The Hidden Worlds of Esports Stages

Features

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by Eron Rauch

Looking at a bunch of players in a plexiglass box isn't that interesting on its own. These days, esports event stages are making things a lot more exciting.

The gridiron. The squared circle. The ring. The pitch. The diamond. The very names we give for sports fields conjure mystique and deep history to their fans. Within the rising tide of esports these gladiatorial locations have even more evocative titles: Summoner's Rift, Fields of Death, Defense of the Ancients. But there is one small complication: though these fantastical locations are where the highlight reels are recorded, when tens of thousands of fans are at a tournament cheering the worlds' greatest players the fans aren't actually staring at these pixel blades of grass, digital trees, and CG monsters.

Esports spectators at physical tournament events, jamming down the same stadium hotdogs and clutching the same plastic cups of overpriced beer as traditional sports fans, are staring at a bunch of young people huddled behind computer screens. While dragon knights might combat two-headed ogres, these players are sitting on a matte black platform a few feet off the ground in comfy chairs, talking to each other over microphones. As the crowd does the wave and stomps their feet, the players can't even hear the outside world since the stadium's roar is muted by sound-proof booths and branded aeronautical headphones to prevent cheating. In live esports, the stage becomes the focus of attention, a new place that exists between the game field and the audience.

Trying to make live events as exciting as the in-game action is a big problem for the production companies and broadcasters trying to grow video games as sports. Watching someone huddled over a computer in a locked pod is not very interesting from the third balcony cheap seats. Even if you have platinum-tier-VIP-front-row access, no matter how many speakers pump out seat-rattling explosions and regardless of the number of swirling laser lights, staring at someone clicking quickly in a plexiglass box is not particularly compelling.

Some purists dismiss stages as merely decoration for the in-game action. But I propose that esports productions should view stages as a unique creative opportunity. By designing the stages as active contributora to live events, it is possible to leverage both the real and virtual elements inherent in esports, and combine them to create a new evolution in the audience experience of sports.

For many years, esports event organizers didn't put much thought into these stages. For much of esports history, fans who watched games were also typically the most hardcore fans and dedicated players of the video games themselves. Simply passing

on the in-game footage for them to digest, with all of their insider knowledge, was good enough. Adding announcers, called casters in esports, provided a level of audio flourish during slow parts of the game, but the focus remained on the action taking place in the video game.

ZOOM LoL's first season stage had none of the flash that current major LoL events do.

Recently, however, audiences for competitive video games have grown dramatically, which has also led to a massive increase in esports viewership. These events are no longer primarily for semi-professional players. Within my group of friends, many of us spend more time watching coverage of time-consuming games like *League of Legends* than we spend actually playing those games. This trend actually shouldn't be a surprise. Traditional sports audiences are mostly fans who spend far more time watching and cheering, than playing the games. Esports stages have the ability to become the integral bridge between the virtual fields of competition and the rapidly expanding and diversifying live audience.

But the production companies that run esports events have started to realize they no longer have to mimic the presentation of traditional sports. Theatrical tricks and technical wizardry can actually create new ways for live spectators to experience these games. Not only do these innovations create a more exciting experience for the audience, but as we'll see in a moment with the *DOTA2* and *LoL* stages, it also lets event producers emphasize what makes seemingly similar games different from each other.

ZOOM

The best known esports stage is very likely Riot Games' in-house studio where they play the numerous weekly matches for *LoL*'s Championship series. The players sit on a slightly raised platform about 50 feet wide in front of stadium seating, much like a small movie theater. Each team sits together in open booths with the blue side squad on stage-right and red side stage-left, both facing out to the audience. In the center a large projection screen hangs from the ceiling between the teams where it displays the same footage as the video streamed on Twitch and YouTube. What defines the Riot Games stage and production style is the large number of individual monitors placed all around the stage—upwards of 30 home TV size screens can be displaying content at once!

The most prominent set of screens cover the front of the desks where each of the players sit. These screens are large squares which show the animated portrait of the champion the player is currently using, along with their in-game name. These screens show the audience that player's role in the game in the same way that a jersey and equipment can indicate a player's role on a traditional field. A large monitor above each team displays their team logo similar to the banners that hang from the ceiling of a stadium. On each of the numerous smaller monitors that are scattered around the front of the room, the production team can display a dazzling array of player statistics, small maps, health bars, timers, information about the team's abilities, close up cameras of the player's faces, and custom branded animations related to the game. It feels like being in a sports bar filled with TVs, but with every screen and scrolling ticker showing different fragments of the same game. To integrate all of the tech, the Riot stages also have elaborate LED lighting systems which make them look a bit like a set from the movie *Tron*.

