

SPRING 2025

# ESPORTS NEXT

TRACKING THE INDUSTRY PULSE OF ESPORTS



**HBCUS  
HIT PLAY**  
ON THE FUTURE  
OF ESPORTS

**NOT A  
SIDE  
QUEST**  
WOMEN'S ESPORTS  
IS THE NEXT BIG PLAY.

**WHO'S MISSING**  
ESPORTS BELONGS TO EVERYONE—SO  
WHY ISN'T EVERYONE HERE?



esports  
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**Level Up Your Esports Career in 2025**



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### EsportsNext Magazine Mission

As the official publication of the Esports Trade Association, EsportsNext Magazine aims to advance the esports industry through in-depth reporting, insightful analysis, and compelling storytelling. Reflecting ESTA's mission, we strive to unify, advocate for, and promote the broader esports community, providing a platform for professional development, innovation, and industry insights.

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

In gaming, representation isn't just a social imperative—it's a competitive advantage.

Across the esports landscape, we're witnessing a transformation that promises to redefine not just who plays, but how the entire industry evolves. Our spring issue explores this revolution through three interconnected stories that reveal how diversity is becoming the industry's most powerful cheat code.

The HBCU phenomenon represents perhaps the most remarkable turnaround story in esports and education. What began as scattered gaming clubs has evolved into sophisticated programs producing both championship-caliber competitors and next-generation developers. These institutions aren't just participating in the gaming ecosystem—they're fundamentally reshaping it, creating blueprints for inclusion that other underrepresented communities can adapt.

Meanwhile, the executive suites of esports and gaming companies are undergoing their own quiet revolution. Women, tired of waiting for the industry to fix its notorious gender imbalance, have decided to rewrite the code themselves. Their impact extends far beyond representation—companies embracing female leadership are delivering better financial results, creating more innovative products, and building more sustainable player communities.

Perhaps most fascinating is how gaming itself is evolving from parental concern to career launchpad. The journey from skepticism to opportunity shows how competitive gaming is creating pathways to careers that simply didn't exist a decade ago. For communities historically excluded from traditional tech pipelines, these new routes represent more than just jobs—they're gateways to economic transformation.

What excites me most about this moment is how inclusion is proving to be gaming's ultimate power-up. When different voices and perspectives enter the arena, the entire ecosystem levels up—from game design to competitive strategy and business models.

The stories in this issue aren't just about diversity. They're about how bringing everyone to the table is creating better games, stronger communities, and more sustainable businesses. The message is clear: the future belongs to those bold enough to embrace the full spectrum of human talent.

Game on,

Megan Van Petten  
Editor-in-Chief  
EsportsNext Magazine



## THE NEW PLAYERS REDEFINING ESPORTS' FUTURE

Welcome to the frontlines of esports' most important evolution. In this issue, we examine how diversity isn't just changing who plays—it's revolutionizing the entire business of competitive gaming. From HBCU campuses to women's leagues, the industry's next growth markets aren't just emerging—they're already delivering results.

The competitive landscape has fundamentally shifted. HBCU esports programs have built sophisticated ecosystems transforming underrepresented talent into industry professionals across all sectors of gaming. Meanwhile, women's competitions have evolved from diversity initiatives into commercial powerhouses, proving that inclusive tournaments deliver superior engagement metrics and untapped audience value.

Our exclusive reporting takes you inside this transformation, revealing how forward-thinking organizations are approaching diversity not as a social obligation but as a strategic advantage. From pioneering academic degree programs to championship dynasties built by women's teams, we showcase the institutions and individuals converting market inefficiencies into competitive edges.

The future of esports won't be defined by traditional metrics alone. It's the ability to recognize and develop undervalued talent pools that will separate tomorrow's industry leaders from today's legacy brands. Consider this your essential intelligence briefing on gaming's most significant business opportunity.



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10

## Pressing Start *The HBCU Revolution*

Learn how HBCUs transformed from gaming outsiders to industry innovators and what other under represented groups can learn from the HBCU experience.



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16

## The Unexpected Revolution in Education *Inside the New Wave of Esports Arenas*

Educational institutions on both sides of the Atlantic are quietly revolutionizing their campuses, and it's not happening in traditional classrooms or athletic facilities. The transformation is taking place in high-tech arenas where competitive gaming meets academic innovation.



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20

## The Equalizers *Women Transforming Esports From The Inside*

Meet the executives and innovators breaking the industry's longest-running bug—and building a more profitable future

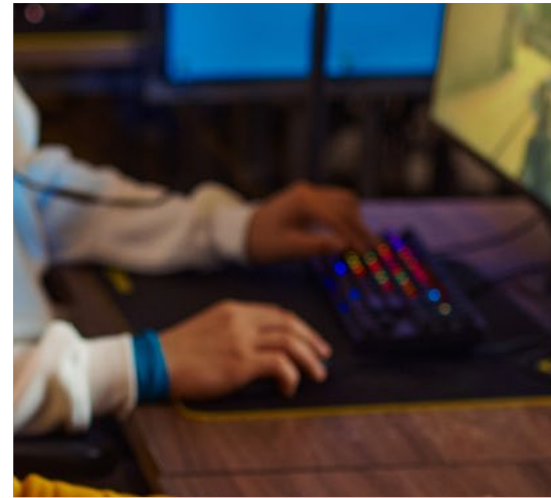


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30

## Esports Reimagined *A Parent's Doubt, A Gamer's Rise, and a New Career Playbook*

From "Get Off That Game!" to unlocking a world of opportunities



## Esports Unlocks New Level of Student Engagement

From prep schools to colleges, competitive gaming is reaching students where traditional enrichment falls short.

By Johanna Navari Welch

At first glance, Cottesmore School seems an unlikely champion for competitive gaming. With its wood-paneled halls, traditional uniforms, and deep-rooted boarding school heritage, it exemplifies centuries of British educational tradition. Yet this prestigious prep school has become a pioneer in educational esports, recently hosting what they believe to be the world's first prep school-aged gaming championship. It's just one example of how British educational institutions are discovering the unexpected power of competitive gaming as an enrichment tool.

"The story isn't that we do esports," Rogerson explains during the online panel, "it's the fact that we do esports in this paradigm, in this setting." As the head of a deeply traditional boarding school, Rogerson's embrace of competitive gaming represents a broader transformation happening in educational institutions across the UK, where esports is evolving from an after-school distraction to a powerful educational catalyst.

