



By Heather Newman

Sony plans 2004 attack on the Game Boy Advance

Take a gander at the new Sony handheld game device hitting the streets for holiday 2004 — it's likely to be on the wish list of someone you know. Personally, I think it looks like a slightly bulky cross between a Game Boy and a next-gen wireless phone, but they didn't consult with me.

Nintendo's handheld Game Boy Advance outsells all consoles combined. Given Sony's marketing might and the strength of the PS2's market share, the PSP (PlayStation Portable) will be the hottest holiday gift in a long time.

Sony says it will have the ability to wirelessly communicate with other PSPs, for cable-free head-to-head gaming. It'll use Sony's new Universal Media Discs, play digital music and video, and eventually have more real communications abilities, according to hints from a recent public Sony strategy session.

Guess it's not a coincidence that it looks like a phone. The best part: that sweet 4.5-inch wide-screen display.



Sony's 2004 handheld game unit will be called PSP, for PlayStation Portable.

You go, girls

Ever wonder what it takes to get into the video game biz? Lesley Matheison of Insomniac Games has one of the best jobs in the industry: game designer for "Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando," the bop-shoot-hop-and-run sequel to the first best-seller.

The good news, she says: You really do have an excuse to hone your skills taking out enemies on small, spherical worlds.

Folks who want to get on the game design track should start by being a game tester, which is pretty much the entry level position.

Qualifications? You have to play a lot of games, be willing to sit through painstaking hours of extensive tests, have an eye for details and be able to write well.

Matheison took that route after working in films. Now she helps design levels, placing enemies and deciding how they behave, and puts together other parts of what you play. In "R&C," keep an eye on many of the vehicles, the space combat and the hoverbike races. They're hers.

Matheison encourages girls to get into the game. She's one of just a few women in development in an 80-person company, which is a depressingly common statistic. And hurry up, y'all; I'd like to see scantily clad men in these games someday.

BETTER PLAY

Crimson Skies

We've had a hard time peeling Game Master Jim Schaefer off this Xbox title, and I can't blame him. Its addictive combination of beautiful, lifelike single-player missions and the thrill of dogfighting online make it a game worth returning to often. Here are a couple of tips to get you started:

- In single-player mode, be sure to explore all parts of the landscape, including all the side missions; upgrade tokens are sometimes well-hidden and can boost your plane's abilities when you collect enough.
- Online, choose the Piranha if your aim stinks. Its secondary electrical surge weapon will follow your enemies to some degree, and requires little accuracy. If your game host won't allow a Piranha, take a Devastator with its mildly magnetic secondary missiles.
- Use your brakes. I'm used to gunning ahead in other games, on the theory that fast-moving targets are harder to hit. But in the sky, braking makes you turn on a dime, and that's tough to keep up with — especially in combination with the special moves that flip you on a moment's notice.

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NEW THIS WEEK

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

1. "Final Fantasy X-2," PlayStation 2, Teen
2. "Mario Kart: Double Dash!!" GameCube, Everyone
3. "Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic," Windows, Teen
4. "Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga," Game Boy Advance, Everyone
5. "Need for Speed Underground," PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, Windows, Everyone
6. "Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy," Xbox, Teen
7. "XIII," PlayStation 2, Xbox, Windows, Teen
8. "Warhammer 40K Fire Warrior," PlayStation 2, Windows, Mature
9. "NCAA March Madness 2004," PlayStation 2, Xbox, Everyone
10. "Ultimate Card Games," Game Boy Advance, Everyone

Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT



MIDDLE EARTH HAS A WINNER IN 'RETURN OF THE KING'



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS
GAME MASTER

Open your arms wide and give a big ol' bear hug to the new "Lord of the Rings" video game. "The Return of the King" is a grand game — in size, quality and ambition.

This is as it should be. The boundless imagination of author J.R.R. Tolkien, who fashioned his thoughts on Middle Earth, lionhearted hobbits and rancid darkness into classic literature, demands nothing less.

I'm happy that the makers of "The Return of the King" acknowledged that this game should shoot for too much, rather than too little. The result is a monumentally gorgeous, if flawed, video game.

"The Return of the King" is basically a movie with action scenes you play. You see long video clips from the "Rings" films, with the stars morphing into playable characters at climactic moments.

Curiously, the game backtracks at its beginning, reliving events from "The Two Towers" rather than marching straight on for the climax at Mordor. Later on, the game delivers footage and battles from the new film, scheduled to hit theaters in mid-December.

You must first earn victories in places like Isengard, where you benefit from the roused spirits of the Ents, giant tree creatures who

help you attack and bring down the traitor Saruman.

There are nine playable characters. Each has his own upgradeable abilities: Aragorn is mighty with his sword, Gandalf fires blue blazes from his staff, Sam whacks away just enough with his small blade to protect Frodo as they move through the shadows.

The hobbits, Gandalf and Aragorn follow separate paths in the game, and you must complete all three to win. You and a friend can play cooperatively on one machine, or online with a PlayStation 2 that has a broadband connection. Where so many other games offer just online death matches, this team play is mighty refreshing.

The fighting is third person, and cooperative play adds an unintended challenge: If your teammate moves too far away, you may find yourself stuck until he returns. Of course, by then you might be dead.

Sometimes the viewpoint camera zooms far out to give you a wide view of the action. In some levels, shadows and mist also swirl over everything. All of this, while stunning, can be problematic. I had a hard time seeing my character in the scrum, and I found myself whacking away with futility.

