

Title:	Microsoft Inside Drive 2000
Developed by:	High Voltage Software (http://www.high-voltage.com)
Published by:	Microsoft (http://www.microsoft.com)
Reviewed By:	Tim Maxwell
Official Site:	(http://www.microsoft.com/sports/insidedrive2000/)
Overview:	Finally, EA Sports has some solid competition in the basketball world.
Genre:	Basketball
System Requirements:	Multimedia PC with a Pentium 166 MMX or higher processor. Microsoft Windows 95 or Windows 98 operating system. 32MB of RAM. DirectX 6.0-compatible 2MB local-bus video card and sound card. 90MB of available hard-disk space (50MB of additional hard-disk space for virtual memory). 6x speed or faster CD-ROM drive. Microsoft Mouse or compatible pointing device. Super VGA, 16 Bit Color Monitor. Windows 95 compatible sound board. Speakers or headphones required for audio.
Supports:	DirectX 6-compatible 3D accelerator card
ESRB Rating:	Everyone
The Good Press:	Nice arena and player graphics, on-the-money audio, tons of control options, solid play and feel.
The Bad Press:	There's still three months until basketball season, unbalanced difficulty, no player editor or career mode, too many steals.
Ratings:	Graphics: 8/10 Sound: 8/10 Getting Started: 7/10 Documentation: 5/10 Value: 8/10
Tips:	Foul trouble is a major factor in this game. Resist the urge to reach-in for steals late in the game. Attempting to manually defend quick guards up top is usually a pointless exercise. If you're getting burned, switch defenders to your center early and let the computer do the work.

For years, EA Sports has dominated the basketball game market with its popular *NBA Live* series. While EA definitely deserves credit for releasing great games, much of the domination can be attributed to the fact that they've had absolutely no competition the past few years. Microsoft and developer High Voltage Software aim to change all that with *NBA Inside Drive 2000*, an ambitious yet ill-timed entry into the basketball world.

When I think of basketball, I think about brisk, fall days and Thanksgiving turkey. Considering most of us are mired in a nation-wide heat wave, the decision to release a basketball game in the dog days of summer

is certainly curious. While the early release will probably give Microsoft a quick sales boost, I, like most sports junkies would prefer to play a cyber-season along with my favorite real-life team. It remains to be seen how this release will effect sales, but as we've learned in the past, releasing a game before a season is much better than releasing it late into or after a season.

Opinions aside, it's time to discuss *Inside Drive* – Microsoft's first crack at 3D basketball. Installation was quick and relatively painless and the interface should be very familiar to sports fans. The standard game options are available including playing an exhibition game, starting a season or playoff, or honing your skills on the practice court. I didn't run into any quirks in the interface and with a few mouse clicks, I was ready to take the court.

Assuming you've got the right hardware, you're in for a graphical treat with *Inside Drive*. Microsoft is developing a reputation for greatness in their games visually and this game is no exception. Although not quite on par with the *Live* series, the players are scaled accurately and boast realistic uniforms and faces. The various arenas also look terrific and the crowd, although stiff as a board, looks quite realistic. Motion capture was handled by Milwaukee Bucks' star Ray Allen and his athleticism pays great dividends. Hoop fans will be thrilled to see the impressive array of dunk, rebound and shot animations and, with all the camera options, seeing your favorite stars in action is easy from just about any angle.

On-court ambience is another area where Microsoft is second to none. Everything from the roar of the crowd to the distinct squeak of sneakers on the court is superb. Kevin Calabro (Seattle Supersonics play-by-play man) and Marques Johnson (NBA analyst for Fox Sports) handle commentary quite nicely. The two work very well together and do a good job keeping up with the action on the court. Perhaps the only problem is that they'll frequently launch into pointless, cliché-laden diatribes during stoppages in play. These spiels are relatively humorous at first, but I quickly grew tired of hearing Johnson sing "Don't Be Cruel." The good news is that this minor gripe doesn't detract from gameplay at all and I was actually quite pleased with the sound in *Inside Drive*.

Controlling the action in *Inside Drive* can be as simple or as complicated as you want it to be. With a few minor adjustments, advanced players will have the ability to box out defenders for rebounds, control tip-ins, and post-up and back down defenders. If this isn't your thing, you can choose basic controls and just dribble, pass, and shoot. Either way, you'll enjoy some of the tightest control around. Obviously, Microsoft prefers to tout control with their own Sidewinder Gamepad but users of the Gravis line among others should find control equally responsive. Control is perhaps the best aspect of *Inside Drive* and its innovation alone should win the hearts of even the most demanding hoopsters.

But what does this game do to actually make you feel like you're out there on the court? Well, I'm happy to report, a whole lot! Simply put, some of the minor details in *Inside Drive* are astonishing. For example, let's say that your best player has been on the bench for a while in foul trouble. Once he comes back in, a graphic might appear that lets you know how the team did while he was out. These graphics appear constantly and give you all the information you could ask for about the game. Other details include players diving to save the ball in-bounds, jumping to catch errant passes, and animated referees that actually act out all the calls. While these little nuances don't affect gameplay, they really do add to the ambience.

Despite a great rookie effort from Microsoft, *Inside Drive* isn't perfect. First and foremost, difficulty may be a problem for novice players. I consistently had to play my best to win games on rookie setting and lost a good many games on veteran and all-star. No one likes a pushover of a game but this might be a bit excessive. Other problems include a lack of a player editor or career mode and the fact that steals are far too abundant. Since good gameplay and control make up for these shortcomings, I'm willing to look past them.

Overall, Microsoft has a winner on their hands with *Inside Drive*. Arcade fans will be thrilled with the over-the-top dunks and high shooting percentages while simulation fans will enjoy all of the control options and moves available. With a few more minor tweaks, I see a bright future for the *Inside Drive* series. EA Sports take note, you now officially have competition and, with a retail price of only \$19.99, you can't go wrong.

