The NBA Live Franchise
An analysis of gameplay and marketing advances over the years since its inception

STS 145: History of Game Design
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Pre-Game Warmups: Introduction

Electronic Arts (EA), headquartered in Redwood City, California, is the world's leading independent developer and publisher of interactive entertainment software for personal computers and advanced entertainment systems. Year in and year out their games dominate the sports video games market. EA’s flagship and most popular basketball game, NBA Live, has advanced significantly in many areas of game design since its first release in 1995. This case study is an in-depth analysis of how EA Sports’ NBA Live series has advanced over the years, focusing on the ways in which it is exemplary of the evolution of video game design and marketing. Specifically, we will analyze the advances in game play (improvement of controls, realism, graphics, etc.) and the unprecedented marketing strategies that combined to make the NBA Live series such a huge success in the sports gaming industry.

NBA Live was one of the few games on the basketball simulation market during its early years, leaving it with very little competition, which subsequently stagnated advances and innovation. Between its inception and about 1999, the game primarily advanced graphically as newer consoles and more powerful personal computers entered the market. Up until their 2002 release EA Sports sat comfortably on top of the market without making any groundbreaking gameplay innovations. In 2003, however, on the heels of intense competition from Sega with their NBA 2K series, EA introduced the Freestyle control, which revolutionized gameplay by allowing users to execute special moves by the moving of the right analog stick while dribbling, passing, or playing defense.

Along with Freestyle control came shrewd marketing strategies to put NBA Live atop the market for basketball simulation video games and ensure that it remained number one. Early on, EA’s only targets for their new basketball game were hardcore videogame players and basketball
fanatics – the casual gamer was left out of the mix. When competition was minimal this strategy was sufficient because NBA Live remained the leader in basketball simulation video games and saw no need to change their approach. As competition increased, however, EA introduced an urban theme highlighted by the packaging of a hip hop compilation soundtrack with NBA Live 2003. This marketing strategy of appealing to a new audience helped NBA Live reclaim the consumers that the NBA 2K series had taken away a few years earlier.

**First Quarter: The Tip Off**

Well before the introduction of the revolutionary EA Sports Freestyle control in 2003, the NBA Live series debuted in 1995 on the Sega Genesis, Super Nintendo, and DOS platforms, combining “fast action-packed gameplay with all the strategy and realism of 5-on-5 basketball”.

The supposed strategy and realism that the ’95 edition touted was a far cry from the quality remediation seen in the most recent version. In fact, the main feature of the game was that it included the complete team rosters from all 27 teams in the NBA, the East and West All-Star teams, and the ability to create four custom teams. The controls were rather uncomplicated in comparison to the detailed syntax needed in present versions of the series, but this (along with other aspects of gameplay) was limited due to the platforms on which the games were played. Both the Super Nintendo and the Sega Genesis had at most 6 buttons and a directional pad; it was nearly impossible for EA to create syntactically complicated moves. Along the same lines, playing on 16-bit consoles, the realism that EA advertised definitely did not come from the

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1 Nowadays complete rosters are no longer considered special at all, but actually necessary.
graphics due to hardware limitations as well. The players depicted on the screen looked more like figurines than reproductions of the actual NBA players. Although it is easy to point out the gameplay limitations of the first version of Live, it still “stands as a classic title that started the evolution of the Live series to what it has become”. ²

Just as the gameplay in the original game drastically differed from the recent games, the marketing strategies EA used to beat out the competition were different as well. Back in 1995, the only demographic buying and playing sports videogames were hardcore gamers and sports enthusiasts, so they became EA’s sole targets for NBA Live ’95.³ To grab their attention, EA sports placed print ads in popular gaming magazines like PC Gamer, hyping up the different technological advances (it featured “12 megs of intense gameplay” instead of eight, maintained capability to support 5 users at once, etc.⁴) of the game. Although putting an emphasis on the technological advances of the game would be pervasive throughout future marketing campaigns, actual gameplay innovations would be rather lacking.

Between 1995 and 1999 only minor changes and features were added to the game; there were just enough new highlights in each game to make gamers buy the latest edition, but nothing truly new and excited was added. The main attractive feature of the games during this time frame was updated teams, rosters, and players. For example, one could not play the “old” NBA Live ‘95 in 1996 because the NBA had added two expansion teams that year. In order to play with the Toronto Raptor or Vancouver Grizzlies, gamers had to fork over another $35. Moreover, with the addition of drafting and trading in NBA Live ’96, users could synch the rosters in their game with the wheeling and dealings of the actual NBA. And to not keep the gameplay too stagnant, “cool new dunks” and more offensive/defensive plays were added.⁵
For the 1997 edition, EA was able to make significant graphical improvements utilizing the new Sony PlayStation and Sega Saturn. EA Sports also made its first release of the Live series on the Windows ‘95 platform. EA opted to still release NBA Live ’97 on the legacy DOS, SNES, and Genesis platforms so as not to completely eliminate those who had not yet upgraded their systems and had been the main target group in the previous two editions. The Live ’97 game was the first in the series to highlight an individual player from the NBA on its cover. This year’s edition chose Mitch Richmond of the Sacramento Kings. Supplied with new 3D graphics made available by second-generation platforms, EA sought out to improve gameplay as well. They added in a 2-on-2 and 3-on-3 practice mode, as well as new reverse lay-ups and dunks, but most importantly, it was the only basketball game to have the latest NBA superstar, Shaquille O’Neal.

