

Why John Madden Football Has Been Such A Success

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STS 145: The History of Computer Game Design: Technology, Culture, Business

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Why John Madden Football Has Been Such A Success Case History

Athletic competition has been a part of the human culture since its inception. One of the most popular and successful sports of today's culture is American football. This sport has grown into a worldwide phenomenon, and like the video game industry, has become a multi-billion entity. It was only a matter of time until game developers teamed up with the National Football League (NFL) to bring magnificent sport to video game players across the globe. There are few, if any, game genres that are as popular as sports games. With the ever-increasing popularity of the NFL, it was inevitable that football games would become one of the most lucrative of the sports game genre. With all of the companies making football games for consoles and PCs during the late 1980s and 1990s, there is one particular company that clearly stood and remains above the rest, Electronic Arts. EA Sports, the sports division of Electronic Arts, revolutionized not only the football sports games but also the entire sports game genre itself. Before Electronic Arts entered the sports realm, league licenses, celebrity endorsements, and re-release of games were all unheard of. EA was one of the first companies to release the same game annually, creating several series of games that are thriving even today. The John Madden Football series has no counterpart that even comes close to rivaling its in-depth detail of the game of football. With its innovation, marketing, and star power, EA Sports used John Madden Football and other sports titles to strong-arm market share in the sports sector of video game industry and become the largest producer of video games in the

entire world. Electronics Arts sales in 1997 were over \$600 million, with John Madden Football contribution approximately \$70 million¹. The main factors that directly contributed to the success of the John Madden Football over the years were the constant technological innovations of the series, EA's acquisitions of NFL and NFLPA (National Football League Players Association) licenses, intense branding and marketing of the EA Sports name, and of course John Madden himself.

In order for a sports game to be successful, it must offer something that others do not. It must contain some type of innovation and new ideas that will cause players to look past other titles of the same genre, which is exactly what Electronic Arts did with the John Madden Football series. Just about every sequel in the Madden series offered new and better features than its predecessor and every other football game on the market at that time. The first Madden Football was released on the Apple II in 1989. The popularity of Madden took off when John Madden Football '91 was released in 1990 on the Sega Genesis, the first 16-bit game console of its time. In this version EA Sports revolutionized video game football with the introduction of offensive and defensive formations, each with a few plays in them. To improve the passing game EA Sports introduced the "passing windows." These windows allowed the player to see a close view of his receivers and choose the one he wants to throw to by pressing the corresponding button on the controller. Some of the drawbacks of Madden '91 include that there were only 16 teams and the lack of NFL and/or NFLPA licenses.

Madden '92 saw addition of all 28 NFL teams, the Electronic Arts Sports Network (EASN), turf and weather settings, and more formations for the defense and

¹ Nikhil Hutheesing, "Electronic Arts's Strategy in Computer Game Publishing." Forbes.

offense. In this version EA added some of its classic features, many of which are still used today, such as easily operable kicking meter, end zone celebrations, and detailed game statistics. At this time the Genesis version was by far the better than its Super Nintendo counterpart. There were relatively few changes in Madden '93 and '94, except that the real NFL teams were added in and the EASN was discontinued in Madden '94. During this span the quality of the Super Nintendo versions caught up quite a bit to the Genesis versions. John Madden Football '95 also saw a few minor changes, except for the fact that the Super Nintendo version lacked the NFLPA license. A graphically and technically superior Madden '95 was created for the new 32-bit Panasonic 3DO game system.

