

NHL 2K – Sega Dreamcast

Developed by: BlackBox Games (<http://www.blackboxgames.com>)

Published by: Sega (<http://www.sega.com>)

Reviewed by: Tim Maxwell

Official Site: http://www.sega.com/games/games_nhl.shtml

Genre: Hockey

Number of Players: One to Four

ESRB: Everyone

Overall Rating: 8/10

Graphics: 9/10

Sound: 7/10

Documentation: 8/10

Getting Started: 8/10

Gameplay: 7/10

Value: 8/10

The Good Press: Eye-popping graphics; tight, precise control; the game is just plain fun to play.

The Bad Press: Some of the missing options are inexcusable; merely adequate sound; incredibly unrealistic AI at times.

Supports: VMU or compatible memory device

Tips:

Scoring on a breakaway is incredibly difficult to do. You're better off skating to the far side of the net and look for a teammate with a centering pass.

The standard ice camera is a cool action cam, but depth perception is difficult. Try using the $\frac{3}{4}$ overhead view for a better view of the ice.

Maybe I'm off my hinges, but I really wasn't all that impressed with Sega's highly-acclaimed sports titles *NFL 2K* and *NBA 2K*. Now, before you tie me up and burn me at the stake, allow me to explain. Yes, the graphics in both were revolutionary, and they each scored very high with intangibles, but let's be honest with ourselves – the gameplay left much to be desired. A successful running game was virtually impossible in *NFL 2K*, and it was far too easy score on lay-ups and dunks in *NBA 2K*. These might have been considered minor problems by casual fans, but us real sports aficionados would take realism over glamour any day. That brings us to Sega's newest sports title, *NHL 2K*, and even though it suffers from some of the same drawbacks that plagued the other games, it still manages to play a great game of hockey.

The first time you load up *NHL 2K*, you might be under the impression that the game offers all the same gameplay features that helped to make the other games in the *2K* series so popular. As you dig deeper into the menus, however, you'll start to see that even some of the most fundamental play options have been left out or dumbed down. For example, let's say you want to play through a season but don't have the time or patience for the full 82 games. Well, you're out of luck my friend -- it's 82 games or nothing. Or perhaps you'd like to adjust the frequency of penalties called in the game. Sorry, you can only toggle penalties on or off. Come on guys! You mean to tell me that you could adjust the color of the breathing strip on the players' noses in *NFL 2K*, but don't even allow a shortened season in *NHL 2K*? Shameful.

Luckily, once you actually hit the ice in *NHL 2K*, things start looking up in a hurry. Each game begins with the traditional National Anthem/light show that you'd see in a real pro hockey game, and it all looks breathtaking. The players themselves, much like those in the other *2K* games, are made up of around 1500 polygons each and the results are evident. Players glide around the frozen pond smoothly and at an amazing clip. Each player also bears a strong resemblance to their real life counterparts – complete with real bit-mapped faces and accurate body-scaling. The arena and rink graphics are equally impressive –

you'll even notice the trails left in the ice by the players' skates. Despite the abundance of eye candy, the game still manages to run at a cool 60 FPS. Hats off to Sega for delivering another stunning graphical effort.

In terms of presentation, *NHL 2K* does an adequate job of giving you that on-the-ice feeling. Hockey Night in Canada veteran announcers Bob Cole and Harry Neale handle the play-by-play and do a decent job for the most part. Of all the tandems that have been brought on to call video hockey games, they probably do the best job of keeping up with the action onscreen. Still, as a whole, the sound effects in the game all seem rather ho-hum to me. The whack of a stick striking the puck or a player getting leveled by a vicious cross-check all sound fine, but at times, the arena seems more suited to golf than hockey. Cole follows the action well, but never really gets all that excited and Neale, (thankfully) only chimes in occasionally with some pointless blurb that has no effect on the game. The crowd does come through with their share of ooh's and ahh's, but the excitement level just isn't there. Oh, and here's the kicker: no celebration sound is played after a goal. No wonder the crowd is bored – they get to hear the organist bang out Beethoven's Fifth after the game-winning goal in overtime as opposed to a blaring bullhorn or siren. Note to Sega: this is a hockey arena, not Carnegie Hall.

Ah, but sound does not a good game make. The gameplay and control do and in this phase, *NHL 2K* comes away as a cup contender. I'm not prepared to say it takes home Lord Stanley's Cup, but it certainly does a lot of things right. First of all, the control is really tight and responsive. Analog control was meant for hockey and allows you to stop on a dime or pull off that beautiful pirouette to lose the defender with ease. All of the buttons on the controller are used for one function or another, but once you've played for a while, you'll see that getting used to the controls is quite simple. One move that is notably absent however, is a fake shot. Fakes are a very important part of hockey – it's too bad this aspect was overlooked.

In terms of artificial intelligence, *NHL 2K* is a mixed bag. For the most part, the goalies behave as they should and only flop down to the ice when it's absolutely necessary. As a result, scoring a goal can seem very difficult at first. You can aim your shot using the analog stick, but more often than not, it seems like no matter where you aim, the shot always hits the goalie square for an easy save. Obviously, this can be frustrating, but with practice, you'll improve your chances by noticing where the goalie is set up. Passing frequently and setting up a cross-ice one-timer is probably the best way to score, but you'll see maybe one in 25 slappers go in too if you aim them right. The goal scoring frequency is still far from perfect, but of all the video hockey games I've played, I'd say *NHL 2K* does it the best.

Other areas of artificial intelligence are so laughable, you can't help but shake your head. For example, if you're on the power play and the defense chooses a passive box approach for the penalty kill, the defenders will very rarely stray from their positions and go for an easy loose puck. It's actually quite humorous watching the puck sit two feet from the goalie for five seconds without the defensemen so much as flinching. Equally annoying is dealing with manual line changing. I'm not going to go into too much detail here, but just imagine being caught in five on zero breaks once or twice a game and you'll get the drift. To be fair, these are minor complaints that really don't detract much from gameplay, and honestly, I can't think of any major AI problems.

For a first attempt, Sega Sports and BlackBox Games have done a pretty good job of simulating the game of hockey. EA Sports has been doing it for nearly a decade now and there are still flaws in their games year after year. Of all the sports out there, hockey must be the toughest one to translate into a video game. If you're a Dreamcast owner and a hockey fan, you have no excuse not to pick this game up. Sure, *NHL 2K* is missing a few features and has a few quirky AI problems, but it's stellar graphics and solid control will undoubtedly have you happily body checking your opponents for a long time to come.