

ROSS VIDEO UPS ITS GAME IN ESPORTS

Ross Video's Cameron Reed gives the EVS the lowdown on the company's work in the esports sector.



Can you please give us an overview of the solutions that Ross Video offers the esports sector and your own role within the company?

Ross Video is an industry leading production technology manufacturer that provides an end-to-end live video production solution. We offer every necessary tool along the way from the cameras and source acquisition, to smart production tools like data-driven 3D graphics and replays, to the output with low-latency live video processing and encoding for getting that production to large in-venue displays and broadcasts.

My role at Ross Video is as the Esports Business Development Manager. Previously, I was directing and producing many of the largest esports events in the world, including the Intel Extreme Masters, ESL One, the Madden NFL Championships on NFL Network, and many more. Ross shares my excitement about esports, and they've asked me to help drive their business in this new market.

Many companies we've talked to had already worked on high profile live sports events before widening their services to include esports. Is that also the case for yourselves? Can you give us an idea of some of the sporting events that you've successfully been involved in?

Absolutely. Sports and Live Events has been our fastest growing market at Ross Video over the last six years. With the creation of XPression Tessera, for graphic design and pixel mapping, and Carbonite Mosaic, for image processing, our solution has become the industry standard for large venue display control. Our solution is set apart by being able to bring production and display control into a Unified Workflow.

Our solution drives most of the biggest, baddest sports stadiums in the world, including Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta, the Chase Center in the Bay Area and the brand new SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles. We have scaled down this same technology to serve the esports market, with many of the largest

venues and broadcasters in esports also turning to our solutions. The HyperX Esports Arena at the Luxor in Las Vegas, the Esports Stadium Arlington, ESL, NGE and more all turn to Ross for their live video production needs.

In your opinion, what are the fundamental similarities and also differences from a production delivery perspective when comparing traditional sports events with esports events?

Well from a delivery perspective, the main difference is that esports has a better, more flexible medium: live streaming. It's better because it has all the same functionality as television, plus potentially limitless interactivity. For example, television talent and producers cannot directly interact with their audience; they need to turn to third party platforms like Twitter. In esports, though, the audience is constantly giving you real time feedback!

That being said, esports has taken many of its cues from live sports productions:



from the format of the shows (pre-game show, live game coverage with instant replays and stats, post-game show with analysis and around the league score updates), to the tools we use to execute. I think esports, though, has much more room to innovate and even change the way we view traditional sports as everything slowly, but surely, moves away from television and onto the internet.

Can you give us some examples of the kind of people (eg tournament organisers) that you often work with on an esports project and how important is regular communication to ensure that client expectations are being met?

Many of the same roles as in television and event production: there are producers, talent, crew, teams, team managers and coaches, etc, but with a few notable distinctions.

One such distinction is that the referees and production are much more intertwined in most esports productions than they would be in traditional sports. Whereas in sports, the production crew may have one "orange hat" who communicates with the refs and informs production about what is going on, in esports the head referee will often be on comms with the production crew. In fact, the producer in esports is often the final arbiter of when games start, even.

Another distinction is the involvement of the game developers themselves.

Whereas nobody owns "football" or "basketball," there are companies that own League of Legends, CounterStrike and Overwatch. In fact, there are still very few esports tournaments that are truly independent of the game developers. Most of the time, the developers are the primary source of funding for esports tournaments, as it comes out of their advertising budgets, so they have even more say and authority than the Executive Producers and League Commissioners. Or the EP and Commish simply work for the developer, as is the case with Riot Games and Blizzard Entertainment.

When it comes to production technology, what in your opinion are the most important factors which esports tournament organisers and project teams need to think about when deciding which supplier to work with to ensure a successful project?

In my experience directing and producing esports events, there were three core pillars that we needed from our tech that would hold up the proverbial roof over our heads: The ability to do more with less, the ease of use, and the scalability of the tech.

On the Do More with Less front: esports still has more modest budgets than sports and touring. However, in order to attract those same advertisers and drive revenue, we need to make our shows look just as technically and creatively amazing as those shows. We

just need to do it with smaller boxes and less people to operate those boxes. That's where Ross distinguishes itself from some others: with a proprietary protocol called Ross Talk, we have true 2-way communication between all devices, enabling condensed workflows that aren't possible with traditional solutions.

Regarding ease of use: Esports needs to be driven, at least in part, by gamers. Good luck asking most 20-year Sports Replay Operators for "Fer's 4K at Banana cross-rolled into the B defend." They'll look like a deer in the headlights. The challenge is that gamers don't have training and experience with professional production tools most of the time. Enter Ross' Dashboard. Building on the back of Ross Talk, Dashboard is a free software that enables users to create totally custom control interfaces, bringing very complicated cues that trigger many devices down to a single button push.

And then scalability: one Wednesday you might be doing Street Fighter (a 1 vs 1 game), and on Friday you'll be doing CounterStrike (5 vs 5) and on Sunday you might be doing Fortnite (75-150 player free for all). You need tech that can scale up and down with you. In addition to being able to create as many control points as you want with Dashboard, Ross also checks this box by making most of our upgrades, including I/O, software based, without needing to send any new hardware.



