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Forget baseball: Increasingly, e-sports becoming our pastime

In 1986, Australian hard rock band AC/DC had an epic hit song, "Who Made Who." The song began, "The video game says play me."

If the group penned this song today, the lyrics might easily be "The video game says PAY me," in deference to the fast-growing sector of e-sports.

E-sports, more commonly referred to as organized video game competitions or "gaming," is skyrocketing in popularity across the world and bringing with it astronomical sums of money.

Yes, you are reading this correctly.

Playing video games is now globally considered a sport at both the collegiate and professional levels. Before you laugh this off as a joke, take a look at the staggering metrics:

- According to Newzoo, 194 million Americans regularly play video games — more than double the number who play traditional sports.

- Twitch.tv, the streaming-video home of most gaming feeds, has more video traffic than WWE.com, MLB.com and ESPN.com combined.

- Thirty-two million people tuned in to watch the 2013 "League of Legends" World Championship final — more than the number of people who watched the NBA Finals and the World Series that year.

- In just one week in 2014, Twitch users spent 5.4 million hours watching other people play "Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare."

- Corporate America has now recognized that gaming is no longer just a hobby and jumped into the frenzy. Amazon bought Twitch in 2014 for \$970 million, and Activision Blizzard recently acquired e-sports tournament organizer Major League Gaming for \$46 million.

- The top professional e-sports earner in 2015 won more than \$1.9 million in prize money.

- Analysts expect the e-sports industry to grow at such an accelerated pace over the next few years that revenue is expected to surpass \$1 billion by 2018.

The dollars and numbers surrounding e-Sports are truly insane and make me think I should have spent more time during my youth at Peacock's Palace Arcade in Northbrook and less time on the baseball field.

But should playing a video game really be considered a sport? It already is. Enter Chicago's own Robert Morris University. In June 2014, RMU became the first institution of higher learning on the continent to offer athletic scholarships to varsity gamers.

We're talking up to 70 percent of the costs of tuition, books, room and board paid for by the university in exchange for playing video games at an elite level on behalf of the school. In the past year and a half, four more colleges across the country have added scholarship programs for e-sports, and that number is expected to trend significantly upward in the coming years.

There is no arguing that offering a scholarship for gaming will make a college education more accessible to some students and will open doors that might otherwise remain closed. I had the opportunity to sit down with two of Robert Morris' e-sports coaches to talk about their unique scholarship program.

Program Manager and Assistant Coach Jose Espin admitted, "We have a lot of people who financially can't afford college, and this (scholarship) gives them the opportunity to do it." Jason A. Greenglass, an attorney and assistant coach, added, "This is an opportunity for kids who are going to be interested in playing video games to help fuel their progress through education."

He took this notion a step further and commented that "students who are more involved, if they are more invested because they are passionate about something that they believe in, or passionate about something that they care about,

AGENT OF CHANGE



NELLO P. GAMBERDINO II

Nello P. Gamberdino II has represented professional athletes from three different sports in eight countries. He is a Major League Baseball Players Association certified agent. He represents professional baseball players and acts as an adviser to amateur baseball players who are eligible for MLB's annual first-year player draft. In addition, he is the employer outreach coordinator at The John Marshall Law School, where he earned his J.D.

then that level of commitment and engagement typically sees higher matriculation rates and higher graduation rates and higher retention rates."

Not only are top gamers having their college education expenses picked up, but they are also making money off of their hand-eye coordination prowess. Income can be generated not only through winning competitions, but also via subscribers who pay a fee for the opportunity to watch a gamer practice on a streaming web page.

The potential income stream is so high that there now exists a small, but burgeoning, industry of e-sports agents. The rise of agents stems from gamers increasingly recognizing the need for attorneys and agents to help them monetize their celebrity by negotiating playing contracts with professional e-sports teams and leagues, procuring and negotiating sponsorships and marketing deals, handling licensing deals, orchestrating personal appearances and even selling merchandise.

Power players in the entertainment industry are also beginning to acknowledge the increasing popularity and earnings potential of e-sports. To wit, last year William Morris Endeavor

Entertainment, a company whose background is in representing Hollywood's biggest actors, purchased a company that represents and manages professional gamers.

As an added bonus, college gamers and agents do not have to worry about amateurism rules. Currently, there are no collegiate rules or bylaws regulating e-sports. Consequently, gamers are able to compete for prize money and earn income without having to worry about losing their eligibility.

When asked about concern over the NCAA or NAIA changing their bylaws to include e-sports, Espin didn't seem too concerned. "It's so new that I don't think anyone has really prepared for it. I don't see them doing anything until big universities form teams and there's a big established league."

Greenglass took a more pragmatic approach with his response. "I don't think people in glass houses should throw stones. I think they'd be hard-pressed to make a rationale and reasonable argument as to why players who are achieving national, if not global, level achievements of success at an excellent level in what is perceived worldwide as a sport should not be rewarded for their efforts in a way that fuels their academics."

If you still don't believe that gaming is a sport, know this: One of the more successful competitive video gaming leagues in the world, the Electronic Sports League, announced last summer that it was going to institute anti-doping regulations and begin testing for performance-enhancing drugs for its players.

Still not convinced?

There are rumblings within the e-sports industry that the formation of a players' union is next on the horizon. It is clear that gaming is the next big thing in sports, and it's here to stay.

Hmmm, two of my kids are left-handed. I wonder if pro gaming teams pay more for lefties.