

Affinity Space Project

INTE 5320

Justin M. Bale
justinmbale@gmail.com

Introduction

When I was young I played a lot football games. Pickup games with the neighbors, catch with my brother. Later in high school with team mates. I loved the game. It was everything to a young version of me. I first played Tecmo bowl with my brother one Christmas morning and was delighted beyond comprehension. As much as I loved football, I loved Nintendo even more. A football Nintendo game? I was hooked. Tecmo Bowl gave way to Super Tecmo Bowl. Super Tecmo Bowl lead to NFL Blitz. Sometime around then I started playing Madden. I played it a lot. After school, weekends. I created plays and players and strategies and beat everyone I knew. It wasn't long before I couldn't find anyone else to play.

This is where the story takes a turn into the uninteresting. I stopped playing. I went away to college and got a real job. I didn't play it for almost fifteen years. There are many reasons for this. I didn't have as much time to play games. I had also grown tired of Madden as I felt I mastered all that could, and the game did not seem to change much from year to year any more. As the years went on there were also personal ethics issues with professional football that I could not ignore. In addition, the older I get, the less interested I seem in sports in general. I still follow my Vikings, I am just not all razzle dazzle about it.

And then a very odd thing happened to an adult version of me. I fell back in love with Madden. I bought myself a Playstation 4 as a reward for quitting smoking. I picked up Madden with the thought that it would be a good game to jump into here and there without a major time commitment. I was so very wrong. Madden has come a long way in fifteen years. Those small changes that I lamented from year to year actually add up over the course of a decade or more! The game is great, and I have had a lot of fun playing it. The biggest changes however may not be in gameplay or graphics, but the ability for networked games. Where before I could only be the king of my block or my neighborhood, now I can test myself against the best in the world.

I always thought I was pretty good at these games. I never knew how good. I dove back in and in a manner of months am now consistently place in the top one hundred in the Madden Ultimate Team (MUT) weekend league. I have qualified for upcoming tournaments and next year will look to enter some larger tournaments with large prizes. Madden Ultimate Team (MUT) is a mode where you are building your own fantasy team out of a universe of available players. You get to pick the players and your style of play. The combination of game play and team building make it very customizable. Every game is like a live puzzle. You figure out where your opponents are strong, what they are doing, and how to stop them.

After playing for a few months I started playing a new mode within the game. In this years edition they have included a three vs three MUT mode. One person contributes their offense, one contributes a defense, and the third player acts as the head coach. This is hands down the funnest cooperative play I have been a part of, football or otherwise. The depth and dynamics of this mode make for absolutely incredible game play. You are also wired in for sound communication with your teammates through the PS4. In a normal game of Madden the computer is running all of your wide receiver routes. You are only playing against one “user” controlled player on the other team. In 3v3 you are playing against three other users which increases the difficulty dramatically. One person generally plays quarterback, one halfback, and the third can either block or run the wide receiver routes manually. This forces a level of coordination among the players that I have rarely seen in games. On defense the other three users can choose whoever they want to play. What this results in is a crazy style of coordinated backyard football. In a normal game you can get through your reads and maybe check the ball down or hit the guy that is open. There is usually one guy open and you can get to him eventually. In 3v3 most of the time the three users on the other team will take away all of your normal routes. This ignites a perfectly orchestrated chaos style of football. Your users are running around the field in any which way they can to break free of defenders. The defenders chase you around trying to figure out where you and the quarterback are trying to get to. Communication is paramount to success. If you assume your guy is going to follow the original route, and then he cuts left right when you are about to throw it, you are going to throw an interception.

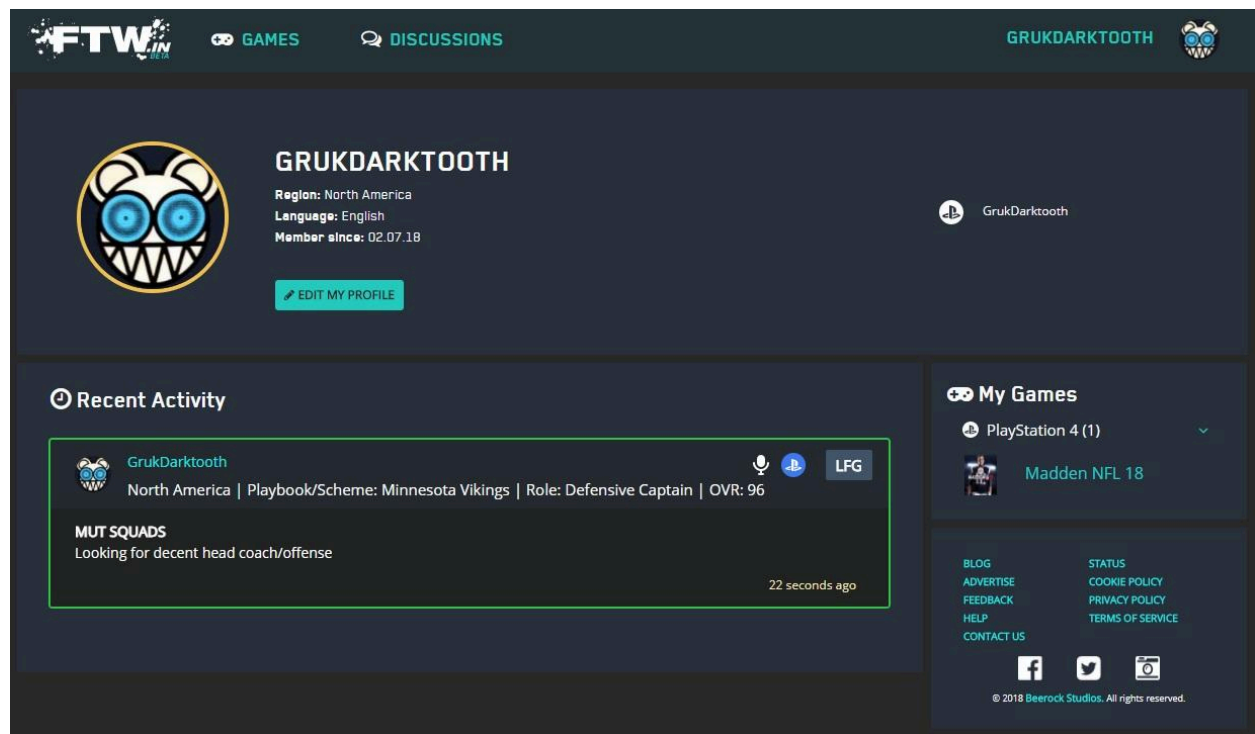
As genuinely great as the 3v3 mode can feel when you are “on”, it is really harsh if you are not. If you are playing with randomly chosen team mates the coordination and familiarity will likely not exist. This can lead to all sorts of interceptions, indecision, and ultimately bad play. While it feels really good to win in this mode, there is also an extra level of frustration if you lose. Since it is team based, you don’t want to let your team down. You also have scapegoats when you lose. If you are playing with anonymous people over the internet you can see how this can lead to angry messages and coldly silent communication. Only adding to these frustrations is the nature of the team selection mechanism within the game. Sometimes you get paired up with really bad players or people who start the game but don’t actually contribute to playing. At other times they just hog the running back the whole time or will run terrible routes with your receivers. Sometimes you get people that are blasting music you can’t stand over communication. Or their baby is screaming into the microphone as you are trying to pick a game winning play. The game tries to match based on ranking and how good your team is, but at times this completely fails. There are other human factors at play here. It is hard to find good help these days.

