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Printed in the United States of America



DJPubba Tim Lindquist

We were going to start a videogame Wiki until it turned out that it was more like the Encyclopedia Crack-tannica than just a fan-made brain dump. Our writers were spending more time editing their favorite game entires than writing articles for the magazine.

Now playing: *Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin*, *WarioWare: Smooth Moves*



Wanderer Thomas Wilde

I'd write my bio, but I'm busy with the wiki. Come back next month.

Now Playing: *Dracula X: Chi no Rondo*, *Rogue Galaxy*, *Resistance: Fall of Man*



Lynxara Alicia Ashby

As far as "Top Chef" goes, I'm pulling for Elia and expect the final winner to actually be the strong, silent, and endlessly badass Sam. Also: we need a good strategy guide for wedding planning. Yeah, there are books out there, but all the advice they give is "grind for money." Christ, any idiot could come up with that. Maybe GameFAQs has something about it, maybe a good catering FAQ...

Now Playing: *Lost Planet*, *DDR Ultramix 4*, *Valhalla Knights*, *Wii Sports*



Racewing Geson Hatchett

Since I didn't get to attend last month's editor retro-party, my bosses asked me if I wanted to write the cover story for this issue. They then waited until I said "yes" before letting me know that there wasn't a single cute heroine to be found anywhere in the game I was covering. Those bastards! Ah, well. Enjoy the article. It's my first, and it's full of badass!

Now Playing: *God of War II*, *Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney: Justice For All*, *Zelda: Twilight Princess*.



Shoegazer Dave Hulegaard

After an excruciating holiday season, I decided that I needed a break from games and instead spent most of my free time watching the first four seasons of "Scrubs" on DVD. Once that was completed, I moved on to massive over-spending on my iTunes account. Hmm... wasn't taking a break from gaming supposed to save me money?

Now Playing: Nothing (Multiplatform)



KouAidou Elizabeth Ellis

Sometimes I feel like my brain is just a series of on/off switches that flip at random. Right now, drawing is "on;" martial arts is "on;" writing is "off;" translating is "off;" internal ranting about artists I hate is "on" (with a passion!); adventure games is "on;" strategy games is "off;" proofing is "on;" controlling my sleep schedule is "off." Some day I'll actually learn to control these switches, and it'll be a better day for everyone.

Now Playing: *King's Quest Anthology*



Roger Danish Greg Off

I'm just wondering when the Roger Danish Wiki will be up!!! There are volumes of info that need to be chronicled, categorized, and spread to the masses like a bad case of the shingles. Will someone take up the charge, or will the story of the Danish go untold for decades to come?

Now playing: *God of War II*, *Monster Madness: Battle For Suburbia*, *Motorstorm*



4thletter David Brothers

Paul Pope's *Batman: Year 100* dropped in trade format recently, and it is even better on a reread. It's pure, distilled Batman. What's more, he's also doing a 12-page story in *Fantastic Four* #543, and he's putting the touches on *Pulphope*, his art and sketchbook. Check out his blog at <http://pulphope.blogspot.com/> for some sweet art, and check out my blog at <http://www.4thletter.net> for some sweet words.



James James Cunningham

Tired of the same old thing, my brain demanded something new and unknown the other day. Picking a TV show compendium at semi-random, I watched all 13 episodes of "Wonderfalls" for a week. Though I'm glad I did, it's frustrating to see something this good fail so miserably with the public. "Wonderfalls" suffered a bad case of *Beyond Good & Evil Syndrome*, except that all of its storylines wrap up at the end.

Now Playing: *Wario Ware: Smooth Moves*, *Elebits*, *Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin*, *Rhythm Tengoku*



HonestGamer Jason Venter

I'm a few years behind all of this, but I blame all the DVD releases because without them I wouldn't know that. Buffy is hot, "Seinfeld" doesn't have a bad episode, Leah Remini is a goddess and Bruce Willis was really funny back when he had hair and wasn't bitter. Some people torrent. I go to Best Buy.

Now Playing: *Valhalla Knights*



Hitoshura Iaian Ross

I laugh off claims people have that "such and such a thing is just like *Star Wars*," because I can't stand *Star Wars* geeks. However, *FFXII* has made me eat those words in every conceivable way. I'm even doing what I do while watching a *Star Wars* film as I fight Yiazmat: lying back in a chair and watching this protracted computer-generated fight scene play out.

Now Playing: *Final Fantasy XII*



Sartius Danny Cowan

So hey guys, did you catch the season premiere of "24?" Holy crap. Jack Bauer totally bit that dude's neck off! That and Kal Penn's quick death (thank God he didn't stick around long) already make this season awesome. Now they just need to bring back Crazy First Lady and we'll really be in business.

Now Playing: *Lumines II*, *DJ Max Portable*, *Fun! Fun! Pingu*, *Urban Champion*



Wolfie Terry Wolfinger

I picked up my copy of the *Warcraft* expansion set, *The Burning Crusade*, and am now rolling a Blood Elf Paladin (just to show those Alliance scum what pains they are!) By the time this prints, the winner of "Top Chef" will most likely have been picked, so I just want to put out there that I was rooting for Marcel! Yes, you heard that right.

Now Playing: *World of Warcraft*, *The Burning Crusade*



Metalbot Anthony Mertz

The Dorsai Irregulars showing up at MAGfest inspired me to finally "finish" reading Gordon R. Dickson's *Childe Cycle*. I've read *Dorsai*, *Soldier Ask Not* and *The Necromancer*. Which flowed perfectly in that order. Now I'm not sure which book to pick up next. Wait, that's why I never picked up the other books. Oh, no! I'm stuck again!

Now playing: *Time Pilot* (Xbox Arcade)



Arfeth Thomas Shin

Currently, aside from this loli-fighter from Japan called *Arcana Heart*, there isn't much in the way of new arcade games. However, the U.S. *Melty Blood* scene seems to be growing at a steady pace; as of January, import copies have been sold out throughout the internet. More fresh meat for my beasts to feast on... muahahaha! </Nero>

Now Playing: *Melty Blood: Act Cadenza*, *Kagetsu Toya*, *Maximum Tune 2*



Ashura Brady Hartel

So I just got a JVC X'EYE! The thing was sitting up at the local pawn shop collecting dust, and only cost me a 50-spot. It's a Genesis/Sega CD combo, and originally came out in Japan as the *Wondermega 2*. You can't imagine how much better it is to play *Sonic 2* on actual hardware and not wankily emulated. I plan to make some videos which show off tricks and glitches you can do in the *Sonic* games, so look out for those! The only thing I need now? *Snatcher*. Now Playing: *Sonic 2*, *Sonic CD*, *Popful Mail*, *Lost Planet*



Jeremy Jeremy Peeples

By the time you read this, "Kim Possible's" fourth season will be on the air, and I will be very, very happy. To celebrate, I'll watch a ton of prior episodes, play the PS2 game, and then watch the season 3 finale movie. Gaming-wise, I plan to focus on getting the 360, and enjoying *Gears of War*, *Saints Row*, and *PGR 3*.

Now Playing: *WWF No Mercy*, *WWE Day of Reckoning 2*, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, *Sega Genesis Collecton*



Mads Amadeo Garcia III

While all my colleagues like to keep 'in the groove,' as it were, I'm usually pretty much doomed to playing most releases months, or even years late. I find it's a small price to pay to be sure that there's a walkthrough floating around somewhere by the time I do get to play. Curse my Aura of Fail(tm)!

Now Playing: *Phoenix Wright: And Justice For All*, *Gears of War*, *Summon Night*

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Previews

This month we've got the larger-than-life rhythmic fighting action of *Def Jam ICON*, next-gen sports dirt with *Virtua Tennis 3*, and a new look on Lara Croft's first adventure in *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*. Atari's *Silverfall* and the *Ultima Online: Kingdom Reborn* expansion round up our PC coverage, and we've got the PS2 version of *Test Drive Unlimited* and *300* for the PSP watching our backs.



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Tomb Raider Anniversary: p18

Def Jam ICON: p10

Features

We've got two sweet features this month. Check out **page 28** for a look at SkillGround, the online gaming service that brings the prospect of winning cold hard \$\$\$ into the mix. Then head over to **page 48** to get the latest dirt on MAGfest, one of the greatest gaming conventions the East Coast has to offer.



On the cover



To hell with next-gen, the next level of video game ass-kicking is heading to your PS2. Our very own incorrigible Racewing takes a look at Sony's *God of War II* and gives you the dirt on all the carnage, creatures, and chaos you can expect from Kratos's latest epic adventure. Check it out on **page 38**... if you dare.

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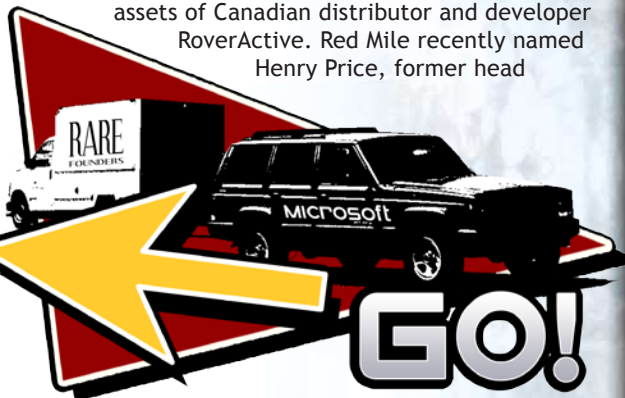
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COMINGS GOINGS

Back in 2005, Take-Two closed its Vienna studio, which developed titles like *GTA 3*, *GTA: Vice City*, and the console iterations of *Max Payne*. Since then, it's been really quiet, but a new studio has emerged from the ashes under the banner of Games That Matter, sporting "a visionary game production business model."

In-game advertisement pioneer Massive Inc., acquired by Microsoft in May 2006, lost two of its founding fathers as its CEO, Mitch Davis, and President of New Media, Nichola Longano, resigned. While no specific reason was given for the departure, Davis stated that pursuing entrepreneurial start-ups has always been his passion, and that Massive is currently well positioned in the in-game advertising industry.

Red Mile Entertainment makes its foray in the nearly \$1 billion casual games market by acquiring the assets of Canadian distributor and developer RoverActive. Red Mile recently named Henry Price, former head

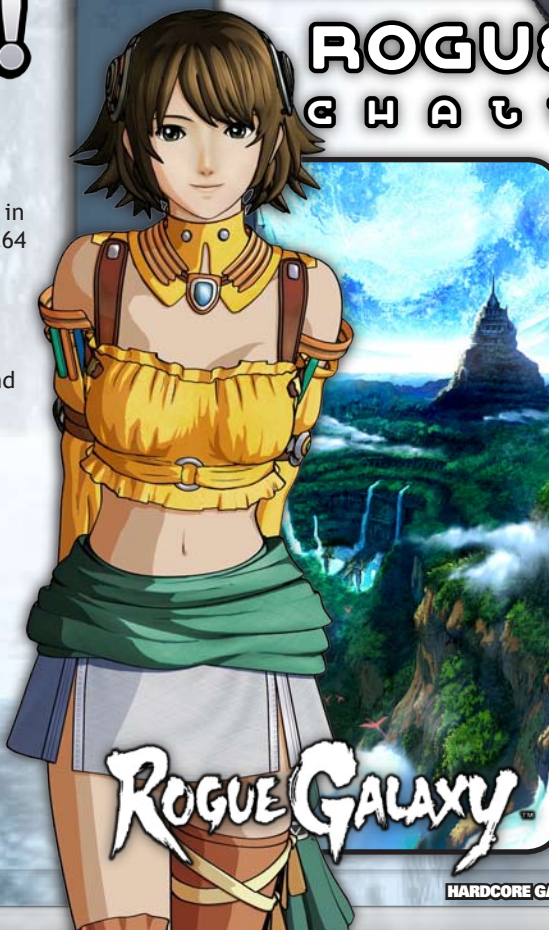


of sales and marketing for casual games company Mumbo Jumbo, as Director of Sales.

Rare has seen many changes since it was founded in the early '80s. It started off developing for the C64 and NES, scored a hit with the N64's *GoldenEye*, and have since transitioned into being one of Microsoft's flagship developers. After more than two decades, two of its three founders, the Stamper brothers, have decided to call it quits and pursue other opportunities.

Traveller's Tales, of recent LEGO Star Wars fame, has acquired Embryonic Studios. Established by the former founders of Warhog and Digital Anvil, Embryonic is known for titles such as *Privateer*, *Privateer 2*, *Brute Force*, *Starlancer*, and *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone*.

Rockstar Games appointed Gary Dale as its new COO. Dale was the European Managing Director for Capcom since 2003, prior to which he was President of BMG's interactive media before its 1998 acquisition by Take-Two. During his tenure, he oversaw the development of the original *Grand Theft Auto*.



ROGUE GALAXY

THAT THING

got an EMMY!?



YES!?

NO!?

Sony announced that it had been recognized by the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences with a Technology and Engineering Emmy Award for the PS3's SixAxis wireless controller. The very next day, NATAS debunked that statement and explained that Sony did not win for the PS3 controller, but for its old DualShock analog controller for the PS2. The Emmy was shared with Nintendo for the innovation of the D-pad. Not to be left out of the fun, Microsoft was awarded an Emmy for Pioneering Work in Near and Real-Time Fully Programmable Shading Via Modern Graphics Processors for its DirectX technology.

ROGUE GALAXY

CHANGES!

To celebrate the awesomeness that is *Rogue Galaxy*, *Hardcore Gamer* is running a two-part challenge on HardcoreGamer.com through the month of February to see just how space pirate-crazy people really are. The first part of the challenge dares people to dress themselves and their pets as characters from the game and send photos in for fame and prizes. The second part is a galaxy-wide treasure hunt which will have participants scouring the far corners of the universe in search of an elusive peice of treasure from the game that will score them, well... fame and prizes, of course! Point your internets at www.hardcoregamer.com and join in the fun today!



Fans of LucasArts's *Zombies Ate My Neighbors* have reason to rejoice come this March. It turns out that SouthPeak Interactive's *Monster Madness: Battle For Suburbia* is its unofficial, spooky spiritual successor, delivering all of the next-gen thrills, chills, and spills one would expect from an over-the-top, horror-themed action/shooter.

The game revolves around four teens who discover their neighborhood has been overrun with all sorts of ghoulish freaks, including zombies (of course!), vampires, werewolves, gargoyles, and the occasional evil robot, with over fifty unique monster types in all. Presented in a top-down, three-quarter perspective (think *Baldur's Gate*), *Monster Madness* throws you and up to three other players (for a total of four offline and up to sixteen online) into a tongue-in-cheek, nightmare-filled world where you must use everything and anything you can find to fend off the hordes of monsters (lawnmowers, tables, lamps, tires, beach balls, trash cans; you name it!).

Control is handled using both analog sticks (left stick to move, right stick to rotate and aim), and using weapons is as easy as pressing X to pick an item up then slapping the right trigger to attack. Of course, the gameplay goes deeper than that. Throughout the game, you can collect weapon

Preview by Roger Danish

parts and build bigger and better weapons (nail guns, rocket launchers, pipe shotguns, cell phone tasers, and more), as well as drive vehicles (like go-karts, mech-walkers, and UFOs), use projectiles (Molotov cocktails, grenades, etc.), and even transform yourself into a variety of monsters with unique abilities.

Each campaign level (there are thirty in all) features unique mission objectives, physics-based puzzles, and plenty of visceral action using the Unreal 3 powered engine coupled with AGEIA physics. In addition, the game's story and cut-scenes are told via cool, comic-book-style FMV sequences (and the game's cover art was done by our very own cover jockey, Wolfie).


With tons of game modes online and off, plenty of non-stop arcade-style action, and a hilarious storyline that doesn't take itself seriously, SouthPeak has a very cool and fun title on their hands. We expect to have a full-fledged review in next month's issue.

Publisher: **SouthPeak Interactive** Genre(s): **Action/Shooter**
Developer: **Artificial Studios** Category: **B-Movie**
Release Date: **3/2007** # of Players: **1-4 Offline/Up to 16 Online**

Def Jam **ICON**



Publisher: Electronic Arts Genre(s): Fighting
 Developer: EA Chicago Category: No More Wraslin'
 Release Date: 3/6/2007 # of Players: 1-2

 Preview by Shoegazer

Continuing down the gritty path started by *Fight For N.Y.*, *Def Jam ICON* ups the ante with an even darker take on urban street fights. The all-star cast of familiar hip-hop faces return, but there is also a create-a-player option in case you can't find an artist to your liking.

The stunning graphics will certainly be the first thing to stand out, but it's the retooled combat system that is the biggest improvement here. While regular attacks are mapped to the four face buttons, *Fight Night* vets will quickly pick up on some of the more advanced tactics, including the use of the right analog stick for power attacks and the left shoulder button for blocks.

One of the coolest new features is how the in-game music becomes a part of the battle. The environments react to the beat of the music and trigger interactive hazards spread out across the arena. If you keep in time with the beats of the music, you'll be able to calculate when these hazards will come into play, adding a whole new level of strategy. *ICON* will also support the ability to import your own songs to keep the battles against your buddies fresh.

All of these improvements to the core gameplay, in addition to an all-new story mode penned by the writers of *24* and *Training Day*, make *ICON* look like an attractive pick-up come March.



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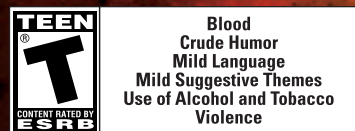
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Preview by 4thletter

It is my secret shame that I never really understood why Sega uses "Virtua" in the titles of their games. Why not just go for "Virtual?" Is "Virtua" more exotic? Regardless, *Virtua Tennis 3* is on the way for the PlayStation 3, so some questions will just go unanswered.

There aren't a lot of tennis franchises out there, and the *Virtua Tennis* line has always been among the best of the few that exist. The third game in the series is no different. It avoids going the straight simulation route, instead choosing to focus on accessible gameplay. "Tried and true" has become something of a cliché in games these days, but it definitely applies here. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Of course, this game is coming to the PS3 as well as the 360. Sony's leviathan wants to be the big dog on the gaming block. Does *VT3* live up to the PS3's potential? It features four control schemes, one of which takes full advantage of the SIXAXIS. Tilting the controller left, right, front, or back results in character movement. To say that that requires a deft touch is a severe understatement. The courts are immaculately detailed, as well.

There are a number of minigames built-in, but an online mode is conspicuously absent. It's been a "Will they or won't they?" affair so far. We will probably find out once *VT3* hits PS3 and 360 in March.

Publisher: Sega | Developer: Sega | Release date: 3/20/2007
Players: 1-4 | Genre: Tennis | Category: Arcade



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Preview by 4thletter

Replay

TV MODE

Man.



I remember a time when the PlayStation was the go-to system for racing games. The *Gran Turismos*, *WipeOuts*, *Need for Speeds*, *Ridge Racers*, and, if we're feeling generous, *Twisted Metals* all helped make the system the zillion-selling classic that it is today. The PS3 appears to be getting back to those roots, and *Formula 1 Championship Edition* is going to be one of the first realistic racing simulations to hit the streets.

Formula 1: CE features all the cars, teams, drivers, and circuits of the 2006 FIA Formula 1 World Championship. If the preceding sentence made any kind of sense to you at all, this is going to be your game. Think of it like the *Madden* of F1 games: a slavish attention to various details and rosters.

Formula 1: CE is most definitely a sim. It comes with car damage, wear and tear on your tires, and some lovingly rendered rain. The rain in particular is very, very nice to see, even in this console age of bump maps and self-shadows. New users aren't simply thrown under the bus, though. There is a virtual driving line that helps you ride on a proper path, and brake assistance in case you come into a turn too fast.

