

Push the button

The inauspicious arrival of a new computer game through the post was the beginning of an addiction that has never fully faded

By KRIS GRIFFITHS

In 1988, Emlyn Hughes was better known to pre-adolescent Londoners like me as the perky, high-pitched Lancastrian from *A Question of Sport* than the Liverpool legend who'd captained them to several major trophies. So when I first saw his cheery visage on the latest football game to arrive from the subscription club my brother and I had ploughed our pocket money into it wasn't much of a glowing endorsement or indicator of the game's quality. In fact, the opposite was true. Only someone like John Barnes or Ian Rush from the then Liverpool squad would've had that gold dust effect, not this squeaky old-timer.

Little did we know, after first loading the tape into the C64 cassette deck and sitting through several minutes of screechy bleepy-bloopy loading sounds, what a watershed it would turn out to be. Weeks and months ahead would be consumed by this pioneering football simulator that set a new standard for what was then a neglected genre.

That market had hitherto been cornered by Kevin Toms' seminal *Football Manager*, while arcade-style games had been inadequate, encompassing the clunky likes of *Pelé's Soccer*, *Gary Lineker's Superstar Soccer* and Commodore's *International Soccer*. How *Emlyn Hughes International Soccer* blew them all away was to successfully combine that team management aspect with the best arcade action game so far, offering the most realistic fluid gameplay in a side-on vantage like watching on TV, rather than the more alien floating overhead view of rival titles like *Microprose Soccer*.

It may not look impressive graphically by today's standards but it was truly revolutionary. For the first time you could execute a full diversity of moves, skills and passes that encompassed backheels, delicate chips, barging, diving headers and



spectacular cross-cum-shot goals from distance, with accompanying crowd noise that swelled with every shot on target. And all moves pulled off with only one joystick fire-button at your disposal, before the arrival of two-buttoned joypads with Sega and Nintendo's eight-bit machines.

The game customisation options elevated it to another level: not only were strip designs and player names editable, you could incredibly also change the colour of the pitch. To top it all, you could save your position and standings on tape and continue days later where you left off

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– unheard of at the time, and a rocket-boost for the game's longevity.

Some negatives offset the awesomeness. The graphics were blocky. None of the keepers wore gloves. A voice in the crowd would always shout "C'mon shoot!" (sounding more like "joot") no matter where the ball-carrier was on the pitch, plus there were umpteen rhythmic klaxon blasts, annoyingly one of the few things you couldn't toggle off. The four defenders were always sentried in front of their team's area like a permanent wall, only emerging to "defend" when you got near them: no attacking full-back play or roving upfield for a corner.

And when you did score, the sole celebration sequence was the scorer rhythmically pointing at the crowd, not unlike Dennis Taylor after his 1985 World Snooker Championship win, with every other player frozen on the spot. These were negligible reality-deflaters, however, which any gamer would happily have accepted at the start of their *Emlyn Hughes* adventure, a football simulation experience that would only be surpassed by the likes of the *FIFA* and *PES* franchises a decade later.

Nothing will come close though, in relative terms, to the sheer addictive playability of that 1988 game, during a precious life period of bounteous time to devote to it: no internet, adult responsibilities or continuous televised football to pull you away. I still own my copy of the game, and very occasionally dust off my wheezing old C64 to give it another whirl, the accompanying nostalgic rush never fading.

Even though he likely had very little to do with the game's construction, Emlyn Hughes' name and face is forever secured in me and my family's story. And I'd bet he never fully realised how the title he was enlisted to endorse turned out to be the greatest football game ever committed to tape cassette. 🏈