

Review: 'DeathSpank,' 'Limbo' bring summer heat

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This summer has been so oppressive throughout most of the United States that even driving to the video-game store feels like an ordeal. Fortunately, you don't have to leave home to experience some of the season's most interesting games — you can download them directly to your console.

That's assuming you have an Internet-connected Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3. Wii owners are less fortunate. While Nintendo has produced a steady stream of downloadable "WiiWare" games, there's nothing distinctive or original in its roster of recent releases.

The quality control on Xbox Live and the PlayStation Store is far more reliable. Let's start with a game you can play on either of the high-definition systems.

—"DeathSpank" (Electronic Arts Inc., for the Xbox 360, PS3, \$15): Dying in video games is easy; comedy is hard. "DeathSpank" has plenty of both. Its titular hero is a blockheaded slab of beef who stabs first and asks questions later. His search for a powerful artifact (called "The Artifact") leads to a series of increasingly absurd missions, like rescuing a bunch of kidnapped orphans — not for their own sake, but so the mayor can use them as political props.

"DeathSpank" was created by Ron Gilbert, best known for the hilarious "Monkey Island" games, and Hothead Games, which developed "Penny Arcade Adventures." It's a savvy parody of the kill-everyone-and-take-all-their-loot mechanics of "Diablo," with silly monsters (from "stupid" chickens to vicious unicorns) and more ridiculous weapons (like the Fist of Super Bashing). If you like your mayhem mixed with a little Monty Python, don't miss "DeathSpank." Three-and-a-half stars out of four.

—"Limbo" (Playdead, for the Xbox 360, \$15) is a much darker affair. Your character, a nameless boy, is dropped without explanation into a world that's been completely drained of color. If you've ever played a two-dimensional platform game, you know what to do: Keep moving to the right. Watch out for traps. Don't get impaled by the giant spider.

Sounds simple enough, but the further into "Limbo" you wander, the more devilish it becomes. Death is frequent and gruesome, and you'll reach obstacles that seem impossible to overcome. Stick with it, though, and you'll be rewarded with that rare sense of satisfaction that comes from solving a truly clever puzzle. You'll also experience one of the eeriest places ever seen in a game — one that may haunt your dreams long after you've finished playing. Four stars.

—"Joe Danger" (Hello Games, for the PS3, \$15): Last year, Microsoft paid tribute to the Nintendo classic "Excitebike" with the motorcycle stunt game "Trials HD." This year it's Sony's turn, and players who were frustrated by the radical difficulty spikes

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

in "Trials" will feel much more comfortable with "Joe Danger."

Joe is a paunchy stuntman trying to make a comeback after a near-fatal crash. To regain the limelight, he has to relearn all his old stunts: popping wheelies, speeding through loop-the-loops, leaping over school buses and shark tanks. Speed is important, but most of the tracks also include other objectives, like striking targets or collecting the letters in "DANGER."

Those objectives give "Joe Danger" plenty of replay value, and its colorful graphics and cartoonish effects make it a charmer. Three stars.

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Xbox is a product of Microsoft Corp.; Playstation is made by Sony Corp.; Wii is made by Nintendo.

Source URL (retrieved on 04/21/2015 - 5:52pm):

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