

Shaun White Snowboarding

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Extreme sports games have always been popular with gamers, for the same reasons they have been popular with people in real life (for those of you who need a hint, the clue is in the name). Yes, ever since a virtualized Tony Hawk first showed us how much fun pulling ridiculous trick combos could be, we've been hooked, and the genre has flourished. Snowboarding has never been as popular as skateboarding in the video games world, with only a handful of titles, but some of these have been truly outstanding. 1080 Snowboarding on the N64, SSK Tricky on the Xbox, and even Amped 3, already available on the 360, have all been great games, and reflected the over the top nature of the sport. However, since EA rocked skateboarding with Skate, offering a much more realistic experience, the market has changed somewhat, and so Ubisoft bring us Shaun White Snowboarding. Featuring one of the most popular snowboarders of the day, Shaun White, and built on the Assassin's Creed engine, Ubisoft have hoped to emulate Skate's success by focusing more on the relaxed, laid back nature of the sport, and the skill involved in pulling off tricks. It's a decent first foray into the sport, but it is blighted by a number of flaws on many different levels that keep it from challenging any of its snowboarding predecessors. Let's start with the positives, though. Being built on such an impressive engine, SWS features some gorgeous graphics, and more importantly, the power has allowed for each of the four available mountains to be breathtaking. Each is simply epic in scope, and taking a helicopter to the top and careering down, pulling tricks here and there, avoiding avalanches, is the most satisfying experience the game offers. The game is also one of the finer examples of the new, so-called 'Passive Multiplayer'. In essence, this means whenever you are connected to Live, you are playing alongside other players, and you can jump in and out of challenges against them. These are two areas where Ubisoft have achieved what they were hoping for as you can relax and enjoy snowboarding, or just simply having a play around. It's a shame, then, that these go side by side with so many flaws. Shaun White is not Mario. He is not a plumber, he does not fight turtles and he has never saved a Princess. And, as far as I could tell, I wasn't playing as Mario, just a snowboarder based on me. So why Ubisoft decided to add coin collecting to this game almost defies logic. What is essentially all the story mode consists of ...you collecting a series of giant, floating coins, so that Shaun will reward you with a 'Supa Power', such as mach speed or Focus power. What starts as tedious quickly becomes frustrating, as the coins become more and more difficult to obtain. Walking around in a snowboard is beyond dull, especially when the mountains are so large it can take what feels a lifetime to reach the coins. Moreover, this completely shatters the realistic feel Ubisoft has tried to achieve. I'm no snowboarder, but I'm fairly sure giant coins that say 'Euro' don't feature much on the slopes. The powers you receive also help to shatter this illusion, whilst being fairly useless. Once you have finally collected all these coins, you get to tour with Shaun himself. However, it is questionable if you will have the patience to do this. This aspect of the game is without a doubt the biggest problem. The controls are also less than stellar. Skate was praised for its intuitive trick stick controls, and SWS has (somewhat shamelessly) emulated this. However, ignoring the fact that this game has one of the most unhelpful and pointless tutorials I have ever seen, the controls are difficult to pick up with any success unless you have played for a long time, and you will spend the majority of this time falling down, A lot. Perhaps most galling is that you can ease the difficulty by obtaining a better board, which costs money, which is obtained by winning challenges, which is difficult with your awful starting board and the sketchy controls... a cruel circle indeed. Further compounding this horrible difficulty curve is the fact that, once you have a top end board, the game becomes so much easier, and potentially offers little challenge to keep going. The boards are so unbalanced that once you have a top board you can easily pull a back flip from a standing start, which is both stupid and yet another thing shattering the illusion of realism. The challenges themselves are also uninspired affairs. Standard 'achieve this score in this time' abound, and are also frustrating at times with your standard board. Finding the challenge is never easy, as your map merely offers a small overview of its general location, and it can often be tedious to find. Shaun's challenges are also somewhat tired affairs, and offer little that the main ones do not. They certainly do not warrant the preceding games of fetch. In fact, there is very little in general to say about the challenges, as alone they are dull. Online, with what is a clever system of inviting friends to play with you, they can be much more enjoyable due to the obvious competitive aspect, but still become tiresome quickly. There is the saving grace of a wide range of available apparel, from boards that change your stats, to hats, goggles and coats that are just for fashion appeal. Obviously this is not a crucial part to the gameplay, but in a game of this nature it's always much more enjoyable to be able to collect these products, especially as they are all faithful reproductions of real snowboarding gear, from top brands like Burton. The downside to this is that you must complete so many competitions to get the money for this gear, and most of your money should be focused on getting a top end board as soon as possible. The soundtrack is also quite varied, with modern songs from Calvin Harris or the Ting Tings standing alongside Bob Dylan and Run DMC, but the boys at Ubisoft seem to have screwed up their playlist options, as I only ever seemed to hear the same few songs during my shredding. Shaun White Snowboarding is uneven and unsure of what it wants to do. Despite making a conscious effort to ditch the OTT nature of titles such as SSX in favour of a realistic experience, the ridiculous powers destroy this, and the coin collecting is frankly one of the worst ideas I have ever seen in gaming. The tricks and challenges are uninspired and tedious, the learning curve is brutal and there is no real structure to the proceedings. There is definitely some potential under all these problems, the passive multiplayer being a real highlight, and hopefully something all games will adopt in the future. However, there are just too many flaws in this game, and perhaps most damning of all, it just isn't that fun or interesting in any way. Playing the game is like being hit by one of the snowballs players throw at you online- Unwanted and unenjoyable. Discuss this in our Forum