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Microtransaction Politics in FIFA Ultimate Team:

Game Fans, Twitch Streamers, and Electronic Arts

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Introduction

The game series *FIFA*, previously known as FIFA Soccer or FIFA Football, has been annually produced by video game developer Electronic Arts (EA) via their EA Sports division since 1993. The licenses that the FIFA franchise holds include original names, logos, stadiums, and colors of a football club, which has offered an often maligned franchise a significant advantage in marketing and name recognition.¹ Throughout the years various game modes have been introduced, and now alongside friendly matches or tournaments gamers can take on the role of either footballer or manager. Online multiplayer also features several modes, and the most popular and most extensive of these is the so-called “FIFA Ultimate Team” (FUT), which was introduced for the first time in *FIFA 09* (and is hence a little over a decade old at time of writing).

¹Daan Floris Juistenga, and Joris Martijn Bertholet, “How FIFA Scores from an Offside Position: Understanding the Longevity of a Disliked Brand” (Jönköping: Jönköping University, 2021).

may buy packs for “coins,” in game money earned by playing matches, winning tournaments, and numerous side-game modes, and generally devoting an extensive amount of time into the game. The packs can also be acquired through real-world currency (via “FIFA Points”), which makes FUT a mode considered as “pay-to-win” as it is possible to pay to advance.² At the risk of anticipating our subsequent analysis, one can already detect echoes here of the controversy around, for example, *Star Wars: Battlefront II* (2017), another EA release that received extensive criticism for the near-essential role microtransactions played in its progression system. The core of many microtransaction-based games is a constant pursuit of improved virtual items, perks, skills, and so on. This is no different in FUT, as the entire season is full of events introducing cards that might improve footballers’ statistics and overall rating.

With gamers buying packs and the FUT earnings rising year after year, this mode is the company’s primary source of profit from the game series. Microtransactions in *FIFA* exceed the revenues from the sale of the game itself.³ In its annual report for 2020, EA confirmed that Ultimate Team made more than \$1.62 billion,⁴ the most impressive result so far. However, various government entities are looking into the practices of EA in this regard. For example, in January 2019 Belgium⁵ declared the packs an “illegal game of chance” which resulted in EA’s withdrawal of FIFA Points from sale, with something very similar happening in the Netherlands in October 2020. Other countries may well follow, as this situation is being monitored by relevant institutions in Sweden, France (with a lawsuit underway), and the UK, among others.⁶ In this we begin to see that the mode designed to let football-inclined gamers construct their ideal team is, perhaps, not quite as idyllic as it first appears: there are serious issues of finance, regulation and ethics here, lurking behind the veneer of sport-related fantasy fulfilment.

²David Zendle, and Paul Cairns, “Video Game Loot Boxes Are Linked to Problem Gambling: Results of a Large-Scale Survey,” *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 11 (2018). Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0206767>.

³Weronika Makuch, “FIFA Ultimate Team to żyła złota. Otwieranie paczek przynosi większe zyski niż sprzedaż gry [FIFA Ultimate Team is a vein of gold. Opening packages brings more profits than selling a game],” *AntyWeb*, November 6, 2019. Available online: <https://antyweb.pl/fifa-ultimate-team-fut-zyski-zarobki-najwiecej/>.

⁴Ronan Murphy, “How Much Money Does EA Sports Make from FIFA & Ultimate Team?” *Goal*, June 10, 2021. Available online: <https://www.goal.com/en/news/how-much-money-does-ea-sports-make-from-fifa-ultimate-team/r1tbutqcbjhx19gkz54rtrp68>.

⁵Philip Conneller, “EA Sports Buckles Under Belgian Gambling Prosecution Threat,” *Casino.Org* (blog), January 31, 2019. Available online: <https://www.casino.org/news/ea-sports-buckles-under-belgian-gambling-prosecution-threat/>.

⁶Tom Usher, “Does Fifa Ultimate Team Risk Turning Players into Gambling Addicts?” *The Guardian*, February 4, 2020. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/04/fifa-ultimate-team-gambling-french-lawsuit-ea-video-game-card-packs>.

