

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Jeff Rubin:

You can take a very business business-centric approach to Esports. You can take a communication centric, such as shoutcasting to Esports. You can take a technical approach to Esports, such as game development. You could take a design-centric approach such as computer graphics, animation. We can look at Esports in the metaverse. Now we're dealing with VR in AR. There's not a mold that says when you graduate with this degree, this is where you're going to end up. I think it's quite the opposite, and that's why it was so important that we create those tracks is to allow the students some flexibility to choose the path that makes the most sense for them.

John Boccacino:

Starting in the fall of 2024, Syracuse is offering a new, first of its kind degree program that's focused on Esports. The program, Esports Communications and Management will be offered jointly by both the Newhouse School and the Falk College. And it will include three tracks, Esports Business and Management, Esports Communications and Esports Media and Design. Our guest today played an instrumental role in getting this program off the ground. His name is Jeff Rubin, Special Advisor to Chancellor Syverud on Esports and Digital Transformation. Jeff, thanks for making the time to join us today.

Jeff Rubin:

Thanks for having me, John.

John Boccacino:

This is exciting. I tell you, it really seems like it wasn't that long ago that Esports occupied this dark corner in society, and now we're bringing it mainstream and it's been really bursting at the seams here on campus for the last couple of years. How does it feel to have this program out there in the news public?

Jeff Rubin:

It really, it's unbelievable. And to think how quickly this happened, there are folks who told me, you want to start a new major on campus is going to be two, three. I heard as long as four, as many as four years that it would take to bring a new major on campus. But this is really a testament to, I think, how popular Esports has become and how many folks wanted to... Or who saw the opportunity and said, there's really something here. And so it wasn't me, it was a group of deans and faculty and staff working together and got this accomplished.

John Boccacino:

Give our audience a little background into the foundational framework. What was already in place on campus that made up move like this possible?

Jeff Rubin:

Esports or gaming was trickled throughout the university in various areas. VPA has a computer gaming minor. Our university college or College of Professional Studies has a program in Esports. We've got Chris Hansen out of Arts and Sciences who teaches course on Esports, one along with Olivia Stomski from Newhouse. We have Sport Management in Falk who is touching on various aspects of Esports. So it was all out there in various pieces, but then you combine that with alumni who were constantly reaching out saying, who can we hire? We're looking for more talent. These are alumni that are working with Esports companies. And you combine that with Microsoft, who, as you know is trying to complete the 69 billion acquisition of Activision and Blizzard, Microsoft's largest acquisition in the history, which is pretty incredible. And that's in Esports. So when you take all these pieces together, you realize that we had more than a foundation. We had courses, we had people, we had alumni, we have potential corporate partners out there. And so to me it was, wow, how do we just put these pieces together to form the puzzle?

John Boccacino:

We recognize the value of a degree for our students, and we always try to offer our students with that unique first class educational opportunities that will parlay into real world job experiences. How do you think this Esports program is going to position us as a leader when it comes to this blossoming industry?

Jeff Rubin:

Esports, like any... Esports is an industry, as you said, just like sports. And so it's not that you graduate with a degree in Sport Management and you just, you're pigeonholed into one area. And Esports is similar to that in that you can take a very business centric approach to Esports. You can take a communication centric, such as shoutcasting to Esports. You can take a technical approach to Esports, such as game development. You could take a design-centric approach such as computer graphics, animation. We can look at Esports in the Metaverse now we're dealing with VR in AR.

And of course we have some of our own students who are influencers themselves who are looking to build their brand and continue building their brand on platforms such as YouTube or Twitch. And so there's not a mold that says when you graduate with this degree, this is where you're going to end up. I think it's quite the opposite, and that's why you mentioned the tracks, and why it was so important that we create those tracks is to allow the students some flexibility to choose the path that makes the most sense for them, and then come out with a degree that from business to tech, there's an opportunity for them.

John Boccacino:

And what kind of benchmarking and research went into the thought processes that eventually led to those three tracks that encompass this program.

Jeff Rubin:

So we had both internal and external factors that contributed to this. So on the internal side, originally we spoke to every dean, or I spoke to every dean on campus and every dean then brought in at least one representative as part of this subcommittee that was exploring this. Now, quickly it became apparent that there were some schools that this wasn't a perfect fit for, and others which were along for the ride. And then in addition, we did an external study with a third party where they benchmarked Esports and what was going on across the nation at other universities. We are the first R1 institution, so a top level research institution to have an Esports major. And that became apparent through this research that we would be, had this gone through and gotten approved as it did.

But we did look at other programs across the country that had minors that offered classes, that were competing at a club level, that were competing at a varsity level. So that was some of that third party research. And then we brought in some consultants to help us as well to think about how do we, not just the academic piece is important, but how do we make sure we also have the facilities and the labs to support the extracurricular side of Esports or a living learning lab, if you will, within an Esports.