In 1998, when EA’s competitors had added Shaq as well, EA Live’s realism in order to differentiate themselves from the rest of the pack. NBA Live ’98 once again contained all the NBA rosters for the upcoming season (including all of the new rookies), but more importantly featured all 29 basketball arenas and used over 350 scanned faces to improve the verisimilitude of the game. In addition, new moves (crossovers, fade-aways, leaners, etc.) and a 3-point shoot-out were also implemented. Lastly, to give the user the feel that playing the game was just like watching a real game, EA hired TNT/TBS color analyst Verne Lundquist to perform the play-by-play commentary in the game. With this feature, an amazing dunk in the game could actually be described as “an amazing dunk” by the commentator just like it would be if the user were watching a TNT-televised NBA game.
As the NBA Live series continued to gain more success and garner larger portions of the sports video game market, EA seemed to become increasingly more complacent and significantly less innovative. Although newly released for the Nintendo 64 console (they also ended releases for the legacy platforms) and possessing sponsorship from Tuner Sports (TNT and TBS), NBA Live ’99 was not much more than an updated roster version of NBA Live ’98. It did contain some additional features like the ability to sign and release free agents or download updated rosters from the EA Sports website\(^8\), but no significant improvements were made. The larger and further reaching consequence of this complacency, however, was that it allowed for the competition to finally step up and develop a better game.

**Second Quarter: Sega Gains Momentum**

In 1999, the NBA Live series experienced real competition for the first time when Sega’s sports studio, Visual Concepts, released their first basketball simulation game, NBA 2K. While EA Sports had enjoyed the security of dominating the basketball simulation market for so many years, Sega Sports had been developing the NBA 2K series for the new Sega Dreamcast. Because Sega had the advantage of developing a game on its own hardware, developers were able to make an amazing game that quickly gained respect as one of the best basketball simulations available.\(^9\) From graphics to gameplay, the game received rave reviews. According to GameSpot.com reviewer Ryan Mac Donald, “NBA 2K's dazzling graphics, superb control, and strong AI [made] it the most dynamic basketball video game ever,”\(^10\) and the overwhelming majority of game critics agreed with him. Players were realistically modeled down to the tattoo, the controls were intuitively easy to learn, and the AI allowed the CPU to
make realistic decisions like intentionally fouling when trailing at the end of a game.\textsuperscript{11} NBA 2K had such an incredible debut that it created even more excitement about what innovations Sega Sports would bring to the table for its next release.

Because NBA Live 2000 and NBA 2K were simultaneously developed, EA Sports was unaware of the vast improvements Sega’s NBA 2K had over EA’s own franchise game. For their 2000 version of Live released on PlayStation and Nintendo 64, EA Sports remained innovatively stagnant, making the usual graphical improvements and simply adding the Franchise and one-on-one modes to the release.\textsuperscript{12} The main selling point of this edition was that Michael Jordan, who had never before been featured in a basketball simulation game due to licensing issues, would appear for the first time in NBA Live 2000. Although NBA Live 2000 and NBA 2K were released on mutually exclusive platforms, NBA 2K’s arrival showed that Live was no longer the uncontested leader of basketball simulation games.

In 2001, EA Sports \textit{had the opportunity} to react to its newly found competitor by utilizing the newly released PlayStation 2 hardware, but instead, Sega raised the bar once again by releasing another impressive and drastically improved game. Sega’s NBA 2K1 featured a franchise and GM mode, a street mode in which gamers could play 2-on-2 and 3-on-3 hoops, NBA legends teams (with some of the best players in NBA history), and even a network mode for Internet play\textsuperscript{13}; it already had all of the features of the veteran NBA Live series in just two years of existence. NBA Live 2001, on the other hand, did very little outside of the usual graphical make-over. The biggest gameplay enhancement this time was the new post-game feature that allowed the user to execute everything from a hook shot to a fade away with his back to the basket.\textsuperscript{14} NBA 2K1’s post game, however, proved to be just as impressive, if not better. NBA Live once again was able to get away without making any major improvements, but when
Sega Sports announced that NBA 2K2 would be released on PS2 and XBOX as well as Dreamcast, direct platform competition was finally going to occur, putting more pressure on EA Sports to keep their game on top.

By 2002, most critics agreed that Sega’s basketball title had finally outmatched NBA Live. Sega had raised the innovative bar for basketball simulation games and caught up with, if not surpassed, the established NBA Live series in only two releases of their NBA 2K series. But with a well established group of loyal fans, NBA Live still managed to stay on top with respect to sales. According to EA’s Simulation Products Competitor Market Share Goals for NBA Live 2003, the presence of the NBA 2K2 in the basketball simulation market was certainly felt: on platforms for which both games were made, EA was only expecting to accrue 37% of the market share, while predicting that NBA 2K3 would gather 43%. From EA’s lowered expectations it is evident that the NBA 2K series was on the path to outselling Live. Would NBA Live really lose the majority market share to its momentum gaining competitor?

**Fourth Quarter: Live Regains the Lead**

As the NBA 2K series gained increasing respect among gaming critics, it became more of an urgent need for EA Sports to find a way to thrust NBA Live back into its usual dominant position. With its 2003 release, EA Sports was able accomplish this goal with unique marketing strategies, including the infusion of hip hop into its advertising scheme, and the addition of several new gameplay advances, highlighted by the revolutionary Freestyle control.

Through the Freestyle Control (also called the Total Player Control), which debuted in NBA Live 2003, EA Sports delivered a sense of individualism and creativity on the court. Freestyle allowed the gamer to create a variety of realistic moves on screen based on the sequence of motions made with the right analog stick. This unique element of the 2003 release
introduced a new level of syntactical innovation to basketball simulation games, allowing gamers a tremendous amount of offensive creativity and defensive control.

