

March 2019 | commercialintegrator.com

Commercial INTEGRATOR

THE BUSINESS HANDBOOK FOR TECHNOLOGY PROFESSIONALS

ESPORTS IS THE FUTURE OF AV

Next-generation customers love watching people play video games. We analyze the enormous opportunity for integrators. PAGE 22

DEEP DIVE:
EVER-EXPANDING
VIDEO WALL
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WHY PEOPLE WATCHING OTHER PEOPLE
PLAY VIDEO GAMES
IS GREAT FOR AV INTEGRATION

Savvy AV integrators are learning as much as they can about the billion-dollar esports industry — before their competitors do. Colleges, universities and even high schools are building esports arenas and awarding scholarships.

By D. Craig MacCormack and Adam Forziati



Harrisburg's esports stadium is part of the Whitaker Center, which features a science and art museum along with the esports training center and digital laser theater, which is a 700-seat performing arts theater equipped with a 44-foot-wide IMAX screen.

IT'S EASY FOR PEOPLE who don't understand anything about esports to dismiss it as a passing fad or a trend that keeps their children from doing their homework. But there's a huge opportunity for AV integrators to capitalize on what's becoming an unstoppable force.

The esports market represents a multibillion (that's billion with a B) landscape that's been making its way to early-adopting colleges and universities and will likely soon be coming to a high school near you, especially as higher education institutions have made it a scholarship sport.

For the uninitiated, "esports" refers to live-play video game matches in special venues or on YouTube channels. The industry is fueled by highly-engaged and AV tech-acquainted fans. In 2017 alone, investors sank almost \$150 million into 34 esports deals, according to sports business reporter Darren Rovell.

Fans of esports are typically more engaged with their surroundings during live events — be they at a physical, common location like an arena or convention room, or in online settings like a group chatroom on Discord or Twitch, says Premier Mounts marketing coordinator Brandon Breznick, a gamer himself.

The ability to broadcast live play is equally important for an arena-setting event or an online-only one, he says. Integrators seeking esports technology jobs must be equally adept with live broadcasting as they are with screens and typical event AV, says Breznick.

Gaming Comes to Campus

While professional esports leagues have been around for about a decade, collegiate teams are relatively new, says Harrisburg University president Eric Darr, whose school is perhaps the model all others will follow when it comes to creating an immersive, tech-packed esports arena.

Harrisburg's esports stadium is part of the Whitaker Center, which features a science and art museum along with the esports training center and digital laser theater, which is a 700-seat performing arts theater equipped with a 44-foot-wide IMAX screen.

The university spent about \$750,000 to transform the space, says Darr. There's ample room for players, coaches and spectators and a large screen on one wall to allow fans to keep up with the action without huddling around one screen.

The investment was part of the annual budget approved by Harrisburg trustees and got support because of the benefit to the students themselves and the marketing opportunities for the school as a whole, says Darr.

The teams have gotten sponsorships for their computers, headphones and chairs, he says.

Although Harrisburg is home to about 7,000 students interested in science, technology, engineering and math from 103 countries between its undergraduate, master's and doctorate offerings, its esports teams were the first time it offered varsity sports, says Darr.

Why esports? For one thing, it's the second-most watched sport in the world, he says, attracting more than 20 million people on any given night. Harrisburg University launched its esports varsity teams — dubbed the Storm — in January 2018. Players focus on Hearthstone, League of Legends and Overwatch.

Darr, who's been playing video games himself for more than 20 years, is impressed with the early returns on Harrisburg University's investment.

"It really brings the community together," he says. "It's something to get behind. It's also a way for the university to build its brand." To that end, Harrisburg's esports teams have been featured on the main page of ESPN's website multiple times, thanks to their success, with the League of Legends team ranked fourth out of more than 300 entrants.

St. John's University is another college with an impressive esports presence, one that's already "bursting at the seams" after it opened in part of an old computer lab that also includes 3D printing, multimedia editing and virtual reality with 12 stations, according to director of academic technology Eric Alvarado.

SJU is part of the Big East's League of Legends and Rocket League esports entries and other teams — including Hearthstone,

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Overwatch and Call of Duty — have emerged as unofficial esports options on campus.

