

A Life in Baseball, Digital and Otherwise

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Roger and Me

To a kid growing up in the armpit of Massachusetts during the late 80's, a perennial little-leaguer two-stepping every 4th of July through clouds of second hand smoke, a child with shiny dreams of baseball glory not yet sullied by the dinge of athletic mediocrity, to him Roger Clemens was god. I wanted to be him. I didn't know what a steroid was, nobody did, and at that point he was simply the greatest pitcher I had, in my yet young existence, ever seen. My father would mention names as we played catch in the street – Seaver, Palmer, Gibson, Carlton, Koufax, but to a 9 year old they were merely fiction. They were stories of greatness imagined, but unknown. But Clemens, he I had seen. Clemens, he was *real*.

My imagination was free then. I remember toeing the slick rubbery plastic atop the pitchers mound, thinking about how Clemens would move, thinking about how he would stare in at the batter, attempting to win the battle before any pitch was even thrown. I remember wanting to duplicate the smooth windup, and the explosive, violent delivery. A scrawny, lean, and lanky boy, I wanted to defy my body and blow every single batter away with heat. I wanted to strike out the entire opposing team. I worked ceaselessly, pitch after pitch, waiting patiently for the teledramatic breakout moment, the moment when a salty, small town coach, watching a young phenom throw, takes off his hat and shakes his head, not believing the talent to which he just bore witness. I waited for that moment, wishing and wanting for a future I did not

know was outside my reach. I waited for the moment that would signal a future in baseball; a future that, until recently, I thought had passed me by.

A Future in Baseball

Last night I threw a six-inning gem. There I was, that is to say 18 year-old me, standing on the mound for the Birmingham Barons. I'm a minor leaguer, drafted by the Chicago White Sox, and sent to the Deep South to sink or swim. It is a familiar narrative in baseball, the story of so many ballplayers – Clemens, and Seaver, the story of *Bull Durham's* Ebby Calvin "Nuke" Laloosh. Each had found their way pitching in the minor leagues, honing their skills, only to emerge from the obscurity of local baseball to reach the pinnacle of the sport. At that point, for a young, fresh out of high-school boy, earning a few thousand dollars to play a kid's game, my promise far exceeded my record. But with that moment, that first opportunity at a minor league start, the "Road to The Show" offered by *MLB 11: The Show* began its winding course with an ascent, the crest remaining out of sight.¹

A few hours earlier, in an expression of shameful vanity, I labored over my character creation. I spent ten minutes on the squint and rotation of my eyes, another five on my nose, and an unfortunate five minutes on my receding hairline. I danced on the line of reality, making a pitcher resembling a mash of myself at 18 and an idealized vision of myself as an elite baseball player. I was tall, and lean, and intimidating. I had recognizable bags under my eyes and crows feet. Kindly, I gave myself less of a double chin. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the designers had taken the time to record a PA announcer saying both my first and last name, allowing my created player to be announced as if he were real. I tweaked everything with painstaking care, from the color of my glove, to the length of my undershirt. I was, after-all, not making just any player, I was recreating a me I had once known daydreaming of a future in baseball. Satisfied with my monster, I threw the switch and entered him in the MLB draft to be selected by whatever team might see fit to give me a chance to be great.

I had spent the first few weeks of the AA season as a middle reliever, amassing some impressive stats after a disappointing first appearance in which I coughed up three runs in less than an inning. That first game was a nightmare. I came into the game in the 6th inning, eager to prove myself, having never thrown a single pitch of professional baseball to that point. I struck out the first batter with my powerful fastball, recording my first out. I was confident and ready. I felt, in that moment, like my childhood idol Clemens, towering over the opposition, staring them down with a mixture of arrogance and pride, swagger and confidence. I puffed my chest, and smirked at the screen.

