

## CAR CRASH

# NEED FOR SPEED UNDERCOVER

**F**lip to the next page and take a look at the score. Bad, isn't it? But it's not just that *Need for Speed Undercover* is a bad game; it's that it's a bad game with an incredibly erratic engine. The notion of constant and sustained frames per second must have been way down on EA's list of priorities, something completely and utterly ridiculous in a game that wants you to perform with pinpoint accuracy.

Let's cut to the chase. In a world where *Burnout Paradise* and *Midnight Club: Los Angeles* already exist, there is almost no fathomable reason why you'd want to go out and spend money on *Need for Speed Undercover*. Let's acquaint ourselves with the current gaming landscape: *Burnout Paradise* is a glorious, beautiful, rock-solid open-world driving game with a bounty of free updates and some of the nicest, most endearing developers on the market: *Midnight Club: Los Angeles* is a hectic, bustling, lovingly consistent racer that gives the player an incredible journey if they're prepared to invest a few hours. Now, let's go back to *Need for Speed Undercover*. It's an awkwardly painful, insulting title that's been intentionally designed from the ground up to extract your money. In a move almost guaranteed to annoy, *NFS Undercover* has a rather stingy in-game financial situation that, literally, encourages you to spend your *actual* money on buying upgrades, new cars and various liveries.

The flaws, the problems and the issues are virtually inexcusable for a popular franchise from such an affluent publisher. *Need for*

*Speed* games are churned out each and every year, and I'm almost entirely convinced that this one recycles assets from the rather delicious and slightly guilty pleasure that was *Need for Speed: Most Wanted*. The series has never exactly propelled the genre forwards, which has always partially explained the frustration many seasoned gamers have felt towards it. Consistency has always been *Need for Speed's* most prominent feature, and by throwing in some nonsensical storyline, putting a spin on the gameplay and using their solid, reliable driving engine they've managed to create a generally winning formula. That's all in the past. *Undercover* must be trying far too hard to play catch-up with the competition because the engine and the gameplay are falling apart at the seams.



