

Reviews of recent video game releases

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**McClatchy-Tribune News Service
(MCT)**

"BIOSHOCK"

For: Xbox 360 and PC

From: Irrational Games/2K Games

ESRB Rating: Mature (blood and gore, drug reference, intense violence, sexual themes, strong language)

"Bioshock's" supreme greatness comes down to three factors, each of which could fill this review's space and then some in its own right.

Factor No. 1: variety. In terms of weapon selection alone, "Bioshock" is a terrific first-person shooter, boasting a healthy roster of guns and drastically different ammo types for each. All weapons are upgradeable, and you can craft special ammo from junk littered throughout the game world.

But where most shooters end, "Bioshock" merely begins, allowing you to outfit your character with a trove of genetic modifications _ telekinesis, fireballs, enemy possession, a portable insect swarm and so much more _ that make your guns look downright impotent. When all else fails, you also can hack various machinery _ security cams, gun turrets, bots _ to work for instead of against you.

Thanks to factor No. 2, technical polish, all things are possible. "Bioshock's" artificial intelligence is brilliantly alive, and the gorgeous world of Rapture _ a mid-20th century underwater utopia gone horribly wrong _ is your playground as result. Your weapons and genetic powers work together in all manner of creative ways, and the game leaves you free to play to whatever strengths you have as a gamer.

It doesn't hurt, either, that everything just works. The controls are perfect, the framerate's rock-solid, and a clever respawn system allows the game to lay it on thick while also allowing players of all abilities, with persistence, to see it through to the end.

That brings us to factor No. 3: the presentation.

Put simply and without spoiling even the intro, "Bioshock's" 20-ish-hour storyline belongs on the same pedestal as the best of science fiction entertainment, regardless of medium. Few games possess the ability to genuinely creep you out, and fewer can do so with their tongue simultaneously planted in cheek. Only one _ this one _ can do all that while "How Much is That Doggy in the Window?" plays on a bullet-riddled jukebox while you fight for your life.

The supernova of discovery, polish and beauty makes "Bioshock" an obvious candidate for multiplayer, and the lack of any such mode is the game's only true drawback. Fortunately, that same explosion gives "Bioshock" a level of replayability most shooters, multiplayer or not, will never achieve. Plenty of great ones will hit Xbox Live this fall, but none will do even half of what this one does so splendidly.

"HEROES OF MANA"

For: Nintendo DS

From: Square-Enix

ESRN Rating: Everyone 10+ (language, mild fantasy violence)

Yes, first impressions are important. Sometimes, though, lasting impressions matter more. Just ask anyone who gives "Heroes of Mana" more than a couple hours of their time.

It isn't a pretty sight at first. Players have been waiting a long time for a real-time strategy game to arrive on the Nintendo DS, and Square-Enix initially appears to fumble the opportunity entirely. "Mana's" derivative, dreadfully slow introduction is a buzz killer, and the oppressive level of handholding in the opening levels does little to alter the perception that this is anything more than a strategy game for babies.

But around the third mission _ as if it's reading your mind _ the game loosens the leash and eases up on the storytelling. Not surprisingly, the experience improves exponentially from there.

Around the same time, "Mana" starts to pull the covers off its potential, allowing for the creation of more facilities and detailing a surprisingly strong chain of power for its various unit classifications. While the game never reaches the same level of complexity as a "Starcraft" or "Company of Heroes," the self-contained mythos it creates allows it to challenge you in different but similarly gratifying ways.

That said, this is still a DS game, and no DS game will ever be privy to the same level of horsepower a PC strategy game receives. "Mana's" battlefields are impressive for a portable game with 16-bit graphics, but they're modest by RTS standards. Unit information is similarly limited, making it hard to research various units and exploit enemy weaknesses.

Most notable of all is the game's stunted artificial intelligence. Units respond to commands, but they commonly experience more difficulty than they should in getting from points A to B. Sometimes they take the long way around. Other times, they stop completely. Usually, they get where they're supposed to go, but it's wise to keep an eye on crucial units when they're on the move. You just never know.

In spite of that rather notable problem, "Mana" perseveres and emerges as a fun validation of the DS' ability to handle real-time strategy. It's visibly flawed, but it works, and the stylus controls make it easy to select multiple units and zip around the map. The aforementioned issues and omission of online multiplayer keep this one from being all it could be, but at least the ball is finally rolling now.

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