Then the wheels fell off. I walked the next batter on a pitch that should have been called a strike by the game's umpire. In *MLB 11: The Show* the umpire is designed to be flawed, just like a real umpire, and since I was pitching in the minor leagues, not yet at the top, this very umpire was *especially* flawed. The marker left on the strike zone indicating where the pitch had landed vindicated me to a powerless juror on the couch. The deliberate, designed "error" is in fact a procedural strength, breathing life into a system that would otherwise be static, obvious, and sterile. *MLB 11: The Show* is a game inside of a game, and the relationship between the rules of both invigorates the language of the whole system. The rules of baseball as such are understood via the rules of baseball as played, as simulated by the rules of baseball as video game. The obvious strike was *called* a ball.

I was mad, and *I* was mad. The "me: on the couch swore at the screen. The "me" on the screen lost points on a confidence attribute, and subsequently lost some of the efficacy of his pitches. What a brilliant system, modeling the state of mind of an athlete, and creating opportunity for that state to align with the feelings of the player! We were, I was, rattled. A few base hits and a few runs later and the manager walked to the mound to pull me from the game. I was sent to the shower of a loading menu, my team had lost, and I gained no experience from the game with which to improve myself. How quickly a bright future seems to fade at the first hint of adversity.

Every hit the opposing team got that inning felt like my fault. Because of the interface for controlling pitching, when I failed on the couch I knew the batter had a good chance to capitalize on my pitching mistake. To throw a pitch in *MLB 11: The Show* one must first select the location and type of pitch to be thrown, in the instance of my player, either a fastball, a curveball or a changeup. Once the pitch is selected, the player rocks the right thumbstick back to initiate the windup. Slowly a meter fills, and at the precise instant the right thumbstick must be thrown forward to an exact location. To miss the location or the timing is to err, and depending on the attribute scores of the pitcher, and the skill of the batter, such mistakes can have dramatic consequences.

The mimetic pitching interface is a combination of precision and power, of rhythm and timing. Not unlike real pitching, one must remain poised while executing a precision-oriented skill quickly. In addition to the physical skill of manipulating the right thumbstick, the strategic element of pitch selection mirrors the same strategy a real pitcher would need to consider. When I was a boy, I threw pitches with my arm. Today, I throw them with my thumb, and while there are obvious differences, the challenge of trying to master a quick and precise physical skill is comparable. That is to say, when I pitch with my thumbs I am reminded of when I used to pitch with my arm in a way I have not experienced with other baseball video games.

I did not pitch again for a few days. Three games and half a week passed in five minutes on the couch, and doubt began to creep into my head. I was eager to prove myself, eager to find redemption in the long season of professional baseball, but where was my opportunity? I had grown accustomed to opportunity in games, conditioned by a life of video game playing to simply press start and try again after repeated failure. We are spoiled in many video games by a glut of opportunity, and many have argued that this is a strength of the medium. I was somewhat surprised by the scarcity of opportunity so early in my career in *MLB 11: The Show*. Now I was wondering when my next chance would come. Was I being punished by my digital

coach for previous failure? Had he lost confidence in me, as I was beginning to do myself? That the game was designed to limit opportunity based on performance accurately models how baseball is experienced for many young men trying to succeed in the sport. The accurately modeled system allowed me as a player to impose my own questions and doubts based on a baseball context I had brought into my game play. I was building a story around the game, and it felt real. Seeking solace, I chose the menu item to “interact” with my coach, to see what options were available to me.

At that moment the only options available were to retire from the game of baseball at the ripe old age of 18 or ask the manager for the opportunity to start a game instead of being a relief pitcher. Thinking that retirement might be premature after only one outing, I contemplated asking for a start. The doubt from earlier began to seep back into my head. What right did I have to ask for another, more significant opportunity? I had not yet proven myself to this faceless, voiceless coach. It would be brash to ask for more responsibility. No, I should wait, and wait I did.

In my next appearance, as the first batter stepped into the box to face me, I was nervous. I was eager to prove myself after an abysmal first outing, and I sat forward on the couch, renewing my focus. The controller thumped in my sweaty palms. Was that my heartbeat, or my character’s? I had been brought in with two outs, a runner on first and second base, and a one run lead. A hit in this situation would give up the lead and likely cement my reputation as a pitcher who could not handle any pressure. Taking a deep breath, I delivered my first pitch. Strike, fastball outside corner.

