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Midway calls `Blitz' in attempt to upset video football rival

New video game features cheap hits, trash talking and risqué cheerleaders, but can it tackle sales king `Madden'?

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With "Blitz: The League" due in stores this month, Chicago-based Midway Games Inc. has created a video game the National Football League would never allow.

Yanking on a face mask and other dirty tackles are fair game in Blitz. Players dope up with banned supplements and pepper each other with taunts like "Your ass is mine." Cheerleaders' outfits, ultraskimpy, of course, come in leather and snakeskin.

Not surprisingly, the game merits a "mature" rating, a rarity for sports video games.

For Midway, Blitz is the gaming equivalent of throwing the bomb. It's a risky play more likely to fail than succeed, given the dominance of video games blessed by the NFL, say game industry analysts. But it's a unique play and, therefore, intriguing to watch.

Due in stores Oct. 17, Blitz is one of five new titles that Midway is releasing during the fourth quarter, traditionally the game industry's biggest season. While Blitz isn't a make-or-break title for the company, David Zucker, Midway's chief executive, acknowledges it's "a big one for us."

Midway, which is majority owned by media magnate Sumner Redstone, could use a hit. Though the company is largely viewed on Wall Street as being on an upswing, it has lost money for most of the last five years and could use another marquee title like its "Mortal Kombat" series.

Sports can be fertile ground for gamemakers. In 2004, sports games made up nearly 18 percent, or \$1.2 billion, of video game sales, said Anita Frazier, an analyst at New York-based market researcher NPD Group. Football is the king of sports games, generating about \$430 million in sales last year, she said.

Electronic Arts holds NFL rights

The lucrative football video game market is dominated by the franchise named for pro football commentator John Madden. They are made by video game giant Electronic Arts and follow a

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straight-laced script sanctioned by the NFL. There are no late hits or trash talking. Gamers get to control real teams and their star players.

Midway, a video game David to EA's Goliath, used to make an NFL-sanctioned version of Blitz. It was more exaggerated and cartoon-like than the Madden games. But in late 2002, the NFL told Midway to make a more realistic, Madden-like Blitz .

That new version, "NFL Blitz: Pro," flopped. So Midway went back to the drawing board in mid-2003, this time abandoning the NFL and its demands for "sanitized" action, Zucker said.

If Zucker had second thoughts, they likely were erased in December when the NFL signed an exclusive agreement with Electronic Arts. Now, only EA can depict NFL teams and players in their games.

With Blitz, Midway dreamed up its own 17-team league. Chicago, for instance, is home to the Marauders, which are led by quarterback Shane Spain and housed in a stadium called The Asylum. (Gamers are encouraged to create their own team too.)

Midway fashioned a story line for Blitz that's culled from the sports pages' seamier side. Off the field, the game's animated players engage in the sort of activities, like carousing and fighting in bars, that would make the NFL cringe.

Meanwhile, the game's main character, a vicious linebacker named Quentin Sands, is voiced by Lawrence Taylor, a Hall-of-Fame New York Giants great and one-time cocaine addict.

For all its cheesecake and football fury, attractive elements to the young male demographic the game is aimed at, Blitz is flying in the face of a key sports game convention.

Typically, football gamers are also big football fans. And analysts say they relish the idea of controlling their favorite team and favorite players on screen, as is the case in the Madden game. But in Blitz, the players are made up.

"I really don't think guys who like football simulation games [like Madden] are going to want to play a game that has a bunch of characters who are no-name players," said Michael Pachter, a stock analyst at Wedbush Morgan Securities in Los Angeles.

"I don't think they want to see some no-name receiver outrun some no-name secondary."

So, while Pachter said he's optimistic about other coming Midway games, "my confidence level in sell-through for [Blitz] is low."

Other analysts voiced similar skepticism, though they thought Blitz was an intriguing idea.

"I don't see Blitz as a big threat," said David Cole, an analyst with video game researcher DFC Intelligence in California. "I think [Midway] will face a pretty uphill battle."

Zucker said Blitz isn't going to outsell the Madden game. "But I think it will surprise people," he said.

2nd Blitz bombed

Midway has been making football games since 1997, when the original Blitz appeared. In 1998, Midway said, Blitz outsold the Madden game on Nintendo 64 consoles, though it lost ground after that. Still, Midway said, Blitz remained a viable title until 2003.

That's when "NFL Blitz: Pro" came out to lackluster reviews in gaming publications and in Midway's own test groups. It had 11 players per team, not seven like in the old Blitz that allowed for more on-field action. And it lacked the over-the-top, pro wrestling quality of the old game, with thunderous hits and showboating.

But the NFL demanded the new style, Zucker said.

"The NFL over the years became more and more politically correct in what they wanted to see in their video games," he said. "They were reviewing every single tackle animation."

The NFL says it did want Midway to change. The league had heard complaints from players, fans and the media that the old Blitz wasn't authentic enough, said Brian McCarthy, an NFL spokesman.

As for the new Blitz, McCarthy said the NFL "doesn't comment on the business affairs of other companies."

The NFL is the sports industry's most lucrative brand, bringing in more than \$3 billion annually from sales of licensed products.

The league has long been "hypersensitive" about anything associated with its brand, said David Carter, head of the Sports Business Group, a California-based consulting firm. The NFL tends to be more conservative than other leagues, he said.

Blitz is the antithesis of the image the NFL tries to project.

Just check out the game's opening scene. Its main character, Quentin Sands of the New York Nightmare, delivers a crippling tackle to the opposing quarterback. Sands then smashes the QB's thumb, its mangled remains spurting blood.

Players get spinal contusions, sprained necks and more, with each injury heralded on screen by an X-ray-style picture of a bone snapping.

Zucker makes no excuses for the violence.

"Football is a violent game," he said. "Let's face it. You can't hide from that."

Interwoven within the game is a story penned by Peter Egan, who also created "Playmakers," a TV show that explored pro football's seedier side. The NFL reportedly pressured ESPN to yank the show off the air after one season.

The Blitz cast includes a greedy team owner trying to extract public subsidies for a new stadium; a veteran player saddled with money woes from a busted marriage and a gambling problem; and a rookie trying to hit on a cheerleader named Jacqui.

Cheerleaders get plenty of screen time. They are animated versions of models for FHM, a magazine chock-full of women in minimal clothing. As Blitz players progress and win games, they can add new cheerleaders to their squads.

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