



Computer Games Put Baseball In a League by Itself



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The boys of summer are unlimbering again and the sap is stirring in those of us who, through some fell quirk of fate, wound up playing with computers instead of baseballs.

All is not lost, however. Baseball, that most statistical of team sports, appears to be the best suited to computerization, for there are some fine baseball games on the market to suit virtually every taste.

They come in two distinct flavors - the arcade type and the statistical.

I looked at two arcade types: Championship Baseball (\$40 list, \$27 retail) from Gamestar (Activision) for IBM and Apple, and Hardball, from Accolade (\$35-\$23) for Apple II and Macintosh. In these games you manipulate your defense, running your fielders around to retrieve the ball and throwing to the proper base, and you control what your pitcher throws; at bat you control your swing and the action of your baserunners. You can play against the computer or a friend.

Hardball offers a third-base view of the action; Championship Baseball presents a split screen: overhead and behind the plate. Both present fictional players and teams, although Championship Baseball has a much more elaborate structure, with a large pool of players who can be drafted for each team, with league play and standings. Hardball gives you two teams, period.

On the Apple II, batting is a little easier in Championship Baseball. I found Hardball on the Apple virtually impossible to play against the computer; it's too good. Hardball is the only baseball game I know of for the Macintosh, however, and it's a very good one on that machine. The computer proves a tough opponent.

There is much more to choose from in the statistical games, and the choices are even harder. I looked at APBA Baseball from Random House (IBM and Apple, \$60 list, \$40 retail) MicroLeague Baseball from MLS, (IBM and Apple, \$40-\$27) Pure-Stat Baseball from Sub-Logic (Apple, \$50-\$33) and Radio Baseball (\$40-\$27) from Electronic Arts (IBM).

In the statistical games, there is only one pitch per batter to speed things up; your contribution is limited, largely, to managerial decisions. The games are based on actual statistics with real players and real teams; box scores of each game can be printed out and statistics are kept; there are random events such as injuries and, if you can credit it, rainouts. There are a great many computer leagues in operation around the country.

MicroLeague Baseball, for IBM and Apple II, is easily the most handsome of these products. The normal screen shows you the field from the upper deck along the third-base line. The players are cute and they move very smoothly. Every play is carried out on the field, while you get an idiomatic radio-announcer description of the action in a box at the top of the screen.

MLB comes with some all-star teams, historic teams like the 1927 Yankees, and so forth. But if you want to set up a league and play out a season, with full stat-keeping, it's going to cost you. The game and the extra disks needed could run over \$100, even at discount prices.

Pure-Stat Baseball competes with MicroLeague on the Apple II. It isn't nearly as handsome or as smooth, but it gives you more for your money. It comes with full statistic and drafting capabilities - they won't cost you extra. And you have more detailed managerial decisions - such as pitch aggressively or pitch around this guy.

APBA Baseball, for IBM and Apple II, is in a league by itself, in several respects. Based on a popular board game of the same name, it has no real graphics; instead it gives you a diamond with the name of each player on a label at his position.

It is fast-moving, though, and very exciting, because the decision-making process extends down several levels below the other games. For instance, you are at bat, two runs behind in the bottom of the ninth; you have runners at first and second and your batter drills a shot down the right field line.

The action begins; one run scores, your baserunner from first will make third easily. Then everything stops and you must decide whether to send him home or hold him at third. When that decision is made, the defender must decide whether to throw to the cutoff man or try to nail the runner at home - and the computer won't give you all day to scratch your head, either.

The lack of MLB's handsome graphics would not, in the long run, make much difference, but APBA Baseball has one bizarre drawback: it is the only one of these games in

which you cannot play the computer. You either play a friend or you play both sides.

Radio Baseball dispenses with graphics; you get a detailed play-by-play printed out on the screen. But the narration doesn't have the flair of MLB, and it runs at a sluggish pace. The game comes with a collection of teams and all-stars similar to that of MLB, but no other player disks are available. It is a well-thought-out and highly playable game, but it lacks the excitement of MLB or APBA.

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