

Reviews of recent video game releases

By Billy O'Keefe

**McClatchy-Tribune News Service
(MCT)**

ULTIMATE GHOSTS 'N GOBLINS

For: PSP

From: Capcom ESRB

Rating: Everyone 10+

Video-game jumping has come a long way in the last two decades or so. Back in the mid-'80s, all you could do was leap and hope for the best. But today, you can steer your jump in mid-air, pull off crazy attack combos before touching down, and even jump a second time before the first jump even ends. Impossible? Maybe to you, but it's cake to video game characters.

Most of them, anyway. Arthur, the armored star of the "Ghost 'N Goblins" franchise, has only half evolved. He can pull off a mean double-jump, but once he's in flight, there's no changing his arc. You're landing where you land, so hopefully it's not in some bottomless pit. Best of luck.

Lest you need any clarification, "Ultimate Ghosts 'N Goblins" is a brand-new, if wholly faithful, game. There are all-new levels, weapons and monsters, and Arthur can now equip a shield and perform some new feats of magic. But the colorful, semi-humorous style that permeated the original "G&G" is, happily, back in full effect here, and the sidescrolling gameplay, for better or worse, hasn't changed much at all.

But oh, that Arthur. His stiff mechanics, combined with steady stream of areas requiring precision jumps and occasionally leaps of faith, means you will die a lot before you see the final credits. Were someone to compile a collection of the 50 cheapest video game deaths of 2006, "UG&G" alone would account for at least 15 of them.

Fortunately, Capcom has a soul, and if you play "UG&G" on the novice or standard difficulty levels, the game generously hands out continues and usually respawns your character fairly close to the point of death. Eventually, given some persistence, you'll come out on top of what arguably turns out to be the most accessible game in the series' history. The challenge will still drive you nuts, but that dim light at the end of the tunnel makes it a fun kind of challenge instead of the usual hopeless variety all but the most gifted of players feel.

BOMBERMAN: ACT: ZERO

For: Xbox 360

From: Hudson/Konami

ESRB Rating: Teen

A few years back, gamers the world over were shaken to the core after learning, thanks to "Tetris Worlds," that it is in fact possible for a multimillion dollar video game publisher to screw up something as foolproof as "Tetris."

Now, in 2006, the nightmare is unleashed anew as Hudson and Konami present a new version of "Bomberman" that makes sense only as an April Fools' Day joke. Alas, it's not.

The first and most jarring problem with "Bomberman: Act: Zero" is ... well, wait, where the heck is

Bomberman? The iconic Bomberman cartoon character, as much an institution in his games as Mario and Sonic are in theirs, has been replaced by a generic, wholly forgettable android. The colorful levels have similarly been given the pink slip in favor of dank, metallic grids that also lack personality. Throw in a generic angst-rock soundtrack, and it's hard to believe we're playing the same game we've enjoyed for more than two decades now.

Unfortunate as these design decisions are, they'd be forgivable had "Zero" played like a good "Bomberman" game should. But oops, someone forgot to include offline multiplayer, which is the chief reason to play "Bomberman" in the first place. Playing against up to eight players online is good and fun, but it's no match for taking on a bunch of friends who are sitting (and taunting) right next to you. And that's assuming you can even find eight ready opponents online -- no guarantee for a smaller release such as "Zero."

"Zero's" single-player mode is decent -- 99 levels, playable either in classic, top-down fashion or dreadful new third-person-shooter style. But the level variation isn't enough to carry the title on its own should a game not be available on Live. So we're left with one OK mode, one unreliable mode and a \$50 price tag, which is just absurd. Hudson would be wise to release one of its many classic "Bomberman" games on Xbox Live Arcade. The asking price might not be as high, but who wants to bet they won't serve a truckload more happy customers that way? After "Zero," it won't be difficult.

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

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Video-game review: `Star Fox Command'

Images

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**McClatchy-Tribune News Service
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"Star Fox Command"

For: Nintendo DS

From: Nintendo

Rating: Everyone 10+

The latest entry in Nintendo's meandering "Star Fox" franchise is mostly a throwback to the game's roots, eschewing ground missions and "Zelda"-style adventure in favor of the kind of dogfights that made the game famous. But it wouldn't be "Star Fox" - or a DS game, for that matter - without a twist.

Just for good measure, "Star Fox Command" has two.

