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More Than a Game: Sports-Themed Video Games and Player Narratives

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This article considers the social importance of sports-themed video games, and more specifically, discusses their use and role in the construction of gaming and wider social narratives. Here, building on our own and wider sociological and video games studies, we advocate adopting an audience research perspective that allows for consideration of not only narratives within games but also how these narratives are used and located within the everyday lives of gamers. In particular, we argue that sports-themed games provide an illustrative example of how media texts are used in identity construction, performances, and social narratives.

Cet article considère l'importance sociale des jeux vidéo sur le sport et, plus spécifiquement, il porte sur leur utilisation et leur rôle dans la construction des récits de jeu et des récits sociaux. À partir de nos propres études sociologiques et de jeux vidéo, nous favorisons une perspective de recherche fondée sur l'auditoire qui permet de considérer non seulement les récits au sein des jeux mais également la façon dont ces récits sont utilisés et situés dans la vie quotidienne des joueurs. En particulier, nous suggérons que les jeux à thème sportif offrent une illustration de la façon dont les textes des médias sont utilisés dans la construction de l'identité, les performances et les récits sociaux.

This article considers the social importance of sports-themed video games. Building upon earlier work on sports-themed video games (such as Crawford, 2005a; 2005b; 2006; 2008), and more generally video games (such as Crawford & Gosling 2005; 2008; Crawford & Rutter, 2007), we continue to advocate the consideration of how games are used and located within the everyday lives of gamers. Here specifically, this article argues that narrative analysis provides a useful mechanism for understanding, not just the content of video games, but also their use by gamers as a resource in identity formation, social performances and social narratives.

This article begins by arguing that video games are an important cultural artifact and industry, and briefly considers some of the key debates surrounding the relationship between sports and video games. In particular, this article cites

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the call made by Leonard (2006) for greater discussion and research into this relationship.

Discussing and building upon debates surrounding ludological and most notably narratological approaches to video games studies, we suggest that audience research provides a useful mechanism for considering video games within a social context, and specifically here, how sports-themed games narratives extend beyond the games screen into everyday life. In particular, we suggest that sports-themed games provide an illustrative example of how resources can be used in the construction of social narratives.

Though this article is largely theoretical in its arguments, and endeavors to provide a basis for further research, we draw on illustrative data in the last section to support our argument for considering the social location and importance of video games narratives. The aims of this article are therefore threefold. First, to add weight to the argument for the consideration of video games, and also specifically sports-themed video games, as an important area of sociological analysis. Second, this article continues, and applies our earlier arguments for the consideration of gamers as a media audience. Finally, this article supports the position of narrative as a useful mechanism for studying video games, but here extends this to suggest that narrative analysis can also provide an understanding of how games are used beyond the games screen.

Video Games and Sports

Though video games are often dismissed as not befitting of the same level of attention afforded to (other) media forms such as literature and film, it is important to recognize that video gaming is now an important leisure industry and pursuit. Though the origins of video gaming can be traced back to the 1950s, it was in the late 1970s and 1980s that this began to develop as a common leisure activity, largely due to the rapid rise in popularity of arcade-based games such as *Space Invaders* (Midway, 1978) and home-based consoles and computers such as the *Nintendo NES* and *Commodore 64*. Today, video gaming is a major global industry rivaling the film, music and book publishing industries. Global games sales exceed \$21 billion (ELSPA, 2005), and a recent poll by the *Entertainment Software Association* (ESA, 2007) suggested that 67% of heads of households in America play computer or video games. Global games sales are now at levels comparable to box-office cinema takings (Bryce & Rutter, 2006) and more video games are now sold in the US and UK than books (Bryce and Rutter, 2001). However, the study of video games is still a relatively young, but rapidly developing, area of academic interest.

The relationship between video games and sports is quite complex, but these two activities and industries are not as far removed as many would assume. In particular, the terms *sports* and *video games* are often (though not exclusively) used together in five contexts.

