Title
THE COMPLEXITY AND ETHICAL DILEMMA OF GAMBLING CONCEPTS IN SPORTS VIDEO GAMES

Author
Sharma, Kaeshev

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THE COMPLEXITY AND ETHICAL DILEMMA OF GAMBLING CONCEPTS IN SPORTS VIDEO GAMES

By

Kaeshev Sharma

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University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

Dr. Raj Singh

Department of Business

Dr. Begoña Echeverria, Howard H Hays, Jr. Chair

University Honors

Abstract

Video games have been synonymous with entertainment for years now, allowing companies to ignore their ethical obligations. Companies exploit consumers to boost the bottom line. While video games are approved by a rating board for in-game content, these boards often overlook the harmful tendencies that these games push, specifically those focused on gambling. Companies use unethical strategies to manipulate their in-game content and disguise gambling principles in order to maximize their profits. This allows them to inflate profits and push predatory practices under the guise of "engaging game content".

I will be reviewing existing research that includes financial earnings, strategy reports, and consumer responses, centered around two major sports video game companies, Electronic Arts (EA) and Take-Two Interactive (2K). I will also be using core Business Ethics and Principles readings to properly determine how and where unethical business strategies are being applied.

My project will be focused on analyzing these companies' financial reports to understand how gambling concepts affect company earnings and if they stem from unethical business practices. I will use consumer behavior reports to further understand the effect these gambling practices are having on consumers.

I plan to go in-depth in order to prove the unethical nature of these sports video game companies, and to attract attention to such malpractice that is being swept under the rug, quietly harming millions of video game enthusiasts who are promised safe and ethical content.

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I would like to thank my father, mother, and sister for their unwavering support through this process. Their sacrifices and teachings have helped shape me into a man I can look in the mirror and feel proud of.

I would like to finally thank you, the reader, for giving me your valuable time and reading my paper. I hope you leave this paper with an understanding of how truly severe this epidemic is, how many people it affects, and how you can help fight it. I also hope to inspire you to take action wherever you see predatory and unethical business practices, as we are the voice of change. You are your own hero, and your voice is more powerful than you know.

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Introduction

Sports video games have been a pillar of the entertainment industry, providing what is considered to be clean and age-appropriate entertainment for many players. A booming industry, however, is susceptible to unethical and predatory behavior from companies, such as exploiting consumers to push the bottom line, by introducing harmful gambling principles in these sports video games. Harmful tendencies are often ignored in favor of boosting company profit.

Sports video gaming companies have relentlessly pushed gambling concepts in video games, and there is no stopping the unethical business strategies that these companies promote. With such a high volume of gamers playing these games, most are naive to the nuance of these gambling concepts implemented into the game, as the two major sports video game companies, Take-Two (2K) and Electronic Arts (EA), hide their corporate strategies well.

The significance of this gambling and ethics problem stems from the need to reform the sports video game industry, to eliminate such unethical practices. There is a need for laws and regulations on these unethical business strategies, as consumers are being harmed. As most users are teens and young adults, there is a need for parents to be alerted to the harm that gambling concepts pose if they continue to be prominent in sports video games. These companies release targeted attacks and try to lure in players who have gambling disorders to gain profit on packs (Lemmens, 2022). These companies also refrain from stating the true odds on packs, which is an even more intense integration of gambling tactics. In a casino, you can at least accurately calculate your chances of winning a game. However, in these video games, packs are labeled with less than one percent chance of getting the flagship advertised player. That means that the true chance of getting a player could be as low as one-millionth of a percent, as the odds are only disclosed to be less than one-hundredth. It is the same logistical concept as betting, as Take-Two and EA are bringing gambling tactics into the minds of vulnerable users (Usher, 2020). Urgent action is needed to remedy this gambling epidemic in sports video games, with the primary significance being to highlight the extent of the ramifications and to bring attention to the problem.

