

Umatilla High School launches esports program

The team hopes to be running by the spring

By ANNIE FOWLER
Hermiston Herald

Video games have come a long way since Pong.

Those who played Pong in the 1970s now have AARP cards, while the younger generation is rolling its eyes at the black and white “tennis” game on the TV screen that took minimal skill to play.

Video games have moved into a new era, where graphics are realistic, colors are vivid and if you are good enough, there is money to be made.

A group of Umatilla High School students are among the elite players, and they have gone the extra mile to bring an esports team to the small Eastern Oregon school.

“It’s a very cool opportunity for the kids,” said Kyle Sipe, who coaches the robotics team at Umatilla, and will oversee the esports program. “The kids took it to the school board to get approval. They had to tell them why they wanted the program and how it could benefit the students. The scholarships from this are huge.”

The group of senior Alejandro Escovedo, juniors Quin McClenahen and Kaidan Blair and freshman Avery Gutierrez have spearheaded the project. All four also are members of the robotics program.

“I researched a bunch,” McClenahen said. “I mainly used one link, which had how many school have esports leagues, how many schools are in each division,



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Umatilla High School students Avery Gutierrez, left, Kaidan Blair, Alejandro Escovedo and Quin McClenahen pose for a portrait Tuesday, Nov. 30, 2021, at Umatilla High School. The students have been pivotal in helping get the high school’s esports program off the ground.

and how much scholarship money there is in esports.”

His research showed that nearby Riverside High School has a team, as do Eastern Oregon University, Oregon Institute of Technology, Portland State University and University of Oregon. The scholarship money available is considerable, but nearly \$5 million in scholarship money has gone unused.

Blair said there are 429,000 jobs tied to the gaming industry. His research noted students who participate in esports programs have a higher attendance at school, and their GPA improves.

“Mainly, we were asking the school board if we could play,” Blair said. “We had already secured grant money. Mr. Sipe took care of that.”

There is an expense with having an esports team, with

the biggest chunk of money being spent on computers.

The school district had grant money from the Department of Education, and it was allocated to the esports program. The students now are waiting for the computers to arrive — worldwide distribution issues have delayed shipping.

Once the computers arrive, the students will get to put them together. They hope to start competing in the spring.

“It’s a huge financial burden,” Sipe said. “Computers are expensive. Money was the biggest hurdle.”

While Sipe has an impressive robotics team at Umatilla, he is looking forward to hopefully having a new group of students to work with in the esports program.

“I get to make better connections with the kids, and

different connections with a different population of kids,” Sipe said. “It gives them a reason to come to school. Like the robotics kids who like to put nuts and bolts together, we now have the kids who will control it. They will learn how to make a video game work.”

A non-contact sport

While encouraging students to get off the couch and do something active is admirable, esports teach some of the same principles of mainstream athletics, including teamwork, strategy, the thrill of competition and learning to lose, but without the bumps and bruises.

Esports also is accessible to those with physical barriers, making it an inclusive program.

When the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily shut

down live sports in 2020, people turned to esports to fill the void.

Work and school were done by Zoom, so why not interact with others in the gaming world the same way. Some people play, while others are fans and like to watch the action. In 2020, esports was a \$1 billion business.

Esports combine art, science and business, which is what draws Escovedo to the program.

Escovedo, who teaches a Minecraft class after school at Umatilla, said he has been playing video games since he was 6 years old. He’d like to pursue a degree in computer science.

He carries a 3.8 GPA and has applied to and been accepted to Washington State University, Eastern Washington University and OIT. The scholarship money is a big draw, which he said he needs to be able to fulfill his college dreams.

Once the Umatilla program is up and running, it will be able to compete against other teams from throughout the world. While some people like the solitude of playing alone, esports encourage teamwork.

“It’s really fun Escovedo said. “You are right next to each other instead of on headsets.”

Blair said he always has had an interest in computers and has built his own. That led him to gaming. You can hear the passion for the esports program in his voice.

“We haven’t officially started asking people to join, but people are asking to come and play,” he said.

“We will have scheduled practices.”

Once the program is up and running, participants will be held to the same standards as the athletes, who must maintain a certain GPA and have good attendance at school.

McClenahen and Escovedo played a session of Valorant, which is one of a dozen games that are approved for esports leagues. While their left hands controlled the keyboard, their right worked the mouse. It takes a special skill and hand-eye coordination.

Contrary to popular belief, esports have been around for decades, starting in the 1960s with the game Spacewar, which is considered the first digital computer game.

The first esports tournament was held in 1972, and Spacewar was the game used. There were 24 players and the winner received an annual subscription to Rolling Stone magazine.

Sipe, and his wife Heidi, the superintendent of the Umatilla School District, played video games during the pandemic when everything, including school, was done by Zoom.

Heidi took an interest in Dr. Mario (circa 1990), where the objective is to defeat different colored germs with vitamins of the same color.

“I think if I can beat Dr. Mario, I can end this pandemic,” she said.

— Editor’s Note: Quin McClenahen is the stepson of the Hermiston Herald editor/senior reporter Erick Peterson.

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