If you're a *Gran Turismo* nut who has been waiting for some solid F1 action, you probably can't go too wrong with *Formula 1: Championship Edition*.

Publisher: SCEA
Developer: Studio Liverpool
Release Date: 3/6/2007
Genre(s): Racing
Category: F1 Track Star
of Players: 1-2



INSPIRED BY GRAPHIC NOVELIST FRANK MILLER

300

WARNER BROS. PICTURES PRESENTS
IN ASSOCIATION WITH LEGENDARY PICTURES AND VIRTUAL STUDIOS A MARK CANTON/GIANNI NUNNARI PRODUCTION A ZACK SNYDER FILM
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LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER ANNIVERSARY



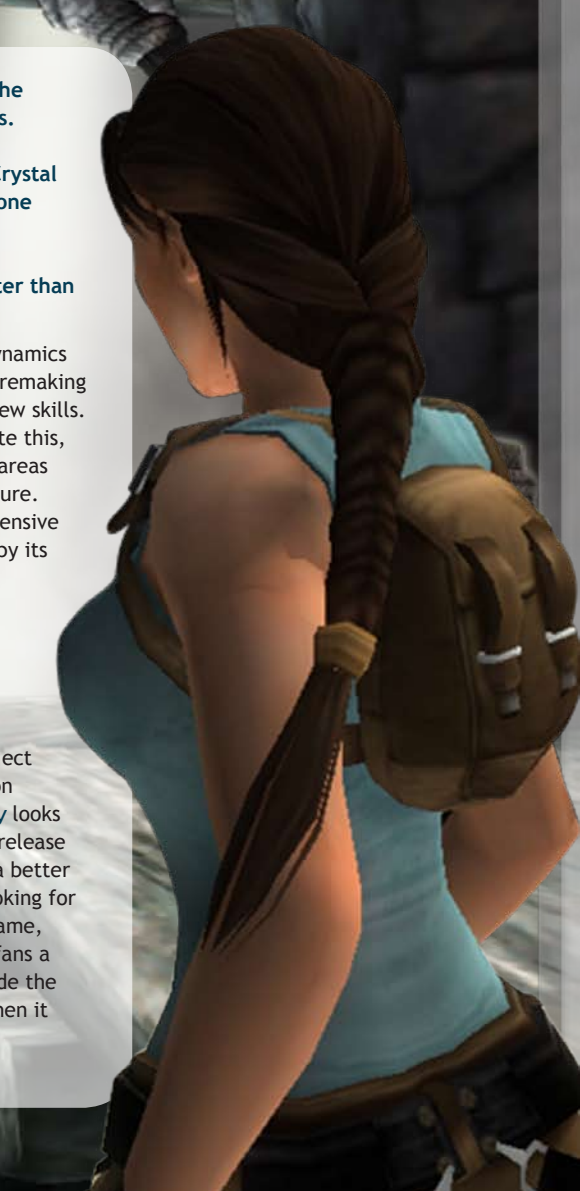
Preview by Jeremy

Tomb Raider: Legend provided players with the most enjoyable entry in the franchise in years. With their *Tomb Raider* debut marked as an across-the-board hit by fans and critics alike, Crystal Dynamics set out to create the game that everyone playing *Legend* wanted: the original *Tomb Raider* with the newest game's superior controls, refined gameplay, and overhauled graphics, making it better than ever before.

To show that it isn't resting on its laurels, Crystal Dynamics will also be improving the AI of Lara's enemies, and remaking all of the game's levels so they make use of Lara's new skills. The existing areas will now be larger to accommodate this, allowing for even the most wily *TR* vets to find new areas to explore and new ways to enjoy the classic adventure. The team's reimagining of the original will be so extensive that even the main theme song has been revamped by its original composer.

Thus far, it appears that Crystal Dynamics will give players a new, definitive version of the game that made this series so popular, while also making it a fantastic game in its own right. Due to the universally-acclaimed new game engine being used and the developers' passion for the project seeping through with each bit of information that is released, *Tomb Raider: Anniversary* looks like a can't-miss prospect. Its lengthy release delay appears to have resulted in a better game that'll satisfy anyone looking for a fresh take on a classic game, while also giving newer fans a chance to see what made the series so acclaimed when it first came out.

Publisher: Eidos
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Release Date: Q2 2007
Genre(s): Adventure
Category: Classical Remake
Number of Players: 1



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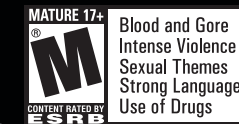


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Ultima Online™ KINGDOM REBORN



Preview by Metalbolt



Publisher: **Electronic Arts** Genre(s): **MMORPG**
 Developer: **Electronic Arts** Category: **No need for real life**
 Release Date: **2007** # of Players: **A lot**

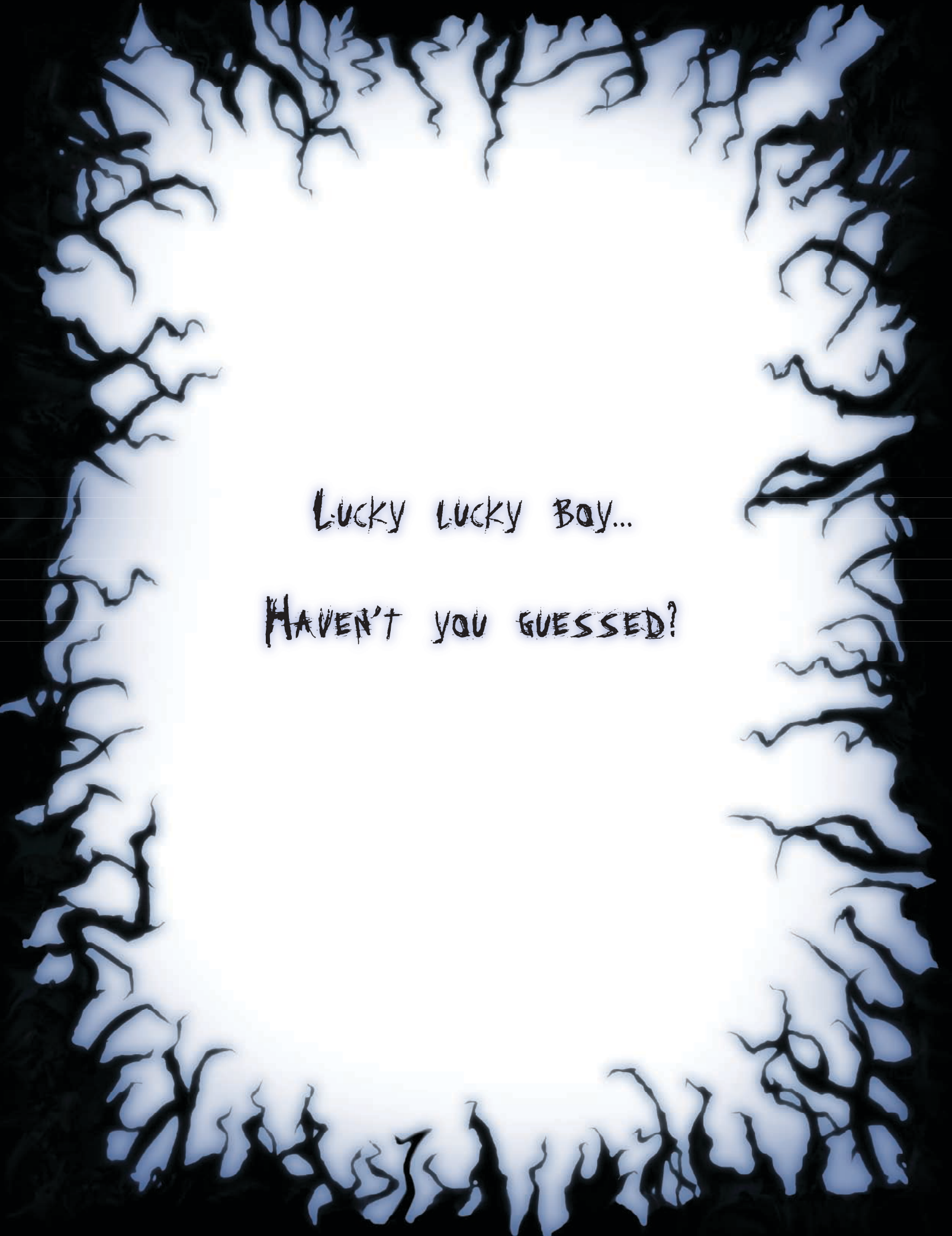
Although it's not as popular as *Everquest* or *World of Warcraft*, *Ultima Online* has an incredibly hardcore fanbase, which has kept it alive for almost ten years. Implementing a smoother learning curve for new players as well as a new, easier to use interface, EA hopes to entice new players into the world of *UO* with *Kingdom Reborn*. It isn't forgetting the hardcore base that keeps it alive: the old UI will still be available. Graphics tweaking is also on the upgrade menu. It's bringing the world into full 3D while retaining the classic *UO* look, and old players will be happy to know that the requirements are being kept as low as possible.

A few months after *KR* launches, there will be a *KR*-only expansion, *Stygian Abyss*. This expansion will make the gargoyle race, which has been present since *Ultima 3*, playable. Yes, you read that right: it's an expansion of an expansion.



Lucky lucky boy...

HAVEN'T YOU GUESSED?





Preview by Wanderer

In Nelwë, they used to worship the Four Dragons. They used to live in thaumocracies, with every country coming to honor their gods and saints at elemental temples.

Now there are only two elemental temples left, and the world is coming up on an industrial revolution. As steam power and firearms spread among the people, the elemental priests got... a little upset.

In *Silverfall*, you're in a position to shift the balance of power between magic and technology. What choices you make will determine what allies you can have, what skills you learn, and both the appearance and the businesses of the city of Silverfall.

You can create your character as a human, elf, goblin, or troll, with each race providing different advantages and disadvantages. If you side with nature, you can develop into a spellcaster or shapeshifter; if you go with science, the game turns into a bizarre steampunk/cyberpunk crossover, with mechanical limbs, arms, implants, and more. You can recruit unique followers to help shore up your character's weaknesses, but they have allegiances of their own. You have to maintain relationships with them through your actions, or they may go their separate ways.

Silverfall has an interesting concept, and it runs off the new Ageia physics cards, allowing a new degree of realism in combat. This may be one of the first truly next-generation action-RPGs.

SILVERFALL

Publisher: Atari | Developer: Monte Cristo | Release Date: 3/6/2007
Genre: Action-RPG | Category: Guns vs. Swords | # of Players: 1



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TEST DRIVE



Publisher: Atari
Developer: Melbourne House
Release Date: 2007

Genre(s): Racing
Category: Simulation
of Players: 1



Preview by **Honestgamer**

You can tell a lot about a racing game by its first sharp corner. If you can fly into it going full speed and come out the other end in one piece, you've either got an arcade-style game like *Need for Speed* or you're an amazing player. If you drift into the corner after catching a slipstream from your opponent, then accelerate out of the curve and into first place just in time to cross the finish line, you've got *Test Drive Unlimited*.

There's nothing wrong with the occasional arcade racer, but sometimes it doesn't really feel like you're controlling a car when it turns on a dime and plows through telephone poles like they're made from cardboard. The vehicles in *Test Drive Unlimited* don't do that. If you hit a fence, you stop. Everyone passes you and you feel sorry for yourself. You start wishing that you'd thought harder going into that corner because you just know you could've done it better. Then you try it again and prove yourself right.

This game is about more than just the time you spend between the start and finish lines, though. You also get to drive around between challenges and avoid cops, and there are options to buy new homes and a fleet of vehicles. The result is that the expansive Hawaiian environment you explore comes to feel like a real place.

Test Drive Unlimited may have hit the Xbox 360 first, and there's a lot to be said for that release, but some people can't buy every system on the market. For those of you still enjoying your PlayStation 2 and playing the waiting game with next-generation consoles, the diminishing amount of new software can be downright sickening. From what we've seen, *Test Drive Unlimited* is the cure.



Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive
Developer: Collision Studios
Release Date: 03/2007
Genre(s): Action
Category: Fighting in the shade
of Players: 1



Preview by **4thletter**

Frank Miller's *300* was a great, if not entirely historically accurate, graphic novel. The Battle of Thermopylae is interesting, with its epic tale of a few thousand Greeks versus nearly a million Persians. It's been adapted into a film, due to be released in March 2007, and the film in turn has been adapted into a video game. It's a game based on a movie that's based on a book. Still with me?

300: March to Glory hits the PSP as a Spartan-themed beat-'em-up, with constant battle in the vein of *Spartan: Total Warrior* or *Final*

Fight as the order of the day. You're going to fight everything from Xerxes's infantry to elephants, which means that you'll need quick fingers and an awareness of your surroundings to come out unscathed.

You'll probably need some good attacks, as well. Luckily, *300* offers those. Fighting and scoring kills nets you points that you can spend on improving your mettle. You can buy more armor, new weapons, or new combos. All of this in turn allows you to kill more enemies in more effective ways.

300: March to Glory is due to arrive at around the same time the film does. It's following the *Spider-Man 2: The Game* route of skipping a straight adaptation and focusing more on the action scenes.



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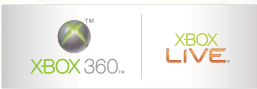
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skillground™

By **Daniel Kayser** of GameTrailers.com

It's no secret that online gaming has all but changed the interactive entertainment industry over the past several years. Internet gaming pioneers no doubt recall their first online experiences with titles such as *Unreal Tournament*, *Quake*, *Tribes*, *Ultima Online* and of course many more. With the continual rise of broadband penetration throughout the world, however, many companies see a unique and lucrative opportunity within the online gaming sector. One of these companies is Groove Games, developers of SkillGround.com: where PC gaming amps up to the next level by offering users the opportunity to gain fortune and fame through competitively gaming online.

"The initial vision for the SkillGround service was to create a platform that would allow players to play games the way they want to play them — and have fun while doing it," said Jon Walsh, CEO of Groove Games. According to Walsh, competitively gaming for cash prizes is one of the ways players want to play, and his company has been designed from the ground up to ensure that they are offering a smooth and reliable service. "We have tools and systems in place to ensure games are fair and help players choose appropriate competitors. As SkillGround evolves you will see more and more examples of the concept of "player freedom and choice," with regard to how players choose to play and progress through our games."

"The initial vision for the (SkillGround) service was to create a platform that would allow players to play games the way they want to play them - and have fun while doing it."

Gaming on SkillGround is made simple. A gamer simply needs a PC running Windows XP, a broadband Internet connection and a

valid email address (and some additional information if you choose to play for cash). Once you head online and create an account there's a one-time client install, then you download any of the available games and begin playing immediately for free, for cash, or even to practice by yourself.

Of course, offering a unique service is great, but in this industry, if you don't have the games to back it up, then you've pretty much failed. Walsh attributes much of SkillGround's early success to the sheer fun factor found within the four games currently offered on the service. *Kung Fu: Deadly Arts*, *WarPath*, *L.A. Street Racing* and the military shooter, *Close Quarters Conflict*, (see boxout, page 32, for more info on each game) have been designed to appeal to a wide range of gamers, something the company understands is crucial to success. "SkillGround's games play and feel like the games that we have all come to know and enjoy over the years," said Walsh. "In that sense, SkillGround appeals to traditional gamers, and makes the transition to playing online easy."

As we all know, however, "traditional" gaming audiences aren't the only ones to consider in the burgeoning business of games, and when it comes to the more casual gaming audience, Walsh is hoping their service comes off as an attractive one to try out. "Because SkillGround is online, it establishes new communities, forges relationships between players, and introduces a fresh way for gamers to interact with one another. In this way, SkillGround is perfect for non-traditional gamers, and anyone looking for a completely different experience. As we continue to push the envelope of this medium, our games will branch out to include more modes, more content, and more ways to interact with your opponents for money, bragging rights, or just for fun."

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Building a community is nothing new for the folks at SkillGround, especially considering that the development teams behind the game are from all around the world. Development on the SkillGround concept started about a year and a half ago and has involved multiple teams from around the world, totaling well over 100 developers at a time. Since last year, they have completed four live games for the service, as well as the basic functionality of the site that you see today.

Although the teams behind the service span multiple continents, the importance of providing a good gaming experience spans the globe and is a concept that the makers of SkillGround pride themselves in understanding. "The guiding principles behind SkillGround are fun, fairness, and simplicity," said Walsh. "SkillGround is accessible to many types of gamers, from the most dedicated hardcore fanatic to casual gamers who just want a quick adrenaline rush. Our ranking system allows the player to choose an opponent within their own skill range, so they can experience the most rewarding level of game play." One of the factors that continually detract from the online gaming experience, however, is cheating. Fortunately, the team behind SkillGround has been working hard to ensure its service is just about void of it. "Keeping it fair and fun and free of cheating is a big difference that SkillGround offers," says Walsh, "and since the system is completely developed in-house, we can closely manage all performance aspects of the

service and deliver a quality experience to every player."

One of the major goals of SkillGround is to bring competitive gaming to the casual consumer. While it's great that the likes of Johnathan Wendel (Fatal1ty) and Victor Cuadra (Makaveli) are able to earn six figures per year on the professional gaming circuit, every day gamers can now look forward to earning a little cash of their own through successful sessions on SkillGround.com. "Our team launched SkillGround as an evolutionary product in gaming," said Walsh. "We believe that reward-based online multiplayer gaming is the natural evolution of the PC gaming industry and thus the future of both PC games and PC gaming competitions. As broadband penetration continues to grow worldwide, we expect to see adoption rates for digital delivery of content increase and we believe that SkillGround is firmly positioned to offer gamers the experience they're looking for."

Even though the floodgates of competitive online gaming are just beginning to open, Walsh understands that offering true competition throughout the world will always bring people back for more. "Competition is at the heart of SkillGround. With strong representation from players already signed up from over 20 countries, it isn't a far stretch for SkillGround to manage global tournaments for players of all skill levels – with qualifying events across regions – and all from the comfort of your broadband home. Competitive gaming is now being opened up to a much wider audience."

Competitive gaming is in fact increasing in popularity and the demographic of gamer that you would expect to be involved is quickly expanding as well. Walsh and his crew have considered this when evaluating who exactly you'll meet online through the service by developing SkillGround for a large and varied audience. While the main target is still gamers between the ages of 18 and 34, the use of SkillGround's ranking system allows for wider accessibility to all types of gamers, matching them up with someone who is close to their own skill level. When competition is at the core, practicing up is also a big part of achieving personal success, so SkillGround allows players to practice as much as they

Top Players » Updated hourly

Name	# Games	Rating
1. CHAUTAUQUA	34	1181
2. JEM	13	1161
3. testtest99	6	1134
4. paypalcash	3	1130
5. ScatterEye	104	1125

Our ranking system allows the player to choose an opponent within their own skill range, so they can experience the most rewarding level of gameplay.

"We've always planned to add games from other developers and publishers and we specifically designed the SkillGround back-end system to allow simple integration of external games."



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PlayStation 2



want, play in one-on-one or death match cash games, or simply choose to play matches for free.

