

Game On!

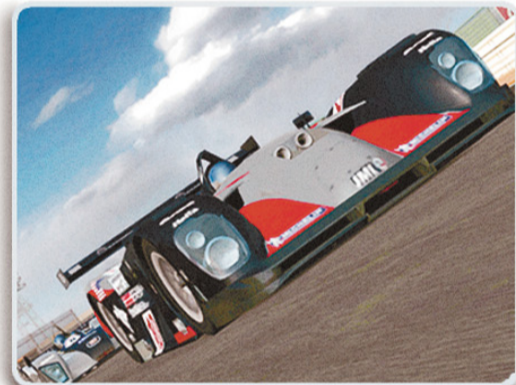
12J SUNDAY, MAY 22, 2005

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"FORZA MOTORSPORT"
 ★★ ★
 out of four
 Price: \$49.95
 Players: 1-2, up to 8 online
 Web site:
www.xbox.com/en-us/forza
 Format: Xbox
 Category: Racing simulation
 Rating: E (Everyone)



THAT'S ME IN YOUR REAR-VIEW MIRROR, EATING YOUR DUST



JIM SCHAEFER
 FREE PRESS
 GAME MASTER

I am terrible at "Forza Motorsport." One race performance landed me in 32,758th place. I am not exaggerating.

How can this be? Well, if you play this game over Xbox Live, it tracks most everything you do, ranking your performance against every gamer, everywhere, who ran the same race.

Obviously, this is not my kind of game. But if you're into racing simulation of the highest quality, this very well could be yours.

"Forza" takes a more serious approach to cars, and tuning them up, than any other Xbox title out there, rivaling the PlayStation 2's "Gran Turismo" series.

I can't tuna fish, let alone analyze the telemetry of my video game vehicle to figure out how to make it run better. But — get this — telemetry is an actual feature in "Forza."

You can watch replays of your races and switch on the telemetry option, which monitors virtually every move your car made. It shows you things like RPM, torque, tire load, camber, steering adjustments, angle and intensity of forces on the vehicle's body, plus many more things.

The upgrade tools go way beyond tricking out your car with style and flash (though you can do that, too). Here, there are many things to tune, from tire pressure to exhaust systems to suspensions, chassis, bumpers and more.

The result is absolute true-to-life road racing, right

down to the tracks, where the settings are so realistic you wouldn't know they weren't computer-generated (were it not for the people in the crowd, who resemble two-dimensional cardboard cutouts).

"Forza" is big, offering a portfolio of more than 250 licensed real-world vehicles, from super cars to everyday cars.

And, man, is this game difficult, even on the easy setting. I prefer games with unreal speed, power boosts and shortcuts. I just couldn't seem to get a grip on "Forza" until I played around with different cars, perusing the six classes, from standard production cars like your basic Honda Civic to race cars like the Audi R8.

I didn't win a first-place trophy until I got behind the wheel of a Dodge Viper GTS. Thank goodness for American muscle. I was able to keep the Viper steady and straight enough to win.

This game has a great feature called the "suggested line" that helps the driving considerably. Purists can toggle it off, but I loved how it displays the best route on the track. It is green when you should accelerate, yellow when you should slow and red when you should brake. The colors change with your speed.

Career Mode is deep and has another great option: You can play online. This allows you to race other real-live players, and even trade cars with them.

But don't expect to call me out for a ride anytime soon. I'm still stuck in the pits.

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GAME BITS

By Heather Newman

E3 trade show delivers some gaming surprises

LOS ANGELES — The Electronic Entertainment Expo flooded the streets of L.A. with game company employees this week, as virtually every game firm in the world showed off its upcoming products at the industry's largest trade show.

Walking around the Los Angeles Convention Center, I saw a lot of more of the same — sequels to games you've already played, different-colored versions of accessories you already own. But there were also a few surprises.

N-Gage games to leap to phones

Nokia, makers of the slow-selling N-Gage cell phone and handheld gaming device, finally acknowledged that gamers just haven't taken to the expensive, taco-shaped unit.

