PRO-GAMER

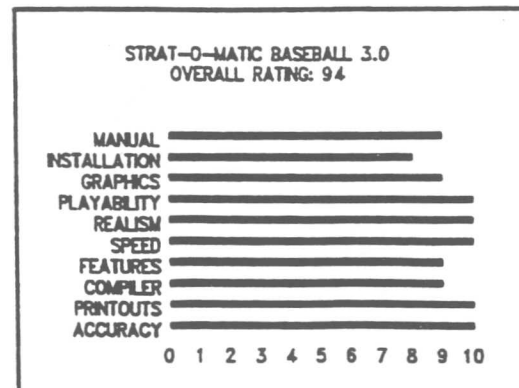## "The Journal Of Computer Sports Gaming"

STRAT-O-MATIC COMPUTER BASEBALL 3.0

STRAT-O-MATIC GAME COMPANY
46 Railroad Plaza
Glen Head, NY 11545

STRAT-O-MATIC BASEBALL 3.0
OVERALL RATING: 94

	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
MANUAL	
INSTALLATION	
GRAPHICS	
PLAYABILITY	
REALISM	
SPEED	
FEATURES	
COMPILER	
PRINTOUTS	
ACCURACY	

Copy Protected: On Disk
IBM PC/compatibles: 640K, single floppy
Hard drive & 286 recommended for some features
Graphics: CGA or EGA needed for optional graphics   Reviewed By: Mark Cohen

In the history of computer sports gaming, January 15th, 1992 might well be remembered as: "...one small step for mankind, and a HUGE step for computer baseball fans!" If all goes according to plan, the 15th will be the day STRAT-O-MATIC releases version 3.0 of its baseball game; and after much deliberation on the part of STRAT management, it will be the day baseball gamers across the country can play STRAT-O-MATIC COMPUTER BASEBALL without the cards.

Lest I be accused of dishonoring the STRAT card design, which has been nurtured for over 30 years by founder Hal Richman, I must give credit to all who have made the current card what it is today. It is truly a scientific marvel, simple in its complexity, offering insights into a player's abilities that no other game has been able to capture. But for me and thousands of other gamers, player cards are no longer a viable part of the gaming experience. The demands of family and career have changed the way we enjoy our hobby. To those who still use the cards to complete replays and draft leagues every year, I can only wish you well (and hope the divorce settlement is not too unkind). As for the rest of us computer jockeys, STRAT-O-MATIC has finally arrived. Sure, it's been around for awhile, but we haven't been able to enjoy the complete package. All the romance of a board game blended with the ease and speed of a computer. Get your orders in now, boys; STRAT 3.0 is just around the corner and it's the best computer baseball game I've ever played.

Since Version 2.0 hit the market a couple years ago, the game documentation has shown steady improvement. Probably the most valuable section is a detailed explanation of the STRAT playing card, especially useful to those who have never played the board game. While some will argue the need for copy protection, the system is straightforward and efficient, allowing a single installation to either hard drive or floppy. I have no problem with the method, although I think two installations would have been more reasonable, enabling a user to install on a desktop and laptop, or home and office. But, it works and once in place, does not require the use of a key disk or code from the manual.

While version 3.0 keeps the foundation of the original game intact, many changes have been introduced on the game screen. Most obvious, is the expanded playing field containing each player's last name (instead of initials), along with fielding range, error and throwing arm ratings. The pitcher is placed on the side of the mound he pitches from. In the upper left corner is the information box, which can be toggled to contain various statistics and ratings, including actual, game and year-to-date stats for batters and pitchers. The upper/middle of the screen contains the scoreboard, outs, inning and additional items depending upon the situation (success % for the batter: sacrifice bunt, squeeze play, hit & run).

In the upper right portion of the screen is the game menu, containing standard managerial choices (swing away, bunt, hit & run, etc.), as well as access to team rosters and exit/quickplay options (more on these later). While the entire list of options can be displayed on screen, a one line display is less crowded, and enables you to scroll through the entire list. An experienced user can also hit the appropriate single key command for instant access.

Below the menu option bar are three new statistics that reflect the individual lefty/righty match-ups. For computer only users, these ratings do a remarkable job of quantifying the depth of left/right information that appears on a STRAT card. Line #1 contains the current batter's basic hitting stats, along with a "BAL" rating that shows his edge (scale of 1-9). For instance, a hitter rated 1R is slightly better against right handed pitching, while a 9R would represent a batter who owns righthanders. An E indicates a hitter with equal abilities against either side. The next line is the pitcher's BAL rating, showing his best side (a pitcher's rating of 8R would indicate a definite advantage against right handed hitters). Finally, the third line summarizes the total balance of the match-up from the batter's position. A positive number gives the advantage to the hitter while a negative number gives the edge to the pitcher. Naturally, a larger number in either direction indicates a more dramatic edge. What makes this system better than simply presenting left-handed and right-handed batting averages and ERA's, is the portrayal of the individual match-up. Instead of just staring at averages, you can almost "feel" the dominance of a pitcher or hitter. (Individual BAL ratings are also included when you access the roster screen).

While board game fans can still opt for reading play results from the cards and watching the dice roll around on the screen, computer gamers can select two different styles of play. In text mode, the result of <u>every</u> play will be presented on screen (unlike the "no text" option that shows only play results read from the charts). Depending upon your graphics card you can select either CGA or EGA graphics to view occasional cartoon style depictions of certain plays. Stolen base attempts, long fly balls, passed balls and tough fielding plays are some of the images included. While these brief graphical interludes are far from the digitized action graphics used in some games, they provide a surprisingly pleasant break from the text screen, along with an element of drama as the play unfolds.

