

Reviews of recent video game releases

By Billy O'Keefe

**McClatchy-Tribune News Service
(MCT)**

RED STEEL

For: Wii

From: Ubisoft

ESRB Rating: Teen

While most developers _ Nintendo included _ take the safe, sound route with their initial offering of Wii games, Ubisoft has hit the ground sprinting with a game that purports not only to be a full-fledged first-person shooter, but a first-person sword-fighter as well. Throw in an instruction manual featuring seven pages dedicated solely to the controls, and it's clear someone's feeling pretty plucky about their place on Nintendo's hot new console.

Speaking generously, Ubi bats .500. Like most games that try to do two different things, "Red Steel" does neither as well as one hopes and never feels as complete as it should.

The shooting side is where "Steel" fares best. Numerous problems abound: The aiming sensitivity isn't customizable enough, zooming is awkward (instead of pulling the Wiimote in close like you would a gun, you do the exact opposite), and the game sports an ugly glitch that causes the aiming reticule to occasionally, randomly jump a couple of inches and back. These issues, on top of a game that's mostly average in FPS terms, means it isn't time just yet to abandon the more traditional methods on other consoles.

And yet the possibilities still manage to shine through. With time _ and when "Steel" isn't glitching _ the Wiimote and nunchuck attachment make for a surprisingly intuitive combo. The extra layer of immersion really sinks in during the game's better firefights, which take place everywhere from car washes to pachinko halls to a spa featuring towel-clad thugs. Ubi unquestionably rushed this one out the door for launch, but it managed to make use of everything from the nunchuck's motion-sensing abilities to the Wiimote's built-in speaker (listen for a nice touch when you reload your weapon, for instance).

"Steel's" interspersed swordplay sequences, on the other hand, are all bust. On top of making zero sense (since you still have your gun and appear to have little time to stop for a sword fight), they just never feel like they should. The precise-enough control found in the shooting segments takes a powder here, and your best bet is to just swing away like a madman instead of formulate any sort of intelligent attack. Unfortunately, what's effective isn't necessarily fun. And that's a shame, because the Wiimote is made for moments like these.

NEED FOR SPEED: CARBON

For: Xbox 360, Playstation 3, Xbox, PS2, PSP, PC, Wii and Gamecube

From: EA

Rated: Everyone 10+

EA's "Need for Speed" series is not exactly what you'd call a driver's ed teaching tool. But that

changes ever so slightly with "Need for Speed: Carbon," which reminds us that even law-ducking street racers sometimes need to follow the rules of the road.

"Carbon" lifts most of what made last year's "Most Wanted" so good: an activity-rich open world, multiple race types, a hokey story mode, car customization up the wazoo and arguably the best impromptu cop chases ever processed into video game form. The airtight mix of speed and solid handling returns completely untouched, and EA saves you some early aggravation by spotting you a much nicer first car as the story mode kicks off. (Cars can be purchased and upgraded per usual, and even players with an aversion to tuning may find the new autosculpting feature an addictive treat.)

The new story and setting in "Carbon" provide the basis for most of the game's changes. You'll see a lot of "Most Wanted" in the game's open world (now entirely under the cover of moonlight instead of sunshine), but "Carbon" complements the urban street races with drift-heavy canyon races that double as the game's boss encounters. A new drift stunt event also debuts, replacing the annoying drag races of yestergame as a regular event.

Drive safely, though: While the drift system and canyon races provide plenty of fodder for daredevil behavior, Carbon Canyon features stretches of paper mache guardrails that, if broached, will spell curtains for you, your car and whatever event you're trying to complete. If you merely got by in the handling department in "Most Wanted," you'll need to learn to take better care of yourself.

"Carbon's" story cinematics are much more pervasive this time around, and the new territory theme means you're racing with teammates instead of by your only. The change is probably the least welcome of "Carbon's" additions: Your teammates are hard on the ears and they occasionally interfere rather than help. Fortunately, you can trap and mess up the opposition (and cops) by yourself just as you could in "Most Wanted," and doing so makes the crew controls far less invasive than they originally appear to be.

