

## Review

# NASCAR SimRacing - Part 4

In our final installment, Chunx and Jens look at Career Mode, The "Other" Racing Series in NSR and provide closing comments.

by **Chunx** and **Jens "McGonigle" Lindblad**



## Career Mode

Despite EA's marketing hubris, NSR's "campaign" mode was first introduced in NASCAR Thunder 2004 and its clear to us that it has hardly been changed at all from the earlier EA title.

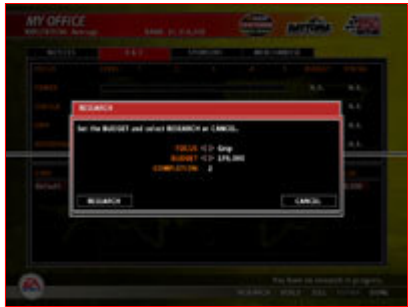
### Chunx' Career Mode Impressions

I must admit that I am not a big "campaign" player regardless of simulation subject or title. In fact, I'd say that the only campaign that I was ever really impressed with was in the flight sim MiG Alley. And while many at SimHQ weren't very impressed with it, I think the "campaign" mode of NSR is somewhat neat and I was pleasantly surprised that it wasn't a hokey, "Dukes of Hazzard" affair like some other games have offered. In fact, if I had to compare NSR's career mode to another game, it might be called, "NASCAR Tycoon".

Getting started in career mode, you will begin your racing career in the very fun-to-drive Craftsman Truck Series. You'll start out with a modest \$1 million bankroll and have to decide how you're going to use it to make your team more competitive through Research & Development programs, gaining team prestige and recognition with merchandise product lines and sales and obtaining new sponsors to help pay for your operation. I am quite a



skeptic when it comes to racing "campaign" modes and while this is clearly a very simplified version of reality I think this one is a fairly entertaining distraction from the actual racing for a sim fan and at first blush it seems to be tastefully and professionally done.



Just to test how the career mode really works, I ran the first CTS race of the series, a night race at Daytona (which looks GORGEOUS) in the regular "Race Now" CTS module. I tweaked up a good setup that let me run pretty consistent laps in the low 49 second range, with laps in the low 48s in the draft. Then I went back to the Career mode and ran the same race, using my tweaked setup. I worked my way through the pack carefully and finished this race in 2nd place. All in all I wouldn't say it was a challenging race, but I do enjoy the way the CTS trucks drive — entertaining, but not too twitchy.



Then I moved back into Career mode to run the same race. I noted that nowhere in Career mode did I see any place to adjust the strength of the AI or their aggressiveness, as in the Race Now module. Regardless, having set my R&D priorities, secured sponsors and printed up some T-shirt merchandise for the race, I entered the night event at Daytona.

***"All-New Career Mode:  
Start from humble beginnings and battle  
your way through NASCAR's minor  
leagues to make it big."***

***- EA Sports***

The first thing I noticed was that in qualifying the best I could muster was a 50.77 lap time, nearly 2 seconds slower than I ran with the same car, same setup, in the "Race Now" module (for comparison, the pole sitter in Career ran a low 48 sec lap). It would appear that there is some "software governor" on the cars in career mode that keeps you from running at full speed until you build some experience and gain points for your team's engineering skills. No problem with that, in my opinion. My lap time was only good for a 34th position on the grid, but at least I was in the race.



Once the race began, I shifted into 4th too early and watched the pack disappear in front of me. But, I had one car trapped behind me, so I blocked him until I could let him by in Turn 3 and then slip in on his bumper to form a small drafting team. My goal was merely to hang on and hopefully finish the race.

Well, as it turns out, the other AI cars suddenly seemed to get slower, despite having formed a nice 10 car, single file drafting pack of their own. I was surprised when we easily caught this larger drafting pack and then slowly worked our way through it, with me moving all the way up to 12th place in a matter of laps.

