

The Illusion of Control

CHOOSE YOUR CHARACTER TO BEGIN

By: Margaux Lawrence





Central Thesis

In Retro Bowl, you swipe. The pass launches. You read the defense, you chose the right receiver, you timed it perfectly — and then a defender appears from nowhere and picks it off. You didn't do anything wrong. The game just decided. This exhibit is not about football. It's about what it feels like to believe you are in control, and what happens when that belief breaks down. Retro Bowl is the starting point, but the question reaches back decades — to arcades, war rooms, city grids, and labyrinths. Every game here has asked the same thing: how much does your decision actually matter?

[Next](#)

A pixelated illustration of a football player in a blue and brown uniform, positioned on the left side of the text box.

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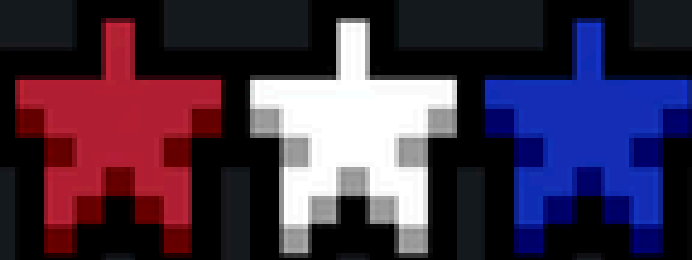
[Next](#)



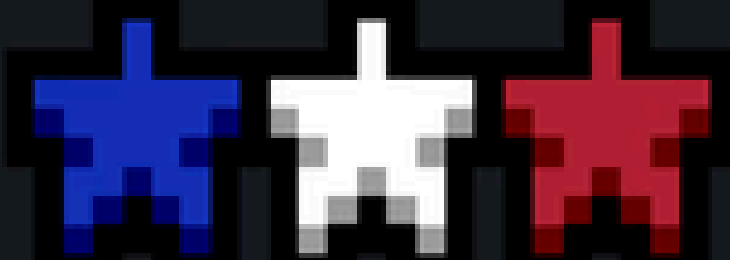
Artist Statement

This exhibit explores the illusion of control through Retro Bowl. While playing, I often felt like I made the right decision but still got the wrong outcome, which led me to focus on the gap between player choice and results. By connecting Retro Bowl to games like Pac-Man, Doom, and XCOM: Enemy Unknown, I show how this feeling is built through patterns, randomness, and hidden systems across game history. I designed the exhibit to feel like the game itself, using a front office and roster system so the viewer experiences control the same way players do. Ultimately, this project argues that control in games is never complete, it is created, challenged, and what keeps players coming back.

[Begin Game](#)



RETRO BOWL

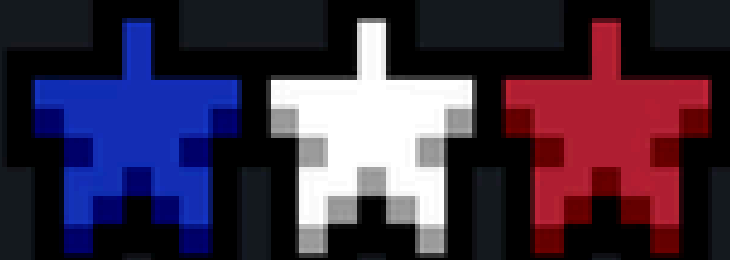


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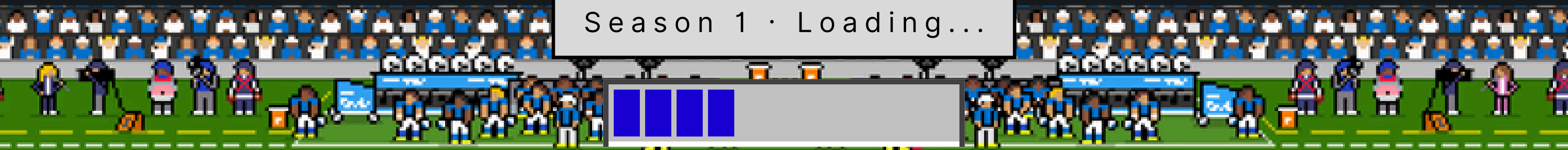




