View from the (Virtual) Terraces: Football Fandom in Videogames

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Abstract

"Other" is a concept that is fundamental to sports: the other team, other player(s), other fans. Football fans share a camaraderie and can enthuse a tribalism (Mangan 1996) that is difficult to understand and replicate in the virtual world. Yet, that identity and fandom are expressed in virtual spaces. Who is a virtual footballer? What is fandom in virtual football? How is that fandom represented and expressed? How do real-world identities translate to the virtual? What does fandom mean in the virtual footballing context?

Football fans are commonly viewed as passionate, vociferous, and loyal (Bradley 2003). Though often portrayed negatively due to sporadic violent incidents they also represent a peaceful and positive way for fans to connect with 'otherness'. Fans can entertain (for good and bad reasons), act as ambassadors for their respective club/country and through their behaviour break down stereotypes. We are interested in how that manifests itself in the virtual world.

This paper examines virtual football players to explore expressions of identity and loyalty (club or country) amongst those who regularly play major football video games: *EA Sports FC*, *eFootball*, and *Football Manager*. As current incarnations of longstanding popular franchises (*FIFA*, *Pro Evolution Soccer*/*Winning Eleven*, and *Championship Manager*, respectively) we consider how 'otherness' affects the player base through popular perceptions and misconceptions of real football, franchise rivalry and platform popularity (Guins et al. 2022). We also reflect on 'other' player agencies, audiences, and experiences between different types of football games. Lastly, we examine how these games act as a gauge in representing real football fans and how they are used to portray different notions of self, other layers of identity and what these might mean in understanding gamer identity. We then consider how these provide comment on some of the political, social, religious and national nuances involved in football more generally.

Keywords

Football, Identity, Fandom, *FIFA*, *EA Sports FC*, *Football Manager*, *eFootball*

Introduction

Representations of fandoms and identities in football and videogames - two seemingly disparate and exclusive communities - share a common experience: 'othering' (Brons 2015). In football, fans are typically depicted as passionate, vociferous and loyal spectators (Bradley 2003) oftentimes embroiled in violent conduct and antisocial behaviour (Dunning 2000). In gaming, player audiences have a turbulent history surrounding identity and misrepresentation (Shaw 2012) but increased awareness of toxic behaviours in gaming (Rousseau 2023) often overshadow the true complexities of the "player" identity. Critical discourse on social identity between-and-across these communities has yet to be fully explored, despite their popularity: globally, football is the world's most-popular sport with around five billion spectators (FIFA 2021) while games are projected to reach three billion players by 2029 (Statista 2024).

The aim of this paper is to explore the social, cultural, and political nuances associated with football spectators and football video game players by examining the interrelationships of identity associated with these audiences. It considers classifications of fandom and characteristics of behaviours

towards football and video games and aims to synergise these through a taxonomy of identities to illustrate the complex relationships embodied by billions of people in a global community. The purpose of the research is two-fold: firstly, in classifying these relationships, the researchers challenge conventional stereotypes and 'othering' of both football spectators and video game players beyond media-based representations; secondly, the proposed taxonomy serves as a starting point for novel research into the overlapping identities of two large and interconnected communities which has been largely under-researched.

Otherness in Football

'Otherness' in football has deep-rooted connotations that are typically associated with rivalry, antagonism and aggression (Taylor 1972) and manifests through a notion of tribalism and loyalty (Mangan 1996; Bradley 2003) in which people feel a sense of place and purpose in a community much grander than themselves as individuals. That otherness is both heralded and scrutinised by the mainstream media dependent on the context, but more often than not it is anti-social behaviours before, during, and after matches (Guay 2024; Kirby 2024) that garner media attention. Academic research into football fandom has largely explored identity, camaraderie, and hooliganism prevalent in the twentieth century (Armstrong and Harris 1991; King 1997; Frosdick and Marsh 2005) whilst acknowledging the complexity of the relationships that exist amongst fans.

