

# Game On!

## Phone games may be about to leap forward

The United States might finally dive seriously into the world of wireless phone gaming this year — and you could end up with a better phone and better games as a result.

Even though almost half of all U.S. gamers also play on their phones, this country is far behind Europe and south-east Asia — especially Korea — when it comes to how many people play and what's available.

But several wireless content publishers and analysts think that's about to change. Right now, there are about 35-45 million wireless devices capable of playing games in the United States. Ifone, an entertainment publisher for wireless phones, thinks that number could triple by the end of the year.

Investment analysts, too, are gearing up for a surge in wireless gaming. They think manufacturers have had enough practice in other markets developing games we might like to play and handsets that are both powerful enough to display them and simple enough to use.

Sometimes, being behind to start means you end up in front. Take South Korea, one of the biggest wireless markets in the world. It became the global leader in gaming and wireless phones it is today in part because traditional telephone service there didn't have the coverage it does in this country. So when wireless phones came along, people snapped them up in record numbers.

Now it's the United States that's behind the curve. Despite the fact that a lot of people use wireless phones, we didn't jump on them like some markets where they were the only way to talk. Europe, Japan and South Korea have all left us in the dust in terms of what's doable over wireless networks.

But because we've been so far behind, analysts now think we are the ones who can take a quantum leap to catch up. That means a lot more high-end handsets at reasonable prices, a lot more games to choose from and a lot more happy gamers on the road. Enjoy.

## Gates says new Xbox is near

The next generation Xbox will definitely hit stores before the year's end.

Microsoft's Bill Gates told the Society of American Business Editors and Writers this week that the next 'box — which most industry insiders expect to be called the Xbox 360 — will hit this year and include even more high-definition video than the current Xbox.

Gates said Microsoft is optimistic it can surpass Sony's PlayStation juggernaut in the marketplace this time around.



Activision

The movie will be based on "Doom 3."

## "Doom" movie will star the Rock

Are you smelling what the Rock is, um, shooting?

Universal is putting out a movie based on id's "Doom" video game series, and they've confirmed that Dwayne Johnson, a.k.a. the Rock, will star as one of the marines sent to save a planet from an alien invasion.

The plot is mostly centered around "Doom 3," and those who have played the PC and console game know that this means there will be plenty of swearing, much blood, fast-jumping aliens and not a lot of character development. However, in an in-joke to watch for, one of the characters has been named after id Software lead programmer John Carmack.

It'll hit theaters in October.

## From console to concert hall

You knew it was only a matter of time, after how successful the "Final Fantasy" orchestra concerts have been, before the next event popped up.

It's here. "Video Games Live" starts a national tour July 6 in Hollywood and includes several orchestras, choirs, video game footage, lasers, lights and live action. It's produced in part by the heavyweights at Clear Channel Music Group, so expect lots of ads when it gets close.

Just when the tour stops here — or anywhere other than Hollywood — hasn't yet been announced. Keep an eye on [www.videogameslive.com](http://www.videogameslive.com).

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## MINI-GAMES, BEAUTIFUL VISUALS AND A MYSTERIOUS STORYLINE MAKE 'JADE EMPIRE' SUPERB



JIM SCHAEFER  
FREE PRESS GAME MASTER

So there I was, recuperating after another martial arts brawl in the beautiful worlds of "Jade Empire," and I'm thinking, "Hey, this is a pretty darned good game."

And then it threw me — in a fantastic way. Right in the middle of this combat, role-playing game, I found myself in a defeated foe's aircraft battling a bunch of swirling, twirling enemy planes like the space ships in that old arcade game "Galaga." I shot most of them down.

Then, as seamlessly as it had changed, "Jade Empire" switched back to its original style.

Now that is the kind of innovation I love. Mini-games like this are one of the many superb touches in "Jade Empire," a broad and deep role-playing game for the Xbox.

You pick your lead character based on speed, magic, power or a balance of the three. You are given some rudimentary skills, then the game builds around you.