First, it is evident that many within the mass media, parent groups, politicians and even some academics, argue that video games are leading to a generation of antisocial, over-weight, unhealthy, and aggressive “mouse potatoes” (Kline et al., 2003). In particular, the popularity of sports-themed video games has led some,

such as the British journalist O'Connor (2002, p. 2), to suggest that there is probably "more football . . . being played on home computers than local fields" (cited in Crawford, 2004, p. 147). These arguments have been discussed in more detail elsewhere (such as in Crawford, 2005b), but to reiterate some of these briefly, there is little evidence to suggest that playing video games has any detrimental impact on sports participation rates, or for that matter, levels of aggression, or sociability. Similarly, though many authors such as Dill and Dill (1998) have suggested that high levels of violence, which undoubtedly are evident in many, even sports-themed video games such as *Red Card* (Midway, 2002) and *NFL Blitz* (Midway, 1997–2005), can lead to heightened levels of aggression within gamers, there is little conclusive evidence of direct causal links here (Bryce and Rutter, 2003). In addition, though many games may be played alone, Colwell and Payne (2000) in their study of over two-hundred school children, found no evidence to suggest that those who regularly played video games had fewer friends, and it is evident that gaming can be a very sociable activity in itself (for example, see Wright et al., 2002)

Second, and somewhat more positively, the argument has often been made for considering video gaming as a sport. This argument dates back to at least the late 1990s when the UK Professional Computer Game Championships unsuccessfully attempted to have competitive gaming recognized by the English Sports Council as a sport (Wagner, 2006). The basis for this argument is that some forms of video gaming readily match definitions of what a sport is, in that they can involve interpersonal competition, the development and training of skills, the enforcement of rules, attainment of goals, and even levels of coordination and agility (see Wagner 2006). In Europe and the US, competitive gaming, which is sometimes referred to as e-sports, is closely linked to the development of first person shooters (FPS) such as *Doom* (id, 1993) and most notably *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 1999), while in the East, and in particular in Korea, competitive play has tended to focus most notably around strategy war games such as *StarCraft* (Blizzard, 1998; Wagner, 2006). In recent years e-sports have seen a whole culture and scene develop around competitive play through the establishment of a significant number of teams, competitions, leagues, prize monies, management and sponsorship deals (see Rambusch et al., 2007). Moreover, e-sports are also starting to gain significant television coverage on dedicated channels, such as *xleague.tv*, spectator and fan interest, and even associated gambling. Unfortunately, to date, their still remains little research on e-sports and their competitors, but what research does exist, such as the work of Rambusch et al. (2007), suggests that this is likely to be a fertile area for further analysis.

Third, it is evident that sports-themed games constitute one of the best selling genres of video games. From the very beginning of video gaming history, sport has proved a popular subject for gaming (see Crawford, 2005a), and today, there are video games versions of almost every major, and many minor, sports and competitions. The ESA (2007) suggests that in 2006 sports-themed games made up 17% of all console-based games sales—second only to the all-inclusive category of action games. In addition, the best selling console game of 2006 in the US was the football-related game *Madden NFL '07* (EA Sports, 2006), which grossed over \$1 million in its first week of sales in the US alone (EA Sports Online, 2007). Similarly, the soccer-based games series *FIFA* (EA Sports, 1993–present) was the

best selling game in the UK in both 2005 and 2006, and in 2006 the second best selling title was *Pro Evolution Soccer 6* (Konami, 2006; ELSPA, 2007). Similarly, in the UK the top three fastest selling PC games of all-time have been produced by the games developers Sports Interactive Games (who produce the *Football Manager* series, previously known as *Championship Manager*, and renamed *Worldwide Soccer Manager* for the US market; SI Games, 2007).

Fourth, video gaming has likewise proved a profitable partner for the sports industry. For instance, software and hardware manufacturers frequently advertise their products on hoardings and billboards at and around many sports venues, and games companies have provided major sponsorship for many sports teams and competitions—such as Sony Playstation’s sponsorship of the UEFA (soccer) Champions League since 1997 (Crawford, 2008). Similarly, individual athletes, such as Tiger Woods and David Beckham, and clubs such as Manchester United FC, make sizable profits from lending their names, and digital representations, to video games (Crawford, 2008). It is estimated that when EA Sports signed an exclusive deal in 2004 to use the names of NFL players, teams and stadiums within their games, the NFL profited in excess of \$300 million (Morris, 2004)—as well as all the free advertising these games bring for this sport and its teams.