Unregulated gambling accusations have already forced changes in FUT. Since *FIFA 19* players are now informed about the probability of getting some cards—for example, one might be told by the game that the chance to draw a footballer ranked above 85/100 (in the game’s rating system) is 4 percent (with the FUT 21 best card, Lionel Messi, ranked 93 in its basic version). It is unknown, however, what the chance of getting a *specific* card is, but it seems fair to say that it will be extremely low for top footballers. These sorts of systems are designed to encourage continual payments in pursuit of highly unlikely but highly desirable in-game outcomes, and EA is not a game company known for being an exemplar of ethical conduct. In 2020 *FIFA*’s developers launched a tool called FIFA Playtime, which allows users to monitor the amounts of time and money spent in the game (one notes the charming “playful” name of this tool despite its supposedly serious purpose). On June 18, 2021, that is at the very end of the *FIFA 21* season, the company also introduced a feature called “Preview Packs” allowing players to view the footballers inside of a pack before deciding to buy.⁷ According to a producer, this is a one-timer for this year’s “Festival of FUTball,” an annual FUT event, and it is not yet clear whether it will be introduced in *FIFA 22*. If it is, this might of course affect the relationships we draw out in this chapter between the game’s players, developers, and content creators—the topics we explore in the Discussion.

This chapter and its analysis of these power relationships circulating around FUT (and the *FIFA* games more broadly) is based on a project conducted by the first author over three years (2017–19) on the official FUT forum, the details of which are described in a previous publication.⁸ The original project showed gamers as subversive consumers that do not want to give up “control” over the game and thus “clash” with producers. This was based on the fan studies approach, and a specific paradox was highlighted: “The criticism that flows toward EA from gamers does not stop them from playing and often does not limit spending real money on packs.”⁹ Fans (in this case game players) “can be loyal to a specific media brand (spend a lot of money), but at the same time dissatisfied with the actions of producers.”¹⁰ They want the better product and act accordingly. This is interesting, and points to the need to more fully examine the dynamics of finance and play in such games. The study showed that FUT players did not

⁷Owen S. Good, “FIFA Ultimate Team Now Shows Pack Contents before You Buy,” *Polygon* (blog), June 19, 2021. Available online: <https://www.polygon.com/22541541/fifa-ultimate-team-preview-pack-changes-loot-boxes-rules-ea-sports>.

⁸Piotr Siuda, “Sports Gamers Practices as a Form of Subversiveness—the Example of the *FIFA* Ultimate Team,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 38, no. 1 (2021): 75–89. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2021.1876897>.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

seem to be thoughtless consumers and instead represented a community that is active and subversive, manifesting in criticism of EA and many of the game's practices. These subversive perspectives on the game and its play were proposed as being emancipatory for players, and this subversion was understood via the works of John Fiske¹¹ and Henry Jenkins.¹² In doing so it brought to light the so-far undiscovered social world of FUT players, but did not look to address more political or economic issues of the sort we tackle in this chapter vis-à-vis microtransactions, company decisions, and player perspectives on the power relationships surrounding the FIFA games.

In this previous work three main categories of gamers' dissatisfaction with the game—which we explore here in a context of power relationships between players, content creators, and game developers—emerged. The first was frustration felt by players at EA's policies, such as each subsequent *FIFA* edition essentially being little more than just a refreshed version of the previous one. The players do not expect major changes from year to year, but rather object to a seemingly cynical “wash, rinse, and repeat” strategy.¹³ *FIFA*—seen as an expensive game—is 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. Also, some considered *FIFA* to also be deeply flawed in many areas, especially gameplay (e.g., tactics, formations, disconnection issues with FUT servers, etc.). The second was criticism of microtransactions since while theoretically any player can get the best athletes if they play enough, in practice the community agrees that without buying FIFA Points it is almost impossible to have a competitive squad. Players proposed that they are dealing with a system designed to encourage people to spend more and more money, and that they should know how many people are buying¹⁴ and how much money the company is making. Players also propose that the game is designed to make people want to open new packs, and hence may easily become addictive. The third area of displeasure comes from the claim that microtransactions demonstrates the company's *greed*—a serious accusation in a gamer community. This is especially the case when even the most expensive packs are not guaranteed to contain the most wanted athletes, and so players cannot be sure to “pull” anyone “good” from the packs, and hence dissatisfaction grows with real money spent.

¹¹John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 30–49.

¹²Henry Jenkins, “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5, no. 2 (1988): 85–107. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295038809366691>.

¹³Brett Hutchins, *Sport Beyond Television*, 1st edn. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 154–59.

¹⁴Nick Akerman, “Is It Too Expensive to Be Good at FIFA?” *B/R*, 2019. Available online: <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2836528-is-it-too-expensive-to-be-good-at-fifa>.

