

the Escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Throughout my school years, I played sports. Soccer, basketball, softball, volleyball ... I was all over the map as far as the sports I played, and very active. And I liked it.

But then I graduated from university and moved into the world of work. This is the world in which one wakes in the morning and sets out for the office, only to leave at the end of the workday tired and after dark has fallen. This state of affairs makes sports a difficult activity in which to engage. Tired can be overcome with enough desire, but finding a lit field or arena in which to play when not affiliated with a school that has such facilities is nigh impossible.

And so, to try to fill something of the void, I tried sports videogames. I've tried various sports games over the years and never really could quite glom onto them. It could be that after finding Baseball and Hockey for the NES to be useless but for the sound effects and fighting, respectively, I never really attempted another one at home.

And later on, I played a round or two of Golden Tee in a couple of local pub type establishments, but frantically spinning the white trackball controller to hit the ball did nothing for me. It was all too still. I just decided I liked playing sports, not so much watching them.

That's not to say there's anything at all wrong with playing sports videogames. Professional sports have bestowed upon and received much support from videogames. They have enriched the lives of sports fans the world over for years. Anything to help people have more fun and pull more enjoyment from life, I'm all in favor. But having established that sports games were much too inactive for my interest, I put them aside in favor of other more interesting (to me) games.

Enter: Wii Sports.

The kids over at Nintendo (for kids they must be, as they seem to excel at play like only a child can) have made a sports game for those of us who like only to play sports as opposed to watch them while mashing buttons. Wii Sports encourages people to get up off the couch and swing a club or roll a bowling

ball. It feels a bit like actually playing. And that's just exciting.

Others are following suit. Madden '07 is promised to be a blast on the Wii, allowing players to move about, getting involved a third sense, that of touch. Madden, a series I'd long since put aside, is grabbing my attention. My attention – the long-time sports game passerby. I wonder how many others like me will do the same?

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Confessions of an MMOG Cross-Dresser" from The Escapist Forum: When I played World of Warcraft, I did make a bunch of female characters.

I mean, why not? The option is right there on the character creation screen.

When I make a characters for these games, I usually just think for myself an outline for a character, and then make and play it. Male or female, I give them both equal opportunity. I don't prefer playing one over the other, all of this is just aesthetics to me.



- Meophist

In response to "The Rise and Fall of Troika" from The Escapist Forum:

How many games have been released that should not have been in their current state? A lot.

I'm very naive when it comes to publisher/developer contracts, but it would make sense to me that each has a percentage of the profits from the game. So why isn't there a situation where the developer can go over budget and deliver the product late with penalties? ...or is there? Like, for every month after the supposed date, you get less 0.X% from the profits. Also, all profits go to the publisher until all developer expenditures over the budget amount are repaid.

Either the publishers have to change the way they operate or the developers need stick to their guns and not be so desperate to sign with whoever is willing. I would love nothing more than to see talented people developing successful games on small budgets and small teams. Who says that a successful game has to have a huge budget and an army of developers? ... Publishers?

- Echolocating

In response to "Local Hero" from The Escapist Forum:

Localization is always something that core fans have had a love/hate relationship with, particularly when it comes to anime. Personally, I think that localization has gotten a lot better in the past 5 years than ever before, and with games as magnificently localized as Final Fantasy XII, it just goes to show how far localization has come in terms of quality control and balance.

It's understandable when there are liberties that are taken to make something more understandable to an audience, but its another thing when it could have been better. Games like Final Fantasy XII, Metal Gear Solid 3, and Kingdom Hearts II make me smile when it comes to awesome localization, but some games just don't shine as brightly as others, and its hard to distinguish what it was that made it murkier. Is it the gameplay? The voice acting? The script? The game itself? In the end, it's mostly the overall package that decides the quality of the game, but its the localization that's key to that extra shine.

By the way, though its a well known fact that the Japanese version of Phoenix Wright has both the English and the Japanese versions, why is it that it takes so long for a Phoenix Wright title to get overseas if its already finished? What's taking so long? I mean, will the American version have this feature? What's the deal?

- Darkpen

In response to "Nintendo Sued Over Wii Wrist Strap" from The Escapist Daily:

Upon using a device you should read the instructions. Before powering a game, you get a notice to place your wrist within the strap and tight it. If the game requires the Nunchuk to play, it says to insert the strap in the loop before playing. I've played a lot with the Wii and never did it ever slip. I just don't see how people can be throwing around their controller like it's a baseball.

- Sokaku

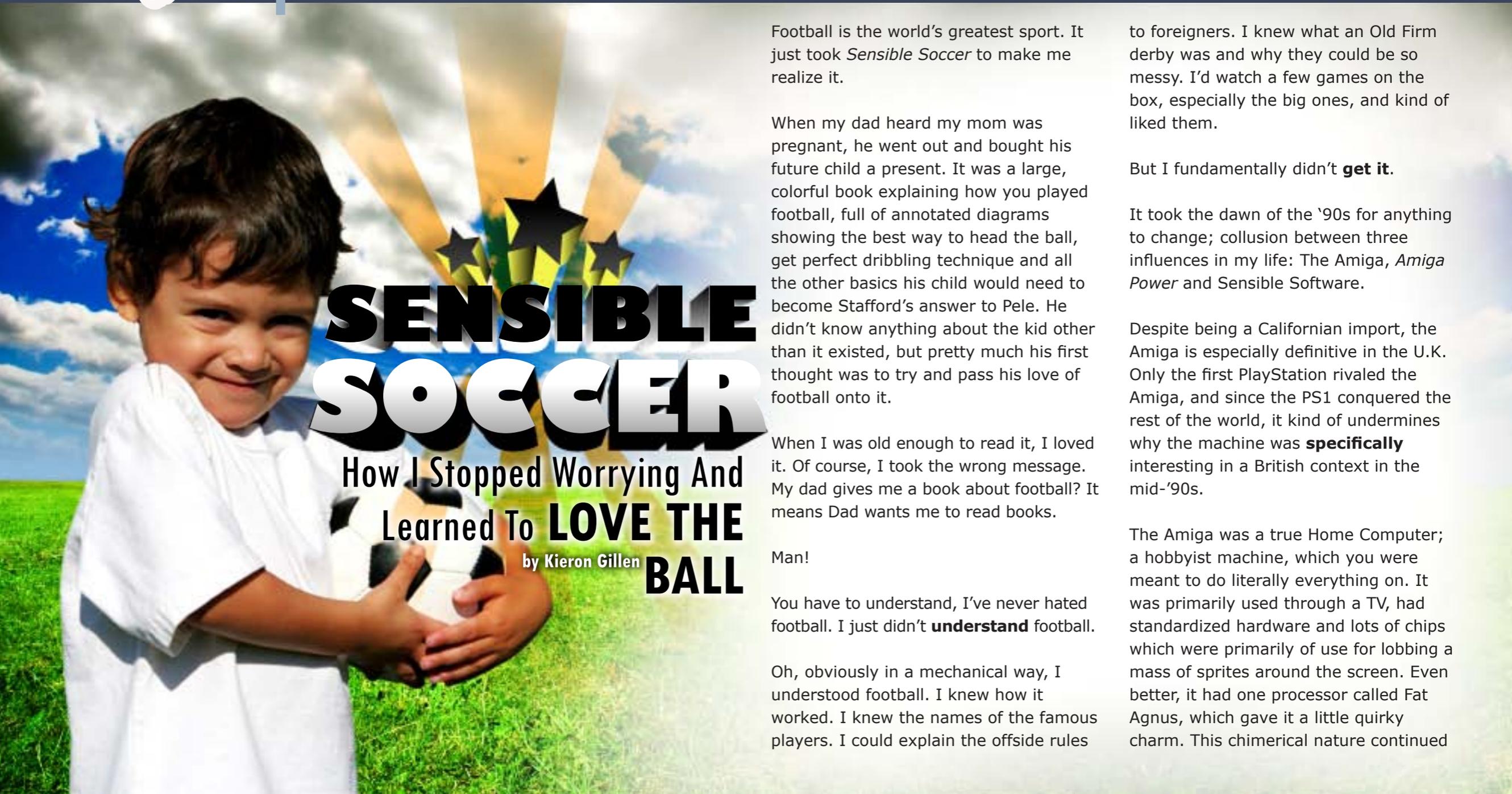
In response to "Nintendo Sued Over Wii Wrist Strap" from The Escapist Daily:

