

MADNESS BREWING

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E3 2011: The Lame Duck Conference

E3 wrapped last week in Los Angeles with no real innovative ideas to remain profitable in the long-term or get back into the black (which happens to be most of the companies). It may have been fun for gamers to see trailers of sequels of all their favourite franchises but investors—the financial backers of these companies—watched the conference with trepidation (or in the case of Nintendo, downright fear).

There were salvos fired all across the board even before the show started. Microsoft opened the pre-festivities by announcing that they were staying the course. There was little in the way of anything new. They showed off the new *Gears of War* game which we were all expecting and ended the show by announcing a new Halo game. That, in itself, should tell you what's going on behind the scenes at Microsoft's Xbox division, They had said countless times that the *Halo* franchise was going to be ended yet they keep bringing the franchise back as it's the only 1st party title (actually it's technically a 2nd party title) that people will buy without hesitation.

The Xbox is a two-trick pony that is starting to look pretty sickly. The *Halo* franchise has been surpassed by Call of Duty as the must-own multiplayer FPS. Halo still ends up selling millions of copies but it is routinely outsold by many franchises like *Call of Duty* and *Mario*. While Halo hasn't fallen into the realm of an "also-ran" game series, it struggles to stay on the minds of gamers well beyond the first few weeks of release. The games are barely profitable for

only the reason that it's a Microsoft-published title so it doesn't need to pay the license fees associated with being published for the Xbox 360 and that it does sell several million copies (you could argue that it might be on the books that the money does get taken away due to licensing costs but it really is a case of money going from the left pocket to the right pocket). The games are expensive to produce costing tens of millions on top of multi-million dollar marketing campaigns. This is not a sustainable business model unless they are able to reinvent the wheel with Halo (which, after several sequels, it has become evident that this probably isn't going to happen). The profit margins will continue to shrink even though development costs will go down since these costs will not shrink by much as fans of the series are going to demand a high-quality experience; something that can't be phoned in.

The other part of Microsoft's strategy was a big part of their E3 show. Kinect was out in full force during their presser. Retailers are happy with the push for Kinect as the machines have been flying off the shelves. Sure, gamers might have not been happy that Microsoft dedicated time to games like *Disneyland Adventure* and *Sesame Street* when they could have showed more *Gears of War* footage but considering that Kinect is as hot as it is going to get right now, Microsoft made the right call in pushing the product and showing retailers and investors that they've got the hottest thing in gaming right now and they will

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MADNESSBREWING.COM Coming Up This Week

Thursday

- Weekly Video Game Podcast
- Donkey Kong Country (SNES) Review
- The Social Network (Film) Review

Friday

- Weekly Movie Newsletter
- The Fighter (Film) Review
- Toy Story 3 (Film) Review

Saturday

- The American (Film) Review
- Decimation X (Xbox 360 Arcade) Review

Sunday

- Centipede (Arcade) Review
- The Town (Film) Review

Monday

- Salt (Film) Review
- Space Invaders (Arcade) Review

continue to support it as much as possible

There should be some worry that the Kinect's momentum is starting to slow down quickly. There's not much the device can do for core games. I'm sure Microsoft has enough creative people to come up with a multitude of mini-game compilations that would seem reasonable fresh enough to keep releasing software for a good while. The problem is that few have been able to make something out of Kinect other than producing mini-game diversions. Some core titles are taking advantage of the Kinect's capabilities to offer supplemental content but these additions are not required for the game nor do they add enough to warrant core gamers to rush out to buy a Kinect in the first place.

Much like the Wii, Microsoft probably has one good holiday season with the Kinect before people are ready to move on. The bread-and-butter of the Xbox are the core games while Kinect was a way of getting people who have never played a video game to get into gaming. The problem though is that while Kinect has been selling well, it has not buoyed Xbox 360 systems. Most likely the only reason why Xbox 360 systems have been selling at a marginally better rate than last year is because of price drops, bundling of different software, and retailer specials (there have been a number of specials in North America where the console was up to 50% off its normal price).

It seems Microsoft has no real strategy on how to migrate casual Kinect users to playing Halo or how they can continue profitability without relying on Kinect. Kinect was a big reason for Microsoft to post a profit in their Xbox division (although it's hard to determine exactly how much profit they made on the Xbox as there isn't a specific Xbox division but a computer entertainment division). Without Kinect, the only major source of profit is Xbox Live and even then the profit is marginal. While it is bringing in over \$100 million in revenue a month, it's not like it's a two bit operation. Microsoft pours

tens of millions into Xbox Live each month to ensure that everything works well and is secure; not to mention the cost of purchasing and maintaining infrastructure like servers.

The only thing to come out of this E3 show for Microsoft was that this year will still be a good year for Microsoft. Not an amazing year like Nintendo had for the first couple of years in the Wii life-cycle but a strong enough year that they will continue to operate at a profit. After the entire E3 event, it felt like the only company that was assured to remain and stay financially in the black would be Microsoft.

While Microsoft's conference was upbeat, Sony almost felt sombre. It felt like someone died and that people were trying to cheer each other up. It's no longer happy days for Sony as it is taking a beating on all fronts. The Playstation 3 is still selling well in North America but it is still sitting a distant 3rd in the console race (although recently it has been beating the Wii on a monthly basis). Blu-Ray has failed to catch on as much as Sony liked and it still barely has over 10% market penetration (the highest plausible estimates I've seen have it at 15% while the lowest are at 11%). 3D seems to be dead-on-arrival as people are balking at the high costs of both the television sets and the glasses required to watch programming.

The biggest elephant in the room during Sony's presser though was the Playstation Network outage. To their credit they did address it immediately and went back to apologizing about it several times. The problem was that the only thing they did was apologize. Giving free games away is fine and all but they did nothing to calm fears by stating that they have gotten to the bottom of the situation and have tied up all the loose ends so that this problem doesn't happen in the future.

Sony continued to ram 3D down our throats without a care that we're gagging on it. Sony can say all they want that they are the only system that has a full 3D line-up but unfortunately nobody cares. The

segment of the gaming population that thinks 3D is a priority is probably the same number of people that thought the Virtual Boy was the next big thing in gaming even after the migraines.

Aside from their new portable hardware, there wasn't much to their presentation. This is from a company sitting dead last in the current console wars and is losing billions. That's not a typo. Sony lost billions last year with their gaming division being hugely responsible for that loss. Forecasts show that it doesn't look better for this coming year either. It's like that *Far Cry* trailer where the guy kept repeating the so-called definition of insanity. Sony just doesn't get it that they can't keep doing the same thing over and over again and expect a much different result.