Despite their current success, the team behind SkillGround is continually searching for new ways to revolutionize the competitive online gaming space. One of these aspects, as you've probably guessed, is partnering up with publishers and developers to offer SkillGround-based competitions for popular online games. "We've always planned to add games from other developers and publishers and we specifically designed the SkillGround back-end system to allow simple integration of external games," said Walsh. "We're actually already working with a number of partners to integrate well-known existing games. Nothing specific can be discussed right now, but we'll keep you guys posted and we expect you'll be hearing some exciting news on that soon." Of course, the popularity of online gaming through today's consoles such as the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 would be a great place to expand the territory of SkillGround. That very scenario is a concept that has definitely been kicked around in Walsh's mind. "Many elements of the SkillGround system will translate very well to a console environment, and where and when it makes sense we will be entering the console market with the service. Right now, and for the immediate future, however, we are very focused on building our PC service and customer base."

While having a vast library of popular multi-platform titles is the eventual goal that will no doubt encourage online competitive gaming through SkillGround, the team is currently focused on fleshing out the experience offered on the site right now. "Development of SkillGround is ongoing," said Walsh, "and in the coming months players will see lots of additions, including many more ways to play. We're adding solo play score-based games, team-based contests, and the ability to earn or purchase in-game assets that allow for the customization of your character, cars, etc., and even enhance your abilities in certain games."

One thing's for sure: although exactly how much gamers will buy into the concept of online competitive gaming remains to be seen, the future of the genre is growing fast, and SkillGround is looking like it might become *the* place to prove your skills online.



Corrupt Private Military Corporations (PMC) are the driving force behind the militaristic first-person shooter *CQC: Close Quarter Conflict*. These PMCs have become big business, as small governments and large multi-national corporations have increasingly come to rely on the flexibility, value and discretion that PMCs provide in their security schemes. Two corporations vie for ultimate power, as the best of the best (Navy Seals, US Army Recon Rangers) square off in squad combat around the world. Choose between six classes of fighter: Assault, Support, Sniper, Recon, Demolition or Medic, and three different maps.

CQC can be played in death match multiplayer mode and coming soon will be team death match, and capture the flag. With nineteen weapons to choose from, players should have no problem deciding how best to deal with the enemy.



Kung Fu: Deadly Arts

In the province of Hunan, in ancient China, a village has lost its leader and four brothers have lost their father. A tournament of hand to hand combat has been arranged to decide his successor. The four brothers, each deadly in their own style of fighting, must also compete against other Kung Fu artists who have stepped up to claim the title of village elder. Now it is not only a fight to decide who rules, but a fight... to the death. To win a Kung Fu match, you must beat your opponent in two out of three rounds.

Each round is sixty seconds long. To win the round you must either completely reduce your opponent's health or have more health remaining when the timer runs out.

If you and your opponent have the same amount of health at the end of the round, the round will go into a thirty second Sudden Death overtime. The first player to damage his/her opponent will win the round. Available for one-on-one gameplay only.



L.A. Street Racing allows you to choose from five types of cars and five tracks of varying difficulty. Tracks on city streets are lit up with turns indicated by large glowing arrows. Avoid parked cars and other obstacles as car damage will affect performance. The first player to cross the finish line wins the race. Time allocated for the race is limited; if none of the players finish the race in the allocated time, the one who is ahead when the time limit is called becomes the winner. One-on-one or multiplayer is available.



In *WarPath* the player must choose between representing the biomechanical race of the Ohm, or the Humans. Both races struggle to make the planet Kaladi their home and will stop at nothing to wipe out the threat of the opposing faction. This first-person shooter has one-on-one capability or can be played in a death-match multiplayer setting. There are four maps to choose from and seven weapons. Wit and quick reflexes are the only defense against the enemy. The hunt is on – whoever frags the most, wins.

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VALHALLA KNIGHTS

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MAFIA WARS™ REVIEW

YAKUZA



The *Mafia Wars* have moved to Tokyo with the latest episode, called *Yakuza*. It tells a story of honor and betrayal, and like previous titles, the gameplay is all about bullet-ridden death and destruction. *Yakuza* implements a number of much-needed improvements to the *Mafia Wars* formula that make the game deliver a worthy performance.

The new combat system allows for a simple control scheme without slowing down the action. As you walk up to enemies and come within a certain range, your chosen weapon automatically locks and starts firing on them. This means you can continue to move around freely during the firefight, and lets you to take on many enemies at once without having to stop. Aside from the gunplay, you can also move in close and deal melee damage with a katana or conjure up special "Dragon" attacks to wipe out groups of enemies.

The enemies are plentiful and move in aggressively to take you out. This conjures up the feeling of one man alone against an army that is so prevalent in action movies. There's always something happening onscreen, and you'll have to pay careful attention to your game. This is one of the classic marks of good shooter gameplay.

As always for the *Mafia Wars* series, the environments create a fitting atmosphere and there are plenty of destructible objects that add to the explosive action. Once the storyline is completed, there is a never-ending survival mode that takes place in the Tower of Destiny. This features hundreds of levels to rampage through, and also includes online components that allow you to form your own clans and earn points through the developer's Mobile League.



Mafia Wars: Yakuza takes a step in the right direction for mobile action shooters, with simple controls and intense gun battles. The story is interesting and the difficulty appropriate, but the run-and-gun can feel a little much at times. It's not a bad thing if you love that sort of game, but a little more variety in the gameplay would've made for a more complete experience.



Publisher: Digital Chocolate
Developer: Digital Chocolate
Release Date: 11/1/2006
Genre: Action
Category: Shooter
of Players: 1

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5



THE NEXT GREAT ACTION RPG FROM THE CREATORS OF THE "Us" SERIES.

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Explore a vast world with challenging boss battles, trap-filled dungeons, mind bending puzzles, and addictive mini-games.



GEOMETRY WARS

RETRO EVOLVED MOBILE

PREVIEW

Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved Mobile is a modern arcade-style shooter that first became a hit on Xbox Live Arcade.



An ode to classics like *Robotron: 2084*, *Asteroids* and *Tempest*, the player uses a starship to annihilate an onslaught of circles, squares, and diamonds in an enclosed field.

In preview form, *Geometry Wars* provides three modes of intense shooting. "Evolved Mobile" mode gives an experience just as you would expect from dropping a coin into an arcade machine: three lives and a couple of bombs start you toward obtaining upgrades and trying for the highest score possible. "Challenges" mode sets up gameplay with eight specific objectives like gaining the highest score with one life, lasting the longest without using bombs, or scoring without moving. The final mode, "Immortal," allows you to play without the danger of being destroyed. This is great for practicing or for youngsters.

The only goal in the game is to destroy as many enemies as possible to rack up a high score. It starts off fairly easy with only a few enemies onscreen, but as you proceed the gameplay gets increasingly hectic. More foes crowd the screen and new types of enemy appear. At times, there are so many enemies that slowdown is inevitable. Reaching certain point totals lets you gain extra firepower, bombs and ships.

The game offers one-handed controls, with you responsible for moving the ship and detonating bombs. Shooting is automatic, and by tapping the action button you can concentrate your fire in one direction. This allows you to strafe. Tap the button again and fire will follow in the direction you're moving in once again. This is a smart control scheme implementation.

Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved Mobile is a fine looking game that, aside from the slowdown, controls well and offers plenty of action. There are different mode types available to keep your interest, and its general style is enjoyable.

Publisher: Sony BMG **Genre:** Arcade
Developer: H3D Wireless **Category:** Shooter
Release Date: 2/2007 **# of Players:** 1



UP and AWAY

Up and Away is a simple action game where a wandering extraterrestrial has found himself stranded on Earth and needs your help to find his way home. No, this isn't a rip-off of the infamous *E.T.* game that burned so many gamers back in the day, but the storyline is just a bit over-similar, let's say.

In any event, in this game you must help Jada the alien get back to his spaceship before it leaves town without him. The trouble is that his spaceship is in outer space and he is on Earth. In order

to make it back up in time, he must climb quickly through the stratosphere using blocks that have magically appeared to form a ladder of sorts into space.

Like any true alien gymnast, he'll swing and jump from block to block. By pressing the action button, you dictate at what point he lets go of a block to propel onto another. Which block he lands on is determined by what angle he was at when you had him let go of that block's convenient swinging pole. It is important to time the jump correctly, not only so that you jump in the right direction, but also to avoid hazards.

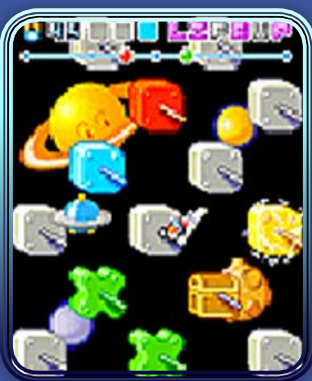
A number of blocks have elemental hazards attached to them, like fire, water and lightning. The hazards constantly flash on and off. If you happen to land on a block while its hazard is active, good riddance to you. Some blocks, in turn, are also treasure chests that hold crystals that let you protect yourself from the various elemental hazards. Other treasure chests also hold letters you can collect to obtain extra lives, while some are booby traps that unleash vicious dangers like rain and comets.

Up and Away is a unique title that starts off easy. As you reach higher altitudes, the number of hazards increases as you begin encountering things like airplanes, clouds and rain. The difficulty factor coupled with the simple controls make for a very good pastime, and the added Time Attack mode increases the longevity. It's a completely different type of casual game that just might peak your interest thanks to its challenge.



Publisher: Dodo Mobile **Genre:** Action
Developer: Dodo Mobile **Category:** Casual
Release Date: 2/2007 **# of Players:** 1

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5



REVIEW

REVIEW

NAVAL BATTLE

MISSION COMMANDER

Naval Battle: Mission Commander is the newest addition to the slew of Battleship-inspired titles already on mobile. You might be thinking to yourself: seen one, seen them all. While that's true to a certain degree, this offers some new features that might make you think twice.

There are a total of five game modes, each one corresponding to a variation on the familiar game. In the "Campaign" mode, you attempt to defeat the enemy fleet and rise through naval ranks in 18 missions. "Salvo" mode gives you a shot at the enemy fleet for every ship in your fleet that is still afloat. "Advance" mode gives each boat a special attack. For those feeling nostalgic, "Original" mode provides the classic, no-frills gameplay. Finally, a "Multiplayer" mode allows for two gamers to battle each other using pass and play or even remotely on two phones using Bluetooth.

The battles take place in three different settings with as many as eight ships under your command. In a few of the modes, the ships will have special attacks that can be called upon while afloat. For instance, the submarine can use torpedoes that sail across the opposing grid, the carrier can send out reconnaissance flights to identify enemy locations, and the battleship can launch a barrage of gunfire. You can also uncover extra power-ups, and use your environments and strategic items to gain the edge in a game. For instance, you can hit a volcano to make it unleash its fury all over your opponent.

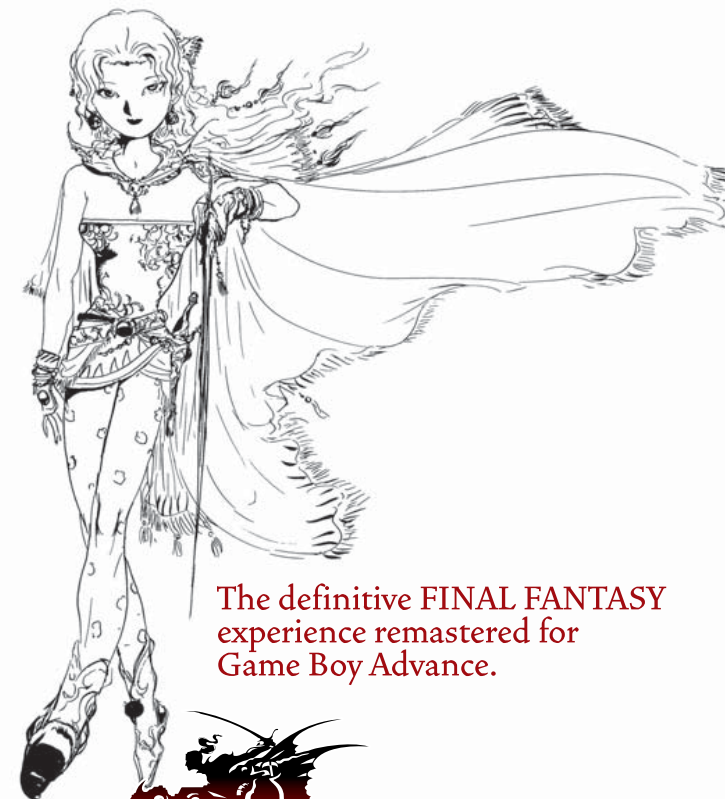


All of the special weapons and items leave a substantial arsenal at your disposal. While this adds a level of coolness to the game, it also results in giving you a decided advantage against the CPU in the early going. You really won't run into many problems until at least half of the missions are over, but when playing against friends it won't matter.

Naval Battle: Mission Commander has detailed graphics that use a variety of animations to bring the battle to life, unlike most other comparable titles. The different play modes improve on the classic formula without feeling out of place. Yes, there are already a number of similar titles available, and you may have tired of them. If you haven't, though, this would be an excellent choice for download.

Publisher: Gameloft **Genre:** Adventure
Developer: Gameloft **Category:** Strategy
Release Date: 11/1/2006 **# of Players:** 1-2

FINAL SCORE :
3.5 of 5



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ADVANCE

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BADASS EVOLVED

PUBLISHER: SCEA
DEVELOPER: SCEA - Santa Monica Studios
RELEASE DATE: March 2007
INTERVIEWED: Cory Barlog, Game Director

KRATOS, THE GOD OF WAR, leads the charge of the final blow to the conquest of the city of Rhodes. On this island stands the Colossus, a giant statue of the Greek sun god Helios, that will eventually be labeled as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. A comparable structure by today's standards would be New York's Statue of Liberty.

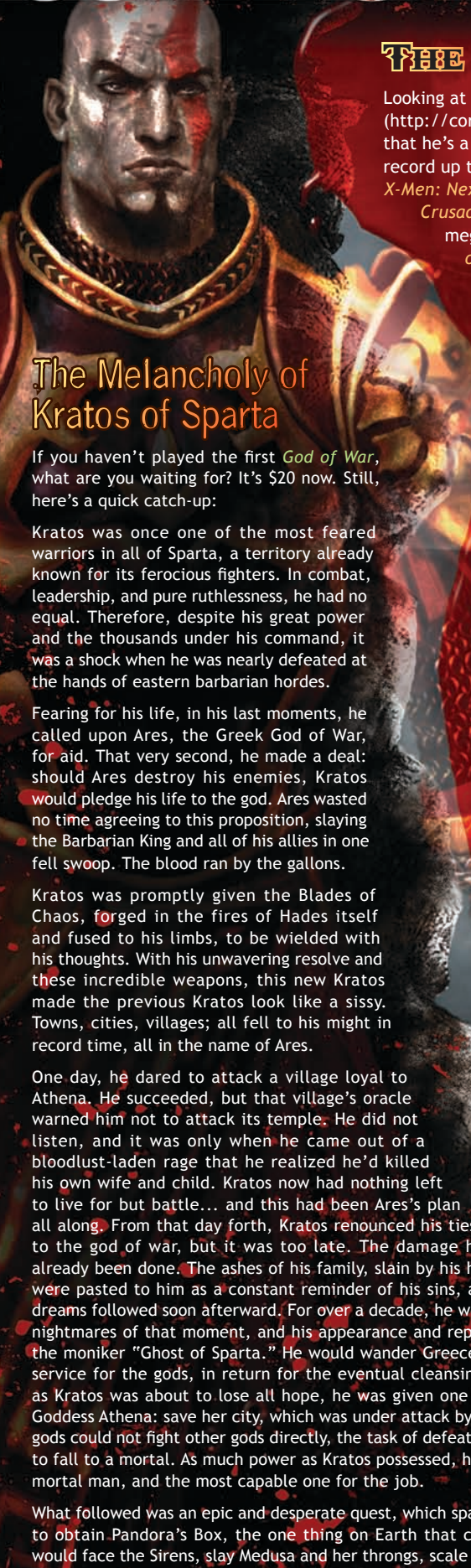
Before this day is over, the Colossus will have been given life by the gods. It will become a living weapon of destruction, whose power will be used to defend the island in its last gasp.

This does not matter to Kratos, because before this day is over, that same life-filled Colossus will be dead, by his hand, and his hand alone. He will have scaled its glowing, burning insides, and destroyed it from within, while an army attempts to kill him from all sides.

This is *God of War II*. Welcome back.

Story by Racewing





The Melancholy of Kratos of Sparta

If you haven't played the first *God of War*, what are you waiting for? It's \$20 now. Still, here's a quick catch-up:

Kratos was once one of the most feared warriors in all of Sparta, a territory already known for its ferocious fighters. In combat, leadership, and pure ruthlessness, he had no equal. Therefore, despite his great power and the thousands under his command, it was a shock when he was nearly defeated at the hands of eastern barbarian hordes.

Fearing for his life, in his last moments, he called upon Ares, the Greek God of War, for aid. That very second, he made a deal: should Ares destroy his enemies, Kratos would pledge his life to the god. Ares wasted no time agreeing to this proposition, slaying the Barbarian King and all of his allies in one fell swoop. The blood ran by the gallons.

Kratos was promptly given the Blades of Chaos, forged in the fires of Hades itself and fused to his limbs, to be wielded with his thoughts. With his unwavering resolve and these incredible weapons, this new Kratos made the previous Kratos look like a sissy. Towns, cities, villages; all fell to his might in record time, all in the name of Ares.

One day, he dared to attack a village loyal to Athena. He succeeded, but that village's oracle warned him not to attack its temple. He did not listen, and it was only when he came out of a bloodlust-laden rage that he realized he'd killed his own wife and child. Kratos now had nothing left to live for but battle... and this had been Ares's plan all along. From that day forth, Kratos renounced his ties to the god of war, but it was too late. The damage had already been done. The ashes of his family, slain by his hand, were pasted to him as a constant reminder of his sins, and the dreams followed soon afterward. For over a decade, he would have nightmares of that moment, and his appearance and reputation earned him the moniker "Ghost of Sparta." He would wander Greece, doing community service for the gods, in return for the eventual cleansing of his mind. Just as Kratos was about to lose all hope, he was given one final task from the Goddess Athena: save her city, which was under attack by Ares himself. Since gods could not fight other gods directly, the task of defeating Ares would have to fall to a mortal. As much power as Kratos possessed, he still qualified as a mortal man, and the most capable one for the job.

What followed was an epic and desperate quest, which spanned all of Greece, to obtain Pandora's Box, the one thing on Earth that could kill a god. He would face the Sirens, slay Medusa and her throngs, scale a Titan, and survive

THE MAN

Looking at Cory Barlog's development blog (<http://corybarlog.blogspot.com/>), one can see that he's a bit tongue-in-cheek about his track record up to this point. Check out his background: *X-Men: Next Dimension*; *Backyard Wrestling*; *Crusaders of Might and Magic*. In fact, his first mega-hit project would be the original *God of War*, where he served as its Animation Director. Now, for the sequel, the reins have been passed on to him.

Does he have help from wizards behind the curtain? Not really. The director of the first game, David Jaffe, oversees the studio as creative director, and maintains contact with Barlog. On the whole, this new *God of War* is pretty much Barlog's baby, and it's easy to see he's proud of it. "[Jaffe's] given me a lot of freedom. He's given me the freedom to say, 'this is where I want to go, these are some of the ideas that we have.' And then we chat about them... the reason I'm in the [director's] position is because we see eye to eye on a lot of stuff. We kind of have the same outlook on the way this game should go."