Literature and research in the field of gambling in sports video games revolve around the harmful ramifications and false advertising that these sports video game companies benefit from. With this existing research, I can see the consumer-based effects of gambling and predatory practices, and I can also see the need to approach these problems from a business perspective. The research highlights the facade of sales used by 2K and EA, discounting the virtual currency needed to purchase packs. This facade creates an impression in a user's mind that they should purchase now, as the user hopes to purchase enough currency to land their favorite player. Manipulative tactics such as the promotion of lightning sales target children and younger users, who do not particularly understand the concept of buying virtual currency (Advocates, 2022). Another key point highlighted by existing research focuses on the gambling concept of the "chase" created by purchasing packs. By consistently releasing new and updated players, companies make the user feel like they never have enough and have to continue to spend to keep up in terms of the game. Companies highlight specific users obtaining flagship cards to manipulate everyday users to purchase packs. However, these specific users are usually EA and 2K sponsored creators, who are given the cards by the company. When average users cannot obtain a card, they feel frustrated and end up with a mentality that their next pack purchase will be the last, but they are never satisfied (Usher, 2020). This vicious cycle furthers 2K and EA's financial initiatives, as these companies create a steady stream of weekly profit from the gambling victims they have produced, with the game product.

Existing research also highlights the false promises these companies make to gamers, with no repercussions when they backtrack. Through my experience of playing multiple 2K-made games, I have seen these false promises up close. For example, in the popular basketball game NBA 2K24, created by 2K, users were promised a 100 Overall Kobe Bryant when they collected all in-game player cards. It was estimated that it would cost over $30,000 to obtain this Kobe card, but many users spent these funds, primarily because Kobe Bryant is a fan-favorite player. However, a day before the last player needed to obtain Kobe Bryant was released, the reward changed to a 100 Overall Player Pack. This pack contains previously released 100 Overall players, but none of them were Kobe. This outraged fans, who acknowledged that they did not spend large amounts of money on any player, but specifically on Kobe. 2K released a statement surrounding the reward change but failed to give any reason (Tassi, 2024). This act enraged the community and truly marked the peak of predatory behavior, as 2K failed to give any reason for this drastic change and did not bother to offer any compensation to players who spent their money for a promised prize, which was changed a day before its scheduled release. 2K misled and manipulated its gaming consumer base to profit further from gambling strategies, taking away consumer trust.

While existing research focuses primarily on the effects on consumers from gambling practices, there is little research to highlight and target the companies behind the game. The unethical business strategies employed by 2K and EA need to be brought to attention and analyzed to prevent further harm not only to the consumer but to the gaming industry as well. In my proposed approach, I will analyze the unethical business practices that 2K and EA are utilizing, the science behind those practices, and the reasons behind these companies' resorting to these strategies. I will also be touching on the long-term effects these practices can have on not only the consumer but the video game industry as a whole. Finally, I will be highlighting what I believe to be the necessary actions needed to rectify this epidemic and to reform the sports video game industry.

My proposed approach will begin with utilizing my existing research to create a background for my project and inform the reader about the basics of the video game industry as a whole. From there, I will introduce the problem, with a primary focus on the unethical business strategies of 2K and EA. I will also be connecting real-world examples to my problem to properly convey the gravity of the problem and to help the readers visualize the effects of the problem. I will then begin an analysis of both corporations, explaining how they operate and implement their business tactics. I will tie in my analysis on how the strategies are morally and ethically wrong, and provide the reasons behind the unethical actions, zeroing in on causation. My resources on business ethics and corporate financial analysis will play a major role here. I will conclude with my proposed solutions and reforms needed, and give a call to action, encouraging my readers to become integrated with solutions in any way they can, and once again driving home the severity of my problem. As I am utilizing existing research and sources, I do not require any special requirements or approvals to complete this project.

This will help my reader stay engaged and have a consistent line of thinking, allowing them to understand my argument. From there, I will finish with my solutions and call to action. This process will allow the reader to tie my analysis of the problem into my proposed solutions, and will also make them feel involved in my suggested actions for them to actively participate in solutions.

