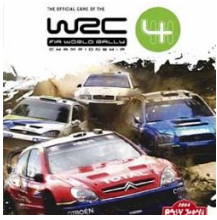


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[WRC 4: The Official Game of the FIA World Rally Championship](#)

"Arcade-simulation"

The long running rally racing series started by Evolution Studios back in 2001 and fully licensed by the FIA World Rally association has always been known for its accessible arcade game play in factual dressing. With the latest installment however, in the classic "chasing to hares" fashion, the developers attempted to move the series forward, towards simulation, without straying from its arcade roots. The result is neither arcade nor simulation, an "arcade-simulation" if there's such a thing. **Gameplay** Like any self respecting racing game, WRC4 offers a number of modes of play from the familiar Quick Race and Time Trial modes, to the Championship, Pro Driver Challenge and the Super Special Challenge modes. There's also a Test Tracks section where you can drive the cars around a number of practice tracks and get a feel for the handling on various types of terrain, such as asphalt, snow or gravel. There are even a few tests you can take to evaluate your abilities. In the Jumps test, for example, you have to make it to the end of a fairly straight stretch of bumpy terrain within a given time, and if you don't, you know you need to practice controlling your car during jumps a bit more. The Championship mode, as the title suggests, takes you through a whole World Rally Championship, in the shoes of a relevant real world driver. There are four classes to choose from, basically four championships differing in difficulty and, for two of them, cars: the WRC Professional, the WRC Expert, the Super 1600, with a lower class of cars and the WRC Extreme, with cutting edge, extra fast cars. The difficulty level is pretty steep by default, even early on in the championship, and you're not given the possibility of lowering it, which is very likely to be a turn off for some gamers. The whole set of sixteen WRC events have been included, from the season opener in Monaco, to the final event in Australia, including the new events in Mexico, Japan and Sardinia. All events have six courses each, so there's quite a lot of driving here. The Pro Driver Challenge is the game's career mode, which is very similar to that of Colin McRae Rally 2005. This takes you through the career of a professional rally driver, starting as a rookie driver, and all the way up to the top. You will be able to go through all aspects of driving, including how to setup and repair your car, though WRC4's car setup is nowhere near as detailed as that of its competitor. Repairing your car is done after each stage and is as simple as selecting what you want repaired or selecting auto repair, with time allocated to each bit of the car you've trashed, but the game won't let you run them into penalty time like Colin McRae Rally, meaning you'll often have to leave an important part damaged for the next stage. The damage system, though better than before, is still less harsh than that of Colin McRae Rally, a good or a bad thing, depending on your preferences. The Super Special Challenge is a new addition to WRC4. This mode is made up of a string of races against a single A.I. opponent, across the two-lane super special stages from the Championship mode. All in all, it's a pretty satisfying package. In terms of handling, the driving in WRC4 feels great, especially as concerns suspension and steering and maintains a fine balance between arcade and simulation. There's plenty of depth here, in that corners have to be correctly judged and the surfaces drastically affect your performance, as does the weather, all this, without being impossibly tough for beginners. The challenge, however, comes from the stages and not the cars, some of which are real car breakers, especially the unforgiving Cyprus Rally. Speaking of stages, they are the best you will see in any console game, and it's amazing how well it manages to capture the overall feel of the real ones. Being the official game of the rally championship, it features all the teams and their drivers. However, only a small number of cars are initially available, including the Subaru, WRX, Citroen Xsara, Ford Focus and Mitsubishi Lancer, and the rest must be unlocked by using

the points you earn from winning races. You can also unlock additional stages and "evolutions" in this fashion, the latter of which improve the performance of the cars in various ways. On the downside, for some gamers at least, whenever you leave the road you are soon reset onto the track regardless of the circumstances. You don't have to worry about driving off a cliff, because the car will be reset before it reaches the bottom. Also, the co-driver seems to have suicidal tendencies, often calling corners too late to do anything about them, and I learnt this little fact by taking a short flight off a cliff. But other than that, he's a nice fellow, really.

Video and Audio Graphically, WRC4 is one of the prettiest rally games around. The sceneries you speed through are wonderfully detailed and feature some of the best textures on the PlayStation 2. The view distance is impressive, gone are the pop-up issues of old and the spectacle on offer is often breathtaking. The weather effects are fairly decent, but some of the particle effects, such as the dust cloud behind the car, look really great, as do the lighting effects. It's a pity that the crowds of onlookers, despite being more lively than before, have remained two-dimensional. The cars replicate their real-life counterparts perfectly and have a fantastic amount of detail, but like in many other games, they appear much too reflective and shiny. Fortunately, they get dirty or dusty as the race progresses so it's not that big an issue in the end. The effect of collisions on the cars also looks great, as you can lose anything from windows and lights to the spoiler, bumpers, even the bonnet and I felt a twisted enjoyment from seeing them flying. The sense of speed is superb, especially in the in-car view which is the best I've seen. It's in this view mode where the attention to detail is particularly evident, with droplets of water realistically running up the screen, as you accelerate while hurtling along in the rain and dust or snow forming on the parts of the glass that are out of reach of the windscreen wipers. The sound effects in WRC 4 are also excellent. The roar of the engine and the shift of gears are clearly audible and very authentic, and little touches like gravel pattering against the car's underside, or the sound of rain pounding and that of the windscreen wipers when in the in-car view during a storm, all add greatly to the atmosphere. There's no music during game play, but the sound effects more than made up for it in my case.

Multiplayer A new addition to the series is the online mode, which allows up to 16 players to compete for the best times on any of the WRC stages. The opponents appear in the form of live ghost cars, which is a neat system and you can download the best ghost car to time trial against it, in order to improve your skills. You can also submit your times in an attempt to get amongst the top 100. Multiplayer offline is also available, in which up to 4 players can in turns, compete for the best times.

Conclusion If it's all-out simulation you're looking for, I say look elsewhere. If it's arcade driving you're after, all about ease of use and pick-up-and-play, there are better games out there. WRC4 stands somewhere in-between, leaning more toward simulation, however. What it's set to do, it does really well, so if that sounds like your cup of tea, it's definitely worth it.