Basketball is a sport of individual expression. Every player has their own playing styles and tendencies. Basketball videogames have long strived to capture this with varying amounts of success. The question is, “How do you design a way for videogame users to express themselves through the controller?” -EA Sports Freestyle Abstract

The Freestyle control allowed users this in-game expression most impressively on offense, allowing the user to execute fifty or more moves with the right analog stick. While stationary, the player was able to perform an array of lifelike “ball fakes, jab steps, and ‘style’ moves such as holding the ball away from the defender.” When the user began to dribble, the Freestyle control can then be used to create various moves ranging from spins to behind the back dribbles. To allow the user even more creativity on the court, these moves could be linked together to create more dazzling show-off moves. This notion of creating “show-boat” moves had already been successful in NBA Street (EA Sports’ street-ball version of NBA Live that had an even greater hip-hop/urban influence), where the player could rack up many points stringing different “playground” moves together. But the Freestyle control was so revolutionary because it was a complete deviation from the old style of gameplay (which their competition was still using) where the user pushed one button and a random action would occur depending on the situation. For instance, if Steve Francis was dribbling up the court against Paul Pierce, in the old system when the user pressed the “crossover” button, the game would randomly decide whether to execute an actual crossover, a behind the back dribble, etc. With Freestyle, however, if the user felt that the best way for Francis to blow by Pierce was with a hesitation dribble, the user could explicitly execute that action with a specific syntactical combination using the right analog.
stick; all of the randomness was eliminated. NBA Live granted its consumers the ability to have total control over their every offensive move.

But the feeling of complete control over the player did not disappear on the defensive end. Using the Freestyle control feature on defense, the user could attempt steals with either hand, put both hands up to challenge a shot, put additional pressure on the offensive player or take a charge. Before, the user could only press the steal button and rely on the game to choose the closest hand to steal the ball. Whether on defense or offense the Freestyle control came in handy, allowing the user to make specific decisions in any particular situation on the court. It was this gameplay innovation accompanied by an effective hip hop marketing strategy that catapulted NBA Live back into its old position of superiority.

With the most emphasized feature of NBA Live 2003 being the new Freestyle control, there was no better marketing scheme available than using hip hop culture to sell the game. The Freestyle control and hip hop marketing scheme went hand in hand because the term “freestyle” in hip hop culture refers to a rapper’s ability to spontaneously create rhymes, just as the NBA Live Freestyle control allowed gamers to spontaneously create their moves on the court. This integration of hip hop culture and gameplay was unprecedented in the marketplace and thus not only attracted those hardcore gamers looking for innovative gameplay advances, but also the casual gamers that could be lured in by the “cool” and “hip” marketing scheme.

The choice to implement this hip hop marketing strategy was a well-calculated move that helped swing the NBA Live series back in the direction of its previous dominance. After substantial research, EA realized that they could attract more consumers by following the changing cultural trends of the NBA. As high school players began to jump directly to the NBA more frequently and as hip hop began to increasingly infiltrate the mainstream, the culture
pervasive throughout the league gradually became more hip hop oriented. A new generation of “cool” players such as Allen Iverson and Kevin Garnett now dominated the league\textsuperscript{18}, and EA Sports recognized that remediating not only the game of NBA basketball, but also the lifestyle associated with it, would bring about a new level of authenticity to their product.

The main way in which EA began to incorporate hip hop into their marketing scheme was by including the EA Sports Trax CD with their 2003 release. The Sports Trax CD featured some of hip hop and r&b’s biggest superstars and even contained unreleased songs that could only be heard by purchasing EA’s game. According to EA Sports marketing manager Otis Perrick, this unique marketing tactic helped set NBA Live apart from its competition: “The goal of this promotion is for the music CD to be a differentiator at the point of sale and help secure additional market share in the basketball war.”\textsuperscript{19} In order to associate NBA Live 2003 with being “cool/hip” and to promote the exclusive Sports Trax CD, EA Sports utilized a number of urban marketing strategies including listening/viewing parties on college campuses, a mall tour featuring rap star Fabolous, and Street Marketing Teams to “invade” key major cities and key street destinations. These marketing efforts resulted in both the Fabolous track, \textit{It’s In the Game}, and the Just Blaze track, \textit{Let’s Go}, from the Sports Trax CD receiving airplay on over 30 major urban radio stations and being included on at least a dozen mixtapes. EA Sports also sent NBA Live representatives to the Roc-a-Wear clothing booth at Magic Johnson’s annual Las Vegas fashion show in order to demo the game to the attendees.\textsuperscript{20} Although this fashion show and NBA Live had very little in common, EA Sports recognized that by being stationed at the most popular hip hop clothing line booth, they would further create the desired “cool” image of their product. By
following the trends of an increasingly youthful and hip hop oriented NBA, EA Sports was able to intertwine NBA Live with hip hop/urban culture and thus market it to an even larger demographic.

This hip hop marketing scheme, however, was not the only addition to an already effective marketing system. EA Sports also implemented a variety of less visible marketing tactics that contributed to an extremely successful 2003 release. For example, footage from NBA Live 2003 was used in the 2002-2003 NBA Draft in order to grab the attention of those hardcore NBA fans and potential Live consumers. NBA Live 2003 provided images of rookie sensation LeBron James in his new #23 Cleveland Cavaliers jersey, which Turner Sports then displayed on television when James was drafted. This strategy created an association between NBA Live and the new generation of young NBA talent which, reinforced the idea of Live being in touch with changing culture of the NBA.

In another marketing tactic, EA’s marketing team began “secretly” releasing notifications of fixed flaws in the previous release as well as hints about the added features in the new release to create a buzz about the upcoming NBA Live 2003. Because of this, many gamers received the message ahead of time that those aspects of Live 2002 that they did not like would be fixed for the 2003 release. In addition, they also found out what new and improved gameplay features they could look out for in the next version of NBA Live. But with all these different marketing strategies, how could EA the effectiveness of them?

