



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS GAME MASTER

I said: "Check the bedroom."
She checked the bedroom.
I yelled: "Shoot head! Shoot tail!"
She shot a monster in the head and tail.
I said: "Leave the room."
She asked: "Do what with what?"
So "Lifeline" isn't perfect. But this PlayStation 2 game gets kudos for trying something new.

"Lifeline" is a voice-activated action-adventure. You do not use the regular controller for most of the game. That handicap adds an unexpected yet enticing feeling of unease, especially at moments of high tension and action.

You want to pull the trigger, but you have to tell someone else to do it.

You are the omnipotent puppeteer of a young woman named Rio, who is trapped inside a Japanese space hotel. Aliens are attacking the joint. You have to direct Rio as she searches for survivors, encounters enraged beasts and struggles with a mystery.

Man, is she helpless without you. You have to unlock doors, raise firewalls, tell her what to pick up and what to put down.

Using a map of the ship, you comb through rooms looking for clues and living humans. This sameness can grow monotonous, but the game spices things up with potential attacks around every corner.

You'll see a lot of monsters who aren't as fearsome as

**Bark orders
into your
headset
and Rio will
blast the
aliens away**

Shout out for action



An Old West gunslinger meets Dracula's minions

Sammy Studios has gone from being a niche Japanese developer with a quirky, fun, fighting series ("Guilty Gear") to being the largest shareholder in Sega and developing games on American soil. I caught up with Brent Disbrow, senior game designer on "Darkwatch," the company's first U.S. effort.

"Darkwatch" is a first-person shooter with a twist, due out for the holidays.

It combines two of the top trends this year in niche heroes: vampires (soon to be seen in titles like Activision's "Vampire: the Masquerade") and the Old West (hitting store shelves soon in Rockstar Games' "Red Dead Revolver").



"Darkwatch" lead character Jericho is half gunslinger, half vampire.

QUESTION: What's the plot?

ANSWER: Simply, Jericho Cross is a train robber who robs the wrong train. . . . When he blows the train's vault, he unleashes the Vampire Lord of the Undead who, in return, bites him. Descending into vampirism, Jericho joins the Darkwatch, a monster-hunting secret organization. His goal? Find and kill the Vampire Lord.

Q: How much vampire versus old-West gunslinger are we going to see?

A: Jericho has a suite of vampiric powers (vampire jumping ability, enhanced vision and a blood shield among others) and a Darkwatch arsenal. Maybe he is 50-50 in terms of vampire versus gunslinger.

Q: Why a vampire, why a Western?

A: Using the Western premise has been a lot of fun because it comes with pre-conceptions. Given the horror nature of our game, we can take cliched situations and turn them upside down, making them much more interesting, unique and fun. The Darkwatch is an ancient organization with vast scientific knowledge, and the weaponry they provide is very cool and modern but appropriate to the setting.

Strategy games go mobile

Games on handheld computers have rarely been more than casual fun.

But I'm encouraged by a slew of handheld games I've had the chance to play over the last few weeks. Mobile Digital Media (MDM) sent along a small pile of PalmOS/Pocket PC games that run off a Secure Digital/MultiMedia Card. You can safely skip anything that involves fast action: "Atari Retro" and "Sega Classics" soon become both frustrating and passe.

But it's surprising how well strategy and simulation games translate. MDM's "Game Essentials" pack includes a bunch of forgettable board games and one addictive classic: "SimCity," which is just lovely in this form.

So is MDM's "Age of Empires" (Pocket PC only) and Handmark's dual-platform "Warfare Incorporated," both of which should make bored strategy fans happy in long office meetings.

BETTER PLAY

Sonic Heroes

Reader Phil Poccia returns this week with tips for "Sonic Heroes." You can submit game play tips by e-mailing them to me with your name and town.

"Sonic Heroes is one of the fastest platform games of all time. Here are some tips to get you started."

"Though there are four teams of characters, each team has a character whose focus is on speed, flying or power."

"The best way to beat a boss is with team blast or the homing attack."

"If you are stuck in the game, it is usually because you have not switched to the proper character formation. Look for screens throughout a level that say which character should be the leader."

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NEW THIS WEEK

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

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|---|--|
| 1. "Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow," Xbox, Windows, Teen | 7. "Sacred," Windows, Teen |
| 2. "Syberia 2," Windows, Teen | 8. "All-Star Baseball 2005," Xbox, Everyone |
| 3. "Far Cry," Windows, Mature | 9. "Trivial Pursuit: Unhinged," Xbox, PlayStation 2, Everyone |
| 4. "Final Fantasy XI," PlayStation 2, Teen | 10. "Samurai Jack: The Shadow of Aku," PlayStation 2, GameCube, Teen |
| 5. "Counter-Strike: Condition Zero," Windows, Mature | |
| 6. "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation Dark Motives," | Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store |

they are icky. Many of them look like two-pound slugs. This and the game's bland appearance were disappointing. But the voice tool draws you in. Fortunately, your female ally can talk, too. Her advice is helpful as you grapple to verbalize moves and strategy that typically would require just a flip of a thumbstick.

The first attack was a doozy, energized by my panic as I fought the urge to grab the gun from m'lady and blast away. Instead, I scrambled to direct her shots — shoot head, tail, stomach! — at the creature's weak points, which were indicated, handily, at the bottom of the screen.

There's a problem that adds to the drama. Rio doesn't understand everything you say. "Do what with what?" is a repetitious remark from her that is a real problem during battle. You learn to make the game work by modifying your voice when necessary.

Rio allegedly can comprehend 5,000 words and 100,000 phrases — "Hop like a little stinking monkey" not being one of them. I mention this because you, too, at slow points will be tempted to stretch this new technology to its limits.

