



A SPECIAL SECTION

The Board Meeting

Inboard, outboard and onboard with the best of the baseball-simulation games.

By Rick Reiff and Kit Kiefer

Ever since there's been a game of baseball there have been baseball-based games to play. The earliest games were card games, like the Tom Barker Baseball Game and Fan Craze. Mechanical games followed, and then they were followed by role-playing games and electric games and spinner games and dice games and board games and more card games and fantasy games and reality-based games and notepad games and computer-simulation games and computer-action games. But no matter how simple or complex the game is, the essential principles remain: someone wins and someone loses, and it's just not the same as real baseball.

It's getting closer, though. The modern baseball-simulation games are just about as close to the real thing as you can get without paying someone \$3.7 million a year to complain that his arm hurts. They're just games, though, and reality-based games like these are only as good as their perception of reality. If the game assumes that baseball's a simple enterprise, then their reality is simple and the game is straightforward, quick to play and none too complex. If

the game takes the approach that baseball is fantastically complex and minutely detailed, then you can spend 35 minutes trying to figure out whether or not a second baseman ties his shoes right-over-left or left-over-right.

Thankfully, all five of the games reviewed here take a middle-of-the-road approach to the questions of complexity and detail. They show compassion for the glassy-eyed games player, and they usually value playability over absolute reality when the two clash and there's no middle ground.

Forbes magazine's Rick Reiff and *Fantasy Baseball* editor Kit Kiefer sat down with the games and between them, came up with their impressions of the five most popular baseball-simulation games. Their reviews follow.

STRAT-O-MATIC

On popularity alone, Strat-O-Matic is the champ. It's the big seller in stores, and probably outsells APBA in mail order as well. Its "one-armed" pitcher is almost as much a magazine fixture as Charles Atlas.

But if sales were a good gauge of artistic success, we'd be reviewing

Coleco spinner baseball, too. Still, any game that has stood the test of time and continues to grow must have something going for it. And 28-year-old Strat-O-Matic clearly does.

The biggest plus: For ease of play, Strat-O-Matic is as close to perfect as any baseball table game is likely to get. A child can learn it in five minutes. With a little practice, you can complete the basic game in under 10 minutes, and the super-advanced version, with all of the trimmings, in 35 minutes. That's fast.

The three-dice system of Strat-O-Matic creator Hal Richman ranks with Alexander Cartwright's 90-foot bases as one of the mystical beauties of baseball. A white die tells you what column to look in — one, two or three on the batter's card, or four, five and six on the pitcher's card. Add the red dice and find the result, two to 12, in the appropriate column.

And the outcome is there in plain letters: a single, a popout, whatever. No other game delivers a result so effortlessly. The tempo of a Strat-O-Matic game is baseball in compressed form, with each roll of the dice like a swing of

the bat. Of course, many results require another roll or two of the dice or of a 20-sided die (toss Strat-O-Matic's deck of 20 easily creased split cards in the trash) in order to reference the fielding chart, distinguish between a home run or deep fly out, and the like.

Its simple setup enables Strat-O-Matic to add on optional features that allow you to play the game on several levels of complexity. You can play the basic game (no longer an alternative for the serious baseball gamer), or flip the card over to play an advanced game that includes individualized lefty-righty breakdowns. Choose from a basic, advanced or superadvanced fielding chart. The new superadvanced stealing system incorporates such things as a pitcher's pickoff move and balk tendencies and a runner's ability to get a good lead — excellent innovations, but onesthat you can disregard if you don't want the added complexity.

Richman accuses Pursue The Pennant of copying many of Strat-O-Matic's features, but he ought to drop the PTP folks a thank-you note for prodding him to make a better game. The new, improved Strat-O-Matic includes such PTP-like features as clutch hitting and ballpark factors.

Statistically, Strat-O-Matic is ridiculously precise, capable of dissecting bat-

ting averages, pitcher home-run frequencies and other data down to a fourth decimal. No other game has such individualized cards that tell a player's story at a glance. And players' cards list their statistics.

Strat-O-Matic has weaknesses. There are no individual pitcher fielding ratings (other than for errors), only four range ratings for middle infielders and standardized flyballs and groundballs for pitchers; even Tommy John can't get a batter to beat more balls into the dirt than the next guy. But give Strat-O-Matic time and it seems to get around to dealing with its flaws.

The superadvanced fielding chart contains rundowns and other plays not previously available with Strat-O-Matic, but you still won't be wowed by player brawls, cloudbursts or drunks falling out of the bleachers. If you like such flourishes, knock Strat-O-Matic down a peg on realism.

The game is relatively inexpensive — \$34.50 plus postage for the game and all 729 of the 1989 player cards, \$23.75 plus postage for just the cards. The cards, unfortunately, are flimsy and come on perforated stock. The library of oldtimer teams is huge. Strat-O-Matic staffer Steve Barkan spent half a

year poring over old box scores to recreate the 1927 season, and in the process created a new standard for the hobby. A newsletter, the *Strat-O-Matic Review*, includes product updates and ads for old game sets. The company has a toll-free line, too (1-800-645-3455, department 3605).

Those who rap Strat-O-Matic's half-batter, half-pitcher setup assert that pitching is more than 50 percent of the game. But is it? And if it is, don't the statistics already reflect that fact? Maybe it's just too hard to understand how anything so simple can work so well. Strat-O-Matic proves the adage: less is more.

PURSUE THE PENNANT

We were sent samples of Pursue The Pennant when the game first hit the market in 1986. The game looked intriguing — rich in detail, filled with nice touches like fake stadium backdrops and wind factors and grass vs. turf charts — but also daunting, serious, fun in the sort of way doing your taxes is fun. We opened the box, took one look, got scared, closed the box right away, and set the game on a shelf, where it was repoed by one of the former editors on his way out the door.

Now, after playing PTP, we realize we were hasty. The game looks much worse than it is. It looks like it's tre-

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G A M E S	STRAT-O-MATIC	
	PLAYABILITY	4
	REALISM	4
	STATISTICAL ACCURACY	4
	STRATEGY	4
	3 P's	4
	3 P's: price, peripherals, pride/quality	
	TOTAL	20