esports 'Rocks!

Junior **Addie Charlton** has been interested in video gaming since she was young, crediting her dad for the introduction. In eighth grade, she discovered Valorant, a tactical team-based game, and now she captains Bishop Feehan's first all-girls Valorant team on the school's competitive esports team.

Yes, you read that correctly – competitive esports. Video games. Charlton's all-girls team is the newest addition to one of the fastest-growing teams at Feehan, one that now has several dozen members and boasts the finest esports facility anywhere around.

Typically, Feehan's esports teams are co-ed or all male, but team moderator Brian Endler, '06, loves the all-girls addition this year. "They're stoked and I'm stoked. They're very good. That's what I love about esports—there's no strength disparity and you can easily have mixed teams," Endler says.

What are esports, anyway?

In simple terms, esports—electronic sports—are video games played in a structured, competitive, team format. Today, it's a multi-billion-dollar global phenomenon that has exploded in popularity, and US high schools are jumping on board. Esports was recognized as an official sport in 2018 by the National Federation of State High School Associations. By 2020, more than 8,600 high schools fielded teams to play in state or national leagues, and the trend is growing (for reference, 14,000 high schools have football teams). Thus far, 23 state athletic associations have approved varsity esports. A couple hundred colleges are on board too.

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Feehan's esports team started in 2019 with the enthusiastic support of Endler, himself an avid gamer. Recent seasons have seen the Feehan teams competing at the Helix esports facility located at Patriots Place in Foxboro. The team is now looking forward to hosting matches on campus.

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These positives and the recognition that the phenomenon is only growing pushed Bishop Feehan to go all in with an eye to the future. The new Innovation & Arts Center (IAC) houses the school's esports facility, the first of its kind in a New England high school. It doubles as a media arts classroom by day, where Endler teaches subjects like 3-D design, animation and film. After school, the esports team arrives to practice and discuss team tactics like any traditional sport.

Sporting their own team jerseys, Feehan students compete against high schools across the US through an online high school esports league, Vanta, and still play in person at Helix. With the new IAC completed, Feehan will be the first local school to host league play right on a school site.

Boasting 25 members, the team has several different game teams, each dedicated to a specific video game. There are teams for Super Smash Bros, Overwatch, Valorant, and Rocket League. And they're doing well. In fact, they're winning. "Our Rocket League took first place at a Helix competition against local schools and Overwatch took second place," Endler says. Generally, team members can choose whichever game they wish—they just need to commit and put in the work on that game.

Endler's initial goal for an esports team was modest. "When we first started, the idea was to give kids an outlet if they didn't like traditional sports," he says. (Turns out, many students interested in esports play traditional sports, too.) He also wanted to offer

in-person practices with coaching and mentoring, so in 2019 he took over and restructed from a casual online gaming group to an esports team. He coaches Overwatch while student captains handle their particular game's strategies.

Practice consists of watching "game film" and learning about a game's characters, their moves, and how to make split-second decisions. "There's also an emphasis on not panicking," says **Paul Moura '23**, former esports captain at Feehan and now a college freshman at University of Rhode Island. "If you panic, things devolve really quickly."

The in-person format offers camaraderie and connection. Students can even earn a varsity letter if they meet the requirements. "We were one of the first, if not the first, in the state to even try a team," Moura says, who was with the team from its inception. "We didn't have any reference point for how to do it."

Unfortunately, the team squeezed in just two face-to-face practices before school went online in March 2020. Luckily for esports, converting to online practice was easy. During this time, Moura says the group thought seriously about how to be a competitive team. They signed up for the national Vanta league and later Helix, practicing online three times a week. Now they meet twice a week in the IAC to learn strategy, just as Endler envisioned, and practice online (optional) at home.

Junior **Mecca Thomas**, captain of one of the Overwatch teams, likes in-person practices. "The face-to-face connection that you have with your teammates is better for team synergy," he explains.

The team meets year-round to keep up with skills, but competing is seasonal—Valorant, for example, is a fall sport—which allows students to participate in other sports and activities.

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Benefits of esports

Like any extracurricular, esports offers another avenue for school involvement, and involvement, research shows, boosts school success. It also spawns friendships, Endler says. Charlton got involved as a freshman because she thought esports would be a good way to meet people. Thomas, who joined as a sophomore, has found his place too.

The skills gained from esports, including critical thinking, leadership, explaining complex concepts, and working with others, transfer widely. Moura says the analytical skills he learned—evaluating a mistake, how to fix it, and how to avoid it next time—have helped him in college. He applies the same strategy to evaluating the results of an assignment. "The discipline of esports has helped me prepare for big tests or projects and learn how to manage my time," he says. He's in conversation now with URI about starting an esports club.

