

# Game On!

10G SUNDAY, DEC. 26, 2004

Editor David Blomquist can be reached at 313-223-4288 or gameon@freepress.com

WWW.FREEP.COM/GAMEON



**GAME BITS**

By Heather Newman

## What to do first with your new game console

A whole lot of you bought video game consoles and software for each other this holiday, according to sales statistics and those painful hardware shortages. So chances are, you or someone you know has a new machine — or a new title — sitting in the remains of gift wrap, waiting to be used.

Here are my top four suggestions for what to do with your new present, one each for new Playstation 2, Xbox, GameCube and PC software owners.

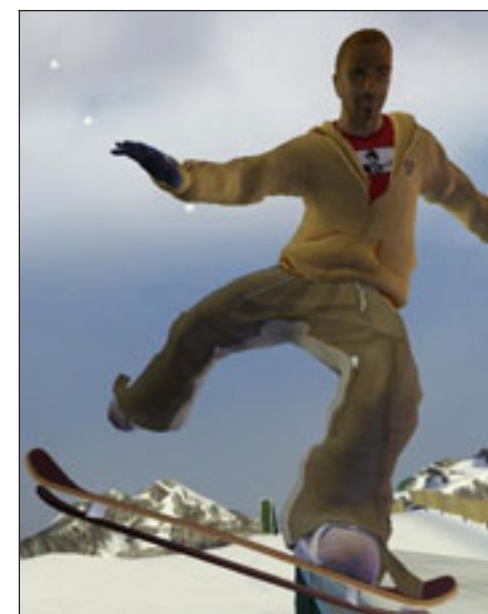
**PlayStation 2:** Get thee to the bargain bin at your local software store. Some of last year's very best titles — including "Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time," which I talk about in the review of its sequel elsewhere on this page — have been spotted there for \$15 or less. Sure, there are dozens of hot titles from this year. But last year's are in many cases just as fun to play, and much easier on the wallet.

**Xbox:** Get online. If you have an Xbox and don't have Xbox Live, you're missing out on a terrific reason to play on the 'box (besides frequently better graphics and sound). Live audiences tend to be more mature, more friendly and just more fun to play with than those on some PS2 titles, in my experience. Then again, your mileage may vary. Best bet: Buy a game with two free months online and decide whether you're ready to pop for the annual fee.

**GameCube:** Get the Game Boy Player to go with your new console. If you have a GameCube in your house, chances are you also have a Game Boy Advance, as everyone and their dog seems to own one at this point. For about \$50, you can play your GBA games on the big screen with a real controller using the Player, which is shockingly nice. The graphics don't look bad, either. It screws on to the bottom of your GameCube.

**PC players:** Get voice. For those games that don't support voice chat — and you are playing online, aren't you, dear reader? — PC games were made to bring us together, in some cases so we can blow each other apart. But I digress.

If your favorite game doesn't support voice chat, Ventrilo ([www.ventrilo.com](http://www.ventrilo.com)) and TeamSpeak ([www.goteamspeak.com](http://www.goteamspeak.com)) are two excellent alternatives to let you talk to fellow players. I like Ventrilo better for quality and lack of interference with the games, but there are vocal advocates of both brands. Both are free for individuals to use, though you may have to find someone with a server you can piggyback on — or pay for one through the companies themselves.



"Amped 2" is a snowboarding game for Xbox.

### Gaming notes

Also making news in the last week or so:

■ Nintendo advertised a bounty hunter position on [Monster.com](http://Monster.com) as part of a viral marketing effort for its space bounty-hunter sequel, "Metroid Prime: Echoes." It received more than 90 serious real-life responses from ex-military types for the job.

■ Take-Two, the parent company that also owns Rockstar Games, bought out Microsoft's Sports Studio, including the makers of "Amped" and "Links." The studio's future had been in doubt ever since the company had announced that it was discontinuing future annual sports releases for seasonal sports like hockey.

Speaking of Take-Two, it posted a profit of more than \$62 million for the fourth quarter, and more than \$1.1 billion for the fiscal year, thanks primarily to "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas." Xbox and PC versions of the game are on the way.

Contact **HEATHER NEWMAN** at 313-223-3336 or [neuman@freepress.com](mailto:neuman@freepress.com). Find her gaming online as "Gbits."

**"Sprung"**  
★  
Price: \$29.99  
Player: 1  
Web site: [www.ubi.com/US/Games/Info.htm?pid=1806](http://www.ubi.com/US/Games/Info.htm?pid=1806)  
Format: Nintendo DS  
Category: Role-playing  
Rating: T (Teen)

**"Mr. DRILLER: Drill Spirits"**  
★★★  
Price: \$29.99  
Players: 1 (plus wireless multiplayer)  
Web site: [www.namco.com/games/mrdriller/](http://www.namco.com/games/mrdriller/)  
Format: Nintendo DS  
Category: Puzzle  
Rating: E (Everyone)

**"Ridge Racer DS"**  
★★  
Price: \$29.99  
Players: 1 (plus wireless multiplayer)  
Web site: [www.namco.com/games/ridgeracer/](http://www.namco.com/games/ridgeracer/)  
Format: Nintendo DS  
Category: Racing  
Rating: E (Everyone)



## New DS games lack the originality to fill two screens



**JIM SCHAEFER**  
FREE PRESS  
GAME MASTER

I know a guy who spent \$200 for a Nintendo DS on eBay — \$50 over the retail tag. Yow. That's the price you pay, he said, for this year's hot holiday item. He couldn't find one anywhere else.

