



REVIEW

ESPN NFL 2K5 Review

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XBOX

≡ GAME INFO

ESPN NFL 2K5 is yet another excellent football game in a long line of excellent football games.

By [Alex Navarro](#) on July 21, 2004 at 1:03PM PDT



Amid the usual prerelease hoopla for this year's installment in Sega's football franchise, ESPN NFL 2K5, announcements of both a massive drop in price to a more budget-minded point of \$19.99, and a sudden release date shift that puts the game in stores over a month earlier than it shipped last year both caught a lot of people off guard. This led to a lot of wild speculation about the fate of this year's title and whether the overall quality of it would suffer. Yes, it certainly has been an interesting past couple of months for fans of Visual Concepts' brand of football, but, thankfully, the end result of all this drama is a game that seems no worse for



the wear. ESPN NFL 2K5 is yet another excellent football game in a long line of excellent football games, bringing to the table a host of feature improvements, amazing visuals, and the same brand of exciting and highly playable football gameplay that Visual Concepts is so well known for. Add to all of that a ridiculously cheap price, and you've got a game you simply can't afford to pass

up.



Where to buy

PS2 ▼

ESPN NFL 2K5

\$34.98 at Amazon

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We're still a good month away from the start of the NFL season, but that hasn't stopped Sega and Visual Concepts from bringing out the latest in their NFL franchise.



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If you played and enjoyed last year's ESPN NFL Football, you will find yourself quite at ease when playing ESPN NFL 2K5. The basic gameplay has remained largely untouched, save for a few improvements that aren't necessarily immediately noticeable but become readily apparent when compared to last year's title. The biggest complaint about rushing the ball last year was how incredibly easy it was. This was largely due to the runner's ability to simply turn on a dime without any notable time needed to shift direction. This year, a bit of momentum has been added to the running game, thus making it impossible for you to simply shift directions at will without slowing down a bit first. You can

still use your juke and spin moves to turn and move past defenders, but if you just shift from left to right, you'll see a momentary step where the runner has to readjust himself. This is a fairly subtle effect, but it definitely makes for a more realistic running game.

The biggest upgrade to the passing game is fewer dropped passes. At times in last year's game, good receivers would manage to somehow just drop easy passes while wide open. This year, things have changed. If you've got a great receiver that you can manage to get open, he'll catch the ball almost every time. You'll still see occasional drops here and there, but, hey, even the best receivers in the game drop occasional easy ones. Just ask ESPN's cover boy, Terrell Owens. While all of this is well and good, the increase in caught passes actually manages to make the game significantly easier than ever before on the default difficulty. Certain in and out routes, with good receivers, pretty much turn into money plays where, if you time the pass right, you can get a completion around 80 percent of the time. Cranking the difficulty up to all-pro (from the default pro difficulty) remedies this a bit, because coverage gets tighter, and it's easier to throw interceptions when being careless.

Speaking of coverage--and all things generally defensive--the defensive game has also gotten tweaked a bit. For starters, you can redesign defensive back and linebacker schemes now using a combination of the right and left triggers (on the Xbox) or the R1 and L1 buttons (on the PlayStation 2) with the right control stick. By holding down one button or the other and then pressing the right stick in a direction, you can shift your DBs or LBs to the right or left, you can pull them back, or you can push them in to press receivers. It isn't quite as dynamic as the single-player defensive hot routes that Madden has this year, but it does give you more control over how your defense is laid out. Another tweak that's been made involves sacks. Seemingly, it is actually easier now to work your way past an offensive line to get to the QB than it used to be. The flip side to this is that now, QBs have specific dodge moves (that you yourself can make use of by tapping the right control stick when controlling your QB) that allow them to shake would-be sackers off. While these moves are more effective for athletic QBs like, say, Michael Vick and Daunte Culpepper, it still is just a little too easy to sack someone. And then when you find yourself against a largely stationary quarterback like Drew Bledsoe or Tom Brady, you can imagine what happens. This, in the grand scheme of things, isn't really all that bad. It just means that the sack numbers tend to be a little higher than your average NFL sack numbers.



The running game this year features a bit more of a momentum-based physics system. It's subtle, but it makes rushing more realistic.

The final, notable gameplay adjustment made for this year's title is an added emphasis on control over tackling. Aside from the ability to dive tackle by specifically pressing a button, tackling, up to this point, had basically simply been a matter of running one player at another

player. While you can still simply run your defensive player at an opponent until you make contact, you also have some control over what kind of hit you deliver. By pressing the X button on the Xbox or the square button on the PS2, you can either deliver a massive hit by holding the button down, or you can simply give the ball carrier a shove by tapping the button lightly. On the whole, tackling just feels better in this year's game, and it's more under your control. It feels quite good to really lay a big hit using a strong safety like Rodney Harrison.

