

BC-CPT-OKEEFEGAMES:KRT _ entertainment (810 words)

Reviews of recent video game releases

By Billy O'Keefe

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MARIO KART DS

For: Nintendo DS

From: Nintendo

There hasn't ever been a bad version of "Mario Kart." It just seems like it.

Not even taking the long-awaited inclusion of online play into consideration, "Mario Kart DS" is so definitive that it makes its beloved predecessors look incomplete by comparison. The Gamecube "Kart," for instance, played nicely but was feature-weak. "MKDS" plays just as nicely _ there's a real sense of 3D racing that older games lacked _ but offers a horde of tracks old and new and some badly needed new modes of play. Nintendo hasn't taken a leap and given us a story-based game, but the mission mode is a nice nod in that direction.

"MKDS" offers wireless support for up to eight players in many of its modes, and the map on the second screen is surprisingly useful. These would be spectacular selling points were they not completely overshadowed by Nintendo's venture into the murky waters of the Internet. Beyond keeping track of your win/loss record, the game's online features are limited _ only four players can race at once, there's no chat lobby and you use codes to find friends rather than keep a friends list. But it plays just like you hope it would, so the shortcomings are quickly forgiven. Just be prepared to run into your share of quitters and "snakers" (look it up on Google) who dampen the fun. Your best bet is to accumulate a group of friends and race those people exclusively. It may take some time, but it's worth the hassle.

TONY HAWK'S AMERICAN SK8LAND

For: Nintendo DS

From: Vicarious Visions/Activision

Vicarious Visions has to be commended for their ability to bring some form of Tony Hawk to portables over the last four-plus years. The games were heavily compromised technologically, but they were still fun. Or rather, they were until "American Sk8land" came along. The DS has the kind of 3D capabilities the Game Boy Advance lacks, and "Sk8land" takes full advantage, delivering the wholly unique but full-featured game for which handheld gamers have long pined.

Once you get acclimated to the non-analog controls in "Sk8land," you can pretty much do it all _ lips, flips, grinds, grabs, manuals, reverts, wallrides, all the way down to acid drops and natas spins. The 3D engine _ dressed in a very cool cel-shaded style _ is fast, smooth and capable to the point that even the "Matrix"-like Focus mode is packed in. Specials can be called using either button presses or the touch screen, which also allows you to design custom boards and graffiti in the game's many creation modes.

But wait, that's not all! Like it's bigger console brothers, "Sk8land" features both a full (and funny) story mode and the old-fashioned classic mode. The levels are large in scope, and there are a good

number of them, including a customizable warehouse, ready for unlocking. If you're itching for some human competition, "Sk8land" offers the best online experience of any DS game yet, with leaderboards, downloadable missions, tradable designs and four game modes. The only serious drawback: Online games are limited to two players. Otherwise, it works beautifully.

ANIMAL CROSSING: WILD WORLD

For: Nintendo DS

From: Nintendo

"Animal Crossing: Wild World" is as disappointing as the original "Animal Crossing" was pleasantly surprising. A bad game, it is not; in fact, if you've never played or tired of the original "Crossing," it's great. But there's enough missed opportunity here to power a small house.

The magic of "Crossing" _ a lighthearted, relaxing and very funny mix of RPG, "The Sims" and "Harvest Moon" _ is hard to describe. The gameplay is a mix of errands, collecting and interior decorating. Sounds horrific on paper, and yet it's such a striking change of pace that it completely sucks you in. That world has expanded, thanks to "Wild World's" online capabilities: Now you can visit your friends' towns, where you'll be able to meet new animals, purchase unique items for your house, and do almost anything else you'd like to do.

But unless you plan to take advantage of its multiplayer features, "World" may feel a little too familiar. The game's structure is almost identical to its predecessor's, and beyond a few new tricks, you're essentially doing the same things you did three years ago. This would be okay if Nintendo had used its own hardware properly. But and you still have to call up a menu whenever you want to manage your inventory or character. Why this wasn't permanently relegated to the touch screen is a total mystery, especially when the top screen goes almost completely to waste instead. How very third party of you, Nintendo.

(Billy O'Keefe writes video game and DVD reviews for Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service.)

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