

LAUNCH NO. 28

Temple Of Twitch, Game Reviews

High Heat Baseball 2000

(3DO)

SYSTEM: PC

By Jeff Kitts

With the 1999 MLB season now in full "swing," gamers can choose from a seemingly infinite number of baseball titles on the market. Making the right selection certainly isn't easy, as baseball games vary tremendously from arcade-style home run fests to more demanding and complicated simulations. Every so often, however, a baseball game emerges that strikes an appropriate balance between bat-crackin' arcade action and hardcore sim. Enter 3DO's new *High Heat Baseball 2000*.

Stat freaks and detail-minded gamers will relish the game's attention to numbers and customizable options. Each team's roster list comes complete with not only a thorough rundown of each player's 1998 stats, but also their full career stats. Want to know how many dingers Sandy Alomar has hit in his career? No sweat. Similarly, upon completion of a 20-pitch Home Run Derby, you can pull up the full stats of the *mano-a-mano* batting duel: each pitch and the distance the ball traveled and whether or not it made it over the wall. The same goes for the end of a regular game; full stats, right down to the most minute detail.

Gamers who like to futz with options will find much about *High Heat Baseball 2000* to tinker with. Using a full screen's worth of buttons, players can customize many of the game's attributes, including errors, wind, designated hitter, game pace, bullpen pitcher warmup, auto fielding, and baserunning settings. Players also can manipulate the difficulty level, camera views, managerial modes, and audio/video preferences. The command interface for tweaking the options is easy to navigate; even altering a team's roster is a breeze when using the intuitive drag-and-drop system.

On the field (in one of 38 fully rendered stadiums, including the old Ebbets Field and Polo Grounds, two minor league parks and four newly created stadiums), *High Heat* offers everything a fan could ask for in a baseball game. Again, players are given complete and total control over every aspect of the game: aside from all the basics (hitting, bunting, stealing, etc.), the game lets you throw

bean balls, shift your defensive assignments, attempt suicide squeeze plays, or even try the ol' "butcher boy" fake bunt. A total of nine different pitches are available, though most hurlers only have three or four specialty pitches at their disposal. Gameplay is fast and nicely unpredictable (as you'll see when your third baseman bobbles an easy grounder in a clutch situation and blows the game). Control is very natural, with only a few buttons handling most of the game's actions (perfectly suited for the Microsoft Sidewinder or Gravis gamepads).

Off the field, *High Heat Baseball* is a wannabe manager's virtual paradise. Throughout a season (or career), you can develop minor league players (in A, AA, and AAA leagues), trade players, sign free agents, check league news (trades, injuries, and general news), and even create players to your exact specs (batting style, baserunning speed, infield range, age, and even facial hair).

High Heat Baseball has a lot going for it, though some annoyances keep it from being perfect. For example, fielders tend to throw high-arc "rainbows," often allowing runners to steal an extra base; computer-controlled pitchers make far too many pickoff moves; and you can't change the position of the batter in the box. Also, the commentary from announcer Ted Robinson is rather bland and could use some help from a color man. But these are somewhat minor grievances against a game that performs so well in so many other areas.

BALDUR'S GATE

(Interplay)

SYSTEM: PC

It had been one of the most hotly anticipated RPGs in recent memory, and now that it's finally arrived, *Baldur's Gate* more than lives up to discerning gamers' grandiose expectations. Spanning a whopping five CDs and boasting over 10,000 scrolling screens, *Baldur's Gate* is a mammoth adventure set in the popular Forgotten Realms Advanced Dungeons & Dragons campaign setting. The scene opens on the city of Baldur's Gate, which is besieged by economic strife and violence. The local leaders blame neighboring Amn as the nation responsible for Baldur's troubles. The two nations are on the brink of war, and the player is thrust into the middle of the conflict.

Baldur's Gate is mostly a typical RPG--the interface is of the standard point-and-click variety with wicked spells to cast, creatures to fight, people to talk to, and items to collect and use. But that's where *Baldur's Gate* stops being a typical RPG and becomes one of the biggest, deepest, most

engaging adventure games to date. *Baldur's Gate* utilizes a real-time modification of the AD&D rules system and can be made to play in a turn-based fashion. You manipulate a party of six unique characters; control them one at a time or as a group. The game sports a non-linear storyline that ties into the region's history, gods, natural resources, and politics. In terms of its appearance, *Baldur's Gate* (using a top-down isometric view) is rife with detail, full-color lighting effects, daylight shifts, and weather effects like rain, snow, fog, and lightning, all occurring in real time. For RPG fans, particularly those familiar with the AD&D Forgotten Realms campaign setting, *Baldur's Gate* is everything gamers had hoped it would be.--*Jeff Kitts*

SILENT HILL

(Konami)

SYSTEM: PlayStation

There's been quite a bit of talk about this one lately, but frankly, the hype is unjustified. A 3D walk-and-explore adventure in the vein of *Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill* is a decent effort, but simply can't compete with Capcom's groundbreaking series.