According to Otis Perrick, the effectiveness of all marketing campaigns is not necessarily measurable. For example, it is impossible for EA’s marketing team to know what direct impact their trip to Magic Johnson’s fashion show had on the sales of the game, but these kinds of strategies are nonetheless implemented in order to put the game in influential hands that can leak
out information about the upcoming release. What is measurable, though, is the impact of marketing on different types of NBA Live consumers through different mediums of media. Perrick says that “when [an EA Sports] marketing plan is taking place, [they expect to] see an increase in different traffic flow to different regions, from online to presales to on-shelf sales.”

For example, after the NBA Live 2004 print ad appeared in PlayStation magazine and Observer Sport Monthly, pre-sales went up 50%. Keeping in mind that primarily hardcore gamers buy their games in advance, EA’s marketing team could then deduce that their print ads in those hardcore gaming magazines were the impetus for such a dramatic presales increase. Another way that EA’s marketing team measured their effectiveness was by analyzing their daily website hits. For example, if hits on Freestyle control link on the NBA Live website increased dramatically after a promotional campaign for that feature, then EA’s marketing team would know that they had successfully attracted the attention of their target audience.

This way EA could get a better idea of what marketing tactics worked, and what gameplay features were most anticipated.

Apparently, EA’s marketing efforts and gameplay improvements had not at all gone to waste, because they exceeded their projected market share goal (for NBA Live 2003) of 37% by a huge margin, grabbing 55% of the market share for platforms on which NBA 2K3 was also sold. Instead of Sega Sports getting 43% of the market share as EA predicted, they finished with a less impressive 33%. EA Sports had successfully fended off the onslaught of competition from Sega Sports.

4th Quarter: Live Continues to Innovate

But even with the success of the new Freestyle control and hip-hop marketing strategy, EA Sports’ chose not to be complacent as they had done in the late nineties and opted to keep the
innovation machine churning for its next version of Live. For this edition, EA Sports introduced the 10-Man Freestyle, “a revolutionary addition to NBA LIVE 2004 that provides the most realistic movement for all ten players on the court.” In their motion capture facility in Vancouver, British Columbia, the NBA Live 2004 team had ten NBA-level players play 5-on-5 basketball on their motion-capture court. In past NBA Live games, EA Sports would just take motion capture data on individual players performing game-like moves, but by capturing ten players at once, they could see how all the players interact and move on the court to create an even better life-like simulation. The result was a “fluid, seamless reproduction of life on a real basketball court, where all ten players work both independently and in conjunction with each other to produce dynamic and intelligent offensive and defensive play.” With the data taken from the motion capture of 10-Man Freestyle, the game developers could see what players actually do away from the ball and how they move in response to the passing of the basketball, instead of having to make uninformed educated guesses. 10-Man Freestyle brought to the game better and stronger traps and double teams, timely screens and pick-and-rolls, and low-post battles for position. The level of realism was taken up a few notches, leaving NBA Live once again atop the basketball simulation games market.

Even with the Freestyle control, 10-Man Freestyle, and the hip-hop infusion, EA Sports still had to improve on several deficiencies in its NBA Live game (that had been exposed by the NBA 2K’s game quality) in order to regain its crown as the best basketball simulation game. The first improvement dealt with the games artificial intelligence (AI). In early versions of NBA Live, especially during heightened competition from Sega, its AI, particularly on defense, was
sub par. Even with the difficulty set to Superstar (the highest difficulty level), a skilled gamer could easily blow by a defender and penetrate the defense with a few simple moves. For example, if Tracy McGrady in the game caught the ball on the perimeter, the user could pump-fake three or four times, which would cause the defender to jump even though on-screen it was obvious that the player was not about to shoot. After the defender was in the air, the user could easily get to the basket because there would not be any significant or organized help defense (10-Man Freestyle had not yet been created). Initially this flaw was fun to exploit because it allowed the user to potentially score a basket when conventional methods failed, but when intense competition was desired, this deficiency lost its appeal.

For the 2004 release, the NBA Live team beefed up the AI in the game with the help of 10-Man Freestyle in order to fix and prevent this problem and others like it. Now, on-ball defenders played tighter “D” and were no longer fooled by multiple superfluous pump-fakes. This improved defense, however, could easily frustrate beginners who were simply trying to learn how to play the game. The novice could choose to play on the Rookie difficult level (the lowest level) to make the defense lighter, but then he or she would be able to score from practically anywhere on the court since the “made-shot probability” would be very high. To handle this issue, and simultaneously make the AI more dynamic than ever, the NBA Live team implemented difficulty slider bars that could be adjusted within a difficult level, so that the game could be specifically tailored to the user’s desires. This way a user could play on the intermediary Starter level so that the defense was not too hounding, but then turn up the shot difficult slider so that he or she had to really work for their points.

Along with artificial intelligence improvements came several remediation enhancements. Remediation in video games, defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, is reproducing
views, perspectives, or other techniques from television and cinema in gameplay.\textsuperscript{30} EA Sports had already done an excellent job in remediating television by including many of the features seen in television broadcasts in their own game as well. For example, the current score, quarter, and time remaining are always displayed at the bottom of the screen on television, and EA Sports chose to show that information exactly the same way in NBA Live. Furthermore, NBA Live also included all the camera angles and pop-up effects shown during gameplay and free throws that television uses to display extra information. Lastly, the graphical artists used advanced human modeling technologies to capture exact likenesses of a majority of the NBA players so that playing the game was really like watching the game, but with complete control.

