

Game On!

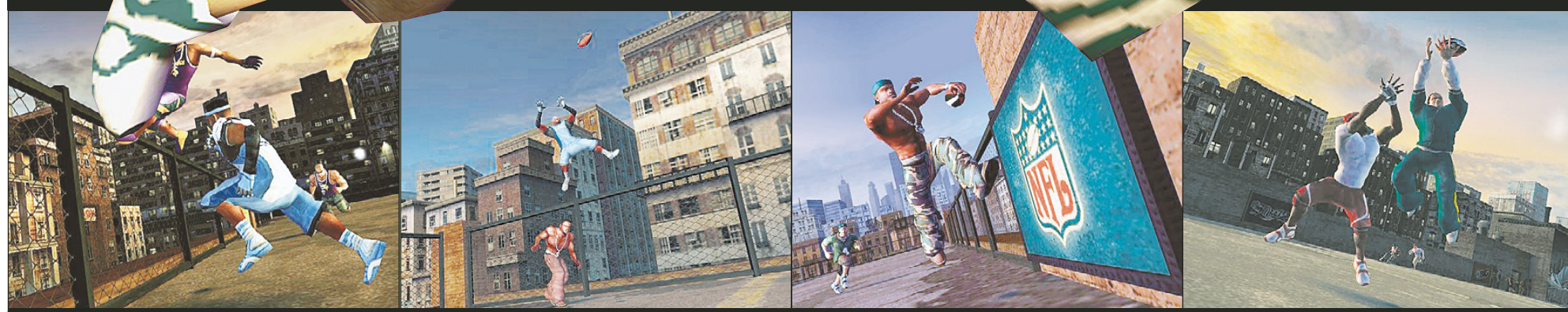
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losing 'Street' cred



NFL-themed sequel struggles to improve on its once-innovative foundation



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS
GAME MASTER

I've been re-gifted. Someone wrapped up last year's copy of "NFL Street" and sent it to me again.

No, wait, I guess it just feels that way. Only 11 months after the very original arcade football game "NFL Street" hit the 'hood, Electronic Arts put together "NFL Street 2."

This is a fine game, just like the first version, which earned three stars from me. But the scant innovations in "Street 2" make it optional for anyone who has the original.

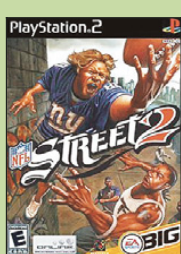
I accept that sports games will come out annually (mainly to reflect roster changes), and that the quick production plan doesn't leave time for the makeovers that take years with some game sequels. But the best sports games

— "Madden NFL," for instance — tend to add enough new stuff to merit plunking down another \$50.

Here, we have just two big changes, one of which doesn't tickle me.

First, the walls are now in play. "Street" has always been about extreme, stylish athleticism, and now as a quarterback you can bounce off a wall to get a better angle on bombs to your receiver. As a runner, you can juke off the wall and hurdle would-be tacklers. All of this is accomplished with a punch of the L1 button and a tap of another.

The new action here is, indeed, amusing — more so if the pursuing defender is left snatching air and smashing his



"NFL STREET 2"
★★
out of four
Price: \$49.95
Players: 1-2
Website:
www.easportsbig.com/games/nflstreet2/home.jsp
Format: PlayStation 2 (also available for Xbox, GameCube)
Category: Sports
Rating: E (Everyone)

monstrous mug into a wall. There are also hot spots on the wall, and if you hit them, you gain lots of extra points that collect in your Gamebreaker meters.

You remember the Gamebreaker. This is a special trick that you can unleash when you have earned enough points. On offense, it makes you virtually unstoppable for a whole series of downs. On defense, you can usually get a turnover and score.

Now, in the second major change, "Street 2" adds an extra Gamebreaker that requires twice the number of collected points. Once unleashed, the Gamebreaker 2 takes the controls from you, and the game cuts to a video of the next

play, which usually involves an outlandish display of athletic ability resulting in a score.

This all is fun to watch, but Gamebreakers change the game so much that it affects your strategy. Instead of concentrating on scoring to win, you spend your time showboating as much as possible to rack up those important style points and obtain the big Gamebreaker.

That's it for the major innovations in "Street 2."

The rest of the game is very familiar, from the look of the playing fields to the character bodies, the music, the nicely simplified playbooks and the frenetic physics.

"Street 2" is just like the original — not bad, but also not new. I think I'll wrap this one up and ship it out again.

