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Printed in the United States of America



DJPubba Tim Lindquist

Welp... Issue 24. That's two years' worth. I'd just like to say *neener-neener* to the weiners who said we wouldn't last more than 2 issues and give a giant dry humping of thanks to all the people who helped prove them wrong.

Now Playing: *Punch-Out!!* (SNES), *Bust-A-Move Bash!*, *Super Paper Mario*, *Bagman* (Arcade), *Hot Dog Storm* (MAME), *Hole Land* (MAME), *Ghox* (Arcade/SuperGun)



Wanderer Thomas Wilde

...wait, it's been two years? Why was I not informed of these things?

Now Playing: *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, *Tomb Raider Anniversary Edition*, *World of Warcraft*



Lynxara Alicia Ashby

Two years, and not much has changed. Except for escaping GODS COUNTRY, that is.

Now Playing: *Etrian Odyssey*, *Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales*, *Puzzle Quest*, *Rune Factory: A Fantasy Harvest Moon*, *Atelier Iris 3: Grand Phantasm*



Racewing Geson Hatchett

Man. Two years here, and I've managed to not get fired. Either I'm doing something extremely right, or these people *just don't read newspapers*. Well, since I'm still here: for Year Three? I'm going for even more fanservice! *Two times* as much!

Now Playing: *Earth Defense Force 2017*, *Afterburner: Black Falcon*, *Super Paper Mario* (Nastasia can pencil me into her schedule *anytime*.)



Shoegazer Dave Hulegaard

What a way to bring a two-year career to a close: being trusted with so many Square-Enix write-ups after months and months of soccer titles! Thank you, sincerely, to the most dedicated staff in the biz, the most talented group of designers, and of course, the most passionate readers. I leave you with one last parting shot: Ashura only cosplays as Rose Tyler. GOOAAALL!!!



KouAidou Elizabeth Ellis

Two years, and I'm still just a translator. Seriously, guys.

Now Playing: *Genesis Rising*, *Picross DS*



Roger Danish Greg Off

Two years, two ulcers, two lumps on my head (where my girlfriend whupped me), two strained retinas, two enormous ass cheeks (got to go to the gym), and two more consoles. You know what? I freakin' love it!

Now Playing: *F.E.A.R.*, *Spider-Man 3*, *Crush*, *Warhawk*



4thletter David Brothers

"I stopped needing to save the world," she said. "Saving is what misers do..." Is that profound or does it just make no sense, man?"

--Jack Frost of The Invisibles

Now Playing: In the street



James James Cunningham

Two years already? Wow, that was quick! For me this month was all about being jobless after five years of gaming retail. I'd forgotten what it was like to feel rested and unstressed, and though I'm looking forward to diving back into the grind this surprise vacation has been great. The sad thing is I haven't managed any more gaming time than before.

Now Playing: *Super Paper Mario*, *Kororinpa*, *Okage: Shadow King*, *Raiden III*, and watching *The Venutro Bros. Season 2*.



HonestGamer Jason Venter

Don't let anyone tell you differently: playing and writing about video games every month is a blast! These last two years have been perfect. I can't wait to see what the next ten have in store for us!

Now Playing: *Gurumin: A Monstrous Adventure*



Hitoshura Iaian Ross

I have nothing to write again this month because I was stuck in GODS COUNTRY.

Now Playing: *Gran Turismo 4*.



Sartius Danny Cowan

Two years ago, I wondered what I was getting myself into when the first game I reviewed told me to double-tap the Y button to Vampire Jump. Man, if only I knew. Thanks for everything, guys. It's been a real trip.

Now Playing: *Shining Force: RotDD* (GBA), *Strider*, *Time Gal*, *Wu-Tang: Shaolin Style*



Blooper Chicken Cluck Fu

Cluck, cluck, cluck. Peck, peck, peck. Clucker peck. Squawkbox cluck! Peck.

Now Playing: *Bust-An-Egg*, *Final Flappity IV*, *The ChiccitaWiccita Project*, *Southern Fried Killers*



Wolffie Terry Wolfinger

Hardcore Gamer Magazine! Two years and counting!! Not bad for a bunch of "gamers," eh? I also want to thank everyone here for making this mag kick ass, and lemme give a shout out to my man, Mads. That last *Spidey* comic of yours had me rolling!

Now Playing: *Gears of War* and *WoW*.



Metalbot Anthony Mertz

Car troubles, again? I love this *Supra*, but man does it like to kill random parts. Five years and four master cylinders later, I'm almost fed up with this! So much technology in cars, and it doesn't take more than a tiny air bubble to kill you. Someone should fix that.

Now Playing: *Quantum Redshift*, *Titan Quest*, *TrickStyle* (PC), *Crime Killer* (PC), *Raven Shield*



Arfeth Thomas Shin

I've had no internet at home or work, and so in order to catch up on all my oh-so-important budget videogaming, I downloaded an SNES rom + English translation of *Ys IV: Mask of the Sun*. Through my cell phone. Two years of writing for HGM and I'm still playing games from the last millenium.

Now Playing: *Ys IV: Mask of the Sun*, *Melty Blood: Act Cadenza v.B2*, *Puyo-Puyo RPG*



Ashura Brady Hartel

In between endless amounts of work I've been catching the fantastic third series of *Doctor Who*. So far, this series has been kicking last year's ass and taking names. Well, except for the Doctor's. This is one of the best shows on TV, and it sucks that no one (in America) seems to know about it. Watch, darnit!



Jeremy Jeremy Peeples

I can't believe it's been two years already. When it began, it gave me the ability to fulfill numerous lifelong dreams and now that dream has been a reality for two of the the most enjoyable and fastest-moving years of my life. Here's to many more years of *Hardcore Gamer*.

Now Playing: *Crazy Taxi*, *WWF No Mercy*, *Sega Genesis Collection*, *Test Drive Unlimited*, *Tetris DS*, *Rez*



Mads Amadeo Garcia III

So. I've been making comics for a gaming magazine for two years now, not counting the few times I came down with leprosy and missed an issue or two, and I've been making comics for a gaming website for just a few months shy of that. Am I a reputable journalist yet? Do I have street cred? And more importantly, will I get invited to E3 this year, or have I missed my chance FOREVER? THE SUSPENSE

Now Playing: *Pokémon Diamond & Pearl*, *PW: JFA*, *FFT*



Daniel Kayser Daniel Kayser

Putting together the rather, um, large feature on *Mass Effect* this month has made me more excited about the game than I've ever been before. I can't wait to pimp my Lunar Buggy!

Now Playing: *Rainbow Six: Vegas Red Packet* an unhealthy pace.

CAMER MAGAZINE

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We've got both *Final Fantasies XIII* and a look at the upcoming *Mario Strikers Charged* for the Wii. Check out NIS-A's first foray into RTS with *Grim Grimoire*, Square-Enix's latest with *Heroes of Mana*, *The Darkness* and *DIRT* for the Xbox 360, and a whole lot more we don't even have room to tell you about.



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The Darkness: p17



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Feature

People are doing crazy things with PCs and their consoles, and we've got the skinny on it in a big article full of pictures, grills, and flying Wiimotes. Then stop by with HGM's very own fighter fanatic Arlieth and get a step-by-step guide to building your own tournament caliber home arcade joystick.



Create Your Own Joystick: p48

Growing Together ...

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On the cover

MASS EFFECT

We love RPGs and the Xbox 360, so we're losing our collective minds over BioWare's upcoming *Mass Effect*. Check out Daniel Kayser's long, long interview with Project Manager Casey Hudson and get the inside scoop on all the characters, gameplay, and story that are going to rock the gaming world when it drops later this year.

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- FEELING TO DRIVE: AWESOME (WITH EXTRA AWESOME)



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Jump in.



MOVERS SHAKERS

- Ubisoft has acquired German developer Sunflowers, which also grants the company a 30% stake in Related Designs and rights to the Anno brand, which had previously been published in North America by EA. Recently, Sunflowers closed down developer SEK after disappointing results with its RTS, *Paraworld*.

- EA and Korean developer Neowiz have previously teamed up to launch EA Sports's *FIFA Online*, which has more than 4.4 million subscribers but is not available in the U.S. Building on that success, EA plans to make a 19% equity investment in Neowiz, and expand on the existing relationship.

- Activision signed a multi-year agreement with Live Nation, which gives them exclusive worldwide rights to create video games based on the *Monster Jam* series. The first title is expected this holiday season and will feature twenty of the top monster trucks on the circuit, including *El Toro Loco*, *Grave Digger*, *Maximum Destruction*, and *Monster Mut*.



- Known for the EA Trax playlists in their games, EA has entered into a joint venture with Nettwerk One Music to form a new full-service music company, Artwerk. In the course of finding new tunes for EA Trax, EA discovered promising unsigned artists; this new endeavor will allow EA to sign these up-and-coming stars to their music label.

- Capcom has secured the PlayStation format rights to publish video games based on the *MotoGP* sport license. The first game to be published under this agreement will be *MotoGP*, due for release this autumn on the PS2.

- Electronic Arts has renewed its *The Lord of the Rings* license through 2008 to launch additional games within the fictional world created by J.R.R. Tolkien. EA already has a separate agreement in place for games based on the New Line Cinema films.

- Microsoft has extended the Xbox 360 warranty period in North America to cover from 90 days from the date of purchase to one year. Additional service enhancements include free return shipping, new post-service warranty upon repair, disc replacement for scratched Microsoft-published titles, and generally faster service.

- Codemasters is looking to return to the big leagues with its upcoming titles. A sequel to the war game *Operation Flashpoint* is being developed internally, rather than by original developer Bohemia. Set in ancient Greece, *Rise of the Argonauts* is an action RPG by Liquid Entertainment, known for titles such as *War of the Ring* and *Dragonshard*. *Race Driver One*, the next installment in the *TOCA Race Driver* franchise, will feature improved physics, visuals and car damage and include circuit and urban locations around Europe, Japan, and the U.S.

MOVIES, MEET GAMES GAMES, MEET MOVIES

Production on the *Hitman* movie has begun, filming in locations such as Sofia, Bulgaria; South Africa; St. Petersburg, Russia; and London. Timothy Olyphant (*Deadwood*) stars as Agent 47, and Dougray Scott (*Mission Impossible: II*) portrays the antagonist.

After a failed attempt to get the *Halo* picture off the ground with Peter Jackson as the executive producer, Microsoft has been shopping around the *Gears of War* franchise to movie studios, and it seems New Line Cinema has managed to reel it in. Stuart Beattie, known for *Collateral* and *Derailed*, will be writing, and it will be produced by Temple Hill's Marty Bowen and Wyck Godfrey.

According to the Atlanta Business Chronicle, 300 executive producer Thomas Tull has teamed up with dot-com success story Bert Ellis to form Brash Entertainment, a new video game publisher planning to bridge the gap between movie and game licenses. Brash Entertainment is backed by a \$150 million private equity funding and will open offices in Los Angeles and Atlanta, with a plan to release a whopping sixty to one hundred titles over the next five years.



NINTENDO DOES WHAT SONY DON'T?

Nintendo continued its dominance of the new console generation in the U.S. with 259,000 Wii systems sold in the month of March, despite a continual shortage of systems to be found on store shelves. By contrast, Microsoft and Sony's next-gen consoles sold 200,000 and 130,000 units, respectively. Third-place Sony is still crying all the way to the bank, however: the PS2 is still number one in total console sales for the month, with 280,000 PS2s sold.

In the console market, Nintendo also remains on top. The rapidly blossoming library of the Nintendo DS, including the highly anticipated release of *Pokemon Diamond/Pearl*, propelled its sales to over half a million in March. Meanwhile, the PSP faltered, dropping to 130,000 sales from 180,000 the month before.

Since the beginning of 2007, overall video game-related sales have risen 54% to \$3.3 billion, proving that no matter what company you support, there's no better time to be a gamer.

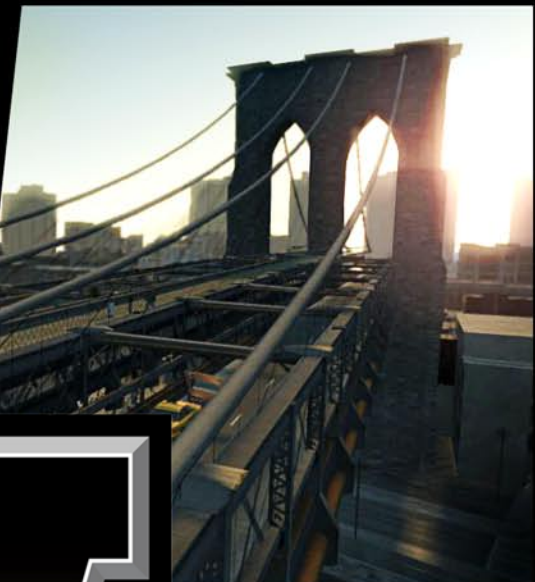


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PUB: ROCKSTAR • DEV: ROCKSTAR NORTH • GENRE: URBAN ADVENTURE • CATEGORY: TROUBLE MAGNET • RELEASE: 10/16/2007 • # PLAYERS: 1-2



TV

Preview by Roger Danish

As we were closing this issue, Rockstar Games released the first set of official screen shots for its upcoming next-gen, episodic megamonster, *Grand Theft Auto IV*. The game takes place in a fictionalized New York City, where you play as Niko Bellic, an Eastern European immigrant guilty of heinous criminal acts (smuggling people, murder, etc.). Niko's cousin Roman lures him to Liberty city with tall tales of living the "American Dream."

Rockstar has recreated four of NYC's five boroughs, as well as parts of New Jersey, for the gritty backdrop of the game. New locales include "Broker" (Brooklyn), "Algonquin" (Manhattan), "Dukes" (Queens) and "Bohan" (Bronx). While the map is smaller than the one in *GTA: San Andreas*, it's definitely much more detailed. The game is powered by the RAGE engine (Rockstar Advanced Game Engine) which debuted with *Table Tennis*, so expect realistic world physics and a high level of detail never before seen in a *GTA* game. We'll have much, much more in the coming months leading up to its October 16th release date.



