

Ball is (Virtual) Life: An Ethnographic Examination of Identity, Culture and
Community in NBA 2K

by

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined how culture and community are created in the popular sports video game, NBA 2K. Sports video games are some of the most popular video games, but there has been lack of critical scholarship into these games. By engaging two popular cultural theories, the circuit of culture and the fields of cultural production, this study critically examined how culture shapes online communities in sports video games.

By employing a variety of ethnographic methods including thick descriptions of cultural artifacts, an intake questionnaire, interviews with 17 NBA 2K players, and in-game participant observation, this study established cultural patterns, insider language, and other elements of culture within the NBA 2K community. The researcher learned to play NBA 2K, critically examined both physical and virtual cultural artifacts, conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with game players, and participated in NBA 2K with study participants to contextualize their experiences.

This study established NBA 2K as having some of the most advanced functions of any sports video games, including sophisticated multi-user domains (MUDs) and complex avatar (MyPLAYER) creation. NBA 2K offers a unique opportunity to create diverse MyPLAYER representations, setting the bar for sports video games to include people from varied physical identities. Though the game has made strides to include WNBA athletes, the lack of gendered options for the MyPLAYER feature reinforces misogynistic and hegemonic power structures that are common in both sports culture and gaming culture.

DEDICATION

To my loving, selfless, and endlessly supportive parents,

Mom and Dad,

Thank you for nurturing a wildly curious spirit. I have never met a dream too big,

thanks to you.

... and to my dogs Gormley and Gamble,

Good boys!

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To my family, Jess, Greg, Soohyun, and Ian,

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GIRLS RULE!

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PREFACE

The popularity of video games is undeniable. Video games exist as products of culture that are purchased and sold for profitability. In turn, they are used to sell other products and different lifestyles (Gray, 2014). Video games are also able to create social meaning. In 2009, video games outsold books in the United States and the United Kingdom (Crawford & Gosling, 2009). Sports games like NBA 2K, FIFA, and Madden Football sell millions of copies per year (Consalvo et al., 2013). Sports video games are highly social and immersive (Stein et al., 2012). As more of our social interactions take place online and in virtual space, sports video game studies have emerged as an important site for critical scholarly examination. According to Shaw (2011), researchers should focus their attention on the construction of the medium of video games, not only the audience. As a result, this study offers important context into the features and functions of NBA 2K.

This study, like many qualitative research projects, was designed to inform and document the NBA 2K community for the sake of social knowledge and cultural understanding. Not only are video games cultural commodities that generate billions of dollars worldwide every year, they also encourage game players to enter a world of fantasy or escape for the purposes of pleasure and excitement (Gray, 2014). It is important to examine video games and their communities as unique cultural artifacts due to their ongoing ability to create shared meaning between people in virtual space. Video games offer a unique and innovative space to consider cultural elements of “representation, narrative, human beliefs, and behaviors” (Gray, 2014, p. xiii). As a result, sports video games offer unique opportunities to examine how culture functions within this community.

What was traditionally considered a niche pastime or a time-consuming diversion from everyday life, “has become a fascinating form of expression, worthy of serious commentary and criticism” (VerBruggen, 2012, p. 552). VerBruggen (2012) explained that online games need to be considered beyond their most simple uses and as social artifacts that inform about those who play them. Over the last 80 years, there was exponential growth in the popularity of video games, especially the most popular genre, the sports video game genre. Yet, very little scholarship into the experiences of the game players existed. Because of the exclusive focus of game scholars on overtly violent content in online communities, virtual spaces, and video games, race and gender studies have all but been ignored. Many scholars ignore critical game studies and video games’ role in reinforcing power structures because of the stereotypical ideas that surround video games and video game culture as taboo and stigmatized (Leonard, 2003).

Sports and video games create and influence modern culture by acting as the intersection of two separate popular cultural communities. The intersection of sports and video games can help inform the broader discussions of the functions of culture in a community, especially in relation to race and gender. There is a need for critical sports video game scholarship because, “culturally speaking, videogaming doesn’t know what to do with sports” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. vii). Sports video games occupy the important intersection of two popular and influential cultures, sports and video games. Therefore, it is important to examine sports video game culture both as a subgenre of sports and video games culture, but also as a cultural artifact of their own. The online communities and cultures that form inside of global popular video games call for critical examination and analysis to further insights into the people

who play these games and the roles sports video games play in their lives. The intersection of video games, technology, and sports has created a ripe and important area of academic study that has been left mostly understudied by scholars.

Gamer culture, including sports video game culture, is more than just the act of playing games or being a good video game player (Ortiz, 2019B). According to Consalvo et al. (2013), “sports videogames are where rivalries and a competitive spirit are nourished well after someone’s competitive days have ended” (p. vii). Through studies of the experiences of sports video game players, they determined “the sub-genre of sports videogames commercially referred to as ‘sports simulation’ is highly representational, modeling not only the rules of the given sport, but also the broad sports context that defines a given sports culture” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. 116).

The game industry uses the “hardcore gamer” image to disguise the hidden systematic oppressions inside of the virtual spaces (Gray, 2011). According to Shaw (2011), “the lack of portrayal of marginalized groups in videogames is often tied to the fact that the industry rarely recognizes members of these groups as gamers” (p. 28). A marginalized group can be understood as any group being pushed to the margins or edge through “practices, practices, and other mundane interactions” (Gray, 2020, p. 165). Gray (2020) determined,

...gaming culture replicates racialized and gendered exclusionary practices based on whose content and bodies are deemed worthy... these practices delimit and restrict access to certain places for particular populations, defining who is entitled to take part in defining, shaping, and innovating in the digital realm. (p. 12)

This means that online video games have become a site to access and exchange symbolic capital within a virtual community. This study will further advance the understanding of how culture operates in the unique and complex community that exists both within and surrounding the popular sports video game NBA 2K.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Video games allow billions of video game players a chance to enjoy different online worlds and become a professional athlete, a warrior, one of their favorite superheroes, or endless other characters of play or fantasy. Sports video games like NBA 2K, are designed to emulate and mimic real people, such as National Basketball Association (NBA) athletes and coaches from professional sporting leagues. NBA 2K also depicts virtual representations of real places like NBA arenas, practice facilities, iconic outdoor courts, and other physical spaces intimately linked with NBA and basketball culture more broadly.

This study employed ethnographic fieldwork using a variety of qualitative research tools to better understand the functions of culture in NBA 2K. Video games have traditionally been designed to offer game players opportunities to live out their dreams and fantasies in imaginative virtual worlds. First released in 1999, NBA 2K is the longest standing basketball game series with yearly installments of the game released for all consoles and computer play each year (Consalvo et al., 2013). NBA 2K moved to an online format in 2009, which included live online play between players in different geographical locations all over the world. In 2019, the NBA and NBA 2K reached a \$1.1 billion-dollar deal in their partnership for exclusive rights.

NBA 2K is a role-playing-game (RPG). RPGs allow players to immerse themselves in a story line and play the role of their favorite NBA player, or to create a character themselves to live out their dream of being drafted into the NBA. RPGs are some of the most popular forms of fantasy and play.

As a result of the emergence of the Internet, online communities began to develop. The original online communities were text-based worlds like online chat rooms where users communicated strictly through typing text to one another. It was not until late in the 19th century that people who were located in different geographic areas were able to communicate, which meant communities were geographic bound. Traditionally, a community had been considered those who occupy a specific geographic space. Because of the Internet, communities are now interpreted as a group of people with a common interest instead of the traditionally understood geographic bounds. Virtual communities share a feeling of bounded space with those communities who are bound geographically (Giese & Kauffman, 1998).

As sports video game popularity has grown, so too have their capabilities. Games like NBA 2K offer multi-user domains (MUDs). A MUD is a virtual world with multiple players that functions in real time (Gray, 2014). As technology advanced, MUDs incorporated more advanced graphics, creating graphical virtual worlds. NBA 2K has feature options to play in a graphical virtual world.

There are four ways for video game players to engage with and enjoy MUDs (Gray, 2011). The first is with achievements gained inside the game itself. A second way game users enjoy MUDs is by exploring different virtual worlds and experimenting within that world. Next, video game players enjoy MUDs by causing havoc and distress to other video game players within the MUD, and finally video game players enjoying using the communication tools within the games to socialize. As a result, there exist four different types of MUD players: achiever, explorer, killer, and socializer (Gray, 2011).

Community

Scholars interpret the notion of community in a variety of ways; however, most definitions of community highlight the functions of gathering and connecting a group of people. A community can be big or small, geographically bound or completely virtual.

Online communities are bound electronically. This should not deter scholars from examining those communities using traditional qualitative research methods. The lack of geographical boundaries should not deter scholars from considering online communities as bound and connected. Many online games allow for immersion in a new world where the game player completes a story line. As a result of the evolution of MUDS, video games also focus attention to the centrality of community (nation), race, and gender by offering, “a window into the persistent stereotypes, political debates, and insatiable desire for all things violent” (Gray, 2014, p. xiii).

Social and racial norms create boundaries for people in physical spaces (Bonilla-Silva, 2006); however, the anonymity of online gaming space provides opportunities for blatant expressions of racist hate speech (i.e., trash talking), which contributes to the construction and maintenance of racial order (Cote, 2017; Ortiz, 2019B). Though social interactions take place online and the game players physical bodies are often hidden, social issues related to race and gender found their way into online spaces. Gray (2020) concluded that in gaming spaces online, elements of a game player’s identity (e.g., race or gender) are determined by other game players through elements such as language, graphics, images, and voice within the game.

Some scholars identified a separation between social interactions online and *real life* social exchanges. According to Ortiz (2019A), online play in Xbox Live functions in a realm with different social norms from those commonly accepted in the physical world. Rules online that regulate social interactions are much more resistant to change and online games offer protection for White men to harass others (Ortiz, 2019A). It is important to examine the relationship between offline life and online play because “virtual worlds have a long history of leveraging off-line social connections in world affiliations and activities and in a related move they also have a solid tradition of offering people a possibility of forming new offline connections” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 63). Traditionally, virtual games have been considered a simple and pleasant diversion from everyday life, just a game, but scholars now identify the need to consider sports video games as cultural artifacts that teach us about sports culture, video game culture, and the experiences of those who play them. In this process, games like NBA 2K create a unique virtual community that warrants academic research.

Culture

Researchers and social scientists have been unable to adopt a universal understanding and interpretation for the definition of culture. Culture is complex and scholars from different academic disciplines define culture in a variety of different ways. Cultural studies derived from the traditional concepts of cultivation of land, and later developed from the idea of cultivation of the mind (du Gay et al., 1997). The concept of “culture’ itself then ranges from a significantly total to a confidently partial dimension of reference” (Williams, 1995, p. 11). Culture can be all encompassing or precisely specific, and requires a multipronged approach to

understanding its functions in any given community. The study of culture is important to understand how people engage with different meanings and

...belonging to a culture provides us with access to such shared frameworks or 'maps' of meaning which we use to place and understand things, to 'make sense' of the world, to formulate ideas and to communicate or exchange ideas and meaning about it. (du Gay et al., 1997, p. 8)

Hall et al. (2013) explained "culture is about shared meaning" (p. xvii).

Culture is a reproduction of social structures with a community or society. Meaning is produced and exchanged through culture. Boellstorff et al. (2012) explained culture as, "shared systems of meaning and practice, shape our hopes and beliefs; our ideas about family, identity, and society; our deepest assumptions about being a person in this world" (p. 1). The present study was exploratory in nature and designed to generate new knowledge about the NBA 2K community, their social patterns, and the power structures that exist within NBA 2K culture.

Ortiz (2019A) established that gaming culture is actively constructed and contended by game players. Culture establishes patterns of meaning within a community, sometimes loosely bound (Ortiz, 2019B). Online communities have developed within popular online video games resulting in a ripe area of academic study for the social scientist. Online or virtual social interactions are commonplace and a part of everyday life within these virtual communities.

When studying a specific culture within a community, researchers must identify different cultural artifacts within a community to help inform their cultural patterns and societal norms. A cultural artifact is anything generated by people in a society that translates information or meaning about the culture from which it has

been created (Hall et al., 2013). Cultural artifacts obscure meaning that has been ascribed to them as a result of their existence within that culture. The symbolic meaning of the cultural artifact becomes central to the examination of culture (Hall et al., 2013). Cultural artifacts act as messengers that communicate culture from within any given community to others within the same community and those outside of that community. This study identified cultural artifacts that exist within the NBA 2K community and culture.

Ethnographic Museum

When assembled together, cultural artifacts establish the pillars of what researchers call an ethnographic museum. However, cultural artifacts and their descriptions are not the only elements of an ethnographic museum. Ethnographic museums also encompass cultural ideas and “attribute value and meaning in line with certain perspectives or classificatory schemas which are historically specific” (Hall et al., 2013, p. 127). As a result, this study sought to examine NBA 2K as an ethnographic museum that each year offers historically specific game features and captures specific elements of the NBA during that time.

Ethnographic museums create representations of culture, mobilizing meaning and ideas of historical and existing societies (Hall et al., 2013). This is reinforced in NBA 2K because the game both updates the player ratings within the game nightly, creating a virtual society reflective of the current NBA, but also older versions of the game that encapsulate historical context and elements of the NBA from previous years. This research was guided by the emerging video game scholarship and cultural theoretical frameworks that will be highlighted and discussed in detail throughout the following chapter.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have long recognized the important role that sports and games play within a society. As a result, it is important that scholars address the gap in critical research into the experiences of sports video game players. Sports video games occupy the important intersection of two key subgenres of culture: sports and games. Mass media is any, “staged situations and spectacles that allows many people to actively participate in communal life and stated that both have to be regarded as mass media” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. 200). Based on this definition, both sports and video games are mass media. Sports video game culture, the intersection of sports and video games, offers valuable insights into how culture functions online and within sports.

Some scholars identified video games as a tool for sports fans and sports marketers including, “[using] basketball videogames to deepen their knowledge about the sport and dive into statistics” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. 212). Not only is this a marketer’s dream, the social experiences in video games encompass some of the most advanced and sophisticated forms of fantasy and play. This suggests ways for sports marketers to use video games as a tool to strengthen and deepen elements of fandom and brand loyalty.

Ryan and Duckworth (2017) explained that basketball created a massive global community. This is evident by the fact that global communities with diverse cultures play basketball. According to Gardner and O’Brian (2005), foreign born players began to enter the NBA in larger numbers in the 1990s. The global

expansion of the league was evident with the expansion into Canada with NBA franchises popping up in Toronto, the Toronto Raptors, and Vancouver, formerly the Vancouver Grizzlies, now the Memphis Grizzlies after a relocation. The league began to attract a more international viewership, and fans in foreign markets were able to personally connect to the NBA and its players.

According to former NBA great Dennis Rodman (1997), foreign-born players were attracted to the idea of the bright lights, money, and fame, which in turn helped increase the popularity of the NBA. The NBA represents a particular lifestyle, that of the rich and famous, something many NBA fans fantasize about. NBA 2K offers NBA fans the opportunity to live out such fantasies in a virtual space. The NBA also represents the highest-level of basketball competition played worldwide. The Olympics offer a high level of basketball competition, but the United States are dominant every time, reinforcing that the NBA and American-born players set the bar for basketball culture worldwide.

The popularity of basketball in the United States can be attributed in part to the success of the 1992 Olympic basketball team. Superstars like Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Larry Bird suited up for team USA (Gardner & O'Brian, 2005). This growth in popularity of the NBA and basketball more generally in the USA and worldwide paralleled the growth in popularity of video games, as a growing number of families began purchasing videogaming consoles for their homes. NBA 2K is a complex collection of many different basketball cultures in one online location. As a result, the community that surrounds NBA 2K has unique social patterns and cultural practices. According to Gray (2014),

...video games teach, inform, and control, mandating our development of tools of virtual literacy, to expand pedagogies of games as a part of a larger discursive turn to (and within) game studies. We need to teach about games since games are teaching so much about us . . . and ‘them.’” (p. xii)

Ortiz (2019B) determined, “the literature is missing insights into the mechanism through which gaming culture is socially constructed” (p. 880). The meanings associated with this group and this community help create the social profile and identity of NBA 2K (du Gay et al., 1997). It is important to critically examine the cultural elements of NBA 2K as a unique community with individual cultural patterns.

Ortiz (2019B) determined that online culture is created in three different ways: (a) overreaching power structures; (b) economic and political realities; and (c) social actors who are creating meaning. The process of creating culture results in those in power deciding who belongs and who does not. NBA 2K culture is especially important to consider because “basketball videogames in particular lend themselves to bring extensions of the sport of basketball” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. 197).

Consalvo et al. (2013) argued that, “playing a basketball videogame also is a very personal experience for players and fans. It can act as a means of fantasy play but also complement one’s identity construction as a fan” (p. 214). Sports video games offer important insights into sports fan, sports culture, and how these different elements function together online.

Fandom

According to Consalvo et al. (2013), “a fan can generally be seen as a passionate individual who shows very high interest in a certain celebrity, band,

sports team, etc.” (p. 200). Fandom is at the heart of professional sports culture. Borer (2009) explained, “clothing alone can only superficially designate a tier in the fan hierarchy” (p. 3). Clothing acts as an important social artifact within any given culture, especially in sports fandom.

Kendi (2019) explained the intricate relationship between basketball shoes and Black culture, and stated “our black Air Force 1s had to be blacker than the prison populations. Our White Air Force 1s had to be whiter than the NYPD. Had to be smooth as a baby skin. No blemishes. No creases” (p. 85). This reinforces the convergence of the NBA and NBA 2K culture, and reinforces the idea that NBA 2K can be used as a vehicle for NBA fans to connect beyond the traditional bounds of sports fandom.

Fandom takes ongoing engagement and “the diehard fan is not an identity that is implicit; it must be continuously reasserted and reinscribed with purchased paraphernalia to truly register as ‘authentic’ within a community” (Borer, 2009, p. 1). Most communities and cultures employ a status hierarchy based on levels of engagement and commitment, interest, and longevity (Borer, 2009). According to Consalvo et al. (2013), in “[the NBA], technology has also brought new media channels, aside from visits to the stadium to engage fan communities, among them sports videogames” (p. 200). Sports video game designers want to appeal to “the sensibilities of the sports fans who are their primary audience, have developed an aesthetic that is highly referential to the broadcast experience with which game players are so familiar” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. 116). Not only are sports fans and marketers engaging in new ways through sports video games, but game players seek

out a similar aesthetic to the game as the one experience when watching TV broadcasts.

The style of NBA TV broadcasts shaped the experience and expectations of sports video game users. For example, game developers use similar camera angles as those the TV broadcasts use. This creates a uniform experience between watching a NBA game on TV and playing NBA 2K. Also, graphic elements of the broadcast are shared between the NBA and NBA 2K. This means that the score bug displayed in traditional NBA broadcasts is the template for game designers when designing a score bug graphic in NBA 2K. As a result, game players have come to expect a very specific experience of game play that is highly influenced by the aesthetic of the TV broadcast. This highlights how sports video games have created a new avenue of media convergence in sports.

Media Convergence

Media convergence describes the connectedness between electronic media and virtual space, communication and content (Britannica, 2021). Media convergence is understood, “as the ‘flow of content’ across multiple media platforms” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. 201). When the first sports video games were developed, the aesthetics of these games was highly influenced by television broadcasts. This highlights how sports video games are an example of media convergence because of the symbiotic relationship between live NBA broadcasts and NBA 2K.

Media convergences are responsible for new industries and products. NBA 2K is an important example of popular and successful media convergence. There are five key elements to consider when examining media convergences: social, technological, industrial, textual, and political (Britannica, 2021). Media convergences emerged as

a result of the Internet. When examining media convergences, it is especially important to consider video games as they occupy a space between fantasy and reality. Video games are played, which is a more engaged and active form of participation, unlike other traditional forms of media that are experienced more passively. Gray (2014) explained, “this direct immersion into gameplay makes focusing on what the audience is consuming is even more compelling. There is a strong emotional resonance that gamers have within the interactivity of gameplay” (p. 5). No other media form allows the developer to create a living world for the consumer to explore (VerBruggen, 2012).

For sports marketers, games like NBA 2K offer new and innovative ways to connect to their fanbase through media convergences (Stein et al., 2012). This highlights how fandom overlaps with sports video games and the experience of game players, a clear pattern that has emerged from the data. As a result, the current study considered the intersecting relationship between NBA 2K and the NBA as a form of media convergence. According to Consalvo et al. (2013),

Games are released in anticipation of a televised sports season, and sales can be mapped to sports season specifically, with the bulk of purchasing occurring leading into, and at the start of a season with a slight bump as payoffs begin. Furthermore, sports videogames are situated into a broad and far-reaching culture of sports, predicated in large part by way of the televisual. (p. 135)

When considering traditionally avenues of sports media, “sports videogames are one more avenue in which connectedness can occur and an increasingly important site for shaping how players and fans imagine varied sports and their relations to them” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. 5). Many sports video games are

designed to recreate the experiences that sports fans expect from television broadcasts of their favorite leagues and teams. Their experience playing games is personal, cultural, and heavily influenced by adapting and advancing technologies (Consalvo et al., 2013).

Sports video game players are often reminded of nostalgic times in their own lives when they play and connect. Consalvo et al. (2013) determined “the most unexpected result of the scenarios was how nostalgic experiences were triggered by playing older basketball videogames” (p. 212). The experience for each user is individual and unique. One of the key abilities of sports video games, “is their function to extend and deepen individual parts of the fan experience” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. 197). This means that NBA 2K exists within the bounds of NBA culture and community, and exploration into how the two intersect has long-reaching implications.

When sports video game technology advances, so too does the gaming experiences and gaming communities (VerBruggen, 2012). As sports video games advanced with faster graphics and more detailed storylines, so too has the power of the video game player to create their own unique experience. The rapid changes and development of technology was the biggest driving factor to the growth, development, and popularity of video games (VerBruggen, 2012).