The most important piece of Sony's show was their new portable system, the PS Vita. While I wouldn't call it a beast (it's more powerful than the 3DS by approx. 30% on the CPU side), it's no slouch of a system either. It has tons of features that many people would appreciate such as: two cameras, MP3 and video playback, Wi-Fi capabilities, and dual analog sticks (a first on a portable device). The screen is not as wide as the PSP but it still has a widescreen display that is more along the lines of a standard widescreen television. Sony is looking to support it quite a bit with many of its big first-party franchises supporting it like *Uncharted* and *LittleBigPlanet* on deck. The games look pretty and for \$249, the price looks extremely pretty for consumers.

However, there are several problems right off the bat. The system does a lot but in the end it is still a handheld system. This means that people are not going to be buying it to play 50-hour games and are not going to be willing to spend more than \$40 on a game. For games like *Uncharted* to do well on the system, they'll either have to sell a ton of copies because the production costs are going to be ridiculously high (compared to the costs of other games on the handheld market). For

example, if a full-fledged *Call of Duty* were to do well on the PSP, Activision would have to sell approximately 3 million to even make back their money. Even if you're talking about a game with a third of a budget and needing 1 million to break even (think your *Need for Speeds* and *Medal of Honors*), that's still asking for a lot considering that few games on the PSP actually surpassed 1 million in sales.

Because of this, there's not going to be much chance that there will be many publishers who are going to be willing to put a lot of time and energy into a game. Chances are the current trend of publishers supporting their console games that provide smaller experiences on the handheld-market will continue. Even though Ken Levine says there's going to be a *Bioshock* game for the PSP, unless they release it at launch, they may not like the software sales and pull the plug or offer a reworked version of a previous *Bioshock* game. I could be wrong though; they may blindly continue with a *Bioshock* game and take a giant gamble. Few companies are going to be willing to do that. That's why Sony didn't talk all that much about 3rd party support for the device during the conference.

Sony needs to get a clue. It's like they completely forgot why people play video games in the first place. They want to be the jack of all trades but they're not even the mediocre of any. If they are going to continue in the games division then they need to start working on making a console that plays video games. The big problem with the Playstation 3 is that it feels like a Blu-Ray player and media hub that also happens to play video games. This is in contrast to the Xbox 360 that feels like it is a video game machine first and it has a whole bunch of value-added stuff thrown in (and even more stuff included with Xbox Live).

The greatest problem that Sony will have to face over the next couple of years is that they don't have anything to compete with Xbox Live. The Playstation Network and its trophy system isn't as good as Xbox Live and its achievements and

gamerscore. However, it's not like Sony can hope it all disappears with a new console because there's no way that Microsoft is going to get rid of that golden goose for their next console.

Nintendo, which has proven industry watchers wrong again and again, showed off both tons of stuff and not very much all at the same time during their presser. They only showcased six games; five of which were for the 3DS. A few titles like *Super Mario* and *Mario Kart 3DS* will not only move systems but sell in the millions if Nintendo keeps to their statement that they'll be out in time for the holiday season. The only other title showed off in great detail was *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*; a title that we know is coming this year and didn't look all that different from when we saw it last year.

The biggest question mark going in was what was Nintendo going to show us with their new console. Even though most people were guessing touchscreen interface, people were still taken aback by the Wii U (and not just by the silly name). Some people like the controller (such as myself) which has a seven inch touchscreen smack in the middle of it with the traditional analog sticks and control buttons on the left and right sides. It basically looks like your average controller with a giant screen in the middle. It sort of looks like what controllers on future Dreamcast systems would have looked like as it was the first major system that actually had a screen in its controller (via a visual memory unit that the owner would have to buy and plug-in separately).

The system will have slightly more horsepower under the hood than both the Xbox 360 and the Playstation 3. Many analysts would groan and say that Nintendo missed their time and should have released a more powerful console a couple of years ago instead of 2012. The greater issue, in my opinion, is that this additional horsepower will never be properly utilized outside of a few first-party games. Considering that most of the hardcore user bases is either on the Xbox 360 or the Playstation 3,

most players are going to continue to buy their hardcore games on that system; especially Xbox 360 owners since they're hooked on Xbox Live memberships. Therefore it will most likely not be in the best interest of developers and publishers to push for ports that take full advantage of the Wii U's capabilities. If they're only going to sell between a quarter to half-a-million copies on the Wii U and anywhere between 5 to 10 times more on the Xbox 360, then companies are going to make games with the Xbox 360 in mind and port the game to the Wii U.

Even though Microsoft and Sony are a few years away from releasing new hardware, Nintendo only has a small window to get a huge audience. The Wii U, even with the touchscreen, offers little incentive for players to actually buy one. Chances are that if the Wii U is successful, then Sony and Microsoft will copy some of the Wii U's tricks for the next console. This means that if Sony and Microsoft reveal new consoles in 2014, Nintendo will be forced to follow suit or be left in the dust.

There was no price announced for the Wii U which may mean that Nintendo is hoping to release it at a very low price to get people to buy it and not feel angry if they're going to have to buy a new Nintendo console in 2014. Then again, Nintendo doesn't sell products at a loss to gain market share and that controller looks pretty expensive so who knows what they're planning.

Nintendo is taking a big risk with the Wii U. It's not because it's a bad system but it's because they're releasing a new system outside of the window that is set by trends in the industry. Usually, new consoles come out within a year of each other. The last company to work outside this window was Sega and look where they are now; out of the console race and bleeding money. The Wii U could be a fantastic system but then again so was the Dreamcast. The next eighteen months are going to be very interesting for the entire industry.

Nintendo Rebounding and Microsoft Losing Momentum Going Into the Slow Summer Season

Much ado was made about the poor start out of the gate for the Nintendo 3DS. It wasn't a runaway success as Nintendo would have liked or many had expected. Some complained that it was the high price point or that people didn't care about a portable system where games cost \$40 compared to mobile gaming where games cost a couple of bucks. It turns out the big problem the 3DS was facing was the poor game library.

According to VGChartz.com The first week of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D*'s sales have been incredible. The title sold over 200k copies on a system that barely has an install base of 1.5 million units. At this point in time, nearly 1 in 6 3DS owners picked up this game.