Two more strikes and I was out of the inning. Getting out that one batter began a streak of consecutive scoreless innings that brought my earned run average (average number of runs allowed per 9 inning game) down to a spectacular, sub 2.00 level. I had regained some focus, and was now pitching like the phenom that, two decades ago, standing on the little league field, I had hoped

to be. I again checked my “interactions” menu to talk to my manager. Blinking back at me was the option to ask for the chance to start a game, a significant upgrade in status for a relief pitcher of my track record. I was ready. One push of the button and I may get the chance to prove myself that I had been hoping for.

And there I stood, 18 year-old me, on the mound for Birmingham, ready to start my first game. I was ready to begin my climb to greatness, confident in my abilities, and hoping for the resolve to see it through. I was, we were, both there: the reflection of a childhood dream on my television, and the thirty-something reality on the couch – the fusion of unrealized goals and realized life. I pulled back on the controls and stepped back to begin my windup, ready to deliver.

A Game About A Game

MLB 11: The Show, and specifically the “Road to the Show” career mode, is a game about a game. At the core of the software is a simulation of baseball. The rules of the sport are written into the system, and baseball as a game is digitally simulated and played, in part or in full. Elegantly wrapped around this core of the game are meaningful interactions that reflect the experiences of baseball as a culturally situated activity, as a livelihood, and as a childhood dream realized.

For those who love it, baseball is more than just the formal properties that structure its play. Baseball fans, more than with any other American sport culture, look back at history to understand the present. The game has been played almost unchanged since the turn of the 20th century. Great players transcend their accomplishments on the field, acquiring saint-like status in a practice that to many resembles folk religion more than sport. Children are told legends about “The Shot Heard ‘Round the World” and are shown enduring images like Yogi Berra leaping into Don Larsen’s arms, and Hank Aaron shoving a fan as he rounds the bases. Traditions and narratives are passed through generations. No American sport is more in touch with its

history than baseball. Perhaps owing to the codification of copious statistics, fans regularly compare players and teams in a vain attempt to measure quality empirically, and historically.

MLB 11: The Show invites players to mediate such speculation through the game, as players are invited to pore over accurate historical statistics as they steer their player throughout his career. There is even a “Hall of Fame” meter that abstracts the player’s performance into a measurable likelihood of being voted into the digital version of Major League Baseball’s museum of excellence. Player’s can be voted to all-star teams, and awards are presented at the end of seasons to deserving players. The designers of *MLB 11: The Show* recognized that baseball in America is understood by fans through the lens of historical context, and they made sure to include content and features that awakened old debates, and allowed players who play the career mode to impose their digital athletes into the discourse surrounding the game.

I often remark that sports games are some of the greatest role-playing games I have ever played. Career modes in sports games share many of the statistics-based mechanics that other role-playing games have adopted over the years. However, by applying them to a world constrained by the conventions and culture of sport, the game invokes new and different storytelling. The “Road to the Show” career mode in *MLB 11: The Show* has some engaging mechanics that reinforce the notion of a career in baseball. More specifically, the career mode allows for the construction of familiar baseball narratives, including the experience of young men struggling for accomplishment in the minor leagues.

Most professional baseball players do not make it to the sports highest level, the Major League, or as it is called by many, “The Show”. Mired in obscurity in places like Durham, Toledo, Ogden and Hickory, they play out a decade of professional baseball making a livable wage and traveling by bus across the country. Many barely speak English, and live in homes with families who

try to help them acclimate to their new surroundings. Opportunity, to a minor leaguer hoping to prove himself, is the difference between success and failure.

Most role-playing games I have played inundate the player with opportunity to succeed. Failure either returns a player to a saved point in the game's narrative, or results in some economic loss that can be easily recuperated. Opportunity in *MLB 11: The Show*, like in the lives of real minor league baseball players, can be scarce. Imagine the pressure of not knowing when you might receive another chance at success. What if winning a game were only available should the computer decide if you were worthy of the opportunity? I have not felt pressure in a video game like I have in *MLB 11: The Show's* "Road to the Show" mode. Sure, the stakes were not, in fact, my livelihood. Even as I gave up hit after hit, my refrigerator remained well stocked. However, I felt, at times, victimized by my own failure. I felt an approximation of the sickness in the gut of doubting whether I was good enough, and wondering if each blown opportunity would be my last. Imagine how great I felt when I managed to succeed!

