

Press Start for Heritage: Representing University Sports Rivalries in EA Sports College Football 25

Abstract: Does university heritage appeal to gamers? The commercial success of *EA Sports College Football 25* suggests it does. After an 11-year hiatus, NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) college football returned to video game consoles and became the best-selling sports video game in the United States.

This article illustrates how universities can be compelling places for worldbuilding in games, by arguing that university heritage is both inherently conflictual and deployable as a tool for conflict. The video game *College Football 25* portrays real-world contemporary university heritage through its representation of sports and rivalries with other schools. *College Football 25*'s success and popularity lie in the framing of selective authenticity, with near-hyperrealistic portrayal of game-day pageantry that fosters a sense of place and celebrates a positive representation of heritage from the 134 American universities included. This conflict-driven heritage shapes university place identity and aligns with common game design principles in which conflict resolution is central to play. The implementation of role-play mechanics in *College Football 25* invites fans, (former) students, and gamers, to enact and experience university sports heritage in different interactive ways from the perspectives of athletes and coaches.

By applying a close reading analysis to *College Football 25* and focusing on its conflict design choices, we argue that interactive digital media, especially with elements of role-play, can effectively preserve and promote conflict heritage, with implied allusions for transformative play to affect players in their out-of-game neo-tribal expressions relating to these universities.

Keywords: conflict, heritage, video games, role-play, universities

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this study, we analyze how (university) heritage can be a source of conflict in video games that incorporate role-play mechanics. First, we argue that universities and their heritage make for a valuable place in game worldbuilding. Second, we show that incorporating role-play mechanics in a university heritage-centered video game can help preserve and promote selective authentic representations of a university. In doing so, university heritage in video games invites players to enact and experience these representations in a variety of ways through different perspectives. Third, we consider how these in-game university heritage representations, expressed through design choices such as procedural rhetorics and diegetic elements, may affect players through bleed, transformative potential, and neo-tribal expressions of attachment and allegiance to the university as a place.

By applying a close reading methodology, we discuss in which ways the game design of *EA Sports College Football 25* (EA Sports 2024), selectively represents and uses university heritage to evoke conflict. Specifically, rivalries between institutions are a vivid case of the duality of university sports heritage; while a shared heritage with another institution is celebrated, it is also used to generate conflict.

2. UNIVERSITIES IN VIDEO GAMES

2.1 The university as a place

Universities are more than places of learning; they are cultural anchor institutions that preserve and promote heritage for society through traditions, rituals, and identities (Ashley and Durham 2021). Although such heritage has increasingly been studied in a post-colonial context (e.g., Wilder 2013), it is generally portrayed in a positive manner (e.g., Bulotaite 2003).

Smith (2006) argues that heritage has an important role when it comes to place-making. A place is more than just a physical or virtual space; it is a space infused with cultural meaning (Tuan 1977). People assign meaning to spaces, transforming them into places through their experiences, identities, and emotions. The place identity of universities is heavily shaped by their heritage, in which conflict, such as sports rivalries, may take up a solid part (Counted 2016). People form emotional ties to places through feelings of satisfaction and familiarity. It strengthens their bond with places they value. In Tuan's (1977) words, "The city or land is viewed as mother, and it nourishes; place is an archive of fond memories and splendid achievements that inspire the present." Universities may definitely function as such, exemplified by their allegorical indication as *alma mater* ("nourishing mother").

Champion (2016) argues that there is a shortage of research integrating theory and practice on how best to augment or invoke the user experience of place via digital media, including games. However, Plunkett (2011) is more optimistic, suggesting that some games evoke such a strong sense of place that players even form emotional connections to digital environments. These environments become meaningful to players through familiarity and engagement. In that regard, virtual replications of universities may have that very same effect, evoking memories with a potentially similar intensity.

2.2 Categories of university representations in video games

The most common portrayals of university heritage in mainstream video games can be grouped in three broad categories. The first is fantasy and magic universities, as mystical places that teach players the arts of wielding magic to create, prevent, or resolve conflict, such as *Skyrim's* College of Winterhold (Bethesda Game Studios 2011). The second is historical and imperial universities, as real-world prestigious places of influence and power, such as the "world wonder" Oxford University in *Sid Meier's Civilization VII* (Firaxis Games 2025). The third is contemporary universities, which form the most fluid group as a place for conflict, spanning from post-apocalyptic survival at the University of Eastern Colorado in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) to the struggles of everyday student life at the *Sims 4's* University of Britechester (Maxis 2019).

