

Reviews of recent video game releases

By Billy O'Keefe

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

F.E.A.R.: FIRST ENCOUNTER ASSAULT RECON

For: Xbox 360 (previously available for PC; coming 2007 for PS3)

From: Day 1 Studios/Monolith/Sierra

ESRB Rating: Mature

"F.E.A.R." is, by gaming terms, old news. The Xbox 360's newest first-person shooter is a year old on the PC _ practically a relic in an industry that defines "old" as "came out last month."

Normally, the dampened hype is justified. But the only thing "F.E.A.R.'s" delayed release demonstrates is just how far ahead of the curve the game originally was. A year later, it's still there.

It's not that "F.E.A.R." reinvents anything. The sci-fi/special ops storyline marriage produces a creepily cool narrative, but the game still consists largely of repeat encounters with one enemy soldier after another. The gun selection is nothing unusual, and the environments _ industrial areas, abandoned office buildings, slums _ are FPS cliches, right down to the always-inexplicable overabundance of fire extinguishers and soda vending machines.

It's what "F.E.A.R." does with these otherwise derivative elements that makes it special. Those ordinary guns are extraordinarily powerful, and the firefights that erupt in their wake are stunningly visceral _ a continuous barrage of flying debris, shattered glass and dust clouds from bullets crashing into concrete. Similarly, while the enemy soldiers look mostly alike, they think for themselves, able take/create cover, communicate strategy with one another and even flank you in hopes of smoking you out or suppressing your fire. That last trick is made possible by "F.E.A.R.'s" excellent level designs, which take ordinary environments and gift them with multiple passages and hordes of destructible props-in-waiting.

Heck, even the inclusion of cliched bullet time effects feels fresh. Beyond the occasional paranormal hallucination, "F.E.A.R." moves at an intense clip from bell to bell, and you're as vulnerable to enemy fire as they are to yours. Being able to slow down the action makes for a fun change of pace, but don't mistake it for a gimmick: You'll likely need it if you wish to survive.

As with everything else, "F.E.A.R.'s" online modes are old hat on paper but another story in practice, with the game's finer points (including slowdown) translating nicely to the online world. The instant action time trial mode is no substitute for the "Extraction Point" expansion pack PC gamers recently received, but any excuse for another firefight in this universe is a good one all the same.

POWER STONE COLLECTION

For: PSP

From: Capcom

There's a small but spirited segment of the world's population that prays for a next-generation "Power Stone" sequel before going to sleep every night. "Power Stone Collection" isn't quite what these

prayers are going for, but it's (a) a start and (b) a sign that Capcom is listening.

For the uninitiated, "Power Stone" is a fighting game. But instead of two brawlers going nose to nose ala "Street Fighter," the action takes place from above, and you're free to run wild around an area full of rocks, bombs, cannons and all manner of other objects with which to do damage. You can let your fists and feet do the talking, but sometimes it's more fun (and effective) to rip a pillar off its foundation and swing it like a bat.

In addition to plunder, "Stone's" colorful themed levels are dotted with special stones (hence the title). Collect three _ either by scrambling for them or beating them out of your opponents' hands _ and your fighter temporarily transforms into a fierce alternate form, capable of dishing out extra-devastating attacks. The roster of fighters is as inspired as their environments, so expect to see an extremely diverse (and amusing) collection of visually clever maneuvers.

The two "Power Stone" games in "Collection" each feature different advantages, with the original providing some fantastic one-on-one action while the sequel delivers a level of four-fighter mayhem that must be seen to be believed. Both games originally appeared on the Dreamcast, and time has been surprisingly kind of to both. The addition of minigames and other unlockables provides a nice bookend.

All that said, it's odd Capcom chose the PSP as the vehicle for "Stone's" comeback. The small screen isn't conducive to a game as busy and cramped as this one is when four fighters are sharing one screen. The long-ish load times dampen the pick-up-and-play appeal, and wireless multiplayer holds no advantage over traditional multiplayer, since splitscreens were never needed in the first place. Online play likely would not have been omitted from a console version, either, but it's nowhere to be found here. Hopefully _ and one can hope _ Capcom's saving that for "Power Stone 3."

KONDUCTRA

For: Nintendo DS

From: oeFun/O3 Entertainment

ESRB Rating: Everyone

Were the Nintendo DS a TV series, "Konductra" would be that very special episode in which we learn that real beauty comes from within. Between the lazily slow presentation, comically hideous menu font and graphics that rival the default wallpaper patterns from Windows 95, it is _ by several lengths _ the ugliest puzzle game you'll ever consider purchasing.

