

Andrea Hopelain Transcript

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Matt: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move at an ever-increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder and CEO of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the shifting consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now, and how you can keep up. Welcome to the Speed of Culture. Today, we're thrilled to be joined by Andrea Hopelain, the GM and SVP for EA Sports. After a career spanning 20 years in media, kids TV, and video games, she's left a legacy that will forever pave the way for girls in marketing and sports. Andrea, so great to see you here at CES.

Andrea: Thank you for having me. This is going to be fun.

Matt: Yeah, this is going to be fun. And thanks so much for joining. I was looking through your background and you've cut your teeth in the entertainment space and came right out of the gate in your career working for Disney and ESPN. Was the entertainment world always a place that you wanted to end up in?

Andrea: You know, I've been thrilled and honored and worked quite hard to build a career at the intersection of sports, entertainment, and technology. I've always loved the idea and the motivations behind fans. I'm obsessed with the business of fandom. So the career choices have been both intentional and opportunistic along the way, but super excited about the journey that it's taken me and the things that I've gotten to accomplish along the way.

Matt: Absolutely. And in terms of the intersection of that and marketing, why was that an area that you decided to specifically pursue within the world of entertainment?

Andrea: I think it goes back to that obsession with fandom and trying to understand why people fall in love with what they fall in love with. You know, we all either have a team or a show or a character or a world or a type of competition that we just love. Getting deep and understanding those consumers' first motivations for why you love what they love was at the heart of my becoming a marketer. But it's transcended into very different spaces and allowed me to grow big businesses now and lead with that consumer-first orientation.

Matt: Yeah, and it's not a loss to me that you started your career off at Disney. And when I interview a lot of people on the podcasts that are in CPG or Food, a lot of them start at Procter & Gamble because of the discipline that they learn at a company like that, they're able to take for their careers. And I imagine you being in the entertainment space is very similar to Disney because it's a worldwide leader in entertainment. As you look back on your time at Disney, what are some of the main takeaways that you were able to take with you for the other roles that you would then take part in?

Andrea: I mean, I think that Disney was a masterclass in building a brand.

Matt: Yeah.

Andrea: And building a brand that has deep storytelling at its core, but multidimensional entry points for consumers to come in and find their way and to express their fandom. And so whether you're a Star Wars fan or a Marvel fan or a Mickey Mouse fan, like, you know, there's plenty of ways, whether you come in through the parks, come through it, and a comic book, come in through a T-shirt or a toy. Disney was a masterclass in building a brand and creating brand extensions that tell the story in a variety of different ways and access points. I think, you know, to your point on consumer products, many people coming in from Procter and Gamble, I was very lucky to have been able to go spend some time at Hasbro later in my career, in the middle of my career, where it taught me the art of commercializing a brand through products as well. And so I've kind of gotten both ends of the spectrum in my career.

Matt: Right. Because Disney, was more of the licensing agreement, right? When it came to the toy category?

Andrea: Correct. Yeah, Disney for me was about building audiences and sharing our stories and, you know, driving eyeballs and ears into IP management. And in Hasbro in particular, I ran the girl's business there. I was responsible for the Disney Princess and Frozen business and commercializing that through play and toys and products.

Matt: So let's talk about your stint at Hasbro because obviously, it is a much different role than working at Disney. You also have to think about the retail footprint and working with those channel partners. So I guess what were some of your focuses and takeaways there?

Andrea: Hasbro was the first opportunity for me to transition from driving audiences and driving fan growth into really commercializing a business. You know, I was responsible for a full P&L, responsible for a team that oversaw SKU development, product development, and the engineering of those products. And also really, to your point, the sell-in and sell-through to retail and e-commerce players. And so it taught me the art of full business management, which was an exciting and eye-opening chapter of my career. I remember the first time I went to China and met with some of our manufacturers in China.

Matt: Pretty eye-opening, right?

Andrea: Eye-opening. And even just thinking about the things that as a consumer you don't think about. You know, as I mentioned I ran the fashion doll business the princess business and so the art of stitching the seams on the little tiny fabric dresses and the art of rooting hair and just the choices you have to make in terms of how do you make the right choices that ensure that the product is exciting and delivers on the features and benefits that you're selling to the consumer but also knowing how you make money as a business too.

