

Right: Knockout animations are often accompanied by amusing, if stereotypical, audio and visual effects. Frenchman Glass Joe goes down in a shower of croissants, for example. Below: King Hippo's charge attack is the first time you need to use the duck move, which mixes things up and hints at far tougher fights later in the game.

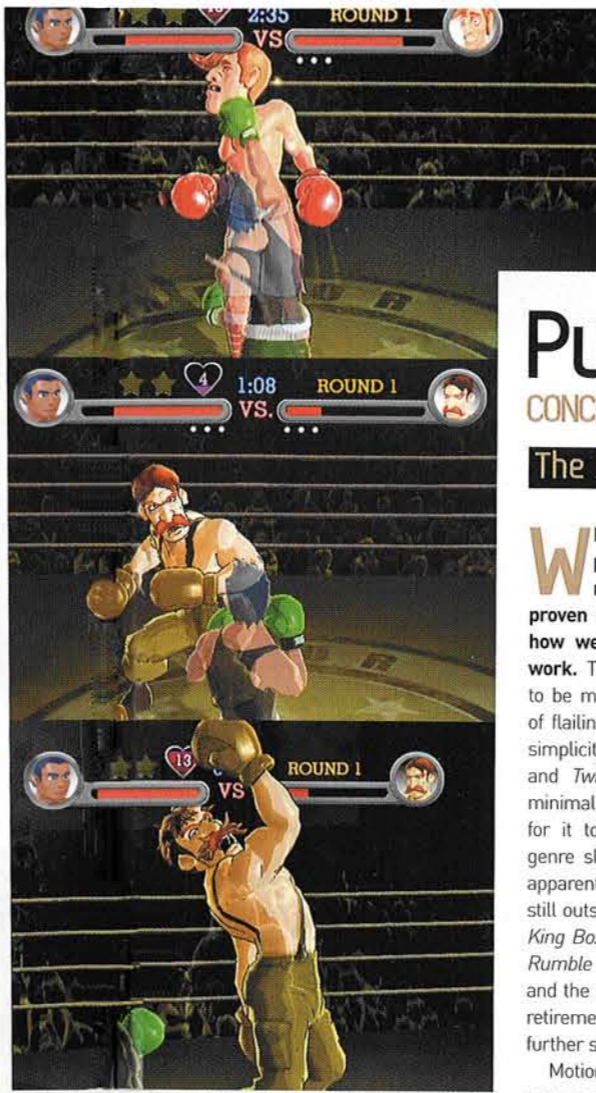


TWO MEN ENTER...

WHILE THE BELATED rebirth of the *Punch-Out!!* series plays very much on familiarity, there's one interesting addition that breaks away from tradition. Our early build of *Punch-Out!!*'s title screen teased with a locked Head To Head mode, suggesting that the return of Little Mac will follow on from the likes of *Wii Sports Boxing* with a split-screen versus mode. In such a patient take on boxing as this, it's still not quite clear how this would work. It could quite easily just be either a mash-a-thon or a total stalemate. Ideally, however, it'll allow you to select any of the boxers you've defeated in Career mode, since their attack patterns are far better suited to a versus mode than Mac's speedy blows.



Right: Lumps, bumps and bruises appear on characters as fights go on, often leaving opponents borderline unrecognisable by the end of the third round.



Punch-Out!!

CONCEPT After taking a dive for two full generations, Nintendo's classic boxing franchise returns in superb form ready to take on all comers.

The return of the Mac

While shovelware and dodgy third-party ports have given the Wii a bad reputation, Nintendo itself has a proven track record of demonstrating just how well its motion-sensitive control can work. The thing so many developers seem to be missing is that the inherent vagueness of flailing your arms lends itself far better to simplicity than complexity – *Super Mario Galaxy* and *Twilight Princess* both make relatively minimal use of the Remote and work superbly for it too. Even in terms of such a small genre slice as boxing games, this is already apparent, with *Wii Sports'* take on pugilism still outshining full-price retail efforts like *Don King Boxing* and the frankly dreadful *Ready 2 Rumble Revolution*. But in bringing Little Mac and the much-loved *Punch-Out!!* series out of retirement, Nintendo has simplified matters further still, to amazing effect.

