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Case History: The History of Football Games

In the last 25 years, video games have skyrocketed in popularity and cultural significance, and the genre of sports games has been a large part of that. While adventure games such as "Super Mario Bros." and fantasy games such as "The Legend of Zelda" have enjoyed widespread popularity, sports simulations have had their own large fan base for decades.

Within the sports genre, football games have been at the forefront in terms of visibility, popularity and game quality. Football games have been a part of the console gaming industry from its early days, and over the last two decades, the games have evolved along with the platforms on which they are played. From the Atari to NES to the Sega Genesis to the Microsoft XBox, football games have utilized the full potential of the speed and graphic capabilities of the system to give the user the most realistic experience possible.

In addition to technological advancements, the growth of the console football video game has been about business. With the gaming industry being such a lucrative enterprise ("sales of game consoles and software in Europe and the United States will generate over $17 billion worth of business a year by 2003," (Poole)), sales potential has shaped what kinds of kinds of football titles are designed and what features are included in the games.

Electronic Arts is one of the companies that has played a major role in the development of football games with their EA Sports division. Their marketing strategy of

signing John Madden to name their line of football games was a major reason for the company's success. Many other software manufacturers such as Sega, Midway and Sony followed their lead on the business side (attaching celebrity licenses) and on the creative side (including graphical characteristics pioneered by EA Sports). EA's "Madden" franchise showed that football games could be highly popular and profitable and the result was an explosion of football titles to hitting the market in the 1990s and 2000s.

The history football video game is based on the history of the video game console, with respect to graphical capability and industry profits. The general rule has been (and will likely continue to be) that the more successful the console, the more realistic and the more popular the football game.

What are football video games?

Since the earliest days of the video game, game developers have used sports as a basis for games. Primitive versions of basketball, baseball, soccer and even golf were available for the Atari 2600, the first mainstream video game console. The use of sport as a video game theme made sense, since sports were competitive, had established rules for scoring, and, since the general population is familiar with how most sports were played in real life, required minimal instruction to the user. Football was a natural choice of themes for late-1970s video game designers, since the sport had established a nearly century-long history in the United States and the National Football League was emerging as the premier professional sport in America. Within the sports video game genre, a sub-genre of football games would soon be formed.

Games in the football sub-genre give the user the virtual experience of controlling a simulated football game. The basic premise behind these and other sports games is that the user can have control over the game that they are watching on their screen, which until now, was the passive experience of watching a football television broadcast. But in order to create an experience that users would find somewhat familiar, games were designed with the television audience in mind.

As Yorgos Panzarisin explained in the March 7 lecture, the trend in sports games overall has been to offer a perspective that simulates the experience of watching a football game on television. Even the first football video games offered a third-person perspective, with an overhead view that scrolled up and down a vertical field. In the 80s, this began to change, as game perspectives began using the same 45-degree sideline vantage point used by TV cameras. The players on the field were in isometric 3-D, nicknamed 2.5-D.

However, as consoles evolved, technology broke these conventions of viewer perspective. In the late 1990s football video games incorporated 3-D technology, and users were given the option of watching the game from a variety of different angles including those of on-field players, a feat that even today is impossible for television broadcast. The technology of the video game had leapfrogged that of the medium that it originally strove to simulate.

In addition to graphical advancements, football games began to include more technical features found in the real sport. EA Sports, which manufactured the extremely popular "John Madden Football" series even made their slogan: "If it's in the game, it's in the game," meaning that if you can find it in the NFL, you can find it on this video

game. Realism began to take over as football titles began to include minute details, such as the accurate uniform designs, distinguishable faces in the crowd, and the use of real player names. The games of today, such as Sega's "NFL 2K2" and "Madden NFL 2002" are realistic enough to have blurred the line between watching a real NFL broadcast and playing a video game. Play is now focused on authenticity as these "games" are turning into true audio-visual simulations.