The N-Gage underwent a redesign over the last year, but it hasn't been enough to compete with the gorillas of the handheld market, like Nintendo's Game Boy Advance or Sony's PlayStation Portable.



"Glimmerati" is a stylized racing game originally designed for the N-Gage gaming device but coming soon for Nokia phones.

Still, market research shows that we like to play games on our phones. So Nokia did the logical thing: It's expanding N-Gage game capabilities to other smart phones, probably from the company's 60 series, coming out later this year.

You won't see the big ad push until

2006, but the company is quietly building in the ability to play N-Gage games on some of its phones as early as this fall.

'Duty' calls twice

Activision showed off two new completely different versions of "Call of Duty" coming out later this year. "Call of Duty 2," for PC and the upcoming Xbox 360 console, promises an immersive experience with detail never before seen in the World War II shooter series.

A level I saw showed you interacting with enemies and squad mates in a hyper-realistic attempt to take over gun emplacements at the top of a cliff. All around you, dozens of soldiers faced off against each other, reacting in an incredibly lifelike way to the threats they posed to each other.

Throw a grenade and the enemy runs away from it, making it an effective way to flush out folks who have settled into spots where you can't see them. People duck, provide cover for one another, run away, advance and shout realistic advice to each other during a fight.

The physics — what breaks and how, how people react when they've been shot — were spot-on.

Also showing was "Call of Duty 2: Big Red One" for current-generation consoles. It wasn't as hectic and people-filled as the next-generation version — current consoles don't have the guts for that — but it showed detail and sharpness that have once again advanced what we can play on current machines. The PlayStation 2 version I saw in action looked every bit as good as last year's Xbox games.

Mad Catz is wired to the 360

I also got a chance to see Mad Catz's new Xbox 360 controllers — or to be precise, resin mockups of the wired versions.

You read that right: wired. The Mad Catz rep said that Microsoft hasn't yet let people create wireless controllers for the 360 and may not until next year. They've been told it will be holiday 2006 before a full product line can go on sale, even though the 360 itself ships with a wireless controller this fall. That may mean fewer choices for people who shop for the new console this year.

Analysts say that about 40 percent of us use wireless controllers right now. That number is expected to jump to around 60 percent by the end of the year.

As for the wired controllers, they showed very little change over the current generation Xbox in terms of button placement. It looks like there may be an extra set of shoulder buttons (a la PS2), and the headset jack may be on the bottom rather than the top of the controller. Otherwise, it's alpha-and-d-pad business as usual.

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RECENT RELEASES



"GUILD WARS"
 ★★ ★★
 NCsoft for Windows, \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).
 Great visuals, lots of opportunity for both solo and group play within the game's vast world, plus an intense player-versus-player (PvP) arena are likely to keep "Guild Wars" healthy for quite a while in the cutthroat market for gamers' dollars — especially when there's no additional monthly fee.

The game's remarkable range of creative options hit us as we sat down to create our first characters. Unlike many games that require players to start at the weakest level and earn skills through long hours in training missions, "Guild Wars" offers the immediate option of jumping into the fiercest combat with a high-level character, protected by some of the best armor available in the game.

Then we had a choice of wandering around on our own or entering a quest mode in which we joined with the countless other players and entered the lands of Ascalon in a group. In the PvP zone, players can fight in teams, so we would join the fray in a team of four, battling another quartet of players.

The interface is easy to learn, especially for veterans, and after just a few battles we started to perfect our techniques, learning how to use our most potent skills. Choosing a character's blend of skills is one of the best strategic challenges. The game limits each character to a mix of eight skills, and it's that chemistry of skills that very often can transform a looming loss into victory.

The role-playing portion of "Guild Wars" doesn't rank with other, costlier games in this genre, such as "Everquest 2" or "World of Warcraft." It felt quite linear in its quests and didn't give us the broad, expansive feeling of some other games.

Still, we were overwhelmed by the huge range of top-quality gameplay that's available here for \$49.99 with no online fees. "Guild Wars" is a cool concept pulled off with creative flair by the folks at NCsoft. It's a great choice for months of adventure.

