

## **NHL 2001 (EA Sports)**

### **PC**

As specific video game series go, few have ever had the ability to stick around for a full 10 years--and even fewer have dominated their respective genre the way EA Sports' *NHL* series has ruled the rink for the past decade. Hockey games have come and gone since *NHL* made its debut on the Sega Genesis, but this franchise line from EA has had an astounding run as the premier hockey title in gaming history. And luckily for desk-chair hockey players, the 2001 version for the PC is the best yet.

Of course, at the time, last year's version was the best yet--so what has EA done for an encore? Truthfully, not too much--but such is the problem when a game is already *this close* to perfection. Most of the improvements and new additions are minor--for example, the on-ice Momentum Meter, which adjusts as the game shifts from side to side; the inclusion of the two new NHL teams, the Minnesota Wild and the Columbus Blue Jackets; some new camera angles; improved AI; authentic crowd involvement (whatever that means, exactly)--you get the point. So while there isn't quite the plethora of new features some might expect, it's just enough to keep the *NHL* series on top, and to make *NHL 2001* the best PC sports game of the current season.

What makes *NHL 2001* so ferocious is that it combines everything one could ask for in a hockey game: unsurpassed graphics (the replays and cut scenes are like watching a game on TV...and the real-player faces are downright eerie); smooth, intuitive control; various gameplay modes; and attention to even the most minute detail, on and off the ice. Hockey fans will appreciate its deep simulation characteristics, while general game players will love all the hard-hitting, high-scoring action that makes both real hockey and virtual hockey so exciting.

As in years past, *NHL 2001* offers a variety of gameplay modes, namely Quick Game (exhibition), Season (Long, Medium, or Short), Tournament (8-, 12- or 16-team international series), Shootout or Multiplayer (LAN or Internet). Whichever mode you choose, *NHL 2001* is fully customizable to the user's preferences: edit your lines, trade players, change coaching strategies, adjust penalties and overtime rules, turn fighting on or off, etc.--you can even stick your own face on a player that you create! There's enough here to keep you busy for the entire NHL season--and we all know how long a hockey season is. Expect to be playing this one until next summer.

--Jeff Kitts

## **Madden NFL 2001 (EA Sports)**

## **PlayStation 2**

Sports gamers by and large were an unhappy lot when they initially learned that EA Sports would not be producing games for the Sega Dreamcast--which pretty much explains why the Dreamcast, in almost 18 months of existence, has only a small handful of decent sports titles. However, EA Sports--the preeminent sports gaming company--has jumped into the PlayStation 2 pool with both feet, having released a slew of sports titles when the new Sony gaming machine debuted this fall--among them, *NHL 2001*, *Fifa 2001*, *NASCAR 2001*, and its killer-app football game *Madden NFL 2001*.

EA's *Madden* series has been one of the few consistently great sports series in gaming through the years--and *Madden* for the PlayStation 2 continues that tradition. But it should be noted that the PlayStation 2 version of *Madden* is not markedly different from its PlayStation predecessors. Aside from the obvious and expected graphic improvements (everything is smooth and beautiful now, not a jagged edge in sight), the gameplay is pretty much the same as in years past. The play-calling screens, controls, play-by-play commentary: It will all seem very familiar to *Madden* devotees. In essence, it's typical *Madden*--and that's a good thing.

Gameplay modes include Exhibition, Season, Franchise, Practice, and Quick Start. If there are any complaints to be made, it's that the kicking mechanism is very hard to read and therefore a serious detriment, and that the players are a bit on the small side compared to, say, Sega's *NFL 2K1* for the Dreamcast. But despite their diminutive size, the players here are positively jaw-dropping in their realism, with incredible detail and lifelike movements. It's safe to say that playing *Madden* for the PlayStation 2 is as close to watching a live football broadcast as we've seen yet.

--Jeff Kitts

## **Midnight Club: Street Racing (Rockstar Games) PlayStation 2**

If you liked *Grand Theft Auto*, *Destruction Derby*, *Driver*, and/or *Crazy Taxi*--in other words, racing games based on illegal activities and reckless driving--you'll love *Midnight Club: Street Racing*, one of the first racing games for the PlayStation 2.

The idea behind *Midnight Club* is to get involved in high-speed races with other deviants through the streets of New York City or London, at times other than daylight hours (night, midnight, dawn, or dusk). Pedestrian in the way? Run his ass over. Glass storefront dead ahead? Crash through it. In *Midnight Club*, using your ride as an object of death and destruction is par for the course.

