

The Changing Art of "Housery" in The Age of VAR

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Keywords

Football, rules, cheating, foul play, dark play, Video Assistant Referee

INTRODUCTION: DARK ARTS OF FOOTBALL

"The aesthetics of football is not limited to the aesthetics of the moments of athletic prowess; the game is beautiful when Maradona scores a clearly illegal goal the referee does not see, when Filippo Inzaghi was so much on the edge of being offside that it was impossible to decide whether he was on or offside." (Sicart 2023, 903)

With roughly 3.5 billion fans and 250 million players worldwide, football (also known as 'association football', or 'soccer') is the most popular sport in the world. Football is widely known as "the beautiful game", but for those who follow the game closely, the appeal of the game is greater than the moments of extraordinary individual skill or seamless teamwork. Football is also very much about unmannerly behavior including provocation, bluffing, time-wasting, and other actions that aim at winning the game by scamming opponents and hoodwinking match officials.

The dark arts of football, 'shithousery' or 'housery' (Football Daily 2023) as this phenomenon is often called in the UK, come in a variety of forms. 'Housery' is about finding ways to beat the system and identifying the creative loopholes in the game. In many ways, it is about engaging in dialogue about the rules and their interpretations. The actions employed by the masters of football dark arts share qualities with cheating (Consalvo 2007), dark play (Mortensen, Linderoth & Brown 2015), foul play (Rowbottom 2013), gamesmanship (Potter 1947), or optimizing (Paul 2024), but cannot be reduced to them entirely.

As university lecturer and football referee William Lai (2020, 150) suggests "There is no doubt that the Beautiful Game and the Dark Arts are forever entwined and will evolve together as long as football exists as a competitive sport and a major commercial industry". We argue that the field of game studies can significantly benefit from a detailed analysis of 'housery' and how the clever hacks performed on a football pitch change over time. We are especially interested in the impact of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR), a new supportive role that allows a review of match officials'

Proceedings of DiGRA 2024

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decisions using video footage. If experienced players have traditionally been able to identify moments when the on-pitch referees have a limited view, the VAR, utilizing high-resolution multi-camera systems, makes it much easier to capture “old-school” tricks and forces players to come up with entirely new strategies.

CONTEXT: VIDEO ASSISTANT REFEREE IN FOOTBALL

Football is not only very popular – it is also a game that is constantly developing and changing. The laws of the game are administered by the International Football Association Board (IFAB) and they are updated every year. Some of the rule updates introduce new roles and technologies to the modern game. One of the most significant recent transformations is the introduction of Video Assistant Referee in 2018.

The design of VAR resembles the instant replay mechanisms already common in many other sports. The VAR team follows the live footage of the on-pitch actions from a dedicated video operating room. The reviewable calls include goals, penalty kicks, red cards, and cases of mistaken identity. The VAR is instructed to intervene in the event of a ‘clear and obvious error’ or ‘serious missed incident’, but the final decision is made by the on-pitch head referee (Zglinski 2022, 3).

It is fair to say that VAR has had a substantial influence on international football in the past few years. While VAR originally aims at enhancing decision-making accuracy and promoting fairness, it has also sparked debates and controversies among players, managers, pundits and fans. The critics of VAR argue that the system disrupts the flow of the game and increases confusion. Visible examples of influence of VAR include but are not limited to the application of the redesigned handball rule, extended duration of football matches, and the continuous uncertainty around celebrating a goal (due to all goals now being checked for prior offenses) (Sicart 2023, 902). What remains under-researched is the impact of these technologies to tactics, fouling, delaying the game, confusing opponents and other aspects that together shape how the game is played and consumed.

With this study, we aim at getting a better grasp of how the controversial actions known as ‘housery’ contribute to the nature of football and how the game changes if the forms of ‘housery’ are forced to change. By analysing journalistic accounts, player interviews and fan forums, we explicate the role of VAR in this process and put all this into the context of broadcasting and social media. As Sicart (2023, 890) argues, “game studies can use sports as case studies in ‘classic’ topics of the field, such as the nature of rules in games”. We believe that studying football helps in showing how governance of rules and introduction of new technologies shape games and the ways in which they are played, and that the study of sport offers us a fresh perspective to help inform game studies.

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