Overview

Enter the need for a new method of finding and recruiting team mates. Over the course of the next couple months I will document the process of joining and contributing to a Madden 3v3

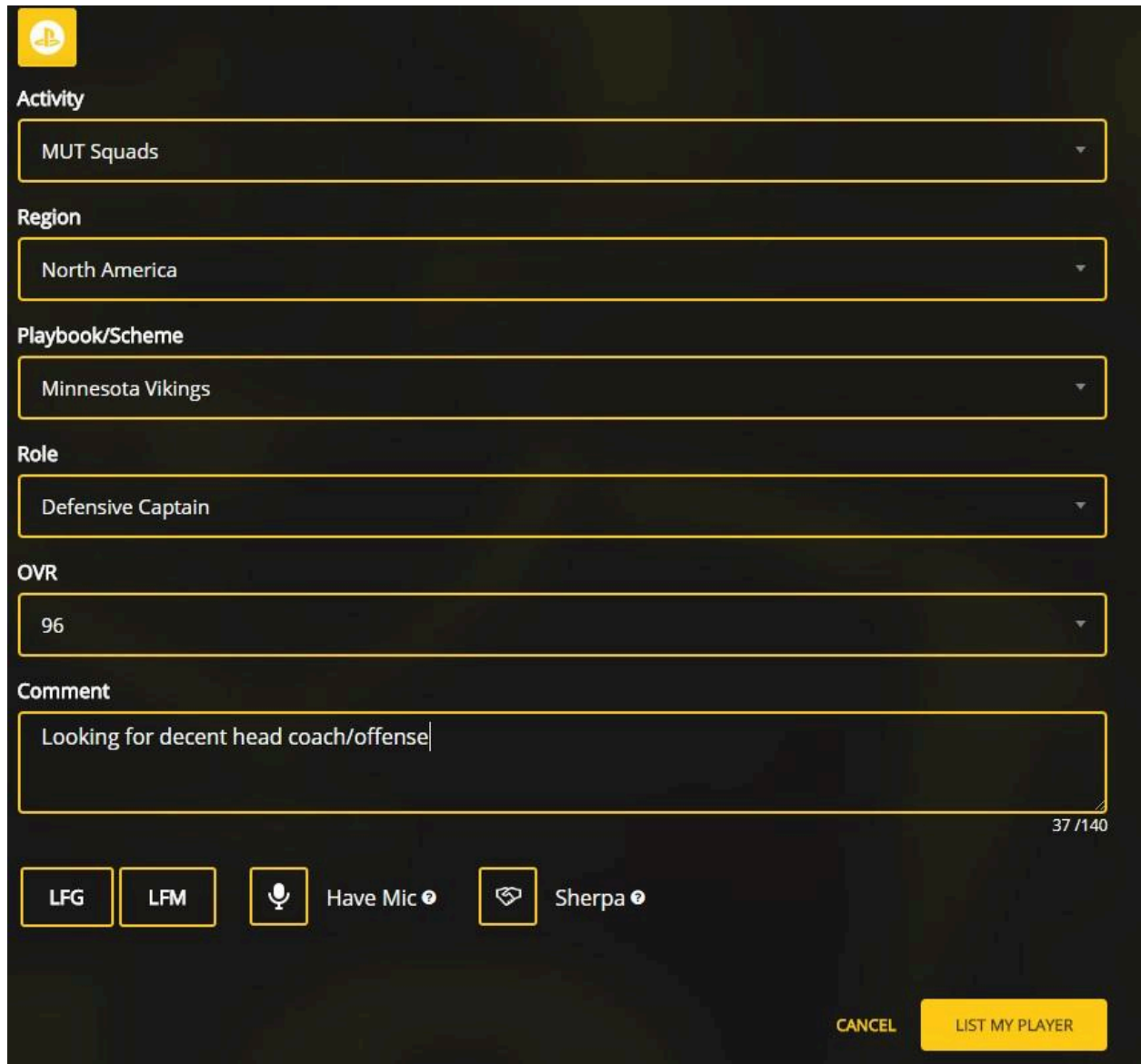
community. I will be delving into the For The Win (FTW) website. This site has a subsection dedicated to MUT squads. This includes a Looking For Game (LFG) feature, chat boards, and a tool for posting your profile. You can either look for other team mates or post your profile for others to review. The idea is to find and communicate with like minded people who are interested in the same games you are. I have become an active member of this affinity space, seeking a greater understanding of the learning opportunities afforded by such involvement. I will observe and contribute to this space, attempting to understand what exactly I am learning while playing Madden and interacting with this group.