Fifth, and closely linked to the previous two points, is that video games technologies have also expanded the possibilities and realms of sports-participation and sports-spectating. For instance, Atkinson (2007) highlights how leisure establishments have been set up that allow golfers to hit a ball toward large screens and see the flight of these continue on, while similar machines allow others to bat against simulated Major League Baseball pitchers or participate in numerous other sporting activities. Similarly, Syed and Miah (2006) talk about the future possibilities of being able to play sports “*Matrix*-style”: in other words, where our minds are plugged into a full sensory immersed environment. Current games technologies are also being used to train athletes, such as allowing racing car driver or skiers to experience and scope out courses they have never physically visited (see Fairweather, 2002). The interplay between traditional and what Atkinson (2007) refers to as “virtual sports” has also been enhanced by the popularity of new gaming technologies, such as the Nintendo *Wii* console and games such as *Wii Sport* (Nintendo, 2006) and *Wii Fit* (Nintendo, 2007), which allow individuals to participate and compete in sports-simulations that require them to replicate the actions (to a point) of swinging a bat or club and various other sports-like activities and actions—and the popularity of the *Wii* is certainly an area of the sports/video games nexus that requires further research.

However, there has been relatively little academic discussion of the relationships between sports and video gaming. For instance, in their consideration of “Football [soccer] in the Digital Age,” Boyle and Haynes (2004) only mention video games once, and this is only in relation to how the German former international goalkeeper Oliver Kahn took legal action against Electronic Arts to secure control of his own “personality rights” within video games. Of the limited amount of literature that does exist on sports and video games, David Leonard (2006) makes the very apt point that much of this remains quite celebratory, or at best not critical, of the nature of both sports-themed video games and competitive gaming. For instance, the work of Andy Miah (2002), and others such as N. Ben Fairweather (2002), focus primarily on the opportunities new gaming technologies

bring for participants and followers of sports, overlooking a myriad of social issues and controversies inherent in gaming. For instance, Leonard (2006) highlights how sports-themed games focus almost exclusively on male participation sports, and when women do feature, they are often portrayed in sexualized and stereotyped roles. Similarly, Leonard (2004) discusses how the majority of protagonists in many sports-themed games are White, and again when Black and Minority Ethnic characters do appear they are often racially stereotyped and placed in stereotypical locations, such as urban ghettos.

This article is therefore a contribution to the call made by Leonard (2006), and others, for greater analysis of the relationship between video gaming and sports, and in particular, his assertion that this is an area in need of greater qualitative research. It is first however, important to briefly consider some of the theoretical debates within games studies that this article draws and builds on.

Studying Video Games: Play and Narratives

In recent years, much of the developing literature on video gaming has attempted to move beyond the overly-deterministic approach of early “do games heighten levels of aggression?” media effects theory, and in particular, has sought to understand the interaction between gamers and the games that they play. One of the key defining, though sometimes denied, debates in games studies, is between narrative and ludic approaches. We say “sometimes denied” because, as with most debates, the lines between these respective sides are often far from clear, with many writers drawing on tools from both, as well as other literatures. For many within games studies, the idea of a “ludic versus narrative” debate may now seem a bit *passé*, although this is still a debate that continues to bubble away under the surface of games studies. It is also important in understanding the perspective we adopt in this article.

In recent years a ludic, or at least a ludic-inspired, approach, appears to have become the dominant perspective within contemporary games studies. Ludic, or ludology, approaches to games studies, such as Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003), focus most keenly on patterns of gameplay. Many of these studies often evoke classical theories of play, such as the work of Roger Caillois (1962), and most notably, Johan Huizinga (1949). For Huizinga, play is central to understanding human society, and he highlights the importance of play in language, civilization, law, war, knowledge, poetry, mythologies, philosophy and art (Blackshaw & Crawford, *in press*).

The work of Huizinga has been applied to games studies most notably in three key ways (Rodriguez, 2006): first, in arguing that play is fixed and limited to a specific location and time. Second, that play is connected to “make-believe, transforming the real time and place of play to an imagined time and place,” and third, that during play individuals are subjected to (through free choice) rules and goals that do not apply to their lives outside of the game (Rodriguez, 2006, n.p.). Hence, play is often seen as taking place within, what Huizinga referred to as, a magic circle.

The concept of the magic circle has become a particularly popular and frequently applied tool within contemporary games studies. However, problems arise in the way that this is often, almost literally, interpreted and applied, which sees play as distinct and “separate from everyday life” (Kerr et al., 2004, p. 13). In particular, Pargman and Jakobsson (2008, p. 227) argue that empirical studies frequently challenge the validity of, what they refer to as, this “strong boundary between games and ordinary life” thesis. In many respects this argument shares similarities with the (almost equally influential to games studies) work of Gary Alan Fine’s (1983) application of Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis to table-top role playing games, which sees gaming as located within a separate social frame with its own rules and patterns of social behavior. We, among others, have two main concerns with these theorizations. First, both Huizinga and Goffman’s theorization view everyday life as relatively homogenous and attempt to impose order and structures on often highly complex, and increasingly fluid, social patterns (see Blackshaw & Crawford, in press). Second, it is impossible to isolate play from the social influences of everyday life, and in turn, play will have both intended and unintended consequences for the individual and society.

