

## From skepticism to celebration: French football's changing attitudes to videogames

Ervine, Jonathan

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*Jonathan Ervine*

**From skepticism to celebration: French football's changing attitudes to videogames**

**Abstract**

France's major role in shaping the history of international football – both via the performances of its national teams and its role in organizing the sport – is mirrored by its importance within the development of videogames. However, videogames – like sport – remains an understudied aspect of French culture with French Studies. This article explores significant debates about the cultural capital of videogames in France that feature contrasting reactions such as skepticism and celebration. It argues that interactions between football and videogames are increasingly blurring the boundary between the sport of football and the world of videogames. The world of e-sports (professional videogaming) will be shown to be a domain where leading French football teams and politicians are particularly keen to harness the cultural, economic, and political importance of videogames.

Le rôle majeur de la France dans l'histoire du football international - à la fois grâce aux performances de ses équipes internationales et son rôle dans l'organisation du sport – va de pair avec son importance dans le développement des jeux vidéo. Néanmoins, les jeux vidéo – tout comme le sport – manquent de visibilité dans les *French Studies*. Cet article examine des débats importants sur l'importance culturelle des jeux vidéo en France où l'on voit souvent entre des réactions contrastées qui oscillent entre le scepticisme et la célébration. Nous verrons que les relations entre le football et les jeux vidéo rendent la frontière entre le football en tant que sport et le monde des jeux vidéo de moins en moins perceptible. On

montrera notamment que les eSports constituent un domaine où les principales équipes de football françaises et les hommes politiques font preuve d'une volonté frappante de tirer profit de l'importance culturelle, économique, et politique des jeux vidéo.

**Key words:** football, soccer, videogames, computer games, e-sports,

### **Introduction**

In an era of ever more lucrative television contracts and sponsorship deals, top-level professional football is unashamedly embracing a consumerist and capitalist mentality (Giulianotti "Supporters, Followers, Fans, and *Flaneurs*" 29-31; Crawford *Consuming Sport* 11, 78; Dubal 126-128). Where once teams focused on their relationship with fans, there is now a growing trend for clubs to seek to maximize profit from followers that they are increasingly referred to as consumers (Wilson; Giulianotti "Supporters, Followers, Fans, and *Flaneurs*; Llopis-Goig). As we will see, this can involve exploiting new technologies to try to provide the modern fan/consumer with new ways to engage with football and generate revenue for leading teams. Videogames technologies can also create a hyperreal footballing experience as the difference between the reality of experiencing a match first hand and experiencing a representation of it mediated by technology becomes ever less noticeable. Giulianotti has argued that Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal "involves an intensification of reality", and furthermore is characterized by "the obscene attention to excessive detail" ("The Fate of Hyperreality" 233). This latter element is particularly applicable to the way in which contemporary football videogames are often based on highly detailed databases that

rate and rank a great many attributes of the players and teams present within the game (Crawford "The cult of Champ Man" 499, Conway 133-134).

In an age when there is an ever increasing reliance on science in many other aspects of top-level football – whether to plan training or assess players' performance – it can be said that the professional game is not just modern but becoming ever more postmodern. When the idea of postmodern football has been evoked in academic literature, it has often been when analyzing aspects of the sport such as spectatorship, fan culture, athletes' bodies, and high-tech stadium design (see Giulianotti "The Fate of Hyperreality", Redhead, Rail, and Perelman *Smart Stadium*). However, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the – postmodern and hyperreal – ways that football videogames play a role in both representing and re-shaping professional football. In France, it is not merely the case that football is present within the world of videogames. Videogames are becoming an ever more integral part of the world of football as clubs are embracing them in order to both help them to achieve their on-field aims and also boost their profile within a highly significant form of popular culture. Indeed, leading French clubs appear particularly keen to embrace the world of e-sports (competitive videogaming) in order to boost their image and levels of brand recognition in new markets.

