

ESPORTS VENUES IN THE SPOTLIGHT

PS&AM talked to Brian Mirakian, Senior Principal, Populous; Chris Grundy, UK Technology Group Leader, ME Engineers; Jie Zuo, Senior Associate, Walter P Moore; and Ian Cooney, Project Director, Holmes Miller about the latest in esports venue development.



CG: With many venues competing for a small number of events (the ecosystem is building, but it takes time), venues should consider how they can stand out, and provide spaces for competition, adjudication, training, and breakout. This can include both at venue flexibility via use of meeting rooms and lounges, along with local third party providers, such as gyms and hotels. Venues should consider how they can assist with the duty of care of both players and audience, which typically, have a younger demographic. Overall, flexibility is required to facilitate event overlay and speed of set-up, along with understanding the needs of a particular game and competition (for example whether compute is onsite or offsite).

Sometimes the venues with the biggest visual impact on camera may not be the most practical for an event, how do you assess/compromise those key infrastructure decisions with the need to create a spectacle?



IC: Adaptation will always be a compromise when using an existing

venue for esports events, and overlay can be key to that - whether it be additional seating to create the desired audience format - or upgrading visuals to a larger size / quality.

We see this a lot in stadia where particular events may require specific capacity or technology. The pandemic has shrunk the world when it comes to events - people are au fait with event streaming and so there is a balance to be struck with the in-venue experience / broadcast experience.



CG: The revenue model of an esports event is fundamentally different to a traditional music or stand-up comedy show, with online revenues dominating. To support the internet audience and associated sponsors, the venue needs to have resilient power and internet connectivity. Internet resilience/ bandwidth should be able to scale up and down to cater for events and provide better control of opex costs.

The venue has an important role in creating visual impact and energy from the audience, which is then translated on-line. If a venue has good floor-to-ceiling heights with structural rigging points, then event designers have more options for stage and audience

configurations, along with stage/ player camera views.



BM: As an architectural design practice and a consultant providing value for our clients, we're always trying to balance the pragmatic and practical needs with the high impact moments that we can deliver to an audience, because we know that for any venue to be truly successful, we can't just have one or the other. The best venues can really provide an answer for both, delivering efficient, smart design and infrastructure while still allowing the venue to shine.

The best and most iconic venues like Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, Yankee Stadium or Wembley Stadium are ones that are instantly recognisable on camera, and you can't discount that. For example, what makes Esports Stadium Arlington a high-impact venue is that it's instantly recognisable onscreen. We didn't compromise in that venue.

We started with technical needs, and then we designed an instantly-recognisable stage. Success is the balance, and it's the same approach we would take in any venue, not prioritising efficient infrastructure or innovative design over the other, but both equally important.

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JZ: Some of the largest gaming tournaments have been held at sold-out arenas like Madison Square Garden or Staples Center with 360 degree seating around a central stage.

The atmosphere is electric and the visuals on camera are astounding, but the sightlines to key areas of the stage are lacking from specific vantage points. To improve the viewing experience, it's ideal for all spectators to be facing the front of the stage and see the players and video board straight on, which is why an auditorium or theatre seating format works better functionally, although those types of venues may not be able to seat as many fans.

There is a definitely balance needed to be struck between creating a positive viewing experience for as many spectators as possible while selling as many tickets as possible.

How important is having a 'flexible venue' to help meet these requirements?



BM: A flexible venue is absolutely essential, because the venue ultimately has to respond to the demands of the market to be economically viable. What we know is that in the current moment, esports and gaming are still in a formational state, and where we will be five, seven or 10 years from now is very different than today in terms of meeting the needs of live event programming. What is extremely exciting is that the return to live events has far exceeded even our expectations in 2022.

The indicators are strong around the massive growth that will continue to take place. Today, we are looking at venues that are going to allow for massive event planning through adaptability, not only designed for esports and gaming programming, but also live music, TED talks, corporate events, comedy shows, product demonstrations and everything in between.

You have to have a venue that's hyper-adaptable and supports a wide range of entertainment programming, as it's the fundamental way in which to address and create economic viability for growth into the future.



JZ: A flexible venue is crucial to suit the needs of different types of gaming events. For example, team events, solo events, or 1v1 events all have different ideal staging and visual layouts that can enhance the spectator experience. Flexibility in seating, staging, visuals, lighting, and audio that can meet the needs of several different types of events can make a venue a unique visit for any type of fan.



CG: For events with an at venue audience, it is important not only in putting on 'the show' but accommodating people in the venue over what could be several days.



IC: As seen at the recent Esports Venue Summit in Swansea, a modern flexible venue is key to the success of hosting any event. Per my thoughts regards considerations on briefing for an esports venue, diversity of spaces will ultimately benefit the fan experience, and attract more events.

