STUDENT LIFE

'Halo 2' creates gamer widows one person at a time

Review by Aaron J. Amendola
staff writer

Think back to Nov. 9. Do you remember many people being absent in your classes? Yes? It's no wonder. Halo 2 was released at 12:01 a.m. Tuesday morning, and a new definition of "gamer widow" was just being created.

I was no exception . I had a rigorous schedule planned. Beginning at 9 p.m. the night before, I went retro and began playing the first Halo game on multiplayer with my friends. That is until 10:30 when I proudly stood in line at my local Gamestop until midnight, when I would turn in my pre-order stub and receive my brand-spanking new copy of Bungie's Halo 2.

I was excited - what can I say?

Over three years that Xbox hype machine has had, a substantial amount of press time has been given to this title. Microsoft has treated this game as if they were releasing a brand new console, not a game.

You see, Halo isn't just a game anymore. It's a calling. It's been saturated into the being of console gamers everywhere. It almost seeps from the pores of gaming goodness, so much so that the game's main protagonist has become a trademark for Microsoft. Just as Mario is Nintendo's sugar daddy, Master Chief will serve as Microsoft's icon for years to come, and it's easy to see why.

Halo 2 outdoes its predecessor in nu-

merous ways. Luscious graphics, pulse-pounding audio, and even some minor tweaks in the controls have made all the difference in the world. After playing Halo 2 for even five minutes, you'll look back at the original as an eyesore. That's not to say the original was ugly in any manner, but the sequel trumps it in every aspect.

The most scrutinized portion of the game comes in its single-player campaign mode. Ever since early summer, Microsoft has been using a fake propaganda site oddly named ilovebees.com to help stir up commotion for the game by using cryptic messages and fake hacker threats warning of an alien invasion. Thousands of avid fans signed on daily to see if the site would reveal any information about the game whether it be sparse or nothing at all. Clearly, Microsoft's ploy worked, and frankly, the campaign mode delivers in spades. Gone are the repetitive corridor levels of the first Halo game, replaced with whole cities, lavish alien infrastructures and other intergalactic sanctions that will have you guessing at every turn.

At least once during every level (of which there are 15), there are marquee battles. Whether it be taking down a giant robotic spider during a city raid, defeating a covenant general while evading dozens of enemy sentinels or taking down a fleet of the covenant's finest, there is something to remember in each

and every stage.

Master Chief doesn't have any time to waste either, with the assortment of foes he has to deal with this time around. Everything has increased: enemies, weapons, vehicles and the most fun of all, ways to kill. Now that you can dual-wield weapons, you possess an uncanny amount of potential carnage in your hands. Don't even get me started on the fact that now the power of an energy sword is but a click away.

The game's only downfall rears its ugly head in the form of the co-op campaign mode. Bungie seems to have made the warp and spawn nodes at very inappropriate places. Whether it be in the middle of a battle or far away from where you started, it gets annoying after a while. If you're not playing with someone you are totally in-sync with, you're in for trouble. An experienced Halo veteran playing with a newbie makes for bad bedfellows.

What gave Halo its legs after the initial story mode was its multiplayer options. Bungie has clearly listened to and addressed the questions and concerns of fans everywhere, implementing additions like more customization options and bigger, more lush maps for players everywhere to get their frag on in Halo 2.

Just give the game a few hours with three of your closest friends. You'll see how friendly everyone is after you get done pummeling your roommate relent-

BUNGIE SOFTWARE/GAMEWALLPAPERS.COM
Video game lovers stood in line Tuesday morning to purchase"Halo 2," which was released at 12:01 a.m. "Halo 2" provides more options than the first, such as larger maps and more personal options.

lessly with two needlers in a round of Slayer. The multiplayer is, dare I say, the best time you'll have killing your friends on a console since the legendary Goldeneye 64.

It's that perfect. There's literally thousands of combinations that could be met by the furthest reaches of players' imaginations. With Xbox Live capability enhancing the experience allowing you to go online and frag worldwide, Halo 2 very well could be the only game you'll need for awhile or at least until Halo 3 comes out.

When the end of the day comes, the best way to play Halo 2 is with four friends, a ton of Pepsi, pizza, and a

couch. You'll be set for hours. You'll commiserate with your comrades about the tragic losses and uplifting victories on the battlefield and no one will get hurt, sans for maybe a few egos.

If you're an Xbox owner and you don't yet have your very own copy of Halo 2, then I pity you. It is no longer a matter of if you have time to play; this game will make you reserve time to play. It is with a clear head and a stable heart that I say Halo 2 is the must-have game for the Xbox. Don't have an Xbox? Here's your excuse. Christmas is just around the corner. Beg your parents. Beg your cousins. Just do whatever you need to do and buy it.

