

# Playing Between The Lines: The Pleasures (and Despair) of Real and Virtual Football

**DiGRA 2026, Maynooth, Ireland, 14-18 June 2026**

## Keywords

sports, game studies, fandom, representation, interdisciplinarity

## Overview

With the FIFA World Cup 2026 overlapping with DiGRA 2026 this workshop invites researchers, designers, and critics to explore intersectional pleasures and despair within real and virtual football.

Football videogames are forms of play that exist between performance and simulation, fandom and labour, identity and escapism. This can take the form of photorealistic simulation sports games such as *EA FC*, *eFootball*, and *Football Manager*, or as abstract or fictionalised videogame takes on football formats such as *Rocket League* and *Despelote*. These games sit at an intersection of realism, repetition, and affect (Cotta et al. 2016; Guins, Lowood and Wing 2022). Often dismissed as formulaic or commercial (Heffernan 2024), they can offer complex perspectives on the world (Srauy and Cheney-Lippold 2019), societal pleasures (Kim, Walia and Sanders 2023) and everyday engagements (Kim, Tan and Bairner 2023; Butcher and Bryant 2024) that blur the lines between play, media consumption, and sporting culture (Crawford 2004).

This workshop invites consideration of intersectionality (Collins and Bilge 2020) through aspects of purpose, cultivation, sense-making, belonging, and perceived cultural capital between - and within - football and videogames. Considering how football videogames create rhythm, routine, ritual, identity, and meaning that permeate beyond the screen.

## Aims and Objectives

Despite their global appeal (Markovits and Green 2018; Deshbandhu 2020) akin to the popularity of football (Sandvoss 2004), research into sports videogames is arguably a niche within games studies. With hundreds of millions of players and their experiences, behaviours, and rituals, there

are opportunities to cultivate a seminal understanding of the intersectionality of fandoms between football and videogames (Donald and Reid in print).

Games Studies scholarship has largely focused on concepts of identity, narrative, meaning-making, and cultural studies, with DiGRA previously hosting workshops on identity construction through narrative choices (Knysheva et al. 2025), and responsible design practices for game fandom (Włodarczyk, Tymińska and Lamerichs 2025). This workshop will build on this momentum, exploring the space between identity and culture (football and games) and how these are constructed, understood, and rewritten through the intersection of their interaction (football videogames).

The workshop aims to:

- Stimulate conversation around intersectional pleasures in football videogame play, fandom, and sport culture.
- Reframe football videogames as critical cultural artefacts.
- Connect media, cultural, and ludic analysis to the lived experiences of players, fans, and creators.
- Form critical perspectives of experiences that emphasise “pleasure” through eudaimonia, virtuosity, and craft in football and football videogames.

Participants are invited to consider questions such as:

- How do football videogames operate intersectionally between sport and play, work and leisure, competition and narrative?
- In what ways do football videogames reflect oscillating emotional journeys between pleasure and despair, adulation and alienation?
- What kinds of temporalities and rituals do players construct through repetitive engagement such as daily matches, time-limited game modes, and online seasons?
- How do designed game components and economic systems shape emotional and affective investment in intersectional play?
- In what ways do these games perform national, gendered, or classed identities within global sporting imaginaries?
- How do fans, streamers, or modders extend or reframe these games in everyday life and online communities?
- How might we rethink football videogames as a form of slow media, grounded in routine, care, and long-term attachment?

**Workshop outcome(s):**

- A collaboratively developed conceptual framework for intersectional pleasures in sports and football games.
- A working group or special interest network within DiGRA focused on Sports, Simulation, and Everyday Play.

- A proposed Special Issue or Edited Collection offering accessible methodological, theoretical and conceptual approaches to the study of sports videogames.

## Format and Submission Details

This half-day workshop will comprise of three paper sessions each involving three 15-minute papers, grouped thematically and followed by a 15-minute collective Q&A. 15-minute breaks between sessions, will be included.

Please prepare up to a 500-word abstract (excluding references) related to the questions and topics listed above. The official language of the workshop is English, but we welcome contributions from outside the Anglosphere. Authors should make clear in their submission of their intention to attend in-person or remotely, with both submission types welcomed. Participation from colleagues with research or development experience from the games industry and broader sports culture is very welcome. Submission of in-progress results is encouraged.

**Please send submissions to Dr. Iain Donald ([i.donald@napier.ac.uk](mailto:i.donald@napier.ac.uk)).** All submissions will be evaluated by the workshop organisers, who will make the final selection.

### Important dates:

- Paper submission: Friday 10th April 2026
- Notification to authors: Thursday 30th April 2026
- Camera Ready: Friday 15th May 2026
- Workshop: Tuesday 16th June 2006, 14:00-17:00

## Organisers

**Dr Iain Donald** is a Lecturer in Design and User Experience in the School of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment at Edinburgh Napier University. His research examines the intersection of games, digital media and history with a focus on commemoration and memorialisation.

**Dr Andrew Reid** is a Lecturer in Games Production at Abertay University. Andrew is an interdisciplinary researcher that explores collaborative practices and evaluations of “applied games” in areas such as heritage and culture, education, health and wellbeing, and within the third sector.

**Dr Michael McDougall** is a Lecturer in Sport Psychology at University of Stirling. His research is interdisciplinary in exploring cultural and social issues in sport and traditional work domains, trying to surface what is socially significant to people and groups, and to suggest alternative forms of sensemaking and organising.

**Dr Bruno de Paula** is an Associate Professor in Digital Media (Game Studies) at University College London. His research focuses on digital games, more specifically in decoloniality,

locality, and history of games. He has published on digital games and education, multimodality, media and game literacies.

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