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Markus Stauff and Travis Vogan

21 Legitimizing and institutionalizing eSports in the NBA 2K League

Abstract: Launched in 2018, the NBA 2K League is a National Basketball Association eSports subsidiary centered on the popular *NBA 2K* video game series. The 2K League enables the NBA, an organization that has more aggressively embraced trends in emerging media than its North American peers, to infiltrate new markets and platforms through investing in eSports. Meanwhile, the 2K League helps to legitimize eSports by attaching the niche activity to an established sports brand. This chapter uses the 2K League to explore how eSports’ development and institutionalization are changing sports organizations’ relationship to media while preserving – and even strengthening – sports’ significance and role in commercial media culture.

Keywords: eSports; video games; National Basketball Association; media convergence; branding

1 Introduction

“Think of the eBulls against the eKnicks.”

– Adam Silver, NBA commissioner (Needleman 2017)

“When you see 200 million-plus eSports viewers worldwide, if that doesn’t get your attention, you should go into another business; maybe the Salvation Army, Kris Kringle at Christmas ringing a bell on a corner.”

– Peter Guber, Golden State Warriors owner (Youngmisuk and Wolf 2018)

In April 2018, the athlete who ranked highest in the world in “social interactions” – a measurement of social media attention – was not LeBron James, Lionel Messi, or Serena Williams. It was Tyler “Ninja” Blevins, who is most famous for playing the video game *Fortnite*. *Forbes* reported that Blevins was making approximately \$500,000 a month by streaming his *Fortnite* sessions and competing in tournaments (Heitner 2018; Paumgarten 2018).

Arguably the fastest growing segment of the sport industry, eSports expands on and formalizes competitive video gaming, which has been around as long as gaming itself.¹ Like golf and poker, eSports is a “participant sport” in which consumers

¹ As arcade gaming emerged in the 1970s, high scores allowed gamers playing on the same machine to outperform each other. Networked computing extended these competitions, and the Internet allowed

partake in the same games as professionals. The professional gamers' relatability is amplified by the interactivity of eSports' streamed presentation on platforms like the Amazon-owned Twitch, which includes chat overlays that enable viewers to comment and garner responses from the gamers, exchanges that are as important to building gamers' valuable personal brands as their gameplay. Twitch and other livestreaming platforms allow anybody to share their gameplay, build a community, and learn from others. For the most prominent gamers, these interactive platforms offer income through advertising revenue and donations. Organized tournaments reach global audiences that rival established mega sport events. In 2017 and 2018, for instance, the *League of Legends* World Championship attracted around 100 million viewers compared to the Super Bowl's respective 111 and 103 million (Mickunas 2019).

Far from online-only events, such prominent eSports tournaments are now also regularly broadcast by traditional TV networks and staged in stadiums that otherwise house traditional sports. An August 2016 *League of Legends* tournament sold out Toronto's Air Canada Centre in 34 seconds, faster than any event – sports or not – in the venue's history. As Brett Hutchins claims, eSports uniquely redefines sport's traditional and symbiotic relationship with media. Unlike media that represent sports or sports that media represent, eSports constitutes "sport as media" and is the "production of the logic of media" (Hutchins 2008: 857).

The eSports industry – an economy composed of media rights, advertising, ticket sales, and merchandise – generated \$865 million in 2018 and the Amsterdam-based market research firm Newzoo estimates that it will grow to more than US \$1.5 billion by 2021 (Pannekeet 2019; Webster 2018; Cioletti 2018). Beyond their escalating profitability, eSports are uniquely positioned to attract the coveted young male demographic that is becoming "harder to reach with conventional TV advertisements" (Wingfield 2014). What's more, Kenon A. Brown and colleagues (2018) found that eSports consumers are unusually devoted to their favorite sport, and potentially to those brands that attach themselves to it. After all, in eSports participants both purchase games and provide "free labor" through their play that helps to build the community and attracts other participants, who purchase more games and provide their own playful and community-building labor (Johnson and Woodcock 2019; N. T. Taylor 2016). As Tobias Sherman, head of eSports at the talent agency WME-IMG, bluntly put it, "If you are a CMO [Chief Marketing Officer] and you are not in eSports in 2017, you are going to risk getting fired" (Schultz 2017: 12).

