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Introduction of player fiction in digital sports simulation : Player fantasy in *FIFA 13*

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In 2012, the *FIFA* series (*FIFA 12* and *FIFA 13*) sold over 10 million units worldwide, on home consoles only, despite yearly -and thus costly for the consumer- iterations of the franchise ever since the beginning of the 1990s. While most titles only boast one or two new gameplay features with each release, the recurring key selling point is that they give players access to updated rosters. Therefore, it is clear that what is important in sports-themed video games (SVG) is the access to an up-to-date interactive simulation of mediated sports (understood here as the representation through different media, from television to online magazines).

As a simulation, one can argue that *FIFA* is more toy-like than game like, and thus could be assimilated to a playground with updated toys every year. Frasca defines simulation as the modelization of “*a model through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviours of the original system*”¹. The series, relying on its hyper-realism through in-game player behaviour (in the latest title, the packaging announced features such as “*pure shot*”, “*precision movement*” and “*real ball physics*”), is still limited to that simulation of the rules, along with the representation of players in relation to how they behave in this rule-based system that is a football game. No matter how accurate this simulation can be, its focus is only on one part of what constitute football, leaving out the cultural aspect developed around the game. Grünvogel states that “*the main difficulty to construct a model is to identify the important aspects of the system*”², and I will show that the *FIFA* series, and SVGs in majority, are focused on the technical and mediated aspects of the game they represent, and leave out the emotional, subjective part of sports culture.

Unlike other game genres, most SVG players actually play the physical version of the sport they interact with digitally. They are sports fans, passionate individuals who show very high and personal interest in a certain celebrity, band, team³. Sports fans have a deep knowledge of the details of the game, of the way rules are played and interpreted, and recognize a well-played game. They also have an emotional bonding with the team they support, as the evolution of a team over time can lead to emotional moments shared by the same community of fans (the celebration of the World Cup victory in Spain is a clear example of that communion). Finally, the medium of

¹ FRASCA, Gonzalo, *Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology*, Parnasso, 1999

² GRUNVOGEL, Stefan, *Formal Models and Game Design*, gamestudies.org, 2005.

³ HILLS, Matthew, *Fan Cultures*, Routledge, 2002.

videogames itself is particularly prone to player-constructed narratives, with recurring concepts such as emergent narratives⁴.

FIFA 13 has been chosen here for its popularity and success as a commercial video game, as well as its positioning as a realistic sports simulations in relation to other soccer simulations (e.g. *Pro Evolution Soccer*).

This essay will therefore explore the introduction of emotional, fictional meaning within a realistic system provided by the *FIFA 13* videogame. How does the personal, subjective view of a sports fan and gamer enter the realm of a fixed, digital system ?

After examining closely the system in it to understand what sort of sports simulation it is, what it recreates, and what it leaves out, I will focus on how players insert fictional content within that game. The last axis of this essay will provide an explanation as to why this is, using performance theory, as well as participatory culture in conjunction with digital consumption.

Finally, for clarity's sake, I will reference the virtual representation of real-life soccer players as *players* and videogame players as *gamers*.

FIFA 13 presents the player with multiple types of gameplay, which are divided between realistic simulations of the physical practice of soccer as a competitive sport, and a playful representation of that sport, where the idea of being a space of possibility comes to life by giving players more options regarding the narrative they want to create. As a simulation, *FIFA 13* features traditional modes of play, such as Kick-Off, a regular game abiding by the official rules of the FIFA. The player can only modify these fixtures if they don't fundamentally change the gameplay (for example, choosing the duration of a full game, or the type of overtime if the game ends in a draw, or the number of players changes the gamer is allowed to make during a game). These are not radical changes, and belong to the rules approved by the FIFA, so that they fit within the gamers' common understanding of the game. Identically, customizing tournaments can only be done within the existing frame of reference of existing tournaments, such as head to head, group fixtures, location of the final game or appearance of the virtual trophy.

Within the game itself, its digital nature can enforce without any misunderstanding the rules of the game. The algorithm deciding whether there is or not a foul is arguably less biased than a referee's opinion, often subject to vigorous doubts from the supporters and the spectators of a real-life game. The key point of the *FIFA* series is to simulate as accurately as possible player behaviour within this given set of rules. In this endeavour, EA Sports tries to model player resemblance, but also player performance, by using motion capture for the former and a detailed statistics system in the latter.