Movies put a new gloss on animating humans
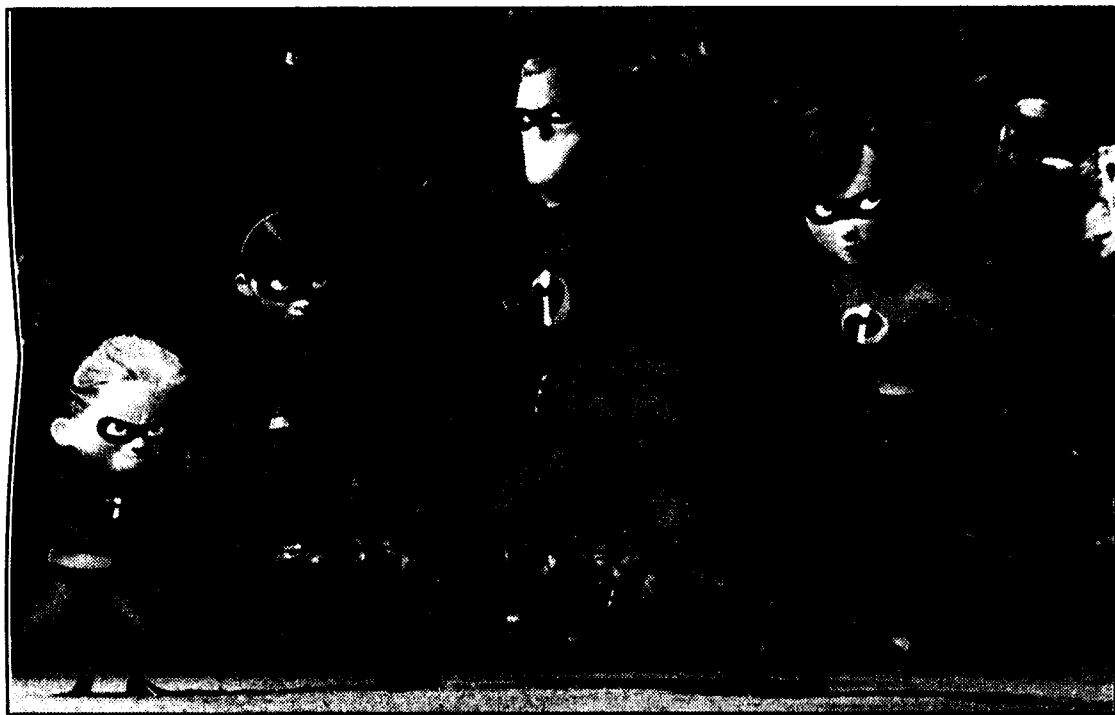
BUENA VISTA
The stars of Pixar's new animated film, "The Incredibles," are superheros that are forced to enter a relocation program. The humanity of the story line shows why it is necessary to create advances in animation to portray human life.

By Chris Vognar
The Dallas Morning News
(KRT)

The best thing about animation is its capacity for invention and imagination, its ability to go places and do things off-limits to live-action film. But what happens when your subject isn't a wacky creature, but a human being?

A whole new set of challenges arises as the moviemakers try to strike a balance between animation's fanciful potential and the believability expected with the depiction of people.

Two new big-budget movies tackle these challenges with novel technology and winning results. One, Pixar's humbled superhero saga "The Incredibles," opened Friday with some nuanced new wrinkles in computer animation. The other, "The Polar Express," arrives Wednesday bearing a painterly look achieved through mind-blowing (and not easily understood) filmmaking advances.

Together, "The Incredibles" and "The Polar Express" represent bold steps in the field of humanimation.

"Our goal was to do something patently unreal that feels very believable," says Brad Bird, the "Incredibles" writer and director. "Something where you're going to get involved with these guys and be convinced that they have lives and hopes and dreams and are thinking beings."

That's a tough balance, but it's essential to the movie's story and themes. The heroes of "The Incredibles" are superheroes forced to enter a sort of suburban relocation program after all "supers" are targeted by a rash of lawsuits. As they navigate civilian life before jumping back into action, their dual nature as ordinary people capable of extraordinary feats comes into sharp focus. Their humanity is essential.

"Animation is bringing characters to life, not just making them move," says Mary Clarke-

Miller, associate dean at the Art Institute of California in San Francisco. "And 'The Incredibles' is awesome. It's A-plus. The attention to detail that they applied to the characters is just amazing."

Bird notes that our familiarity with the human race makes people difficult to animate.

"Everyone is really well versed in how humans move and how they shift their weight and how they go about things," says Bird, who previously made the hand-drawn animated film "The Iron Giant." "So the litmus test for what is convincing is much more thorough."

