



Thriving Through Competitive Gaming

Through a new initiative in California, students can pursue their love of competitive gaming while developing career skills and fulfilling curriculum requirements. **Professor Constance Steinkuehler** explains this new form of connected learning.

In the last five years, competitive videogame play or 'esports' has quickly emerged as one of the fastest growing spectator and participatory sports for young people on a global scale. According to Forbes, 2018 global revenues are predicted to hit the one billion mark, a 38 per cent increase from 2017 (Perez, 2018). In North America, there are now more than 50 universities and colleges with varsity esports teams, many of which now offer scholarships for their top players. And this rise of interest in esports at the collegiate level is mirrored by the rise of interest at the high school level as well, with more than a dozen youth esports leagues emerging in the last three years in the United States alone.

To date, esports programs for high schools have largely remained in the after-school and for-profit sector, consisting of competing teams of high schoolers who play commercial videogame titles on teams and against one another in either school-versus-school matches or structured league playoff events. Such programs are permitted by the schools, but take place out-of-classroom and offsite, leveraging students' interest in esports as a means to organise and connect socially, but not as a means for teaching and learning or for more targeted development of career-oriented or social-emotional skills. Such programs attempt to create a positive competitive environment for young adults that might foster healthy attitudes toward school and productive connections with their peers. However, to date no programs have designed the league with learning in mind or assessed whether or not such programs are actually making good on their potential to connect and enrich the intellectual and social lives of kids.



The North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF) takes a very different approach, using esports as a Trojan horse for *connected learning* (Ito et al, 2013) – learning that connects students' personal interests with academic, career, and civic achievement as well as with a network of mentors and peers that can support and amplify that learning and build relationships between young people and the broader community as a means for affiliation, recognition, and opportunity. Launched in 2017 in California and now expanded across North America (United States, Canada and Mexico), NASEF league and club structure directly connects academic content to esports in authentic ways to enrich students' gameplay and to demonstrate to young learners how school content across the disciplines is directly and crucially relevant to our everyday lives. Our fundamental premise, based on more than two decades of research, is that "the most resilient, adaptive, and effective learning involves individual interest as well as social support to overcome adversity and provide recognition" (Ito et al., 2013). NASEF makes good on this principle using the meteoric rise of esports.



NASEF Goals

The stated mission of NASEF is “to provide opportunities for all students to use esports as a platform to acquire critical communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills needed to thrive in work and in life.” (About the Federation, 2018). This grant mission includes both academic content goals and equity goals.

Academic Content Goals. Unlike any other high school esports league to date, NASEF puts learning at the very heart of the entire enterprise. Here, esports is seen as a vehicle for engaging students’ learning across the academic domains of Science, Math, and English Language Arts (ELA) (see Figure 1) as well as career-ready practices in game design, entrepreneurship, marketing and hospitality (Career Technical Education standards or CTE, 2018) and social-emotional skills (CASEL, 2018). This cross-disciplinary laundry list of standards may seem ambitious from the perspective of the standardised classroom, but in practice the content standards across domains readily hang together out ‘in the wild’ of everyday work and play. Esports is no exception, and success in esports at the team and club level requires a broad set of knowledge, skills and dispositions that traverse a single discipline.

Research during this first year of implementation focused primarily on assessing the current and potential learning opportunities in the league as it naturally evolves. Findings showed that organic, unprompted efforts and ideas from students, coaches and GMs emerged even without heavy scaffolding. At one school, the GM tasked students with producing their own website for their school’s team. At another, students took it upon themselves to edit in-game video clips into mini movies for their school’s television station. At yet another site, the GM and coach gave impromptu homework assignments on learning various game characters’ abilities and weaknesses and students created several game-related, self-directed lessons. As one participating student commented, “I never really analysed a game more closely than I have with League [of Legends]. Mostly because of my coach.”

