

Theatre of (Virtual) Dreams: Exploring the Cultural Heritage Value of Stadiums in the EA FC/FIFA Franchise

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of both real-world and fictional stadiums and in Electronic Arts EA Sports FC (formerly FIFA) franchise. Stadiums in the EA FC/FIFA video game series are more than just the digital arenas for gameplay. They represent more than just fan connections to clubs but through personalization features characterize fan identity in-game and embody footballing cultural heritage, symbolizing the history, identity, and traditions of football across the globe. This research explores the cultural heritage value of these stadiums, focusing on both their role as virtual representations of real-world landmarks and as spaces of shared memories and experiences for players. The research question guiding this study is: How does the representation of stadiums in the EA FC/FIFA video game series contribute to their cultural heritage value and global significance?

EA Sports has consistently presented the game series as an 'authentic' experience. Although this is frequently used and abused for marketing purposes, for over three decades it has been EA's stated goal to create the most realistic football game (Parkin 2016). The complexity in defining how publishers, developers, marketing, and players each define 'authentic' and 'accurate' has been central to the academic discourse on historical games (Champion 2011; Elliot and Kapell 2013; Salvati and Bullinger 2013; Copplestone 2015; Chapman 2016; Stirling and Wood 2021; Authors 2020; Wright 2022). Whilst there has been considerable scholarly interest in interactive works on cultural heritage, more focus has been placed on game-adjacent interactive works, e.g. cultural heritage VR experiences and interactive narratives (Gaitatzes et al 2001;

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Gonizzi Barsanti et al 2015; Barbara et al 2021; Barbara et al 2022; Bianconi et al 2023). Scholarly work on games and cultural heritage has generally focused on games with a more obvious historical theme (Shaw 2015; Hammar 2017; Wright 2024). Less attention has been given to games like EA FC / FIFA, potentially because they are focused on the commercial aspects of selling to established fandoms rather than being focused on cultural heritage. The speed that the franchise moves at, with its annual release cycle (Guins 2022), combined with an often-changing roster of clubs and stadiums being promoted and relegated in the various leagues inevitably distance the commercial considerations away from ethical aspects of digital cultural heritage, such as the London Charter from 2009 (Beacham et al 2009). Yet, for many football fans, their first experience of the stadium of the team they support comes through video games.

Stadiums are central to the EA FC/FIFA gaming experience, serving as the backdrop for millions of matches played by users worldwide. For football fans they represent home (Charleston 2009). The digital versions meticulously replicate iconic real-world venues (such as the Bernabéu, Wembley, and La Bombonera), alongside lesser-known stadiums representing regional leagues. Through high-fidelity graphics and soundscapes, the games capture the architectural details, atmosphere, and local nuances of these arenas, fostering a sense of authenticity and place. This study examines how the virtual reconstruction of these spaces enables players to engage with and appreciate the cultural heritage of football stadiums that they may never visit in real life. The research also investigates the symbolic and emotional connections players form with virtual stadiums. Drawing on theories of digital heritage and participatory culture, the study considers how these spaces act as sites of memory, nostalgia, and identity for football fans and gamers (Wood and Gabie 2013). For many players, these stadiums are tied to personal or cultural milestones - such as a favorite team, a historic victory or the atmosphere of a childhood match. EA may not be developing these other than to demonstrate its clout as the most 'authentic' video game, but they nevertheless create a means of preserving and sharing these experiences across generations.

The paper explores the global reach of EA FC/FIFA's stadiums and their potential to democratize cultural heritage. By including stadiums from a diverse range of regions and leagues, the EA FC/FIFA series offers visibility to football cultures that might otherwise remain under-represented. However, this inclusiveness is not without limitations. Further research explores the game's tendency to prioritize high-profile stadiums from wealthier regions, raising questions about whose cultural heritage is being valued and commodified in the virtual world. The complexity of licensing may explain some of these gaps, but EA also creates a range of generic stadiums that bear a striking resemblance in location or atmosphere to stadiums that are not in the game.

Our paper concludes with the findings to date with the aim to contribute to broader discussions in heritage studies, digital humanities, and game studies by positioning the virtual stadiums as significant cultural artefacts. Currently, the virtual arenas serve as conduits for preserving some of football's legacy and potentially fostering a sense of belonging and connection amongst the worldwide community of players, as indicated by the popularity of certain clubs/ By interrogating the interplay between representation, technology, and cultural memory, the study seeks to illuminate the broader implications of video games as tools for heritage preservation and cultural exchange. This research highlights the need for greater critical attention to the

cultural value of digital spaces in popular media, advocating for their recognition as integral components of contemporary cultural heritage discourse.

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