

Rethinking FIFA International Soccer (1993) as a Classic

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100,000. That was the entire budget for a small 10 person team in 1993 as they looked to create a game for the soccer world. What they did not know was that they were going to start one of the most successful and influential franchises in gaming history. Today, AAA titles can cost anywhere from \$5 million to over \$200 million. Yet many of them won't even come near the influence and impact of *FIFA International Soccer* (1993). Our discussions in this course include five main criteria: Design (how gameplay mechanics and narrative design persist in public memory), Economic (the role of re-releases and circulation across platforms and generations), Mimicry (how games inspire replication and adaptation in other titles), Cultural (influence on the evolution of games and popular culture), and Discourse (sustained critical acclaim and ongoing player engagement). Games discussed in the course, including *FIFA International Soccer*, encompass all of these criteria. But some criteria are far more important than others for certain games. Frome and Martin analyzed over 580 articles in Game Studies to determine which games receive the most attention in the field. They found that, despite creating massive cultural, economic, and commercial impact, sports videogames are notably absent from such discourse within the field. This is because many such sports games don't have the traditional narrative or design criteria that researchers look for. This insight is extremely important for us because *FIFA International Soccer* is historically important. This essay will examine the game's absence and what it reveals about its status as a classic. This essay argues that *FIFA International Soccer* attains classic status not mainly through its design, but through its foundational role in transforming the commercial and cultural aspects of video games and the influential franchise it established. Given the importance of the FIFA

franchise, it is necessary to discuss the series' installments; however, this essay will focus primarily on *FIFA International Soccer* 1993.

Over the past couple of years, many of EA's FIFA games haven't featured many significant design innovations. However, that was not the case for *FIFA International Soccer*. The isometric camera angle introduced within the game was an important design innovation for its time, not only in soccer games but in the sports gaming genre as a whole. In their research, Consalvo and Dutton explore four components of games. Specifically, their "Interface Study" component examines the information and choices available to the player. The isometric camera perspective allowed players to instantly scan the pitch around the ball and know where their players were at all times. It changed the amount of information players had access to and how they could use that to their advantage within the game. It also mirrored the televised soccer people watched weekly, adding to the game's authenticity. However, this design implementation wasn't perfect; it introduced problems that the game couldn't solve. Since the game focused on the ball and the players around it, crossing was very unreliable, as you couldn't see where the players on the wings were. Consalvo and Dutton classify this as a game withholding information from the player. This took away from one of the core aspects of not only gaming but soccer tactics at the time. Players on the wings became effectively useless, unlike in real life, where some of the best players played there. The camera became the game's unique selling point, but also a constraint. But at the time, it was a genuine design advantage. A testament to this fact is how this design was featured and immediately copied by competitors, a point that connects to mimicry, which we will discuss later in this essay. Due to limitations in playing on the wings of the field, the game rewarded short passes and shots from outside the box. This direct style of play allowed for shots to feel satisfying even if they weren't perfect. EA went so far as to reward shooting, so casual players could have fun too. This fact may have taken away from the game's realistic simulation logic, but it was a commercially smart decision to appeal to a wider audience. The game also made up for this by implementing real soccer tactics. It offered real tactical depth through five

formations, six strategy types, and a slider system to control the width and depth of your team relative to the field. This type of technical depth was remarkable for 1993. These design decisions served as starting points, and at times during gameplay, the game could not support advanced tactical changes, leaving characters in the wrong spots. However, it is important to understand this gap rather than simply treat it as a design flaw. Jesper Juul explains this as a level of abstraction present in games. Abstraction is a principle in software development that addresses complexity by hiding unnecessary details from users. Juul writes, “The level of abstraction concerns the border between the content that is purely fictional and the content that is presented in the fiction as well as implemented in the rules of a game.” Juul argues that all games do this by implementing the game world only to a certain extent, writing, “the gap is part of your toolset.” Juul emphasizes that game abstractions are necessary to make it more believable and complete for the player. This directly applies to *FIFA International Soccer’s* realism. The producers could have attempted to reduce abstraction by adding more character controls and tactics, but doing so may have added unnecessary complexity for players. Instead, by keeping a simple three-button layout, CPU-assisted goalkeepers, and simpler tactics, EA produced a game that felt like a realistic simulation yet still assisted the player just enough. Juul’s frameworks allow us to understand these design decisions. Our course’s design criteria looks for mechanics “that endure in public memory.” For *FIFA International Soccer*, you would think that means the controls and mechanics. But it’s the isometric camera angle, the broadcast style, the goalkeeper bug, and the inconsistencies stemming from the short development timeframe that people still remember. Its design serves as a foundational starting point for the franchise’s following success.