Amid this combination of growing popularity, increasingly professional competition, and new interactive infrastructures, eSports developed an ambivalent relationship to the established sports industry and its long running efforts to adapt to the

for real-time competitions. By the 2000s gaming tournaments were organized that allowed for professional and sponsored careers. This happened first in South Korea, where gaming was harnessed as a tool of governmental and industrial IT initiatives, but quickly became a global phenomenon (see T. L. Taylor 2006: 19–26).

transforming media landscape. On the one hand, eSports imitates audience building strategies from traditional sports – the serialized and hierarchized system of competitions, big live events with stars and branding, and so forth – and aggressively adapts them to a convergent media environment geared toward a younger, tech-savvy audience. The interactive, participatory features of streaming platforms and the constant innovation of game play contrast the organizational and cultural inertia of established sports. As such, eSports threatens to lure consumers away from legacy sports. On the other hand, the traditional media sport industry increasingly enrolls eSports as an extension to complement and intensify existing cross-media branding strategies. While the competitive playing of first-person shooter and action-oriented real-time strategy games have encountered difficulty integrating into sports culture, sports-themed games blur the boundaries between the traditional sports media industry and eSports. Moreover, eSports is organized, branded, and culturally legitimized through its entanglement with famous teams, leagues, and broadcasters. It thereby remediates established narratives and visual forms into streaming media platforms.

Launched in 2018, the National Basketball Association's NBA 2K League illustrates this ambivalence and eSports' evolution from marginal to mainstream. The 2K League is an NBA subsidiary centered on Take-Two Interactive's popular *NBA 2K* video game series, the second-most popular sports video game franchise after EA Sports' *FIFA*. The 17 NBA franchises that participated in the inaugural season have parallel *NBA 2K* teams that compete in front of live audiences and on Twitch, which partnered with the NBA for the effort. The 2K League enables the NBA, an organization that has more aggressively embraced trends in emerging media than its North American peers, to infiltrate new markets and platforms.² Meanwhile, the NBA 2K League helps to legitimize eSports by attaching the niche activity to an established sports brand. Beyond simultaneously fueling the NBA's growth and fostering eSports' mainstreaming, the 2K League illustrates how eSports' development and institutionalization are changing sports organizations' broader relationship to media while preserving – and even strengthening – sports' significance and role in commercial media culture.

2 Sporting legitimacy in eSports

While its reputation is changing, eSports is still often marginalized in mainstream sports culture and beleaguered by stereotypes of gamers as antisocial misfits neglecting healthier and more serious pursuits (Li 2016: 41; Crawford and Gosling 2009: 51). The prevalence of violent and war-oriented games in eSports does not help its reputa-

² The NBA began distributing game highlights on Twitter in 2013, using Instagram as a “storytelling platform” in 2015, and experimenting with virtual reality coverage in 2017 (Popper 2013; O’Kane 2015; Sarconi 2017).

tion. Traditional sports organizations – suppressing their own histories of corruption, violence, and exclusion – often promote themselves as peacemaking and edifying sites of cultural production. These purist and dubious discourses further fuel traditional sports’ denigration of eSports as artificial and depraved. Reinhard Grindel, president of the German Football Association (DFB), derided eSports as an impoverishment of traditional sports (Krempf 2018). Similarly, International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach sanctimoniously rationalized excluding eSports from the vaunted Olympic Games by asserting, “We cannot have in the Olympic program a game which is promoting violence or discrimination” (Wade 2018).³

Reflecting these turf wars, the little scholarship yet produced about eSports has focused mostly on whether and under what circumstances it might be considered a legitimate sport (Hallmann and Giel 2018; Jenny et al. 2017). These questions, however, seem unproductive and old-fashioned to those involved in eSports. “The industry is asleep at the switch,” said Lee Trink, owner of the eSports team FaZe Clan. “For people my age and older who control a lot of the zeitgeist, the vibe is still ‘gamers must be nerds in their parents’ basements’” (Bowles 2018). As Alex Lim, secretary of South Korea’s International eSports Federation (IESF) added, “Broadcasters, traditional sports, advertisers they are all going to have to get used to the idea that these games and these tournaments are not just a niche activity, but the way that a generation that grew up with very different choices [...] thinks about entertainment” (Lewis and Bradshaw 2017: 9). Ted Leonsis, owner of the NBA’s Washington Wizards, even predicted that eSports will eventually become the world’s biggest spectator sport. “It will dwarf the NFL [National Football League], it will dwarf the NBA,” he declared, “because first and foremost, it is a global phenomenon” (Schuster 2017). These accounts of an economic and symbolic rivalry notwithstanding, eSports and traditional sports are interrelated not only because of the audience attention for which they compete and the similar target groups they aim to attract, but also because of the increasingly similar ways they organize and mediate competitive events.

