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Sports gamers practices as a form of subversiveness – the example of the FIFA ultimate team

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ABSTRACT

The video game *FIFA* (Electronic Arts) is an annually released title with a very profitable FIFA Ultimate Team (FUT) mode backed by a large community of gamers. This article demonstrates that they are subversive consumers based on a fan studies approach. The netnographic study was conducted over two years on the official FUT forum and supplemented with analysis of online news services and different web archives. It revealed that players do not want to give up “control” over the game and “clash” with producers on several fronts. They criticize the game, mainly the micropayments and other EA practices, considering them manipulations. This has given rise to subversive practices, including illegal ones from the company’s point of view. The author distinguishes three levels of activities, showing the intricate relationships between players and producers. Until now, little attention has been paid to meanings that gamers attribute to sports games and their consequences for producers.

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EA sports

Introduction

The *FIFA* series is possibly the most famous football¹ simulation and one of the most popular series in all of video games. The game is a key brand in the portfolio of EA Sports, a part of Electronic Arts. The beginnings of the series go back to the 1990s when, in 1993, *FIFA Football Soccer (FIFA 94)* was released on PCs and some consoles. Since then, the games in this series appear at regular one-year intervals. Each subsequent FIFA features only limited changes, and these are not just about graphics or music as different game modes are regularly presented. Currently, in addition to the basic modes, that is playing friendly matches or tournaments, players can take on the career of a given player or manager. For those who want to challenge other players online, there are several modes and the most popular and most extensive is the FIFA Ultimate Team (FUT), presented for the first time in *FIFA 09*.

In FUT, the player can create his or her dream team from scratch (see [Figure 1](#)), but it is difficult to talk about a specific goal to achieve. It may be just promotion to the next league until reaching the top (first league). For other gamers, the goal is to participate

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Figure 1. The team created in “FUT 18,” an example. Source: author’s photograph.

in the so-called Weekend League only, for others, to constantly improve their squad and achieve an advantage over others. Officially, there is no goal, and a given FUT season simply coincides with the release of the next *FIFA* game, when the FUT team-building season begins. When it is over, players’ attention shifts to the next edition and the team-building process starts again, and the cycle continues.

Acquiring new athletes in FUT is done by buying so-called packs – bronze, silver, and gold. They not only contain football players but also stadiums, outfits, and emblems, as well as training cards to improve athletes’ skills and other cards to change their position on the pitch. Of course, the most valuable are gold packs with the best (gold) players, but they are also the hardest to get. You can buy packs for coins obtained through playing matches, winning tournaments, and numerous side-game modes. The best packs are expensive – to buy the one that can improve the team, a player has to devote a lot of time to the game. What is more, the purchase is often unsatisfactory, which I show in more detail later. However, a second, much easier way of getting packs, is buying them for “FUT Points” purchased with real money. Micropayments are very profitable for EA,² and the income is enormous and depends on gamers’ willingness to buy packs. The digital sale is the company’s primary source of income, with FUT having a special place here as microtransactions exceed the revenues from the sale of the game itself.³ In 2019 Ultimate Team was about 28% of the total EA income⁴ with a further explosion in sales during COVID-19 lockdown.⁵

I am a FUT gamer myself, and I have been following FIFA for about five years, not only playing, but also observing the FUT community. This is how a research question presented here came about and this is how I decided that the netnographic approach would help interpret how players are talking about the game. When observing the FUT community, it became clear that when it comes to FUT gamers, there is a specific paradox: the criticism that flows towards EA from gamers does not stop them from playing and often does not limit spending real money on packs. FUT players are not thoughtless consumers though and do not mindlessly consume a given media

product. When it comes to my research goal, I use fan studies research to show the practices of FUT gamers who I consider active and subversive, which manifests in criticism of the micropayments (although this is not the only point of criticism), and other practices. In some sense FUT players reflect core gamers in general, i.e. they are “biased” in favor of a pay-once for a game economic model and reject the micropayments as such. I do not presume that microtransactions are bad. I focus on the critical voices of players, which does not mean that this is the whole picture. I am aware that the FUT community is very complex, but I am guided by a specific theoretical approach and my focus is on the EA critique.

Much has been written about media fans today, showing that fans’ subversiveness can result from dissatisfaction with what cultural industries propose (Booth, 2018; Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1988). For example, fans may believe that a given producer has introduced changes unfavorable to a particular cultural text (Brooker, 2002; de Bruin-Molé, 2018). Their subversiveness may also result from being a member of certain social groups, such as LGBTQ groups (Maris, 2016) or feminists (Cui & Zhang, 2017; Scott, 2019), or it may have a political background (Siuda, 2014).