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PlayStation 2





It looks like it's going to be a while until we see some of Nintendo's biggest Wii guns, like *Super Mario Galaxy*, and *Super Smash Bros: Brawl*, but there are some solid first party titles coming our way that will help ease the wait. In addition to the stellar *Super Paper Mario*, Next Level Games's *Mario Strikers Charged* is rapidly approaching like a corner kick to the groin.

One of many first-party sports games featuring the Italian plumber and his wacky cast of friends and foes, this follow-up to the original *Super Mario Strikers* for the GameCube includes a brand new roster of features. Most importantly, perhaps, it's the first Wii title to offer online play via the Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection Service.

Charged provides a fast-paced, action-packed game of "football" that throws out most of the rules of the traditional sport and mixes it up with crazy power-ups, hazardous interactive environments, and deadly Mega Strikes, where your character charges his power up and performs a special move that can send a hail of balls flying down from the sky at the goalie. During this sequence, the player must use the Wiimote to target and block these balls. The better the charge, the faster they come.

In addition to the online multiplayer mode (which offers Ranked and Unranked play) and single screen multiplayer (for up to four players), there is a single player mode that allows you to compete in a series of games against increasingly difficult teams. The stadiums in which the players battle host certain "gimmicks" that can cause the player to lose the ball if he's not careful. There are seventeen stadiums in all, ten of which are new, and seven of which return from the first game. Look for a complete review and some developer tidbits in an upcoming issue.

MARIO STRIKERS CHARGED

Preview by Roger Danish
 Genre: Sports
 Category: Footie
 # of Players 1-4
 Publisher: Nintendo
 Developer: Next Level Games
 Release Date: Summer 2007



The comic company Top Cow is doing better now than it has been in years. *Witchblade* is actually worth reading for the first time in, well, ever, and now Jackie Estacado, mob assassin turned supernatural engine of destruction, is getting a next-generation video game to call his own.

Naturally, *The Darkness* is set in a different continuity than the comic book. Jackie, on the night of his twenty-first birthday, is part of a job that goes sour. With his friends dead and a cadre of crooked cops on his tail, Jackie finds that he's the latest in a long line of wielders of the Darkness, a demonic force that gives him vast power as long as he's not standing in the light.

The Darkness is an FPS, but Jackie's Darkness powers give it a certain edge beyond the usual shoot-and-loom gunplay; you are, in short, the monster in the dark, and the game lets you act like it. You can use the Darkness to pick up and throw heavy objects, or summon a variety of Darkling monsters to provide backup or overcome obstacles. You also need to keep it fed by devouring the hearts of your enemies, which is always fun.

The Darkness will also ship with a multiplayer mode, pitting players against each other in a variety of high-speed deathmatches. You can equip a variety of weapons, but every character will also be able to transform at will into Darklings, allowing for a certain degree of stealth. You can use Darkling form to hide in shadows or slip through ventilation shafts, all the better to come at other players from out of nowhere.

Finally, and this is important: you can summon Darklings who wield jackhammers. The knees of New York's mob may never be the same.



Preview by Wanderer



IN ANY OTHER GAME,
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When death can come from anywhere, it can make even the most unflappable near-future warrior a little jumpy. In Shadowrun, good brains matter as much as good aim as you ditch the usual run n' gun to outwit and outgun your enemies. You're a deadly combination of firepower and mystic powers as you teleport, see through walls, and even turn to smoke to put the bad guys in a state of permanent relaxation. The bad news? Your enemies can, too. Better keep your eyes open.



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shadowrun.com



Dead Head Fred



Preview by Sardius

Publisher: D3 Publisher
Developer: Vicious Cycle
Release Date: August, 2007

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

Fresh off of the unexpected success of portable hit *Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords*, D3 Publisher and developer Vicious Cycle are looking to capture a different market with *Dead Head Fred*. It's not quite clear which market this is exactly, but from the looks of things, it's apparently a market that enjoys film noir-styled third-person action games about zombies and stolen heads. So... me, in other words.

Players take control of detective Fred Neuman, who is just fresh off of being murdered. Gameplay takes place over a period of several years in a coffin buried underground, where the X button summons maggots and... nah, I'm just messing with you. Anyway, Fred is back from the dead, but he has no head. All that's left atop his shoulders is a brain in a jar. That's okay though, since Fred is able to wear the heads of decapitated enemies and use their unique powers to solve puzzles and kill things. In concept, it all sounds a little bit like Treasure's oft-overlooked Sega Genesis platformer *Dynamite Headdy*, and that's just fine with me.

Fred also has a variety of combat moves at his disposal, ranging from hand-to-hand fisticuffs (with a moveset featuring the dreaded "nut-punch") to projectile-based attacks that vary depending upon which head is employed. It's wacky, it's silly, and yes, it's even what hack journalists would call *quirky*, even though it's not Japanese. *Dead Head Fred* is tasked with filling a very specific niche in the PSP's library, and I for one admire the guy and hope he finds his head again someday. Seriously, good luck with that, Fred.



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PUBLISHER: SQUARE-ENIX • DEVELOPER: SQUARE-ENIX • RELEASE DATE: 2008 • GENRE: RPG • CATEGORY: FF in HD!!! • # OF PLAYERS: 1

Fabula Nova Crystallis is an ambitious three-pronged attack that promises to reinvent the way gamers look at the *Final Fantasy* series, starting with *Final Fantasy XIII*.

Though all three games from this massive project will take place within the same universe, they will not share any characters, or plot. *FFXIII* appears to star a woman simply known as Lightning, but the details of her background are still a mystery, including her real name. In fact, Lightning knows very little about herself, but all secrets promise to be revealed as the game's plot unwinds.

The world is split up into two parts: Cocoon and Pulse. Cocoon is the safe haven above the ground that is protected by the crystals, whereas Pulse is the dangerous world below filled with monsters. The citizens of Cocoon are terrified of Pulse, and believe that anyone who comes in contact with it becomes "infected." All that is known about the game's plot at this time is that something from Pulse invades Cocoon, causing a widespread panic, and leading to a grand real-time battle that opens the game.

In typical Square-Enix fashion, much of the content is still being kept tightly under wraps, but with veteran director Motome Toriyama at the helm, *FFXIII* appears to be in very safe hands and grows more exciting every day.



As great as *Final Fantasy XIII* looked at last year's E3, its existence was one of the worst kept secrets in the industry. The *real* surprise came in the form of *Final Fantasy Versus XIII* and the announcement that Tetsuya Nomura would be acting as Director and Character Designer.

With as little information as there is regarding *FFXIII*, there is even less known about *Versus*. However, it is known that the game takes place in the same universe as the other *Fabula Nova Crystallis* titles, though not directly related to them, and that the story will once again be primarily focused around the crystals. The extended game trailer shown at Jump Festa reveals the unnamed protagonist fending off waves of would-be invaders with a variety of punishing attacks, giving an early glimpse of the gorgeous visuals that are possible on the PS3 hardware.

Even from the early footage shown, *Versus* appears to be an incredibly dark game, to a degree never been seen before in the series. It is expected that *Versus* will feature a real-time combat system similar to *Kingdom Hearts*, and using the fight scenes from *FFVII: Advent Children* as inspiration to create a more cinematic experience. Its release is still such a long ways away, but there is every reason to be excited, even this early!

Preview by Shoegazer

XIII

FINAL FANTASY VERSUS XIII

PUBLISHER: SQUARE-ENIX • DEVELOPER: SQUARE-ENIX • RELEASE DATE: 2009?? • GENRE: RPG • CATEGORY: NO IDEAR • # OF PLAYERS: 1



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HEROES of MANA

The much-beloved *Mana* series is getting set for one extraordinary makeover in the form of *Heroes of Mana*: an RPG/real-time strategy hybrid built to take full advantage of the Nintendo DS.

Heroes is the story of a soldier named Roger, whose aircraft is shot down during the middle of a reconnaissance mission, leaving him and his companions abandoned and forced to fend for themselves. They quickly discover that their own army's superiors had set them up to fail their mission and plotted to eliminate them. They must now battle against their own countrymen as a means of both retribution and survival.

With the touch of a stylus, players will have full control to lead armies, build bases, and plan full-scale assaults on the enemy. Much as in franchises like *Warcraft* and *Age of Empires*, you will have to gather resources, assemble battle plans and act as the general of your own touch-screen army.

Heroes is truly a departure for the *Mana* series, but it still has enough tradition, such as the signature art style and a score provided by composer Yoko Shimomura, to make you feel right at home.

Preview by Shoegazer



Publisher: Square-Enix
Developer: Brownie Brown
Release Date: Summer 2007
Genre(s): RPG/RTS
Category: RTS?? Yep, I Said It
of Players: 1-2



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DIRT

Publisher: Codemasters Genre(s): Racing
Developer: Codemasters Category: Not Just for Europeans Anymore
Release Date: June 2007 # of Players: 1-2 (Online Multiplayer)



Preview by Shoegazer

With the exception of an incredibly rabid fan base, the *Colin McRae* rally racing titles have gone largely unnoticed despite being amongst the best in the genre. How can that be, you ask? Simply put, rally racing doesn't have the same appeal here in the states that it does in Europe, leaving the *Colin McRae* brand about as desirable as an EA Sports cricket game. However, with *Dirt*, Codemasters has taken its classic, proven formula and built a game with the North American gearhead in mind.

Though McRae's name has been dropped from the title, the smooth gameplay engine and unprecedented car physics that fans have come to expect remain faithfully intact. The inclusion of forty-six licensed vehicles and real-world locations will certainly be of interest to racing enthusiasts who have never tried a previous game in the series.

With next-gen fueled, jaw-dropping visuals and multiple game modes such as Rally, Rally Cross, Hill Climb, and the CORR desert series, *Dirt* will ensure that there is plenty under the hood for the serious racer. Add in online multiplayer, and suddenly you've got a potential sleeper on your hands that may be hard to ignore.



The brightest light casts the darkest shadow



Aedis Eclipse

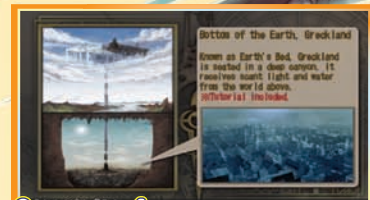
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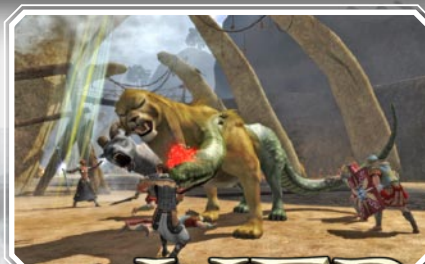
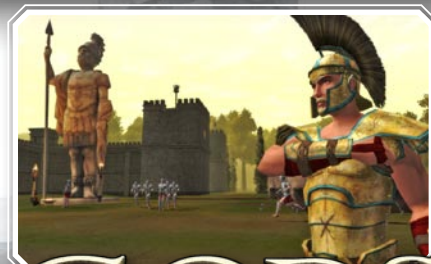
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GODS & HEROES

ROME RISING



Preview by Wanderer

Publisher: Sony Online

Developer: Perpetual Entertainment

Release Date: 6/1/2007

Genre(s): MMORPG

Category: Pixel Hunting

of Players: Many

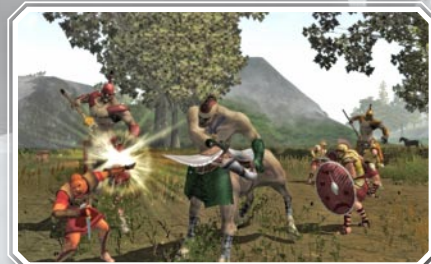
We first hit the point where everyone had to have an MMO, and now we're at the point where everyone has to have an MMO that does something different. Some people are going with licensed properties; others are tinkering with the formula.

Gods & Heroes falls into the latter category. Under the tutelage of Stieg Hedlund, one of the level designers of *Diablo 2*, Perpetual is trying to overhaul MMORPG combat. Their stated goal is to pattern the game after tournament fighters like *Soul Calibur III*, with a similar sort of feel and payoff.

You begin the game as a gladiatorial slave in the Roman arena, and naturally, you're also the offspring of a Greek god. Each class has two gods that are aligned with it, and the player can pick which one, thus giving you certain unique abilities and responsibilities, including a new skill tree.

Further, you will rapidly acquire minions, which work to maximize your character build synergistically. You can collect more than a hundred minions, including mythological monsters that are unique to your patron god, and use them to close up your weak points. A warrior may want to bring archers or healers; a spellcaster may want tanks. Each player is effectively the leader of a small adventuring party.

Gods & Heroes is presently set, as the title might suggest, in Rome, and any possible expansions that might come out will broaden the scope of its world to other nations and cultures. Whether it'll last that long is an interesting question, though, as in the increasingly cutthroat world of the MMORPG genre, it doesn't have star developers or a major license. It's got some interesting ideas, though, so it has a shot.



NIS America has been enjoying a small measure of success by picking just the right Japanese titles to bring to American gamers. These titles have included both NIS's internally developed games (*Disgaea*, *Phantom Brave*, *Makai Kingdom*) as well as other companies' titles (*Atelier Iris*, *Blade Dancer*, *Generations of Chaos*).

Now, for the first time, they are doing both. Developed jointly between NIS and Vanillaware (*Princess Crown* (Saturn), *Odin Sphere* (PS2)), *Grim Grimoire* represents a move in a slightly different direction for NIS America. Most of its titles have been straight RPGs or strategy RPGs; *GG* is a real time strategy game.