When Nintendo decided to put a strap on the product it basically made consumers believe there was a promise

behind it: if you let go of your controller this will keep it from flying across the room. When people do stupid things they look to blame other people. A broken strap leads to an easy target: a faulty product.

- Blaxton





SENSIBLE SOCCER

How I Stopped Worrying And
Learned To **LOVE THE
BALL**

by Kieron Gillen

Football is the world's greatest sport. It just took *Sensible Soccer* to make me realize it.

When my dad heard my mom was pregnant, he went out and bought his future child a present. It was a large, colorful book explaining how you played football, full of annotated diagrams showing the best way to head the ball, get perfect dribbling technique and all the other basics his child would need to become Stafford's answer to Pele. He didn't know anything about the kid other than it existed, but pretty much his first thought was to try and pass his love of football onto it.

When I was old enough to read it, I loved it. Of course, I took the wrong message. My dad gives me a book about football? It means Dad wants me to read books.

Man!

You have to understand, I've never hated football. I just didn't **understand** football.

Oh, obviously in a mechanical way, I understood football. I knew how it worked. I knew the names of the famous players. I could explain the offside rules

to foreigners. I knew what an Old Firm derby was and why they could be so messy. I'd watch a few games on the box, especially the big ones, and kind of liked them.

But I fundamentally didn't **get it**.

It took the dawn of the '90s for anything to change; collusion between three influences in my life: The Amiga, *Amiga Power* and Sensible Software.

Despite being a Californian import, the Amiga is especially definitive in the U.K. Only the first PlayStation rivaled the Amiga, and since the PS1 conquered the rest of the world, it kind of undermines why the machine was **specifically** interesting in a British context in the mid-'90s.

The Amiga was a true Home Computer; a hobbyist machine, which you were meant to do literally everything on. It was primarily used through a TV, had standardized hardware and lots of chips which were primarily of use for lobbing a mass of sprites around the screen. Even better, it had one processor called Fat Agnus, which gave it a little quirky charm. This chimerical nature continued

into what you actually **did** with the machine. In terms of its games, it straddled the gap between what the PCs and consoles were up to. It couldn't do the action games as well as the Mega Drive or the SNES. And it couldn't do more heavyweight topics as well as the fledgling PC – specifically, it struggled with 3-D, even early vector 3-D, let alone when people started lobbing texture maps around. But since it could manage some simulacra of both, you had a climate where both sorts of games were accepted, hybridized and a middle-ground between the two explored.

Yes, you can play a decent game of *Pro Evo* or *OutRun 2* on a PC now. But you couldn't then, and the attitude – that, somehow, you don't play action games on the PC (unless they're first person and/or online and/or enormously macho) – has fossilized into dogma. That simply wasn't true on the Amiga, which means that any time I hear a modern gamer say, "That's not my sort of thing," I end up sighing. Back then, it was **all** our sort of things. True gaming sluts, we were up for anything.

This attitude was personified by *Amiga Power*, unarguably the greatest

magazine about videogames ever written. No, really. For half a dozen reasons, but here's a relevant one: They marked the hardest anyone's ever dared. Sub 10-percent was absolutely commonplace, even for relatively big games. By the time it closed, there was a considerable list of publishers who'd just refuse to send the magazine their games. Because they were ... well, to use *AP*'s own words, whining, childish hatemongers.

AP was a bit juvenile at times, which is fine, because games are a bit juvenile, and being juvenile isn't just a pejorative. Being idealistic and having a complete unwillingness to compromise are two absolutely primary juvenile traits. I'd swap a lot of quasi-seriousness professionalism for them.

If something got a mark in the 90s in *Amiga Power*, it meant something. I didn't always agree with them, but I knew **they** agreed with what they'd written, and they'd lead me to enough interesting places for me to follow whatever they suggested. Hell, they'd already got me into pinball via the divine *Pinball Dreams*, created by future *Battlefield 1942* developers, Digital Illusions. (Huh!)

AP gave *Sensible Soccer* their highest-ever mark. I trusted *AP*.

For what it's worth, I trusted Sensible Software too. Everyone trusted Sensible. While it'd have been harder to call at the time, with the match long over, it's fair to describe Sensible as the definitive Amiga Developer. Despite being rooted throughout the 8-bit scene, they came to their full power with Commodore's 16-bit machine. They're also definitive in a way that they ended up being tied to the Amiga, being unable to transform into something else as its age came to a close. While people like Bullfrog became a PC developer of note, Sensible disappeared down a hole of their own making with their infamous unfinished great-lost game, PC graphic adventure *Sex 'n Drugs 'n Rock'n Roll*.

But before that, they left behind a string of genuinely classic games. *Mega Lo Mania* was *Civilization* as observed through an English surrealistic filter and one of those pre-*Dune II* proto-real-time-strategy games which people tend to forget about when writing history books.

Cannon Fodder was an overhead-viewed action/strategy game using a mouse-

“My dad gives me a book about football? It means Dad wants me to **READ BOOKS.**”

MAN!”



control. Arriving at a similar time to Bullfrog's *Syndicate*, it was a fascinating example of how two development studios could approach a similar concept with their own design priorities and end up with a radically different games. Where *Syndicate* was oppressive, *Cannon Fodder* was witty. Where *Syndicate* was black satire, *Cannon Fodder* was underwritten with a quiet moral rage at war.

Of course, there was *Wizkid*, a game so delightfully warped that it makes *Psychonauts* look like Gary Grigsby's *World at War* and probably remains the world's only graphic adventure/*Arkanoid*-clone hybrid.

And there was *Sensible Soccer*.

I wasn't quite sure what to expect, sitting down to play. Not quite true: Back on the Spectrum, I'd played a fair chunk of Jon Ritman's seminal *Matchday II*, and I'd also enjoyed *Microprose Soccer*, Sensible's chunky eight-bit forerunner. But *Sensible Soccer* was something quite different.

It was obviously a Sensible game. Unlike *Matchday*'s side-on view – now the

standard one ala *FIFA* or *Pro Evo* – it was viewed from above. And not slightly from above, but some distant point, perhaps suspended precariously from the bottom of a blimp. You could see huge expanses of the pitch. The men beneath you were tiny blurs of pixels. Even if there **was** masses animation, it'd be almost impossible to tell.

Sensible Soccer didn't look like the best game ever, if you didn't know what you were looking for.