Investment analysts for the London-based firm J. Stern likened eSports’ growth potential to soccer in the 1990s, but maintained that “for eSports to track a similar path [...] it needs to be more professionally structured, starting with an organized calendar of events and leagues” (Yu 2017). Similarly, Seth E. Jenny and colleagues (2017) identified eSports’ lack of familiar institutional characteristics as a key barrier to its acceptance as a bona fide sport. Media ethnographer T. L. Taylor, however, tracks how eSports throughout the past decade has successively established legitimacy through a combination of rhetorical and structural measures that align with traditional sport and media coverage of it (T. L. Taylor 2012: 17, 2018: 138–139).

³ In 2016, the Finnish eSports Federation became the first eSports organization to be accepted as an associate member of its national Olympic Committee (Turtiainen, Friman, and Ruotsalainen 2020).

Increasingly, eSports is organized in leagues with unified rules and seasonal schedules that reflect mainstream sports calendars (N. T. Taylor 2016: 298; Roettgers 2011). This follows the pattern of sportification, a process by which leisure activities “assume the structural characteristics of ‘sports’” (Elias and Dunning 1986: 151; see also Turtiainen, Friman, and Ruotsalainen 2020). This dynamic impacted more and more playful activities throughout the later 20th century and continues to characterize activities such as skateboarding and snowboarding, which occupy a precarious cultural position somewhere between legitimate, competitive (e. g., Olympic) sport and a lifestyle activity that, in fact, subverts several basic ideas of sports (discipline, etc.).

Additionally, eSports establishes an increasingly rigid demarcation between players and spectators, another characteristic of sportification, and aims more and more at a mediated audience instead of a community of fellow players. This also implies that the actual competitions are augmented by media practices imitating traditional sports coverage (from draw events to post-game interviews) and that the interfaces of computer games are adapted to display relevant knowledge for a broader audience (T. L. Taylor 2018: 159–160).

As eSports emerged, the competitions mainly drew TV coverage from marginal broadcasters that could not afford the rights to marquee sport events. ESPN, for instance, hesitated to give eSports attention. But ESPN’s attitude shifted once it noticed the valuable audience eSports was attracting. “Those were young, predominately male consumers,” former ESPN president John Skipper remarked, “and that’s what matters to us, so we entered the business” (Li 2016: 103–104). Thus, eSports is part of a longer history of using sports to create and address a principally male audience. Ironically, though, gaming – because of the lack of physical toughness associated with it – is at once a stereotypical symbol of emasculation and an instrument that broadcasters use to capture young male audiences.

ESPN began covering eSports competitions in 2014 on its less prominent appendages like ESPN2 and the streaming service ESPN3. While ESPN’s eSports coverage drew some backlash from traditionalists, this content, as Skipper surmised, tapped into a growing and devoted audience that overlapped with its primary viewership. Consequently, *ESPN.com* launched a permanent eSports section in 2016 (Gaudiosi 2016). In 2018, ESPN made the *Overwatch* League Grand Finals the first eSports event to be carried live in prime time on its flagship channel. Beyond courting the elusive young male demographic, ESPN’s coverage further legitimizes eSports by placing it into the context of the conventional sports ESPN typically covers and building recognition as such among its viewers and advertisers.