John Boccacino:

Playing into that comment right there, I know that the Barnes Center has a phenomenal Esports lab and Esports center. What else will be added as far as resources and facilities to really fulfill the vision of this program?

Jeff Rubin:

So in the Barnes Center today, I mean, which is awesome. So I'm a Syracuse grad, graduated many decades ago. We didn't have the Barnes Center, but if you go into the Barnes Center and you go into the Esports room, it's awesome. There's 36 high-end gaming consoles on lightning fast internet connections. They have Xbox Xs, they have PlayStation fives with ginormous flat screen televisions. They have a streaming booth that that's in there, where students, we kind of talked about that a minute ago. Where they can be an influencer and there's lights and cameras and a mixer and a green screen and they can do their thing. But that room, it's 36 high-end computers. And while that sounds great the first time I said it, when you think of the population of our undergraduates, that's not enough. And so we realized that now when we go to add a major, that's only going to put more pressure.

And some of what we were hearing wasn't, that just wasn't enough. That space is typically filled. But it was also that we have a club on campus, which also has a competitive component to it. We have gamers who are playing competitively locally, nationally, and internationally, and they can't use that room to compete, because there's other folks in there playing with their friends. And also there was no place for these clubs to train to practice. So we took all of this feedback from our students, as well as from the third parties, and looked at what other folks were doing, and we said, we need at least two more spaces. And so we're going to be building out a space in the Schine Student Center, kind of a showcase space similar to what's in Barnes. It'll be a recreational space with additional consoles and additional Xboxes and PlayStations, but also more getting into virtual reality space simulation, racing pods.

And then you get yourself over to Marley. So our newly acquired Marley building near Crouse Hinds Hall. And in that space, we're also going to do everything I just said, plus there's going to be a competition space. And with that competition space comes an area for spectator seating, which is, as you look at Esports, people are watching Esports and being entertained the same way they watch traditional sports. And so we now have, with these three spaces, a place for recreational use as well as a place for our teams to practice, and as well as a place for our teams to compete and our students to have fans watch them compete.

John Boccacino:

It really seems like it's going to, any program we add, it's going to enhance the holistic development of the student experience here on campus. What do you think are some of the opportunities that this is going to create for both students? And then also faculty and staff too, what are some ways that this is going to really just take our campus to the next level?

Jeff Rubin:

Look, I think there's tremendous research opportunities in this space. So as much as we talk about how great Esports are, there's also a lot of discrimination, bias, Esports trend more towards male than female. And so when we look along the lines of gender equity, racial equity, these are areas where the ethics that go along with Esports, the accessibility factors that go along with Esports, meaning that allowing anybody to play regardless of cognitive or physical limitations. These are areas where I think Syracuse University is going to excel.

You know how important DEIA is to Syracuse University. And I think this now allows us to take our DEIA principles and attach them to what's going on in the Esports world, which is maybe a way that's going to resonate more than others to our students. Because 90, I think I saw says 97, 98% of students, or of kids the age of 13 to 17 year olds are playing video games. And so this is something that may resonate with them more than maybe something else we're trying to do. And at the same time, give our faculty an opportunity to go do, or continue to do some world-class research in these areas.

John Boccacino:

You mentioned earlier that you kind of initially were greeted with a little bit of pushback just as far as the speed and how long it would take to get this off the ground. Let's kind of pull back the curtain. Who gets some credit for really helping advance this down the pike to make it a reality a lot faster than I think you thought it might have been possible.

Jeff Rubin:

It was the team... It was to the subcommittee that I talked about, which Dean Murphy, Dean Lodato, their leadership and vision because was... One thing we haven't talked about, John, is that this is the first major on campus that is dually owned. It's not a dual major. It is a dually owned major, and it doesn't exist. So you needed two strong leaders willing to be able to say, let's be innovative, let's try something new. And they needed to have that leadership to convince, if that's the right word, their faculty that this was the right decision. Because they needed their faculty be on board. Let's understand the process curriculum needs to go through is starting... If the deans like this, or oftentimes it's actually the faculty that bring this through, then it's got to go through curriculum committees within these schools, then it's got to go before their entire faculty, then it has to go to the University Senate, then it has to go to New York State Department of Education. There's a lot of hoops.

So that leadership by the Deans was critical, but I think it's because of the trust those Deans had on the folks on the subcommittee, Olivia Stomski, Michael Veley, Gina Pauline were incredible, Chris Hansen. They were trusted and believable. So then I think, once you get it past the school level, now you look at the leadership from our Provost and our Chancellor. So Provost Ritter and Chancellor Syverud both backed this major. They both thought this was an area that was important for the university to grow in. That matters, to have their vote of confidence. They can't push it through the University Senate, but to have their vote of confidence in the process and in what we were doing helped tremendously. And then it was a package where we then took this whole package, we sent it off to New York state. And to be honest there, I think we were all a little surprised at how quick we got approval.

