



Digital Aspirations in Education Podcast S1E7

Perfect for a Pandemic: Esports Gets Schools Back into the Game

Jared Heiner, Director of Education Innovation and Sales at Aspire Technology Partners, with Tyler Schrodt, Founder & President of Electronic Gaming Federation.

Jared Heiner: Welcome to another episode of the Aspire Technology Partners' Digital Aspirations in Education Podcast, sponsored by Cisco, where we explore all things education. And today, I'm super, super excited. I'm on with Tyler Schrodt, who is the President and Founder of the Electronic Gaming Federation, which is super, super exciting for me because I like gaming. But Tyler, how are you?

Tyler Schrodt: I'm good. Thanks so much for having me.

JH: Like I said, it's my pleasure. And I'm really excited today because I'm fascinated not only with gaming in general, but, having been an educator, watching gaming start exploding in education, it's something that I think is necessary. And I think it has a lot of amazing opportunities for students of all ages.

But before I go too far down that line--the [Electronic Gaming Federation](#)--tell me a little bit about how you got into this and how you started this organization. And, correct me if I'm wrong, but you're essentially running championships, the likes of the Big East NCAA stuff. I mean, this is the real deal.

TS: Yeah, we have the distinct pleasure of playing the role of governing body for Division One Collegiate Esports. And then, we do the same thing at the high school level where we work with Disney. So, as a gamer for my entire life, it's a dream come true. But really, we got started because my personal background started in esports, all the way back in the early 2000s as a player. And then I moved into team management. And then, ultimately, working on the league and tournament size. So, while I was doing that, I was also in football, and wrestling and all that kind of stuff. So, sports and esports always made sense when they went together.

And then, I ended up going to college at the Rochester Institute of Technology up in Rochester, New York. And while I was there, I started working for Residence Life and Student Conduct. And one of the consistent challenges that we were always trying to solve - and it's pretty true across most campuses, high school and college - was how do you engage with students that weren't as excited about other things as they were about gaming, and how do you, as administrators, bridge that gap and, ultimately, give those students the experience that they're looking for, which obviously helps tremendously with the idea of retention, and engagement and, ultimately, graduation.

So, after some convincing, I had the opportunity to start running video game tournaments as part of the programming that I was doing in Residence Life. And, as you can imagine, it was pretty popular because people love playing video games. And then, it just continued to grow on campus, and then, certainly, get others involved.

So, by the time I graduated in 2015, we got into this point as a group that we felt good and felt like we were in a position to do it full-time. So, at the time, we were doing a lot of grassroots stuff. And then, over the last five years, we've really been focused specifically on working with administrations, how do we make esports really accessible across all the campuses that we work with. And then, from what you said about championships, we're now at a point where we work with division one universities all across the country, running leads for them, and then helping them on campus to really understand what esports is and what it can do for their campus.

Gaming as Community for Students

JH: So, you just said a lot there, which all of it is very exciting to me. And I mean, it's very entrepreneurial. You've had something that you love, you saw a problem, and the solution kind of presented itself. And we'll get to some of that in just a second, but I want to start at the very beginning, which is - I even said this too - there is an explosion, but it's really not an explosion. It's just it's come to the surface.

I mean, I go back to my childhood in the early '80s, my father brought home the first video game system. Video gaming has been wildly popular. It's just something that has always been 'you do it on your own', which is a not the way to say it because you have to be in front of a computer. So, it seems isolated, but the reality is there are these massive online communities. So, this isn't really new. This is just a new venue.

TS: Yeah. I mean, if you think about it, before the internet and before cable internet was widely accepted, you have the opportunity to go over to a friend's house and play Couch Co-op and people still got really excited. And I know I was one of them, even when I was growing up. You got any Super Mario game or something, you want to go play it. You're playing Smash on N64 or something like that.

And then, as you had internet that was actually good, you didn't have to listen to that awful dial-up sound every time you try to connect or picked up the phone by accident, which was a huge turning point. And that was me in 2001 being able to play online for the first time and in a really meaningful way. And that opened up all these really amazing friendships.

And then, really, what was the huge point for gaming and esports in terms of viewership and content was, first, YouTube and the ability to create content really easily and really cheaply as basically anybody, no matter where they were. And the most important one probably in recent history was the introduction of Twitch. So, everybody always really enjoyed watching people play video games. It just wasn't something that was accessible.

