Game Reviews

Real Football 2013 // The Dark Knight Rises

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|Summary

01. REAL FOOTBALL 2013

a. Context

Real Football 2013 is a free-to-play football game, which mixes team enhancement and club management within a traditional gameplay found in the football simulation genre. This year's iteration drastically changes the user's experience from its predecessor, for example, by borrowing some features used in social gaming (ex: sports facilities or player management and updates).

In terms of game design, this new direction is interesting because it offers players a rewarding experience based upon the idea of perpetual progression towards success.

The concept is quite interesting and efficient, but we will see throughout the analysis how the association between the game and a freemium business model tends to restrain users from the core gameplay – play football games – without feeling forced to bring a financial solution.

b. Presentation

On the whole, the presentation is relatively solid, including art direction, quality of graphics, animations and sound design. However, I would bring some updates over the distinction between players because each squad member looks similar. Maybe it is because the user can't start with a roster of all-star players, but the variety of player skins seems really sparse.

In my opinion, it would have been more interesting to broaden the number of face templates destined for "standard" players in order to better diversify their looks. Consumer acquisition and retention play a key role in Free to Play games, so it would appear more efficient to seduce them from the beginning of their playthrough to maximize in-app purchase chances (I'll come back to this point later on).

c. User Interface

Player name position

As a matter of fact, player similarities bring up an obstacle to in-match comprehension, specifically when it comes to recognizing the character controlled by the user. The name is indeed displayed at the top right corner of the screen, but I find this emplacement counter-intuitive. On one hand, the user is focused upon the on-going action, near the ball (center of the screen) or on the radar (bottom center), and on the other, the player name locations are usually placed on the bottom corners of the screen in traditional football games (which obviously can't be done due to the virtual buttons' position).

Knowing each player has his own activity on the pitch, it is important for users to easily distinguish the handled players in order to optimize their built-up play and find the best scoring opportunities. To do so, it would be more suitable to locate the player's name near the radar (cf. *PES* mobile), or even near the player himself (cf. *FIFA* mobile). The same applies to the opposing side, which would be useful for the gamer to understand the threat he is facing (ex: A one star player will not be as dangerous as a five star player).

Player name position in other football games

The radar

Due to the fact that the camera cannot display the entire field without compromising in-game readability, the radar quickly becomes an essential tool in a football game. It serves for various purposes, such as monitoring teammates and contenders positions. In general, the icons' color on the radar matches the team jerseys. Nevertheless, during my playthrough, my team was dressed in red with blue radar icons, whilst the rival's radar icons were … red.

The idea here would be to modify the radar icon colors depending on the teams shirt color, or to create clearer differences between the two teams (ex: Home/Away, User/Ai, etc.).

Objectives and stats

Finally, the last suggestion I would bring to user interface would be the display of objectives, stats and results. Although the game is based upon team evolution and customization, it is strange not to be able to access these pieces of information directly from the main dashboard. In a similar display as Gameloft's social games (ex: *Ice Age Village*, *Monster Life*, etc.), showing a menu regrouping the various objectives on the bottom left corner of the screen would improve comprehension and access to content.

Moreover, implementing these data in a menu that regroups all the optional settings (settings, help, trophies, app rating, credits, etc.) is not really coherent. Moreover, being able

to access them just before a match kick-off could potentially force the user to come back to the main dashboard in order to complete a specific task.

The lack of an intuitive flow to objectives and results indirectly impairs the user experience and questions the utility of the notifications tool (mail icon): the user can be informed of completed actions without understanding its incentive at first glance.

d. Gameplay

Game handling during matches

The first thing I noticed while handling the game was the fact that the reaction time between the moment I touched the virtual button and the player's movement was rather long for my taste (which changes according to a player's dribble stats?). This feeling occurs mainly when trying to dribble with a character, which ultimately becomes clumsy for risky moves. I frequently found myself losing the ball to an opponent even though I had already asked the player to give it away.

Furthermore, it is impossible to attack the ball after a pass from a teammate in built-up play. For that reason, it is simply impossible to plan the orientation of an offensive sequence before actually receiving the ball, leading the adversary to disrupt the game phase more easily.