As this article will demonstrate, there are many deeply postmodern aspects of the ways in which football and videogames interact in both a French and global context. France is a country that is particularly worthy of study in this context for reasons rooted in both its sporting history and its relationship with videogames. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, French bureaucrats and journalists played a major role in the development and codification of the sport of football by founding its international governing body FIFA and also creating international tournaments such as the World Cup and also major European club

tournaments in which many of the world's greatest players compete against each other. Within the world of videogames, France in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is home to major international game developers such as Ubisoft, whose work has been assisted by the French government's decision to offer tax breaks to computer games companies in order to generate economic activity and compete against major companies from United States in an age of globalization (Dauncey, French Videogaming 386-7). This state support has created a model of which several other countries are envious, as was demonstrated in a 2012 *Management Today* article entitled 'Why can't the UK games industry be more... French?' (Wilson). In 2016, a report produced for France's Ministère de l'Économie advocated regulating competitive videogaming in a similar way to professional sports by placing it under the auspices of the Comité national olympique et sportif français (CNOSF) (Durain and Salles 35-39). This planned move was reminiscent of aforementioned French-led codification and institutionalization of sports in previous centuries as both could be seen as attempts by France to establish a form of soft power on a global stage.

France appears to be making a concerted effort to establish itself as a key player within the videogames world, and in particular within the field of e-sports. The idea that France constitutes a pioneer within the field of competitive gaming was cemented in 2016 when it created Europe's first football e-sports league via a partnership between Ligue 1 – the top division of its men's professional football league – and the videogames company EA Sports (see Hattenstone). French government figures suggest that, at 398 000, the number of people in France who regularly participate in competitive videogames is more than the number of registered rugby players (327 818) in the country (Salles and Derain 3). In order to facilitate the development of e-sports in France, a 2016 government report produced for the Ministère de l'Économie advocated that e-sports professional should become a legally-

recognized occupation; furthermore it stated that a new visa policy should be established in order to allow leading foreign competitive videogame players to take part in competitions in France and join French e-sports teams (Salles and Derain 24-8). This provides a recent example of what Dauncey described in 2012 as a trend that has seen French governments “redraw the conceptual, legal, financial and industrial boundaries of videogaming” (Dauncey, French videogaming 385). Despite French governments’ significant support for videogames, and their willingness to perceive them as in some respects akin to sports, this article will demonstrate that videogames are at times treated with disdain within the *institutions* of professional football in France.

This article will fill significant gaps within both French Studies and Games Studies. Just as videogames constitute a largely neglected aspect of French Studies, it has been argued that “in the field of Games Studies, sports videogames is an understudied genre” (Linderoth 15). This article will begin by examining how football videogames are categorized as well as how they are perceived by those involved in professional football in France. This analysis will map out ways that researchers, journalists and those who work within professional football have described football videogames. This article will then examine ways in which recent years have not just seen videogames seeking to represent professional football in an ever more realistic manner, but also how professional football is increasingly referencing videogames. Despite these trends, it will nevertheless show that (post)modern football’s technology-focused efficiency is not entirely appealing for some nostalgic followers of the sport. Finally, this article will show that e-sports provides a way not just to celebrate football videogames but also for leading football teams to promote their brand within a gaming environment that is not uniquely focused on football videogames.

### **Categorizing, dismissing and embracing videogames**

Before exploring the specific issues mentioned above, it is important to examine broader questions concerning what football videogames represent. Within Games Studies, there is a clear division between those who argue that football videogames provide a *simulation* of football and those who argue that they go further by constituting a *variety* of football.

Miguel Sicart is a games scholar who feels that sports videogames such as *FIFA 2012* are “game[s] based on a sport” (35-36). One of the key reasons why Sicart categorizes football videogames as *simulations* of football is that he argues that videogames adopt an overly rigid means of applying the rules of football that does not factor in the element of “human interpretation” that can play an important role in how referees apply the rules. He introduces a further important distinction by arguing that the popular *FIFA* series of videogames provide a “physical, tactical, and statistical simulation of the game *as being broadcast*”, which places the emphasis firmly on high-level professional football (37).<sup>1</sup> Due to the way that the videogames generally represent only top-level football and are not always able to fully recreate the subtleties of the sport as played on a pitch, one could argue that what videogames are actually providing is a form of simulacrum.