Before *FIFA International Soccer’s* release, EA had to gauge how many copies of the game they wanted to produce and could sell. People within EA believed that soccer was too complicated for the American market and predicted that only 300,000 copies would be sold across Europe (Parkin). But EA saw an opportunity to launch the game just before Christmas, and within four weeks of launch, the United Kingdom alone sold more than

500,000 copies. It went on to become the best-selling game of the year, despite a measly initial investment; that game had proven to EA its economic and commercial potential. This proof of success is discussed in “The winner takes all: Standardization and console games,” by Nieborg. He argues that success in the gaming industry has become formulaic rather than organic. Nieborg writes, “The theory of network effects poses that the value or utility of a good or service. . . is causally related to the number of goods or services sold. . . success breeds success.” (2) One commercial outbreak, like *FIFA International Soccer*, can trigger consistent subsequent production of games in the franchise and the publisher invests even more in the brand. Nieborg directly makes this comparison to the FIFA franchise, writing “This approach to blockbuster publishing is labeled ‘fewer, bigger, better’, meaning that a smaller slate of franchises—The Sims, EA Sports Active, Dragon Age, and FIFA—become bigger propositions, requiring higher investments, and hopefully better results.” (3) The bigger propositions and higher investments can be seen later in the franchise with FIFA 16, which had a development budget of \$350 million (Huang). This rapid compounding effect is a clear example of exactly what Nieborg argues. The industry starts sticking to what works and only trying to make it bigger and better, rather than working on new and innovative games. Each iteration sought to reinvest previous returns into the next game. One of EA’s biggest investments in FIFA was securing licenses for real teams and players. The FIFA license was more than just an asset. It was something that turned the game into an experience akin to real life. Simon writes “. . . game making blurs the lines between work and play, production and consumption, voluntary activity and precarious exploitation, in a way that typifies the boundless exercise of biopower.” EA started running the FIFA franchise as a machine of capitalism, and the license was a major contribution to the infrastructure they were building. Simon further explains this as “cognitive capitalism”. Where the value of a franchise and a game isn’t just within the code that runs it, but within the intellectual property and marketing surrounding it. The license grew from essentially costing nothing in 1993 to a reported \$150 million annual fee in the 2020s (Sutcliffe). The economic criteria we

discussed in class concern re-releases across multiple platforms over successive generations. *FIFA International Soccer* is unique because it has not been re-released or remastered for modern devices. Instead, its economic aspect runs through the franchise that it created. Our economic criteria for classic games are satisfied not only by the original but also by the franchise it founded.

We often say that imitation is the best form of flattery. This is especially true in video games, where this has become a principle of sorts. Success within the industry is so hard that any time a game can mimic another successful one, it almost becomes its duty to do so. This is why we have mimicry as one of the criteria for classic games in this course, and why it is one of *FIFA International Soccer*'s strongest claims to classic status. *FIFA International Soccer* is unique because it created two types of mimicry: design and commercial. Design mimicry refers to the specific design innovations that competitors copied. Commercial mimicry, on the other hand, is the way EA's use of licensing began to be copied. We will be looking at both as we discuss *FIFA International Soccer* and the mimicry criteria. Arsenault examines the processes of mimicry and innovation in "Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation". Arsenault cites Gérard Genette, arguing ". . . the fact of generic memory does not incite only imitation. . . but also differentiation. . . and thus minimal evolution"(Genette qtd. in Arsenault). This means that developers don't just copy and paste; they remember what worked and add what was missing. Each new entry within a genre looks to solve a problem that the entry before couldn't. In the case of *FIFA International Soccer*, that meant using the pace of games like Sensible Soccer while adding a new broadcast style. According to Arsenault, this method of innovation ensures that games are always evolving and trying to turn a new corner. The Isometric camera perspective was a major evolution for *FIFA International Soccer* compared to its predecessors and rivals. This one design point became the most copied innovation in the sports gaming genre. It also included the scoreboards, the dynamic crowd, and the replay camera system, all of which became the standard for sports simulation games. Examples within EA itself include NBA Live 95. Following *FIFA*

International Soccer, EA used the same style and applied it to basketball. It mirrored the TV broadcast style and the crowd dynamics to show how the formula could be applied across sports simulation games. Outside of EA, Konami is an example of a rival that saw FIFA's success and mimicked it within *International Superstar Soccer*. They also adopted the isometric camera and the replay system, but focused on making them even more cinematic by adding expressive player animations and more camera angles. These are all clear examples of design mimicry. We must also talk about examples of commercial mimicry. Following FIFA 96's pursuit of player licensing, Konami's *International Superstar Soccer* looked to do the same. The industry realized that commercial advantage was in having real players and teams, and without them, a game could be considered inferior or a knockoff. Arsenault also discusses the concept of "playing King-of-the-Genre." This is the competitive desire to be more innovative than your competitors. In the sports simulation, specifically soccer, EA achieved this domination through official licensing. Since licensing could be offered to only one company or game maker at a time, this forced the rest of the companies within the genre into structural mimicry, as they could not commercially replicate the business model that EA and FIFA had agreed to with licensing. EA and their titles were given the "crown" of the genre because they had something unique that no other game did. Arsenault closes by pointing out that genre is "codified usage of particular mechanics. . . to express a range of intended play-experiences." This means that eventually mimicry stops seeming like unique features being copied back and forth. The original innovations become inseparable from the game and the genre as a whole. We must consider this shift from innovation to convention in how we evaluate *FIFA International Soccer*, specifically its cultural impact.

