

GEEKED Videogame reviews by Adam Diamond



MVP 06 NCAA BASEBALL

PUBLISHER | EA SPORTS
PLATFORM | PS2, XBOX
PRICE | \$29.99
ESRB RATING | E (EVERYBODY)

WHAT'S COOL: The new hitting system is challenging, but appropriately so. Live ESPN Ticker and Radio adds previously unheard of realism.

WHAT'S UNCOOL: Base-running is a little awkward on the D-Pad;

lacks many schools; graphics are no better this year than last year. The Players aren't based on real life counterparts. No Mascot Game!

It's hard to pretend these are real guys.

GAMEPLAY ▲▲▲▲▲
GRAPHICS ▲▲▲▲
SOUND ▲▲▲▲

BLAMING 2K SPORTS for getting the exclusive MLB license on all platforms is wrong—after all, EA started the whole thing with their exclusive NFL license last January. Yet 2K's license, which (for some inexplicable reason) doesn't prohibit Sony from developing their own MLB title, has prevented the best baseball game yet from having pro baseball's actual teams and players. While this is sad news and definitely takes away from the game, I must reiterate the most important point: this is the best baseball game ever.

Video game baseball has come into its own in the past few years, but with this game they've finally gotten batting right. Hot and cold zones helped, but you were essentially able to ignore them and still do fine. While hot and cold zones remain, now the true difficulty of batting comes into play: timing.

Like good sex, good hitting comes with knowing how to effectively use your joystick. Pull back on the right stick, pressing R1, and move forward as the pitch crosses the zone for contact hitting; do the same thing, pressing L1, when hitting for power. Can you still just swing using the X button if all this joystick twiddling leaves you cold? Of course—but if playing with your joystick makes you feel awkward and embarrassed in polite company, get over it. This control isn't easy to master, but it actually makes the game more challenging and much more fun to play.

As good as the gameplay is, however, it pales in comparison to the ESPN Online Everywhere feature. With this feature, as long as you are connected to the Internet, you'll get the real, live ESPN ticker scrolling across the bottom of your screen. I even learned of the tragedy that befell Kirby Puckett while playing the game, which made me pause things and reenter the real world for a while.

Another feature here is the ESPN live radio updates which come through while the game is playing. Again, they are real and live so you'll never hear the same one twice, a bonus when playing a game like baseball where after a few games you've memorized most of the announcers' clever game coverage.

Now it ain't all wine and roses. Given all the finger twitching you've got to do to swing, base running can be difficult. As the left analog stick and the D-Pad map together, you can use either to move the runners, but neither is very comfortable given the position of your hands. The throw meter is so hard to master that I gave up in the middle of one game and turned on partial auto-fielding. Also, not having real college players means the teams aren't representative of their real life counterparts. And while the few mini-games help you learn the new features, one staple of the EA NCAA stable is the mascot game, and the fact that it's missing here is a glaring omission.

MVP 06 NCAA Baseball is well worth the price, but given the lack of depth, I'm guessing next year's game will blow the doors off of this one. Yes, you should buy it, but be prepared to buy one of the MLB licensed games as well. Those Major League teams will be missed.

DISC JUNKIE by Paul Gaita

A TIP SHEET FOR COMPULSIVE DVD BUYERS



MULTIPLEX

One of the biggest "am I really seeing this?" laughs my wife and I enjoyed at a recent showing of *16 Blocks* wasn't Mos Def's mealy-mouthed accent, but the trailer for *Basic Instinct 2* that preceded the film itself. I can't imagine that the entire movie offers the full-bodied platter of Cinemax Late Night cheese served up by the trailer, which is literally bursting at the seams with the groan-iest double entendres, exploding cars, and an apoplectic David Thewlis (save that venom for your agent, man). All of this was an excellent reminder that the original *Basic Instinct* was returning to DVD in an "Ultimate Edition" from Artisan. What comprises said *Edition?* Commentary by director Paul Verhoeven, a couple of new featurettes, and a "conversation" with Sharon Stone ("So, Sharon... what's up?"). In short, the same as the previous DVD editions (one of which was a "Collector's Edition," as I recall), but with even more ridiculous extras. Awesome. Throw out your John Sayles movies and make room for this one.

Or better yet, pick up *Good Night and Good Luck* (Warner), George Clooney's terrific drama about CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow (David Straithairn) and his battles with Senator Joseph McCarthy during the height of the Communist panic of the 1950s. It's one of the most beautiful-looking movies of last year (show it to someone who "hates" black and white), expertly performed by a great cast that includes Robert Downey Jr., Patricia Clarkson and Frank Langella, and most importantly, rescues this pivotal moment in American history from the dusty academic vaults. The DVD includes commentary by Clooney and producer/screenwriter Grant Heslov.

