

Case History: The Evolution and Success of College Football Videogames

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On first inspection the sports game is one of the most paradoxical genres of videogames. There is the stereotypical view that videogames are to be played alone in dark rooms by people who never get any real physical exercise. Yet, over the years increasing numbers of gamers, whether athletic or not, are playing out their dreams as star athletes through sports videogames. Therefore,

the present-day notion of a sports videogame triggers the stereotype of sports fans gathered around a television in a living room yelling and laughing amongst themselves while they compete against each other. In today's society, there are few if any, videogame genres that have become as popular as sports games.

Currently, any ordinary gamer no matter who they are or how old they are has the opportunity to be a football star or to control an entire team to a national victory. With the ever-increasing popularity of college athletics, it is inevitable that college football would evolve from the broad category of football videogames. However, for a sports game to be a success, it must offer something that the others do not; some kind of innovation or new idea that will entice the players to play that one rather than the other games under the same genre. College football videogames accomplish this goal in several ways by offering a unique sub-genre of the standard football games, remaining fundamentally the same with each subsequent edition, fostering a social playing atmosphere, and providing a plethora of new innovations for each new edition.

History of EA Sports Football Videogames: NCAA Football

The story of sports video gaming parallels the story of football gaming. Ever since the console and computer game industries got going in the late 1970's, developers have been trying to build a better football game. The concept of little black gaming boxes dragging Sunday afternoon and Monday evening football through the rest of the week was a huge selling plus for the console systems. Although there were originally serious draw backs with the animation and playing options, football videogames were still popular in the 1970's and 1980's (Todd, Internet). The ability required to outsmart as well as outplay one's opponents provided football gaming with an added strategic element that could not be attained in baseball, basketball, or hockey videogames.

At the end of the 1980's, a new era in football videogames began. EA Sports, a division of Electronic Arts, emerged as the particular company that stood above the rest; it revolutionized not only the football games but also the entire sports game genre itself (Todd, Internet). With the advent of John Madden Football debuting in 1989 from EA, a series would evolve into one of the most popular of sports game franchises over the following decade.

After spending 15 years on the sidelines in sports videogames, college football finally got into the game in 1993. EA Sports founded a Sega Genesis series based on the John Madden Football line; otherwise known as Bill Walsh College Football, the game featured collegiate clubs instead of their professional counterparts (Holmes, Internet). College Football debuted in 1993 and soon developed a strong fan base. At the outset, the videogame was nothing more than a basic copy of the latest Madden game, with 24 clubs and 24 of the best college teams since 1978 taking the place of the 28 NFL franchises (Holmes, Internet). At the time, there was no NCAA license, so the teams represented simply fictional schools with close ties to their real-world equivalents (Hawes, Internet). For instance, South Bend represented Notre Dame, and Los Angeles stood in for UCLA. Thus, in many respects, this first college football videogame was a quickie port of an NFL game; the season mode was absent, bowl play was replaced with an unrealistic playoff system, and many trademark college formations were left out. In actuality, aside from the presence of football legend, Bill Walsh, there simply wasn't much of a collegiate feel in this game.

However, with the acquisition of the NCAA license for the sequel all that changed. By 1995, the Bill Walsh College Football version boasted 36 of the top collegiate teams in the nation with complete rosters. In addition, players had the ability to put the teams through their paces in full season play that led to either a bowl appearance or a playoff to determine a national champion. Furthermore, the playbooks were eventually reworked to include such college standbys as the offensive wishbone and the flex, along with the defensive plays needed to counter them. Since its emergence back into the gaming scene in 1997, NCAA Football has improved each year, drawing in more fans and increasingly capturing the unique ambiance of a college football game like never before.

Unique Genre of Football Videogames

The NCAA Football series has taken off since its Bill Walsh College Football days. Due to a combinations of factors the series has now been able to step out of Madden's shadow and be in a league of its own amidst the many football videogames on the market. With football becoming the most hard-nosed competitive sport developed these days in the gaming industry, logical variations

of the sport are clearly needed. Currently, there are at least 40 different football video games out on the market, such as John Madden NFL 2003, NES Play Action Football, NFL Blitz 2003, Pro League Football, Quarterback Attack, Tecmo Bowl, and Unnecessary Roughness, just to name a few (Boulding, Internet). Because all these games and more are competing for the gamers' interests, there is intense pressure to develop better and more realistic games to beat out other competitors in the market. This is where college football finds its unique niche in the extensive and competitive category of football videogames. It is able to set itself apart from the NFL and Pro versions on the basic premise that NCAA Football captures the spirit and excitement that is unique to college football. Special features such as the crazed fans in the stands, to the mascots on the field, to the fight songs played by the band help to distinguish NCAA Football in a sub-genre of its own.

