

Kill (with) the Batman

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Batman fans are getting spoiled. Just last year, the film "The Dark Knight" opened to rave reviews and enormous commercial success. This past summer, the apparent death of Bruce Wayne and subsequent "Battle for the Cowl" that followed was one of the biggest storylines of the DC comic universe. Now, fans of the Caped Crusader can add one of the best video games of the year to that list. "Batman: Arkham Asylum" is being hailed by many as the best comic book video game ever made. After playing the game, it's easy to see why.

"Arkham Asylum" is a third person action game created by Rocksteady games featuring an incredible story written by veteran Batman comic writer, Paul Dini. The game begins with a movie-like opening sequence that sets the ominous tone for the rest of the story. Batman captures the Joker and brings him back to Arkham. Yes, it sounds like the ending to a

number of classic Bat tales. But this is just the beginning. Once inside the facility, Joker breaks free, releases the inmates and creates a living hell for all inside, including doctors, Commissioner Gordon and of course, Batman. What ensues is a plot worthy of any graphic novel or feature film.

The player will have to complete objectives that range from saving hostages to obtaining physician's notes on the inmates to confronting some of the most famous Batman villains. The Joker is the star bad man, but the Riddler, Harley Quinn and the Scarecrow also play dark, pivotal roles in the story. There are other characters such as Bane, Killer Croc and Poison Ivy you'd expect to see. There are also a few you might not.

The characterization of these villains is one of the biggest treats of the game. Three of the stars of "Batman: The Animated Series" are back to lend their voices to the characters they played on the show: Kevin Conroy as Batman, Arleen Sorkin as Harley and a spot-on Mark Hamill as the Joker. Hamill is brilliant as Batman's

number one rival, blending just the right amount of humor and horror that makes Joker the Caped Crusader's most formidable foe. Other characters like Riddler and Scarecrow are presented differently than most fans are accustomed to. It's a welcome change. The game succeeds in soliciting fear, and these villains look and act like characters out of a low budget horror film.

The villains are great, but at the end of the day, a game like this will always live or die with the success of the hero. The creators of "Arkham Asylum" don't disappoint. This is what a Batman game should be like. There is less emphasis on combat and more on stealth-like detective work. Batman isn't Superman. He doesn't rely on superhuman strength or any other power to fight crime. He relies on his brain, human skills and striking fear to get the job done. Fans will enjoy the detective mode that allows Batman to analyze different environments and clues. And rather than simply beating the criminals into submission, players have to lurk in the shadows and

crouch in the rafters, picking the right moment to silently sneak up behind a goon or swooping down on a villain, and then quickly disappearing back into the night.

The game has a lot to offer. The graphics are very impressive and it's obvious that the game's creators paid attention to detail in a variety of different areas, including progressive damage to Batman's suit and references to a number of characters who don't make a personal appearance, but whose presence is still felt. The score is suspenseful and even chilling at times, adding a thrilling feel to the game. The fight sequences require combinations of counter and attack moves to earn points that allow Batman to upgrade his armor, combat moves, Bat gadgets like Batarang, Batclaw, explosive gel, and more. There are plenty of patient interviews and character bios to be unlocked. It's not a game that you'll beat in one sitting however, which is a blessing or a curse depending on whom you ask. Even after the main storyline is completed, there are still 240 Riddler challenges to beat. There is an adult feel to the game. Adult

language is used every once in a while and the female villains are scantily dressed. The synching of the character's voices to their lips could have been a little better but these are small quibbles for a game this good.

Simply put, "Batman: Arkham Asylum" is a great game that allows its players to experience what it's like to wear the cowl on the longest night of Batman's crime fighting career. It's a must have for any true Bat fan. It's obvious that right now, Batman reigns supreme in the superhero universe. The excitement generated by the recent success of "The Dark Knight," "Batman R.I.P." and now "Arkham Asylum" have pushed Superman, Spiderman and all other superheroes to the back burner for the time being. The character's history is rich and includes success in all facets of pop culture: the sixties TV show, the graphic novel "The Dark Knight Returns," Christopher Nolan's films, and now this excellent video game. "Batman: Arkham Asylum" is just one more notch in the Caped Crusader's utility belt.

