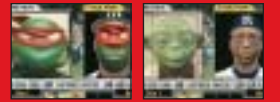


I don't care if I never get back.

REMEMBER WHEN?
EA Sports has come a long way since *MLBPA Baseball* (1994, Genesis/Super NES), its first baseball game.



Maybe you don't want to see yourself in *MLB 2005*. But have some fun with the EyeToy feature anyway, using a good action figure or photograph. Like these...



MVP BASEBALL 2004
You can even relive your favorite cinematic moments "Nobody seems to know what to get Millie or Jimmy for their wedding present."
"OK, well, uh...candlesticks always make a nice gift."

With four simulation-focused baseball videogames now available (farewell, *High Heat*), no single PS2 sports genre faces more competition than America's pastime. Fortunately, they're all ready for the Show. But between EA's *MVP Baseball 2004*, Sega's *ESPN Major League Baseball*, Sony's *MLB 2005*, and Acclaim's *All-Star Baseball 2005*, which one is the superstar? And which are better off sitting on the bench?

PITCHING

Three of the games—*ESPN*, *MLB*, and *All-Star*—handle pitching in the same "choose a pitch, press X to throw it" way you've seen for years. It's effective and well executed...but kind of boring.

MVP, on the other hand, distinguishes itself by making pitching fun. Unlike other games, in which pitchers just become less accurate as they tire, *MVP*'s pitch meter makes it actually feel like it's your fault if you screw up. And don't be surprised if you see the

occasional wild pitch or a pitch in the dirt that means you have to throw down to first on strike three. Impressive.

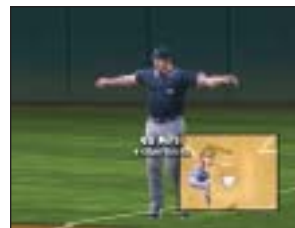
ADVANTAGE: *MVP Baseball 2004*

HITTING

All-Star features more hitting interfaces than any other game—but that doesn't make its hitting the best. In a one-player game, it works fine enough, but it's hard not to whiff in a two-player game. I struck out the side in nine pitches against Giancarlo while using Jose Vizcaino...a shortstop. And why can't I square to bunt while the pitcher is in his windup?

For that matter, in *MLB* (in which you actually can hit consistently), why can't I check my swing? Or tell if a ball will hit the dirt until it actually bounces?

Of the remaining two, *MVP* holds the slight edge because of one simple feature: When a pitcher screws up, a little yellow circle appears that indicates you shouldn't swing if the pitch is a ball. And you can really whap a



cy and vice versa—somewhat makes up for any faults, though. And *All-Star*'s new FielderCam? Absolutely useless. You never see any ball height, and routine hot grounders pass right on by. At least you can turn it off. Well, except when you can't (more on this later).

ADVANTAGE: *ESPN Major League Baseball*

BASERUNNING

I miss the good ol' days when running the bases in games like *R.B.I. Baseball* was as simple as pressing the D-pad in the direction you wanted to go and pressing one button to go there, another to go back. *ESPN* comes close to this, but the other games feel the need to utilize as many buttons as possible. Especially in *MVP*, expect to lose close games due to poor baserunning controls (and not because you stink).

ADVANTAGE: *ESPN Major League Baseball*

ATMOSPHERE AND PRESENTATION

You'd think with such a diverse assortment of personalized taunts ("Hey, Andrew! It's spelled with an E!"), *ESPN* would easily offer the best atmosphere. Only thing is, there's absolutely no crowd involvement beyond a light roar. The fact that they aren't excited in key moments takes so much away—it almost

MLB functions well enough, but weird A.I.—stuff like the ball being thrown to the only base no one is headed toward—occurs semiregularly. Meanwhile, it seems like you can never get a good jump on the ball in *MVP*, and using the right analog stick to dive usually just screws you over. Preloading your throws—sacrificing ball speed for accurate



MLB 2005
989's game might just have the best animations of any out there.

makes it boring.

The other three games do a much better job of making you feel like you're watching an actual broadcast. But nothing comes close to the slickness of *MVP*...which actually feels more like an ESPN broadcast than Sega's game. Little touches like appeals to first don't hurt.