Admittedly, I did. The tiny sprite thing was just one of Sensible's constant visual signatures. Sensible's John Hare has since talked about how this minimalism wasn't actually a weakness. In fact, *Sensible Soccer* is better animated than a modern football game, by using the impressively sturdy anti-aliasing of the human mind to fill in the gaps. When watching *FIFA*, there's always going to be tiny problems which drag you out of the world where animation doesn't quite match up. As you approach perfection, the errors scream. In Sensible, the reverse happened, with people claiming to have seen animation where there was none. It

“ Sensible Soccer **DIDN'T LOOK** like the best game ever, if you **DIDN'T KNOW** what you were looking for. ”





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the Escapist

“
over those first few months
with Sensible Soccer, that’s
what it taught me. The core,
the reason why people
watch this **BLOODY**
GAME”

all happened so quickly, overhead kicks were pasted in our inner minds.

Meanwhile, thanks to its perspective and one-button control system, *Sensible Soccer* was Audrey Hepburn elegant. In *Sensible*, you were instantly passing the ball around the pitch in ballet-like movement, from player to player to player.

It took me time – I was young – but I eventually worked out *why Sensible Soccer* was so extraordinary. First, the initially odd camera angle: Taken out so far, you saw most of the pitch. You were aware of the positioning of all your team at any moment. You could see who was free. You could see who was covered. You could just see. And since you could **see**, you could actually **choose** who would be best to pass to. Yes, other games had radar. But no one **ever** used radar.

Secondly, the basic button press: In *Sensible*, the ball was kicked the second the ball was tapped. An instant, accurate pass at whomever you chose. Tap. Tap. Tap. The ball moves from one to the next to the next, in perfect movements. While there was very little skill in performing the action, with it automatically choosing

the appropriate player, this freed the player’s attention to considering the higher level matters. Passing was easy, so – yet again – people were free to choose who would be best to pass to.

The result was strings of passes that had the geometrical perfection of cheekbones.

There was more to the game than passing, of course. It allowed for impossibly dramatic aftertouch to the ball, allowing it to swerve past the outreached pixel-fingertips of the keeper. You could abandon the passing, and just play the long hoof, but even that was more tactical than in a game with a closer view, and in practice proved an ideal way to take advantage of a lapse in the defense. Enormous leaping headers and sliding tackles allowed a sudden thrust to reclaim a ball or turn a cross into a goal-threatening shot. You could play with formations for strategic effects.

But the passing was always the skeleton around which the game was built, what everything else was built upon. Even the basic skill of dribbling the ball up the pitch was – in game terms – defined in how it’s **not** passing the ball. When doing this, your players basically bobble

the ball at their feet, a far, far trickier proposition than a pass, risking a loss of control. Your ability to risk a run was based around a tactical commitment of giving up the ability to easily slide into a pass. You believed you could swap flexibility for a tactical gambit.

Which means that, compared to a modern football game, *Sensible Soccer* had much fewer moves. In terms of “If it’s in the game, it’s in the game,” it was a far less accurate simulation of a football game, but I suspect more accurate games wouldn’t have taught me to understand football in the way *Sensible Soccer* did. *Sensible Soccer* was a cartoon of a football match, and cartooning is the art of magnification by removal. What remains is what the artist considered important. And in this cartoon simulation of football, you’re left with what is – basically – the core of football.

And over those first few months with *Sensible Soccer*, that’s what it taught me. The core, the reason why people watch this bloody game. Yes, the atmosphere is one thing, but not the only thing. I’d been to matches before as a kid, and even then got the intensity of tens of thousands of people staring at a

field of grass and desperately wanting a small ball to go one way or another, but that didn't explain why they were doing it in the first place.

Equally, the iconic images confuse you. The absolutely showy seconds, caught on film, played forever in slow motion over recent AOR hits on evening television aren't what football are about. Not really, any more than the icing's the cake or the orgasm's the sex. You watch a 90-minute game; it's not really for the high marks of skill. In fact, if you watch a game in real life, you can barely see the skill when it happens. It may be part of the payoff, but football – the bit you should be watching – is a structural thing.

And the trick is that football, more than any other major sport, is one of constant fluidity. Others have lots of handholding for the viewer, with regular stops and short bursts of play before the game comes to rest again, giving the observer a chance to consider. Football, compared to baseball or American football or even basketball, never stops. You have to read it on the fly, following a long tactical sentence of meaning. To really watch a game of football is to know why the ball is moving over there, why that defender

is being pulled from position, what is going to happen next. Or, rather, what should happen next, and why someone's being a bloody idiot if he doesn't do it. That is, to understand its language and grammar; to read it. *Sensible Soccer's* simplified form showed me the structures to watch for, in platonic-perfection. *Sensible Soccer* explained it all.

After Sensible Software, I understood football. I was never going to love football as much as – say – any of the narrative forms, or a decent conversation or a movie. I was never going to love it like my dad – the sort of love which redecorates the garage door with an enormous Everton logo when they got to the cup-final – but I get it, and know why – as far as sports go – there's none finer, and why it's the world's favorite. And I like understanding it, and I understand liking it. [COMMENTS](#)

Kieron Gillen has been writing about videogames for far too long now. His rock and roll dream is to form an Electro-band with Miss Kittin and SHODAN pairing up on vocals.

“
After Sensible Software,
I UNDERSTOOD FOOTBALL
”



CURT SCHILLING: THE ESCAPIST INTERVIEW

by Joe Blancato

Since Sunday, November 4, 2001, Curt Schilling has been my nemesis. That was the day he and Randy Johnson teamed up to beat Roger Clemens, Mariano Rivera and the rest of my beloved Yankees in game 7 of what has since been called the best World Series of the modern era.

Since then, Schilling has popped up repeatedly, finding new ways to ruin my life. He was on the 2004 Red Sox, the team that rallied from a 3 games to none

deficit in the American League Championship Series against the Yankees (he pitched in and won game 6). The day after that happened, I literally spoke only in disjointed obscenities. And then he went on to help them win the World Series for the first time in 86 years.

So, when the opportunity arose for The Escapist to interview Schilling about his new game company, Green Monster Games, I wasn't exactly Executive Editor Julianne Greer's first choice. But I lobbied ("Hey, name someone else around here who knows what an ERA is") and eventually won, not entirely sure about how well I'd control myself when talking to a guy who makes the sports fan in me tremble every time he takes the mound in the Bronx.

But in the end, talking to Schilling was like talking to a game developer with more business and leadership acumen than the average bear. He didn't hiss; I didn't smell fire and brimstone when the secretary transferred me. And when he told me about his content-based dream team with a fan base 400-million strong, I found myself wondering if it would be OK if he were only my sporting nemesis.

Here, then, is Curt Schilling on Green Monster Games.

The Escapist: When did you first have the idea to form a company, and who did you talk to before going forward with it?

Curt Schilling: I had the idea about a decade ago. Probably longer than that, since I've been a gamer my whole life. The genesis of it was maybe 10 years ago but I really started to act on it probably seven or eight years ago, when I started my relationship with the people at Sony. I got into looking inside the industry and started to act on it a few years back and really started to move on it last year.

TE: Do you see this as a pet project or is this something you're going to focus on after you retire?

CS: This is something I will focus on explicitly and completely when I'm retired. Outside of working out for this season and my family right now, it's taking up every minute of my day.

TE: What role do you plan on playing?

CS: I'm founder and CEO of the company. I've hired a president and have leadership in place. [We'll have] a core team over the next six months of about 30 people.

TE: What's Green Monster's philosophy? What's the mission?

CS: Everything we do is intent on being the best, on being innovative and revolutionary, from a product and a company standpoint. We truly have aspirations of being the best in the world at what we do. From top to bottom, this company will operate with a very different mandate in every aspect, from how we treat our employees, how our employees are compensated and their vested interest in the profitability of the company to every ounce of every product we produce.