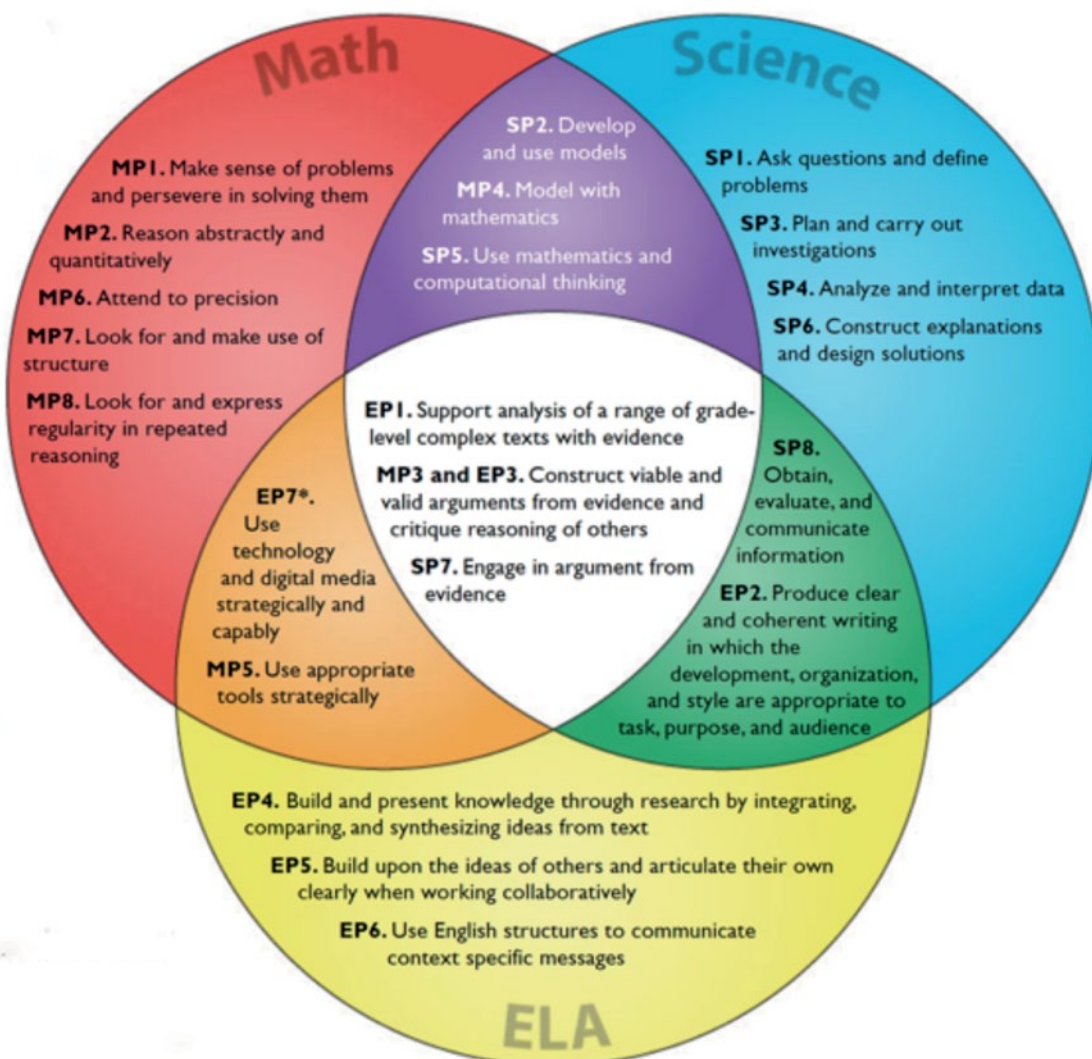


Figure 1. NASEF academic content goals as a convergence of Math, Science, and English Language Arts (Cheuk, 2013).

Equity and Inclusion. But academic content alone is not the only goal of NASEF. Equity also plays a central role in this mission. In the words of Gerald Solomon, Samueli Foundation Executive Director, “Our mission is to help insure that a child’s future is not determined by the zip code they are born into.” (personal communication, 29 June 2018). In esports, the particular challenge is attracting players who might not normally consider esports their ‘scene’ (particularly women), while also staying true to students’ existing interests and steering clear of any attempts to advocate for one set of affinities over another. Walking this fine line – between drawing a broader crowd, on the one hand, and meeting where students are already, on the other – is a challenge. NASEF’s main strategies to increase equity and access are (a) to rotate game titles so as to not preference only one game community in place of several varying ones, and (b) to ensure that the overall culture of gaming in the league is welcoming and inclusive.

Creating an inclusive environment, one that contrasts with the reputation of spectating crowds on Twitch and other commercial streaming platforms, is done through near peer mentoring via teacher ‘general managers’ (GMs) and coaches. Meeting students where they are and helping shape that environment



to be more positive and inclusive for everyone not only increases equity and inclusion but, we argue, improves gaming for all players, stereo-normative or otherwise. As one participating student commented, "It would create a better environment, not just for the team, but for everyone. You would get to talk to a lot more people. I feel like it would be a good way to be more social." (Student, School 3).

