Gaming champions

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From the Tokyo Olympics to Euro 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 has forced many live events to sit out for the rest of the year. While empty sports stadiums have been transformed into makeshift hospitals and dedicated channels have resorted to re-airing classic games, fans, players and brands are channeling their community spirit and competitive edge into the already thriving business of online gaming and esports.

On March 28, 2020, the gaming industry set aside its competitive streak and united to promote the #PlayApartTogether initiative, with the overarching message “wherever you are, whatever game you play, you can make a difference.” The premise is to help reinforce the World Health Organization (WHO) communication encouraging people to stay at home and reduce the spread of COVID-19. Participating brands include Riot Games, YouTube Gaming and Zynga. “Games have the power to not only entertain people, but bring them together in difficult times,” says Nick Earl, president and CEO of Glu Mobile, also part of the initiative.
On the same day, Amazon’s live-streaming video platform Twitch hosted a 12-hour charity stream featuring esport competitions and musical acts—and showing off the potential of live virtual events. Twitch Stream Aid, organized by Enthusiast Gaming, attracted a variety of professional athletes, including Formula 1 driver Lando Norris, who has also taken part in a virtual Australian Grand Prix, and NFL’s Richard Sherman, who plugged in for a friendly game of Call of Duty. The event raised over $2.7 million for the WHO COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund and attracted over 100,000 concurrent viewers.

It is perhaps not surprising to learn that live-stream gaming has experienced increased engagement during the period of self-isolation. Twitch reports that its February and March 2020 viewing figures were nearly double those for the same period in 2019. YouTube Gaming streams increased by 15% in March 2020, according to StreamElements, which develops tools and services for streamers. Gaming platform Steam reports that it reached a new record of concurrent users the weekend of March 28, with 20 million online and 6.2 million in-game, up 11% from the previous high.

Esport tournaments are suffering the same suspensions as other live events, but the difference is that esport can relocate to a virtual stadium. “Canceled events impact a certain aspect of the fan experience, but, unlike traditional sports where the live event is a financial and economic driver of the overall experience, esport is different in that, from a broadcast perspective, so much of broadcast is focused on online and not as dependent on the live audience,” Kent Wakeford, cofounder and vice chairman of Gen.G Esports, told the Washington Post.
Moves of this kind are already happening. China’s King Pro League announced on February 18 that it will move its Global Tour online and American gaming company Electronic Arts launched a Stay & Play initiative, shifting physical tournaments online and upping the rewards to attract more players.

Before COVID-19, the gaming industry was already growing in popularity across the world, with a predicted value of $300 billion by 2025 estimated by GlobalData. Major brands had already spotted opportunities debuting or strengthening collaborations with game-fluencers and esport tournaments.
Louis Vuitton partnered with Riot Games in 2019, creating a one-of-a-kind trophy travel case for the League of Legends World Championship. The luxury brand also released in-game prestige skins designed by Nicolas Ghesquière, artistic director of Louis Vuitton’s women’s collection.

American furniture manufacturer Herman Miller is collaborating with gaming accessory company Logitech G to design “high-performance furniture solutions for gamers,” launching spring 2020. And in January this year, Nike announced further investment in esport—the company will sponsor South Korea’s T1 Entertainment & Sports organization, creating apparel and training programs for the players and teams.
Beyond competitive gaming, overall online play is gaining attraction during lockdown. In a recent, unprecedented surge, online gaming more than doubled in Europe, according to Telefónica. Overall video-game internet traffic has increased by 75% in the United States, reports Verizon, noting the strain this is causing to internet bandwidth. Even getting hold of certain games consoles is proving difficult as demand soars. Since mid-March, the Nintendo Switch has become a hot commodity—it has sold out in major retail stores including Best Buy, Target and GameStop, with sales on Amazon from third parties hiking prices up to as much as double.

As people hunker down in their homes, the demand for gameplay and spectatorship in the form of live-stream games has become a positive activity during a disconcerting time. “During this time of self-distancing, we can see a revisiting of video games as a pastime for some who have not had the affordance of time to engage with this rich medium,” Kristopher Alexander, professor of video games, design, broadcasting and esports infrastructure at Ryerson University in Toronto, told CNN. “Video games can be a positive activity during this time of self-distancing if we can take the time to discover the types of games that are best for you.”

Live sporting events may have fallen silent because of COVID-19, but the immunity of online gaming is offering much-needed respite and comfort, demonstrating this industry will not only survive a pandemic, but thrive during lockdown.

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