

Game On!

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GAME BITS

By Heather Newman

GameStop's growth could cut competition

There's going to be less competition among your local video games stores. GameStop is buying Electronics Boutique in a \$1.44-billion merger, creating a video game sales super-behemoth responsible for almost 4,000 stores and \$4 billion in revenues each year.

Both companies combined control about a fifth of the U.S. market. (Factoid: The leader is Wal-Mart, which controls about that much, too.) But they are two of the last nationwide chains that aren't subsidiaries of other media businesses, such as Best Buy's Game Rush.

You won't see any visible changes when you shop until 2006, when the EB stores will start morphing into GameStops. Still, what are the chances that they're going to significantly undercut each others' prices anymore?

Kid-appropriate fun

Two nice pieces of news from publisher Namco:

First, the company managed to get the rights to publish games based on the 55-year-old "Peanuts" comic strip. No specific titles have been announced, but they have the right to use all characters and it's exclusive through 2009, so expect some kid-friendly fare.

For those who aren't in elementary school anymore (but wish they were), the company is also releasing a package of more than 20 classic games for Sony's PlayStation Portable handheld, including "Pac-Man," "Galaga" and "Dig Dug," as the "Namco Museum Battle Collection." As the name implies, you'll be able to face off with other gamers using the PSP's wireless connection. It'll be out later this year.

'Resurrection' tops PC field

New content for "Doom" fans finally knocked "World of Warcraft" out of the top spot for PC games the week of April 3-9. The NPD Group's list of top-selling games was headed up that week by "Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil," with "World of Warcraft" dropping to No. 2.

Then it was all about the Sims: "The Sims 2: University," "The Sims 2" and "The Sims Deluxe" held the next three spots, presumably as people bought the original version of "Sims 2" so they could play the "University" expansion pack. "Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory" held on to a somewhat disappointing sixth place, followed by the big trio — "Half-Life 2" (can't wait until that expansion pack hits this summer), "Doom 3" and the original "Halo" (yes, that's right, *not* "Halo 2") in spots No. 7, 8 and 10, respectively. "Galaxy of Games 350 JC" snuck in at No. 9.



Electronic Arts

"The Sims 2" will have a host of characters to direct from a console or handheld gaming device.

'Sims 2' is coming to consoles

Speaking of "The Sims," they're moving into a game device near you. Electronic Arts announced that it's going to be releasing "Sims 2" on consoles and handhelds — including PlayStation 2, PSP, GameCube, Game Boy Advance, Xbox and DS — this fall.

The original PC version has sold more than 4.5 million copies, despite strong competition among PC games last year.

Here at Game Bits, we're especially intrigued by the idea of taking "Sims" characters with us on the PSP. Aaaaaa, my hands, they're on fire!

Marvel characters will game

If you just can't get enough of the Fantastic Four from the upcoming movie, you can always plug them into a console near you.

Accessory maker Mad Catz has gotten the license from Marvel to make video game accessories for the PS2, PSP, Xbox, GameCube and DS using those characters. Activision is putting out the video game in July; the movie from 20th Century Fox bows the same month.

Expect to see a big earthy-looking fella on controllers near you this summer.

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MIDNIGHT IN THE motor city

RACER SET IN A VIRTUAL DETROIT HAS PLENTY OF VRROOM



JIM SCHAEFER
FREE PRESS
GAME MASTER

I tore into "Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition" thinking this was going to be my time to fly.

You see, the street racing in this game is set in three cities, and one of them is Detroit. And I know the Motor City's pavement pretty darn well.

So I jumped online thinking I'd cream all the newbies who didn't know which way from up in Motown. I immediately joined a game set in my city. *Vroom.*

Uh, oh. What's Interstate 69 doing in Detroit? *This* is Greektown? Where's the Plaka Café? Since when are Highland Park and River Rouge almost neighbors? And I don't want to be mean here, but this virtual Detroit is way too spiffy.

So much for my time to fly! "Midnight Club 3" is not a faithful re-creation of Detroit — or of the other two cities it portrays, San Diego and Atlanta. In fact, it's not even close.

But this is still a wonderful game, and were it not for a bit of concern I have for the graphics (car damage is weak; raindrops look like white streaks), I'd give it four stars.