Furthermore, given the school spirit with college athletics these days, it is inevitable that college football games would be a popular genre of sports videogames. Football gamers are most often football fans. At topnotch football schools, such as University of Miami, Ohio State, and Texas, each game attracts about 90,000 people. Therefore, given the rabid fan base for college football, it is not surprising the NCAA Football videogames have been successful. College football videogames attract gamers that can range anywhere from college students, parents of the players, kids who aspire to someday play at the collegiate level, the players themselves, and ordinary gamers. It doesn't matter who one is in real life or what physical capabilities one lacks, football videogames provide a gamer with the possibility to extend beyond their own physical limitations (Poole, 32). When playing a videogame, college sports fans want the real teams and players in the games; they want to have the opportunity to play with the teams and players they know and love. NCAA Football caters to these interests on many levels; NCAA Football 2001 captures the college atmosphere by incorporating many features such as the Momentum Meter, additional college mascots, a new Hang Time Clock, and dynamic crowd cheers and chants, all of which recreate the true-to-life ambiance of a college football game. Since then, further advances in technology have only heightened the level of college football atmosphere. The newest 2003 edition includes over 200 different college licensed fight songs, 3D cheerleaders, and 144 Division I-A schools, all of

which fosters that unique ambiance of a college football game (Boulding, Internet). Thus, NCAA Football has evolved to symbolize the natural extension of the EA Sports brand and motto, "if it's in the game, it's in the game."

Fosters Social Activity

Athletic competition fosters the concept of a social sporting event; this has been an integral part of human culture since its inception. At a basic level, social video gaming involves two, three, or four friends playing against each other through colorful digital surrogates on the screen. With the option of multi-player controllers, football videogames allow for and are specifically built for a form of social play activity. The videogame console is mediating and providing the visual forms for such contests, yet the pleasure remains largely a social one (Poole, 166). "One of the most enjoyable times that people have when they're playing games tends to be good multi-player games" (Poole, 166). In NCAA Football, opposing college teams face-off against each other; friends and gamers have the option of choosing among their favorite college football teams to battle it out.

Furthermore, not only do football videogames provide the option of multi-player capabilities, but they are also taking on a new realistic form of televised sports broadcasting. In the newest versions of NCAA Football, hours of football commentary are recorded from real TV commentators, such as Lee Corso, Kirk Herbstreit, and Brad Nessler (Boulder, Internet). Their comments have become increasingly more situational given the specific context of the game. In NCAA Football 2003, the XBox provides the Dolby Digital Surround Sound while GameCube and PS2 makes use of the Pro Logic sound effects. The surrounding fans, coaches on the sidelines, and commentators help foster the ambiance unique to a television college football game.

In addition to sound, the animation also attempts to capture the essence of a broadcasted sporting event. For instance, slow-motion replays from multiple angles on outstanding plays emulate how television broadcasts portray such similar plays. Furthermore, in NCAA Football 2003 on GameCube, there is a noticeable blurring effect of the players after each play is completed; as the players are getting up and heading back to the huddle, the running back or receiver who just

had the ball will be in crisp focus, while everybody around him in both the background and the foreground is blurry. This illustrates one of the many attempts of football videogames to re-create the televised camera effect. Thus, this combination of advanced sound and imagining options help to blur the division between a videogame and a televised sporting event; NCAA Football is increasingly able to capture all the frills of a Saturday morning including rabid fans, cheerleaders, and fight songs more than its predecessors in the past. Thus the modern sports football game is no longer a re-creation of an actual sport so much as it is a re-creation of viewing that sport on television. Furthermore, football video games are designed with the television audience in mind. In this way, both the non-players and players alike can enjoy the social activity of watching a football game on the screen which nearly parallels one that is a televised broadcast. The main difference now is that watching college football is no longer a passive experience; with the advent of more realistic football videogames, the fans can really get into the action.

