

# Love's Labors Lost

*Are The Stat-based Sports Companies Being Pushed Off The Field?*



It's no secret that many of today's computer gamers cut their teeth on dice-activated board games long before the personal computer revolutionized the way we play. Believe it or not, back then, great graphics often meant a wargame map that fea-

tured several shades of brown to distinguish hills from mountains. How exciting! An improved statistical model in a baseball sim could be as simple as using three dice instead of two to generate runs, hits, and errors. And of course, role playing games required a flesh-and-blood game master, not a CPU, to control the pace. A few companies dominated the market in that era. Avalon Hill, SPI, and TSR all held the wargame or RPG high ground at different points, while APBA and Strat-O-Matic battled each other for sports gaming dollars in a rivalry that's lasted since

JFK was in office.

Now, of course, everything's different. It seems like every month brings a new release with mega-graphics that not only push the technology envelope, but also give gamers a not-so-gentle shove along the path to the next hardware upgrade. Did you CATCH FRONT PAGE SPORTS FOOTBALL PRO 96's great looking player animation? Only if you were running at least a 486/66. You can bet the ranch that you'll need a Pentium for the '97 version.

So, it's only natural that some gamers look back wistfully at the days when life was simple—at least life's sports gaming side. Who recalls excitedly poring over hitter's columns on brand-new APBA player cards, or trying to fathom STRAT-O-MATIC's secret formula for assigning fielders' ratings? If you remember, perhaps you're one of the many table-top loyalists who migrated along as dice-and-card game companies converted their products over to PCs. The computer versions

of games like APBA and STRAT-O-MATIC were the product of a life and death struggle against looming competition by the graphics-oriented sports sims from large, well-capitalized software houses, a David and Goliath battle that rages on.

## DAVID VS. GOLIATH

What's more, it's not just the old-time board game companies tilting at the corporate windmills of the big game publishers. A mixed bag of mom-and-pop software operations offer full-blown commercial sports game products in an effort to grab their slice of the pigskin, puck, or cowhide. While industry leader Patrick Cook presides over the highly successful FRONT PAGE empire at Dynamix, sports nut Dave Koch busily chums out code in a Wisconsin garage, tweaking his fine text-based NFL sim, ACTION PC FOOTBALL. Actually, I don't know if Dave Koch even has a garage, but the image of the little guy burning the midnight oil in a labor of love holds true. After all, isn't that the stuff of legends in the personal computer industry? It's a wonder, really, that these small publishers are able to buck the odds and survive, considering professional sports licensing fees, limited (usually mail order) distribution networks, and an overall lack of pizzazz

“For the stat-based sims to survive, they have to offer modem play and better customer service.”

## ON DECK

► Dynamix is currently revamping the engine undergirding the venerable FRONT PAGE SPORTS PRO FOOTBALL series for FRONT PAGE SPORTS PRO FOOTBALL '97. While you're waiting, though, you might want to try out the strategies in next month's magazine and CD-ROM.

► Electronic Arts is allegedly working on a new MARIO ANDRETTI racing game. Expected to appear first on the Sony PlayStation, the game is expected to feature at least three

types of vehicles to race—a first to our knowledge in the console market.

► 3DO Studios is reported to be working with Stormfront Studios (of TONY LARUSSA BASEBALL fame) on a baseball game for the PC. The project would unite EARL WEAVER BASEBALL publisher Trip Hawkins (then CEO/President of Electronic Arts) with EWB producer Don Daglow (now President of Stormfront).



## DENNIS MCCAULEY

compared to the higher profile products. While FRONT PAGE SPORTS FOOTBALL PRO '96 and Accolade's UNNECESSARY ROUGHNESS dominated the shelves at software retailers this past football season, you'd only have stumbled upon ACTION PC FOOTBALL if you scanned the small ads in the back of sports magazines.

