

Simulation or Simulacrum? The Promise of Sports Games

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When *MADDEN* copies the camera works and commentaries of televised football matches, it's not just a clever postmodern strategy. It's satisfying the basic desire of a game player: "Wouldn't it be cool if I could be in charge of the game playing out on my TV?" You could probably devise a football interface that gives better tactical control, if the point of the game is simply to beat the computer. But it's unlikely *MADDEN 2005* will sport a jet-fighter-like *HUD* with GPS and radars. The role-playing at the heart of the game is not about strategy and tactics, or even athletics—it's about the life on the little screen.

– Steve Theodore (48)

Despite the fact that there are arguably more than 40 different genres of computer games, American gamers are remarkably passionate about sports games¹. In 2003, for example, nearly twenty percent of all console titles sold were sports games (The Entertainment Software Association), and the granddaddy of them all, *Madden NFL Football*, became the first franchise ever to be honored and exhibited at the Pro Football Hall of Fame (EA Sports "Madden"). Players' passion for sports games can be seen in the big money tournaments hosted by Microsoft and Sony, the formation of professional gaming leagues such as Major League Gaming², the thirty million copies of *Madden NFL Football* sold over the last fourteen years (EA Sports "Madden"), and the growth of Electronic Arts into a multi-billion dollar company that in 2003 alone boasted almost \$2 ½ billion in sales (Hoover's Inc.).

What is particularly striking about Americans' passion for sports games, however, is that it is a passion fuelled by a curious promise: sports games such as *FIFA Soccer* (2004), *ESPN Major League Baseball* (2004) and *NHL 2004* (2004) claim at once to authenti-

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cally represent both “sport” and the commodification of sport, or rather competition and how that competition is packaged in and by the media (e.g., “football” and “NFL football”). The problem is that they rarely fulfill this promise, or at least rarely do so fully. The user experiences that sports games offer are distillations and conflations of the experiences they are meant to simulate. While abstraction is inherent to simulation—especially for computer games because of hardware limitations and playability issues—the abstractions found in many sports games mean that the games themselves are less simulations than simulacra. Games such as *Madden NFL Football* not only conflate and distill “football” and “NFL football,” but in so doing create an experience that mimics neither.

The purpose of this article is to delimit the curious promise of sports games, as well as what it is they actually deliver. We will begin by analyzing the realism sports games claim to offer, and describe the ways they purport to simulate the play and management of sport. We will then show how this realism is in fact better understood as “realism,” a wholly commodified version of sport that in fact has very little to do with the real-life socio-economic phenomenon.

The Promise

Sports games have certainly come a long way since Mattel first introduced *Football* and *Auto Racing* in 1977. The red blips and two-inch screen that were so revolutionary during the “me” decade now seem quaint (if not downright prosaic) compared to the photorealistic graphics and audiophile-quality sound of contemporary offerings such as *ESPN NFL Football* (2004), *ToCA Race Driver 2: Ultimate Racing Simulator* (2004) or even *Mario Kart: Double Dash!!* (2003). Yet current sports games offer more than just stunning aesthetics; indeed, they trade in customizability. Not only are there now multiple types of sports games, including “street” (e.g., *NBA Street* [2001]) and “adult” (e.g., *Dead or Alive Extreme Beach Volleyball* [2003]), but many games also allow players to select from an astounding array of clothing, shoes and other gear with which to equip and personalize their avatars. So customizable, in fact, are contemporary sports games that they often exceed the “realism” of the environments they are designed to simulate.

“Street” games provide an especially good example of this hyper-realism. In titles such as *NFL Street* (2004) or *NBA Street Vol. 2* (2004), players select teams from among rosters of current and classic professional stars such as Ricky Williams, Barry Sanders and Nate Archibald. Players can also select from among both real and fictional “fields” upon which to play (e.g., Rucker Park, “da roof,” etc.). The attraction of street games (and perhaps computer games in general) is that they allow the player to mute her/his ego ideal (that part of identity formed during the mirror phase that works in conjunction with the superego to police the self) with an ideal ego (an idealized, omnipotent vision of the self)—an ideal ego embodied by the celebrity professional athlete³. Street games conflate

nostalgic remembrances of childhood with the appeal of inhabiting the virtual bodies of performers who are capable of far greater athletic exploits than anything remotely possible by gamers themselves. These electronic versions of pick-up basketball or street football thus become powerful carriers of desire and identification, combining nostalgia with celebrity to produce an emotional cocktail that fuels an enormous market.