Ian Bogost contrastingly argues that match footage from the latest football videogames is becoming almost indistinguishable from that which is broadcast in television coverage of major football tournaments (“What are sports videogames?” 58). His approach significantly diverges from that of Sicart as he argues that “sports videogames are not simulations of sports but *variants* of sports [...], sports videogames are *just another way to play sports*” (own emphasis added). Furthermore, Bogost specifically mentions that many

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<sup>1</sup> One could perhaps ask whether it might be more apt to describe football videogames as simulating the sport of football ‘as watched in the stadium’ rather than ‘as broadcast’. However, it is important to remember that many football videogames feature elements of football that are present within football as it is televised (e.g. action replays, commentary) that are not as present when watching a match in a stadium.

sports feature different “variants” already before one seeks to categorize sports videogames. (“What are sports videogames?” 58-59). When we look at present day football, it is clear that commodification and commercialization are increasingly shaping the sport at the top level. For Pierre Bourdieu, this is one of the prime aspects that allows one to differentiate between the way in which football exists both as an “amateur sport” and as “televised spectacle” or “commercial product” (16). Football videogames are certainly “commercial products”, as is demonstrated by both the ways that they are marketed to fans and the highly lucrative nature of leading franchises such as the *FIFA* or *Pro-Evolution Soccer* videogames. For some critics, football has become increasingly associated with a form of *passive consumption*. Indeed, the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano has described “a sad voyage from beauty to duty” during which “[p]lay has become spectacle, with few protagonists and many spectators” (1). However, I will argue that football videogames are actually playing a role in the re-shaping of professional football and that they can also provide a means for both supporters and players to connect with the sport in a new and potentially empowering range of ways. In addition, the e-sports teams of leading French football clubs symbolize these clubs’ desire to connect with gamers and the gaming in a manner that appears geared towards boosting brand exposure and commercial revenue.

Within professional football in France and elsewhere, there are differing attitudes to videogames but it is nevertheless evident that many leading professional footballers are not just present as players within football videogames but also, like amateur football videogamers, enjoy playing these games. The thrill of being able to take control of major teams within videogames is thus enjoyed by both supporters and players of teams at many different levels of football. When it comes to fans, Miguel Sicart argues that “playing sports casually, and playing sports videogames are about performing the impossibilities of



professional sports, letting us dream the possibilities of being our heroes” (32). When it comes to players, the Mexican writer and journalist Juan Villoro argues that footballers can experience “self-referential delights” by virtue of being able to select themselves when playing football videogames (101). The extent to which videogames provide players and fans with a potentially empowering means to taking on the role of leading footballers is conditioned by gender, however, as it is generally only the role of the *male* sporting hero that one can take on within the most successful sports videogames (Consalvo 87-111, see also Ervine, “Lack of female players in football videogames is an own goal”).

The teams that footballers have taken control of when playing videogames have at times led to media speculation about potential transfers to the teams concerned (“Euro 2016 : sur Football Manager, Griezmann joue avec...”). Several members of the French squad were photographed playing the game *Football Manager* on the flight to the 2014 World Cup in Brazil (Corcostegui), and the former Paris Saint-Germain and Marseille midfielder Edouard Cissé has argued that videogames “favorisent la cohésion du groupe et aident à l'intégration des nouveaux venus”. However, Cissé has also noted that some French supporters and journalists see videogames in a much less positive light and instead use them to establish an unflattering comparison between current players and their predecessors:

La plupart des footballeurs aiment les jeux vidéo, ce qui nous vaut d'être qualifiés de 'génération Playstation'. Nous avons pris la succession de la 'génération belote', souvent présentée comme moins individualiste et plus respectueuse que la nôtre. La Playstation est, elle, un objet 'non grata'.

