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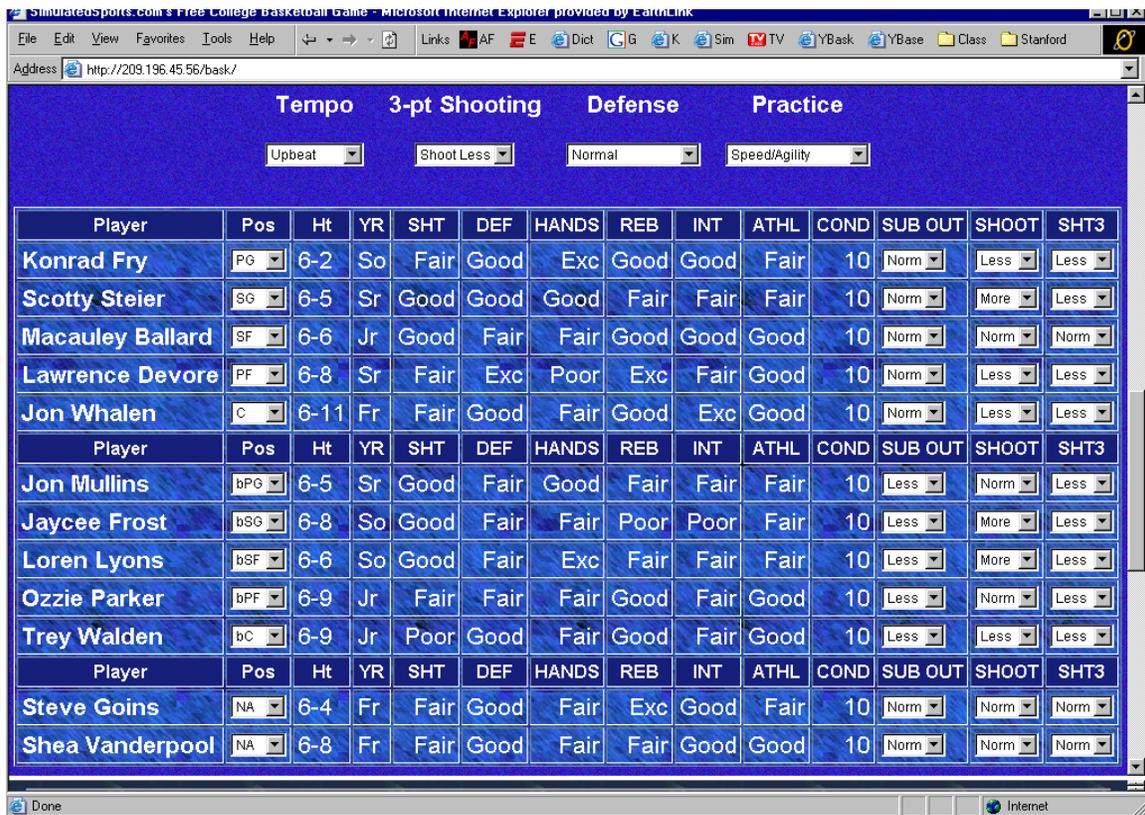
Case History: Sim Basketball **An Online Sports Simulation**

It took Jeremy Vessels about six months to develop the simulation and online interface for Sim Basketball; however, it could have been completed in far shorter a time if not for his many other responsibilities. The success of Sim Basketball is not due to the complicated statistical models underlying the simulation, nor to a flawless representation of reality or to a sophisticated online presentation - as long as these components were adequate the game would have been popular. The game itself is fairly minimal: what makes it a success is simply that it exists at all.

Sim Basketball is divided into 17 parallel leagues, each with 32 conferences of eight teams for a total of 256 teams per league (and an overall total of over 4,000 teams). A season is nine weeks long: one week of exhibition games, five weeks of regular season games, one for the conference tournament, and two for the national tournaments. Games are played three times a week; that is, the simulation is run with the current lineup settings for each team and then the box score and play-by-play are uploaded for users to view. Players are all randomly generated; they have six attributes which only the coach of their respective team can see: shooting, defense, hands, rebounding,

intelligence and athleticism. The goal is ultimately to win the most prestigious of the end of the season tournaments, the National Title Tournament.

