

Two new console games rival PC strategy heritage

Who says strategy game lovers will never leave their PCs? I've had the opportunity to look at two console games in recent weeks that fall firmly into the category of Strategy Lite. "Goblin Commander" is a PlayStation 2 and Xbox game from Jaleco that was designed by some of the team that worked on the "Warcraft" PC series for Blizzard Entertainment. Instead of the armies of little orcs or humans or undead or whatnot that you command (complete with their cities) in "Warcraft," you're in charge of simplified little groups of goblins led by a Titan that you control. It's not perfect, and I suspect that later titles will make "Commander" seem downright clumsy. But it's a look at one way to make strategy work with controller buttons. The other is "Wrath Unleashed," a LucasArts strategy-fighter combination that's coming out this week for PS2 and Xbox. Again, it's not as complex as PC titles, but your characters' success at fighting does depend in part on where you move them on a gameboard-like landscape, and what elemental strengths and weaknesses each area has. For strategy nuts like me who would rather plop down on a couch than sit at a desk, this could be the start of something beautiful.

Pac-Man is red, Zeldas are blue

You knew it was only a matter of time before someone let something like this happen. The first book of poetry and "emoto-versatronic expressionist pieces" (or so it says) about video games has just hit the market.



I took a look at "Blue Wizard is About to Die!" (Rusty Immelman Press, \$15) — and yes, that's its real title — and found it a real romp to read, especially for the nostalgia of author Seth (Fingers) Flynn Barkan's take on older games.

Many of the essays and poems are both poignant and funny. In "Mario in Exile," Mario's Princess, dead from a self-inflicted turtle shell to the head, leaves a suicide note asking, "Where has my plumber gone?" The poem "Half-Life" is largely an ode to the pleasures of wielding a crowbar, including some musing on how it feels when that makes you get up close and squishy with nasty aliens. "Things I've Experienced," one of the first poems in the book, is a must-read for parents everywhere who just don't get why their kids keep spending more hours with electronic characters than outside playing in the street. While the book claims to cover games from 1980 to 2003, many of the oldest titles are like TV criticism written by critics who have only seen reruns, thanks to Barkan's young age (his Web site says he's 22). Still, the overall collection is worth the \$15 it costs, even if you just keep it around to hand to people who say, "I don't get it."

BETTER PLAY 'NFL Street'

Our Better Play tips this week come courtesy of Phil Poccia of Shelby Township. "If you are getting tired of simulation football games like 'ESPN NFL Football' or 'Madden,' 'NFL Street' is a must buy," Poccia says. "It will take months to get old if you play it with your friends or online" — the latter on PlayStation 2 only. Here are some of Poccia's suggestions: ■ As in "NBA Street," Gamebreakers are important since they are nearly unstoppable. Earn Gamebreakers and use them when you have to score or need a big defensive stop. ■ To keep your opponent's defense on their heels, mix up your running, passing and trick plays. ■ Do not rush your passing plays on offense; let them develop so that your players can get open. Do you have some tips to offer for a favorite game? E-mail them to me with your name and address, and you might see them in a future Game On! column.

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NEW THIS WEEK

- Most-ordered games going on sale this week at Amazon.com, including title, platform and ESRB rating:
- | | |
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| 1. "Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles," GameCUBE. | 5. "Everquest: Gates of Discord," Windows. Teen. |
| 2. "Metroid: Zero Mission," Game Boy Advance. Everyone. | 6. "Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Athena Sword," Windows. Mature. |
| 3. "Spellforce," Windows. Teen. | 7. "Unreal II: The Awakening," Xbox. Mature. |
| 4. "Yu-Gi-Oh! World Championship Tournament 2004," Game Boy Advance. Everyone. | 8. "Universal Combat," Windows. Mature. |
- Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store

Where's Capt. Kirk when you need him?