On either side of the ball, the artificial intelligence this year is quite top-notch--or, at least, when you opt to turn the difficulty up. As mentioned previously, on the default setting, ESPN NFL 2K5 is immensely easy if you've ever played a Visual Concepts football game before. Once you get to all-pro--and, eventually, legend--the AI really kicks up. Aside from a couple of odd coverage lineups here and there, the defensive AI is superb, and when you're going up against a high-ranked defense, look out. An AI-controlled offense can still be tamed on higher difficulty levels with some practice, but, at least for a while after first picking the game up, you're likely to give up a lot of big plays. The AI coaching has also been completely revamped to better assess and emulate the styles of real-life coaches. Each coach has his own profile that tracks everything from how often he runs the ball to how often he calls shotgun plays and right down to how often he typically goes into a hurry-up offense. It's a great system that brings a lot more variety and strategy to the game.

However, aside from the coaching profiles, each of the other fixes and additions to the ESPN gameplay system, while certainly most welcome, aren't always immediately noticeable. The feel of the game is a bit different thanks to these tweaks, but really, no particularly revolutionary gameplay upgrades have made their ways into this year's game--at least nothing that would leap out at anyone who wasn't a devout fan of last year's game. After a while, you kind of can't help but feel like you're just playing last year's recycled engine, which has been given an extra coat of polish to make it look shiny and new. Of course, last year's gameplay engine was phenomenal, so, really, however light the game may be on significant changes to the overall play style, it is still exceptionally fun to play.

