

## Reviews of recent video game releases

**By Billy O'Keefe**

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

"JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD"

For: Xbox 360 and Playstation 3

From: Tiger Hill/Midway

ESRB Rating: Mature (blood, drug reference, intense violence)

Arguably no game has earned the "action game" classification quite like "Stranglehold," which incidentally also rewrites the rules on how to translate a film into a game.

"Stranglehold" isn't based on a movie, but in fact is a sequel to John Woo's "Hard Boiled." The narrative isn't Hemingway, but it works as an excuse to revisit Chow Yun-Fat's Inspector Tequila. (Yun-Fat provides his voice.)

More importantly, though, "Stranglehold" gives us a crack at reenacting some of the greatest action scenes in movie history, and the degree to which it pulls that off is remarkable. Environments are ridiculously destructible, enemies storm in like clowns out of a limousine, and Tequila is gifted with an insane arsenal of moves that are deliriously fun to execute and arrange.

"Max Payne" fans will see a lot of that game in "Stranglehold." Tequila can slow time in limited bursts, and time slows automatically whenever he has an enemy in his sights and is in the throes of any number of acrobatic moves ranging from diving to sprinting across the tailbone of a wrecked dinosaur museum exhibit.

Additionally, "Stranglehold" is generous with the firepower. Ammo is everywhere, and every gun uses a magical magazine that never needs a reload.

When all else fails, a foursome of special, limited-use moves \_ allowing Tequila to heal, zoom in on an enemy, enjoy limited indestructibility and automatically clear out a room \_ are available. The more style with which you dispatch enemies, the more times you can take advantage.

To compensate for your many talents, "Stranglehold" hurls the kitchen sink at you. With few exceptions, the action never stops during the game's seven levels: Cronies constantly blitz you, boss characters are made of steel, and sometimes both problems land on your plate at once.

Some technical problems \_ namely, a camera that struggles with tight spaces and an action/jump button that occasionally doesn't respond as intended \_ compound the problem. For the most part, though, the game feels exceptionally good, offering a sense of control that belies the madness happening around you.

"Stranglehold's" single-player experience is beatable in a weekend, and the death-match multiplayer is chaotic fun but not built for endurance. But that's forgivable, because if there's a game that's worth dusting off and replaying every few weeks or so, this easily is it. If you fancy action games at all, a return on your investment is assured.

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"TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 08"

Reviewed For: Xbox 360 and Playstation 3

Also available for: Wii, Playstation 2, PSP, Nintendo DS, PC/Mac

From: EA Sports

ESRB Rating: Everyone

In every way but one, "Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08" is the best "Woods" game yet.

The "but one" has nothing to do with features, because "08" is loaded. The multi-pronged career mode is deeper than ever, with the Tiger Challenge receiving a role-playing-game-style makeover that incorporates the game's numerous golf (10), arcade (two) and mini-game (10) modes.

A full tour also is available for your created character, who comes courtesy of the most amazing character-creation tool in any game, period. The new headshot import tool works astonishingly well under the right conditions, but crafting something from scratch is awfully fun.

The "but one" has nothing to do with online support, though online play occasionally falls prone to some lag. It still delivers, and the new Gamernet feature \_ which lets post online clips of your greatest golfing exploits and challenge others to match them and "bust" your clip \_ could be the franchise's best new feature in years.

Visually, "Woods" isn't much prettier than last year, but it's impressive where it counts. The golfers, including your created characters, look exceptional, and the courses are easy enough on the eyes to make some ugly spectators and jagged edges forgivable.

Nope, the "but one" is bigger than all those things \_ combined.

For whatever reason, "08" needlessly tinkers with its most essential asset: the swing. Put simply, it's measurably more sensitive than before. The window for hitting a straight shot is perilously small, and the difference between a shot or putt that falls short and one that grossly overshoots the target is a soft touch that's impossible to quantify. Well-prepared shots with feel-good swings occasionally go nowhere near their intended targets, and it's often unclear why.

"08" reintroduces the three-click swing control scheme as an alternative to compensate, but the margin for error is so cruelly small that it merely adds to the illusion that the game is working against rather than challenging you. Fortunately, you can switch schemes instantaneously if you find that different setups deliver in different situations.

That's ultimately what you'll have to do if you don't want to wait until next year. "08" offers a ton to love, but it also dares you to keep coming back after the new control alterations send you storming off. Mastery remains a possibility, but you'll need the patience of a steady-handed saint to topple Tiger this year. You've been warned.

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"STUNTMAN: IGNITION"

Reviewed for: Xbox 360 and Playstation 3

Also available for: Playstation 2

From: Paradigm Ent. /THQ

ESRB Rating: Teen (drug reference, mild language, suggestive themes, violence)

Mercy is a beautiful thing, and it's the one thing "Stuntman: Ignition" needed most. The original "Stuntman" had none, and it turned an intriguing game with a dynamite concept into something unplayable.

The concept returns untouched in "Ignition." You're a movie stunt driver, and it's your job to complete various scenes by following on-the-fly cues from the director and hitting your assignments. Miss too many, and you have to start the scene over.

But "Ignition" undoes many of "Stuntman's" most grievous offenses, and it's an immeasurably better game for that reason alone. Vehicles that controlled like boats in the first game now maneuver as intended, so it's easier to hit those assignments. The director is more forgiving, allowing you room to string together some tricks without having to be unreasonably precise when hitting a target. If that's still not enough, an optional easy mode allows you more strikes and the chance to finish the scene, for practice's sake, even when you fail.

"Stuntman" was nerve-fraying because of all the aforementioned issues, but it was the excessive load times whenever you failed that really did the game in. By contrast, you can jump right back in and try again in "Ignition" without any wait at all. If you played "Stuntman," you know how great that news is.

Still, "Ignition" is less aggravating than "Stuntman" in the same way a twisted ankle hurts less than a sprain. It's much more fun, but it still demands patience.

Nailing a scene to satisfaction remains challenging, and it's made tougher by the game's sometimes-random nature. That same arbitration that makes "Ignition" more forgiving can sometimes backfire, and there are times where you'll complete a move and still receive a strike. The physics engine sometimes produces unpredictable results as well, and it's bound to occasionally burn you in similar fashion.

But compared to the first game's mile-long list of problems, that's cake. "Ignition" is playable in every way "Stuntman" was not, and it doesn't do so at the expense of the concept, visual presentation (looks terrific, though the framerate occasionally dips) or features (career mode and the awesome stunt track editor return, and eight-player online multiplayer joins the fold on the 360 and PS3). If you felt gyped the first time around, it's time to get your feet wet again. This is the game you wanted to play all along.

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

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