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GOD OF WAR II



CASTLEVANIA: DRACULA X



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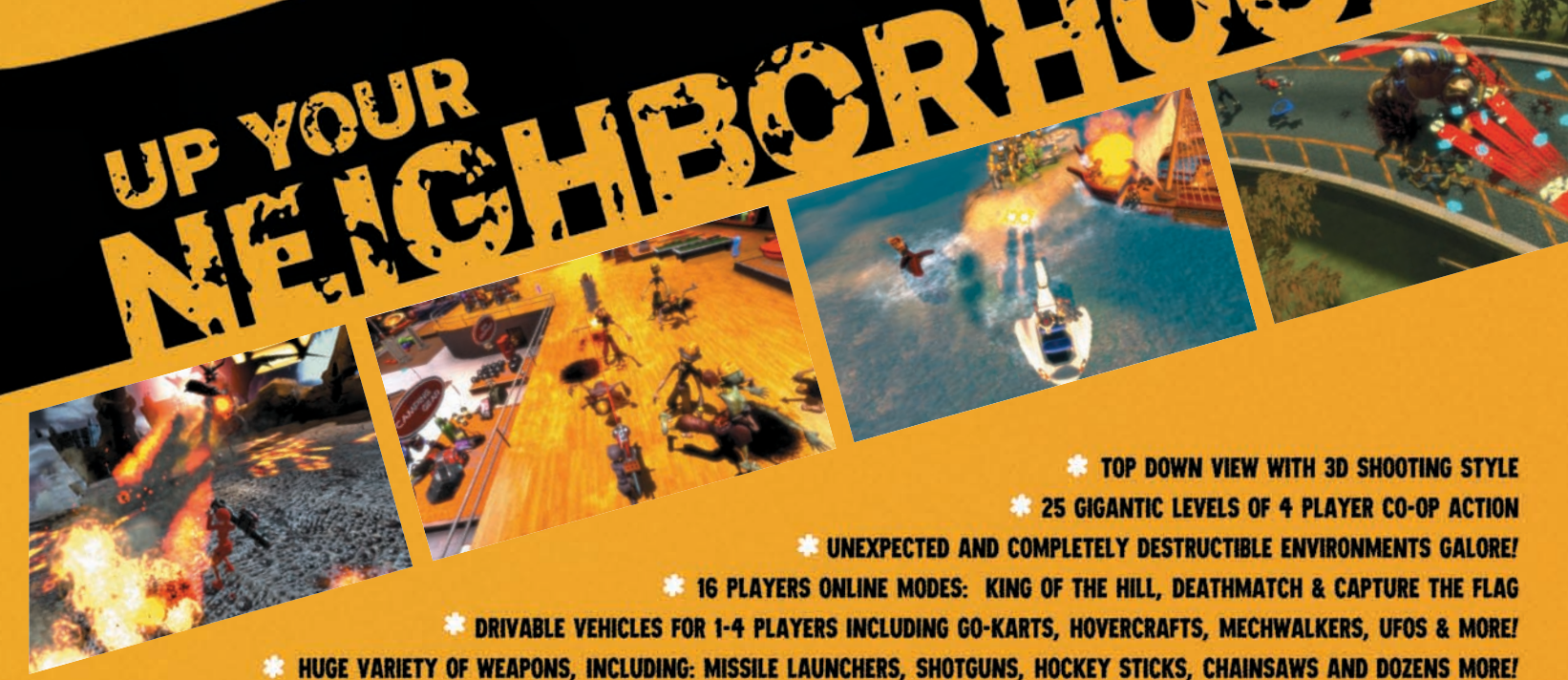
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.check out a bunch of mmoes, but mostly ea mythic's
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Printed in the United States of America



DJPubba Tim Lindquist

After getting the massive *Rogue Galaxy* strategy guide finished, I decided to dust off the old PC and see what games I've been missing. The last PC game I played was *Half Life 2* so I loaded Steam to see what was new. Holy! There are a lot of games there now. I paid for and downloaded *Prey*, but only got to play it for a day before it started asking for my CD key. WTH? My pleas for customer service from Steam have gone unanswered. :(Now Playing: *Half Life 2: Episode 1*, *Prey* (almost)



Wanderer Thomas Wilde

For the past month, I've either been at a press event, on an airplane, or in a fantasy world hunting critters to fulfill newbie quests. My handle has rarely been this accurate. As I write this, 4l and I are preparing to go to the NY Comic-Con. I figure he'll kidnap Grant Morrison, leading to a wacky road comedy. Stay tuned!

Now Playing: *Fire Emblem*, *World of Warcraft*, *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*



Lynxara Alicia Ashby

I think I may be a workaholic. This month I published one strat guide, worked on another with our illustrious EiC, published a bunch of previews with our friends at WorthPlaying.com, and got an article published in issue 43 of *Anime Insider*. All this in addition to the usual work with this mag and nefarious errands for our illustrious publisher... and I'm still way behind on my assignments. Now Playing: *Aedis Eclipse: Generation of Chaos*, *Lunar Knights*, *Guitar Hero II* (360)



Racewing Geson Hatchett

After being completely enthralled by *Smooth Moves*, I was motivated to purchase and play the entire *WarioWare* series from *Mega MicroGame\$* on up. Three frantic days later, I only have *Touched!* left to go... but man, it's been an awesome three days. Now, if you'll excuse me, Penny Crygor is summoning me, and I hate to disappoint my mistress. Miss Penny dislikes it when I'm late. FASTER! Now Playing: *WarioWare, Inc.: Mega MicroGame\$, WarioWare: Twisted!*, *WarioWare: Touched!*...



Shoegazer Dave Hulegaard

Since there was a nice break in-between "must play" games, I used some of my free time this month to get into the studio and record my second CD, *Ashes*. With that now out of the way, I'm ready for the gaming industry to bring on the compelling games again. *Super Paper Mario*, you're on my hit list.

Now Playing: *Crackdown*, *Hotel Dusk: Room 215*, *My Guitar*.



KouAidou Elizabeth Ellis

I'm now TAing a class in History of the Japanese Language at my old University, and I'm grading my first quizzes this week. This means that if I have to write out "Shitamachi dialect does not distinguish s and h before i and y" or "Yama no ate = area in the vicinity of the mountain" one more time, something's going to break.

Now Playing: Not a kind of word. Words that begin with g may still contain a nasalized g.



Roger Danish Greg Off

I spent the better part of this month playing and replaying *God of War II*. Am I sick of it? Hell no! This game has made me forget I have a PS3, Wii, and Xbox 360. In other news, I turned 38, which means I am an old bastard. I also don't like mustard, but that's a story for a different bio.

Now Playing: *God of War II*, *Warhawk* (it's awesome, even if it is only multiplayer), *Motorstorm* (I like), *GRAW 2*.



4thletter David Brothers

I decided a little while ago that I don't write enough fiction. I probably do not suck at it, so I'm thinking that I should sit down and make an effort toward getting published this year. We'll see how that goes. Until then, you can catch me on 4thletter.net and in this here magazine, among other places. Also, *Hotel Dusk* on DS is ridiculously cool and good-looking. More, please.

Now Playing: *Hotel Dusk*, *Fire Pro Wrestling 2* (GBA), *Super Mario World*



James James Cunningham

You know that feeling you get when you complete a game? Sometimes it comes from just seeing the end and other times from milking every single secret you can possibly pull from the depths of its code. Whichever it is, I can pretty much guarantee that I won't be getting either from *Rogue Galaxy*. I'm coming to the conclusion that, as much as I enjoy the occasional RPG, I just don't have time for them any more. *Crackdown*? Not a problem. RPG epic? Um... no. It won't stop me from buying them, though.



HonestGamer Jason Venter

This month I found out belatedly that Keith Parkinson passed away in 2005. He was much too young. I was very sorry to hear of his passing. His paintings really spoke to me and held all the grandeur and beauty you could ever hope for from an oil-based medium. Farewell, Keith. You are truly missed.

Now Playing: *Ar Tonelico*, *Ridge Racer 7*



Hitoshura Iaian Ross

In this issue I was tasked with reviewing *Disgaea Portable* for our imports section. The PS2 original felt vastly inferior when I tried to play it afterwards. I never thought I'd say that about a PSP port.

Now Playing: *Disgaea Portable*



Sartius Danny Cowan

Fair warning: most of my writing this month was done while under the influence of cold medicine. I think it turned out pretty well, considering! Well, except for the part where I thought that ponchos had sleeves... and then there was that whole "exhorting industry figures to commit suicide for the benefit of mankind" thing. Sometimes, I feel bad for making our editors work so hard, but the feeling quickly passes.

Now Playing: *Lumines II*, *Furari no Shiren DS*, *Kid Icarus*



Wolfie Terry Wolfinger

So Hellfire Peninsula has turned out to be quite the cash machine in the *World of Warcraft*. Just about every quest gives you gold and/or very fancy items. Can't use the item? Sell it and get even more gold! Already I almost have enough cash for a flying mount... unfortunately can't get that till I'm level 70 and that is a ways away...

Now Playing: *World of Warcraft*, *Gears of War*



Metalbot Anthony Mertz

Troy, buddy, you lucked out this time. You have no idea what I had planned for you. I didn't go for it because it was probably ten inches too far. If I had, though, you would have either laughed until you died, or ripped my head off and dined on it. It didn't involve a billboard, but it did involve your face!

Now Playing: *Trackmania Nations ESWC*, *Battlefield 2*(PC), *Field Ops*



Arteth Thomas Shin

This April-July period is looking to be just a little bit crazy for you fighting game fans. With six Qualifiers for Super Battle Opera 5 and three Qualifiers for Evolution 2k7 throughout the United States, I'm sure you'll be needing to practice, so next month, I'll be showing you hardcore gamers how to modify a joystick or build it from scratch with cardboard, duct tape and glue!

Now Playing: *Uplink: Hacker Elite*(PC), *Senko no Ronde*(Arcade)



Ashura Brady Hartel

Poor Mega Man. No ducking, no shooting up, and if you die... try entering *this* password, buddy! Not only that, but his creator has the audacity to always beam him in on the far side of the spikes. Man, what kind of weakness is that? It's not like he's impaled over that shiz; he's just straight vaporized by spikes, and then Dr. Light is all "In my next-generation Mega Man, Mega Man X, he will be so advanced he can SLIDE UP AND DOWN WALLS. BUT SPIKES? THOSE WILL STILL KILL HIM INSTANTLY."



Jeremy Jeremy Peeples

"Kim Possible's" fourth season mini-marathon premiere just wrapped up, and I loved it! All four episodes were good, and I ended up with 1,643 screenshots from them. My average for a two hour block of TV is 200. That was the best night of TV ever, in all my life. Besides "KP," Will Friedle is also fantastic in *Rogue Galaxy*, which I'm currently addicted to.

Now Playing: *Rogue Galaxy*, *WWF No Mercy*, *Tetris DS*, *Top Spin*, *GTA: Vice City*



Mads Amadeo Garcia III

To optimize our recent acquisition of a PS3, 360, and a Wii, my household got an HD TV early this year. At some point, I discovered a marvelous new use for this big-screened wonder: watching television! I never knew Conan O'Brien had that many freckles, and I am now of the opinion that House should be a playable character in *Trauma Center: Second Opinion*. It's never lupus.

Now Playing: *Lost Planet*, *Tetris DS*, *Einhander*

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WHAT A TIME TO BE HARDCORE! CHECK OUT THE DRACULA X CHRONICLES, SNK VS. CAPCOM, KORORINPA, AND FINAL FANTASY TACTICS. THEN GOGGLE AT HOT NEW TITLES LIKE FIELD OPS, BLACKSITE: AREA 51, JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD, HOUR OF VICTORY, AND AEDIS ECLIPSE: GENERATION OF CHAOS.

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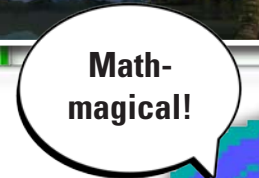
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An inside look at MMOs through the eyes of EA Mythic

ANOTHER DOUBLE-THREAT OF FEATURES THIS MONTH. CHECK OUT A SLEW OF UPCOMING MMORPGS WITH MASS APPEAL, AND GET A PEEK INTO EA MYTHIC'S UPCOMING WARHAMMER: AGE OF RECKONING. THEN HEAD INTO THE SEAMY SIDE OF NOSTALGIA WITH PORTS GONE WRONG, A DARK SIDE OF RETROGAMING SPECIAL ABOUT EVERYTHING YOU WISH YOU'D NEVER PLAYED.



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On the cover

HEIST



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OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

Casual games developer MumboJumbo acquired Ritual Entertainment, which has developed or contributed to titles such as *25 To Life*, *Black Hawk Down: Team Sabre*, *Counter-Strike*, *Painkiller*, and *Quake 4*. This puts the next installment of the *SiN* franchise in jeopardy.

THQ acquired Mass Media, known for the PS2 edition of *Full Spectrum Warrior*, to further enhance THQ's internal, next-gen console development capabilities. THQ now boasts fifteen studios working on several products across console, handheld and PC systems.

EA is closing down its Japanese development studio as part of a consolidation and will work with external Japanese developers instead. The studio's three titles still under development – *Theme Park DS*, *Sim City DS*, and the licensed title *Dragon Zakura DS* – will continue until completion, after which the studio will close its doors.

Fashion designer Marc Ecko has launched his own development label, Marc Ecko Entertainment, which will create, fund, and develop interactive properties. An initial project is with a developer that was responsible for one of the biggest games of 2006.



The former executives of Gathering of Developers (G.O.D.) have risen from the ashes like a phoenix to announce the launch of an independent game publisher, Gamecock Media Group, with five projects currently in the pipeline. The entire HGM staff is delighted by this new endeavor's name.



FINANCIAL GIBBERISH

SCi/Eidos's revenue increased by 40%, due to the strong sales of *Just Cause* and *Justice League Heroes*. SCi plans to release four Wii titles, as well as further next-gen installments for *Championship Manager*, *Hitman*, and *Tomb Raider*. It also confirmed that *Just Cause 2* is in development.



Ubisoft enjoyed a 24% revenue increase. Its financial results revealed that it has some new Wii (*Driver*, *TMNT*, *Prince of Persia*) and PC titles (*Driver*, *Resident Evil 4*) in the works, and that *Haze* has been delayed until at least April 2007.

Driven by *Madden '07* sales, EA's Q3 revenue was up a mere 1%, curtailed by higher next-gen development costs and acquisitions. EA revealed *Spore* and *My Sims* are coming to the DS (in addition to the PC and Wii versions, respectively), and that *Lord of the Rings: White Council* is "on hold," contrary to previous cancellation rumors.



THQ's Q3 2007 net sales increased 33% from a year ago, driven by strong sales of its numerous licensed titles and *Destroy All Humans! 2*. THQ executives revealed a new title in the *Red Faction* franchise, as well as for the *Stuntman* license it acquired from Atari. *Cars* will get a sequel by the year's end, and *WWE Smackdown* will expand onto the PS3, Wii and NDS. In total, THQ is working on eleven new Wii titles, and the previously revealed but unannounced *Juiced* and *MX* games are due in fiscal 2008.



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Castlevania

the dracula x chronicles

Preview by Wanderer

publisher: konami • **developer:** konami • **release date:** fall 2007 • **genre(s):** adventure • **category:** long overdue • **# of players:** 1



For more than a decade, *Rondo of Blood* (or *Chi no Rondo*, if you're feeling particularly pedantic) for the PC Engine Super CD has been the "lost" *Castlevania* game, despite its direct sequel, *Symphony of the Night*, arguably being the best *Castlevania* game. Unspecified technical issues have delayed it being ported to another system until now.

The Dracula X Chronicles is a compilation of three games: the original 2D, sprite-based *Rondo of Blood*, where Richter Belmont and Maria Renard are out to rescue four maidens and kill Count Dracula; a new version of *Rondo*, where the 2D gameplay has changed very little, but the graphics receive a 3D polygon update; and a new version of *Symphony of the Night*, which Koji Igarashi said will feature "additions." (He didn't say, however, whether this version will have the Saturn bonus content.)

In short, this is a package containing one of the greatest 2D sidescrollers of all time, a remixed version thereof, and a potentially enhanced version of one of the greatest PSOne games of all time. After Konami helped sell a few PSPs with *Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops*, this represents an attempt to continue its winning streak. The odds are that if anything at all is going to make the hardcore buy PSPs, this is going to do it. After all, what are the hardcore? Nothing but a miserable pile of secrets.



2005's version of *Area 51* wasn't a *bad* game, really. It was just unmistakably derivative; imagine *Half-Life* if somebody at Black Mesa forgot to pay the power bill, and that's *Area 51*.

BlackSite: *Area 51* is building on that by taking the action outdoors, and into the next generation. As the leader of a squad of soldiers tasked with fighting otherworldly threats, you'll be dispatched into areas surrounding the infamous Area 51 to rescue survivors and dispatch alien threats.

The most interesting change is that in *BlackSite*, you aren't alone. You can use the left trigger (on the 360 version, anyway) to dispatch your CPU buddies to distant locations. They'll interact with whatever they find there, too, so you can use them to set charges, break down doors, or flank enemies.

In the short playable demo that Midway recently showed in Las Vegas, *BlackSite* begins in a small desert town that's been attacked by aliens. Following a few skirmishes with bizarre techno-organic insects, the half of your team that's still alive watches as an alien worm the size of Bermuda punches through the street, sending cars flying. The demo ended on this note, thus intimating that the full version will be an intense and difficult experience, or at least will make Freudians giggle.



Preview by Wanderer

Publisher: Midway
Developer: Midway Studios Austin
Release Date: Summer 2007

Genre(s): First-Person Shooter
Category: Applied Xenophobia
of Players: 1-?

