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## New school subject: playing games

**I**magine schoolkids getting tested on a subject that, until now, would have got them kicked out of class. That is precisely what is happening at Centennial Schools, a private school that opened a year ago to focus on a futuristic curriculum that includes coding, social media, crypto and gaming. It competes with the likes of Reddam House and Crawford College, where its founder, Shaun Fuchs, held senior positions.

Last year it built an esports arena – an enclosed area equipped with Asus gaming machines, screens and gaming chairs – at a cost of \$3m to host competitive computer gaming.

For those who don't crack the gaming big time but still have a passion for esports, a studio attached to the arena teaches pupils to become shoutcasters – esports commentators.

Now Centennial is putting more money where its curriculum is: it has become the first school on the African continent to offer esports scholarships.

Three scholarships, to a total value of R750,000, are being offered to South African student gamers, from grade 6 to grade 9.

There is a catch, but it is as cool as esports gets: candidates compete in a tournament, and the top three players are awarded the bursaries, respectively worth R300,000, R200,000 and R150,000. That excludes the value of laptops provided by Asus and gaming equipment from Cooler Master.

The school has gone to great pains to position esports as a future career rather than a frivolous pursuit. It says the initiative ties into the school's ethos of reimagining schools for the 21st century.

"Esports have become more inclusive than other sports, with boys and girls able to play on the same teams and participants coming from various social groups and demographics," says Fuchs. "Esports is incorporated into our overall approach to education as it teaches pupils valuable skills beyond the classroom."

Research shows that children who play video games have a far better chance of navigating complex psychological issues compared to those that do not actively participate in video games.

He says playing video games can make pupils keener and more employable across a wider spectrum of careers, including the medical field, engineering, remote flying – drones – and computer sciences.

"Esports can boost children's strategic thinking, teamwork, communication, leadership and performance. It has also been shown to boost confidence – building skills."

The first question parents would ask would be whether their children could earn a living from it. The answer is maybe. The esportsarnings.com website has identified a total of 684 South African competitive gamers, who between them have earned a mere \$1,482,079 (about R25.5m) in prize money, across 367 tournaments.

However, that is also a factor of South Africa still being in its esports professional infancy: it ranks only 62nd in the world in earnings.

Six international gamers have won more than \$5m each, and close to 150 have topped the million-dollar mark. Around \$1.4bn in total prize money has been tracked. Scandinavians dominate the top of the leader board, but Jordan and Lebanon also feature.

While Americans do not feature in the top 20, US schools have taken up the cause in a big way: more than 170 colleges have esports programmes, offering scholarships that total around \$10m per year.

A local organisation called BRUSA Sports, which has helped more than 200 young South African athletes get scholarships in the US, will help gamers tap into its networks. It claims \$20m in total value of scholarship dollars earned across 15 sporting codes.

It charges a fee, but part of this "facilitation rate" will be built into the Centennial scholarships.

One could say these are testing times for esports in South Africa. But they will be tests with a difference, and won't be written behind traditional desks.

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