This statistical approach to player performance reveals the game's desire to be as objective as possible. Statistics and classification are systems that allow for a fixedness that reflects that objectivity, and embody a particular world-view of the object

⁴ JENKINS, H. *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, USC Press, 2004.

represented⁵: The current statistics system in *FIFA 13* uses several dozens of different criteria, rated from 0 to 100 and by updating them every year. The characteristics of statistical systems is that they allow for clear comparison, visibility and control, all necessary to a successful game, where gamers can have a structure to build their communities around, by comparing different players, choosing carefully their roster, and building their opinions (e.g. "This player is better than this player") on factual data. Furthermore, this classification system also contributes to the dehumanization of the represented players. In line with the idea of simulation, these players are seen by the system as an aggregate of numbers, emphasizing a skill-based mediation of the game of soccer rather than, say, an economic or cultural mediation. Procedurally speaking⁶, these players become more and more toys that the gamer can rearrange and embody, and less human beings with particular behaviours or personalities.

This positivist approach seems to lead the gamer to compensate with what he knows and understands as being a sport: that is, not only the combination of skill and rules in a given moment in time, but also the over-arching culture of fandom that has developed around that game in a strict sense.

Presenting a playground with clear, readable players being assimilated to toys, *FIFA 13* is not unlike early simulation games such as *SimCity*, described by its creator Will Wright as more toy-like than game-like⁷. As a "software-toy", a simulation allows gamers to come up with his own objectives, his own goals, and his own way of playing, instead of having a clear, precise goal dictated by the game's system. Indeed, as we will see later, SVG gamers have very different ways of enjoying the game. This indicates how players start to insert their own conception of a game (beyond the simple need to win by scoring more goals than the opponent) within a skill-based -and therefore, restricted-representation of the sport.

Despite that realistic approach, some aspects of the game have been slightly modified to enhance the player's experience -that is, to trigger emotional responses during a game. Steven Conway has analysed football simulations through the dual concept of contra-ludicity and hyper-ludicity, concluding that sports simulations tend to prioritize engaging play over realistic play⁸. Hyper-ludicity, that is, the high degree to which digital games allow the possibility to have an effect upon the game-world, is mainly associated with attacking strategies, always passing the ball forward, sprinting and shooting, unrestrained by real-life fatigue and stamina of players. On the other hand, contra-ludicity is associated with defensive strategies, where the gamer has to struggle against an incoming threat without being able to take direct action upon the game-world. This dichotomy, unseen in real-life games where players will mostly save up their energy and establish a structured, balanced strategy over time, allows for more intense

⁵ BOWKER, Geoff, and STAR, Leigh, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its consequences*, MIT Press, 1999.

⁶ BOGOST, Ian, *Persuasive Games*, MIT Press, 2007.

⁷ ROUSE, Richard, *Game Design: Theory and Practice, Second Edition*, Wordware Game Developer's Library, 2004

⁸ CONWAY, Steven, *Hyper-Ludicity, Contra-Ludicity and the Digital Game*, *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 2010.

play sessions, where the game consists mostly of back and forth movement of attack and counter-attacks between the opposing teams.

This modification of gameplay from real-life sport to its digital simulation shows how player experience, implying an emotional engagement, is considered and incentivized by the game. Indeed, SVG gamers are keen to go beyond the intricate numbers game that is the system composed of player statistics, and tend to be involved more subjectively in a ludic fashion. As fans, these gamers are therefore prone to emotional engagement when interacting with a representation of the sport they are fans of.

In a 2012, Abraham Stein and Mia Consalvo have published a study concerning SVG gamers⁹, gathering data such as age, race, gender, but also relation with sports and meaningful experiences within the game. The most important finding is that 93.1% of respondents consider themselves sports fans, in the sense that they could give a name of a favourite sports club, and have been to a live fixture in the past year.

Sports fans have a particular relation to the game. On the one hand, they tend to have a strong tendency towards identification, as Caillois described by the concept of *mimicry*¹⁰, a tendency to act as a whole within the community, and to identify strongly with the supported team or athlete. Sports are indeed drama-creating machines, where the skill-based tension of the player is transferred as an emotional-based tension on the supporter. Furthermore, it is clear that *FIFA 13* is not only a sports simulation, but a particular representation of the sports, a mass-media representation of these sports. Dramatic camera angles, lens flares, over-the-top screen effects, and live commentaries belong to the "reality" of mediated sports. These effects, without having anything to do with the actual sports in itself, still contribute to a certain atmosphere, that of the stadium, where the gamer/fan can re-experience his time at a stadium.

We start to see here that *FIFA 13*, as other sports game, tend to provide a frame of experience for the player to enjoy the realistic simulation, by replacing that simulation within a known environment, that of the mediated sport. Because fandom implies identification in dramatic situations, as a consequence, it is related to the realm of the imaginary, of fantasy. One of the oldest modern simulations of sports is indeed *fantasy football*, where fans would gather statistics about real-life players and then constitute a make-believe team which would be, within virtual money constraints, the best in the fan's opinion, and then pit his pick against another's pick.

