

HOME >> CLASSROOM

NOV 04 2021 CLASSROOM

Anyone’s Game: K–12 Esports Opportunities Abound for Girls

Schools are working to ensure robust female participation and engagement in the sport.

by Erin Brereton

Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

LISTEN 07:36

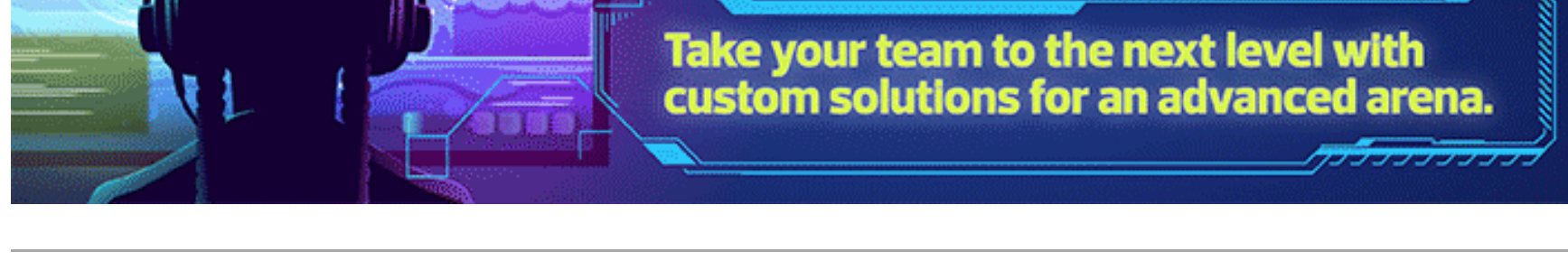
In recent years, esports has become increasingly popular. Its audience [increased by 38 million from 2019 to 2020](#), and it's projected to reach more than 576 million by 2024.

Female participation in the sport, however, hasn't quite mirrored that pace. Sixty percent of female gamers in the U.S. and U.K. say there's a [significant lack of women participating in esports](#); nearly as many feel the gaming community isn't doing enough to encourage female participation in the sport.

Ashley Hodge, who now coaches a 45-student esports team at Dodge County High School in Georgia, previously oversaw a large esports program at another high school in the state. Out of more than 125 students on that team, only five were girls, she says.

"Female esports players are kind of like unicorns, even in 2021," Hodge says. "They're rare. They're just outnumbered, and that's throughout the amateur, collegiate and professional esports world."

[Click the banner to discover resources from CDW to bring your K–12 program to the next level.](#)



Several factors may be contributing to the scarcity of female players, including how those players view the industry. In K–12 esports settings, school coaches can monitor players' interactions and report any inappropriate comments an opponent makes, and there will likely be consequences. At nonacademic esports events, which are less regulated, verbal harassment can be a concern, Hodge says, giving female players of various ages the impression the gaming community isn't particularly welcoming.

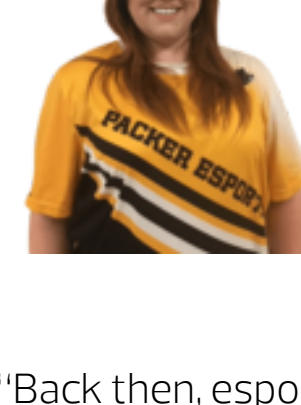
"It's a very toxic environment for female players," she says. "We don't see a lot of female representation in professional or collegiate esports. It's hard to get many females to say, 'Hey, let me get really good at this game that I know has a toxic community — or if I talk, I'm going to be talked down to like I'm subhuman.' People don't want to sign up for that."

Examples and Encouragement Could Help Pique Girls’ Interest

More women are involved in the sport now than in the past. When [professional esports athlete EMUHLEET](#) began participating in events around 2005, she says, she was often one of the only females present.

"There was a lack of other girls who wanted to compete and not just be a fan, and that's probably because there weren't very many women figures to look up to who were gamers," she says. "Slowly, we're starting to see all these amazing women putting their foot in the door and really paving the way for young girl gamers."

EMUHLEET is currently part of an all-women's team she formed in 2014. In recent years, increased global investment and involvement have drawn attention to gaming in general, as well as esports. EMUHLEET says several years ago fewer people viewed esports in the same capacity, if they were even aware of it.



Female e-sports players are kind of like unicorns, even in 2021. They're rare."

Ashley Hodge, Esports Coach, Dodge County (Ga.) High School

"Back then, esports wasn't really a career," she says. "We were competing in all-weekend tournaments for just a mousepad. Now we have tournaments that are worth millions of dollars. Because gaming is getting bigger and there is more of a spotlight on it, we're seeing more female role models, which is going to encourage girls who want to compete."

Schools may need to tweak their esports recruiting approach to make sure it isn't alienating novice players. [Laylah Bulman](#), founder and executive director of the Florida Scholastic Esports League, which helped schools across the state launch esports clubs in 2019 that participate in regional and national tournaments, says that in a number of the clubs, roughly 50 percent of the players are girls.