I position myself differently than the analysis showing subversiveness as largely impotent, an illusion of agency and source of exploitation. According to these theorists the producers/capitalists “trick” consumers so that they would spend money with willingness and emotional commitment (Andrejevic, 2008; Jones, 2013; Zwick et al., 2008). One could say that gamers are without any kind of social power. I move away from this and it is not my goal to reflect on how the player’s actions undermine or sustain the system/capitalism. As such, I do not agree that spending money/consuming is contradicting subversion. Fans can be loyal to a specific media brand (spend a lot of money), but at the same time dissatisfied with the actions of producers. The gamers do not undermine the system as such, but rather want the better product and act accordingly. They spend money on it anyway, but since they do it, they want the product to meet their expectations. This is somewhat emancipatory, and I see subversion as effective only in this regard. My understanding of subversion is therefore close to that of John Fiske and Henry Jenkins who draw on the work of Michel de Certeau (see e.g. Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1988).

This theoretical framework is often used when it comes to researching gamers. Academics underline the subversiveness of female players and emphasize heteronormative character of games, male domination in the world of games, or the sexualization of gameplay (Chess, 2016; Potts, 2015). Much attention is also devoted to gamers’ productivity, primarily to mods (amateur game modifications), vids (short video assembled from in-game snippets), or game guides (Postigo, 2007; Russo, 2009; Wirman, 2009). The power of collective intelligence, team storytelling, communal shaping of meanings given to games is also emphasized (Humphreys, 2005; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014).

The research presented in this article should be treated as enriching the indicated considerations, but more importantly, as filling a specific research gap. While quite a lot of space is devoted to gamers in general, researchers rarely deal with sports gamers. It is not only a matter of using fan studies while researching them. Generally, there is a considerable deficit when it comes to discovering the social and cultural dimensions of sports gamer communities, as reported by Stein et al. (2013). They stated that “[s]ports video games rank among the most successful products of the game industry. Yet, very little

is known about the players of sports video games, resulting in a blind spot for media and video game research” (2013, p. 345).⁶

The article brings to light the so-far undiscovered social world of FUT players. At the same time, I reflect on the heterogeneous nature of gamers’ opposition and note that showing the practices of the FUT community has considerable practical value. The presented analyzes can be placed next to business research of sports gamers’ brand perception, the effectiveness of sports advertising in games, or gamers’ motivations (Cianfrone & Zhang, 2013; Hwang et al., 2017). In this regard, I do not go beyond the fan studies approach because it has already been noted that fans are especially important to producers. Their commitment and productivity make them valuable consumers. Producers want to use their work, and often stimulate such work for the benefit of the company (Siuda & Troszynski, 2017). In the article, I also consider whether EA Sports can somehow benefit from criticism.

Methods

I discovered the practices of FUT gamers using netnography (Kozinets, 2009), which is a special form of ethnography dedicated to the study of online communities. Player practices manifest in online interactions because for them, the web is the main social space. Of course, EA Sports runs tournaments for pro-gamers where prominent members of the community meet offline. Besides, the game as a cultural phenomenon extends beyond the Internet, becomes the subject of conversation – polemics – an element of everyday life. This does not change the fact that online communities are crucial for shaping the practices of FUT players.

In my research I focused on the official most “populated” English-language FIFA forum run by EA Sports.⁷ It refers to each of the FUT editions separately, that is, when the next FUT edition is released, a new, extensive section is created. I started observations in September 2017 when *FIFA 18* was released, continued for *FIFA 19*, and ended in December 2019, so the study covered half of the *FIFA 20* FUT season. I decided to analyze the three FUT sections to get a more comprehensive view of the community; took a closer look at all threads related to a given FUT edition and decided whether they should be analyzed. I was looking for threads related to relations of EA Sports and gamers, company policy, game criticism (all possible reasons for this criticism). If I located these, I copied the entire conversation to a word editor and then ran a qualitative content analysis of all the documents. In Table 1, I present a list of the analyzed forum sections and information about the volume of the analyzed data.

The observation lasted 28 months, which allowed systematically – week after week – to keep track of threads and extract those that related to the research problem (due to this regularity, I decided not to carry out automatic coding despite the huge number of threads). I systematically analyzed the collected material, organized the threads into various themes, and highlighted interesting statements.

The study was not purely observational though as lurking, downloading data from the Internet, and analyzing it from a withdrawn position – although highly important for netnography – cannot be its only element (Costello et al., 2017). For each FUT edition, I created a thread informing players that I was entering their community, watching what was happening on the forum, and trying to detect their attitude toward EA

Table 1. List of analyzed forums together with the number of threads dedicated to FUT, the number of threads analyzed, and the number of entries set up by the researcher.

