

Video Game Review: 'NHL 13' is Great For Newbies

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on October 2, 2012 - 1:19pm

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CHICAGO – For sports gamers, late summer into early fall is a stressful time on the wallet. This is when EA Sports releases their holy triumvirate of sports titles; “Madden,” “FIFA,” and “NHL,” all within a month of each other. “Madden” is always a blockbuster release here in the USA, with midnight launches, coverage on ESPN, and enough hype to direct a Kanye West music video. “FIFA” is actually the most financially successful franchise, mostly because everyone outside of North America thinks American Football is silly, or because it’s a game based on the world’s most popular sport. If you throw in Visual Concepts’ excellent “NBA 2K” series, “NHL 13” is sort of the black sheep of the fall sporting season by default.



Video Game Rating: **4.0/5.0**

There could be a few reasons as to why digital hockey isn’t as popular as digital football. Maybe it’s because real hockey isn’t nearly as popular as real football, American or otherwise. Maybe it’s because hockey appears to be such a chaotic game that, to the casual fan, it seems devoid of strategy or planning. Perhaps it’s because the standard hockey season is 82 games long (well, typically) and that’s an incredible time investment for would-be armchair GMs. For whatever reason, it’s obvious that EA Sports’ golden goose is “Madden,” and “NHL” is oftentimes forgotten.

That’s not to say it’s an inferior product. In fact, it’s anything but. “NHL 13” is a quality hockey simulation that’s easy to pick, easy to play, and most importantly, a load of fun. Like “Madden 13,” this year’s installment brings a new momentum-based physics engine, a new rating system that judges player’s skill in their given position, Hockey Ultimate Team, and some other tweaks and refinements that are likely Philadelphia flying over my head because I’m not that big of a hockey maniac.



NHL 13

Photo credit: EA Sports

So, how does it play? Game control is easy to understand, and made easy by a step-by-step tutorial that opens the game (and is missing or hidden in all other EA Sports efforts). This tutorial goes on to explain skating, shooting, checking, blocking, and all the nuances you’ll need to know and master to compete for the Stanley Cup. My only gripe here is that the fighting mechanics are needlessly complicated and based on analog stick control, when really a button-focused scheme similar to every fighter ever would make things far more entertaining when it came time drop the gloves.

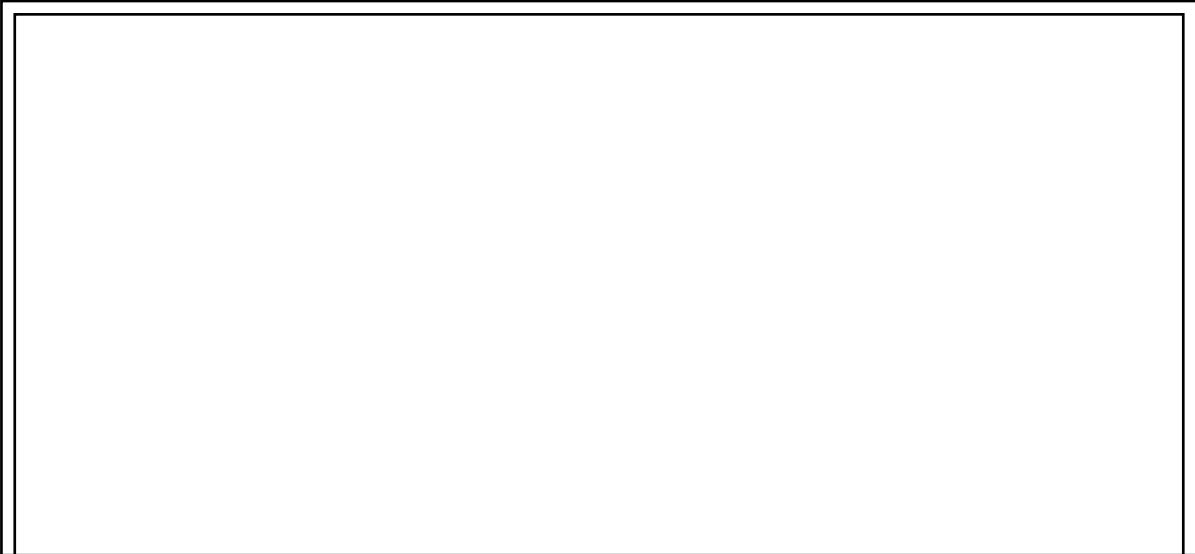
While the tutorial makes things easy to understand, once you’re thrown onto the ice against another team, it takes a bit of time to get your wits about you. The physics engine flows through every element of the game, skating isn’t about who’s the fastest, but instead is about agility, the ability to keep the puck away from your opponent, and making well-timed and accurate passes. Passing is nuanced and absolutely essential to getting quality offensive opportunities. It’s actually one of the more rewarding parts of the game, as it’s something you feel direct control over. If you do it badly, it’s **your** fault. If you do it well, it’s **your** accomplishment, worthy of bragging to the cat about.



