

Nigeria struggles with dream to rule Africa's eSports

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'Some say there are 60 million players in Nigeria,' says Kunmi Adenipebi of Gamr.

At the very last second, the Lagos professional gamer wins his battle of "Street Fighter", sending the crowd into roars of joy, a scene

unimaginable a few years ago in Nigeria, where the eSports is now in full bloom.

In a room decked out in futuristic decor in an upscale district of Nigeria's economic capital Lagos, several thousand visitors gathered for a giant video game tournament on Saturday.

Whipped up by an emcee, crowds of young spectators cheered all day in front of the competitors whose games were interspersed with concerts of local Afrobeats stars, Victory and Crayon.

Competitors battled it out in popular eSports games like "Call of Duty: Mobile", "Street Fighter" and "FIFA".

The bling of the "Nigerian-style" show lived up to the ambitions of Africa's leading economy as it looks to establish itself as an eSports — electronic sports — leader despite the economic and logistics problems the country faces.

South Africa is now crushing the African eSports scene, thanks to numerous investments, followed by Egypt and Morocco, then to a lesser extent by Senegal, Ivory Coast and Kenya.

But Nigeria has something to make its neighbors swoon because its strengths—and its challenges—are immense.

Immense especially in size: it is the most populous country in Africa with more than 215 million inhabitants, renowned for being competitive in business, sports and music. And three-quarters of the population is under 25.

In Lagos, in the midst of the din of the tournament he was supervising, Kunmi Adenipebi explained it was almost impossible to know exactly

how many players there are in Nigeria.

"Some say there are 60 million players in Nigeria. We did a survey and we know one thing for sure: there are at least 3 million players," said Adenipebi, chief of operations at Gamr, which organized the event.



Competitors battled it out with popular eSports games like Call of Duty mobile, Street Fighter and the FIFA game.

Feet of clay

The potential pool of Nigerian players is enormous: broadband internet penetration has reached 48 percent, almost all via smartphone, and it

continues to grow.

This is only the beginning, however, as Nigeria will be the second most populous country in the world at the end of the century with nearly 790 million inhabitants, just behind India, according to Lancet projections.

But, between widespread poverty, power cuts and the poor quality network, Nigeria remains a colossus with feet of clay.

It has few professional players even if there are more and more since the global COVID pandemic, Adenipebi said.

"Esport is a beautiful opportunity for our youth and to pull people out of poverty. We want it to become a means of living," said Chike Okonkwo, co-founder of Gamic, which promotes eSport.

A few metres from the main hall, Akintoye Arogunmati, who goes by the name "The_Arogs", was participating in the tournament.

Eyes glued to the screen, the 25-year-old, one of Nigeria's best professional players on "FIFA", says he earns an average of 300,000 naira (420 euros) per month. This is 10 times the minimum wage of 30,000 naira.

Last November, he participated in the Paris Games Week, which he called "a dream".

But "there are so many challenges to overcome" before he can get ahead, he said, laughing, his controller in his hands.

"Being a gamer in Nigeria comes with so many challenges. For an average Nigerian, equipment and generators are very expensive. There is no constant electricity in Nigeria. And the network," he said.



In the room drenched in purple and blue neon lights, players compete on state-of-the-art giant screens.

Nightmare

To play online, a gamer must obviously have a good internet connection but also a low "ping", a nightmare for many Africans.

Ping is the [reaction time](#) between when a player presses a key and when that action actually takes place in-game. It is the round-trip time between the player and the server they are on.

African players are at a disadvantage in online competition because the

servers for almost all games are hosted in Europe, North America or Asia. That means it takes longer for African players' actions to register in the system.

"It is so frustrating, you know that the guy is not as good as you but because of the ping, you can't do anything. You can't compete," said Arogunmati.

In the room drenched in purple and blue neon lights, players compete on state-of-the-art giant screens. In the VIP area, the whisky flows freely.

The glitzy scene contrasts with the reality facing pro [players](#), because even when you are a champion, life has "nothing fun" and the rewards are too low, said pro player "K.I.D".

"For a tournament like this one, they can pay you in three months or more," said Kevin Durst, a pro competitor in "Street Fighter".

"The reality is that without my sponsors I wouldn't have anything to eat."

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