RETRO BOWL

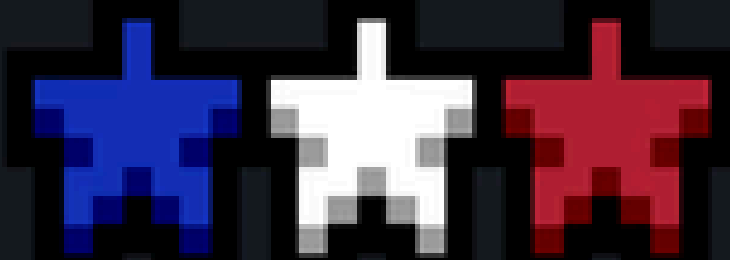


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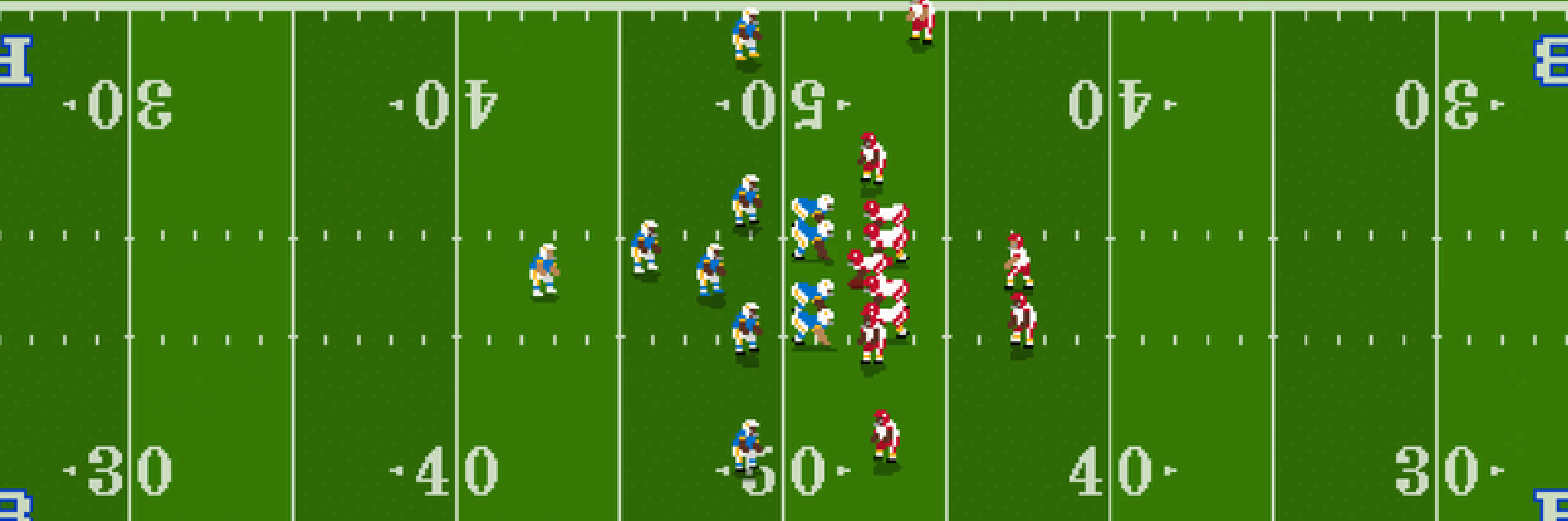
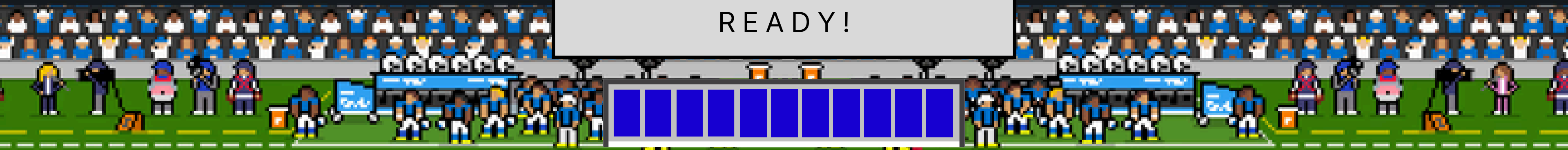




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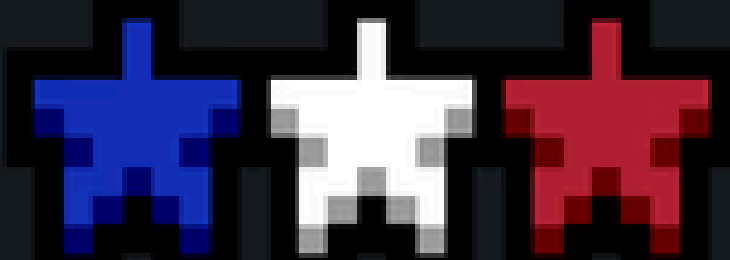


READY!

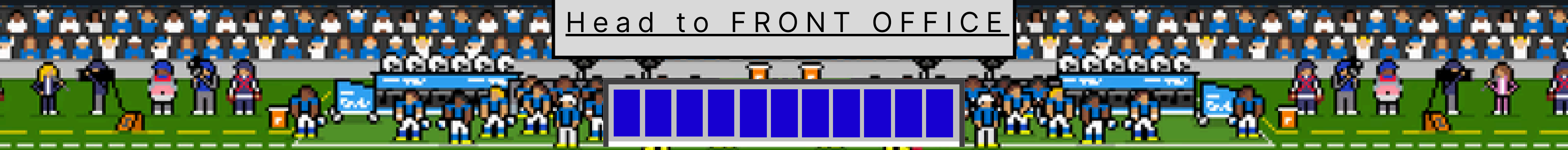




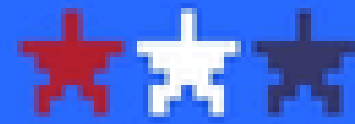
RETRO BOWL



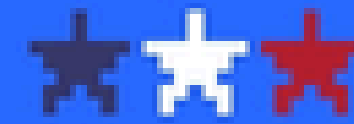
Head to FRONT OFFICE



185 🏆



FRONT OFFICE



KICKOFF



MORALE

100% 😊

COORDINATORS

OF 😊



OU



ENSE



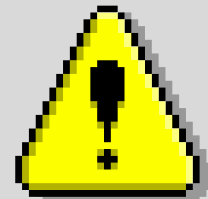
DF 😊



MARGAUX



DEFENSE



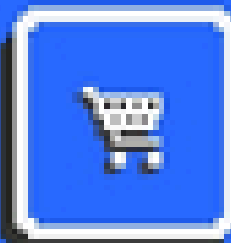
Before You Begin

In Retro Bowl, you control one thing during a game: the pass. Swipe. Aim. Release. But between games, you control everything. Salary cap. Morale. Draft picks. Facilities. You are not just a player. You are the architect of a system, but the system doesn't always do what you tell it.

