

COVID-19 & Esports - Part 2 - The Socio-Cultural Context

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In Part 1 of this article, I noted the stark contrast between how the esports industry was reacting and adapting to the changes forced on society and the economy by the COVID-19 virus in comparison to many other industries. I concluded by questioning whether these differences might be purely situational, and perhaps fleeting in nature. In Part 2, it is worthwhile considering why this may not be the case.

It would be easy to attribute the impacts on the esports industry that we are seeing during these early months of 2020 as a result of people having more time on their hands due to the quarantine and self-isolation measures put in place over the period. In addition, the absence of (1) professional sports (2) major film releases, (3) access to bricks and mortar businesses offering recreational and entertainment retail products and services and (4) many venues (bars, restaurants, schools and other places of education, public spaces, clubs, etc.) have removed access to the locations and types of activity that people formerly engaged in as their preferred means of recreation, socialization and entertainment. Gaming and esports might be going through a relatively positive phase solely as a matter of default, as one of the few pursuits that may still be able to function within the isolation or quarantine restrictions imposed by government authorities. Without a doubt, this is a part of the story, but there may be more to it.

Gaming and esports have a number of attributes that, once experienced in this new environment, may foster longer term attitudinal and behavioural change:

- They are highly social - as game and event play/viewing is typically carried out with others present, albeit not always in person;
- They are easily broadcast - and as a result a number of broadcast and narrowcast media have evolved that carry play and events
- They are highly malleable - as digitized activities, they are easy to manipulate, and re-package in a variety of formats and for different purposes;
- They do not exhibit cultural or linguistic bias - as the underlying activities easily translate across cultures and languages;
- They involve defined and controllable environments - which are particularly comforting in times when circumstances emphasize a lack of these elements;
- They are immersive ecosystems that contain compelling storylines, characters and relationships;
- They allow individuals to adopt idealized and varied personas; and
- They are both adaptable and evolving - as the underlying activity of gameplay is constantly undergoing updating and change, often in wholesale fashion as new gaming titles are published and played

These attributes are difficult to match in other spheres of human endeavour. They constitute particularly powerful attractors for individuals in times when physical interaction is not just frowned upon, but actively restricted (and in some jurisdictions criminally penalized). While entertainment is still readily found online in other forms, it often tends to have been pre-packaged, is non-interactive and is generally of a fixed, limited and episodic nature (e.g. online streaming services, traditional television and cable, etc.), and on a comparative basis lacks the immediacy of experience which gaming and esports can create.

Historically, in a more cluttered and frenzied environment, the favourable qualities of gaming and esports in comparison to other media and entertainment offerings might not have been as readily apparent - but in the current climate they will be increasingly so, in the same fashion that after a fire has passed through a forest the few trees left standing become particularly striking until new growth has had time to re-establish itself.

Accordingly, the COVID-19 virus situation may provide gaming and esports a unique opportunistic position. In Part 3 of this article, I will examine what this may mean for the industry and society on a broader basis.

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