

The Gamer

Spunky Young Heroines in Sensible Outfits

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Published: August 13, 2005

The New York Times

In the last couple of weeks I have been vicariously living the lives of a series of spunky teenage heroines, engaging in typical heroine activities like collecting clues, trekking through the Amazon and saving the world. While I could claim this as a journey to explore my feminine side, the real reason is less profound: there just wasn't anything else to do.

Nancy Drew, starring in the latest of Her Interactive's adventure game series, *Secret of the Old Clock*. The game is based on the first Nancy Drew book, published in 1930, and Her Interactive has decided to replace the modern Nancy of previous games with a Depression-era version who reads a newspaper headline on the recent discovery of Pluto and talks to people who use words like *moxie* and *jeepers*.

This first mystery of Nancy's illustrious career revolves around a destitute young innkeeper. Her only hope to save the inn was the promised inheritance from an eccentric neighbor, but instead a will was found leaving the entire estate to a local psychic. Could there be another will?

To find out, Nancy must work her way through a series of puzzles and activities, decoding clues, answering a logic quiz and playing a variety of mini-games.

Clock is pleasant but inconsequential. The puzzles are interesting but among the easiest of the series, and the mini-games are generally fun but poorly integrated into the story. The game design feels a little lazy, as in a generally amusing miniature golf game that doesn't give you enough room to swing the club in some spots, or in such ridiculous plot devices as a banker who insists Nancy sew a dress before he will unlock a safety deposit box.

To get around town, Nancy has a roadster, and to earn gas money she must deliver telegrams to the locals. Since this isn't especially fun I couldn't understand the reason for its inclusion until I reached the end of the game and realized that it was simply a desperate effort to stretch out the playing time. But even with the busywork I finished the game within five hours feeling that it had ended almost before it began.

Clock is one of the shortest and easiest games in the series, and the main reason to buy it is that there's not much else to buy this time of year. Game reviewers don't need to look at a calendar or be suffocated by withering heat to know when it's summer: in summer, the games stop coming. After completing *Nancy Drew* I was left with nothing to play except *Jumpstart Reading With Karaoke*, an edutainment title from Knowledge Adventure that aims to teach children ages 4 to 7 to read. But as someone who isn't 4 and doesn't know any 4-year-olds, I found the game's cutesy presentation and mind-numbingly simple songs more than I could bear.

The next day two action adventure games from developer A2M arrived, That's So Raven 2: Supernatural Style and Kim Possible 3: Team Possible. Raven was a poorly designed piece of schlock I gave up on in half an hour, but Team Possible turned out to be quite entertaining.

Based on the "Kim Possible" children's cartoon series on the Disney Channel, Team Possible follows professional world-saving high schooler Kim and her best friend, Ron Stoppable, as they attempt to retrieve a family album stolen by the diabolic supervillain Dr. Drakken.

To do this, Kim and Ron must jump across platforms, battle henchman and bypass barriers, assisted by a variety of gadgets. The player alternately controls Kim or Ron, using Ron's rocket boots to reach a high platform or the mole he carries in his pocket to eat through the wires of a security door and using Kim's grapple gun to swing over gaps and her holographic imager to lure out enemies.

With nice graphics, diverting game-play and amusing expository scenes of Drakken hatching his half-baked plan, Team Possible is a lot of fun while it lasts, which isn't long. Like the Nancy Drew game, the ending came with a startling suddenness. Even at a leisurely pace I managed to finish the game in under four hours. Finding myself once again with nothing new to play, I spent the day watching movies on television ("Shaun of the Dead" is a very funny movie but I could have done without seeing that guy's intestines pulled out).

The next game to arrive was Hypnotix's Outlaw Tennis, which follows the same formula as Outlaw Golf and Outlaw Volleyball: create a well-designed sports game and attempt to make it wacky and outrageous by throwing in loud obnoxious characters, lewd young women in bikinis and witless, puerile humor. I also attempted to play Electronic Arts' Madden NFL 06, which is a great game for people who don't hate football. It left me, like all football games except NFL Street, confused and annoyed.

With nothing left to play, it looked as though I might be forced to read a book or go out into the sun. I was rescued from this eventuality by the spunkiest heroine of all when I discovered GreGames' adventure game Jessica Plunkenstein and the Düsseldorf Conspiracy.

A free game available at www.gregames.net and created by a Yale student as his senior project, Düsseldorf begins as Jessica's parents, disturbed by their daughter's membership in the A.C.L.U. and her "Free Tibet" poster, send her to Miss Pernilla's Institute for Unwifely Women.

Fortunately for Jessica, an airport mix-up results in an Indiana Jones-style adventurer swapping tickets with our heroine. And as the stewardess advises passengers to "please take a moment to ignore the safety information card in your seat back pocket" Jessica finds herself winging her way to the Amazon. There she is asked to save the world from Baron von Düsseldorf, who is preparing a formula that will make people dumb enough to enjoy his terrible Broadway musical, "Les Misercats."

The crazy story involving llamas, yetis and ninjas is supported by a series of wacky puzzles involving llama-eating plants and yodeling competitions. Puzzles are logical and imaginative, although the game's final puzzle is out of place and so unpleasant that even the game itself makes

a derogatory comment about it. While the graphics could have been designed by a 12-year-old and the dialogue sounds as if it was recorded in someone's living room, the game's laugh-out-loud dialogue and clever puzzles make Düsseldorf the best adventure game I've played this year. It is also far more generous than either Secret of the Old Clock or Team Possible, offering a gaming experience that took me around seven or eight hours to complete.

Smart and resourceful, Nancy Drew, Kim Possible and Jessica Plunkenstein are a refreshing change from the buxom, mini-skirt-wearing supermodel types one generally encounters in videogames. And while my masculine side rather enjoys these underdressed fantasy women, my feminine side knows how hard it is to save the world and trek through the Amazon in a leather corset and high-heeled boots. Still, both masculine and feminine sides of me agree on one thing; they are anxious for fall to arrive with its many, many games.

IF YOU BUY

Nancy Drew: Secret of the Old Clock

Developed and published by Her Interactive.

For Windows 98/Me/2000/XP.

\$19.99.

For all ages.

Kim Possible 3: Team Possible

Developed by Artificial Mind and Movement (A2M).

Published by Disney Interactive.

For Game Boy Advance.

\$29.99.

For all ages.

Jessica Plunkenstein and the Düsseldorf Conspiracy

Developed by GreGames.

For Windows 95 and up.

Available free at www.gregames.net.

Not rated, but no violence or sex. Some yodeling, however.

I began my journey with the grand old lady of teenage heroines,