The game plays in 2D, so think *Worms* instead of *Command & Conquer*. You will take on the role of a young, cute, female magic student who has enrolled in a prestigious magic school housed in a huge tower that, apparently, was formerly home to some sort of nest of evil. Evidently, not all of the former residents paid attention to the eviction notice and have been up to all sorts of nefarious, after-dark mischief, like snatching students who stray from their rooms at night and generally terrorizing the timid. It's time to clean house.

Grim Grimoire looks like it's going to be an enchanting, delightful dose of wicked, wizardly warfare. Fans of beautiful, modern Japanese-style character design, interesting magic school politics (love, rivalry, mystery...) and clever RTS game mechanics will probably eat this up.

GRIM GRIMOIRE

Publisher: NIS - Developer: NIS/Vanillaware - Release Date: Summer 2007
Genre: RTS - Category: Wicked, Wizardly - # of Players: 1



Preview by DJPubba

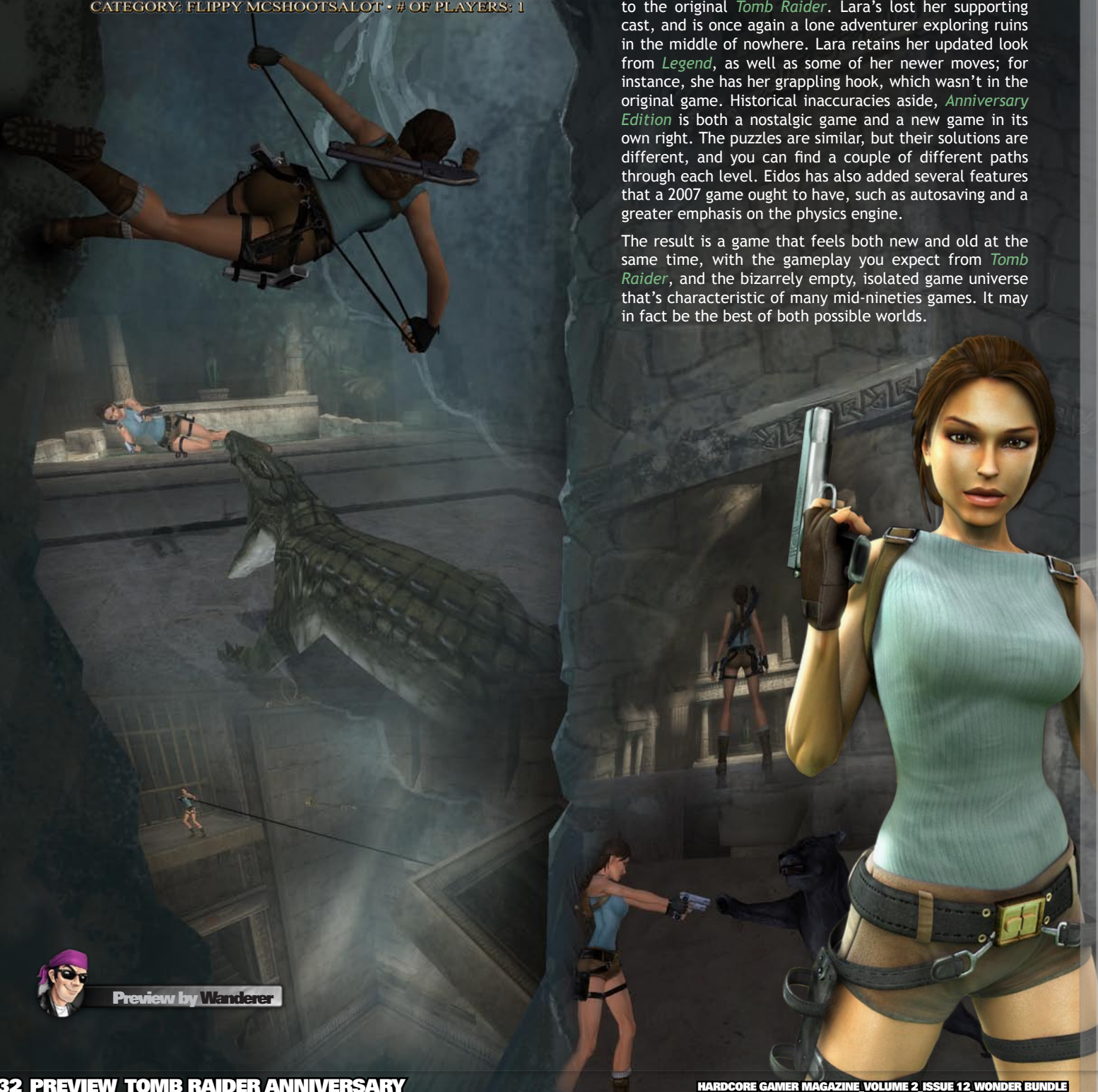
LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER ANNIVERSARY

PUBLISHER: EIDOS • DEVELOPER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS
RELEASE DATE: 5/29/2007 • GENRE: ADVENTURE
CATEGORY: FLIPPY MCSHOOTSALOT • # OF PLAYERS: 1

Lara Croft has followed a weird path. She began as the first iconic character of the 3D video game era, and became a megastar and, inexplicably, a sex symbol despite the *Tomb Raider* series's primitive graphics and increasingly strained gameplay. *Tomb Raider Legend* restored Lara to some degree of prominence, giving her a realistic look while updating the gameplay to the best it had been since her original appearance. Reportedly, Eidos proceeded to get three hundred thousand cards and letters asking for a remake of the original *Tomb Raider* using *Legend's* engine.

The result is *Anniversary Edition*, a back-to-basics approach to the original *Tomb Raider*. Lara's lost her supporting cast, and is once again a lone adventurer exploring ruins in the middle of nowhere. Lara retains her updated look from *Legend*, as well as some of her newer moves; for instance, she has her grappling hook, which wasn't in the original game. Historical inaccuracies aside, *Anniversary Edition* is both a nostalgic game and a new game in its own right. The puzzles are similar, but their solutions are different, and you can find a couple of different paths through each level. Eidos has also added several features that a 2007 game ought to have, such as autosaving and a greater emphasis on the physics engine.

The result is a game that feels both new and old at the same time, with the gameplay you expect from *Tomb Raider*, and the bizarrely empty, isolated game universe that's characteristic of many mid-nineties games. It may in fact be the best of both possible worlds.



Preview by Wanderer



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GROWING TOGETHER

a feature by
*Angelo M.
D'Argenio*



For a long time, the gaming world was divided into two camps: you were a PC gamer, or you were a console gamer. Sure, many people enjoyed both PC and console games, but there was still a definite split between those who primarily favored one or the other for their gaming needs.

PC games were "fluid." Performance largely depended on how much money the gamer was willing to spend on their gaming rig, allowing the PC gaming experience to vary from person to person. A major title could run new on a bleeding edge system, or two or three years old on a system that also doubled as a home office or word processor.

Consoles, on the other hand, were "solid." System specs never changed, so all the programmers had to do was make an experience using extant hardware that most players would find fun. Fatal bugs, patches, and installation woes were all concerns the console gamer could safely ignore.

Though both PC and console gaming were always fun in their own way, the two gaming experiences never quite seemed to intersect. That is one of the facts of gaming life that is changing in this hardware generation.

The Mod Squad

Game consoles, once simple dedicated devices, now surf the internet, play DVDs, edit pictures, and deliver up-to-date news and weather information. Likewise, the advent of the internet has produced a generation of hardcore gamers who are, on average, more curious and adventurous than ever before. The innards of a gaming system are no longer a no-man's land, whose workings could only be understood by professional game programmers or devoted hardware enthusiasts. Instead, console gamers have been taking a page from the book of PC gamers, and have started to build their own custom gaming rigs.

The "building blocks" of consoles and PCs are not very different anymore. DVD drives, hard drives, RAM, Bluetooth, and IR technology were staples of home computers far before they were incorporated into consoles. Knowledge of these commonplace technologies then becomes knowledge of the parts of a gaming console. "To be honest I think it all came from the people who just want to go out there and try new things" Michael Kiederling, games culture analyst and annual speaker at Anime USA

says, "when people see a new computing platform, they say 'Hey, lets see what we can do with this' and boom, we have Linux on a PS2. People like to mess with stuff; it's why humans run the world."

"Messing with stuff" often results in interesting inventions. Some gamers noticed PS3 looked oddly like a George Foreman grill, and so in time someone created an actual working PS3 grill (although how long they play games and grill successfully is unknown). These sorts of "unusual" modifications have more purposes than just cooking meat and appealing to the internet for lulz. Modified consoles are already a booming grey market, and could very well drive a future where consoles are treated more as general computers than glorified toys.



A physics student at Rutgers University, Michael Kiederling routinely uses consoles in place of PCs for computation purposes. "In my job, consoles are extremely useful as they provide quite a lot of computing power at a low price. One of the most cost effective ways to perform a big calculatory job is to make a gigantic Beowulf cluster of consoles.



A Beowulf cluster is a large parallel processing setup in which multiple computers (or in this case game consoles), operate together toward one purpose. They are the cheapest way to get computing power simply due the fact that they are sold nearly without profit."

"Some gamers noticed PS3 looked oddly like a George Foreman grill, and so in time someone created an actual working PS3 grill."



The Evolution of Gameplay

One of the oldest examples of the fusion of PCs and consoles is the PC controller adapter, used to let people connect PlayStation, GameCube, and Xbox controllers to PC gaming rigs. Sometimes this is done to play classic console games via emulation or PC ports of console titles, but increasingly players are using them to play all sorts of games, including those commercially released for PCs.

This is a strange state of affairs, since conventional wisdom has always lionized the keyboard and mouse as the ultimate gaming input device. In the words of local gamer Kirk Rahusen, "There are certain degrees of precision you simply can't reach using a joystick. The whole concept of using a mouse in a PC environment is to be able to point at things accurately, and with a joystick you simply can't point at things accurately. It's an incredibly natural and intuitive way to play the game. You are using three fingers to move instead of one. Overall it's all about improving accuracy." Rahusen also finds the idea of playing even PC ports of console games with a traditional game controller unthinkable. "There were analog-based shooting elements in *Vice City* that the PC just handled much better with a mouse."

The tables with input can turn in the other way, and have. If a keyboard and mouse can control games, then a game controller can control computer functions as well. Enterprising fans have been adapting Wiimote technology to work as an IR and motion-based mouse for both Windows and Mac machines. While rusty, it performs almost exactly like a standard IR pointer-based mouse. "It's awkward," Michael Kiederling says, "but all IR mice are awkward. It's good for novelty value, but bad for general computing. However, it's wonderful if you want to set up something, such as playing all your downloaded media on your TV." Certainly, using a Wiimote on a computer just has a certain "cool" value to it, which might inspire a person to find some legitimately good uses for it.

For instance, the Wii's motion-sensing gameplay style has not been unnoticed by FPS fans. Recently Pat Glynn and the coding community at wii.hl2world.com have been adapting PC classic *Half Life 2* so that it can be played on a computer with a Wiimote. The pointer-based technology gives the game a natural "gun" feel, substituting mouse accuracy for the ability to literally "point" and "shoot" at a target. "You don't really lose any accuracy," Rahusen says of the gameplay style, "because you are actually pointing at your target, and nothing is much more accurate than that." More to the point, the Wiimote is essentially a mouse-based technology. The Wii's famous pointer is essentially an IR-controlled mouse cursor, something that isn't a far leap to bring home to the PC again.

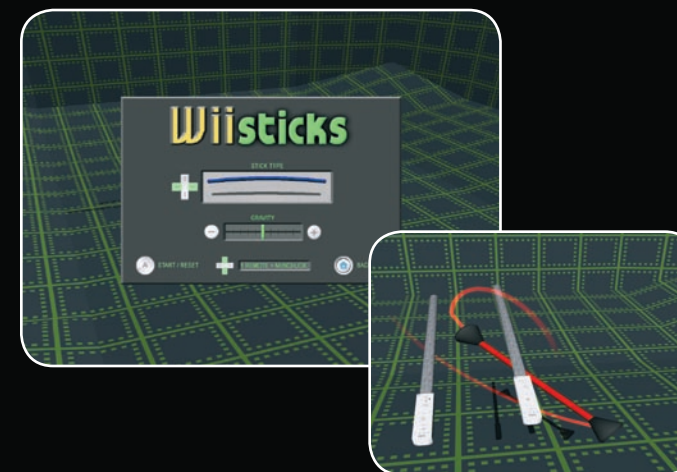
"The pointer-based technology gives the player a natural "gun" feel, substituting mouse accuracy for the ability to literally "point" and "shoot" at a target."

DJ Wii

What happens when we take the relationship between PCs and consoles one step further than gaming? DJs have used their PCs and laptops to digitally mix music for years, and Bluetooth technology makes it possible for a Wiimote to interface with a computer. With those powers combined, we don't get Captain Planet; we get a whole new animal all together, WiiJing.

WiiJing represents a whole new step in the field of the digital DJ. Through the use of the Wiimote's wireless motion-based technology and an interface program called Glovepie, DJs can control the popular mixing program Traktor without having to stay hunched over a laptop or console. In fact, the DJ can experience full freedom of movement, his gestures themselves controlling the music he is mixing. Whether or not the DJ can dance in the first place is another story.

DJ ! (pronounced DJ Shift One) recounts the invention of WiiJing on his website, www.djwii.com. "After reading about Wiimote hacking, DJ ! decided to try some of it himself. After getting the Wiimote to work as a mouse, he booted up Traktor and began playing around with the Wiimote mixing songs on the program. It was upon realizing that it was indeed possible, as it was fun, he began to investigate more into making the Wiimote a DJ tool. He began to map the buttons on the Wiimote to letters on the keyboard, then mapping those letters to controls in Traktor. The A button would be set press Play, the left/right would be set to bend the pitch, etc etc. He mapped out 2 Wiimotes with different controls and took a step back. Free from wires, free from standing over a laptop or control unit, he was able to mix perfectly with two Wiimotes. This led to being able to move around freely while still retaining full control over the mix. Nudging the beat slightly back in sync while dancing around, adding stutter effects while pretending to shoot a gun, dancing while mixing! Upon realizing the potential the Wiimotes had, he began to practice DJing with them and created the website DJ Wii J, a site dedicated to DJing with Wiimotes."