However, inhabiting the bodies of world-class athletes is not necessarily easy or even desirable. Many players instead choose to manage these athletes, playing games in Manager Mode (*MVP Baseball 2004*), Owner Mode (*Madden NFL Football 2004*) or GM Career Mode (*ESPN Major League Baseball*). Rather than emphasize what most computer gamers (and indeed most people in general) cannot actually do—run the 40 yard dash in 4.4 seconds, hit a 97 mile per hour fastball, take a slam into the boards from a 220 pound left wing, or do a bicycle kick for a goal past three defenders—becoming management enables players to do what they already think they can. Management decisions, such as picking the right players or calling the right play, are tasks that many sports fans do every day while arguing around the office water cooler or on sports talk radio about the decisions made by real-life coaches and general managers. In many ways, this is perhaps the boldest promise made by sports games—not only can players master sport, but capitalism (or at least the form of capitalism embodied by professional sports). *Madden NFL Football 2004's* Owner Mode, for example, is devoted to “the business side of owning a professional football team” (Prima 2). As Prima’s Official Strategy Guide for the game explains,

we’re not just talking about player contracts and free agent signings. You have to manage your bank account like a real owner, by monitoring ticket prices, special events, coaches’ salaries, concessions, and much more. Watch your pennies, and you’ll have cash for signing bonuses, contract extensions, and eventually a new stadium. (2)

Thus in order to go from “doormat to dynasty” (Prima 2), a *Madden NFL Football 2004* player must successfully navigate the socio-economic context that shapes professional football as a game and a business. We turn now to that context in order to describe what it is that sports games actually deliver.

The Reality

If nothing else, sports games promise “authenticity.” *NBA Live 2004*, for example, claims to deliver “the definitive basketball experience”:

Step up your game with NBA LIVE 2004. With brand-new 10-Man Freestyle, authentic gameplay, and stunning graphics, NBA LIVE 2004 delivers the definitive

basketball experience. Whether running the point with one-button Quick Plays, spinning free in the lane for a vicious dunk, or locking down on “D”, our revamped EA SPORTS Freestyle Controller puts you in total control. With a dramatically enhanced Dynasty Mode, the ability to take the court at all NBA arenas, and all-new commentary from Marv Albert and Mike Fratello, NBA LIVE 2004 is all about authenticity. (EA Sports “NBA Live”)

So too, in fact, are *ESPN NHL Hockey* (2003), *EA Sports Fight Night 2004* (2004), and even *ESPN College Hoops* (2003), which combines “all the tradition, pride and competitive spirit of real college basketball with real college gameplay” (ESPN Videogames).

No matter how faithfully these and other sports games claim to embody “sports,” however, they can only approximate the authentic sports experiences they promise⁴. For one thing, sports games trade on “total control,” something exceedingly rare in real-life sports where climatic and biorhythmic fluctuations, plain old bad luck, and a host of other forces affect athletic performance. Sports games do away with vitiating elements—e.g., bad weather, nerves, insomnia, uncomfortable uniforms, game-related superstitions⁵, low morale caused by losing streaks, etc.—that plague professional and collegiate athletes alike. Sports games instead offer a purer form of sport, one in which athletic ability alone (rather than Murphy’s Law or the vagaries of the human condition) determines victory or defeat.

And yet, this purer form of sport too is abstracted, with the computer acting less as a facilitator than a mediator. The movements, strategies, and skills essential to real-life play are at once simplified and combined according to developer taste, playability issues, hardware and software limitations, and business concerns. *NBA Live 2004*, for example, reduces what is arguably the most difficult and complex position in basketball—point guard—to a series of “one-button Quick Plays.” While these shortcuts certainly enhance game play (and are actually essential in the sense that feature richness must often be sacrificed in some way to insure intuitive and immersive play⁶), they ultimately make the sports game experience much different from the authentic sports experience the games purport to offer. Sports games are ciphers; they provide the look of sports but not the substance or complexity.

