

Game On!

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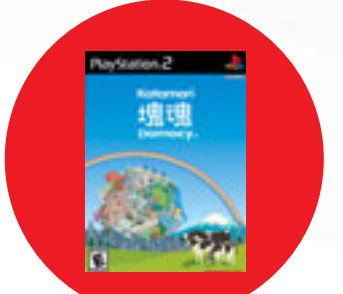
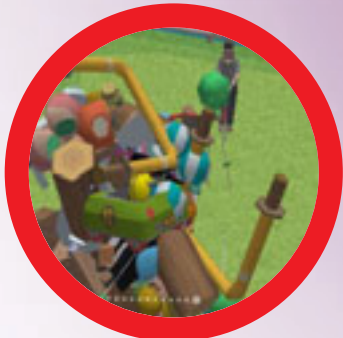
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GAME BITS
By Heather Newman

roll

There's
nothing
quite like
'Katamari
Damacy,'
a bargain-
priced big
ball of fun

playing



Katamari Damacy
★★★
out of four
Price: \$19.99
Players: 1-2
Web site:
www.namco.com/games/
/katamari_damacy/
Format: PlayStation 2
Category: Action
Rating: E (Everyone)



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS
GAME
MASTER

In a holiday season packed with huge releases like "Halo 2" and the latest "Grand Theft Auto," it's easy to overlook a golden nugget like "Katamari Damacy." Besides having a title that's hard to pronounce (for the record, it's "kah-tah-MAH-ree dah-mah-see"), this game has a plain package with some cows and a rainbow on the cover. And at \$19.99, you may find it tossed in the bargain bin.

Do whatever you have to do to find it. "Katamari Damacy" is one of the most original games of the season. I admire gutsy games that ignore tired but marketable formulas. "Katamari Damacy" forgets about high-definition graphics and intricate controls. This game looks like it might have appeared on the original PlayStation or the Nintendo 64, with blocky characters and text bubbles instead of audible conversation. It doesn't matter. The designers' priority list has the word "fun" at the top. Here's the very simple premise: You roll around a ball otherwise known as a katamari. That's it. It's like building a snowman, except you're not picking up snow — you're picking up whatever is in the way. And I mean whatever. You start out picking up tiny things like thumbtacks, lipsticks, sandwich cookies and fried chicken. Eventually, you'll be rolling around a growing conglomeration of automobiles, people, buildings, stadiums and more. You control the game with the two thumbsticks. Point your sticks in the right direction, and the ball rolls. You move from inside a house to outdoors, swallowing up larger things as you go.

It's madness. But there's a story that plays out in weird cut scenes and crazy conversations. You are a heavenly prince. Your father, the king, has made a colossal blunder that wiped all the stars from the sky. He sends you to earth to create balls that he'll raise into the sky to replace the stars. You make single stars and whole constellations. Or you can choose for your ball to be pulverized into stardust, spreading color across the darkened heavens. The king is wise, and I don't mean smart. As your teacher and critic, he plays a peculiar wise guy, critiquing your efforts and needling you in a fatherly way. Odd video cut scenes with blocky characters and wacky scripts show how your efforts are playing out in the lives of the masses on Earth. Backing all this is a wonderful soundtrack that sounds like a cross between anime and a Renaissance festival. Can you collect everything? The game tracks items you've picked up. You can find rare items and presents, including clothing you can wear. A two-player mode allows you and a friend to see who can build their katamari the quickest. This game has some camera problems that obstruct your view of the ball. But it's no big deal and doesn't diminish the fun. "Katamari Damacy" still plays pretty big, even if it's no holiday blockbuster.

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A Tauren shaman in "World of Warcraft" displays his ability to run on water. The launch is set for next month.

'World of Warcraft' to debut week of Nov. 22

One of the most anticipated PC games of the year now has a launch date. "World of Warcraft," the online world game from the makers of the incredibly popular "Warcraft" strategy game series, is scheduled to launch the week of Nov. 22, the Free Press has learned. Most stores have predicted Nov. 15 would be the launch date for "World of Warcraft," guessing that Sony Online Entertainment's behemoth "Everquest 2" would come out on or near the same day. But Phil O'Neil, president, North America, of "Warcraft" publisher Vivendi Universal Games, said the game will actually launch a week after the company's other hot holiday title, "Half-Life 2," which debuts Nov. 16. "We think that it will do extremely well," he said. That's pretty much a given internationally, since textbooks have been written on how earlier games from the developer of "Warcraft," Blizzard, have single-handedly changed the economy in countries like South Korea. Here, though, it may face stiffer competition from "Everquest 2." So what are the two games like? I've had the luxury of playing both in the beta tests that are currently under way. "World of Warcraft" is a fast-paced fantasy set in the world of the strategy game series. You choose to play as either Horde (orcs, trolls, tauren and undead) or Alliance (humans, dwarves, night elves or gnomes).