Structure Stays the Same

The use of a sport as a videogame theme is very appropriate since sports are inherently competitive, have established rules for scoring, and the general population is familiar with how they are played in real life. Therefore, the unbeatable advantage of football videogames is that the rules are already given and most people know them; one does not have to spend precious time studying a manual to learn the rules involved of how to win (Poole, 38). At the outset of the sports gaming industry, the accepted logic was that a gaming business designed and sold one version of a sports game, perhaps augmenting it with a season disc or two. Yet, EA Sports' successful development of Madden football as a yearly franchise revolutionized the way sports games were marketed (Holmes, Internet). In today's sports gaming industry, the updated version of a game is now released with calendar-like precision, with the new version hitting the store shelves before the beginning of the equivalent real-world season.

With each new release, the rules fundamentally stay the same, yet game quality and options keep improving annually with the new technological innovations available. Therefore, EA's

formula for success with its football franchises is a continuing cycle revolving around on a college football season, revamping the old-version of the videogame, and then releasing the new one. Just about every sequel in the NCAA Football series has offered newer and better features than its predecessor. Recent additions over the years, include Dynasty Mode, pitch and pump fakes, analog passing, and polygonal players, plus a few other extra enhancements and options that help to keep the old formula fresh. For instance, in NCAA 1999 EA Sports gained exclusive licenses for the FedEx Orange Bowl, the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl, and the Nokia Sugar Bowl, which were featured in that series (Hawes, Internet). In 2000, EA Sports sponsored the Las Vegas Bowl to hype the release of the next year's edition. The 2001 version employs the use of the official real-life BCS rating system. The videogame contains the all-time top 25 teams, and allows the player to play in Bowl games and is home to the Nokia Sugar Bowl and, of course, the FedEx Orange Bowl (Zdyrko, Internet). Subsequent versions also provide the BCS rating system for their given year. Thus, the advancements in game technology allow for the annually-released edition to improve upon the older version's weaknesses, while the structure of the game remains the same over the years, allowing the gamer to play just as he had on the older versions.

Innovations in Game Design

NCAA Bill Walsh College Football 1993 was a forerunner of better things to come; the original version suffered from weak graphics, yet set a standard that has only been improved upon over the years. Higher-resolution graphics on home computers and gaming systems ushered in a new wave of sports games that have been highly successful. Graphics have become more detailed, control methods more complex, and environments more colorful, detailed, and changeable. When videogames cracked 3D representation in the mid 1990's, sports games flourished more than ever before (Poole, 38). With new possibilities in graphic design, realism began to take over as the games increasingly included minute details, such as accurate uniform designs, distinguishable faces in the crowds, as well as school mascots and cheerleaders. NCAA Football 2003 has everything from the players' helmets, to fans in the crowd, to the cheerleaders' sweaters displayed in perfection.

The 2003 NCAA Football XBox version features a polished sheen on the players' uniforms, even on the dark colors the jerseys look like actual fabric rather than just dark paint. The helmet reflections of the surrounding stadium and lights are particularly noticeable in both the XBox and PS2; the detail is so advanced that one can see the sun shining off their lids on a bright day or the ring of stadium lights shining off the top of the helmet at night. Therefore, advances in graphic technology and presentation allow for numerous new animations that help make the game more realistic and exciting. With each new release of NCAA Football there are continual improvements made to game play and graphics that year.

In addition to enhanced graphic and animation abilities, with each new edition EA Sports has revamped NCAA Football by incorporating numerous new options of gameplay. From the 2002 to 2003 edition of NCAA Football, several improvements have made the jump seem like a quantum leap (Zdyrko, Internet). The Create-A-School feature and Trophy Room lead the pack of new things that put NCAA Football at the forefront of 2003's crop of football titles (NFL or otherwise) and licensed sports games in general. Create-A-School mode allows a gamer to create their own football team. Everything from the logos on the field, to stadium size, to their school's fight song can be customized. Thus the player can choose their favorite team and the game interface will be based around their team's fight song, mascot, logos, and school colors. Likewise, in Dynasty Mode, any championships or individual season awards that one wins are placed under a player profile's Trophy Room. This means conference championships, bowl championships, coach of the year awards, and Heismans will all be in one convenient location. The majority of classic rivalries are acknowledged, for instance, Cal and Stanford's Big Game have a traveling trophy at stake, USC and Notre Dame battle for the Jeweled Shillelagh, while Michigan and Michigan State's Battle for the Paul Bunyan Trophy. In this 2003 version, over 140 schools go helmet-to-helmet in the tradition and pageantry that is college football; the announcers recap the plays, the school bands play the fight songs, the 3D cheerleaders shout, and the mascots parade around (Boulding, Internet). With the improved innovations of plays, variable formation strings, and gameplay options, there are numerous options of configurability and variety that one can extrapolate from NCAA Football.