DOTA2's stage for the 2015 International tournament could not have been any more different from the *LoL* studio stages. The stage was located in the middle of the floor of a large basketball stadium with the audience seated 360 degrees around. The broadcast game footage was displayed on the stadium monitors suspended dozens of feet above the court. The stage itself was raised about three or four feet off the ground, and was shaped like a roughly hundred by hundred foot square with cutouts and protrusions that gave it the same silhouette as the game's map. The competing teams were seated in booths that had plexiglass walls and ceilings so the fans could look down on the players from any angle. Since *DOTA2* is played on a diagonal with home

bases in the lower left to upper right, the booths were located in same two opposing corners of the stage matching the starting locations for the teams in the game.

With the stage shaped like the game map, and the players seated in their respective base locations, the most innovative element of the International stage was to project a real-time video of the game map on the stage surface. As day and night came and went the stage projection changed too; as the players cast fireballs and lighting at each other spells in the virtual world of the game, the same spell effects and interactions would be projected flying back and forth between the two booths as part of the digital floor-map like a boxing match between wizards. The technology for this sort of real-time translation between digital assets in a video game and dozens of projectors is still limited, so the spell effects and maps were somewhat simplified. But the even with these limitations, the *DOTA2* International stage was an incredible use of cutting-edge technology to bring a video game world to life as a stadium-filling event.

Hearthstone's Championship Tour stage also brings elements from the game in to the real world, but in a very different way than *DOTA2*. Hearthstone is a virtual card game, which is set in a specific inn from the *Warcraft* franchise fantasy world of Aezorth. When you log in to the game, the virtual innkeeper, a dwarf named Harth Stonebrew, greets you alongside the din of a bustling bar. The games of *Hearthstone* are supposedly played by the fireside of this inn. For the current Championship tour, the Blizzard esports team has decided to make a stage that replicates the experience of being in Stronebrew's inn.

ZOOM Hearthstone's tavern-themed Championship Tour stage

The stage is arranged in a traditional manner, with the audience all seated in front of the raised stage at the far end of the room. Set about three feet high, the stage contains a central Medieval-style table where the two competitors face each other, their computers hidden buried below the faux-tabletop. Behind them, a screen plays a video of a flickering fireplace like those novelty Christmas videos, nestled within a mammoth tromp'loeil brick and stone hearth—two-dimensional, but painted to look three-dimensional. Stacked to either side are fake kegs of strong ale. Vertical projection screens mimic windows, and show a hazy view of an evening sky, like something from a soap opera set.

Seated at another table to stage right are the three announcers, perched like they are noisy patrons peering over at the next table at a bar. Some *Hearthstone* tournaments even have a small side room on stage left where the other tournament players can mill about, play practice games, watch the main event, and drink from tankards, fleshing out the illusion that the games are taking place in a crowded bar. The events have large screens showing the live footage but they are located well beyond the edges of the stage off to the left and right, so as not to intrude on the theatrical space.

For *StarCraft 2*'s 2015 and 2016 World Championship event, Blizzard contracted experimental visual arts and architecture collective V Squared Labs to construct a massive stage. The final product was a 130 foot by 40 foot sculptural wall containing two pods raised a dozen feet above the audience to hold the players. These pods only had small portholes for the players to look through, and the wall held three big screens. Stage-left and stage-right each showed a camera trained on the respective players, while the middle screen held the in-game footage.

But calling these three areas "screens" is actually incorrect. Since the whole stage was white sculptural structure designed to be projected on, these three screens were actually just subsections of a much more massive screen. At turns the stage looked like it was made of glimmering metal, or like chitinous armor, but this was all an illusion created by projection mapping from 24 of the highest resolution video projectors.

Projection mapping is the technique of creating 3D digital models that match real objects and then using sophisticated software to virtually bend the perspective of projected video to make it look "natural" when shown on those real objects (so the sides and curves aren't all distorted). Technicalities aside, projection mapping basically lets you take blank objects in the real world and make them look like they are moving with computer graphics. In the case of the SC2 stage, V Square Labs used characters, textures, and animations from the game to create an ever-moving, morphing, and animated sci-fi wall like you might see on the bridge of a massive alien flagship cruising through space. These incredible effects neither tried to highlight the aspects of playing the game like the *LoL* stage, nor to replicated a specific in-game space like *Hearthstone*'s stage, but were designed simply to be as spectacular as possible.