The first act of participation was in registering with the site. I was required to provide my Playstation Network ID and an email to achieve this. In some ways this seems unnecessary, but it does provide the confidence of knowing you are dealing with real users on the other end. Once you verify your email and psn id you are given access to the basic features of the site (screenshot 1).



(Screenshot 1)

In addition to creating my profile to get going, I created an initial solo post (screenshot 2) using the LFG feature. Here I can specify some details about my current team and what I am looking for in team mates. I usually play defense, so I create a post inquiring about an offense and head coach.



A screenshot of a game lobby setup screen. At the top left is a yellow PlayStation icon. Below it are several filter sections, each with a dropdown menu: 'Activity' with 'MUT Squads', 'Region' with 'North America', 'Playbook/Scheme' with 'Minnesota Vikings', 'Role' with 'Defensive Captain', and 'OVR' with '96'. Below these is a 'Comment' section with a text input field containing 'Looking for decent head coach/offense'. To the right of the comment field is a character count '37 / 140'. At the bottom are five buttons: 'LFG', 'LFM', a microphone icon, 'Have Mic', and a hand icon with 'Sherpa'. In the bottom right corner are two buttons: 'CANCEL' and 'LIST MY PLAYER'.

Activity

MUT Squads

Region

North America

Playbook/Scheme

Minnesota Vikings

Role

Defensive Captain

OVR

96

Comment

Looking for decent head coach/offense

37 / 140

LFG LFM Have Mic Sherpa

CANCEL LIST MY PLAYER

(Screenshot 2)

After turning on my Playstation for the next time I could already see the results. I had several messages and friend invites from strangers.

“Yo. Me and my boy run great offense, you wanna run D?”

“Your defense and my offense are fire. Do you have a coach?”

“My buddy is top 100, we run the ball a lot. Interested?”

“You play 4/3?”

“SKOL Vikes! My bro and I run offense nights. Looking for someone who plays D consistently from 6-9 central during the week. Hit me up for a game.”

I responded to a few of the inquiries and started firing off games. The first game I played with a pair of brothers from the East coast. On the very first drive of this game I could tell the difference in coordination. They had a system in place where one of them would play quarterback and the other would play a specific wide receiver. The receiver was really good at running routes and getting open, and the quarterback had developed a trust that his brother would be in the right place at the right time. I did not ultimately play many games with this pair due to personality conflicts, however it did show me the potential for dynamic gameplay that I never knew existed before hand.

This testing out phase continued for the next couple of weeks as I explored the various responses to my FTW LFG post. Eventually I found a player that would change my 3v3 MUT experience forever. I will refer to him as Vader from this point forward. We were involved in one of the most intense games of Madden I have ever played. It was a back and forth affair that we managed to pull out in the very end. It is this sort of bonding experience that I believe highlight why I love games so much. We were losing very badly at some points and it seemed hopeless, however we came together and problem solved what was happening to us as a team. “Guys I am getting torched in the flats, my normal plays are not stopping them. Any ideas?” After adjusting and trying my teammates ideas we eventually squeaked it out. We were decent players, had a good sense of what each other was doing, and most importantly we liked each other. We could communicate, which was the point of perhaps the whole charade in the first place. We adapted our own unified style and fell into roles which we were good at. We were better than the sum of our parts. We ended up going on a very large winning streak and had a lot of fun.

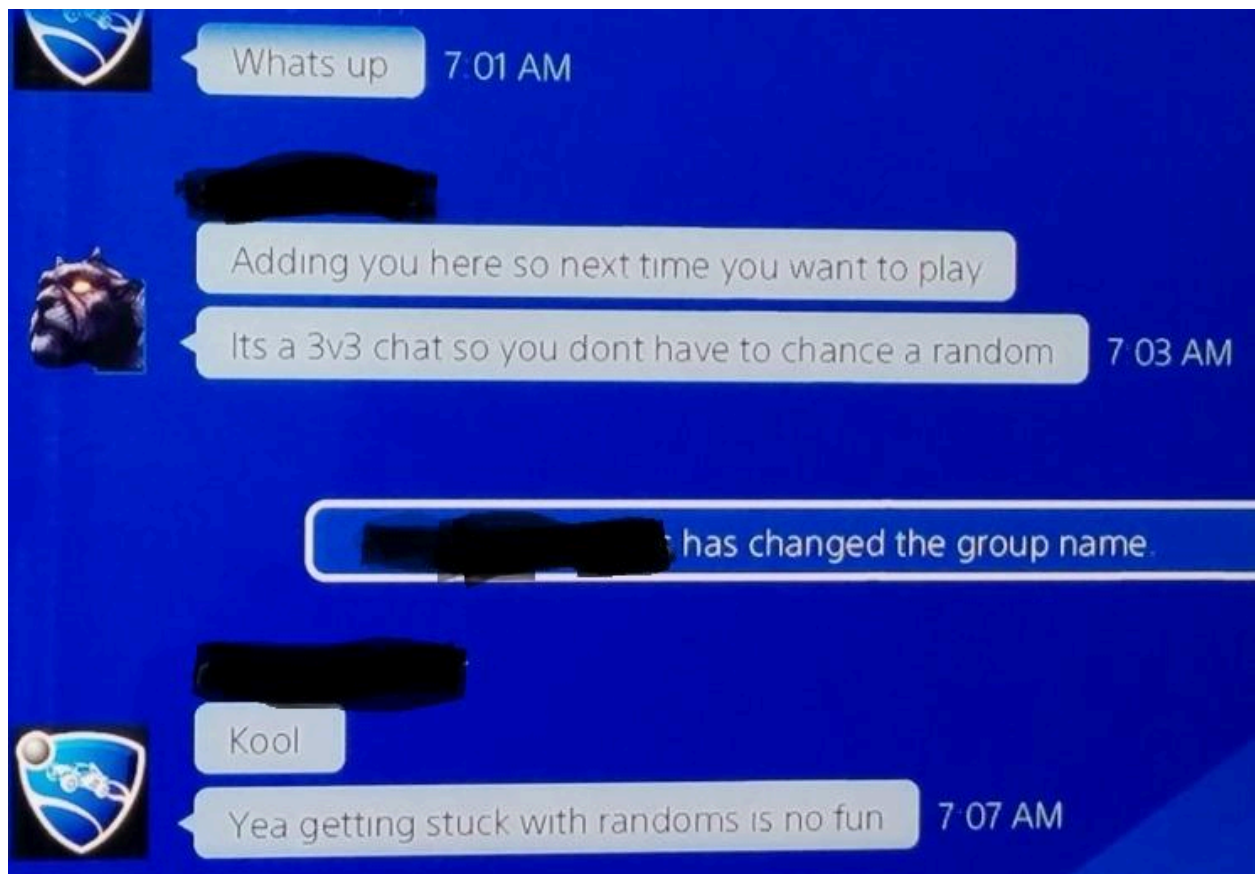
After some more time passed I got a message from Vader that included an invitation to a Playstation network “group”. This is basically a private messaging feature where you can invite different users in to participate in your conversation. He told me “I started this group so we can add people we like playing with, I figure this way we should always have a pool of decent players to play with at any time”. Fantastic idea indeed! And so begins the next chapter of affinity space exploration and observation.