## FORMAT REVIEWED

Xbox 360

## OTHER FORMATS

PS3, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS, PC

## PUBLISHER

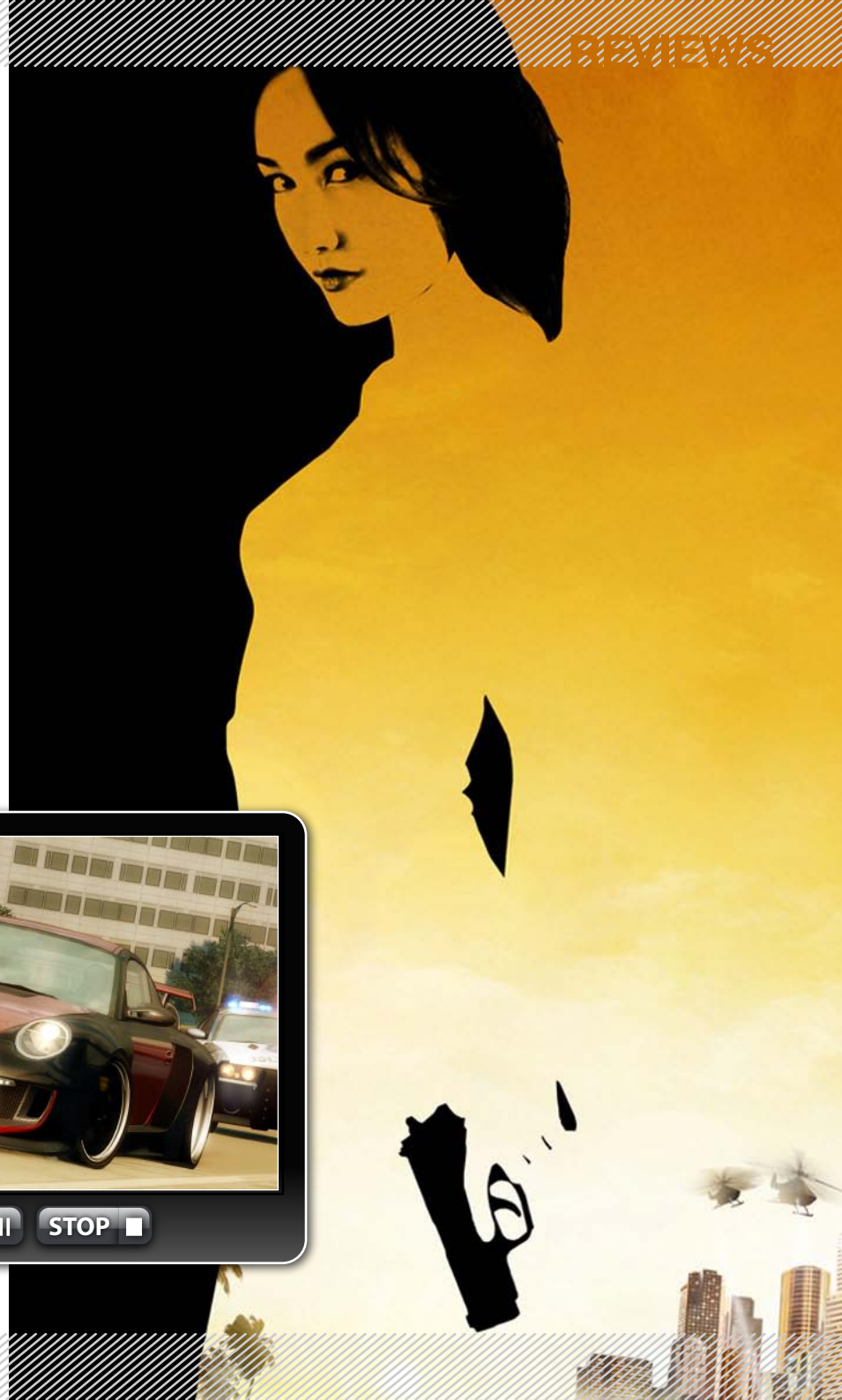
EA

## DEVELOPER

EA Black Box

## REVIEWED BY

Martin Gaston



**“TRI-CITY FEELS DEAD, HAUNTED WITH AN EERIE SENSATION THAT THIS WASN'T HOW THINGS WERE SUPPOSED TO BE”**

That nonsensical storyline is intact, however, so there's plenty of opportunity to occasionally look at every part of Maggie Q's body (face excluded) and Ronnie from *The Shield* doing stuff that's virtually irrelevant but supposedly very important. The player is cast as an undercover cop with some decent driving skills, so predictably you get tasked with infiltrating an underground car smuggling syndicate. To do that you have to grind up your eerily arbitrary wheelman level by undertaking missions, which unlock the all-important 'story' levels. It's quite repetitious, but I can at least respect EA's attempt at trying to mix-up a rather linear genre to begin with. You've got your point-to-point races, traditional circuit races and the mid-90s arcade racing throwback checkpoint mode, but there's also stages where you need to overtake a car and stay ahead of it for a couple of minutes or get a certain distance away. The fuzz are back in action, too, so there are plenty of challenges where you've got to wriggle away from their filthy, law-abiding clutches.

It's safe to say *Undercover* has a fair bit of variety in its modes, but if only the same could be said for its levels: Tri-City is probably the dullest open-world environment ever seen in a videogame. You only ever race at sunrise or sunset (probably the two least desirable times of day for driving) and so it's no wonder that everyone you come across seems to be obsessed with breaking the law and jazzing up



their cars. If I moved to such a bland, bloom-happy world I'd be strung out, on the run from the law and begging passers by for spare change before the end of the day. Glare is so prominent and frustrating it's no surprise that traffic density in this city is suspiciously low. Tri-City feels dead, haunted with an eerie sensation that this isn't how things were supposed to be. The combination of gameplay elements shouldn't have been so strangely lacking. All the shiny, fast, desirable sports cars could never have intentionally been designed to feel so lifeless, and the arcade handling of the vehicles has always worked in *Need for Speed* before, so the conundrum is why nothing seems to work now.

The next game in the series will almost definitely have to be *Need for Speed Most Wanted 2*, as the combined mediocrity of *Carbon*, *ProStreet* and now *Undercover* have helped nosedive the *Need for Speed* series into the ground. This, I think, is a shame, because the developers are more than talented enough to get it right and the series is so robust that it should be able to withstand anything Black Box throw at it. Better luck next year, EA.



**VERDICT** ★★☆☆☆