

COVID-19, Esports, & K-12 Education

K-12 Blueprint Trend Brief

The emergence of COVID-19 across the globe resulted in the mass cancelation of gatherings, affecting everything from Broadway to the 2020 Summer Olympics*. The NBA* and MLB* both postponed their seasons, The Masters* was rescheduled, the NFL* draft held without its typical Las Vegas atmosphere and the Kentucky Derby* moved from its traditional May date for the first time since World War II. Sports aren't the only ones affected: TED*, the Cannes Film Festival*, and the World Series of Poker* have all been altered. Burning Man*, the annual art ecosystem in Nevada's Black Rock Desert, will be held virtually: *"We can still build it together, and be together, and burn together, only digitally instead of in the dust¹."*

Loss in revenue from in-person events has traditional sports turning to its "little brother," esports, for a way to stay relevant, and esports as an alternative to traditional sports is gaining momentum. The result is a budding collaboration that is yielding benefits for sports and other forms of entertainment. New events that bridge and blend traditional sports, the arts, and esports are becoming more common and more popular.

Formula One* racing has launched a simulated racing series, featuring current F1* drivers alongside esports gamers², and NBA 2K*, a virtual basketball game, announced an NBA* players-only tournament—with ESPN* broadcasting the three-day competition³. Twitch*, the popular game streaming platform,

¹ Burning Man, [Virtual BRC 2020](#)

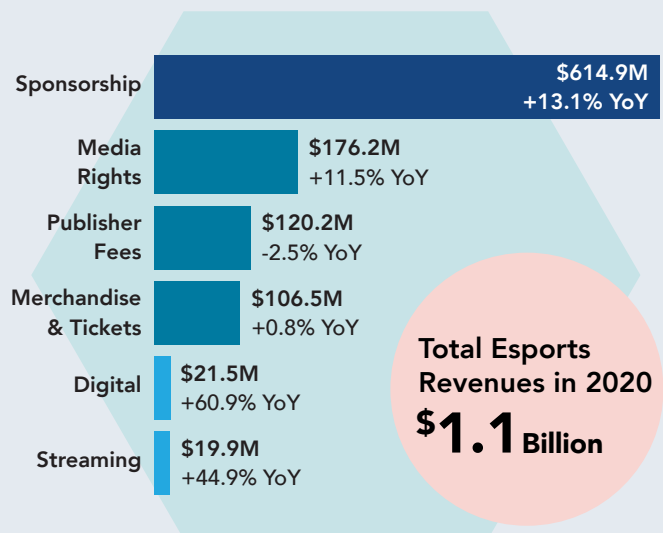
² Traditional Sports Relying upon Esports during COVID-19 Crisis, [Esports Insider](#)

³ Players-Only NBA 2K Tournament to Air on ESPN during Coronavirus Shutdown, [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#)

The Esports Evolution

Esports are multiplayer, online video games played competitively as part of a team. Just as with traditional sports, the ecosystem around esports ranges far and wide, from its fan base to commentators, attracting sponsors, celebrities, and major tournaments across the globe. This estimated \$1.5 billion industry wasn't showing any signs of slowing down, until COVID-19 halted face-to-face gatherings in early 2020. By embracing collaboration with traditional sports and entertainment—and focusing on the long-term viability of virtual gatherings—the industry is adjusting, and some segments are even flourishing.

2020 Global Esports Revenue Streams



\$150,000
\$150,000
First Place
\$150,000



Mike Evans
Twitch Partner



JuJu Smith-Schuster
Twitch Partner



tfue
Twitch Partner



scoped
Twitch Partner

The winning banner from Twitch Rivals SuperGames Tournament in April 2020, where NFL's Mike Evans and JuJu Smith-Schuster partnered with two esports professionals, tfue and scoped, to win the grand prize. Image Source: <https://rivals.twitch.tv/supergames/>

organized the "Twitch Rivals SuperGames Tournament*," where professional athletes and professional esports gamers paired up for a Fortnite* charity benefit, because "Sports are off, so it's game on for a good cause⁴."

Esports players—whose median age range hovers around 30, unlike the teenage stereotype from the past—are socializing through the games themselves; the games are not just a replacement for live sports, but an arts and live entertainment replacement as well. Rapper Travis Scott's Fortnite* concert brought an artistic experience to the game, ratcheting views beyond 28 million people⁵; John Legend performed during the NBA 2K* virtual tournament, watched by more than 139,000 live viewers with countless replays online⁶. This intersection of esports with art, this message that "if you're not plugged into gaming, you're not plugged into pop culture," is a message that will likely resonate with students beyond the current COVID-19-related crisis and undoubtedly have societal implications for sports and entertainment in the future.



Effect of COVID-19 on Esports

As with traditional sports, much of esports fervor occurs via publicly played tournaments in packed arenas, generating revenue, exposure, and excitement for the industry. These onsite tournaments have been an integral part of the esports experience, and this segment of the industry has been significantly impacted by the advent of COVID-19. *Dota 2's* The International*, the most famous tournament for the battle arena game, has been indefinitely postponed despite its lucrative track record, and ESL One Rio 2020*, the leading *Counter Strike** tournament, was "rolled" into its November leg, combining the two for a cash prize of 2 million dollars.