The responsibilities of a user running a Sim Basketball program can be divided into two areas: coaching and recruiting. The coaching options are actually very basic. There are only



The coach's page for changing player and team settings

four player settings - position, playing time, shooting and three point shooting - and only four team settings - tempo, defense, three point shooting and practice. All these options (except for practice, which is weekly) can be changed before every game; but, once the game begins, they cannot be altered. There are no

plays, no individual defensive assignments, and no adjustments can be made to what the other team does. Coaches are also forced to use a ten-man rotation in which each player has a specific position; so, for instance, a backup small forward could never play shooting guard. These limitations are often discussed by coaches (these are just a sample of some of the most frequently discussed), and in fact Vessels promised that a "dynamic" coaching upgrade was coming. Yet no improvements have been made. While a more comprehensive array of coaching strategies would certainly help the game, the elementary options in place now are just as assuredly not greatly crippling it.

Because the coaching options are so limited, it is impossible to establish a top program through great coaching ability; this makes recruiting paramount. Every week a program is allotted a certain amount of recruiting points based on the program size the coach elected (more on this later) - coaches recruit high school players by spending these points. All high school players' statistics are available, as well as an estimate of their attributes and their preferences for the type of college they would like to play at. At the end of a season, recruits choose a college based on how many points each school spent on them. Much of their decision is random: if two teams each spent the same number on a points on a recruit, they will each have about a fifty percent chance of signing him. Unlike real college basketball, the signing period generates more league wide excitement than even the national championship game.

Vessels, who continues to oversee the day-to-day operations of the game, made Sim Basketball available to the public in 1999 at SimulatedSports.com, making it one of the earliest games of its kind. It is best categorized as an online sports simulation, a small but growing genre. MPOGD.com (Multi Player Online Games Directory) lists over 50 such games associated with everything from basketball to billiards to sailing. Vessels' main inspiration in creating Sim Basketball was a friend of his who was already running an online horse racing simulation. He suggested to his friend, "that I should get involved, get us operating as a legal entity (LLC), and begin developing a second game," (Vessels). This second game, of course, was Sim Basketball. This game also, "filled a void that I had as a teenager (the sports geek or stat geek void)," (Vessels). So while Vessels' motivation in creating the simulation may not have been historical, Sim Basketball is still derivative of what came before it.

There are two primary predecessors that set the groundwork for online simulated sports: computer simulations in general and war games. People saw immediately the opportunity for modeling real life with computers: "early uses of computer simulations involved putting different values into a constant model... to see... what would happen," (Murray, 92). This is exactly what Sim Basketball is: each team is made up of players with different attribute values and the coaches get to see what happens when their teams are put into the constant model - Vessels'

simulation. The gaming aspect of the simulation comes more from the second precursor, war games. War games originated in the early 19th century with von Reisswitz's *Kriegsspiel*. Later, "sophisticated war game designs had been created in the commercial sector... These games shifted the mechanics of game design from abstract strategy... to simulation," (Lenoir and Lowood, 3). The evolution of these two phenomena, along with the advent of the Internet, is responsible for the existence of games like Sim Basketball.

Not surprisingly, Vessels' game has gone through quite an extensive evolution itself. At the outset, it was strictly free for users. During this era, the only revenue was from advertisements. When the Internet advertisement business waned, "for fun" pay options were introduced. These were peripheral features users could pay for - such as naming players or scheduling scrimmages. Unfortunately, this was still not enough to cover the amount of effort needed to maintain the site. As a result, Vessels decided to introduce a new feature in the game.

Now, every season, coaches must select from four program sizes: small, middle, large and sponsor. It is free to run a small program; however, it costs two, five, and twenty-five dollars respectively to run one the other three. The main difference between the several program sizes is the number of recruiting points and scholarships available to the program. This was a potentially dangerous transition, as Sim Basketball could have suffered a decline similar to another online

simulation game, Planetarion: "MechWars is very quickly turning into one of the leading browser based games, and with Planetarion [a similar browser based game] going 'Pay to Play', it's growth can only be sure to continue," (MPOGD.com). Vessels made the change just several months ago, so the long-term consequences remain to be seen; but, as of yet, there has been no noticeable attrition. The key was providing the opportunity for players to participate free of charge, as almost 84 percent of the over 4,000 programs are small.

Allowing people to continue to play for free, albeit with a slight disadvantage, has allowed the site to remain popular. But why is Sim Basketball popular in the first place? It is not so much the simulation or the presentation that attracts gamers, but the idea and the environment themselves: it is a novel combination of familiar components, it presents a forum for friendly competition, it is an artificial source of statistics, and, most importantly, it is the foundation for a community.

The first thing that makes Sim Basketball successful is simply that it is a fresh form of gaming: most people are familiar with sports or with simulation, but the merger of the two in an online setting is a unique experience. "As kids, my brothers and I used to create teams of make believe players in all sports. We would devise ways to play games with dice, cards, etc. and keep stats for our teams and leagues. This game brings back all of that childhood fun in a fairly realistic format," (coach dknute). It is also a new medium for coaching

and running a college team. "Sim sports is fun because you get to coach. It's fun to see your [game] results... It's fun to play with the line-ups to see what you can do... Another great thing about sim sports is the recruiting," (coach twhite). The idea of Sim Basketball is something people are drawn to, so as long as the execution of the game is satisfactory, people will most likely enjoy playing it.

