

Is esports a beneficiary of a global pandemic?



Competitors pack a Southern California venue at a Super Smash Bros. tournament. (photo courtesy of Tobechi Ugwumba)

Nathan Ansell – June 4, 2020

When Cole Schwartz, founder of the Esports @UCLA club, graduated college a year ago, he didn't have to look far to complete his post-undergraduate job search. Schwartz, hired as UCLA Recreation's first esports engagement coordinator last October, called the position a "dream come true," and he was eager for a chance to prove that esports could be as engaging as any traditional sport. He never imagined that such an opportunity would arise so soon.

With the COVID-19 pandemic causing major leagues to shut down, it seemed like esports competitions were in a prime position to benefit from an increased spotlight.

“We've definitely won over some new people,” Schwartz said, “But I think that a lot of people are certainly looking forward to traditional sports coming back.”

The gaming-focused live-streaming platform Twitch saw its average concurrent viewers increase from 1.4 million in February 2020 to 2.5 million in April, the first full month of the pandemic, and total hours watched shot up from 1 billion to 1.8 billion. Esports broadcasts were seeing record audiences like never before.

Despite this, questions remained as to whether these numbers were sustainable.

“It's not going to be an especially strong effect, simply because [esports] is something that people tend to participate in only if they have some ties to competitive gaming,” Emmet Hilly said. Hilly is the captain of Northwestern University's Overwatch team. “It's not something that I foresee someone not interested in before suddenly becoming interested in simply because they have more time.”

Some esports did receive showcases to more mainstream audiences. Facing shortages of live games and related news to cover, networks such as ESPN and Fox Sports turned to online gaming, airing both professional events and impromptu matches between athletes and celebrities. MLB, NASCAR, NBA and other leagues broadcast virtual versions of their own sports on Twitch and other platforms.

Nielsen ratings estimates were down overall – NBCSN's IndyCar simulated event attracted just 55% of the viewership of last year's real races – but ESPN and Fox Sports both saw their virtual competitions significantly outperforming reruns of classic football and basketball games. NASCAR iRacing, which boasts the five largest American audiences for televised esports events, averaged 1.14 million viewers through May, according to Sports Media Watch.

Ryan Garfat, senior vice president of business operations for Kroenke Sports & Entertainment, which owns the Overwatch League's Los Angeles Gladiators and the Call of Duty League's Los Angeles Guerrillas, said because many traditional athletes already game between training sessions and on road trips, these competitions are a natural fit.

“Gaming has filled in the gaps for [traditional athletes],” Garfat said. “They're competitive people, and so competitive online games and the growth of it really does feed into where the ethos of a professional athlete is, so it's not surprising that you see guys like [Cincinnati Reds pitcher] Trevor Bauer taking his gaming monitor with him on a plane to the All Star Game, [Philadelphia 76ers guard] Ben Simmons streaming, [Los Angeles Clippers forward] Paul George [as well].”

The loss of large-scale venues has necessitated cancellations of annual LAN events, such as EVO 2020 and the Fortnite World Cup. These championships will return at some point, but travel restrictions may limit the number of international showdowns, part of the reason that these events are so popular in the first place — internet connection speeds are much less reliable from half the world away, affecting the competitive integrity of the matches.

Quarantine measures have also impacted smaller areas of competitive gaming. Hilly's team uses now uses Discord instead of in-person meetings to review match footage and coordinate scrimmages across time zones. Hilly himself had to restart his computer during a collegiate tournament, causing a five-minute delay.

“Some people are playing close to their family, so late at night they may have to mute themselves, or talk more quietly,” Hilly said. “As for internet quality or people cutting out or having disconnects, I would say one or two members have had issues ... but it’s not been debilitating.”

Similar disruptions at professional events, such as a stream blackout during a recent VALORANT Champions Tour circuit match, suggest that not all esports are perfectly equipped to handle a remote viewing environment.

“There’s a strong desire to have events again,” Garfat said. “When that’ll happen, I can’t say, but we’re getting ready and excited that once we feel safe enough to have them and we can be a benefit to our audience, we’ll be ready to have live events again ... I don’t think that the esports industry is any different than the music venues or anything that’s held large gatherings.”

It’s not just teams who are forced to adjust. Adam Abbas, founder of Midlane Esports, a Chicago esports bar with over 40 high-end gaming setups, was forced to close within three weeks of his launch date. Midlane Esports, a pun on a League of Legends term and “Midwest,” hopes to reopen within a couple months.

Even after a delayed launch, however, concerns about people in close proximity with shared equipment could linger. Running a newer institution, Abbas figured that Midlane’s reputation depends on getting safety precautions right the first time.

“We’re just going to continue our business concept along with following CDC guidelines,” Abbas said. “Three to six feet apart, being as clean as possible.”

Abbas had already been contacted by Coca-Cola, G-Fuel, Monster Energy and Totino’s, among others, for brand deals prior to his launch. He said he is optimistic about Midlane’s return, whenever that may be.

“They’re still on the lookout for branding [and] marketing opportunities in esports just because it’s pretty simple,” Abbas said.

The pandemic has also led to the inception of new competitions to replace offline events. Schwartz and UCLA Esports hosted a 16-university invitational between April 24 and May 10 with Rocket League, Overwatch and Hearthstone events. As travel time and physical distance were no longer obstacles to finding entrants, he was able to find interested teams from all corners of the country.

“We know that if we put on a tournament, and we include some titles that don’t get as much attention, then we would be able to attract a lot of different schools,” Schwartz said. “People want to come together for this tournament even more so than they would typically.”

[Listen to Schwartz’s full answer on the sustainability of esports’ growth [here](#).]

When campus closings spelled the end of the University of Chicago’s Super Smash Bros. Ultimate weekly tournaments, fourth-year student Albert Aboaf, along with fellow organizers Athan Liu and Elijah Gelman, created Tri-Fi, a joint tournament with Northwestern and the Illinois Institute of Technology, both of whom also had to cancel their events.

“It was a unique opportunity for us to all kind of come together and play,” Aboaf said.

Aboaf credits the remote environment for enabling more collaboration between schools, but he acknowledges that the region’s collegiate esports presence was founded and popularized on live gatherings. Retaining the hundreds of competitors from the Intercollegiate Chicago Championship Series (ICCS) and Midwest Arena events was always going to be challenging, so Aboaf set a more realistic goal.

Tri-Fi, considered by some as an online substitute for ICCS, averaged over 40 entrants across its first six tournaments.

“[We] had a lot of people from outside the college scene that I don't think we expected at all,” Aboaf said. “We’re probably the most stacked and largest weekly in Chicagoland.”

As Garfat points out, if there’s one industry insulated enough for these circumstances, it’s esports.

I don't think that NBA 2k leagues are going to replace [the] NBA anytime soon,” Garfat said. “But I think it certainly will lay the foundation for people to be more familiar with it. And when you see esports on ESPN in the future or [other] major networks, it won't be as, ‘What is this thing?’”