

With the New Breed

Recruiting the next generation of Marines

by Capt Michael Maggitti

“Recruits, you must do two things to survive: communicate and work as a team. If you do not, you will most certainly fail. Do I make myself clear?” the Recruit Instructor belted. A unanimous, “Sir, Yes Sir!” echoed throughout the aircraft. As the engines started to rumble and the recruits exchanged nervous glances, Mario Saldana felt assured that he was prepared for this moment and what lay ahead. Having driven more than two hours from Corpus Christi to Houston, TX, Mario was in search of something that day—a sense of self-discovery and belonging, which he could not find at home.

Quickly, each recruit took to their stations awaiting orders as they familiarized themselves with the Pelican aircraft controls. Mario recalled from the video in brief that each station had a unique function and that all stations had to be operable to land the aircraft safely. He looked down at the thruster controls when suddenly the aircraft shuttered, and all hell broke loose.

“We’ve been pummeled by debris,” alerted the pilot over the intercom, “Life support systems are in the red. Whatever hit us must have ruptured our oxygen processors. We are venting O2 in a bad way.”¹ All the recruits panicked as the breach alert sounded and emergency warnings flashed on their screens.

“Recruits—when I call your station number, you need to turn your O2 bypass valve as fast as you can to reroute the oxygen to the reserve. Remember, each module requires dual stations to fully charge. We need to work together!”²

Mario waited in anticipation for his station number to be called when suddenly his monitor indicated that the right thruster had lost power. As he reacted with the appropriate keystrokes, he heard a fellow recruit yelling for oxygen from station

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six. Mario listened attentively for station six to respond in kind as he worked the thrusters, but no answer followed. His eyes darted in between screens as the O2 levels continued to plummet until the aircraft froze and time stood still.

Mario scanned the dimly lit aircraft replaying his motions as he pondered where the group of recruits had gone wrong. As the lights returned, he stared in disbelief at a large number six painted above his station. “Recruits—you crashed my



PFC Saldana poses with Master Chief at the Halo: Outpost Discovery event in Houston, TX, on 16 August 2019. (Courtesy photo by PFC Mario Saldana.)



Recruiters of RS Houston pose with Master Chief at the Marine Corps booth during the Halo: Outpost Discovery event in Houston, TX, on 16 August 2019. (Courtesy photo by Recruiting Station Houston.)

spaceship,” asserted the Recruit Instructor, “Good thing this was just a tutorial. Time for an after-action report to learn what went wrong.” What immediately followed was an in-depth discussion facilitated by the recruit instructor and driven by the recruits themselves. From signaling to delegation of duties, they quickly familiarized themselves with all functions aboard the Pelican spacecraft simulator and prioritized a chain of command to triage communications.

“Play time is over. This is the real deal now. Work together, master your boards, and communicate. If you survive, you will earn your dog tags.” The recruit instructor quickly brandished his own before wishing the team well and departing the spacecraft. As the engines began to rumble a second time and the simulator came back online, the recruits exchanged glances once again but did so with a renewed sense of confidence in their abilities as a team.

A few minutes later, Mario emerged from the Pelican flight simulator and walked the halls of the George R. Brown Convention Center in downtown Houston as a proud member of the Halo Outpost Discovery. As an avid gamer and lifetime fan of Microsoft’s Halo franchise, Mario

was anxious to show his new dog tags to the voice actor behind the game’s most iconic character: Master Chief. However, on his way to the interview panel, he noticed a bright red pull up bar flanked by two Marine Corps recruiters. Fueled by his recent accomplishment, he approached them with his eyes on the ultimate challenge—earning the title of United States Marine.

It is no secret that the Marine Corps shares a long and illustrious history with the entertainment industry. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of the Marines and civilians in the Entertainment Media Liaison Office based on Camp Pendleton, CA, who routinely collaborate with Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC) and Wunderman Thompson, its advertising agency of record, the Marine brand has endured across every medium both in and out of the limelight. From sitcoms and screen plays to bestselling novels and blockbuster films, the Marine Corps continues to wage war against other brands for share of mind among today’s youth and their immediate influencers. For as LtGen Victor Krulak once noted, “The United States does not need a Marine Corps ...

