



Mike Aguilar

# Esports

## Gets Down to Business

The OU Department of Esports readies a new generation for careers in the multi-billion-dollar gaming industry.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

**Z**ach Mazzie practices with his team five days a week, spends hours analyzing film and gets keyed up before games just like any other student-athlete on scholarship at the University of Oklahoma. But Mazzie turns his gifts of drive and razor-sharp reflexes into OU victories through a screen, controller and headset.

The Park City, Utah, freshman is one of the first esports athletes recruited to OU. He also is part of the university's largest and fastest-growing student organization and a new department preparing students for careers in the multi-billion-dollar industry of gaming and esports.

Most people are familiar with computer gaming. "But gaming and esports are not



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Ashley West

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Travis Caperton



the same,” says Michael Aguilar, director of OU’s Department of Esports and Co-Curricular Innovation. “Esports are team-based video games with a prize pool. If gaming is like playing pickup basketball with your friends, esports is the NBA Finals.”

And like the NBA Finals, esports tournaments are streamed to vast audiences and create revenue through sponsorships, advertising, media rights and event ticket sales. “It’s almost a 100% copy of sports entertainment on the business end,” Aguilar says. Professional esports have drawn an estimated 474 million audience members and \$1.08 billion

in revenue this year, according to games analytics company Newzoo.

Esports also are booming on the collegiate level. “In 2016, less than 25 universities offered institutional esports programs,” he says. “There are now more than 275 in the United States and Canada.” That represents a 1,000% growth, with teams in each of the U.S. “Power Five” conferences.

Within the Big 12, only OU and the University of Kansas offer esports scholarships. When OU moves to the SEC, it will join esports peers at the University of Mississippi and the University of Missouri.

“We are going to walk in with a very big opportunity to help sculpt SEC involvement in esports,” says Aguilar, whose program has already seen early competitive success that includes an appearance at the 2018 OP Live Dallas regional grand finals. “OU is developing 16 different teams across 12 different game titles, and four of those teams are at the scholarship level.”

OU offers partial scholarships for varsity students competing under the game titles of *League of Legends*, *Overwatch*, *Rocket League* and *Valorant*, he says, adding that the esports

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**LEFT** - Michael Aguilar has led OU’s efforts in esports and gaming from its earliest days as an organization and is helping students prepare for future careers. **BELOW LEFT** - Zach Mazzie is one of the first esports athletes recruited to OU. The Park City, Utah, freshman prepares for the national *Overwatch* tournament from his room in Cross Village. **BELOW** - OU 2020 alumna Callie Simonton competes at the 2018 OP Live Dallas Tournament.



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OP LIVE DALLAS  
SEPTEMBER 22, 2018  
OVERWATCH INTERCOLLEGIATE COMPETITION  
IRVING CONVENTION CENTER, TEXAS

SOONER ESPORTS

“When you’re gaming and you complete an objective, you release the same endorphins as if you made a basket or scored a touchdown, and the adrenaline starts going.”



program is fully licensed and players bear the OU logo on their uniforms.

That’s a universe away from where everything began just five years ago, when Aguilar partnered with then-OU students Jack Counts and Alex Tu to create the Esports Association at the University of Oklahoma. Counts can remember chalking sidewalks and posting fliers to drum up student interest.

“I was a closet gamer in high school,” admits Counts, a 2020 OU graduate and the association’s founding president. “When I came to college, I realized there were so many other people who like gaming and we could all enjoy it together. My biggest goal was to create a home for gamers on campus.”

Counts knew they were onto something when student volunteers multiplied quickly and the association’s first official event, a 2017 mini-tournament, attracted more than 100 attendees. Soon after, Aguilar and association members began collaborating on a strategic plan driven by students for students. The plans centers on six program “pillars.”

“The pillars are a road map helping us build the culture of who we want to become, establish partnerships with OU programs and develop a pipeline to post-graduation careers,” says Aguilar, who recently was named one of 30 “Higher Education IT Influencers Worth a Follow” by *EdTech Magazine*.

The pillars—in Leadership Development, The Community, Media and News, Production, Streaming Entertainment, and Intercollegiate Esports—will tie to existing OU degree programs and future job opportunities. A practicum within OU’s Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication on livestreaming production for gaming and esports launched in August, and a course on business analytics in esports also is under development.

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**ABOVE RIGHT** - A veteran of both the U.S. Navy and Army, Jody Farmer has found new opportunities to use her leadership training as a coach for OU esports athletes.

Additional courses are to come, Aguilar says, pointing out that other universities’ programs tend to focus solely on either intercollegiate esports competition or academic tie-ins to esports, while OU’s does both, plus more.

Zach Mazzie, the recent esports recruit, says the combination brought him to Norman.

“I’m excited about competing on the esports team, but the thing I’m most looking forward to are the plans for the entire program. That’s why I’m here as an out-of-state student,” says Mazzie, who was scouted by an OU coach during online tournaments featuring as many as 200 teams competing in the game *Overwatch*. “It’s definitely a direction I think the industry should be moving.”