This notion symbolizes the way that some journalists and critics of modern professional footballers use videogames to portray contemporary players as unsophisticated, uncultivated and/or juvenile. This dismissive approach was exemplified by one French journalist describing Nicolas Anelka as a footballer who “n’a pas grand-chose à dire ... à part [sur] sa PlayStation et le rap” (qtd. in Azhar 31). Such an attitude typifies the way in which high-profile failures of the French men’s team at several recent tournaments have led to journalists and politicians questioning the behavior and mentality of its players, and suggesting that contemporary players are not as respectable, or respectful, as of their predecessors, with videogames being the aspect of their behaviour that focuses this criticism. This is in keeping with the way much of society has traditionally tended to see videogames as “une activité ludique et puerile” (Mora and Haas 131). As the sociologist Philippe Mora has pointed out, being the subject of recurrent moral panics is something that football and videogames share. Mora notes that football “ne plaisait pas à la société du 19ème/début 20ème car perçu comme dangereux pour le corps et pour l’esprit”, and adds that this is similar to “certaines critiques envers des pratiques de la jeunesse actuelle” where videogames are concerned (165). Such criticisms illustrate a reluctance to embrace, or seek to understand, a leisure pursuit that has evolved into a major social and cultural phenomenon. They also involve a degree of skepticism about predominantly youth-focused popular cultural from older middle-class critics.

It is important to remember that generations of French players from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s did not receive a level of salary that permitted them to live the same sort of lifestyle as contemporary footballers; furthermore, their actions on and off the pitch were the subject of much less scrutiny within the French and international media. PlayStations have also come to symbolize the aloofness of modern players whose plugging in of a games

console symbolizes disconnecting from – and implicitly disrespecting – the world around them. Some – such as the sociologist Stéphane Beaud – argue that this type of criticism of contemporary footballers symbolizes not just journalists’ nostalgic affection for past heroes but also a form of class snobbery (80, see also Ervine “Nicolas Anelka and the Quenelle” and Ervine “Les banlieues and Les Bleus”). The idea that playing videogames involves disconnecting oneself from other people can easily be challenged, and Crawford argues that football videogames can in fact “mediate social interaction” when they become “a common activity for friends and family”. Furthermore, he states that “gamers can get together at conventions, competitions and organized ‘meet-ups’, [and] play with others online” (*Consuming Sport* 153). This can therefore involve professional footballers playing games with *each other* and also against *fans*; indeed, former Paris Saint-Germain attacker Zlatan Ibrahimović has described using a gamer tag that hid his real identity when playing Xbox games against fellow gamers (215-6).

Within the professional game, figures such as former Lille, Rennes, and Paris Saint-Germain coach Vahid Halihodzic are reported to have discouraged their players from spending time in front of games consoles. Edouard Cissé has recounted how Halihodzic once asked him and a team-mate to stop playing videogames prior to a team meal due to “a Chinese study that supposedly explained that videogames wear out something like 60% of our energy”. This attitude contrasts with that of other coaches, such as current French national team boss Didier Deschamps, who are more open to the idea that videogames can provide a valuable form of relaxation or team bonding prior to a match (Cissé). Nevertheless, Deschamps did reportedly stop a football videogames tournament being organized by the French national squad during the 2014 World Cup in Brazil as he was concerned that the players were getting over-excited (“Euro 2016: quand Deschamps a

interrompu une partie de FIFA”). If Vahid Halihodzic had been more familiar with contemporary research about videogames participation and exercise, he might well have noticed that many studies suggest that playing videogames does *not* have a negative impact on participation in exercise. In 2007, the French academic Christopher Peter published a study which showed that adolescents who play sports are *more* likely to play videogames than those who do *not* partake in sport. Furthermore, Peter also cited an earlier study of young adults in the Paris area from 2004-5 that suggested that people who played football computer games were more likely to play football than those who merely watched the sport on television (6). The results of these French studies are similar to others that have been carried out in the United Kingdom (Crawford “Digital Gaming, Sport and Gender” 262), Germany (Fromme) and the United States (Olson 285).

What the aforementioned studies collectively suggest is that the demonization of sports videogames to which some French journalists and football coaches have contributed is often misplaced and based on perceptions about games’ supposed negative impact on players that do not stand up to scrutiny. Furthermore, dismissive approaches to videogames in France – or attempts to allow nostalgia to justify skepticism towards videogames – are actually at odds with the way that the French state has become increasingly accepting of the value of videogames. As Dauncey notes, in 2006 the French government set out to “redraw the conceptual, legal, financial and industrial boundaries of videogaming, and particularly, to signal that for the Ministry of Culture, video[gaming] was truly ‘cultural’ rather than mere software” (French videogaming, 385). During the same year, Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres (Minister for Culture) stated that “people have looked down on videogames for far too long, overlooking their great creativity and cultural value” (Crampton). Such comments about the cultural value of videogames are in stark contrast to the tone of condescension that