[she] wants a Marine Corps,”³ and as such, the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor cannot concede territory in any domain if it wants to remain relevant and attractive to its target demographic. While legacy brands posture on the traditional battlefronts of television, print, and radio advertising, emergent brands keen to connect with today’s youth of Generation Z have focused on digital media and, more recently, interactive entertainment via competitive video games (i.e., esports) as well as live-streaming and video-on-demand gaming content. It is here, within this new domain, that today’s recruiters will find tomorrow’s Marines.

While some readers may question the validity of video games as recruiting tools, allow me to provide further context in that the gaming ecosystem has evolved tremendously since its 8-bit beginnings in the early 1980s. Outside of coin-operated arcades, video gaming started as an inherently individual experience due largely to the limits of technology. While communities grew around individual game titles, the world was not connected as it is today, both physically with modern infrastructure and digitally with high-speed internet. Until the advent of local area networks, video games were largely relegated to a single console and a limited catalog of multiplayer titles, both of which were price prohibitive for the median household income. At the same time, there were no professional teams or personalities that the youth could aspire towards, since the esports industry did not yet exist in its current form. As such, gaming and those who participated in it inherited a social stigma because they did not have the platforms or programming to support organized competition on a public scale. The same is not true for traditional sports, which have benefited from a low-entry price, ease of adoption, mass awareness, and professional leagues dating as far back as 1869 with the founding of professional baseball—America’s favorite pastime.

In recent years, however, the esports industry has evolved and in many cases adopted components of its traditional sports counterpart. On the global level, esports organizations have amassed mil-

lions of fans thanks to a roster of professional athletes who compete across various game titles. In addition to competing, each organization caters to its community through dedicated content creation teams, branded lifestyle apparel lines, high-profile sponsorships, and celebrity endorsements. FaZe Clan, one of *Forbes*' most valuable esports companies, boasts over 230 million social media followers. This far surpasses the two most valuable franchises in football and baseball combined—the Dallas Cowboys at 16.1 million and New York Yankees at 14.4 million followers—all this despite FaZe's net worth of \$305 million, which accounts for less than 6 percent net worth of the aforementioned titans.⁴ Not surprisingly, FaZe Clan's fan demographics trend significantly younger and are in direct contrast to the average age of an National Football League (50) and Major League Baseball (57) fan.⁵ Additionally, much like today's professional sports leagues, esports organizations focus on the holistic development and longevity of their athletes, which is why many top teams are investing in state-of-the-art training facilities. In Texas, Complexity Gaming built the GameStop Performance Center on the same campus used by the Dallas Cowboys, so both teams' athletes can share training facilities, professionally prepared meals, proprietary training software, and recovery equipment.⁶ At the collegiate level, various governing bodies exist to provide the scope and scale to varsity esports athletes akin to the National Collegiate Athletic Association. One such organization, the National Association of Collegiate Esports, includes more than 170 member schools, 5,000 student athletes, and has granted scholarships in excess of \$16 million to students competing on behalf of their school.⁷ Naturally, these scholarships have led to the downstream development of robust high school esports programs both in and outside of the classroom. The High School Esports League provides STEAM accreditation and integrated curriculum to its more than 3,100 participating schools and 100,000 students.⁸ Within the independent school district of Dallas, \$450,000 was allocated in late 2019 for esports

extracurriculars to reach more than 700 students across 64 campuses.⁹ Clearly, the training and advancement pipeline from recreational to amateur to professional esports athlete is in high demand and growing.

Based on these developments, it is evident that U.S. societal norms are shifting to embrace esports and its career potential for today's youth. But the question remains, "Aren't these students just playing games?" Yes; however, in doing so, they are also communicating as a team, developing leadership traits, thinking strategically, acting decisively under pressure, adapting to sudden changes, and employing technology to amplify their innate abilities. If this

ficer at the age of 18."¹¹ On the cerebral front, where emergent and advanced technologies are empowering individuals to learn, think, and innovate, the Marine Corps must change its tactics in who, how, and where we recruit to win in the future operating environment.

