FILLING THE VOID

With the Right Tech, Remote Esports Can Bring Us Together, as Allison Tardif, Industry Advocacy Manager, AVIXA, explains.

The 40-year evolution of esports, competitive video gaming, has sped up exponentially.

Once, this space was a niche market and subculture of devoted fans, but most people had never even heard of it.

Recently, the term "esports" has entered everyone's vocabulary and gained the attention of investors, entrepreneurs, venue operators, technology companies and parents who are scrambling to understand this "new" sport.

I recently spoke with Robert Mathews, CTS-D of AVI Systems to learn more about how esports got to this point and their potential in the future.

Mathews has been involved in esports from a young age. He grew up playing tournaments of games like Street Fighter II at arcades across Europe and is now helping to bring that kind of experience to the masses through his work at AVI Systems.

He explained that the growing popularity of esports in recent years has focused on the jaw-dropping financial rewards for the players, as well as impressive attendance, and viewership numbers.

CNBC reported that the 2018 **League of Legends** championship finals attracted twice as many viewers as the **NFL's Super Bowl** the same year.

But now, with the new challenges of a global pandemic, esports are poised to become more popular than ever, while also filling a need in our culture and society.

Even as stay at home orders are relaxed, it will be some time before many people feel comfortable gathering with thousands of others in a packed stadium.

The absence of traditional sports leaves a social and cultural gap in the human experience.

GOING VIRTUAL

Compared to traditional sports and entertainment options, esports have a unique ability to go virtual as players do not actually need to interact with each other in the same physical space.

From the beginning of the pandemic, esports tournaments have immediately pivoted to be held through remote video production technology that maintains social distancing protocols.

Additionally, some traditional sports fans have discovered esports during this season of postponed or cancelled live games.
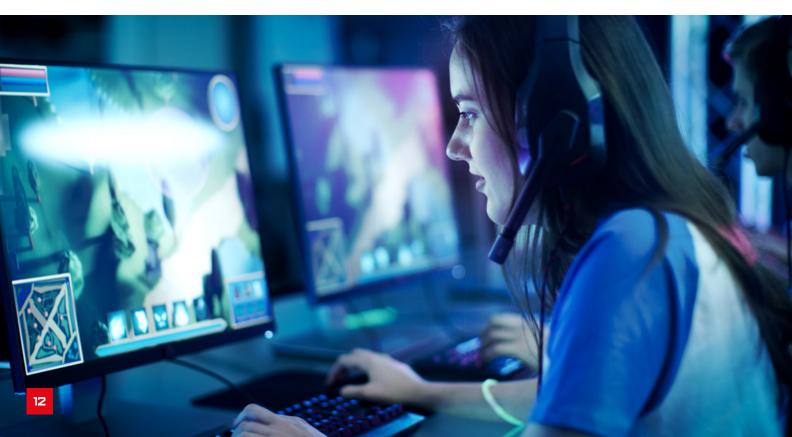
For the time being, fans can satiate their desire to watch football by watching tournaments of **EA's Madden NFL 20** game. Madden games are now broadcast on YouTube, Twitch, and ESPN, and drawing major sponsors like **Starbucks** and **Bose**.

Games such as League of Legends, **FortNite**, and **OverWatch** are taking their place among popular sports for young people to hone their skills just like basketball, football, and hockey.

Some of the appeal of esports is driven by social needs that are heightened by quarantine.

For one, playing esports is an incredibly inclusive activity with the best players being able to compete from across the globe.

In an era when social connections are more important than ever, the hyper-social nature of esports streams is also filling a need. Anyone can set-up

a Twitch or YouTube channel to stream their play and connect with other gamers or even gain a following.

Some of these "streamers" have become characters who make money from their following much like influencers on other social media channels.

Esports is perfectly positioned to become a preferred digital gathering place while we all figure out how to safely gather again.

To fully take advantage of this opportunity, the various leagues, teams, and players will need to turn to professional audiovisual providers to maintain and improve production quality to attract and engage fans. That is where AV providers like **Robert Mathews** and **AVI Systems** can help make this critical pivot a success.

AVI has been providing venue and broadcast AV solutions to gamers, leagues and teams that need to produce high quality streams. That production value allows them to display sponsor logos and messages, up-to-the-moment statistics on the gameplay, and other visual cues that sports fans are accustomed to seeing on both traditional and esports broadcasts. These upgraded systems allow a streamer to improve performance and increase their level of competition.

Roberts describes the system this way: *"AVI esports broadcast platform*

ships local and remote systems as an isolated remote broadcast system for esports tournaments. It features custom options including a virtual greenroom with mobile compatibility, live webfeed production inputs, a live custom 3D virtual set and is controlled with low latency connectivity and remote cloud production synchronized between operators. As the platform allows a low-latency transmission of the game with the same production values expected at a live tournament broadcast, the system is appealing for executive broadcast and telelearning purposes also."

CUSTOM BUILT

Different size kits are assembled depending on the needs of the client. The kit can include a full production switch and sound board or use a simpler software interface.

Such a system could be sold to a tournament operator, but also an individual streamer or team. It can also be scaled up to broadcasters that support the gamers and esports venues.

AVI provides support personnel to help talent use the equipment, but for the most part, it's a plug and play setup that's designed to be easy to use.

These broadcast kits are outfitted with equipment similar to what was used to enable the highly rated 2020 NFL virtual draft, and parallels between

electronic and traditional sports don't end there AVI use the same skills and experience in pro sports like the NFL and **MLB** to deliver design for esports, particularly collegiate esports, through expertise in higher education workflow and technology solutions and instructional delivery.

Indeed, the value of esports is not limited to live events venues and elite gamers, as there are significant benefits in esports for educational institutions. Higher education colleges, universities and high schools are all learning how to deploy esports and leverage not just the prestige of an award-winning team, but the enrollment benefits, making a school more attractive and differentiated to other options available to scholars.

AVI and Mathew's have worked with many schools and colleges in educating the educators on the benefits and potential pitfalls of developing a gaming club to a varsity esports which extends AVI's Pro Development service into the nuances of gaming culture and social considerations when defining the human impact to truly conceptualise a technology solution.

Mathews finds that the most exciting aspect of the increasing ubiquity of esports is the future potential to reach young people with new possibilities. Studies have shown that curriculum developed around esports increases academic achievement and can even be utilised for physical education.

Esports create an avenue for young people who have not been able to participate in traditional sports because of physical disabilities, financial disadvantages, and geographic distance. In addition, grants that put esports programs in schools can give students access to technology that normally would not. Just the exposure to that technology alone could also be an avenue for many students into the robust and exciting AV and technology industries.

What esports can contribute to the world is much more than just a game. While the present moment is challenging, we also have a huge opportunity to use AV tech and esports to bring the world together online, writing a chapter in the history of this new sport that has a positive impact on an entire generation. ■