

Triple Play 2000 Review

Final Score : 68%

The Basics

Spring has finally arrived and with the melting snow and budding plants comes another exciting season of America's favorite past time: baseball. This year, EA sports jumped out of the gates first with the new edition of their popular baseball series, Triple Play 2000. Has EA improved upon last year's mediocre effort enough to remain a top contender? Or will this be the year that EA is finally dethroned as the leader in the sales race?

Graphics

If there are any aspects of EA Sports' game lineup that don't warrant any criticism, it would definitely be the graphics. TP2000 continues this winning tradition with accurately-rendered stadiums, realistically-scaled players and all the interface eye candy you've come to expect. But while such innovations as real player faces and animated crowds have greatly improved the atmosphere in EA's other sports titles, there are no noticeable changes that really make it stand out this year. Player detail hasn't changed much, and with the exception of animated flags and other little nuances (such as running waterfalls in Kansas City), neither have the stadiums. This is not to say that the graphics are poor, but basically, if you saw last year's game, you've seen TP2000.

Gameplay

Although sales figures didn't let on, Triple Play 99 was, as most baseball enthusiasts would attest to, completely outdone by a little-known developer called Team .366 and their sleeper hit *High Heat Baseball '99*. Faced with something unfamiliar to them, competition, EA now attempts to improve upon last year's mediocre effort enough to put the series back among the elite.

Perhaps in an effort to stand out from the other baseball games on the market, EA has elected to scrap most of the simulation aspects of TP2000 and rely solely on arcade play. The Triple Play series has never really been known for simulation, but such features as career mode and manage-only mode may have been enough in previous years to win over the stat-freaks. This year, the limited career mode is still around, but the manage-only mode has been removed. According to EA, the mode was removed in order to spend more time perfecting the new Internet play option.

Most of TP99's shortcomings have been addressed with mixed results in this year's version. It is finally possible to get an extra-base hit – a fundamental that was noticeably absent previously. Also, camera management has been reworked to allow easier fielding, and the framerate has been jacked up to an acceptable level. These improvements combined with a better-than-ever “TV-style” appearance really make you feel like you're at the ballpark. Further proof of the movement to arcade action can be found with the

new “bigger sweet spot” feature which turns last year’s homerun-happy effort into a veritable slugfest every game. All of these new features are sure to please any arcade baseball fanatic.

Unfortunately, this movement to arcade play really detracts on what makes baseball such a wonderful sport. For example, 90% of all pitches thrown are strikes and therefore most at-bats are over in one pitch. There’s no sense trying to nibble the corners as the pitcher either – the computer very rarely swings at anything out of the strike zone. The great thing about *High Heat* was the spectacular pitcher-batter interface. The absolute complete absence of this confrontation really drags this one down. On top of all that, it doesn’t really matter if you’re pitching as Randy Johnson or your Uncle Mel because the pitches are all relatively the same – the only difference being an occasional speed difference.

Other chinks in the already-battered armor include the fact that the action still takes place too fast – despite the ability to adjust the speed. You fire a pitch over the middle, the batter hits it, and it’s through the infield and in to center before you have time to blink. Potential double-play balls shoot through the infield as a result and frustration builds. Then, when your team is lucky enough to get a few players on base, they’re often erased on line-drive double or triple plays. Base runners display a complete lack of common sense as they stand ten feet from the base as a sharp liner is snagged by the shortstop. By the time they react, it’s too late. The defense, complete with infamous cannons for arms, has plenty of time to fire it around the horn before your base runners have time to as much as adjust their jock straps. This oddity results in an unscrupulous amount of triple plays. I guess that’s where the name of the game comes from.

Even potentially positive additions turn into blunders in this game. Take the difficulty levels for example. On rookie or pro settings, seemingly one in three batters will hit a homerun. Ten games into a season as the Rockies, Larry Walker had 13 dingers and a whopping 15 RBIs. Now that’s production! Crank the difficulty up above pro however, and, all of a sudden, your team is literally stymied. What would be a towering homerun on pro or rookie now becomes a harmless pop fly on the infield. On the other hand, the computer seemingly doesn’t have any trouble cranking them out of the yard. There are many other difficulty sliders to fiddle with to balance things out, but it seems impossible to find a happy medium.

Sound

EA’s dynamic duo of Jim Hughson and ESPN’s Buck Martinez are back to call the game and for the most part, do an adequate job. EA has worked hard to keep the dialogue up with the game and the results are noticeable. You won’t be two outs into the next inning by the time Hughson gets done telling you the score this year. Much of the dialogue is the same as last year and while I’ve always enjoyed Hughson, I think Martinez’s commentary is pointless and over-used. I’m sorry, but a routine pop-up will not be a “real shot in the arm for the ball club.” The two work together well, but most of what Martinez has to say would never actually be said in a real broadcast.

Other sound effects are exaggerated in a way you'd expect from an arcade baseball game. For example, if you really get a hold of one and your speaker setup includes a powerful subwoofer, you're in for a treat – talk about a big bang! Stadium chatter and applause sounds as it should, and the various ditties that play from time to time add to the overall atmosphere.

Bugs and Performance

As stated earlier, the game now runs pretty well thanks to a framerate boost. On my PII 450 with dual Voodoo2 cards, the game ran silky smooth at any resolution I could throw at it. I didn't come across any particular bugs in programming.

Final Thought

Whether or not I recommend this game depends solely on what type of game you're looking for. If you crave a solid game of realistic baseball, look elsewhere – this game isn't even worth a look. If you're looking for an arcade slugfest, set it up on the rookie difficulty and swing for the fences. Just remember, it's still early in the season – you might find something that fulfills your need for realism and arcade action in the same game.