

# **Be A Pro: A Comparative Analysis of Interactive Narratives within Sport Simulation Titles**

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Media.

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## Summary

Sport simulation titles have long been a dominant presence among the contemporary video game market. These games aim to replicate professional sports—and with increasingly realistic graphics and sophisticated motion capturing technology, these games are coming closer than ever to achieving this goal. Recently though, sport simulation titles have begun to incorporate interactive narrative features into their games. This paper presents a comparative analysis of three different narrative game modes within sport simulation titles: *Madden NFL 07*'s NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame, *FIFA 17*'s The Journey, and *NBA 2K18*'s MyCareer. These modes all involve the player creating or taking control of an avatar and playing through their career as a professional athlete. In analysing these game modes, this paper examines the narrative features within these games and ultimately how they both co-exist and interface with the games' simulation-style gameplay in order to create unique experiences. Finally, this paper identifies two conventions of this emerging genre: the role of a current or former professional athlete as a mentor, and an “ego spectrum” that a character is rated on based on choices the player makes throughout the game.

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## 1 - Introduction

When it first appeared in 1972, *Pong* famously helped launch the video game industry as we know it today, cementing itself as a cultural touchstone and one of the most influential games of all time. But *Pong* was not only the first mainstream video game; it can also be viewed as the first mainstream sports simulation title, leading the way for a genre that has developed into a powerhouse in the gaming industry.

In the *Fundamentals of Game Design*, Ernest Adams posits “all games fall along a continuum between the abstract and the representational” (36). According to Adams, abstract games have imaginary locations and rules, and do not replicate real world events. Representational games are the opposite, aiming to offer authentic simulations that mimic reality (36). With this in mind, *Pong* can be considered an abstract version of table tennis, with similar rules and goals, yet a completely abstract location and visual design. Since the days of *Pong*, sports simulations have come to be increasingly representational, utilizing the continued development of graphics and motion capturing technology in order to recreate professional sports as closely as possible.

Today, sport simulation games provide players with the opportunity to take control of their favourite professional athletes and participate in games and events they are used to watching on television. Rolf Kretschmann describes these games as having “the aim to replicate (or to simulate) real-life situations within the world of sports in a computer or video game. This simulation is based on real life and details as many essentials and key features possible that a specific sport has in reality” (68).

As they have developed over the years to this increasingly realistic depiction, sport simulations have also grown into a dominant presence in the video game market. In 1988, American football game *John Madden Football* was released for the Apple II computer (Hruby). The game featured a full 22 players on screen at a time, 11 each on offence and



defence. Previously, football simulation titles featured fewer players, such as *RealSports Football* (1982) for the Atari 2600, which had five players on each side of the ball. Today, the *Madden* franchise has sold more than 100 million copies worldwide and generated more than \$4 billion in revenue (Gaudiosi). From 2001-2006, *Madden* had the best-selling game of the year four times (Webb). EA Sports' *FIFA* franchise, which made its debut in 1993, is now the best-selling sports game of all time, having sold more than 260 million copies to date ("EA SPORTS FIFA"). Konami's *Pro Evolution Soccer*, another soccer simulation game, has also moved more than 100 million copies worldwide ("PES Reaches 100 Million Sold Milestone"). Meanwhile, 2K Sports' *NBA 2K* franchise, which premiered in 1999, is nearing the 100 million mark itself, having sold more than 90 million copies as of February 2019 ("Take-Two Interactive").

These games have made a large cultural impact beyond just raw sales numbers too. Artists like Jay-Z, Pharell, Imagine Dragons and Travis Scott have all worked with *NBA2K* titles to help curate the games' soundtracks. In March 2019, Snoop Dogg created his own *Madden NFL 2019* e-sports league, "Gangsta Gaming League" (Chalk). Meanwhile, the National Basketball Association (NBA) has partnered with 2K to create the *NBA 2K League*, a professional e-sports league with 21 teams based out of NBA cities. Similarly, the National Hockey League (NHL) and EA Sports teamed up to create the *NHL Gaming World Championship*, which offers a prize pool of \$100,000 to the tournament's six finalists.

Among the gaming community, however, popular sports titles are sometimes viewed as money-printing machines putting out the same game each year with a few added tweaks and a few new faces. Yet, since around the mid-2000s, many of the most popular sport simulation titles have begun investing in single-player interactive narrative modes within their games. These narrative "career modes" see players create or assume the role of a character within the game and play through their career as a professional athlete.

In one of the first large-scale studies of sports video game players, Abraham Stein, Konstantin Mitgutsch and Mia Consalvo found that about 95 per cent of the approximately 1,700 people they surveyed had created a playable character in a sports game, while 87 per cent of respondents had created themselves as a playable character (353). These numbers demonstrate the demand that is driving the creation and evolution of these RPG-like narratives within sport simulations.

Yet despite the cultural impact and popularity of these games, within the world of game studies, “little attention has been given to understand sports video games or the players who engage with them” (Stein et al. 346).

## **1.2 - Research question**

This paper examines the function of interactive narrative features within sport simulation titles by analysing how they work and how they interface with the genre’s traditional simulation gameplay.

In order to address this question, the paper presents a comparative analysis of three separate sport simulation narrative career modes; *Madden NFL 07*’s NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame, *FIFA 17*’s The Journey, and *NBA 2K18*’s MyCareer. These three titles were chosen to form representative selection of games within the genre that present unique design decisions in terms of gameplay and narrative. These three titles also represent three separate sports, and are examples of both older and contemporary contributions to this genre.

For each title, we will examine the narrative; in particular how choice is presented in each game, along with other unique elements being used that set these games apart from their peers. We will also examine how, if at all, typical simulation-style gameplay co-exists with these narratives. Finally, the paper will examine how narrative features interface with

simulation gameplay to create unique in-game experiences.

### **1.3 – Definitions**

In order to avoid ambiguity, in this paper the term “player” will refer to the person playing a game. The terms “character” and “avatar” will refer to the individual within the game that the player is controlling. The term “match” will be used when describing a sports competition, while the term “game” will refer to video games.

### **1.4 – Document Roadmap**

In Chapter 2, this paper will present an analysis of the NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame game mode in EA Sports’ *Madden NFL 07*.

Chapter 3 will analyse The Journey game mode in EA Sports’ *FIFA 17*.

Chapter 4 will analyse the MyCareer game mode in 2K Sports’ *NBA 2K18*.

Chapter 5 will present a comparative analysis of the three games with a view of identifying conventions of the genre.

Finally, Chapter 6 will conclude and offer directions for future work.

## **2 – An analysis of *Madden NFL 07*’s NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame**

EA Sports’ *Madden NFL* franchise started its foray into narrative game modes with their 2006 title’s NFL Superstar mode. For the first time in the history of the franchise, this game mode allowed players to create a character and play through their entire career

from draft day to retirement. This game mode had unique features that helped develop a simple narrative around the career of the player's avatar. Yet, the matches within the game mode were no different from *Madden*'s typical simulation style of gameplay. In the franchise's subsequent instalment, *Madden NFL 07*, the game enhanced its NFL Superstar mode to create a more immersive experience with NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame by adding a clear motivation that drives the narrative and a shift in perspective that results in more unique and engaging gameplay.