What sort of outlook would this be, you may ask? For one thing, a single overarching philosophy: the game must be "accessible, and easy to use, but fun, with the first and foremost edict of being fun." You can see this all through the game's

design. When any new events or game mechanics are introduced, the action pauses, and a quick tutorial screen concisely details what to do. You're then thrown right back into the action, and everything works exactly the way it was explained to you. Sometimes, the game doesn't even have to go this far. Helpful moving pictures of buttons that require pressing are shown during action sequences. Grapple points radiate when Kratos is in range, eliminating guesswork. The player is able to swing on his chain-blades with the single touch of a button. The game does not hold your hand all the way through; it merely does everything it can to make sure that you are never lost.

Whenever you are in control of Kratos, it is always full and total control, and none of his actions are wasteful. "I don't want to wait for your animation to finish, I don't care how good-looking it is. I want to be in control of the character at all times. To me, that equals fun. One hundred percent, total control of your character equals fun," says Barlog.

Barlog and his development team can't wait to get Kratos's new adventure into your hands. Read on to see why you can't wait, either.

THE MACHINE

Ever since *God of War II* was announced, fans the world over had been hoping to see Kratos ripping minions in half in next-gen. When the team debunked any possibility of *God of War II* on the PS3, hopes were crushed. Why stick with the PS2, a console near the end of its life cycle. Hadn't the first game maxed out everything the PS2 could do to begin with?



The answer, really, comes down to two factors: timing and economics. The *GoW* team already contains a PS2 coding ninja, and the PS2 is the most dominant piece of home console hardware today. In Barlog's words, "I think the largest reason for us was the time frame. We had an idea about how we wanted to get this game done, we had an idea for the story, and we knew we wanted to get started on it right away. For us, over a hundred million units installed means that there's potentially a lot of people who can play this game. So for us, it makes sense... I didn't want [this game] to be a [PS3] launch title, and spend a ton of time figuring out the hardware as I was still figuring out how to get this game done."

The *God of War II* team has managed to get even more out of the PS2 than before. The graphics actually manage to surpass those of the first game, and the effects are second to none. The game hits the ground running: the previously-described Colossus scenario is the very first stage, and things only get better from there. The fast-paced action gameplay, with only the rare moments of load time, makes it

all the more stunning. After all, most eye-popping console visuals get delivered in the form of slow-paced, disc-grinding RPGs.

Your ears will have just as good a time as your eyes, with new epic tracks mixed in with the classic tunes of the first game. The original voice acting crew returns as well. "T.C. [Carson]'s playing Kratos, still, and Linda [Hunt] has kind of a dual role in this, that will make sense as you start playing the game." Without giving away massive spoilers, rest assured that if you're a *God of War* fan, once you see this dual role in action, a smile will break across your face.

When asked just how much of a hard time the team had cramming this massive epic onto the PS2, Barlog responded, "I think we have pushed the hardware pretty much to its limit, but every time we say that, we find something new. It's... the little engine that really, really, really could." He also notes that the team can't wait to get cracking on the PS3, especially if this game sells well (see sidebar: "Kratos Through the Ages"). Circumstances merely dictated that it wasn't time just yet.

Kratos Through The Ages

As suspected, Kratos's adventure didn't end with the first game. Early in *God of War II*, you find out that Kratos's destiny is to bring about large-scale change of the balance of power involving the gods. This destiny is why he gains the assistance of the Titans in the first place.

Beyond Kratos's outside influences, will his inner life be touched on as well? Definitely. "You're going to learn more about Kratos, you're going to learn more about his family, and you're going to learn more about how he deals with the situations that he's presented with." Expect Kratos to not

only evolve as a character (sometimes in ways that no one will expect, and not all of which are instantly likeable), but for his personal history to evolve just as well. Many – though not all – questions will be answered.

More surprising is that *God of War II* isn't the end of the story, either. "The tagline for [this project] is 'The End Begins.' In our minds, this's the middle point of the overarching story. We have a big story that we want to tell." Will we get to see the end of it? That's up to you. "If fans are into this game, if everybody digs the second one, we absolutely want to finish this thing off in a big way." Yes, folks, we are looking at a trilogy here.

Some may cry "cliché" at this, but remember that it's a milestone for a gaming trilogy to ever run its full course, let alone stay as engaging as *God of War* has been so far.

What about other hardware? It's the same deal. Should *God of War II*'s sales prove brisk, there's no reason to believe that the series won't be finished off in style on the PS3. Gamers' wallets speak louder than any critical acclaim or positive feedback (let us now all share a moment of silence for *Beyond Good And Evil*). Be sure to vote with yours.



FROM ANTI-HERO TO ZERO

At the end of the first game, Kratos had taken Ares's place as the god of war. This meant that he had zero rivals in the world of mortals, and for that matter, few on Olympus. He still continues to be tormented for his past sins. Shunning his fellow gods (and said shunning was mutual), he instead found solace in his Spartan brethren, and led them in the conquest of Greece. The gods, as one can guess, did not approve of this behavior any more than they approved of Kratos's disrespect. Even Athena, who bestowed godhood upon Kratos in the first place, had enough. When reason failed, the gods acted.

When Kratos arrived on the island of Rhodes, his power was mysteriously sapped, but not destroyed completely. Even scaled down, he was still able to overcome the defenses of the island using his rage, his fighting prowess, and the powers of Poseidon he gained before becoming a god. The mighty Colossus statue had been brought to life to oppose him, but after a long battle, even it proved no match. Part of this would be due to the fact that Zeus brought the Sword of Olympus — the blade which ended the Gods' great war with the Titans — to aid Kratos in his endeavor. Should Kratos drain the remainder of his godly powers into the blade, it would become unimaginably potent.

As one can surmise, it was all a trick. The Blade of Olympus indeed became a mighty weapon when Kratos's powers were emptied into it, but, under Zeus's directive, it would not return those powers. Kratos was now mortal once again, stripped of his power for the crime of hubris. This disrespect persisted even as Zeus came down from Olympus to berate him personally... and then to kill him, when it was clear that Kratos would not fall in line.

Kratos had been to Hades before, but it would seem that this stay would be permanent. However, as he was about to spend an afterlife of eternal torment, he was restored by beings who knew that he was destined for greatness: the Titans themselves, the elder rivals of the gods, who had lost a war with them long ago. In order to change his destiny, Kratos learned, he would have to travel to the ends of the earth, and meet the three Sisters of Fate. A resurrected Kratos climbed out of Hades for the second time in his life and, aided by the winged horse Pegasus, sets off on a journey even more brutal than the one he undertook when he opposed Ares.



MYTHOLOGICAL CELEBRITY GUEST STARS

Even beyond the Colossus of Rhodes, the Gods, and the Titans, Kratos's journey this time pretty much plays like a Who's Who In Greek Mythology, so much so that you may want to bone up on your lore before going into this. Some of these entities will be your allies, and some of them will be enemies. All of them serve a purpose. "There's a lot of tying things together within the world," Barlog says, "and a huge number of mythological beasts; all of the ones from the last game that are returning, and some new ones."

If you know Kratos, then you know that his enemies are never ordinary, and his fights are never balanced. You'll run into giant club-wielding Cyclopes, ready and waiting for their eyes to be yanked out and put into Kratos's inventory. Remember when you killed Medusa in the first game? Her sister, Euryale, isn't too happy about that at all. In addition to her, the Gorgon minions are back to try to finish you off once and for all.

You'll meet Theseus, one of the Greek heroes, who defeated King

Minos's Minotaur of legend. Perseus, the original slayer of the Medusa, also makes an appearance, as does Icarus, the young man who dared fly too close to the sun.

The Barbarian King (leader of the eastern barbarian hordes, and arguably responsible for all of Kratos's ordeals thus far) has already been revealed as a massive boss fight, and as Kratos rides on the back of Pegasus between stages, he will fight winged griffins, both with and without riders.

Just so you all know, that last bit in the official trailer where Kratos rips off the griffin's wing and jumps off? *That is not a cutscene. It is actual gameplay.* It also varies whether or not there is a rider on the griffin. If there's no rider, you clip the griffin's wings. If there is a rider, you'll have to fight him first.

No, really. We *told* you this was badass.



TAKING FLIGHT TO PARTS UNKNOWN

Kratos's quest is world-spanning; he must reach the ends of the earth to accomplish his objective, but in between, he'll be flying to lairs, strongholds, secret island hideouts, the whole shebang. Since carjacking wasn't invented in Greece yet, Kratos will have to use the next best thing: the magical flying horse, Pegasus, whose wings are eternally aflame.

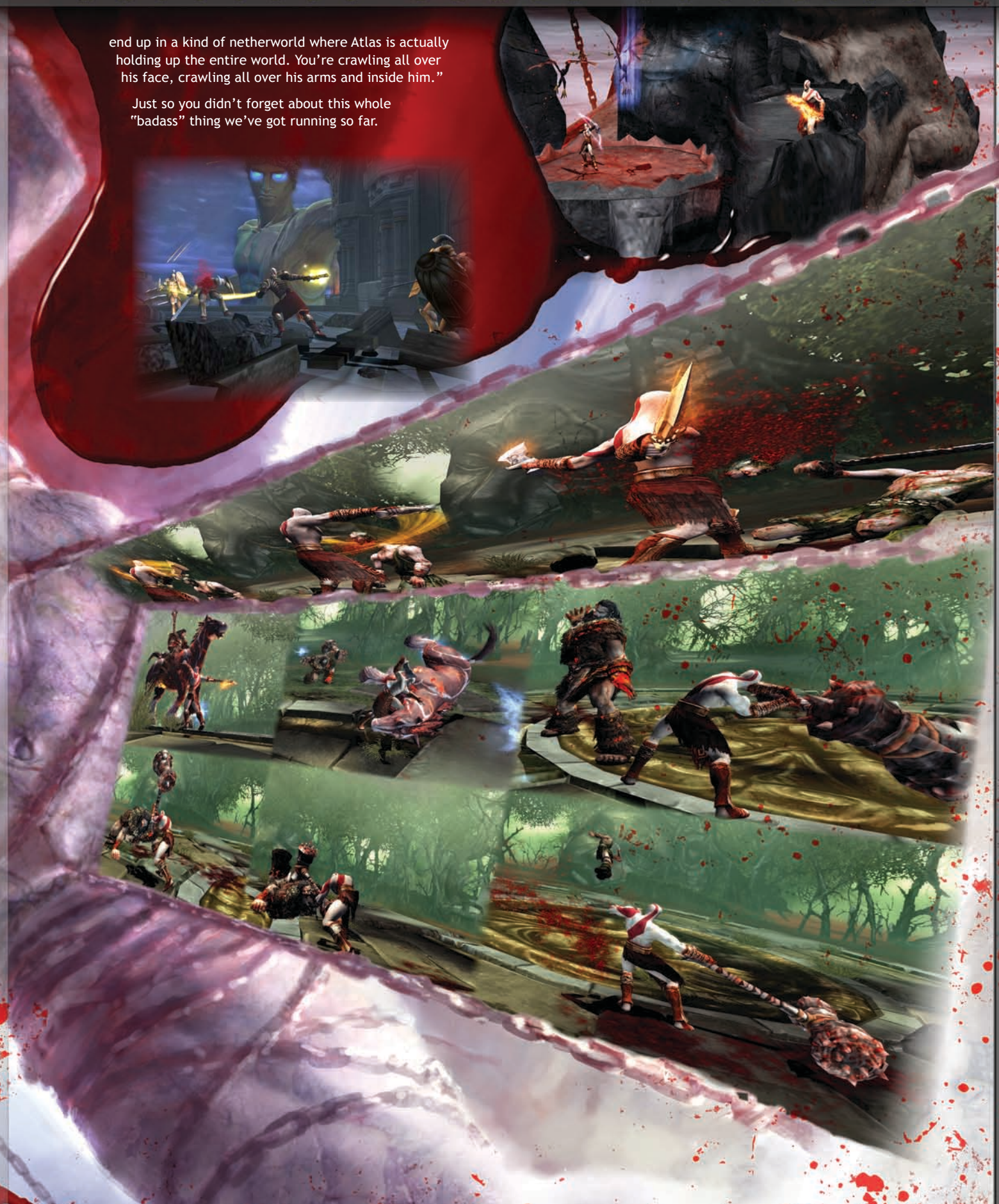
Kratos's new locations aren't limited to the skies, however. One of his major destinations is the Island of the Fates, a secret stronghold where destiny can be changed — not just Kratos's destiny, but those of many others. Kratos will not be alone on this island, and you will encounter most of Greek mythology's most famous faces, all searching for the same thing Kratos is.



As if all this weren't enough, you may recall that in the first game, Pandora's temple was held up by Cronus. It was definitely a sight to behold, but it's about to be outdone. This time around, Kratos will have the opportunity to scale Atlas himself as he holds up the earth, in keeping with this game's tradition of letting you actually play out what the first game would only let you see in cutscenes. "You're going to be going to the [Fates'] island, and you're going to be falling through the earth. You

end up in a kind of netherworld where Atlas is actually holding up the entire world. You're crawling all over his face, crawling all over his arms and inside him."

Just so you didn't forget about this whole "badass" thing we've got running so far.



MORTAL ABILITIES, TITANIC POWERS

As in the first game, Kratos will have four magic powers to gain and choose from. Unlike the first game, multiple weapons will make the cut. (The Golden Fleece, which allows the reflection of Gorgon stone gazes, was already revealed in the E3 demo.) The first game has only two weapons, but more had been planned and eventually cut. "The idea of having multiple weapons... we kind of thought of it late, and got our act together late, which is why the Blade of Artemis was sort of a half-hearted effort," said Barlog. "It was fun, and it was a great little extra, but we just didn't put the time into it... that we wanted to. We wanted to do multiple weapons, without losing the focus of the fact that the chain-blades are pretty freakin' badass. There's really honestly no reason for another weapon unless it truly complements [Kratos], and has a bonus associated with it."

All weapons and powers will be acquired from characters in the game, usually in the form of a fragment of their powers. Yes, this has done since the beginning of time, but it's also another way to keep track of Kratos's achievements, and mementos of the adventure that you've lived thus far.

The official name of the "wind bow" from the E3 demo of the game is the Typhon's Bane, which Kratos steals from the titan of the same name. It shoots arrows in rapid-fire fashion, and can be used to snipe enemies from a surprising distance, as well as juggle enemies in the air.

One of the other magic powers will return from the first game, and in addition, Barlog hints, "There's a really cool magic that you're going to get from Cronus that, I think, for the novice player, [it'll be really fun], but for the advanced player who looks deeper and understands how it works, really adds a lot to the combat, how to pin guys down, and how to deal with a large group of enemies."

The Blades of Athena, of course, are still the stars of the game, and allow for a new selection of finishing moves. Kratos can now also swing from designated ceiling fixtures (a la Samus Aran or the Bionic Commando) with the Blades for added mobility.



THE END WILL BE THE BEGINNING

The first *God of War* contained an immense amount of unlockables for anyone wanting to dig deep into the game, and *God of War II* continues the tradition. Some of these can be obtained by beating the game; others take the form of hidden (and not-so-hidden) collectibles in the game itself. For example, if you manage to take a certain number of Cyclopes' eyes for yourself, that's one unlockable.

The first and most notable addition to *God of War*'s unlockable franchise is Titan Mode. Three difficulties are available at the outset: Mortal, Spartan, and God, with God difficulty corresponding to that of the first game. Titan, unlocked after beating the game once, goes even beyond this. "God Mode in the last game was pretty hard," Barlog says, "but we've kind of ratcheted it up for the [final] difficulty because we're bringing the Titans into this game... we really wanted to something to play along with the epic nature of these giant beasts."

Sound daunting? It should, but there is hope. *God of War II* will also feature a sort of "New Game Plus" mode, similar to most RPGs. The powers and collectibles that you have amassed — weapons, upgrades, and magic — from your first playthrough can be taken with you into subsequent playthroughs, and into any of the alternate gameplay modes that you unlock. The emphasis here is on replayability, and keeping the experience fresh.

As for the supplemental material, the game will once again be packed to the gills with DVD-like special features. These go far beyond most other games' usual meager offerings of concept art. In addition, people who just love combat will be ecstatic to know that there's more fighting

to be had beyond the main game. The Challenge of the Titans, like the previous Challenge of the Gods, is a series of rooms that will test any aspiring *God of War*, but there's a new mode that Barlog alludes to: "For people who are, like, 'look, I just love

You Know What They Call Coffee In Greece?

A little ways into the original *God of War*, the player could engage in a minigame that most definitely helped earn the title's "M" rating. Simply put, after the narrator explains that no amount of women could put to rest the nightmares that plagues Kratos's mind, the game then allowed the player to *experience* such a scenario, through a button-pressing minigame that took place in Kratos's quarters. Most of the action was offscreen, but the visual cues and (ahem) convincing voice acting made it stand out.

Straight from the horse's mouth: the idea was David Jaffe's, though he did kick the idea around to a lot of people before implementing it. Some thought it was too much, while others (including Cory Barlog himself) loved the idea. In the end, it got in mainly due to the fact that it wasn't gratuitous sex just for the sake of being there. It helped to define Kratos as a character. Since the game was rated "M," meaning kids shouldn't be playing this game anyway, then no harm, no foul, right?

Did they ever come under fire for the minigame? In the wake of *Hot Coffee*, it's surprising to learn that no, they did not. Of course, Sony doesn't have a history of games that attract the ire of politicians under its belt.

As for whether or not such a thing will make a return, Barlog remains mysterious: "...if it happens, it happens... it's very in the story, and it's controlled by the player. That's all I'll say about that." It looks like we'll just have to play and see for ourselves.

to fight,' in this game, we've got answers for [them] as well." A straight-up fighting mode? One can only hope.

By the time you read this article, there will at least be a demo in your hands, if not the full game itself. *God of War II* is the original *God of War* turned up to 12, but unlike most "bigger, better, badder" sequels, both in games and movies (how many of us saw *Bad Boys II* more than one and a half times?), there's a lot to keep you coming back for more.

It's kind of poetic, really: the next generation of badass is on the previous generation of hardware. At least you won't have to shell out \$600 to experience it.



M

magfest

A gaming convention for gamers

An Interview with Brendan Becker

Twenty Seven year old Brendan Becker runs the show at MAGfest. We got ahold of him to pick his brain about all things related to MAGfest.

HGM: What is MAGfest?

Brendan: Magfest is the culmination of what is good about video games.

HGM: Why MAGfest?

BB: My friends and I were all good at throwing good game parties and concerts, so we decided to do it all at once. We went to MAGfest its first year, fell in love with it and bought it from Joseph Yamine, who was running it at the time.

HGM: What is the purpose of MAGfest?

BB: Everyone attends or staffs with a different purpose in mind. One of my purposes is to make money off of doing something awesome with video games, while making gaming better for everyone. [Another is] to give gamers an outlet to hang out with one another and feel like they truly belong somewhere. Today games are bigger than movies and music combined, yet gamers are still typecast as nerds that sit around with no lives. I want to prove that we're more than that.

HGM: So MAGfest is a for-profit then?

BB: No. We don't make money off of it, but we'd like to some day. I've invested thousands so far, and right now any extra money we get is put towards making the con better.

HGM: A lot of events at MAGfest deal with gaming culture. In your opinion, what is gaming culture?

BB: Gaming culture is about as



open-ended as your question. (laughs) If you can say you really like the music from *Guilty Gear*, that's gamer culture. Dressing up in a Wii-mote, and people saying "that guy is something else, he's awesome!" These people are into gamer culture. It doesn't have to be made into anything more than that. Gamers just want to be recognized as who they are, without being mocked for it.

HGM: What is your personal favorite thing about MAGfest?

