

Promoting Female Participation in Esports in Schools

Esports is like a freight train moving inexorably down the tracks, and these tracks lead directly through formal education spaces. No longer is there a question of *if* Esports will make its way into K-12 and Higher Education, it is already there. The question now becomes: what should it look like? Because the adoption of Esports is in its early stages, there is an opportunity to guide its path. It is encouraging that the benefits of Esports are becoming clearer, including the development of communication, conflict resolution, complex problem solving, data analysis, team building, and leadership skills. Further, there is a strong correlation between participation in Esports and future STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) careers. Esports is *not* just playing video games, it is playing video games *mindfully*, in a community, and with a purpose: ultimately to compete. By embracing Esports and bringing it into the light, educators can elevate this space. The alternative is to ignore it, which would be a terrible mistake, as Esports provides an *Affinity Space* that students are naturally attracted to and reaches a group of students who otherwise might not participate in more traditional sports. Embracing and elevating Esports expands opportunities and prepares our youth for technology-enhanced 21st century job environments, and what could be more beautiful than that?

Unfortunately, the current status of Esports is largely male dominated. Traditional sports have a similar history, and were male dominated until the passage of Title IX of the 1972 Amendments to U.S. Civil Rights Act, which expanded high school athletic opportunities for girls. As organizations such as the National Federation of High Schools (NFHS) and the National Association for Collegiate Esports (NACE) begin to endorse and promote Esports, we need to seriously consider how we can encourage female participation. To begin with, Esports in schools and universities (and in general) needs to be conducted in a *non-toxic* environment. By ignoring video games and Esports, the loudest and most obnoxious personalities have emerged, and have often drowned out other more moderate voices. Worse, these loud and obnoxious voices are often teenage boys, who are often not developmentally ready to do much more than play out natural urges. One can hardly fault young girls for taking a wide berth around this space. In talking with my own daughters (16 and 13), in their mind it is simply not for them. In watching them and their friends, their natural patterns of behavior involve *creating* things. Whether that is music, art, or crafting digital environments in *Minecraft*, their *Affinity* is toward creation spaces. They are very interested in competition, but it looks very different than what we currently see in Esports, which is, if reduced to its essence, a game of counting who destroys the other team more. And while there is *some* female participation in Esports as it currently exists, many young girls and young women are simply not interested. Over time, as the environment becomes less toxic and embraced formally by schools and colleges, participation will increase, but this will be limited if we continue to conceive of Esports as oriented toward destruction.

To that end, as a designated arts campus, SUNY Potsdam will help to guide the development of creation-oriented digital competitions, with the hope that they will be included in the Esports landscape. The first thing we have done is to embrace the transformation of STEM, through the inclusion of Art, to *STEAM*. Art is a natural conduit for creation, and technology is now used more and more in artistic spaces. The next step will be to explore radical new competition

spaces that are creation focused. Some initial touchstones come from popular television competitions such as *Project Runway*, *Top Chef*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *The Next Great Graphic Designer*. Other sources of inspiration come from poetry slams, timed digital-design games found on custom *Minecraft* servers, and the crafting tools already embedded in many games. The Esports competitions that emerge from this space are yet to be determined but suffice it to say they will be played in a non-toxic environment, and the focus will be on using digital tools to quickly design things like characters, levels, items, or even artistic performances. And to be clear, creation oriented Esports is not focused on making pretty things, it is about creating something beautiful.

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