

# Golden Goal: Altruism versus Toxicity and the Soul of Football (Soccer) Simulators

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper explores contrasting player behaviors in two of the largest football (soccer) franchises - *EA Sports FC* (formerly *FIFA*) and *eFootball* (formerly *Pro Evolution Soccer*). Each game has built up substantial global online player bases (Guins 2022) and offer a wide range of official tools and paratextual materials to engage with their respective communities. Outside the official ecosystem, players have found their own ways to create, improve, subvert and re-engage with the games. Whilst toxic in-game behaviors often attract attention, players often demonstrate altruistic behaviors and collective action that mirrors both wider fan behavior regarding the sport (e.g. commemoration or remembrance activities), standing up to the perceived owners and authorities that police the game (e.g. fan protests towards both game companies and football owners) or reflect a range of social, activism, political and non-political causes (e.g. support for Ukraine, Palestine, LGBT+ rights and various charities).

Toxicity in multiplayer games is “complex and systemic” (Adinolf & Turkey 2018). Studies have shown that negative experiences are normalized in the environment (Beres et al 2021), whether as the result of direct gameplay (Canossa et al 2021) or in community-used communication channels (Märtens et al 2015; Kuznekoff & Rose 2013). Multiplayer football games have proven to be fertile grounds for toxic behavior as result of the heady combination of competitive game modes, rewards-based incentives and the tribalism associated with football fandom (Mangan 1996), arguably similar to the underlying motivations and behaviors that drive “hooligan” culture in football (Frosdick et al 2013). Although players face a range of negative experiences in online gaming, this paper focuses on wide-ranging “good behaviors” - altruistic, prosocial, collective, and individual - that exist in the online football gaming communities.

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This paper considers how player behaviors are communicated, responded to and further disseminated. For new players, online gaming communities can range from hostile to supportive but are initially bewildering. Football games, like others, have a range of textual and non-verbal behaviors used in-game to communicate expectations. ‘Git Gud’ has developed as a staple response in those communities for players who raise issues regarding scripting, dynamic difficulty adjustment, lag, server availability, toxic behaviors, bugs or other gaming issues (Paul 2022). Yet, it is those same frustrations that have led to external tools being developed and distributed in the community that offer greater convenience and efficiency, whether to limit the grind or reduce the likelihood of player errors. Similarly, there exists a large body of players who want to compete on a level playing field and help each other by sharing tools, tactics and gameplay tips to communities via social media (Stein 2022). Reciprocal acknowledgement of fair competition and play experience can see matches amongst players conclude in a simple ‘gg’ or ‘good game’ message enhancing their social capital (Depping et al 2018). These behaviors are not necessarily unique but within the two football game communities they frequently differ and offer insights into how players interact based on the existing tools they have available in-game and outside of the game.

The paper then moves on to consider how the game communities play and morph the design. Emergent fan behavior has developed to present wider collective action or encourage altruistic behaviors to circumvent features implemented by the publisher, development and content teams. This is particularly prevalent when players perceive that gameplay conditions are designed to demand greater player engagement, encourage microtransaction purchases or to hurt the community. An example of this is the ‘Golden Goal’ rule where, to reduce the grind of multiple matches played in full, players collectively agree to only play until the first goal is scored. This concept of ‘next goal is the winner’ is one that every player of football is familiar with as a community-driven playground rule. This paper concludes by exploring how these behaviors and actions are illustrative of common, intergenerational, multicultural themes with real football, where fan rivalry can be put aside for collective events and actions for celebration, commemoration, and commiseration.

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