

## Review of recent video game release

**By Billy O'Keefe**

McClatchy-Tribune News Service  
(MCT)

'NEED FOR SPEED PROSTREET'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360 and Playstation 3

Also available for: Nintendo Wii, PC, Playstation 2, PSP, Nintendo DS

From: EA

ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+ (suggestive themes)

Sometime in the last year, "Need for Speed" decided to cut its hair, shave its face, buy a nice suit and start acting like an adult. The result is "Need for Speed ProStreet," which takes a franchise known for cop chases and street culture and wedges it into a world of sanctioned, legit racing that's scarcely more rebellious than a NASCAR event on network television.

The shock doesn't end there. The open-world approach of recent games is gone, replaced by a pedestrian tree of racing events at different locales. And while past "NFS" games looked the other way where car damage was concerned, "ProStreet" makes you pay even for bending your fender. Repair costs will take a huge hit on your race winnings, and accrued damage carries over even if you restart a race you don't finish. The era of ruthlessly bouncing off opposing racers and guardrails is long gone.

Why EA so drastically altered such a successful racing franchise isn't exactly clear. "NFS" was the best of its breed, and the "ProStreet" effect transforms it into just another good track racer in a field already saturated with them. The speed of the game has slowed only a touch, but it's a noticeable touch. The track designs have no choice but to be less interesting and diverse. And the limitations in track design lead to a reduction in event styles, which leads to an even higher concentration of the drag and drift events that bogged down past "NFS" games.

All that said, "ProStreet" never is bad. Makeover aside, many of the series' hallmarks return. The mix of simulation and arcade physics is still there despite the reduced speed and newfound emphasis on safe driving, and "ProStreet's" career mode still comes loaded with content despite the more straightforward structure.

You still can manage your garage and customize cars to an intimidating degree, and your creations still look sharp even when they're cruising down some pretty bland track. Online play benefits from your creativity: In addition to the usual race modes, you can share vehicles, photos and customized race events with other players.

It's enough to keep "NFS" fans mostly happy \_ at least until next year. With respect to "ProStreet's" approach, it's not built for the long haul. Unless EA refines it in a big way for next year's edition, it's best enjoyed as an experimental detour on the u-turn to rebellion.

---

'CONTRA 4'

For: Nintendo DS

From: Konami

ESRB Rating: Teen (blood and gore, fantasy violence, language)

In the 15 years since "Contra III" debuted, "Contra" has undergone a number of awkward transitions into the modern era, with results ranging from disastrous ("C: The Contra Adventure" on the original Playstation) to lukewarm ("Contra: Shattered Soldier" on the PS2) to just plain bizarre ("Neo Contra," also on the PS2). Whatever Konami's intentions, there seemed to be a reason none of the games were called "Contra 4."

Finally, "Contra 4" is here, and sure enough, it earns the right to wear the badge. The adventure is entirely new, but if the opening level doesn't remind you of the original "Contra," you've probably never played the original "Contra." Flashes of familiarity run amok, with everything from controls to enemies to guns to graphical elements borrowing from the blueprints established two decades ago.

So pure is "Contra 4," in fact, that it buckles the almost automatic practice of saving a player's progress after a level is cleared. If you fight your way past level one and turn the system off, you won't find level two waiting for you when you return. A limited number of lives and continues merely ups the ante, making this perhaps the least forgiving game in the Nintendo DS' library. (It doesn't help matters that, even on the easy difficulty setting, the game puts up a monstrous fight.)

The huge difficulty curve will send newbies scrambling for the power switch, but fearless "Contra" veterans wouldn't have it any other way. "Contra" enjoyed a reputation for being tough as nails before it went soft during the experimental years, and "Contra 4" resumes that tradition rather forcibly. To beat this game is to do it the old-fashioned way \_ memorizing enemy patterns, perfecting your timing, getting lucky now and then. (The reward for doing so \_ unlockable versions of the first two "Contra" games \_ isn't too shabby, either.)

Alas, "Contra 4's" most significant alteration \_ the use of dual screens \_ also raises the most issues. The gap between the two screens is live, which means that enemies and bullets you don't see will occasionally imperil you when you maneuver between screens. Fortunately, this happens only occasionally. Unfortunately, the bigger problem of managing activity on both screens rarely goes away. Keeping an eye out for one screen's worth of danger was tough enough, and having to double that task will push a lot of players past the breaking point of patience.

---

(Billy O'Keefe writes video game and DVD reviews for McClatchy-Tribune News Service.)

---

© 2007, McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.