

Billion dollar baby

A permanent esports venue in the heart of Las Vegas? Someone's onto a winner

Las Vegas might be famous for its 'gaming', but there the term has a very different meaning. Its connection to videogames has so far been limited to the Evolution Championship Series, an annual fighting-game event, and the occasional Halo tournament. That, though, is about to change: a permanent esports venue, owned by Millennial Esports, is soon to throw open its doors.

Having recently formed through the merger of digital esports company Pro Gaming League and financial firm Stratton Corp, Millennial Esports had its choices when it came to selecting a location for its first venue. But as **CEO Alex Igelman** tells us: "Las Vegas was a no-brainer. Vegas is the entertainment capital of the world and esports is the entertainment of the 21st century." Igelman hopes that Millennial Esports' new venue will make it the first company to bring esports and Vegas together in a meaningful way.

Picking a location within Vegas, you'd have thought the Strip would be the first place on the list. Home to mammoth casino resorts such as the Bellagio, the Mirage and Caesar's Palace, it's 4.2 miles of neon-studded razzmatazz. NASA has declared it the brightest place on Earth. Surely it's the dream location? But Igelman says, "The Strip was never a consideration for us, as we wanted to launch where the action was." That 'action' is now in downtown.

Once considered a no-go area, downtown Vegas has evolved through more than 20 years of investment and renovation. So much so that it's now Vegas's trendiest destination, thanks

largely to Fremont Street, the 'second Strip'. A buzzing hub of entertainment, 15-million tourists visit Fremont Street each year to take in its hotels, casinos and clubs, and to shop in the 50,000 square-foot mall, Neonopolis.

It's inside Neonopolis that Millennial Esports' new venue is under construction, and it's hard to imagine a better location. "Neonopolis is a great venue and is smack dab in the middle of downtown," Igelman says. "It truly is a hidden gem." Occupying 15,000ft on the third floor, in a space that was previously a cinema, the venue will be cut in half to create two distinct, but connected, spaces. "The first is an area to facilitate large LAN tournament play and viewing parties and

it will house our interactive experiences," says Igelman. "The second is the arena, where the arena-play and event finals will take place."

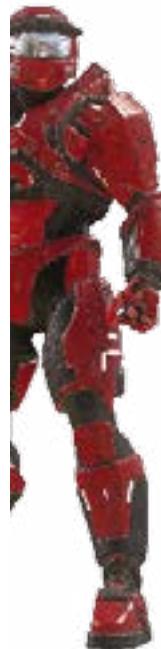
Inside, you'll find the conventional seats and stage of any other venue, but there'll also be top-of-the-line broadcast and

production equipment. That's because it's intended to be not just an arena, but a studio too. "It will operate as an esports hub and interactive venue with the ability to host and broadcast videogame tournament campaigns hosted by Millennial Esports, game publishers and partners," company president **Chad Larsson** tells us.

The venue is already set to host the North American finals of the Halo Championship Series Open Circuit when it opens in November. Thereafter, Larsson is bullish about growth and hopes to work with a variety of developers and



FROM TOP Millennial Esports CEO Alex Igelman and company president Chad Larsson



publishers from across the competitive-gaming spectrum. "We're game-agnostic and plan to collaborate with as many publishers as possible," he says. "Exposure from tournament broadcasts and in-person spectators will drive growth and total reach for the company." This in turn, he hopes, should provide incentive for partners and gaming enthusiasts to both visit the venue and work with Millennial Esports.

Echoes of Millennial Esports' developments in Vegas can be seen around the world. With revenue from esports estimated to grow to \$1.1 billion by 2019, events and tournaments are on the rise the world over as companies vie for a slice of the action. But to date, most events have taken place in venues designed for other sports: Toronto's Air Canada Centre, for instance, traditionally home to ice hockey and basketball, hosted more than 15,000 fans for the League Of Legends North America finals in August. Esports, however, offers unique challenges and is both requiring and deserving of dedicated venues. That, in a nutshell, is what Millennial Esports is all about: providing a dedicated space to cater for all of esports' needs.

Igelman estimates that similar venues will become commonplace. "As esports moves more into the mainstream, it only makes sense that venues are built that can accommodate amateur and professional competitive game play and act as a meeting spot for like-minded people."

Vegas is the logical place to start. If Millennial's plan comes off, this could be a landmark moment in the development of esports, the moment where competitive games stepped out of borrowed stadia and into a neon-flecked home of its own. Uncommonly for Las Vegas, it seems like a safe bet. ■



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ALL BETS ARE OFF
Will Vegas's relaxed gambling laws mean betting at matches?



Walk through the crowd at the Evo fighting-game tournament and you quickly realise it isn't only held in Las Vegas for the size of its venues. Yet Igelman downplays any suggestion gambling was a factor in Millennial's decision to set up shop in Vegas. "We don't intend to apply for a gaming licence or offer any gambling in our venue," he says. "But there are plenty of licensed gaming companies in Las Vegas that could offer gambling on esports," he continues. "It will only be a matter of time for the Nevada Gaming Commission to approve and regulate esports wagering, as well as, potentially, skill-based gambling."