

21 December 2007

By: Alexandru Stanescu, Editor, Gaming Reviews (Consoles)



## [The Golden Compass](#)

### *Pointing towards mediocrity*

Game movie tie-ins are usually a great way for big developers to make a quick buck, using the movie's reputation and this usually happens when a blockbuster comes out or during the holiday season. Since we're almost at Christmas time, it's raining with blockbuster motion pictures and, of course the game-movie tie-ins start surfacing. From Beowulf, to this here [The Golden Compass](#), there are quite a bunch of titles to choose from and looking back at this year's games, I can say that at least 20-30% of them were inspired by movies. There's usually a recipe for such products: they feature the same storyline plus a minor twist, they come out before the movies do and they're quite mediocre. Can't remember the last time I was pleased by a game based on the Marvel Universe, for example, but Pirates of the Caribbean (any of the titles in the series) managed to disappoint me as well. The Golden Compass is no exception, failing to deliver the fantastic atmosphere of the movie and it seems to me that its producers were rushed to finish the game before the launch of the motion picture. Just a theory of mine, though, so don't let my thoughts distract you from analyzing the title for yourself. Even if you don't take into consideration the fact that we're dealing with a game-movie tie-in, The Golden Compass is still an average media product, specially when played on the [PSP](#). Why? Read below to find out!

**Lyra Belacqua's Story**

Although the game was launched a day before the movie, it seems that it's unveiling a storyline that you already know. If you've never looked up the plot online or seen the movie, you'll see that understanding the game's action and each character's motivation is a tough thing to do. We're witnessing a storytelling, as that's how the game's plot is delivered through the classic "two month ago...they went... let me tell you that...." lines. You can play as Lyra Belacqua the protagonist of the game and movie, but you'll also control the vital character Iorek Byrninson (talk about names that are difficult to spell). There are many things to be said about the entire story of the fascinating universe where Lyra dwells, but saying them would mean ruining the fun of reading the book and watching the movie. It's worth mentioning that Lyra will travel to fascinating locations, chasing the "Gobblers" who kidnap children and trying to save her uncle, Lord Asriel. In case you're wondering, the golden compass is the Alethiometer, a strange device shaped like a clock, which has the gift of answering any of the questions you ask it. However, it'll have to use particles called Dust or shadows, which play a vital role in this alternative universe...Oh, let's not forget about Pan, another one of the story's important characters. He's Lyra's daemon, her inner self turned into an animal, which can morph into other beasts, too. Since I've already said too much, I guess it's time to pass to the actual concept of the game.

**Concept & Gameplay**

The adventure begins without too much of an introduction and you'll wake up in the midst of a Syberia-lookalike environment (the game, not the real life location). The Golden Compass is an action adventure that could have been turned into a real success, had the potential of the trilogy of books and upcoming movies been exploited to the max. There's not much fighting to do, but you'll have to, specially when controlling the mighty armored bear Iorek. You'll probably be wondering what you can do while controlling Lyra, since she's not much of a fighter.. Well, she's more the explorer type, constantly using her daemon companion, Pan to explore environments, travel from one place to another and pull off various stunts. Pan can turn into a wildcat, a hawk, an ermine or a sloth, with the aid of a single press of a d-pad button. Iorek is extremely physical and he'll mostly kill wolves or other creatures he encounters, like hunters and even a pretty cool boss during one of the major battles from the game's beginning. If what I wrote till now seemed like a fascinating adventure, you'll probably have to read more in order to understand why the game sold poorly and I'm not

