

new games • old games • console games • pc games • arcade games • portable games • game stuff

HARDCORE GAMER[®]

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MAGAZINE

v1i11 . Girl Power

TEST DRIVE

Oh, yeah!

MMORCR1!

(Massively Multi-
player Online
Racer Numba 1!)

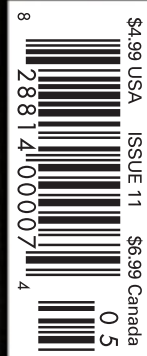
Plus, check out
John Woo's
Stranglehold

JOHN WOO PRESENTS
STRANGLEHOLD



Then gaze upon
Lara's new guns

LARA CROFT'S
TOMB
RAIDER
LEGEND



As if that weren't enough...

we 'splore the long sordid history of online games,
lost in the translation — Kou gets lost in the UK,
plus the usual happy mix of reviews and previews

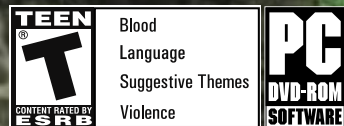


Wolfer '06

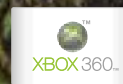
SEEING IS BELIEVING



LARA CROFT
**TOMB
RAIDER**
L E G E N D



PlayStation 2



www.TombRaider.com



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Publisher
Tim Lindquist
Editor in Chief
Greg Off
 greg@hardcoregamermag.com
Art Director
Terry Wolfinger
Senior Editor
Thomas Wilde
Editors

Anthony Mertz
Dave Hulegaard
Geson Hatchett
Jason Venter
Jeremy Peeples
Steven Kent
Elizabeth Ellis
Tim Kinneen
Girls Impress
David Brothers
Artists
Amadeo Garcia III
Production Artists
John McKechnie
Brady Hartel
Jody Seltzer
Translator
Elizabeth Ellis
Ad sales
Burr Hilsabeck
415-412-5685
 burr@hardcoregamermag.com
Ad coordinator
Martin Gilbert
Customer Service
Judy Snow
706-369-3743

Danny Cowan
David Brothers
Iaian Ross
James Cunningham
Ken Horowitz
Thomas Shin
Alicia Ashby
Julie Stoffer

Dane Miner
Bryan Neff
Gary Harrod

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Printed in the United States of America

Biographical Data



DJPubba Tim Lindquist

I got to visit Nintendo for the first time this month. It's exactly as I'd always imagined it would be when I was young. When you walk in the front door, it's a normal looking company reception area. Then, they take you up the stairs and it's like, *oh my dear lord*, just go ahead and forward my mail here, please. I'm never leaving.

Now Playing: *Metroid Prime Hunters*, *Super Princess Peach*



Wanderer Thomas Wilde

If anyone needs me, I'll be over here beating my computer with a sledgehammer. It's difficult to come up with an appropriately hilarious bio when everything around me is abruptly failing to work... although leaving the pile of new parts in the living room intimidated the old PC into working for a while.

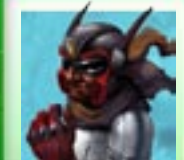
Now Playing: *Grandia III*, *Atelier Iris 2*, *Shadow Hearts: Covenant*



Mogis Tim Kinneen

With this generation of consoles winding down, I've been loving all the dirt-cheap games on store shelves. Lately I've built up a huge stack of shrink-wrapped titles that I missed out on the first time around, and by the look of it they're going to keep me busy until well after the PS3 launches.

Now Playing: *Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow*



Racewing Geson Hatchett

I promise to never subconsciously laugh at white gangsta rappers again. Playing *Guitar Hero* has taught me what it's like to have the shoe on the other foot. I look like an idiot with this mock-guitar in my hands, making super-cheesy rock-out motions. Good thing the game's so addictive, or else I might actually start to care.

Now Playing: *Guitar Hero*, *Sonic Riders* (Xbox, and screw the haters, this game's 100% quality), "Scientifically Examining" Ema Skye (*Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*)



Shoegazer Dave Hulegaard

This month has been all about juggling a bizarre combination of *Kingdom Hearts II*, making travel arrangements, and trying to keep up with the World Baseball Classic in my down time. Like Jeremy, nostalgia hit me as well this month thanks in part to Bret Hart rightfully taking his place in the WWE Hall of Fame. Well deserved, Hitman.

Now Playing: *Kingdom Hearts II*, *Burnout Revenge*, *Tomb Raider Legend*



KouAidou Elizabeth Ellis

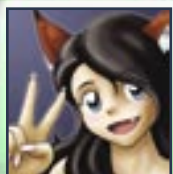
What, you want me to amuse you? I just got back from a five-day *marathon* in the UK, and you think I have the energy to amuse you with a witty and entertaining bio piece? Not a chance, buddy! Go amuse yourself for once!

Now Playing: Far too many pirate games.



Roger Danish Greg Off

I don't need a PS3. Even though current gen is slowing down to a crawl, it's nowhere near dead. Titles like *Kingdom Hearts*, *Tomb Raider*, *Metal Gear Solid: Subsistence* and *The Godfather* have me glued to my PS2 and Xbox. Meanwhile my PSP is finally getting the attention it deserves... Aw, who am I kidding -- I might as well be playing Parcheesy. I want my PS3!!!
 Currently Playing: *Me and My Katamari*, *Tomb Raider: Legends*, *Ace Combat Zero*, *Kingdom Hearts II*.



Lynxara Alicia Ashby

Banzai for Super Robot Taisen in the US! In celebration, I shall now continue playing *MX Portable* despite every rational fiber of my being telling me that this game isn't very good and I should perhaps play the superior PS2 version I've owned for years instead.

It's *Compact 3* all over again, I swear. Why are the crappiest games often the most hypnotic?

Now Playing: *Super Robot Wars MX Portable*, *Grandia III*



4thletter David Brothers

100 Bullets is consistently the single best comic book to hit the streets. Brian Azzarello's writing paired with Eduardo Risso's pencils (and Trish Mulvihill's colors!) combine each month to deliver 22 pages of solid gold goodness. Everything else can kick rocks.

Now Playing: *Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes*, a tremendous backlog of awesome games



James James Cunningham

As of this writing, I'm now primed for E3. Plane ticket? Check! Hotel? Check! Irritation at those who say E3 is overrated and no fun? Check! Now it's just a matter of slogging through the month and a half to the show, wondering all the while how to fit everything that needs to be done into a mere three days plus pre-show insanity.

Now Playing: *Exit*, *Super Princess Peach*, *MGS3 Subsistence LE*.



HonestGamer Jason Venter

Time grows scarcer with each passing minute. When I was a kid, every day was an eternity. Now I work and it's changed: five days are an eternity, then there are two that rock before it's back to that miserable eternity. *sigh*

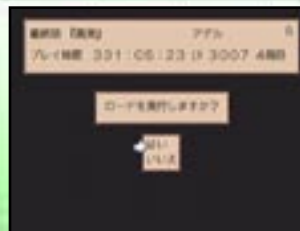
Now Playing: *Shadow Hearts From the New World*, *Generation of Chaos*



Hitoshura Iaian

Story of my life: Hey, I think I see room for another digit on the clock.

Now Playing *Disgaea 2*



FragHag Julie Stoffer

I am a cancer. I enjoy long walks on the beach and kittens. I do not like olives but I acknowledge their existence. My game of choice for the moment is *Beyond Good and Evil*, an oldie but a goodie. My bike currently has a flat tire. I adore Whatchamacallits but I rarely purchase one. Why? I suppose that is one of the mysteries of life.

Now Playing: *Kingdom Hearts II*, *Tomb Raider: Legends*, *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Chase the Chuckwagon*



Wolfie Terry Wolfinger

I just saw the best movie: *The World's Fastest Indian*. It's about an old guy (Anthony Hopkins) who spends his life customizing this old Indian motorcycle in hopes of breaking the land speed record back in the '60s. You don't have to love motorcycles to like this movie. The journey he goes through is just plain awesome. Also just read the first volume of the comic, *The Walking Dead: Days Gone Bye*. Good clean zombie fun!
 Now playing: *World of Warcraft* Can't wait: *Test Drive*



Metalb0t Anthony Mertz

A giant shout out to the guys at Skullies place for helping to resurrect my Supra; Maiku, Hydra632, and guy from Philly: you dudes rock! What I lost in fancy paperweights, I gained in mobility. Walter, good luck helping out in New Orleans, because they need it. Someday, I hope to be as manly as you are.

Now Playing: *Airforce Delta Storm* (XBOX), *Postal 2*, *Battlefield 2*



Arfeth Thomas Shin

Hey Red Octane? We're still waiting for that Yamaha drum-kit with an extra floor-tom and a hi-hat pedal. We promise lots of booth babes to flock to your arms, except the booth babes will be completely covered in cardboard boxes and armed to the teeth with survival knives and CQC combat knowledge to kidnap your designers.

Now Playing: *Guitar Hero*, *Dead or Alive 4*, *MGS 3:Subsistence*



Ashura Brady Hartel

It seems all of my time lately has been spent laying out pages or playing *Metal Gear Online*. Well, not exactly. I got in a good bit of Raizing's, er, I mean, Cave's new shmup *Ibara*. Great game, though I wouldn't suggest playing it sideways, one handed, while trying to use the other hand to take screenshots. No single credit clear there, believe me. (PS: Look for me on MGO as 'Ashura'!)

Now Playing: *Ibara*, *Super Princess Peach*, *Metal Gear Online* (yeah...)



Jeremmy Jeremmy Peeples

The '80s kick I've been on has spread to everything from my viewing habits (hello, "Miami Vice" and "Mid-South Wrestling") to gaming, and it's kind of freaking me out. I'm afraid I'll start enjoying Tears for Fears and try to grow a rat tail. Maybe a quick trip through Vice City will solve these problems. If not, I'll just drink some Tab. Canned soda stays good after a few decades, right?

Now Playing: *Tecmo World Wrestling* and far too many DC games to count



Sardius Danny Cowan

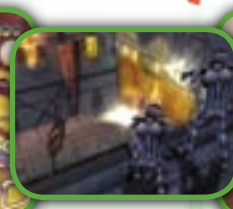
Right now I'm realizing that I have spent my entire spring break writing about videogames. This makes me sad. I'm going to go outside now to think on this, and hopefully when I get back I'll be able to squeeze out 300 more words for *Dirge of Cerberus*. Wish me luck!

Now Playing: *The Godfather: The Game*, *Mr. Bones* (Saturn), *Penn & Teller's Smoke and Mirrors* (Sega CD)

Contents

Previews

If our previews were an animal, they would be a panda bear. So soft, so cuddly, so damn cute! You could watch them frolic in their pen, lap at their salt lick, and poop in the grass. (How serene.)



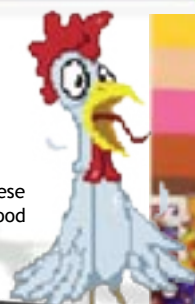
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Features

If our features were a vegetable, they would be cauliflower. White and crumbly, and only tasting good when covered in cheese sauce, they would be so good for you. (So Gassy.)



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On the cover



If our cover was a mineral, it would be Buttgenbatchite. It's rare, includes fibrous crystals arranged in tufts, sounds funny, and comes from the copper mines of Cornwall. (It's vitreous.)

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THE WAIT IS OVER



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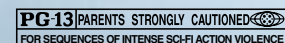
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DVD SPECIAL FEATURES

- Feature Film including original Japanese language with English subtitles and an English dub
 - Reminiscence of FINAL FANTASY VII Story Digest
 - The Distance: Making of Featurette
 - **FINAL FANTASY VII: Advent Children** Venice Film Festival Footage
 - Sneak Peek of upcoming FINAL FANTASY VII games
 - **FINAL FANTASY VII: Advent Children** trailers
 - Deleted Scenes
- Special Features Not Rated

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RARE BRINGS PIÑATAS TO LIFE

The folks that brought you the colorful elves and orcs of *Kameo* on the Xbox 360 are bringing you a colorful world of, umm... piñatas! "*Viva Piñata*" is an upcoming game exclusive to the Xbox 360 that will tie in to an animated Fox Saturday Morning TV series. The series will be produced by 4Kids Entertainment, who brought other classic kid programs such as *Pokémon*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* The show will air in the U.S. in Fall 2006. The Xbox 360 game will come shortly after for Holiday 2006 release. The game will have a *Sims/Pokémon-like* spin, where the players control an eco-piñata-paradise. Create eco-systems to attract unique species of Piñata. Smash—um, catch, them all. More than 60 species total and they're not all burros. Maybe in ten years, after *Viva Piñata* reaches puberty, it'll go the way of *Conker* and *Fur Fighters* with some cute explosive candy fun. Until then, visit vivapiñata.com for screenshots and sweetness overload.



ROCKSTAR GETS BULLIED

The Miami-Dade School District in Florida passed an amendment to prevent the sale of Rockstar's upcoming game, *Bully*, to minors. The PTA council unanimously approved the resolution, but the board's only non-voting advisor, a student and avid gamer, opposed it. The game places you in the role of a school bully.

That's a wrap of this month's news for your itchy gaming finger. For more news bits, check out gamingbits.com.

Have some news you'd like to share? Email alexis@gamingbits.com

Looks like November is Next-Gen month! Sony announced its first worldwide console launch for its release of the PlayStation 3, making it one year after the November 2005 Xbox 360 launch. Sony is touting that the PS3 launch will simultaneously happen in Japan, USA and Europe. At the time of this writing, Sony estimates that 6 million units will be shipped by end of March 2007.

It won't go the path of Microsoft's core/premium console bundle options, as all PS3s will come standard with a 60 gig hard drive, plus Linux installed. Similar to the Microsoft's Xbox Live Network, Sony's "PlayStation Network Platform" will offer online multiplayer interaction and downloadable content. The PS3 will be fully backwards compatible with all PlayStation and PS2 titles, and can display any of your older games in HD resolution. That's right, you won't need to check a "Backwards Compatibility List" with this console.

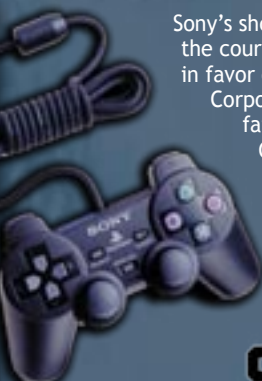
The PS3 was anticipated to be released in Spring 2006, but copy protection issues with the Blu-ray drive were cited as a cause of the delay.



PS3 TO DEBUT THIS NOVEMBER

SONY PSP DELIVERS A HANDFUL

Sony has some treats in store for you PSP gamers. What, you don't have a PSP? Well, let's start with the lowered price from \$249 to \$199. If that gets your hands on it, the PSP will offer you a few new add-ons: a PSP EyeToy, USB GPS Receiver and voice over IP (voice over a network). A system update in Spring 2006 will bring a browser upgrade, including Flash 6 support (Flash mini games galore!). Sony is also working on a plan to let the PSP emulate PlayStation titles, by offering the games as downloadable content.



Sony's shot at overturning the court case ruling in favor of Immersion Corporation's suit has failed. Immersion Corporation is the inventor of the "rumbling" feedback coming from your controller. Sony is the only company using the rumble technology going up against Immersion. Microsoft, Mad Catz and Logitech all settled out of court with Immersion.

SONY RUMBLINGS

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GAMINGBITS
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VIDEO GAMES GO ON NORTH AMERICAN CONCERT

Theatrics, festivals and gaming! Video Games Live is a concert event paying tribute to video gaming through music and video. A selected few can get on stage and show off their gaming skills while an orchestra plays interactively with them in the background. Beat that, Dolby! Check out the tour dates on videogameslive.com.

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Splitting up to save their home... Reuniting to save the world!

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- GameInformer

ATELIER IRIS 2

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Switch main characters to experience both Eden and Belkhyde!



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PlayStation 2



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Publisher: **Capcom**
 Developer: **Capcom**
 Release Date: **Q2 2006**

Genre(s): **Action**
 Category: **Monster Hunting**
 # of Players: **1-4**

MONSTER HUNTER FREEDOM



Preview by **RogerDanish**



Having been available for some time now overseas, *Monster Hunter Freedom* has become a huge phenomenon, and is the most successful selling PSP title in Japan to date. Whereas the PS2 *Monster Hunter* emphasized online gameplay, *Monster Hunter Freedom* focuses on offering a more accessible single-player experience. In the game, challengers take on a variety of quests and set out either alone or with the aid of others to conquer huge beasts in the world. Quests range from retrieving a valuable egg from the nest of a menacing dragon to hunting down powerful creatures and more. Hunters can scavenge defeated monsters for food, collect bones for weapons and armor, and even use pieces for decorative accessories. In addition, by completing objectives, players receive an array of rewards that allows them to upgrade their arsenal and equipment.

From what we've seen and played, *Monster Hunter Freedom* looks like it will be a great PSP game. Some of the features include lush open environments, ad-hoc multiplayer play for up to four players, a ton of mini-games, many new areas to visit and explore (shops, farms, towns, etc.), and a new two-player co-op treasure hunting game.

In his 20+ years in gaming, Pac-Man has been through mazes, hopped atop platforms, and even had side-scrolling adventures. Given the glut of kart racers we've seen over the past five years, it's surprising that he hasn't had one dedicated to him until now. With *World Rally*, Smart Bomb hopes to give players not only the best kart racer ever, but one that does justice to Pac-Man while also paying homage to other classic Namco franchises.

Roughly 15 characters will make up the playable roster of racers. Pac-Man and his rival Toc-Man have been confirmed along with Pooka from Dig-Dug and the ever-present ghosts. Namco has promised more of their franchise characters will appear, which makes me hope we'll see Klonoa and maybe even some of the Tekken gang show up.

While some of the roster remains elusive, we at least know that single and multi-player modes will be plentiful. With each, you'll have basic time trial and grand prix races available, while a multi-player battle arena allows you to face off with friends and foes using customized weapons.

No matter how you choose to ply your trade, Pac-Man's classic gameplay will run through the game. You collect power pellets as you progress through the track, and in doing so gain the ability to literally take a bite out of your competition. Boost-filled bottles litter the roadside and allow you to get a quick jump on the pack. Namco is promising tight controls, and they'll be a necessity when fighting foes and your own boost to gain the checkered flag.

Namco doesn't seem to be hedging many bets on this game, which should allow Smart Bomb to take their time and craft a licensed kart racer that actually furthers the genre. We've seen many franchises fall victim to the cash run kart-racer trap, and I'd hate to see *Pac-Man* join them. Going by what they say, it should be a fantastic game. What we play may tell a different story.

Publisher: **Namco**
 Developer: **Smart Bomb Interactive**
 Release Date: **Summer 2006**

Genre(s): **Supersonic racing**
 Category: **Kart**
 # of Players: **TBA**



Preview by **Jeremy**



Square Enix knows that its fans love *Final Fantasy VII*, and they're exploiting this love to its fullest. Thousands of gamers worldwide have begged for a true sequel or even a remake to *FF7*, and at long last, Square Enix has decided to give us what we wanted: a third-person shooter set in the *Final Fantasy VII* universe. Wait a minute...what?!

It's not as weird as it sounds, though. Set immediately after the events seen in the *Final Fantasy VII* sequel film Advent Children, *Dirge of Cerberus* is an action title starring ex-Turks member and fangirl third-favorite Vincent Valentine. The game will feature the return of several familiar characters from the original game, including Cloud, Yuffie, and even Cait Sith. Aeris may have to sit this one out, though, because (SPOILER) she is dead.

In a vast departure from its RPG roots, *Dirge of Cerberus* plays most like a first-person shooter. Much of the action takes place from an over-the-shoulder perspective, but aiming and shooting works just like in your average FPS. Well, you probably can't use Materia to shoot magic bullets in your average FPS, but you get the idea. Gameplay is also much more deliberately-paced than in other shooters; though the action is fast, there's a pause between every bullet fired, so you'll have to make every shot count in order to survive.

The game exudes style in plenty, and *Final Fantasy VII* fans are going to love the Advent Children-quality cutscenes interspersed throughout. Get your bishounen on with *Dirge of Cerberus* this August.

DIRGE of CERBERUS FINAL FANTASY VII



Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Square Enix
Release Date: August 2006

Genre(s): Action
Category: Shooter RPG
of Players: 1



Preview by Sardius



Preview by Jeremy

Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Venom Games/Human Head Studios
Release Date: TBA

Genre(s): FPS
Category: Supernatural
of Players: 1-8

Take 2 intends to make their first FPS release one that people remember for its quality and innovation. They've enlisted Venom Games (Human Head, for the PC version) to ensure this goal is met, and will use a modified version of the *Doom 3* engine to bring their take on this well-worn genre to life.

Recognizing that it's important to stand out in a crowded field, emphasis has been placed on the supernatural gameplay elements that you can use. While common in other genres, supernatural phenomena are rarely seen in FPSes, and certainly never to this degree. Thus far, it is known that *Prey* allows you to leave your physical body behind, manipulate gravity, and even walk on walls during play. Each of these should create opportunities for players to creatively dispatch foes, as should the organic environment, which can attack you and should prove to be an interesting obstacle throughout the surreal adventure.

I can honestly say that I don't recall any other games starring Cherokee garage mechanics with a hawk as a sidekick. Sure, there's some 'save the girlfriend' stuff, but at least some funny-but-terrible traditions are kept alive, like Earth-destroying motherships. This plot could either be a masterwork of insanity, or more likely, it's just something cobbled together from a bunch of B-movies. Wal-Mart bargain bins should not be used for research and development. I cannot stress that enough.

Luckily for us, as players anyway, a great deal of care seems to be going into the game itself. They've thrown a lot of lighting and shadow effects into the visuals, which should make for an engrossing experience. When you throw in aliens out to enslave an entire race, what's not to love?





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PlayStation 2



 IO-Interactive

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After undergoing name, publisher, and developer changes, *Warhammer's* first massively multiplayer online adventure is finally turning from a *Duke Nukem Forever*-like fantasy into reality. With the once-cancelled online *Warhammer* resurrected as *WAR*, Mythic hopes to create an iconic MMORPG that redefines the genre and their company while also doing justice to the legendary tabletop battle game.