BLACKSITE: AREA 51

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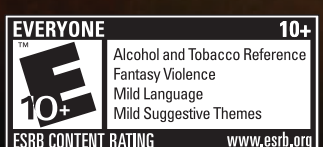
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FIELD OPS

Preview by **Metalbolt**

As *HGM's* resident "RTS guy," I can tell you first hand that even if you love the RTS genre, it can get old real fast. One level blurs into the next, as you keep resorting to the same old tactics. Eventually, you get so sick of bad AI, sloppy pathfinding, and merely witnessing the action, that you want to get in there and be a part of the fight! *Field Ops* may be the game to remedy this.

By allowing you to switch between RTS and FPS on the fly, *FO* gives you total control over your units' actions. If you're not confident in their ability to engage a target the way you'd like, then you can help them out by going FPS and fighting by their side. Likewise, if you're not confident in your medic being quick enough to keep your men alive, you can jump in and do his job for him. You're in control.

No matter how good the RTS, you'll always have those moments where you are cursing at your units for doing something stupid. Hopefully, in *FO* you'll only be cursing at yourself.



Publisher: Freeze Interactive
Developer: Digital Reality
Release Date: Q2 2007

Genre(s): RTS/FPS
Category: War on terror
of Players: 6



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JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD



Preview by Wanderer



John Woo essentially wrote the book on modern cinematic action, and thus, there's an entire genre of action games that owes its existence to him. Now John Woo is helping to make a video game, *Stranglehold*, that's effectively a sequel to his 1992 film *Hard-Boiled*. It stars Chow Yun-Fat as Inspector Tequila and features many of the slow-motion, both-guns-blazing gunfights that made his films something that video games wanted to rip off in the first place.

This, children, is what we call the circle of life.

In *Stranglehold*, an international organized crime cartel has abducted Tequila's family, forcing Tequila to choose between getting them back and upholding the law. Naturally, he chooses the option that allows for the most gunfights.

Stranglehold's environments are nearly fully destructible, allowing you to blow enemies' cover away before blowing them away. Tequila himself can jump onto railings, ride carts, slide down banisters, and dive in slow-motion, earning style points with every successful kill. Style points translate directly to special Tequila Bombs, Woo-style super moves ranging from the elegantly simple to the apocalyptic. (When Chow Yun-Fat starts angrily loading a shotgun, *leave the time zone.*)

Stranglehold is fluid, violent, and amazingly intuitive. It may be the ultimate expression of cinematic techniques finding their way into video games, and it's coming out this summer.

Publisher: Midway
Developer: Midway Studios Chicago
Release Date: Summer 2007

Genre(s): Action
Category: Reloading Is For Pansies
of Players: 1

The brightest light casts the darkest shadow

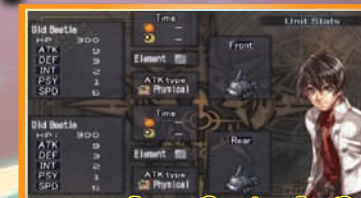


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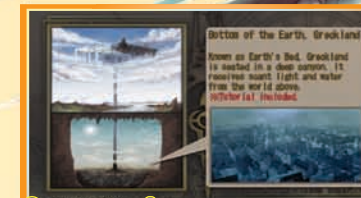
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Preview by Wanderer



HOUR OF VICTORY

Publisher: Midway
 Developer: nFusion
 Release Date: Summer 2007

Genre(s): First-Person Shooter
 Category: Win World War II Again
 # of Players: 1

Just in case you had not yet gotten your fill of shooting Nazis, *Hour of Victory* is here with a twist on the usual formula. Whereas most of the first-person WWII shooters we've seen until now have been exhaustively thorough historical recreations, *Hour of Victory* is an unapologetic action movie; the comparison that Midway makes is that it's *Indiana Jones* to other games' *Saving Private Ryan*.

In the European and African theaters of the war, you play *Hour of Victory* as one of three soldiers at a time. Major Ambrose Taggart is an infiltrator and stealth operative; Lieutenant William Ross is an incredibly strong SAS commando who specializes in frontal assault; and Sgt. Calvin Blackbull of the Army Rangers is an agile sniper. As you progress through *Hour of Victory's* missions, you can switch between the three characters at certain checkpoints, using them to accomplish the same objectives in very different ways.

At the same time, you can drive just about anything you can see, from jeeps to tanks. *Hour of Victory* subscribes to the *Gears of War* school of health, in that you regenerate slowly if you avoid taking damage; there are no first-aid kits.

Past that, nothing in *Hour of Victory* is set in stone just yet. Online multiplayer is still up in the air; it'll be there, but they're still deciding what form it'll take. If you're not sick of WWII yet, this looks like an entertaining take on the war.



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Available May 2007



PlayStation 2



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Publisher: SNK Playmore • Developer: SNK/Ignition Entertainment
 Release Date: April 2007 • Genre(s): RPG (Cards, Strategy)
 Category: SHINKUJUUU PAPER-CUT • # of Players: 1-2

SNK vs. CAPCOM CARD FIGHTERS DS

Preview by Racewing

Remember the Neo Geo Pocket Color? Of course you do... or don't. Honestly, if you've actually seen one up close in your life, consider yourself lucky. It didn't last very long, but it had a smattering of gaming gems on it that you couldn't find anywhere else. One of these, of course, was SNK vs. Capcom: Card Fighters' Clash. While a "simple" card fighting game on the surface, it contained enough character, personality and fanservice (the cards themselves contain so many guest stars from both companies it isn't even funny) to make it one of the NGPC's most-loved games.

When the system crashed and burned against the might of Nintendo's Game Boy Advance, the game appeared to be lost to obscurity. However, in a slightly sardonic twist of fate, the card fighting game that claimed dozens of social lives will now be reborn on the Nintendo DS with added touchscreen capabilities.

Over 300 cards featuring characters from Capcom and SNK's top franchises (*Street Fighter*, *Mega Man*, *King of Fighters*, *Samurai Shodown*, *Rival Schools* and more) will be at your disposal, provided you can collect them. You can build your deck by buying cards in the game's virtual shops. You can also win them by fighting strategically, using the cards' special abilities, in RPG-style single-player matches. Furthermore, you can link up with a nearby friend and wager cards in battle, or simply trade them.

Warm up your styluses now: you'll be able to throw down with your favorite character cards in late spring. Now that SNK's come this far, clearly, the next logical steps are remakes of *Match of the Millennium* and *SNK Gals Fighters*. Onward, gamers! To the Internet petitions!



NIS America has been staunchly supporting the PSP since the word "go," largely through localizations of titles by the small Japanese developer Idea Factory. *Aedis Eclipse: Generation of Chaos* is its latest effort in that vein, a follow-up to last year's *Generation of Chaos*.

Aedis Eclipse uses essentially the same battle system as the last game in the series. The map is a series of twisting and turning tile paths much like a board game's, and all the factions involved in a scenario take turns positioning their forces. When the player crosses paths with a monster or rival faction, real-time combat takes place, featuring two generals with up to thirty troops each. Players can guide the battle by giving orders to troops or their general, either to use new tactics or unleash devastating super moves.

Aedis Eclipse's gameplay is a massive improvement over *GoC's*, debuting a lot of much-needed additions like a comprehensive beginner campaign, full tutorials, and too many interface improvements to list. The real-time combat portions let you give more detailed orders to your army, and also let you mix together different kinds of troops. The entire pace of the game is faster and more approachable, especially when it comes to resolving battles.

While previous Idea Factory PSP titles have been marred by excessive load times and other technical problems, *Aedis Eclipse* is once again a dramatic improvement over its predecessors in this regard. Right now the cutscene load times are minimal, and the battle sequences have yet to show any signs of unsightly slowdown. With three unique campaigns to start with, optional characters to unlock, and plenty of maps to conquer, *Aedis Eclipse: Generation of Chaos* may just become a must-buy for PSP-owning strategy fans.



Publisher: NIS America • Developer: Idea Factory
 Release Date: April 2007 • Genre: Strategy
 Category: Board Game • # Players: 1

Preview by Lyra



Aedis Eclipse E

GENERATION OF CHAOS™



KORORINPA™ MARBLE MANIA



Preview by Wanderer

Publisher: Konami
Developer: Hudson Soft
Release Date: Spring 2007

Genre(s): Puzzle
Category: Full Contact Pachinko
of Players: 1-2

This may have been the breakout hit of this year's Konami Gamers' Day, *Castlevania* notwithstanding. *Kororinpa: Marble Mania* is the quintessential Wii game: it takes about ninety seconds to learn how to play, and once you start, it's not easy to stop.

At first glance, this resembles a next-gen take on *Marble Madness*, but it's not quite that simple. You don't control a character or object in *Kororinpa*; you control the environment. At the start of a level, a marble is dropped into a maze. You then tilt the Wii Remote to tilt and turn the maze around the marble, slinging it around corners, over gaps, through mazes, down holes, and finally, into the goal. Along the way, you need to collect various crystals to open the exit gate.

It sounds simple, but it's tricky. The physics are spot-on and the controls are sensitive, which means a twitch at the wrong time can send your marble off the maze. Later maps even require you to turn the maze completely upside down in order to progress. It's a lot harder than it sounds, but no matter how many people see you screw it up, you'll just keep trying. Trust me on this.

This may look like a kiddie game, but *Kororinpa* is amazingly appealing. I came very close to trying to walk off with the demo kiosk. It's addictive enough to risk jail for.



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REVIEW

LOST PLANET TRAG ZERO

The goal in each is basically the same: to reach the end of the labyrinthine level while surviving the harsh environment and battling the Akrids. There is some diversity in the levels with different objectives to mix things up, but fighting off the Akrids remains enjoyable throughout the entire game.

The most challenging aspect to the game deals with the health system called Thermal Rating. Since the environment is so frigid and harsh, this rating bar continuously decreases as time goes on and when it reaches zero, the end is near. To counteract this loss, you must repeatedly pick up thermal energy that is dropped from a defeated Akrid or that lies hidden. This thermal energy idea adds a sense of urgency to the game and makes finishing the level a tougher challenge.

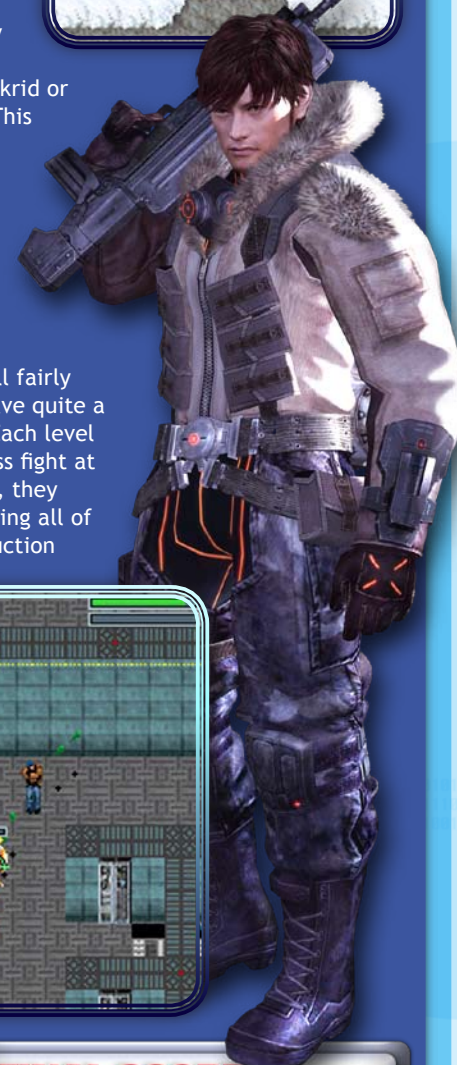
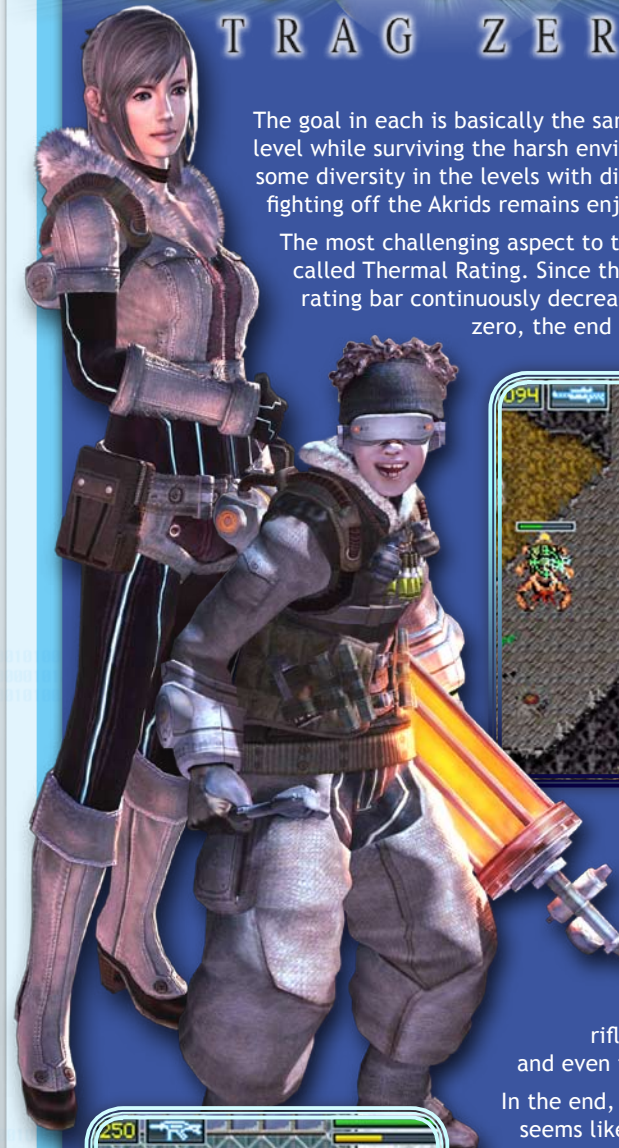
The Akrid, even though they are all fairly easy to defeat, have quite a variety to them. Each level also features a boss fight at the end, and as usual, they are larger, tougher and scarier. But fighting all of them is made easier through the introduction of a new weapon in each level. This includes shotguns, machine guns, rifles, rocket launchers and even the armored vital suit.

In the end, *Lost Planet: Trag Zero* seems like the standard blend of machine, monsters and mayhem. Auto-targeting enemies works well, the levels are lengthy, and an overall fun is retained. If you would like to get a bit more of the backstory to the console game, since this is a precursor, you should consider this download.

Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Capcom
Release Date: 12/15/2006

Genre: Action
Category: Shooter
of Players: 1

FINAL SCORE:
4 of 5



FINAL FANTASY TACTICS

ファイナルファンタジータクティクス 獅子戦争

PUBLISHER: SQUARE-ENIX • DEVELOPER: SQUARE-ENIX • RELEASE DATE: TBA
GENRE(S): RPG • CATEGORY: STRATEGY • # OF PLAYERS: 1



Square-Enix is going back to the game that introduced Ivalice ten years ago: *Final Fantasy Tactics*. Released in the shadow of *FFVII*, *FFT* was at one point exceptionally hard to find thanks to a low print run. Since the PSP is a bastion for ports of old PlayStation games, this is the perfect system to let fans who missed *FFT* the first time delve into Ivalice's rich history for themselves.

Details are scant at the moment, but it seems like S-E is going to make some sweeping modifications to this ten year old game. One big change is that some story scenes will now be fully animated using *FFT*'s original hand-drawn art style. The biggest surprise is that Balthier from *FFXII* makes a cameo appearance in this port. Exactly how involved Balthier will be in the story, or what role he'll play, is still

unknown. Of course, he does share a major bond to one of *FFT*'s original characters. We won't say who, since we're not about to print a major story spoiler to *FFXII*.

The big question at the moment is not "when will this game come out?", but "will Fran make an appearance?"



Preview by Hitoshura



Mass Appeal:

An inside look at MMOs through the eyes of EA Mythic

By Daniel Kayser of GameTrailers.com

Over the past several years, the gaming industry has been turned upside down, grabbed by the boots, and had its Puzzle Solving, Platforming, 2D Fighting and First Person Shooting roots rearranged by the biggest craze in years: Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) Games. While many of the traditional genres continue to thrive, MMOs are the new frontier that helps broaden the appeal of gaming throughout the world by tapping into the human desire to socialize. Quite simply, the recent rise of MMOs has helped define a new era in the industry, and one in which a game like *World of Warcraft* can not only set new standards of success, but also become its own unique cultural phenomenon.

But what is it about the Massively Multiplayer genre that has ignited such a fire in the gaming community? How has the convergence of creativity, technology, and interactivity changed the perception of gaming as a social medium throughout the world? Recently, I had the chance to visit with EA Mythic Studios, one of the premier developers of MMORPGs in the industry. EA Mythic was known simply as Mythic Entertainment before being acquired by Electronic Arts in June '06, and the game it was known for was *Dark Age of Camelot*. It's been

over 10 years since *DaoC* hit the MMO scene, and fans around the world have shown their love and support for what turned out to be one of the most innovative games created in recent memory. Now, the team at EA Mythic is hard at work on its upcoming project, *Warhammer: Age of Reckoning*. I had the chance to catch up with the game's senior producer, Jeff Hickman, to get some insight into the genre.

"Years ago, MMOs were often seen as an oddball game type that many people did not understand," says Hickman, whose own "oddball" style of producing ensures his team's continually fresh approach to their project. "People had a hard time grasping the game+social+community aspects that really make MMOs stand out as special in the industry." While online gaming has been around for years, the rise in the use of the internet as a social vehicle has allowed the MMO genre to begin reaching its full potential. "With the continued growth of social spaces on the internet, such as MySpace, YouTube, blogging, etc., the acceptance of using the internet as a social medium has grown immensely."

This convergence has allowed gaming to reach unprecedented levels of success. As

Hickman puts it, "People are truly beginning to understand that MMOs can be virtual communities, not only chat areas, but places to live, love and play together. This is one of the places that we as MMO developers need to invest more time and energy: enhancing the community and community system, both in-game and outside of game."

