The math behind a return of video game college basketball is in fact complicated. As Matt Brown wrote this past week, there are several financial factors that impact a return of virtual college hoops when compared to College Football's return this summer. (Link below)

[The complicated math behind a return of video game college basketball by Matt Brown](#)

Matt Brown, publisher of both Extra Points and Athletic Director Simulator 4000, has done a phenomenal job of reporting on College Football 25 and other topics related to college athletics for years now. Thanks to his excellent reporting on collegiate licensing and NIL in College Football 25, it is has led many to ask what this could mean about other college sports returning to video games.

I don't want to give away too much of what Matt Brown wrote is his article since it is a premium content on his site of which I highly suggest you subscribe, but I write this in response to solve some of the problems he mentioned. College football is uniquely popular in comparison to college basketball. In addition to them both being niche to the United States, college football viewership and prior game sales are substantially higher than those in basketball. Here are some relative comparisons below.

Real-Life Viewership

NCAA Football National Championship 2024: Michigan v. Washington – 25M viewers

NCAA Men's Basketball National Championship 2023: UConn v. San Diego St. – 15M viewers

NCAA Women's Basketball National Championship 2023: Iowa v. LSU – 10M viewers

Video Game Sales
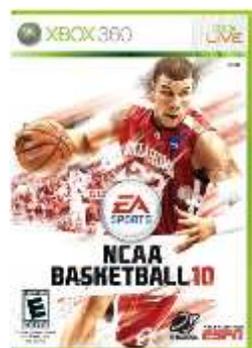
NCAA Football 14: > 1M copies

NCAA Basketball 10: 150k copies

College Hoops 2k8: 270k copies

As you can see, viewership and video game sales tell an ominous story for those hoping for a college basketball video game. The question I keep asking myself is why sales on a video game are so far off pace with real-life viewership? NCAA Basketball 10, the last college basketball video game produced, sold 15% of its college football counterpart, yet viewership between sports is much closer. Personally, I think there are multiple reasons for this. Some are tied to the product itself being inferior, but also plenty of other reasons that can now be solved, and answer some of Matt Brown's and others pressing concerns.

It's March Madness...

As we begin one of the most exciting months in all sports, it's nearly impossible not to associate March with brackets and basketball. Unlike football, casual fans tend to wait until late in the college basketball season to begin following the sport. TV viewership begins to ramp in February, spikes considerably during the first few rounds of the NCAA Tournament, leading to its largest ratings during the Final Four. With this said, NCAA Basketball 10 and College Hoops 2k8 released on November 17th and 19th respectively.

Sure, traditionally sports video games are released prior or at the very beginning of their respective seasons, but maybe this was the wrong approach with a niche sport. As mentioned previously, college basketball popularity spikes very late in the season and captures millions of casual fans in the month of March. Die-hard fans will begin watching and focusing on college basketball in November, but to create a successful video game, a new approach must be considered.

My suggestion would be releasing the game in "seasons" or "versions" on a bi or tri annual cycle. I would open the new series with a special March Madness version. Today happens to be March 1st so let's consider this scenario two years from today.

- **V1: $35 - March 1, 2026** – Release a March Madness version of the game featuring teams and players who agree to licensing. This version would only include the NCAA Tournament including all authentic arenas allowing full customization of teams and seeding. On Selection Sunday night, feature the full tournament for users to play. Offer this version of the game for a reduced price point and incentive towards purchasing the full game in the upcoming fall
- **V2: $45/$70 - Late November 2026** – Release full version of the game. Price reduced to $45 for those who have purchased V1
- **V3: Free/$35 - March 2027** – Version Update for March Madness. Free to those with V2
- **V4: $45/$70 – Late November 2027** – Version Update for new Rosters, arenas, conference alignment, new D1 members. $45 for those who purchased any prior version
- ***Continue cycle through 2028***

Taking this approach allows for several things to happen. It allows you to market the game at the peak of college basketballs popularity while charging those casual fans less than the standard $70 for a new AAA game. Die-hard fans will always purchase the game, so it is important to focus on this audience. Additionally, it allows for people to demo what a full version may look like. Giving people the option to try this mode without full commitment is good for the developer and user as it allows both sides to test their product and leave ample time for appropriate improvements six months later. This approach is also great in a

non-annual cycle, allowing the game developer the opportunity to update the March Madness feature each year as a "Version Update" for a reduced cost to the user.

One game that has taken advantage of this is the PGA Tour 2k series which has released bi-annually since inception. The PGA Tour and golf in general is a niche product and sport, however they have consecutively sold more copies from 2k19 through 2k23 totaling over 2 million units sold in its most recent version. In addition to these units sold, they have consistently released "season" updates that can be purchased or earned every few months that also happens support the game during the longer cycles.

A lot has changed since 2009 when the last college basketball game was released. This type of model was not possible then, but 15 years later, this is a great solution. This model should be used in a new college basketball game, potentially allowing the game to go two or three years without a completely new release.

