Esports Club: Connecting Students Online and Off

Tom Tran December 4, 2025 **5 min read** 564

Top: Esports Club playing Super Smash Bros. Photo courtesy of Alex Aldrich. Bottom: Photo taken by Tom Tran.

Ready up and bring along your Player 2!

Hastings Senior High School's Esports Club enters its fourth year with more members this 2025-26 season.

During the previous season, the Esports Club fluctuated between seven to ten students. This year, the number of students who regularly attend is ten with an upwards of 15.

"I think it's wonderful," Esports Club Advisor Alex Aldrich said. "More kids are able to express what they want to, and more kids are able to compete with other schools."

When the club was first established in the fall of 2022 and held in the JAG room, Holden Jacobsen was one of its first members. Back then, it had half the number of people it currently has.

"I kind of feel proud because I was there watching it grow," Jacobsen said. "Not to toot my own horn, but I'm definitely one of the bigger *Valorant* players… who helped it grow."

Jacobsen convinced seniors Miguel Contreras Ramos, MacKenzie Quig, and Anthony Kuehn to join the club during the spring of his freshmen year. The three introduced more members the following years.

“Sometimes, I would bother the heck out of them until they joined,” Jacobsen said.

For some of them, such as Jacobsen and Kuehn, the Esports Club became a way of connecting with each other. The two attended the same middle school but only saw one another as acquaintances.

“We didn’t talk a lot, but we have definitely gotten to know each other better through esports,” Jacobsen said.

New freshmen also played a role in the club’s growth. A portion are simply interested in gaming while others aim to compete in the statewide competitions held by the Nebraska Schools Esports Association (NSESA), which takes place in the fall and spring.

“I enjoy gaming, and [Esports] helped me find people I have in common with,” freshman Joshua Muske said. “Playing with friends is a fun time.”

If Aldrich thinks a member excels at a game and displays teamwork skills, he gives them a spot on the respective esports teams. Jacobsen, Quig, and Kuehn regularly make the team for the game *Valorant*. Last year, they placed fourth and nearly qualified for in-person state.

“Going into these tournaments, it’s kind of nerveracking,” Quig said. “Either way, if we win or lose, I had a great time, and I really hope the rest of the future competitors also have that [mindset] too.”

At the tournaments, sometimes nerves and inconveniences like poor communication leads to frustration. At times, the HHS esports team experienced toxic behavior such as in-game taunting and poor sportsmanship from the opposing team.

“The other team might be kind, or they also might just be disrespectful… because they have this human emotion of ‘Oh, I’m better,’” Quig said.

The Esports Club does not want such toxicity nor their own moments of emotion to deter others from joining.

“There are some days, yes, [*Valorant*] is very toxic. But, you get mostly nice people,” Quig said. “I’ve met a couple of my friends there, and we’ve absolutely had a blast… It is just a game. It’s not real life.”

Besides competing at tournaments, the Esports Club spends time together playing couch games like *Super Smash Bro* on the Nintendo Switch. A few of their favorite moments are also in games like *Titanfall 2* and *Valorant*.

“[What’s memorable] probably is not the actual tournaments themselves, but goofing around,” Jacobsen said. “We’ll just pick some absurd agent in *Valorant* and try the most insane strategy, and sometimes it’ll work and we’ll have a lot of fun.”

Unlike at tournaments, a member getting excited and frustrated at a casual gaming session is generally not a big issue for the others. Most times, they take it light-heartedly and joke around.

“It’s always fun to see someone rage,” Contreras Ramos said. “You feel a little bad, but it’s quite the scenario I’d say.”

For many of them, gaming is not something they take too competitively. Rather it is their way of letting loose when overwhelmed with duties or a pastime whenever they have time to kill. Several of the seniors began gaming in sixth grade, which was during the COVID-19 quarantine.

“It’s an escape from reality,” Contreras Ramos said. “My parents were quite strict with me staying inside, which I obviously understand, but I got bored very quickly and turned to games.”

Video games offer a space for people to connect with millions of others online, such as for Contreras Ramos, who attended online school last year.

“The amount of people that I’ve met, I don’t believe I would have met them [otherwise] if I hadn’t played games, and I’m quite thankful,” Contreras Ramos said.

Quig, a self-described introvert, found gaming helped her overcome social anxiety.

“Gaming has brought me to that point where I am able to talk to people more and more,” Quig said. “I’ve even met some of my best friends on *Valorant*, and they also trust me the same way I do.”

Some members believe esports and video games allow people to interact not just online but offline too.

“I think I’ve been a little less of one, but I am absolutely a nerd still,” Jacobsen said. “It’s definitely a good way for those nerds to find other ways to connect.”

Aldrich has been the Esports Club’s advisor for three years. Some of the members believe the club has become a welcoming environment due to his help.

“He’s like the perfect example of being an advisor because he keeps everyone in line to be like, ‘Hey, we got to be respectful. We also have to be very responsible with schoolwork too,’” Quig said.

Kuehn believes more schools should begin offering esports programs to create similar environments for students to connect. Schools seem to be embracing this idea, as high school esports in Nebraska exponentially grew with over one hundred schools competing under the NSESA.

“I think just having a safe place to talk and play with my friends is good,” Kuehn said. “There are some people definitely looking for that kind of thing.”

Beyond building relationships, esports offers opportunities to play on scholarship-backed college teams like Hastings College’s and potentially professional teams. Several of the seniors are looking forward to playing collegiately.

“I think I’m going to pursue esports because after that [first] round of *Valorant* that I played with my friend, I’ve gotten stuck on it,” Quig said. “I’m hoping that when I go to CCC here, I will meet new people and have a great time with them.”

The Esports Club is open to all students who are into video games, competitions, or just want to meet new friends. They meet from Monday to Thursday, running from the end of school to 5:30 p.m.

“We’re very tight-knit,” Jacobsen said. “But, get to know us. It’s a very cool club”