Hitchcock remastered

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"North by Northwest" is one of the most exciting, action packed and fun filled American movies of all time. Now, you can add director Alfred Hitchcock's 1959 classic to your personal collection. On November 3rd, the film gets the special treatment it deserves in the form of a two disc 50th Anniversary Edition DVD.

The movie alone is worth the money. Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint star in this film with a script by Ernest Lehman, dealing with everything from mistaken identity to fleeing a killer crop duster. From a stabbing at the United Nations in New York City to scaling Abraham Lincoln's nose at Mount Rushmore, this one's got it all.

New York executive Roger O. Thornhill (Grant) is mistaken for George Kaplan, an imaginary U.S. government agent. Confused and

not sure what to do next, Roger flees across the country to keep from being killed by foreign spies. Along the way he meets Eve Kendall (Saint), the cool blonde that Hitchcock repeatedly made a centerpiece of his films, and they spark up a romance consisting of innuendo filled banter and one sensual train ride.

Not knowing that Kaplan is an imaginary agent created by the government, Roger escapes the law in the east and heads west, hoping to clear his name by finding Kaplan and setting the record straight. This sets up one of the most iconic scenes in American cinema.

Roger steps off a bus and stands in the middle of a four-way dirt road, waiting for Kaplan to show up to a scheduled meeting between the two. The man he meets isn't Kaplan, but he lets Roger know that there is a plane "dusting crops where there ain't no crops." Eventually the low flying plane turns and flies straight for our protagonist, sending him diving

into a cornfield for protection. Obviously the mystery deepens.

The climax takes place 2,000 miles from where the story began at the American landmark and artistic wonder Mount Rushmore. Lehman recalls how the entire plot of the film came about after Hitchcock commented that he'd always wanted to film a chase on the faces of Mount Rushmore. There's a wonderful exchange between Roger and Eve while hanging onto the monument for dear life.

While the film is full of countless thrilling moments, it's also a lot of fun. Grant will always be remembered as the screen's most debonair leading man, and his suave personality and spot on comedic timing are perfectly blended to create one of the defining performances of his illustrious career. He is a man on the run fleeing for his life, but he never seems to lose his sense of humor. The best example is the scene at the art auction. Roger does all he can to keep himself

alive and yet one can't help but laugh at not only his methods, but also at how well they work. Saint shows that she's capable of playing more than the gritty dramatic roles she was known for before this film. Eve is sophisticated and sexy. She also knows more than she is telling. She seems unflinching, but her feelings for Roger expose the cracks in her armor. The love scenes between Grant and Saint are some of the most electrifying on celluloid. James Mason and Martin Landau give great supporting performances as the sly, arrogant and possibly homosexual foreign agents. With characters this smooth, the movie could be a lesson in class.

"North by Northwest" is sometimes overlooked due to its positioning in Hitchcock's filmography. "Vertigo," released in 1958, has become his most revered film, while "Psycho," released in 1960, has become a horror standard, practically inventing the slasher film genre. Obviously "The Master of Suspense" had one

of the best three-year runs in film history. "North by Northwest" doesn't contain the personal themes of "Vertigo" or the cover your eyes and scream moments of "Psycho," but it's much more fun. The fourth and last of Hitchcock and Grant's collaborations, it makes film lovers long for those director/actor teams who worked so well together, consistently creating grade A material.

"North by Northwest" ranks number 4 on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 most heart pounding movies. It's also ranked number 31 on the Internet Movie Database's top 250 films list. Fifty years after its initial release, the film continues to dazzle and thrill fans and critics alike. The special edition DVD is a must have for any true film fan. If it's not in your collection already, there's no longer any excuse. A big thank you is in order for Hitchcock, Grant and those who labored on this DVD. "North by Northwest" is the ultimate thrill ride. You can't help but enjoy the trip.