While the driving action is top-notch and the graphics certainly impressive (the two cities are rendered down to the smallest detail, with actual landmarks sprouting up all over the place), it's actually the variety of gameplay that gives *Midnight Club* its high replay value. You can play the game in either Career Mode or Arcade Mode, each with its own series of objectives and race types. In Career Mode, you start out on the streets of NYC, where you compete in short waypoint and head-to-head races with the other thugs, your goal being to win their cars and ultimately unlock London. In Arcade Mode, there are all 39 races from Career Mode, plus an additional 10 races. For a change of pace, you can enter a Capture The Flag competition against the computer or take a Cruise Tour, which is a chance to drive freely around either city and take in the sites. Whichever option you choose, you can bet that *Midnight Club: Street Racing* will hold your attention for quite some time.

--Jeff Kitts

### **Orphen: Scion Of Sorcery (Activision) PlayStation 2**

Based on a popular Japanese anime television series, *Orphen: Scion Of Sorcery* is one of the first action role-playing games for the PlayStation 2--but while it's certainly pretty enough to look at, the gameplay just isn't what it should be.

Players assume the role of Orphen, a powerful but lazy sorcerer who is on a quest to escape the island of Chaos. Over the course of their adventure, gamers will explore the 3D areas (castles, caverns, forests, a ship caught in a vicious storm, etc.) and talk to people, pick up items, open doors, fight monsters, etc. The problem is that you'll spend most of the time watching the animated cut scenes and not actually doing anything--it's like watching a cartoon unfold before you, with periodic objectives to complete. And even when you are in control of the action, it's not particularly gratifying. The control is a bit clunky, and the fight scenes are truly bizarre--more like target practice with magical lightning bolts instead of actual hand-to-hand (or tentacle, or whatever) combat.

If you have the patience and time to sit through all the animation, there is ultimately a lot to do in Orphen, as there are three different storylines, six playable characters, and 38 different spells and attacks to master. The programmers of Orphen certainly created a fine piece of Japanese animation--the problem is, they forgot the gameplay.

--Jeff Kitts

### **Spawn: In The Demon's Hand (Capcom)**

## **Dreamcast**

Of all the comic book franchises ever created, Todd McFarlane's *Spawn* oozes the most potential for video game success. Tortured hero, check; hell-spawned demons, check; outrageous weaponry, check. Though the pieces are seemingly in place, *Spawn*'s transition from comic book to video game comes up hellishly short.

Sure, the gorgeous graphics marvelously capture the desolate spirit of the comic, complete with gritty environments and buckets of blood. And on the sound front, you'll hear thrashing industrial-metal tunes and deafening explosions. But *Spawn*'s simplistic gameplay betrays its arcade roots; you'll sprint through the cluttered 3D arenas while blasting boss characters, collecting weapons, and evading gunfire. Though the shallow single-player game is a drag, the serviceable four-player Tournament mode allows you to suffer with your buddies. Either way, you'll despise the hyper-sensitive controls, awkward camera views, and cheap enemy tactics.

A double-fistful of hidden characters, weapons, and levels can't redeem *Spawn*'s mediocre arcade gameplay. Unless you're a die-hard *Spawn* fan clamoring for more half-baked action fluff, stick with balanced blast-a-thons like *Quake III: Arena* and *Unreal Tournament*.

--Sid Shuman

## **Shenmue (Sega) Dreamcast**

*Shenmue*, Sega's massive four-disc Dreamcast epic, is a difficult game to describe. Is it a fighter, a role-playing game, an adventure, or a simulation? Though the genre may be unclear, one thing is certain: *Shenmue* is a ground-breaking title.

In *Shenmue*, you'll guide Ryo Hazuki, a young martial artist, through 1986-era Japan while investigating the mysterious death of his father. Though the setup is standard, *Shenmue*'s richly interactive approach allows players to blaze their own trails. You can touch, use, or otherwise manipulate nearly everything (and everyone) in the game; feel free to gamble at the casino, get into fights with other pedestrians, or hang out in the local arcade. Time is also an important consideration during Ryo's quest, so shops are open only during business hours, and dark alleys become dangerous at night. Visually, *Shenmue* is mesmerizing: The painstakingly detailed characters and environments look eerily authentic.

Finally, the Dreamcast's true killer app. Part *Dragon's Lair*, part *Virtua Fighter*, and part *Final Fantasy*, *Shenmue*'s genre-hopping gameplay thoroughly demonstrates the Dreamcast's power. Though experienced players will quickly plow through the quest mode,

*Shenmue's* immense interactive world provides endless hours of experimentation and entertainment.  
--*Sid Shuman*