



## Nothing recreates baseball magic like Strat-O-Matic

By Michael W. Michelsen, Jr.

It seems improbable, if not impossible, in today's video game culture that a board game created in 1961 would continue to gather what could best be described as a cult following, but that is exactly the case with that honored game, Strat-O-Matic, now 50 years young and still going strong with fanatics around the world.

The phenomenon, which has hooked a generation of kids (and yes, a fair number of adults) has ignited the fanaticism of millions of sports fans with its ease of play, realism and statistical accuracy.

Members of fan groups that frequently gather by the hundreds in obscure meeting rooms to play include doctors, lawyers, teachers, and many others, often paying hundreds of dollars to participate in days-long world championship matches of Strat-O-Matic baseball. In fact, this past 50 years of the game's history has turned many a sports-crazy kid into adults who now live dreams on the game board.

Strangely, although today's home sports games are dominated by video games, Strat-O-Matic continues to flourish. Hundreds of thousands of fans continue to roll the dice and check the cards of their chosen players as they recreate whole seasons or series or pit storied teams against one another. Even Trip Hawkins, the founder of Electronic Arts, the pre-eminent sports video game maker, still

plays Strat-O-Matic with his friends.

### A passion for realism

Realism and surprisingly, simplicity, account for much of the longevity of Strat-O-Matic. But the competition and camaraderie it breeds, the social lubricant and taunting opportunities it provides, may be just as important.

The godfather of all this is 74-year old Hal Richman, who at 11 and knowing nothing about statistics, but having a gift for numbers, decided that an existing game – like his more popular competitor, All-Star Baseball – lacked verisimilitude, due largely to the spinner modality of determining moves. Richman's solution was to substitute a spinner with dice, which he decided would make for a more accurate game. According to Richman, he rolled dice 5,000 times to create dice tables. Further, he spent much of his time at camp the following summer to create the player statistics cards used in the game.

"Games, especially creating games has always been a retreat for me," Richman explained in an exclusive interview with *Mature Focus*. "My father was a very tough man, very difficult to please. Creating and playing games, whether they were sports games or not, was my refuge."

After several years of using his friends as guinea pigs while he fine-tuned his new game, Richman finally dove into his bar mitzvah savings to create the boards and cards and unveiled the first version of Strat-O-Matic in 1961.

"Not long after that, my mother introduced me to a fellow who was in the toy business, and he was the one who really got me to thinking in a more commercial manner about my games," Richman said. "He urged me to strive for making my games more commercially viable. That was the key."

Throughout the years, the game has remained much the same since its beginning. Each major league



The Founder's Edition game (a re-release of the original game from 1961.)

player is represented by a card, on which his statistics from the previous season are crunched into various rankings and outcomes. A roll of the dice and a check of the batter's or pitcher's card then determines the result of each play.

The game's name came to Richman while shoveling snow in his driveway after riffling through variants of the word "strategy" he had come across while leafing through a dictionary.

### Beginning a legend

Sales in the early years of Strat-O-Matic were not encouraging. In his initial sales effort, Richman

sold 350 games, but lost \$2,500 on his investment. He still had \$500 worth of games and unsold boxes and game parts remaining. Then, in 1963, at age 25, Richman borrowed \$5,000 from his father, who was in the insurance business, and promised that if he could not pay back the money, he would work for him in his business. But giving up was not in Richman's credo, especially in the face of such a threatening prospect.

Fortunately, the popularity of the N.Y. Yankees in the early 1960s helped sales on his second attempt, eventually becoming a bastion of the Strat-O-Matic phenomenon. This second attempt was the charm. Richman, who was by now a college graduate and an accountant for a private company, paid his father back by the end of the summer.

"I worked full time during the day, but at night, that's when I worked on the development of Strat-O-Matic," Richman recalled.

Richman soon thereafter created Strat-O-Matic versions for other sports, including football, basketball, and hockey. This time, people across the country, and practically every walk of life – from Spike Lee to Bryant Gumbel and Dan Patrick to writer Buzz Bissinger – avidly embraced the game. Some were children, others were adults, but all of them loved it, and have played continuously since 1965.

Today, the company produces computer versions of all its board games, but the old-fashioned version of the baseball game remains its biggest seller.

Much like Richman, today's board-game enthusiasts started young, often in junior high school. They spent hours replaying full seasons by themselves. In the leagues they created, they named their team, adopted theme music, even created life-sized wood cutouts of their favorite players to lean against the board. They've even held onto cards that have

suffered indignities such as the urinary wrath of a girlfriend's cat as in the case of Steve Wulf, executive editor of ESPN The Magazine. Even flooding, as was the case with former negro league star Art "Superman" Pennington, whose Cedar Rapids home was nearly destroyed in the 2008 flood, left few memories but all of his Strat-O-Matic intact.

"I've enjoyed Strat for years," Pennington said. "Playing the game with friends brings back such fond memories, and I enjoy the realism, especially when the company brought out the cards for the old negro league. You have to remember that a lot of the guys in that pack were fellows I played with or against."

Pennington relives the old days with Strat-O-Matic, and the time he homered off the great Dizzy Dean when their paths crossed on separate barnstorming tours – about the only chance black players were able to measure themselves against the white stars of the major leagues. And the first time he faced Satchel Paige, issuing his standard warning – "Throw it and duck!" – only to strike out three straight times.

I could hold my own against anybody, except Satch, maybe, and he was the onliest man that made a fool out of me," he recalled. "Strat is pretty much on the mark with the way all of us played."

### **Old-fashioned to its credit**

The repartee, sophisticated or otherwise, that comes during face-to-face play is just one element that contributes to Strat-O-Matic's endurance, that and Richman's single-minded determination to make his game a success, even during troubled times, remaining true to its essence, refusing to go head-to-head with companies like Electronic Arts.

Sports video games generated

more than \$12 billion nationally in sales in 2004, according to NPD Group, a research firm, and Electronic Arts, which is the maker of John Madden's NFL games, accounting for about 63 percent of that total. Madden's football game alone has sold more than 42 million copies since its debut in 1989.

Richman declines to divulge his company's revenues. But weathering baseball strikes and the computer age, a profitable Strat-O-Matic has surpassed the rival APBA games and beat back other competitors, including *Sports Illustrated*. Richman put the total number of Strat-O-Matic games sold over the years in the low millions.

"Strat-O-Matic hasn't made me rich," Richman said, "but it has allowed me to live comfortably. And now that I'm largely retired, I can spend more time or less time on it as I see fit."

The bare bones of Strat-O-Matic's nine person operation in Glen Head, New York, reveals itself in various ways. The graphics of the board game's packaging – nondescript players looking vaguely as if they're in high school – has barely changed over the years.

But what the game lacks in glitz it more than makes up for in realism.

Strat-O-Matic fans echo each other in raving about the simulation of reality. Over the course of a season, a player's performance will parallel closely to his actual statistics. And the game plays quickly and easily.

"That's part of the fun of it," one fan comments.

Indeed.