

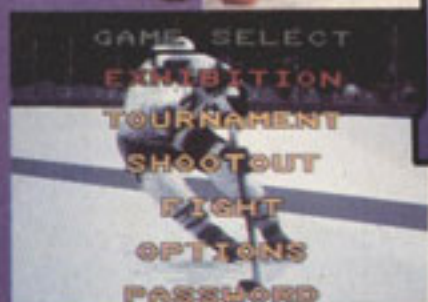


Mario is back and this time he's not taking any mushrooms. That's because the Mario in question is in fact the NHL ice hockey star Mario Lemieux. As you may have guessed, this means the game is a simulation of the fair sport of ice hockey, complete with sportsmanlike features such as fouls and even fistfights! The action is viewed side-on, and there are close-up screens of certain aspects of the action - such as fistcuffs!

However, despite these violent touches, ice hockey actually has rules. The game is played with two teams of six players. Each of these is armed with a curved wooden stick with which to strike the puck. Should the puck be touched by anything other than the player's stick, a foul is awarded to the other team. The only exception to this rule is the goalkeeper, who can stop the puck with whatever he likes, although should he hold on to it for too long a face off is awarded on the offenders' penalty spot.



▲ It's a goal!



◀ Plenty of options abound in this game.

MARIO LEMIEUX



PUCKING OFF

Face offs are used on a number of occasions. To start with, they are used to decide who gains possession at the beginning of the game. Once again, the action is shown close-up in a one-on-one scene. The puck is dropped between the players by the referee and the first one to flick it back to his team gains possession. Face offs are also used to decide fouls, such as a holding offence by the keeper. Each team has two penalty spots, located at short diagonals from each goal mouth. The face off is held near the goal of the offending team, so should the attacking team who have been fouled against gain control, they are in an ideal position to score!





COMMENT

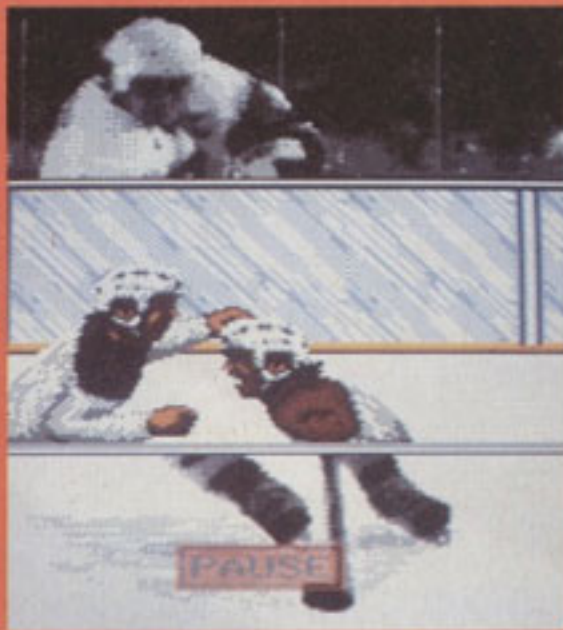
The obvious question is how well does Mario stand up to EA Hockey? Well, not all that badly, as a matter of fact. The close-ups are an improvement over the EA formula, and mastering the fight and penalty sequences especially takes some doing. The main game is quite speedy, although the automatic player selection is a bit dodgy. The graphics are okay, but the sound is awful, with a few bars of a dying tune squeaking up at moments of tension and hardly any sounds effects to speak of. Mario Lemieux is a fine game, more challenging and harder to master than EA Hockey, but without quite the smoothness of gameplay of the Electronic Arts game, or the atmosphere that gave EA Hockey its sense of realism. Worth a look, but EA Hockey still reigns supreme.



RAD

SCRAP ON

One of the more popular elements of ice hockey is when a couple of the players have a bit of a rumble. Having seen the potential in this, the programmers of Mario Hockey have added an arcade beat 'em up sequence in which you take on your opponent. A number of offensive moves are available, such as jabs, hooks and uppercuts as well as a selection of defensive moves, like retreating, dodging and ducking. Some teams are better in a fight than others, so make sure you know what you're up against before starting something!



▲ Plenty of near-the-goal mouth action here. Can you score that winning goal? Or will you completely spaz it up?

ICE HOCKEY



▲ Three players close in on the puck, while the rest of the players wander about aimlessly. Strange...



▲ The players skate about aimlessly, painfully oblivious to the fact that no one has the puck!



REVIEW

PENAL HILARITY



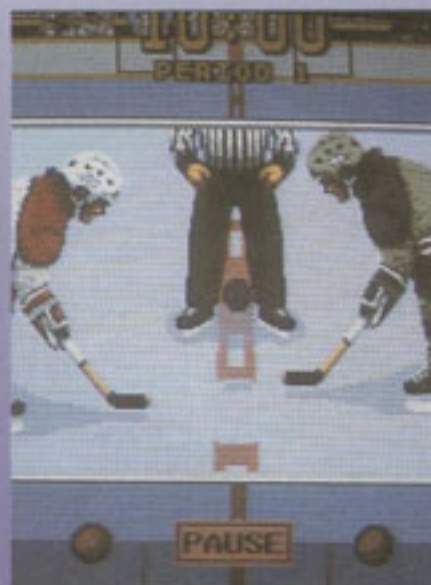
The third and final close-up sequence in Mario Lemieux is that of the penalties. First off you see a team-mate passing the puck to you from one corner of the screen. Then you must quickly decide where to post the puck to best fool the keeper. Timing is essential, as just the tiniest delay causes the puck to stop dead on your stick or even whizz harmlessly underneath it!



▲ The sports commentator appears on-screen occasionally to liven up the proceedings a bit.



▲ A bonus beat 'em up section! Here each button produces a different type of punch.



▲ These gorgeous visuals appear throughout the game. Groovy, eh?

COMMENT

After much play, I've come to the conclusion that EA Hockey still rules supreme, but Mario Lemieux Ice Hockey certainly gives it a good run for its money. Mario is tricky to master, packed full of excellent features, but is unfortunately marred by the annoying player selection - when you pass, the computer sometimes chooses a player away from the puck which results in you being intercepted and your attack completely breaking down. Very irritating, especially if the computer team scores! Apart from that, Mario Lemieux Ice Hockey is a very comprehensive simulation of the sport which features impressive stats screens and some neat touches. It should definitely appeal to fans of the sport - but check out EA Hockey before you buy.

JULIAN

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SLAVE STATS

There are more stats contained in Mario Hockey than you could shake a whole forest of sticks at and you don't even have to wait for the end of a period to see them! Pausing the game brings up the first page of stats, and pressing left or right cycles through them. If you fancy seeing how your goalkeeper's performing, how good your pass coverage or blocking is or even who scored each goal, just pause that game and away you go.



BY: SEGA

PRICE: £TBA

RELEASE DATE: JANUARY

GAME DIFFICULTY: MEDIUM/HARD

LIVES: N/A

CONTINUES: N/A

SKILL LEVELS: 3

RESPONSIVENESS: A BIT SLOW



PRESENTATION 94%

Jam-packed with options, stats and other great presentation-related screens.

GRAPHICS 79%

Small sprites and poor animation in the main game, but zoom-in screens are tops for detail and movement.

SOUND 12%

Absolutely awful. A mockery indeed, if ever there was one and no mistake.

PLAYABILITY 79%

A little tricky to get to grips with, but good fun nonetheless.

LASTABILITY 79%

More difficult than EA Hockey, but that's due more to the controls than difficulty of opposition.

OVERALL 76%

A decent console version of an exciting sport that lacks atmosphere but has enough playability to make it worth a look.