With 2 laps to go, the AI cars seemed to realize that I was now driving faster and their pace magically picked back up. I was now in a drafting pack and was able to trade spots back and forth, finally getting up to 10th place, but on the final lap the car immediately behind me was able to make a move to my outside in Turn 4 and pass me, leaving me just out of a top 10 finish. After the race, I was informed that my purse for the race was \$105,000! Not bad for a rookie with limited sponsorship!

Although I could sense an "adaptive AI" feature was running in Career mode, still I found the racing to be exciting and challenging. It also seemed as if the AI aggressiveness was turned down for this race, because although I was bumped a lot, it wasn't too rough out on the track — actually it felt more like a real NASCAR event than I had experienced so far.

Strangely, when I observed my replay of the race, there were no sponsor decals on my truck! I guess my sponsors won't be happy about that when the race reruns on Speed Channel!



Over time I would imagine that you "grow" into the Busch series and when you've done well there, right on up to the big leagues — the NEXTEL Cup series. All in all I think the Career mode is a very well executed module of NSR.

### Jens' Career Mode Counterpoint

You start out with a tired old Craftsman Truck, paint it up a bit and secure the sponsors who are blissfully unaware of whom they are giving their money to. You can initiate Research & Development, but only one focus item at a time. So, if you start R&D into engine power at one race event, you'll then have to wait until the next before being able to launch R&D efforts on other areas of the car.

You can order the manufacture of you own clothing line, die-cast models, helmet replicas and — wait for it — action figures! Imagine me as an action figure! I shall not be offended if you let out a roaring laugh...

Take care of your car and yourself out there on the track because if you get sloppy and wreck and then decide to restart your career, you'll have to repaint your car, resign all the sponsors, remanufacture the merchandise, etc. Doing that two or three times may be very well, but the fourth time gets very tedious.

If you stay with your career you get to watch how demand on your merchandise develops as you progress and will have to manage sponsor contracts.

Some have asked where the advertised paint shop is located in NSR and Jens has found it. The paint shop is available in the career mode and is of the variety that we saw in NASCAR Thunder 2004. You choose between a set of predetermined different patterns and then change a couple of primary and secondary colors. Sponsor decals are added as you sign new sponsors.

While it is not a fully fledged "paint shop" as seen in other NASCAR sims, it is quick and lets those of us who are challenged for painting skills create an individual and professional looking skin in literally 2 minutes.



## Game Performance

We found NSR to be a stable game in all driving modes. None of us have suffered a single CTD or lock-up while racing or testing or MP, something that NR2003 could never lay claim to. In single player, the action is consistent and there don't appear to be any major glitches or hiccups with game stutter or memory leakage. This is no small feat in the world of demanding game code, so we'd like to give a nod to EA for making a stable, single player game product.

If you'd like to observe how your system is performing while running NSR, there is a little known key command that will bring up a FPS display for you ("little known" only because it's never been documented in previous ISI F1 games, nor in NSR's skimpy manual). But if you hit *Ctrl + F* on your keyboard, the command will display Frames Per Second in upper right corner of screen. Be advised that the FPS display will take about 2 seconds to show up on-screen and it doesn't work in replay mode. But it is nice to have available.

What the frame rate counter illustrated is what we knew by watching the screen — that by and large, NSR provides good frame rates on modern PCs even with the graphic details set to High or Full. And that's a nice aspect of this game engine.

## Racing Gameplay

Heading into any race session highlights NSR's roots in the basic code of ISI's previous F1 series of games. Of course, F1 Challenge is a very fun game when you're racing and that's really what these games are about. But compared to other vendors, ISI sims offered a distinct lack of functionality and convenience that veterans of earlier NASCAR simulations will immediately miss. So as you try your first races in this game, one thing that will probably stand out are the convenient race management features that are NOT provided in this title. For those who have never tried F1 Challenge, Here's a rundown of those missing features:



- There is no way to manage who the specific AI opponents in a race will be. You can select the number of opponents, but not who, as would be possible with an opponent manager GUI.

