



ESPORTS GAME PUBLISHERS:

*How do they deal with the global pandemic in 2020 ?
Which games benefited from it and which games suffered?*

An exclusive whitepaper, brought to you by Esports BAR in association with Esports Charts

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INTRODUCTION

Online or offline? Which one is superior and why? We will try to answer these and many other questions regarding the events of 2020 in this brand new white paper brought you by Esports Charts and Esports BAR.

The whole entertainment industry was hit by the pandemic, with esports being no exception to this. Considering how quickly the borders were closed, it made sense to cancel the planned offline championships, while keeping all the future World Championships indefinitely suspended. Of course, there were some exceptions to this – such as the 2020 LoL World Championship.



BLIZZARD, ACTIVISION, AND THE CORONAVIRUS

Immediately after switching to an online format, everyone started talking about its advantages, how cool and amazing it is, even being superior to offline in terms of the views-to-organizer-expenses ratio. But not everyone understands that such “incredible” viewership results were only possible due to the absence of competition from LAN tournaments, to begin with.

The disciplines which relied on offline for all their competitive events suffered the most. In particular, this involved the franchise leagues such as the Overwatch League or Call of Duty League.

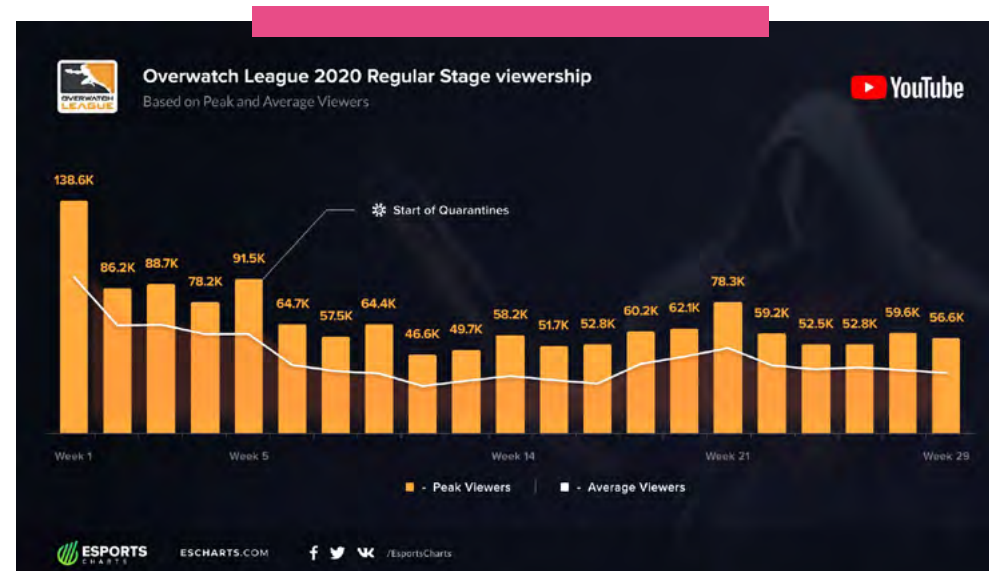
During the mid-season, **Call of Duty** league was characterized by a decline in viewership, with the peak viewers indicators ceasing to exceed a hundred thousand people at the league’s fourth stop already. The format of the CDL’s debut season changed to online one right after the Dallas championship. But

this did not get in the way of the fans of the shooter, with the views climbing back up at the final stage, even setting a new peak viewers record for the discipline.

In the case of **OWL**, everything is much worse – not only due to the coronavirus pandemic but also due to internal problems, such as the championship’s transition to YouTube. It should be reminded that the first two seasons of the Overwatch League were held exclusively on Twitch – but then in early 2020, the

competition decided to switch to a different platform.