[NEXT](#)

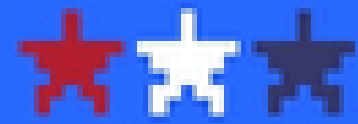


[CLICK HERE TO BEGIN PLAY](#)

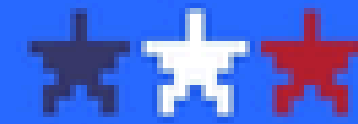


[MANAGE ROSTER](#)

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FRONT OFFICE



KICKOFF

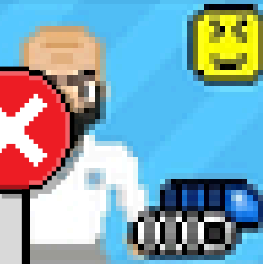


MORALE

100% 😊

COORDINATORS

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MARGAUX



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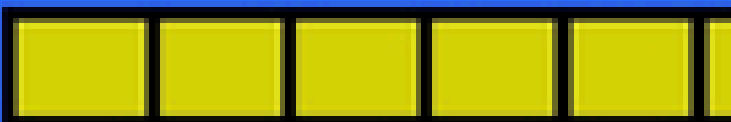
DEFENSE



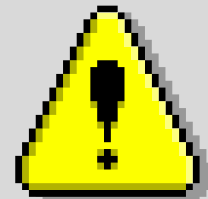
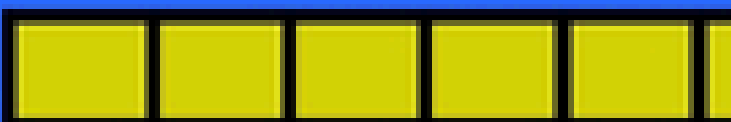
SYSTEMS



BREAK



PLAYERS



Before You Begin

You're not just reading this exhibit.
You're playing it.
Each "play" explores a different part of how Retro Bowl creates the illusion of control, where your decisions feel powerful, but outcomes are never guaranteed. Explore your Front Office. See what happens.

NEXT

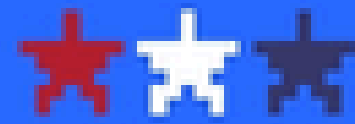


CLICK HERE TO BEGIN PLAY

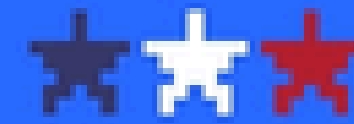


MANAGE ROSTER

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FRONT OFFICE



KICKOFF

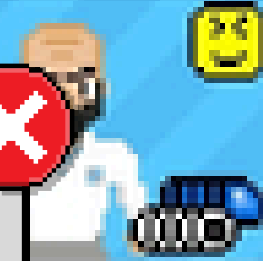


MORALE

100% 😊

COORDINATORS

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★★★

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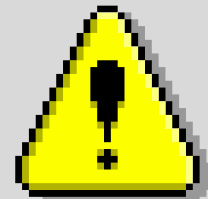


MARGAUX

★★★★

DEFENSE

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Before You Begin

Areas to Explore:

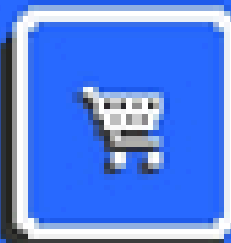
- Kickoff
- System
- Breakdown
- Playbook
- Roster

When complete, being gameplay.
Click the ⓘ for help if needed.

CLICK X TO EXIT

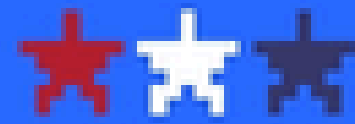


CLICK HERE TO
BEGIN PLAY

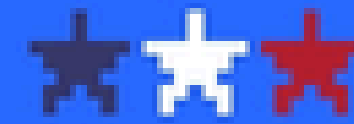


MANAGE ROSTER

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FRONT OFFICE



KICKOFF

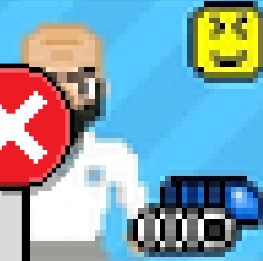


MORALE

100% 😊

COORDINATORS

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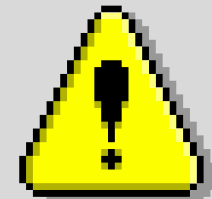
DF 😊



MARGAUX



DEFENSE



More Information

Areas to Explore:
Kickoff, System, Breakdown,
Playbook, and Roster

Click on each section from the Front Office. When on each individual page, you can return home by clicking the home button.

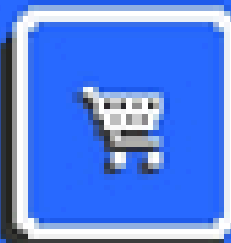
When complete, return to home and click to begin play.

Click the ⓘ for help if needed.

CLICK X TO EXIT

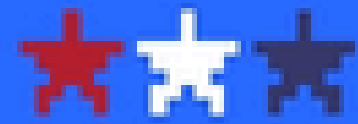


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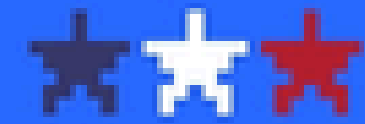