Their existing *Dark Age of Camelot* battle system is back for *WAR*, and will allow you to choose from seven races to do battle with. Orcs, dwarves, chaos, humans, goblins, high elves, and dark elves will all be playable in the final game. Beyond merely visual differences, each race has its own characteristics that you can tailor your style to. So if you'd like to inflict as much pain and/or suffering as possible, try being a goblin, or their slightly less-ugly brethren, an orc.

It's been a long journey for dedicated fans and casual followers alike, and after two decades of tabletop and computer games, *Warhammer's* dedicated fan base will finally be able showcase their talents on a global stage. Mythic is planning to release a series of online *Warhammer* games, so you can rest assured knowing that their work print will be as impressive as possible. They seem to have realistic goals for the *Warhammer* franchise, so *Fable*-level false promises shouldn't be an issue. Thank heavens.



Preview by **Jeremy**

Publisher: Mythic Entertainment
Developer: Mythic Entertainment
Release Date: 2007

Genre(s): MMORPG
Category: Medieval
of Players: TBA

WARHAMMER ONLINE AGE OF RECKONING



Preview by **KouAidou**

When the Allied troops landed on Normandy on June 6th, 1944, they weren't the only armies involved in the final push to take down the Nazis. *Rush for Berlin*, the upcoming release by Hungarian developer Stormregion (makers of the *Panzers* series and *S.W.I.N.E*) is here to make sure we don't forget that.

A real-time strategy game set during the final months of the war, *Rush for Berlin* will allow you to experience the war from just about any side. This can be seen in the four playable scenarios the game includes: the Allied rush from the West, the Soviet march from the East, the efforts of the French Resistance, and an alternative timeline scenario involving a German counter-attack.

Rather than going for a true simulation, the game will provide an experience true to its RTS roots. You'll get officer units with unique abilities (let your imagination run wild as to how this'll work in practice), and special units based on unused or underused prototypes actually developed by each army during the war. This includes, but is not limited to, the Maus (the largest working tank ever created), the Goliath (remote-control explosive units), and yes indeed, the Churchill Crocodile. Flamethrower tanks, baby!

RfB also includes one peculiar characteristic that distinguishes it from the other members of its genre: the main resource of importance is not money, but time. Its creators think that *Rush for Berlin* will shake up the world of RTS. Come May 2006, we'll get to see if the promise holds true.

Publisher: Atari
Developer: Stormregion
Release Date: May 2006

Genre(s): RTS
Category: WWII
of Players: 1





ARMORED CORE LAST RAVEN



Preview by Racewing

Publisher: Agetec
Developer: From Software
Release Date: Q2 2006

Genre(s): Action
Category: Mecha
of Players: 1-2

In *Armored Core: Last Raven*, you'll get to take the fate of the world into your hands as an elite mecha pilot, a "Raven," and participate in a struggle between two world powers: the Alliance and the Vertex. The Ravens are their enforcers, and you can choose to fight with other Ravens on each side. You can also strike out on your own, and risk fighting every other affiliated Raven pilot out there, backed by two organizations that can make your life very miserable very quickly.

As in any good 'mech sim, you'll be able to customize your robots using a variety of items, attachments, weapons and assorted parts. You can build your own fighting machine, and go against entire squads with mega-guns, plasma swords and secondary ordnance all at the same time. Best of all, this time around you'll be able to fight until your 'bot is completely scrapped, even if you lose an arm, a leg, or a head in the process.

This last *Armored Core* game for PS2 will be out in just a few



months' time. If you dig giant robots (and hey, who doesn't, right?), keep your eyes open for more news about this one.



New storyline aside, *Blood Money* introduces a variety of cool and new features to the mix while still not straying too far from the formula that has made this series so popular. As Agent 47, you will still be able to strangle, snipe, drag, knife, and stealthily eliminate your enemies in just about any imaginable fashion (both in third and first-person). However, IO Interactive has added a host of button-press reactionary moves to 47's repertoire, which allows him to respond to the situations at hand via hand-to-hand combat, the art of distraction, disarm techniques, taking hostages, and many new assassination executions that weren't available before. In addition, a lot of attention has gone into making 47 much more fluid and able-bodied. He can now use the environment to his advantage, such as climbing railings, scaling structures, and vaulting from building-to-building. While he's not as athletic as, say, Lara Croft, this new level of agility only adds to the stealthy gameplay. Finally, a new Notoriety feature has been implemented in the game. If you botch an assassination attempt, you can try to "clean up" the scene. If successful, your notoriety will stay low and you can enjoy anonymity. However, leave evidence behind and information on your identity will slowly appear in the papers, making it tougher to stay in the shadows and make your contract kills.

Now that *Tomb Raider: Legends* has hit retail, our focus has shifted to Eidos's next big franchise release, *Hitman: Blood Money*. The fourth title in the series (which includes *Hitman: Codename 47*, *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin*, and *Hitman: Contracts*), *Blood Money* once again chronicles the brutal and violent exploits of Agent 47, a cold-blooded killer for hire. Having discovered that the tables have been turned and members of his contract agency, the ICA, are being silently assassinated by a rival agency, Agent 47 travels to the US to "take care of business."



There's much more to tell about *Hitman: Blood Money*, including the ability to purchase custom built weapon parts, the new economy system, a much more populated and interactive world, and a much improved graphic engine showcasing an impressive level of detail and special effects thought impossible on the PS2.

Publisher: Eidos
Developer: IO Interactive
Release Date: May 2, 2006

Genre(s): Stealth
Category: Contract Killing
of Players: 1



Preview by Roger Danish

HITMAN BLOOD MONEY

Publisher: Square-Enix
Developer: Tri-Ace
Release Date: TBA

Genre(s): RPG
Category: Asgardian
of Players: 1

Valkyrie Profile came out to little fanfare back in the PlayStation days, but now you see used copies go for a hundred dollars a pop on Ebay all the time. A re-release was inevitable, and the PSP is the obvious system for it. The real news with *Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth* is the new material Tri-Ace is adding into the PSP port of the title, which will tie in with the upcoming *Valkyrie Profile: Silmeria* title for the PS2. Among the promised goodies are some added story concerning the character of Silmeria, and full CG FMVs to replace some of the original's cutscenes. For those of you who missed it the first time, *Valkyrie Profile* first came out in Japan in 1999, and told the unusual story of Valkyrie Lenneth.

Like her mythological namesake, Valkyrie's duty is to gather fallen warriors and bring them back to Odin in time to help defend kingdom during the prophesied battle of Ragnarok. Along the way, she'll need to train her warriors up until they're worthy of fighting alongside Odin. Exploration in the world of *Valkyrie Profile* happens in a side-scrolling, 2D environment. Lenneth moves through dungeons in platformer style, with RPG-style battles happening when she touches or attacks one of the enemies wandering around the dungeon. Combat uses a then-innovative and still-unique combo system that blends turn-based and real-time action within a single battle. You have a set amount of time to find and train Lenneth's warriors, before Ragnarok happens and you're sent into the final battle with whoever you've managed to scrape together. Your decisions throughout the game and the difficulty level you choose to play on can lead you toward one of three different endings. That's a lot of replay value for a single RPG, and it should be enough to make even old fans come back for more *Valkyrie Profile* on the PSP.



Publisher: Square-Enix
Developer: Tri-Ace
Release Date: TBA

Genre(s): RPG
Category: Asgardian, Booty
of Players: 1

One hundred years before the events of *Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth*, Lenneth's younger sister Silmeria dared to turn against her master Odin. To punish her, Odin forced Silmeria to be reincarnated as a mortal. That mortal is Alicia, the first Queen of Dipan. Remarkably, Silmeria's soul has regained consciousness despite being trapped in Alicia's body. Silmeria warns Queen Alicia to prepare for Odin's retribution, but Alicia's attempts to converse with Silmeria make her seem mad to her own subjects. Odin dispatches Silmeria's eldest sister Alys to deal with the problem, and so the story begins. *Valkyrie Profile: Silmeria* brings the world of *Valkyrie Profile* into full 3D for exploration and combat. The *Silmeria* battle system is modeled on the original *Valkyrie Profile* battle system, with each party member mapped to a face button and a big emphasis on scoring chain combos for big damage. New to the system is the addition of air combos and the Leader Assault system. With Leader Assault, enemies will form up around a leader, and your party can win the battle automatically by defeating the enemy group's leader. Defeating enemies quickly is in your favor, as each battle begins with an Extend Gauge that slowly depletes of the course of the fight. The more of the Extend Gauge is left when you win, the more bonus XP your party will receive at the battle's end. Outside of battle, players can look forward to using Silmeria's Object Reading power to psychically obtain information about upcoming quests from key items. Then you can use the Materialize system to give the spiritual form of an object or person a physical body. Silmeria will use this to incarnate the warrior souls that serve her into humans that can join Queen Alicia in battle.





Fuel offers quite a bit of gameplay bang for its buck, with sharp graphics, and plenty of tracks, playable characters and vehicles. In addition, it offers a four-player splitscreen multiplayer mode and a ton of unlockable content. Look for *Fuel* to hit retail shelves this month.



Genre(s): Racing
Category: Off Road
of Players: 4



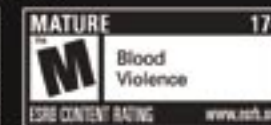
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There's a new trend in the video game industry. It seems more and more game publishers are scrambling to throw together some sort of pre-E3 event in order to get their upcoming titles in front of the press a month or two before the big show. In all honesty, this leaves us scratching our heads, as it kind of makes E3 a moot point if you've already seen everything that they are going to have on display. But hey, who are we to complain, right? Like Capcom's event in Las Vegas for last month's issue, this month it's Midway at the House of Blues in Los Angeles. Among the tasty buffet, comfy couches and free booze, there were some decent if not great games showcased. Read on!

MIDWAY SPOTLIGHT



Preview by Roger Danish

JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD

Without a doubt, *Stranglehold* is going to be Midway's big ticket item for 2006. Planned for Xbox 360, PS3 and PC, this action-packed third-person shooter should make it in time for the holiday season (although whether or not it ships for PS3 in '06 depends on whether the system shows in the US before '07).

This game already has a huge leg up in our book due to the fact that it's being developed internally by the team that brought you *Psi Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy*, one of the greatest games you never played. On top of that, the man who practically elevated the use of slow motion to an art form, acclaimed action director John Woo (Face Off, Mission Impossible II, etc.), is lending his talents to the project. Of course he should, as *Stranglehold* is the "spiritual sequel" to Woo's action-shooting death-fest *Hard Boiled*, starring Chow Yun-Fat as Inspector Tequila (who has lent his likeness and voice talents for the returning role in this game).

As Inspector Tequila, you play the "shoot first and don't bother taking prisoners" cop who is waging a personal war with Hong Kong's nastiest crime lords. Tequila's loyalties to the police force are tested when his ex-wife is kidnapped by the Russian mob in Chicago. The action takes place across the globe as Tequila struggles to balance his duty to uphold the law with doing what it takes to save his family. From what we've seen of the brief gameplay snippets, this is going to involve a lot of shooting and killing. Sign us up!

In terms of gameplay, *Stranglehold* looks to be an amazing next-gen experience. Like Woo's movies, the focus will be on intense action, as you will be able to seamlessly pull off such stunts as running up railings, swinging on chandeliers and leaping onto moving objects, all the while shooting it out with the enemies using Woo's trademark dual-wielding gunplay (as well as a variety of other weapons).

Using a highly modified version of the Unreal 3.0 engine integrated with the amazing Havok physics system, everything in the world is destructible and interactive. The level of detail, even at this point in development, is unbelievable, featuring stunning graphics and detailed models. While the game was still too early to allow for hands-on play, what we were shown literally blew us away. We'll definitely be keeping our eyes on this game as it nears closer to completion in the upcoming months.

Release Date: Q4 2006

of Players: 1

Genre: Third-Person Shooter

Platform: Xbox 360, PS3, PC

Category: Action



SPY HUNTER NOWHERE TO RUN

Release Date: Summer 2006

of Players: 1

Genre: Driving / 3rd-Person Action

Platform: PS2, Xbox

Category: Retro Regen



Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run could be just what this franchise needs. Midway has taken the retro franchise and mixed it up by allowing you to get out of the car and hoof it, for action that gives off a real *Chronicles of Riddick* vibe (definitely a good thing). Whether or not fans and *Spy Hunter* purists will balk at this new gameplay mechanic remains to be seen, but from the demo we played, it's a welcome feature.

Featuring the likeness and voice talents of Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, who is also starring in the movie version of the game coming out next year (which, not so coincidentally, is directed by John Woo), you take on the persona of Alex Decker, the man behind the wheel of the sleek and versatile Interceptor assault vehicle. This time around, the NOSTRA organization has returned with plans to steal the latest government technology (including the Interceptor) and use them for their evil schemes. It's up to Alex to stop them using firearms, brutal melee combat, and of course, the Interceptor's heavy arsenal of missiles and firepower. As with the previous *Spy Hunters*, you can still drive the Interceptor on land and water (as well as transform it into a motorcycle), and there will be plenty of intense action both behind the wheel and on foot. We expect to have a playable version in time for next month's issue, and we'll return with our hands-on impressions.



Unreal TOURNAMENT 2007

Release Date: Q4 2006

of Players: TBA

Genre: First-Person Shooter

Platform: PC

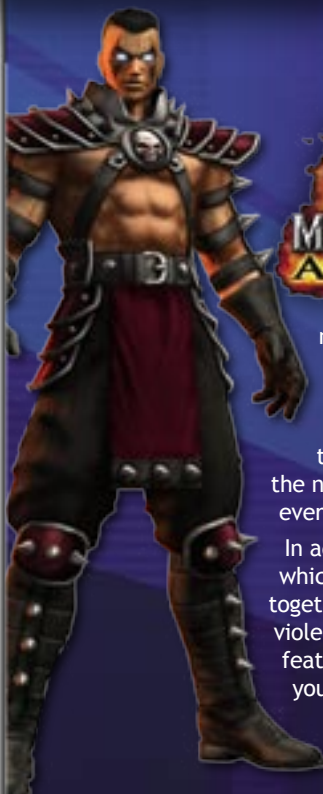
Category: Eye Candy



Having seen the tech demos off and on for the last few years, it looks as if Epic's *Unreal Tournament 2007* is fast becoming a reality. Running on their amazing Unreal 3 engine, the game will support a number of high-end special effects, including bump offset mapping, dynamic range lighting and a new physics model.

While it's still a ways off, a playable version of *UT 2007* was demoed for us at the event, which focused mainly on the variety of weapons, the unique environments, and the characters in the game. A lot of emphasis has gone into making the world and objects more detailed and "believable," by adding levels of "grungification," a process that adds layers of dirt, dust, scratches, etc., resulting in a lived-in feel and atmosphere. The weapons that were shown included a rocket launcher, shock rifle, and link gun, all of which now have mechanical and visual inner-workings to ante up the realism.

In regards to gameplay, a lot of effort is going in to perfecting how you play. A new addition to *UT 2007* is the ability to use the mouse to fine-tune your aim for precision strikes. In addition, more vehicles are being introduced, including an armored transport, a new version of the SPMA, and an aerial ship called the Cicada. Admittedly, there is still a lot of work to be done before the game shows up. However, there is no doubt that this is one of Midway's most highly anticipated games and Epic, the developer, will not release it until it's ready to go.

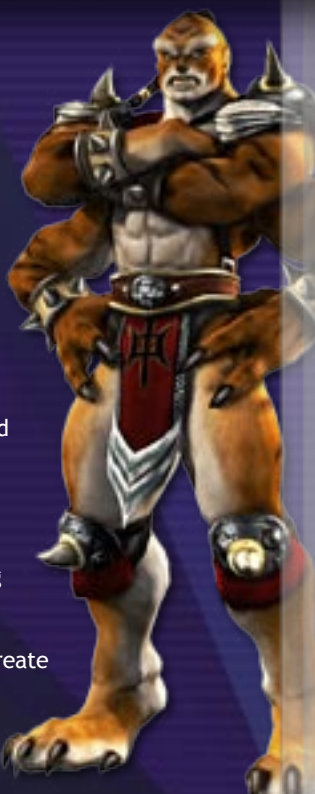


Release Date: Fall 2006 **# of Players:** 1-2
Genre: 3D Fighting **Platform:** PS2, Xbox
Category: Killtacular

The once controversial *Mortal Kombat* franchise makes a return this fall with *Mortal Kombat: Armageddon* for the Xbox and PS2. Featuring the most complete *MK* roster ever (just about every character from the *MK* universe is playable in the game); new, in-depth editing options (Create-A-Fighter and Create-A-Fatality modes); and a much more detailed and robust Konquest mode, *Mortal Kombat: Armageddon* is shaping up to be the series' swan song for the current generation of consoles.

While the game's story line is still unknown, the word "Armageddon" does imply that this may be the end for many of the characters in the game. Ed Boon, *MK's* creator, has referred to this title as the last in the series, but it's more likely that the franchise will continue on the next-gen consoles in an evolved and different state. What we do know is that he's throwing everything but the kitchen sink into the game, making it the ultimate *Mortal Kombat*.

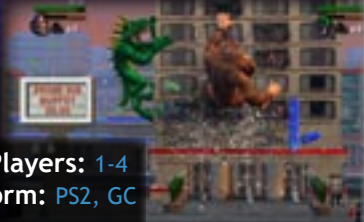
In addition to the massive roster (60+), improvements in gameplay include a new parry system, which allows you to counter and reverse attacks, and the ability to create Fatalities by stringing together multiple combo chains; the more combos you pull off in the given time, the more crazy violent acts your character will perform on your victim before the Fatality ends. Another new feature includes the aforementioned Create-A-Fighter, which not only gives you the option to create your character from scratch (with the usual stuff, like clothing, facial features, accessories, etc.), but also their fighting style and abilities. Finally, both Konquest and online modes have undergone a serious overhaul. However, the details are still scarce concerning exactly what is new and improved. We'll have more to talk about soon.



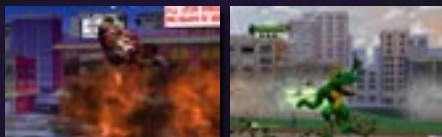
Release Date: Fall 2006 **# of Players:** 1-2
Genre: 3D Fighter **Platform:** PSP
Category: Mini Kill

Midway is taking most of their popular franchises to the PSP this year. In addition to *Rush* and *NBA Ballers* (previewed next issue), *Mortal Kombat: Unchained* will be out this fall. A quasi-port of *Deception*, Midway has tailored the game to the PSP and added some new features, options and modes. Featuring multiple fatalities per character, multi-tiered interactive backgrounds, extensive game modes, six new fighters (Kitana, Jax, Frost, Blaze, Goro and Shao Kahn), and a new endurance mode, *MK: Unchained* could give Namco's *Tekken: Dark Resurrection* a run for its money.

All of the trademark features from the next-gen *MK* series are in the game, including interactive, multi-tiered, death trapped backgrounds, mini-games (Chess and Puzzle Kombat) and Konquest mode. New and exclusive to the PSP is the introduction of an Endurance Mode (battle your way through opponent-after-opponent with limited health), as well as head-to-head battle via the PSP's wireless Ad-Hoc functionality.



Release Date: Spring 2006 **# of Players:** 1-4
Genre: Retro 3D **Platform:** PS2, GC
Category: Monster Mayhem



Continuing to mine their retro franchises and revive them for current generation consoles, *Rampage: Total Destruction* looks to retain the core elements that made the original popular — giant monsters, lots of destruction and offbeat humor — while adding new game mechanics, play modes and, of course, an updated 3D graphic engine. In all, there are a total of twenty-five monsters to unlock and play (a huge step up from the original three) and a total of seven destructible cities in which to wreak havoc and chaos across. Compared to the original, these cities are much more sprawling and interactive. Instead of being limited to a 2D grid on a city block, your monster can now roam the streets, back alleys, sidewalks and wedge between buildings. New gameplay mechanics include cooperative play (two players on PS2 and four on GC) and the addition of a Rampage Rage Meter, which allows you to unleash a variety of signature super moves once charged up.

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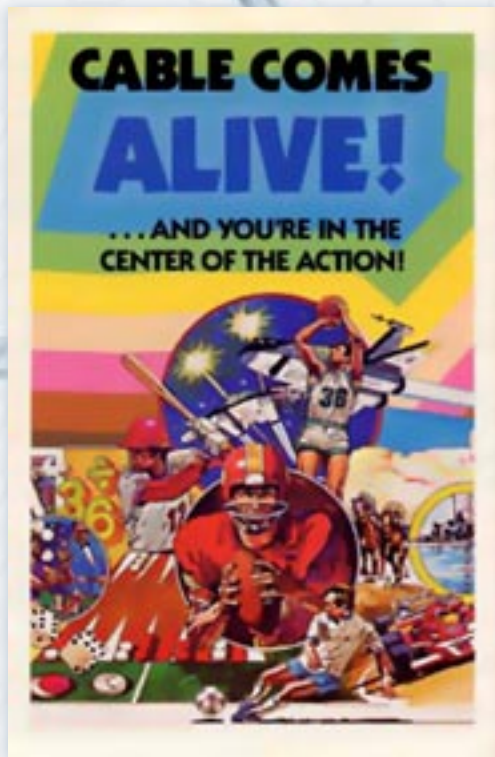
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a feature by lynxara

the online past

the history of online gaming



Canada 24 hours a day via pre-existing cable TV lines. Games were downloaded via an add-on device called the PlayCable Adapter that plugged into the Intellivision's expansion slot.

To access PlayCable, first a gamer (or, most likely, his parents) would rent or purchase the Adapter from their local area cable provider, the same way you'd buy a cable box to get cable TV service. It came along with a user's manual and an incredible stack of over forty different game manuals for titles regularly featured in the PlayCable service. The adapter would read PlayCable's channel on the cable service as data, and call up a series of menus that listed the month's available games.



Over the course of the last two console generations, the participants in the console wars have decided that the big battleground is online functionality. Xbox Live is arguably what's allowed Microsoft to stay in the game this long, and Sony and Nintendo are making a lot of noise about the online potential of the PS3 and the mysterious little system codenamed the Revolution.

It's as good a time as any to look back and see what's come before them. The history of game consoles online is, like any other facet of the hobby, littered with bizarre ideas and spectacular failures that slowly struggled toward success. What most gamers probably don't know is just how long that history is. Game companies have been trying to sell online functionality to consumers for practically as long as consoles have existed.