The first two categories frame universities as exclusive places shrouded in mystique and power. Less common in mainstream games, the third category possibly offers greater creative flexibility for game designers by detaching the universities from their ancient and fantastical tropes.

2.3 University sports heritage and conflict

University sports are widely represented in fashion, movies, television, and video games, offering mass consumable opportunities for neo-tribalist expression and inviting worship-like behavior by the fans (Serazio 2012; Tarver 2017). In university sports contexts, rivalries with other schools become central to institutional heritage. While heritage is often approached by its UNESCO (2009)

definition of both material and immaterial expressions of culture, a more critical definition would describe heritage as “contemporary uses of the past for political, cultural, or economic gains” (Graham et al. 2000). As such, it is an instrument that is used for a wide range of objectives, almost always with an inherent notion of conflict: it is an ever-ongoing process of (re)production of one narrative (“us” and our heritage) against another (“them” who are not entitled ownership of our heritage). It is framed as an idea that is not necessarily about memorizing the past, but more about our relationship with the present and the future (Harrison 2012). Heritage is shaped to meet our current needs and is ultimately a product of contemporary selection (Logan 2007; Smith 2006), leading to an inherent bias. This leads to conflict, as some stories are omitted, affecting constructed identities and narratives (Smith 2006; Graham et al. 2004). Therefore, heritage is often used as a powerful instrument in (geopolitical) conflicts.

2.4 Conflict and role-playing game design

The dynamic relationship between places and their heritage fuels conflict (Smith 2006); therefore, video games taking place in a university setting can inform conflict game design approaches, where narrative and mechanics emphasize resolution (Baker 2003–2004; Schott 2016). These conflictual drifts can be channeled in the *magic circle*: a regulated game space away from the rules and norms of everyday life (Freud and Strachey 1961; Huizinga 1949). Hall (2016) suggests that (role-)play engages in selective authenticity, shaping the uses and presentation of heritage to a dissonant “on demand” experience.

Heritage is a personal experience, as interpretations differ from person to person (Graham et al. 2000). This connects to Mochocki’s (2021) perspective on role-play and reenactment as forms of lived heritage experienced in the present by the player. He argues that almost all forms of role-play are informed by heritage. Role-play allows players to assume the role of an in-game character rather than their own identity. Bowman and Hugaas (2021) describe role-play as a three-staged process: players legitimize their in-game character behavior through *alibi* (Deterding 2018), resolve cognitive dissonance through off-game role-distancing, and conform to mainstream social norms after role-play.

These mechanics challenge players to immerse themselves in a heritage setting and can evoke different intensities and types of immersion, depending on the circumstances and role assumed (Bowman 2018). Strong immersion can help in realizing the transformative potential of a game: the out-of-game effects on a player’s identity or views, caused by playing a game. This often goes together with *bleed*, when the identities of players and in-game characters spill over to one another (Bowman et al. 2025). Nonetheless, as Hugaas (2024) argues: “Bleed is not always experienced as transformational or even pleasant.” Bleed and transformative play can both be a positive and negative experience for players.

Diegetic design elements contribute to the transformative potential of games by existing within the fictional world itself; these are things that characters can hear, see, experience, etc. On the other hand, non-diegetic elements operate outside of the game world and are only visible to the player, yet still shape their interpretation and engagement. On a deeper mechanical level, game design choices through procedural rhetorics (Bogost 2007) can convey messages to players through their rules and processes rather than through words or images.

3. METHODS

3.1 Case study selection

College Football 25 (CFB25) was chosen because it foregrounds university conflict heritage in the relatively uncommon category of “contemporary” real-world university representations in video games. Its design centers around heritage-as-conflict, especially institutional rivalries between schools.

The game became the best-selling sports game of all time in the U.S. (Wilson 2024), proving that a heritage-centered game is commercially viable and interesting for a large audience. Though other sports games have included heritage representations, none emphasize them as much as *CFB25*. Outside the U.S. market, *CFB25*'s performance was weaker, likely due to cultural differences in sports preferences and lack of personal connections to American universities.

3.2 Close reading

This study employs close reading: a qualitative method rooted in literary studies, but increasingly used in game studies. It offers interpretative depth by analyzing design and storytelling through concrete examples such as gameplay mechanics (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011).

Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011) suggest that researchers alternate between two perspectives during the close reading analysis: as a “naïve” participant, immersed in play, and as a “reserved” participant, to maintain a critical distance from the material. The first author applied these two lenses through repeated play sessions, note-taking, and loose thematic interpretation. During analysis, extra attention was given to procedural rhetorics, diegetic elements, and neo-tribalist dynamics.

The aim of the close reading analysis is not to summarize or review the game, but to interpret how it represents university heritage. Special attention is given to the game's relation between conflict and role-play. Three guiding questions give structure to the analysis:

- How does the game's design frame heritage through conflict and rivalry?
- How do role-playing elements allow players to enact this heritage?
- What potential (real-life) effects might these design choices have on players?

3.3 Limitations and positionality

While close reading offers in-depth qualitative insights, it is interpretive and shaped by the researcher's perspective. As a former University of Minnesota student, the first author's connection with U.S. college football and this university may have influenced interpretations. To overcome or at least mitigate any potential bias, the first author conducted the close reading whereas the second author reviewed the findings for reliability, comprehensiveness, and relevance. We apply the pronoun “I” for the first author specifically and “we” for the team of both first and second author. Consequently, this paper uses both I and we. Also, I analyzed multiple schools from both naïve and interpretive perspectives.

The scope of the analysis is limited to in-game analysis. Although transformative potential, bleed, and participatory fan culture are considered, they cannot yet be directly measured (Jenkins 2006; Hugaas 2024; Bowman et al. 2025). Furthermore, this study is a snapshot of *CFB25* at the time of analysis. Since it is a live-service game, subsequent updates and future installments may potentially alter its design and heritage representations.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Implied neo-tribalism

Starting up the game shows a unifying picture of college sports (Figure 1). However, after this screen, the game presents a first situation of conflict: to select one favorite university team, essentially Othering the remaining 133 as non-favorite teams. The player cannot continue, nor engage in gameplay, before this choice is made. Selecting the Minnesota Golden Gophers, for example, caused a complete overhaul of the in-game menus: maroon-and-gold-soaked visuals filled with school logos, mottos, pennants, and a mascot took over the screen (Figure 2). Though it seems like a simple non-diegetic presentation to decorate menus with school talismans, the deeper meaning of this design choice and presentation reinforces neo-tribalist framings of loyalty and identity (Serazio 2012; Tarver 2017). Players can change their favorite team and menu presentation as an option hidden and not actively advocated in the game settings.



Figure 1: Title screen of *EA Sports College Football 25*, showing college athletes from various schools leaving the tunnel together on their way towards the field filled with anticipating fans.

Across all 134 carefully recreated in-game representations of university stadiums, the game-day diegetic elements of rivalry are prominently shown, such as crowd hand signs, trophy celebrations, cheer routines, and taunting mascots (Figure 3). Just like that pennant on the menu screen, in-game mascots can recall personal memories of a university, as Tuan (1977) would suggest. Seeing Minnesota's Goldy Gopher perform his signature "headspin" evoked my personal memories of encounters with him at the university campus.

From a procedural rhetorics lens (Bogost 2007), victory remains the central goal of (university) sports, but "rivalry" derby matches raise the stakes. Beyond athletics, these matches emphasize institutional pride and heritage, which are embodied in trophies, prestige, and lasting impacts on university sports legacies. By building progression and rewards around these achievements in its game design, *CFB25* communicates that conflict heritage is foundational to the meaning of college football. The game procedurally persuades players that maintaining traditions and defeating historical opponents is just as important as athletic performance. It is especially emphasized in 67

match-specific non-diegetic rivalry elements, such as rivalry video packages and commentary, framing the athletes as modern-day gladiators that inherit this conflict legacy:

“... a rivalry like this is what makes college football great! Yeah, the tradition and the history . . . but right here, right now there’s great intensity. This is why these guys came to these schools: to play in games like this!” -- Chris Fowler, sports broadcaster for ESPN, featured in *EA Sports College Football 25*.



Figure 2: One of the 134 available personalized menus in CFB25, with this one being for the Minnesota Golden Gophers.



Figure 3: A collage of match day rituals – team presentation, cheerleaders, marching bands, and mascots – all contributing to the place identity of the university.

4.2 Role-play and enacting heritage

College Football offers two role-play paths: athlete or coach. Both roles position players as active agents of in-game heritage enactment, which offers a different perspective than typical spectating matches. Per role-playing game standards, players have the option to customize their characters, hone skills, and choose backstories (Figure 4).

