

Fight Night Round 4

Written by Davey Pitch
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Boxing games seem to me to be one of the kinds of games that should, in theory, be pretty easy to make. After all, you only have 2 people facing off against each other, in a very small and limiting arena. They can't pick up and throw one another, they can't kick each other, they can't bite each other (legally, anyway), so they only have their fists to use. Each round is 3 minutes long, and the fight carries on until all the rounds have been finished, or one man is deemed unfit to continue, either by failing to answer a 10 count after being knocked down, or by referee decision. So, it's a pretty basic formula, yet over the years it's been one that has been so hard to replicate properly. There are nuances to boxing that seem so hard to bring onto our home screens, from the different styles of each boxer, to the way they move and feint, to the way a single punch can end a fight. The best virtual representation we've had of the sport in recent years has come from the Fight Night series of games, and EA Sports are back once more to prove yet again they have what it takes to make their game the undisputed heavyweight champion.

Fight Night Round 3 was one of the first games to really show what HD gaming could look like. With absolutely stunning graphics, a lot of people picked up the game for its visuals alone. When they did so and spent some time playing it, what they found was an exceptional boxing game let that was unfortunately let down by a really poor single player career. With control of the game moving into the hands of EA Canada from the now defunct EA Chicago, many people, myself included, were wondering exactly what EA Canada would bring to the table to improve the series. It must be incredibly tempting for a new developer taking over an established series to just maintain the status quo, use the same game engine and add in a few improvements here and there. Credit must go to EA Canada for being brave enough to make several pretty big changes to the game, and even more credit must go their way for those changes being an improvement over the way things were done before.

One thing that is very noticeable right off the bat to Fight Night veterans is the way the game moves and behaves. In previous editions of the series, all the fighters seemed pretty slow and cumbersome, and this has been changed quite drastically here. Boxers move around the ring quicker than before, and when the leather starts to fly the punches are so much quicker than they've ever been. Moving inside, landing a quick 3 hit combo and then bouncing back out of range is now doable thanks to the increased speed and new physics engine in place. The new physics are especially well done, and give an extra level of oomph when punches land right. Just as you'd expect, if you're a little out of range and your punch grazes your opponent, he'll react like you've just grazed him. Manage to duck under a hook and launch a perfectly timed uppercut flush into his chin and you can fully expect to stagger your opponent at the very least, with him ending up on the seat of his pants a distinct possibility. It's these physics that drive the action in the ring and it's great to see they've been handled so well, creating a truly believable collision detection system.

If you've played any of the previous games in the series you'll be used to the Total Punch Control method of throwing punches. Fight Night Round 4 uses a virtually identical control set up as in FNR3, with a few tweaks here and there. Face punches are controlled in exactly the same way as before, with the right thumbstick used to throw out quick jabs, damaging straights and thundering hooks. If you want to start attacking the body, all you need to do here is quickly flick the stick to the side to throw a hook to the body, or diagonally down to throw an uppercut to the body. It's a nice change that fits in nicely with the increased speed on offer, allowing you to easily throw those punches in bunches that real life boxers do. If you're new to the series you'll be glad to hear that when the game starts it jumps into a brief tutorial that goes through all the basics of attacking and defending and the controls will pretty soon feel second nature.

The countering system has also been given the makeover treatment here. In FNR3, to deflect a punch and create a counterpunch opportunity you had to defend the correct quadrant (left or right to the face, left or right to the body) as the punch was coming in. If you defended the right area, you would deflect the punch and leave your opponent wide open for a counter attack. In FNR4, the system has been tweaked somewhat. Instead of the four quadrants to defend, you now only need to worry about defending either your head or your body. The way you give yourself those counter opportunities is by either raising your guard just before the punch lands, or by nimbly dodging out of the way. If you manage to do this, a subtle little camera movement will let you know your opponent is primed for a counter punch straight to his face. I quite like this new countering system, though I do have two problems with it. Firstly, the window for deflecting the punch seems a little random at times, as punches I thought I had deflected perfectly didn't give me any counter opportunities, though it could be that my timing was off ever-so-slightly. The other problem is more pronounced, as the AI seems to be a little too good at it some times. As an aggressive fighter I like to get in nice and close and throw lots of hooks and uppercuts, and several times I'll seemingly be on top of my opponent only for him to pull a perfectly timed counter out of nowhere which saps half my energy and leaves me bobbing and weaving just to stay out of trouble. If the AI wasn't quite as good when it comes to counterpunching it would make the game less frustrating at times. Thankfully however, one of the pieces of free DLC available adds some gameplay sliders in, so you can adjust the offensive and defensive abilities of the AI so with some tweaking you should be able to find your perfect level.