In addition, while sports game players might well spend as much (if not more) time immersed in the world of games as real-life athletes, coaches, and team staffs, that time is spent developing very different skills. In a world dominated by mathematical algorithms, predicting a player’s rate of success is based on criteria other than actual physical appearance, a key index real-life coaches rely on. The ability to see in a person an athlete’s “intangibles” (e.g., desire, work ethic, intensity, leadership, etc.), and then use those intangibles to determine how the athlete will perform on a specific team or in a given situation, requires a connection to the physicality of sports that computer games do not yet (and may never be able to)

reproduce⁷. The promise inherent in sports games—that the management skills required to “win” not only already exist within the player but are the same as those needed in the real world—is impossibly false.

Conclusion

Though capable of creating environments that completely immerse their participants, sports games never fully deliver the authenticity they promise, an authenticity that in large part lies at the heart of their appeal (or rather, at the heart of the ways that appeal is created and cultivated by game publishers). Sports games provide both a surfeit and a profound lack of realism; many titles are supremely customizable yet collapse the complexity of modern day sports down to a kind of quintessence. Sports games, in other words are simulacra, not simulations. They offer all of the spectacle yet little of the substance of real-life sports.

And yet, in a sense, sports games actually do deliver something very authentic. As simulacra, they mirror American sports today, where much of the meaning of “sport” itself has been papered over in the commodification of athletes and the games they play. Not only have professional and collegiate athletes become walking billboards for Nike, Riddell and other apparel companies, but sports arenas are filled to the gunwales with advertising signage and goods available for purchase (e.g., memorabilia, concessions, clothing, etc.). The games, too, have become less about sport than consumption. “TV timeouts” and other breaks in play designed to create additional advertising space have made modern-day sporting events exercises in ancillary consumption rather than sport. A case in point: many people now watch the Super Bowl for the commercials rather than for the game itself.

The failure of computer games to deliver the authenticity they promise is definitely something to keep an eye on, especially as games become increasingly sophisticated. Despite some gamers’ desire for adopting the actual physical corpora of real-world celebrity avatars, simulation too close to reality might lessen the immersive qualities of sports games. Much as a recent article in *Slate* chided game developers for using high-end graphics to attempt to fool the human neurological system with too-real portrayals of actual people (Thompson), sports games may be doomed to failure as they grow closer to delivering authentic sports simulation. In attempting to recreate actual human bodies virtually, developers may inadvertently be bypassing basic physiological human responses, resulting in player distaste for the game experience. Perhaps maintaining the distance between athlete and fan, rather than attempting to break the code of the human body critical to such distance, is the key for sports games, keeping Theodore’s “life on the little screen” in its place, as a simulacrum rather than a simulation.

Notes

¹While game scholar Mark Wolf has created a taxonomy which includes over 40 computer game genres, many of the games occupy multiple categories, suggesting: a) that his taxonomy should be expanded, or b) that perhaps his classification system should be condensed. Legendary game designer Chris Crawford, by contrast, utilizes a taxonomy that contains only twelve categories. This may be somewhat limited, given the remarkable growth and proliferation of the game medium in the twenty years since Crawford wrote *The Art of Computer Game Design*. Regardless of the classification system, however, there are clearly many different kinds of games, which makes Americans' passion for a single type—sports games—all the more remarkable.

²See <http://www.mlgpro.com/index.shtml> for more information about Major League Gaming. Also see the Cyberathlete Professional League Homepage at <http://www.thecpl.com/league/>.

³For more on the mirror phase, the ego ideal and the ideal ego, see Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits: A Selection*.

⁴Authenticity, of course, is a deeply problematical concept, even without accounting for contemporary society's ability to digitally, biologically or mechanically reproduce all manner of artifacts, experiences, stories, *objets d'arte*—even living creatures. The definition and value of the concept is the subject of a great deal of debate throughout the academy, from American Indian Studies to Zoology. We have chosen to forgo unpacking the term and the discourses that surround it for reasons of space, not lack of interest.

⁵Professional athletes are notoriously superstitious. Michael Jordan, for example, reputedly always wore University of North Carolina athletic shorts underneath his Bulls uniform to insure good luck. Former big league slugger Wade Boggs likewise had a special game day diet, and pitcher Turk Wendell supposedly brushes his teeth between innings. So common are sports superstitions that they even figure prominently in sports movies (e.g. *Bull Durham*, *Major League*, etc.).

⁶See Crawford.

⁷Interestingly, games such as *ESPN College Hoops* (2004) allow players to scout and recruit talent. Players can review stat sheets, get reports from assistant coaches or even play games as potential recruits. They cannot, however, watch recruits in action, as real coaches and scouts do.

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