Much revamping was done to the 1996 version (created in 1995 of course) John Madden Football. Fox football hosts Pat Summerall and Leslie Visser were added as commentators and there were several noticeable changes to the Madden playbook. Left-handed quarter backs and jumping receivers were two of the notable innovative additions for this year. The graphics and game play were redone, as well as the "create a player" option. Madden '97 was a new era graphically for the Madden series. The 32-bit Sega Saturn and Sony Playstation provided new visual technology that blew away the Genesis and Super Nintendo versions of this Madden. The graphics and greatly improved and lots full motion video was added. The rest of the game, however, remained similar to its predecessors. A few improvements were made in all versions of Madden '98, '99, and '00 such as improved AI, graphics, and the Fantasy Draft. The Nintendo 64 version of Madden lacked an NFL license in Madden '98. Better commentary was inserted into the '00 version. THQ took over the development of the Super Nintendo and Genesis

versions. Madden '01 and '02 were released on the Playstation 2 as well as the other platforms. The Playstation 2 brought even better graphics, AI, video, etc. to the Madden series. For the most part though there were not many changes.

Despite the several innovations in the overall game play and the technology used in the John Madden Series over the years, John Madden Football would not have been as successful as it was without the NFL and NFLPA licenses that the EA acquired for the game. The NFL and NFLPA grant licenses to individuals or companies who wish to incorporate the teams and or players of the NFL in a commercial product. Based on the product the party wishing to acquire the license must pay a certain fee to the body that they are trying to acquire the license from. If no NFL license has been granted to a company, then the teams and logos of the NFL cannot in any way be present in the product. Similarly if a company does not have a NFLPA license, NFL players' images, their names, signature facsimiles, voices, pictures, photographs, likenesses and/or biographical information cannot in any way exist in the product.

NFL Properties, the marketing and licensing subsidiary of the NFL, was established in 1963. NFL Properties is responsible for promoting and protecting the league's logos and trademarks. By 1969 the gross revenue for NFL Properties was \$1.5 million dollars. By 1986 that number had jumped to a staggering \$500 million dollars, and in 1992 that number grew to over \$150 million². Needless to say, the NFL is making a sizeable amount of money off of the licensing of its name, logo, and teams every year.

The NFL was created in 1920, however at that time there was no representation present for players until almost 35 years later. Players were given no benefits, which

²John Steinbreder, "Marketing and Licensing by NFL Properties." Sports Illustrated

means that players had did not have health insurance, life insurance, a pension, a minimum salary, or pay for preseason games. Even worse injured players were not guaranteed salary. In 1956 several players of the Green Bay Packers requested clean jocks, socks, and uniforms for two a day practices from the team owner. The owner refused, so the players decided to organize. This organization eventually led to the creation of the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA). The NFLPA has now grown to an organization that represents over 1,800 active and 3,200 retired NFL players³. PLAYERS Inc. was created in 1994 as the licensing and marketing division of the NFL Players Association. Prior to 1994 licensing and marketing were handled directly by the Association itself. Players Inc. currently has licensing agreements with over 100 companies for retail products. Players Inc. also has several corporate partnerships, where they help create marketing campaigns that involve NFL players.

One of the companies that the NFL and the NFLPA has licensed to and continues to license to, is EA Sports. The first John Madden Football, released in 1990, featured no NFL or NFLPA license, a grave mistake that EA Sports eventually learned from. According to a writer of Videogames.com, “Surprisingly, only 16 city teams were included, plus the stereotypical All-Madden team. While this made the playoff tree easy to configure, numerous fans around the country were out of luck because their team was not represented.”⁴ Because football gamers are football fans, they want the real teams and players in the games. They want to have the opportunity to choose and win their

9 March 1992: v76, n9.

³ “Licensing – Company History.” NFL Players.com.

http://www.nflplayers.com/licensing/licensing_companyHistory.asp.

⁴ “The History of Madden Football.”

http://www.videogames.com/features/universal/hist_madden/index.html

favorite teams. No matter how good the first John Madden Football's gameplay and game features were players were disappointed because several of their favorite teams and players were not present. EA Sports did acquire an NFL and NFLPA license until the release of John Madden Football '94 (released in 1993). How licensing affects sales became very apparent with the release of John Madden Football '95 (released in 1994). In John Madden Football '95, the NFLPA license was present in the Sega Genesis version but not in the Super Nintendo version. Even though the gameplay and technology was almost identical in both console versions, the Genesis version severely outsold the Super Nintendo version. EA later made the same mistake when it released Madden 64 for the Nintendo 64. A game reviewer from Nintendorks.com notes,

