

Chapter 72

Football Manager as a Persuasive Game for Social Identity Formation

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ABSTRACT

This case illustrates the way in which the football management simulation game, Football Manager (Sports Interactive), enhances the processes through which players formulate their social identities, which extend beyond the boundaries of gameplay itself. The case discusses the findings of my interviews with Football Manager players, which provides an in-depth examination of experiences associated with the game, both during gameplay and the way in which it functions within the wider social contexts of their lives. I discuss these findings in relation to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), through the way in which the game promotes players' sense of in-group affiliation, as well as promoting positive shared experiences between players. In this way, the current case presents an interesting insight into the social functions of the game and its role within the social narratives and identities of its players. From this, I conclude the utility of Football Manager as a persuasive game for formulating players' social identities, which may lead to further positive social impacts.

BACKGROUND

I am a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Edge Hill University. My research focuses on the psychology of digital gaming, with a particular focus on the social contexts of gameplay. Within this, I am particularly interested in the positive social and psychological impacts which digital games can provide when considering gaming as a functional part of our everyday lives.

The background to the case relates to the fact that there is currently very little understanding of the way in which specific games may be related to our everyday social experiences. In particular, issues surrounding how they may provide enjoyable social experiences, promote development of friendships, and facilitate the formation of social groups remain relatively unclear. Based on this, I was keen to investigate these important issues as part of my own research.

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Having existing connections with Football Manager players made the processes of this research relatively straightforward. The individuals who kindly took part in my interviews were very keen to share their experiences, and were willing to recommend their own friends to be suitable participants for further interviews. In fact, I had first met one of these participants; “Peter”, when he had contacted me to ask whether I could assist in taking part in a short documentary which comprised a group media project he and his group were completing for their second year of their university course. This project was aptly named “Football Manager stole my life”, in which “Peter” and friends reflected on their experiences of playing the game Football Manager, and deconstructed the issue of addiction, and their time spent playing it. Within this, I was interviewed as an expert in the area of digital games, in which insights into the social experiences of digital games comprised the main focus of the interview. It was my engagement in assisting with this project which first opened my eyes to the possibility of pursuing some research specifically in relation to this game. I therefore got in contact with “Peter” and his friends, and suggested the possibility of them “returning the favour”, in being interviewed for my own research. They happily obliged.

SETTING THE STAGE

This case describes the way in which the football management simulation game Football Manager (Sports Interactive) enhances the processes through which players formulate their social identities, which extend beyond the boundaries of gameplay. The game not only provides opportunities for players to make decisions and consider tactics, but provides social experiences in which players compete in online leagues, or can engage in network play with other players. This presents an interesting case for examining

the different social experiences associated with playing this particular digital game. That is, the direct social experiences of play (e.g., social interactions, competition) may be distinct from other those of other games, due the nature of the game features. Specifically, whereas other “e-sports” may present greater opportunities for direct competitive gameplay and interactions, Football Manager may present alternative social opportunities, such as “indirect social experiences” which occur outside of gameplay (e.g., social cohesion, conversations relating to the game).

Prior to the case described in this chapter, little research has been dedicated to specifically examining the digital game Football Manager, and how it functions within players’ everyday social experiences. In fact, to date, little research has been dedicated to examining these issues for any form of digital game. The need for further research, particularly in relation to sports games and the activity of sport more generally, is reflected in the recommendations by Leonard (2004), particularly in calling for further qualitative research to investigate such issues. Based on this assertion, I felt it was important to explore both the in-game and “outside-of-game” social experiences associated with playing Football Manager. This was intended to provide an in-depth examination of gamers’ experiences associated with the game, both during gameplay and the way in which it functioned within the wider social contexts of their lives. To achieve the aims of my research, I interviewed

Table 1. Demographics of the sample

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	FM Experience (In Years)
Susan	Female	19	2
Peter	Male	25	>5
Kirk	Male	20	4
James	Male	26	>5

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