

Review of recent video game release

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(MCT)

'ASSASSIN'S CREED'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360

Also available for: Playstation 3

From: Ubisoft Montreal

ESRB Rating: Mature (blood, strong language, violence)

The best way to introduce "Assassin's Creed" is to compare it to other games, because there never has been a game precisely like "Creed" before. So picture an open-world game like "Grand Theft Auto" or "Crackdown," throw in some fluid acrobatic controls a la "Prince of Persia," sprinkle in the social stealth element the next "Splinter Cell" game is promising, top it off with some terrific hand-to-hand and weapon combat, and set the whole thing in a gorgeous rendition of the Middle East during the 12th century.

That's what playing "Creed" is like, and if you think that sounds like fun, wait until the controller is in your hands.

The beauty of "Creed" is that it glues these genres together with a control scheme that's both all-encompassing and just plain fun to use. The game features a suite of low-key (for when you're trying to blend in or sneak up on a target) and aggressive (for when you're making a break for it or just don't care about public perception) maneuvers. Switching between the two styles is as simple as holding the right trigger button, making it incredibly easy to manage a proprietary arsenal without having to juggle buttons.

The controls shine brightest when you're running, leaping and climbing through the absolutely massive recreations of Middle Eastern cities Ubisoft has laid at your feet. If you can see it, you almost certainly can scale it, and the single-button acrobatics you can perform make it a joy to jet around simply for the sake of doing so. "Creed's" storyline is pieced into nine primary missions and numerous smaller tasks, and you're generally free to run around and tackle them in whatever order you want. The smaller missions are nicely bite-sized, and the lure of tackling just one more makes it hard to put the controller down.

The catch, unfortunately, is that many of these missions simply are variations of one another. Completists will get their money's worth out of "Creed" by tackling handfuls of tasks every now and then, but those simply looking to rent and blow through the story will endure some pronounced repetition as they complete basically the same tasks in different contexts. The polish does wonders for keeping "Creed" fun to play the whole way through, but once you've taken down a few targets and unlocked the primary combat moves, you've practically seen it all.

'ROCK BAND'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360 and Playstation 3

Coming soon for: Playstation 2

From: Harmonix/MTV Games/EA

ESRB Rating: Teen (lyrics, mild suggestive themes)

Just when you thought there was no new system to buy this holiday, along comes a gaggle of peripherals that'll bogart more living room space than all three consoles combined.

Yes, if you want to experience the phenomenon-to-be that is "Rock Band," prepare to pay for it _ \$170 and several square feet, to be exact. EA isn't selling "Band" in pieces until next year, so the special edition bundle _ which includes a guitar, drum kit, microphone and USB hub _ is the only true way to experience the year's most ambitious multiplayer experiment.

It's possibly for the best. While modern multiplayer games increasingly turn their focus to the online frontier, "Band" wants everyone to gather around the same screen. That's why the wonderfully fun four-player Band World Tour mode is offline only. "Band's" online component consists solely of quick play modes, and the game's solo tour mode is missing band management features and other perks you'll see only by sharing the screen with friends.

The thin online features doubtlessly will kill the deal for those who can't scrounge up some bandmates, but Harmonix's focus on group play definitely pays off. "Band's" core gameplay isn't terribly groundbreaking: Drum kit aside, it's just more of what Harmonix first made famous in "Guitar Hero" and "Karaoke Revolution." It's the way "Band" packs it all into a single experience that makes it special, and the only genuine way to channel that magic is by jamming with friends in the same room. Playing "Band" online is fun in a pinch, but it's akin to being in a band that only practices over speakerphone.

A word about the drum kit: It's the centerpiece of "Band," and deservedly so. While playing guitar in "Band" never will be confused with the real thing, the drum portions bridge the gap considerably. Not coincidentally, they're also most challenging instrument to play, particularly when the foot pedal comes into heavy play.

"Band" promises to be in short supply this holiday, but those on the fence might do best to wait until EA starts selling the pieces separately. Reports of faulty peripherals have popped up since the game's release, and until "Band" goes a la carte next year, the only way to replace those parts is to send them to EA. (On that note, giving EA a couple months to tinker with and toughen up those peripherals isn't a bad idea, either.)

'BLACKSITE: AREA 51'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360

Also available for: Playstation 3, PC

From: Midway

ESRB Rating: Teen (blood, violence, language)

Looking for an issue to take with "Blacksite: Area 51?" Take your pick.

The story is predictable, as is the enemy A.I. The graphics, while sometimes nice, too often cancel that niceness out with bad textures and jagged edges. Objects are destructible, but only sometimes. The voice acting is hampered by some obnoxious squadmates who long ago overdosed on macho juice and cliché sauce. Driving portions take longer than they should for a game that's primarily a first-person shooter, and you're usually stuck driving because your squadmates refuse to enter the jeep when you commandeer the turret gun.

Worst of all, "Blacksite" isn't glitch-proof. During testing, the game froze twice, and there were three instances in which a triggered scripted event didn't go off, roadblocking progress and forcing a restart in order to push forward. How does something like that get past quality control?

That's the bad news. The good news? As full of issues as "Blacksite" is, the vast majority of these grievances are molehills rather than mountains. Even the glitches, should you encounter them, are more an aggravation than a deal-killer.

What remains isn't spectacular, but it's a good time nonetheless. "Blacksite's" single-player component takes you briefly through Iraq before dropping you into the Nevada outskirts, and while the desert-heavy levels do have a slight sameness to them, they're unique enough to give the game its own identity. You really do feel like you're fighting in America, even if most of your time is spent near military bases and deserted suburbia rather than in busy cities with recognizable landmarks. Fighting aliens in a Quick Stop or a half-completed housing project has its advantages, and "Blacksite" capitalizes on them often.

Just as importantly, "Blacksite" gets the basics right. There aren't a great many guns from which to choose, but the ones you get feel good and are ideally precise when your finger is on the trigger. That goes as well for control in general, be it on foot or on the highway. The game maintains a fast pace, and the mechanics keep up nicely.

Things are a bit more troubling on the multiplayer side, where multiple attempts to start a game failed due to a lack of available players. Midway was smart not to release "Blacksite" opposite "Halo 3," as was originally the plan, but butting heads with "Call of Duty 4" isn't a whole lot smarter.

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

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