

PUBLISHER: Microsoft DEVELOPER: Rare GENRE: Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail Box ESRB RATING: Everyone
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.BGHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 10GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended) MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

## REVIEW

Picture yourself in a colorful, fresh world of papier-māché. Piñata animals with tasty names thrive among exotic plants. Even better: Money is made of chocolate, and the worst villains are the ones who break piñatas. Welcome to the offbeat world of strategy/sim game (and Xbox 360 port) Viva Piñata.

Long ago, Jardinero—the best gardener on Piñata Island-retired, leaving his garden abandoned until it became a mess. As the new gardener, it's your duty to fill those dirt-covered boots by growing fabulous plants, attracting cool piñatas to live and romance in your garden, and keeping away the nasty Sours. As the less-thanencouraging Jardinero himself often comments, this is harder than it seems (my self-esteem took a hit from remarks such as "You are now an Expert Gardener. I myself reached that goal in my first day in the garden."). The farther you progress, the more of the story you unlock; the "Storybook" feature lets you access chapters of the story from your handy-dandy Journal without interfering with your gardening. The odd story forms a good foundation, but it isn't so involved that it overwhelms the gameplay.

To play, you can either use an Xbox 360 controller or a mouse and keyboard. The mouse/ keyboard felt very awkward, as if I were playing a console game with PC controls. The 360 controller's smooth layout is definitely preferable.

## TIME SINK

Once you get past the control issues, Viva Piñata is very addictive. I frequently found myself getting so absorbed in the game that a couple of hours would pass, during which I'd forget all about my homework (just ask my mother). As long as you have a goal to accomplish, it's hard to stop—and it's pretty tough to not have any goals. You can always find another piñata to tame or romance, another plant to grow, and so on. Don't get over-

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whelmed if a lot of things happen too quickly at the beginning; at the time, it bothered me...but later, I found that this gave me more freedom and challenges with my garden. Occasionally, I would get bored or frustrated for chunks of time, but that was when I knew it was time to take a break. My main problem was that romancing the piñatas (this leads to the creation of new piñatas) felt confusing: At the beginning, it's easy...but later, the piñatas start getting pickier and refuse to romance, even those in happy moods and with all their requirements completed.

Overall, Viva Piñata is a must for the "Sims generation," the 9-to-13-ish kids who don't enjoy violent games—they'll definitely fall in love with the piñatas. If you get Viva Piñata for your kids, make sure to get tissues, too; it's hard not to get teary when a Syrupent eats your Mousemallow. Also, adults shouldn't dismiss this as a "kiddie game," as you might be surprised at how much strategy's involved. Viva Piñata is a great escape from both standard violent games and reality.

Sarah Jaisser Green

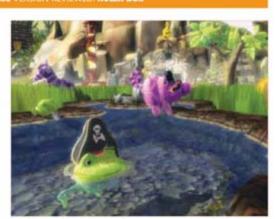
## VERDICT

- Very addictive; deceptively strategy-oriented.
- Wonky mouse/keyboard controls scream "plug in a gamepad already!"



GOOD









So cute and colorful, it hurts.