BB: Putting it on so that so many other people can enjoy it. The other thing that I really look forward to is seeing all of the people that I don't get to see over the course of the year like *Virt*, the *Neskimos* and lots of other awesome people.

HGM: Why is MAGfest "not an expo?"

BB: Expos focus on businesses, dealers and increasing business and exposure to products and services; and we're just not interested in that. If people like that want to show off at MAGfest, like PNY giving away a Geforce 8800 this year, I don't have a problem with that. The problem I have is when that becomes the focus of the event. The focus of MAGfest should be having fun, playing games and rocking out.

Continued on page 50.

Laid back!

To a gamer that's used to bigger events, MAGfest will be underwhelming at first, until you realize that, unlike other cons, MAGfest is not a spectacle unto itself. Rather, the people, the events and the games are the focus of the con. Attending MAGfest is like hanging out with hundreds of friends that you didn't know you had. It's *that* laid-back!

It's so laid-back, in fact, that you can make requests in the game room! If you don't see a game you want to play, ask: they may have it. Almost everyone in the game room keeps a very good attitude about themselves. I got smoked like I have never been smoked before at *Street Fighter 2 Turbo: Hyper Fighting*. The nice guy that slaughtered me shook my hand and said "Good match." I know that he didn't mean that. I only hit him once in two rounds, but it was nice to not be slammed verbally, since I had already been slammed virtually. The attitude during tournaments is a little different than normal play, but that's to be expected, and come on, when you do nothing in *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* but cheese your opponent with Cable's Air Hyper Viper Beam you deserve to be heckled!

When you're exhausted from getting your game on,



the video room is a good place to kick back. Gems such as *Double Dragon*, *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Wizard* can be seen here. There are plenty of game-related cartoons as well, including game-based anime and everyone's favorite The "Super Mario Bros Super Show!" The biggest draw, however, is X-Strike studio's game-inspired fan films. Love them or hate them, there is no denying the pull they have in the gaming community, and at MAGfest, it shows.



Welcome

When most gamers think of a video game convention, they probably think of E3. A quick Internet search will show that even some game journalists have dubbed E3 a "convention." That's different now, of course, since it has been shrunk down to what it was supposed to be in the first place: a trade show. With E3 off of most gamers' plates, what are they to do? There's PAX, but a lot of the focus there is on Penny Arcade, and at a game convention the focus should be on the games and the fans, not the fellows who put the whole thing together.

Enter MAGfest, an annual four-day, twenty-four-hour video game convention in Virginia. It took place this year at the Sheraton Premiere in Vienna, January fourth through the seventh.



A feature by Metalbolt



Like most conventions, MAGfest also has panel events, ranging from video game politics to a name that tune contest. When you don't feel like gaming, or watching movies, panels are a great way to interact with other gamers. If you don't see a panel that you like, talk to MAGfest, and maybe next year you can run your own panel!

All of these things are fun and a great reason to go to MAGfest, but there is one other thing that sets it apart from other gaming events: the concerts. Friday and Saturday night there is a video game cover band concert. Friday night, Arm Cannon, Parasprinter, Year 200X, Powerglove and The NESkimos rocked it out. Saturday night, Shawn Phase, This Place is Haunted, Wave Theory, DJ Potatoe, The Smash Brothers and Sprite Slowdown rocked just as hard. MAGfest is to game music what Ozzfest is to Metal.

There are expos that pass themselves off as conventions. There are trade shows that are mistaken for conventions. There are conventions that focus a little too much on themselves. Then there are conventions that get it right. MAGfest gets it right. For next year's event dates, when they become available, check out www.magfest.org. See you there next year!



An Interview with Brendan Becker (cont.)

HGM: But not how much swag you can grab?
 BB: Right. Who cares how many company-branded cup holders you got for your beer? I could care less, ya know? I don't need extra goodies, I want cool stuff, like a CD from this awesome guy or a T-shirt from a band I've been listening to for a long time. That kind of stuff keeps the love flowing in the gaming community.

HGM: What's the ultimate goal for MAGfest? Do you have anything larger in scale in mind for it?
 BB: We might like a little bit more going on over the weekend. We wouldn't mind getting better organized and running other events. But MAGfest itself has been what we've wanted it to be from the start. At closing ceremonies when we ask what we can do to make it better, everyone always says "keep doing what you're doing, it's awesome!" So we do.

HGM: Would you like to see MAGfest become as big as something like Otakon?
 BB: I'm fairly adamant about keeping MAGfest small. Otakon is cool, because it's so huge, but I don't want to see MAGfest get that big. It would make MAGfest impersonal.

HGM: Why do you hate cosplayers so much?
 BB: Cosplayers are pretentious people. (laughs) If you think your costume is awesome, that's fine. If you think your costume is awesome and therefore you deserve to be the main event of MAGfest, that's not. (We had that happen once.) There is nothing wrong with a totally awesome kick-butt costume. I go around to other cons taking pictures of them all the time, but when you show up to a convention just to cosplay, not taking part in any of the other cool stuff that was planned, what does that say about the convention? There's a time for costuming, and there's a time for all of the other stuff that we plan for MAGfest. We schedule the costume contest last not because we hate [cosplay], but because it's not a major part of MAGfest.

HGM: Which is why you posted a "cosplayer haters anonymous" gathering in the schedule?
 BB: Definitely. It was late, I was tired, it was amusing. So it made it into the schedule. No one showed up to it anyway. I wrote that in mostly as a joke, but also so there was nothing else planned during the "name that tune" event.

HGM: You showed a few really bad video game movies in the movie room. I'm assuming not because people like them but because it's fun to shout at the screen?
 BB: Right.

HGM: So then, why no Uwe Boll?
 BB: Quite frankly, he sucks.

HGM: Fair enough. What could be done better at MAGfest?
 BB: Staffing! We need more staff! This year we had a group of people named the Dorsai Irregulars. Who are just awesome. If you need them to staff, they'll staff. If you need them to do security (which we did), they'll do that. I'm used to running everything at MAGfest myself. At this point we're too big that I can't do that anymore.

HGM: So besides showing up and enjoying the con, the most useful thing a gamer could do is staff?
 BB: Just volunteer to check badges at the door. Run something to a room. Run and pick up some burgers for a band that needs them. "Go to this room, you see the big shiny thing that's black? Pick it up and bring it back." You don't need knowledge, just an able body and a willingness to help. We push really hard for staff all the time. Not staffing is cool, just show up and have fun, but if you want to help MAGfest be better, we always have room for more staff.

HGM: Thanks for your time, and thanks for MAGfest!
 BB: Thank you, and you're welcome!

REVIEWS

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HGM REVIEW GAUGE

- 5 = Really Good
- 4 = Good
- 3 = Average
- 2 = Bad
- 1 = Really Bad

Wolfin '07

ROGUE GALAXY

Review by Wanderer

Publisher : SCEA
Developer : Level-5
Release Date : 1/30/2007
Rating : Teen
Genre(s) : Action-RPG
Category : Pirates! In! SPAAAAAAACE
of players : 1

In the event that someone were to write a book tracking the history of the Japanese console RPG, the chapter featuring *Final Fantasy XII* and *Rogue Galaxy* would have to be titled "The Return of the Grind."

This isn't an indictment of either game's quality by any stretch of the imagination, and *Rogue Galaxy* is a quality game, albeit one that can't quite make up its mind what genre it is. The random encounters play out like a turn-based action-RPG, the world exploration and characterization are pure CRPG, and the difficulty curve and post-game content are straight out of an MMORPG. You spend a lot of time in *Rogue Galaxy* camping on save points, grinding levels, looking for drops, and stocking up on healing items, all so you can survive the dash to the next save point.

If *Rogue Galaxy* didn't have a solid combat system, it'd be a chore to play. Fortunately, it does; each random encounter turns into a frenetic real-time beat-'em-up, with up to two CPU characters fighting by your side at a time and just enough strategy to remove it from the dreaded "button-masher" territory.

This also means that you can get ganged up on in real time, which is where a big chunk of the grinding comes in. *Rogue Galaxy* wants you to grind for experience, for powering up your weaponry, for hunting prizes, for post-game bonuses, and basically to get anything done at all. If you don't spend the first two hours in a new dungeon scared to break direct line of sight with a save point, you're either cheating or a ninja.

It's possible I'm belaboring the point. *Rogue Galaxy* is actually a pretty good time, all told.



It's a sort of space fantasy, about a young man who wants to leave his backwater planet and explore space, and the crew of idiosyncratic pirates who accidentally allow this to happen. It's a story full of space galleons, people sword-fighting in the middle of futuristic cities, and absolutely enormous monsters, all told with a decent cast of voice actors (including the omnipresent Steven Blum, who's turning into the Mickey Rooney of video games) and streaming cel-shaded graphics that are frankly well beyond what I thought the PS2 was capable of.

The game isn't without its quirks and flaws. The grinding's a problem; so's wanting to throttle a sizable percentage of the cast. It feels like the game was designed for multiplayer but can only be played in singleplayer, especially when one of your CPU buddies gets swarmed and goes down in five seconds because the CPU doesn't know how to block or dodge. You can freeze the action at any time to throw items around, though, which helps mitigate that.

This is still a quality action-RPG, for all those complaints. *Rogue Galaxy* is one of the competitors for the title of the last great PS2 game, and while it's by no means flawless, it should still keep you entertained for a few dozen hours.

Rating: 4 of 5



the revelation flow

No good MMO-esque RPG would be complete without making you carry around three inventory screens' worth of bizarre stuff, such as harvested monster bits, imported foodstuffs, precious gems, and more. As a general rule, the less you'd want to pick it up, the more important it'll turn out to be.



In *Rogue Galaxy*, these items are used to progress through a character's Revelation Flow, a grid that contains each character's special abilities. By setting an assortment of seemingly random items in place, you can unlock an ability, and in so doing reveal the next set of options on the grid. It's a remarkably abuse-proof system, as some items simply won't be available early on no matter how much grinding you do, but it does mean you'll spend a few hours hanging around on various planets, killing monsters so they'll drop the items you need to max out your Flow.

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

Rogue Galaxy is a good game, but never quite breaks the threshold and becomes a great game. That's frustrating, because all of the potential is there. Allowing co-op multi-player would've been a good start.

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

Shining Force EXA



Review by Wanderer

Publisher : Sega
Developer : Sega
Release Date : 3/2007
Rating : Everyone

Genre(s) : Action-RPG
Category : I Like Swords
of players : 1



In the field, *Shining Force EXA* is pure top-down hack-and-slash, with cel-shaded graphics, hand-drawn character art, and full voice acting. You can customize characters by picking up Mythril and spending it at a machine in the castle, amping up stats or skills, and every piece of equipment you use has a proper visual effect on your character.

It's a decent formula, well-executed, but where it falls down are the finer details. For one thing, the voice clips during combat are not merely repetitive but maddening; one character in particular, Faulklin the androgynous young priest, sounds like a techno remix of himself.

Repetition, come to think of it, is *Shining Force EXA's* entire problem. Dungeon crawlers are inherently repetitive anyway, with strategies that read like shampoo instructions: run into lair, use violence on everything you see, repeat. The best dungeon crawlers mitigate the occasional monotony of the premise by including elaborate skill trees, bizarre storylines, varied locations, or, most frequently, multiplayer.

Shining Force EXA needed multiplayer. With a crew of four adventurers to help you mow down orcs and giants, this would've been one of the last great party games on the PlayStation 2, especially now that the PS3 is out and you ostensibly don't need to hunt up a multitap anymore. (Hell, with three friends, the four of you might even be able to afford a PS3.)

As a singleplayer experience, *Shining Force EXA* lacks the druglike addictiveness that makes a good dungeon crawler more than something you kill time with. The presentation is admittedly great, but it feels like the singleplayer version of a multiplayer game.

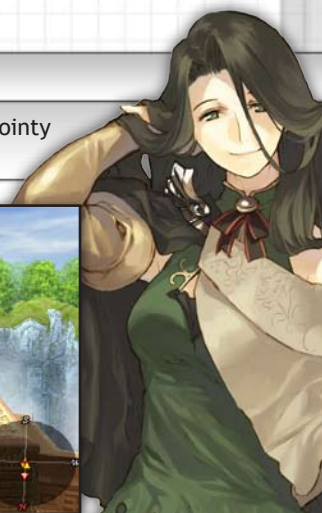
By the way, Sega: translate *Shining Force III's* last two scenarios already. I mean, come on.

Rating : 3 of 5

2nd opinion by EcchiFreak • Alternate Rating : 3.5 of 5

Natural-sounding dialogue and inoffensive cel-shading make putting the pointy end into the soft bits more fun than usual.

FINAL SCORE : 3.25 of 5



Q. What makes a hardcore gamer?
A. An undying love for games.

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19. weskershuna	4210
20. Magunbo	3735
21. eternalblue81	3730
22. darkslime	3690
23. MP1tails	3620
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The holiday season is over but we're still in the giving spirit. If you're in the mood to receive, enter our Lost Planet competition to win not only points, but perhaps even a copy of the game!
[more...]

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VALHALLA KNIGHTS

Review by **Lynxara**

Publisher : XSEED Games
Developer : Marvelous Int.
Release Date : 3/6/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+

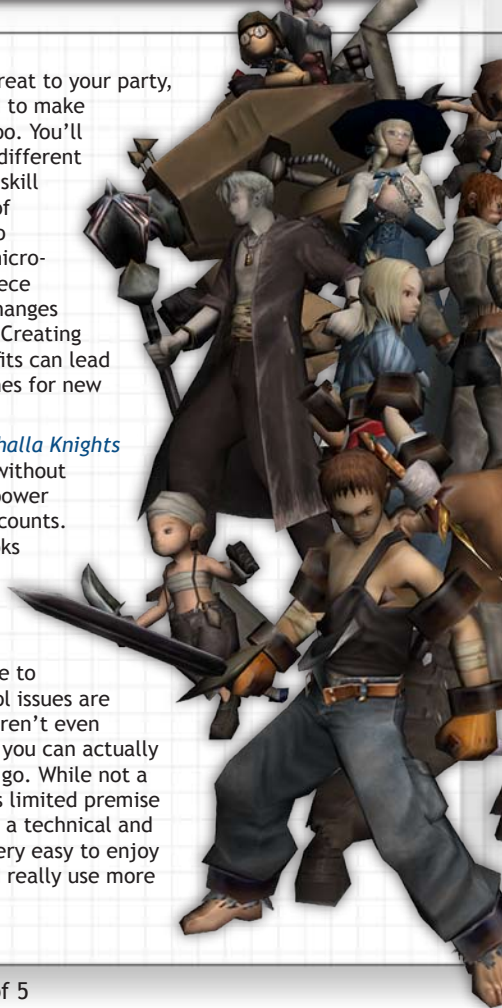
Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Dungeon Stomp
of players : 1-2



Knights pose a legitimate threat to your party, so you'll find yourself forced to make good use of that freedom, too. You'll end up tinkering with many different race, class, equipment, and skill combinations in the course of your game. The graphics also encourage obsessive party micro-management, since every piece of equipment in the game changes the look of your characters. Creating matching yet functional outfits can lead to bizarrely obsessive searches for new types of equipment.

The character models in *Valhalla Knights* are detailed and attractive without blowing a lot of processing power on pushing PS2-caliber poly-counts. Instead, *Valhalla Knights* looks like a late-gen PlayStation game. The dungeon environments are likewise sparsely textured and lack much detail, but still manage to be evocative. Camera control issues are nearly non-existent. There aren't even any obtrusive load times, so you can actually play *Valhalla Knights* on the go. While not a supremely inspired game, its limited premise is implemented so well from a technical and design standpoint that it's very easy to enjoy despite itself. The PSP could really use more titles like this.

Rating : 4 of 5



Most PSP RPGs are simply creaky ports of much older games, and the few that aren't don't often rise above mediocrity. *Valhalla Knights* is, in contrast, an intelligently designed and implemented game that makes excellent use of the PSP hardware. While "grind" has become something of a dirty word in game design in recent years, there's really no other way to describe *Valhalla Knights's* basic gameplay. It is a moderately long and surprisingly interesting grind, and makes no apologies for this.

Your game is essentially about gathering a party of adventurers at a local Guild so you can begin exploring the game's many dungeons for monsters to kill and treasure chests to loot. You can take Quests to gain extra cash, which mostly ask you to find particular points in the dungeon or to fight particular enemies. Kill monsters to raise your levels until you've gotten strong enough to take all the Quests, kill everything, and create your own perfect custom party of nine characters (with up to six on the battlefield simultaneously). At that point, the game is basically over. In theory, you can go online to do extra co-op missions or have competitive bouts with another player, but *Valhalla Knights's* ad hoc wireless ensures that not many players are going to bother.

What's so fun about playing *Valhalla Knights* is the way the combat system and dungeon exploration combine. It's essentially a portable *Final Fantasy XII* with much tougher dungeon crawls and much easier optional quests. While in dungeons, you trigger encounters by touching (or being touched by) one of the monsters that wander the dungeon map. Once you're in battle, you control one character directly while the others are managed by AI options you set up in the "Behavior" option in the menu. Putting "Thought Points" in a certain type of behavior results in your character adopting that as part of their fighting style. Likewise, not investing points in a behavior results in your character never taking that action. You can tap Select to quickly take control of another character in the party, and even change a character's equipment on the fly.

You are, essentially, free to micromanage every battle and almost every aspect of the game to a nearly ludicrous degree. Encounters in *Valhalla*

2nd opinion by **Racewing** • Alternate Rating : 3.5 of 5

The dressings are about as generic as you can get, but the battles and party management system definitely make up for it.

FINAL SCORE : **3.75** of 5

Monster Kingdom: Jewel Summoner

Review by **Sardius**

Publisher : Atlus
Developer : Gaia
Release Date : 2/13/2006
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Dreamcast-quality
of players : 1-2



Do you remember when it was possible to play RPGs? Way back when, an RPG would immediately send you off into the wilderness with nothing more than a bamboo pole and a few words of encouragement from the king, and the fun would then come in trying to survive and build yourself up in a world that hated you. Despite their lack of narrative depth, these early entries in the genre are still engrossing today thanks to their focus on rewarding gameplay that communicated a constant sense of advancement.

Now, we get games like *Monster Kingdom: Jewel Summoner*. Forget the days of being able to wander around as you please within the first few minutes of gameplay; you'll have to endure two and a half hours of tutorials and approximately three million lines of dialogue before *Jewel Summoner* stops holding your hand and becomes something that actually requires your input. By this point, your attention span will be so strained that you'd question whether even the most forgiving of RPG fans would want to continue.

During its excruciating first few hours, *Jewel Summoner* introduces an interesting plot, then proceeds to completely ignore this plot so that your main character can go to school. He needs to learn how to

summon monsters, you see. Well, actually, he can summon monsters already, but only sort of. It's complicated. Thankfully, everything will become more clear after hours of pushing the X button to advance dialogue sequences. What fun!

In essence, *Jewel Summoner* plays like someone glued a visual novel onto *Pokémon*, only it has about half the depth of the latter and none of the naked breasts you'd expect from the former. This wouldn't be so bad if its supporting characters were interesting enough to warrant their hours of drawn-out and redundant dialogue, but this is certainly not the case. Do you like squeaky-voiced anime girls who refer to themselves in the third person? How about wordless loners with tragic pasts? And who could possibly hate brash hotshots who constantly insult others? At least the hammy voice acting is good for a laugh every so often, because otherwise a good portion of *Jewel Summoner* would be intolerable.