No.	Message board name; URL address	Number of threads dedicated to a given FUT edition	Number of threads analyzed	Number of entries created by the researcher
1.	EA SPORTS FIFA Forums – FIFA 20 Ultimate Team https://fifaforums.easports.com/en/	22,578	1,734	2
2.	EA SPORTS FIFA Forums – FIFA 19 Ultimate Team; https://fifaforums.easports.com/en/categories/fifa-19-ultimate-team	71,658	3,758	9
3.	EA SPORTS FIFA Forums – FIFA 18 Ultimate Team; https://fifaforums.easports.com/en/categories/fifa-18-ultimate-team	77,844	4,260	12

Source: Own study.

Sports. And although my presence “disappeared” in a flood of entries, from time to time I interacted with the gamers. I created threads whenever I found that some topics were too rarely addressed in discussions. My entries usually took the form of a short question or a survey of up to three options (usually created with Google forms; the number of entries created on each forum is given in Table 1). I marked the statements from those threads with a code indicating the forum being analyzed and the entry number. For example, code FUT18T01 means that the entry was posted on the forum dedicated to FUT 18 and was the first one. In the article, whenever I cite statements, I provide the relevant code.

Content analysis and interactions resulted in another element of the study. I expanded the netnography to collect archival data from many web sources. The following were analyzed: (1) gamers’ YouTube channels with videos about the game (gamers not only stream matches but also comment on all aspects of the game); (2) posts and articles published by journalists or gamers on blogs, gaming portals, and different webpages (e.g. reddit or EA Answers); (3) press articles published on various newspaper websites. I reached these sources either through the forum or by using the Google search engine or the search engine built into a given website (e.g. YouTube and some gaming portals). I used keywords based on observation of the forum, for example, “Fifa addiction,” “FUT addiction,” “FUT scripting,” “FUT micropayment,” “EA Sports gambling,” etc. I searched the web regularly, using all keywords once a month starting from January 2018. I encountered the same sources many times, however, when I came across new ones, I added them to the growing volume of data.⁸ When going beyond the EA forums and searching for additional sources, I was interested in “subversive” content only. Nevertheless, there is a huge amount of discourse of a different nature, e.g. guides or advice on team-building (written or video) which proves how complex the FUT community is. All elements of netnography – observation (content analysis), interviews, surveys, and analysis of online archives – allowed learning about the subversive practices of FUT gamers.

Results

Players do not consume FUT unreflectively and do not want to give up “control” over the game. The criticism concerns, among others, the low quality of the gameplay:

It's not that the game is bad (...). But overall if you compare FIFA to PES⁹ then the gameplay is worse. Although it improves from year to year. But FIFA is not too realistic and we get the same product almost all the time [FUT19T04].

Gameplay, however, is not the only point of criticism. Some respondents mentioned the often-criticized practice of EA to “wash, rinse, repeat” titles (see e.g. Hutchins, 2013, pp. 154–159), that is, releasing games in series, with each subsequent edition being just a refreshed version of the previous one. Some gamers believe this proves the greediness of EA and focusing on quick and easy earnings is particularly visible in the case of the micropayments. The packs are expensive, and their price depends on what kind of athletes they contain – bronze, silver, or gold. One must remember that some players accept a certain amount of spend to move forward.

However, when it comes to critically minded gamers they object not so much to the price but the mechanism of placing footballers in packs. When buying a given pack, even the most expensive one with the largest number of gold athletes, it is very difficult to get the best ones. EA justifies this by saying that the best-rated footballers are supposed to be very rare. At the same time, the company proves the randomness of packs. One of the gamers noticed this inconsistency, asking the following question on the official EA support page:

The-Spell: (...) I opened lots of packs in UT (around 400\$) or so And didn't get any good players (...), just a bunch of low rated (...). While some people are opening a couple of packs and getting 88+ rated players my question is ... does EA hate me? or is there a problem with my EA Account (...)?

EA_Andy: Hi @The-Spell. There isn't anything wrong with the account, there's no settings that can be changed to make one person have better “pack luck” than another. The chances of any given item being pulled from a pack is random (...).