In part because of these shifts, eSports is slowly gaining acceptance from institutions that confer sporting status. As early as 2013, the US State Department began granting visas to professional gamers under the same program that covers traditional athletes. Shortly thereafter, a smattering of American universities created eSports teams, some of which award scholarships to top gamers, and some that create academic courses and programs on eSports (Anderson 2019). Though the university

eSports teams are not sanctioned by the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association), in 2017 the NCAA's ruling board of governors began to discuss potentially including eSports (Schonbrun 2017). Along these lines, the global eSports community identified the need to augment South Korea's IESF by forming the World eSports Association (WESA) in 2016, which approves teams, ensures players are fairly compensated, and works with anti-doping agencies to curb the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Subsequently, the 2018 Asian Games in Indonesia – the second largest multisport competition after the Olympics – included eSports as a demonstration sport, which means the medals earned in the competitions do not register on official medal counts. Extending this gradual trend toward acceptance, the 2022 Asia Games in Hangzhou, China will feature eSports as an official medal event. Despite Thomas Bach's stated aversion toward eSports' violence, the IOC is beginning to consider whether eSports may someday have a future in the Olympics (Crook 2018).

3 Sports organizations and the gaming industry

Sports organizations and the gaming industry share a longstanding commercial entanglement through the sports-themed games that publicize leagues and offer them additional income through licensing. Sports organizations provide the game industry a “built-in audience” and help to convince consumers to buy updated games each year that reflect seasonal cycles. Likewise, sports video games cultivate fan engagement with the organizations they simulate.

Often, though, the biggest video game tournaments were organized around non-sports themed games. Nevertheless, some traditional sports organizations quickly identified eSports as a convenient and profitable way to diversify and expand their audience and started investing in eSports by acquiring pre-existing teams that mainly competed in a broad variety of non-sports games. In 2015, the Turkish club Besiktas JK bought Aces High eSports Club and renamed it Besiktas eSports Club. Besiktas was quickly joined by soccer clubs like Brazil's Remo and Santos, Germany's VfL Wolfsburg and FC Schalke, France's Paris Saint-Germain, England's Manchester City, and the Netherlands' Ajax.

American sports executives followed the lead of their European counterparts and similarly focused their initial attention on eSports teams that competed in non-sports games. Los Angeles Rams owner Stan Kroenke, New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, and New York Mets COO Jeff Wilpon bought separate *Overwatch* teams in 2017. NBA owners and executives were even more bullish on eSports than their peers in football and baseball. The Philadelphia 76ers, Miami Heat, Houston Rockets, Milwaukee Bucks, Washington Wizards, and Golden State Warriors all invested in eSports between 2016 and 2017. “We see great asset appreciation quickly,” observed Wizards owner Ted Leonsis, who bought Team Liquid in partnership with Warriors owner Peter

Guber in October 2017. “To put that in perspective, when Peter Guber and I bought Team Liquid, it was valued higher than when I bought the [National Hockey League’s] Washington Capitals in 1999. At that time, the Caps were 30 years old, and the NHL was 70 years old. These were established brands” (Aldridge 2018). Philadelphia 76ers CEO Scott O’Neill compared eSports’ emergence to the Ultimate Fighting Championship in the 1990s – “coming almost out of nowhere, very quickly” (Yu 2017: A12).

By now, sports organizations’ investment in eSports has been more systematically applied to sports-themed games that simulate and complement their primary products. In 2016, the top Dutch soccer league, the Eredivisie, formed the eDevisie, an eSports league based on *FIFA*. The Eredivisie obliged each of its member clubs to participate in the eDevisie by creating corresponding eSports teams that would compete via *FIFA* during the 2016–2017 season (Zantingh 2017). Such expansion to eSports was not always welcomed by fans of the traditional sport. Supporters of Switzerland’s Berner SC, for instance, protested the club’s entry into eSports by heaving game controllers onto the pitch and displaying a banner that read “Pull the plug on eSports” (Holland 2018). Yet, the institutionalized convergence of eSports and traditional sports composes a promising strategy to cope with a changing media landscape.