The shift isn't just aesthetic. At New College Swindon, Programme Leader Chris Baxter has built a comprehensive esports program that would have been unthinkable just

five years ago. Students can now progress from entry-level qualifications through to Higher National Diplomas, spending up to five years developing skills that extend far beyond mastering game mechanics. "We're seeing students use gaming as a springboard for developing transferable skills that benefit them across any industry," Baxter notes, detailing how their dedicated esports room has become a hub for both competitive gaming and crucial skill development.

But the real revolution isn't happening in the victories or the high-level plays – it's in who's showing up to play. Tyler Wilson, drawing from his experience at York College, has discovered that esports programs are reaching students who have historically struggled to engage with traditional enrichment activities. The data is striking: up to 75% of students with additional learning needs are more likely to engage in esports-based enrichment compared to traditional activities. "We're seeing a completely different side to students who might have been labeled as challenging in traditional settings," Wilson says. "It's about meeting them where they are."

The transformation extends beyond individual success stories. David Higginson, co-founder of DAIGON Esports, has observed gaming creating unexpected social bridges in schools. Students who might never interact in traditional settings are forming teams, developing strategies, and building friendships through shared digital experiences. It's a phenomenon that's catching the attention of educators who have long struggled to break down social barriers in their institutions.

Yet for all its success, esports in education still faces significant challenges. Despite statistics showing that women make up over 50% of global gamers, competitive educational esports programs show a marked gender disparity. At Cottesmore's recent championship event,



only a handful of girls participated among dozens of competitors. The disparity has prompted educators like Rogerson to launch dedicated initiatives aimed at creating more inclusive competitive environments.

The impact of these programs extends far beyond the screen. Chris Baxter shares how a partnership with a local Islamic school used esports access as a behavior modification tool, leading to measurable improvements in attendance and academic engagement. It's this kind of concrete impact that's helping to silence skeptics who question gaming's place in education.

The business world is taking notice too. Major aerospace companies are now actively seeking graduates with esports experience, recognizing that these students develop unique problem-solving and team coordination skills that traditional education struggles to teach. It's a trend that suggests the true value of educational esports might lie not in the games themselves, but in the cognitive and social skills they develop.

As more institutions adopt esports programs, they're discovering that success lies not in replacing traditional activities but in creating new pathways for student engagement. Whether it's building confidence in socially anxious students, developing communication skills in team environments, or creating new social connections, gaming is proving to be an unexpectedly powerful educational tool.

In Cottesmore's great hall, as another round of competition begins, the contrast between old and new feels less jarring. Perhaps this is what educational evolution looks like: tradition and innovation finding common ground in unexpected places, one game at a time.

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### Real Conversations. Real Experts. Real Impact.

In an industry where yesterday's innovation is tomorrow's standard, ESTA's LinkedIn Live series has become the essential gathering place for esports' most influential voices.

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Don't miss the next broadcast. Follow the Esports Trade Association on LinkedIn and join the conversation that's defining gaming's future.

## Bringing Esports to Life

### Designing the Future of Esports Events

As the driving force behind B-Side Events, Ben Schlegel blends competitive integrity, immersive brand activations, and seamless execution to deliver world-class esports experiences.



Esports events are more than just competitions—they're immersive experiences that connect players, fans, and brands in meaningful ways. At the heart of this movement is Ben Schlegel, President and Executive Producer of B-Side Events, an agency dedicated to crafting world-class gaming activations. From high-profile industry conferences to live tournaments in unexpected venues, Schlegel and his team are redefining what esports events can be.

#### What makes B-Side Events stand out in the esports space?

We specialize in experiential marketing, blending esports competition with immersive activations. Whether it's a large-scale industry conference or a tournament in a non-traditional venue, we ensure every event is designed for both players and spectators. Our goal is to create an authentic experience that brands want to be part of and gamers won't forget.

#### What's one of your most exciting esports events to date?

Producing EsportsNext, the Esports Trade Association's annual conference, has been a game-changer. It's a space where the industry's biggest players—publishers, teams, brands, and investors—come together to shape the future of esports.

Another standout was a live tournament we produced for Coca-Cola and ENT Marketing at Six Flags Fiesta Texas. Running an esports event inside a theme park presented unique challenges, but it also introduced competitive gaming to a whole new audience. It was an incredible way to merge entertainment and esports.

#### What's the secret to a great esports event?

Authenticity and flawless execution. Players need to trust that the competition is fair, while fans need engaging moments that keep them hooked. We focus on creating high-energy matches, interactive experiences, and seamless production that elevates gaming beyond just the screen.

#### What challenges have you faced in esports event production?

Esports is still evolving, and not every venue is built for live gaming competitions. At Six Flags, we had to adapt to an unconventional setup while ensuring top-tier production. Close collaboration with the park's staff and meticulous planning allowed us to pull off a seamless event.

#### How has being part of ESTA helped B-Side Events?

ESTA has been an incredible resource, connecting us with industry leaders and opening doors for new partnerships. Through EsportsNext and networking opportunities, we've expanded our reach and helped shape conversations about where esports is headed.

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May 22

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INDUSTRY  
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May 23

PANELS &  
KEYNOTES

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# **PRESSING START THE HBCU REVOLUTION**

**How HBCUs Transformed from Gaming  
Outsiders to Industry Innovators**

By Greg Smith

**W**hen Johnson C. Smith University became the first HBCU to offer an undergraduate program in esports management in March 2020, few predicted what would follow. Within three years, a complete revolution would unfold across historically Black colleges and universities—one that transformed these institutions from gaming outsiders to industry innovators.

By 2023, this pivotal moment had produced remarkable results: 35 HBCUs with established esports programs, over \$1 million in distributed scholarships, dedicated gaming facilities at multiple campuses, and structured pipelines connecting middle schools through professional careers.

Today, HBCU students compete for life-changing prize pools, with four competitors at the Mountain Dew Real Change Challenge taking home approximately \$75,000 each. Howard University operates its Electronic Sports Lab. Winston-Salem State University leverages a \$400,000 National Science Foundation grant to integrate esports into computer science education. And graduates are launching management companies, production studios, and game development teams.

This transformation didn't happen by accident. It resulted from a methodical approach that saw opportunity where others saw obstacles—one that offers a blueprint for any underrepresented group seeking to carve out space in the esports and gaming industry.