Another fascinating thing is that had *Ocarina of Time* not come out this week, software sales would have just been over 50k in sales; a number not much higher than the Playstation 2 which is all but a dead system in North America.

While *Ocarina of Time* is considered one of the best games of all time, it's not like people who wanted to buy this game have not been able to since 1997. The game is currently available on the Wii Virtual Console for \$10. Before that, the game was offered on the Gamecube through several promotions.

3DS owners are thirsting for games. Sales for *Star Fox 64 3DS* should be strong if this is true. Even if *Star Fox 64 3DS* sells half the amount of *Ocarina of Time* did, it will still have sold more copies than *Star Fox Command* (the last and only handheld Star Fox game) in its first couple of weeks. Keep in mind that *Star Fox Command* was released at a time when the Nintendo DS already had an install base of over 20 million in North America.

The 3DS's game library has been pretty light since its launch. With only a few games worth buying

and nothing worth buying the system for, it makes sense that software and hardware sales are going to be light.

Apparently that is going to change with Nintendo announcing several major titles that they say will be released prior to the end of the year. This year's major Mario title will be coming out on the 3DS as well there will be a Mario Kart game on tap for the system. Third parties are beginning to finally show that they are supporting the system by releasing games (instead of saying that they're supporting the system by releasing a couple of quick ports at launch and then complaining about poor sales and lack of support by Nintendo).

Nintendo Wii sales are back up to where they were last year which shows that the system is still healthy and has at least one good holiday season left in it. The problem though is that with only *Zelda: Skyward Sword* as the sole game in their holiday line-up, they may be hoping on selling legacy titles to make up for the lack of games.

Microsoft is still doing well although it appears Kinect sales are slowing down. Sales for Kinect are down to about 30k a week and retailers are already discounting them by \$50 in some places (although this may be a Microsoft rebate deal for retailers much like they have done the last couple of spring seasons with \$100 temporary price cuts on Xbox 360 consoles).

That's not to say that Kinect is dying but there were no Kinect titles in VGChartz's top ten for this tracking week. In fact, the first title aside from *Kinect Adventures* that pops up on the list is at number 35 (*Dance Central* with 13k units sold). Still, the hardcore audience is with Microsoft as the system still had three games in the top ten. The problem with that though is the oldest title out of the three is *Duke Nukem Forever* which is only two weeks old as of the tracking week. Outside of the top ten are more Nintendo titles.

Another strike against Microsoft is Playstation 3 sales are almost tied with the Xbox 360 week-to-week. Playstation 3 system sales

are just more than 10% behind the Xbox 360 but considering where they were last year and how much bad P.R. they've had in 2011, it's still a big surprise.

Actually, the only real positive that can be said about Microsoft is that the Xbox 360 is moving more software than anyone else. Software titles are still selling slower on the Playstation 3. The PS3 only has one title in the top ten with *F.E.A.R. 3*. It opened in the eighth spot while the Xbox 360 version opened in second with 71k.

At least that's still better than the numbers being posted by the Playstation Portable which didn't even have a title in the top forty and barely beat out the Playstation 2 in system sales.

Top Ten Games (and New Releases) Chart for Weekend Ending July 3rd

(All data is from VGChartz.com)

Rank	Title	System	Weekly Sales	Weeks in Release
1	Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D	3DS	215k	new
2	F.E.A.R. 3	Xbox 360	71k	new
3	Mario Kart Wii	Wii	62k	165
4	Zumba Fitness	Wii	55k	32
5	Dungeon Siege	Xbox 360	52k	new
6	Wii Sports Resort	Wii	51k	100
7	Wii Sports	Wii	47k	240
8	F.E.A.R. 3	PS3	43k	new
9	Wii Fit Plus	Wii	41k	90
10	Duke Nukem Forever	Xbox 360	43k	2
14	Dungeon Siege III	PS3	35k	new
15	Cars 2: The Video Game	DS	35k	new
22	Cars 2: The Video Game	Wii	24k	new
26	Shadows of the Damned	Xbox 360	16k	new
27	Cars 2: The Video Game	Xbox 360	21k	new
28	Shadows of the Damned	PS3	14k	new
31	Cars 2: The Video Game	PS3	14k	new

Systems Sales Chart for June 25th, 2011

(All data is from VGChartz.com)

Rank	System	Weekly Sales	Weekly Software Sales	Lifetime Sales
1	Wii	85k	905k	42.0m
2	Xbox 360	70k	922k	32.1m
3	Playstation 3	62k	755k	20.0m
4	DS	45k	585k	55.7m
5	3DS	45k	268k	1.6m
6	PSP	18k	108k	22.1m
7	Playstation 2	14k	44k	55.9m

Grading the Nintendo 3DS eShop Virtual Console After the First Month

Alleyway

Before they became a dime-a-dozen, brick and ball games were something that people got excited about. It was a great game initially for the original Game Boy but time has not been kind to this title. Fundamentally there is nothing wrong with this game; if it was still 1990, I would tell you that this is a must-own title. The problem is that it is 2011 and you can get dozens of *Alleyway*-type games for free on most portable devices (except for the Nintendo and Sony portables). If you are a huge fan of the genre (meaning that you love this genre so much that you're planning on naming or have already named your first child 'Paddle') then you'll probably have a good time with this title. Actually, even if you're only a casual fan of this genre, you may feel like you get your couple of bucks worth out of this game. It's a decent little game but there are better ones out there and they're usually cheaper to get too.

Donkey Kong ('94)

Before *Donkey Kong Country*, the big ape was the nemesis of Mario. After a few years of nothing from the franchise, Nintendo released this game to showcase its new Super Game Boy attachment for the Super Nintendo. Unfortunately, *Donkey Kong* doesn't come with any of the enhancements that came with using it in conjunction with the SNES peripheral. That's ok because *Donkey Kong* provided some of the best gameplay on the portable wonderbrick. The game combined Mario style platforming (as well as including some aerial moves for Mario to master) with some very clever puzzle design. Some of the later levels of the game provides for a strong challenge. The colour might be missing from the game but the gameplay still shines and playing through the game's near 100 levels

will give you hours of fun and satisfaction.

