

E3 BUZZ: Old games find new life

June 17 2015, by Lou Kesten



Attendees watch a Square Enix "Hitman" video game at the E3 Electronic Entertainment Expo at Los Angeles Convention Center on Tuesday, June 16, 2015. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

Seen and heard on the floor of the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo as it begins its three-day run at the Los Angeles Convention Center:

E3 is all about the new: new games, new gadgets, new ways to connect with like-minded players. So the inventors and developers who are hoping they're creating the next big thing must be bewildered by the outpouring of enthusiasm for a remake of an 18-year-old game.

That game is Square Enix's landmark "Final Fantasy VII," a classic Japanese role-playing adventure that introduced many Westerners to the genre. When Sony announced a remake would be coming to the PlayStation 4, its fans—many of whom were children when it first appeared—roared with approval.

But it isn't the only old game getting attention this week. Microsoft won over some skeptics by announcing it would be making the entire library of the good old Xbox 360 playable on the Xbox One. Rare, a studio whose games date back to the early 1980s, announced "Rare Replay," a \$30 compilation of 30 of its old hits, including classics like "Battletoads" and "Banjo-Kazooie." And then there are revivals of long-dormant series like Bethesda Softworks' "Doom" and Nintendo's "StarFox."

Nintendo, more than any other publisher, has been mining nostalgia for years: Every new "Mario Bros." or "Legend of Zelda" title takes gamers back to the '80s, when they played the originals on the Nintendo Entertainment System. When the company's "Super Mario Maker" comes out later this year, I suspect we'll see tons of fan-created tributes to the Mario games of our youth.

Another old title drawing buzz is "Shenmue," a wildly ambitious Sega game from 1999. It was an intriguing and not entirely successful attempt to combine role-playing, brawling and, well, forklift racing. Despite its drawbacks—in particular, some very slow pacing that's a little too lifelike—it pioneered the sprawling open worlds of modern games like

"Grand Theft Auto" and "Far Cry."

After a 2001 sequel flopped, Sega ditched plans to complete the trilogy. But on Monday, "Shenmue" creator Yu Suzuki appeared at Sony's pre-E3 event and announced a \$2 million Kickstarter campaign to fund "Shenmue III." It reached its goal 12 hours later.

The whole affair has raised plenty of questions. The original "Shenmue" cost nearly \$50 million to produce, and games cost a lot more to develop these days. And some critics slammed Sony for asking fans to fund "Shenmue III" rather than providing the financing itself—although Sony is expected to kick in some cash now that fans have demonstrated their ardor.

E3 has always been a place where East meets West, and nowhere was that more evident than Square Enix's pre-E3 showcase. Square's portfolio is a fascinating mix of beloved Japanese franchises like "Final Fantasy" and Western-developed series like "Tomb Raider," and the company's presentation was divided pretty much evenly between developers speaking English and Japanese (sometimes without translation).

The epitome of this dichotomy is the newly announced "Kingdom Hearts III," the latest collaboration between Square and Disney. The series mixes anime-inspired characters with classic Disney toons like Goofy and Donald Duck; the latest chapter adds the cast of "Tangled."

That struck me as an odd choice, but director Tetsuya Nomura said through a translator that Rapunzel and her hair offered some interesting potential in the gameplay. He also pointed out that "Tangled" follows the "traditional Disney structure." He was less forthcoming when asked

about the possibility of Disney-owned Marvel and "Star Wars" characters coming to "Kingdom Hearts"—but, given the series' focus on old-school animation, I wouldn't count on it.

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Buzziest game announcements of E3 Day One:

— "Shenmue III."

— "Kingdom Hearts III."

— Nintendo's "The Legend of Zelda: Triforce Heroes," a multiplayer adventure for the portable 3DS.

— Square Enix's role-playing sequel "Star Ocean: Integrity and Faithlessness," earning major props for its title alone.

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