Henry Mason and his daughter Cheryl are en route to the sleepy town of Silent Hill for a vacation. As they approach the outskirts of the desolate town, Henry's car is forced off the road and into a gully. Knocked unconscious, Henry awakens to find that Cheryl has disappeared. Now, you must find clues regarding her whereabouts, solve puzzles, pick up items, and use assorted weapons to fight off winged creatures and maniac dogs. It's not very original, and not very well done, either. Control is awkward and the spinning camera is disorienting; the graphics are bland and blocky and the gameplay is not engaging. Much of your time, at least in the early going, is spent aimlessly wandering and toggling between the town streets and the map screen (very annoying) while defending against the hordes of enemies. In a word, it's boring. *Silent Hill* promises five different endings--but it's debatable whether or not you'll want to reach even one.--*Jeff Kitts*

ROLLCAGE

(Psygnosis)

SYSTEM: PC, PlayStation

Futuristic combat auto racing with high-velocity vehicles on corkscrew tracks: Pardon the pun, but we've all been down this road before. So what's different about this new

Psygnosis entry? Not a whole lot on a conceptual level, although *Rollcage* does offer a wee bit more in terms of pure adrenaline-pumping racing action than the average speed-shooter.

For starters, *Rollcage* thrives on diabolically quick racing; action so fast it'll take your breath away. These little futuristic, indestructible dune-buggy-like cars are incredible--pure four-wheeled lightning. Crash through buildings, drive along walls or upside down on ceilings in tunnels; whatever the task at hand, these cars can handle it, all while achieving simulated speeds in excess of 450 kph (have a barf bag handy if you dare attempt it in first-person mode). As you can imagine, controlling a vehicle traveling at supersonic speeds upside down on the ceiling is no easy feat, and you'll often find yourself completely disoriented after a particularly nasty end-over-end spill.

Graphically, *Rollcage* is somewhat less refined looking than many other racer games, and the environments have a tendency to be overly dark. (This is unnecessarily problematic for drivers racing at 450 kph.)

While not original by any stretch, *Rollcage* is still a tremendously exhilarating expansion on an old theme.--*Jeff Kitts*

SYPHON FILTER

(989 Studios)

SYSTEM: PlayStation

Hot on the heels of Konami's commercially successful and critically acclaimed *Metal Gear Solid* comes 989's *Syphon Filter*, a similar 3D action-adventure title in which you must use stealth maneuvering and expert marksmanship (via various sniper views) to succeed. As Special Agent Gabriel Logan, you're thrust into a secretive military world where an act of biological terrorism threatens all mankind; your mission is to stop the organization producing the deadly virus. Gameplay is of the *Resident Evil* or *Duke Nukem* third-person variety, and the 3D environments are large and unpredictable (a sudden blast can not only kill Logan, but scare the gamer silly). Despite its rather cumbersome name, *Syphon Filter* is a first-rate effort aimed at those who appreciate a smart, lengthy, combat-heavy adventure.--*Jeff Kitts*

NEED FOR SPEED: HIGH STAKES

(Electronic Arts)

SYSTEM: PC, Playstation

It seems like Electronic Arts' *Need For Speed* series has been ruling the racing world forever, and the new *High Stakes*--the sixth installment in the series--just might be the finest of the lot.

Picking up where *Hot Pursuit*, the previous *NFS* edition, left off, *High Stakes* is a magnificent achievement that combines the classiest elements of traditional auto racing with the heart-pumping drama of the chase; hence the *High Pursuit* portion of the game. In fact, there isn't a single racing game around that can match *High Stakes*' brilliant Hot Pursuit mode. Just pick your ride (Corvettes, BMWs, etc.), hit the pavement on one of the long, winding courses, and get ready to dodge the countless cop cars that'll do anything to impede your progress--including ramming you head-on, setting up road blocks, and laying down spike strips. When you tire of being hunted, *High Stakes* even lets you play the hunter. Climb behind the wheel of your own police cruiser, flip on the lights and siren, and start chasing down speeders. It's a royal thrill, to be sure--but not nearly as exciting as evading the law.

But *Need For Speed: High Stakes* doesn't stop there. In addition to Hot Pursuit mode, there is a Tournament mode, a Test Drive mode, various multiplayer modes, and numerous Special Events. And if you think the different modes offer plenty of variety, try driving each course in inclement weather, with or without local traffic, at night or in the day, or even backwards. The list of options and combinations is endless.

Analog control is spectacular (as are the discrete vibration effects), graphics are gorgeous, and the sound effects (particularly when fed through a surround sound system) are breathtaking. Courses are brilliantly designed and a pleasure to navigate, even when being chased by cops at 200 kph. You can hurl superlatives at this game until the cows come home, but you won't do it justice. See for yourself: *Need For Speed: High Stakes* is a racing masterwork.--Jeff Kitts

RUSHDOWN

(Electronic Arts)

SYSTEM: PlayStation

If downhill racing of any kind is your bag, one all-inclusive title that features mountain biking, kayaking, and snowboarding would seem ideal. However, while Electronic Arts deserves some praise for giving this unique concept a try, the result, *Rushdown*, could be the most miserable

failure in modern gaming history--a strong candidate for the all-time worst racing game.

The list of inexcusably bad attributes is endless: wretched controls, dinky crashes, and annoyingly narrow snow, dirt, and water courses littered with trees and boulders are just a few complaints. Meanwhile, the flat 2D graphics (with terrible background draw-in problems) resemble those of the pathetic Sega Genesis 32X add-on system from a few years back (another miserable failure, mind you). Hell, even the vibration effects when using a compatible gamepad suck.

Just get past the game's excessive inadequacies and you can bike, kayak, and snowboard your way down courses in five locations: Europe, South America, North America, Southeast Asia, and Africa (yes, snowboarding in Africa, believe it or not). Of course, you won't be able to race on a given course until you complete the previous level, which ultimately could be the game's only strong point. The less you see of *Rushdown*, the better.--Jeff Kitts