

## Review of recent video game release

**By Billy O'Keefe**

McClatchy-Tribune News Service  
(MCT)

`SUPER MARIO GALAXY'

For: Nintendo Wii

From: Nintendo

ESRB Rating: Everyone (mild cartoon violence)

One of the most telling things one can say about "Super Mario Galaxy" is that Nintendo has delivered a game that's a bigger joy to play upside-down than most games are right-side-up.

As you might have gleaned from various teaser videos and screenshots, "Galaxy" takes the gameplay of "Super Mario 64" and literally sends it into the stratosphere. As such, large portions of the game take place in space, with Mario running around tiny planetoids with self-contained gravitational fields.

In other words, portions of the game take place upside-down. And here's the beautiful thing: It almost instantly feels natural.

In spite of some wild new level designs and the presence of the Wiimote-and-Nunchuck control setup, "Galaxy" immediately feels like a "Mario" game. Connoisseurs of 3D "Mario" games need not even crack the manual. Just about every one of Mario's moves makes a seamless transition over to the Wii, and if you trust your instincts, you'll immediately know how to execute all of them.

"Galaxy," as it should, keeps the Wii-specific alterations to a minimum. Outside of a handy spin attack, most of the motion controls are relegated to special, one-off challenges that are best left unspoiled. A second player can use a second Wiimote to help (or hinder) you in a few minor ways, but this doesn't change the game so much as add a fun social element to a traditionally solo endeavor.

Instead, and in most triumphant fashion, "Galaxy" makes waves in the level design department. A far cry from "Super Mario Sunshine's" single-minded tropical setting, "Galaxy's" destinations are bursting with variety and surprise, often changing its design on a dime multiple times within a single challenge. There may be no game that serves up surprise as consistently and relentlessly as this one does. It never stops \_ even after you beat the game, at which point a new development occurs that may make you want to play it all over again.

Happily, Nintendo hasn't dumbed "Galaxy" down to give it more mass appeal. Less experienced players need only beat roughly half the game's challenges to see the game's ending, but true "Mario" warriors will savor the more dastardly levels Nintendo has in store for them. Collecting all 120 stars is a massive undertaking, and it ranks among the most fun endeavors in all of gaming this \_ or, frankly any other \_ year.

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`MASS EFFECT'

For: Xbox 360

From: Bioware/Microsoft

ESRB Rating: Mature (blood, language, partial nudity, sexual themes, violence)

Of the many huge games to release this fall, none come bigger than "Mass Effect," a multi-genre space epic so ambitious as to intimidate even seasoned gamers and push a seemingly powerful gaming console to the brink of its comfort zone.

On the surface, "Effect" is a competent squad-based shooter in the "Gears of War" vein. Controls and camera angles are similar, and the game's use of cover leads to some tense shootouts that regularly leave you one stupid mistake away from death.

But beneath this surface beats the heart of a Bioware game, and true to the lineage of its creators, "Effect" comes positively loaded with role-playing goodness. Characters, weapons and abilities are upgradeable in a cornucopia of ways, and "Effect's" vast galaxy absolutely teems with special weapons, armor and items to discover and modify.

Between the wealth of role-playing options and a massive galaxy of star systems and planets to discover (some play a part in the main storyline, but several are entirely optional), "Effect" delivers an adventure that could eat anywhere from 30 to 100 or more hours of your life.

And that's only if you play it once. Per usual, Bioware has crafted a lovingly detailed means of letting the player drive the story, and you can embody the good soldier or a rogue agent based on the choices you make throughout the game's many storytelling sequences. Given how rich the "Effect" universe is and how expertly the story is told, you may wish to experience both sides of it.

The upshot of all this ambition is that, often, Bioware leaves you to your own devices, free to explore a massive galaxy but not always sure of the best means of moving forward. Everything from character upgrades to driving the moon buggy on uncharted planets comes with a learning curve, and that's on top of the horde of names, faces and places to juggle as the story swells. If you're looking for some mindless gaming that goes down easy, this isn't it. The reward for playing "Effect" is immense, but some dedication is requested if you wish to reap it.

The grandeur takes its toll on the 360 as well, chiefly in the form of some long load times and persistent framerate inconsistencies during heavy combat. Neither is a deal-killer, but the framerate drops are an aggravating (and seemingly avoidable) distraction from an otherwise exhilarating experience.

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'CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360 and Playstation 3

Also available for: PC

From: Infinity Ward/Activision

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

Another year, another "Call of Duty."

On a few levels, that's all you need to hear, for reasons both good and bad. After handing the reigns to another developer for "Call of Duty 3," Infinity Ward is back in the driver's seat for the sequel, and its fingerprints are all over "Modern Warfare."

That's mostly good news, because no one makes a war game quite like these guys do. But the downfalls of "Call of Duty 2" \_ a poor cover system, meathead enemy A.I. and some

blatant instances of enemies continually respawning after you kill one off \_ return unscathed in "Warfare," and they're less forgivable two years later. It's hard to formulate an intelligent attack plan when killing an enemy soldier just prompts a new one to appear in his place.

This rather grievous offense would be unforgivable if the things "Warfare" does do differently weren't so awe-inspiring.

No longer constricted by the events of World War II, Infinity Ward steps into the present day and delivers a knockout of a story that players will experience from multiple perspectives. Without spoiling anything, firefights take place in some ingeniously designed locales, and the storytelling is leagues beyond the between-mission filler we typically get in war games. Frustrating as "Warfare's" gameplay can sometimes be, it's impossible to not keep fighting all the way through the exhilarating final sequence.

(It doesn't hurt that the whole thing is awfully easy on the eyes. War never looked so good.)

Groundbreaking though the single-player experience may be, "Warfare's" true value likely will reveal itself on the multiplayer side. It's also where the franchise sees the most growth.

Infinity Ward has taken the usual multiplayer modes and infused them with a leveling system that rewards you with new weapons and gear as you accrue experience in the field. This is problematic for latecomers and casual players, who are overmatched to begin with and will find themselves increasingly overpowered as more dedicated players rack up experience and better weapons. "Warfare's" flawed matchmaking system doesn't prevent rookies and veterans from occasionally mixing it up, either.

The upside, of course, is that you have a reason to play beyond the simple joy of playing (which should kick in fully once Infinity Ward fully irons out some nagging server issues on both platforms). Victory alone is nice, but victory and a cool new set of armor are definitely better.

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

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