What's remarkable about these early efforts is that the services they provided are essentially identical to functions of Valve's controversial content delivery service, Steam. Despite such cutting-edge technology, though, every online service introduced in this era ended up being a financial failure. While visionaries were starting to grasp how you could expand the potential of home gaming with online networks, the technology and the marketplace simply weren't ready yet.

The first online gaming service materialized in 1981, as part of the first round of console wars. Mattel Electronics and General Instruments teamed up to introduce Playcable: The All Games Channel. Intellivision owners could pay a monthly fee to download any of a rotating selection of games, 20 per month. The network was available in selected areas of the US and

origins



The player would select what they wanted, and then PlayCable would download the game into the adapter's onboard memory. The entire process took about ten seconds.

PlayCable lasted only a few years, and never became a nationwide service. PlayCable used existing TV cable lines for its delivery network, so cable providers were forced to choose between carrying PlayCable or carrying some other cable network (like, say, MTV). In most areas, cable providers rightly decided that general entertainment channels would draw more subscribers than a data service that was only useful to Intellivision owners. Technical limitations also helped kill PlayCable; figures vary, but the Adapter definitely had less than 8K of ROM to store game data in. By 1983, when the service went offline, this was insufficient for holding the ROM data of most new Intellivision games.

Finally, and most interestingly, an online interview with Intellivision founder Keith Robinson at the GameFreaks365.com website suggests that PlayCable gave hackers a backdoor into the Intellivision's inner workings. According to Richardson, a pair of enterprising young programmers realized that, by hooking a personal computer up to the PlayCable adapter, it became possible to access the Intellivision's EXEC files. From there the two hackers blackmailed Mattel into hiring them by threatening to share their knowledge. Had they done so, this would've enabled garage programmers throughout North America to use PlayCable to develop their own Intellivision software. Robinson claims this prospect panicked Mattel so much that they immediately hired the hackers (who, according to internet legend, supposedly worked on the Intellivision port of *Bump n' Jump*) and took steps to kill off PlayCable before it could become a liability to the Intellivision.

Not to be outdone by their competitors, Atari made a point of providing a similar online game downloading service for their AVS (or 2600) console. However, their service didn't appear on the market until 1983, when PlayCable was beginning to fold. Gameline allowed users to download Atari games to the "Master Module" adapter that plugged into the console's cartridge slot. Gameline was relatively pricey, with the Master Module retailing for \$49.95, a \$15 set-up fee on top of that, and then usage fees that amounted to approximately \$1 an hour.





after the
crash

Where PlayCable delivered content over TV cable, Gameline used a 1200 baud modem to let players download games via a dial-up connection. Unfortunately, the Gameline service was far too ahead-of-its-time for most Atari users, and the beginning of the video game crash further hurt sales. Gameline didn't survive 1983, and the Control Video Corporation that backed the service nearly went bankrupt in following years. As an interesting historical footnote, CVC later evolved into a BBS service for the Commodore 64 and 128 computers called Q-Link that was managed by a young Steve Case. From there, Q-Link evolved into a little company called America Online.

Nintendo's NES console, first introduced in 1985, was just the thing to fill the void the industry crash left in the North American home video game market. Although its initial reception was tepid, a year of careful marketing made the NES mushroom (pun intended) into a staggering youth culture fad. Fads don't last, though, and as 1989

rolled around Nintendo was in the sort of difficult situation that only comes with great success.

The company had a huge base of NES users installed in the US and Canada, and hoped to use the system to open up the European market. The problem was that the NES hardware that was so stunningly impressive three years ago was now beginning to look very dated next to competing products like the Sega Genesis and NEC's TurboGrafx-16. Nintendo knew that the 16-bit Super NES console would need to hit the market soon if it wanted to keep up, and NES owners who'd already sunk a fortune into their systems and games would probably be unhappy about being asked to upgrade.

What Nintendo needed was some way to keep its installed base of NES users happy and loyal without tarnishing the appeal of the Super NES when it was ready for market. The answer Nintendo came up with was at the time considered a devastatingly clever scheme: using modems to network all those NES systems together over phone lines. The result would be a proprietary Nintendo online network, functioning much like a combination of Xbox Live and the World Wide Web. Users would be able to play games online against other NES owners and access a host of information services. It was a huge and impossibly ambitious step up from comparatively simple content delivery services like PlayCable and Gameline.

In particular, Nintendo hoped to offer online financial services that would interest the parents of young NES gamers, such as banking, trading stocks, and placing bets. Retailers would be able to access game reviews and other pertinent ordering information, and over time both the Game Boy and Super NES would go online as part of the NES Network. While young gamers would obviously be interested in the network's online gaming, Nintendo's real ambition was to use the Network function to make the NES into a sort of cheap family computer. This would keep the console in living rooms for the first few years after the more gamer-oriented Super NES game out. The US Network would launch after a Japanese launch brought the NES's counterpart the Famicom online.



The media made much of the announcement of the network in 1989, since it seemed like the perfect way for Nintendo to parlay its death grip on the gaming industry into a presence in the wider field of consumer electronics. Despite talks of a partnership with AT&T for the US network and a launch in Japan, though, the NES Network was not rolled out in time for the promised US launch in late 1990. In fact, it was never rolled out in the US at all, and only became available regionally in Japan. The NES Network's problem was purely one of marketing and image; Japanese market tests consistently demonstrated that adults viewed the console as an electronic toy, not as a computer, and simply didn't want to use it for adult business. Nintendo figured, probably rightly, that if this attitude prevailed in Japan then their plans for the Network didn't stand a chance in the more skeptical North American market. The final bit of news that mentioned the Network was an announcement that AT&T wasn't going to work with Nintendo after all, and after the Super NES

launched in 1991, nothing was ever heard of the NES Network again.



wishful
thinking

It's worth noting that modems and online networks began appearing toward the end of the life cycle of the first two generations of console gaming. This is because the online functions were essentially used as gimmicks to breathe life into declining hardware sales. Gimmicks rarely last long when it comes to the world of console gaming, and that's

particularly true of expensive and experimental ones.

The early attempts at taking consoles online also far predated the general acceptance of network technology. Even as late as 1989, only a handful of people outside of hardcore computer geeks were using modem or cable data transfers to accomplish things via online networks. Even the heyday of the BBS was still in the future. In many ways, the world simply wasn't ready to go online yet, and certainly not through an NES or Atari.

Still, these early failures in online gaming never quite put console manufacturers and third parties entirely off the idea of incorporating online functions into their products. Efforts to make online content delivery of varying types workable and profitable continued into the 16-bit era and, as we all know, far beyond. The explosion of online gaming we're experiencing now, with even portables capable of delivering intense netplay experiences, is perhaps less innovation and more an inevitable evolution.

Special thanks to Koji over at the Insert Credit forums for the NES photo.



Available Now



Violence

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a feature by kou aidou

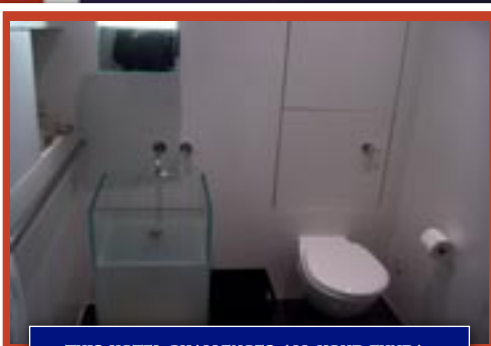


JUNKET JOURNAL: LOST IN THE TRANSLATION

the uk trip



SETTING THE SCENE WITH A LITTLE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT.



THIS HOTEL CHALLENGES ALL YOUR FUNDAMENTAL IDEAS OF WHAT A SINK SHOULD BE.

I have a passport, and no life. That basically sums up why, as a mere translator, I ended up being HGM's representative on a four-day press junket meant to raise awareness of the UK development scene. Unfortunately, I'm prohibited from talking about much of the trip's really juicy findings, but the trip did end up being a great experience.

Day 1: This Train is for COCKFOSTERS

I arrive at the airport early in the morning, to find that no one is waiting for me and I have no contact information in London. As the perfect picture of calm and togetherness (anyone who says they saw me crying and screaming is a filthy liar), I obtain a day room at the airport Hilton and go out to see the city. Our EIC finally returns my messages after I get back to the room (5 hour time difference, remember), and I'm hauled out to our hotel. It's a ritzy modern art hotel, which means the conveniences are more challenge than convenience. Still, I'm grateful just to be on track with everyone, and manage to squeeze in a few

hours of sleep, before...

Day 2: FIFA... With Insects

8:00: Our reporter crew assembles in the crazy hotel's conference room. We meet with representatives from ELSPA, and receive an overview of the British gaming scene. This sets us up nicely for our first meeting with Blitz Games. **9:00:** Like many British developers, the heads of Blitz Games are brothers who started making games on the Commodore 64 in their bedroom as teenagers. Along with "GTA was made in the UK," this information would become a running theme throughout the trip. **12:15:** At Criterion

Entertainment, we learn about the fine British art of designing games for American audiences; Burnout's creator tells us he watches American Idol and Survivor to stay in touch. He also explains in no gentle terms his frustration with developers who are more concerned with abstract creativity and personal amusement than with making a working product that appeals to consumers. **13:00:** Arriving at Lionhead Studios, we are treated to a surprise visit from Peter Molyneux. The irony does not escape us. Though the studio's current project is kept secret (though you can guess it if you try), we're treated to a view of Lionhead's "The Room," an intriguing bit of independent programming for stray bit of physics code. **19:30:** After a brief rest, we are treated to a dinner with a number of influential people in the industry, including Ian Livingstone of Eidos. A Q&A session at the dinner table turns into a fascinating roundtable discussion about the state of the gaming industry, particularly, the why and how to appeal to female gamers.

Day 3: Go! Go! Beckham!

7:00: We take a quick flight and arrive in Dundee, Scotland, where we're given another industry overview from the people at Scottish Enterprise Tayside. **13:00:** Missing out on Real Time Worlds for time concerns, we meet with the people at Denki, who gave themselves a Japanese name despite being a British company.



CRITERION ENTERTAINMENT'S SOMBRERO OF SHAME AND PRIZEFIGHTER OF TRIUMPH. WHAT'S WITH THE SHATNER IN THE GAS MASH? BEATS ME.



PETER MOLYNEUX AND THE ROOM.

We learn that they mainly work on TV games with franchise names and quick turnover times. They also created *Go! Go! Beckham: Adventure on Soccer Island* for the GBA, which I need to play before I die. **16:00:** We meet up with Tim Gatland of Fund4Games, a company that collects money to provide loans for developers. Gatland is passionate about creating a better way to produce games, and this meeting proves to be vastly more interesting than anticipated (maybe it's that smashing view of Edinburgh castle from their second-story window?). **18:00:** We board the train to Newcastle. Last leg of the trip!!

Day 4: Hardcore Whatnow?

8:00: Our day in Newcastle begins. We are exhausted. **10:30:** After another industry lecture from the One Northeast company (whose reps express mild bemusement about my presence next to reps from IGN and GameSpy), we met with Black Bull Games, a group working to pioneer the field of 3D mobile phone games. **11:30:** In one of the highlights of the trip, we tour the studios of Eutechnyx. We're sworn to secrecy on most of what we see, but we are still treated to a lot of amazing production sketches (heaven for a wannabe artist like me). At least, I can safely say that Cartoon Network Grand Prix looks totally sweet. **15:00:** We meet up with Atomic Planet Europe, which is headed by another pair of "bedroom developers," Darren and Jason Falcus. We get a look at some of their upcoming games, including a tornado simulator, and a *Princess Maker*-type game aimed at a female audience. **16:30:** Teeside University offers us our last meeting of the day. It is the first school in the world to offer a curriculum of video game-based studies. Unfortunately, we're all nearly falling asleep; I manage to make my fellow reporters look better by actually doing it and sparing them all the shame. **19:30:** We're back at our hotel, with no time to rest before the final reception. The creator of *Worms* gives me a free copy of his upcoming *Lemmings* game, which I unfortunately cannot play as I do not have a PSP. **23:00:** I stoically decline invitations to go clubbing after midnight in Newcastle, and return to my hotel room to pass out. Yes, I am a square.



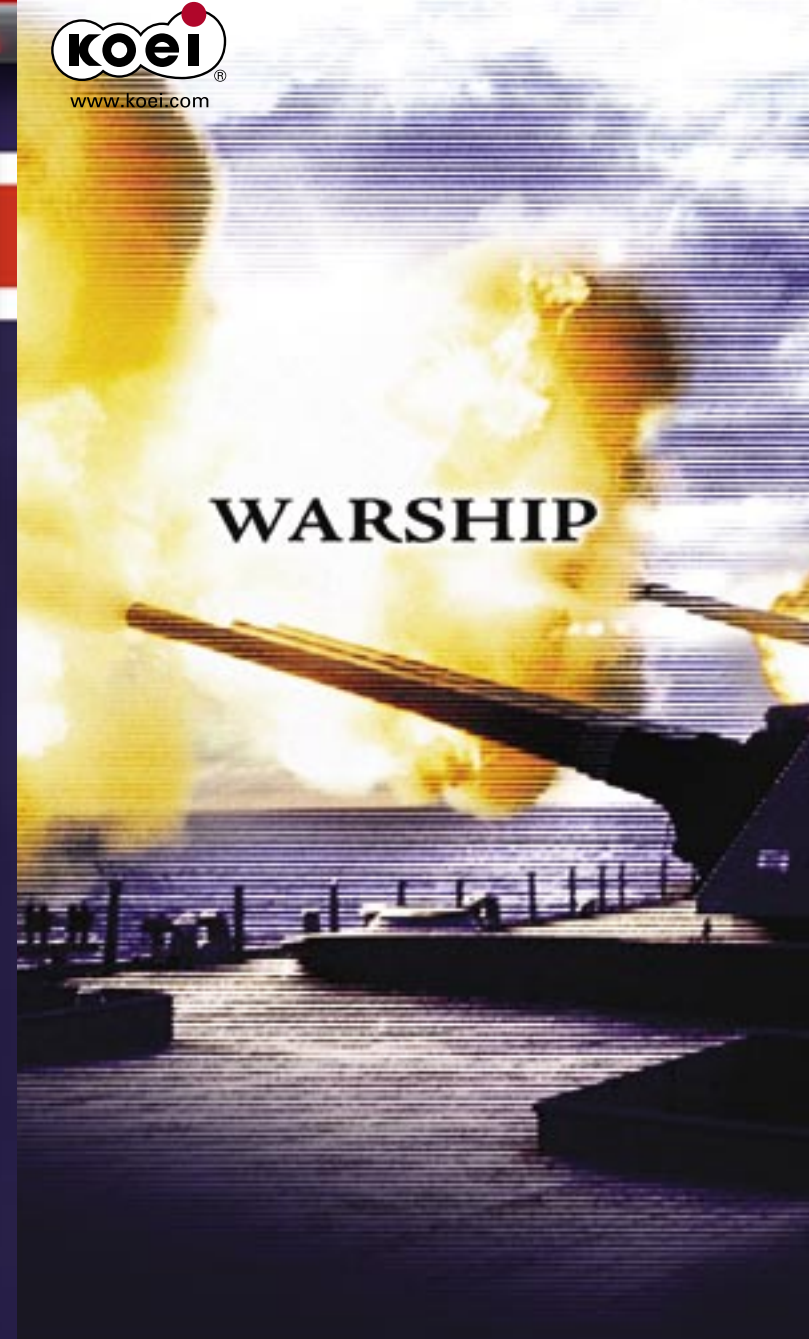
GOODBYE, NEWCASTLE!



RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER. IN EDINBURGH...



DENKI'S ELITE DEVELOPMENT SQUAD.



Available Now

WARSHIP GUNNER 2

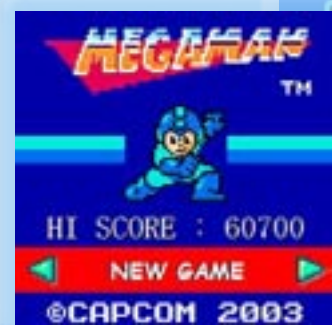


PlayStation 2



Mild Language
Violence

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MEGA MAN

Straight out of Capcom's gaming archives and onto the mobile scene comes one of the most celebrated video game characters of our time, the heroic Mega Man. Sourced from the original NES game, this mobile version re-introduces us to Mega Man and his first encounter against the evil Dr. Wily.

As the original storyline goes, Mega Man is unleashed to stop Dr. Wily, after this former scientist steals six robots from his partner and turns them evil. By jumping and shooting through the unique platform levels, each of which is guarded by one of the six robot masters, Mega Man will ultimately come face to face with Dr. Wily. The key characteristic to Mega Man is that he is able to pick up and use weapons from these defeated robot masters. These weapons will work particularly well against other robots and Dr. Wily, depending on which one you're fighting.

Translated almost perfectly from the original version, Mega Man features two modes: Normal and Capture. It also has both Continue and Save features. Like most Mega Man games, you choose which robot you wish to go after first, but all must be cleared before going up against Dr. Wily. Each robot master will have its own unique level with enemies but it still remains very easy to pick up and play.

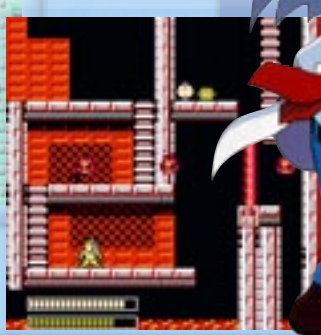
The graphics are quite identical to the original, though on a smaller screen of course. Amazingly, the audio track plays throughout the entire game and really elevates the gaming experience. As for the controls, these are some of the best I've played with so far, especially when it comes to platform games. (You know how critical they can be when timing jumps and avoiding attack patterns from enemies.)

You won't believe how well Mega Man has translated onto mobile. Most of the same elements and mechanics have been integrated, including confrontations against the Yellow Devil and Mega Man's Clone. The levels seem shorter than the original and the game doesn't seem quite as difficult. (Once you figure out the enemy patterns, it will be simple to defeat them.) Nevertheless, if you're looking for a throwback platformer, this is a great one to consider.

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5

Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Lavastorm
Release Date: March 2006

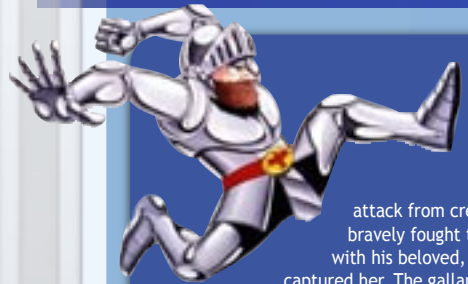
Genre: Platform
Category: Act/Adv
of Players: 1



GHOSTS 'N GOBLINS

Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Capcom
Release Date: March 2006

Genre: Platform
Category: Act/Adv
of Players: 1



One of the true classics in both arcade and console, Ghosts 'n Goblins has always been a favorite of gamers because of its platform style and out-of-this-world challenge. In Ghosts 'n Goblins, a kingdom has come under attack from creatures of the night and Sir Arthur has bravely fought them back. One day, while on a picnic with his beloved, the demons struck by surprise and captured her. The gallant knight had no course but to go after the demons and rescue the fair maiden. He must now trek through haunted lands infested with ghosts, goblins, demons and undead fiends to save her and find peace.

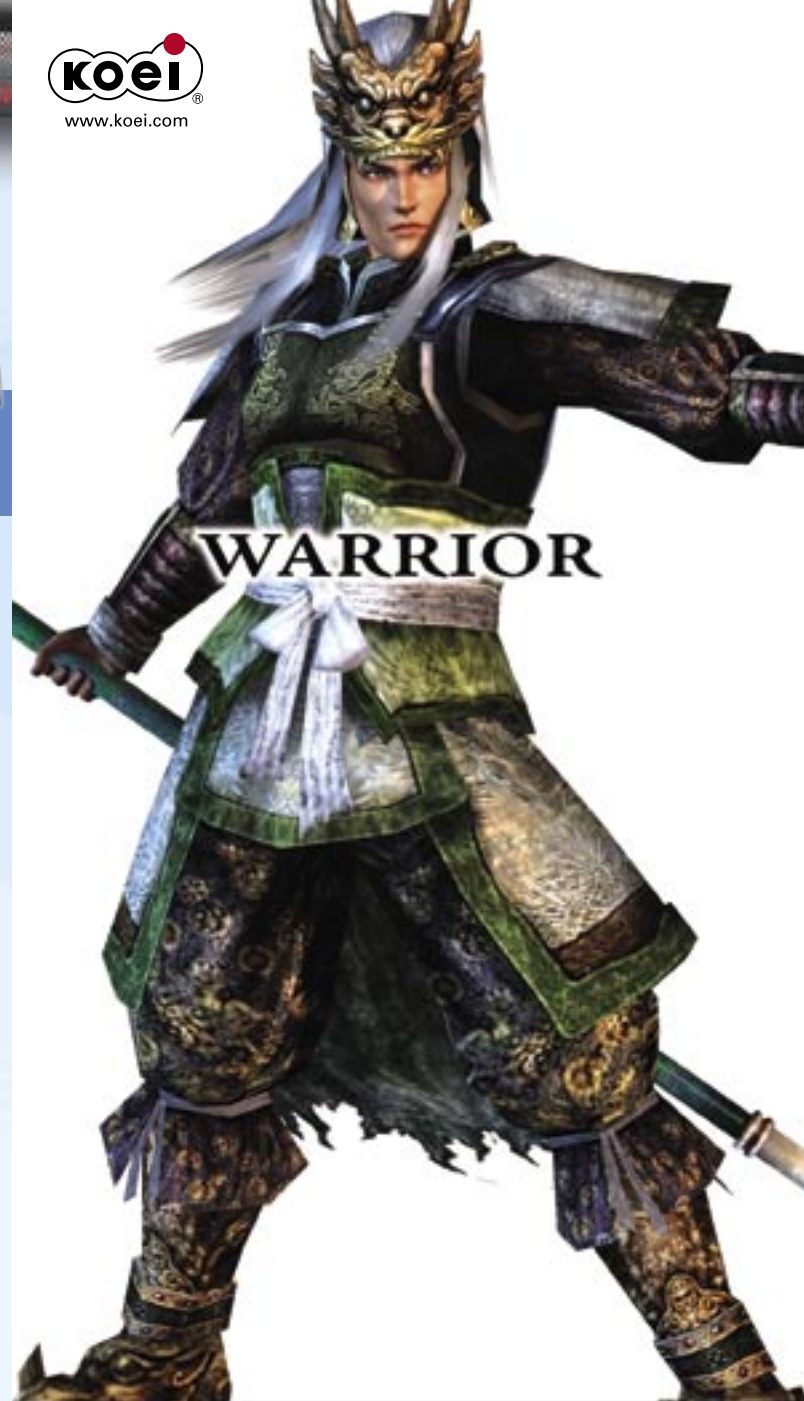
Sir Arthur will have weapons to use like a sword, fire and daggers. These will be thrown at enemies but only one type can be carried at a time and will deal different amounts of damage. (We prefer the daggers.) He will run, jump and climb ladders through three horizontal or vertical scrolling levels (divided into six total areas) to rescue his sweetheart. At the end of each level, he will also face a Boss demon.