You can zoom past the Joe Louis fist on Jefferson, but east of there is a foreign land, except for the People Mover. I actually drove up onto its tracks and zipped around my downtown, not recognizing much other than Comerica Park and Ford Field. But, hey, the game offers a flattering interpretation — a bustling, occupied metropolis.

Beyond the Detroit scenery, "Midnight Club 3" is a game for car nuts or speed freaks who don't need all the repair-manual minutiae of, say, "Gran Turismo 4."

In races, speed is the star and accidents are no big deal.



"MIDNIGHT CLUB 3: DUB EDITION"

★★★

out of four stars

Price: \$49.99

Players: 1-2, or online

up to 8

Web site: www.rockstargames.com/midnightclub3

Format: Xbox (also for PlayStation 2 and PlayStation Portable)

Category: Racing

Rating: E10+ (Everyone 10 and older)

The gameplay resembles "Grand Theft Auto," with the freedom to explore the streets and pick up challenges and organized races that boost you to greater fame and wealth in the offline career mode.

You can join several clubs tailored to your car tastes, such as groups for tuners and muscle cars. You can upgrade all of them with money earned. And each car class has its own unique ability, activated temporarily with a click down of the left thumbstick. Tuners can temporarily slow time to steer through major obstacles; bulky beasts can plow through traffic unimpeded and muscle cars can emanate an engine roar so loud it scatters traffic.

This is a nice feature, but I often found myself accidentally clicking the thumbstick down, because you also use it to steer your ride.

Online, this game offers a number of challenges for up to eight players, including tag, capture the flag and circuit races. Or you can just cruise around and admire the surroundings.

In fact, online is where you can go if you can't wait to unlock Detroit in the offline career mode. The city may not look entirely like home, but Joe's fist still looks pretty cool when you're blowing by at 100 m.p.h.

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RECENT RELEASES



"UNTOLD LEGENDS"

★★★★

Sony for PlayStation Portable, \$39.99. Rating: T (Teen).

This dazzling little gem for the small screen is one of the best in the first crop of games for Sony's new PlayStation Portable. It's everything a handheld adventure should be: easy to see, easy to play, fun to play alone or with other people and strikingly detailed.

"Legends" is a role-playing game — a traditional swords-and-sorcery title — put out by Sony Online Entertainment, who did a couple other little RPG titles like "Everquest" and "Champions of Norrath." You choose a character from one of four races and set off on an adventure that includes more than 100 levels of game world, 150 different bad guys to battle, hundreds of thousands of items to use and a shallow but entertaining storyline.

Each environment is incredibly detailed, despite the limited screen space. Rooms have intricate oriental rugs or stone floors or carvings. Your character is easily recognizable and reasonably lifelike, as are the monsters he or she fights, and all the rooms and outdoor spaces are completely in 3-D. Your view is the familiar isometric, 3/4-angle top-down perspective made famous by the "Baldur's Gate" series of console games, and it works well here to give you a broad view of the action.

Like most games in its class, the bulk of the action is hack and slash, with some spellcasting and limited healing to provide variety. It's repetitive, so the items and enemies and plot and places are what keep it interesting. RPG fans won't be let down, and others will probably get a kick out of all the different things to look at, even if there aren't all that many different things to do.

One of the best features of "Legends," however, is its cooperative play. "Legends" supports up to four players using the PSP's wireless capabilities. That's a lot of fun, though it requires all your friends to have a PSP and a copy of the game for themselves. But it's worth the effort to slash your way through the adventure together and run for the loot along the way.

By Heather Newman, Detroit Free Press



"COLD FEAR"

★★

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

Playing "Cold Fear" will give gamers a case of déjà vu. If you've played the likes of "Silent Hill," "Resident Evil" or any other games featuring zombies and mutants, then you get the gist of what "Cold Fear" offers.

You play U.S. Coast Guard officer Tom Hansen. He and his crew investigate a wayward Russian ship. Something mysterious has killed most of the crew. Eventually, your mates will suffer the same fate. In trying to unravel the ship's mystery, you have to fight off zombie crewmembers, mutants and other ghouls.