underpins the notion that taking an interest in videogames symbolizes contemporary French footballers' supposed lack of culture. Indeed, recent years have seen many French football teams engage with the world of on a variety of different levels. Videogames now provide real life football managers in France, and elsewhere, with tools that they can utilize in order to gain valuable insights that can inform aspects of their role such as player recruitment. In 2014, the makers of the *Football Manager* videogame signed a partnership with Prozone that has led to the statistics in the videogame's detailed player database being used to enhance that of the performance analysis firm. Four years prior to the agreement between Prozone and *Football Manager*, Ligue 1 team OGC Nice reportedly signed Nemanja Pejčinović, a little-known Serbian defender, due to his statistics in the football management videogame (Corcostegui). French international striker Bafétimbi Gomis has also described how he played as Swansea City in the game *Football Manager* in order to learn about the team prior to joining them from Olympique Lyonnais in 2014 (Bleaney).

### **Intertextuality and cross-disciplinary reference points**

In addition to working together in the manner described above, the worlds of professional football and videogames are increasingly referencing each other. Indeed, Garry Crawford argues that some leading football videogames possess "'intertextual' links to the sport of football" ("The Cult of Champ Man" 496). This does not merely concern videogames trying to simulate professional football as accurately as possible but in fact also involves football and footballers *simulating computer games*. Stein, Mitgutsch, and Consalvo argue that "sports video game players are situating and understanding their sports video game play as part of a broader sports context" (361). Professional footballers have also increasingly been demonstrating their awareness of existing in a footballing world that includes both the sport

as it is played on the pitch and also as it is played in videogames. In his autobiography, Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimović describes spending many hours playing on a games console while growing up and “spot[ting] solutions in the [video] games that [he] parlayed into real life” (49). On 7 November 2014, French midfielder Jimmy Briand took this a step further in celebrating his first goal for Hannover in the German Bundesliga by performing a novel goal celebration that he had initially discovered while playing the *FIFA* football videogame with a friend. The celebration involved flopping to the ground - apparently imitating a fish - and some articles about Briand’s goal have said that the gesture was originally performed by Arsenal striker Ian Wright in the 1990s (Anaix). Thus, we appear to have an example of a goal celebration that started on a real pitch in England before being replicated in a videogame, and then the videogame celebration was in turn replicated back on a real-life football pitch by a French player representing a club in Germany. This process demonstrates the transnational nature of videogames culture and involves a form of intertextuality that takes interactions between sport and videogames to a new level.

American sports journalists Mike Burks has argued that, initially, sports videogames “were copying television coverage” before a point occurred when “there [were] things in videogames that have found their way back into television” (qtd. in Taylor 237). Burks argues that these interactions have reached a point where “it’s like a dog chasing its tail” (qtd. in Taylor 237), and this is precisely what appears to be happening when it comes to professional footballers’ presence in – and imitation of – football videogames. This suggests videogames have helped to shape football, and specifically a postmodern form of football that involves repetition and reappropriation, and also a form of intertextuality. Back in 2001, Peter Pericles Trifonas argued that “football ... is a sign that leads to other signs and back in quite arbitrary and surprising ways” (11), and the above analysis of goal celebrations

suggests that is continuing in an ever more complex manner in which videogames constitute a significant reference point. Although Briand's aforementioned videogames-inspired goal celebration dates from late 2014, Mark Turner has suggested that the emergence of what he terms "a 'new' goal celebration culture developed specifically through the rise of new media technology, such as satellite and interactive television, computer games and the internet" can actually be traced back to the 1990s. Furthermore, he argues that marking goals in such a manner has come a "signature of the postmodern goalscorer" (7).