We generally accept that rivalries come with sport, and that they exist for a myriad of reasons, some factual and others more mythical in their reasoning. The intense rivalry that is so associated with football can be somewhat explained through the various ways that we determine our own identities. National rivalries extend from national identity and socio-geographic relationships with other nations. The oldest international fixture in football - England versus Scotland, played in 1872 - is compounded by fans of either country with feelings of nationalism, proximal geographic borders, and an understanding of their complex history. Similar reasons can be applied to many of the other long-standing rivalries: Brazil and Argentina; Netherlands and Germany; Japan and South Korea; Denmark and Sweden.

Geographic rivalries extend to club football which can also be intertwined with wider social, political, and cultural reasoning to explain some of the fiercest local derbies. In Italy, the Derby della Capitale is an intra-city rivalry contested between Roma and Lazio who share occupancy of a single stadium. This rivalry has been subject to intense scenes of fascism, anti-Semitism, and violence (Testa and Armstrong 2010). In Scotland, the bitter rivalry between supporters of Rangers and Celtic - known as the Old Firm - is more than just football rivalry and has far more to do with religion, politics, imperialism and the identity of Glasgow and its people (Bradley 2022). That rivalry has often filtered through to the players who had little connection to that history. In 1998, England's Paul Gascoigne was caught miming playing the flute (a traditional Loyalist song dating back to the 19th century) as a goal celebration at Celtic Park. In 2011, Senegalese forward El Hadji Diouf, was so riled up by the game that he was sent off, for a second bookable offence, after the final whistle (Murray 2011).

Other football rivalries can emerge through the nature of the sport's competitiveness, where teams and fans may not necessarily hold socio-cultural views towards each other, but a rivalry emerges from closely-contested sporting competition, particularly when teams are seen to compete regularly for the same trophies. The rivalry between Manchester United and Arsenal can be attributed to a competitive rivalry. Both teams placed within the top-two regularly, and their dominance of the English Premier League between the 1995-96 and 2003-04 seasons saw only these two teams winning the league. Players showed their desire for competitive bragging rights on the pitch with regular altercations, most famously between Roy Keane and Patrick Vieira, Martin Keown and Ruud van Nistelrooy, and oftentimes between the managers in Sir Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger. Rivalries based on competitiveness can naturally soften or completely dissolve if teams become less competitive: despite a continued rivalry between these two clubs, the intensity of the rivalry has somewhat quietened due to inconsistent competitiveness in respective league positions and success.

Contrary to footballing rivalries, growing evidence of prosocial behaviours between teams (national and club) and fans are emerging, particularly where commonalities and shared interests are met.

England and Greece marked the tragic passing of Greek international footballer George Baldock who spent much of his career playing in England (Leeks 2024). Testimonial matches - exhibition contests between two teams to celebrate a player's service to a team - typically see teams associated with the player for which the testimonial is taking place: for example, Sunderland (a club team) versus Republic of Ireland (a national team) in celebration of footballer Niall Quinn, who subsequently donated fundraising for the match to charity (National Football Museum n.d.). Social solidarity between rival clubs have also been on display: in Germany, football stadiums were illuminated in rainbow colours in solidarity of Hungarian LGTBQ communities during an international meeting between the two nations (Neumann 2021). These acts of communal, positive behaviours emerge through the collective identity of individuals and their understanding of wider socio-cultural value of football fandom beyond the sport's competitive nature.

Otherness in Video Game Football

The similarities and connections between football fandom and game fandom are rarely discussed. Many models for understanding video game players and their behaviours often utilise other forms of game genres to make grand assertions on player "types". For example, the widely-known Bartle taxonomy of player types (Bartle 1996) classifies player behaviours based on data from massively-multiplayer online (MMO) games and multi-user dungeon (MUD) games. Similarly, Quantic Foundry's Gamer Types (Quantic Foundry n.d.) categorise players based on their motivations, though these are represented as "classes" synonymous with role-playing games and have very little translation to sports games more generally (such as "Bounty Hunter" and "Skirmisher").