To conclude, my aim for my capstone research project is to analyze the unethical business practices that lead to sports video game companies deciding to implement gambling strategies in their games. I will be focusing on using a business ethics point of view to pinpoint the corporations' malpractices that lead to it being unethical. I aim to draw attention to this issue and to get proper laws and regulations in place to prevent corporations from tarnishing the video game industry and harming consumers as well. I am confident that my project will help efficiently and effectively address my issue and will help inspire positive change in the sports video game industry.

Methodology

In my capstone project, I focused on utilizing existing data and reports in order to properly analyze and emphasize the financial aspects of these corporations that contribute to possible unethical decision-making. Take-Two Interactive (2K) and Electronic Arts (EA) are mandated to release their financial reports for the year, like any other public company. This data is for shareholders to properly understand and gauge how the company they invested in is doing. This data was key to me, as I was able to discern specific periods of economic downturn that coincided with the rise in pushing gambling concepts in their sports video games.

I also focused on key articles that gave data and background information on the rise of gambling in sports video games. The situation regarding Take-Two and Electronic Arts gained traction with many articles giving input on the history and background of these card-based video game modes. I was able to utilize perspective and history to understand the emotions companies targeted, and how the overall act of introducing gambling concepts to the video game industry was done under the guise of "new concepts". I specifically looked for articles surrounding the business aspects of the video game companies, as that helped me better understand and articulate the raw financial data. My focus was on garnering data and information that would allow me to fully understand the weight of the issue and allow me to decipher and articulate it in a definitive way.

Background in Sports Video Games

Sports video games have always been a popular source of entertainment for many video game enjoyers, such as the NBA 2K series, FIFA series, and Madden. The rise and appearance of prominent gambling concepts in these video games appeared predominantly in the 2022 period, with a significant rise coming in 2024, requiring a direct focus on this time period. As of 2024, there are over 190.6 million video game players all over the world (Entertainment, 2024). Video gaming is a premier source of entertainment that has revolutionized the entertainment industry, with sports video games being emphasized as popular and safe methods of entertainment for all age groups.

These sports video games have two dominant market leaders, which are Take-Two Interactive (2K) and Electronic Arts (EA). Take-Two Interactive is the creator of the NBA 2K series, which is the premier basketball game on the market. They have exclusive rights with the NBA, allowing them rights to player names and likenesses. Similarly, EA has the rights to soccer teams, and Madden, which has the NFL, respectively. They can replicate players, logos, and teams, as the only video game companies with those exclusive rights. Companies like 2K and EA charge $60 for the standard video game, which becomes a one-time influx of revenue. However, they have long strived for ways to generate a continuous income stream past the initial purchase, which led to the creation of the ultimate team mode.

The ultimate team mode is a primary gaming feature in all major sports video games, such as NBA 2K, FIFA, and Madden. The ultimate team mode focuses on player cards and packs. Each player has a clean slate where they can create a fantasy lineup of their favorite sports stars from both past and present. For example, an NBA 2K player and basketball enthusiast could have a team with LeBron James and Michael Jordan, as a fantasy team. The typical life span of a sports video game is from September release to an August conclusion, where game content stops being added, and preparation for a new game begins. In this format, player cards are released throughout the game cycle. For example, a Lebron card could first come out at the start of the release of the game, at an 85 rating. Then, maybe closer to Christmas, he gets a 93 overall card to attract new players who got the game and to offer a better version. Following that model, a few months later, Lebron might get a 97, then a 99, following a constant, upgrade-based model. However, in an attempt to gain even more consumer purchases, they introduced special versions, even past 99. This could be 100 Overall, Invincible, and GOAT players. These cards come out at the end of the gaming cycle, and typically have the best moves and attributes of any card all year, making the need for players to have them feel almost undeniable. This also causes these companies to purposefully decline the rating of cards that are 99 overalls over even 100 overall, as they know they have to have room for GOAT players to be even more overpowering, to entice consumers. This purposeful extension of player cards is a focused attempt to continue to entice users to spend beyond a typical rating system.