Kirby's Dream Land

The only reason I can't give a ringing endorsement to this game is that it is incredibly short. Yes, portable games are supposed to be short but you could beat this game on your lunch break (and that's after eating your lunch). If you don't mind that, then you're getting one of the best looking games on the original Game Boy with some very interesting gameplay. *Kirby* is a different type of platformer than most as instead of stomping on enemies, you suck them up and fire them at other enemies. This isn't run and gun; it's suck and blow. There are only four levels and a final boss level (where you revisit a small portion of each level and fight each level boss once more). The final boss fight with King Dedede still ranks as one of my favourites of all time. It's good fun but it won't take long to finish and the game isn't interesting enough (aside from the Dedede battle) to play more than two or three times.

The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening

Link's Awakening may not be the best Zelda game and you could probably make a laundry list of things that one would dislike about the game but despite all that it is still a title worth downloading. It comes with a premium cost as it is the Game Boy Color version of the game. Still, even though it is a pocket Zelda, it will still take many hours to complete. Think of it as a Link to the Past "light". It has some neat things that were a series first (like jumping) but it also had some annoying things (the musical score when you picked up a power-up). Until they release the *Oracle Zelda* games, this one is a must-own for any action-RPG fan out there.

Super Mario Land

Even though this game is one of the best in the entire Game Boy library, this game is something that you wouldn't expect Nintendo or any

other company would use to showcase a brand new service. The game looks like it belongs on a wristwatch from the 1980s making it look graphically inferior to 99% of all the other games that ever came out on a Nintendo portable system. Despite its elementary graphical design, *Super Mario Land* is one of Mario's finest outings. It plays like a traditional Mario game with added elements (shoot-'em-up levels, for example). If you own a Nintendo 3DS and you haven't downloaded this game, you should get your system repossessed. For less than the price of most everything now a days, you can play one of the best handheld titles ever; either for the first time or the umpteenth time.

(A full review of this game is available in this issue)

Radar Mission

Looking far away and squinting at it, *Radar Mission* seems like a good deal since it is two games in one. However, it is a very light package all things considering. The first part of the game is essentially a Battleship clone. It has some interesting power-ups added to it but it's not a satisfying experience. I'd rather play real Battleship than this. The second part is a submarine shooter that is very fun but can be completed in well less than an hour. Even though it's only a couple of bucks, this title is an easy one to avoid because you will most likely play with it for less than an hour and never think twice about it. I'm a little hesitant to be so harsh on the game because I remember having a blast playing this game when I was a kid with my family. However, considering how many great titles there are out there for the 3DS either on the Virtual Console or DSiWare, it's hard to give it any praise.

Tennis

This game was released during a time when people were willing to pay top dollar for a generic sports title with next-to-no features. That's not to say that *Tennis* is a bad game but there

isn't much you can really do. There isn't anything grand about the game like tournaments or career tracking. It's just tennis. It's fun a couple of times but the novelty of video tennis starts to wear off quickly without any gimmicks. It may have been a blast in the late-80s and early-90s when portable video games were new and quirky. Now it's just a mediocre tennis game. You could probably download a better tennis game for your phone or MP3 player for half the price of this title. Again, it's one of those titles that I remember enjoying quite a bit when I was a kid but now wouldn't pay anything for it.

Summary

Games that you should have already downloaded:

- Donkey Kong
- The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening
- Super Mario Land

Download if curious:

- Alleyway
- Kirby's Dream Land

Save your money:

- Radar Mission
- Tennis

Video Game Reviews

Dr. Mario Online Rx
Nintendo Wii (WiiWare)
2008
Developed by: Akira
Published by: Nintendo

If the NES version of *Tetris* had multiplayer, then perhaps it would have been the king puzzle game in my house growing up. Instead, *Dr. Mario* was the game that caused intense battles between family members in my household as challenges were made and thumbs ached. With the exception of the Gamecube, Nintendo has ported *Dr. Mario* over to ever home console they've ever made. The Wii is no exception and it's version of *Dr.*

Mario, titled *Dr. Mario Express Rx*, is probably the best edition ever made.

The concept of the game is probably even simpler than *Tetris*; you need to kill all the viruses on the screen by dropping three pills from the top of the screen to the bottom of the same colour that match the virus. Pills come in two conjoined pieces that may or may not be the same colour. There are only three colours so the combinations are not limitless. Players can rotate the pills to try and make sure they fit where they want them to. Once three pills of the same colour hit the same colour virus, those pills and the virus disappear. Once all the viruses are cleared, it's on to the next level. This keeps going until the player can't keep up and fills up the entire screen to the top with pills.

There are four play modes: single-player, multiplayer, Flash mode and the Virus Buster mode (which can be played solo or cooperatively with someone else). The single-player mode has the player trying to compete for the highest score. The high score tracking is limited to the top score so it's not like most arcade games that have a top five or top ten list. It works in that it settles the argument on who ranks the best in single-player but it would have also been nice to have included the "close but no cigar" scores too. There are no online leaderboards so you can only be the champion of your own Wii and that's about it.

The multiplayer mode is what will keep people playing this game. The idea is to clear all the viruses before your opponent. The action is fun and frantic as the competition heats up. The elimination of viruses through successful chain reactions will cause additional pills to fall on your opponent's playing field which can completely turn their strategy upside-down. If you don't have any friends nearby, no problem because you can play the game online against others (either against friends you know or against complete strangers). In multiple play sessions, I experienced no lag at all making for a seamless experience. If your friends are cheap and they don't want to

spring for the game, no problem because you can send them a demo version to allow them to play against you online. If the Internet scares you, no problem because you can play against a computer opponent. The multiplayer option is the best mode of the game and it doesn't matter what your situation is because you can still play it either way.

Additionally, unlike the single-player game, the multiplayer mode has a leaderboard system similar to *Mario Kart Wii*, *Tetris DS*, and other Nintendo-published Wii/DS online titles. Players start with an online score of 5000 which goes up and down depending on wins and losses (the calibre of opponents affects the score too). It works well as players who have a run of bad games will be able to redeem themselves against players at the same skill level as them (if they're available online). It also means that if someone is below 5000, it doesn't necessarily mean that they have a winning percentage of below .500. It's a neat little system that keeps it fun for casual players and addictive for hardcore players trying to get as high a score as possible.

The Flash mode has players trying to eliminate three specific flashing viruses as quickly as possible. The Brain Buster mode is a neat diversion that allows players to move the viruses using the Wiimote's motion controls instead of the d-pad. Both modes are gimmicky fun but after a few times it begins to wear thin.