Despite this, there is a rich history overlapping the two with some of the biggest annually-released games based on football. *EA Sports FC* - previously known as the *FIFA* franchise - is considered by many as the market leader in football simulation games (Yin-Poole 2024). Publishers Electronic Arts (EA) Sports promote the game as "the future of football fandom" with multiple game modes, intelligent footballing behavioural systems, and licensing the likeness of tens of thousands of footballers and hundreds of football clubs globally (EA Newsroom 2024). Its market competitor - Konami's *eFootball* - offers a somewhat similar experience of authenticity in football simulation but through a free-to-play distribution model. The *Football Manager* series presents a management-oriented simulation in which players make decisions around club management, training, and player tactics without actively controlling the action on the pitch. Sports Interactive - the developers - promote the game as "the most true-to-life football management game on the market" (Jacobsen 2024). Despite offering alternative play experience on various gaming platforms, each game offers to players a similar purpose: to represent the authentic, simulative realities of the real-world sport.

Football video games have had a commensurate overlap with football fandom. The growth of game broadcasting and esports has led to a number of partnerships between footballing brands and game companies: the sport's global governing body FIFA announced a partnership with Konami to launch the FIFAe World Cup esports tournament (Stanton 2024). Player data and statistics represented in *Football Manager* have been used in the reporting and analysis of transfers and news stories by UK-based Sky Sports News (Sky Sports News 2015). The National Football Museum also ran a dedicated exhibition celebrating the world of football gaming (Slater 2015) highlighting their cultural significance to supporters and players alike. Despite this, representation of football video game players is lacking and results in a sense of "othering" among other game-playing communities where understanding of player behaviours is more established.

Spectator-Player Identities

Richard Giulianotti (2002) advanced four ideal types of spectator identity represented in a quadrant (Figure 1). Each type of spectatorship is categorised by two binary characteristics: a traditional/consumer axis determines "the basis of the individual's investment in a specific club" (p. 31) while a hot/cool axis explains "the different degrees to which the club is central to the individual's project of self-formation" (Giulianotti 2002).

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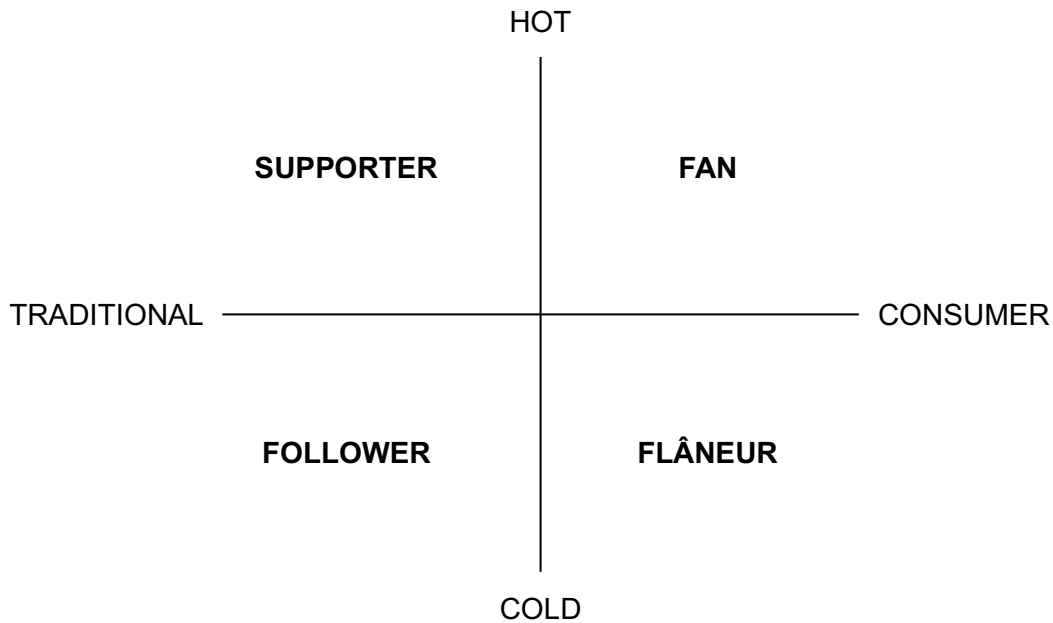
Figure 1: Spectator Identities (adapted from Giulianotti 2002, p. 31)