much of a fan of it, either. Controlling the giant bear is surely a ball, but you'll have to mash buttons in order to make him perform dull attacks and smashes. From time to time, there's the usual cineractive, triggered by the same triangle button, but 90% of such scenes are mere jumps from one giant piece of ice to another. As you play on, you'll find out that there are few things Lyra must do, objectives if you want... That's probably the reason why you can use a Journal option in the main menu, which shows the tasks you must complete. The problem with *The Golden Compass* is that after playing 10 minutes of it, you'll find yourself saying "Is that all?!" while expecting more from the adventure. It didn't bother me when wolves kept jumping around like pinatas with springs attached to them or the fact that Iorek performs attacks and flashes red (as do the wolves when they die). It didn't even bother me when I had to play a "tag you're it" game for about 10 times in order to progress through the game... But when the camera angles change suddenly during a jump and the control scheme's not helping, we have a problem! In the meantime, we return to Iorek, only to find the bear parrying strikes and arrow shots like a Tekken fighter. It's true, there's some silver lining in this cloudy experience, that being the bear's interaction with the environments (total destruction) plus the quests that involve Lyra and Pan (usually environmental ones). Iorek can sometimes perform special attacks, like he were a Spartan or something, by filling his Rage gauge. This is done by destroying objects, defeating enemies and collecting rage claws. You'll break more than a few hunter huts and ice walls, but those are predefined events so there's no surprise here. In case you ever die (usually because of camera angles), you'll be reset to the previous checkpoint you reached. Keep an eye on bear traps, falling pieces of rock and ice and crashing icy floor beneath you ... Those are all dangerous part of the surrounding frozen environment that will kill you instantly (or almost) if you turn your attention from the PSP screen for a second. Since I can't avoid comparing Iorek to a Tekken fighter, a Spartan or even Jack Sparrow, I might as well mention that the armored bear has a cool move you'll surely love: a nice grapple that allows you to grab enemies and toss them around. Directional throws are also available, but combat is so dull in this game, that you won't have time for such stunts, quickly passing to the next parts of the storyline. The recipe of 2007's game-movie tie-ins is followed once again in *The Golden Compass*, so there's another gameplay feature that we'll stumble upon, which has been used in a ton of other games: button sequences. Various actions, usually the so-called quests, require you press the PSP's buttons in a certain pattern in order to finish the challenge. You can throw books at objects high above, throw rocks at stalagmites and there's even a nice scholar-spitting game, you'll surely enjoy. A good idea from the developer of the game is the balance minigame, which pops up occasionally, allowing you to use the analog control to maintain Lyra's balance on poles. Pan's contribution to the game's actions is crucial, as the little fellow can turn into a hawk and help you jump (and fly) over large gaps, or turn into an ermine and use his sight to find cool new objects for you. As a sloth, Pan stretches up and helps you swing around poles, being used a whip to reach them and new heights. Lyra won't just explore her surroundings and solve puzzles and minigames, but she'll also have to evade a hunter's attack at some point, during a scene that has pretty impressive graphics. Of course, it's yet another button pattern adventure... There's no AI, so to say, in this title, as all the fights you'll take part in are a formality stuck between minigames and small cutscenes. The characters' moves aren't natural and they tend to fall off cliff a lot, but the the control system is the one to blame for such unpleasant events. Graphics "Video killed a radio star" and it has also killed this game, mostly because of its camera angle issues and bad graphics plus some major bugs. First of all, there aren't enough cutscenes to satisfy my need for a decent storyline and those that were included are short and feature poor graphics (for wannabe FMVs that is) . Textures appear where they don't belong, while during a jump you may find yourself looking in the wrong direction because of that nuisance we call view angle. The environments aren't impressive, but they're somewhat varied, without a high level of details, but this is a PSP after all, so we won't be bothered by that. Characters lack the individuality needed in such a fascinating story, while some of the

children you'll meet seem to have taken a serious beating, because their traits look weird and deformed. Lyra and Iorek move like huge blocks and you'll surely laugh the first time you see the movie and game's protagonist running. Do you know what I liked the most about the graphical section of the game? The looks and behavior of the cute critter called Pan. When it's time to take a look around, he'll climb on Lyra's head as the little cute ermine he is and gaze in order to find new objects. SoundTop notch soundtrack! Big thumbs up for the folks responsible with the score of this game and the movie's OST as well. I'm listening to a couple of songs that were featured in the movie right now and I have to tell you that, as strange as it may seem, this music tells the story of the Golden Compass better than words, images or animations. The dialogue lines are funny, although somewhat repetitive and annoying, but the young and childish audience will have a ball, if they're really into Harry Potter-style jokes and storytelling. ConclusionIt's difficult to decide whether to spend money on titles like this or not... After all, it's Christmas and we're surely running out of "gold" while trying to pick one of the console we're going to buy for ourselves before Santa arrives. If you're a fan of the trilogy of books, you've watched the movie (and liked it), there's no reason not to spend money on the game, but you shouldn't be a pretentious gamer, or else you'll feel disappointed. Seems that The Golden Compass is an adventure created for the fans of the media phenomenon (movies plus books) that doesn't manage to impress the Metal Gear/Halo/Final Fantasy lover, who'll simply move on to the next shelf of the game store after seeing the cover of The Golden Compass.