- When starting a race, EA has provided you with 2 options to get you to the green flag: Either a full pace lap (or laps) that starts at the end of pit row (pretty, but eventually tedious) or you can hit the Space Bar after you hear "gentlemen, start your engines" to get advanced to a "running start." Selecting this option means you are dropped into the cockpit with your car rolling, just as the green flag drops. After the green flag waves, you are provided with partial (highly damped) control of your car for the first few seconds, after which full control is restored to you about the time you enter Turn 1. But don't forget to steer and mash down on the pedal while you're under partial control of the car — because you're not on full "autopilot" and failure to do so will put you well behind the pack. I guess the goal was to ease you into the driving during a running start and that's probably the only way to get that feature right — if that's how you're going to get the driver racing quickly, rather than a shorter pace period.
- Once a race is over, there is no way to restart or rerun the race session without going all the way back to the main menu and starting the track selection process all over again. This is also true for Multiplayer races. In other racing sims, if players wish to restart practice, or adjust the length of the practice session, or begin a second race session at the same track, all it takes is a click of the mouse while within that track's race session GUI and you're back in business. In NSR, you must return to the Main Menu or Multiplayer "Create Race" GUI and restart the entire track and race selection process all over again — which kicks out all your online players to the Race Roster, where they must re-enter your server to drive.
- In single player races, it is not possible to save a qualifying result and use that same starting grid over and over again in order to practice techniques. A feature like this is also particularly handy for if, for example, you practice and qualify but need to take a break before continuing on to the race itself. It's nice to click "Save" for the qualifying result, then break to have dinner with your family and return to the same race session when it's more convenient. Without this feature, you're forced to restart the entire race session when you return to the PC. Likewise, it's not possible to save a race halfway through and then pick it up where you left at a later stage. This wasn't possible with earlier NASCAR sims either, but it would be a nice feature for development teams to explore, as it would allow folks to work their way through an entire 500 mile race in single player rather than always race a short race that fits their available daily "driving time." Given the busy lives and limited "play time" typical of the motorsports sim demographic, we think a "save game" function that works during a pit stop, freezing the locations of the AI cars on the track so you could pick up the same race the next night would be a very welcome feature indeed.
- Finally, it would have been nice to have a feature where your performance at a particular track is evaluated by the game engine, so that a suggested AI strength could be recommended to provide you with the best overall gameplay experience for that track at your current skill level.

While on the track, running in practice sessions and races with other cars we noticed a few minor gameplay bugs that are still in this title. Driving through the car in the pit stall ahead instead of hitting it. And we saw Busch (National Series) cars driven by AI at Richmond that alternately are jacked up as high as a Land Rover, or sinking into the pavement. This needs looking into, EA!

## Rules

NASCAR has instituted some new rules for 2005 that impact how races are run, but it appears that they didn't give EA a head's up when they implemented them so they could be included in NSR. The most glaring example is Qualifying. Following in the footsteps of the FIA's F1 rules, NASCAR now places cars in "*parc ferme*" (that's "impounding" to Americans) after qualifying. That means the teams cannot tear the car apart after qualifying to reconfigure their chassis and suspension set up to a more race friendly configuration. That means the cars qualify with a more race-ready setup, rather than a twitchy and high strung one that would burn the car up after a few laps. To us, that means that the only things that should be changeable between Qual and Race setups are things like track bar, wedge, tape and tire pressure, while things like shocks and springs should be fixed between Qual and

Race sessions.

Hopefully in a future patch, EA can determine a way to emulate this rule change, as well as many others that occurred in the off season.



## Driving Aids

Although we are aware that the SimHQ crowd are typically sticklers for realism, we thought we should at least take a passing look at the Driver Aid features in NSR. While it's unlikely that the hardcore crowd will use Driver Aids to help their racing, some of us might be looking for a way to introduce our children to the genre, or to see what impact the allowance of driver aids in an online race will have on fair competition.

To evaluate NSR's Driver Aids, Chunx used an NBS car with a setup by Jens, at Lowes Motor Speedway. Since braking isn't really an issue at Lowes, Chunx focused on the Steering Help, Stability Control, Spin Recovery and Traction Control features, accessed from the Settings/Advanced Controls tab.