John Boccacino:

It's really commendable that the teamwork, the collaboration, and again, the fact that we are the first R1 research institution to add this type of program is just another example of the unique offerings and the ways we make a difference in the lives of our students, our faculty, and our staff. And it's really been remarkable, Jeff, because we kind of joked a little bit earlier about Esports wasn't really in the mainstream when we were going to college back in the dark ages. It's really... For both of us, of course,

we've been out of school for quite some time. When did you start to see, from a casual perspective, this Esports rise where it crept from being not mainstream to being so prevalent?

Jeff Rubin:

Yeah, it's a fair question. And I can't say a specific date or time. I think it's been over the last decade that you've watched this movement. And perhaps it's me watching my children grow up. So I have two teenage sons, and watching them grow up in a way that I didn't. So I grew up with an Atari and an Nintendo and eventually upgraded to a Sega. And I also went outside and I played traditional sports. And I watched my kids who had such a different experience in that they weren't even excited to watch live traditional sports, but they were very excited to watch Esports, which to this day still doesn't resonate with my brain of watching folks on Twitch or YouTube play Esports, but it resonates with them. And then I'd watch them play these games the same way I might have played a pickup basketball game. It takes different skills, both mentally and physically, to be able to play, but it's a generational change. And I think when I saw that, to me it was, huh, it's not that my kids are abnormal. This is what they're doing. Now, you add a global pandemic, which pushes everyone into their homes where we can't go play traditional sports where we're afraid to be with our next door neighbor. Well, Esports is just, what a better way. They're socializing. It's their way of socializing. And while maybe folks in my generation or your generation, or our generation, I'm going to put us in the same group here, John.

John Boccacino:

You can do that. We're close in age, I feel like.

Jeff Rubin:

So the folks that maybe we don't fully get it, the same way the generation before us didn't truly get us right. And so I think to me that was it is I was seeing it firsthand. And then more on the business side of what I do, I was witnessing it that we had brands and sponsors that were interested in investing in Esports. You were beginning to see universities across the country promote their Esport teams from club to varsity. So you were beginning to see these shifts happen, which says, wow, if all this is going on externally, well then internally on campus, we better pay attention. And in my mind, capitalize on an opportunity.

John Boccacino:

Now with the program starting to take students in the fall of 2024, what kind of goals do we have in the initial stages for this new program?

Jeff Rubin:

So we're going to start off small, John. And so right now we're in the process of hiring our Executive Director of the Esports program. And so that that's happening as we speak that process. And then over this coming academic year, the 23/24 academic year, that executive director will help form the faculty, make sure that the classes that we propose are the right classes, the advising team, the admissions, et cetera. So when the class of '24 comes in, we are ready to go.

Now we anticipate accepting a smaller class, around 30 students in the fall of '24 to meet our mark, or to meet our goal. That's going to allow us to grow this, I think at the right speed where we're not going to go too large. And I think a similar path, John, to what our sports analytics program did. Sports analytics started off small within Falk, said that they were going to add about five people a year over

four years, but by year two, the growth was hockey stick. And so look, we've got to be careful for that. We got to make sure we can support this, but I believe the demand is going to be hockey stick growth, and then we will see what we're comfortable doing. But we're going to start off with 30, evaluate and grow from there.

John Boccacino:

It's really exciting. Anytime you can add an innovative and game changing major program like this, not to make a pun with game changing and Esports, but it's it. It's so cool because these are opportunities that weren't available to you and me when we were undergraduates studying at Syracuse. And the next generation, we're always talking about ways to make that student experience better for the next generation. I can hardly think of a better example than adding a cutting edge program like this. Jeff, I want to thank you for the expertise you've shared here on the podcast today, for taking us inside the room as to what it took to get this program off the ground. Keep up the great work and continued success.

Jeff Rubin:

Thank you so much, John. Thanks for having me today.

Olivia Stomski:

We are so excited to have the opportunity to have these hands-on experiences for our students so that when that they leave here, they have had actual industry. And that's what we are working towards for Esports as well. The idea of connecting our students with industry leaders and utilizing our alums for that, looking at how we're able to create benchmark trips for our students so that they have an opportunity to not only network, but to learn from industry leaders within Esports. And so, really the idea of what we're doing is that it can be anything we want it to be. If our students can think of it, or we as faculty and leaders can think of it, why not try it if it gives our students an opportunity to get that hands-on experiential learning, I think that's really what sets it apart.

John Boccacino:

We are back on the Cuse Conversations Podcast, and we are thrilled to welcome on. Olivia Stomski, the professor of Practice In Television, Radio, and Film in the Newhouse school. She's also the Director of the Newhouse Sports Media Center and played an integral role in launching this new Esports degree program. Olivia, thanks. Making the time to join us.

Olivia Stomski:

Thanks for having me. This is an exciting topic to talk about.

John Boccacino:

Isn't it? There's been so much momentum building towards this, and I know you have a lot of history with Esports, you and Chris Hansen co-taught a great course, Esports And Media that's been around since 2018. We're going to hear from Chris coming up later on in this episode, but give our audience your perspective. Why was the time perfect to add this program now?