## 2.1 - Story

*Madden NFL 07*'s NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame mode begins with the player creating an avatar to play as. When the player selects an avatar, they choose from an endless list of randomly generated characters whose positions and backgrounds differ. Each avatar that the player can select has a mother and father with different jobs, hobbies and IQ (Figure 2.1). The background of the avatar that the player selects influences the talent level and skills of their character. For example, if the avatar's father was a former Hall of Fame NFL player, that will increase the rating of the player's character. If the parents both have high IQs, it will lead to the player's character having high "Awareness" stats.



Figure 2.1: In NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame, the job, hobbies and IQ of your avatar's parents all impact the character's rating. | Courtesy Etmos Vier, Youtube

Once the player has customized the avatar they have selected they then experience the game's only cut scene, in which a character walks up the steps of the NFL's Hall of Fame as the screen reads, "More than 18,000 players have worn an NFL uniform...yet less than 250 have been enshrined in the Hall of Fame...Are you good enough to join these hallowed few?" This scene clearly lays out the motivation that is meant to underscore the game mode's narrative. The player's goal in Superstar is to make it into the Hall of Fame; all that plays out following this cut scene is a part of that journey.

After the cut scene, players enter their character's home, which acts as a hub for all of the mode's different features. The home is a static picture of an apartment that contains a computer, calendar, phone, mirror, map and handbook. The player can hover over each of these items with their controller in order to access them. The player's home changes as they continue through the game. What starts as an apartment becomes a loft, and later a mansion as the player progresses and their character makes money off of new contracts and sponsorships.

Initially, players have to go through training, a press interview, and an IQ test in order to get drafted into the NFL. The better they perform in the training sessions and IQ test, the higher they will get selected in the draft and the higher they will be rated.

Once drafted, the player progresses through the career of their character. They have the option to play in matches every week or simulate the outcome. The effect of simulating versus playing in matches affects the avatar's progression. The more matches are played, the more influence points the player will gain, which will help increase their character's rating faster. As the player progresses through the game, their character is asked to do interviews, star in movies, endorse products and other decisions relating to their career. At any time the player can decide to retire from their career, otherwise the game will randomly select a retirement day when your character reaches an accurate NFL retirement age. Whenever the player retires, the story ends and the player is then shown

whether or not they have made the Hall of Fame, which is based on their performance and influence rating throughout their entire career.

## 2.2 - Choice

The main way that choice is presented in *NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame* is through interviews. Throughout the mode, players can take part in interviews with the press. When taking part in these interviews, players are presented with a series of questions and three answers that they can select from each time. The answers available to the player typically offer one selfish and bombastic response, one response that presents a team-first mentality, and one that is rather neutral. The answers the player gives during interviews are a determining factor in altering the player's in-game personality, which *Madden* refers to as "ego."

## 2.3 - Ego

In many fantasy RPGs, such as the *Fable* series or *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, players are presented with choices that help determine whether their character becomes good or evil. These games, "have a great potential to provide immersive experiences in fantasy stories of good and evil. As we become agents within their complex narrative arcs, we can develop skills of moral perception and decision making" (Moore, 74). Sports simulations do not offer the same good versus evil, eucatastrophic-type of tales as these games, yet their narrative game modes still factor in choices to determine aspects of a personality. To achieve this, *Superstar* and many other narrative modes within sports simulations replace this good versus evil dynamic with an ego-driven spectrum that focuses on selfish versus selfless choices. On a basic level, this spectrum fits stereotypes seen in modern professional sports. Canned quotes and uncontroversial, generic statements are common when watching, listening or reading athlete interviews, yet at the time *Madden NFL 07* was released, players like Cincinnati Bengals and Dallas Cowboys

receivers Chad Johnson and Terrell Owens were famous for their brash comments and antics both on and off the field (Golokhov).

The player can track their ego throughout Superstar on their character's in-game computer. The character's ego is shown through a silhouette of a football player that fills with either red or green colour (Figure 2.2). The player will gain negative ego points and the silhouette will fill with red when they make cocky, selfish choices, and vice-versa. But the player's ego is more than just a silhouette on screen. In Superstar, the player's ego can have a significant impact on how the matches within the mode are played. Over the course of a match, players earn influence points based on how they perform during each play. Before each time the player's character takes the field, the player is allowed to allocate their influence points to different personal and team stats. A player with a high negative ego rating will not be able to give points to as many teammates as a player with a positive ego rating. A player with a negative ego rating will also lose more influence points when they make a poor play than their positive ego counterpart. This means that a player's ego has an effect on not only how they perform within matches, but in how their team as a whole performs as well.

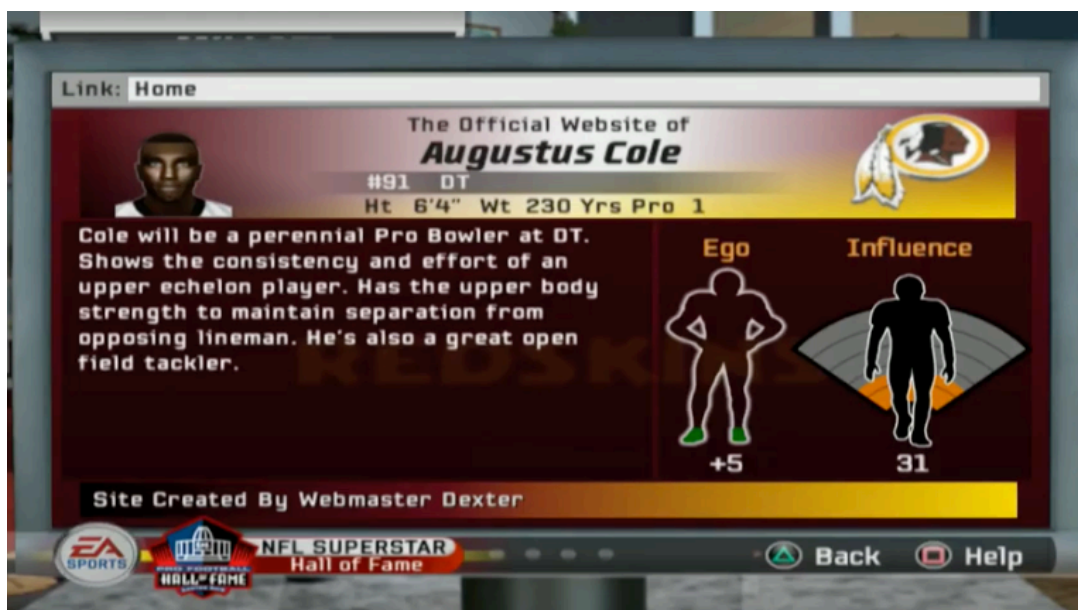


Figure 2.2: Players can track their character's ego by checking their in-game computer. | Courtesy Etmos Vier, Youtube

## 2.4 - Influence

Players gain influence points based on their performance in matches and their career in general. Throughout Superstar, the player will earn different “roles” based on their playing style in matches. For instance, if a player is a wide receiver who catches a lot of long passes, they will earn the “Burner” role. The roles are awarded outside of matches, but players utilize them while they are playing in matches. As mentioned above, the player can allocate influence points to themselves and teammates every time they are about to step onto the field. The different positions and statistics they can allocate these points to are based on the roles they have earned. For example, if a player has earned the aforementioned Burner role, they can use their influence points to increase their own character’s acceleration stats. How many points they have to reward is based on how they are performing in that match. Every time the player takes the field, any points they have awarded previously resets and the player gets to choose once more which role and positions they want to give points to.