There's things that I've learned in the 20 years I've played in professional baseball, being part of a team sport, that apply [to business]. You see the real world out there trying to generate and create that team atmosphere, by Hawaiian shirt Fridays or Jelly of the Month Club for the holidays. You don't build teams that way. You build teams by bringing people in

who believe in the vision of the company, who understand that the logo on the front of your shirt is a lot more important than the name on the back. That's a sports analogy, but it's applicable.

It's literally about checking egos at the door and being in this for the good of the company, and understanding that if you do your job - and this applies to everyone - if you do your job, at the end of the day, everybody wins.

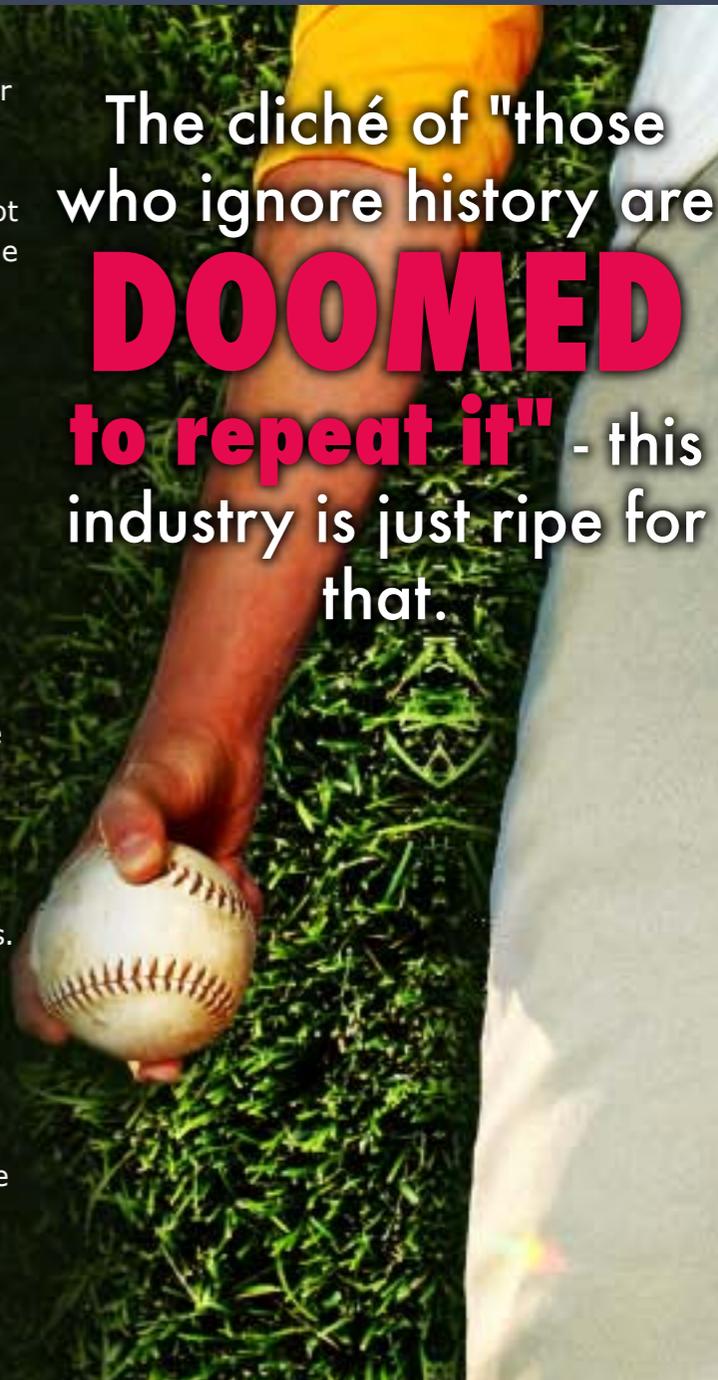
TE: You're known for being an EQ player, and you've worked with the EQ and EQ2 dev teams in fundraising events. Have you ever had your hand in game design?

CS: Not other than the other billion of us gaming geeks out there who said, "Wow, I can do it better than that," or "That sucks." I've been a critic my whole life. Over the last decade, I've gotten to realize that when you sit around and say "How cool would it be if ..." and you have all of those great concepts, when you sit down and start developing a computer game, the globe spins. You go to the other side of the world; it's a totally different world.

The focus for me, from a founder's standpoint - and obviously I am a gamer and I have my head in different aspects of the company - but the goal for me is not to make my game. There's been a lot of people who have made that mistake. The goal for me is to make the game.

And to do that, you need passionate, accountable, talented, resourceful, outside-the-box thinking people. And not just one or two, but everyone on your team has to possess those kinds of traits. And you bring those types of people into something, and you make them understand that as an employer, you're gonna care about them more than anybody they've ever worked for. And the only thing you ask in return is their devotion to the company. And you make them understand that the company will never be more important than the family, never more important than their real lives.

You do things to make them understand [you care]. We pay 100 percent of their insurance premiums; we have matching 401(k); our benefits package is as good as anybody's ... in the industry; to make sure that they understand that the care and commitment I'm telling them this company has for them is not lip service.



The cliché of "those who ignore history are **DOOMED** to repeat it" - this industry is just ripe for that.



if the game sucks, the GAME SUCKS.

TE: If you compare that to the mentality that EA has, for example, with their employees. Their employees are pretty much wage slaves.

CS: There are so many lessons to be learned. The cliché of “those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it” - this industry is just ripe for that.

You look around, and obviously, it’s a small industry. And bringing in incredibly talented people is hard to do, because those incredibly talented people - who are passionate and have character and are accountable - they’re employed. And a lot of the time, they’re employed in a position they’re comfortable in. And

having been able to get those people as the core part of our team has been an immensely challenging and incredibly rewarding experience, because this is far more than a company to me - this is a family. These people believe in me and believe in this company, and to that end, they’re picking up their families and they’re moving them around the country, around the world, to be a part of something that I’ve had as a vision. That’s an immense amount of responsibility for me.

TE: How did Todd McFarlane and R.A. Salvatore get involved? Where did you meet them?

CS: Todd was a friend of mine from my days in Arizona, playing with the Diamondbacks. I met him out there. We’ve collaborated on some stuff with the ALS Foundation, through philanthropic work, and I basically pitched them both. I pitched them together on a road trip in Kansas City during the season.

The ironic thing is five or six years ago, I penciled out my dream team from a creative standpoint, who I’d want and what I would want them to do. R.A. was

the guy behind the creative vision, and I talked to some people that handle some PR stuff for me, and I said, “I’d love to talk to this guy.” Ten minutes later, I’m on the phone talking to him. He lives a half hour from me in Boston, and he’s the biggest Boston Red Sox fan on the planet. We’ve become very close friends very fast. He’s an incredible man, obviously incredibly creative; I’m a huge fan. But beyond all that, he’s a fantastic person. And that was a huge, huge plus for me, to add him to the creative process.

TE: What role will R.A. and Todd be playing in the company?

CS: R.A. was hired on as the creative director. R.A. will drive the creative vision, the story behind what we’re doing. He’s got a pretty decent track record of writing some pretty good stories.

Todd will literally be the art director. He will be behind the artistic vision of R.A.’s story. We will have an art director in house that will collaborate with Todd and Todd’s team to take Todd’s conceptual vision and turn it into a game world and game players and game characters.

