

Game On!



bad kitty!

POOR CONTROLS AND DULL ACTION DECLAW 'CATWOMAN'



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS GAME MASTER

Coughing up a hairball isn't my idea of fun, but I'd almost rather give that a go than launch into another session of "Catwoman."

This game looks nice enough. And "Catwoman," shaped after real-life actress Halle Berry, is graceful and lithe, as a cat should be. She flips through air with dexterity and bounds down alleys with the sleekness of the finest feline.

But this is an action hero? This little kitty spends more time wandering than kicking bad guy booty, at least with me at the controls.

It's not all my fault. "Catwoman" plays more like a platformer than an action game, meaning you spend lots of time skulking through alleys, bounding up and down buildings and climbing fire escapes.

When you leap from a wall to a ledge, you ought to be able to do it precisely. But many times I found myself bounding farther than I aimed because of the imprecise thumbstick on my controller.

This usually caused a fall that plopped me back near the beginning of the maze-like level. I kicked myself when this happened once or twice. But I wanted to kick my controller after it happened 10 times. This game quickly becomes monotonous as you spend more time retracing your steps than fighting bad guys.

The camera is a liability, too. I prefer to pan the camera myself so I can check out my surroundings. There aren't many games where I'll forgive a static

camera, save perhaps a horror title that makes you fear the next turn; I have to be able to see what's up ahead. Yet this game limits manual movement of the camera, leaving you virtually blind at crucial times.

You know what that means: a fatal plunge — except in this game it is very difficult to die. In fact, you can't even kill your enemies. Our heroine snaps a mean whip and can whipsaw the heck out of enemies with her legs, but the only way to incapacitate these guys is to kick them into a trash bin or some other box.

Catwoman is more foxy feline than killer kitty. Were this a singular issue, I could write it off as a game trying to limit its violence. But the more I played "Catwoman," the more I felt like she's a victim herself.

There aren't many female video game stars, and the makers of this game missed an opportunity. Catwoman is supposed to be sensual, but this game goes too far. She runs around trying to earn diamonds to buy neat things, speaks in sleazy one-liners and earns rewards for striking sexy poses.

Ultimately, Catwoman is a bit catty for me. And "Catwoman" the game is a dog.

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"Catwoman"

★
out of four stars
Price: \$39.95
Players: 1
Web site:
www.eagames.com/official/catwoman/catwoman/us/home.jsp
Format: GameCube (also available on other major platforms)
Category:
Action-platformer
Rating: T (Teen)

GAME BITS

By Heather Newman

A pair of interesting titles outside the mainstream

Two obscure games in the works should be quirky fun. "Psychonauts" was supposed to be an Xbox-exclusive psychic odyssey starring a new cadet at a psychic warrior boot camp who squares off against a mad scientist. Majesco picked up the publishing rights, and it's now slated for both Xbox and PC.

What should make you take notice is the name behind the game: Tim Schafer, who designed "Grim Fandango" and "Full Throttle," two of the best adventures LucasArts ever published. "Fandango" was a fun, south-of-the-border look at the afterlife, while "Throttle" let you take on the role of a biker hero.

The new game is also supposed to be funny, and the list of psychic skills you'll wield (a la "PsiOps," but with more jokes) is impressive. No release date yet.

Meanwhile, "Dynasty Warriors 4: Empires" from Koei goes on sale at the end of this month. While it's not an A-list title, it is one of a very small but growing group of strategy games for consoles.

"Warriors" is a PS2 title, starting in ancient China and then giving you regions to attack or defend. No one's quite figured out how to do strategy right on the console, and the bargain price of this game (\$29.99) doesn't bode well. Still, the more strategy games we get on consoles, the greater the chance that someone will figure out how to make them work on the TV screen.

Odds and ends

■ "Madden NFL" fans will have the chance to show off their stuff at the end of this month. Electronic Arts is holding its Madden Challenge across the country again this year, and the tournament hits Great Lakes Crossing in Auburn Hills on Saturday, Aug. 28, at 9 a.m. Winners get a trip to Las Vegas and a crack at \$50,000. Online registration opens Wednesday at 9 a.m. For information, check out www.easports.com/events/maddenchallenge2004/detroit.jsp.

■ Also from EA: a new, free NASCAR online game that's played off the Web, featuring real drivers and tracks. If you don't have a Pogo account already, you'll need one (they're free). See www.easports.com/free. I've seen two industry reports in as many days talk about online gaming over the Web as one of the hottest growth areas in the whole gaming industry, in part because they appeal to a broader audience in terms of age and gender. Games like this one can only help it grow.



Due this fall, the director's cut of "Unreal Tournament 2004" has a new look.

■ I know what I'm saving my pennies for this fall. Atari and Epic Games are releasing a director's cut of "Unreal Tournament 2004," my pick for the best-ever online player-vs.-player shooting game for PC. It'll include three new vehicles for Onslaught mode, six new characters and some new mods made by gamers that will make the game look different. Expect it to cost about \$40.

■ After a string of so-so titles, Eidos Interactive is on the block. In company documents, the publisher has confirmed that it's investigating possible merger or sales opportunities. Rumors name the usual companies: Electronic Arts, Atari, Activision and Ubisoft.

■ A lil' bit of love for Apple users: The Mac version of LucasArts' stellar role-playing game "Knights of the Old Republic" is finally ready for retail. Expect it to hit streets in September.

■ Thank goodness for last week's release of "Doom 3." The top 10 sales list for PC titles for the week of July 18-25 reads like a Who's Who list of last year's games.