As above, in this chapter we intend to extend the original project in question by shifting beyond a consideration of the players themselves toward a more political-economic consideration of the ecosystem these players are a part of—and how these players *see* that ecosystem. The data gathered come from the previously researched FUT forum, and a directed content analysis is used as it is an especially useful method to add new perspectives to previously existing research, hence extend it further. FUT content creators appear to be an important and visible part of the *FIFA* gaming community, making videos for *YouTube* or *Twitch*, and sometimes adopting the status of a gaming “celebrity” within this space.¹⁵ This makes them a valuable case study of player–streamer–developer relationships, especially since some of them are very popular with large subscriber counts.¹⁶ It is the relationship between the FUT players, the players who are also successful FUT content creators on Twitch and YouTube, and the game’s developers, we wish to explore here.

There is in general a lack of research on game streamers in particular genres or games outside of speedrunning games¹⁷ and esports games¹⁸, and the *FIFA* games are no exception. However, general exploration of motivation of gamers in football game series by Zagala and Strzelecki¹⁹ shows that players do watch YouTubers and *Twitch* streamers. *YouTube* gaming videos²⁰—generally prerecorded although there is live functionality—and *Twitch* gaming streams—generally live but also with a video-on-demand function—have become increasingly significant parts of the gaming ecosystem in the past decade. On *Twitch*, for example, we see several million live streamers broadcasting to a combined audience of over

¹⁵Wesley Yin-Poole, “*FIFA 19* Streamers Buying Thousands of Pounds Worth of FUT Team of the Year Packs Reminds Us the Odds Are Very Much Against Us,” *Eurogamer* (blog), January 8, 2019. Available online: <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>.

¹⁶Jamie Hore, “*FIFA 20* Streamer Castro Hits Two Million Followers on Twitch,” *The Loadout*, 2019. Available online: <https://www.theloadout.com/twitch/fifa-20-streamer-castro-two-million-followers>.

¹⁷Rainforest Scully-Blaker, “A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space With de Certeau and Virilio,” *Game Studies* 14, no. 1 (2014). Available online: <http://gamestudies.org/1401/articles/scullyblaker>.

¹⁸Benjamin Burroughs, and Paul Rama, “The ESports Trojan Horse: Twitch and Streaming Futures,” *Journal for Virtual Worlds Research* 8, no. 2 (2015). Available online: <https://doi.org/10.4101/jvwr.v8i2.7176>.

¹⁹Kacper Zagala, and Artur Strzelecki, “ESports Evolution in Football Game Series,” *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research* 83, no. 1 (2019): 50–62. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.2478/pcssr-2019-0020>.

²⁰Hector Postigo, “The Socio-Technical Architecture of Digital Labor: Converting Play into YouTube Money,” *New Media & Society* 18, no. 2 (2016): 332–49. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814541527>.

one hundred million, and although the platform is increasingly branching out from gaming, game content remains dominant on the platform and the kind of broadcast with which it is most closely associated. Live streamers are often adopting significant roles in gaming subcultures and communities but are also entrepreneurs²¹ who produce often high-quality professional-standard video content, especially in the cases of the most aspirational broadcasters²².

At the same time, however, we are seeing increasing tensions within the games industry, especially when it comes to the monetization models used to make—or rather to massively increase—the profits from many blockbuster and mobile games (these monetization methods have yet to really spread into “indie” games). Perhaps most prominent in this regard is the rise of “loot boxes” (or equivalents) in which one pays real-world money for an unpredictable set of in-game items that might or might not be of use. These have become increasingly ubiquitous across many games and platforms,²³ with other models such as the “battle pass”²⁴—essentially a subscription that advantages paying players over those without the subscription—also now being widely used. Although many such games are positively marketed as being free-to-play, this often masks what one scholar has called a “lucrative affective economy” and often massive flows of capital toward games companies.²⁵ More broadly all of this takes place within an industrial context that reflects an increasingly corporatized blockbuster and mobile games industry and extensive efforts from such companies to legitimize the need for not merely profits, but towering profits, from their games.²⁶ In this chapter we examine what happens when successful game content creators, such monetization systems, and the “average” player, clash.

²¹Jamie Woodcock and Mark R. Johnson, “Live Streamers on Twitch.Tv as Social Media Influencers: Chances and Challenges for Strategic Communication,” *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 13, no. 4 (2019): 321–35. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2019.1630412>.

²²Mark R. Johnson, Mark Carrigan, and Tom Brock, “The Imperative to Be Seen: The Moral Economy of Celebrity Video Game Streaming on Twitch.Tv,” *First Monday*, August 1, 2019. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i8.8279>.

²³Andrei Zanescu, Marc Lajeunesse, and Martin French, “Speculating on Steam: Consumption in the Gamblified Platform Ecosystem,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 21, no. 1 (2021): 34–51. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540521993928>.