If you've ever played Ghost 'n Goblins, you will notice that this mobile version is a near-flawless recreation of the home console game, with a few exclusions. Obviously, the game isn't as long and a few enemies have been removed, like the sorcerer who turned Arthur into a frog. Nevertheless, most of the memorable enemies and dangers make their appearance. The unforgettable music is also present through each of the levels, though sound effects have been left out.

The game maintains a sizeable amount of difficulty from the original, which is also probably magnified because of the handset controls. Remember that you're no longer playing with a joystick or controller, so the keypad will do little to help your quest. However, the controls do react very well and give you a choice of two schemes to at least make it slightly more comfortable.

Ghost 'n Goblins is an excellent reproduction of the adventure game that belongs on the A-list of classic-to-mobile titles. Being such a fan of the original, we were afraid our expectations would set us up for disappointment, but we're so glad that wasn't the case. It's understandably shorter, and not as difficult, but this in no way detracts from a mobile game that begs to be played.

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5



Available Now

DYNASTY WARRIORS 5 Empires



PlayStation 2

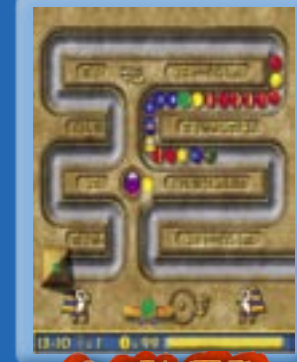


Mild Language
Violence

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MOBILE LUXOR

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In Luxor, players must create matches of three or more spheres of the same color to destroy them and before they make their way into the Pharaoh's pyramid. If all spheres are cleared, you will advance to the next level. Of course, if even one sphere makes it into the pyramid, a life is lost and when all are gone, it's game over

The spheres will slither their way towards the pyramid in multi-colored groups being pushed along by scarabs. As like-colored groups are created and eliminated, more will find their way into the path until you have cleared enough to keep them from coming out. When an entire multi-colored group has been destroyed, the scarab itself will be destroyed and render a gem for extra points or a special sphere. The special spheres will have different powers such as slow time, reverse the procession, or a lightning shot just to name a few. These will all be highly desired.

The trick of the game is to position your shot selection in the right location to create the like-colored groups. You only have to move left and right on the screen, but since the multi-colored groups are constantly advancing, it's easy to time the shot incorrectly. At least the controls are tight enough to give you a solid chance. The spheres also use good contrasting colors to eliminate confusion.

Luxor is a fun game but can tend to get very challenging even in the early levels. This might try the patience of novice users but will please experts who are familiar with the game. It has enough variation in style to play differently than the other similar games but it also amounts to a good time.

Publisher: RealArcade
Developer: Mumbo Jumbo
Release Date: March 2006
Genre: Puzzle
Category: Arcade
of Players: 1

FINAL SCORE :
3.5 of 5



AMY'S JIGSAW SCRAPBOOK



Amy's Jigsaw Scrapbook is a new mobile version of the game that lets you snap pieces together and reveal an image. It comes with a number of them for you to decipher, all taken from Amy's recent trip around the world and more. They include pictures of buildings, landscapes, animals and just about every other type of object, including outer space. (She sure gets around!)

The puzzles have different difficulty ratings and are comprised of 48 pieces. Each one is also timed so that you can compete against friends to see who finishes faster. To solve the puzzle, you will select pieces from the edge or center pieces (that have already been separated for you) and place them onto the main table. You can then shuffle them around on the table and snap them together.

The pieces are small because of the handset screen size so it's difficult to view the interlocking parts. However, Centerscore has been kind enough to help out with this by outlining each piece, when selected, to get a good view of the shape. When the jigsaw puzzle has been solved, you can try it again to improve on your time or simply choose another to solve.

When you have solved all of the pre-loaded puzzles, you can always download others. They will be constantly updated to provide hundreds more with many different themes. What's more, if you happen to have a camera phone, you can convert your own pictures into puzzles as well. So essentially, you will never run out of jigsaw puzzles to solve.

Amy's Jigsaw Scrapbook will be a never-ending delight to those who love solving jigsaw puzzles and want to take them along for a ride. The puzzles are small enough to solve in short intervals and are available in unlimited numbers thanks to the ability of using your own phone's pictures.

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5

Publisher: Centerscore
Developer: Centerscore
Release Date: March 2006
Genre: Puzzle
Category: Jigsaw
of Players: 1



AND 1 STREET BASKETBALL



And 1 Streetball brings to the small screen the likes of players known as Helicopter, the Professor, Main Event, High Octane and many more. It's a two-on-two basketball game that showcases streetball antics mixed with traditional balling.

The controls react well to your input but their layout will take some getting acquainted with. The tutorial will help in this but because both D-pad and keypad are required, expect to press the wrong button every once in a while.

The streeball attitude is captured well throughout the entire game using replays of thunderous dunks, classic messages by the announcer, and excellent sound effects to go along with the And 1 start-up song.

You've probably caught glimpses of the And 1 Streetball tournaments on ESPN and have wondered why these guys aren't playing in the NBA. Your guess is as good as mine but these guys are amazing and that's just the type of game you'll find here. It's fun, it's fresh and And 1 Streetball's game play is the basketball payoff we've been waiting for this year.

Publisher: Gameloft
Developer: Gameloft
Release Date: March 2006
Genre: Sports
Category: Basketball
of Players: 2

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5

GLORY IN DEATH

While playing through the new iteration of Warhammer 40,000, it became very clear to me that I would not like to exist in the future. The galaxy is at war and carnage rages at every corner. This is clearly not a time in which men of my stature (5'6) and strength (we wont discuss that) would survive.

The game allows you to choose from four races, each trying to overcome the others through violent means: The Space Marines, whom are the futuristic equivalents of humans, The Chaos Space Marines, a race of rogue humans who worship evil, the Eldar, mystical creatures fighting for the survival of their once powerful race, or the Orks whom desire nothing but complete destruction. No matter which side you choose to take in this turn-based strategy game, you are not in for an easy stroll through the park.

Warhammer 40,000 Glory in Death consists of 60 different maps that are dispersed throughout four campaigns. Terrain varies from icy mountains, deserts, jungles, and industrial cities, however, if you are not satisfied with the pre-generated maps, the game includes a map customizer that lets you tinker with the different sizes and land formations. One of the aspects of the game that surprised me was how the different land formations affect your troops or vehicles. For example, if you place a soldier or a vehicle on rough land, they are more likely to take damage or reduce mobility.

In most of the missions the objective is simple: destroy the opposing force without being wiped out in the process. In some of the earlier missions the maps are split into four equal sectors and within six turns your troops must control the majority of the sectors to secure victory. This is where it gets tricky because the different troops and vehicles each possess different abilities and weapon ranges which you must quickly learn if you mean to advance anywhere. Lining up soldiers adjacently increases their strength and accuracy when attacking, a strategy that gives you an advantage on the battlefield. The race I enjoyed playing the most were the Eldar mainly because I liked using the psychic's different abilities such as Guide to strengthen my forces from behind the battlefields. Each race, however, seems balanced in comparison to the rest.

During battle the game introduces cut scenes showing your soldiers firing at the enemy or vice versa. These scenes are amusing at first but become monotonous after several hours of playtime. Thankfully, there is an option to ignore them as well as an option to mute the sound effects which are limited to crackling roars that sound like beasts caught in bear traps. The game controls rather easily keeping in mind that most the time your actions are limited to one button used to select the action from menus.

The most fun I had while playing the game was in the Skirmish mode which tests various skills, from total destruction of enemies to defense strategies and even rescue missions in which you must travel to enemy territories and retrieve a specified target. Warhammer 40,000 Death in Glory surprises with its large amount of game play modes, including Arena features and 2P Bluetooth, and with its strategic battles. It may not possess the best sound or visuals but it makes up with a challenging experience that strategy fans should enjoy with a little effort.

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5



Publisher: THQ Wireless
Developer: THQ Wireless
Release Date: March 2006

Genre: Turn-based Strat
Category: Military
of Players: 1-2 Arena

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Available Now

WINBACK 2

PROJECT POSEIDON



PlayStation 2



Language
Violence

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winback2.koei.com



Reverse: The Past

Here's a scenario for you: you're one of the longest-running racing franchises out there, but no one seems to know it. A fast and furious upstart of a series seems to get all the attention, even though you were the first game in its sub-genre. When it isn't that series, it's *Gran Turismo* that's hogging the attention. "You just aren't technical enough," say some detractors. "You're too realistic," say others. "You've changed too much," cry the old schoolers. "You're a game for old folks!" shout the kids. What do you do to keep up? Simple: you raise the bar.

It's almost cliché to say it, but this era of gaming can best be described as post-*GTA*. It's getting harder and harder to simply stick a game in one genre and be done with it. Freedom of choice is all the rage, and if you can't do a wide variety of activities in a game, a lot of people are going to give that

game a miss in favor of a game where you do have that option. Your best possible choice is to pull your franchise, kicking and screaming if need be, into the 21st century. Turn it into an experience, instead of simply something that's one-note. Give your player a plethora of things to do and they'll keep coming back for more. Enter *Test Drive Unlimited*.

First Gear: Insurance

TDU wants to change the way you look at racing games, and even does a bit of reinventing the idea of singleplayer and multiplayer gameplay at the same time. It starts with a big idea. Take the Hawaiian island of Oahu and fully model over one thousand miles of roads that snake through towns, mountains, and forests. Add more than a hundred twenty-five real-life vehicles, and make sure you include everything from Aston Martins to Jaguars.

Toss in a few motorcycles for variety,

and render everything, always making sure to take advantage of the next-gen hardware where available. Then, pull all this off without the aid of "Now Loading" screens, save for at the beginning of races and around certain menus.

This is approaching the level of detail that *Test Drive Unlimited* is bringing to the table. Atari wants to provide a cohesive and immersive racing experience and anything less than excellence is unwanted. This means that the cars must all be accurately modeled on their real life counterparts and perform similarly. What's the point of driving a brand new, shiny, custom Miata if it controls just like your real-life Escort with the faulty headlight and loose bumper? Your in-game ride features features most things that a real car would, from adjustable seats to a working radio to power windows. Everything about your seats, from color to position, is just as customizable as the rest of your car. Feel like letting the wind cool your car as you drive around on the beach at sundown? Drop the windows and turn up the music.

This detail does come at a price however, although it's nowhere near steep. There are no damage models on your vehicles, which means that your cars stay wonderfully crisp and clean, no matter how hard you hit that SUV that's going too slow in the fast lane. However, a high-speed collision with civilian traffic will bust up the other guy pretty badly. Beware, though, as those impacts will net you attention by the police. There's a meter of police badges that appears when you do something bad enough, and filling that meter will net you a ticket, which automatically deducts money from your account. The more trouble you get in, the higher the tickets go. It's to your benefit to drive carefully and skillfully.



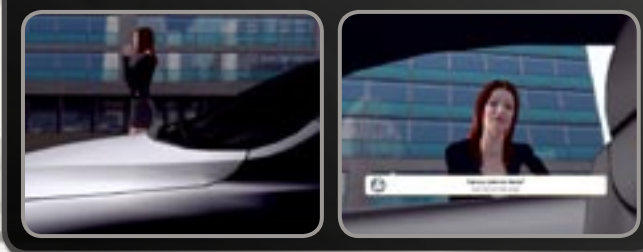
MAY I HELP YOU?



You'll quickly find out that everything matters in this game, particularly in relation to what you are allowed to do. Races require a certain class of car, while buying houses and cars requires money. What's new to the mix, however, are a number of mini-quests, for lack of a better word, that have their own requirements.

If you check your map, you'll occasionally notice a small icon of a woman's face. Drive up to it and listen for a voice telling you that there is a "lady who would appreciate help with her bags." Hit A, and you'll be treated to a quick cinema. Your avatar will ride up in his car, slow down, and stop next to her. He (or she) will roll down the window and the woman will lean inside. If you're cool enough, she'll ask for a ride home. What follows is a semi-*Crazy Taxi*-esque minigame in which you must get her home in a certain period of time. However, if you're driving a low-class car, or just the wrong car, she'll shun you, call you a loser, and refuse to even ask for your help.

This is an incentive to keep your equipment cutting edge. The better your car, the more likely you'll be able to pick up a woman and gain some bonuses by driving her home quickly.





To aid in this, you're given the virtual equivalent of an On-Star system. There's a map located on your HUD which will give you directions to any location you wish, and will let you know when you need to turn and when you have arrived with an audio cue. The map also lets you move instantly to certain locations on the map, though some of them require that you have visited them before in order to gain instant access. Oahu is huge, and it'll take you a good amount of time to explore the entire island and reveal everything. A drive from your house in Waialae to the western-most tip of the island is just a shade over 40 miles. Expect it to take you a good, long while to make that drive.

Think of it this way, though: how many other games let you simulate a road trip?

Getting into an actual race is easy. Instead of simply selecting a race off a menu, you need to drive to the start of the race and hit a button to enter it. You're given a flyover view of the race while you go over the rules, requirements, and possible outcomes, and then the race begins. There are checkpoint races, where you simply have to pass through or by a number of gates before everyone else does, regular lap races, and time attack-style checkpoint races. In short, there's no lack of variety for the modern racer.



ALOHA!



The first thing you have to do when you set down on the island of Oahu is rent a car. Why? Well, that's easy. You've got nothing but the clothes on your back and \$200,000. There were five cars readily available in our revision of *Test Drive Unlimited*. You can pick from an Audi TT quattro sport, an Alfa Romeo GT V6, a Nissan 350 Z Coupe, a Mazda MX-5 Miata, and a Saturn Sky roadster. You're given the specs for each car as you browse, and you can rent any of them for \$500 if you only need it for half an hour, or \$1000 if you need it for a full hour. Even better, you can come back here later in the game and still rent other cars.

Renting is how you get to the real estate office to purchase your first house. Your itinerary is updated and the voice will tell you exactly how to get to the office. Once there, you can pick out the best house for your needs, all the while keeping an eye on upgrading to the \$2,000,000 dream house.



Second Gear: Role Playing

TDU is not all cars and roads, though. You can pick an avatar once you enter the game, male or female, and dress them up how you please. You can go out and buy clothes for them from various shops scattered around Oahu, which stock everything from three-piece suits to Ecko Unltd. jeans. Name brands abound, and who doesn't want their avatar looking their best?

The clothes didn't have any readily apparent function in our preview build of the game, beyond, you know, clothing your character, but it adds an interesting angle to the game. We're no longer stuck with focus group-analyzed "cool guys" as players. In *Test Drive Unlimited*, you pick an archetype at the beginning of the game, and there are plenty to choose from, purchase your first house, and then you can hit the wardrobe for a change. We started out with 48 upper garments alone, and there are clothing stores in various places in Oahu, so you're assured of a wide variety of clothes.

Brand names are big business now, so of course there are licensed clothes for you to wear. Fancy a bit of Ecko? Hook your player up with a full complement of Ecko gear. There's a number of made-up clothing designers, too, if you aren't into name brands. There's something for everyone, from three-piece suits to t-shirts and jeans to biker gear.

Looking your best, though, means nothing if you're living out of a cardboard box. That's why your first stop on the island is the real estate agent's office. You have to sit down with her and shop for a new house. Your choice of house affects the size of your garage, its furnishings, and its location. Some houses are situated near a number of races, while others are off the beaten path.





The house doubles as your base of operations, as well. You can stop by when you need a breather, and gain access to a number of essential components to the game. You can check out your garage to switch cars or edit them if need be, your wardrobe if you feel like your character is not quite dapper enough, or even check out your mail or the newspaper and see what's new on the island. You can see where you're ranked on the island, too, for all game modes.

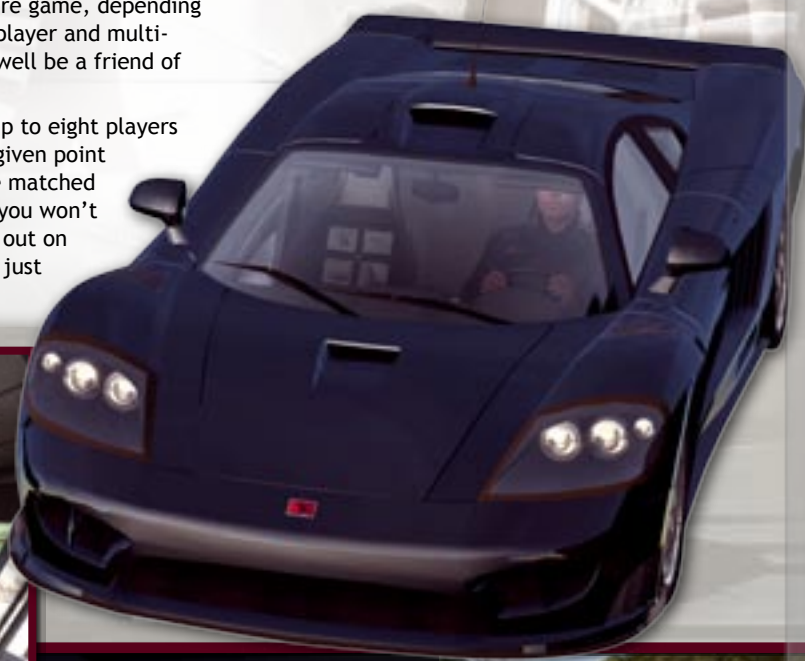
This provides an interesting twist on the whole idea of car management. You no longer have a garage with infinite depths. You aren't just the random "cool" guy that the game needs you to be to fit its gimmick. Here, the character is you. His taste in clothes will be your taste in clothes. His car collection will be smaller and more focused, instead of filled with junk cars.

All of this has an effect on your reputation, as well. See the "May I Help You?" sidebar for more info on how having a cool ride will net you bonus points.

Third Gear: Massively Multi-player

This is the 21st century nowadays, and the next big thing is online play. *Test Drive Unlimited* has you nicely covered, since the entire game, depending on your connection, is online-enabled. It blurs the line between singleplayer and multi-player, as the person who may be passing you doing 160mph may very well be a friend of yours from Skokie, or perhaps a random real-life stranger.

This kind of integration is done via a variety of factors. *TDU* supports up to eight players online, which means there are seven people online around you at any given point in time. Friends are given preference first, of course, and then you are matched up with other players based on ranking and skill. This makes sure that you won't be going up against a digital driving scientist when you're just starting out on Oahu. This is extremely cool, as you can find competition while you're just tooling around on the island, checking out the sights.

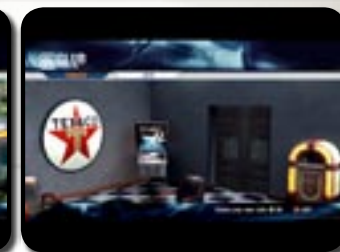
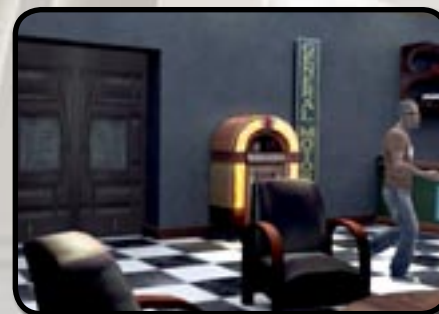


There's more traditional online play, as well, though you won't find, say, a menu labeled "Xbox Live" anywhere. You can select online races the same way that you select offline ones. Go to the map and look at the list of available challenges. Some of them will be online and others will be offline. You can either join an already-created race or create your own and wait for people to drop in.

Beyond that are the car clubs and diners. There's a variety of them situated all over the island, and they offer new depth to the online mode. You go to diners to "meet up" with other drivers and trade challenges. If you have a particularly sick run on a certain race, upload the challenges to a diner and see if you're actually the best.

Car clubs are like clans, if you're familiar with first-person shooters. It's a gathering of like-minded players who band together as a team. Clubs may feature a common theme, like each player has a Lamborghini of a different color, but more often than not they're a group of friends who simply love to race. You can do club-based races, tournaments, or other competitions.

The online play is not limited to simple racing, either. You can buy, sell, and trade car parts amongst the online players. If you need a certain kind of part for your car, and your buddy happens to have it, make him an offer. *Test Drive Unlimited* doesn't just want to give you an online experience, it wants you to have an entire multi-player community at your beck and call. A lot of online games are transient. You can no-scope one guy in *Halo* all you want, but how often do you actually interact with him beyond the occasional witticism? Here, you have to interact. Make an offer, accept an offer, and possibly make a new friend.



ASKING DIRECTIONS

Your map is invaluable. You've always got access to it with the flick of the right button on the d-pad. The map will let you set destinations for your GPS system to map out for you, and you're given spoken cues when you need to make a turn or pull in to park.

The map itself has a Google Earth-type interface, and yes, you can actually zoom all the way out and view the world, the stars, and the sun. Does this mean that there may be new areas, or even countries, to explore? It isn't very likely, but it does bode well for a sequel, doesn't it?



