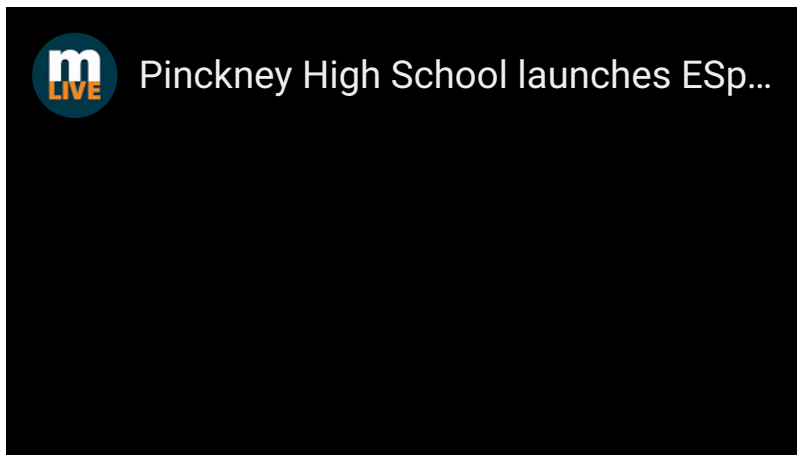


To e or not to e? The debate over video games as a varsity sport in Michigan

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[Pinckney High School launches ESports Team](#)

Jacob Wilburn deftly guides his blacksmith demigod Ornn across the fields of Summoner's Rift, swinging his hammer at the monsters blocking his path.

At stake? Death or glory.

Welcome to the world of esports, where rocket cars -- not soccer players -- score goals and players fight for supremacy on video monitors instead of a grassy field.

Long derided as the time wastes for nerds, video games are now at the center of a debate over whether the Michigan High School Athletic

Association should put games like League of Legends and Rocket League on even footing with traditional sports like football and basketball.

"You can't just put the word 'sports' at the end of 'e' and call it a sport," Ithaca athletic director and football coach Terry Hessbrook said. "There has to be some cardiovascular activity involved, some type of physical fitness. It's not a case of giving a letter to a student who plays video games. We give letters to our students participating in clubs.

"Does it belong as a club or a sport? I just don't think you can call it a sport."

Not so fast, say other coaches.

"The idea of sport or not sport is kind of fascinating to me," Dearborn Divine Child coach Matt Mooney said. "What makes a sport? Is bowling a sport vs. billiards vs. darts vs. cheer?"

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To e or not to e

When new MHSAA executive director Mark Uyl announced last year that the organization would assemble a task force to look into the feasibility of sanctioning esports on the same level as traditional sports like football, basketball, volleyball and track, the eye rolls were apparent.

"The response we got was half of the people wondering what it was about and the other half wondering, 'Why are you even asking this question? This is ridiculous,'" MHSAA official Andy Frushour said.

Does clearing the monsters from a League of Legends alley equate to clearing the pins on a bowling alley? Should hours of practice in front of a video screen carry the same reward as a week of two-a-day football practices in August? Does a mouse-clicking sophomore scoring a video goal with a soccer-playing car deserve as much credit as the sophomore midfielder who played through the rain and scored the game-winner?

"There is no doubt about the popularity of esports or the potential benefits of esports," Frushour said. "But is it a sport? That question is what we're wrestling with right now. We're an athletic association, not an activities association."

But given the exponential growth of esports, especially among high school students, the high school association assembled a task force of high school administrators, gathering information on the structure, hazards and potential benefits of making team video gaming competitions an MHSAA sport.

Adding the sport would allow the MHSAA to reach high school students that may not participate in traditional sports, while giving high schools organizational structure that would include official seasons, practice limitations and eligibility standards. Esports athletes would follow the same MHSAA rules as athletes in traditional sports.

Frushour estimates that 24,000 high school students currently compete in esports, with 72 percent of high school students playing

video games during their free time in Michigan.

"Basically, esports has all the tenets of traditional sports ... teamwork, practice, strategy, leadership, time management, critical thinking," Frushour said. "It doesn't have the sweat that you get from the other sports. If you strip away the cardiovascular nature of sports ... and that's a really hard hurdle to go over ... esports has all the benefits and features of traditional sports.

"You have coaches, scouting, watching video of previous games. It follows the same model of every other sport, except for what is physically required. And that goes back to what is the definition of a sport."



Breaking the stereotypes

Top esports players, said Mooney, are typically in good shape with a workout regimen that focuses on flexibility.

"There's a component of reaction time and twitch response that is very physical. It might not be physical in the traditional sense, but the need for physical health is there," said Mooney.

Andrew Blanchard, tournament director for the State Champs Esports League at Lawrence Tech, believes esports players must make quicker decisions in an online game than a traditional one.

