

Utilization of Simulation in Sport Management Courses: The case of the FIFA 2007 Soccer Manager Mode.

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Finding innovative and interactive methods to teach academic courses is a complex procedure. As educators attempt to enhance student's learning process and generate constructive interaction, the utilization of technology becomes even more critical to that process. Students today have much more technological competence than the students of the past, and teachers need to alter their teaching styles somewhat in order to meet this change ("Foundations of Technology," 2007). Interestingly, most top business schools now use computer simulations, as they take advantage of web-based tools to better manage and track data for the games (Young, 2005). Complex learning environments, such as simulations, encourage identifying relationships between concepts, to view the topic or subject matter from different perspectives and put emphasis upon active application of knowledge or skills to a practical problem (Kolb, 1984). In addition, simulations provide the learner with the possibility to face a real-life problem as a professional, and they may bring along the required complexity and ill-structured components (Lainema & Lainema, 2007).

Academia, and especially business courses, experiences an increase in utilization of web-based simulations. For instance, the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania uses 20 web-enabled simulations in order to provide real-time learning experiences and interactive programs that challenge students to think strategically across multiple business functions and organizations. A study within the aforementioned university indicated that 87% of the students found that the simulation "enhanced" or "significantly enhanced" their attention and engagement in class (Young, 2005). However, Drayer and Rascher (2007) suggested that teaching the simulation to large classes can be difficult because teachers must teach both the critical concepts, as well as the technology itself. In addition, the authors suggested that grades can conflict with learning and if the focus is on getting a good grade rather than comprehending specific concepts, the primary objective of the simulation is lost.

The FIFA 2007 Soccer simulator is produced by Electronic Arts, one of the most prominent video game manufacturers. The game provides a manager mode, where the user has the opportunity to choose among a selection of managers with different backgrounds and qualifications. Furthermore, the user gets to select a team from various soccer championships and leagues all over the world. According to the level and performance of the team, there is a start up budget and certain expectations from the board of directors that the manager has to meet until the end of the season. Among a plethora of duties, the manager is responsible for setting up sponsorships, managing players' contracts, adjusting ticket prices, as well as scouting, transferring, and developing players. In addition, the manager is responsible for dealing with the media and performing critical public relations decisions based on hypothetical scenarios within the team or the league. The simulation provides up-to-date statistics and current information on every league, team, and player via the internet. As users proceed with making decisions in terms of their teams, their performance is evaluated and scored based on three major areas: fan support, job security, and team chemistry. The ultimate goal is to meet the initial expectations set forth by the upper management at the beginning of the season, which are based on realistic data regarding the budget, performance, and status of the selected soccer team.

The FIFA 2007 Soccer may play a pivotal role to students' understanding of the interconnection and interrelationship of a variety of components within a sport organization. Furthermore, the competitive aspect of the game may engage students in establishing high scores within the class. The simulation offers what is called "appropriate randomness;" namely, students may start identifying patterns as they follow specific steps and formulate concrete strategies. However, unexpected circumstances outside the control of the users may occur, such a serious injury of a key player. Consequently, same decisions may produce entirely different results in different simulation runs (Drayer & Rascher, 2007). The utilization of the simulation is outcome-based, as student need to make decisions based on data acquired during their interaction with the program. The simulation has minimal computer requirements and it can be purchased in an affordable price. Undoubtedly, the system provides students with a realistic approach to issues related to sport management and trends within the profession (i.e., variable ticket pricing strategies). Most importantly, the interactivity of the game and the challenge to create a winning organization is intriguing to students and could enhance their focus and interest related to sport management issues. As Springer and Borthick (2004) noted "Simulations are designed to give students opportunities to begin practicing the higher-level thinking the profession demands, where the learner identifies problems, finds relevant information, acknowledges the influence of uncertainties on potential solutions, and then communicates findings to target audiences" (p. 279).

Nowadays, college professors must compete for the students' attention with fast-moving popular culture. The key is to compete with popular culture without being overrun by it ("Foundations of Technology," 2007). Rather than using technology tools as an end, technology in the classroom must be carefully planned and implemented to engage students and promote higher order

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thinking ("Foundations of Technology," 2007). Simpson (2005) suggested that the use of video games as a teaching tool deserves serious consideration as a means of presenting information and bridging learning concepts. The author argued that exploring the use of video games in the classroom forces educators to reevaluate their role as 'teacher.' Thus, it is imperative that sport management educators properly implement technology within the curriculum in a meaningful and effective way. The proper utilization of simulations, such as the FIFA 2007 Soccer, may assist educators in facing the aforementioned challenges, while engaging students in appropriate content using effective technology. It is pivotal that simulations are utilized as platforms for experiential learning using a real-time operated, realistic model of management processes (Lainema & Lainema, 2007). A brief demonstration of the simulation will be provided in the presentation. Furthermore, students' feedback relative to the usage of the simulation in an Introduction to Sport Management class will be discussed. Finally, additional video game simulators (NFL Head Coach 09, NBA Live 09, and Tiger Woods PGA Tour 09) will be illustrated and contrasted in terms of manager mode features, price, and potential appeal to sport management students. References will be provided upon request.