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GAME BITS
By Heather Newman

'04 sales prove that PS2 and Xbox are aging well

Let's face it: 2004 was just an odd year for video games, a fact driven home by a joint report from the Entertainment Software Association and industry analysts NPD Funworld last week.

Until October, sales of video games were down in 2004 compared with the same point in 2003. Then two console titles made it the second-best year in the industry's history — "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" on the PlayStation 2 and "Halo 2" on Xbox.

Together, "San Andreas" and "Halo 2" sold almost as many copies as the rest of the top 10 games combined — 9.3 million — and pushed total console software sales to \$6.2 billion for the year. (Sales of PC gaming software weren't included; those totals are due out shortly.)

That's actually up about 8 percent from 2003, but the total amount people spent on consoles, software and accessories dipped slightly because fewer people bought hardware, thanks in part to some severe console shortages over the holidays, NPD analyst Anita Frazier said.

Despite the dip, analysts have been surprised that sales of hardware and games are so high this late in the consoles' life cycles. New models are coming, possibly as soon as the holiday season later this year, and that typically would mean fewer games and consoles sold as people waited for the new technology.



"Halo 2" is one of the two games that rescued this year's sales.

Not so in 2004, which was a good three to four years after the current generation of consoles came out. Total sales were about \$9.9 billion, not including PC, mobile or Web games. That's just behind 2003's record-setting \$10 billion.

This year is likely to be all about the shakedown in portable gaming devices between Nintendo's dual-screen DS and Sony's new PSP (for PlayStation Portable), which includes music and video playback, Frazier said.

By the way, one of 2004's 10 best-sellers wasn't a title from last year at all, but a game released in 2001. You probably guessed it: It's the original "Halo," which thanks to a price drop and overwhelming interest in the sequel managed to sell more than 1.1 million copies.

RECENT RELEASES



"BLINX 2: MASTERS OF TIME AND SPACE"

★★
Microsoft for Xbox, \$19.99. Rating: E (Everyone).
I found the story of "Blinx 2" to be a bit of a jumble. This bizarre tale of time-sweeping cats battling a gang of greedy rival pigs for control of time and space — topped off with ho-hum dialogue and freaky angelic entities — is just weird. Still, the storyline didn't stop me from enjoying the game, a fun, cartoony platform adventure where you play as critters from both sides of the conflict.

The cats and pigs each have different skills. Felines have the ability to rewind, pause and slow-motion the action. So if your kitty gets blown sky high, just rewind and give it another try. The cats even engage in some "Matrix"-style acrobatic slow-motion bullet dodging.

Our porcine pirates, on the other hand, have gadgety space controls that are usually sneaky devices to help the pigs past the guards. Using decoys, warps, bubble traps, even banana peels, their game-play relies on stealth. They need to quietly creep around, clinging to walls and crawling under laser beam alarms to infiltrate and steal the goods.

The game-play is easy to pick up (players are walked through a tutorial), the graphics are pretty enough (nice visual touches) and a bevy of game modes (single player and two-player adventures plus a four-player versus battle) should keep you hopping.

You also get to design your own protagonists. Want to play a cat with blue fur, pink eyes, and neon green jacket? Or how about a pig with a small pink body and an enormous head with orange glasses and a big moustache? If you can dream it, you can probably build it.

Unlike the GameCube and PlayStation 2, the Xbox has a scant few of these goofy platform games, and even fewer exclusive kid-friendly adventures. At \$20, "Blinx 2" is an enjoyable romp for players of all ages.

By **Ryan Huschka**, Detroit Free Press



"LEMONY SNICKET'S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS"

★★
Activision for Windows, \$29.99. Rating: E (Everyone).
If you had fun at the new Lemony Snicket movie, you've already read the books and you just can't get enough of these half-amusing and half-creepy tales. Before you race to the store and grab this new game, we urge you to think twice.

Like many other movie-related games aimed at older elementary-age children, the designers of this new adventure have done a pretty good job of bringing characters to life. The game's 3D images capture the movie characters fairly well. It's sort of like stepping into the movie.

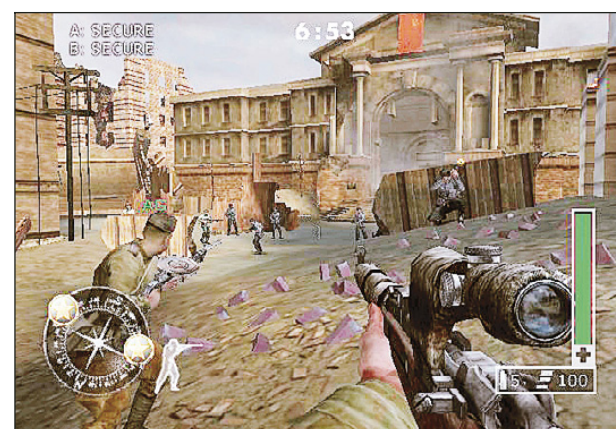
It's just that once we stepped inside, we found that there wasn't much of a game to play. As in the movie, players accompany the three orphaned Beaudelaire children as they are forced to move in with bizarre relatives. Their lives are threatened and they are forced to come up with exotic solutions.

