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## Simulating Football: The Business

In July 2019, fans of the football game *FIFA* (2015-2019) worldwide were in for a surprise as rival *Pro Evolution Soccer (PES)* (2015-2019) announced exclusive rights to the Italian club Juventus (Cuthbertson 2019). Juventus, a powerhouse in Italy and winners of the title in Italy's top league (Serie A) for eight consecutive seasons, are also home to one of football's most popular stars Cristiano Ronaldo. In one strategic sweep, *PES* had not only licensed Italy's most successful team in recent times but also one of the game's most marketable faces.

As fans of football games worldwide discussed the ramifications of the deal, it became increasingly apparent that *FIFA*'s poster child for its two most recent iterations (*FIFA 19* and *18*) Cristiano Ronaldo now played for an unlicensed team. As chatter on forums spoke about *FIFA* renaming Juventus as Piemonte Calcio (Cuthbertson 2019), this move on some level must have felt as *karmic justice* to fans of *PES*, players who have been forced to play with teams titled London Blue and Red (for Chelsea and Arsenal) and Manchester Blue & Red (for United & City) ever since *FIFA* secured the rights to the coveted English Premier League.

On a ludic level, both *FIFA* and *PES* simulate the game of football. If one would base this analysis on the core tenets of simulation from Bill Nichols' understanding (Nichols 1988) then both *FIFA* and *PES* attempt to recreate the ideal football experience virtually, by allowing their players to immerse themselves in a ludic engagement that comes as close to an offline football game as possible. Thus, unlike other games that are understood with regards to the ludic challenges they offer (Juul 2011) or in terms of the various levels/frames of engagement (Calleja 2007), simulated sports need to be understood or rather examined with an added dimension which judges them for their ability to accurately recreate the experience.



million copies in 2018 (exact figures -0.55 million). Noel in her article estimates that *PES* sold one copy for every 22 copies of *FIFA* in 2018 (Noel 2019). As the gap between sales widens and the numbers for *PES* decline, financial logic dictates that like any media product *PES* will be unable to pay for new licenses or renew older ones and thus will begin to lose its exclusive rights. This is also something that came about when *PES* lost the licenses to elite tournaments like the UEFA Champions League and the Europa League (Dayus 2018). *FIFA* quickly acquired those licenses (Pereira and Dayus 2018) and since then *PES* has continued to dip in sales. Thus, *PES'* act of acquiring exclusive rights to Juventus must not be seen as merely a retaliation but as a desperate act to stay afloat.

### Understanding the Monopolistic Progression

Thus unfolds the first layer of the central question of this article: How does a game like *PES* lose the entire market of players who view playing simulated football as a leisure time activity? The most logical explanation is that *PES* simply stopped making good games and thus the players chose the competition instead. However, an analysis of reviews and scores from the last decade of the games' iterations does not indicate that. To holistically highlight the problem at hand, this article compiles the numeric review scores of the annual titles from both franchises, across four review sources. The sources chosen are namely: *IGN*, *Gamespot*, *The Guardian* and *Gamesradar*, and the titles chosen were for a period of eleven years ranging from *FIFA 10* and *PES 10* to *FIFA 20* and *PES 20*. The four review sources were chosen because of their popularity amongst players of video games globally and because they were the only sources who had available reviews for all eleven iterations of both the franchises. However, *The Guardian* did not review the 2020 iteration for *PES*.





researcher to perform ludological analysis by focusing on the game’s components, goals and the players’ in-game efforts (Lankoski and Bjork 2015, Alha et al 2016). Formal analysis of gameplay requires of the researcher to take notes during play. For the purpose of this study, the researcher performed the analysis on five iterations of *FIFA* beginning from *FIFA* 2016 to the latest *FIFA* 2020.

The last dimension of this multi-pronged methodological approach is in direct contrast to the first two. Both close reading and formal analysis of games have their limitations. Close reading is limited when one tries to examine a text’s various social meanings and ways of use (Gray 2010, 37) and formal analysis of games allows examination of various components without delving into specific contexts (Alha et al 2016). Thus, the last level of analysis offers insights with regards to meaning making and the various added layers (not necessarily related to core game elements) that make *FIFA* a successful simulation. By examining *FIFA* as an experience for players, by juxtaposing it as a ludic artifact with the hybrid cross-media product/service existence the franchise has carved for itself in the collective imaginary of its players. This three-dimensional frame of analysis thus allows this study to examine *FIFA* as a ludic artifact, then the various ways in which players of the games engage with it on a daily basis, and lastly its various hybrid dimensions that it has acquired in its attempt to recreate the media spectacle of live football matches.

