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The World of Cricket

With a history dating as far back as the 12th century in medieval England, cricket is one of the oldest and more popular sports known to mankind. During its early stages (12-13th century), cricket was more of an aristocratic sport that attracted both the interest and patronage of several exclusive royal English families. By the 18th century, cricket had become a more popular sport with a formal set of rules and regulations. Over several centuries, from being a gentleman's game played between a few princely states in the British Empire, cricket has today evolved into a highly competitive contest between

nations from different parts of the world. Cricket has been reported to have a worldwide following of approximately 100 billion people. Especially in the last decade or so, the stakes have become so high that for most present day players, cricket is almost a matter of life or death. Cricketers are no longer mere sportsmen but are almost semi-gods who make millions of dollars every year through sponsorship deals, media appearances and game fees. A typical cricketer approximately makes 300,000 – 500,000 USD every year from match fees alone. Cricket has now become a multi-million dollar industry and cricketers worldwide are pampered with an endless amount of love and respect. The high stakes, widespread media involvement and the mass audience in cricket, have all ensured the inevitable convergence of this age-old sport and the computer gaming industry. However, competing in the computer gaming industry has traditionally been very difficult in almost all parts of the world. The perplexing question that a number of cricket gaming executives face these days is- how long will they survive in the complex and fiercely competitive cricket gaming industry?

EA Sports and Cricket games

In 1995, Australia based EA Sports identified the rapidly increasing mass following that cricket enjoys worldwide and decided to fuse the booming computer gaming industry with the thriving world of cricket. This synthesis led to the launch of the first in the series of EA Sports cricket simulation games: Cricket 96 (See Fig. 1.). As part of their marketing strategy, the game developers released the game in the market around the same time as the 1996 Cricket World

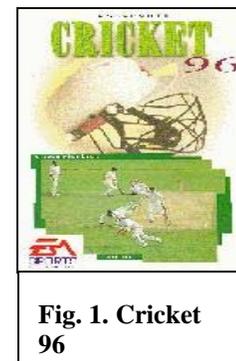


Fig. 1. Cricket 96

Cup. However, their plan of cashing in on the media frenzy and excitement surrounding

this prestigious tournament was not successful and Cricket 96 was somehow not received very well in the gaming circles. Although EA Sports did a relatively good job on the graphics of the game, however, a lot was amiss as far as the difficulty level and game features were concerned. Not only did the game not use real player names, but it also had a number of cricket teams missing from the available list. Moreover, within a few weeks of the game's release, a number of gamers figured out simple tricks and strategies that made it impossible to lose against the computer. "After a couple of days of getting used to the game, I could score 1000 runs on an average against absolutely any opponent. The game was just too easy. Almost boring," says Aditya Singh, a cricket lover and an experienced gamer from India. The developers at EA Sports were quick to learn from this negative feedback and immediately started work on improving the game.

Cricket 97 was a big improvement over the first EA Sports release. Not only were the graphics of a superior quality, but also the players, stadiums and player movements looked more realistic. Learning from the shortcomings of their earlier release, EA Sports worked hard on obtaining legal permissions from cricket boards of various countries to use real player names, logos and dress codes in Cricket 97. This made the overall gaming experience more exciting and realistic. Gamers could now not only choose from a wider variety of available real teams and players, but also had the option of creating their own teams. Moreover, EA Sports invested a lot of financial resources to sign up the legendary fast bowler Ritchie Benaud for an audio commentary stint in the game. By using the familiar voice of Benaud to give commentary in Cricket 97, EA Sports hoped to entice cricket lovers from different ages, regions and backgrounds. This new release also allowed the gamer to play different versions of cricket – test matches, fast one day or one

day – and also offered various formats of play- world cup, one on one or knockout style. The attention to detail, live commentary and realistic graphics all contributed towards making the overall gaming experience more enjoyable. Cricket 97 was a major leap from the first release of the game and was certainly a lot harder to get bored of as well.

The success of Cricket 97 can partially also be attributed to the clever marketing strategies used by EA Sports to sell the game in different parts of the globe. The gaming giant successfully established contacts, local partners and strong distribution networks in some of the most populous cricket playing nations like India, Pakistan, England, South Africa and others. For example, when EA Sports England refused to buy the UK distribution rights for Cricket 96, EA Sports Australia instead auctioned the rights off to another local company named Laserbeam. This clever business adaptation ensured that they did not lose out on the potentially large British market. Moreover, EA Sports usually entered a new market with a big buzz in the local media and more importantly in the local gaming circles. For Example, EA Sports launched into the Indian market with a glitzy company launch at Mumbai, attended by India's leading cricket players like *Sachin Tendulkar*, *Saurav Ganguly* and several others. This star-studded event not only caught the attention of the media, but also ensured that thousands of cricket lovers from across the country rushed to buy a copy of the EA Sports' cricket game. Another interesting business strategy adopted by EA Sports was that of global quality at a local price. In each country, the developers priced their cricket games at a different figure depending upon the local economic conditions. Such a policy enabled EA Sports to sell a large number of copies of cricket games even in economically backward yet cricket-loving countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and others. The greater number of copies that they sold (because

