

Local Game Company Makes a Last Play



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The last independent vestige of Manor Township-based APBA Game Co. Inc., the 50-year-old maker of nationally popular, quirky sports games, is gone.

APBA sold its building at 1001 Millersville Road for \$500,000 in December. That act officially dissolved the company, according to Frederick H. Light, who purchased APBA in 1992 from the estate of its founder and then sold it to a New Jersey company, now called AbleSoft Inc.

In December, FJ Dreams purchased the property, according to courthouse records. FJ Dreams is a private venture for Fred Essis, part owner of Essis & Sons Carpets, which has five retail outlets in Central Pennsylvania. Essis said he isn't sure what his plans are for the building.

He is, however, leasing a portion of it back to AbleSoft for what is now its APBA Games division. The division includes 11 technical and customer service employees. It will use 2,000 square feet of the building's 22,000 square feet. Light, executive vice president of AbleSoft, said APBA would not be moving out of Lancaster County.

"We are not moving out of Lancaster or the building," Light said. "People can still travel to the building and buy our products."

AbleSoft, located in Pennsauken, N.J., purchased APBA from Light in 1995 for \$475,000. It gave Light a contract to stay on with the company until 2010. At that time, AbleSoft was named Microleague Multimedia Inc. The company was renamed when it emerged from Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on Nov. 30, 1998, said Light.

The APBA Game Co. existed only as the owner of the 1001 Millersville Road property, according to Light, but the product name still lives on as a trademark under its parent corporation.

AbleSoft filed for protection under Chapter 11 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code on Dec. 23, 1997. It reorganized and restructured its operations by purchasing educational multimedia and software companies Rabbit Ears Productions for \$2 million in stock and KidSoft for \$11 million. It also gained two major investors in the Hearst Corp., which also owns WGAL-TV and Ameritech.

On the game side, AbleSoft purchased Micro Sports Inc. for \$2 million and uses this segment of the company for development of its interactive games, including APBA.

AbleSoft, which is privately held, has two locations and about 50 employees, according to Light.

Lancastrian J. Richard Seitz founded APBA, which stands for American Professional Baseball Association, in 1951. AbleSoft still makes the board, card and dice games invented by Seitz in his home in 1951.

After five years, Seitz quit his regular job to work full time for his game company and built the three-story building on Millersville Road for its headquarters. When Seitz died in 1992, Light purchased APBA from his estate.

APBA still makes board games for baseball, hockey, golf, football, basketball, hockey and boxing, although its emphasis now is on reality-based simulation games for computers. The baseball board game is wildly popular and often written about in the national press. At its annual convention at Millersville University, addicted gamers show up to win bragging rights until the next convention rolls around.

The baseball game has spawned independently produced newsletters, magazines, leagues and tournaments.

AbleSoft is broken up into four groups:

* Sports games. The company makes

simulated interactive games and recently teamed with Sports Illustrated for a football, baseball and hockey game that features animated graphics, digital sound and play-by-play.

* Education and hobby products. AbleSoft's best-selling multimedia product is Teacher's Toolbox, a set of computer software enabling teachers to maintain report cards, lesson plans and attendance records. It also recently added Comic Collector, which is software for comic book collectors to track the value of their collections.

* Family entertainment. With the purchase Rabbit Ears Productions, AbleSoft sells children's storybooks, videos and audiocassettes narrated by actors Mel Gibson, Meryl Streep, Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams and Jack Nicholson.

* Budget products. The General Admission and General Admission Gold brand software products, which are older and factory-second software products, sell for \$10 to \$20.

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