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## SEIZING THE MOMENT

The collegiate esports landscape of early 2020 revealed a stark reality: while more than 250 predominantly white institutions had established gaming programs with scholarships and dedicated facilities, not a single HBCU had equivalent infrastructure.

This absence wasn't due to lack of interest or cultural relevance. Gaming had long been popular at HBCUs, with informal dorm tournaments and passionate player communities. The disconnect stemmed from structural barriers—primarily economic ones.

"The lack thereof is about a \$1500 to \$2000 difference," noted Ryan Johnson, founder and CEO of Cxmmunity Media, during a 2023 SXSW panel, referring to the cost gap between consoles and the gaming PCs required for competitive play. "That really has eliminated people of color from competing in the highest levels of gaming."

When COVID-19 forced campuses to close in March 2020, this digital divide became impossible to ignore. Many HBCU students lacked even basic technology for remote learning, creating an immediate crisis—but also an opening.

Organizations like Cxmmunity, the Black Collegiate Gaming Association, and HBCU leaders recognized the pandemic as a catalyst for change. Rather than merely addressing the immediate technology gap, they saw an opportunity to build something transformative.

"Having lack of access to a computer in your home has a major impact on your future studies and future interest as you enter into high school and into college," Johnson observed at the 2023 SXSW panel. "So I think one of our first missions was literally getting more people access to product."

This infrastructure-first approach would become the foundation of a comprehensive strategy that unfolded with remarkable speed over the next three years.

# FIVE STRATEGIES THAT CHANGED THE GAME

The HBCU esports transformation wasn't luck or timing—it was methodology. Five interconnected strategies formed a blueprint that any diversity initiative could potentially adapt:

## Build the physical foundation first



While many diversity programs begin with recruitment or representation goals, HBCUs started by addressing the most fundamental barrier: access to equipment. Howard University's Electronic Sports Lab, Benedict College's gaming room, and Johnson C. Smith University's 25-seat facility created immediate access to technology that many students simply couldn't afford individually.

This wasn't just about hardware—it was about creating

visible communities. Students walking past these facilities could see peers engaged in esports, making abstract opportunities concrete and accessible.

The strategy proved remarkably cost-effective. Hampton University secured a \$340,658 grant from the Department of Homeland Security to create its esports lab—a substantial investment, but far less expensive than traditional athletic programs that can cost millions. Even a competitive gaming setup requiring multiple high-performance PCs, monitors, and peripherals typically costs \$40,000-\$80,000—a fraction of what schools spend on conventional sports.

By focusing on physical infrastructure first, HBCUs created the essential foundation upon which everything else could be built.

## Show them the money

The most successful diversity initiatives demonstrate immediate tangible benefits, not just abstract future potential. The HBCU model delivered this through tournament prizes, scholarships, and visible economic pathways.

By 2022, events like the Mountain Dew Real Change Challenge were offering prize pools up to \$500,000, with individual payouts reaching \$80,000—more money than many college graduates see in their first year of employment.

These financial incentives served multiple functions: they attracted students who might otherwise focus solely on traditional studies or part-time jobs, demonstrated gaming's legitimacy to parents and administrators, and created compelling narratives that attracted media coverage and additional sponsorships.

Unlike traditional college athletes constrained by NCAA rules, esports competitors at the collegiate level

own themselves as intellectual properties—meaning they can monetize everything from content to merchandise without violations. This freedom, combined with competitive prizes and the approximately \$15 million distributed annually in esports scholarships nationwide, created immediate economic mobility.

## Design education for multiple career paths

The architects of HBCU esports recognized that sustainable diversity requires more than just competitive players. Their academic programs deliberately prepared students for careers throughout the gaming ecosystem—from technical roles to creative positions to business functions.

Johnson C. Smith University's partnership with Riot Games provided curriculum support, guest lectures, industry consultation, and internships. Winston-Salem State University integrated esports directly into computer science education through an interdisciplinary approach led by faculty from multiple departments.

This educational approach addressed a critical insight: gaming careers extend far beyond competitive play. The industry needs game designers, programmers, event managers, marketers, broadcasters, content creators, business strategists, and countless other roles—most of which offer longer and more sustainable careers than being a professional player.

By preparing students for this full spectrum of opportunities, the HBCU model maximizes long-term industry representation while creating multiple entry points for students with different skills and interests.

## Meet communities where they are

Perhaps the most subtle yet powerful aspect of the HBCU approach was its cultural authenticity. Rather than imposing external gaming standards,



the initiative started with games already popular in the community—especially sports titles like Madden NFL and NBA 2K that had established followings on consoles.

“We’ve been very intentional to start with games that were familiar to our community, but more importantly, start on consoles,” Johnson explained at the 2023 SXSW panel.

This strategy validated existing gaming interests rather than suggesting students needed to change their preferences; created immediate opportunities for participation without requiring new skills or equipment; and established confidence and momentum before gradually expanding to PC titles and more competitive esports games.

The approach recognized a practical reality: while games like Dota 2, Counter-Strike, and League of

Legends offer substantially larger prize pools (often reaching eight figures compared to roughly \$1 million for Madden and NBA 2K), these titles haven't historically had the same cultural resonance in Black communities.

By starting with familiar games, HBCUs created an entry point that could eventually lead to these higher-tier competitions while honoring existing community preferences. This respect for cultural context represents a critical difference from many diversity initiatives that expect underrepresented groups to adapt to established norms rather than meeting them where they are.

### Connect generations through culture

The most forward-looking element of the HBCU approach was its multi-generational strategy. Rather than focusing solely on current students, the initiative built structured connections to both younger and older audiences—creating a sustainable pipeline that would continue growing over time.



“The Kickback” event series exemplified this approach by combining educational workshops, competitive tournaments, and concerts featuring artists like Pusha T and G Herbo.

“From 10:00 am to 12:00 pm, they’ll go through a series of panels and workshops, literally from people that are leading in the gaming industry,” Johnson explained. “From 1:00 pm to 6:00 pm, we have a collegiate esports tournament, and then from seven to nine or whenever, we have a concert to close it all out.”

The approach extended to even younger students through targeted programs. “Last summer we created the first esports and video game summer camp with Microsoft in Atlanta,” Johnson stated. “The kids would show up from 9:00 in the morning, their parents would come at 4:00 in the afternoon, and all day long they’re going through courses about different topics and career opportunities within gaming.”

