

# Game On!

10J SUNDAY, NOV. 14, 2004

Editor David Blomquist can be reached at 313-223-4288 or gameon@freepress.com

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**GAME BITS**

By Heather Newman

## 'EverQuest II' players enjoy bug-free launch

"EverQuest II" opened the doors on its new online world this week, and people flooded in to answer the call.

Sony Online Entertainment reps say that 70,000 registered to play by 4 p.m. Tuesday, the first day it was widely available, and they were expecting that number to double in the two days afterwards. SOE spokesman Chris Kramer called it the company's "smoothest launch ever," with virtually no server problems for people who jumped in to create new sword-and-sorcery characters. That's in stark contrast to other SOE launches (cough, "Star Wars Galaxies," cough) that were plagued with problems that made the games nearly unplayable for the first few days.

"EverQuest" has been around for years, and the company still plans to continue releasing improvements and expansion packs for the half-million people or so who continue to play it. "EverQuest II," while it's set in the same game world as the original, is a parallel-but-separate game.

Players roam the world, talking to thousands of computer-controlled characters to receive quests, which in turn provide experience points that raise the character to a higher level, allowing them to tackle bigger monsters and learn new skills.

"EQII" sets a new standard for graphical detail in the industry, with ultra-crisp characters and landscapes for those with



A Sony spokesman said "EverQuest II" had the "smoothest launch ever."

the beefy computer systems necessary to run it smoothly. Those with average PCs will be looking at average graphics, unfortunately.

Come back to the Free Press on Friday, when we'll have a review comparing "EQII" and its closest competition, "World of Warcraft."

## Sports competition heats up

Terrific news for sports fans: Some of the hottest games just got cheaper. Electronic Arts announced that it's reducing the price on "Madden NFL 2005," "NHL 2005" and "NBA Live" to \$29.99, the first time it's discounted these games so heavily so soon after their releases.

The reason is most likely EA's heated competition with the ESPN-branded sports titles ("ESPN NFL 2K5," "ESPN NHL 2K5" and "ESPN NBA 2K5"), all of which Sega has priced aggressively at \$19.95 since their launch. It's hard to argue with a \$30 price difference ("Madden" and the others sold for \$50, like most games) when both brands of games are fun to play.

P.J. McNealy of American Technology Research was widely quoted a few months ago praising Sega's pricing of their sports games as "brilliant," pointing out that it was a terrific way to swipe the lower end of the market from market leader EA. Reviews of both series of games have been overwhelmingly positive.

It's unlikely that this will translate into a lower leadoff price for "Madden" or other EA Sports games next year, however. "Madden 2005," for example, still dominates the market, and sold record-setting numbers of copies at the original \$50 price when it launched.

## Top 10 cell phone games

Studies show the majority of people who play games also play them on their wireless phones, and as someone who's not above a little "Bejeweled" in waiting rooms, I can see the attraction. Cell phone games are quick, tend to be easy and provide a few minutes' entertainment while you're waiting for something else to happen.