“Last year's football race for the N64 Super bowl was quite a story. Madden 64 sported better gameplay than its only competitor, NFL Quarterback Club from Acclaim. So it should have been another victory for EA Sports, right? Not quite. The lack an NFL license and graphical prowess turned many gamers away from the title. As a result, Acclaim hit the jackpot with Quarterback Club.⁵”

William Gordon, executive vice president of Electronic Arts who once worked for ad agency Ogilvy & Mather), notes “I watched the branding of Henry Weinhard's premium beer and Pillsbury and realized the difference between the branded product and the generic one can be 30%.⁶” Just recently EA.com formed a licensing deal with the NFL. This deal grants Electronics Arts the right to use teams, logos, stadiums, for EA's online games. In giving his reasons for the deal, EA President and Chief Operating Officer John Riccitiello states, "Partnering with the NFL clearly puts a stake in the ground for EA.com to become the dominant provider of online interactive sports entertainment. A

⁵ Preview – Madden 99. [Nintendorks.com](http://www.nintendorks.com). 17 October 2000.

<http://www.nintendorks.com/previews.php?ContentID=339>.

⁶ Nikhil Hutheesing, “Electronic Arts's Strategy in Computer Game Publishing.”

partnership between the No. 1 sports league site in the country and the premier online game destination is a win-win for football fans.⁷ Neither the NFL nor the NFLPA disclose the amount of individual contracts with companies. One can speculate that the contracts of Electronics Arts has with these organizations, based on the revenue that they bring in from their John Madden Football games, are probably some of the more lucrative deals for the NFL and NFLPA.

Although NFL and NFLPA licensing is an extremely important aspect of the John Madden series, the marketing and branding of the game and company is probably one of the more significant aspects of the commercial success of the series. Electronic Arts, particularly EA Sports, has created a brand loyalty similar to that of shoe companies or premier clothing designers. The classic “EA Sports – It’s in the Game,” slogan started arriving in EA Sports games and in commercials around 1993, with the release of John Madden Football ‘94⁸. The slogan, along with constant television advertising, helped to engrain the EA Sports brand into the culture of sports gamers. Even people who were not fanatic video game players started taking notice of games in the EA Sports lineup. This branding of its sports games allowed EA Sports to become the number one producer in the sports game genre. John Madden Football has become a household name both among gamers and non-gamers.

Few, if any, would argue that the success of the John Madden Football series would not have been possible without the help of the man who lent his name to the series,

⁷ “Electronic Arts Seals NFL Licensing Deal.” [Digitrends.net](http://www.digitrends.net/mna/index_13575.html).
http://www.digitrends.net/mna/index_13575.html.

⁸ “The History of Madden Football.” [Videogames.com](http://www.videogames.com/features/universal/hist_madden/index.html).
http://www.videogames.com/features/universal/hist_madden/index.html

John Madden. Prior to signing on with Electronic Arts, the former Raiders coach was a highly respected commentator with a growing reputation. Madden was known for his powerful and energetic personality, especially from his several endorsements. Many of his commercials depicted Madden bursting through walls and doors. The first box cover of the first John Madden Football (released on the Apple II in 1989) had Madden bursting through a chalkboard. John Madden became an integral part of the game series. Any Madden player knows that John Madden's commentary was classic. He often had jokes and one-liners for plays that produced poor performance, and for when a defensive player made a hard hit on the ball carrier. Even though voice samples of earlier Maddens were limited, they were funny and interesting to listen to (at least for the first half or so of the game). When Madden transferred from CBS to Fox back in 1994, this was reflected in the game series (Madden '95 and after) as well. Fox's theme music became the opening music for the game. In John Madden football '96, Madden's partner Pat Summerall and Fox Sports reporter Lesley Visser were incorporated into the game as well. When the Madden series was released on the next generation hardware, Sony Playstation and Sega Saturn, live video of Madden and Summerall and more, tremendously improved, voice samples were incorporated into the series. Madden and Summerall would make give complete analysis of plays, and even tips to the player(s) during the game. John Madden became a key marketing tool for both the series and EA Sports itself. Madden was seen and heard by a nation wide audience on every Sunday, so he was always in the public eye. His career has lasted longer than several players who were featured in the Madden games.