4 “Our fourth league”

Arguably the most ambitious eSports concern run by a professional sports organization, the NBA 2K League expands on the eDevisie and builds on its owners’ earlier investment in various eSports. The 2K League complements the NBA’s gradual expansion through the past decade by staging exhibition games across the globe, nurturing the WNBA and the developmental G-League, and venturing into virtual reality. “When you are able to aggregate that kind of audience,” 76ers CEO Scott O’Neill said of eSports, “I think certainly there’s a business to be had. In a nutshell, we have an organization that looks to be innovative and progressive. We have an ownership group that always likes to explore new and exciting opportunities” (Chin 2018). 2K League managing director Brendan Donohue suggests the upstart will specifically cater to the NBA and *NBA 2K*’s increasingly global following. “What I would say is the reason we think we have a chance with all our demographics is our game, more than any other in eSports, is globally recognizable,” he explained. “Whether you’re in Texas or in Africa, you know the NBA” (Aldridge 2018).

As with sports video game franchises like *FIFA* and *Madden NFL*, *NBA 2K* has driven younger fans to the professional league since its launch in 1999. Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban acknowledges the vast number of NBA fans who built lasting attachments to the league through playing *NBA 2K* and views the 2K League as an obvious way to deepen that connection. “I can’t tell you how many fans know and love the Mavs because they play 2K,” he says (Aldridge 2018). Speaking on behalf of

the NBA, Cuban told *USA Today*, “We think we can take traditional NBA fans, 2K fans and strengthen the bond they have to the NBA” (Game On! 2018).

The 2K League’s partnership with the streaming and social media platform Twitch expands on the interactivity common in eSports – a quality the NBA’s broadcast partners have attempted to develop with practices like in-game interviews and sideline microphones but are not able to reproduce through traditional TV coverage and the protocols that guide it. The 2K League streams include split-screen displays that show both the game and the players as they compete and collaborate. Rather than farming out broadcasting duties, the NBA has hired its own Twitch commentators – called “casters” in eSports lingo. Here, eSports adds to a broader trend in which leagues and federations aim to gain greater control by producing “their own ‘approved’ television coverage of their signature events, including the Olympics and [FIFA] World Cup Finals” (Milne 2016: 5). These in-house commentators are as involved in promoting the 2K League as they are in explaining its events.

Additionally, the streams include chat overlays that allow viewers to remark on the competitions and interact with the casters. “That’s what attracts the millennial audience,” said marketing executive Dario Raciti of the interactive Twitch streams (Katz 2018). The NBA’s partnership with Twitch offers the 2K League competitions for free across the globe and in places where telecasts of the basketball games might be difficult to access. “The Twitches and YouTubes are unwired, available to people throughout the world,” Ted Leonsis remarked (Aldridge 2018). This is particularly valuable in the Asian market, which is both the center of professional eSports and the region where the NBA’s fanbase is most rapidly expanding. While the spread of US sports brands is dependent on facilities and access to media coverage (and susceptible to international political tensions), the availability of game consoles and platforms like Twitch make these global ambitions easier to realize.

The NBA carefully brands the 2K League as a vital part of the organization rather than an experimental gimmick. “From the NBA’s standpoint, this is our fourth league,” remarked commissioner Adam Silver. “Of course, we have the NBA, the WNBA and the G League, and now this is the fourth league in our family, and that’s exactly as we’re treating it: one more professional league” (Aldridge 2018; Rasetti 2018). The NBA organized a worldwide competition to recruit eligible 2K League players that started with roughly 72,000 gamers – a process that both reproduces the meritocratic ideology of competitive sports and courts media coverage in the different countries the players represent.⁴

The 2K League winnowed the competitors down to 250 hopefuls and invited them to a league combine that consisted of skills tests, scrimmages, and other competitions. Finally, it shaved that group of 250 down to 102 – enough for each of the league’s 17

⁴ For instance, an interview with a German gamer who made it to the 2K league was published in Germany’s most important weekly news magazine, *Der Spiegel* (Zander and Klitzsch 2018).

teams to draft six players. The 2K League draft mimicked the NBA's ritzy annual ceremony. Like the NBA draft, the 2K League draft took place at New York City's Madison Square Garden and Adam Silver announced the picks. The players in attendance, like their NBA counterparts, wore formal attire and joined Silver on the podium for a photo op after being selected. While the 2K League draft resembled the NBA's annual ritual, the players' salaries are appreciably lower. 2K Leaguers earn between \$32,000 and \$35,000 plus benefits with the opportunity to make additional money through tournaments that occur over the course of the season. The NBA also houses teams together in the city where their franchises are based to maximize synergies between 2K League teams and their NBA affiliates.

