

Game On!

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GAME BITS
By Heather Newman



armored

'MechAssault 2' puts players into sensory overload



"MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf"

★★★
Price: \$49.99
Players: 1-2 or up to 12 online
Web site: www.mechassault2.com
Format: Xbox
Category: Action shooter
Rating: T (Teen)



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS
GAME MASTER

If there's any Xbox title that has pimply-faced boys sniffing around it, it's "MechAssault," a screaming, cursing, testosterone-soaked attack on your eyeballs and ears. Well, players, if you thought

the robot battles in the original heated up your Xbox, the sequel — "MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf" — will push you into overload. You already know there are explosions and lightning bolts, falling buildings and the whump, whump of missiles. But now you can jump out of your 'mech (short for BattleMech, a hulking armored robot with a pilot inside) for all sorts of high jinks. Get ready for a bunch of new abilities, weapons and machines. There are 10 options for online games in the style of deathmatch and capture the flag, and this is where all the new toys and abilities really change the game. No longer are you stuck with one pre-chosen robot. Now you can run around planting bombs underneath those giants, mindful of the real risk of ending up flatter than momma's pancakes. Or — and this is lots of fun — you can climb up the back of an enemy 'mech and kick the pilot out. Yes, they've taken the game beyond the robots. There are tanks that go invisible, gun turrets to employ and, of course, lots of 'mechs from which to choose. Everyone seems to have a favorite, though a trusty old Atlas fully armed for an Alpha Strike is still among the most feared. Did I mention the new Battle Armor? You can eschew a 'mech for this suit of steel, equipped with jets that send you soaring



around the map. You're tiny but lethal, and you can hitch rides on bigger allies. You can also fly a VTOL (vertical takeoff and landing vehicle), delivering power-ups to your friends and bombing the enemy. Offline, there's a story mode that helps you tune up for the more frenzied online games. But the game doesn't really shine here, with video clips that are just acceptable. The sound effects of destruction and chaos are effective, but the driving guitar soundtrack is mostly generic and forgettable. Of bigger concern is the online service on Xbox Live. The games are great when you can get in, but server problems and general nastiness of the online crowd (some pre-pubescent punk upbraided me in a profane tirade the other night) will repel some folks. The online lobby, where pilots gather before a game starts, also is a head-scratcher. Several times, players were more content to wave at each other, run in circles and trash-talk. One time, in exasperation, I asked the crowd if we were ever going to play a game. I learned they'd rather chat. Still, "MechAssault 2" adds a bunch of energy to a game that was already nuts. If you can stand the heat inside this very warm kitchen, be content that the game now has the sink, too.

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Verdict pays big money for patent infringement

Every time your game makes your PlayStation 2 controller buzz, you're now supporting Microsoft. It sounds funny, but a lawsuit verdict upheld by a California judge last week makes Sony responsible for about \$27 million a year in payments to Immersion Corp., which sued the gaming giant in 2002 claiming that the Dual Shock controllers' vibration feedback and the games that used it violated its patents. A jury ruled in favor of the company in September, and a judge upheld that verdict. The company must pay Immersion a percentage of the profits on sales of PS2s and games that use the technology. But here's where it gets weird. Immersion also sued Microsoft based on the vibration feedback in the Xbox controller. Microsoft chose to settle instead, paying \$26 million for royalties and a share in the ownership of Immersion plus another \$9 million to buy the ability to buy more of the company in the future. As a result, the Redmond, Wash., behemoth now owns about 10 percent of Immersion's outstanding stock — and now has 27 million reasons to laugh.

