

THE DOWNFALL OF THE EA NHL SERIES

Ahhhhh, the EA NHL series. If you're like me and have been following the franchise for years, you'll know it holds a special place in the hearts of many hockey fans, especially those who grew up in gaming. But something's changed, right? It's like watching a friend who was once full of potential, lose their way over the years. What happened to EA's NHL series that once felt like a must-have every year? Let's dig into it because there's a lot to unpack.

First, let's rewind a bit. Remember the early 2000s? The NHL series was on fire. Whether it was NHL 2002, 2003, or NHL 2004, these games had something so appealing about them. The controls were tight, the gameplay felt dynamic, and, let's be real, the commentary and soundtrack? Iconic. Plus, the graphics, for their time, were absolutely stunning. There was something fun and addicting about dropping in for a quick game or diving into a playoff mode that felt like you were really bringing a team to a Stanley Cup.

Then NHL 2009 came along and brought the "Skill Stick" revolution. Remember that? Using the right stick to control your shots and dekes was a game-changer, no pun intended. It made the gameplay feel so much more smooth and natural, like you were actually controlling a player on the ice, rather than pressing buttons in a sequence. That was the beginning of a golden era for the NHL franchise.

From NHL 09 through to around NHL 14, the series was hitting all the right notes. It felt like EA was listening to its fans, innovating the gameplay, and keeping the franchise fresh. You'd see little tweaks each year that made a real difference whether it be better AI, smarter goaltending or more realistic skating physics. The game felt deep, rewarding, and something you could play for countless hours without feeling like you were wasting any of your time. Heck, even the cover

athletes felt like they represented the pinnacle of the sport. I still remember Steven Stamkos on NHL 12 and Claude Giroux on NHL 13.

But then something happened. Around the time NHL 15 launched, the wheels started falling off. It was EA's first attempt at the series on the next-gen consoles (PS4, Xbox One), and honestly, it was an absolute dumpster fire. They cut features. I mean like huge features. Franchise Mode was gutted, you couldn't play Season Mode, and don't even get me started on the lack of EASHL (EA Sports Hockey League), which was one of the biggest multiplayer game modes in the series.

It was like they were so focused on getting the game to look pretty on the new hardware that they forgot to include, you know, the actual fun stuff. Sure, the graphics were nice. The arenas looked slick, the player models were sharper, but the gameplay? The depth? All that was missing. You know it's bad when people are asking to go back to the previous-gen version because it had a lot more features.

Once NHL 15 came out, the series started to settle into this weird pattern where every year felt like a copy-paste job. EA would put out some new random features like improved puck physics or better collisions, but let's be honest, could you really tell the difference year to year? Because I for sure couldn't. They started adding these gimmicky game modes like NHL Threes or Ones, which were fun for about five minutes but didn't have the staying power that the core modes did.

Franchise mode has barely evolved in what feels like a decade. It's the same menus, the same shallow trade logic, the same free agency system that makes you want to pull your hair out. Yes, I know the newer game, NHL 25, revamped franchise mode but it is all mostly menus. Players, like me, don't really like that. Don't even get me started on the be a pro mode. When they announced that they would be doing a complete overhaul on the Be a Pro mode for NHL 21, like everyone else, I was so hyped. I couldn't wait to get my hands on NHL 21. Before this, it was just like franchise mode, just straight menus. They created this conversation thingy where you could actually interact with your teammates and coaches while playing. Even when you're getting drafted

they do like this whole interview with a team's management staff. Now, you'd expect even just a few changes to the mode but nope. It's still been the same beginning cutscene for the past four years where the phrase "Pricey pond hockey" is heard every freakin' year.

Now one of the biggest reasons for the NHL series' downfall is the addition of microtransactions. It's not like they're unique to the NHL series too. Ultimate Team is a big cash grab across the FIFA and Madden series. In EA NHL, it's especially frustrating because the rest of the game feels so far behind in many areas. When you see EA putting so much effort into making sure Ultimate Team is front and centre, it's hard not to feel like the core of the game is being ignored.

It almost feels like EA shifted focus to Ultimate Team. Rather than developing a deeper, more satisfying game, they're catering to the quick-fix, spend-money-here crowd. Ultimate Team is essentially built for people to drop money to build their dream squad, but the rest of the game is left untouched. Long-time players, like myself, are frustrated as EA focuses on the same money-making formula, while the rest of the game feels like it's being ignored.

What made the NHL series so special before was its identity. It really felt like hockey. You could tell EA had a passion for the sport of hockey. There was a focus on making it realistic, immersive, and true to the spirit of the game. But over time, it's like the series lost that passion. Instead of trying to copy the intensity of a real NHL game, it's more like they're just making sure the game is "good enough" to release each year. There's no longer that drive to innovate or evolve in any significant way.

It doesn't help the fact that EA NHL isn't as big as FIFA or Madden. EA knows they can push a new FIFA or Madden game every year, and millions will buy it no matter what. The NHL series, though? It's a smaller market, and it feels like EA is fine with putting in the bare minimum to keep that part of their audience coming back without spending too much time or money developing something truly great. That's probably why we've seen a lot more copy-paste games over the years with very little crazy changes to the games.

Honestly, it feels like the NHL series is at a crossroads. Hockey fans have been incredibly vocal about their frustrations, especially in recent years. You see it all over Reddit, Twitter, and in YouTube game reviews. People are tired of the same old recycled experience. And while EA has made a few improvements here and there, like adding back some features they stripped away during the next-gen transition, it feels more like a band-aid on a much bigger problem.

The question is however can EA make a comeback? Or have they lost the plot entirely?

Part of me hopes they can pull off a comeback. We've seen it happen in other franchises, like NBA 2K, which at one point went through a pretty rough patch before bouncing back with some serious innovation. But for that to happen, EA needs to stop treating the NHL series like a game they can just copy and paste every year. They need to go back to basics, listen to the community, and rebuild the franchise's identity. If they keep doing what they're doing now, focusing more on microtransactions and less on actual hockey fans, the series is just going to keep declining.

At this point, I think a lot of us are just hoping for something fresh, something that can rekindle that excitement we used to feel when a new NHL game dropped. Until then, it's hard not to feel like we're just watching a slow, disappointing downfall.