

Alma College Teams up with Unique Retail Venue and ViewSonic to Provide Varsity Esports Facilities



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— Anthony Collamati, Media Studies Professor Alma College

INTERVIEWED

- ▶ Anthony Collamati, Media Studies Professor, Alma College

INDUSTRY

- ▶ Education

CHALLENGE

- ▶ Transform a historic site into a vibrant esports facility
- ▶ Equip space to be the competitive and practice facilities for local college esports team
- ▶ Create an environment that further serves as a community gathering place

SOLUTION

- ▶ 12 ViewSonic® 24" LCD Gaming Monitors with ELITE RGB Technology
- ▶ 13 ViewSonic 24" Gaming LED monitors
- ▶ ViewSonic 27" 4K UHD Monitor with SuperClear IPS Technology
- ▶ ViewSonic 35" 1440p Ultra-Wide Gaming Monitor with ELITE RGB Technology

PROFILES

COLLEGE

Located an hour north of Lansing, Michigan, Alma College is a private four-year liberal arts institution with an enrollment of about 1,450 undergraduate students from 30 states and 15 foreign countries. With a full-time teaching faculty of 103, Alma College has a student-to-faculty ratio of 12:1 and awards degrees including Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Science in Nursing.

AV INTEGRATOR

Since 1991, CCS Presentation Systems has served customers in corporate, government and education markets. Located in Warren, MI, CCS Presentation Systems of Michigan provides full-service integration, installation, training and maintenance of a full range of audio and video equipment. From simple accessories to multi-million-dollar integration projects, school classrooms to world-class resorts, CCS of Michigan provides superior audio-video products, services and solutions to meet a wide variety of needs.

ESPORTS VENUE

Block House Esports opened on October 4, 2020, to serve as a community gathering place offering an internationally-inspired menu and a variety of video game entertainment options. Located in a storefront at the renovated historic opera house in downtown Alma, Block House also serves as the official training and competitive venue for the Alma College varsity esports team. Block House welcomes neighborhood gamers and fans to play in matches, watch league tournaments and receive coaching. It is also equipped to host live performances and stream digitally.

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SOLUTION (continued)

- ▶ 2 ViewSonic 65" 4K Ultra HD Commercial Displays
- ▶ 4 ViewSonic 50" 4K Ultra HD Commercial Displays
- ▶ ViewSonic 75" 4K UHD Commercial Display
- ▶ ViewSonic 86" 4K Ultra HD Commercial Display

RESULTS

- ▶ Every aspect of the complex AV setup has lived up to and exceeded expectations
- ▶ Alma College now has a formal esports team, with a place to practice and compete
- ▶ The ViewBoard® displays facilitated continued collaboration, learning and connection during pandemic conditions

CHALLENGE

In 2010, the historic Wright Leppien Opera House in Alma Michigan suffered massive interior damage in a fire. Efforts to renovate the space languished and Alma College took ownership of the space in 2017, investing two years of work to bring it up to code. The upper floors became apartments for Alma College students. The ground floor became home to six storefronts, which the university sought to lease to local businesses that would benefit students and the community.

During renovation, the college asked New Media Studies Professor Anthony Collamati for his thoughts on how to use one of the spaces. The result of that exchange gave birth to an exciting idea: Transform the space into an esports environment that would serve as a practice and competition space for the Alma College varsity esports team.

"The college didn't actually have an esports team at that point, but they recognized the value of providing this opportunity to students and plans were in the works," said Collamati. "One of the biggest roadblocks was the lack of facilities for the team."

Collamati teamed up with friend and local business owner Nick Lux and leased the space from the university. The plan quickly expanded beyond a simple practice facility.

"As we talked through the options, we realized that we wanted to create a place that lived up to the original historic mission of the building, which was to be a community gathering place for residents to enjoy what was the dominant medium of the time," said Collamati. "We live in a small town and there aren't that many places to gather and we wanted to create a space where everyone would feel comfortable and welcome."

Today's medium, of course, is gaming. Whereas gaming was seen as a niche hobby for nerds and teenagers two decades ago, today esports has become a multi-billion dollar industry that is still growing. Creating a space that facilitated practice, competition and casual enjoyment – along with comfortable companionship for non-gamers – was an entirely new business and entertainment model.