TE: There’s only one really big player in the MMOG field, and they just barely reached mass market. What is your key to succeed?

CS: It’s really simple. Todd can draw until the cows come home and it could be the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen, and R.A. can write the most beautiful story you’ve ever read, but if the game sucks, the game sucks. It really comes back to the game.

You have to make a game that appeals across the market, across platforms, that has a low barrier of entry, that people will want to play. In that simplistic explanation, there really is a lot of detail,



It really comes back to THE GAME.

the Escapist

but it really is that simple. You have to make a fun game. And I think a lot of people have really just misunderstood that. There's franchises out there, that I'd hazard to guess everybody said were "can't miss," and they've missed.

The three most branded franchises in the history of the MMOG space were Star Wars, Lord of the Rings and, to me, Blizzard. Lord of the Rings had a century to brand their IP, Star Wars had three decades and Blizzard has had a decade of branding and franchise in the world of Warcraft. And they've done it so impeccably well, but at the end of the day, the thing that sticks out amongst those three is Blizzard stayed truer to their visions than anyone else, and fans got what they wanted.

They did it because they stuck to their vision. They didn't try to make a game for 7 million people. They tried to make and stick within the vision that they had, and at the end of the day, they didn't let anybody come into the kitchen and change the recipe.

TE: Do you hope to target any of your fan bases directly?

CS: If you do the math, and you take the McFarlane fans - Todd's site gets, I think, 320 million hits a month. R.A. sold over 15 million books in the United States. You take baseball fans that are potentially Red Sox fans, Curt CS fans. The number that we've come up with on the conservative estimate [is,] over the multiple years of production, we believe that 400 million pairs of eyes will come

to our website. At that point, it's our job to make them come back. That's an enormously large audience.

TE: You hear a lot now about casual and hardcore gamer ideologies clashing. Do you have anything planned that will cater to both communities? You have more than a 40 hour a week job just in baseball, but you still managed to play EQ and EQ2. Do you feel you offer special insight there that most developers wouldn't have?

CS: I think I do, but I might be wrong. There might be people with more insight than I have. I have a unique viewpoint, I think it brings something to the table, but again, this isn't about designing my game. This is about designing the game. That is important to me.

TE: Thanks for your time, Curt.

CS: Thank you. Take care. [COMMENTS](#)

The Escapist, a shadowy flight into the dangerous world of a man who does not exist. Joe Blancato, a young Associate Editor on a crusade to champion the cause of the innocent, the powerless, the helpless in a world of criminals who operate above the law. Joe Blancato, a lone crusader in a dangerous world. The world ... of The Escapist.

“this isn't about designing my game. This is about designing **THE GAME.”**



OFFBEAT SPORTS GAMES

Don't toss the dwarf, hand me the box kite

by Allen Varney



Wikipedia's list of sports has (at the time of this writing) over 400 entries. This falls woefully short of covering all the numberless types of organized physical competition. Turning them all into computer games will take decades, assuming anyone considers that, you know, worthwhile.

Someone probably does. **Someone** out there must want to bring out a PC or console version of, say, takraw/chinlon (kick volleyball), chess boxing or dwarf tossing. How can we know this? Because of all the offbeat sports someone **already** turned into computer games.

By "offbeat," mind you, we're not talking about sports known worldwide except to parochial North Americans, like cricket (seen in *Cricket Manager*, among many others) or rugby. Nor do we mean sports that once seemed odd subjects for computer games, until someone figured them out. Hunting, for instance – no one predicted the tremendous success of *Deer Hunter* in 1997, but now it has platoons of imitators. Hunting games are "offbeat" only in that they come from non-game publishers. For instance, the outfitting chain Cabela's sells *Cabela's Big Game Hunter Alaskan Adventure*,

African Safari, *Outdoor Adventures*, *Alaskan Adventures*, *Cabela's Dangerous Hunts 2*, *Ultimate Duck Hunting 3D*, *Daisy Air Gun Fun* and the ominous-sounding *Hunter Dan Bowfishing Survival Gauntlet*. (Cabela also sells a Laser Shot Technologies Home Theater Shooting Simulator. Buddy, if you're about to spring \$3,000 for that toy, consider going outside and talking to a real girl.)

Likewise, no one raises an eyebrow about all the fishing games; nor extreme motocross, snowboarding, etc.; nor volleyball – though it's unclear how important volleyball, the sport, is to the sun-bleached *Dead or Alive XTreme Beach Volleyball*, with its anime bikini-babe jiggle physics. (It's not an accident the game can be played one-handed. Ewww.)

Perhaps we can define "offbeat" as "not published by Electronic Arts" or "not covered on mainstream sites like Sportsology." More seriously, these are sports you just can't picture as computer games, like yachting, kite surfing and water skiing, to mention a few.

the Escapist

In fact, all these have already been adapted. Can dwarf tossing be far behind?

There used to be many games about unusual sports, like 1999's *Professional Bull Rider* and ultralight flight simulator *Hangsim*. But as production costs rose and publishers focused solely on the mass market, these games got forced off retail shelves. They went indie, moved onto the web and found a different audience. Today, these sports games emphasize simulation over gameplay. Their customers are not so much gamers as sports fans. Some sims explicitly pitch themselves as good training for the real activities, in the manner of the *X-Plane* flight simulator and the *Virtual Air Traffic Flight Simulator Network*.

So, for instance, Joey Skinner of Rodeo Software has made a nice business selling computer games for horse people, such as *TRSim* (Team Roping Simulator), *BarrelSim* (barrel-racing), and *TDRSim* (Tie-Down Roping). Rodeo's RopingArena.com has nearly 13,000 registered players. Its Year-End World Finals for 2005 offered \$2,500 in prizes from sponsor Sparky Superior Roping Machines, maker of Sparky III, "the first

and only functional ground-driven team roping machine." In the December 2005 RopingArena newsletter, Skinner interviewed Bret Trenary, an award-winning roper with 35 years of experience. "You can play on the simulator, and then go rope real steers, and I think you are actually seeing the same look on both runs," says Trenary. "I think real-life roping is mostly hand-eye coordination; what better way to work on this than on a simulation you can do over and over again. There are people around here who have played and actually figured out how to score steers from this game. It is a really awesome concept."

