



GAME BITS

By Heather Newman

APOCALYPSE

REDUX

GIs AND VIET CONG BATTLE FOR CONTROL IN 'BATTLEFIELD VIETNAM'



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS GAME MASTER

In some respects, "Battlefield Vietnam" does a convincing job of capturing the essence of the Vietnam War, with thick brush, snaking rivers and deep ruts conducive to the surprise attacks of guerrilla warfare.

A decent selection of '60s music — "White Rabbit" playing at its eerie best — adds to a slightly desperate mood.

But the reality of an online Vietnam video game is that someone has to play as the Viet Cong, and given all of America's lingering angst over this unpopular war, it feels a bit distasteful tooling up a river in a sampan searching for GIs to take out.

If you can get past that, this game offers loads of virtual war experiences. You can pilot a Huey chopper, carpet-bomb in a fighter jet, bumble along in a Jeep, drive a tank or zip through the jungle on foot with your squad mates — all in one battle.

There are 14 single-player missions to enjoy off-line. Thankfully, you can play them in any order; unlike many games that require you to reach goals in earlier levels to unlock later ones. The off-line play gave me a real sense of the great variety this game offers, allowing me to gain crucial experience from the land, air and water before I went online.

Still, I had a hard time controlling the choppers and the jets, often riding them straight into rice paddies within seconds of taking flight. The fickle

controls aren't a bad thing; those who take the time to master their piloting skills get to see things from a vastly different perspective than the grunts in the brush.

You can pick among several options for weapons and other tools before the start of each battle. You can even choose your role, from point man in the assault to medic bringing up the rear.

The online games involve methodically capturing enemy territory and holding key points long enough for your team to overwhelm the enemy. I found lots of available servers online, and the play was generally smooth.

My team's battles waged back and forth, with the outcome sometimes unclear even in the final seconds. One minute I was a lonely sniper waiting for my enemy to creep into range on a rope bridge. The next I was being overrun by my own advancing comrades.

If you die, you respawn at the closest key point held by your team. That way you don't have to scramble back to the hot zone from too far off.

The graphics aren't the best, with some angular constructions and some of the most uninspired water I've seen in a while — flat and monotone gray. But the environment is interactive; I was able to hide in the brush, which is a must if you're going to hit anything with a sniper rifle.

I spent time playing online as the Viet Cong. I heard no complaints from either side, even when my team was victorious, so maybe it's not a big deal after all.

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'Battlefield Vietnam'

★★★

Price: \$39.95

Players: 1 or online

Web site:

www.eagames.com/official/battlefield/vietnam/us/home.jsp

Format: PC

Category: Shooter

Rating: T (Teen)

'Ratchet and Clank' has a multiplayer plan

Within five years, every game will have an online component. Within 10 years, controllers will disappear, possibly to be replaced by 3-D virtual reality headsets.

Those are the predictions of Insomniac Games' Ted Price, president of one of the hardest-working companies in the business. His studio has turned out seven games in the last 10 years, including the stellar "Ratchet and Clank" series.

Insomniac is celebrating its 10th year of operation and its third straight year with a new "R&C" title. In keeping with his predictions, the new "Ratchet and Clank: Up Your Arsenal" will feature online and offline multiplayer versus modes when it comes out this fall. That's a first in Ratchet's quasi-platforming action game category.

There's even, Price hints, the possibility of online cooperative play.

Ubisoft arms itself

Ubisoft is going to war. Well, at least it's going to concentrate on the war-gaming market, with several new releases announced this week.

They'll publish the console versions of "America's Army," the popular game developed for the U.S. military and an extraordinarily beautiful (judging by early screenshots) World War II holiday title for Windows called "Brothers in Arms."

The developer of "Brothers in Arms" is Gearbox Software, who've had a hand in PC versions of "Halo," "Half-Life" and "Counter-Strike."

Also on deck: "Ghost Recon 2" and "Rainbow Six Black Arrow," which Ubi promises "gives a new dimension to multiplayer online first-person shooters."



An image inspired by the Rouge Plant appears in the game "City of Heroes."

Local hero

Last week I talked about "City of Heroes," the online world game published by NCSOFT that allows you to create your own superhero. If that's not enough to entice you to try the game when it hits shelves April 28, how about the lure of flying your strongman around some hometown scenery?

The screenshot running with the column this week should look very familiar to anyone who's made a trek along I-94. Look, over there! It's the Ford Rouge plant!

Coincidence? Nah. Blame it on local-boy-made-good Matt Harvey, cofounder and art director for Cryptic Studios, which developed the game for NCSOFT. He was born and raised in Dearborn.

A movie and a game

A surfing movie coming out on DVD Tuesday will take a giant step for gaming. "Step Into Liquid," which features 87 minutes of some gorgeous tricks and scenery, will be the first movie to come packaged with a full-length commercially released game inside.

The movie also has the usual DVD extras, plus a high-definition version that requires a computer to play. (No commercially produced HD DVD players are on the market yet.)

"Kelly Slater's Pro Surfer," an awesome surfing game from Activision that debuted to raves when it hit PCs last fall, is included in the \$26.98 DVD price, which makes this release the deal of the week.

Randy Wells, executive director of home video marketing for Lions Gate Entertainment, said the game and the movie were just too good a fit to pass up after a DVD producer pointed out the game at a brainstorming session.

Kelly Slater is in the movie, as are many of the locations from the game, Wells said. Slater also narrates the game. A bit of local trivia: The first DVD that Lions Gate released with a Windows high-definition version packaged inside — this is the third — was "In the Shadows of Motown."

