

► Motorcycles aren't just window-dressing; their low profile prevents competitors from drafting you and charging up their nitrous boosts.



Midnight Club: Los Angeles

A vehicular fashion show

I've just spent the last five minutes agonizing over side skirts. One set gives my RX8 a boxy, futuristic look; the other elegantly highlights the oversized rear tires. These are the kinds of paralyzing choices found in *Midnight Club: Los Angeles*, a game that's as much about looking at cars as it is about driving them.

The game takes place on a single map: a huge, open, idealized version of L.A., full of sparsely trafficked straightaways where pedestrians are nimble and cops are scarce. The game exploits this setting with a seemingly uncountable number of events, from traditional multi-lap circuits to "landmark" races — get from point A to a distant point B, by any means necessary. Also present are a few *Grand Theft Auto*-style smash-and-dash missions that flesh out a forgettable but well-acted story; these break things up a bit, but mostly underscore the fact that the driving engine is designed for racing, not vehicular combat.

Even with a substantial variety of events, though, *Midnight Club* can drift into monotony on occasion. Hunting down shortcuts and collectibles is diverting, but only for so long. The handful of special abilities (slow down time, knock away oncoming cars) adds little strategy, and because there's no fast-travel option, commuting to events can be a chore.

Luckily, the driving itself is only half the draw: The game includes a robust and astonishingly addictive customization engine for its licensed vehicles. Though light on performance upgrades, the garage allows you to tweak the appearance of your cars to an absurd degree, from ride height to the color of your *dashboard gauges*.

This customization offers a strong incentive to show off your ride in multiplayer. On top of the basic race types, the smooth 16-player online mode features a variety of flag-based games, from capture-the-flag to the surprisingly entertaining "keep away." Online also throws in a few innovative features, like tradable custom



► *Midnight Club: L.A.* takes place on one giant map, with brief loading only when jumping into races or teleporting to the garage.

courses and the ability for large groups to hold multiple events simultaneously on the same map.

As a whole, though, the game falls short of true excellence. Perhaps it's the scarcity of under-the-hood customization. Maybe it's that different cars feel too similar. Or it might just be the sprawling sameness of the L.A. setting. Whatever the reason, *Midnight Club* ends up as an extremely solid racer with moments of greatness...but just enough flaws to keep it from the ranks of the classics.

— Joe Rybicki



THE VERDICT

ON XBOX 360

- + Huge number and variety of races.
- + Insanely high level of visual customization.
- Bizarrely low level of performance customization.
- ? Did I really just spend that much time looking at rims? What's wrong with me?



8.0