

## NHL 2001 – Sony PlayStation

**Developed by:** EA Sports (<http://www.easports.com>)

**Published by:** EA Sports (<http://www.easports.com>)

**Reviewed by:** Tim Maxwell

**Official Site:** <http://www.easports.com/hockey.html>

**Genre:** Hockey

**Number of Players:** One to Eight

**ESRB:** Everyone

**Overall Rating:** 7

**Graphics:** 6/10

**Sound:** 8/10

**Documentation:** 7/10

**Getting Started:** 7/10

**Gameplay:** 7/10

**Value:** 7/10

**The Good Press:** You can control every hockey team under the sun; smooth analog control; great sound; challenging computer AI.

**The Bad Press:** Mediocre graphics; unbalanced speed and difficulty; the computer seems to cheat on higher difficulty settings; puck physics could use some work.

**Supports:** Dual Shock Analog Controller; memory card

**Overview:** *NHL 2001* isn't much to look at and can be frustrating, but it still scores as a high-speed and challenging arcade hockey game.

### Tips:

Use the "big hit" button sparingly. If you connect, you'll boost your momentum, but it will often result in a penalty.

On breakaways, try to deke your way close enough to have the goalie attempt a poke check. When you see his stick come out, shoot immediately; you'll have a wide-open net.

A cross-ice centering pass and a one-timer is the most effective way to score.

I remember the first time I played *NHL Hockey* for Sega Genesis; the preliminary title in the esteemed *NHL* series from EA Sports. Sure, it wasn't the most challenging or realistic game available (I actually managed to win a full game playing as the then expansion San Jose Sharks without the benefit of a goalie), but it was the beginning of a legacy of rock-solid and flat out enjoyable hockey titles that continues with the newest release, *NHL 2001*. And while the game certainly has its ups and downs, it successfully continues the tradition of lightning fast gameplay and innovative play modes that you'd expect from the series.

When it comes to options, titles in the EA Sports' series are second to none. *NHL 2001* is no different in this regard. All 30 NHL teams are available, including the expansion Minnesota Wild and Columbus Blue Jackets, as well as a total of 20 additional international and all-star teams. The game offers the standard gameplay modes: exhibition, season, playoff, tournament, and shootout, as well as the new "NHL Challenge," which can be activated in any mode. This feature allows you to earn points used to bump up the stats of your created players by completing increasingly difficult tasks during games. The tasks are broken up into three levels of difficulty—the more challenging the feat, the more points you earn. They range everywhere from simply scoring a power-play goal to the nearly impossible chore of scoring a goal in the first 30 seconds of each period. As you'd expect from an EA Sports title, you can also adjust just about every rule or option to fit your preferences and skill level.

Once you've made your gameplay selections and tweaked the options to your liking, it's time to hit the frozen pond. The first thing you'll probably notice about *NHL 2001* is the sub-par graphics this year. The visuals were undoubtedly superior last year, but the animation was choppy and prone to slowdown. You won't find any such deficiencies this year, as the game maintains a fairly smooth framerate throughout. You'll have to put up with some blotchy and pixelated player models, but I'll take smooth action over eye candy any day. On the sound side, Jim Hughson and Bill Clement return to call the action and they do a fairly good job of keeping up (although I'm not sure if anyone could keep up with this game's frenetic pace). All of the sound effects are right on the money, and

the crowd reactions are phenomenal. I especially liked the fact that if you're having trouble getting the puck out of your own zone, they'll practically boo you out of the building. EA Sports' games always have excellent presentation value, and *NHL 2001* is no exception.

The *NHL* series has seen its fair share of changes and improvements over the years, but one aspect has remained constant throughout: these games are freakin' fast. So fast in fact, that I wouldn't be surprised if the NHL's slogan (the fastest game on earth) was first written after an extended session with *NHL 2001* or one of its predecessors. The raucous pace of the game has always made for wide-open contests with plenty of shots on goal, breakaways and odd-man rushes. This style of game was enjoyable to be sure, but cheap, superhuman goaltenders were the only reason for any AI competency whatsoever. Things have changed this time around and the computer AI has been beefed up considerably. You'll really have to bring your A-game every time to beat them on the higher difficulty settings.

As a veteran of the *NHL* series and someone who enjoys a good challenge, I was pleased to see that the players act much more realistically this year. Teammates now flock to the net when the puck is loose, and position themselves well on power plays. The computer defenders are also much more aggressive—you'll have to work the puck around quickly to get a good shot off. This is a notable improvement from previous editions where the defenders would seemingly ignore anyone other than the puck handler. There are still too many odd-man breaks and some quirky AI decision-making (i.e. defenders standing still and leaving the puck sitting two feet from the net), but the astronomical shot totals are down and the goals are scored at a more reasonable frequency.

My biggest beef with *NHL 2001* has to be the balance of the difficulty levels. As expected, the beginner levels are laughably easy, but the pro and all-star levels are extremely challenging and often frustrating. As previously stated, I welcome a challenge and certainly don't mind losing if I felt like I lost fair and square. The thing is, I felt like most of the goals scored against me absolutely couldn't have been avoided no matter how I played. The computer has no trouble stealing the puck from you, but their players magically pass unscathed through checks and whip the puck around to each other like bumpers on a pinball machine. Even if you manage to build up a lead, the computer seems to crank it up a notch until they even the score. To make matters worse, cheap goals still happen quite often—there's nothing more infuriating than seeing your lead disappear on a slow floating shot from the blue line that somehow trickles under your goalie's arm.

Overall, *NHL 2001* is a solid hockey game—definitely the best currently available for the PlayStation. Still, with a little refinement and balance, the game could have been much better. I'm glad to see that EA Sports is taking steps to improve the realism in their games, but the action is still too fast and inconsistent to be considered a true hockey simulation. Still, the *NHL* series is improving with each passing year, and it's still a blast to play. If you're a fan of high octane, up and down hockey and can live with a little frustration, lace up your skates and hit the ice with *NHL 2001*.