

Reviews of recent video game releases

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(MCT)**

'PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 4'

For: Xbox 360

From: Bizarre Creations/Microsoft

ESRB Rating: Everyone (mild lyrics)

Every gym class has that one kid who finishes the mile run three minutes after everyone else. If you'd like to know what that kid feels like, a couple hours with "Project Gotham Racing 4" should do it.

Fundamentally, "PGR4" falls in line with its predecessors. The racing action blends arcade- and simulation-style elements, and the Kudos points system encourages you to take risks _ powerslides, drifts, sharp corners _ while also winning the race or completing whatever objective is at hand.

But few games go to such lengths to undermine their core concepts like this one, and the result is a disastrous first impression that will send many scrambling for the eject button before the good times begin.

Eventually, "PGR4's" licensed cars _ and, for the first time, bikes _ become fun to drive. But before you can fully utilize those vehicles, you'll have to endure a couple hours with cars that steer like boats and purr like shopping carts with 2 missing wheels. That might be okay if "PGR4's" track design was more open, but the roads are almost comically narrow for the most part. Instead of racking up Kudos points, you'll be bouncing off walls, zigzagging down the road and drifting into unintentional 180s while opposing racers embarrass you.

With patience _ and enough Kudos to purchase some respectable wheels _ the experience improves exponentially. But even when it hits its stride, "PGR4" never hums. Every time you assume the bad times are over, a lousy track design awaits with some cold water, and the love/hate relationship continues.

It doesn't end on the track, either. Beyond the bikes, an improved multimedia editor and a dynamic weather system that makes a pretty game slightly prettier, "PGR4's" other big news is the reorganization of the career mode.

Again, the changes undercut the concept. "PGR" fans who've grown accustomed to repeating events and perfecting their scores will be dismayed by the season-style makeover, which requires you to cycle through the entire calendar before taking another crack at an event. Realistic though that may be, it undermines the pursuit of perfection that made previous "PGR" games so cherished by its fanbase. A new arcade mode replicates this pursuit, but on a much smaller scale.

All told, it's arguably the best-designed game you'll ever possibly hate. It's also, for that reason, impossible to universally recommend in spite of its merits. Rent it, endure the dark period, and see how you feel after that.

'SPIDER-MAN: FRIEND OR FOE'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360

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

From: Next Level Games/Activision

ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+ (cartoon violence)

Say this about "Spider-man: Friend or Foe:" It's the most relaxing Spider-Man game to come along in years.

In many ways, that's a good thing. "Foe" shares no ties with the increasingly bleak "Spider-Man" movies, and the result is a happier, snappier Spidey who isn't being voiced by a sleepwalking Tobey Maguire. An awesome premise _ Spider-Man must posse up with his most renowned enemies and defeat a common nuisance _ gives way to some great odd-couple moments and some pretty funny dialogue, and the game's colorful, semi-cartoony visual style contributes to the happy-go-lucky tone. After the multifaceted downer that was the "Spider-Man 3" game, this is a most welcome change of pace.

Problem is, those good vibes seem to have trickled down to whoever was in charge of making "Foe" challenging _ assuming the job was even handed out in the first place.

"Foe" plays out in the same style as "Marvel Ultimate Alliance." It's primarily a brawler, and while Spidey uses his web-shooting abilities in all manner of combat scenarios, he travels almost exclusively on foot.

The high variety of attacks makes for some fun action, but there's no getting around how ludicrously easy the game is. "Foe" sports a single difficulty setting, and you'll almost never perish during the game's six-hour adventure. Even if you do, so what? You respawn in the same exact spot, a modest loss of character upgrade points your only penalty.

Boss fights are slightly more consequential, but they're so easy, you may never even discover what those consequences are.

The laziness trickles down to the rest of the game. "Foe's" various locales look completely different, but they're all basically the same levels in different clothing. You'll move forward, hit a switch, find "hidden" items the developers didn't even bother to hide, and repeat.

Same goes for the enemies: Bosses aside, you'll face three distinct types ad nauseam. They look different from mission to mission, but they fight almost exactly the same.

This plus a lack of any online co-op (two-player offline only) makes it impossible to argue that "Foe" is anything beyond a quickie holiday cash-in. It's fun in spite of its flaws, particularly for younger players who might find it more challenging. But it's not pay-full-price fun, and the rental period should provide more than enough time to see and do everything there is to see and do.

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

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