And then, when you thought about the esports side of it, you used to have to jump through so many hoops to be able to watch people that were playing and competing. And when Twitch made it literally as simple as typing in the URL and watching something online. It made the growth that you now see in terms of viewership and general engagement across it possible. So, there is this kind of long history of 'everybody had an interest in video games or love doing it in some way'. They had fun. But access was tough. And just like with anything, once you break down those barriers, the rest is history.

Using Gaming and E-Sports to Aid Student Retention

JH: Well, yeah. And I think that, like you said, now that everybody's running around and we're so connected, our ability to have these conversations and collaborate online, it's just gaming has gone to a completely different level.

And I want to shift focus a little bit to the educational piece, and I'm really fascinated to hear what you have to say about retention. At what point did you see a correlation between gaming and having esports on campus and retention? What did that look like for you? Was it a quick observation or did this take some time? And tell me a little bit about that because that is the number one issue. Whether we address it or not, it's the number one issue for colleges is retention, especially those first couple of months for freshmen.

TS: I think it was an involving and evolving thing for us where we knew that video games were a great way to channel and create communications for different student bodies. And one of the earlier stats that we found was that anywhere from 60% to 80% of students, on any given campus, self-identified as gamers. And so, as you were trying to figure out 'how do you get people to pay attention and become a part of the community?', it just made sense that something that was that widely popular became the channel to do so.

And what we were looking at was, even before we looked at the gaming piece specifically, we knew that the more engaged student was, the more likely they were to care about the community, and, therefore, class, and therefore, in theory, their retention rate would be a lot higher. So, that was divorce from the gaming side. So, by burying those two stigmas together, we assumed, even though we didn't really have much good data at the time, that that would be the likely outcome or, at least, that's what we hoped.

And then, what really turned that corner for us is when we started working in the high school space, we weren't really doing very good data tracking at the time, but we had a lot of anecdotal stories from administrators that we were working with saying, "Hey, we just introduced an esports program. We're getting support from you guys, and in terms of what that means for us and how to talk to the students about what the opportunity was."

And then, as soon as students were getting on that team, because it came with eligibility requirements and things like that, you had students that were showing up to class more

frequently. Their academic performance was improving. They were talking a lot about students that hadn't really found their fit previously being part of a group that really mattered to them. And so, these types of things that were coming in from all different types of schools, we started to look at a little bit more deeply. And now, we're starting to track it more scientifically.

JH: So, I mean, it's interesting to see the evolution, if you will, of going just in, and you're a player. Then, all of a sudden, you're setting this up. And then, it starts expanding. You're in the high school realm. My question is, do you see a difference in how these are being started, how your different leagues get started, or how a club may get it started? Do you find that it's student-driven more often than not? Is it adults coming in who have gaming backgrounds? And I'm curious if there's a difference between the higher ed and the K-12 world.

TS: Yeah, there's definitely a variety of ways that they start because what we found is students, obviously, love playing video games just as much as I do, and when there's a lack of support from the administration, they will figure out a way to do it on their own. So, what we found was schools that didn't really have a particular appetite for supporting esports on a formal way, you would have a group of students - sometimes very small, sometimes very large - that would start a group on their own. They would represent the school or themselves as students of the school, and then they would, you know, go off and compete.

And that was pretty similar at high school or college, just kind of depending on who the individual students that were taking the initiative to do solo work. And then, when you had administrators getting interested, either they were gamers themselves, or they were administrators that were looking at the trends in general and said, "Hey, we need to make a change," or "We need to be prepared for this to happen." And so, what we found is the most important thing was to bridge the gap between the students that were either already doing that or already trying to do that and the administrators who are rebuilding that because that made a much more successful community building.

And when it comes to the differences between higher ed and high school, they're pretty similar in terms of their very high level process, there's interest, and then you start to build something formalized, and then you can start to add in things like education and social impact initiatives,

and, ultimately, being able to track data to understand what the impact of esports on campus was.

The main difference usually ends up being the amount of money that gets invested in esports because, as you can imagine, colleges that build out big rooms and stuff like that can take it pretty seriously. And the level of complexity that goes into getting them started because, as you might imagine, college comes with a lot more bureaucratic hurdles to get over than high school usually does.

And there's a couple other things that obviously come with it, but the cool thing is that once you get involved in it and once you get there, it's really easy to build communities either within each school or in the geographic area between high schools and colleges because, at the end, it's playing video games.