Many HBCUs built on this concept by developing pipelines from K-12 programs into collegiate teams. Southern University in Baton Rouge, for instance, created a direct pathway from its laboratory school’s successful esports program into the university’s collegiate team—giving high school students a clear vision of how their gaming interests could lead to higher education opportunities.

By addressing cultural perceptions from elementary school through professional employment, the HBCU model created a continuous pipeline that ensures representation will continue growing through successive generations.

## THE BLUEPRINT FOR INCLUSIVE INNOVATION

What makes the HBCU esports revolution so powerful—and replicable—is its systems-based approach. Unlike traditional diversity initiatives that often address isolated aspects of representation, HBCUs created a virtuous cycle where each element

reinforces the others: Physical infrastructure enables competition, which attracts sponsorships, which funds educational programs, which develops talent, which creates community connections—completing a self-sustaining ecosystem.

The fundamental question institutions faced wasn't whether to participate, but whether to make a strategic investment now or risk falling permanently behind as the industry evolved. By choosing to invest holistically rather than piecemeal, HBCUs transformed their position in the gaming landscape virtually overnight.

The approach offers a clear blueprint for other underrepresented groups. For Latinx communities, the model suggests partnerships with Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) to build gaming infrastructure starting with mobile platforms—which already have high adoption rates but lower barriers to entry. With Latin America representing one of gaming's fastest-growing markets and mobile gaming serving as the primary entry point, HSIs could leverage cultural authenticity while building pathways to higher-tier competitive environments. The infrastructure-first approach would address similar economic barriers while honoring existing community preferences.



**The fundamental question institutions faced wasn't whether to participate, but whether to make a strategic investment now or risk falling permanently behind.**

For women in gaming, the strategy points toward creating women-centered competitive spaces with visible economic incentives and educational programs addressing industry-specific barriers. The HBCU playbook demonstrates how dedicated spaces—both physical and cultural—can rapidly transform representation when combined with economic opportunity. Applied to women's gaming initiatives, this could mean developing dedicated

facilities at women's colleges, creating tournament structures with substantial prize pools specifically for women competitors, and developing educational pathways that address the unique challenges women face in gaming environments, from harassment to limited visibility of role models..

## THE NEXT FRONTIER

Nearly five years in, the ecosystem continues expanding in ways that demonstrate its sustainability. "Kids in our league are starting their companies with each other," Ryan Johnson of Cxmmunity notes, as students who connected through collegiate competitions form management companies, production studios, and game development teams.

Programs are now pushing into emerging technologies: Hampton University's innovations center allows students to create games and pitch to venture capitalists; Winston-Salem State University's NSF-funded initiative integrates esports directly into computer science education; and international opportunities are emerging, particularly in Africa.

These developments reveal that HBCUs aren't just closing gaps—they're creating entirely new pathways and power centers. When the esports industry hit \$1.1 billion in 2020, with young competitors earning up to \$3 million playing Fortnite and platforms like Twitch reaching unprecedented audiences, historically Black colleges made a strategic choice: position themselves ahead of the curve rather than playing catch-up.

By investing not just in hardware but in a comprehensive framework addressing economics, education, cultural authenticity, and generational continuity simultaneously, HBCUs created a model that continues accelerating even as initial investments mature—offering both inspiration and methodology for building inclusive gaming communities that transform industries from the inside out.



## The Unexpected Revolution in Education

### Inside the New Wave of Esports Arenas

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By Johanna Navari Welch

Educational institutions on both sides of the Atlantic are quietly revolutionizing their campuses, and it's not happening in traditional classrooms or athletic facilities. The transformation is taking place in high-tech arenas where competitive gaming meets academic innovation. This convergence of esports and education took center stage during ESTA's January 28th LinkedIn Live session, where industry experts revealed how these digital spaces are reshaping modern learning environments.

The session, hosted by Spectrum Industries' Mykiah Bonhom, brought together two veterans of the educational esports movement: Danielle Rourke, National Esports Manager at CDW, and Nik Turner, Director of Ntesports Ltd. Their insights revealed how gaming spaces are doing double duty – hosting competitive events while fundamentally changing how students learn and engage with their education. These aren't just glorified computer labs; they're becoming the cornerstone of a new approach to learning that matches how today's students think and collaborate.

The momentum behind this movement is building rapidly across continents. "We've expanded from our initial two dozen colleges to nearly 200 institutions offering esports qualifications, with more than 15,000 students completing

these programs," Turner explains. This growth reflects a broader shift in how educational institutions view gaming – not as a distraction from learning, but as a powerful tool for engagement and skill development.

When it comes to convincing administrators to invest in these facilities, the conversation often begins with dollars and cents but quickly evolves into something more profound. "When administrators compare the cost of building and maintaining traditional sports facilities to creating an esports arena, they quickly realize this investment isn't just more affordable – it's creating a space where students can engage with something they're genuinely passionate about," Rourke notes. This cost-effectiveness is particularly compelling at a time when educational institutions are scrutinizing every capital expenditure.

But the real story isn't in the savings – it's in the transformative impact these spaces have on campus life. "Our program grew from 17 students to 178 in just three years after building the arena," Turner shares. "During open houses, the interest was so overwhelming that we had to run concurrent information sessions every thirty minutes alongside the principal's presentations." These numbers aren't just statistics – they represent a fundamental shift in how students engage with their educational environment.

The evolution of these spaces continues at a breakneck pace, driven by technological advances and changing student needs. "The evolution has been remarkable – just two years ago, we weren't installing any racing simulators. Now, they're a standard feature in almost every facility we build," Turner observes. This rapid adoption of sim racing technology exemplifies how these spaces are constantly adapting, incorporating new tools that bridge the gap between virtual competition and real-world skills.



The most profound impact, however, may be in the communities these spaces foster. Traditional extracurricular activities have long created social anchors for students, but they don't reach everyone. "These facilities are reaching students who might never join a band or try out for theater," Rourke explains. "Esports gives them that crucial connection to campus life and their peers." These digital arenas are becoming modern student unions, where shared passion for gaming creates bridges across traditional social boundaries.