(Screenshot 3)

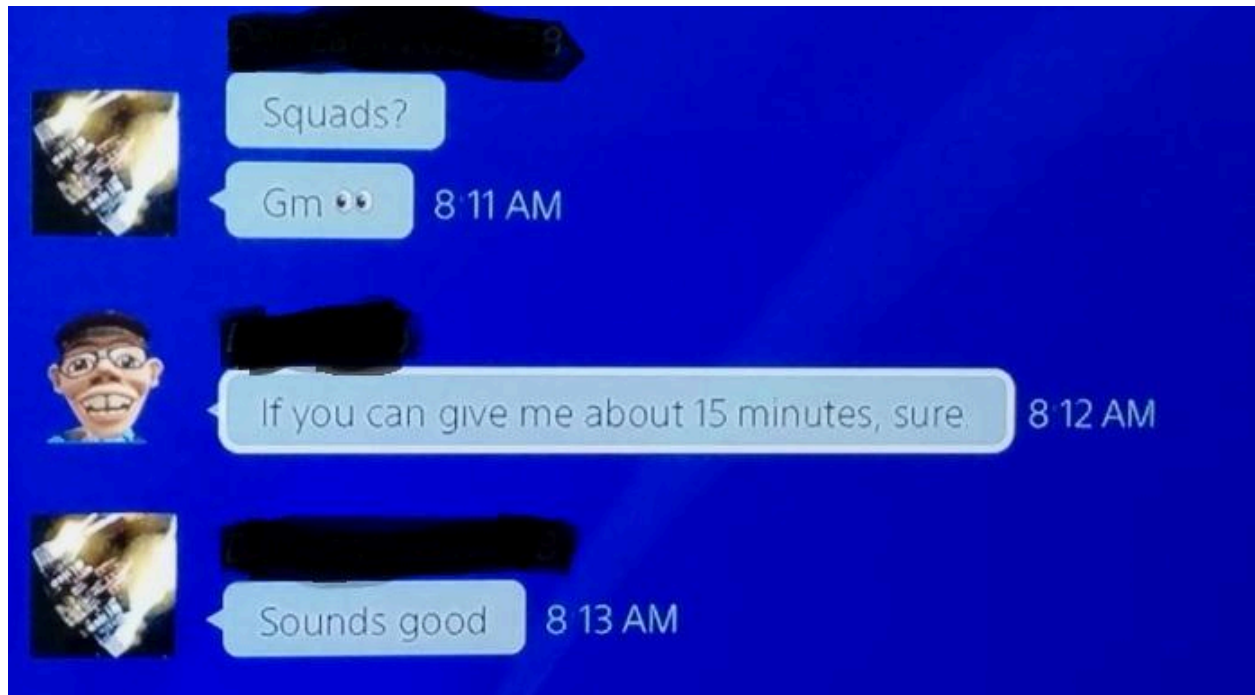
Observation

Originally I intended on documenting the FTW website as the affinity space that I would join and contribute to. In reality this website merely served as an entry point to the affinity space puzzle. This Madden 3v3 squads group (screenshot 3) is where the bulk of observed activity took place. This group quickly became the primary focus of the affinity space and its interactions. This also lead to one of my first observations. The more involved you become with an affinity space, the narrower your space seems to become. Much of finding an affinity space is starting with the world wide view and narrowing until you find groups or even individuals with whom you have the same “level” of affinity for. There are many components that make up the Madden Ultimate Team Squads universe. I have chosen to document my experience with this particular MUT Squads group and how it has influenced my understanding of learning within affinity spaces.