Battle sequences are where the game is at its best. Your party can summon multiple monsters at a time to attack enemies, and various complexities like elemental alignment and jewel amalgamation can be used to your tactical advantage. You can also capture rogue monsters using Pokéballs (mistakenly translated as "prisms" here), and then train them as your own. The system has its quirks, but it's an interesting enough formula that benefits from its simplicity and relatively quick pace.

Monster Kingdom: Jewel Summoner becomes slightly more interesting after the initial tutorial hump, but it's really hard to overlook those first few hours, especially when so many of the game's major characters are so annoying and clichéd. PSP owners, your wait for a worthy RPG continues.

Rating : 2.5 of 5

2nd opinion by **Spinner 8** • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

The battle system's pretty entertaining. However, like the rest of the game, it's not anything you haven't seen elsewhere.

FINAL SCORE : **2.75** of 5



REVIEW GUITAR HERO II

XBOX 360

PLATFORM

Wii

REVIEW WarioWare

SMOOTH MOVES

Publisher : Red Octane
Developer : Harmonix
Release Date : 4/3/07
Rating : Teen

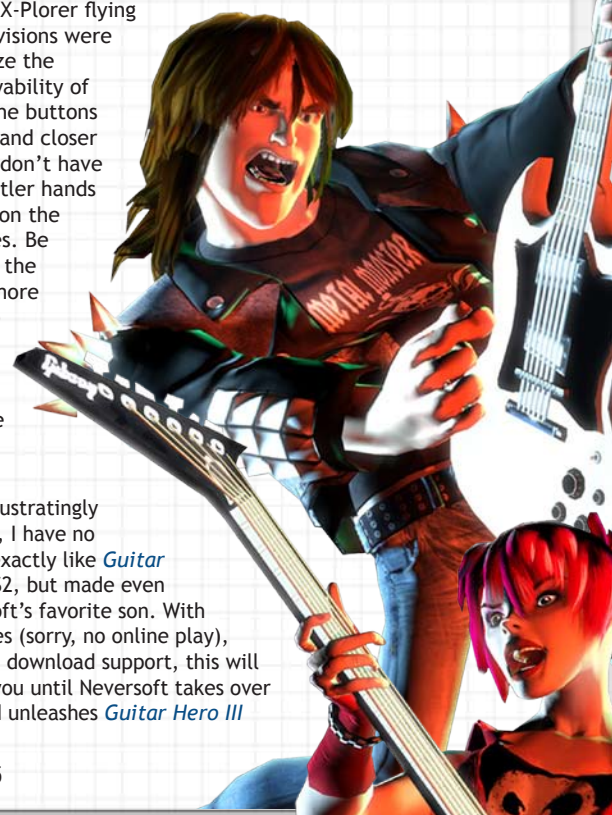
Genre(s) : Music
Category : Not Fit For Apartment Life
of players : 1-2



an ivory colored X-Plorer flying V. Thankfully, revisions were made to maximize the comfort and playability of the controller. The buttons are now smaller and closer together, so you don't have to have pro wrestler hands to be successful on the harder difficulties. Be warned, though: the buttons are far more sensitive now, so take advantage of the practice mode until you get a feel for the new controller. Trust me.

Other than the frustratingly sensitive buttons, I have no complaints. It's exactly like *Guitar Hero II* for the PS2, but made even better by Microsoft's favorite son. With multiplayer modes (sorry, no online play), leaderboards and download support, this will easily entertain you until Neversoft takes over the franchise and unleashes *Guitar Hero III* some day.

Rating : 5 of 5



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

It rocked on the PS2 and it rocks on the 360. I love the white controller, love the extras, and love the game!



This is exactly what the Nintendo Wii needs to distinguish itself from the Xbox 360 and PS3: innovative, interesting games that make full use of the Wii remote, but are intuitive and simple enough to allow complete newbies to pick them up and play.

Twilight Princess is touted by many to be the Wii's "killer app." It comes close, but I think that *WarioWare: Smooth Moves* edges it out. It's fun and funny. The introductions and diagrams that explain how to use the remote for each microgame are clearly explained, but have a healthy dash of humor thrown in. How often have you heard someone refer to the french fry as nature's greatest achievement?

The game itself uses simple graphics that are just perfect for the Wii. It is reminiscent of a flash game. Characters have little animation in general, giving the impression

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

While the original GBA version is still the best *Wario Ware*, *Smooth Moves* is funny as hell and packed full of variety. Just don't think how silly you'll look doing The Elephant.



Publisher : Nintendo
Developer : Nintendo
Release Date : 1/16/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+

Genre(s) : Microgames
Category : Wacky
of players : 1-12



of puppets set against a backdrop. This doesn't hurt the game at all, however. In fact, the graphics are charming. Nintendo knows its fanbase and isn't afraid to deliver the fanservice. The Nintendo throwback stage in particular is filled with references to Nintendo games new and old. There are microgames based on *Metroid Prime*, *Brain Age*, *Super Mario Bros.*, and *Nintendogs*. Expect a few other familiar faces to show up, as well, including a certain sword-swinging, Zelda-saving, ocarina-playing youngster.

The microgames all use a variety of different controls, with an on-screen notice to let you know if you should hold the remote as if it were a TV remote, a mohawk, a samurai sword, or a steering wheel. They pop up briefly, but are immediately understandable. You'll be doing a lot of switching back and forth between the forms, as the game calls it.

Speaking as someone who wasn't a real fan of the GameCube entry in this series, I must say that I'm quite impressed. Something about the Wii remote makes this game feel very immediate and real, leading to a more fun gameplaying experience. Nintendo suggests that you stand up and let go of all your inhibitions while you play this game. That is an excellent idea. Break it out at a party for some real fun.

Rating : 5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 4.5



EUROPA UNIVERSALIS III



Review by KouAidou

Publisher : Paradox Interactive
Developer : Paradox Interactive
Release Date : 1/23/2007
Rating : Everyone (Alcohol and Tobacco Reference, Mild Violence)

Genre(s) : Strategy
Category : World Domination
of players : 1

The fact that *Europa Universalis III* is made by Paradox Interactive should tell you a lot of what the game's about. The company's name is synonymous with complex, open-ended, semi-real-time strategy games; the name *Europa Universalis* means that the game's focus will be on Europe's growing global dominance during the ages of exploration and conquest.

EUIII could also be called a sandbox game, in which your sandbox is the entire world. This is not like the so-called "sandbox games" of the action genre, which are simply open environments you run around in until you face your next rail-based challenge. This game provides the setting, the rules, and the boundaries, then lets you run uninhibited to choose your own goals and fulfill them to the best of your ability.

When you begin, you'll be able to choose a year between the 15th and 17th centuries, and then you'll have three hundred fifty years to play out the history of the world however you like. Are you a pioneer, expanding your nation through colonization of terra incognita, or do you prefer to push your borders through military conquest? Religion and culture also play major roles: when expanding, you must deal with the possibility of cultural and religious clashes, or face internal rebellion.

As with most games in Paradox's family, one of the highlights is your great freedom of choice in choosing your home country. Playing as a smaller, less ambitious nation, your goals might simply be to bolster your economy as much as possible through trade and religious influence. As a native tribe of the Americas, it may be enough of a challenge for you to try to remain autonomous against more advanced invaders. Uninterested in petty European politics? Play as an Oriental nation, and use the foolish westerners as trading tools while you spread your influence across Asia.

The execution of the concept is basically flawless. The graphics are the best we've seen from a Paradox game: simple from a distance but providing more information the further you zoom in. The game's

FINAL SCORE :
4.25 of 5

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

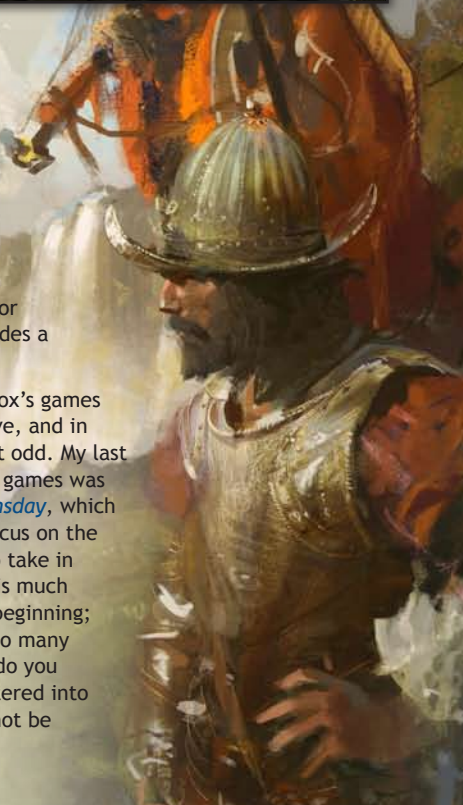
This is what a sandbox game should be. The learning curve is a bit unreasonable, but if you have any taste at all for strategy, check this one out.



extensive menus are a breeze to navigate, and its concepts are entirely intuitive; if you have any doubts as to why you can't do something, an explanation is simply a mouse rollover away. The intense musical score is especially deserving of praise, and anyone thinking of getting the game should go for the special edition, which includes a soundtrack CD.

The usual complaint that Paradox's games face is their steep learning curve, and in this respect I found *EUIII* is a bit odd. My last experience with the company's games was last year's *Hearts of Iron: Doomsday*, which was more complex due to its focus on the military, but also a bit easier to take in as a result. *Europa Universalis* is much easier to understand from the beginning; the trouble is, in a world with so many possibilities to explore, where do you begin? It's not a game to be entered into lightly: once you start, it may not be possible to stop.

Rating : 4.5 of 5



Heroes of Annihilated Empires



Review by Metalbot

Publisher : CDV
Developer : GSC Game World
Release Date : 11/6/2006
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : RTS
Category : Crossbreed
of players : 1-7



There have been attempts in the past to mix the RTS with other genres. Some of them were solid contenders (I will always love you, *Sacrifice!*). Others were failed attempts at a great idea. Solid gameplay or not, they almost always fail in the marketplace, because most PC gamers are not open to new experiences. When a game comes along that promises to be in their genre and it ventures outside of the known boundaries, they hate it. *Heroes of Annihilated Empires* bravely marches into this battlefield. Having bravery, however, doesn't always mean that you'll win the battle.

The main unit you control in *HoAE* is the Hero unit. This unit serves as your avatar. If you are in an RTS battle, he (or she) will be how you cast spells. When you're in RPG-style battles, he (or she) will usually be your only controllable unit.

Forced into RTS or RPG gameplay styles, you must act accordingly in each level, and you're often given little choice as to which style to use. When you do get a choice, going it alone is silly, and most times impossible, when you could have chosen to have an entire army to back you up.



As an RTS, *HoAE* is too old school. Little actual strategy actually comes into play. This will be fine for some people, but the time it takes to build just one unit will not. Most modern strategy games give you the option to speed the game up. In multiplayer, *HoAE* does; in singleplayer, it does not. After suffering heavy damage, it can take well over forty-five minutes to replenish your units. That is far too long to be sitting idle, waiting to play again.

As an RPG, *HoAE* suffers from a lack of balance. Build your hero wrong and you'll regret it later on. Unlike pure RPGs, starting over in *HoAE* is a daunting task, because each map can take upwards of three hours to beat. Again, if the game could be sped up, this would not cause a problem.

Underneath all of the muck, there are plenty of things that would have made *HoAE* decent: bright colors, huge battles featuring several hundred units, no irritating voice acting every time you click on a unit and a *Diablo*-esque addictiveness when in RPG maps. Unfortunately, the inability to speed up the game when you have about an hour of troop-building ahead of you, or when your hero must rely on auto-regen to heal, means that you'll be watching *HoAE* more than you'll be playing it.

Rating : 2.5 of 5

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

Neat graphics and huge battles of attrition make *HoAE* fun. However, a clunky UI and bad unit pathfinding (they have their own agenda, I swear it!) keep it from being great.

FINAL SCORE :
2.75 of 5



Romance of the Three Kingdoms XI



Preview by Hitoshura

Publisher : Koei
Developer : Koei
Release Date : 2/7/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+

Genre(s) : Strategy
Category : Historical/Turn-Based
of players : 1-8 (Pass the Controller)



Koei's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms (RTK)* series is now in its eleventh iteration. While fans and armchair generals alike may never tire of Koei's efforts, Koei seems to be tired of introducing newcomers to the complexities of detail-oriented strategy. Thus, let it be written in stone that *Romance of the Three Kingdoms XI* is for long-time fans only.



A newcomer can't simply start playing without first spending over an hour in the tutorials, because you're plunked down in the middle of a campaign with utterly no advice, direction, briefings, or instructions on how to execute a plan. The

context-sensitive tutorials from *X* are gone; in their place are prescribed lectures followed by a practice session you choose from the title menu. This may annoy people who learn in a practical nature, as well as being forced to observe the failed humor of "Egotistical Student/Arrogant Teacher" lessons.

Once you sink your teeth into the game, you'll find that it has a lot of meat to it. Navigating menu commands quickly becomes second nature, and before you know it, you'll be recruiting troops to attack, building traps, and laying siege to walls and cities while developing each city's land. During the game, officers might engage their opponent in the form of Duels and Debates. Duels aren't too enjoyable, since you and your

opponent take turns attacking each other for fifty blows, or until there's a victor. Debates, on the other hand, are every bit as complex and strategic as the rest of the game. They are incredibly complicated to explain, but rest assured that the tutorial explains debating succinctly. Take my word for it: debates are fast, simple, highly strategic, and fun to play.

There is so much information to take into consideration for every officer (even those that you can create manually) and city that managing it all can make *Three Kingdoms* a headache to play. There are pages and pages of stats and technical info for every object in the game. Knowing this, Koei has thoughtfully provided a context-sensitive encyclopedia at the touch of the Select button to ease the burden.

One categorical flaw with how *XI* plays is its 3D map. You can freely rotate and tilt the camera around, but it's hard to see anything because the sprites are so small, and the essential info-overlays overlap themselves and the sprites, making it aggravating to find anything on a crowded map. It gets especially bad when you can't relate troop positions to cities automatically, because the aerial perspective is so tiny.

If one victory is not enough for you, *RTK XI* offers multiple starting points with varying levels of difficulty to choose from. For many people, conquering China once will be enough without making the game a chore to play. Fans of the series will be pleased to know that after *Romance of the Three Kingdoms X* left out multiplayer play, Koei has brought it back. You can assign up to eight controllable forces in the Scenario mode to be played by passing the controller around after every turn. *XI* is fantastic when playing against another player rather than the CPU, which is unfortunate because there's no online play. Ultimately, *RTK XI* is a game you should rent before you buy it.

Rating : 3 of 5

2nd opinion by KouAidou • Alternate Rating : 3.5 of 5

My first experience on a *RTK* game was perfectly enjoyable, and I, for one, enjoyed the silliness of the tutorials. This game really, really, really needed to be on the PC, though.

FINAL SCORE :
3.25 of 5



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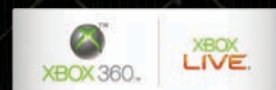


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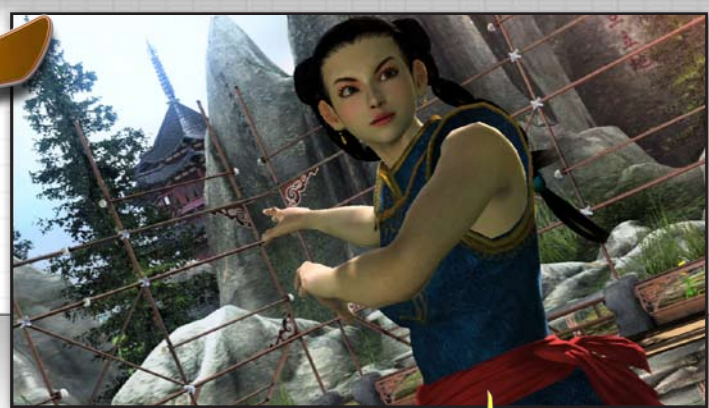
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Virtua Fighter 5

Review by 4thletter

Publisher : Sega
Developer : Sega
Release Date : 02/20/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : Fighting
Category : Citizen Kane
of players : 1-2



The *Virtua Fighter* series, in general, is the Orson Welles or Hitchcock of fighting games. *Tekken* and *Dead or Alive* are the Quentin Tarantinos of the fighting game world. They speak to different audiences. One is not inherently better than the other, and there is some level of overlap between the two. Orson Welles, for example, acted in *Transformers: The Movie* and Tarantino helped write *Natural Born Killers*.



FINAL SCORE :
4.5 of 5

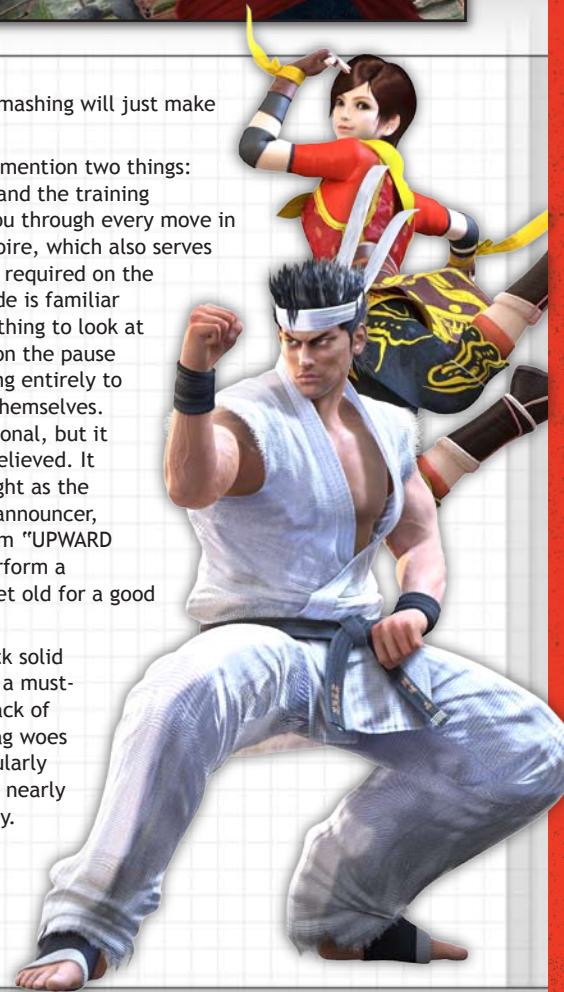
Still with me? *Virtua Fighter 5* maintains its serious roots, but still features a few nods toward gaining a toe-hold in pop culture. It is still obscurely (or wonderfully, depending on your point of view) technical, but that is assuaged a bit by the bright and incredible graphics. Characters like El Blaze, Kage, and Wolf look great. Backs and muscles glimmer and sweat and the animation is on point. The backgrounds are bright and vibrant, and while not interactive in the *Dead or Alive 4* sense, definitely have plenty of walls, water puddles, and other things to make you go "Wow!" when your character gets body-slammed into them.

The fighting is very carefully paced. It isn't as insane as *Tekken* or Capcom's 2D *Versus* games and it will give you fits if you try to play it like one. Tossing out random attacks will get you absolutely nowhere. *Virtua Fighter* has been called a "fighting simulation," rather than a fighting game, and it kind of fits. You have

to think ahead. Button mashing will just make you look dumb. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention two things: the commentary mode and the training mode. Training walks you through every move in your character's repertoire, which also serves to teach you the timing required on the game's moves. This mode is familiar and welcome. It is one thing to look at the move list included on the pause screen. It's another thing entirely to actually *do* the moves themselves. The commentary is optional, but it has to be heard to be believed. It isn't quite as overwrought as the *Street Fighter Alpha 3* announcer, but hearing a guy scream "UPWARD THRUST!" when you perform a pop-up doesn't really get old for a good long while.