The big problem, however, is not even the practices of these companies in creating an influx of player cards beyond a typical system, but the gambling concepts that appear in the way of obtaining these cards. A player card in these games is obtained through two different ways: from a pack or from the auction house. These are the only two methods to obtain a player card throughout the whole video game cycle. The gambling concepts are heavily prevalent in the pack model, and thus create an adverse effect on the auction house, leaving players who spent money with no player card or resources to obtain the player from the auction house.

The pack model in sports video games is a very simple model that can be altered and modified in order to promote gambling concepts. It starts with a player typically purchasing virtual currency, which costs real money. A typical purchase of the most popular VC deal is 450,000 VC for $100. A typical box offer in these games offers 20 packs in a package purchase, for 225,000 VC, or around $50. The biggest drawback is that through carefully calculated packs and wordings, there is no guarantee that any amount of money will get you the specific player, which is where the gambling concepts are most prevalent (Marsh, 2024). Players are, in essence, chasing a virtual card they have no guarantee of getting, with real currency.

The predatory practices are employed by first advertising big banners as soon as a player enters a game, showing big offers for the new premier players, for example, let's say Cristiano Ronaldo in FIFA Ultimate Team. A young player will see the graphic and ultimately think that purchasing the pack will result in them obtaining a Cristiano Ronaldo card. The player then buys a pack, does not get anything, and automatically feels the adrenaline and rush, often referred to as a “gambler’s high”. The thought arises that perhaps the next pack will have the Ronaldo card, and if that does not work, maybe the next one. It is a deep dive into the exact principles that gambling is built upon, as the player is constantly chasing a goal that is not guaranteed, nor clear, with the mindset that the next pack purchase can have the player card of their dreams (Advocates, 2022). There is no ethicality to how young players are being targeted with these predatory and unethical practices, for these corporations can make a profit. However, it is not just young players who are vulnerable, as these games are played by players of all ages. Gambling addictions are a real illness that does not see age. An older player can also easily fall into this cycle, especially as they have more control of finances compared to a younger player.

There is less of a chance they are held accountable with their money, and in turn, they can also become prey of these predatory gambling practices.

The predatory practices don't stop there, as the company has successfully countered the few calls to action against them. To respond to calls to be transparent about the odds of pulling a certain flagship player from packs. 2K has very expertly inserted pack odds that address the issues, but maintain the vagueness to entice the gambling concepts. They list the chance of pulling the flagship card as being less than 0.1 percent, in adherence to the calls for transparency. However, this indicates again that there is no guarantee, as less than 0.1 percent could be a millionth or trillionth of a percent, and still qualify as being the advertised less than 0.1 percent. This is a completely unethical way of maneuvering through calls for social responsibility, and prioritizing promoting profit and harmful practices, rather than showing care for the consumer.

Companies like Take-Two and Electronic Arts bolster these gambling practices throughout the game cycle, as each week brings a new exclusive drop and new players to obtain. Typically, content schedules have packs dropped twice a week, with new powered-up player cards designed to bring the player into a cycle and routine of gambling and pack openings (Lemmens, 2022). The continued reinforcement and enticement are meant to hook players into buying packs until it becomes second nature and a routine every week. Players can often coax themselves with irrational justifications to try to make sense of their developed spending habits. However, the constant chase every week, with no end goal, ultimately makes them enslaved to the exhilaration they experience from purchasing packs and obtaining the top player. Furthermore, if they, by miraculous chance, do happen to obtain the flagship player, their fixation does not stop there. Instead, they feel more empowered and confident when the next week rolls around with the next flagship player, as they feel they can imitate their actions from the previous week and spend the same amount of currency, and the player will be there. They fail to recognize that it is a system built on sheer luck and chance, designed to prey on their desire to obtain the feeling they had felt once they pulled the player they wanted.

To further deepen the hold they have on the consumer, these corporations utilize the willingness of consumers to spend money on one of their flagship in-game products, which are season passes. These games have introduced the concept of seasons, where, following a six-week rotation throughout the game cycle, new premium seasons come out with exclusive rewards and packs. These are expertly priced at $10 for the pass, with 40 levels to gain. One can either play throughout the season and win games to get level increases on a basic level or pay $10 for special rewards, which include packs. Players can also pay $2 a level skip, totaling $80, to get all the rewards on the first day alone. Many players see this as a justifiable expense, as they think that they already spend large amounts of funds on weekly packs, so spending the money to get the packs is justified.

