

Title:	Microsoft Baseball 2000
Developed by:	Wizbang! Software Productions (http://www.wizbang.com)
Published by:	Microsoft (http://www.microsoft.com)
Reviewed By:	Tim Maxwell
Official Site:	(http://www.microsoft.com/sports/baseball2000/)
Overview:	Microsoft's newest baseball simulation is doomed by a serious lack of innovation and realism.
Genre:	Baseball Simulation
System Requirements:	Multimedia PC with a Pentium 133/50 MMX or higher processor. Microsoft Windows 95 or Windows 98 operating system. 32MB of RAM Quad speed or faster CD-ROM drive. Microsoft Mouse or compatible pointing device. Super VGA, 16 Bit Color Monitor. Windows95 compatible sound board Speakers or headphones required for audio.
Supports:	Baseball 2000 supports force-feedback hardware compatible with Microsoft DirectInput API, as well as AGP technology.
ESRB Rating:	Everyone
The Good Press:	Exquisite graphics, incredible on-field ambience.
The Bad Press:	Sparse improvements over last year's game, uninspired pitcher/batter interface, annoyingly-long load times and transitions.
Ratings:	Graphics: 9/10 Sound: 7/10 Getting Started: 6/10 Documentation: 4/10 Value: 4/10
Tips:	When at-bat, resist the urge to turn off the pitch location cursor. It is nearly impossible to identify the location of the pitch without it. With a good lead and decent speed, stealing bases can be accomplished rather easily due to the pitcher's long wind-up animation.

The way I see it, there are two types of sports gamers out there: the arcade fans and the stat freaks. While I'll take realism over glitz and glamour any day, I'm always willing to give an arcade game a fair shake if it offers a good time. That brings us to *Microsoft Baseball 2000*; the patch...er...sequel to last year's mediocre effort. And after agonizing through a few dozen games, I've decided that Microsoft should stick to operating systems and business suites.

Getting started in *Baseball 2000* is easy enough. Once the installation is complete, you're greeted with a standard game-selection menu. Here, you can select whether you want to play a single exhibition game, a full season, a playoff series, participate in a homerun derby, or play one of the games on today's docket. I didn't have any trouble navigating through these screens and I was ready for action in no time.

Since *Baseball 2000* doesn't come with an instruction manual, it might take you a bit of luck to realize that advanced roster management is not handled in-game. Instead, within the game's program group, you'll find access to a handy little feature called the General Manager. Once you've stumbled upon the General Manager, you'll realize that there is quite a bit of tinkering to be done in *Baseball 2000*. Besides the ability to change your pitching rotation and create players, you can edit the ratings of any of the real Major Leaguer's in the game. Let's say that Mark McGwire's power numbers aren't quite up to your expectations. With a quick adjustment, you can increase his hitting power and he'll be rocketing 'em out of the yard every other pitch. To be fair, all of this comes at the expense of other ratings such as speed and throwing ability, but none of that matters anyway. More on that later.

If you're satisfied with your rosters, it is time to strap on the cleats and take the field. Soon thereafter, you'll quickly be treated to an impressive array of eye candy. At the beginning of each game, the home team takes the field and this gives you an opportunity to check out the stadium graphics. For the most part, the stadiums are accurately portrayed although some of city backdrops could use a bit more detail. The players themselves look stunning; boasting real, texture-mapped faces and are generally scaled to the correct height and weight. Some of the heavier players tend to look a bit pudgier than they really are, but at least some sort of distinction was made (unlike in *High Heat Baseball 2000*). The field itself is as realistic as it gets as well. Visually, I can't find much to complain about in *Baseball 2000*.

On the sound side, *Baseball 2000* offers unmistakable ambience. The crowd sounds absolutely superb. Fans react realistically to every pitch whether a ball or strike and vendors wander the stands selling their wares. Hecklers are also quite prevalent and never hesitate to voice their opinion of your performance. These sound effects, combined with a decent sound card and some nice speakers offer a ballpark experience unmatched by any other game. Arizona Diamondbacks play-by-play man Thom Brennaman is the man in the broadcast booth and although he stutters quite a bit, he gets the job done adequately. Other stadium sounds such as the crack of the bat and the umpires aren't awe-inspiring, but certainly nothing to complain about.

Unfortunately, things really start falling apart for *Baseball 2000* once you get out and start playing the game. Anyone who played last year's game will tell you that the difference between the two isn't all that significant. The pitcher/batter interface, undoubtedly the most important aspect of baseball, is sadly the same as last year. Basically, the pitcher aims the pitch using a circular cursor and the batter aims his swing using a box (which gets smaller whether you've chosen a contact, normal or power swing) with a crosshair. This setup is acceptable, although unnecessary and unrealistic. Obviously, a real player wouldn't know the location of the pitch before it is thrown. *High Heat Baseball 2000* has no such aiming mechanism yet offers the best pitcher/batter interface out there. Another flaw with this configuration appears in the fact that there is little difficulty getting your pitch where you want it to go. Walks are a definite rarity and contact on the first pitch is the norm.

One thing that Microsoft and Wizbang! has improved this year is the control of the fielders. The atrocious camera angles that shifted when you fielded the ball last year have been reworked and no longer disorient the player. Despite this important fix, all the players are still created equal. What I mean by this is that everyone seems to have cannon throwing arms and similar running ability. As you might guess, this makes for very few extra-base hits and, like many other flawed games, it is difficult to score from second on a base hit. As a result, most of the runs scored are as a result of homeruns.

These shortcomings combined with the complete lack of any managerial mode further substantiate the fact that this game is an arcade game through and through. As an arcade game, however, *Baseball 2000* seems to have a bit of an identity crisis. An identifiable part of any arcade sports game is that the action is generally fast, furious and action-packed. This is hardly the case with *Baseball 2000*. In fact, you'll be hard-pressed to complete a full, nine-inning game in under an hour. The game is filled with useless

between-pitch transitions that are meant to add to the atmosphere, but ultimately slow the game to a crawl. Thankfully, you can skip through most of them with a button click, but some, such as tossing the ball around the horn after a strike out can't be bypassed. I would be able to forgive this minor quibble easily if it didn't take so darn long for the pitcher to release each pitch. You have roughly enough time to run to the kitchen and make a sandwich in the time it takes the pitcher to release his next offering.

When it comes to artificial intelligence and realism, little to none can be found in *Baseball 2000*. Computer managers have a habit of pinch-hitting for their catchers early in games and leaving starting pitchers in the game although they're being shelled (or taking them out when they're pitching brilliantly). Base-running blunders abound and there is no need to warm up a reliever before inserting him into the lineup. Lapses of realism such as these are quite abundant and prove that Microsoft and Wizbang! made little effort to improve upon last year's game.

Overall, *Baseball 2000* is essentially last year's game with a minor patch installed. Microsoft had promised a patch for the original game, but the idea was later scrapped and work had begun on the new game. Quite simply, the few changes made were not significant enough to warrant the purchase of this game. It should be noted that this game carries a retail price of only \$19.99, but I'd spend an extra \$10 and get much more enjoyment out of *High Heat Baseball 2000* any day.