First, Chunx ran a few laps with Jens' NBS Lowes setup in his normal driving mode (all aids off). Once he was comfortable with his car placement on the track, he turned on the above listed aids and ran another session of laps. He then used the telemetry page to compare his best laps with Driving Aids on and off. See the attached screenshot to compare Chunx best laps with Aids ON (Red) and OFF (Green).

Happily, driving aids do not improve lap times at the speedway tracks. What the driving aids will do is make your line "smoother" around the track as you encounter bumps (see telemetry) and prevent most (but not all) out of control situations or spins. That is very good news for serious online racers, because you want drivers to be competitive based on their actual skills and you don't want to be needlessly wrecked by a newbie who's just learning the game (something that happens regularly in NR2003).

However, our evaluation of Driver Aids also highlighted the physics engine's need for high chassis slip angles in order to turn fast lap times. The traction control and stability control fought that need and the result was slower speeds in the turns and thus slower lap times.

Another glitch Chunx noted was that when he turned the driving aids back OFF



and returned to the track, his wheel had become divergent again. In other words, when he let go of the wheel, the wheel "fell" over to the full left or right stop, instead of centering. Closing NSR and restarting it solved the problem, but it indicates that there are some bugs in the FF wheel code.

## Accelerated Tire Wear and Fuel Consumption

As with NR2003, NSR provides options to accelerate the wear of tires and other components, as well as fuel consumption rates, within a given race session. This allows those of us with short attention spans, or competing demands on our free time, to drive in shorter races that still require pit stops and their associated strategy. It was good to see this feature included in NSR.

## Frame Rate

Chunx was happy to see that with higher end systems like his, he could have both high graphic detail and respectable frame rates while racing. Typical frame rates for Chunx were in the 35-60 fps range with a large field of cars on the track.

## The "Other" Racing Series

### Craftsman Truck Series

***"2 New NASCAR Racing Series:  
The NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series  
and the NASCAR (Busch) Series join  
the competition."***

***- EA Sports***

These are the "forgotten" of the NASCAR big three series, mostly because their races are typically carried on Speed Channel verses the big NASCAR networks of Fox or NBC. Although the CTS trucks are less aerodynamic and less powerful than the Nextel Cup cars, make no mistake — slow can really level the playing field and make for some fun, head's up, door to door racing. Not only that, the track graphics at the smaller racing venues like IRP (the track Chunx chose to test the CTS trucks at) are simply gorgeous. Our biggest disappointment with the CTS trucks was lack of variety. Whereas in the Nextel and Busch series all manufacturers are represented, oddly the CTS series only offers a Ford-ish looking truck, with no Toyotas, Dodges or Chevy's (or Ford's, if you're picky) represented. We have to wonder why — when the CTS trucks are so much fun to drive and are the player's first introduction to racing in NSR's Career mode — the truck 3D models had to be so generic when the other series are very model specific.



With EA's exclusive rights to NASCAR games it seems highly unlikely that licensing issues with the truck manufacturers are involved, so we are left wondering why EA would go to all the trouble of including this exciting series only to drop the ball on graphics modeling with their game's introductory race car?



## NASCAR Busch Series

Referred to in NSR as the "NASCAR National Series" due to its beer manufacturing sponsor, NASCAR's Busch Series (NBS) series often reminds us a little of College Football. Out on the track and in the pits you'll see more mistakes — which we think adds more "flavor" to the racing. The real NBS cars are almost the same shape (with minor differences) and weigh about the same as their Nextel Cup counterparts, but have less horsepower and the resulting slower speeds makes the racing all the more close and competitive. Indeed, the NBS series cars are meant to be a tool for the younger drivers to hone their craft in terms of learning about racing lines around the different tracks, drafting and working in an environment that is similar to that of the Cup Championship. Although it might seem counterintuitive to some, the lack of horsepower and lower overall experience level of the drivers actually makes the NBS series races closer affairs and therefore quite exciting to watch — although they're typically not shown overseas, so Jens will just have to take Chunx' and guod's word on that! 😊

At the time of formatting this review Jens was starting the text editor to write a letter to the satellite company that carries the broadcasts from NASCAR, bent on convincing them that they simply have to include the National series in their programming!

