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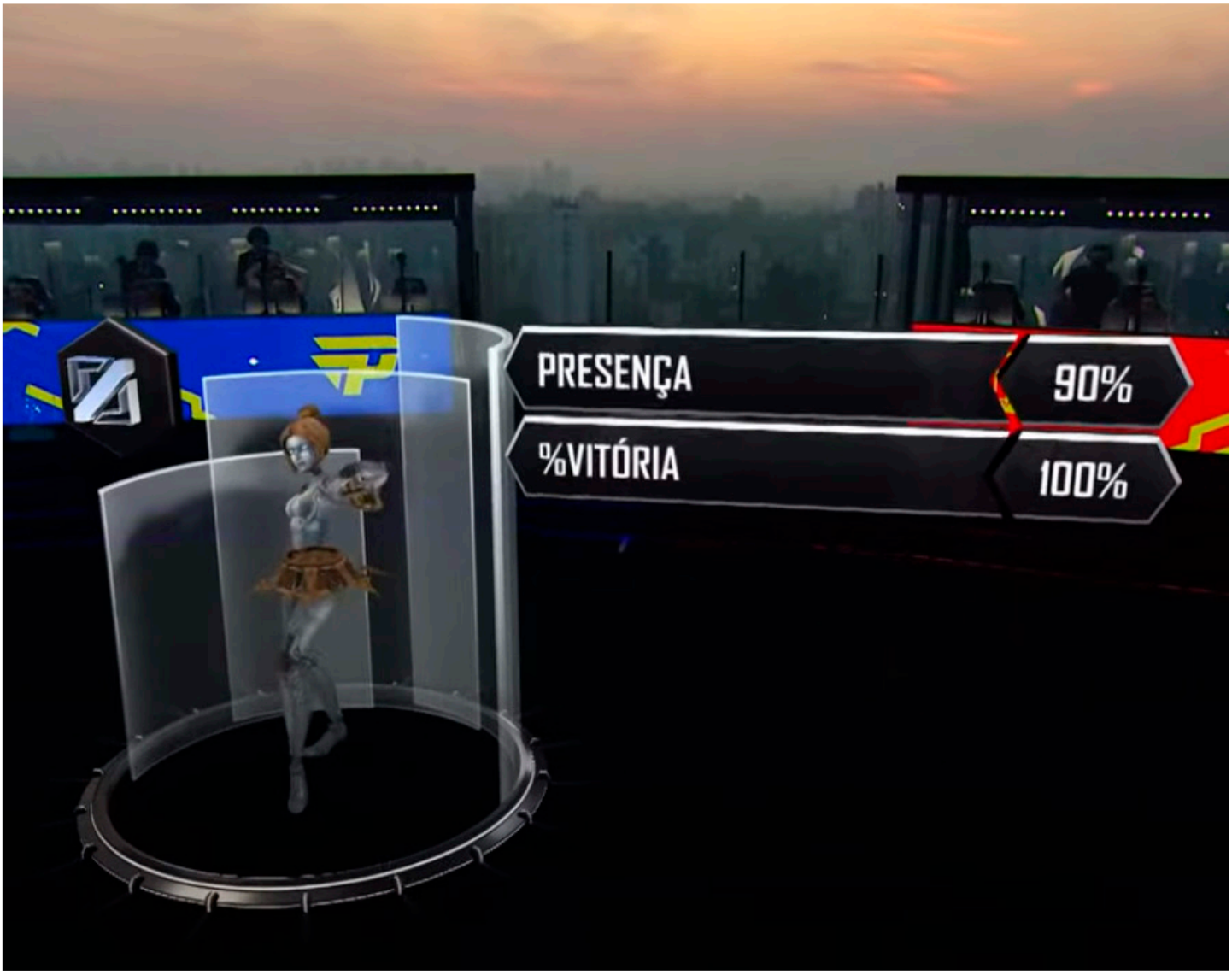
Case Study

Ncam Brings Real-Time AR to Brazilian League of Legends Final at Height of the Pandemic



What happens when one of the biggest esports events collides with a COVID hotspot? Riot Games found themselves facing this very dilemma when planning the 2020 CBLoL (League of Legends Brazilian Championship) finals in São Paulo, Brazil. Tasked with keeping players and staff safe, while still executing a tournament worthy of the League of Legends name, Riot turned to Ncam technology to bring the battle to life for an audience of nearly 400,000 viewers… all from the rooftop of a high-rise downtown.