Harnessing the social aspect of the internet is indeed a key component of growing the MMO genre. Still, all gamers know that a title is just a novelty until it can present players with some meaty gameplay. According to Hickman, MMOs have certain baseline components that define the gameplay experience. These baselines are an immersive world, character development, and community. Most of all, though, Hickman believes that developers need remember that they are building *games*, and that means giving the players an enjoyable, long-lasting experience. "Fun, you f***ers" is written on my whiteboard for a reason," laughs Hickman. "As difficult as it is, meeting the baseline for the standard MMO experience pales in comparison to investing your game with a soul and making it fun and compelling. This is the true baseline that must be met. Certain MMOs in the last several years have raised the bar

in the expectations for fun in an MMO. We as developers must meet or exceed this bar to truly be successful."

Even with a general understanding of the fundamentals of surviving in today's competitive MMO market however, certain key aspects, such as an attachment to a well-known IP, can make or break a multi-million dollar investment. Games like *Dungeons & Dragons Online* and the upcoming *Lord of the Rings Online: Shadow of Angmar* offer familiar faces and places that help bridge the gap between hardcore and traditional gamers. In the case of Hickman and EA Mythic, the world famous *Warhammer* universe is helping to set the stage for a unique approach to MMO gameplay. "Making a game from an IP like *Warhammer* is a truly challenging and awesome experience," says Hickman. "Staying true to the IP and to fan expectations is a huge responsibility that everyone on the team feels intimately. That being said, an IP like *Warhammer* does help to break down the barriers of entry for many people. They are often attracted to the comfortable feeling of an IP they are familiar with, and are much more inclined to take the first step of entering the game world. Our job is to make sure that once they have entered the world, that the gaming experience is a great

one and meets up with their expectations. *Warhammer Online*, even as it stands this early in production, stays true to its roots and provides a glorious gameplay experience for novice and fan alike."

Like any aspect of gaming however, once a formula for success is established, new products have to innovate within the confines of that formula if they hope to have any impact. Most game journalists dealing with the industry now tend to feel that Blizzard's competitors are simply looking for gimmicks to differentiate themselves from *World of Warcraft*, which by some estimations accounts for over 60% of all MMO players worldwide by itself. The absolute domination of *WoW* and thriving success of *Blizzard* has made other developers and publishers recognize what can be achieved, but has forced them to make sure they appear to differentiate themselves somehow. Ideally, it will be through innovative new approaches to the genre.

"Are there untapped features, mechanics and functionality to explore in the MMO genre?" asks Hickman. "Of course there are! I believe that this is actually where most innovation is going to come from. Bigger worlds do not necessarily make better games. What makes

better games is innovation and enhancement in what makes the games fun. On *Warhammer Online* we are constantly looking for the things that we can do better, the things that are new and crazy amounts of fun, and the things that set us apart. For us this revolves around gameplay mechanics like Realm vs. Realm combat taken to the next level, or our innovative Public Quest system. We have such a plethora of untapped ideas that we probably can't even fit them all into *Warhammer*, they will have to wait for the next game, or maybe even the one after that..."

Despite understanding that *WoW* has truly accomplished something special with its scale of success in the MMO genre, EA Mythic sees long-term possibilities for growth when it comes to investing in the industry's latest craze. "I think that MMOs continue to have massive growth potential," says Hickman. "Will they continue the same growth patterns that came about over the last three years specifically? That is a tough question, but I think that MMOs and social networking online is becoming more and more accepted by humanity as a whole. This acceptance, along with the presence of fun and compelling games, will lead to massive and steady growth of the MMO space for many years to come."



Here's a look at a few MMOs heading your way in the coming months. Each of these games is offering something unique and will hopefully continue to broaden the appeal of the genre.

SWORD OF THE NEW WORLD

Developer: imcGAMES | Publisher: K2



Preview by 4thletter

Ragnarok Online. Have you heard of it? It's got twenty-five million subscribers worldwide and is easily one of the world's most popular MMORPGs. Hak Kyu Kim, creator of *RO*, and his company imcGAMES are bringing out a new MMORPG that puts an innovative spin on the somewhat stale fantasy formula. They call it *Sword of the New World*.

Gone are the *Lord of the Rings*-style fantasy trappings. The Middle Ages have been replaced with the age of exploration. The setting is modeled after Europe's discovery and exploration of the New World, and is rendered with the eye for detail you might expect from historical fiction. Ruffled shirts, large skirts, and sabers are the order of the day, though the hundreds of costumes allow you to customize your character as you wish, even to the point of sporting clothes that would've been scandalous in the 17th century.

The biggest innovation by far is the "Multiple Character Control" system. You do not just control one single player, you have a team of three members that you can customize as you wish. It can give all the advantages of having a party without having to spam "LFG" for twenty minutes over global chat.

Sword of the New World also features a wide variety of combat-oriented gameplay, with PvE and PvP as mainstays. There are at least two more modes, Family vs Family and City vs City, as well. Perhaps most notable is the fact that there will be two versions of the game offered to the public when it is released during the summer. There will be a free trial in addition to a boxed version that delivers up a more complete MMORPG experience.



LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SHADOW OF ANGMAR

Developer: Turbine | Publisher: Midway



Preview by Wanderer

Welcome to the War of the Ring. As a Man, Woman, Elf, Dwarf, or Hobbit, you'll begin as a random soldier pressed into service on one front or another of the war. At the behest of the *Lord of the Rings*'s signature characters, you and the members of your fellowship will be sent on a series of quests that could determine the fate of the war.

Shadow of Angmar is in beta, and runs surprisingly well for that. It's already drawing fire from die-hard fans of the books and film, as it does admittedly play somewhat fast and loose with the world's mythology. If nothing else, a few dozen playable hobbits surging into Minas Tirith with intent to pillage is a hilarious mental image, but one imagines Tolkien spinning like a drill bit in his grave.

As an MMO, though, it's quite playable and addictive, with a deep crafting system that's designed to coerce players into cooperation. It's built around PvE, which renders it immune from many of the usual stupid griefer tricks. If you want to take on other players, the beta is alive with talk of "Monster Play," which becomes available around level 50. All would-be Ringwraiths, please take note.



PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN ONLINE

Developer: Disney Online | Publisher: Buena Vista



Preview by Wanderer

Pirates of the Caribbean Online is set in the films' universe, but not in their timeline. In other words, Jack Sparrow, Elizabeth Swann, and other notables will appear in the game, but the events of the films have no bearing on *PotC Online*; thus, the game deals with a certain event from the end of the second film by ignoring it completely.

You begin as a simple scalawag in the Caribbean, out to gather infamy and sail the seven seas. By defeating zombies, sinking privateers, and accomplishing great feats, your notoriety (read: experience points) will rise, and with it, your abilities.

Each character in *PotC Online* begins with basic proficiency in cutlass, dagger, pistol, grenades, and voodoo powers, and gathers experience and better techniques with each by using the weapon. Thus, the weapon you like the most will also be the weapon you're best with. (We recommend grenades. They're great for killstealing.)

The interesting thing about *PotC Online* is how accessible it is. It's being designed to run on just about any PC out there, and it'll be strictly available for download at launch. If you like the one-third of the game you can play for free, you can sign up for a \$9.95/month subscription and gain access to the rest.



WARHAMMER: AGE OF RECKONING

Developer: EA Mythic | Publisher: EA Games

Preview by Daniel Kayser

Based on the popular Games Workshop tabletop strategy game *Warhammer*, EA Mythic is looking to immerse gamers in a non-stop world of RvR, PvP, and anything else that screams of battle at its finest in *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning*. While there are still plenty of traditional MMO aspects in place to keep fans interested, there's no doubting the game's emphasis on having a bloody good time in plenty of bloody good battles.

Upon entering the *Warhammer* universe, players will immediately align themselves with one of six classes, three from the Armies of Order (Empire) and three from the Armies of Destruction (Chaos). These classes are designed to be innate rivals from the word "Go" and everything about each class screams distain for its ancestral enemy.

The recent build we played showcased terrific battles (which it should since that is one of the primary focuses of the game), interesting character classes, and terrific usage of the *Warhammer* IP to immerse players into a universe many have come to know and love. The game's innovative implementation of features such as the ability to gain points for your character in areas like abilities and tactics, its unique public quest system, or even the game's support for a wide variety of user interface mods made using the LUA scripting language, make it more of a "contender" than a "pretender" when it comes to competing with the ever popular *World of Warcraft*. If *WoW* is the equivalent of The Beatles, *WAR* just might be the next Led Zepellin.



HEIST



Story by Wanderer



Sum It Up In One Word

The word that keeps being used here, in inXile's Newport Beach office, is "cool."

"The music was cool," Sean Patton, designer on *Heist*, says. "The cars were cool. The fashions were cool. The city was very cool."

He's talking about San Francisco in the late sixties, at the height of the hippie era, and why *Heist* is set there. A lot of names are getting thrown around right about now: Quentin Tarantino, David Mamet, and indirectly, Steve McQueen, the star of *Bullitt*, and thus the patron saint of the cinematic car chase. They mention films like *The Salton Sea*, both versions of *Ocean's Eleven*, and *Three O'Clock High*.

Heist is at least halfway a game about the cinematic feel that films had in the sixties, as well as the movies made by modern directors who invoke that same spirit. It's about car chases, classic rock, smart dialogue, cause, and effect.

It's also, above all else, cool.



Working Class Heroes



Johnny's a bank robber, like his dad was before him. One day, Johnny gets out of prison to find that his dad's died. Worse, his dad left one last big job unaccomplished: holding up the San Francisco Mint.

To honor his father, Johnny sets out to finish what he started. He's going to need to pull off a few other successful heists to fund the big score, though, while he navigates between the local mob and the cops. He'll need to do various people various favors to get what he needs to do the job.

He'll need to put a crew together, too. His Uncle Sal's on reconaissance: he'll scope the place out for Johnny, telling him what the security looks like, where the guards are, and what else he has to look out for.

Johnny's old buddy Kid comes out of retirement at the age of fifty-five, looking for that mythical one last big score. He's the door man, keeping an eye out for the cops while the others get the job done. Crumb's a big guy with a big Afro; he intimidates the locals, making sure that nobody decides to go hero. Cracker's, fittingly, the safecracker, and can open any vault door he can get his hands on.

Heist is an open-world game running on Unreal Engine 3. It's set in the San Francisco of the late sixties, with the cars, fashions, and music to match.

Your goal is to rob a series of six banks throughout the city, the last and most heavily-guarded one of which is the San Francisco Mint. How you rob those banks and when is mostly up to you. You can make alliances, deals, and arrangements that'll make the heist easier, or just barge in with guns blazing and massacre half the cops in the city on your way out.

"The banks are the boss fights," Maxx Kaufman, *Heist*'s creative director, says, and it's easy to see what he means. The earliest banks are simple, with little security and no one looking to play hero. The vault's just in a back room somewhere, so you can be in and out of the place in minutes.

Pure bad luck can play a role, like if someone wanders in through the front door and runs for it before Kid can catch him, and then you're racing the clock until the cops arrive. Your immediate goal upon starting a heist is to maximize the time until the cops show up. Firing a shot, letting people escape, allowing a teller to set off the alarm, or blowing the vault with dynamite will all sharply reduce the cops' response time. That, in turn, will reduce the amount of time you have to grab the cash and run.

The further you go, the tougher the banks are to crack. Larger banks will have security cameras, more guards with better guns, less accessible vaults, and various unpleasant surprises. One of the later banks hides its tellers behind sheets of bulletproof glass, preventing you from simply running over and shooting them away from the alarm. If they *do* set off the alarm, the doors shut and lock, which means you could wind up trapped in the bank with the cops on the way.

At the same time, your tactics in cracking one bank will determine how easy or difficult it is to hold up the next one. If you're quick, professional, and nonlethal, Johnny will acquire a reputation as a gentleman bank robber. Tellers will hit on him, guards are more likely to cooperate (since they know they're not going to get killed, they have nothing to lose by doing as you say), and the cops will use minimum force. Patton and Kaufman mention here that a full-blown gentleman thief may find himself pursued by cops armed with nothing more dangerous than nightsticks.

If your heists are attached to a body count, though, then things start to get more complicated. Johnny is fully equipped to do things the quick and dirty way. You can blow a vault, or a wall, with dynamite charges, or eliminate armed response by shooting guards.

The more bloodshed you cause, though, the more seriously the police and the citizenry will start to take you. More cops will be out on patrol, civilians may be carrying concealed weapons, and when the police show up during a job, they'll be carrying automatic weapons. In Patton's words, "you set your own difficulty level" in *Heist*.



Start the Violence

You can go just about all the way through *Heist* without firing a shot if you play your cards right. None of the robberies will demand that you shoot somebody in order to pull it off, and all of the tasks that require violence — such as bombing a strip club — are completely optional.

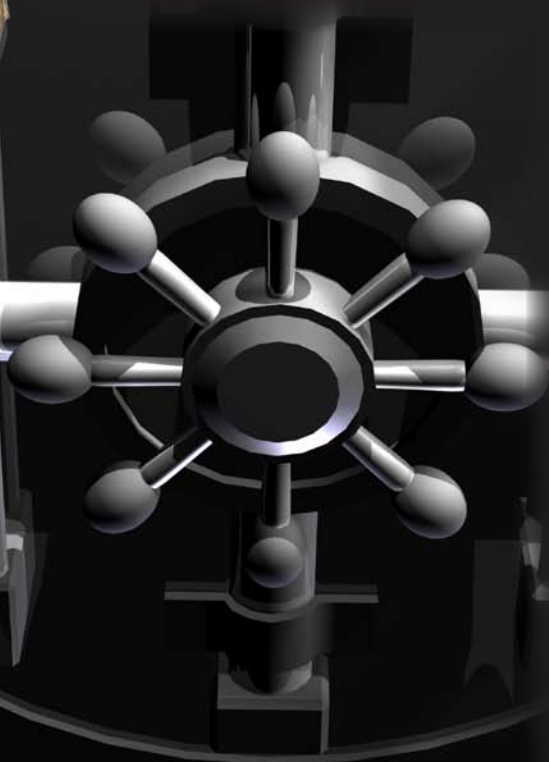
That isn't to say that the violence must absolutely be avoided. The combat system has been put together under the direction of lead designer Scott Crisostomo, who was also the lead designer on Namco's 2003 third-person shooter *kill.switch*. If you've played that game and *Gears of War*, the similarities are unmistakable; both games operate in a similar way, as does *Heist*.

Combat in this game places a strong emphasis on the need to take and operate from behind cover. Your opponents will be looking for it, and Johnny has just enough health that you'll need to be looking for it too. Standing out in the open and absorbing shots to the chest, FPS-style, is a dumb move, and you will get killed by doing it.

Cinematic gunfights are a big part of the kind of movies that *Heist* is trying to emulate, and the environments lend themselves to that kind of doves-in-the-air action. One setting, a derelict cargo ship off the coast, provides plenty of blind turns, snipers' nests, and all the other things that you need for a truly apocalyptic gun battle.

Thus, if you want to break out the big guns, you're equipped to play a much different (but not necessarily better) game than a player who's decided to embrace his pacifistic streak. Like *Knights of the Old Republic*, a game that Patton admits was a strong influence on *Heist*, which moral position you go after determines what kind of game *Heist* turns out to be.

High Score



The Caper

Insert Obligatory Pulp Fiction Pun Here



You begin a bank job in *Heist* by talking to uncle Sal, who, to paraphrase Patton, does most of the grunt work. "We were going to have the player scope the place out," Patton says, "but that made for a really boring game, so Sal does most of it."

Sal's connections are what make a lot of *Heist*'s nonlinearity possible. He'll let you know what jobs you have to run to make the heist easier, such as stealing the bank's blueprints from a warehouse elsewhere in the city, or doing favors for local crime bosses to get favors in return.

One example of Sal's influence is when he sends you to meet an underpaid bus driver he knows. In exchange for a cut of the take, the driver's willing to "accidentally" drive into the cops' way if you need a distraction during a car chase. Just reach a certain intersection, and presto: an obstruction for the cops that looks like a complete accident.

Arrangements like that are part of another one of *Heist*'s mission statements. Movie fans know that the films of the sixties were the birthplace of the modern car chase, with *Bullitt* and *The French Connection* leading the way. A big part of *Heist* is the getaway, where you wind up in a hell-for-leather, pedal-to-the-floor headlong flight from the San Francisco police department, driving like mad through a realistic recreation of the city as it was in the mid-sixties. Along the way, you can arrange for distractions or go for classic delaying tactics, like maneuvering through oncoming traffic.

(While I was in inXile's office, I asked whether stuff like driving through the cartload of fresh fruit, or the guys carrying the sheet of plate glass across the road, would be in the game. They said that kind of thing will be in the final version. *Awesome.*)



One of the most interesting things about *Heist* is that it's squad-based. Most, if not all, of the squad-based video games out there are depressingly realistic military-themed first-person shooters.

Heist uses its squad a little differently. Kid, Crumb, and Cracker aren't disposable meatshields with guns, there to add a little bit of firepower before their poor AI gets them knocked out. Instead, they're fully fleshed-out personalities, intended to contribute to the game's personality and style.

This is where the David Mamet and Quentin Tarantino references really come into play. Your crew is constantly talking amongst themselves and to you, telling stories, cracking jokes, answering questions, making fun of each other, and doing their jobs. These aren't just pieces of hard cover that happen to bleed; they're living parts of the game world. Without them, to quote inXile's CEO Brian Fargo (also known as the *Bard's Tale* guy), "the game would feel empty."

Your squad provides a variety of other benefits, not simply limited to what you can tell them to do. During the planning stage of the heist, you can set their positions and tasks, telling them where to be when you walk into the building. If you want, you can have them all burst out of the bathroom, or begin with them positioned to maximize their fields of fire.