In the past year, the gaming ecosystem has quickly grown to become the cultural crossroads for today's youth as music, sports, fashion, and business trends collide in the immersive and experiential online world. Exacerbated by stay-at-home orders and social distancing amid the global pandemic, the gaming industry grew to \$139.9 billion in 2020—eclipsing the National Football League, National Basketball As-

Regarding physicality, MCRC's Delayed Entry Program is renowned for its ability to train poolees in preparation for the rigors of recruit training.

sounds familiar, it is because these are the very characteristics the Commandant is looking for in the future force. More specifically, Gen Berger's guidance prioritizes force design composed of "elite warriors with physical and mental toughness, tenacity, initiative, and aggressiveness to innovate, adapt, and win in a rapidly changing operating environment."¹⁰

Regarding physicality, MCRC's Delayed Entry Program is renowned for its ability to train poolees in preparation for the rigors of recruit training. There are countless cases of complete body transformations through dedicated training and proper nutrition by those preparing to ship to bootcamp, but an agile mind is harder to hone. These sentiments were echoed by Sgt Anthony Morales, a videographer from Atlantic City and avid gamer, who told the author, "We can improve the physical aspects of our applicants, but we can't teach the higher level of cognitive thinking that some of these gamers have at such a young age. Operational, strategic, tactical levels of thinking are what we learn as we move up the ranking system; [they] have those same skills of a Non-Commissioned Of-

sociation, Major League Baseball, and National Hockey League combined.¹² Turning to online entertainment, Americans spent more time watching gaming videos and streaming gaming content on YouTube and Twitch than watching non-gaming related content on HBO, Netflix, ESPN, and Hulu combined.¹³ According to Superdata, a Nielsen company, more than half of U.S. residents (55 percent) played video games as a result of the first phase of COVID-19 lockdowns.¹⁴ More importantly for the Marine Corps, among consumers ages 18–24, who also fall within the target demographic for military service, 66 percent played more console games, 60 percent played more mobile games, and 55 percent watched more gaming video content as a direct result of COVID-19.¹⁵ Most telling, however, is that the same study indicates the long-term gaming habits formed during lockdown will remain in place post-pandemic.

In light of Gen Krulak's visionary rhetoric and the lack of in-person events in 2020–2021, MCRC has taken steps to explore the burgeoning world of esports. Not one to break tradition, the longest standing track and field compe-



Marine recruiters gather before the opening races during the first-ever digital Penn Relays within the pixelated world of Minecraft on 24 April 2020. (Courtesy photo by author.)



Marines attend a virtual career fair designed and presented by Gamerjibe on 18 May 2020 to discuss career opportunities with students interested in technology and esports careers. (Courtesy photo by author.)



Four of the sixteen participating Marines lead their teams to victory in Reload Drops In with the U.S. Marine Corps presented in partnership with Esports Stadium Arlington on 26 June 2020. (Courtesy photo by Esports Stadium Arlington.)

tion, the Penn Relays, went digital this past year for its 126th iteration. As an enduring partner of the races, the Marine Corps took to the pixelated world of *Minecraft* to compete side-by-side with student athletes and their coaches across various track events while the author provided live-broadcast commentary.¹⁶ This event made history and overcame obstacles in more ways than one thanks to the ingenuity and dexterity of students at the University of Pennsylvania, who recreated their campus brick-by-brick within Microsoft's game to cope with social isolation. Evolving from 8-bits to 3-D avatars for their next online event, Marine recruiters donned their digital Dress Blues during the Gamerjibe virtual career fair, which gathered students in search of careers in technology and esports.¹⁷ In addition to replicating the one-to-one and one-to-many conversations recruiters have with prospects, Marines from Cyberspace Command sat on a cybersecurity panel to address transferrable skillsets and how the Corps leverages technology to protect and serve the nation.¹⁸ While these exploratory events marked new territory for the Marine brand and its iconic uniforms, they served merely as the digital extension of what we have done for years in the physical realm.