Shooting is also a game of nuance, but it’s tricky to shoot where the goalie ain’t amidst the chaos of defensive players swarming your shooting lane. I’d often times just get in the general vicinity of the goalie, say a prayer to the great Gretzky, and hope for the best. Defense is a bit tricky. It’s tricky to really lay into a player who has the puck, and as a result you’ll find yourself doing a lot of poke checks, finally obtaining the puck, and being so freaked out that you’ll end up shooting the thing across the rink to prevent the other team from getting it back. There are a couple of annoyances, such as the fact that if you’re attempting to skate quickly and efficiently, you’re going to be jamming on your thumbstick pretty hard throughout the game, and I don’t know how good that is for the controller.

After playing around in a few exhibition games and having some success, it was time to check out this game proper. First up, was GM Connected Mode, or NHL’s version of Franchise. It’s in this mode I realized that while this game is called “NHL,” it actually has **7** hockey leagues contained on its disc - including minor league hockey, european leagues, and ones from Canada, too. Perhaps hockey is a bit more worldwide than I initially thought. GM Mode is robust, filled with the ability to make trades, adjust lineups, and all the fixings associated with this sort of mode. New this year is improved trade logic that makes sure you’re not gaming the system. However, in an almost unforgivable sin, the length of the hockey season is not changeable. That means you’re playing all 82 games of the season whether you like it or not. Sure, you can sim to the playoffs, but that’s the gaming equivalent of buying a cake and only eating the frosting. This was a problem present in “FIFA 12,” too. “NBA 2K12,” however, let you adjust season length all the way down to 17 games in a season, giving you the full GM experience without having to spend two years of your life to play a single season.

Following my brief and daunting foray into GM mode, I decided maybe it was time to try out the features I typically avoided in other games. “Madden Moments Live” is a feature I respected, but largely disliked because the games didn’t mean anything. I’d much rather be playing Franchise or Ultimate Team. Here however, being a new player with shaky skills, “NHL Moments Live” provided me the ability to try out a variety of teams, in a variety of situations, all of which took place during last year’s season - thus educating me about the game of hockey, the players in the league, and about the actual league itself in the 2012 season.





NHL 13

Photo credit: EA Sports

Ultimate Team has always been a favorite mode of mine in both "Madden" and "FIFA." While in "Madden" I know almost all the players in the league, and the idea of playing with a group of players helmed by Brandon Weeden wasn't a particularly exciting proposition, earning coins to buy card packs that contain good players is the sort of gaming experience I'd take with me to a tropical island if I was ever stranded on one with wifi. But "Madden Ultimate Team" has its problems. In part because it's one of the most popular games in America, you run into people who have spent untold cash on card packs. So your paltry 76 overall team will run up against 94 ovr teams fairly consistently - and get pummeled. Players in this mode tend to be douchier than most - going for it on fourth down, attempting onside kicks every chance they get, and going for 2 points like it's going out of style. It sours the mode a great deal.

So let me say what a relief it is that Hockey Ultimate Team is excellent. Not only is the game competitive - of the games I played only one team had an all-star roster, it's much harder to cheese and be a jerk in a game of hockey than it is in a game of football. Sure, you'll run into the occasional player who's attempting to drop gloves like O.J Simpson, but on the whole the frustration level of this mode is way down compared to it's cohorts in other franchises. On the economic side of things, while obviously the entire purpose of the mode is to take as much money from our pockets as possible, "Hockey Ultimate Team" is a bit cleaner in its presentation, and it's not hitting you over the head with the ability to buy card cards for microsoft points.

After spending considerable time with "NHL 13" and enjoying it far more than I thought I would, I've come to enjoy and respect the sport of hockey far more. Like the best sports games, "NHL 13" endears me to the sport it's representing, thanks in part to its excellent tutorial and smooth gameplay that makes it easy to keep playing. Of EA Sports titles, "NHL 13" may not be the prettiest, the most feature-packed, or the most hyped, but if you ask me, it's certainly the most fun.

"NHL 13" was released on September 11, 2012 by EA Sports. The version reviewed was for the Xbox 360 but the title is also available for the PS3.

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