Web site allows fans to relive history

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It is the bottom of the ninth inning, the ballgame is tied, the bases are loaded, and Randy Johnson is on the mound. Johnson readies his next pitch, and Babe Ruth steps up to the plate and hits the game-winning homerun.

It sounds like a sports fan's pipe dream, but thanks to fantasy sports site WhatIfSports.com it is now possible for nostalgic sports enthusiasts to match up the games' greatest players in baseball, basketball, football and hockey and pit them against today's current stars.

"The primary draw of the site is the unlimited freedom of picking anyone, anytime, from any season," says Josh Singer, an avid fantasy sports player and student at the University of Maryland. "I liked to use Mike Piazza (former catcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers) from the mid-90s. His numbers were ridiculous."

Fantasy sports are an important aspect of sports entertainment, with millions of people playing each year through leagues through sites like Yahoo.com and ESPN.com. These leagues use real-time statistics to determine the results for a user's team.

"The biggest difference is that in a league like Yahoo!, you see David Ortiz hit a homer and he's on your team, and you say, 'That's awesome,'" said Josh Rosenthal, a journalism major at the University of Maryland who says few people are more into fantasy sports than him. "But with WhatIfSports I gained a historical appreciation for the game. I learned about old players and expanded my knowledge of baseball."

WhatIfSports.com's statistics are based on players' completed seasons, which along with other pertinent game information (venue, experience, team momentum) is plugged into WhatIf's iSimNow computer technology. A complex algorithm then simulates the game (a play-by-play is available for each contest) and delivers the results, which will be different every time even if the same game is played.

"If you simulate the NCAA Basketball Championship 100 times, Florida is not going to beat UCLA 100 times by 15 points; some of the games will go to overtime and be very close," says Tarek Kamil, WhatIfSports.com's founder. "There is a probability of any event happening. Let's say the team's star small forward is called for a charge in the first half and picks up his third foul. That event triggers a whole series of events, such as his backup entering the game and replacing him."

Kamil launched WhatIfSports.com in February 2000 as a way for "geeky" sports fans to match up historical college basketball teams. Since then the site has expanded to allow users to match up players and teams from professional and collegiate sports, join historical Sim Leagues and even become the head coach of a college dynasty.

The Web site has more than 400,000 users, with between 50,000 and 60,000 users fielding paid teams at a given time. Since most leagues have multiple games per day, that makes a lot of games to simulate. But the computing power to power the Web site isn't as much as one might think.

"We run seven Windows machines, and the engines are pretty efficient," Kamil says. "To play an entire baseball game takes 1/3 of a second. As we grow and need to scale, it is important for us to be efficient."

It costs between $8.99 and $12.95 to join a Sim League, depending on

which sport the user wants to play. First-timers can play a short, free league to test out the technology. Kamil says almost 80 percent of those who play a free baseball league end up joining a pay league, and the vast majority of users who play in a full-season Sim League pay and play again.

"I found out about the site in a column a few years ago by (ESPN writer) Bill Simmons," Rosenthal said. "I like how stat-intensive the leagues are."

Singer says he had fun playing on the site, especially when he joined a league with friends. But he also says a team's upkeep is time-consuming, especially in the baseball leagues that play three games daily. He says it is "impossible to check your team everyday."

Out of the Park Baseball Manager 2006 is a computer game that offers historical baseball simulations similar to WhatIfSports.com. It gives users hundreds of options, such as creating new baseball leagues, and is available for $35. Being a specialized computer game, Out of the Park doesn't directly compete with the more diverse content offered by WhatIfSports.com There are other historical baseball leagues online such as SimDynasty.com, but most of them don't allow users to play with real players.

Kamil says it is "hard to compete with free" traditional leagues, and his company is aiming for a demographic more interested in customer service and sports' rich history.

"People are used to traditional sites, but also used to a low level of customer service," Kamil said. "Our tactic from day one was different, to become a part of the user community. For us, customer service is a huge deal, and that has helped us as well as our customers. They say, 'Hey there's somebody listening,' and are more open to sending us ideas

and suggestions."

Fox Sports Interactive purchased WhatIfSports.com in 2005, which Kamil thought would lead to an instantaneous boost in users. But he learned to be patient while being part of a large corporation.

"It's not as easy as you would guess, being a part of Fox," Kamil says. "When you are as small as we were you expect things to move quickly. As part of a big company things don't move as fast as you would like them to move. We would like to expose ourselves to millions of people."

For now, WhatIfSports.com relies mostly on word-of-mouth and user referrals to increase its user base, which is how players like Singer find out about it. Despite its low-key marketing strategy, Kamil sees big things in the future for his company.

"People are ecstatic about our site," he said. "They are amazed people will take their idea and listen to their idea. A couple weeks later they say, 'I see my idea in the game.' We have a different dynamic (than other sites). That's how we've grown."

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