League play is expected to occur on participating school campuses, yet year one of the league revealed that an unanticipated challenge to equity and inclusion was the basic technical barriers to competitive play. In some schools, even when GMs were able to convince district administration to install the requisite game titles on school computers, actual availability varied widely on the ground. One school in the year one study only took down the firewall for 2.5 hours in the afternoon. At another school, students struggled all year against slow computers and awkward peripherals and eventually ended up practicing mostly from home. At yet another school, students were able to get access at school but struggled to keep up with their competition who had greater access to computers and the game at home. Figuring out how to create an equal playing field across such disparate school scenarios as the league goes national will be an ongoing challenge.

NASEF Structure: More than Just a League

In order to accomplish its academic and equity goals, NSEF takes a club rather than team approach, engaging participation not only from those students who

can compete on the league team, but also those who bring other vital skills and interests to the table: *strategists* such as analysts and coaches; *content creators* such as shoutcasters, journalists, and artists; *entrepreneurs* such as marketing skills and web developers; and *organisers* such as event organisers and IT support people (Anderson et al., 2018). Figure 2 details the various roles afforded by the combined esports league and club. The professional esports ecosystem includes this diversity of roles and expertise and so it only makes sense that this broad range is also reflected in the structure of student programs as well.

Adult and near peer mentors serve as GMs and coaches to augment and amplify community learning and to enrich students' myriad activities by connecting them in authentic ways with targeted academic, career and social-emotional knowledge and skills. It is these relationships with teachers and with trained, more senior – but near in age and interest – peers that are at the heart of the NASEF club structure. With so much of young people's socialisation and activity now occurring online, it is crucial that we engage with students in those environments in which they spend so much of their time, that we apprentice them into positive ways of interacting and connecting and that we build bridges between their affinity spaces (Gee, 2005), on the one end, and institutions like school and home, on the other.