But the DJ community, much like the gamer community, has some members that push back against this new form of performance. Jersey City DJ Justin Woo states, "It's not the same as spinning Vinyl or syncing up music yourself. It's just a glorified MIDI controller. Show me a Wii control where you can simulate real turntables and I'll be impressed." A program called "Wii Scratch" is being developed to simulate record scratching, but even then there is a lack of resistance and actual touch feedback. The most it can do is simulate a music track being played backwards and forwards at different speeds via motion in the air. Still, what fails as a music mixing method may have potential to become the basis of a whole new game genre in the future. DJ-esque beat games have been developed before, and using WiiJ controls might make for a very fun gaming experience.

If anything, that's what the cross-breeding of PC and console technologies is giving us: inspiration. Now, games are exploring new genres and breathing new life into old genres with cross-pollinated tricks. Real time strategies using Wii pointer control, flight simulators using the PS3's SIXAXIS controller, genres which have traditionally been "PC only" are now exploring new areas of innovation. For gamers, these are certainly the most interesting of times.

Hacking the System

As the line between consoles and PCs blurs, console games can be expected to come to the attention of the "modding" community. Modders create programs that make PC games look and run differently, perhaps instituting new rules or graphics.

The PC emulation crowd has been doing this for years. Currently, there are several game modifications available on the Internet. Older games have received a renewed life through these hacks. One example of a popular hack on the internet is a *Super Metroid* hack that makes the game several hours longer, much harder, and even changes the physics of Samus and her surroundings. Another is an *Earthbound* hack named "Jon Bound" which changes the characters, story, and surroundings of the cult classic SNES RPG. Another form of the "hack" is the fan translation, where a team of translators take a game never before released in the US and translate it into readable English. *Mother 3* (the sequel to *Earthbound*) is currently undergoing fan translation at www.mother3.org.

Gamers are not just content to hack ROMs of retro games. Mods have now jumped off of the PC and hit console titles hard. With the addition of hard drives to console systems, independent developers have been creating programs that can alter the way console games are played. For example, it is possible to copy the contents of the *Guitar Hero 2* game to a hard drive and change the songs. By reburning the altered files to a new DVD, players can now play their favorite songs with custom note lists on a PlayStation 2.

Dance Dance Revolution has been hacked in a similar way, producing the *Stepmania* application. With *Stepmania*, players can easily import their own custom-made song files. This can result in song libraries much larger than anything Konami could pack into a single release, with upwards of six thousand songs available. In addition to copies of traditional *DDR* favorites, fans have created songfiles for novelty favorites like the "Badger Badger Badger" song (www.badgerbadgerbadger.com). *Stepmania* can run on an Xbox or PS2 hard drive, and is played like any other home version of *DDR*. The arcade game *In The Groove* actually capitalizes on this, allowing custom song files to be played on some arcade machines.

"Games are very specialized right now," says Daniel Mullins, president of the Rutgers Underground Gaming Society. "If you want to play a motion game, you use the Wii. If you want to play a touch-based game, you use a DS. If you want to play a game that's more classically controlled, you use a 360 or a PS3. It's a lot less about brand loyalty or even graphical capability, and more about simple ability to play the game the way you want to." The merging of PC and console technologies, and to some extent their fanbases, is just another outlet for gaming freedom. "If you increase the number of ways you can play a game, then you increase the number of ways gamers can experience that game," says Mullins.

With access to the right tools and enough time on their hands, gamers have started to make the games they play their own, deviating ever farther from the industry's desired norms. Consoles and PCs are no longer truly distinct entities, thanks to converters, emulation, and the introduction of PC-style hardware into modern consoles. For gamers, this opens up new worlds of possibilities.



A role-playing game, by definition, is a type of game in which the participants assume the role of fictional characters in order to create or follow stories. This tried and true genre, in its digital form, has existed for several decades and has provided the ultimate in escapism while tapping into the imagination of players the world over, but now, in a day and age of amazing technology and with decades of successful RPG formulas to reference, how do we determine what constitutes a "next-generation RPG," and more importantly, how do you even begin to create it?

That's the question on the mind of many avid gamers who might be growing tired of the same old patterns found in traditional singleplayer RPGs.

Fortunately, it has also been the most pressing question internally at one of the industry's most revered game developers, BioWare, who has looked to its successes of the past in an attempt to redefine the future of the genre with the upcoming Xbox 360 Sci-Fi role-playing game *Mass Effect*.

Recently, I had the chance to catch up with the game's Project Manager, Casey Hudson, to discuss this highly anticipated title and find out exactly how BioWare has attempted to take role-playing games beyond normal expectations and into the next generation of gaming. "The original concept for *Mass Effect* was to build an adventure of tremendous scope, with locations and story elements of the largest possible proportions," said

Hudson. "We wanted to create an epic story based on the most horrific threat imaginable, to all life as we know it. The idea was to put players at the center of that story by creating an immersive RPG experience where they faced morally challenging decisions to save the galaxy."

Within this idea, you can begin to see that BioWare's first step towards redefining the RPG genre was to go beyond normal expectations in terms of scope and to create an experience of truly epic proportions. Considering the vastness of the task at hand, choosing the sci-fi route as opposed to the more traditional medieval setting for RPGs seems to have afforded BioWare the means to accomplish its goal. According to BioWare, *Mass*

Effect is based on creating the ultimate science-fiction experience, a space adventure that fulfills one's fantasies of exploring the galaxy as part of an intensely exciting story. As a result, the team behind the project has drawn inspiration from a number of places, including classic science-fiction movies such as *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan*, and *2001: a Space Odyssey*. The tangible atmosphere and serious cinematic tone of these movies helped serve as a great reference for creating a more immersive experience than the company had previously been able to achieve.

Speaking of BioWare's previous achievements, (which include ground-breaking, award winning titles such as *Neverwinter Nights*, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and *Jade Empire*) it is important to recognize exactly how *Mass Effect* will fulfill next-generation expectations by enhancing the amazing RPG experience the company is currently known for providing. While most of this is accomplished in the aforementioned scope of

the game, the additions of vehicles and vehicular combat, physics-based gameplay, and open-ended exploration (see sidebar, page 41) help go beyond the scope of previous BioWare games. These, in addition to an all-new squad-based combat system that has the immediate familiarity of a third-person shooter, but also seeks to provide highly

the next generation of role-playing games

MASS EFFECT

by daniel kayser of gametrailers.com

answers by casey hudson, project manager



tactical gameplay that BioWare hopes will allow users to create numerous, interesting ways to take out their enemies, are the foundation for a truly "next generation" experience in *Mass Effect*.

"Having developed games like *Baldur's Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *Jade Empire*, and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, pretty much all of that experience can be brought to bear on our work on *Mass Effect*," said Hudson. "There's been a strong evolution across those games towards more cinematic, immersive, and accessible gameplay."

Over the years, BioWare has also been able to learn where it wants to expand the gameplay experience, again, mostly by looking at its previous titles. As an example, BioWare recognizes that it seemed strange to some in *KOTOR* to travel across the galaxy in a starship, but to then have to run on foot to get around a planet's surface. For *Mass Effect*, the team has created a vehicle, the Mako, which you can use to cover huge tracts of land that you would otherwise not be able to traverse just by running.

This is an example of how, at this point, BioWare has a pretty good understanding of things it has done that really resonate with players. In those areas, the company wants to support the



good progress it has made, while innovating and giving players something new to experience. For instance, Hudson points to the ever important story element, which has always been a strong component of BioWare's games. "To ensure that [the story] continues to improve, we've created a new, more interactive way for players to interact with other characters, which allows the main character to have a voice clip for every line of interactive dialog."

Adding new features and enhancing core gameplay mechanics, no matter how technically or creatively impressive they may be, will only go so far in creating a truly revolutionary role playing experience. After all, the single most important aspect in games of this nature is immersion and for BioWare, a new level of immersion has been achieved by enhancing the player's direct involvement with the game's story. "Our focus on continually improving the quality of the story experience has led us to develop a highly innovative new conversation system," says Hudson. "This new system allows players - for the first time ever - to be able to have real-time conversations throughout the entire game with full voice-over for all characters. Because the new interface is faster and more intuitive, you can make responses at the same pace as in a real conversation, making it possible to talk to other characters as though you're actually there. And since we've added a wide range of other actions and sequences into the system, conversation becomes a fully-developed form of gameplay where you may find yourself shoving a gun in someone's face or throwing them against the wall in a heated argument!"

As for the actual story in *Mass Effect*, well, that's where things really get interesting. You might be wondering exactly where the title for the game came from or hoping for some background information regarding the game's lead protagonist, Commander Shepard. Fortunately, Hudson delivered some insight. "'*Mass effect*' is what physicists in real life are currently calling 'dark energy.' Inside the game universe, it's a newly discovered (for humans anyway) physics phenomenon that has properties along the lines of other physics forces such as gravity and electromagnetism. '*mass effect*' fields are responsible for most of humanity's recent technological advances, including faster-than-light travel."



exploring the world of mass effect a Q&A with bioWare's casey hudson



Q: Where does the game start off in relation to the entire *Mass Effect* universe?

CH: The story takes place around two hundred years in the future, as humans take their first steps into a larger galactic community. Most of the opening action takes place aboard your starship, the *Normandy*, and the Citadel.

Q: How big of a role will exploration play throughout the game? What will be the benefit for players looking to explore the galaxy as opposed to going straight through the story?

CH: *Mass Effect* takes place within a vast galaxy full of uncharted planets for players to discover and explore. In addition to the main story arc of the game, players can visit many unexplored planets in an all-terrain rover. They may discover new alien life, resources, ruined civilizations and powerful technologies.

Q: In relation to previous BioWare titles, how big is the universe of *Mass Effect*?

The goal is to create a believable sense that there is an actual galaxy out there beyond the core story locations, so there will be hundreds of places for the player to visit. As in real life, not all stars have planets, and not all planets are ones that you would be able to land on. But there is some interactivity in each location and there are a large number of planets that you can land on and explore, each of them with cool things to discover and interesting subplots that may span several star systems. Beyond the normal astronomical locations, you'll also discover derelict starships floating in space, secret bases on alien moons, lost satellites... the possibilities are amazing. And ultimately your

exploration of the galaxy is in the context of an intense mission where everything you discover is another resource or clue to help you uncover a dark plot that threatens all life in the galaxy.

Q: Please talk about the diversification of the game's environments as they pertain to the various planets featured within the game.

CH: The *Mass Effect* universe is designed to take players to all possible extremes of environments - in fact, the scope of the story spans the entire galaxy. Specifically, some examples of environments you'll see are the sulfur deserts of a mining planet, an ancient lost city overgrown by jungle, and the Citadel: a gigantic floating city many times larger than Manhattan.

Q: Obviously, there will be a limit to the scope of the game world, so when exploring planets or even galaxies, what types of limitations are being placed on the player and how have you attempted to make them feel natural?

CH: That's a good question, because that's really the nature of the challenge for us: creating a galaxy that is vast and full of opportunities for exploration, while having a scope that's actually achievable for us to build. To do this, we've created a spectrum of content, ranging from the huge, hand-made worlds that comprise the major story locations, to the planet surfaces and facilities that you'll find in the expanded galaxy, to planets, satellites, asteroids etc. that you may not be able to land on but may still offer rewards of their own. And since there are hundreds of these kinds of things spread across the *Mass Effect* galaxy, players will have access to a huge amount of discovery and exploration.



a "massive" rpg for the xbox 360

Creating a game with the sheer scope of *Mass Effect* is not nearly as easy as BioWare is making it look, but as Hudson described, the power of a next-generation platform like the Xbox 360 was an integral part in fulfilling the overall vision for the game. "Developing for the Xbox 360 has been quite rewarding. It's exciting to have the power to create the kind of lighting effects and physics features we'll need for *Mass Effect*, and we're looking forward to taking advantage of things like Achievements and downloadable content on Xbox Live. Perhaps most importantly, it allows us to focus on making *Mass Effect* a premium high-definition experience for your home theatre, where the visual and auditory experience is no less than spectacular! I personally love trying out each new build of the game on a big plasma TV, where the graphics absolutely pop off the screen!"

Of course, one of the biggest assets of the Xbox 360 as a console is the support for extended downloadable content over Xbox Live which aids in the distribution of new content ranging from weapon and item upgrades to brand new expansion

packs. When it comes to BioWare's specific support of *Mass Effect* via downloadable content over Live, Hudson only stated that "There is an extremely extensive downloadable content plan for *Mass Effect*, but we're not revealing much detail at this point."

For fans of the Xbox 360, which aside from the incredible *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* by Bethesda, has been a little weak when it comes to great RPGs (and that's an understatement...), Hudson feels the arrival of *Mass Effect* will go a long way towards diversifying the platform's software lineup as a whole. "I think *Mass Effect* is going to be a huge addition to the Xbox 360 line-up. As an RPG, it's got at least as much depth, non-linearity, and customization as any game we've developed, but it also has a level of visual fidelity and satisfying combat that make it absolutely state-of-the-art. But since those things are really just supporting elements to the core experience — an extremely compelling story centered on your decisions — the overall experience will be unlike anything you've played before."



This new phenomenon will permeate everything throughout the game and serve as a major source of tension as you assume the role of Commander Shepard, whose background Hudson explained. "Commander Shepard is a member of the Spectres (Special Tactics and Reconnaissance), elite military agents who answer only to the Citadel, the enormous space station that is the center of political and financial power in the galaxy. They deal with major threats to galactic security and have the authority to do whatever it takes to secure their mission objectives. With the fate of the entire galaxy at stake, Shepard must accomplish his mission at all costs. He must act without remorse, without hesitation, and beyond the limits of the law."