Supporters are the most invested and engaged spectator with a topophilic relationship to the site of the football club (affectionately referred to as their "home"). Supporters also exhibit an unwavering and permanent long-term personal, emotional, and (in some cases) financial investment in the club as well as upholding the culture and values of the club itself. The Supporter identity is most prevalent at clubs where pride of regional identity overlaps with spectators' fandom of football clubs, such as with Walsall Football Club and cultural identity in the Black Country (Lawrence 2015) and Liverpool Football Club as a reflection of Scouse identity (Rookwood 2012). In each of these cases, a strong affinity to the geographic locale and situated social culture is embodied in Supporters' fandom of football clubs and is reflected in an inferred regional meaning and sense of place.

Followers represent spectators with stronger interests in personnel, cultures, and social solidarities across a range of clubs and nations while following a favoured football club of their own. They may have relationships to a club that are based on more complex or nuanced reasons beyond geographic proximity or socio-cultural contexts, but which still feel personal. An example of this includes the Norwegian Supporters Club of Scottish-based club Stenhousemuir: what started as three men with a casual interest in a club based on the unusualness of its name ("Stenhousemuir" can be somewhat translated through Old Norse to mean "Stone House Bog") has led to an active Scandinavian community of Followers which peaked at one hundred members (Godfrey 2019).

Fans are defined as spectators with a relatively distant, unidirectional relationship to clubs and/or players resulting from hyper-commodification of the sport and its personnel as "brands". Fandom surrounding Welsh-based football club Wrexham AFC exploded under the ownership of internationally-recognisable actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McIlhenney (Herbert 2023) and the subsequent broadcasting of the *Welcome to Wrexham* documentary series (Catsam 2023) leading to an increase in social media following, celebrity support, and attendance records set for the women's side and women's domestic football in Wales (Wathan 2024).

Flâneur spectators are described as those who have depersonalised relationships to a club (or football more generally) and are more driven by cosmopolitan motivations over the intricacies of the sport or specific clubs. Interest in clubs can, for example, be driven by perspectives of fashion - where football kits and attire are viewed as an aesthetic choice - rather than their embodied representation of the club's identity and values. The national football kit adorned by Nigeria for the 2018 FIFA World Cup became a global phenomenon in terms of cultural pride and moving design trends in football kits towards bold, vibrant patterns (Steven 2018). Despite their comparatively

distant relationship and fluid affiliation with clubs, Giulianotti argues that the Flâneur is of great importance to football spectatorship in drawing economic benefits and heightened profile to clubs and the sport more generally (2002).

Video game market reports such as Newzoo's Gamer Segmentation (Pamboris 2021) consider the broader motivations and modes of engagement in which people play games agnostic to game genres, mechanics or systems providing a more helpful basis with which to frame player behaviours. The profile of gamers is divided into nine segments, each characterised with different relationships and interests to games and gaming culture (Table 1).

Player Type	Description
Ultimate Gamer	People who live and breathe games, they play all platforms, genres, and want/expect the best experience from their investment of time and money.
All-Round Enthusiast	Avid players that fit regular playtime around full-time work schedules and wider commitments and interests.
Community Gamer	People who are actively engaged with a like-minded community who have significant viewing habits and online activity despite not playing as often as others.
Solo Gamer	People who lean towards single-player games and playing *for themselves* who are also less likely to keep up with news or community activities.
Mainstream Gamer	People who play often, spend less, favour mobile platforms (over PC and consoles), and favour discounts and free-to-play options.
Time Filler	People who play casually and fit very short play sessions around busy lifestyles, using games to pass time on commutes and during breaks.
Popcorn Gamer	People who emphasise *watching* over *playing* games and also prioritise other hobbies over games.
Backseat Viewer	People who don't play games due to work and/or family commitments, but they are very happy to spectate others such as friends, family and live broadcasts.
Lapsed Gamer	People who once played games and may circumstantially have intention to play games in the future, but they do not play or watch games.

Table 1: Player Types (adapted from Pamboris 2021).