Whatever you have them doing, from crowd control to safecracking, they'll gradually become better and better at. While there isn't anything like an experience bar in *Heist*, your crew will learn from what they're doing. That, in turn, transfers benefits over to Johnny. When he's standing near one of his crew, he'll get a bonus to his abilities depending on who he's near and what they're good at. Standing by Kid, for example, will make Johnny a better shot.



That's Why *They* Call It *Money*



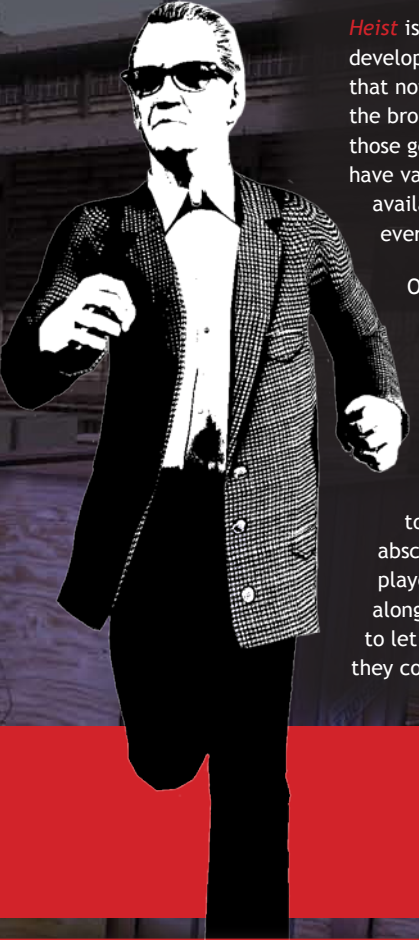
Once you get away from the scene of the crime with your cash in hand, *Heist's* open-world qualities really start to kick in. You can use your ill-gotten gains to purchase all sorts of things, such as new cars, new hideouts, and new weapons. (Would your bank robberies go more smoothly if you had a surplus Russian anti-tank rocket? Well, you're in luck!)

Naturally, you can also steal any number of classic 1960s cars right off the streets of San Francisco, from big old hippie VW vans to three-MPG muscle machines. To drive them around without attracting any attention from the police, you'll need to spend money to legitimize them first.

Afterward, you can take them into the shop and splash out to extensively customize them. You can apply decals and change their paint jobs, if you want. Even better, if you want to invest in a truly serious getaway car, you can improve each car's engine, transmission, suspension, and armor, souping up its top speed, handling, and damage resistance. Remember, this is a game that *wants* you to get into ridiculous, epic car chases. Do whatever you have to do to make that happen.



Games For More Than One Player



Heist is early enough in its development cycle at this point that nothing is certain except for the broadest of generalities. One of those generalities is that *Heist* will have various multiplayer modes, available for online gameplay on every system it hits.

One of those modes is Snatch 'n' Grab, a theft-based shooter mode that pits two teams against each other in a fast-paced, shockingly violent game. With a bank vault in the center of the map, each team must work to bust the vault open and abscond with its contents. Each player will have a CPU buddy along for the ride, enabling them to let the NPC crack the vault while they cover him.



Not All That Realistic

Right now, *Heist* runs on action-movie physics. Johnny can get shot a few times and just kind of walk it off, your team members will get back up no matter what gets done to them, and you can take a seventy-mile-per-hour screaming flight off the top of a steep San Francisco hill without breaking both of your car's axles when you land.

Heist is currently slated to ship with two selectable difficulties: normal and realistic. This will mostly affect the game's combat and its relative lethality, determining just how much punishment Johnny can take before he dies.

The health mechanic, incidentally, is interesting. Johnny won't have an onscreen health bar. Instead, as he takes damage, color will slowly leech from him, with a state of near-monochrome indicating he's close to death.



Screeching to a Halt

Heist is a study in contrasts. It's an open-world game that isn't necessarily about rampant and unnecessary bloodshed, and a squad-based game that isn't about shooting the generic terrorists in the head with the amazingly realistic real-life military rifle.

Instead, it's an interactive movie from the sixties, which is interesting all by itself. Video games, so far, have treated the sixties with vague disdain; it's the place where you go if you want to brutalize the hippies. *Heist* may

be the first game to take the period seriously, and embrace the great things — the music, the movies, the anything-can-happen spirit of the times — that came out of it.

At this point, it's too early to say anything for sure about the game. Most of its features are still in development, and they're still in the awesome-to-behold stage where they keep thinking of things to add. (If you can add

fuzzy dice to a car in the final version of the game, that was my idea. I'm so proud.)

Heist is a good concept from an solid team of experienced developers, many of whom are veterans from the golden age of Interplay, so there's no reason to be anything but enthusiastic. Keep your eye on this one.



A DARKSIDE OF RETROGAMING SPECIAL FEATURE: **PORTS GONE WRONG!**

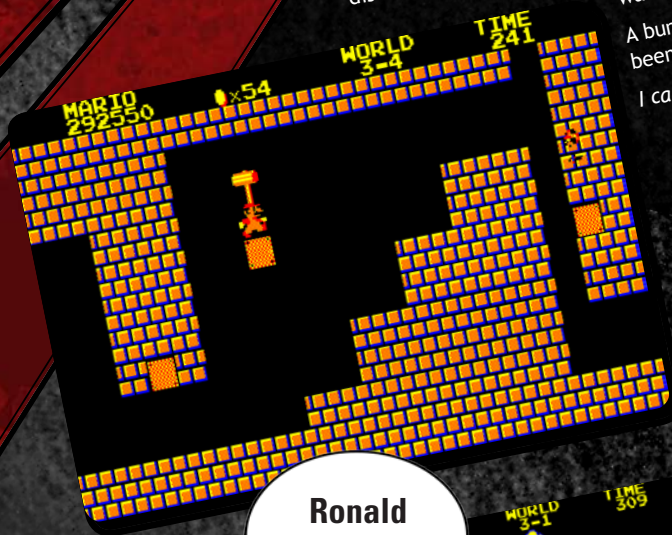
WRITING BY SARDIUS, KOU AIDOU, ATOM, LYNXARA AND ASHURA

SUPER MARIO BROS. SPECIAL (PC88/1986)

Nintendo and Hudson have always been in love with each other, and during its formative years Nintendo handed *Super Mario Bros.* over so Hudson could engineer a port to the Japanese PC-8800 home computer. The folks at Hudson power-ups proud of their effort that they called the game "Special," added Hudson power-ups and enemies, and wrote the Hudson name using bricks in one level. It has all the hallmarks of a kid in love with Nintendo, and they must've had a beaming smile on their faces as they handed playable code over to Nintendo.

This game is so unplayable, Mario dies in the demo. Nintendo? Must have been horrified. If Mario jumps on an enemy and gets knocked into a hidden coin block, he'll be trapped in it. Bowser can only breathe fire to the left, even when facing right. *Super Mario Bros. Special* is full of weird and wacky bugs. The most horrifying part of the gameplay: the stages don't scroll. When Mario reaches the screen's edge, there's a second of "black screen" before the next part of the stage will appear. Even worse is Mario's apparent nervous disorder, since sometimes he just doesn't do what you tell him with the controller. Despite these issues, most stages are designed around the concept of jumping over pits at the edge of the screen. Yes, Hudson wants you to constantly hurl Mario into oblivion.

A bunch of staffers and their friends tried playing this one. We don't know anyone who's been able to finish this game. I can't get past World 1-1.



Ronald McDonald!?



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG GENESIS (GBA/2006)

As anyone who has played the original *Sonic the Hedgehog* can tell you, the game is all about speed; whether running through loops, smashing through enemies, or just blazing through levels at maximum velocity, speed has always defined the *Sonic the Hedgehog* experience. Not so on the Gameboy Advance. Instead, thrill as the Sonic jerks around the screen, and the gameplay slows to a crawl as the system struggles to keep up with his every movement. Not that you can see where you're going, since the port-o-potty that worked on this game didn't bother to resize any of the sprites to better fit the GBA's screen!

Assuming you get past the massive slowdown that pervades each wrenching second of game, you then encounter a veritable smörgåsbord of glitches. Sonic will inexplicably run backwards, gets stuck in walls, or simply die for no reason at all; collapsing bridges sometimes remain standing, if not disappear without warning; backgrounds will flicker, and breakable objects will disappear with a total lack of effect; cats and dogs, living together. Mass hysteria!

We know this port isn't exactly retro, but damn guys; there is Sonic homebrew out there for the GBA that's better than this. Sega: If you decide to port *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* (oh shi-), get those guys to do it.

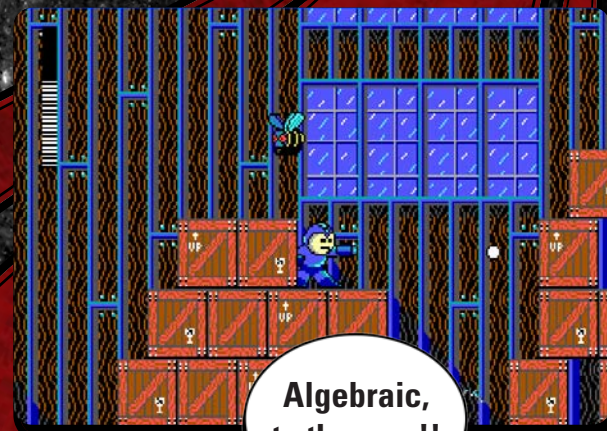


wtf, hax!!!

MEGA MAN (PC/1990)

The game begins. Mega Man takes a slow stroll from left to right across a flat, desolate landscape. Five seconds into his jog, he is savagely mauled by a robotic cat, who pounces on him over and over until he is dead. Given a second chance at life, Mega Man once again faces the beast, who is all too quick to exploit our pudgy and possibly retarded hero's slow reaction speed. The robo-cat is again victorious. Finding life a final time, Mega Man and the cat once again lock horns. In a battle that drains almost all of his energy, Mega Man finally triumphs. The cat is dead. Mega Man continues his walk. A few seconds later, the cat respawns at full health. Mega Man is eaten. Continue?

Assuming you can somehow survive the first stage, you'll be delighted to find that the remainder of the inexplicable PC port of *Mega Man* is just as unplayable. The NES *Mega Man* you thought you knew has been lobotomized, and in its place is a wholly depressing exercise in cheap hits, unresponsive controls, and braindead level layouts. Thankfully, the developers at least saw fit to include the *Mega Man* series's best features: instant-kill spike pits, constantly respawning enemies, and long stretches of disappearing platforms. It's highly recommended!



Algebraic, to the max!!



CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT (SATURN/1998)

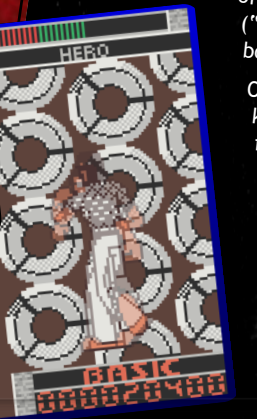
A colleague of mine ("sup JP?") describes the Sega Saturn port of *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (or *Akumajou Dracula X: Gekka no Yasoukyoku* if you want) in terms of how ice cream is filmed for television. Real ice cream melts under studio lights, you see, so what appears on TV isn't actually ice cream most of the time. Instead, it's sculpted mashed potatoes. Playing *Symphony* on Saturn, then, is like shoving what you think is a heaping spoonful of delicious ice cream into your mouth, only to discover to your horror that it's actually mashed potatoes. Specifically, it's the gross kind, full of skins and lumpy, cold gravy that you thought was caramel topping.

Stolen extended similes aside, Saturn *Symphony* is dog balls. It's the same basic game you've played to death on the PSOne, but everything on Saturn is just... wrong. There's constant, persistent slowdown throughout the entire game. The artful transparency effects of the PSOne original more closely resemble mesh-like mosaic patterns here. Worst of all, the load screen hallways lead into additional load screens.

This is to say nothing of the questionable additions exclusive to the Saturn port. There are a few new areas, added enemies, and Maria is now a playable character, among other things. This would be great, except that the garish new stages clash marvelously with the masterfully designed original areas, the enemies are more laughable than threatening, and playing as Maria is a complete waste of time. Don't let anyone make you think you're missing out when *Symphony's* exclusive Saturn features fail to appear in *Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles*. You're much, much better off without them.



Arr, me mateys!!!



DDR GB (GBC/2000)

It seems like a no-brainer that removing the "Dance" from *Dance Dance Revolution* would be a recipe for disaster. Not only are you removing two-thirds of the title, you're removing two-thirds of the point of the game. As satisfying as it is to prove that you can press buttons in sync with scrolling arrows, I think we can all agree that the real fun of *DDR* is in the way it gets you and all your friends hopping around like monkeys.

Yet, in a move to eke out even more profit from its lucrative franchise, Konami ported *DDR* to the Game Boy Color, and the "Dance" aspect, as expected, did not survive the transition. Instead, you basically get to pound the d-pad to tinny, ear-biting midi versions of some of the series's most famous songs, accompanied by a simple "crummy," if I may be so bold) bit of pixelated booty that bops about in a little box to the side.

One might expect that the poor presentation (and lack of, you know, *dancing*) could be mitigated somewhat by a competent implementation of the rhythm game aspects. Sadly, it fails there, too, as the bassless midi mixes and a lack of the usual visual aids (like color differentiation for off-the-beat arrows) make any sense of timing nearly impossible to grasp.

Although it was never released in the US, the game sold well enough to spawn four sequels in Japan, going to show that a big enough name can sell just about anything.

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HGM REVIEW GAUGE

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

GOD OF WAR II

PUBLISHER : Sony
DEVELOPER : Sony Santa Monica Studios
RELEASE DATE : 3/12/2007
RATING : Mature

GENRE : Action
CATEGORY : Bad Ass
OF PLAYERS : 1

Sony has saved the best for last. The PlayStation 2's last hurrah, *God of War II* is one of the best looking and playing PS2 games I've ever played—and I've played most. Left in the very capable hands of Creative Director Corey Balrog, this epic masterpiece follows the further exploits of Kratos, a once mortal warrior with a dark past who in his first adventure took on Ares, the God of War. In this worthy sequel, Kratos finds himself stripped of his godly powers and set on a bloody and brutal path to seek out the Sisters of Fate in order to find a way to bring down the mighty Zeus. Along the way the "Ghost of Sparta" will enlist the aid of the Titans, as well as encounter and go up against some of Greek Mythology's mightiest heroes and villains (including Perseus, Prometheus, Icarus, Theseus, Euryale, Pegasus, Atlas, Typhon, and the Sisters of Fates themselves).

When *God of War II* was first announced, many wondered why it was being developed for the PS2 instead of the PlayStation 3 (including me). Of course, it makes more financial sense to stick with the uber install base of the PS2 than to spend millions of dollars on a new engine and technology—especially when only a few hundred thousand people currently have access to the new hardware. However, one look

at this game in motion and it's a moot point. Graphically, *God of War II* represents the pinnacle of the PlayStation 2. You won't believe your eyes. The detail, the animation, the environments, the enemies—this is the stuff of greatness. I honestly can't even begin to imagine what this team will be able to pull off on the PS3. Needless to say, prepare to be very impressed. If you thought the original *God of War* looked good, wait until you get an eyeful of the sequel.

In terms of gameplay, Sony Santa Monica has taken the formula of the first and expanded on it. Instead of attempting to fix something that wasn't broken, it just gave us more of everything that made the first so great. Expect even more epic boss battles (everyone has seen the first level Colossus battle by now, and this is just the tip of the iceberg); even more visually stunning context-sensitive attacks (some will leave you speechless, guaranteed); and even more visceral gore and brutality splashed across the screen (by the bucketful). In addition, the new gameplay features that were added only enhance the experience. Kratos now gets to ride atop the back of the winged Pegasus in intense flying levels against gigantic Griffins and Ravens. He also can use his chained blades to swing across grapple points,

creating new puzzle opportunities. There is also a host of new magic abilities that can be acquired, including Typhon's Bane (a bow that can fire gusts of wind arrows), Cronos's Rage (bolts of lightning that spread out and electrocute nearby enemies), Euryale's Head (sister to Medusa, this decapitated head can also turn enemies to stone), and Atlas Quake (this magic gives Kratos the ability to create ground-shattering earthquakes). Finally, in addition to a host of new moves and combos, Kratos can acquire and wield a variety of new weapons, including a huge Barbarian Hammer (ripped from the clammy hands of the Barbarian King—the reanimated corpse of Kratos's enemy who changed his fate forever in the first *God of War*), the Spear of Destiny (a deadly dual-bladed spear), and the Blade of Olympus (an all-powerful sword that holds all of Kratos's godly powers).

Of course, the non-stop action is accompanied by plenty of ingenious puzzles. Like the first game, *God of War II* incorporates a ton of exploration and puzzle solving. Dead bodies must be placed on pressure plates; levers must be pulled; time must be manipulated with the use of

an amulet and special statues (a big feature in the sequel); and returning to already-explored levels with a new item or key to find another passage or access a new area is commonplace.

Simply put, *God of War II* is as good as it gets on the PlayStation 2. If you loved the first, you will love this game just as much and even more. If you couldn't get or afford a PlayStation 3, this game will instantly make you forget your woes. If you are just buying a PlayStation 2 (is this even possible at this point?), prepare to be amazed.

Rating: 5 of 5

TREASURES OF THE GODS

Like the original, *God of War II* is jam-packed with extra content and bonus features. In addition to a making of DVD and awesome music soundtrack, there are plenty of cool secrets and unlockable content to be found once you've completed the game. Extras include: multiple difficulty levels, including the near-impossible unlockable Titan level; seven unlockable costumes, including a "Cod of War" costume that replaces Kratos's chain-blades with fish hooks; two separate and intense Arena challenge modes; and six hidden Urns of Power to find if you want to enhance Kratos's abilities on later replays.