How do the little guys do it? Perhaps they've found their niche in sports gaming—statistics. After all, table-top baseball games have been around since at least the early 60s, so they've had plenty of time to perfect their stat models. Gamers know they're getting a reasonably accurate simulation of actual results, which is more than can be said for some of the graphics-oriented sims, with their 4,000 yard rushers, all-too-frequent 1-0 hockey scores, and home run hitters whose output regularly eclipses the best production of Babe Ruth and Roger Maris. This is a real bone



**BACKFIELD IN MOTION** UNNECESSARY ROUGHNESS 96 may emulate the mechanics of a good running game, but for realism, you're still better off with an old-fashioned stat-based football sim.

of contention for the stat-oriented game publishers, who, quite naturally, see their type of product as the Holy Grail of sports gaming. One designer told CGW he'd tried several times to shop his baseball game's well-regarded statistics engine to major publishers as a means of giving their graphical sims a better foundation, but had been rebuffed. He came away with the impression that the larger companies believe that graphics are what sell, and most consumers don't really care about the underlying statistical precision. Could they be right?

Text-based and stat-oriented games

also appeal to upgrade *refuseniks* who can't or won't send their credit card on a fly pattern just to keep up with the latest full motion video, live announcer sports sim. Heck, many of the less-demanding stat-based games will run easily on even a 386, allowing sports junkies to get their numbers fix and still have a few dollars left to buy tickets to a real game once in a while.

Stat-oriented sims have history on their side, too. When you purchase a STRAT-O-MATIC or an APBA, you know you're buying into decades of sports simulation experience. Other games, like Lance Haffner's FULL COUNT BASEBALL, have a track record of several years to rely upon. There's a certain reassurance that comes from knowing a publisher depends on your purchase for his livelihood, and that the product will be there year after year, with updates, past season disks, and other game-related add-ons.

With the bigger companies' sports products, you have to wonder whether your favorite sim will survive the annual shareholders' meeting. Think it can't happen? Guess again. In a recent example, MicroProse has dropped ULTIMATE FOOTBALL like a slippery pigskin after just two seasons. Let's hope you didn't invest too much time in ULTIMATE FOOTBALL's play book editor, designing a custom offense for a game that's now as defunct as the single wing.

For all their virtues, you have to wonder about the survivability factor of the stat-oriented sports sim in a gaming market where 3-D video is the latest buzz. To hold on against the big boys, small publishers must emphasize what they do best—the little differences that set them apart from their corporate brethren.

#### THE SMALL COMPANY PLAYBOOK

Where can small companies make their mark? Customer service is paramount. Publishers must know the gamers who buy their product, and be responsive to their needs. I speak from personal experience when I say that, sadly, this isn't always the case. Some firms just don't get it, customer relations-wise. Do you have a modem? Do you use e-mail? Of course

you do.

Amazingly, some small companies don't even have an Internet address, much less a Web Page. Hello? This is 1996, guys! Perhaps even more frustrating, others have e-mail, but don't answer inquiries promptly, if at all. We've come to expect the impersonal treatment from the software bureaucracies, but from a little firm, the snub feels so much more personal.

And, say, Mr. Small Company CEO, here's a question that you don't need a Harvard MBA to answer. What's better than one lonely customer playing a sports game solitaire? Why, 28 frenzied customers busily engaged in league play, of course. It's a surprising fact that many of the stat-based sims completely ignore the possibilities of the modem. With the old-line companies, this is probably because their customers have a 30-year history of organizing Play By Mail (PBM) leagues. Well, guess what?

As a veteran of many PBM leagues in my dice and card days, I'm here to tell you that I'm not going to lick stamps anymore. I want direct modem play and I'm not the only one.

Finally, small publishers should do what they do best, and not get caught up in on-screen gimmicks in a futile effort to compete with graphics-intensive games. The type of gamer who leans towards NHL 96 or TONY LARUSSA BASEBALL is not going to switch to a stat-based sim just because it features an optional mouse-activated bat and ball graphic. Yet, in a questionable allocation of resources, one company is adding such a module to its '96 version. Professional athletes often use the term, "Stay within yourself." It means play your own game, and don't try to be something you're not. Stat-based game companies should take heed.

Make no mistake, this is a niche market. Small publishers ignore this fact at their own peril. It would be a shame—our loss as well as theirs—to eventually see the little fish in sports gaming gobbled up by a hungry school of officially-licensed, multimedia sports extravaganzas, too many of which turn out to be all icing and no cake. ☞