The Early Stages

Football games have existed since 1978, when the Atari 2600 was the major outlet for home video gaming. The early years of gaming were marked by a lack of variety of football titles and very primitive game play. Designed by Mike Albaugh and Lyle Rains, Atari's "Football" title was the first on the market and it could be considered a primitive interpretation of the sport at best. Due to the limited graphics capabilities of the 2600, visual details such as yard markings, jersey numbers and realistic-looking players were absent. In addition to the limited visual component, "Football" was primitive in terms of game play. The game used only three players to a side rather than eleven and had no real play-calling options. The limited features reflected the very simplistic goals of the game: score touchdowns by getting your player to the other side of the field.

"Football" was followed by a series of games that were also constrained by limited technological capability. Titles produced by Atari, Coleco, Itellivision and Gamestar created games

"Football," courtesy GameSpot

that followed "Football's" template of using a vertically scrolling field and few slow-moving players. These game developers were working under the philosophy that gamers wanted games that featured easy-to-use game play, rather than an experience that mimicked the fast pace and highly technical intricacies that mark the real-life game.

In 1982, Mattel developed "Super Challenge Football" for the Intellivision system. The game represented progress in football game development, particularly with respect to graphics. "Super Challenge Football" featured five players per team, players with body parts that looked and moved realistically and a one hundred-yard field with line markings. However, the most impressive improvement introduced by the game is its sophisticated play-calling. While users were simply expected to choose either a run or pass in Atari's "Football," users were able to give players offensive instructions in "Super Challenge Football." In addition, tackles weren't automatic, meaning the user had to maneuver the defensive players on the field in order to make a tackle.

In these beginning stages of video game development, football games were continually evolving, growing as the technology grew. The focus for game designers was to create titles that were easy and fun enough for the casual video game player to give it a try. Games were "football" in name only; the focus was on scoring points, rather than simulating a sports atmosphere. Only later did the focus change from user-friendliness to realistically capturing the true football experience.

Football Games Grow Up

Throughout most of the 1980s, football games were primitive versions of their namesake, and were a small sector of the fringe sports game market. But all of that

changed in 1989 with the release of Tecmo's "Tecmo Bowl" for the Nintendo

Entertainment System. This was the first football title that was advanced enough to

establish a solid reputation. One of the most important aspects of "Tecmo Bowl's"

success as a game and as a marketable product is the fact that Tecmo secured a licensing

deal with the National Football League Player's Association (NFLPA). This allowed the

game designers to incorporate real player names and statistics into the game, giving it a

very authentic feel. "Tecmo Bowl" was a high speed, high scoring and offered itself as a

respectable football simulation, in contrast to the minimalist games of the earlier part of

the decade. With respect to play-calling, "Tecmo Bowl" found a happy medium between

ease of use and interactivity. Users were given a choice between two basic running plays

or two passing plays. The limited playbook allowed users to briefly wear the hat of

football coach, while not being too complicated to have fun with it.

"Tecmo Bowl," courtesy Gamespot

A key aspect to Tecmo Bowl's immense

popularity is that it was the first sophisticated football

designed for the NES. Because the NES was by far the

most popular console on the market at the time, "Tecmo

Bowl" had little competition in a sub-genre that had largely been untapped by game

developers. The game's success continued, as the sequel, 1991's "Tecmo Super Bowl"

was even more popular than the original.

The most popular console football title in video game history with arrived in 1992

with "John Madden Football 92." Originally designed as PC game by Scott Orr in the late

1980s, the "Madden" phenomenon took off once versions were made for the Sega

Genesis and Super Nintendo. EA Sports shrewdly licensed the image and voice of Madden, a popular and successful NFL coach-turned-television analyst. Madden used his folksy charm, catch-phrases to connect with audiences, secure endorsement deals and establish himself as an icon in the American sports world.

For fledgling EA Sports, Madden was a perfect pitchman for their football video game and the initial licensing deal was made in 1986 for the Apple II's "John Madden Football." One of the conditions that Madden insisted upon when agreeing to the game endorsement was that the game be as realistic as possible. "When it was suggested by EA though that the game would feature two teams of seven players, Madden wouldn't hear of it. 'If it's not 11 on 11, it's not real football,' Madden said. 'I will not put my name on it if it's not real.'" (Madden Franchise)

All 28 NFL teams were included for the first time, and new arrays of offensive and defensive formations were added. Other authenticities were possible due to the expanded graphics capabilities of the 16-bit consoles. Weather conditions could be manipulated to add rain and snow to a game.

