

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Joey Gawrysiak:

So I think somebody looking at Syracuse to come and study esports, yes, you're going to have world-class classes as part of this. You're going to have teachers that are proficient in their discipline, in sport and in communication. But now you're going to have esports specific faculty that are top of their field in researching esports, and teaching esports, but also with the industry connections that will help you find a job and an experience, a capstone, an internship, that are part of your educational journey that you're here. And to top it all off, you're going to have the best in-class facilities that no other college campus has with what we're putting together in Schine and in Marley to go with what we've already had in Barnes. We're going to have three massive esports facilities that any university would be lucky to have one of, for our students to have so many opportunities to engage with esports and gaming that you don't get anywhere else.

John Boccacino:

Our guest today on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast is Joey Gawrysiak, the executive director of Syracuse University's esports, or electronic sports communications and management degree program, which recently concluded its first year on campus. And what an exciting year it has been for our esports community. It's hard to believe but a little more than one year ago we brought you this emerging topic by breaking down this news with Jeff Rubin, Olivia Stomski and Chris Hanson here on the podcast, discussing the exciting news that Syracuse was creating a new, first of its kind degree program focused on esports. Well, here we are now one year later, we're having Joey on to discuss the progress the esports program has made, as well as some of the exciting initiatives planned for the program going forward. And for a little background for our audience, Joey is no stranger to developing esports degree programs. Syracuse University is, I believe, the third institution where he has played an integral role in launching an esports degree program, the last of which being Shenandoah University in Virginia. Joey, it's a pleasure having you on. Thanks for making the time to join us.

Joey Gawrysiak:

Yeah, John, really appreciate it, man. It's always a fun conversation to talk about all the things that we're working on, and then it's intimidating. It's like, oh my gosh, we still have a long way to go, but we've come so far already from being here and having that groundwork initially. So really excited for the conversation today.

John Boccacino:

Give our audience a little background on the program itself and what your role has been serving as, again, that executive director.

Joey Gawrysiak:

This idea of an esports program, and in particular, this esports degree program that we've been working on during this past year in what I call year zero, because no students were actually admitted to the program. We actually have that this coming fall, will be the first admitted students. So yeah, I'll try to give some background about my role, but also how esports in general has evolved on campus and how it's not just about the academic program. It's about what student experience has to offer. Elevating that club program to varsity competition. The chancellor approved that term varsity. So we have varsity teams competing for national championships now to go along with the programming that we're building on the

academic side of things and working with partner organizations. So yeah, there are so many different, I don't know why it was good on octopus. There's so many different tentacles that esports has and touches on a college campus like Syracuse, and I can't wait to keep diving into each of these areas and figuring out how all this works together.

So with the degree program, launch this year, year zero, programmed it out, getting the planning, the curriculum set up, the courses, marketing, advertising, all the things that go with it to bring in our first incoming class. So joint degree program, like you mentioned, it was set up excellently by Olivia, by Chris, by Jeff Rubin, and everybody else that worked behind the scenes over the last few years to get it going. So it's joint between Falk and Newhouse, where the curriculum is split between those two schools. It is not a dual degree, it is a joint degree, which is confusing in some ways and figuring out exactly how enrollment structures work, how the homeschool idea works about communication to students, the advising opportunities. So it's constantly a work in progress like, all right, we have this thing that is split between two different schools equally.

How does that actually work? And when I came to campus, I was like, I don't know, but we'll figure it out. And my favorite phrase that I've learned here, John is, we will get there. And I'm like, okay, that's cool. We'll get there. What opportunities can we set up within this academic program for this broader idea of professional development, career preparation that is not just focused on esports careers, but is also focused on those transferrable skills that work across different entertainment sectors and industries so that we're not here with an esports degree to get somebody to be the next best caster for a rocket league in a professional setting. If that's a career opportunity that somebody gets, awesome, love it, fantastic.

But let's make sure we're preparing our students to work across different sectors and industries through this lens of esports and gaming and getting those transferable skills that is also based in experiential learning. Which is what Syracuse has done so well for so long, is making sure the students aren't just in the classroom learning, but that they're actually out in the field doing and experiencing and networking to make sure they actually have the skill sets that industry leaders are looking for in that next workforce coming through.