As the esports market has exploded in recent years, how have the scale and demands of productions evolved and in your opinion what challenges have arisen from this?

There are two things really driving esports to get bigger and badder: attention from the mainstream and the constant development of new video games. With the attention comes all the usual pressure to make sexier shows, that are more eye-catching and tell more universal stories. With big money on the line, there is high stress to deliver, and a lot of growing pains for young producers and directors to step up to the challenge.

The number one video game genre responsible for pushing esports to get bigger, badder tools has been Battle Royales (like Fortnite and PUBG). Just a couple of years ago, we were building solutions with 12 players being the theoretical max we'd need to follow. Now we have to figure out a way to cover 150 players on huge maps. This has forced manufacturers like Ross to come up with cleverer solutions, because like I said earlier about modest

budgets, heavier (and therefore more expensive) iron in the rack is almost never the solution for esports.

As the popularity of esports continues to grow globally, how have the expectations of fans changed and based on your experiences what are the key elements needed to deliver a compelling esports event?

The fans' expectations get higher and higher every passing year. The hardcore gamers amongst them want better, more integrated analysis – Next Gen stats and data visualisation that breaks down the game to the real nitty gritty. It's no longer impressive to have a former pro talking through a replay or highlight melt. Now they want to see AR renderings of the game map, and 3D telestration tools (not just yellow lines, or Xs and Os).

Then on the other side of things, as esports moves closer to the mainstream, there are members of the audience who want to know more about the players and their personalities. Nothing will make a fan of somebody quite like a well-produced human-interest story!

Any esports event that is able to connect their audience with the gamers themselves and provide the high-level analysis and insight will be one that all fans can enjoy.

Can you talk us through one of the most high profile esports events that you have been involved with and what lessons did you learn from that project?

For me, I had a real make or break career moment when I was tapped to direct the Madden NFL Championships. I had directed plenty of big esports events, but this was the first time I would be directing on national television (ESPN 2 and the NFL Network), and I was directing for a 14-time National Emmy Award winning producer, no less. Talk about nerves!

The big takeaway from that event was this: an esports crew cannot be made up of pure sports veterans, or pure gamers. You need the mix that Mike Burks (that legendary sports producer) and I (a very experienced esports director) were able to achieve. We learned from each other, and the show improved with every single episode as

a result. If we had gone too hard into the traditional sports coverage style that Burks was used to, we would have alienated our core audience of gamers. If we had gone too hard into the hardcore esports coverage I was used to, the NFL Network audience would have never responded. As the sports and esports worlds continue to come together, I stress mutual respect and admiration from both esports and sports personnel. With that, we'll do really amazing stuff!

The ongoing pandemic has affected sports and live events everywhere, and esports has also had to adapt by converting in-person tournaments to entirely virtual formats. Can you talk about the virtual production solutions that you offer to help achieve this with a recent project example?

Certainly. The Ross Production Cloud is one of our proudest achievements in recent memory. Our production services team was looking at a scary couple of quarters ahead of them when the entire Sports and Live Events world came to a grinding halt in March. Rather than get down, we got to work. First, we took a look at many of the existing cloud-based production tools available today and found them lacking. Replays, graphics, picture quality... all of it was just a bit behind where we wanted to see professional productions. Also, the other tools out there had totally

different workflows, which traditional TDs, graphics and replay ops would need to be trained in.

In response to that market need, we developed a hardware solution with cloud-based monitoring and control. By being built on the back of proven, professional production hardware, our solution allows the flexibility and creativity that a crew needs to produce really high quality live event coverage, while also keeping the operators on familiar workflows, so no training is necessary.

We've deployed this solution for a number of clients including The Hollywood Reporter, the WNBA, and most recently for esports the FIFA eChampions League.

We are delighted to be partnering with Ross Video on our upcoming Esports Venue Summit event which focusses on esports venues and spaces. What are your own opinions about how esports venues will develop in the future? Do you envisage more larger bespoke esports Arena projects or do you feel that smaller multi-purpose digital/immersive spaces where esports is the main revenue driver will become more prevalent?

Well, I foresee many, many more esports arenas popping up all over the world. Besides just the growth of the esports industry, a well equipped

esports arena will have all the tools necessary to host just about any sort of non-sporting live event imaginable. With large LED Displays, powerful tools to drive that content and enough seats, there's no reason that esports arenas couldn't also serve multiple functions – think concerts, or TED Talks, etc.

Do I see them ever reaching the size of large American sports venues? Not necessarily, but I wouldn't rule that out, either. For now, only a handful of events a year can attract crowds of nearly 100,000 to a venue – The League of Legends Worlds Championships, the IEM World Championships, and The International come to mind. So in those cases, for now, it's best to rent an existing facility. But a crowd of a couple thousand regularly? That's much easier to achieve in the here and now, and that's what rough size I think esports arenas should be focusing on. Think of the difference between the Madison Square Garden, and the Hulu Theater at Madison Square. Again, not ruling out that we'll ever get there. Only time and a lot of hard work and determination will tell. ■