The benefit is that you see some of the largest, most energetic battles around, backed by a dramatic score and shivering sound effects. I ultimately decided that the tradeoff — and this game — are worthwhile.

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



'Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King'

★★★
out of four
Price: \$49.95
Players: 1-2 or online (PlayStation 2 only)
Web site: www.eagames.com/official/lordoftherings/returnoftheking/ushome.jsp
Format: PlayStation 2 (also available for Xbox, GameCube, Game Boy Advance, Windows)
Category: Action/adventure
Rating: T (teen)

RECENT RELEASES



"TONY HAWK'S UNDERGROUND"

★★★★
Activation for PlayStation 2 (also for Xbox, GameCube and Game Boy Advance), \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).
"Tony Hawk's Underground" features more than a dozen big-name pro skaters. But, this time, I'm the real star.

I'm an up-and-coming skate punk from a bad New Jersey neighborhood. As my quest to become big-time unfolds, I find myself trying to impress the influential locals, tussling with drug dealers and rubbing elbows with skateboarding legends, all while trying to earn some dinero to fuel my career.

The cohesive, sweeping story mode is only the tip of the iceberg; customizable options make the game infinitely replayable.

The best of the features is the ability to put your own mug on your skater. You shoot a digital picture of yourself, e-mail it to an address found in the game, and in seconds they send you a code so you can download your face. After trying a handful of different faces, I have to admit it's very cool.

You can create just about anything you can dream up. In-game editors allow you to make new tricks, build skate parks (complete with goals) and design your own decks.

The network adapter is virtually a must for this game, not only because you can play online in a handful of modes (king of the hill, capture the flag, graffiti battle and trick challenges), but you can share your creations. Everything you concoct can be uploaded, and you can download other punks' inventions, too.

Sure, there's some minor stuff I could whine about (online play doesn't use voice chat and is limited to the PS2, it plays a lot like the last game, the cars control poorly), but why bother? "Underground" looks like the bomb, grinds to a hip soundtrack (with an insanely diverse crop of pop, techno and rock) and controls like a dream. And it provides a wonderful experience that is as good as you make it.

By Ryan Huschka, Detroit Free Press



"KILL SWITCH"

★★★★
Namco for Xbox (also for PlayStation 2), \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).

It was obvious from the opening sequence that I had found my true inner shooter in "Kill Switch." Coworkers nag me in multiplayer matches of "Halo" because I'm so fond of finding hidden high ground and sniping away at them from a relatively safe perch.

"Kill Switch" was made for that kind of strategy. The core of this action-shooter is your ability to take cover behind almost any object — a wall, a column, a tipped-over table, a fence post — aim carefully, and duck out to take out the enemy with a single well-timed blast.

You don't even have to duck out if you don't want to. One of the niftiest innovations in the game is blind firing, where you can aim at enemies that you — as the player — can see but your in-game character couldn't. Your accuracy suffers terribly, but your chances of injury are nil.

Still, you can't go through the whole game that way, because ammo is in limited supply. In fact, you can't run through with guns blazing, period; there are too many bad guys.

The plot of the game, which has you running through a variety of enemy-filled gauntlets, is interesting and twisty, but could have been a lot more fun if it were fleshed out on screen in full-sized movies. As it is, it poses some interesting questions about war that I won't spoil here, but it leaves you even more frustrated with the short time you get to spend with the game.

And that's the game's main flaw: It's just too short. Namco estimates that it lasts 10-12 hours for gamers with average skill. Given how pretty the game is to watch — and how cool it is to play — I would have wished for the plot to be played out on screen more effectively and the game to be a lot longer.

There's no multiplayer option or other changes after you've finished the game, so there's not much to bring you back to it. "Kill Switch" is definitely worth a rental, and it's a fabulous game. It just needs a little more content.

By Heather Newman, Detroit Free Press



"STAR WARS ROGUE SQUADRON III: REBEL STRIKE"

★★★★
LucasArts for GameCube, \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).

"Rebel Strike," a sequel to one of the best GameCube launch titles, surpasses its predecessor when it comes to flying around in starfighters and blasting your way through waves of Imperial TIE fighters.

You again don the flight suits of Luke Skywalker and his buddy-wingman Wedge Antilles in the war against the Empire. Your rebellious duo will make their way through more than a dozen otherworldly locales, battling scores of enemies.

The game play is solid, the improved graphics are some of the best I've ever seen and the score — an orchestrated mix of John Williams' movie tunes with some "Star Wars"-inspired themes — is excellent.

All of that would have been more than enough for me. But there's more, good and bad.

First the bad: Our ace pilots occasionally have to battle on foot. And once they leave their starfighters, the game turns to mush. In theory, I love the idea of taking down the hulking walkers on foot or rescuing a scantily clad Princess Leia from the vile clutches of Jabba the Hutt. But the execution is so poor that these on-foot stages boil down to mashing on your buttons and hoping all of your enemies fall before you do.

Thankfully, "Rebel Strike" also has some solid additions. Our heroes will climb into scout walkers to help ewoks repel Imperial forces from the Endor forest, or hop on speeder bikes and race to rescue captured informants.

The developers also threw in a huge collection of two-player modes, including a diverse array of dogfights, tag and races. Some hidden goodies (like classic "Star Wars" arcade games) are included to sweeten the package.

The good outweighs the bad — but not by much. Hopefully, when LucasArts releases another inevitable sequel, it will keep our pilots where they belong — in the cockpit.

By Ryan Huschka, Detroit Free Press