Answering the Commandant's challenge to continually adapt and initiate change, the Marines of 8th Marine Corps District hosted the largest military-ran public gaming competition to date in partnership with North America's largest esports stadium last June. Dubbed *Reload Drops in With the U.S. Marine Corps*, gamers competed during qualifying matches as teams of three within *Call of Duty: Warzone* for the chance to be reinforced by active duty Marines and fight as a fire team during final matches.¹⁹ Within 10 days of the announcement, approximately 550 gamers registered to compete. Of that number, 107 participants asked to learn more about the Marine Corps.²⁰ To identify top talent to compete on behalf of the Marine brand, the author initiated a command-wide survey within the 8th District to determine attitudes and opinions of gaming. Of

the 261 responses, with ranks ranging from corporal to sergeant major and lieutenant to lieutenant colonel, 208 identified as current or former recruiters. Within the recruiter population, 75 percent were actively gaming and approximately 40 percent were using gaming to connect with their poolees. Not surprisingly 85 Marines, or 41 percent of the total recruiter respondents, expressed interest in competing, and of that population, 75 percent were staff sergeant or below. This suggests that gaming is more prevalent among younger Marines. Most interestingly were the district recruiters' mean responses when asked to rate, on a scale of 1–10, with 1 being the lowest, the following attributes:

- Frequency of video games as a topic conversing with prospects: 5.95.
- Comfort level of discussing video games with prospects: 2.17.
- Familiarity of other Service branches' esports efforts: 1.23.
- Familiarity of Marine Corps esports efforts: 1.18.²¹

Notwithstanding the small sample size from only one of the six recruiting districts, the data does identify a need to educate the recruiting force both about video games as a trending topic among today's youth and how the Marine Corps is actively adding value to the gaming ecosystem. In fact, one staff sergeant recruiting in Little Rock, AR, agreed: "Recruiters are slowly acclimating to the niche area of video gaming and esports ... if given more training, tools, and emphasis we can only continue to win."²² That is not to say MCRC should charter a standing competitive team in the wake of the Army and Navy esports organizations, nor should the individual recruiter shrug school visits and interviews in lieu of prospecting via video games. Instead, what this data and anecdotal evidence suggest is that gaming, like digital media, is a means to connect today's Corps with tomorrow's Marines. We are known as the few and the proud for a reason; not everyone is eligible or qualified to serve even if they are interested. As such, gaming should be interpreted as supporting fires to the already robust combined arms approach at MCRC, and if the situation

dictates, priority can be shifted to make this medium the main effort. That exact scenario played out in late 2019 when the Navy abandoned advertising on linear TV and repurposed 97 percent of its budget—or \$33M—to digital media with a focus on video-on-demand content and esports initiatives.²³ While the jury is still out on the impact of such a significant change of course for Navy advertising, it is worth noting that, as of this writing, ten individuals who participated in the June 2020 *Reload* tournament have contracted to join the Marine Corps, and since then, other districts across the country have begun holding their own events with similar results.

While the most visible of efforts are expended to communicate externally to prospects, there exist equally important initiatives for all branches to recruit both within their ranks and from their respective service academies. Inspired by the Army Recruiting Command's official esports team, the Military Academy at West Point recently debuted *Army West Point Esports* to "enhance the cadet experience through interactions with competitive gaming while providing them an opportunity to develop themselves within the four pillars of the academy's leadership objectives: military, physical, academic and character."²⁴ Combined with the esports organizations at both the Air Force and Naval academies, gaming among future military officers has embraced a joint operations approach. It is the last academy listed, which is of interest to our officer corps as we actively recruit Marine contracts among the midshipmen of Annapolis. As young officers matriculate with an interest in gaming and graduate to fulfill their contract obligations, their passion for competitive esports does not end with their undergraduate studies; it continues with them onto the fleet.

No new venture is without risk but the Commandant himself acknowledges we cannot ignore strong signals of change for our success as an institution relies on continually challenging the status quo. Anchored by entertainment and fantasy, the gaming industry influences today's notions of modern

service and expectations of future war-fighting among its target demographic—whether for good or for bad. Within this digital domain, there is inherent risk in appealing to Generation Z without sacrificing the ethos of our institution or marginalizing the realities of elite and demanding military service. Furthermore, gaming is the great equalizer, where participation is unbound regardless of your age, ability, or gender. The challenge for MCRC is to communicate who we are and what we do in a way that is authentic to both the gaming platform and the prospect while also keeping faith to our brand and its values. Considering what the country expects of her Marines, MCRC remains committed to searching for those highly qualified individuals who possess balance across all fronts—mental, moral, and physical—regardless of which medium they first encounter a recruiter. As such, MCRC recently codified a gaming strategy to augment its existing digital engagement policy. Both documents provide local commanders and individual recruiters with the goals, objectives, and desired end state to align future initiatives within the emergent digital domain of gaming.