We're not couch potatoes

In its continuing efforts to prove once and for all that adult video gamers are not reclusive, geeky societal rejects (and, hey, we aren't, right?), the Entertainment Software Association released last week the results from a Peter D. Hart Research Associates survey. It shows we do things like exercise, volunteer and even attend religious services — no doubt to receive absolution for laughing so hard at some of the violent jokes in "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas." In fact, according to the ESA, gamers spend three times the amount of time exercising or playing sports, volunteering in the community, reading or engaging in religious, creative, and cultural activities than they do playing video games. The study was based on a national survey of 800 adults taken in September. What's interesting is that the more time people spend gaming, the more time they also spend doing constructive activities, which points to some proof in the old adage that, if you want to get something done, you choose a busy person. Your average adult gamer spends about seven hours a week playing and 23½ hours each week on those other activities, the study found. "Avid" gamers, those who play 11 hours a week or more, spend about 34½ hours on the other activities. Of course, it could be that avid gamers don't sleep as much, making more time for other things or that they feel guilty for all their time in front of the television and exaggerate what else they do. The study also found gamers are much more active than previously thought. About 80 percent of those who play also report working out or playing sports, on average, 20 hours a month. One last fun finding: 93 percent of gamers read books or daily newspapers. And we at the Free Press love you for it.

The handheld race is on

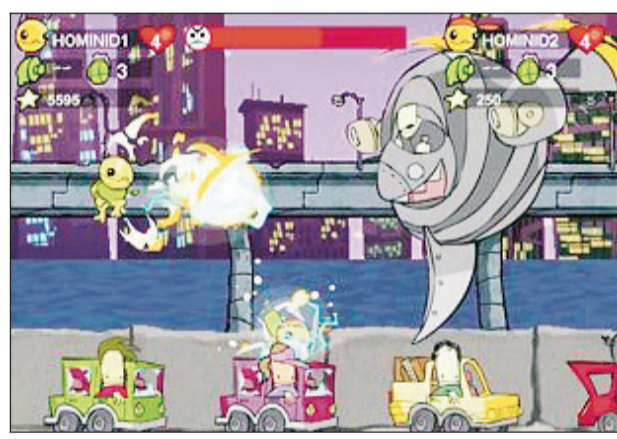
The buzz for Sony's PlayStation Portable handheld gaming device continues to build in the wake of its successful cotillion at the Consumer Electronics Show this month. Software giant Electronic Arts announced its lineup for the new platform, which will include games in the "Need for Speed," "FIFA Soccer" and "MVP Baseball" lines. And Rockstar Games announced that both "Grand Theft Auto" and "Midnight Club 3" will head to Sony's small screen. That hasn't dampened the celebration at Nintendo headquarters, as sales of its dual-screen handheld Nintendo DS continue to be strong here and abroad. In fact, Media Create lists sales of the DS as overpowering the PSP for the week ending Jan. 2 in Japan, where both units are already on sale. The PSP comes to America this spring. But the difference in sales — the DS sold about 210,000, the PSP about 130,000 — was attributed in part to Sony shipping fewer units, which sold out quickly.

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Electronic Arts' "Need for Speed Underground: Rivals" for the Sony PSP

RECENT RELEASES



"ALIEN HOMINID"

★★★ Entertainment for PlayStation 2 (also available for GameCube), \$29.99. Rating: T (Teen). A couple of years ago, www.newgrounds.com created a fun Macromedia Flash game titled "Alien Hominid." Six million downloads later, it's one of the site's most popular games. Its creators decided to thoroughly rework it for the console format, and the result is one of the most wonderfully conceived action games in a long time. A little fellow is joyriding above Earth in his UFO, setting off the FBI's surveillance equipment. The agency shoots the ship down, absconds with it and then returns to capture the alien. The alien, a bit peeved, grabs his gun and jumps into 16 levels of nonstop action in a quest to get his ship back. The alien's primary weapon is an energy pistol, but he has other tricks up his sleeve. The alien can go underground and pull enemies down, hop in vehicles and wreak havoc or — my favorite — jump on enemies' backs and bite their heads clean off, accompanied by a cartoonish chomping sound effect. "Alien Hominid" is just oozing with style. The characters and backgrounds are drawn crudely but animated and colored beautifully, a combination that one has to see to believe. Add a rockin' soundtrack, humorous moments and imaginative mini bosses and main bosses, and you have a winner. That doesn't mean the execution is flawless. First and foremost, it's way too easy to get killed. With all of the explosions and background scenery, it's hard to see the enemies' teeny tiny bullets. Also, it's frustrating to die and respawn into a bad spot, to get killed again almost immediately. You do get a ton of lives, making completing the game possible if you go in guns blazing with little regard for your safety. But I'd rather have fewer lives in exchange for more strategic game-play. Flaws aside, "Alien Hominid" is an incredibly fun action game, either playing solo or with a friend. And, once you've played through it, there are plenty of mini-games to keep you occupied. Even though it's a bit short, for \$30 it's an outright steal. By **Omar Gardner**, Detroit Free Press



"GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT"

★★★ Electronic Arts for PlayStation 2 (also for GameCube and Xbox), \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen). When you think James Bond, you think smooth, cool and stealth. Yet this latest game featuring Ian Fleming's world of espionage is anything but. It's a straight-up shoot-'em-up affair that should entertain gamers, especially the ones who primarily play online. You play a rogue agent unfit for Her Majesty's Secret Service. Your reckless behavior gets you the boot from MI-6 bigwig M. What to do? Play a bad guy and get thrown into a war between Bond villains Auric Goldfinger and Dr. No. It's no mystery whose side you're on, because Dr. No injured your eye and Goldfinger helped replace it with a bionic one. "Rogue Agent" is played from an unspectacular first-person view in a bland and redundant background. But the variety of weaponry makes up for these flaws. You can go light with a hand-held shotgun or heavy with an antiaircraft machine gun. Each gun has a distinct sound and feel to it. This gets magnified when using weapons in each hand. You also have your bionic eye, which gives gamers the ability to see through walls, create a force field, tamper with weapons and injure enemies with telekinetic powers. The strength of "Rogue Agent" is its online and multiplayer play. You can fight or team up with seven other gamers. I got overwhelmed in my first battles, but that was mainly because the fight took place in a tight board. Pick a sprawling setting when you're first venturing out. There are a couple of shortcomings in going online. Two players using the same console can't fight together. I also ran into problems picking a code name. Agent "T-Money" was deemed too vulgar, much to my surprise. My other picks were already taken. After about 15 minutes of searching for a name, I settled with "Soixante," the French word for 60. That name didn't strike fear into my opponents' hearts, but it got me into a world I'll be sticking around in for a while. By **Al Toby**, Detroit Free Press



"MC GROOVZ DANCE CRAZE"

★★★ MadCatz for GameCube, \$49.99 (additional Beat Pads sold separately for \$29.99). Rating: E (Everyone). My sisters call this a GameCube version of "Dance Dance Revolution," a game for PS2 and Xbox. Yes, my sisters also enjoyed rocking on the Beat Pad and helped me write this review. This game has no plot: it's just fun dancing, in your socks or barefoot, to the song of your choice. You plug in a wired pad that's about one square yard. The pad, which takes the place of the controller, has a rubberized bottom to prevent slippage. You choose a song you want to dance to and pick the level of difficulty: easy, moderate or expert. On Easy there are only four spots you need to step on, but on Moderate and Expert there are eight. Once the music starts, arrows appear on the television screen at different points and move into various slots. You are supposed to step on the arrow on the pad that matches the arrow on the television at the exact same time it fits into the slot. If you do it right, you look like you're dancing. Some arrows tell you to do different things. For example, lime-green arrows mean you have to hit two different arrows at the same time, which means you have to jump and land with both feet in the right places. The system gives you points depending on how accurately you step on the arrows. The normal mode is called Just Dance, for one player. There are two multiplayer modes: Dance Together and Dance Face-off. Another option is Workout Mode: You pick a song and instead of going for a high score, you try to burn calories, which the game estimates for you. One thing I didn't like is the song selection. If they had rated the game Teen instead of Everyone, they might have picked better songs. In total, there are 28 songs to choose from. Overall, the things I liked about the game overwhelmed what I didn't like. If you want a high score, you can't be a stiff. You have to get into the groove and use your whole body. By **Craig Campbell**, TI, for the Detroit Free Press

NEW THIS WEEK

- Most-ordered games going on sale this week at Amazon.com, including title, platform and ESRB rating:
1. "The Punisher," PlayStation 2. Mature.
 2. "The Punisher," Windows. Mature.
 3. "Garry Kasparov Teaches Chess, Vol. 1," Windows. Everyone.
 4. "Cabela's Dangerous Hunts" (jewel case edition), Windows. Teen.
- Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store