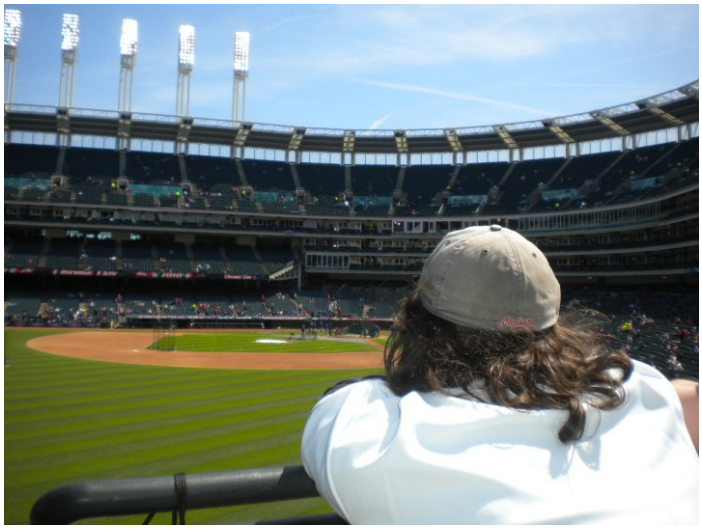


With the calendar flipping to March 3, baseball games have finally returned! The Indians open up their Cactus League schedule against complex neighbor Cincinnati and it marks the start of fans overvaluing Spring Training statistics. With desert winds blowing out and aiding the hitters, outfielders having more trouble with the sun than an albino, and pitchers working on their stuff, inflated Spring Training stats are inevitable. Taking them seriously in any context is laughable.

However, the start of the Cactus League schedule means that Opening Day is just over a month away. That's cause for joy and excitement. Despite the attempts by the media members that cover the Indians to create drama and intrigue about the Opening Day starter, the second least surprising announcement of the Spring is that Justin Masterson will throw the first pitch of the 2012 regular season, barring injury of course. He'll square off against Blue Jays' ace Ricky Romero. I'll go out on a limb here and assume that this year's Opening Day does not end 15-10.

Even with the earth-shattering announcement about Masterson, the biggest news story of all this past week in Goodyear, which has been covered in depth by my TCF comrades Nino Colla and Paul Cousineau, is about Grady Sizemore. Here's what happened. We in the Midwest tend to celebrate Groundhog Day on February 2. It's a stupid "holiday" in which a fat rodent pokes its head out of a hole and is somehow able to predict the remaining duration of winter. (For the record, the main prognosticator, Punxsutawney Phil, predicted six more weeks of winter in 2012. Why don't we ask those affected by severe, devastating tornadoes how the snow and cold weather is working out for them four weeks later? Our resident roadkill, Buckeye Chuck, predicted an early spring.)

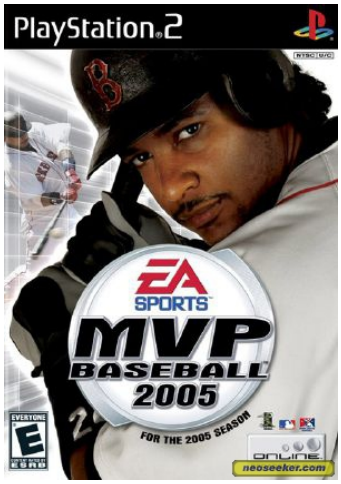
Well, in Goodyear, had the Indians only consulted with Abner the Armadillo before giving Grady Sizemore a five million dollar contract for this season, they would have been able to dodge a

bullet. Instead, unfortunately, Abner saw his shadow this week in Goodyear and Grady's out for half the year, at best.

Without much else to talk about this week until the first week of Spring Training games is in the books, I'll talk about something very near and dear to my formative years. Although, like any other kid, I enjoyed playing catch outside and hitting a wiffle ball pretending to be Candy Maldonado, my favorite baseball-related things to play were video games. I never really possessed the hand-eye coordination it took to hit a baseball and was easily frustrated with batting. I much preferred catching fly balls hit to me by my father in an open field. I always had a strong, accurate arm, but could never hit and never wanted to hit. So, playing organized baseball wasn't really an option for me. I regret that I never played growing up because I love the game so much.

Instead, while other kids were taking BP and getting dirty on the diamond, I would play video games in the cool air of the basement. The days of blowing into the back of the Nintendo cartridge. The days of knowing who was on the Indians but having a limited knowledge of the other players around the league. The days when video games featured an Italian plumber breaking bricks and a purple dragon gallivanting around levels in the sky. Before games were realistic first-person shooters with mass weaponry or carjackings in shady neighborhoods.

