

How Ready Is Your Campus?

It's Time to Design Spaces Where Esports Can Thrive

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All over the world, students are bringing their skills and passions for esports with them to school. However, high schools and colleges still differ dramatically in their readiness to recognize and support this fast-growing phenomenon as an activity and opportunity that's here to stay.

At some, esports is still regarded as an informal pastime, taking place in corners of the student union, dorm lounges or libraries. At others, esports officially falls under the umbrella of student affairs and has a designated room or two. Still other schools have made it part of their engineering or design program, with games occurring in classrooms and labs.

But increasingly esports is now part of a school's athletics program, operating alongside traditional sports like football, basketball, tennis and track, with revenues and budgets big enough to support teams, league play, scholarships and spectator arenas. As one observer has put it, "Esports are, finally, just like any other sport."

More than Just Fun & Games

At the same time that esports is becoming more mainstream, schools are discovering the value of the informal learning and socialization it provides.

"It's not just gaming for gaming's sake. Especially with team-based esports, there are real skills being developed — such as collaboration, problem-solving, creativity, working with others to achieve a common goal," reports Andrew Kim, a Steelcase researcher who specializes in educational issues and environments.

In addition, he says, esports can help build engagement and confidence among students who typically wouldn't participate in traditional athletics or clubs. And during COVID-19 pandemic campus lockdowns and closures, esports has provided a way for gamers and spectators to stay connected online as a campus community.

"Any time students are more engaged in campus life, it will lead to greater student success," says Kim.

Yet, like so many aspects of education, at its best esports takes place in the real world versus virtually. And, like any other campus activity, it benefits greatly from well-designed settings that reflect the latest research and insights into how best to support it.

"Of all the resources devoted to collegiate esports, facilities might matter most of all," says Melanie Redman, Steelcase senior design researcher. "They set the tone, attract and nurture players, and have the ability to create a wow factor that reflects well on the entire campus."

It Starts With the Chair

In the heat of the battle, esports gamers typically sit for hours; there's no grabbing a coffee, no stand-up stretches, no getaway strolls. That's why, whatever a school's commitment is to esports, the chair is of paramount importance. Here's why:

Improve Performance

Alertness and concentration are essential for gamers. And few things can be more distracting than the discomfort that comes from long bouts of sitting. Unfortunately, however, most so-called gaming chairs offer more in the way of surface pizzazz rather than the hard-working performance that gamers require to be their best.

Increasingly, schools are discovering that high-performance chairs that provide a dynamic known as "active sitting" are a much better option. Originally designed for sedentary office workers, these chairs are supremely adjustable to each person — height obviously, but also back tension, lumbar support, armrests and headrests. Moreover, active sitting chairs instantly support leaning back, scrunching forward, and all of the other fidgets, wiggles and waggles that typically occur when someone sits for an extended time. Every one of those movements, no matter how small, helps pump fresh blood and oxygen to the brain, keeping it alert.

In addition to the superior adjustability and features that are standard in Steelcase's Gesture and Leap chairs, adjustable headrests on chairs are a must for esports gamers, according to Redman. "They keep the head balanced on the torso, helping to prevent the spinal deformity that can result when players lean forward for long stretches to peer at their monitor. Footrests are also wise – again to support frequent posture changes."

Reduce Risk

Though students are unlikely to experience a concussion or break a bone in esports, gaming for hours on end takes its toll on the body. The inherent risks and injuries are essentially the same as those experienced by office workers whose jobs involve sitting for hours on end.

In a survey of esports players from nine universities, the most frequently reported complaints were eye fatigue (56%), neck and back pain (42%) and wrist and hand pain from repetitive motion (33%). Over time, these discomforts can result in serious problems such as disc damage, tendonitis or carpal tunnel syndrome.

These risks can be combated with seating that helps players sit correctly, with the shoulders relaxed and the lower back fully supported. Additionally, since most competitive esports athletes favor high-end keyboards and mice versus the handheld controllers used by home gamers, forearm support from adjustable armrests is also vital. A soft-edge surface or desk pad can further ease pressure and reduce wrist fatigue.

But It's Also About Much More than the Chair

As esports programs gain momentum, broader design strategies are coming into focus as schools realize that an elevated experience requires more than just giving gamers a supportive chair. It also means considering a facility plan that includes a range of performance-focused spaces for players, as well as appealing environments for spectators and fans.

For programs still in their infancy, a flexible, multifunctional gaming lounge is a good place to start. Such spaces can also support things like coding classes and community events and should be designed to easily adapt to the inevitable technology changes ahead for esports.

Schools with a competitive program might start with a team training area equipped with a number of battlestations, then add supplementary spaces as their programs become more established.

For example, an adjoining decompression room recognizes the substantial cognitive and emotional benefits of players taking a break between bouts. Calming colors, outdoor views and healthy food options in these spaces help players decompress and fortify themselves for what's next.

On campuses where esports is more advanced, a wider range of spaces may be considered. These include:

- A **welcome lobby** where students and visitors get their first impression of esports
- A **replay room** for analyzing past plays
- A **gamification lab** where research and testing can occur
- A **broadcast studio** where announcers can provide commentary on team competitions and top players can stream their talents
- A **player lounge** for socializing and building camaraderie between games or training sessions
- A **cooldown space** where players can relax, recharge or study
- **Nap pods** for those times when only deep respite will do
- An **esports arena** for hosting visiting teams and competitions that include spectators, when permitted

No Longer a Novelty

Each year, high school graduates who grew up with esports are touring prospective campuses and, increasingly, they consider esports facilities an expectation versus a novelty. Colleges that purposefully plan for this unstoppable wave will be in the best position to gain its advantages.