## 2.5 – Perspective

One of the main ways in which *Madden NFL 07*’s NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame mode adapted from the previous year’s iteration to create a more unique, immersive experience was by changing the player’s perspective when their character was in a match. Typically, the *Madden* series’ default view in gameplay is a wide camera angle positioned behind the offensive team, which allows players to see all the players on the field. In *Madden NFL 07*’s Superstar mode, the camera angle changes to focus on the player’s character. In this mode, the camera is positioned behind the player, no matter if their character is on offence or defence. The camera is also considerably closer to the player compared to the game’s default view. This leads to a significantly different gameplay experience, as the player cannot see what all of their teammates are doing, they can only focus on their own actions. Both the default and Superstar mode view are third-person perspectives, but, in essence, the difference is that in the default view the player is a fly on the wall following



the match at hand, whereas in Superstars view the player is a fly on a wall that follows only their character. To heighten this personalized sense even further, when playing in Superstar the player also has no control over which plays can be called. Plays are automatically chosen and displayed on screen before every snap. If the player is playing as a running back and a passing play is called, they will have to wait longer for a chance to demonstrate their running skills. When the player's character is not on the field, the player has the opportunity to either simulate until their character takes the field, or to play the match in typical non-Superstar mode *Madden* style until their player comes back on.

## **2.6 - Critique**

In its second ever career mode instalment, *Madden NFL 07's* NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame improved upon the previous year's NFL Superstar mode to create a more immersive experience. The Hall of Fame motivation that the game added gives players a clear goal to work towards, and one which they are given closure on when they reach the end of their character's career.

The game's ego meter is an influential feature that has since been adapted by other games within the genre. Not only this, the ego meter effectively interfaces with the simulation gameplay, providing players with tangible repercussions for choices they make in the game's more narrative-focused elements.

The shift in perspective to focus on the player's avatar offers a unique gameplay experience compared to the rest of *Madden NFL 07*. While being locked on to one avatar and not being able to control coaching decisions (e.g. play calling, timeouts, etc.) may frustrate some, to those looking for a more realistic experience these changes help to enhance the importance of the character's performance every time they are on the field.

At the end of the day, *Madden NFL 07*'s NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame mode offers a simple narrative when compared to *The Journey* and *MyCareer*. Yet the game's simpler design in the end gives the player more control in how their avatar's career unfolds. Despite the narrative's simplicity, the player's choices within that narrative are better able to interface with the game's simulation style.

### **3 – An analysis of *FIFA 17*'s *The Journey***

Released in September 2016, EA Sports' *FIFA 17* game introduced an interactive narrative game mode, *The Journey*, into the franchise. Previous instalments of the game had career modes that allowed players to create an avatar and control their career, which included some unique elements like sponsorships and email interactions. But *FIFA 17*'s *The Journey* moved further beyond *FIFA*'s traditional simulation gameplay to create an interactive narrative.

#### **3.1 - Story**

In *The Journey*, players engage in the beginning of English soccer star Alex Hunter's professional career. Alex is first shown in the game as a 10-year-old during a cut scene where he is playing in a youth soccer championship match. The scene introduces other important characters in the game—including Alex's mother, father, grandfather and best friend/teammate Gareth Walker—while also laying the groundwork for some of the story's main tension (Alex's mother and father have an intense argument on the side lines). The scene culminates with the player taking control of Alex during the game's deciding penalty kick.

Alex Hunter is the grandson of Jim Hunter, a former Premier League star. Alex's father also played in the Premier League, but injuries forced him out of the game. Alex's father left him and his mother when Alex was a child, partially due to resentment over how his

career ended. Throughout the game Alex struggles with the lack of his father's presence as his own career is beginning to blossom.

After the game's opening cut scene and credit sequence, the player is brought to present day, seven years later, when Alex and his best friend Gareth are going off to compete in "exit trials." Here, the player completes drills and scrimmages<sup>1</sup> with the goal of gaining Alex a Premier League contract. The drills and scrimmages that the player competes in are all regular simulation features of the *FIFA* series that the player can access outside of this game mode.

After the trials, Alex is offered a contract in the Premier League, and is given the choice of which club he wants to play for. After choosing a team, Alex finds out that Gareth has signed with the same club as well. The player also finds out that whatever squad Alex selects is the team that his grandfather used to play for. Once a team has been picked, Alex plays in several games and training sessions. Eventually, one of soccer's biggest stars signs with Alex's club. Depending on the position and team the player selects, the star that signs with their team will either be Harry Kane, Angel Dimarria, Marcel Reus or James Rodriguez. These players all voice their own avatars in the game, and no matter which one joins your club, all of these stars will appear in cut scene cameos at some point during *The Journey*. This signing results in Alex losing playing time in favour of the new star. Because of this move, Alex is loaned out to a team in the EFL Championship, which is a tier below the Premier League. The player is given three teams (Norwich City, Newcastle, Aston Villa) they can pick from to play out their loan with.

While in the lower division, Alex has the opportunity to gain more playing time, builds a friendship with former rival Danny Williams, and watches as Gareth starts acting arrogant and unruly in the Premier League because of his status and results. Eventually, Alex earns a spot back on his Premier League team and Gareth demands to be transferred

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<sup>1</sup> During the exit trials, the player is tested on their passing, shooting, ball control and defence before taking part in a match with other AI characters at the trials, including their friend Gareth.

to a new club because of disgruntlement with the team's manager. If the player wins enough games once Alex re-joins his Premier League squad, *The Journey* reaches its climax—the FA Cup Final between Alex and Gareth's teams. After the FA Cup Final match is played, the game mode ends with a cut scene suggesting that Alex has been selected to England's national team for the upcoming 2018 World Cup—a cliff-hanger ending that sets the stage for the continuation of the story mode in the following year's instalment of the game.

While the game mode's interactive story elements all happen outside of its simulation-style gameplay, there are points within the game where the two interact. Most notably this happens through the in-game commentary that accompanies every different game played in *FIFA*. In *The Journey*, the commentators often refer to Alex and describe events or progressions in his story. For instance, when Alex plays Gareth's team for the first time, the commentators mention the feud between the two as Alex is playing in the match. At various points during games the commentators will discuss Alex's accomplishments, his famous grandfather, his upbringing, and other elements of the story.

