# 2. The Digital Gaming Pathway Program

*using digital games to diversify the tech fields*

**STAN ALTMAN**

*In this chapter, Stan Altman introduces the new Gaming Pathways Program which produced this special edition of the Well Played Journal. Stan is the Director of the Gaming Pathways Program and Professor at City College of New York.*

How can we eliminate systemic obstacles that have prevented Black and brown students from pursuing careers in the technology sectors?

It has been well documented that tech corporations have a need for skilled personnel that is unmet by the available workforce. At the same time, large number of Black and brown students are unable to fill these jobs for lacking the required skills and knowledge. This is one of the challenges that the City University of New York (CUNY) works to meet.

The CUNY is the nation's largest urban public university, a transformative engine of social mobility that is a critical component of the lifeblood of New York City. Founded in 1847 as the nation's first free public institution of higher education, CUNY today has 25 colleges spread across New York City's five boroughs, serving 243,000 degree-seeking students of all ages and awarding 55,000 degrees each year.

More than 80 percent of the University's graduates stay in New York, contributing to all aspects of the city's economic, civic and cultural life and diversifying the city's workforce in every sector. The University's historic mission continues to this day: provide a public first-rate education to all students, regardless of means or background. For example, over 50% of its students are Black or brown and over 50 percent report an annual household income of less than $30,000.

After more than two decades working at CUNY, I learned that many Black

and brown students had received negative messages growing up that they couldn't expect to succeed in STEM fields. With little to no awareness of pathways for success, many abandoned their hopes and dreams. To change this paradigm, others from CUNY and I founded the Harlem Gallery of Science (HGS) in 2016, weaving together the arts and STEM fields to create interactive exhibits and culturally relevant programs for igniting and nurturing the interests of Black and brown youth.

After exploring exhibits on sports and music, then starting a STEM mentoring program, HGS shifted its focus to digital games. We wondered how digital gaming, as a familiar activity to youth of color, might prepare them for careers in the technology sectors. To find out, a joint study conducted in 2021 by HGS and CUNY's City College of New York (CCNY) revealed that the skills developed included creative thinking, teamwork, leadership, and complex problem solving and communication skills. For example, one female gamer in a Bronx high school, when asked what career she intended to pursue, quickly responded that she wanted to be a physician assistant in an emergency room. When asked how playing video games helped her achieve these goals, she said she plays games to develop the same skills she will need to succeed in an emergency room, by playing games in which she has to think quickly, make decisions, and work closely with team members.

In response, in partnership with CCNY, HGS established the Gaming Pathways Program, to open new opportunities for education and employment for Black and brown youth within the digital gaming industry within New York City.
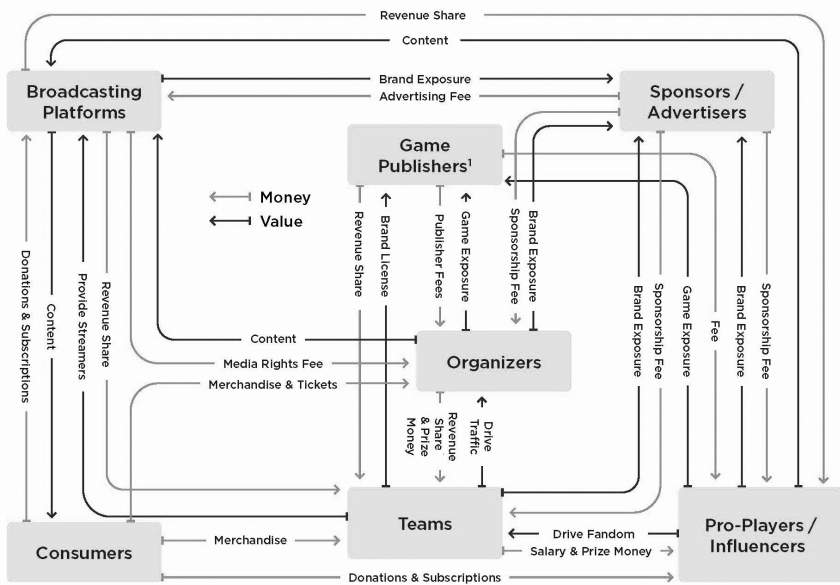
There are many programs that try to address developing a more diverse workforce that reflects the demographics of New York City. Some focus on high school programs. Some focus on college-based programs that reach out through a variety of after school programs. Some offer grants and scholarships and support programs to try to identify talented students of color. However, much of these efforts tend to be disjointed and not connected.