While the game had a clear cultural impact, I would argue it comes more from corporate strategy and brand power than from the game itself and its design. To understand this properly, we need to set the stage for when *FIFA International Soccer* was released and the cultural moment in which it was released. EA intentionally set the game for release just months before the 1994 FIFA World Cup. Moreover, this was the first World Cup ever

held in the United States, a country EA deemed a primary market for soccer and sports video games. EA wanted to cater to the North American brand so much so that they even considered launching the game as “Team USA Soccer” within the North American market (“FIFA International Soccer Facts”). However, EA stuck with International Soccer and, by aligning itself with FIFA’s brand, it brought global recognition to the game. In “Cheesers, Pullers, and Glitchers: The Rhetoric of Sportsmanship and the Discourse of Online Sports Gamers,” Moeller, Esplin, and Conway argue that a sports game relies on its resemblance to what is seen on TV. In their article, they cite Scott and Bruegel, who wrote “Sports games. . . claim at once to authentically represent both ‘sport’ and the commodification of sport, or rather competition and how that competition is packaged in and by the media.” (Scott and Bruegel qtd. in Moeller et al.) This points to how the game’s value, especially for consumers, doesn’t always lie in perfect physics or game mechanics, but in reproducing the atmosphere the audience is familiar with. For sports games, this means mimicking the television broadcast as closely as possible. For FIFA, the cultural aspect is evident in how families gather around the television to watch games weekly, and EA’s goal was to have them do the same when playing the video game. EA was trying to sell the feeling of watching soccer as a commodity. EA didn’t have to develop a culture from scratch. The soccer culture was already present and deeply ingrained among consumers. All they had to do was make a product that could effectively imitate the experience and leverage the cultural aspects already present, and EA did just that. In comparison, games we’ve discussed in the course, like Pokémon, had to create TV shows, trading cards, and merchandise to support the game’s culture. *FIFA International Soccer* is unique because it didn’t have to spend resources to do that. What they did need was a unique brand identifier. Part of this was the “EA Sports: It’s in the game” audio branding, which was rolled out across many FIFA and Madden games. It served as a culturally necessary identifier that connected the consumer’s experiences to EA and soccer. It became so successful that it has persisted for over thirty years. Moreover, in “ ‘It’s in the game’ and above the game: An analysis of the players of sports video games,” Conway

directly looks at how FIFA has managed to recreate the experience of watching soccer on TV. Conway writes “. . . the experience of watching sport on television is remediated so that the videogame may surreptitiously blend into the wider culture of football.” The media experience of watching soccer itself is being replicated. Conway argues that the game disguises itself as a software product when in reality it is more of a cultural product. One that tries to integrate into the target consumers’ existing habits. A question that Conway presents, which I want to highlight, is: “What position does the videogame incarnation occupy within the user’s comprehension of the culture and community?” We can use this question to understand how *FIFA International Soccer* helps the player understand soccer culture as a whole. By playing the game, the user stops being a bystander and becomes an active participant not only in the game but also in soccer culture as a whole. It becomes a tool not only for people to interact with the sport but also to understand it. This is evident in the game’s realistic tactics and mechanics, many of which a player may encounter for the first time. It becomes almost an educational tool that teaches about culture and soccer as much as it is a tool for simply gaming. All in all, the game’s cultural impact lies more in strategically leveraging existing soccer culture rather than creating something from the ground up. It commodified an already existing experience that it knew its target audience valued. This point is important for us to analyze the discourse surrounding *FIFA International Soccer* and the franchise as a whole, as well as the game’s perception at the time and now.