While these remediation features do give the gamer that feel of watching and controlling a real game, they were not original because every other basketball simulation games implemented the same features to different degrees of effectiveness. To distance themselves from the competition, they first hired hall of fame announcer Marv Albert to do the play-by-play announcing, and his broadcast partner Mike Fratello to provide color commentary. Using real announcers was not new to the industry and actually had been used in previous versions of Live, so the NBA Live team enhanced this feature by adding individual player-specific commentary, intelligent replay analysis, and background comments about the players. Graphically, they redesigned their player models to better differentiate between extreme sizes (Shaq and Iverson would be modeled differently), used higher resolution textures for the uniforms so that they look more realistic with creases and folds, and developed new head geometry to realistically recreate players’ likenesses.\textsuperscript{31}

Another target advancement in EA Sports’ sights was improving the atmosphere of gameplay by further increasing its realism. They faithfully recreated all 29 NBA arenas in full
3D by placing closer attention on creating livelier and more immersive arenas. To accomplish this, they added more courtside elements like in-game referees who run the floor with the players officiating the action, inserted some rows of 3D crowd to remediate the feeling of sitting courtside, and placed cameramen and photographers courtside, also adding to the ambience of the game. They also made strides in improving in-game animations by recapturing new run, jog, walk, dribble, and run-dribble animations, placing emphasis on the differences between the locomotion between smaller players and much larger players.32

Lastly, the NBA Live team expanded on their Franchise mode to Sports Role Playing (SPR) mode to target those hardcore gamers who are also interested in a sports equivalent to regular role-playing games (RPGs). In this mode, “players [were] given the task of building their team over a period of time, while earning the ability (through completion of game play tasks) to grow their team's skills by performing off season drills, making shrewd contract decisions, and purchasing bonus items to improve their team's chances for success.”33 There was a Development Points Economy added in which the user could earn points by performing different tasks in the game and spend those points to make their team better. The game also featured a walk-through 3D trophy room where the user can view all of the NBA awards won throughout their prolific career. This new addition to NBA Live brought a new dimension to basketball simulation games that has great potential for growth in the future.

**Post Game Analysis: Learning From the Past for a Promising Future**

The situation that EA faced during the “Sega Slump” at the turn of the millennium is paralleled with the competition Nintendo of America faced with Sega over ten years earlier. At the time, Nintendo had an 85 to 90 percent stranglehold on the console market, but it still had one vulnerability: its success. David Sheff in his book *Game Over* even said that “Nintendo was
dominant, and such companies tend to stagnate by sticking with old technology.” They were fat and happy, and had been lulled into a sense of invulnerability. Plus, its leaders, Hiroshi Yamauchi and Minoru Arakawa, felt that they did not see Sega as a threat and did not need to react to competition simply because they were Nintendo, which could have been a fatal mistake. Sega release their 16-bit Genesis console, which ultimately sold fairly well, but not on the level of Nintendo’s thoroughbred, the NES. This bite of their market share, however, did wake up Nintendo to the fact that they could not sit back and just watch their NES sell. They had to keep the innovation motor running in order to stay on top, which they did with their release of a superior 16-bit console, the Super NES.

Although EA Sports’ innovative slump, just like Nintendo’s, was not severely damaging, there is still much to learn from their near loss of market dominance to Sega Sports’ NBA 2K series. No matter how successful a company becomes in the video game industry, they must keep in mind that they are still in an industry of entertainment. Video game companies must realize that all forms of entertainment, from hit albums to record-breaking movie titles, are only on top for a frighteningly short amount of time, which is especially applicable to video games whose consumers are constantly looking for growth and innovation in their favorite titles.

In the midst of an uncontested command over the basketball simulation market, EA Sports forgot about its responsibility to its consumers to continuously provide better and more innovative games year after year. Although EA was able to respond to Sega Sports with cutting edge advances, this may not always be the case for them or other companies. To ensure their company’s prosperity and their consumers’ happiness, dominant companies such as EA must relentlessly innovate – even in the absence of competition.
Notes

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Appendix A
All images taken from www.mobygames.com

NBA Live ‘95

NBA Live ‘96
NBA Live ‘97

NBA Live ‘98
NBA Live ‘99

NBA Live 2000
NBA LIVE 2003 CAMPAIGN BRIEF

TITLE: NBA Live 2003

Campaign/Event: EA SPORTS Presents “Live it Live” Thursdays

Timeline: November 4th – December 20th

Objective: Each Thursday night prior to (or in between) NBA on TNT broadcasts, EA SPORTS will host a NBA Live 2003 pre game party at a campus bar/restaurant/hot spot. A NBA Live tournament will begin prior to one of the actual NBA games, with the final round of the tournament being held at halftime. NBA Live 2003 and EA SPORTS branded prizes will be awarded to event attendees, making this “the event” for basketball fans on Thursday nights!

Key Message: Feel the explosive power of the NBA with “Total Player Control.”

Target: NBA Fans, NBA Live and Sega 2K2 owners, 18-24 basketball gamers/non-owners of Madden, new hardware owners.

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<td>Wallet-sized, foldable NBA on TNT broadcast schedules with “freestyle stick” info on the back</td>
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<td>NBA Live 2003 NBA Jerseys (similar to the Reebok NFL jerseys used for Madden)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVD Trailer</td>
<td>DVD Trailer featuring the Live &amp; Jason Kidd sizzle video, and the draft commercials.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**RADIO CAMPAIGN:**

**Date:** September 5, 2002

**Target:** Basketball Players, Sport Gamers, Hardcore Gamers, Urban Market

Regional Radio trade in key urban markets – will focus on the below stations allowing LIVE to reach 30% penetration in the US market.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Rep</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>KPWR</td>
<td>nixon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>WPWX</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philly</td>
<td>WPHI</td>
<td>josh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC</td>
<td>WPGC</td>
<td>duki</td>
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<tr>
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<td>KUBE</td>
<td>dexter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>WHTA</td>
<td>Barr</td>
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<td>Tampa/Orlando</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>duki</td>
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<td>Las Vegas</td>
<td>KLUC</td>
<td>warren</td>
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<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
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</table>

**Objective:** Utilize Street Marketing Teams to ‘invade’ key major metros (LA, Chicago, Philly, DC) and key street destinations.

