

Video Game Review: ‘Top Spin 4’ Features Great Simulation of Difficult Sport

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 28, 2011 - 7:48pm

- [2K Sports](#) [2]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [Nintendo Wii](#) [5]
- [PlayStation 3](#) [6]
- [PS3](#) [7]
- [Top Spin 4](#) [8]
- [Video Game Review](#) [9]
- [Xbox 360](#) [10]

CHICAGO – Is there any sport less attuned to a video game simulation than tennis? I don’t think so. The actual sport involves so much physical coordination and timing that it’s just impossible to fully recreate with a controller in your hands. Having a motion controller helps (and the PS3 copy of “Top Spin 4” is Move-enabled), but there’s still something about tennis that seems to fight the world of gaming even when it’s as remarkably well-done as “Top Spin 4.”



And yet, since the days of “Pong,” developers have been returning to the simple art of hand-eye coordination and a ball going back and forth when it comes to the world of video games. There’s something that’s impossible to capture about the remarkable physical shape it takes to be an international tennis phenomenon and yet the sport is also attuned to the most-simple elements of gaming in that all it really takes is two paddles and a ball. So, while “Top Spin 4” first frustrated this player coming fresh off a true simulation like “MLB 11 The Show,” one of the best sports games ever, it wasn’t long before I realized that “true simulation” shouldn’t be the bar for a title like this. Shake off your preconceptions and “Top Spin 4” is fun. Some of the gameplay can be frustrating, but it’s remarkably addictive, the kind of title that can take a few hours and make them feel like the blink of an eye.



Top Spin 4
Photo credit: 2K Sports

Like most modern sports games, “Top Spin 4” is insanely deep. It features numerous real-world locations along with the largest player roster ever with 25 of the world’s top pros and legends including Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer, Serena Williams, Caroline Wozniacki, and many more. Of course, the real fun of a game like “Top Spin 4” is creating your own pro and taking him (or her) to the top of the tennis ladder. The player creation in “Top Spin 4” is deeply customizable with your own name, likeness, and even fashion sense integrated into the experience. I played a few exhibition matches and thought the title was a bit underwhelming. It didn’t really start to get its hooks into me until I created my own player.



Top Spin 4
Photo credit: 2K Sports

At that point, your player can go through a career of tournaments, practice drills, and even events that can add fans or XP. You use XP to upgrade your chosen skills like a stronger Offensive Baseline Play or more points in your Serve and Volley section. The depth isn't that remarkable but it's enough that the game can play to your actual real-life strengths. Another element that helps with that is a Coach system that sets certain goals. When met, those goals add new points to certain attributes depending on the coach's strengths. In other words, if you're a fan of the volley, you can upgrade the right attributes and find the right coach to make that a prominent part of your online game as well.

How do you play? Well, it's a bit unrefined. Holding down one of the face buttons swings your arm back and the timing of your release along with trying to place it with the left analog stick determines your play. After the serve, the player has four baseline shots — Flat Shot (X), Top Spin (O), Slice (Square), and Lob (Triangle). At the line, the player has volley options, but it's more about the timing and the placement than the particular shots. Your flat shot is the most consistent and easy to time but it's the trick shots that will really win the match. As for serving, once again, it's a case of timing, releasing the button at just the right moment and placing it in the corner. Serving an Ace is remarkably difficult.



Top Spin 4
Photo credit: 2K Sports

When it's a one-on-one experience like tennis, opponent A.I. is essential. It's a bit of a mixed bag here. There were times when my opponent got to shots when it just seemed physically impossible to do so and other times when they watched an easy one bounce by. There also seemed to be a bit of a rubber-band effect in that I would crush multiple opponents in a row only to then lose unexpectedly. They don't want everyone to become Nadal overnight.

Visually, "Top Spin 4" is impressive without being particularly remarkable. The game boasts 4,000 animations, some excellent close-up shots of familiar faces, and deep individual customization. Having said that, there are still a few shots that seem a bit awkward and a few arm movements that seem unnatural. The game looks good, not great.

And, honestly, that's a good summary of the entire title. "Top Spin 4" is unlikely to be anyone's favorite sports game of the year or even of the season but that shouldn't necessarily be the bar by which to judge it. Partially due to the difficulty of fully capturing it in a video game along with its overall popularity, a tennis game will never be as successful as "Madden" or "NBA 2K." With that in mind, "Top Spin 4" is a success.

"Top Spin 4" was developed and released by 2K Sports on March 15th, 2011. The version reviewed was for the PS3 but the title is also available for the Xbox 360 and Nintendo Wii. It is rated E (Everyone).

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Published on HollywoodChicago.com (<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com>)



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Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 29 2024 - 2:31am*):

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- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/top-spin-4>
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