Opinion: With e-sports on the rise, "real" sports need to up their game

By Fred Bowen, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.31.18

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Image 1. Players go head-to-head at an e-sports competition in Paris, France, in November 2017. On the left is Lucas Cuillerier, screen name "DaXe," who plays for the PSG E-sports Team. He was competing in a soccer video game against Florian Muller, whose screen name is "Cody." Photo from: Thomas Samson/AFP/Getty Images

The latest sports craze is not even a sport. According to a recent Washington Post article, "e-sports" are attracting a large world audience.

In e-sports, players and teams compete in popular video computer games such as Dota 2 and Overwatch. Fans fill arenas to watch the action live on huge television screens.

The games have gone way past kids playing against each other while sitting on a sofa at home. The International, a major competition for players of Dota 2, awarded $24 million in prizes. The winner took home almost $11 million. Other competitions have sold out Madison Square Garden in New York and the Staples Center in Los Angeles, California.

A recent e-sports competition attracted more than 80,000 fans to the Olympic Stadium in Beijing, China.

I have to admit that I am not a big fan of computer games. I know that some games can be educational. Still, I think too many kids spend too much time sitting in front of a screen shooting space aliens.

I think it would be better if kids spent more time reading or playing real sports such as basketball, baseball and soccer.

And please don't tell me that competitive gaming is a real sport because it requires hand-eye coordination. According to my American Heritage Dictionary, a sport is "an activity involving physical exertion and skill." I don't think anyone works up much of a sweat playing video games.

Still, video games are very popular, especially among kids. Some estimate that the audience for e-sports will be 590 million worldwide by 2020. And studies show that fewer kids in the United States are playing physical sports than just a few years ago.

So maybe the folks who run traditional sports could learn something from the e-sports and video game people.

Video games are good at giving kids what they want from any game: fun. The games are packed with action. They let kids play at their own pace with their friends.

Also, video games let everybody play. I've never heard of any kid being discouraged from playing a video game because he or she wasn't good enough.

Too often, regular sports send kids another kind of message. Competition starts early, when lots of kids are not ready for the ups and downs of games. Tryouts and travel teams come next, giving too many kids the message they are "not good" at sports. So lots of kids quit and start playing more video games.

Maybe everyone in youth sports — coaches, parents and kids — should steal a page from the video game playbook.

Turn up the action, keep it fun and let everyone play.

Fred Bowen is an author. He has written 22 sports books for kids.