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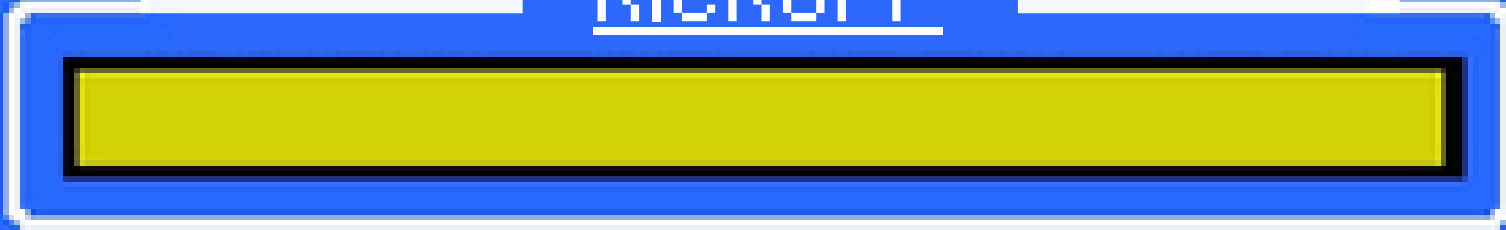
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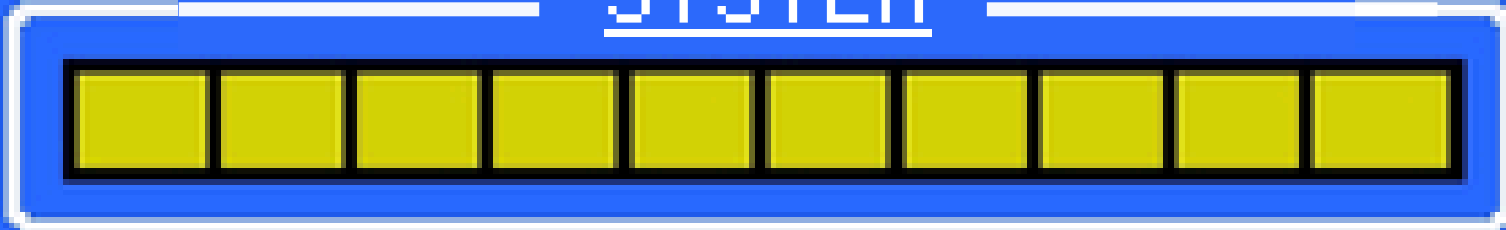
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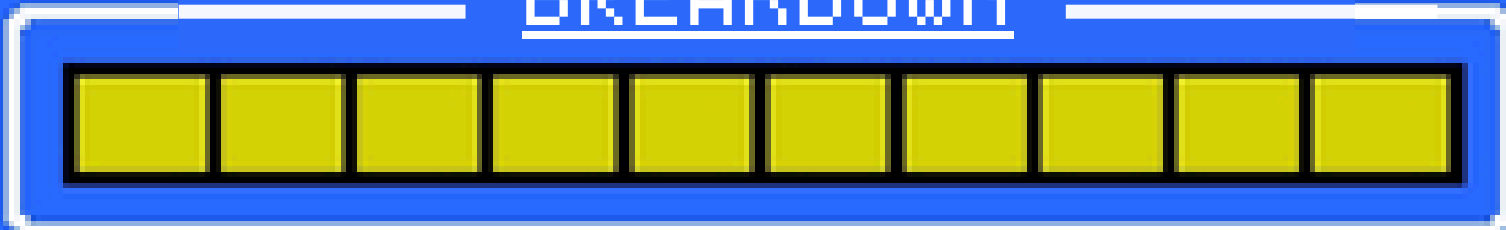
KICKOFF



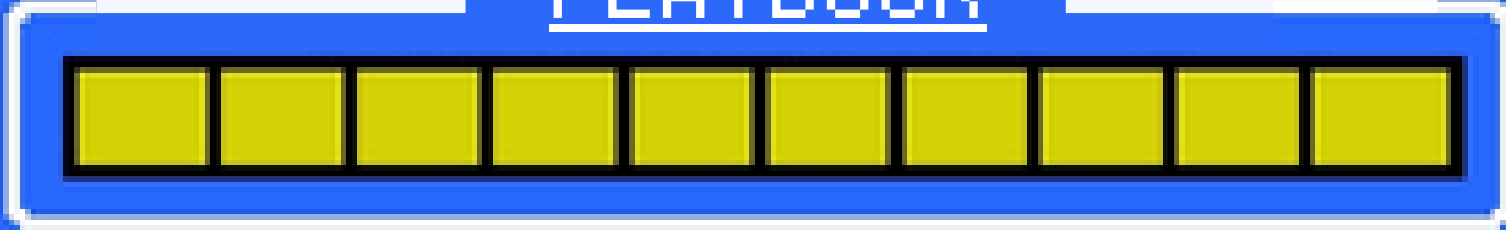
SYSTEM



BREAKDOWN




PLAYBOOK

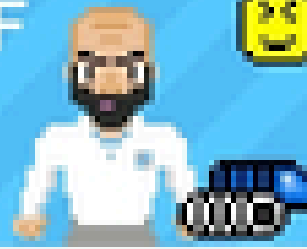


MORALE

100% 


COORDINATORS

OF 



YOU
★★★★

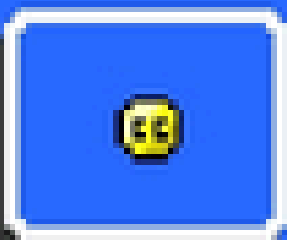
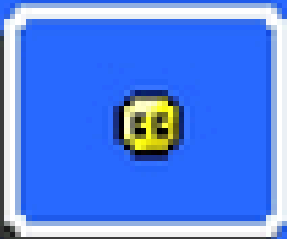
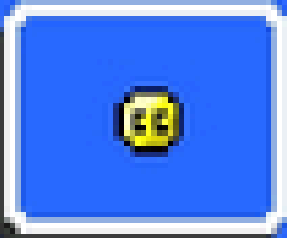
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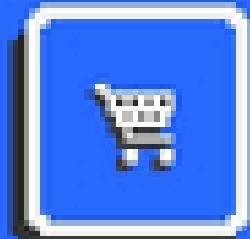
MARGAUX
★★★★

OFFENSE
★★★★★

DEFENSE
★★★★★



[CLICK HERE TO BEGIN PLAY](#)



[MANAGE ROSTER](#)

★★★ FRONT OFFICE ★★★

KICKOFF:

You swipe. The pass launches. You read the defense, pick the right receiver, and time it perfectly.

And then it gets intercepted.

Nothing about your decision changed.

The outcome did.

Retro Bowl creates moments like this constantly. It gives you just enough control to feel responsible, but not enough to guarantee success.

This is where the experience begins—not with winning or losing, but with uncertainty.



★★★ FRONT OFFICE ★★★

SYSTEM:

It doesn't feel random.

On the field, your role is simple: read, decide, throw.
Every action is direct. Every choice feels intentional.

But outside the play, everything expands—ratings,
morale, timing, defensive behavior.

You're not just making a decision.

You're acting inside a system.

And that system decides how your decision plays out.