What else? With Johnny Cash fever still blazing bright after *Walk the Line* (picked it up yet?), Sony has released *I Walk the Line*, a solid drama about the travails of a Southern sheriff (Gregory Peck) that features five of JC's songs, and a TV remake of *Stagecoach* that's enlivened by the presence of Johnny, Kris Kristofferson and Willie Nelson. Thriller fans might want to try the kitschy-but-fun 1965 version of Agatha Christie's *Ten Lit-*

tle Indians (Warner), which includes the original "Who Dunnit" break from the theatrical release. And while your kids might be already begging for the *Ice Age Super Cool Edition* (Fox—just in time for the sequel...), the real quality children's release this week is *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: What Do You Do With the Mad That You Feel?* (Anchor Bay), which offers an excellent return trip to the calm, loving, and sane world of Fred Rogers. Maybe someone should send a copy to Dick Cheney.



ARTHOUSE

Two excellent roots music documentaries are out this week: *Searching for the Wrong-Ed Jesus* (Home Vision), indie singer Jim White's exploration of rural Southern culture, with tunes by the Handsome Family, 16 Horsepower, and David Johansen; and *Townes Van Zant: Be Here to Love Me* (Palm), a sobering look at the brilliant country musician's troubled life, with plenty of performance footage to back his status as one of America's best songwriters. I'm less enthusiastic about *Debbie Does Dallas Uncovered* (New Video Group). Its examination of this seminal (ahem) porn film turns quickly ponderous, but the interviews with its cast and crew offer insight into the bleaker side of XXX. Speaking of '70s artifacts, MVD has unearthed a lost freak-era artifact: *The Butterfly Ball*, a live performance of the children's book, featuring members of Deep Purple, Ronnie James Dio, and a battery of UK rockers... oh, and Vincent Price. Very heavy, to be sure.



GRINDHOUSE

Slim pickings at the Grindhouse this time, but horror hounds shouldn't miss *Marebito* (Tartan), a surreal horror-fantasy from director Takashi Shimizu (*Ju-On*), who provides commentary on the DVD. And *Lovedolls Superstar*, David Markey's incredible sequel to *Desperate Teenage Lovedolls*, sees the DVD light in a director's cut from MVD. You think you're a hip L.A. rocker chick? Not until you've seen this movie, honey.

MANGA by Lyn Jensen



BLACK CAT IN A FIX

SHONEN JUMP, the Japanese comic magazine, has given the world some of the most popular and longest-running manga anywhere. The magazine's international hits include *Yu-gi-oh*, *Prince of Tennis*, *Naruto*, *Hikaru No Go*, *Dragon Ball*, and *Bleach*. Kentaro Yabuki's *Black Cat*, popular enough to run 20 volumes in Japan, is the latest *Shonen Jump* series that VIZ is bringing to the USA.

In Japan, *Black Cat* brought forth spin-off anime and merchandising, but whether it'll be as successful in the US depends on American teens' tastes. Volume one is little more than a cheesy sci-fi crime caper that may not even turn on many high school boys. VIZ rates it "Older Teen," primarily for violence, but it's actually quite juvenile.

This series supposedly places more emphasis on character development than most action comics, but this first volume shows little of it. Black Cat is an anti-superhero with a magical pistol that can deflect bullets and disable enemy guns, but the character introduction is quite sketchy.

Typical of superheroes, Black Cat has a se-

cret identity as Train Heartnet, a much-feared assassin who faked his own death to get away from his former organization, Chronos, and became a bounty hunter. For such a feared assassin, he looks (and often acts) like he couldn't bust his way out of a casting call for a designer jeans commercial. He has a sidekick named Sven and is being pursued by a beautiful female thief (who wants his magnificent pistol—if you catch my drift) and a little cloned girl who can change her hand into a blade.

Various crooks battle this bounty hunter, but the larger plot is that Chronos is after the Black Cat. (His death didn't fake out Chronos.) He's the 13th assassin (thus, the bad luck name Black Cat) and in subsequent volumes most of the other 12 come after him, including a martial-arts babe.

It's left to a subsequent volume to reveal why he left Chronos and became a bounty hunter. A rival assassin killed a woman close to him, but he's out for justice, not vengeance. Perhaps subsequent volumes will also reveal what this superman's kryptonite is. In Volume One he gets out of every fix a little too easily.

Black Cat is cute, but that's about all. Its appeal is just too obviously limited to 16-year-olds. Mature audiences will probably demand something weightier and more, well, mature.