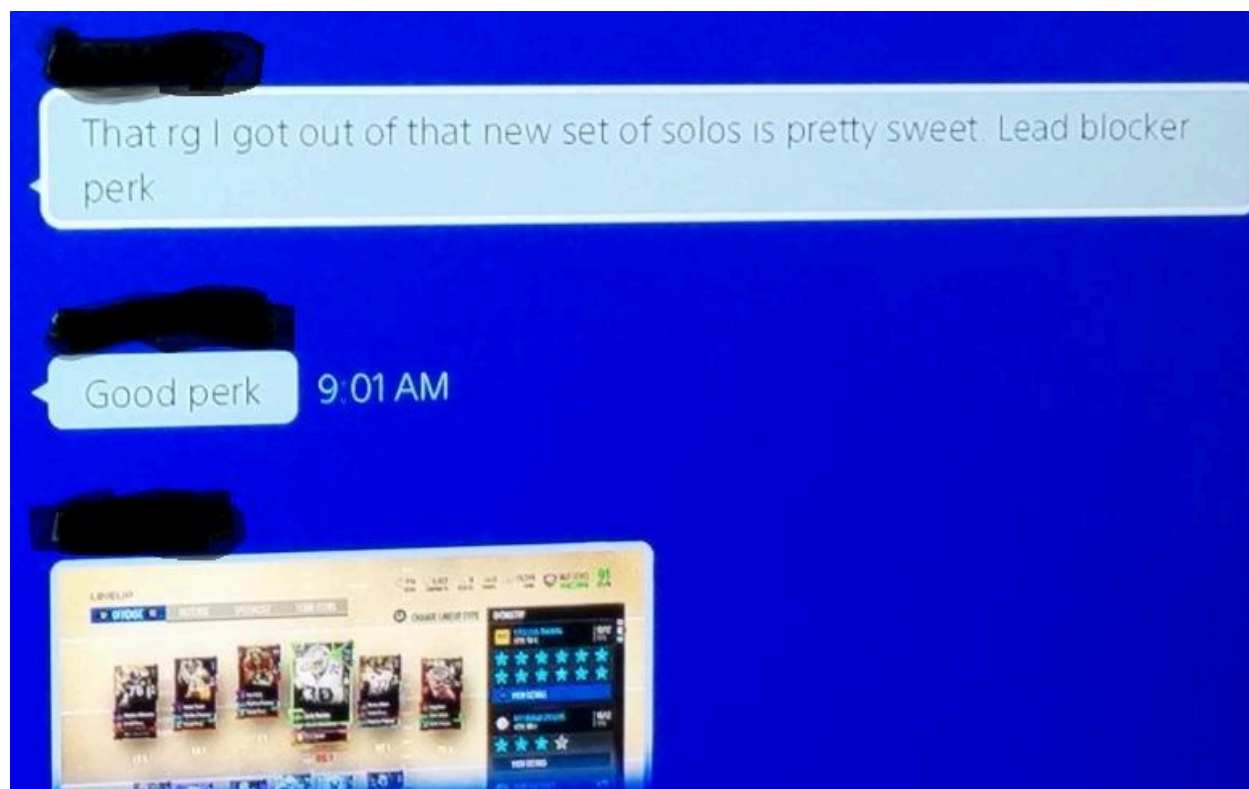
(Screenshot 4)

The main use for this group has been as a communication hub for finding “good” MUT Squads team mates. Or at least non “random” team mates as evidenced by screenshot 4 above. This group was started by the aforementioned Vader and quickly grew to around twenty five members. There were no rules or restrictions put on the users. Members could invite anyone else they wanted to. The only guiding experience is them joining themselves under the understanding they are a “good” squads player. Surprisingly without any effort this did not cause any issues. I believe everyone respected the group on some basic level and only invited players they deemed “good”. I keep putting quotes around the word good because for the most part these were arbitrary decisions made on the fly by individuals. The members all seemed to agree that some level of experience and common interest was sought as a baseline. This group allowed individuals the confidence to find and play games with others who were into the game on at least the same level they were. This group was created around this common interest and passion level as the only restriction for entry. This speaks to the main feature of Gee and Hayes Affinity spaces which are not primarily defined by race, class, gender, or disability, but driven by a shared passion. A lion's share of the activity in this group involved quick messages to find and facilitate these games (screenshot 5).



(Screenshot 5)

This group also promotes each of the members improving individual skill level and play. Players have an interest in improving and learning how to play together better. This is especially true of coordination and tactics within the squads mode itself. As members communicate and play together they form their own subgroups and styles of play. These subgroups are not necessarily exclusive, more so chosen based on how you prefer to play. They have become more exclusive over time however as people fell into teams of three that they liked. If you like running the ball for instance, you would probably tend to play with the person with a great offensive line and running back. If you prefer playing shut down defense, you might be more willing to accept game invites from members who had great defensive players. In addition to pairings of skill and style, people also naturally found individuals they liked playing with. Within the scope of larger affinity for the game, personal affinity for individual players and teams eventually took over.



(Screenshot 6)

The group also acts as a bulletin board that hosts tips and strategic information which is shared amongst the group itself (screenshot 6). Users can post screenshots of their teams or interesting situations they were put in. The core experience of this space takes shape once you are within the game and playing with co-members. Voice communication within the games is where most of the strategy, tactics, and information are shared. Players within this group have a baseline interest in improving and learning how to play together. This helps the communication in game run much more smoothly. There is a certain level of trust that the players in this group possess over teaming with “randoms”. This allows players to be comfortable to discuss what is going on in game without fear of reprisal or making mistakes. If, for instance, you are getting torched on defense (and you know it), it is very difficult to hear “your defense sucks” from a stranger. Hearing “maybe we can try covering the seams and middle while you play deep” from a person you know is much more palatable (and ultimately successful). Since there is a baseline trust you will work through the problems rather than just getting angry at a stranger. You may play with them again in the future. You will also be a bit more courteous and willing to bite your tongue. In addition players can talk about their teams, why they use certain players and their overall strategies. This advances the knowledge level of everyone involved. At times the game is patched or updated, and there is a constant influx of new players added to the universe. Below is one example of audio communication regarding team construction after one such patch:

"Did you see they increased the levels on the chemistries? It looks like toughness actually gives +1 speed at tier 5 now. I might have to start switching my team over".

