

eSports league announces franchises for 'Overwatch' competition

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Visitors play the video game "Overwatch" at the 2016 Paris Games Week. Game developer Activision is creating an eSports league around the game

A league being formed for local-based eSports—competitive video gaming as a spectator event—has awarded seven franchises aimed at fueling the fires of fans with city-based teams.

Computer game giant Activision Blizzard announced Wednesday team

rights in the "Overwatch" league, with buyers including the NFL's New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft and baseball's New York Mets chief operating officer Jeff Wilpon.

Teams have been bought in Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco, Shanghai and Seoul for what is being touted as the first eSports league with teams rooted in cities.

Although millions of people watch eSports online and at global tournaments, backers of Overwatch say this approach is likely to draw in new audiences which can develop loyalty to their local players and attend community competitions.

Establishing local teams to compete in an Activision league devoted to its hit video game "Overwatch" could lead to some of the same treatment as traditional sports, with local matches held in real-world venues and trash-talk by fans wearing garb emblazoned with team logos.

"I think anchoring eSports teams in a community will change the way people think about the spectator experience," Activision chief executive Bobby Kotick told AFP.

"The thing we really like about traditional leagues is local fans."

Activision did not disclose the price of the franchises, but a source close to the matter confirmed reports that each cost about \$20 million.

Kevin Chou, co-founder of mobile game company Kabam, bought the rights to a Seoul team, predicting that the league was going to take eSports "to the next level" in terms of market size and fan engagement.

Chou said he is partnering with a stadium in Seoul that can pack about 10,000 people and that he intends to fill the venue for "Overwatch"

matches.

Local heroes

This league will be focused on competitive play of Activision's team-based shooter game "Overwatch," and a goal of building professional stars—possibly with big-league payouts.

The league is to get started later this year, with initial matches taking place in Southern California. Teams will share revenue generated by the latest entry in the booming trend of computer game play as spectator sport, according to Kotick.



Video game players compete against each other, at the Palais des Congres in Bordeaux, France, during the eSports World Convention on July 2, 2017

New team owners will be recruiting players and getting rosters formed in coming months.

Kotick envisioned "Overwatch" players becoming local heroes and role models, similar to stars of real world sports.

"I think this is the next evolution of sports, and we want to be part of it," Wilpon of the Mets baseball team told AFP.

"When you start seeing people wearing team hats and T-shirts around town, that will be very exciting."

Advertisers aiming to reach real-world baseball fans have been expressing interest in ways to connect with online viewers, according to Wilpon.

"I see out advertisers looking for something different than we are giving them in the ballpark," Wilpon said.

"And, there are advertisers in eSports wanting to go mainstream to local networks, so there are some cross-pieces we see that are very exciting."

It is certainly a money-spinning industry, with global revenue in the hundreds of millions of dollars and growing, according to industry trackers.

Data shows that eSports fans watch and compete in growing numbers, bringing passion akin to that seen in traditional sports which have started to see audiences skew older, according to Kotick.

"We realized there is a great economic opportunity in eSports that would be enhanced with entrepreneurs as team owners," Kotick said.

'Overwatch' boasts 30 million players around the world. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of people watch eSports.

A strong focus of the Overwatch League is to provide competitive gamers with the kind of status typically given to professional athletes in traditional sports.

Teams in the league will share in revenue from sources such as licensing, broadcast rights, and ticket sales, according to Activision.

"Overwatch" was designed for eSports experiences, building in features such as international settings and characters representing a wide range of demographics, according to the chief executive.

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