The French, and many others, have also used videogames as a metaphor for displays of improbable skill on the pitch. Arsenal's Alsace-born manager Arsène Wenger once described Barcelona's Lionel Messi as being "like a PlayStation" following a game in 2010 when the Argentinian player scored four times against Wenger's team (Kuper). However, journalist and writer Simon Kuper questions whether such a display of near robotic efficiency is a good thing. Kuper laments the way that disciplined, physically fit and immaculately groomed modern players lack the endearing rough edges of their predecessors. He states that "Ferenc Puskas in the 1950s was fat, George Best in the 1960s an alcoholic, Johann Cruyff in the 1970s a chain-smoker, and Diego Maradona in the 1980s a fat cocaine user". Kuper even states that "the temptations of stardom were magnificent; succumbing was almost the point". Thus, one may well ask if the way that football videogames have aspired to high production values and graphic slickness is eliminating some of the sport's rough edges and unpredictability that are valued by fans with a sense of nostalgia.

Within the world of videogames themselves, real-life football players are also used as reference points for leading gamers. Indeed, there are also discussions about how leading videogame players are seen as something between artists and robots. Bruce Grannec, a

French gamer and one of the most successful ever players of football videogames, is often referred to as “the Messi of videogames” (Loisy, Froment and Rouyer). However, his consistency and calm temperament have resulted in him being nicknamed “the machine” (Lizé). This pair of contrasting descriptions shows how, on one hand, professional football provides a reference point that can apply in a console-controlled environment in which it is possible to demonstrate flair associated with the professional sport of football. On the other hand, ‘the machine’ is a moniker that could either be taken as a sign that Grannec’s mastery of the controls renders an already somewhat mechanical reproduction of a sport even more robotic. However, Kuper’s previously discussed conceptualization shows that displaying seemingly robotic tendencies could actually help rather than hinder attempts to emulate modern football stars. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that football has always been a sport defined by a clear objective – to score goals – and not one where points are awarded for artistic expression. Indeed, Tim Elcombe observes that “to firmly remain a Sport, from a traditional metaphysical perspective, soccer’s aesthetic elements must remain a by-product of the game” (165). He further warns that “if, for example, the game added judges as assistant referees to qualitatively award bonus points for stylish play, critics would probably consider dismissing soccer’s status as a real Sport” (165). Within French football, there has long been a sentimental attachment between lovers of the sport and clubs such as Nantes and Monaco that are associated with a playing style involving skill, short passing and quick movement that is perceived as beautiful. French football journalists have sought not just to celebrate notable victories but also teams that play with a degree of panache that is referred to as *football champagne* (see Hare 3).

### **E-sports: a field where France is ahead of the game**



At the same time as football videogames companies have continued to create games that provide ever more realistic representations of the sport, the boundaries between videogaming and sport have been lessened by significant actions by both the French state and French football teams. What is particularly significant is that the French state has gone much further than many other countries in terms of treating e-sports in a similar manner to conventional sports. This mirrors the way that 2016 saw France become the first country in Europe to create a football e-sports league (see above). In the preface to a 2016 government report for the Ministère de l'Économie, Rudy Salles and Jérôme Durain (ii) stated that it was "prématuré de reconnaître l'e-sport comme un véritable sport" although this appeared more due to a lack of governance than the intrinsic nature of e-sports. They went on to state that "fermer définitivement la porte à un ... rapprochement institutionnel avec le monde du sport constituerait indiscutablement une erreur", before making the following comparisons:

Les e-sportifs, comme les athlètes traditionnels, s'entraînent, connaissent des transferts, sont soumis à une compétition sans frontières, deviennent des icônes et des supports publicitaires ... Ajoutons que les athlètes sont souvent des e-sportifs de niveau respectable !

On one level, these words potentially over-play the connection between e-sports and professional sport via the notion that "les athlètes sont souvent des e-sportifs de niveau respectable". In reality, professional athletes generally play videogames as a leisure pursuit rather than as part of a quest to attain levels in e-sports that are comparable to those that they reach in their chosen professional sport. However, what is more significant about the