The “Stadium Pulse”-mechanic (Figure 5) amplifies immersion, with a seemingly innocent meter in the user interface indicating the intensity of the crowd. The meter’s values coincide with the amount of gamepad vibrations and the volume of crowd roars that affect on-field performance by the athlete-character and, potentially, player emotions out-of-game. The Wear and Tear mechanic (Figure 6) acts in a similar way by directly impacting individual athletes, showing their injuries in real time. Coaches might consider different strategies by choosing either to substitute worn-out athletes, or to push their athletes to go the extra mile and risk serious injuries.



Figure 4: College Football 25 gives players plenty of role-play freedom in terms of character customization, skill tree paths, and narrative background. Shown here is the student athlete editor.



Figure 5: Stadium Pulse indicates the intensity of the crowd, which directly impacts your athlete’s performance.



Figure 6: Wear and Tear aims to portray the risks of engaging in continuous physical conflict on the field, presenting coaches with dilemmas on whether to pull a player off the field.

From both the athlete and coach roles, players have direct control on the trajectory of their university sports team, as opposed to the real-world performance of a team. They can do so through their in-game performance on the field, or off the field through choices in the game's menus. For coaches, these choices revolve around managing scholarships, resources, and the well-being of athletes. Athletes have limited ways to spend their energy; they can engage in dialogue branching options, though limited, while coaches cannot. Athletes make decisions through their smartphone (Figure 7). Dialogue choices can have real consequences, as student life must be balanced with athletic life.

The number of wins or losses determines the in-game heritage course, such as trophy wins. The role-play choices have consequences on how players take part in the university's heritage, leaving an in-game legacy either offline against computer-controlled opponents, or against other fans through online modes and leaderboards. Both the athletes and coaches can deliberately choose to actively engage in sports conflict and aim for success, which possibly leads to a transfer to a better sports program or a promotion to head coach.

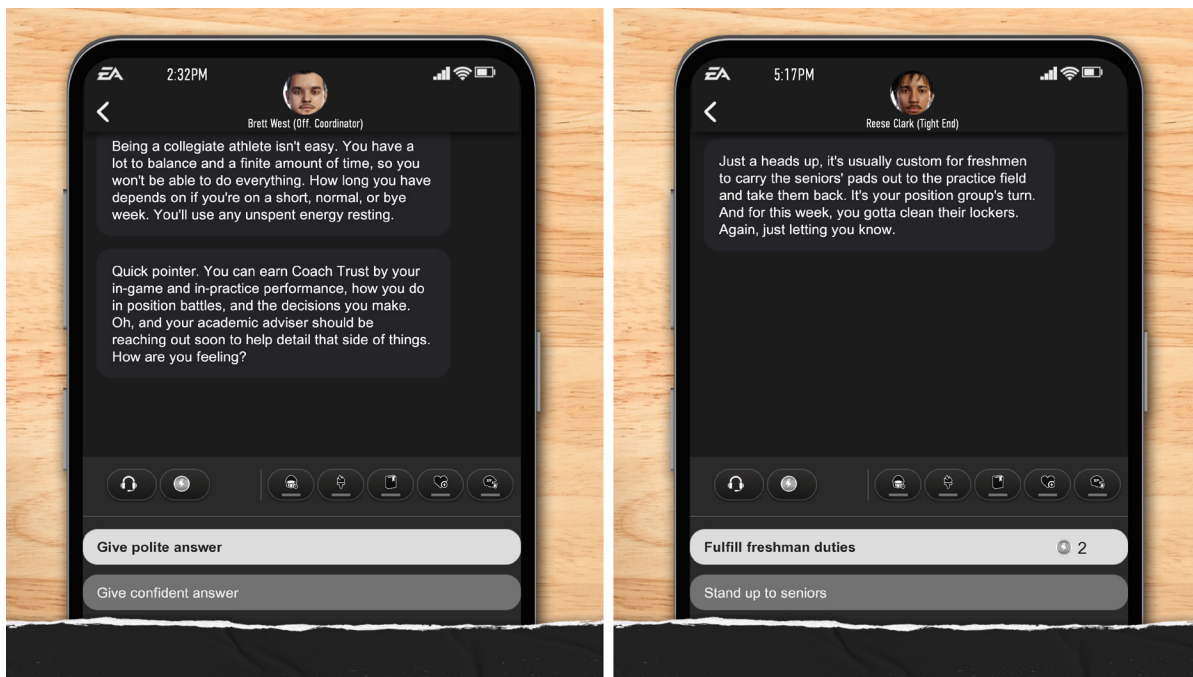


Figure 7: Though *College Football 25* includes role-play elements such as dialogue branching, all conversations with other in-game characters is limited to texting on a smartphone. Academic-athletic life balancing and locker room antics are portrayed as harsh reality on this athlete's phone.

