

# How to be an esports star without going pro, playing games like Solitaire and Madden NFL

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Fernando Lewis knew he was good at video games like Madden NFL and NBA 2K, but he wanted a better barometer of his skills.

He signed up for some tournaments, but it wasn't easy to get regular competition in between them. Then he found Play One Up.

The app, which officially launched earlier this year in Apple's app store, connects players on Microsoft's Xbox One and Sony's PlayStation 4 in online matches of Madden, NBA2K and FIFA 2019 and the players can bet on themselves.

"You might be good in your neighborhood, but when you get on the site you might lose a couple games," said Lewis, 23, a business management graduate of Norfolk State University in Virginia. "But it's going to make you better. It's going to make you grind harder so you actually get a chance to be on the level (of players) you see on Twitch or YouTube."

Play One Up is just one venture looking to capitalize on the growing interest in esports and competitive video games. Until now, most of the attention given to esports focuses on professional leagues, tournaments and streaming of video games. With good reason.

## **Show me the money**

U.S. esports spending by consumers and advertisers—including media rights and sponsorship revenues—is expected to increase from \$221.6 million in 2018 to nearly \$516 million in 2023, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Major esports competitions can draw tens of thousands of attendees or more, with prize money in the millions. And pro gamers can make six-figure incomes, not counting sponsorships.

A sign of the potential in esports? Owners of traditional professional sports teams including New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft have paid tens of millions to own esports teams. Kraft owns the Boston

Uprising, a team in the Overwatch League; Sterling Equities, which owns the New York Mets, having landed one of the five Call of Duty World League franchises, through its Sterling.VC venture.

Activision Blizzard plans to begin the new Call of Duty league's competition next year. Franchises reportedly sold for \$25 million each, according to ESPN, which regularly broadcasts esports competitions.

Viewership has been growing, too, with 258 million viewers globally in 2017, according to research firm SuperData, a Nielsen company. For perspective, that compares favorably with the 204 million U.S. viewers who tuned into the 2016 National Football League regular season, based on Nielsen data.

But several companies—Play One Up among them—are looking to get average and amateur players into the action.

## **Call your Solitaire obsession training**

Where Play One Up is focused on console games, Skillz has been building a competitive mobile esports platform directly on Apple and Android devices.

The San Francisco-based game company, founded in 2012, has more than 28 million registered gamers and about 5,000 games, of which 10% have its esports technology activated to award prizes. (You can get Skillz in the Apple App Store, Samsung's Galaxy store and on [games.skillz.com](http://games.skillz.com).)

Last year, its top 10 competitors won more than \$8 million in combined winnings. Seven of those top-ranked players were women. The games here are not hard-core offerings you would find on the PS4 and Xbox, but [casual games](#) including Mahjong, bowling and dominoes. Earlier this

year, Skillz held a global Solitaire tournament with \$250,000 in prizes, with the first place winner getting \$25,000.

"What is really cool is getting women more interested in both watching and playing esports," said company founder and CEO Andrew Paradise. "It is just overall broadening the industry and the interest. I think it's going to look just like offline sports eventually where there will be something for everyone. I may like watching tennis, you may like watching golf. But there will be a lot of different types of games and sports for different demographics."

There's plenty of interest in expanding the gaming market for casual players, with Skillz' investors including the Patriots' Kraft and the owners of the Mets, Milwaukee Bucks and Sacramento Kings, whose co-owner Andy Miller is also co-owner of NRG Esports, an esports team that competes in games including "Fortnite," "Counter-Strike: Global Offensive" and "Overwatch."

## **Winning by wager**

Another venture looking to let average gamers compete for money is GameCo, a Las Vegas-headquartered company, which is deploying video game gambling machines that let players compete for monetary prizes. Among the games are casual matching games (similar to games like "Candy Crush Saga") and others such as the video arcade fighting game "SoulCalibur II."

A player's skill can impact their potential winnings just their skill helps at a poker table, says Blaine Graboyes, co-founder and CEO of GameCo. Casino operators are keen on the company's new machines because slot players are older and an influx of Gen Xers and millennials would help sustain their business, he says.

"There is definitely a demand for [younger people](#) to get to casinos," Graboyes said. "But they are just looking for a different product that appeals to their sensibilities and interests—interactivity, story and character, and the ability to compete."

GameCo recently got approval to install in Nevada casinos its gaming machines that let players compete in a single-player challenge mode or in a tournament mode against a field of opponents. They already have machines in casinos in Connecticut, Mississippi, Oklahoma and California.

"Part of what we are doing is providing a way for these fans and participants to now take part in these activities in a licensed and regulated manner," Graboyes said.

Play One Up CEO Brandon Pitts knew gamers were interested in betting on themselves after organizing game competitions for a decade. "Video gamers spend a lot of time sharpening their gaming skills and invest a lot of money on the games and video [game](#) consoles," he said. "Our mission was to create a platform for the large portion of video gamers worldwide that can't go pro and make a way for them to compete for earnings, at the tap of a button, right from their living room couch."

## **Betting on the business**

Players have wagered about \$1 million on Play One Up over the last six months, with paying customers numbering 6,000. Overall, about 60,000 have signed up. The company is actively seeking investors to scale up its operations, Pitts says.

Growing opportunities for people to gamble on contests—accelerated by the Supreme Court's decision last year that allowed sports betting and new laws allowing wagers on fantasy sports—concerns Les Bernal, the

national director of Stop Predatory Gambling, a Washington, D.C. non-profit watchdog group.

Major gambling companies are watching these new ventures and hoping there's a way to "get a whole new generation hooked on gambling through these video games," Bernal said.

"Younger people aren't gambling. They aren't doing traditional slot machines and table games," he said. "You would think most of America would say, 'That's a great thing,' given we have a society strapped in debt. ... Allowing gambling on video games severely harms young people and it's going to radically change the way that they interact with video games as well as traditional sports."

For now, gamer Fernando Lewis remains on Play One Up, using his skills on PS4 and Xbox to win more than \$10,000 so far playing Madden NFL and NBA2K, while he looks for a job, potentially in the [video game](#) industry.

"It can give you a chance to play really good players... (and) see where you really rank," Lewis said. "If I can beat the top players it proves myself and you can make really nice money up there."

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