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RECENT RELEASES



"CSI: DARK MOTIVES"

★★★

Ubisoft for PC, \$29.99. Rated: M (Mature).

"Dark Motives" is the second game from Ubisoft based on the hit TV show, and this one's much more pleasant to play than the last. Character graphics are better (the lip movements are atrocious, but at least they move), the scenes look more realistic, the cases are interesting and a bit longer than last time, and the whole cast returns to the show.

But don't get the idea that this is a game written for gamers. The audience for "Dark Motives," as for the first title, is squarely the mass market that watches the TV series.

While you can customize the difficulty of the game this time around (whether evidence lights up your cursor and is automatically tagged, whether the game prompts you for evidentiary questions), it's still a slow-paced, easy ride that will frustrate even casual adventure game fans out for a challenge.

That's not necessarily a strike against it. Ubisoft knows its audience, and from the ample in-play help for gaming newbies to system requirements that go easy on older PCs, they've made sure that "CSI" fans won't have to be game nuts to have an enjoyable experience.

Instead, they'll have fun taking on the role of a new crime scene investigator, talking with the stars of the show, suspects and victims, and scouring panoramic scenes for evidence.

The voice work is barely adequate, which is a surprise given the joy that the actors seem to take in their quirky lines on the show. But then, just getting the entire cast is still a coup for games these days (see "Buffy: The Vampire Slayer" as an example of that), and considering how stinky getting an A-list license tends to make titles, I'm grateful this one is reasonably fun to play.

This isn't a title for experienced gamers, nor for anyone who doesn't like — or doesn't watch — the show. But for the millions of "CSI" fans out there, this isn't a bad introduction to gaming, and it plays like a fairly interesting episode.

By Heather Newman, Detroit Free Press



"ONIMUSHA BLADE WARRIORS"

★★

Capcom for PlayStation 2, \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).

The name is familiar, the characters are familiar, but the game play isn't. "Onimusha Blade Warriors" is a different take on the demon-slaying series set in Japan.

No dramatic quests here; "Blade Warriors" is all action. It brings together the heroes and villains from "Onimusha" and "Onimusha 2," who can embark on their own adventure or fight each other, depending on the game mode.

Regardless of the mode, though, this is a fighting game at heart. The warriors, armed with swords and other hand-to-hand weapons, battle on multi-level feudal Japan backdrops. Random weapons and power-ups pop up in treasure chests; the first to grab them can get the upper hand.

The fighting system isn't nearly as elegant as in benchmark fighting series such as "Virtua Fighter." Its redeeming values are undermined by slow response to control inputs.

For the single player, there's a story mode. Each of the dozen characters initially available (hidden characters can be unlocked later) has an individual story line, none of them compelling. To progress, you complete an objective in each stage: defeat enemies, collect soul spheres, defeat a boss, etc. Between stages, you can boost your character's strength, defense and magic stats. This gets repetitive quickly.

The multiplayer mode is more fun, especially if the players take a couple of minutes to learn the fighting system. You can take on a computer-controlled opponent, a human player or engage in a two-on-two fight with three friends.

The graphics are clean, but not spectacular. Backgrounds are what you'd expect given the ancient Japanese setting. The music is fitting, too. But the kung-fu movie dub voice acting is horrendous. Thankfully, nobody does too much talking.

"Blade Warriors" might tide over hardcore fans until the scheduled release of "Onimusha 3," April 27. But the casual fan or the uninitiated would be better off looking elsewhere.

By Omari Gardner, Detroit Free Press



"THE X-FILES: RESIST OR SERVE"

★★

Vivendi Universal for PlayStation 2, \$29.99. Rating: M (Mature).

Stop reading. There's nothing to see here. Go back to your blissfully ignorant life on your inevitable path to oblivion or extraterrestrial servitude. Believe the lies your government has told you.

The story of "Resist or Serve" is a digital page-turner, a twist-filled tale of intrigue that keeps you firmly planted in front of the television waiting to see what happens next.

The game's three episodes are classic "X-Files" lore (and they should be, as they're written by the show's writers and performed by the cast). When FBI special agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully are sent to a small town to investigate some mysterious deaths, they find the inhabitants have been turned to bloodthirsty zombies. By the time our duo gets to the bottom of this mystery, they'll cross paths with many of their arch-nemeses, including the dreaded Cigarette-Smoking Man.

It's a good thing the story is solid, because on the technical side, this game is a murky biohazardous abomination that even Mulder and Scully would steer clear of.

"X-Files" looks and plays like a poor man's "Resident Evil" — that is, like a dirty photocopy of a game that's been around for nearly a decade. Horrible camera angles, ridiculous animations (the protagonists move like broken robots) and excessive loading times (it seems to take a breath to load after every other minute of action) nearly ruin the experience.

However, once you've mixed in some profanity (Mulder makes ample use of four-letter words), loads of in-jokes and show references for the die-hard X-philes, and the government's aforementioned alien cover-up, the result isn't so bad.

The overpowering "X-Files" mythos — along with the \$30 price tag — make these extraterrestrial conspiracy theories a little easier to buy into, but gamers who aren't ready to believe the truth won't be won over by this game.

By Ryan Huschka, Detroit Free Press

NEW THIS WEEK

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

1. "Hitman Contracts," PlayStation 2, Xbox, Mature.
2. "Worms 3D," Xbox, Teen.
3. "Manhunt," Xbox, Mature.
4. "Stealing Soul 2," Game Boy Advance, Everyone.
5. "Siren," PlayStation 2, Mature.

Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store