

Reviews of recent video game releases

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(MCT)**

'SKATE'

For: Xbox 360 and Playstation 3

From: EA

ESRB Rating: Teen (blood and gore, crude humor, language, mild violence, tobacco reference)

After eight years and eight games, the "Tony Hawk" skateboarding games finally have something we've all wanted all along: worthy competition.

In fact, as competition goes, "Skate" is about as best-case as best-case scenarios get. It takes a stale genre into a wondrous new direction, and it arguably shames "Hawk" in doing so.

The concept is simple: The left analog stick controls your skater's body, the right stick controls the board. Various motions with each produce various tricks, while the right and left triggers control your right and left hands, respectively, during grabs.

Additionally, "Skate" runs wild with real-world physics. Grinding a rail, for instance, isn't a case of pressing a couple buttons. Here, you have to kick to build speed, perform a well-timed ollie, and time your landing similarly. Ollie too soon, and you'll miss; procrastinate, and you'll hit the rail with your gut.

A similar attention to physics permeates all of "Skate," making crazy tricks and combos much more of a feat here than in "Hawk."

And that, right there, is what makes "Skate" great. The control scheme, physics and a camera angle that's lower to the ground all take getting used to, but it's a satisfying learning curve to say the least. When you finally nail that trick you've tried hitting 20 times _ and a nice marker system makes it easy to keep at it _ it truly feels like an accomplishment.

Happily, "Skate's" open-world city, in addition to looking fantastic, is loaded with such opportunities.

The good vibes trickle down to "Skate's" cool presentation and feature set. A mostly non-linear career mode lets you explore and master the game to your liking with a customized skater, which comes courtesy of a great creation tool. A Party Play mode allows for offline, pass-the-controller multiplayer, and online play includes races, trick competitions and trick-offs at set locations. You can save and edit replays of your greatest exploits, and you can even upload them to EA's Web site, where others can rate them, YouTube-style.

"Skate's" more realistic leanings aren't for everyone, and the odds of the arcade-leaning "Hawk" disappearing after nine games are no higher than they were after eight. That doesn't mean Activision should lose a little sleep, though. For the first time since 1999, the holiday skateboarding game on everyone's lips won't be theirs, and for good reason.

'MEDAL OF HONOR: AIRBORNE'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360 (Playstation 3 version coming in November)

Also available for: PC

From: EA

ESRB Rating: Teen (blood, mild language, violence)

It isn't easy being a World War II first-person shooter these days, and it all but takes a gimmick to stand out anymore. Fortunately, "Medal of Honor: Airborne" has one, and it's a gift that keeps giving.

The hook in "Airborne" comes at the start of a mission (or, whenever you die, your revival): You're in an airplane, and the first thing you do is leap out of it. From here, you can land anywhere within reach on the map _ rooftops, the woods, a truck bed, an enemy soldier's head. As soon as you touch ground (ideally with your feet), you're in battle.

The "start anywhere" approach forces "Airborne" to take a far less linear approach than its predecessors, and the game responds perfectly. Objectives remain in set locations, and the timeline for completing the various sub-missions obviously hasn't changed. But the freedom to attack the enemy from multiple angles and latitudes breathes all kinds of new life into old concepts, and "Airborne" takes full advantage with some fantastic levels and encounters.

The mission designs, and the tense firefights they usher forth at a relentless clip, make "Airborne" a blast to play in spite of some flaws that bend but don't break the game.

Namely, "Airborne" has a problem with aiming. For the most part, it works fine, but there are times when you'll take a perfect shot, hit an enemy soldier flush, and get no reaction whatsoever. A very cool system allows you to upgrade your guns by using them in combat, but even a bargain-basement rifle should blow away a soldier at point-blank range every single time.

Other, smaller gripes surface, including a lack of destructible objects in the environments and the propensity of otherwise-intelligent enemy soldiers to chuck grenades at you even when you're two feet away. Fortunately, the latter problem is resolved by the more-fun-than-it-should-be ability to football-kick nearby grenades back at enemies.

"Airborne's" single-player campaign falls on the short side _ eight hours, give or take _ but the fun battle designs and numerous weapon upgrade paths give it replay value. The multiplayer mode is novel _ allied soldiers spawn from above, axis soldiers from below in one mode _ but there's no telling what kind of following it'll have once "Halo 3" thunders in. The aiming issues also stand out more, and they're bound to frustrate some into not coming back.

