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## Issue 12 (2020)

### articles

To Dream a Game. Dreams as Interactive-Narrative Devices in Digital Games

by Frank G. Bosman, 1

Towards a Monopoly. Examining *FIFA*'s Dominance in Simulated Football

by Aditya Deshbandhu, 49

*Paradise Lost. Value Formations* as an Analytical Concept for the Study of *Gamevironments*

by Gregory P. Grieve, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, and Xenia Zeiler, 77

Surveying the Frontier. Subjective Rendering and Occlusion in Open-World Westerns

by Joshua D. Miner, 114

### research report

Politics at *The Heart of Gaming*. A Critical Retrospective of *gamescom* 2019

by Kathrin Trattner, 144

## interview

Interview with Luis Wong from LEAP Game Studios on the Video Game *Tunche*

by gameenvironments, 157

## reviews

*The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay.* A

Review

by Antonija Cavcic, 162

*Assassin's Creed Odyssey.* A Review

by Leonie Glauner, 169

# Towards a Monopoly. Examining *FIFA's* Dominance in Simulated Football<sup>i</sup>

Aditya Deshbandhu

## Abstract

Simulating the world’s most popular sport is big business and the most popular titles in the industry are Electronic Arts’ *FIFA* (2015-2019) franchise and Konami’s *Pro Evolution Soccer (PES)* (2015-2019). A rivalry that begun in 1995, the last 24 years have seen the games modify, adapt and transform the way sports simulators are made. In the pursuit of digitally recreating the magic from the football pitch, the two titles have garnered extremely loyal fanbases that include some fans whose gaming practices are limited to playing just one of these games. This article aims to analyze the success of *FIFA* and the decline of *PES* in the last decade when reviewers of games and industry observers have repeatedly found *PES* to be the better game. It begins by comparing review scores of the last eleven iterations of the two franchises and then uses a multi-pronged approach to identify the various dimensions that allow *FIFA* to thrive as a game despite offering a comparatively poor gameplay experience to its players. This paper uses a multipronged approach to identify and analyze the various dimensions that has enabled *FIFA* as a franchise to create a near monopoly in the simulated football/soccer genre. By close reading streams of players of the game, formally analyzing the last five iterations of the *FIFA* franchise and then juxtaposing the two frames to examine *FIFA* as a hybrid cross-media product/service, this paper looks at the various non-play related elements that make it successful. The paper identifies and analyses the various dimensions that make *FIFA* a service that has allowed the franchise to create a near monopoly in the simulated football/soccer genre.

**Keywords:** FIFA, PES, Simulated Sport, Game Studies, Gaming Economics, gameenvironments

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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.

Thus, acquisition of necessary rights becomes a major component of the digitally rendered playable simulation that aspires to be as similar to its inspiration, the televised spectacle. With the most popular football leagues broadcast across a multitude of nations (Deshbandhu 2019), the games thus strive to acquire the requisite permissions to recreate the same experiential atmosphere in-game. This includes the likenesses of players, managers, stadia, uniforms, the match ball, recreation of in-stadia crowds, sponsors, the shoes players wear and weather conditions. Accuracy in recreation stands out as a key differentiator and thus the need for the aforementioned rights' acquisition of leagues, teams and players is foundational in recreating the spectacle that makes the simulation believable.

However, in the world of offline sport, facets like rights, permissions and merchandising are intrinsic to revenue generation models that help determine the stature of a player, team and competition. When organized sports meets the world of broadcast media, the dual product nature of the latter (Picard 2005), a heady mix of rights, permissions and merchandising, conflate with live content and advertising. Thus, simulating football as a video game needs to capture this combination in order to recreate a spectacle that resembles the modern game of football in its totality. In this context, *PES'* acquisition of exclusive rights to Juventus must be seen as not a single incident but as part of a traditional annual rivalry that goes back two and a half decades. The tussle for recreating the world's most popular sport today is almost one-sided today with *FIFA* dominating both sales figures and revenues generated, but this race was quite even circa 2009. In 2008, *FIFA* sold 8.67 million copies of *FIFA 09* as opposed to *PES'* 6.87 million copies (Noel 2019). The numbers have only grown more disparate since, as *PES'* sales have steadily declined year on year and in 2016, *FIFA17* sold 17.02 million copies as opposed to *PES'* 1.26 million (Noel 2019). The numbers have since dwindled further as *PES'* cumulative sales have failed to breach a

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*.