I chose Furious Ming, a speedy but not overpowering fighter, who makes up for less than brute strength with speed. Ming is an orphan from a conquered race of people. In the game's beginning, he is training under a martial arts expert who holds deep secrets to Ming's past and future. So begins a quest to avenge Ming's people and soothe the restless dead.

As in many classic role-playing games, you can level up your strength and abilities through experience points, but you also can make leaps by earning new fighting styles.

This is more than just finding new weapons. I added the ability to wield fire (choosing it over ice) and a monstrous sword.

Sometimes if you kill an enemy you take on not only its skills but its shape. If you beat the toad demon, for instance, you can then transform into this hulking creature and swipe enemies aside with its clawed flippers. Enemies can be vulnerable or immune to different attacks, which causes you to often evaluate your styles. And I love that you can change the difficulty even in the middle of missions. Whew!

You meet people along the way who will join you as followers. They can support you in battles or jump right into the brawls, helping you defeat multiple enemies. Or you can send them on side missions adapted to their skills.

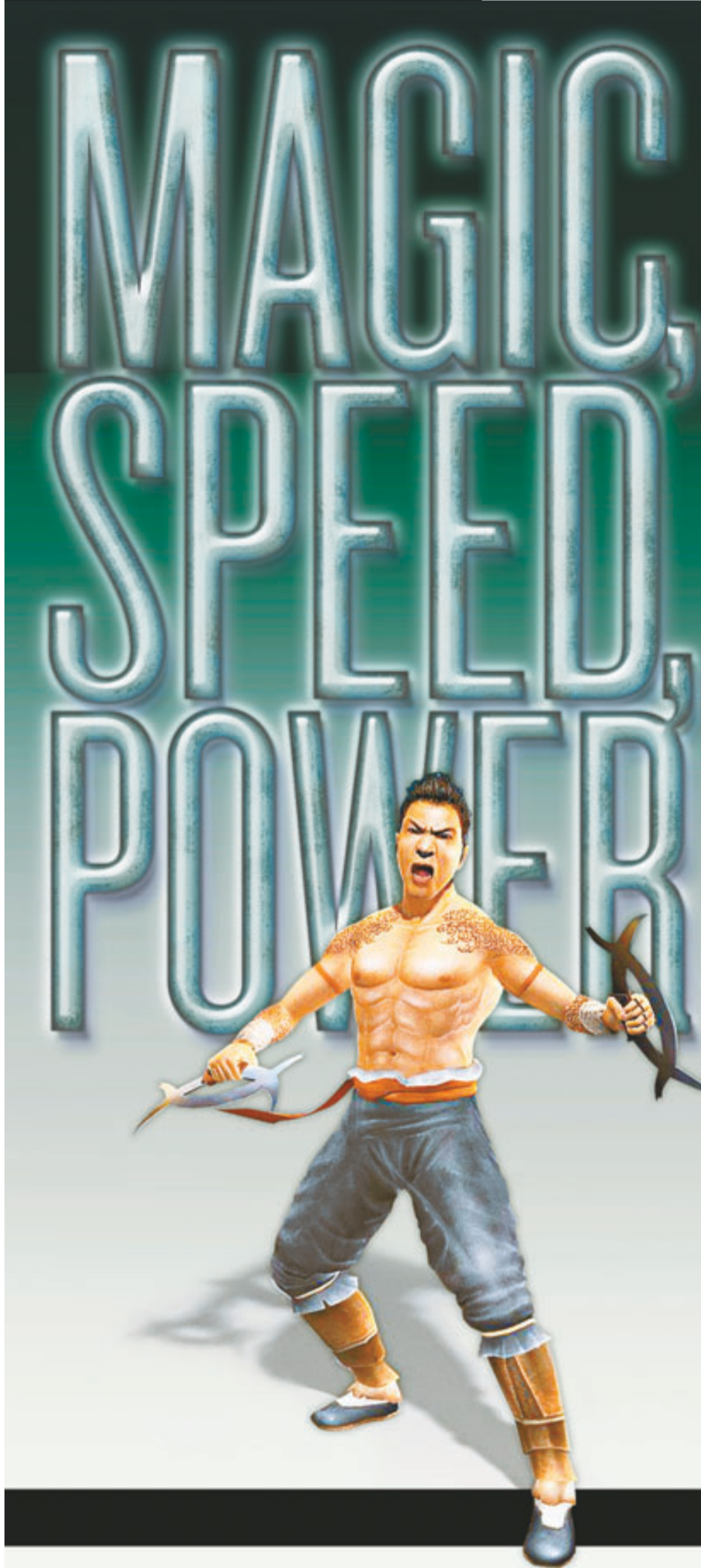
Yet "Jade Empire" is not all fighting. You learn pieces of the mysterious, well-crafted story as you go, overhearing talk from passers-by, drawing information from people in layered conversations and through extensive cinematic clips.

