

## **"It's in the game" and above the game: An analysis of the players of sports videogames**

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Videogames and sport have a long and productive relationship. Not only does sport serve as inspiration for many computer games (1958's Tennis For Two is perhaps the earliest example), but it also shares many characteristics with what constitutes a digital games-playing experience; mastering techniques, performing under pressure, working as part of a team, and of course the indelible aspect of competition.

In products such as the highly successful FIFA [3] and Pro Evolution Soccer series [6], the experience of watching sport on television is remediated [1] so that the videogame may surreptitiously blend into the wider culture of football. Official licenses are invoked and player likenesses are painstakingly recreated alongside a plethora of physical and mental statistics with the aim to accurately transfer the ludic ability of the sportsman from the real world into the virtual.

In doing so the product creates a unique connection between footballer, sport, culture, videogame and player where the use of one can be informed, or indeed changed, by the use of another. Such a complex relationship invites the asking of numerous questions: How does this transmedial relationship with sport affect the gamer's understanding, utilization and consumption of the videogame? What does the sports genre offer the consumer that is not available to them in other sports media? What position does the videogame incarnation occupy within the user's comprehension of the culture and community?

Taking a group of players of Pro Evolution Soccer 2009 [8] as its subject, with the primary methodologies being participant observation and open-ended interviews, this paper presents an analysis rooted in symbolic interactionism (notably Goffman's dramaturgical perspective on social relations [5, 6]), Bourdieu's conception of cultural and symbolic capital [2], and Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow [3] to appreciate the multiple ways in which the sports videogame satisfies the player's psychological, social and cultural desires.

This research firstly asserts that the playing of the sports videogame is a highly cathartic, intertextual and often social experience for the user. Whether wearing a rare football shirt, imitating a famous celebration, or speaking in sport vernacular, the gamer is consciously creating a socially-motivated communiqué.

Following from this, the study goes on to discuss a form of meta-game that sits above the playing of the actual product, an idea influenced by the abovementioned theories derived from symbolic interactionism and the flow state [4], and seemingly pervasive throughout social relations. Centered upon how communal status is bartered, won and lost through agonistic social interaction, the analysis of this meta-game illuminates the tactics and strategies used by players to win social standing, to steal the social status of rivals, and also to collaborate with others in an attempt to achieve and maintain the flow state amongst all participants.

This paper concludes by discussing what these findings have to say about how players use videogames psychologically, socially and culturally to fulfill their

needs, better their social standing, and, as Stebbins terms it, provide a resource for self-enrichment and actualization [9].

Steven Conway is an AHRC Award PhD student and lecturer at the University of Bedfordshire. His work examines the sport genre of the videogame, its incorporation of social and cultural values and also its position and use within player communities.

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