

## 6. An Inside View

### *getting esports into Madison Square Garden*

ASI BURAK

*Asi Burak, a professional in the industry, recounts his experience building a city-wide esports community through the first major esports competition held at Madison Square Garden. Asi is the Chairman of Games for Change and Chief Business Officer at Tilting Point. He is an award-winning videogame and digital technology executive, and was named one of the “Digital 25: Leaders in Emerging Entertainment” by the Producers Guild of America (PGA) and Variety Magazine.*

Seven years ago (2015), I stepped down from leading a non-profit organization, Games for Change, and decided to do a bit of consulting.

I had a business partner, Itzik, who formerly served as an executive at Activision Blizzard. So he was there when esports was just getting started, all around the world. He made some of the first esports deals in Korea, for StarCraft and other titles.

Together, we tried to figure out how we could move the needle on esports in the United States. At the time we had a project with the Tribeca Film Festival, in New York City. They told us they wanted to do something with Madison Square Garden, which was their equity partner.

Itzik, due to his background, was excited. He said, “Let’s bring esports to the Garden.”

This was not an easy sell. The only esports the Garden had explored was Defense of the Ancients (DotA), which is not the right title to do in the U.S. (It is much more prevalent in Asia). They held the event in their smaller theater, which is around 5,000 seats. Compare that with their arena, which can hold up to 18,000 seats. They ran the event with ESL (the Electronic Sports League, a German esports organizer and production company). ESL is huge now, running tournaments around the world. But they are not a first-party publisher.

In the end, they only sold one-third of the tickets. Madison Square Garden's experience with esports was not great.

We learned all this when we met with the Garden to pitch our idea to run a competition in the Arena. Their response was, "If it can't work in the Theater, we're going to embarrass ourselves in the Arena."

We told them we knew people at Riot games. Itzik had the connection because when he was at Blizzard they had started modding their game engine from Warcraft III to create League of Legends (LoL). We had called Riot's leaders and said, "Let's do something big at Madison Square Garden!"

We told Madison Square Garden, "Forget what you've done before. We're talking here about partnering with Riot Games. We know they can pull this off because they have done it before" — earlier in Los Angeles at the Staples Center — "They sold everything out in one day. We assure you: this is the right place and the right thing to do."

We were in a position to bridge between those two worlds, that of Madison Square Garden and that of Riot Games. One party speaks business; one party speaks games and experience.

And at the end of the day, we did it, and they sold out in 24 hours, for two nights. It was the National Championship, and the winner went to Worlds (the global contest of LoL).

Since then, we have seen dozens and dozens and dozens of esports events across the United States. But that was an important one, because MSG is arguably the most famous Arena in the world. This is New York City. All the important media outlets were there. ESPN saw esports up close for the first time. And it was a bit of a moment, a big stepping out for esports.

It was a great success and a milestone for the industry.

Population	<b>373.2M</b>
Online Population	<b>328.8M</b>
Esports Awareness	<b>266.0M</b>
Games Live Streaming Audience	<b>103.7M</b>
Esports Enthusiasts	<b>22.4M</b>
Esports Revenues	<b>\$ 349.7M</b>

*Esports awareness and enthusiasts in North America. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information.*