

“Game On” Promised Action—and Delivered

With a full-day program dedicated to esports, or competitive organized gaming at the professional level, SMPTE 2020: “Game On” illustrated why and how esports has become such an important element of the media and entertainment industry.

“When you look at esports, it’s huge,” says Chris Witmayer, SMPTE 2020 program committee co-chair and organizer of the event’s esports programming. “Esports might not be on everybody’s radar, but it’s joining the ranks of traditional pro sports broadcast worldwide.”

In the last four decades, esports has evolved from small and relatively obscure tournaments to spectacular live competitions, produced and streamed from some of the world’s largest venues. There has been a significant increase in the number of viewers, as esports delivers hard-to-reach demographics—an affluent and multicultural mix that leans toward millennials, males, and heads of households with kids. That is not to say there are not plenty of women players, teams, and fans too.

As Hillary Li, President of RIT Esports at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), explained in the day’s first esports session, “What It’s All About: The Heart and Spirit of Esports,” viewers are increasing by 60 million per year, with projections taking up to 654 million in 2022. Jeremy Dujardin, chief technology officer of Global Media Services at Tata Communications, dropped another key stat from Ovum: esports



Chris Witmayer.

revenues are projected to reach \$2.2 billion in 2023.

One reason for this incredible growth is that esports offers something for everyone and is increasingly accessible through subscriptions and free-to-play models on a wide array of devices and platforms. The esports world boasts a variety of games and leagues that suit different interests: cars playing soccer (Rocket League), first-person shooter (Overwatch), team-based strategy battle arenas

(League of Legends), racing simulations, and other genres. Fans can play these games themselves as part of a larger community, or join other fans to watch the pros take play to another level.

Fans who attend live esports competitions look a lot like sports fans for any arena or stadium event, with branded gears, noisemakers, and a passion for their favorite player or team. Specialized “casters” provide commentary, much



Hillary Li.

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Tyler Schrodtt.

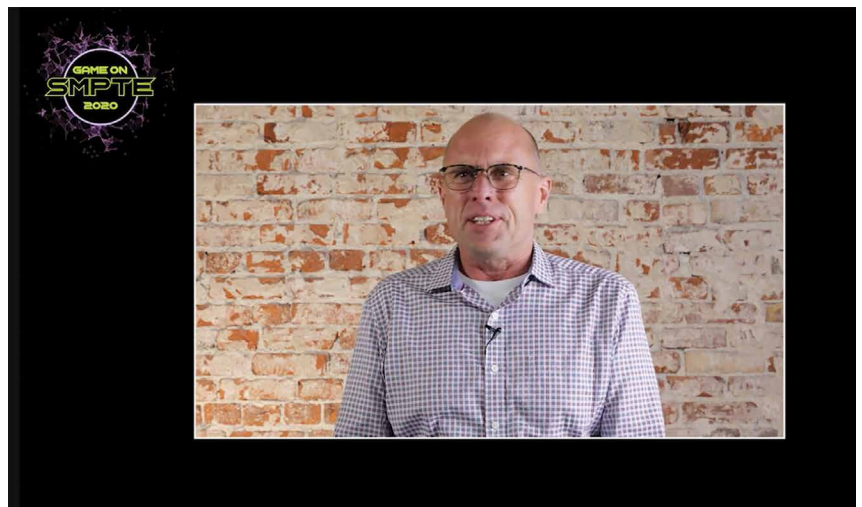


Ian Sansavera.

like what viewers know from professional sports broadcasts. Esports has been growing at the college/university level as well, sometimes with the scholarships and support normally associated with traditional college sports. As Tyler Schrodtt, founder and president of the Electronic Gaming Federation, pointed out, there are strong and growing pipelines of both esports pros and esports viewers.

Today, esports fans consume both streaming and broadcast content, but several speakers referenced the early days of esports when content was whatever a few gamers could manage to put on the internet. Things have changed a lot since then, and this was beautifully illustrated by Ian Sansavera, director of post-production for Team Liquid’s internal production company, IUP Studios, in his keynote, “Visual Storytelling in the Age of Esports.”

Sansavera is a talented editor, and through his history (and several clever videos), viewers saw the immense progress esports has made in offering “follow doc” and creative content tied to the gaming community—games, players, influencers, casters, leagues, and more.



Michael Thuney.

He showcased some of the in-game “observer” tools and capture technology that turned recorded game play into a cinematic production. Esports remains a Wild West, he said, but with a bright future driven by more capabilities, brands, events, money, structure, and innovation.

Esports was early to IP delivery for practical reasons, but that legacy has allowed for innovation in building distributed production workflows that span the globe and support efficient remote (and socially distanced) content creation for events—and especially now, in the COVID era.

Presenters across sessions agreed that to experience the thrill of esports, modern esports productions require many of the same infrastructure, tools, and technologies that support the broadcast industry, in general, and live sports coverage, in particular. Esports is exciting because it is pushing beyond the boundaries of conventional models.

During “Boots on the Ground Esports: Real-World Experiences,” Michael Thuney of De Tune summarized the shift of esports from grassroots streaming, by a passionate few upstarts, through adoption of mobile production and broadcast technologies to current distributed and remote models that rely heavily on the cloud. He and fellow presenters offered their experience in making these models work.



Shots of the live esports competition between RIT Esports team and Team Liquid.



Esports gaming hosts Reinessa Gaming and Trevor McNeal.

In “The Magic Enabler: The Esports Architecture” and “Boots on the Ground,” experts from different backgrounds—production companies to technology suppliers to network/transmission providers—explained the end-to-end infrastructure and workflows, both hybrid and purely software-based, being used to support esports production. In doing so, they explored different ways of connecting operators, contributors, engineers, and administrators to a scalable production control room while keeping latency under the 80-ms

ceiling so vital to viewers’ quality of experience.

Presenters addressed critical challenges in esports production, the foremost of which is dealing effectively with latency and timing across video, audio (often in multiple languages), data, Interruptible Fold/Feed Back (IFB), and communications as the entire production is brought together—from sources across the globe with access to very different bandwidths and service level agreements (SLAs)—and then packaged and distributed. The cloud and microservices were key elements in the models outlined

by various presenters, who focused on the agility and efficiency that come with using cloud-based compute resources and in aggregating microservices as needed to deliver key production capabilities at scale.

The final esports session of the day featured a live competition that provided an overview at the potential of esports. Even with an unusual amount of delay, the matchup between the collegiate RIT Esports team and professional squad from Team Liquid showcased the talent of the players and the excitement of live play.

“The SMPTE 2020 esports program tapped into almost every facet of esports, offering a perspective that was new for a lot of SMPTE members, and attendees embraced it,” adds Witmayer. “We tend to think of sports as being the world’s top five pro leagues—the NFL, NHL, motorsports, and so on—without considering esports. Hopefully, these sessions showed how important esports are on that same worldwide stage and that we need to be aware of what’s happening in esports as we continue to evolve standards and practices.”

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