As game features, graphics, and the technological capabilities of sports video games develop to accommodate more user-generated content, a more robust and immersive game experience results. Players can do more in the games. User-generated content changed how players engage in online spaces. As technology advances, video game players have more control over their experiences within

games. Technology and graphics paired with advances in online capabilities and play allowed game users to participate in ways not originally intended by developers. As a result, unanticipated social patterns and themes emerged in online spaces that exclude groups of people from being a part of the *in crowd* within the game.

Video games have also emerged as a new site for professional opportunities. As video games have grown in popularity, so too has eSports. Game players are now able to compete in organized leagues all over the world in eSports competition, which allow game players to earn profit from their game play. eSports are not specific to sports video games, however, many of the popular sports video games now have professional leagues that game players can join.

Not only are game players able to compete in eSports, video game players have begun engaging in live streaming their gaming experience for audiences online. In some cases, game players are able to monetize their video game streams by offering ad space to marketers, if they reach a large enough audience.

As a result, it becomes especially important for scholars to examine video games more critically, as game play offers opportunity to create new sources of revenue for game players,

Power and Hegemonic Masculinity in Video Games

Power structures are often hidden as a result of the explicitly racialized and gendered (White and male) structures of operation (Gray, 2019). Power is generated through social and cultural structures, highlighting the importance of examination into sports video games. By establishing power and culture, a hierarchy evolves that

establishes who belongs and who does not belong within any given community. This can lead to isolation and exclusion of marginalized bodies. Gray (2019) determined that online social structures mirror and recreate offline social patterns.

Leonard (2003) determined that platform or console video games, “represent a powerful instrument of hegemony, eliciting ideological consent through a spectrum of White supremacist projects” (p. 1). As a result, online games create spaces that replicate social power structures common to physical spaces, including hegemonic masculinity especially in regard to race, gender, sexuality, and class. There exists a complicated relationship between digital gaming technology and the intersectional users that enjoy playing and engaging in game culture. It is important to understand how cultural violence functions in video game culture and communities (Gray, 2020). Many scholars and game players have criticized software developers, programmers, algorithms, and facial recognition software as embedded with racial and gendered stereotypes. Scholars have begun identifying the negative outcomes of these hidden power structures that result in a variety of oppressions against women and people of color (Gray, 2014).

Online cultural violence does not always lead to real life violence, but reinforcing racial and gendered hierarchy creates a legitimization of those same opinions in the physical world. This can result in unequal opportunities and divisions of resources, which can result in real life violence or death. Gray (2020) explained that just because structural cultural violence in video games does not cause direct harm, this structure creates unequal opportunity life chances and reinforces other negative social patterns. These cultural imbalances in the game can lead to direct threats of violence in real life due to stereotypical and harmful

assumptions about women and people of color. Sports video game players often reinforce these online social patterns through hegemonic masculinity.

Class relation scholars understood hegemonic masculinity to refer to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is exalted. Hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of the patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. 203).

Hegemonic masculinity is common in both video game spaces and sports spaces, and deeply embedded in the social structures that exist in those spaces. In many cases, hegemonic masculinity is normalized as common sense, which makes it more difficult to identify and dismantle. This study investigated the role of hegemonic power, specifically hegemonic masculinity, within NBA 2K culture and community. Gray (2014) said, “hegemony is not granted through coercive force but rather by consent from subordinate groups” (p. 7). By exploring the experiences of NBA 2K players, this study investigated how hegemonic masculinity operates in this space.

Women are excluded from the NBA because, “‘basketball is a man’s sport. Sports is a man’s world.’ Everybody has an image in their mind of what it means to be an athlete in our society” (Rodman, 1997, p. 207). When broadcasting women’s sports, such as the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), in primetime national sports on popular sports media outlets such as ESPN and Sports Illustrated, companies hide behind the idea that if there are no obvious revenue

streams then there is no time allotted for women's sports. According to Consalvo et al. (2013), "women's sporting events have allegedly not drawn attendance or viewership numbers to trigger the interests of game developers" (p. 87). As a result, women and girls are excluded from NBA 2K.

Combination of Real and Virtual

Not only are games designed to incorporate elements of the real physical world, NBA 2K and other sports video games draw success from their ability to recreate the experience of the NBA for players. The game player is buying into the culture of an NBA lifestyle. NBA culture is recreated and sold in new and innovative ways to fans, including games like NBA 2K.

The hidden physical bodies in online play become visible through racist and sexist trash talk online. According to Ortiz (2019A), White men use racist and sexist language to reinforce their social status online in the absence of their physical White bodies. As a result, men of color and women were automatically excluded from the "in crowd" in these virtual social spaces.

Trash Talking

Ortiz (2019A) established that trash talking is used in a game to establish capital amongst players. Generally, those using trash talk want to be the star or the hero of the game. A player's ability to talk trash and make their friends laugh enhanced the competitive nature of the multi-player experience. Trash talking plays an important role in the formation of culture within a space. Many scholars interpret language as a medium to make sense of the world; language is a system of representation within a culture (Kendi, 2019).

Trash talk is pervasive in online spaces and in sports. In professional and other competitive sport environments, trash talking is the use of aggressive verbal insults that generally include homophobic language, sexist and racist remarks, and other abusive language (Ortiz, 2019A). Sports culture and video game culture intersect in a variety of ways, but trash talking is prevalent in both cultures. Both sports and video games present opportunities for players to engage in competition, which can lead to verbal abuse and insults. The language of online virtual play is especially racially and sexually charged (Gray, 2014).

According to Ortiz (2019A) “racist trash talking was not conceptualized as articulating physical domination, but rather about Whites exploiting their anonymous environment to express pent-up aggression toward people of color” (p. 885). Racist trash talking online is used as a form of boundary setting, reinforcing White capital online. As a result of the lack of social consequences and social expectations, game players are much more likely to behave inappropriately online (Gray, 2020; Leonard, 2006; Ortiz, 2019B).

Ortiz (2019A) said that sports video games and fighting video games are especially intense; consequently, trash talking is predictable. Verbal insults and abuses are common in video games, but are especially prevalent in shooting games and sports video games. Sports video games are often the site of racist or sexist trash talk. Previous studies show that men of color who play Xbox Live “believed anonymity provided trash talkers with the resource necessary to insult others without the consequences of in-person confrontations” (Ortiz, 2019A, p. 888). Though this toxic environment is pervasive, marginalized groups tend to downplay sexism and racism in games (Ortiz, 2019B).

The anonymity of the gaming space created an environment ripe for racist, sexist, and homophobic behavior, resulting in online spaces that are exclusionary and toxic for many game players. This illustrates the importance of understanding cultural patterns and functions in popular sports video games, and highlights the idea that sports video games can inform us about the millions of people who engage with these games. This study examined the interconnectedness of information between the NBA and NBA 2K, NBA media content in relationship to NBA 2K content, the computer networks that connect both entities, and how the communication that exists between the two creates and reinforces existing culture.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employed two popular theoretical frames to examine cultures and communities in the popular sports video game NBA 2K: (a) the field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993); and (b) the circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997). Both theories focus on the production and consumption of symbolic elements of culture. According to Hall et al. (2013), “culture is about ‘shared meanings’” (p. xvii). This can include art, music, fashion, language, and any other element of shared meaning between two people in a group. Culture acts as a frame of reference and understanding for people in the same group. Identifying symbolic elements of culture helps when operationalizing both theories in virtual space for the examination of sports video games. This project emerged as a response to the lack of critical scholarship surrounding the functions of culture in sports video games.

Every community is able to create different and unique cultures that are specific to the members of that social group. Within any social group and community, there are elements of social knowledge. Social knowledge is the information about the group that people know without actually knowing when or how they learned that information. This is knowledge that is taken for granted, which is essential and fundamental to any given culture (du Gay et al., 1997).

Being a member of a community requires active engagement. It is not a passive action. Members of a group or community are motivated to engage in public action and shared knowledge as a way of creating and acquiring symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1993). The following section will discuss Bourdieu’s (1993) popular

cultural theory, the fields of cultural production, to establish a foundation for later analysis.

Fields of Cultural Production

Bourdieu (1993) established the field of cultural production theory, and determined that culture is produced as a set of societal conditions reflecting the circulation, consumption, and production of symbolic goods. Agents of culture exist in all social situations and those agents are governed by objective social relations. Beyond social elements of production, circulation, and consumption, Bourdieu (1993) established three important concepts that informed the present study: cultural capital and symbolic capital, fields, and habitus. Each of these concepts inform the functions of culture.

Fields.

Fields are the structures of hierarchy within a given culture or community. All social formations have structural fields. Some examples of fields of cultural production are the educational field, the economic field, or the political field. According to the field of cultural production, each field maintains its own laws and functions in different and separate ways from the overall culture outside of any specific field.

Fields are central to the examination of online communities, because virtual space has created an entirely new field as an extension of everyday social culture. Fields become especially important in the study of online communities and more important the study of sports video games for different reasons. Thinking about fields as physical space rather than virtual space helps inform the study of communities that exist in real life and online.

DiAngelo (2019) offered a clear example of how cultural fields can change via the relationship between a school administrative assistant and a school custodian. When the custodian comes into the office to ask the administrative assistant to order new supplies, the administrative assistant possesses cultural capital in that space. He or she would be more familiar with the cultural patterns in the office, and the administrative assistant is likely in professional clothing. However, when the administrative assistant enters the custodian's workshop to ask for his help with a spill in the cafeteria, the custodian holds cultural capital as they find themselves in his workshop with his equipment and material. This example highlights how the cultural field is especially important to consider when determining the cultural capital someone might enjoy at any given time.

When considering sports video games, fields help inform a variety of intersections of culture within a particular game. Some game players are a fan of the sport; some game players are a fan of a particular player or team. Some game players are fans of video games or sports more generally with little to no personal connection to the games or players. There are all different types of engagement with a given game, and the idea of fields helps researchers better understand how different players relate to games. In the context of sports video games, fields can incorporate either the public and private space or virtual space and physical space as examples.

When examining specific sports video games, it is impossible to separate the video game itself from the culture that exists within and around that professional sports league. For example, NBA 2K is the sports video game that embodies the

NBA and as of 2020 the WNBA. The two leagues existing in one game present two separate fields of examination, one with male athletes and one with female athletes.

Sports video games offer unique opportunities to examine fields across multiple levels of fan engagement. Sports fans engage with sports video games for a variety of reasons. Game players can be attracted to a particular game because they are a fan of a specific league, team, or player. Some video game players are a fan of the sport more generally. Some are former athletes themselves. Examining sports fandom, through Bourdieu's (1993) concept of fields, helped inform many important elements of sports video game culture.

Habitus.

Bourdieu (1993) determined that the concept of habitus informs scholars of the functions of culture within a specific culture. The habitus includes the social elements of a culture or community that a person knows without knowing how they know. Habitus is what du Gay et al. (1997) described as, "the unconscious dispositions, the classificatory schemes and taken for granted preferences which are evident in an individual's sense of the appropriateness and validity of their taste for cultural goods" (p. 92). A culture's habitus can change amongst different races, ethnicities, genders, or class structures. As a result, different taste structures and lifestyles emerge within the same community and culture, each encompassing different elements of habitus within that culture.

If a person possesses habitus, they more easily enter certain fields within that culture. To fully participate, social subjects must exhibit some knowledge, skill, or talent to be a legitimate *player* within that social space (Bourdieu, 1993). It is the structural systems that generate and organize elements of representation or practice

within a culture. Examples of habitus are especially obvious when examining elements (moments) of consumption, because personal taste is an element of habitus (Bourdieu, 1993; du Gay et al., 1997). There is unique habitus that exists within NBA 2K; however, some of this social knowledge may be related to a game player's direct knowledge of the NBA or basketball IQ. This study examined elements of NBA 2K habitus and determined how NBA 2K and NBA habitus overlap.

Symbolic and Cultural Capital.

Bourdieu (1993) highlighted two forms of capital that are particularly important when applying fields theory: cultural capital and symbolic capital. Bourdieu described cultural capital as “an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competences in deciphering cultural relations or cultural artifacts” (p. 7). Cultural capital is a contextual knowledge or a level of cultural awareness or understanding that helps any social agent decipher their experiences within a given culture.

Bourdieu (1993) determined,

‘A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possess the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded’. The possession of this code, or cultural capital is accumulated through a long process of acquisition or inculcation which includes the pedagogical action of the family or group members (family education), educated members of the social formation (diffuse education) and social institutions (institutionalized education). (p. 7)

Symbolic capital refers to the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration, or honor and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (connaissance) and

recognition (reconnaissance) (Bourdieu, 1993). Symbolic capital was especially important to consider in this study, because game players can change their symbolic representation (their avatar) in a variety of ways including encompassing the virtual representation of famous NBA athletes or unique in-game avatars. When creating an avatar in NBA 2K, game players are able to change a variety of physical attributes including head shape, skin color, hair style, clothing, and tattoos; all of which can change the symbolic capital of a game player in that space.

Dennis Rodman (1997) was one of the first NBA players to dye his hair different colors, express himself through fashion, and challenge traditional societal norms. Now, over 25 years after his career ended, this is commonplace in the NBA community and in NBA 2K culture. Rodman is an example of NBA culture personified. He explained, “one look at me and my tattoos, my hair and jewelry, and that’s all they would consider” (Rodman, 1997, p. 174). Rodman (1997) stated, “it’s total freedom. Totally. It’s freedom to be who the fuck you want to be, and nobody else matters” (p. 224). This passage emphasizes elements of social capital from the NBA that game players are hoping to experience through NBA 2K.

Bourdieu (1993) explained that levels of symbolic capital are not tied directly to economic capital. In NBA 2K, however, players spend real money to purchase clothing, tattoos, or shoes in the game, which highlights the link between economic and symbolic capital at least in the context of NBA 2K. Examples of other forms of symbolic capital are academic capital (derived from formal education, measured by degrees or diplomas) and linguistic capital (an agent’s linguistic competence measured in relation to a specific linguistic market where often unrecognized power relations are at stake). Though Bourdieu (1993) made clear distinctions between

cultural/symbolic capital and economic/political capital, he also explained that the dominant position within any given culture is always tied to economic and political capital. The power that exists within cultural capital and symbolic capital is most visible (and inevitably powerful) as it relates to either economic or political capital.

The field of cultural production offers many tools for close examination of cultures within a given community. To further explore how culture functions in NBA 2K, this study incorporated the circuit of culture to use different moments of cultural meaning to inform the functions of culture within a specific community. This study sought to examine and understand how symbolic capital is created, acquired, or shared in online spaces and highlight why sports video games warrant more academic focus and attention from social science researchers by examining social and cultural patterns emerging in the game NBA 2K.

The Circuit of Culture

The theoretical framework established by du Gay et al. (1997), the circuit of culture, was an appropriate theoretical approach for this study as it has been employed by social scientists to examine different communities and the functions of culture in communities. It allows researchers to examine a community and its culture as an ongoing social construct and system. This system is constantly changing as a result of societal forces that are constantly renegotiating culture within a social group at any given time (du Gay et al., 1997).

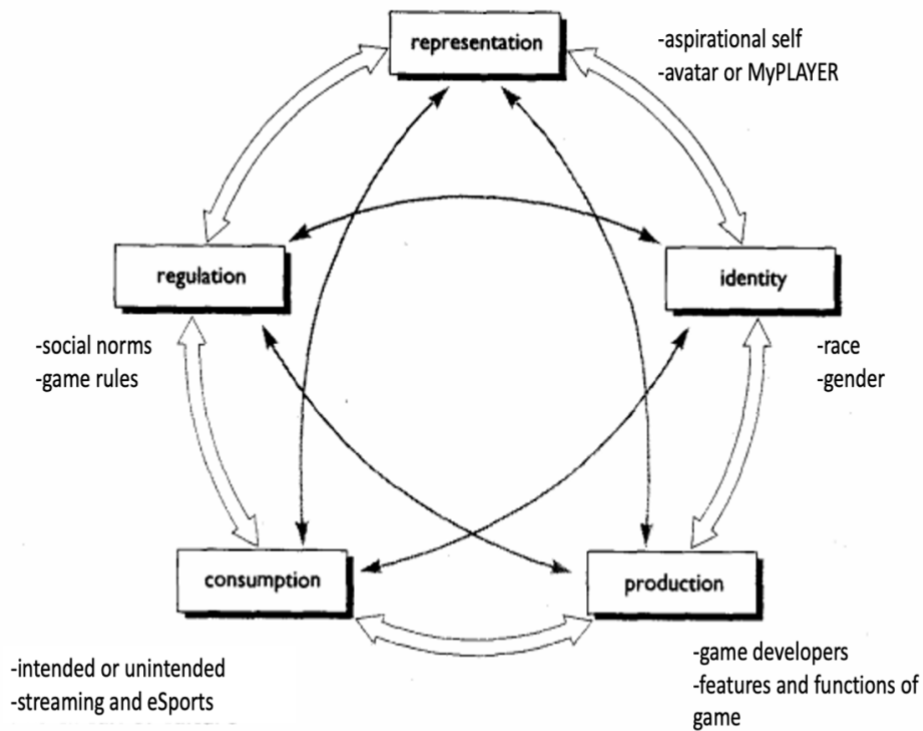
By using the Sony Walkman as an artifact of cultural examination, the researcher established a theoretical framework for interpreting meaning and functions of culture, which can be applied to any unique and dynamic community. This approach equips social scientists with tools necessary to begin to untangle the

complex web of cultural artifacts and elements that inform the function of culture within a society. Du Gay et al. (1997) determined culture is best understood when examining it from multiple avenues or what the researchers called *moments*.

The five moments that create the circuit of culture are central to operationalization of the theory in formal research. The moments are: representation, identity, regulation, consumption, and production. These moments are elements that inform how culture functions within a community. Moments represent elements of meaning making within a culture. Figure 1.1 shows the relationship between moments of the circuit of culture. The arrows represent the articulations or the relationships between each of the moments, which is also used when applying the circuit of culture to any given community.

Figure 1.1

The Circuit of Culture



Note: Figure 1.1 adapted from du Gay et al. (1997) p. 3

It is important to make the distinction between the moments in the circuit of culture and cultural artifacts. In this sense, moments in the circuit of culture contribute to the functions of culture based on their cultural practices (du Gay et al., 1997). These moments create a body of knowing that informs how the dimension of culture are created and shared within a community. It is important to make a clear distinction between du Gay et al.'s (1997) conceptualization of moments and cultural artifacts more generally. Cultural artifacts are objects that assigns symbolic meaning to anyone within a specific culture. Unlike cultural artifacts, which

represent material culture, moments in the circuit of culture inform sites of cultural functions that help inform how culture operates within a specific society or group (du Gay et al., 1997).

Production

The first moment to consider in this examination is the production. The process of production ascribes cultural artifacts with encoded meaning that emerges as a result of many factors during the production process. That meaning manifests in the production process in multiple fashions including who the product is made for, what it does, and how people use the product (du Gay et al., 1997). Production can create both intended and unintended meaning for a cultural artifact. Production is inspired by people and companies who contribute to the design and production process. In the case of the Sony Walkman, these elements of production spawned the unique Sony culture, and finally encoded meaning to the Walkman and Sony as a company more generally.

Any step in the production process has the potential to influence the symbolic message that is projected by an item. In video games, that process includes game development and the developers who design the games. To comprehensively examine the production of sports video games, it is important to identify the functions of the game to determine what game players can and cannot do within the game, which helps shape and mold the culture in that space. As video game technology advanced, the ability to impact how video game players use games and its functions and features changed. This is especially true for online play.

Regulation

Regulation functions within the circuit of culture in multiple ways including reinforcing power structures that contribute to how societies can function (du Gay et al., 1997). When considering regulation as a moment in the circuit of culture, it does not always refer to formal rules, laws, or capabilities of a game. Regulation also refers to the social expectations and embedded patterns that emerge within a social group.

Representation

Representation helps connect members of a culture through signs that can create shared cultural meanings (Hall et al., 2013). This reinforces the work of Geertz (1973) who explained representation is shared meaning between two people. According to Hall (2013), “representation has come to occupy a new and important place in the study of culture. Representation connects meaning and language to culture” (p. 3). Representation also connects meaning to language used in the cultural process (Kendi, 2019).

One of the common arguments of game developers is that the average gamer will not play games or be interested in characters with which they cannot relate. Developers hide behind this guise when questioned about the lack of representation of female characters, minorities, and other marginalized groups (Gray, 2014). Representation informed this study, as only in recent years has NBA 2K included WNBA athletes, and these functions are limited within the game. Representation is a moment that is especially important to consider in relation to the circuit of culture, especially when examining virtual and online communities like NBA 2K. Members of a particular culture share interpretations and understandings of representations

in the same way, which encourages media convergence between NBA culture and NBA 2K culture.

Identity

In NBA 2K, gamer identity intersects with other elements of a person's identity, including fandom; playing video games does not automatically qualify someone to consider themselves a gamer (Shaw, 2011). Game developers and marketers spend time and money to determine the identity of the person or persons who might use a product. To do so, marketers create demographics on who they are targeting to use their products. This means the identity of the end user contributes to the circuit of culture, both from the perspective of the marketers and the consumer's individual perspectives of themselves. As a result, identity of the product and of the user are critical when examining how social patterns are developed and reinforced. Identity is especially important because it closely aligns with the other moments in the circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997). The identity of a product is a reflection of those who created that product and the intended identities for those who will use the product. These identities are usually the result of time and money spent on marketing data and analysis.

There is a resistance to the continued expanded visibility of people of color and women in games; White masculine anxieties generate fear and anger that is expressed online (Gray, 2020). Such anxieties vilified anyone outside of the commonly accepted group, which assumes a White masculine center to games (Gray, 2020). Women and people of color have been ignored by marketers who constantly position White, straight, cisgender, masculine men as the template gamer (Gray, 2014; Leonard, 2006; Ortiz, 2019B). It is important to examine both the cultural

identity of the product itself, but also the identity of those consuming the cultural artifact. This is especially important as personal identity may change from physical space to online environments. That means online personal identity and offline personal identity are both important when determining how culture functions in NBA 2K.

