

Emerging Discourses: eSports

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eSports, while broadly referring to video games outside of the realm of conventional sport, also contain video games based on popular professional sports, like the American-based National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL), and National Basketball Association (NBA). While Esports are sometimes dismissed as trivial, they have a surprising, underground effect on the sporting world. eSports operate as an expansion of the sports they simulate and offer a virtual and social connection to fanbases from arenas to living rooms. But how powerful is the Esports world and what does it mean for the professional sports world?

eSport participants might not yet be featured in popular press tabloids, but there are high-stake rewards that can be reaped from the competitive gaming world, especially in the sport-adjacent eSport world. Madden NFL (2019, Electronic Arts [EA] Sports), which is based on each current NFL season and takes its name from renowned NFL coach, player and commentator John Madden, is one of North America's most popular sport-adjacent eSport games. In 2018, the eSports Championship Series (ECS) Madden NFL '19 guaranteed an estimated \$1.4 million USD for the winner. Additionally, since the game emulates NFL teams' dynamics and athletes' attributes, the results of the Madden '19 ECS are noteworthy for team strategists. Therefore, gamers have the potential to act out season-specific emulations and get paid by the NFL to do so.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell has capitalized on this unique dynamic by collaborating with EA to create the Madden NFL Club Championships. In a statement last year, Goodell elaborated, "Competitive gaming and esports are one of the most exciting ways to engage a larger, younger and digitally savvy NFL audience" (Variety, 2018). The draw of Esports is that "anyone can participate" and this engages a wider umbrella of fans. This is exciting for stakeholders, since eSport advertising, apparel, and ticketing sales can generate revenue like professional leagues.

The NBA has also recognized the money-making potential of eSports, as seen through its genesis of the NBA sponsored 2K League. In March, seventy-two thousand applicants (and their personal avatars) were whittled down to one hundred and two (none of whom were women) and drafted by seventeen NBA franchises. Each franchise acquired six gamers to compete in a 17-week season, streaming through Amazon's Twitch. Throughout the duration of the season, the team will live for free within the franchises' region and be flown in for weekly competitions. Gamers now have official gaming *careers* and a chance to win up to \$1 million USD prize money and \$300,000 USD for championship winnings.

eSport gamers are considered athletes by some, which has considerable ethical ramifications and blurs lines of informed consent. Statements on Twitter claim the NBA 2K Leaguers will be drug-tested, although details and official confirmation has been withheld.¹ In all, the eSport world has

¹ <https://www.dexerto.com/news/nba-2k-esports-league-will-reportedly-include-drug-testing/37498>

considerable ties to its professional counterparts. With its future growth, eSports might become a major contributor to professional league revenue and fan outreach strategies. If eSports remain a staple, hopefully their place as an outsider will allow them to properly address prevalent barriers found in professional leagues.

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