

## GAME THEORY

## Strat-O-Matic Is Baseball by the Numbers

By PETER OLAFSON

THE manager in "Bull Durham" who declared "baseball is a simple game" never had to keep the books. Strat-O-Matic CD-ROM Baseball offers a fascinating window into the information-rich world of the baseball manager and the subtle, but enduring, satisfactions of statistics.

Strat-O-Matic Baseball is based on the classic Strat-O-Matic game played with cards and dice. Using data from past baseball seasons (this version has the 1999 statistics, but statistics from each of the last 100 baseball seasons are available), you draft players and give them positions in the lineup or starting rotation. You cannot simply draft an All-Star team, because you are competing against other, computer-generated managers.

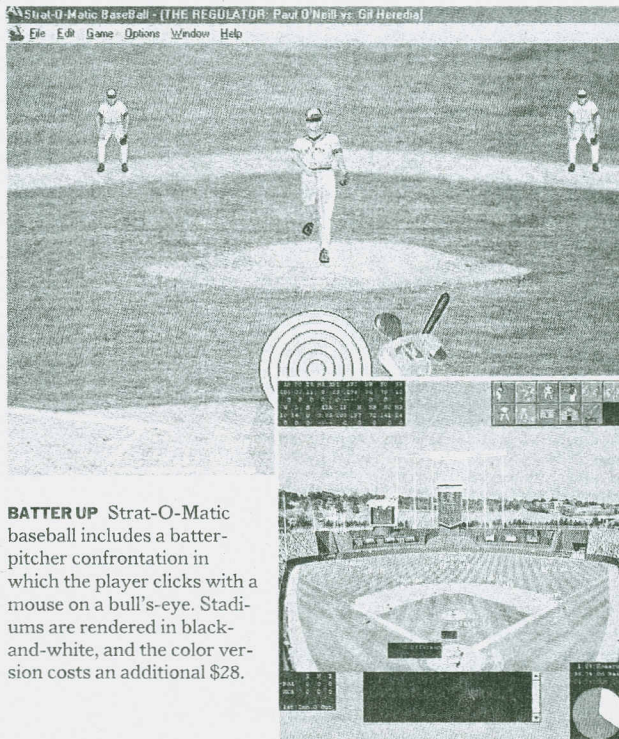
You assign as many as 16 tendencies per player. Give that inconsistent starter the quick hook. Bump up the hit-and-run attempts for your most reliable hitter. And then they're off. The games are played out either automatically, at a daunting speed, or play-by-play, with the player making decisions like stealing a base, adjusting the outfield or delivering an intentional walk before each at-bat. The results, reported in charmingly detailed text, reflect both the players' historical statistics and the tendencies they receive from their Strat-O-Matic managers.

Visually, the games don't compete with slicker products like Triple Play 2001 by Electronic Arts or Microsoft Baseball 2001. The players' names

### An old favorite moves from the table top to the desktop.

are superimposed on generic-looking players against a black-and-white stadium background. The only on-screen action is the animated path of the ball.

But the game resonates with echoes of real baseball. You are not simply following the dead hand of history: merely replicating the statistics of real-life players would not be much fun, after all, and changes in the variables can have a significant impact on how a player performs. Adjusting the variables of any player's statistics can drastically alter his season. For instance, could a Mark McGwire or a Sammy Sosa hit



**BATTERUP** Strat-O-Matic baseball includes a batter-pitcher confrontation in which the player clicks with a mouse on a bull's-eye. Stadiums are rendered in black-and-white, and the color version costs an additional \$28.

80 homers playing half his games in the thin air of Denver? Would Kenny Loften be able to steal against a team stacked with power pitchers? Could Pedro Martinez or Randy Johnson break the single-season record for strikeouts if his manager gave him less rest or left him in games longer?

Even a straight historical replay of the 1999 season found the World Series champion Yankees edged out for the division title by third-place Toronto and losing the wild card slot in a tiebreaker with Boston.

To be sure, Strat-O-Matic's opening screen looks like the first page of a database (not surprising, since organizing data is a significant part of the game) and the game itself is spartan. Color stadium backgrounds cost another \$28. The game does include an option for a batter-pitcher confrontation in which the player does not actually swing the bat or pitch the ball. Rather, you have to time a well-positioned mouse click on an on-screen bull's-eye.

But Strat-O-Matic has a breadth and depth I have not experienced in other baseball games. The team is distinctly my team, the results are

distinctly my results, and the level of control of that team and the displays of those results are nothing less than mind-boggling.

In a recent season, my Boston-based team was anchored on the sluggers Luis Gonzalez and Mike Sweeney, and included Billy Wagner as my closer. How did we fare in extra-inning games in May? How did Wagner perform against left-handed hitters at night? Strat-O-Matic knows. Double-click on a player's name on the main screen to summon a table that contains his performance in every simulated game. A Strat-O-Matic team has lots of room for its owner's fingerprints, and lots of feedback to indicate whether they are on the right buttons.

The uninitiated may see the results simply as columns of numbers, ranging from sports-section standards like batting and earned-run average to obscurities like isolated power. They would be right, but after a 162-game season of tweaks, experiments, promotions and demotions, I cannot bring myself to feel cool and calculating. I feel like the people who line up at Strat-O-Matic's headquarters in Glen Head, N.Y., every year to

collect the new cards for the tabletop game. I can pore over the statistics for hours, until they begin to signify something more. My players have come to seem like adopted children, their records like report cards, and the post-season, if I have done my job, a kind of graduation. After all, I have chosen them from a field of hundreds in the Draft-O-Matic. I have placed them in the lineup, the pitching rotation and the substitution slots to accentuate their natural gifts and compensate for their defects. And — just to puncture this father analogy — I have traded them ruthlessly and opportunistically in the Swap-O-Matic when they have repeatedly disappointed me.

I suspect the appeal of statistics lies partly in their distinctiveness and partly in their purity. In life, we can know relatively little of other people's hearts and minds, and statistics represent, if not absolute certainty, then at least a refreshing illusion of certainty — that what has been might be again. If action-oriented baseball games live for the fleeting moment of the pitch, the swing and the catch, statistic-oriented ones speak to tendencies: the streak, the slump, a gift for hammering lefties with two on and two out.

It is agreeable to find Strat-O-Matic now also speaking in a non-numeric voice. After each game, the software generates a newspaper-style game report, complete with a description of the key plays, a modest sense of context and even occasional clichéd quotes.

Granted, the computer game Baseball Mogul did that first, but it is delightful to find it here. A peculiar validation springs from reading about events that you have engineered — rather like hearing yourself discussed by passengers on a bus — and it is interesting to see how your games look from the outside. This is a voice I would like to encounter more often between the numbers, and I wonder if the game's publisher could find a way to integrate the vast storehouse of accumulated data into its sports-writing machine to provide a deeper analysis. It would be fun to have the game display pre-playoff matchups or offer predictions.

But I am not complaining. Far from it. My "kids" made the papers today, and I'm one proud papa.

Strat-O-Matic CD Baseball, Version 5.0; published by Strat-O-Matic Game Company; (800) 645-3455; for Windows 3.1, 95 and 98, and Macintosh; from \$31.95 (for upgrade without card images) to \$71.95 (new purchase with card images).