

Lauren Garrett: Hello, and welcome to the Decipher Podcast. This podcast is hosted by William & Mary staff members who are committed to student success. We all know that this year has been unlike any other, and our hope is that this podcast provides a fresh perspective on the challenges our students are facing.

Heather Deere: Navigating college life is no walk in the park, and being a William & Mary student in 2020 is no different. Join experts from around campus as they discuss ways to decipher common college experiences.

[00:00:30] Thank you so much, Michelle, for joining us today to talk a little bit about the e-sports program. So, to kind of get us started, can you introduce yourself and a little bit about your background here at William & Mary?

Michelle King: Absolutely. My name is Michelle King and I've been at William & Mary for 22 years. I've been teaching in the theatre speech and dance department. So I've been teaching public [00:01:00] speaking, communication courses, entertainment education, and I have a background in gaming, but many might think old-school gaming board games. And so I've traveled the world doing research on board game studies. And also I have an affinity for video games. I do game online myself. And so when I found out there's a gaming community already here at William & Mary and an initiative getting ready to take place. I wanted [00:01:30] to be a part of that.

Heather Deere: Yeah, no, thank you. I didn't realize you'd been with us for so long. That's awesome. So you have a lot of very deeply rooted in the William & Mary community. So my first question is probably, I'm not going to say a dumb question, but it's perhaps a naive question. With the development of this e-sports program, I have realized that I don't think I actually know what e-sports is. So can you define what e-sports is? So we kind of have the same [00:02:00] understanding about what that program is and then what it looks like here at William & Mary?

Michelle King: Well, a simple definition is it's competitive video gameplay. You give it that way, but everybody is a gamer in some way, if you have a game on your phone an app that you play candy crush or something like that, then you game in that sense. But when you take it to another level where it is the competitive video gaming, that's more so e-sports

Heather Deere: [00:02:30] Sure. So what is the history of the e-sports program on this campus kind of, when did this start to bubble up and how, what is your role with the eSports program?

Michelle King: So a little over about two years ago, Dr. Conner, and a few other faculty and staff took part in the studio for teaching and learning initiative or innovation. And so they put together a way to come up with ideas [00:03:00] to enhance student learning. And so it's the studio for teaching, learning innovation, steely, and the UTLP is a university for teaching learning project, a lot of acronyms and

initiatives here. So they began their research on looking at gaming, gamification game based learning and all the research and everything they were finding, kept bringing them back to e-sports. And they're like, this is huge. This is huge. This is going, this is something that we [00:03:30] can really focus in and on itself. And so that's what they started to do. So it was, Dr. Karen Connor, Terry Trojack, John Drummond, April Warrants and Kat Worgo. And then they brought me on because I had presented a few years prior on gaming and my research. And so when they brought me on, I said, yes, I'd love to be a part of this because students are already doing it here. [00:04:00] Let's validate them. Let's bring legitimacy to what they're already doing.

Heather Deere: That's great. And so I understand we have on campus already, students that are doing e-sports, is it like a club sport? What's kind of the best way to describe it,

Michelle King: Right. So there are clubs sports that we have a smash club, we have a William & Mary e-sports club, but then we also have what we've built is an [00:04:30] academic and applied e-sports program. So the wide side, that's the one that was really easy because it's the student grassroots effort. That movement was already there, the excitement they wanted to game but they wanted to represent William & Mary on a national stage. And so it's sort of like if you have soccer or club soccer, that kind of a thing. And so the applied side, we have partnered with EGF, which is the Electronic Gaming Federation [00:05:00] and they are the governing body for division one schools and universities. So we compete with other division one schools on titles; e-sports from League of Legends, Overwatch, we do Rocket League, Smash, FIFA. And so we compete on those titles on the applied side.

And so the academic side is what we're trying to build as well. It takes a little bit longer and so interdisciplinary. [00:05:30] So if you think of e-sports, not every one say for example is going to go into the NFL and be a football player, but there are aspects of it. So if you think of e-sports, we're going to look at pipelines into that industry. So are you a game designer programmer? Are you event planner? Are you business? Are you data analytics? So we give students that pipeline into this billion dollar industry. That's what we're trying to do.

Heather Deere: Yeah. So [00:06:00] is what is kind of the long-term goal for the academic program? Right? I know that there are classes that are being offered, but what's kind of the end goal for this, or what is your vision for all of this?

Michelle King: Well we started actually this winter, we had our first ever winter class. It was the introduction to e-sports and students were introduced to professionals in the industry. We had people from NBA2K come in and talk, we've had [00:06:30] other people from the industry share with them. And so we offered that course during the winter, the summer, we have the e-sports level up program where they could take e-sports and education, e-sports and marketing, e-sports and communication, data 146 I believe and computer science as well. Now our end goal is we would love to offer a minor and a major in e-sports. I

know [00:07:00] other colleges and universities there's one that already has a master's and they're working on a PhD in e-sports.

Heather Deere: Wow. So what would be, so for example, students that want to participate in the e-sports program, what would be some of the skills or knowledge that they would gain as part of taking those courses?

