication takes place through pre-generated voice lines that convey “good-natured sportsmanship.”

League of Legends: Two teams of powerful and unique “champions,” each with their own play styles, battle head-to-head across multiple battlefields and game modes.

Overwatch: A shooter game set on a near-future earth, where each match pits teams made up of a diverse group of soldiers, scientists, adventurers and oddities going against each other in objective-based maps around the world.

Paladins, Premier League: A team-based first-person shooter game that features cards for customizing character abilities and weaponry.

Rocket League: This game combines soccer with driving; team players choose from a variety of vehicles equipped with rocket boosters to score aerial goals and pull off saves.

Smite, Battleground of the Gods: Five-player teams use a third-person perspective to control mythological gods, each with his or her own abilities, to fight each other on a map with its own set of rules.
A Beginner’s Guide to Esports Organizations

You can’t understand college esports without knowing the major players.

WHEN THE University of California, Irvine discovered in a survey that nearly three-quarters of its students identified as “gamers” and 89 percent supported launch of an esports team, the university didn’t waste time. By 2016 it had launched UCI Esports, including construction of a gaming arena and creation of a robust scholarship program, calling itself the first “public university” to form a college esports program.

Some might quibble with that declaration. After all, the higher ed esports phenomenon kicked off six years earlier, around 2009-2010, when students all over the country began creating on-campus gaming groups that eventually banded together in clubs like Collegiate Starleague and American Collegiate Esports League to participate in intra-college tournaments and run all-night gaming parties.

By 2012, a group of students formed the Texas eSports Association (later renamed “Tespa”) to host tournaments at the University of Texas, Austin. Tespa expanded to other Texas schools and then nationally. Its focus is on student-formed chapters, which now number more than 236 in North America with another 77 in development. The organization, which has free and paid memberships, also serves as an intermediary to help college teams cut deals with ESPN, Amazon-owned Twitch and other outlets to broadcast and stream game play.
A variation on the student chapter approach is the game-specific approach. Riot Games, the maker of League of Legends, runs its own **college program** with some 500 student clubs.

Amid this hubbub of activity, it didn’t take long for campus visionaries to recognize that esports could serve as a recruiting vehicle. All that was required was a nominal investment in hiring a coach or two, offering scholarships to woo the players with the greatest potential (often identified through the campus tournaments) and remaking lesser-used spaces for dedicated gaming gear. Besides the obvious tie to degree tracks in gaming science, game design and sports communications, those schools that have launched esports have also seen interest percolate throughout academic divisions, including computer science, cybersecurity, media studies, digital arts, engineering, anthropology, law, medicine and neuroscience.

As the competition heated up among participating colleges, it was inevitable that the institutional ecosystem would seek a more formal approach to operations. By 2016 NACE, the **National Association of Collegiate Esports**, had formed as a nonprofit to officially recognize those varsity programs that adhered to member-defined standards. That served as a seal of approval when student gamers considered which schools to apply to.

Currently, NACE has somewhere in the region of 80 members, claiming 90 percent of all varsity esports programs in the United States. Besides serving as a standards and policy-setting body, the organization also lists jobs (primarily for esports head coaches), sets up sponsorships with major gaming companies, hosts tournaments and runs a convention that draws faculty, game industry experts, university esports representatives and professional players to discuss the phenomenon.

Among the topics that are increasingly coming to the forefront as esports matures: increasing diversity, grappling with amateurism, and addressing legal, compliance and accessibility issues. But concerns about those issues aren’t holding many schools back. Since the start of the current academic year nearly dozen colleges and universities have announced their intentions of joining the fray by launching or planning new programs. Those include:
- Alma College in Michigan;
- Bay State College in Massachusetts;
- Cazenovia College in New York;
- Concordia University-St. Paul in Minnesota;
- DeSales University in Pennsylvania;
- Misericordia University in Pennsylvania;
- Park University in Missouri;
- Thomas College in Maine; and
- University of Missouri.

So with this level of fierce competition, it should surprise nobody that colleges and universities are now vying for the best recruits and the biggest audiences. As a result, they’re also upping the stakes.

Take Florida’s **Full Sail University**, which expects to launch its new esports facility shortly. “The Fortress,” as it’s called, will be equipped with “the most current technology to host collegiate and professional gaming tournaments, live esports streaming events, and will be used to explore activities including drone programming, possibly drone racing, and more.” A hundred esports athletes will be able to play simultaneously, as hundreds of onsite spectators cheer them on, according to the school’s press coverage. The price tag: $6 million. As its marketing folks noted in the announcement: Game on.
Your Winning Strategy: Esports Program Development

To help your campus find its place in esports, start with a simple plan that covers space and gear.