parallels drawn by Salles and Durain is that they suggest that there exists a particular willingness in France – at an institutional level – to bring sport and e-sport closer together. Indeed, Salles and Durain suggested in the same report that an ideal opportunity to do so would arise if Paris were to be successful in its bid to host the 2024 Summer Olympics. Now that Paris has won the right to host this event, it will be intriguing to see to how, and to what extent, it seeks to use the Paris 2024 games to cement its reputation within the field of e-sports. Tony Estanguet, co-president of the Paris 2024 organising committee, stated in August 2017 that the possibility of including e-sports as an Olympic event in Paris was one that he was keen to explore (Harris). However, such an ambition would very much depend on the attitude of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Further obstacles in the way of a potential *rapprochement* between sport and e-sports also stem from the fact that France’s Ministère des Sports appears yet to have embraced e-sports and videogames in quite the same way as the Ministère de la Culture and the Ministère de l’Économie. As Besombes (12) notes, leading e-sports organisations in France had – as of late November 2015 – made several unsuccessful attempts to gain official recognition from the Ministère des Sports. Thus, it appears that Durain and Salles’s aforementioned desire to see e-sports become regulated by the Comité national olympique et sportif français (CNOSF) (see Durain and Salles 35-39) may face significant challenges. This situation is in contrast with the way that a major South Korean e-sports body – the Korean eSport Player Association (KeSPA) – has already become part of the country’s Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism (Besombes 13).

When discussing e-sports, it is important to acknowledge that the ‘sport’ in ‘e-sports’ refers to the competitive aspect of videogaming that it involves (i.e. leagues and tournaments involving different competitors and/or teams) and that e-sports is *not* entirely

based on specifically sports videogames. Indeed, both football videogames and videogames with little to do with sport provide leading teams in countries such as France with opportunities to boost their brand exposure in new markets. French champions Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) have explicitly stated that their aspirations of “devenir une marque lifestyle” involve “la conclusion de partenariats dans l’univers de la musique, de la mode, de l’art” and that “tous les univers culturels nous intéresse” (Alyce). Although these comments do not explicitly mention the world of videogames, PSG are one of several leading French football teams who have sought to boost their brand exposure via the creation of an official e-sports team. Olympique Lyonnais (OL) have done likewise, and their e-sports team – OL eSports – has a prominent presence within the club’s official website and their own official club Twitter account (@OLeSports). In addition, there is an e-sports room within Olympique Lyonnais’s high-tech new stadium that was opened in 2016. The strategic importance of the club’s e-sports team within the club structure is made clear in a quotation from their president Jean-Michel Aulas that appears in the introductory section of the OL e-sports pages that appear on their official website: “La création de cette équipe eSports s’insère dans un projet plus large de l’Olympique Lyonnais d’ouverture vers de nouveaux territoires et la volonté de se rapprocher encore de la communauté OL en partageant des expériences onlines à travers le monde” (“OL eSports: présentation”). This aim to engage with new markets was made even more explicit in March 2017 when OL launched its official Chinese e-sports team, which a club press release claimed to make it “le premier club de football étranger à se lancer dans l’eSport en Chine”. OL heralded this move as being part of a “stratégie novatrice” that aimed to “reserrer les liens entre l’Olympique Lyonnais et ses fans chinois et à promouvoir le développement du football et de l’eSport en Chine” (“Communiqué: L’OL se lance dans l’eSport en Chine”). It is only towards the end of the

official press release that the notion that the creation of an official Olympique Lyonnais e-sports team in China is implicitly linked into a wider financial context that has brought increased funds into the French team. This comes via an allusion to the fact that a Chinese investment fund named IDG Capital has held a 20% stake in OL since December 2016 (“Communiqué: L’OL se lance dans l’eSport en Chine”). At the time of writing, Olympique Lyonnais were, along with Nice, Auxerre and Sochaux, one of four teams in France’s top two divisions of professional football that were at least part-owned by Chinese investors. Other French football teams appear keen to use e-sports as a means to connect with Asian markets, and it was suggested that this one of the prime reasons that Lille’s official e-sports team intends to compete in competitions that focus on the multiplayer online battle arena videogame *League of Legends* (Dulac).

