

Reviews of recent video game releases

By Billy O'Keefe

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

ELEBITS

For: Nintendo Wii

From: Konami

ESRB Rating: Everyone

Nintendo's Wii promises to become a destination for games not remotely possible on other systems, but there's just as much room in the pool for the likes of "Elebits" _ an entirely possible, potentially ordinary game made special through the magic of the Wiimote.

"Elebits" is essentially a game of video hide and seek. The game derives its name from the hundreds of tiny glowing creatures hiding in and around your house _ in corners, behind furniture, in the back of a broom closet, under a vase, even inside various appliances. Your job is to tear apart each area and catch enough of the critters to satisfy each level's objectives before time runs out.

Trashing a room (as well as capturing Elebits and activating various context-sensitive actions) involves the use of a beam-enabled capture gun, which you can use to push, pull, pick up and heave anything _ literally anything _ that isn't bolted down.

This, predictably, is where the Wii advantage kicks in.

"Elebits" first-person-shooter-style controls have been possible on any console made in the last six years. Ditto the graphics, which are serviceable but definitely not impressive, and the story mode, which boasts power-ups and surprises aplenty but is inevitably limited by the simple concept.

But swinging the Wiimote to fling furniture around a crowded room is a special kind of destructive fun that ordinary controllers simply can't replicate. The fling-happy controls, fun physics engine and sheer variety of plunder transform "Elebits" from an arguable tech demo into an enormously fun time sink, especially when up to three friends are along for the hunt.

The multiplayer, score attack and clock-free modes add some nice variety to the proceedings, but no review would be complete without mention of the game's level editor. Creating your own environments from the scraps of completed levels adds significant life to the game in its own right, but "Elebits" does one better by being the first Wii game that lets you to trade your creations with other players online. (Should you prefer to destroy rather than create, you also can swap screenshots of your proudest room-trashing moments.)

STAR WARS: LETHAL ALLIANCE

For: PSP and Nintendo DS

From: Ubisoft

ESRB Rating: Teen

2006 was a quiet year for mankind's most milked movie-to-game franchise, and "Star Wars: Lethal Alliance" isn't exactly out to raise the volume any.

For starters, the game remains property of the portable realm, which means "Star Wars" fans are forced to choose between compromised controls (PSP) and yet another sketchy 3D game for a system (DS) that's best enjoyed in two dimensions. On top of that, "Alliance" stars a franchise unknown (Twi'lek mercenary Rianna Saren) and features a heavy concentration of generic enemies for every recognizable face that pops in for a cup of coffee. The back-story behind the Rebel Alliance's theft of the Death Star plans makes a great idea for a game, but "Alliance" isn't exactly the most gifted of storytellers, and Ubisoft bungles the opportunity to do something special.

With all that said, "Alliance" does a nice job of combining the shooting and melee combat from your typical third-person "Star Wars" game with the kind of acrobatics found in "Tomb Raider" and other such platformers. Rianna is two parts Han Solo and one part Lara Croft, and her partnership with an equally versatile security droid named Zeeo opens the door to a host of acrobatic moves and cool tag-team combat maneuvers. Where "Alliance" fails as a "Star Wars" game, it succeeds simply (if unspectacularly) as an action game. The only serious drawback: the auto-targeting system. It's serviceable most of the time, but it inevitably will burden you when lots of enemies crowd the screen.

Perhaps as compensation for the serious (and unflattering) discrepancy in presentation and graphical quality, the DS version of "Alliance" peppers the gameplay with mini-games that employ the touch screen. The DS game's levels also skew slightly more toward platform challenges than shooting sequences (which use the buttons and not the touch screen). At the end of the day, though, the games are far more similar than different.

Both copies of "Alliance" feature multiplayer modes, but "tacked on" doesn't begin to tell the story here. "Star Wars" fans and other interested parties are best off renting the game, plowing through the somewhat short single-player campaign, and waiting for one of the big three consoles to deliver something more substantial in 2007.

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

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Mini video-game review

Images

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"Call of Duty 3"

For: Xbox 360, PS3, PS2, Xbox (alternate version available for Wii)

From: Treyarch/Activision

ESRB Rating: Teen

It's easy to take "Call of Duty 3" for granted. It comes merely a year after its predecessor, which had twice the development time. It also comes courtesy of developer Treyarch, which pulls fill-in duty while series creator Infinity Ward works on next year's title. Finally, it's yet another World War II game - hardly a knockout idea in a holiday period jammed with console launches and A-list blockbusters.

But once that first level kicks off, we're reminded straight away that no shooter illustrates war quite like "Duty's" relentless rainfall of screaming soldiers, airborne debris and round after round of gunfire whizzing by your ears. When "COD3" finds that balance between wartime strategy and wartime insanity, it's an experience - other "Duty" games notwithstanding - without peer.

Unfortunately, those moments are fleeting, broken up by a smattering of problems ranging from a storyline that tries too hard to levels that rely too much on imaginary barriers and scripted events.

But the most troublesome issue - by far - is the game's bizarre A.I. Enemy forces act like drones rather than trained soldiers: They run right at you, fire uncontrollably, and occasionally ignore activity taking place right behind their backs. Often, when you kill a soldier who is near another soldier, that second soldier moves into the fallen soldier's position, and you can kill him without even nudging your weapon. Sometimes this cycle repeats itself, and suddenly it's as if you're playing that carnival duck-shooting game instead of fighting a war.

Your allies are no brighter. They'll shoot at cover instead of around it, and occasionally co-exist out in the open with an enemy soldier while neither fires on the other. Before the single-player campaign is over, expect a few instances in which your own soldiers get you killed by blocking your path and making it impossible to seek cover from enemy fire. It will happen.

The news is endlessly better if your aim is to play online, where the spirit of "Duty" - including vehicles this time around - lives unhindered by A.I. and storyline aggravations. The 360 version supports 24 players simultaneously; the others (save for Wii) support 16 at a time.

_ Billy O'Keefe

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