While 2K League players make less over the course of an entire season than many NBA players earn in a single game, Knicks Gaming point guard Adam Kudiemati, who plays under the handle "iamadamthe1st," maintains that "the NBA is constantly letting us know that we're part of the family."⁵ The 2K League instituted a multifaceted infrastructure for teams that includes coaches, general managers, scouts, and trainers. It also claims to offer gamers the same professional resources it gives NBA, WNBA, and G-League players. "We'll treat them with the respect that they deserve," said Washington Wizards executive Zach Leonsis. "We'll give them access to our facilities and trainers. We want them to be comfortable, we want them to be healthy, we want them to be professionals so that they can play at the very top skill level" (Schuster 2017). The new league instituted a rookie transition program similar to the NBA's required orientation that teaches incoming players about the challenges professional athletes face, such as living away from home, dealing with fame, handling social media, and keeping healthy. The 2K League program added a component devoted to vision and eye care, which pose the greatest physical risks to eSports athletes. Donohue suggested this professional training was particularly important for the 2K Leaguers, who, unlike players entering the NBA, have not received the same degree of media attention elite amateur athletes attract prior to turning professional. "We have 102 players that really didn't have the path to professional sports that many athletes have," he stated. "Playing at a major college or university, or being on TV previously, or talking to the media – all those types of things probably help with the transition" (Darcy 2018). The NBA, then, works to treat its 2K League members as bona fide athletes and accommodates the unique needs that come along with the nascent profession.

The 2K League further reflects its parent organization by having the teams adopt names and logos that mirror their sister franchises. The Golden State Warriors 2K League affiliate, for instance, is called Warriors Gaming Squad, and the Miami Heat affiliate is named Heat Check Gaming. The team logos combine the affiliated franchises' color schemes and emblems with a computerized look that evokes the mechanized culture of eSports. NBA.com also created webpages for the teams and players

⁵ Adam Kudeimati, interview with author, 24 August 2018.

that – like the NBA’s main website – include league news, schedules, standings, and statistics. The logos ensure the 2K League resembles the NBA while the webpages filter it through the familiar quantitative frameworks that organize traditional sports.

The 2K Leaguers compete as the individualized avatars they established before joining the league. The Twitch casts display a combination of the virtual world of the game play and the people playing the game. During matches small close-ups of all ten players and their nicknames are inserted on the upper edge of the frame. Their avatars – with each gamer only controlling one corresponding player in the game – are also marked with their respective handles. This allows clear accountability of each player’s performance. Additionally, the audience sees the gamers’ focused faces while playing. During short game breaks, the players are displayed full screen and can be observed communicating with each other, including, in rare cases, conflicts between the competing teams. The casters also switch between commenting on the moves of the virtual players and the performance and behavior of the actual players. Of course, the players are also asked to comment on replays after the games. This mimics the visuals and rhetoric of traditional sports coverage and increases the relatability and authenticity of the gamers, who otherwise tend to become invisible behind the spectacle of the simulated game play.

Most 2K League players were obscure, even within the eSports and *NBA 2K* community, before being drafted. Their branded connection to the NBA, in the words of *SportsBusiness Journal*’s Ben Fischer, provides “legitimacy and clarity” to otherwise unfamiliar consumers (Fischer 2018). The NBA, for example, secured each 2K League player a verified Twitter account immediately after the draft, a marker of prestige in social media reserved only for celebrities determined to be in danger of potential impersonation. In doing so, it suggests these players have social status on par with mainstream athletes. As Taylor found, eSports “fandom is often regarded either quiz-zically or suspiciously” in contrast to the acceptance that mainstream sports fandom – and performances of it like wearing gear and purchasing memorabilia – commonly enjoys in popular culture (T. L. Taylor 2012: 193). The 2K League works against this stigmatized fandom by enveloping an eSports product into a traditional sports league and making sure it is recognized as authentic by that established organization.