Review by Roger Danish

SECOND OPINION

2nd opinion by Lynxara • Alternate Rating : 4.5 of 5

The gameplay here may not blaze trails, but it's absolutely fun as hell. The only bad thing about it is, well, this is the middle game of a trilogy. The ending is a little frustrating, but only because it makes you wish *God of War III* was already finished.

FINAL SCORE :
4.75 of 5

ICON

Review by 4thletter



Publisher : Electronic Arts
Developer : EA Chicago
Release Date : 3/7/2007
Rating : Mature

Genre(s) : Fighting
Category : Ante Up! (Jack that Fool!)
of players : 1-2

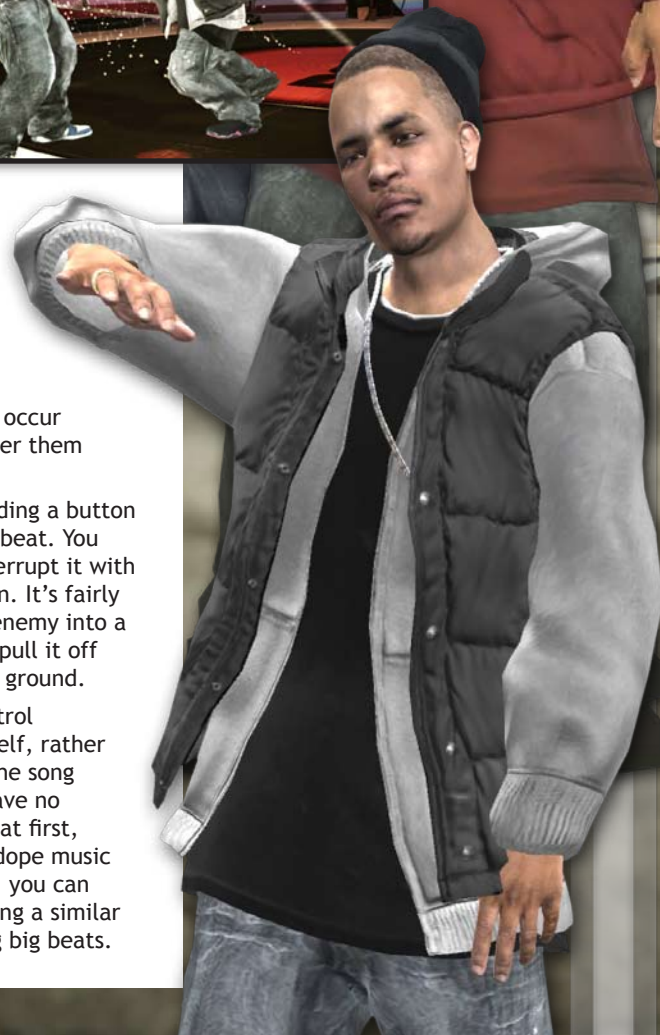
The house that Russell and Rick built is pushing twenty-three years old and still going strong. Def Jam provided the soundtrack for much of my younger life, so I've followed the Def Jam video game series with no small amount of attention. Def Jam: Icon is the latest in the wrestling game-inspired series and it's quite a departure from the previous games we've come to love. Is it a good thing or a bad thing? We'll see.

I'm not saying that it isn't a quality game, but those expecting a game that's heavy on the grapples and Blaze maneuvers may want to look elsewhere. Icon has flipped the gameplay to a more brawler/combo-based style. Rather than focusing on grapples and holds, Icon has switched to branching combos, environmental hazards, and music-based actions.

Make no mistake, though. This isn't even remotely Dance Dance Revolution: Def Jam. In most game modes, you'll pick a song for yourself, while the enemy gets his own track. The songs affect gameplay by way of what EA is calling "Big beats." They come through at regular intervals in the song, and multiple times during the chorus, and trigger environmental hazards. These hazards range from gas station pumps exploding, doors slamming open, and light fixtures falling. When they occur naturally, i.e., with no user interaction, they do big damage. However, you can trigger them yourself for slightly lesser, but still punishing damage.

This is where the music control comes into play. You can activate the hazards by holding a button and spinning the right analog stick. The music will scratch, cut, and restart on a big beat. You can whip these out whenever you like if you're fast enough, but your enemy can interrupt it with the touch of a button. It's fairly simple to toss your enemy into a hazardous zone and pull it off when they're on the ground.

The other bit of control involves the song itself, rather than its big beats. The song you pick seems to have no effect on the battle at first, beyond being some dope music to fight to. However, you can change the songs using a similar method to triggering big beats.

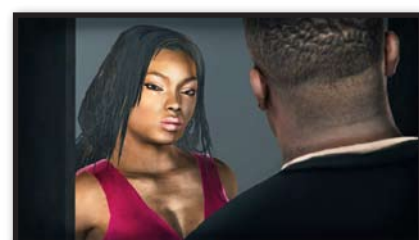


When you switch the song, you gain a brief stats boost for some extra firepower. You also get the satisfaction that comes from turning off a song you don't like and turning on a good one.

Icon is sporting some seriously awesome graphics. The stage design tends toward wide open areas with hazardous zones toward the barriers, which tends to turn battles into a kind of dangerous dance, where you are trying to get your enemy into a hazard zone while staying out of danger yourself. The stages seem realistic at first, at least until the music starts hitting. The seemingly normal houses in the background of the gas station quickly turn into warped buildings that bounce along with the beat. Other stages go from night clubs to penthouses to outside of a run-down house on the block, complete with candy-paint cars and two dudes hanging out on the porch, watching the fight. Keep an eye out for a rooftop that features a helicopter as a hazard, too. It's particularly brutal under The Game's One Blood.

The switch to a more combo-based system is sure to aggravate some Def Jam fans. It works as far as gameplay goes, but AKI's signature wrestling style helped make the Def Jam videogame brand. There are also a notable lack of icons in the game. Fight For New York featured a sprawling cast featuring everyone from Ice-T to WC to David Banner to Mobb Deep. Only a few of the cast from FFNY made it back, with series regulars such as Method Man and Redman appearing during the course of the game. Icon features a heavily southern rap-oriented cast, too, with T.I., Big Boi, Lil Jon, and Young Jeezy playing big roles during the Build a Label mode.

Icon is a fun ride, but it's got some pretty deep shoes to fill. This is definitely a promising relaunch, but the specter of FFNY still haunts it. It is fun, and the music features are pretty cool, so give it a look.



Rating : 4 of 5

The Second Opinion!

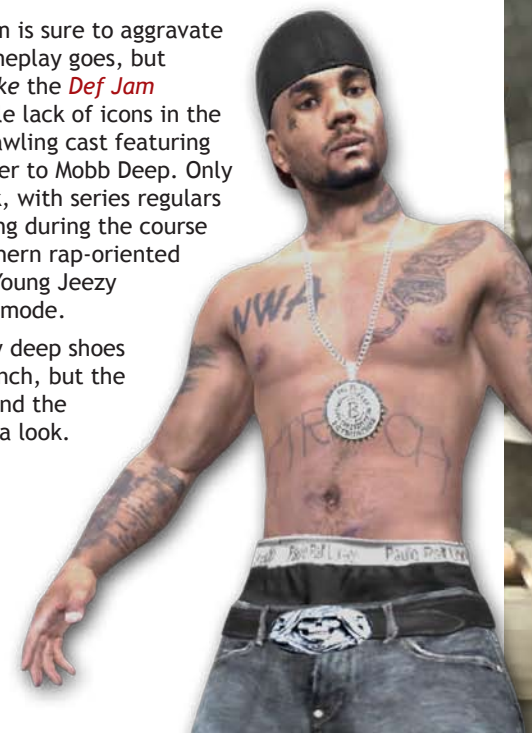
2nd opinion by Shoegazer • Alternate Rating : 4 of 5
Virtua Fighter this is not, but Icon packs one hell of a next-gen punch in its own right. With solid, if somewhat limited, gameplay and unbelievable graphics, even non-hip-hop fans can find a reason to play.



Build A Label

Icon's story mode is called "Build a Label." You play the role of A&R, marketing, and promoter for a major record label. You sign acts (by beating up your competition), handle problems (by throwing money at them), and date your girlfriend (by throwing money at her). You decide the budgets for each new single and get to reap the rewards when it goes gold, platinum, or multi-plat.

Your character quickly gets caught up in record label intrigue, however. Someone has been giving the police tips on your artists, causing them to get arrested, beat up, or harassed. Sometimes there is even intra-label beef, which has to be settled one way or another. In those cases, you'll take control of one rapper or the other and handle it. By the end of the game, you'll have uncovered a conspiracy and dodged certain death.



FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

LUNAR KNIGHTS™

Review by Lynara

Publisher : Konami
Developer : Kojima Productions
Release Date : 2/6/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+
Genre(s) : Action RPG, Also a Shooter
Category : Yeah, We Know, That's Kinda Messed Up
of players : 1-4



the boss is just the beginning. To destroy vampires completely, you need to drag them into space and shoot them with a ridiculously huge solar laser. You can only accomplish this if you successfully clear a 3D shooter stage that feels quite a bit like *StarFox*. This portion of the game uses touchscreen controls exclusively, both for firing and moving your ship. This is quite challenging at first, and feels more natural (though sometimes frustrating) as you hone your skills.

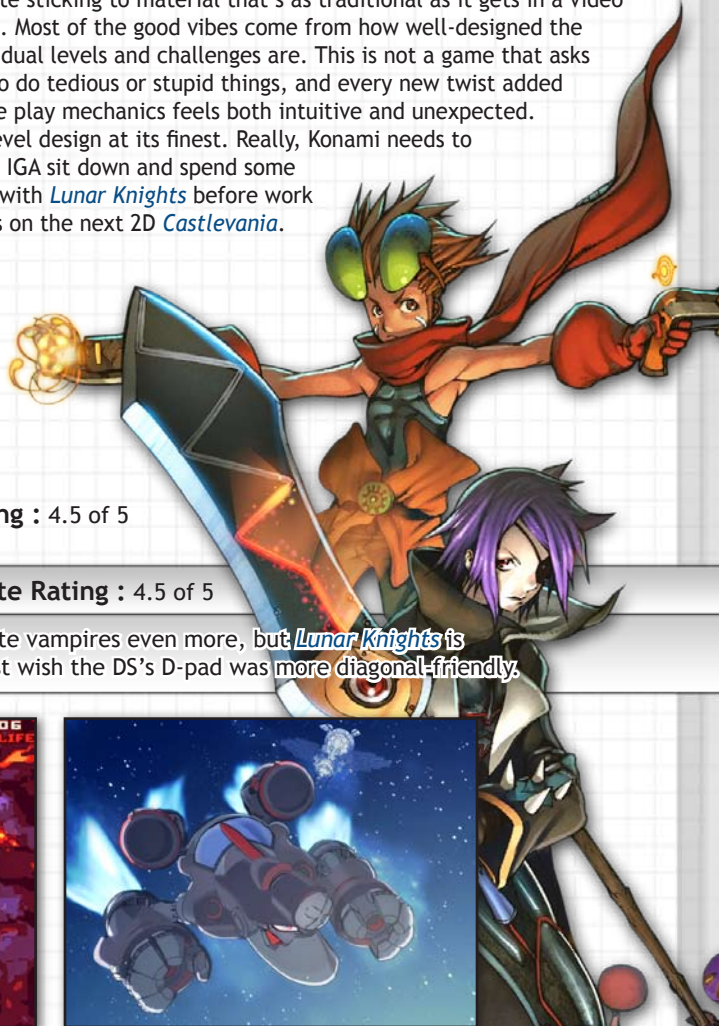
Lunar Knights is a game that manages to feel really fresh and original despite sticking to material that's as traditional as it gets in a video game. Most of the good vibes come from how well-designed the individual levels and challenges are. This is not a game that asks you to do tedious or stupid things, and every new twist added to the play mechanics feels both intuitive and unexpected. It's level design at its finest. Really, Konami needs to make IGA sit down and spend some time with *Lunar Knights* before work starts on the next 2D *Castlevania*.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Sardius • Alternate Rating : 4.5 of 5

I hate isometric viewpoints, and I hate vampires even more, but *Lunar Knights* is wonderful through and through. I just wish the DS's D-pad was more diagonal-friendly.

FINAL SCORE : **4.5** of 5



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

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The screenshot shows the Hardcore Gamer website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Home, About, Download HGM, Get Swag, Contact, AUP, and Help. A search bar is on the right. Below the navigation is a large banner for 'HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE' with a 'SUBSCRIBE!' button and a 'Logout' button. The main content area is divided into several sections: 'MAIN MENU' with links like Home, News Archive, Forums, Store, Challenges, Theatre, Admin Functions, and User Menu; 'TEAM MESSAGES' with a message from 'Hi, djubba Super Administrator 36856 Points'; 'CURRENTLY ONLINE' listing users like Glitch, Fishious, Lynara, etc.; 'POINTS LEADER BOARD' with a table of members and their career points; and various challenges like 'LOST PLANET REGISTRATION CHALLENGE', 'TRIVIA CHALLENGE', 'COMIC CHALLENGE', 'FAN ART CHALLENGE', 'CHICKEN LOOKIN' CHALLENGE', 'YOUR PERSONAL AD CHALLENGE', and 'SUBTITLE HARDCORE GAMER CHALLENGE'. There's also a 'HARDCORE NEWS' section on the right with several news items.

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The skins you can get in the store just aren't cool enough because they're not signed by the man. This one is (although it may be printed on, not touched by him himself).
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REVIEW CHILI CON CARNAGE



Review by Sardius

Publisher : Eidos
 Developer : Deadline Games
 Release Date : 2/27/2007
 Rating : Mature

Genre(s) : Third-Person Shooter
 Category : Mexicans
 # of players : 1-4



How much do you hate Mexicans? This is the question players face in *Chili Con Carnage*, an action game from a Danish developer which apparently despises Mexicans. In *Chili Con Carnage*, your bullets will pierce the skin of hundreds of our brothers to the south, all of whom are the biggest, bushy-moustachiest, sombrero-wearingest, drug-dealingest Mexican stereotypes ever seen in a videogame. Unfortunately, *Chili Con Carnage* is much better at sparking a racially-charged debate than it is at being an entertaining product.

Chili Con Carnage has at least a few good ideas up its sleeve. As a spiritual successor of sorts to 2005's *GTA*-like *Total Overdose: A Gunslinger's Tale in Mexico*, *Chili Con Carnage* adopts the characters, setting, and core gameplay from *Overdose* and places them in a more portable-friendly, level-based action title.

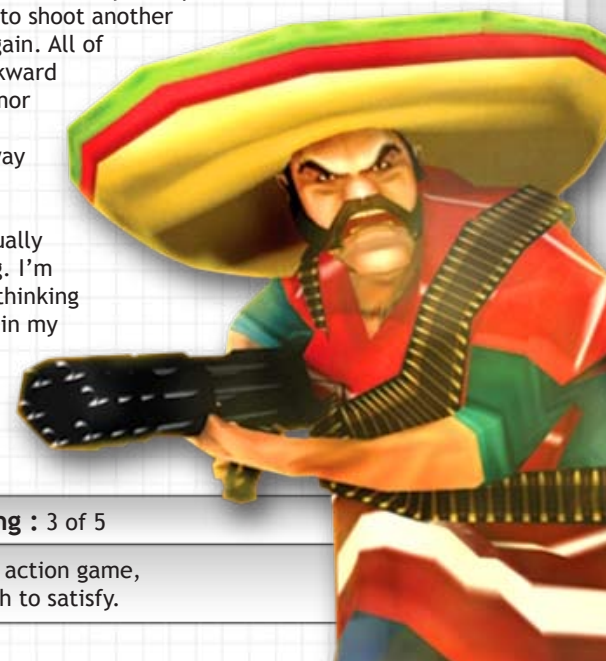
Like *Total Overdose*, *Chili Con Carnage* also blends traditional third-person gunplay with a *Max Payne*-inspired shootdodge mechanic. These components work a little better here than they did in *Total Overdose*, mostly due to the addition of a combo meter which encourages a quick trigger finger and an eye for style. A combo filled with a string of stylish and varied kills is rewarded with more points than individual kills alone, and the urgency created by a constantly draining combo meter results in a frantic and arcade-like experience.

It's too bad, then, that this innovative gameplay concept has gone almost entirely to waste. Cramped, corridor-filled levels do little to accommodate the mayhem necessary for combos; poor enemy placement means you'll see lots of big, empty rooms in between tiny alcoves choked with evil Mexicans; and man oh man, just wait until you get to those platformer sections. You may have jumped across crates in a videogame before, but have you ever jumped

across crates without the benefit of a real jump button? Even when the level design isn't conspiring against you, *Chili Con Carnage*'s inconsistent gameplay is always there to tear up your ticket to Fun Town. Facing a target and pushing the dodge button will make time slow down for more precise aiming... *sometimes*. Pressing a shoulder button will shift your aim to an enemy's head, *sometimes*, and ensures a one-hit kill, *sometimes*. The more complex stunts also rarely trigger when you want them to, but you'd expect at least the basic mechanics of aiming and shooting to work consistently.

I want to like *Chili Con Carnage* more than I do. It offers occasional fleeting moments of stupid, arcadey fun when everything works like it should, but it's never long before frustration takes over and you hope you never have to shoot another Mexican ever again. All of the horribly awkward attempts at humor can go right to hell, too. The way this game fails to live up to its potential is actually kind of angering. I'm angry now just thinking about it. I'll be in my room. Don't talk to me.

Rating : 2.5 of 5



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

Total Overdose works much better as a straight action game, but *Chili Con Carnage* isn't quite intense enough to satisfy.



REVIEW CALL OF DUTY: ROADS TO VICTORY



Review by Honestgamer

Publisher : Activision
 Developer : Amaze Entertainment
 Release Date : 3/13/2007
 Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : First-Person Shooter
 Category : World War II
 # of players : 1

Call of Duty: Roads to Victory shouldn't have been possible on the PSP. It doesn't seem like anyone could reasonably expect to pack the magic of the console versions into a tiny little UMD, yet that's precisely what Amaze Entertainment has done.

