



"Madden NFL 06"

★★★★
out of four
Price: \$49.99
Players: 1-2,
plus online play
Web site: www.easports.com/games/madden06/home.jsp
Format: PlayStation 2
(also available for PCs
and for other major
consoles)
Category: Sports
Rating: E (Everyone)

'MADDEN NFL 06' SHUTS OUT THE COMPETITION AND RUNS UP THE SCORE

Joey Harrington is no Peyton Manning, and the new "Madden NFL 06" — which comes out this week — makes this plainer than ever.

When Harrington drops back to pass in this game, his eyes can view a small wedge of the football field. When Manning gets ready to fire the ball, he can see half the field.

This is quarterbacking control at its most sensitive level. This year's version of "Madden" gives you more of it. If your receiver is not in the wedge of the quarterback's vision, you most likely won't complete the pass. And better quarterbacks have better eyes.

They call it "Vision and Precision," fancy descriptors for this game's biggest two new features: shifting the quarter-

back's viewpoint and dropping a pass in perfectly behind a defender.

It works pretty smoothly, and it adds another layer of strategy and button-pushing to a game that already was ridiculously detailed. Now that game maker Electronic Arts recently spent all that money to lock up NFL licensing, there is no other game to rival "Madden" 's realistic look and play.

You can make the quarterback eyeball his intended receiver in a number of ways. I found using the right thumbstick most useful, adjusting it after the ball was hiked. This gave me a new way to fake defenders: I shifted my eyes away from



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my target until the last minute, then looked back and zipped in a bullet.

The other new control allows you to direct your pass after you release it, hitting the receiver high, low, behind and in front, using the directional keypad.

"Madden" has all the other perennial goodies, and there are tons, including expanded online play and more defined hot routes for receivers.

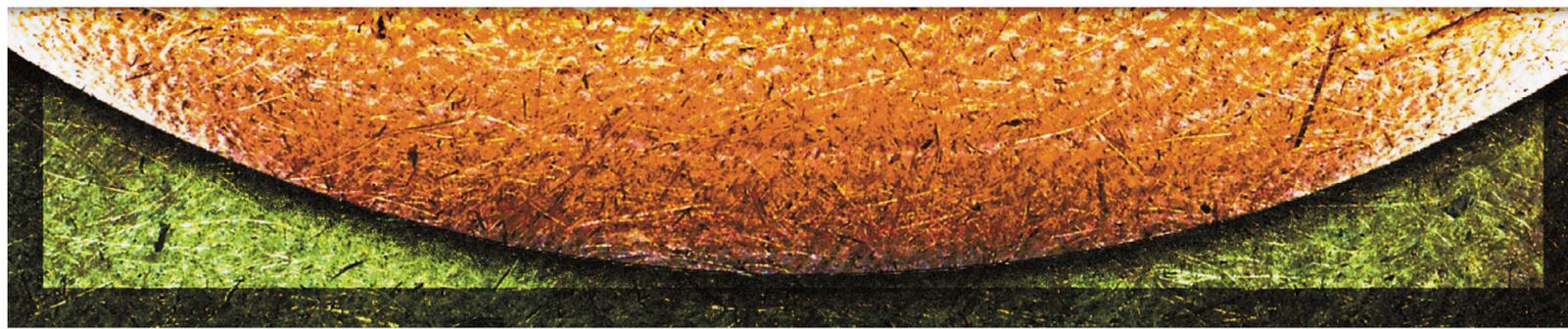
There's also an overhauled single-player superstar mode, which allows you to create a player or import your saved player from "NCAA Football 06" or "NFL Street 2."

Truly, my only nit with this title is the announcing. Al Michaels, who coanchors the games with John Madden, still sounds robotic after all these years. I now believe it's a problem with him, not the game, because the announcers sound great in Electronic Arts' collegiate counterpart to "Madden."

I still miss this game's big rival from last year, "ESPN Football," whose demise came when Electronic Arts bought up everything.

But if you want the best pro football game out there, "Madden" is the only choice now. And make sure Manning's at the helm, not Harrington.

Contact **JIM SCHAEFER** at 313-222-5995 or games@freepress.com.



PATRICK SEDLAR/Detroit Free Press

RECENT RELEASES



"Ryl: Path of the Emperor"

★ Planetwide for Windows, \$50 plus \$12 a month. Rating: T (Teen).

Online world games should be many things. They should entertain and engage; they should involve you in an interesting story; they should give you the chance to create a character you care about; they should draw you in with something new that you haven't seen in online world games before.

They should not subject you to hours upon hours of tediously repeating the same tasks with no hope for reward in proportion to that pain. Which is why I say to online world gamers everywhere: Stay away from "Ryl."