From online trolls on social media to group chatrooms or countless stories of online bullying, the Internet and virtual spaces created a new arena for oppression and cultural segregation. As a result, these offline patterns manifest online and create new spaces of marginalization for people of color and women. Gray (2014) articulated,

As with much of popular culture, [games] offer a ‘safe’ space to discuss and consume stereotypical ideas about race and gender. They exist as a means to circulated accepted stereotypes of the OTHER, all while creating spaces to normalize those representations while disciplining those who seek to challenge the hegemonic organization of gaming culture (p. xiii)

The default operating system of gamer culture caters to a European American cultural center. According to Leonard (2003), “race matters in video games because many of them affirm the status quo, giving consent to racial inequality and the unequal distribution of resources and privileges” (p.1). This resulted in scholars exploring digital space as a new frontier, capable of producing and reproducing sexist behavior and messaging (Gray, 2014; Ortiz, 2019B). Online spaces inevitably create and reinforce culture in the gaming space, yet little attention has been paid to sports video games specifically. As a result, it is important to consider sports video

games like NBA 2K as experienced differently based on the different identities of the game players at the intersections of race and gender.

This study was a response to the call from Consalvo et al. (2013), who said, “it would be important to compare sport playographies from different cultures and also to include female participants in the study” (p. 275). Scholars have made the plea to “ask tough questions about the inclusion of women athletes in sports titles, as many game companies have a problematic history with the overall representation of women in any games” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. 88). Gray (2020) said, “women who insert themselves into the ‘digital locker room’ meet with resistance from the ‘boys club’ for violating the invisible borders of the space” (p. 165). Male game players are much more likely to identify as gamers than female or transgendered players, which suggests a comfortability and belongness in the space (Shaw, 2011). For this reason, it is sometimes difficult to attract female gamers to participate in a study, and many scholars shy away from using the label gamer in their participation efforts. In a study on gamer identities, Shaw (2011) determined,

Identifiers like gender, race/ethnicities and, sexualities can shape how individuals relate to gamer identity. Interestingly, however, in this study only gender was correlated with a count of who identified as a gamer. No other category, including race, sexuality, religion, education, age, or type of gaming platform, demonstrated such a striking disparity between who identified as a gamer and who did not. (p. 33)

Across all genres of video games, male characters and heroes are portrayed four time more often than female characters. When female characters were present, they were represented in hypersexualized ways (Gray, 2014). VerBruggen (2012)

explained, “games also tap into masculine urges, particularly violent and heroic ones, and many of them use sexual imagery as a selling point” (p. 556).

Rodman (1993) determined that sports are an environment of courage and “manliness,” and act as character forming. Those who participate in sport develop a will to win, which is one of the most important qualities in a leader. In many cases, the will to win with the boundaries or rules of the sport is most important, which aligns sports with discipline and character (Rodman, 1993).

Video games should be considered racial projects, and the content of these games connect racial meanings to cultural structures and online social experience (Gray, 2020). According to Gray (2020), “race continues to be an elusive concept within gaming culture” (p. 13). According to Rodman (1997),

When you talk about race and basketball, the whole thing is simple: a Black player knows he can go out on the court and kick a White player’s ass. He can beat him, and he knows it. It’s that simple, and it shouldn’t surprise anyone. The Black player feels it every time. He knows it from the inside. (p. 159)

However, the locker room is one of the few places in the United States where Black and White men can come together on an even playing field. Rodman (1997) highlighted that because NBA teams work together and travel together, spending more time together than traditional work colleagues, they offer better opportunities for comradery, understanding, and acceptance. Athletes and sports should be where society establishes healthy relationships between people from different backgrounds (Rodman, 1997).

Video games center on straight, White, CIS gender men. From game content to advertising about new games, new releases and any other marketing efforts are

generally targeted at White men. Historically, specific racism has emerged as a result of online culture, communities, and the anonymous nature of these spaces. In an examination of the experiences of men of color in online spaces, Ortiz (2019B) determined that online harassment occurs for folks if their identity is perceived to be outside of the White male center. This means women and people of color experience online harassment if they offer social cues for their personal identities in the online space.

Many White game players desire to occupy virtual Black bodies because of manifested stereotypes “of strength, athleticism, power and sexual potency all play out with the virtual reality of sports games” (Leonard, 2003, p. 2). Gray (2014) explained, “[video games] offer White middle-class youth the ability to experience the Other, to virtually transport themselves into an imagined world of play and pleasure” (p. xi). Sports video games have become a new frontier in which White players commodify and colonize both Black virtual bodies and Black online spaces like NBA 2K.

NBA 2K is unique in the sense it offers audiences the opportunity to consume and immerse themselves in images of Black bodies, which is uncommon in video games, but much more common in sports video games. According to Leonard (2003), “as Whites are heroic figures, Black characters are reduced to the stereotypical athletes. More than 80% of Black characters appear as competitors within sports-oriented games” (p. 84). According to Gray (2020),

Audiences may see the same thing, but they are not experiencing the same thing. Black audiences’ consumption of Black characters, for instance, is a dramatically different experience than it is for their nonBlack counterparts.

White audience consumption of Black characters is mostly read as a racial tour through the digital ghetto. In thinking about the power structures of digital technologies, we see a practice of reducing Black characters to tropes and stereotypes to render their bodies subject to the White masculine supremacist gaze.” (p. 167)

Leonard (2003) determined, “it is impossible to appreciate the significance of video games without considering racial images, identities, and ideologies” (p. 1). The NBA has always been a pioneering force when it comes to the intersections of race, sport, technology, and culture. According to The Institute of Ethics and Diversity in Sport (2015), most athletes in the NBA are Black and that number jumps to nearly 82% when considering all people of color. The NBA also sets the bar for professional North American leagues as far as gender and racial hiring. NBA and WNBA athletes have been the frontrunners for social justice initiatives and social awareness (Lapchick, 2020).

NBA 2K presents a unique opportunity for Black video game players to participate in virtual space while occupying a body that resembles their own. It also presents White game players or players of other races an opportunity to occupy a virtual Black body (Leonard, 2006). This is a flickering of racial insult and envy that reflects both the disdain and the adoration for Black people that is deeply seeded in the White community (Leonard, 2003). Video games exist as an online space that reinforces and breeds White supremacy (Gray, 2011). As a result, it becomes especially important to examine and understand the complex social exchanges and relationships that NBA 2K players create and foster during game play.

Consumption

Consumption informs functions of culture because meaning is ascribed at the moment of consumption (du Gay et al., 1997). The different patterns and process of cultural consumption also encode social meaning, highlighting that the meaning making process is not a fixed process and that meaning can be made a result of any moment in the circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997).

Regardless of the intended meaning resulting from the producers of an artifact, the moment of consumption can create new and unique meanings not originally intended by the producers (du Gay et al., 1997). Consalvo et al. (2013) explained,

today's console games are franchise-driven empires that rely on name brands and celebrity players in order to sell units. It makes the case that ongoing limitations in the coverage of women's sports have led to the deficits we now see in women's sports videogames titles. (p. 89)

In the past, games were designed for leisure game play, a pleasant divergence from daily life; however, sports video games have evolved to offer many new and different avenues of consumption. Consalvo et al. (2013) developed 11 non-exclusive categories for identifying why sports video game players consume sports video games, which can easily apply to NBA 2K game players' motivations for playing sports video games. Table 1.1 highlights the codes developed by Consalvo et al. (2013).

Table 1.1

Meaningful Experiences of Sports Video Game Players

EXPERIENCE	DESCRIPTION
SOCIAL EXPERIENCE	when relations to other players, friends, families (online and offline) were essential
SINGLE PLAYER VICTORY	when the experience focused on the single-player mode if winning was the core of the activity
NARRATIVE	when the response included a specific narrative explaining a situation in the sport game
MASTERY	when the player mentioned his/her skills development in the game as specifically meaningful
ONLINE PASSION	if the gameplay focused on online usage if the players mentioned their passion for a particular game
PERSONAL CONNECTION	if the reported story included a particular subjective framing of the play experience
USER-GENERATED CONTENT	of the significance of the experience was related to user-generated content, such as character design and development or creating new teams
MIX REAL & VIRTUAL	when the connection to real sport events or players was central
LACK OF MEANINGFULNESS	if the response neglected the answer or criticized the question

Note: Table 1.1 adapted Consalvo et al (2013) p. 255-256

These categories help generate in-depth understanding of sports video game players' motivations. Sports video game consumption has changed and developed as technology continues to advance. Now, game players can play sports video games professionally as eSports players or via online streaming.

New Channels of Game Consumption

Online streaming refers to NBA 2K game players who create online live content by broadcasting themselves playing NBA 2K. Esports are organized leagues in which teams of game players compete against each other in tournaments and season-long games. Between sponsorship, new teams and leagues, and prize money, esports have seen exponential growth in recent years (Debusmann, 2021). Both esports and online streaming have become lucrative avenues for NBA 2K players to generate income and grow a fanbase. These two avenues of consumption highlight new and innovative ways that NBA 2K players are consuming NBA 2K in ways that the original game developers did not anticipate.

The relationship between moments is also a tool to identify functions within the circuit of culture (du Gay et al., 1997). Key articulations can be instrumental in informing social scientists of how each moment relates to the others, which adds dimensionality to any analysis of community and culture. These articulations help researchers expand and develop their understanding of community. The following section examines the key articulations used when analyzing the data for this study.

Key Articulations

The relationship between production and consumption is an articulation that can help inform the product design, intended use of the cultural artifact, and how that product is actually consumed. For sports video games, an important articulation is the relationship between identity and representation. When examining representation in video games, Gray (2014) explained, “eight out of ten black male video game characters are situated within sports games” (p. 21).

Sports video games encompass the virtual representations of Black athletes in the NBA and as a result offer Black video game players a chance to play a game with heroes and central characters that resemble themselves. The identity and representation relationship is a key articulation when examining the creation of MyPLAYER in NBA 2K, the avatar NBA 2K players create to navigate through the functions and features of the game.

According to Consalvo et al. (2013), “the qualitative insights gained from this analysis build on the reflection and contextualization of personal insights” (p. 203). Therefore, this research allows for flexible interpretation and exploratory insights to help form the foundation of future studies. Because of its popularity, paired with the lack of critical scholarship into sports video games more generally, this study was designed to further the critical discourse about NBA 2K.

NBA 2K is an appropriate site for cultural examination. By operationalizing the two theoretical frameworks, this dissertation explored the following research questions:

RQ1a: Who is the community in NBA 2K?

RQ1b: How does culture function in NBA 2K?

RQ2a: How is NBA 2K culture and community situated within the broader spectrum of NBA culture?

RQ2b: How is NBA 2K culture and community situated within the broader spectrum of sports video game culture?

RQ3a: What role does race play, if any, in the ways in which NBA 2K players construct and enact their personas for their MyPLAYER?

RQ3b: What role does gender play, if any, in the ways in which NBA 2K players construct and enact their personas for their MyPLAYER?

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

There is a lack of critical scholarship in sports video games, which has opened a gap for media scholars to investigate the role of these games in the lives of sports fans and video game players. This study was exploratory in nature and the research was designed to generate new knowledge about the NBA 2K community, their social patterns, and the power structures that exist within NBA 2K culture. The ethnographic tools used included an examination of cultural artifacts and field notes, participant observation, 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews with NBA 2K players conducted from December 2020 to April 2021, an examination and analysis of secondary data such as NBA 2K social media sites, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, Twitch, and YouTube, and finally personal experience playing NBA 2K both online and offline between January 2020 and April 2021. This qualitative research approach employed a variety of ethnographic methods. The data for this study was collected using qualitative research methods common in traditional ethnographic work.

Ethnography

According to Hall et al. (2013), “ethnography comes from *ethnos*, meaning ‘people/race/nations’, and *graphein* meaning ‘writing/descriptions’” (p. 127). Fetterman (2015) defined ethnography as “the art and science of describing a group or culture” (p. 11). Fetterman (2015) described traditional ethnographic methods as “attempts to be holistic – covering as much territory as possible about a culture, subculture or program – but it necessarily falls short of the whole” (p. 21).

Ethnographic studies are both precisely specific by using thick descriptions, but also overly general by examining overarching patterns in community behavior. Social scientists have yet to agree on a commonly accepted understanding and definition for the concept of community. A community can be big or small or geographically bound or completely virtual. Most definitions of community highlight the functions of gathering and connecting for a group of people.

Boellstorff et al. (2012) explained culture as, “shared systems of meaning and practice, that shape our hopes and beliefs; our ideas about family, identity, and society; our deepest assumptions about being a person in this world” (p. 1).

Traditional ethnography is the immersive study of cultures and communities (Fetterman, 2015). A successful ethnography uses immersive data collection techniques that offer the researcher the opportunity to examine a community from within it, rather than from the outside looking in (Shaw, 2011). When completing an ethnography, the researcher identifies and defines emergent social norms, elements of individual identity construction, and cultural elements of ethnicity, race, or gender.

Ethnographic Museum

An *ethnographic museum* is a formal tool used for categorization by an ethnographer. Ethnographic museums exist to educate and inform about a specific culture or society, and use specific patterns in their presentation (Hall et al., 2013).

Ethnographic museums are a collection of ethnographic texts derived through ethnographic research. To create an ethnographic museum, a researcher must engage in ethnographic field work. By creating ethnographic museums, researchers are able to look for patterns within a culture and then contextualize those patterns

(Singer, 2009). In doing so, the ethnographic museum becomes a reflection of the community being examined.

Being There

Beyond identifying a specific field site, it is important for the ethnographer to get permission to exist within the community. Because each community and culture is different, the concept of *being there* changes across societies. It is important for the ethnographer to identify what it means to “be there” in the community they wish to study and be able to navigate a community “to a sufficient degree to be able to manage this on a trial basis” (Giese & Kauffman, 2001, p. 17). At the same time, a culture will always possess different points of view. The ethnographer will always add a different and new perspective to any given space (Boellstorff et al., 2012).

Ethnographic Instruments

Fetterman (2015) described ethnographic studies as basic research in the sense that the research is designed for general discovery of information and data about a specific group of people or culture. The most effective way to explore any given culture is by understanding the categories and common symbols or cultural artifacts used by those participating in that culture.

A strong ethnography requires a combination of traditional qualitative research methods such as interviews, participant observations, and in-depth *thick description* of communities, cultural artifacts, or members of the community (Geertz, 1973). A cultural artifact is anything generated by people in a society that translates information or meaning about the culture from which it has been created. Cultural artifacts act as messengers that communicate culture from within any given

community to others within the same community and to those outside the community (Hall et al., 2013).

Thick Description

Thick description is a term used to describe the process of describing intricate details of a person, place, or object to give important context to that item. It is important for researchers to create thick descriptions of the cultural artifacts and experiences within a culture to add context to their study (Boellstorff, 2012; Geertz, 1973). Geertz (1973) explained, “thick descriptions allow for new concepts/patterns/ideas to stem from the descriptions which will help researchers identify new concepts and patterns in the data during the analysis process” (p. 312). Thick descriptions also help contextualize data, allowing for parallels to be drawn with other themes that emerge within the data.

Reflexivity

Singer (2009) explained that a researcher’s subjectivity is both a producer and product of the data being analyzed. As a result, it is the responsibility of the author to demonstrate adequate self-awareness and offer appropriate transparency and positionality within their study. This is called *reflexivity* (Shaw, 2011; Singer, 2009). The analysis process in an ethnography is an iterative process and always ongoing. According to Bolker (1998), it is important for researchers to engage their mind with the data and change the material as a result of their engagement. As a result, the researcher becomes an important tool and element of the study.

Reflexivity is especially important in ethnographic studies because an ethnographer must always consider how their unique perspectives have shaped the research and how the research has molded and shaped their perspectives. Because

cultures are complex, the human as a tool of interpretation becomes especially important (Boellstorff, 2012). It is important to include the personal interpretations and understandings of the research as context for the data. The main goal of the ethnographer is to be immersed in the culture being examined while remaining open and honest about their positionality within the community and culture. Reflexivity allows the reader to situate that researcher within the context of the study. By acknowledging my own personal frames of reference, I am able to locate myself within the data, which helps the reader better understand personal elements that may impact and inform the analysis for this project. In ethnographic work, it is the job of the researcher to clearly communicate their position in relationship to a culture and community. As a result, this chapter offers important insights into the positionality of the researcher, highlighting the frames and lenses through which this project was designed and produced and gives important information about the interview participants who offered key insight into this study.

Interpretation

A key element of an ethnography is the interpretive nature of the research and analysis of the data. It is important for ethnographers to show adequate self-awareness when drawing conclusions about the data collected (Singer, 2009). As a result, as the researcher, I am a part of this study and the data collected. So, all of my field notes and ethnographic memos are important data and insights into this study. The notes and journals used during the data collection were important components of the process.

The ideal ethnography is narrowly focused to guide the research, but offers insights that can be applied to a broader population. Boellstorff et al. (2012)

explained, “as ethnographers, what interests us about virtual world is not what is extraordinary about them, but what is ordinary” (p. 1). A key element of any ethnographic research is its ability to connect meaning from the patterns of one culture and the contextualization of that culture beyond those being studied (Singer, 2009).

Ethnology

An *ethnology*, in many ways, is like ethnography. It is a research technique that focuses on the relationships in a community. The focus of ethnography is generally one specific culture or specific elements and structures within a culture. The use of ethnology in anthropology is the study of the relationships between members of a culture and the relationship of those members to their specific culture (Giese & Kauffman, 2001). In anthropology, a close relationship exists between ethnographic studies and ethnology as a tool to examine members of a culture. Both use similar data collection processes such as participant observation, interviews, and secondary data.

This research study employed a variety of ethnographic methodologies to examine the functions of culture in the popular sports video game NBA 2K. These methods included an intake questionnaire to identify potential study participants, participants observations that included thick description of the game play experience, and traditional semi-structured interviews. Finally, it included the reflexivity of the researcher.

Virtual Ethnography

This dissertation research was a *virtual ethnography* which aimed to discuss, explore, and identify patterns in the popular sports video game, NBA 2K (Fetterman, 2015). Sometimes called *netnography*, a virtual ethnography follows traditional ethnography guidelines for research techniques, data collection, and analysis. The difference between a traditional ethnography and a virtual ethnography is the community at the focus of the research. For the purposes of this study, the community was anyone who played NBA 2K, especially those who played using the online functions of the game.

Traditionally, an ethnography examines a community that is geographically bound. A virtual ethnography decenters the idea of community as being bound by geographic borders and instead considers community to be bound by virtual boundaries.

Heim (1991) explained, “with its virtual environments and simulated worlds, cyberspace is a metaphysical laboratory, a tool for examining our very sense of reality” (p. 59). The Internet has offered new ways to connect, inevitably forming new online cultures and communities. As more of our social interactions move to virtual and online spaces, so too does the need to examine emerging online communities and cultures. Boellstorff et al. (2012) explained that online interactions have begun forging communities via online social interactions. In many cases, online interactions offer people new ways to connect with people they otherwise would not have met. Online communities nucleate around a common interest instead of being bound geographically like traditional communities. As with different cultures in the physical world, “virtual worlds can teach us valuable things about selfhood,

embodiment, governments, globalization, learning, and many other topics relevant even to those without much interest in online technologies” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 54).

Instead of defining a community based on their geographic bounds, new communities have emerged online bound by a common interest instead. These communities have the same feeling as communities in geographic space and operate in many of the same ways, which reinforces why traditional ethnographic methods are appropriate in online worlds (Giese & Kauffman, 2001). Giese and Kauffman (2001) determined that we present different selves to the world based on different social contexts; however, a sense of personal continuity exists. This is especially relevant to this study because of the continuity of the virtual space from the physical space of NBA culture and community. This study was a virtual ethnography of the community and culture within NBA 2K.

Scholars such as Gray (2014) and Boellstorff et al. (2012) offer other examples of virtual ethnographies. Gray (2014) examined the experiences of women and people of color in the Xbox Live community, and Boellstorff et al. (2012) offered a variety of examples of virtually ethnographies; especially important was an examination of the popular online computer game SecondLife, as this study probed for answers surrounding online representation and the link to personal identity, similar to the present study. These studies demonstrated the importance of how communities function online and what communities suggest about the users who engage within them. Because of my unique positionality as a researcher, a sports broadcast professional, and a former college basketball athlete, and coach, I am

uniquely positioned to examine the community in NBA 2K. The following section will offer key insights to the reflexivity of this study.

Positionality of the Researcher

Video games have been around my entire life. The first Nintendo was released on July 15, 1983, three years before I was born. As a result, video game culture has evolved throughout my lifetime. We had video game consoles in our home growing up. We had a Sega, the original Nintendo, and a variety of others throughout the years. I played the early basic games; however, I stopped playing video games in any real capacity some time in middle school.

When considering the basketball community and culture, I occupy an insider or what scholars call an emic perspective (Boellstorf et al., 2012). Before I became a researcher, I was a sports broadcast professional for TV and radio. Before I was a sports journalist, I was also a basketball player and coach. I started playing in an organized recreational league at the age of five, a year younger than other children in my community. My parents were both involved in the program as coaches. I grew up in a “basketball family.” Basketball was the thread that stitched my family together.

As a young athlete, I often competed with and against boys my age. This was the first of many times in my life that the intersection of gender and sport became muddied. It was also when I first became aware of the boundaries to women in sports. Those boundaries existed in competition, coverage, funding, resources, and exposure and I became aware at a young age that my occupation of those spaces was not always welcome.

As a little girl playing against boys in sports, I was teased for being “too athletic,” “too loud,” “too assertive,” “too competitive.” I remember how controversial it was for the other parent volunteers when I played in the boy’s division. Convinced I would get hurt, many mothers protested the decision to place me in the boy’s league.