Along with the new playing field, graphics, and balance ratings, a dotted line has been added showing the direction of each ball put in play. It is a simple, but effective way to focus your attention on the player(s) who are involved in the action. Still intact, is the excellent two-step base stealing system (1 - getting the best possible lead, & 2 - analyzing the lead and deciding whether or not to go). Designer Bob Winberry deserves a programming Oscar for

transforming the often monotonous text computer game experience into an exciting, mentally challenging drama. The numbers and averages are here, but the design of STRAT-O-MATIC forces you to manage a baseball team, rather than act like a spreadsheet jockey racing out of control to a final boxscore. When it comes to PLAYABILITY and REALISM, this game is a 10 all the way!

Along with the re-designed playing options, several other features have been strengthened. The team roster screens have been expanded to include statistics and ratings for each player as you scroll down the bench. Computer manager tendencies have been expanded to include frequency of intentional walks, and the earliest inning you would bring the infield in. All the previous manager tendencies have been retained, including lineup selection, pinch-hitters, defensive replacements, relief rotation, closer, and closer usage.

Behind the scenes improvements include a refinement of the computer's ability to handle starting rotations, along with the tendency of the computer manager to yank starters early. I have played a couple hundred games with version 3.0 and have been impressed with the accurate percentage of quality starts and complete games. Finally, replay fans who like to duplicate actual trades and injuries, will appreciate the computer's ability to retain eligible/ineligible lists from game to game.

While the experience of managing your team is the best part of playing STRAT-O-MATIC, the new game offers enough speed options to satisfy even the most crazed replay fanatics. Any individual game can be downshifted into passing gear by tapping the exit/quickplay keys. You can instruct the computer to finish the game to the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th or end of game. On a 386SX it takes 8-10 seconds to finish a game in progress. Equipped with a co-processor, a single game takes about two seconds.

Autoplay is the fastest way to stage multiple series' of games, and a new "Out of Town Scoreboard" adds drama to a late season pennant race. First, you set up a schedule of games for one day, including a single game to be played manually. Once the games are programmed, the screen blanks and all the games are played in autoplay, except for your game. When the autoplay has finished, the teams will be loaded for the manual game, and the opening game screen will appear. While playing the game you can access the "Out of Town Scoreboard" by tapping the F9 key. The scoreboard is always kept one inning ahead of your game and the summaries include boxscores, current pitchers and recent home runs. STRAT recommends at least a 286 machine and hard drive for this function.

Also included in the automatic play section is the ability to program and store schedule files; and the option to store special games in files you can print later. By selecting Box/Play-By-Play For Event, the program will store the following "big events": Batters (5 or more hits, 5 or more RBI's, 3 or more HR's or a grand slam); Pitchers (10 or more K's); Team (If either team has 2 or less hits, 16 or more runs, 21 or more hits, and games that go more than 16 innings). STRAT has all the bases covered when it comes to automated play and races to another 10 in the Speed category.

When you consider the individual game options, autoplay and stats compiler, STRAT provides an almost perfect baseball system. The only missing ingredient is an efficient player creation module. While you can edit or clone players, creating cards from scratch is a painstakingly tedious process, due to the complexity of the STRAT cards. An automated card creation utility would be nice. In the meantime, the designers will continue to produce past seasons (1975 will be available in January, with 1941 to follow later in the year). Other years currently available are: '27, '30, '50, '59, '61, '62, '68, '69, '70 and '78, along with 84 through '90. (A conversion utility is included in the new game to convert our old version 2 roster disks to the new format). Longtime STRAT board game players can also input their card sets using the edit player function.

The stats compiler/league leaders package included with the game is outstanding, with over one hundred categories tracked. In addition to season stats compiling, a player usage report lists percentage of actual playing time along with projected season statistics. The only major omission is a home/away team vs. team report (although the team file includes overall records against other teams). The league leaders module is comprehensive, however does not include a flexible sorting option or the ability to list more than the default number of players in a particular category. While it falls short of perfect, the choice of categories is expansive and the reporting speed is exceptional (On a SX with a math co., it takes about 5 seconds to sort and display the entire league Leaders report module for a 12 team league). Printed reports are well-organized and the program appears to have few printer compatibility problems.

The Accessories Disk, once a $15.00 add-on, is now part of the game package. This utility allows you to edit stats, input basic stats from board game play, merge statistics for league reports, insert player names into stat files, and back-up your roster and stat files.

Finally, STRAT 3.0 has moved up a notch in the area of statistical production. Previously mentioned adjustments in the computer manager's handling of pitchers has remedied problems in the area of complete games. Season stats are excellent, and individual games and confrontations are uncanny in the way they portray the "real" players. The new balance ratings provide a great breakdown of every batter/pitcher match-up and the improved computer manager provides tough competition.

In closing, I'd like to offer a final comment on the transformation of STRAT-O-MATIC BASEBALL into a pure computer simulation. The designers continue to recommend using the player cards with the game. There appears to be concern that somehow the game will suffer in the long run if the cards slip in popularity. On the contrary, STRAT 3.0 will break down barriers that existed in previous versions. This game is a gem, and it stands on its own with or without the cards. It is a thoughtful, well designed simulation that respects a technology and pays tribute to an era we will all hold dear. To Hal Richman and Bob Winberry, "Long live the cards... and thanks for giving me the option to leave them in the box!"