Scott Simpson, MBA ’22, couldn’t be happier with the capstone 596 project that he embarked on two years ago with three other cohort members of Gustavson’s custom MBA program for TELUS (MBA for TELUS). Not only does the outcome of the project—the TELUS Esports affiliate program, which was launched by the telecom giant in February—have the potential to change the way the company communicates with gamers, it also aims to combat bullying, racism and sexism in the gaming community.

Simpson, who is director, business development at TELUS, hadn’t exactly planned to do an MBA at that particular time in his life. In fact, had he not sought a promotion at TELUS and been shot down, the capstone project would never have come about. In 2008, after graduating from The University of British Columbia with a business administration degree, Simpson joined TELUS and methodically worked his way up the corporate ladder—from business analyst to manager of a marketing team. Eager to continue his upward trajectory, Simpson approached his manager to discuss his next advancement. “You need to be more holistic in your thinking, and how it impacts the rest of the organization.”

A somewhat dejected but undeterred Simpson wondered how to think “holistically” about a company that is 65,600 plus people strong and spans more than 20 countries. After some inward contemplation and research, he landed on the perfect solution: as a TELUS representative, he would apply to earn the custom MBA that TELUS and UVic partnered to create in 2015. “I had always wanted to get my MBA, but I didn’t do it immediately after I graduated because I wanted to get work experience,” Simpson recalls. And so he found himself back in the classroom, only this time with 18 fellow high-performing TELUS employees and future leaders. Eventually, with Andy Balser, vice president at TELUS as their VP sponsor, Simpson and teammates Amit Sharma, Madeline Baker and Emily McGlenen began brainstorming for their capstone project. Many possibilities were entertained, including brief consideration of gaming’s dark cousin, gambling. But this was quickly rejected. “Not quite on brand for us,” Simpson laughs. “However, since we were getting deep into hosting the greater TELUS Esports Series, in which more than 800 teams compete for over $50,000 in prizes, we thought we might just have something here.”

The team quickly developed the TELUS Esports affiliate program. The premise was simple: the program would reward gamers for referrals to TELUS service. “We added fun to it by gamifying the experience and meaningfully connecting to the gaming market, incorporating everything that TELUS is.” Working with underrepresented groups in the field, most notably female gamers, the team also took on the task of trying to combat bullying, racism and sexism in the gaming community by carefully vetting the gamers TELUS accepts into the program. “We want to build people up on the online community who have the right message, who will make the community a better place,” Simpson says.

A rigorous approval process was developed that involves sifting through all the potential gamers/partners’ social media, as well as a multi-level list of checks and balances. Although complex, the process did not deter the type of gamers TELUS wanted to attract—in fact, 230 applications were filed during the February 2022 launch week alone.

Simpson says the program and its applicants will be assessed in the next six, 12, 18 and 24 months. “It will be really exciting to further the reach of women in gaming, for example. Right now, only about four per cent of the protagonists in games are female.” Rather than target gamers who already have three million followers, the program targets those building influencers with around 200 followers. “We want to help them as a sponsor to get their career to the next level. We also want to help lessen the stigma associated with gaming and addiction. There’s a lot of good that can come from gaming,” says Simpson. Although he himself isn’t a gamer, Simpson knows of what he speaks. His nine-year-old daughter was diagnosed with dyslexia and struggled with reading, but thanks to playing Minecraft, Roblox and other games that greatly developed her focus, she now reads to him and consistently ace’s her weekly spelling tests. “We don’t owe it all to gaming, but if it’s supervised by parents, there are a lot of positives,” he says.

Simpson admits that he initially went into the MBA program with a cavalier attitude: “Almost a ‘my way or the highway’ attitude. Plus, I was probably lacking a lot of the hard skills, such as the legal side of things, accounting, and math-based and numbers-based learning.” But today he has a solid understanding of how those elements impact TELUS’s business as a whole. In short, he has gained that holistic view of the company he was after.

Another positive outcome for Simpson’s MBA team is a marketing award for the TELUS Esports affiliate program. Plus, Simpson is reaching the finish line for his MBA. But as satisfying as these wins are, Simpson, who convocated with his cohort mates in June 2022, says he has gained a much longer-term sense of satisfaction—that of having forged business bonds with classmates he knows will last a lifetime.