Speaking of the controls, the game's controls are rock solid. The Wiimote is held NES style with the d-pad moving the viruses and the 1 and 2 buttons rotating the viruses. It's not complicated at all (if you're at all familiar with *Tetris*, it's similar and actually even easier to control). The controls are tight and there's never the feeling that the game made a mistake because you swear you pressed the button just before you saw the game over screen. If there's a mistake, it's you who made it and not the controls.

The graphics are fine but they're not going to wow anyone.

Considering that this is a single-frame game and that the only thing that the player is manipulating is simple-coloured pills, there isn't really any opportunity to make the graphics all that fancy. Remember, this is a Mario game and not *Geometry Wars* so fancy light effects wouldn't do the game any favours. Everything looks clean and polished which is the only thing that's important with this title.

The soundtrack is great. The original *Dr. Mario* music was a pleasure to listen to back on the NES even when it sped up once it became apparent that you're grasping to survive and trying to hold off seeing the game over screen. The original tunes are back although they have been spiffed up a bit. There's also an additional track that was introduced in the Nintendo 64 version. Aside from *Tetris*, this may be the best music in a traditional puzzle video game.

Even though this is the best version of *Dr. Mario* there is, it's not without its faults. This version does not have four-player multiplayer compared to the Nintendo 64 version that did. Additionally, there is no voice system to send trash talk to opponents. Mind you, this game came out before the Wii Speak peripheral was released. However, considering that the focus of the game is the online multiplayer (it's in the title), Nintendo should have held off on releasing this game by a couple of months to take advantage of the Wii Speak peripheral (it hit store shelves a couple months after the release of this game). Another idea would have been for Nintendo to have released either a patch or an updated version for owners of this game to download for free that would have allowed for WiiSpeak support. These are minor problems but they would have made a great game even better.

The WiiWare service has been a magnet for some great puzzle games. Nintendo's *Dr. Mario Online Rx* is the leader of the pack as it is one of the best puzzle games ever. It's easy to pick up and a lot of fun. If you like *Tetris*, you'll love *Dr. Mario*. Even if you're not a huge puzzle game fan, you should give *Dr. Mario* a shot

because it's a puzzle game that feels like there's actual strategy involved rather than just waiting all the time for the right piece/combination to show up. This is an essential download for any Wii owner.

☆☆☆☆

A Space Shooter for Two Bucks!
Playstation Portable (PSP Mini)
2010
Developer: Frima Studio
Publisher: Frima Studio

Few cheap games are actually worth their low price tag. The PSP Minis have been more miss than hit but there are still plenty of gems to be found. Frima Studio's *A Space Shooter for Two Bucks!* is an incredibly fun game at its price point...which just so happens to be two bucks. It's fun, enjoyable, and provides a cheap thrill that's well worth its cost.

Commander Jefferson started life as a schoolyard bully who grew up to become an intergalactic space bully. He spends his day flying around and massacring aliens because he's bored. Despite the fact that the aliens pose no threat to Jefferson and are minding their own business, Jefferson still blows them away. He's a doofus in a charming way as his cheesy one-liners aren't meant to be clever. It's sort of a tongue-in-cheek way of saying that the plot doesn't really matter and we should only care about the gameplay.

Thankfully, the gameplay delivers. This game is purely run and gun in that you need to shoot everything that moves. Blown up asteroids or enemies leave behind power-up that will aid you on your way. The action is fast and addictive. The player has a main blaster although after boss battles, Jefferson steals their special weapon to use for his own purposes (just like the *Mega Man* games). Even though the game is sort of linear, there is the option to go on side missions to score permanent power-ups to help during the harder levels. Destroyed enemies also leave behind "remnants" which act as the in-game currency. Remnants can be

used to buy additional upgrades to the ship. Players who find some of the later levels hard can go back to earlier levels to get extra remnants so they could buy more upgrades. Normally this type of grinding would seem tedious but all the levels feel unique and are still fun to play after multiple times.

The graphics of the game looks great. Even when playing this game on a Playstation 3, it looks like something you'd expect from a downloadable PS3 game. It's visually similar to an average 16/32-bit shooter which is good enough for the price point of this game. Even during some of the more chaotic firefights, there doesn't seem to be any slowdown in the action. Even for a space setting, everything looks colourful and is pleasing to the eyes.

The soundtrack, while not bad, doesn't stand out as much as the gameplay or even the graphics. The music is decent but not at all memorable. The voice acting is well done though and is quite amusing. It really adds life to the game.

There is also a survival mode where you try to stay alive for as long as possible while trying to get the highest score. It's a neat feature but because there is no online functionality with this game, it loses its flavour after a couple of play sessions. If it had online leaderboards, it would have been something, but without it, it's a throwaway addition.

Apparently there is a bug associated with this game where the game either freezes or progress is not recorded. I don't know if that was an earlier build of the game but I've played the game for many hours since I downloaded it in Jan. 2011 and I have not experienced such a problem. I have also played the game on both the PSP and the Playstation 3 and never been hit with the bug. That's not to say it doesn't exist as I see multiple examples online of people being stung by it.

Even with that, the gameplay is so much fun that even the odd hiccup shouldn't stand in your way in downloading this title. Frima Studio did a fantastic job with *A Space Shooter for Two Bucks!* and if they

ever decided to make an even larger game titled "A Super Space Shooter for Twenty Bucks!!!", I would definitely check that one out. In the meantime, do yourself a favour and download this game. It's near the best two bucks you'll ever spend on a single game.

☆☆☆☆

Super Mario Land
Nintendo Game Boy
1989
Developed by: Nintendo
Published by: Nintendo

It feels like it is near-impossible for Nintendo to make a bad traditional Mario platformer. Even though *Super Mario Land* for the original Game Boy looks extremely primitive, it is still one of the best in the series. It might be a bit rough around the edges and looks and handles differently than most Mario games, but it provides one of the best platforming experiences on any system.

Unlike most of Mario's adventures, this does not take place in the Mushroom Kingdom. It takes place in Sarasaland. Instead of Bowser we have Tatanga, an evil space alien. Peach/Toadstool's part has been filled by Princess Daisy. Tatanga kidnaps Daisy with the intention of conquering Sarasaland. Mario takes off after Tatanga to save Daisy and her world.

