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Video Game of the Week /'Piano Wizard'

'Wizard' may lead you to purchase a real piano

By Shaun Conlin - COX NEWS SERVICE

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MY YAHOO!



"Piano Wizard" is a computerized music teacher bundled with a color-coded keyboard filled with helpful lesson stickers.

Sure, you can live the plastic fantasy of rock hero with EA's "Rock Band" or Activision's "Guitar Hero" games, but if you actually want to learn something that boosts real musicianship potential, you'll want the "Piano Wizard" by Allegro Multimedia's Music Wizard Group.

"Piano Wizard" might look like a toy when judged by its cheery, kid-smiling, parent-doting marketing material, but that's just packaging.

In actuality, it's no toy. It's a computerized music teacher bundled with an MAudio 49e MIDI keyboard that you color code with a batch of included stickers for lesson purposes to use in conjunction with a PC or Mac via USB.

These stickers also make it look more toy-ish. Or maybe they were going for more accessible, less daunting?

The package also includes Allegro's award-winning "Piano Wizard" software, which offers up basic-through-advanced piano lessons in the guise of interactive fun for the whole family. It has settings to accommodate wee tots, graduating on a curve to more erudite lessons that older kids and adults can tackle

(as can wee tot prodigies, for that matter).

More than the plastic playthings found on Xboxes and PlayStations (and soon Wiis, too), there's serious longevity in the "Piano Wizard." It includes the "can-play" basics of rhythm-based icon-popping, but also cranks it up a notch or three (when you're ready) with more sophisticated tasks of learning to read and play from virtual sheet music, thus teaching music theory as well.

What's more, "Piano Wizard" can integrate just about any MIDI music file (the protocol that enables digital music equipment, including keyboards and computers, to synch up in real time) and make a lesson out of it. This includes digitized cover tunes of popular songs freely available at sites such as cyberMIDI.com and WizardTunes MIDI music downloads (like iTunes). From "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" to "William Tell Overture," "Super Freak" to "Turn Off the Light," great songs are offered. It's enough to make you want to buy a real piano.

'Piano Wizard'

Music Wizard Group; PC, Mac; \$199.99

ESRB Rating: Everyone (6+)

Score: ★★★★★½ out of 5

'Ninja Gaiden II'

Tecmo; Xbox 360; \$59.99

ESRB Rating: Mature (17+) (blood and gore, intense violence, partial nudity, suggestive themes)

Score: ★★★★★ out of 5

When "Ninja Gaiden" came out of Xbox back in 2004, it was lauded as the best ninja game ever made, but also decried, by all except the ardent, as exceedingly difficult — even frustratingly so.

"Ninja Gaiden II" for Xbox 360 is more forgiving — though still tough as nails, but sensibly so. Button-mashing combat suffices more often than not (along with the requisite die lots, try-again motif), while getting a handle on the delicate, rhythmic combos comes with time, making it all the more satisfying when you do get it down.

All in all, something ventured, something gained — "Gaidened," if you will.

That said, to call "Ninja Gaiden II" anything more than a flat-out brawler is misleading. Sure, it's supposed to play out as an action/adventure game, complete with hokum plot, befuddling camera work, linear-level design, perplexing purpose and a rambling assortment of platform-hopping and bauble-collecting tasks — but all that is just sloppy window dressing for what is otherwise a delicious hack-n-slash game.

It's smooth, slick, menacing and sexy as ever. And violent: A big time, multi-weapon gore fest, this game is definitely not for kids. To be totally clear: limb hacking galore, blood-spurting decapitations, gut-chucking gore, gore, gore. It's enough to make you forget that Ninjas are supposed to be all about stealth and trickery and defensive combat. My advice: Go crazy.

Sierra's gonna call iconic 'Ghostbusters'

Just speculating here, but somewhere between several crates of forgotten Adam West memorabilia and the Lost Ark of the Covenant, Sierra found a tired old 1959 Cadillac Miller-Meteor endloader combination car, hauled it out, washed it off and dubbed it "iconic."

That is to say, the Ectomobile, that converted hearse jalopy from the "Ghostbusters" movies with license tag ECTO-1, is back and will be "busting ghosts in a town near you," to help promote the forthcoming "Ghostbusters: The Video Game," slated for release this fall. It's only the umpteenth time a game based on the Ivan Reitman films has been made.

ECTO-1 will be stopping at several destinations across the United States. The ECTO-1 Tour schedule

looks like this:

- Aug 9: Nightshift Pomona (Pomona Fairplex; Pomona, Calif.)
- Aug. 29-31: Penny Arcade Expo (Seattle Convention Center; Seattle)
- Sept. 20: Nightshift Pleasanton (Alameda Fairgrounds; Pleasanton, Calif.)
- Sept. 27: Hot Import Nights (Minneapolis Convention Center; Minneapolis)
- Oct. 11: Hot Import Nights (Dallas Convention Center; Dallas)
- Oct. 15 and Nov. 1: Knott's Scary Farm (Knott's Berry Farm; Buena Park, Calif.)
- Nov. 19-30: L. A. Auto Show (L. A. Convention Center; Los Angeles)

Assessing the 'value' of video game history

Video game enthusiasts in search of industry knowledge and historical context surrounding their old Atari home system or new Sony PlayStation 3 need look no further than "Play Value," a new Internet TV show chronicling the past 30 years of video game history at www.playvalue.tv.

The show explores the ways in which video games have become a part of the fabric of our daily lives. Throughout each episode, "Play Value" uses a documentary-style format reminiscent of VH1's "Behind the Music" and "Pop-Up Video" to chart the mainstreaming of video games and their subsequent growth into a multi-billion-dollar industry.

"Play Value" also features a quirky lineup of Gen X gaming aficionados who humorously recount the industry's highs and lows. With new episodes added regularly, the program's pilot episode, "The Death of Arcades," highlights the rise and fall of dedicated gaming centers, which, in their heyday, saw Americans playing about 2 million hours a year on 1.5 million arcade machines, to the tune of \$20 billion annually.

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