

## Reviews of recent video game releases

**By Billy O'Keefe**

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

DIDDY KONG RACING DS

For: Nintendo DS

From: Rare/Nintendo

ESRB Rating: Everyone (Mild Cartoon Violence)

Roughly a billion kart racers have come, gone and been forgotten since "Super Mario Kart" invented the genre more than 14 years ago, with only one \_ "Diddy Kong Racing" \_ being good enough and loved enough to endure the tests of both Mario and time.

But that was 10 years ago, and an enhanced port of a game from 3D gaming's training wheel days still is a port. Anyone who has played "Mario Kart DS" will realize immediately that, in terms of graphics, framerate and overall gameplay polish, the year-plus-old "MKDS" pretty well smokes "Diddy Kong Racing DS."

What makes "DKRDS" still well worth playing is the same thing that made it worth playing in 1997: variety, and lots of it. Races come in three flavors \_ via go-cart, unwieldy hovercraft and airplane (which suffers a bit due to the DS' lack of an analog stick) \_ and are connected by an impressively large and open hub world that's teeming with boss races, treasures and unlockable secrets. The enhanced port piles on more trimmings, with the ability to customize and upgrade vehicles and (finally!) design your own tracks and share them online.

The incorporation of DS hardware features yields mixed results: Some additions (blowing into the mic to jumpstart a hovercraft, random touch screen surprises in the hub area) are great, while others (rubbing the touch screen to jumpstart the cart and plane, a new magic carpet ride mode that's saddled by some bizarrely bad control decisions) are clumsy and actually a needless step backward.

Perhaps the best news about "DKRDS" also is the least surprising: wireless multiplayer support for up to eight friends and online play (complete with friend list and matchmaker support) for up to six friends and strangers. The best news about the best news? The cheater-friendly control exploit that ruined online play in "MKDS" is nowhere to be found here. It remains to be seen how the online landscape will shape up once more people are logged in, but things look very promising so far.

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DUSK: ROOM 215

For: Nintendo DS

From: Cing/Nintendo

ESRB Rating: Teen (Mild Language, Mild Violence, Alcohol)

Huh? Wha? What's this? The Nintendo logo is on the box, so we must assume it's a Nintendo game. But why has Nintendo \_ never one not to hype a forthcoming game in any number of clever ways \_ said almost nothing to promote "Hotel Dusk: Room 215?"

One guess: It has no idea what to say. That sometimes happens when you release a game that, like

"Dusk," represents a stark departure from any game you've delivered in the last two decades or so.

"Dusk" comes courtesy of the same development team behind the oft-overlooked adventure game "Trace Memory," and similarities between the two are clearly there \_ particularly as far as basic presentation, exploration (first-person viewpoint on one screen, overhead view on the other) and puzzle-solving are concerned.

But where "Memory" was a game defined by its puzzle-solving elements more than anything else, "Dusk" tips even greater in the opposite direction.

Playing "Dusk" is akin to reading one of those "Choose Your Own Adventure" books. The story \_ a mystery that drops you into the shoes of an undercover private detective \_ drives the game, and most of the gameplay consists of talking to people you meet, gathering clues, and doing your best not to say the wrong thing and sabotage the case.

Puzzles do pop up, and certain challenges are scattered in pieces throughout the hotel. But dialogue trees rule the day here. If text-heavy games make you queasy, consider yourself positively allergic to this one.

Should that not scare you \_ and should you not be put off by a perilously slow start \_ "Dusk" is a novel (in every sense of the word; you even hold the system sideways, like a book, to play) addition to the DS library. If Cing hedged its bets a bit with "Memory," it doesn't here, and the result is a game that's smarter, prettier, more expansive and more sure of itself than its spiritual predecessor. That it's not for everyone can't be emphasized enough, but gamers with great patience, a love of reading and a taste for something very different have an intriguing new means of complementing all three.