This particular change resulted in average viewership decreasing below a hundred thousand. The hours watched indicator wasn’t that great either, with quite a disappointing difference between the first and the second weeks. For the fans, all hope was lost even for the finals – as the results showed the tournament losing 62.9% of its average viewers. In other words, only a third of the last season’s audience was watching the Overwatch League in 2020.



LEAGUE OF LEGENDS REACHED NEW RECORDS DURING THE PANDEMIC

At the beginning of the coronavirus era, many were intrigued with how League of Legends would handle the situation, given that a significant part of the game's esports scene revolves around long-term regional leagues in an offline format. But the prompt reaction of the organizers helped avoid any big problems, allowing the season to end on time.

Despite being held online, the finals of LEC summer split still managed to reach the second-best peak viewers mark in the discipline's history among the regional tournaments. The final European match between Fnatic and G2 was watched by 1 million viewers, exceeding the championship's previous record by 19%. That's given that the teams themselves played from the team houses under the supervision of the Riot Games referees.

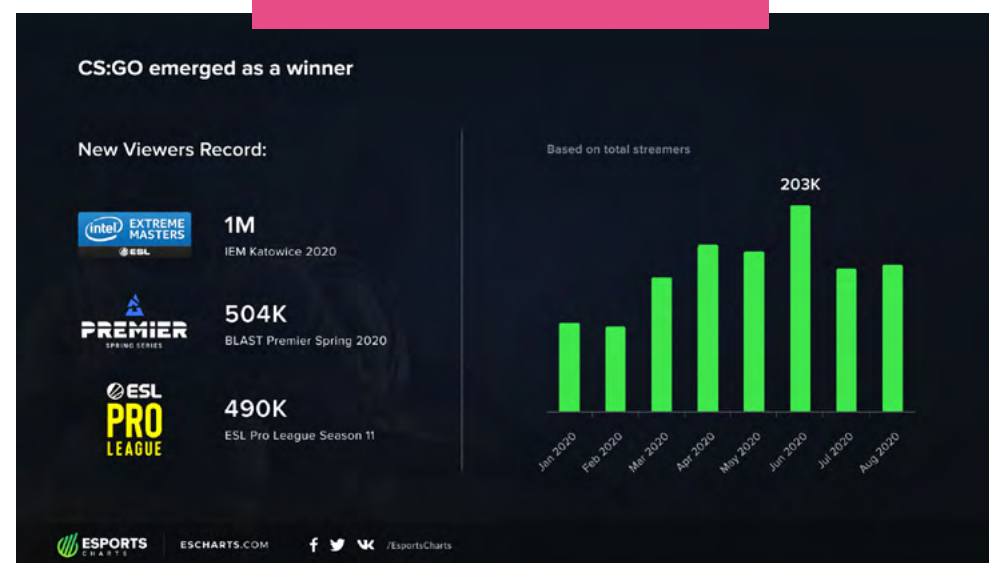
Only the LCK spring split managed to collect more; as it became one of the few tournaments managing to still maintain an offline format despite happening during the very height of

the coronavirus crisis. In a way, this makes the online LCK Summer 2020 look worse – as the latter failed to repeat the record, only reaching the mark of 823 thousand peak viewers. Of course, it should be mentioned that the Korean regional qualifiers also reached a million viewers and yet were still behind the spring's record by a few tens of thousands of viewers.

CS:GO EMERGED AS A WINNER

The organizers whose schedule was mostly filled with offline events ended up completely dropping out of the esports life. ESL, DreamHack, Epic Esports Events and Starladder were affected by this in the most dramatic fashion. All these companies were actively involved in Dota 2 and CS:GO competitions supported by the game developers, such as Valve.

ESL Gaming has dealt with this situation in quite a positive way: by quickly switching all their planned offline tournaments into an online format. The list of participants was expanded, and the competitions



themselves were divided by regions: North America, Oceania, Asia and Europe.

The ESL Pro League of theirs even managed to show near double peak viewers increase compared to the previous (offline) competitions. For example, the European region reached 490 thousand peak viewers in season 11 – which is 160% more than the previous season, as well as 32% more than the record set during the finals of Season 10. Therefore, online doesn't seem to be a problem.

