

Reviews of recent video game releases

By Billy O'Keefe

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

OKAMI

For: Playstation 2

From: Clover Studio/Capcom

ESRB Rating: Teen

You know that sound a politician makes when he promises to reform government and lower your taxes? That same hollow thunk is what you can expect to hear from hundreds of games that proclaim, "You've never seen anything like this!" only to arrive months later looking exactly like (insert previously released game here) with (insert slight improvement here).

"Okami" isn't exactly guilt-free in this regard. To say it models its structure, gameplay and storytelling approach after Nintendo's more recent "Legend of Zelda" games is something of a kind understatement.

But unless you've ever witnessed a watercolor painting come to life, enter the third dimension and move at the mercy of your two hands, you truly have never seen anything like "Okami" before. Clover Studio's art direction is so stunningly original and expertly executed, all charges of me-too-ism would be forgiven had "Okami" merely aspired to be a "Zelda" copycat in gorgeous clothing.

Fortunately, that's not the case. Whereas Link employs a cornucopia of gadgets to save the day, our hero in "Okami" - a wolf with a better backstory than perhaps any wolf ever - wields a paintbrush. A button press transforms the world before you into a canvas, and from here you're free to alter it as needed to move forward. Paint a sun to light up the sky, swipe a straight line to cut down trees, fill in a path to reach points B, C and D. Maybe sketch out a bomb for when

all else fails. The brush comes into play during combat as well, with some memorably original boss fights ensuing as result.

If this sounds gimmicky to you, guess what? During the first hour, as Clover lobs remedial kindergarten-grade challenges at you, it is. But once practice ends and your range of abilities increases, novelty gives way to integration. And if there's anything more impressive about "Okami" than its art direction, it's how Clover takes a should-be gimmick and brilliantly employs it as the heartbeat of an adventure that's every bit as satisfying as Link's best. Who needs a shiny new Playstation 3 when the arguable game of the year is playing right now on the rickety old PS2?

MARIO VS. DONKEY KONG 2: MARCH OF THE MINIS

For: Nintendo DS

From: Nintendo

ESRB Rating: Everyone

Poor Mario. Every time he tries to do anything - meet a girl, take a trip, start a business - there's someone ready to bring him down. In the case of "Mario vs. Donkey Kong 2," Donkey Kong not only has crashed the opening of Mario's new theme park, he's also kidnapped Pauline - Mario's first flame

from way back in the day - yet again.

How's this for jaded, though: Instead of performing his usual rescue job, Mario has taken the wind-up Mario toys he saved in the first "Mario vs. Donkey Kong" game, ordered them to do his dirty work, and slipped out the back door to catch the end of the ballgame at home.

As implied by Mario's absence, "March of the Minis" is a different game than its predecessor. Whereas that game was mostly a platformer with a passing resemblance to the classic "Lemmings," this one is a full-blown, touch screen-powered "Lemmings" homage with Mushroom Kingdom parts. You have some control over the toys, but it's limited. And as they march through and around a gauntlet of pipes, pits, spikes, piranha plants, toy Donkey Kongs and more, you'll need to tinker with the levels themselves as much as the little Marios to

keep them away from peril.

It's a simple concept. But as the levels grow more intricate, you'll need to be quick of mind and hand in order to keep the Marios on point. Escorting a single Mario to the goal is all that's needed to unlock the next stage in "Minis," but players who want enjoy the game for all its worth will aspire not only to march all of them to the exit, but earn top ratings and unlockable minigames while doing so.

You get out of "Minis" what you put into it, and saving Pauline is only half the point.

Should you prefer to flex your creative rather than multitasking skills, "Minis" includes a fun, intuitive level editor. Up to eight creations can be saved at a time, and you can trade levels with friends (wirelessly or online) to keep the fun from ever running dry.

TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED

For: Xbox 360

From: Atari

ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+

The onslaught of open-world racing games - where you're free to just cruise around to your liking and rack up any number of moving violations between races and missions - is a blessing with one critical flaw. Driving around and unleashing vehicular mayhem in a virtual world is a stupidly fun time sink, but it's not quite the same when you're terrorizing computer-controlled traffic instead of other maniacal drivers.

"Test Drive Unlimited" does away with this problem like a Maserati crashing into a Yield sign, offering not only a real virtual world - Oahu, Hawaii - but one populated with real drivers whom you're free to ignore, challenge or rear-end incessantly until your stress melts away.

