

'Spore' meets some hype, ignores rest

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When "Spore" was revealed at the 2006 Electronic Entertainment Expo, its scope was too grand for most gamers to wait very long. Promising the chance to raise a species from simple multi-cellular life in a pond to sentient, intergalactic conquest, the game was quickly heralded as one of the greatest games ever created before it was even released. Since then, however, it suffered numerous setbacks; originally being set for October of 2006, it was then set for Spring 2007, then Fall 2007, and so on until it's release this past Sunday.

So after being stuck in the video game equivalent of production hell, and gathering more hype as Will Wright, its creator (whom also created the ubiquitous "The Sims") took the unfinished game on a nation and worldwide tour, "Spore" would need to fill every caveat of hype it was garnished to be acceptable. It would need to give players the chance to do

everything it promised and then some. "Spore" would need to fill every critique with ice cream and lollipops, or at least the chance to hold dominion over millions of players own little empires. "Spore", in order to meet the hype, would need to be the best game every created.

It is with some sadness that I report that "Spore" is not the best game ever created.

However, it still is a great an amazing game by all sane standards (of which few have been applied to the game). I, like many folks, rushed to the store sometime on Sunday and purchased the game, eagerly awaiting my chance to create an entire race of beings that would build and destroy cities, race and design vehicles, and breed new life on alien planets only to gleefully destroy them sometime later.

The game starts you off on a 2D plane as a cellular organism (properly called the "Cell" Stage). You, as a wormy little creature with, at your choosing, an herbivore or carnivore mouth, swim around your little pool, eating food and gaining DNA

points. After a certain amount is gathered, you lay an egg and enter the true genius, the Creator engine. At this stage, you can only add tiny fins or a new mouth, but this engine allows you to evolve your creature well past the point of sentience, as well as design tribal costumes, buildings, vehicles, and spaceships.

You also begin to see the way Wright has crafted an entire ecosystem. Other creatures (having been cached from other players' profiles) swim around you, collecting food or, in some frightening instances, threatening the life of your still new species.

After growing with food and earning enough DNA to buy legs, you crawl out on land and begin your species. A small group of your kind will form a nest and migrate beyond your command. Your continent is also populated with likewise colonies of other creatures. Your goal comes to either befriend or annihilate these species. As your species eats more and more, you again earn the ability to add traits to your creature, varying from arms and hands to antlers and poisonous-

glob-spitters. The customization is seemingly endless, which is possibly the most inventive aspect of the game.

From then, you evolve to the Tribal stage. Here, you take your now-sentient beings to either ally or destroy (that pattern will show up a lot) with surrounding tribes. The currency changes from DNA to Food, and the format changes from the RPG-Creature phase to a Real-Time-Strategy, with control over a group that eventually grows to 12 per tribe.

The Civilization Stage is likewise to the Tribal Stage, except now you can create the architecture of your city, as well as the style of vehicle, and you now control groups of those vehicles, not individual creatures. It doesn't take a grand amount of time to control the planet (about an hour). In fact, the greatest drag for some (although it may be a draw for others) is that the entire game doesn't require a whole lot of time. However, the unlimited customization to nearly every aspect of the game (your Civilization has a theme song you can choose to craft), as well as its enormous scope (millions of

players accessing the same galaxy of creatures and inventions) will surely keep one busy.

The game is not perfect, but no game is. The graphics are not realistic (but still aesthetically pleasing). The camera (particularly in the Tribal phase) is not friendly to those of us used to Mario-64-style follow-along camera angles. Some stages will get quite annoying, and keeping up to date may be costly (patches are due to come and cost quite the coinage). The social aspect of the game, dubbed Sporepedia, allows you to follow your friends creations and subscribe to Sporecasts, feeds that will siphon one user's creations into your game. Handily, this is not required to play the game (you can play offline) and, in fact, the disc itself is not required (saving much battery life). The final verdict is that this game is definitely worth your attention, but some more hardcore (read: picky) gamers might want to just start another "World of Warcraft" profile.

'Into the Wild' a search for meaning

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Anyone with a love of the great outdoors and the mystery that draws people out there will certainly enjoy Jon Krakauer's most recent novel, "Into the Wild."

Krakauer tells the story of a young man named Christopher John McCandless, who after his graduation from the highly esteemed Emory University in 1990, donated his entire savings of \$24,000 to charity and set off for an adventure across America in his car.

Not long after his journey began, he disposed of the car and took on the life of a "leather tramp," which is simply slang for a hitchhiker. His ultimate goal was to make it to Alaska someday to seclude himself from the society he was so unhappy with, and live off the land on his own.

McCandless finally made it to Alaska after two years of wandering out West, but his adventure only lasted four

months and came to an abrupt halt when he died of starvation. The later discovery of his body leads to an investigation of his death. Moose hunters passing through the region he had been living in found his body in September of 1992.

What many people who have neither read this novel nor explored McCandless' story believe is that he set out on a foolish journey to waste his life and most importantly that he was extremely ill prepared for the time he would spend in Alaska. It was for this reason that Krakauer made it a personal mission of his to try and explain to the world what was going on inside that young man's head. He wanted to understand what would drive



Photo courtesy of nationalgeographic.com
Jon Krakauer (right), seen here with actor Sean Penn, investigated the tale of John McCandless and penned it in his most recent work "Into The Wild".

a young, wealthy and intelligent law-school candidate out into such a dangerous and challenging lifestyle.

Krakauer used the journal entries McCandless left behind to tell the truth about his story and to give his readers an insight into everything

he was going through. With the aid of his own experience as a serious mountain-climber and wilderness explorer, and that of other men who have gone through similar experiences as McCandless, Krakauer discusses his opinions on what affected his mind so

deeply, and shakes any doubt a reader might have of the young man's sanity or preparation for his Alaskan adventure.

The stories about the places McCandless explored and the people he made lasting bonds with also help the reader to understand what he had been missing out of life and are what helped to inspire some of the last thoughts he would scribble in a book while dying alone in Alaska: "Happiness only real when shared."

Krakauer's incredible talent for detail and description make this novel a definite page-turner and a must-read for anyone looking for a book that stimulates a bit more deep thinking than the average paperback might arouse.