*** FRONT OFFICE ***

BREAKDOWN:

So you try it again.

Same read.

Same receiver.

Same throw.

Different result.

Not because you changed— but because something else did. Control doesn't disappear in Retro Bowl.

It gets layered with variables you can't fully track.



★ ★ ★ FRONT OFFICE ★ ★ ★

PLAYBOOK:

So what do you do?

You adjust. You try again. You call a different play.

Every option feels like a solution—
even when it leads somewhere unpredictable.

That's the design.

This isn't just a set of choices.

It's a system that keeps you believing the next decision
will work.







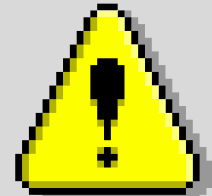
561 

★★★ ROSTER ★★★




EVERY PLAYER SHAPES THE SYSTEM

RB 	TE 	WR 	WR 
P			WALL GER 18
L			LITZ 18



Important Notice


Retro Bowl didn't come from nowhere. It was built from decades of game design, arcade simplicity, strategic systems, fast gameplay loops, and unpredictable outcomes.

Each game on this roster represents a different piece of that design. Select a player to see how they helped build the illusion of control. Click the  for help if needed.

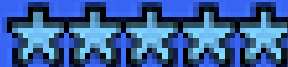
CLICK X TO EXIT




SALARY C



86% 

OFFENSE 

DEFENSE 

561 

★★★ ROSTER ★★★



EVERY PLAYER SHAPES THE SYSTEM

<p>RB </p>  <p>PAC-MAN 1980</p>	<p>TE </p>  <p>WII SPORTS 2007</p>	<p>WR </p>  <p>DOOM 1983</p>	<p>WR </p>  <p>FOOTBALL MANAGER 2008</p>
<p>LB </p>  <p>SIMCITY 1993</p>	<p>LB </p>  <p>XCOM 2012</p>	<p>LB </p>  <p>TECMO SUPER BOWL 1998</p>	<p>DB </p>  <p>NFL BLITZ 1998</p>



SALARY CAP 327M / 350M



MORALE

86% 

OFFENSE

★★★★★

DEFENSE

★★★★★

561 

★★★ ROSTER ★★★



EVERY PLAYER SHAPES THE SYSTEM

RB  

TE  

WR  

WR  



More Information

How to Navigate:

Click on each player to see more information. From each player page, either navigate back here by clicking home or see the next player by clicking next player.

When complete, return to homepage by clicking the home button.

CLICK X TO EXIT



WALL
GER
18



LITZ
18



SALARY CAP 327M / 350M

MORALE

86% 

OFFENSE

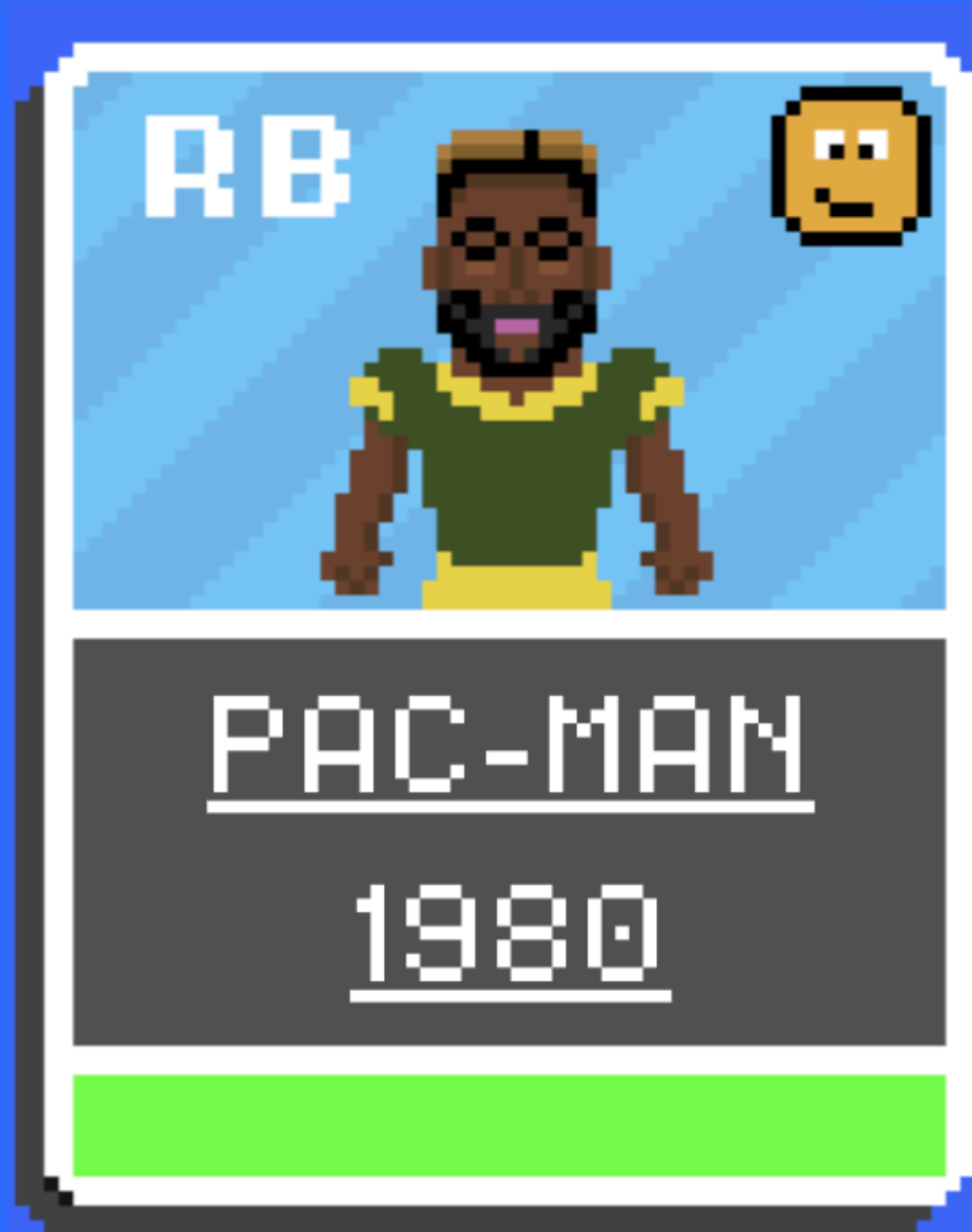
★★★★★

DEFENSE

★★★★★



ROSTER



Pac-Man (1980)