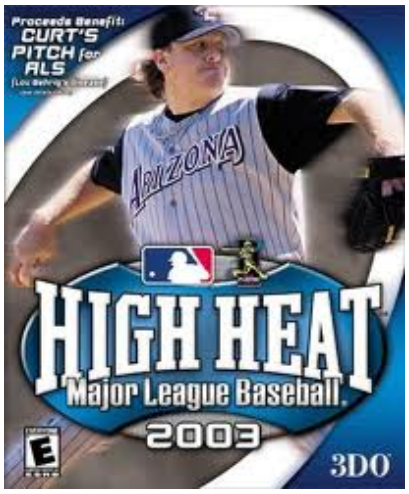
The free time I have to play video games has obviously dwindled. I do have an old Nintendo hooked up at my house and fire it up when I'm feeling nostalgic and there's nothing on TV. But that doesn't stop me from thinking about baseball video games. Here's the View from the Porch all-time top-five baseball video games list.



5. MVP Baseball 2005 for Playstation 2

The most innovative feature of MVP ’05 was the hitter’s eye feature which, when enabled, changed the color of the ball on the way to the plate to signify what pitch was coming. Even though I haven’t played that game in years, I still remember that green was a changeup. Purple was a splitter. Any fastball on the inner half of the plate was launched into orbit. I’d have 47 HR with Travis Hafner by the end of May and only 71 RBI. Hitting somehow became impossible with runners on base.

One of the coolest features about the game was the ability to unlock historical ballparks and players like Lou Boudreau. It was the first baseball game I had really played on a gaming console in quite a long time so I got attached to it for my first two years of college. I’d even skip class to continue to play my season. I was less attached than my roommate who had a knack for punching off the closet door in our dorm room when losing a game. It cracks the list here as an easy choice for #5 because it wasn’t a great game by any means, but it was the one that brought me back to baseball with a controller.

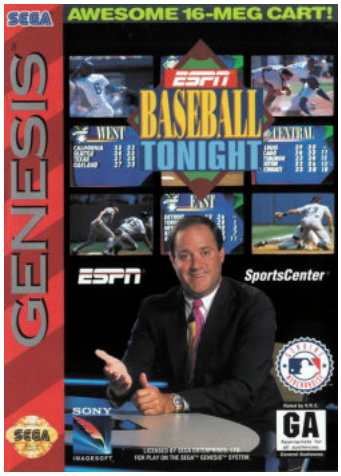


4. High Heat Baseball 2003 for PC

The High Heat baseball series was pretty underrated. There were some relatively obscure versions that came out for the Playstation and Playstation 2, but the one for PC always stuck out for me. For one thing, there’s something really convenient about being able to set your lineup by clicking and dragging. I think that’s why Yahoo changed their fantasy baseball setup from the drop-down box to the click and drag.

Since the Indians had fallen on hard times and I had no interest in having Matt Lawton and Ricky Gutierrez on my team, I would always do a fantasy draft before starting a season. I'd load up on pitching with guys like John Smoltz, Mark Mulder, and Mariano Rivera and then wind up with lineups that had second-tier players like Lyle Overbay and Geronimo Berroa. Hell, I think I had Preston Wilson batting third. I'd have a third-tier catcher like Michael Barrett, but my rotation and bullpen were full of studs.

In rare cases, if you got a called strikeout to end the inning, the umpire would do a couple spins and a dance before punching out the hitter. Something I wish we could apply to Major League Baseball. Who wouldn't want to watch Cowboy Joe West do a jig before punching out Miguel Cabrera?



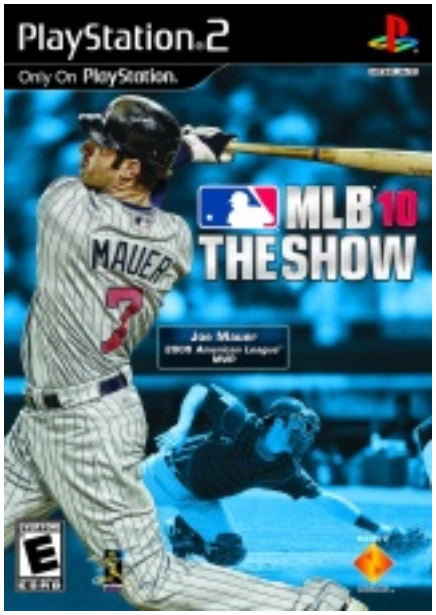
3. ESPN Baseball Tonight for Sega Genesis

The ESPN games were a great series for the Sega Genesis. There was ESPN National Hockey Night, ESPN Sunday Night Football, and then ESPN Baseball Tonight. Baseball Tonight must not have been able to get a lot of love from the MLB Players Association because none of the players had names. They were only referred to by their numbers.

