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Tiger Woods PGA Tour Online hands-on

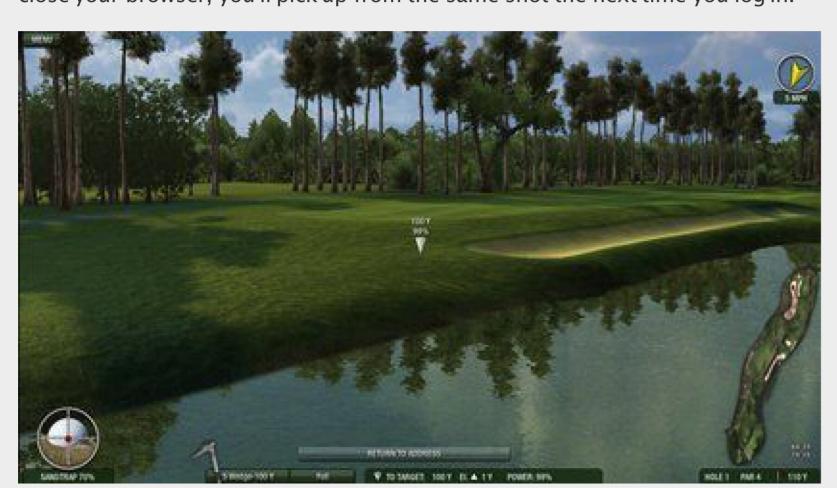
By Joe_Rybicki November 03, 2009

A console–quality golf experience... in your browser?



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After strolling the links in the closed beta of Tiger Woods PGA Tour Online, we've discovered that EA might be onto something here. This is a game that comes to you completely through your browser, streaming via a small plug-incalled the Unity Player. Since everything is hosted on the server, the game is playable on practically any recent Windows or Mac machine. And since the server takes care of everything, you can pause and resume your game from di!erent machines. Even if your boss walks in while your shot's in the air, forcing you to frantically close your browser, you'll pick up from the same shot the next time you log in.



But here's the surprising thing: Though the game is certainly streamlined from its bigger siblings on console and PC, the core gameplay experience is shockingly similar. In a browser. With multiple tabs open. And a couple other programs running in the background.

If you've played any of the recent TigerWoods releases, the experience will be very familiar: You'll swing your way through painstakingly recreated courses using either a venerable three-clickshooting system or the Tiger franchise's trademark "TrueSwing" system, in which you swing your club by simply drawing back and #icking forward on your mouse. This edition brings back the putt preview (an on-again,o!-again feature of the franchise), and in this early stage the TrueSwing seems a bit hypersensitive, but the on-the-coursegameplay is otherwise almost identical to recent Tiger games. You even get a narrated intro for each hole.

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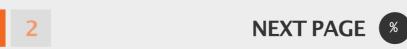
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It's o! the greens that the big changes appear. For one thing, Tiger Woods Online currently includes just \$ve courses. Now, they're \$ve of the best: Pebble Beach, TPC Sawgrass, Sheshan Golf and Country Club, St. Andrews and Wolf Creek Golf Club. But even so, the limited lineup could be a bone of contention for players. Fortunately, EA expects to add new courses based on community feedback.

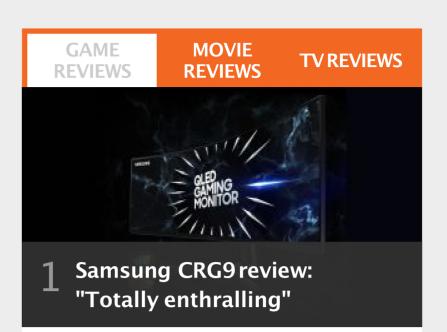
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Also absent are the ridiculously deep golfer-customization options featured in recent Tiger titles; here you get your choice between just four pre-setgolfers, with customization limited to clothing and accessories purchased in the pro shop. (This, too, could change as the game evolves -remember that the game is still in beta.)