A narrative or narratological approach to games studies tends to focus primarily on analyzing games as a text, which can be understood using theoretical tools borrowed from literary and media studies (such as Murray, 1997; Jenkins, 2004). As the name of this approach would suggest, the most frequently adopted concept here is that of narrative. At its simplest, a narrative can be understood as comprising of a discourse and a story—where, the story provides the resources for the narrative, but the form that each particular narrative takes will be shaped by discourses (Carr, 2006). Therefore, a narrative-focused approach to gaming not only focuses upon the story being told, but also on underlying discourses, as well as patterns of reception and interpretation.

In recent years there has been an enthusiastic argument (often from advocates of a ludic approach) against the use of literary and media theory, and in particular narrative, in understanding video games. For instance, Juul (2001) points out that not all games tell stories, and even those that do, tend to have very limited narratives. It has also been suggested that unlike traditional narrative-based media forms (such as literature, television or cinema), which are representational, video games are interactive and simulation based—and hence, should not be seen as a media text. However, though we readily accept that playing a video game is different in many respects to watching a film or reading a book, the assumption that other media audience are passive (compared with the activity of gamers), neglects a whole history of literature ranging from Walter Benjamin (1979), to Stuart Hall (1980), to Michel de Certeau (1984), which highlights the active and creative role of the reader or viewer of media texts in creating their meanings. For instance, de Certeau suggests that texts are like a city, which though they provide only certain avenues (a “map”) each individual can actively seek out and define their own path (or “tour”) through this, and hence, find their own meanings. As Jenkins (2004, p. 121) argues, too often critics of a narrative concentrate on “the activities and aspirations of the storyteller and too little on the process of narrative comprehension.” That is to say, critics of a narratological perceptive tend not to

recognize that narratives exist beyond the page or screen, and it is the reader who gives a text meaning and life beyond the page or screen.

Hence, within recent years there has been a growing awareness within certain areas of games studies of the need to consider and locate gaming within a wider social context. However, beyond this recognition, there have been few attempts to theorize, or empirically consider, the location of gaming within everyday practices. Hence, here, and elsewhere (such as in Crawford & Gosling, 2008; Crawford & Rutter 2007), we advocate that a potential way forward is for games studies to align itself with other media audiences and literatures.

Studying Video Games' Audiences

The very idea that gamers are an audience has been strongly denied by Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003). In particular, they support this argument by drawing parallels between video games and sports, and suggest that video games, like sports, do not require an audience to be present—as unlike a television show, or a stage play, which they suggest require an audience, video games and sports do not. However, this presents a very limited understanding of what an audience is; assuming that any one individual cannot occupy the positions of participant and audience at the same time. What Eskelinen and Tronstad do not recognize, is that through gaming performances, gamers create spectacles, to which they are also an audience (Rehak, 2003). Moreover, gamers can also be understood as an audience in a much more traditional sense. As Newman (2004, p. 95) writes, “It is essential to note that videogame experiences are frequently shared by groups, perhaps crowded around a television set in a domestic setting, or . . . around coin-op machines in arcades.”

Furthermore, many of the debates games studies continues to toil over are very similar to those that audience research debated in previous decades. Much of the games studies literature can be aligned with early paradigms of audience research, which Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) refer to as the “behavioral” and “incorporation/resistance” paradigms, where research has focused primarily on how audiences are influenced by, or at best react to, media texts. However, more recent audience research, which Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) define as the “spectacle/performance” paradigm, seeks to locate media use within a wider and changing social context. This paradigm draws on recent sociological debates that suggest we live in an increasingly narcissistic, performative, consumer-based and media-drenched society, where the mass media (and we include video games in this) envelopes society in an omnipresent, increasingly influential, but not necessarily noticed, mediascape (Appadurai, 1990). However, and very crucially, this paradigm does not see audiences as passive, but rather active producers and performers who draw on the mass media and consumer goods in the construction and maintenance of their social identities and performances. Hence, individuals become increasingly performative, and in turn increasingly “audienced” to others’ social performances. Significantly, Longhurst (2007) suggests that narratives play a key role in this process, as media-informed social performances become woven into individual and social narratives. This recognizes that narratives exist beyond texts, and when applied to games studies, allows narratives and games to be seen in a wider social and cultural setting.