So that's been a big push for us recently is making sure that we do have those opportunities with those companies and those industries to do that. It's been a really great start for things. And my job, my position again, has evolved to not only report to Dean Jordan and Dean Lodato and Falk and Newhouse respectively, but working with Jeff Rubin out of the chancellor's office, but also now working with Allen Groves out of student experience to set up experiences on that side of things too. So it's been a great start. It's been 10 months, it feels like sometimes 10 years and sometimes 10 weeks that I've been in the position. So it's never a dull moment and always exciting to work with great people at the university that's doing things that nobody else is doing. And we're one of about 15 or 20 schools that has an esports major in the country, and we're by far the biggest when it comes to brand recognition and popularity, those kinds of things. So I really like where we are.

Also, the fact that we have the chancellor and the provost supporting these initiatives on campus goes a very long way, because they understand the importance and the opportunity, that educational opportunity that esports and gaming has to offer that is not about playing video games, but it's understanding the ecosystem and the industry around this idea of video games and competitive video games and all the components that go with it. So even this year, no esports students per se, but we still, in our office space, we had about six to eight students on a daily basis that would just be in here asking us questions, wanted to get involved with the planning, the understanding, the execution of our matches or our competitions or the production, the long form, short form content we were creating. Because it helps them build their resume up and build their portfolio through something that they're interested in already.

We know these young adults are playing video games. But now with this program, we're offering them a structured and intentional opportunity to have an educational experience through this new and exciting lens that they value and they love and they're passionate about, to help them gain those skills and build

that portfolio, develop their network of connections in this field, yes. But it touches so many different fields that it's important for them to understand where their career can go with the knowledge and skills they get through these opportunities.

John Boccacino:

You happen to come from a great school, Shenandoah University in Virginia that actually was one of the first esports programs in the country. What lessons did you take away from that experience that have served you well so far in your current role here at Syracuse?

Joey Gawrysiak:

Yeah, that's a great question. And I love my time at Shenandoah. It was a fantastic experience. I came there as a sport management professor. That was my background, was teaching in sport management. And then I developed the curriculum about, at this point, it's about seven, eight years ago, geez, that makes me feel old. That I started working on this curriculum for what esports could look like in higher ed. And I think that what was so great about the program down there is that it was all in one school. It was in the business school down there, and I had the varsity programming. I had the facilities that we were building at the same time I was writing curriculum. And what was great, and this is one of the biggest lessons I had I wanted to carry over, was that it was really based in not just being in the classroom.

It was also based in hey, running events out of our esports arena that we could use as almost like a lab space for students to be in, not to play video games, but to understand different setups for an event, understand a run of show and broadcast and production that goes with running an esports event. We could have local high schools come in and have a competition in our space, and we could have our students doing the tournament operations, do the advertising, social media posts, do the videos, the editing, the graphics, everything that goes with an event, hospitality, all this stuff that goes with an event. Our students can now do that as part of the curriculum to get a degree, which I thought was great. Because honestly, somebody looking at an esports degree on a resume, it's like esports degree, okay, "They played video games and got a bachelor's in that? What does that mean?"

I want that to pop out and people to say esports degree, tell me about what that means and what you did? And our students can talk about not just being in a classroom listening to somebody like me talk and blab on, but actually being in the field in an arena or off campus running an event and talking about all the things that go into that planning, the organizing, the execution of those events. So at Shenandoah, one of the biggest things I learned was how to write experiential learning based curriculum. And that's something I wanted to make sure that we had here, those experiences. Something else was the value of global experiential learning to go with that. So how do we take students abroad? How do we work with organizations and schools in other countries to give students that chance to connect with students from other countries that have very different backgrounds, very different cultures, but have a shared commonality of esports and gaming to work on projects or experiences with?

How do we take our students out to South Korea or to Amsterdam or to London or to Dublin or the other places that Bangkok that we traveled to, with students to work with organizations in the esports and gaming industry to get their connections, to develop their network. But maybe most importantly, just have global competencies to understand how the world works, that it is not all about what's going on at the time in Virginia or here, what's going on here in New York, but what's going on abroad? What's going on across borders? How do I navigate that landscape when I might not speak the same language as that person I'm trying to work with? I think those are important ideas as well that I wanted to make sure to bring here to implement international programming as part of the experiences our students have.