We won't give away any more specific details that will spoil the experience, because there are so few details to give away. However, potential players need to know that we cruised through the entire game — without any cheats — in about four hours.

The game designers seem to have been aware of this problem. Built into the game are a few challenges that suggest some players might work their way through this adventure more than once. For instance, in our trip through this series of cliff-hanging adventures, we found a number of places where letters of the alphabet turned up on stray pieces of paper. If we activated these letters, a message popped up — giving us the definition of a word beginning with that letter. However, by the time we completed the quest, we had not turned up all 26 letters.

We thought: Hmm, perhaps an especially persistent child will insist on playing this game, again and again, until every single letter is found. Or maybe not.

By **David Crumm** and **Benjamin Crumm**, 15, for the Detroit Free Press



"CALL OF DUTY: FINEST HOUR"

★★
Activision for Xbox (also for PlayStation 2), \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).
Call it "Playing Private Ryan." "Call of Duty: Finest Hour" is a first-person shooter that crafts some decent wartime action while telling the stories of the soldiers forced into the World War II frontlines. Playing as Russian, British and American troops, you battle Nazi forces along separate fronts.

The characters' tales and strong voice work, which help set up the personal drama behind the conflicts and give "Call of Duty" that blockbuster movie flair — are the game's greatest assets. With massive explosions of mortar ripping through the sky (the disorienting slow-motion effect is rather cool) and bullets whipping past, this game firmly entrenches players in an engrossing World War II atmosphere.

Still, this is hardly gaming's "finest hour." For starters, most of the soldiers are pretty stupid. I know it's supposed to be the 1940s, but even then combatants knew not to get stuck in the open. These chucklehead troopers will even get stuck when trying to navigate around debris, making them easy fodder for your rifle.

The Axis-vs.-Allies skirmishes can also play out online, where up to 16 players can wage war in either deathmatch or capture-the-flag variants. Not surprisingly, facing other gamers online is a bit more engaging than picking off the computer's adversaries. Graphics are average at best, lacking the dynamic lighting and sensational details of other recent Xbox releases. The characters' movements are very robotic, and the controls aren't really shipshape, either.

Maybe I'm being a bit hard on "Call of Duty," but the competition in the first-person shooter genre is fierce. I'm getting tired of replaying World War II at least once a year. And "Finest Hour," while offering a well-scripted narrative, comes up with precious few reasons to play out these battles again. No surprises here — just solid, albeit predictable, action that could have been better.

By **Ryan Huschka**, Detroit Free Press

Woes of 'Warcraft'

"World of Warcraft" fans are already rabid — but also ready to bite the hand that feeds them. The game broke additional sales records over the holiday season, selling more than 600,000 copies and hosting an amazing 200,000 simultaneous players during the season.

But the enormous demand has led to problems on many of the company's servers, which are handling many more players and much more play time than originally expected. Blizzard issued an apology to its players this week after database issues caused more than 20 of its 88 servers to go down over the weekend.

Players are getting an extra 48 hours added to their accounts free, but some are still up in arms about crashes, minor rollbacks that reset some game-play accomplishments and new log-in queues for some servers that have been experiencing problems.

Blizzard said in a statement they realize the situation is unacceptable, and that they are working "around the clock" to fix the problems.

In the meantime, Sony Online Entertainment's successful-but-not-quite-as "Everquest II" will be expanded with new adventure packs, starting in March, which will sell for \$5 each. Both games get a breather as the competition that was expected to come early this year from "The Matrix Online" and "Guild Wars" slips later into spring. Both have been delayed.

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NEW THIS WEEK

It's January, and the video game industry is experiencing its typical slowdown following the autumn rush to get games into stores for holiday buyers. According to the Amazon.com Video Games Store and other sources, only two major releases are scheduled this week: "Playboy: The Mansion," for Xbox, PlayStation 2 and Windows PCs, and "Oddworld Stranger's Wrath," for Xbox. "Playboy" is rated M (Mature) and "Oddworld" is rated T (Teen).