

# Strat-O-Matic hits seeing-eye double in digital version

It became an annual rite of my boyhood. Each spring, I'd anticipate the arrival of a package from a Long Island company called Strat-O-Matic, makers of a classic dice-based baseball simulation board game. Inside the mailing was the newly minted set of cards representing the real-life statistics of most every player to don a uniform the prior season.

I was a Strat-O-Matic Baseball rookie in 1969, and on many an afternoon and evening from then on (often when I should have been doing homework) I tested my prowess as a big-league manager.

I kept a Strat-O-Matic well past my college years, until the responsibilities of adulthood finally intruded on this particular passion.

Apparently I was not the only Strat-O-Matic addict. On the day that a fresh copy of the baseball game showed up in my office, USA TODAY's Wall Street reporter happened to notice: "Strat-O-Matic! Cool," he said. Our book critic also admitted to being a Strat-O-Matic junkie, as did our resident wine and dining expert.

As you might expect, the roster of devotees includes sports and other celebrities, notably Drew Carey, Spike Lee, Tim Robbins, Bob Costas and Marv Albert.

## The 40th season

This year marks the 40th anniversary season of Strat-O-Matic Baseball and, as with other board-game mainstays, Strat-O-Matic now also plays on digital fields.

The company teamed up recently with SportingNews.com in an online simulation (\$24.95 to replay one team's entire 162-game schedule), and has unveiled an improved version of the baseball CD-ROM, with free Internet play and WebBuilder tools — to show off your eagle in cyberspace.

Having retired my dice long ago,

## Personal tech

By Edward C. Baig

## The bottom line

**Strat-O-Matic Baseball** (★★★½ out of four for the CD-ROM game, ★★★★★ for the 40th-anniversary board game; \$49.95 to \$72.95 for the CD-ROM, depending on player card and card image options; \$39 for the board game; [www.strat-o-matic.com](http://www.strat-o-matic.com))

**Pro:** Classic board game statistical simulation adapts well to the computer.

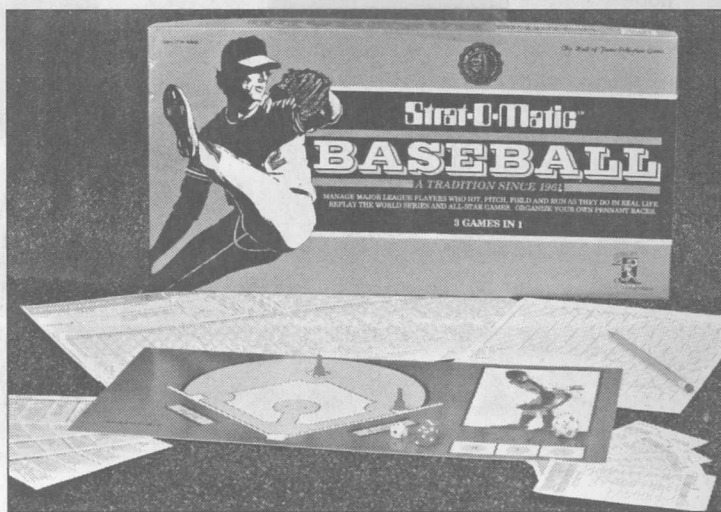
**Con:** Lacks spiffy graphics. Buggy. Poor tech support.

I thought it would be a sterling opportunity to reacquire myself with Strat-O-Matic and to see how the computer version stacks up against my low-tech memories.

I had doubts. The software renditions of great board games — Monopoly and Scrabble come to mind — are generally not as much fun as their predecessors. Most computer games tend to be less social, too, though to be honest, I typically played the Strat-O-Matic board game solitaire. In any case, those of us who appreciated Strat-O-Matic for its ease of play and statistical realism would demand software that preserves the look and feel of the original game while piling on graphics and features.

So it should not be read here as a major criticism of the CD-ROM when I say that the board game prevails. Put in baseball terms, though the software version laces a solid double to the outfield gap, the original game goes yard.

To understand the Strat-O-Matic CD-ROM is to understand how the first incarnation plays. The basic



**Play ball, virtually:** Beloved baseball board game Strat-O-Matic is celebrating its 40th anniversary with an updated computer version.

board game is deceptively simple. Three six-sided dice, one white and two red, are rolled simultaneously, with the white die read separately from the other two. So if you roll a white 2 and a red 4 and 5, the result is 2-9. A white die roll of 1, 2, or 3 corresponds to columns only found on an individual batter's card, while 4, 5, and 6 refer to columns on a pitcher card.

You then cross-reference the sum of the red dice with the appropriate line in the hitter or pitcher's column and the outcome of the play — hit, walk, strikeout, fly ball, etc. — will be revealed. A 20-sided die and fielding charts based on players' defensive abilities determine more complex outcomes.

## Rolling the virtual dice

On a computer, the dice rolls are simulated, of course, and one immediate benefit of playing with balls, bats and bytes is the ability to print box scores and scoresheets and compile the statistics I used to do by hand. Almost every imaginable baseball statistical report can be generated, with league leaders in bold type, just as they're displayed in your local newspaper. True stat nerds can import data to an Excel spreadsheet.

The deluxe board game fetches \$39. A Strat-O-Matic Baseball CD-ROM costs \$49.95, with extra charges if you want to see the classic player cards on the screen, or desire the actual cards. With op-

tional feature sets, you can pit old-timers against modern athletes. Most past-season disks cost \$20. And a limited-edition Hall of Fame set, available for the board game (\$39.95) and computer (\$20), sports individual cards based on the best seven seasons for every Cooperstown inductee, plus non-members Carl Mays, Shoeless Joe Jackson and Pete Rose.

At the start of a computer game, you choose the teams, rosters and batting order, or have the computer make recommendations. *The Star-Spangled Banner* (or *O Canada*) is played, and you're ready for the first pitch (or dice click). You can play against the computer, find a Strat-O pal on the Internet, or manage both squads. You decide when to pinch hit or change pitchers, all with drag-and-drop ease.

You also choose when to play the infield in, steal a base, or challenge an outfielder's throwing arm. A complete nine-inning computer game takes roughly 20 minutes, about the same as the board game.

## Checking out the stats

If you're so inclined, you can have the PC automatically play out an entire season and give you the results — part of the fun is in measuring the accuracy of the card-weightings and statistics. Replaying the 2001 schedule for every team took a mere 15 minutes or so.

Many of last year's statistical outcomes were realistic, but there

were certain aberrations. The Colorado Rockies snagged the NL West title by winning 19 more games in the Strat-O league than they did in real life; the real-deal World Series champion Arizona Diamondbacks failed to qualify for the playoffs, though their overall record of 91 wins was just one fewer than they actually accomplished on the field. As he did in real life, Barry Bonds won the home-run crown, but his 67 dinners fell six shy of the major league record he established last year.

## **A multimedia throwback**

In many respects, the CD-ROM feels like a throwback to the early days of computer games. To say that Strat-O-Matic lacks the spiffy graphics and multimedia effects found in other sports software is to

game scroll as lines of text. The playing field is a stationary black-and-white or (for an excessive \$28 extra) color photo of the stadium in which the game is being played; day and night shots are included.

You see a quick animation of the swinging batter and the flight of the ball when it is hit. To install certain teams, I had to visit the MS-DOS prompt for the first time since I migrated to Windows XP.

Worse, I did encounter a few mysterious errors, though none of the bugs proved serious. Alas, the tech-support staff spends more time on the bench than they ought to: support is only available by phone Monday to Friday, between 8:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. ET.

But tech support never even enters my mind while I'm playing a good old-fashioned board game.

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