

Reviews of recent video game releases

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(MCT)**

"BRAIN AGE 2: MORE TRAINING IN MINUTES A DAY"

For: Nintendo DS

From: Nintendo

ESRB Rating: Everyone

The first time I fired up "Brain Age 2," I did so on maybe three hours of sleep. I paid dearly, bombing on my first set of challenges and finishing with a brain age nearly twice my actual age. The game asked me if I was feeling a bit tired, and while it was just a rhetorical question, I couldn't help but nod in shame.

It didn't help my plight that "BA2," like any good tool of educational enlightenment, has visibly upped the ante in terms of challenge.

Like its predecessor, "BA2" aims to keep your mind young by making your brain sweat. The game, designed around the research of neuroscientist Ryuta Kawashima, presents a collection of challenges that engage everything from your prefrontal cortex to your angular gyrus. (Yes, you have one of each.)

Based on your efforts, "BA2" assigns an "age" to your brain, ranging from 20 (brilliant) to something much less impressive (see above). Like the first game, it tracks your day-to-day progress, via a Daily Play option, without demanding a heavy time investment in return.

But while the original "Age" provided a well-rounded mental workout by focusing on different facets of mind power, the sequel comes straight at you by combining those facets within a single challenge. An activity that might've tested only computation the first time around now tests memorization as well, while a spate of new challenges ask you to draw on combinations of visualization, on-the-spot analysis, concentration and even rhythm.

The new layer of intellectual oomph and the clever new challenges that accompany it are "BA2's" chief, and perhaps only, selling point. The look and interface Nintendo established in the first "Age" returns in full, and the game doesn't introduce any monstrous new features like online play or leaderboards. Multiplayer's a tad meatier, there are new Sudoku puzzles to solve, and Nintendo tosses in a nice little "Dr. Mario" clone for the heck of it, but little has changed fundamentally.

The overwhelming sense of familiarity makes "BA2" feel more like an expansion pack than a brand-new game. Fortunately, Nintendo's priced it like one at \$20, so it's hard to take much umbrage with that. Given how much value the first "Age" provided _ and still provides in a complementary role _ it's also hard to doubt that an even more advanced challenge won't provide a similarly fruitful return on that investment.

"GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER 2"

For: Sony PSP

From: High Voltage/Ubisoft

ESRB Rating: Teen (violence)

When Sony recently unveiled its redesigned PSP, the one thing a lot of people really wanted _ a second analog stick _ wasn't part of the equation.

Given that hardware isn't known to fiddle with core functionality in the middle of its lifespan, the omission wasn't particularly surprising. But unsurprising and disappointing aren't mutually exclusive, and if you don't know why but wish to understand, look no further than "Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2."

On paper, the arrival of "GRAW2" on the PSP is exciting news, in particular because the game's story and setting fit into the "GRAW" universe but are otherwise completely different than the story and setting from the Xbox 360/PC/PS3 game of the same name. For fans pining anxiously for the series' third chapter on those systems, this presents an awfully tantalizing way to ease the wait.

The deal sweetens once it becomes apparent that "GRAW's" essence translates to the PSP without much sacrifice. While no one will confuse this version of "GRAW2" with its next-generation peers, it looks nice by PSP standards, moves quickly and replicates the interface of its big-screen counterparts in many satisfactory ways.

That High Voltage packs so much technical goodness into such a small package is most impressive. But it merely makes it that much more lamentable when control limitations just about undo everything.

To master "GRAW" is to master a lion's share of commands that keep your character alive, your squad(s) on the move and your arsenal of weaponry and gadgetry hearty. A task like that is enough to push an 360 or PS3 controller to its limit, and it's impossibly overwhelming on a system that's one analog stick and two shoulder buttons short. The PSP wasn't built with first-person controls in mind, and managing such a complex arsenal of commands with a gimped control scheme just never feels right, particularly when things get hairy.

To compensate, "GRAW2" dumbs it down a bit, stripping away the squad aspect and offering an optional auto-aim feature that's almost embarrassingly remedial but pretty much necessary for average players who wish to get very far. But even with this and the option to play with a friend in co-op mode, the constant negotiation with controls never fully disperses.

Neither, then, does the feeling that you're settling for something in hopes that it eventually will transform into something else. Despite its intentions, it won't.

(Billy O'Keefe writes video game and DVD reviews for McClatchy-Tribune News Service.)

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