Throughout my time in college, I played basketball. I competed as the starting point guard at two different Canadian schools: Brock University and the University of Ottawa. Other than the Canadian national team programs, this is the highest level of female competition for basketball in Canada. After I finished my playing career in college, I began to coach, first at the youth level and then in college. I have coached players that have gone on to play four years at Harvard and other American Division I schools.

In 2015, while studying for a post graduate diploma in Sports Journalism at Loyalist College, in a small town outside of Toronto, I was the lead assistant of the men’s basketball team. At that time, I was the only female coach in the league. This is yet another example of an atypical gender dynamic, something that was common for me during my time in coaching and in sports broadcasting. This meant that of the 12 teams in the division with 3–4 coaches per team, I was the only female coach.

The “quirkiness” of being a female coach for men in college is what led to my job at SportsCentre. During my interview, the hiring manager asked questions about what it was like the first time I stepped into the gym with them, or if they respected me. We spent the whole 30 minutes of the interview chatting about my experience as a woman in this protected male space. The gentleman that hired me acknowledged that he felt if a woman could make it coaching college men, then she

likely had a thick enough skin to make it in sports media coverage. At SportsCentre in Toronto I again was one of just a few women in a newsroom out of hundreds of male story editors and producers. When I started at SportsCentre, my guess is women comprised approximately 5% of the broadcast production crew.

I also worked events for a major golf broadcaster. There were many times that, outside of the “audio girls,” I was the only female on crew. The audio role is generally thought of as a less physically demanding role, as the responsibility of the audio person is to walk the course holding a light mic and backpack. At over half a dozen golf tournaments that I have worked in the last 10 years, the other crew members find it a novelty for traditionally male roles to be occupied by a woman.

From SportsCentre I moved on to TROY University, in Troy, Alabama, where I became the color analyst on ESPN for men’s and women’s basketball. I also traveled with the women’s basketball team and covered their road games on the radio. After my time at Troy, I began my PhD at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. While completing my studies at ASU, for four years I have been a co-instructor of a live sports production course that teaches undergraduate and graduate students how to produce live broadcast of ASU athletic events for the Pac12 Network.

As a child, when asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would say I wanted to be the first woman in the NBA. Professionally, I have been in the production trucks for multiple live broadcasts for the New York Knicks and multiple times with the Phoenix Suns. I own and wear several Jordan brand sneakers, the brand of basketball sneakers created for and by Michael Jordan. Jordan brand sneakers are intimately linked to NBA culture. This again highlights my level of

engagement with NBA culture and community. Not only do I own half a dozen pair of Jordan's, I own more than a dozen NBA jerseys of mostly Canadian players, but a collection of NBA jerseys that would impress most NBA fans. I follow social media sites devoted to NBA players' fashion including some sites designated for tattoos of NBA players. I consume this culture daily and consider myself inside that culture. As highlighted above, as the researcher in this study I bring some insider perspective; however, in many ways in the context of this research project, I occupy an outsider's perspective.

Though I consider myself an advocate for female sports journalists and broadcast professionals, admittedly, I could have done more to support women in sports. The WNBA played its first game in June 1997. Without a Canadian team, or a team in Boston the closest major market to my hometown in Riverview, New Brunswick, there was not much opportunity to engage with the WNBA, until at age 31, I moved to Phoenix, Arizona.

Though I do not consume WNBA culture at the rate or for the length of time I have consumed NBA culture, I do know that they share many of the same cultural practices, while still maintaining unique cultures and communities specific to each individual league. This point becomes especially important later in this chapter when discussing the functions and features of NBA 2K in relationship to cultural production, cultural fields, and specific elements of how gender and sports video games intersect.

It is both a privilege and responsibility of the ethnographer to document and conceptualize the culture and community in which they study. When doing so, that research can occupy different positions in relationship to that community and

culture. Boellstorf et al. (2012) explained this positionality as etic, or outside the culture and community, or emic, which means inside the culture and community. When considering this subculture, I occupy an etic or outsider perspective. In many cases, the researcher exists inside the community in question but outside the community for other reasons as well (Boellstorf et al., 2012). The following section will highlight the different ways that I occupy both an insider perspective and an outsider perspective within the boundaries of NBA 2K culture and community.

Study Preparation and Game Overview

In some ways I am inside the native culture of basketball and the NBA. But sports video games, NBA 2K basketball, and the NBA make up only one subsection of the project. The other key subgenre of the NBA 2K culture is the gaming community, more specifically the online gaming community.

From August 2019 to April 2021, I generated *field notes* and *memos* in a variety of different formats including regularly emailing myself any ideas that pop up at any given time. I also made a handwritten dissertation journal in order to keep a timeline of thoughts, ideas, and progress. From December 2020 to April 2021, I then kept a monthly digital dissertation journal that I wrote in for roughly one hour, four to five times a week.

I also began familiarizing myself with NBA 2K by playing alone both online and offline and I used thick descriptions to describe the different spaces in the game. As I progressed through the study and attracted participants, I also completed participant observations in the game by playing NBA 2K with study participants. I observed their behavior and the behavior of others during that time. I conducted in-game participant observations between January 2021 to April 2021.

Gaming Consoles and Equipment

When the Nintendo 64 (N64) was released on June 24th, 1996, video games changed to incorporate 3-dimensional screen movement. Instead of the traditional flat character on the screen, Nintendo added a joystick. Game players were now able to move their avatar across numerous plains that they had not been able to in the past, creating a 3D video game experience. As a result, game development and creation became more advanced. Three years later, in 1999, in anticipation of the year Y2K, the first version of NBA 2K was released.

There are technological hurdles for traditional researchers who are interested in studying video games. If you are not familiar with video games or electronic technology more generally, that limits a researcher's ability to access this space and the culture and community. Familiarizing myself with the features of the newest editions of NBA 2K before the interviews became especially important in gaining the trust and respect of the study participants. The more I played, the more familiar I was with the game and its features, the more elements of the game I could discuss with the study participants.

I first needed to acquire the proper game console and game accessories to be able to play NBA 2K, familiarize myself with its features, and to access the in-game communities. I had access to a PS4, on loan from my younger brother. I purchased the game NBA 2K19 for the PS4 in February 2019. I was limited with my knowledge and ability with the PS4 more generally, which presented a hurdle for me to navigate quickly through the console operating system and the game features. So I decided if I wanted to familiarize myself with the game, I would need to find a more appropriate console.

In order to successfully immerse myself in the NBA 2K community, I had to first familiarize myself with the gaming systems and NBA 2K itself. To do so, I searched for the most user-friendly game console. In December 2019, I purchased a Nintendo Switch and the game NBA 2K20, the most recent release of the NBA 2K franchise, as well as some other games I was more familiar with in hopes of becoming more familiar with the console. These games included Super Mario, Mario & Sonic Go to the Olympics, FIFA, and Sonic the Hedgehog.

The Nintendo Switch alleviated some of the hurdles of the more advanced system, the PS4, and allowed me to more quickly and easily learn the functions and features of the console and the game. I used the Switch, playing NBA 2K20 both with the online and offline features from December 2019 to January 2021. In that time, I explored different features of the game and different game spaces. I learned to play in different functional areas of the game including MyCareer, MyTeam, and within the community space called The Neighborhood using MyPlayer. MyPlayer is the name of the avatar each person creates to be able to participate and engage with other players in NBA 2K.

To familiarize myself with the NBA 2K community, language, features, and players, I first began by collecting *secondary data* from different social media sites and online platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, Twitch, and YouTube. This is common in virtual ethnographies and assists in identifying commonalities or differences within the community and social patterns before beginning the formal interview process (Kozinets, 2015). Secondary data was collected ongoing from December 2019 to April 2021.

Tutorial videos on YouTube, a common tool for NBA 2K players, became especially important to progress through the game more quickly, which meant I was able to access more online features and different skill levels of NBA 2K players. This helped me progress through different in-game features, which allowed me to categorize the game environment and to learn quickly how to navigate the game spaces. As a result, NBA 2K tutorials on YouTube have helped to shape this study both by offering information on the NBA 2K community and culture beyond game play itself.

Though study interview participants played NBA 2K across a variety of different game consoles, this study used both Nintendo Switch and PlayStation 4 for all in-game observations, and to familiarize the researcher with the features and functions of the game.

Now, a popular feature of many current video games is the ability to play across consoles, which means two people who play video games on different consoles can play the same game together at the same time. Most contemporary video games offer this feature, which helps connect different video game players that had traditionally not been able to connect before. During the data collection for this study, both Xbox and PlayStation released new gaming consoles, that offered more advanced capabilities for the game. As study participants began purchasing new game consoles, it began to limit the cross-platform access to participant observations. The following sections will provide the background and evolution of NBA 2K as a game, and frame NBA 2K as an ethnographic field site—important information in ethnographic work (Giese & Kauffman, 2001).

NBA 2K as an Ethnographic Field Site

It is important for an ethnographer to identify a specific *field site*, or in some cases multiple field sites. The field site is best understood as the combination of people, places, social artifacts, and patterns that encompass a culture. A field site can be virtual or physical or a combination of the two (Boellstorff, 2012). The field site for this ethnography is within the game NBA 2K, but it is also informed by the physical world and how NBA 2K players engage with the NBA culture outside of the game.

NBA 2K is a game designed after the National Basketball Association professional basketball league. It is especially fascinating to examine how the gaming and virtual world are interwoven into the physical world in significant ways.

NBA 2K21 is the newest version of the game, which is why most study participants wanted to play there and why it became the only game version used to observe participants. I purchased NBA 2K21, the newest version of the game, so I was able to connect with participants in NBA 2K21 on the PS4 system to study and engage with those players.

Overview of the NBA 2K Franchise

NBA 2K more commonly referred to as simply “2K” was first released in 1999. Boellstorff et al. (2012) determined ethnographers should emphasize the language of the culture when describing that culture. Throughout the interviews, participants discussed many different editions of NBA 2K. Some participants, such as Jeremy, whom I will discuss in more detail in the next section of this chapter, started playing NBA 2K more than fifteen years ago.

In 2009, NBA 2K10 offered the first opportunity for console game players to play NBA 2K online. Though only some participants report playing online in the early years, the change from exclusive offline play to online play afforded new opportunities for NBA 2K players to engage in NBA 2K. Eventually, the online features of NBA 2K became the central functions to the game and played a key role in its rise in popularity. The Internet is how this online virtual culture and community began to form. This offered NBA fans and video games players opportunity to be engaged in new ways within their own fandom.

The small amount of academic research surrounding sports video games highlights the lack of representation and the stereotypical portrayal of women and people of color in popular sports video games. According to popular NBA media outlet HypeBeast, “players from the WNBA first made their appearance in the popular NBA 2K franchise in 2019 for NBA 2K20, a move which elicited a strong reaction and misogynist comments from fans of the video game” (Jensen, 2020). Though WNBA players have been incorporated into the game, game players are still unable to create a female or WNBA MyPLAYER, a topic that I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter and in later chapters of this dissertation.

From a media perspective, NBA 2K is some of the most advanced technology in video gaming, with the fastest and most realistic graphics. As these graphics have advanced, live NBA broadcasts have incorporated similar graphics into their productions. Graphics are examples of how sports media and sports video games are converging. Their relationship is symbiotic in the sense that live NBA broadcasts are impacted by NBA 2K and clearly NBA 2K is designed to mimic live NBA broadcasts as much as possible.

The game is designed around creating the NBA experience for NBA 2K players and as a result NBA 2K game developers have curated the game to give game players the same feel they get from watching their favorite players. Also, when video game technology advances, it offers live broadcasts an opportunity to integrate the new technology into the broadcasts, highlighting the give and take relationship between the broadcasts and the game.

NBA 2K21: Newest Edition

Most of the in-game participant observations for this study took place in NBA 2K21 for the PS4 game console. One study participant, Brian, participated in NBA 2K20 on the Nintendo Switch with me. We played two separate sessions on the different console, with NBA 2K2020 edition. This expanded the study dimensions by including a different console and game; however, it also highlighted some of the limitations of studying NBA 2K culture exhaustively as the researcher would need access to multiple gaming consoles, and the newest editions of the game for each console for each year they would like to study the game. Subsequently, researchers would need historical games and consoles in order to do exhaustive studies of all game features and functions of all NBA 2K game editions. Table 2.1 provides an overview of the main screen of NBA 2K21, the newest release of the NBA 2K franchise, to highlight the many ways NBA 2K players can engage in the game.

Table 2.1: NBA 2K21 Main Page Screen

PlayNOW	-Straight to NBA or WNBA play -Used for quick games and for 2 player games in the same physical space
MyTEAM	-Build a team with favorite NBA players -Money incentives
MyCAREER	-MyPLAYER the key feature is promoted for players to become “next big thing in the NBA.” “Win championships on the court and own the streets in The Neighborhood.” -cannot create a female MyPLAYER
MyLEAGUE	“Forge your own dynasty with the roster of your dreams in MyLEAGUE, featuring MyGM 2.0 and full WNBA Season mode”
FEATURES	Customizing your NBA 2K1 experience -computer settings, controller settings, coach settings -roster settings, player DNA, shoe creator -2K Beats and credits Player DNA “Likeness or attributes” -Shoe creator allows players to customize and design their own shoes from popular brands like Nike and Adidas
CONNECT	-this feature is how game players connect their system to the Internet to play with others online

PlayNow.

The PlayNow function is the most basic function in sports video games. Game players choose the team they wish to compete with and they almost instantly are placed into a virtual NBA arena to compete. Since 2019, the PlayNow feature allows game players the opportunity to compete with WNBA teams in WNBA arenas.

Game players can play offline, against a friend or family member in the same physical space. The PlayNow feature also allows game players the opportunity to play only and offers the opportunity to compete against other NBA 2K players

online. PlayNow is one of the few ways NB2K has incorporated female athletes and representation in the game.

MyTEAM.

One basic function of the game includes a section called MyTEAM, which allows the game player an opportunity to play a simulated NBA season with a specific team, including the virtual representations of the players who are on that team in real life in the NBA. When playing in MyTeam, the game player can control all aspects of game play for that specific team. As the basketball is shared among the team, the video game player controls whichever player has the ball at any time. This is unlike MyCAREER mode, where you use your MyPLAYER, and can only control one player, even during game play.

MyCAREER.

Another popular feature of NBA 2K is MyCAREER mode in which game players can participate in a virtual or open world called 'The Neighborhood.' The Neighborhood is an open space in which an avatar designed by the NBA 2K game player can run freely in a virtual community, interact with other players, play in games, and compete in other types of challenges. These gaming communities are called 'open worlds, which means players have unique goals and they are able to roam around the virtual world with their avatar (VerBruggen, 2012). While playing in the MyCAREER feature, game players can play with other game players in these community spaces while continuing to play a simulated NBA season with a specific NBA team. In both MyTEAM and MyCAREER, game players can compete against either other game players by using the online feature, or the game simulations themselves by playing either offline or online.

NBA 2K creates opportunities for game players to wear different representations of themselves, called MyPLAYER. When playing in MyCAREER, game players can create their own virtual depiction of a player. In some cases, that player closely aligns with how they identify in real-life. In many cases, though, video game players create virtual representations of players who have characteristics very different from their own in real-life.

MyPLAYER.

This feature is promoted in the game as a chance for NBA 2K players to become the “next big thing in the NBA” and to “win championships on the court and own the streets in The Neighborhood.” According to Stein et al. (2012), “how and why sports video game players include digital versions of themselves in the sports games they play needs to be researched further” (p. 361). MyPLAYER becomes especially important to consider because it offers the most advanced avatar creation in any sports game. There are very few games even outside of the sports genre that offer comparable advanced development of in-game characters like NBA 2K through their MyPLAYER features.

MyPLAYER offers a variety of customizable features for both physical characteristics but also basketball capabilities and other complex tendencies that both directly and indirectly impact how the player performs in the game. Some of these attributes impact the style of play of the MyPLAYER “build.” Others only change the aesthetic of the player. Many of the participants in the study referred to these MyPLAYER creations as their MyPLAYER build or just their “build.” Elements of race, gender, fashion, and style I will discuss in greater detail in later chapters of this analysis.

Table 2.2 demonstrates the different customizable elements of an NBA 2K build through the MyPLAYER feature. It focuses on the customizable body features and accessories of the build.

Table 2.2: MyPLAYER Build Customizable Features

Game prompt or feature	Optional Customizations
Body	Height from 5' 4 - 7' 7 Weight 145 lbs. - 350 lbs. Wingspan Shoulder width
Shoes and Gear	Shoes and undershirt for home games Shoes and undershirt for away games Sock length Short's length
Accessories	Upper body accessories Lower body accessories Examples: headbands, wristbands, arm and leg sleeves
Attributes	Offensively Defensively Athleticism Durability Mentality
Tendencies	Drop down menu of different basketball tendencies (skills)
Hot Zones	Locations on the floor the player is affective from
Signature	Best or "signature" moves for your MyPLAYER

This highlights the advanced and in-depth consideration given to the development of the online representations of self in NBA 2K. MyPLAYER offers some of the most sophisticated and advanced customizations for video games in general, but especially in the sports video games genre.

Recruiting Study Participants

The recruitment and selection of participants is especially important in ethnographic work. Researchers must consider how to correctly describe the people within any given culture. It is important to recognize that, "the qualitative insights

gained from this analysis build on the reflection and contextualization of personal insights” (Consalvo et al., 2013, p. 203). This applies to both the researcher and also to the study participants.

Prior to recruitment, I needed to apply to the IRB for approval. Once I had support from my committee to submit my study, I completed the IRB application forms. It took 3 days and 3 sets of revisions to obtain IRB formal authorization to begin recruitment of study participants. Once the IRB was approved, I was able to post the recruitment intake questionnaire online.

In order to attract study participants, a *recruitment post* with a link to an *intake survey* was posted on a variety of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. See Appendix A for a copy of the recruitment post. The link to the intake questionnaire is https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NBA_2KSTUDY.

The intake questionnaire began by giving more information about the study yet was still brief enough to not deter participation. Ethnographers may begin their study with a participant questionnaire in order to orient themselves in the community (Fetterman, 2015). This questionnaire offered general insights that the research may not identify or recognize right away. See Appendix B for a copy of the intake questionnaire.

The researcher shared this link on her personal Twitter and Facebook accounts, as well as posting the link to the intake questionnaire on different Reddit threads, Facebook groups, and included different hashtags such as #NBA 2K, #NBA 2K20, or #NBA 2K21 so that the recruitment link would be visible and accessible to the larger NBA 2K community. The researcher also sought out other video game researchers to share the link to their social networks.

I completed multiple rounds of recruitment from December 2020 to March 2021. Adult participants 18 or older were recruited for interviews. The goal was to attract a diverse sample of participants in terms of race, gender, education, age, class, education, and socioeconomic status. The ideal participant considered themselves as engaging at a high level with NBA 2K, but all levels were encouraged to participate. I first started building relationships with members of the NBA 2K community through email, Facebook, and Twitter.

In order to invite participants into the study, and to participate in follow up interviews, I emailed potential participants a brief, preliminary message that suggested possible interview days. See Appendix C for the email invitation.

Research Sample

Sample study participants ranged in age from their early 20s to their late thirties. The participants consisted of five women and 12 men for a total of 17 participants. Of the 17 participants, all five of the female participants considered themselves streamers and the 12 men played for fun or more casually. One participant indicated playing NBA 2K was her full-time job. Participants in this study have been playing NBA 2K anywhere from 20-plus years (all the versions, since the original NB2K) to just over one year. All participants came from either Canada or the United States. However, one participant worked throughout the year in Europe so had experience playing on European servers with European players.

The study did call for adults 18+, but it is important to recognize there are people 40+ who play NBA 2K but did not make their way into the sample. A reason for this may be because of the choice of recruitment method. Most participants were recruited to the study via social media such as Facebook and Twitter, which may

have skewed the sample to a younger, online demographic. At the same time, the older the NBA 2K player, the less likely they were to engage at a high level in the NBA 2K online community in the Neighborhood or the City.

Too much of the critical scholarship surrounding video games relies on the limited view of the stereotypical “gamer” (Shaw, 2011). Previous research has reported that sports video games play a large role in the lives of those who play them (Stein et al., 2012). This theme was reinforced by all the participants in this study. All participants described an intimate relationship to the NBA 2K franchise and their experiences playing the game. The following sections offer insights into the research sample of participants and add important contextualization of the data in this study. Consalvo et al. (2013) determined that “insights into sports videogame players’ biographies show the importance of the contextual dimension of videogame play” (p. 274). Singer (2009) likewise explained, “ethnographers emphasize their subjects’ frames of reference and try to remain open to their understandings of the world” (p. 191). By first orienting myself with secondary data and the functions of the game, it became easier to recognize, define, understand, and contextualize the experiences of my study participants and the references they make about their game play.

As highlighted above, there were 17 participants in this study. They ranged in age from 20 years old to 39 years old. 3 participants were professional athletes, and four covered sports for a living. All the women in this study considered themselves NBA 2K streamers, while none of the men streamed themselves playing. Only one woman considered herself a professional streamer, Alana, who mentioned NBA 2K streaming as her primary source of income. Three participants were located

in Canada, while the other 14 participants were American. Only Walter, expressed having played NBA 2K outside of North America.

All study participants considered themselves fans of basketball and all were fans of the NBA. Two participants mentioned having attended WNBA games in the past, which suggests at least a general interest in women’s basketball and the WNBA. All study participants also said they play basketball outside of the time they spend playing NBA 2K.

Only one participant identified as a parent, Jeremy, who said he often plays NBA 2K with his 11 year old son. Romeo, a rookie in the NFL said that though he has never played against a woman online (to his knowledge) once and awhile he plays with his girlfriend using the PlayNow function.

Three of the study participants identified themselves as fans of the Utah Jazz, while three others identified as fans of the Los Angeles Lakers.

The following section adds important demographic background for the study participants at the time this study was conducted. Table 2.3 is a brief overview of the NBA 2K game players who participated in this study.