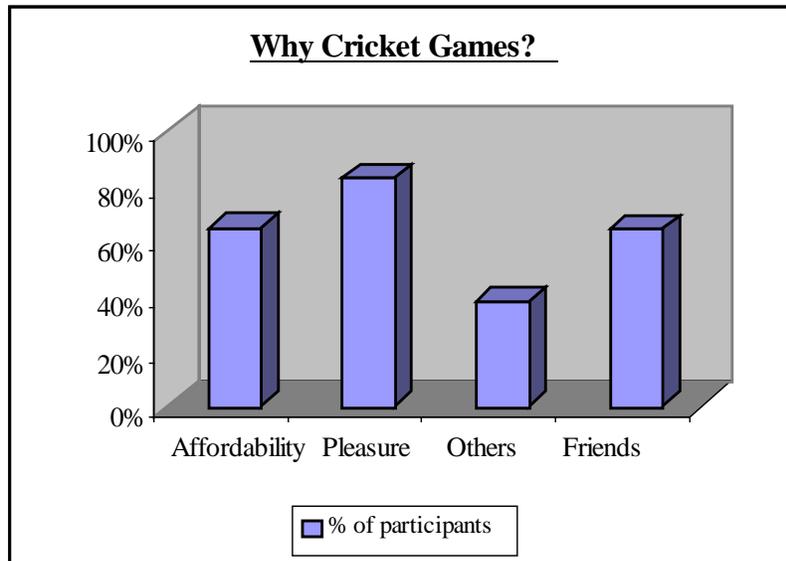
of the price cut) in these countries compensated the money that they lost by reducing the prices. Moreover, by pricing their games at a higher figure in economically well off countries like England and Australia, EA Sports managed to further maximize their profits.

The next major upheaval by EA Sports came in the form of Cricket 2002 and later Cricket 2004, which were both designed by the prestigious HB Studios. These new releases were a big step forward and had a number of exciting features that fascinated even veteran gamers. For Example, each player in the game had a virtual life and career, which allowed him to improve with experience. Gamers were given more control over the various gaming features like- weather, stadium, player fatigue, ground conditions, crowd control and others. Infinite replays, different camera angles and a wide choice of playing modes all added to the overall gaming experience. Although the reactions in the gaming circles has been relatively good till now, however skeptics argue that it is still just a bit early for EA Sports to heave a sigh of relief.

Cricket Game Revolution: Myth or Reality?

India with approximately 600 million cricket-crazed people is probably one of the largest potential markets for EA Sports' cricket simulation games. In an attempt to obtain some real-life figures from India, I researched and analyzed the gaming habits of approximately 100 randomly selected individuals in the demographics: Indian residents aged 12 to 20 years. Research was conducted through email by sending questionnaires to people who agreed to participate in the research. The responses of the participants remained unedited and spurious responses -like incomplete or blank questionnaires- were filtered out in an attempt to obtain a more accurate picture. Based on the responses of the

participants and the data collected, several interesting inferences regarding the overall Indian gaming industry were made. The survey revealed that most Indian teenagers are fairly familiar with and have played at least one release of EA Sports' series of cricket games. Affordability, vicarious pleasure and competition with friends were identified as the three most common reasons for playing cricket games amongst teenagers.



A typical middle class Indian teenager on an average receives a monthly allowance of approximately INR1000-INR1500 (\$20-\$30). Such healthy monthly allowances supplemented by abundantly available part-time jobs for teenagers are representative of the enormous spending power that Indian teenagers today possess. This further encourages gaming companies like EA Sports to tweak their games and marketing strategies to specifically suit the preferences of teenagers in potential markets like India. Such encouraging figures and trends speak volumes of the optimistic future of the Indian gaming industry.

Not just a Bed of Roses

In spite of several positive signs and the relatively good feedback received from gamers, the future of EA Sports' cricket games remains plagued with a number of *ifs* and *buts*. The company faces a number of challenges that must be overcome to ensure a continued growth in profits. An overestimated market size, increased competition, technical limitations, widespread piracy and a few other critical factors threaten to prevent EA Sports from proliferating the global gaming markets (with cricket games) at a pace as rapid as they would like.