Some servers will give players the chance to fight the other faction when they're in contested territory. Others will be more player-vs.-environment focused, but still allow for dueling, raids and specialized battlefields where factions can face off. When not fighting against each other, players complete quests (typically fetch and deliver, kill monsters or collect items) and craft simple items. There are more than enough quests in the game to level a character from 1 to 60 without having to randomly kill the monsters in the world if you don't want to. That's also true in "Everquest 2," which adds the feature of hearing all quest text spoken aloud by actors. (In "World of Warcraft," it appears on screen like writing on parchment, with some small introductory vocals in some cases.) Players in "Everquest 2" choose Good or Evil factions, with some neutral races able to choose between either. The crafting system of "Everquest 2" is also much deeper than "World of Warcraft," with more complex recipes, a system that can actually kill you (!) and some items that carry better statistics than most drops you can get in the world. The pace of the two games is drastically different. "World of Warcraft" speeds along, making it easy to level up and experience new areas, quests and challenges. "Everquest 2," while much faster than the original "Everquest," still moves much more slowly. Expect a head-to-head review in the Free Press as we get closer to launch.

Lookin' sharp, Larry

I also talked with O'Neil about the success of "Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude," Vivendi Universal's controversial college hijinks title that launched Oct. 5. "Larry" has been around since 1987, and given the success of the first title, which won awards despite its raunchy humor and sexual nature, it's surprising that the idea of a sequel stayed on the shelf this long. The new "Larry," which features adult themes, humor and virtual nudity, launched with an Mature rating to mixed reviews. But that hasn't stopped it from selling 100,000 units so far, outstripping all expectations, O'Neil said. Those sales are especially stunning when you consider that major mass-market retailers — Target and Wal-Mart among them — have passed on "Larry," even though they carry games that are rated M for explicit violence.

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RECENT RELEASES

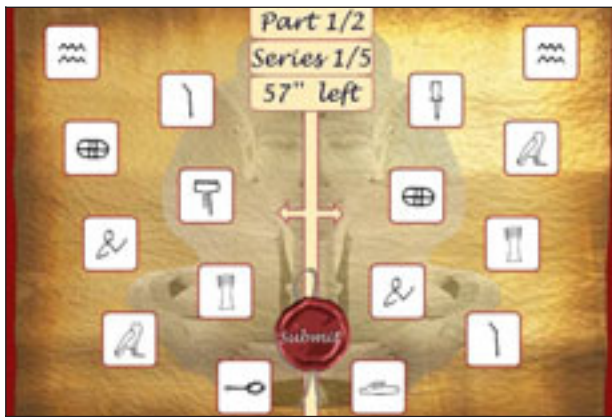


"ESPN NBA 2K5"
★★★
Sega for PlayStation 2 (also available for Xbox), \$19.99. Rating: E (Everyone).

"NBA LIVE 2005"
★★★★
EA Sports for PlayStation 2 (also available for Xbox), \$39.99. Rating: E (Everyone).

America, you've got a big decision to make: Which game deserves to be in your console by the time the NBA season tips off on Election Day — "ESPN NBA 2K5" or "NBA Live 2005"? "ESPN NBA" is a worthy challenger to "NBA Live," the undisputed king of basketball video gaming. It has superior graphics, and its programmers put more detail in the little things hoop fanatics will notice. For instance, in "2K5," when cover boy and Pistons star Ben Wallace scores at the Palace, the Big Ben going goes off. "Live," whose cover boy is Nuggets star Carmelo Anthony, omits the chime. That's heresy, especially in Detroit. "ESPN NBA" also goes pretty deep in its franchise mode. Gamers can manage players' egos, tailor practice routines, do some scouting, organize the business side of things and match coaching wits with the opposition. But in the extra game modes, "ESPN NBA" doesn't compare to "Live." This is where the champ dunks all over the challenger. "ESPN" has a 24/7 mode that allows you to customize your own player. It also features a nice 21 mode, where you can use NBA players and hoop it up at some nice locales. Yet they don't compare to the All-Star Weekend mode in "Live," which features the rookies vs. sophomores game, a three-point shootout and a dunk contest. Biting commentary from broadcasters Kenny Smith and Ernie Johnson is a nice touch. If you're looking for a free-flowing, arcade experience, vote for "Live." If you're more into the X's and O's and real-life game simulation, pick "ESPN NBA."