“ When administrators compare the cost of building and maintaining traditional sports facilities to creating an esports arena, they quickly realize this investment isn't just more affordable – it's creating a space where students can engage with something they're genuinely passionate about. ”

The educational value extends far beyond the obvious technical skills. "We're using esports as a vehicle for teaching transferable skills," Turner explains. "It engages students through their passion while developing the professional competencies they'll need for their futures." From project management to team communication, these spaces are becoming laboratories for the soft skills employers increasingly demand.

What's emerging isn't just a new type of classroom or competition space – it's a model for how educational institutions can adapt to meet students where they are while preparing them for where they're going. As these digital arenas continue to evolve, they're not just changing the game – they're rewriting the fundamental rules of education, creating spaces where passion and learning seamlessly intertwine. The revolution may have started quietly, but its impact is becoming impossible to ignore.

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## Stepping Up the Game

### How Glydr Is Revolutionizing Esports with Foot-Powered Controls

Cofounder and Inventor Rick Tett on unlocking a new dimension of gameplay



For decades, gaming has relied on hand-based controls—keyboards, mice, and gamepads. But what if there was a way to incorporate foot movements into gameplay, adding an entirely new dimension of control? That's exactly what Glydr, a foot-operated game controller, aims to do. Cofounder and inventor Rick Tett is pioneering a shift in how players interact with games, offering an innovative approach that could transform competitive gaming.

#### What inspired you to create Glydr?

The idea for Glydr came to me after attending a lecture about Virtual Reality and its challenges with continuous locomotion. That same day, I had seen my nephew using a hoverboard, and something clicked—why weren't we using our feet for gaming? I realized that hand controls alone were limiting, and incorporating foot movements could improve both gameplay and long-term comfort for players.

#### What sets Glydr apart from other gaming peripherals?

Glydr is designed to complement traditional controllers rather than replace them. While keyboards, mice, and gamepads remain essential, Glydr introduces an additional control input that allows players to offload certain functions to their feet. This can be movement, camera control, or other in-game actions that would traditionally require hand inputs.

Beyond adding an extra layer of control, Glydr could also reduce strain from repetitive hand motions. Many gamers experience hand fatigue, carpal tunnel, and other issues from long hours of play. By redistributing certain actions to the feet, Glydr helps alleviate some of that repetitive stress, promoting better ergonomics without sacrificing performance.

#### How do you see Glydr influencing the esports landscape?

Esports players are always looking for ways to refine their mechanics, optimize efficiency, and gain a competitive edge. Glydr introduces a new dimension of control that could allow players to execute actions faster and more fluidly. For fast-paced games that require precise movement and reaction times, having foot-based controls could be a game-changer.

Additionally, as the industry explores new forms of interaction through VR and AR, Glydr's potential expands

even further. With immersive gaming experiences becoming more common, having a natural way to incorporate foot movement could redefine how players interact with their environments.

#### What motivated you to join the Esports Trade Association, and how has it benefited Glydr?

We first got involved with the Esports Trade Association through the Pitch Competition at EsportsNext 2023. It was a great opportunity to introduce Glydr to the esports community and receive valuable feedback. Being part of ESTA has allowed us to connect with industry leaders, learn about emerging trends, and position ourselves within the competitive gaming space.

As we continue to refine Glydr and prepare for launch, we look forward to further integrating with the esports community and helping shape the future of competitive gaming.

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# THE EQUALIZERS

## WOMEN TRANSFORMING ESPORTS FROM THE INSIDE

Meet the executives and innovators breaking the industry's longest-running bug—and building a more profitable future

By Greg Smith





**F**orget everything you thought you knew about esports leadership. The industry that grew from LAN parties to billion-dollar valuations is experiencing its most significant evolution yet—and women are at the forefront of this transformation.

The stats are clear: esports is projected to hit \$4.8B in revenue in 2025. What's changing isn't just the money but who's shaping the industry's future. Women are no longer peripheral characters in gaming's story; they're defining the next generation of the industry as CEOs, competitive players, marketing leaders, content creators, and strategic innovators.

The outdated narrative ("Where are all the women?") has evolved into something far more compelling: How are diverse leaders transforming the business of play? The answer involves building upon existing foundations to create something more sophisticated and inclusive.

The industry's new architects are bringing fresh perspectives through three essential components: representation that reflects gaming's diverse audience, opportunity that creates multiple paths to leadership, and endorsement that amplifies innovation across the ecosystem.

In this feature, we spotlight the pioneers who are enriching esports from the inside out. Through conversations with these visionaries, we discover how they're evolving competitive frameworks, reinventing sponsorship models, and proving that inclusive strategies aren't just equitable—they're smart business. For these leaders, success isn't about pink jerseys—it's about creating jerseys that fit everyone who wants to play.



## **Anna Rozwandowicz**

Founder & CEO

The Story Mob

### **Q How has the narrative around women in esports evolved during your time in the industry, and what communications strategies have proven most effective?**

When I first started, the narrative was often about the lack of women, or focused on novelty. Now, we're seeing a shift toward celebrating the incredible talent and achievements of women in esports - many of them not just on-air talent but also athletes, founders and innovators. The most effective communication strategies have been those that amplify these stories authentically. We've moved away from tokenism and towards highlighting genuine skill, competitive spirit, and the community that supports women in gaming. Showcasing role models, creating platforms for women's voices, and challenging stereotypical portrayals have been crucial. Driving diversity in esports and gaming, especially at the leadership level, will be about the three things I always considered crucial for us: representation, opportunity, and endorsement. This concept should be woven into all aspects of communicating about women in esports.

## **From your communications expertise, how can organizations effectively articulate the business case for women's esports to investors, sponsors, and other stakeholders?**

It's about demonstrating the untapped potential. When we founded The Story Mob, only 2,2% of VC funding went to female founders and CEOs - so it was very reassuring to see that our lead investor, BITKRAFT, saw the potential we believed we had. For all other stakeholders, we need to present data that shows the growing female audience, the rising viewership of women's esports events, and the increasing engagement with female streamers and content creators. It's also vital to highlight the unique opportunities for brands to connect with a diverse and loyal audience. We need to frame it not just as a 'good cause' but as a smart business move. After all, what's the point of excluding half of the world's population from your target audience? Show the growth, the engagement, and the clear ROI.

