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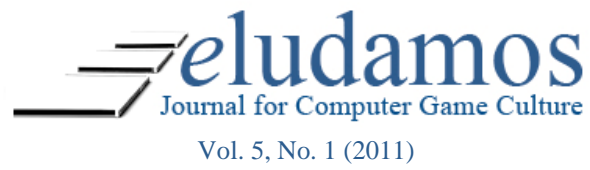
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The Sentimental Mood of All-Star Baseball 2004

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The Sentimental Mood of *All-Star Baseball 2004*

ABE STEIN

It is the American game, that's just what it is – and, actually, it makes you, me I'm 81, but I can feel like I'm fifteen when I'm talking baseball, I'm watching baseball, this is it, it does this, it can do this to any man, it brings you back. (Buck O'Neil in Ken Burn's *Baseball*)

Like most sports, baseball is best understood in the context of its play. So much more than just the formal properties that dictate the execution of the game, fans experience baseball as a great and long succession of history. In its mere century of play, a grand history of the game has been written, into which each new game, each new team, each new player, and each new event is meticulously positioned. Players are compared to their predecessors, and teams roll into new iterations as each season makes way for the next. Fan bases remain religiously devoted to the laundry and spirit of a team, regardless of their quality or makeup.

All-Star Baseball 2004, more than any other modern baseball video game, is reverent of baseball history. It is fitting then to start this review of Acclaim Sport's game with these words from Buck O'Neil, one of the greatest ambassadors the game of baseball has known. Despite having never played in America's top level, the Major League, O'Neil earned a reputation as a decent player, with a larger-than-life personality. From 1937 to 1955, O'Neil played first base for the Kansas City Monarchs, a team in the so called "Negro Leagues". In *All-Star Baseball 2004*, O'Neil is one of over 100 historic, hall-of-fame, and Negro League players who appear as playable characters. These playable characters are just one facet of a rich design approach exhibited in the video game. *All-Star Baseball 2004* is not just a baseball game; it is a video game about baseball history.

The history of baseball becomes a map for the touchstone moments in the lives of fans. We remember years by what team won the World Series, or by what player won a triple crown. We mark our lives with baseball events like Bobby Thomson's Shot Heard 'Round the World, Hank Aaron breaking Ruth's homerun record, or the Red Sox winning a World Series after an 86-year drought. We also measure our lives with events that may be related to baseball the sport, not baseball the game: the Dodger's leaving Brooklyn, the tearing down of the Polo Grounds, or more recently, perjury cases related to the use of steroids. For those who love the sport, it becomes a part of the fabric of their day-to-day life, whether checking a box score in the summer, or spending the winter wondering and hoping for the next season, anxiously awaiting its return. This is what Buck O'Neil speaks to above: that the rich history of the sport can bring us back to a once forgotten time.

The designers of *All Star Baseball (ASB 2004)* understood the importance of history to the fans of American baseball. No other baseball video game has emphasized the

history of the sport to the same degree. The game is dripping with sentimentality. It opens with a video of Lou Gehrig making his famous “luckiest man” farewell speech from home plate at Yankee Stadium, one of the iconic moments of the pre-war golden age of baseball. What follows is a video montage of historic baseball moments with legendary players: Ricky Henderson stealing his record-setting base, Cal Ripken Jr. playing in his 2131st consecutive game, Babe Ruth slugging a home run, Jackie Robinson stealing home, Nolan Ryan pumping his fist in victory. Despite the unfortunate Smash Mouth soundtrack (yes, “All Star”), the intro video prepares the player for a baseball video game experience unlike any other before, or since, rich with historical reference and context.

Loading screens show pictures of oft forgotten Negro League players, alongside relics like bats, ticket stubs and gloves that seem to belong in a museum. The game’s menus are set in a nondescript, mid-century locker room, complete with a coach’s office, benches, chalkboards, and green lamps pulled straight out of a scene in *The Natural*. In fact, Randy Newman’s iconic score from that very movie plays behind your menu navigation. The hauntingly powerful music, filled with Copland-like flourishes of Americana, suggests themes from a different era. The menus are presented with a film grain effect to reinforce the “oldness” of the space. Just navigating the menus of the game feels like a time warp.

As a baseball simulation *ASB 2004* is unremarkable, especially when compared to the standard of more modern baseball video games. While some of the other titles of 2003, *MVP Baseball 2003*, *High Heat Major League Baseball 2004*, or *World Series Baseball 2K3* were innovating on mechanics or controls, *ASB 2004* instead focused on representing the history of the sport. In truth *ASB 2004*, is unnecessarily hard. Hitting is challenging to the point of fault on the normal difficulty setting, and even with the best pitchers it is hard to keep average hitters from making solid contact. Mechanically, hitting is executed through the use of a tilting icon in the strike zone for location and a button press for timing. Pitching requires the player to select a type of pitch and a pitch location, with delivery the result of a button push as well. Neither interface mechanic exhibits incredible innovation on the standard form of baseball video games of that console generation (Playstation 2, Gamecube, Xbox).

