

Reviews of recent video game releases

By Billy O'Keefe

McClatchy-Tribune News Service
(MCT)

'RATCHET AND CLANK FUTURE: TOOLS OF DESTRUCTION'

For: Playstation 3

From: Insomniac/Sony

ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+ (alcohol reference, animated blood, crude humor, fantasy violence, language)

Everybody dances in "Ratchet and Clank Future: Tools of Destruction." Doesn't matter if we're talking about a grunt, boss character, ally or even a gun turret. If you throw a Groovitron and it lands in someone's vicinity, they dance. Period.

The Groovitron, one of umpteen weapons and gadgets at your disposal in "Destruction," has high strategic value, because enemies in a dance trance can't hurt you. But it also underscores just how much care went into this game's design. "Destruction" wouldn't play any worse if every single character didn't have his or her own unique dance animation, but Insomniac went ahead and made it so anyway. That level of detail is all over "Destruction," and it's what makes a game not terribly far removed from its predecessors a must-play all the same.

Improvements abound in "Destruction." It's exponentially prettier on the PS3 _ not quite Pixar country, but certainly within striking distance. The story is more ambitious as well, overlaying the usual mix of adventure and comedy with some rather straight-faced insight into Ratchet's origins. (Some will love the new direction, some won't, and the ending won't please everyone.) There are new weapons and gadgets to play with, naturally, and you now can selectively modify your arsenal with the terrific new upgrade tool, which operates in the same vein as a "Final Fantasy" character upgrade system. Insomniac also included some modest (and fun) support for the Sixaxis motion controls, but you can use the analog sticks for these sections instead if you prefer.

At its core, though, "Destruction" is a bigger, grander case of more of the same. And that's mostly fine, because Insomniac has the science of creating an awesome action game down cold. From the moment the first cut-scene ends, "Destruction" propels you forward, and while you're free to traverse the galaxy at your leisure, the game sits continually ready to drop you into one loaded set piece after another. In outline form, it's formula. But the creativity and polish that bubbles under the surface of that formula leaves you hard-pressed to find a dull moment.

If "Destruction" leaves a hole anywhere, it's in the multiplayer department. Given how brilliantly the PS2 and PSP "R&C" games did multiplayer, it definitely hurts not to see any such component in "Destruction." Perhaps Insomniac will surprise us with a downloadable add-on. More likely, we'll just have to wait for the sequel.

'THE SIMPSONS GAME'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360, Playstation 3

Also available for: Nintendo Wii, Playstation 2, Sony PSP, Nintendo DS

From: EA

ESRB Rating: Teen (alcohol and tobacco reference, animated blood, cartoon violence, crude humor, language, suggestive themes)

There exist plenty of gamers who will play "The Simpsons Game," regardless of how awful it is, simply to see it in motion and check out the storyline.

Fortunately for them, whatever plans EA had for making an awful "Simpsons" game were scrapped in favor of making a good one instead.

The vast majority of "TSG" plays out like a third-person action game. You star as Homer, Bart, Lisa, Marge and (occasionally) Maggie, with two characters (the computer or a friend controls the second character) partnering up at any given time. Each Simpson boasts unique special abilities: Homer can roll around like a ball, for instance, while Marge can round up angry mobs for any purpose.

Beyond a few nagging issues _ namely, some unrefined jumping controls and a camera that goes awry in tight spaces _ the action comes together shockingly well. The diverse superpowers give "TSG" lots of gameplay variety, and it also allows for some clever level and puzzle designs. Your A.I.-controlled partner seems to know when to act and when to wait for you, and you'll almost never fail an objective because the game failed you first.

Pleasant a surprise as the gameplay turns out to be, it's still the writing that ultimately rules the day, led by a storyline that's a structurally incoherent but hysterically funny amalgamation of past "Simpsons" episodes and commentary about the video game industry. Brilliant, biting one-liners swarm from every direction, and the twists the writers create _ be it a shocking boss character or a sudden transformation into an entirely new gameplay genre _ are inspired to a jaw-dropping degree. (Wait until you see who the final two bosses are. Pure gold.)

Gameplay and writing aside, no review of "TSG" would be complete without noting just how insanely cool it is to finally experience a "Simpsons" video game that actually looks like the TV show. The cel shading style EA incorporates occasionally produces some hideous results, particularly during a small handful of cut-scenes that weren't produced by the show's animators. For the most part, though, it looks stunning, especially in motion. Being able to walk around the "Simpsons" universe as we know and love it has been a want of fans ever since the first 3D "Simpsons" game appeared, and the novelty of finally being able to do so isn't something that will wear off any time soon.