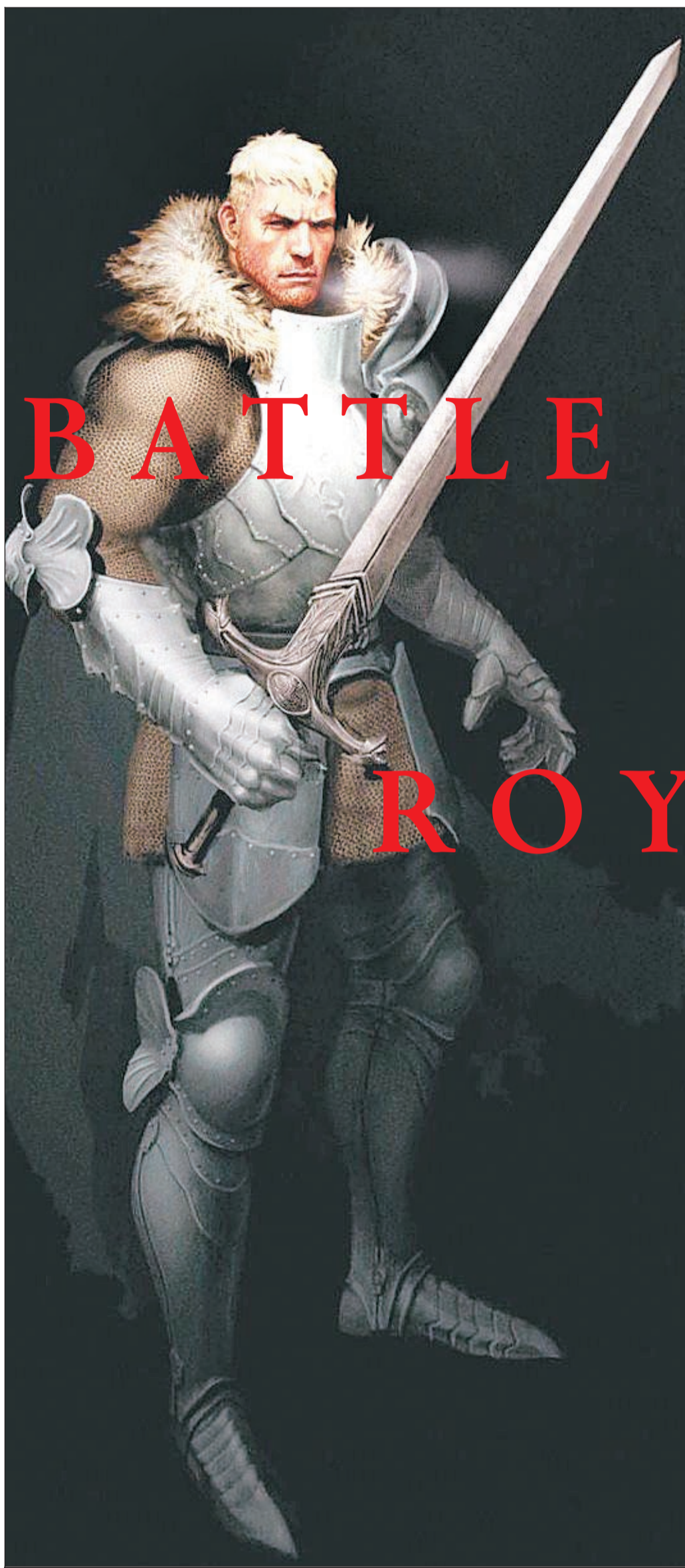
Here, from our friends at Verizon Wireless, are the top 10 wireless game downloads on their service for the month of October, proving once again that arcade games, casual puzzle games and movie licenses rule this genre: 1. "Tetris," 2. "Jamdat Bowling," 3. "Pac-Man," 4. "Downtown Texas Holdem," 5. "Ms. Pac-Man," 6. "Bejeweled," 7. "Driv3r," 8. "Solitaire by Jamdat," 9. "The Fast and the Furious," 10. "Frogger."

Contact HEATHER NEWMAN at 313-223-3336 or newman@freepress.com. Find her gaming online as "Gbits."

## NEW THIS WEEK

Most-ordered games going on sale this week at Amazon.com, including title, platform and ESRB rating:

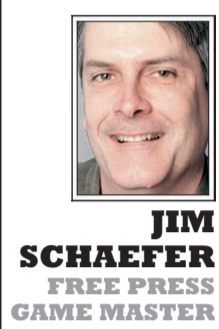
1. "Half-Life 2," Windows, Mature.
2. "Metroid Prime 2," GameCube, Teen.
3. "Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater," PlayStation 2, Mature.
4. "Dragon Ball Z: Budokai 3," PlayStation 2, Teen.
5. "Half-Life 2: Collector's Edition," Windows, Mature.
6. "Need for Speed: Underground 2," PlayStation 2, Everyone.
7. "PlayStation 2," PlayStation 2, Everyone.
8. "Need for Speed: Underground 2," PlayStation 2, Everyone.
9. "Dragon Ball Z: Budokai 3," PlayStation 2, Teen.
10. "Dragon Ball Z: Budokai 3," PlayStation 2, Teen.