The Gaming Pathways Program addresses this through being designed as a system that eliminates the disconnecting gaps that often impede students' progress. It includes a high school program run by our partners at Urban

Arts, a new CCNY undergraduate bachelor's degree program in game design, and opportunities to connect with NYC's AAA and indie gaming companies.

Last year the NYC Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment published a report titled Impact of the Digital Gaming Industry on NYC Economy and concluded that the city was well positioned to expand its share of the rapidly growing digital gaming industry. Digital gaming is an industry showing explosive world-wide growth, with many well-paying tech and arts jobs. At present New York City currently ranks No. 5 in the country in economic impact from the gaming industry. The Mayor is committed to making NYC a hub for digital games. NYC will require a significant expansion of the local workforce if the city is to achieve this goal. Thus, it was a natural fit when the Gaming Pathways Program was launched through a partnership with the NYC Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, funding the program through a $2M contract with CCNY for the term January 1, 2022 through June 30, 2024.

Our first efforts to engage everyone – specifically high school and college students, NYC gaming industry leaders, and game-study academics – is documented within these pages. In the spring of 2022, we offered a series of public events focused on esports – both competitions and lectures. Each essay within this special issue of the Well Played Journal began as a presentation at one of those events. We hope, taken together, they can offer readers a glimpse into the issues addressed and some of the lessons learned during the launch of the Gaming Pathways Program, as well as a hint of the great things to come.

Revenue Share

Content

Brand Exposure

Advertising Fee

**Broadcasting Platforms**

**Sponsors / Advertisers**

**Game Publishers**[1]

⊣ Money

Value

Donations & Subscriptions

Content

Provide Streamers

Revenue Share

Revenue Share

Brand License

Publisher Fees

Game Exposure

Sponsorship Fee

Brand Exposure

Brand Exposure

Sponsorship Fee

Game Exposure

Fee

Brand Exposure

Sponsorship Fee

Content

Media Rights Fee

Merchandise & Tickets

**Organizers**

Drive Traffic

Revenue Share & Prize Money

**Teams**

**Pro-Players / Influencers**

Merchandise

Drive Fandom

Salary & Prize Money

**Consumers**

Donations & Subscriptions

*The boundaries of the esports industry. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information. .*

# 3. Games as Gateway to College

*collegiate gaming during COVID*

**NICK FORTUGNO**

*In this chapter, Nick Fortugno makes the case that esports provides preparation for life on a college campus and is a powerful socializing tool once one has arrived. Nick Fortugno is a game designer, gamification expert and entrepreneur of digital and real-world games. Nick is the educational director of the game design program at the City College of New York in the City University of New York, which is part of the Gaming Pathways program. He is also the Chief Creative Officer of Playmatics, a company that creates highly-engaging games, media, user experiences, and applications on the internet, social media networks, and a variety of connected platforms. Nick is also a co-founder of the Come Out and Play street games festival hosted in New York City.*

It makes me happy to be here at City College talking about esports and I want to explain why.

There are two things I want to address really quickly at the start. We are here in this really beautiful room, on this really beautiful campus, and we're talking about esports. I don't know about you, but that strikes me as weird because, growing up, people talked about games with me in negative terms. I have a deep knowledge about games, but that's not something I necessarily got a lot of love or praise or respect for growing up, certainly not from adults in my life. I'm sure you have had similar experiences, hearing many things about why you shouldn't play games.

What DO you hear about why you shouldn't play games?

Audience members shout out:

- It's addictive.
- It's a waste of time.
- It rots your brain.
- It makes you violent.

- You can't tell the difference between the real world and the fake world.
- You spend all your time indoors.

All sounds familiar, right? And yes, we hear that about games. But what I find really fascinating is that I can read you quotes from the 18th century that are exactly the same condemnations about novels. Here are a few.

> The minds of novel readers are intoxicated, their rest is broken, their health shattered, and their prospect of usefulness blighted. ("Moral Poison": The Evils of Reading Novels, 1864)

> Childishness in boys even of good ability seems to be a growing fault; and I do not know what to ascribe it, except to the great number of exciting books of amusement…that leave [a boy] totally palled…

… meaning like their skin has no color because they've been inside all day…

> … not only for his regular work, but for literature of all sort.