Matt: And also, I would imagine it has to be reliable in terms of the supply chain and making sure you can manage the inventory and get it to your retail partners.

Andrea: All of it. And so it was like a marketer through and through the learning, the art of really owning and developing and leading a business through, you know, that consumer-first lens. It was a game-changing career opportunity for me that I think has been one of the most fundamental for me in terms of the future from that point.

Matt: And the other unique thing about Hasbro is, you know when you're marketing a product that's consumed by children, the audience is the parents as well. So it's an art form of marketing, which is unlike somebody who's marketing Coca-Cola as a person who drinks Coca-Cola. So talk to me about that approach and how you're able to refine that over time.

Andrea: It's why the art of storytelling is so important across the board and why insights are, you know, the driver of any great marketer's success. I'll tell you a funny story. When I came to Hasbro on my first day on the job, my boss said to me, she gave me one of those surprise moments of welcome to the company and surprise and handed me an RFP from Disney. She said, you know, we know we just hired you and you've just worked at Disney, but guess what? Welcome back. And the RFP was for the Disney Princess and Frozen business.

Matt: So you're competing with other toy manufacturers to get the license you can manufacture on that IP.

Andrea: Correct. And the Disney Princess business had been going through a little bit of maybe a wane in perception from parents. I mean, parents saw the princesses as, you know, the beautiful debonair women, stereotypical, you know, just waiting to be kissed. But it was the start of the next chapter for Disney and the Princess and Frozen business, which was rooted in a core theme. It became a multidimensional theme called Dream Big Princess. And it was about celebrating the inner strengths of all the princesses. And so whether that was Tiana, who was an amazing cook, or Merida, who was an athlete.

Matt: Or Moana comes to mind as well. Yep.

Andrea: Exactly. Moana. And so it was a really fun challenge for me because I got to reinvent the product strategy for toys and play in how we celebrated the inner strengths. And we built Rapunzel toys that had Rapunzel's long, flowing, beautiful hair becomes the paintbrush for the canvases of our art. And the pack out, you know, we packed the toys out. So instead of featuring their beautiful clothes, we put them in really strong, heroic poses, inside the boxes. And it became a really fun marketing challenge for us to work with Disney to celebrate the new theme of Dreaming Big. And telling the parents the story as much as telling the young girls and boys who would buy our product.

Matt: Yeah, it's interesting because Disney has these tales, in some instances, that is the oldest time, and they continue with that in the IP, but then the world changes around them, and then they have to adapt. But it's easy if you are marketing sneakers and you can just change the design to make it more contemporary. But talking about these stories, it, I would imagine, becomes a little bit more challenging.

Andrea: Yes, characters, stories, and worlds. And, you know, the good news is there are endless threads to pull. You just have to kind of dig a little deeper and find the insight. And I always feel like the insight leads to innovation.

Matt: Yeah, and Disney it's going to be interesting. You know, Bob Iger came back, and they're trying to juggle a lot of challenges and opportunities in the space. Their theme park business seems to continue to do great. And then the streaming business is highly competitive. And it's just going to be interesting to see how they compete with the Netflixes of the world, even the Amazons of the world moving forward.

Andrea: Yep, I'm rooting for them.

Matt: Yes. We'll be right back with the Speed of Culture after a few words from our sponsors. So you made the jump from Hasbro to EA to gaming, and gaming is something different than the past roles that you had prior. You're marketing to largely a different audience, and it's a space that moves a lot quicker than some of the IP we're talking about. What did you see in the opportunity at EA to make you jump on that opportunity?

Andrea: Yeah, for me, you know, I saw tremendous synergies from the things that I knew very well. IP, characters, and worlds aren't that different than athletes, teams, leagues, you know, and why people fall in love with those things aren't that different. It's a fandom. At the heart of it, it's fandom. And so I loved very much staying rooted in brands that make emotional connections with audiences. I can tell you that I knew that my career had a gap in it. I had not spent any time deeply in sort of digital or technology-led businesses. And I saw such an interesting opportunity at Electronic Arts to combine my strengths and the things and power of play. I certainly knew to play very well at that point from an analog play through a toy but to transition to an interactive space.

