

Game On!

10F SUNDAY, DEC. 19, 2004

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GAME BITS

By Heather Newman

All talk, no action



BY JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS
GAME MASTER

Shhh, don't make a sound. Smear your face with green and black makeup. Gently slide out your .45, and crawl on your belly through that mucky grass. And please, for your own safety, don't you dare snap a twig. Oh, but if the chance arises to ogle a beautiful woman or chit-chat over your survival radio about movies like "It Came from Outer Space," then pour yourself a cup of tea and pay no mind to all that danger.

This is how you play "Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater," a game whose bright spots are lost to fatal mixed messages and, well, plain old bad acting.

Let me sum up the good stuff. The video storytelling is good, the music is good. You can fix your own wounds and ailments with things in your backpack. You can hide in plain sight with many different camouflage packages.

But not since the movie "Rambo 3" have we seen such cheesy dialogue and a storyline so over the top that it can be comical. That's fitting because the plot also borrows heavily from "Rambo 3," or at least the worst parts of it.

What a shame. The "Metal Gear" series, which popularized the stealth-action genre, has been justifiably popular. Yet with a recent GameCube version and a new game coming out for the Nintendo DS, it looks like leading man Snake has been reinvented too many times.

Here, the gravel-piped CIA agent is plopped down into the Cold War of the 1960s. The game mixes real-life history like the Cuban missile crisis and the Kennedy assassination with fantasy elements like a rogue Russian with super powers and a high-ranking American traitor who is so out of her mind that her story is laughable.

It's the same endgame: The Soviets are trying to kill us all. Snake must invade their territory to stop them (eating snakes to survive, get it?).

This story develops through some very nice video clips that weave in some authentic footage from way back when. Unfortunately, these clips also dominate the game: You don't play as much as you watch. Some pauses in the action — and I timed them — are about 15 minutes long.

I'm not against games that are more like movies, but this probably will disappoint diehard Snake fans who want more time to stalk around and snuff people without making a peep.

You can do that here, even with controls that are herky-jerky and outdated, but your successful silence doesn't last long. Your radio rings with interludes from various allies and bosses. They want to help, but their penchant for chitter-chatter really distracts from your tasks at hand.

I think I'd had enough when a double agent named Eva came barreling into an enemy camp to help me dispatch some evil Russians. She kicked butt, and then stripped down to a bikini top, right there in the jungle. Snake, of course, paused to take in the view. A punch of a button even provided a close-up.

If I wasn't supposed to be quiet, I would have screamed.

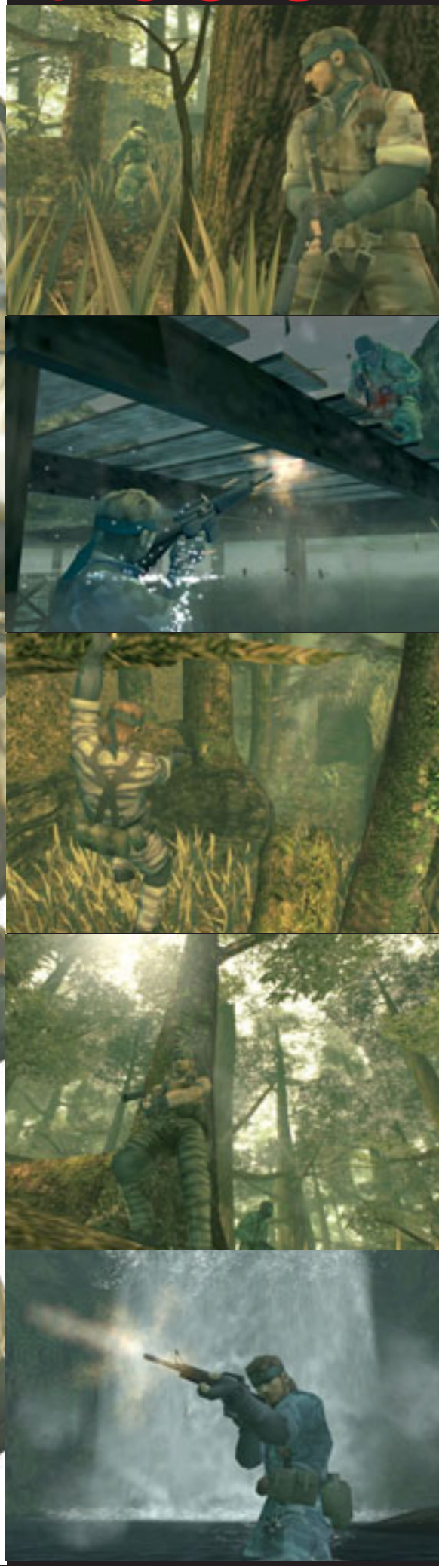
Contact **JIM SCHAEFER** at 313-222-5995 or games@freepress.com.



"Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater"

★★
Price: \$49.99
Players: 1
Web site: www.metalgearsolid.com
Format: PlayStation 2
Category: Stealth-action
Rating: M (Mature)

Bad acting and slow action create little fun in 'Metal Gear Solid 3'



Looking for a new PS2 or Xbox? Good luck

They're a hot holiday present this year — even though they date from 2001.

Parents, spouses and friends trying to buy their loved ones a PlayStation 2 or Xbox for the holidays are seeing something that hasn't happened since the consoles were released at the beginning of the century: widespread shortages.

Sony released a new svelter version of the PS2 for the holidays. It's been so popular that it's a rare sight on store shelves.

Microsoft's Xbox continues to be the only game console to increase sales and market share year over year, and with the PS2 becoming scarce, there are reports here and overseas that shortages of the 'box have begun.

Analysts say that many families are buying a second console to complement one they already have. But the shortage is predicted to have a negative impact on the market as a whole, driving down the dollars that people spend on consoles and games by 10 percent in November and possibly up to 40 percent over the entire holiday season, according to American Technology Research.

Meanwhile, the Nintendo DS handheld gaming device continues to set sales records, with 5 million expected to be sold by March. Nintendo recently revised that estimate upward based on how fast it's been selling. Sony's new PSP portable unit has pretty much sold out in Japan, leading some analysts to think that the release date may move up here to early in 2005.



Electronic Arts has made an exclusive agreement with the NFL.

Tidbits from gameland

Electronic Arts and the National Football League rocked sports game fans' worlds with a new exclusive agreement that gives EA sole access to NFL teams, players and venues in their games. That's shocking considering the popularity of Sega's "ESPN NFL" series, which sells for just \$20 (driving EA to cut its prices on its popular "Madden NFL" series) and competes well with EA on quality.

The agreement lasts five years, and while the details of how it will affect other football games haven't been made clear, it definitely cements EA's position as the top dog — and, soon, possibly the only dog — in pro football games.

Hackers have already begun discussing how to make the most of their new DSes, adding the ability to play old Game Boy games and possibly extend the range of the wireless connection between units.

That's not so notable because of the hacks themselves, but because it puts the DS into the category of mobile phones and other handheld gaming/communication devices — interesting enough to a large enough group of people to make it worthwhile for the hacker community to tackle.

Elsewhere on the hacking front, some Washington, D.C., store employees that modified Xboxes for sale including larger hard drives, pre-loaded games and other goodies were arrested, accused of intent to violate copyright law.

"The Matrix Online" game, a title based on the popular movie series, has gotten an official price tag — and a delayed release date. The game will sell for about \$50, and the monthly fee to play will be \$14.99, putting it in line with other last-generation massively multiplayer online games hitting the market this fall. But "Matrix Online" has been pushed back to a spring release date instead of January as originally planned.

"We are committed to quality games and making this the best possible experience for players," Jason Hall, senior vice president of Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, said. "Since this is our first MMOG, we are taking measured steps to ensure it will be polished and are investing additional resources into our community-oriented initiatives."

The game's beta test has been plagued by bad buzz, with players complaining that bugs and frustrating game-play were outweighing innovative features like randomly generated quest locations and personally-created questgivers.

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RECENT RELEASES



"APE ESCAPE: PUMPED & PRIMED"



★★
UbiSoft for PlayStation 2, \$36.95. Rating: T (Teen). Playing "Ape Escape: Pumped & Primed" is like munching on a gob of bubble gum. For the first few hours of play, the action is oh, so sweet. But after a while, it gets stale, and you're ready to move on.

Novices to the "Ape Escape" series will get lost on the significance of monkeys. I'm still trying to figure out what the apes are escaping from. The story mode here hardly gives a story, so take a pass if you're looking for a straight-up adventure game.

Instead, this latest installment places you in an Olympiad of mayhem. After choosing one of eight characters, you're thrown into a tournament which includes a melee in the ring, a coin-collecting race, a tank battle, a slingshot fight and a kayak race. Each character brings along its special weapon or vehicle.

You'll receive some fan mail, gifts and some help from your primate competition as you progress. I wasn't so fortunate to receive any holiday gifts, as I'm stuck in the kayak race, which is hands down the hardest competition to master. The analog sticks control most of the action, and in the kayak race, you have to utilize both of them. Good luck trying to keep your thumbs injury-free.