**COPY:**

*NBA LIVE 2003* is coming at you with all-new, revolutionary EA SPORTS Freestyle Control. With unprecedented two-handed control, step up your game with sweet crossovers, triple threat moves, post moves, and strip steals. Using the right analog stick, you can string together your moves and pull off what you want, when you want it. Whether you're taking the court as your favourite NBA team, or going “old school” with past NBA greats, you're ready to blow down the court and blow away your opponents like never before. Also featuring EA SPORTS Trax ... with original music from DJ Clue, Fabolous, Flipmode Squad featuring Busta Rhymes, Just Blaze, Snoop Dogg and more,
**NBA LIVE 2003** is the must-have basketball game of the year. EA SPORTS … "If it's in the game, it's in the game."

**Key Phrases:**
EA SPORTS presents NBA LIVE 2003  
EA SPORTS Freestyle Control – a whole new game  
EA SPORTS Trax – original songs from Fabolous, Snoop Dogg, Busta Rhymes, DJ Clue

---

**BUZZ REPORT**
**WHAT'S GOING ON OUT THERE??**

**Feedback from the Street:**

Media: House calls, radio Promotion, flyers, tournaments, word of mouth, and event tie-ins.


Swag Feedback: Although there were XXL t-shirts made, we didn’t make nearly enough in quantity, so the street team only received XL. The choice to make them in different colors worked out well, because as people from different markets traveled to Madden Challenges, they brought back different color t-shirts from other markets to their home markets. Every item we distributed was a hit, even the socks, which we thought won't be received well, were well received by the gamers, DJs (Mixshow Power Summit), and other folks. The swag was effective in creating an early buzz (M&N Jersey, Baby Doll tanks, and hoodies) in Las Vegas Freestyle Launch. Records, socks, t-shirts were extremely effective in Puerto Rico Preview at the Mixshow Power Summit. People loved the CDs, wristbands, t-shirts, and stickers, as our game launch and tournament promotion efforts continued.

Demand for this game: Very High in all street team markets.

**BUZZ:**
- Casual gamers got into this game immediately, because the graphics look real, but the play is more fun, like NBA Street.
- Throwbacks are so in right now. The decision to use Hardwood Classics jersey in the game gives this game a brand new dimension.
- People love the music, especially Fabolous cut and Just Blaze feat. Freeway/Memphis Bleek.
- People still hate the pop up bubble, with the music info. but say that it doesn’t bother them as much, since the music doesn’t “SUCK.”
- One exception on the music, they thought Hot Karl was “garbage.”
- With the music being very close to the lifestyle, our street team members are being asked on a daily basis: “How can an artist submit their music to EA for one of these games?”
- Although NBA 2K3 is a better simulation of the actual NBA basketball, Live 2003 is definitely more fun to play, and gives the player more reasons to play again and again.
- People are disappointed at the generic shoes in the game (last year, Live 2002 had actual shoes for adidas and Reebok athletes).
- Soundtrack on the vinyl is the hottest promo idea ever for a video game!
- On both Fabolous track and Just Blaze track, we are receiving airplay on over 30 major urban radio stations, and have seen at least a dozen mixtapes featuring those tracks, as well as Joe Buddens.
- Live is outselling 2K3 by a wide margin.
- Tournaments are becoming almost as popular as Madden tournaments.
- Kids either skipped school or went during their lunch period to pick up Live in Chicago, DC, Atlanta, and Philly.
- In DC, the house call demo was broadcast live on WPGC FM (50,000 watt commercial station)
- Heavy plug with XM Satellite Radio for the game launch.
Appendix C

NBA LIVE 2003 - TOTAL PLAYER CONTROL

Abstract
Basketball is a sport of individual expression. Every player has their own playing styles and tendencies. Basketball videogames have long strived to capture this with varying amounts of success. The question is, "How do you design a way for videogame users to express themselves through the controller?"

All other basketball videogames have associated one action with one button press. For example, if the user wants to perform a special dribble move such as a crossover, he/she presses a button and the animation plays. This is fine if he/she only wants to ever perform that one move. But that's not the case. Every player has a number of moves that are triggered randomly when a button is pressed. One time, the crossover dribble may play; the next time a behind-the-back dribble may play. How does the user perform the exact move he/she wants at the precise moment that he/she wants? The simple answer: pure luck.

Total Player Control - No more randomness
The Total Player Control in NBA Live 2003 is designed to address the problem described above.

First, let's provide a basic explanation on the concept of the Total Player Control. If you have ever used a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) such as Palm Pilot™, you are familiar with the input language, Graffiti®. This language associates a shape drawn with a letter of the alphabet, a number, or some other character.

Total Player Control shares this same theory: if you make a shape using the Right Analog Stick on the controller, a move (or animation) will be played. Making the same shape will always result in the same move. This means that users can decide exactly which move to use in a specified situation. No more randomness.

So, if for example, moving the Right Analog Stick up performs a spin dribble but nothing else, the user learns to associate that move with that motion on the stick. During a game situation in which a spin dribble would be the ideal move to elude a defender, the user then knows what exactly to do to give him the advantage.

Total Player Control on Offense
The greatest impact that the Total Player Control will have is on offense. This is where the players can express their own style of play best. Everyone likes to show off when they have the ball and this is where the Total Player Control shines.