So yeah, I take a lot of lessons I learned at Shenandoah, and I bring them here to Syracuse. Because I see it as a very similar conceptually program with the academic component, the facilities, the varsity component. It's just elevated to such a higher degree here at Syracuse because it's a very prestigious and

historical university. So we want to make sure that we are carrying on that legacy of what has made Syracuse so fantastic and now implement something brand new to it and learn lessons along the way and make mistakes along the way because that's how we get better as long as we learn from them. But I take so much from Shenandoah and that opportunity I had to even get started, and I'm trying to bring that here now. It doesn't always look the same. It's going to look a little different everywhere you go, but conceptually, a lot of the same ideas are brought up here with me.

John Boccacino:

What do you think it was about yourself, your background and your work experiences that you feel made you the right person to lead this program?

Joey Gawrysiak:

Yeah, number one, I know how to talk, unfortunately. It's true because a lot of people that maybe are working in this space or are traditional gamers, they're introverts, they don't have the same social skills and know how to present themselves and sell. For lack of a better term, sell themselves to prospective donors or recruits or corporations for partnerships, sell themselves to administration to get the point across about the importance of esports in higher ed. But I think it's also my background. My background in that I am traditionally from academia. I came through the University of Georgia, got my undergrad and masters and PhD, which I know is maybe not the best idea to get all three from the same school. So having that traditional academic background of scholarship, I did a lot of research. I've published a lot of journal articles, done a lot of presentations at different conferences over the years.

So having that background paired with starting a program exactly what Chancellor Syverud wanted here with a strong academic programming, with varsity and enhanced competitive experiences, with designing facilities that would go with all parts of recreation, student experience, competition, academics, professional development, hosting events, international travel, experiential learning. All of those same things that I was doing at Shenandoah and had experience in, Chancellor Syverud wanted here. And that steering committee was very clear. We need somebody that has done this before, has worked in this space. I'm like, "Well, that's what I've done the last five years." So I think I was really lucky to get the opportunity to come here and work with some great people because of my background.

But I also want to make sure I brought not just the academic background to this position, I wanted to make sure I did bring in that varsity competition background and that opportunity for students to come here to compete at the highest level against other schools around the country at that highest level. Scholarship opportunities, national championships, jerseys, coaching, travel, all the things that go with it. Because I saw the value that brought at Shenandoah, so I wanted to bring that here as well. So I think not only my background in traditional academia, the fact that I have a terminal degree in, I don't want to say the field because there is no terminal degree in esports, but my research was in esports and video games for several years and I made a lot of presentations on that.

So I think having all those experiences really was the reason I was brought in. And I'm learning new things along the way. Fundraising, I was never good at fundraising, never really had to do that at Shenandoah. Here it's like, all right, what are we doing for fundraising? I'm like, all right, let's explore this chance. And that's where the talking and the gabbing comes in, the fact that I have to sell myself on some things and sell the program on some things. So I think that's why I was brought here is that, that really holistic background I had and experience I had that honestly, there might be one or two other people that have that same experience I've had if that many in the country.

John Boccacino:

And when it comes to, you mentioned a couple of times the core tenant of the... And we'll get into the recreational sports and the varsity sports component because that's fascinating to me. But I want to do a

little more on the academic side of the house. And with the three-pronged degree program having esports business and management, esports communications, and esports media and design, all of these arms have been well calculated to set up our students for success, both when they're in the classroom and then once they graduate from Syracuse and go out to be difference makers in the world. What did you love about the way the degree programs were set up that really played to your strengths, your research background, and how you could help these students reach their goals?

Joey Gawrysiak:

There were a couple of things that really I love. I love the fact that it pulled on two of the strongest schools and colleges at Syracuse, and not just at Syracuse, two of the best. One of the best sport management areas and programs with Falk in the country that everybody knows about, everybody hears about. But also with Newhouse, I mean, there's nothing that compares with Newhouse around the country for a school of public communication. So it's like that's a no-brainer to me. And one of the things I've always said to people is that an esports degree program has to talk about the communication side of the industry. It can't just be about the business or sport business side of the industry. There has to be a component that students can learn about, content creation, monetization of brand, name and image and likeness opportunities like we hear in athletics, but this time is with content creators.