Creative Licensing

As Matt Brown has laid out several times, the development of College Football 25 and other AAA sports games with IP is very expensive. College Football 25 is likely to spend over $10 million on NIL for players and a similar total for institution royalties for the schools and other entities such as CFP, Bowl Games, and broadcasting packages. Beyond this, there is the production and development of the game which costs millions, bringing the likely total cost north of $30 million.

$30 million is a significant investment, but if College Football 25 sells on par with NCAA Football 14, it is likely to produce revenues in the $70-100 million range. This would make CF25 a wild success in terms of profit. Even if creating a college basketball game is a little less expensive, sales would need to far exceed its former versions from the late 2000's to succeed. So, what can be done? I have some ideas.

One thing that has been eye opening from Matt Brown's reporting is school and player excitement to be apart of the game. Player's will surely take the $600 and free copy of the game, but many have admitted they would agree to be in the game for free, including the service academies which cannot receive NIL money. School's have also been very cooperative in their involvement, with some even asking if they could be included in the game, despite not meeting the current FBS outline in CF25. They understand the marketing and recognition tied to being in the game and because of this, all 134 FBS teams will be included in CF25.

It is assumed that college basketball would be less expensive to license since there are less scholarship players and less "value" attached to IP for schools, but that still may add up to a risky investment for a developer. To combat this risk, I am suggesting a revenue share for all schools involved, rather than a set royalty. As mentioned earlier, schools would likely want to be apart of a new game regardless of the paycheck, but especially in college basketball where there are over 350 teams, some of which receive almost no national attention. In this revenue share, a percentage would need to be agreed upon that allowed schools with the most usage in the game and national recognition (AP Poll / NCAA Tournament Appearances) to get larger shares. This type of model allows a developer to take on less risk, while giving the schools a chance to be apart of the game and share incentive in making a quality product.

Even assuming this type of revenue share would work for schools, players would be much different. Players would require a similar NIL deal to that in CF25 which would likely cost $3-4 million each year. This however could be combatted with "version" passes mentioned earlier, allowing users the ability update rosters and other items in this manner.

NBA/WNBA Integration

This is a tricky one, especially since it would likely require 2K Sports to be the developer of a new game. Although it has not been confirmed, it seems very likely CF25 will include integration into this year's version of Madden. This is likely to include a Road to Glory and Superstar connection, as well the ability to import draft classes into Madden. These types of integrations not only boost the potential for microtransactions, but they also boost potential of cross-over purchases. Personally speaking, I have not purchased Madden recently due to poor reviews and lack of innovation year over year. This however is likely to change this year because of CF25 and its potential cross-over with Madden.

As we look forward to a potential college basketball video game, NBA/WNBA integration would be a huge advantage for the developer. Not only would professional basketball fans be more likely to purchase a college game with the potential of living out their MyPlayer career, but they would also see college fans purchase an NBA product.

Women Ball too

Caitlin Clark has taken the basketball world by storm in the past few years. She is now the all-time leading scorer in Women's college basketball and she has drawn millions to her talents. One way to boost appeal of a new college basketball video game would be to include the women's game. Considering a significant number of women's teams playing in the same arenas as men, the lift would be light in adding these teams into the game.

It may be difficult to include all 360 women's teams, but maybe the answer is featuring every women's team that reaches the NCAA Tournament and featuring them as apart of

the March Madness Version. This would be great for the casual fan and help boost sales, especially during March and April when both men's and women's basketball takes the world by storm.

How? When? Who?

On the surface, creating a college basketball in comparison to football game is much riskier. The key in my opinion is scraping away at the surface and getting creative as shown in the sections above. This means the developer of the game and its fanbase needs to get away from the traditional sense of thinking, even from how CF25 is being developed. College football games weren't cancelled due to sales, only college basketball games were, so it's time to think of their production, marketing, and audience much differently.

Being realistic, the soonest we could see a college basketball video game is Calendar Year 2026. As Matt Brown and others have stated, there is no news of a game in production, meaning it would likely take 12-24 months to produce and go to market. EA Sports and their production of CF25 have certainly helped pave the way for others wanting to enter the college sports video game industry, but the production of a game would still take considerable time.

Assuming everything above comes to fruition, this to me is the most fascinating question. The most obvious two developers would be EA Sports and 2K Sports, both of which have significant pros and cons.

EA Sports

Pros:

- Understanding of player and school licensing process
- Company profile to handle project
- Relationships with schools involved in CF25 (134 overlapping schools)

Cons:

- Lack of recent basketball game/engine
- History of struggling to produce a basketball game product
- No integration into an NBA game

2K Sports

Pros:

- Fully operational basketball game and engine via NBA 2K series
- Integration with NBA game for career mode and microtransactions
- Company profile to handle project

Cons:

- No recent relationships with NCAA or schools involved

As shown above, there are major variances from company to company and there is always the possibility an indie company could get involved. I tend to lean towards 2K Sports as being the most appropriate suitor due to their existing successful basketball engine and potential integration into their NBA 2K series.

Conclusion

As we close in on the NCAA Tournament, it's hard not to imagine a world of being able to do so virtually. I still log a considerable amount of time playing College Hoops 2k8 and always wonder what a game would look like in the now. I hope that we all get to find out soon, and I feel more optimistic than ever.