While the NASCAR Busch Series series may seem to some a bit of a side show, standing in the shadow of the Cup cars in terms of prestige, the NBS series is very interesting in its own right since it is a championship that clearly is aimed at spotting talent for future Cup campaigns. And you can see how these up-and-coming drivers develop their skills as they often get to race along side a handful of Nextel Cup regulars like Tony Stewart, Kevin Harvick or Matt Kenseth (who are usually using their Busch rides to get more "seat time" at the same tracks that the Nextel Cup races are run at). In fact, the NBS series may be the last feeder series in motorsport where the young talents can battle on a regular schedule with the established stars from the Cup championship. It's a bit like the '60s and '70s when F1 stars like Hill, Clark, Rindt and Stewart raced in F2 against newcomers like, Ickx, Cevert, Courage etc.

Here at SimHQ we're quite pleased to see EA include both of these important and exciting NASCAR series in the game. We hope that NSR racers will not ignore the CTS and NBS series, because just like the real world series' they emulate, they're not only a great way for new sim racers to hone their skills, but should also provide lots of close and competitive driving — particularly online.



## Subjective Feel

This section could be called "gameplay" or "immersion factor". The key term is "subjective", so immersion is in the mind of the beholder. For example, while one person might find Falcon 4.0 to feel more 'right' and immersive than Jane's FA-18, others would heartily disagree. But for what it's worth, we'll try to capture our subjective feelings about NSR in these paragraphs.

## Chunx' View

"I really wasn't into NASCAR until 2002, when I met a new coworker who was a huge NASCAR fan, both in the real and virtual sense. At the time, I was strongly in the "NASCAR is just 'go straight, turn left, repeat'" camp. For me, road racing was where the challenge was — I was definitely a road course "snob" and GPL was my game. But on a whim I tried NR2002 and after that I was hooked, because it finally opened my eyes to what this kind of racing was all about — driving FAST in traffic. It was quite a rush to be in the jostling pack at 190+ mph. When NR2003 came in the mail, I started using the game to "follow" the real NASCAR season track-by-track and that opened me up to a whole new way of enjoying a PC simulation. As a result, I am now a NASCAR "junkie" and I know the teams, the drivers and the off-track drama that defines the sport. Without high fidelity NASCAR sims, I don't know if I'd have ever really gotten into the sport the way I have — but I am glad I did.

"Having grown up on Papyrus sims, I honestly didn't have much confidence in EA to shape NSR into a high-fidelity simulation. But with some ex-Papy members on the development team and the hype EA was making about catering to the hardcore crowd, I kept an open and hopeful attitude about the title. But after three weeks of playing it, I'd have to say that NSR has left me feeling a little flat. While it has its merits and welcome aspects, for me what NSR seems to lack are the thrill of some earlier NASCAR titles and something even more intangible — a rewarding driving experience. That's a tough one to explain, but something very real. GPL was the first sim of any type that I could spend a few hours at and be both frustrated and have a feeling of supreme accomplishment at the same time. I can't think of another form of "virtual" entertainment that can generate the same feelings as one might get the first time they shoot a sub-par round of golf, or set a new personal best running time in a 10K — all while sitting in front of a PC screen (something the wife will never understand). Later, NR2003 and F1C/RH2004 have had a similar effect on me. But try as I might these past few weeks, NSR never left me with that same heady, adrenaline rush feeling that I had just done something hard and done it well.

"What I think we got with NSR are moments of brilliance, marred with some areas of really poor or unpolished craftsmanship that didn't have to be that way. However, I still have hope for this title, because I think many of the weak areas are an easy fix, either for EA, or for a 3rd party mod team — but for the sake of EA's reputation I hope they are the ones that aggressively rectify the problems."