Virtua Fighter 5 is a rock solid entry in the series, and a must-buy for your PS3. The lack of online support due to lag woes is disappointing, particularly when other games have nearly flawless online gameplay. Still, it is well worth a play with some friends. Just don't expect very much flash.

Rating : 4.5 of 5



2nd opinion by Roger Danish • Alternate Rating : 4.5 of 5
Virtua Fighter 5 for the PS3 looks and plays as one would expect from the series and a first round next-gen title. While it doesn't overly impress, it continues to do everything it does best even better.



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Microsoft Zune
• MP3 Player • Price: \$249.99

Reviews by 4thletter

It's pretty much impossible to review the Zune without making comparisons to the iPod. At the moment, neither is drastically better than the other. iTunes and the iPod are better established, with a wide range of accessories and songs available online, but Zune and the Zune Marketplace offer a subscription/rental service and a built-in FM tuner. The larger screen and fonts on the Zune is also a master stroke, though the Zune is heavier and thicker, breadth-wise, than the iPod. The Zune is also incompatible with Apple's OSX, but that market is probably using the iPod anyway. The customizable backdrops are kind of cool, too.

One problem: if you want to play music off your PC using the Zune software, you'll likely find that it comes up short. If you want to begin playing your library from a certain song, you'll have a devil of a time getting it to work. Searching for a song will play only that one song, instead of using that song as the beginning of a playlist that includes your entire library. The Marketplace points also add an unnecessary step in purchasing songs. Why not just support straight credit card transactions? A 60GB model would be nice, as well, but I can understand why they launched with only one.



Features
Three-inch screen
30GB hard drive

Overall, though, the Zune is a nice bit of entry-level hardware. It has a bright and large screen, and its weight isn't too much of a downer. Hopefully firmware and software updates will fix a few of the honestly minor problems with it.

Zune Home A/V Pack



Zune Car Pack



Zune Travel Pack



Zune Accessories

Ideazon Reaper Gaming Mouse
• PC Mouse • Price: \$39.99

Hardcore gamers pay attention to their hardware. This is especially true of hardcore PC gamers. A bit of unwanted latency here, a stuck key there, and your awesome raid in *World of Warcraft* just went from "easy-peasy" to "in the toilet."

Ideazon's Reaper mouse is another gaming mouse focused on replicating every little motion you make with the mouse. It even comes with a gold plated USB 2.0 connector, just for that extra bit of speed. How much speed? Well, it runs at a pretty nifty 1600dpi and, according to the box, "6469 frames per second."

On top of that, it comes with six fully customizable buttons, an on-the-fly DPI switching button, and a contoured grip. It's a very good-looking mouse, too, with a black finish and red glow. The downside: it's not a nice mouse for southpaws. If you grip your mouse with your left hand, expect an awkward ride.



Features
1600dpi
7 buttons
Rubberized buttons

Razer Tarantula Gaming Keyboard
• PC Keyboard • Price: \$99.99

Razer's Tarantula has a hefty price tag for a hefty keyboard. Is it worth the money? That depends on how serious of a gamer you are. It has a bunch of features that may convince you, however.

The Tarantula comes with an "anti-ghosting capability." Most keyboards have a limit on the number of keys that can be pressed at once. This, in turn, limits the number of shortcuts or macros you can set up. The Tarantula is programmed to lift this limit, leaving you with a newfound freedom for programming keys. While we're on the subject of programming keys, it even comes with a set of ten keys that are customized for use in FPS titles. Having two extra USB ports on the board is nice as well. It isn't as gaming-customized as some gaming keyboards out there, but it's a step in the proper direction.



Features
Anti-ghosting
100 Customizable profiles
10 Programmable hot keys

Nyko ZERO Wireless PS2 Controller
• Controller • Price: \$49.99

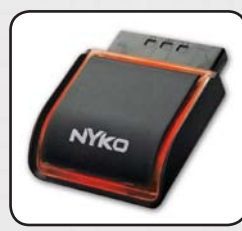
We managed to get our paws on the Zero Wireless controller that we previewed a few months back. Nyko's new pad is quite interesting, to say the least. People who pay attention to hardware will notice a couple of familiar features and a few new ones that make so much sense you wonder why no one's included them before now.

You will probably spot the little slot on top of the controller pretty early on. That's where you can stick a USB cable and recharge your battery. The good bit here is that the rechargeable battery comes with the controller, along with a compartment to stick in a couple of AAs. There is even a battery indicator light on the controller's face, to go along with the backlight buttons.

I'm not very fond of the recessed L2/R2 buttons. They're thinner and pointy, so they leave less of a footprint, which means that there is less of a button to press. In contrast, the L1 and R1 keys are large and contoured for a perfect feel.



Features
Comes with rechargeable battery
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Battery indicator
25 hours of play time



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CASTLE SHIKIGAMI 2

Castle Shikigami 2 had a low-profile release, ignorable anime cover art, and you can find it in the bargain bin at every second or third GameStop. It's also the best damn game you'll ever spend \$10 on, and that's not just in comparison to the used copies of *Choro Q* and *Fugitive Hunter* with which it shares shelf space. *Castle Shikigami 2* is a great shooter for a great price, but more than that, it's also one of the finest comedy masterpieces of our time.

As a vertically-scrolling shooter, however, *Castle Shikigami 2* is still pretty awesome. It has multiple playable characters who all have different powers and attributes, and each has a unique storyline. Your chosen character only possesses two attacks: a normal shot and a "Shikigami" attack, which is a more focused and powerful move that comes at the expense of speed and range. The power and effectiveness of your shots and Shikigami depend on your choice of character, as all of them have radically different attacks, and all require different strategies and playstyles as a result.

As an added wrinkle to the standard shooter formula, your shots become stronger whenever your character grazes against (or "buzzes") enemy bullets, and any points you earn will increase exponentially. This unique risk-based gameplay mechanic allows for some interesting player-controlled flexibility as far as difficulty is concerned, as more daring play is consistently rewarded with higher scores.

That's nice and all, but forget everything I just said because none of it's important. I'm recommending *Castle Shikigami 2* because its localization is so amazingly awful, you'll swear that it must have been botched on purpose. The script was given the roughest, most literal translation possible, with no cleanup whatsoever. Due to bugs, entire paragraphs are skipped during story sequences. Individual lines of dialogue are full of bizarre non-sequiturs and literally-translated Japanese humor, and at no point does the storyline ever make any sense.

The best part? *It's all fully voiced.* A sample monologue from an early level:

"Still a bit green. I'm only 17. Too much fighting! I don't like it!! I am so pissed! Stop making trouble! *Kicking your butts!*"

Imagine the above being read by an indifferent high-school kid on his break at the Ice Cream of the Future stand in the mall food court, and you'll have some idea of what it's like. It gets so, so much better than this, though. Two-player mode is a beautiful thing to behold, as shakily-translated innuendo and not-at-all subtle homoeroticism between both characters awaits you at the end of every stage. What makes this even better is the fact that the dialogue differs depending on which two of the game's eight characters are paired up. The desire to hear every conversation stored on the disc will keep you replaying *Castle Shikigami 2* long after the initial attraction has worn off.

If nothing else, I've certainly played *Castle Shikigami 2* more than any other game I've ever paid \$10 for, and it's more fun than many \$50 games. For the money, *Castle Shikigami 2* is way more enjoyable than it has any right to be, and I give it my highest recommendation. Kicking your butts.

Slaves for fashion dislike bulges.

Damn! I hate activites.



The World calls. The World rules. Ooh!



Smell of a man. Earthy body smell.



Kicking your butts!

Mr. Bean has come. Here's zzzzzzzzz!

I like girls. But now it's about justice!

Not alike. I'm a hero. Well I'm done.

Another castle! Too many problems.



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DEVELOPER: DOMBER GAMES • PLATFORM: PC
GENRE: BRAWLER • CATEGORY: SIDE-SCROLLING
OF PLAYERS: 1-2 • PRICE: FREE
GET IT AT: [HTTP://WWW.DOMBENGAMES.NET/SOMR_E.HTM](http://www.dombengames.net/somr_e.htm)

The streets are crawling with punks, thugs, and lowlife scum, every single one of which is badly in need of a major beatdown. Seeing as Sega can no longer be bothered to provide the means to do this, it's up to Bomber



Games to step in with *Streets of Rage Remake*. It combines levels and enemies from all three *Streets of Rage* games, and *Remake* adds new areas, branching paths, and even new moves and animations.

For those who've never played *Streets of Rage*, which could be a depressing number seeing as there's been nothing new since the Genesis days, it's a classic side-scrolling brawler set in a city overrun with crime. Assorted enemies do their best to pummel one of six selectable heroes (with two more unlockable) into submission across eight levels while a thumping soundtrack drives the action. Each character has their own set of moves to go with varying attack speed and power ratings, and though some are unquestionably more powerful than others they're all fun to play. The wide variety of enemies, some of which have been imported from other brawler series, are a treat to punch, kick, bludgeon, stab, throw, suplex, explode, and electrocute, and it's even better with a friend or AI sidekick. *Streets of Rage Remake* is an excellent reminder of why brawlers are so much fun. Violent, politically incorrect, fueled on pure testosterone, and probably due for a cease and desist from Sega any minute now, it's a thug-thrashing good time from start to finish.

SCORE: 4.5 OF 5



DEVELOPER: EXACT • PLATFORM: PSP
GENRE: ACTION • CATEGORY: MECHANICAL DUNNS MAYHEM
OF PLAYERS: 1 • PRICE: \$5.99
GET IT AT: PLAYSTATION 3 NETWORK

Robot bunnies need mechanical carrots, and in *Jumping Flash*, Robbit is going to scour the wide-open levels to find them all. *Jumping Flash* was the first widely-available and truly 3D platformer, with levels that were designed with Robbit's incredible jumping ability in mind. Though it's small in acreage by today's standards, the levels soar hundreds of feet into the air to accommodate Robbit's triple-jump, and the first-person perspective makes you feel every inch of height. The bright, candy-colored, and vertiginous worlds are filled with enemies that hop, fly, shoot, or just tool around minding their own

JUMPING FLASH



business until Robbit either pegs them with a few shots or jumps on their heads. Though originally a PSOne game, *Jumping Flash* has aged very well and is as fun today as it was a decade ago in 1996.

SCORE: 4 OF 5



DEVELOPER: HUDSON • PLATFORM: WII
GENRE: ARCADE SHOOTER • CATEGORY: VERTICAL
OF PLAYERS: 1 • PRICE: 600 WII POINTS (\$6.00)
GET IT AT: WII VIRTUAL CONSOLE

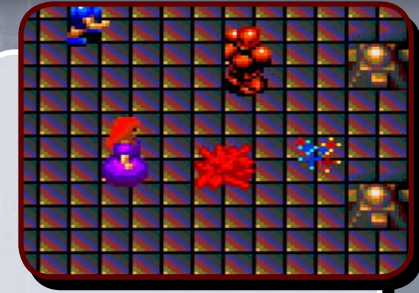
Super Star Soldier and *Soldier Blade* were two of the best vertical shooters on the TurboGrafx, with a combination of amazing visuals, excellent soundtracks, and huge, ass-kicking weapons to clear the screen of the dozens of enemies that swarm it at any given moment. Each of the four weapons can be powered up to a ridiculous degree, but one hit drops you back to "wuss" status and the

SUPER STAR SOLDIER / SOLDIER BLADE



next means instant death. *SSS* can seem incredibly unfair, with death meaning a trip back to the start of the level, but *Soldier Blade* lets you continue on, tossing in a free powerup to boot. Both games also feature a challenge mode, and a timed score run option that challenges you to rack up the most points possible within a two or five minute time limit. Brutal, fast, and a ton of fun, these are classic shooters from the genre's heyday.

SCORE: 4 OF 5



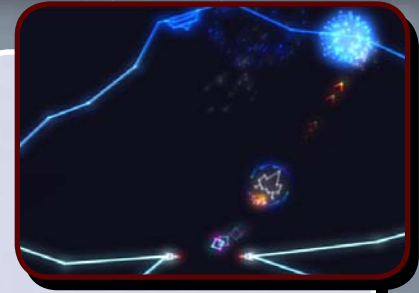
DEVELOPER: HUDSON • PLATFORM: WII
GENRE: ACTION RPG • CATEGORY: DUNGEON CRAWL
OF PLAYERS: 1-5 • PRICE: 600 WII POINTS (\$6.00)
GET IT AT: WII VIRTUAL CONSOLE



The Demon King Natas has stolen the ORA Stone! Will the horror never end?! It looks like there's nothing for it but to select one of several different character classes and raid dungeon after monster-filled dungeon to get it back. Played in classic *Gauntlet* style, *Dungeon Explorer* takes up to five players on a slaughter-fest as endless creatures pour forth from destructible monster generators. Killing everything is optional, though, because the only way to level up is by destroying dungeon bosses. Then it's time to whip out pen and paper to write down your character's password, because even on the Wii there's no save feature. While *Dungeon Explorer* is pretty good for 1989, in 2007, its genre has moved on. Even with its solid, albeit offline multiplayer, it's a game best left to nostalgia.

DUNGEON EXPLORER

SCORE: 2.5 OF 5



DEVELOPER: WIEDO CASTLE SOFTWARE • PLATFORM: PC
GENRE: CLASSIC REMAKE • CATEGORY: FUN WITH PHYSICS
OF PLAYERS: 1 • PRICE: FREE
GET IT AT: [HTTP://WIEDO.WORDPRESS.COM/MY-PC-GAMES/](http://wiedo.wordpress.com/my-pc-games/)
[HTTP://XOUT.DLACKED-INTERACTIVE.COM](http://xout.dlackeded-interactive.com)

One of the fun things about classics is that they get remade, sometimes faithfully, and other times, they're used as inspiration for something similar but new. *Thrust Xtreme* is a straight remake of the classic Commodore 64 game *Thrust*, while *GraviTron* was inspired by the excellent remake but branches off to find its own identity.

Thrust Xtreme rebuilds the original using lovely vector-styled graphics. A rocket is slowly falling to earth, able to thrust from one end and fire from the other, and has to navigate gun-lined tunnels to rescue the Klystron Pod (a dense ball) from the planet's nether reaches. The rocket can rotate left and right, shoot, use a shield that doubles as a tractor beam, and, of course, thrust. The real enemies of the game are gravity and inertia, and things only gets trickier once the pod is tethered to the ship. One smack into the tunnel walls by ship or pod means instant death, and the ball's swinging mass is constantly dragging the ship around. *Thrust Xtreme* is a pure and unforgiving test of control, and very satisfying once the skills are mastered.

GraviTron, on the other hand, is a bit more arcadey. It dispenses with the Klystron Orb, and instead, the rocket needs to land to pick up refugees. The enemies fire faster and more accurately than *Thrust*'s, homing missiles can pierce the shield, moving tanks fire multi-shot barrages, and in general there's more stuff trying to shoot you dead. *GraviTron* is a faster version of the *Thrust* formula, but still requires mastery of the game's physics to get anywhere.

SCORE: 3.5 OF 5

THRUST XTREME / GRAVITRON





GuitarFreaks & DrumMania V2



Review by Sardius

Guitar Freaks V2 & DrumMania V2 is a tough game to score. On one end, Guitar Freaks V2 is a terrible game that has been outclassed in every possible way by Guitar Hero. At the same time, DrumMania V2 offers a unique, creative, and altogether fun experience that hasn't yet been duplicated or improved upon in any American-made rhythm game. This, of course, makes my job way more difficult than it has to be. Thanks a lot, Konami.

Guitar Freaks originally debuted in arcades in 1999, a good six years before *Guitar Hero* came along. In *Guitar Freaks* and its sequels, players use three fret buttons (as opposed to *Guitar Hero*'s five) on a guitar-shaped controller to strum along to the notes that appear on-screen. The gameplay should feel very familiar to anyone who has played *Guitar Hero*, save for a number of negligible and mostly aesthetic differences between both games.

While its rigid, arcade-style gameplay wouldn't necessarily impress plastic guitar gods weaned on *Guitar Hero*, *Guitar Freaks* was a great game for its time, and has won its share of fans over the years. Unfortunately, seven years and a dozen sequels later (*Guitar Freaks V2* is actually the thirteenth game in the series), the *Guitar Freaks* formula has hardly changed since its initial release. *Guitar Hero* evolved this core gameplay significantly thanks to its focus on presentation and recognizable licensed music, but *Guitar Freaks* has remained the same sterile experience it has always been, and if anything, its music has only gotten worse with time.

The sad fact is that *Guitar Freaks V2 & DrumMania V2* features the worst musical lineup of any recent Bemani release. This isn't to say that there aren't any good songs hidden among the crap, but few

tracks manage to make a lasting impression. *V2*'s tracklist consists almost entirely of generic J-pop and J-rock, hardly any of which is distinct or good enough to warrant playing more than once.

Guitar Freaks may be nothing more than *Guitar Hero* with none of the effort, wit, or rock, but *DrumMania* is a different story. Since *DrumMania*'s introduction in 2000, new *Guitar Freaks* and *DrumMania* releases have debuted simultaneously, as arcade cabinets for both games could be linked for what is called "Session Play." This is a mode where one player on drums and one or two players on guitar can get together for a virtual jam session, playing the same songs at the same time and sharing one lifebar.

Session Play inevitably leads to insane jealousy on the parts of the poor bastards forced into playing *Guitar Freaks*, because *DrumMania* offers some of the most fun to be had in the rhythm genre today. Somehow, *Guitar Freaks V2 & DrumMania V2*'s lackluster music selection doesn't seem to matter when you're pounding away at an impressively convincing drumkit controller and receiving appropriate percussive feedback. Unlike *Guitar Freaks*, *DrumMania* offers a surprisingly realistic simulation of its instrument, and as a result, the experience is much more involving and rewarding. It also helps that most of the drummer's note charts are usually more well thought-out than the guitar portions, making for a more challenging and fun experience overall.

With such a vast difference in quality between both of its included titles, *Guitar Freaks V2 & DrumMania V2* is difficult to score as a complete package. *Guitar Freaks V2* alone would earn a 2 out of 5. *Guitar Hero* has raised the bar for what is to be expected from a guitar simulation, and *Guitar Freaks* has not evolved in any meaningful way since 1999. *DrumMania V2*, though, would likely get a 5 out of 5. While *DrumMania* may also be much the same game as it was in 2000, the experience is still fresh and convincing enough to be worthwhile today.

Averaging these two scores together and calling it a day would be taking the easy way out, and that's exactly what I'm going to do! 3.5 out of 5 it is.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

Publisher: Konami | Developer: Konami | Release Date: 11/22/2006
Genre: Rhythm | Category: lame/Awesome | # of Players: 1-3

Jam With the Band

As with every other game in Konami's Bemani series of rhythm games, you're going to need to buy a special controller to enjoy *Guitar Freaks V2 & DrumMania V2* to its fullest. Or rather, you'll probably want to buy multiple controllers, since both games in the package simulate different instruments. Hey, you have money to burn, right?

If you've got the cash, Konami's *Guitar Freaks Arcade Style Controller* is the only way to play *Guitar Freaks*. Compatible with all previous *Guitar Freaks* releases for the PS1 and PS2, the *Arcade Style Controller* is a meticulously exact replica of the guitar controllers found in arcades, right down to the sturdy strum bar and hard plastic and metal body. Thanks to its responsive fret buttons, this controller offers gameplay accuracy not possible in other third-party guitar controllers. Unfortunately, the *Arcade Style Controller* is also a lot more expensive than any other guitar controller currently on the market, and will probably run you about \$250, not including hefty shipping charges due to its massive weight and size.