You're given the option of merely clicking on an icon on the map and teleporting directly to that spot, but only if you've been there before. It's similar to how some RPGs will allow you to easily revisit areas you've conquered after you beat them. Driving around and getting the feel of the island is important, and after you've mastered that, you can just jump from spot to spot, racing and earning cash to upgrade your ride. Learn to use the map well and your in-game experience will be so much easier.



DON'T CALL IT A COMEBACK

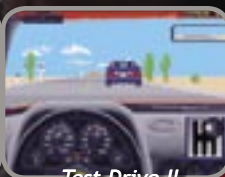
A lot of people seem to not know it, but the *Test Drive* series goes way back. When people think of long-lived series, they think *Mario*, *Legend of Zelda*, *Metroid*, *Castlevania*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, or *Contra*. However, get this: the first *Test Drive* was released in the US in the same calendar year as such NES stalwarts as *Castlevania*, *Legend of Zelda*, and *Mega Man*. The series had two more entries in the bag before *Sonic the Hedgehog* hit the ground running. Even better, the very first game featured the "Outrun the Police!" action which has been in dozens games ever since.

There was a break between *Test Drive III: The Passion* and *Test Drive 4* (seven years, in fact), but the series has since made an appearance on every major system out there. There's been entries on the Commodore 64, Dreamcast, Game Boy, Genesis, PC, PlayStation, PlayStation 2, Super Nintendo, Xbox, and now the Xbox 360. The series has changed formats often, and features rally racing, destruction derby, and real-life sporting events as shown in *Test Drive Le Mans*.

Test Drive isn't a new series by any means. It's evolved over the years into a wide variety of different forms, and if *TDU* is any indication, it's going to keep innovating and remain relevant for some time to come. I wonder what's in store for its 20th anniversary?



Test Drive



Test Drive II



Test Drive III



Test Drive IV

Fourth Gear: A New Age

Our copy of *Test Drive Unlimited* is still quite early, and it shows it occasionally, but it also shows a ton of potential, much of which is already realized. Integrating the online and offline aspects of the gameplay is a masterstroke and adds a needed shot in the arm to a long-running genre. How often have you stopped playing a racing game because you get stuck on one race where you always lose by a tenth of a second? Here, that's not an option. There's a stellar amount of races available right from the start, and if you get stuck on one, simply move along to another or do a couple online races to cool down.

The gameplay toes a comfortable line between super-realistic and arcade. You can get away with going extremely fast, but you won't be able to whip around a right angle turn at 200mph like you can in other games. It's not annoyingly technical, but it is just technical enough to require a decent amount of skill to play. It's easy to get the hang of at first, though each car does control differently and require different levels of touch to drive perfectly. Luckily though, if you go off the beaten path, you can simply hit the Back button and be put back on the road and facing in the proper direction. They've made it as easy as possible for you to get into the game and going 150 on the highway.

You could almost call *Test Drive Unlimited* a mash-up. It has fully combined online and offline gameplay, elements of the Sims with your player character, high speed racing, open-ended gameplay, and a remarkable freedom of movement. Half the fun of *Grand Theft Auto* is going off-mission and doing whatever you want. *Test Drive Unlimited* gives you that option and more. You can vary between fighting to be top dog online and dressing up your punk rock chick in a business suit for ironic purposes. Here's hoping that it can deliver on all its potential and promises once it drops in June. It's already part of the way there.



HIS BAZOOKA IS WORSE THAN HIS BITE.

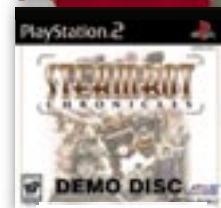
"...dogs with rocket launchers sounds like a recipe for success."

- VGO Network

"...deep and totally likeable..."

- Newtype USA

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Sometimes, playing *Tomb Raider: Legend* is like living a dream. When Lara stands at the top of a cliff in the heart of Africa, surrounded by roaring waterfalls and a misty veil you can almost feel, it's easy to be swept up in the moment. When she creeps into a damp tomb, you'll tell yourself that this is what the series has always been about. Then everything goes wrong.

Think back to the most generic puzzles you've ever solved in a game. They're all here. The key difference is that now they're executed sloppily and you're controlling Lara Croft. Sometimes, you'll know just what to do but it will take you numerous efforts even to pull a switch. You'll think maybe you were wrong and try other techniques. Then, after a wasted hour of frustration spent wrestling with a camera that makes it difficult even to push crates, you'll find that you were right all along. This can happen numerous times within a given stage, as they're quite large. It makes starting each new zone intimidating.

LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER LEGEND

Publisher: Eidos Interactive
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Release Date: 4/11/2006
Rating: "T"

Genre(s): Action
Category: Adventure
of players: 1

You dare not rush, either. Later areas feature gauntlets of jumps where timing is crucial, yet Lara hesitates every time you tell her to leap. You can adapt, but it's frustrating, especially when she falls into a pit. Frequent checkpoints should make instant deaths a minor concern, but they don't for one simple reason: load times. Each new level or (more frequently) death prompts a 15-second wait.

Often it's even longer. So there you are, negotiating a series of jumps and Lara stumbles into a pit. Twenty seconds later, you get another chance but last two or three seconds before a weak ledge or spotty collision detection gets the best of you.



Review by HonestGamer

Fortunately, annoying puzzles are interrupted by enjoyable action sequences. Few activities are more exhilarating than darting around crumbling stone columns as you unload on your enemies. Lara can roll quickly out of the way if someone gets too close, then fire off a quick burst of ammunition that bangs against metal and thuds against wood and stone in a most satisfying fashion. The targeting system also lets you know when you're out of range. Moments like this almost make you forget the parts you don't like. and distinct boss encounters take that even further. The first one might not seem like much, but later struggles will force you to fight back with every ounce of courage and ingenuity that Lara has at her disposal.

There's also the intriguing plot to consider. Lara's friends chatter on her headset as she journeys deeper into each mysterious ruin she encounters. Their dialogue is humorous and frequently provides vital information about how you can advance. Don't even think about playing with the sound turned off, and pay close attention to each cutscene unless you want to get lost.

Of course, that might happen anyway. As a first attempt by a new developer to return *Tomb Raider* to greatness, this isn't a bad game. Considered under any other pretense, it's disappointing. There's no excuse for tedious puzzle solving, sluggish controls and a nasty camera, no matter what the franchise is. Try it if you like Lara Croft or puzzling adventure games with occasional moments of greatness, but pass on it otherwise. Perhaps the next attempt will fare better. Rating : 3 of 5



Lara's latest outing can sometimes feel more like a movie than a game. That's not surprising; she's gone to Hollywood twice. Angelina Jolie portrayed the intrepid adventurer on both occasions, while her real-life father lent his talents when necessary. Go rent some DVDs to watch her swim through underwater ruins, jump from rooftops without a parachute, fight monsters in Africa and do pretty much everything she does in the latest game. Just don't look for a third outing anytime soon. Box office results were downright underwhelming.



the **second** opinion!

2nd opinion by *Roger Danish* • Alternate Rating : 4.5 of 5

Unlike HG, I really dug Crystal D's attempt at restoring the series back to its former glory. As a fan of the original games, *Legends* captures the spirit and essence of what made it so great.

FINAL SCORE :

3.75 of 5





Publisher : Capcom
Developer : Digital Eclipse
Release Date : 3/23/2006
Rating : TEEN

Genre(s) : Arcade
Category : Variety
of players : 1-2

Review by James

Once upon a time, arcades thrived; they were a metaphorical grassland where games thundered in mighty herds. While those days are long gone, for those who either remember the past or wish they'd seen it, there are now arcade compilations. *Capcom Classics Collection Remixed* brings twenty games from Capcom's arcade heritage onto the PSP, where their pick up and play nature fits perfectly with on-the-go play.

Included on the *Classics Collection* are action, shooter, platform, driving, puzzle, and even quiz games. It's a good variety, but a compendium is only as good as the titles making it up. Fortunately Capcom is showing off some fantastic stuff in here, much of it extremely obscure.

Take *Three Wonders*, for example. Named as such for the three full games on it (yes, an arcade collection inside an arcade collection; very fractal), it's a 1991 title with some amazing



graphics to back up its gameplay. *Midnight Wanderers* is a run & jump action game, *Chariot* is a side-scrolling shooter, and *Don't Pull* is *Pengo* with a greater variety of boxes to push around. While *Don't Pull* is fairly weak and overly cutesy, *Midnight Wanderers* and *Chariot* are both excellent, gorgeous examples of their genres.

Then there's *Varth*, a fairly standard vertical-scrolling shooter that's still a lot of fun. Like all the vertical scrolling games in the *Classics Collection*, hitting Select cycles through a variety of video modes, allowing the game to be played with the PSP turned sideways for full-screen action. It takes a minute to get used to playing that way, but seeing the graphics full-screen is so much nicer than shrinking things down to fit standard resolution that it's well worth doing.



While most of the games work well on the PSP's screen, not all of them look as sharp as they should. *Legendary Wings* in particular is almost impossible to play, with enemy bullets getting lost in the background. Fortunately it's only the one game that really suffers, although *Section Z* could use some clarity as well. These are the original arcade graphics, though; they were just meant for a bigger screen.



Another feature of *Capcom Classics* has been argued about by fans for years now: infinite continues. Each game can be completed easily by just hitting Continue as often as it takes, no skill required. There are a few, like *Street Fighter*, where you'll need to start the level over, but the game is willing to give you as many quarters as it takes to either learn some skills, get lucky, or just blindly bull on through. Some people will beat a game once and never play it again using that method, complaining all the while that it's too easy. While this is technically true, completing a game isn't actually the same as beating it. Also, those infinite credits are a great way to practice later levels without having to start from scratch every time, building up the skills necessary to single-credit your game of choice.

How much enjoyment you'll get out of *Capcom Classics* all depends on whether or not you're the kind of gamer willing

WHAT'S IN HERE, ANYWAY?

- Avengers*- Urban brawler
- Bionic Commando*- Side-scrolling run & gun
- Black Tiger*- Side-scrolling fantasy action
- Block Block*- Puzzle
- Captain Commando*- Bizarre urban brawler
- Forgotton Worlds*- Horizontal shooter
- Final Fight*- Urban brawler
- Last Duel*- Vertical shooter
- Legendary Wings*- Fantasy vertical shooter
- Magic Sword*- Side-scrolling fantasy action
- Mega Twins*- Side-scrolling fantasy action
- Quiz and Dragons*- Quiz
- Section Z*- Horizontal shooter
- Side Arms*- Side-croiling shooter
- The Speed Rumbler*- Post-apocalyptic driving and shooting
- Street Fighter*- One of the earliest progenitors of the fighting genre
- Strider*- Side-scrolling action
- Three Wonders*- Horizontal shooter, run & gun, and puzzle all in one.
- Varth*- Vertical shooter



games have fared better than others with the PSP's LCD screen, those that aren't pleasantly retro look good even by today's standards. And whether it's shooting up the screen in *Last Duel*, brawling through the urban jungle in *Avengers*, or slashing monsters in *Mega Twins*, there's no denying the addictive power found in here. The long-successful formula of simple gameplay mixed with

quarter-munching difficulty has worked for over twenty-five years now, and arcade collections like this show how it can still be successful after all these years.

Rating : 4 of 5

to do this. While some games will never be beaten on one quarter (*Final Fight*, I'm looking at you!), watching it go from being an almost impossible continue-fest into a feat of skill is still as rewarding as it's ever been.

In addition to the games themselves, *Capcom Classics* also includes a variety of bonus features for each game. Tips, artwork, and music can be unlocked, with in-game goals needing to be beaten to access them. Most are pretty easy to achieve, although a few involve doing something mildly clever like picking up an obscure item. The goal list is easily found in the pause menu, and continuing often enough to beat the game will usually net everything.

So is *Capcom Classics Collection Remixed* worth it? For those hung up on graphics and unable to separate story from gameplay, probably not. For anyone wanting to run, fly, fight, punch, kick, slash, think, and shoot, absolutely. Time has been kind to most of these games (although *Quiz & Dragons* has an awful lot of early '90s trivia in it) and the 2D visuals have aged nicely as well. While some

2nd opinion by Roger Danish • Alternate Rating : 4.5 of 5

This is the way retro compilations should be done. It's packed chock full of old-school goodness that's definitely worth the price for admission and a trip down memory lane.



FINAL SCORE :
4.25 of 5



DRIVER PARALLEL LINES

Review by Shoegazer

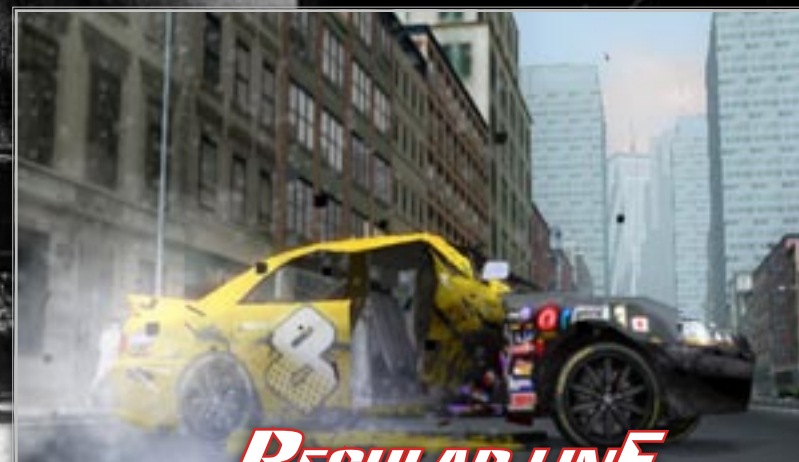
Publisher: Atari
Developer: Reflections Interactive
Release Date: 03/14/06
Rating: "M" for Mature

Genre(s): Action
Category: Sandbox
of players: 1

How do you like your violence? Which came first: the chicken or the egg? In recent years, the video game equivalent to this question has been a comparison between *Grand Theft Auto* and *Driver*. Compelling arguments could be made on either side. On one hand, *Driver* was the first to take the action out from behind the steering wheel and into 3D, but it was *Grand Theft Auto* that created the seamless living, breathing world that put the genre on the map. After playing *Parallel Lines*, there is no longer any question as to which franchise has directly influenced the other. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, than developer Reflections Interactive has just written one hell of a gushing fan letter to Rockstar.

After a disappointing effort with *Driver 3*, the team at Reflections Interactive scrapped everything that they had created and started over from scratch. The brainless baddies that refused to return fire in the middle of a firefight are long gone, and the mercilessly tuned AI cop cars, a signature of the franchise, have returned. You'd be wise to savor every training mission contained within, because you'll need every swift driving maneuver that you can muster to escape these relentless boys in blue. They're good... almost *too* good. Even when you lose their tail (by some miracle) and switch up your ride, they somehow always seem to find you and the chase is on all over again.

It's refreshing to see the series include a bit more focus on the actual wheelman missions. The cars are fun to control, and the meticulously detailed real-life New York City is massive, begging to be explored. True to the genre, just driving around the city can be an appealing break from missions, and can help you plan your shortcut routes for an easy getaway. There is also something eerily satisfying about the realistic traffic out on the road with you. While it's frustrating at times while you're trying to obey the laws of the road and not draw any attention to yourself, it is impressive to get caught up in real-time traffic jams and AI fender benders. Since there is a gauge keeping track of how much reckless driving has been recorded by your current vehicle, you have to really watch your radar for those cop cars. If there aren't any around, then you're safe to be as hazardous as you please.



REGULAR LINE OR SPECIAL LINE?

If you've got the extra \$10 in your wallet, you might as well spring for the limited edition version. Unlike most other special editions, this one is



well worth the price. It's chock-full of cool bonus items such as an 18-song soundtrack, a behind-the-scenes "Making of..." DVD, plus interviews with some of the bands on the soundtrack. It also comes with a two-sided poster/map, and some video features showcasing the best car chases, and crashes, from the game. Don't worry, there won't be any mistaking this version on the shelf for the regular edition thanks to its behemoth-sized packaging.

Even though *Parallel Lines* isn't the prettiest contender in the pageant, it does feature a high level of movie quality production values. The story is intriguing, and keeps you wanting to continue on, even during the most frustrating missions. The characters are all believable and unique, and having the game take place during two different time periods is an interesting twist. It tells the classic tale of betrayal and revenge, paying homage to Hollywood flicks such as *Kill Bill*.

The toughest part of *Parallel Lines* to swallow is its utterly shameless aping of everything that *GTA* has done before it. While the scope of the game is well done, it carries absolutely no "wow" factor since *GTA III* did this all four years ago. If *San Andreas* redefined what gamers expect from the sandbox genre, then why commit development dollars to chasing down the ghosts of the past? Giving credit where credit is due, *Parallel Lines* is by far the closest that anyone has come to successfully implementing the *Grand Theft Auto* formula, but we deserve more. The once mighty *Driver* brand has been reduced to nothing more than a "me too" sequel trying to soak up any leftover *GTA* dollars, and it's depressing.

It's playable, has a sweet soundtrack, and is a relatively entertaining way to spend your gaming hours. Just don't set your expectations too high.

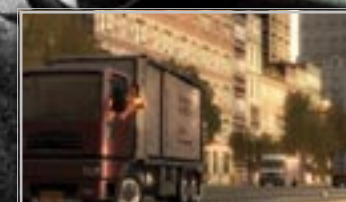
Rating : 3 of 5



2nd opinion by Metalbolt • Alternate Rating : 1 of 5

The *Driver* series is officially dead to me. What once was a thrilling experience is now a boring drive in the park. Steer clear of this wreck at all costs!

FINAL SCORE :
2 of 5





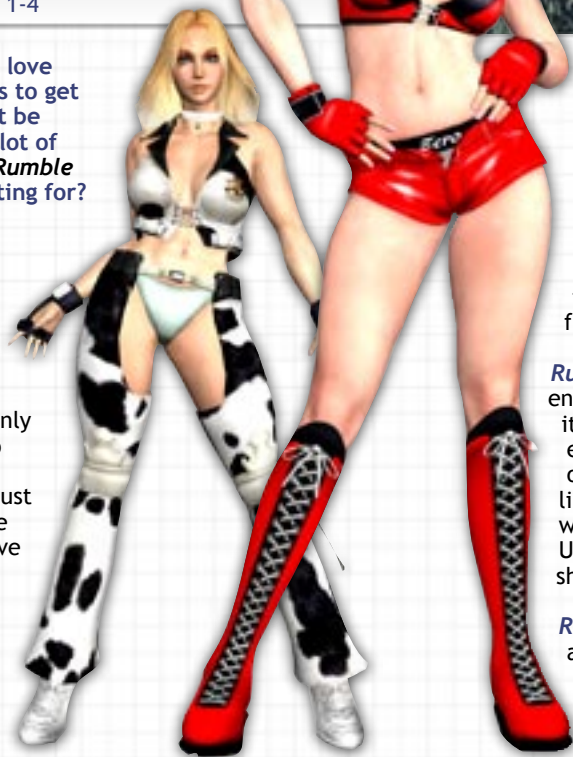
Publisher : Konami
Developer : Yuke's Media Creations
Release Date : 03/28/06
Rating : "M" for Mature

Genre(s) : Wrestling
Category : Softcore
of players : 1-4

I'm a big fan of wrestling games. I'd love for either of Microsoft's two systems to get a quality wrestling game, whether it be technical or arcade-y, and I know a lot of other people feel the same way. Is *Rumble Roses XX* the game we've been waiting for? Well, yes and no.

I'll get this out of the way now: this is a game that your mother would slap you in the face for playing. Its cast is full of pinup girls. There's the cowgirl who forgot her pants, the nurse who didn't zip her top all the way up, the teacher who mistakenly wore her short skirt and high heels to class... you see where I'm going with this. If that's your thing, have at it. Just know that your mother won't approve of the humiliation moves or provocative camera angles, okay?

If you're here for the wrestling, you're in luck. *RRXX* has a solid engine at play, though it's probably a bit easy for wrestling game vets. There are three basic holds, and the various grapples and moves build off this foundation. It's a simple system, but sensible, as it lets anyone get into the game with a minimum of fuss. It does occasionally lead to some awkwardly animated transitions between moves, which is definitely jarring, but very easy to use. This ease of use is what makes the gameplay portion work. It's easy to get into a fun



match with friends. The moves are suitably over the top, be it in innuendo or impact, and easy to pull off.

All is not golden in Eden, though. The wrestling and graphics are nicely polished, but the rest of the game is decidedly not. The single player mode is so barebones as to be almost an afterthought. You're given no reason to play this game other than the fact that it might be a fun time. A little impetus goes a long way.

Rumble Roses XX's biggest problem is the enemy AI, however. It isn't smart so much as it is exploitative. The other wrestlers will either fall for every single trick in your book or counter your moves whenever they feel like it. It's entirely possible to get into a match where your lovely opponent will reverse your Up+Y grapple eight times out of ten, even if she's dizzy and her back is turned.

Rumble Roses XX is a fun game wrapped in a pretty poor package. The lack of an actual story mode, or even a fighting game-style arcade mode, hurts. Spotty hit detection during matches with more than one opponent hurts, too. This is currently the only wrestling game available on the Xbox 360, and it definitely has a fun engine, but it's focused a little bit too much on the fanservice and not enough on delivering an experience that's actually worth sixty bucks.

Rating : 3 of 5

2nd opinion by Shoegazer • Alternate Rating : 2.5 of 5

Pretty? Check. Naughty? Check. Dumbed down game engine? Check. Bare bones presentation? Check. Mildly satisfying? Check. Play this if only to pass the time until *Smackdown* arrives? Check.



I have a confession to make: I played *The Godfather: The Game* before I saw the movie. I really enjoyed the game, and what I played impressed me so much that I decided to see the movie it was based upon. That was a big mistake.