Table 2.3: Overview of Study Participants

NAME & AGE RANGE	GENDER	QUICK FACTS
STUART - Early 20s	Male	A college student in the southwestern USA, from Philadelphia. He works in sports broadcasting.
ROBBIE - Mid 20s	Male	Canadian living and working in his hometown, Kingston, Ontario. He works in sports broadcasting.
JEREMY - Late 30s	Male	A college law professor living in Florida, from Salt Lake City, Utah. Often plays NBA 2K with his son.
IAN - Late 20s	Male	Canadian living and working in his hometown, Moncton, New Brunswick. Favorite teams are the Boston Celtics and the Toronto Raptors.

MICHAEL - Mid 30s	Male	Canadian living and working in his hometown, Moncton, New Brunswick. Says a hobby is spending time and money on sports betting.
DONOVAN - Mid 30s	Male	Married and works in IT. He always gives his MyPLAYER blue hair because he had blue hair in high school.
NOLAN - Early 20s	Male	A college student in the southwestern USA, from California. Considers Greg one of his best friends. Works in sports broadcasting.
GREG - Early 20s	Male	A college student in the southwestern USA, from California. Consider Nolan one of his best friends. Works in sports broadcasting.
ROMEO - Mid 20s	Male	Just completed rookie season in the NFL. Plays NBA 2K often with his team mates in the locker room.
C.J. - Late 20s	Female	Started playing NBA 2K with her dad. She was eligible to be drafted in the 2021 NBA 2K esports league draft.
NORA - Early 30s	Female	Plays basketball regularly in physical life. She was eligible to be drafted in the 2021 NBA 2K esports league draft.
RITA - Late 20s	Female	Vocal about her support of female NBA 2K players. She was eligible to be drafted in the 2021 NBA 2K esports league draft.
WALTER - Later 20s	Male	A professional basketball player in Europe but from Brantley, Alabama. His dad and uncle each played 10+ years in the NBA.
AARON - Late 20s	Male	A graduate student at a school in southeastern USA, from Alabama. Considers himself the world's biggest Kobe Bryant fan.
ALANA - Late 20s	Female	A professional NBA 2K streamer. The only participant to use NBA 2K as their primary source of income.
BRIAN - Mid 20s	Male	A college student studying in the Midwest of the USA, originally from Phoenix. Works in sports broadcasting.
AMANDA - Mid 20s	Female	Has been streaming NBA 2K for a month at the time of her interview. Has only been playing NBA 2K online for one year.

As indicated in Table 2.3, there were 17 participants in this study, 12 male and five female NBA 2K players. All participants completed a recorded interview via Zoom, except one, Rita, who participated in the interview process through email and via Twitter direct messaging. Rita expressed that she suffered from social anxiety and the idea of a taped interview heightened her stress and discomfort. All five women

who participated in this study considered themselves NBA 2K streamers. None of the men in this study considered themselves NBA 2K streamers.

In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviewing is the most commonly used qualitative research technique in the social sciences (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Semi-structured interviews help the participants express different understandings and emotions they experience while playing. In-depth semi-structured interviews also create opportunities for the research to go beyond surface understandings and this methodology of data collections best serves the researcher in answering the research questions (Obiegbu et al., 2018). The use of interviews in social sciences also helps the researcher “interpret and probe the meanings behind difficult to decipher symbols and images” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 185).

As mentioned above, the responses from the interview questions inform how and what you observe during the participant observations, so it is important for ethnographers to be open and flexible during the analysis process. It is important that researchers completing an ethnography, “be prepared to modify questions based on what they encounter in the field. Malinowski noted the need to both center on a question and open oneself to what he called the pressures of evidence as ethnographic research proceeds” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 54).

Using interviews as a tool for qualitative data collection helps, “flesh out and amplify important topical areas that may not be explored in sufficient depth or with sufficient insight in naturally occurring online interactions” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 185). Interviews also help determine top priorities for focus during participant observations, in the same way that participant observations help shape the

questions I asked in my interviews. In many cases, “what insiders think newcomers should know about their culture tells us a great deal about what is important to them” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 45).

Interviews conducted on Zoom lasted on average 90 minutes. Each interview was automatically transcribed and recorded, both advantages of conducting the interviews through Zoom. Data collected via online interviews produced data as viable as in-person interviews. As a result, all interviews were held via Zoom except one interview that was conducted by email. In order to cast the widest possible net of participants, we exchanged a few Twitter messages and emails with some specific questions instead of the traditional interview.

After each interview, I dictated anywhere from five to thirty minutes of notes to reflect on the interview and make comments on my observations. I did this in order to document as many elements of the interview as possible, including my own post-interview thoughts. Each participant was given a pseudonym after the interview was concluded for the sake of confidentiality and anonymity. This is both common and appropriate in ethnographic studies (Singer, 2009).

One added advantage of Zoom is that these interviews can easily be recorded and transcribed for in-depth analysis (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). I also made notes during each interview of major themes that emerged or for follow up questions I wanted to ask. After the interview was over, usually the next day, I transcribed the handwritten notes to revisit any themes I may have missed during the interview.

After nine interviews with men, I realized I had to be more strategic in my approach to recruitment in order to attract female NBA 2K players, which helped ensure I had a representative sample of the community. I began targeting female

participants specifically, also using snowball sampling to find female NBA 2K players. Fetterman (2015) explained that finding an entry point into a community and using that person to help navigate new space and identify possible participants is an appropriate method for data collection in this type of ethnographic study. Because the NBA 2K League draft was happening during my recruitment, I was able to access the names of female players, all of whom were streamers who played NBA 2K. Once I identified these women, I began to reach out to them through private message on Twitter to briefly explain the nature of my project and encourage them to participate. Through this process I was able to attract five female NBA 2K streamers to participate.

In total, I conducted seventeen *in depth semi-structured interviews* between December 2020 and April 2021. The interviews lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to over 120 minutes. Each interview was conducted in English via Zoom, except for the one interview that was conducted entirely through email and Twitter correspondence. The in-depth semi structured interview guide illustrating the broad themes of the questions is found in Appendix D.

In-Game Participant Observation

I looked to recruit participants that would allow me to meet them in the online spaces, to let me play NBA 2K with them, against them, and to watch them play others. To be able to play against game users with different game consoles (e.g., XBOX1, Switch, PS4, or PS5), a game needs to have cross platform capabilities. One hurdle in completing the participant observation for this virtual ethnography was the complexities surrounding playing NBA 2K cross-platform. Playing cross-platform means users using different game consoles to play the game together,

which is common in video games more generally, but unfortunately not common in NBA 2K. To play with others on different consoles in NBA 2K is especially complex and therefore uncommon.

Though this is a common feature of contemporary video games more generally, and NBA 2K does have the capacity to play cross platform, it seemed not many people I encountered knew how to play cross platform or played cross platform regularly. As a result, in-game participant observation was limited to study participants who had the same console, and the same year and edition of the game. For example, if someone played NBA 2K on an Xbox, without access to an Xbox myself, I was unable to access that space to observe them. This suggests there are subcultures of NBA 2K players on each unique console. Different game players will have a different experience on different versions of the game. For example, any games before NBA 2K10 did not have online capabilities, so their experiences were reserved to the physical space and playing with those who were in the same physical space.

Five study participants, Michael, Nola, Greg, Brian, and Amanda, all allowed for in-game participation and discussion with the researcher by meeting in The Neighborhood or the City, the virtual world in the game, to hang out, tour around, chat about the game, and of course play the competitive game features of NBA 2K.

All the participant observations were conducted on the PS4 game console and playing NBA 2K21, with the exception of one participant playing on the Nintendo Switch with NBA 2K20.

Game Consumption

Finally, as described above, five study participants are NBA 2K streamers. This highlights an avenue of game consumption that was not originally intended by the game developers. An NBA 2K streamer is someone who enjoys live broadcasting themselves playing NBA 2K to a small or to a large audience. Some NBA 2K streamers are considered famous household names with high-paying sponsorships. An example of a famous NBA 2K streamer that came up during the interview process and is discussed in NBA 2K gaming news is FlightReacts, or just Flight. One study participant, Alana, is a full-time NBA 2K streamer and generates all of her income through her NBA 2K streaming channel.

NBA 2K fans look to these famous streamers for cues about NBA 2K culture and how to play and improve in new editions of the game. The researcher also reviewed old broadcasts and a few live broadcasts of the NBA 2K streamers in this study to best understand how live streaming impacts NBA 2K culture.

Beyond NBA 2K streaming, the NBA has also established an Esports league called the NBA 2K League. This league mirrors the league design of the NBA, including each NBA team having a franchise in the NBA 2K League. NBA 2K players are drafted to different teams around the country, similar to the real NBA, and those drafted train and compete in games with their team, like a real NBA schedule. Esports have become a popular avenue of game consumption beyond just sports video games.

Brief Summary of Methodological Approach

One of the most important tools of analysis in ethnography is the human tool. A researcher's ability to think clearly and critically, to add context to data beyond

each individual piece of data and a researcher's ability to process the information and data are all instrumental tools in the data analysis process (Fetterman, 2015). Geertz (1973) determined that analysis is "sorting out the structures of signification" (p. 314). In qualitative work, it is the role of the researcher, the human tool, to identify those patterns and significant structures.

This study employed a wide variety of qualitative research tools to complete ethnographic work. A central element of any ethnographic field work is being able to identify the cultural artifacts that exist within a culture (Fetterman, 2015). In this study, cultural artifacts ranged from virtual elements of the game, including clothing, shoes, virtual worlds, and other in game representations. These cultural artifacts exist within the game and help to form the overall culture of the game community.

According to Geertz (1973), "analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification" (p. 314). As a result of thick descriptions in the data analysis process, the researcher can create more dynamic and intricate categorizations of patterns or power structures emerging from the data. The more thorough I was with the fieldnotes, the more opportunity there was to identify patterns in this data. This allows the researcher to draw connections between different observations that may otherwise not have been connected. By creating maps, flowcharts, organizational charts, or matrices, a researcher can identify unique patterns. By using Geertz's (1973) concept of thick descriptions, the study examined the different functions and features in NBA 2K. Thick descriptions were important because they allowed me to make observations about the environment in NBA 2K that act as cues for patterns

or structures. As a result of thick description, new concepts and patterns emerge that allow the researcher to consider alternative theoretical findings (Geertz, 1973).

It is important to identify patterns which reach a point of crystallization resulting in some part of the data becoming obvious. Crystallization is when some part of the data becomes obvious or apparent making it clear that all signs point to one answer or one understanding. In many cases, the crystallization process highlights a breakthrough in the data or the research (Fetterman, 2015). Cultural artifacts in many cases are a result of the crystallization of data that draws the researcher to examine certain elements of that culture.

The hurdles for researchers in examining NBA 2K surround the access to the game and the community within it. With my background in production, I was interested in exploring and learning to navigate the game space, and access the NBA 2K culture, most importantly in the game through the online community. This does not negate the fact that NBA 2K culture and community exists outside of the game itself, or in the physical world, but the key to this study, and a successful ethnographic examination of NBA 2K required some video game capabilities.

According to Kozinets (2015), “data are found in archives, co-created, and produced” (p. 175). Fetterman (2015) explained that during data collection it is important for the ethnographer to keep an open mind and to be aware of any potential biases they might bring to the data collection process. When those biases are recognized, Fetterman (2015) encouraged the researcher to write those personal limitations into the research.

Participant observations were limited to study participants who played NBA 2K on either the PS4 or the Nintendo Switch. Because the Nintendo Switch is

marketed to a younger demographic, as a more user-friendly console, paired with the fact this study focused on adults 18 or older, it was no surprise that all the participant observations took place on the PS4.

Though none of the data collection or interviews took place in the physical world, because of the deep connection to NBA culture and basketball more generally, a constant consideration was how the physical world culture impacted the virtual cultures in NBA 2K. It was also important to consider how NBA 2K culture can and does impact the NBA culture or the personal cultures of the study participants and NBA players, more generally, in the physical world.

As a result of the online and multi-modal nature of NBA 2K culture and community, a virtual ethnography was an appropriate qualitative research approach to complete this study. This section of the study has laid an important foundation for the context of this project including the positionality of the researcher, the features and functions of the game itself, and a brief background on the study participants. The following chapter will examine how culture functions within this space, and how NBA 2K fits within the broader scope of NBA and gaming cultures.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

The following section will highlight many significant findings that emerged as a result of the data collection process of this study. The first section will highlight key findings that emerged because of learning to play the game. The next section will discuss the cultural artifacts collected and how those artifacts were used to inform the analysis of this study. The third portion of this chapter will discuss an overview of the semi-structured interviews where data began to highlight emerging themes from NBA 2K players and their experiences. Finally, the chapter outlines key findings that surfaced from the participant observation, new insights, and the emerging data from both the examination of the cultural artifacts and the semi-structured interviews.

Findings

As with any ethnographic study, it is important to understand the boundaries of the NBA 2K community as these boundaries help define the field site. When studying online or virtual communities, those boundaries become blurred because you can no longer rely on geography. For the purposes of this study, the NBA 2K community included anyone who had played NBA 2K in the past, or who were currently playing NBA 2K. The NBA 2K community includes game play both offline and online. Anyone who engaged in NBA 2K on any console since its first release in 1999 could be included in the NBA 2K community.

The NBA 2K community also includes online forums dedicated to NBA 2K discussion boards or NBA 2K fans. It includes social media sites like Twitter,

Instagram, YouTube, and Twitch dedicated to NBA 2K. Use of these sites to familiarize myself with the language, functions, and cultural artifacts important in NBA 2K was significant in setting a proper foundation for this study.

Learning to Play

Before recruiting interview participants, it was important to learn how to play NBA 2K. While learning to play NBA 2K, I learned important language and vocabulary. The key vocabulary that emerged as a part of the game orientation process were The Neighborhood, The City, My Parks, The REC, grinding, NBA 2K League, streaming, build, and VC.

The Neighborhood, The City, and My Parks all described different MUDs within the game. Each term refers to a different MUD from a different version of the game. Though each edition of the game has only one MUD, as the game evolves, newer editions use different names for the MUD like The City (NBA 2K21) or The Neighborhood (NBA 2K20).

In August of 2018, I acquired a PS4 from my younger brother who was on hiatus playing video games after he began home renovations and plans for his wedding the following spring. As a result, I began to try to familiarize myself with the PS4. During this time, I would play other PS4 games like FIFA and Mario and Luigi games because I was more familiar with the concepts and the functions of those games. This gave me the opportunity to become more comfortable on the PS4 console informally, as well as check in and out of NBA 2K19 to familiarize myself with the game.

In the most recent editions of NBA 2K, there are fundamentally two types of ways to play the game. Beyond the many functions and features, an NBA 2K player

can choose to create a MyPLAYER, usually a virtual representation of themselves, where women have to adjust to creating a male player, or NBA 2K players can play as their favorite player and/or team.

After a few months of playing PS4, it appeared the Nintendo Switch was a more user-friendly console, geared toward a younger, less experienced gaming demographic, so I decided to purchase a Switch in December 2019. I purchased NBA 2K20 for the Switch and began keeping a game play journal. This was when I began playing NBA 2K more regularly and got serious about familiarizing myself with the community and the different virtual cultural artifacts in the game. I was now more comfortable with the functions of the console and the features of the game.

As I learned to play NBA 2K it became clear that there were two central functions of the game or two different ways to navigate the game. The two central functions of NBA 2K are to offer game players the chance to experience playing in the NBA as their favorite player, or NBA 2K players can create a unique MyPLAYER to join the MUD to simulate the experience and navigate an NBA career as themselves or as an aspirational character.

When I first began creating my MyPLAYER, like almost everyone else, I wanted him to be as close a representation of me as possible. Since creating a woman was not an option, I figured I should try to create my brother since we are one school year apart. I spent \$20 on two separate occasions to be able to buy some clothes to look “native” to the culture.

PlayNow and MyTEAM

The PlayNow and MyTEAM functions offer opportunities for game players to play as their favorite NBA athlete or team. This function of the game is quick and

can be facilitated by either offline or online play. The PlayNow feature is the quickest avenue to immediate game play and most resembles the original functions of the game. In this feature teams go head-to-head, either single player or two players. PlayNow also requires the least amount of pregame preparation, sometimes time consuming, that is required in some of the other functions of the game.

MyCAREER and MyPLAYER

The MyCAREER that included the MyPLAYER function of the game takes more game management outside of the actual MUD or game competition.

MyCAREER has the most advanced story line, and all game players must create their MyPLAYER, which is the in-game virtual representation. The MyPLAYER builder offers a wide variety of options for physical attributes and aesthetics, so this does require some time to set up and create.

In MyCAREER, game players are able to gather in The Neighborhood, My Parks, or The City in order to play competitive games together or against each other. Game players are able to follow along with the story line of their MyPLAYER entering the NBA, including being drafted to the NBA, and practicing to advance within the game and the story line.

When playing in The Neighborhood or The City online, the MUDS function within NBA 2K, game players are able to play in The REC to play against other game players. The REC, short for recreational, offers game players the opportunity to play with friends against others, using only their MyPLAYER builds. It is while playing in the REC that game players are able to chat with the players on their own team using the party chat, or game players on both their own team and the other team using the game chat.

Cultural Artifacts

The cultural artifacts used for this study included elements of NBA 2K, WNBA, and basketball more generally, especially because of the personal experiences of the researcher within each area, described in the previous chapter. Cultural artifacts identified in the study included different shoes and clothes that the players wore in the games. NBA 2K includes real brands of sneakers such as Nike, Adidas, Jordan Brand, and others, so the clothing choices of the game players informed the study. Cultural artifacts for games like NBA 2K are especially important to consider because the more realistic the virtual artifacts in the game, the stronger the link to the physical NBA culture. This blending of the real and the virtual is one of the main findings of Consalvo et al. (2013).

Other cultural artifacts I examined were different virtual representations of popular NBA spaces like NBA team practice gyms, and replicas of the NBA arenas, and center court logos. This creates the authenticity for the game player to have the sensation of being in the actual arena where the NBA games are played. Fan noise is also part of the experience making the simulation even more authentic.

In NBA 2K, game players can even design and acquire different tattoos in the game. These tattoos also function as cultural artifacts that give important insights and information about the symbolic capital of tattoos, shoes, and clothing to NBA 2K culture. Beyond the cultural artifacts, semi-structure interviews with NBA 2K players offer rich insights to the experiences of game players and the functions of culture and community within the game. The following section will explore the important findings from the discussions with the study participants.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Many important themes emerged as a result of the 17 semi-structured interviews with NBA 2K players. The semi-structured interviews took place with game players who played a variety of different game editions through varying consoles. Because NBA 2K is offered across a variety of consoles, it is important to consider that the experience for each player may vary in some ways through play on different consoles. Game players are able to play NBA 2K on consoles such as the Nintendo Switch, PlayStation, Xbox, and through computer gaming consoles. These are the most popular ways to play NBA 2K. The participants in this study played NBA 2K on the PlayStation consoles and the Xbox consoles. Some of the more active gamers also had a second console. For example, Amanda had both a PlayStation and an Xbox and Brian, who played NBA 2K on his Xbox also had a Switch to play with his girlfriend and other family members.

Recruitment

The first nine NBA 2K players to participate in interviews for this study were men. Male participants jumped at the opportunity to offer their perspectives on the NBA 2K community and culture. Of those first nine interviews, six participants, Stuart, Robbie, Ian, Donovan, Nolan and Greg, all claimed to have never come across a female voice while playing online in NBA 2K. Ian, a White male NBA 2K player from the east coast of Canada said, "I think, in all the years I have played, I've never run into a girl playing NBA 2K. I don't know if it's stereotyped as a man's game or whatever I've just never ran into a girl, middle of the game or anything like that." This reoccurring pattern was an indication that the recruitment process needed to be modified to strategically target women who play NBA 2K.

To ensure more diverse gender representation in recruitment, I identified competitive female NBA 2K players through an online database of women who were eligible to be drafted into the NBA 2K League. This league is the professional esports league that is directly connected to the NBA. Each NBA team has an NBA 2K League franchise and in a similar fashion to the NBA, NBA 2K players become eligible to be drafted to the NBA 2K League through game play and competition. Since it was important to this study to have female representation, this draft database proved to be a valuable link to acquiring female participants.

Insider Language

Through the interview process, a number of language patterns emerged and interview participants began to repeat similar words and phrases, words like “build” or “grinding.” The term “build” means how an NBA 2K player designs their MyPlayer. When you begin to play NBA 2K, building your player is the first thing you are expected to complete in MyPlayer. Build would include such things as skin color, hair color, height, weight, and body build. Grinding means practicing and spending the necessary time to improve the ability and the look of your MyPLAYER. This includes shooting, dribbling, passing, and other skills used in the game. By grinding it out and improving in MyCAREER, game players are able to improve their MyPLAYER and buy other elements like shoes and jerseys.

Study Participants

The NBA 2K community is an appropriate field site particularly due to the global reach of the game and its appeal to such a wide range of participants. The NBA’s popularity has grown worldwide and as such, so has the NBA 2K community. For this study each of the participants offered key insights into their experiences as

NBA 2K game players. The participants in this study were all from North America, meaning that when playing online these players would be connected to an American or Canadian server. All interviews were conducted in English as was any correspondence with the researcher.

Professional Athletes and NBA 2K

Alana, a 29-year-old professional NBA 2K streamer, was first introduced to the game over 10 years ago by her boyfriend and NBA 2K streaming was her primary source of income. Her boyfriend still played casually, but she claimed she beat him regularly. Alana was the only study participant to identify as a professional NBA 2K player and recognized NBA 2K as her primary and sole source of income. The other four women all streamed themselves playing NBA 2K and identified as 2K streamers. This was in part a reflection of the recruitment process for the study. Since the preliminary rounds of recruitment only attracted men, female NBA 2K streamers were identified to offer diverse gender representation among the study participants.