CALL OF DUTY 3

For: Xbox 360, PS3, PS2, Xbox (alternate version available for Wii)

From: Treyarch/Activision

ESRB Rating: Teen

It's easy to take "Call of Duty 3" for granted. It comes merely a year after its predecessor, which had twice the development time. It also comes courtesy of developer Treyarch, which pulls fill-in duty while series creator Infinity Ward works on next year's title. Finally, it's yet another World War II game _ hardly a knockout idea in a holiday period jammed with console launches and A-list blockbusters.

But once that first level kicks off, we're reminded straight away that no shooter illustrates war quite like "Duty's" relentless rainfall of screaming soldiers, airborne debris and round after round of gunfire whizzing by your ears. When "COD3" finds that balance between wartime strategy and wartime insanity, it's an experience _ other "Duty" games notwithstanding _ without peer.

Unfortunately, those moments are fleeting, broken up by a smattering of problems ranging from a storyline that tries too hard to levels that rely too much on imaginary barriers and scripted events.

But the most troublesome issue _ by far _ is the game's bizarre A.I. Enemy forces act like drones rather than trained soldiers: They run right at you, fire uncontrollably, and occasionally ignore activity taking place right behind their backs. Often, when you kill a soldier who is near another soldier, that second soldier moves into the fallen soldier's position, and you can kill him without even nudging your

weapon. Sometimes this cycle repeats itself, and suddenly it's as if you're playing that carnival duck-shooting game instead of fighting a war.

Your allies are no brighter. They'll shoot at cover instead of around it, and occasionally co-exist out in the open with an enemy soldier while neither fires on the other. Before the single-player campaign is over, expect a few instances in which your own soldiers get you killed by blocking your path and making it impossible to seek cover from enemy fire. It will happen.

The news is endlessly better if your aim is to play online, where the spirit of "Duty" _ including vehicles this time around _ lives unhindered by A.I. and storyline aggravations. The 360 version supports 24 players simultaneously; the others (save for Wii) support 16 at a time.

BLITZ: THE LEAGUE

For: Xbox 360

From: Midway

ESRB Rating: Mature

"Blitz: The League" strived to embrace whatever the NFL wouldn't touch _ from illegal hits to illegal drugs _ and package it into video game form. It more than lived up to its billing ... 13 months ago.

Despite being priced like a new game, the Xbox 360 version of "League" is basically last year's Xbox/PS2 game with touchup paint applied. Bill Romanowski joins Lawrence Taylor on the cover and in the voice cast, but he voices a player who already existed in the previous version. The 360 edition looks slightly better than its predecessors, but it doesn't receive nearly the graphical boost you'd expect new hardware and an extra year of development time to provide. Unlockable achievements are naturally part of the package, but every 360 game has these. If you already purchased "League" once, you're basically buying the same game if you purchase it again.

Then again, if you didn't, this one's new to you. And while "League" is a disappointing upgrade, it's still an awesome game in its own right. The gameplay takes "Blitz" back to its arcade roots: eight-on-eight football, 30-yard downs, no flags and the kind of "tackles" only Vince McMahon could endorse. The story mode is a nice consolation prize for the lacking franchise mode: It comes courtesy of the same troublemakers behind ESPN's defunct "Playmakers" television show, and it features the kind of management decisions _ juice players up and risk injury, or play it straight and risk losing? _ you'll never encounter in "Madden."

What truly makes "League" special _ besides the obvious multiplayer throwdown potential _ is how it makes playing defense more fun than playing offense. Give credit to the turbo-like Clash meter, which allows you to slow time on offense but is best used for delivering fumble- and injury-causing hits on defense. Clash feels like a gimmicky hindrance at first, but it hooks you fast. If the 360 version of "League" has a real selling point, it's the ability to enjoy this sick bit of genius with a controller that's far better designed for it than what the PS2 or Xbox could offer.

