

# STRAT-O-MATIC 4.0

## A VIEW FROM THE UPPER DECK

By BRUCE HERMAN

*For such a sophisticated, option-laden game, the ease with which Strat-O-Matic can be manipulated to the fullest extent of its capabilities is truly remarkable — perhaps its greatest achievement.*

It's the cards, it's got to be the cards. Just show up in Glen Head, New York on "Strat-O-Matic Opening Day" and watch hundreds of gamers with outstretched arms, trembling at the thought of tearing into this year's card set. My friend, this is old time religion, a genuine American ritual since 1961.

Now in its fourth generation, the computer game remains loyal to the cards. But thankfully, designer Bob Winberry has taken pity on our overworked imaginations, adding full color VGA ballparks, expanded play descriptions and a wide range of enhanced utilities. More than just a facelift, this year's version brings you closer to the action than ever before. The pennant race is on for the best baseball game of 1993, and Strat-O-Matic is an early season favorite to go all the way.

The enhancements made to version 4.0 have added eight pages to the already comprehensive and well-indexed documentation. Though the booklet looks imposing, it is simply complete. The game is intuitive enough so that gamers will soon use it only for a quick look-up, as opposed to relying on it for step-by-step instruction.

Loading the game on a hard drive is simple, but because of Strat's one installation-only copy protection system, older versions of the game must be "recalled" before 4.0 can be installed. This new version also amplifies the chance of "Ram cram" within the DOS 640K limitation. As much as 590K might be needed to install and load, so resident programs may have to be removed and/or software

purchased to free up traditional memory.

The most dramatic and aesthetic improvement to this new version of the game is the addition of optional VGA ballparks, which include rudimentary (but adequate for a text-based game) digitized graphics and 3-D ball flight. Designer Bob Winberry has made the most of 16 color, 640 x 480 resolution, with meticulous reproductions of each park, right down to the advertising signs.

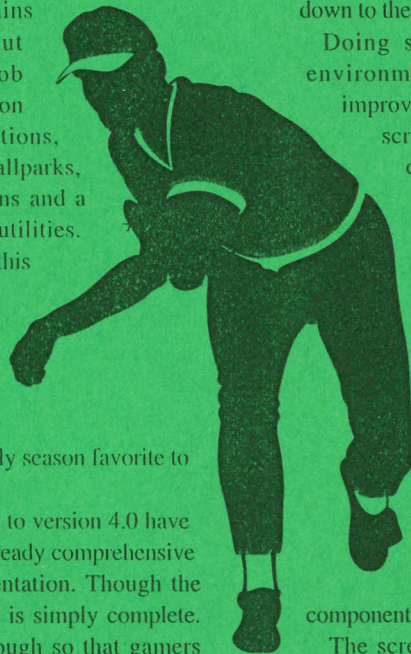
Doing so has provided a much friendlier environment in which to play — a quantum improvement over the stark black background screen of the traditional game. The parks consume about 85% of the screen space, however, so using them requires additional key strokes to access most statistical and game information. Getting in and out of the parks also triggers a quick flicker as screens are re-written.

In the non-VGA mode, the screens are typical of text-based games: unattractive, but reasonably practical. In their most basic configuration, a line-drawn diamond encompassing the players (plus their defensive ratings) in their positions is the most dominant

component.

The screens accommodate only the most basic statistical information at any one time, but a space in the upper left — absent in VGA mode — is variable, depending on what statistical or ratings information you choose to display there. Most helpful is the option to display three columns (game in progress, league in progress, actual), of stat info for the current batter or pitcher.

Approximately 20% of the space in the non-VGA mode typically goes unused, and the diamond is larger than it needs to be. Strat might consider



utilizing this space to allow more columns of stats to be displayed, and/or showing both batter and pitcher stats simultaneously. Perhaps the best option of all would be one to display the actual card of the player, but the company is unlikely to do this. There would then be even less need, after all, to purchase the paper player cards.