MOVING TO THE cloud is looking to dip a toe into esports, the student association is a great place to start, according to Rex Stover, gaming product manager for Lenovo. As he pointed out, you know your students are already playing video games on their own, and the campus may have esports clubs in place, making for a rich pool of source material from which to grow something more substantial. His suggestion: Start by providing some space and gear for weekly meet-ups.

Next, faculty and staff members who are drawn to these activities
can offer a candidate pool for more ambitious efforts. For example, Columbia College in Missouri, one of the early entrants into esports at the institutional level, turned to a member of its own IT organization to hire its first esports coach. Duong Pham, part of the recruiting committee seeking a coach (and a master’s graduate of the college), emerged as the top candidate by proving his organizational skills on the day job and showing cred with League of Legends, where he was well-ranked in North America. Matt Meininger, a computer support specialist at Columbia and another long-time gamer, was named assistant coach. And college president Scott Dalrymple has been known to talk smack and take on challengers — no matter what the title — to publicize the college’s commitment to gaming.

From there, all it takes is “talking to the right people from other universities,” said Stover, to get the insights needed for making a business case and pursuing funding for broader commitment — setting up a dedicated space, sending teams to tournaments and eventually hosting championships on campus.

GET THE “MATS”
These are the materials you need for building a gaming operation — after all, it can’t take place without computing gear. Three form factors are popularly available for gaming computers: laptops, towers and cubes. While the laptops and cubes are smaller, lighter and more portable, it’s the tower that tends to dominate in the world of gaming, said Stover. A big advantage is that it’s simpler to expand towers’ memory and upgrade certain key components, making the units more “future-proof.”

While it’s easy to spend $5,000 for a gaming PC, machines costing between $1,500 and $2,500 “are more than sufficient for playing any of the competition titles,” Stover added.

When choosing a PC for this purpose, the most compelling features are the CPU and GPU. For the central processor, the latest from Intel (Core, generations 8 or 9) and AMD (Ryzen) serve the best user experience. For graphics, the NVIDIA GeForce and AMD Radeon processors lead.

Stover, who heads up development of Lenovo’s Legion series of gaming PCs, advised at least 16 gigabytes of RAM and the use of SSD or traditional spinning disks for better response and performance.

Monitors also play a special role in the gaming world. The optimal size, insisted Stover, is 25 inches. “The idea behind that is because if you go smaller, it’s harder to see certain details,” he explained. “If you go bigger, that’s when the player has to turn his or her head more. The 25-inch display is the sweet spot.”

Beyond size considerations, however, is the resolution (higher is better), refresh rate (faster is better) and synchronization (more responsive is better), “to make the game as smooth as possible.” The goal is to reduce the amount of “hitching, lag or tearing” that takes place on the screen. While ordinary players might not see the difference, professionals “notice the little things — the slightest tear or hesitation.” Gaming monitors must also be matched up against the graphics card. Those running an NVIDIA will be happier with certain monitors vs. those with an AMD GPU.

Finally, esports also requires keyboards, mice and headsets. For those, said Stover, “Everybody is going to have their preferences.” While controllers may be standard fare for home players, competitive esports typically uses the keyboard and mouse. Where a game does require a controller (such as Street Fighter or Super Smash Bros.), noted Stover, players are accustomed to bringing their own.

The equipment investment doesn’t just serve the needs of esports, added Stover. “This type of hardware can be used for more than just gaming. It works for all the other digital content-related software needs schools have too.” That includes pop-up computer labs that are needed for temporary events and academic needs.

DEVELOP YOUR RTS
The real-time strategy for growing your operation has multiple dimensions, Stover said. Get students involved in putting on day-long competitions and then let them go at each other in front of an audience for prizes and glory. Develop a custom Twitch team channel through the company’s
student program, to promote campus esports efforts. Customize with school colors and logo; include a stream schedule, team photo and roster; archive for videos on demand; and broadcast special events. This presence will provide an interactive way for outsiders to get to know the school and learn about its esports initiatives virtually. Eventually, the school can look at making the club an official Twitch partner, which includes monetization opportunities, access to event swag and ever greater numbers of custom channel emoticons that could help players and fans meme your school to fame.

**Go moneyball and promote research projects.** After all, esports involves a lot of science and specifically data analytics, Stover pointed out. “Because you can track the movements of the players, you can track all the stats on a more intricate level than you ever could with physical sports. All that data will continue to play into how this grows.”

**Fuel the fire.** The traditional flavor of college sports became a big moneymaker for higher ed when savvy radio networks began broadcasting the games, heralding the start of corporate advertisers, the sale of broadcast rights and big-time merchandise vending. Could esports be on the cusp of something comparable? Stover believes so. “Seeing the passion among the folks who attend and watch these events, it’s like going to a college basketball or football game. You have that same feeling. You inherently get into it. You may not know everything going on, but you feel that intensity and that excitement. You can see why it’s growing.”

For more information, please visit: [www.lenovo.com/legion](http://www.lenovo.com/legion)