

Reviews of recent video game releases

By Billy O'Keefe

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

LOCOROCO

For: PSP

From: Sony Computer Entertainment

ESRB Rating: Everyone

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As you roll through each level, your LocoRoco collects special berries that make him grow. The more he eats, the bigger, slower and jigglier he gets. But fear not: Should he need to fit through a tiny space, a press of a button splits him into multiple tiny LocoRoco that can be rejoined, kicking and screaming, into the big jiggly LocoRoco once through the crack.

Bizarre much? Wait until you collect enough berries to make your LocoRoco split up and break into song, Brady kids style, in hopes of waking up the sun (yes, he's sleeping) and receiving some unlockable bonus in return. It doesn't make sense, nor does much anything else in the game, but you'd have to be a hard-hearted thug not to laugh at the sheer inanity of it all. "LocoRoco's" strange sense of humor, combined with a sensationally cool visual style that resembles construction paper and Colorforms come to life, make it one of the most disarming and charming games ever made.

Does that charm wear off? If you're looking for a game that keeps your heart racing, then yes, probably. At no point in "LocoRoco" are you in any real peril _ the objective is to reach each level's goal with all berries and collectables accounted for, but there's no grave penalty should you arrive with less. That said, actually finding every last secret _ which involves discovering a ton of secret passages and employing some fancy shoulder button acrobatics _ is a fun, genuine challenge. And the weird combination of challenge without peril is a perfect fit for a game that wants nothing more than to put a smile on your face and keep it there.

NHL 2K7

For: Xbox 360 (coming November for PS3)

Also available for: Xbox and PS2

From: Visual Concepts/2K Sports

ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+

Like Peter Frampton and Frankenstein's monster, "NHL 2K7" has come alive, coupling its always-excellent gameplay with the kind of presentational bells and whistles fans have lusted after for

years. As solid as "2K6" was, "2K7" marks the true arrival of next-generation video game hockey.

With Cinemotion, Visual Concepts has applied storyline-like touches to the gameplay, with cutscenes from the ice, crowd, locker room, bench and more accompanying either a broadcast commentary or musical score (your choice). It's not exactly dramatic stuff, but it adds a layer of intrigue to a game that's already pretty rambunctious. The chatter trickles down to the ice _ if you have a nice sound system, you can use your ears as well as your eyes to spot open teammates and pass the puck accordingly.

More than its newfound flair for dramatics, the real beauty of "2K7," is how gosh-darn beautiful it looks when the whistle blows. Cinemotion may be 2K's big selling point this year, but it's severely one-upped by the on-ice action, which flies by at 60 frames per second and is almost indistinguishable from a real NHL broadcast. Ironically, it's the choppy Cinemotion scenes _ fun though they are _ that bring the graphics back down to earth.

Under the hood, "2K7" refines rather than fixes what wasn't broken. Serious players will love the new on-ice additions, which include the ability to shadow opposing players, perform drop passes and take control of the goaltender. The franchise mode places an overdue emphasis on rivalries and home ice advantage while also rewarding armchair coaches who keep their players both loose and rested. As always, the barrage of adjustable settings and pro controls allows you to play your way, be it an arcadey checkfest or a full-on simulation of a real NHL game. And if you need a break, the air hockey and shufflepuck minigames are now unlocked from the get-go in the skybox area.

"2K7" isn't quite as dazzling on the PS2 and Xbox: This is a Cinemotion-free zone, and the graphics obviously aren't on nearly the same level as on the 360. Then again, neither is the budget \$20 price, so you get what you pay for.

POKEMON MYSTERY DUNGEON: BLUE RESCUE TEAM

POKEMON MYSTERY DUNGEON: RED RESCUE TEAM

For: Nintendo DS (Blue) and Game Boy Advance (Red)

From: Chunsoft/Nintendo

ESRB Rating: Everyone

It is downright mystifying that Nintendo _ a master of spinning off its characters if ever there was one _ completely failed to produce a single worthwhile "Pokemon" spin-off during the franchise's first 10 years of existence. ("Pokemon Pinball," bless its soul, doesn't count.)

Thankfully, the second decade appears to be more fruitful than the first. With "Pokemon Mystery Dungeon," Nintendo finally realizes what fans always knew. The franchise, cute and cuddly as it may be, is as intellectually demanding as any in Nintendo's library, and half-hearted cash-ins with no real lasting value beyond novelty have no place here.

"Dungeon" definitely has its place. Not only does it give fans something they've long wanted _ a chance to play as a Pokemon for the first time ever _ but it does so while satisfying the series' appetite for depth and detail.

