

PLAYING ALONG

Players train. They learn the principles of a game. They learn how to see, how to translate, how to improvise, how to pick out a pattern and how to make a new one, how to make sense of the smallest gestures, how to turn on a dime. They try to be ready for any eventuality. But when it comes down to it, they really don't know exactly what will happen, what the substance of any given game will be. They only know who will be involved and the agreed-upon goal. In this case, the goal is to spend ninety minutes playing, to have an intimate encounter, to do some kind of running around together.

FIFA (The Fédération Internationale de Football Association) was founded in 1904 in Paris. The first World Cup competition was held in Uruguay in 1930 where Uruguay defeat Argentina in the final. Over the course of the twentieth century, it was not uncommon for national football associations to join FIFA before their countries joined the United Nations--trying on the nation-state form for size without fully committing. Today FIFA has more member states than the UN and recognizes twenty-three non-sovereign entities including the United Kingdom's "home nations" (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland), Hong Kong, and Palestine. You can find soccer fields in public and private parks, prisons, and schools, on military bases, and attached to factory complexes, corporate campuses, and youth detention centers.

We learn ways of seeing from watching sports. We are entranced by the choreography of the live broadcast. We should know better. But we are so good at watching television. We are so well-trained. And this is the global media spectacle. Billions of people train their eyes on the broadcasts of these games. The World Cup trains our eyes on the field, on the players. The announcers makes a story out of the game, heroes and villains out of the players. It is the scene that sets up the behind the scenes. And it trains them on its surroundings--suitcases of cash and the histories of these handoffs, hooligan fans taunting opponents with fascist, racist, and homophobic chants, performance enhancement programs, sex trafficking. Cultural politics and political economy are always already present.

But the rhythms of the broadcasters' banter calls to us--the cuts between the thirty-three TV cameras stationed around the stadium, the strangely swooping cable cam, and the long look of the 360 cam that shows us the shape of the game accompanied by the swelling and subsiding of the crowds' roar. Soccer teaches us its time. And ours.

So we play. And we watch. Some play along in EA's FIFA Ultimate Mode, playing (making) alternate World Cups in their bedrooms and living rooms. EA released their predictions for the tournament along with their World Cup update, tapping France to win over Germany in a 4-3 shootout. They have it half-right as of now. The video game is a mostly silent but constant presence, surfacing in offhand remarks from announcers and podcasters about FIFA rankings and statistics. In FIFA, professional players play themselves and each other. Sometimes they complain that their avatars do not do them justice. Of course the premise of the game is that everyone plays the players. A man from Sri Lanka who works as an Uber driver in Los Angeles told me on a ride down the 105 to LAX that he got into playing FIFA when he was living in Oakland over a decade ago. He found a philosophy in the game. He always plays alone.

We are playing along. We are trying our hand at retraining our eyes. We want to play another way.

- Carlin Wing

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