Players feel impatient, with the urge to open packs and chase the high, not allowing them to play games and wait for rewards, but rather just purchase all the levels. This is a continued series that resets everyone 6 months, completely alienating players who spend little to no money on the game, as they don’t have access to the premier players to compete (Drost, 2023). Lacking in the quality of players again leads to poor play against others online, again, shuffling players to spend the money to win and be the best, as every game mechanism is not focused on bettering gameplay, but rather funneling them into opening packs to feel any hope of being competitive and winning games. This ecosystem of constant new rewards and purchases attacks the need of the players to compete and win, targeting them. The key here is the need for transparency. Even if these companies made something as ridiculous as spending $10,000 and obtaining the player card, there would at least be a set amount of money to spend so the player could obtain the card of their choice. With the lack of transparency, each pack purchase is essentially a gamble that has no finite end and is just an unethical practice.

The biggest, most predatory, and unethical situation with these corporations came from 2K, in the NBA 2K24 edition of the game. In NBA 2K24's MYTEAM mode, their version of Ultimate Team, the game was marked with Kobe Bryant as the flagship player of the game that year. In MYTEAM, as is tradition, there is a reward for obtaining 4,000 cards, which is the premier version of the flagship player, which is, in this case, Kobe Bryant. With Kobe Bryant's passing in 2020, and him being one of the most loved public figures, there was a large emotional connection and response. He was meant to be first available in late April, as that is when the 4,000 card would have been released in the game. To obtain him this early, and even at all, participating in packs was necessary to obtain the premier player cards, as without them, obtaining Kobe would be impossible. Players spent tens of thousands of dollars on packs throughout the year, all with the intention of getting that prized Kobe card. A day before he was meant to be made available, he was replaced in the reward section, with an option pack of 10 lesser cards, of which 2 could be chosen. There was devastation and outrage, as there was no hint, indication, or news (Tassi, 2024). A small message was posted on the 2KMYTEAM Discord channel, just letting players know of the change, with absolutely no explanation. Players, who had spent enormous amounts of money to obtain a player card they perhaps did not even care about, continuously every week, in hopes of getting Kobe, were left with no explanation and no proof. 2K soon issued a terms of service correction that indicated that every card pulled was technically their property, and the players did not actually own the cards, effectively doubling down on their unethical behavior. It was a very unethical and truly vicious act by 2K, as players who poured their hard-earned money and love into the game, many victims of the gambling concepts, were left with no Kobe card and no explanation.

The outrage was understandable, but it also furthered the question of how 2K treats its consumers. If they could act with such injustice against their loyal, high-spending customers, how would they act in the future with the consumer who spends little to no money? In the future, what is stopping them from making the MYTEAM mode itself pay to enter with a mandatory season pass purchase, or even have it be an added extra purchasable feature? These companies, with their exclusive licensing rights, monopolize the sports video game industry and are free to exercise their unethical methods. With other action-based and story games, there is always market competition and alternatives to turn to. However, with these games, users have no other option. If they want to play with Patrick Mahomes in Madden or Stephen Curry in NBA 2K, they have to purchase the game from Take-Two and EA. The players have no other avenue, and in turn, rationalize the gambling concepts as something they have to participate in, as they want to play their favorite sports video game. Since the first appearance in 2020, in FIFA and Madden, these gambling practices have been harmful and rationalized as just ways these corporations keep the game fresh (Novy-Williams, 2020). The overall objective has been lost by these corporations, as they have focused on selling and putting profit first, instead of delivering customer value.

The epidemic of unethical gambling concepts in these sports video games is a massive problem that is slipping through the cracks. A vast majority of people play video games in the world, but this is a problem whose gravity is misunderstood. The key here is the business perspective, understanding why and how these corporations commit these unethical practices, and how it reflects on them. Consumers should be safe and protected, not preyed upon.