**A Streamers’ Paradise**

Video game streaming, an established practice amongst players, sees the most popular games streamed across a multitude of platforms - the most popular of them being *YouTube*, *Twitch*, *Periscope* and *UStream*. Researchers like TL Taylor (2012), Johnson and Woodcock (2019a, 2019b) have examined how players of video games

have begun to transcend the boundaries from content users to creators. While other work like that of Mateusz Felczak looks at how game streaming platforms fit into the larger discourse of video games as a medium and a platform (Felczak 2017), Deshbandhu in his work from the Indian context identifies how players of video games classify streamed gaming content into three categories. The three demarcated categories, while not mutually exclusive, are namely: review streams, entertainment streams and specific purpose streams (Deshbandhu 2020).

This article uses the same categories as proposed by me in my earlier work (Deshbandhu 2020) to sift through the plethora of streamed content on *FIFA*. Review streams, where new developments from game worlds are analyzed, are increasingly more common as streamers share their opinions and experiences with fellow players. This kind of streamed content gains value as games become increasingly fluid and ephemeral both in terms of the gameplay and the ludic challenges they offer. The *FIFA* online streaming community has many content creators who focus on reviews of newer players, patches for the game and discuss the underlying game mechanics in conjunction with the meta ways to play the game. Streamers like ZwebackHD (1.01 million subscribers), Marshall89HD (261 thousand subscribers) and Nick-RuntheFUTMarket (330 thousand subscribers) review new players and analyze them for the playing community. Entertainment streams focus on a game being subverted and then being repurposed in a novel way to attract viewers with a unique new entertainment value. The streamers from the *FIFA* community who have established themselves by creating content this way include AJ3 (1.51 million subscribers), CapgunTom (1 million subscribers) and Jack54HD (616 thousand subscribers). Their specific game formats include squad builder showdown, *FIFA* bingo and seven





study have explicitly mentioned, at numerous instances, that the game play is never consistent and the underlying mechanics never function in a uniform way. When a competitive game aspiring to be the best simulation of football cannot provide its players a uniform experience of play, then its aspirations for promoting an e-sports culture need to be critically examined.

The challenges of traversing *FIFA* as a ludic challenge are best showcased by two observations made by Nick-RuntheFUTMarket in his streams. The first comes from a stream in November 2018 when he celebrates the content that the game offers, he says that there is so much to do in the game that the content has literally dropped off the screen (Nick-RuntheFUTMarket 2018). However, by March 2019 he is so exasperated by the gameplay and the newer content that the game offers that he feels that newer content is just developers maximizing on revenue streams for in game transactions (Nick-RuntheFUTMarket 2019a). By the launch of *FIFA20* in October 2019, Nick’s disappointment with the franchise had reached a crescendo: he decided to name his club “FIFA19PTSD” (Nick-RuntheFUTMarket 2019b) This same sentiment is echoed by Nick with *FIFA20* as he begins the game cycle with the latest iterant: he is quite excited with the multitude dimensions of content available for streamers, but by March 2020 is so disillusioned by the franchise that he starts streaming *PES 2020* on his account (Nick-RuntheFUTMarket 2020a). Similarly, Fuji, a player who was ranked in the coveted top-100 ranking a few times in *FIFA18*, sees his performance never match those standards in *FIFA19* as he struggles to find a consistent system and strategy to suit his game style to. He laments the shift in gameplay mechanics where the focus on the perfectly timed shot (a key feature at launch) was nerfed and its effectiveness reduced, forcing players to find newer ways

to play the game. If one were to analyze Fuji’s predicament, then his proficiency at the game where he draws his livelihood from is suddenly at risk, as the developers are unable to decide not only how players must play their game and to design a balanced ludic experience that is fairly balanced.