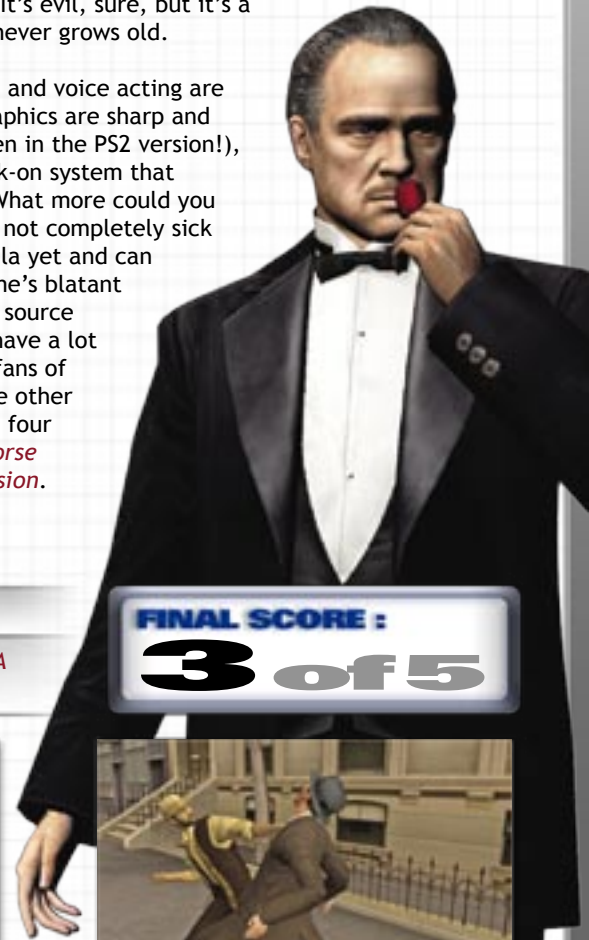
As a movie, *The Godfather* is a work of tension and subtlety. As a game, it's about running people over with cars. You may be okay with this if you've never seen the film, but for fans of *The Godfather*, this game is a slap to the face. *The Godfather: The Game* puts you in control of an anonymous street thug shoehorned into the movie's timeline, where you'll participate in modified versions of some of the film's more memorable scenes.

The problem is that this reimagination of the film's events is often ridiculous and completely inappropriate. Take, for example, the scene in which the family traitor, Paulie Gatto, gets whacked. In the movie, Paulie gets a bullet to the back of the head, execution style. In the game, Paulie sees the gun and *takes the hell off!* What follows is an explosion-filled boss fight with Paulie—yes, seriously!—which may be difficult to win because you'll be laughing too hard to shoot straight.

It's a shame that this absurdity had to be attached to a game that, against all odds, is actually a whole lot of fun to play. It's pretty much the biggest *Grand Theft Auto* ripoff ever—there's a little radar in the corner and everything—but you'll probably have a lot of fun with it despite yourself. The game is big on driving and gunplay, and great controls throughout keep

2nd opinion by Metalbolt • Alternate Rating : 2 of 5

There is no way out! The Corleone family owns you, at least until you tire of *another GTA* clone and turn the game off. Problem solved.





Review by Frag Hag

Publisher : Ubisoft
Developer : Ubisoft
Release Date : 3/21/2006
Rating : MATURE

Genre(s) : Stealth Action
Category : You are Sam Fisher...
of players : 1
(Up to 4 via Ad Hoc play)



Splinter Cell: Essentials starts out with you, in the role of lone agent Sam Fisher, making your way to your daughter's grave on the anniversary of her death. After your arrival (and a quick tutorial), you are suddenly arrested as a traitor to the American government. At this point, you begin a series of levels that serve as flashbacks to your past.

The first thing you'll notice upon booting up *Splinter Cell: Essentials* is its solid production values. In trademark Ubi fashion, the graphics are sharp, and complex lighting and attention to visual detail really makes the game shine on the PSP's ultra-sharp screen. The audio is also well done, and the game features the typical solid voice acting you've come to expect from the series. But, all that value does come at a cost. Loading times are pretty hefty—even by PSP standards. During gameplay, I encountered a few moments of slowdown and even a couple of serious hitches.

For how impressed I was by *Essentials'* amazing graphics, I was doubly pissed off by its shoddy camera. Without the second analog stick, you're forced to use the buttons to adjust the camera, which leaves you unable to do anything else while doing so. When you're done looking around, you can't just keep playing because the camera always points wherever you positioned it last. The camera also has a nasty habit of slipping into weird angles or the back of Sam's head when you're in tight spaces, making some corners a pain and ultimately translating into a lot of hands-on camera work.

The controls suffer somewhat on the PSP as well. With a complex game like *Essentials*, the loss of two shoulder buttons and the second analog stick is considerable. Still, considering that this is a console game on a handheld, the controls eventually become manageable.

The *Splinter Cell* series is known for delivering impressive stealth elements and *Essentials* lives up to its title's expectations. Just like its bigger console brothers, Ubisoft has packed the PSP version with clever level design and challenging stealth opportunities, including trademark moves such as sneak attacks by throwing cans and distracting enemies, or jumping on them from above. On the flip side, however, even with all of Fisher's different moves, the intelligence level of the game's AI may prompt players not to bother. Perhaps the character models should have included really dark sunglasses to explain why the enemies can't see Fisher even when he is standing ten feet in front of them. In some cases, the AI was so clueless that enemies didn't react to being smacked in the back by an opened door.

In the end, *Splinter Cell Essentials* brings the basics of the popular series to the PSP, but feels watered down when compared to the console versions. However, it's a valiant effort on Ubisoft's part, and because it's a handheld version, I'm willing to forgive a little and focus on its positives. If you're a fan of the series there is a lot to enjoy, but there are better options in this category available now, such as Sony's amazing (and surprising) *Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror*.

Rating : 3 of 5



2nd opinion by Roger Danish • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

As far as PSP titles go, *Essentials* is a solid game. However, like Ubi's other PSP ports, it's definitely rough around the edges. If you can only afford one action/stealth adventure, go with *Syphon Filter*.



syphonfilter DARK MIRROR



Review by honestgamer

Publisher : SCEA
Developer : Sony Bend
Release Date : 03/14/06
Rating : "M" for Mature

Genre(s) : Action
Category : Shooter
of players : 1



You'll hear much about how *Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror* comes together in a million meaningful ways, and you should believe it all. What's most impressive, though, is how the game feels like a full-fledged console experience. Within minutes of starting the UMD to spinning, you'll forget about memory constraints and the usual adjustments you have to make for portable gaming. That's quite the accomplishment.

The game begins as Gabe Logan and Lian Xing are dropped in the middle of an Alaskan mountain range. Snowflakes whirl, trees rise from a fine mist, and somewhere in the distance there're buildings that terrorists have raided. The government wants you to quietly eliminate those behind the incident. In the nature of every good tale with government involvement, there's plenty you're not being told.

Levels unveil the plot one chunk at a time, between stages ideal for portable gaming. Checkpoints are spaced intelligently, so that often it feels like you're moving through well-constructed set pieces. By the time one objective grows tiresome, you've already advanced to the next. There are numerous highlights, too, such as when Lian crawls around a jet as terrorists flank her, or when Gabe descends a towering shaft while defusing explosives. You can replay favorite moments and spend time grabbing secrets you may have missed. Your skills are also rated, something that will keep you coming back long after you've "finished" playing.

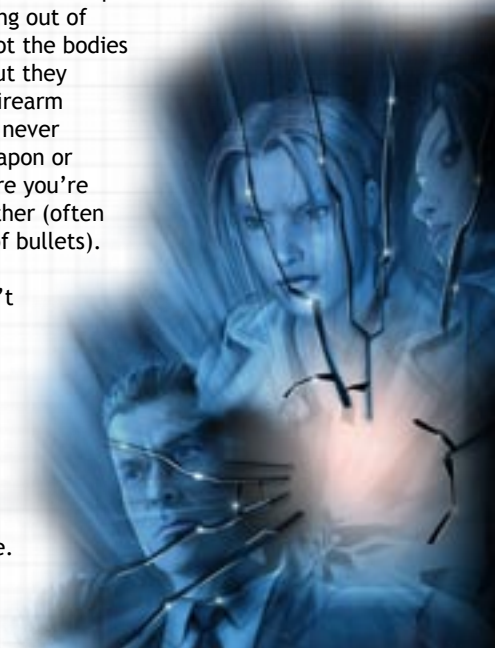
Despite the lack of a second analogue stick, *Dark Mirror* plays almost exactly as it should. Sony Bend mapped camera movement to the face buttons and reserved the trigger and D-pad buttons for other functions. The agents dart and creep about precisely as they

should, but the camera feels a bit jerky at times. This is especially true of the more intense firefights, when enemies are rushing you and you're grappling with the environment.

Another issue is that it's sometimes difficult to tell what to do next. The game expects you to utilize the various goggles in your inventory. Doing so often provides the solution to a given puzzle and even looks cool (the heat-sensitive set is especially nice), but switching around all the time proves tiresome. So does running out of ammunition. You can loot the bodies of those you've slain, but they usually carry different firearm types. It seems like you never spend long with one weapon or stockpile of ammo before you're forced to switch to another (often in the middle of a hail of bullets).

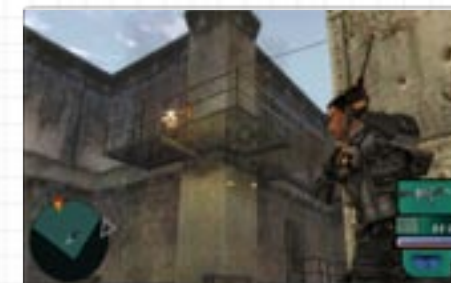
Still, such concerns don't change what Sony Bend has accomplished here. *Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror* is the sort of experience action aficionados have been waiting for since the system's launch and well worth the entry fee.

Rating : 4 of 5



2nd opinion by Wanderer • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

I'm sure this would be just great if I could get used to these bloody hindering awkward controls. Could people please stop making PSP games that require a second analogue stick?



FINAL SCORE :

3.5 of 5

REVIEW

PLATFORM PlayStation 2 XBOX 360

DYNASTY WARRIORS 5 Empires

Review by Lyumara

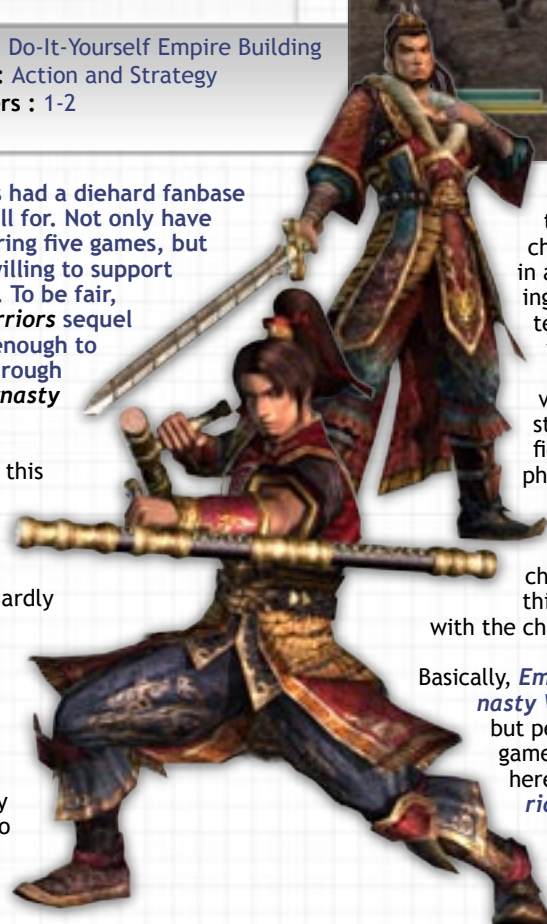
Publisher : Koei
Developer : Omega Force
Release Date : 03/28/06
Rating : "RP" - Rating Pending

Genre(s) : Do-It-Yourself Empire Building
Category : Action and Strategy
of players : 1-2

Koei's *Dynasty Warriors* line of games had a diehard fanbase that a lot of other publishers would kill for. Not only have they carried the franchise to a staggering five games, but for the past few years they've been willing to support multiple editions of the same sequels. To be fair, each of the variants on a *Dynasty Warriors* sequel offers some unique content, but not enough to entice most gamers into going back through a title they've already played. The *Dynasty Warriors* fan is a breed apart.

Knowing this makes writing a review of this game feel somewhat academic. Nothing written here will dissuade a diehard *Dynasty Warriors* fan from picking this game up and loving it to death, and of course a diehard fan hardly needs persuading. By the same token, someone who is not already a *Dynasty Warriors* fan is probably not going to be convinced to want this game at all if they've already played another version of it. *Empires*'s strategy elements put only a slightly different spin on *DW5*. The core gameplay feels basically the same, especially if you choose to do campaigns playing as a core *DW5* cast member instead of creating your own character.

There are still definite differences between *Empires* and vanilla *DW5*. While most of the map areas and character cast are basically the same, the way you progress through the game is very different. There's still a mode for doing one-off battles, but the meat of the



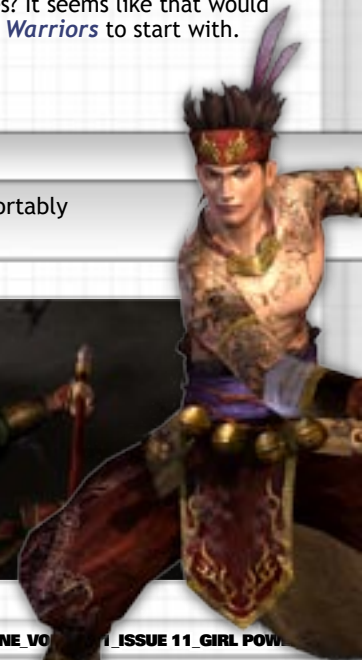
game is the Campaign mode where you can opt to play as part of the *DW5* cast or as an original character you've created. The game progresses in a loosely turn-based way, with battles happening when your units try to advance into enemy territory, or when enemies try to advance on your territory. When not battling you get to manage your kingdom using a highly simplified version of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* strategy engine. It's honestly a bit too simplified, such that what you do during the strategy phase doesn't feel like it has much significance compared to what goes on during the combat portions of the game. The only real reward for advancing in the game is unlocking more character creation options, but even with everything unlocked, it's really hard to make anything with the character editor that feels unique.

Basically, *Empires* is just a new way to play *DW5* again. *Dynasty Warriors* fanatics are probably going to love it, but people already bored by the *Dynasty Warriors* gameplay style just aren't going to find anything here to hold their interest. Even as a *Dynasty Warriors* fan, *Empires* releasing as a stand-alone title feels like a bit much. How many times has this game been released in the past twelve months already? Is there some reason why the strategic elements and character editor of *Empires* can't be part of the standard *Dynasty Warriors* releases? It seems like that would result in a better *Dynasty Warriors* to start with.

Rating : 3 of 5

2nd opinion by 4thletter • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

You've played this game before. If you're a *DW* fan, this will be comfortably familiar to you. To everyone else, choose carefully.



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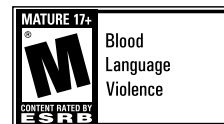
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PlayStation 2



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Me & My Katamari

Review by **Shoegazer**

Publisher : Namco Bandai Games
Developer : Namco Limited
Release Date : 03/21/06
Rating : "E" for Everyone

Genre(s) : Puzzle
Category : Katamari Ball Rollin'
of players : 1 (Up to 4 via Ad Hoc)

Unless you've been living under a rock, or perhaps were rolled up into a katamari ball yourself, then you're well aware of the phenomenon simply known as *Katamari*. This portable installment, *Me and My Katamari*, finds the Prince in the midst of a royal vacation, rolling up as many objects as possible to help create new islands on Earth for needy animals.

As you might expect, the trademark humor and outright zaniness of the PlayStation 2 classics are all accounted for. Long-time fans will be happy to know that the much-beloved soundtrack is back on course after the slightly disappointing last effort. At times, I found myself tapping my foot along to the BGM without even realizing it.

Katamari is a great choice for the PSP because of its bright, hypnotic graphics and its balanced pick-up-and-play level design. The levels are huge and detailed where you could spend hours trying to roll up the perfect katamari, or you can simply stop after a try or two and move on. That's the beauty and genius of the *Katamari* series. It is as rewarding as you want it to be, and doesn't exclude any type of gamer, no matter what their level of commitment is. The multiplayer versus mode is also a lot of fun, and finally adds the joy of competitive smack talk to an otherwise harmless game.

Just to be clear, *Me and My Katamari* is not a port. It is made up of entirely new levels, and an all-new interface. You'll visit many different locations that



will get the more creative types salivating at first glance. New characters were also created exclusively for the PSP and will give you your first chance at meeting more members from the wackiest, dysfunctional family from outer space. If that's not enough, you'll also have the chance to find treasures along the way that unlock new accessories to dress up the Prince with. How could you not take the Prince seriously when he's rolling a katamari ball with a flower on his head?

The only real complaint here is that the controls are quite a bit more complex than they probably need to be. If you're gaming on the go, the simpler the interface, the better. With so many button combinations to memorize, each not all that different from the last, it's easy to get frustrated while you play. Why should *Katamari* be more cumbersome to play than *Twisted Metal*?

With such a small selection of puzzlers available for the PSP, *Katamari* is without question a must-have for anyone that likes a bit more cerebral interaction with their system. It's perfectly accessible for both the hardcore and newbies alike, but heed just one small warning: patience is a virtue, and throwing your PSP in anger will cost you \$250.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
3.75 of 5

2nd opinion by [honestgamer](#) • **Alternate Rating :** 4 of 5

Everything about this release is familiar, and that's a mostly good thing. The quirky music is here and so are the odd controls, despite the missing second stick. Maybe someone used it to make a planet.



Viewtiful Joe Red Hot Rumble

Review by **Frag Hag**



Publisher : Capcom
Developer : Clover Studio
Release Date : 3/28/2006
Rating : TEEN; Cartoon Violence, Suggestive Themes

Genre(s) : Action
Category : Free For All
of players : 1-4

Wanna break into showbiz? Capcom's got you an audition with *Viewtiful Joe Red Hot Rumble*! The game begins with Captain Blue's retirement from acting. This aging super hero has decided to direct, but is unsure who to cast as his lead. Thankfully, he has no shortage of would be hopefuls from which to choose.

While some characters are just plain better to play with than others, there is a wide selection of playable fighters in the roster. Anxious for stardom, much of the old cast, including Joe, Silvia and Alastor, step up to strut their stuff. The surprising presence of *Devil May Cry's* Dante (a PSP exclusive) seems like unfair competition for the rest of the young stars-to-be. Captain Blue chooses to hold auditions by pitting potential stars against each other in battles that progress through popular movies.

Capcom has included a trial mode to the game, which is a collection of mini-games featuring *Viewtiful* characters. Multiplayer is a major aspect of this game, and one that I'm happy to say is smooth and fairly flawless. Similar to their upcoming *Power Stone Collection* on the PSP, *Red Hot Rumble* supports Ad Hoc play and game sharing, but does not support online play.

Despite efforts to appear otherwise, *Red Hot Rumble* isn't incredibly story driven. The plot is less-than-paper-thin until about the third movie into the game when Captain Blue passes out because of a "cursed megaphone." Even from then on, the plot is hard to follow and actually disappears from time to time... but who cares!? This is *Super Smash Bros.* type fun. Who needs a story, right?

Despite the lack of plot, the PSP version of the game is an

entertaining and fast paced button masher. This sometimes causes the screen to get a bit chaotic, although not quite as crazy as in the GameCube version. The widescreen of the handheld opens the environment a bit for elbowroom. The graphics are an ADD kid's (such as myself) dream because there is so much (too much?) on the screen. What is lost in the chaos is made up for by the simplicity of the controls. Moves are easy and fun to execute, and as always, there is a plethora of cool powers. Slow down time, turn into a fireball of death, or even teleport—it's all there for your enjoyment.

Overall, *Viewtiful Joe Red Hot Rumble* is a taste of what you love about the series on the PSP. Sure, the plot is weak and gameplay chaotic. Sure, the controls may be too simple for more advanced players. Sure, it's no *Super Smash Bros.* But, if you are looking for a fun, cartoony button masher driven by an unrelenting pace, *Red Hot Rumble* delivers.

Rating :
 3 of 5



FINAL SCORE :
3 of 5

2nd opinion by [Roger Danish](#) • **Alternate Rating :** 3 of 5

Like its console cousins, *VJRHR* is a frenetic fighter, but it's also shallow. I prefer this series as a side-scrolling beat-'em-up.





Publisher : Atari
Developer : Deep Red
Release Date : 02/21/06
Rating : "T" for Teen

Genre(s) : Simulation
Category : City Building
of players : 1

Tycoon City: New York may at first glance look like another *SimCity* clone. You're given a vast amount of money, and if you invest it wisely as you work to build up an empty New York City, you'll get to make, well, even more money. Unlike *SimCity* and its like, though, *Tycoon City* focuses on the business end of things. All those petty government matters like electricity and internal plumbing are taken care of automatically, which lets you run free to build the city as you like and rake in immediate profits from the consumers.

These consumers are active and thriving. The game allows you to zoom in and follow a single pedestrian going about his day, and you can read his thoughts to find out what he thinks of the places he's visited. Occasionally, you may be given specific tasks to please specific groups of people. Completing these tasks will unlock new kinds of buildings, and give you points you can use to build landmarks and upgrade your existing buildings. Upgrades improve customer satisfaction and sphere of influence at the chosen location, which will help your businesses to succeed over those of your competitors.

Unfortunately, the end result of all this is rather shallow. Your competition is weak, and the fact that building and upgrading pull from different pools means there's little compromise necessary between expansionism and perfectionism. With so few factors requiring careful balance, there's not much you can do wrong unless you just walk away from the keyboard or intentionally build businesses in poor locations. The game's Sandbox Mode is more fun, as it eliminates the competition and restrictions and simply lets you build your own New York City in gorgeous and gloriously customizable 3D.

The interface is intriguing and intuitive, but its execution is clunky. You can click to select a certain point on the map, then



move the mouse to rotate around that point, or zoom in and out using the scroll wheel. It could have used more fine-tuning in the beta stages, though; often you'll end up being unable to click on a target, only to discover that you're technically still behind another building. Though the game provides you with a number of useful map filters, there's no way you can identify buildings from a distance without being forced to click on each of them in turn.

On top of all this, the game eats up an awful lot of memory while running; though the game recommends having 512 MB of memory, I was experiencing slowdown issues with 1 GB of memory after just an hour of intensive play.

If you can get past the gameplay issues, *Tycoon City* is a pretty fun timewaster, but the game's unrealized potential is vast. I look forward to the inevitable sequels building on the foundation of what the engine has to offer, but this game, as it is, is just too much work with too little reward.