Game Title	IGN (10)	Gamespot (10)	Guardian (5)	Gamesradar (5)
PES 10	8.7	6.5	4	4
FIFA 10	9.3	9	5	4.5
PES 11	9	8	3	4
FIFA 11	9.5	7.5	4	4.5
PES 12	8	8	3	4
FIFA 12	9.5	9	5	4
PES 13	8.5	8	4	3.5
FIFA 13	9	8	5	4
PES 14	8.4	6	4	3.5
FIFA 14	9	8	4	3.5
PES 15	8	8	4	4.5
FIFA 15	8.3	8	5	4.5
PES 16	9.5	9	4	4.5
FIFA 16	7.8	9	5	4
PES 17	9.5	8	4	4.5
FIFA 17	8.4	9	4	4.5
PES 18	9.2	8	4	4
FIFA 18	8.1	7	4	4.5
PES 19	8.2	9	3	4
FIFA 19	N.A.	5	4	4.5
PES 20	8.3	9	N.A.	4
FIFA 20	7.6	8	4	4

Table 1. Annual Review Scores for *FIFA* and *PES* from 2010-2020.

A cursory look at the review scores is indicative of the fact that there is little to no difference between the two games and thus quality of gameplay or the overall experience cannot be considered as suitable reasons for the decline of *PES*. The nearly comparable scores and the occasions where *PES* has garnered better reviews are indicative of an anomaly that requires a deeper examination and identification of newer dimensions to answer: How do the makers of the better game and simulated experience go bankrupt?



To answer this question, this article examines three facets of the *FIFA* experience. Firstly, it examines the network of content streamers that stream the game. Secondly, it ludically examines the game modes on offer in *FIFA* in conjunction with the steady transformation of the game from being a product to a service (Deshbandhu 2020, Lizardi 2012). Lastly, it examines the various ways in which *FIFA* as a game has forged various connections with the licenses it has acquired to build a comprehensive hybrid media experience that is difficult to surmount for any other game that attempts to simulate the football experience. An examination of this kind can be categorized under the body of research called Mediasport 5.0 by Lawrence Wenner (forthc. 2021). In Mediasport 5.0, there is (in Wenner’s opinion) an increase in the societal importance of sport communication and a focus on issues of fairness, inequities, effects and abuses of power (Wenner forthc. 2021, 10).

The first level of analysis is achieved by performing a close reading (Gray 2010, 24) of the user generated streaming content of players of the game. The streams broadcast by three streamers in particular, with the stream tags Nick-RuntheFUTmarket, La5ty and Fuji, were selected and videos from their daily streams were analyzed for over a year (from 1 January 2019 – 12 February 2020). Jonathan Gray in his work on paratexts of the media (2010) feels close reading is the most common way of analyzing a text and is like taking apart a specific media object and looking at its various parts (Gray 2010, 37). Similarly, the close reading of the players’ streams here allows us to examine their approach to the game, the way they feel about the gameplay experience and their reactions to the various changes and modifications that a *FIFA* title receives in its annual cycle. The second line of analysis used analytical play as a means of understanding games by specifically using Lankoski and Bjork’s (2015) formal analysis of gameplay; an approach that examines games by focusing on the game and its core elements rather than its contexts. Such an approach allows the

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

minutes squad builder; formats, that have allowed creators of content to actively engage their viewers and reinterpret the standard game of *FIFA* in a variety of ways where the onus on the players is not just scoring as many goals as possible.

Lastly, purpose-specific streams are defined as content that is generated to document a specific facet of gameplay (Deshbandhu 2020). This could include a player's progression in game and them showcasing not only their proficiency with the game but also their decision making, strategic adaptation to changes, grappling with underlying mechanics and so on. In the *FIFA* streaming community, large number of players have begun to document their annual journeys with the game. This includes streamers like AA9Skillz (1.92 million subscribers), Nepenthez (1.88 million subscribers) and Castro1021 (1.71 million subscribers), who have sizable audiences tuned in. Streamers like Fuji and La5ty stream a series called "Road to Glory" (2019-20) where they document their navigation of the game without spending any money to progress in-game. AA9Skillz, on the other hand, promotes a different series called the "Rich man's road to glory" (2018-19) where he chases success in-game with money being no objective.

While streamers create user-generated content by adapting and innovating on the various dimensions offered by *FIFA*, the developers of the game were now able to establish a connection with their player base through these content creators. Thus, streamers begin to transition from being just players of the game to people who can influence their followers and the player base. The term "game influencer", borrowed from Robin Psaila's (2018) unpublished idea, has never seemed more apt. Electronic Arts, the developer of *FIFA* and a host of other games, has elevated popular content-creators to something called the *EA Gamechanger*, a tag that allows them to be part of pre-launch testing processes (beta testing) as well as to showcase upcoming

content prior to launch. This situation is further benefited from when EA has the annual "capture event" (2018-2020) for *FIFA* prior to the launch of an annual iteration. Most of the streamers mentioned above and several others are invited as they capture their experiences with a new game. When a game markets itself to a player base in this fashion, the results can be quite unprecedented. If we were to simply compare the number of viewers who subscribe to content from someone like AJ3 or AA9Skillz or Nepenthez, they alone have more subscribers than the number of players who bought *PES* in 2019. If we are to look at the way a player base's conversation flows concerning games, then EA has managed to make it as one-sided as possible.