## **What role does authentic storytelling play in building sustainable women's esports initiatives and connecting with audiences?**

Authenticity is everything. Audiences, especially in gaming, can spot inauthenticity a mile away. Storytelling that highlights the real experiences, the challenges, and the triumphs of women in esports resonates deeply. It's about showing the human side of competition, passion, and dedication. We need to move beyond just showcasing wins and losses and delve into the personal journeys, the communities built, and the impact these initiatives have. Authentic storytelling builds trust, fosters connection, and creates a sense of belonging.

## **Based on your experience with both endemic and non-endemic brands, what messaging approaches have been most successful in attracting sponsors to women's esports?**

For endemic brands, it's about aligning with the values of the women's esports community and demonstrating a genuine commitment to supporting its growth. They need to show they're not just 'checking a box.' For non-endemic brands, the focus should be on the unique opportunity to reach a highly engaged and diverse audience. We've seen success with messaging that emphasizes the shared values of empowerment, inclusivity, and breaking barriers. It's about showing how partnering with women's esports can enhance their brand image and create meaningful connections with a new demographic. And it boils down to this: don't sell me a pink jersey, sell me a jersey that fits.

## **Looking forward, how do you see the communication strategy around women's esports evolving as the sector matures?**

As the sector matures, we'll see a greater emphasis on professionalization and standardization. Communication strategies will need to reflect this accordingly. However, I believe that human interest stories will still be the type of stories that will continue to drive interest in esports for women worldwide - seeing yourself reflected on the screen in a relatable protagonist is still a very powerful thing. We'll also see a shift towards more data-driven storytelling, using analytics to demonstrate the impact and ROI of women's esports initiatives. We'll see more focus on individual athlete branding, similar to traditional sports. And, of course, the conversation will continue to evolve towards greater inclusivity and intersectionality, reflecting the diverse experiences of women in gaming.



## **Jasmine Chiang**

**Senior Brand Marketing Manager,  
Apex Legends Esports**

**Electronic Arts (EA)**

### **Could you share your journey into gaming and esports marketing? What challenges did you face as a woman in this space, and how did you overcome them?**

My journey into gaming and esports marketing was a natural progression of my passion and hobbies growing up. I've always been a gamer, and when I started my first job at Lenovo as a marketing associate, I was determined to meet just about every person at the company with "gaming" in their title. I must have bought at least a dozen cups of coffee during my lunch breaks where I'd schedule informal chats with various leaders in Lenovo's gaming division to learn more about the ecosystem.

After a few fruitful conversations, I started working on small projects for the gaming team after hours, which eventually led me to my first gaming role. As Lenovo's new Global Marketing Manager, I oversaw the company's gaming and esports strategy, including executing partnerships with brands, creators, and tournament organizers. One of my favorite partners at the time was Apex Legends, since I was a huge fan of the game. When the opportunity arose to join the Apex Legends esports marketing team in 2023, it was a no brainer.

As a gamer and a marketing professional, I've certainly encountered a number of challenges and opportunities as a woman in the space. By staying true to my passion, delivering results, and building strong relationships, I've been able to overcome those hurdles. More importantly, I'm fortunate to have strong allies and mentors who have championed my growth throughout my career.

## **Throughout your career in gaming and esports marketing, how have you seen women's participation evolve?**

Since I first stepped into this space, I've seen firsthand more women competing at high levels, creating content, and taking on influential roles at top organizations. Throughout my career, I've been surrounded by inspiring women. Working with industry veterans like our Head of Esports Monica Dinsmore, and collaborating with women players, casters, and creators has given me a rolodex of peers and mentors who I look up to. From my personal experience, this is helping young professionals feel empowered to apply for roles, speak their minds, and learn from each other.

I'm also fortunate to work on a game title that's particularly inclusive, and that representation impacts opportunities for women players, too. Apex Legends features an incredibly inclusive cast of Legends that reflect the backgrounds of our team, our community, and our players – and that's a badge I wear with pride. Players want characters that share experiences with them, and that diversity is what inspires change.

## **What advice would you give to women specifically looking to build careers in esports marketing or content creation?**

One piece of advice I'd give to any woman in gaming is: Don't feel the need to hide the fact that you're a gamer. I love gaming just as much now as I did growing up playing the Nintendo 64, and that passion has unlocked so many opportunities for me, personally and professionally.

Beyond that, it's incredibly important to gain a deep understanding of the gaming community you're working with – play the game, immerse yourself in the culture, understand the nuances, and learn what resonates with players and fans.

Additionally, make sure to build and maintain a strong network. Attend industry events, connect with professionals on social media, and seek out mentorship opportunities. Not only can networking open doors to new opportunities, but it can also provide a new perspective.

## **From your industry perspective, what are the most significant unmet needs for women in competitive gaming today?**

Many gamers have experienced some form of toxicity playing their favorite game online. That's oftentimes disproportionately felt by women, and it remains one of the biggest barriers to competing professionally. While

there's no industry-wide solution, we can continue to foster a culture of inclusivity and prioritize creating safe spaces for women to compete and connect with each other.

Despite these hurdles, we're fortunate to have thriving women in our space who continue to spotlight opportunities for historically marginalized gamers. Whether it's competitors like TiltedWinnie or streamers like TiffaJessi, the Apex Legends community in particular is full of talented women who are pushing the envelope for competition and content creation. There's undoubtedly a need for strong role models in the space to challenge the status quo.

I don't see that slowing down any time soon, and I anticipate that even more women will continue to be inspired by the creators of today.

## **Looking ahead 3-5 years, how do you envision the pathways for women in gaming and esports evolving - both in competition and content creation?**

In the next few years, I'm confident there will be more pathways for women in the space thanks to the inspiring group of role models I mentioned above. I'm hopeful that these women in Apex Legends and across the industry are laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and equitable future.

## **What marketing strategies have proven most effective for engaging female audiences in the battle royale genre, and how have these contributed to creating what players describe as a more inclusive Apex community?**

The most effective strategy is creating authentic content that reflects the diverse experiences of women gamers. In Apex Legends, it's about more than superficial representation – it's about embracing the strength, complexity, and individuality of the women in the game. From Loba's tactical precision to Catalyst's cool control of a battlefield, the cast of Legends offers a character that every type of gamer can resonate with.

That's captured in our marketing efforts, too. We consistently try to focus on our relatable character design and women creators who are the backbone of this community. Listening to feedback from our fans and lifting up positive voices have helped to foster a sense of belonging and that's just one of the things that makes Apex Legends so great.