Walter was an American in his mid-20s, and he played professional basketball in Europe. Both his dad and his uncle had long and decorated careers in the NBA. His dad was drafted in the early 1990s to the Phoenix Suns and played for a variety of teams during his 11-year career in the NBA. His uncle, his father's brother, played 14 years in the NBA and also played for multiple teams in the league during that time. Walter had direct proximity and experience with the NBA. Walter considered himself a fan of the NBA but had insights most NBA fans could not. Though all participants declared themselves to be fans of the NBA, Walter grew

up with a dad and uncle playing in the league, which gave him unique and in-depth insights into the NBA culture and how that culture manifests in NBA 2K.

Romeo was in his early- to mid-20s and had just traveled home to Cincinnati after finishing his rookie season in the NFL at the time of his interview. Of the 17 study participants, three were professional athletes: Walter, Romeo, and professional NBA 2K streamer Alana.

NBA 2K Hobbyists

Jeremy had been playing NBA 2K since it was first released over 20 years ago. His experience playing NBA 2K came full circle since he began playing NBA 2K in his childhood but played regularly with his then 11-year-old son. He was also the only study participant to indicate he played NBA 2K with a son or daughter.

Many participants described fond memories of playing with their dad growing up. During their interviews, Robbie, Nora, and C.J. each emphasized the importance of these experiences. In Robbie's case, NBA 2K offered a platform for mutual enjoyment of the Los Angeles Lakers fandom he and his father shared. Robbie, as a man in his early 20s, still played with his dad, who was in his late 40s. When talking about playing with his dad, Robbie expressed a level of nostalgia by playing NBA 2K with his dad using some of the historical Lakers teams. This highlighted the ability of NBA 2K to act as a bridge to familial ties.

Aaron, a male participant from Alabama then in his mid-20s said that most of his memories growing up with his cousins surrounded playing NBA 2K. When he and his cousins were young, they played together in person during family events. As they grew older and moved around the state and to bordering states, he continued to play with five or six of his adult cousins regularly, one or two times a week.

Nolan and Greg were both in their early 20s and both were from California, though they met and became friends in college. They played together regularly. They explained they played NBA 2K at least 4 nights a week together, for roughly 3 to 4 hours at a time. This was an enormous time commitment for two college students who were both actively involved in their school.

Stuart described playing with his younger brother on many different consoles and with a variety of different game versions. Stuart claimed to never having played online as his gaming system lived in Philadelphia with his parents; however, he did play his brother often when he was visiting home. Stuart said his brother was an extremely competitive player but did not stream because he was shy and withdrawn. His little brother would not like the attention that being a streamer would generate. Stuart suggested that NBA 2K offered his brother an opportunity to socialize in non-conventional ways online, through a game he was good at and comfortable playing.

Rita was friendly, accommodating, and kind, but did not want to chat in live time with a face-to-face interview via Zoom. She was not the only participant to express hesitancy for the Zoom interview. At least three or four participants expressed some type of social angst and explained that NBA 2K was a site for them to engage socially in a more comfortable way. As highlighted above, NBA 2K offers dynamic features and functions that allows its game players to cater and customize their individual experiences when playing. This emphasizes the importance of game spaces like NBA 2K to offer new and innovative ways for people to connect.

Nora, a female participant in her early 30s recalled her first experience playing NBA 2K as a child with her older brother. She mentioned a fascination with the game because her older brother often played with his friends. This was long

before the online options were available, so it was a very personal and social experience for her. She described in vivid detail her memories of her brother asking her to play for the first time and she sorely remembers the years it took her to learn the functions of the game to be able to compete with him.

Nora was one of a select few women chosen for the NBA 2K esports league draft. Unfortunately, she was not selected in the 2021 NBA 2K League draft; however, she plans to continue training and preparing to be eligible for the 2022 NBA 2K League draft. She is optimistic that with continued preparation she will be drafted next season.

Nora highly prioritized other women in NBA 2K. She described multiple attempts to create an all-female NBA 2K team but also emphasized the hurdles to maintaining an all-female team. Some of those hurdles were a lack of competitive pool of women to choose from, which meant when they were able to create an all-female team it was hard to be competitive. She also mentioned that competitive female players were committed to other teams that took priority, which meant scheduling practice time and coordinating competitive games became difficult. As highlighted above, fandom plays a key role in most NBA 2K players experience. As a result, the following section discusses the relationship between the game players and their connection to their favorite teams.

NBA/WNBA Fandom

There is an obvious link between NBA 2K players and NBA and WNBA fandom. Jeremy, an NBA 2K player in his late 30s, said, “2K is a reflection of the real NBA,” which in this case meant including the pattern of behavior and use of

language. Nearly all the participants were happy to talk about their engagement in fandom of their favorite teams.

Rita described herself as a Miami Heat fan. Her favorite player was James Harden who was not a member of the Miami Heat but a member of the Brooklyn Nets at that time. Rita was able to play NBA 2K using her favorite player, Harden, as a member of her favorite team, the Miami Heat, using the unique MyPlayer features to recreate the total NBA experience with the MyCareer features of the game. This highlighted the ability of the game player to create the experience they wanted for themselves.

Aaron was quick to express his love of his favorite player, LeBron James. According to Aaron he believed he was the biggest LeBron fan on earth. Robbie also believed that he was the biggest LeBron James fan on earth. Aaron's allegiance to LeBron grew over the years because of his love for the Los Angeles Lakers. LeBron James was a very popular player who many participants wanted to use as their game player at the time of this study.

In recent years, as NBA 2K has incorporated features of the WNBA, Jeremy used the WNBA features to educate his son on the female athletes in the league. Jeremy explained:

2K is a way of expressing my connection to NBA basketball. I'm also a big WNBA fan, so when they started integrating the WNBA into it that was a huge bonus for me because then I could like, see the WNBA players. I like [?] in an NBA game I get to use those teams and try and get my son to connect with the WNBA in a different way.

He explained that from his perspective, “the WNBA is a subsidiary of the NBA because the patriarchy is so pervasive that the financing of a women’s sports league to pay athletes, what they are actually deserving of it just doesn’t exist in the United States.” Jeremy and Walter were the only two participants in the study to mention they attended a WNBA game in person, though a few others did say they were at least passive fans of the WNBA, consuming WNBA content mostly through social media.

Jeremy estimated that the WNBA features in NBA 2K exposed his son to the female athletes and players within the WNBA. A self-proclaimed WNBA fan, Jeremy said:

I think [my son] definitely understands more about the WNBA as a league because of the 2K game. I get to show it to him. I think when we were living in Phoenix, we went to like two Suns games and a Mercury game, and he enjoyed all of those. I think just being able to show him like, here are the different teams and conferences and apply the best player on each team and the WNBA.

Jeremy encouraged his son to engage with the WNBA at a high level, including regularly playing the WNBA features of NBA 2K with his son. Jeremy’s only complaint about the addition of WNBA into NBA 2K was: “I just wish there were more features of the WNBA game or like more WNBA exclusive features.” When discussing the WNBA features with his son, Jeremy said, “Okay, here’s the WNBA version. Here’s Diana Taurasi. Taurasi can shoot from anywhere, too, right? So, you could be the Mercury, or something like that. So, I think that was a cool addition that I really liked.”

A common theme among NBA 2K players who participated in the WNBA 2K functions was that it fostered and deepened their connection to the WNBA athletes, a reoccurring feature of the NBA functions of NBA 2K. Walter, like Jeremy, was encouraged by the preliminary inclusion of WNBA features and functions. He explained:

I played a couple of WNBA games and I think it's a pretty cool feature because you know I've watched as a basketball fan. I've watched a lot of these really good players in the WNBA growing up like you know like Candace Parker, and Brittney Griner players like that. So, to actually play with them in the video game and dominate, I thought that was pretty cool.

When other game players were asked about their interest in the WNBA feature, participants like Romeo admitted to never having actually played using the female athletes. He did highlight the importance of including WNBA players for the female NBA 2K players but showed no interest himself. He explained,

It's a cool feature, especially for people like, if you will play with your sister like you can play with women actually in a video game like it's cool, it's great, it's encompassing. But I don't think it's like. . . . I wouldn't buy it if it weren't in it.

Donovan and Nolan, two male NBA 2K players, described several female cousins that played and competed at basketball at a high level and recognized how the inclusion of the WNBA athletes in NBA 2K could accommodate their female family members who were passionate about basketball. Donovan embraced the idea that the WNBA features in NBA 2K could offer him insights into the WNBA that he did not have without the opportunities in the game.

Donovan explained that though he has never actually played with the WNBA features in the game, he would be drawn to them in future games, especially if he was able to create a female MyPLAYER. He explained,

By moving away from an avatar [MyPLAYER] that's just an iteration of myself and into an avatar of a woman, what does the progression and career of a woman trying to go into the WNBA look like? . . . I would find that really interesting and intriguing and just see about like even probably changed my perspective on the real WNBA, that it's a profession.

Walter explained how NBA 2K can be on the cutting edge of inclusiveness when he explained "I'm all for the movement, the women's movement and sports, so see them as 2K I think that was, you know, pretty big step in the gaming community, especially for girl players who enjoy 2K and now they can." Traditionally, sports have treated women and girls as second-class citizens. When it comes to equal pay and resources, the lack of support for women has been at the forefront of the conversation in sports. Walter expressed that by simply including a female MyPLAYER, NBA 2K can continue to be at the front edge of the movement.

This was a similar reaction to other study participants who recognized the importance and value of including the WNBA functions for the sake of representation, but that it did not necessarily appeal to them enough to play the WNBA features. Nolan explained:

I think one thing I could say, which I thought was kind of weird was that you get achievements in games, and one of the achievements is to just played a WNBA game. Because I do support some of the teams, especially since some of my cousins grew up playing basketball. Girls like basketball and they're

big fans of it . . . it's an achievement at the end of the WNBA game. I looked it up and only 2% of the people get the award which is to just play a game. . . . It's actually just play the game.

When playing as a male player, an achievement could score 100 points in a game or get a triple double statistic line in a game. When examining the WNBA features, the achievement is issued for simply playing the game yet only 2% of users inevitably achieve it. This was consistent with my interviews, where more than half of the participants admitted to never having played the WNBA features in the game.

This suggested that although the WNBA has been included in NBA 2K, and game developers are making efforts to entice players to engage in the WNBA features, they have still been unable to offer WNBA features in a way that really appeals to game players. The most popular feature of the newest renditions of the game are the MyPLAYER feature. Therefore, the following section discusses the MyPLAYER feature in detail, including the lack of female MyPLAYER options.

MyPLAYER

The relationship between the identity of NBA 2K game players and their MyPLAYER or the MyPLAYER of their friends warrants examination because their MyPLAYER is their virtual representation. In some ways the interview participants described their MyPLAYER as their aspirational self, and in others, some NBA 2K players designed their MyPLAYER to be similar to themselves.

Jeremy was a self-described half Jamaican, half Japanese American man. He was 6'7, the approximate average height of an NBA player in 2021. As a result, he could create his MyPlayer that was a mirror image of himself.

NBA 2K has one of the most sophisticated MyPLAYER build creators in all of video games, not just sports video games. Since traditionally video games have catered to a white straight male center, NBA 2K does offer opportunity for more men who haven't been represented in the game to be able to create those representations of themselves.

Leonard (2003) established that many White sports video game players desire to occupy virtual Black bodies because manifested stereotypes “of strength, athleticism, power, and sexual potency all play out with the virtual reality of sports games” (p. 2). At least three of the White participants in this study regularly created a Black MyPLAYER to grind out their MyCAREER.

At the same time, NBA 2K offers Black video game players an opportunity to break from the White-centered video games space to occupy virtual representations of heroes that look and sound like they do. Because the NBA and the WNBA are made up of predominantly Black athletes, games like NBA 2K or NFL Madden football, offer sports video game players opportunities to consume video games with heroes that look and sound like they do. According to Consalvo et al. (2013), sports video games are one of the only genres of video game with minority leading characters.

C.J., a female participant, explained the complicated relationship between race in NBA 2K:

I haven't personally noticed it myself but like I said reading on Reddit, every couple of weeks there is a post that's like reverse racism is real. People won't pass the ball to White players and shit like that. I can never identify a time where I've been iced out of a game because I had a White MyPLAYER. But I

have been like iced out of games, so I don't know if it's because MyPLAYER is White. I don't really know how else race would fit into it but yeah, some people seem to think that they get the ball less when they're a White MyPLAYER.

As a result, in NBA 2K, Blackness represents a form of social capital. In many ways, what C.J. was highlighting through this passage was the inherent connection between Blackness, athleticism, and therefore, ability within the NBA 2K space.

When explaining her conflicts with creating the right MyPLAYER, C.J. explained,

I don't know if it's a thing or not, like, actually, but I've read on Reddit, that like some people have problems like if you make a MyPLAYER that's not the color that you are, which, like for me I'm a woman and there are no women MyPLAYER so I feel like it shouldn't matter one way or another.

This perfectly encompasses both the strengths and the weaknesses of the MyPLAYER function in NBA 2K. By offering game players an opportunity to create a sophisticated virtual representation, limiting that creation in one very specific way, to not be able to create a woman reinforces that being a man has social capital in this space.

When asked what she thought about when she made her MyPLAYER, Rita said, "I like to make it in the likeness of me, being my skin complexion is something I am very aware of. My favorite feature? Beard, has to have a beard. I start off with the baby face, further into the season he goes full James Harden." Here Rita highlighted a cultural artifact from the NBA, James Harden's beard, but it also

highlighted her awareness of wanting to create a MyPLAYER with her same skin complexion.

When asked if other gamers ever comment on her MyPLAYER build, Rita said, “[other NBA 2K players] think I am a guy. I do that purposely to avoid being disrespected by the guys in the REC.” She continued by saying, “sadly, I prefer that the guys think I’m one of them. I’m sensitive and would rather not go through the BS of name calling, yelling, and ball hogging. I know me and my temper, I would see red and would rather not feed that type of environment. I just want to have fun.” Rita would rather avoid the conflict with male participants that may result if identified as a woman. She made sure that her MyPlayer build was such that no one questioned her sexuality.

Though NBA 2K has begun incorporating WNBA players and teams, they have yet to offer a MyPLAYER function to create a female build. Donovan described this best when he said:

I’ve only seen exclusively male avatars. On the court I don’t recall even when you’re being drafted and stuff, you’re not given that option. So, I think it’s interesting that it creates a baseline expectation where everybody that I’m playing with is male, right?

I don’t think like I’ve put a lot of conscious thought into data that the avatar might be male but it might be a female playing, you know that in real life, you know. I think it’s skewed things in that sense of just like if you don’t actually take a moment to reflect on the limitations of the game, then it might be easy to assume only 100% of men are playing this game.

And again, I think it's part of that, like because I just haven't heard a lot of cross talk and people talking. I've never been in a situation in which there was you know, verbally somebody who sounds like a female or who is identifying as a female, on the other end that is sort of engaging or interacting so, I don't know that I can answer that question.

As a result, this baseline idea that the space is designed for men creates hurdles for women who want to participate in this space. Jeremy described what he called his

privilege of me being able to take up and play this simulation game versus like my friend. She's a huge NBA fan. Probably the most die-hard Jazz fan in our fantasy basketball league. She drafts nothing but Jazz players every year. She played video games all the time like we play video games online. We play shooting games. She hasn't played 2K. . . . She has not picked up 2K because she can't be herself in the game. I've never really thought about that. And I've never had to think about that because I just get to be me.

Michael, a 35-year-old, father of two, said:

Game developers should probably incorporate the WNBA a little better. I find I don't even go to it. Maybe they should mix it in with the men's stuff and then you can play like women and guys and girls, at the same time. That'd be pretty cool. It's sad to say, but I never really go to the WNBA part. Just mix it all together, maybe, and then maybe get more publicity for that side.

This means that Michael recognized the importance of the inclusion of the WNBA features and athletes, yet still felt drawn to the functions and the features offered in the NBA threads of the game.

NBA 2K has announced the creation of MyPLAYER for women and it would seem that more people want more and more of this. Women are ready to help other women participants. The NBA 2K draft list helped in recruiting participants but highlighted a big problem. Despite the WNBA influence, when interviewing the NBA 2K streamers it was obvious the hurdles that are in place for women to be successful in NBA 2K professionally in both Esports and streaming.

Though NBA 2K has made progress in recent years by incorporating more WNBA athletes into the game, game players reported a hostile and toxic environment, especially for women in the game chat. The following sections highlight some of the important data that arose from the participants' interviews specific to the ongoing toxic behavior toward women in NBA 2K.

Toxicity of Game Chat

Gray (2014) stated that one reason game players engage in MUDS is to cause havoc in the virtual world and towards other game players. This theme was reinforced by discussions with NBA 2K players, as clearly the chat functions have created a toxic environment for women who play NBA 2K. Ian, a male NBA 2K player in his late 20s, explained, "it's almost as if they turn into a group of construction workers from the 80s, so that's what I meant when I talk about the locker room and it's almost like this girl has to come into this male locker room [when playing NBA 2K]." Greg reinforced this idea when he said that NBA 2K was built by men for men, and even included the skill set and the clothing the game designs as examples of who the game is designed for. When asked about the functions of gender in NBA 2K, Greg said:

We're playing against the other men in the game a lot and I think that's the audience is really like just teenagers and 20-year-olds that are men that play the game because of kind of just how the game is built around that very aspect.

According to Cote (2017), game culture has developed into a toxic culture that reinforces negative social norms and patterns that exist in physical space. As a result, bad in-game behavior goes unpunished, reinforcing notions of helplessness and frustration (Ortiz, 2019A). The systems that do exist are ineffective and underused. These systems also place the onus on victims to report the bad behavior exhibited by other game users (Gray, 2014). Amanda explained:

I've been told to kill myself by my own team mates, like people on my own team, and I don't know if it's because I'm a woman or I don't know what it was on that particular day but, it's been it's some pretty nasty stuff so I always mute, and I never, I just NEVER go on the mic, because it's not worth it, even if like one out of 100 times there's like a really nice person. It's just, it's not [sic] doesn't make it worth it.

Describing a similar experience, Alana explained,

I'm being called the B-word. One game I was told that I shouldn't be on the game I should be in the kitchen. . . . I mean I guess it comes with the territory because I'm a female you know what I'm saying. That's why I try to stay out of the game chat. At first, it used to bother me and stuff but like I said I just am in the party chat, because it can get really toxic [in the game chat].

Because Walter lived half of the year in Europe while playing professional basketball, he experienced playing on both American and European servers. He explained the toxicity is worse on American servers but that it existed when he played on European servers as well. This element of game chat toxicity seemed to be a 'given' within the NBA 2K space.

Rita talked about how she managed harassment online when she said, "It's on a mass scale, PlayStation has the same problem with racist and misogynistic players. You just have to do your best with reporting what you can or developing a thick skin." Coping strategies for people of color who face racist abuse online included many different tools. Ortiz (2019B) explained that game players resort to hardening themselves to the impacts of the abuse experienced online.

Amanda, C.J., and Rita, all described different times they tried to change their voices in the game chat in order to not be identified as a woman. This tool was something female game players repeated throughout the interview process. They highlighted one coping mechanism to avoid online harassment and toxicity in the game chat. After facing on-going abuse in the game chat, all the female NBA 2K players except Nora opted to remove themselves completely from the game chat. In many cases, when disguising their voices did not work, the female game players opted out of the game chat. Finally, a male counterpart or ally could help lessen the online abuse. In many cases, a male ally acted as a shield from the online harassment, helping female NBA 2K players navigate themselves in the game chat more easily, with less verbal abuse.

Participant Observation

Nolan and Greg allowed me to play with them on a few different occasions. This offered a new dimension to the participant observation, the dynamic between good friends playing competitively in NBA 2K. Their interactions were playful yet competitive. Before agreeing to meet up with me to play together, they had some extremely specific and thorough recommendations about what I should do to prepare to play with them. It was obvious how important the game and being good at the game was to both Nolan and Greg.

Before I was able to play with them, they suggested I spent money to improve my overall rating of my MyPLAYER. This meant they were concerned about how competitive the three of us could be during the participant observations. I appreciated this, as their intent was to make this experience as real as possible. Not only did they ask me to improve MyPLAYER using real money (they suggested between \$20–\$50 USD), they also suggested a very specific training regime that included participating in team practices in the game before we could schedule the participant observations. They asked me to aim for an overall MyPLAYER rating of 80 so we could play together. For the sake of timing, I had to ask them to allow me to do participation with an overall MyPLAYER rating of 78.

Both Nolan and Greg considered themselves the type of NBA 2K players who “grind it out.” When asked if they spent real world money in the game, they both first emphatically declined ever having spent money to purchase virtual artifacts like shoes and clothes, or to improve their overall rating of their MyPLAYER.

As I continued to engage Nolan and Greg in the participant observations, Greg actually admitted to once spending \$10 to improve his MyPLAYER in order to

compete with Nolan at their next scheduled gaming session. Greg was ashamed that he had paid to improve his player and asked me not to tell Nolan that he had done it. He explained it happened at a time when he did not have as much free time to grind out in MyCAREER, so in order to “catch up” to Nolan’s progress, he succumbed to temptation and purchased attributes.

While playing with Amanda, we decided to only use the party chat, which means only the people on your team can hear each other. The chat function does not include random game players or players from the other team. This offered us opportunity to chat informally and get to know each other.

We joked about the game but chatted about other elements of her experience as a woman playing NBA 2K, especially as a streamer. When I asked her to join the game chat and engage the other online users she refused. Amanda explained she needed to be mentally prepared to enter the game chat as she knew she would likely be targeted with negative comments and abusive language when the other game players recognized her female voice. I tried to reassure her and explain that she did not need to engage the players and that I was fine with whatever abuse that I might experience, but she would only agree to participate in the game chat the next time we played.

Unfortunately, although I followed up on multiple occasions to play again, Amanda was no longer available to play together. I believe this was as a result of her stress and anxiety associated with participating in the game chat.

When Amanda does play online, she streams with a viewership of roughly 10 to 15 people for each live stream. She says when playing she apologizes a lot. I noticed this while playing with her. When I asked about it, she said she feels bad if

she is “letting people down” or “wasting people’s time.” She apologized a lot to me while we played too. She was doing me a favor by allowing me to play with her, but it was easy to tell, she felt pressure to perform.