As hinted by its name, "Dungeon" employs the "Mysterious Dungeon" engine, which is renowned in Japan for its mix of turn-based and real-time gameplay and the randomly-generated dungeons it creates on the fly for freshness' sake. Picture a cross between the "Knights of the Old Republic" games and "Diablo," and you have something of an idea how this works.

The play style lends itself well to the Pokemon universe. "Dungeon's" catacombs are loaded with Pokemon to meet, fight and rescue _ close to 400, in fact. The battles are faster-paced than the traditional "Pokemon" throwdowns, but they're as deep as you wish to make them. There's even a touch of team strategy due to having a rather useful computer-controlled partner for a teammate. As with any game of this sort, "Dungeon" lends itself to lots of repetition, but it's the same kind of obsessive-compulsive repetition that made "Pokemon" the institution it is today.

Despite being for different systems, the Red and Blue games are largely the same, with the Blue version taking advantage of the DS' optional touch controls and extra screen real estate. The two games can communicate with each other _ either wirelessly, while in the same DS or via password _ and friends can trade missions and even rescue each other when a mission goes awry.

THE GODFATHER: THE GAME

For: Xbox 360

From: EA

ESRB Rating: Mature

You could've been playing "The Godfather: The Game" back in March on the Xbox or PS2, but those who waited for the definitive version did the right thing. With respect to version 1.0, which was a much better game than it got credit for being, the Xbox 360 edition of "The Godfather" is quite easily the superior game.

For those unfamiliar, "The Godfather" offers players the chance to step into the shoes of a wannabe mobster _ whom you design from scratch _ and either play a supporting role in or simply witness many of the major events that shaped "The Godfather" film trilogy. You don't, for instance, control or even interact much with Don Vito Corleone, but you do watch him die. The 360 version doesn't rewrite the formula _ at its core, it's the same game _ but it does feature quite a few missions and plot points exclusive to this version.

Story aside, what made "The Godfather" stand out was its ability to ape the trendy sandbox gameplay format without losing sight of its source material. Between story-driven missions, you're free to take on side jobs, rough up shopkeepers, run racketeering scams, put the police in your back pocket and more _ in as violent or non-violent a fashion as befits you.

This, happily, is where extra baking time pays off the most. The weapon count is up, as are the means for fighting, interrogating and executing enemies. There are more destructible objects with which to wreak havoc, smarter and livelier New Yorkers milling around you, and even entirely new scams (drug rackets) and gameplay elements (your own crony!). There's more of pretty much everything here, and the improved graphical touches and animation don't exactly hurt things, either.

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

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Mini video-game review

Images

McClatchy-Tribune (MCT)

Yakuza

For: Playstation 2

From: Sega

ESRB Rating: Mature

"Yakuza" is many things, but here's one thing it's not: another "Grand Theft Auto" rip-off. The free-roaming gameplay and gang lord storyline might suggest otherwise, and assumptions by those who have seen but not played the game have only emboldened the argument.

Yes, you can roam freely, and you're free to take your time between missions and plot advancements. But you can't, for instance, go around beating up random strangers and stealing their cars. "Yakuza" isn't ultra-restrictive, and you're free to explore the meticulously detailed replica of Tokyo's Red Light District whenever you wish to gather information, build some experience points, play slots or enjoy the other surprises and diversions (batting cages - seriously!) Sega has tucked inside. But this isn't a sandbox game, and even with the diversions and optional fights scattered about, there's not a great deal to do before moving on to the next story point.

That's not by accident. "Yakuza's" ambitious storyline, penned by famed crime writer Seishu Hase, is silver screen-worthy, and it runs neck-and-neck with the excellent fighting engine as the best reason to fire this up. Were it even possible to wreak havoc all over Tokyo, the lure of finding out what happens next might prove too strong for anyone left jaded by the B-minus-movie storytelling that typically plagues games.

The fights that break up "Yakuza's" story are some of the best of the 3D brawler era. "Yakuza's" solid, gimmick-proof controls competently handle one-on-four battles every bit as well as one-on-one fights. Furthermore, the number of moves you can learn - along with the more than 300 foreign objects you can use as weapons - make "Yakuza" an arguably better wrestling game than most of the PS2's actual wrestling games. If you liked the way the old WWF games on the Nintendo 64 handled themselves, you'll almost instantly feel at home here. That they're encased in such a well-rounded package makes them that much more appealing.

_ Billy O'Keefe

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