

Reviews of recent video game releases

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(MCT)

'MERCURY MELTDOWN'

For: Nintendo Wii

Previously available for: Sony PSP, Playstation 2

From: Ignition Entertainment

ESRB Rating: Everyone

It took a year, but "Mercury Meltdown" is finally in its rightful place. What was a great game on the control-challenged PSP and a slightly greater game on the slightly more capable PS2 is now one of the few year-old ports that not only belongs on the Wii, but feels like it was designed for it all along.

For those unfamiliar, "Meltdown" is a contemporary take on "Marble Madness," but with a twist: Instead of maneuvering a marble to the exit without letting it fall off the playing board, you're responsible for a glob of mercury that's susceptible to splitting, spilling over the side and anything else that could endanger a glob of silver goo.

"Meltdown" already had the blob physics down on the PSP, and that goes double for the exceptionally clever levels, which feature numerous combinations of gadgets, traps and strange characters. The objective _ reaching the goal _ is simple, but the board designs, high score challenges and bonuses that come with finishing quickly and minimizing mercury loss give some real depth to that simple idea.

"Meltdown" also already had the controls down, but the benefits the Wiimote brings are obvious before you even turn it on. (For those who disagree, the Classic Controller is supported.) Instead of tilting the playing field with an analog stick, you instead hold the Wiimote sideways and tilt that, as if you're holding the level in your hand. It feels great, and the game responds to even the smallest nudge, so there's no blaming anyone but yourself when your blob falls into oblivion.

And if it does, so what? "Meltdown's" proficiency at what it does gives it such an addictive quality that you'll likely retry levels even after you succeed, just to see if you can top your score. The difficulty curve heads skyward at an ideal pace, and the 160 levels include numerous gems that are rewarding to complete and master, alone or with friends. ("Meltdown" doesn't feature any proper multiplayer mode, but it's easy enough to pass the Wiimote and create your own.) That goes as well for the handful of multi-level party games you'll unlock as you progress through the main mode.

The final cherry on the sundae? It costs \$20. Given how many shoddy ports cost more than twice that, it's darn near heartwarming to see Ignition deliver both a great game and a great deal.

'CRASH OF THE TITANS'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360 and Playstation 2

Also available for: Nintendo Wii, Sony PSP

Alternate versions available for: Nintendo DS, Game Boy Advance

From: Radical Entertainment/Sierra

ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+ (cartoon violence, crude humor, mild language)

When you're desperate, things sometimes look better than they are. And when all three gaming consoles are mired in an inexplicable drought of mascot-based platforming games, even the arrival of one with a history as checkered as Crash Bandicoot's is a welcome sight.

Happily, you don't need beer goggles or the gift of self-delusion to enjoy "Crash of the Titans." Groundbreaking though it isn't, "Titans" nonetheless may be the best "Crash" game since original developers Naughty Dog abandoned it eight years ago.

In a lot of ways, "Titans" succeeds simply by taking the familiar and polishing it up. You'll do a lot of platform-jumping, but an infusion of physics adds a level of fun beyond simply timing the jump and sticking the landing. There's only one means of alternative transport _ a sort-of hoverboard _ but the game gets the mechanics down pat and creates some fun areas in which to use it. There's incentive to collect a few different types of items within each level, but "Titans" never gets lazy and leans on that as an objective.

A little more surprising is how combat-heavy the adventure turns out to be. "Titans" balances acrobatics and fisticuffs pretty well, but the fisticuffs clearly run the table this time. That's partly because Crash is, despite his sheepish personality, well equipped to deliver some damage.

Mostly, though, it's due to Crash's new ability to "hijack" monsters, assume control of their minds, and use those monsters to take down and hijack even bigger baddies. This food chain-style approach sounds monotonous on paper, but it's pretty brilliant in practice, and it allows "Titans" to throw down some extensive but beatable enemy gauntlets. Though hampered by Radical's strange decision to use a camera that players can't manually adjust, the fights are satisfying and, at least initially, fresh.

Once the novelty of the combat wears off, Radical is mostly out of surprises. But derivative fun done right is fun nevertheless, and "Titans" serves up a solid six-plus-hour adventure that's pleasing to look at, hilarious to listen to (stop and eavesdrop on your enemies; you won't be sorry), fun to play the first time through, and worth at least one replay for completists. New "Mario" and "Ratchet" games will arrive in the coming weeks to take credit for ending the platformer drought, but it's very worthwhile to give this one a look while you wait for those.