### **3.2 – Choice**

Throughout *The Journey*, players are able to influence how Alex's career plays out not only through traditional *FIFA* simulation gameplay, but also through choices made during conversations and post-game interviews. Whenever a choice appears in the game, the player has to select from one of three paraphrased responses that display on a dialogue wheel at the bottom of the screen. Much like the dialogue choices in BioWare's *Mass Effect* series, *The Journey* offers players a voyeuristic view of these conversations. The responses that players select are not exactly what Alex will say in the scene, they are more paraphrases of what his general response will be. The player also sees Alex say the dialogue option they have chosen rather than only seeing a response from the character Alex is interacting with. This voyeuristic design allows players to “influence a scene as opposed to directly influence the playing character” (Troisi).

Each time a choice appears in *The Journey*, the player is able to pick between a “fiery”, “balanced,” or “cool” response. Also similar to *Mass Effect*, there is an indication as to which type of response the player is selecting. In *Mass Effect*, as Troisi explains, the nature of a response is indicated by its position on the dialogue wheel (for example, friendly responses are placed as the top left option on the wheel). In *The Journey*, there is an icon beside each of the three dialogue options to indicate the response type. Unlike in *Mass Effect*, the status of Alex’s personality is shown every time the player makes a choice (Figure 3.1). This feature allows players to track their responses and see how much of an effect they actually have on Alex’s overall personality. The personality bar in *The Journey* is similar to the Light and Dark meter in BioWare’s *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Figure 3.2). In this game, players’ dialogue choices dictate whether their character will become a Sith (evil) or a Jedi (good). The player can track their progress towards the light (good) or dark (evil) side through a sliding scale in the game’s menu, which is affected by the dialogue choices made throughout the game.



Figure 3.1: Players can track Alex’s personality after each response they give. Each of the three types of response have a corresponding icon.



Figure 3.2: *Knights of the Old Republic* contains a meter that measures whether a player is making good or evil choices. | Courtesy StrategyWiki.org

In *The Journey*, the personality meter develops throughout the game in direct response to these choices made in conversations and interviews. The status of Alex's personality can alter his relationships with other characters and the size of his social media following. For example, if Alex develops a fiery personality, he will become more popular and attract more followers on his social media feed within the game. The more followers you have in the game, the more sponsorship opportunities you get. Apart from these factors, which primarily carry weight during cut scenes, Alex's personality also can have a direct impact on the game mode's simulation gameplay. The team's manager often disapproves of fiery interview responses, meaning a cooler personality type will earn greater trust from Alex's manager, thereby resulting in more playing time during games.

Despite this impact, the main factor that determines Alex's playing time is the player's success in games and training sessions. If the player is successful in simulation gameplay, they will get a spot in the starting lineup and plenty of playing time no matter the nature of their personality. As long as you are playing well, you are free to respond to people however you please during conversation without fear of repercussion. In fact, performance in the simulation aspects of the game mode is the biggest influence in how the entire narrative plays out. The narrative follows a mostly linear, gauntlet-style structure (Ashwell). The only way for the narrative to end early is through poor in-game

performance, which results in Alex being released from his contract. Meanwhile, good performance in games will lead to team victories, which changes the outcome of the game's climactic FA Cup Final.

### **3.3 - Perspective**

*FIFA*'s typical gameplay has the player controlling an entire team. This includes not only how characters perform on the field, but also managerial tasks such as substitutions, schemes and tactical deployment. The player's default view during gameplay is the same as the view of a soccer game broadcast on TV, although the player has the option to switch the camera angle in the game's pause menu. In *The Journey*, before each match players are able to select whether they want to control the whole team, as is regular *FIFA* style, or "immerse yourself into the story" by controlling only Alex throughout the game.

Controlling the whole team during a match offers the traditional *FIFA* gameplay described above, minus the managerial components that allow for control over substitutions and in-game tactics. Choosing to play as Alex leads to a few different controls from typical simulation play as well; for example, when teammates have the ball players can call for the ball passed to them. The default in-game view when controlling Alex is no different from the view when controlling the whole team. This is different from *FIFA 15*'s similar player career mode, in which players could create their own custom avatar and play out their career, starting in lower levels and working their way to the game's top clubs. *FIFA 15* introduced a unique default camera angle to this mode that reflected the change in gameplay and perspective from controlling an entire team to just one character. This camera view is dynamic and positioned behind the player-controlled avatar. When the player's character has the ball or is close to the ball, the camera is more tightly zoomed in and focused on the character. When the ball is far away from the avatar, the camera zooms out to give the player a better view of what their teammates are doing on the field.

### **3.4 - Critique**

*FIFA 17*'s The Journey mode is a unique blend of interactivity and narrative into a typical sports simulation game, and is a promising start to a trilogy following the same narrative in the franchises following two titles. The Journey's narrative cut scenes present the player with plenty of chances to make decisions. This helps to connect the game mode's story with the simulation gameplay that drives that narrative forward. However, keeping this in mind, there is still an overall lack of impact from the choices made in The Journey. Hong Yu and Mark O. Riedl define the primary goal of an interactive narrative as the ability "to make players feel like they are part of a coherent unfolding story while also affording them the opportunity to act in a way that can change the direction or outcome of the story" (174). In The Journey, altering the direction of the story mainly comes from performance in the simulation aspects of the game, rather than from interactive choices made during the game's narrative-focused scenes. Choices do influence certain parts of the game (e.g. how many followers you have on social media, how many sponsorship opportunities you get), but ultimately the only way to change the story's climax is by either winning, losing, or not making it to the climactic FA Cup final, which is determined ultimately by gameplay and not by choice.

## **4 – An analysis of *NBA 2K18*'s MyCareer**

In their 2010 title, 2K Sports' NBA series introduced their first create-a-player mode, titled MyPlayer, which allowed players to create a custom character and play out their career. Initially, MyPlayer's gameplay was not significantly different from the typical *NBA 2K* experience apart from a different camera angle. However, in the years since, *NBA 2K* has developed these game modes into larger narratives that move beyond just traditional simulation-style gameplay. In recent years, the franchise has employed many famous names to voice roles in their annual narrative modes, such as Michael B. Jordan, who plays the main character's initial rival and later best friend in *NBA 2K17*. Along with



famous actors, notably in *NBA 2K16* Spike Lee directed the title's narrative player mode, *Livin' Da Dream*. Released in September 2017, *NBA 2K18*'s MyCareer mode added a unique open world element to the series' interactive narrative.

#### 4.1 - Story

Upon first installing *NBA 2K18*, players have to create an avatar. This avatar acts as the conduit for the player in MyCareer. *NBA 2K18*'s MyCareer mode opens with a title sequence that sees the player's avatar walking around their "neighbourhood" to their local outdoor asphalt "blacktop" court. Even though the player gives their avatar a name when they first create him, in MyCareer their avatar is given the nickname DJ, which everyone refers to him as throughout the game.

After the title sequence, the player finds DJ attending a local street ball tournament. Through early cut scene interactions, the player finds out that DJ is a promising basketball player who quit the sport for a few years to try and pursue a career in music (hence the nickname).