Twist no. 1 - stylus controls - isn't much of a surprise. "Star Fox Command" employs a faux-mouse-and-keyboard control scheme similar to what Nintendo gave us in "Metroid Prime: Hunters." Drag up to ascend, down to descend, right and left to turn. Boosting, braking, looping, u-turning and of course barrel rolling are all possible as well, either by quick motion, double-tapping or touching the appropriate area of the bottom screen, which doubles as a map. The controls feel unnecessarily cumbersome at first, but like all things unconventional but made with care, it becomes second nature very quickly.

The second twist - turn-based strategy - is a bit more surprising. Rather than hit you with one battle after the next, "SFC" comprises of missions that feature multiple dogfights. Each "turn" involves you drawing a path on a map for your ship (or ships, when Slippy, Falco and the rest of the gang join the fight). Eliminate all enemy ships and bases while protecting the Great Fox ship, and you pass the mission.

The TBS element represents new ground for a "Star Fox" game, but it makes perfect sense and fits in remarkably well. The only drawback: The missions in "SFC," while a lot of fun, are fairly easy, and the game ends just as things really start to get complicated. This wouldn't pose much of a problem had Nintendo included the strategic elements in its multiplayer and online modes, but only straight dogfights make that cut. So what we're left with is a very fun game, online and off, whose road to perfection nonetheless remains cut off at the pass. Have a blast with this one, but don't be surprised to see a sequel blow it out of the water in a year or so.

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

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Mini video-game reviews

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"Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII"

For: Playstation 2

From: Square Enix

Leaps in technology and graphics have enabled game developers to take storytelling and creative license to increasingly unforeseen levels. That, accidentally, has led to the creation of a new, mostly unfortunate genre of games known as "not necessarily worth playing, but eh, I'll do it anyway to see where the story goes."

"Dirge of Cerberus" is the latest game to carry a card from this club. It's been nine years and nearly 10 million copies sold since the release of "Final Fantasy VII," and the cast of "FF7" is, in some eyes, as much a part of gaming lore as Mario and Donkey Kong. A continuation of that cast's story, no matter how packaged, is a tantalizing prospect to say the least.

Here's the rub: "Cerberus" isn't "FF7." It isn't even a role-playing game, but instead a third- and first-person shooter whose run-and-gun elements call to mind "Devil May Cry" and "Gungrave" before they remind you of anything from Square's canon.

Unfortunately, Square's inexperience in this arena shows, and "Cerberus" feels dated from the start and derivative at every step. Enemies are repetitive and generally very stupid, and aside from a few nice nods to the "FF7" universe, the levels are rote, simple-minded and surprisingly low on interaction. The simple-minded approach is carried off well, but when you've done it all before, it's hard to justify paying \$50 to do it yet again. Aside from the ability to customize your gun several different ways, there isn't much imagination given or brainpower required in this spin-off.

So we're left with a game whose gameplay may appeal to those in search of a truly mindless shooter, but whose storytelling and lineage is very hard for a completely different crowd to resist. Followers of that crowd will enjoy seeing some old friends come alive one more time, but the drudgery involved in doing so may be more of a workload than they wish to take on.

_ Billy O'Keefe

"Texas Hold 'Em"

For: Xbox 360 Live Arcade

From: TikGames

Price: 800 MS Points (approx. \$10)

Here's hoping you took advantage of Microsoft's 48-hour "Texas Hold 'Em" giveaway, because that's the only way you're getting what you paid for if your hope is for a good game single-player game of Hold 'Em on the Xbox 360.

Playing this version of "Hold 'Em" alone is akin to playing with a bunch of stuffed animals sitting around your kitchen table. You'll win a lot of hands, but it doesn't mean you're great or even good. Opponent A.I. is transparent: Players either raise when they have the cards or they fold when they don't. If nobody raises, all you have to do is bet big and the hand is as good as yours. Bluffing? Slow-playing? The occasional gamble? Sorry, no can do.

Fortunately, aside from a few achievements, TikGames isn't delusional enough to present "Hold 'Em" as anything but a multiplayer experience, and it goes without saying that the experience is far less

predictable online than when taking on computer players.

Sometimes that's good news, especially when you play with people on your friends list. "Hold 'Em" supports all of Live's existing features, but it also supports the upcoming Xbox Vision Camera, which will do plenty to position this as a better substitute for live poker than the free online offerings on the PC.

But without the stakes of real money on the line, it's inevitable that some players will be reckless with their chips. The persistent bankroll and online leaderboards will go a long way toward the eventual separation of good and bad players, but big spenders and impulsive all-in bets and calls, regardless of cards or ability, are a fact of life here. If all you seek is serious, nuanced poker with equally serious competition, your time is better spent on a PC.

_ Billy O'Keefe

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