



WAR-THEMED SHOOTER IS SO CLOSE TO THE REAL THING, YOU CAN ALMOST SMELL THE GUNPOWDER



"Full Spectrum Warrior"
★★★
out of four
Price: \$49.95
Players: 1-2, plus online co-op play
Web site: www.fullspectrumwarrior.com/gm_game.php
Format: Xbox
Category: Action/Strategy
Rating: M (Mature)



BASIC TRAINING



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS GAME MASTER

There are war games, and then there are games about war. The latter take themselves much more seriously.

"Full Spectrum Warrior" is that serious. It's not boot camp, but for a video game, it gets pretty darned close.

And it should. "Full Spectrum Warrior" is a third-person action game based on a training aid used by the U.S. Army. Believe me, you can tell.

I spent at least two hours just fiddling around in the game's tutorial, a forgotten tool in some games that are so simple you just pick them up and play. Here, before you put a foot on a battlefield, you must progress through five levels of fairly intense instruction on movement, strategy, weapons and other intricacies crucial to not only victory, but survival.

The game puts you in control of eight grunts split into two fire teams, Alpha and Bravo. With a press of the Y button, you can toggle back and forth between your team leaders, who direct your men, coordinate their attacks and call on individual infantrymen to step up with a particular weapon or talent.

This game is much more of a simulation than others of its type. There are no Rambos here, just field grunts who dart from cover to cover and, if they're smart, keep their heads low. You can even hear their nervous chatter and colorful swearing as you send them into danger.

Nothing is over the top. There are shootings and explosions that simulate the real thing. You won't find any circus moves or outrageous guns.

This tends to make the game ponderous. To move, you use a thumbstick to put a cursor on a distant location, then click A. Your team will run to that spot.

There's one axiom here: Never leave your soldiers out in the open. If one guy dies, your game might end. This means a slower battle as you think and rethink your next line of attack.

If the Alpha and Bravo teams discover an enemy tank blocking the way, order your troops to halt. Request a reconnaissance flight. Check your global positioning unit for map information. Send Bravo down an alley to flank the tank, then direct Alpha to unleash suppression fire. Sneak up from the side with Bravo, order a mortar attack and — boom! — the enemy surrenders.

"Full Spectrum Warrior" is a thinking gamer's game. If you don't mind action taking a lower profile than strategy, then this game is for you. It reminds me of the difference between the bookish original "Battleship" and its souped up and noisy brother, "Electronic Battleship."

There are some situations where you control even more teams, which might strain your brain even more. Toggling between two groups of soldiers is difficult enough.

Keep everyone safe and you might make it home. At the least, you'll live to think again.

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The next big thing from Nintendo: Revolution

Nintendo raised some eyebrows this week when it announced a new console that won't just be a faster, better GameCube.

Code-named "Revolution," the new machine is supposed to break new ground in the way people play games, rather than just add better graphics and more speed to today's game designs.

The company has been emphasizing new and different gadgets like that lately, including the forthcoming Nintendo DS (for Dual Screen), which it showed at the recent Electronic Entertainment Expo. That handheld device has two screens instead of one, allowing gamers to look at menus and maps without interrupting gameplay.

Nintendo President Satoru Iwata wouldn't give details, the Associated Press reported, but he did say a prototype will be shown next year.

The announcement ends rampant speculation that Nintendo would back away from the hardware business, where it is No. 3 in the market, and concentrate on its own first-party games and handheld equipment, which have a terrific reputation for quality and sell well.

But Nintendo's facing some strong competition from Sony, whose PSP (for PlayStation Portable) handheld device will threaten the Game Boy Advance, Nintendo's big money maker, when the PSP hits the market here early next year.

Forgive me if I'm a bit skeptical about whether this new vision for console play will keep Nintendo competitive as Sony prepares to release the PS3 and Microsoft works on Xbox Next.

Finally, console game patches

Now that the PlayStation 2 has a hard drive available — and of course the Xbox had one all along — we're starting to see something new in console gaming: patches.