“Tournaments and events across *Overwatch**, *League of Legends**, *PUBG**, *Dota 2**, *Counter-Strike**, the fighting game community, and many more have been postponed or canceled outright. Players, casters, coaches, journalists, fans, and others have lost opportunities and money, and they don't know when they'll be able to get back to work⁷.”

To adjust, leagues are getting up and running with more professional (and therefore higher-paying) online tournaments, with "integrity measures" like webcams, screen sharing during game play, and even intentionally delaying the broadcast to at-home players so they can't sneak a viewing advantage. Some professional teams are still sequestered and training together in team housing, with ESPN*'s Tyler Erzberger quipping, "as long as Postmates* is still around and they can still get deliveries, I think the esports players should be okay⁸."

⁴ *Twitch Rivals Super Games Featuring Fortnite*, [Rivals Twitch TV](#)

⁵ *A Staggering Number Of People Saw Fortnite's Travis Scott 'Astronomical' Event*, [Forbes](#)

⁶ *Amazon's Twitch Leads a Booming Esports Six-Figure-Salary Job Market in Coronavirus Era*, [CNBC](#)

⁷ *The Coronavirus' Human Impact on Esports*, [The Verge](#)

⁸ *Can Esports Seize the Moment?*, [ESPN Daily Podcast](#)

Esports is a global phenomenon, and it draws its power from a worldwide audience watching athletes from every country compete—but, technology doesn't yet suit a sport in which a millisecond advantage can mean winning or losing, and online play can be compromised by connectivity and latency issues. An *Overwatch** player in California might play a game with their New York friend, and depending on which server they are assigned, one player will suffer a slight disadvantage.

While tournament play has been disrupted, some industry leaders are finding ways to make it work. Riot Games* is the first to span the COVID-19 space with a cross-regional tournament. *The League of Legends* mid-season cup, hosted entirely online, featured a \$600K USD prize pool and eight teams from China and Korea. The announcement included their plan to partner with “third-party technology providers, to ensure the latency is around 30-40ms,” and explanations that because China and Korea are geographically close, their internet infrastructure has more fidelity⁹. These innovations in technologies that benefit esports will benefit a myriad of other industries as well.

“ Verizon reports that the U.S. Network usage specific to gaming increased 75% in the first week of quarantine.”

As tournament play adapts in response to COVID-19 and continues to grow in spite of it, recent data indicate that virtual participation in games is soaring. Verizon* reports that the U.S. Network usage specific to gaming increased 75% in the first week of quarantine, with old and new gamers alike seeking

⁹ Riot Games to Host \$600K League of Legends Mid-Season Cup: LPL vs LCK, [The Esports Observer](#)

¹⁰ With Sports in Lockdown, Does COVID-19 Herald the Victory of Video Gaming?, [World Economic Forum](#)

¹¹ How COVID-19 is Taking Games and Esports to the Next Level, [The European Sting](#)

¹² As Covid-19 Halts Live Matches, Sportskeeda Evolves with Esports and Marches to the Top, [European Gaming](#)

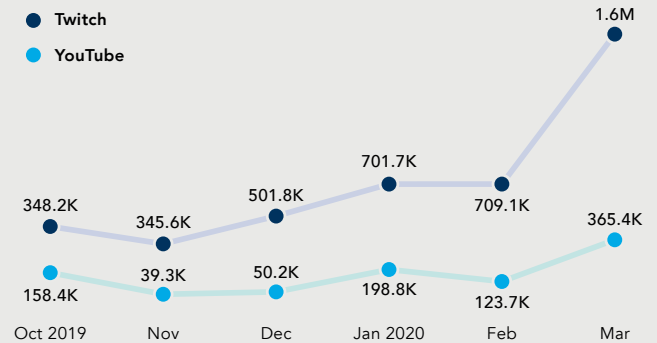


Pre-COVID-19 crowds in Silesia, Poland, for the Intel Extreme Masters 2019 - Electronic Sports World Cup.

social interaction and a way to make use of their free time¹⁰. With more players comes more opportunities for advertisers, and the revenue for gaming companies and platforms has increased: “The global video game market is forecast to be worth \$159 billion in 2020, around four times box office revenues (\$43 billion in 2019) and almost three times music industry revenues (\$57 billion in 2019)¹¹.”

Viewership on Twitch* and YouTube* is also up, indicating that people aren't just playing video games, but watching them, which is a great sign for esports. And this increase is not limited to North America: India's Sportskeeda*, the leading sports media content platform, has pivoted to become the major purveyor of esports, logging a 2000% increase in daily traffic¹². This level of participation may dip post-quarantine, but esports has undeniably made a lasting impression on people all over the world.

iRacing's Live Viewership Spikes During Lockdown



As esports takes the place of traditional sports during quarantine, more viewers are tuning in to watch their favorite sports “replaced” in a digital space—and yet, viewers may become post-quarantine fans.

