

Reviews of recent video game releases

By Billy O'Keefe

McClatchy-Tribune News Service
(MCT)

'ZACK & WIKI: QUEST FOR BARBAROS' TREASURE'

For: Nintendo Wii

From: Capcom

ESRB Rating: Everyone (cartoon violence)

Every time you try to do anything in the first level of "Zack & Wiki: Quest for Barbaros' Treasure," the game interrupts to slowly demonstrate how to do what you already know how to do. The source of these interruptions: a sidekick/monkey named Wiki, whose inclusion in the game's title suggests he isn't going anywhere.

Wiki's constant interruptions inspire fear that, because "Z&W" is an old-fashioned adventure game on a very new-fashioned (and mass-market) gaming console, Capcom has decided to hold our hands tightly as compensation. Factor in the cutesy (albeit technically impressive) graphical style, and one can't help but pigeonhole this as a game for kids.

Fortunately, level two changes everything. The coddling stops, and "Z&W" suddenly comes into its own as an ingeniously fun point-and-click adventure game that's far more intelligent than first impressions imply.

While a storyline glues it together, "Z&W" essentially is a collection of levels, with each level presenting a treasure to acquire and a handful of cause-and-effect puzzles to solve in order to reach the treasure. Imagine a micro-sized version of the dungeons in a "Zelda" game, and you can loosely understand how these puzzles present themselves.

The big difference, of course, is the point-and-click interface _ a concept almost completely foreign to console gamers.

Fear not. It works. The indirect control you have over Zack's movement (point the cursor, press button, and there he goes) gives "Z&W" enough of a console game feel to flatten the adjustment curve, and the game makes numerous clever uses of the Wiimote when you're interacting with the many items Zack can use. Players who like some head-cracking with their puzzle-solving won't find much here, but the puzzles more than compensate by being both legitimately challenging and relentlessly original.

"Z&W's" lone stumble, beyond the first level and the occasional puzzle that falls flat, is a scoring system that penalizes you for taking chances that don't pan out. Overcoming a tricky level should never feel anything less than rewarding, but it's hard to get excited when the game gives you a lousy score for being adventurous.

Furthermore, there's no satisfaction in gunning for your high scores. Once you've solved a level, it takes no skill whatsoever to go back, do everything right, and "achieve" a perfect mark. Fortunately, the score system doesn't impede your progress through the game's otherwise sterling adventure, so you generally can ignore it.

'GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360 and Playstation 3

Also available for: Playstation 2, Nintendo Wii, PC, Macintosh

From: Neversoft/RedOctane/Activision

ESRB Rating: Teen (lyrics, mild suggestive themes)

It's been a "Dear Diary" kind of year for "Guitar Hero," which could only watch as its creator (Harmonix) not only abandoned it, but immediately began work on a new game ("Rock and") that some trumpeted as the first nail in "Hero's" coffin.

Through it all, and despite being in the hands of a new developer, "Guitar Hero III" arrives pretty much as the same game we've always known "Hero" to be. New developer Neversoft adds some new features to the mix, but it almost completely leaves alone the gameplay that made "Hero" such a startlingly popular hit. The interface rearranges a graphical element or two, but if you dive into this game with any prior experience, you'll need little more than a brief once-over before finding yourself completely back at home.

(That goes as well, conversely, for the game's graphical style, which is familiar but more outdated than ever on the PS3 and 360.)

"GH3" gets its "Legends of Rock" tag from one of Neversoft's new ideas: boss battles. Sparsely scattered among an otherwise familiar career mode is a handful of duels against rock legends, and the objective is to outplay them and cause their strings to break before they do the same to you. The battles add a tangible roadblock to a career mode that generally molds itself to accommodate all abilities, but they're scarce and, on some occasions, avertable if the game senses you aren't up to the challenge. For those same reasons, they provide a fun and unobtrusive change of pace.

Elsewhere, "GHIII" improves the experience in small but important ways. A new co-op career mode allows two players to work with instead of against each other. For the more combative types, a suite of online play options are available on the 360, PS3 and (untested) Wii versions. The new Les Paul guitar controller not only cuts the wires on those three systems, but also features more comfortable buttons, a more responsive strum bar and a detachable neck for easier transport.

Last but definitely not least, there's the soundtrack. After "GH2's" mixed bag and the debacle that was "Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the 80s," it's nice to see Neversoft dig in and deliver a lineup that's loud, fast and entirely reflective of the game's larger-than-life style. (A full track list is available at guitarherogame.com/gh3.) Maybe the competition made them do it, maybe not. Either way, bravo.

'DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION: HOTTEST PARTY'

For: Nintendo Wii

From: Konami

ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+ (mild lyrics)

For that segment of the population that looks at the Wii and salivates about its calorie-cutting potential, "Dance Dance Revolution: Hottest Party" likely stands as the most significant piece of good news until "Wii Fit" arrives in 2008.

Of course, "Party" is marketed as a game first and a fitness tool second, with the emphasis this time on getting multiple sets of feet on the dance floor. Standard "DDR" conventions apply, but "Party" fans the multiplayer flames by tossing various combinations of two- and four-player competitive, cooperative and team play modes into the mix.

Additionally, the game mixes things up by tossing in special objects you can use to penalize opponents' scores, block their screen and more.

Taking full advantage of these modes, of course, means plugging in extra dance pads. The pad that ships in the "Party" bundle plugs into one of the Wii's Gamecube controller ports. That's good news, because that means you can use any Gamecube dance pads you might already own for multiplayer purposes. But that's also bad news, because any hope of getting a wireless dance pad is lost. In fact, the cord is disappointingly short, making it hard to spread multiple pads out depending on your setup.

If logistics kill your dream of dancing alongside three of your friends, "Party's" fitness-friendly attitude still gives it immense value for solo players. Konami has fleshed out the workout mode beyond the modest stat-tracking system of games past. This time, you can set a goal for how many calories you wish to burn and establish some workout parameters, and "Party" will let you know when you reach your goal. It's by no means a complete workout solution, but it is a fun and wholly legitimate way to impart some variety into your routine without feeling like you're dogging it.

That's truer than ever thanks to a feature _ motion controls _ that only a Wii "DDR" game can bring to the table. "Party" predictably complements foot steps with steps that involve moving your right and left arms with the Wiimote and Nunchuck, and the result predictably works once you get a sense of the timing discrepancies between arm and foot movement.

"DDR's" track list runs 50 songs deep, and its quality, per usual, comes down to personal taste. The official "DDR" site doesn't yet feature a full track listing, but you should be able to find it online without much difficulty.

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

© 2007, McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.