Dribble vs. Non-Dribble - Different Moves
Further adding to the depth of the Total Player Control is the fact that there are different moves available to the player depending on whether the player is dribbling the ball or not. Moves that can be performed when the player is dribbling includes crossovers, behind-the-back dribbles, spin moves, and many, many more. Moves that can be performed when the player is not dribbling (but has possession of the ball) include various ball fakes, jab steps, and "style" moves such as holding the ball away from the defender.
In all, there are over 50 individual moves combined between the Dribble and Non-Dribble states that can be triggered using Total Player Control.

**Linking Moves**

On top of the unprecedented control that the user gets from this feature, there is also the ability to link moves. For example, if the user wants to go from a crossover dribble right into a spin move, he/she can do that by learning what motions to make on the Right Analog stick. This combines the dribble and non-dribble moves. Some of the coolest combos can be derived by linking moves from these two states.

By combining the 50+ moves available, the number of potential sequences that can be achieved by the user becomes quite mind-boggling.

**Post Moves**

Another game situation in which the Total Player Control can be used with great effectiveness is in the post. From a back-down situation, the player can initiate fakes, “style” moves, and more by moving the stick to various positions.

**Total Player Control on Defense**

Of course, the game experience would be somewhat incomplete if Total Player Control were not available to the defender. Relative to the arsenal of moves available on offense, the number of defensive moves is much smaller since the primary objective on defense is to prevent your opponent from scoring. The types of moves available to the defender using Total Player Control includes things like making a steal attempt with the right or left hand, depending on the direction in which the Right Analog stick is moved. Moving the stick right corresponds to the defender's right arm, and vice versa with stick movement to the left. The user can also set up to take a charge, and put additional pressure on the offensive player by moving the stick to other positions.
Appendix D

NBA LIVE 2004 HIGH CONCEPT

LAST MODIFIED: 11/18/02 - G. Lam

Product Description

Building upon the strong momentum of NBA Live 2003, the next version of the NBA Live franchise will focus primarily on in-game graphics, depth of game play, and NBA authenticity. Our goal is to deliver a product that is graphically superior, offers a deep and rewarding game play experience, and is true to the lifestyle and culture of the NBA.

Major Hooks

1. All New In Game Announcer Team (Mass Market)
   We have signed Hall of Fame announcer, Marv Albert to handle the Play by Play commentary in NBA Live. His broadcast partner and former NBA head coach, Mike Fratello also joins the NBA Live team to provide the Color Commentary.
   - Individual player specific commentary
   - Intelligent replay analysis
   - Background/historical comments about players

2. Improved Players (Graphics & Sound)
   Enhance all aspects of the in game art to deliver the best looking basketball game on the market. A strong emphasis will be placed on the player faces and body types.
   - All new player models - better differentiation between extreme sizes (e.g. Shaq vs. Iverson)
   - Use higher resolution textures for uniforms - result is better looking jerseys with creases and folds.
   - New player head geometry - Allows us to more realistically recreate players' likenesses

3. Improved Environments (Graphics & Sound)
   For the first time, NBA Live will feature all 29 NBA arenas faithfully recreated in full 3D. Attention and focus will be placed on creating livelier and more immersive arenas, meaning more courtside elements will be added.
   - In game referees - NBA referees will run the floor with your players officiating the action.
- Courtside crowd - Adding in some rows of 3D crowd to recreate the intimate feel of being courtside.
- Courtside photographers and camera people - Animating camera people will be located around the floor to add to the ambience of being at the game.

4. **Sports Role Playing Mode (Hardcore)**
This is the evolution of the current Franchise Mode. Players are given the task of building their team over a period of time, while earning the ability (through completion of game play tasks) to grow their team's skills by performing off season drills, making shrewd contract decisions, and purchasing bonus items to improve their team's chances for success.
- Development Points Economy - Earn development points by performing tasks in game. Spend those points to make your team better.
- 3D Trophy Room - View all of the NBA awards that you've won over the course of your prolific career.
- Cinematic Sequences for important events - NBA Rookie Draft, Big Name Free Agent Signings.

5. **Improved Gameplay (Gameplay)**
Build on the momentum from the myriad of gameplay enhancements and new features in NBA Live 2003 to deliver an authentic NBA experience that is deep but most importantly, fun to play.
- Off Ball Play - Allow the user to switch to (and control) any player on the floor.
- Team Specific Quick Plays - Add "pet plays" for all 29 NBA teams.
- In-air player collisions - Focusing on the collisions between players around the basket. Examples include being blocked on a lay-up or dunk.
- Major enhancements to the defensive AI - Also a heavy focus on improving the user controlled defensive game play mechanics.

---

**Minor Hooks**

1. **EA Sports™ Freestyle Control Enhancements (Gameplay)**
Build upon the success of the Freestyle Control feature. Focus on individual player differentiation so that players' unique skill sets are reflected in the types of moves available. For example, Gary Payton's moves will be different than Jason Kidd's even though both are point guards.
- Signature Superstar Moves - Superstars will feature their own signature style moves.
- Freestyle Passing - Some players will be able to throw highlight reel passes from their freestyle moves.
2. **Expanded PS2 Online Feature Set (Hardcore)**
   Partner with the Madden/Tiburon team and other EA Sports Products to deliver a consistent feature set and to share technology.
   - Add One on One game mode to online play
   - Increase the number of user statistics being tracked on the server.

3. **EA Sports Bio (Hardcore)**
   A joint initiative with all of the EA Sports franchises, the EA Sports Bio is a shared file type displays individual product accomplishments as well as an overall EA Sports user level. At any given level, each individual product will unlock special rewards.

4. **Customizable Gameplay AI (Gameplay)**
   NBA Live 2004 will allow the user to customize the game play experience by adjusting a series of slider bars. Things like game speed, shot block percentage, rebounding, fouls, and more can be manipulated by the user.