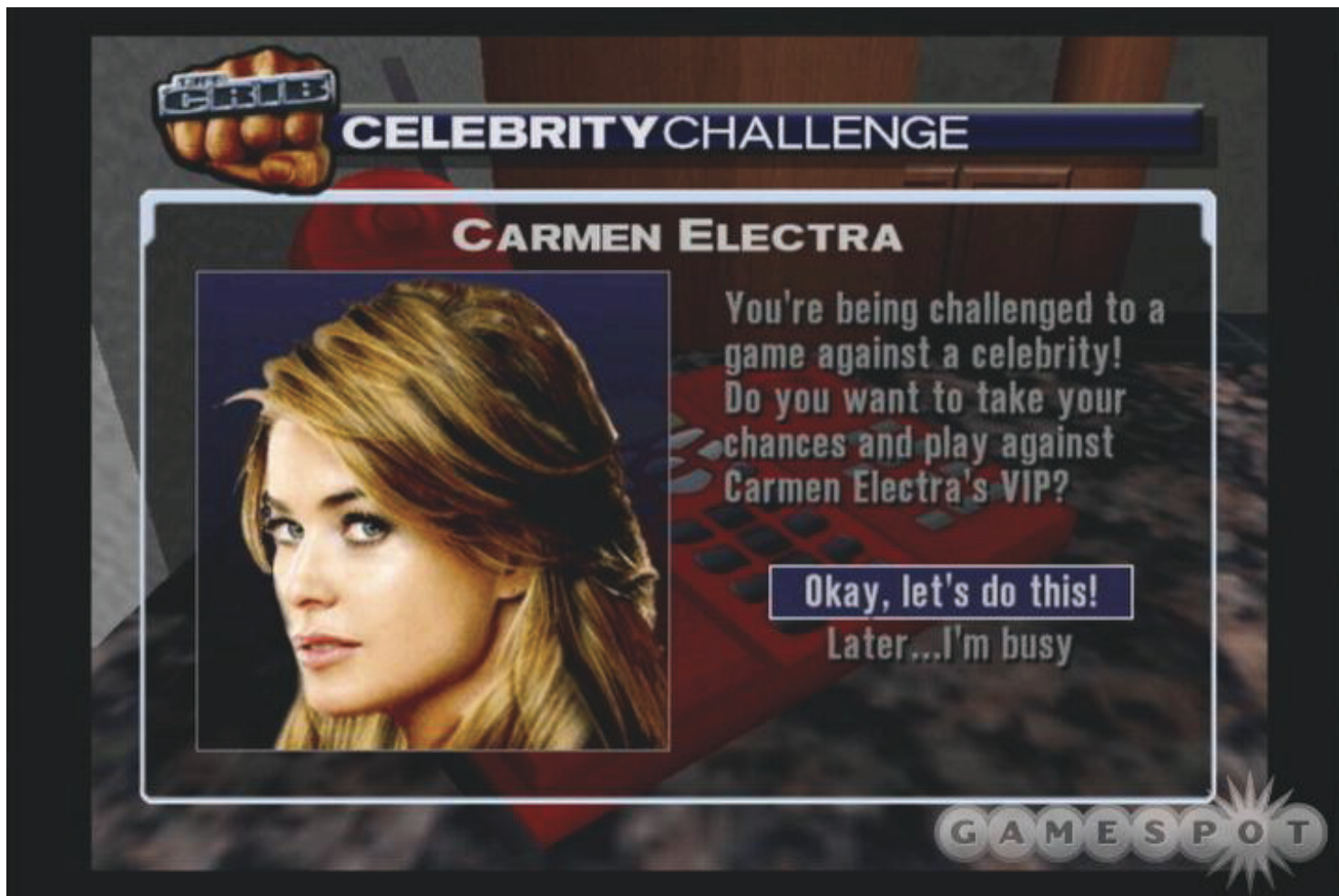


While the game still plays wonderfully, you can't help but feel like you're still playing the same basic game as last year.

For what the game may be lacking in major gameplay upgrades, however, ESPN NFL 2K5 more than makes up for by being feature-rich across the board. Going back to the coach profile aspect of the game for a moment, one of the game's biggest innovations pertains to a

user version of this exact same profile. Essentially, when you create your profile, the game immediately starts tracking how you play. Most of the same ratings and stats from the coach profiles are tracked as you play, as well as a host of other statistics that are far deeper than the coach profiles themselves. This "VIP" profile system, as Visual Concepts has labeled it, is amazing. If you were to play through a few games and then play a game against a team that was coached using the attributes found in your own profile, it would almost be like looking in a mirror. The team would play so much like yours, it would be almost scary. On top of all of that, your profile can be uploaded to your friends' memory cards or online, allowing future opponents to effectively "scout" you. Not only does this add a whole new dimension to the game's multiplayer component but also it's very, very cool.

The VIP profile system is really the only effectively *new* feature in the game, but many of the preexisting ESPN modes have been given huge upgrades. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the franchise mode. Comparing this year's to last year's franchise mode is like night and day. For starters, the contract system finally gives you the ability to include signing bonuses, as well as design salary structures out over a number of years. So, if you're signing an older free agent whose skills might diminish after a couple of seasons, backload the contract and keep the signing bonus minimal so that you can possibly trade or cut that player a couple of years down the road with minimal penalty. This kind of signing logic has made its way into the franchise AI as well, because the remaining 31 teams you don't control will sign and release players during the offseason just like in real life. Rather than just occasionally signing big free agents and filling holes where needed, players will get cut, signed by other teams, cut again, and so on. You can also now place players on injured reserve, which allows you to sign a fill-in player if that player is going to be out for the season. All in all, it seems like the signing, cutting, and trading logic is absolutely realistic (for the most part), though teams do still have odd tendencies to stock up on positions that are already filled out by high-ranked players, thus making for slightly weird roster balances once you get five or six years into a franchise.



The new VIP profile system tracks every aspect of how you play the game and makes it so that others can use your profile to practice against your style of play.

Perhaps the biggest addition to the franchise mode this year is the new team-preparation feature. This feature essentially gives you the ability to design exactly how each and every player and position on your team prepares for a game. If you think your quarterbacks need to watch some game film of the opposing defense, then you'll schedule it. If you've got an injured cornerback that you want for next week, schedule some specific rehab. You're given an allotted number of hours per day with which to design your training regiments, and the allotted number allows for quite a number of workouts. You can design most all types of training and coaching in varying degrees of intensity, and you can also design them to be weekly bouts or single sessions. To put it bluntly, it is utterly insane how much stuff you can do, and if you do it well, the results really show in your players' ratings (as it does when you coach and train poorly). The only problem with this addition is that it requires some intense micromanagement to really be effective. Your average football fan probably isn't going to want to put up with this sort of thinking man's work, but, fortunately, you have the option to just skip the preparation altogether so that you can go into a game with your team as is. It's certainly a nice feature to have, though.

And then there are the figurative second-year players in first-person football and the crib. Last year's rookie season for these two features yielded both positive and negative responses, so many were curious to see how the two would improve. Well, they really haven't. First-person football remains, largely, a gimmick mode. You can now cycle through viewed receivers when playing as the quarterback, and you can also toggle out of first-person at any time during a game as well. But aside from these tweaks, it's basically still last year's first-person football. If you liked it last year, you'll certainly like it this year. If you hated it last year, well...perhaps you'll just want to skip it this time around.