Matt: Far more immersive space.

Andrea: Far more immersive and operating really at a much greater pace and speed.

Matt: Absolutely. And, you know, we're here at CES in Vegas, and there's so much innovation being discussed. What do you see in the gaming industry in the future? I had an interview with Shachar Scott from Meta Reality Labs talking about the things that they're doing with their VR lenses and how that's going to be a huge intersection with gaming. I imagine you have no shortage of conversations with EA, about similar topics. Where do you see gaming headed?

Andrea: I think for us, the future of sport and the future of gaming is truly interactive and connecting fans. We have one of the largest sports fan communities on the planet with hundreds of millions of people coming into our experiences on an annual basis. And not only do they love to play, but they love to connect. And they're connecting with a community of like-minded fans in a space where they can participate and play together. It's really powerful. And so you'll see, I think the future is rooted in harnessing the power of connectivity through interactive experiences and continuing to build onto that in ways that reduce fiction, particularly for sports fans who are watching, are playing, are connecting, are creating around sport. And they also are participating.

Matt: I just think that, when I'm betting, I mean, that's driving even more engagement. You see it everywhere. I was at an NBA game last week and everyone around, for better or for worse, it is whether the leagues are embracing it. Everybody is putting five hours in a game or 100 hours in a game and it's bringing people closer and closer to the sport. Fantasy sports, all those things.

Andrea: All of it. So there's an incredible opportunity to continue to lean into connecting fans across all of the dimensions of their sports fandom. And also an ability for us to keep leaning in. We have one of the youngest audiences in sports, Cedar Sports. If you think about the youngest generation's first form of entertainment now is gaming. And so the position we hold and can continue to drive forward in interactively leading the future of sport, I think we're well positioned for that.

Matt: Yeah, it's two-way because I think that as much as the NFL takes advantage of Madden, Madden kind of takes advantage of the NFL both ways. You know, younger kids, when they play Madden, it teaches them about the game, teaches them about the players, and then when they get older, they're more likely to take their kid to an NFL game because they've been engaged with the sport in a way they might otherwise not have.

Andrea: Yeah, the youngest generation is an athlete first now. Athlete first, then team, then league.

Matt: It's almost like music. They like the song versus the album. Yeah. Fantasy sports are a big reason why.

Andrea: Exactly. And inside of our games, you know, they're learning about sport. They're learning about the team. They're learning athlete stats. In ways that surprise and delight us. You know, they know more about the strength of the cornerback on this team. You know, ESPN might not be talking about it, but certainly, they as fans now know about it through their exposure to our games. We've heard countless stories of youth who are growing up and learning about sports through EA Sports. And not only are they playing and engaging and becoming lifelong fans of sports, but they're also participating in sports. So, you know, you're about, I heard one the other day, someone was telling me about how their son played Madden and then decided to go try out for the high school football team. And it was through fun he had playing and connecting with the sport through our game that led him to become an athlete as well.

Matt: That's awesome. There are other learning opportunities too with Madden because me and my son play all the time. He's older now, but I remember giving him an allowance to buy the coins where you can buy players. And I remember he was probably 11 years old and he had to decide, am I going to get two good players or one great player for the 50 coins I have? For those of you who don't know what I'm talking about, in Madden, you could build your own team and trade players with other people and try to build the ultimate team. You could also buy players with coins. That's a whole new gameplay modality that didn't exist five, or ten years ago.

Andrea: It's one of the really fun ways and one of the most competitive ways of playing some of our sports games at EA Sports. And yes, exactly to your point, teaches to be about the strategy of sport and what it means to be a manager, you know, a club manager or a GM of a team.

Matt: Yeah. We've talked about American football, but I know a huge title that you work on is what's more known as football around the world, which is what we call soccer. A big title that EA has in that area was FIFA but is getting rebranded. Talk to me about that property overall and what the thinking behind rebranding it is.

Andrea: So we rebranded FIFA to EA Sports FC this past year, which was arguably one of the largest entertainment rebrands in history.

