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Interview with Erik Wahlberg: Q & A with Knockout Kings 2000 Associate Producer

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By Chi Kong Lui

We had the opportunity to contact Associate Producer, Erik Wahlberg, and ask a few questions about EA Sports' latest incarnation of Knockout Kings on the PlayStation. Here's what he had to say:

Please explain your title and level of involvement in developing Knockout Kings 2000?

I am the Associate Producer for the PlayStation version of Knockout Kings 2000. Although I have several roles in the position, my main contribution was game design and day-to-day interface with the development team to ensure the game met our schedule and quality standards. The development team, by the way, is internal this year, and they are fantastic. That makes my job that much easier, and is one of the main reasons Knockout Kings 2000 turned out so well.

I was pretty surprised to learn that the PSX version was conceptually different from the N64 version. You have to admit that it's rare for publishers to finance two separate games bearing the same name (since porting is usually the norm), so why did it happen and what was the reasoning behind that?

That's a good question and I'm glad you asked, Chi. Looking at the N64 demographics, EA decided to go for an easy-to-play, arcade-like experience for that version. The PSX players tend to be more of our typical "EA SPORTS fan" type, so the PSX was more sim-focused. Which is fine for me, because I am a big fan of boxing and I've always wanted to help deliver the kind of boxing game EA SPORTS fans would want.

Were any actual boxers or boxing experts consulted at any point during development?

Yes. Ex-lightweight champion and current boxing analyst Sean O'Grady was used in the motion-capture this year. We also used some motion-capture from last year that was done by Shane Mosely, Sugar Ray Leonard and Oscar De La Hoya. We also worked with boxing writers to ensure accurate biographies and statistics for the fighters in Knockout Kings 2000. To ensure authenticity in portraying the licensed fighters (proper signature moves, taunts, power ratings etc.), we worked with an ex-boxer (and boxing historian) named Mike Bazzel. We also reviewed many fight tapes and accessed many written documents on the fighters.

KK2000 musically, has a hip-hop tone. Why was that decision made? And tell us about the rap artists involved with the project.

EA has some great contacts in the music industry, and Hollywood records provided a lot of music for us, including the original "In the Game" song by new artist "O". The song, and video, are in Knockout Kings 2000, and I'm happy to say the song is in the top ten on the rap charts. *Randy Eckhardt, who works in the production group, also got us some other licensed and original music for the game. Randy even managed to get us an original tune "Knockout" by Mix Master Mike.* As for direction, we all agreed that rap was a good direction as it felt was a good fit and the response has been good so far. A funny story about "O"; He came to one of our company meetings last week and I told him I'd heard his song so many times I had it memorized. He said "OK, hit me with it." So, I started rapping, and I use the term loosely, but he thought it was great and he started rapping along with me! It was pretty funny. Good thing no one got that on videotape!

Boxing is notorious for having some of the biggest egos in professional sports. Were there any particular boxers who were overly concerned about their digital representation and wanted hands-on-control? Did any one of the licensed boxers make any strange requests?

The boxers were actually a pleasure to work with. Most of them were really pumped to be in the game and be associated with EA SPORTS. For example, Shane Mosely wears the EA logo on his trunks during fights and Lennox Lewis showed up on the Tonight Show wearing a Knockout Kings 2000 jacket, just because they like the game and wanted too! Oh, and we do need to get Ali's sign-off for how he looks in our game, but he hasn't had any complaints yet.



High profile names like Mike Tyson, Prince Nasim and George Foreman aren't in the game. Please explain why they couldn't be included.

We went to great lengths to sign the very best boxers of yesterday and today. Time, money, and other influences affected who we did and didn't sign. I am pretty proud of the line-up, though. In addition to last year's fighters, we added Joe Frazier; the best boxer of all-time Sugar Ray Robinson; Julio Caesar Chavez; and more.

I would like to think that those boxers would want their names in what is the most comprehensive boxing videogame ever and alongside ring legends like Dempsy, Marciano and Ali. Was it frustrating to have such this impressive lineup of boxers and then come up short for those one or two high profile names?

Unlike a sports license, like the NFL, we couldn't just sign the boxer's as a group. We had to deal with dozens of agents from all over the world, and we had to track down some of the families of the deceased boxers. All this with a very tight deadline as the game was being developed. As I said before, I'm proud of the line-up we have.

I was laughed my butt off when I found out Tim Duncan of the San Antonio Spurs and Marlon Wayans from the WB Network is actually in the game. So what's the story behind that?

EA has a great cross-promotion deal with a great clothing company, Ecko. Wayans, Duncan, and the other celebs are actually in Ecko's ad campaign, and in the ads you will see, say, Q-Tip, and the Ecko ad will note "Play as Q-Tip in EA's Knockout Kings 2000 for the PlayStation by going to Career Mode and spelling his name". Something like that, anyway. I saw a funny post by a consumer who thanked us for putting Duncan in the game so he could beat him but for beating his "beloved Knicks". He went on to ask if we could put his boss in the game so he could beat him up, too!

If Mike Tyson was in the game and be honest, would there be an 'ear chomp' attack? :-)

Probably not specific to Tyson; his camp probably wouldn't like that. If you haven't found this year's hidden illegal move, press all four face buttons (x, square, etc) during game play and see what you get!

Thank you for your time. As we close this interview, is there anything else you would like to mention to the gaming public about yourselves and Knockout Kings 2000?

The franchise is only going to get better. With a great internal development team, strong upper management, and a dedicated production team, Knockout Kings 2000 will stay well ahead of the competition and give gamers what they want, and then some. I, for one, feel both excited and lucky to be working on such a great game with such talented people. Thanks for the opportunity.

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