# BATTLE ROYAL



## SMART WAR SIM 'KINGDOM UNDER FIRE' PUTS YOUR LEADERSHIP TO THE TEST IN A SERIES OF MEDIEVAL MELEES



**JIM SCHAEFER**  
FREE PRESS  
GAME MASTER

Sometimes smacking a guy upside the melon with a 50-pound war hammer gets old. There are many games that offer such shallow and short-term titillation. But I've found one smart enough to go beyond the gratuitous violence.

"Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders" is a thinking gamer's war game. It keeps you coming back to discover your potential as a battlefield general, to learn how

The melee attacks are easy — one button to fight, with some simple button combinations for special attacks. The battles are chaotic and compelling as you and various allies plow through hordes of oncoming enemies.

You can pull the left trigger to switch to your other units. Is the enemy overwhelming you? Position a group of archers nearby to send in a helpful aerial attack. Is another foe advancing from the north on horseback? Send in your spearmen to take out the cavalry with sharp wooden poles.

This can get complicated. Fortunately, the game starts you out with just a bit of responsibility, then ratchets it up as you succeed. Helpful video tutorials appear with each new type of troop unit, and there are upgrades available.

You often work with other generals controlled by the computer. Your role might be to cover their troops, use your sapper units to disarm battlefield booby traps, or destroy a dam to drown the enemy in a wall of water. This requires timing and clear thinking.

The learning curve is significant. Directing troops is tough because the world is large. You must master a mini-map, which conveniently pops up with a pull of the left trigger and helps you direct troops more accurately.

The game is highly developed, but a few areas seem cheap. The soundtrack of generic heavy metal guitars was out of place. And despite some fine video cut scenes during battles, the plot moves in strange little text bubbles and some amateurish voice acting when you are resting at a base.

But the smart gamer will know "Kingdom Under Fire" is worth it anyway. You don't need a knock in the head to realize this.

Contact JIM SCHAEFER at 313-223-5995 or games@freepress.com.

mighty your army can become, to see how divine your eventual fate can be.

Rest assured, this game delivers the action through fantastic, in-your-face battlefield combat, but it also requires you to think before you slaughter.

The setting is a medieval-type world called Bersia. After two hellish wars, the kingdom is at peace. But the Dark Legion is rising and the good forces of His Majesty are preparing for new war.

You can join either side as a hero, which requires you then to lead a growing number of troops into battle. You start out heading a small group of infantrymen. Your troops can eventually grow to 1,000 soldiers — think "Lord of the Rings" and the battle for Isengard.

As your troops run into battle, the game switches to a close-up of your hero and a couple dozen other soldiers in hand-to-hand combat. Though the battle may be large, you simply control your one guy.



"Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders"

Price: \$49.99  
Players: 1-2 or online  
Web site: www.kufo.com  
Format: Xbox  
Category: Team combat/role-playing  
Rating: M (Mature)

## RECENT RELEASES



**"RATCHET & CLANK: UP YOUR ARSENAL"**  
★★★★  
Sony Computer Entertainment America for PlayStation 2, \$39.99. Rating: T (Teen).

"Ratchet & Clank" is one of many so-called platforming games — games that require coordination to run, jump, do athletic moves and fight to get to an objective — that gets an annual update. For many games, each new vintage is just a repackaged version of last year's levels.

Not so with this sterling title. "Up Your Arsenal" is definitely the best in the "Ratchet" series so far — and that's saying something, because the earlier games were excellent.

You control Ratchet, a rodent-like cat creature, and his little mechanical buddy Clank, as they attempt to battle the forces of evil. Both are well-drawn, as are the colorful environments they fight in. The incredible detail in the environments, including hundreds of animated goodies that are just there to provide ambiance, makes the game truly fun to play.

The action is silky-smooth, and the variety of weapons — something the series is known for, as well as a terrific sense of humor — makes every encounter seem new.

Something that I really appreciate is the level design. You never get stuck into a corner with nowhere to go, or feel like you're being led by the nose down a particular closed-in path. Enemies are grouped and distributed in interesting ways, and there are multiple tactics you can use to get by them.