The ideas of the behind this camera in front of the camera operations, full-fledged production because that is not my background, but I knew how important it was in the esports ecosystem, and I knew that I wanted that as part of what a degree offering would be. And when I was here touring and I saw the Newhouse spaces like the Dick Clark Studios and other spaces in there, I was like, 1000% I'm sold. This is all I needed to see, knowing that this could really be a difference maker for students. Because again, it's not in a classroom. These are studios that don't just replicate what you see in the professional industry. They are the professional industry. They literally are being used for professional industry experiences. I'm like, yes, if we can get our esports students to being able to understand how something at that level works and then take their understanding of esports, not only are they going to be well positioned to be successful, they're going to be well positioned to accelerate the esports industry coming from Syracuse alums.

We're going to set new standards because of the skill sets and experiences our students go through while getting their degree because of the strength of Newhouse that we are pulling in on for part of the esports degree, because of the strength of Falk and what we're pulling in as part of that esports degree. So now I'm so lucky because I get to take the best of both worlds and put that together in this giant snowball and I guess snowball's appropriate because in Syracuse. Put this giant snowball that I can start rolling down the hill, and really it starts picking up momentum, picking up steam. Students are working with each other, pulling on different experiences.

So those three prongs that you mentioned, one more Falk oriented, two more Newhouse oriented, I think they are so well positioned that we can really get things started in a meaningful way that other schools, they're already looking at us. They're already asking me, "How did you start this program?" They can really look at our students now when they graduate, and they can work with our students to help them set up programs at other institutions or professional industries. And it's not only that, John, it's like I also want to make sure we're starting to tap into Whitman and entrepreneurial opportunities. Make sure our students understand business finance and economics and things that go on in Whitman. Make sure we understand what's going on in the iSchool or engineering, and pull in some of those tenants and those courses as well. Because the ideas of computer science, game design.

While that's not "esports directly," there are a lot of overlaps and parallels with the esports industry and game design and content creation that go with the engineering as well as the analytics and the iSchool. Dude, I get so excited with all the different opportunities that esports has to touch so many different areas of campus, and I think we're just getting started. But seeing that it started in Falk and Newhouse, which is exactly where my mind always has gone with understanding that sport management side of things and the

broadcast and production side of things, I was like, this is already set up perfectly for me to come into and hopefully start filling that cupboard up.

John Boccacino:

When do you think that became the reality where the switch flipped from esports being gaming and a fun passion to an actual career opportunity?

Joey Gawrysiak:

Obviously, yes, we are there and people are like, they want to go to school, they want to study to work in esports. But even with a lot of students that we get as part of this program, or even my time at Shenandoah, a lot of students came in, they just wanted to play. They wanted to compete. Yes, they were taking the degree program. But a lot of them still wanted to compete. And then at about their junior year, after their sophomore year, they're like, you know what? I'm not going to be a pro gamer. It's something I was telling them the whole time because I was like, "Guys, you are not going to be a pro gamer, sorry. Top 1% make it as a career and you're not the top 1%. I hate to burst your bubble, but it ain't going to happen." So they're like, okay, well what can I do to leverage my knowledge and passion of esports to find a career?

So they will then start working more on the sales, the development, the marketing, the branding, the social media, the broadcast production. They will switch from playing and competing while also studying and going to class to just working as a work study position and professional development while also going to class. So I think that that change happens. For some students it happens in high school that they think, all right, this is a career. And I think that age continues to get lower because they're starting to see more opportunities not just as careers, but also in college. And the curriculum is starting to evolve, not just to be college curriculum, but to be high school curriculum where you can take esports courses now in high school that can feed into college. So I think just as we continue to evolve as a discipline, that age is going to keep getting lower, that people can realize that they can go into esports or gaming or entertainment as a career opportunity and not just as a pro gamer.

So I think that's where we are. That light bulb doesn't switch on for some people as early as we want it to. But at some point during their college career, while they're here, we make sure that we are constantly in front of them making sure they understand, there are real opportunities to study esports and gaming from an academic discipline that lead to career opportunities. And it's not playing games or on keyboard and mouse. It's not doing that. It's through the lessons you learn through understanding that, but not just about playing the game.

John Boccacino:

What would you say to a prospective student or a parent or family member who listens to this and the light bulb goes off in their head that they might want to pursue the esports program? What are the best benefits of coming to Syracuse to study here under Falk, under Newhouse and under the Syracuse umbrella?

