Review: 'Need for Speed,' 'Forza' hit the gas

December 6 2012, by Lou Kesten

This video game image released by Electronic Arts shows a scene from "Need for Speed: Most Wanted." (AP Photo/Electronic Arts)

Holiday-season TV ads would have you believe that lots of people get brand-new cars for Christmas. With giant bows on top.

I hate to play Scrooge, but you're probably not one of those people. But why settle for one real car when you can buy one video game with dozens of virtual rides? Plus, when you take these vehicles out on the highway, you don't have to worry about insurance, gas prices or speed limits.

— "Need for Speed: Most Wanted" (Electronic Arts, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, $59.99; PC, $49.99) is the most gleefully irresponsible of this year's racing games. It was developed by Criterion Games, the British studio best known for the "Burnout" franchise, and it shares that series' obsession with vehicular mayhem.

"Most Wanted" is set in an open-world environment called Fairhaven City, which is more of a playground for speed demons than a plausible place to live. While cruising the streets, you'll come across signs inviting you to participate in an assortment of events. In sprint and circuit races the object is just to get to the finish line first, while in the ambush and pursuit events you also have to escape the police.

Dozens of cars are available from the start, and race victories earn vehicle modifications, like road-gripping tires or a more aerodynamic chassis. You have to win the "most wanted" beauties—say, the Lamborghini Aventador or the Porsche 918 Spyder—by beating them head-to-head.

"Most Wanted" also includes robust online competition that you can slide right into without having to navigate through a bunch of menus and lobbies. But even if you just want to zip around Fairhaven, flying off ramps and crashing through billboards, this entire package is a blast. Three-and-a-half stars out of four.

— In "Forza Horizon" (Microsoft, for the Xbox 360, $59.99), British studio Playground Games takes U.S. developer Turn 10's exemplary car-geek series off the racetrack and onto the open road. Instead of offering a tour of classic tracks like Le Mans, the new "Forza" moves the action to the fictional Horizon Festival in Colorado.

I found this game's presentation of "car culture" grating, with idiotic characters who seem more interested in partying than driving. But you

can ignore all that once you punch the accelerator, and with hundreds of challenges there's no shortage of action.

Most events are point-to-point races or multiple-lap races on closed circuits, but there are also unsanctioned street races and "showcase" events against airplanes or balloons. Online, you have plenty of straightforward eight-driver events as well as wackier games like "Infected," where you're trying to pass a "virus" from car to car.

In between races, you score points with dangerous driving, such as drifting, zipping past speed cameras or passing other cars a little too closely. Still, "Horizon" stays mostly true to its roots as a simulator rather than an arcade racer—you can't equip nitro boosters or rocket launchers. And whether you're driving a Ferrari or a Ford Focus, the cars look as gorgeous as ever. Three stars.

More information: www.ea.com/most-wanted
forzamotorsport.net/

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