There seemed to be lots of waiting while scenes loaded in the game, but I didn't really mind. The graphics are solid, giving life and color to the three-dimensional world. The channeled path doesn't permit much wandering, but I didn't really care about that, either. "Jade Empire" is too big, with too many options, to worry about the little stuff.

Contact JIM SCHAEFER at 313-222-5995 or [games@freepress.com](mailto:games@freepress.com).



"JADE EMPIRE"  
★★★★  
out of four  
Price: \$49.99  
Players: 1  
Web site: <http://jade.bioware.com>  
Format: Xbox  
Category: Role-playing  
Rating: M (Mature)



## RECENT RELEASES



"PSYCHONAUTS"  
★★★  
Majesco for Xbox, \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).  
"Psychonauts" is a trip — a brain-bending trip to la-la land, that is. It's also a fresh, creatively designed adventure packed with plenty of jumping, collecting and psi-blasting.

The oval-headed Razputin, the game's goggle-wearing boy protagonist who bolted from his life at the circus, sneaks into a freak-filled summer camp for the mentally gifted in hopes of being trained to become a psychonaut, a sort of mental beat cop.

It's not long before Raz is jumping from one mind to another, gathering fragments of imagination, uncovering locked-away memories, cleaning out mental cobwebs and — get this — lugging away emotional baggage. Seriously, I couldn't make this stuff up: It's really that zany.

There's even an old psychic sage lingering in his mind whom our eager camper can summon for advice with — no joke — a piece of bacon that he carries around in his backpack.

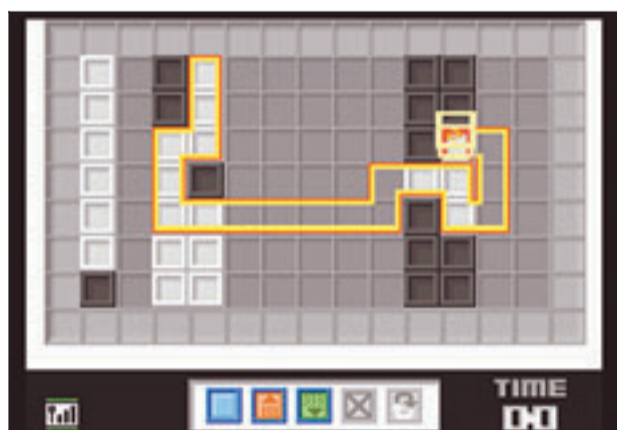
The mindscapes are also bizarre and wildly diverse, ranging from a pitfall-filled war zone to a tightly organized cube that suddenly bursts open and spews out foes eager to erase all memory of your existence. The over-the-top colorful scenery dances fancifully like a Tim Burton movie viewed through a kaleidoscope.

As he sharpens his mind at camp, Raz earns merit badges that give our crazy cadet more psychic powers. In no time, he'll even be using his mind to torch foes and to turn invisible.

Imaginative as the presentation and supernatural powers are, the basic game play does feel a bit familiar — but in a good way. If you've played any other pitfall-jumping, collect-the-goodies style game (think the recent "Super Mario" games), you'll be able to quickly hop about inside others' brains without even opening the instruction booklet.

