Directions:

 1 – Highlight your confusion.

 2 – Demonstrate evidence of a close reading.

 3 – Write a 1+ page reflection.

VARSITY GAMERS: MAKING HISTORY AND DUMBFOUNDING PARENTS

Story by Jessica Ravitz, CNN

Chicago

They go by monikers like BoomBoom, xshockwave27x and ClydeBot. They calculate click speeds and work to build up their APM, or actions per minute. They don jerseys emblazoned with sponsorship logos while sitting in $400 top-of-the-line gaming chairs.

In a custom-built, tricked out room on the third floor of a downtown Chicago building, we catch a glimpse of college students making history. They are part of Robert Morris University Illinois' video game program -- the nation's first varsity eSports squad. For at least five hours a day, and in most cases plenty more, they are engrossed in League of Legends, their online game of choice.

Tap, tap, tap go their mouses and keyboards. Tap tap tap, as their knees impulsively shake up and down. Tap, tap, tap, as their screens blur with motion, explosions and messages that outsiders can't possibly comprehend. Tap, tap, tap, as they speak to their teammates through fancy headsets.

"We can close this game right now."

"Just wait. Just wait."

"Why is she alive!?"

"Help me out there."

"Oh, please don't. Please don't."

"Dude. What the f\*\*\*?"

"Are you going to die?"

"I got one. I got one."

"Oh my god, I so walked into that."

The dozen or so students we met last spring had earned scholarships to play video games while pursuing college degrees in subjects ranging from computer networking to business to design.

That this is happening surprises them, but it's even more astonishing to their parents, who may have once felt like broken records: Go outside! Be social. Why are you wasting your life?

For the generation that grew up on games like Pac-Man and Frogger, what does this twist of collegiate fate mean?

Ask these gamers during breaks in play, and they tell tales of parents whose reactions have run the gamut from total support to utter confusion.

One mother can't watch because the games make her dizzy; a second can't keep the name straight and calls the game "League of Nations." Another mom can hold her own in any competition, and a fourth carved out a weekend to play with her son so she could begin to understand. There are fathers who remain baffled, some who told their kids video games would never pay the bills and others who've admitted they're downright jealous.

As for their offspring? They smile wide and can't help but relish the turn of events, knowing they were onto something all along.

**Thinking bigger**

When he graduated from high school in the small town of Ava, Missouri, Andrew Casey had no idea where his life was going. He wasn't college bound like some people he knew and lived at home, finding work at a nearby Taco Bell.

He found meaning caring for his grandmother, who had moved in with his family as she was dying of cancer. He fed her, gave her medicines and lifted her up when she needed to move. It was the sort of compassion for others her son had always exhibited, says his mother, Kim Rolling. Just like the time he asked her to buy a special elementary school T-shirt for a classmate who couldn't afford one himself.

After his grandmother passed away, Andrew, 22, had nothing but time.

Some friends suggested he check out League of Legends. He'd been drawn to computer games since he was about 3, when he first got his hands on an old-school Nintendo and played Mario Bros. with his grandparents. He went online to see what his friends were talking about and was immediately sold.

"All my stress disappeared," he says.

His mother won't lie when she thinks about how much time he spent in front of computer screens.

"It did drive me crazy," Rolling says. "I was always telling him, 'You're never going to get anywhere playing video games.'"

Now, she's eating her words. Gladly.

It's this opportunity to play at RMU that got her son thinking about college and bigger possibilities. And now that he's there, he's thriving.

The same story gets told by other parents, including one who suspects her son flunked out of his first college because of video games. Now at RMU, where his playing is tied to a scholarship and students must maintain a benchmark GPA, she boasts that her son made the dean's list.

Some students on the squad haven't lasted. They weren't able to strike the right balance between academics and gaming. Or maybe the school wasn't the right fit. Or Chicago wasn't for them.

But for Rolling and other parents, the program has been a blessing, even if it hasn't been easy watching their kids leave the nest.

Her son went from a town with one traffic light to embracing big-city living. He's majoring in graphic arts, has a girlfriend and a circle of good friends. He's part of a team and, in that capacity, being true to himself.

"My role is to help people out," he says of his League of Legends position. "I'll do anything so my friends on my team don't die."

**Training with elite athlete dedication**

Some of the RMU gamers are gregarious ex-high school jocks who defy gamer stereotypes. Others struggle to make eye contact and seek solace in their keyboards. Most are somewhere in between.

They don't all feel comfortable calling what they do a sport, per se, or seeing themselves as athletes, but they certainly get the connection. They train with similar dedication. One guy who picked up the game about four years ago says he's clocked more than 4,700 hours of game time -- a commitment comparable to nearly 200 days of his life.

They study their competition and run practice drills ordered by coaches. They can't watch and copy LeBron James' moves, but they can analyze giants in the gaming world and learn new tricks. They marvel at the prowess of Lee Sang-hyeok, a 19-year-old Korean and the most famous LoL player who they all know as "Faker." Some of them, in preparing for tournaments, have consulted with a Finnish sports psychologist over Skype.

The intensity of focus can leave them wiped -- even more than sports ever did, says one gamer who played soccer competitively for 12 years before multiple concussions forced him to hang up his cleats.

League of Legends pits two teams of five players against one another, so they must learn to work competitively together. They step up as leaders, bolster the strengths of others and build up their patience. The game requires that they think ahead, always critically, and stay calm -- not letting frustrations derail their play. All these skills they take into the bigger world.