The game is also filled with many of the design flaws that have plagued other baseball games of the era, with awkward ball detection, long animations, incoherent GUI, and some clunky glitches. That said, the game itself is functional, and the joy is not in playing a well-executed game of baseball. Rather, the excellence of *ASB 2004* comes from the depth of its reference to baseball history.

As mentioned before, there are over 100 legendary baseball players that appear in the game as playable characters. Players can unlock 19 teams of legends, ranging from a collection of Negro League stars to Pre War stars, or teams of All Power players, or All Speed. Some of the legends are familiar names, like Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, or Bob Gibson. Some unlockable players would only be familiar to fans of baseball; a collection so deep that it must have been designed with baseball fans in mind. Stars like Catfish Hunter, Bobby Doer, Phil Niekro, and Willie McCovey are well known to fans of the sport, but lack the household recognition of other legends of the game. That these players are available to be controlled shows that the developers of

ASB 2004 were designing the game with a detailed eye to the history of the sport, as a love letter to fans.

Indeed, it is not that these players are digitally represented that sets *ASB 2004* apart from other baseball video games. Rather, it is the interactivity of playing as these baseball legends that invites players to mediate an established baseball discourse of comparison through playing the video game. Because the rules of baseball have remained largely unchanged over a century of play in America, it is not uncommon for fans to engage in “what if” discussions, or to fancy impossible scenarios of great players facing off against one another. Could Babe Ruth homer off Nolan Ryan? Who was a better hitting second basemen, Joe Morgan or Jackie Robinson? Could Satchel Paige strike out Lou Gehrig? While *ASB 2004* provides no definite answers to such hypothetical scenarios, by enabling players to interact with baseball’s legends, the designers created a playground for exploring such questions. The stars are well modeled, and their batting stances and pitching deliveries are remarkably accurate. Babe Ruth has a gut, and Whitey Ford has a very high leg kick. When legends enter the game they are presented with a graphic of their lifetime statistics, impressive accomplishments for each. Playing digital baseball with these legends affords a new degree of access to the history of the sport that was otherwise unavailable. Our understanding of their excellence can now be informed by playing as them.

As mentioned before, it is notable that the developers included many Negro League stars in the video game. Racial segregation is an ugly part of American history, and baseball as an American institution reflected the prejudices of an empowered white American culture. Many of the greatest baseball players in American history are less known than their white counterparts because their accomplishments were performed in the Negro Leagues. Despite efforts made by former players like O’Niel to evangelize the talents of so many forgotten players, there are still an unfortunately disproportionate number of Negro League stars in Baseball’s Hall of Fame. Negro League stars do not yet have the name recognition that stars in the Major Leagues enjoy. Players like Bingo DeMoss, Pop Lloyd, and Turkey Stearnes were some of the best to have ever played, and yet their names are still relatively unknown to baseball fans. Their inclusion in *ASB 2004* shows a sensitivity on the part of the developers that deserves recognition and approbation.

The designers also understood the importance of space and architecture to the history of baseball, and they included some historic stadiums in which you can play games. The Polo Grounds, Forbes Field, Shibe Park, The Baker Bowl, The Astrodome and other unique historic parks and stadiums are playable in the game, each with its own quirks and characteristic architecture that can dramatically affect the play of the game. Also included in the game are “historic” versions of older parks that have been renovated over the years: Classic Fenway Park, Classic Wrigley Field and Classic Yankee Stadium for example. It is a joy to play a game between Pre-War and Post-War legends in a park that some of them had actually played in! Other baseball simulations have included historic parks, but never so many as are included in *ASB 2004*.

Most sports video games of the last two console generations are measured by the accuracy of their sports simulation. While some titles like *NFL Blitz* or *MLB Slugfest*

emphasize certain aspects of the games over others, presented with appropriate arcade like flare, the most popular sports titles strive for some measure of authenticity. Indeed, sports video game players are generally placing their video game play into the larger context of their sports fandom, seeking to understand the sport there are passionate about in new ways through digital play and fantasy fulfillment.

ASB 2004 was also created as a baseball simulation, however the designers chose to emphasize the history of the sport through an historic aesthetic, historic teams and players, historic stadiums, and a presentation that frames the experience of the game as reflective and sentimental. For fans of baseball, already familiar with the stories, myths, and legends that make the sport so rich and meaningful, the video game offers a new lens through which we may focus our impassioned gaze. Stories from baseball's past that were once the domain of only photographs, filmstrip, and newsprint are afforded a new dimension through player experience and interactivity.

Few other genres of games can operate in so fertile a landscape. While some historical documentary games may recreate famous battles or conflicts between cultures, the constraints of sports history provide a meaningful context for players who are also sports fans (Fullerton, 2008). The rich history of baseball informs the experience of *ASB 2004*. It is a love letter to fans of American baseball. The attention to historic detail, and the sentimental homage to the sport's past have allowed the video game to endure as a meaningful play experience far beyond its commercial shelf life.

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