Motion control for such a basic and precise game may seem a horrible idea on paper, but we were impressed with not only how well it actually worked, but also just how right it felt. Body blows are triggered by Remote and Nunchuk swings while holding 'up' on the control stick shifts your punches upstairs for a little more damage. It's classic *Punch-Out!!* from this point on; each opponent an exercise in pattern learning and quick reactions, and, as ever, a well-timed dodge will leave them open to a certain volley of jabs. Quicker reactions still allow you to catch cheeky rivals mid-taunt, which, like landing a perfectly timed counter attack, grants one power star that can be used to throw a devastating Star Punch. These seem to slice through almost any defence and do ridiculous damage, making it crucial to exploit chinks in your opponents' armour every time you spot them.

If you're more the traditionalist, you'll be glad to hear that disconnecting the Nunchuk and flipping the Remote 90 degrees enables you to play the old-school way, an option that for once isn't infinitely preferable to its more active alternative, but rather a second viable control scheme. Playing like this certainly builds on the game's already plentiful retro charm, perfectly mimicking the NES controls

of the original home versions. But while the basics might not have evolved much since the Eighties, Next Level has given *Punch-Out!!* a hearty polish that can leave nobody in any doubt that this is a brand new game. The cartoon-style visuals come to life beautifully in 3D, slick animation and effects securing the game's place as one of the prettiest Wii titles to date. It's not purely cosmetic either, the fluidity ensuring that openings in attack patterns can be easily spotted and exploited.

/// As structurally simple as it is mechanically, *Punch-Out!!*'s solo modes consist of just career and quick-play modes, the former playing out just as it always has and setting up several bouts in each circuit before you take on the champion. We got to run through the first circuit several times, taking on familiar faces like Glass Joe and Von Kaiser before running into new boy Disco Kid and ultimately going toe-to-toe with King Hippo. As is customary, each has their own strengths and weaknesses to pick up on and work off as you play. Our second run saw us so au fait with their patterns that we made it all the way to amusing lummoxx Hippo without taking a single punch.

The real joy of *Punch-Out!!*, however, will be watching the complexity of opponents build as Little Mac grows in confidence and

"The motion-sensing Wii Remote and Nunchuk controllers turn real-life swings into on-screen punches, so anyone can play"

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stature. Weaving round multi-part attacks and accurately predicting killer blows has always been a highlight of the series and we see little reason why that would change here – while *Mario*, *Metroid* and *Zelda* have all evolved almost beyond recognition since their 8-bit introductions, this is one series that refuses to change with the times purely because it doesn't need to. Those wishing to flail like a broken windmill can do so with *Wii Sports* or – through an ill-advised gift or regrettable purchase – *Ready 2 Rumble*. But if you've been holding out for something a little less full of epic flail, take comfort in the fact that the champ will reign again very soon indeed. ☺

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Next Level Games
Release: 22 May
Genre: Sport
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Canada-based Next Level Games has a diverse portfolio to its name, spanning the entire current generation of platforms. The award-winning developer was recently voted the best place to work in British Columbia for the second year running and its call-up to work on the rebirth of *Punch-Out!!* should prove its ability.

Developer History

Spider-Man: Friend Or Foe 2007 [Multi]
 Mario Strikers: Charged Football 2007 [Wii]
 Super Mario Strikers 2005 [GC]
 NHL Hitz Pro 2003 [Multi]

High Point

The original *Mario Strikers* is probably the best full release to Next Level's name so far, although we do have a lot of time for the *Hitz* series as well. Both over-the-top takes on their sports, this bodes pretty well for *Punch-Out!!*.