²⁴Daniel Joseph, “Battle Pass Capitalism,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 21, no. 1 (2021): 68–83. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540521993930>.

²⁵Josh Jarrett, “Gaming the Gift: The Affective Economy of League of Legends ‘Fair’ Free-to-Play Model,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 21, no. 1 (2021): 102–19. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540521993932>.

²⁶Mark R. Johnson and Tom Brock, “The ‘Gambling Turn’ in Digital Game Monetization,” *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 12, no. 2 (2020): 145–63.

Methods

Although EA runs tournaments for “pro” gamers where prominent members of the community meet offline, online interactions prevail and online communities are crucial for shaping the practices of FUT players. The first author’s original project used netnography, understood here as being a form of ethnography dedicated to the study of online communities.²⁷ The focus was on the official most “populated” English language FIFA forum run by EA Sports (<https://fifaforums.easports.com/en/>). This netnographic research included interaction (starting threads and polls) with the studied online community, as well as keeping track of threads on the forum and downloading and analyzing all those related to players’ opinions about EA Sports, EA’s company policies, or criticism of *FIFA*.

As indicated in the Introduction, the research presented in this chapter is intended to complement the first author’s one. Therefore, in study design and analysis, we used the approach described by Hsieh and Shannon²⁸ and named qualitative *directed content analysis* (DCA). It is especially appropriate for research aiming to describe further a given phenomenon as the previous study would benefit from expanding. DCA validates or extends existing studies, and these help focus the research question. Also, this approach is deductive²⁹ as it “is guided by a more structured process than in a conventional approach”.³⁰

As a follow-up to the original project, this study was carried out in June and July 2021, at the same official FIFA forum. The analysis began by searching for threads related to content creators. The forum’s internal search engine was used, with the following keywords: “streamer,” “streamers,” “streaming,” “Twitch,” and “YouTube.” The search generated 2,307 threads (after eliminating threads that repeated for two or more keywords) and these were the unit of analysis. Using prior research, key concepts were then identified as initial coding categories and definitions for each category were determined. The categories indicated were *Streamers as a source of frustrations* (C1), *Streamers as reinforcing micropayment* (C2) and *Streamers as profit makers* (C3). In developing these categories relevant forum threads were read and all text that appeared to represent opinions on streamers was highlighted. This

²⁷Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, 1st edn. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009).

²⁸Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, “Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis,” *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (2005): 1277–88. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>.

²⁹Philipp Mayring, “Qualitative Content Analysis,” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 1, no. 2 (2000). Available online: <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-1.2.1089>.

³⁰Hsieh and Shannon, “Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis.”

step was carried out to increase trustworthiness, and reduce the possibility of initial coding biases. The data was reduced at this point, as not all of the 2,307 threads were important for the analysis (sometimes the thread could include a given keyword but no opinions on streamers were present). Additionally, we should note that the analyzed threads were not always set up to discuss streamers, as the opinions on them could appear in the course of discussing a different topic. The final step was to code all highlighted passages using the predetermined categories. Any text that could not be categorized with the initial coding scheme was considered as *other criticism* (we do not give a separate category here as this criticism was not relevant for the aim of the chapter, e.g., it was about streamers behavior or personality). It is also worth mentioning that a certain thread may fit more than one category.

Nevertheless, using preexisting concepts and predefining categories has some inherent limitations in that researchers approach the data with an informed bias. They may be more likely to find evidence that is supportive rather than non-supportive of a given theory and they could also be blind to contextual aspects of the phenomenon.³¹ In the case of the presented research, looking for threads related to specific opinions about content creators, could have overemphasized gamers' criticism. To achieve neutral, objective, and unbiased results, we included the negative case analysis.³² Searching for gamers' opinions was also about checking whether any positive opinions on streamers are present, and this category is also included (see Table 4.1; C4 – *Positive opinions about streamers*). Besides, credibility results from the presented research were a part of prolonged engagement with the FUT community and persistent observation carried out as a part of the original netnographic project.³³

Ethically, we do not violate the players' privacy in any way nor cause them any harm. All posters on the forum are aware that their messages are accessible to anyone—this is not a private forum—and the messages in question do not concern private, intimate, or sensitive issues.³⁴ In turn, pseudonymous usernames are used by the forum's posters, further decreasing the likelihood of identification.³⁵ Given this situation the quotations showed are not changed in any way (also when it comes to the language—hence many typos, etc.) because it is important to accurately reflect the precise

³¹Ibid.

³²Kathleen Manning, "Authenticity in Constructivist Inquiry: Methodological Considerations Without Prescription," *Qualitative Inquiry* 3, no. 1 (1997): 93–115. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049700300105>.