At its core, gaming is three things: communal, connective, and competitive. Fundamental to this formulation is camaraderie—what we Marines know as *esprit de corps*—and whether you realize it or not, there is a growing population of Marines who game recreationally, competitively, or perhaps have forgotten their love of games and are waiting to plug back in. While pride of belonging will always prevail, the cohesion developed at the tactical level in our units and barracks does not always transcend a permanent change of station or promotion which is why Marines gravitate online to sustain those bonds. Within the sample size previously mentioned, 72 percent, or 167 total respondents, acknowledged they currently play video games. Unfortunately, our gaming community is in discord—completely separated and lacking an online identity—but soon, it will be united on Discord. For those unfamiliar with the online messaging application, Discord has become the

central hub for gamers to commune and interact directly with esports teams, professionals, brands, leagues, game publishers—the list goes on.

As a warfighting institution, there is valid concern that gaming may take us away from our top priority—winning battles on behalf of our Nation—but I assert gaming will make our community *more* resilient and cohesive as a combat force. This is possible thanks to the inherent connectivity that gaming provides between age, rank, duty station and military occupational specialties that can often divide us. Gaming can cultivate camaraderie and belonging within the force, which those seeking to join the few and the proud ultimately desire while those within the force cite as a reason for retention. Lastly, competition is essential to the DNA of every Marine and is what pushes us past the physical and mental barriers to overcome what most deem unattainable. While having acknowledged there are no plans to start a formal esports team, MCRC will continue to compete against the other Services to ensure a consistent share of voice among our target audience. This past December, MCRC Marines participated in the first interservice esports competition hosted by Activision Blizzard's *Call of Duty Endowment*.²⁵ Officially promoted as a provisional quick reaction force, the participating Marines were identified from past gaming events and competed alongside prominent *Call of Duty* streamers and *Call of Duty League* professionals to millions of viewers.

As gaming continues to grow, so too does the need to organize and identify the community of gamers among our ranks. Whether competing against each other to build resiliency or against the other services to breed competition, the Marines now have a platform of their own—*Marine Corps Gaming*. Forged by and for active-duty Marines, this community will serve to identify top talent to compete on a volunteer basis as representatives of our brand, our Corps, and our community of gamers. More importantly, it serves to connect all Marines who share the fighting spirit and passion for competitive gaming. For more information on how to join,



Four MCRC Marines team up with top gaming influencers and streamers to compete against the other Service branches in the Call of Duty Endowment Bowl on 11 December 2020. (Courtesy photo by Activision Blizzard's Call of Duty Endowment.)

please visit <http://www.marinecorpsgaming.com>.

While the illustrious title of *Old Breed* is owed only to those Marines who comprised the first division-sized, integrated amphibious strike force in U.S. military history, there exist more perplexing naming conventions among Marines of years gone by and the current force. Derivative and aptly coined the “Old Corps” and the “New Corps,” there is no clear delineation as to where

these classifications begin and end or why they even exist. While colloquial, they hint at an obvious divide between generations that are quick to forget the crucible that every Marine endures regardless of disposition. More troubling, they also ignore that the future operating environment is unknown and rapidly evolving yet requires the same level of honor, courage, and commitment engrained in every Marine. When asked by the author about the propensity for



From poolee to private first class, Mario Saldana graduates with Golf Company, Platoon 2145, from Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego on 18 December 2020. (Courtesy photos by Recruiting Substation Corpus Christi and MCRD San Diego.)

gaming among today's youth during an open panel at the recent Modern Day Marine Virtual Experience, the Commandant had this to say: "Every age group has a unique contribution to the Marine Corps."²⁶ This is telling for the future of our Corps as we modernize the force while competing directly in the open marketplace for top talent. Whatever the future force looks like, America need not worry about its capability or commitment—after driving more than 400 miles roundtrip to meet his Spartan hero, PFC Mario Saldana proudly marched across the parade deck at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego 490 days later to fulfill his ultimate challenge—becoming a United States Marine.

Notes

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26. Response from Gen David H. Berger to author inquiry during the open interview panel for Modern Day Marine Virtual panel.