The-Spell: Its not random if I keep getting the same low rated players over and over and over again ... it doesn't make any sense to be honest (...).¹⁰

The-Spell is just one player and it is unknown to what extent her/his doubts are justified, or what her/his expectations or style of play are. However, the quote gives a good insight into the forum which is full of similar threads in which gamers vent their frustrations because they cannot “pull” any good footballers from the packs. The-Spell mentioned that other players open only a few of these and easily get the best athletes, but she/he probably meant FUT streamers placing videos on YouTube or Twitch and becoming a kind of celebrity. They boast of the biggest pulls on videos made solely to show only the most valuable purchases. These are another source of frustration for some FUT gamers who speak about “influencers” very negatively, as “fake” [FUT18T10], “tricksters” [FUT18T10], or “pseudo-celebrities” [FUT18T10] wanting to “build their fame on falsehood” [FUT19T03]. The phenomenon of FUT “influencers” was well described in the article on Eurogamer:



















FIFA 19 was, briefly, the most popular game on Twitch yesterday evening (...). The Team of the Year promotion adds the ultimate versions of the best 11 players of 2018, as decided by EA. Last night, the first part of the promotion kicked off (...). Big personalities in the FIFA community, such as Castro and Bateson, each with millions of followers across multiple platforms, took to FIFA 19 last night to collectively buy thousands of pounds worth of FUT packs hoping to get a TOTY card. (...) Whatever the case, watching these YouTubers

and streamers fork out ridiculous amounts of money on FUT packs shows just how much money you'll probably have to spend if you want to pack a TOTY player (...). Meanwhile, the TOTY event trundles on. In the days to come, more cards from the promotion will be added to packs (...) and many more millions will be spent on virtual cards that won't carry over to FIFA 20 (...).¹¹

The last sentence perfectly reflects a crucial feature of FUT, which is the continuous releases of better and better footballers. For each edition of FUT, many similar events are organized throughout the year introducing improved cards. Additionally, Team of the Week is selected every week. For a footballer to be on the team means an increase in his statistics and overall rating. Therefore, the game is about the continuous pursuit of constantly improved cards with the original ones being less relevant (which is in fact at the core of many microtransaction based games).

In response, some gamers claim that “something is wrong” [FUT20T01] because “it is physically and psychologically impossible to keep up with new cards. To buy them using FIFA coins, you would have to play for ages” [FUT18T08]. Hence the strong temptation to buy packs for real money – interestingly, gamers know that “in fact, buying dozens of packs may not bring the desired results” [FUT18T08]. Still, they buy, although they see that “the game is designed to arouse the desire to play” [FUT18T03] and that buying is very addictive. A survey by bleacherreport (Akerman, 2019)¹² confirmed that among the FUT 19 gamers, almost 53 percent of respondents (716 people) buy packs for real money. Almost 40 percent of respondents said they had spent more than \$100 in total on a FUT game, and 2 percent said they had already spent more than \$10,000 on all of the games.

On the forum gamers often see their expenses as excessive and talk about how much money needs to be spent to get valuable players. They confirm that “instant gratification is the key. You can spend weeks playing matches and spend all earned coins on one package, or you can pay and have this package right away” [FUT19T07]. And if there is nothing good in it, “you can buy another” [FUT19T05]. The community constantly discusses this:

It's very addictive, but the gameplay is so                  

Special and gold cards are usually the most expensive, but they are often matched by brown and silver. It happens because there are usually only a few of them since most people buy gold packs. We are therefore dealing with a grey/black market manipulation. What is more, gamers are constantly sharing tips on how to quickly get rich,¹⁷ e.g. when to buy and when to sell certain cards, what packages to buy, etc.

Some gamers (not all though) decide to take a shortcut and buy FIFA coins for real money from numerous sellers on eBay or similar services,¹⁸ as it is much cheaper than buying packs.¹⁹ On one of the entries I have initiated, 26 percent of gamers (52 people) who answered my question said they “bought coins at least once,” of which 58 percent (30) said their “price is quite high” [FUT19T01]. The costs of buying entire accounts with already established teams, usually with attractive, difficult-to-get special cards are even higher (see Figure 2). The better the squad, the more expensive it is.

Both trading coins and accounts are illegal and strongly countered by EA Sports. The company penalizes both sellers and buyers, starting from cleaning the offenders’ accounts of coins and blocking access to the transfer market, to banning the entire account. Some players discuss how to protect themselves from these unpleasant consequences.²⁰ Interestingly, there are those in the FUT community who believe that sellers are primarily pro-gamers, i.e. those who make a living by playing. Due to the relatively low prizes (compared to other games) at FIFA tournaments and considerable competition (Akerman, 2019) trading coins and accounts is a way to earn extra money. Normal, “average” players may notice that it is impossible for pro-gamers “not to break the EA regulations, yet they don’t bear any consequences” [FUT18T11].

