

Friends forever: The story of Sportsfriends



By Mike Rose



"Originally *Joust* wasn't even part of the conversation. We kinda knew it in the backs of our minds that that might be interesting, but it wasn't really a serious discussion."

When Douglas Wilson first created the prototype for *Johann Sebastian Joust* back at grad school in early 2011, he had no way of knowing just how much that simple demo would consume his life for the next three years.

The game, as [has been detailed](#) many a time before, does not utilize your television screen -- rather, it's a physical game in which players attempt to knock the PlayStation Move controllers in the hands of the other players. Whoever keeps their controller steady throughout play wins.

After being carted all over the world to various festivals and meetups, and being bigged up in the press on numerous occasions, the PlayStation Move game is finally getting a release alongside a bunch of other fellow local multiplayer games.

Sportsfriends is the brainchild of Wilson, Ramiro Corbetta, Noah Sasso, and Bennett Foddy, with programmers Jonathan Whiting and Edward Di Geronimo Jr. also putting in plenty of work. It's being released this month on PS3, PS4, and PC, meaning that the general public will finally be able to play it themselves.

So why exactly has it been such a long time coming, and why did *J.S. Joust* need to cuddle up with a bunch of other games to receive the proper release it deserved?

"It's been a very long road," says Wilson. "I got really fortunate. *Joust* made IndieCade in 2011, and then it made IGF in 2012. The IGF nomination and then winning the Innovation Award at the GDC Awards was big. Business people take notice of that -- at least, 'insiders' of the industry."

"So I was actually talking to some publishers, and spent way too many months in 2012 possibly trying to negotiate a deal or two. Ultimately, the game was kinda too weird, and it didn't really make sense for publishers."

This was *Joust's* core problem -- people seemed to love it when they got their hands on it, but it was a hard sell when it came to actually releasing it. How many people would buy a local multiplayer only game that required multiple PS Move controllers?

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"In retrospect, I wasted way too many months," Wilson admits. "That's part of the reason development got stalled. I was also finishing up my PhD at the time, so I wasn't paying attention to the game's development."

"But it turns out that negotiating with publishers is kinda the worst," he laughs. "Who knew! So that kinda fizzled, and I

was pretty bummed and not sure what to do."

Meanwhile, the beginnings of what became *Sportsfriends* were already set in motion without him realizing it. In early 2011, around the same time that Wilson was inventing *Joust*, Ramiro Corbetta was putting together his own strand of local multiplayer brilliance.

Hokra is a barebones sports game for four players, that has colored squares bounding around a plain playing field and attempting to knock a ball into goals in the corners of the screen. It may sound simple, but in action it's a frantic, fantastic experience to have with friends and strangers alike.

"Immediately we were obsessed with this stupid, really simple squares game," says Wilson of the first time he saw the game in 2011. "It was kinda dumb, and wasn't that amazing-looking, but it was pretty much the funnest game I had ever played."



Wilson had actually met Corbetta a year before, when the pair put together some *Babycastles* exhibitions in New York. What they both came to realize rather quickly was that they were in the very same boat -- they both had these great local multiplayer games that a publisher were never, ever touch. Either they were both going to be doomed to be exhibition-only games, or end up in the pit of *Xbox Live Indie Games*.

"So we were thinking through these problems, and then at some point we thought well, maybe inspired by *Wii Sports*, if we put a bunch of these small games together..." Wilson recalls.

"This was in 2011, and it's the moment when local multiplayer was exploding. *Nidhogg* wins Nuovo, TIGSource did their multiplayer compo. I feel like 2011 was the watershed year where this kind of stuff was exploding. So we were like well, maybe we should try to make some kind of compilation, and I had this company Die Gute Fabrik, so maybe I could be the producer."

"I thought 'Wii Sports has five, maybe we should have five.' ... A few people talked me down from that."

Here's where [Bennett Foddy](#) comes into the story. The *QWOP*, *GIRP*, and *CLOP* developer, best known for creating games that make people want to scream, was in New York in the summer of 2011, when Wilson was part of the Babycastles exhibition.

"I'd never met him in person," notes Wilson. "I was hugely obsessed with *GIRP*, and I had already been in touch with him online about *MEGAGIRP*, which is how I kinda got to talk to Bennett one-on-one. So we were like, 'You should come to Babycastles, we can show *MEGAGIRP*, you can curate this show with us.'"

