

Playable Archive: The management of data in the *FIFA/EA Sports* franchise.

Dr Iain Donald

Edinburgh Napier University
School of Computing, Engineering & the Built Environment
Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
i.donald@napier.ac.uk

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The *FIFA* series (now known as *EA Sports FC*) of video games are football (soccer) sports simulation games that claim to provide “unrivalled authenticity” for fans (Escaravage and Ludlow 2023). EA releases a new version annually and each iteration routinely sells in excess of 10 million copies, outstripping rival football games such as Konami’s *eFootball* (formerly *PES: Pro Evolution Soccer*) and Sports Interactive’s *Football Manager*. The game has been described as one of a select few that is “familiar to people who have no interest in gaming – or even real football” (Parkin 2016) and “woven into global culture” (Markoff 2023: xiii). In this paper, I explore how the data in the *FIFA/EA Sports* series and its wider ecosystem is presented and used by developers and the player base. That data both replicates and represents the structures, machinations and history of association football but is also played with to create an alternate history. In this context the paper will consider how EA manages core aspects of the game data and what this means for authenticity.

In 2022 it was announced that the licensing agreement between EA Sports and FIFA (the governing body of football) that has existed since 1993 was coming to an end and that from 2023 *FIFA* (the game) would be known as *EA Sports FC*. The news gained significant mainstream press attention (Powell 2022; Agini and Criddle 2022; Panja 2022) and has heralded a significant change to the how the series presents the sport. Like many games that are based on real-world data, EA Sports has consistently presented the game series as an ‘authentic’ experience. Whilst this is often convenient shorthand for marketing purposes, the company have repeatedly emphasized that the over-arching aim was always to create the most realistic football game – EA’s original slogan was “If it’s in the game, it’s in the game.” (Parkin 2016). How that is interpreted by the publisher, developer, marketing departments, and players is often in flux and further complicated by how we each define ‘authentic’ and ‘realistic’. This research views *FIFA* not just as a sports simulation but as a historical game in two ways – through the content (e.g., use of real-world players and ex-players, stadiums, retro kits) and through each iteration’s representation of play (e.g., the rules, squads, and other default data in each version) which create a playable archive but many modalities (Dhaliwal 2022: 155). How the real world is represented

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in games has generated considerable discussion within Historical Games Studies. Salvati and Bullinger for example coined the phrase “selective authenticity” to consider how facts in historical games were chosen to help generate a sense of authenticity (2013). That selectiveness has been applied by others to understand historical games from considering accuracy and realism (Shaw 2015), developer and player perspectives (Chapman 2016) and the presentation of historical content (Grufstedt 2022). Taking a mixed-methodological approach utilizing several game design research frameworks (Hunicke et al 2004; Walk et al 2017; Donald and Reid 2023) and close reading methods of the game and paratextual materials (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011; Wright 2022), various versions of *FIFA* (and the new iteration *EA Sports FC*) were played and analyzed with a range of paratextual material.

My analysis shows that the game has always leaned heavily on its own 30-year history, extensive licensing agreements and use of real-world data to sell itself as an authentic representation of the sport and its history. I also demonstrate that the game iterations are both snapshots and playable archives of the various Leagues, Clubs, Player Organizations, Players and Ex-Players, Stadiums, etc., at the time of release. This is particularly true of the core modes such as Kick-Off or Pro Teams which remain representative of the real world. Each game version underpinned by its annual release cycle coming shortly after the start of the ‘new’ European football season (Guins et al 2022: 4) and reinforced through regular game data updates that include the latest player transfers. Even in the hugely successful Ultimate Team mode, where game players can use microtransactions and trade to build their fantasy team (Siuda and Johnson 2022) that authenticity is delivered through ‘inform’ cards of players who performed well in real world matches. Whilst the actual statistics on the card will typically be met by a range of responses from the community as to the perceived accuracy there is wide acceptance that the game mode mimics, rewards, and authenticates real world performances.

The research also shows that EA has increasingly pushed promotions with boosted cards that include far more fantasy elements (players being played out of position or with game-changing attributes). Although EA typically tries to balance these, and the community tacitly accepts promotions as part of the game mode there are frequent debates over the notion and interpretation of authenticity. With the licensing split from FIFA (the governing body), EA has made more radical changes. *EA Sports FC* allows ultimate teams to be created that mix both female and male players, a significantly progressive move and negative responses in the community were met robustly with EA emphasizing the game was “for everyone”. However, it further resets the narrative away from simulation and more toward fantasy (Yin-Poole 2023). This research then explores the paradox where the data is now historical and ahistorical. The ‘authentic’ game now exists differently across game modes but mimics, alters, and retells ‘history’.

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