Olivia Stomski:

Yeah, so you're right. I have been working with Esports here on campus really since the year that I got here in 2018. The late Dean Lorraine Branham was such a visionary that she wanted to make sure that as a Newhouse Sports Media Center grew, and as our curriculum grew around sports here in Newhouse, that Esports was a part of that. And so she really challenged me to research, to jump into the world a little bit more than I even had been in the past and figure out what our students needed to know and learn about the industry. So Chris and I did create the Esports media class, and it's been absolute honor to work with Chris. He is just brilliant and the students love him, and his experience has been awesome. So it's been great to be a part of.

But as the process really started from there, it was the idea of what other classes, courses, curriculum, could we create here on campus, not just in Newhouse, but across campus, whether that be in Falk, the I School, VPA, what did we want to do? Would this be a minor? Was this, how were we going to do this? So, like anything else, it just has to be the right time in the right place. And so when the Chancellor's Office, and the Provost came to us to investigate whether or not this was an avenue that the university wanted to really go down, our research showed that it was exactly the right time. As the industry is growing, there is not an R1 university with this kind of program right now. And I think the message it sends not only to our students, but to the industry, is we're going to invest in this. We're going to create experts in Esports. We have three different tracks I'm sure we'll get into. And it just was the right time, so we're excited.

John Boccacino:

Just how involved was this process of researching industry trends, but also the needs and wants of our students that led to the addition of the program?

Olivia Stomski:

Well, it took up about two years of my life. And all of us on the committee, it was the idea of if we were going to do this, we needed to do it right, and we were willing to do that. So we had an awesome committee, and as you well know that the program will be 50/50 with Falk and Newhouse. So our research was not just at other universities and what they were doing, which it did entail a lot of that, but also the industry and what parts of the industry were growing? What were the skills that a lot of people were looking for in this industry? How could we develop those skills? And so that process took some time, and it took a lot of attention to what we wanted our program to be.

So here at Newhouse, we created 11 new courses, and it was imperative that we do that and we invest that time. And so there was a lot of figuring out, more than anything, how can we serve our students? And so that was the most important thing. How can we be prepared for our students to succeed in Esports? And how can we prepare them to have the skills, some transferrable to other industries, that would help them to be career ready when they left here? And so it was all encompassing. For a few months, we all kind of ate and slept and breathed Esports. You would go to a meeting and on my calendar would just say Esports meeting. And I would think to myself, which meeting is this? Until I showed up, I wasn't really sure. Once I figured out who was in the room, I was like, oh, okay, we're talking facilities today. Okay, got it. Curriculum today. Okay, good. Okay. Student experience. Okay, that's great too. So all of this is important for us to have the program that we want.

John Boccacino:

And you mentioned earlier the three different tracks, and we heard from Jeff Rubin giving his perspective on it. From your side of the equation, with your industry knowledge and expertise, what

made the three tracks, again, their Esports Business and Management, Esports Communications and Esports Media and Design, why did those stand out as the right tracks to pursue with this program?

Olivia Stomski:

Well, we took a deep dive into the industry itself. What areas within the industry were thriving? Who was hiring and who were they hiring? And so we wanted to make sure that we were best preparing experts in these industries. And so the one thing I will say is that we learned very quickly that storytelling within Esports and within gaming is growing. And the importance of storytelling is growing as well. We're seeing that. And so that there's an underlying aspect of storytelling in a lot of the classes here at Newhouse.

And so it was a long-drawn-out process to come up with these three tracks, but our research showed that this is where the jobs are, this is where the industry is going. We really felt that within these tracks, there were several other career paths that would make sense for our students when they left here with this set of skills. And so that was really where we wanted to make sure we were offering what students wanted. It's not just Esports, we're not majoring and playing video games, John, that's not what we're doing. But we wanted to make sure that our students were prepared for the aspects of the industry that are really starting to grow, but most importantly, are hiring now.

John Boccacino:

And we've seen a lot of these interdisciplinary studies and concentrations come out of Syracuse, with partnerships across different schools and colleges. Just how special is it going to be for a student that enrolls in the fall of '24 knowing that they're going to have access to Falk, they're going to have access to Newhouse and the I School and Arts and Sciences. This is such a cross collaboration.

Olivia Stomski:

It really is. I always tell the story that when I got here, I thought silos were on farms. I didn't understand the idea of working in silos. I didn't even know the term literally. And so, one of the first things I did was to go over to Falk and say, hey, anyone want to build something with me? And I got really lucky. Michael Feeley and Gina Pauline and Rick Burton said, hey, I do do that. We have so many of the same students and our students want to cross over. We want to make sure that we're giving our students a wide variety of courses, and the freedom to learn, and not just put them in a box. And so there is room in this curriculum for open electives, which means students have the freedom to take classes across campus. And those classes and those skills are so important for their careers, but also is what sets apart our students here at SU is that they have the opportunity to learn more than just what their one craft is.