Defensive aerial phase

A major gameplay issue appears when defending, during on-going aerial sequences or set pieces. I currently still haven't figured out how to do a defending header. When these moments happen, the virtual gamepad doesn't modify the "press", "sprint" and "tackle" button scheme. In addition, the user can't apply pressure on an opponent receiving a long ball.

These occurrences make the user especially vulnerable to aerial attacks from the AI without being able to counter or defend it properly. The idea here would be to change the control scheme during these sequences by adding a "header" input like in rival productions.

Touch controls

Considering the game runs on touch devices, it would have been relevant to further adapt the gameplay to touch screens. It could have widely improved the overall handling and lack of comfort compared to a physical gamepad.

In my opinion, some examples from other football games are really suitable:

- During attacking sequences, have the ability to use the "Drag & Release" method on none controlled characters to create through pass opportunities or free space between defensive lines,

- Be able to select the pass receivers during set pieces by simply tapping on them,

- Be able to apply different effects on the ball when taking a free kick or a penalty shoot, by using the "Drag & Release" input (giving a curved or more direct finger swipe following the desired effect).

It would also be very interesting to develop new gameplay mechanics for defensive sequences, thus creating innovative added value (nb: I haven't played *FIFA 13* on mobile yet):

- Be able to "Drag & Release" a none controlled player to tell him to press on the ball carrier to let the user place his character adequately and attempt an interception,

- Be able to play the offside trap by selecting all the defenders (ex: by drawing a circle on the screen) and slide a finger toward the opposing half of the pitch,

- Give the possibility to choose the team's defensive width (narrow or wide) according to the rival's tactics. It would allow the team either to suppress hostile offensive chances or to play through the opponent's back on dazzling counter-attacks (ex: by using the traditional zoom in/zoom out touch control).

e. Introduction To The Game

The great thing about this rendition of *Real Football* is the users' ability to administrate a team on a bigger scale than only player management. This also means they have more information to digest in order to understand all the game's subtleties. On this account, the not-so-intuitive access to menu objectives does not ease the learning curve when adding to the fact of the need to get skilled on the pitch.

That said, the game doesn't really help the players to perfectly understand all the implemented mechanics as the tutorial ends quite abruptly. After what, it leaves them without any substantial clue to progress properly. I can imagine newbies being discouraged of playing the soft because of the lack of explanation and a steep learning curve (which could lead to a loss of potential consumers).

Several suggestions can be worthy of attention in this case:

- Allow users an access to a thorough tutorial by clarifying gameplay mechanics with more details (both for explaining club management and for giving tips during matches), or to simply better highlight access to the "Help" section.

- Give the opportunity to lower down temporarily the difficulty settings (ex: until the end of the first league). For instance, because I wasn't used to the game in the beginning, I often had to wait for the AI to make a mistake, pass the ball directly to my top player (won in the lottery) and try to score only with him.

- Grant users a "Training" game mode.

f. Business Model

The benefits and drawbacks of a Free to Play game are actually being free, and *Real Football 2013* sums it all (too much?). After a few matches, Gameloft's production shows its barriers regarding long-term games per punctual play (due to player fatigue, injuries, staff limitation, etc.) without invoking in-app micro-transactions.

It can be qualified as "appropriate" knowing the game is free. However, these early boundaries added to a fairly aggressive incitation to purchase don't really encourage users to hang on to the product and eventually be seduced in investing financially into the game. This means that the longer it takes for players to realize that they will have to pay eventually a greater extent, compared to a traditionally paid app that lets you enjoy the game at once, the more rapidly they'll turn elsewhere.

Hence this business model benefits only to players who are willing to cough up money right away or to the really patient ones, knowing soft currency (virtual coins) can only be acquired by playing career matches. It should also be noted that I still haven't figured out if hard currency (virtual bills) can be obtained in-game.

g. Game Modes

For gamer retention

In purpose of answering the business model related issues, it would have been interesting to integrate a game mode where users could have enjoyed the core gameplay – meaning playing matches – and obtained a small amount of virtual cash after each game (even if the mode lets gamers only select teams encountered in career mode).

Thanks to this method, the users' attention could be sustained and they would continue appreciating the game while waiting for their team's full recovery in career mode. Moreover, they could keep feeling a sense of progression by saving virtual currency (like in buildings granting coins per period of time in classic social games) …

… But not enough to avoid letting them abuse from this game mode: XP points wouldn't be acquired in this case, so unlocking higher level elements in career mode would be impossible. If gamers still manage to benefit more from it than initially planned, an income per day quota could be set (without stopping gamers from playing after that), as well as objective-based match games.

