

Review of recent video game release

By Billy O'Keefe

McClatchy-Tribune News Service
(MCT)

'UNREAL TOURNAMENT III'

For: Playstation 3

From: Epic/Midway

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

The mad rush of groundbreaking games has come and gone, but 2007 still has one last fantastic trick up its sleeve.

That, initially, wouldn't seem to be the case -- at least not if the game in question essentially is a technologically revved-up version of its predecessor, which is what "Unreal Tournament III" is. If you've played a "UT" game before, you know what to expect here: a high-speed, mostly-multiplayer, first-person shooter with lots of maps, gametypes, weaponry and eye candy.

In gameplay terms, "UT3" doesn't innovate so much as tweak. Epic mostly let ride the gametypes from "UT2," adding a single new mode that simply combines two preexisting ones. Familiar guns, vehicles and characters return, and the map lineup consists of a mix of brand-new and upgraded designs. The single-player component still takes a back seat to multiplayer, but some significant A.I. improvements make it more fun to practice against computer opponents when you don't feel like taking on live competition.

Online, the story also remains mostly the same. "UT3" runs a touch slower on the PS3 than it does on the PC, an intentional (and smart) tactic to accommodate players using controllers instead of mice and keyboards. But it's still the fastest multiplayer shooter in the business, and initial tests on the Playstation Network found no issues with framerate drops or network lag. The only serious caveat: The PS3 version can support only 16 players at a time, which is half of what the PC version can handle.

Fortunately, "UT3" doesn't skimp elsewhere in the PC-versus-PS3 department, and that's where the aforementioned innovation comes into play. You can, for instance, play with a mouse and keyboard if you prefer that to a controller, though players can elect to engage in matches that allow only controller-holding players.

Much more importantly, though, "UT3" allows PS3 owners to import and employ the endless sea of user-created maps, gametypes, characters and other content that shortly will flood numerous community sites devoted to the game. You'll still need a copy of the PC version if you want to create your own modifications, but being able to access all that free content on a whim gives "UT3" the kind of legs that previously was the exclusive domain of PC games. There's a reason PC shooters enjoy a longer lifespan than their console counterparts, and some happy PS3 owners are about to discover what that reason is.

'GAME PARTY'

For: Nintendo Wii

From: Midway

ESRB Rating: Everyone

Not since the days of "Baseball" and "Tennis" on the original Nintendo has a game been so lackadaisically named as "Game Party." (How long until someone releases a game called "Video Game?") On the other hand, the cover art is pretty nice. So is the \$20 price tag.

Such is the running theme with "Party," a modest compilation of parlor games that constantly makes you take the good with the bad.

"Party" features seven games: darts, air hockey, skee-ball, hoop shot, beer pong (called ping cup to protect the children), table shuffleboard and trivia. All essentially are what you expect them to be, and you generally can predict how the Wiimote controls work in each.

Problem is, for some reason, not all games click the same way. The throw motion in darts is fundamentally similar to the motions in hoop shot and skee-ball, but for whatever reason, it's significantly more intuitive in darts. Where darts seems to adjust to different players' release timing, skee-ball and hoop shot do not, resulting in a truckload of non-throws and wildly missed shots in each. Beer pong raises similar issues, but they're easier to mitigate once you master that game's distinct timing.

Beyond darts, the stars of "Party" are air hockey and trivia. The sideways camera angle in air hockey takes getting used to, and it's a shame the game doesn't switch to a behind-the-back perspective when you're playing solo. But it works pretty intuitively, and the ability to lift your mallet and trap the puck, a la real air hockey, is a nice touch. Trivia is exactly what it sounds like, but the diversity of questions and a cool interface make it a far more polished throw-in than one might expect. Spinning the virtual category wheel is stupidly fun, too.

That leaves shuffleboard, which is neither fantastic nor troubled. It could stand to be more intuitive, but it's very playable once you figure the nuances out.

Every game in "Party" features four-player support, which is nice. What isn't as nice is the way Midway shafts solo players. Beyond air hockey and shuffleboard, you can't set up computer opponents to challenge you, and in those games, there exist no options for adjusting difficulty. Even if "Party" is intended as a multiplayer-centric title, what's wrong with throwing a few options in for those who have, or simply may want, to play alone?

'THE GOLDEN COMPASS'

Reviewed for: Xbox 360

Also available for: PlayStation 3, Nintendo Wii, PlayStation 2, PSP, Nintendo DS

From: Shiny Entertainment/Sega

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

The current method du jour of converting movies into video games is not to do one thing exceptionally, but rather do a million different things somewhat adequately.

It's a philosophy "The Golden Compass" embraces all too warmly. Before you see the end credits roll, you'll run through levels that borrow from "God of War" (button-mashing combat), "Metal Gear Solid" (stealth), "Kameo" (using different creatures to change abilities), "Ico" (ledge-hopping and climbing aplenty) and more. You'll also encounter an enormous number of mini-games, the completion of which allows your character to win dialogue exchanges with other characters.

At first, Shiny seems to have a handle on it all. None of the game's elements are particularly spectacular on their own, but they work, and the mini-games function as a nice, occasional diversion between challenges.

Before long, though, those dialogue exchanges start springing up like weeds. It's also at around this time that "Compass" introduces you to the compass, which you'll use to decrypt certain mysteries that need solving for the story to push forward. An explanation of how excessively bloated this feature is could fill all 400 words of this review on its own, and at no point does fun enter the equation.

Just like that, the wheels are off, and you're left to navigate semi-linear levels without always knowing what you're supposed to be seeking out. Stumble into the general vicinity of the answer, and the game grabs your hand and holds it in a vice grip until the solution is abundantly clear. From there, you simply press the buttons that need pressing, and it's on to the next segment. There's little room for a middle ground that would challenge seasoned gamers without absolutely roadblocking younger players.

The mob of compass- and dialogue-related interruptions are a deal-killer for all but the most ardent "Compass" fans, because there simply are too many good games out right now to justify purchasing something so patched together.

But perhaps the worst news of all is that, beyond the chance to wander through certain areas of the film, "Compass" doesn't offer much for its fans, either. The film's actors don't lend their voices, and the graphics fall far short of what they should be. "Compass" easily ranks among the year's worst-looking PS3 and Xbox 360 games, and it might even top that list once you account for atrocious interface design. Blurry 2D graphics in 2007? Really, Shiny?

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

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