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A Passion For The Game--And Its Numbers

By Dan Ackman

"I love statistics, and I love baseball. I am a lover of both," says **Harold Richman**, founder of **Strat-o-matic** and inventor of the company's signature board games.

Richman, now 64, started marketing Strat-o-matic baseball in 1961. Over the years, he has added football, basketball and hockey. But it is Strat-o-matic baseball that has become a part of the sporting culture and in a small way a progenitor of the computer sports games so popular today.

Richman invented his first board game at age 11 and worked on others through his teens. When he was applying to college his mother told him, "Whatever you do, don't tell him about those games you work on." Richman listened to his mom and made it through Bucknell University as a business major. But when he got out he still had the bug, and he

tried to peddle his ideas to a family friend in the toy business.

The friend told him his ideas were good but not commercial. Next he entered into a correspondence with **J. Taylor Spink**, the legendary editor of *The Sporting News* who died in 1962. Spink's advice was that the idea of a baseball board game had been tried and failed. He neglected to mention that the attempt he had in mind was in 1910, before Babe Ruth even started his career.

So, at 24, Richman invested $3,500 in his own company. He lost it and borrowed another $3,500. He lost that too. He then went to his father, who was anxious for Harold to join him in his insurance business, and asked to borrow $5,000. The deal was that if he succeeded, he would pay his father back. If he failed, he would sell insurance.

Properly motivated, Richman was able to pay his father back and earn a profit. The company, while still quite small, has been on the upswing ever since.

The classic Strat-o-matic game plays with dice and player cards, which list a player's statistics and chart his tendencies. Today, the company also produces a CD-ROM version. But the board game, which sells for $39, remains the biggest seller. Every year in January, men and boys line up outside the company's squat, sparse headquarters in Glen Head, N.Y., to wait for the player cards representing statistics of the previous season.

A fair number of the game's devotees have gone on to invent board and computer games of their own. Some raised on the game now run big computer games companies. More than a few professional ballplayers have said that holding their Strat-o-matic card in their hand was a sign that they'd arrived.

As business grew, Strat-o-matic came out with board games simulating what Richman calls "the minor sports." But in 1986, Richman saw "the handwriting on the wall: Computer games were impacting board games." Richman knew he had to adapt. "But at the same time, I had no feeling for computers," he says.

So for the first time, "I had to rely on others for development." After a couple of false starts, in 1988 he hired **Bob Winberry**, now 40, a programmer who grew up playing Strat-o-matic and who remains with the company.

The computer also changed the nature of the game. "A board game depends on a balance between realism and playability," the inventor says. The programmers took most of the playability out, leaving only realism. "They took away my greatest strength, which was upsetting to me."

Though CD-ROMs have been gaining ground, a majority of players still prefer the board and cards. The board game is superior for head-to-head competition, and people like to throw the dice, Richman says. With the advent of computer games, Richman also must compete with billion-dollar companies like **Electronic Arts** (nasdaq: ERTS).

The Internet provides a new challenge. The seven-employee company has a rudimentary Web site, through which it gets the bulk of its orders. Most of the rest come by phone and mail as the company sells just 10% of its product though retailers.

Next year Strat-o-matic expects to have a version of the game that can be played on the Internet, which it will offer in partnership with **Stats**, a Chicago company that also provides Strat-o-matic with box scores and statistics.

In no version of the game can Strat-o-matic compete with the graphical qualities of Electronic Arts or **Sony** (nyse: SNE). Also, the Strat-o-matic game is largely text based. This aspect is more of a detriment for football, a highly visual game, than for baseball, which emphasizes statistics. "We appeal to lovers of realism and people who want a quick game," Richman says.

Over the years, boys who grew up playing Strat-o-matic have gone on to invent their own games. **Trip Hawkins**, founder of Electronic Arts and more recently **3DO** (nasdaq: THDO), played the game, as did **Mark Jacobstein**, CEO of online games maker Smallworld. **Bob Costas** and **Spike Lee** played it too, Richman says. During the

1981 baseball strike, newspapers played Strat-o-matic games instead of real ones and reported the results. The game can be used to settle bets, like which team is the best ever.

Hawkins, for one, says he learned Bayesian probability as a teenager by studying the game. To this day, he remains "addicted," orders the cards the moment they are available and competes in a league he's belonged to for 20 years. Hawkins says that "it validated the feeling that play is the best way to learn."

While Richman has entered the computer age, he still reinvents the game the old-fashioned way. Come Oct. 15, you will find him in his barely finished office, off to the side of a warehouse by the Long Island Railroad station. There he will work 75-hour weeks, poring over statistics laid out on a card table, preparing the new cards for the January rush.

He remains excited by the business and sees growth through a new computer football game and exposure on the Internet. He has no plans to retire and notes that his father lived to 100.

After racking his brains on baseball players--how they hit as lefties, their fielding stats and their ability to take an extra base--does Richman still enjoy the game?

Yes, he insists, though he no longer watches it much. "When it's your business, you want to get away from it," he says. "And if I turn on a game, my wife says, 'enough already.'"

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