These four types of stages are just a tiny glimpse at the future of esports events. Remember that only a tiny handful of years ago the thought of getting beer spilled on you by one of ten thousand other overeager video game fans crammed in a stadium would have seemed ludicrous. With the revolution of virtual reality, ever-increasingly more capable visual effects hardware and software, miniaturization of electronics, wearable tech, and the rise of robust robotics, esports' combination of theatrical technology and sporting drama is set to be one of the most exciting and weird spaces in the media landscape. So while esports events currently often try to mimic centuries of sporting tradition, it is important to remember these differences, especially in having stages as an additional step between player and spectator, are places ripe for creative exploration.

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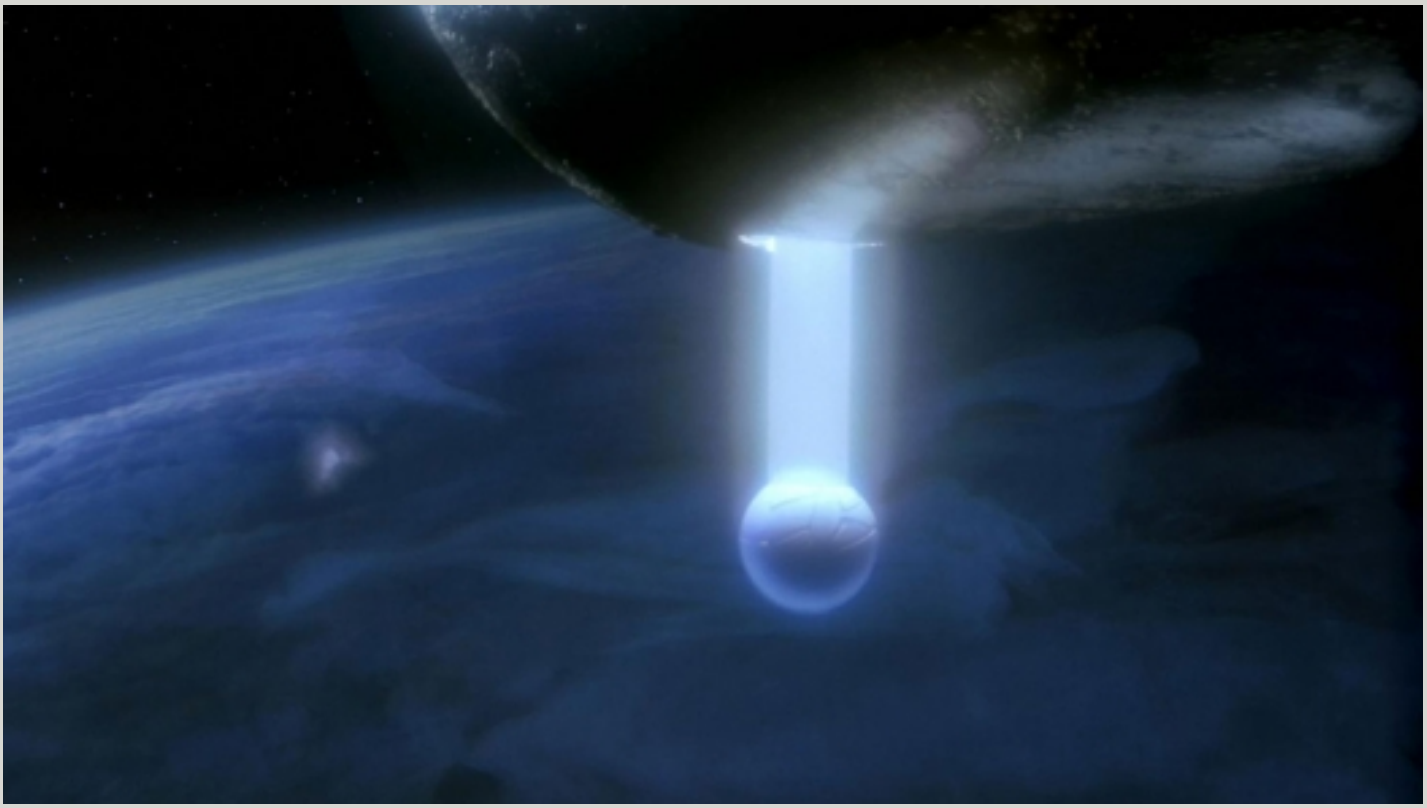

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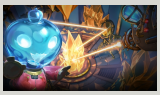

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