

Game On!

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

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ONCE AGAIN, WITH FEELING

Wario's back, touchier than ever



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS
GAME MASTER

Count with me: One, Mississippi ... two, Mississippi ... three ... four ... five. Now stop — game over!

Welcome to the world of micro gaming, as defined by "WarioWare: Touched!" That's how fast these micro games are: A challenge pops up; you tap, rub or scratch the Nintendo DS touch screen with the stylus and hope you beat the clock. Then in a second or two, it happens again — and again.

The games keep coming until you fail four times. Success will get you a boss battle, new levels and souvenirs.

"WarioWare: Touched!" has 180 games in all, which sounds like a lot but is actually down from 200 in the Game Boy Advance original. But the difference between the GBA versions and these new micro games is dramatic: Here, they make good use of the DS's two displays and touch-screen capability.

Instead of pushing buttons, you use the stylus. A slashing motion cuts fruit in half. A swirl rolls snow into a snowman. A scribble scrubs mud off a kid's face.

"WarioWare: Touched!" even has levels that require you to blow on the touch screen. The DS has voice recognition that picks up the sound of your breath.

Someone put their noggin to this game, taking a lot of creative risks. Some of the ideas are fantastic, some mildly amusing, but the effort is special. Some can be a little crude — root around in a man's nose to make him sneeze, for instance — but they're more amusing than harmful.

There really isn't a storyline. The game is hosted by Wario, the infamous greedy Nintendo bad guy, but a bunch of characters put you through different levels. There are cool video clips before each level, designed mainly as tutorials.

Each level has a theme. In Jimmy T's disco, you have to rub things to win (lather shampoo on someone's head, erase a blackboard). In Ashley's haunted mansion, you drag things (coins into a change purse, a match across a flint). There's music,



unique to each level, and people shout things at you like "Lame!" or "Pretty good!"

You can unlock a game called Orbit Ball that requires you to repeatedly draw a trampoline for a bouncing ball as it travels progressively higher into the air. You start on a beach, and keep the ball bouncing until you reach outer space and beyond.

Then there's the yo-yo game, which is crafty, but doesn't hold your attention. You turn the DS upside down and use the stylus to make a yo-yo go up and down.

The only real nit I have with "WarioWare" is that there is no wireless multiplayer gaming. But the dual screens make up for it. You just have to like a game that asks you to catch a drop of water as it falls from the top screen to the bottom.

Think it's easy? Tick, tick, tick.

Contact **JIM SCHAEFER** at 313-223-4542 or schaefer@freepress.com.



"WARIOWARE: TOUCHED!"
★★★
out of four
Price: \$39.99
Players: 1
Website:
www.warioware.biz
Format: Nintendo DS
Category: Puzzle games
Rating: E (Everyone)



GAME BITS

By Heather Newman

Night at the symphony that gamers would dig

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra may be about to add a whole new meaning to scoring in video games — and metro Detroit gamers might get the chance to attend a really unusual music event.

Kendra Whitlock, programmer of pops events for the DSO, was scheduled to attend a concert of the Chicago and Pops Orchestra on Saturday night in Rosemont, Ill. On the program: music from the "Final Fantasy" game series. She wasn't alone; symphony programmers from Cincinnati and Cleveland were also expected to check out the show.

Whitlock is enthusiastic about the idea, and assuming that it seems like a good mix, said the DSO could offer a similar concert as soon as this summer. The Chicago event was to include an afterglow party with the composer of the scores, which the DSO would also want to do here if it decided to go ahead with the project.

"When I heard the music, I thought, 'Wow, this would make a good show,'" she said Wednesday. "But sometimes it's better to see it before you get married to it. I'm really excited to see it."

Whitlock is a classically trained musician, no surprise given her position. But her enthusiasm about this concert could have something to do with her secret life as a gamer. She's a big fan of the "Tiger Woods" series and, in an unusual twist, the "Grand Theft Auto" games.

"I know, they're violent. I know, they're not politically correct. But I really like them," she said, laughing.

Whitlock said what she really wants to know is whether Detroit-area gamers would come to this kind of concert. She's so serious about finding out, she gave us her e-mail address and asked us to share it. So if you want to tell her you'd stand in line to attend — or not — drop her a line at kwitlock@dso.org.



Sony

Sony is talking with movie studios to get them on board with the new PSP.

PSP: A legit movie player?

You're about to be able to watch more palm-sized movies. People who buy Sony's new PlayStation Portable handheld gaming package when it goes on sale March 24 for \$249 will get "Spider-Man 2" in the bundle, distributed in the PSP's Universal Media Disc (UMD) format.

Less than a month later, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment will follow up with four other movies: "XXX," "Hellboy," "Resident Evil: Apocalypse" and "Once Upon a Time in Mexico." The company is in talks with other studios to release movies on UMD discs as well.

Unlike Sony's Memory Sticks, the UMD disc structure will be publicly available to other companies, so others can make UMD players and the discs themselves. That gives the discs a halfway decent chance of becoming the format of choice for portable videos.

'Matrix' mimics Matrix

If you've been waiting to dive into "The Matrix Online," you've got only got a few weeks left to wait before you can jack in. After a few delays, the game makes its formal debut.

This online world game is different from some others on the market because it dynamically generates the locations and people that you get missions from as you're playing. You or your group is sent to a type of building in the virtual city that makes up the game — a hotel room or a bar, for example — but which one you're sent to and who you talk to when you get there is generated on the fly, much like the Matrix itself in the movies.

Creating missions on the fly supposedly eliminates quest bottlenecks, because multiple groups of players will never be trying for the same objectives at the same time. That's the theory, anyway. We'll have a detailed preview of the game here in the next few weeks.