**Rebecca Dixon**

CEO

the\*gamehers

**Could you share your journey into gaming and founding The\*gameHers? What challenges did you face as a woman entrepreneur in this space, and how did you overcome them?**

I didn't come from a traditional gaming background, but I've always been passionate about community-building and media. My journey into gaming started when I saw a massive gap in the industry—there wasn't a centralized, safe, and inclusive space dedicated to women gamers, whether they were casual players, industry professionals, or students. That's what led to the founding of the\*gamehers.

As a woman entrepreneur in gaming and tech, one of the biggest challenges was breaking into a space that has long been male-dominated. Whether it was securing funding or gaining credibility, there were moments when I had to push harder to make our vision a reality. I overcame this by surrounding myself with a strong network of allies, amplifying the voices of our community, and proving our value through data and engagement.

**Since founding The\*gameHers, how have you seen women's participation in gaming evolve? What key market shifts have created new opportunities for organizations like yours?**

Since we launched, I've seen a shift in how women are represented and included in gaming. There's more awareness around diversity and inclusion, and brands are recognizing the purchasing power and influence of women gamers. There's also been an increase in women-led gaming organizations and initiatives, which is encouraging.

One of the biggest market shifts has been the rise of content creation and social-driven gaming. Women are leading the charge on platforms like Twitch, YouTube, and TikTok, creating opportunities for brands, partnerships, and new business models. Esports is also expanding beyond just competitive play—there's more emphasis on lifestyle, education, and professional development.

## **What advice would you give to women specifically looking to build careers on the business side of esports?**

For women looking to build careers on the business side of gaming and esports, my biggest piece of advice is to network relentlessly and develop cross-disciplinary skills. The industry moves fast, and understanding marketing, partnerships, community management, and monetization strategies can set you apart.

Another key approach is to actively seek mentorship—there are more women in leadership positions now than ever before, and many are eager to uplift the next generation. Also, don't wait for a traditional career path to emerge. If you have an idea, build something. The gaming industry thrives on innovation.

## **How has The\*gameHers' mission and business model evolved since you started?**

When we first started the\*gameHers, our primary focus was on creating safe digital spaces for women gamers. Over time, we realized the impact we could have across different segments—whether it was supporting women in the gaming industry, parents of young gamers, or college students. That's why we expanded our platform to include career development resources, events, and partnerships with universities and gaming organizations.

One of the biggest pivots that worked well for us was leaning into our community-driven approach. Instead of dictating what our audience needed, we listened and built features, programs, and events based on real feedback.

## **Looking ahead 3-5 years, how do you envision the pathways for women in gaming and esports evolving - both in competition and content creation?**

Over the next 3-5 years, I see massive growth in women-focused gaming initiatives, especially in content creation, collegiate esports, and leadership roles. More brands will be investing in inclusive gaming campaigns, and the talent pipeline for women in gaming will continue to strengthen.

Some of the most promising market segments include:

**Content creation & influencer marketing** – Women are shaping gaming culture through streaming and social media.

**Collegiate & educational programs** – More universities are integrating gaming into their curriculum.

**Esports & competitive opportunities** – While still evolving, there's potential for women's leagues and co-ed tournaments.

**Web3 & gaming technology** – The rise of new monetization models could empower more independent creators and entrepreneurs.

Ultimately, the future of gaming is more inclusive, and the\*gameHers will continue to play a role in helping to shape that evolution.

## **What strategies have proven most effective for building sustainable communities for women in gaming, and how do you measure the impact of these communities?**

The key to building a sustainable community is fostering engagement and trust. We've found that prioritizing authenticity, representation, and moderation is critical. Our most effective strategies have been:

- Creating both online and offline spaces where women feel heard and valued.
- Partnering with brands that genuinely support women in gaming.
- Providing mentorship and career opportunities to help members grow.

To measure impact, we look at engagement metrics, retention rates, and direct feedback from our members. But beyond the numbers, it's about seeing real stories of women finding opportunities, friendships, and confidence in gaming..

## More Than a Venue

### How Midlane Esports is Powering Chicago's Gaming Scene

Adam Abbas on creating a unique space where competition, community, and content thrive.



Tucked in the heart of Chicago, Midlane Esports is more than just a gaming venue—it's a dedicated hub for competition, content creation, and community. CEO Adam Abbas and his team are redefining what an esports space can be, blending grassroots tournaments with high-profile collaborations. Here's how they're making an impact.

#### What inspired you to start Midlane Esports, and what gap were you looking to fill?

Chicago has an incredibly passionate gaming community, yet there was no dedicated space where players could compete, connect, and grow. Midlane Esports was built to fill that gap—a venue where competitive and casual gamers alike could hone their skills, meet like-minded individuals, and experience the energy of live esports events without having to travel across the country.

#### What sets Midlane Esports apart from other gaming venues?

Midlane isn't just another LAN center—it's a full-fledged esports ecosystem. We host weekly tournaments for Super Smash Bros., Tekken, Call of Duty, and Rocket League, along with larger-scale competitions that attract top-tier talent. Beyond that, we serve as a production hub, offering live streaming, content creation, and event

hosting capabilities. Our partnerships with organizations like Team Liquid, Dignitas, Evil Geniuses, and the Chicago Bulls further bridge the gap between traditional sports and esports, solidifying our role in the industry.

#### How does Midlane contribute to the growth of Chicago's esports scene?

Chicago hasn't historically had the same level of esports investment as cities on the East and West Coasts. We're changing that by creating a centralized venue where players, teams, and industry professionals can connect. Our grassroots approach is fostering a new generation of competitive talent, and we're laying the groundwork to launch a professional Valorant team that will represent the city on the global stage.

#### What excites you most about the future of esports?

Esports is evolving beyond the screen—it's becoming a cultural

movement that blends competition, entertainment, and community. The rise of VR and AR will make esports even more immersive, and we're eager to see how technology continues to push the industry forward. We're also excited about the increasing crossover between esports and traditional sports, which will continue to introduce new audiences to competitive gaming.

#### How has being part of ESTA benefited Midlane Esports?

Joining the Esports Trade Association has been a game-changer for us. It's provided valuable networking opportunities, connected us with industry leaders, and helped us explore new partnerships and sponsorships. Being part of ESTA reinforces our belief that Chicago can be a powerhouse in esports, and we're committed to making that a reality.