Michelle King: It would depend on the pipeline that they want you to take the track. So if they wanted to, let's say major in business, [00:07:30] but minor in e-sports, they would then be able to put those worlds together and then have that background. Or someone say psychology, they want to do research. We are really big on wellness as well for our players, our gamers; and so we recently opened what we call the ETARC the E-sports Training and Research Center. So our gamers go in there, they train and they practice and they compete in that, ETARC; but then also we are [00:08:00] welcoming those who want to come in and do research and look at, say, for example, if someone wants to track the eye movements of the gamers as they're playing or heart rate and things like that. So it really would depend on the student who, what tracks would want to take, but it's one thing to have that academic background, but when you put it with experiential learning, you are beyond marketable.

And that's what we're doing. We're very [00:08:30] innovative here at William Mary and so what I did was I created a position, actually, several positions and I called them EPs e-sports pioneers, and they are blazing a trail. And with anything at William Mary, we're making history here. And so I have EPs e-sports pioneers, one is Caleb, he sat on panel round table discussion with me talking about wellness and being a team coach; [00:09:00] he's the coach for our smash team. Also, I have another EP, Tyler who's majoring in business; and so he has learned hands-on how to write a proposal and go through the proper channels. And we actually just found out that we receive sponsorship from Pepsi because of his proposal. So there's that, hands-on again with research, we have another EP, Jonathan who actually sits on our faculty task force [00:09:30] and he gives the students a voice of what courses they want to see.

And so they have a say in this is the whole process there. We have another EP Nick who is our data analyst and he will analyze games and he will look at who needs to go in what stage of this in order to win. And then also looking at the hours that they play to then say, okay, wellness check, we need to have you to take a break and certain things. [00:10:00] We have Kai, she is along with Max; she and Max are our social media communication specialists. They handle Twitch, Twitter, Instagram, you name it, they do all of that wonderful job. Then Tim, he is our varsity coordinator and he's the one who puts together the tryouts, help put together the rosters, identify the coaches, designed the jersey and the coaches. So the students have [00:10:30] had input, but the experience they're getting along with the education, that's priceless.

Heather Deere: Sure, sure. No, that makes total sense. I'm assuming you all probably work really closely with the Cohen career center too, and taking advantage of those resources.

Michelle King: We have actually one student, she is the captain of our FIFA team, and she's already had an internship with the Pittsburgh Knights with another e-sport league and the Pittsburgh Knights [00:11:00] have a partnership with PNC bank and they're doing a women in gaming initiative. That's also wonderful. And she just found out she received another internship with Epic Games. There's so many possibilities and we have so many alumni in the industry. They're reaching out to us and we're definitely talking to them.

Heather Deere: That's awesome. I mean, I think it's interesting, like you were saying, when we think of William & Mary, [00:11:30] we kind of think of this second oldest institution in the United States, very prestigious institution, very much grounded in its history, but also very forward thinking. And so thinking about something like e-sports, I think is just a great example of what we can accomplish for students at William & Mary, taking advantage of our talented faculty, our campus colleagues, our alums, really to harness [00:12:00] this knowledge base around something that might be new; I know it's new to me, but it might be new to a lot of folks to kind of understand this e-sports thing. So I think that's really great that we're able to make that happen for students. Roughly how many students do we currently have that are participating in e-sports whether it's the different teams or taking the classes?

Michelle King: Yeah. We approximately have about 36 on our roster, 36 gamers on our roster and about [00:12:30] six coaches as well. And then within Discord, which is the platform gamers use to communicate. We also communicate with the William & Mary e-sports club and the Smash club; And there are about 270 active members there and about another 170 with the Smash club. So the community is alive and well for sure. And you brought up earlier about how, William & Mary is the second oldest public institution [00:13:00] in the United States, and I have a saying, students come here for our history or our history, but stay for their future. And that's, we're providing them, we're providing that.

Heather Deere: I love that. I love that. So I could envision as you're talking, describing this, I can envision students that are very interested and that want to get involved. I can also envision parents that might have questions or concerns because they, you don't know what you don't know. So how, how would [00:13:30] you talk to a parent or a family member of a student that's interested in e-sports, but just doesn't have the background knowledge to really understand how it can be a great option for students going forward?

Michelle King: I heard someone tell a story one time that a father and son or daughter and father would connect through sports; whether they went to a baseball game together whether they did some sport together, soccer, same thing with e-sports sit and play with your kids. [00:14:00] You get a whole new perspective of

what's out there and what they're doing, what this generation is doing. So sit and play with them and get to know what they're playing. And I look forward to a day when we have family weekend. And we're going to have e-sports tournaments with the kids or the students and the parents.

Heather Deere: Yeah. [crosstalk 00:14:21]

Michelle King: Okay.

Heather Deere: I was going to say, I have to imagine that we're starting to approach that, right. Just thinking generationally of who the parents of college students are and [00:14:30] who the college students and who the college students themselves are. I mean, we're getting to a point where folks where the parents of our college students had Nintendo's had Sega's right? And are very familiar with gaming.

Michelle King: Yes. And gaming's no longer seeing this as a silly pastime, that stereotype of in the basement and oh, you're drinking energy drinks all night. No, it really is like I said, this industry that we can [00:15:00] prepare students for that.

Heather Deere: No, I think that's awesome. Thank you so much, Michelle, for being willing to talk to me about all of this stuff today, it's really helpful. Thank you so much for tuning into this episode of the decipher podcast. For our show notes, please visit our website, decipher.blogs.wm.edu. Take care.