Fewer options exist for *DrumMania* fans. While Konami's *DrumMania Controller* (\$70) is decent enough for casual play, fans will note that the controller looks and plays nothing like the drumkit used in *DrumMania*'s arcade versions. Worse, the included bass pedal is nothing more than a flimsy foam cushion that provides inconsistent performance at best, and is downright unresponsive at worst. When using Konami's *DrumMania Controller*, it's recommended that you enable the *Auto Bass* option in *DrumMania V2*, and avoid dealing with the worthless bass pedal attachment altogether.

If your love for fake drumming knows no bounds, however, the latest *DrumMania* releases also support the use of MIDI-capable electronic drumkits like Yamaha's DTXplorer. These "controllers" are mainly used by professional musicians and carry a premium price at over \$800, but for those who want to get the most out of *DrumMania*, this may be a worthwhile investment.



WORTH IMPORTING?

Buy this only if you want to bang on the drums all day. There ain't no room around here for a guitar man.

ティンクルスター スprites

TWINKLESTAR SPRITES La Petite Princess

Publisher: SNK Playmore • Developer: SNK Playmore
Release Date: 11/22/2006 • Genre: Puzzle Shooter
Category: Munching SweetTacos • # Players: 1-2

Twinkle Star Sprites: La Petite Princess is the sequel to the awesomely acclaimed puzzle shooter game of similar name for the Neo Geo. In *La Petite Princess* you play as Time. Here, Time is not a system of sequential relations that any event has to any other, but, instead, a cute little girl with pink hair, a broom, and a really screwed up looking wool dog demon sidekick thingy. Can you imagine this paragraph if I was writing about the first game? Where do you think I would've went with "Load Ran?" Much like Ran, Time seeks the twinkle star, so that she might wish for, uhhhh, I'm going to say a stick of butter, a tank, and world peace because I can't read Japanese.

As Time you are presented with your basic vertically scrolling shooter, including a bevy of flying enemy, uh, thingies. Enemies range from clams, plastic snowglobe people, and bubbles, to all sorts of other stuff which glide through the air just like in real life! Now, how is this different than other shmups? Well, the screen's cut in half. This is where the puzzle elements come in: there is a divider in the middle, and on the other side is, dun dun dun, your opponent. Your opponents range from cute little girls with pigtailed riding on fire-breathing dragons to midget robot cat expletive-deleteds. The designs are all lovable in that *Disgaea*-esque cute and creepy manner, and everyone's favorites from the old game return as well.

Back to the game: Time's goal is to destroy her opponents so much shiz at them that they can't help but bump into it. To do this, she must send golems (the crazy flashing bird thingies), sub-weapon attacks (your sidekick doing beatdowns), or the even awesomely mcawesomer boss attack (just like your sub-weapon attack, only huge like Xbox) across the screen! 'Course, your opponent is doing the same thing to you.

To create golems you must trigger combos by shooting the enemies on your side of the screen. This forces them to explode, which in turn sets off a chain reaction which makes other nearby enemies explode as well. Boom, combo. The bigger the combo, the more golems whiz across the screen, the better your chance of making or reversing golems into sub-weapon attacks and even boss attacks. What do I mean by reversing? Well, you can actually reverse the golems your enemy sends to you by shooting or exploding them during a combo. By doing this, you can trigger chain reactions and other sorts of screen spamming insanity. Reverse the golems twice, and they turn into the aforementioned subweapon attack. You can also create sub-weapon and boss attacks by using your charge shot, too. If you need that explained to you, well, think *Mega Man's* Megabuster. The reversal system has changed slightly from the original, and actually kills some of the game's kinetic nature. In the first game, you could reverse golems three times or more before they became a subweapon. This, combined with the fact that *LPP* makes you wait a long time for enemies to combo, changes the focus of the game from massive comboing to a more reserved playstyle of dodging golems and spamming your sub-weapon attacks when you can. This is also why the high-scores are so much lower than in the first game, and the difficulty extremely easy even on the hardest modes.

Despite these changes, however, the game is still as fun as it is addictive. It's one of those games you can't stop playing, just like the original. Speaking of the original, the NeoGeo AES version of *TSS* is available as an unlockable (along with some art and the cool-cool dandy animated Saturn intro). Sadly, the emulation is so-so; the music very weak, and unpredictable slowdown almost ruins the endgame. While not perfect, it's a nice, playable treat, and also happens to be insanely expensive to buy otherwise. With all of this now in a budget package, what else can you ask for? Yay. Let us all munch sweet tacos.

Review by Ashura



worth importing?

Don't be brue, reader! Despite its differences (that docked it one point), the game is still awesome even though it's not the original. Go get it!

Score: 4 of 5

JEANNE D'ARC

ジャンヌ・ダルク

Jeanne D'Arc is a turn-based strategy RPG, loosely based on the French heroine of the same name (perhaps more commonly known as Joan of Arc). I had high hopes for this game because it was from Level-5, and there just aren't enough good SRPGs. It turned out to be rather disappointing. I shall stick it underneath my bookshelf, where I keep my treasured copy of *Final Fantasy Tactics*, to keep it level. The story is rather dark and sinister. A wizard with an unknown agenda causes the six-year-old king of France to be possessed by an evil spirit. Meanwhile, Jeanne discovers a magical bracelet, and a short time later her village is razed to the ground. Jeanne embarks on a quest to rid France of her enemies. If you don't speak Japanese, the finer points of the story will escape you, but you'll still find the game's controls easy to learn.

Like typical SRPGs, combat takes place on a grid. You are limited to five characters in a battle, but of course your enemies can be far greater in number. Each of your allies takes a turn, then all enemies. Most battles have special win/lose conditions, such as "kill the enemy leader" or "keep all party members alive." Each battle has a turn limit, so it's game over if you don't act quickly enough. Every action your characters take awards them with experience. The amounts are adjusted based on level, so it's pretty easy to get low-level characters up to speed. You have a variety of weapons, magic spells, and skills at your disposal. *Jeanne D'Arc* has some unique features on the battlefield. If you keep your party members close together, their defense is increased, so it's wise not to send them all to the far corners of the map on commando missions. If you use a melee attack on an enemy, a Burning Site will appear on the opposite side of them. If you have other characters stand on that spot, their attacks will do extra damage. Each ally or enemy can be attuned with the spirit of sun, star, or moon, which affects damage in a rock/paper/scissors fashion. These attunements can be modified with special skills. Finally, there are transformations. Certain characters like Jeanne can use their magical bracelets to transform, increasing their power considerably. It takes a few turns to build up enough energy to transform, and it only lasts two or three turns. However, if you defeat an enemy, your transformation gets an extra free turn, so you can effectively go on a killing spree.

In the early stages, it feels like the other members of your team are simply there to act as decoys or to heal Jeanne while she mops the floor with the enemies. Later, as you acquire others who can transform, it becomes more of a team effort. If you've played *Rogue Galaxy*, you may recognize the odd purple frog who tags along. In *Rogue Galaxy* he combined weapons for you, but in *Jeanne D'Arc* he combines skills to make new ones. *Jeanne D'Arc* has some interesting features, but it lacks the depth of other SRPGs. The amount of customization is very limited. You are spoon-fed story characters with pre-determined strengths and weaknesses. There is no job system, which of course usually serves as the bread and butter of SRPGs. The result is a game that is less about strategy and more about making sure you just buy upgrades in shops when they become available. SRPG enthusiasts can safely skip this one and not miss much.

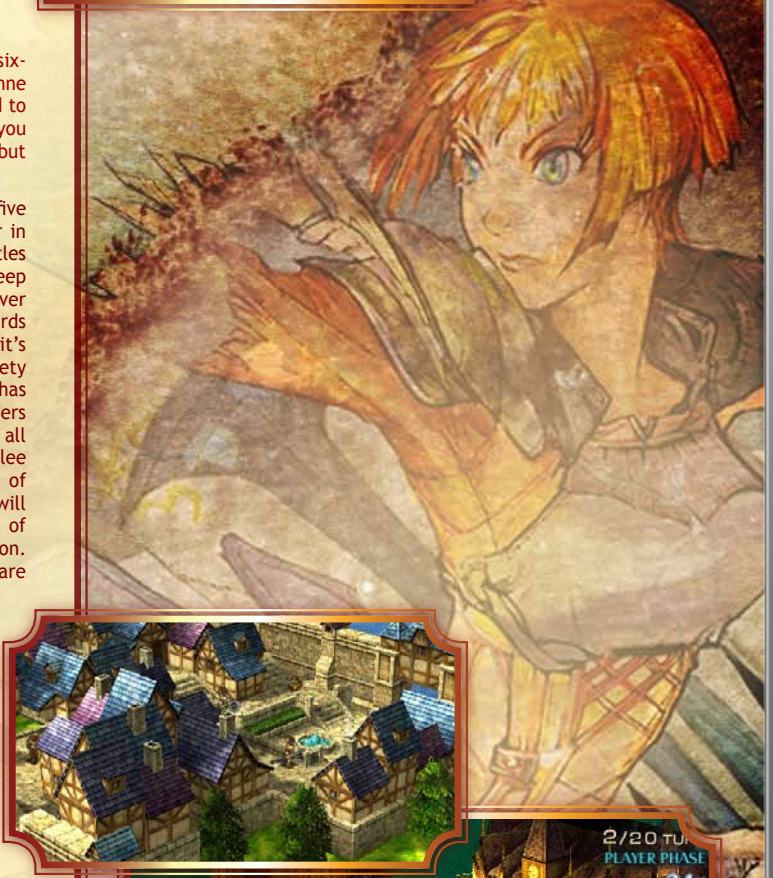
Publisher: Sony • Developer: Level-5 • Release Date: 11/22/2006
Genre(s): Strategy RPG • Category: French Victory!?! • # of Players: 1



WORTH IMPORTING?

As yet, no American release has been announced. Die-hard fans of SRPGs may be disappointed with this title. If you're new to the genre and want a gentle introduction that isn't very deep or complex, it would serve that purpose.

FINAL SCORE:
2 of 5



LANDSTALKER

THE TREASURES OF KING NOLE

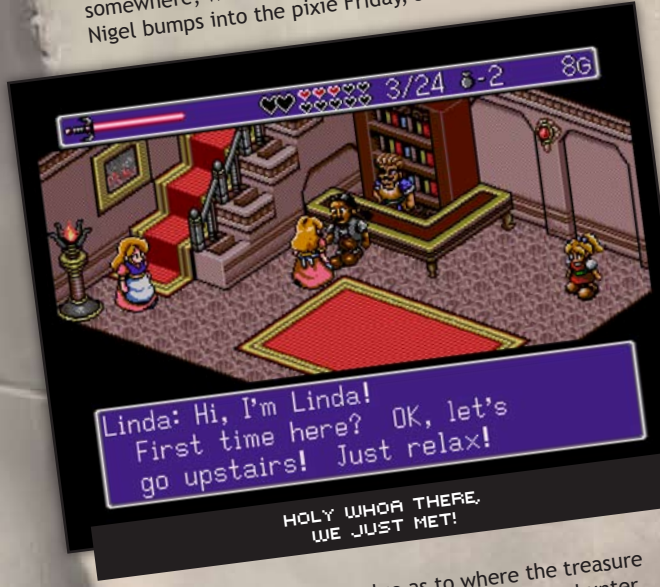
You'd think a series as popular as *Zelda* would have more clones, but there really aren't that many out there. Most action/RPGs are happy to stick with straightforward action while downplaying any challenges for the brain, mysteriously leaving out half the reason people liked the genre's undisputed top banana in the first place. One of the best games to really nail the *Zelda* formula was *Landstalker*, and its uncompromising difficulty was perfectly balanced by its fun story and ingenious dungeons.

A long time ago, King Nole ruled the land with an iron fist and incalculable greed. Long dead and gone by the time of *Landstalker*, Nole's treasure is still out there somewhere, waiting to be found. One day, our hero Nigel bumps into the pixie Friday, saving her from a trio

whining about how people are sheep and life is unfair. *Landstalker* is an upbeat adventure on a smaller scale, cheerful without being cute, and topped off with a fun sense of humor. It's a race for treasure in the RPG equivalent of a buddy caper flick, with plenty of time along the way to help the inhabitants of Mercator with their problems.

Most of those issues, of course, involve dungeons. Mercator is covered with caves packed full of monsters and traps, and it just wouldn't be a proper adventure if every single one wasn't thoroughly investigated and stripped of its treasures. Life Stock is the best thing to find, adding one heart to Nigel's meter and making his attack just a tiny bit more powerful than before. Nigel starts off at four hearts, but by game's end will probably have 90 or more. It's a good thing, too, because the traps and puzzles will whittle his health down to nothing even with piles of hearts available. Giant rolling balls, spiky floors, and tiny platforms requiring seriously precise jumps are just the start of the huge variety of challenges *Landstalker* constantly throws at the player.

Thankfully, so long as there's an Eke Eke in the inventory Friday will revive Nigel when he falls.

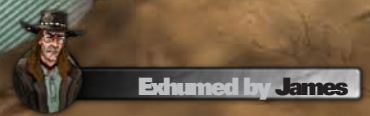


of thugs. She's got a clue as to where the treasure might be, and seeing as Nigel is a treasure hunter there's only one thing to be done: head out into adventure!

So it's off to the island of Mercator in search of riches beyond imagining. There are no evil overlords planning on grinding the world under their jackbooted heels, and not a single white-haired goth wannabe



Platform: Sega Genesis
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Climax
Release Date: 1993
Genre: Action/RPG
Category: Isometric
of Players: 1



NOT MANY PEOPLE KNOW THAT RAP WAS ACTUALLY INVENTED DURING THE MIDDLE AGES BY SPEAR TOTTING HEDGEHOG PEOPLE.



APPARENTLY, INTERNET SPEAK WAS TOO.



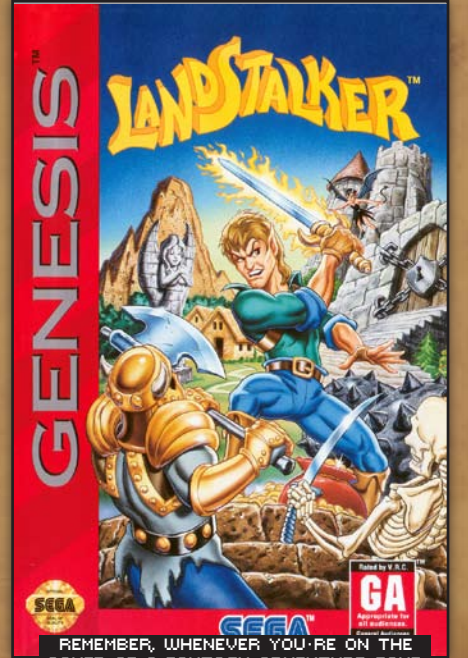
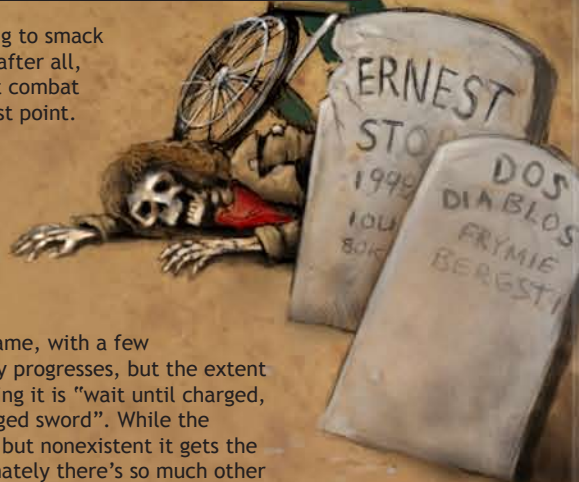
That's going to be often, in no small part thanks to *Landstalker's* biggest quirk. All the action is viewed from a fixed isometric perspective, meaning it's controlled with diagonals at all times. So you have to make ninety-degree turns while jumping from one crumbling platform to the next, while also worrying that the d-pad is actually going to let you turn in the right direction. While controller inadequacy issues aren't the game's fault, other aspects of the isometric perspective could have used some work. There are no shadows in *Landstalker*, so any precision jumping or climbing turns into a matter of trial and error. Seeing a spiky ball rising and falling near a gap is one thing, but knowing exactly where it is in pseudo-3D space can be something else entirely.



On the plus side, the perspective allows for some truly clever 3D design. While faking 3D using an isometric perspective has been around forever (*Q*Bert*, *Zaxxon*, *Ant Attack*, *Solstice*, etc.), *Landstalker* uses it to its full potential. Stairs and chests can be hidden by scenery, not to mention characters necessary to the plot, and finding everything takes a major amount of snooping in odd places. Boxes and vases can be lifted and placed, useful for getting to otherwise-unreachable areas, and frequently will need to be piled several high in a gravity-defying staircase. The labyrinth of Greenmaze is particularly evil, with trees hiding the ground even when scaling cliffs. *Landstalker* takes the drawback of an immobile camera making the scenery obscure everything behind it and turns it into another element of puzzle-solving gameplay.

monsters aren't going to smack themselves around, after all, but it's a shame that combat is the game's weakest point. Swing sword. Swing sword again. Repeat until enemy stops moving and drops a cauldron of strangely pluralized golds. Nigel gets a magic sword early in the game, with a few upgrades as the story progresses, but the extent of the strategy in using it is "wait until charged, hit enemy with charged sword". While the fighting engine is all but nonexistent it gets the job done, and fortunately there's so much other stuff to do that it never manages to become boring.

And that's what makes *Landstalker* and the *Zelda* formula so much fun. There's always something different to do waiting around the next corner, whether it's a new puzzle, a pack of monsters, or the next part of the plot. One task segues into the next with barely a dull moment, and even when the going gets frustrating it's worth pushing on to see what's past the next set of floating platforms. Fun characters, good music, and a lively plot keep the action moving. It's been so long since an RPG has been free of cheap melodrama that the 12-year-old story feels like a breath of fresh air. *Landstalker* is a gem from the days when Sega was king, thumbing its nose at Nintendo and screaming "SEGA!" at the top of its lungs. Though I miss that company and wish it could return, we'll always have *Landstalker* to remember it by.



REMEMBER, WHENEVER YOU'RE ON THE COVER OF A FANTASY ADVENTURE GAME, BE SURE TO ACCENTUATE YOUR GROUCH.

Nigel does more than just solve dungeon-based puzzles, though. The



Snake?
Snake!
SNAAAAAKE!

Snake and Eva from Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

Cosplayers: HuongStar and Jeff The Ruler



Photos by: Mary Elam of Firefly-Path.net



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(Some people don't play video games.)

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Age : 22
Location : Des Moines, IA



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Age : 26
Location : Woonsocket, RI



Title : Murtagh's Steed
Artist : Adeel Arif Khawaja
Age : Undisclosed
Location : San Jose, CA



Title : Tails's Girl
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Hahaaaaa! Eat blazing steel, evil scum-being!!

SWOOSH! DINK!! DINK!!



Oop... I'm gonna need a longer chain!

Did yer mommy tie those on so you won't lose 'em?

©Wolfie



DAMN THESE SPIKES!! I CAN'T REACH MY BACK!!



... I NEVER SHOULD HAVE LEFT THE BED THIS MORNING...



HEY!!!

..FIND YOUR OWN DAMNED GIANT!! THIS IS MY TURF!!!

WHAT'S GOING ON BACK THERE?!

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