Alas, she responds on a limited scale, though she has some one-liners designed to drag you back on point.

If, for example, you proposition Rio, she'll snap back with "Let's figure a way out of here first, Casanova."

Once, after a particularly heated battle, I couldn't help myself.

"I love you," I told her.

"Can you at least try to be serious?" she responded.

Ouch.

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

RECENT RELEASES



"UNREAL II: THE AWAKENING"
★★
Atari for Xbox (slightly different version for PC), \$39.99. Rating: M (Mature)

"Unreal II" is a predictable trek of shooting fairly stupid alien enemies in single-player mode, and its online play isn't groundbreaking.

But that online mode has just enough potential that it may be worth a rental, especially for Xbox Live shooter fans starved for something better than "Unreal Championship" and unwilling to put in the teamwork for "Rainbow Six 3."

Offline, you're a space lawman in a backwater part of the galaxy, called in when a surprise alien invasion threatens humanity. The voice acting is reasonably good and the story makes sense, though you've danced to this tune before.

As single-player campaigns go, it's a bit short and a lot shallow. The graphics have been dumbed down from the PC version and look downright ugly compared to other recent releases. Xbox owners without a Live subscription should probably just go back and play through "Halo" again.

If you have access to Xbox Live, here's what you'll see if you rent "Unreal II": There's only one online mode, a tweaked capture-the-flag system, where your team and the opposition fight to control four artifacts on one of four maps. (Yes, one mode and four maps. This is why you're renting.)

What makes it interesting is all the other doodads you can control on screen: turrets and generators (to give your team the power to create new technology), doors, spawn points and other goodies (so they can't be easily used by others).

There are three classes of character: rangers, who are quick healers and carry a sniper rifle; techs, who can hack faster, heal teammates' shields and carry an assault rifle; and gunners, who can boost teammates' ammo and carry a rocket launcher. These matches are limited to 12 players (eight via system link). Lag times in the Xbox Live skirmishes vary widely depending on who's hosting, but are generally acceptable except in major melees.

By Heather Newman, Detroit Free Press



"METAL GEAR SOLID: THE TWIN SNAKES"
★★★★
Konami for GameCube, \$39.99. Rating: M (mature)

Don't be fooled by the title. "Twin Snakes" treads on familiar ground for "Metal Gear" fans, as it's an updated retelling of a 1998 classic.

Six years later, it's still an outstanding game, especially for GameCube owners who never played the original "Metal Gear Solid."

Gritty commando Solid Snake is thrust into a hostage situation at a nuclear arms facility in Alaska. Squaring off against an eclectic band of terrorists, Snake has been ordered to rescue imprisoned heads of state and stop a potential nuke launch. Or so he thinks.

The twists and turns of the suspenseful story may be the same, but the plot in "Twin Snakes" unfolds in new beautifully rendered cinemas. The in-game graphics have also received a significant makeover, making it just as stunning as the PlayStation 2 sequel, "Metal Gear Solid 2."

The stealthy game play has also been spruced up. The guards are smarter (if an incapacitated guard fails to report, they call in backup). Snake can hang from ledges, do somersaults or even switch to a first-person view at any time.

Most importantly, "Twin Snakes" clings to the simple, yet still revolutionary play techniques of the original. You'll have to look on the back of the game's case to solve one puzzle and move your controller to a different port on the 'Cube to solve another. And you'll marvel at the mind-reading abilities of one of the baddies. (He knows what you've been playing!)

Of course, the game retains the nits, too. Several of the cinemas are way too long (plan ahead before you start playing, as some top 30 minutes in length). And poor camera angles can occasionally obscure the action.

If you played the original, don't expect many surprises. But this "Metal Gear" exercise has aged very well and the game is still solid.

By Ryan Huschka, Detroit Free Press



"NINJA GAIDEN"
★★★★
Tecmo for Xbox, \$49.99. Rating: M (mature)

Ryu Hayabusa is a man on a mission. His village was torched, his clan massacred. Now he's out for blood. Dragons, demons, zombies, bats, military goons and — of course — ninjas stand between him and vengeance.

And despite many deaths you'll endure on your challenging quest to right this wrong, you'll keep coming back for more. Why? Because "Ninja Gaiden" is one of the most enjoyable games available for the Xbox and easily the best game I've played so far in 2004.

For starters, "Ninja Gaiden" is a visual masterpiece. All of the characters, from our leather-clad hero to the voluptuous vixens he encounters to the gnarly undead you'll find in the depths look incredibly detailed and move with lifelike grace. The exotic locations — a Japanese village, an airship, cavernous catacombs, etc. — are distinct and loaded with atmosphere.

Ryu is outfitted with a proper arsenal. You can needle the opposition with throwing stars, then slice them to bits with your razor-sharp sword. (Parents be warned: Blood will spatter and body parts will fly.) Or just fry the rival clan members with your magical arts. Or whale on them with nunchaku.

Thankfully, pulling off gigantic combos (you can have hit counts of more than 100) is effortless once you've mastered the controls. Not only is the swordplay silky-smooth, but you can also run up walls, walk on water, even hop across the heads of your enemies. You're equal parts assassin and circus acrobat.

And when you do finish your vengeful crusade, there's more to enjoy. The original "Ninja Gaiden" classics, from the days of the Nintendo Entertainment System in the late '80s and early '90s, are hidden on the disc. An Xbox Live tournament (a score-based competition with no online battling) is set to start in May.

The only things you could complain about — the excruciating level of difficulty and the occasionally troublesome camera — are easily overpowered by the brilliance of this game.

By Ryan Huschka, Detroit Free Press