"Really? I thought toughness was the worst chemistry?"

"I kind of thought the same before, but +1 speed is huge in combination with the other bonuses"

"Wait are you telling me tier 5 toughness Randy Moss has 98 speed?!?!?!?"

"Yep"

"Hmm so it's either he is faster or can get off of the line better with go deep chem"

"His beat press skill is already 98 though, so go deep is kind of a waste on him"

"Yeah I'd rather him be faster all the time.....Oh man now I want to sell half my team and rebuild it"

These critical thinking exercises pop up all the time. This is an environment where you are forced to reanalyze what is strong at any given time. Being connected to a space like this can provide some major advantages in deciphering these changes more quickly. Being able to play with different teams and players allows you access to a broader spectrum of conclusions than just your own. The players obtain individual experience and information from the larger affinity space and their own play. In game we can then transfer this information and experience between us. Below is an example interaction of this information transfer.

"Did you see the reddit post on how zones work?"

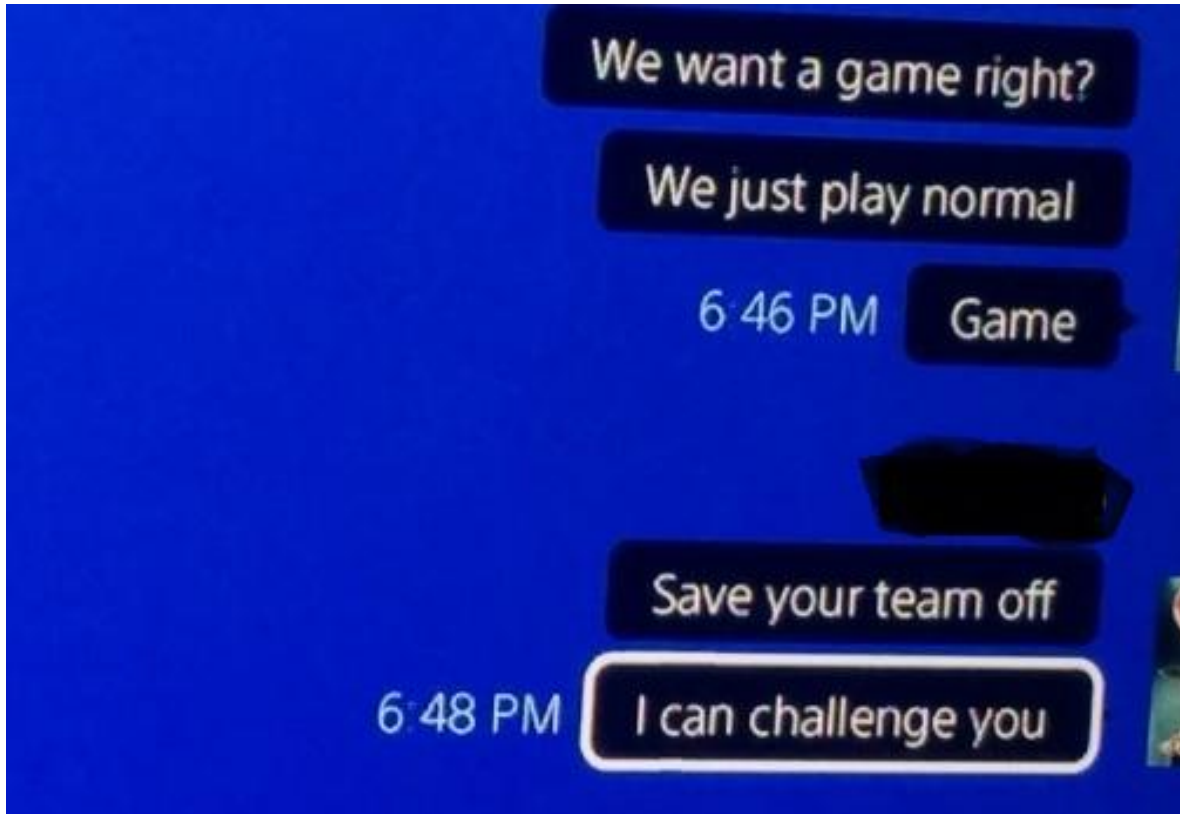
"No, anything important?"

"Yeah basically you want 91+ for them to break effectively in zone coverage. I can send you the link"

"Interesting, yeah I will take a look"

These team games also provide an opportunity to observe others calling plays. This lets you view first hand what works and does not, enhancing your own playbook in the process. There are 32 different playbooks with hundreds of plays in each. It is not realistic to expect everyone to have tested all of these against every defense, but through this group sourcing effort the very

best plays usually bubble to the top. This helps individuals play and team construction, allowing a transformation of the experience of their games. “Content producers in an affinity space, especially in a nurturing affinity space, also are sensitive to the views, values, and interactions of other members of the group”(Gee and Hayes 2012).



(Screenshot 7)

Another interesting observation of this space is that players pushed each other to be better players. A competition of sorts grew within the group to produce the best teams. Users would post screenshots of their teams with claims they had the best offense or defense. At times there were rebuttal responses or congratulations for unlocking certain players within the game. This feature of this group is very much in accordance with Gee and Hayes definition of affinity spaces: “In an affinity space, people are encouraged (but not forced) to produce and not just to consume; to participate and not just to be a spectator”. In other instances when players could not find games or wanted to test their teams they also played each other (screenshot 7). While there is competition, for the most part it is healthy and raised the skill level of the group as a whole. An interesting event happened one day when three members of the group were queued up against three other members. To say the intensity of this game was raised would be a drastic understatement! It also happened to be the two best defenses in the group squaring off for bragging rights. Everyone really wanted to win. This kicked off a flurry of trash talking activity within the group chat, some that continues to this day. Due to the nature of our relationship and understanding of each other as players this has produced a sense of

comradery within the group. I believe this game and resulting interaction highlight how this group has made us better players. This also showcases the spirit of affinity spaces in many ways. These spaces allow you to have shared experiences with something you have interest in, alongside others that have these same interests.