Unethical Gambling Concepts: A Business Perspective

To properly understand the business motivations behind the unethical behavior of Take-Two and Electronic Arts, it is necessary to understand the company's position from a financial perspective. As has been established, these corporations put revenue and profit ahead of consumer value and safety, choosing to take advantage of the average player instead of looking for meaningful updates and enhancements to the game that would naturally increase revenue, as players would feel more keen to interact with the mode.

As we look at Take-Two Interactive, it is to be noted that they were going through a poor fourth quarter fiscal year in 2024, as their GAAP Net Revenue had decreased from 1.45 billion dollars in 2023 to 1.40 billion dollars in 2024 (Take-Two, 2024). Take-Two's overall net profits were facing hits, and they were facing a volatile market, unsure of what to do and how to approach moving towards positive market growth. They had become comfortable in a system of stagnation, believing that the same, repetitive content would continue to generate profit, and believing that their monopoly over the sports licensing in their sectors would benefit them. However, they were stuck facing economic downturn, with no immediate pathways of restoration. In fact, their overall GAAP net loss was 2.90 billion dollars in the fourth quarter of 2024 (Take-Two, 2024). This financial loss and overall poor financial performance across the board had the company reeling, which in turn led to Take-Two resorting to unethical and predatory profit-generating strategies, spearheaded by the heavy emphasis on packs and gambling concepts. The primary reason Take-Two had for bringing in these unethical practices was fear of financial loss, as pressure from shareholders and a lack of innovation on their own part forced them to resort to quick and predatory practices, focused on preying and taking advantage of the consumer, instead of focusing on growing with them and delivering value.

From Electronic Arts' perspective, their focus on unethical gambling concepts was not a response to economic loss, but rather a factor they introduced that helped bolster their already growing revenue stream. They saw their net revenue hit 7.562 billion for 2024, which was up 2% year over year, with a large part of these earnings being contributed to the EA SPORTS FC soccer game and Madden (Electronic, 2024), Their emphasis on packs and predatory odds with no clarity had been introduced in years prior, but was used with a heavy emphasis in the 2024 year, as they found it to be a beneficial way to boost profit without spending and extra on resources and game improvement.

The key driving factor is also how simple and easy it is to introduce these gambling practices in terms of implementation and cost. It is virtually free for these corporations, as they just have to adjust the algorithm of the pack odds to make the premier players as rare as they would like them to be. They then just advertise as they normally do, and can even put some sales on packs to lure in players. Once in, the cycle continues, and players chase that high of obtaining a premier card, with no guarantee of whether it will happen or not, as they just pour more money into their behavioral addiction. These companies have found a way to maximize profit while incurring a very small increase in their costs, and they have put that over the safety of the consumer. Unethical decisions are very simple to make and often seem to be the best, but in reality, these corporations are harming their own consumers (Jennings, 2024). Both Take-Two and Electronic Arts are utilizing gambling practices for economic benefit, as, from a business perspective, their unethical practices are a way to find economic profit in a volatile market and incur revenue growth strategies at low costs of implementation. These companies make the conscious decision not to focus on better gameplay and work with innovation and creativity, and rather choose to resort to unethical business practices.

The corporate strategies being utilized by Take-Two and EA are centered around ways to take advantage of the business industry and their position as a monopoly. As they have the rights and exclusive licensing rights to professional sports leagues, they understand that they can creatively push profits to the brink, to see what is still considered acceptable, and what their consumers will try to rationalize to make acceptable. They often make veiled attempts at change, promising to fix problems of the game being unethical and unfair, when in reality, they are just looking for ways to boost their own grasp on the consumer market.