But Foddy had a different game on his mind. He'd attended a game jam in Cambridge, UK three or four months before, and created a multiplayer game called *Pole Riders*. While it showed huge potential, he just couldn't find that little extra something to give it the push and polish it deserved.

"I'd be waiting for more inspiration to strike," Foddy tells me. "After sitting on it for a while, I thought, 'Fuck it, I'm just gonna launch it.' It seemed like it lined up with the show pretty well, so I decided to premier the game as a global thing at Babycastles."

Interestingly, when the idea for *Sportsfriends* began brewing around this time, *Pole Riders* and *Hokra* were the two "confirmed" titles for the package. Wilson was still doing a jig or five with publishers. He was happy to be producing *Sportsfriends*, but *Joust* wasn't in the picture.

"Very early on, it was me, Bennett, and Ramiro thinking, like, 'What should this compilation be?'" says Wilson. "*Super Pole Riders* and *Hokra* were the two confirmed games. Originally, I thought it should be more than four games -- which I was definitely wrong about. A few people, including Bennett, talked me down from that, saying it would devalue them if we put too many in the package."

"I thought 'Wii Sports has five, maybe we should have five.' But actually these games are pretty meaty -- so four at most, otherwise you start losing track of the games you have."

So it was decided - *Sportsfriends* would have four games. But this meant that the team still needed two more games, and the big problem was that, well, there aren't really that many sports-related games out there, especially indie ones. In fact, it took nearly another year before the third game was added to the package.

"I originally really wanted [TENNNES](#) from Vlambeer's JW," notes Wilson. *TENNNES*, a stylish tennis game, was made for No Quarter in 2012 -- the same year that Noah Sasso's *BaraBariBall* was also a No Quarter game.

"JW was pretty burnt out from Ridiculous Fishing and all his Vlambeer stuff, and he was like, 'I can't commit to this.'"

"We were all super hooked on *TENNNES*," continues Wilson. "It's really pretty incredible. But JW was pretty burnt out from *Ridiculous Fishing* and all his Vlambeer stuff, and he was like, 'I can't commit to this.' He foresaw how much work this was actually going to be for everyone involved. But he was nice enough to let us give it as a Kickstarter backer-only goodie later on."

Fortunately, *BaraBariBall* was also a bit of a winner. Wilson had gotten the opportunity to try the fighter/ball-dunker out before No Quarter, and he immediately saw potential in the game. Sasso was approached for *Sportsfriends*, and he accepted.

"So then we had a few ideas for the fourth game, but nothing was really sticking," says Wilson. "We didn't really just wanna do just general-purpose local multiplayer -- this was even before we had the name *Sportsfriends*."

He adds, "I was pretty keen on keeping it with weird sporty games, because I thought -- listen, I love games like *Samurai Gunn* and *Towerfall*, but we thought the sword/gunplay genre was already established, and it'd be cool to do this game that was a little bit more abstract."

Sticking with the sporty theme meant that more months dragged on, and no fourth game was showing its face. Then, as the summer was drawing to a close, final *Joust* publisher negotiations fell through, and Wilson said, "Screw it, we're gonna throw in *Joust*" -- thus, the package was complete.

"It's a pretty weird choice, to be honest," muses the dev. "This has been a big messaging problem for us. *Joust* is this physical installation game, but the other games are couch games. So then some people think that all the games are motion-control games, which isn't true. Then the people who want *BaraBariBall* and *Pole Riders* probably think *Joust* is this weird, dumb kids' game."

"But I think we decided early on that that tension would be productive -- at least, that was the hope," he adds. "The presence of *Joust* points to this more radical future beyond the screen, and really tries to appeal to a larger crowd of people who maybe didn't grow up with video games. But then it also tries to get traditional video gamers into this motion control stuff, while using *Joust* as a sugar-coating."

This is part of why *Sportsfriends* remains as a local multiplayer only game, rather than featuring online or AI features. The team wants to invoke a sort of spectator, performative reception for the collection of games, and having *Joust* in there in particular signals, "No, this is a physical, in-person experience."



Of course, internet forums and comments sections are already filling up with people complaining about the lack of online play. "And we know we're going to face that," notes Foddy. "But for me, the whole point of the project is to recreate the feeling that we had at those events, which was super significant for us, and for other people as well."

"I love games like Samurai Gunn and Towerfall, but we thought the sword/gunplay genre was already established, and it'd be cool to do this game that was a little bit more abstract."