DJ is asked to fill out a registration form, in which the player can specify body details (weight, height, wingspan) and the position they want their avatar to play in their career. The weight, body and positional details will have an effect on the style of play and the skills the player's character can excel at and improve in the most throughout their career.

After completing registration, the player is given navigational control of their character. They can explore the space and walk to the courts where the tournament is taking place.

It is at this point that the player is given their first narrative choice in the game. In a cut scene, DJ is approached by a NPC named "ATM," and has the option to "be friendly" or "push back" in their ensuing conversation. This response determines whether ATM will

be a friend and teammate or a rival and opponent throughout the course of the tournament.

The player's initial goal is to win three games and make it to the tournament's "Showdown Game," which includes only the 10 best players from the tournament. This outcome is achieved no matter how the player performs in any of the tournament's initial three games.

After completing the tournament, DJ is approached by an NBA team scout, and so kicks off the main portion of the story. DJ has to find an agent and play in some try-out scrimmages before officially starting his career as an NBA pro. In the early part of his professional career, DJ builds a relationship with teammate "Shammy Wells," the only other fictional NBA player in the game.

The rest of the story follows DJ's career through his rookie season. The player progresses through the story and season by playing matches. Before and after matches there are frequent cut-scenes that develop DJ's relationship with Shammy and other characters in the game. As the season progresses, DJ builds friendships with other NBA stars such as Paul George and Isaiah Thomas.

There is no conclusion to the narrative. After DJ's rookie season is finished, so do the cut-scenes. There are cut-scenes for special events, such as winning the NBA Championship, but even in that scene there is no conclusion to the narrative.

According to Marie-Laure Ryan:

The combination of narrativity and interactivity oscillates between two forms: the narrative game, in which narrative meaning is subordinated to the player's actions, and the playable story, in which the players actions are subordinated to narrative meaning.

Or, to put it differently, in a narrative game, story is meant to enhance gameplay, while in a playable story, gameplay is meant to produce a story (45).

By Ryan's definitions, 2k18's MyCareer mode fits the mould of both a "narrative game" and a "playable story." The Neighbourhood setting and the relationships built through the game's cut scenes and structure enhance the gameplay. And at the end of the day, the mode uses the same game controls seen outside the MyCareer mode; meaning the narrative and interactive features add story to what would otherwise be a traditional gameplay experience. But even with these elements, MyCareer still also fulfils some of Ryan's definition of playable story, especially more so than either *Madden NFL 07* or *FIFA 17*. Even though the cut-scenes and choices the player can experience in the game are limited to DJ's rookie season, MyCareer mode can still be played for as long as the player decides. While there is a goal to have your avatar reach a 99 rating, there is no way to beat the game. If your avatar does reach that 99 rating, the game does not stop there. A player's character could reach a rating of 99, surpass all of the cut scenes and narrative engrained in the mode, but still play it in order to continue the success of the career that the cinematic story has facilitated; continuing to play in games, get sponsorships and play out the mode's multiplayer elements. The player can continue to explore The Neighbourhood environment, changing their hair and style as they see fit, even after they play through the narrative arc. If played in this way, the narrative and interactive features could create a story from the outset that the player is immersed in, so much so that they decide to continue the story on their own terms once some of the interactive elements of the mode expire.

#### **4.2 - The Neighbourhood**

One of the features that sets 2K18's MyCareer mode apart from previous 2K instalments and from other similar sport simulation game modes is its setting of The Neighbourhood. The Neighbourhood is an open world space, which acts as a hub for the game's MyCareer mode and the player's avatar in general. Players navigate their character throughout The

Neighbourhood and have access to select areas and buildings that are core to the game mode's narrative arc and wider multiplayer gameplay. Along with places essential to MyCareer's main story arc (the team practice facility, DJ's apartment, the recording studio, his agent's office, etc.), there are also several buildings in The Neighbourhood used for multiplayer gameplay. There is the 2K Zone building, in which players can play mini games by themselves or against other online players; there is a barber shop, tattoo parlour, and apparel stores where players can change the look and style of their avatar; a Gatorade-branded training facility where players can upgrade their avatar's stats; a blacktop court and a stadium where players can team up and play against other online competitors. Because of all these features, The Neighbourhood allows players to choose to follow the game's narrative arc, or to navigate the space and focus on multiplayer, non-narrative aspects of the game mode. The Neighbourhood is populated with other online players and their avatars (Figure 4.1), but a player's character can not interact with other online avatars apart from simple emotes. The Neighbourhood is reminiscent of a smaller-scale *Grand Theft Auto* style of map in that it gives the player the option of participating in online matches, playing mini games, customizing their character's style, increasing their rating, or making decisions that will progress the MyCareer narrative arc.



Figure 4.1: The Neighbourhood's open-world setting is populated with other online players, yet avatars have little ability to interact with one another.

The introduction of an open world setting in *NBA 2K18* distinguishes it from other sports simulation games and their narrative game modes. In *Madden NFL 07*, the player was placed inside their character's home, but the home was a static background image. The player navigates the space in *Madden NFL 07* by hovering over certain objects (cellphone, map, etc) in the room. They are not able to see their character physically navigate the space.

However, despite The Neighbourhood developing a unique open-world concept within a sports simulation, the feature has been widely criticized for heavily promoting microtransactions and establishing a pay-to-win environment. MyCareer's only resource is virtual currency (VC). A player earns VC by playing in matches, online play, mini games and training. In The Neighbourhood, VC is spent on avatar clothing, tattoos, hair cuts and most importantly on increasing the character's attributes, which in turn increases their overall rating. The player's avatar starts with a rating of 60 overall, and can reach a maximum rating of 99. In addition to earning VC within the game, players can also buy packs of VC online. Critics have said that earning enough VC to significantly raise the rating of a player's character is too long a process, which as a result pushes players to spend money in order to quickly increase their rating. In a critique of *2K18*'s VC system, Kotaku's Gita Jackson writes, "the overall sentiment online appears to be that *2K18* feels more predatory than previous games in the series. One fan estimated that in order to get to an overall rating of 86 and not spend any money, you'd have to play over 200 games" (Jackson). The criticism over the nature of VC was prominent enough that it garnered a response from Take-Two CEO Strauss Zelnick, who told *Gamespot* "we are concerned about any perception, any negative feedback .. and we're taking it really seriously" (Makuch).

The effect this microtransaction-laden environment has on MyCareer's narrative is unclear. A player does not need to upgrade their rating for the game's story to progress, yet the story's arc does suggest that your character is becoming a star in the league. If your

avatar's rating is around 60 overall, it is hard to perform like a star in matches. In addition to this, certain features that are meant to accent the game, such as tattoos for a player's avatar, cannot be unlocked until your character reaches a rating of 70 overall. This ultimately lessens the player's control over their character's customization, which can lead to a less immersive experience.

