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CONNECTING WITH TEENS
THROUGH ESPORTS

EVERYONE MUST COUNT
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VIRTUAL STEM COACHING
FOR LIBRARY STAFF



What Goes into Building an Esports Team

Build an esports team by connecting with community.



By Tyler Hahn

Esports is the competitive wing of multiplayer gaming where competitors form teams and compete against others in games such as *Fortnite*, *Call of Duty*, and *Madden NFL*. The popularity of esports continues to grow, and hundreds of esports teams are hosted at schools, public libraries, and college campuses. Players in esports leagues are often scouted in the same way traditional sports prospects are recruited. While research is underway at the Connected Learning Lab on the connections between esports and academics, similar research has not focused on esports in public libraries, especially rural libraries. This is in part because esports is just taking hold in public library teen services. Esports is an amazing platform for delivery of services to teens, a way to engage adolescents in programming, and an opportunity to provide youth voice and choice, while achieving outcomes related to academics and college and career awareness.

The International Olympic Committee declared that esports, or

competitive video gaming, could be considered a sporting activity. Intel recognized this pivotal declaration and will host a week-long esports competition in Japan the week before the 2020 Summer Olympics. Keeping these recognitions in mind, it's the perfect time for library staff working with teens to consider that esports is both a practical and valuable way to connect with adolescents:

Why Cherokee Public Library Is Integrating Esports with and for Teens

The Cherokee Public Library integrated esports into their teen services as a part of the YALSA Institute of Museum and Library Services-funded Future Ready with the Library project (a project focused on supporting middle school college career awareness). As the Cherokee Library researched the needs of middle schoolers, staff learned that local businesses found that teens lacked soft skills such as the ability to communicate clearly with team members, the ability to stay on

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FEATURES

task, and the ability to adapt to older technology. Researching our middle school population to learn about their interests led to the discovery that many had an interest in playing video games or played video games regularly. Some even played video games the same day they completed the library's survey. With this information, and the library staff's knowledge of esports, the library's esports team was born.

How the Cherokee Public Library Got Started

To get the Cherokee Public Library's esports team off the ground, library staff contacted an adult esports team and observed how players worked together and how they structured an esports practice session. Library staff quickly discovered that the adult team was loosely structured with communication taking place primarily over texts between members, meeting time being decided on a whim, and no clear goal or objective to what the team wanted to accomplish other than trying to compete in video games at a higher level than individual play. Library staff knew there needed to be more structure for a youth team.

The next step after the initial research was for library staff to contact the North American Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF). Staff wanted to learn more about the Federation's scholastic approach to esports, as well as their model for team structure in an informal learning environment. This contact led to a very fruitful collaboration with NASEF and the Orange County Department of Education. A key learning from this collaboration was that the library program should not "suck the fun out of" esports and should focus on emphasizing team member voice and choice while games were being played. We learned that we could indeed integrate nongame-play activities for the esports team, but these had to be

balanced with and allow for practice time for students to pursue gaming or their own interests related to the game and the team.

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What's Accomplished with Esports

When the program was up and running we had team members work on a number of projects, including creating resumes featuring their favorite game characters and identifying skills the characters possessed in various video games, as a way to develop coping and teamwork skills. This particular activity tied in well with esports, as it allowed team members to discuss their passions in games and share their favorite game characters and skills with other team members. Some members were more into first-person action games, whereas some were more interested in brawler games and would solely play one particular character. Our activities allowed for clear discussion and presentation of an argument and identification of particular skills that the game characters and team members shared together. At the end of the activity, we created a document that teen job applicants could use, as they would be able to transfer their own experiences from that template into an actual resume.

Along with activities such as the resume writing, we had community partners join us to help facilitate the esports program activities. At the

same time, the community members were able to build relationships with the teens and help them learn about different job opportunities. We learned

from local businesses that young people often struggled, when working at a local business, with using the technology available at the business. This technology is often older and unfamiliar to youth in Cherokee. So, we hosted retro-technology programs at which teens could learn about the technology often found in local businesses. The curriculum we tapped into through NASEF helped us to connect esports to these technologies and to learn about esports-related careers such as graphic and web design, journalism, coding, streaming, entrepreneurship, and shoutcasting.

The Outcomes and Assessments

Developing outcomes and assessments for library activities such as esports can be challenging, particularly if the information collected is more qualitative than quantitative. Knowing this, Cherokee Public Library staff structured assessment tools that reflect the interests of esports participants. Talk-back boards (often whiteboards or chart paper on which participants provide information by leaving an answer to a predetermined prompt) are a clever way to gain insight on a topic. In the past, library staff used



talk-back boards sparingly to gauge interest and outcomes of programming. With the esports teams, we utilized talk-back boards when team members were working on identifying when they were frustrated with a particular aspect of a game or another player. Library staff actually covered this specific topic in several meetings so that when players identified that they were indeed frustrated, they could vocalize their concerns or frustrations rather than physically display them.

Library staff also experimented with using memes as a medium for a talk-back board. Esport team members captioned a photo by connecting the photo to a concept they were talking about as a part of the esports team. Meme templates can easily be found online, and relevant memes can be found on popular forums like Reddit (which is a collection of online Web forums where members can create and

share content, as well as discuss that content, fandom, or interest). For our purposes, we used meme templates from memes that team members were already sharing within our team Discord server (Discord is like Skype for gamers and allows for communicating via text, audio, and images).

Team members collect gaming tips, original art, comics, and memes about concepts they learn as a part of their esports experience and publish them in the form of a small zine. The zine also functions as a recruitment mechanism to connect with potential team members who may not be avid gamers but who like to edit and create. These less-gamer-oriented teens can learn future-ready skills by collaborating, utilizing and learning new technology, and serving as a contact to distribute and print the zine.

Finally, given the feedback from surveys we have received from team members, library staff decided to split

up future esports programs into nine-week seasons: winter, summer, and fall. Team members can therefore fully participate at a time that best works with their schedule. The new schedule also allows for growth in the number of team members as we can involve those who may not be able to devote time to a weekly esports schedule. Programs for youth are also under development with an emphasis on coding and technological literacy, as well as a week-long summer program for high school students focusing on the specifics of the intersection of esports, streaming, building a brand, and what college esports coaches are looking for when scouting new players. ■

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