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Esports meets mainstream: NBC and Turner executives on how open brackets could be the next step for esports on TV

by [Daniel Rosen](#) Aug 29

Thumbnail image courtesy of theScore esports, Turner Sports, NBC Sports

Over the last few months, this column has [discussed putting esports on TV](#) a number of times. It's probably the area in which esports has intersected with the mainstream most in the last year or so, and the results have been mixed. Ratings have gone up and down, a bunch of different titles have been tried in several different genres, and now we're seeing some stuff come out of left field.

TBS has just wrapped up their broadcast of their ELEAGUE: Road to The International documentary series, and this past weekend, NBC broadcast the Grand Finals of the Rocket League Universal Open. Both are non-standard broadcasts given what we've seen so far, in that the Universal Open is for a game that doesn't have the largest esports audience and was the culmination of an open bracket, something we don't often see on TV in esports, and Road to The International was not a tournament at all, but a documentary about Dota 2 teams struggling to compete in a tournament.

However, both efforts come from the same place. Telling stories about esports players could be a way to make esports appeal to a casual audience in a way a standard tournament simply can't.

Starting with the Universal Open, Rocket League is a game that has a spectacular potential among casual, non-endemic audiences. It's extraordinarily simple to understand at a glance, and it slots in well thematically with other sports on TV. That's one of the reasons NBC was interested in it when they decided to get involved in esports.

"Rocket League has sports DNA," NBC Sports Ventures senior vice president Robert Simmelkjaer told theScore esports. "So when we're putting this on our NBC platforms, whether it's our regional sports networks, or NBC Sports Extra or our digital platforms, it doesn't look totally foreign on that television screen. If you're at home, you're flipping around watching sports, it's got the Soccer DNA. If you're at a bar or restaurant and they just had a baseball game on and this follows it, clearly it's different, but at least you can tell it's got sports DNA to it. You can understand what's going on, you can see the ball going into the goal, you can follow it and understand it."

What really makes NBC's broadcast different though is that they went through a large open bracket, held at their various regional networks over the last few weeks. It's interesting that they chose to do this, if only because we've mostly seen televised esports events feature the best of the best so far. Either they're invitationals with some qualifiers, like the CS:GO and Street Fighter ELEAGUE leagues, or they're the culmination of premier open brackets, like ESPN's Evo broadcast. The format is different, but it makes a lot of sense for a broadcaster like NBC, who has a history of spinning stories out of smaller names.

"If you watch our Olympic coverage, you don't know very much about those stars you've never heard of," Simmelkjaer said. "The polevaulter or the swimmer, you don't know about them. Not at the start. But through our coverage, we create household names out of more people than just the quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys. We do make stars and tell stories about ordinary people."

And while the tournament ended with mostly pro players in the finals, NBC did end up with stories. Most notably, amateur player Josh "[JumpOnStuff](#)" Russo's father [subbed in for his teammate](#) in a match against G2 Esports. While G2 won, it was the kind of moment you can't get in an invitational, pros-only tournament. It's why NBC started with the idea of running an open bracket esports tournament before selecting Rocket League. It's a format that makes a lot of sense for NBC, which is better than just blindly throwing esports on TV (not that we've necessarily seen much of that lately), but it's also not one I think would work well on other networks.

Which is why other networks interested in esports are trying very different things. Over the last year, Turner has built a brand presence in esports among a more hardcore esports audience while appealing to the mainstream through their TV broadcast. Their Dota 2 documentary was another attempt to strike at that middle ground between their two very different audiences, as well as a way to see how Dota could work on TV.

"We believe we have this obligation to the hardcore fan and we have this obligation to the casual fan," Turner Sports executive vice president of production and chief content officer Craig Barry told theScore esports. "So we would need to kind of figure out how we can approach a game like Dota in a way that would fill that obligation for the hardcore fan, and potentially create that opportunity that could teach people how to play, teach people how to watch and we would need to really feel like we were being effective, so that when we air on a platform like TBS, that we're not alienating every casual fan or every amateur esports enthusiast."

That balance between appealing to Dota fans and actually broadcasting something that a casual audience can understand is what led ELEAGUE to a documentary series. It's why ELEAGUE, like NBC, is looking at amateur events with their upcoming open bracket at PAX West.

It's another avenue to player-focused storytelling, which essentially lets these broadcasters have their cake and eat it too. They get the tournament, and they get an easily packaged story line to hook an audience that doesn't understand the game as well. That's not to say that we're going to suddenly see esports broadcasts shift to entirely amateur brackets, but it's interesting that several broadcasters are considering it at the same time.

"I'm sure you've seen that pyramid model, where the pros sit on top and then there's that big chunk of casuals and amateurs at the bottom," Barry said.

"We always said to ourselves that there's a real opportunity there. Not necessarily from a business standpoint, but I see the ability to create these kinds of open format tournaments where anyone can participate and potentially, it's almost like that Willy Wonka golden ticket scenario. Anyone can come in, and have the opportunity win a half a million dollars and suddenly you see this one individual winning and you kind of pull off the cover and it happens to be a kid, or someone that has this really compelling backstory. I think that the pro space is super important and structurally sound, but I think the amateur space offers a lot of the unknown, a lot of the dynamic creative opportunity, and I think it's important to play in both."

Grade B — Putting esports on TV is slowly working better, and part of that is because we're seeing broadcasters try to do more and more things that don't just mimic a traditional sports broadcast. Esports don't have to be sports, they can be something different and I'm interested in the directions these traditional sports broadcasters are trying.

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