The Best Esports Games for 2019

These 14 games have launched the careers of their young players to global fame.

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If your parents ever disparaged your video game obsession as a huge waste of time, they're either a) out of touch or b) lacking in vision.

That may sound overly harsh, but there's some truth in my take. Esports, the video game industry's competitive arm, has amassed huge audiences, incredible cash pots, and sponsorships that enable elite gamers to transform their passions into careers. In fact, research firm Newzoo estimates that esports will generate $1.79 billion per year by 2022.

The esports business

Of course, esports are more than purely capitalistic ventures. Though gamers dig the idea of standing on stage holding oversized checks, the true reason for traveling to tournaments around the globe is to prove they're the best in their titles of choice.

Esports comprise many games, both popular and under the radar, in numerous genres. You like shooters? You can pop some caps in a rival playing Counter-Strike: Global: Offensive. In the mood for a battle royale of epic proportions? PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds has got you covered. Into sports? In a merging of the two worlds, the NBA and Take-Two Interactive — publisher of the super-popular NBA 2K video game series — partnered to create the NBA 2K eLeague. In the esports world,

there’s a video game, and related scene, for everyone.

Maybe there’s too much choice. There are so many video games on the market with a competitive, multiplayer focus that getting started in playing, or simply watching, professional video gaming may prove intimidating. Fortunately, this guide to the best esports games is designed to gently nudge you in the right direction. After all, every game going after that sweet esports money isn’t worth your time. And there are a whole lot of those.

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The esports criteria

This guide contains several esports-worthy titles that PCMag’s staff has reviewed and wholeheartedly recommends playing. In fact, many of the titles that we suggest checking out also live in our best PC games roundup, though we also toss a bone or two to console players.

To be considered for inclusion in this guide, a game simply has to have official tournament support from its publisher. Though we love many of the smaller, community-backed efforts, such as the incredible Tecmo Super Bowl community, we had to create a cut-off point, lest damn near every competitive game be deemed worthy.

So, that’s that. If there’s a notable esports game that’s not listed below, that means we either didn’t review it yet or score it well enough to make the cut. What you’ll find below, however, are some of the best esports games played by amateurs and professionals in 2018 — and likely beyond. Dig in. And, more importantly, have fun playing.



Image credit: via PCMag

Counter-Strike Global Offensive

Valve’s Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS: GO) debuted in 2012, backed by a strong heritage of multiplayer FPS titles, including the original Counter-Strike and Counter-Strike: Source. Years later, the fast-paced PC game still mostly holds its own against more modern titles, partly because of its established core gameplay and active community.

Visually, however, CS: GO is starting to show its age, and it’s not as thematically rich as Overwatch. Still, many folks enjoy CS: GO’s no-frills experience and its highly competitive esports circuit, which includes the Eleague Major, a competition with a $1 million prize.



Image credit: via PCMag

Dota 2

“Easy to learn, hard to master.” This phrase is used to describe many things, especially in gaming. Few titles exemplify that mantra more than Defense of the Ancients 2 (Dota 2), one of the most popular multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games on the planet.

This free-to-play MOBA tasks you with selecting one of more than 100 playable Heroes to take to the battlefield, utilizing that character’s unique abilities, play style, and attributes to help your team achieve victory.

Sure, the MOBA genre proves inscrutable to viewers who are unfamiliar with the play mechanics, but the annual Dota 2 International has insane cash pots (more than $30 million!) and stiff competition that makes the game an esport worth watching if you’re willing to learn the ropes.



Image credit: via PCMag

Dragon Ball FighterZ

Beside *Fist of the Northstar* and *Jo Jo's Bizarre Adventure*, there are few anime properties as intrinsically suited to the fighting game treatment as the *Dragon Ball* series. Spanning multiple series, movies, and generations of characters, Akira Toriyama's manga-turned-anime-turned-game series is all about buff monkey men, humans, aliens, and androids trading blows in actual earth-shattering battles.

