

Esports to Fill Gap Left by Sports?

Written by Marco Attard
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Among the disruption brought about by the coronavirus (aka Covid-19), the sports calendar is currently all but empty, as matches and leagues are either postponed or outright cancelled. However Futuresource points at a possible replacement-- esports.



Traditional sports teams are already familiar with esports, as clubs ranging from the top European football leagues to the NBA already field teams for digital tournaments and even retain players on salary. The sports currently leading in esports are football, basketball and sim-racing. The digital versions of such sports, the analyst says, make an ideal transition for traditional fans, given the inherently familiar spectator viewing positions.

While digital versions of traditional sports make the most press, thanks to the investment by teams, players and celebrities, they actually make a small part of an overall esports ecosystem worth \$923 million 2019, at least according to Futuresource. For instance, while the FIFA eWorld Cup prize pool was worth \$500000 in 2019, the 2019 Fortnite World Cup is worth

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\$100m, while the DOTA 2 International tournament offered \$25m in prize money.

As well as big money, esports also draw huge crowds, if online. And just as well, considering large public gatherings are banned. The 2020 IEM Katowice CSGO Grand Final had a peak online viewership of over 1m fans, making a respectable comparison with the 3.4m viewers of the hugely anticipated November 2019 premier league match between Liverpool and Manchester City. Such number suggest esports viewership has great potential for growth, particularly among young fans wanting to maintain engagement with favourite clubs.

In the short term, initiatives boosting esports viewership will increase the user figures for popular streaming sites such as Twitch, YouTube Gaming and Mixer. Twitch viewership has already seen a 12% Y-o-Y increase in viewers compared with March 2019. There is also an increase in paying subscribers, not to mention the number of channels and content creators, as the young audience looks for ways to interact with the outside world as schools remain closed due to the pandemic.

Of course, traditional broadcasters face challenges to implement the transition to esports. Certain sports broadcasters in the US already have an esports option, but Futuresports says long-term success will probably be found online, and as such broadcasters should either include digital streams or team up with more experienced streaming websites.

Overall, the coronavirus brings opportunities for at-home entertainment providers, as well as those willing to adapt programming to suit the demands of the captive audience. Digital video providers, game publishers and esports tournament organisers will benefit from the lock-down situation, as fresh programming will be in high demand should the outbreak persist beyond H1 2020. Esports, as a naturally online strain of entertainment, is perhaps best suited to fill the scheduling void, and thus satisfy consumer demand.

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