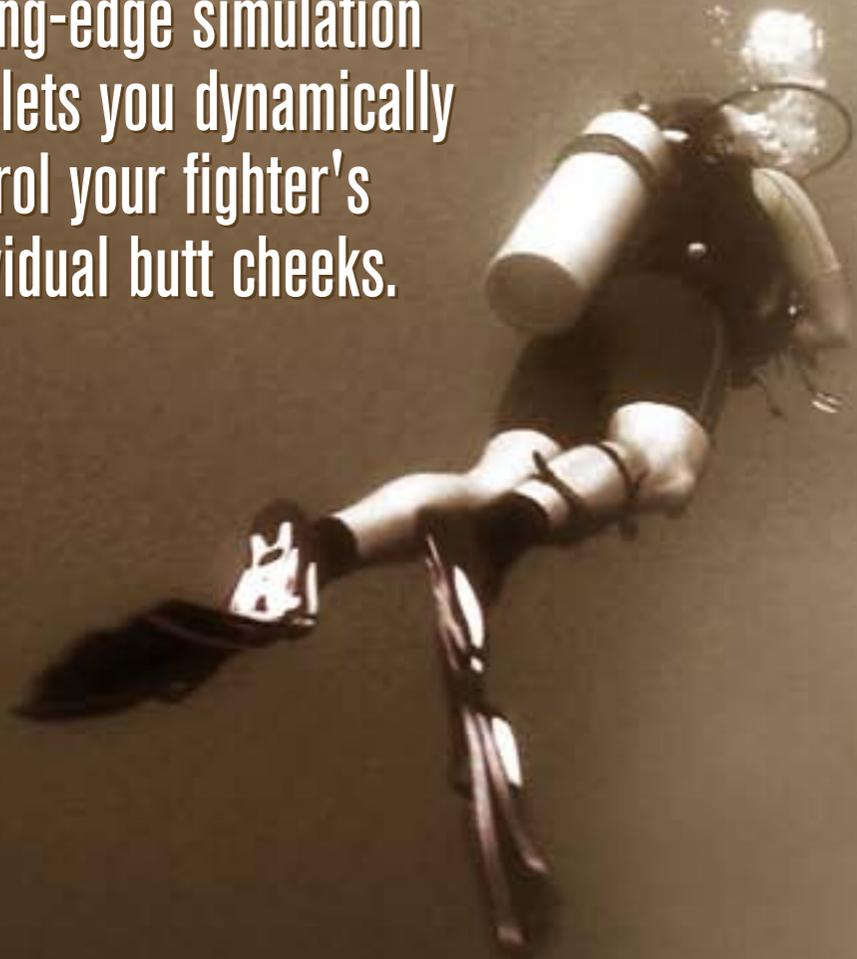
In sailing, the equivalent might be *Virtual Skipper 4*, "the ultimate regatta simulator." Offering 12 different seascapes, *VS4* promises to help you "master direction, wind flurries and calms, and select the right sails according to the weather conditions." A worldwide network of *Virtual Skipper* fan

sites stages regional multiplayer competitions. Meanwhile, aeronautics engineer Ilan Papini of Hangsim recently released Version 7 of his *Virtual Sailor* simulation. Sailing in these games is an idyllic experience – perhaps too idyllic. The games do well enough modeling calm water, but even choppy waves, let alone stormy seas, are still way beyond desktop PCs. Still, stay the course, and in a few seasons you may know the joy of capsizing in a hurricane.

KiteSim simulates kite surfing with a leading edge inflatable (LEI) traction kite. "You can use this program to learn how to fly a kite, practice making loops, or try out different water launching techniques without worrying about untangling your strings later." With the mouse, you both steer the kite and



... you have to admire a cutting-edge simulation that lets you dynamically control your fighter's individual butt cheeks.



adjust its power using the "chicken loop." The site provides instructions for making your own real kite camera. Both *KiteSim* and a fly-fishing game, *FlySim*, were programmed by J.R. Gloudemans and Walter Hsaio. Their previous work includes 1st & 10, that enhancement you see on televised football games that draws a yellow line at the location of the first-down marker.

If you fall off your kite board, consider *Diver: Deep Water Adventure* from the Russian developer BiArt. Along with a video teaching system, authentic equipment and 15 real diving sites, *Diver* promises a "revelle of treasures" and "smart and heartless opponents." On the schedule: "taking photos of rare species of underwater fauna, treasure hunting, researching sunken submarines, vessels and crashed transports, immersion to the Loch Ness lake and to the area of Bermudan triangle, neutralization of the dangerous legacy of World War II and death combats with sea predators and black divers." Available in France, Germany and Russia, *Diver* is still plumbing the depths for an English-language publisher.

Then there's *Toribash*, a physics-based fighting game like no other. It's hard to call *Toribash* a sports game, as such – too much dismemberment and decapitation – but you have to admire a cutting-edge simulation that lets you dynamically control your fighter's individual butt cheeks.

Moving up one level of abstraction, we reach the booming industry of fantasy sports. Everyone knows about fantasy football and basketball – there's also fantasy baseball, cricket, hockey, golf and auto racing – but people are also forming fantastic leagues for more unusual endeavors.

More than your typical shareware yacht sim, fantasy sports dangle the prospect of serious money. The Fantasy Sports Trade Association, founded in 1998, now represents more than 240 companies, leagues and publications "in a mature industry with a market size our research estimates at 15 to 18 million unique participants." A September 2006 *Business Week* article by Catherine Holahan says Yahoo Fantasy Sports drew 3.1 million users in July, and ESPN and

Sportsline drew nearly 2 million more. "The fantasy sports industry generates \$1 billion to \$2 billion a year on publication subscriptions, paid league entrance fees, mail-order draft kits, and fantasy software and other products."

So we now have fantasies on the following sports and, uh, competitions:

- Fantasy Water Ski ("Live your dreams!").
- MyRodeoTeam.com is not affiliated with Rodeo Games.
- Shootclub: Maybe fantasy pro wrestling doesn't count as "offbeat," but check this one just to see the wrestler names.
- Fantasy Fashion League was started in 2005 by Erica Salmon, a self-described stay-at-home mom in Pitman, New Jersey. Players draft teams of fashion designers – clothing, shoes, handbags, jewelry – plus three celebrities. In a 28-week season, climaxing with the Oscar ceremony, competitors earn points from mentions and pictures in *Women's Wear Daily*, fashion magazines and award shows. Salmon has also started a Fantasy Country Music League.

- Likewise, Tabloid Fantasy League lets you pick celebrities, then score points each week based on how often they appear in *People*, *Us*, *Star and In Touch*. Publisher Famfam LLC offers a wide range of gossipy pursuits.
- Survivor: The CBS reality TV series has spawned more fantasy leagues than you can believe, including promotions by CBS itself. FantasySurvivor.net is one indie effort.
- Fantasy Congress: Either silly or brilliant, this summer project by four college students at Claremont (California) McKenna College lets you manage a team of 16 U.S. legislators. You earn points when your Senators and Representatives successfully introduce bills and get them voted into law.

We can rise still higher in levels of meta-competition. With tabular rankings of national performance in dozens of categories – everything from Olympic medals and environmental protection to opera and beer – the International Match site turns civilization itself into a sport. ("This month's themes: Corruption, Volleyball.") Soon, no doubt, we'll see a Fantasy United Nations. "I'll trade you Norway for Taiwan and two Balkans."



Why so much competition? No, never mind. It's a stupid question, like "Why so much breathing?" People compete, period.

Joshua Davis, author of *The Underdog: How I Survived the World's Most Outlandish Competitions* (Random House, 2005), "survived" the U.S. National Armwrestling Championships, a Spanish bullfight, a sumo match, a backward-running race and Finnish competitive sauna. (Wonder when we'll see those computer games?) Davis theorizes, "Individuality can be hard to come by when there are 280 million other would-be individuals in the country. ... We need some way of comparing ourselves to others to prove that we are different. That's why I've always been attracted to competition. Rankings give me a way of knowing how close (or far) I am from being a champion."

Davis' explanation may be right, as far as it goes. But these computer games, besides letting you compete while nestled comfortably in your desk chair, also replicate another aspect of sports: community. All these games offer forums; some are quite busy. The

contest may drive us, but the community gives context to our struggle. The social dimension, in computer games as in real life, gives our efforts meaning.

[COMMENTS](#)

Allen Varney designed the PARANOIA paper-and-dice roleplaying game (2004 edition) and has contributed to computer games from Sony Online, Origin, Interplay and Looking Glass.

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Stick and Roll: Next Gen Sports Controllers

by Dana Massey

Next-generation consoles were supposed to change the way games were played. History will show that – at least in the first year – they’ve only really changed the way sports games are played. Both Microsoft’s Xbox 360 and Nintendo’s Wii have opened new, yet dramatically different doors for sports fans to bring their dreams to life.