And so it's an honor. There aren't names bigger than Falk and Newhouse, really, that is an awesome thing to be able to walk off campus with both those names in your back pocket. But more than that, it's all about the people. It's about the faculty day of access to, the staff, they have access to the facilities. And it's important for our Syracuse University students to feel like they can go anywhere on campus and be allowed to learn, ask questions, be curious, but also create a skillset that's uniquely theirs, be based on what classes they've taken.

John Boccacino:

With regards to focusing on the student success piece of it, regardless of what the degree program is, we really pride ourselves on setting our students up for success, both when they're on campus and once



they graduate. What are some of the hands-on experiences that students in the Esports degree program will be able to take advantage of to then reach those post-graduation goals?

Olivia Stomski:

So one of the things that I'm most excited about is the opportunity to host large events here on campus, to host large in-person Esports competitions. And why that makes me so excited is the number of students in different parts of the major that will be able to be involved. So not only is there a competition that will involve our Esports teams and the competitors, but we're looking at the production, the promotion of it, the actual event itself, and managing that event, the budget of that event, the camera operators that will be involved, the social media that will be involved, our students shoutcasting and reporting on this event. And so we are so excited to have the opportunity to have these hands-on experiences for our students so that when they leave here, they have had actual industry.

We often say that when there's a job description that says a minimum of three to five years experience, Newhouse takes care of that for you. You leave Newhouse with three to five years experience. And that's what we are working towards for Esports as well. And Falk does that as well. The idea of connecting our students with industry leaders and utilizing our alums for that, looking at how we're able to create benchmark trips for our students so that they have an opportunity to not only network, but to learn from industry leaders within Esports. And so really the idea of what we're doing is that it can be anything we want it to be. If our students can think of it, or we as faculty and leaders can think of it, why not try it if it gives our students an opportunity to get that hands-on experiential learning, I think that's really what sets it apart.

John Boccacino:

And it's nothing different from if you're watching a basketball or a football game in the Dome with the Newhouse Sports Media Center. You all are working with the ACC network or whatever carrier is broadcasting the game to give the students on campus those experiences. But doesn't, this wasn't always the case where Esports would draw national attention, media attention. Can you think back to when this started to see the light as far as wanting to broadcast and give the attention to Esports that we do to say football or other sports?

Olivia Stomski:

Yeah, I mean, I think it's been a slow burn, but not everything that happened during the pandemic was bad. And I think that the pandemic definitely had a role in the popularity or the push towards Esports. Traditional sports fans didn't have sports to watch. And so I've been teaching this class since 2018, and I would have friends that work in the industry call me and say, I don't know if what I'm watching is real or not. I'm watching a car race and it's on ESPN, but I think it might not be real. And it's like, okay, now you're starting to understand what is out there. And so I think that more than anything, the big push was probably during the pandemic, but I say that and there's millions of Esports competitors and fans that are like, no, it happened well before that. And so I think, if anything, the pandemic helped those that weren't paying attention pay attention.

John Boccacino:

And when you mentioned broadcast storytelling is such a huge part of taking you inside the arena to get to know these athletes. What are some of the ways you envision the Esports program and our students

telling those stories? What are the platforms they might be capitalizing on? I'm sure there's things we aren't even thinking of now with how ever-evolving this industry is.

Olivia Stomski:

Well, I think there's a lot of opportunity here, not only for us to look at Esports as another avenue for journalism, for production. But more than that, the storytelling really happens within games. And the idea, I think that we need to not neglect here is that games have really changed over the last few years as we're starting to take the spectator into account for what we're doing. It's not just the person playing, it's the spectators as well. And we're seeing that we, as humans, we're hungry for stories. We want a backstory, who is this character? And what we're able to do through gaming and through Esports is create that story ourselves as fans or as operators of this game. So you can choose who your character is, you can choose where they go, you can choose how they operate, and who they talk to and what they're doing and all of this.

So we're creating these stories on every level, not only as content creators, but as users of these interfaces. And so a lot of our classes are going to be centralized around that. Understanding that virtual production, understanding how we can create stories, levels within games themselves to not only utilize gaming as instruction, but also a chance for us to engage more as users and as spectators within that. So this is a whole school full of storytellers. You know that we love it and we love to listen to stories. We love to tell our stories. Most importantly, we love to tell other people's stories, those that can't tell their own. And Esports is just another avenue for us to do that.

John Boccacino:

There's also big money to be made in Esports too, which I think was a little confusing for me at first as to how is there revenue? But you think about it, these are people that can market themselves. How do you think that's going to play into this new degree program too, almost like a name, image and likeness and marketing? How is that going to play out with the program?