³³Ibid.

³⁴The design and data collection for this project were both conducted by the first author, who takes full responsibility for the ethical conduct of the research.

³⁵The adopted ethical procedure meets the ethical guidelines of many scientific associations, e.g., Association of Internet Researchers (see <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>).

TABLE 4.1 *Analytical Categories and their Definitions*

Analytical category Number of threads in each category	Definition of each category
Category 1 (C1) Streamers as a source of frustrations. Number of threads – 107	Threads with criticism of content creators related to general criticism of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• quality of the gameplay and the game in general.• not being able to play well (e.g., losing games) because of game flaws.• not being able to get any good footballers from the packs.
Category 2 (C2) Streamers as reinforcing micropayment. Number of threads – 172	Threads with criticism of content creators related to general criticism of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• micropayment.• EA making the game addictive.• EA not punishing gamers who cheat (buy or sell coins and/or entire accounts).
Category 3 (C3) Streamers as profit makers. Number of threads – 44	Threads with criticism of content creators related to criticism of EA as a company that cares only about income. Similarly, content creators as entrepreneurs who care solely about their income.
Category 4 (C4) Positive opinions about streamers. Number of threads – 65	All positive opinions on content creators, e.g., threads with messages indicating who is the best streamer and giving reasons for this.

Source: Own study.

wording, pacing, and thrust of each quotation. Next to each quote, the categories (e.g., C1; C2; C3) are indicated.

Results

In Table 4.1 we present the complete list of categories, the definitions of categories and the number of threads included in each category.

Category 1—Streamers as a source of frustrations

We first note that players seem to express frustrations toward streamers as a result of the sorts of in-game strategies these streamers pursue, perceived

detrimental effects on the game emerged from these practices, and due to the perceptions of luck exhibited by the game's content creators. Each of these elements is interesting and has something to tell us about the power relationships of the game, its content creators, and its monetization methods.

The previous research showed that many FUT players are frustrated by the fact that EA offers what is essentially the same product year after year while still charging the price of a full game, as well as the expectation of its microtransactions. Yet messages addressing live streamers and influencers in the FUT space also show comparable frustrations about the game, with at least some of the blame being transferred onto the practices of these content creators. For example, players state that streamers prefer certain player formations (e.g., 4–2–3–1) and tactics while building the squad, and these are considered to favor counters and players believe this is using flaws of the game. Some see this as a fault in the game because such builds enable a player to dominate on many metrics (possession, shots, etc.) and yet still lose the game ultimately—despite this of course being what can happen in a physical game of football as well. Others propose these formations are boring and less interesting to both play with and play against. Such strategies based on counters “make it easier to win” (C1) and are extremely frustrating to opponents, as they could attack endlessly and concede a goal from one counter-attack, losing the game as a result. The streamers are said to benefit from these kinds of “flaws” and, according to players, thus influence the community to use these strategies because people wish to emulate what appear to be winning strategies for *streamers*, yet can be difficult for players to easily replicate. Many suggest that younger gamers in particular, sometimes called “kids” (C1; C2) or “fanboys” (C1), are fascinated with streamers and consequently “follow everything these say” (C1; C2), and it is hence “no wonder 99% of this Fifa community are 4,231 drop back noobs is thanks to these streamers” (C1; C2). Here we see players frustrated by the significant influence that FUT content creators yield, and what this has done to the play of the game as a whole.

In turn, criticism of streamers can also become criticism of EA, with the company accused of promoting game design choices that have “ruined Fifa over the years” (C1). For example, one comment shifted from complaining about these *FIFA*-related content creators to EA, emphasizing a belief that the company was responsible to laying the groundwork that streamers then took advantage of, and so original responsibility for such problems lies with the company. To wit:

Youtubers are just bell ends in general but ea needs to start taking blame for most of the problems.

They turned this game from a casual game into a super sweaty get your sweat bands ready competitive game which it never should have been. Implemented overpowered tactics system ea giving people the tools to

— -1
— 0
— +1

abuse the game even further ... And the lottery sluggish gameplay just makes the game completely unplayable ... Ea and youtubers can both get fisted for all i care (C1)

Comments of this sort begin to point toward the analysis we wish to develop here—a perception that both the game’s developers *and* popular streamers are simultaneously responsible for the game’s perceived problems, and in turn an almost conspiratorial perspective that suggests both of these powerful actors have, even if not necessarily in a coordinated way, been interacting with each other to mutually reinforce and promote what are seen as the undesirable elements of *FIFA* games. In this case the game is seen as less diverse because all streamers keep using the same players, formations, only custom tactics, *but* streamers are only doing this because the possibility exists within the game’s code. The implication seems to be that *Twitch* streamers and *YouTube* creators are taking advantage of broken or flawed mechanics that EA have implemented into the game, and hence deserve some blame for not playing the game as apparently “intended,” while some responsibility is also on the company for creating the game in this manner in the first place. We therefore see here live streamers more fully adopting the “intermediary” role of the cultural influencer.

