



H O T S T U F F



Don't get too comfortable: the Predator Thronos all-in-one gaming chair could be a thing of the past when esports get physical.

THE FUTURIST

THIS VIRTUAL SPORTING LIFE

Stuff's award-winning futurist, Matthew Griffin, tells us what's next for esports



When someone mentions esports, most of us envisage crowds amassing in a kind of combat arena to watch gamers huddled over hundreds of screens battling against each other. The scale of these tournaments can put rock concerts to shame, and they're playing for sums of money and fame that would make wannabe rock stars weep.

But while the tournaments in this billion-dollar industry are still mostly screen-based, or in some cases played out on VR headsets, every part of the esports experience is set to get increasingly intense and ever more real...until, eventually, those arenas lose most if not all of their screens altogether.

Hang on... how are you supposed to play video games without a screen?

Have a bit of patience, will you? First let's look at personal gaming, and how it will take advantage of

those ultra-fast, low-latency trans-oceanic terabit fibre cables and 5G. This allows us to shove all those consoles into the cloud so online games can be streamed to everyone, everywhere.

Now let's recruit some creative machines (as discussed in last month's column – AIs that can imagine and generate synthetic content in real time). They can create and tailor games just for you, based on the emotional feedback that these cloud gaming platforms are gathering about you in real time from the cameras and sensors in your devices.

OK, so say we've kissed goodbye to buffering and reached the point of superconnectivity. What next?

Then let's kick it up another notch. Let's ditch bulky old VR headsets

and swap them out for a pair of ordinary-looking wireless glasses that are anything but ordinary. Manufactured from the latest metalens nanotech, these nanoscale-thin lenses look set to replace the heavy ones used in cameras, optical instruments and – you guessed it – VR and AR headsets.

They'll use something called AI-based foveated rendering: integrated eye-tracking that follows the position of your pupils, enabling the GPU to know where it needs to focus its rendering resources. This cuts the amount of network and computing power needed to create your 4K VR gaming experience by up to 90%.

The Specsavers of the future. 2030 vision, you might call it...

You might. Then, of course, no future gaming experience would be complete without haptics and other sensory systems that make the feelings, sights, sounds and tastes you experience in the game 'real'. And last but certainly not least, there's electromagnetic flooring that will let you walk and run miles without ever having to be more than five steps away from your favourite energy drink.

So how does all this feed into esports and the gaming arenas of the future?

Put this tech together. Throw in some AI opponents who are getting increasingly adept at wiping out all humans – in gaming terms anyway – and suddenly you're filling gladiatorial arenas with human competitors facing off against adversaries and other gamers in the virtual world, while getting gently pummelled in the real world to the amusement of spectators.

I said esports would be getting increasingly intense, but they'll get increasingly physical too. Imagine crowds watching players thrown into the air while haptics administer whatever punishment is being dished out in the virtual realm. Until we enter an era of VR moshpits, rock concerts have got nothing on this.

MEDALS OF HONOR?

A first-person shooter set in a war zone might be a stretch for the Olympic values of friendship and respect, but esports could soon become a medal event at the Games. Intel is hosting an IOC-sanctioned tournament in the run-up to Tokyo 2020, where players will compete in *Street Fighter V* and *Rocket League*. Meanwhile, at the recent Olympic Summit in Switzerland, esports were described as having great potential for future inclusion in the Games themselves.

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