> I have seen a young lady with her table loaded with volumes of fictitious trash, poring day after day and night after night over highly wrought scenes and skillfully portrayed pictures of romance, until her cheeks grew pale, her eyes became wild and restless, and her mind wandered and was lost… She was insane, incurably insane from reading novels." (A Massachusetts physician in 1864)

So when you hear that stuff, it's nothing new. In fact, it's SO not new that I can point to a name at the center of the window behind me and tell the same story. That name, hanging over this entire hall, is Socrates.

Do you know how Socrates died? Do you know what the crime was that got him killed?

He was killed for corrupting the youth of his era.

So this idea that the mediums that we participate with — the activities that younger people do, that the communities of younger people involved in things that interest them and challenge them and bond them — is something that rots their brains… well, I think that's a very old message that  gets drum beat into every new generation by the last one whenever the new thing comes along.

So you should know that you're not alone in hearing these things, and getting this kind of criticism. And I think the example of the novel is super interesting because, now, if older family members of yours saw you reading novels, they would jump for joy at the fact that you're spending your time doing something valuable. And we can only think that games will be THAT in 150 years, because we will have something else that will be rotting the brains of our children and grandchildren by then, there will be something else that's wasting their time and keeping them away from the things that they should be doing. There will be something else that corrupts them.

And why I like being here, in this room, with these names behind me and with the kind of company we are keeping, is that we're in an institution of learning talking about games. I think that's amazing because games are not just the negative things that we hear about them — games have all of these positive aspects too. Gaming communities can be more inclusive. Games can raise challenging topics. Games can bring people together. But what I want to talk about is why that's valuable to college specifically. That is, why are we talking about esports in college? And why do colleges even have esports at all?

Part of the reason why is this question of how esports are sports. What does it mean that an esport is a sport? How is playing *League of Legends* like playing a sport?

*Audience members shout out:*

- *There's training. You practice and you get better.*
- *There is strategy. When you play you have to think.*
- *You put together a team that works together.*
- *It's a pathway to a kind of profession. You can be a professional player.*
- *If you achieve in it, you can go to competitions.*

There's another thing that I think is really interesting. When we talk about sports at college, I think we are often thinking about big sports. We think about big basketball at college. We think about big American football at college. We think about these activities that draw crowds and money.

But there's a whole other part of collegiate sports, which is people playing together on campus. Just this idea that you play on an esports team, like

you're playing League of Legend with people or Overwatch with people or even Smash with people. You're hanging out in the room training together, which is just time doing the same task as a team. And how many of you have just kind of stumbled into the spaces where you play these games, whether it's an online search for players, or you go to an esports lounge where you can play with people, and you meet people, and you bond with people in those contexts? These people become friends. These people become teammates. You strategize with them and you build those social relationships.

Colleges recognize that. Colleges like to see that people do that, especially for people coming in to college for the first time, as it becomes this really amazing way for people to make friends and connect and find community. Sports have done that traditionally. But sports are not for everyone. Not everyone is going to compete in those kinds of activities. Esports are another way of achieving the bonds and communities that sports do.

It's not a shock that sports and esports do this. It's actually another really important part of what games are, and there's a whole philosophy in games around just what it is like to play with other people and how that creates bonds and community.

Have you ever played that game when you were a little kid where you have a big parachute and they throw the parachute up and then you have to run under it? That game was designed by a game designer and theorist named Bernie De Koven. And De Koven, who passed away three years ago, was the proponent of a whole school of games that was thinking about these questions of bonds and community. It was called the New Games movement. It centered around thinking about games as an activity that people did together for a reason.

De Koven wrote a book called The Playful Path. This is a really wonderful book, and if you want to shut up everyone who hates that you play games, give them a copy. It contains the idea that just by playing a game together, any game with other people, you connect with the people you are playing with. De Koven calls this co-liberation. The "co-" means to cooperate. You play the parachute game, and you're going to run and have to track where everybody is. And you all have to be in sequence together to get through the parachute together. You have to sync up your activity with everyone else

playing to do this right. If you play an esports game together, you have to strategize together. You've got to be in rhythm with your team. Everybody in that system is playing at the same time thinking together, coordinating together, working together. Playing games such as League of Legions brings you into tight connection with your teammates.