'Star Trek' ADVENTURE FINDS TROUBLE IN A MIRROR UNIVERSE



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS GAME MASTER

I'm not a Trekkie, but I've watched enough "Star Trek" episodes to know that Capt. Kirk always found a way out of trouble. I could have used his special touch playing "Star Trek: Shattered Universe." This game is unreasonably hard, even at the so-called "easy" difficulty setting. Throw in some repetitive missions, and it adds up to a subpar gaming experience.

"Shattered Universe" isn't horrible. It was nice revisiting Sulu and Chekov, former lackeys from the original starship Enterprise who are big-time captains this time around.

But the game, which features lots of dogfighting in single-occupant fighters to protect big ships like Sulu's Excelsior, can be aggravating. It felt like I couldn't hit a darned thing with my phaser bolts, photon torpedoes and phaser beams.

This is a problem, as this game is based on defending Excelsior and taking out bad guys.

As the title suggests, "Shattered Universe" turns the regular "Star Trek" worlds upside down. In this mirror society, everything good has gone bad. Even

Chekov, Sulu's former mate on the bridge of the Enterprise, has turned into a doom-and-gloom opponent.

The voice-acting is good, with the original actors behind Sulu and Chekov — George Takei and Walter Koenig — providing the chatter. It was nice to learn they're still out and about.

But I failed mission after mission trying to master a bad targeting system. It's hard to tell good ships from bad (part of the problem of a mirror society), and a tough pursuit system made up-close tussles nearly impossible to pull off. You can race after enemies, but you don't seem to be catching up. Then, all of a sudden, the bad guy zooms right past you.

Most of my shooting was done from a long way back, and hitting the mark proved difficult.

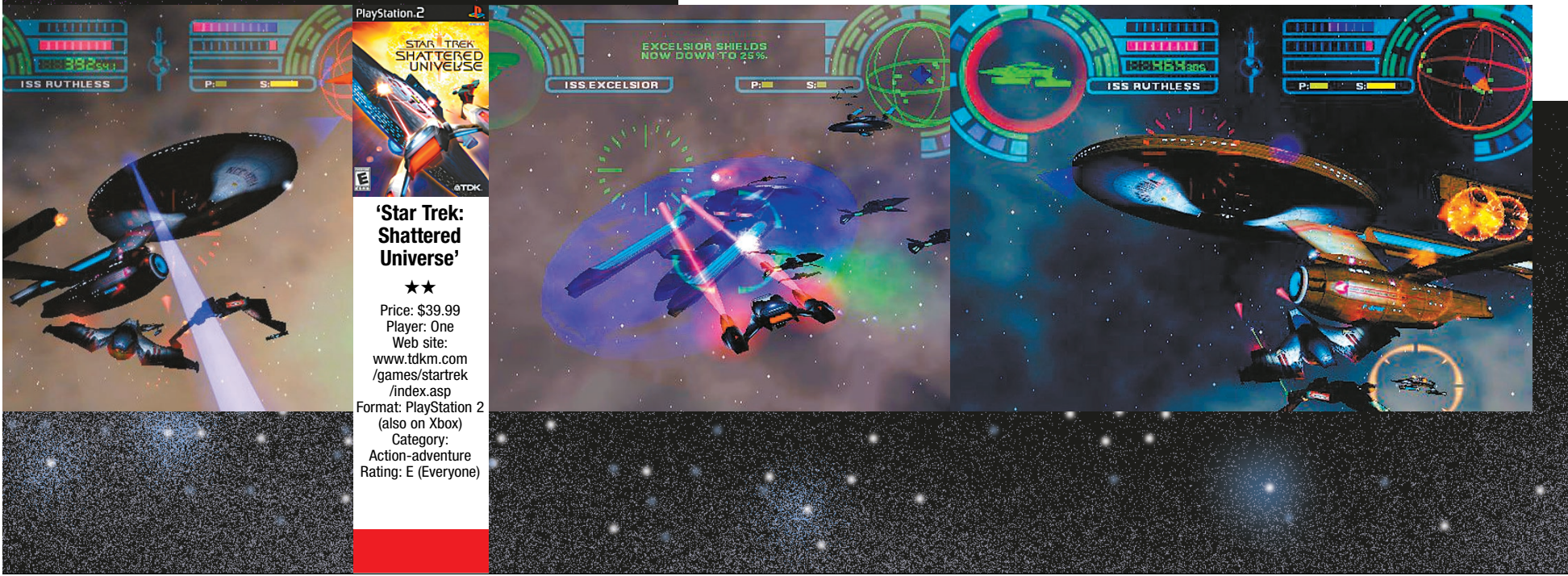
There are 19 levels in this game, each divided into missions that can be irritatingly long. You can pilot up to six single-person fighters, which leave the mother ship to defend, seek out natural resources and rescue allies.

