

## Reviews of recent video game releases

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

'HALO 3'

For: Xbox 360

From: Bungie/Microsoft

ESRB Rating: Mature (blood and gore, mild language, violence)

The best thing Bungie could do for "Halo 3" was apply the lessons it learned from the two chapters that preceded it. For the most part, that's what it did.

Consequentially, "3's" single-player campaign is the series' best. Stale treks through indoor corridors are rare, backtracking is minimal, and with exception to one soon-to-be notorious level, you rarely fight alone. That's a direct product of both the storyline and the fantastic new addition of four-player online co-op. But it's also Bungie giving players what they want: large-scale skirmishes on enormous battlegrounds with more weapons, enemies, vehicles and ways to win than ever before.

Despite the upsurge in activity, "3's" campaign also is the series' shortest and most accessible. Checkpoints are more frequent than before, and the addition of special items that do everything from regenerate health to create insta-shields certainly help your cause. If you're accustomed to playing "Halo" on Normal difficulty, you might want to try "3" on Heroic. Fortunately, co-op play and an optional but fun points challenge make the campaign worth at least two replays.

That, of course, is to say nothing of multiplayer.

That Bungie has comprehensively improved on "Halo 2" \_ a game still in massive rotation on Xbox Live three years after release \_ is almost good enough. Maps are bigger and more varied, and the firepower balance is improved despite an increase in weapon variety and the introduction of the aforementioned special items. You can customize matches to a ridiculous degree, and players can veto unpopular game types and maps if a majority agrees.

But it's the community features that elevate "3" to a new plane of longevity. You can sink hours into the Theater mode, which automatically records your most recent play sessions (campaign or multiplayer) and allows you to edit, save, trade and dissect them from any angle or perspective. But you can eat just as much time in the new Forge mode, which lets you edit multiplayer maps and slip into and out of God mode while a live game is in progress. The game types you can invent \_ and subsequent havoc you can wreak \_ have no end.

Totaled up, "3" is a stunning package, and it puts lesser but equally-priced games to shame by piling on so much quality and value. If you have a Live account, no game will give you your money's worth like this one will.

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'ETERNAL SONATA'

For: Xbox 360

From: Namco Bandai

ESRB Rating: Teen (fantasy violence, mild language, use of alcohol)

Some people like the idea of role-playing games more than the actual genre itself. Others simply cannot justify dedicating 70-100 hours of their lives just to see how one ends.

For both audiences, and any RPG enthusiasts hungry for a change of pace, "Eternal Sonata" may provide some salvation.

For starters, "Sonata" is a 30-ish-hour game \_ short by modern RPG standards, but longer than most story-driven games in other genres. The story path the game takes is pretty linear, and players rarely will find themselves drawn off the main road by side missions or dull fetch quests. The narrative chugs ahead, and outside of searching for hidden paths that lead to rare weapons and armor, you'll do the same.

"Sonata" also takes measures to minimize the need for "grinding," that fun-draining practice of leveling up your character's stats in lieu of an important boss fight. Characters level up liberally, and opportunities for raking in gold for potions and other protections are everywhere if you know where to look. The game eschews random encounters in favor of placing enemies in plain sight, and you typically can avoid filler battles whenever you'd rather push forward.

Funny thing, though: The fights are so much fun, you might actually seek them out.

Like most RPGs, "Sonata's" fights play out in turns. Within those turns, though, it transforms into an action game. You can move, attack and perform special moves in real time whenever it's your turn, and you can block attacks with perfectly-timed button presses when it's an enemy's turn. It's a terrific system that blends mindless action, reflexes and strategy, and here's hoping we haven't seen the last of it.

(For an especially good time, play with friends. "Sonata" offers three-player co-op, but only offline, not over Live.)

"Sonata's" music-centric storyline takes place inside the mind of a dying Frederic Chopin (yes, the composer), and the creative liberties the game takes with that premise keep things interesting even when the narrative occasionally plateaus.

The dreamy premise also makes way for what is, bar none, one of the prettiest and most musically gifted games of 2007. "Sonata's" environments are soaked in color and detail, and its character designs redefine how cel-shaded graphics should look. The voiced dialogue that comes out of these characters' mouths is fairly awkward, but the music is so good that your ears never suffer for long.

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