Joey Gawrysiak:

Yeah. The biggest benefits is, like I mentioned earlier, you are studying under Falk and Newhouse. This is not this new independent thing that doesn't pull on the strengths that are already here at Syracuse. So we're not reinventing the wheel, we're just making a better wheel that makes sense for esports. So it's something that you get to be part of Falk and you get to be part of Newhouse as part of this degree program. But we're also pulling our connections and our alum network that are based out of Los Angeles. And a lot of students working in the gaming and esports industry. So students that come to Syracuse, they're going to have a chance to travel to Los Angeles and work with Gen.G or Team Liquid or Riot

Games as part of their experiences here. As part of the experience, they're going to be able to travel to Washington DC and go meet with monumental and other entities down in DC that are part of the esports organization because of the umbrella and the network that we have here.

So I think somebody looking at Syracuse to come and study esports, yes, you're going to have world-class classes as part of this. You're going to have teachers that are proficient in their discipline in sport and in communication. But now you're going to have esports specific faculty that are top of their field in researching esports and teaching esports, but also with the industry connections that will help you find a job and an experience, a capstone, an internship that are part of your educational journey that you're here. And to top it all off, you're going to have the best in-class facilities that no other college campus has with what we're putting together in Schine and in Marley to go with what we've already have in Barnes. We're going to have three massive esports facilities that any university would be lucky to have one of if for our students to have so many opportunities to engage with esports and gaming that you don't get anywhere else.

We have the, and I'm sure we'll get into this, we have the largest staff for esports on any college campus. And that's some on the academic and some on the student experience side. We have the most work study opportunities. We have the most facilities. We are competing and engaging in so many different levels that if you want to have any experience in and through esports and gaming, there is no place that's doing what we're doing here. So that's the biggest thing that we talk to parents about is, "What does your son or daughter like to do?" "Oh, they'd like to stream their stuff." Cool. Here are seven different streaming rooms that we have, and here are some streamers that we work with on a daily basis that could talk to your son or daughter about how to set up a stream and how to monetize their branding through that stream in a way that makes sense.

We're not just going to throw them to the wolves and say, "Streaming. Cool. Good luck. Go find a PC on your own." We're going to support students every step along the way as part of the program here.

John Boccacino:

And that's really reassuring. Again, given the fact that with this program we just wrapped up year zero in the fall, we'll have students admitted for the first time. So how would you summarize the first year of the esports program on campus, and what were some of the highlights you're most proud of?

Joey Gawrysiak:

It's been a whirlwind. It's been a lot of fun. It's been a learning experience for sure, not just for me, but for me educating and working with other people across campus. For me, the biggest area of growth that I've seen is that getting people to understand what esports looks like in higher education and that it's not just a degree program. It is not just a club team. It is not just a varsity team. It is not just a facility that you're throwing money at to make it look really cool and sound really cool. It's how all of those pieces work together to make an esports program. Not an esports major, not an esports team, but an esports program under this awesome S right here.

So that's the biggest thing that I'm most proud of is that people were starting to coalesce and not have siloed approaches to what esports can be on campus. We're bringing it all under this esports broader umbrella to make sure that all those entities are working together. The sum of everything we do is so much greater than those individual parts that we were offering initially to students, which were great, and it's fantastic that we had some offering for students. But seeing the top down approach and the value that the chancellor and other administrators have for what esports can be, is really reassuring that we are going to have that support structure for us to really go for this and make it something meaningful for our students. So our varsity teams, they don't operate in a silo. Our varsity team works with our production area to make sure they coordinate the schedule and information and analytics and graphics and headshot

and media that goes that they need. All of that has been an experience just to get things set up and structured how they can work most effectively and efficiently as a holistic program.

The thing I'm really, really proud of is also the fact that we had varsity competition for one semester. So we had clubs, they were competing on their own. In January, I had a full meeting with all of our students that wanted to keep competing, and I said, "All right, we're going to offer the chance for you to be varsity competition starting this spring semester. If you want to be varsity, there are certain expectations you will have. And there are time commitments, GPA requirements, blah, blah, blah. If you want to remain a club, because that's what you want to do and just have fun and play together, cool, we will support you still, but you will be on your own a little bit more. More freedom, but not as much support from the university." So some teams decided they wanted be varsity, some wanted to stay club.