"What we're trying to do is open people's eyes to something that is new. Video game fans have found what they love and enjoy, and I think they feel threatened by people who are trying to change what video games are, and what they mean. There's a certain kind of defensiveness, which is sort of understandable at one level.

"But what we're hoping is that the games themselves will be convincing enough, that after a struggle, friction, a kind of argument with those people, we'll win them around with the way that you feel -- the joy that you can have when you're playing these sorts of games."

"That's the hope," he adds. "Of course it won't work for everybody, but we just hope that for some people, the experience itself will be a compelling argument."

The team is wary of appearing defensive on this stance, giving players the impression that online could have been implemented, but the developers just didn't because it would be additional work. The fact is that most of the games wouldn't even work as online experiences.

"We've been talking about doing a video of us playing *Joust* online, standing in different rooms, dancing around by ourselves," laughs Foddy. "I hope that point will be obvious to people, but maybe it won't be. We'll see."

Let's get back to the *Sportsfriends* story. At the end of 2012, the team ran a successful [Kickstarter campaign](#) for the game, which essentially turned the idea into reality. I asked both Foddy and Wilson how the Kickstarter came about.

"You'll have to ask Doug, because honestly, I don't even remember," laughs Foddy.

"I don't actually remember either," Wilson adds. "I don't remember one big moment where it was like, 'Ah, Kickstarter!' I think Kickstarter was just so in the water by 2012."

In fact, it turns out that one of the biggest factors in taking *Sportsfriends* to Kickstarter came from an unlikely source -- Sony.

"It turned out that making console games is crazy difficult and expensive!"

"The Sony people, especially Nick Suttner [account support manager at SCEA], really have their ears to the ground," says Wilson. "Nick was a big fan of the games, and he was kinda separately encouraging me to do something with *Joust*. He had been, through that whole period, talking to me, and now he was also getting interested in *Hokra*."

So when the concept for *Sportsfriends* began gathering speed, and then the *Joust* publisher dealings fell through, Wilson realized -- hang on a minute, what if we do this with Sony?

"Nick was excited, so we got talking about that," Wilson continues. "But it turned out that making console games is crazy difficult and expensive! We're just this rag-tag team of artist-developers, not a proper company, but we were convinced that despite the fact that console development is difficult and expensive, it was the right fit."

The living room was the right space for *Sportsfriends*, and *Joust* already utilized PlayStation Move controllers, so Sony seemed like the perfect company to pick up *Sportsfriends*. But just like all the other publishers that Wilson had been dealing with, there was no way that Sony was going to foot the bill for such an outlandish concept.

"We knew we had to fund it, and we knew none of us had the time or skill to program it," he recalls. "Bennett actually ended up doing much of the programming, but we really needed to have a full-time programmer, doing a proper port development job. So we knew we needed money, and we didn't really have any money... I guess that's where Kickstarter was a natural fit."

But Sony still wanted to be a part of the project, and as such, came up with a part-solution. *Sportsfriends* became the first ever (and, right now, last) Kickstarter to be fully endorsed by Sony, with posts on both the company's PlayStation blog and Twitter feeds.



"It was totally crazy!" laughs Wilson. "Okay, not totally crazy, but it happened because we had good, personal relationships with people like Nick Suttner and Brian Silva [manager of developer relations at SCEA], and they were progressive and really liked the games enough that they wanted to help make it happen. Adam Boyes was really instrumental too."

"But it was weird," admits Wilson. "The contracts were weird, and we were sort of in uncharted territory. Our project has been crazy in every aspect. As if console development isn't tricky enough, in so many ways this project does stuff that's not traditional. We've had to fight through a lot of weird bureaucratic snags. But luckily Nick and those guys have helped guide us through it."

"PlayStation has published some weird ones over the years," adds Foddy, "but in terms of structural weirdness, this is probably right up there. In a big multinational corporation, it's a battle to get weird things out there. It takes hard work from them to make it happen, and that's something that they've done, thankfully."

"And they finally have a proper use for the PS Move controllers," I say. The pair laugh.

"Yes! Although it seems like they've kinda still given up on it a little bit," says Wilson.

"Thankfully, *Joust* is now playable without one," notes Foddy. "I think for them it was mostly about putting Move support into existing games. But we're big believers in designing things starting with the controls -- that's one of the liberties you have when you're an indie developer."