For such a sophisticated, option-laden game, the ease with which Strat-O-Matic can be manipulated to the fullest extent of its capabilities is truly remarkable — perhaps its greatest achievement. It consists of two distinct modules, the game program and the utility program, toggled instantly with the touch of a key and two seconds of hard-disk activity. All the major functions are menu driven and make full use of key stroking shortcuts. Even the most complex functions involving league, team and player management can be executed in seconds. Best of all, it is conceivable that one could be playing a game — with a nearly complete understanding of it — within five minutes after opening the box.

Although some other games cram more information onto a screen, most of what might be needed in the way of stats, ratings, match-up data, and even in-progress box scores and play-by-play detail is just one or two keystrokes away. The easiest way to access this data, as well as to execute certain strategies within the game itself, is to memorize about two dozen single key strokes. Failing that, one additional stroke pops up a menu from which to make your selection.

It doesn't get any friendlier than this.

Until this year Strat-O-Matic lagged way, WAY behind other games in the area of play-by-play commentary. APBA is still the king of the play description, but Strat has closed the gap. There are now 10 to 20 different text descriptions for any given play outcome, some of them even sensitive to what park the game is being played in or what the weather conditions of the day might be. In a complex bit of programming, certain phrases of the calls are randomized, then stitched together, thereby increasing the number of possible combinations. About three dozen weird plays are now possible, but you'll have to play a long, long time to encounter all of them.

This is a new frontier for Strat, and the designers have been working hard to beef up an area that is especially urgent in text-based games where impending boredom is always a factor. There is still too much repetition — especially of catch-phrases and clichés — but it's a noble start that is bound to bulk up in future versions.

In a multi-year evolutionary process, the Strat game has unfolded from its "basic" incarnation into the "super-advanced" version in deliberate increments. Realism has been added component by component: lefty/righty breakdowns, range versus

error differentiation on defense, throwing-arm adjustments, a mysterious (perhaps dubious) clutch-hitting option, park and weather effects, the impact of fatigue on pitchers, and so forth.

This trend of tweaking player-performance variables continues in 1993. For the first time, pitchers are fine-tuned for their tendency to induce double plays; "closer ratings" have been added to place more value on a true closer, as compared to another pitcher brought into a late-inning pressure situation; out location is no longer random, but sensitive to whether batters are pull or spray hitters; and pitchers are now individually rated for running speed and bunting.

Historically, Strat has been tardy in offering a wide and realistic variety of play results, eschewing even many common occurrences. (Gamers went many years without balks and catcher overthrows on steal attempts, for example.) But the introduction of a rare play chart a few years ago and the advent of 4.0 with its beefed-up text descriptions erases many of those inadequacies.

Because Strat cards are so slavish to statistics, there is always the temptation to throw "real baseball" out the window in favor of beating Strat at its own game — pinch-hitting Phil Clark for Cecil Fielder because Clark massacres lefties, or pinch-hitting Tom Marsh for Dave Hollins with the game on the line because of the disparity in their clutch ratings. But overall, Strat-O-Matic has grown into a simulation that is as close to real baseball in the factors that affect a game, as can be found on the market.

Bing-bang-boom. That's about how long it takes to do just about anything in Strat. Even statistical compilation whirs by, producing a set of leaders in dozens of categories in seconds. A configuration screen offers the user complete customization of text scrolling speed and graphics. The auto-play option, too, is swift; a game unfolds in about four seconds on a 386 processor. There is little use splitting hairs about which game does certain things a second faster than another; suffice it to say that, with Strat, you never find yourself waiting for anything to happen.

Options the way they oughta be: easy to use, useful, without pretension, and lots of 'em. The highlights (with an \* indicating a new feature in version 4.0):

—The Automatic Play Feature and computer-manager options are outstanding. "Hal," the skipper, can write out a funky line-up card on occasion, but he's exceedingly adept at using players in realistic ways in realistic amounts and is moderately programmable.

—Images of all cards are loaded in the utility module where they can be viewed and edited. With the fringe-player creation\* option, new Strat cards can be composed just by entering the pertinent stats

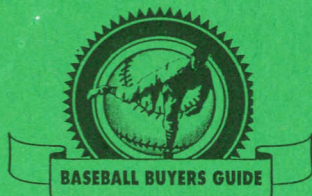


#### SGR LINE-UP CARD

.....