Community

Even though *Real Football 2013* is inspired from various social games such as *FIFA Superstars* or *FIFA*'s *Ultimate Team* game mode (by borrowing specific codes: currency mechanics, asset management, etc.), a crucial aspect of this kind of games is completely lacking and hinders the entire experience: A multi-playing option and/or a community oriented playstyle.

The idea of being able to compete online against friends with customized teams (in leagues, cup championships, leaderboards, etc.) would have undoubtedly increased the gaming pleasure and emphasized a real sense of reward. Consequently, the monetization chances would have been incomparable thanks to the additional motivation of building the most competitive team. Besides, rivalry between players could have caused a united infatuation around the game, thus giving it more credibility and visibility towards other potential users.

Similarly, character exchange (ex: player for player, player for currency, etc.) would have then been possible.

h. Overall Impression

In my opinion, the new path taken by Gameloft's football franchise is more consistent with its freemium model, compared to last year's version, thanks to it progressive gameplay system. Nevertheless, incitation to purchase is far too prevalent, which can frustrate users from fully benefiting from the game soon after they start playing.

Despite some imperfections in its presentation or gameplay mechanics, *Real Football 2013* is entertaining enough to overlook them. I think the game still has some place for improvements and represents a good alternative to the competition's productions. If it remains free.

To sum up, the following are the different changes I would bring to the game:

- Increase graphically the physical differences between characters,

- Polish user flow and user interface during matches (player name position, radar readability), and club management (ease access to objectives and stats),

- Refine gameplay on the pitch (more reactive handling, defensive sequence revision) and optimize it for touch screens (additional touch inputs and virtual pad customization),

- Ease the game's introduction to newcomers,

- Add new components grabbing users' attention while waiting for cooldowns in career mode (being able to play outside the career mode, implementing a multi-playing option).

02. THE DARK KNIGHT RISES

a. Context

The Dark Knight Rises for mobile devices is an ambitious open world action game, loosely based on the last Batman movie rendition from Christopher Nolan's trilogy. It includes some RPG elements as well as exploration, puzzle solving and driving sequences.

Gameloft's product is technically astonishing and very enjoyable for its concepts (gameplay wise). However, issues on the adventure's overall pace and some of its core mechanics (stealth and hand-to-hand combat amongst others) hinder the user experience from being a perfect run.

I shall explain my viewpoint on different aspects throughout the following analysis, and submit some alternative solutions in order to improve the game.

b. Presentation

Graphically speaking, the game is absolutely gorgeous and deserves praise for the accomplishment, considering that it runs on mobile devices. That said, the lack of lip-synching during cut-scenes becomes even more unusual (time/budget limitations?), which could have created a livelier atmosphere.

In the same way, it would have been nice to cross some NPCs more often (friendly or enemy) during outdoor stages. At some point, Gotham City feels as empty as a ghost town, even though this aspect becomes coherent once Bane has started his occupancy in the story.

c. User Interface

Menus and in-game user interface are well built, but inconsistencies remain when actions are completed or when chapters are finished. Especially when it comes to indicating that the player can upgrade his character on mission debriefing panels or when he levels up. The game should offer the choice of getting access to the *Tech Shop* directly after the stated actions are completed, in order to improve the user flow and strengthen the feeling of progress.

The incentive of dividing the story into chapters is arguable (except for the first chapter, obviously used for tutorial purposes), knowing only missions got named and there's no real transition between them outside of a set of narrated slide shows. Consequently, if the chapter pacing were to be fully taken advantage of, it would be interesting to create a chapter completion panel in which mission stats could be regrouped.

Furthermore, perhaps the creation of global leaderboards for these stats could be an exciting extension for users to encourage replay value.

d. Gameplay

Globally speaking, the game's main issues originate from its stiff controls and repetitive gameplay, in particular during fighting sequences. Here are some suggestions to improve different aspects of the game:

Transition between different sequences while on foot

Playing the game using stealth is possible, but for the most part, enemy bashing is easier and more intuitive in terms of control. The idea here would be to add a button letting the user freely change the character's stance from "Stealth" to "Combat" or "Exploration". This way, a different set of buttons could be implemented depending on Batman's posture (cf. Warrior's stances in *World of Warcraft*). The player could then proceed without fear of tapping the wrong button and thus be forced to be in a specific position to modify the "Punch" button to a "Silent Kill" button, for example.