Along with the pay-to-win culture of MyCareer, there is also an excessive amount of branded content within The Neighbourhood and the MyCareer story. While navigating The Neighbourhood, the player has access to the Gatorade Training Facility, where they can buy Gatorade drinks and energy bars in order to boost their "Turbo" attribute for their next match. Players can shop at the NBA Store and Foot Locker for new avatar clothing. There are Nike and Mitchell & Ness billboards scattered around The Neighbourhood, and while navigating through the open world the player can choose to put on DJ's JVC headphones and listen to the game's soundtrack as opposed to the setting's regular ambient noise. Brands are even integrated into the game's cut scenes (Figure 3.2). How this branded content affects MyCareer's story may depend on the player. While to some the amount of brands and companies that appear within the game mode may be reminiscent of *Wayne's World's* famous product placement scene, perhaps the amount of branding in MyCareer accurately reflects the real world, and in particular the life of professional athletes, who are subjected to sponsorships, branding and the like on a larger scale than most. When analysing the interactive game *Heavy Rain*, Daniel and Sydney Homan determine that the presence of small, everyday tasks in interactive narratives are "crucial to establishing real emotional connections between the gamer and his onscreen representative" (179). For some, small tasks and events such as drinking Gatorade or watching a friend eat an actual brand-name cereal may enhance the realism in what ultimately is a simulation title, while also building a connection between the player and MyCareer's story.



Figure 4.2: *NBA 2K18*'s MyCareer mode is filled with branded content and product placement.

### 4.3 – Choice

Throughout the game mode the player is presented with choices in two different fashions. Firstly, when in conversations with other characters and the player is presented with a choice, a dialogue wheel appears at the bottom of the screen, normally offering two different options for how the player can respond. This type of choice will generally only appear once, if at all, in a conversation, and will only offer the player a choice as to the general way they want to approach their answer. For example, when doing a radio interview after a game, the player is given the choice to answer “confidently” or “carefully” (Figure 4.3). This choice dictates all responses given over the course of the entire interview. The player chooses only the general direction to take the interview, and the result plays out in the remainder of the cut scene.



Figure 4.3: Players are often given the choice of cocky versus humble dialogue options in MyCareer. | Courtesy Chris Smoove, YouTube

The second way that choice is presented is over the phone. In the game, players can access DJ's phone, which allows them to reply to texts, check their social media, and invite friends<sup>2</sup> over to train with him (Figure 4.4). When DJ receives a text from a NPC, the player is presented with a list of responses to choose from. In the case of the phone, unlike the choices that appear during conversations, the replies that the player selects are exactly as they appear when the character is first presented with the choice to respond. The player will often have to reply several times per conversation over text. The player is never able to reach out to one of their contacts through the texting function; they are only ever able to respond to messages that they have received.

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<sup>2</sup> In MyCareer DJ becomes "friends" with NBA players by playing with them or by playing well against them. Initially, DJ's friends list is occupied only with his teammates.





Figure 4.4: In MyCareer, players have the chance to make dialogue choices in cut scenes and through texting on their avatar's in-game phone.

#### 4.4 – Perspective

When comparing the typical simulation gameplay of *NBA 2K18* to how matches are played within MyCareer mode, there is actually little difference between the two. In previous *NBA 2K* narrative career modes, a different default camera angle was used from the typical view meant to imitate the angle of an actual NBA broadcast. In these games, the camera was placed behind the viewer at all times, and was significantly closer to the action than the game's default view. In *NBA 2K18*'s MyCareer, the camera angle is the same as the one used throughout the rest of the game. Unlike other game modes in *NBA 2K18*, however, the player is locked on to their avatar and unable to fully control any other characters. Unique to this mode, the player is able to call for a pass, in which case their computer-controlled teammates will pass to them most of the time, and call for teammates to shoot the ball. If the player calls for passes too often though and when in bad positions, they will lower their in-game rating. This feature aims to let the game be played in a more realistic manner, as no player in real life would run around the court constantly calling for a pass from their teammates. In addition to this, another element

seen while matches are being played in MyCareer that is unique to the game mode is the bench. When the player's avatar is not in the match and is sitting on the bench, the player watches the simulation of the match from the angle of a character sitting on the team's bench. With the right stick, they can turn their head to see all of the action. When on the bench, the player has the option to watch the match from this angle on the bench, or to simulate the parts of the match where their character is not playing. This unique view while characters are on the bench is one of the most obvious examples of how the narrative of DJ's career intersects with the typical style of matches within the *NBA 2K* franchise.

#### **4.5 - Critique**

*NBA 2K18*'s MyCareer mode introduces an open world aspect into sports simulation games. This freedom allows players to navigate the story at their own pace and choose themselves whether they want to play MyCareer as a narrative game or a playable story. The Neighbourhood provides an improved, three-dimensional version of the map used in *Madden NFL 07*'s NFL Superstar mode. In Superstar, the map on the wall of the character's home will take them to different places around the city they live in, similar to some of the options in MyCareer's Neighbourhood (the barber shop, tattoo parlour, training facility). However, the map in Superstar is static, and the player simply selects where they want to go on the map. There is no actual travelling and no way to see what the game world looks like outside of the avatar's home, the training facility, and the stadiums in which they play. While small and limited in what it offers, The Neighbourhood's open-world concept offers greater interactivity and helps to create a more immersive setting compared to the map in *Madden*'s Superstar mode. In MyCareer, a player is able to receive a text from a friend, and then walk over to their house or office to meet up with them, similar to how they would in real life.

Despite its open world concept, *2K18*'s MyCareer mode still suffers setbacks in terms of its interactivity. For one, the choices the player makes have little effect on the narrative

and no real effect on the simulation-style gameplay that advances the narrative. MyCareer has plenty of cut scenes, but the opportunity to make choices within those scenes is rare, much less so than the amount of choices the player can make in *FIFA 17's* The Journey. When the player does make a choice, with one main exception, it does not influence anything beyond the dialogue in the remainder of the scene. The previously mentioned exception to this is the street ball tournament that opens the game mode. In this part of the game, the choice the player makes in their interaction with ATM not only influences whether their relationship will be friendly or hostile in future cut scenes, but it also influences whether you play with or against ATM in the tournament's next game. Considering this choice happens at the beginning of MyCareer, it sets an expectation of choice influencing gameplay that is not met during the rest of the game.

The lack of choice in cut scenes mean that they are being played to add colour and build a narrative around the character of DJ. However, the dialogue in these scenes is over-the-top, cheesy and forced. In a review of *2K18's* MyCareer, Kotaku's Luke Plunkett writes, "MyCareer's tale has always felt a little erratic and under-developed, a random collection of sketches rather than efforts to genuinely develop a character over the course of hundreds of hours of basketball" (Plunkett). The game's lack of choices and its forced dialogue sequences are all factors in building this sense of an underdeveloped narrative.

Along with this, there are also points in MyCareer where cut scenes play seemingly without the context of player performance or choice in mind. For example, after a game in which the player puts up a mediocre stat line and grade, teammates and the team's security guard will congratulate DJ. Or after a game in which the player only misses one free throw, Shammy will tell DJ that his "free throws were a joke." These disjointed responses to in-game events separate the narrative from gameplay and hurt the immersive experience MyCareer attempts to build.

