

Forza Horizon 3

(Narration)

A long time ago, Gran Turismo was THE racing game. If you wanted to play a simulation racer, you would board the Sony Flagship, and prepare for the “Drive of your Life.” That sentiment began to wane in more recent times, as misstep after misstep began to show for the aging Racing Game.

Enter the Forza Motorsport series. Microsoft wanted what Sony had on many fronts, and one of those fronts was the simulation racer. They saw that Gran Turismo was losing traction, and they wanted to convert those lost by Polyphony Digital, to the House of M. The first Forza brought the excitement back to the simulation racer, with its vast car selection, more immersive environments, and actual sense of speed.

But, even then, the simulation racer is a little too hardcore for your average player. While gearheads and tuners can really get a lot out of the robust features of Forza Motorsport, the casual car fan could not. So Turn10 went back to the drafting board and came up with the Horizon series, a perfect marriage of the hardcore and the casual, the serious business and fun loving, the simulation and the arcade.

This is the third installment in the Horizons series, and with its release comes a bevy of new features, tweaks to old formulas, and lessons-learned from some of the short-comings of the past. So grab your ticket, fly to the other side of the planet, and come explore Australia behind of the wheel of your favorite dream car.

(Insert upside-down footage, and correct it because Australia)

As a twist on the previous games, your character is now the show-runner for the Horizons Festival, a weird complete takeover of a tract of land where everyone drives fast, drives dangerously, and there are no insurance premium increases. There has always been a strange disconnect between what you as the player did in game, versus the whole festival itself. You would drive to where the festival is being held to change cars, and not much else. That disconnect remains, however it is downplayed by giving you the choice of where to open new centers, which gives you new races, new challenges, and new settings.

Boasting a map that is nearly twice the size of the Horizon 2, Turn10 did everything in their power to not waste any of the space you are given. All of your favorites racing tropes are represented in the micro-Australia crafted by the development team. Want to rally across the desert? How about forwarding a river like an American settler looking for Oregon? Drift effortlessly through hairpin turns teetering on the edge of a mountain? Want to cruise artificially lit cities at speeds that would make Chuck Yeager squeamish? All of the settings are represented, and represented well in the game's free-roam mode. The game doesn't just give you a setting though, it gives you plenty of things to do in the sometime sand, sometimes pavement box. From finding things like signs to crash through for bonuses, to new routes and races, to challenge spots like speed traps, to ludicrous jumps off insane ramps, there is no shortage of free-roam stuff to do.

But as you know, free-roam is not useful unless there is something to do in vast expanses of the Outback. With everything that you do in game, you earn fans that can unlock even more things to do, so there is no shortage of objectives to occupy your time. Turn10 takes time to give the player the freedom to pursue these objectives however they want. If you don't like racing, you can do stunts. If you don't like stunts, you can do the road challenges. The game lets you approach any objective how you want to. When racing, unless a race is locked to a certain type of car, you can race any race in your favorite car. The game loads opponents based on what you are currently driving.

The racing is no slouch either. Using the "Drivatar," the unfortunate name for computer controlled personalities based on your friends list driving habits, makes for a satisfying experience, where opponent drivers may fight dirty, if that is how your friends do. The races range from huge sprints, to tight circuits, and everything in between. You can even design your own events in some instances, to put that personal touch on your time spent in Australia. The sliding difficulty allows for the hardcore fans to make the game as close to real as allowed, while the casual fan can still win races, and be challenged to make every time you hit the tarmac, a leaning, heart-pounding, fight to the checkered flag.

And all of that adds to the immersion of the game. Graphically, it has improved upon its predecessor, making marked improvements in the environments, effects, and small details. Cars get muddy. They get dusty. They get clean when you drive through water. The crowds feel organic, at blistering speeds, or at a standstill. Rain rolls off your windshield in a way that you would see in real life. Water splashes up from puddles taking in to account your angle and speed. Turn10 made every effort to make their game feel as true to life as possible.

The sound design captures exquisite details as well. You feel the rumbles and throaty roars of mighty V8 engines. You hear the high-pitched whines of the turbos, and the squeals of the tires as you break for turns or burnout at launch. Combine this with soundtracks for literally every taste, and you have a buffet for the ears. Radio stations in game play classic rock, EDM, old-school rap, and even classical orchestra music. IF that isn't enough variety for you, you can use the Groove Playlist app, Microsoft's version of Spotify, in game to customize your own music to tear across the desert. That last feature does have a caveat though, with you needing a subscription separate from Xbox Live to take advantage of.

Controls are tight and precise when are on asphalt, and slower and more clunky while driving on dirt, perfectly mirroring real-world conditions. The biggest issue that you see on the control side is the lack of responsiveness from the press of the pause button, to the actual menu coming up, oftentimes not working at all, unless you are at a full stop in game. If you are trying to select a new objective, it really breaks the flow of the game. This seems to be more frequent as time played goes on in a session, and hard resetting usually fixes it.

I have put nearly 45 hours into my play through of Horizon 3, and I must say, I did not feel any of it. There was never a shortage of things to do, even when I wasn't doing anything. One of the series staples, the Livery Editor, returns, and is once again expanded. While still somewhat annoying to work with due to controller input, and no fill tools, it still lets you completely change the painting of your favorite car, adding generic shapes on to a blank canvas to create works of art. Check out this totally not brand-dealed Lightning Dogs themed Lamborghini Aventador powered by Briggs. The tools they give you are simple to work with, if not a little limited, and yet you can get so much out of them, if you are willing to learn.

Putting that all together makes for a wonderful experience. If you have always wanted to traipse across wide-open plains at 135mph without completely obliterating your car's axel you can. Or if you want to do that, crank up the realism and go for it. Turn10 was not kidding with their tagline that this "Is Your Horizon." They exemplar that sentiment in every way they can. So buckle up for what is truly a "Drive of your Life."