### Jens' View

I'm probably not a typical NASCAR fan in the sense that I don't really have a fave driver or a fave team and I wouldn't be watching NASCAR on the telly if it hadn't been for Papyrus and NASCAR Racing 2003, which hit me in the "feel" department like N4 and NR2002 did not. Going so close at those speeds, as the real drivers do, really needs precision, skill and guts.

I highly anticipated this title, downloading the videos that were released, watching the in-game footage as well as the interviews with James Hawkins that were released. The prospect of having updated, correct car shapes and paints, good physics and the new rules that have been applied by NASCAR since the year 2003, combined with solid multiplayer, was almost too much to hope for. If the product is OK the name of the developer/ distributor is of no consequence to me.

Testing NASCAR SimRacing has been a roller coaster ride to an extent I have rarely experienced before. I really wanted NSR to be everything that had been promised.

The registration routine and initial problems in getting the game to recognize my DFP properly made me almost uninstall the game. And I would have, had I not been working on this review.

Controller issues aside, the track graphics with 3D audience, 3D signs and the gorgeous weather effects are the high point of this title for me. Frame rates are good and I did not detect any stuttering or slow downs, as long as I was realistic and did not push my old Ti4200 beyond what I should expect of it.

In some instances I can be on a good footing with the new kid in town: If I select the right track and the right car and

the AI behave themselves instead of trying to bump me off the face of the planet, I can have a fairly good time driving. But it's not sublime and I never really feel immersed. Overall I feel I'm playing a video game and not driving a virtual car, if you see the difference.

As well as driving several thousand laps, I've spent a lot of my time in the menus, so my criticism of the layout and the general User unfriendliness is not thrown out lightheartedly. My gripes are caused by more than just unfamiliarity.

In the physics department the results of drafting are very easy to detect in the lap times and when running in traffic the car feels notably different from when it runs by its own. This is a good thing.

But, I get a sneaking suspicion that the folks developing this title were trying to make a new GPL, so they made light-feeling cars that slide the rear-end a lot with very little in terms of up/down suspension movement or general weight transfer.

The product has clearly been pushed out of the door before it was polished and truly finished. We and other reviewers have found many small, but annoying and immersion killing bugs indicating an unfinished product. Sim racers are currently tweaking differential and suspension files and settings in the player and control files and if they find a solution that will only temporarily solve the problems. Because how do we now make sure that all players have applied the same tweaks? Multiplayer and rankings will be severely compromised if we cannot be absolutely sure that everyone is on the same playing field.

Besides, it is totally unacceptable that we, the consumers should spend literally days tweaking obscure parameters that should have been tweaked right by EA a long time ago.

In my opinion EA will have to do two things. First they must show the courage to leap off the marketing machine they themselves have set in motion and acknowledge the shortcomings of their product in its current state. Promising something and not delivering, is bad form.

Secondly they need to produce one or more whopping patches that will take care the valid issues that have been brought forward. The message from EA at the time of writing this review is that there will be patches and very likely several.

When this review is done I'll put NASCAR SimRacing on the shelf and wait for the patches.

## Conclusions

As we said in Part I of our review, last year's revelations on national TV set the stage for EA to buckle down and give NASCAR's fan base a high fidelity simulation title. The game would target consumers looking for a more challenging and rewarding experience than their line of entertaining arcade racers could provide. With all the hype from EA talking about a completely rewritten physics engine, redefining Sim Racing and the hiring of former Papyrus team members, we at SimHQ had high hopes that EA was finally hell-bent to gain a great deal of credibility with it's NASCAR PC titles and set new standards of realism and fidelity with NASCAR SimRacing — to provide a product that's not only convincing and immersive to the rank and file PC simulation consumer, but perhaps even with the actual drivers themselves.

For the past week, Jens and Chunx have shared with you their objective and subjective analysis about this exciting new title. Here's what that analysis has led them to conclude:

As hard as EA's Tiburon Studio's efforts may have been, it doesn't look like they've attained that goal with NSR — at least not yet. It's obvious after our exhaustive review that there are quite a few too many bugs and shortfalls

being detected by ourselves and others to qualify NSR as having "raised the bar" for racing simulations. It is VERY important to note that NSR had NO major showstoppers like CTD's or the like — a VERY good thing for any high-end simulation and something most cannot lay claim to — but the many bugs and other issues that we found really should have been crushed during beta testing.