Esports Scholarships And the Emotional, Social, and Educational Benefits of Gaming in Schools

JH: But yet, it is so much more. But that's kind of the cool thing about it, you can boil it down. It's like I'm just playing video games. Like I'm doing the thing that I want to do; and yet, there's so many of these other benefits. Now, at the college level might, am I misunderstanding this, because my son, who is going to be 10, is a huge gamer and we've always battled that how much time is in front of the screen, but I'm working off the impression that there's now scholarships for esports, and I'm really pushing that one. Am I accurate in saying that?

TS: It is. Right now, there are about 185 or so colleges that offer some formalized esports program. Within that group, there's an array of scholarship opportunities, with some that have small offerings like a thousand dollars a semester stipend situations, and some have gone as far as giving full rides just like if you were going on a football or a basketball scholarship. So, there's still a lot of development on that front, but I would certainly expect just based on how things are going that by the time you see in colleges, there will be a lot more opportunities.

JH: So, back when I was in education, we used to offer ... and I had actually work as a tutor for like ACTs and the SATs. So, would it make sense to actually get him like a video game tutor? Is

that a thing? Get them really good early. I jest but it's interesting, especially at the K-12 level, because what I've seen happening, there's a lot more debate about the content of the game. So, it almost seems like there are some more mature scenarios, there's games that have some language. Does that become an obstacle when setting up clubs? What does that hurdle look like when you go into a school, you're sitting there and saying, "We want to start this," people have to be bringing up the fact that there are some issues.

TS: Yeah, of course. Well, we look at it as something to tackle head-on and have a friendly conversation about it upfront because some of the stereotypes about gaming and stuff like that--that every game is like that. Depending on the stance that you take on that, that can be really big barrier and certainly something that prevents adoption, which, ultimately, with these students that really care about gaming, is going to put them in a position where they don't feel particularly supported.

So, what we've done is we segment college from high school, different age groups, different focuses in terms of what's important to them. At the high school level, we just put a really straightforward benchmark and say, "We're not going to do any games that are rated M. We're not going to do anything with red blood and things that typically are the games that, from a content perspective, you might have an issue with," and try to make that decision as easy as possible.

But we also try to have that conversation with administrators that while you may not want to support a game like Counter-Strike from Call of Duty formerly they are usually some of the most, if not the most, popular games with students. So, while you may not want to support that team formerly, you have to acknowledge that students are doing that and figuring out a way to support them because, otherwise, you're going to end up in a position where you're working against the students' interests and their benefit.

So, we try to go at it from like 'let's talk about gaming and esports first, and let's start with a game like Super Smash Brothers or Rocket League' because that's accessible, no one really has an issue with it, and then we can have some of the deeper conversations about what the real true impact of interacting with students can be. And then, getting into that becomes

interesting. And obviously, there are lots of interesting challenges when you're dealing with school boards and things like that that take just a lot longer to deal with over time.

JH: And I guess, having this conversation, we're only into this now for maybe 15 minutes and already, without even identifying it, you're talking about the social, emotional and there's a lot of educational benefits to getting kids to just talk. And to your point, they could very well just be sitting at home, playing these games without somebody there to walk them through things that they may be seeing, experiencing, et cetera, et cetera. So, you look at how this is coming about, and you're getting kids together, and having a good time. They're learning from one another.

Socialization, especially in the K-12 grades, it's so, so important. And we oftentimes don't recognize that. The first thing that gets cut is going to be recess. The next thing cut his art or music. And a lot of times, those kinds of arts are very important. So, I see this as another expression of that. My question is, do you see gaming bleeding into the instructional programming at all?

TS: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we do a couple programs that are really designed on using esports as the easiest vector to engage a student, not just from a social perspective and from their interaction with the school as an institution, but also with particular learning subjects. So, there's like a whole field of gaming in education, and how to gamify learning, and things like that, which I'm far from an expert in but certainly support that in the biggest way possible. But when it comes to esports in education, we use it more as like a use case for students to take what they're learning in the classroom, and then apply it to a real-life scenario.

So, for example, we run a broadcast education program where students that are interested in becoming shoutcasters, or producers, or media people, in general, come in, work with us, and then actually broadcast real life esports matches of high schools playing against one another. And it gives them this safe environment where everybody knows what they're focused on to be able to put that stream out on Twitch or YouTube, and it gives them the opportunity to hone those skills. And while we use broadcast as the easiest example, you can also use it in the case of math, marketing, social media management, and a whole variety of other things.

