

Game On!

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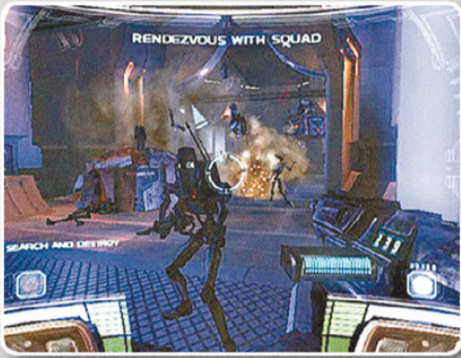
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GAME BITS
By Heather Newman

YOUR SQUAD MATES ARE THE BEST IN 'STAR WARS: REPUBLIC COMMANDO'



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS
GAME MASTER

If you hear the simple phrase "We got bugs!" from one of your teammates in the new "Star Wars" game, you could just panic and scream. But that'll get you whacked. So round up your friends, lock and load your blaster rifles and tip them toward the sky.

A squadron of misery is zooming in from the south — airborne aliens, rather huge ones, that look like big old wasps with a foul disposition. No problem. You've got your pals. Send one warrior to shoot from a sniper's perch, dispatch another to barricade a door, order the third to help you search and destroy. Your squad will smartly skulk around cover, taking potshots with you until the bad birds are deboned.

Well, that's what will happen if you command your squad with poise and intelligence. And that's what lifts "Star Wars: Republic Commando" above other squad-based games. While this title may have shortcomings in other areas, supervising your three squad mates is slick and simple, with more options than I'm used to seeing.

Your squad is part of the Republic's clone army (geek alert: the game offers a sneak peek at some content from the upcoming "Episode III" movie). In the offline campaign mode, your team is sent into enemy territory to battle in more than 14 levels, which take you into alien facilities

and outside on a rocky planet's surface. The graphics are a bit blocky, but decent, though it was hard for me to see power-ups.

The battles are tense, with about 10 different enemies, including the aforementioned bugs, ponderous 'droids, battle 'droids and larger, meaner mechanical nasties.

Your teammates constantly radio with hints, compliments and fun wisecracks, like shouting "Old school!" if you whack a bad guy on the head.

You have to watch their health, but they don't need constant baby-sitting. They'll duck and cover, revive each other on their own and seek out their own health boosts when the action slows.

With a T rating, this game isn't as violent or gory as some others, though you sometimes will find your face shield splattered with bug juice after a melee attack. But I wouldn't recommend even trying such hand-to-hand combat. The controls make it hard to aim and the attacks are weak.

I also had many issues with the online multiplayer battles, where there are just a meager helping of deathmatch and capture-the-flag games to play. You have to look down and press the A button to pick up new weapons, leaving yourself open to attack. The controls are so touchy that it is hard to aim precisely. And bullets seemed to fire slightly to the side of my targeting reticule.

So this game is a no-go for the online battles. But if you're into squashing some bugs as a finely tuned team, "Republic Commando" can be special.



"STAR WARS: REPUBLIC COMMANDO"
★★★
out of four
Price: \$49.95
Players: 1-4 or online
Website: www.lucasarts.com/games/swrepubliccommando/
Format: Xbox
(also available for Windows)
Category: Shooter
Rating: T (Teen)

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Sony Metreon

The Walk of Game has its first honorary stars in place now.

The first stars shine

You heard about the new Walk of Game (inside Sony's huge Metreon shopping complex in San Francisco) in Bits last year, and it's finally come to pass. This week the first stars were installed for Shigeru Miyamoto (creator of "Mario Brothers" and "Donkey Kong"), Nolan Bushnell (cofounder of Atari and the driving force behind "Pong"), "Halo," Link (from the Zelda series), Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog.

Movies coming for PSP

Adding to the buzz over the upcoming release of Sony's PlayStation Portable handheld gaming device, Lion's Gate Entertainment said it will offer movies in the gadget's Universal Media Disc format. A dozen movies will be released to start, including "The Punisher," "House of the Dead," "Total Recall" and "Rambo: First Blood." Newer movies will go for \$20-\$30 each, while older titles will probably sell for \$10-\$20.

New 'SOCOM' boosts offline fun

"SOCOM" fans are likely to love the next installment. The hugely popular online Navy SEALs game for PlayStation 2 is in development now for its third installment, and early word on it is reasonably impressive.

The developer told GameDaily, an industry publication, that much more focus will be placed on the single-player experience. That's novel for a game whose audience has traditionally spent all their time online.

'Matrix' will be out March 22

"The Matrix Online," the massively multiplayer online game set in the world of the movies, has gone gold and should hit streets March 22.