While an intriguing overall story and compelling lead characters are usually at the heart of any great RPG, traditional games in the genre simply let you play out the narrative as opposed to letting you impact it with your own decisions. Perhaps one of the greatest things about *Mass Effect* is that it builds upon the alignment system found in previous BioWare games (most notably *KOTOR*) to actually deliver on this often over-promised sensation of being able to make relevant decisions. In *Mass Effect*, BioWare feels they have created an experience that is extremely non-linear, and one that gives players a true sense of freedom and control over how their story develops. According to



BioWare, the game itself is really a collection of locations in space, each with its own subplot within the main story arc. The player will be able to travel to any of these locations as he or she wishes. Of course, some of them unlock over time, and as you reveal more of the main story.

What this means is that in *Mass Effect* you can visit planets in your own choice of sequence, and you can even spend some time in a place and then change your mind and go somewhere else instead, as long as you haven't gotten yourself into some kind of trouble that you need to escape from before you can leave. As Hudson not-so-reassuringly states at the notion of being trapped on a desolate planet in the middle of an amazingly vast galaxy, in *Mass Effect* "that kind of thing can happen, even to a Spectre!"

Of course, throughout all of the exploration and decision making in *Mass Effect* there will be one constant: your character. Like previous BioWare titles, *Mass Effect* affords players the ability to truly customize the hero (or villain, if you're so inclined) of the game's universe. Between the development of your character's abilities and the customization of your equipment, vehicles, and even the other members of your squad, players will have a ton of opportunity to customize the *Mass Effect* experience. The game starts with a deep character customization system, allowing players to choose Commander Shepard as you've most likely seen him in footage released by BioWare, or to create their own Commander Shepard as they see fit. Characters can be made male or female, and players will have an extreme level of detail in creating their appearance. You can choose a character class to get you started in defining your starting set of abilities, and you can even choose your backstory so that you can define what your life has been like leading up to the start of the game. These little tweaks are clearly a part of BioWare's overall vision to make every aspect of *Mass Effect* feel bigger, better and for all intents and purposes, the next step for role-playing games.

The customization and infused sense of interaction extends into the game's combat system as well. Players will be



Q: What was the design approach when it came to the game's controls?

CH: Looking back at *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, we realized that the semi-turn-based approach to combat made it less accessible to many players. Since we work so hard to create an amazing experience for players, we naturally want to make sure that our work can be enjoyed by as many people as possible. So one thing we wanted to do with our next game was to make the combat more similar to what most players are already skilled at. That meant making an interface that was based on a third-person shooter style of combat, where you can simply point and shoot where and when you want.

At the same time, the challenge was to have that familiar interface while continuing to give players the variety of combat abilities and tactical choices that made games like *KOTOR* a lot of fun. The result is something that most players can pick up and immediately have fun with, but is amazingly similar to the squad-based fun and tactical decision-making of a game like *KOTOR*.

Q: How difficult was it to generate a control scheme that would be intuitive to players no matter what their playing style is?

CH: Controls — especially during combat — are probably the most

difficult part of game design, so we've spent a huge amount of effort on getting them right, and will continue to tune them until the very end.

For *Mass Effect*, the goal was to create a type of combat that would have the familiar feel of a third-person shooter, with pacing that allows you to make tactical decisions. By keeping this target in mind as we tune the A.I., enemy movements, and level geometry, we're able to ensure that the controls and the gameplay work well with each other, and can therefore be enjoyed by different kinds of players both in terms of gameplay challenge and tactical choice.

Q: What type of work went into ensuring a smooth experience as players navigate the game's menu systems and various interfaces?

CH: It's a combination of good interface design, coupled with lots of testing and integration of feedback. We apply some rules about interface design, plus our experiences with previous interfaces, to allow us to create the various menus and controls in a way that's more likely to be easy to use. But even a good design needs to be improved once it's tested in actual gameplay. We often go through 5-to-7 complete iterations of a major interface design, before we get to the exact version that you'll play.



able to choose their squad members from a larger group, and equip them with weapons and armor to further specialize them. You'll have a wide range of weapons and equipment to choose from (see sidebar page 46), and you can modify them with various enhancements to give them some amazing capabilities such as incinerating enemies (which, by the way, looks *hella* cool [Editor's Note: We're going to be making fun of you about this until the end of time, Daniel. *Hella* fun. -Thomas]). You'll also be able to modify your vehicle throughout the game and give it enhancements such as better handling or weapons. Highly modified vehicles will be able to get into areas that are otherwise unreachable, and will be much more powerful in combat situations.

the cast

commander shepard

You are Commander Shepard, a veteran of the human alliance and an N7 Elite, meaning you're the best of the best among human military types. As an agent of Spectre, your mission is to deal with the greatest threats to galactic security, and thus you are given nearly limitless authority to take action when operating in deep space. As a result, your experience as Commander Shepard is an extremely empowering one. Not only are you very highly capable and respected, but you're also on a mission that gives you justification for taking extreme actions to accomplish your goals.

The rest of the backstory is actually up to you. You decide what happened in your past to put you where you are at the start of the game. Did you establish yourself through heroic or ruthless reasons? What kind of upbringing did you have? These choices will affect the first impressions people have of you throughout the game.

In the opening scenes of the game — the prologue — you discover that long ago, a race of ancient machines harvested and destroyed all civilized life in the galaxy. And with the help of a rogue Spectre agent (a supposed top-ranking protector of the galaxy), they're about to return. You are then reluctantly granted status as the first ever human Spectre, to track him down and put an end to the plot that could end life as we know it.

saren

Saren is the longest serving turian member of the Spectres, the elite military operatives answering directly to the Citadel Council. For twenty-four years he has been an agent of the Council's will, a zealous defender of galactic stability in the unsettled border region of the Skyllian Verge.

Official records of Spectres are sealed, but it is known that Saren followed turian tradition and entered the military at the age of 15. In 2155 he was promoted to active service after only a year of training, though it is unclear whether his unit was involved in any of the battles against human forces during the First Contact War of 2157.

In 2159 he became the youngest turian ever accepted into the Spectres. Intelligent, cunning and capable, Saren quickly developed a reputation for ruthless efficiency. Although there were a number of unsettling rumors about the brutality of his methods, there was no denying his results.

In recent years Saren has become an outspoken opponent of human expansion. Like many other non-humans, he believes the Alliance has become overly aggressive in its efforts to establish the people of Earth as a dominant species in Citadel space. As a Spectre it is generally believed he will continue to follow the will of the Council in this matter, but there are some — particularly among the Alliance — who fear Saren may soon decide to take matters into his own hands.

the digital actors of *mass effect*



Q: How difficult has it been to create believable characters that don't interrupt the flow of the game? What were/are some of the biggest challenges in this area?

CH: It's been one of our biggest challenges, if not *the* biggest. Some of the most difficult (and most rewarding) parts are in the character's faces. As human beings, we all have highly evolved abilities to read faces, and that makes it extremely difficult to create a digital actor that can talk and animate in a way that seems compelling on an emotional level. But it's extremely rewarding to be able to have those kinds of interactions in a game.

A side effect of having to work so hard to create believable humans is that it translates into some of the most compelling alien characters I've ever seen, even by comparison to CG aliens in the best feature films. Getting the technology for the humans to work right means we can pull off a conversation with an alien with subtleties that normally aren't achievable.

Q: Aside from the main characters in the game, how do the extraneous environmental characters and/or those you briefly interact with impact the player's perception of the *Mass Effect* universe?

CH: With *Mass Effect* we really want to create a world that you

can believe in — one you'd want to actually live in and explore. This adds credibility to the story experience, making it much more interesting. To do this, we've built features that allow characters to do things that humans do normally, but game characters typically don't, such as leaning against walls, talking to you while sitting at a desk, reclining in couches, etc. And some peripheral characters will even have little story arcs of their own, such as members of the crew on your starship, who will comment on things that you've done recently.

Q: Why was it so important to have the player's character respond to choices made in the dialogue tree with "acting"? Since this takes place on the fly, how difficult was this to implement?

CH: The goal is to constantly get closer to being able to immerse players inside the game world, as though it's a real experience, full of actual people and real places. To do this, we're borrowing techniques from the film world, which has similar goals in projecting a life-like story onto a screen. That's why we've built extremely realistic characters, and have given them the ability to act with compelling emotion — it becomes a powerful reason to believe in the story that unfolds around you.

Going even further into the development of a truly "next-gen" experience, BioWare has recognized that limitations in technology and numerous other factors have often contributed to a sense of separation from the player and the characters within the game. Remediating this age-old detractor was no easy task, but one in which BioWare felt their ideas and innovations that would help change the genre forever. "One of the biggest features of *Mass Effect* is our use of cutting edge 'digital actors' to truly bring the level of NPC realism to the next level for the next-generation console hardware," said Hudson.

By utilizing the power of the hardware and implementing ultra-realistic animations and movements, including credible facial expressions and body

exploring the storyline of *mass effect*



Q: How was the story for *Mass Effect* comprised? Who was involved?

CH: It started with the core leads of the team discussing what we wanted to do with *Mass Effect* as a complete experience. So first we designed the setting — not just the story — to be an ideal place to have the ultimate space-based adventure. It started with the creation of rules, which would determine the kind of stories that would be possible. We'd have faster-than-light travel, but not teleportation. There would be conventional weapons like rifles, but they'd use futuristic technology so that we wouldn't have ammo as a resource. We'd have alien species. Earth would still exist. These are all choices that must be made consciously, as each one fundamentally changes the framework of the setting, and enables or disables certain kinds of stories.

With the setting in place, we then did a similar process with the story. The lead writer, lead designer, and I would lay out goals for what we wanted players to experience in the story, and the lead writer would prepare an outline that achieved that. With each outline, we further condensed the key themes of the story into major, iconic "hooks," while ensuring that the story itself supported the three-act structure that allows us to understand the experience from a cinematic storytelling perspective.

And once the final high-level outline of the story was in place, our team of writers developed it further, fleshing it out into the rich detail that you'll play in the game, with actual plots, dialog, and characters.

Q: How intimately will the game's story follow the player's decision making throughout?

CH: Players have a surprising level of control and choice about how the story unfolds, while experiencing an overall story arc that's extremely well-crafted

from a writing perspective. Throughout much of the game, you can choose from any available location in the galaxy to pursue the story, and you'll be able to choose who comes with you on your adventure. The different personalities of your squad members have a strong influence on the way you'll perceive the story, and will unlock different kinds of quests and conversations.

Of course, the way you deal with situations is the central idea of the experience of being Commander Shepard. You'll be in an extremely powerful position to make important decisions, and there will be enough pressure on you that you'll feel justified to act without hesitation, and beyond the limits of the law. Those decisions, whether kind or ruthless, become the nature of the storyline that unfolds, and will affect the entire galaxy by the end of the story.

Q: Why are character customization and direct involvement with the story so important to the overall objective of the game?

CH: There are plenty of games where you're a fixed character in a pre-set story, but we believe that having control over who you are and what you do makes the events in a game more meaningful. This is, after all, an interactive medium. So the thing that inspires us about giving you the ability to create and customize your character, and a story that you can shape and influence, is that it makes it *your* experience — this is *your* adventure, and it will respond to every choice you make even though it's rendered with intimate detail and puts you at the helm of truly epic situations.

It has other rewards too, such as replayability. *Mass Effect* continues to be extremely compelling even on second and third playthroughs, because your choices create such substantially different experiences.



language, that will be combined with professionally performed dialogue, BioWare hopes players will believe the characters are all real people, or in the case of aliens, the most amazing representations of aliens in any game to date. When it comes to the alien characters in the game, there will be a vast number of races that players can encounter and discover over the course of the entire game. BioWare has been working hard to ensure that each race will have their own unique and complex culture and way of communicating, and they will react to you in dynamic ways, depending on your actions.

The game is still a little ways off (TBD 2007), but from what I've seen of these "digital actors" in action, it is clear that BioWare is truly onto something special (see sidebar, page 44). That immersion, that sense of attachment to the characters that most game developers strive for, has always been diluted by a lack of realism. *Mass Effect*, however, through its amazing implementation of these new ideas and technology, is taking the term "role-playing" to new heights.

Even with the game's immersive storytelling and advanced digital actors taking the experience beyond typical RPG experiences though, ultimately, the unique conversation system and advanced combat system leave the bulk of the action where it should be; in the player's hands. *Mass Effect's* squad-based combat system was designed to be as accessible as the most popular first-person shooters, involve cooperation of varying talents in your squad like in *KOTOR*, and to provide a simple way for the player to set up complex attack plans on the battlefield. By implementing its best answers to these goals, then improving them over and over again, BioWare has been able to close in on a combat system that has the rare qualities of being both easy to use, and tactically complex. What this will hopefully translate to is the sense that players have a very deep level of control and customization in combat. One in which players can choose their squad members and equip them with weapons and armor as they like, but also going so far as to allow them to adjust their preferred tactics on the fly, and even issue specific orders for movement, targeting enemies and other essential strategies to gain victory on the battlefield.



the weapons of *Mass Effect*:



In *Mass Effect* there are four classes of conventional weapons that you can equip (pistol, sniper rifle, automatic rifle and shotgun), in addition to various types of grenades, tech weapons, etc. All of your equipped weapons fold up into compact shapes for storage directly on your character, and can be retrieved with a press of the D-pad. You can modify them all with X-Mods, so they'll do different types of damage or they'll enhance the effects on them. We have different types of ammo — incendiary rounds, explosive rounds, armor-piercing rounds — as well as grenades.

You'll also have twelve different talents that combine tech, weapons, Biotics (dark energy powers) and other skills to allow the player to customize your character's ability. By developing your talents, you will open up active abilities and powers that the player uses to master the game.