Initially, though, more male students tended to be part of the competitive teams within the clubs. Female students gravitated toward becoming club president and taking on other leadership positions — perhaps indicating, Bulman says, they didn't feel they had the necessary experience to participate in competitive matches.

LEVEL UP: [Support your team with tech for all students in the program, not just athletes.](#)

"On some of the forms, the teachers were asking how many hours of playing students had," she says. "Those kinds of tryouts perhaps didn't allow girls to demonstrate their interest. By changing that and making it more accessible, they started addressing the gender imbalance."

Initiatives Aim to Give Girls Game–Related Skills for Competition or a Career

Research suggests gender equality in gaming still has room to grow — just 27 percent of U.S. and U.K. female players say women are very or quite well represented in the gaming industry. Women also appear to earn significantly less in the field.

The professional esports player with [the highest overall earnings](#), who is male, has netted \$6.97 million to date. The [highest-earning female esports player](#) has made \$393,000 over the course of her career.

In addition to schools' attempts to bolster female participation at the K–12 level, a number of other programs are offering gaming-related instruction and experience geared specifically to girls interested in playing on an amateur or professional level or someday working in the industry.

[Girls Make Games](#), a series of game design–oriented summer camps, workshops and other events, has reportedly been attended by more than 20,000 girls in 89 cities since its 2014 launch.



Source: Newzoo, "The Way Consumers Interact with Games Is Changing; Nearly Half of Gamers Are Female; Over Half Are 30+," Aug. 12, 2021

A women-led online gaming community, the*gameHERs, introduced a [collegiate division](#) earlier this year. Ed Fleming, founder of Fleming Tech Camps, which offer esports, game design and other instruction, told nonprofit news site The 74 that [40 percent of his program participants](#) are girls.

Getting girls to join a program or team, though, is just the beginning. To ensure both male and female students have a chance to participate equally, Hodge has found alternating roles can help.

"For each game, the leader will call the shots and communicate effectively to the team," she says. "We rotate, whether they're the most knowledgeable player or a beginner. That way each of them has that opportunity."

School esports programs may also want to consider which games will best resonate with girls and inspire them to participate, Bulman says. On a console or PC, for instance, action and adventure games are female players' top pick; they rank shooter-style games considerably lower.

"Different schools have all-girls teams, or all-girls' tournaments," she says. "Others make sure there's a variety of titles that could be used to expand access and equity for girls."

[Click the banner for more esports content featuring advice from experts for K–12 teams at all levels.](#)



Both male and female players can benefit from schools' efforts to establish a more diverse esports team, which can provide students with a better overall learning experience and also help prepare them for future success, Bulman says.

"We're at a critical juncture in the education space where we should be able to impact what the future of esports looks like," she says. "That means ensuring you have an inclusive environment in terms of what your club rules are, what titles students want. Schools have a great opportunity to change how students see themselves and the achievements they'll have in their academic life, as well as the esports industry."

EXPLORE: [Invest in leveling up your K–12 esports program.](#)

PHOTO BY ADAMKAZ/GETTY IMAGES



Become an Insider

Sign Up >>

Sign up today to receive premium content!

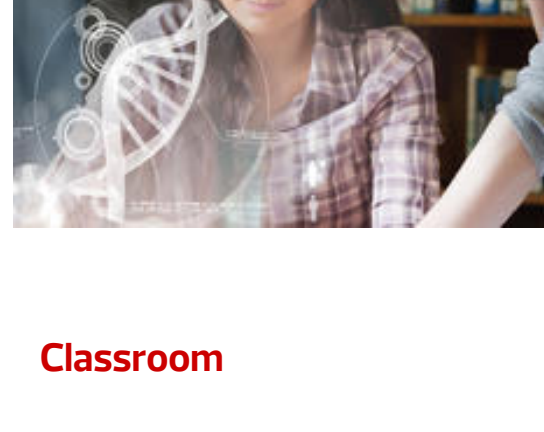
More On ESPORTS COLLABORATION LEADERSHIP

Related Articles



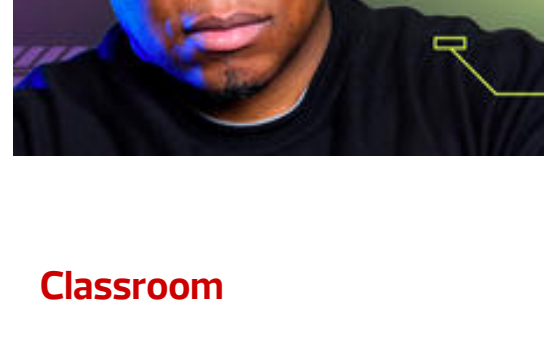
Classroom

Playing with Ed Tech: Using Digital Tools in Kindergarten Classrooms



Classroom

Holograms Add Depth to Remote Classes



Classroom

Q&A: The General Manager of the Brooklyn Nets Gaming Crew on the Path to Going Pro