Position: Pattern Reader

Pac-Man's ghost follows consistent movement patterns, allowing players to predict paths and plan routes through repetition. This creates a system where control feels earned through recognition and timing. Retro Bowl mirrors this through defensive coverage patterns and route timing, where reading the defense creates the feeling of control even when outcomes still vary.

What it adds: A sense of control through repetition and learning.

Why it matters: Control feels earned, even when it isn't guaranteed.





ROSTER



Wii Sports (2007)

Position: Easy Control

Wii Sports uses motion-based input to directly map player movement to in-game action, creating an immediate cause-and-effect relationship. The simplicity removes complexity, making success feel tied directly to player skill. Retro Bowl applies this through its swipe-to-throw mechanic, where direction and release timing make passing feel fully controlled.

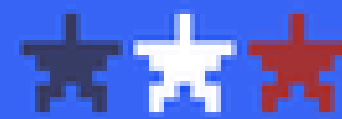
What it adds: Immediate accessibility and player confidence.

Why it matters: Simple controls make players believe outcomes are based on skill.





ROSTER



Doom (1983)

Position: The Loop

Doom is built around fast respawn and continuous action, where failure leads instantly into another attempt without delay. Enemy encounters vary slightly each time, forcing players to adapt rather than memorize exact outcomes. Retro Bowl uses this same loop through quick drives and immediate restarts after turnovers or losses.

What it adds: A fast cycle of failure → retry → improvement.

Why it matters: Failure keeps players engaged instead of pushing them away.





ROSTER



Football Manager (2008)

Position: Master Planner

Football Manager 2008 centers on systems like player attributes, morale, contracts, and tactical decisions that simulate performance outcomes. Players influence results through preparation, but matches are resolved by underlying calculations and simulations. Retro Bowl simplifies this by letting players control roster and morale while outcomes remain system-driven.

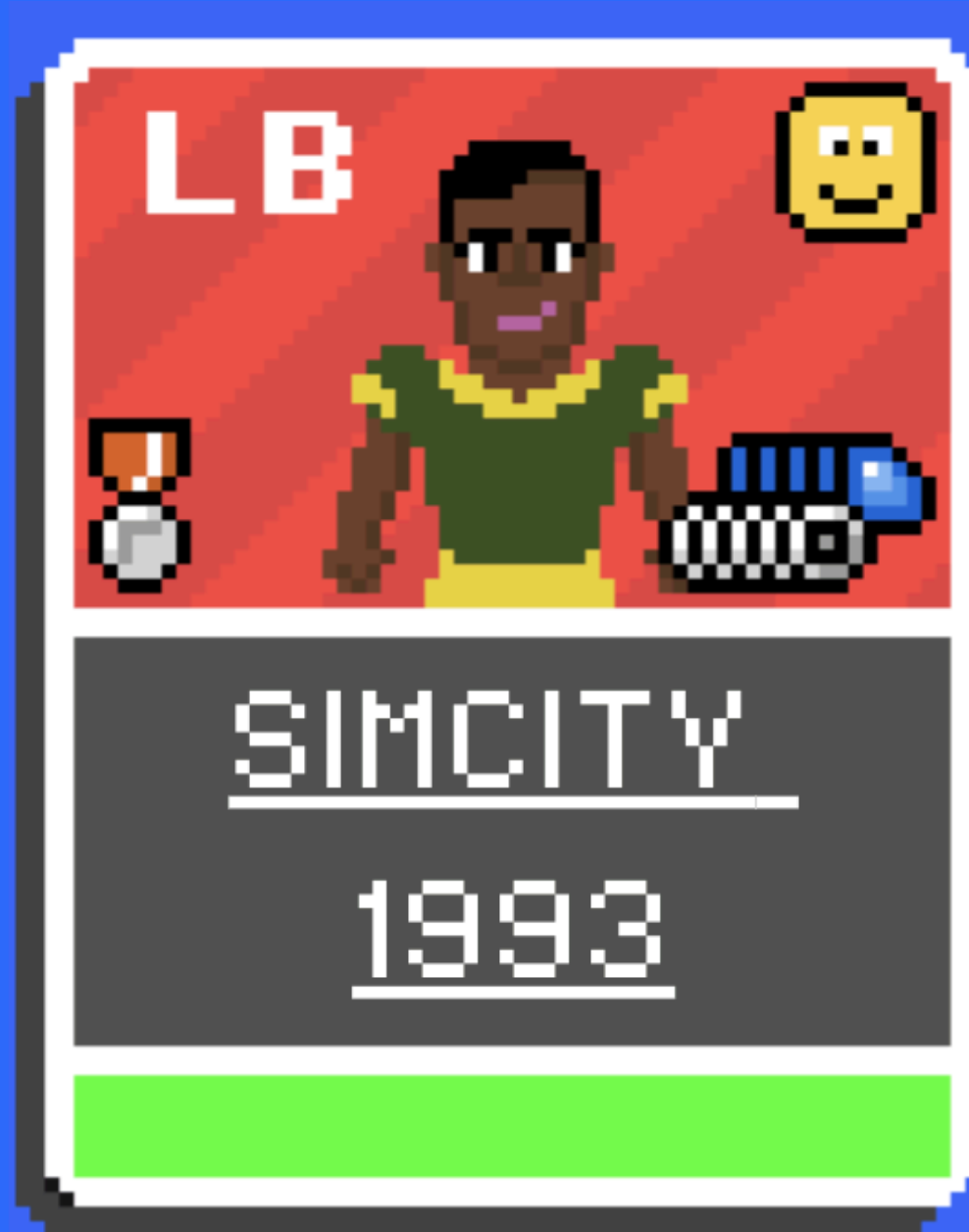
What it adds: Full system control without guaranteed outcomes.

