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At ESPN, Play-by-Play Goes Virtual

By **BROOKS BARNES**

LOS ANGELES — ESPN, the cable powerhouse that calls itself “Worldwide Leader in Sports,” is looking to extend its domain in virtual worlds by merging video game graphics with real-life sports anchors.

The network, which is owned by the [Walt Disney Company](#), has spent the last year working on a new technology with Electronic Arts, the leading game publisher, that would allow ESPN commentators to interact live with realistic-looking, three-dimensional virtual players as they pontificate about coming matches during broadcasts.

“It’s a way for us to remain relevant,” said John Skipper, ESPN’s executive vice president for content. “We want to make sure we remain connected to lots and lots of fans, and using the language that gamers understand is one way.”

Boiled down, the complex technology, which will make its debut this Sunday on ESPN’s popular “NFL Countdown” program, involves using an Electronic Arts’ title — say Madden NFL 09 — with specialized digital camera equipment in the studio. Presto: Both real and virtual people move around the ESPN set to demonstrate plays and possible situations.

And the sports behemoth has more ambitious plans down the road. Instead of using the technology, called EA Sports Virtual Playbook, to tell viewers what to look for before games, ESPN wants to use it in reverse to play the ultimate Monday morning quarterback.

Using real information from a game, ESPN anchors could reprogram an actual sequence to show, for example, what would have happened had [Peyton Manning](#) thrown right instead of left.

Much is made about how various forms of media — television, the Internet, radio — are all moving toward one another. And while television content has converged into video games, Virtual Playbook offers an example of convergence moving in the opposite direction. ESPN is bringing the look and feel of a video game to television for the sake of interactivity, flexibility and visual aid.

Television and movie executives have struggled for years to attract young consumers who play video games to more traditional forms of entertainment. At the same time, ESPN is on a mission to tap new areas of growth as it faces challenges in its core operations.

ESPN, three decades old, remains one of the media industry’s biggest gold mines, with successful magazine and Internet operations to complement its suite of cable channels. Analysts estimate that ESPN represents about a quarter of Disney’s annual operating income.

But ESPN must also battle the ever-increasing number of Web sites offering sports video and maintain growth as cable operators resist paying higher subscription fees to carry its programming. ESPN charges cable companies about \$3.50 a month for each subscriber; the vast majority of cable channels charge well under \$1.

So far this year, ESPN's household rating is up a modest 10 percent compared with the same period last year, largely because of more interest in basketball and the X Games. But household ratings for "Sunday NFL Countdown" have stagnated over the last two years. Ratings for "Monday Night Football" dropped 13 percent in 2007 over the year earlier, according to Nielsen Media Research data.

Among ESPN's programming improvements are an expansion of "SportsCenter," the network's flagship program, into daytime and an ambitious push into high-definition programming. But the network is also banking on technological advancements like Virtual Playbook.

"We think this will wow our viewers," said Stephanie Druley, a senior ESPN producer who oversees [N.F.L.](#) studio programming. "No one has seen this before."

EA Sports, a division of Electronic Arts, had a business goal of its own in developing the technology. The unit is actively moving toward a broader sports and entertainment enterprise to speed up growth. Licensing technology is a main part of the strategy.

There is also the matter of increasing sales for the division's bread-and-butter products. Its longtime strategy of churning out annual sequels for its Madden football game — the series is in its 20th sequel — is showing strain. With heavy promotion on ESPN via Virtual Playbook, sales might improve.

"We've got to keep swimming," said Peter Moore, president of EA Sports. "Part of that effort is to bring the consumer more into our world. Virtual Playbook is going to give us a lot of opportunity to talk to football fans."

ESPN will also showcase Virtual Playbook on programs like "Monday Night Countdown," "NFL Live," and, occasionally, "SportsCenter." The network hopes to expand the feature to analysis of other sports like basketball and soccer, said Anthony Bailey, vice president for emerging technology at ESPN.

In 2005, Electronic Arts reached a 15-year deal with ESPN to publish sports games that use the ESPN brand name and content. Analysts value the agreement at \$850 million to ESPN over the contract's duration.

Neither ESPN nor EA Sports would say whether Virtual Playbook was part of the 15-year contract or if the two companies reached a new licensing agreement. An ESPN spokesman said current contracts with the National Football League allow it to use the likenesses of players to enhance its programming.

Integrating human anchors with virtual-reality players might be new, but Virtual Playbook is likely to look familiar to avid ESPN viewers. The network has sometimes shown video game simulations of match-ups that look similar.

Still, new media analysts gave ESPN early praise for the effort.

“If ESPN wants to gain more exposure to the gamer audience, this seems like a smart way to go about it,” said Michael Dowling, the chief executive of Interpret, a new media consultancy based in Santa Monica, Calif. “It adds an element of coolness and realism that gamers really want.”

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