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- ✓ Facility development
- ✓ Influencer agreements
- ✓ Collegiate esports programs, including compliance with national associations and Title IX





# ESPORTS REIMAGINED

## A Parent's Doubt, A Gamer's Rise, and a New Career Playbook

*From "Get Off That Game!" to Unlocking a  
World of Opportunities*

By Dr. Gigi Hamilton & Kendall Hamilton

If someone had told me years ago that my son's deep passion for video games would lead to a top 10 global ranking and a career path in esports, I would have laughed. Like most parents, I urged Kendall to focus on school, apply for college, and limit his screen time. Esports? That wasn't a real future—at least, that's what I thought.

But Kendall wasn't just playing—he was developing a strategic mindset, honing his competitive edge, and strengthening his leadership and problem-solving abilities. The same skills that top-tier companies seek in employees were being cultivated through gaming. Once I opened my eyes to the bigger picture, I stopped telling him to get off the game and started figuring out how to support his journey. That's how we both entered the world of esports—him as a player, performance coach, and mental health advocate, and me as a career architect and industry consultant.

## From Player to Mentor, Advocate, and Consultant

Kendall's introduction to esports was unintentional but transformative. He had been playing Rocket League for years, but during high school—amidst the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic—gaming became an outlet. What started as a hobby quickly propelled him to a top 10 global ranking in 3v3 competition.

At the height of his success, Kendall was offered multiple full-ride scholarships and even a six-figure NIL deal, but he turned them down to prioritize his mental health and personal growth.

Now, Kendall has expanded his role beyond competing—he is an esports consultant, performance coach, and mental health advocate. He speaks at national conferences, universities, middle schools, and high schools, educating young gamers on how to balance competition with well-being. Through one-on-one coaching, he helps players develop both their in-game skills and emotional resilience, ensuring they are prepared to navigate both the challenges and opportunities within esports and beyond.

## A Mother's Perspective: From Skeptic to Advocate

As an organizational psychologist, licensed psychotherapist, and career architect, I thought I understood career pathways. But esports challenged everything I knew. I realized there was an untapped space where performance psychology, career planning, and gaming intersected. I dove into the industry, working to bridge the gap between esports, mental wellness, and professional development.

For many emerging adults who play video games, the esports industry feels like an exclusive space reserved for professional players or streamers. They often don't see themselves fitting into this world beyond just playing. What they don't realize is that their problem-solving, teamwork, strategic thinking, and adaptability are highly valuable skills in countless industries—tech, media, marketing, game development, and beyond.

Our role is to help them recognize that their passion for gaming isn't just a pastime—it's a gateway to meaningful and lucrative career opportunities. Through coaching and career guidance, Kendall and I help them translate their in-game strengths into real-world success, showing them that the skills they develop in gaming can propel them into careers they never imagined possible.





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## Pioneering Programs That Reshape Gaming's Future

Together, Kendall and I created Game On: The Tale of Two Generations in the Gaming World, a program that educates parents, players, and industry professionals on how esports can shape careers and mental wellness. We've spoken at major conferences, including EsportsNext and Blacks in Technology, and partnered with organizations to change perceptions about gaming and career development.

Kendall's hands-on work in performance coaching and consulting has impacted countless young players, helping them transition from casual gamers to industry professionals.

“

For many young gamers, especially people of color, marginalized populations, and those without traditional career access, the esports industry presents a unique paradox—offering potential pathways forward while simultaneously feeling out of reach

## Wellness as the Foundation for Gaming Diversity

For many young gamers, especially people of color, marginalized populations, and those without traditional career access, the esports industry presents a unique paradox—offering potential pathways forward while simultaneously feeling out of reach. This intersection of opportunity and barrier is where our work focuses most intensely.

The mental health challenges in esports are particularly pronounced for diverse players, who often face additional obstacles including discrimination, lack of representation, and imposter syndrome. These players don't see enough people who look like them in leadership roles, lack clear pathways into professional gaming careers, and frequently don't have the support systems needed to manage the pressures of competition and industry expectations.

That's why emotional wellness forms the foundation of our approach to diversity and inclusion in gaming. Without intentional mental health support paired with career guidance, many talented individuals from underrepresented backgrounds struggle to transition into sustainable careers—despite possessing the skills to thrive in this environment.

Kendall and I have worked extensively in this unique intersection, helping players navigate challenges such

as anxiety, depression, performance pressure, and self-doubt while simultaneously building bridges to career opportunities. Through our mentorship, coaching, and practical application approach, we ensure that players develop both the mental resilience and professional skills needed to succeed—not just in gaming, but in their personal and professional lives as well.

Our workforce development program reflects this integrated philosophy, built on three essential pillars: targeted mentorship, comprehensive emotional wellness support, and practical daily life skills. This holistic approach ensures that players from all backgrounds are not only prepared for careers in the esports ecosystem but also equipped with the tools to manage the unique challenges they'll face along the way.

## Transforming Passion into Professional Purpose

What started as a battle over screen time in our home—"Get off that game!"—has evolved into a mission to transform how the world sees gaming. We've discovered that esports isn't just about competition; it's a gateway to innovation, leadership, and career transformation for a generation of talented young people.

Together, we're leveling up the conversation and revealing the full potential of esports as a pathway to professional success. But to truly break down barriers and create sustainable opportunities, we need partners who believe in the power of gaming to shape tomorrow's workforce.

We're seeking visionary collaborators from three key sectors:

- **Companies & Investors:** If your organization is looking to diversify its talent pipeline, invest in the future of gaming, or make a real impact in the esports workforce development, we want to collaborate with you.
- **Esports & Tech Leaders:** If you are committed to building a more inclusive industry and need fresh, high-potential talent, let's work together to create structured pathways into gaming, esports, and tech careers.
- **Universities & Educational Institutions:** If you're preparing students for the future of work, let's explore how we can integrate esports into career development initiatives and equip students with industry-ready skills.

This is more than an idea—it's a movement to ensure every player has a real chance to thrive. We're focused on "Putting More Talent in the Game," transforming gaming passion into professional purpose.

We are building something revolutionary, but we need partners who see what's possible and are ready to invest in the next generation of talent. If your organization is ready to be part of the solution, let's connect.

The players are ready. The future is here. Who's ready to build it with us?





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