To go along with the new fighting controls and experience, you also have a brand new career mode to play through, called the Legacy Mode. Gone is the linear and quite frankly boring career mode from FNR3, replaced instead with an

infinitely better career mode that actually makes you feel like you're part of a living, breathing world. You can pick your next opponent from a list of possible candidates and then select the date you'd like to fight on, something which can have an impact on the amount of training sessions you can have before the fight. You can check out the rankings across all weight classes, as well as an overall pound-for-pound ranking list which you'll be trying to climb. You'll have access to all kinds of stats to see how well you're performing in your career. You've also got a popularity meter with each level having certain criteria that must be met before you can go up a level. These can be anything from winning a certain percentage of your fights, to be ranked above a certain level in the pound-for-pound rankings, or holding a championship belt. If you want to get to the very top you'll have to meet some very stringent criteria before you can call yourself the Greatest of All Time. There are even awards to be won at the end of every year, from Fight of the Year, to Knockout of the Year, to overall Fighter of the Year. Some of the winners don't always make a lot of sense (my rookie with a perfect record didn't win the Prospect of the Year award, losing out to someone I'd previously knocked out), but it's a nice addition nonetheless and always a buzz if you manage to win any of the awards.

As improved as the career mode is however, it's still not without its faults. The training games which you'll partake in between matches are unfortunately one the main problem. While it's nice to have 6 training games to offer a bit of variety, the majority of them are simply too hard to be enjoyable most of the time. As your boxers' abilities increase and you've spent more time playing the training games you'll find yourself improving on them, but for the most part I simply found the best thing to do was to simulate the training. You will only get half of the potential stat increases by doing so, but it was generally more than I would have gotten if I'd attempted the training myself.

That being said, the other niggles I have with the Legacy Mode are purely my own little nitpicks. I'd still love to see a more realistic game world, with several organizations, and area, national and continental style titles to win, as well as the world title. I'd like there to be more interaction with different promoters, perhaps by trying to get yourself signed to a big promoter in order to help get a world title shot easier. These really are minor things though and I shouldn't really criticize a game for not getting the career exactly how I think it should be.

Graphically, the game is just as much a powerhouse as FNR3 was, maybe even more so. To boxing fans virtually every fighter will be recognizable right away, with some of them looking so lifelike it's frightening. They all move so well around the ring, and thanks to the new physics on offer, when punches connect they really do look painful. You can see the rippling in muscles as punches are thrown and bodies duck and dodge. The presentation is spot on as well with ring entrances and the like, everything has the now-typical EA polish and it's something they should be commended for. It all runs at a rock-solid 60 frames per second as well without a hint of slowdown in sight.

The audio on offer is also of a high quality. Joe Tessitore and Teddy Atlas are on hand with the commentary, and they both do a very good job. While some of the lines will get repeated, especially if you play a lot, they both have some very interesting commentary regarding fighter styles and such. The sound effects are also well done, with punches sounding just as painful as they look and they can really make you wince at times. The soundtrack is pretty decent as well, featuring artists such as Bloc Party and Mos Def, though of course tastes vary, so some will love the soundtrack while others will hate it.

When you piece everything together, despite some of the problems I've pointed out in the review, Fight Night Round 4 sits very comfortably as the undisputed heavyweight champion of the boxing genre. It took everything great about Round 3, shined it, tweaked it and polished it, wrapped it up with a much improved career mode and served it up as a shining example of how much fun games can be at times. With a deep career mode as well as plenty of options for fighting your friends online, Fight Night Round 4 is not only the best boxing game available, but it has a real longevity about it. Forget any other boxing game out there, this truly is the Greatest of All Time.