In general, MyCareer's underdeveloped narrative in part leads to a less immersive experience than *FIFA 17's* The Journey or *Madden NFL 07's* NFL Superstar. To go along

with this, the player's customized avatar may also be a leading factor in the game's lack of a true immersive narrative experience.

In their study on the effects of avatar customization in player identity, Turkay and Kinzer found that "Avatar-based customization played an important role in players' identification with their characters by increasing their sense of autonomy" (22).

As previously noted, MyCareer uses a custom avatar that players create after first installing *NBA 2K18*. This avatar can be customized to meet whatever role the player wants it to fill. The player can even go far as to digitally scan their own face onto the avatar by using a photo. The level of customization "might have allowed players to create characters closer to their ideal self, which might have increased their identification with their characters" (18).

But when thrust into the MyCareer story, the avatar loses some of the player's identification. In this mode, players who spent time creating a detailed avatar see that avatar thrust into a story where they have a new name and act and talk in a pre-written manner—a story in which the player has little control over how their avatar acts when interacting with other characters in the story. In essence, players create an avatar meant to represent themselves, but then can only watch as that avatar acts in a completely forced manner that the player has little to no control over

On the whole, MyCareer's The Neighbourhood feature adds a new element to interactive narrative modes within sports simulation games. However, MyCareer's narrative does not intersect well with the mode's simulation gameplay due to illogical responses and dialogue bugs. The lack of choice in how narrative cut scenes play out and forcing the character of DJ upon a customized avatar also help to diminish the mode's immersive experience.

## 5 – Comparative Analysis and genre conventions

While they all fall within the same genre, *Madden NFL 07's* NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame, *FIFA 17's* The Journey and *NBA 2K18's* MyCareer each approach narratives within sports simulations in a different manner. There are inherent differences to these games based on the different sports they cover and the times when they were released. Apart from the obvious differences between the games, however, are differing approaches to the matters of story, choice, and character customization.

### 5.1 – Story

Hong Yu and Mark O. Riedl define an interactive narrative as “a form of digital entertainment in which players create or influence a dramatic storyline through actions” (174). Despite its early graphics and its slim, relatively basic narrative, when compared to *FIFA 17's* The Journey and *NBA 2K18's* MyCareer, NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame’s narrative does a better job at integrating with its gameplay; allowing players to create and influence their own storyline. While the choices that appear during cut scenes in The Journey and MyCareer are presented in a more elaborate and engaging fashion, they have little to no impact on the simulation-style gameplay that intersects with the narrative.

Superstar’s narrative arc is simple compared to The Journey and MyCareer, however that simplicity lets the characters fill in the blanks, so to speak. In The Journey, there is no player control over character customization and little control over the majority of the story arc. In MyCareer, the player has complete control over their avatar yet no control in how the character’s cinematic arc unfolds, thus stripping away some of the immersion the highly customizable avatar built. In Superstar, the player can interact with as much of the narrative colour as they want, with the choice to participate in or skip their avatar’s interviews and movie shoots. They have the option of adding in as much colour to the story as is offered, or they can just play matches and work towards the game mode’s simple, clear motivation: to make it into the Hall of Fame. This one, clearly stated goal

also differentiates Superstar from The Journey and MyCareer. In The Journey, Alex Hunter has many different goals as the narrative unfolds. However, as Mark J.P. Wolf states, having this many different goals within the game can still be effective, as “The motivation behind the decision making required in a game can be complex and hierarchical, as the player must complete a number of smaller objectives in order to complete other larger ones” (84). In contrast to both games though, MyCareer has no clear motivation that drives the narrative forward. There is a goal to max out your character’s overall rating, but doing so has no effect on the mode’s narrative.

The simplicity of Superstar does mean that players will run through the exact same narrative each time they replay the game mode, minus the different roles and in-game experience that a player will get when they play as a new position. However, allowing players to skip through any and all elements of the mode means a player would not have to deal with repetitive aspects of the game they do not want to see. In this sense, The Journey and MyCareer have much lower replayability. While the cinematic experiences can change slightly in both modes based on different decisions, most of both games’ cut scenes will play no matter what choices the player makes, and neither game offers players the ability to skip its cinematic elements. The Journey’s narrative cut scenes do present the player with more opportunities for choice and interactivity in comparison to *NBA 2K’s* MyCareer mode. This helps to better connect the cinematic narrative that plays out in The Journey with the simulation gameplay that drives that narrative forward. MyCareer has plenty of cut scenes, but the opportunity to make choices within those scenes is rare, much less so than the amount of choices the player can make in The Journey.

## **5.2 – Choice**

In The Journey, the choices made during cut scenes influence the personality of the player’s avatar. This feature is clearly reminiscent of the player’s “ego” in NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame. The player’s ego meter in Superstar not only helps bridge between the

game's narrative and simulation gameplay, it is also a feature that has influenced future narrative career modes like *The Journey* and *MyCareer*. In *The Journey*, Alex Hunter's personality is built on a scale of "fiery" to "cool." The answers the player can choose from in the game for both of these ends of the spectrum are similar to interview answers players choose from in *Superstar*. While there is no measure of ego in *MyCareer*, when a player gets the opportunity to choose they are generally offered options on a similar emotional spectrum, such as in a post-match interview where the player can choose to approach the interview "confidently" or "carefully." In *Superstar*, the answers to interview questions are either selfish and boastful or humble with a team-first mentality. The ego of the player's avatar can be viewed at any time, as can Alex's personality in *The Journey*. In *MyCareer* there is no way to track DJ's ego/personality. Along with this, despite having the choice to respond in a similar manner as in *Superstar* and *The Journey*, DJ's responses have no impact on *MyCareer*'s narrative apart from the game's introductory street ball tournament.

### **5.3 - Avatar Customization**

Unlike in *NBA 2K18*'s *MyCareer* and *Madden 2007*'s NFL *Superstar* modes, *The Journey* presents players with a pre-made avatar to control, with no character customization options. In *MyCareer*, the player has full control over character customization, and can even go as far as to scan an image of their face onto their in-game avatar. In NFL *Superstar*, players are able to select from an endless number of avatars that have different family backgrounds, and can customize their weight, height and face. When it comes to a first-person point-of-view narrative, Timothy Garrand states "making the player an active part of the characterization process allows for character development, while maintaining the interactivity of the narrative," (70). To go along with this, as discussed in section 1.1, a study on sports video game players found an overwhelming majority of the people surveyed had both created a playable character in a sports game and had created themselves as a playable character (Stein et. al, 353).