In NBA 2K24, there was a big scandal around coin sellers, which 2K utilized to their advantage. Small groups of players would log long hours on the game, doing every challenge and every extra game to amass large amounts of MT coins, which were in-game coins different from VC, that were accumulated by playing the game. While VC got you packs, MT points allowed you to purchase players in the auction house. These groups of players then began selling the MT points, as a more justifiable purchase, as instead of spending money on VC to open packs for the premier, one could buy the MT points from a third-party seller and ensure expenditure of funds guaranteed them a player. Players would purchase the MT points and list a cheap basic player for a large inflated price on the auction house, which the MT point sellers would buy, successfully transferring the coins. 2K, seeing a threat to profits and a violation of their Terms of Service, were quick to issue bans, wiping out a player's account and banning them from the mode. However, they went a step further and took out the auction house as a whole in NBA 2K24, completely controlling the market and making only the basic players available through MT points. They then made the premier players, "pack only," successfully developing a strategy that turned a solvable issue that could actually help the player community get rid of coin sellers, into another predatory, unethical gambling practice.

As much as the corporations are at fault, in business, the leaders of the company have to decide to act ethically and choose to see the human side that is beyond just revenue and profit. Instead, their company leaders are focused on their own profits, rather than the social responsibility they have to be ethical. Take-Two Chairman Strauss Zelnick took 43 million dollars home from his management fund as profit, citing exciting future things for Take-Two (Chowdhury, 2024). There is just a focus on maximizing the executive's take-home earnings, even if it is at the expense of the consumer. Executives, in fact, tend to push for more predatory practices if it results in an increase in their own financial well-being, as they put pressure on the company, and in turn, the development teams have no choice but to turn to unethical gambling concepts in order to rapidly increase profits.

Take-Two and EA, like any other corporations, are built on profit, on revenue, and have to answer to shareholders. However, that is not an excuse to resort to being unethical. When leaders themselves fail to make the conscious decision to be ethical, the rest of the company follows suit. When comfort is then introduced into the equation, it eliminates the need for change. In the short-term, this may seem beneficial and sustainable, but over the long run, customers will respond negatively, and the effects will be felt greatly. If there is no limit to unethical behavior by corporations, consumers will either respond by shifting to an alternative product or, if that is not an option, they will resort to boycotting the game itself. In NBA 2K and Madden, the hashtag "Pack Strike" was trending in response to the predatory practices, in order to get the player community together against buying packs. The business perspective is clear, as Take-Two and EA are putting profits over players, as they resort to unethical behaviors in order to meet revenue goals, while failing to consider the effects of their gambling concepts on the consumer.

The Impact of Gambling Concepts in Sports Video Games

The importance and discussion surrounding these unethical gambling practices are not just limited to corporate profit, but rather the effect it is having on the consumer, and how this is a quiet issue that is affecting millions. Every single person is guaranteed to know someone in their family or circle who plays these sports video games and is knowingly or unknowingly targeted by these practices. As a society, this issue is being overlooked, simply because video games are considered childish entertainment. However, the reality is that there is a multi-billion-dollar industry in play that is resorting to unethical practices to raise its bottom line. The fall-out and repercussions could be catastrophic, as if players develop gambling tendencies, they are prone to connect that ideology with other parts of their life, whether that be sports betting or even more intense and high-stakes gambling. Putting that aside, some players spend tens of thousands each year on packs in these sports video games, which is just arguably even more dangerous than betting in a casino, as there is often no one around to stop them, and there is no chance of money in return, as there is rather a virtual playing card. Gambling in a sports video game is not as societally frowned upon as gambling in a casino, simply because of the unawareness of the issue. As a society, we must protect our future against these predatory gambling behaviors, as even something like a pack-opening addiction can have severe and lasting effects.

The problem again stems from not only the predatory practices, but the blatant lack of transparency and unethical behaviors that Take-Two and EA use to disguise their in-game gambling concepts. The legal age for most states to enter and gamble in a casino is 18, with many even raising the age to 21 (Legal, 2025). It brings into question why Take-Two and EA are allowed to market their games with an E for Everyone rating. There are no laws providing pushback, and this gambling epidemic is being swept under the rug. Games like NBA 2K and Madden are marketed as clean entertainment, surrounding sports, and fostering safe enjoyment. Most parents who buy this game are uninformed, simply accepting the E rating on the game as a signal that it is safe, completely unaware of the predatory practices that lie within the game's most popular mode. People need to be more aware of the gambling practices in these games, but until it is legally mandated, companies will continue to be unethical and take advantage of the lack of knowledge around the situation. It extends further beyond teens and parents, as even adults who play the game can be subject to the same obliviousness regarding the gambling ideologies within the game, as they are simply not highlighted. Any player, of any age, is completely blind to their favorite basketball or soccer video game, targeting them and luring them into a gambling cycle.

