

EA Sports' sees momentum in 'Madden NFL 21' and other sports games amid coronavirus pandemic

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Professional and college sports have been disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. But sports played on virtual athletic fields and courts have

thrived.

Video [game](#) publisher EA Sports has seen 13% more players taking the field in Madden NFL 21, released Aug. 28—and that's coming off record activity last year, the publisher says.

Now there's another reason for players to keep playing Madden NFL, which is a perennial top-seller. They can help fill out the roster for the Virtual Pro Bowl, which will be played Jan. 31 using Madden [video game](#) software and broadcast on ABC and ESPN.

Each NFL team has one player on offense designated to be added to the virtual squad. Every touchdown video game players rack up using those player in the Madden game while playing online Head-to-Head matchups (ranked and unranked) will count towards identifying the top scoring players.

The AFC and NFC squads will each get one additional player through this Video Game Numbers challenge, which runs Dec. 22 to Jan. 3, 2021. The one AFC player and NFC player will added to this year's Virtual Pro Bowl rosters on January 4. For the full list of 32 eligible players for the challenge go to ea.com/videogamenumbers.

The event gives "players a reason to impact what is happening in the real world. I think it is super compelling," said Cam Weber, executive vice president and group general manager at EA Sports.

When the National Football League decided to cancel a live Pro Bowl, EA Sports worked with the league on the virtual event. Simulated hockey matchups using the publisher's "NHL 20" video game were televised before the NHL restarted its season and sounds from the game were subsequently used in real games played with no fans in attendance. Sounds from its FIFA game have been used in soccer matches, too.

"As things like shelter-in-place started kicking in over the world, not only did we start to see a lot of extra engagement in our games, but this gap in the market where all the major sports leagues around the world were shutting down," Weber said. "Our games were kind of being substituted for awhile, so we really embraced it."

Similarly, simulated matches of NBA teams using Take-Two Interactive's NBA 2K21 game were televised and before the baseball season got the OK to start. Sony Interactive's "MLB The Show" conducted a tournament with pro players from each team in the league, while NBA 2K21 held a 16-player tournament of pro basketball players.

Video games have become a reliable diversion during the pandemic. From March to August, spending on games rose 30% over last year, according to The NPD Group research firm. And with continued spending increases, a new annual record of \$50 billion is likely. And gamers of all ages played and spend more, NPD found, with those aged 45 to 54 playing 59% more and spending 76% more.

EA Sports saw increased participation across all of its sports games. Its FIFA games had 12% higher engagement, while NHL 21 had 9% more players. Its UFC 4 game grew by 10% more players. And the publishers mobile sports games have been played by nearly 53 million since Aug. 1.

"This crazy year and the pandemic and people spending a lot of time at home that's driven engagement across the video game space," Weber said.

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