All in all, CS:GO has shown some incredible results. The game has constantly increased its performance since March 2020 – which affected not only viewers but also the ordinary streamers. We've already described the situation regarding the shooter once. In short: the number of both the players and viewers on Twitch has shown constant growth since March, once even outmatching the results of Valve's other game – Dota 2.

Arguably, Valve has shown itself to be the game developer most unprepared

for the pandemic. While virtually every other competitor was busy with adapting their own games to this new reality and cooperating with third-party organizers, Valve remained silent. Such a choice had an extremely negative effect of keeping the majority of the esports players, teams and organizers in the dark.

FIGHTING GAMES SUFFERED THE MOST

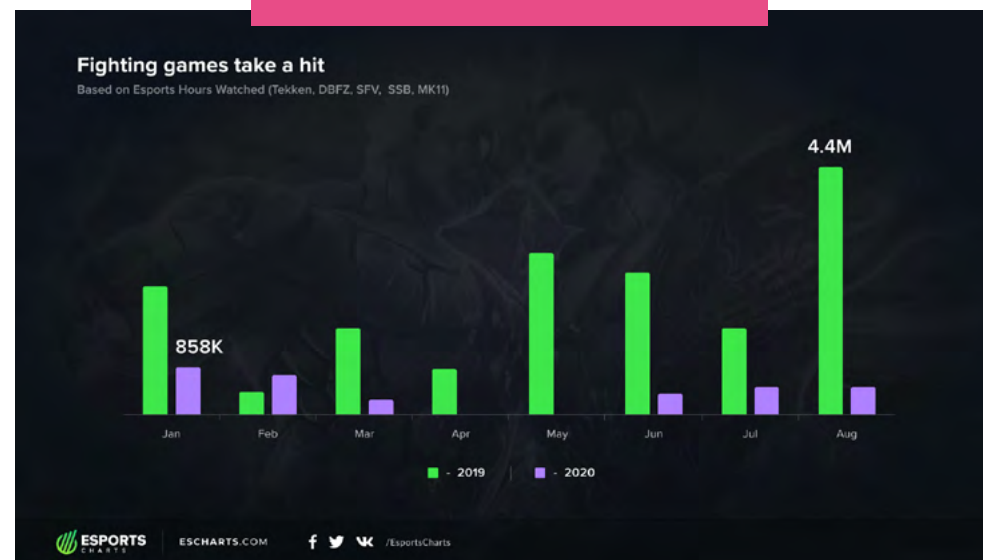
The representatives of the fighting game genre have flat out disappeared.

These disciplines heavily relied on large esports festivals where competitions in several different games were usually held simultaneously. This was the traditional setup for the industry – which, however, was simply incompatible with going online.

As such, the ban on offline events has stopped the fighting game disciplines in their tracks, with not a single major event happening since March. The most anticipated events of this kind, such as Evolution Championship Series and CEO, have failed to switch

to the online format. All of this caused Street Fighter V, Super Smash Bros., Tekken and Mortal Kombat to show extremely underwhelming statistics.

Only by the third quarter, the silence was broken by the Capcom Pro Tour. This Street Fighter V tournament series finally opened a new season by bringing the qualifiers online and dividing them into different regions. The first results shown are quite encouraging, given that the first CPT 2020 Online Asia East entered the top 20 disciplines based on its peak viewers indicator.



TRADITIONAL SPORTS WENT ONLINE DUE TO COVID-19

There's a positive side to the pandemic as well: due to the traditional sports also being unable to play live matches in stadiums, both the teams and individual athletes have switched to online meetings rather quickly.

The football players have immediately started to broadcast their FIFA adventures; the same was true for other popular types of sports – such

as hockey. By the way, the latter became less popular among esports fans judging by the results of the NHL World Championship. This can be attributed to the lack of grand and spectacular stage-based finals.