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

© 2006, McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

'Excite Truck' for Wii takes turbo jump to the extreme

Images

By Billy O'Keefe

**McClatchy-Tribune News Service
(MCT)**

"EXCITE TRUCK"

For: Nintendo Wii

From: Nintendo

Your enjoyment of "Excite Truck" is directly and completely proportional to how soon and how well you master the ability to turbo jump. Simple as that.

It's not that "Truck" isn't fun without the turbo jump - it is. But the Wii's main selling point is its ability to let us play games in strange new ways, and anyone who has purchased a driving wheel in the last 10 years (or has ever been to an arcade) has more or less experienced what "Truck's" steering controls bring to the table. If only in this one genre, the Wii is old hat.

So it falls on "Truck" to impress in other ways. Happily, it rises to the challenge. The game is fast from bell to bell, and the tracks are loaded with deep dives, shortcuts and triggers that dynamically alter the landscape in ways that help and harm you and your adversaries. The star scoring system rewards daredevils as well as speedsters: Winning races nets you a ton of stars, but so does catching big air, wrecking opposing trucks and driving through a forest full of fender-bending trees, to name some examples.

But it's the turbo jump - the process of applying turbo right as your truck takes to the air - that makes it all come together. Mastering the timing behind this technique will take practice, but once you get it, "Truck" goes from a seven on the fast scale to roughly a 20. Perfect your technique and string jumps together, and it's hard not to be hooked.

Nintendo's online strategy has been caught with its pants down at launch, so "Truck" features split-screen multiplayer for two players only. That, and a somewhat low variety of races and special challenges - ring-jumping, a slalom-like gate challenge and a demolition-derby-style manhunt - will leave mode-aholics a bit unimpressed. This doesn't necessarily hinder the replay value, though: Like "Mario Kart" and "Wave Race" before it, "Truck" makes the most of what it does have, and there's very little here that doesn't command a return visit (and several more after that).

Billy O'Keefe writes video game reviews for McClatchy-Tribune News Service.

© 2006, McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Video-game review: `SingStar Rocks!'

Images

By Billy O'Keefe

**McClatchy-Tribune News Service
(MCT)**

"SINGSTAR ROCKS!"

FOR: Playstation 2

FROM: Sony

ESRB RATING: Everyone 10+

Sony has a deal for you: Embarrass yourself in front of others, get a free microphone.

Unlike every karaoke game that preceded it - in other words, the four iterations of "Karaoke Revolution" - "SingStar Rocks!" stomps the notion of passing the mic by including two USB microphones in one \$50 package and practically bribing would-be glass-breakers to duet, have a sing-off and even participate in team-based challenges. Soloists can hone their craft as well, but "Rocks!" takes the ball and runs with the notion that karaoke is rarely a solo affair.

The "SingStar" series has been a hit in Europe for a couple of years and has four versions of its own, so "Rocks!" isn't exactly a rookie effort despite its brand-new status in America. The game's voice- and note-recognition technology is serviceable, and the clean, minimalist layout is a time-tested means of attracting new players and non-gamers with as little fuss as possible.

Still, "Revolution" vets be warned: "Rocks!" isn't quite as generous in terms of letting flat notes by, and there's no satisfactory means of letting you know how best to adjust your pitch and tempo. This and the lack of a satisfying tutorial/practice mode means you're left to figure this one out on your own - not a big deal if you're goofing off with friends, but potentially aggravating if you're discovering this one alone.

Other "rookie" mistakes? The 30-song lineup (including Thin Lizzy, Marvin Gaye, The Killers, Joss Stone and The Rolling Stones) is more authentic than "Revolution's" sound-alike songs, but it's also considerably smaller in size. And in a bizarre karaoke no-no, there's no option to mute the original singers and sing along to just the backing music.

Still, even that last oversight can't curb what is one of the PS2's better multiplayer train wrecks-in-waiting. Karaoke in any quantity is an easy crowd-pleaser, but turning it into a group activity takes the fun (and trauma) to cool new heights. "Revolution" remains the better game overall with its larger lineup and variety of modes, but casual party gamers in search of an affordably priced party-in-a-box will find plenty to enjoy here.

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

© 2006, McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.