

## Reviews of recent video game releases

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

'THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: PHANTOM HOURGLASS'

For: Nintendo DS

From: Nintendo

ESRB: Everyone (fantasy violence)

"The Legend of Zelda" and "Diablo" are proud to announce the birth of their first child, "The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass."

At least, that's what "Hourglass" feels like. Nintendo has gone hog-wild in delivering a "Zelda" game with all-stylus controls, right down to Link's movement and swordplay. Some annoying but small missteps aside, the gamble pays off.

Those missteps, predictably, surface whenever "Hourglass" prevents you from doing things that are automatic in other "Zelda" games. Moving Link around with the stylus is pretty elementary, but there will be instances when you swipe your sword (or, more commonly, perform a forward roll) when all you mean to do is run. The opposite also happens, with both the roll and circular swipe losing major points in the reliability and timeliness departments.

Again, though, these issues are more exception than rule. They're also a small price to pay for all the doors the all-stylus scheme blows open.

That "Hourglass" lets you literally write on in-game maps is cool enough, particularly because the game saves every mark you make. But Nintendo takes this concept beyond the basics and manages the impossible \_ making note-taking fun \_ through some ingenious puzzles and boss fights that incorporate the map in numerous brilliant ways.

"Hourglass" also teaches some old items new tricks. Most prominent is the boomerang, whose path you can dictate by drawing it with the stylus. Per tradition, the improved and new items play prominent roles in dungeons and boss fights.

Graphically, "Hourglass" marks a meeting in the middle between 2D and 3D "Zelda" games. The bird's-eye perspective is evocative of 2D games, but the use of polygons makes for a much more fluid game than any previous 2D title. The game borrows the "Wind Waker" graphical style in full, and outside for some unflattering close-ups, it looks outstanding.

Unfortunately, "Hourglass" shares something else in common with "Waker:" a lack of any serious difficulty in combat. That you can simply tap on most enemies, "Diablo"-style, doesn't help matters, particularly because "Hourglass" doesn't unload enemies in waves like "Diablo" did.

But Nintendo is more concerned with solving riddles than cracking heads, and that focus uncovers some of the most inspired puzzles ever to appear in the series' 20-year history. The stylus setup is about as un-"Zelda"-like as control schemes get, but it's hard to deny its place after this impressive demonstration.

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## 'DEAD HEAD FRED'

For: PSP

From: Vicious Cycle/D3 Publisher

ESRB Rating: Mature (blood and gore, intense violence, mature humor, strong language)

"Dead Head Fred" is your typical mob revenge game. You've been left for dead, and it's on you, upon returning to your senses, to take out the boss who tried you take you out first.

Thing is, the guy who tried to take you out actually succeeded. Your head fell off, you died, and it's only because of a truly mad scientist and some impressive artificial-head technology that you're still on your feet.

So yeah, typical mob revenge game.

It's a bit of a backhanded compliment to praise a game's style over its substance, but few games are as stylistically gifted quite like "Fred," which takes a wholly original concept (a main character who sports prosthetic, interchangeable heads) and mixes in terrific voice acting (John C. "Scrubs" McGinley voices Fred), a top-notch sense of humor and some truly inspired character designs.

Plus, it's in the substance department where the game struggles the most. "Fred" is a third-person action game on the PSP, and it suffers from the same problems as many other such games. The controls are hampered by too many commands fighting for too few buttons, and the game compromises by sometimes combining buttons in strange, awkward ways. Hand-to-hand combat is simplistic and repetitive, and platforming segments sometimes go awry because the camera goes bad. (You can control the camera, but it's one of those weird button compromises and isn't always convenient to enable.)

What makes "Fred" worth playing, in spite of its rough edges, is how well it otherwise is designed. Fred will collect nine different upgradeable heads over the course of the game, and each comes with multiple special talents and applications, as well as unique animations and other little perks. While the game often eliminates the joy of discovery by making it painfully clear when and where to employ each head, the various applications are still clever (and, failing that, often pretty amusing).

Beyond that, it's just fun to see where the game goes. "Fred's" bizarre concept merely provides a gateway to a bizarre universe that's stuffed with imagination, and it's worth slogging through some repetitive fights or negotiating with a crabby camera to see where the next chapter leads. "Fred" doesn't always feel like time well spent, but between the cool level designs, bonus mini-games, aforementioned humor and other surprises that lie in wait, that ultimately is what it becomes.

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