



headline news: Oil - what a rip off

Game of the month - NHL 2K9 Hands-On

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There is always some uncertainty when a sports game is ported to the Nintendo Wii. Much of this concern stems from EA's focus in the past few years on making its Wii sports games more accessible to novice players. The result has been sports games devoid of the advanced features and controls of their Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 counterparts. 2K Sports is taking a different approach with its latest hockey offering on the Nintendo Wii, the console's first-ever hockey game. Although the NHL 2K franchise has struggled in recent years with overly complex controls, NHL 2K9 boasts an entirely redone control scheme designed to bring back the pick-up-and-play nature of hockey games from the early '90s.



Although the specific controls on the Wii will undoubtedly bring a new twist to the hockey experience, the Wii version will include nearly every feature that you would expect from a next-generation sports game (the exception being online play). The game offers full-featured season and franchise modes, which is noteworthy considering 2K's solid track record for in-depth general-management options. The Wii version also includes many advanced controls such as on-the-fly coaching, the ability to use both saucer and drop passes, and even some abilities unique to the Wii (more on this below). Although the graphics are not as crisp as on the 360 and PS3 versions, NHL 2K9 on the Wii will play at 60 frames per second.

The on-the-fly coaching controls deserve mention simply because they include a level of depth atypical in a Wii sports game. Pressing the Z and C buttons together on the Nunchuk opens up options to sub your forward lines or defensive pairs, modify team strategy, and even call plays. Although everything, with the exception of the line changes, is probably too clunky to use in-game, at least they are available for use if you want them.

The big question with any sports game on the Wii is how the console's unique controllers are used, especially the Wii Remote. An overreliance on the Wii Remote's tilt and motion capabilities can result in unresponsive controls (as in NBA Live 08), whereas a lack of Wii-specific controls will have you wondering why you didn't just pick up the 360 version. NHL 2K9 addresses this issue by making only one control reliant on the swinging of the Wii Remote: shooting.

Shooting in NHL 2K9 is done by simply swinging the Wii Remote forward. A forward motion alone will result in a quick wrist shot, whereas holding B prior to your swing will cause your player to pull his stick back in preparation for a slap shot (the power of the shot increases the longer the button is held). Slap shots can also be faked by simply releasing the B button without swinging the Wii Remote. One-timers and shot redirects (if

close to the goal) are done by beginning your shot motion before the puck reaches the player. The shooting-control mechanics work relatively well but may not always respond as intended if your player is in the process of another action (such as a superstar move).

On the other hand, player movement is handled entirely by the Nunchuk (the Nunchuk is required to play NHL 2K9). The analog stick controls player movement, and turbo and backward skating are mapped to the Nunchuk's Z and C buttons, respectively. You will also be able to perform player-sensitive superstar moves by shaking the Nunchuk up and down. (The specific move is determined by player attributes.)

In addition to the superstar moves, you will have the ability to create your own dekes or protect the puck via the Wii Remote's control pad. The control pad essentially lets you control the position of the puck, independent of your player's motion. The same holds true on defense; the control pad will let you sweep with your stick. Passing is done in one of two ways. The first method, which most players will find familiar, is to simply direct the analog stick toward a teammate and hit the pass button (A). It's quick and easy to perform, but it requires that your player skate toward the pass recipient (which you may not want to do) and doesn't allow for some of the more advanced passing techniques.

The second method of passing involves pointing the Wii Remote where you intend the puck to go and hitting the pass button. Crosshairs will appear on the screen and will magnetize onto a teammate if relatively close. Though this method takes some practice, it allows for passing independent of player movement, as well as the ability to lead the pass recipient, and even a means to chain multiple passes together for quick give-and-go's. Using the Wii Remote for passing is also more accurate, given that directional passing can sometimes result in passes to the wrong teammate. The one knock against the point-to-pass control is that the crosshairs, although small, can be distracting, especially with multiple players.

Crease control returns to 2K9 but works slightly differently on the Wii. You can assume control of your goalie at any time by hitting the 1 button. During a shot, the game will slow down and you will be forced to match a remote/Nunchuk configuration displayed on the screen (for instance, tilting the remote and Nunchuk toward one another to drop into a butterfly). Doing so correctly will result in the proper move being executed to stop the shot. Messing up doesn't always result in a goal, but it dramatically increases the likelihood. This feature had some response issues in the build that we received, given that it involves contorting the controllers, but the feature is entirely optional.



Defense works much as you would expect, but it is worth noting that the majority of checking in the game is done by shaking either the remote (for hooking and holding) or the Nunchuk (for a body check). The only other checking in the game is the poke check (B button) and manual poke checks using the control pad.

Fighting also makes the transition to the Wii. The controls work similar to shooting; swinging the Wii Remote forward results in a weak punch, whereas holding the B button prior to a swing results in a stronger punch. The added element here is that you must also maintain your player's balance by rotating the Nunchuk when needed.

The debut of hockey on the Wii may signify the console's first sports game to maintain appeal with hardcore sports audiences. The approach is undoubtedly different from EA's, and its success may decide what types of sports games we see on the Wii going forward.