Lots of folks have been searching for the new handheld DS, which is selling way above expectations.

There are about a dozen titles available for the nifty machine. I've played most of them, looking for innovations that justify its two Game Boy-sized screens stacked atop one another.

The best games I've seen for the DS are "Super Mario DS" from Nintendo and "Feel the Magic: XY/XX" from Sega, which I reviewed last month (you can catch up online at [www.freep.com/entertainment/videogames/game28e\\_20041128.htm](http://www.freep.com/entertainment/videogames/game28e_20041128.htm)). Both use the two screens in clever ways. Here's my take on four other DS games I've played.

I don't know why someone would want to play "Sprung," a dating-mission game from Ubisoft that stains this fine game-maker's name. You play as a guy or a girl and fire off pickup lines to win hearts.

There's nothing innovative here in the use of the two screens. There's one person on the top screen and one on the bottom. In my case, the girl talked and I tried to give answers that would worm my way into her graces. This was lamer than a spring break movie.

I also played "Ridge Racer DS" from Namco, which is one of two racing games available for the DS. Like "Asphalt Urban GT," which I also reviewed in November, I didn't see much in this game that pushes it beyond its basic Game Boy Advance title. The major difference in appearance is that the bottom screen shows a large steering wheel and a tiny course map, while the top screen shows all the action.

Putting a tiny map down there is a bad idea. It takes your eyes too far from the action on the top screen and caused me to lose

control of my car.

One plus: This game allows wireless competition with up to six players, and you need just one game card.

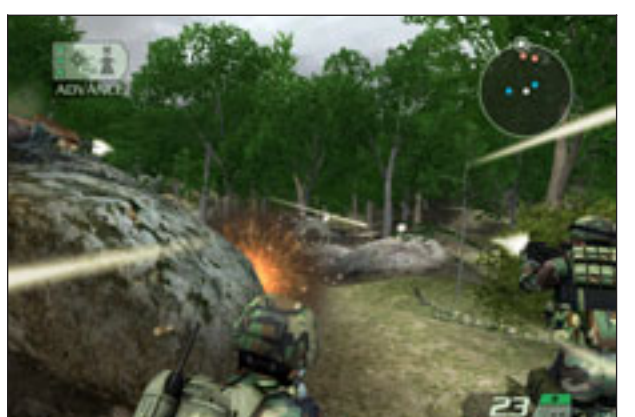
"Ping Pals" from THQ looks like a game, but beware, it really isn't. It's a communications program that dresses up the wireless communication ability of the DS. It's geared toward young'uns who like to text chat and exchange collectible clothing and such for unique Ping Pal characters that appear next to their dialogue.

"Mr. DRILLER: Drill Spirits" from Namco is the one game out of this bunch that I would recommend. You dig down through colored blocks while trying to avoid blocks crashing down on your melon. The two screens work together to create one large, two-story game screen. Wireless play is available for up to five players, also using one game card.

This game is worth the cash. As for the others, you'd be better off buying something else on eBay.

Contact **JIM SCHAEFER** at 313-223-4542 or [schaefer@freepress.com](mailto:schaefer@freepress.com).

## RECENT RELEASES



"GHOST RECON 2"

★★★  
Ubisoft for Xbox (also for PlayStation 2), \$49.99.  
Rating: T (Teen).

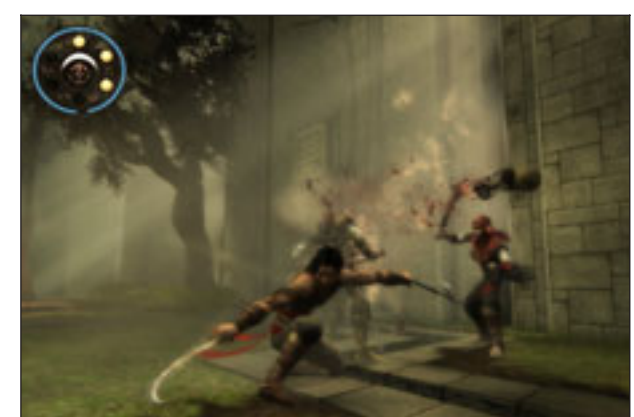
"Ghost Recon 2" is likely to irk die-hard fans of the original simply because the sequel brings some hefty changes to the series. But don't hate it because it's different, for when it comes to "Ghost Recon," change is a good thing. Most noticeably, Part 2 shifts the play perspective from first-person to a third-person, over-the-shoulder view (though you can still play first-person if you really want to). Not only does this swap lend a greater sense of character to your ghost squad, but it actually helps with gameplay. Now you know if you're really hiding behind that bush — a welcome change when one bullet can take you down.

