

# Play the game, Know the game...Shape the game

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Also see :

First Person Scholar essay

<http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/play-the-game-know-the-game-shape-the-game/>

Kinephanos paper :

<http://www.kinephanos.ca/2016/football-manager/>

## Football Manager is sports management video gaming, it is not FIFA gaming

DIAPO2 Football Manager is a videogame belonging to the sports management genre. DIAPO3 When games media talk about football videogames, they often mention FIFA and Football Manager alongside one another. They are –after all– the best sellers in their category, and at first sight, they seem to have much in common. DIAPO4 Yet, although both are sports video games they are often confused even though they belong to different genres, but also, I argue, to different **cultures**.

DIAPO5 Part of this distinction stems from gameplay differences (sports management game vs sports game), but also in terms of how the game design interacts with the real world. For FIFA, both gameplay and game design are related to the relationship between football and television broadcasting. For Football Manager, those interactions between the game and the real practice of football management lie in the world of “**Big Data**” — the quantification of football and its economics.

## Football Manager is modelisation

The aim of Football Manager is to simulate a lifelong career. Its ambition is similar to a mathematical system where football players are quantified and football matches scores are resolved by systems of equations involving the highest possible number of parameters, which actually makes the game highly demanding in terms of computational power. Even though similar quantifications do exist in FIFA, they are not part of the core gaming experience. DIAPO6 On the contrary, the Football Manager gameplay resembles the work of a data analyst more than Leonel Messi dribbling with the ball filmed in close-up. To build a successful football team, the gamer has to rely on **number crunching**, on statistical analysis.

## Football Manager is culture

It is thus possible to play FIFA without being particularly interested in football. However, it is a **void** experiment to play Football Manager without interest in the “**beautiful game**.” Being unaware

of football mechanics, rules, administration or culture largely hinders a gamer's immersion. To build a tactical setup, to successfully negotiate contracts, to interact with players or agents, all of this requires an understanding of what is football in real life. DIAPO7 The sociologist Garry Crawford argues that playing Football Manager can be part of a larger football fandom cultural identity. Football fandom is not satisfied with media narratives like **magazines or television**, so playing games like Football Manager allows a more thorough construction of fan identity. The Football Manager gameplay allows a football fan to build **narratives** that are more relevant to their expertise and football culture than any other media ever could. A sport video game like FIFA achieves this only very partially, because it lacks the integration of deep football culture. FIFA's focus is on **heroes and entertainment**. Football Manager's focus is on **culture and modelisation**.

## Football Manager is database

The representations of football players (and also the clubs, leagues, coaches, etc ...) within the game are intended to be accurate quantitative representations of their real player counterparts. DIAPO8 That is to say, the model seeks to be the best possible translation of every football player—their style of play, their physical, technical and mental traits—into numbers. This quantification of **hundreds of thousands** of real football players (some of whom are playing football in obscure championships with very low media access) is the core of the reliability of this database, which is constantly being updated. It is the bedrock of the game experience. Football Manager is about quantitative modeling and the task of completing, tweaking, updating the database involves the whole gaming community. Football players in Football Manager are not heroic avatars like in FIFA: they are the numerous, anonymous, tiny quantitative representations of an entire footballing world.

## digital labor

DIAPO9 The community of millions of gamers, organized worldwide in forums and networks of so-called “researchers” participate de facto in the co-construction of a database that no organization would be able to set up. The database of the Football Manager players is thus **crowdsourced**. It is also the flagship product of a company with **sales targets**, for which the database is a key issue. DIAPO10 It is the active community of gamers who is in charge, under the hierarchy of the publishing company of the game, and through the webforums. “Head researchers” are casted and then appointed by geographic and “footballistic” divisions; they recruit « researchers » in the community or contacts on football fan forums. (I for one have the privilege of being the official researcher for a modest third-tier French club). This represents a global grid from Hong Kong to Hartlepool that no specialist in football can reach, be it a journalist, a club scout or a player's agent. This also represents a deep knowledge of the players, and a collective one, a “**wisdom of the crowds**” guaranteed by thousands of fans attending the matches of reserve or youth teams of their favorite club, producing expertise. Arguably, it also represents a form of “digital labor”, that is to say, the use of the labor of a crowd of enthusiast and organised gamers/consumers to produce value with no or feeble reward.

# double mutual shaping

## players

In recent years, the success of Football Manager's database modelling has paralleled the commercial success of the series. Some real-life football players rose to worldwide fame in real life, years after Football Manager predicted they would acquire stardom status (Nakrani, 2013).

Obviously, there are also a lot of "future star wonderkids" in Football Manager who eventually turn into anonymous limited players in actual football leagues. DIAPO11 But the striking examples of success (Lionel Messi is often cited) are enough to give Football Manager a credibility that goes beyond the gaming world and begins to be recognized in the real life football world. Within a few years, the quality of the database has acquired fame and a reputation for predicting for future talents in professional football. Some players who blossom in the real world appear to have been notorious "wonderkids" in former versions of the game, even before they are modestly renowned in real life. DIAPO12 This led to the game database to be seriously considered as a credible source of information in the real life football world. In the mid-to thousands, it was suspected that football clubs did sign young players on the basis of the Football Manager database. Nowadays, clubs admit it openly (Stuart, 2014).

