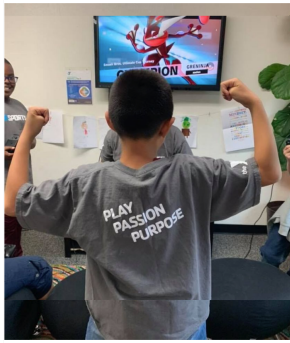


YMCA of Orange County's new esports program teaches kids the business of gaming



The YMCA of Orange County esports program team captain gets prepared to face his first opponent. (Courtesy of YMCA of Orange County)

By BEN BRADY, MARCH 12, 2020 | 1:40 PM

The YMCA of Orange County is offering an esports after-school program that teaches students the ins and outs of the gaming industry.

As part of the program, students learn the components of the business, including game design, content creation, entrepreneurship, marketing and branding, as well as the teamwork, cooperation and strategy needed to succeed in the games.

"Normally, kids are just playing the games themselves, they are not thinking of everything that goes into the game," said Chris Adams, who leads the program at the YMCA. "We want to introduce them to all the elements that go into it."

For the program, the YMCA is partnering with the Orange County Department of Education and the North American Scholastic Esports Federation, which forms high school esports clubs across the United States, Mexico and Canada.



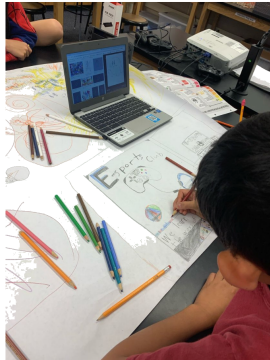
Students of the YMCA of Orange County esports program work together to create their club charter. (Courtesy of YMCA of Orange County)

Classes, which each have 14 kids, run twice a week for two months in each of the 30 YMCA facilities in Orange County. Students only play games for half an hour during the second class of the week. The rest of the class time is devoted to the curriculum.

"We are teaching the kids practical skills," Adams said.

The eight-week course is called a "season," in keeping with the sports theme. The YMCA ran a pilot season of the program in the fall. It is currently in its second season.

At the end of each season, the students will compete with teams from each of the 30 locations in games like Super Smash Bros. and Mario Kart. There are about 300 kids currently enrolled in the esports program throughout the county.



The YMCA of Orange County esports program marketing team creates their logo. (Courtesy of YMCA of Orange County)

The current season's final event will be in April. It's yet to be determined where it will take place. The winners will be deemed the reigning champions and will receive a UFC-style belt to show off their superiority.

"This is the first time that a YMCA has really gone this in-depth with esports," said Dolores Daly, chief operating officer of the YMCA of Orange County. "We have been contacted from YMCAs across the country wanting to see what we are doing and how they can implement it in their local communities."

"The [YMCA] is always looking for opportunities to engage kids. A lot of that is getting innovative programs like esports that get them excited to come to the [YMCA]. We have been in this business for a long time, and we know keeping kids engaged after school is not only positive, but they don't go to those more risky behaviors."



Students in the YMCA of Orange County esports program prepare a poster for their open house event. (Courtesy of YMCA of Orange County)

Adams, who once competed in the strategy game StarCraft while attending Concordia University, said the class dispels the myth that gaming is a waste of time.

"The program and approach we have taken at the [YMCA] really is helping change the idea of gaming and bringing it into the most positive light," Adams said. "There are a lot of benefits to video games. If you look at the stats, 97% of kids are playing games in some form, and we really think there is something special about that."