Of those varsity teams, we had a Counter-Strike team, one of the games we compete in, they won a national championship. They were the best counterstrike team in the country. I've got a three-foot tall trophy sitting right outside my office. Because this team had got to go down to Orlando and compete against the other top schools in the country that were on full ride scholarships. And our players are on no scholarships for esports, but they still won a national championship. I was so incredibly proud of what they did and how they really embraced this idea of varsity. And it wasn't them, our Rocket League team did the same thing. They finished 12th in the country out of 400 teams. So very, very successful. They won the first ever ACC member championship for Rocket League as we were competing against SMU, Florida State, Miami, Clemson, and other ACC schools. So we got some bragging rights already going on for the best ACC school. So really proud of that competitive side in the first semester of varsity.

But I'm also really proud that we've made some great connections for our students that are going to be part of this major to work with some of the best esports organizations in the world. Like I mentioned earlier, Team liquid, Gen.G, Riot Games, Xbox, Samsung, Sony, EA. We've got great connections with all those companies for our students to work with immediately as part of this degree program.

John Boccacino:

If you look into your crystal ball, what types of expanded opportunities do you think will be available to our students moving forward?

Joey Gawrysiak:

Once we reach our final form as a program, some of the opportunities are things that we want to do like working events. We want to be hired by convention visitors bureaus from around the country. So CVBs in Indiana and South Carolina and New York. I want them to hire our students and our program to run an event for them completely offsite where our students get to plan in everything from start to finish and run the event, get paid for it, get a great experience, get great networking, awesome, put that on their resume. I want that to be something we do on a yearly basis. I want there to be expanded international opportunities. There has to be international components that our students can study abroad in South Korea for a full semester or London, or Germany's got a great scene. France has a great scene. Where our students can go abroad and for an entire semester and study esports, but also work with international companies that are in and around the esports and gaming industries.

I want us competing on the competitive side. I want us competing for ACC and national titles on a consistent basis in two or three different titles. And I want to continue to bring events here to campus. I would love, and John Wildhack would love it, Kent Syverud would love it. So many people would love it if we can bring a massive esports event and put it in the dome. That is something I hear over and over is get, League of Legends or get Valorant or get something, get Call of Duty to be in the dome at some point. I'm like, that is really ambitious because that's like what, 40,000 seats or whatever it might be. An esports event might get 400 people, 500 people. There are maybe four events a year that get to that 20 to 40,000. And they're typically in New York City or Seoul, South Korea, these major metropolitans. So if



we could get something like that to Syracuse, New York, I mean mind blown. You'd know we've arrived. You know we got the best program.

John Boccacino:

People might not believe there are hardcore intense practice sessions that go into these esports games. There's communications lessons, there's comradery. How does an esports student athlete demonstrate that comradery, that communication, the skills needed to reach the pinnacle?

Joey Gawrysiak:

Yeah. A lot of it is communication. It's just like any other sport. It's constant communication and teamwork and practice. So our students do have very intense practice sessions. They have what we call VOD review, video on demand, where they're watching gameplay of scrimmages they have. Scrimmages are so important in the competitive esports space compared to more traditional sports because you can play a team from anywhere in the world online right now. So coaching, VOD review, breaking down film, knowing tendencies, and this is where this is really cool. This is where we're going to tap into our analytics programs at Syracuse that are sports analytics, best in the country. No question about it. We have data analytics out of the iSchool that are amazing as well. So we're going to tap into those students and get them involved with our teams to start tracking progress and trends that they have. And then reporting back to help our coaches with the analytics part of esports that is incredibly untapped.

So hopefully that we can elevate our players to even higher level based on analytics and science now, not just on how they play and how they communicate. But we are constantly talking about, hey, who's the IGL, the in-game leader, who's making the callouts for what's going to happen in the game? How are we communicating that to each other effectively and efficiently so that things aren't getting jumbled and they're not trying to talk over each other during a competition? So it's listening to communication. It's breaking down gameplay, looking at mechanical ability as well as mental ability and understanding gameplay and mechanics that go into it. But it's always, it's playing with each other. It's constantly playing with each other intentionally to get better so that you can. It's not just playing the game to have fun, unfortunately.