The most exciting feature of the new game is the online play. For the first time, you can take Ratchet and Clank online, playing a variety of modes against other people using the PS2 Network Adapter. The online game play is just as smooth and fast-moving as the offline versions, and the wacky variety of weapons — turn your enemy into a sheep! — makes it a heap of fun.

"Up Your Arsenal" isn't perfect: The story drags for the first level or two, and the good weapons can be slow in coming. But it's a solid buy for just about any age group, a true rarity in console games.

By Heather Newman, Detroit Free Press



**"NEO CONTRA"**  
★★  
Konami for PlayStation 2, \$39.99. Rating: M (Mature).

Back in the early Nintendo days of 1987, Konami unleashed the classic thumb-bruising shooter "Contra." It didn't make much sense, but it was fun. "Neo Contra" repackages the formula with modern overtones — yet nostalgia can carry it only so far.

The cursory, teaspoon-deep plot: It's 4444 A.D. Earth, wrecked by environmental destruction, has become an anarchist prison colony. Neo Contra, a military gang that ruthlessly keeps the order on Earth, has soiled the good name of the original Contra. To stop Neo Contra, the Federation Congress resurrects the legendary Contra warrior Bill Rizer from his cryogenic sleep. Joining forces with Rizer is Jaguar, a warrior who follows the samurai code.

Whatever. Give me a gun and something to blast. And plenty to blast you'll get. Game play is simple: Shoot everything that moves with your infinite supply of ammo.

Your mission starts off with an overhead view of the action, but your perspective changes frequently. One moment, you'll plummet down a shaft while shooting at enemies. Another, you're riding some dinosaur-like critter and shooting at bikers and other motorized baddies.

The industrial wasteland graphics and generic rock music set an appropriate tone for this straightforward title. The controls, while not awful, are a bit too slow. Aiming can be a pain at times, and that'll cost you lives. For an action game, that's a sin.

For all of its action, however, "Neo Contra" just isn't that interesting. The movies between stages intended to advance the story are boring, and the sci-fi enemies come off as "Doom" rip-offs. Another beef: The original "Contra" was tough for two friends to finish and brutally hard if going solo. This incarnation is short and unchallenging.

If the "Contra" name invokes some strong memories, it's worth renting. Otherwise, it's another run-of-the-mill action game that belongs in the bargain bin.

By Omari Gardner, Detroit Free Press



**"ATV OFFROAD FURY 3"**  
★★★  
Sony Computer Entertainment America for PlayStation 2, \$36.95. Rating: E (Everyone).

It's not every day that a tune from funkmesiter Bootsie Collins gets stuck in your head after playing a video game. Credit "ATV Offroad Fury 3," a successful third installment to the series.

"Offroad Fury 3" has a great mix of racing tracks to plow through, complicated stunts to maneuver, and music to bounce to in the background. That diverse music selection, which includes tracks from Good Charlotte, Slipknot and Collins, balances out the roar of ATV engines.

If you haven't ventured into the "Offroad Fury" world in the previous two installments, don't worry. It's easy to figure out basic and intermediate skills in the training level. Most gamers will probably spend about an hour messing around with the basics and trying to get a handle on complicated stunts before going full-throttle in the racing circuit mode.

As for the aerial stunts, you'll be glued into trying to figure out how to score the most points, which will help you modify your ride and move up in the rankings. Sure, you can pull off a scorpion, where you arch your back in a scorpion's tail shape while in mid-air. But can you do that and a heel-clicker at the same time? The freestyle mode is for fooling around.

If tricks aren't your thing, don't worry. The tracks feature nice backgrounds with splendid graphics. I got distracted racing in a redwood forest because a low-flying airplane was coming in the background. During another race, this one in the desert, it was hard to tell what was the road and what was just background. Several times I looked like Wile E. Coyote falling into a ravine.

One gripe: If you're in last and have no desire to finish the race, there isn't an option for a quick restart. You either have to finish or go to one of the opening menus. Yuck.

Like most sports games today, online play is essential in keeping a game fresh. "Offroad Fury 3" allows up to six players. Yet another reason to come back for more.

That, and a tune by Bootsie. By Al Toby, Detroit Free Press