In the aviation world, when a plane reaches its aerodynamic limit and is pulled past it, we say it "departs" controlled flight. Cars do the same thing, although when pushed past their limit they usually spin out, or simply push up into the outside wall. And just like high performance aircraft, different types of race cars uniquely communicate to their drivers that they are approaching the limit and are about to lose control. For some cars the transition is benign and predictable, for others less so. But they all give you some warning that the end of control is near.

It's nice that the cars in NSR are more predictable and communicative in their presence at the limit of adhesion — especially when jostling with other cars. They might be too communicative for a NASCAR stock car, but only a real driver would know. We do know that NSR provides a race physics model that lets you know you're at the limit and gives you more time to recognize that fact so you can attempt to modulate your inputs in order to correct and recover. But something just doesn't feel right in the physics model and we think it shows up in four major areas. First, it seems that the chassis slip angles required to keep the cars tracking quickly through the turns (and thereby run realistic lap times) are much too high. From our limited exposure to the game (about a thousand laps per reviewer) in order to turn realistic lap times at speedways, the cars need to have about a 9-12 degree slip angle in the turns. Often you get the visual effect that you're in a World Of Outlaws sprint car rather than a Nextel Cup stocker. Second, when tuned for a slightly loose cornering stance, the cars seem to be highly unstable on the back straights — almost to the point of uncontrollability. Third, the physics model doesn't really communicate weight transfer or the tires' grip level to the driver via force feedback or visual cues. Finally, tire wear seems to be a bit undermodeled, failing to match the lifespan we would expect from a set of racing tires. So, while we like the forgiving nature of the car physics at the limit of adhesion, we think the physics model needs some refinement.

Racing with the AI is quite exciting and there's a large amount of "rubbin'" on the track with the AI cars. That's a welcome new feature for a NASCAR sim, but in this case we think it has been a bit overdone, sort of like how a Hollywood movie's fact-based characters are portrayed a bit larger-than-life to make them more entertaining than they might be in real life. When you lower the AI aggressiveness to 50%, you get closer to what the "average" bump and grind of a NASCAR race has to offer, but even that seems a compromise between speedway and short track realities. So our hope would be that in future versions of NSR, that the aggressiveness is toned down just a tad and that the aggressiveness level varies not only from driver to driver, but from track type to track type.

Driving against the AI is challenging, but for a real sweaty-palmed adrenaline rush, there's no beating the challenge of racing other humans in online multiplayer races. For those who have tried multiplayer on VROC for GPL and/or Sierra.com for NR2003, you're probably hooked on the rush you got from racing online. But the multiplayer experience really depends on how solid the MP code is in the game you're playing. Lag and warp can effectively kill the MP experience for any player. And a NASCAR sim demands a robust multiplayer code, because the style of racing is up-close, cut and thrust driving with lots of cars in very close quarters. We think here NSR also shows it's biggest and most dramatic weakness compared to earlier NASCAR simulations. In the various online races we've participated in, the general experience was one of lag and warp — even with limited numbers of cars on the track. You really can't race other cars when an opponent's fender comes into your cockpit without wrecking you, or when a car you're far in front of suddenly accelerates to jet fighter speed and slams you into the wall, or when the cars around you on the first lap are hopping around in all directions like jumping beans. Our experience with NSR online is that it never satisfied the need for an adrenaline fix the way other online racing sims can, regardless of developer. We're hoping for an all encompassing patch, because we think the design team can overcome these shortfalls as the code matures.

We were all perplexed at the inconsistent levels of graphics quality. The tracks and cockpits are without doubt the best we've ever seen in a NASCAR sim. In contrast the cars are a "B" grade effort at best. Were NSR a flying simulation with planes this malformed, I think the forums would be filled with complaints that would make even an

IL-2 fanatic blush.

