

# Virtual Pool

(Better than the real thing?)

by BOB JEWETT



WOULD YOU LIKE to have the stroke of Mike Massey for trick shots? To be able to play daily against someone who will run 50 at straight pool more often than not, and run over 100 yourself? To be able

to predict exactly where the cue ball is going to end up on any shot? All this and more is possible with a new computer simulation game called Virtual Pool, available on CD-ROM.

Your introduction to Virtual Pool begins with an animated video clip about the history of cue sports. Paintings and diagrams — the Billiard Archive and Mike Shamos are in the credits — illustrate the narrator's summary of billiard events from the elevation of lawn bowling to tables up to the current boom and recent players.

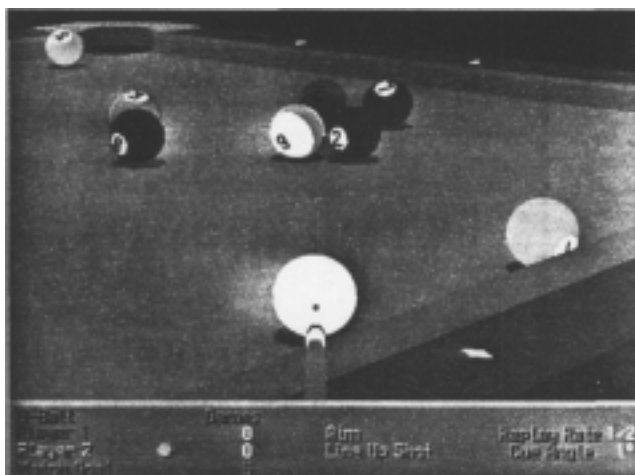
The basic control of play is much like other simulators on the market. You use the mouse to select the aiming angle and to place the tip for various amounts of English. To shoot, you press a key to let the program know you're ready, and then move the mouse back and then forward. The speed of motion determines the force of the shot. To avoid broken mice on hard shots, there is a "speed amplify" button which is especially useful on break shots.

There are lots of different things the simulator lets you do. You can practice alone, play against another player either on the same machine or over the phone or network, or play against a computer-generated foe. Of the latter, don't try your hand against Deadeye Dan until you have your aiming perfected; in our last match, he beat me 150-7 in straight pool.

Where Virtual Pool really shines is in the display graphics. The table is presented in a three-dimensional perspective. The player's point of view can easily be panned around the table to check angles and clearances, and can be zoomed in to check

whether two balls are really touching. A single key returns you to an overhead shot to check the whole table. All of this works very quickly, so that the motion is smooth.

A very useful feature, and one that transforms the program from a mere game to a learning tool, is the shot prediction feature, called "tracking." With this turned on, the expected paths of all the balls are shown, and are updated as quickly as you change anything in the shot, such as the angle, speed or English. For example, at straight pool, you often need to break up clusters



during a run. You can see exactly how much draw, follow and English will be needed to get the cue ball to break up a cluster. Even better, you will see where the balls in the cluster will end up, and you may conclude that there is no good way to go into the cluster along the path you had planned. This sort of prediction would not be of much use if the results weren't true to real life, and the programmers have done a very accurate job.

Another feature is a brief instructional clip taught by BCA Hall-of-Famer "Machine Gun" Lou Butera. He begins by saying that he'll run a rack of straight pool in 90 seconds, but only takes 66. A gallery of trick shots is also available. Lou shoots them in video clips and you can set them up and try them yourself in the simulator.

I have a few minor complaints. The "virtual" cloth is a little slow and slippery, perhaps just like many players will find on

their new home tables. You are never required to raise the butt of the cue to avoid an obstacle, such as an object ball just on your side of the cue ball. If you crank up the speed, you can get more spin on the ball than Mike Massey; that's a fantasy for most of us. Also, Deadeye Dan kicks balls in better than any living human.

My major complaint about Virtual Pool is that although the game knows four different types of pool games, and you can do others in practice mode, snooker and carom billiards are not included. I understand that a snooker version is in the works; I hope that carom is not far behind.

The program comes with a startling guarantee. If your actual pool game does not improve after using Virtual Pool, you can get your money back. I won't be getting my money back, since I had a personal best at Internet Equal Offense after "virtually" running 150 a couple of times. (IEO is a pool competition held over a computer network, but played by real people on real tables.)

The hardware required is a PC, running Microsoft DOS or Windows 3.1, with at least a 386SX 40MHz or higher processor (I used a computer with a 60 MHz Pentium chip while evaluating the program), a SVGA card, a CD-ROM drive, at least four megabytes of RAM and two megabytes of free hard disk space. A sound card is needed if you want to listen to the music, sound effects or narration. The price is under \$50, which in my mind makes this a must for any pool player who also has a PC.

**Virtual Pool, is available for \$49.95, from Interplay Productions, Inc., 17922 Fitch Ave., Irvine, CA 92714, (800) INTERPLAY.** (A demo version of is available on the Internet; connect to the URL <http://www.interplay.com/>. A version for Macintosh platform is planned.)

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