More alterations for the better: The visuals have been greatly improved. Nice touches abound, from the shimmer of the water to the sway of the grass. Your squad's dynamic has also changed, and now is very similar to that found in the "Rainbow Six 3" games. You can get your computer-controlled team moving by barking out orders into your Xbox mic. Want your buds to blow up a tank? Say "attack vehicle," and they'll tear it up like it's paper.

The campaign mode is a rather vanilla assignment set in the near future in North Korea. As with most Xbox shooters, the real prize is online gunplay, and the vast array of multiplayer modes found in "Ghost Recon 2" deliver thrilling white-knuckle battles. You can play cooperatively with your friends (including playing the game's campaign missions) or square off in any number of competitive modes (deathmatch, hostage rescue, base siege — your typical online warfare). You can even split your TV screen and play online with up to four players per Xbox.

Ultimately, I think, "Ghost Recon 2" changes the series for the better by making the game more approachable for a larger audience (the revamped graphics and perspective really help). But in a glut of military shooters the changes aren't radical enough to make it truly exceptional.

By **Ryan Huschka**, Detroit Free Press



"PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE WARRIOR WITHIN"

★★★★  
Ubisoft for Xbox (also for PlayStation 2 and PC), \$49.99. Rating: M (Mature).

The last "Prince of Persia" installment was a stellar "Arabian Nights"-style platformer in which moving the character was sometimes more challenging than the combat itself. It was a work of art, and a strong runner-up to my choice for game of the year last year.

But sales of the last "Prince" were disappointing. Now the prince is back, and he's darker, madder, more adult and more angry. And once again, I'll tell you: Buy this game. It's fabulous.

In last year's installment, the prince loosed the Sands of Time, glowing dust that turned all the castle servants into monsters and generally messed up the prince's world. He spent the game killing off bad guys, making impossible leaps, spins and turns and re-collecting all the Sands, which coincidentally gave him power over time — slow motion, rewind, fast forward, visions, you name it.

Well, now it turns out that his little adventure has loosed an even darker enemy on the world, one that plans to annihilate humanity. That has the prince racing to erase time itself, to remove the series of events that resulted in this dark foe being released.

The prince has gone from an "Aladdin"-style teenager to a grim, angry young adult. He's even more beautifully drawn than before, and this year's installment adds a much better combat system.

The action is smooth and fast, and this year's bad guys are definitely smarter. That makes the prince a harder nut to crack, which should also attract more adult gamers.

I'll tell you again: This is one of the best games of the year. It has a terrific storyline, fabulous graphics, wonderful moves and some stunning cinematography. Please go buy it. You'll be happy you did.

By **Heather Newman**, Detroit Free Press



"X-MEN LEGENDS"

★★★  
Activision for GameCube (also for PlayStation 2 and Xbox), \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).

I liked this game for its intensity, its strategy and the superpowers that the good guys you control — the X-Men — use to defeat the evil Brotherhood and save the world.

The X-Men and the Brotherhood have things in common: They are mutants living in secret societies. The human authorities don't like mutants, and they don't realize that the X-Men are on their side.

In this game, you control four X-Men at a time out of 15 characters you can use for different missions. You choose the best players depending on their powers and how they work in the environment of each mission. For example, a character called Iceman can put out fires with his ice attack.

As players gain experience for their characters, they become more powerful, releasing more mutant powers. When you attack a bad guy, a little bar appears at the top of the screen that tells you the health of the enemy.

The graphics are solid — you can see everything you need to see. Controlling the camera view is easy and helps you play. One thing I didn't like is that the X-Men are all the same size. In a dark cavern, you can't tell friend from foe.

The sounds are good and change with each level, keeping you focused on what's ahead.

Up to four people can play at the same time, each controlling one of the four X-Men. It isn't a separate game; you play in the same areas with the same level of difficulty.

In each mission there are Xtraction points, places where you can take a timeout to regroup. You can save your current game and move to a different saved game, you can visit Forge to buy or sell extra powers or you can go to the Danger Room, which is like a training school for X-Men.

The game is rated Teen for violence and blood. I didn't see any blood, and the violence was fairly mild.

Overall, this was a game I didn't want to stop once I started.

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. "MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf Limited Edition," Xbox, Teen. | Rock? Windows, Teen.   |
| 2. "Mega Mahjongg" Jewel case edition, Windows, Everyone.  | 4. "Cabela's 4x4 Off-Road Adventure 3," PlayStation 2, Teen. |
| 3. "Who Shot Johnny"                                       | Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store                         |