JH: And it almost works on its own as well. And again, I'll reference my own son, but when I look at even my daughter, my son and their friends, the world has changed so dramatically where if my son is struggling, let's say Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, he spent hours on that. And it's funny because it was something he was so impassioned with that he would actually go and sit down in front of YouTube and find gamers that were working through different battles, and he would figure out where weapons were.

It's almost like the self-serving little environment where because we have so much access to technology, he's really teaching himself how to learn. That learning process is there. And so, I would assume it's the same going online and having conversations with your friends. He'll bring people over, and he and his buddies will discuss Minecraft. There are so many avenues that I think gaming can go. And just talking with you, it's clearly not, "We just set up competitions." It really is all about creating a social experience.

TS: Yeah. Well, I mean, I think about it as gaming was such an impactful part of my life since I was three years old watching my older brother and sister play Super Mario. So, when we looked at what we wanted to be in this space and what we really needed to accomplish in order to fulfill that mission, we knew that competition was the easiest thing to understand because you just say, "Hey, it's like sports, but you're playing video games instead." And people can understand that because the idea of playing games against another school and having a championship and things like that is pretty easy.

And then, to be able to use that as a beachhead to have these conversations about how esports informs learning and provides different opportunities for students to look at things in a slightly different way and for them to get involved in that process. And then, looking at the social impact side of it whether it's just helping people understand how social games are and why that's so important to be able to do those things, like talk about strategy, and especially when you're on the team, the same leadership teamwork, all those different qualities that you're trying to build in football or basketball are still there.

And then, we've also been able to have some really friendly conversations about things like diversity and inclusivity in gaming and mental health, which can be really difficult topics to make real. But when it comes to gaming, the cool thing is that the community is really

supportive and welcoming. And you find that when people share an interest in a particular game, like, for example, Minecraft, who you are, and what you look like and where you're from doesn't matter as much because the game bridges that gap in a way that it's hard for something else to do.

And then, with mental health, we've used it as a way to start that conversation with a lot of students. Especially at the high school level, they aren't really sure about, where do I go for this type of information and how do I know that I'm getting what I need out of this. And working with groups like Rise Above the Disorder and individual schools on their particular efforts, we've seen gaming become a really positive fashion for people to feel safe enough to have some conversations that they might not be willing to on their own.

JH: And that's fascinating because, again, in education, so much of what we're trying to accomplish is really those opening up and the social emotional pieces. And all of those, it's tough. You don't get to do that, really, when you're sitting for 45 minutes, 80 minutes, whatever the case may be going over fractions that just the time is not there for that. And I think a lot of teachers would like to have that experience.

And at the same time, it's a lot of soft skills, you've described. And what I mean by that is you're talking about creativity, leadership, those are things that don't end up getting addressed necessarily in the classroom. There really aren't any grades for some of those things. The ability to carry on a conversation, the ability to look at something differently, but those are the skills that employers are looking for. So, as we're talking about this I'm thinking, "God, there's such a space for this and such an outlet."

And to the point you made in the very beginning, so many people identify as gamers in some capacity that I think it really opens up the door for tremendous, tremendous community. And you must be seeing the numbers just going up astronomically.

TS: Yeah. Especially now with everything that's going on in the world, video game and distance learning pair really naturally together, which is great. And, in general, people are starting to become more comfortable with the idea of not thinking of gaming as like that stereotype of a

kid in their parents' basement that doesn't ever do anything else, and starting to understand and appreciate the possibilities beyond that.

So, it's been a long road, certainly, since the first video game was put out there, and it will continue to be a long road, but I think there's finally enough data and enough traction to start making the real case that people are comfortable because they don't see it as a risk. And as an administrator, they're not thinking like, "Oh, my God. If I you now invite video games into my school that I'm going to lose my job because I took a risk on it," which was one of the early hurdles that we had to get over. I feel good about where we're at now.

Using Technology to Support Gaming and Education in Schools

JH: Well, that. And I think, I would assume that building a club, it's going, like you said, through the administration. I would also assume that there is a curriculum component. There's somebody who has to be running this and sponsoring it, especially the K-12 level. But in higher ed and K-12, there's also got to be investment from the IT folks because if you're running some type of tournament, and you bring a group of kids in, you have to have gaming computers, you have to have collaboration technology, you have to have all of the technology to make this run, which we don't even see in the classroom, or if we do, it's sparse at best, and sometimes doesn't work.