The game should be fun, but they've got to take it seriously. They've got to make sure they're grinding and putting the time in needed for an hour or two a day in practice, and then going to class. It's not about playing for six or seven hours a day and not doing something and getting anything out of it. It's about playing for one or two hours intentionally to work on a skill to get them better at the game. So we treat it just like any other sport. We're going to work with psychologists, work with nutritionists.

We're going to work with physical trainers to make sure they are in good shape, mentally, physically, emotionally, to compete at a high level for a longer period of time. We're going to tap into that science side of things with the analytics. We're going to work with team psychologists. Psychology is right in the same building that our esports program will be in. So it's like a perfect marriage. So yeah, we really want to really capitalize on all those different areas because all of those skills are what's needed to take somebody to make them a really high level player, just like in traditional sports.

John Boccacino:

And it's really remarkable. I mentioned earlier the growth that esports has seen. I saw a recent study from Pew saying that 90% of teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 play video games in some way, shape or form. That's clearly got to be music to your ears as future potential students and student athletes to bring here to Syracuse's program. What do you attribute that rapid growth and interest in esports and video games to?

Joey Gawrysiak:

Kids are digital natives. It's accessible. It's accessible like it never has been before. And it's largely because of this thing that's in my pocket right now. That I could pull out and I could play a video game on right now. And the mobile gaming industry, it's not the same as the esports industry unless you're in Southeast Asia where mobile gaming is the biggest form of esports. But I've heard those same numbers. But I've also heard numbers that 99% of all boys and 94% of all girls play a game before age 12. And what other activities even close to that? Nothing. So yes, we know that people play video games. We know there's an interest in video games, so how do we set this up to intentionally have an educational opportunity that utilizes and harnesses that power and impact that gaming can have to teach people skills that are transferable and important for valuable careers across different industries?

That's the whole point of an esports degree program. That's the whole point of professional development through esports and gaming. These they're very real world skills. But it makes me very excited and I hate trying to forecast and guess on anything in the future, but I feel really safe where we are with the value and passion that gaming has and the fact that kids growing up today are digital natives and they're understanding what, not just esports and games are through different devices, but just how to engage in social media, how to engage with YouTube and people that are out there and talk to people through this right here, like Zoom, like Teams. That you're not picking up a phone and calling somebody, you're doing a video chat through something like this for meetings and social experiences, and they're making friends with people around the world that they've never met in real life.

So how do we harness this new age, this new digital age that we're getting into through this idea of entertainment and technology that is esports and gaming, just like we're looking at AI and VR and robotics and other STEM and STEAM fields. Esports is that entertainment component to STEAM education.

John Boccacino:

With this ever evolving industry, what's next? Where else can this industry be headed when it comes to the academics and then the esports competitive side of it as being varsity athletes?

Joey Gawrysiak:

Yeah. I think it is understanding that the continuing evolution of technology, AI being a major part of it. But I think AR VR is another part of it that we need to understand. Esports in particular, will there be like virtual reality esports? Of course there will be. There already has been. They haven't been as accessible or available to people as other esports have been. So I think as we look at trends for the future and the education, it's an understanding of technology more all encompassing and how we utilize technology not just for entertainment like the esports industry is in, but also for other areas of industries, whether it be religion or work or economy or education. How we utilize technology and computers and all the equipment, all the hardware, all the software that comes with esports and gaming and streaming, and how we utilize all that in a way that makes sense across other industries. I think that's a big part that we need to keep an eye on.

But for the esports industry in particular, it's understanding AR VR. It's understanding mobile gaming a little bit more and how to get things a little bit smaller. But also the biggest key phrase is accessibility. How do we make this more accessible and equitable to make sure that we are encouraging and including everybody we can through these mechanisms? There are some DEI initiatives in place that the esports industry is not good on different diversity standards right now. It is very white male or Asian male. So how do we get more people included? How do we get more people, more backgrounds included in this space? I think that's a big thing that we've got to figure out as an industry as well. And I think it's lowering that barrier to access, lowering that barrier to entry. So getting things cheaper, getting things more accessible, those are going to be some of the big trends that we see in this industry going forward.

John Boccacino:

I can't wait to see what happens moving forward in the fall with students being admitted for the first time to the esports program here at Syracuse University. Joey, keep up the great work and thanks again for making the time to talk with us.

Joey Gawrysiak:

Awesome, John. Really appreciate it, man, and happy to be here. Really excited for the conversation we had today and really appreciate your time as well.

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.