Perhaps the biggest revelation in observing this group was its ability to create real life friendships. Over time specific bonds grew out of this squads group as people became splintered into subgroups and teams. The team I have played the most with exemplifies this ability. This is also an example of an affinity space becoming more focused as you become more involved. The FTW website lead me to the MUT squads group and this group lead me to the team I ultimately chose to play with. This process of “choosing” is interesting to observe as well. In my own experience this involved playing with a lot of different people and developing my own style based on what I enjoy playing and what I am good at. This includes finding players with whom you can communicate and get along with. My own affinity space experience differs slightly from Gee and Haye’s assertion that “affinity spaces do not segregate newcomers from masters”. While this group did start in this fashion, it also naturally segregated itself over time. My main team within the group consisted of Vader and another player whom I will call Kyre. We all work very well together and have a lot of fun. Kyre in many ways is the heart of the team and likes to run the ball. Vader and I block really well and run timely routes. The three of us together have innovated many squads tactics that help us win a much higher percentage of games. In addition to an affinity for MUT Squads, we also have an affinity for each other. One day while playing Kyre and I had revelation that went something like this:

“Heads up, I am not going to be online this weekend”

“Me neither, I am going to be in Aspen”

“Aspen, Colorado?”

“Yeah a friend and I are going to the X games”

“Dude, I didn’t know you lived in Colorado!! Me and my girl are going to be there too!”

“Wait, you live in CO? In Denver?”

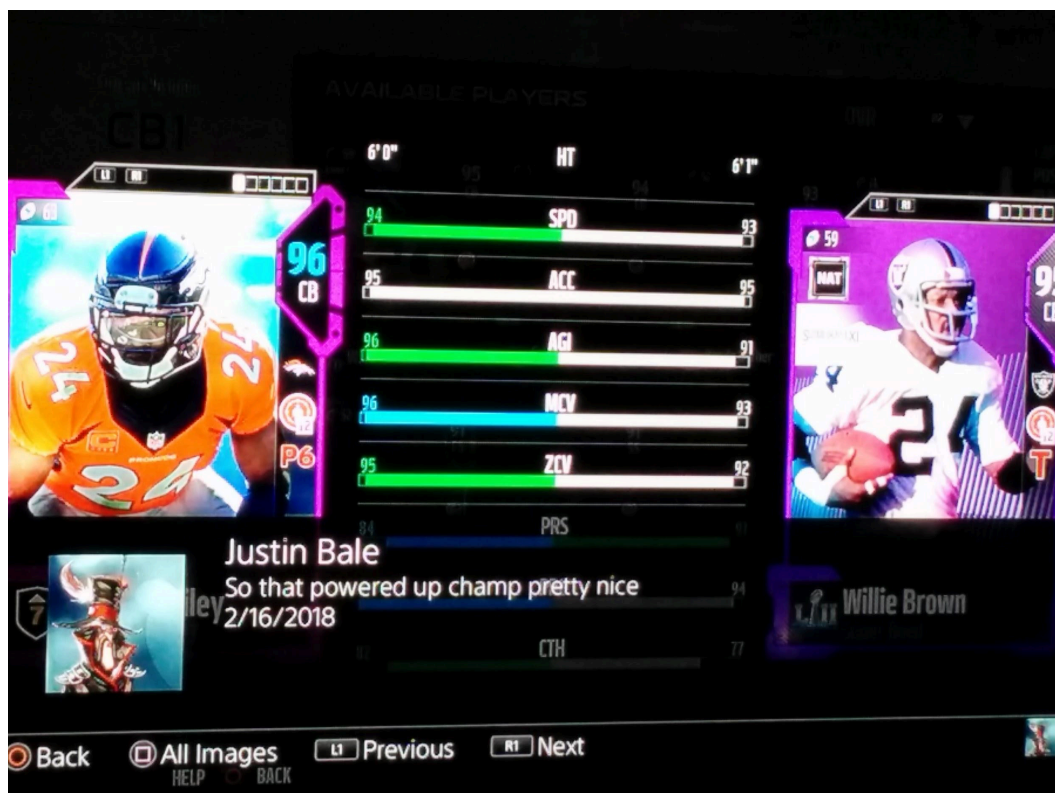
“Oh wow you are like 20 minutes from me!!! I had no idea!”

Not only has this affinity space quest lead to insight about learning, it has created meaningful relationships along the way. Kyre and I met in real life at the X games and have been fast friends ever since. Vader lives in Costa Rica, however has a standing invitation to visit either Kyre or myself at any time. We have even thrown around the idea of taking a trip to Costa Rica

to visit him. Of all the things I expected when joining this group, meeting real friends would have been near the bottom of the list. I enjoy playing with this group so much it has actually tainted my experience(for the better). Now that I know what level the game can be played at I have much higher standards. I can no longer group with “randoms”, it is too frustrating. These relationships are also interesting because both of these individuals are not necessarily the type of people I would befriend through normal channels. In this space it does not matter if we are conservative or liberal, young or old, quiet or loud. It only really matters that we have a common purpose and like playing together. This also enforces a feature of Gee and Hayes affinity spaces in that they are not segregated by age. “Older and younger people judge others by their passion, desire to learn, and growing skills, and not by their age”. Affinity spaces create and nurture these relationships with a purpose.

Contribution

My personal contributions to this space have come in a couple different forms over time. Interaction has been facilitated mainly through the group chat feature and in game communications provided by the Playstation network. These chat conversations range from soliciting games to discussing strategy with many others along the way. In game communications involve quick lessons with players, in game problem solving, and even personal real life struggles.