Some say they hope to turn pro, but plenty don't have those sorts of aspirations. Perhaps they'll work in the gaming world as designers or analysts. Others have their eyes on careers entirely unrelated, like finance.

**Being me**

The inaugural season at RMU started with two female gamers, but Rachel Zurawski, 20, is the only one left standing. On her graphics tablet and on the wall of the team's "arena," she shows off images of her favorite "champions" -- the characters gamers can choose to play in League of Legends. Among them is Thresh, a former jailer who collects the souls of enemies.

Her first foray into computers came with "Disney's Animated Storybook: The Lion King," a point-and-click video game. Then it was Blaster Pals for math, science and reading. Later it was all about Pokemon, which she still likes to play. By 12, she taught herself to code and do web design.

"I got bullied a ton growing up," she says of life in rural Woodstock, Illinois. "Gallons of bullying."

Her parents say there weren't a lot of kids to play with where they lived, especially in her age group.

In high school, she hit her stride after joining the cartooning club. But she still didn't like talking much to others and found comfort at her computer, often playing games until 2 a.m. She graduated amid what she calls an "identity crisis." She says she felt helpless, depressed and eventually bought a lizard "to give me purpose in life."

It was her dad, Ed Zurawski, who told her about the RMU program after hearing about it from his mother, who'd seen a story about it on TV. He asked Rachel, "Isn't this the game you're playing?"

Rachel's mother, Kim, who joined her husband in visiting RMU while we were there, looked around the arena where her daughter practices and said, "She's so made for this. This is her."

Her parents talk about how her confidence has grown. She's found her place and her people. Her adviser, Mary Russell, calls her "Razur" -- Rachel's gamer name -- and describes a young woman who has become more outgoing and is learning to live a balanced life between schoolwork and gaming.

"This is the ground floor of something that's going to be huge," her mother says. "Who'd have thought?"

Her father says he lost hours of his life staying up late playing games himself, and for that reason he cautioned his children about making the same mistakes.

"It was a different time," he says. "The time is now for them. ... I wish I could go back to college."

Rachel may be the only woman in the program for now, but she says she feels like one of the guys.

"I get to be me and express myself as I am," she says. "Here, everyone's weird."

**Surging popularity**

One need only look at the numbers to see how popular League of Legends is. The last time figures were crunched by developer and publisher Riot Games, 67 million people played each month, 27 million played each day and up to 7.5 million played at any one time. That was at the start of 2014.

More people watched the League of Legends world championship finals that year than they did Game 7 of the World Series or the last game of the NBA Finals, according to ESPN.

RMU emerged as the first varsity team in the United States. But the University of Pikeville in Kentucky is following suit, offering its own gaming scholarships come fall, and numerous other schools have reached out to RMU to explore developing varsity eSports programs. RMU itself is expanding its program in the fall to include two more games: Dota 2 and Hearthstone.

The formal programs, however, only tell a small part of the story. A Riot Games spokesman says more than 1,600 club teams from more than 600 schools across the United States and Canada competed this year.

Four teams made it to the North American Collegiate Championship finals in Los Angeles in May. One was from RMU. But a team from the University of British Columbia took the title.

**Gaming for growth -- and healing**

Early in his junior year of high school, Blake Soberanis was transported by chopper from an emergency room in Ukiah, California, to a children's hospital in Oakland, where he was diagnosed with a brain condition that's often fatal.

He had meningoencephalitis, an infection or inflammation of both the brain and the meninges, the lining of the brain and spinal cord.

That first week he was in the ICU, his mother, Karen Adair, says she was briefed on "how to take care of a vegetable." If he did survive, she was told, he would have brain damage.

Somehow, her son pulled through, although he faced hurdles in his recovery. Among his challenges: He'd lost his hand-eye coordination. As she coached him to use a fork again, she also pulled out her laptop.

While some parents may have shunned video games, Adair played them with her three sons. She used her computer to teach them the basics as they were growing up.

She taught Blake to read using pop-up bubbles that appeared in Super Mario 64. She turned to the computer again to help teach him years later when she feared she might lose him.

To this day, she says, Blake, 22, credits gaming with helping him heal. And he talks about his mom and her League of Legends acumen with wonder.

"At first, she was kind of intimidated by the game," he says. "But then she got it really fast. It was really cool to see. ... She's actually higher ranked than some of the players here at RMU, which I think is fantastic."

Blake was on that RMU team of five that made it to the finals in May.

"It was really hard to watch," says Adair, who was in Los Angeles for the games. "Not so much that they lost, but seeing how crushed they were."

She says the loss threw her son, that he had his heart set on doing better than they did. After one year at RMU, she adds, Blake will not return. Nor will a handful of his teammates, including at least a couple who are going pro.

But she's not concerned about her son and knows he'll figure life out. He's armed with analytic and strategic skills he mastered playing games -- which have already paid off for him. Blake recently landed his "dream job," his mother says. He's moving to Los Angeles to work for Riot Games as a game tester and is "indescribably happy and excited to get to work." And she couldn't be more proud.

"One of the things I would love to do is help parents find a positive way to integrate games into their families," she says. "Games are not going anywhere."

Possible response questions:

* What conclusions can one draw about the changing nature American society based on the article?
* What skills and abilities of students should be of greatest concerns to schools and colleges?
* Choose a passage from the article and give a response.