If there's one strong area in NSR's recreation of the sport, it's at the Super Speedways. We enjoyed the way the game "drives" at these venues, in terms of physics and AI. I think it was here that the developers focused most of their talents. If there's a second best in racing fidelity for NSR, it would be at the short tracks, where the predictable limits in the physics model pay off in the slow speed corners. But where the cars feel fairly good at Daytona, they feel really artificial and sloppy at the real bread and butter of NASCAR's circuits — the banked speedways like Atlanta and Lowe's. Curiously, NR2003 was just the opposite, with a physics model that peaked at the speedways but was somewhat twitchy at the short tracks and super speedways.

But even an enjoyable experience at Daytona or Talladega can't make one forget about the annoying fit and finish to NSR. The GUIs are not self explanatory and no consumer support was given in making the game easier to operate or manipulate. With two tabs for controller calibration, three for multiplayer chat, separate screens for race server and lobby, this game takes the prize when it comes to redundant, confusing and overcomplicated User Interfaces.

Overall it seems like NSR is a noble first effort by EA on the road to establishing its credibility as a true simulation title franchise. While we don't think NSR has "raised the bar" in terms of realism in the world of hardcore racing simulations, EA has produced a reasonable "entry level" or "lite" simulation, one that has a more realistic character than an arcade racer but isn't too demanding to drive for the consumer new to the genre. In some sense, you could call NSR the "Jane's USAF" of racing sims.

But if you're thinking that this review is intended to thrash EA make no mistake — *We at SimHQ are thankful that EA has made the effort to produce a NASCAR title that directly addresses the desires of the hardcore simulation community.* While on the whole we weren't impressed with many aspects and features of NSR version 1.0, we offer this review in the sincere hope that it provides some detailed, constructive criticism for EA's development team to put to good use. For NSR clearly has great potential yet to be realized either in this version, or in "NSR 2006". Hopefully a comprehensive patch will be offered for this game that addresses the graphics, physics, controller interface, multiplayer, GUI and sound issues that we've identified here in our review.

## Goods & Others

In the military aviation world, as well as the racing world, we like to summarize a training or testing event by looking at the things that went well and the areas that didn't go as we'd hoped and need improvement. So, to finish our review of NSR, here's what we saw as the title's "Goods & Others. "Others" being the parts that we politely feel need improving.

### Goods

- Track Graphics and Animation
- Cockpit Graphics and Views
- Spotter and Crew Chief Monologue and Sound
- Car Sounds
- Car Physics and Drafting
- Replay Editor (as compared to previous EA titles)
- Telemetry Program Features
- Stackable Info Boxes
- Career Module

### Others

- Multiplayer Interface
- Multiplayer Lag / Warping
- Multiplayer (lack of) Documentation
- Multiplayer Gameplay
- General Interfaces
- Spotter and Crew Chief comment timing and detail
- Replay Editor (as compared to Papyrus products)
- Car Skins, 3D Shapes, Lighting
- Busch Series AI car ride height
- 2005 Series Accuracy (skins and shapes)
- Craftsman Truck Series Detail
- Weight Transfer Physics and / or Cueing
- Telemetry Program Stability
- AI Overly Aggressive
- Game Manual
- Game Registration Process
- Race GUI Operation
- Controller Interface
- Controller Recognition
- Too many workaround tweaks required
- Gameplay Bugs

SimHQ will revisit NASCAR SimRacing as the patches arrive and update their impact on the sim. Judging by the reports of what is arriving in the first set of patches, it looks like EA is serious about supporting this racing sim. We have little doubt that it will benefit from the patching program EA Sports has committed to producing and that certainly that bodes well for the future of NASCAR SimRacing.



## Postscript

Jens sent along this comment today regarding NaturalPoint's TrackIR3 System and NASCAR SimRacing: "Having just received a TrackIR3 unit with Vector Expansion and installed it, we can report that it works *flawlessly* in all 6 DOF and it seems to pan nicely and smoothly. Look out for a future SimHQ Feature on TrackIR3 in racing simulations."