

In many ways, Visual Concepts' long-running NBA 2K series mirrors the careers of players it works so hard to emulate. Sometimes, it's a flash of potential: a hotshot rookie catching fire after putting up duds in consecutive games. Others, it's more comparable to a wily veteran nearing retirement – we see a glimpse of talent, a peek into what it could still be. NBA 2K26 is a bit of both. It's flashy and old school, like a “how do you do, fellow kids” teacher who wears different Jordans to class every day, and it has enough cool new kicks, fits, and gimmicks to make it a much more interesting and enjoyable experience than last year's entry.

NBA 2K26 review

It's the little things

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Reviewed on PlayStation 5

Also available on Xbox Series X|S, Switch, and PC

Of course, “cool” probably isn't the right word to describe that teacher, let alone NBA 2K26. After all, an annual sports game is obviously not going to be a radically new game, since most of its gameplay and mechanics are fundamentally similar to last year's iteration, and the one before that, and so on. But in the context of the genre, it's made a good first impression because several minor improvements cumulatively make such a huge difference to the whole. Yes, I am talking about the new and improved shot meter. As always, one of the smallest components in its vast hardwood floor of dribbling and crisscrossing parts leaves a massive influence on how just about everything else on the court plays out.

If you didn't experience last year's shot meter, lucky you. In place of that nightmare-inducing dial/arrow/ring de sign from 2K25, NBA 2K26 features a much more intuitive, easier-to-time, and infinitely better-curved bar shot meter. If you've heard that before, it's because it's similar to 2K23's – but this isn't entirely a reversion to that. Instead of remaining static, the new meter's green field adjusts based on defensive coverage: if a defender is right up in your face, you'll have practically no chance of making the shot. But if you're open, it'll be much easier to time the release right and make a shot.

It's so much more fun shooting jumpers now than it was last year because it's easier to make them consistently. There is a slight tradeoff, though: because it's easier to get greens, there's also less room for im perfection. Meaning if you get a slightly early or slightly late timing, you might as well start running back on defense because the shot will more than likely brick.

But it's not just the shot meter that's worth shining a spotlight on. An even bigger, and arguably more important, tweak is the noticeable change to player movement. While NBA 2K25's motion made it feel like the players were stuck running in quicksand, NBA 2K26 makes running, cutting, and defending so much smoother. And since it permeates every single mode, it makes the entire system feel less robotic and far more natural and enjoyable.

Plus, it makes the new gameplay feature, Go-To Post Shots, look even more accurate and realistic. Remember last year how you couldn't dominate the paint with Jokic's or Embiid's

shimmy shake fade-aways? Well, now you can spam the Sombor Shuffle an ungodly amount of times in each match you play because the AI cannot stop it. In the immortal words of Shaq, it's "barbecue chicken alert" each time down the floor.

Goodbye, Yellow Brick Road

Now for the bad news. What, you thought it was going to be all good from here on out? Sorry, Dorothy, but the years haven't been kind to this yellow brick road. We're talking about NBA 2K26's offline-only modes here. Last year, the so-called improvements to MyNBA were underwhelming, to say the least. This time, dear friends, they are practically non-existent, and it is very disappointing.

With 2K25, we at least had the addition of the Steph Era, even though it already felt redundant alongside two other eras in the 2010s (in addition to the LeBron Era). Are you ready to hear what the 2K26 MyNBA modes have in store? Drumroll, ple...you know what, don't even bother. It's called Offseason Scenarios for MyGM. These are tailor-made, long-term quests for each franchise that you must fulfill to appease the fanbase and, more importantly, *the owner*.

These scenarios come in threes and are given out at the beginning of the offseason. But much like the issues with last year's MyGM mode, these tasks still feel forced and, at times, unrealistic. The RPG elements, with their perk and attribute point systems, seem out of place and unnecessary because they hardly make a difference in the grand scheme of basketball operations. At the end of the day, it's still all about winning as many games and championships as you can. Or, if you're on the other end of the spectrum, losing and tanking as much as possible to get back into playoff contention.