The series' latest video game adaptation, Dragon Ball FighterZ, ditches the Xenoverse games' arena-brawling model in favor of 3 vs. 3 tag-team fighting on a 2D plane. The gameplay shift is just one of the many reasons Dragon Ball FighterZ is being held aloft as one of the most intriguing esports titles. Its beautiful design, intense combat, and accessible control scheme add up to a game that anyone can jump into for Super Saiyan thrills.

Besides appearing at Evo, the anime fighter has an expanded

competitive scene courtesy of Bandai Namco’s Dragon Ball FighterZ World Tour.



Image credit: via PCMag

Fortnite

Fortnite is the battle-royale game to beat. In fact, Epic Games confirmed in early 2019 that Fortnite hosted 7.6 million concurrent players in one record-breaking session. This notably beats Player Unknown’s Battlegrounds (PUBG) highest-ever player count recorded on Steam, which topped out at just more than 3 million players. Fortnite’s popularity is off the charts.

Fortnite has a lot going for it, including approachable gameplay modes, bright and zany graphics, and an excellent construction system. Iffy combat and the presence of microtransactions detracts from the experience, but, as it is a free-to-play game, fans of the genre should still give it a shot. The title is on virtually every platform that plays video games.

2019’s inaugural Fortnite World Cup saw 16-year-old Kyle “Bugha” Giersdorf take home $3 million from a $30 million prize pool.



Image credit: via PCMag

The King of Fighters XIV

SNK’s latest entry in the long-running The King of Fighters series ain’t the prettiest fighter in town, and the title doesn’t consistently headline Evo, but it’s one of the best competitive fighting games on the market.

KOFXIV‘s deep combo system, team-based action, massive 58-person roster, varied special attacks, supers, and offensive, defensive, and movement options combine to form a spectator game that’s as thrilling to watch as fighters with higher profiles. To be fair, those same qualities make KOFXIV a somewhat intimidating game to master, but should you put in the work, the rewards are immensely satisfying.

Even though KOFXIV isn’t a main Evo game, it’s supported by the SNK World Championship series.



Image credit: via PCMag

League of Legends

League of Legends, Riot Games' free-to-play, multiplayer online battle arena title is, simply put, the best MOBA game you can buy. Its gameplay incorporates elements of role playing, tower defense, and real-time strategy – a combination that differentiates it from the many cookie cutter MOBAs that have flooded the market.

League of Legends' accessibility is one of its highlights, but that does not mean it lacks complex core gameplay elements. The way skillshots, cooldowns, unique abilities, and equipment work in tandem makes League of Legends the face of MOBA gaming, outclassing the likes of Dota 2 and Heroes of the Storm.

In terms of esports, Riot Games supports the title via the League of Legends Championship Series. The tournament boasts a prize pool of more than $2 million.



Image credit: via PCMag

Mortal Kombat 11

Mortal Kombat 11, developer NetherRealm Studios' newest fighting game, is far more than the cracked skulls, severed spines, and blood spurts on which the series built its fame. The narrative sequel to Mortal Kombat X, Mortal Kombat 11 uses time travel to pit characters against their rivals in the past in order to alter the present.

Thanks to animation improvements and new offensive and defensive mechanics, the mercs, ninjas, gods, and monsters play better than ever. As a result, Mortal Kombat 11 is an excellent entry point for people unfamiliar with the series (or those who've lapsed).

NetherRealm Studios supports Mortal Kombat 11 via its Mortal Kombat Pro Series esports initiative.

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Image credit: via PCMag

Overwatch

Shooters don’t always have to be dark, gritty, or realistic. Cartoony fun has its place, even in gun-filled PC games. That place has been filled by Valve’s Team Fortress 2 for nearly a decade, but now Blizzard’s taken the reigns with Overwatch. It takes all of Team Fortress 2’s hallmarks, such as colorful levels, multiple game modes that focus on teams attacking and defending, and cool characters with vastly different play styles, and adds a few MOBA-like twists.