As for the crib, it's deeper, there's more stuff to unlock (ranging from furniture to free agents), and it's got one all-new feature to speak of. That feature? The inclusion of a bunch of B-list celebrities. These celebrities consist of *Ready to Rumble* and *3,000 Miles to Graceland* star David Arquette, Dave Navarro groupie numero uno Carmen Electra, mildly funny comic actor Jamie Kennedy, the loudest hip-hop personality on earth in Funkmasta Flex, and the grotesque human curiosity-turned-occasional reality TV star Steve-O. Each of these celebrities has his or her own "team," which basically consists of a roster most pro bowl teams can't even compete with, and through the crib, they'll challenge you to matches. The only interaction you have with the celebrities is through a little box with a talking head that appears from time to time during a game. The celebrity taunts you when his or her team makes a big play, while he or she laments when you pull a big play. For the sake of brevity, we'll just sum it up nicely and quickly for you: This feature is dumb. None of these celebrities makes any manner of contextual sense in the game, their dialogue is painful to listen to, and, really, the last thing we ever want to see is Steve-O's grinning, desperate face when we give up a touchdown. The good news is that you can, if so inclined, completely ignore these celebrity interactions, even if you happen to visit the crib regularly. And you'll want to ignore it.



First-person football and the crib are back. Whether you loved them or hated them last year, you'll likely have much the same reaction to them this time around.

The last couple of additions to ESPN NFL 2K5's feature list are celebrations and, on the Xbox, editable stadium music. The celebration mode actually lets you assign specific celebration animations to various control buttons, letting you bust out with your favorite celebrations after a big score. The list of available celebrations isn't huge, but there's a decent variety to choose from. The stadium music mode is Xbox-exclusive since it ties into the game's custom soundtrack feature. Basically, you can take any song from the Xbox hard drive and edit it to fit into the game as background ambience. Score a big touchdown and set it to play the most celebratory song you've got. Get ready for a kickoff and set up "Welcome to the Jungle" to play (just like a New England home game). It's a very cool feature, to say the least.

Aside from these modes, most of the remaining game is much the same as before. The requisite quick match, situation, practice, tournament, player create, and team create modes are all there, front and center. One notable omission is the season mode, which, for some reason, just doesn't exist this year. While you can just play a single season in the franchise mode, and the franchise mode does support multiplayer, it is a little odd that season was just dumped.

Online play is also back once again for ESPN NFL 2K5, and, this year, both the PS2 and Xbox are basically on an even keel when it comes to online features. Both have your basic head-to-head play, and both feature tournament- and season-based league play. Leagues existed on the PS2 last year, but they weren't all that spectacular. This year, leagues are set to offer up a multitude of options that weren't previously available, including live rosters. Essentially, the system will host your league's rosters on a server, allowing you to perform trades, conduct free agent signings, and track injuries across your league. It's basically the closest thing to that Holy Grail of online football--called an online franchise mode--that fans have been pining for since the advent of online play. That all sounds very cool, but leagues are currently unavailable as of this writing, so it's hard to say one way or the other if this feature will work out as intended.



The online mode on both the PS2 and Xbox features league play, complete with live roster storage for trades, injury tracking, and free agent signings.

One change that's been made to the online gameplay is a new EQ balance that essentially balances out the two teams in competition to make their statistics more comparable, which means that if you want to play with a team that's lower-ranked, you'll still be able to compete

with the juggernaut teams. It seems as though this works pretty well, though we did find that pitting, for example, the Giants against the Patriots was still a fairly one-sided affair. Another nice addition is the effective requirement of updated rosters for online play. Once a new roster update comes up, the game prompts you to install it once you log on. For those who demand roster purity, this is exactly what you've been hoping for. Finally, in regard to online performance, for the most part we came across no lag, no drops, and no issues to speak of. We had one connection drop on the PS2, and the PS2 version also seemed to experience a bit of slowdown online, but otherwise, it seems as though online play should be pretty much copacetic across the board.

For all of its excellent modes and gameplay, however, ESPN NFL 2K5's greatest asset comes in the form of its graphics. Hands down, flat out, undeniably, inarguably, this is the best-looking football game ever made. All you need to do is take a nice, up-close look at any given player model, and this fact will become readily apparent to you. The jerseys, helmets, body builds, and faces all look amazing. Sure, a few players' faces don't look quite perfect, but the ones that do are phenomenal. And then there's the animation. Never has a football game looked as parallel to the real game as ESPN NFL 2K5. The tackles, the catches, the throws, the blocks, the interceptions... Every single aspect of the on-the-field action--all of it--looks completely awesome. Watch a safety jump up for an interception, or check out linemen on opposite sides of the ball grappling with one another, or catch a glimpse of a running back as he spins past a would-be tackler. Try to recall a game that captured these visual aesthetics better. You might as well just give up, because you won't be able to.