The game can be seen as just a vehicle to do that. It's an excuse to spend a half an hour with six or seven people just working together in the same system.

And what De Koven points out is that there's something really freeing about that. That's the "liberation" part of co-liberation. There's something wonderful about the idea that, "I'm just going to be in this space with you for half an hour. And we're just going to do this thing together." We know we're going to have a good time. We know that because we're going to be with people we care about doing a thing together. And that can be competitive, or that can be collaborative. That can be hard or casual. That can be long or quick. But what we end up doing is all engaging in a system at the same time. And that leads us to bond, that leads us to connect in ways that we might not in other contexts.

I have run a festival with a few other people for the past 16 years called Come Out and Play. We just run games in public. Real dumb, simple games. Games with, like, lots of dodge balls or pool noodles, where maybe you just run around the streets tagging each other and stuff like that. Why do we run this thing? We can get like a couple thousand people out to one of those festivals. Why? Because it's free and people are happy to just show up and play games.

But what happens when you play games with a stranger? Well, it's hard to meet strangers. It's awkward to talk to people you don't know. You know what makes it not awkward? Having something to do. If you want it to be even less awkward, have something stupid to do, because no one's going be precious or pretentious about doing something stupid.

If I run up to you and I say, "Hold this pool noodle with me while we run across the street and make sure we don't drop the ball that's resting on the top of the pool noodle," nobody's taking that seriously. We're just going to be silly and laugh together while we do it. And that kind of magic — that I can

just make a thing that just makes you coordinate and laugh and bond with someone you don't know, in a safe way — there's a kind of magic to that.

And we know from research that those kinds of connections are what get people through college. Having people you trust and care about with you, helping you, working with you. And games build that. They build it automatically, independent of game content, independent of type of gameplay.
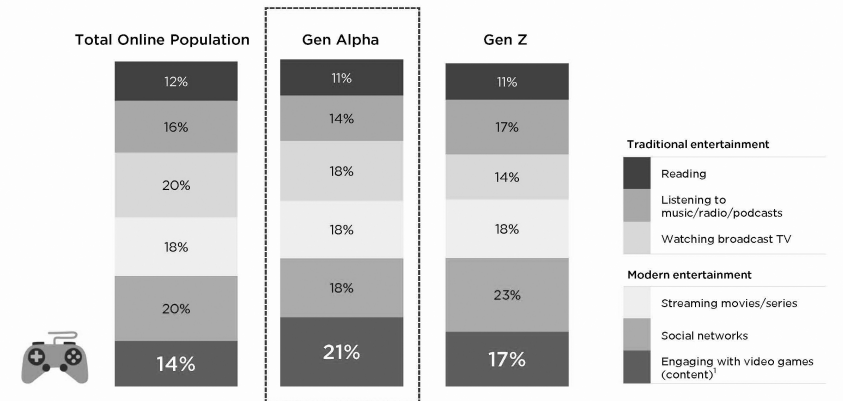
We want to teach you games because games can be a job and that's a good thing. We want to teach you games because games are an art form, a really cutting edge art form, and there's a lot of opportunity to make something new if you want to do that.

But they're also a chance for you to meet and connect with people and have a safe way of being part of a community. And if nothing else, there's a level of college which is a community, a community of thinkers, a community of learners, a community of practitioners. Games are a vehicle to bring you in.

I would say that esports, in some ways, is a great preparation for college, because they give you an angle to connect with the people around you through something that trains you, something that disciplines you, something that gives you an excuse to spend time connecting to other people. That's something that I think colleges value.

That's why it makes me happy to be here just to talk about esports. It's a fun tool for people to connect in a place that's meant to connect them.

**% LEISURE TIME SPENT PER WEEK PER ENTERTAINMENT PLATFORM (OUTSIDE OF WORK)**
Base: Total online population

| Total Online Population | Gen Alpha | Gen Z | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 12% | 11% | 11% | Traditional entertainment |
| 16% | 14% | 17% | ■ Reading |
| 20% | 18% | 14% | ■ Listening to music/radio/podcasts |
| 18% | 18% | 18% | ☐ Watching broadcast TV |
| | | | Modern entertainment |
| 20% | 18% | 23% | ☐ Streaming movies/series |
| | | | ■ Social networks |
| **14%** | **21%** | **17%** | ■ Engaging with video games (content)[1] |

*The percentage of leisure time spent playing games. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information.*