TS: Yeah, we definitely go through a lot of really interesting scenarios depending on the school that we're working with. College and universities tend to be a little bit easier because once they've said, "Hey, we're all in on esports," they're willing to put a pretty significant budget behind it a lot of the time, which makes it a little bit easier. And with high school, you have to be a little bit more creative because you're dealing with, usually, a lot more strict requirements around the IT permissions and things like that, but you're also dealing with a significantly higher level of budget volatility.

So, what we typically will do when we go to work with a school is say, "Here's all these different options that are meant for where you are along this spectrum of resource availability, esports understanding and maturity, and then, ultimately, the goals of the school." And so, in some

cases, you may have institutions that don't have a particularly good computer lab; and therefore, some games are just out of their reach.

And so, we will redirect them towards maybe they've invested in X-boxes, or PlayStations, or something like that, or find that to be a more accessible option, then you can play a game like Rocket League, and it's still possible to get a lot of students involved in that really quickly. And then, over time, be able to say, "Here's the use case where not only are these PCs that you're upgrading are good for esports in a game like OverWatch or something, but you can also use them in the classroom in these different ways. And that way, they're really serving the educational mission of the institution and the campus while being able to enable these esports team in a more proficient way.

JH: It's a turn from the, I don't want to say Chromebook because it's a product, but, essentially, schools were running out trying to give everybody Chromebooks, but the reality is there, obviously, are applications where there's got to be a bigger investment and some thought put into it. But it sounds like you have covered so many different bases that if I'm a superintendent, or I'm a principal, or curriculum director, or even a teacher and I say, "This is exciting," how do I get in touch with you and your organization, Tyler, to start the conversation? What does that process look like?

TS: So, typically, we have a still a lot of outreach or schools will come to us and talk to us through our website, or sometimes, they'll be referred by another school in their district or something. And so, we'll have a conversation with, typically, a principal and IT director or, sometimes, like a superintendent at a district and just really have a conversation about what they're trying to accomplish, what's important to them. And then, we start to build out a plan with them that says, "We're brand new to this. And so, we're going to start really small, really easy, and just kind of get something up and running." And typically, it's going to be one Rocket League team because it's really easy. It's really easy to find data around it as you're building it out.

And then, bring in other partners that we have on the technology side where you're talking about hardware or IT-related items, and then talking about curriculum and all these things you want to do on the social side of it. And so, it's really planting a seed in the ground, and then

tending to the plant as it grows. And as we go through that process, schools get more comfortable with it, they get more sophisticated in their understanding of what's happening, and they're able to take it and do really cool things with it over time.

JH: Yeah, that's awesome. And I'm sitting here reflecting on the conversation, and we're coming to the close, and I'm thinking we could go on this conversation. And in fact, actually, you'll be joining me, I believe, it's the end of November at NYSCATE for a similar conversation. We'll have some more time, but there's so much to this. And I say it's exciting because, again, I think for schools, for academic programs, for kids, it is just such an exciting way to expand what they already love to do and, like you said, all those really cool things.

So, thank you so much for joining. Like I said, there's a lot more that I think we can talk about, but the good news is we have the opportunity to do that. And I look forward to continuing our conversation. And thank you for joining Aspire Technology on our Digital Aspirations in Education Podcast, which, again, is sponsored by Cisco. And Tyler, the last question that I'm going to ask you is this. When do you think there will be a GoldenEye tournament opened up to the public for guys like me to come in and show off my prowess?

TS: They come up every now and then. Just some really cool mods that have brought it back and made it more accessible. So, I would say as soon as you want to make it happen.

JH: And I was going to say I don't think it can be more successful because as far as I'm concerned, that was the greatest moments of my life playing that game. And the only reason I don't continue playing it is that I've got two kids, I'm married, I've got a house and pay bills to pay. But like I said, Tyler, thank you so much. Is there anything that we haven't talked about? Did we miss anything? Because I like I said, there's so much we could go into, but I think knowing what you're up to is really the key ingredient.

TS: I would just say that if you're a school administrator thinking about it, or a teacher, or even a student it's trying to figure out how to get it started, don't be intimidated. There's obviously a lot of stuff that you can go through but being able to start small and build into something is the most successful way to do it. And don't be afraid to have a conversation.

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JH: Awesome. Again. Thank you, Tyler, so much. I appreciate it.

TS: Thanks for having me.

This transcript has been edited for clarity

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