With its mind-jumping mayhem, "Psychonauts" is definitely a breath of fresh air. It is crazy, though. Crazy good.

By Ryan Huschka, Detroit Free Press



"POLARIUM"  
★★★  
Mitchell for Nintendo DS, \$29.99. Rating: E (Everyone).  
This game is not for everybody. For me, it was just like learning how to play a game such as checkers. For those of you who are stylus-challenged — my dad, for example — I would not recommend it. It is all work with the sweeping stylus movement (it's more like writing cursive than hitting a button) and requires a lot of dexterity. It's confusing at first, but it gets easier as you gain experience.

"Polarium" has two basic single-player modes, Puzzles and Challenge. There are black and white tiles randomly set up in a four-sided figure in every puzzle and challenge. You highlight the tiles you want with the stylus. When you finish, all of the black tiles you've selected go to white and vice versa. What you try to do is get horizontal lines of one color. When this happens, the line disappears.

In the Puzzles mode, you try to clear the entire figure in one sweep of the stylus. If you succeed, you can keep the puzzle. For every set of 10 puzzles you earn, you get to take a stab at the next 10. There are 100 puzzles in all. Their difficulty increases as you go up the line.

Challenge mode is similar to "Tetris." Many sets of tiles fall from the top screen into the bottom screen. The faster you clear the lines, the faster the sets fall.

One feature that I really like is that you get to create custom puzzles. There is a feature that allows you to create the size of the overall puzzle and the positions of all the tiles. The puzzles you make have to be solvable — you have to beat them before you're allowed to save them. You also can trade them with other Polarium users via wireless link.

There is also a mode called "Versus," in which you and a friend play each other. You have to clear lines and use power-ups to fill your opponent's screen with pandemonium.

If you like solitaire, "Tetris" and puzzle games, this is for you.

By Craig Campbell, 12, for the Detroit Free Press



"SPY VS. SPY"  
★★  
Global Star for Xbox, \$19.99. Rating: T (Teen).  
What's not to love about "Spy vs. Spy"? The Mad magazine comic has been around for decades, pitting the white-robed spy versus the black-robed spy in a global game of intrigue and Rube Goldberg-esque traps, weapons and ways to die. But they never really die, of course, and that — plus the innovation of the strips in the weapons and tactics used — were what made it fun to read.

This game attempts to capture that humor in interactive form, but with mixed results. The single-player game feels like an easy, tacked-on-at-the-last-minute addition, and the multiplayer game is fun but limited. This is a bargain title, and it shows.

First, the focus of this game is definitely on the multiplayer component via Xbox Live, so if you don't play online, don't bother. The single-player missions, in which you try to steal things and plant traps and take out opponent 'droids, are far too easy to complete, and the gameplay seems short.

The weapons are fun, ranging from your average bazooka to a chainsaw, though less creative than in other recent titles. The graphics are fairly crude by today's Xbox standards, but the sound effects are spot-on for evoking the feel of the comic.

The multiplayer option consists of several modes that require you to obtain items and set traps to prevent your opponents from getting those same items. The maps you play on are fairly small, and with four players, you're going to be tripping over each other often, but that's part of the entertainment.

There are simple multiplayer modes as well as in all of them you can use hand-to-hand combat or a variety of weapons.

The variety of traps is nice, and until the novelty of blowing your opponent up with an electrocuting doorknob wears off, the online game is a lot of fun. Once that's over, though, you realize that "Spy vs. Spy" just doesn't have the depth of bigger-budget titles, and it doesn't quite have enough of the kitschy appeal of the comic to overcome those limitations.

By Heather Newman, Detroit Free Press

## NEW THIS WEEK

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

1. "Smart Bomb," PlayStation Portable. Everyone.
2. "Need for Speed: Underground 2," Nintendo DS. Everyone.
3. "Donkey Konga 2," GameCube. Everyone.
4. "Haunting Ground," PlayStation 2. Mature.
5. "Cold Winter," PlayStation 2. Mature.
6. "Metal Slug 4 & 5," PlayStation 2. Teen.

Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store