4.3 Selective heritage representations

Overall, the in-game observations show that *CFB25* is an idealized depiction of university sports heritage, which makes the game on its own conflictual. Licensing partners — the NCAA, conferences, and universities — prioritize a celebratory image of university heritage over uncomfortable truths such as the long-term health consequences of student athletes, which are not included in the heavily marketed Wear and Tear system. This selectivity contrasts the developer's claims of true authenticity, which was highlighted in the Sights and Sounds Deep Dive trailer, in anticipation of the game's launch, stating, "We designed *College Football 25* with a philosophy that every team is somebody's favorite. So, to create a truly authentic and immersive game day experience, we gave a little love to every single school in the game" (@EASportsCollege 2025).

The keywords here are *favorite* and *truly authentic*. Heritage scholars would be critical of suggesting authenticity here (Graham et al. 2000; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Smith 2006). The game's version of authenticity commodifies heritage, prioritizing marketability over critical engagement, and illustrates how heritage representations, even in a consumable merchandized form like this blockbuster video game, perpetuate the repression of other narratives due to conflicting interests.

The roster of playable university teams further highlights this selective representation. Only 134 schools appear, leaving thousands unrepresented. Whether this is due to licensing or technical limitations remains unclear, though the game includes a community-driven Download Center, which enables players to engage in participatory fan culture (Jenkins 2006), allowing players to share missing or fictional universities with other players online.

5. CONCLUSION

Close reading showed that *College Football 25* is not simply a product that statically represents university heritage, but a platform to celebrate and encourage a personal experience of university 71

heritage through emotional and sensory engagement (Tuan 1977). This celebration is essentially selective based on the game's design choices. By prioritizing the positive and marketable depictions of university sports heritage, this blockbuster entertainment product primarily mobilizes it as an economic resource (Graham et al. 2004; Smith 2006). The game misses out on opportunities to act as a critical and inclusive platform for heritage education, engagement, and comprehensive place identity formation and representation. However, questions can be asked whether a more serious game design approach would benefit the appeal and commercial success of the game for the parties involved, such as publishers, universities, and casual sports fans.

The study's scope is limited to in-game representations, excluding out-of-game effects such as bleed and transformative play (Hugaas 2024; Bowman et al. 2025). Future research would have to examine whether interacting with university-themed games have (long-term) out-of-game impacts on players, such as stronger place attachment (Tuan 1977) or increased identification with the neo-tribe of the university and its sports team (Serazio 2012; Tarver 2017). Nonetheless, the findings of the close reading suggest that *College Football 25*, through its role-play mechanics, design choices, and rivalry focus, actively encourages neo-tribalist behavior. The weight of rivalries and presentation of conflict in its many shapes can, potentially, affect the emotional state of the player. Especially when engaging with other players (online).

The role-play framing in the game makes players interact with heritage as if they are an active, contributing part of the heritage of universities, albeit a virtual representation. Outside role-play, the study shows that conflict is presented in different ways. For example, the partial inclusion of schools might make some players feel left out, while also encouraging participatory fan culture through its Download Center (Jenkins 2006).

The game's procedural rhetorics elevate rivalry heritage's impact by rewarding wins and punishing losses against historic rivaling schools; it persuades players that institutional conflict and heritage form the foundation of university sports. The heritage trajectories relating to the in-game behaviors of players, shows how in-game heritage enactment through role-play can possibly help players gain a better understanding of university sports heritage (Bogost 2007).

Ultimately, the study highlights the dual role of universities in games: as places for conflict enactment and as places for intriguing worldbuilding. Despite being underexplored in both scholarship and public debate, universities as a place in games can be interesting to both game designers and university administrators, e.g., as a gamified recruitment and marketing tool for prospective students or as a virtual repository of heritage for alumni. While *College Football 25* cannot be considered a comprehensive or critical representation of American university heritage, its (pop-)cultural and commercial impact is undeniable, opening pathways for further discussion and research on these themes.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Guus van Tilborg contributed to writing the original draft, methodology, investigation, data curation, conceptualization, revisions, and editing.

Peter Groote contributed to revising, editing, and supervision.

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