Olivia Stomski:

Well, I will tell you that one of the first meetings when we decided to even teach an Esports class, I had someone ask me, so when I tell my child that they're not going to become a millionaire playing video games, am I lying to them? And everyone in the room laughed and I said, you might be. You might be lying to them. I don't know. And so there is a lot of money to be made, and you're right, in some cases it is similar to NIL in looking at how do we build our own brands? Who do we want to be, and what kind of content do we want to create? We're always making those decisions, and we're thinking about that as storytellers. We're thinking about that as journalists, were thinking about that as producers and content creators. And there's so many unanswered questions.

I had a student ask me a few years ago, do Esports athletes have agents? Well, they do. So thinking about that, well, maybe I want to be an agent. Maybe I want to own a league. Maybe I want to create a league, maybe I want to own my own team. These are all things that our students are navigating with the rest of the world. If we think that it's an opportunity, then it might be. And so I think it's important for our students to learn all about that. And that's one of the great things about this connection with Falk, because we're able to take that storyteller and that communicator, and we're mixing it with that business and the analytics there. So we're able to connect the two for these students to finish with this well-rounded experience in education. And that I think will only be helpful for them as they're building their own brands, those that choose to do that.

John Boccacino:

Don't worry about 30, 40 years ago, I was told the same thing by my folks that there was not money to be made playing video games. But that seems like it really, like you said, has changed dramatically. From what you've witnessed, and I know that you aren't a game designer, for example, but you have your hands and your fingers on the pulse of Esports. Is it possible to quantify just how much growth this area and this industry has experienced?

Olivia Stomski:

Most importantly, we need to look at how much the culture of Esports in our stereotypes around Esports and gaming has changed. So we want to look at who are the sponsors? Who are the biggest promoters within Esports, and who are the people that are the targeting, who's the target market? And we're seeing that, in fact, the education is quite high in those that identify as gamers, therefore the income is quite high and their buying possibilities are quite high. So this is all growing, and it's important for our students to understand where the money comes from, and who it goes to and how that works. We teach that in the Esports and Media class.

And so we're seeing it not quite double in size and in the amount of money that is actually going into the industry, but for the first few years, it nearly did double, and it's growing at quite a quick and rapid pace, partially due to the number of platforms that our students, but young people have access to how much they are going to these events in person, creating these large arenas full of fans. And so it's growing. We're seeing it grow exponentially, but then also, where will it go? Any other newer industry, it has to start somewhere. There was a Super Bowl One, and we're seeing so many of the firsts still within Esports that it's hard to say exactly where it is going, but it has been moving at such a rapid pace that we don't see it slowing down.

John Boccacino:

It's reassuring too, to know that Syracuse University is going to be at the forefront, again as the first R1 research institution to add an Esports degree program. It's been a pleasure and an honor having on Olivia Stomski, the Professor of Practice in Television, Radio, and Film in the Newhouse School, she also directs the Newhouse Sports Media Center, giving our students hands-on experiences that are going to branch out-and-out of the Esports realm as well. Olivia, thank you for the time and keep up the great work.

Olivia Stomski:

Great, thank you.

Chris Hanson:

I've been involved with thinking about the major since before Esports were even a thing on campus. I see it as sort of a natural extension, and part of the growth of gaming communities on campus and the sport of more courses in gaming, but also supporting students who are interested in gaming and Esports in general.

John Boccacino:

Chris Hanson, the Associate Professor of English in the College of Arts and Sciences, who also serves as the faculty advisor for the University's gaming club and the Esports club, and he played a large integral

role in developing the coursework for this new Esports degree program. What has your involvement been with getting this Esports degree program up and running?

Chris Hanson:

So as you're probably aware, a number of years ago, about five years ago or so, Professor Stomski and I started teaching an Esports and Media class, we were co-teaching this class in Newhouse, and that sort of stemmed from both of our interest in Esports and the student interest in learning more about Esports, and the sort of rapidly expanding world of Esports. So we had been teaching that class, and then Professor Stomski and I had sort of been advocating for that there should be some sort of curricular development around Esports, given how much interest there was, and it seemed like a really cool opportunity for the university. And certainly something which students are very interested in and passionate about. And we were sort of saying to whoever would listen that we think there should be more courses around Esports. And Professor Gina Pauline in Sport Management in Falk was leading a... We were doing curricular design under her guidance and leadership for thinking about what an Esports minor might look like.

And then it said it became apparent after the success of the Esports room in the Barnes Center. To back up even further, I had been teaching courses on games at SU for a number of years, and there's a computer gaming minor as well at SU in VPA in Visual Performing Arts in the department, which is now called Film and Media Arts. But this minor, students, when they took my games classes, said they were really interested in taking this minor, but unfortunately, some of the courses for the minor weren't being offered, and the minor hadn't really been updated. And so I worked with the folks in Film and Media Arts, in Computer Art and Animation to get this minor going and supported again. And as part of that, students were interested in forming a gaming club. The students in my classes said, I came to SU to try to do this gaming minor, I'm really interested in studying gaming, and they're also interested in building communities around people who are interested in playing games.