Combat

Considering the soft instigates button mashing during hand-to-hand combat, simple tricks can solve the matter:

- The possibility of learning different types of combos or throws (by leveling up or purchasing them) suited for different types of enemies, so as to bring a more diversified experience (ex: quick attacks for tough guys, throws for opponents protecting themselves, etc.),

- The possibility of tweaking Batman's gadgets with more variety, and usable in contextual attacks (ex: disarm an enemy using a ranged weapon by throwing a batarang),

- Zooming out from the character while in close combat, to be able to watch out for all the opponents without having to rotate the camera (cf. *Sleeping Dogs* or the console/PC versions of *Batman* games).

Touch controls

Like in *Real Football 2013*, and since the game is exclusive to mobile devices using touch screens, why doesn't the game take more advantage from this specificity? Again, making the controls a little bit more touch friendlier would have made the gameplay more intuitive:

- Being able to counter or hold attacks with a finger swiping move (cf. *Dead Space* for iOS),

- Being able to select an enemy or an edge of a building by tapping on it,

- Creating more complex touch based quick time events (ex: when climbing up the pit, or when defusing a bomb),

- Using the gyroscopic features for gliding.

Virtual pad customization

As it is designed, the pad's default button placement tends to put some action buttons too close from the thumb. For instance, batarangs are frequently misused in the heat of combat in spite of their limited number. Therefore, the possibility of customizing the button placement in the settings could be a suitable addition (cf. *Spell Sword* or *GTA III* for iOS).

Resistance management mini-game

This topic is more optional and differs from the soft's core gameplay, but it seems helping the resistance clear Gotham's districts don't have any purpose outside of getting additional XP and credits. As a result, it could be interesting to create a territorial management mini-game (cf. Turf wars in *GTA San Andreas*), where the player would complete secondary missions in order to reinforce the resistance, get them geared up and have them defend specific districts (ex: which could be lost if not well protected) against Bane's thugs.

The player would then navigate inside the city to bring help to the sections under attack and get additional bonuses to his character or defense resources. This way, the game could offer a different experience and let the user take a break from the traditional gameplay, without misrepresenting the movie plot.

e. Game Pacing

In my opinion, the second main issue with the game is represented by its pacing which never really evolves. Due to the fact of combat being the main attraction, and because the character's moves never change from the beginning, the sense of redundancy appears quickly. Upgrades exist, but aren't perceptible enough to get a rewarding feeling after purchasing them. Therefore, the sole intention of pushing the combats' complexity could have changed a lot of things.

Moreover, the game's chapter division and story could explain skill learning evolutions. For example, in this case, let's say all Batman's powers are unlocked for the first three missions in chapter 1, which are used as a tutorial to get the player used to the gameplay mechanics. Then the fourth mission (cf. *The Pit*) would "reset" all the skills after Batman's injury according to the story plot. Finally, the last mission from chapter 1 during which he returns to Gotham could be used to indicate to the user that he has to win all his powers over again by completing missions in order to defeat Bane.

The game already tries to create this feeling of evolution thanks to the vehicle and gadget unlocks, but it is too bad it does not do the same for combat mechanics.

f. Overall Impression

To conclude, although *The Dark Knight Rises* is an entertaining game, the core gameplay doesn't really live up to the expectations of its insane production value, at least from the perspective of a hardcore oriented gamer, often distracted by the lack of pacing throughout the story progression.

Nevertheless, the game's potential could easily rise to a whole new level with the addition of minor gameplay upgrades.

To sum up, the different changes I would bring to the game:

- Minor presentation upgrades (lip-synching, make Gotham City more lively),

- Some minor changes to the global flow of user interface (easier access to the *Tech Shop* and more distinctive transitions between chapters),

- Major modifications to the gameplay during combat (unlock moves, be able to change stances), when in free roaming (create a different gaming experience), and optimizing the touch controls (additional touch inputs and virtual pad customization),

- Gameplay tweaks that could have better paced the overall experience (a better sense of progression).