By **David Crumm** and **Benjamin Crumm**, 16, for the Detroit Free Press



"STAR WARS EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH"
 ★★
 LucasArts for Xbox (also for PlayStation 2), \$49.99. Rating: T (Teen).
 My lightsaber crackles with zest as I mow down yet another battledroid. Or was it a clo-entrooper? Maybe it was a nameless, faceless generic jedi? I forget. The hours I spent racing through this game are a blur. While I distinctly remember having fun when I started my journey (that "Star Wars" opening fanfare gets me riled up every time), when the twin suns of Tatooine set on the conclusion, the enjoyment was drastically pared down.

All of the elements should be in place for a great game. The story roughly mirrors that of the film; it begins with Anakin and Obi-Wan's efforts to rescue the chancellor of the Republic from Gen. Grievous. The action that follows is packed with plenty of Jedi with sabers and powers galore, clips from the film, hordes of opponents to hack and slash, and bosses — characters like Count Dooku, General Grievous, Mace Windu — to duel. Unfortunately, this game is also strong with the dark side.

Flawed gameplay that borders on monotonous is this game's menace. While the lightsaber fighting scheme is actually fairly deep, especially when you mix in grapple attacks, force tricks and counterattacks on top of counterattacks, I rarely used most of these goodies. I ended up blocking almost nonstop, waiting to unleash the same simple combo I'd used over and over since the game's start. When I tried the fancier stuff, I got walloped.

I was even disappointed by the game's audio. The voice acting, performed by the sound-alikes who worked on the fantastic "Clone Wars" cartoon, is rigidly stiff. Moreover, the game's music was pieced together from the scores of the other films, not the somber and soulful "Revenge of the Sith" themes.

"Revenge of the Sith" looks slick and does plenty of things right. But "Star Wars" fans would be wise to rent this one before speeding off to the store to buy a copy.

By **Ryan Huschka**, Detroit Free Press



"STILL LIFE"
 ★★
 Microids/Adventure Co. for Windows, \$29.99 (also for Xbox, \$19.99). Rating: M (Mature).
 This slick but inconsistent puzzle-driven adventure begins with the discovery of a naked tattooed woman dead in the bathtub of a crumbling tenement, the fifth victim of a Chicago serial killer.

Detective Victoria McPherson has no leads, but she soon makes an interesting discovery: Her grandfather Gus had investigated similar murders in Prague 75 years before.

A painter turned detective, Gus was the protagonist of Microids's 2002 "Post Mortem." This time he shares the lead with Victoria as the game alternates between the two cases.

The cinematic animated scenes propelling the story are flashy and stylish, but the game's puzzles — some of which have little to do with the story — are a mixed lot. Several of the best involve locks, as when you go through an elaborate lock-picking exercise.

There are other clever ideas: Some, like seeking clues in old photographs, are ingenious, but others, like Victoria's Internet search, fall from bad implementation.

The Xbox version is, unfortunately, vastly inferior. Every time you walk from one room to another, there is a load time of a couple of seconds, making the game sluggish.

Even worse, the graphics are clearly designed to be viewed on a sharp computer monitor from a foot away, rather than on a television set across the room from your sofa. You will have to move close to the screen to read journals and study puzzles. This is assuming you have a digital input on your television set; if your Xbox is attached through the coaxial cable, the fine details are so obscured that at least one puzzle is virtually unsolvable.

At times "Still Life" is terrific, but just when you are having fun a poorly thought-out puzzle bursts your bubble. And be prepared to be disappointed: Apparently the game's big mystery will be revealed, if at all, in a sequel.

By **Charles Herold**, New York Times

NEW THIS WEEK

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

1. "Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones," Game Boy Advance, Everyone.
2. "Star Wars Galaxies: The Total Experience," Windows, Teen.
3. "WarioWare: Twisted!," Game Boy Advance, Everyone.
4. "Postal 2: Apocalypse Weekend Expansion Pack," Windows, Mature.
5. "Boiling Point" (DVD), Windows, Mature.
6. "Metal Slug 4 & 5," PlayStation 2, Teen.

Source: Amazon.com Video Games Store