Of course, all of this is to say nothing of the game's usage of the ESPN license for every aspect of its presentation, which is equally incredible. Last year's game feels like just the tip of the iceberg compared to what Visual Concepts has done with it this year. Along with all the awesome replays, menus, stat overlays, crowd cutscenes, and otherwise cool-looking ESPN bric-a-brac, real-life ESPN personalities Chris "Boomer" Berman and Suzie Kolber are polygonally represented in the game. Boomer provides pregame, halftime, and postgame commentary, whereas Suzie interjects the game with injury reports and appears at the end of the game to interview the top player of the contest. Aside from some rather poor lip-synching dialogue, these representations of the two actually look a whole bunch like their real-life counterparts. Additionally, ESPN anchor Trey Wingo and draft guru Mel Kiper Jr. also make appearances--albeit only audibly--to discuss specific aspects of a season during episodes of *SportsCenter*, which can be played during the franchise mode. Wingo talks up injury reports, retirements, and contract signings, whereas Kiper discusses promising rookies and lends his name to the mock draft feature. Not all of the dialogue is brilliant, but it works just fine.



The crib mode lets you assemble a large collection of random items, including bobbleheads.

However, while the dialogue from the ESPN folks is certainly great, the in-game commentary isn't quite up to snuff. Longtime Sega Sports no-name commentators Dan Stevens and Peter O'Keefe are back yet again, and if, when playing the game, their commentary seems just a

tad too familiar, don't worry. You're not crazy. It seems as though the developers didn't really record much new commentary this year, and much of it is directly lifted from last year's game. Additionally, we encountered some weird spots where specific lines of dialogue kept showing up over and over again throughout a game. We actually heard the same line about "a huge punt" seven times in the same game. Aside from the repetition and lack of vicissitude, however, the commentary is still largely good, and it manages to stay accurate in most every situation.

Faring far better in the audio department are the in-game sound effects. Though, again, not a ton has changed here. However, what has changed makes a huge difference. The sounds of hits and tackles are excellent and so is the roar of the crowd, especially if you happen to have some surround speakers, because the game makes solid use of Dolby surround support on both systems. The on-the-field dialogue is about the same as always, consisting of some junky insults thrown from opposing players, which is fine for what it is. Less fine, however, is the dialogue during the Suzie Kolber interview with the player of the game. Suzie herself is appropriately obtuse for her usual on-camera interview style, but the player dialogue actually manages to be less interesting than your usual player interview. You get nothing from it, and half of the time the player speaking has the completely wrong voice. Tom Brady talking like he was raised in Brooklyn? Not good. Funny, perhaps, but not good.



As creepy as the idea of a polygonal Chris Berman is, the implementation of him, Suzie Kolber, and the other ESPN personalities is a great touch.

When comparing the two versions of ESPN NFL 2K5, the Xbox version wins in most every respect. Graphically, the PS2 version is pretty clearly just a dumbed-down take on the Xbox version, with some occasional frame rate problems to boot. Also, the PS2 version has a

notable difference when it comes to highlight reels. While the Xbox version features full video highlight clips, the PS2 just uses static images presented in succession. That's not to say the PS2 version doesn't look excellent when compared to other PS2 games, because it does. However, the Xbox version holds a much clearer-cut advantage over other games on its respective system. On the flip side... Over the years, some have claimed that the PS2 versions of the ESPN games have controlled better, due to slightly more responsive button timing and analog control. An extremely minute difference can be noted between the two versions of ESPN NFL 2K5, but it's so slight that it practically doesn't matter. The Xbox version still plays wonderfully, and nobody should have any problems with it.

So, when all is said and done, and after all the price drop and release date hullabaloo, does ESPN NFL 2K5 manage to come together to make a compelling, quality football game? The answer is an unflinching and resounding "Yes." Don't think of ESPN NFL 2K5 as a budget game, because it's about the farthest thing from the average budget title that you can imagine. If anything, this game should be called the "Steal of the Century," because you're getting all the benefits of one of the best football franchises of all time for an incredibly measly 20 bucks. If this price isn't enough of an excuse to get you to give ESPN NFL 2K5--arguably the best football game on the market right now--a fair shot, then you are out of your mind. As for the rest of you who are not suffering from bouts of insanity, go pick up ESPN NFL 2K5, and do so with the peace of mind that you're getting no less than the deal of a lifetime.

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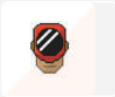
The Good

- N/A

The Bad

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