Some of the most important aspects of the game really have nothing to do with the game itself at all. One such aspect is the challenge and competition. Sim Basketball is not challenging and competitive because the simulation is difficult. Every team is using the same simulation. Rather the difficulty is a product of the coaches themselves: 256 real people are all contending for the same thing.

"The game is pretty tough, when thinking about winning the NTT [National Title Tournament] title. It is such a tough thing to do that it makes me want to keep trying so I can do it again. I felt actual honest to goodness pride when my lg18 team won a title. It's one of those things which makes even very experienced coaches continue to play due to the difficulty in winning it all!" (coach deathwalk)

A love for statistics, in addition to motivating Vessels in Sim Basketball's creation, is an alluring aspect to many of the coaches. This is a relatively more subtle attraction, in that the other factors that draw people to Sim Basketball - basketball or simulations - are obvious charms. While the simulation generates the stats for each game played, the site actually tracks very little: it is the coaches who take the time to harvest, manipulate and present the statistics in meaningful

ways. Coach deathwalk admits plainly that, "I am and have always been a stat nerd. I love stats. I played all those numbers sport sims board games while growing up and even the ones on the computer. This is just a better step. I love all the numbers and stats and being made up players is better since I don't have an reel feelings about the guy beforehand," (coach deathwalk). Coach posdonous, another self-described stats nerd, has created his own player rating system (he one of many), which he uses to evaluate every player and every recruit in each league that he is a part of, posting his results on the message board for everyone to analyze and discuss.

People are usually drawn to the game because of an interest in basketball or statistics or simulations. However, it is the community of users that players come to appreciate most. The foundation of this community is the message boards maintained at the site. Coach noone believes "the game might be fun without the active community but I have to admit, the less active leagues are boring to me," (coach noone); that is, the leagues in which not as many coaches contribute to the message boards are not as enjoyable as those in which coaches do contribute. For some coaches, the community is even more essential: "I mainly keep playing because of the community, the game itself still has a long way to go," (coach catsfan).

In addition to the message boards, there are quite a few independent sites users have created dedicated to Sim Basketball - some of these sites are just for a coach to talk about his own

team, some are committed to a single conference, and some are league wide. Other coaches often contribute to these sites by submitting articles about anything from conference previews to editorials on their favorite team nicknames. Two of the more substantial sites are located at www.funkzone.net and www.vickditale.com. The coaches running FunkZone.net actually interview users throughout the league in an effort to let people know each other more intimately.

It is certainly important for the simulation to be at least a fairly accurate model of college basketball. Yet for the game to be successful, this seems to be one of the least significant factors. There are some players who feel that a precise representation of reality is a necessary component of a good simulation; for instance, coach catsfan prefers a soccer simulation hosted at www.worldelitesoccer.com, which "is probably my favorite, because it is the most realistic," (coach catsfan). Coach dknute also asserted that, "it is the realistic aspects that I like most," but acknowledges, "many sim coaches don't seem to want the game to be too realistic," (coach dknute). Vessels, in fact, has compromised on occasion to make the game either easier for coaches or more fun. One example of this was a change made to the recruiting system. In the original scheme, every week a coach could decide to perform various actions that were allotted different amounts of points when recruiting a player - for instance visiting a player was worth 17 points, calling a player 9, or reading about them 1 point. Eventually though, this

system was abandoned, in spite of its attempt to instill some realism; and the change was universally praised. Now, coaches simply spend from 1 to 17 points on a recruit each week.

There are many other cases where reality is ignored. There is no concept of home and away games. Even some aspects of games themselves are imperfect. For example, at the end of each half, it is often a big man who ends up taking a three pointer as time expires. Users are aware of all of these shortcomings, and often complain about them on the message boards. But it is extremely rare for somebody to quit playing because of something of this nature. Players are willing to endure deficiencies in the simulation because of the other enjoyable aspects of the game.

According to game-research.com, simulation games "attempt to convey a completely concrete experience and place realism as the most important goal," (game-research.com). It is important that Sim Basketball is at least a fairly accurate model of the real thing, as it claims to be a college basketball simulation. But this is not the key to its success. All Sim Basketball has to do is be there; the players take care of the rest.

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¹I conducted this survey on the message boards at SimulatedSports.com. The citations refer to the user names of those I quoted.