If you’d told me at E3 that the most innovative hockey game of the next year would be released on the 360 and not the Nintendo Wii, I’d have laughed at you. After all, Microsoft was releasing a glorified Xbox with a PS2 controller, and the Wii was making a device clearly designed by a sports fan. Surely, Nintendo had this round wrapped up? EA showed me how wrong I was with *NHL 07* for the 360.

As a sports fanatic, I was oddly anti-console. Sports games thrive on consoles, and I even had a PS2-style controller for my PC, but for whatever reason, I hadn’t purchased a new console since the Sega Genesis. I was a PC guy and never stopped to consider the ramifications of the “next-gen war” on my beloved sports games.

At first, all the hype about the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 and Nintendo Wii centered around the shape of their boxes, who would be doing exclusives for them and how many pixels they could fit on your screen. I didn’t care – and wouldn’t care – until I actually got my hands on a 360 controller.

The 360 controller was not, as I had assumed, a PS2 clone. They swapped the positions of the d-pad and the left analogue stick and subtly placed the right analogue stick in a more convenient position. At a glance, who cares, right? Not so. The move has fundamentally altered the sports genre just as much as the Wii’s innovative wand has.



The beauty of that change is most apparent in two EA Sports titles: *Fight Night Round 3* and *NHL 07*. In *Fight Night*, the punches are no longer just mashing buttons. For a right uppercut, I move the stick down and to the right, then trail it up in the motion of that form of punch. For a left hook, I move it out and swing it up, just like a left hook. In a way, I am doing exactly what my boxer is doing. That's a phrase people have thrown at the Wii, but in its own way, it is true of the 360 as well.

Things got even better in *NHL 07*. As I skate around the ice, I stick handle by moving the right stick back and forth, I fire a snapshot by pulling back the stick and pushing it forward, and I take a wrist shot by rolling the puck out to my forehand, then gliding it forward. All the while, I aim with the left stick. I was never a boxer, but I was (a rather terrible) hockey player, and this just feels right to me.

This design change has actually made me dislike some of their other offerings. *Madden 07* bores me to tears; having to tackle your opponents by using the left stick (or "hit stick" as they call it) has

been in the franchise for years and it just doesn't cut it anymore. Plus, actually getting the tackles off – which is a rather important part of football – is much harder than checking is in hockey. The experience is at best an exercise in frustration. Potentially, the actual throwing motion could be mimicked with the stick. Rather than simply hitting a face button to throw, the player

I fire a snapshot by pulling back the stick and pushing forward, and I take a wrist shot by rolling the puck out to my forehand, then gliding it forward.



The Skill-Stick Revolution

by Jon Wood

Tired of the same old button-mashing technique that's become all too important in sports games over the past 15 years? I was. In fact, I had stopped buying and renting sports games altogether, right around the release of *NHL 98*. Fortunately for me, 2006 brought with it a few games that rekindled my interest. EA's *NHL 07* and *Fight Night Round 3* are the beginning of my new love affair with sports games. The invention of the Skill Stick feature has replaced traditional, mindless button-mashing with something sports games have always lacked: player skill.

I know some digital sports fans out there are going to get caught up on my use of the word mindless. After all, EA and other sports franchises have done a good job over the years in adding new features to their games, giving players new tricks to master. The problem I have is more fundamental: In terms of the controls, not much has genuinely changed since the release of *NHL Hockey* for the Sega Genesis in 1991.

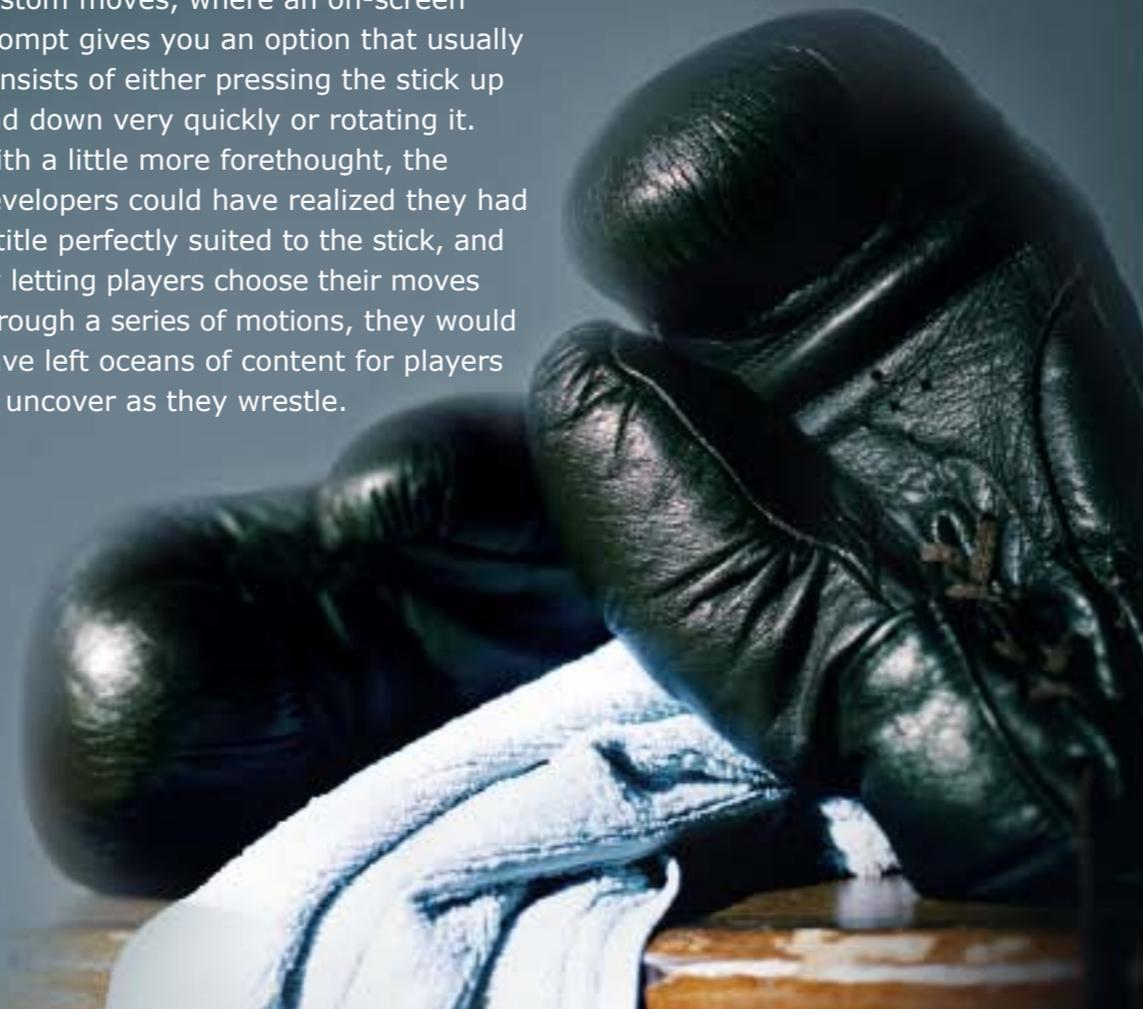
the Escapist

would have to look around (like a real quarterback) and face the person they want to throw to. Whomever they're aimed at is where the ball goes when they perform the back and forth motion with the stick. Now, not all plays in football are that black and white, but the play could easily be modified using a trigger. So, for example, when facing to the left, if the player holds down the right trigger and performs the throw motion, he might turn at the last second and toss it to a receiver he knows to be running a route on the opposite side of the field. The advantage is surprising the defense, while the disadvantage is throwing it blind.