"Konductra's" core gameplay starts with a blank grid that's surrounded by dark and light grey electrical outlets. You place colored tiles _ two at a time, always adjacent _ on the grid using the DS' stylus. The trick is to arrange them so tiles of matching colors connect not only to each other, but to matching electrical outlets as well. This creates a current which, when activated, clears away all the same-colored tiles that exist in the current.

It sounds complicated on paper, and yet it initially seems way too simple in practice, particularly when playing the restriction-free marathon mode. What "Konductra's" manual fails to tell you, though, is that you can ignite up to four currents at once if you plan your moves carefully and are of steady hand. This little bit of risk versus reward, combined with an eventual increase in color variety and move timer speed, makes for a game that's slyer than initial appearances suggest. Take it for granted, and you'll soon find yourself trapped without a move while the world's most annoying warning sound signals your pending defeat.

"Konductra's" marathon mode is fun, but it's also, crummy aesthetics aside, the game's weakest link. True puzzle aficionados will flock instead to the 66-level task mode, which has you setting up and activating up to four simultaneous conducts exactly as dictated by a set pattern on the top screen. The versus mode, on the other hand, adds a burst of instinctual, competitive urgency to the standard game. Last but not least, "Konductra" offers both wireless as well as online multiplayer, complete with a friends list and worldwide rankings. If that right there isn't a thing of inner beauty, nothing is.

SCURGE: HIVE

For: Nintendo DS (similar version available for Game Boy Advance)

From: SouthPeak Interactive/Orbital Media

Oh, isometric perspective. We thought we'd seen the last of that strange diagonal viewpoint that attempts to marry 2D and 3D gaming but always produces something markedly less functional than either. A cameo appearance in some cheap cash-in game or junky piece of shovelware ... sure, that's fine. But this full-blown starring role in "Scurge: Hive" isn't quite so easy to ignore. It's simply too good a game to be saddled with such a puzzling design decision.

"Scurge's" underlying conflict and storyline are ripped straight out of Nintendo's "Metroid" playbook. You're a female bounty hunter with a strange name (Jenosa Arma instead of Samus Aran), you wear an upgradeable multipurpose suit, and you're investigating and doing battle with a horde of infectious and very likely deadly biological creatures. "Scurge" is more story-heavy than your typical "Metroid" game, but it shares lots of presentational touches in common with Nintendo's cherished franchise.

Fortunately, "Scurge" also boasts its share of liberties, including upgradeable character stats, drastically unique power-ups and a special emphasis on puzzle-solving as well as shooting and platforming. Best of all is the projectile gauntlets, basically this game's answer to "Metroid's" arm cannon. Different uses for the gauntlets are scattered about the game world, and certain projectiles are more effective on certain enemies. The twist is that these same attacks actually strengthen other enemies depending on their biological makeup. Figuring out what works and what backfires against whom adds an extra element of science to a genre that begs for it.

Unfortunately, experiencing all of "Scurge's" good points means constantly wrestling with the inadequate perspective from which it's presented. Get ready to miss jumps you'd otherwise nail and misfire at waves of enemies that would be an easy shot at any other angle. Best advice: If you have a Gamecube and the Game Boy Player attachment, play the near-identical Game Boy Advance version on that with a Gamecube controller. It doesn't alleviate every isometric-induced problem, but moving diagonally is much less of a hassle with a joystick than it is with a D-pad.

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

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Mini video game reviews

Images

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"Splinter Cell: Double Agent"

For: Xbox 360 (altered versions available for PS2, Xbox, Gamecube)

From: Ubisoft

ESRB Rating: Mature

Impatient gamers have been taunted year after year by Ubisoft's "Splinter Cell" games, which reward players for staying under the enemy's radar rather than going in with guns blazing. The level of care required to excel at "Cell" is unacceptably high for overeager types, but the polish and production values these games receive make it extremely difficult to pretend they don't exist.

Longtime fans may feel otherwise, but for the fence-sitters, "Double Agent" represents Ubi's most tempting dangle job yet. The story is better developed than before, with government agent and perennial good guy Sam Fisher playing for the other side for the first time. Carrying out this story also requires less patience than ever: You still need to exercise good stealth etiquette to excel on the game's higher difficulty settings, but you can afford to be considerably more reckless on the easy difficulty. (You also can save anywhere, all but eliminating excessive backtracking should you fail a mission.)

These same selling points may not please "Cell" fanatics, some of whom undoubtedly would love another game as pure and strict about stealth as the series' first. Similarly, "Agent's" online multiplayer components, while fun and faster paced than ever, will feel dumbed down to those reared on the more intricate modes from the previous two games. The game also looks only marginally better than "Chaos Theory" looked on the Xbox, which makes the occasional framerate dive hard to stomach.