Why it matters: More control doesn't mean more success.





ROSTER



SimCity 2000 (1993)

Position: System Builder

SimCity 2000 operates through interconnected systems like zoning, taxation, and infrastructure, where small changes affect long-term outcomes. Players cannot isolate one decision as the cause of success or failure because systems interact over time. Retro Bowl applies this through morale, salary cap, and roster decisions that impact performance across multiple games.

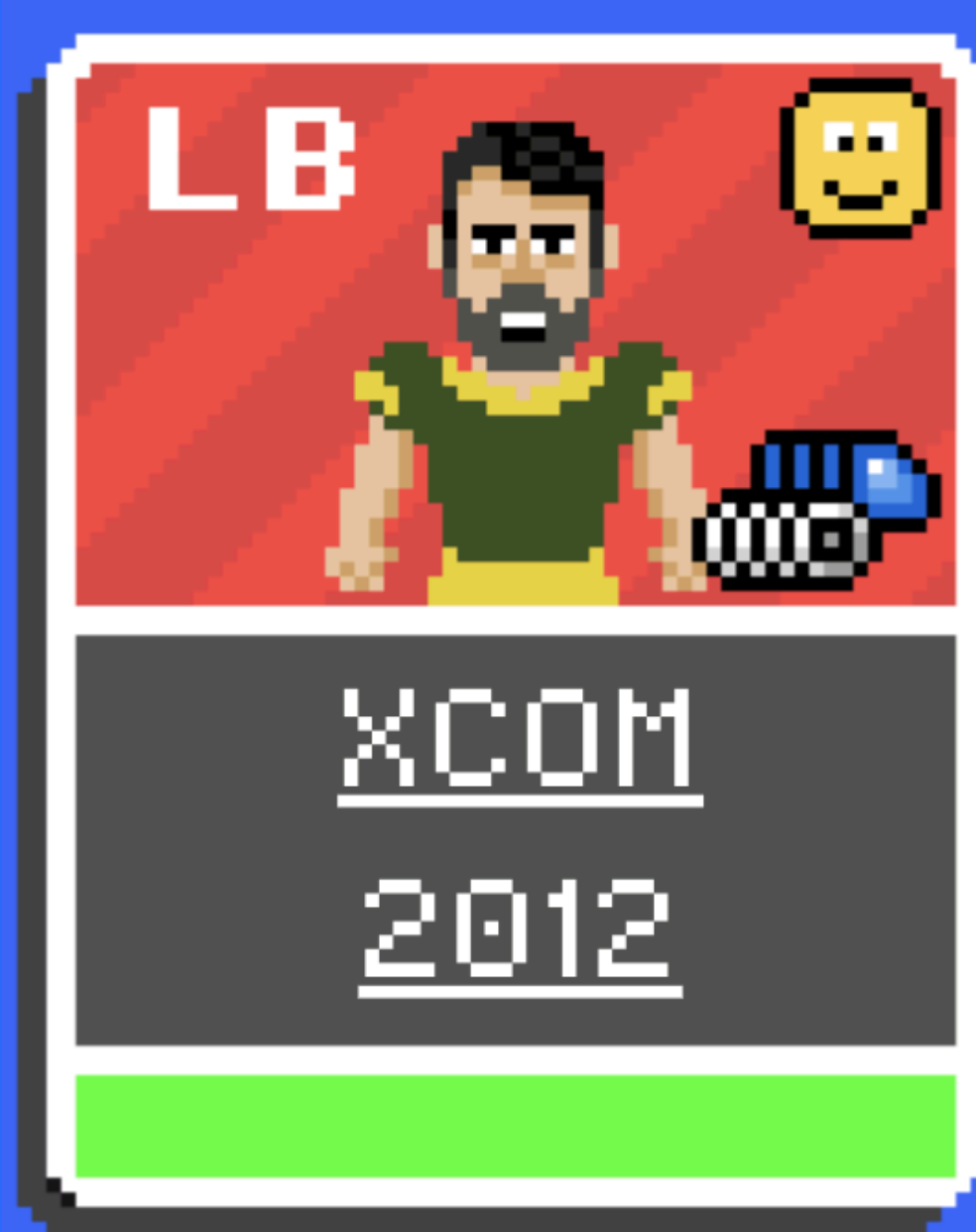
What it adds: Long-term consequences and hidden systems.

Why it matters: Players feel in control, but systems determine results.





ROSTER



XCOM: Enemy Unknown (2012)

Position: Risk Manager

XCOM uses percentage-based hit chances, where even high-probability actions can fail due to RNG. This forces players to make decisions knowing outcomes are never guaranteed. Retro Bowl mirrors this through pass accuracy, interceptions, and player performance variability that introduce risk into every play.

What it adds: A percentage-based combat system where hit chances determine if actions succeed or fail.

Why it matters: It shows that even optimal decisions can fail.





ROSTER



Tecmo Super Bowl 1998

Position: Arcade Core

Tecmo Super Bowl simplifies football into directional movement, limited play options, and timing-based passing mechanics. Players focus on reading defenses and executing plays quickly rather than managing full simulation detail. Retro Bowl builds directly on this by reducing control to core offensive decisions and fast gameplay loops.