Certainly, the game has some disadvantages. For example, dual-analog controls aren't possible. You aim instead with the face buttons. The analog nub controls your soldier's movements while the shoulder buttons fire or zoom in for a closer view. Touchy controls make long-range shots tricky, but that's only seldom frustrating. Auto-aim alleviates the issue somewhat when it comes to running and gunning, but this isn't a complete fix.

The graphics are another area where the game couldn't possibly match its inspiration, but that doesn't end up mattering much. You'll still see plenty of stunning vistas. Textures often look pixelated if you inspect them too closely, but the visual

presentation on the whole is quite sufficient. There are nice animations, too, like when you shoot a soldier and he topples from the side of a building. When bombs strike nearby or grenades explode, you'll definitely feel the rush of adrenaline as you realize how close you came to instant death.

Death is never far away, either. Throughout the game's 14 missions, you'll find yourself flirting with disaster on a regular basis, whether you're storming a building or planting explosives on tanks or even taking to the sky to man gun turrets while enemy fighter planes swarm your precarious position. Checkpoints are spaced far enough apart that you may have to retry some areas more than you like, but as a whole the game feels quite balanced. Since players can choose from three difficulty levels, almost anyone can play. Even if the game is kicking your butt, there's a definite urge to stick with a stage until you beat it, and once you do it's difficult to resist the lure of 'just one more level.' Online multiplayer arenas and medals you earn for superior performances extend the experience even beyond that.

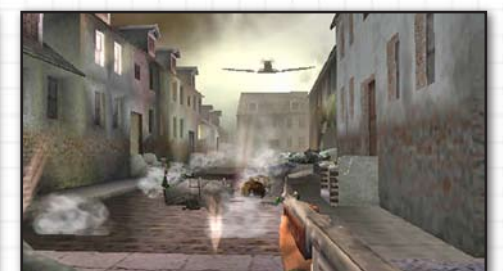
Some of the game's value comes just from the startling variety. You'll witness war from the perspective of three separate nations: the US, Canada and Great Britain. Your soldier wanders wooded paths and twisting courtyards, smoke-filled streets and crumbling staircases. Blessedly, load times are infrequent. You'll wait around 45 seconds between missions, but otherwise your adventures are never interrupted for more than four or five seconds before you're back in the heat of battle.

Throughout the game, you'll find all sorts of signs that the developers knew what would ruin the experience, and so worked overtime to avoid those pitfalls. As a result, *Call of Duty: Roads to Victory* is a serious contender for the handheld FPS crown. Give it a shot.

Rating : 4 of 5

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

Well, I'll be. This is on the PSP... yet it's pretty easy to control, and fun besides! This may well be the end of the world.



FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5



CAPCOM PUZZLE WORLD

Review by Lynxara

Publisher : Capcom
Developer : Capcom
Release Date : 2/6/2007
Rating : Everyone (Mild Violence)

Genre(s) : Puzzle
Category : Guess!
of players : 1-2



Capcom Puzzle World features ports of some relatively rare Capcom arcade titles, like the *Buster Bros.* series and the little-known Capcom *BreakOut* clone, *Block Block*. Rounding out the package is a new port of perennial fanboy favorite *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo*. The load times are frankly worse than they should be for a collection of 2D games, but they're tolerable, so it's really a matter of whether or not the individual ports are worth it.

The port of *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo* is excellent, and adds some nice features not seen in previous ports. There are two alternate play modes; one turns the game into a *Lumines* clone where you move the gems around in a box-like shape, and another that removes the crush gems and makes the game play a lot like *Columns*. In addition, you can train, view demos, indulge in ad-hoc wireless multiplayer, edit your own counter gems, or view an interesting collection of bonus art that includes some original Japanese promotional materials. *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo* hasn't seen very many ports recently, despite Capcom's aggressive re-marketing policy for most of their older games, so this is basically the main reason you might want to purchase this game.

The three *Buster Bros.* games on the disc are treated as filler. This is unfortunate, since the basic gameplay in this series is quite fun. These simple games all involve giant balloons bouncing onscreen, and you have to fire a sort of harpoon gun upwards to split them into smaller balloons. Keep going until

you clear all the levels or die. As balloons pile up and continue bouncing around the area, gameplay can get very fast and frantic. The problem with putting all three *Buster Bros.* games on one disc, though, is that they're all more or less the same. It's more like three different skins for *Buster Bros.*, rather than three different games.

Finally, there's *Block Block*, which is interesting if you like *BreakOut* clones. The original arcade game used a twist-knob to let you control the paddle, and was extremely fast-paced as these games go. The PSP port suffers from twitchy controls, especially if you try to use the analog nub, but is decently playable with the d-pad. *Block Block*'s original aspect ratio is taller than it is wide, so you need to set the PSP's display into "tate" mode and play while holding your PSP on its side. It's already available on earlier Capcom collections, so it must also be considered filler.

Capcom Puzzle World is really only worth it for the *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo* port, and perhaps if you want the *Buster Bros.* games. *Block Block* itself is just filler on the disc, and the *Buster Bros.* ports could've used some enhancements. Overall, this is more of a game to snag out of the bargain bin than buy new. Only one title on the disc is actually a puzzle game to begin with...

Rating: 3 of 5

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

Load times? Missing features from the console versions of *SPFIIT*? No online play? This collection's decent, but could have been so, so much more.



MOTORSTORM



Publisher : Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer : Evolution Studios
Release Date : 3/7/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : Racing
Category : Mud Boggin'
of players : 1 (1-12 Online)

Most racing games these days are all about being clean. Cars have to be shiny, sexy, and sleek. The closest they get to getting dirty is getting rained on, which only serves to accentuate how sleek and shiny they are.

Motorstorm, on the other hand, is filthy and dirty. Its desert sands are unnaturally muddy, dusty, and wrecked. The tracks warp as you race, creating a new lap experience each time. Your competitors will kick up clouds of dust and throw mud onto your screen as they scream past you. Your vehicle will show signs of wear and tear as you race, too. Pick a bike and watch how quickly your character is turned almost completely muddy over the course of a race.

Even though there's a lot of dirt to be found, the view is one of the best I've seen in a while. The stages are very meticulously detailed and, quite frankly, look incredible, be it in HD or SD. The stages have plenty of up-close detail, but the non-interactive stuff, such as backgrounds, towers, and signs, look even better. We're getting to the point where the line between real landscapes and virtual ones are blurring, and *Motorstorm* is a definite proof of concept in that regard.

That, in and of itself, is the biggest problem with *Motorstorm*. It looks great, and the music is sharp, but it lacks compelling gameplay. Sure, you can unlock new vehicles, and the ability to race a handful of genuinely different types of vehicles is wonderful, but the racing feels a little slow and a lot floaty. For an arcade-ish racer, taking a turn at high speeds is pretty rough. It gets slightly worse when you go caroming into a wall off a bad turn and wreck, losing precious seconds and race placement. Dropping from third to twelfth is a little too common.

Motorstorm has both singleplayer and online gameplay. That is cool, but that's also it. You've got a selection of hi-def videos to check out, and you can set up some gimmick races, but you don't really have a true range of options here. Have you played the demo for *Motorstorm*? Okay, good. You've played the meat of the game, then.

Motorstorm comes out of the gate feeling more than a little mediocre. The racing is okay, the graphics are awesome, and the vehicle selection is nice. It'd be a lot nicer if there weren't some fairly annoying loading times when doing something as simple as selecting your vehicle and its color. You'd think that there would be some form of pre-loading, or background loading going on, but you're treated to a handful of seconds of a spinning *Motorstorm* logo whenever you change. That's uncool, especially when viewed in the context of the rest of the game. If you're jonesing for some arcade racing, have a go at it. Otherwise, keep on waiting.

Rating: 2.5 of 5

2nd opinion by [Roger Danish](#) • Alternate Rating : 3.5 of 5

I liked *Motorstorm* more than 4l did, but I'll admit that once you get past the sleek graphics, there's not much under the hood.





Publisher : Atari
Developer : Cavia
Release Date : 2/27/2007
Rating : M; Blood, Language, Violence
Genre(s) : Action
Category : Bullets & Witchery
of players : 1



Have you ever read up on a game, convinced you were going to love it, only to get your hands on it and suffer the ultimate letdown? Such was my experience with Atari's Bullet Witch.

Bullet Witch starts off very promising, actually. In the same vein as Resident Evil, there is a great cinematic that opens the game to explain the backstory.

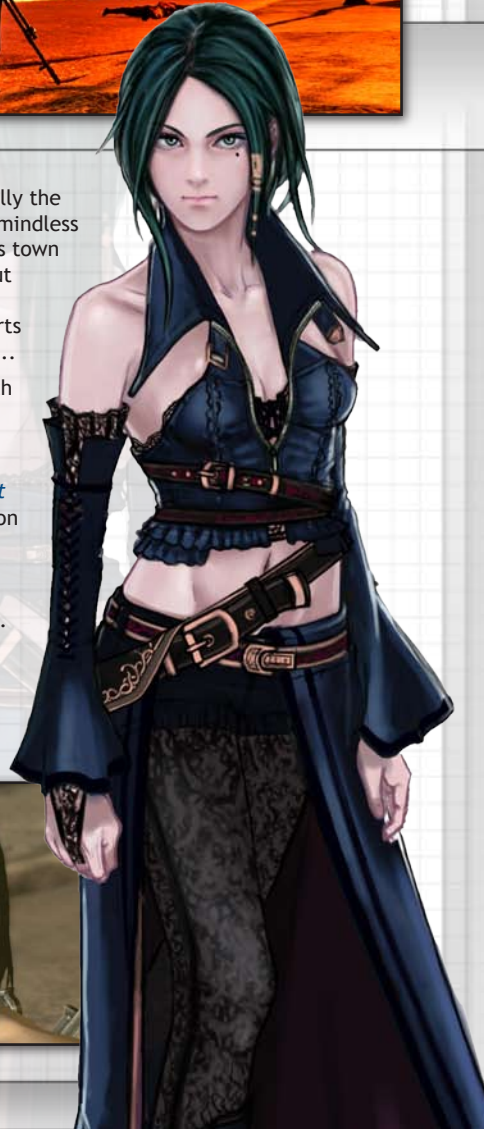
Alas, as interesting as the story is, it merely sets you up for almost immediate disappointment. The game throws you into action right off the bat, witch... I mean, which demonstrates how cumbersome the combat is.

As bad as all that is however, the final nail in the coffin is in the gameplay design. Bullet Witch is to the Xbox 360 as Bloodrayne was to the PS2, meaning it's ugly, boring as all hell, incredibly linear, and the

earlier levels all have essentially the same goal. In between killing mindless foot soldiers, Alicia runs across town shooting enemies called Walnut Heads to break down barriers, allowing her to access new parts of the level.

Had Bullet Witch been a launch title, this bitter pill could've been swallowed, but with so many other great choices out there like Gears of War or Lost Planet, there's simply no reason to play this.

Rating : 2 of 5



Publisher : Sony
Developer : High Impact Games
Release Date : 2/13/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+
Genre(s) : Action
Category : Adventure
of players : 1-4

Ratchet is resting on a sunny beach with his robotic pal Clank when a girl asks them to strut their heroic stuff. Ratchet agrees, and Clank reluctantly comes along for what soon turns into a hilarious, action-packed tour of the galaxy.

The PSP's missing second analog stick is partly to blame for any shortcomings. As always, Ratchet has plenty of moves and weapons at his disposal, but they're not always utilized as easily as one might hope.

Although the controls will likely have you wishing for a full-blown console outing, the visuals fare significantly better. The worlds Ratchet and Clank explore are vibrant and full of life.

Those enemies are plentiful, even if you don't always see them. They like to linger off-screen and pelt you with projectiles you can't see coming, so it's important to note their location and to use your projectile weapons from a safe

distance when possible. There are other times the camera works against you, too, like when you're controlling Clank in some missions. One obvious example is a case where you're racing down steep slopes with robot helpers in tow and you have to duck into shelter before a large boulder crushes you.

None of the flaws keep Size Matters from serving as a competent entry in a popular franchise, though. You'll most likely enjoy it a great deal, whether you experience the meaty single-player game or take it online for some wireless death matches.

Rating : 3.5 of 5



FINAL SCORE : 2.25 of 5

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

Bullet Witch comes so close to being an interesting game that its many failures are downright depressing. Even another six months in development could've saved this one.

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

Honestgamer's right on the money here. This isn't a bad time on the PSP at all... provided you can get used to the camera and controls.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5



FUZION FRENZY 2

Review by Racewing

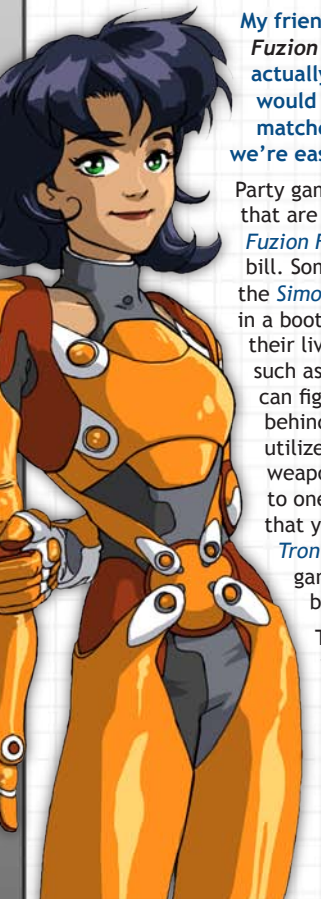
Publisher : Microsoft Game Studios Genre(s) : Party
Developer : Hudson Soft Category : All Flash, No Substance
Release Date : 1/30/2007 # of players : 1-4
Rating : Everyone 10+ (Fantasy Violence)



GHOST RIDER

Review by Sardius

Publisher : 2K Games Genre(s) : Punchy Game
Developer : Climax Category : A Bad One
Release Date : 2/13/2007 # of players : 1
Rating : Teen



My friends and I have fond memories of the original *Fuzion Frenzy*. I have no idea where these memories actually came from, but they're there. Of course, we would also get together for *Kung Fu Chaos* grudge matches. I'll willingly entertain the notion that we're easy to please... but we're not *this* easy.

Party games are supposed to contain playable sequences that are instantly accessible, engaging, and fun. In *Fuzion Frenzy 2*, there are precious few that fit that bill. Some minigames are rote bore-sessions, such as the *Simon*-esque minigame where everyone stands still in a booth while the DJ screams as if they're fighting for their lives. Others are good ideas implemented badly, such as pretty much every single event where you can fight someone. There is absolutely no technique behind the combat engine in this game. Characters utilize punches, kicks, jumps, projectiles, melee weapons, and even aerial attacks that are all mapped to one button. You can only dodge, mash, and hope that you hit. What's left is actually pretty fun (the *Tron* light-cycle homage, the wireframe ball-rolling game, etc.), but those are few and far between.

Then there's the infuriating card system, which is supposed to add unpredictability to the competitive atmosphere, but instead usually serves to make you feel cheated out of victory. There are cards for letting you choose which minigame to play next, which would be great if the minigame selection didn't vary from arena to arena. A universal list would probably have been better here.

Worse than these are the "math cards." These allow you to mess with the amount of points everyone gets from winning a match. You can get some outrageous point multiplier cards in this game (x6, and even further up!), which already makes little sense, but there are also cards which turn those point multiplier cards into point *division* cards. However, *these* cards can be reversed yet again. All four contestants can play this sick brand of Mathematical Sniper at the same time. Therefore, it's possible to trudge through a barely-controllable minigame, manage to place first by divine luck, and still get a big fat zero... or see someone gain an instant whopping sixty-point lead. This was officially the straw that broke the camel's back.

I will admit that the graphics are quite beautiful, especially in high definition. The character designs are nice, attractive (hello, Naomi) anime-style revamps of the original cast. Unfortunately, the voice-acting is a groaner, as is the music. A word of advice: if you value your ears, turn off the DJ.

The best audience for this game is very young people who don't know anything about non-functional combat systems or strange number games. Unfortunately, all of those people are currently playing retro systems handed down to them by their older siblings—or failing that, GameCubes. You can find much better party games on any of those systems. Try those first before picking up this one.

Now I'm depressed. After a disappointing sequel like this, it doesn't look good for *Kung Fu Chaos*.

Rating : 2.5 of 5



The first fifteen minutes of *Ghost Rider* are pretty damned awesome. You'll swing flaming chains, punch demons in the face, and drive a motorcycle through an obstacle course... in hell. It gets a little repetitive at around the five-minute mark, but hey, surely the next level will introduce a whole bunch of new gameplay elements to keep things fresh, right?

You'd think that, wouldn't you? Well, I hate to break it to you, chubby, but once you've played through fifteen minutes of *Ghost Rider*, you've seen everything it has to offer. You see, *Ghost Rider* is what we in the business call a "Punchy Game." In Punchy Games, you control a Punchy Guy who goes around punching things. The Punchy Game genre reached its peak in the early '90s with the release of *Final Fight* and its many clones, and since then, whenever developers don't know how to turn a popular license into a video game, they end up making a Punchy Game that fails to even live up to the standards set by side-scrolling brawlers released fifteen years ago.

The meat of *Ghost Rider's* gameplay feels like a crappy hybrid of *God of War* and *Devil May Cry*. Like *God of War*, you wage hand-to-hand combat through a series of button presses, and like *Devil May Cry*, your performance is scored based on how well you can string together different sets of moves. Somehow, though, *Ghost Rider* manages to miss everything else that made either game entertaining in the first place. It lacks the gameplay variety and compelling narrative that kept *God of War* from being just another Punchy Game, and

whereas *Devil May Cry's* gameplay was heavily reliant on skill and technique, *Ghost Rider* feels more like you're just mashing buttons until everything on the screen dies.

