

## SILENCE AND STEALTH ARE GOLDEN IN NEW 'SPLINTER CELL' GAME



Tired of running, gunning, barking orders and ripping off primal screams while taking down bad guys in frenzied battles? Try a little hide and sneak.

That's what the new Tom Clancy spy game offers: stealth action, and, for the first time in this series, online play.

**JIM SCHAEFER**  
**FREE PRESS GAME MASTER**

"Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow" has some of the most unusual and hair-raising game play you'll find on Xbox Live, even though what you hear mostly during the games is silence.

Unlike other Xbox Live games that throw you into an arena with a dozen or more other players (see any "Unreal" game), "Pandora Tomorrow" keeps it intimate. It's just you and a friend against a couple of bad guys. This keeps the game from becoming a fragfest. And it keeps this question gnawing at you: Where is my enemy?

Will you be the spies who infiltrate a compound in pursuit of a prized package, or the mercenaries who protect it? Spies creep around in ventilation shafts and dark crannies but have no lethal guns. Mercenaries seek them out with a bevy of high-tech gadgets.

This is very tough yet intriguing. I'm still not very good, partly because there are no maps. Until you memorize the levels available online, you're at an extreme disadvantage.

That means you'll hear this sound often: "Crick." That's your neck under the vise grip of an opponent who has crept up behind you.

Some online games can last 20 minutes, when you can find them. I got booted unexpectedly fairly often, but persistence made online play work.

The offline game is darned hard, but it's still fantastic. You are Sam Fisher, an American spy. Indonesian rebels have overtaken the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, and you are sent in to destroy classified information.

Kill someone and you're done; your handlers will pull you out. Using your wits, you skulk through 17 levels, using assorted gadgets and even some old-fashioned tricks. I simply whistled to lure the terrorists to me one by one, then knocked them out.

Many times I got through three or four bad guys only to fail, making the game deliciously frustrating. "Pandora Tomorrow" captures the flavor of espionage like no other game. As you would expect in this sequel to the popular "Splinter Cell," the lighting is wonderful; the graphics are as good as they get.

It's hard not to score this four stars, but they could have made it just a bit easier to play.

Contact JIM SCHAEFER at 313-222-5995 or games@freepress.com.

## Softly, softly creeps the spy



'Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow'

★★★  
Price: \$49.99  
Players: 1-4 or online  
Web site: www.splintercell.com  
Format: Xbox  
Category: Action  
Rating: T (Teen)

## RECENT RELEASES



**"HARVEST MOON: A WONDERFUL LIFE"**  
★★★★

Natsume for GameCube, \$39.99. Rating: E (Everyone). If you can't enjoy a game without adrenaline coursing through your veins, then this title may seem like an odd concept: a farming simulation set in a vaguely Alpine-style village with a leisurely pace to its human relationships and growing seasons.

In a sea of first-person shooters, sports simulations and driving games, "Harvest Moon: A Wonderful Life" is as fresh as the spring-time blossoms of the fruit trees dotting Forget-Me-Not Valley.

There's an intellectual challenge here, trying to calculate the best mix of crops and livestock to raise while balancing the farm work with time spent tending relationships in the village. In this version, Natsume's designers have fully harnessed the power of the Gamecube to bring 3D environments brilliantly to life.

We were cast as a young man starting from scratch on a modest farm that our late father bequeathed to us. We also

inherited the handyman Takakura, who often pointed out good deals on farm equipment and animals. Starting with one cow and two tomato plants, we had to turn pennies into dollars through hard work. Meanwhile, we had to preserve enough time to court a fiancée in the village in the hope of forming a family. Unlike "The Sims," however, this is an entirely G-rated relationship, involving challenges like picking flowers that might help us woo a girl.

Soon we were planting crops, milking cows, shearing sheep and collecting eggs. And we were able to branch out into nearby mining and digging for fossils that might be valuable. Fishing also turned out to be a profitable pastime.

Granted, such choices aren't pulse pounding. But if you like the idea of kicking back for a few hours in the country, watching the sun and clouds trace shadows across rolling meadows as you ponder your family's next move, then this is a rare gem.

By David Crumm and Benjamin Crumm, 14, for the Detroit Free Press

**"FAR CRY"**  
★★★★

Ubisoft for Windows, \$39.99. Rating: M (Mature).

After weeks of reviewing mediocre shooters, I was ready for a treat. "Far Cry" delivered. It's the prettiest, smartest new shooter in years, and it deserves to become a new franchise.

Granted, it doesn't have the compelling story of "Halo" or the multiplayer mayhem of "Unreal Tournament 2004." But the single-player campaign is a blast, and I'm looking forward to seeing more games developed with the brand-new engine that makes this title tick.

Let's start with the stunning graphics, which feature amazingly subtle lighting and lush scenes. The game has the longest detail distance of anything on the market, which means, if you shoot someone on the deck of a boat, you can see him clearly when you later climb to the top of a mountain nearby.

Getting that enemy shot is often a challenge. These guys are smart. They don't forget you when you duck around corners.



They don't pop out from behind cover in a repetitive pattern, giving you clear shots every few seconds. Heck, even on the easy setting, enemies called for reinforcements, snuck up beside me and followed me in a Jeep, fercryinoutloud.

You have a lot of tools at your disposal, too. The environment is destructible: You can knock over furniture, shoot the radio or make holes in metal walls. You have the usual complement of shooter moves: strafe, crouch, prone, throwing rocks as decoys, sprinting and using your binoculars.