Overwatch is a thoroughly enjoyable first-person shooter that’s filled with mechanical variety, thanks to the game’s many heroes and classes. As you might expect, it has developed a highly successful esports scene. Blizzard supports the Overwatch competitive scene with several esports initiatives, including the Overwatch World Cup.



Image credit: via PCMag

PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds (PUBG)

Like many other games in the open-world survival or first-person shooter genres, the primary goal of PUBG is to be the last player alive. However, PUBG doesn’t adhere to the genre norms. It takes some of the best aspects of open world games, combines it with the mechanics of a good first-person shooter, and accommodates a player base typical of MMOs.

There’s also a good balance of gameplay elements. For example, you get to choose where to parachute down on the map, everyone starts without a weapon, and there’s a deadly and giant shimmering blue dome that reduces the playable area every so often. It’s tense, but extremely entertaining.

The PUBG Global Invitational has a prize pool of more than $2 million.



Image credit: via PCMag

Rocket League

2015’s out-of-nowhere hit, a game that still dominates Steam sales charts, is one of the few sports games not associated with a real-life league that receives massive esports love.

Rocket League, with its fast car-based game play, explosive hits, and thrilling shots on goal is a raw thrill, especially when it’s played by professionals. Seriously, if you thought your last-second score was impressive, wait until you see someone with supreme skills drive up a wall, flip off it, and score from center field.

The Rocket League Championship Series is where you’ll find the world’s best players pulling off incredible maneuvers. The most recent competition featured a $1 million prize pool.



Image credit: via PCMag

Samurai Shodown

The original Samurai Shodown found an audience back in the 1990s thanks to its unique weapon-based bouts, feudal Japanese setting, and bloody flourishes. Still, it was a tough fighting game for some people to pick up due to the methodical combat and shocking damage scaling; characters hit brutally hard, so a few simple mistakes could cost you the match and your quarter.

Despite no new series entries in more than a decade, developer SNK rebooted Samurai Shodown, preserving many of the classic gameplay mechanics that made the original games so memorable.

Samurai Shodown became an Evo game in its first year (2019), and is also supported by the SNK World Championship series.



Image credit: via PCMag

StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void

What’s a real-time strategy (RTS) title to do in a gaming landscape packed with MOBAs? If you’re talking StarCraft Il, the answer is simple: continue to offer best-in-class gameplay and multi-million-dollar cash prizes in the StarCraft II World Championship Series.

The StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void expansion has the military strategy that die-hards adore, while simultaneously serving as a fantastic conclusion to Blizzard’s five-year saga. It’s truly one of the most satisfying strategy games ever made, though novice RTS viewers may not appreciate all the complexities on display during high-level play.

The Global StarCraft II League has a prize pool topping a half million dollars at the time of this writing.



Image credit: via PCMag

Street Fighter V

Street Fighter V, despite its rocky start and DLC shenanigans, may very well be the most accessible esports title for people who don’t identify as gamers.

The simple premise of two people punching themselves unconscious is one that’s damn near universal. The idea has existed in many forms, including ancient gladiator clashes, professional boxing, and UFC – and is instantly recognizable, despite the hadokens, sonic booms, and other ridiculous super-powered attacks.

As a result, Street Fighter V is one of the rare esports games that receives significant mainstream airtime, with several high-profile tournaments being broadcast on Disney XD, ESPN 2, and TBS. It’s bolstered by the Capcom Pro Tour, a series with a cash pool that tops $600,000.

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Tekken 7

Tekken 7, like the main-line Tekken games that came before it, is a tale of fathers and sons attempting to murder each other

to purge the Mishima clan from the Devil Gene, a magical DNA bit that transforms certain people into hell spawn.

Though Tekken 7 is known for its single-player story, the game thrives as an esport due to its multiple fighting styles, 3D movement (which creates new avenues for attacking and dodging), and slow-motion effects that kick in when both fighters' life bars are low and they perform simultaneous close-quarter melee attacks. High-level play results in many *Kung Fu Theater*-like moments that you won't see in rival fighting games.

The Tekken World Tour is where the best pro players duke it out, for prizes totaling nearly $200,000.

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