The inconsistencies in the underlying mechanics of the simulated system and its limitations are consistently showcased by streamers and players on a plethora of occasions; however, with no supposed improvements in sight, Nick voices his feelings in the stream that the game has become increasingly less fun as the developers are focusing on maximizing revenue rather than developing a desired play experience (Nick-RuntheFUTMarket 2019b).

**FIFA as a Ludic Artifact**

The game *FIFA* has changed significantly in the last decade, a game that was a staple for players to match-up against each other and play with their favorite teams (Crawford et al 2019). The formal analysis of gameplay (Lankoski and Bjork 2015, Alha et al 2016) reveals the franchise’s attempts to introduce a certain narrative to the structure with its manager mode where players could experience the simulated life of a football manager and shape their careers by winning trophies and signing the best players for their teams. With future iterations, the manager mode became part of a *career mode* where players could now also experience the life of becoming a football star, along with that of being a successful manager. Similarly, in the dimension of online play, the game expanded into a game mode called “pro-clubs” (FIFA 2015-2020) and for local LAN and co-op play the game offered a variety of tournament modes. *FIFA* as a game also made the right moves when it became the first sports simulation to offer women’s teams in *FIFA 16*. *FIFA*’s expansion into a ludo-narrative

experience continued with the arrival of the “Journey” (FIFA17-19), a game mode that spanned three iterations and allowed the players to live the life of Alex Hunter as he evolved from a precocious talented teenager to a global superstar. However, none of these game modes transformed *FIFA*’s core essence the way *Ultimate team* did.

*FIFA*’s *Ultimate Team* game mode (popularly known as *FUT*) was first introduced as a paid DLC (downloadable content) in *FIFA* 2010. Since *FIFA* 2011 it has been made available for free with the main game. *Ultimate Team* since its launch has become the game’s most popular game mode and was played by 64 per cent of all *FIFA* players, and had a unique gamer base of 21 million (Doke 2014). Since Doke’s article in 2014, *FUT* has grown steadily and the number of matches played on the game mode has grown year-on-year by 15 per cent between 2018 and 2019 (Wilson 2019).

From a ludological perspective, *FUT* is a game mode that offers its players to make unlimited customizations to their squads by using cards. Cards are the bedrock of the format as everything that a team needs, from the stadium and uniforms (playing kits) to players, coaches, contracts and playing styles, can all be modified by acquiring cards. Card buying is often the most popular activity for *FUT* players, as they constantly seek to perform better by continuously strengthening their squads. The game permits players to acquire cards from packs available at the *FIFA* store or the online transfer market where players can trade cards.

The game, centered on rules of chemistry linkages, and players’ numerical ratings (called overalls) are carefully monitored by Electronic Arts. The game mode uses two distinct currencies for in-game transactions. The first, *FUT* Coins, can be used by players to take part in an always-on auction, which is called the transfer market, or to buy packs from the *FUT* store. Coins are earned by playing games and earnings are





However, the essential question remains: While new content is great for a streamer and an ever-competitive mode is better for an achiever/hardcore player (Bartle 1996), is *FIFA* through *FUT* eliding the voices of its larger player base? With a simulation plagued with problems that have not been rectified in numerous iterations, some of them glaringly visible in the formal analysis of the game, until what point can new content and a more competitive format keep the players interested in a market where they are at the cusp of a monopoly?

### The Mixed/Hybrid Media Experience

It is important to acknowledge that no game that simulates football exists merely in the ludic space nor is it what can be called *just a game*. Work on fantasy football (Deshbandhu 2019) for instance situates the game in the intersection between mediated sport and the frames of an always on lifestyle (Boyd 2012) and offline sport events. Similarly, *FIFA* needs to be examined in the various frames it inhabits, in addition to the overall experience it offers as a resultant of that hybrid existence. The hybridity is akin to a transmedia like existence (Jenkins 2010) but different, too, as here the ludic and the narrative are simulations constantly fed by real life sporting events or hypothetical scenarios that developers of the game can imagine.

As a game that allows players to compete against each other, essentially this is a game of skill; *alea* as Caillois classifies it in his seminary text (Caillois 1957). However, when the game is not fixed and is open to changes via updates, patches and fixes, then the challenge becomes less consistent and fair.

The connection that *FIFA* enjoys with other leagues and clubs when it renders the simulation is a key element. In the simulated space, the entire illusion of reality that

















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