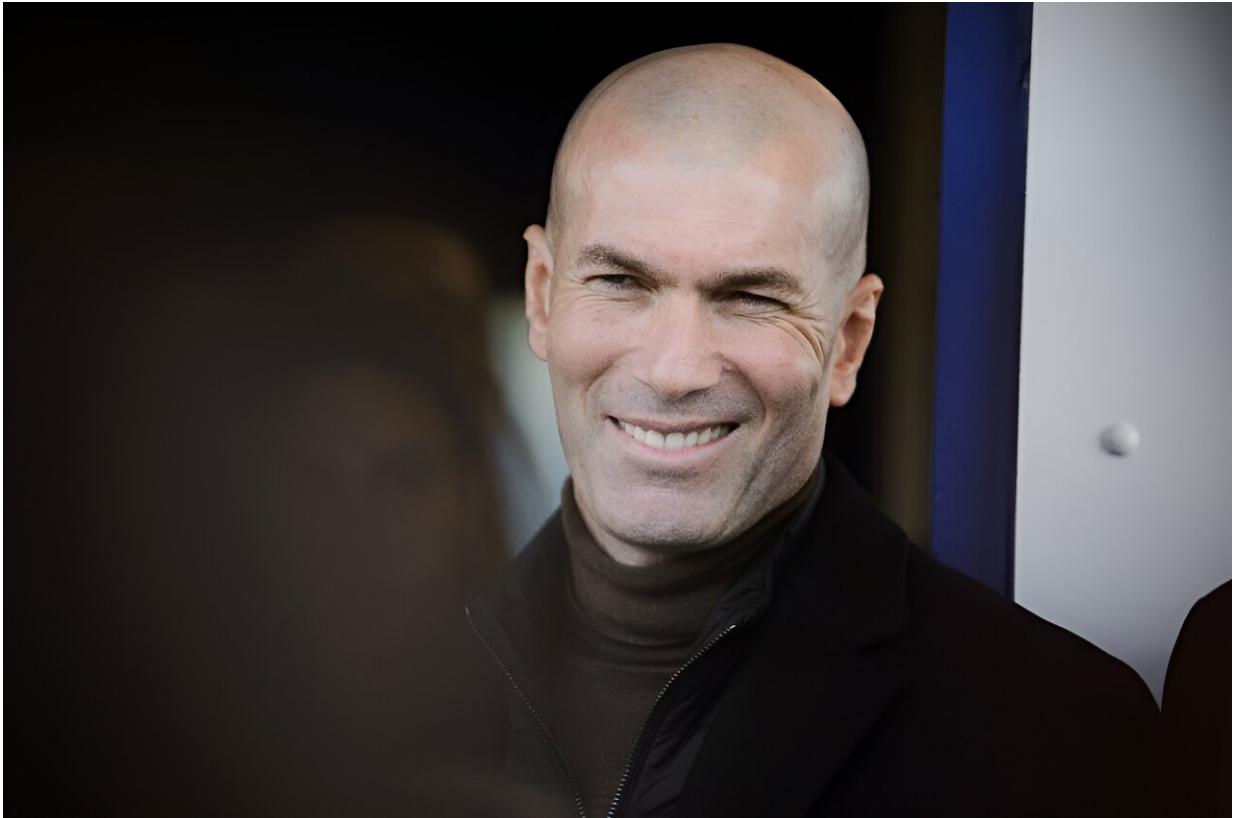


# Video games give sports stars second life

September 29 2023, by Yassine KHIRI

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French legend Zidane says many young children now know him largely through his appearance in the video game.

The post-retirement careers of the biggest sports stars can be fascinating to watch—Viagra ads, property ventures, crypto projects—but one option is becoming a sure-fire winner: put your face on the cover of a video game.

And death is no barrier for this particular career, with two popular games this year choosing sports legends who are no longer with us.

LA Lakers basketball star Kobe Bryant, who died in a helicopter accident in 2020, graces the cover of "NBA 2K24".

And two of the world's greatest footballers from bygone eras—Pele and Johan Cruyff—get posthumous respect with their figures emblazoned on "FC 24" from EA Sports.

They are joined on the cover of the EA game by a galaxy of still-living stars of the more recent past—Zinedine Zidane and Ronaldinho—and present—Erling Haaland and Alexia Putellas.

French legend Zidane told AFP in June that many [young children](#) now knew him largely through his appearance in the EA's game, formerly known as "FIFA".

"Kids aged eight to 10 don't know me, unless their dads have told them about what I did back in the day," said the World Cup winner.

"It's more through PlayStation, so it's kind of funny. I'm used to it."

## Marketing nostalgia

The ties between video game publishers and sports stars go deep, particularly in the United States.

The leading video game series on American football bears the name of a former player, John Madden, who retired in 1978 to become a sports commentator.

Julien Pillot, an economist specializing in cultural industries, told AFP

the endorsement of bona fide legends was clearly a powerful marketing tool.

And the often huge cost of getting their endorsement, he said, was "more than offset" by the sales they generate—both of the games themselves and the ubiquitous in-game "cards" required to unlock additional content.

Gaming firms were playing on the "intergenerational aspect" and adding "a touch of nostalgia", said Pillot.

It's a feature that executives are not shy about highlighting.

"My seven-year-old only really knows who Pele is because of his amazing rating on FC," David Jackson, vice-president of the EA Sports FC brand, told AFP.

He said the game had allowed fans to feel a little bit of the magic of playing with stars from earlier generations.

And it works both ways, according to some of the stars involved—even those who don't rate as highly as Pele.

"People of a certain generation know me by what I've done on the pitch," said World Cup winner Robert Pires at the launch party for the EA game in Paris.

But a 12-year-old boy told Pires recently he had only learnt who the French star was through playing the [game](#).

"I asked him: 'Am I good?'" said Pires. "He told me: 'You're good, but you're slow.'"

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