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

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## Mini video-game review

**McClatchy-Tribune**  
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"Assault Heroes"

For: Xbox 360 Live Arcade

From: Wanako Studios/Sierra

Downloadable for: 800 MS Points

ESRB Rating: Teen

Arcade games like "Robotron" did it for years: Use the left joystick to move your character, and use the right joystick to shoot in whatever direction you nudge it. With this control scheme, you can walk north and shoot south, and that makes it possible for a game to throw enemies at you from every direction without making it impossible to complete.

With the advent and popularity of Xbox Live Arcade, it finally became feasible to bring this style to consoles, and developers created a traffic jam trying to get into the door first. Unfortunately, with one exception ("Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved"), the results were underwhelming. And even "GW:RE" confined the gameplay to a single, small space.

Finally, with "Assault Heroes," someone has put the control style to real-world use. The result? Amazing - and easily one of the best reasons yet to scrounge up some MS Points.

"Heroes" is a top-down shooter that borrows elements from a number of arcade classics, including "Ikari Warriors," "Spy Hunter," "Commando" and (to an extent) "Contra." As with those games, the premise is simple: Blow stuff up and do whatever you gotta do to stay alive.

What makes "Heroes" so unbelievably cool is the way it takes these classic arcade elements and gives them a major and very modern facelift. Enemies are smarter and more diverse. The graphics and animation, complete with lighting and weather effects and thunderous explosions, are light years ahead. The pacing is comparable, but the level of precision in the game's controls makes everything feel faster and more intuitive.

"Heroes" also makes itself accessible by giving players of all abilities a fighting chance. Three difficulty settings and two-player co-op are available, and you start each life in a 4x4 (or speedboat) rather than on foot. Wreck the vehicle, and you're fighting to survive on foot/jet ski until another arrives. Chances are good you'll lose that fight, but a checkpoint system makes it easy (without being too easy) to get back up and try again. Each overworld level also contains a challenging (and more meticulously paced) underground level that strips you of your vehicle straight away, but these are optional bonus levels that meek players can skip entirely.

\_Billy O'Keefe

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# Video-game review: 'Lost Planet: Extreme Condition'

## Images

**By Billy O'Keefe**

**McClatchy-Tribune News Service  
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"LOST PLANET: EXTREME CONDITION"

For: Xbox 360

From: Capcom

ESRB Rating: Teen

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Capcom harnessed the full promotional power of Xbox Live by releasing a demo of "Lost Planet" way back in May, long before the game even had a release date. Busloads of Xbox 360 owners downloaded - and loved - the demo. And "Planet," despite being a completely new and completely unproven franchise, enjoyed the kind of pre-release hype usually reserved for a big-budget sequel.

Finally, the other 90 percent of the game is publicly available. And while it's not a great deal different than the 10 percent we saw last spring, it delivers on the promises the demo made.

Despite the surprisingly heavy (and arguably regrettable) infusion of storytelling, "Planet" really is about one thing: Shooting stuff. Sometimes you shoot stuff on foot. Other times, it's from the womb of a giant mech. Sometimes that stuff is people - specifically, the agents and snow pirates who comprise much of the sparse human population on E.D.N. III, a snow-covered wasteland straight out of "The Day After Tomorrow."

Mostly, though, "stuff" refers to bugs - big ones, huge ones, enormous ones, "oh my God!" ones and the nests from which they spawn. "Planet" easily is one of the 360's prettiest games, and some of its encounters - featuring screen-sized insects that challenge you to keep your balance, never mind survive - are instantly legendary. The innovative creature designs, incredible special effects and sheer activity scream "blockbuster," and the unique health system allows you to take full advantage and live pretty dangerously. Even when "Planet" does its best to frustrate - and camera issues, tons of cheap attacks and an inconsistent checkpoint system ensure it often will - it never bores.

"Planet's" taste for firepower and horsepower makes it a perfect candidate for pick-up-and-play multiplayer, and that's precisely what we get here. You can't play as the giant worm, and outside of some game-specific influences, nothing here is terribly new. But tearing up E.D.N. III with up to 15 of your closest friends is tremendous fun all the same, and Capcom doesn't ruin it by dropping the technical ball.

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