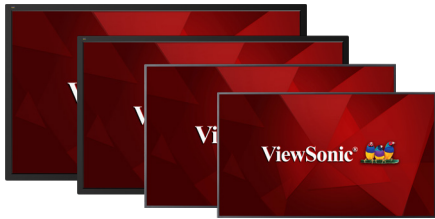
"We wanted to create a space that would be inviting to anyone who walked in, along with the serious gamers and the Alma esports team," said Collamati. "The vision encompassed multiple areas designed for different types of game play, as well as areas for the spectating and dining-only crowd."

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Monitors

- ▶ **XG240R**
24" LCD Gaming Monitor
- ▶ **XG2401**
24" Gaming LED monitors
- ▶ **VX2776-4K-MHD**
27" 4K UHD Monitor with SuperClear IPS Technology
- ▶ **XG350R-C**
35" 1440p Ultra-Wide Gaming Monitor with ELITE RGB Technology



Displays

- ▶ **CDE6510**
65" 4K Ultra HD Commercial Displays
- ▶ **CDE5010**
50" 4K Ultra HD Commercial Displays
- ▶ **CDE7500**
75" 4K UHD Commercial Display
- ▶ **CDE8600**
86" 4K Ultra HD Commercial Display

A critical component, said Collamati, was a stage area that would replicate the high-level competitive esports experience, which typically takes place in large halls or stadiums, is broadcast live and includes play-by-play "shoutcasting."

SOLUTION

While there were some challenges related to building on a historic site, building a bar and dining tables proved to be the easy part. Mapping out the varied game spaces, individual team practice stations, a pro-level gaming stage and the AV needed to tie it all together into a vibrant environment was beyond Lux and Collamati's experience. For this, they turned to Matt Smiley, owner and president of CCS Presentation Systems of Michigan.

"Matt was tremendous at helping us think through ideas and finding pitfalls before we fell into them," said Collamati. "Typically, to create the type of environment we sought would require a giant broadcast switcher that costs as much as a house and could run AV feeds from many PCs, along with a control booth, command center and a few producers and operators to manage it all."

Constrained by costs and space, this full-on esports broadcast approach wasn't an option, said Collamati. "Our daily team would need to be just a couple of people to edit the broadcast, and we could only afford a dozen AV inputs," he added.

That's where CSS presentation systems came in. CSS utilized a dynamic AV over IP solution that used network switching to transition between SDI and HDMI, creating an immersive environment at a budget-friendly price point.

"To do this, we needed monitors and large screen displays with the appropriate integrated connectivity options and Anthony wanted top-notch graphics and color," said AV pro Matt Smiley. "I've worked with ViewSonic for years and they've been my go-to monitor brand for some time now. Their products are very dependable, and every client we've sold ViewSonic displays to tells us they're great."

CCS suggested several ViewSonic® monitors and large screen displays to meet the varied requirements of the installation. Not only were the ViewSonic graphics displays beautiful and the gaming monitor specs up to par, said Collamati, the display's enabled CCS to bring the entrepreneurs' vision to life.

"ViewSonic did a great job of sending us demo equipment and helping us pick the right monitors and displays for each area," said Smiley. "They went above and beyond and together we determined the displays that fit the budget and had the specs Anthony needed."

"A critical feature of the game displays was the refresh rate," added Smiley. "And ViewSonic had great monitors specifically for the gaming market."

Before committing, Collamati put the ViewSonic gaming monitors to the test, determined to make sure that the technology was a good fit for the serious gamers.

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RESULTS

Despite delays and constraints related to the coronavirus pandemic, Block House officially opened on October 4, 2020. The response has been even better than he could have dreamed of, says Collamati.