ADVANTAGE: *MVP Baseball 2004*

FRANCHISE MODE

MVP impressively allows you to play 120 seasons in franchise mode, including full seasons for AA and AAA affiliates. Too bad you can't opt for anything less than a full 162-game season, though. Who has time for that? Yeah, you can sim any game you want, but don't you actually want to feel like it's your fault if you lose? On the other hand, if you actually do have the time, it's cool to play your minor-league games and actually feel attached to someone who

GIMMICKS AND EXTRAS

You could definitely say that each game can point out a unique feature to the competition and say, "Hey! Don't you wish you'd thought of this?!"

In *All-Star*'s case, it's the This Week in Baseball Challenge, a series of "what if?" situations in which you try to change the outcome of pivotal moments from the 2003 season—the "Cubs fan" incident included. How 'bout that? Unfortunately, the inability to turn off the damn FielderCam in this mode (and online, for that matter) makes tasks like scaling walls to catch a ball next to impossible. And then it takes a full minute for the challenge to load up again...just so you can quickly fail. Unlike the interesting, informative stadium tours also included in the game, it's a classic example of poor execution of a great idea.

Similarly, there's *ESPN*'s less-



MLB implements its gimmicky features much more effectively. You can actually use your EyeToy to make you a playable character. It takes a few tries, but after you've mapped your face onto a character model, you can use him in *MLB*'s returning career



ALL-STAR BASEBALL 2005
FielderCam allows easy grounders to pass right by. Thanks, Acclaim!

against MLB teams, online or off.

ADVANTAGE: *MLB 2005* and *MVP Baseball 2004* (tie)

GRAPHICS

Nothing matches the look of *MVP*'s total package. However, the animations in *MLB* at least rival those of EA's game (even if its players lack only the cel shading needed to resemble full-fledged cartoon characters). Meanwhile, *ESPN* and *All-Star* both fail to disappoint in the looks department, but they aren't particularly special, either.

ADVANTAGE: *MVP Baseball 2004*

OVERALL

You'll have a good time with any of these baseball simulations. You'll just have the best time—hands down—with *MVP*. At this rate, by next year it could be the *Madden* of baseball games.

Chris Baker

You'll have a good time with any of these baseball simulations. You'll just have the best time—hands down—with MVP Baseball 2004.

gets called up or sent down. It's not just pure looking at stats.

ESPN and *All-Star* have everything you need, too (trades, drafts, etc.), but nothing meets the depth of *MLB*'s franchise mode. In Sony's game, you control everything from the games themselves to when your team should have a bobblehead night.

ADVANTAGE: *MLB 2005*

innovative Confidence meter. I had Roger Clemens pounding the Red Sox 11-1, yet his "confidence" was as low as it can get. Is this supposed to mean anything? And you can see it all through Roger's eyes in first-person baseball mode, which, though better than *ESPN NFL*'s first-person football mode, is still rather useless.

mode. Here, you guide your hot-shot-rookie alter ego through spring training and (hopefully) into the majors.

And I could do without *MVP*'s both fail to disappoint in the looks department, but they aren't particularly special, either.



BARRY. WHERE'S BARRY?!

No MLBPA means no Bonds

Since he's no longer part of the MLB Players Association—and, as a result, it would cost each publisher megabucks to include him—Barry Bonds cannot be found in any baseball game this year. That hasn't stopped most titles from including a substitute hitter of comparable dominance in the Giants' cleanup spot, though. But just how similar are these fake players? (Note: *MLB 2005* takes the easy way out by just plopping the ever-so-comparable Jeffrey Hammonds into left field.)

	Barry Bonds	Wes Mailman	Joe Young	Jon Dowd
Associated With...	Real Life	All-Star Baseball 2005	ESPN MLB	MVP Baseball 2004
Number	25	7	34	51
Age	39 (July 24)	34	44	31 (July 6)
Race	African-American	Caucasian	Um...Asian?	Caucasian
Height	6'2"	6'2"	5'7"	6'2"
Weight	228	228	250	225
Bats	Left	Left	Switch	Right
Throws	Left	Left	Right	Right
Position	LF	LF	LF	LF
Years in MLB	18	17	Unknown	Rookie



ESPN MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL
Play from a first-person perspective. Or don't, if you value fun.

PLAY BALL!

MVP BASEBALL 2004 · MLB 2005 · ESPN MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL · ALL-STAR BASEBALL 2005

An all-inclusive review of this year's baseball simulations