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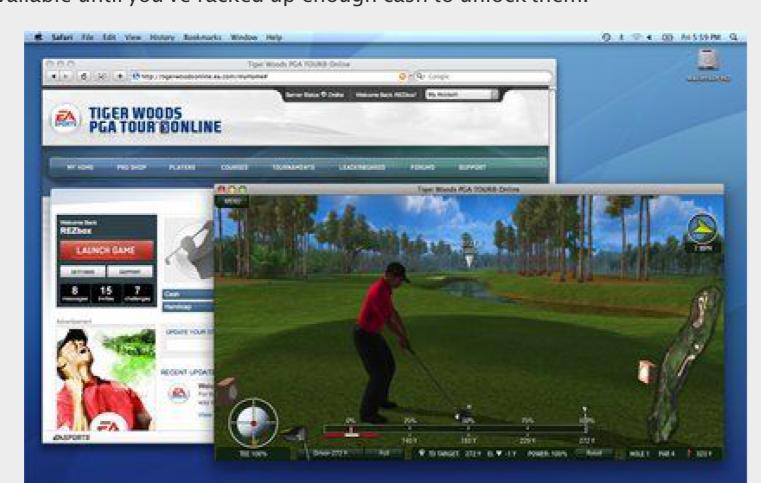
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But the big tweak is the complete overhaul of the golfer-upgradesystem. Unlike previous games, which relied on skill points and experience, Tiger Woods Online's upgrade system is entirely cash-based. You earn cash for feats on the course, and each of the #ve courses includes a whole suite of objectives (think Achievements) that keep the cash \$owing. You use this cash to level-upyour dilerent swings -or unlock new ones, since Punch, Flop and Chip shots aren't available until you've racked up enough cash to unlock them.

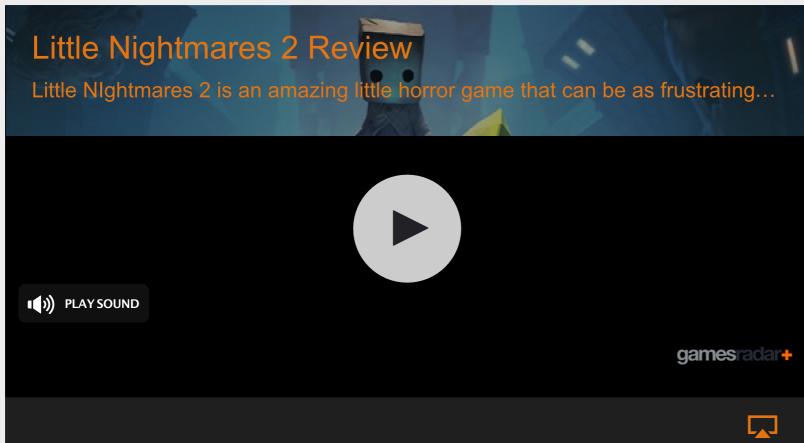


Earning enough cash to level up your golfer is key, because the EA hosts daily and weekly tournaments with huge purses, and the rewards get bigger as your golfer's level gets higher. Place well in a tourney and you get big cash to level up your player... to do better in the next tourney, and get more cash.

If you think that sounds like the philosophy behind a massively multiplayer RPG, you're on the right track. EA is looking to build a similar community around Tiger Woods Online, right down to the idea of clans or guilds (called simply "groups" here) where you can track the collective accomplishments of your team of likeminded players. They're also building something of a shared world, where you can monitor the progress of folks playing concurrently on the same course; you get shot trails of players on the same hole, and a running chat window for the genteel exchanges that ought to mark all friendly games of golf. (Both features are, of course, easily disabled for those who prefer to play solo.)

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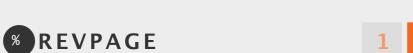
It remains to be seen whether players will embrace this kind of format. Fans of Tiger on the PC have been feeling neglected since the franchise's last PC release in 2007, and may have already departed to greener links. And we still need some idea of rates for the "multi-tiered subscription" model EA has promised –as of this writing the numbers are still undetermined. If the rates go high enough, it could prompt potential subscribers to wonder why they shouldn't just pick the game up on a console instead.

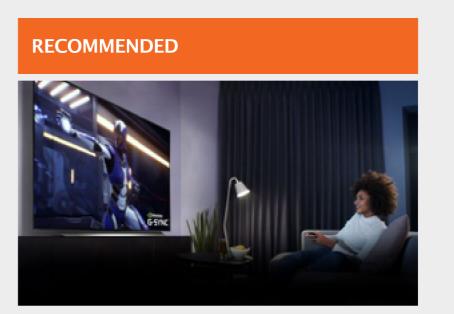
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Even so, seeing a game like this running in a browser is frankly startling. It may not lead to the end of the dedicated game machine as we know it, but it's certainly a step in an interesting direction.

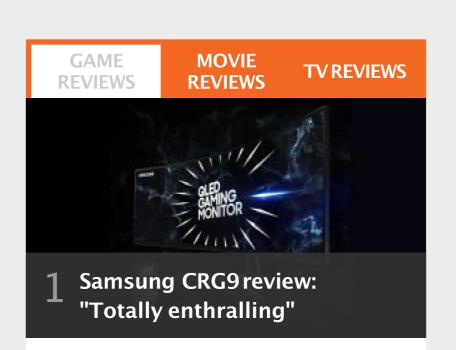
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