So they said, there's not a gaming club. And I said, well, you should start one. Let's start an RSO. So they started an RSO for gaming, and I still serve as the faculty advisor for that. And as part of that, we were looking at, started talking to people in IT and different parts of the administration about where places we might be able to build a community space, a gaming space for students. So we looked at a number of different locations as part of that, and it's when Esports started to become popular and get on the register of more and more people that we thought, well, this could be an Esports space. And so that evolved from a sort of community gaming space to an Esports room, and that suddenly took off. And the idea to put it in the Barnes Center came forth, and that seemed like a really logical place to put it, given the update to the Barnes Center that was taking place.

And then students approached about starting an Esports RSO, and they talked about linking with the gaming RSO, but decided ultimately to do their own RSO. And so I helped and served as the faculty advisor for that when they started off. Explosive growth of the Esports RSO and how popular the Esports has become with students and popularity of the Esports room in the Barnes Center. To use the Field of Dream things, it's like they built it and now students have come in droves. They've just like... It's been extremely popular.

And all of that, I think helped to serve as a clear sign that there was... It was like Professor Stomski, Professor Pauline and I and others, Professor Rick Burton in Sport Management, who also teaches a class in Esports have been advocating for thinking about how to grow this at the university. And then it's like, well, let's maybe make a major around Esports. So then that transformed into, there was a curriculum committee that was created for creating the major. And that a lot of that work took place in,

let's see, last year. So that would be in 2022, about trying to design this new major and what it might look like.

And it was decided that it would be split between Falk and Newhouse. So sorting out how that would fit within existing courses, but also what new coursework might be offered to support this major. So I see it as sort of a natural extension and part of the growth of gaming communities on campus and the sport of more courses in gaming, but also supporting students who are interested in gaming and Esports in general.

John Boccacino:

When did the Esports RSO become established on this campus? And what has the growth been in membership, in participation and the overall impact of that organization on campus?

Chris Hanson:

When I say the sort of explosive growth of it, I believe that it went from being basically one of the newest RSOs on campus when it was formed to being now, I believe, one of the most popular RSOs in terms of membership, just the number of people who are signed up. It was just sort of like eye-popping in terms of its rapid growth. So I believe the Esports RSO was formed in 2018, and already in that short time, just a few short years, it's become extremely popular on campus.

John Boccacino:

What do you attribute to that spike, that passionate, rabid interest in this RSO?

Chris Hanson:

There are several reasons for this, but to be honest, I think one of the main things is sort of a generational shift. I think that for many people of my generation, we grew up in a home where there was television in the living room, and that was the sort of place where you consumed media and consumed sports and that sort of thing. So you would sort of have access to sports that were on major networks, major linear networks. And that's how people I think often become sports fans, either through family members, friends and so forth. They start to follow particular teams and that sort of thing.

Obviously, that landscape and the domestic landscape has shifted pretty considerably in the last 10, 15 years, where increasingly people have their own screens and access to be able to consume their own content. So rather than everyone watching a single screen at home, it's not uncommon for a family to have everyone basically have access on their own screen, their own computer, phone, tablet, whatever. And so that allows then people to pursue their own interests. And I think when I say a generational shift, I think a lot of people who are now students or who will be coming future... Coming to SU in the coming years are people who grew up maybe consuming Esports in a way that just was not on the radar of people of an older generation. And they are highly invested in Esports and understanding the different teams, the different games, the different players of Esports in a way that is almost,

I've certainly spent a lot of time during this whole process trying to explain Esports and its relevance to people who are not familiar with it. And it is just, there's always a sort of moment where people are just blown away by how popular it is. And when they see sports arenas, traditional sports arenas filled with fans who've gone to go see Esports events takes place, it sort of is like a light bulb moment of, wow, I had no idea that there were people who were going to a major sports venue to watch Esports rather

than to go watch a traditional sports basketball, football, something similar, but they're actually going there to watch Esports.

So I think that's... Sort of this thing where it's been growing steadily, and obviously it grew significantly in Korea, for instance, and other parts of the world before it became... The US is sort of catching up at this point, and still continues to. But it happened in a way that I think just may not be on the radar of a lot of people who, if they haven't been interested or following Esports, it's like what? They don't even understand... It's like, what is Esports? And this is not just a generational thing. I mean, certainly there are people of my generation who may not be aware of Esports, but they're also those who are hugely invested in Esports and follow it closely.

So I think it's just sort of an interesting reflection of the ways in which this sort of proliferation of screens and access to media, for those who are able to afford it and be able to access technology, now can see and experience things like Esports that the person just sitting across the table from them may have no idea about.

John Boccacino:

The Twitch channels taking over, the popularity of watching folks gaming on YouTube channels. It's a money-making industry and it's really a revenue source for the university, but it's also a great opportunity to enhance the development of our students in working with top-notch faculty. I love the three tracks that this program is outlining Esports Business and Management, Esports Communications and Esports Media and Design. From a faculty perspective, how can you explain how these courses, how these tracks will help set up our students for success?