Today's online world titles capitalize on rich back stories and thousands of quests, giving you a gazillion choices to make and things to do. Not "Ryl," which gives you nothing much to do but kill nasties, toddle off to town, kill nasties, toddle off to town ... you get the idea.

The appeal of the game is supposed to be its player-versus-player combat, but that's not realistically possible until you can join a guild (a group of players who work together), and that in turn is not possible until Level 30. Trust me, you do not want to play this game long enough to get to Level 30.

The graphics and sound on this game received as much attention as the crafting system and questing system — which is to say, almost none. It's a travesty compared to modern online world games. Avoid this at all costs.

By Heather Newman, Detroit Free Press



"Charlie and the Chocolate Factory"

★ High Voltage Software and Backbone Entertainment for Game Boy Advance, \$29.99. Rating: E (Everyone).

Charlie Bucket has just discovered the last of the golden tickets underneath the wrapper of a Wonka Whipple-Scrumptious Fudgemallow Delight, so he and four other lucky ticket holders will be allowed to visit Willy Wonka's renowned chocolate factory and see what it's like inside!

You know the story, and you'd think this game would follow it almost exactly. Sadly, this is not the case. Instead of doing things that follow the movie or book, you must complete cheap video game tasks — adding up to a weak attempt to make a popular GBA game.

I like games that involve strategy, but this game has none. You do what the game wants you to do with a just a bit of brain power involved, but no strategy.

Willy Wonka and signs around each level give you instructions on how to complete tasks. It may be a way to get Oompa-Loompas to follow you or just to avoid chocolate geysers.

There is some variation in the levels, but not much. If you collect 25 candies in some levels you get a picture of an Oompa-Loompa from the movie. Who cares?

The sounds were the same throughout the game, never adjusting to the environment. The graphics were comparable to any other Game Boy title.

I wouldn't spend the money on a game that won't take you too long to beat.

By Craig Campbell, 12, for the Detroit Free Press



"Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana"

★★★ NIS America for PlayStation 2, \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).

NIS America reminds me of Square Soft in its early days: It doesn't release a lot of games, but when it does, the results are great. Harkening back to Square's early "Final Fantasy" games, "Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana" is a purely traditional — some might say dated — role-playing game that's so engrossing and charming that its lack of innovation is forgiven.

The story — traditional as it is — follows the adventures of Klein, a youth who's studying the dying art of alchemy. He's accompanied by Popo, a spritish Mana who helps him fuse magical items using alchemy. Against a monster, Klein is defenseless. That's when a monster-hunting young woman, Lita, saves him. Klein, Lita and a growing cast end up on a world-saving quest.

At first, "Atelier Iris" seems like a carbon copy of old-school RPGs: You go from town to town, fighting monsters and meeting a lively cast of characters. But at various points, a new game-play wrinkle is thrown in. For example, you have to take special care of one of your characters after an event unfolds, for reasons that I don't want to spoil. Each wrinkle adds an extra layer of depth. My main gripe is that it's not that challenging.

Adding to game's character are vibrant, highly stylized, cel-shaded graphics and a catchy soundtrack. And NIS has assembled a pretty strong voice-acting cast.

You've seen a lot of this before, but that doesn't make it less enjoyable. If you're looking for a lighthearted, unpretentious RPG, "Atelier Iris" is well worth it.

By Omari Gardner, Detroit Free Press

NEW THIS WEEK

Most-ordered games going on sale this week at Amazon.com, including title, platform and ESRB rating:

1. "Lego Star Wars," Macintosh. Everyone.
2. "Sacred Underworld," Windows. Teen.
3. "Namco Museum Battle Collection," PlayStation Portable. Everyone 10+.
4. "Graffiti Kingdom," PlayStation 2. Everyone.
5. "Sacred Gold Edition," Windows. Teen.

Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store

COMING SOON

"Star Wars: Empire at War"

Platform: Windows
Format: One-player strategy (multiplayer TBA)

Release: Spring
This real-time strategy title from LucasArts has tons of potential. It captures the epic mojo of the titanic clashes from the original film trilogy. Most RTS titles take place on an isolated battlefield, with little or no influence from the state of the surrounding war. "Empire at War" is the opposite — you have control over where your forces move and battle. One of the great things about "Star Wars" games has been the radical differences between the crafty Rebels and their Imperial foes. These are definitely on display in "Empire at War." The space combat doesn't play like a true three-dimensional game. The fighters and capital ships are on separate horizontal planes, which makes it easier to wrap your brain around the situation. With this impressive early showing, we're willing to give the "Star Wars" franchise our attention again.
— Game Informer Magazine