

Adding Hoop Excitement

Gamer Suggests Upgrades For Basketball Computer Game

By Anthony Giacobbe, Jr.

When SOM decided to make basketball its second computerized sport, basketball gamers jumped for joy at the decision. Although basketball sometimes takes a back seat to SOM's other games, this was a clear sign that SOM was making improving the basketball game a top priority. Those gamers who have played the board game know that it is a truly fantastic product. It accurately simulates the true strategy of an NBA game with its strong emphasis on player positioning. The fastbreak system is extremely realistic and individual player ratings for passing, rebounding and defense all play an important role in play results. Clearly, the model itself needed no major changes.

SOM dressed this model up in a very unique interface which conveys the feel of an NBA game by showing player positions and ball movement. At the time, this format was revolutionary. Now, it still remains the best idea used in text-game simulations. SOM's very first computer basketball release was incredible and served as a complete computer game. In the past few years, however, attention seems to have dwindled, resulting in relatively few changes to the computer version each year. As we enjoy the current version 4.1, there is still room for improvement to this excellent product. With this in mind, I turn to an analysis of the state of the basketball game and offer another list of suggestions in the hope that next year's version will be even better.

STRATEGY

SOM games are all about strategy and SOM's avid gamers play these games because they love the strategic aspects simulated by the game. In SOM's basket-

ball game, the most important strategy decision each team makes is whether or not to use a fastbreak offense. This decision is crucial as the fastbreak offers a high-risk, high-reward mechanism for directing your team. As gamers, we want complete control over our team and its strategy. Unfortunately, the game does not give gamers the degree of control necessary for a complete gaming experience.

CHANGES ON THE FLY

In the computer game, a coach may only change this strategy choice (fastbreak or normal offense) at the start of each quarter or upon calling a timeout. This is not realistic. Basketball contains many play stoppages in which substitutions are made and strategy is changed. In fact, some coaches (do I hear Rick Pitino) try to micro-manage just about every play (offense and defense). Although SOM's game allows you, as coach, to make player substitutions and to change player positions at every stoppage, it does not allow you to change your offensive mode.

I have given this much thought (and felt much frustration while thinking about it) and I simply cannot see any reason for SOM to prevent gamers from changing strategy when they change players. It just doesn't make sense. The players you use dictate the strategy you implement. Why should you have to "waste" a timeout when you can just send in the players with instructions as to which offense to run. The same is true of the press defense, although this situation occurs much less frequently. Again, part of the strategy involves selecting the appropriate players. Changing players should certainly come with the opportunity

to change strategies.

TIMEOUTS

Because timeouts are necessary to change offensive and defensive strategies, it is essential that they be implemented exactly as they are in the NBA. Unfortunately, this is not the case. I have tried, through play testing, to determine exactly how the game allocates timeouts, but I have been unable to fully understand how it works. In the NBA, each team is allocated seven full timeouts per game and one 20-second timeout per half. Each team must take one full timeout per quarter and the 20-second timeouts are usually reserved for the second and fourth quarters. The full timeouts are charged automatically at designated time intervals unless they are taken sooner. Ideally, SOM's game would charge these automatic timeouts at the same times they would occur in NBA games (if not taken sooner). Instead, the game will automatically deduct one timeout at the end of each quarter if it has not been used.

But this is only a small part of the bigger problem. When a team takes its first timeout of each half, the game automatically charges that team with its one 20-second timeout rather than a full timeout. This means that each team must actually call two timeouts in the first and third quarters or one will be lost. Since the first timeout called is charged as a 20-second timeout, each team still has seven full timeouts after the first one it calls. This number will automatically be reduced to six at the end of the first quarter, thereby forcing each team to call two in the first quarter or lose one for no apparent reason. This results in a coach in SOM doing the exact opposite of what coaches in the NBA do by using two timeouts in the first and third quarters and not having the 20-second timeouts available near

the end of each half. The fact that these timeouts are so essential for implementing strategies as described above makes this problem even more frustrating.

STRATEGY INFORMATION

As with all of its computer products, SOM suggests that gamers use the actual player cards when playing the basketball game. Those gamers who do this will have immediate access to each player's detailed ratings and can make the same kind of quick comparisons that a board gamer makes when deciding which players to use. Unfortunately, gamers who prefer not to play with the cards (and I am one) do not get the kind of access they need to appropriate strategy information. I have already expressed my thoughts on this subject in great detail (see "Shooting in a Dark Gym," STRATFAN, April, 1997), so I will not repeat all of them here. However, some simple changes are definitely necessary to make the coaching part of the game complete and realistic.

RATINGS HARD TO GET

Each coach should be able to compare player ratings directly against each other. During a game, the ratings of each individual player can be accessed one player at a time. Thus, when comparing two or three players in particular categories, the coach must access each player's screen and then remember (or write down) each player's ratings while reviewing the other players. Consider, for example, a case where a coach wants to select the best defensive player available at a position. First, the coach views one player's defensive ratings. These are expressed in bar graphs

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(not exact numbers) with a separate graph for each shot. The coach must then look at each other player separately and then decide whom to use. Clearly, the ability to compare players directly would be much better at assisting coaches in making these decisions.

Another important aspect of team strategy is the game plan displayed at the beginning of each game. This lists a schedule of playing time for each player at each position. When first displayed, it presents a generic plan useful for the team in any game. A second option exists for the computer to select a new plan specifically designed for play against the game's opponent. Unfortunately, neither option may be printed or accessed later on in the game. I cannot understand why the game does not allow access to these game plans by printing or during the game. This requires each coach to write down the entire chart before the game. Of course, coaches need not follow the game plan. However, I find it useful in making some playing-time decisions.

The "Let Computer Suggest" function does offer excellent strategy advice during the game itself. Once a lineup is selected, this function will suggest the appropriate positioning for players (inside, outside, block man) as well as defensive strategies (close, sag, normal) and even double teams. It is a great feature and very helpful to coaches learning the game. Strangely, this function does not include a suggestion for selecting a normal or fastbreak offense. As explained above, this is a crucial strategy decision and it should be included in the ones suggested by the computer.

SOM has done little to improve the detail and variety of its play descriptions in successive

versions. The game remains a disappointment in this area, as gamers can often predict exactly which phrase is coming next from the phrase before it. This is a missed opportunity for SOM to add excitement and variety to game play. The most glaring example of this omission concerns technical fouls. When one occurs, the game will say that a technical foul has been called against a team without describing who committed the foul and what they did to deserve it. Here is a golden opportunity for SOM to add a little excitement and variety. Technical fouls can be for abusive language or improper behavior. They can be charged to players or to coaches. All of these subtleties are lost when the game charges the foul to one team without further explanation.

With Version 4.0, SOM included an optional play-by-play file designed by a gamer named Richard Baxter. Compared to the SOM version, Mr. Baxter's file offers a much-improved set of play descriptions with more variety and more detail. This is a big step up, and gamers should be grateful for the efforts of Mr. Baxter. I use his file all of the time. Nevertheless, it is no substitute for the kind of play descriptions SOM could produce if it put the same effort it has put into the baseball game. This would add considerably to the gaming experience, as play descriptions are a key part of each gamer's enjoyment.

CONCLUSION

SOM basketball remains my favorite game. I love the game model and it is an incredibly realistic simulation of professional basketball. However, SOM should still strive to improve the game, especially where technical changes can substantially improve the realism and the gaming experience. I thank SOM for the great game, and fervently wish for some of the improvements described above to be implemented in the 1999 version.