It would be fair to say that as a child playing little league baseball I did not dream of being a career minor league baseball player. I wanted to be Roger Clemens. I wanted to be the best. Few entrenched in the world of adolescent sports strive for a level of mediocrity, for a future playing a game at a non-spectacular level. The hope for excellence, the passion for success drives many to work hard for the goal and many more to suffer the pains of inadequacy. *MLB 11: The Show* balances player skill and character skill in a remarkable way. Characters have a myriad of numeric attributes, ranging from the efficacy of certain pitches, to composure in the face of adversity, and the effect of upgrading those statistics is real and perceptible. However skilled I make my character though, my focus as a player, and my strategic choices will always effect the outcome of any given play session. Sure the goal of "The Road to the Show" is to become a star in the Major Leagues, just as I dreamed of it as a child. That is evident in the very naming of the feature.

However, it is clear from the design of the game that such success is not a forgone conclusion. Created characters may spend an entire career in the minor leagues. They may end up traveling back and forth between levels, always hoping to pounce on an opportunity, and yet never really reaching the pinnacle. Success and failure are not diametrically opposed in *MLB 11: The Show*, and just as childhood dreams may find degrees of fulfillment, so to do aspirations for characters in the game. *MLB 11: The Show* has allowed me to play out a childhood fantasy of baseball success. More importantly though, it has allowed me to model the experience of a possible future, filled with successes and failures and uncertainty, and to be reminded that childhood dreams are pure when held against the nuance and murkiness of reality.

Safe at Home

My relationship to baseball is, in a word, complicated. Sadly, I chose at one point to ignore the sport, forsaking the game of generations preceding me for a more violent, faster, newer sport. I regret sacrificing the youthful years I could have been playing baseball to instead play other games. And yet, the memories of my baseball playing youth are visceral like none other. I remember the smell of the tanned, oiled leather of my glove. I remember the feeling of the brown clay that had snuck off the diamond and into my shoes. I remember the sting of sunscreen in my eyes on a balmy July in New England, chewing an unwieldy wad of gum while chanting at teammates as they determinedly eyed the pitcher. Even as I reflect on those experiences, I recognize that memory's senses pale in comparison to their precursors.

No video game will return those senses, those experiences to me. Despite the claims of "immersion" or "photorealistic graphics" no video game I play will allow me to smell and feel the game I love like I had. This is the unfortunate limitation of memory, always offering a glimpse of the past while keeping the reality tauntingly out of reach.

What *MLB 11: The Show* has allowed, however, is an opportunity to experience, and interrogate the emotions associated with a future I had once imagined for myself so many years ago. On one hand, the game reinforces the fantasy of my childhood, allowing me to excel at baseball in a way I never really could. Better though, the game invites me to imagine myself as a baseball player, complete with the frustrations, the doubts, the uncertainty, and the discomfort of a life dedicated to playing a game well. It allowed me glimpses of a real life, reconfiguring a fantasy that was so prominent as I was growing up. Playing the game allowed me to hold up my childhood dream closer to the reality of my life, that I might compare the two and understand better that the dreams of a child may be best kept a fantasy. I will always love baseball, but playing *MLB 11: The Show* as a version of myself allowed me to understand the sport more fully. Anecdotal stories of triumph and failure, of determination and doubt are now, somehow, lived. I have played the game.

I no longer want to be Roger Clemens, now that I have been me.

End Notes

- (1) "Road to the Show" is *MLB 11: The Show's* exhaustively detailed career mode. Players are invited to create a character that will start in the professional minor leagues of baseball, possibly working his way to the highest level of baseball in America, the Major Leagues. Minor leagues are divided into three categories ranging from Single-A to Triple-A, with the AAA teams being one level below the Majors. In "Road to the Show" players start on either an A or AA team, depending on how the character is drafted.

References

MLB 11: The Show, Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., SCE Studios San Diego, Mar. 2011.