Rating : 2.5 of 5



2nd opinion by Metalbolt • Alternate Rating : 2.5 of 5

Tycoon City is too simple and shallow to please long time sim fans. However, because of its simplicity, and an odd attempt to be culturally hip, it may convert some new players.



It's tempting to speculate on just what Groove Games was hoping to accomplish here. Nobody just makes this thorough of a ripoff of *Unreal Tournament* by accident.

Warpath is a first-person shooter set during a war on three fronts. The ancient and honorable House of Kovos has protected the one resource-rich planet in the Kaladi system for centuries. Now, the Ohm, biomechanical warriors, have landed on the planet to take it over and suck it dry. At the same time, the Human Coalition has landed on the planet, completely unaware that they're standing on what's about to become the battleground for the Trinity Wars.

It's not the worst plot I've ever heard, but it's where *Warpath's* problems start. Like most of the rest of the game, it's phoned in.

The singleplayer mode is just the multiplayer mode with bots, with "levels" laid out in a hexagonal grid. Which level you choose to complete determines which of *Warpath's* six weapons—machine gun, plasma rifle, rocket launcher, sniper rifle, grenade launcher, or shotgun—you unlock next. Each faction starts with two, and you can unlock the other four by taking on twenty-minute team deathmatches, CTF levels, and Front Line Assault, which is your basic "destroy the generators" kind of match.

When you sign onto Xbox Live, *Warpath* becomes the same thing, only moreso. You don't have to worry about what faction you're in, all six weapons are unlocked, and you have four gametypes to play with. The gametypes are classics and there are plenty of different kinds of maps, but unless you are a complete and total newbie, you've played all of this before twice. Being able to customize your weaponry is cool, and the game is smooth, but

2nd opinion by Shoegazer • Alternate Rating : 1.5 of 5

A budget title in every sense, this is a poor man's *Unreal Championship*. It's so sloppy, rehashed, and full of moronic AI that it should come with an apology.



Publisher : Groove Games
Developer : Groove Games
Release Date : 3/28/2006
Rating : MATURE; Fantasy Violence

Genre(s) : FPS
Category : We Hate and Wish To Kill Blue Team
of players : 1-8

it's very familiar stuff.

Now, to be fair, *Warpath* looks and plays surprisingly well, for what it is. With smooth animation, nice-looking weapons, the Havok 2.0 physics engine, and well-drawn backgrounds, this at least looks like a quality production. The character and level design are a touch generic, but that's the kind of thing you forget in the heat of the action.

I don't doubt *Warpath* will pick up a few fans. It's not an inherently bad game, and the PC version will probably get a lot of mileage out of its mod community.

It is, however, uninspired as hell; with a bad case of Every-Other-Shooter-itis. It doesn't have a big hook, some innovative feature, or a storyline to follow; it's just kind of there.

Rating : 3 of 5



FINAL SCORE :
2.25 of 5

COMMANDOS STRIKE FORCE



Review by Racewing

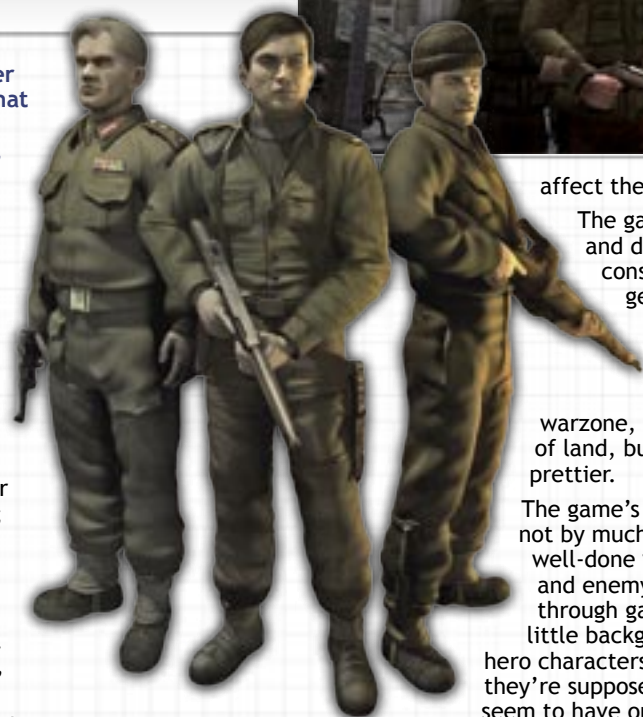
Publisher : Eidos
Developer : Pyro Software
Release Date : 3/17/06
Rating : "T" for Teen

Genre(s) : World War II
Category : Yes, Again
of players : 1-16

PlayStation-2

XBOX

PC



Commandos: Strike Force isn't Just Another World War II Game... or at least, that's what Eidos would like you to think. Instead of leading random squads into killing sprees, you follow and take on the roles of three characters, each with their own special operations capabilities. One's a sniper, specializing in stealth kills. Another is a Green Beret, able to both take and dish out heavy fire. The final is a spy, who specializes in covert killing, infiltration, and disguise. Each of these characters is a blatant, overblown stereotype, which gives the game a sort of cheesy charm.

A few stages into to the game, I checked the instruction booklet to see if there was a way to play a cooperative multiplayer campaign, preferably by LAN. I found none; with that option goes most of the positive points that this game could have had. See, much of the game requires you to control two, or all three characters at once, switching off between them. As you control one, the other two just sort of... stay there, oblivious to the world around them.

With all of the rampant switching you'll be doing, you never truly feel as if you're in complete control of your elite team. It doesn't help that controls for each individual specialist fall below expectations. While the sniper is fairly straightforward, the Green Beret's shooting sequences are tough to get a handle on if you want to hit anything further away than five feet. Meanwhile, the stealth routines powering the spy character... well, there are none. You just sort of put on a disguise and hope for the best. Maybe it will work this time; maybe it won't. These snags will

affect the multiplayer, too. Have fun.

The game is powered by Renderware, and does its absolute best to constantly remind you of this, with generic textures and character models, and sparse animations.

This can be excused due to the fact that you're often in the middle of a populated warzone, which involves large expanses of land, but excuses don't make it any prettier.

The game's a bit better on the ears, though not by much. On the one hand, we have well-done voice cues on the part of allied and enemy soldiers, which help guide you through gameplay. On the other, there's little background music that matters, the hero characters talk to themselves (even when they're supposed to be stealthy), and they only seem to have one line each.

With a bit more polish and better design choices, *Commandos* could have been the game to turn the World War II genre (yes, as sad as it is, WWII has had enough games to be labeled its own genre) on its ear. Instead, it ends up a forgettably average entry into the crowded set, with gameplay that has its moments, but will ultimately make you cringe at all of its holes and missed potential.

Rating: 2.5 of 5

2nd opinion by 4thletter • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

Commandos is not a bad game, but it also isn't quite good enough to distinguish itself from its brethren. If you really, really need a WWII fix, try it out.



PLATFORM

PC



Buccaneer's Bounty is a collection of three lesser-known maritime simulations by German developer Ascaron Entertainment: *Tortuga*, *Port Royale 2* and *Patrician 3*. Despite the convenience of the numbers and their similar interfaces, each game is actually from its own series, with individual gameplay appropriate for a wide variety of strategy tastes.

Tortuga is the simplest of the three. It's your basic Caribbean pirate simulator: gather crew, trade between towns, battle pirates, and curry favor with regional governors. Yes, it's practically a copy of *Pirates!* in many ways, but that's hardly to the game's fault. The graphics aren't as nice as its more famous older brother; on the other hand, it does offer a very easy-to-use interface based around the mouse (nice for us people on laptops), and a complex supply/demand ratio that makes the trading aspect of the game a lot more fun. The option of sixteen different playable scenarios gives the game some welcome variety and a comfortable difficulty curve.

Port Royale 2 is a sequel to a different game, but for purposes of this set, it plays like an expanded form of *Tortuga*. The setting is identical and the controls are also familiar, right down to identical trading lists in towns. Rather than putting you in the part of a lone captain venturing through pirate-infested waters, though, *Port Royale 2* gives you loftier goals to achieve. As an ambitious trader in the 17th century, you'll find yourself with multiple fleets to manage rather than a single trading convoy. As you gradually acquire more prestige (and money), you'll be able to establish automatic trade routes to help you manage your trade empire.

On top of the complex shipping scenarios, *Port Royale 2* lets you have

2nd opinion by Metalbolt • Alternate Rating : 4 of 5

Avast me mateys! If tradin', plunderin' and booty be yer thing, then this here three-pack be the romp ye been lookin' for! ARR! (Editor's Note: Don't worry. We'll beat him up for you.)



FINAL SCORE :

4 of 5

Buccaneer's BOUNTY



Review by KouAidou

Publisher : Cinemaware Marquee
Developer : Ascaron Entertainment
Release Date : 3/6/2006
Rating : TEEN

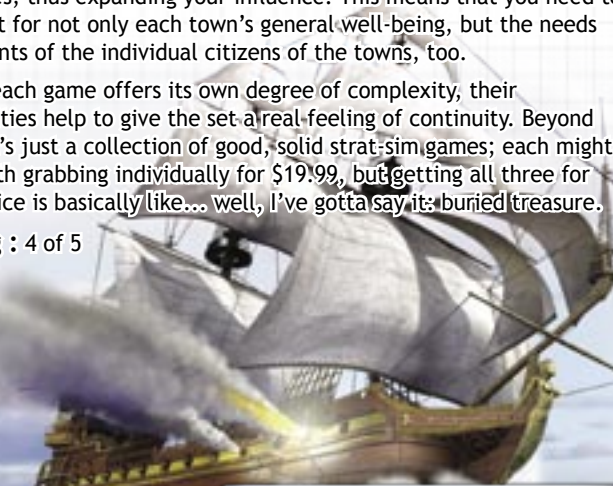
Genre(s) : Strategy Compilation
Category : Trading, Pirates
of players : 1

even more control over your situation: once you get enough sway in a given town (usually by providing them with goods that they need when they need them), you can buy a building permit there. This allows you to start building plantations and factories, hiring workers, and creating raw and finished products to directly manipulate the supply and demand of various towns. That one little mechanic vastly changes the feel of the game, giving you a lot more control over the setting without resorting to hair-pulling complexity.

The last game in the set, *Patrician 3*, is the most ambitious of the lot, and as a refreshing change of pace, it moves the setting moves from the New World back to Old Europe near the end of the Middle Ages. Gameplay is another step up from *Port Royale 2*, with even more emphasis placed on the management of towns; your goal is to use your position as a prosperous merchant to pave your way to electoral victories, thus expanding your influence. This means that you need to account for not only each town's general well-being, but the needs and wants of the individual citizens of the towns, too.

While each game offers its own degree of complexity, their similarities help to give the set a real feeling of continuity. Beyond that, it's just a collection of good, solid strat-sim games; each might be worth grabbing individually for \$19.99, but getting all three for that price is basically like... well, I've gotta say it: buried treasure.


Rating : 4 of 5



REVIEW

BLAZING ANGELS

★★ SQUADRONS OF WWII ★★



Review by 4thletter

Publisher : Ubisoft
Developer : Ubisoft Romania
Release Date : 03/06
Rating : "T" for Teen

Genre(s) : Aerial Combat
Category : World War II
of players : 1-16

World War II has been pretty effectively strip-mined, thanks almost entirely to the FPS genre. There are still a few more fronts to experience, and *Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII* is here to blaze trails.

Take the fast-paced ground combat of your average WWII game and shift it thirty thousand feet into the air. That's the basic conceit behind *Blazing Angels*. It's fairly easy-going up to and until the point that you realize you've got roughly thirty seconds left before London is razed and there's two bogies on your tail, with no apparent way out.

Blazing Angels is quite linear. You'll be shuffled through its eighteen stages with no room for deviation, but this doesn't prevent the game from putting you into some impressive and intense situations. A cynic might say that all the missions consist of "Shoot these guys down, wait, bomb this, then shoot some more," but that's just scratching the surface. You're going to be pitted against everything from other airplanes to AA guns to Nazi convoys. Missions range from the usual run-n-gun, to protecting an area or group of infantry, to photographing shots of Rommel's army in North Africa.

The actual engine of the game is tight and responsive, allowing you to pull off a number of neat, death-defying stunts in order to maneuver behind someone and blow them out of the sky. It isn't as easy as it sounds. Your foes are smart and have every skill that you do. You can issue commands to your wingmen to back you up, but you are the star of this game. You're going to have to outwit and outgun the Nazis



before they take you down. It's fun, and you'll be short of breath before you know it.

Beyond the Campaign mode, there's a decent variety of minigames and bonuses. There's over forty planes for you to tool around in, plus Bombing runs and Dogfight duels. Your performance on each stage of Campaign mode is graded, and you're given a rank based on your performance when you're done. Your wingmen and enemies chatter often, and while there are a few repeats, it's interesting and informative enough to be fairly cool. Each wingman has a distinct personality, even if they fall a little too easily into familiar stereotypes.

The graphics are good, no matter which version of the game you play. You can fly in low to the ground or skim the top of the water all you want to with nary a hitch in sight. Each town is well-detailed, and the damage models on certain constructs are very cool.

Blazing Angels is simply well-crafted and tons of fun. There's plenty of missions to keep you busy, and challenging AI to keep you interested. It's well worth a look.

Rating : 4 of 5

2nd opinion by Roger Danish • Alternate Rating : 4 of 5

Even with a few stutters here and there, Ubisoft continues to surprise and delight. *Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII* is a great aerial combat game that plays as good as it looks.



Imagine being the brother of the kid everyone loved in your family. You didn't make the straight As, you didn't have the prom queen girlfriend (and later, wife), and you definitely didn't have the extremely detailed, incredibly lit graphics like your older brother. Now you know how the vanilla Xbox version of *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* feels. If you have the option to play the Xbox 360 version, do so. If not, let's chat.

Hype kills. This is gospel truth. Do not come into this version of the game expecting the same graphics that you've seen on display since E3 last year. Those were all 360 hype videos. The basic underlying ideas behind the newest iteration in the *Ghost Recon* series are still in effect, and the Cross-Com has made the transition to current gen mostly intact. The sweet picture-in-picture display has been scaled back, though. The resolution and framerate on it has been limited so as to not bog the Xbox down. You can still command your crew via the Cross-Com, but the drone functionality has been limited. It's much more automated now, and you can't exactly send it willy-nilly all over the tactical map any more.

There's a few more things that are worrying. You're locked in first person, you only have one (slightly stupid) AI teammate, ducking has been awkwardly added to the Cover button, the framerate tends to chug, sniping is a chore thanks in part to the lack of a prone stance, and the textures are pretty much disappointing in general.

It's tough to fairly judge the graphics after the Xbox 360 version has been thrown at us for nearly a year straight now, but it just doesn't

2nd opinion by Shoegazer • Alternate Rating : 2.5 of 5

This has most of the functionality of its next-gen cousin, with none of the panache. The series, once again, relies on its multiplayer options to give you any bang for your buck.



REVIEW

Tom Clancy's GHOST RECON

ADVANCED WARFIGHTER



Review by 4thletter

Publisher : UbiSoft
Developer : UbiSoft Shanghai
Release Date : 3/8/2006
Rating : TEEN; Blood, Mild Language, Violence

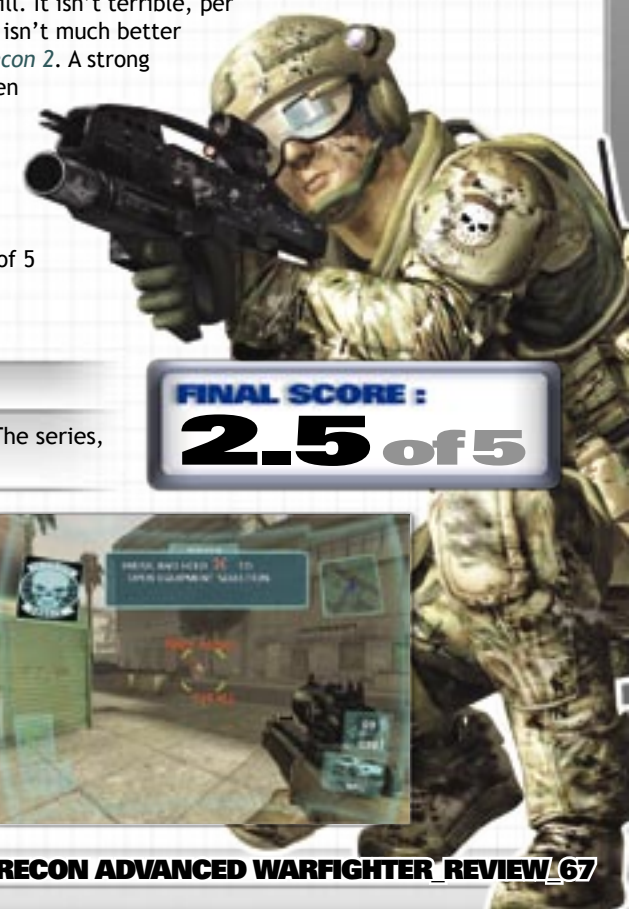
Genre(s) : Third-Person Action
Category : Tactical
of players : 1-16

work. The graphics are bland. Riding in the chopper over the streets of Mexico City wasn't awe-inspiring the way it should be. It just looks... blah. There's tons of buildings, but they're all brownish and dry-looking. If it's not visually interesting, then you're going to be bored as you run down alleys and streets that don't keep you engaged. You'll just be chasing around drab, prescient enemies through similarly drab streets.

The enemy AI is very eagle-eyed. You can pop someone with the sniper rifle (assuming you can adjust for aim drift) from a distance and they'll still zero in on you with a quickness. This apparently psychic ability is mitigated by the fact that they'll eagerly run into your gunfire and fall down dead without firing a shot. Just for an easy demonstration, check out the first enemy contact you have once you get your squadmate. The baddies will run in circles and into each other like *Three Stooges* extras while you shoot them full of holes.

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter has big shoes to fill and doesn't quite fit the bill. It isn't terrible, per se, but it also isn't much better than *Ghost Recon 2*. A strong case could even be made for *GR2* being the better game overall.

Rating : 2.5 of 5



FINAL SCORE : 2.5 of 5

NEIGHBORS FROM HELL

ON VACATION



Review by James

PC

Publisher : Cinemaware
Developer : Jowood Productions
Release Date : 03/25/06
Rating : "T" for Teen

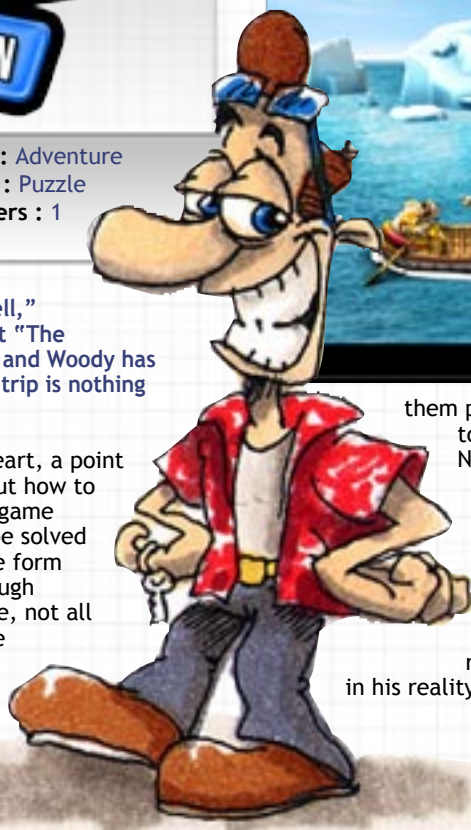
Genre(s) : Adventure
Category : Puzzle
of players : 1

The wacky reality tv show, "Neighbors From Hell," is taking a holiday! The Neighbor (no name, just "The Neighbor") is touring China, India, and Mexico, and Woody has tagged along to make sure that the cruel slob's trip is nothing but misery.

Neighbors from Hell 2: On Vacation is, at its heart, a point & click puzzle game. Search for item, figure out how to get item, use item, repeat. Each level of the game has a certain amount of puzzles that have to be solved before progressing to the next area, taking the form of practical jokes played on the Neighbor. Though there are a certain number of pranks per scene, not all of them have to be performed to complete the level... but what fun is that?

Each level of the game is between four and five "rooms" large, and it's important to keep Woody in a different area than the Neighbor. Being caught results in a thorough beating for Woody, although it might not prevent a perfect run-through of the level. Fortunately, Woody can run around independent of the camera, so it's easy to keep track of the Neighbor's route (which he'll follow like clockwork the whole level) while taking care of things. Of course, once Neighbor's Mom is introduced, the timing gets a whole lot trickier because she's as prone to violence as her son.

While solving the puzzles is fun enough, *NfH2* is never more than somewhat entertaining. Most of the pranks are pretty obvious, and the humor from torturing a pathetic, mean-spirited slob wears thin pretty fast. It's more fun to set up the gags than watch



them play out. The real challenge comes from trying to put together a perfect run, with the Neighbor getting angrier and angrier with every pratfall until the final gag makes him blow his top.

Unfortunately, the game never explains how Woody is better than the Neighbor. While it's true that the Neighbor is a dick, Woody doesn't come out smelling like a rose either. He's torturing the guy for ratings in his reality tv show, after all.

On the plus side, *NfH2* runs very smoothly. Its 2D presentation lets levels load up fast, and everything is well animated. The activation area over a usable item is usually a fair size as well, so the bane of the puzzle game, pixel hunting, doesn't rear its ugly head more than a time or two. As an added bonus, the original *Neighbors From Hell* is included on the CD.

So *Neighbors from Hell 2* ends up being little more than competent. Most of the appeal is in the humor, while the game itself is pretty easy and short. Its humor isn't funny enough and the puzzles aren't tricky enough to really recommend it, but it isn't actually bad either. It's the perfect definition of the 3 rating.

Rating : 3 of 5

2nd opinion by JPeebles • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

I love the unique premise, but the humor isn't funny enough to carry it. If you love oddball humor and point-and-click games, try it. Otherwise, you aren't missing a thing.