In 1984 Chris Crawford predicted that he "suspect[s] sports games will not attract a great deal of design attention in the future" (Poole, 37). Yet, contrary to his prediction, the current era of sports videogames has evolved into a multi-billion industry. Ironically, the challenges facing sports videogames nowadays is no longer whether there will be a large enough consumer interest, but rather if the game designers can create enough new and unique sports games to quench the undying thirst of gamers. Presently, football gamers have a plethora of options to chose from, which in turn has its pros and cons for the gaming industry. There are three major consoles, PlayStation 2, GameCube, and XBox, each with high-speed processors and large memory capacities, with future generations of consoles in development (Takahashi, 217). When this is combined with multiple software companies who design games across platforms, the result is consumers that have a variety of high quality choices for their gaming experience. Yet NCAA Football has emerged successful in the sports videogame arena due a the combination of several factors: capturing the unique ambiance of a college football game, remaining structurally the same with each edition improving over the last, fostering an alternative social environment for football fans, and providing the latest innovations in every new version. These four aspects of NCAA Football have helped college football games to emerge from the football genre of videogames in a league of their own. With technological advancements fueling game innovations and an increasingly growing fan base of consumers, the future of such football, and sports videogames in general, is infinite. Yet, the question remains of how far sports videogames can evolve until they can truly get a gamer "in the game."

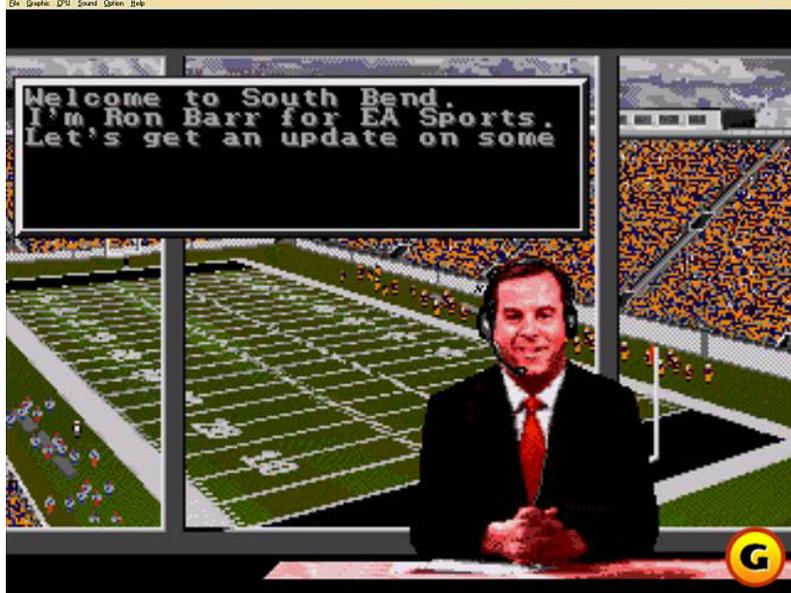
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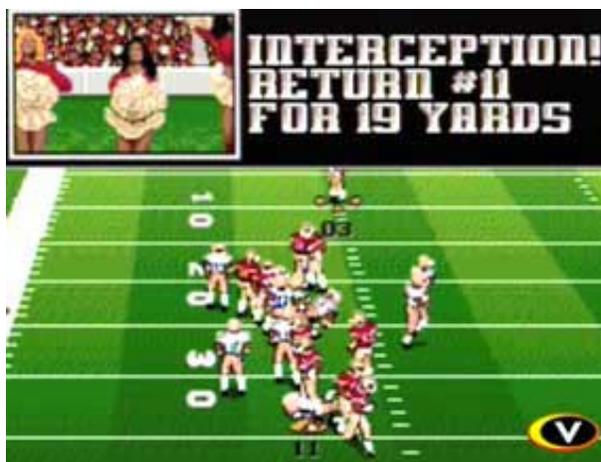
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NCAA Football 1993 Screen Shots

How It All Began...
Bill Walsh College
Football





NCAA Football 2003 Screen Shots

How Far We Have Come...



Boo CAL!