Trading coins and accounts is a response to the aforementioned ambiguity of micro-payments, which according to the most critical gamers leads to addiction. The ultimate allegation against EA is that “[i]t doesn’t matter if you’re good or not, the game is actually scripted” [FUT18T04]. The argument for some is that EA stimulates the desire to

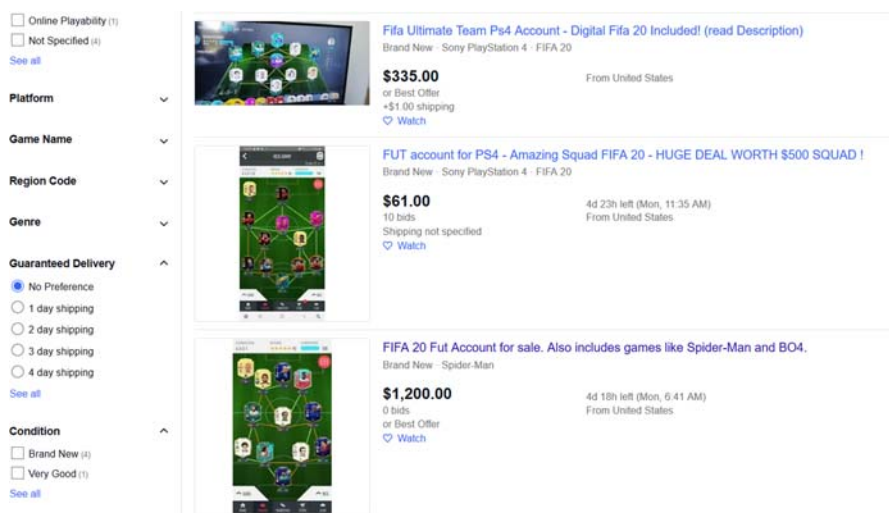


Figure 2. An example of an auction on eBay with FUT 20 accounts. Source: https://www.ebay.com/sch/i.html?_from=R40&_trksid=m570.l1313&_nkw=fut+20+account&_sacat=0&LH_TitleDesc=0&osacat=0&_odkw=fut+20+xbox+one+account.

constantly improve the team (and of course buying packs in the process) through covert manipulations of the game. Such conspiracy theories can be found on YouTube, and videos of matches abounding with bizarre and incredible situations, such as “weird” penalties in the last seconds of the game, unbelievable goals, impossible moves of footballers resulting in a loss of goal, etc. (see Figure 3). Some gamers report atypical games, for example, when someone with a huge advantage takes 33 shots and scores only once. Meanwhile, the opponent shoots 4 times and scores 2 (see Figure 4). Conspiracy theory supporters claim that EA does not want the gamers to achieve the intended goals too quickly, because if this happens, they will get bored with the game. It is about keeping them suspended between the euphoria of victory and disappointment after losing:

I swear there is some conspiracy behind this game ... When you are one point away from winning the division title, I was hammering people left right and centre, but as SOON as I am now 1 point away from the title, I go on the biggest losing streak of my entire FIFA Ultimate Team career! I went from having 5 games to get 1 point and now only have one game left ... I am scared to play it. I was also winning 2-0 in all of the games at one point and then ended up losing 3-2, in every one (...).²¹

Some gamers believe otherwise and claim that “strange” games result from an algorithm responsible for selecting opponents. As one respondent said: “You’ll get matched with players who are shit compared to you and players who are unbelievable compared to you” [FUT18T04], hence the series of victories or defeats. Others explain it differently: “It’s just you making it up and playing bad under pressure, if the game really was like this (...) why can people go on unbeaten streaks” [FUT18T04]; “I used to think the same way as you until I started cooling myself and playing defensive” [FUT18T04].

EA either does not comment on the accusations or completely rejects them. The *Dream Team* online magazine quotes FIFA producer Aaron McHardy, who said in 2012: “This scripting behavior ... I can absolutely say this is not in gameplay (...) we hate this kind of logic.”²² Strange games are explained in terms of simulating real football matches. In real life there are plenty of games where one team wins while being on the