Each of these player types can realistically engage with football video games in different ways: for example, Ultimate Gamer may be driven to acquire the best players through means of purchasing content and in-game progress, whereas the Popcorn Gamer - representative of the majority of gamers - may find more enjoyment in watching live broadcasted or pre-recorded football video game footage from content creators than playing the game themselves. Additionally, as players' habits with gaming continuously evolve to align with various life circumstances - such as growing and declining interest levels in certain games (Bauckhage et al. 2012), platform choices to play games (Cai, Cebollada and Cortiñas 2022), and satisfying changing psychological and social needs through games (Vuorre et al. 2021) - so too does their perceived identity as a "gamer". Even in recent times, the identification of "casual gamers" (Juul 2012) and "streaming communities" (Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne 2014) has changed how gaming culture is understood and engaged with. As such, recognising the fluidity and adaptability in which a player's identity can change is important.

In developing our understanding of identity between football and gaming fandoms, the researchers utilise Giulianotti's spectator identity types and Newzoo's Gamer Segmentations to define the "Spectator-Player" (Figure 2), a classification of people's overlapping identity extending from their interests in football (as spectators) and football games (as players). We propose the understanding of the "Spectator-Player" as someone who engages in both the virtual and real-world footballing fandom with a fluidity that changes as their relationship to either football or gaming (or both) changes over time.
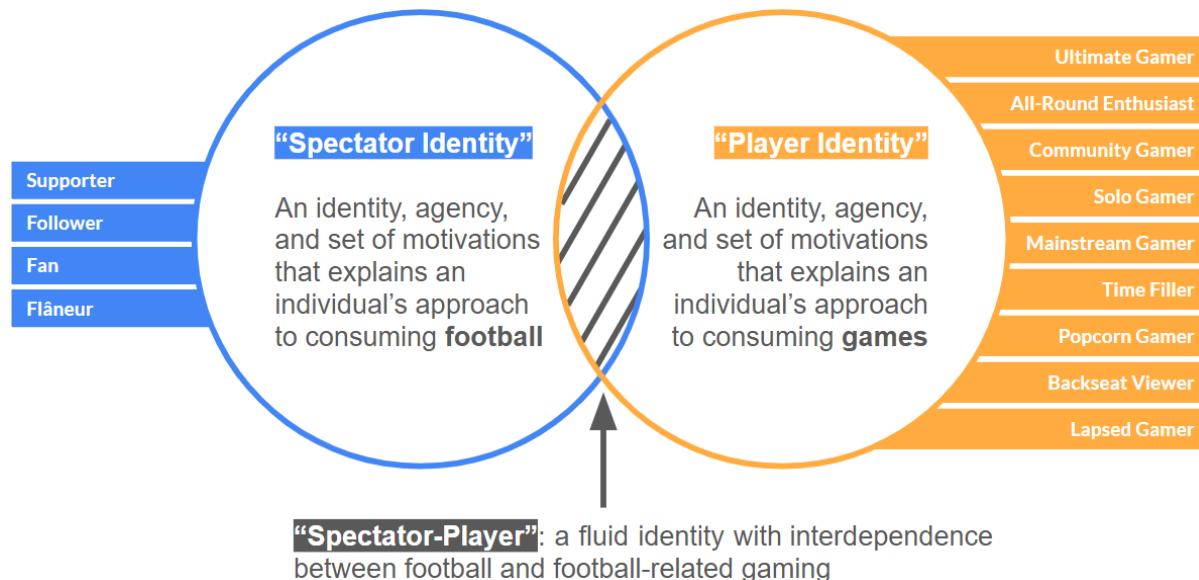

Figure 2: The Spectator-Player Identity

With four spectator identities (Giulianotti 2002) and nine player identities (Pamboris 2021) there are conceptually thirty-six possible combinations of Spectator-Player identities to be explored. There are also no critical dependencies to dictate the likeliness of an individual exhibiting a particular identity as a spectator or a player depending on their perceived identity as a player or spectator: for instance, a Supporter is no more likely to exhibit the motivations of an Ultimate Gamer as a Flaneur, and a Lapsed Gamer is equally capable of having a stronger affinity to following football than they may exhibit towards gaming. The interdependent relationship between football and football-related gaming is constantly changing based on changes to habits, perceptions, and motivations as a spectator and a player.