"TDU" merges its single- and multiplayer modes into one seamless, gigantic island o' fun, and you're free to engage in solo events, multiplayer challenges and other diversions (car/motorcycle shopping, taxi missions, house hunting) on the fly. "TDU" doesn't really offer an endgame beyond winning events, buying nicer vehicles and just having a good time cruising the island (which, besides some pop-up issues here and there, is gorgeous and rich with detail). Log on, have some fun, log off. It's a fantastic example of old-school sensibility enhanced by first-rate technology.

Gameplay-wise, "TDU" shares much in common with "Need for Speed: Most Wanted," sharing strong parallels in terms of visual style, car physics and mission layout. As with that game, you'll also contend with cops and heavy traffic during and between races. Veterans of "Wanted" also will take quickly to the driving controls here. Just be prepared to pay some dues: The Class F vehicles handle

pretty atrociously. (Things improve dramatically with a Class E vehicle, so sit tight.)

Presumably to beef up its online community, Atari has priced "TDU" to move - \$40, to be precise, compared to the usual \$60. This, however, is not your typical budget-minded game: There's a ridiculous amount to do here, and Atari has designed a beautiful, forward-thinking beast of a game in which to do it. Expect parts of this game to provide inspiration for more than a few racing games in 2007 and beyond.

DRAGON QUEST HEROES: ROCKET SLIME

For: Nintendo DS

From: Square-Enix

ESRB Rating: Everyone

You may not know word one about "Dragon Quest," but you've probably encountered one of the many toys, plush dolls and keychains modeled after the blue glob of slime that has become the unlikely face of the franchise. Fifty-hour role-playing epics aren't for everyone, but a dollop of goo with a cheerful smile on its face? Who doesn't love that?

The lowly slime finally get their day in "Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime," and what a strange day it is. For the first hour or so, "Slime" consists simply of walking around, collecting items with seemingly no purpose, and stretching and launching yourself, Stretch Armstrong-slash-slingshot style, into evil cats and birds in order to advance the story. It's fun for a while, but it's not long before you wonder if this is all there is.

It's at that exact moment the game puts your fears at ease. Those apples you collected? They aren't food, but fodder for a gigantic tank you can summon from thin air (from thin air!). Same with the bombs, obelisks, arrows, rocks and more. The tank battles in "Slime" mark the climactic points in the story, and with good reason: They're strategic, exciting and humorously creative. You can stock your tank with whatever combination of fodder works best with your fighting style, and pretty much anything that isn't bolted down - including yourself and your tankmates - can be thrown into the canon and launched at the enemy.

The tank battles are available as a multiplayer option as well: Between four and 16 players can participate, depending on your configuration. That's good news, too, because "Slime's" single-player modes aren't intent on challenging so much as entertaining you. The story is bursting with bizarre humor and so-bad-they're-good puns, and players who fancy an easygoing exploration- and puzzle-fest will find hours of enjoyment inside. But if there's one word that will never describe "Slime," it's "perilous." Should you manage to find a way to let the cats and birds get the best of you, you simply aren't trying.

BOMBERMAN

For: Playstation Portable

From: Hudson/Konami

Proclaiming, "Bomberman's back!" doesn't really carry a lot of thunder when you consider the most recent "Bomberman" game came out ... oh, about three weeks ago. But when a game as unrecognizably awful as "Bomberman: Act: Zero" lands with the thud it did, the arrival of the plain-titled but fundamentally divine "Bomberman" on PSP is, indeed, cause for such a proclamation.

The best news about this "Bomberman?" No news at all. The age-old gameplay has aged

spectacularly compared to most arcade games from the 1980s. That same gameplay shows up in fine form on the PSP, gifted with a clean, colorful look and graphics that take advantage of the system's 3D capabilities without abandoning the classic overhead perspective. Gameplay is paced just right: Bombs don't take an eon to explode as they did in "Zero," but you have ample time to get out of the way after planting one.

Of equal importance to any good "Bomberman" game is how it handles multiplayer. (Or, post-"Zero," that it HAS multiplayer.) Thankfully, this "Bomberman" also passes that test. Four-player wireless play is available, and you need only one copy of the game to have at it. "Bomberman" offers plenty of customization options as well: You can dictate what special items are in play, how many winning rounds equal a winning game, the match structure (2-on-2, 1-on-3, every Bomberman for himself) and more.

If there's a disappointment about "Bomberman," it's the lack of online play. That said, should you play solo, bots can be substituted in place of human opponents. All the same customization options are available, and the bots don't exactly lie down and let you beat them. Hudson included a nice 100-level story mode for solo players, but the solo battle mode (and unlockable copy of the original "Bomberman" levels) are so good as to trump it even when friends aren't around.

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

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Video-game review: 'Pokemon Mystery Dungeon'

Images

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"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.

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