I often found myself nearing the successful end to a six- or even 12-minute mission, only to die and be relegated to starting the level over again.

Other games like "Star Wars: Rogue Squadron" (for GameCube) and "Crimson Skies" (for Xbox) are superior when it comes to aerial combat. They make you feel the rush with spectacular airborne moves and super sound effects. Part of the problem in this game is the sound — the effects are understated and add no urgency.

But there are Klingons and Vulcans and Romulans. For some Trekkies, that's probably all they need to deem a "Star Trek" game successful. For the rest of us, though, it's just not enough.

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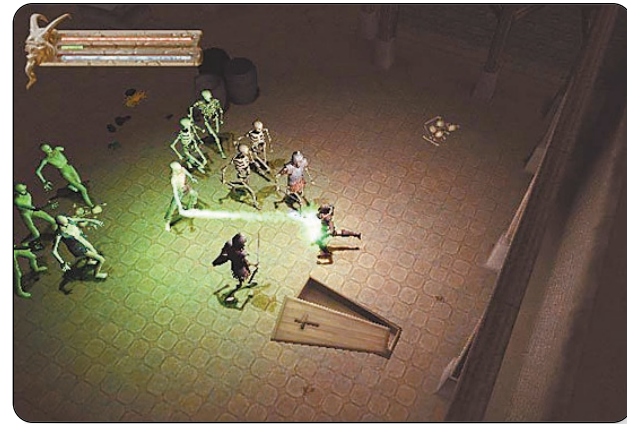


'Star Trek: Shattered Universe'
★★
Price: \$39.99
Player: One
Web site: www.tdkm.com/games/startrek/index.asp
Format: PlayStation 2 (also on Xbox)
Category: Action-adventure
Rating: E (Everyone)

RECENT RELEASES



"MAXIMO VS. ARMY OF ZIN"
★★★★
Capcom for PlayStation 2, \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen)
Back in the good ol' 8-bit Nintendo days, games were pure fun, not massive, self-important productions. Capcom's "Ghosts and Goblins" was one of those classics. More than a decade later, the publisher paid homage with "Maximo: Ghosts to Glory." So naturally, a sequel was in order. Just like its predecessors, "Maximo vs. Army of Zin" is a blast, light on plot and heavy on action. Our hero, traveling with his buddy Grim (as in Grim Reaper), is searching for his lost love, Sophia. They encounter mechanized monsters, powered by stolen souls, slaughtering villagers. Grim takes off to investigate the matter, leaving Maximo to deal the horde and find out who is behind this madness. Using Maximo's sword (another weapon comes later), you protect the innocents from these abominations. Once the people are safe, they give you money to buy power-ups and restore your health, and they offer tips. The control is easy to pick up. You have a great deal of fighting techniques at your disposal, giving you freedom to experiment and develop your style. One minor complaint: Camera orientation can be glitchy at times, making you miss enemies or mistime jumps. Level design is excellent, as well. You face enemies that blindside you from hidden spots, tough puzzles that must be solved before you progress and an old-school favorite, bottomless pits. Get ready to die — a lot. The levels are very challenging, but not impossible. "Zin" is so much fun it's easy to overlook its strong production values. The graphics aren't complex, but they are clean and strike the right tone. The movie-caliber soundtrack is superb, ranging from big and brassy to subtle and orchestral. This is one of those video games that reminds you of what made you love video games in the first place. "Maximo vs. Army of Zin" will have you muttering, "Just one more level before I go to bed. . . ." Good luck getting a full night of sleep.
By Omari Gardner, Detroit Free Press