Gambling concepts should be treated uniformly, across all sectors, regardless of whether they are in a casino or a virtual video game. It is unjust to turn a blind eye to these corporate actions, simply because the problem has not affected many yet and is not yet mainstream. There is no purpose in waiting for the problem to become too severe and get to a point of no return. State and federal governments should act now to protect players from these predatory notices. The change does not have to be drastic and severe to solve the problem, as that will likely lead to an elongated process; the solution is simple. Laws should be put into place that force transparency, and for companies like Take-Two and EA to list the gambling contents of their packs, in order to let the consumer make an informed decision to purchase the game or not. They must not be allowed to sell unethical practices under the guise of an E for everyone rating, as they must be upfront and label the games as 18+, in order to ensure in following gambling laws, because again, at its core, it is a gambling simulator disguised as a player card pack. It is up to consumers to take matters into their own hands to force change, as corporations will act unethically to maximize profit, so it is up to society to stand against these practices and hold them accountable.

The common rebuttal against this idea of forcing these corporations to be transparent using government-mandated laws is the idea that, through corporate lobbying, these laws will never be approved. The notion that banning companies from introducing unethical concepts to consumers is too challenging is often one that stops innovation and protection from forming. However, the US government would not be a pioneer in this field if they can make these protection laws, as it would be aligning with the European Union (EU), which has already introduced laws to combat these predatory practices in video games. The EU has recently introduced laws protecting the player from harmful and predatory practices, requiring full transparency and accountability around virtual currencies and the way advertisements are made in games (Commission, 2025). The EU has effectively and successfully blocked video game corporations like Take-Two and EA from enacting their predatory and unethical gambling practices while maintaining the availability of the game itself. They have ensured that the public has access to the games and can still enjoy them, while also being fully informed and protected from being taken advantage of and targeted. If the EU can pass such protective and provisional measures, the US can follow suit. The formula is there as the biggest thing is transparency, and making sure players are aware that they could be subjected to and exposed to gambling ideologies. That allows parents and players to make informed decisions, where they are not kept in the dark, and are instead fully knowledgeable about their decision to play the game. While the idea of introducing laws against corporations like Take-Two and EA may seem daunting, it is important to understand that it is possible and necessary in order to protect players. The EU has made an informed and completely correct decision, and the US and other countries' governments should follow suit to ensure that they are protecting consumers and fighting back against unethical corporate strategies.

The ultimate responsibility, as mentioned, is placed on society itself to stand up and bring awareness to this issue of dangerous, unethical behavior. Even in 2026, these predatory gambling practices continue, and it is up to consumers to stop them. It is almost guaranteed, with the sheer amount of consumers there are of sports video games, that everyone knows someone who can fall victim to these predatory practices. One can sign petitions, call local government offices, write blog posts, or just post on social media to describe concern and call for change. This gambling epidemic in sports video games is rampant and growing more dangerous with each new release, and with each new pack hitting the game’s virtual market. It is up to the consumers themselves to band together and push for change, ensuring the safety of players who just want to enjoy a simple video game surrounding their favorite sport.

My purpose is to do my part in bringing these unethical gambling practices in sports video games to the attention of the world. I want to ensure that consumers are put over profit, and that they can have a safe entertainment environment. I encourage readers to make their voices heard and combat this dangerous epidemic. Corporations like Take-Two and EA will continue to be unethical unless they are held accountable by society itself. It might seem like a trivial problem over a video game, but it has the potential to have a dangerous, lasting effect on millions of players. Forcing these companies to be transparent will ensure that consumers are informed and have the insight they need to understand what content they are being exposed to in their games. It is up to the people themselves to protect and stand up to unethical business practices, and ensure the world is a safer place for everyone to enjoy what they love.

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