So as a soldier, you will develop an awesome arsenal of weapons and some amazing special abilities such as Carnage, where you can handle an overloaded shotgun to deliver a devastating close-range attack. On the other hand, Sentinels can create chaos on the battlefield by throwing objects around, disabling enemy weapons, and turning enemies against each other. Each character class gives you a different blend of talents, creating very different types of combat gameplay.

the music of *Mass Effect*:

One of the things BioWare wanted to capture with *Mass Effect* is the feeling of a classic science fiction movie, like being immersed inside one of the great films of the late '70s / early '80s such as *Alien*, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, or *Blade Runner*. And it's not so much the themes and stories of those movies that they're talking about — it's the atmosphere. Back then, that thick ambience was often powered by the haunting scores of Jerry Goldsmith or the rich electronica of Vangelis or Tangerine Dream.

That was the genesis of the concept for the music of *Mass Effect*: to bring those different elements together into a specific fusion of sophisticated electronica and the thunderous power of a live classical orchestra. To somehow navigate this unique direction, BioWare enlisted the award-winning talent of Jack Wall as *Mass Effect*'s lead composer, who brings a wealth of industry experience and was the composer on their last major title, *Jade Empire*. Working with Jack on the *Mass Effect* score is Sam Hulick, a brilliant composer who not only adds a remarkable ability to create rich and complex electronic pieces, but provides an additional perspective on blending electronic sound with classical instruments.

the normandy:



You'll command the starship Normandy, and the crew (including the veteran pilot) answers directly to you. So you'll get around space by using the enormous galaxy map, issuing navigation orders to your crew. The Normandy is a prototype stealth ship of the Human Alliance, capable of faster-than-light travel, and has the ability to make itself invisible to sensors so that it can enter a star system and land undetected. While you're on board the Normandy, you can explore the entire ship, and talk to any of the crew members as their Commander.

Human Alliance ships are named after historic battles on Earth, hence the name Normandy.

The Normandy is about the size of a 747, but is extremely sleek and on the inside it resembles something more like a large Navy submarine — with a substantial crew and even a large bay to store ground-based vehicles. You can explore the entire ship anytime you're on board, and you can talk to any of the crewmembers.

As you can see, this game is beginning to live up to the hype, but considering the vastness of the project and the fact that this is BioWare's first next-gen offering, one would assume that *something* had to be left on the cutting room floor. According to Hudson, BioWare is extremely pleased with exactly what it has been able to accomplish. "The overall experience of the game has become more like our original hopes than we could have expected, and in general, the changes that we've made to our original designs have been ones we've made to improve the game, and to ensure it's the best experience we can deliver."

Even knowing BioWare's satisfaction with the end result, you'll probably be interested to learn that in some of the first story drafts, the Geth were actually a bat-like species, instead of synthetic killing machines. Also, initial versions of the combat system allowed players to crouch behind crates, etc, whereas the final combat system gives them an extremely physical interaction with cover objects

next-gen interface:

When describing the next-gen interface of *Mass Effect*, it's probably best to use an example from early in the game. You're coming down a slope, and up ahead you see a group of enemies taking cover inside a ruined structure. There are several large rocks ahead that you can use for cover. You point to one of the bigger rocks and press a button on the D-pad to tell your squad members to run there. The two of them will immediately run there, firing at the enemy as they go. That's the easy real-time way to give your squad simple orders.

Now you're near the ruins, and the enemy is just around the corner. You can pause the game, select one squad member and have him run into the ruins to target one enemy, select another squad member and have her enter through a different opening while targeting a different enemy, and when you go back to realtime, they'll execute your orders and take down their targets as you provide support, taking out additional enemies as you enter the structure.

where they can lean around corners and pop up from behind low obstacles. These are the kind of changes BioWare has made along the way that have helped the team behind the project navigate towards completing the original vision for "*Mass Effect*."

All in all, the sheer amount of time, energy, ingenuity and creativity put into *Mass Effect* on behalf of BioWare looks like it will all come together to fulfill the companies' overall vision to advance the genre of role-playing games. Whether or not the game lives up to expectations however, that of both gamers and BioWare itself, remains to be seen.

Sure, we all have our own definition for what a "next-gen" RPG should be and most of us even have our own expectations for exactly what *Mass Effect* will mean for Xbox 360 gamers and RPG fans alike (see sidebar, page 42). But what about BioWare? What do they hope players will take away from the experience that the team has worked so hard on for so many years to provide? "One of the things I'd like to see *Mass Effect* achieve is to bring an extremely deep level of gameplay choice to a broader audience" said Hudson. "For many years, players of RPGs have enjoyed creating their own characters, deciding how a game's story unfolds, making satisfying tactical decisions during battle, and exploring game worlds in a free-form way. But these aspects of gameplay are really just part of a complete experience in my opinion. So with *Mass Effect*, I'd like to see players jumping in and having a ton of fun shaping their game experience in these ways, whether they consider themselves RPG players or not."

As a studio, BioWare's goal is simple: create the ultimate next-gen RPG experience. "What we'd like players to get out of *Mass Effect* is the same as the design principle we put into it: the definitive science-fiction experience" said Hudson. "Command your own starship, explore alien worlds, lead an elite squad in spectacular tactical battles, and experience strange and wonderful science-fiction adventures as you fight the greatest threat the galaxy has ever known." While these concepts have been attempted before, the combination of the studio's experience along with revolutionary in-game enhancements and next-gen technology might just mean that BioWare's latest will truly have a massive effect on how we define a role-playing game in the next generation of gaming and beyond.



an interview with bioWare CEO Dr. Ray Muzyka and president Dr. Greg Zeschuk

It's not every day that certified doctors abandon their profession of medicine to pursue a career in game development, but when it comes to the story of BioWare CEO Dr. Ray Muzyka and President Dr. Greg Zeschuk, their self-prescribed conversion to making hit RPGs has made the gaming world a better place. I had the chance to catch up with the kind Doctors to get the prognosis on *Mass Effect* and the genre of role-playing games.

Q: As the first next-gen title from BioWare, what do you hope *Mass Effect* proves about the company?

RM: We've always focused our efforts on making the best story-driven games in the world, so we hope *Mass Effect* will be the next big leap forward in that tradition, especially with all the new innovations we've been able to achieve with this new generation of technology. For example, *Mass Effect* will feature the most realistic digital actors you've ever seen who behave, react and talk to you in ways that have never been done before. We anticipate players will form real emotional connections to the characters we create and are truly compelled by the story.

Q: How has the RPG experience changed over the years and how does *Mass Effect* showcase where the genre is headed?

GZ: Ray and I have great memories of playing the early pencil and paper RPGs, but what was fun about them still remains true today even with how sophisticated they've become as video games. Ironically even as we are able to make our game systems more sophisticated than ever before we simultaneously strive to make our games more accessible and truly easy to pick up and play. The technology also allows us to drive the emotional connection to the player to a new level.

RPG gamers still want to create and customize a fully detailed character that they can become, and they still want to be immersed in an adventure filled with exciting stories, challenges, places to explore, and interesting characters to meet and battle. The biggest change over the years has been the technology and techniques we've used deliver that immersive experience for gamers, so RPGs have become more cinematic in style and scope. The games we are creating have morphed into extremely accessible and compelling experiences and are starting to resemble movies in many ways, which you'll see when you play *Mass Effect*.

Q: With larger game budgets and the ever increasing power of technology at your disposal, how much of a great RPG experience do you feel should still be left

up to the player's imagination? How (if at all) does *Mass Effect* exemplify this?

RM: In *Mass Effect* we wanted to give players true freedom to fully customize the role they will be playing as well as they way they play the game. *Mass Effect* features a really deep character customization system where you can literally design your face, choose your background and profession; you'll also be able to customize other things like your squad (you decide how every member progresses) and even the Mako (the vehicle you use to travel the planet surfaces in the game). But, if a player doesn't want to deal with all of those details he or she can choose the recommended path for player growth and their choices will be made optimally for them. This is one type of freedom we think is important: freedom to either deal with the details or avoid them altogether!

We also wanted to allow players the freedom to experience the story exactly how they want, and this means giving them the ability to explore the galaxy and go anywhere they want, and also to make choices along the way that have significant impact on how the story plays out. Players can choose to either advance the story or go and explore — it's totally up to the player. *Mass Effect* will immerse players in a rich sci-fi adventure, but it's really up to the player how they want to experience it.

Q: What was the most rewarding thing about this project and how do you feel it will impact your studio in the future?

GZ: We've talked about doing *Mass Effect* for years, so to finally see it coming to life — and surpassing a lot of our expectations — has been absolutely thrilling. It's definitely the most ambitious project we've ever taken on, and we've certainly learned a lot since we started on it. Perhaps one of the most interesting things about the cinematic presentation of the game and the quality of the storytelling comes through in simply watching someone else play the game. There are very few games that are fun and interesting to watch! The story is so good and the digital acting comes through so well that playing or even watching *Mass Effect* is really compelling! It's like watching a great movie, only when you're playing you're the director and the lead actor!

In fact, a lot of those lessons have already proven invaluable with our other projects, like *Dragon Age*. We try to make each game better than the last, so *Mass Effect* will leave us some pretty big shoes to fill with our upcoming games. But that can only mean good things for our fans.



A FEATURE BY **ARLIETH**

CREATE YOUR OWN JOYSTICK



WELL, ACTUALLY, MODIFYING A JOYSTICK TO TOURNAMENT SPEC

For those of you who want to take your game to the next level, decent hardware is essential. There are painfully few arcade-standard joysticks on the market, and what few manufacturers there are often take months to deliver. Furthermore, there's still the matter of maintenance and customization. This guide is intended to help you modify an existing stick, and inform you of the parts and tools necessary to maintain it. You can purchase parts from a variety of vendors, such as Happ Controls (www.happcontrols.com).

You can apply these modification methods to most third-party sticks, but we're going to modify a Nubytch Street Fighter Anniversary Edition Arcade Stick. It comes equipped with a cheap clone of a Happ Super Joystick, and high-raised convex buttons with a long activation length. That's not so good. However, it comes with a memory card port, dual support for Xbox and PS2, and has a standard button layout, as well as a nicely designed circuit board.

TOOLS YOU'LL NEED

- Standard and Phillips Screwdrivers
- Precision Phillips Screwdriver
- Crimper + Wire Stripper (Often combined into one tool)
- 3/8" Nut Driver
- Needlenose Pliers
- Channel Locks or Button Wrench (Happ, Model #: 58-8002-00)
- Masking Tape and Pen

PARTS YOU'LL NEED

- 1 Joystick (Happ Competition, Model #: 50-6070-16)
- 1 Stiff Joystick Spring (Model #: 95-1309-01)
- 24-30 Female Quick Disconnects (.187" size)
- 8 Pushbuttons (Happ "Competition" Convex, Model #: 58-9616-L)
- A spool of 18 AWG insulated wire (for Ground wiring)
- 12 different colors of 22 AWG insulated wire (for wiring maintenance)
- Microswitches (Cherry brand, for maintenance purposes only)
- Small nylon wire-ties (To keep the wiring tidy)

DISMANTLING YOUR STICK

Start by removing the T-Molding (that rubber trim) from the edges. Set aside. Next, remove the outer screws on the bottom of the panel and remove the cover. Disconnect the cable that connects the controller cord to the circuit board.

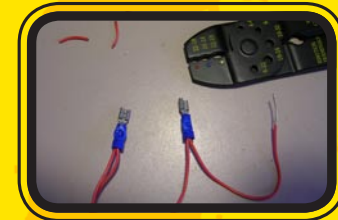
MASH THEM BUTTONS!

We'll switch your buttons out with convex-style Happ Competition buttons. Their lower height compared to the default buttons on the Nubytch stick, as well as their rounded (convex) tops makes it easier to mash buttons. (The opposite of convex buttons are concave buttons, which have depressed surfaces.)



Let's look at the wires before we remove any buttons. First, look for a wire that connects to multiple buttons or joystick switches. It's typically black, but may be another color. This is known as a *Ground*, or *Common* wire. The other *function* wires conduct current which activates the various functions of your stick.

Some sticks may have wires that are fused, or *soldered* onto the shiny metal bit (a 'terminal'). This means that when you want to replace the microswitches of your buttons, you'll have to rip the wire off the terminal and solder it again. This is not fun to do, nor is it practical at a tournament. For now, remove all wires from their terminals after labeling them with your masking tape and pen. For any wires that have heat-shrunk terminals on them, use a pair of needle-nose pliers to gently remove them.