Super Mario Land controls like most of the 2D Mario titles prior to New Super Mario Bros. on the DS. Mario's primary actions are jumping, running, and shooting fireballs (when he has the appropriate power-up). The jumping part takes a little getting used to as Mario in this game doesn't jump like he does in other Mario titles. He sort of goes up and then sinks like a stone. It makes some of the later platforming stages more challenging than they should be but it doesn't come close to being a dealbreaker; it's just something that one has to get used to.

There are few power-ups to speak of in this game. It's exactly like the original *Super Mario Bros.* game in

that there is a Super Mushroom which makes Mario bigger, a Fire Flower which makes him shoot fireball projectiles, a Super Star which makes Mario invincible for a short period of time, and a 1-Up Mushroom which gives Mario an extra life. This game was developed after the Japanese release of *Super Mario Bros. 3* so there isn't a big excuse for the lack of power-ups.

However, instead of a large assortment of power-ups, we are treated to some shoot-'em-up stages in this game. They are small but are very fun. In fact, they're so enjoyable, it almost feels like Nintendo was holding out on us by only having a couple of shooting levels in there. Still, it does a great job at diversifying the gameplay without it feeling like a cheap gimmick.

The graphics are very rudimentary. They are barely better than a Game and Watch title. While Mario and the enemies are discernable from one another, they generally only make up a few pixels. The backgrounds are quite nice though and were a sign of things to come on the system. It's weird how some of the backgrounds are quite extensively detailed yet Mario looks like a couple of dots put together. It's definitely a strange contrast.

The musical score of this game is great as there are many earworms to be had here. There really isn't a bad tune in the bunch. Surprisingly enough, despite the low-end hardware compared to games of today, this title still has some of the best and most memorable music out of all the Mario titles. The sound effects sound good too and are almost identical to the NES games.

Even though it may not look like it, the game is incredibly fun. It can be quite challenging for those who haven't played the game before and even experienced gamers will see the game over screen a few times before they're able to beat the game. The difficulty curve is perfect as it never feels like the game is doing something wrong; the player is the one making the mistakes that's sending Mario to an unsavoury death. In addition to that, the game never

feels too punishing which makes players want to keep playing despite it getting harder towards the end.

There are some drawbacks to this game. First, it almost doesn't seem long enough. Even though it's a pocket game and one of the first games for the Game Boy, it only has 12 levels (compared to 32 with the original *Super Mario Bros.* on the NES). While some of the later levels can take a few minutes to beat, it's a game that can be beaten in less than an hour. It makes sense considering that few Game Boy games at the time had battery backup and the concept of the system was to be played on the go.

The other problem with the game (and this is a minor nitpick) is that even though the game is very fun to play through multiple times, it would have been nice to have battery backup to keep the score. The inclusion of a time attack mode would have given this game even a longer life inside a Game Boy slot.

Nintendo's *Super Mario Land* for the original Game Boy is an incredibly fun experience that ends way too early. It almost feels like they should have called "Diet Super Mario Land". Thankfully, it's a great game to play over and over again. It is one of the best titles in the Game Boy lineup. If you have any Nintendo device that plays this game and you haven't ever tried it, you need to do yourself a favour and do so immediately.

☆☆☆☆

The Top 10 Video Games of 2010

**This article is being republished because next week will see the beginning of the discussion for the top games of 2011. Next week's issue will look at the retail games from January 2011.*

Another year, another top ten list for video games. Unlike last year where it was a bit difficult to come up with a top ten list, this year there were only a few titles that I feel one could argue could have made this list that aren't on my list. Actually, I

was not too surprised that Screwattack had nine out of the ten games I picked on their top ten list. Additionally, Gametrailers only had a top five but all five were games from my top ten list. Even though my list is being published last (I usually publish it on New Year's Day), the list has essentially been in the bag for almost two weeks now. Had I published it earlier, I could have accused other sites of ripping me off. However, I think it's because there were very few MUST OWN!!! games this year that it's no surprise that there is quite a bit of consensus across the Internet. The last couple of years there has been major differences between the lists of most outlets. Now, it almost seems unanimous.

Whether you agree with this list or hate it, say something about it. Leave a comment at the bottom or send me an e-mail at madnessbrewing@gmail.com and I'll read your comments during the next Weekly Video Game Podcast,

This list is not in any order other than alphabetical.

Call of Duty: Black Ops – Activision (PC, PS3, Xbox 360)

Activision is in the enviable position of having a franchise that is the cream of the crop in its genre. They could have easily re-released *Modern Warfare 2* with a few new guns and maps and it still would have sold well and received high praise. However, *Black Ops* isn't just a stopover between *Modern Warfare* titles; it actually feels like a more complete game. *Black Ops* still possesses the strong multiplayer component that *Call of Duty* is famous for (and it is still the best FPS multiplayer game at the moment). While this would have made a game of the year candidate in the minds of many, the single-player campaign is probably the best the series has seen since the release of the original *Modern Warfare*. The single-player campaign doesn't feel like an afterthought or a practice arena for would-be multiplayer enthusiasts; there actually feels like there is

substance to what used to be considered the principle part of any game.

Civilization V – 2K Games (PC)

It seems like that with every release of *Civilization*, there is universal praise and that there is no question on how incredible the game is. Yet, 2K Games has managed to do it again and released *Civilization V*; a game so great, you'll never think they'll be able to improve on it (until they release *Civilization VI*). Even though the previous *Civilizations* were captivating games, this version feels less like a chess match and more like an action game despite the fact that it's a turn-based strategy. Even if you play for several hours and go through an entire game, you will still not have touched everything the game has to offer. They've managed to add so much to the game without it feel too complicated or redundant. Both new players to the series and seasoned pros will have no problem getting started with this game and losing many hours in its immersive gameplay.

Donkey Kong Country Returns – Nintendo (Wii)

When the original *Donkey Kong Country* was released for the Super Nintendo in 1994, the creator of the franchise mascot, Shigeru Miyamoto said quite a number of negative things about the game. He criticized the gameplay and essentially said that the game was more about style than substance. Many disagreed with Miyamoto (and Miyamoto has since apologized for his comments and has since praised the game for its achievements in the platforming genre) but when one plays the first level of *Donkey Kong Country Returns*, you can sort of understand what Miyamoto was trying to say. *Donkey Kong Country* was an average game compared to *Donkey Kong Country Returns*. *DKC Returns* is one of the best platformers ever made. While the series has always been known for its graphics, it's the gameplay that stands out this

time around. Each level feels different despite the fact that the game has the standard lumping of levels in a themed world. Even levels with the same gimmick (like the cart levels) feel unique and different from one-another. If it weren't for the questionable controls, *Donkey Kong Country Returns* could have been the ultimate 2D platformer. Considering this is on a system with many other incredible platformers this year, to be sitting on such a lofty perch is quite the accomplishment.