The Research

The illustrative data drawn on in the next section are from a subsample of 65 interviews taken from a slightly larger sample of 82 gamers. The reason being is that this article focuses solely on those interviewees who indicated that they had, on at least one occasion, played a sports-themed video game. Hence, from this point on, we refer only to this subsample.

All the interviewees were based in the UK, 55 were male and ten female, ranging in age from 11 to 56 years old. All but two were White, and all came from fairly affluent (at least upper working class) backgrounds. These interviewees were collected from a variety of sources. This was done for both representational reasons, trying to obtain interviewees from a variety of different sources and types of gamers, but also for convenience, due to funding and time constraints. Hence, though a strength of this research is that to date there still exists little (particularly of this size) qualitative research on gamers, no claims of the general representativeness of this sample can be made. All of the interviews were semistructured, one-to-one, face-to-face interviews, recorded, and later coded and analyzed by the researchers using *NVivo*. All interviewees were asked roughly the same questions—though obviously these varied due to the context and as new issues and ideas arose. The data presented here were selected by the authors as illustrative examples of typical responses given by interviewees. All interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

The majority (38) of the sample were social science undergraduate students studying at Sheffield's two universities. These interviewees were selected from a larger sample of just under 400 students who had completed questionnaires on their gaming habits, which were distributed in classes. Interviewees were purposefully selected on the basis that they had, at least once, played a sports-themed video game, and on their availability and willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. The second group were nine individuals who were selected from a larger sample of just under 400 respondents to a 2005 postal questionnaire that had been distributed to 4000 homes around the university areas in Sheffield—a predominantly White middle class area, picked solely for its convenience. Once additional funding was secured in 2007, follow-up interviews were conducted in the interviewees' homes with those who indicated that they had or did play video games, and were willing and able to participate in further research. In addition to this, another eight interviews were conducted with participants gathered via snowballing from the Sheffield postal questionnaire; usually friends and family of interviewees. Finally, ten interviews were obtained with gamers at three LAN (Local Area Network) events in the UK in 2007. Interviews here were conducted in quiet public spaces at the LAN events.

Narrative and Sports-Themed Video Games

Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003) argue that video games are similar to other games forms, such as sports, which they suggest do not have narratives. However, Carr (2006, p. 39), applying the work of Genette (1980), suggests that sports do have narratives, but that these are “simultaneous narratives” (i.e., they are constructed as the action takes place) as opposed to the “classical [canonical] position of the

past tense narrative” (Genette 1980, p. 217). Examples of simultaneous narratives would be those constructed by radio or television sports commentators, which still tend to follow a linear narrative structure—such as the underdog team fighting back in the closing seconds of a game to snatch victory. In particular, this kind of simultaneous narrative is evident, to some degree at least, in many sports-themed games, which use commentators to voice-over the action; such as John Madden in the *Madden NFL* games. But narratives, though not necessarily spoken, are likewise constructed by both spectators and players of sports. Grodal (2003, p. 131) argues that narratives need to be understood as embodied processes; where external information is received, processed and ordered by individuals into stories, so that they can be both contextualized and made sense of. For instance, most films and books do not follow a necessarily linear past-tense narrative structure, but it is the reader or viewer who constructs the information into logical narratives in their own imaginations (Jenkins, 2004). Hence, just as the reader of a book assimilates the information on the page into a coherent story, it can be argued, that players of sports and video games, similarly construct narratives of play—a point we will return to shortly.

In sports-themed games, narrative is certainly helped, if not facilitated, by how many sports-themed games follow the career or franchise path of an individual athlete or team. For instance, from 1997 onwards *Madden NFL* video games have included a franchise mode that allows gamers to manage a team over several seasons, as well as make out-of-match decisions, such as player drafts and trades. Similarly, games such as *Football Manager* follow the career of a player-created manager, who can manage one team, or alternatively several, over a career. In particular, the majority of our interviewees recounted the importance of gamer-created narratives within the sports-themed games they played—such as indicated by the comments of Stephen (male, age 35, university researcher):

They [video games] . . . let me play out my own little fantasy of managing Wolves [Wolverhampton Wanderers FC] to Premier League and Champions League glory [laughs]. That’s the nice thing about the latest football management games, like *Football Manager*, they allow you to comment to the press or talk to your players, you really feel as if your nurturing this team, taking it on a journey to glory [laughs].