'TONY HAWK'S PROVING GROUND'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360 and Playstation 3

Also available for: Playstation 2, Nintendo Wii, Nintendo DS

From: Neversoft/Activision

ESRB Rating: Teen (alcohol reference, tobacco reference, language, violence)

The bright light of scrutiny shines hotter than ever on the "Tony Hawk" line of skateboarding games, which after nine years and nine games is hearing more cries than ever to take a break, retool, and return refreshed.

"Tony Hawk's Proving Ground" won't change that. It's still arcade skating, and you still can pull off ridiculous strings of tricks no real-life skater could dare accomplish. The

controls, save for a few new maneuvers, go largely untouched. The overarching storyline _ you're a nobody trying to become a somebody _ also will ring familiar to "Hawk" veterans.

Still, the notion that "Ground" is merely last year's game with new cities (Philadelphia, D.C. and Baltimore) and some new objectives isn't fair. In fact, some of this year's additions are among the best the series has seen, even if they're sometimes too rough around the edges to reach their full potential.

Most notably _ and with stark exception to a create-a-character tool that doesn't let female gamers design a woman skater _ "Ground" really lets the creative juices fly. The skate park editor has been integrated into the career mode in the form of a lounge, and you can alter both the architecture and ambience as you progress through your career. If you're online, you also can invite other gamers into your lounge and host online competitions.

The creativity extends out into the game world. "Ground's" career mode takes a cool new turn by offering three separate goal tracks, which you can tackle separately or simultaneously. While two of them are entirely about skating prowess, a third _ rigger _ has you constructing impromptu skate zones in the cities before executing tricks on them. The building tool isn't as intuitive as it should be, but it's always available, regardless of whether you're pursuing the rigger track or simply want to build for fun.

A new video editor rounds out the package. Having to manually begin recording _ as opposed to the game doing it automatically _ is a bummer, but the tool is impressively robust otherwise.

The new features complement the old ones, and "Ground" once again offers enough content to make it a worthwhile purchase for its most ardent fans. Neversoft's baby is no longer the critical darling it once was, and it certainly isn't groundbreaking anymore. But until it stops being fun to play and stops hitting that pick-up-and-play sweet spot, who cares?

'ACE COMBAT 6: FIRES OF LIBERATION'

For: Xbox 360

From: Namco Bandai

ESRB Rating: Teen (mild language, violence)

Staying the course has rarely looked as good as it does in "Ace Combat 6: Fires of Liberation," which makes the jump to the new generation of hardware in about as no-nonsense a fashion as could be expected.

The big news with "Liberation" is, without a doubt, how good it looks. The "Ace Combat" series has long been the premiere source of aviation eye candy on gaming consoles, and "Liberation" launches that reputation into the stratosphere. The game's aircraft look stunning on the outside and from within the cockpit, and the environments look incredible at eye level and practically photorealistic from 7,000 feet above. It's a shame Namco Bandai insists on basing the storyline in a fictional world, because the only thing "Liberation" lacks is that one-of-a-kind wow factor that comes from zipping around a real-life locale.

The other big story, perhaps predictably, is the series debut of online multiplayer. "Liberation" marks the first appearance of "Ace" on the Xbox platform, and that means Namco Bandai is now playing to a crowd that not only expects an online component, but one with plenty of legs.

Happily, the game delivers _ perhaps a little too well. "Liberation" supports 16 fighters in the air at a time, and that almost always leads to action more frantic than most "Ace" veterans are used to experiencing. Everyone's firing missiles at will, you're continually in someone's sights, and the balance between simulation and arcade that the single-player missions strike pretty much comes undone on Xbox Live.

That doesn't mean it isn't fun, of course. "Liberation" packs in a ton of different individual and team-based modes, and the mayhem that ensues is terrifically entertaining once you adjust to the tempo. If all else fails, you can always sample the game's two co-op missions, which are such unexpected and well-executed treats that you might wish the entire single-player campaign supported co-op play in some fashion.

Alas, no such luck. Instead, "Liberation's" single-player component is more of what gamers have come to love and hate about past "Ace" games: good action, inane story, control support for both simulation and arcade fans, missions that are epically and sloppily designed within the same space, and a sparse checkpoint system that aggravate struggling players to no end. If past "Aces" got your blood pumping, be it for good reasons or bad, "Liberation" should deliver a similar result.

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

© 2007, McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.