St. John's spent about \$6,000 per station, says Alvarado, and is already pushing to add more esports stations in other parts of the campus along with exploring a dedicated esports space.

"The space turned a lot of heads," says Alvarado. The college president has made sure to show it off when walking the campus with other college and even high school administrators and it was part of the tour for potential applicants during the fall, he says.

Gaming Is Big Business

Of course, esports isn't restricted to college campuses. Blizzard Arena, a dedicated esports venue in Burbank, Calif., contains many kinds of commercial technology that drives fan engagement, including:

- › **AUDIO:** speaker systems that can make feel like they're right next to the gunfire, metal-banging and other action on-screen.
- › **VIDEO:** LED cabinets, narrow pixel pitch, permanent installations. Using a video wall to show content in real-time allows audience members to stay immersed.
- › **BROADCAST:** all of the matches are broadcast live to fans who can't make it to eSports arenas.
- › **MOUNTING:** necessary for the audio/video systems.
- › **WI-FI AND CELL SIGNAL EXTENSION:** not only is this necessary for the games and broadcast elements to run smoothly, the fans themselves benefit when trying to share their experience on social media.

Breznick says esports are still in an "early-adoption phase," meaning that spaces which host them are typically more general-purpose, retrofitted for these events. The integrator has to be able to work with existing architecture, deciding on video wall variables and ideal placements.

But there are some esports arenas built exclusively for esports, and Breznick says integrators have a unique opportunity to get in on the ground floor.

"Getting in with those architects and consultants early lets integrators make calls on trusses and architectural support systems that will bolster their installations later," he says.

Obviously, integrators with large venue and event space integration experience are a perfect match for the esports technology market. But those with live broadcast experience might have more of a leg up.

Competition Builds School Spirit

Harrisburg University hosted the largest esports tournament ever in the fall, with 32 teams playing both League of Legends (five-on-five) and Overwatch (six-on-six) during the two-day event that served as a springboard for many other schools looking to build what they have.

That tournament could double in size next fall to 64 teams, says Darr. Harrisburg officials are talking about an additional esports installation in the performance arts theater in the student union and the launch of esports teams has led to hundreds of applicants who wouldn't have otherwise considered Harrisburg, he says, including almost 40 this year alone.



COURTESY ROBERT PAUL FOR BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Blizzard Arena in Los Angeles is a venue dedicated to eSports — and filled with technology systems and tech-savvy people.

Darr has been approached by high school officials in roughly 20 surrounding districts about investing in esports for their students and he expects it won't be long before high school esports competitions are as popular as football and basketball games.

"It's all about the ability to do it when and where and how you want," says Darr. "Football fans enjoy the skill it takes to make a great catch and it's the same when it comes to enjoying esports. Fans appreciate the skill the players have to do things they've never seen before. Win, lose or draw, they get better as a team."

How AV Integrators Fit in Gaming Space

Harrisburg University represented the first foray into esports for the New Era Technology-PA team. Staff looked at the installation as a traditional video wall job but learned there was much more involved and a much larger opportunity in the esports space than they realized.

It went from a simple construction project to one that needed IT infrastructure and New Era-PA's design team, says Mike Morgan, the company's GM/business development manager for central Pennsylvania.

After the Harrisburg University opportunity came to them about 18 months ago, New Era put together a team that interviewed gamers and fans of esports "so we could educate ourselves and see what the bigger picture was," says New Era-PA director of design Susan Lucci.

"We saw there was a lot more in this than we knew," she says.

The team "starting spitballing ideas about taking [esports ideas] to customers," says New Era-PA sales engineer Andrew Dorman, and discussed hosting gaming events in the company warehouse

or at local restaurants “mostly just to educate ourselves.”

One thing Dorman learned is high resolution isn't as important as the refresh rate for gamers.

“We're reshaping the paradigm that we think about AV,” he says. “It's about being able to break out of the norm and expand into this world.”

In the Harrisburg project in particular, acoustics presented a challenge, says design engineer Doug Malora. Each player has his or her own work station and they communicate on headset, either among the team or with the coach. With glass, high ceiling and exposed ceilings that were designed by the architect, New Era had to cut down on the reverberation time with absorbent material but without using acoustical treatments to cover the ornate design.