The physics, lighting, movement and landscape are so realistic that this is the most utterly believable — well, later plot points are a little over the top — and immersive first-person shooter I've played.

Now the bad news. While "Far Cry" does a great job of scaling itself down to play on older hardware, you're going to have to upgrade your PC to get the most out of it. That's all right if you're a shooter fan.

Believe me, it's worth it. Don't miss a shot at "Far Cry."  
By Heather Newman, Detroit Free Press

## Publishers replenish online world games

Over the holidays, it became hip for journalists to declare online world games dead.

Those reports have been pummeled flat by a horde of orcs with +20 Clubs of Vengeance.

Not only do we have high-profile games like "Everquest 2," "World of Warcraft" and the Tolkien-based "Middle Earth Online" opening their doors this year, but even lesser-known publishers are jumping on the bandwagon.

Last week I got the chance to beta-test two titles that are generating big buzz: "Lineage II," the upcoming sequel to the most popular online world game on Earth, and "City of Heroes," where you can create your very own superhero. Both are coming from NCSoft.

"Lineage" is a beautiful, and brutal, struggle for dominance over a fantasy feudal landscape. It's going to take me a lot more play time to get all the intricacies, but I can tell you that it's much more political than other online worlds I've encountered — and that it's frankly stunning to look at.



When "City of Heroes" comes out, beware of the nobly purple Gbits.

"City" will be worth playing for a month when it comes out just for the joy of creating your own heroes. The character creation is the best part of the game so far, letting you pick your heroes' origins, archetypes and powers, in addition to some nifty costume and cosmetic customization. It took me roughly 15 minutes to create Gbits, my tall, mostly purple, magic tanker with fiery aura, energy powers and a hot costume complete with a set of retro shades.

### New this week

■ For "Far Cry" fans — and you should be one after reading my four-star review on this page today — there's good news. Ubisoft announced this week that a console version, at least for Xbox, will be released this fall as "Far Cry Instincts." Other platforms aren't confirmed.

■ Antec is trying to give Shuttle and FragBox a run for their money when it comes to giving geeks the tools to create cute, portable PCs for gaming. Their new Aria case accepts a reasonably standard motherboard and standard desktop PC expansion cards and has a good power supply for gaming demands. It's roughly 8 inches high, 11 inches wide and 13 inches deep, and weighs 10 pounds. Just be prepared to BYOC — build your own computer. For info, see [www.antec-inc.com](http://www.antec-inc.com).

■ Atari has launched an on-demand gaming service for PC gamers who want access to titles like "RollerCoaster Tycoon 2" or "Magic the Gathering: Battleground" without buying them. For \$14.95 a month, you can stream the games direct from their site. It's a bit pricey for the titles you get, but the idea's a good one (mimicking other PC streaming sites like <http://gamesondemand.yahoo.com>). See [www.atariondemand.com](http://www.atariondemand.com) for details.

### 'Duty' calls

Activision released a Game of the Year edition of its popular, award-winning combat title, "Call of Duty," this week. But you don't have to power up a PC to play: A version was also recently released for some wireless phone owners.

I tested it on a Verizon Wireless LG VX6000 phone and was pleased with the results. Sure, the controls are typically cell-phone-clumsy. But they worked consistently, and the graphics and movement were Game Boy Advance quality.

"Call" for the small screen version is mostly a top-down-view, run-gun-and-demolish fest. But directing your tiny squad of soldiers is surprisingly fun, and I was impressed with the quality of the production. Prices vary; it's about \$7 for unlimited play.

Contact HEATHER NEWMAN at 313-223-3336 or [newman@freepress.com](mailto:newman@freepress.com). Find her gaming online as "Gbits."

## WIN AN XBOX AND TICKETS TO GAMERIOT

GameRiot, one of the largest traveling video game events and competitions in the country, is coming to metro Detroit — and the Free Press can take you there.

We're giving away a chance to join other gamers Monday at Clutch Cargo's in Pontiac to test-drive some hot new and unreleased titles. You'll play on Xbox consoles and state-of-the-art PC gaming stations.

Two grand prize winners will receive an Xbox, five games and eight tickets to GameRiot. Four runners-up will win four tickets to GameRiot.

Want to play? For your chance to win the goods, race to the Free Press video games Web page at [www.freep.com/gameon](http://www.freep.com/gameon) and enter the following code: RIOT.

Don't delay: All entries must be received by noon Monday, April 12.

And don't forget to look for the Free Press banners at GameRiot!

No purchase necessary. Must be 18 years of age or older to enter and win. By entering this contest, the contestant does hereby agree to receive Detroit Newspapers product and service information including any and all solicitation phone calls from a Detroit Newspapers representative. For complete contest rules and location of free point of entry, go to [www.dnps.com/contestrules](http://www.dnps.com/contestrules).

Due to the time-sensitive nature of this contest, every reasonable attempt to contact the winner will be made, but the winner will have two hours to call us back from the initial call time before his or her prize is forfeited and given to an alternate winner.



The Rose Group

### NEW THIS WEEK

- Most-ordered games going on sale this week at Amazon.com, including title, platform and ESRB rating:
1. "ESPN Major League Baseball," PlayStation 2. Everyone
  2. "World Tour Soccer '05," PlayStation 2. Everyone
  3. "UFC: Sudden Impact," PlayStation 2. Rating pending
  4. "WWII Carrier Ops for Microsoft Flight Sim 2004 and 2002," Windows. Rating pending
  5. "Serious Sam Next Encounter," PlayStation 2. Mature
- Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store