"When you have a football player, they have to look ahead of them, maybe see defenders right or left of them and then make a decision where to run," said Blanchard. "The esports player makes those decisions over and over again and much faster. The football player makes that decision once every 40 seconds once the ball is snapped. The esports player makes that reaction and decision every second for 40 minutes."

Most games last between 30 to 85 minutes. The Lawrence Tech tournament runs for two days, from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m. each day with teams playing up to five or six games a day.

"You can play 10 games straight at home when it's not serious, and it's not a problem," Blanchard said. "But when you're playing three, four, five games straight at that competitive level, at that intensity, at that high-pressure competition for four to five hours ... you are completely drained after. You are mentally exhausted. The more physically fit you are, the better you're able to handle that intensity."

Michael Brooks, the executive director of the National Association of Collegiate Esports - a governing body for 129 college esports programs - said fitness is important.

"We do have stories of esports student-athletes sharing the gym with the basketball team, both teams trying to get in the best possible physical shape," Brooks said. "Then the basketball team goes to the esports arena to play. Most everybody is a gamer anyway, including

the traditional athlete.

"To be a top player, you have to be active, you have to be healthy. This requires fast and accurate movements. That requires short muscle fiber or quick-twitch muscle. The best way to do that is to hit the gym. If you need rapid movements with incredible accuracy, you have to be in shape."

Lapeer athletic director Shad Spilski, a member of the MHSAA task force, doesn't know how physically fit an esports player has to be to succeed, but he does believe the stereotype of an esports player does not fit reality.

"There's the image that there's a big pizza, some Doritos, a big jug of pop in someone's basement," Spilski said. "That's the stereotype. But the reality is very different than what many adults believe."

"If you look around, your all-state football player is gaming in his down time. After the game, what are our athletes doing? They're going to someone's house and playing video games."

One of the draws of the MHSAA's involvement is cost.

For some schools, there is little cost, depending on the level of sponsorship from vendors.

"From an equipment standpoint, from what we've been told, these games can be played on your normal computer that you already have in your computer lab," Frushour said. "Some people may go out and buy a better mouse or headsets. A lot of players playing now already have their own peripherals like headsets or keyboards."

"Generally, there are no buses. You can play everything at your school with no road trips. We're talking to some third parties who would help us organize things. There would be a seasonal cost for the game, probably around \$50 to \$60 per player. When you add everything up, it's cheaper than traditional sports."

Dearborn Divine Child has worked to fund its esports program. Mooney said the school has received sponsorships to cover the cost of the gaming equipment and the peripherals.

Pinckney is in its first season as an esports team, and funding has become a challenge.

"We've had to fund raise in order to get the gaming machines ... it's hard to get this up and running," Pinckney co-coach Ted Kidd said. "We've gone out to area businesses to raise money and get donations. But it is definitely not easy."

"If the MHSAA sanctioned it, chances are people and school districts would be more likely to get behind it financially."

An uncertain future

Still, there is reluctance to embrace the esports-as-sport movement.

"I exercise a lot, and it's just hard for me to make that leap that someone clicking a mouse has the physical requirements that, to me at least, constitutes a sport," Essexville Garber athletic director Dave Schwartz said. "At our school, we have a great tradition of supporting the arts like band and choir."

"If it gets kids involved in school, it's worthwhile. I always tell kids that at your 30-year reunion, you don't want to be the one saying I wish I had done this. I coulda, woulda, shoulda. Get involved while you can. If this does that, even if at this point I may not think it belongs as a sport, then it can be a positive.

"But at this point, I would have to learn more and would have to be convinced it's an MHSAA sport and not a club."

Skeptics likely won't have to worry about waking up tomorrow to find Madden football on the same footing as varsity football..

"If it happens, it will not happen soon," said Frushour. "We're a ways away from that. We have had a task force meeting with some athletic directors. Let's step back and see how it plays out nationally.

"There are somewhere between six and 12 state associations holding state tournaments this year. We're learning from them. Everybody is just trying to figure it out. This is up and coming. Is it the MHSAA's role to be involved in it? We're good at working with schools and at putting on state tournaments, but we're not gamers. We're learning. The National Federation (of State High School Associations) is working with a third party (PlayVs) in sponsoring tournaments."

According to several coaches, the esports community would welcome MHSAA involvement.

"I try to shy away from the mentality that it's coming, so you better get behind it," said Mooney. "But it's out there, it's immensely popular, it's gaining steam and somebody needs to be in charge of it. Maybe MHSAA wants this, but does esports want this? The answer, from

people I've talked to, is yes. We don't want to be a fringe thing with five kids tucked away in a computer lab somewhere.

