

Welcome to the virtual lounge

Ateme is helping its customers develop new digital user experiences during the World Cup and future events.

Goran Nastic takes a look

Even before the pandemic, it has always been fashionable to use big sporting events like the World Cup to test and showcase future technologies, being as they are a good opportunity to see how these innovations can augment the user experience of the sports fan. At the same time, the next generation of consumers is emerging, the digital natives raised on YouTube, TikTok and other platforms, who are bringing with them an appetite for new ways of enjoying content.

“When we talk to our customers worldwide and especially those having some rights for live events, such as sports or concerts, they all acknowledge that the new generation has very different expectations in terms of entertainment,” says Remi Beaudouin of Ateme, a provider of encoding software.

“Young people need more than just video streaming to stay engaged. It’s the famous war for attention,” Beaudouin says. “We see a convergence between gaming, betting and streaming, so that the viewers can really be into the game during that live transmission.”

With this in mind, Ateme has built what it calls a ‘virtual lounge’, a digital social space where friends can meet, while also interacting with video streams or multiple cameras and/or events inside this virtual room.

“Instead of texting or WhatsApp-ing your friend, you have an enhanced social experience. You can talk to them just as if you were in the bar. We see it as a new screen where you provide a different experience,” explains Beaudouin.



It does not require users to have a VR headset, at least not yet. In this sense, it is metaverse-light, which can be accessed on any connected device once the user has signed in and registered through a common app or website.

The value that Ateme sees for its customers is, firstly, being positioned as an innovator because it’s a first little step into the wider metaverse. Second, it offers an opportunity for monetisation, for instance through branding and advertising inside the lounge area. Broadcasters could, Beaudouin also suggests, restrict access to a few thousand seats only at first to create an element of VIP type of exclusivity.

Ateme’s role is providing its OTT low latency transcoder and bringing together various partners. Behind the scenes, the virtual room is powered by an Unreal Engine, the 3D gaming engine increasingly popular in the broadcast space for interactive and XR apps.

Of course, low latency streaming is a critical technological part. The way Ateme sees it is that broadcast is still the gold standard that sets the bar. And rather than low latency being an infinite race to the bottom, the goal is for all viewers to enjoy the same synchronised video and audio irrespective of the type of screen they are using.

This is because OTT is the future of broadcast. “If you hear your neighbour celebrate multiple times ahead of you

then the OTT app is ruining your experience and you might not want to consume it anymore. It’s not in the broadcasters’ interest to do that, because in terms of advertising monetisation, the growth will come from OTT, not necessarily from the broadcast.” When it comes to OTT, Ateme has adopted and uses LL-DASH and LL-HLS inside its products. The company is also in talks with THEO Player about the HESP low latency protocol, for gambling and betting use cases.

Next frontiers: beyond the lounge

Among the ideas that Ateme is exploring with one of its customers is taking the virtual lounge beyond an indoor space, embracing the whole court or stadium experience. The idea here is enabling users to, for example, watch the action from the ‘stands’ and then go on to visit the court or even take a virtual stadium tour. How the video will be rendered is among the details under discussion, but the goal is to give people a fully personalised experience.

According to Beaudouin, the next steps will take place during various events that the company will support throughout 2023. “We are getting some traction. We pitched that to some customers around the World Cup and we got the ‘Wow’ effect, telling us that’s definitely something they will look at.”

For the industry, it is a strategic question of enabling what the new generation of consumers would like to see and meeting their demands. For viewers, meanwhile, as broadcasters and their technology partners continue to innovate, there has never been a better time to be a sports fan. **CSI**