For Stephen, and many of our other interviewees, an important attraction to (certainly some) sports-themed games is their level of realism. In particular, Leonard (2006, p. 395) identifies how many sports-themed games “attempt to replicate every detail of the sports world,” such as creating realistic looking models of sports stadiums, athletes, games rules and physics. Many sports-themed games then provide gamers with the opportunity to play out and create narratives that have, at least some, basis in existing sports narratives and settings.

However, video games can also allow gamers to develop alternative narratives that would not be possible outside of the game. Though to many Stephen’s dream of seeing Wolverhampton Wanderers achieve Champions League glory is a highly unlikely event, video games also offer the opportunity to play out even less likely scenarios, and this can be illustrated by further comments made by Stephen (male, age 35, university researcher):

The good thing about video games, or one of the good things, is that they give you some kind of insight into things that wouldn't normally be possible. Like pitching the 1966 [soccer World Cup winning] England team against the Man[chester] U[nited] triple winning [European, League and FA Cup] team of 1999, or Mike Tyson against [Mohammad] Ali.

This "what if?" or alternative narrative aspect of sports-themed games has been used effectively by many television stations to illustrate the possible results of alternative plays in a big football game if the coach had made different choices (Leonard, 2006).

Of course, not all sports-themed games attempt to replicate reality as closely as possible, and Leonard (2006) rightly points out that some games, such as *Ready 2 Rumble* (Midway, 1999), can be cartoonish in how they depict sports and athletes. The pleasure obtained from these games appears to be more based on their transgressive nature. For example, games like *Red Card* (Midway, 2002) that allow gamers to carry out numerous illegal tackles and fouls (Crawford, 2005a). However, all claims of realism must be understood as mere versions or interpretations of reality. Even at the simplest level, sports-themed games involve subjective decisions made by games designers (or at best, consultants) about how sports and athletes are interpreted within games. For instance, most sports-themed games define players by attributing them a rating for a set number of attributes; such as *NBA Ballers* (Midway, 2004) that rates NBA players in 16 different attributes, such as "shoot" and "steal." However, games also involve many ideological assumptions, and in particular, Leonard (2004, 2006) highlights how these are particularly apparent in relation to gender and racial stereotyping in sports-themed games. For instance, Leonard (2004) discusses how sports-themed games such as *NFL Street* (EA Sports, 2004) perpetuate stereotypes of the urban ghetto, and common-sense ideas of Black ballplayers as naturally gifted, but aggressive, and who spend most of their time playing basketball, rather than working. Similarly, Crawford (2005b) and Leonard (2006) discuss how female athletes are often absent or marginalized within most sports-themed video games. Those that do appear often conform to sexualized stereotypes such as in the *Top Spin* (Microsoft, 2003) tennis games or the extreme sports *BMX XXX* (Acclaim, 2002).

Narrative analysis also allows for a consideration of the implied reader, which Carr (2006, p. 37) contends is not necessarily a "flesh-and-blood" individual, but rather "a structural entity, and organizing principle within the text" that privileges one reading over others. In relation to sports-themed games, Leonard (2004; 2006) again offers great insight here, suggesting that many video games are specifically designed by, and targeted toward, young White men. For example, many sports-themed games give White players the opportunity to play with race and put on (in Leonard's terms) "Blackface" by playing Black video-game characters. However, Leonard argues, this is not done in a way that transgresses or challenges racial boundaries, but rather reinforces traditional racial stereotypes.

Obviously then textual analyses of sports-themed games can provide an important and potentially fruitful area for further sociological analysis. Leonard (2006) offers many suggestions of how this could be done. Leonard does not however, consider how these games ideologies and narratives are read, understood and located by gamers within their everyday lives. As Carr (2006, p. 37) suggests the

“the actual real-life reader might well reject the subjective responses suggested by the implied author to the implied reader.” Hence, it is crucial that narrative analysis is carried beyond the page or screen, and considers how narratives are used and located within gamers’ everyday lives.

In particular, contemporary sociologists such as Paul Ricoeur and Anthony Giddens argue that narratives play a crucial role in the construction and maintenance of our identities. For Ricoeur (1988) the idea of “narrative identity” suggests the self as a “storied self” made up of stories told by the person, by others, and wider social and cultural narratives. Similarly, Giddens (1991) suggests that the narrative of the self is a modern social construction linked to our contemporary ideas of romantic love that requires the active construction a shared history. The role of narrative in identity and group construction is also taken up by Longhurst (2007), who argues that within an increasingly media drenched society, the mass media operate as a resource on which individuals actively draw in constructing their identities and social performances. Therefore, the mass media not only help inform what people talk about, but also how they appear and perform to others.