### STRAT-O-MATIC COMPUTER BASEBALL 4.0

Category:	Text
Price:	\$60.00 (upgrade from version 3.0: \$32.00, \$40.25 with card set)
System:	IBM/compatible
Memory:	640K (590K available ram)
Graphics:	VGA (for ballpark display)
Sound:	PC speaker
Install:	Hard disk recommended for advanced functions
Interface:	Keyboard, mouse optional
Copy	
Protect:	One install per user, can be recalled
Publisher:	Strat-O-Matic Game Company Inc. 46 Railroad Plaza Glen Head, NY 11545 (800) 645-3455 (Orders only) (516) 671-6566



and ratings.

—Draft-O-Matic\* is a breakthrough feature likely to be copied by other games, that will either recommend draft selections for a particular team from a free-agent pool or draft full rosters all by itself.

—Out of Town Scoreboard was a nifty creation, optimized during season replays, introduced in Version 3.0. It allows the player to follow along with other games in progress on that day while manually conducting another game of choice. New this year is the ability to view the play-by-play of those games as they unfold.

—The Encyclopedia Function\* allows the dumping of final stats into a data base at the end of a season, where they are stored and, over the course of many seasons, updated into career records.

The scheduling module not only includes built-in actual schedules for the season at hand, but can generate unique schedules\* based on parameters that are input by the user.

If you think hard, you might be able to come up with some ideas to improve the stats compiler. But you'd have to think VERY hard. Many refinements over the prior version have made this a very comprehensive package. In the individual-leader compilation, for example, there are now 74 stat categories that can be selected or de-selected, ranging in scope from traditional to sabermetric. The game also tracks player utilization and performance on a pro-rated basis so it can be seen at a glance if a player is over- or under-performing, and over- or under-utilized. The leader boards are inflexible, however; they print the top 12 per category, with un-editable minimum qualifying standards.

Manipulating statistics for draft-league purposes is, perhaps, the most unwieldy function of the entire game. Everything that needs to be done can be, but will take some hunting and pecking — plus multiple reads of the documentation — to do it. Subtleties in procedure must be mastered, but once the whole system of "subset stats," "report leagues," "primary stats," etc. is comprehended, it will become routine. The company maintains an ongoing dialogue with some draft leagues to better accommodate the vagaries and complexities of that milieu.

Every statistical report that can be viewed can also be printed, and there are no complex configuration procedures necessary to ensure printer compatibility. All reports, including box scores and play-by-play accounts — can also be printed to disk and edited through a word processing system.

We know that, when a tree falls in the forest, it makes a sound — we just can't prove it. So it is with the realism of Strat-O-Matic Baseball. Since the board game's inception 32 years ago, the mathematical model on which it is based has been — despite its inherent simplicity — celebrated and copied. Though no definitive study has ever

PROVEN which might be the most statistically accurate game, there is almost incontrovertible empirical evidence that Strat is at or near the top.

If there is quibble to be made it is that some statistics that occur with relatively low frequency may occur too often in the Strat system of probabilities. Examples: A free-swinging, contact hitter like Ozzie Guillen will walk and strikeout too much. He may not have any chances on his own card to do so, but over a full season he'll get too many such results off pitchers' cards. And, sinker-balling Greg Maddux will allow too many homers — again because he'll be burned too frequently by results on batters' cards.

Strat allows optimal managerial control and, because the probabilities of occurrences can be so clearly evaluated, the doors are wide open for unrealistic use of players that leads to unrealistic statistical outcomes. Left to its own devices, however, you will find your Strat-stats to be clean, sensible and accurate.