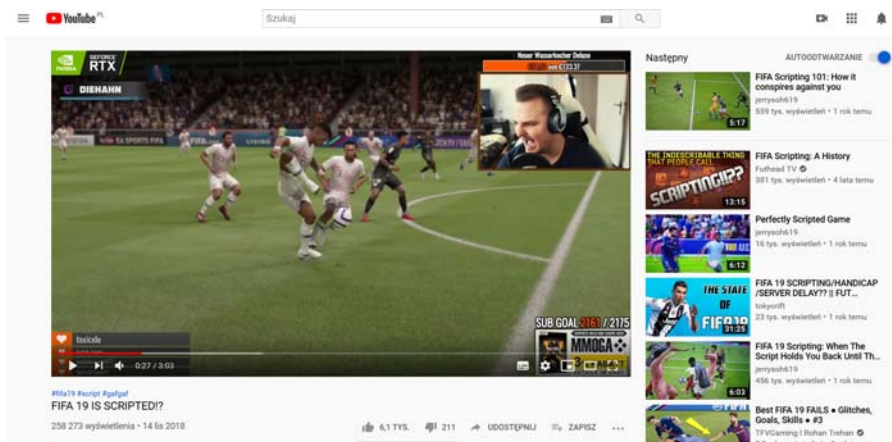


Figure 3. Video on YouTube attempting to prove that a match was scripted. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhsG2f7kFNob>.

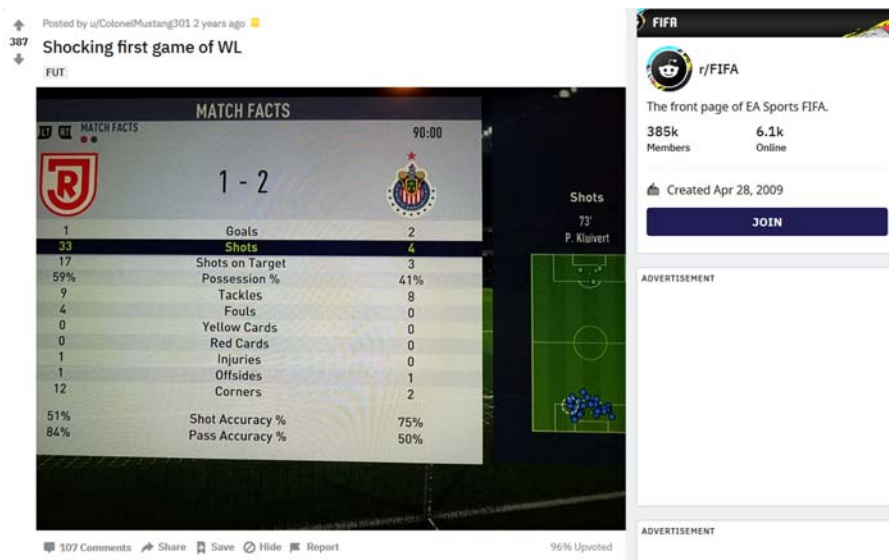


Figure 4. Reddit entry with stats from an atypical game (presented to prove that the match was scripted). Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/FIFA/comments/7uqmj2/shocking_first_game_of_wl/.

defensive all the time. Besides, something that is referred to as game momentum is important as well. It is this unspecified factor determining how well athletes perform at a given moment of the game. Of course, my aim is not to state whether the gamers' allegations are true, just to note that there is a vivid discussion in the community. It is full of tension and players do not agree with each other. The community is thus diverse, and this should be taken into account every time fan studies is used as a theoretical approach.

Discussion

Fan studies can be a theoretical background when studying FUT gamers whose subversiveness is about making the product meet their expectations. They indicate that as loyal consumers they should be treated much better. At the same time, they believe that the company wants to get rich at their expense, and they do not deserve this since they play *FIFA* year after year. As one gamer put it: "we can't stop playing even tho (sic) the game is trash (...) [FUT20T01]." It is the love of the game that makes it so criticized.

Just like fans of other media, players also "resist" producers but in different ways. Their subversive practices are more or less intense, hence I indicate three levels of subversiveness: easy, medium, and hard. These overlap in the sense that the practices on the lower levels are also evident on the higher ones:

- 1) The first one, easy, is well-characterized in fan studies. It is about giving individual interpretations of media (Fiske, 1992). In the case of FUT, they are shaped through discussions about EA practices, complaining about micropayments, creating conspiracy theories, and sharing them with the community.

- 2) On the second level, the medium one, the gamers not only argue and complain but also develop their own “style of play,” for example, they might boycott packs. As pointed out earlier, only a certain percentage of players buy them anyway. Some decide not to participate in the kind of “rat race” involving the continuous improvement of the team, instead, they often play weaker teams consisting of only silver or bronze footballers. On the other hand, buying coins or entire accounts to “cheat the system” should also be considered as developing their style of play. At the medium level, one can also point to other previously characterized practices, for example, exchanging advice on how to avoid penalties for illegal actions or analyzing the chances associated with drawing good athletes.
- 3) Level three, hard, is characteristic of the most die-hard FUT gamers, often playing for a living. Hard activities include, for example, selling coins or using several accounts and selling them later, or creating software that helps achieve an advantage (one can automatically and within a few seconds buy footballers put out by others at bargain prices). Level three is therefore highly illegal from the EA perspective.