PLATFORM

PlayStation 2

ATELIER IRIS 2

THE AZOTH OF DESTINY



Review by Lynxara

Publisher : NIS America
Developer : Gust
Release Date : 4/25/2006
Rating : E10+

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Stuff Makin', Cute Things
of players : 1



The original *Atelier Iris* was an odd title that turned into an unexpectedly big cult hit, featuring high-res 2D graphics, a quirky sense of humor, and fundamentally strange gameplay. *Atelier Iris 2* goes out of its way to try to address the original title's flaws while still maintaining the same feel to the gameplay. Gust's efforts here achieve mixed results, fixing many old problems while introducing new ones. *Atelier Iris 2* is a game that fans of the original will love, but it's not as good a game as it should be.

The story follows two protagonists, Felt and Viese, who are working together to try and fend off your usual impending RPG disaster. Felt wields a magic sword called the Azure Azoth and fights bad guys in the wild world of Belkhyde, while Viese stays behind in the tranquil world of Eden to try and outthink the problem. The two characters share the same inventory, so Viese can make alchemical items for Felt to use while Felt can help her find ingredients. The dual-protagonist mechanic works really well, keeping the game interesting by forcing you to juggle your adventuring and alchemy as you go.

The alchemical system returns from *Atelier Iris* with a significant overhaul. Now you must obtain recipes for alchemy items before synthesizing, in addition to requiring ingredients and Mana. The first game's ill-conceived Weapon Synthesis is replaced outright, with a new system that lets Felt improve weapons by forging alchemical items into them. When you forge or otherwise combine items in *Atelier Iris 2*, they pass their Review Properties along to the result, which can change the way the newly-made item behaves. This lets you begin precisely customizing all of your alchemical creations as well as your weapons very early in the game.

Combat is *Atelier Iris 2*'s big trouble spot. It uses the first game's battle system, with an altered skill system and a *Grandia*-style initiative bar tacked on. Plays can now use Break Attacks to interrupt the enemy. Eventually you can dizzy a foe and have the whole party gang up on him to inflict chain combo damage. This sounds interesting, but in practice it becomes way too easy to infinitely juggle opponents once you start a combo. There are few enemies in the game that can make you think about your battle tactics, and basically no real challenges. It helps that the game now caps the number of random encounters you can have in each area, but combat still isn't as interesting as it should be.

It's a shame, because when it comes to everything *but* the battle system, *Atelier Iris 2* is a real advancement over the first game. The graphics are sharper, the world more beautiful, and the music is still extraordinary. Great little touches like the eccentricities of the characters and the original's weird sense of humor are still there. Yet, with a combat system that's so pitifully easy to abuse, it's hard to recommend it as anything more than a light diversion for hardcore 2D and RPG fans.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Wanderer • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

Atelier Iris 2 has great graphics, nice music, interesting if cliched characters, and no real challenges until you reach the final boss. Enh.



3.25 of 5

サムライチャンプルー SAMURAI CHAMPLOO チャップルー

Review by Lynxara

Publisher : Namco Bandai Games America
Developer : Bandai
Release Date : 04/11/06
Rating : Teen 13+

Genre(s) : Beat 'Em Up
Category : Hip-Hop
of players : 1



Samurai Champloo is based off of the stylish, highly acclaimed anime of the same name. The game attempts to capture the feel of an episode of the series, putting the show's protagonists—Mugen the wild swordsman and Jin the silent ronin—into a new storyline that takes place in north Japan. Female lead Fuu's also along for the trip... but this is an action game and she can't fight, so don't expect to see much of her.

Champloo is a great anime, but the game is a near-complete misfire. It struggles to try and capture what makes the show's action sequences unique—the blend of frenetic action and hip-hop rhythm—but just falls short of the mark. The game ends being sort of a generic beat 'em up, complete with simplistic combo chains, a counter system, and frenzied super-attack modes. There's sort of an interesting "rhythm track" mechanic that lets you change the music you fight to and your combo chains along with it, but it makes very little difference in practice. If you bother to exploit the game's combat engine, you can enter special gameplay modes like Tate and Trance that let you unlock the usual sorts of bonuses for racking up big kills. Still, these special modes are really just excuses to flog different buttons as fast as you can. Combat in *Samurai Champloo* gets really boring, really fast, so of course there's tons of long levels full of infinitely spawning identical mooks to mow down.



Still, at least the combat is functional. Everything else in the game fails in truly spectacular fashion. Environments are usually empty and repetitive. Textures and rendering, especially in the cut-scenes, could only have been impressive during the dying days of the PlayStation. The difficulty level is miserably low, and you can play the game for hours on end

and hear as many as three songs in that time. The storyline is positively insipid in comparison to anything that went on in the *Champloo* series, and impossible to believe as some kind of playable "lost episode." The voice actors from the *Champloo* dub show up and doggedly perform as their characters for the game, but the script is so weak they can't really add much to the proceedings. There's just not anything about the game that works.

Of course, *Samurai Champloo* isn't a license you'll get good games out of easily, simply because the show is so strange. A good game could've played around with that fundamental strangeness to produce something weird and wonderful. The *Samurai Champloo* game we got is absolutely bland and ugly in a way the anime never, ever was. Laziness is the hallmark of the game's design and presentation. That is perhaps the game's most serious failing. Save your money for DVDs and other merchandise, *Champloo* fans. It'd be absolutely wasted on this game.

Rating :
1.5 of 5



2nd opinion by 4thletter • Alternate Rating : 2 of 5

Take one of the best cartoons out, add cool style and no substance. Season lightly with mediocrity and watch as they keep on passin' you by.

FINAL SCORE :

1.75 of 5



So what was that big rackus about anyway?



HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE VOLUME 11 ISSUE 11 GIRL POWER

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Reviews by Mogis

Nyko
Theatre Experience

Battery/Sound System
System: PSP
Price: \$79.99

Features
Adds 7 hours of playtime
High fidelity speakers
Form-fitted neoprene lining

Sony's UMD cartridges are great for watching movies on the go, but they leave you high and dry when you want to kick back and enjoy them at home. Nyko's Theatre Experience helps to solve this problem, and makes watching movies on the PSP a whole lot more enjoyable.

The Theatre Experience is encased in a sturdy aluminum shell that will safely usher your PSP from place to place. When the unit opens up, a PSP can slide into the collapsible stand, where it's held at an ideal angle for viewing. Placed behind the system are two quality speakers that spit out a loud, rich sound. There's even an internal battery that adds seven hours of extra playtime.

While it isn't going to make watching movies on a television obsolete in the near future, the Theatre Experience is a great product for anyone trying to get the most out of their PSP.

Nyko
Charger Grip

Battery
System: PSP
Price: \$29.99

Features
Analog triggers and joysticks
Vibration Feedback technology

Combining two totally different functions into a single product is always risky business. This practice has been known to revolutionize entire industries, but also causes a lot of products to fall flat. Nyko's charger grip, which mashes together a lithium ion battery and a set of gaming handles, falls into the latter category.

The battery part of the combo works well, and adds up to five hours of extra playtime. What bogs down the whole experience are the grips, which feel flimsy when locked onto the PSP. To make matters worse, you can't switch between games while the grips are attached. If you're looking for an extended battery, go for a standalone model, because the Charger Grip just doesn't cut it.

GameStop
Wired Controller

Controller
System: XBOX 360
Price: \$24.99

Features
Adds 5 hours of playtime
Ergonomic Design
Clip-on Installation

Lately GameStop has been dabbling in the console accessories market. Their most recent offering is an Xbox 360 controller that apes Microsoft's first-party design. The color scheme and button layout are nearly identical, but the real difference seems to be the quality of materials used. The controller is constructed with a cheaper looking plastic, and the buttons don't feel very sturdy.

That isn't to say it's a bad controller, because it plays pretty well. It's also relatively cheap, and will save you a small fortune if you're trying to fill all of the Xbox 360's controller ports. Just realize that if you're looking for quality, there are better options out there.

Phillips Consumer Electronics
Samurai Freak Pad (Series Two)

Controller
System: Playstation 2
Price: \$19.99

Features
Pressure-sensitive analog stick
Eight-way pressure sensitive analog pad
Dual vibration feedback

There are a lot of different PS2 controllers on the market, but it's safe to say that none of them are like the Samurai Freak Pad. The controller has a similar shape and button layout to the Dual Shock, but its casing is sculpted and painted to look like an undead samurai warrior. First and foremost, the Freak Pad is about style. The skull's eyes glow bright green when the power is turned on, and function as select and start buttons. The other buttons are emblazoned with Japanese lettering, and there's even a removable samurai mask that fits on the skull's face for the sole purpose of looking cool. While the Freak Pad plays well enough, it's not the most comfortable controller out there. But if you collect unique and interesting game accessories, they don't come much weirder than this. If nothing else it'll look great on the shelf next to your Hori Slime controller.



Gel Tabz
Gel Tabz

Crotroller Grips
System: Xbox 360, Xbox, PS2
Price: \$5.99

Features
Installs in seconds
No adhesive necessary
Gel Cushioning

These days, gamers don't pay much attention to the grips that come pre-installed on their analog control sticks. The makers of Gel Tabz want to change this, and are attempting to up the ante of first-party controllers in terms of both comfort and control. They've largely succeeded here, considering that the Tabz are made out of a soft material that feels great on the thumbs. They grab your fingers much better than any standard grip, and make controlling feel more responsive. The biggest flaw applies to the PS2 Tabz, which will only fit after ripping off the Dual Shock's factory grips. This isn't too big of a deal, but requires a little more commitment than its Xbox cousins. Still, if you've ever found yourself wanting more out of your controller's analog grips, then the Gel Tabz are a solid buy.



Pelican
Dance Drum

Music Peripheral
System: PS2
Price: \$19.99

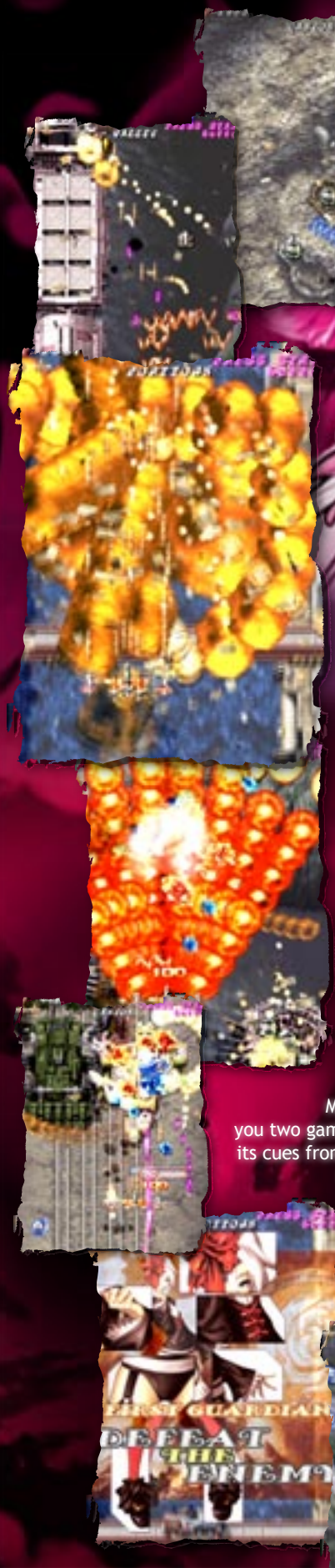
Features
Reinforced and durable surface
Non-skid bottom
Eight foot cable
Compatible with all PS2 rhythm games

Do you dream about playing *Dance Dance Revolution* games, but are held back by your two left feet? If so, then Pelican's Dance Drum is right up your alley. It allows you to experience *DDR*'s frantic gameplay without all the sweat and exhaustion of actually dancing.

The drum itself is a thin pad that rests easily on your lap, and comes with a sturdy pair of plastic drumsticks. Classic *DDR* arrows have been printed on the drum's face, and sensors beneath the surface accurately pick up any pressure that's applied to these areas.

The Drum is less physically demanding than a dance pad, but at the same time makes you feel a lot more involved than a regular controller would. If you're not a big dancer but want to see what all the fuss over *DDR* is about, then the Dance Drum is your best bet.





"We are going to make you beautiful."

Six sexy boss babes known as the "The Rose Sisters" have invaded the land of Edelweiss and taken over. Two "Negotiators," Bond and Dyne, are sent into their homeland guns-a-blazin'. They are charged with taking out each of these sisters one by one, using only the ships they're piloting and whatever weapons they can pick up along their way through six deadly stages. There, that's the story of *Ibara*. The End. Bam. Forever. Pretty typical, huh?

On the outside *Ibara* may *seem* like your typical shoot'em up, but in reality the system it employs for scoring is unlike any game previously released by Cave. Design-wise, *Ibara* is more like the spiritual sequel to Raizing's *Battle Garegga*. In fact, the head programmer of that game (Shinobu Yagawa) came over to Cave and headed up programming and design, creating a game with a system that is honestly pretty abusive. Like all shmups, *Ibara* is played by the way it scores: as your ranking goes up, the difficulty will increase. The better you do, the harder it gets. This actually makes dying a better strategy than trying to survive. Tactical deaths, in conjunction with medal chaining and boss milking, are how you're going to get a high score while keeping the game to a level that's possible for humans to play.

Many shooter fans bemoan the fact that the game isn't very "Cave-like," but the game actually offers you two gameplay choices: Arcade and Arrange. While Arcade is as described above, Arrange (taking most of its cues from the recently released arcade update *Ibara Kuro*, or *Black Label*) is more like a typical Cave shmup. You know the drill: The difficulty is more controllable (collecting roses lowers the difficulty), holding down the fire button makes your ship move slower, optional weapons and configurations, the scoring is different, masses of enemies, etc. While you're only given one credit, you can gain extends. Extends are more-or-less lives within that credit, and you gain one every ten million (as opposed to one million in arcade mode) points.

Publisher: Taito
Developer: Cave
Release Date: 02/23/06
Genre(s): Shmup!
Category: Explosions!
of Players: 1-2



Other options include everything a good shmup *should*. You can choose between Yoko and Tate L and R (Left and Right), so you can tilt the TV and play the game like the arcade original. Tate (tilting your tv) is actually preferred, since the scaling used to fit the entire game in the default Yoko mode makes the game pretty hard to see. Other than Yoko mode, the only other real problem with the game is the removal of the helpful slowdown. To

be honest, neither of these things ruin the game, and the port from arcade is really solid. Those who bring up the (minor) load times... well, they're just nitpicking.

In conclusion, this game is made of beautiful. It features old-school sprite graphics, solid gameplay, weird (and interesting) enemies, sexy bosses, a rocking announcer, and massive explosions. Seriously, every single thing in this game explodes: the enemies, the buildings, the greenhouses, and even the artsy nude statues.

While it's sometimes hard to follow what's going on, boy-oh-boy is it pretty. The character art (by Tomoyuki Kotani, oddly reminiscent of Kim Hyung-Tae) is fanservicey, but luckily doesn't break my personal mathematical equation stating that: One Breast > One Head = Fail. The soundtrack itself is also the best shooter soundtracks I've heard in a long time. Any soundtrack where you start nodding your head to a lot of the tunes is a good one, and one that can motivate you to play more is even better. Believe you me, it'll motivate you to play this game even as you die. Repeatedly.

(Oh, also, what's in the first paragraph really isn't the end of the story. You know, up there, where I put forever, then sound effects? Maypril Fools! Cave's actually gone as far as to give this game an expansive (and free) web manga which you can check out on their website: <http://www.cave.co.jp/webmanga/ibara/>. Even if you can't read Japanese, it's cool to look at the art.)

Worth Importing?

It's the usual logline! Are you into shmups? Are you into really hard shmups? Optionally, are you into dying a lot? If the answer's yes, you should try out *Ibara*. Otherwise, you may want to stick to something a mite easier.

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5





ZOMBIE vs. AMBULANCE



Review by Sardius

WORTH IMPORTING?

FINAL SCORE :

1 of 5



Super Robot Wars

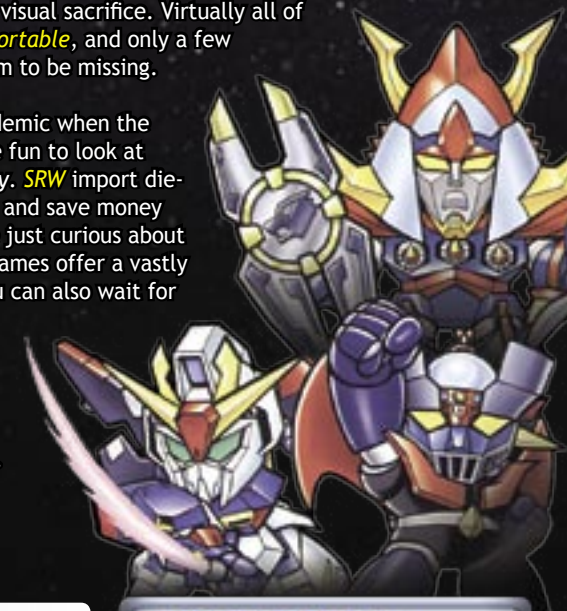
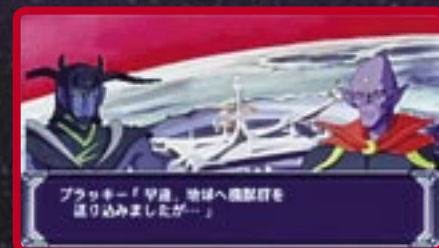
Review by Lynmara

Genre(s): Strategy RPG
Category: Tiny Anime Robots
of Players: 1

WORTH IMPORTING?

FINAL SCORE :

2 of 5



Fan art is all about giving exposure to aspiring artists who might not otherwise have a way to get their artie parts seen. If you are one such artist, point your web browser toward www.luv2game.com and check out the Fan Art section of our message boards. That is where you can post your arts to get them considered for this section. You may also email submissions to fart@hardcoregamer.com.

A few things to keep in mind: There is no deadline for submissions because we'll be doing this every issue. Keep it video game related, please. Only post drawings which you drewed yourownself. Don't expect drawings of nekkid people or any adults-only type stuff to make the cut. Keep it rated "Teen" or below. You are the copyright owner of your artwork as soon as your draw it whether you make note of that fact or not. However, in submitting your artwork to us, you give us permission to reprint your art and make fun of it if necessary.



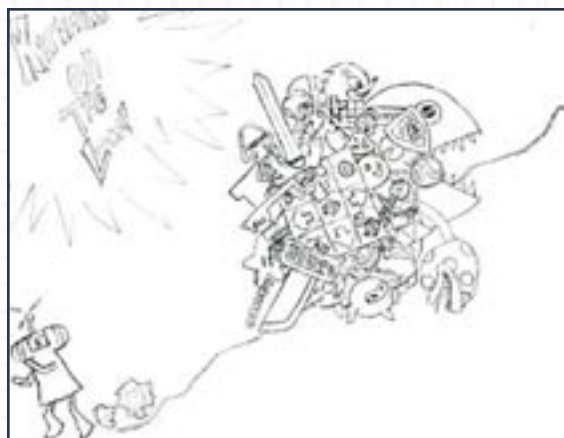
Title : Get Over Here!
Artist : Douglas De Guzman
Age : 23
Location : Las Vegas, NV



Title : Guitar Hero
Artist : getmeoutofjoli
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Joliet, IL



Title : Shooting Starfox
Artist : Mitchel Aselage
Age : 15
Location : Ft. Loramie, OH



Title : Katamari on the Loose
Artist : Bang Tran
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Hiram, GA



Title : Yang from SF3: 3S
Artist : Thomas Shin
Age : 24
Location : Simi Valley, CA



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IT'S A GUARANTEE

Not many people cosplay Ruby Heart from *Marvel Vs. Capcom 2*, and even less can say that they are the female equivalent of the Joker from *Batman*. (Sure, "Jokergirl" isn't from a game, but she's just so cool!)



by Metalbolt

Cosplayer:
Mandy Moore

Location:
Not far from Pittsburgh, PA

Website:
www.amazonmandy.com

Years cosplaying:
2.5

Next con(s):
Tekkoshoccon & Pittsburgh Comicon

Cos-play (kos-plä) v. A combination of the words costume and play. People known as "cosplayers" dress up as their favorite characters from anime movies, and video games.



Ruby Heart

Cost: \$53.00

Time: 4 weeks

HGM: What inspired you to cosplay Ruby Heart?

MM: She's a pirate girl. I so love me pirates!! ARRR!

HGM: How much sewing ability was required?

MM: More than I knew I had. I learned so much making the coat. I also ruined two hats to get that one right. I think it should have been bigger, but it works well!

HGM: What is your favorite thing about cosplaying?

MM: Meeting so many awesome new people and going to lots of conventions!

HGM: Your least favorite thing?

MM: Costuming elitists. To me, it should be a fun hobby that *anyone* can enjoy and be included in, without being made to feel bad for any reason. Some people just take themselves a little too seriously!

HGM: Yeah, no kidding. On your website you state that you don't like to show too much skin. What on earth, as a cosplaying female, possessed you to actually have some self respect and dignity?

MM: [laughs] I think there's enough girls out there passing on dignity for the wrong kinds of attention. I'll keep doing what I love for myself and people who enjoy it for what it is. There's always elsewhere for them to look if they need to see "more."

HGM: How true. Well, thanks for your time, and if we may so demand it: do some more gaming cosplay, please!



Photographer: Trevor Lindgren

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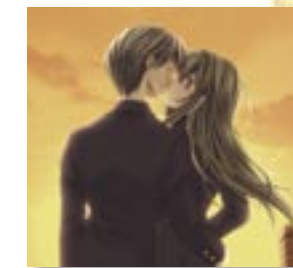
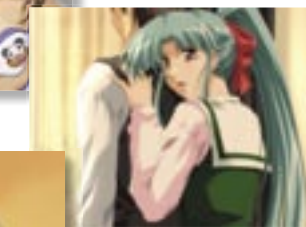
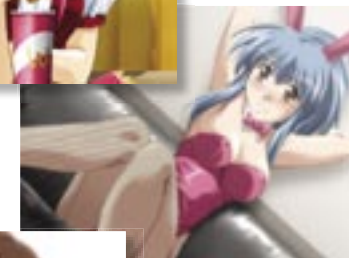


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