The motorcycle levels, on the other hand, are just plain sloppy in concept and in execution. Ostensibly designed to break up the extreme monotony that characterizes the rest of the game, these levels quickly become an exercise in frustration. You'll zoom through dark tunnels and smack right into obstacles and enemies you never had a chance to avoid, and you'll have to slide and jump at very precise moments in order to avoid crashing and being forced to repeat large sections of each level. The only solution for these stages is rote memorization, which still doesn't help you overcome all the cheap hits and random wipeouts that come from nowhere.

Ghost Rider is a game that aspires to be mediocre, but comes up several leagues short. Its best feature is that it uses many of the same sound effects and voice samples found in games like *Doom* and *Resident Evil*, so at the very least, *Ghost Rider* will occasionally provide fleeting reminders of games that are actually fun to play. Otherwise, you'll be mashing the square and triangle buttons until your eyes glaze past the TV screen, and it won't be long until you begin to wonder if *Ghost Rider* could be an accurate representation of what hell is like.

Rating: 1.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 2.25 of 5

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

Sometimes people wonder why I have anger management problems. It's because I have to play stuff like *Fuzion Frenzy 2* on a regular basis.

2nd opinion by 4thletter • Alternate Rating : 1.5 of 5

I remember when *Ghost Rider* was awesome, with his chains, flaming skulls, and motorcycle. This game, sadly, is not awesome. Poor showing, folks.

FINAL SCORE : 1.5 of 5



J2Games.com / GoodDealGames.com

From Neptune to Earth

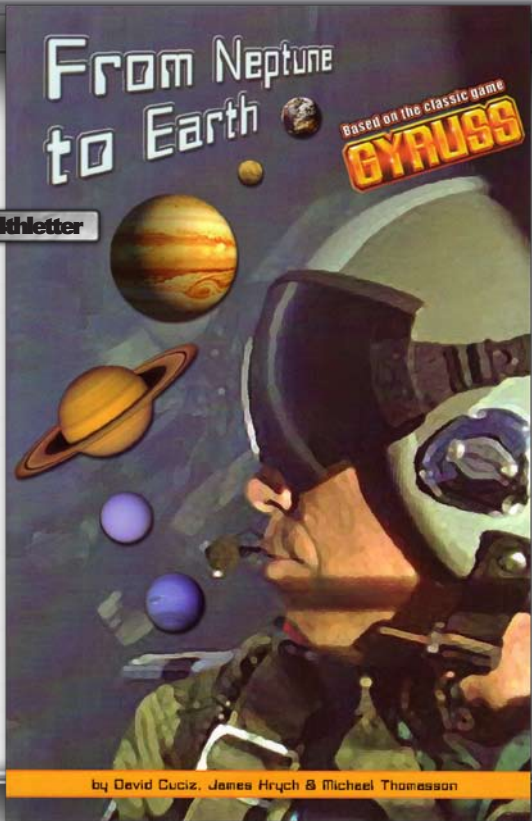
• Novel • Price: \$12.99

Tie-in novels for games are kind of few and far between. They're usually kept to extremely big-name titles or the like. The classics, though, have been left relatively untouched. Until now, that is. *Gyruss*, the classic space shooter, has been novelized by the writing team of David Cuciz and James Krych, with assistance from Michael Thomasson.

From Neptune to Earth tells the story of two men, David Kurtz and Jon Kryton, both soldiers in the fight against the Ideoclan. They go from being complete strangers to battle-hardened brothers in the fight for freedom and safety for the Outer Colonies. The book takes the form of eight chapters that are divided into two entries, for lack of a better word, from each of the protagonists. We get easy insight into their hopes and fears as their lives go on. Old arcade games tended to be light on story, so it's pretty interesting to be given a bit of background on a straightforward shooter like *Gyruss*.



Reviews by 4thletter



Features
Two rechargeable batteries
Rubberized grip

Nyko Charge Station for Wii

• Rechargeable Battery Dock • Price: \$29.99

The Nintendo Wii is a wonderful system, but the remotes eat batteries like nobody's business. It's all too easy to have a gang of friends over your house for a few rounds of *WarioWare*, only to have the batteries run out just when you're getting the hang of the Mohawk form.

Enter a true "no duh" invention, the Charge Station for Wii. It is essentially a set of two rechargeable batteries, custom-fit to the Nintendo Wii remote, and a charging stand that doubles as a remote storing station. The battery packs feature a rubberized grip, which means that you folks have absolutely *no* excuse to sling a remote across the room any more. All you have to do when you get done playing is slap the remotes into the station and they'll charge while you rest.



Features
Five adjustable fans
Relocated power switch

Nyko Intercooler for PS3

• Cooling Fan • Price: \$29.99

Here, try a science experiment. Set your PS3 up in a room and shut the door. Play it for an hour or so. Feeling the heat? Yeah, exactly. Cooling is a big deal this console generation, and Nyko's Intercooler accessories have quickly turned into almost necessary additions to your setup.

This time around, the Intercooler is a base that the PS3 itself sits in. From there, five fans cool the high-heat areas of the PS3. You can adjust the fan speeds if you need to, as well. The Intercooler relocates the PS3's power switch to the front of the system, making turning the system off a little more convenient. The Intercooler can easily extend the life of your system, as heat tends to kill technology dead. It won't do much for the decibels the PS3 puts out, though.

SteelSeries SteelSound 5Hv2

• Professional Gaming Headset • Price: \$99.00 (USB \$119.00)

By now, almost everyone should know the power of a proper headset. Gamers need the proper audio fidelity and noise-cancelling that a good headset can bring, while podcasters need a focused microphone that won't pick up noise from the other room, but will deliver your voice with clarity. With the advent of Skype, Ventrilo, TeamSpeak, and other VoIP solutions, a good headset can end up being a wonderful thing.

The SteelSound 5Hv2 is a "professional gaming headset" that delivers on all these things. The model we reviewed uses the standard mic and audio ports on your computer rather than a USB connection, but a USB variant is available. The microphone slides in and out of the left earpiece and is on a bendy stem to make things a little easier on you. The cord, instead of being harsh plastic like most computer accessories, is actually made up of soft fabric. It comes with an extender for the mic and earphone plugs and an in-line volume controller. The bass levels on it aren't quite perfect, but definitely passable. Otherwise, the audio quality is top notch, and it's nice having padding on every part that touches your head.

Features
Retractable microphone
Comfortable padding
Easy disassembly



Pacific Design Nintendo DS Lite Street Pack

• Carrying Case • Price: \$19.99

Nintendo DS carrying cases, at least for us grown-ups, are a tricky thing. It's a battle between form and function. Do you go for that hard case that holds the charger, all your games, earphones, and who knows what else? Or would you rather have that slim and sexy case that holds your DS, fits in your pocket, and that's it?

Pacific Design's Nintendo DS Lite Street Pack case delivers something between the two extremes. The camo version that we reviewed is, in a word, rugged. It's made of sturdy material and padded in such a way that your system won't break if you drop the case. It's too big for a pocket, but right-sized for clipping onto a laptop, messenger, or book bag. It's even got slots for a handful of GBA games and DS accessories. It's a semi-compact little number, and good for kids and adults who are prone to dropping their stuff. It comes in a variety of colors and designs, as well.

Features
Sturdy construction
Protective padding
Plenty of space

Nyko FrontMan Wireless Guitar for PS2

• Guitar Hero Controller • Price: \$59.99

C'mon, admit it. You're a *Guitar Hero* freak just like everyone else, aren't you? It's okay, you can admit it. We love it, too. There is one problem, of course. Let's say that you're at a party and break out the guitar and get ready to bark at the moon. You're jamming out when your buddy walks past and trips over the cord, snatching the guitar out of your hands and sending your PS2 crashing down to the floor. Oops.



Features
2.4GHz wireless
USB charging cable
25-foot range
100% rock'n'roll

Nyko's FrontMan wireless guitar solves this problem. It works with *Guitar Hero* and *Guitar Hero II*, features a twenty-five foot range, and, in what is quite honestly a masterstroke, features a USB charging cable for your rechargeable AA batteries. Nyko's got every base covered on this one, it seems, and the FrontMan's black and red design is pretty good looking.

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INFO!

Publisher: Agetec
Developer: Irem
Release Date: 2/15/2003
Genre: Adventure
Category: Skyscraper Hat
of Players: 1

DISASTER REPORT

You may remember *Disaster Report* as *Zettai Zetsumei Toshi*, which was the subject of a "Penny Arcade" strip a few years ago ("B---h, f--k your dog").

Disaster Report is the kind of game that, playing it in 2002 or 2003, really made you appreciate the power of what was then a "next-gen" console. It built an entire major city, which it then collapsed directly on your head.

It's set in Capital City, on the man-made Stiver Island; thus, it's a monument to man's hubris on top of an abomination of nature, so you shouldn't be too surprised by the earthquake. You play a young reporter who's going in for his first day at a new job. He's riding a train when the quake hits, and barely survives. What's worse is that the quake's knocked out the road behind him, so to get off the island intact, he'll have to go all the way through the city.

The result is a bizarre adventure-platformer, somewhere between a survival-horror game, with a wide variety of surprisingly intuitive puzzles, and something Lara Croft might get put through. You have to keep finding sources of fresh water while you navigate the wreckage of the city. Post-quake, the city becomes an obstacle course; buildings collapse, gas lines ignite, streets rupture, and the survivors are often insane. *Disaster Report* subscribes heavily to the "surprise! you're dead!" school of adventure-game design, which is where most of its flaws come from. You will die a lot, and it will usually be overkill.

Since you're playing as a reporter, you don't have any real choice but to ferret out the story behind the earthquake. If you're wondering why someone would build an island on a fault zone, the game covers that.

Agetec published the game in North America and Europe, and here's where the *other* amusement factors come in. For whatever reason, Agetec chose to give *Zettai Zetsumei Toshi* a translation makeover that's reminiscent of mid-eighties anime localization.

You spend the entire game picking through the ruins of a Japanese city and picking up Japanese items, such as the adorable collectible toy compasses. The protagonist and everyone he runs into are Japanese. Naturally, the thing to do here is to turn everyone in the game blond and change their names to something WASPy. The protagonist becomes *Keith Helm*, Man of Action; his female sidekick goes from Aizawa Mari to Karen Morris. The facial models have not changed, nor has the city itself; everyone's just blond and American now. Don't mention the epicanthic folds. They're sensitive about those.

Disaster Report is excellent fodder for a page like this for a couple of reasons. One is that I have never been in a game store that did not have a copy of this game handy; the other is that it's unique, both in its setting and in its mechanics. It's got a similarly survival-themed sequel, *Raw Danger*, which should be released any minute now. Hopefully, it'll have a translation that's equally amusing.



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Fight back at www.theeca.com



ON THE DOWNLOAD

GAMES YOU CAN DOWNLOAD AND PLAY ON YOUR CONSOLES AND COMPUTING MACHINES



Developer: Nadeo • Platform: PC • Genre: Racing
Category: Stunts! • # of Players: Lots • Price: Free
Get it at: www.trackmanianations.com
www.tm-exchange.com

Trackmania Nations doesn't have the dated look that a lot of free 3D games have. Its graphics are current-gen. That's no surprise, since it was originally developed for the 2006 Electronic Sports World Cup.



Having more in common with Excitebike than Gran Turismo, there are plenty of loops, cork screws, wall rides, jumps and stunts in any given race. There are ninety offline tracks, but the offline mode is only a warm-up, because TN truly shines online. With over fifty thousand player-made tracks to race on, the track selection never gets stale. That number grows every day, because TN has a built-in track editor that is capable of custom graphics, custom music, mission style races, and "push forward" races (where you give your car gas and it does insane stunts). There's even custom camera work, including intros, outros and in-race cinematics. TN's races aren't based on who finishes first. Rather, they are based on who gets the best lap time. Given a set amount of time on each track, you get to finish the race as many times as you can before the time runs out. Often times, on tougher tracks, you forget that you're racing other players; it's you against the track. Even if you come in last, if you finished the track, you're satisfied. Trackmania Nations ESWC is one of the best racing games that I've played in the past few years, and it's free! How can you say no to that?

Downloaded by Metalbolt

SCORE: 5 OF 5



Developer: CTXM • Platform: Xbox 360
Genre: Side-scrolling • Category: Tank!
of Players: 1-4 • Price: 800MP (\$10)
Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

Just how many weapons can you cram onto one tank, anyway? This is the question Heavy Weapon seeks to address, and the answer appears to be "stupid-lots." A rapid-fire spread cannon, homing and straight shot missiles, flak cannon, lightning, and lasers still aren't enough to clear the skies of the hundreds of bomb-dropping planes cluttering them up. As the atomic tank rolls to its destination, either in Mission



Downloaded by James

HEAVY WEAPON

mode or endless Survival, dozens of enemies firing hundreds of destructible missiles and not-so-destructible pink bullets clog the screen at any given moment. Online multiplayer co-op is a blast, and it's amazing to see four fully-powered tanks working together to mow down planes, satellites, bombers, blimps, missiles, helicopters, and more all swarming the screen at once.

SCORE: 4 OF 5



Developer: Exidy • Platform: PC
Genre: Arcade • Category: Tank Balance
of Players: 1 • Price: FREE
Get it at: http://www.mamedev.org/roms/

Can you believe that MAME is ten years old already? There's no better way to celebrate than with presents, and MAME 0.112 offers up support for the rare prototype game Teeter Torture. Not only has it been brought back from the brink of extinction, the copyright holder has given his blessing for free distribution.



Downloaded by James

TEETER TORTURE

A tank sits on a teeter totter above a barrel of TNT. Plungers on either side will blow everything to smithereens if depressed, so staying on one side of the screen too long is a bad idea. The guys falling from the top of the screen will latch on to the teeter totter, and though they can be shot, letting them land while keeping things balanced is the way to rack up the scores. Teeter Torture is simple and dated, sure, but still good fun in a 25kb four-color way.

SCORE: OLD



Developer: gPotato • Platform: PC • Genre: MMORPG
Categories: Click to Move, Very Short Skirts • # of Players: Many • Price: Free
Get it at: http://rappelz.gpotato.com

When someone who doesn't like MMOs starts talking about the reasons why, he could very well be talking specifically about Rappelz. It's almost completely about monster hunting and it's little more than an exercise in clicking. If you already like Korean-style MMOs, though, this will keep you entertained for a while, and the price is right.



To get anywhere, you need to seek out and undertake various quests, which invariably involve killing monsters. Sometimes, they involve killing several separate groups of the same monsters. You'll want a nicely varied party to do this with, because the further you go, the more interesting Rappelz becomes.

There's a long slog to get to the meat of the game, though; it only really opens up once you hit level 15, and you need to be level 20 to use decent equipment. If you're willing to commit that much time to the game, it's fun enough, but it badly needs more varied questlines and more dungeons.

Downloaded by Wanderer

SCORE: 3.5 OF 5

RAPPELZ: SIEGE FOR GLORY





DISGAEA PORTABLE



Nippon Ichi has always been a fan-centric company, and *Disgaea* is one of those rare games that can turn a person into a sleep-deprived fanatic in one day. However, what's a fan to do when they're stuck on an hour-long train commute, or an even longer flight across the Pacific? NIS's answer to this problem is to port *Disgaea* onto the PSP.

Don't think for one second that NIS simply dumped the game from the PS2 onto PSP and added loading screens, like most other companies would. It has somehow gotten rid of all loading screens, aside from when you boot the game up. If you utilize the PSP's sleep mode to play *Disgaea*, you can start playing again right off the bat. It will take a second or two from sleep mode for the music

to kick in, but you will never see a loading screen again.

Most companies would simply forget about optimizing the graphics to fit on the PSP's 16:9 widescreen display and simply let the hardware stretch the graphics out, giving everything a bit of a squashed look. *Disgaea*, however, was properly optimized, and it actually looks cleaner and sharper than it did before. It's interesting to note that the PSP's own Japanese fonts look like a blurry mess compared to the ones improved from the PS2 version that NIS uses.

NIS added in a few features that make *Disgaea* play like a fundamentally different game on the PSP. The first big addition to the *Disgaea* port is a game stats checklist. Here you can see all sorts of various stats the game has been keeping track of, such as damage records, Item World dives, enemies killed, and, critical to determining the ending you get, a tally of ally murders. More than that, however, there's also a checklist and running percentages of all the items you've obtained throughout the game. The item collection list will keep completionist players busy for a very long time, because the percentage counts whether an item is common, rare, or legendary, essentially bringing the total item collection count to just over fourteen hundred. To give you an incentive to collect every common, rare, and legendary item in the game, NIS has also added in a rewards program for achieving certain percentages.

Many fans love *Disgaea*'s music, so NIS implemented a music test feature that lets you listen to any song you've heard in the game... for a price. NIS didn't just drop in a sound test. Oh no, they went and found a way to use the music test to make the game more enjoyable. You can shell out a hundred thousand HL (in-game currency) for any of the thirty-three background music tracks, or ten billion for any of the eight vocal tracks. These aren't here simply to listen to while you waste time on something else; they are in fact used to select what background music you would like to listen to during Item World dives. This feature alone practically eliminates most of the tedium associated with going into *Disgaea*'s randomly generated Item Worlds.

If that wasn't enough, *Disgaea Portable* also sports an all-new unlockable storyline that turns Etna into the main character. After completing the main, you unlock the ability to start a new cycle in "Etna Mode." This new storyline contains nineteen additional maps; the final three completely new. The new Etna Mode is mostly madcap backstory that sheds light on the subplot about Etna's stolen memories in the main game. The addition of this new scenario means that there'll be new pieces of music for Laharl's Castle, the episode introductions, and the staff roll when you complete it. You can also check Etna's diary during Etna Mode, and receive one of those old school button-pressing codes. Punch it in at the title screen to access Etna Mode whenever you want.