## metrics

Parallel to this, "Big Data" hype is spreading gradually in the football world (Sullivan, 2016).

DIAPO13 Corporations offering comprehensive metrics to evaluate players based on data collected during the matches are flourishing. A situation arises that Joly describes as a market based "**techno scientific promise**" regime (Joly, 2013): DIAPO14 The transfers of football players in professional leagues are valued at tens of millions of euros, and the business of trading is based on an opaque rationality. Clubs' scouting departments become more and more fond of number crunching in the hope of rationalizing player investments. This is well known and well documented in the media, **but there is more**: the even more flourishing industry of sports betting is increasingly paying attention to football metrics definitions to enhance its own calculated profits. DIAPO 15 These profits depend highly on the statistical accuracy of prediction of football events outcomes. There is an enormous global financial challenge at stake, in terms of relationships between football metrics and business models.

DIAPO 16 So we have two levels of mutual shaping there : Football Manager database tries to quantify real life football players to build a consistent gameplay. The modelisation reaches predictive status and recognition in the football industry and those quantified players are now used to depict real life football players .

DIAPO17 Not only on TV but also in the world of football business : clubs buy real life players based on the Football Manager database.

But there is a deeper mutual shaping : Football Manager simulates lots of football matches thanks to a so-called "match engine", which relies on parameters extracted from the database. DIAPO18 Just like a molecular dynamics simulation, the match can then be analyzed in terms of metrics and data. DIAPO19 number of runs, number of touches, positional heat maps, and these metrics are imported from the world of data acquisition.

DIAPO20 Football Manager is actually officially linked to one of these data acquisition companies : prozone (recently absorbed by STATS). The number crunching Football Manager analysis is thus influenced by "big data" metrics and prozone benefits in return from a huge database of players **orders of magnitude** bigger than any other source.

But there is more : data acquisition relies on televised games and human operators. Some metrics are easily quantifiable. It's easy to define a pass, or a shot. Other metrics resist: It is very difficult to consistently quantify what is dribbling, even though, this is culturally one of the best known movements in football.

How will you define when a run with the ball in a match is "dribbling", and even more difficult : a successful one ? Will you define it by terrain gained ? by individual movement ? is it a duel with a victor ?

Actually, corporate data acquisition relies on human judgment to decide when there is dribbling and there is not, the rules are opaque and most probably different from one acquisition company to the other. Epistemic consistency is at stake, but it's also corporate science, based on competitive secrecy.

DIAPO 21 Yet, Football Manager does mathematically define dribbling, because, **unlike real life football data acquisition**, it measures it from a simulation (it is after all, a set of equations and parameters) and thus, dribbling definition in Football Manager may well lead to a standardization of dribbling metrics inspired from a modelisation. This is the second mutual shaping: **the shaping of metrics**.

## Values

DIAPO22 These metrics and data have of course values embedded in them. Football Manager is a very British game. Even though there is, in the discourses of the actors, a naive reductionnist commitment to design the "**most realistic simulation of football**", the whole gameworld structure and mechanics are very anglocentric.

*DIAPO23 It's well known for instance that, for the two thousands seventeen version of the game, the concerned stakeholders at the game studio decided to imagine and include ingame scenarios based on eventual Brexit that sparked controversies in the community forums.*

*Deeper than this, you can find issues in the very definitions of players or clubs structure.*

DIAPO24 For example, the wage structure of modest clubs as defined by Football Manager is completely irrelevant to the French world. In the lowest tiers of English football you can find whole teams filled with players earning as low as a few hundred pounds a month, something completely illegal in France where unions imposed a minimum wage policy "**le contrat fédéral**". In lower tiers in France, some players are contracted and others are amateurs. But Football Manager is filled with French players on a few hundreds euros a month in France, well below the mandatory minimum wage of any worker.

*Another similar issue is nationalities. Many French players are of African descent. They are defined ingame as both French and Senegalese (or Cameroonian) because they **MIGHT** respond favorably to a callup from the nation of their ancestry at some point in their career. And if they do, they are*

*automatically defined as Senegalese and not French anymore. A player may thus become "**homesick**" ingame if he feels lonely in a team even though he is surrounded by French teammates, and cohesion is a very important parameter for the manager to build a team that gels together.*

*These two examples, among others, allow to unveil how characteristics pertaining to other countries are disregarded by a British worldview embedded into a video game. A video game that came to actually define what is a real life football player, not only on the football field, but also in his employee status as a workforce or his cultural multinational identity.*

*A video game that participates also into the shaping of metrics and measures of a whole industry, the football industry, but furthermore, the mathematically-based **betting** industry.*