It used to be that if a game shipped with a bug, PC buyers could download a tiny piece of software called a patch to update the game and get rid of the problem. Console buyers, though, were stuck with the product unless it was dire enough to prompt a recall of the game, an extraordinarily rare occurrence. (I'm still waiting for the recalls on "Batman: Dark Tomorrow" and "Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness," for example. The glitches in those two games made them nearly unplayable, but they're still sitting on store shelves.)

Yet now that millions of console gamers are jumping online and have hard drives to store files, game makers are starting to slip patches to them as well. For instance, when "Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow" had a few bugs in online play for Xbox earlier this year, it was almost immediately patched.



GlovesPlay's controller covers have a suede finish and padding.

Get a grip, gamers

I had a chance this week to try out a new product for console gamers: GlovesPlay's controller covers, which slide over the pointy parts of your Xbox or PlayStation 2 controller and are held on with an elastic strap that loops around the controller cable.

They look dorky as all get-out, but I was surprised by how comfortable they turned out to be. The outside has a soft suede finish and there's padding built in, which felt pretty darned cushy.

The fit was good on the PS2 model I tried, though it's not made for aftermarket controllers — the Pelican Predator's lower L2 and R2 buttons didn't fit, and it wouldn't work at all on controllers that less resemble Sony's original model.

Still, at about \$10, this is a great accessory for people who have sweaty palms — you know who you are — or just want their hard plastic controller to feel a little more comfortable. It'll go on sale later this summer at www.glovesplay.com.

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RECENT RELEASES



"HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN"

★★★
Electronic Arts for Xbox (also available for PlayStation 2, PC and GameCube), \$39.99. Rating: E (Everyone).

Class is back in session at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Our three heroic students — Harry, Ron and Hermione — will have their hands full in their third year of classes.

The delightfully enchanting game play puts you in the cloaks, neckties and sweaters of the three youthful wizards. You toggle between the three to take advantage of each spellcaster's slightly different abilities. For example, Harry's a little more daring and athletic and can jump across fairly long chasms. Ron is good at finding secret doors and hidden items, and Hermione can squeeze through smaller gaps than her companions.

As the game progresses, Harry, Ron and Hermione will also learn different spells, ranging from a freezing incantation (**glacius**) to a telekinesis spell (**carpe retractum**).

The trio spend most of their time rescuing fellow classmates from danger, solving simplistic puzzles, scuffling with other Hogwarts students (like that troublemaking Malfoy) or — gasp! — doing their homework, which thankfully consists not of studying but of collecting ingredients for your potions class.

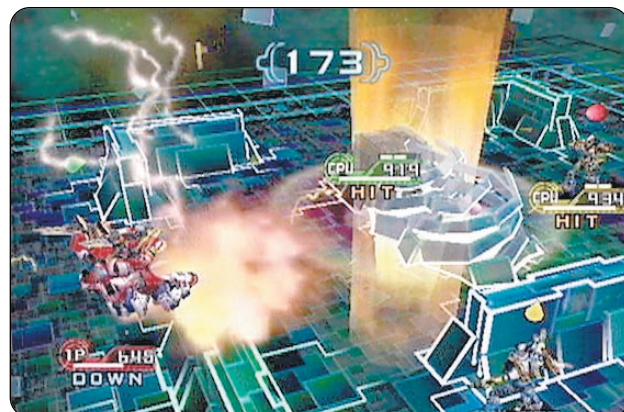
While you won't play any high-flying broomstick battling games of quidditch in this title (booooo!), you will fly on the back of a hippogriff (it's the creature you'd get if a horse and an eagle mated) and even take command of Harry's owl, Hedwig.

"Azkaban" doesn't have the level of cinematic polish found in other EA movie games (like the James Bond and "Lord of the Rings" series), but the graphics suit the action nicely, with colorful, snazzy spells cast by highly detailed, well-animated characters.

The technical wizardry behind the game could use a healing potion, though. Long loading times often slow the witchcraft action to a stuttering halt, and accessing the inventory menu seems to take several seconds longer than it should.