The coin race and the slingshot events will probably draw the most rave reviews when playing against real-life foes. In the coin dash, you can mug your opponents and steal their loot, all the while hovering over cliffs and scaling walls. The slingshot is just a mindless melee in which you hurl missiles at your opponent.

The weakness of "Pumped and Primed" is that it's geared primarily for group play. The graphics are outstanding; it feels like you're trapped inside a cartoon. But if you're only playing the computer, the eye candy loses its flavor.

If you're looking for an alternative to sports games and friends are around to join you, "Ape Escape: Primed & Pumped" wouldn't be a bad choice. Without the human competition, however, you're looking at an expensive gumball.

By **Al Toby**, Detroit Free Press



"SID MEIER'S PIRATES!"



★★★
Atari for Windows, \$49.99. Rating: E (Everyone). We can't recall another PC game that challenged us to furious one-on-one sword fights and strategic warfare with cannons blazing — interspersed with a test of ballroom dancing skills in which each click of our keyboard's keys translated into a deft move on the dance floor.

Only Sid Meier, the creative mind behind the "Civilization" series, could have pulled together such a diverse PC adventure. We were blown away by the cutting-edge design of this new Atari game. One moment, we'd be fighting naval battles with little 3D ships dueling cannon to cannon. We had to manipulate keyboard and mouse commands to send a hail of cannonballs at just the right moment and avoid as many of the incoming shots as possible.

Moments later, if we rammed an enemy ship, we could jump onto the deck amidst the wreckage. The view switched to a real-time challenge in which our character had to pick his way through the smashed wood, small fires and even destroyed cannon aboard this enemy vessel. And, standing there with his broadsword ready was the furious opposing captain, challenging us to a real-time battle across the damaged deck.

And that's only part of this sprawling game. We visited mysterious pubs and chatted with patrons. A successful pirate thrives on information and the ability to cleverly move through the oceans, stealing, selling and trading at each port of call. The dancing was part of the game's romantic subplot, in which our dashing pirate tried to arrange an advantageous marriage.

And, because this is a Meier game, there's a lot of learning that happens along the way. As we played, we encountered a variety of 17th-Century sailing vessels and learned the importance of each member of a typical crew. We picked up the names of historic Caribbean ports as well as some of the world's fiercest real-life pirates. The game is such fun that day after day we found ourselves eager for the workday to end, so we could fire up "Pirates!" and set sail again.

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



"THE URBZ: SIMS IN THE BIG CITY"



★★
EA Games for PlayStation 2 (also available for Xbox, GameCube, Game Boy Advance and Nintendo DS), \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).

Bored with tranquil suburbia, the Sims are looking for a good time in the big city. It's not about building yourself a happy little life anymore; it's about wearing the right clothes, networking with the right people and being the big shot in town. And if that sounds shallow, well, then it's fitting for this stripped-down "Sims" spin-off.

You create your Sim (or, in this game, your Urb) by customizing its face, hair, clothes, etc. Then select one of the game's nine districts — maybe the seedy South Side Bridge or the glitzy Diamond Heights. The game opens in your 98th Avenue apartment, where you meet an old friend, Will, and Darius, a major player in the city.

Unlike the original "Sims," game-play is not confined to your home. Reputation is everything, and to build that rep, you have to get out there and make friends. Wander out into the district and you'll run into assorted characters. If you fit in with the crowd, those social interactions will go well, and your reputation meter will rise. To help you build your rep, the game gives several goals for each district. Once those goals are completed, you'll gain access to the other districts — a linear approach that's uncharacteristic of "The Sims."

Seems that once you've done it all in one district, though, you'll end up doing the same things elsewhere. The only fundamental changes are the background and the inhabitants. There's no real final goal; you just keep playing until you get tired.

On the bright side, "The Urbz" is visually entertaining — the backdrops are colorful and rich with detail — and the soundtrack matches each district's atmosphere well.

I'm sure "The Urbz" will have many fans, but this isn't to my taste. The PC versions of "The Sims" had much more depth, nonlinear game-play and a nearly endless supply of downloads. I can't see how the \$50 price tag is justified.

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:
- | | |
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| 1. "NFL Street 2," PlayStation 2. Everyone. | 5. "Mech Assault 2: Lone Wolf," Xbox. Teen. |
| 2. "Mech Assault 2: Lone Wolf Limited Edition," Xbox. Teen. | 6. "Texas Hold 'Em Tourney Edition 2005," Windows. Rating pending. |
| 3. "NFL Street 2," Game-Cube. Everyone. | Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store |
| 4. "NFL Street 2," Xbox. | |