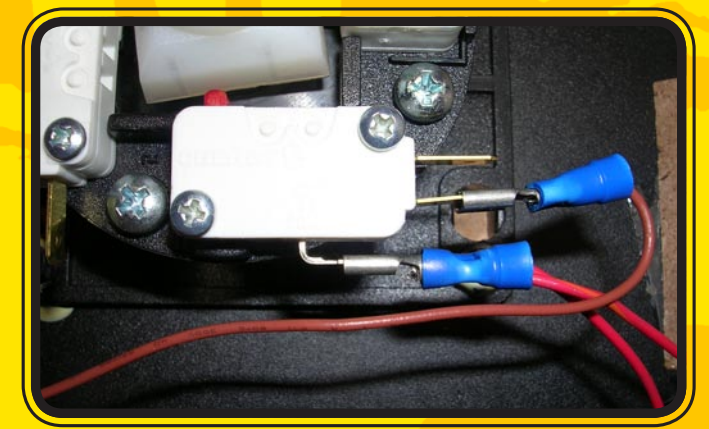
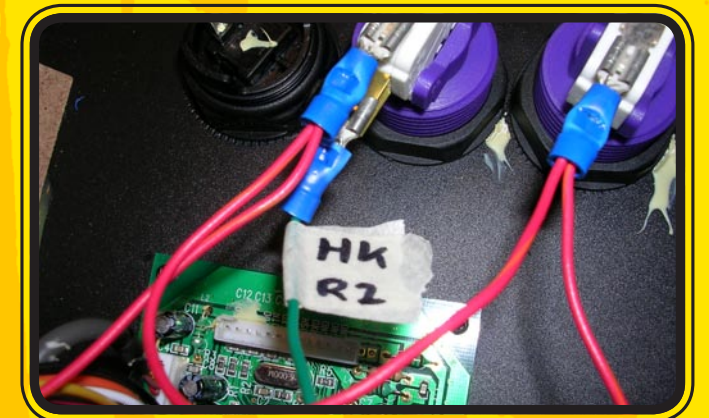


Remove the fastening nut (that six-sided ring) around each button. If the nuts are glued on, then get a pair of channel locks or your trusty Button Wrench to apply more torque to your nuts. (Please do not laugh too hard while reading that last sentence.) Remove the old buttons, and replace them with your new convex Happ Competition buttons. Tighten the fastening nuts and fit the microswitches onto the buttons. Now we'll reconnect your wires

to your microswitches. This is where your Quick Disconnects come into play. With your wire stripper, remove 2 cm of insulation from the end of the wire. Next, twist the exposed wire to strengthen it, fold some of the end over into a loop, and insert the end into the sleeve of a Disconnect. Place the jaws of your Crimping tool around the sleeve (aim for the 'loop' of wire) and squeeze hard. Tug on your wire gently to make sure the Disconnect is firmly crimped.

Your microswitch terminals are labeled with "CO" (Common, or Ground), "NC" and "NO", which stand for Normally Closed and Normally Open Circuits. Make sure your function wires are on "NO" Circuits. Continue crimping all function wires and plug them into their respective buttons.

Now, we'll need to make a Ground wire for your buttons. You'll want to make sure that you have plenty of extra wire to re-crimp your Disconnects over time as they'll eventually wear out. I recommend between five to six inches of wire between buttons, so for ten to twelve buttons, that's a lot of wire! Cut eight pieces of wire. Strip the wires, twist the ends of two wires together and apply your Disconnects so that each wire is daisy-chained to another. One end of your new daisy chain should be connected to the old Ground wire. After you're finished, plug them into all of your buttons.

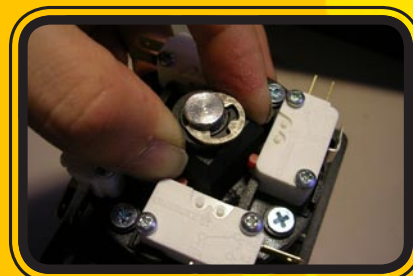
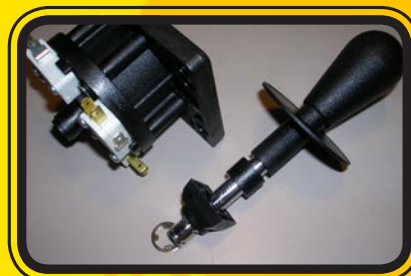


STICK SURGERY

Before assembling our Happ Competition Stick, we'll want to switch the internal spring with a more robust version for greater durability.

Slowly and evenly remove the four screws holding the stick's body together. (Be careful of the spring's tension inside the stick.) Replace the standard spring with the stiff spring, *large side down*. Don't worry if it looks unbalanced. Put the stick back together, center the actuator, and set aside.

To remove your old stick, use the nut driver to remove the four nuts holding it in place, and then use a flat-head screwdriver and pliers to remove the C-Clip from the bottom of the shaft. Assemble your new Happ Competition stick in place. Applying the C-Clip will be the hardest part – apply steady pressure for great victory! Once you're finished, make a new ground wire for the stick, apply Disconnects on all wires, and plug them in! Before screwing the case shut, be sure to test the stick first. You're all set! Happy Gaming!



REVIEWS

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HGM REVIEW GAUGE

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



Review by Shoegazer

Someone has to come out and say it, so it might as well be me. *Super Paper Mario* is, beyond any shadow of a doubt, the most bizarre entry in, arguably, the most beloved franchise of all time. I'm not just talking slightly weird either. I'm talking full-on *Super Mario Bros. 2* proportions of weird. You remember that, right? The Japanese *Super Mario Bros. 2* was deemed too difficult for American gamers, so they took a game called *Doki Doki Panic* and pasted in the familiar heroes from the Mario universe while introducing us to brand new enemies. It had Mousers, Birdos, Shy Guys, potions and all kinds of weird crap that's rarely ever been seen again. Be prepared to experience that all over again. *SPM* stars a new villain, Count Bleck, and features a storyline more akin to something you'd find in *Kingdom Hearts*.

Though the *Paper Mario* games have been patterned after traditional RPGs, *Super Paper Mario* attempts to combine the finer RPG elements from recent years with the tried-and-true platformer elements from years past. For the most part it works, but it doesn't ever quite reach the status of pick-up-and-play that most other Wii games possess. While the platform elements are reminiscent of the Italian plumber's historic adventures, they don't feel quite as epic as you're used to, especially after playing last year's brilliant *New Super Mario Bros* for the DS. The levels feel incredibly short, but a great deal of backtracking and fetch quests stretch it out, giving the illusion of more dynamic design.

Of course, *SPM* started out originally as a GameCube title and Intelligent Systems deserves a large amount of credit for going back to the drawing board and implementing Wii functionality in such a short amount of time. Don't go expecting the most innovative use known to man of the Wii's remote controller or anything, but what's here is perfectly adequate and easy to comprehend. I enjoyed the more traditional platformer-style controls and wasn't disappointed that there was little in the way of motion-sensing gameplay. The clever gameplay mechanic of switching between 2D and 3D views at the press of a button is more than just a gimmick and definitely adds to the puzzle-solving and exploration fun factor. When in doubt, just flip to 3D, and most of time the answer to your queries can be found. Don't be fooled by the cutesy graphics here. This game can throw some real head-scratchers at you that will require you to be resourceful and use logic.

Long-time fans of the series will be happy to see that Intelligent Systems's signature humor and superb localization are intact. Sure, there are plenty of "groaners," as always, but its chock-full of witty dialogue exchanges that will make you laugh out loud. There are a slew of jokes and gags awaiting you, including an almost 100% accurate reconstruction of level 1-2 from the original *Super Mario Bros*. I said almost 100% accurate, so don't go expecting to find that hidden 1-up on the top row of bricks this time. Though weird it may be, and lacking a bit in the platformer implementation, it's hard to deny that *SPM* is still well worth checking out. In a perfect world, the menu system could've been tightened up a little to make switching between characters a bit more fluid, but it only slightly mars the experience. The inclusion of multiple playable characters, superbly crisp visuals and trial-and-error puzzle-based gameplay are a tough combo to ignore. It's not perfect, but it is fun and addicting and really, who can ask for more than that?

Score: 3.5 of 5

Publisher : Nintendo
 Developer : Intelligent Systems
 Release Date : 4/9/2007
 Rating : Everyone (Comic Mischief, Mild Cartoon Violence)

Genre(s) : Platformer/RPG
 Category : Flat as a Flitter
 # of players : 1

SUPER PAPER MARIO



Get a clue



Stuck? You might have been foolishly drawn in by *Super Paper Mario*'s adorable-looking visuals, but you'll soon find your heart broken at the first frustrating dead end. While the game will consistently remind you that you should "flip" when you feel as though you've exhausted all possibilities, sometimes even that won't be enough to solve all of the game's tricky puzzles. Never fear though because you have the power of the mighty Pixls on your side, and none handier than the very first one you acquire, Tippi. By pointing the Wii remote at the screen, the game will pause, allowing you use Tippi's ability to see invisible doorways and staircases, as well as intricately detailing anything of significance you point at. Want to know how much HP that stage boss has? No problem. "Flipping" is definitely going to help you solve many of the game's clever brain teasers, but you won't get very far if you underestimate the power of Tippi.

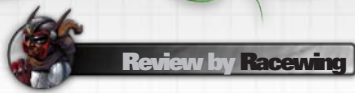
2nd Opinion

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

Super Paper Mario is as memorable for its wonderfully bizarre settings and characters as its blend of platforming, adventure and light RPG elements. It's pleasantly insane and loads of fun.

FINAL SCORE :
3.75 of 5

DAWN of MANA



Publisher : Square-Enix
Developer : Square-Enix
Release Date : 5/22/2007
Rating : Teen (Fantasy Violence)

Genre(s) : Action/Role-Playing
Category : Tree-Warrior Simulator
v.0.9 alpha
of players : 1



It's strange, really. Playing *Dawn of Mana*, I have no idea if I'm just spoiled by all the good action and RPG games I've played over the past year, or if this is *really that bad*. Seeing as this game had me clawing my eyes out by hour six, I'm going to go for the latter. Still, why would Square-Enix give one of its higher-tier franchises this sort of abysmal treatment? It boggles the mind.

Dawn of Mana is a prequel in story, and a sequel in name, to the *Seiken Densetsu* series of games. The most fondly-remembered of these would be the two SNES installments, *Secret of Mana/Seiken Densetsu 2* and the import-only *Seiken Densetsu 3*. (For reference, *Dawn* is *Seiken 4*.) Those games invoked 2D real-time combat using multiple party members at once, spells and all. For their time, they were a sight to behold, and a wonder to play.

Times have changed, however, and now we have a *Mana* game that's single-player, three-dimensional, convoluted, and just plain not fun. The camera's worse than anything Sonic Team's come up with in the last hardware generation, if you can believe that. In what sort of game are you not allowed to see in front of you without adjusting your angle every 1.5 seconds? This especially gets in the way of the platform jumping, which is floaty, clunky, and imprecise at best.

The camera is the least of the player's worries, however, as the game controls themselves have no sense of direction. The lock-on system is utterly useless, even when split into two functions (for objects and for enemies). The whip system, which allows you to ensnare enemies and objects and toss them, is pretty much broken. If you do manage to ensnare the target you're actually after (which is an accomplishment in itself), good luck actually throwing it in the direction you want, or at the enemy you want. Since collisions are the prime way to weaken enemies enough to make them beatable, to have this integral part of the combat system *just not work* is inexcusable. The same woes

extend to firing projectiles such as stones and the magic spells that the game constantly bestows upon you. It's like a twenty-plus-hour eating-soup-with-a-fork simulator.

The sad part is that, had all of the mechanics worked the way they were supposed to, this would have been really fun title. However, take this game as it is, then throw in a graphics engine that was cutting-edge in 2005, a soundtrack that's a total snooze-fest, and a clunky sub-menu system, and you've got a completely unpolished product that leaves you wondering just who would ever release something in this shape. *Dawn of Mana* is a hodgepodge of ideas that range from nonsensical to decent, all smushed together in a failure of a game. Even if you're a die-hard *Mana* fan, if ever you find yourself wondering, "should I get this?" you should step away from the box, go back home, and just replay *Kingdom Hearts 2*. Trust me, you'll have a much better time.

Rating: 2 of 5



FINAL SCORE : **2 of 5**

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

Should the company be rebranded as Enix-Soft? Its franchises have certainly fared better. Come on, Square. What happened to you? Study your PSOne library and try again.



Etrian Odyssey

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RUNAWAY

the dream of the turtle



Review by Wanderer

Publisher : CDV
Developer : Pendulo
Release Date : 3/16/2007
Rating : Teen (Language, Scantily Clad Ladies)

Genre(s) : Classic Adventure
Category : Pixel Hunting
of players : 1



Conventional wisdom holds that the classic adventure genre, where one takes whatever isn't nailed down in order to use it in an unconventional fashion to solve various puzzles, is dead. Many current genres can trace their roots to it, but the modern adventure game is either endlessly chatty, like *Syberia*, or a genre beerslam like *Dreamfall*.

Runaway, on the other hand, is a complete throwback to adventure games circa 1999 or so; it resembles nothing quite so much as *The Longest Journey* with less bizarre puzzles. It has a lot of dialogue and a truly horrible plot, but at the same time, it challenges me to figure out how to use a cheap Mexican toy, a fifth of whiskey, and a water tank to defeat a mischievous lemur. In many ways, it is like coming home.

The Dream of the Turtle is a sequel to 2003's relatively obscure *Runaway: A Road Adventure*. As it opens, Brian Basco is on vacation in Hawaii with Gina Timmins, the girl he saved in the first game.

Their day trip promptly ends in a plane crash. Gina parachutes to, well, a total lack of safety, while Brian gets marooned on a lost Hawaiian island. As Brian, you have to reach civilization, find Gina, and deal with all the problems you encounter along the way. Inexplicably, this will include a military conspiracy, an ancient alien race, much of the cast from the first *Runaway*, and on one memorable occasion, being directly responsible for an act of interspecies rape. (No, I'm not kidding. Yes, I wish I was.)

Runaway has its share of problems. The first and most obvious one is one that's endemic to the adventure genre, and that's pixel hunting. *Runaway* uses a combination of hand-drawn art and cel-shading to create a unique, well-animated look that'll run on just about any decent PC. Unfortunately and consequently, it's very difficult to tell what's important and what's not amidst all the set clutter, save by

convulsively searching every inch of the screen. Several characters and objects are actually hidden by bad "camera angles," which means that virtually any time you get stuck, it'll be because you missed something that you had no way of knowing was there.

The other major problem *Runaway* has, simply enough, is its plot. An adventure game relies so heavily on its plot, and on the player wanting to see what happens next, that it lives or dies by it. While *Runaway* has puzzles that range from decent to interesting and the occasional moment of laugh-out-loud parody, the game's story takes a nosedive at the end of Chapter 4 and never recovers. It goes from a weird beach adventure story to a really stupid alien conspiracy, while making sure to keep the most annoying character in the game around for as long as possible. (Game developers, take note: if an entire chapter of your game could have been prevented if one of the characters wasn't retarded, you may wish to revise that chapter.)