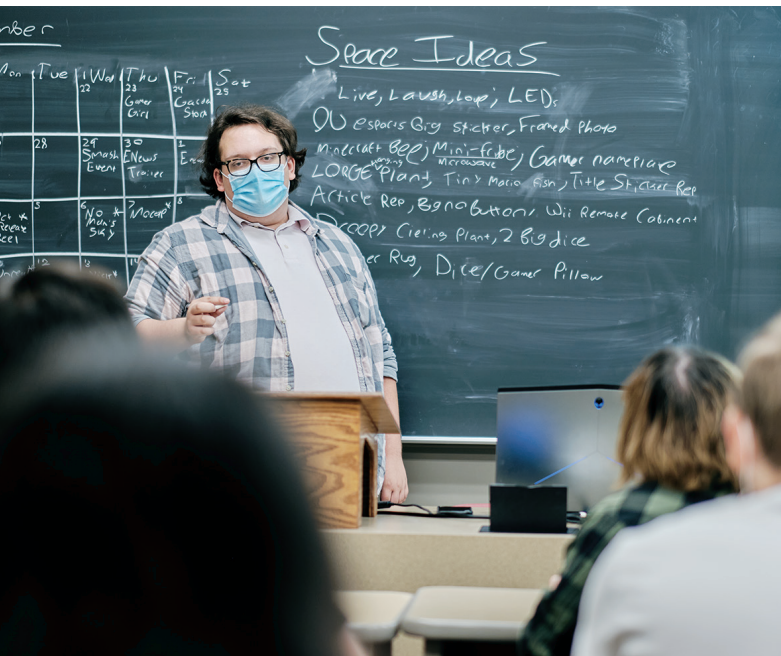
That direction sped the growth of OU’s program, which was elevated to the Department of Esports and Co-Curricular Development in 2000. The same year, an anonymous donor established the Solidus Scholarships and Awards.

The scholarships carry the online name of the late Forest Dayne “Solidus” Sharp, an OU student who helped establish the first gaming club at the university and was the driving force behind “Super Bit Wars,” one of Oklahoma’s premier gaming tournaments. The tournament now attracts esports professionals from around the world.

Solidus scholarships are available within each pillar to students like Michela Thompson, a Yukon, Okla., public relations senior who co-leads a News and Media team of 20 writers contributing articles, reviews, opinion pieces and event coverage for Esports and Co-Curricular Innovation’s comprehensive website and streaming channel, [Sooneresports.org](http://Sooneresports.org).

Eighteen months ago, Thompson was an OU transfer student seeking a way to get involved. “I love gaming—I would talk about it to anyone who wanted to listen,” she says. “Then, when I started on the news team, people re-tweeted my work on Twitter and made comments thanking me for writing stories.





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**LEFT** - OU student Derek Snow, co-director of Esports and Co-Curricular Development's media and news team, helps volunteers plan September coverage for the program's web page and social media.

"That was more people than had ever cared about anything I'd done in my life, except my grandma," Thompson quips. "It was really exciting because gaming had been this totally singular experience. It transformed into something I could do with friends and use to connect with other people, as well as write about and share my passion.

"I realized that I'd found a viable career path," she says. "And although I don't know if esports is part of my journey, I had the opportunity to speak about my Sooner esports experiences during a recent job interview." The interview with an online wedding floral business resulted in Thompson being hired as a full-time media manager while still in college.

Jody Farmer, a veteran of both the U.S. Navy and Army, has discovered her own budding career path and fulfillment as coach of three OU esports teams. The 38-year-old OU sophomore from Maidstone, Vt., ruptured discs in her spine while serving with the Army military police in Iraq. She became involved with gaming through the Wounded Warrior Project and led weekly online games and tournaments for veterans.

"When you're gaming and you complete an objective, you release the same endorphins as if you made a basket or scored a touchdown, and the adrenaline starts going," Farmer says.

The creative media production major now coaches 20 students competing in *Call of Duty League* and *War Zone*, both fast-paced, strategic games. Farmer says the experience has restored something she lost upon leaving the military.

"I have students who ask me questions and look up to me. I can be a leader again," she says. "When I got injured and was at home all the time, I felt wasted. I wasn't using the skills I was taught, and now I'm able to do that.

"There's a sense of pride and camaraderie when you teach students to become a team, build each other up and support each other," Farmer says, adding that her team members have formed important connections and help one another through

both academic and personal challenges. "Seeing them grow gives me the same feeling I would have when my soldiers succeeded at something."

Outside of OU, Farmer is moving toward her dream of becoming a professional esports coach. An online esports seminar she designed for middle and high school students quickly filled, and Farmer was recently asked to organize an esports tournament for high school and college women throughout a four-state region.

Aguilar is thrilled to see OU's program providing such viable career skills and preparing high-caliber, competitive esports teams. But, he says, an even more important aspect of the Department of Esports and Co-Curricular Innovation might be the broad community it has created.

Any student can join the OU Gaming Club, now the university's largest and fastest-growing campus organization. More than 2,600 members have officially signed up via the online platform Discord, which promotes the club's events and features chat groups linked to each of the program's pillars.

"The Gaming Club is the community pulse, something that every student can be a part of," Aguilar says. "We've gained 1,000 additional members just since July. And nearly every minority demographic has doubled, including women."

Michela Thompson says fully half of the students who joined her News and Media team this fall are women. She credits the growth to the culture that her fellow OU Gaming Club members and Aguilar have created.

"OU has cultivated a community that sees gamers as equals," Thompson says, acknowledging that she is an introvert who was hesitant at first to put herself out into a public forum. "We make it clear that we should be kind and respectful of each other."

By winter, the community and each pillar of the Department of Esports and Co-Curricular Innovation will have a new home in OU's Cross Village. Students will have access to a computer lab with gaming software that will serve casual gamers and organized esports team competitions alike. Specialized equipment and offices will be provided for students producing news, media and streaming entertainment. And a dedicated space for events and social mixers will help bring OU students from all walks of life together.

"Gaming and esports are inclusive by design," Aguilar says. "There is no entry barrier, whether students are men or women, whether they're in a wheelchair or standing 7 feet tall. It doesn't matter if students are from in state or out of state, an engineering or law major. All are welcome at this table." 🍷

*Anne Barajas Harp is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.*