Pistons GT point guard Fred “I’m So Far Ahead” Mendoza considers the 2K League to be similar to the original NBA. “We’re doing the same thing, it’s just in a virtual aspect,” he insists.⁶ These apparent resemblances, however, are not obvious to those unacquainted with eSports. But the NBA’s affiliation with the 2K League imbues the eSports athletes with the organization’s identity and symbolic capital. Heat Check Gaming small forward Carlos “Sharpshooterlos” Zayas-Diaz said his friends and family responded to his choice to become a professional eSports athlete differently given the 2K League’s formal connection to the NBA and he recounted impressing

⁶ Fred Mendoza, interview with author, 22 August 2018.

people he meets by telling them he works for the NBA.⁷ Other 2K League players left more lucrative and stable careers to join the league in large part because of its relationship to the NBA. Mendoza had a comfortable IT job and Zayas-Diaz worked at a bank. Jazz Gaming small forward Jaishon “Smooove” Scott secured a position working for the United Parcel Service just before learning that he earned a spot in the 2K League.⁸ Without hesitation, he declined the permanent job to join the upstart eSports venture. The 2K League, as Kudiemati put it, “legitimized eSports across the board” by affiliating with the NBA.⁹

The 2K League’s casters deliberately align its competitions with traditional sports in their Twitch coverage – part of their intersecting efforts to explain the league’s competitions and promote the upstart. The stream of the 2K League finals between Knicks Gaming and Heat Check Gaming, a three-game series that Knicks Gaming won, repeatedly used popular sports references to make sense of the teams and their competition. The casters likened Knicks Gaming’s surprising late-season run into the championship to the English Premier League soccer team Leicester City’s improbable 2016 league title. They also said the championship “feels like those old Knicks–Heat rivalries in the ’90s,” drawing a direct comparison between the 2K League teams and the decades-long histories of the basketball franchises on which they are based. The coverage augments the effort to legitimize the 2K League by placing it into dialogue with mainstream sports.

Amid its legitimizing alignment with the NBA, the 2K League participates in the less formal and structured culture of eSports. Taylor indicates that authenticity in eSports is characterized in part by players adopting unpolished personas detached from traditional institutions (T. L. Taylor 2012: 189). NBA 2K League publicity fosters this brand of authenticity by stressing players’ backstories as regular folks. Reflecting Mendoza’s work in IT and Zayas-Diaz’s job in banking, the first pick of the 2K League draft, Mavericks Gaming’s Artreyo “Dimez” Boyd, drove a tractor trailer before entering the league and Kudiemati was a student at Penn State University. The 2K League uses these biographies to emphasize the players’ similarity to those who play video games in their spare time and might aspire to turn professional. “Certainly, we will help amplify our teams through the game competition,” Donohue explains, “but in addition, we think where the teams are going to have a huge advantage is growing a large grass roots audience as well. We think there’s a huge opportunity, and we’ve seen it in eSports, growing content around the practice house, where they’re living, how they came to be great players” (Aldridge 2018). A 2K League-produced video centering on Portland’s Blazers Gaming, for instance, has the team going on an outing after practice to pal around, sample snacks from downtown Portland’s food trucks, and

7 Carlos Diaz-Zayas, interview with author, 31 August 2018.

8 Jaishon Scott, interview with author, 5 September 2018.

9 Adam Kudiemati, interview with author, 28 August 2018.

mingle with locals. Similarly, the New York-based Madison Square Garden Network produced a series that offers behind-the-scenes coverage of Knicks Gaming, such as a trip the team took to the Brooklyn Bridge. The theme that unites these promotional videos is the players' status as normal people who are employed by the NBA but do not exhibit the unapproachability and entitlement often associated with wealthy and famous athletes. They are down-to-earth folks who have turned their hobbies into a profession. "I'm just like you," Mendoza modestly says of his fans. "It puts me in awe that someone is in awe of me."¹⁰