At the time of the game’s release, the discourse surrounding it was certainly strong, but the ongoing discourse and player engagement, especially after EA established a franchise, are better points of context and discussion for us within this course. *FIFA International Soccer* remains as the historical origin point and must be discussed in its own terms as well as in relation to the rest of the franchise. One aspect of acclaim that we can examine for *FIFA International Soccer* is its reception in magazine reviews. One popular magazine at the time was Edge Magazine. In the December 1993 issue of Edge Magazine, they reviewed *FIFA International Soccer*, which was scheduled for release that month. At the time, the

magazine was known for having strict reviews. It often ranked games around 4 to 6 out of 10. However, for *FIFA International Soccer*, the magazine rated it 8 out of 10, highlighting the game’s animation, tactics, and immersion. (“FIFA International Soccer” 96) These were not small publications. These were established magazines whose job was to critically and objectively review games. The fact that *FIFA International Soccer* was ranked highly shows that it achieved something genuine and made real ground within the gaming community’s discourse. An important source for discussing the discourse on FIFA, soccer, and games in general is Kirkpatrick’s “Constitutive Tensions of Gaming’s Field: UK gaming magazines and the formation of gaming culture 1981-1995.” Kirkpatrick’s work is based on a study of UK gaming magazines from the 1980s and 1990s and seeks to analyze the gaming culture they established. Specifically, Kirkpatrick argues that “gameplay” was invented as a category to help magazines evaluate and criticize games. He writes, “The analysis shows a structural break associated with the introduction of the term ‘gameplay’ around March 1985, after which the appraisal of games takes on a limited independence from technical, educational and other normative criteria. . .” According to Kirkpatrick, critics were using new criteria to judge *FIFA International Soccer*. They weren’t just looking for the technical implementation; they also looked for the game’s experience, as defined by the term “gameplay”. Looking over the Edge review itself, it’s clear they were still working through new terminology. Not only because of the growing landscape of the gaming industry and its discourse, but also because *FIFA International Soccer* was something that they hadn’t really seen before. Examples include reviewers describing *FIFA International Soccer* as more of a simulator than a console game, writing “Probably the best way to describe International Soccer is not so much a console soccer game as a Saturday afternoon big match simulator” (“FIFA International Soccer” 97). We can see the tension between describing something as a game versus a simulator, which suggests there was almost a back-and-forth over how to categorize such games. Kirkpatrick supports this point by adding “. . . what is most striking about gaming discourse is the faltering character of its autonomy, as late as the mid-90s. . . . The field’s failure to develop

a fully autonomous vocabulary for evaluating and criticizing its objects turns out to be constitutive.” Part of discussing discourse is also looking at the gaming community around *FIFA International Soccer*. Although there may be small retro communities still playing *FIFA International Soccer*, there aren’t any competitive or highly active ones. This aspect of *FIFA International Soccer* is unique, especially within our course, because many of the other classical games we’ve discussed don’t have the same level of franchise and subsequent games that EA does. But the caveat is that the original game is played less because there’s always a new iteration for players to try. Hence, players may not return to the game for the actual gameplay the same way they return to Street Fighter or Doom, but rather for the game’s nostalgia. Garda, in the article “Nostalgia in Retro Game Design,” examines two types of nostalgia, restorative and reflective. Garda describes restorative nostalgia as the recreation of something from the past, calling it “total restoration of monuments of the past” (Boym qtd. in Garda 2). The goal is to achieve accuracy and preservation by collecting original hardware and emulators, and remaking classic titles for newer platforms. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, is more the feeling of the past and is defined as “lingers in the dreams of another place and another time” (Boym qtd. in Garda 2). The goal here is to reflect on history and experiences. With *FIFA International Soccer*, the nostalgia seen is the restorative kind. Although there may be many nostalgic feelings about the game, especially given its importance in FIFA and EA’s history, they are more often expressed from a historical perspective. The game has been preserved for its historical importance rather than for the gameplay experience it afforded its players. Hence, it can be categorized as restorative nostalgia.

FIFA International Soccer achieved classic status not only through its role in launching an influential franchise but also by helping the industry understand the commercial and cultural benefits of a sports franchise. The game established an economic model that produces titles released annually. It demonstrated examples of both design and commercial mimicry and showed how the existing soccer culture can be leveraged. It also generated discourse by

creating simulation games and integrating them into the broader gaming industry. However, despite our discussion of *FIFA International Soccer* in this course, it and similar games remain absent from academic discourse in game studies overall. As Frome and Martin have analyzed, sports games generate significant revenue for the gaming industry and have been among the most successful franchises to date. Johnson argues that franchises like FIFA are overlooked in academic discourse because the industry tends to focus on a “limited number of highly visible games” and ignores others that may span multiple genres. He claims that this exclusion creates neglect and a sense of prestige within games, and that “the social values expressed in canonical video games. . . are hierarchy, exclusion, and dominance.” This is why it’s important to discuss *FIFA International Soccer* as a classic game; it helps reduce hierarchical standards and helps us learn from games across genres. Overall, I believe *FIFA International Soccer* deserves its classic status because of its significance as the foundational piece of a growing franchise. It was neither a standalone nor the final product. Still, what it started, what it identified, and what it uncovered within the gaming industry, the soccer community, and simulation games as a whole cement its classic status.

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