Overestimated and Overcrowded Markets

Executives at EA Sports seem to have now realized that the size of the potential global cricket gaming market might have been overestimated. The truth remains that the market for cricket games is indeed limited and confined to only specific geographic nations. Only approximately 25 nations in the world have some form of a working domestic cricket system, while a mere 10 nations actually have recognized national teams. Most of these cricket-playing nations are third world developing countries (like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Kenya and others), which are relatively still economically and technologically backward. The relatively low computer penetration and poor internet usage figures in most of these cricket playing nations means that a majority of the people still consider computer games to be a luxury enjoyed only by the rich. Despite the policy of local pricing followed by EA Sports, affordability still remains a big issue in most markets. As a result, compared to other EA Sports' games like FIFA, NBA Live, NHL and others, cricket has a lower profit margin and a much smaller market. This has meant that in the last few years, EA Sports has diverted a higher amount of resources and investment towards the development and marketing of other more profitable games (other than

cricket). This lack of adequate interest and attention from the game developer itself has resulted in a decrease in the overall quality and performance of the game. This has further led to a decrease in the total number of cricket game patrons across the globe.

Making profits in the cricket gaming industry has now become tougher than ever before. Until recently, EA Sports and a few other regional gaming companies enjoyed an absolute monopoly over the global cricket gaming industry. However, EA Sports is now in fierce competition (for profits) with numerous gaming giants like *Stumpvision*, *Audiogenic*, *Midas Interactive* and *Eureka Software* amongst others. With the emergence of several new computer cricket games in the market, novelty and innovation seem to hold the key to survival. Cricket gaming companies need to regularly adopt innovative marketing and gaming strategies to lure gamers in and to keep the competition down. Unless EA Sports regularly reinvents itself using unique strategies, it will find it increasingly difficult to remain a leader in the cricket gaming industry. Increased competition in the global scenario has also resulted in a brutal price war between the various computer gaming giants. The major problem that EA Sports faces is the threat from cheaper similar games from local competition. With the advancement of game development technologies, it has now become increasingly easy for local competition to copy and prepare a similar cricket game and make it available in the market at a much lesser price. Such cutthroat competition certainly benefits the consumer by catalyzing a price cut in popular games. However, in the last few years, an increase in competition, inflated marketing budgets (to accommodate innovative strategies) and a continuous price war has adversely affected the profits of established gaming giants like EA Sports.

Pirates & Player woes

Piracy is yet another menace that EA Sports has had to face in a few of its largest markets across the globe. In some of EA Sports largest markets like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kenya and others, pirated copies of EA Sports cricket games are openly sold in the black market. High corruption levels in the police force make it possible for the piracy peddlers to use bribes to facilitate the open practice of the flourishing piracy business. “If I am getting the same game for 2 USD instead of 30 USD, why should I pay extra?” beams Talwar Pandit, who claims to seldom bother to legally buy a computer game. A similar problem plagues the gaming industry worldwide in some form or the other. Unless EA Sports joins hands with other gaming giants and puts adequate pressure on the local governments, piracy will remain difficult to counter. This problem does not only adversely affect the short-term profits of the gaming companies, but it can also threaten their long-term survival.

EA Sports has made a vast improvement in the field of graphics and sound technologies since Cricket 96. However, a lot more needs to be done for a tangible effect to be felt in the cricket gaming circles. Most gamers still feel that Cricket 2004 is very easy to master and tends to get boring after a while. Even the artificial intelligence graphics agent, realistic stadiums and replays do not impress experienced gamers. Shoddy graphics, inaccurate commentary and unrealistic play movements seems to be the general consensus on Cricket 2004 amongst regulars in the gaming society. Unless EA Sports takes adequate measures to improve the overall features of the game, it will find it exceedingly tough to make any further inroads into the market. “The fact remains that the high level of complexity and infinite different equations involved in cricket are quite

difficult to capture and replicate in a computer game,” says one EA Sports marketing sales executive who preferred to remain anonymous.

Conclusion

With such diverse yet important forces at play, one can expect a new generation of creative strategies from EA Sports. Although EA Sports has succeeded in making its presence felt in the industry, however, still a lot of work is required for it to be able to monopolize the global cricket gaming market. Unless EA Sports is able to master the four mantras of success – innovation, gamer satisfaction, keeping competition down and fighting piracy – it faces the risk of potential losses and a possible failure in recreating one of the most historic games in the world.

Notes

¹ I want to thank those who have contributed to my research on this topic, including my professor, my classmates, fellow gamers, Mr. Aditya Singh and Mr. Talwar Pandit from India and everybody else who participated in my research work in India.

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