

NBA and Microsoft in Together Mode: How Fans can be a Part of the Action *and* Comply with COVID-19 Guidelines

Microsoft and the NBA are teaming up to get as close to in-person live viewing as possible during the pandemic. Whether their deal foreshadows our “new normal” is yet to be hashed out, but it is almost certain contract law will be a significant factor.

Businesses and large organizations have caused an exponential increase in collaborative online software in the age of COVID-19. Recently, professional sports organizations have been following suit.

A key example of this is the National Basketball Association (NBA). The NBA is operating in a small bubble in Orlando, yet has managed to keep people in the stands. To do so, it teamed up with Microsoft in a multiyear deal.¹ Microsoft is now “the official [artificial intelligence], cloud, and laptop provider for the league.”² As part of the deal, Microsoft has created “Together Mode” as part of its well-known Teams.³ Together Mode uses artificial intelligence to separate your bodily image from your video and place you in a virtual space with other people.⁴

Fans can be seen and heard by the court players via LED screens reaching seventeen (17) feet high.⁵ While the fans look as if they’re sitting in stadium seats, they are actually viewing a split-screen that shows the basketball game on one side and the fan section on the other.⁶ While not an ideal set-up, it encourages the home team and gives fans a chance to be involved in the action.⁷ It also mitigates the need to pay for expensive parking and overpriced drinks and snacks.⁸ Although, critics argue there is no adequate replacement to watching in person.⁹

Microsoft has been under pressure to prove its ability to keep up with the changing times.¹⁰ Together Mode allows moderators to remove fans for inappropriate behavior or leaving the screen

¹ <https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/24/21337326/nba-microsoft-teams-together-mode-basketball-virtual-experience-fans>

² <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/16/21223932/microsoft-nba-partnership-deal-azure-surface-details>

³ <https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/24/21337326/nba-microsoft-teams-together-mode-basketball-virtual-experience-fans>

⁴ <https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/24/21337326/nba-microsoft-teams-together-mode-basketball-virtual-experience-fans>

⁵ <https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/24/21337326/nba-microsoft-teams-together-mode-basketball-virtual-experience-fans>

⁶ <https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/24/21337326/nba-microsoft-teams-together-mode-basketball-virtual-experience-fans>

⁷ <https://www.wired.com/story/watching-basketball-virtually/>

⁸ <https://www.wired.com/story/watching-basketball-virtually/>

⁹ <https://www.wired.com/story/watching-basketball-virtually/>

¹⁰ <https://www.geekwire.com/2020/virtual-nba-fan-like-cheer-digital-sidelines-microsoft-teams/>

for too long and hosts “waiting room” virtual spaces to fill newly empty seats.¹¹ Microsoft seems to be stepping up to the plate here.

The multiyear nature of the deal poses an interesting foreshadow. Will virtual viewing become a common option when purchasing tickets? Some might say so; it would not be the first time a large company seeks to maximize its profits from a contract. With Microsoft as the official provider of this type of technology for the NBA, it builds its reputation and profits. It would not be surprising to see other large technology companies follow Microsoft’s lead to take advantage of the unprecedented need and opportunity for technology development.

--Katie Schelli

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¹¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/nba-season-restart-virtual-fans-orlando-behavior-eject-button-11596120629>