Chris Hanson:

Well, I think that the tracks really reflect how interdisciplinary Esports and games and the game industry are by their very nature. Obviously, with the major being split between Falk and Newhouse, the tracks sort of speak to the expertise, and industry expertise, in those respective colleges. But it's also to note that the tracks also draw from colleges beyond just Falk and Newhouse. So there's coursework that's taking place in other colleges, engineering, computer science, arts and sciences, visual and performing arts. There's coursework that's taking from all of these places. So game design courses, for instance, in Computer Art and Animation and Film and Media Arts in VPA. So the idea for... Because Esports and games are really interdisciplinary fields, they draw from a lot of different areas of expertise and skillset sets, that this then allows students to cater their experience and their interest in Esports and where they might to land after completing their degree at SU in a sort of field which reflects their interests and their own expertise.

And I think it's really important to note that Esports is just a small chunk of games, and the game industry, I think it's something like less than 5% of the games industry. The game industry is just an enormous behemoth. And there's often, you still see these in publications of, oh, the games have made more than films this year, or something similar, but there's just been this sort of meteoric rise in the size of the games industry. And these are, Esports is one component, one factor within this. And so I think what the three tracks really allow students to do is to benefit from the faculty expertise and the skillsets and the research that's taking place within Falk and Newhouse, but then also beyond Falk and Newhouse to create a really robust interdisciplinary background, which will really help them to prepare for what is still a growing and emerging field.

John Boccacino:

If someone had told you when you started teaching these classes that would serve as a metamorphosis in a sense, to launch this degree program, just how surreal is it that we're here now talking about this program coming to creation?

Chris Hanson:

It's awesome to see. It's amazing. It's been really inspiring to see faculty from so many different corners of campus work together to try to create this. I can say that a long time ago worked in the game industry and had always been interested in studying and researching and going to grad school for studying games. But the sort of degrees and programs that I was interested in doing didn't really exist when I had finished college, let alone at an undergraduate level. And when I first arrived at SU in 2010, I taught courses on film, on television, and on digital media, what was sometimes then called new media or emerging media and games were always a part of what I was teaching, but they were not necessarily a focus. And within a couple years, I started offering courses specifically on games, and they became, I mean, it's probably not the most shocking development, but it turns out students are interested in taking courses on games.

And so these were very popular, and my interactions with students really helped to inspire me to create new courses on games and different levels of courses on games. So I teach courses everywhere from introductory lecture course for, not just incoming first year students, but other students interest in games to upper division courses on games and game history and cultures. We were talking a little bit earlier about interest in older game consoles, but also to graduate level courses in games. I'm teaching a graduate seminar in Game Studies, for instance now. And in all of these courses, what's been really cool for me is that I teach in English and Arts and Sciences, and I certainly get a number of students within the major in English and Arts and Sciences, but also from Newhouse. I get students from Falk, from architecture, from VPA, the gaming people interested in the gaming minor or who are just doing computer art and animation or other things.

And I get students like a truly interdisciplinary blend of students in the class. And that's been really awesome too, because it's like everyone can sort of benefit from each other's backgrounds and skillsets. The students can really help each other learn, basically. So yes, that's a very long way of saying it's pretty awesome. And it's been... I don't know that I would've believed it if you told me this, that 12, 13 years ago when I first came to SU, that there'd be this strong interest in Esports and gaming. And it's been really awesome, because it's something that I've been interested in and working on developing since coming to SU. How can we build games and understand them?

And I think that's another area that I think the major signals is that games represent a really awesome opportunity for the university, really fantastic opportunity to build areas of research and expertise in the study of games, which are now one of the most dominant media industries on the planet, and don't show... The games industry doesn't show any signs of slowing down. And so as Esports being a component of this, I think is a really exciting, and you know, use the word surreal early, earlier than that to see this explosive growth and interest in, it's great. It's really, it's exciting to see, and I'm excited to see where it will lead the university.

John Boccacino:

The fact that this popularity in this hobby has turned into such a lucrative profession for so many folks, so many students who want to get into the business, and of course, working with great faculty as part of the Esports degree program that we'll launch in 2024. It's an exciting time to be a part of the university. The fact that we're growing the facilities too, I mean, the Esports room in the Barnes Center at the Arch is visually breathtaking when you walk in and you just see the resources. But we're growing a lot more

than just that Barnes Center at the Arch place for Esports gaming to take place for game development to take place. It's a fascinating development here on our campus.

He is Chris Hanson, the associate professor of English in the College of Arts and Sciences, who also serves as the faculty advisor for the University's gaming club and the Esports club, and he played a large, integral role in developing the coursework for this new Esports degree program. Chris, thanks for taking the time to stop by and share your expertise, and keep up the great work.

Chris Hanson:

Oh, thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.