"Cold Fear" gets credit for making fighting challenging. It isn't a blast-'em-up, shoot-'em-up type of game. You have to plan your shooting attacks well, fight in close quarters without pulling the trigger and know when to cut your losses and just retreat. The game also makes excellent advantage of its environment. During fighting on deck, for instance, it gives a good feel of a rocking vessel. The wild swings affect your aim, which is crucial, because headshots are the best way to drop bad guys.

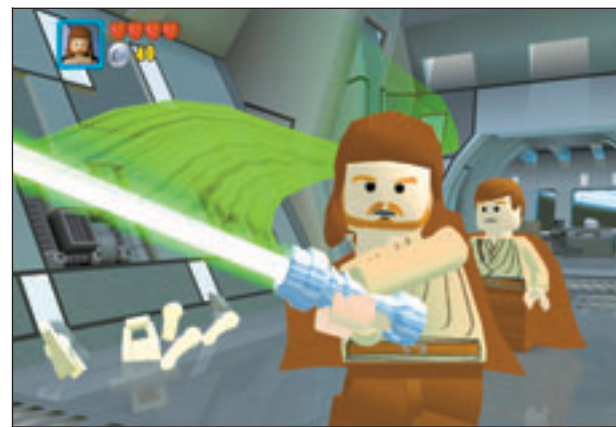
The learning curve is about 15 minutes. Once you master the over-the-shoulder camera angles, you're set to go.

Don't, however, expect to enjoy this game for long. The plot is unoriginal; the dialogue is OK, but not great; there isn't anything memorable about the music; and the backgrounds within the ship are dull and redundant.

One last gripe: The game's save option is annoying. You don't have free will to save progress. I played for about 30 minutes before I got to a computer-induced save point, much to my chagrin.

If you're new to the horror game genre, you'll probably get a kick out of "Cold Fear." It has a couple of scenes that will make you drop the joystick. But if you're well versed in the horror game field, give "Cold Fear" the cold shoulder.

By Al Toby, Detroit Free Press



"LEGO STAR WARS"

★★★★

Eidos for Xbox (also for PlayStation 2, Windows and Game Boy Advance), \$39.99. Rating: E (Everyone).

Darth Maul no longer frightens. With blockish legs ready for action, a round black-and-red head with dots for eyes, and a lightsaber in his cup-shaped hands, this Lego warrior evokes laughter, not fear.

By toying with the "Star Wars" franchise and building everything in the game — even the characters — from round-peg-topped Lego bricks, gamers are treated to a whimsical, entertaining romp that runs through the first three tales of the "Star Wars" saga (i.e., Episodes I, II and III) at light speed.

While jovial in appearance and its storytelling the cutscenes have no dialogue, instead relying on the characters' chuckle-inducing goofball facial expressions) the action does get a bit hectic, especially with all of the characters onscreen.

Jedi can deflect blaster shots with their lightsabers and hack up their foes. Others, like Padme, have blasters to defend themselves. Droids like R2-D2, on the other hand, can't fight but can help the heroes advance by hacking open locked doors. You — and a buddy, if you like — can switch between the characters onscreen with a tap of a button.

Many of the characters also have additional traits. For example, Jedi can use the force to build stairs or bridges out of Lego blocks to nab items otherwise unreachable.

Of course, this game is for kids, and as such, it won't take any Jedi powers to topple the game's starfighter battles and blaster-filled firefights. In fact, you can't really lose. If your character gets turned into Lego bits, you'll shortly reappear minus some of the goodies you've collected. And while the starfighter levels are a bit more frustrating — you have to replay parts of the action if you crash — they're not really all that challenging, either.

But with more than 30 playable characters from the movies and loads of goodies to unlock, "Lego Star Wars" is more than just kids' fodder. It's a great "Star Wars" game.

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. "Empire Earth 2," Windows. Teen.
2. "Area 51," Xbox. Mature.
3. "NBA Street Showdown," PlayStation Portable. Everyone.
4. "Resident Evil Outbreak 2," PlayStation 2. Mature.
5. "Predator: Concrete Jungle," PlayStation 2. Mature.
6. "Predator: Concrete Jungle," Xbox. Mature.

Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store