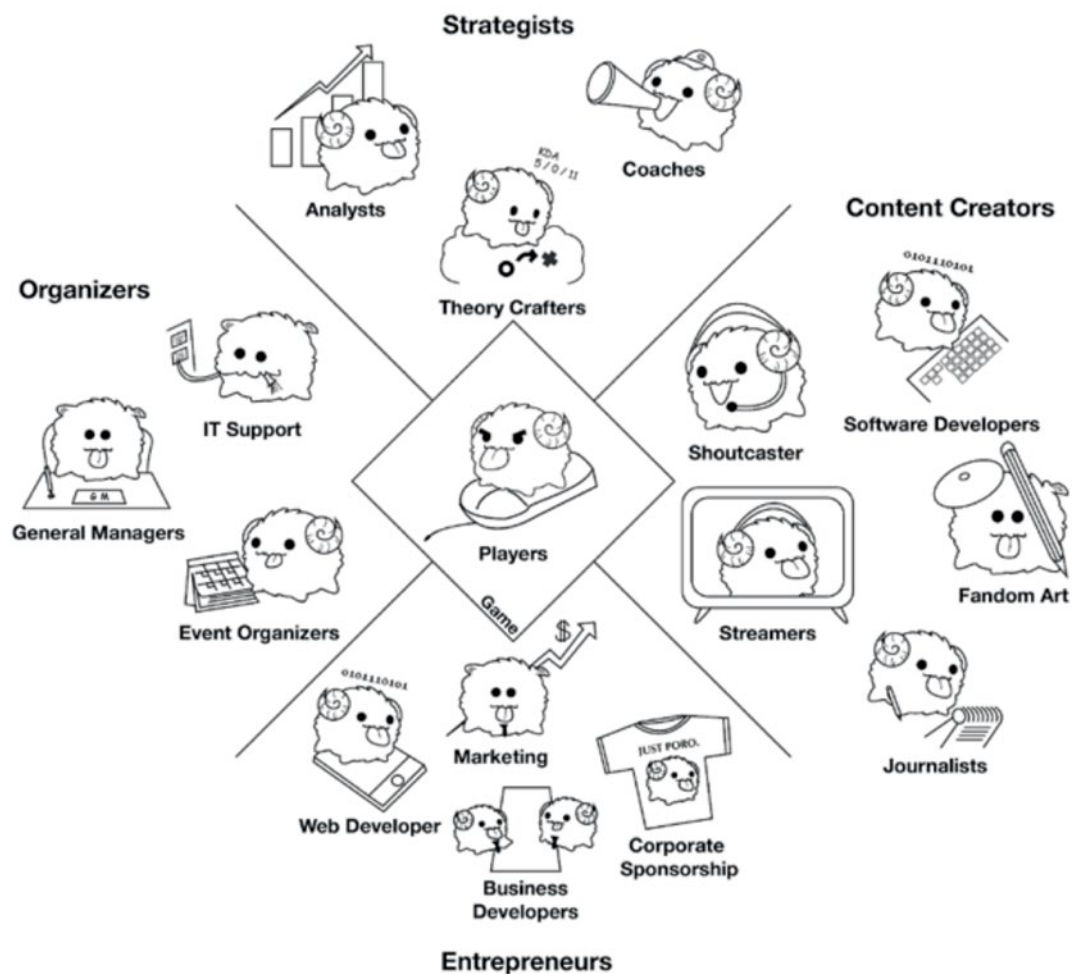


Figure 2. The esports ecosystem and NASEF club participatory roles (Anderson et al., 2018).



NASEF classroom ELA curriculum

As part of this effort to build bridges between the real world and school goals, we created the first ever four-year accredited high school curriculum that was designed to meet the English Language Arts requirements for college-bound students. In year one of the NASEF league, core units of activity were piloted on the University of California, Irvine campus as weekend half-day enrichment



activities. Once the activities were designed, pilot tested, and refined where needed, the broader synthetic curriculum was submitted and accepted for California state credentialing. Now in year two, the NASEF league launches nationally with a full curriculum available for schools that are able to participate. Table 1 provides an overview of units from the 12th grade (17-18 year olds) curriculum entitled 'The Saga of the Tournament', focusing on esports and event planning (CTE 'Hospitality'). By focusing on real world activities in this way, standards across ELA, Career Technical Education, STEM, and social-emotional learning are easily and synthetically met.

Table 1. Overview of the 12th grade (17-18 year olds) ELA curriculum (NASEF Curriculum, 2018).

<p>Unit 1: On Your Mark, Get Set, Play</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1: Reflective Essay: <i>Gameline, A Memoir</i> 2: Argument: Tournament Game Selection 3: Research: Esports Ecosystem 4: Developing a Resume & Cover Letter <p>Unit 2: No 'I' in Team</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1: Debate: No One is an Island, SWOT Analysis 2: Book Study: Dystopian Novels & Modern Society 3: Developing a Team Mission & Culture <p>Unit 3: Lore Building</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1: Mythological Influences on Esports 2: Narrative Writing: Creating a Backstory 3: Marketing as a Means for Building Lore <p>Unit 4: What IS the Quest?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1: Analysis: Live Tournament Breakdown 2: Developing a Business Plan 3: Formal Presentation: Tournament Proposal 	<p>Unit 5: There Be Dragons Here!</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1: Reorganisation into Divisions 2: Choice Writing: Exploring Grit through the Hero's Journey 3: Contingency Planning <p>Unit 6: Transformers</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1: Writing for an Audience: Gladwell's Recipe for Success 2: Discussion: Defining & Working within a Budget 3: Persuasive Speaking: The Elevator Pitch <p>Unit 7: "Do, or do not. There is no try."</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1: Stakeholder Communication: Finalising Event Website 2: Script Writing: Final Event Preparation 3: Mock Tournament Run Through and Reflection <p>Unit 8: The Dragon's Lair</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1: Event Post-Mortem and Reflection
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This new curriculum builds on the same pedagogical models and activities as the esports clubs, but it more systematically introduces students to core reading, writing, and communication skills across the levels that represent the various esports roles within the ecosystem (Figure 2). Each grade level ties ELA to one of four fundamental Career Technical Education pathways: Game Design (grade 9), Entrepreneurship (grade 10), Marketing (grade 11), and Hospitality (grade 12). Students can take one year or multiple years, opting in and out of the course sequence as they choose, in order to provide maximum flexibility for learners and teachers. Ideally, by year three of the NASEF league,

students will be running the team websites, promotions, fundraising, and league championship event themselves, with adults taking a side seat as guides and mentors for their work.

Final Comments

Rejecting and denigrating the passions and interests of young people is, in our view, to land on the wrong side of history. Instead, we choose to meet students where they are and use those contexts as sites for their intellectual, social, and civic development. NASEF connects students' passion for esports to thinking and reasoning, which have been long valued in classrooms, and caring mentors and near peers who can shape participants' online and gaming lives in positive ways. In so doing, we hope to raise not only more connected, resilient and engaged students but also better citizens of the increasing networked and cosmopolitan world.

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