Of course, these three levels relate to subversive practices. Many activities are less subversive but they may fit here as well, for example content creators who stream or make videos and pay for packs and do huge openings. This gets them money through YouTube and other platforms, so they treat spending on the game as a cost of doing business. Creating such content could be seen as developing their own “style of play,” and at the same time, it shows how complex the FUT community is and that the discussed subversiveness is not the only attitude present.

The hard level is familiar territory for fan studies, where a lot of space is devoted to textual productivity by fans. Fan fiction, fan movies, and other fan productions (including mods or vids created by gamers) are treated as an expression of fans’ interpretations but also often violate copyright (Cai, 2018; Sarikakis et al., 2017). In this sense, the use of characters and themes from official productions can be highly subversive. FUT gamers do not infringe copyright but some are similarly subversive when they undermine other rules imposed by producer, such as the trade in coins and accounts. This case could be a starting point for additional research because similar subversive practices can surely be indicated when it comes to other sports games and games in general. It is worth emphasizing, however, that due to the *FIFA* history²³, those playing may not line up fully with other gamers (see e.g. Paul, 2013). It could be that in FUT micropayments may be better accepted, so the differences between gamers, sports gamers, and FUT gamers must be researched further.

A study of subversive practices of FUT players can add to the discussion on the *FIFA* brand reception. However, it goes beyond business analysis, as it shows the paradoxical nature of the developer-gamer relationship. Fan studies often treat fans as valuable consumers, the most engaged kind (Lamerichs, 2018). Scholars indicate that media brands can use fans’ productivity and consider them prosumers, i.e. consumers who are producers at the same time (Siuda & Troszynski, 2017). Paradoxically, fans are valued even though their practices may violate the interests of a given company.

FUT is the perfect illustration – the most “valuable” players are also the “criminals.” The fact is that the company is criticized on the official EA forum, and the company’s employees do not interfere with the life of the community in any way. What is more,

there is a widespread opinion among FUT gamers that illegal sales of coins and accounts are done by pro-gamers. These players are valuable to EA and include YouTubers and streamers showing and advertising the game through their videos. As I have mentioned before, some players who buy coins, criticize EA Sports for punishing them for breaking the rules while turning a blind eye to the pro gamers. The FUT example shows that fan/gamer-producer relationships are far more complex than usually assumed. We are not dealing with a simple division into producer and valuable (though often strongly opposing) consumer. Consumers are different, some are more or less involved, undertake different practices, adopt different meanings, and understand their relations with the producers and other consumers differently. Therefore, there is a rich and diverse landscape of mutual relations. It is worth remembering that not only in the case of research on sports games or games of other genres but also media in general.

The presented study is relevant to EA Sports. Being accused of manipulating and stimulating gambling is not very beneficial. EA representatives have repeatedly opposed such bad intentions like an EA spokesperson did in an interview with *Eurogamer* magazine:

We believe that EA SPORTS FIFA is developed and implemented ethically and lawfully around the world (...). We care deeply that our players are having a fun and fair experience in all of our games and take great care to ensure each game is marketed responsibly (...). A player's ability to succeed in FIFA Ultimate Team is not dependent on spending in the mode.²⁴

Some players' response is usually: "These people are so delusional it's laughable (...) The best part (...) we care deeply that our players are having a fun ... LOL."²⁵ Can EA somehow benefit from the criticism discussed? Perhaps not directly, although analysis of gamers' behavior and criticism should become an important element of community management – an important but relatively understudied facet of computer game development (Zimmerman, 2019). More research on subversive practices is needed, not just in *FIFA* but games in general. It could help community managers in the computer game industry to manage gamers appropriately, especially when it comes to business ethics (Harviainen et al., 2019). In the case of FUT, despite the criticism and various forms of "opposition" the game is popular, which shows that players have more responsibility in maintaining the success of EA than they may think. Gamers' subversiveness is emancipatory and gives them collective strength. Together, they realize that they have been exposed to an effective marketing strategy without ever being educated on the risks of it.