The Kickstarter itself was a bit of a nail-biter. While the pledges started coming in thick and fast to begin with, it all sort of died down pretty quickly, and suddenly the funding goal seemed like quite a way to go. With days left, there was a final boost and *Sportsfriends* was clear -- but only just.

"I think we could have done a bit better job with the videos," says Wilson, "but I think it's just a really weird project that's hard to convey. It was one of these cases where the core games were proven and designed, and we had toured them aggressively. So it was this kind of underground thing, where the games had a very passionate fanbase."

"Keep in mind that this is quite different to a lot of other Kickstarters, where the games have not been made yet," he continues. "People had already played and liked these games, but especially a game like *Joust* and *Hokra* too -- I mean, if you're just looking at *Hokra*, it looks like a bunch of dumb squares. They're the kind of games that you have to be there for. So we had this really passionate group, but conveying that was more difficult. They are very much word of mouth games, and I think what happened is that our fans amazingly stepped up when it was looking grim and increased pledges, and put the word out for us."

Fortunately, the *Sportsfriends* developers had budgeted the Kickstarter perfectly, such that only just hitting their target didn't make for a tricky situation, as we've seen with many other crowdfunding campaigns.

"When we were originally planning this, we thought we'd only need to ask for half that amount," the dev says. "But luckily we really did our due diligence, and having all four of us discussing this really helped. In talking and planning forever, we kept realizing 'Okay, well, actually we need to budget for this and that.'"

"I basically rewrote the game. I felt like I had this opportunity, and you don't get that when you're writing Flash games."

What's happened since the Kickstarter, then? As it turns out, development and porting -- far longer than any of them were expecting. The menu design for connecting the games together turned out to be difficult, while porting the games was also not so simple, especially given that all four games were written in different engines.

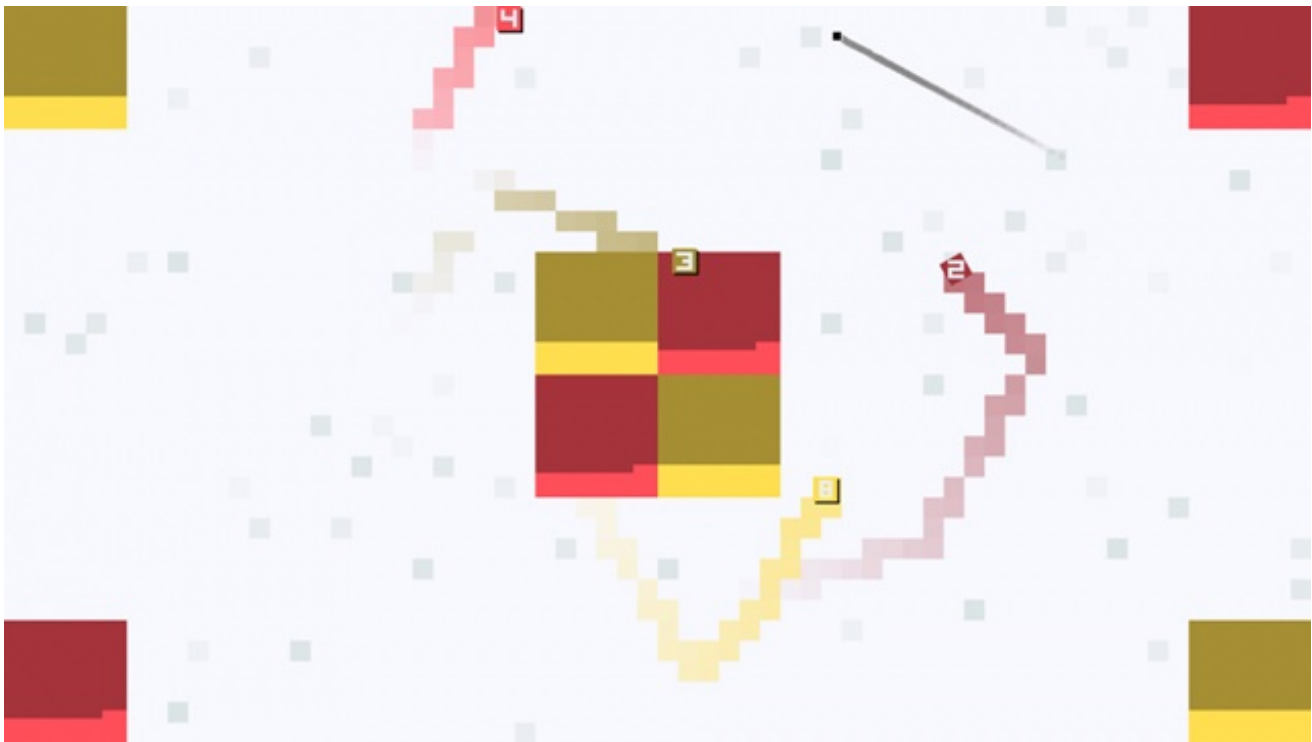
Super Pole Riders in particular took a fair amount of time, as Foddy decided to completely rebuild the game from the ground up. "I basically rewrote the game," he says. "I felt like I had this opportunity, and you don't get that when you're writing Flash games."