This section has highlighted key findings that emerged as a result of learning to play, the examination of cultural artifacts, semi-structured interviews, and participant observations. It was critical to the research that I could at least participate to some level in the NBA 2K game. That allowed me to describe the terminology within the game such as MyPlayer and MyTeam as well as game format. The following section will offer insights and analysis of cultural patterns and themes that emerged from the data findings.

Analysis

NBA 2K emerges as an important site for examination because NBA 2K acts as an intermediary for so many elements of existing cultures, such as professional sports, the NBA and WNBA, and sports gaming culture more generally. As a result of technological hurdles for researchers, NBA 2K has gone unexamined, though it does offer important insights into the large population of NBA fans, WNBA fans, basketball fans, and the global NBA 2K community. The following section will draw on important findings from the ethnographic study to analyze the data using the theoretical framework described in Chapter 4. First, this section will operationalize the key moments and articulations of the circuit of culture to determine how the insights from the examination of cultural artifacts, interviews, and participant observations helped inform how culture functions within the game. I offer an overview of each moment, focusing on four specifically: production, representation, identity, and consumption with a brief description of the social regulations that were

found in the game (du Gay et al., 1997). Beyond the circuit of culture, this analysis will then consider the fields of cultural production to discuss how the Internet and online features, including pay for play functions, have created different fields within sports video games (Bourdieu, 1993).

A key to ethnographic work is being able to identify how social interactions are regulated within any given community (Giese & Kauffman, 2001). Key functions NBA 2K include the ability to connect people, fans, family members, and athletes. Social function is a key component and successful game play relies on comradery and interaction between participants. The following section will discuss how social interactions govern NBA 2K and create unequal opportunity for NBA 2K players who identify differently than the targeted market for the game. To begin the conversation relating to the functions of culture, it is important to consider and reinforce why NBA 2K acts as an ethnographic museum.

When examining the functions of culture, NBA 2K acts as an ethnographic museum. Every year NBA 2K developers aim to encompass the essence of the league and its players within the game. As a result, each NBA 2K edition offers a glimpse into the culture of the league at the time of the game release. As technology has advanced, NBA 2K developers are more equipped and better able to encapsulate the “realness” of the NBA.

Circuit of Culture, Key Moments, and Articulations

As highlighted in the theoretical framework chapter of this dissertation, the moments of the circuit of culture help researchers understand how culture functions in relationship to cultural artifacts. First, when considering the production of NBA 2K, it is important to consider the cultural artifacts embedded in the game, many of

which are depicted from real NBA cultural artifacts, as discussed in previous chapters. In NBA 2K, cultural artifacts help combine the virtual and the real in ways that other fantasy games do not. As Consalvo et al. (2013) showed, one key feature for sports video games players is the games' ability to blend the real and the virtual.

Culture within the NBA 2K community extends beyond the bounds of the game itself and is integrated into the overall culture of the NBA more generally, including when NBA players engage with NBA 2K. NBA 2K culture includes the NBA players that talk about their NBA 2K ratings to the media or through their social media.

Beyond the virtual cultural artifacts, it is equally important to examine the physical cultural artifacts that are found with the NBA 2K communities. These artifacts include the gaming consoles like Nintendo Switch, computer gaming systems, Xbox and PlayStation that offer game players opportunities to play NBA 2K.

During the interview with Romeo, he talked about the importance of his MyPLAYER look and how much he enjoyed acquiring clothing within the MyCAREER function for use in the MUD. He explained that he used real money to acquire high demand shoes and clothing. He said that if he was not able to access limited sneakers, the next best thing was to access the artifacts with his MyPLAYER in The Neighborhood. In this sense, NBA 2K clothing becomes an extension of Romeo's physical closet and the blending of virtual and real becomes even more pervasive.

This also highlights the ability of cultural artifacts, even virtual ones, to act as both symbolic and cultural capital. To acquire shoes, clothes, or tattoos in the game, a player must either spend a lot of time “grinding” or pay real-world money to purchase virtual money in the game. Not only is NBA 2K designed to create and recreate cultural artifacts that represent NBA culture in the virtual space; NBA 2K also acts as a vehicle for social interactions and communications. Many of the participants found playing NBA 2K to be a bonding activity, for university friends, father and son, brother and little brother, girlfriend and boyfriend. Amanda highlighted her desire to create long lasting friendships online, similar to Rita, who highly prioritized using NBA 2K to create new friendships.

There was a reoccurring theme among NBA 2K players that suggested there are strong familial connections to NBA 2K as well. A clear pattern from the NBA 2K players in this study was the idea that the majority of participants in this study play NBA 2K with a family member or were originally introduced to NBA 2K by a family member. NBA 2K like other popular games, acts as a facilitator to social interactions among friends and family. More than two thirds of the participants in the study expressed that they played NBA 2K with family members or their significant other usually in relationship to fandom. This is consistent with the findings of Stein et al. (2012) who determined that sports video games offer friends and families games that challenge their skills and abilities, creating a friendly but also sometimes toxic competition.

Almost every participant in the study was introduced to NBA 2K through a family member. This connection to family was closely linked to fandom as NBA 2K offered family an opportunity to engage in fandom using video games. All of the

experiences described by study participants engaging in NBA 2K with family members brought on positive reactions and cherished memories. This was an unanticipated finding of the study and presents opportunities for sports marketers to examine the intersection between the familial connection of sports fandom and sports video games.

In 2009, when NBA 2K began producing online features and functions, this created opportunities for NBA 2K players to connect in ways they were never able to before. Within a few years of going online, NBA 2K began producing MUDs in the game that required an avatar. It was at this point that NBA 2K shifted its production to accommodating two different types of game play, either as your favorite player or team, or online in the MUDS as your own created avatar, which later became MyPLAYER.

The incorporation of online play in NBA 2K changed how game players were able to connect and engage each other, which changed the landscape of the game. Examining how game players act in their offline lives, or specifically their offline play will be different from how those same players engage online. Unfortunately, as the game advanced in important ways, an alarming and reoccurring social theme emerged: the toxicity of the game chat.

Toxicity of the Game Chat

Women and girls are met with sexist and sometimes racist language in the game chat; therefore, women and girls often remove themselves entirely from game chat. This limits their ability to create meaningful relationships and connections in-game, which creates hurdles for women and girls to be successful in Esports or other professional NBA 2K opportunities.

The game chat in NBA 2K is especially important for competition and success because in basketball more generally the game relies on chemistry and awareness of teammates. Any basketball coach you ask would agree that a fundamental element of game play is communication.

In basketball, communication encourages chemistry and comradery. In NBA 2K, the game chat can have the same impact. Communicating with teammates can help game players make adjustments on the fly and give each other indications about where they want each other to be located on the floor.

Amanda, a female participant who had been playing NBA 2K online for just over a year and had been streaming for about a month at the time of the interview, explained, “first it’s so toxic whether you’re a male or female, it’s toxic, and I think I’m not part of many online communities but I’ve heard that 2K is like one of the worst for just like toxicity like that.” Based on the responses from the participants in this study, in many cases, NBA 2K players will exit the game when they realize there was a girl competing against them in the game. Thought of as an easy mark, the virtual presence of a woman alone was enough to offend members of the NBA 2K community. When all players did agree to continue and play together, most of the game chat was focused on the female voice and verbal insults were inevitable.

All participants in this study made it explicitly clear that game chat is a toxic environment for women. As a result, the female participants in this study generally did not engage in the game chat when they played NBA 2K. Amanda described a “crippling” fear of participating in the game chat. When pressed to join the game chat during one of our gaming sessions, she made it very clear that she wanted to

protect her mental health and opted out of participating with me in the game chat function.

During our game session, Amanda explained she needs “at least a few weeks” to mentally prepare to enter the NBA 2K game chat. Weeks later, when I invited her to play again, this time with plans to play with the game chat activated, she canceled at the last minute, explaining she was having high levels of anxiety and it was not a good day for her to play. We did not play together again. Most participants, both male and female NBA 2K players, repeated this. Even before a female participant was identified for this study, the male participants highlighted how toxic the environment can be for women and girls.

Identity in NBA 2K

Another key moment in the circuit of culture that offers important insight into this study is the moment of identity. For the purposes of this study, identity is most closely aligned with an NBA 2K player’s physical identity. According to Giese and Kauffman (2001), “our bodily existence stands at the forefront of personal identity and individuality. Both law and morality recognize the physical body as something of a fence, an absolute boundary, establishing and protecting our privacy. Now, the computer network simply brackets the physical presence of the participants, either by omitting or by stimulating corporeal immediacy” (p. 74). This definition helped researchers navigate questions of race and gender in relation to how culture functions in NBA 2K.

When I began this project, I was especially interested in the fact that NBA 2K offered game player opportunities to adopt and “try on” different races through the MyPLAYER option. The goal was to better understand how NBA 2K players use

these functions and what their MyPLAYER builds may tell us about their connection between their personal identity and their online representation. When discussing race swapping online and its relationship to gender swapping online Jeremy said, “gender swapping is okay. I don’t see a problem with that, to me that doesn’t trigger anything at all. If you had men playing as women online, in MyCAREER and if they were able to like be drafted in the same way, like I create a female avatar in MyPLAYER mode to go into the NBA.”

As I began discussion with game players, ideas about race were somewhat illusive. Some participants dismissed questions about the functions of race in NBA 2K and claimed that race played no role in how they acted in NBA 2K. Others thought NBA 2K offered a unique opportunity for a variety of game players to be represented in the space. At first glance, knowing that game players are able to create MyPLAYER builds however they saw fit, I started to wonder if skin tone became a sense of symbolic or cultural capital in NBA 2K. Though this data does suggest that some game players associate skin tone and virtual representation as symbolic capital, it is clear that the real symbolic capital exists for men in NBA 2K.

The women in this study, although they enjoy playing NBA 2K, came across as too timid to interact in the full capacity of the game. For the most part they turned their mics off and although they played the games, they preferred not to be in the chat rooms or to identify as a woman for fear of being bullied or called names.

Like many other genres of video games, traditionally, sports video games have excluded women and girls. When women have been present in sports video games, they occupy stereotypical and hypersexualized roles (Leonard, 2003). NBA 2K is one of the first sports video games to make a substantial effort to incorporate

female athletes beyond the stereotypical portrayal common in contemporary sports video games.

Interestingly, though, many of the male participants liked the fact that the WNBA is being incorporated into the games. Some were fans of the WNBA and some felt it was a way to include family members and friends that were female. Concerns were expressed over the fact that the female participants were unable to create Avatars that represented the potential female participants.

Fandom is also a key element of identity that is important to the examination in NBA 2K culture.

NBA Fandom

All study participants identified themselves as fans of basketball and all but one participant considered themselves an active fan of the NBA. Nora, the one study participant who did not describe herself as an NBA fan, actually was a fan of the NBA, but was unfamiliar with the events of the NBA this season. When asked if she had ever been a fan of the NBA, she offered multiple memories of watching NBA games with her dad while growing up.

Though most study participants did play other video games, a few participants explained they either exclusively play NBA 2K or they exclusively play sports video games. This means that NBA 2K players are most likely to consider themselves NBA fans but not necessarily “gamers” who engage in other genres of video games at a high level.

NBA 2K players show their NBA fandom in a variety of ways, including wearing NBA jerseys in Neighborhood, when they have unlimited options for other clothing items. NBA 2K players demonstrate their NBA fandom in the physical

world by supporting their teams through merchandise purchases and attending games in person.

As NBA 2K has evolved, the game has incorporated specific player movements associated with NBA superstars like LeBron James or Stephen Curry and allows game players to adopt those movements for their own MyPLAYER. As a result, NBA 2K players also demonstrate their NBA fandom through their knowledge of the players in the league. NBA 2K players who are aware of the daily events of the NBA are able to use that knowledge to engage the game and compete within the gaming space.

NBA IQ is also important to gamers as they use their NBA knowledge and overall basketball IQ to get competitive advantages in the game. This was a consistent theme that emerged during the research as participants worked to be able to find an edge against their opponents. Certain players mirror the skills of their NBA counterpart and selecting a competitive team becomes very important to game play.

WNBA Fandom

In many cases, when asked about the inclusion of the WNBA into NBA 2K, male study participants would use female family members as validation for why it was a great feature in the new games. Male study participants referenced female cousins who played basketball either at a high level, or younger female family members who would play the WNBA features.

NBA 2K becomes a vehicle for NBA 2K players to access the WNBA culture and community, while also influencing elements of the NBA 2K community. In this sense, the WNBA acts as a tool for educating people and NBA 2K players about the

WNBA, its teams, and its athletes. Michael admitted that being able to play in the WNBA features in NBA 2K has changed his perspective on the WNBA and admits that the inclusion of the WNBA into NBA 2K helps cement the professionalism of that league. Though nearly all the study participants emphasized the importance of including the WNBA in NBA 2K for the sake of representation, only a few of the study participants had actually played the WNBA functions. This underscores the importance of the next key moment in the circuit of culture, representation.

Representation in NBA 2K

NBA 2K culture is robust and the community is global. The game's cutting-edge technology sets the bar for sports video games and as a result offers the game's developers unique opportunities to incorporate all different types of sports video game players, including women who want to see themselves represented in the game. The MyPLAYER function of NBA 2K is where game players are able to design their own in-game player that will act as their virtual representation in the online community. Many participants in the study struggled with the conceptualization of their MyPLAYER as both a virtual representation of themselves living out their fantasy of being drafted to the NBA, or a total fantasy that left room for participants to deviate from their own identity. The MyPLAYER feature in NBA 2K is one of the most advanced in video games, as is evident from the variety of customizable options during the MyPLAYER creation process. MyPLAYER is definitely the most sophisticated avatar generator in sports video games, which means NBA 2K provides valuable insights into the complex relationship between offline and physical identity in relation to a player's online and virtual choice in representation.

Study participants were torn about whether the idea of racial voyeurism within the game was problematic. Some thought it was a natural and obvious advantage of the game. Others suggested a discomfort in the idea of racial sharing and adopting different races in online space. Jeremy was emphatic when he explained the idea of trying different races on in NBA 2K made him uncomfortable.

Not only does it offer game players an opportunity to represent themselves in a variety of ways; NBA 2K offers people of color, especially Black men video game players the opportunity to consume heroes that look like they do. It offers White game players, by contrast, the opportunity to consume Black virtual representations and “try other races on.” NBA 2K has also made strides in representation of women in NBA 2K by adding WNBA features into more recent versions of the game in NBA 2K20 and NBA 2K21.

MyPLAYER Scale

The ways in which game players made decisions about their MyPLAYER build varied from participant to participant. On one end, you had NBA 2K players like Jeremy who did everything in his power to create a MyPLAYER that looked and played like he did. This is consistent with the findings of Stein et al. (2012) who determined that 95% of people created a playable character of themselves.

Robbie, however, used the MyPLAYER function as an opportunity to create an aspirational, Black, MyPLAYER to engage with others in the game. Outside of the virtual representation of the MyPLAYER function in NBA 2K, players use insider language to represent themselves with the game chat. The following section will discuss how language informs a game player’s representation in NBA 2K.

Language in NBA 2K

The language the game players use within the space creates a level of habitus and insider language. Words like “grinding” are especially significant to the NBA 2K community. The concept of grinding mean spending the time you need to improve your overall player score. Players describe the long process of establishing themselves within the community as the grind. Other players skip the grind altogether by spending money on improving their overall player rating.

As highlighted by the example of Nolan and Greg in the findings section, players appear to associate grinding as the “real” or “authentic” way to play the game. Grinding it out in *The Neighborhood* is a badge of honor within the community. Someone who pays real world money to improve their ability and look in the game is someone who has “avoided the grind” or sped up the achievement process. And although it is not evident to other players in the game, spending money on attributes creates an asterisk on a person’s account or ability. Different fields are created in the game by those who pay real money to acquire virtual currency that helps them advance in the game, buy different virtual gear like shoes and clothes or tattoos, and also helps them improve their overall rating of their MyPLAYER.

This language is especially important and if you play NBA 2K often, you are aware of the habitus and the language of the space. The language, especially the toxic language described above is one of the downsides of the online social functions. As NBA 2K’s MUDS became more sophisticated, it seems not many successful efforts have been made by game developers to improve the experiences in those spaces. As a result, informal social regulations have emerged.

Regulation of Social Spaces in NBA 2K

The social power of NBA 2K was highlighted by Romeo, who himself is a professional athlete, yet still expressed his love for NBA 2K as it allowed him to live out a childhood dream of being drafted to the NBA. There were virtual experiences he was afforded in NBA 2K that he still could not access in his physical life. NBA 2K, especially the MUDS, The Neighborhood, The City, and My Parks, represents a new and important site of media convergence that warrants thorough examination.

The overarching power structures that exist in NBA 2K are reflective of those found in many online communities. Hegemonic masculinity is pervasive. This comes as no real surprise, as hegemonic masculinity is common in both video games spaces and sports spaces. Still, examples of hegemonic masculinity were replete throughout the game both from the perspective of embedded game content and from the user generated content of the game players within the game.

An obvious social pattern that emerged throughout this study is the NBA 2K community has all but ignored women and girls and does little to protect them in the online environment. It is important to examine these themes. While in many cases online cultural violence does not lead to real life violence, reinforcing the racial and gendered hierarchy creates a legitimization of those same opinions in the physical world (Gray, 2020).

In many ways, NBA 2K community was separate from physical life, in that women did not exist within the bounds of the community. In some interviews, women, girls, or the WNBA features did not come up at all. Women could participate but only as a male character. This reinforces patterns in the traditional NBA and professional sports more generally.

No women who play NBA 2K strictly as a hobby participated in this study. This is a result of strategic recruitment to identify female NBA 2K players, but all female participants in this study played competitively and streamed themselves playing. It seems this is reflective of the disconnect women feel to the NBA 2K community and space as a result of being outcast in a variety of ways. As such, female NBA 2K players may not immediately identify as an NBA 2K gamer and were less likely to make themselves available to discuss their experiences.

Mental Health

Amanda and I clicked from the first few minutes of our interview. We had a lot in common. We were about the same age, and our conversations flowed very naturally. We played together a few times in what is called a party chat, which is just the players in your party being able to communicate over the microphone.

When asked if she was willing to turn on the game chat, she told me she was not mentally prepared for that but would be willing to enter the game chat the next time we played. She said she needed time to prepare for the harassment she anticipated if we were to enter the game chat as two women with female voices. When I followed up with her a few weeks later to play again, we had to reschedule a few times—not an issue we had in the past—and ultimately we were never able to play again.

Issues of social anxiety and mental health only became a part of the discussion when it came to the female participants in this study. All five women expressed being victims of verbal abuse while playing NBA 2K online. This is important information, because although Rita wanted to create new friendships

through NBA 2K, she was the only study participant who refused a Zoom interview, citing social anxiety as her reservation.

She was not the only other person to express social anxiety, however. One potential participant set up two different dates to participate in the interview, rescheduling the interview twice before eventually cancelling and making herself unavailable for a new date. She also expressed that she suffered from social anxiety and the idea of the face-to-face interview was stressful to her, which inevitably was the reason we did not schedule an interview and she did not participate in the study.

All female participants in this study described a level of mental abuse they experienced when playing NBA 2K. Rita, a female NBA 2K player and study participant felt too anxious to participate in a recorded interview, which she blamed on her high level of social anxiety. She did not directly tie her social anxieties to her participation in NBA 2K, but questions of mental health did not arise with the male study participants. The five female participants in this study also described, in detail, tools and personal strategies they used to navigate NBA 2K space to minimize verbal and emotional harm or abuse they experienced while playing the game. These strategies included refusing to participate in the game chats hindering their ability to network or create meaningful social and professional relationships within the space.

The first tool described by female participants to help navigate the toxic experiences they encountered was to disguise their voice in hopes of “sounding like a man” to avoid harassment and discontentment in the other players in the game. These findings echo Gray’s (2020) conclusions, which determined that many online

game players use voice in the absence of the physical body to gender other players in the space.

In many cases, female NBA 2K players make efforts to disguise their femininity or gender, to avoid harassment and to more easily be accepted in the NBA 2K community. Gray (2014) determined that in many cases, video game players are gendered by the sound of their voice. If the other players interpret a female voice, they are more likely to be the object of verbal harassment and insults. This was consistent with the experience of the participants in this study.

Rita was not the only female participant who engaged in this type of behavior. According to Amanda, “I actually sometimes would try and disguise my voice, I would pretend to be a dude, so that I would get some respect . . . yeah I can remember times when I would like kind of go into deeper voice.” This highlighted the fact that many female participants hid their real identity to be able to participate in the NBA 2K community. Accordingly, Gray (2014) found that some users engaged in MUDS to create HAVOC for other game players. In this case, the HAVOC created for game players seems to be disproportionately aimed at female NBA 2K players. As a result, the consumption of the game changes across different player identities.

Consumption of NBA 2K

As game technologies have advanced, how game players play NBA 2K has also changed. Originally without online features, game players were limited to head-to-head game play with no MUDS or MyCAREER options. When NBA 2K moved online, it changed how players consumed the game.

Rita emphasized the importance of the detailed story line. This echoes Consalvo et al. (2013). Rita explained, “2016 and 2017 had the best story lines. 2018 was the worst. . . . I would like to buy homes and cars.” Ian reinforced Rita’s sentiment, as he described the idea of living out his childhood dream in MyCAREER and being drafted into the NBA.

Allyship for Safe Consumption

Allyship is especially important to a positive experience playing NBA 2K. Though the NBA 2K community both ignores and harasses its female players, female allyship within the game was strong. Many of the women participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The network of women NBA 2K players is small, and all of those that participated in the study expressed a desire in helping foster and grow that subsection of the NBA 2K community that has been systematically excluded in the past.