By Al Toby, Detroit Free Press



"TEST AND IMPROVE YOUR MEMORY"
★★
Happy Neuron for Windows, \$29.99. Not rated.

If the idea of spending an evening taking an endless series of standardized tests sounds more like a nightmare than a creative challenge, then you'll probably hate this new suite of PC games with the grandiose title "Test and Improve Your Memory." This group of a dozen kinds of puzzles is presented by the developers at Happy Neuron more as a mental-training device than a typical PC game. We enjoyed the puzzles as a change of pace from other kinds of computer gaming — but, then, we also enjoy chess, Trivial Pursuit and the occasional crossword. "Memory" is designed to be played occasionally, over a long period of time. Each player creates an ongoing record of every score, high and low, and can go back over the records, carefully dated by the software. When we became veterans at a particular challenge, we could turn up the difficulty in a variety of ways. The latest of the 12 offerings was a short-answer quiz, described as an effort to increase our cultural memory. But we found some topics in this quiz just too obscure to be fun and other parts of it repetitive. For example, the names of U.S. presidents kept popping up too often. The most enticing challenge was also the only truly three-dimensional one. It placed various large objects in an abstract landscape. Then, an imaginary camera would move through the array of objects and the computer screen would show us snapshots and ask us to identify where the camera had passed. We can't judge whether the couple of weeks we tested this suite of puzzles actually improved our memories. But we did find ourselves analyzing our strategies for memorizing lists of words, remembering patterns and figuring out relationships between objects. And it was a nice break from zapping aliens or trying to conquer the world. The developers apparently did not obtain a game rating, although there's no objectionable content in the 12 challenges.

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



"MARIO PINBALL LAND"
★
Fuse Games for Game Boy Advance, \$29.99. Rating: E (Everyone).

This is a major disappointment for a new Mario title, especially considering Mario's long reputation. It has the feel of a game that might have come out five years ago — the game play is limited, there are few bonus features and the graphics are mediocre. You play pinball, and when you hit different objects, various things happen: You enter a store where you can buy upgrades, you change stages and you collect stars and coins. The characters are familiar: There's Mario, Peach, Toad and an unknown villain guarding Peach. The game begins with Toad getting turned into a ball by a strange machine and being fired through a cannon at a target. Then Peach gets turned into a ball, but a Goomba turns the cannon as she gets fired out and she's shot into a dark, ancient castle. Mario also gets turned into a ball — a pinball. From there, all you do is play video pinball, with no breaks to run around and jump on enemies. It's boring compared to other Mario games and pinball titles, such as "Pokemon Pinball." The graphics are basic two-dimensional. That's OK: 3D would make it harder to concentrate and ruin the feel of plain old pinball. Still, it's hard to distinguish the Mario ball from objects scattered through the level. The game is improved if you use Game Boy Player for GameCube: the big screen lets you see tiny details that you barely notice on the GBA. Overall, it's the lack of variety that makes this disappointing. The obstacles at different stages are very similar, and it's hard to tell when you finish one level and are ready for the next. When you lose your ball, you go back to the very beginning. Your number of stars and other achievements stay the same, but your progress and the enemies that you have defeated are erased. That was frustrating. My bottom line: Don't buy it unless you're crazy about Mario, pinball and games that are straightforward and easy. If that's all you want, you should be able to find it for \$9.95, not \$29.99.

By Craig Campbell, 11, 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. "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas," PlayStation 2. | 4. "Yu-Gi-Oh! Capsule Monster Coliseum," PlayStation 2. |
| 2. "Ace Combat 5," PlayStation 2. | 5. "Dr. Mario," Game Boy Advance. |
| 3. "NBA Live 2005," Windows. | 6. "SpongeBob SquarePants: The Movie," Game Boy Advance. |
| 4. "Yu-Gi-Oh! Capsule Monster Coliseum," PlayStation 2. | 7. "SpongeBob SquarePants: The Movie," Game Boy Advance. |
- Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store