The combination of innovation, key licensing deals with the NFL and NFLPA, marketing and branding, and acquisition of deal with John Madden has put Electronic Arts at the pinnacle of the football gaming world. The John Madden Football series, a true dynasty for video games, has become the standard for the sports game genre. Each Madden game was always technologically and conceptually superior than any of its competitors. Over time EA Sports learned that it takes more than a quality games and technological innovation to be commercially successful in the sports gaming industry. The company eventually realized that NFL and NFLPA licenses are critical to the success of a John Madden Football game, no matter how high the quality is of the actual game. If the licenses are not present, game players will be immediately turned off, as they do not have the opportunity to play with the teams and players that they know and love. EA Sports has had some kind of NFL licensing agreement since 1993, an agreement that has been very profitable for both Electronic Arts and the NFL. "We've had a very successful relationship with EA for many years."⁹ said NFL Commissioner Paul Taglaibue. "EA Sports – It's in the Game," while introduced back in 1993, is a slogan even today resounds throughout the entire sports gaming culture. Any video game player, sports game fan, or plain old sports fan has heard this familiar saying several times throughout their life. This style of aggressive marketing and branding has proved to be extremely successful with all of the sports titles associated with EA Sports. Without the help of the man on the box, the John Madden Football series would never have achieved its level of greatness. He provided the instant star power that the game needed to give the series credibility. John Madden was a legendary coach and respected broadcaster, and brought

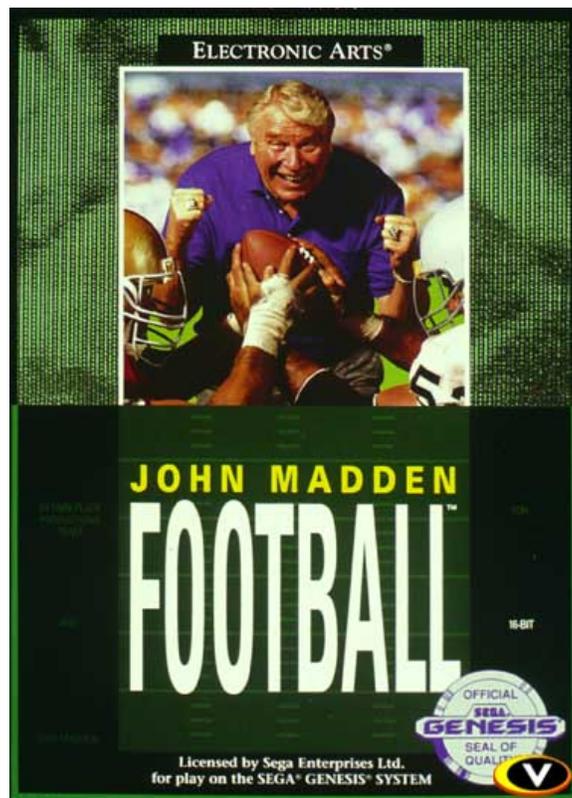
⁹ "EA.com Inks Online License with NFL." EA.com. 18 January 2001. www.ea.com.

instant recognition to EA Sports. With his face on television week in and week out, John Madden never faded from the public eye, allowing gamers to always put a face and personality with the game. He even brought his NFL experience to the development of the game, providing help with the playbooks and intricate details of the sport that no programmer would ever know. Without one of these three necessary components, the John Madden Football series would have never become as successful as it is today.

John Madden Football Screen Shots

How It All Began...

John Madden Football – Sega Genesis (Released in 1990)



How Far We Have Come...

Madden 2002 – Nintendo Game Cube (Released in 2001)



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