Dragon Quest IX – Nintendo/Square Enix (DS)

Unfortunately for the portable systems, RPGs have remained a somewhat standard affair. While the RPG genre on the consoles and the PC has taken off in different directions thanks in part to series like *Fallout* and *Mass Effect*, playing an RPG on the DS or the PSP hasn't changed much since the release of either system (or even since the days of the Game Boy Advance). That's why *Dragon Quest IX* was such a breath of fresh air. Sure, it's no *Mass Effect* and it's not like it's a major evolution over *Dragon Quest VIII* for the PS2 but considering that there is so much to do in the game, it genuinely feels like an adventure. Even though the main game can take dozens of hours, it doesn't feel like a grinding chore. Even when the main quest is done, there is so much other stuff to do that it almost feels like this DS RPG is actually an MMO. Then again, this game does have a great multiplayer option which may make some dream optimistically of the possibility of a Square-developed MMO on the DS (or 3DS) in the future.

God of War III – SCEA (PS3)

Some people may rave about *Uncharted* and its action gameplay but there are those that have criticized it for it basically being a movie with gaming interruptions. That same accusation cannot be said for *God of War III* even though it feels like it was developed to be a

blockbuster movie. Sure there are some annoying quicktime events that mean nothing and there's plenty of video to tell the narrative of several movies but the main focus of *God of War III* is gameplay. The series that redefined the beat-em-up genre is at the top of its game here. In fact, if there was one game this year that should have convinced gamers to buy a PS3 over any other system, it was this game. As a fully-immersive HD experience, there's nothing like it. It's fun, easy to get into, and just as easy to get lost in.

*Note – *God of War: Ghosts of Sparta* for the PSP was also in consideration. Like *God of War III*, it had plenty of action and lots of fun gameplay. It played like a console game on a portable system. A prime example that the PSP, when people put the effort into making great games for it, still has plenty of life still left in it.

Mass Effect 2 – Electronic Arts (PC, PS3, Xbox 360)

This may be one of the best RPGs of all time. Not much more needs to be said about *Mass Effect 2* as most of the stuff that made playing RPGs a chore (such as grinding and boring, statistical-based battles) have been thrown out and replaced with an action experience unparalleled in its genre. The actions of the player have actual consequences (which is what they probably mean by "role-playing-game") and players can replay the game multiple times with different sequences, events, and outcomes occurring due to the choices they've made in the game. It makes it easy to get lost in the story because the player becomes part of the story; it doesn't feel like one is controlling the actions of a character designed by a development team but that one is controlling the actions of someone they designed themselves. *Mass Effect 2's* adventure is on such a large scale that it feels like one is playing through an entire season of an action-adventure television show (if only television was as good).

Red Dead Redemption – Rockstar Games (PS3, Xbox 360)

Some will call *Red Dead Redemption* a *Grand Theft Auto* clone set in the Wild West; those who do haven't played one of the best sandbox games ever. Unlike *Grand Theft Auto* which has a meager single-player campaign supplemented by mini-games and gimmicks (like blowing stuff up with tanks) to keep the player fooling around in the game's world for hours, *Red Dead Redemption* has a large single-player campaign that is incredibly fun to play. In fact, the single player campaign in *Red Dead Redemption* can take as long to play as it would take to play the single-player campaigns for all three *Grand Theft Auto* games on the PS2 combined. On top of that, the mini-games are better designed and more interesting in *Red Dead Redemption* (with the poker game actually playing better than some console games dedicated solely to poker). Another great thing with *Red Dead Redemption* is the multiplayer which is probably second to *Call of Duty* in terms of addictiveness (at least on a home console). *Red Dead Redemption* doesn't need cheap gimmicks like tank codes to make the game fun. It's so jam-packed full of content and gameplay that just playing the single-player campaign is fun enough; everything else feels like a wonderful bonus.

Starcraft II – Blizzard Entertainment (PC)

Sure, Blizzard could have re-released *Starcraft II* as a deluxe version of the original game released over a decade ago with some updated graphics and people would have been happy. However, *Starcraft II* has given new life to the real-time strategy genre. It's not so much a graphical improvement but many refinements were made to the game that made it easier to play. Those who haven't played a RTS before can feel a little overwhelmed by the strategy involved and the need to be quick to handle any situation. *Starcraft II*

makes the adjustment for those used to something like a turn-based strategy a little bit easier without watering the game down completely. The best changes to the game were the online component which, while possible with the original game, is quite limited by today's standards. Blizzard managed to come up with a game that almost feels like an MMO without having the need to pay a monthly subscription like their crown jewel, *World of Warcraft*.

Super Mario Galaxy 2 – Nintendo (Wii)

The original *Super Mario Galaxy* was one of the best games of all time. No company has been able to come up with an experience on any console that could come close to matching Mario's first galactic adventure. Even Nintendo couldn't really top it so they came out with a nearly identical sequel to a Mario game (something that they haven't done in almost 25 years) with *Super Mario Galaxy 2*. Some may say it's sort of like a director's cut but very little from this game feels borrowed from the first title. Most of the levels feel original and imaginative (some of the levels in this game are the best out of any 3D Mario game). Even some of the gameplay elements like Rock Mario could have been released as its own standalone package and it would have still been considered a title worthy of purchase. *Super Mario Galaxy 2* may not be twice as good as the original but at least we've been able to experience this fantastic voyage a second time.

Super Meat Boy – Team Meat (PC, Xbox 360)

Super Meat Boy harkens back to a time when games looked simple but were actually quite challenging. On its exterior, *Super Meat Boy* may look like a game suitable for kids with its apparently adorable main character. However, when one actually starts to play the game and see the punishment Meat Boy has to suffer through to save his girlfriend, that it's easy to understand why this

simple looking package is one of the most hardcore games released this year. Dying is a fact of life in *Super Meat Boy*. In fact, one should expect to die at least a dozen times on average per level in this game. This is not because the game has horrible controls or the level design is so horrendous that success is hard to come by; it is because it takes skill, precision and patience to make it to the end. The game isn't responsible for any cheap deaths; it's the player who is in total control and responsible for their own mistakes. Even with its difficulty, it never feels punishing. Thanks to all this, when one finally does succeed, it feels like an accomplishment. Aside from the wonderful main gameplay, there are many other features that make this a stand-out game: the alternative levels, the Game Boy-esque minigames, and the replays after one finishes a level where the player gets to see all their attempts on screen at the same time to some very messy results. All this in a downloadable game package. Some developer and publishers should take a long hard look at this title and realize what the word value means because *Super Meat Boy* is full of it.