Sustainable Engagement, Post-Quarantine

Social Engagement

As the world reaches out for social interaction during quarantine, esports is taking the reclusive “gamer-in-the-basement” stereotype and transforming it into a “how-to-quarantine” guidebook. Esports gamers and viewers didn’t need to learn how to be social from their homes; it is already part of the fabric of their community. When Mike Sepso, esports pioneer since 2002, hears parental concerns about the lack of social engagement in gaming, he responds by saying, “Your kid is not all by himself; he’s probably talking to 30 different people from around the world. In fact, he’s probably got a substantially bigger network of close associates than you do...those of us over 40 had to go hand-to-hand and recreate social networks to keep in touch with people while we’re stuck inside...the connectivity that [gamers] have was already there¹³.”

Economic Engagement

Revenue models in the game and sporting industries are changing, shifting even before COVID-19 isolation. In-game purchases have outstripped the original “buy game, play game” model, with games like Fortnite* costing nothing to install and play, but racking up millions in “microtransactions” including costumes, “skins,” and other game and character features¹⁴. Cloudbet* further “digitized” the traditional sporting experience, offering cryptocurrency betting on the English Premier League* soccer matches¹⁵. These monetary transactions, fully occurring in the digital space, also amplify the momentum of the cryptocurrency movement¹⁶. Nevada’s recent legalization of esports betting alone may change the games completely¹⁷; this connection inexorably links esports to monetary gains, which in turn likely lead to industry growth, and therefore job growth and economic opportunity.

“If this crisis has taught us anything about esports, it’s the industry’s resilience. No matter the state of affairs in the world, as long as there’s a reliable internet connection, you can bet someone will be gaming through it.” — [Esports Insider](#)

Future of Esports in K-12 Education

What do all of these trends in esports (and traditional sports and entertainment) portend for K-12 education? Looking to tomorrow’s future means looking at today’s learners, and their medium is the virtual space. Students are organizing political movements on Tik Tok*; brands are curating their entire lifecycles on Instagram; advertisers are buying tapestry space on medieval *League of Legends** banners¹⁸. Many of these young gamers have never watched TV; they have only seen YouTube*, Twitch*, and other online viewing platforms. That means that the younger generation is watching esports, perhaps more than they will ever watch traditional sports.

Industry leaders predict that the surge in esports popularity will continue. And as more players enter the space the ripple effects will be felt throughout higher and K-12 education. With more players comes more engagement; more engagement leads to more advertising; more advertising leads to more revenue. With increased legitimacy in esports, there will be more professional levels of players, as well as more professional roles (job postings for esports roles rose 43% during the first quarter of 2020¹⁹).

¹³ [Gaming and Esports: Winning Gold in the COVID Shutdown, World Economic Forum’s World vs Virus Podcast](#)

¹⁴ [How Does Fortnite Make Money?, Investopedia](#)

¹⁵ [Cloudbet Offers Zero Margin EPL Betting, European Gaming](#)

¹⁶ [Why the Future of Esports Is Tied to Cryptocurrency, Bitcoin.com News](#)

¹⁷ [Sportsbooks Struggling, Vegas Embraces Esports Betting Despite Match-Fixing Concerns, Washington Post](#)

¹⁸ [League of Legends is About to Get In-Game Ads during Official Matches, PC Gamer](#)

¹⁹ [Amazon’s Twitch Leads a Booming Esports Six-Figure-Salary Job Market in Coronavirus Era, CNBC](#)

Given this growth in esports as an industry that offers professional opportunities and a career path, higher education is likely to take notice. Institutions of higher education may offer esports scholarships, which translates to greater interest and more support for K-12 esports players and teams.

Newzoo*’s data shows that Minecraft* is the top PC game in any given month, and “consistently ranks in the monthly top five for all PC games²⁰.” With its already-formidable presence in K-12 education, youthful gamers will find educational footholds for their after-school hobby.

Think about the resilience of the gamer: they were ready to weather this kind of socially distanced storm, with a network and toolkit already in place to remain connected.

With an eye on this phenomenon, more and more resources are emerging for esports in the education sector. Start-ups are forming to help highschool gamers go pro, and as Sam Wang, CEO and Founder of Esports learning platform [ProGuides*](#), comments, “This is just the beginning... Gaming is one of the largest, most accessible and fastest-growing industries worldwide....²²”

Are you ready to join the esports phenomenon? Take the [Gamers vs COVID-19 pledge](#), and get gaming!

²⁰ *What Gamers Are Playing & Watching During the Coronavirus Lockdown*, [New Zoo](#)

²¹ *Gaming and Esports: Winning Gold in the COVID Shutdown*, [World Economic Forum’s World vs Virus Podcast](#)

²² *As Esports Find a Place in School, This Startup Teaches Gamers How to Go Pro*, [EdSurge](#)



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Leagues of Learning: The Rising Tide of Esports in Education



Dive deeper into esports, its history, and its growing momentum in K-12 and higher education.

[View the White Paper](#)

Fueling an Appetite for Esports at Fresno USD



Read a case study on Fresno Unified School District, a leader in high school esports participation.

[View the Case Study](#)