The interest in sports was shared even by Twitch. With the support of Real Madrid and PSG football clubs, the popular streaming platform has launched its own 24/7 sports channel. While it failed to attract a large number of viewers so far, it is the very fact of the platform and large clubs showing interest that is important.

IS FORMULA 1 STILL ON THE TOP OF VIRTUAL MOTORSPORT GAMING?

In the case of Formula One racing, everyone saw the emergence of virtual Grand Prix featuring the stars of motorsport – including the champions of the main Formula divisions, which participated in simulator-based races alongside famous streamers and athletes from other disciplines.

As it usually goes, the American audiences followed a slightly different set of disciplines. When it comes to the North American viewers, most of

them were watching the eNASCAR Coca-Cola iRacing Series 2020 and INDYCAR iRacing Challenge 2020 (as part of the iRacing game). While still being far behind the indicators of virtual F1, the results are more than satisfactory. After all, NASCAR and Indy Car have less global success than F1, being more focused on American fans.

CHESS, AN ETERNAL CLASSIC

Chess attracted much of the public interests. Given that the board game joined the ranks of those no longer able to host large tournaments, going online was the only option. However, thanks to such personalities like Hikaru Nakamura, who were actively involved in establishing broadcasts with popular streamers, many began to look towards the strategy game.

The organizers of the chess tournaments were responsible for extra hype as well. Many of them began to invite the platform's popular streamers, which, in turn, spawned a huge wave of content for the average viewer to deal with. From the

standpoint of many modern users of Twitch.tv, following the streamer might be more important than following the game itself.

The reigning World Chess Champion, Magnus Carlsen conducted his online tour, raffling off \$700,000. The tournament final became the most popular chess event of 2020 with a total of 193 thousand peak viewers.

MOBILE ESPORTS STRIKES BACK

Mobile esports has managed to really impress everyone this time. The competitions there were already online-oriented for the major part of the events. Because of this, mobile esports was quite quick to switch into online completely when conducting LAN events became impossible, starting to attract hundreds of thousands of views.

PUBG Mobile World League East would be one example of setting a big record during the pandemic, attracting 1 million 135 thousand peak viewers – which is an incredible number for a regional tournament. However,



judging by a similar performance on the part of an ever-increasing number of mobile games, soon such numbers will no longer be surprising.

We can't avoid mentioning yet another outstanding representative of mobile gaming. Thanks to the fifth season

of MPL ID, Mobile Legends managed to reach the mark of 1 million 163 thousand peak viewers, therefore updating its own record. MPL ID Season 6 was the closest when it came to reaching this result, being already at the mark of 2 million 849 thousand peak viewers at the time of writing. ■



CONCLUSION: DIFFICULT TIMES ARE GREAT FOR COMING UP WITH NEW SOLUTIONS

Another clear advantage of the online format was that it caused the content creators to look for new solutions within the bounds set by the pandemic. The new Venn channel was one of the unique projects appearing due to these conditions and being broadcast 24/7 on a variety of streaming platforms. You may read more about the project in a [separate article](#).

The popular streamers have either found new or "old-but-forgotten" opportunities for themselves. One example would be the spontaneously arising popularity of the Mafia board game in the Russian-speaking segment. This pastime was favoured by the viewers so much that one could find the popular analysts and commentators of the esports industry among the participants

invited. Some even started holding show tournaments. Indie projects such as Among Us and Fall Guys became prominent newcomers on the world stage. The audience loved these so much that the games immediately took over Twitch's top. For example, Fall Guys was watched by 700 thousand viewers at the end of August. It got to the point where Twitch themselves began to hold their own tournaments for these games. It can be concluded that esports was among those hugely benefiting from the coronavirus pandemic. While the traditional sports went on a significant hiatus, the choice of esports was a relatively simple switch to an online format. While this has allowed the industry to break new records, it is still a far cry from offline tournaments.

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