"I just kinda wanted to reinvent the whole thing," Foddy adds. "New art, new levels... but I think most importantly, the ability to point the pole anywhere that you want -- so you can stand up on the end of it, or use it to push the ball, or jump around on it, or hold the other person down. There are all these actions you couldn't do in the original. So that was the kind of reason for that. I had a vision for it which, just for technical reasons, I couldn't pull off the first time around."

And Noan Sasso wanted to take *BaraBariBall* even further too, going deeper into the analysis of the fighting mechanics, much in the same way that, say, the *Street Fighter* or *Smash Bros.* teams would.

"For me and Noah, a lot of the year was spent touring as well," adds Wilson. "Constantly at events, knowing that these games are very word-of-mouthy, really trying to sow the seeds. It's been non-stop traveling and exhibitions. Managing this big motley team, and everything from contracts to negotiating with Sony, to going through cert..."

"And we also made the decision to add a platform as well, which was significant," interjects Foddy.



"Yeah, PlayStation 4 was not in the cards," agrees Wilson. "The PS4 was announced after our Kickstarter, and halfway through 2013, we realized we'd have to do PS4. It just wouldn't make sense without it. That's exactly why it's good that we asked for what we did on Kickstarter, because it turns out we really needed every penny."

Given that *Sportsfriends* is a rather unconventional project, I asked the devs what they feel they've learned from bringing together multiple games into one big collection, and what any other devs considering a similar move should take note of.

"I think one of the things we're proudest about with the project, is that it's this very unorthodox development setup," answers Wilson. "I wasn't their boss. I guess legally I was, but really we were all equals. It was the four of us doing this together as a collective, not as a traditional publisher relationship."

"That could have gone so, so wrong," he laughs, "and I think we underestimated how intense it would be. But the four of us got along really well, and for the most part it was incredibly positive. It was fun, the four of us talking all the time, and hanging out all the time. It was motivating to see what the others were doing and you'd get feedback from each other."

| ***"It's the Speakerboxxx/Love Below of indie games."***

Adds Foddy, "I think creatively, one thing you don't get in most group development projects is an area of your game where you're completely responsible for the quality and the development. Normally, one of the things that goes wrong in a lot of studios is that there's a person who has to do a certain range of jobs, but everybody has a stake in how good the quality is, and people wind up saying 'That's not good enough,' or redoing somebody's work, and they wind up not feeling like they have a creative ownership over the project."

"I think that's a new thing in game development," he notes. "I don't think it's so new. Like, if you think about music for example, you could think about the double album from Outkast. It's a little like that -- it's the Speakerboxxx/Love Below of indie games."

What happens now then? Well, the Windows, Mac and Linux versions of the game are still being finished up, but otherwise the hardest part is over. Corbetta will be joining Long Island University as faculty, while Foddy is faculty at NYU, and plans to work on some smaller projects soon.

And Wilson himself is planning to switch over to a new game soon. His studio Die Gute Fabrik is currently working on [Mutazione](#), a gorgeous single-player adventure game -- "So basically as far removed from *Joust* as you can get" -- and he's producing, designing and programming on it.

"But we all live in New York, so we all see each other a lot, and in the future, I would love to do something with them, or some combination of them," he says of his sportsfriends. "I think the installation stuff was really great and I'm happy I spent a bunch of years doing it -- in fact I wrote most of my PhD about this kind of physical and multiplayer games."

"But I'm older now," he adds, "and I'm not quite in such a social environment since I've moved away from Copenhagen. I kind of want to try my hand at something a little different, but I hope I keep making weird installations on the side for fun. But yeah, it'll be nice to have a change of pace and try my hand at something else."

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