In turn, some gamers’ frustrations are caused by streamers being perceived as having unnatural luck. It appears that many players believe the gameplay is sometimes all about luck (a topic also addressed in the previous study) with players stressing that skills, although important, do not always help to win. Frustrated players therefore ask, “are there any streamers that are just regular average players?” (C1). For streamers they claim that “the gameplay seems to be butter smooth” (C1; C2), and what is even more frustrating, “they say they are facing the problems ... normal guys face” (C1) despite this apparently not being the case. For many watching these streams it seems that every move and shot and pass is perfect, which apparently does not happen when they themselves play. One longer quote in particular exemplified this perspective:

i thought I’d give a streamer a go, clicked on a random one near the top, can’t remember his name ... He’d played about 13 matches, had 67,000 fifa points and 3mil+ coins. His team was all icons bar van dijk kante and mbappe. Watching him play just upset me, he was obviously a bang average fifa player but everything he attempted was coming off because of his team. Its what I consider to be everything wrong with ultimate team (C1; C2).

Category 2—Streamers as reinforcing micropayment

FUT players therefore direct significant criticism to live streamers for their apparent use of overpowered strategies, a reliance on luck, and their influence

-1 ____
0 ____
+1 ____

within the community. However, more focused criticism also emerges about the central role of microtransactions to the *FIFA* games, and the perception that content creators are playing an undesirable role within the game's financial ecosystem (and more broadly the financial relationships between the developers, the streamers, and the players). Criticism of micropayments is hence not only directed at EA but also (much like game design criticism) at content creators as people who contribute to "tricking" ordinary players into buying packs. One player asked: "Is anyone surprised the You Tuber gets the best packs? Does it need to be explained by now?" (C2; C3), suggesting either that *FIFA* content creators are somehow in cahoots with EA; or that they only show themselves getting the best prizes and omit the times they get the weaker prizes; or perhaps some combination. This is reinforced in other comments, such as players reporting on the "incredible pack luck" (C2) of streamers, who are often spending huge amounts of money when opening these packs:

Wow now I understand why ea shows the love to the streamers Bateson87 in his latest video clearly says he spent 800,000 fifa points so almost £5200 quid wtf on a single promo this guy has almost spent £20,000 by my calculations.... (C2; for one of Bareson87 posts on Twitter see Figure 4.2).

Another streamer hits 5 icons in a week !! After spending 2k ... It's crazy as people and kids see this type of hype put money in and pack no one I see almost every streamer seems to have packed a toty or two lol. (C2)

Streamers thus appear to these players as EA's "agents" in the sense that they support the company in its greed, and hence *YouTube* and *Twitch* videos and broadcasts become seen as "just another huge marketing lie to suck more cash" (C2). Some messages warn against not being fooled, and that *YouTubers* or *Twitchers* should be somewhat absolved because "it's their job" (C2), with the "dirty rotten system" (C2) to blame in which "EA decides who get what" (C2). It is worth noting also that one can sometimes come across players defending those streamers, who are understood to carefully select their content showing only "good drops" (C2; C4). According to some players, there is nothing wrong with that, because it is only marketing, especially since "lots of people pack icons ... you just don't see them packing icons as they are not on these forums or twitter pages" (C2).

Nevertheless players do seem to feel a divide between themselves and the content creators in the eyes of EA. To work around this the previous project showed that there are players who take a "shortcut" when it comes to building squads and buy *FIFA* coins from numerous sellers on eBay or similar services. It is much cheaper than buying packs, and they can even buy entire accounts with already established teams. Both trading coins and accounts are however against the game's terms of service and EA

— -1
— 0
— +1



FIGURE 4.2 One of Bareson87—an influential content creator—posts on Twitter emphasizing his incredible pack luck in FUT 19.