And Say Hello to My Little (Old) Friend

At this point, NBA 2K's offline modes are a desert, and as easy as it would be to stay in this familiarly comfortable place of habitual sameness, dying of thirst sounds like an awful way to go. Luckily, this next part is an oasis, a place of revitalizing respite that makes it easier to continue.

Just to be clear, the oasis being referred to is not The City, although it is a massive relief that each location in the typically huge hub is easier to access than ever. The place has been revamped in a great way. Everything, from the arena where you play NBA games to The Rec, is now only a short skate away (some places are even interconnected), so you'll have more time to enjoy schooling (and being schooled) in the art of green.

Called Out of Bounds, this year's MyCareer focuses once again on MP and his journey to the pros. But instead of a depthless series of events where the games you play have practically no bearing on what team you land with or pick you get drafted at, it's the opposite. You start out as a no-name high school player in middle-of-nowhere Vermont, where your chances of making it to the NBA are frighteningly slim. In other words, you have to show out in every game, whether

that's on the youth team you play for or the European club you join; your performances and the choices you make along the way all have an impact on your NBA future.

And that's what it should always be about. A huge part of what made this mode so exciting when it was first introduced in 2K10 was its ability to capture just how difficult it is to make it into the NBA—a dream millions of kids have, but only a few hundred get to turn into reality. Your teammate grades had to be stellar, and your performances on point if you wanted a chance at getting drafted in the lottery, let alone in the first round. This latest journey, while it doesn't quite mirror that path, hits all the right emotional and storytelling notes, making it the best MyCareer story in years.

There's No W in Microtransactions

In this economy, spending too much on unnecessary stuff is a one-way ticket to financial crisis, and Virtual Currency falls into that category. Thankfully, getting kitted out with a respectable starting squad in MyTeam is easy - that is, if you don't mind grinding. Much like last year, you just have to complete the tutorials, and that will give you a decent-enough starting five that could keep up in the lower ranks. But decent is never enough, is it? The false promise of a shinier veneer, the devilish contract that is microtransactions, is always there, peeking its ugly head over your shoulder in each online mode.

They continue to be one of the biggest black marks in what has otherwise been NBA 2K26's relatively clean sheet. MyCareer, as usual, is especially infected by its thick, suffocating miasma. Oh, you wanted a 99 OVR player? Yeah, that'll cost you around 500,000 VC. Want to create another one with a different build? Selling a kidney might help. It's so easy to tell people just to ignore these because you technically can, but the reality is that they are made to be enticing and undeniably predatory: buy something once and it becomes easier to buy it again, and the cycle goes on with millions of people worldwide. Don't even get me started on MyTeam, also known as microtransaction central. Because as soon as it opens up, it assaults you with a screen full of Season Pass ads and Virtual Currency "deals."

It isn't all bad, though. This year's addition of WNBA players makes it even easier to get high-rated players. But adding "The W" to MyTeam doesn't just magically erase the influence of overpriced superstar packs and jewel-themed players. As long as they remain, and they more than likely will, there will never be a W in microtransactions.

Verdict

Belief and disappointment go hand in hand; just ask any sports fan. The crushing blow of losing lingers, but is eventually replaced by a newfound fervor – a flicker of hope that maybe this time things will be different. With the NBA 2K series, it's mostly been frustrating in recent years because we so often end up being disappointed. But NBA 2K26 bucks that trend with a MyCareer mode that's the best it's been in years, thanks to an amazing prelude storyline. A handful of tweaks, most notably the updated shot meter and player movement, tie everything

together nicely so that the gameplay in each mode is less stressful and more rewarding. Unfortunately, these excellent improvements also highlight the imperfections, with MyGM continuing to stand out like a disgruntled benchwarmer. But overall, NBA 2K26 is the equivalent of a team that's a few pieces away from contending, making this year's catchphrase, "Ball Over Everything," pretty fitting if you don't count the endless microtransactions in all the online modes. Because when you've got the core performing this well, and all eyes are on the on-court action, it becomes easier to ignore those imperfections.

Score: 8

For more on this year's sports games, check out our reviews of Madden NFL 26 or F1 25. And for everything else, stick with IGN.