Matt: I probably know, this is what you guys took lately.

Andrea: We have not taken it lately. Gosh. No, that was a bit of a handwinger for us. We've been in the business for a couple of decades now and have amassed hundreds of millions of fans that come back annually to play our game. And we're incredibly proud of that. And to that insight of our fans being fans of athletes first, then teams, then clubs. In addition to our partnership with FIFA, we've also had partnerships with over 300 different licenses underneath FIFA to deliver this really special

game that we have. For us, you know, as we think about the future of sport and we think about the future of interactivity, we're focused on a couple of components. Play is certainly fundamental, but watch, create, connect, and participate. As we think about our own ambition spaces, it became a natural moment for us to start to push the boundaries and start setting out onto our own. We knew that we had to do it right, though. And there were three components of doing it right. One was authenticity. And so the maintaining of the over 19,000 players, you know, 700 teams and clubs inside the game. Two was the innovation. Annually, we're driving significant year-on-year innovation and ensuring we're delivering the best in gameplay. And then purpose. Which was an opportunity for us to start to own and to reach resonance for our brand in the market. And so maybe seen us launch some initiatives like FC Futures, where we're investing in grassroots sport and trying to lead our brand forward.

Matt: Yeah, and the sport of soccer is obviously really taking hold in the U.S. When Leo Messi came to Miami this year. It was like the Beatles stepping foot in New York. So it's incredible to see how this is spreading with the Olympics and the World Cup. And I just feel like it continues to gain momentum as a sport.

Andrea: The momentum is huge. We've seen a lot of growth in North America. The World Cup certainly held Messi, as you're right. I would also say the NWSL and the acceleration of the NWSL here in North America has been a big driver for sport, particularly among youths.

Matt: Yeah, I mean, the Olympics has, I think, drawn a lot of attention to women's soccer players, and they've been very competitive, certainly more competitive than the male U.S. Team, and I think that's driven a lot of popularity in the U.S. As well. So in terms of the business of video games, your business used to be you had to go into GameStop or whatever and buy the discs, and then it became basically all streaming now. I'd imagine most of your sales are streaming. So does that mean that you're just a direct-to-consumer company now, and how's that changed the way that you go to market? Because I would imagine retailers are for a small piece of the pie.

Andrea: Our business has shifted over the last decade. We're seeing significantly more digital transactions, I would say, without having a specific number. I would say the lion's share of our business is digital now. But we still have really important partners that help us deliver that business. Certainly, we do have physical retailers, and you will see us across all of them around the world and, you know, the big ones and the smaller ones around the world. But we have great partners, partners like Microsoft, partners like Sony and Steam, and others that are also helping us distribute our game through their consoles. And so they're an important partner of ours as we continue to deliver. And usually, you find someone's like, oh, I play on Xbox and oh, I play or I play on PlayStation. I think what's most important about the work we do is to reduce the barrier for fans between those platforms. And so really, over the last couple of years, we've significantly increased the technology that allows cross-platform play. So me to be able to find you on-

Matt: PlayStation on Xbox.

Andrea: Correct. And not letting that be a barrier for fans.

Matt: Yeah. So as we look ahead to 2024 and beyond, and we're here to see, yes, what are some of the innovations that you're excited about, either relative to their impact on the gaming industry or otherwise, that in your role you have your eye on?

Andrea: There's a couple. We've been working on several things that sort of start to push the bounds of who we are and what we represent. I mentioned to you that I'm excited about the potential for EA Sports to be a leader in the future of sport. And that comes with sort of expanding ourselves into new categories and taking on new challenges. This past year, we partnered with Nike and we launched an Air Max 90, a custom Air Max 90 inside of Madden for Madden fans. They were able to purchase it inside of our game and then also get a virtual pair of those Air Max 90s for their avatar. So they are the physical shoe and the virtual. And so, you know, that was an expansion of our capabilities and driving commerce. You're seeing us partner with traditional entertainment partners in new ways. We partnered with Ted Lasso inside of EA Sports FIFA last year and did a whole AFC Richmond experience, which was amazing. So I think you're going to continue to see us push the lines in those spaces.