However, in the case of *The Journey*, the avatar of Alex Hunter is more effective at maintaining the game's interactive story than the player's custom avatar in *MyCareer*. Both modes have a linear story arc with a limited amount of choices that can actually alter the story in any tangible way. In the case of *MyCareer*, placing a fully custom and personalized avatar into a pre-written narrative presents the player with a character that looks like them, but also a character "who does things you have never done in a world you have never visited" (Platt 147 qtd. in Garrand 70). In *Madden NFL 2007's* Superstar, where you only see your avatar during games and never watch them interact with other characters, the ability to customize your avatar is more effective at creating an immersive experience. However, in a mode like *The Journey* or *MyCareer*, where there is a linear story structure and a greater investment in the narrative told through cut scenes along with gameplay, having a pre-set avatar does not take away from the experience. In *FIFA 18's* continuation of *The Journey*, a new playable character, Alex's sister Kim Hunter, is introduced. In *FIFA 19's* conclusion to the trilogy, Alex's friend Danny is also introduced as a playable character. While these characters are not customizable, the additional avatars in these subsequent *FIFA* narratives offer players a small variation in race along with the ability to play as a female character, which is rarely seen thus far in this genre.

#### **5.4 – Identifying genre conventions**

Though interactive narratives in sport simulations are a relatively recent venture, this paper's analysis has uncovered two main conventions of this genre: the role of a mentor and a decision-based "ego" spectrum.

#### **5.5 – Mentor**

In these narrative game modes, a current or former athlete will often mentor the player's character. These mentors present positive attitudes that the player can choose to follow with their character. In *NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame*, the player's mentor is actually just called "Mentor," though in the game mode that preceded *NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame*



the year prior, the player's mentor was Hall of Fame running back Terrell Davis. In *Superstar*, the mentor informs the player of sponsorship and movie opportunities, gives the player feedback on their gameplay, and also warns the player about their attitude if they give an interview with a lot of negative ego responses. In *The Journey*, Alex's grandfather Jim Hunter acts as his mentor. In the game, Jim is seen comforting Alex about his dad, giving him advice and coaching him, and even provides Alex with motivation to win the FA Cup. In *MyCareer*, Shammy Wells "claims" DJ as "his rookie" and from there shows him the ropes of life in the NBA. Shammy introduces DJ to team staff and at certain points will confront DJ about his performance.

The actual effect mentors have on gameplay is minimal. *NFL Superstar's* mentor will send messages to the player about giving negative interviews, however these messages have no impact on the game at all unless the player chooses to heed the mentor's advice. In *The Journey*, Jim Hunter does provide the motivation that fuels the narrative's climax.

Although, Jim also has no impact on Alex's performance in matches and no impact on the choices the player can make throughout the game. *MyCareer* offers a different mentor perspective than the other two games, as the player will sometimes play with Shammy in matches. However, Shammy's role as mentor has no effect when playing in matches, where Shammy acts the same as any other computer-controlled teammate.

At the end of the day, the role of the mentor is mainly one that adds colour to the games' narrative and generally has little impact on player choices or gameplay in matches. Yet regardless of overall impact on the game mode, a former or current athlete acting as a mentor to the player's avatar is clearly a convention of this genre.

## **5.6 – Ego spectrum**

In *Madden's* *NFL Superstar* mode, a player's responses to interview questions help determine their avatar's personality, which the game refers to as "ego." In *Superstar*, a player will get negative ego points for responding to interview questions in a cocky,

boastful manner, and will receive positive ego points for answering humbly and putting their team first. Other actions in the game, such as requesting to be traded to a new team, will also accrue negative ego points.

This personality spectrum of selfish versus selfless, boastful versus humble decisions is a convention of the genre reminiscent of the good versus evil spectrum that accompanies many fantasy RPGs, such as *Fable* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. This spectrum is seen in both *The Journey* and *MyCareer*. Most notably in *The Journey*, the player sees a visual representation of this personality spectrum on screen every time they make a choice with Alex. In *MyCareer*, this spectrum is not visible and does not have any lasting impact on gameplay, yet is still present in the answers the player is given to choose from on the dialogue wheel.

In *Superstar* and *The Journey*, the personality of the player's avatar does in fact have a lasting impact on the narrative and simulation-style gameplay. In general, a negative ego will result in a larger fan base, yet it will also result in heightened negative reactions to poor performance in matches.

Generally speaking, this personality-driven ego spectrum invokes professional athlete stereotypes in order to mould a feature seen in other categories of games into a convention of the narrative sports simulation genre.

## **6 – Conclusion**

Recently, interactive narratives have become increasingly common within sport simulation games. This blend of interactive narrative is interesting considering the view of sport simulation titles as non-creative, money-printing machines from many within the gaming community. This paper sought to analyse a representative selection of this

emerging genre, *Madden NFL 07*'s NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame, *FIFA 17*'s The Journey, and *NBA 2K18*'s MyCareer game modes. The goal of this analysis was to identify narrative features within these games and examine how they interact with the simulation gameplay of this genre. This paper also identified two conventions of this emerging genre.

Overall, this paper found NFL Superstar: Hall of Fame to be a simple, yet effective execution of narrative features within a sports simulation title. This game mode gave players control over most aspects of their character's career. Narrative features, such as the game's ego meter, could have a tangible impact on gameplay depending on the choices players made throughout the game. NFL Superstar also presented players with a unique shift in perspective from their typical game of *Madden*, which leads to an original and immersive gameplay experience.

The Journey was unique among the game modes selected in that the player was not given any character customization opportunities, and was instead given the premade avatar of Alex Hunter. While past research into sports gamers has found that an overwhelming majority of players have created themselves as characters in these type of games, in a story as linear and focused as The Journey's, I found the avatar of Alex to be more effective than a custom character. The Journey also had its own version of Superstar's ego meter, a personality bar that graded Alex's responses throughout the game on a scale from "fiery" to "cool." This feature was also integrated into the mode's simulation gameplay, although in the end as long as the player performs well during matches the personality bar will not have much of an effect.

Most notably, MyCareer presented The Neighbourhood, an open world feature that had not been seen previously in sport simulation titles. The Neighbourhood is an impressive first step towards creating a completely immersive hub environment, however the setting is weighed down by overt branding and branded content. Though, it is still unclear what affect if any this level of branding has on the game's story. More importantly in regards to the narrative, MyCareer contains many long, cringe-worthy exchanges that ultimately do

not lead toward any overriding motivation in the game mode. Hand in hand with the game mode's narrative problems is its inability to connect the player with their avatar. *NBA 2K18* offers players complete customization over their avatar, but MyCareer pushes aside the immersive connection that this customized character may bring by imposing a pre-set name, voice, and personality upon the player's avatar.

In the end, by examining and comparing the narrative features of these three games this paper identified the presence of a current or former athlete as a mentor, along with measuring selfish versus selfless personality types, as genre conventions in these games.

### **6.1 – Future research**

Interactive narratives within sport simulation titles are a relatively new genre without much related research conducted to this point in time. Going forward, it would be interesting to further analyse the effects of character customization on these game modes. Additional research could also be conducted on how choice is best presented to the player in these genres, along with how players generally respond to the selfish versus selfless personality measures presented in these games.

Seeing as simulation titles aim at virtually recreating the world of professional sports, research could also be done into relating the genre conventions identified in this paper to the real-world “performances,” “narratives,” and “characters” that appear in professional sports.

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