

Review: 'Streets of Rage 4' does justice to cult beat-'em-up series

May 13 2020, by Gieson Cacho



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A childhood hatred of Sega kept me away from "Streets of Rage." It's a franchise that I know vaguely but never played thanks to the console wars of the 1990s.

Back then, you either backed Nintendo or Sega. No middle ground existed. Choosing one meant the unrelenting contempt of the other. It was a mandate bestowed upon the playground gods or perhaps the companies' marketing departments. Because I grew up with Nintendo, I stuck with Mario and despised those Sega kids who lived in a backward society with a 512-color palette and a chunky four-button controller.

Unfortunately, that disdain created a gaming blind spot, one that I recently filled because of "Streets of Rage 4." The sequel's release gave me an excuse to go back and play through the cult classics. It was a chance to relive someone else's childhood and discover why the beat-'em-up series was beloved by so many.

What I discovered is that at its core, the "Streets of Rage" games were about fighting-system depth and incredible music. The stories were never any good. They usually dealt with the big bad Mr. X trying to take over Wood Oak City through robots, ninjas or the brute force of his gangs. The narrative was always secondary to the journey, which took players through an army of adversaries along beaches, factories and underground bases.

That mentality carries over 26 years later in the latest chapter. Developers Dotemu, Lizardcube and Guard Crush Games gave "Streets of Rage 4" a major facelift with hand-drawn visuals that look cartoonish but work for the franchise. The developers bring back the main heroes Axel Stone, Blaze Fielding and Adam Hunter and introduce new faces Cherry Hunter and Floyd Iraia. (Other fan favorites are unlockable.)

They come together to battle the children of Mr. X, the Y Twins. The kids have emerged as a new threat to Wood Oak City by ingratiating themselves into the social fabric while coming up with a mind control process through music. The heroes band together to stop the twins through the campaign's 12 stages.

Off the bat, "Streets of Rage 4" feels worlds smoother and faster than the 1990s entries. The characters move effortlessly and the animation looks fluid. Better than that, though, the developers fixed one of the more annoying flaws in the genre. In the past, once enemies reached the end of the screen they disappeared and players had to back off to lure them back into play. Doing so broke the pace of combat and created an exhausting process, especially when fighting strong foes.

In the new [game](#), enemies that reach the end of the screen bounce back into play and become fodder for juggle combos. It's a smart move borrowed from the likes of "Street Fighter II" and rewards aggressive combat. It makes the flow of the brawls feel so much better.

Elsewhere, the developers refined the combat system. Players now have a dedicated grab button and combos take into account long and short presses for a weak and strong attack, respectively. They added a back attack to guard from enemy sneak strikes while the player is pounding on a foe. The teams also kept the Blitz move, which lets characters close the distance between a foe via an attack. To add a visual flair and help with crowd control, the game lets players perform a star move that deals massive damage across big parts of the screen. Sadly, it can only be used with a star in a character's possession and those opportunities are somewhat rare.

The other important improvement is how Dotemu and company handled the Special Attack. This is a powerful move that deals impressive damage, but in past entries, the move was tied to health: If players used it repeatedly it sapped away energy and led to a quick death.

In "Streets of Rage 4," the studios came up with a compromise that lets players use these attack more often. It will cost health but if players are aggressive enough, they can earn that energy back by beating up enemies. It creates a risk-reward scenario that encourages offensive play

at moments when it's needed.

All these changes create a system that's familiar to veterans while bringing some badly needed gameplay updates. It's a remarkable feat overhauling the gameplay while keeping the quirks that define the "Streets of Rage" franchise. After playing through past games, "Streets of Rage 4" felt like a cohesive part of the whole. It shows the care the developer put into crafting not just an upgraded beat-'em-up but one that evokes the spirit of the series.

What ties everything together is the music. That has been the other calling card of the franchise, and the music from "Streets of Rage 4" doesn't disappoint. With call-backs to previous entries and some new tunes, the soundtrack, with its catchy synths and driving score, keeps pushing the players forward. It matches the environments while inspiring intense nostalgia.

The only issue with "Streets of Rage 4" is its length. Like the previous chapters, it's short but the developers did add several extras including secret stages and unlockable characters. That should keep fans busy, but let's just hope, they don't have to wait another two decades for another chapter in the series.

"Streets of Rage 4"

3 stars out 4

Platform: PC, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Xbox One

Rating: Teen

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