Brian Hayes, senior design and sales engineer at IVCi, expects the St. John's University job to be the first of many for his company in esports. Gaming represents a \$900 million market in 2018 and that could grow to \$1.4 billion by 2020

“If you're not aware of it or involved in it, you'd be doing an injustice to your customers as well as your company,” says Hayes. “If we didn't go down the path, we'd be foolish. The future is very open.”

IVCi called on the Crestron NVX system to serve as the heart of the St. John's installation, knowing that lag time was of premium importance in esports competitions.

“Milliseconds counts for these individuals,” says Hayes.

Ron Epstein, senior public relations manager for Crestron, calls esports “a new and interesting use case” for NVX, noting “there's a pathway to a career here” for gamers.

While NVX wasn't built specifically with gamers in mind, Epstein isn't surprised it's being used in that space, especially after seeing it work so well in the casino market at the Peppermill Sportsbook.

“We're always on the forefront of technology,” he says. “Sometimes these solutions don't seem as obvious until you're talking to the end user about their pain points.”

Big Things Ahead

Even though New Era is behind other integrators when it comes to getting into the esports market, VP of Sales and Marketing John Greene says the success of the Harrisburg University job means there's much more on the horizon for them in that space.

“This is a blooming onion,” he says. “There's a general excitement about esports every time you touch it. We have to do nothing different. It's just about identifying those customers. We've found this has been going on behind our backs for more than five years.

“This is the very beginning of a good thing for a lot of people. It's not going away,” says Greene. New Era has become part of the National Association of Collegiate Esports, a consortium of 120 or more colleges that are focused on gaming.

Greene heard more about esports during a conference at Lebanon Valley College and has been part of the N3rd Street Gamers' efforts to build cultural events around esports. The projects have health-care companies thinking about ergonomics, furniture companies rethinking how they design chairs and integrators thinking more deeply about robust IT infrastructure.

Dorman is surprised so few AV integrators have pursued esports to this point. There are cross-generational and social benefits to

being part of it, he says.

“It seems like the industry in general is keeping it at an arm's length,” he says. “When you look at it as inputs, outputs routing and network, it's not radically different from what we usually do. It's just a different lens for us to use to look at it.

“There is a vernacular and a mindset as with any other industry. Knowing what you're going to talk about in a way that's exciting to them makes them feel comfortable. Also knowing what their values are,” he says.

Every video wall project should be thought of in the context of esports, says Dorman, whether on a college campus, corporate headquarters or even a command center, where military training teaches the same dexterity, teamwork and quick reflex skills many gamers use to succeed.

Could that mean the corporate softball team gives way to the corporate esports team? **CI**

GAMING AS A RECRUITING TOOL

NEW ERA TECHNOLOGY VP of sales and marketing John Greene recommends integrators who pursue esports have someone on the team who “speaks the language.”

“These athletes know a lot about technology,” he says.

Mike Morgan, the company's GM/business development manager for central Pennsylvania, isn't surprised to hear Harrisburg University is attracting new students as a result of its esports success. “It's not only functional; it's also a recruiting tool,” he says.

The market can help AV integrators and manufacturers find new talent too, says Premier Mounts marketing coordinator Brandon Breznick.

“With video games, there are many simple setups where the console uses HDMI to hook into a display,” says Breznick. “For kids who grow up gaming, that's an essential concept. When you have a kid in one of these esports arenas look up and see a video wall and is in love with the environment they're in, you can tell the kid that they can be involved in this.”

St. John's is looking at bringing high school esports competitions to campus and has seen the college of professional services incorporate esports into several majors and class offerings, including sports management, science and mass communication, with options including video game design and video game animation.

“There are exponential ramifications in blossoming these academic focuses,” says St. John's director of academic technology Eric Alvarado.

Crestron's Ron Epstein wonders how many of today's gamers will be tomorrow's integrators. Video games can help with hand-eye coordination and developing a more strategic mindset, he says.

“It used to be, ‘stop playing video games and do your homework,’” says Epstein. “Now it might have flip-flopped. Education is an evolving thing.”