However, the same creators of content have never been too impressed with the gameplay or the overall experience that *FIFA* has to offer. Streamers like Nick-RuntheFUTMarket have used their videos and channels to call out the various difficulties they face with the game. Nick (2019a) has spoken about the various inconsistencies in the game and how he strongly feels that the game is not ready for a competitive format, with the variety of glitches, errors and flawed game mechanics that persist in the game. La5ty in his content often alludes sarcastically to the existence of a *kickoff glitch* where after scoring a goal the player is powerless from conceding one, as systems and mechanics prevent the player from being adequately able to defend it. The kickoff glitch has plagued *FIFA* titles for several iterations and was also found by the researcher during his sessions of the play for the formal game analysis stage of the study. This is in line with the experiences of several streamers who have lamented its existence. Similarly, Fuji (2020) in one of his videos describing his experience with the game's competitive weekend league is seeking favor from the "FIFA gods" and is hoping that gameplay remains smooth and lag-free the next time he plays the game. All the three streamers whose content was examined for this

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



higher when one wins. The second type of in-game currency is *FIFA Points*, which can only be acquired by paying offline money and used to buy packs. Coins and *FIFA Points* fit into the binary of in-game currency (soft currency) and hard currency that have characterized most Free to Play game worlds today (Alha et al 2016). Since the success of *Ultimate Team*, it has become the bedrock of the current *FIFA* experience. Most developments in the game are now catered for *Ultimate Team*, as revealed by the formal analyses of the games. The mode has also gained prominence in its location on the games' start screens and most other game modes in the game subtly nudge their players towards *FUT*.

At the center of *FIFA's* dominance is the shift from it being a standalone product to a service that is always in flux (Lizardi 2012). The service nature coupled with updates and a fluid play space allows developers to keep the game updated with the latest happenings from the world of football. The shift to a service-natured experience coupled with online play possibilities has allowed *FIFA* to introduce the *FUT Champions Weekend League* where the best players of the game compete every weekend. The ability to build teams how they wish coupled with now a desire to face up against the best and push for as high as a ranking as possible has made *FUT* an extremely competitive game mode. Thus, the in-game market is constantly shaped and re-shaped in order to resemble the various strategies that work for ludic success. The developers also use the service model to ensure that football stars in-form receive special cards in-game, and the simulation attempts to re-capture the magic of the form in-game. This is something that *FIFA* has managed to evolve as a practice in *FUT* and to refine in order to reach newer ways of monetization. The last two iterations of the franchise (*FIFA 19 and 20*) have seen the development of a dedicated calendar that lasts throughout the year and where specific promotional events see the launch of special cards (which are boosted versions of existing ones). Players of

the game who are in constant pursuit for better teams, as they directly correlate to in-game performance, are then presented with opportunities to spend their money and acquire the card they desire.

While work on micro-transactions in games and literature on the use of loot boxes looks at comparing them to gambling like activities (Drummond and Sauer 2018, Zendle and Cairns 2018, Griffiths 2018) and also explores how the endless pursuit of the intangibles is a problem for the larger gaming community (Macey and Hamari 2019). However, the gaming community is seriously divided on the use of in-game transactions when a game is not free to play. The participant pool from my work on gaming cultures (Deshbandhu 2020) players is quite critical of such games and the same can be said of the *FIFA* player base considering the cost of the game's acquisition is on par with any flagship game in the industry.

With *FUT* however, *FIFA* seems to have transcended the product-service binary as it now offers service like features in the game mode. With the variety of promos and the regular simulation of actual football events or the creation of hypothetical scenarios like the *Future Stars promo*, *Halloween's Scream*, *Futmas*, *Futbirthday* or the *Futties* the game is not shorn of new developments for the entire year. Through the ongoing COVID-19 crises where football matches globally were suspended, *FIFA* went ahead and released new kinds of content to keep players interested in the game. As the shift to a service like model aims to maximize on the player base's consumer surplus, *FIFA* has found a unique way to make player repeatedly purchase the content in a game that they paid to begin with.