This could then be extended to the running game as well. Like "deking" in *NHL 07*, the stick could easily replicate stutter steps, spins, straight arms and the other moves pulled in football. *Madden 07* took some baby steps with the hit stick – although that is now a few years old – and the use of the stick for kicking, but they didn't even begin to exploit the potential of the 360 controller.

EA Sports isn't the only one to use or abuse the skill stick in the realm of

sports. THQ was similarly unimpressive in their shoddy *WWE: SmackDown vs. RAW 2007*. In this game, players can use the "skill stick" to grapple and perform moves, but again, it is almost exclusively limited to simple one-directional taps. THQ's only bow to the power of the stick was the inclusion of custom moves, where an on-screen prompt gives you an option that usually consists of either pressing the stick up and down very quickly or rotating it. With a little more forethought, the developers could have realized they had a title perfectly suited to the stick, and by letting players choose their moves through a series of motions, they would have left oceans of content for players to uncover as they wrestle.



When my roommate bought an Xbox 360 earlier this year, I was excited. But my head hung low when I found out he bought nothing but sports games. I remember thinking the last thing I was going to do was sit down and spend hours on yet another boring game from the NHL franchise, nor was I likely to enjoy a new boxing game. I'm not a huge fan of the sport in general, and *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out* is probably the last digital version I enjoyed playing.

What I expected to find in *NHL 07* and *Fight Night* was more of the same: D-Pad to move, X to shoot, Y to check or X for uppercut, Y for jab, Z to block. What I got were two dynamic games that actually required me to develop, use and retain skills rather than the button-memorizing I had become so disenchanted with over the years.

Then, the Skill Stick came and changed everything. This new invention has replaced those years-old buttons with a way to simulate the real-life actions you'd take while playing sports. In hockey, to take a wrist shot, you have to wind your stick back and come back for a smooth release. In boxing, a jab, a hook or an uppercut all require different arcs from the boxer's arm.

If the 360 got me excited about sports again, the Wii put me right over the edge. *Wii Sports* is packaged with every system to show people the power of the controller. For those living in a cave, players use a wand-like device to perform actions on the screen. Thus, if you're playing tennis, you just swing the stick as you would a racket. The same goes for bowling and the other sports in the game.

Although hockey was not included in the sports pack, it's a sport ripe for the Nintendo to take to the next level. With his left hand a player could use the analogue stick to skate around the ice, and with his right hand, he could easily mimic the motions of stick handling, deking, passing and shooting.

If a Wii hockey player wanted to fire a pass to the right, he would just need to make a short smooth motion in the direction of the player he wanted it to go to. If he wanted to do a slap shot, he'd wind back with the wand-hand and bring it down underhanded to fire. The speed at which the player moves could determine the strength of the shot, while the use of the D-Pad – which is located

at the top of the remote – lets him aim. To do a saucer pass instead of a direct one, all he would need to do is flick his wrist at the end of the passing movement. Deking could be performed by simple, delicate wrist motions.

The possibilities of Wii hockey are endless, just as the golf and bowling in *Wii Sports* have made fans out of many who didn't previously care about those sports.

Both the Wii and the 360 have opened the door to innovation in the one area I had thought innovation was becoming impossible. The 2008 crop of sports games should include brand new ways of playing the games, rather than just new rosters and higher poly counts. It's up to EA Sports, THQ, Take2 and anyone else making a sports game to ensure that their products take full advantage of the technology provided to them. For the first time in a long while, I'm looking forward to seeing if they do.

[COMMENTS](#)

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Although hockey was not included in the sports pack, it's a sport ripe for the Nintendo to take to the next level.



The skill stick allows players to actually simulate those movements, engaging the player in a way simply not possible with button combinations.

Before now, it seemed as though sports games were more about learning tricks than they were about actual knowledge or skill in the sport. In various incarnations of hockey games, it's been everything from shooting from in between the face-off circles to the one-timer.

Gone, too, is the feeling I always had that I could pick up any new sports game and within a few minutes rely on old muscle memory to get me into form. Now, leaving the game behind for even as little as a week has me stumbling to remember how to get my wrist shot to fire in just the right direction at just the right moment, or how to land that left-right combination that leaves my opponent's head spinning. [COMMENTS](#)

Jon "Stradden" Wood is the News Manager at MMORPG.com and is a former GM for Wish. Wood is also a certified teacher in Nova Scotia, Canada.

THE ART OF

Kicking

by Brian Easton

There's less than two minutes left in the fourth quarter, and I have just led my beloved alma mater to score, going ahead of their hated backyard rivals, 21-17. The opposition's return man nearly ran the last kick in for a touchdown. Somehow, he does it again.

Kicking a football is an art form. With the right spin, the ball can bounce backward and die on the 5-yard line, forcing the return man to chase it into oncoming defenders. Or it can be a nigh un-returnable "squib kick," football's equivalent of the knuckleball; it's nearly impossible to catch on the fly.

If you hit the ball in the right spot with the right force, you can make it do anything you want. But sports games have never really captured that feeling. You're traditionally given a power meter and a directional slider in the form of a timing-based mini-game that amounts to a base insult.

But EA's latest *Madden* and *NCAA* games have taken a step in the right direction. By putting the kicker's power and

accuracy on the right analogue stick, the player has a lot more control over how he kicks. But even if you crank the angle all the way down to the turf, you still can't do much beyond a long-distance kick.

One way to fix this problem is to make kicking more like a golf game. A developer could adjust the swing control to the left stick and let the right stick control the strike point where the kicker's foot hits the ball. This would allow the player to exercise greater influence over the ball. For punting, this element of control could be used to put spin on the ball and change the way it bounces.

After my opponent scores and tallies a two-point conversion, I'm able to march the ball downfield. The wind is at my back and my hometown crowd cheers every first down. Tragedy strikes: My quarterback gets sacked, and third and goal at the 6 becomes fourth and goal at the 12. Settling for a field goal, I'm down one point and still have to get the ball back. I set up an onside kick and hope for the best.

the Escapist

As it stands now, onside kicks in videogames are even more of a crapshoot than they are in real life: The chances of having one go your way are exceedingly slim. With a new control method, onside kicks would be less of a "point and pray" affair. Instead, a variety of kicks, from high jump-balls to drilling an unsuspecting receiver, would be available.

What we really need in the special teams portion are more options: the option to keep the wedge intact on kick returns instead of the blockers peeling off, the option to rush as few as one player at the punter. The playbook for special teams should be much bigger than it is now.

Moreover, special teams plays don't even require the special teams players to be on the field. Add the quick kick option for an element of surprise on those fourth and mid-range plays that people usually end up going for. In overtime, why risk a turnover when the quarterback can slide the ball between the hash marks to set up the perfect winning field goal?

I manage to recover the onside kick and march the ball down the field. My drive ends at fourth-and-10 on the 30. A field

goal might win it, but my quarterback has been on fire. There's enough time for one more pass. I set up a quick outside route to the receiver, enough to get us closer to the endzone for an easy field goal, which my kicker chips through the uprights. I may have won my season's biggest rivalry game, but somehow it feels like it could have been better. [COMMENTS](#)

Brian Easton is a freelance writer currently working on his first novel and a new entertainment website. He and his brother can be found at Free Play.



"TRAGEDY STRIKES: My quarterback gets sacked, and third and goal at the 6 becomes fourth and goal AT THE 12!"

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