(Screenshot 7)

In these types of groups I tend to take on an advanced research role. I will often provide information from the web on updates to the game and new players that were coming out. This is a natural role because I am genuinely curious myself and it is not too much work to share. One of my most significant contributions is my ability to “lab” various players, teams, and strategies. I then share my findings among the group and within games. This involves paying particular attention to new players coming out and testing them against players you already have (screenshot 7). At times when there are significant patches or changes having this advanced understanding pool can help to keep things in perspective.

In addition to labbing I became a sort of defensive subject matter expert within the group. This happened naturally over time as I usually contribute defense to our squads teams. Through research and play I also usually have pretty good players. If you have good players and win more than you lose people want to play on your team! “Leaders in an affinity space, when they are leading, are designers, mentors, resourcers, and enablers of other people’s participation and learning” Gee and Hayes (2012). This includes in game defensive philosophy conversations and impromptu lessons. Below is an example of one such exchange:

“Why does your secondary use read and react chemistry while the rest of your defense is built on toughness?”

“Read and react gives buffs to zone coverage and pursuit, which I find helps out secondary more than strength. The speed boost it gives now is nice, but I still feel like high zone and pursuit makes my safeties play so much better. Toughness is great for the front seven guys because strength helps you get off of blocks, but doesn’t help the secondary guys as much. I would rather have them breaking on balls better.”

“Is that why your Sean Taylor seems to be everywhere, all the time?”

“Yeah since his speed is so high already it makes a bigger difference if he breaks quicker on the ball when it is in the air.”

“So tier four read and react makes him have 99 zone?”

“Yeah and 99 pursuit. He always takes the best angle to the ball carrier. This is especially critical for safeties”.

“Ahh that makes sense. I need to check that out”

While being involved in this group I have also created video content which has been contributed to the larger MUT squads community. The first of these was a [short youtube video that](#)

[contained some highlights of our teams plays](#). This video displays how flashy things can get if you have multiple people coordinating plays. With one person blocking and someone running the ball who can follow those blocks you can achieve extraordinary things. The Playstation 4 comes with tools that allow you to screen capture and record video with relative ease. It also contains tools for editing and distributing these videos to popular web platforms such as Youtube, Facebook, and Twitter. This was a nice introduction to the video editing tools, I plan on making more of these videos as we acquire more in game footage. This is a great example of a Games+ environment and evidence that Sony has taken deliberate steps toward enabling these behaviours in all games. According to Gee and Hayes: “games that stress the involvement of players as designers in the first sense, by making game design a core game mechanic, facilitating modding, and encouraging robust design communities to develop around the game are, we believe, particularly good for fostering skills with technology, design, system thinking, and socio-technical engineering”. In many ways gaming systems now are built with these aspects of Games+ into their very existence.

After investing a great deal of time in this group and squads, I also decided to create a [beginner guide video to playing MUT 3v3 Squads](#). In large part this video seeks to address many issues with new players to the squads mode. It was created as a quick primer to highlight the very issues that started this affinity space quest in the first place. As squads is highly coordinated this video seeks to give some up front recommendations to novice players who may not be aware of the differences between squads and solo play. In many ways this is a summary of all the lessons learned through playing squads with the members of this affinity space over the course of this season. In conjunction with this class and learning process it makes sense to make it available to the community at large. This also made me want to learn various streaming technologies to be able to present this in a better form. Perhaps next season this can have some positive impact on organized MUT squads play.

Reflection

Most of the affinity space features defined by Gee and Hayes have been represented within this group and space. One major difference was that this group did get more splintered over time and was somewhat exclusive. This runs in some contradiction to their feature which states “Newbies, masters, and everyone else share a common space”. While the group did have people of different skill sets and levels, there was a bar for entry. How any one individual deems another “good” is a very complicated subject for perhaps another study. This was not a group of masters, but there was definitely a screening process. Rather than accommodating the whole continuum of Madden Ultimate Team squads players, this group was tailored to a slightly more specific group of non-newbies. Perhaps this squads group should be considered a group rather than an affinity space due to its restrictive nature.

One of the most dramatic changes in my understanding of games and learning has been through observing the technology we have available at our fingertips (and controllers). The

technological advancements in networking and gaming that make these communities possible is incredible. Within the Playstation 4 alone you have many different tools that support affinity spaces. Screen sharing. Video creation capabilities. Group chat. Voice communication within game. Private messaging. YouTube and Facebook to share. Networked games that allow people with these specific affinities to find and play with and against each other. These tools allow for an enhanced gaming experience that promote and facilitate a culture of sharing and learning, all from your controller. The rise of these new technologies coincides with formation of affinity spaces in the first place. Previously you would most likely be stuck in your hometown playing your brother, maybe even ridiculed for these interests. In this age of connectivity not only can you find a place where you are welcomed for your interests, you can gain a sense of status and esteem through it. I did not foresee using digital media production skills and this many new tools through participating in this affinity space. As educators do not underestimate your students skills and access to tools capable of doing extraordinary things.

As I reflect on my experience within this space a central theme repeats itself. Relationships with a purpose. I keep coming back to the relationships that have been created and how they differ from others in my life. The key difference is the guiding interest and passion. Where other relationships may be forged by personality or blood, these are defined by self guided interests. This group reminded me of my group of college friends, which in many ways was my first affinity space. We all came together under an affinity for technology. A relationship was born out of this affinity and we pushed each other to become better. Through shared experience anchored in these interests we flourished and galvanized our personalities. This affinity space group has functioned in much the same manner. A group was formed based on an affinity for Madden and the squads mode in particular. Relationships were formed for the purpose of getting better and we have pushed each other to do so. We have enhanced our knowledge of the game and transformed the game experience itself. My exploration into affinity spaces has proven just how valuable they might be to learning. Friends and relationships are built through people finding each other in like spaces. Fostering individual interests and providing purpose go a long way in unique learning experiences. Affinity spaces are gateways to relationships with a purpose. Find their interests, and give them purpose!