The Strat-O-Matic Game is self-contained and not burdened with catalogs of add-on disks and utilities, and is a terrific value at the price. First-time buyers get the game at \$60.00, but can (and should) chip in another \$10.25 to get the 864 player cards included. As updates of the game are released, they are offered to prior-version owners at a discount (\$40.25, cards included, for Version 4.0). Every season is available from 1968 to 1992, along with a collection of classic seasons, all at a very reasonable \$20.00 per disk. It should be noted, due to the evolution of the game, you must have the most recent version to guarantee compatibility with all past season disks. 🏆

## ROAD TEST SCORESHEET

TITLE: **STRAT-O-MATIC  
COMPUTER BASEBALL 4.0**

CATEGORY: **TEXT**

		MAX SCORE
DOCUMENTATION:	5	5
INSTALLATION:	3	3
SCREEN DESIGN:	8	10
USER INTERFACE:	10	10
PLAY DESCRIPTIONS:	6	7
REALISM:	14	15
SPEED:	3	3
OPTIONS:	10	10
STATS COMPILER:	7	8
PRINTOUTS:	4	4
STATISTICAL ACCURACY:	14	15
PRICE TO VALUE:	10	10

TOTAL SCORE **94** **100**

# The SPORTS GAME REVIEW

JULY 1993

YOUR GUIDE TO HOME SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT

## ROAD TEST SCORING GUIDE

### THE SPORTS GAME REVIEW RATING SYSTEM: COMPUTER SOFTWARE

Until I started writing about software, I thought an upgrade was something you did when the old one fell apart, like moving from a 13" TV to a 19" when the picture tube blew out, or trading in your V-6 for a V-8 to get more passing power on the hills. Not so in the software industry, with companies punching and counter-punching looking for that one blow that will knock the competition off the shelves.

As reviewers of sports software and game cartridges, we take our job seriously. We know that as a consumer, you can't buy every product and upgrade that hits the market. Some software manufacturers and retailers understand your dilemma, and offer a trial exchange period or full money back guarantee. Frankly, those dealers that show unconditional support for their products, deserve your business. But, unless you want to spend a few hours each week traveling back and forth to your favorite software store, you need to make informed buying decisions, and that's where we come in.

**THE SPORTS GAME REVIEW** uses three categories for computer software:

**Text:** A program that uses actual players and statistics, or fictitious players with statistics that can be edited, and text commentary to describe the action of the sport. Some graphics or animation may be used.

**Graphical:** A program that uses actual players and statistics, or fictitious players with statistics that can be edited, and full animation to represent each participant of the sport.

**Action/Skill:** A program that does not use actual players and statistics, but uses full animation to represent each participant of the sport.

The table below lists the maximum point totals for each category:

The unique rating scales reflect the different characteristics of each product category, and insure that games are only compared to others in the same category. As an example, it would be unfair to compare *PGA Tour Golf*, a game that uses actual pro golfers, to *Links*, a game that simulates the same sport, but does not use

pro golfers.

Also, the unique rating scales reflect different priorities within each category. For instance, a text or graphical simulation that uses real professional athletes and statistics, will be rated for statistical accuracy. An action/skill simulation which does not include real athletes or statistics, will not be rated for statistical accuracy. Instead, it will be rated for challenge, since an action/skill simulation requires the user to attain a certain physical level of proficiency at a given sport.

### YOU BE THE JUDGE

As a sports game consumer, your opinions are just as important as ours. In each issue you will find a blank *Road Test Scoresheet*. As you purchase and use sports games, send in your ratings. Every scoresheet will be tabulated as part of the average rating for each game. The *Road Test Rankings* will list the games in order based on their composite average score. Let your voice be heard. The end result will be more responsive software designers and better sports games! 🎮



#### TEXT

Documentation	5
Installation	3
Screen Design	10
User Interface	10
Play Descriptions	7
Realism	15
Speed	3
Options	10
Stats Compiler	8
Printouts	4
Statistical Accuracy	15
Price To Value	10

Maximum Score 100



#### GRAPHICAL

Documentation	5
Installation	3
Animation	15
User Interface	10
Play Descriptions	3
Realism	15
Speed	7
Options	10
Stats Compiler	8
Printouts	4
Statistical Accuracy	10
Price To Value	10

Maximum Score 100



#### ACTION/SKILL

Documentation	7
Installation	5
Animation	15
User Interface	15
Realism	15
Speed	5
Options	10
Sound	5
Challenge	5
Printouts	3
Stats Compiler	5
Price To Value	10

Maximum Score 100