Matt: In-game advertising. You do in-game advertising as well, don't you?

Andrea: Inside of our mobile games, in-game advertising is more common.

Matt: Gotcha. Because I recall at one point seeing logos of brands inside your games.

Andrea: So core to who we are is to deliver the authenticity of sport.

Matt: Got it.

Andrea: So I'm a big F1 fan. And so, you know, as you're racing, if you're on the Vegas Grand Prix circuit or the Miami circuit, you'll see a lot of the partners in sport, whether it's the DHL Bridge or Aramco, because it supports the authenticity of delivering our games.

Matt: That's awesome. And what about AI? I mean, I would imagine that it's got to have a big impact moving forward in the world of gaming.

Andrea: Machine learning has been a really big driver of our ability to drive realism inside of our game. And it's massively, massively changed the way we're able already to drive very specific play styles for our players and to show the uniqueness of athletes and how they, their mannerisms, the way they dribble, the way they move their bodies. And so machine learning has been a big part of our development for some time and will continue to be.

Matt: Yeah, it's fascinating. So zooming out, you know, as we wrap up here, Andrea like you've had such a cool career working in companies like Disney and Hasbro, but now EA and a lot of people who go into marketing would love to have the career that you've had today and to play in such a fun space as well as play at the highest level of business. What advice do you have for maybe younger people who are listening to the podcast and are at the beginning of their career and want to be able to pursue a similar path? What are some of the things that you think you did right to enable you to have these opportunities?

Andrea: I have a personal mantra that I like to share a lot, which is just the three C's. The first is confidence. You know, you've got to believe in yourself and you've got to have the confidence that it's okay to ask a question. It's okay to open a door and you have to believe in yourself a little bit. The second is candor, being able to spot things and have a point of view.

Matt: That comes along with confidence, doesn't it?

Andrea: It does come with confidence.

Matt: Yeah.

Andrea: It does. And the third is curiosity. And really, they're not in any order. But being curious, and asking deep questions, I think all of those allow you to have really interesting conversations and open your mind to perspectives that you may not have considered. And actually, I find curiosity to be one of the most interesting things. When you have someone curious sitting by your side, asking you lots of questions, and thinking thoughtfully about your business. Those are the people that I want to hire. Those are the people who are showing me that they have the right brain space to push boundaries, experiment, and progress. And so curiosity, candor, and confidence, are probably three of the most important ingredients to drive a career forward.

Matt: And how do you think embracing those tenets has been different for you being a woman or young woman in business when you first got started? Because, you know, some industries are more male-dominated. And maybe some people could think that they don't have the license or permission to be candid. Maybe as much as males do. And I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

Andrea: Look, imposter syndrome is real, male or female.

Matt: Yeah.

Andrea: And I have worked in a lot of male-dominated spaces throughout my career. I think bolstering my confidence, even if it meant faking it till I made it, I think that's been one of the more important things. But also being authentically me and showing up and keep trying.

Matt: Absolutely. Well, we're going to leave it with that. Thank you so much, Andrea It's been awesome. Cannot wait to continue to see your success from afar and can't wait to see the new games you guys are going to have coming out in the next year. So it's going to be awesome.

Andrea: Yes. Look forward to college football.

Matt: Oh, I was going to ask you about that. Go Blue, by the way. Congrats on Michigan. Is college football coming out?

Andrea: We are looking forward to an exciting summer for college football.

Matt: Okay, there you go. There you have it. And we'll see what that means moving forward. So on behalf of Suzy and the Adweek team, thanks again to Andrea Hopelain, SVP of EA Sports, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review the Speed of Culture podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Until next time, see you soon, everyone. Take care. The Speed of Culture is brought to you by Suzy as part of the Adweek Podcast Network and Acast Creator Network. You can listen and subscribe to all of Adweek's podcasts by visiting adweek.com/podcasts. To find out more about Suzy, head to suzy.com. And make sure to search for The Speed of Culture on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Google Podcasts, or anywhere else podcasts are found. Click follow so you don't miss out on any future episodes. On behalf of the team here at Suzy, thanks for listening.