Critics Picks of the Last Three Months

Multiplatform

- Dirt 3 (PS3, Xbox 360, PC)
- L.A. Noire (PS3, Xbox 360)
- Mortal Kombat (PS3, Xbox 360)
- Outland (PSN-PS3, Xbox Live Arcade)

Multiplatform (Continued)

- Portal 2 (PS3, Xbox 360, PC)
- Shadow of the Damned (PS3, Xbox 360)

Microsoft Xbox 360

- Child of Eden (Xbox Live Arcade)
- The Dishwasher: Vampire Smile (Xbox Live Arcade)
- Galaga Legions DX (Xbox Live Arcade)
- Trenched (Xbox Live Arcade)
- UFC Personal Trainer

Sony Playstation 3

- infamous 2
- Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition (PS3 Version)

Nintendo 3DS

- Dead or Alive: Dimensions
- The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D

Nintendo DS

- Mighty Milky Way (DSiWare)

PC

- Anomaly: Warzone Earth
- Capsized
- Frozen Synapse
- Jamestown: Legend of the Lost Colony
- Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012 (PC Version)
- Terraria
- World of Tanks

This Week's Retail Game Releases

Microsoft Xbox 360

- Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon

Sony Playstation 3

- Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon

This Week's Downloadable Game Releases

Microsoft Xbox 360 Arcade

- Dead Block
- Deadliest Warrior: Legends
- MLB Bobblehead Pros

Nintendo WiiWare and Virtual Console (Last Week)

- Big Town Shoot Out
- Final Fantasy III (VC-SNES)

Sony Playstation 3

- Playstation Move Ape Escape
- Rapid Angel (PS1)
- Yakiniku Bugyou (PS1)

Nintendo 3DS

- Kirby's Dream Land (VC-GB)

Nintendo DS

- Boardwalk Ball Toss
- Hearts Spades Euchre
- The Lost Town: The Dust
- Moto eXtreme

Sony Playstation Portable (PSP)

- Ninjamurai (Mini)

Next Week's Issue

Publication Date: July 14th, 2011

- **Feature Article:** Nintendo 3DS vs. Sony PS Vita
- Video Game Sales for July 2nd, 2011
- Top Retail Games From Jan. 2010
- Adventure Island (NES) Review
- Centipede (Arcade) Review
- Decimation X (Xbox Live Arcade) Review
- Donkey Kong Country (SNES) Review
- Final Fight (Arcade) Review
- Space Invaders/Space Invaders 2 (Arcade) Review
- Other Assorted Junk

**WEEKLY MOVIE
PODCAST**

**NEW PODCAST
EVERY TUESDAY**

**WEEKLY VIDEO GAME
PODCAST**

**NEW PODCAST
EVERY THURSDAY**

The Final Madness

The Legend of Zelda series has always been heralded as the number three franchise in Nintendo's library (behind Mario and Pokemon). That may or may not be true (you could debate that the Wii-branded games are a hotter commodity) but even if it is, does it help sell Nintendo's brand? Even though the Wii launched with a Zelda title, it has almost been forgotten

about five years later by most Wii owners who played mostly the Wii-branded games and Mario titles. Even the Nintendo DS saw several Zelda titles that sold less than expected. Despite fanboys frothing at the mouth for a new Zelda game, is it really in Nintendo's best interest to make them? An even more interesting question is if Zelda is nothing more than a glorified

"cult" title, then should Nintendo of America really listen to those clamouring for Japanese RPGs to be sold stateside. The numbers for sales of the Zelda titles on the Wii, Gamecube, and Nintendo DS are listed below. All sales information comes from VGChartz.com unless stated otherwise.

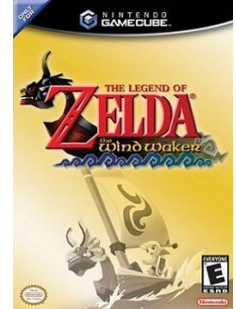
The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past (GBA)

Release Date: December 2, 2002
Lifetime Sales (NA): 1.67 million
Rank Among GBA Titles: 12th



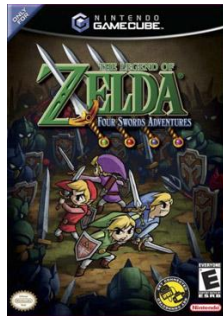
The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker (Gamecube)

Release Date: March 24, 2003
Lifetime Sales (NA): 2.58 million
Rank Among Gamecube Titles: 4th



The Legend of Zelda: Four Swords Adventure (Gamecube)

Release Date: March 24, 2003
Lifetime Sales (NA): approx 250k¹
Rank Among Gamecube Titles: n/a



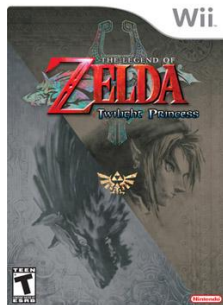
The Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap (GBA)

Release Date: January 10, 2005
Lifetime Sales (NA): 830 thousand
Rank Among GBA Titles: 36th



The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess (Wii)

Release Date: November 19, 2006
Lifetime Sales (NA): 3.28 million
Rank Among Wii Titles: 10th²



The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess (Gamecube)

Release Date: December 11, 2006
Lifetime Sales (NA): 1.13 million
Rank Among Gamecube Titles: 13th



The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass (DS)

Release Date: October 1, 2007
Lifetime Sales (NA): 1.91 million
Rank Among Gamecube Titles: 17th



The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks (DS)

Release Date: December 7, 2009
Lifetime Sales (NA): 1.28 million
Rank Among GBA Titles: 33rd



* Lifetime sales to date are up to the weekend of August 14, 2010. All images are taken from Wikipedia except for the Gamecube version of Twilight Princess which comes of IGN.com

¹ No sales information available at VGChartz.com, sales information from Nintendo

² Officially listed as 12th but that would include Wii Sports and Wii Sports Resort which had been pack-in titles for the Wii until recently.