Are dedicated esports venues sustainable (particularly those aiming to host larger events) or should we be fitting out with esports in mind as part of a wider business case?



JZ: I think the most successful esports venues will be those that have a primary focus in supporting the needs of esports events with things like a robust power and internet system, attractive audio, visual, and lighting components, and a grand competition stage with auditorium style seating for the best sight lines. But they can also serve other functions. Youtube

Theater at Hollywood Park for example was designed with esports in mind, but can also host a variety of live entertainment from concerts to comedy shows, award shows, conferences, community gatherings, etc. The venue features that esports requires also lends itself well to these other types of events.



IC: In our experience the multi-use event venue will always be a starting point – the ability to host music, sports, TedX and esports from one day to the next must be a pre-requisite. With our Arcadia Dundee Project we are including a number of dedicated esports uses (such as the Gaming Café, Academy and Broadcasting) and combining them with social spaces that are attached to the main Arena. The bi-product of these areas is they are designed with flexibility in mind for use by the city's universities / schools, these areas tie into the wider business case through increased usage.



CG: Operators and venue developers need to understand the local/regional gaming community as part of understanding the viability of purely esports schemes. The answer will depend on where you are in the world, what you want to build and how integrated you wish to be into an education and gaming community. Our current project portfolio includes a range of multi-purpose venues, with esports a key, but not sole element of the business case. Hence, design for event flexibility is important. For larger events in established major city markets, the model is not sustainable, because of competition from established multi-purpose sports arenas, such as the Chase Center in San Francisco, which will host the 2022 League of Legends finals.



BM: In every venue we design, we aim for it to be the best in its industry, while also being able to adapt to secondary uses. Tottenham Hotspur Stadium was designed to be one of the premier venues in the English Premier League. At the same time, it was equipped with capability to host NFL International games and other special event programming. Dedicated esports venues of the future will be focused on esports and gaming, designed for those fans and fan cultures and for the best competitive environment possible, but also creating opportunities for additional streams of programming.

How can esports ready venues maximise fan interaction, including the potential for the event to be closer to the audience i.e. stats on smart phone, or even audience game play'?



IC: New Arena venues aim to provide an immersive experience and I think this is very much at the forefront of client/designer's thoughts. The forthcoming Outernet Project in London highlights this through its 4-dimensional BK Gallery, which acts as centrepiece, capturing the imagination as you enter the building. It also provides a canvas that can be monetised for advertising, brand launches, and corporate gatherings. EPOS apps are already being used widely for sporting event retail and we're now seeing real-time engagement platforms that drive data interactivity, gamification, registration and revenue for clients.



CG: Venues should consider the engagement of fans/visitors through the 'entire experience' which starts from pre-booking, all the way to post show. Tools include seat visualisation at pre-booking, augmented reality activations and community gaming. What is good for esports, is generally good for a venue to attract other forms of entertainment and business conferences. Investment in internet broadcasting capability can help artists connect with their wider fanbase. We are starting to see music shows learn from esports, and provide hybrid at venue and at home ticketing, where there is demand for tickets, but

tour schedules mean only a restricted number of performances are available. In the future, it is not inconceivable to think of a venue being part of the esports event itself through the virtualisation of the venue, created in a computer gaming engine. The blurring of the physical and virtual could be exciting.



BM: Looking into the future, creating a digitally immersive environment that brings people into the game in the most powerful, dynamic, immersive manner is our goal. We see a future where the fan environment is so powerfully immersive that fans will feel like they're inside the game while it's being played, using technology such as atmospheric sound, sensory technology, wind, temperature control and synthetic climate effects like snow and vapour. In addition, the one-to-one personalised connection between competitor and fan is made more possible by new advances in augmented reality, personalised stats, the ability to follow specific gameplay on a mobile device and more. It's a question we solve with all of our projects: How do we create something that brings people out of their living rooms and to the venue? Ultimately, it's creating a more powerful experience, and venues of the future will bring fans, competitors and immersive experience into a realm that's more powerful than it's ever been. It's exciting for the future of digital entertainment because of the way we're blending the physical and virtual realms together.



JZ: Fan interaction can come in different ways. Interactions with online streams, shout casters, or the competitive players can be done in person or virtually. Mobile apps can be developed to allow the fan to participate in polls, make predictions, earn virtual currency, or compete in challenges on upcoming events. AR or VR opportunities are available to make the experience even more immersive, giving the fans more options to see behind the scenes, rewind a play, see hidden stats, or compete with other fans at a macro level. Gaming enthusiasts want a totally immersive experience when coming to an esports venue and are inclined to try out new technologies and competition formats. ■