The game skyrocketed in popularity, and would go on to become the most popular football game series in video game history. "Madden" put EA Sports on the map as a heavyweight design company. At the time of its release, the console market was being split between Sega Genesis owners and Super Nintendo loyalists. The fact that EA Sports, an independent design company, created the game meant that it could be made for multiple consoles ensuring that the game could enjoy sales success independent of a particular console. This fact would bode well for the future, when Sony and Microsoft would further crowd the console market.

Games of the Third Dimension

The mid 1990s saw the introduction of the 64-bit generation of video game consoles to the market. Sony's Playstation and the Nintendo 64 offered graphical capability and information capacity that made their 32-bit predecessors seem obsolete. The Playstation was equipped with a 33MHz processor and had a 3D graphics processor, which allowed for graphical capabilities unseen in any console before it. The technological resources of the new consoles meant that the next generation of football video game could be more realistic, more detailed and more intricate simulation than simplistic toy.

In 1995, Sony subsidiary 989 Sports introduced its first entry into football game video game market, "NFL Gameday." The game's release coincided with that of the Sony Playstation,a fact that would prove very fortuitous for 989 Sports. Because "NFL Gameday" was

"NFL Gameday," courtesy Playstation Galleria

among the first titles available for the console, the game was a huge seller. The fact that the game was designed specifically for the Playstation and its outstanding graphical ability made the game synonymous with the console, Sony successfully launched the 989 Sports, which would go on to create other sports-themed games. "NFL Gameday" sequels were released each subsequent year and a new, flourishing era of football video games

had begun. This era saw a flood of titles on the market, and game development companies had to find ways to differentiate their products from one another.

In 1998, Midway made its first venture into the football game world with "NFL Blitz." Looking to differentiate itself from the rest of the field, Midway game developers created a product that was unlike anything on the market: football as violent entertainment rather than competitive sport. "NFL Blitz" bore little resemblance to the real game played on grass (or even to other NFL video games from EA Sports and Sega), as many rules and conventions were flouted in order to create a game that was more fun and fantasy-based. Each team had only seven players and users could manipulate the players to perform violent and acrobatic tackles and blocks on their opponents. Many of the moves performed by the players looked straight out of fighting video games, a sign that Midway was targeting a gaming audience that was broader than just fans of sports games.

The inclusion of violence was an attempt to turn football games into products of mass appeal. It was a marked contrast to the trend of the previous decade, which had been to increase the realism of football video games in order to more closely resemble NFL telecasts. The strategy worked, as "NFL Blitz" gained a large following, and went on to spawn several annual sequels for the Playstation and Nintendo 64. "NFL Blitz" also inspired Midway to create a series games ("NHL Hitz," "NBA Showtime") for other sports that also centered on fantasy and violence.

While new titles joined the market throughout the 1990s, the football sub-genre was still ruled by "Madden." EA Sports put out a new edition of "John Madden Football" every year, and while some weren't necessarily improvements on their predecessors, the

"Madden" title continued to enjoy sales success that was unrivaled by any other game in the sports genre.

> According to the TRSTS Video Game Report published by the NPD group, Madden NFL 99 was the number one selling PlayStation® sports video game in 1998 in North America. The NPD group reports that Madden NFL 99 on the PlayStation sold 1,128,366 units in 1998. That number is over 164,000 more than its closest competitor in the sports category. (The Sports Gaming Network)
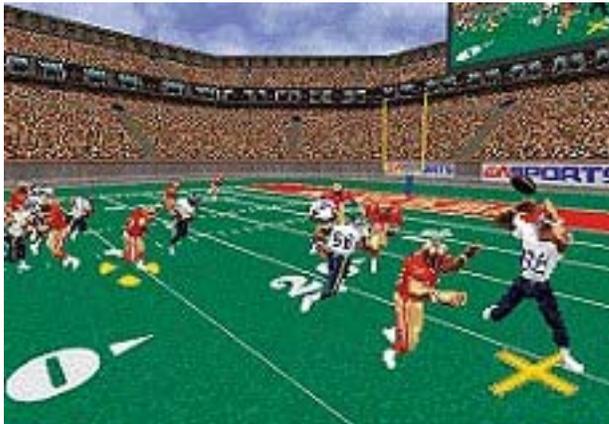
"Madden NFL 97," courtesy Sports Gaming Network