But a disappointing "Splinter Cell" game is still better than most franchises' best, and "Agent" proves it. Level designs are top-notch, Sam is as fun to control as ever, and a good story idea serves and is served by good game design. (Case in point: The new trust meter, which provides an easy way to keep tabs on your influence with good and bad guys, both of whom you're simultaneously serving and fighting.) Problems everyone can agree on do arise - namely the inconsistent A.I. of games past and an uncomfortably close camera, to add to the list assembled above. But the good very easily outweighs the bad, regardless of if this is your first "Cell" game or your fourth.

_ Billy O'Keefe

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"Family Guy: Video Game!"

For: Xbox, Playstation 2 and PSP

From: High Voltage/2K Games

ESRB Rating: Mature

"The Simpsons Hit & Run" wrote the book on how to turn a (once)-hilarious Sunday night cartoon into a video game that's as fun as it is funny. If the first few levels of "Family Guy" are any indication, it's a book High Voltage and 2K Games can recite from memory.

As a piece of fan service, "FG" does everything right. The show's cast and crew lent their talents,

and the result is an extremely funny lost episode that mixes in new material while tossing in just about every inside joke or side character the series has ever trotted out. The show's barrage of non-sequiturs are cleverly presented in the form of equally out-of-left-field mini-games. "FG" even does "Hit & Run" one better by incorporating cel-shaded 3D graphics instead of plain old polygons.

"FG" drops you into the shoes of three characters: Stewie, Peter and Brian. Stewie's levels - a handful of which open the game - are the highlight, mixing platforming, item collection and ray gun shooting in derivative but mindlessly fun ways.

You're waiting for the bad news, right? Well, here it is. Brian's levels are all about stealth - creep around this and that corner and don't let yourself be seen. Unfortunately, what constitutes as "being seen" is so arbitrary, you'll spend half these levels guessing and the other half shooting steam out of your ears because you guessed wrong and have to start the level over. This, also, is where the game's humor works against it: Lines that were funny the first time are blood-curdling the fifth time around.

Peter's "Final Fight"-style levels are a relief by comparison, but they don't feel nearly as developed as Stewie's portion. Certain characters are randomly impervious to certain attacks, but that and a few obligatory combos are as deep as the action gets. Just mash, move right and repeat. Once you acquire a special move or two, you can sleepwalk through these levels. Take advantage - your nerves could use the rest before the next Brian level rolls around. If you want to see this episode to its conclusion, you have your work cut out for you.

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_Billy O'Keefe

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Video-game review: 'Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07'

Images

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TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 07

For: Xbox 360, Xbox, PlayStation 2 and PSP (coming November to PlayStation 3)

From: EA Sports

ESRB Rating: Everyone

Here's hoping you brought your appetite: EA Sports is serving Tiger a la carte this year, and you have a poison to pick.

Do you want lots of courses? The Xbox or PS2 version of "Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07" might be for you. Each boasts a total of 21 real and fantastical courses, nearly twice as many as the Xbox 360 version's dozen. Then again, the courses you do get are prettier and more immersive on the 360 than what's possible on the older hardware. That goes as well for the pros (15 on the 360, 21 on Xbox/PS2): You get less of them, but they outclass their old-hardware counterparts in terms of looks and animation.

It gets trickier. The 360 version sports nearly two dozen modes, including the essentials (tour, training challenges, skins, match play, player creator), some new stuff (a full-featured practice facility, the deservedly-hyped team tour) and a healthy smattering of arcade- and mini-game modes that can be enjoyed solo, with friends or online. The PS2/Xbox versions sport the new team tour mode, but a good chunk of the fun side games are exclusive to the 360.

The PSP version has its own exclusive suite of fast-paced mini-games as well, but no team tour and only slimmed-down versions of the other essentials. Then again, this is the only version that allows you to save a game in progress. Never mind that it's also portable and allows you to play online from wherever you can find a hotspot. Just be prepared for a lessened degree of control: The PSP's analog nub is no substitute for any of the aforementioned systems' controllers.

So you can't have it all. Fortunately, if you're a fan of the series, you can't go terribly wrong, either. "TW07" is fundamentally identical to its predecessors: The analog swing and putt controls still provide the most intuitive game of video golf around, and the optional new preflight adjustments (including shot targeting and power boosting) offer additional accessibility for players who miss the days of meters and three-click gameplay. That, plus whatever features you decide are most important to you, make "TW07" second only to itself as the market's most comprehensive golf simulation.

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