Source: <https://twitter.com/bateson87/status/1169644154655260672>

cleans offenders’ accounts of coins, blocks access to the transfer market or even bans the entire account. However, on the forum players notice that live streamers usually “play ... on 2 accounts. One on stream and one ... off stream” (C2). EA does not prohibit this, but players believe that “twitch is full of people streaming with mule accounts” (C2) for packing best footballers “while legit people are left empty handed again” (C2). Whether or not this is true, there is again a great deal of bitterness, with players reporting getting “a massive warning when logging in to FUT about coins” and then watching “people ... buying accounts in the millions” (C2). From this perspective there seems to be one rule for the content creators (with EA’s implicit or perhaps even explicit blessing), and one rule for everybody else. This is further intensified by the fact that content creators are seen to promote coin selling, “yet nothing happens” (C2), as EA prefers to ban “poor players that put hundreds of euros in their game instead of the big youtubers and streamers who promote their game” (C2).

Such opinions come to resemble conspiracy theories that proliferate on the forum, about EA favoring content creators over “average” players. This is found, for example, in stories of how EA employees watch Twitch and “see” when a given streamer is opening packs, and “suddenly” the streamer’s luck shifts and they get huge pack openings. According to the forum’s players this is to make them feel that they “could also be this lucky” (C2) and thus become more inclined to buy coins and open packs. Players doubt the good intentions of EA because it is apparently “just an insult to even the average persons intelligence to think that is an organic, random, uncontrolled series of events”. Some even so further and search for proof of “swaying high rated cards” (C2) in streamers favor:

Something a lot of us always thought and a lot of others disregarded [here the poster referred to the article on *Polygon* blog³⁶ — PS, MRJ].

“I’ve definitely been in a room where a publisher said, ‘We could do better odds on the packs that this person opens for promotional purposes.’” (C2)

Category 3—Streamers as profit makers

The third component identified in these players’ critiques of FUT’s developer–streamer–player ecosystem relates to the idea that content creators are profit-oriented entrepreneurs, which is viewed negatively in terms of greed and similar to how the community talks about the company. For example, some quotes demonstrate the idea that content creators may only be “in it” for the money, and perhaps implicitly that they are less “true” players³⁷ than those with other motivations:

He’s making a fortune streaming on Twitch. If he stopped spending money on Fifa, he’d stop getting viewers... a kick in the teeth to people who spend their money on packs. (C2; C3)

Most of them built their platform by opening packs with a sick amount of fifa points. But as long as there are kids who watch their “content”, they are making a living. (C2; C3)

Some even claim that “these people have ruined FUT and make money off of advertising it too” (C2; C3), and even hosting charity streams is criticized,

³⁶Charlie Hall, “FTC Panel Reveals Troubling Relationship Between Streamers and Loot Box Creators,” *Polygon* (blog), August 7, 2019. Available online: <https://www.polygon.com/2019/8/7/20758974/ftc-loot-box-panel-streamer-publisher-sponsorships>.

³⁷Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul, *Real Games: What’s Legitimate and What’s Not in Contemporary Videogames*, Illustrated edn. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019).

because apparently “charity is for taxes” (C3). Players post messages stressing the differences between themselves and streamers, with “regular folks are forced to earn ... wins in fut champs” (C1; C3) while *YouTubers* or *Twitchers* “get given wins by their viewers” (C1; C3). The disjuncture also results from the huge income of streamers, as a given streamer “in donations alone ... makes more in 1 day than someone grafting in a minimum wage job for a month” (C3). We therefore see again here how FUT content creators have increasingly become the target of criticisms and attacks from the “average” player, but also how accusations of greed and a financial focus (as opposed to play, leisure, enjoyment, etc.) have *transferred* from the company onto, in part, the content creators themselves. Coupled with the previous two points of analysis we see a further blurring of criticisms of streamers and the company, with anxieties about both the motivations and practices of content creators, and the company whose games they broadcast, becoming increasingly interwoven.

Category 4—Positive opinions about streamers

However, there are also positive perceptions of live streamers and YouTube video creators to be found here, and the FUT community does post on “who the best streamers are.” Threads apprise *YouTubers* and *Twitchers* for their style, personality, or charity, that is, for things for which they are also being criticized (often the given thread contains both approval and criticism at the same time). This demonstrates that the critiques of these individuals—and the perceptions of their roles within a wider, acquisitive, and perhaps even corrupt ecosystem—are not universally accepted, but are rather one discourse among several. For example, some players appreciate streamers they consider skilled, “extremely good players” (C4), and who are informative about the game, tactics, and so forth. Watching these is seen as useful because one can learn something and become a better player themselves, with streamers talking about how “to fix the game” (C4) or about “game mechanics and the problems” (C4) that FUT gamers face. Contrary to the opinions cited above (C1), the way streamers play, the tactics and formations they choose are also approved and considered “effective” (C4) or “guiding” (C4), and some may find it “helpful to improve” (C4). This applies not only to the game but also general football knowledge:

An older FIFA streamer—actually has good football knowledge as opposed to others—is good at the game and doesn’t scream every two seconds.