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Besides sharpening communication skills, Thomas says he's learned how to motivate, inspire, and pull his team together in crucial moments during the game. Charlton has honed leadership, time-management, and planning skills as she maps out practice drills for her team.

How esports expands career pathways

Katherine Quinn '20, a college senior at Marist College in New York, is majoring in Games and Emerging Media. In the design track, she's learning how to design games, including creating 3-D models, mechanics, and storylines. Like Charlton, Quinn started gaming young, learning along the way how good games work. The graphics and 3-D modeling classes she took at Feehan contributed to her interest.

Esports can also foster careers in STEM or the many roles behind professional sports, such as marketing, finance, event planning, videography, public relations, and shoutcasting, the play-by-play action breakdown a commentator provides that may be part of a sports broadcasting degree.

For students into game design, Quinn recommends starting now. "You don't have to know everything that goes into making games. Write down stories for games, take a 3-D modeling class, watch free tutorials on YouTube," she says.

Esports scholarships also offer opportunities. According to the National Association of Collegiate Esports, the average scholarship is $4,800 with some 200 colleges offering esports scholarships.

Are you intrigued? Students needn't be intimidated if they're not expert gamers. Sometimes not knowing how to play is better because you learn more effective habits and strategies from being on a team. "Come try it," Endler says.
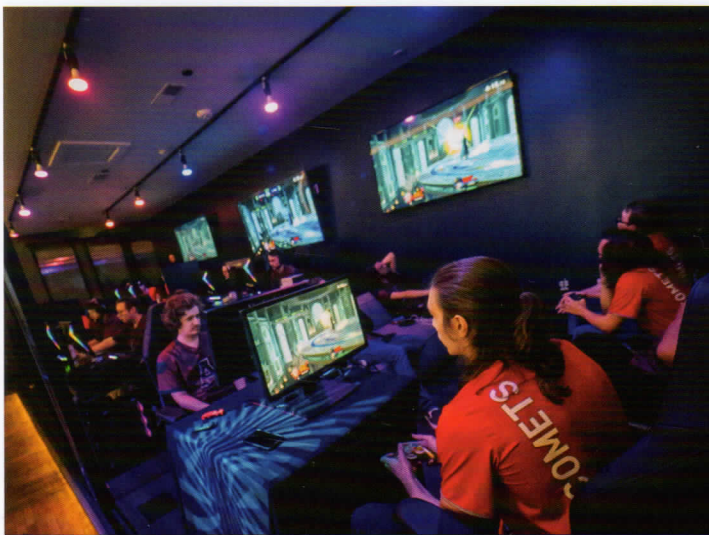
Michigan Shamrock Creates esports Hub

In small-town Alma, Michigan, a movement has taken off. It started with Alma College's plan to repurpose an historic downtown opera house the college owned. The thinking: a space for digital media. Then, **Anthony Collamati '94** (pictured) who teaches in and chairs the New Media Studies department at the college, suggested esports.

In keeping with its roots, Collamati and his business partner, Nick Lux, envisioned returning the building to its origins as a gathering place for performance—but with 21st-century entertainment. "We think of opera as highfalutin, but in the late 1800s that was just the popular art form," Collamati explains. Today, he says, that's video games.
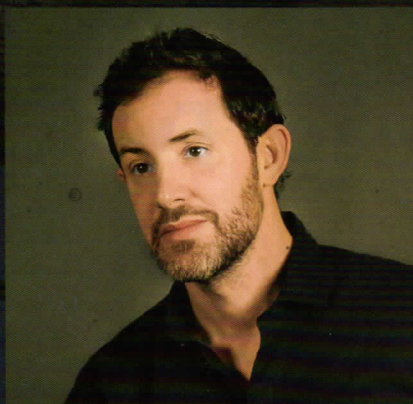
Brainstorming a venue that would have universal appeal, the partners settled on combining esports with an eatery serving international comfort food. Block House was born.

Besides being a community hub, Block House serves as homebase for local middle school, high school and collegiate esports teams. The players practice and compete on Block House's esports stage with competitions live streamed on Twitch and cast onto large screens in the restaurant. Diners watch and cheer as shoutcasters narrate the games.

Block House's professional setup enables schools to field esports teams; many otherwise couldn't afford to. For high schoolers, being on a team opens access to college scholarships. College esports programs can scout Block House for competitive players. Another plus for area high schoolers, Alma College's esports coach directs Alma's high school league. The model has been so successful, Lux and Collamati opened a second location in Olivet, Michigan this fall.

"It's been greatly rewarding to see these esports programs flourish these last few years," Collamati says. "The kids bring so much energy to it." He credits his Shamrock roots for shaping his idea of community. "It's about bringing people together and forming relationships that are meaningful," he says.