Given all the additions in *Disgaea Portable*, it's baffling that the annoying camera controls and random map generation problems from the PS2 version weren't fixed. You also have to hold the Square button and use the R and L buttons to either rotate the map or zoom in and out. NIS has thoughtfully included a setting in the options menu to select which set of commands you can use with the shoulder triggers by holding down the Square button. Regardless, *Disgaea Portable* feels more like *Disgaea 1.5* without using *Disgaea 2*'s refined gameplay improvements. Not only do the additions make this version of the game more fun, but the fact that NIS took the time to make a port that's actually superior to the original version can't be overlooked. It's undoubtedly one of the best games available on this otherwise beleaguered gaming system.



フツ……面白い！
なら、オレさまが一人居なってやる！



LIMITED EDITION!

NIS issues a limited box set edition of *Disgaea Portable* along with the game's first printing. It comes with the full, two CD official soundtrack from the PS2 version, and a "singles disc" that contains the three additional tracks added for Etna Mode. Both these soundtracks come with the lyrics to all the vocal tracks in the game for you to sing along with, thus making you look like the world's biggest geek. This all comes in a big, nicely designed box that is more about showing off the artwork than selling a product. Any fan that sees this box will no doubt want it. Did I mention the box this all comes in is huge?

WORTH IMPORTING?

NIS hasn't said a word about a North American release. PSP games are region-free, so if you don't mind not understanding the dialogue in Etna Mode, you won't be disappointed with your purchase.

SCORE: 4.5 of 5



JUMP ULTIMATE STARS



Publisher: Nintendo • Developer: Ganbarion
Genre: Fighting • Category: Party
Date: 12/23/2006 • # Players: 1-2

Review by Lyozara

The sequel to last year's *Jump! Super Stars*, *Jump! Ultimate Stars* delivers more of the same. There are new characters and new featured manga in this year's crossover, of course, and some from the first game have been rotated out. There's a more noticeable bias in favor of newer and ongoing series in *JUIS*, but that sort of thing is to be expected. It'll probably be there in whatever next year's sequel is, too.

JUIS sticks to the basics of *JISS*'s gameplay. A "deck" of characters, which you create by arranging comic panels into a "page," sits on the bottom screen. The page is laid out as a grid, and more powerful characters take up more squares of the grid. A fully playable main character takes up at least 4, while a "striker" you can summon for a quick assist takes two or three. One-grid characters grant stat boosts and immunities, but now the effects are constant and passive rather than requiring a stylus tap to activate (as in *JISS*). This makes one-panel support characters tremendously more useful. It's also strategic, since you can only assign their benefit to one fighter at a time.

The gameplay is also very similar. *JUIS* is still like playing *Super Smash Bros.* in 2D, with widely varying level designs, random items, and status effects playing a huge role in the outcome of a battle. The goal of the single player game is to unlock everything by clearing levels themed around the game's varying manga. Meeting each level's challenges earns in-game currency in addition to the unlocks. *JUIS* only requires you to unlock characters once, instead of each form of each character. After that, you can pay to "evolve" the character into more powerful forms. Once you've unlocked everything, there's an online multiplayer community to test your skills against. This gets dull after an hour or so, as most players have already figured out the most unbalanced deck builds, and to win you basically have to use the same kind of build. Playing with your friends online is a different story, and really lets you get into *JUIS*'s party game possibilities.

Jump! Ultimate Stars is a worthy sequel to a surprisingly good game. Unlocking everything is actually fun and addictive, and the fighting action is good for quick bursts of play. You may be irked by how many sprites from the original game were recycled, or how many manga don't get represented with a fully playable character, but these are forgivable flaws. If you've ever really wanted to see Light Yagami write Son Goku's name in the Death Note, this is still the game for you.



WORTH IMPORTING?

Yes, especially if you liked *Jump! Super Stars* and have friends to play with online. There's little chance of this game seeing a localization, and there are plenty of translation FAQs to help you through the text-intensive parts.



風来のシレン DS

Review by Sardius

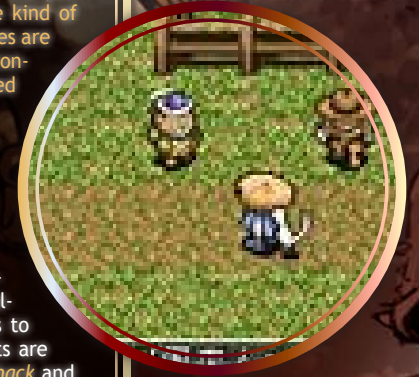
In order to fully enjoy *Fushigi no Dungeon: Fuurai no Shiren DS*, you have to be a little bit sick in the head. You have to be the kind of person who constantly complains about how today's videogames are too easy. You find little appeal in many games that others consider to be the best of all time, and you've probably attempted to single-credit clear a shooter on more than one occasion.

If you can identify with any part of this description, *bless* you. You're the reason why games like *Fuurai no Shiren DS* can continue to alienate the vast majority of the sane gaming populace. I and many other weirdos like me thank you for your good taste and masochism.

Fuurai no Shiren DS is a "roguelike" dungeon crawler: a particular breed of combat-centric RPG in which nearly every element is randomly generated. Everything from level layouts to monster placement to the location of items and their effects are all left up to chance. Like *Rogue* and its clones (such as *Nethack* and ChunSoft's own *Torneko: The Last Hope* on PS1), *Fuurai no Shiren DS* is most famous for its ball-busting difficulty. Die at any point, and you're sent back to the very beginning of the game. You lose all of your items, and your experience level rolls all the way back to level one. This isn't some girly RPG where you can just reload your last save without penalty if Cloud dies during the Vincent makeout minigame or whatever; death is harsh and ever-looming in *Fuurai no Shiren DS*, making for a tense and wholly engaging experience.

This isn't to say that the game is unfair, however. Many of *Fuurai no Shiren DS*'s unique features help to stack the odds in your favor. Your inevitable death may send you back to the first village at the start of the game, but talk to the townspeople again and you may find that things are a little different now. Those who you have helped during the course of your previous journey may now be willing to tag along and help you fight monsters, and there's always the chance that the shopkeepers you encounter will sell more useful items than the last time you visited. Your quest is still an uphill battle regardless, but unlike many roguelikes, death in *Fuurai no Shiren DS* is often followed by benefits that are just enticing enough to make you want to continue playing.

Purists may be upset by the fact that *Fuurai no Shiren DS* is slightly easier than its Super Famicom counterpart originally released in 1995, but these people are *nerds*. Barring some small language barrier issues and the uselessness of its optional touch screen interface, *Fuurai no Shiren DS* remains one of the greatest roguelikes to ever be released on any platform. Just don't whine to me when it hurts you and makes you cry. Shiren says you got that black eye when you accidentally slipped and fell down the stairs, and I believe him.



WORTH IMPORTING?

While it's possible to play through *Fuurai no Shiren DS* without Japanese knowledge, doing so means missing out on the story and item names. If this sounds like a deal-breaker, you might instead want to check out the Aeon Genesis-produced fan translation patch for the Super Famicom version, or if you're in the market for a very similar game with a little less difficulty and a lot more English, give Atlus's *Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja* a shot.

SCORE: 4.5 of 5

Publisher: Sega • Developer: Chunsoft • Release Date: 12/14/2006 • Genre(s): Dungeon Crawler • Category: Roguelike • # of Players: 1

SKULLMONKEYS

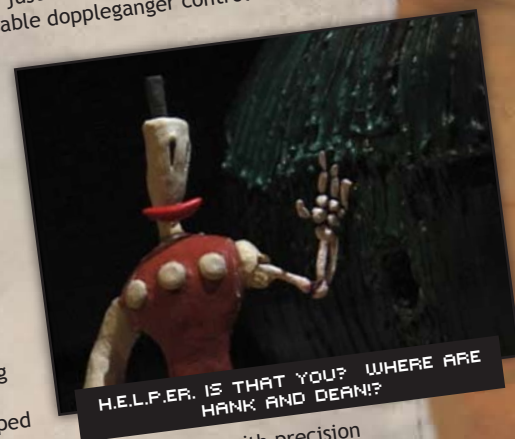
Clay is fun. You can roll it into balls and throw them at people, mold it into worms, and... well, that's about the extent of my skill with it, but if you're patient, clever, and creative you can take several tons of the stuff and mold it into one of the best pure platformers ever made.

Skullmonkeys is the sequel to *The Neverhood*, a point & click adventure game that was also made in the claymation style. At the end of *The Neverhood*, the innocent hero Klaymen has re-awakened local deity Hoborg and chased the evil Klogg out of town. Klogg ends up on the planet of the skullmonkeys, quickly takes over, and starts building Evil Engine Number Nine to destroy The Neverhood once and for all. The one skullmonkey not under Klogg's control promptly sends away for Klaymen's help, and then it's time to start running and jumping through the brilliantly bizarre levels of *Skullmonkeys*.

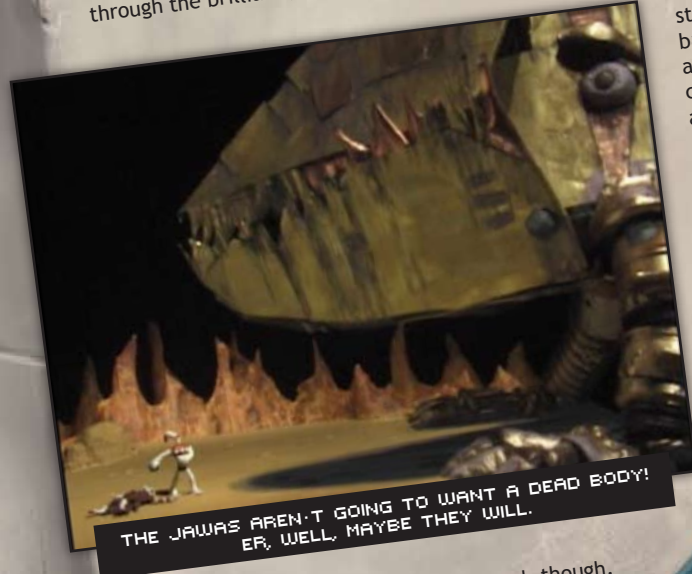
locks his thumbs together and sends out a homing bird of doom. Of course, when there's a screen full of armed and angry skullmonkeys, the Universe Enema is just the ticket. A buffed-up Klaymen sends out a shockwave that clears all the threats on screen at once, a flash of lightning and roll of thunder accentuating its godly might... or you could just send out a Phart Head, a gaseous green disposable doppleganger controlled in place of Klaymen.

The only real downside to the power-ups is that, aside from the very useful Phart Head, they feel unnecessary. *Skullmonkeys* is platforming stripped to its basics, so just about everything can be either avoided or jumped on. If you don't have the skill to clear out the baddies with precision jumping then there's no way you'll be seeing the end of Evil Engine Number Nine, which serves as both final level and the ultimate boss fight against pure platforming hell. The difficulty curve of the game has been perfect up to that point, though, so by the time Klaymen gets to the Engine, this otherwise impossible task becomes simply a very tricky challenge.

Between Skullmonkeygate and Evil Engine Number Nine comes a whole host of levels, all with their own unique look and style. Temples and factories, rivers and clouds and all the myriad settings between are



H.E.L.P.E.R. IS THAT YOU? WHERE ARE HANK AND DEAN?!



THE JAWAS AREN'T GOING TO WANT A DEAD BODY! ER, WELL, MAYBE THEY WILL.

Klaymen won't have to do it unarmed, though. He's got a handful of fun power-ups to collect, ranging from normal to bizarre. The most common power-up is the basic bullet, a green ball of energy shooting straight across the screen. It may be generic but there's no denying its effectiveness, especially in boss fights. The Phoenix Hand is a more entertaining method of enemy disposal, where Klaymen

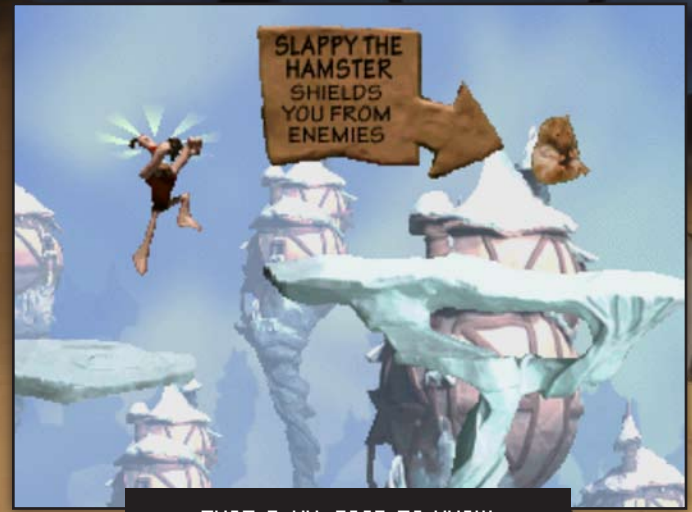


Platform: Sony PlayStation
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: The Neverhood
Release Date: 1998
Genre: Platformer
Category: Claymation
of Players: 1

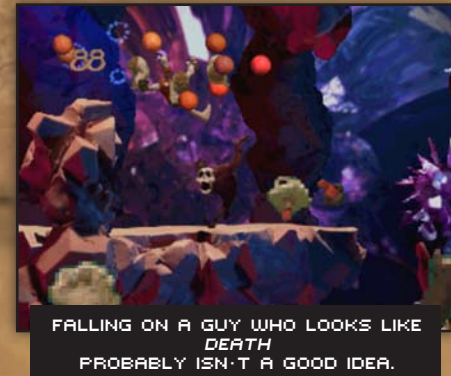
Exhumed by James



DON'T SHOW US THAT!



THAT'S, UH, GOOD TO KNOW.



FALLING ON A GUY WHO LOOKS LIKE DEATH PROBABLY ISN'T A GOOD IDEA.

hardly unique in the platforming genre, but still a lot of fun to see when created using heaping piles of clay. Each level is divided up into multiple parts, with a giant ball of clay at the end of each section for Klaymen to dive into. Certain sections have multiple exits, some in hard-to-reach places and others sitting politely beside the main exit point, colored bright red to let you know that this isn't the easy path to take, betcha don't dare to jump in. Each level also has three blue swirls hidden in it, and getting them all takes Klaymen to a bonus room filled with wondrous goodies and accompanied by one of the best songs ever put in a game (see sidebar). On top of that there are three 1970s icons scattered through



IS DAT SUM RICHARD GERE URBAN LEGEND ACTION!?

the game to take Klaymen to a deep shag, lava-lamped, funky tie-dyed level of cool. You'll be needing all those extra goodies too, because the later levels of *Skullmonkeys* will tear through your stock of lives like a chainsaw through the heart of a marshmallow peep.

As painful as all those deaths are, accompanied by the knowledge that it's 100% your fault due to the controls being absolutely perfect, there's one major issue with *Skullmonkeys* that tops it. There's no memory card support. Yep, none. Passwords were an anachronism by the end of the NES, and *Skullmonkeys* requires one twelve digits long. While features like a world map would have been nice, allowing a replay of early levels to see the different paths in each, lack of memory card support is just plain baffling.

and the cutscenes are honestly funny. Making a game entirely using the claymation process must have been an insane amount of work, and it turned out worthy to stand beside the best Mario and Sonic can provide. *Skullmonkeys* is, not to put too fine a point on it, a huge heaping helping of sheer damn awesome.



The Lil' Bonus Room
from the album "Imaginarium"
(Soundtrack to "The Neverhood," "Skullmonkeys" & "Boombots")
Words & Music by Terry Taylor
©1998 Songs of SKG

Here's a little bonus room, because I know you've had it tough
Here's a little bonus tune, about collecting real cool stuff.

Yes, here's a little bonus room, where you can play.
Don't be frightened, don't run away.
You can linger, 'cus I'm your video friend.
Think of me as a father figure, with a hand to lend.

Here's a little bonus room, where you don't have to worry.
Take your sweet time, you need not hurry.
Oh, you're looking incredible, you're the bomb!
And me, I'm kind of like your dad, and a little like your mom.

There are no Monsters here, hey wait, look over there.
AAAAHHH AAHHH AHHHH!!!
I was just kidding. don't be scared.

And when you turn this game off, in the real world once again,
You won't have to play make-believe, or try to pretend.
'cus I'll be right there when you open your hand,
'cus I'm your little invisible musical friend.

So, show me to your pets, or show me to your pals.
You really will impress every nifty guy and gal.
Show them you are individual, show them you are BOLD!
Besides, I get residuals for every game that's sold.

I'm your little invisible musical friend for life.
I'll never leave you.

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(Some people don't play video games.)

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CREATIONS



by Metalbolt

INVENTGEEK.COM

Hardcore Creation: Heavy duty DDR decks
Hardcore Creators: Jared Bouck and Danny Staten
Hardcore Spendings: \$450 a deck
Hardcore Website: www.inventgeek.com

Bringing the *DDR* experience home properly is a rough deal. The dance pad that comes with it, while good for recreational players, isn't sturdy enough for hardcore *DDR* jitterbugs. For them, only the priciest metal pad will do. Those, however, still have their share of problems, which isn't acceptable for something so expensive.

With input from his *DDR*-loving friend, Danny Staten, Jared Bouck set out to rectify this. No small task, it took over seventy hours of R&D before he began building his prototype, and it took another eight and a half hours to construct it. Satisfied with the end result but still wanting more, he began to make an even better dance pad! Adding a stability bar, thicker tiles and adjustable sensors, Jared made vast improvements on his original design. As of press time, these are "world premiere" pictures of version 2.0. Feel free to enjoy them, and then watch inventgeek.com to find out how to build your own! (Version 1.0, along with step-by-step instructions on how to build your own, can already be found there.)



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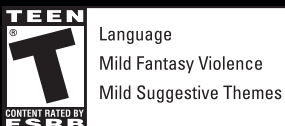
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