Before the 2K League launched, Silver speculated that the upstart would ensure players' relatability by broadening the range of participants beyond the NBA's decidedly limited horizons. "There's a global pool of players," he told *USA Today*. "They come in all ages and sizes and ethnicities and sexes" (Amick 2017). The 2K League communicated this inclusivity by adopting a variation of the NBA's logo that abandons the silhouette of Jerry West. As Donohue explains, "The absence of that silhouette is important to us because it actually represents the fact that there is no prototypical NBA 2K athlete. Man, woman, tall, short, young, old, domestic, or international" (Yeboah 2017). But only one of the 250 hopefuls the 2K League selected for its draft pool was a woman – Wendy "ALittleLady87" Fleming – and she did not make the final cut to the 102 draft-eligible players. The NBA expressed astonishment at this result and created a task force to guarantee greater diversity in subsequent seasons. We expected there to be women in the draft," said Oris Stuart, the NBA's chief diversity and inclusion officer. "We know women play the game and that they do play and compete at an elite level" (Peterson 2018). The next season, only two women qualified for the 2K League draft, which had more spots than the previous season once the league expanded from 17 to 21 teams. Just one of these players, Chiquita Evans, was drafted when Warriors Gaming selected her in the fourth round.

But the 2K League's exclusively male debut season, and almost entirely male sophomore campaign, reflects a broader gender disparity across traditional and eSports. Taylor indicates that while women participate in eSports, the competitions are "deeply segregated, with women and men generally playing on different teams and in separate tournaments" (T. L. Taylor 2012: 125). The 2K League perpetuates this separation by extending a culture of eSports competitions composed almost solely of male gamers, basing itself on a sports organization constituted entirely of men, and using a video game that exclusively had male avatars until *NBA 2K18* began including WNBA teams. Although this gender segregation characterizes eSports as a whole, the 2K League in particular encourages even fewer women participants than other popular games like *Fortnite* and *Overwatch*, which have included female avatars since their inception.

The 2K League works to build legitimacy – and contributes to the broader effort to legitimize eSports – by simultaneously participating in mainstream sports' branded

¹⁰ Fred Mendoza, interview with author, 22 August 2018.

corporatism and eSports' relatable populism. The upstart organization's efforts to establish itself across these spheres illustrate Sarah Banet-Weiser's theorization of how authenticity is constructed and exploited in commercial culture. Banet-Weiser indicates that the concept of authenticity traditionally distances itself from corporate commercial culture. However, she asserts that corporate brands are increasingly engaged in the work of conveying authenticity – often by suppressing their corporate identities and commercial motives. Authenticity, in contemporary brand culture, is characterized by ambivalence and exists both within and outside corporate commercialism (Banet-Weiser 2012). Along these lines, Taylor claims the “public performance of a professional athletic identity sits uneasily within e-sports” and can potentially diminish pro gamers' perceived legitimacy (T. L. Taylor 2012: 220). The 2K League accommodates this sort of sporting identity while still ensconcing it within the NBA's authenticating corporate image. The 2K players represent the NBA – and the traditional sporting culture it signifies – while maintaining the down-to-Earth personas that deliver cultural capital in the context of eSports.

Similar eSports leagues tethered to established professional sports organizations emerged to reproduce the 2K League's synergistic recipe. Major League Soccer founded the eMLS in 2018, which, like the Dutch eDevisie, focuses on *FIFA*. MLS senior director of properties and events James Ruth says that more MLS supporters become fans of soccer through *FIFA* than by watching or even playing the sport. “It's only natural for the MLS to use gaming as a conduit to create great content or different touch points with fans,” he explains. Similarly, the National Hockey League established the NHL Gaming Championship in 2018 – an eSports tournament based on EA Sports' *NHL* series. The MLS and NHL follow the NBA's lead by using eSports to broaden their audience beyond traditional sports fans. They also participate in eSports' legitimization through attaching to legacy sports organizations.

Sports institutions have a long history of reinventing themselves and cultivating new fans through emerging media. To do this, they steadily accommodate the shifting media platforms' imperatives to capitalize on the exposure they provide and the audiences they gather. Baseball, for instance, gained its “National Pastime” status by collaborating with print journalists and football became “America's Game” through suiting television's needs. More recently, mainstream sports organizations have become media outlets themselves that administer their own robust, cross-platform, and promotionally-driven media infrastructures. The NBA 2K League continues this longstanding trajectory by extending the National Basketball Association's aggressive engagement with emerging media to stoke its growth into new global markets and demographics. The 2K League marks an important moment in sport's gradual transformation from relying on media to becoming media that drives economic and technological innovation across the industry. It also shows how the new and historically marginalized practice of eSports is legitimized through connecting to traditional sports organizations, the marketing practices surrounding them, and the media coverage they receive.

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