He does football news segment at the start of each stream where he goes over what’s been happening—was great during the transfer window as

he pretty much showed all the rumours from multiple sources and had a big chat about it. (C4)

Discussion

These findings support the first author's previous research and add to it by showing players' reactions to FUT content creators on *Twitch* and on *YouTube*. We see critical discussions about EA's practices including micropayments, or creating conspiracy theories about so-called scripting, which is to say EA covertly manipulating the game to promote the desire to constantly improve one's team and buy packs. Atypical games, when someone with a huge advantage loses because of "weird" penalties, unbelievable last second goals, or impossible moves of the digital footballers, are all taken as evidence that there is "a conspiracy behind this game"³⁸ because EA "does not want the gamers to achieve the intended goals too quickly."³⁹

In the case of *FIFA*, we might also see the relationships in this ecosystem changing as a result of various "innovations" proposed by EA. For example, if the "Preview Packs" will be included in FUT 2022, this might well change the perception of micropayments—although the company certainly has a lot of ill-will accrued over many years to begin working off if there is, indeed, a commitment to such a change. Yet even this may not necessarily be a change for the better, since game journalists and other critical voices show that the preview is very limited.⁴⁰ For many special packs the player can preview only one, with others waiting in line, and all of them disappear after a short period. There is hence a choice introduced here: buy now and hope that the next pack will be better, or lose the opportunity of buying at all. It is thus easy to imagine gamers—not unreasonably—seeing this as another EA trick to raise sales. Hence the communal response to *FIFA* and FUT requires future research, and with streamers, casual gamers, different levels of involvement, different opinions or practices, since we are dealing with a diverse landscape of mutual relations. This may be the case not only when it comes to sports games but also in games of other genres as well.

Lastly, we must note that the presented research cannot be perfectly representative of the entire FUT community and, as has been mentioned before, the results revolve around threads and hence point toward future research that could take place, for example, in the *Twitch* streams or through the *YouTube* videos of *FIFA* content creators. Thus we hope to have offered here a starting point for a more in-depth analysis of streamers' place in

³⁸Siuda, "Sports Gamers Practices as a Form of Subversiveness."

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ricky Frech, "FIFA 21: What Preview Packs Say About the Future of FUT," *Screenrant*, 2021. Available online: <https://screenrant.com/fifa-21-preview-packs-loot-boxes-fut-future/>.

the community—for example based on other qualitative methods, such as grounded theory or phenomenology, as they go beyond content analysis to a nuanced understanding of the lived experience.

Although community management has been to date a relatively understudied⁴¹ facet of computer game development (with some notable exceptions such as T. L. Taylor's work on community construction on Twitch and studies of MMORPG communities and Esports⁴²), the issues—and particularly the perspectives of players—demonstrated in this chapter highlight the importance of these issues for understanding sports games (with their particular entanglements) and games as a whole. FUT serves as a valuable case study in this regard both of the connections between players, content creators, and game developers, but also of the *perceptions* of such connections, especially if undesirable connections are widely believed to exist. More research on these sorts of perspectives is thus needed, and not just in *FIFA* or sports games, as it could help the industry to treat gamers with appropriate business ethics.⁴³

The case of FUT seems ideal for exploring such questions precisely because, despite the criticism, the game is very popular—as one respondent in the previous study frankly stated: the players “can’t stop playing even tho ... the game is trash.”⁴⁴ FUT players still watch content creators on *YouTube* and *Twitch* despite the range of criticisms being leveled at them, up to and including allegations of what might reasonably be called active and deliberate deceit. If these questions of power and connections in this emerging content-creator ecosystem are not resolved or at least addressed with comprehensive codes of ethics and transparent behavior, we may be on a path toward a collective realization that these emerging financial relationships and their entanglements with internet entertainment and celebrity have the potential to cause significant problems in gaming communities going forward.

⁴¹Joshua J. Zimmerman, “Computer Game Fan Communities, Community Management, and Structures of Membership,” *Games and Culture* 14, no. 7–8 (2019): 896–916. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017742308>.

⁴²T. L. Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); T. L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015); T. L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).

⁴³J. Tuomas Harviainen, Janne Paavilainen, and Elina Koskinen, “Ayn Rand’s Objectivist Ethics Applied to Video Game Business,” *Journal of Business Ethics* (2019). Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04159-y>.

⁴⁴Siuda, “Sports Gamers Practices as a Form of Subversiveness.”