While much of the game's popularity can be attributed to John Madden's name and celebrity status, a large portion of the title's success is due to the continual improvements made to game play and graphics. In the 1995 edition, players were bigger and thus more detailed and realistic. The voice of Madden himself was used for play-by-play commentary. The 1997 edition which used a 3-D graphics engine for the first time, expanded to a true simulation of watching the NFL on television. The entire Fox television broadcasting crew was used, and with it came realistic production values. There were introduction videos and statistical graphics that mimicked those used on TV. Clearly, EA Sports had decided that pure realism and graphical intricacy was the way to be successful in the football gaming business, and the company was rewarded with the title of industry leader.

Today and Beyond

After the inevitable demise of Sega's Genesis console and the complete failure of the 64-bit Sega Saturn, the company focused on game development in mid and late 1990s. But in 1999, Sega used the launch of its 250 MHz Dreamcast console to re-enter the football game development industry. "NFL 2K" was the company's first football game since their original "Joe Montana Football" line, which began in 1990. The game was made exclusively for the highly touted Dreamcast, so "NFL 2K" sales were positively correlated with that of the fledgling console.

The game took advantage of the phenomenal technical capabilities of the Dreamcast. Each team came with customized playbooks, giving users the opportunity to play to a particular team's strengths or an opponent's weaknesses. Nearly every detail of the game was authentic, from the players' faces, to the quarterback's throwing style to the architecture of the stadium. Motion-capture animation and slow-motion instant replay made the "NFL 2K" series seem even more like a television broadcast than any game before it. Such painstakingly accurate visuals

"NFL 2K2," courtesy Sega.com

After two years of sluggish sales, Sega decided to abandon the Dreamcast and focus exclusively on the development and production of games. The company released "NFL 2K1" in 2000 exclusively for Dreamcast, but the following year, sensing the need to tap into a greater market, made versions of "NFL 2K2" for the Playstation 2 and Xbox as well. This allowed Dreamcast owners and fans of the "2K" line to develop brand loyalty to Sega's software, even though the hardware was soon to be obsolete.

The current football video game climate is much different than anything that could have been imagined back when the sub-genre began in 1978. Users have a plethora of choice, which has pros and "cons for the industry. Right now there are three major consoles (Playstation 2, Gamecube and Xbox) with high-speed processors and huge memory capacities, with future generations of consoles in development. When this is combined with the multiple software companies who design games across platforms, the result is that users have a myriad of high quality choices for their gaming experience. More competition means that developers are continually working to develop better and more realistic games and to beat their competitors to the market with the next "great" football game.

However, the downside is that there is a glut of similar product on the market that consumers are left to wade through. How is the casual gamer to know the difference between Sega's "NFL 2K1" and 989 Sports' "NFL Gameday 2000?" The constant influx of new games may have negative effects not only for the consumer but for the gaming industry as well. Sports games are unique in that there is an expectation that a new edition of any given title will be released annually. With the pressure to rush out new versions of football games at specific times of the year, games sometimes fall short of expectations. EA Sports' "Madden NFL 96" was widely regarded as a flop, because it did not sufficiently improve on "Madden NFL 95." By committing to a philosophy of prolific game production, game developers are often forced to sacrifice quality.

So what does the short history of the football video game tell us about what will happen in the future? If current trends are a good indication, football will continue to

loom large in the video game industry. Football games are now a genre in itself, and with

technology fueling game play improvement and an ever-growing fan base, the future for

the industry is limitless.

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