Fandom leads to a particular conception of sports. If, on the one hand, it is strongly set in the real world, with great attention given to game scores, player performances, tournament rankings, it also belongs to the field of wishful thinking. The

⁹ STEIN, Abraham, CONSALVO, Mia, *Who are Sports Gamers? A large scale study of sports video game players*, Convergence, SAGE, 2013.

¹⁰ CAILLOIS, Roger, *Man, Play and Games*, University of Illinois Press, 1961.

concept of the "*Monday morning quarterback*", the sports fan who tries to re-create the Sunday game, who wishes he had been there during the game to change the potential outcome reveals the sports fan's relation to historical events as a space of possibilities¹¹, where one outcome could easily have been different (a defeat by a fan's favourite team does not mean that this team will forever be defeated).

Interacting with a limited simulation, the SVG gamer will therefore complete his experience with what he considers a sport experience: that is, completing a skill-based simulation with his emotional, fan approach. For example, most players in *FIFA 13* tend to re-create *El Clasico* (a game between the FC Barcelona and the Real Madrid) through their digital avatars, in order to re-live the experience of such a high-level match-up. While surveyed gamers in the study have acknowledged that some of their most meaningful experiences have been related to real-life events (winning a championship with a team the same year as their real-world counterparts, scoring multiple goals with a rising player, etc.), this type of subjective behaviour is also enabled further by the game. The *Games of the Week* mode allows gamers to "*play the next game your team will play in real life and five of the top upcoming real-world clashes*"¹². The *Match Day* mode allows gamers to replay real-life fixtures, dismissing the actual result for a chance to prove that they can bring the defeated team to victory. Here, the *FIFA* series acknowledge this particular relation the player has with sports historicity, and allows within its system a space for fan behaviour to thrive, and for gamers to re-create their own, ideal reality.

In the Stein and Consalvo study, we also find that, as gamers engage with the game, they find plenty of meaningful moments while playing on their own, and fantasy football players even describe their game as being eminently based around the concepts of "*role-playing and fantasy*". As most players declare playing by themselves and offline, they have also, by a surprising margin (53% of players answered the non-compulsory question), documented what was described as "*having meaningful moments*", without further defining what it meant exactly to have a meaningful experience. This indicates how much players get subjectively involved in a physics, numbers based simulation of a sport by assigning meaning to their actions, such as victories, decisive plays, but also contextual play (with siblings or friends, online or offline) or meta-play (by customizing players, managing teams, or pursuing a virtual career as the manager of a game). These introductions of gamer narratives, or fiction in a realistic simulation can therefore be classified in three different categories.

The first one is relates to gamer subjectivity, where the gamer assigns meaning to a particular event, by interpreting it through the particular lens of real-world sports fandom, in relation to live fixtures or sports history. This introduction of subjectivity does not necessitate any modification of the original game rules, but modification or confirmation of the situation in the real world through the medium of that game, by actualizing the gamer's expectations of a certain team or player.

¹¹ BAERG, Andrew, *Digital Hoops History: NBA 2K12 and Remediating Basketball's Past*, SAGE, 2012.

¹² FIFA 14 - Features, <http://www.easports.com/fifa/fifa14-mobile/iphone>, 12.14.2013

The second category is constituted by social play, in the sense that sports games such as *FIFA 13* foster a community around it.

*"Everything within the game, and against friends, is measured in a meaningful way. Build status as you climb 100 levels, unlock rewards in the all-new Football Club Catalogue, and enjoy live challenges based on real-world football games. Support Your Club and compete against rivals, lifting your club higher in the league tables or helping them avoid relegation"*¹³.

Built upon a community of fans, the game allows for more meaningful connections between gamers, leading to the introduction of gamer performances and competition, parallel to real-life competitions between clubs and international teams. We will explore this type of fiction creation through Henry Jenkins's concept of participatory culture.

The last category consists in introducing gamer fiction through what I will call here as the meta-game. Not directly connected to the actual simulation of a football game on the pitch, the meta-game in *FIFA 13* allows gamers to customize their teams, customize players, or participate in different tournaments of which they decide the rules. Even though this type of fiction relies on the playing of a virtual fixture (to see a player evolve, to win a championship, to improve a club's reputation), gamers still describe meaningful experiences as they see their favourite teams advance throughout a championship, or by replicating past exploits.

After examining the three general categories through which gamers introduce fiction in a realistic sports simulations -subjective play, contextual play and meta-play-, I will now focus on explaining why gamers use these different approaches with different concepts: restoration of behaviour, participatory culture and digital consumption.