"My fear is that a third-party body will come in and govern this for profit. We lose out on the kid-first mentality that we would have with the MHSAA instead of the third party that's in it for the money. Having the MHSAA involved would also add an air of legitimacy to this. You would have set seasons, set practices, set rules ... it would fix some of the misconceptions about esports and the players."

Some third-party entities have already approached high school esports teams.

"We've had a company, PlayVs., get involved ... they're going from state to state trying to get states to commit to play in their league," Pinckney co-coach Chris Fowler said. "Each student has to pay to participate with them. I'm afraid that in this state, if the MHSAA isn't doing anything, we'll have to go with a third party, a for-profit party.

"It's like the Wild West right now. There aren't any rules right now."

The MHSAA would follow the current esports model, focusing on the less-violent games such as League of Legends and Rocket League.

"There is some violence to some degree in all video games ... you win by knocking the other person out," Frushour said. "League of Legends has animated fantasy violence. There is a sliding scale of violence. Is Pac Man violent because he eats ghosts? Rocket League has the advantage in that there isn't any violence and, if you want to connect it to sports somehow, cars are essentially playing soccer.

"One of the selling points of MHSAA getting involved is that we would be able to determine the games that are being used, like League of Legends. There is some violence involved, but its minimal. There's no blood and gore. We would avoid games that include single-shooter situations or real-life simulated violence. All games we would use would be rated Teen."

Some video games also have sexually suggestive overtones and chat rooms can become hostile toward females, making it difficult for the industry to attract female gamers. While some estimate that females comprise almost 50 percent of people playing video games, less than 10 percent of esports competitors are female.

Esports would also exist with no gender separation, unlike other MHSAA sports. Esports teams consist of both boys and girls, with the hope that MHSAA moderation and enforcement would create an environment that would encourage female participation.

It is just one reason athletic directors and coaches would welcome the structure that comes with being an MHSAA sport.

"There are regulations that go with being an MHSAA sport, from eligibility to transfers to season start and end dates," Spilski said.

"Some of our clubs, like robotics, or activities, like marching band, would have to make a huge adjustment if they had to follow MHSAA rules. It's something that we would not pursue.

"But esports would fit into the MHSAA model."

Frushour is making no promises.

"There are a lot of positives, from teaching teamwork to bringing in students and getting them more involved in school ... students that we do not reach at the moment," Frushour said. "When you see an esports event sell out Madison Square Garden three straight nights or an esports event selling out an 80,000-seat arena in Asia, you have to take notice.

"When you see the numbers of people who are watching live streams of these competitions, you have to pay attention. Gamers watch the competitions like I watch PGA golf. I learn things from watching. They learn things from watching."

The International Olympic Committee has discussed making esports a potential Olympic sport for the 2024 Games in Paris. A Goldman Sachs report estimates that the potential viewership of esports world championships could equal the Super Bowl viewership by 2020.

"NBA owners are buying esports franchises in leagues," Frushour said. "An Overwatch league had 12 teams ... all were owned by professional sports team owners. It is already big, and it's only getting bigger. But what role will the MHSAA have in it, I don't know, or even if it should have a role."

Coaches have seen the positive impact esports competition has had for its students.

"I was dubious at first and kind of balked at the idea," Mooney said. "Now I'm at open houses advocating for it. There are so many similarities to traditional sports.

"When we got our jerseys, it was a galvanizing moment for our kids. It

made it legitimate in their eyes. They were a team. I value our school community. We became a part of that community. School has so many opportunities for involvement, but you always have kids who don't buy in. High school can and should be, for your formative years, a good experience. This is a good experience that gives our students a sense of involvement to their school."

Spilski was also impressed with the impact of esports on a demographic that tends to get left behind.

"The engagement piece is so big," Spilski said. "There are so many things kids can do outside of school that anything that we can do within school to keep them engaged and to get them involved is worthwhile. I've watched competitions online. The kids have jerseys, and they're so proud. You get to see the teamwork, the leadership, all the things within what we call traditional sports. I was skeptical at first, but not anymore.

"Is it something that we should have in our school? Absolutely. Where or if it fits in the MHSAA, I'm not sure. I do know that when kids are involved, they do better in school. Let's give them the opportunity to have them involved."

Mooney doesn't know if the MHSAA will get involved, but he hopes the eventual result is a non-profit governing body with rules for student-first competition.

"It is too popular and offers too many positives for it to exist in a vacuum," Mooney said. "Someday, there will be a body in the state that handles this. It's my hope that it's an official body and not a third party that comes in to make money.

"If it's the MHSAA, I would love to continue the conversation. But maybe athletics or sport has evolved to the point where the MHSAA has to evolve, maybe creating an off-shoot organization to handle the next generation of athletics.

"Someone is going to do it. It's gotten too big to ignore. My hope is whoever that is will put the kids first, not the profit."