A Love Triangle: Deeply Playing FIFA

“I don’t believe skill was, or ever will be, the result of coaches. It is a result of a love affair between the child and the ball.” - Mia Hamm

This article presents a deep play analysis of FIFA 12/13, focusing on how some simulation design choices might result in a negative bias against a number of tactical choices (Dylla et al., 2008), Jonasson, 2010), specifically the 3-4-3 formation (Wilson, 2008). This article argues that the computational design of a simulation (Stone, Quinlan and Hester, 2010) affects the role of tactics and strategies, as well as the skill development required for becoming a competent player, in competitive gameplay.

FIFA 12 introduced a tactical defense mode by which defending became playfully interesting and tactically deep. Tactical defense forced players to partially delegate defending to an AI controlled avatar. This delegation added a new layer of tactical thinking to competitive FIFA 12 gameplay, while it forced many seasoned players to learn to play the game again.

Tactical defending had interesting tactical outcomes when it came to choosing formations for competitive online play. In the case of a 3-4-3 system, the AI heuristics for selecting player, combined with the way in which the computer performs defensive markings, resulted in an involuntary penalizing for defending with a 3 back line. Therefore, in competitive play, players tend to use tactics that are difficult to unbalance by the AI player selection algorithms - particularly the 4-2-3-1 tactic (Zauli, 2002; McNamee, 2010).

Besides the deep analysis of FIFA’s defensive system and AI algorithms, based on personal experience, reverse engineering, and gameplay footage analysis, this article makes three more general points:

1. In competitive gameplay of multiplayer computer games, players need to learn both the psychology of competitors and the computational design of the system. Competitive computer game playing requires human as well as procedural knowledge. Therefore, becoming a good competitive videogame player requires learning about the limits and exploits of the programming of a game. This will be defined as deeply playing a competitive computer game.
2. Even in the most faithful of simulations, the computational nature of these games has effects in the way the games are played. A decision taken in the design of the player selection heuristics implied biased tactics in FIFA 12. Game scholars should pay more attention to the implications that system design decisions have in the practices of competitive play, and what it takes to become a good player of a game (Taylor, 2012).

3. This type of deep play that connects the human and technical aspects of competitive computer game play is a valid methodology for understanding these games (Aarseth, 2003; Consalvo, 2006; Karppi and Sotamaa, 2012). Game studies would benefit from this type of methodology, as well as from a focus on close analysis of specific instances of a game, which can reveal interesting effects for the relations between human and machine, and the cultures around computer games.

This article will require a certain knowledge of football tactical knowledge from the audience.

references


Russell, JS. "Are Rules All An Umpire Has to Work With?" Journal of the Philosophy of Sport 26, no. 1 (1999)