This spring's "City of Heroes" finally lost its grip on the top spot, slipping to No. 9. Microsoft's "Rise of Nations" was No. 1, followed by "The Sims Deluxe," "Flight Simulator 2004," "Zoo Tycoon: Complete Collection," "Age of Mythology," "The Sims Mega Deluxe" and "Far Cry." The holidays just can't come soon enough: We need more new smash games.

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RECENT RELEASES



"KARAOKE REVOLUTION VOLUME 2"

★★★
Konami for PlayStation 2, \$39.99. Rating: E (Everyone). "Karaoke" falls into that category of games that make you look (and in this case, sound) like a complete idiot. But you'll soon be having enough fun that you'll forget you're belting out "I Will Survive" in front of company.

Like the original, the second volume of "Karaoke" asks you to sing along with a variety of songs while it tracks your rhythm and pitch. I liked the variety in the 35-song catalog, which is all over the place in style, from Britney Spears to Kiss to Sting (though none are performed by the original artists, so far as I could tell).

You must have a USB headset or microphone, and I gave Logitech's USB Microphone for PS2 a try. It's a hoot — much more karaoke-bar like than just wearing your "SOCOM" headset — and at \$16, it's a worthy addition to any singer's PS2 accessory collection.

This game features the ability to sing both long and short versions of some songs, a quick play feature to jump right into the tunes, some new animated people and backgrounds to look at and a new medley mode that strings five songs together.

That last one is harder than it sounds, and for people without perfect pitch, hitting every note on any song — even though the game doesn't care how high or deep your voice is on any tune — can be a challenge.

Volume 2 offers a few more modes, some different graphics and a new collection of songs to sing, but it doesn't offer any truly significant improvements over the original. If it were a bargain-priced way to get some additional music into your karaoke repertoire, I'd have given it a higher rating.

As it is, however, unless you're a karaoke fan — or you hold a lot of parties in your living room — I expect that the appeal of the game will fade quickly.

By Heather Newman, Detroit Free Press



"HAMTARO HAM-HAM GAMES"

★★
Nintendo for Game Boy Advance, \$29.99. Rating: E (Everyone).

Hamtaro, a popular anime hamster who's hammed it up in his own TV show and several Game Boy games, talks to his band of hamster buddies using his own language consisting of rhyming words stuck together or words with "ham" tacked on. So to sum up "Ham-Ham Games" in words these Ham-Hams (and their fans) will understand: This Olympics-themed game is fun-fun, but it's also a bit of a ham-sham.

Four teams of hamsters compete in more than a dozen Olympics-style events to claim the most gold medals. There are some serious challenges; no mindless button mashing will be found here. Beating your fellow hamsters requires precision, especially at the higher difficulty settings.

Your Ham-Ham team starts on the track in the 100 hm (yes, that's ham meters) dash. Your critter races to victory by timed presses of the A button in tune with a meter that speeds up as you quicken your pace. Time it right, and Hamtaro bolts to the front of the pack and takes home the gold.

In synchronized swimming and the marathon, your time button presses to the rhythmic beats of the music. In diving, you tap the button combinations that appear onscreen as you flip head-over-tail on your way toward a watery victory. The carrot pull, where the hamsters dig up veggies while racing to the finish line, is truly unique.

This game has one big Ham-goo: You can't compete against your friends. While you can link up to trade player cards and obtain more costumes, you and your buds won't experience the head-to-head competition that, for me, makes sports games entertaining.

While I don't understand the draw these happy critters have, it's clear Hamtaro has a following. Children who are fans of Hamtaro should have a blast with "Ham-Ham Games." The rest of us, though, should just stay away.

By Ryan Huschka, Detroit Free Press



"TALES OF SYMPHONIA"

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

Weeks ago, we stepped into a fantasy world, taking the form of a heroic young man with a red shirt, wind-tossed hair and a pair of razor-sharp swords — and we haven't looked back. "Tales of Symphonia" is a vast, mesmerizing realm in which players are asked to use their wits and their fighting skills to save the Chosen, a mysterious girl with blond hair.

We're told that this girl must be transformed into an angel to awaken a goddess, named Martel, so she can turn back the evil Desians and save the whole world. Got all of that? If not, that's why Nintendo says it takes players an average of 80 hours to complete this entire saga. The unpredictable storyline includes such an exciting battle system that the combined effect is a smashing good challenge. In the heat of battle, we found that we had to execute complex maneuvers — in real time — and use various items to save our character and protect our friends. Some of these special moves are quite difficult and involve tricky stick-and-button combinations.

Game play mostly focuses on moving the main character around the landscape. The intense sequences start when an enemy strikes, switching the game over into battle mode.

We enjoyed the ability to change the storyline through the decisions we made. One example was a foray we made into a Desian fortress to free a human being the wicked Desians were torturing. In the process, we wound up killing a human who had been driven insane and had morphed into a dangerous creature. We were stunned to discover that this creature was — well, it would spoil the game to tell.

We're not really sure we'll go back and replay all the alternate choices. But the beautiful artwork and the splendid game play make this a fascinating adventure and, with two discs of content, we had no fear of beating the game and getting bounced out of this realm too soon.

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

NEW THIS WEEK

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

1. "Madden NFL 2005," all major console platforms. Everyone.
2. "The Political Machine," Windows. Teen.
3. "Chessmaster 10th Edition," Windows. Everyone.
4. "Reel Deal Slots Nickels & More," Windows. Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store
5. "Kingdom Under Fire," Xbox. Rating pending.
6. "Reel Deal Casino Championship Edition," Windows. Everyone.