BEYOND THE SCREEN

MOUNT UNION'S NEW ESPORTS PROGRAM ATTRACTS A NEW GENERATION OF STUDENTS IN ONE OF THE WORLD'S RISING COMMUNITIES

Located at one of the most high-trafficked areas in Alliance, a building that once held prescriptions and grocery items is now home to Mount Union's response to a $1.4 billion and growing field. Competitive esports is one of the fastest growing communities both across the nation and on myriad college campuses. Mount Union has shown its commitment to making its esports program successful with industry-leading resources in a space that intends to be an inclusive gaming hub for the Mount Union community.

What is esports?

The competitive esports industry is part of the $138 billion video game market and features athletes from across the world who play a wide array of games. A far cry from Pong and Space Invaders, the games featured in the most popular and lucrative tournaments range from sports games to battle arena and even digital fantasy card games like "Hearthstone," which are broadcasted worldwide.

As the field continues its rapid ascent, professional gamers are earning an average salary of $60,000 each year, with the most prolific face of the industry, Tyler "Ninja" Blevins, making $500,000

each *month*. Much of this comes from sponsorships and live-streaming, yet game developer Blizzard recently signed a television contract with ESPN to create the College Esports Championship. To some, that may seem surprising. However, a study conducted by Syracuse University estimated that, by 2021, an esports final will have 84 million viewers, which would be more than the World Series, NBA Finals, and Stanley Cup.

More than Video Games

Although the creation of the esports program at Mount Union stems from the industry's rapid rise, Director and Head Coach Derek Spinell is excited to structure the program to be successful while embodying the mission of the institution. An industry veteran who has been an events contractor for Major League Gaming since 2013, Spinell understands what prospective students are seeking.

"I was drawn to this position because it was a program that I could build from the ground up with a very supportive administration," said Spinell. "This is a great opportunity for students who have an interest in this expanding field. Across the country, everybody who is involved in esports is working together to help the continual growth of collegiate esports."

HyperX Cloud II Headset

Zowie BenQ XL2430 144hz Monitor

Zowie FK1 Mouse

Zowie Celeritas II Keyboard

iBUYPOWER Slate 2 Custom Built Gaming PCs
- Intel i7 9700k
- MSI GeForce RTX 2080 8 GB
- 16 GB RAM
- Liquid Cooled

Top: The Esports Center, located on the corner of State Street and Union Avenue, features more than 40 gaming stations with industry-leading hardware.

Bottom: The Varsity Lounge provides a space for athletes to relax and strategize between matches. It also doubles as a professional meeting space for companies interested in partnership opportunities with the team.

> **"The team atmosphere of esports involves everybody constantly pushing one another to reach the potential we have; that will definitely help me as I proceed academically."**

- AJ Hammond '22
Computer Science and Management
Hermitage, PA

"I am a transfer student coming from a community college to Mount Union. In transferring, I have had a lot of doors open up to me that would otherwise not be available," said Jordan Wilson '21, a criminal justice and psychology double major of Greenfield, Ohio. "This is just one of the many great ones."

Mount Union will offer scholarships for qualified students in its esports program when it officially launches in fall of 2019. The games featured at the launch of the program will be "League of Legends," "Overwatch," and "Rocket League." Although scholarships for playing these games competitively will be a selling point for many prospective students, Spinell knows academics and career preparation remain focal points of the Mount Union student experience.

"Esports student athletes learn many transferable skills similar to those who play other collegiate team sports," Spinell said. "In order to succeed, these players need to have skills in interpersonal communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and time management to balance their studies and practices."

"Personally, I cannot wait to play on a stage again with great teammates and win some championships," said AJ Hammond '22, a computer science and management double major of Hermitage, Pennsylvania. "Some of my greatest memories in my life are the ones where I was on stage competing, laughing, and, most importantly, winning with my team."

Spinell plans to utilize Mount Union's Starfish retention software so he can make sure athletes in the program are excelling outside of team activities. Students on the esports team will be required to hold membership in at least one other campus organization and volunteer in campus community-service initiatives.

Upon seeing models for success while traveling to peer institutions and national conferences, Spinell also hopes to work with academic programs to strengthen the interdisciplinary connection between academics and esports. One of his goals is to work with the exercise science program to develop a training regimen for the esports team focusing on spine health, reaction time, and hand-eye coordination.

"I want these athletes to be engaged members of the campus community while getting the chance to be part of something bigger than themselves," Spinell said.

New Hub of Campus

With the Hoover-Price Campus Center on the opposite end of campus, Spinell hopes the building that held a once-downtrodden Family Dollar can become a shared space for everyone at Mount Union.

The facility features more than 40 gaming stations and a broadcast projection that are open to the campus community, as well as a lounge for players on the team.

Those who are not interested in playing competitively are still welcome to utilize the space, as video games are meant to be enjoyable at their core. Spinell envisions the area will be a place where otherwise introverted students can feel comfortable opening up and being socially engaged.

"The people you meet and interact with create a sense of camaraderie," Spinell said. "It really is awesome to see people come out of their shell through something you have a hand in creating."