Though it's a short, easy game, this "Harry Potter" offering has enough magic to charm fans of the series and nothing that would deter newcomers from enrolling in this supernatural curriculum.

By **Ryan Huschka**, *Detroit Free Press*



"CUSTOM ROBO"

★★★
Nippon Ichi Software for GameCube, \$39.98. Rating: T (Teen).

We were only trying to follow our father's last wish when we took control of a series of battling robots and set out to conquer all challengers. This may not sound like what most fathers demand of their sons, but that's the storyline in "Custom Robo,"

a game combining a bit of science fiction with a whole lot of strategic slugfests, pitting custom-designed metal monsters against each other.

We found the storyline interesting, but the attraction of this game really is battling robots, a concept that's attracted guys for nearly 40 years, ever since the original plastic Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots debuted in the late 1960s.

What's different here from the old days is that a player doesn't simply control a ready-made robot. Now, computer software allows players to customize their robots with various torsos, legs and a variety of guns, bombs and other weapons. The mixing and matching isn't unlimited, though, and we quickly figured out which robot combinations were the most effective.

While the robots are small in stature, these little guys pack a real punch — especially if you start customizing them with tough-to-find parts. Yet there's more than brute force at work here. The game requires strategic planning to design a robot that will match the capabilities of a whole range of mechanical opponents.

Beyond making wise choices in the basic design, there also are several options for squaring off against foes, including one-on-one and tag-team modes. So there's a lot to decide before the sparks start flying and explosions rock the screen.

Once we completed the basic storyline after about a half dozen hours of concentrated play, some of the game's suspense was lost. But we kept returning to try new combinations in the arena.

Four people can play at the same time, so it's a great choice for a rainy day with a group of friends.

By **David Crumm** and **Benjamin Crumm**, 15, for the *Detroit Free Press*



"LA PUCELLE TACTICS"

★★★★
Nippon Ichi Software for PlayStation 2, \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).

Nippon Ichi, the developer of the wickedly delightful "Disgaea: Hour of Darkness," dusts off its quirky older "La Pucelle" for the underserved North American strategy role-playing game audience.

The story, dotted with typical anime humor, follows the adventures of Prier, a loudmouthed, sarcastic 16-year-old girl, and her level-headed kid brother, Culotte, who have just joined the Demon Hunting Squad of La Pucelle, overseen by the Church of the Holy Maiden. Their kind, but mysterious, mentor Alouette guides them. Prier firmly believes she is destined to become the next Maiden of Light, who legend says can defeat the feared Dark Prince.

The meat of any strategy RPG is the battle system, and "La Pucelle" gives you plenty to wrestle with. Its nuances are complex and not the easiest to grasp, but the game's first chapter teaches you enough to survive. You dispatch up to eight members of your party to the battlefields, defeating demons with weapons and magic. This is not an easy task: The enemy AI isn't especially bright, but the monsters compensate with brute strength.

An interesting twist: You can talk demons you encounter into joining your party. After beating them into submission, you're responsible for training them. You have to be strict with them in order for them to get stronger, but if you're too harsh, they'll run away forever, severely handicapping your chances of winning.

On the down side, the game's presentation shows its age. The anime-inspired graphics are clean and vibrant, but look two generations behind. And the inconsistent soundtrack, which has great and crummy tracks, is generated by a dated synthesizer.

Yet "La Pucelle" becomes addictive. The main quest is a bit on the short side, but the bonus areas — with super-strong opponents to conquer and rare pieces of equipment — gives the game extraordinarily long replayability (just like "Disgaea"), and that's what matters to the strategy RPG fan.

By **Omari Gardner**, *Detroit Free Press*

NEW THIS WEEK

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

1. "Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising," Windows, Teen.
 2. "Worms 3D — Special Edition," Xbox, Teen.
 3. "Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy" with bonus, Xbox and PlayStation 2, Mature.
 4. "McFarlane's Evil Prophecy," PlayStation 2, Mature.
 5. "Sitting Ducks," GameBoy Advance, Everyone.
- Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store