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

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 are playing.h 10.34u0 Td401 0 Td also ther(vanore-0cave)Tj-0.001 T9 1.022 0 Tds

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

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

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, tha. We're wantry

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,

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,

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

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 thi$hift,the dome⌉naf)) Tf-0ts hift,

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,

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

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.