The biggest challenge was gauging how much detail to use, when to hold back and when to go all-out. Bird and the Pixar folks solved this problem by going beneath the surface. The computer models for the characters were given muscles that move within them. They also benefited from a process called subsurface scattering, which is based on what actually happens when light hits skin.

"The light doesn't just hit the surface of the skin, it also goes beneath the surface," says Bird. "It hits blood vessels, and that scatters the light under your skin. It's a very subtle effect, but it's the difference between flesh and plastic. You don't have to do some of the surface details. We didn't do hair follicles or pores. And it gives the character a kind of a glow."

"The Polar Express" features a completely different approach to capturing human movement and emotion. If you've seen the trailers, you might have noticed that the characters, five of them played by Tom Hanks, look almost real. That's because, oddly enough, they are real.

The movie's technological trump card is called performance capture and it's a lot more elaborate than subsurface scattering. On the most basic level, the characters aren't really animated. Actors wear body suits covered with reflective jewels, which are also affixed to their

faces. Digital cameras record the movements of the bodies as an assortment of three-dimensional dots. The characters are then integrated into virtual sets, created in computers. (A similar motion-capture process was used to bring Gollum to life in the "Lord of the Rings" movies).

"Performance capture is key to trying to do something that has always been very difficult for animators to do, which is animate correctly proportioned characters," says "Polar" director Robert Zemeckis. "All the performances in the movie are digitized and captured in real time, along with the voice, in three dimensions. That's why I think you have that wonderful ability to have those subtle things that actors intuitively do that it would take an animator way too many hours to try to draw."

How important are correctly proportioned animated characters? The question gets at the relationship between animation and realism, and the matter of whether animation should embellish reality or replicate it. Zemeckis sees motion capture as the perfect way to re-create the impressionist look of Chris Van Allsburg's beloved children's book. "The Polar Express" looks like a painting come to life.

"Chris Van Allsburg never wanted the movie to be animated, because he knew the animation would have to simplify and cut the heart out of his art," says Zemeckis. "In this particular case, photo-realism (or live action) would take a lot of charm out of the movie as well."

"The Polar Express" does look magical, but that's mostly because of the settings and effects; in other words, the stuff that isn't real. The characters certainly move convincingly, as well they should; they're human. But the vacant look in their eyes is a bit eerie, like the neither-here-nor-there faces that made the 2001 space adventure "Final Fantasy" such a flop.

"Some of the characters feel cold," says Dr. Clarke-Miller of the Art Institute of California. "They don't seem to light up. There's no expression."

Bird, the "Incredibles" director, has spoken about the importance of caricature in animating humans, the art of capturing a character's abstract essence through creative exaggeration. We see this in "The Incredibles" with Incredible's oversized head, shaped a bit like a pineapple and his daughter Violet's floppy mane of black hair and big, nervous eyes.

"Animation is about catching the essence of something and being truthful in the essence, but being a little bit pushed in the execution," says Bird. By contrast, "The Polar Express" is after something closer to reality, hence the use of real actors and motion capture.

But, at the end of the day, the same basic challenge faces animated and live-action films: If the story doesn't work, neither does the movie. And if the characters don't work, neither does the story. Great writing is just as key to Pixar's incredible run as great animation. As Bird puts it: "Animated films have all the strengths and weaknesses of live-action films. Some of them just have a little more going for them than others."

Remember these one-hit wonders?

DallasNews.com
(KRT)

1. You'll never forget the song and the dance it spawned, but do you recall who sang "Macarena"?
A. Los del Rio
B. Los del Rio
C. Diablo
D. Los Parasitos

2. Which of these lines is not a lyric from Dee-Lite's one hit, "Groove is in the Heart?"
A. The depth of hula groove
B. Not vicious or malicious
C. Give me thrills, baby
D. My smyperdish, my succotash wish

3. The Vapors had their one hit in the '80s with what song?
A. "Take On Me"
B. "Kids in America"
C. "No More Words"
D. "Turning Japanese"

4. The Starland Vocal Band's one hit, "Afternoon Delight," was so popular that the group landed a CBS variety series called The Starland Vocal Band Show. Which now-popular talk show host appeared on the show?
A. David Letterman
B. Oprah Winfrey
C. Jay Leno
D. Conan O'Brien

5. Which of the following should not be classified as a one-hit wonder band?
A. The Weather Girls
B. The Divinyls
C. Spin Doctors
D. Dexy's Midnight Runners

CORRECT ANSWERS:
1. B. Los del Rio
2. C. Give me thrills, baby
3. D. "Turning Japanese"
4. A. David Letterman
5. C. Spin Doctors. The Docs are known for both "Two Princes" and "Little Miss Can't Be Wrong."