It is certainly evident from our research that discussions of sports-themed video games were quite common for many gamers. For instance, when asked if he ever discussed video games with friends or family, Mark (male, age 23, student) responded:

Like *Championship Manager* is probably the most talked about . . . [game] we do and . . . there’s not a point in the day where . . . it’ll be referenced somewhere in my day and me and my mate Tony always talk about it . . . and we’ll talk about real football as well, ’cause they’re pretty much the same thing aren’t they. (cited in Crawford, 2005b, p. 264)

Mark also continued to elaborate the nature of these conversations:

Typically what we’ll talk about [is] how we’re doing on *Champ Man*. The highs, the lows, who we’ve bought, who we’ve sold, and how it changed things around for us. Big victories are talked about a lot, but like . . . also the build up to ‘em, like what we did right, the decisions we made along the way [that] . . . led to the win. It involves a lot of decisions, skill as well, [and] . . . each little one has an effect to how your season goes.

What is significant about how Mark and other interviewees talk about the games they play, is their use of a canonical narrative structure to recount this (see Grodal, 2003). Events are ordered and sequenced in a logical linear pattern and story. The Internet provides gamers with the opportunity to extend these gaming narratives further. In particular, many sports-themed games Web sites, such as the *Madden NFL* dedicated site *Madden Planet* and *SI Games* Web site provide gamers with spaces where they can recount their gaming experiences and stories to others. For instance, a typical post on the *SI Games* stories page is offered by the poster “Life in FM”:

I had just failed to keep Birmingham up and as a result I resigned, mostly because Brummie land [Birmingham] wasn’t were [*sic.*] I wanted to be it was a challenge when I took over the job to see if my tactical knowledge had

improved enough to take the bottom side to safety in a few easy steps. . . . First job that came up was the Aston Villa job. . . . I applied, Villa took their time over a decision mean while Arsenal came straight in to ask me if I wanted to take up the management role at The Emirates. With a healthy budget of £109 million to help an under achieving Arsenal side win the league again. Since 2007 Arsenal have only finished in the top 3 once, so it was no surprise that they wanted someone who had constantly broke into the top 2 with Liverpool. (posted on SI Games, 2008)

However, this kind of out-of-game narration is far from specific to sports-themed video games, and most game genres have a large number of Web sites dedicated to them that often feature similar kinds of gamer narratives or production or both. This is particularly apparent with most, if not all, massively multi-player online games (MMOs), such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) and *Star Wars Galaxies* (Sony, 2003) that have many Web sites dedicated to them featuring gamer/fan stories, art work, poetry and so forth.

However, what is significant about sports-themed video games, is how these are frequently used as resources for social performances and narratives not directly related to video gaming—and specifically, this relates back to the theme of realism within many sports-themed video games. Many sports-themed video games provide gamers with a huge amount of information on athletes, clubs, managers, stadiums, histories and much more. For instance, the latest games in the *Football Manager* series contain detailed information on over 5000 teams, in more than 50 different countries, with a truly massive database of footballers and backroom staff, each featuring over a 100 statistics (Crawford, 2006). The only other games that provide similar resources would be those that draw on existing media narratives, most commonly science-fiction films and television shows like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. However, few, if any, of these games offer the same levels of information and detail found in many sports-themed video games. Hence, most sports-themed video games provide gamers with large amounts of sports knowledge and information—information that relates to, and can be directly used in, the construction of sport fans' identities, conversations, and social performances—such as indicated in the comments made by Shaun (male, age and occupation unknown):

Yes I used to love trying to impress my work mates with my knowledge of relatively unknown foreigners [soccer players], never letting on that it was all gained from buying them in CM [*Championship Manager*]. (cited in Crawford 2006, p. 509)

Sandvoss (2003) suggests that sports fandom is a textual construction. Sport, and in particular a fan's sense of what it is that they follow, is constructed from a series of multiple and changing texts. For instance, what makes up the identity of a sports club are the multiple players and managers who have played and worked at the club over its history, as well as significant locations, other fans, stories, histories, media coverage, and a long list of other factors (or texts). Each of these texts then becomes a resource on which fans can draw in constructing their own particular version of the club's, and their own associated, narratives. Therefore, sports-themed video games provide an additional, and for many of those who play them, not insignificant, text and resource that contributes to their understanding of

sports, and possibly their own identities, narratives and social performances as sports fans.

