Review: 'Rivals' a fast, furious 'Need for Speed'

November 19 2013, by Derrik J. Lang

This photo provided by Electronic Arts shows a scene from the video game, "Need for Speed: Rivals." (AP Photo/Electronic Arts)

It's no secret the light launch lineup for next-generation consoles leaves a little something to be desired. However, there's at least one game that's sure to get next-generation owners' engines running—and their eyes bugging out. It's the dazzling street racer "Need for Speed: Rivals" (Electronic Arts, for the PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3, Xbox One, Xbox 360 and PC, $49.99).

"Rivals" is the 20th entry in EA's long-running "Need for Speed" series,

which shows no signs of slowing down despite the age on its license. "Rivals" revs up the franchise by borrowing some of the best traits from past EA racing games, all while forging its own route with graphics that illustrate what's possible with new fully loaded gaming hardware.

The developers at Ghost Games, clearly influenced by 2008's chaotically awesome "Burnout Paradise," have crafted a minimalist "Need for Speed" that combines single- and multiplayer elements across a giant high-octane world completely unlocked from the outset. They also kept the experience tight by including just a handful of pitch-perfect race modes.

"Rivals" is set within Redview County, a California-esque domain where curvy canyon roads lead to unfinished bridges, beachy boulevards and a big ol' highway in the desert. Fortunately, the streets are devoid of gridlock, leaving them free to serve as a playground for the game's dueling factions: street racers and a special police task force that pursues them.

This photo provided by Electronic Arts shows a scene from the video game,

"Need for Speed: Rivals." (AP Photo/Electronic Arts)

"Rivals" tries to form a narrative with interstitials featuring narrators spouting some of the cheesiest dialogue ever spoken in a game. (Perhaps the bar is intentionally being set low in advance of the "Need for Speed" movie adaptation set for release next year.) Luckily, they're speedy enough not to deter from the overall game.

"Rivals" players can switch between advancing as either a racer or a cop. Both sides offer dozens of different cars and upgrades for completing lists of tasks, like rear-ending the opposition a certain number of times or finishing particular races. The freewheeling approach makes for a game that's completely easy to pick up and play for five minutes or five hours.

Other than graphics, there aren't really any differences between the current and next-gen versions of "Rivals," but what a difference the glorious 1080p resolution of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions make. The polished details on the cars and crisp environments they fly through cement "Rivals" as possibly the best-looking game of the new generation.

This photo provided by Electronic Arts shows a scene from the video game, "Need for Speed: Rivals." (AP Photo/Electronic Arts)

With that combo of stunning visuals and fluid gameplay, "Rivals" excels at delivering an insane sense of speed without loss of control. Despite a silly attempt at a plot and some minor glitches while playing online, the exhilarating chases possible in "Rivals" make other racing games feel like you're just playing with Hot Wheels. Three-and-a-half stars out of four.

More information: www.needforspeed.com/rivals

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