`DK: JUNGLE CLIMBER'

For: Nintendo DS

From: Paon/Nintendo

ESRB Rating: Everyone (comic mischief)

For the few who remember the under-publicized "DK: King of Swing" Game Boy Advance game that released a couple years ago, "DK: Jungle Climber" is the sequel. For the other 97 percent of you, read on for a more thorough explanation.

Like "Swing" before it, "Climber" isn't so much about the what _ another 2D platformer with Donkey Kong in the lead role _ as the how.

Much of the movement in "Climber" involves (shock!) climbing upward, and you do so largely by swinging from one peg to another. The shoulder buttons do most of "Climber's" heavy lifting: The R

button grabs a peg with Kong's right hand and swings him in a clockwise motion, while the L button does the opposite. Pressing both causes Kong to grab two pegs and hold still. (Traditional controls also apply, with the D-pad moving Kong on the ground and the A button providing a means for attack.)

The unique control scheme takes a little while to endear itself, and it doesn't help matters that "Climber's" opening levels are designed with babies in mind. You'll face maybe two puny enemies during the first three stages, and the level designs won't exactly inspire players to get creative with their newfound swinging powers.

Fortunately, things ramp up quickly once introductions are made, and it slowly becomes clear how dynamic and flexible the swinging controls actually are. New levels bring higher enemy counts, but they also bring new pegs and other objects on which to swing. "Climber" scatters various special items throughout each level, and grabbing them all before hitting the exit demands both flair and the gift of good timing, which isn't the cakewalk it first appears to be during "Climber's" introductory stages.

Lest anyone worry, "Climber's" single-player adventure includes numerous nods to past "Kong" games, including a storyline straight out of the "Donkey Kong Country" universe, barrels a-plenty, and a heavy supporting role for perennial sidekick Diddy Kong. A simple but amusing multiplayer component brings back other Kongs as well.

Like other platformers on the DS, "Climber" doesn't wedge touch controls into a scheme that doesn't need them. It does take advantage of the dual screens, which provide an obvious service given all the vertical movement that's taking place. Given the amount of discovery going on with the shoulder buttons, there's more than enough novelty to go around as is.

'DYNASTY WARRIORS: GUNDAM'

For: Xbox 360 and Playstation 3

From: Koei/Namco Bandai

ESRB Rating: Teen (fantasy violence, mild language)

No game gets away with repackaging itself quite like "Dynasty Warriors," which has managed to sell numerous variations of the same exact game to a hungry audience for going on eight years now. "Gundam" games have a similar history, with one below-average title after another selling well enough to keep the train of mediocrity rolling along.

That the two have combined forces in some sort of run-of-the-mill-gaming supernova is almost comical, as if Koei and Namco Bandai have teamed up to play a mean inside joke on game reviewers who can't fathom slogging through another game under either brand, much less both at once.

At least "DW:G" chooses to model itself after the lesser of the two evils. Stuck in a time capsule though it may be, the "DW" method of mindlessly carving through hundreds and even thousands of enemies in a single level remains satisfying on some primitive level. "DW:G" replaces the usual soldiers with Gundam characters, and plowing through a sea of robot and mech carnage admittedly is good for a temporary thrill.

The problem _ once again _ is that once that thrill wears off, that's the ballgame. The vast, vast majority of "DW:G" consists of picking off hordes of the same enemies ad nauseam with the same techniques. Your attack options are severely limited, and the complete lack of friendly fire means you can button-mash your way through an entire battlefield without fear of hurting your allies.

Not that protecting your comrades matters any, since they're about as helpful in battle as a red

tablecloth in a bullfight. "DW's" A.I. was bad in 2000, and it's downright embarrassing in 2007.

None of this, of course, will deter the usual crowd from gobbling it up. Fortunately, those folks at least will get some serious content for their money. "DW:G" boasts two separate story modes, both of which feature multiple unlockable characters with unique quests to complete. Characters level up with experience per usual, but so do their suits, which you eventually can mix and match to suit your tastes.

That adds up to many, many hours of gameplay for anyone who wants to discover the game's every last corner. But that also means many, many hours of doing the same thing over and over and over and over. Unless you can find the fun in some seriously brain-drying repetition, take that warning to heart and try something else.

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