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NEW THIS WEEK

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

1. "Silent Hunter III," Windows. Teen.
 2. "Yoshi Touch and Go," Nintendo DS. Everyone.
 3. "Pokemon Dash," Nintendo DS. Everyone.
 4. "Act of War: Direct Action" (DVD), Windows. Teen.
 5. "Backyard Baseball 2006," Game Boy Advance. Everyone.
 6. "Donkey Kong Jungle Beat," GameCube. Everyone.
- Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store

RECENT RELEASES



"SHADOW OF ROME"
★★★
Capcom for PlayStation 2, \$47.88. Rating: M (Mature).
A game about fighting gladiators that has a real storyline sounds like an early April Fool's joke, but "Shadow of Rome" proves that it is, literally, bloody serious about its characters.

This beautiful PS2 game follows Agrippa, a soldier trying to save his father's life by fighting in the gladiatorial games, and his friend Octavius, who uses stealth and puzzle-solving skills to figure out what's going on in the campaign to discredit Agrippa's dad.

The combat in the gladiator fights is bloody and brutal; this game earns its M rating. But it's also fun to control, fast-paced and challenging. It starts fairly simply and does a good job of teaching you how to fight. But once you've gotten started, things rapidly get difficult, though never too overwhelming.

The variety of moves you can use during combat is deep, and there are some nice twists to the battles — who you fight and how will require different strategies. Your weapons and armor can break, so you might find yourself trying to rip a sword out of an opponent's hands or scoop up a mace from the ground near a fallen combatant. Your foes will use some decent intelligence to fight you, sneaking or ganging up on you or evading your attacks. If you get the crowd happy enough with you, they might throw you some weapons or food in the middle of a fight. It's a fun system.

There are many fewer stealth levels with Octavius, and they're not as well-polished as the fighting. But they're a nice break from the arena action, and none of them are very long.

"Shadow" is a surprisingly good entry in the action genre, and offers about 22 hours of playing enjoyment.

By Heather Newman, Detroit Free Press



"DEVIL MAY CRY 3: DANTE'S AWAKENING"
★★★★
Capcom for PlayStation 2, \$49.99. Rating: M (Mature).
The makers of "Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening" have nothing to cry about, unless they're tears of joy.

The third installment to the series is a brilliant follow-up to the second game, which was widely criticized for lacking style and falling woefully short of the original.

You play Dante, a half-human, half-demon wunderkind trying to uphold the legacy of your father, Sparda, who has kept the forces of evil at bay for mankind. Your nemesis is your twin brother, Vergil, who has chosen a darker path.

The storyline grabs you immediately with a strong fight sequence between Dante and Vergil's hellish imps. Here, you're introduced to Dante's cavalier fighting style and attitude. Style is important, because in order to upgrade your weapons and skills, you must execute some nifty combination moves against your enemies. For good measure, you can even taunt your foes with a push of a button.

Guns and swordplay are interchangeable in fight modes, and nothing gets lost in the game's flow. You can even take the battle into the air by slashing your enemy upward, jumping and then blasting them with your guns. The camera work is top-notch, and nothing gets lost in the fast-paced melees.

The graphics show off a dark, apocalyptic world, reminiscent of the "Resident Evil" series. One problem I've always had with dark games is the background is too dark. In "Devil May Cry 3," you have the option of controlling the brightness in the setup mode.

"Devil May Cry 3's" music, a cross between hardcore heavy metal and techno, enhances the dark tale. In between missions, there is spooky whispering that sounds like what you'd imagine an Ozzy Osbourne record being played backward would be like.

Want to add to this game's creepiness? Play it in the dark.

By Al Toby, Detroit Free Press



"FIFA STREET"
★★
EA Sports Big for PlayStation 2 (also for Xbox and GameCube), \$39.99. Rating: E (Everyone).
"FIFA Street" is a pretender. Sure, it has a ball, two goals and some fancy ball work of the best footie stars on the planet, but this game isn't really soccer. What you really get for your \$40 is an arcade-style, 4-on-4 clash that is mildly enjoyable but ultimately unsatisfying.

While the other "Street" titles are built upon overly stylized versions of their respective sports, those titles also have hearty substance to complement the sizzle. "FIFA Street" has a similar design, but comes off as rather hollow.

The game's flash is its right spot. The tricky footwork looks fantastic, the slightly exaggerated players are easily recognizable for the real McCoy's, and even the playing fields — city-scapes from across the globe closed in by chain-link fences — are dynamic enough to please.

Yet the gameplay, which focuses on style just as much as scoring, feels shallow. As with other "Street" games, humiliating your opponent by pulling strings of tricks — like tapping the ball through the legs of a defender, running around him and picking up where you left off behind him — will earn you points toward a game breaker.

This formula is passable, but it is foiled by two key problems. First, the tricks, while impressively animated, often break up the flow of the game, as you lose control of your character while the trick is executed. Moreover, the game breakers you work so hard to earn really don't turn the tide. All you get is a slow-motion, high-powered shot that's likely — but not guaranteed — to net you a goal.

While "FIFA Street" has a nice set of features, including a "rule the street" mode where you create your own up-and-coming footie wanna-be, the inevitable sequel will likely add more cred to the game play. As for this debut, rent it before kicking out cash for it, or you'll likely be kicking yourself after a few hours.

By Ryan Huschka, Detroit Free Press