League of Legends is a massively popular online multiplayer game developed by Riot Games for Microsoft Windows and macOS. Released in 2009 to high acclaim, the game has continued to grow in both stature and popularity, amassing 40 million followers across YouTube and Twitch, and boasting over 20 million daily users.

At the time of the event, Latin America had become an epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic and Brazil was one of the hardest-hit countries in the world. While most esports tournaments were moving online, they struggled to match the thrill and energy of an in-person event. Bucking this trend, Riot Games instead chose to create a controlled environment on the rooftop of the Tower Bridge Building in São Paulo, marking the first League of Legends match not held in a gymnasium or stadium and ensuring a lasting place in the game's history.

"Moving outside was not only safer, it provided a backdrop that set this match apart," said Fernando Svevo, broadcast manager at Riot Games in Brazil. "We wanted to stand out from what other leagues were doing, and had lots of big ideas, but the main concern was keeping everyone safe. We were determined to do both."

Their first step was to create a contained space on the rooftop and run a number of COVID protocols, including daily testing; a layout that allowed for proper social distancing; plexiglass enclosures for the players; and plenty of masks, gloves, face shields, and sanitizer for everyone involved.
Once the protocols were set, the team turned to the event itself. After nine years of league play, LoL broadcasts had taken on a major-league aesthetic, raising expectations for viewers and players alike. "We needed the final to look like a final, with all of its intrigue and grandeur," said Svevo. "The rooftop filled a piece of that puzzle, but viewers need more to stick around. We kept them locked with real-time graphics."

To do this, Riot Games used Ncam Reality, a real-time tracking

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system that lets productions visualize XR and CG elements in-camera. For months, Riot had been putting the system through its paces, using it every week in-studio for playoff matches. Just like major-league coverage, LoL tournaments include pre- and post-game rundowns on everything from stats and gameplay to predictions of who's going to win. In a five-hour event, the key is presenting this in a way that keeps the audience hooked.

While full-screen graphics are common, they would have covered up the glittering cityscape, robbing the production of its biggest asset. Because Ncam tech let Riot preview the graphics in-camera, they were able to balance the visuals and blend spectacular AR fireworks, characters and player graphics into the frame, without any need for bulky equipment. "No other solution offered that," said Svevo. "And because the footprint was low, we were able to employ it without a lot of onsite staff, which helped us maintain protocols without any real tradeoff."

While the rooftop was a hook in itself, it also introduced a number of uncontrollable variables, like lighting and weather, as well as equipment restrictions. You can't exactly park a truck on the roof of a high-rise, after all. Instead, Riot built an entire technical center 407 feet in the air and got to work.

"The remote workflow was pretty much the same as the studio setup," said Svevo. "Ncam camera tracking is so flexible, it can track anywhere. We didn't even need to create external points in the environment – it just worked."

Which was important, because unlike the bright city lights behind the camera, the stage was dark and the roof was black. For many tracking systems this would have been an impossible feat, but thanks to its use of computer vision and 3D point clouds, Ncam was unconstrained by location. Once the system created a point cloud for the rooftop, it stayed intact, even as the production shifted from sunset into night.

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In the end, 400,000 live viewers watched the Brazilian finals, as the INTZ team battled through four intense games to defeat paiN Gaming in a final score of 3-1. They advanced to the League of Legends World Championship in Shanghai.

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