The ways in which the Spectator-Player identity manifests and evolves over time is illustrated by online personality Jonny Sharples, a player of *Football Manager* who has chronicled playthroughs from playing games through social media. Despite his identification as a Supporter of Newcastle United (Delaney 2020), Sharples has discussed his selection of club management - and subsequent Fan status - of Dynamo Dresden and Gateshead, the latter of which was driven by "a lovely day out in the Metro Centre once" (The Byline 2019). In one particular game session, while managing Celtic Football Club, Sharples garnered a cult online following for Ivica Strok, a fictional, game-generated player who has since been celebrated in the National Museum of Football (Sharples 2016) and has served as a campaign ambassador for the charity CALM (Crae 2017). Sharples discussed his Supporter status of Celtic and Strok while showing an intense application to gaming akin to the Ultimate Gamer in which he "spent nearly 750 hours of my life making sure Ivika Strok kept scoring [...] This had become more than a game now - this really was my life" (Sharples 2015). His acknowledgment of the game as "the world's biggest Choose Your Own Adventure book where every page has thousands of options of what to do next" (The Byline 2019) is representative of his wider interests as a Follower of football which, in turn, serves his individual interests as a Solo Gamer making such decisions based on personal preference. Antithetical to being a Solo Gamer, Sharples shows his relationship to the game as a Community Gamer with a deep appreciation of the social aspects of the game: in discussing the *Football Manager* community, he explains "say Tonton Zola Moukoko or Kerlon to the right person and it's like a secret handshake into a private member's club"

(The Byline 2019). The example of Sharples' experience with *Football Manager* is illustrative of the constantly-evolving sense of place and identity that is common among football supporters and football video game players alike.

Discussion

This research has largely been borne out of anecdotal and empirical observations from the researchers' respective long-term experiences of playing and observing various football video game titles. Initial discussions on this topic revolved around how players choose to showcase their identity and fandom through a virtual representation and how this translates to their relationship to football as a spectator. The Spectator-Player identity was developed as a result of this: an appreciation of the growing influence that fandoms of football and football video games have on each other. On closer investigation and analysis, we have identified a number of areas for further research within the growing and overlapping cultural space of sports, games, and identity.

Firstly, defining fandoms in both footballing and gaming contexts requires an appreciation that these are constantly evolving (Hognestad 2012; Dale and Green 2017) and require consistent revision. The proposal of a novel taxonomy of overlapping identities between football spectatorship and game play behaviours is based on contemporary understandings of these fandoms at the time of publication. The researchers acknowledge the need to develop and adapt the Spectator-Player identity to reflect the evolutionary realities of spectatorship and play in the context of football and football video games.

Secondly, ongoing efforts to illustrate the application of the Spectator-Player identity is encouraged. Football video games have regularly reached hundreds of millions of players through sales over a significant period of time (Batchelor 2021; Konami 2020; Sports Interactive 2024) and represent a notable proportion of the gaming community. Separate research into identity within football and games fandoms exists, but with the changing landscape of sports consumption, and the growing popularity and ubiquity of video games, there presents an opportunity to better understand how these identities manifest and overlap within real-world and virtual settings.

Finally, the researchers identify the idealistic and limiting perspective of represented behaviours and motivations in each fandom. Within the identification of football spectators, there is little scope or discourse inclusive of behaviours that represent associative phenomena to hooliganism and antisocial behaviours which persists in the sport today. Likewise, in representing player behaviours in games, there is little understanding and representation of players who are motivated to perform behaviours that are non-conforming to the intentional design and spirit of the playing community, such as cheating, "griefing", and harassment, and how this differs from intertextual references made during and after gameplay (Conway 2010). Classification and developed understanding of the broader realities of each community - and how these may overlap as part of the Spectator-Player identity - could be explored and lessons shared in how each community has managed antisocial behaviours in each setting.

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