"BALDUR'S GATE: DARK ALLIANCE 2"
★★★
Interplay for Xbox (also for PlayStation 2), \$45.95. Rating: T (Teen)
"Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance" broke new ground in hack-and-slash dungeon crawling. The water effects were stunning, the inventory system was a pleasure and two-player co-op play made it a family favorite. Alas, the sequel — while fun, with more content than the original — has been eclipsed in many ways. First, the good news. There are five characters to choose from, including the typical barbarian warrior and human cleric, but also including a dark elf who fights best hand-to-hand and a moon elf necromancer who can summon a skeleton as a pet. More characters are unlocked by finishing the game in various modes, a feat that took my husband and me 24 hours of play. That's longer than the original, and unlike the original, we're playing again with the more varied characters. Besides what you collect from treasure chests, buy and beat out of enemies, you can also create better items by combining rune stones and gems with existing weapons or armor. The story is fairly run of the mill, but the voice acting is good, which keeps it from being too corny. The classical soundtrack did a good job of pacing the action. But I felt that no one really stretched for either new concepts or perfect quality. I was surprised to see problems again and again where a character or item would partially pass through another on screen. In far too many cases, our necromancer could fire magic flaming or acid arrows into a room we hadn't opened the door on, killing all the inhabitants without risk to our skins. No online play is available, unlike the forthcoming "Champions of Norrath." "Baldur's Gate" does, however, mix up the enemies you face and the treasure you get each time. Fans of the last "Dark Alliance" will enjoy the chance to play this one, with its superior graphics and longer play time. But if you're looking for a casual co-op game and only plan to buy one this spring, you might wait to see how things go with "Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel" and "Champions of Norrath."
By Heather Newman, Detroit Free Press



"BROKEN SWORD: THE SLEEPING DRAGON"
★★★
Revolution Software/The Adventure Co. for Xbox (also for Windows), \$39.98. Rating: T (Teen)
Fans of the "Broken Sword" adventure game series feared the release of this sequel, which stirred controversy when the head of Revolution Software, its developer, declared the death of pointing and clicking with a mouse. Worried that "Dragon" would emulate the much-derided keyboard-only interface of "Grim Fandango," gamers began criticizing the game sight unseen. Fuel was added to the fire when screenshots from the game showed the protagonist, George Stobbart, on a mountainside where he clearly would have to jump from ledge to ledge. Would "Broken Sword" follow the route of series like "Indiana Jones" and "King's Quest," which dropped a pure puzzle-solving design in favor of action? With fewer adventure games appearing each year, those who lack the interest or twitch reflexes needed for action games felt abandoned. Now that it's finally been released, "Dragon" has proved to be squarely in the adventure genre. George does have to jump across chasms, but this only requires pushing a button. Few people will find the action sequences in "Dragon" difficult, but then, few people will find the puzzles difficult, either. "Dragon" is one of the easiest adult adventure games ever released. The best adventure games require the player to find ingenious solutions to complex problems. But while "Dragon" requires a methodical approach, one never has to think outside the box. With slick graphics, witty dialogue and a globe-hopping story, "Dragon" has a polish lacking in most modern adventure games. Its interface is simple, and unlike point-and-click action, easily translates to console gaming. But although the game can be quite funny — for example, when George finds a demonic primer titled "Sacrifice Made Easy: 101 Ways to Kill a Goat," I never found the story or locations interesting enough to offset the lack of challenge.
By Charles Herold, New York Times