On rare occasions, I will quote Dan Patrick saying "The whiff" from that game on strikeouts. Far

and away the best feature about ESPN Baseball Tonight was the Home Run Derby with the automatic pitching machine. The home runs had about four or five designated areas to left and right where they would land and would have Chris Berman's voice going "Back, back, back, back, gone!" on every single long ball.

It was low on features and very primitive on gameplay, but the Indians were a good team during the game's heyday and that made it that much more enjoyable.



2. MLB 2010: The Show for Playstation 2

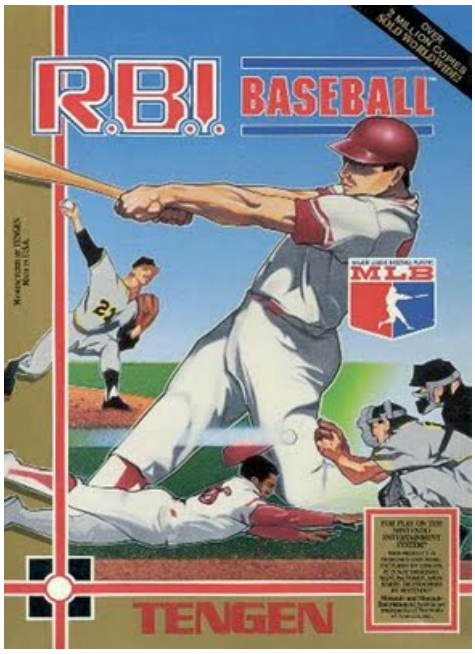
This game is so good that I've never bothered to upgrade it. For my money, it's the most realistic baseball game that has ever been created and I could play it for hours on end if I had the time. It's remarkably in depth "Franchise" mode gives the player control of everything from having to set ticket prices, get advertising money, give the players upgrades like modes of transportation, better ballpark facilities, set concession prices, and create promotional dates on the schedule.

The gameplay is great and incredibly accurate, except for the over-the-shoulder catches from fat outfielders lazily jogging for fly balls. To top it off, Matt Vasgerian, who does the game's

play-by-play, has one of the best voices of all baseball media members. He fits the game's soundtrack so well.

The "Road to the Show" mode is also fantastic. You get to play every at bat for your created player and the game throws in some defensive plays that have to be made. You work your way up from Double-A and the game is highly realistic about the gap between Double-A, Triple-A and Major League pitching.

Whenever I find myself missing baseball during the offseason or on Indians off days during the season, I play MLB '10 The Show to get my fix.



1. RBI Baseball for Nintendo

You had to know that this game was going to be #1 on this list. You just had to. No better baseball game has ever or will ever be created. I always chose to be the Minnesota Twins. I'm not totally sure why, but I just gravitated to them as a kid and still do now when I get the chance to play.

The NAACP must hate this game because there's nothing like rounding second with a white Kirby Puckett. Every player in the game is strikingly Caucasian. All of the fielders move in unison in whatever direction you're pressing on the directional pad. Any and every mistake thrown to the plate was hit out for a home run and no human player has any sort of plate discipline.

It's a phenomenally simple game. There are no throws to the cut-off man unless you manually cut the throw. The catcher throws underhand/sidearm to every base. It's damn near impossible to steal third base. It becomes monotonous after while because you just keep mercy ruling teams by the fifth inning.

But, for all of us that have played it, or still play it, it's a reminder of a simpler time. When life was easy. Even the controller itself is a throwback to the days of old. Four directions on the controller and four buttons – start, select, A, and B. Only four pitchers at your disposal for every game. Four bench players. No defensive alignment. No guessing of pitches or their location.

Just a simple, clean baseball game. Just like the ones that are the best to watch in real life.

This week's VftP has no real bearing on the Indians, Spring Training, or really anything significant about life. But, this week has been an incredibly hard week for a lot of people. Tornadoes have left paths of destruction, death, and injury in many parts of the eastern Midwest and Dixieland areas. There was the tragic loss of four lives in a car wreck on I-75 where three Bowling Green State University sorority sisters and one 69-year-woman were killed. And, obviously, there was the unthinkable tragedy at Chardon High School that has affected so many in a small community and even some here at TheClevelandFan.

In our daily lives, very few of us have time to sit down with a controller and lose ourselves in a virtual world. If reminiscing about any of these games takes you back to simpler times and happier days, then this week's VftP did what I intended it to do. It's meant to be a light-hearted column, not one that takes a hardcore look at Spring Training games or Manny Acta's projected

lineup.

Sometimes it’s good to just relax and read something that’s ultimately meaningless. Just the ramblings of a baseball fan looking for something carefree and easy to discuss. Now, if you’ll excuse me, white Kirby Puckett would like to drive that runner in from second.