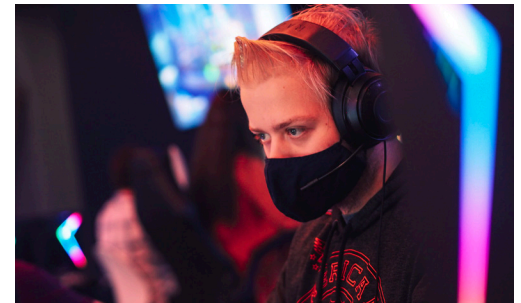
"We host the Alma varsity team practices and competitions, just like a hockey team rents ice time at a rink," he said. "Beyond this, the response from the community has been overwhelming. Whenever pandemic conditions have allowed us to serve them, we have people here enjoying the food or the bar, or gaming – or all three."

The crowd ranges from families and groups of kids to couples on dates, said Collamati, who says he's thrilled to be helping esports come out of the basement and become a social activity.

The space roughly breaks out into three activity-based areas: The bar/dining tables; gaming stations; and competitive streaming stage. To keep track of the large screen displays and facilitate easier communication and programming (while having fun to boot), Collamati and his team named the large ViewSonic commercial displays after the Greek Gods.

Upon entering the Block House, just inside the doorway, Hades, the massive 86" 4K Ultra HD commercial display greets visitors, provides a family- and group-friendly game zone, and captures the attention of passersby. To the left, drinking, dining and spectating visitors can choose from a bar, four-top tables and a large community high-top.

Two-person gaming nooks with ViewSonic XG2401 24" gaming monitors line the wall with larger ViewSonic 50" displays above that showcase the action to spectators. Venture further into the Block House and you'll find more game stations nestled against historic bare brick walls and situated throughout open spaces. Couches in front of two pairs of ViewSonic 50" 4K Ultra HD Commercial Displays (Ares, Hephaestus, Apollo and Artemis) invite visitors to get comfortable and grab a controller.



The stage area comes to life with 12 ViewSonic 24" LCD gaming monitors with ELITE RGB Technology, which can be configured for a variety of live competitions ranging from 1v1 to 6v6. "These ViewSonic Elite RGB monitors are really terrific," said Collamati. "We can program them to use our brand colors or can color code the teams so it's easy to tell who's home and who's away."

Above the stage and along the back wall of the Block House, Zeus, a ViewSonic 75" 4K UHD commercial display is flanked by Poseidon and Hera, ViewSonic's 65" 4K Ultra HD commercial displays. Transmitters on top of every player station send signals to the control screen, where the Block House team uses a digital switcher to broadcast gameplay onto the big screens.

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"The ViewSonic displays have been fantastic and they're a big part of how the media staff is able to craft an exciting audio-visual experience for people coming into the venue," said Collamati. "For example, say there's a group of four battling it out on Valorant, we can stream their game to Zeus, Hera and Poseidon, amping up the competitive excitement."



What's more, Collamati adds, the content on the ViewSonic commercial displays can be easily adapted to fit the season, day or mood – as well as to deliver advertising and promotions. "We like to cycle through some branding for ourselves and our sponsors, like the Alma Esports Team, on at least one display," said Collamati. "On others we could be running seasonal or themed movies. We can run a Twitch broadcast or a live or virtual football game on another. The possibilities are endless."

One of the biggest thrills and most heartwarming aspect of the venue, says Collamati, is seeing the ways in which the games and the environment bring people together.

"Say we have a mom and daughter playing Mario Kart and we take their game and put it on a ton of screens around the space; it's such a joy to see their reaction and the connection between the parent and child," he said. "I knew we could do that – it was our goal all along to be able to show the game play around the space – but I didn't realize the huge guest experience value it would bring."

From start to finish, he added, Block House has been a labor of love. To date, their crew is still working out the kinks and looking forward to the post-COVID days when teams in the Block House can livestream their battles on Twitch, just like the pros. On days when Block House is able to open, the excitement just keeps going.

"We just love seeing people walk by, and the big 86-inch ViewSonic display in the front window catches their eye and draws them in," said Collamati. "We've seen a family with young kids eyeing the couch and the rich colors on the display showcasing Donkey Kong or Mario Kart, and they come in and play together, smiling and laughing. Or a teen with his parents who convinces them to come in and they end up playing together. You gotta ask yourself – would those parents have ended up playing Among Us in their basement with their kid?"