'FLASH FOCUS: VISION TRAINING IN MINUTES A DAY'

For: Nintendo DS

From: Nintendo/Namco Bandai

ESRB Rating: Everyone

It's going to be fun to see what crazy ideas Nintendo comes up with for its next round of training games. Given the irony of using a video game system with two tiny LCD screens to promote better eye health, nothing is off-limits.

That's not to say "Flash Focus: Vision Training in Minutes a Day" actually trains your eyes. Even the instruction manual half-admits such a feat is beyond the reach of a video game.

Either way, "Focus" makes its case. Like the "Brain Age" games, it's doctor-approved,

created under the advisement of renowned vision training expert Hisao Ishigaki. (Sadly, unlike "Age," "Focus" uses a "King's Quest" reject instead of Ishigaki's disembodied head to serve as the game's mascot.) It also seeks to educate players about the eye in the same way "Age" waxed educational about the brain.

"Focus" tests your visual acuity in tandem with your mental dexterity, honing in on such attributes as peripheral vision, hand-eye coordination and the abilities to gather lots of information at once and track moving objects and patterns. As in past training games, it scores your results by assigning an "age" to your eyes. Scoring in the 20s is optimum, and scoring close to your actual age is good. Any other result means you have work to do.

"Focus" 17 training exercises _ 10 basic, seven sports-themed _ are a fun lot overall, with the sports challenges (hit a pitch perfectly, engineer a perfect table tennis volley) easily providing the game's highlight.

What these exercises aren't, however, is rewarding over a long haul. Nintendo's brain training games offered some real intellectual hills to climb, but "Focus" doesn't enjoy this same luxury. Timing your bat swing is fun, but there's no sense you're permanently improving at it in any meaningful way. The element of luck also plays a larger role in these games, which in turn can skew the progress "Focus" charts over time.

Given that "Focus" doesn't offer anything beyond this core component, it's a tougher sale than its brain-training cousins. Then again, given the wildly different opinions people have about these games, you may disagree completely. As long as you realize that "Focus," while fun, is a step down in the franchise, you probably know whether you want it or not. If all else fails, the \$20 price tag dulls whatever buyer's remorse you might experience two weeks from now.

'CLIVE BARKER'S JERICHO'

For: Xbox 360, Playstation 3, PC

From: Mercury Steam/Codemasters

ESRB Rating: Mature (blood and gore, intense violence, sexual themes, strong language)

The "Jericho" in "Clive Barker's Jericho" refers to a squadron of soldiers trained both in conventional and unconventional arts of warfare. As the game begins, you're filling one soldier's shoes while artificial intelligence takes on those of your teammates.

An hour or so later, you'll likely prefer the protection of the Chicago Cubs to that of Team Jericho, which clearly has no idea what the word "warfare" means. Regardless of whatever storytelling pedigree "Jericho" has behind it, it's no match what could easily be the worst A.I. to appear in any squad-based shooter this year.

The potential is there. Each squadmate is gifted with two weapon specialties and a special ability of some kind (telekinesis, fire, time manipulation and more). An early plot twist gives you the ability to inhabit your teammates' bodies, and from that point on you're free to swap bodies and control any active soldier on your squad at any time.

Ironically, "Jericho's" massive A.I. complex surfaces almost the instant this happens. Suddenly, squadmates not under your control forget how to (a) take cover, (b) fire and © heal fallen teammates _ a common occurrence because of (a) and (b). You'll spend far too much time healing fallen teammates yourself, which in turn puts you in immense peril.

Should you go down, you'll assume control of another active soldier. But between the

disorienting effect of switching bodies and the fact that whichever soldier you're commandeering probably is horribly out of position, you'll barely have time to react before getting pummeled again. Once all soldiers perish, it's back to the checkpoint.

Because "Jericho" assumes you have a respectable army at your back, it plays cheap with the difficulty curve. The guns feel weak, the grenades are awful, and the game often rewards killing an enemy by spawning a new enemy either in the same exact place or a few feet behind you, resulting in yet another cheap death. A dull visual style (this is perhaps the most monochromatic game since "Asteroids") makes it hard to discern enemies from teammates, and it's only when those teammates have taken yet another fall that the picture clears up.

The worst part? You're stuck with these mopes. A squad-based first-person shooter released in 2007 without any co-op play whatsoever is completely unheard of _ until now. Among all indications that "Jericho" was rushed to market, this easily is the most damning.

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