And if you're not a PC gamer, take heart: Atari has announced a new Matrix game for both consoles and PCs called "The Matrix: Path of Neo," which hopefully won't stink as much as "Enter the Matrix" did.

Contact **HEATHER NEWMAN** at 313-223-3336 or newman@freepress.com. Find her gaming online as "Gbits."

RECENT RELEASES



"CHAMPIONS OF NORRATH: RETURN TO ARMS"
★★
Sony Online Entertainment for PlayStation 2, \$49.99. Rated: T (Teen)

I don't think I've ever given such a low rating to a game that looked and played so smoothly. But this sequel to last year's excellent "Champions of Norrath" is so similar to that game — and the ones that came before it using variations of the "Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance" game engine — that it's hard to drum up much enthusiasm for it.

It shares the things that made those titles great: beautiful graphics, especially by PS2 standards; terrific cooperative play with friends on the couch or around the world, and a smooth-running program that makes tough fights easy to control.

But there's hardly anything new here. The plot is paper-thin, and lacks a driving sense of humor or drama to keep you interested. The game-play is just as basic as it's ever been, and frankly, if you've played any of its predecessors, you've slashed and spellcast just this way a million times before. Upgrading your armor and weapons using the shards you get along the way is just as fun as it was in the last installment — but it doesn't give you any new things to do.

It's hard to be so harsh on a game that works so well. But last year's "Champions of Norrath: Realms of Everquest" is in stores for \$20 — and if you haven't played that, you can save yourself \$30 by skipping this one and buying it instead.

If you have played "Realms of Everquest," well, be warned: You've got a couple new playable characters (whose spells and melee look an awful lot like previous characters, though one gets to dual-wield weapons). The online play works better this time around. But will it captivate your attention the way the first one did? Probably not.

If you're desperate for an action-role playing game (as I often am, since it's the only genre my husband and I consistently play together), then this is a safe, if unexciting bet.

By **Heather Newman**, Detroit Free Press



"ZOO TYCOON 2"
★★★
Microsoft Game Studios for Windows, \$39.99. Rating: E (Everyone)

Bring on the elephant dung and ring-tailed lemur. "Zoo Tycoon 2" challenges gamers to build the ultimate zoo, filled with different exhibits and various animals, take care of visitors and make a little money.

"Tycoon 2" has three game modes: campaign, challenge and freeroom. The campaign mode allows you to select a scenario with specific goals to meet. The challenge mode allows the gamer to select from different challenges to try to conquer. Freeroom lets you build a zoo with unlimited money and all the animals and objects that are available.

The platform from the first installment remains the same. You must keep the animals, staff, and visitors happy. The better care you take of the animals, the more they entertain and the more money visitors donate to your zoo. Sounds simple, right? Wrong. There are never enough restrooms, food, donation boxes and places to sit, and also never enough money.

The graphics, sound, a first-person view and the way you invent environments for the animals are greatly improved. Environments are made easier with what's called the "biome brush," a landscaping tool that allows you to easily lay foliage, rocks and terrain, and quickly create livable quarters for your animals. No more hearing Panda 1 complaining of too many rocks (animals can be picky!).

The graphics have greatly improved, moving from 2D to 3D and allowing for more details to be seen. Some would say the sound is weak and could use a boost, but I somewhat enjoy the lack of music and the sounds of the animals.

"Tycoon 2" has its glitches, like zookeepers walking through animals, but all in all it's worth purchasing if you are a fan of the strategy genre or just need a break from other games. I enjoyed ruling the animal kingdom — it was much more rewarding than cooing my Sim to get up on time.

By **Rashaun Rucker**, Detroit Free Press



"STAR FOX ASSAULT"
★★
Nintendo for GameCube, \$49.99. Rating: E (Everyone)

Foxes are known as clever and crafty animals, able to adapt to various situations. While the title character in "Star Fox Assault" tackles everything that's thrown at him — space battles, surface skirmishes and an occasional on-foot fracas — and handles most of it with sly grace, he's clearly no smooth operator.

When you're piloting Fox's Arwing starship, blasting away at nonstop waves of bug-like alien starships alongside his fellow pilots (a bird, a frog and a rabbit, to name a few), "Assault" is in fine form. You'll be dodging huge asteroids, saving your comrades from certain doom and taking down gigantic end-level bosses, complete with their large red shoot-me-here-and-I-go-boom weak points. The controls are slick and precise, allowing you to quickly perform barrel rolls and loops while picking off foes in rapid succession. It's a shooter fan's delight.

As soon as the quick brown Fox leaps out of his star cruiser, though, the fun factor drops. On foot, Fox flails about, blasting everything that moves with an assortment of weapons. While hotfooting it around seems like a decent concept, nightmarish controls dampen the action no matter which setting you select. They're far too wild and loose, and his Landmaster, a futuristic tank, feels like it's stuck in molasses, slow and clumsy.

The music is sprinkled with heroic melodies from "Star Fox" games of old and flows very well, but the voice acting is laughably bad — so much so I would have preferred the spoken animalistic gibberish with onscreen text that was featured in the original Super Nintendo Game. The story game is a bit short, and the split-screen multiplayer modes, while a fun sideshow, didn't really blow me away. Fans of the "Star Fox" series should definitely strap in, though, and at least give "Assault" a rental. If only our hero would have stayed in his space ship, this adventure would have been a little more foxy.

By **Ryan Huschka**, Detroit Free Press

NEW THIS WEEK

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

1. "Gran Turismo 4," PlayStation 2, Everyone.
 2. "Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30," Xbox, Mature.
 3. "Heritage of Kings: The Settlers," Windows, Teen.
 4. "Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30," PlayStation 2, Mature.
 5. "FIFA Street," PlayStation 2, Everyone.
 6. "Judge Dredd: Dredd vs. Death," Xbox, Mature.
- Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store