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

allows the magic to leak in and make the process believable is the burden of the cybernetic system (Nichols 1988). However, the system here in itself is neither unbiased nor geared towards fair-play. EA and *FIFA*'s partnerships with specific leagues and teams means that those specific partners are simulated to a closer degree of likeliness. Fuji (2018) in his streams, for instance, remarks how the Manchester City player Raheem Sterling is great to use in-game because EA has managed to re-create his unique running style and the way he controls the ball. The simulation is problematic when signature moves/traits of only specific football stars are recreated. In a competitive game mode where players are trying to eke out every sliver of advantage they can gather, the developers/sim-authors are not only telling players how to approach the game but also what players to use and what strategies to exploit, thus affecting the balance between the two.

This discrepancy/non-uniformity in the simulation only seems to magnify when one looks at how players from specific partner leagues receive boosted cards depending on their performances. The simulation thus in a way also simulates existing power structures from football as a sport, as the game tends to seek partnerships with more popular leagues and clubs. One such development is the creation of the *player of the month event*, an event that is applicable only to four of the thirty-one leagues the game offers. Thus, reducing the game to a model of hybridity that reinforces the cultural superiority and imperialism of specific leagues, competitions and others. To put it simply, it was in the radical possibilities of the video game as a post-modern artifact that several possible outcomes could emerge if the players were willing to exert the requisite ludic effort. However, as *FIFA* gets closer to simulating not just the football but also the various non-playing related disparities that regulate global football, the simulation ceases to remain a game after all.

## Monopolistic Despair

In line with Nick-RuntheFUTMarket’s decision to stream *PES2020* (as mentioned above), there was a new promo launched by *FIFA* later that week, which Nick had to stream about, and then that event led to another, and soon *PES* was forgotten. In a nutshell this explains the problem this study hopes to holistically engage with.

This article explored the emerging dominance of *FIFA* in the last decade, as the sales figures of *PES* shrunk to a mere 5 percent of the market (Noel 2019). The reason of *PES*’ dwindling sales on the surface is anomalous when examination of critics’ reviews of annual iterations repeatedly indicates that *PES* offers both a better gameplay experience and in a superior simulated game of football.

The need to examine this trend becomes even more necessary when *FIFA*’s financial advantage consequently allows the franchise to license and add unique elements to their simulated experience, that raise barriers to entry for possible new games and also make it difficult to compete against. This financial superiority is reinforced by the game by drawing on three key aspects: (1) by acquiring as many licenses as possible to simulate the perfect spectacle; (2) by forging key partnerships with leagues and teams that ensure that the game always has enough new content, now that it has transitioned from being a product to a service (Lizardi 2012); and (3) by ensuring that they win the streaming battle. When players of the game who singlehandedly have more subscribers than the number of players of the closest rival (as presented above), then the competition is all but non-existent. In late 2019, the latest iteration *FIFA 20* received an update that attempted to rectify a problem where players’ shots at goal were striking the post too much (revealed from formal game analysis of *FIFA 2020*). In a game where the number of goals scored differentiates the winner from the loser, a franchise that is simulating the experience for over twenty-five years old is struggling

to balance the pivotal act of what results in a goal, the bedrock of its simulated empire. Thus, the foundations of a game aspiring to have in place a global e-sports competition and a system that regulates professional players seem flawed.

With the competition nearly wiped out and a systemic elision of reviewers' opinions by a well-oiled machinery that pumps out regular content to streamers who in-turn have enough content to keep their viewers enthralled, EA's model is nearly unstoppable. This heady repetitive creation of *hype* in-game has ensured that the world's largest selling simulated game is riddled with a host of problems in terms of game experience, but is not ever going to take the necessary time to rectify the issues at hand as the annual cycle of content needs to be generated. The biggest loser in such a situation is the genre of simulated football. The sales of the games have declined, as more and more players have begun to walk away. In 2009, when the race between the two games was still even, the total number of sales of games in the genre were at 15.54 million, a number that went up to almost 20 million in 2015 (Noel 2019). The numbers since then have only dropped; the inherent problems of the game coupled with the rise of a casual revolution in gaming and the steady rise of games like *Fortnite* (2017), *PUBG* (2017) and *Apex Legends* (2019) has shrunk the market to about 13 million players in 2018 (Noel 2019). A trend that has forced *FIFA* to incentivize players and encourage everyday play by rewarding them for repeated logins and introducing a season-pass like progression system. However, these developments - while they mimic the Free-to-play genre (Deshbandhu 2020) - cannot paper over the deep fissures in the simulation and the player base's need for significant improvements in a flawed simulated system. By destroying the competition using a strategy that emphasized factors that were anything but ludic or narrative, *FIFA* as an artifact stands at the cusp of a monopoly that will destroy the genre. By eliminating a better system, to begin with.

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