It is worth remembering that EA Sports is a powerhouse when it comes to the gaming industry. The company has achieved mastery with the "wash, rinse, and repeat" strategy. Next to *FIFA*, the most popular game is *Madden NFL*, but EA also produces simulations of the NBA, NHL, NASCAR, and Formula 1. They all rely on a similar formula in which the games are developed, released, and then re-released annually with new cover art and updated team lists, most of the time with only minimally "tweaked" game mechanics. Many of these games offer a similar mode to FUT, for example, in *Madden NFL* it is Madden Ultimate Team. These modes will never cease to attract gamers because new sports stars, teams, and events appear constantly. The impact of EA Sports on the global sports media industry cannot be overestimated. The company pushes the media-tization and commercialization of sport to a whole new level, changing the way sport is

perceived around the world. This is another reason why it is crucial to analyze the subversive practices of sports gamers as it can help us understand the contemporary relationship between media, sport, and the everyday life of people.

Notes

1. I use the global name of the discipline (football), instead of the American one (soccer).
2. <https://www.spieltimes.com/news/fifa-ultimate-team-net-revenue-up-by-40-fifa-accounts-for-majority-of-eas-net-revenue/>.
3. <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2016-03-02-eas-ultimate-team-earning-around-usd650-million-a-year>; <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2016-03-02-eas-ultimate-team-earning-around-usd650-million-a-year>.
4. <https://antyweb.pl/fifa-ultimate-team-fut-zyski-zarobki-najwiecej>.
5. <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2020-07-31-fifa-ultimate-team-revenue-off-the-charts-during-lockdown>.
6. Stein and others cite Crawford (2006; Crawford & Gosling, 2009) and Conway (2010). Both dealt with how sport games are used in identity construction, performances, and social narratives of gamers. It is also wise to look into the chapters in the book *Sports Videogames* edited by Consalvo, Mitgutsch and Stein (2013).
7. Message boards are the basic communication tool used by FUT players.
8. The articles comprised 238 pages in a word editor. I came across 28 YouTube channels that criticized EA Sports.
9. *Pro Evolution Soccer* (PES) is a series of football games published since 1996 by Konami.
10. <https://answers.ea.com/t5/FIFA-17/What-is-the-problem-with-FUT-PACKS/td-p/5614837>.
11. <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2019-01-08-fifa-19-youtubers-buying-thousands-of-pounds-worth-of-fut-team-of-the-year-packs-reminds-us-the-odds-are-very-much-against-us>.
12. This survey brought out a lot of interesting data, for example, it showed how much gamers spend. Unfortunately, there is little information on the methodology of the research and one should treat the study as pure entertainment. The survey was an additional element of a journalistic article. In total, 1,352 players were surveyed.
13. <https://fifaforums.easports.com/en/discussion/400468/the-fut-addiction-thread>.
14. https://www.reddit.com/r/FIFA/comments/a9ijbr/pack_addiction_is_real/.
15. This results from the fact that various government entities are looking into practices of EA. In January 2019, in Belgium, the packs were declared an “illegal game of chance”, which resulted in EA’s withdrawal of FIFA Points from sale (<https://www.casino.org/news/easports-buckles-under-belgian-gambling-prosecution-threat/>). The situation is being monitored by relevant institutions in Sweden, France, and the UK (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/04/fifa-ultimate-team-gambling-french-lawsuit-ea-video-game-card-packs>).
16. For example: <https://www.goal.com/en/news/fifa-20-ultimate-team-pack-odds-what-are-the-chances-of/1a5vudndnxgca1w2r3norbnrd1>; <https://www.fifauteam.com/fifa-20-pack-odds/>.
17. For example: <https://www.futbin.com/tips>; <https://www.goal.com/en/news/how-to-trade-in-fifa-20-ultimate-team-best-coin-making-tips/12cuvfq3fzvjlj6d8v8gu1z8o>.
18. For example, in Poland this is Allegro – the Polish equivalent of eBay.
19. The coins are handed off through market manipulations, usually trading cards at highly inflated prices.
20. <https://www.mmogah.com/news/fifa/how-to-avoid-getting-banned-for-buying-fifa-coins>.
21. https://www.reddit.com/r/FIFA/comments/2hxrgrt/i_swear_there_is_some_conspiracy_behind_this_game/.
22. <https://www.dreamteamfc.com/c/gaming/431558/fifa-19-scripting-ultimate-team-ea-sports-futmas/>.

23. The FUT is strongly anchored into the history of sports card collecting, and that influences how it plays with aspect of its audience and with monetization more broadly. It blends a sports game with sports card collecting with a collectible card games, and it was very important in creating micropayments and loot boxes.
24. <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-04-25-now-belgium-declares-loot-boxes-gambling-and-therefore-illegal>.
25. <https://fifaforums.easports.com/en/discussion/387998/eas-response-to-lootboxes-lol>.

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