5. **Improved Animations (Graphics & Sound)**
   We will be capturing all new run, jog, walk, dribble, and run dribble animations. Emphasis will also be placed on differentiating the differences in locomotion between smaller players and much larger players.
   - Ambient animations - Players away from the ball will animate in a more lifelike manner and be more aware of the ball.
   - Continuation of motion - Non-user controlled players will no longer "stop on a dime" when the whistle blows, opting for a more realistic slow down animation.
Appendix E

NBA Live Marketing Plan

Advertising

TV
- $8+ Million Campaign beginning at launch
- NBA Draft spots to build early momentum
- “Livin’ it Live” Campaign: Art imitates Life (60 sec. and 30 sec. spots)
- Nationally Televised Launch Event
- Enhanced TNT Cyberstrator

Print
- $500k campaign in Nov-Dec Books Concept:
- 2 page spread in Lifestyle pubs
- 4 page spread in Gaming Pubs

Music Bundle
- The goal of this promotion is for the music CD to be a differentiator at the point of sale and help secure additional market share in the basketball war
- Call out (starburst) on front of pack (per approval from Sony and Microsoft (if not, back of pack)
- Call out in second round of print advertising
- Stickerering browser boxes (4 weeks in advance)
- Online push -- early give-aways, streaming music sound bytes, ...
- Hand out promos for Street teams, college teams, floor personnel
- Radio distribution -- distribute to radio stations for potential airing

Public Relations
- Listen and Learn Tour
  - Listen and Learn Tour - 4 trips to 3 cities
  - 2 Rounds of Preview code personally delivered by Producers
  - Press Events in SF, Chicago and NYC
- Leverage Cover Athlete - Jason Kidd
- NBA Live Player Council: Steven Francis, Drew Gooden,
- Camp EA, NY Tour
- Door to Door preview code presentations
- Incorporating 3rd page into print advertising specific trade
- Marv Albert VO of tutorial directly into product, featured on menu screen, Marv’s top 10 list of ways to use Freestyle Control
- Testimonials talking about how awesome it is from Busta Rhymes, Snoop Dogg, Hot Karl, Just Blaze, Marv Albert, Jason Kidd
- Lifestyle launch event to key influencers @ MAGIC show in Las Vegas.

Launch Event
- Simultaneous launch events at in LA, NYC and with online play to TNT in Atlanta in October.
• Countdown to launch event/campaign using Media, Promotion, Retail, and PR
• Leverage our music partners to blow out a campaign that supports the games lifestyle

Street Marketing
• Listening/viewing parties on college Campuses
• Fabulous Mall Tour
• Radio remotes/giveaways/artist voice drops
• LIVE big wall projections
• Regional radio
• Music award shows
• MixPower show Summit

Promotions - Marketing
• Old Time Jersey’s: Hardwood Classic’s (hang tags)
• Urban Radio Campaign
• Dub Campaign
• Wave of Street Team presence at industry’s events
• College Campus tournaments with College reps

Retail
• Blockbuster Guarantee rental with in-store support - Live guaranteed for rental
• Pre-sell campaign with EB and Gamestop online
• All Star Weekend sweepstakes with Specialty trade
• Music CD GWP for PS2
• Browser Boxes in stores
• In-store Demo Kiosks and Videos via Sony
• $5 (EA buck) off coupon in Madden for Live
• Online giveaway of an autographed Jason Kidd Basketball
• NBA Live 2003 Stickers for Online Presell
• All Star Sweepstakes Prize Package
• Support Manager shows

Web/Online
• NBA.com video game section 4 month advertising campaign
• $5 off LIVE coupon cross-sell insert with Madden
• AOL promotion for All Star Balloting
• Email blasts to databases on easports.com, nba.com
• Exclusive content on gaming pubs

Check it out!
Music

- Just Blaze - Pre-awareness
- Fabulous - 10 city tour (2 weeks prior to launch)
- Snoop Dogg - Launch Event
- Busta Rhymes - Thanksgiving (3 weeks after launch)

PS2 on-line: unlockable character and song

NBA Live 2003 EA Sport Trax

1. Snoop Dogg - “Get Live”
2. Fabulous - “It’s in the Game”
3. Hot Karl - “Blao (Cherokee Parks Remix)”
4. Joe Buddon - “Drop Drop”
5. B. Rich - “Whoa Now”
6. No Good - “Ballin’ Boy”
7. Archie Eversole (feat. Bubba Sparxx) - “We Ready”
8. Lil Bow Wow - “Basketball”
9. Angie Martinez - “If I Could”
10. Knocturnal - “Musik”
11. Brandy (Fat Joe Remix) - “Full Moon”
12. Monica - “All Eyez on Me”
13. 3LW - “I Do (Close to You)”

- 5 week PR and Marketing Rollout
- MixPower Show Summit – 35 top urban radio markets
- 10 city mall tour with Fabulous tied into Charity 2 weeks prior to launch
- Snoop and Brandi support at launch - songs, videos, TV shows
- Busta Rhymes releases new album 3 weeks post launch
- PS2 on-line: unlockable character and song
- Just Blaze: Pre-awareness
- Leveraging Music Partners in conjunction with the NBA for a soundtrack
- Effectively penetrat3 and leverage Music Award Shows
- On-line promotions and contests around #1 Music Track
## Seasonal Rolling Calendar

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<th>Total MIL</th>
<th>6%</th>
<th>6%</th>
<th>42%</th>
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### Competitor Market Share Goals

2003 Simulation Products

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<th>Drive</th>
<th>Other</th>
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* Sony

Appendix F
### 2003 Simulation Products

EA's Market Share Estimates for

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Sports