Each of the five women who participated in this study had a male teammate, family member or mentor that they played with and encouraged them to continue to play even after experiencing harassment. These male allies acted as a virtual cocoon for these women who were establishing themselves in online virtual play.

The presence of a male ally ensured a level of membership in the community by offering female NBA 2K players more opportunities to compete and socialize within the game. Male allyship also offered a level of credibility within the space, because if a man was going to play with a female 2K player, “she must be good.” For example, Alana explained that her boyfriend originally introduced her to the online features of the game over 10 years ago. “I met my boyfriend in 2010 and he

introduced me to 2K in 2011. I never played the park or anything like that. I will just do like little quick games versus other people online,” she said.

NBA 2K Streaming

The female participants in this study were NBA 2K streamers. That means the women in this study broadcast themselves live when playing NBA 2K.

Streaming NBA 2K is a method of consumption not intended by the game developers. There are many reasons why someone chooses to stream. In Alana’s case, she used streaming as her primary source of income.

As I interviewed the women for this study, it was obvious that NBA 2K streaming offered them an element of game engagement and social interactions that was more public and more controlled, so they were less likely to experience the same aggressive and abusive language they experience in the game chat. This did not completely eliminate the abuse, but because the streamers are in control of the production of the broadcast, they are able to block and mute abusive comments and behavior. Though these features do exist in the game chat, streamers were less likely to face abuse when streaming than they were in the privacy of games that are not being broadcast. Finally, when discussing consumption not originally intended by the game developers it is important to examine Esports and the NBA 2K League.

The NBA 2K League and Esports

As sports video games have grown in popularity, they have moved into the cultural sports fold. Now, colleges and universities are offering scholarships for Esports players, which blurs the lines for what is considered an athlete. Large video game competitions have become big business. Tournaments are held, statistics are kept, and prize money is awarded. Virtual stars are emerging. This is why it

becomes especially important for all NBA 2K players to have equal access to opportunity within the game. There is literally money on the table.

According to NBA commissioner Adam Silver, the NBA 2K League is considered the fourth professional league within the NBA family that also includes the WNBA and the NBA G-League (Aldridge, 2018). Jeremy said:

I think that Esports might be a place where you could see like the women in Esports has already a broad content, but women playing sports games in Esports League. Like, I know, I know it does happen in Madden. I don't know that it happens that much in 2K. Haven't I don't think that a woman has been drafted to an Esports a professional sports team in the 2K League."

For this to be the case, NBA 2K will have to continue to find innovative ways to encourage a wide range of identities to engage in the NBA 2K community.

Finally, the circuit of culture focuses on the articulations of the moments, which means the relationship between moments for any cultural artifact. The relationship between production and consumption informs an important articulation because the consumption of the game is sometimes different than the game developers' intended use of the game.

Beyond the specific moments of the circuit of culture, it is important to examine how the moments relate to one another. These articulations help researchers identify social patterns beyond the five moments. The first key articulation that this study will examine in detail is the relationship between identity and production.

Identity and Production

In 2019, NBA 2K20 was released and for the first time included female athletes from the WNBA. As a result, for the first time in NBA 2K history, game players were able to occupy the virtual body of a female character and play with all female teams. To do so, when a player logs into the game, that player can then select the WNBA thread. The game features are limited, but the inclusion of the WNBA and its athletes demonstrates why the game is a complex site for identity construction and representation.

Before 2019, there was no female virtual representation in NBA 2K beyond traditional stereotypes of female cheerleaders in the cut scenes or backgrounds of game play. Leonard (2003) explained that sports games are guilty of depicting women in stereotypical and gendered ways. NBA 2K reinforced this trend. The lack of women representation in MyPLAYER reinforces the idea that female players do not belong in the NBA and NBA 2K more generally, which helps foster the attitude that this is not a domain for women participants. When attempting to use the face scan option, a participant cannot make a girl or a woman. The only current option is still a masculine presentation.

In many ways, when you consider the production of the game, it makes sense that NBA 2K is slow to adopt women and the WNBA into the game. Originally, the sole purpose of the game was as new media, a media convergence between video game players and the sports genre. By offering sports fans new ways to consume their favorite team and player, contemporary sports video games encouraged sports fans to indulge in video games as a part of showing allegiance.

However, as game technologies have evolved, and video games have grown as a part of popular culture, NBA 2K has been forced to adapt to not only offer the consumption of NBA teams and players, but their consumers the opportunity to insert themselves into the story line and the virtual world of the NBA community.

The articulation of consumption and representation is important to consider because currently, the consumption of NBA 2K is gendered and only includes men. As a result, women are forced to create male avatars and not offered the same opportunity afforded to male players, to create “themselves in the game.”

When I first learned to play, I was tasked with creating a MyPLAYER to begin my virtual NBA career. As a researcher, I want to be transparent, so I wanted to create the closest MyPLAYER to myself as possible. Because I could not create a woman, I felt uncomfortable about being forced to misrepresent myself, so I decided to create a MyPLAYER that closely resembled my younger brother. I conceded that my brother was the closest representation of me as a man that I could create.

There was a barrier for me to be represented online as my real world identity. When I was forced to create a male version of myself, I did feel a moment of excitement about what that disconnection meant. There was a moment of freedom with the idea that I was being “forced” to create something other than myself which gave a free pass to create an aspirational version of myself. However, for the sake of transparency of this study, I did the best I could to create myself, as a man, within the bounds of the MyPLAYER generator.

This section highlights some important insights into the functions of culture in NBA 2K drawn from the examination of cultural artifacts, participant interviews, and participant observations. The final section of this dissertation will discuss the

overarching themes from the data analysis, discuss limitations to this research study, and provide suggestions for future research into the functions of culture in NBA 2K.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

This project is important for a variety of reasons. Sports video games have the ability to impact, generate new, and influence existing sports culture because of the global community that plays games like NBA 2K. NBA 2K is an important place to begin the conversation into how sports video games function as a part of our culture. Sports video games are an authentic extension of traditional sports community and culture. They offer both sports fans and video game players the opportunity to engage in new and innovative ways in their hobbies. NBA 2K culture is an auxiliary of the NBA culture.

When considering who makes up the NBA 2K community, the game is played by people with dynamic identities. Through this study a variety of different people participated in interviews, both from a racial and eventual gendered standpoint. Though NBA 2K developers have made efforts to create a more inclusive environment for game players, the NBA 2K community is a comfortable place for some people and an abusive and dangerous place for others.

A key element of the NBA 2K community is the players' connection and fandom of basketball, the NBA, and in some cases the WNBA more generally. It is also common in video games for knowledge about the world to be implemented in the virtual space (VerBruggen, 2012). NBA 2K's connection to the NBA as a sub-genre of the large culture is important to consider because of the cultural impact and global reach of the NBA. However, to begin to understand how those unique sub-cultures

function, NBA 2K as a standalone community and culture deserves critical examination, as this study offers.

Next, NBA 2K does offer unique opportunities for diverse MyPLAYER representations, however, setting the bar for sports video games to include people from varied physical identities. NBA 2K is highly immersive and highly social. As the game content continues to evolve to accommodate more user generated content, game players produce NBA 2K content at the same rate at which they consume it.

Though the game has made strides to include WNBA athletes, the lack of gendered options for the MyPLAYER feature reinforces misogynistic and hegemonic power structures that are common in both sports culture and gaming culture. NBA 2K developers should thus consider the experience of different types of game players instead of simply a target game demographic in hopes of improving the overall community of NBA 2K and the experience of all of those who play the game. Because the NBA is made up of predominately Black athletes, the experience of Black users should be especially important to those developing the game.

Because of the sophisticated development of the MyPLAYER function, NBA 2K is unique to sports video games as it offers the most sophisticated avatar creation, paired with the only MUD in sports video games. As a result, cultural elements like identity and representation become especially important to consider.

NBA 2K is an important site for examination because NBA 2K acts as an intermediary for so many elements of existing cultures. NBA 2K culture is influenced by NBA culture, WNBA culture, basketball culture, gaming culture, and other professional sports and athletes. Game players draw on personal familiarities and comfortable practices to engage in new cultural environments (Giese &

Kauffman, 2001). As a result, both NBA and WNBA fans look for familiarity in NBA 2K from their experiences with consuming NBA and WNBA media. Multiple study participants highlighted the realism of the graphics as one feature of the game they enjoyed most.

Video game technologies have advanced and offer game players more opportunity to consume the game in different ways. The power of the game has been passed to the game player through user-generated content creating a unique and catered experience for everyone who plays NBA 2K. Sports video games have proven to be immersive and social, but NBA 2K does not offer the same opportunity for all of its players. NBA 2K may be the most advanced sports video game, but because of its evolution it has created barriers for some game players to both enjoy and compete in the game. Like many other online games, NBA 2K does not offer the same positive experience for all of its players. NBA 2K leads the way for sports video games as far as advanced representation created through the MyPLAYER function, yet it reinforces a 'boys only' message by excluding a differently gendered option.

Conclusion

At the same time, NBA 2K represents a virtual Black space because Black players make up the majority in the NBA and the WNBA. This is a virtual Black space inside a predominantly White dominated and White-centered gaming culture. The game offers a different experience than any other game, especially because of the racial and gender dynamics of play. There is a sense that Blackness offers symbolic and cultural capital within the game. Many game players expressed the idea they create a Black MyPLAYER as if Blackness and basketball or NBA culture

are synonymous. This offers insights into the idea of aspirational identity through virtual representation in game.

Like common patterns described by other video game scholars, misogynistic and hegemonic power structures contribute to the toxic behavior in the game chat and in the overall design and functions of the game. The mental toll of reliving these negative and, in many cases, abusive experiences are other reasons why female NBA 2K players may have been hesitant in making themselves available to discuss their experiences in this space. Because of the social spaces in NBA 2K, this reinforces bad social behavior, which can breed these misogynistic and hegemonic behaviors. Though many players come to NBA 2K to play basketball as their favorite player or team, game players are exposed to the toxic behavior of others online. Women and girls are unable to establish in-game relationships that will help them improve and compete at a higher level because of the misogynistic and hegemonic attitudes of the other game players, paired with the lack of tools to protect players from abuse.

As a result, no channel exists for women to become professional eSports players in the NBA2K League. When entering the game space initially they are met with racist and sexist trash talking, and no ability to create themselves in the game. When a female player was able to navigate the toxic environment, she was rarely given opportunity to find recurring teammates that helped foster growth and success without a male ally to help create that network. This means that female NBA 2K player must often rely on a male player to be successful in the space. With more lucrative opportunities for eSport players and streamers, it is important for scholars to help identify the hurdles to women to be successful in these spaces.

Because NBA 2K streamers have control of their broadcasts, it seems those NBA 2K players who stream have created a space for themselves to safely engage in the game. Streamers record their streams, which means they have created a public forum for themselves. This does not guarantee their safety; however, it does offer added protections to the NBA 2K streamers. The women in this study did offer other tools for protecting themselves while streaming, including blocking other users from watching or commenting on their streams and blocking other NBA 2K players within the game. Though these tools are impactful, and some of the women explained that they used them, this puts the onus on the abuse victim to constantly be creating barriers between themselves and other users in the game. As professional streaming and esports opportunities continue to grow, this means women are at a disadvantage when attempting to “go pro” in NBA 2K. This results in a lack of opportunities for women to create income in NBA 2K or to create opportunity for academic scholarships.

NBA 2K is a ripe area for academic research because it offers scholars an opportunity to examine many different cultural intersections in one virtual space. NBA 2K offers important insights into sports culture, and the intersections of race and gender in sports video games. From elements of production and consumption, the game design, and who the game includes and excludes, becomes especially important to consider as more lucrative professional experiences emerge through eSports and streaming. The following section will offer insights on opportunities for future research in this area.

Limitation of Study

In the end, only five women NBA 2K players participated in this study. Each of the five women NBA 2K participants that were interviewed in this study were all NBA 2K streamers. Many of these women were training to become professional Esports athletes or were currently professionally streaming NBA 2K as their full-time job.

This study offers a variety of experiences with different NBA 2K players on a variety of consoles, but a wider net could be cast in future studies. This study included adults only so all study participants were 18 years or older. It would be a mistake to think that the NBA 2K community does not include children. Many study participants described scenarios in which they played NBA 2K with their own children, or younger siblings and cousins, and experiences of encountering young children in the online chat. Other limitations to this study resulted from NBA 2K's lack of accessible cross-platform play. It is not as simple as just buying a console and a game. Some consoles, like the Nintendo Switch, require external memory cards to be able to operate the complex graphics of NBA 2K. This led to a steep initial learning curve. The beginning frustrations lasted a few weeks, but then I became more comfortable with the operating system and the features of the game more generally.

A second limitation to this study is that some NBA 2K game players were hesitant to meet to chat face to face. In many cases, it took these face-to-face interviews to identify if we played NBA 2K on the same system or with the same game versions. Once I established the technology capable to play with the participant in the game itself, we had already met through the interview. A study

designed to use NBA 2K to identify participants in the game and use the primary communication tools in the game to conduct interviews may be able to accommodate those who participate in the NBA 2K community but feel social anxiety about doing a face-to-face interview.

As highlighted earlier in this dissertation, subgenres of NBA 2K players exist within each console, and though this study did incorporate interviews with players across multiple platforms, it did not consider how game players experience NBA 2K differently across different console platforms. For researchers looking to study sports video games, a working understanding of how a game system functions both from a hardware and a software standpoint is key.

A reason why it was difficult to recruit female NBA 2K players was likely because of the discomfort experienced as a result of discussing those experiences. Because female streamers are used to the spotlight, I believe that is why so many female NBA 2K streamers were willing to participate in this study.

Finally, a limitation of any ethnographic study is the fact that all study participants had to opt into this study, which means the study sample is made up of only those who have self-selected. Therefore, the results of this study are not generalizable, but instead offer insights into NBA 2K culture and community in hopes of creating opportunities for other scholars to engage in more research in this space.

Suggestions for Future Research

NBA 2K is currently the only sports video game with a MUD, which means it is ripe for academic research through both traditional gaming theories but also traditional examinations of sports cultures, patterns and community.

Sports video games are a tool for development in sports. Because of the connection to basketball IQ, more research needs to be done in how sports video games can act as a tool to enhance training for athletes. Some of the study participants suggested NBA 2K could be used as a tool for development of youth sports, helping young athletes with positioning, communication, and other important elements of developing into a successful basketball athlete. As a result, there is opportunity to examine sports video games as a tool for enhanced learning.

Future research should examine how sports video games like NBA 2K are experienced differently by different people. Sports video games are the sole genre of video games to offer minority heroes and are also the most popular genre of video games. The popularity of NBA 2K relies on the fact that it offers this level of representation to its game players, considering the MyPLAYER functions are some of the most advanced in video games. While offering this unmatched level of representation, NBA 2K has completely cut women out of the game. As a result, a better understanding into how people of varying identities experience these games could offer important insights to game developers, sports marketers, and others within the NBA 2K community. The evolution of NBA 2K is a tool for education into the NBA and WNBA, which is another reason NBA 2K is an important site for academic research. This presents an opportunity for sports marketers to engage fans in new and innovative ways.

NBA 2K can be used as a tool for sports marketers, an avenue to social connections, and a new media technology that offers game players opportunities to engage in fandom in different ways not originally intended by the game developers.

Though this research provides a snapshot into the functions of culture in sports video games and does not draw conclusions on a larger population, this research is important beyond the scope of just NBA 2K and informs the discussion about the relationship between sports video games and sports culture and where sports video games fit within the scope of sports culture more broadly.

Finally, the NBA and the WNBA are two of the most socially conscious professional leagues in North America. Athletes from both leagues are at the forefront of social awareness in regard to race, gender, sexuality, and other human rights interest. There is an opportunity for researchers to determine whether NBA 2K aligns with the social values and priorities that encompass both leagues.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT POST

“Do you play NBA 2K? Are you a regular in The Neighborhood? If so, please click this link to a short questionnaire about your game play

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NBA_2KSTUDY.”

APPENDIX B
INTAKE QUESTIONNAIRE

This intake questionnaire is to help identify future participants for a research study on NBA 2K directed by a PhD student at ASU's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications.

Participation in this questionnaire is completely voluntary. Some participants who have identified their willingness to participate beyond the questionnaire will be contacted for follow up interviews.

The questionnaire should take less than five minutes. In each case, for each question, a blank space is provided for the respondent to fill in their answer.

NBA 2K Participation Intake Questionnaire

1. How long have you been playing NBA 2K (roughly)? example: 3 years, 4 months
2. In the last month, how many days a week have you played NBA 2K?
3. In the last month, how many days a week have you played My Career or in The Neighborhood?
4. When playing in The Neighborhood (MyCareer), do you usually play alone or with friends?
5. Have you ever participated in a celebration, memorial, or protest in The Neighborhood?
6. Are you willing to provide a picture of your My Career player and/or pictures and video of game play?
7. What is your age?
8. Where do you live (country and/or state)?
9. What is your gender?

10. Are you willing to participate in a 1.5-2 hour follow up interview via Zoom about your participation in The Neighborhood?

If yes, please provide contact information for follow up interview. Name:

Phone number:

Email:

APPENDIX C
EMAIL INVITATION

Hi (insert participant name),

I am a PhD student at Arizona State University, who is collecting data about the experience of NBA 2K players. Based your answers to the brief in-take questionnaire, you have been selected for a follow up interview to discuss your experience playing NBA 2K. These interviews should last between 1.5-2 hours and will be conducted via Zoom at your convenience. Please respond back to this email a day and time you would be able and willing to participate in this interview.

Thanks for your willingness and participation!

Ali Forbes

PhD student, Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications,
Arizona State University

APPENDIX D

IN-DEPTH SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background

How long have you been playing video games? What made you start playing NBA 2K? When you play NBA 2K, do you usually play in MyCareer mode or a different game feature? Who do you usually play with in NBA 2K? How did you meet them?

Are you a fan of the NBA?

Do you play other video games?

Representation

Tell me about your avatar. Does your avatar look like you? Do other gamers ever comment on your avatar?

Do you spend VC on clothing, shoes and/or tattoos for your avatar? How important is the look of your avatar to you?

What are your favorite features about your avatar?

Identity

What does playing NBA 2K feel like for you?

Are you any good? What are key features of your style of play?

Are you a trash talker? Why or why not? If yes, what type of trash talk do you use?

What do you bring to the NBA 2K community?

Production

What are your favorite features in NBA 2K?

How do you feel about the graphics?

What is missing from the game that should be included in future versions?

Does the game do a good job of creating a fun and safe place for all its members?

Regulation

Are there any ways you feel limited in the game? What are some rules for playing in The Neighborhood?

Consumption

Where do you play NBA 2K? When do you play NBA 2K?

What is your most memorable experience playing NBA 2K? -who where you playing with?

-why was this experience so memorable?

-how often do you think about that experience?

Anonymity

What **function**, if at all, does anonymity play in how you act in NBA 2K?

What role do you think anonymity plays for others in the game?

Beyond the Circuit of Culture

Have you told other gamers about your experiences, or talked with them about it? Why or why not? If you have talked with other gamers, tell me about their reactions to your story.

Have you told people who do **not** play NBA 2K about these experiences? Why or why not? If you have, tell me about their reactions.

Thinking forward

What are the most important things for me to know about NBA 2K? Is there anything else you would like to say?

APPENDIX E
GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Build, a term used by NBA 2K players to describe their MyPLAYER or Avatar

Embedded Game Content, the basic features and functions of any video game that cannot be changed or manipulated by the video game player

eSports, organized professional gaming leagues

Ethnography, an immersive qualitative research tool used for in-depth examinations of cultures and communities

Game Chat, the chat feature in video games that allow players from both or multiple teams to communicate through the game or competition

Gaming Consoles, video game systems that operate as small computers used to play video games, including Nintendo Switch, SONY PlayStation and Xbox

Grinding, a common term in the gaming community that describes applying time and practice to advancing through a game and accomplishing the in-game achievements

Multi-Player Game (MPG), describes online games in which multiple people in multiple places can engage and compete against each other

Multi-Used Domain (MUD), describes an online virtual gathering space for game players. According to Gray (2020) MUDs are used for four main reasons:

NBA 2K, a popular sports video game designed to emulate the National Basketball Association and the Women's National Basketball Association

Party Chat, the chat feature in video games that allow players from ONE team to communicate through the game or competition

Streaming, the act of live broadcasting video game play to an audience of followers

Trash Talking, in-game language such as racist and sexist insults used to gain a competitive edge during competition

User-Generated Content, in-game content created and developed by the end user, the game player

APPENDIX F

UNIVERSITY HUMAN SUBJECTS INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

(IRB) APPROVAL



EXEMPTION GRANTED

[Dawn Gilpin](#)
[CRONKITE: Journalism and Mass Communication, Walter Cronkite School of](#)
602/496-5237
dgilpin@asu.edu

Dear [Dawn Gilpin](#):

On 12/9/2020 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	The Circuit of Culture in NBA2K: An Interpretive Inquiry
Investigator:	Dawn Gilpin
IRB ID:	STUDY00013032
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CITICompletion Report.pdf, Category: Other; • CoC Recruitment Post.pdf, Category: Recruitment Materials; • In-Take Questionnaire, Category: Screening forms; • Intake Questionnaire Consent Form, Category: Consent Form; • IRB Social Behavioral -COC 2020 .docx, Category: IRB Protocol; • Semi-Structure Interview Questions, Category: Recruitment materials/advertisements /verbal scripts/phone scripts; • Short Consent Form, Category: Consent Form;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 12/9/2020.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at research.integrity@asu.edu to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required. Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Allison Forbes
Allison Forbes

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ali Forbes is a Canadian PhD candidate at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. She grew up in Riverview, New Brunswick, on the east coast of Canada, where her family still lives. Forbes' professional background is in live broadcast production for radio, television and online and she teaches classes in live sports production, advanced issues and ethics in sports journalism. Upon graduation, Forbes is headed to San Marcos, Texas to begin her new role as a tenure-track assistant professor of electronic media at Texas State University.