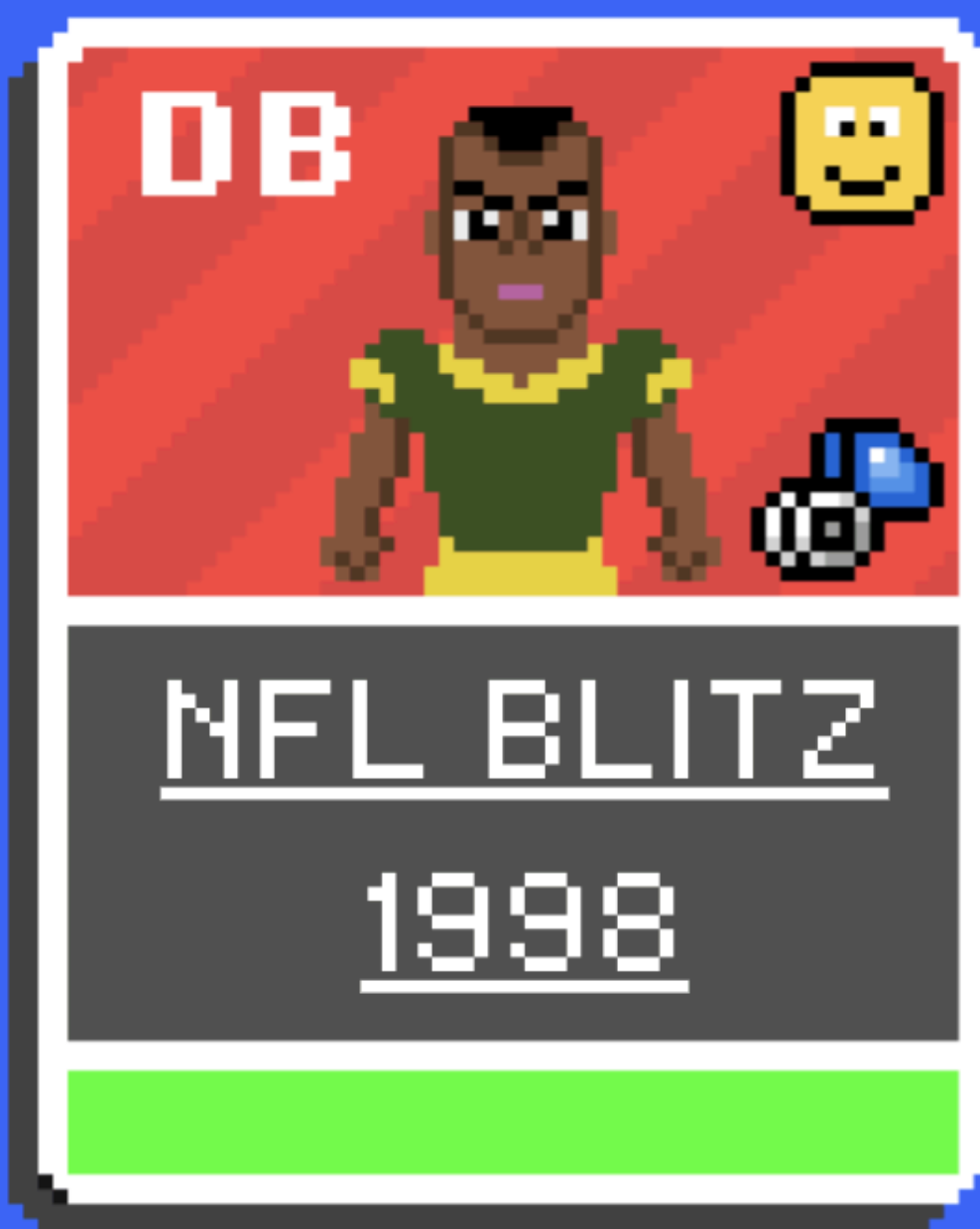
What it adds: A simplified play and passing system that focuses control on timing and quick decision-making.

Why it matters: It shows that limiting mechanics can make player control feel stronger and more intentional.





ROSTER



NFL Blitz (1998)

Position: System Builder

NFL Blitz exaggerates football mechanics through faster movement speed, simplified playbooks, and frequent big-play outcomes. Tackles, passes, and turnovers happen quickly and unpredictably, prioritizing excitement over realism. Retro Bowl reflects this through rapid drives, high-scoring plays, and sudden momentum shifts.

What it adds: Fast-paced gameplay with exaggerated physics and frequent turnovers that create unpredictable outcomes.

Why it matters: It shows that built-in chaos keeps gameplay exciting and prevents outcomes from feeling fully controlled.



SEA 0

1st Qtr 2:00



One Last Thing

You know how it works now.
Do you still think you're in control?

CLICK X TO PLAY

Kick Off



SEA 0

1st Qtr 2:00



30


40

50

40

30

GET READY!

Receive


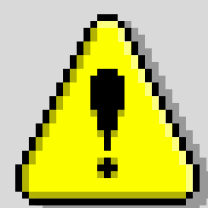
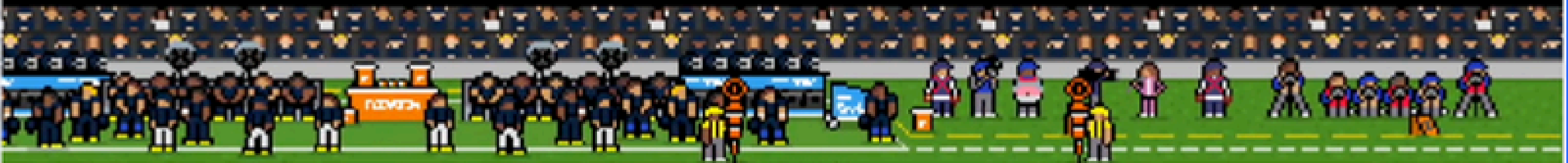
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CLICK HERE
WHEN
INCOMPLETE



Game Over

You made the right read.
You called the right play.
And it still didn't work.

That doesn't mean you failed.
It means the system did exactly what it
was designed to do. Retro Bowl doesn't
give you full control, it gives you the
feeling of control. And that's what
keeps you playing. Every game in this
exhibit shows the same idea in a
different way: control is never
complete, but it always feels possible.