Subjective play can be explained through performance theory, and particularly by the concept of restoring behaviour¹⁴. As we have seen, sports are not only defined by rules and athletes' performances, but also by the surrounding culture, constructed by sports fans. SVG gamers being almost consistently sports fans, it is possible to explain their introduction of fiction and emotional involvement in this realistic sports simulation through the restoration of fan behaviour during play. Restoration of behaviour is a concept explaining how gamers can perform a given role (either by the game's designer, or self-assigned), and perform that role subjectively by actualizing a text. Here, that text happens to be the role of sports fan, sports athlete, or a sports team, of someone who cares about the dramatic tension that happens in sports through skilful achievements by athletes. Given a realistic simulation, the gamer restores his behaviour by assigning special meaning and by identifying (again, through the concept of *mimicry*) with happens on the screen. The gamer thus performs as both actor (controlling players and sports teams), but also as a spectator (as fan, watching a game unfold).

¹³ FIFA 13 Features, <http://www.easports.com/fifa/fifa13/xbox360>, 12.14.2013

¹⁴ FERNANDEZ-VARA, Clara, *Play's The Thing: A Framework to Study Videogames*, MIT Press

On the other hand, contextual play can be explained through Henry Jenkins's theory of participatory culture¹⁵. Jenkins defines this new form of culture as one with relatively low barriers to artistic expression (understood in this essay as *skillful* expression in *FIFA 13*), civic engagement (understood here as engagement in a community, through contributing to its content and to its competitive aspect), support for creating and sharing creations (being able to share any game or section of games in online) and some type of informal mentorship (as a multiplayer game, *FIFA 13* pits opponents against each other in a tournament-like system, matching players of equal skill level so that they can improve and move on to a higher tier). This participatory culture of *FIFA 13* gamers is one that is distinct from the bare game, but reflects the fan culture that surrounds real-world sports. Being created by the gamers around the game, they participate to the fictional aspect of the game, by sharing replays, informal learning through match-ups and community engagement by participating in a competitive environment, which is the core of realistic sports simulations. The more gamers witness the apparition of user-generated content, the more they will be likely to contribute to that culture, within the framework provided by the game (the EA Social Network was the newest addition to *FIFA 13*) or within external frameworks (replays shared through Youtube, offline mentoring and competitions with friends, etc.).

Finally, gamers introduce their own point of view and subjectivity through the meta-game, as they customize original players, develop their "dream-team" or modify the skills of existing athletes through in-game purchases. This can be explained by a particularity of modern sports simulations, since they simulate not a sport, but a mediated representation of sports, as gamers are accustomed to by the mass media (TV, newspapers, radio). Seeing football games as media products being consumed by the spectators, Molesworth and Janice Denegri-Knott can help us shed new light on player behaviour in relation to sports simulations. Performances during digital play can be considered the product of consumer fantasy¹⁶, and therefore are the introduction of gamer imagination in a representation of the material world, explaining how players tend to subvert the reality of sports results and performances to make them fit their own imagination during their play sessions, with the virtual stadium as a staged consumer theatre, where an aestheticized drama unfolds according to the gamer's performance.

In conclusion, we have seen that *FIFA 13* boasts its realism, and provides gamers with a skill-based simulation of football. Yet, most of these gamers are also dedicated sports fans, and this culture of fandom, is an important aspect of sports, which seems to be left behind in the game. They introduce their own fictions, and subjective conceptions of teams and players of this sport in the game by different means, either by restoring their behaviour of sports fans and assigning meaning to skill-based performances, performing as both the player, the manager and the spectator, finally able to identify as much as possible with the team they support. Another way for the player to introduce fiction is through participatory culture, contributing to a culture around *FIFA 13*, both digital (online rankings, online social networks, sharing meaningful experiences) and

¹⁵ JENKINS, Henry, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture*, MIT Press, 2009

¹⁶ MOLESWORTH, Mike and DENEGRİ-KNOTT, Janice, *Digital Play and the Actualization of the Consumer Imagination*, Games and Culture, SAGE, 2007.

physical (as gamers acknowledge that an important part of the game's experience is face-to-face competition and learning through mentorship). Finally, gamers can be considered as mediated sports consumers, and take this media product into the digital sphere, where they can actualize the fantasies that come with modern consumerism (seeing a team win a championship, customizing a player to resemble one's appearance, or constituting the *Ultimate Team*).

As a result, we have seen how and why players introduce fiction in their play experiences within a system that, *a priori*, seems solely based on numbers and statistics. Yet, some aspects of the simulation lean towards more game-like aspects, from the hyper-ludicity/contra-ludicity couple to the featuring of particular modes designed to support player imagination (such as *Ultimate Team* or *Match Day*). Therefore, if the *FIFA* series seem to be focused on a realistic -that is, physical, measurable- representation of football, gamer subjectivity and fantasy are starting to be acknowledged and fostered by the system itself.