Of course, this relationship between textual resources, fan identification and narratives is far from straightforward and other identities and social positions will of course shape how game texts are used. For instance, Crawford (2005b) highlights the reluctance of many female gamers to play video games that do not feature female protagonists. Crawford (2006) also discusses the example of how one female gamer would pretend to be male on *Football Manager* web discussion boards, as she did not feel she fitted into this culture as a woman. Similarly, Leonard (2004, 2006) discusses the important interplay between the racial and ethnic identity of the gamer and in-game characters. Our research would also seem to suggest that the career position of the gamer will shape their style of play and associated narratives. For instance, for the more hard-core gamers we interviewed, gameplay seems to be less about relating the games to wider social narratives, such as picking their favorite football team or player, but more about the mechanisms of the game itself. This is what Kirkpatrick (2004) would describe as the “cynicism” of the gamer; where gameplay becomes less about narratives and more about completing a series of interconnected, but at times monotonous, tasks. For instance, Paul (male, age 18, student) who was a regular player of the soccer-themed game *Pro Evolution Soccer*, recounted how his playing habits had changed over time:

Well . . . when you first start . . . when I first started, I’d pick my favorite team, only play my favorite players, whether they were good or not. But I’ve played in a few competitions where they let you pick your own team, though not all [do], most don’t . . . and also when I’m now playing against mates who are equally matched to me, you pick the best team and players you can . . . don’t really matter if you like them or not . . . it’s about winning the match, not the team anymore.

However, even here, one should be cautious about homogenizing types of gamers; for it is evident that not all female gamers will play and use games in the same way, and even more hard-core gaming still involves levels of narration—such as narratives revolving around victories and gaming competence. However, because of space limitations, this article is not able to explore these complexities in any detail, but what it has aimed to do is highlight the social significance of sports-themed games, and offer a promotion, and defense, of narrative as a useful mechanism for understanding not only games texts but also how these are used and located within gamers’ identities, everyday lives, and social narratives.

Conclusion

Video games are now an important and well-established global leisure industry that has a significant relationship with sports. To some, video games are seen as a distraction from participation in other “healthier” activities such as sports, or worse still, as morally corrupting, whereas others argue that video games themselves should be considered a sport. There is little doubt, however, that sports have

proved a popular theme for many video games developers, and in turn, the video games industry provides significant promotion and income for many sports and athletes.

A ludic, play-based, approach has prevailed in games studies in recent years, and also extensively critiqued narrative-focused games analysis. However, ludic approaches are limited in that they often isolate gameplay from everyday life, and also fail to recognize that games narratives can extend, and have life, beyond the games screen. To this end we advocate adopting an audience research approach, which allows for a consideration of how gaming is located within patterns of everyday life, and how gaming is frequently drawn on as a resource in social interactions, identities and performances. In particular, the final section of this article provides some illustrative data, which highlights how sports-themed games facilitate the development of gamer narratives, and also often act as a resource in social narratives constructed around both video games and wider sports-related themes. This illustrates that video games, for many, are an important component of their everyday lives, narrative identities and social interactions, and in particular sports-themed video games provide an important resource and cross-over with associated sports fan interests and narratives. However, the key focus of this article is to provide a basis for further, and more empirically-based, research. There is still considerable need for the textual analysis of sports-themed video games' content and discourses (Leonard, 2006). Research also needs to take into consideration the changing nature of gaming technologies, and in particular how convergent technologies are blurring video gaming with other leisure activities, such sports. In turn, the sociology of sport literature could help us understand patterns of video gameplay, such as professional gaming, but also other aspects of video gaming, such as, the roles and division of labor of players in MMOs. It is also likely that analysis of video gaming will allow us to understand the changing nature of sport, particularly since games-related technologies appear to be helping shape the future of both sports-spectating and participation (Syed & Miah, 2006). However, our chief argument is for a more detailed empirical consideration of how gaming is drawn on and used within everyday social patterns, and in particular, we suggest sports-themed games provide a particularly apt subject of study given their relationship to, and often wealth of information on, wider social (and most specifically sports-related) narratives. And further and more detailed research could consider how video gaming, and associated narrative constructions, are shaped along lines of gender, ethnicity, class, age, career and so forth, and also fit into, support, or undermine existing social patterns.

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