It is also clear is that France seems to be a country where there is particular interest in exploring what the world of e-sports can offer professional sports teams. In March 2017, the California-based sports technology firm Sports Council SV hosted its first ever event in Europe at the Allianz Riviera Stadium that is home to French Ligue 1 team OGC Nice. The theme for the evening was “how e-sports will change the game of professional sports and help pro teams reach out new audiences (gamers...) and help them build global brands” (“VIP eSports event”). Thus, it located engaging with e-sports within the context of boosting global brand awareness in precisely the manner that teams such as Olympique Lyonnais appeared to be seeking to exploit. This broader ambition of seeking to exploit dynamic forms of popular culture to engage new audiences is reminiscent of the commercial strategies of Paris Saint-Germain evoked above. It is tempting to suggest that French football teams are primarily seeking to leverage the field of e-sports due to their own financial interests. However, to criticize them for doing so would be potentially paradoxical

given that representatives of certain leading videogames companies have admitted that this is precisely what they seek to do as well. Antoine Frankart of the e-sports platform Toornament has argued that “[le] premier intérêt [d’e-sports], c’est d’être un outil marketing pour faire la promotion d’un jeu” (Audureau). At the Videogames Economics Forum that took place in Angoulême in May 2016, Benoît Clerc of the videogames company Bigben Interactitve admitted that “on ne fait de l’e-sport pour faire joli, mais pour améliorer le bénéfice opérationnel et transformer les joueurs en relais de communication”. He added that “cela permet aussi de maximiser les ventes sur la durée” (Audureau). Several French football teams include e-sports items in their official merchandise ranges, selling items such as gaming chairs, control pads and headsets that are branded with either the football team or its e-sports team’s logo. Thus, they appear to see the gaming community as a potential source of commercial income as well as an audience to exploit in order to generate greater brand exposure.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The aggressively capitalist and consumerist nature of modern professional football means that we are now in an age where there is a widening gap between the form of football that Bourdieu described as “amateur sport” and that which he termed “televised spectacle” or “commercial product”. Within this context, videogames and computer technology paradoxically have the potential to both make general-public spectators feel more connected and also more disconnected from the increasingly high-tech and highly commercialised world of professional football. However, e-sports is a field where professional football teams appear keen to connect with a new sort of fan, an indeed fans whose prime interest may well be in videogames rather than the sport of football. We have

now moved well beyond the stage identified by Crawford and Gosling where “videogames technologies have ... expanded the possibilities and realms of sports-participation and sports-spectating” (53). It is becoming ever more noticeable that sports videogames – or at least technology that is reminiscent of videogames – are a crucial part of top-level sports such as football. Boyle and Haynes argued that the way in which videogames have become part of the highly commercial professional game has opened “new vistas for the exploitation of player names and images” (89). As leading French teams’ engagement with e-sports demonstrates, videogames also provide a means for clubs as a whole to seek to broaden their appeal by reaching out to new markets. Whether this becomes a long-term strategy that French football clubs continue to adopt is likely to depend on the extent to which e-sports continues to grow. Given that clubs such as Paris Saint-Germain are intent on “devenir une marque lifestyle”, it appears reasonable to presume that they will focus on whatever cultural phenomena look likely to create the greatest returns in terms of both income and brand exposure.

Back in 2012, Martin Kelner described television as “the prism through which all significant sport now passes and is given meaning” (5). However, we are now in an era in which new forms of spectatorship and relationships with football are emerging out of a context in which videogames and football are interacting in ever more numerous and sophisticated ways. On one hand, this may not please nostalgic followers of the sport. However, it provides a means of cultivating, engaging and maintaining new types of football fans. The relationship between videogames and football in France analysed here is in keeping with a contemporary trend identified by Bogost (*How to do things with videogames* 7):

Videogames are already becoming a pervasive medium, one as interwoven in culture as writing and images. Videogames are not a subcultural form meant for adolescents but just another medium woven into everyday life.

This normalization of videogames is evident within government discourse in France, notably due to the French state treating videogames as a cultural form worthy of recognition rather than just an industry or form of technology (Dauncey, French videogaming 385, 387, 393).

The way in which France has sought to exploit e-sports to establish itself as a leading country in the videogames world symbolizes a desire to break down boundaries between sport and videogames. This process is reinforced by the way that leading French football teams have sought to exploit the world of e-sports. This provides an important example of how videogames are providing France with a potentially powerful means to promote its cultural and technological richness and also use videogames as instruments of soft power and economic power on a global stage.

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