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### Video (And Licensing Fees) Killed Our Most 'Creative' Sports Games

by Jon Last, Tuesday, July 12, 2011 6:59 AM

Tomorrow, July 13, is what I used to refer to as "Sports Void Day." It remains the only day on the U.S. sports calendar where one of our major sports does not have a live event for us to enjoy (and I say this with all due respect to the Women's World Cup, WNBA and Tour de France). Such a void for even the most die-hard sports fan needn't be tragic, given the proliferation of sports simulation video games. Yet, July 13 got me thinking about how when I was growing up, Sports Void Day was often when we would break out some of the plethora of long-lost sports games or toys.

Before PS3s, if you weren't playing a card-based sports simulation like Strat-o-Matic, you could turn to classics like Electric Football, where a vibrating game board propelled your plastic running back behind a wall of cross-armed blockers. Electric Football's baseball and horse-racing cousins operated off of the same concept but lacked the "authenticity" of the perfectly sculpted little football players that often ran in circles rather than through the line.

There was Super Toe, a proportionally incorrect field goal kicker who put the ball through the uprights when you smacked him on the helmet (clearly before concussions were an issue!). In-hockey players were controlled by metal rods or, in the Phil and Tony Esposito game, magnets moved players from the top and bottom of the rink, respectively. Bas-Ket was a hoops adaptation in which players pushed the ball into a hole where a spring-activated lever propelled it skyward and final scores paid homage to the Four Corners offense.

Strolling Bowling featured an anthropomorphized bowling ball with large feet waddling down the lane. Perhaps my all-time favorite was Arnold Palmer Golf, where you fastened a plastic, sculpted Arnie figure to the shaft of a club and pulled a trigger to make him swing. Before computers and video games made golf simulations incredibly realistic, there was Avalon Hill's short-lived "Challenge Golf" and "Pro Golf" series of board games. The latter was based on PGA Tour statistics, and a friend of mine and I actually figured out the algorithms used for generating player cards to the extent that we updated the game for a couple of years after it was discontinued.

I have been converted to today's incredibly realistic video sports games and enjoy them immensely. But my sense of nostalgia did prompt me to speak recently with a friend who owns a toy company, to gain his perspective on why the old games have gone the way of the Edsel. The obvious reasons lie in the realism with which video game developers can render today's simulations, along with consumers' desire for authenticity that now only comes with the multiple licenses that today's game developers must pay to the leagues and players' associations.

It's the latter rationale that most intrigues me. As a researcher, I would hypothesize that sufficient niche demand might exist for some creative modern-day versions of the classics, but when one must cover license fees, production costs and consumer price expectations, Electric Football 2011, replete with multiple team uniform sets, accurately sculpted figurines and stadiums would never be as feasible as what can be accomplished in a video simulation at a fraction of the cost.

But with these accurate video game simulations, are we depriving today's sports gamer of the variety of choices spawned by multiple creative and imaginative games of the past? And does this, in turn, inhibit the type of "relationship" that past generations of kids had with their favorite sports? Yesteryear's Oilers/Titans fan needed to dress Super Toe up like Tony Fritsch. Today, I can have video Rob Bironas.

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0 comments on "Video (And Licensing Fees) Killed Our Most 'Creative' Sports Games".

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**Jonathan Hutter** from **Garrand** commented on: July 12, 2011 at 10:27 a.m.

If the simplicity of life has changed, don't just put it on the technology. The people running and participating in the sports, and appalling lack of long-term vision, have all combined to change the way we should be viewing sports as entertainment and as business.

The old days will never be back. Bironas notwithstanding, how many players stick with teams long enough for kids to develop any kind of relationship with them? And, if you're a parent, do you want your kids to idolize someone like Ben Roethlisberger (you know his joke name) or any one of the upstanding, steroid-addled superstars of today?

Team owners care even less. When I was in Little League, we could name our team the Mets. Now, no chance. That costs money that even Little Leagues don't have (neither do the Mets for that matter).