

Convergent Sport Culture: Mediating the Game

Thomas P. Oates

Deep in the Heart of the Madden Nation: Producing and Consuming Masculinity in the Changing Sports Marketplace

The National Football League (NFL) dominates the US sporting scene. The NFL's average television audiences, the size of its television contracts, and the value of its franchises dwarf those of its competitors. No sport seriously challenges football as a site of ideological innovation and consolidation. Since it first emerged as a significant cultural form more than a century ago, football has served as a kind of "laboratory of masculinity," defining hegemonic modes in cooperation with the media commentators whose narrative crafting of heroism and villainy has given texture to the broader cultural project of racialized masculine domination.

In recent years, however, new media technologies, economic arrangements, and fan practices have combined to produce new kinds of narratives about masculinity. What do these new practices mean for football fandom, especially its long association with hegemonic forms of masculinity?

Since its launch in 1989, EA Sports' *Madden NFL* franchise has been the best-selling sports themed video game in the history of the US market, with more than 60 million copies sold. *Madden* allows gamers to control virtual NFL rosters in competition.

Part of *Madden's* phenomenal success is rooted in its deep relationship with the NFL and important elements of the sports/media complex. The game enjoys an official licensing agreement with the NFL and is endorsed primarily by longtime NFL announcer and former head coach John Madden. The franchise is currently in the fifth year of a fifteen-year agreement with ESPN to integrate the brands. Hence, EA Sports offerings, including *Madden*, are regularly featured on ESPN analysis programs predicting the outcomes of games or breaking down features of player or team performance.

In addition to these innovative arrangements, *Madden* also articulates the changing and complex nature of football fandom at the beginning of the 21st century in an interesting way.

Madden gamers are offered a set of complex hyper-masculine fantasies, where the aggression, strength, and skill of NFL players, as well as the control and authority of NFL coaches and organizations can accrue to gamers. This combination reflects deep ambivalences in contemporary football fandom, where the affirming possibilities of masculine strength, speed, and physical skill exist uncomfortably alongside the widely expressed suspicion that whites are hindered by an inherited race-based disadvantage in football and other hyper-masculine sports, and frequently expressed disgust about the perceived undisciplined selfishness of the contemporary black-dominated game.

Madden NFL offers fans a way to bridge this difficult tension in football fandom by offering parallel fantasies of embodiment and managerial control. *Madden* gameplay requires that gamers call their team's plays and select players like a coach. The most

recent edition of *Madden* boasts GameFlow, “an all-new playcalling system that automatically selects the best play for your team based on situational, authentic NFL game plans.” But beyond these tactical decisions, gamers must also execute the plays, as an NFL player would do. *Madden 11*’s “Dual Stick Control” makes it possible for even 98-pound weaklings to “run through holes, break tackles, and explode in the open field.”

For those desiring a deeper simulation of these perspectives, a “Superstar mode” invites gamers to create an NFL player and simulate his career. Meanwhile, “franchise mode” allows gamers to take control of a virtual NFL organization, drafting and trading talent, negotiating contracts, as well as controlling player selections and strategy.

The presentation of contestants on the ESPN reality program *Madden Nation*, which traces the competition of a dozen of the nation’s best *Madden* gamers, highlights this complex combination of pleasures, where managerial control co-exists with the hegemonic appeal of controlling the movements of elite football players. The players are referred to as “coaches.” When they discuss strategy in solo interviews with the “coach cam.” But their proximity to their NFL athlete is emphasized as well. Contestants in *Madden Nation* are matched with an active NFL player representative of the team he or she controls for the duration of the tournament. Contestants are identified primarily by their nicknames, which often reference physical destructiveness (“Mad Dog,” “UFC Champ”), celebrity (“Hollywood,” “KStarr”), or macho trash talk (“The Gift,” “Dynasty”). During competition, it is common for opponents to be shown engaging in the kind of trash talk one might expect from athletes themselves, and gamers routinely take credit for the physical feats of their *Madden* avatars.

Madden’s remarkable commercial/cultural significance is due not only to the franchise’s remarkable integration with some of the most recognizable and profitable brands in the contemporary sporting economy, but also to the sophisticated fantasies it constructs, which navigate the complex, shifting terrain of racialized masculine dominance. *Madden* offers gamers the virtual embodiment of NFL athletes, experiencing the thrill of dominating opponents in the arena of masculine conquest. At the same time, it affords gamers the fantasy of controlling virtual NFL rosters – developing athletic talent as a commodity, and deploying it in virtual competition.