Runaway: The Dream of the Turtle starts off as a great adventure game, with plenty of potential, but basically throws it all away. I want to like it, because the developers clearly get what makes a good classic adventure game worthwhile, and there's a good game lurking between cutscenes here. It's simply that when a cutscene happens, it makes me want to throw the disc out the window.

Rating : 3 of 5



FINAL SCORE :

3 of 5

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

Runaway features beautiful animations and puzzles that really hit that sweet spot. I just wish the plotline they served was a less irritating one.



FINAL FANTASY FABLES

CHOCOBO TALES



Review by Lynara

Publisher : Square-Enix
Developer : Square-Enix
Release Date : 4/3/2007
Rating : Everyone (Comic Mischief, Mild Fantasy Violence)

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Twitchtwitchtwitch
of players : 1-4



Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales is a bundle of minigames, glued together with traditional Square RPG plot. It's also a pseudo-sequel to the *Chocobo Mystery Dungeon* games, using a similar cute, kid-friendly visual style. While there's no dungeon crawling in *Chocobo Tales*, a lot of the *Mystery Dungeon* cast members return to populate the game's light fantasy setting.

As the titular Chocobo, you have to rescue your friends from a spell that's turned them into highly collectible trading cards, which you can find by searching the overworld and investigating the game's sixteen enchanted picture books. Each picture book has a different minigame contained inside, and tons of secrets to unlock. Once you've beaten the crap out of the AI, then you can also play the mini-games online against other players via Wi-Fi. There are also optional microgames hidden throughout the overworld, usually demented and addictive *WarioWare*-style twitch challenges.

Everything in the game is designed to be controlled with the stylus (or sometimes the microphone), but the controls don't suffer from any frustrating mushiness. The controls aren't incredibly precise, but they more than get the job done when it comes to playing the various mini and microgames. Even controlling Chocobo in the 3D overworld feels completely natural, as you only have to point in a given direction to make him go there.

Chocobo Tales would hold together just fine if it was nothing more



than a string of amusing mini-games bookended by simple, fairy tale-like plots. Unfortunately, there's combat, which involves a painfully shallow active time CCG battle system. You and your opponent draw a card from your three-card hand each turn, and depending on their attributes, one or both of you take damage. Your deck pool is very limited, with no more than fifteen cards, so you can't really do much with forming combos or deck strategy. Just throw together your rarest, most powerful cards, and maybe bring some counter-element stuff for bosses, and you'll steamroll the game's mandatory battles.

Unlocking CCG cards is supposed to be what motivates you to get really high scores in the mini and microgames. In practice, you'll end up getting high scores because the games are fun, and perhaps to remove obstacles in the overworld. All the CCG battles add is a sense of slow tedium that takes away from the more enjoyable parts of the game. You can opt to CCG battle opponents online via wi-fi, but I can't imagine why anyone would.

The vestigial CCG is really the only bad thing about *Chocobo Tales*, and that's unfortunate. The game is otherwise ideal all-ages entertainment, offering plenty of twitch action and adventuring along with the amazingly cute characters. The 3D graphics are an impressive technical feat for the DS, especially the beautiful paper-like "pop up book" cutouts. Even the music, full of cheery homages to old 8 and 16-bit *Final Fantasy* tunes, is deeply enjoyable. You just have to be willing to put up with a really boring card game to get to all the good stuff, and there's something depressing about that.

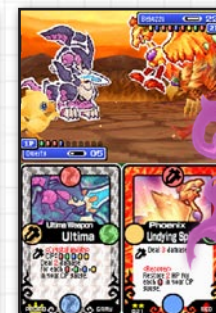
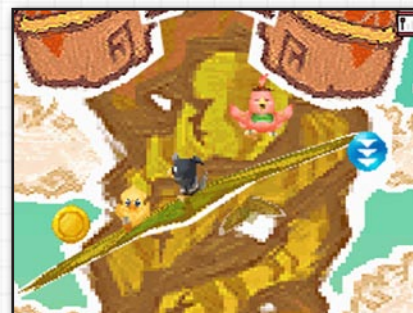
Rating : 3.5 of 5

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

Much like *Rocket Slime* before it, here's another example of a seemingly "kiddie" game set in a familiar universe that winds up catering to all ages quite well.

FINAL SCORE :

3.5 of 5





FEAR

FIRST ENCOUNTER ASSAULT RECON

Review by 4thletter

Publisher : Sierra
Developer : Day 1 Studios/Monolith Productions
Release Date : 4/24/2007
Rating : Mature

Genre(s) : First-person Shooter
Category : Anti-Life Equations
of players : 1-2



Here's a bit of a hint for those of you thinking about specializing in the military. Be wary of what your unit is named. If your crew has a snappy name, be it A.I.M., H.Y.D.R.A., S.H.I.E.L.D., or W.A.S.T.E., you're going to be dead, maimed, or driven insane within three weeks of joining up.

You're a member of the US Army's paranormal unit, First Encounter Assault Recon, better known as the eponymous *F.E.A.R.*. Not very far into the game, you've seen horrors that no one should have to experience. Even better, your whole team ended up slaughtered, so you're the proverbial last man standing.

The PS3 version of *F.E.A.R.* is the third, following the Xbox 360 and PC releases. The PC version won a number of awards and the PS3 version holds up quite well. The action is about as fast-paced and frantic as your average *Halo* or *Quake*. In fact, it's a little more intense. A lot more.

F.E.A.R. combines horror elements, most of which you've seen before if you've paid attention to horror films in the past few years. They are extraordinarily effective in this title, however. Creeping shadows, humanoid figures that just manage to stay out of your reach, invincible and powerful little girls, and other odd occurrences make *F.E.A.R.*'s name very apt. You will be scared. The shocks you receive will be much, much worse than you expected.

This wouldn't be possible without *F.E.A.R.*'s awesome graphics and sound. It's made the transition from PC to HD console quite

smoothly. The decently-detailed textures, realistic modeling, and lifelike (or inhuman, in some cases) animation all make the fictional backdrop very believable and real. The audio is also excellent, with appropriately scratchy voiceovers, haunting echoes, and quiet whispers being punctuated by bursts of gunfire, shouts, and your own gasps.

The frantic pacing and action are *F.E.A.R.*'s greatest assets, but wouldn't be possible without the entire package. The horror aspect of the game gets your blood pumping and adrenaline going. This, in turn, affects your aim and efficiency in real life. What would be a normal encounter in another FPS, you against five or six other people, becomes something else entirely when the encounter is kicked off by a dead body dropping from the ceiling and half the area being covered in, say, flames. It gets kicked up another notch by the bright and clever enemy AI, who refuse to stand there and be shot up like cannon fodder.

F.E.A.R. wants to make you jump, and I'd say that it succeeds pretty well. Even the cliché effects come off surprisingly well, despite the fact that we've seen them before. The inclusion of an Instant Action mode was a great touch, as well, for when you just want to shoot off a few hundred rounds and test your might against relatively normal foes. If you haven't played it before, *F.E.A.R.* is easily a must-own for your PS3. You won't even notice the lack of keyboard and mouse control, because the SIXAXIS controls are just that good.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

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

F.E.A.R. is a great FPS that manages to thrill once again on the PS3. While it's nothing new (Instant Action aside), it's still a great ride from start to finish.



FULL AUTO 2

BATTLELINES

Review by Racing



Publisher : Sega
Developer : Deep Fried Ent.
Release Date : 3/20/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+

Genre(s) : Car Combat
Category : Fully Automatic
of players : 1-4

Full Auto has turned into quite the franchise for Sega. It hit with something of a bang on Xbox 360 and was followed up with *Full Auto 2: Battlelines* on PS3. The latest entry in the series shares a title with the PS3 version, but isn't a direct port. It's more of a side story, or a spin-off.

The PS3 is, obviously, one of the big boys when it comes to processing power. Its younger sister, the PSP, obviously can't keep up with the high-powered, high-definition, and high octane graphics, so a different plan of attack is necessary. *Full Auto 2: Battlelines* focuses more on making a pick-up-and-go portable car combat racer rather than a super-detailed next-gen title.

The graphics aren't top notch. They textures and models are serviceable and just okay at best. The cars eschew things like details and realistic reflections in favor of a speedy framerate and massive amounts of debris. Sometimes, it's actually a little hard to keep track of what's going on thanks to the debris. There are areas of certain maps where you'll have to juggle dodging and firing on foes while you crash through trees, trash cans, and other assorted things that toss debris right up into your screen.

Ultimately, the graphics are on about the



same level as a higher-end PSOne title. There are a number of jagged edges to be found on everything from cars to houses to trees. To say that *Full Auto 2* is a pretty game in general is a bit of a reach, despite slightly clever menu design. It just looks old.

On a slightly brighter side, though, the game is fast-paced and fairly fun. It isn't exactly new or groundbreaking, and it is far from the best in the genre. As far as portable games go, this isn't too awful.

It works as the kind of game that you play for a little while or on the go and then put down after a few turns. The campaign can be beaten in half a dozen hours if you ease your way through it, and the quick play modes really don't offer any kind of longevity once you've been through a few of them.

Therein lies the problem. There's not really any story to speak of, beyond the usual post-apocalyptic scenario, and the gameplay isn't as compelling as it should be. There's a very real sense of "I've done this all before" at work, and that's not really something you want out of your entertainment. It's a nice try, but it still needs a bit of polish.

Rating : 2 of 5

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

As far as PSP driving games go, *Full Auto 2* is as mediocre as it gets. Stick with *Burnout Dominator* instead.

FINAL SCORE : 2 of 5



Etrian Odyssey

Review by Sardius

Publisher : Atlus
 Developer : Atlus
 Release Date : 5/9/2007
 Rating : Everyone 10+

Genre(s) : Dungeon Crawler
 Category : Older'n Dirt
 # of players : 1



Etrian Odyssey is specifically made for me. You're not going to like it. You might as well not even read this review.

I don't know why Atlus would create a game for a target audience of one person. Why would anyone release a first-person dungeon crawler in this day and age? Nobody likes them but me. Why release a game that features *cartography* as a major focal point of gameplay? That's something only I would enjoy. Why would you hire Yuzo Koshiro to do a soundtrack full of totally sweet Sega Genesis-like FM synth, rather than the generic trance stuff that makes him popular today? I'm *positive* that I am the only person on the entire planet who appreciates this decision.

If you enjoyed the *Wizardry* series and games like *Shining in the Darkness* and *Swords and Serpents*, however, you'll have a lot of fun with *Etrian Odyssey*. Like most first-person dungeon crawlers, *Etrian Odyssey* cares little for story and characterization, and instead places its focus entirely upon exploration and mapmaking. Whereas many other games in the genre lack any kind of in-game mapping feature, though, *Etrian Odyssey* encourages you to draw your own maps on the touch screen. It even has little stamps you can drag and drop to label traps and item locations. How completely awesome is that?

The combat is also brilliantly executed. Random encounters are frequent, but dig this: *they're rarely a waste of your time*. You always have the option of fast-forwarding through every battle by holding down the A button to automatically attack with every turn, but more interesting options lie with the touch screen. While your party members slug it out with monsters on

the top screen, you're free to dick around on the map at whim, charting which path you're going to take next, or penciling in details to help with your return trip. By the time you're done plotting, the battle will likely be over, leaving you with no wasted time and multiple goals accomplished in the meanwhile.

Seriously, I can't get over how great this is. Unlike most RPGs, *Etrian Odyssey* allows you to do useful, meaningful things during battle, instead of just drooling on yourself while you watch your characters go through the same attack animations over and over. Why is efficient multitasking so rarely possible in a genre so often plagued with bloated length and pointless busywork?

More importantly, why are these annoyance-reducing features probably never going to be seen in an RPG ever again? To the untrained eye, *Etrian Odyssey* is a throwback to ancient times; it's a cypher whose aged gameplay and obscene difficulty level will cause many to overlook its subtle innovations. In reality, though, *Etrian Odyssey* is a challenging, ballsy, rewarding game

that gives the otherwise stagnant RPG genre a swift, much-needed kick in the ass.

You're not going to like it.

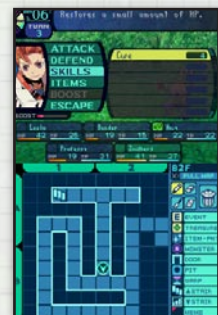
Rating: 5 of 5



FINAL SCORE :
4.75 of 5

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

An Atlus-made *Wizardry* clone for the DS? With built-in mapping tools? Yes, I can see the interface is pretty bad, but those pretty first-person 3D graphics put me in a forgiving mood. I'll take *two*.



DRAGON BALL Z SHIN BUDOKAI 2

Review by Racewing

Publisher : Atari
 Developer : Dimps
 Release Date : 3/20/2007
 Rating : Teen (Violence)

Genre(s) : Fighting
 Category : Rehash Level... OVER NINE THOUSAND
 # of players : 1-2



Before *Super Dragon Ball Z* (which really, *really* needs a sequel, world), and *Budokai Tenkaichi*, the first three numbered *Budokai* games were the only way to get your *DBZ* fighting on. Said games gained a sizable fanbase, especially after the third iteration. However, these days, with the *Tenkaichi* games having become smash hits and *Super Dragon Ball Z* having gotten its share of fame, what's to become of the original *Budokai* fighting engine developed by Dimps? What can its seemingly forgotten fans do?

Well, they can grab a PSP, because the Dimps engine lives on in the form of the *Shin Budokai* series... somewhat. As a way of keeping *DBZ* fresh in the minds of gamers with access to wallets (or parents with wallets), it does its job. As a fighting game, or even as a *DBZ* game, however... well, that's where the problems start.

Another Road is the second of this series, and yet is pretty much *Budokai 3*, stripped of most of the features that set *Budokai 3* above the pack. Gone are trivial, insignificant things like crowd-pleasing Dragon Rushes, an extensive cast of characters, or even a *tutorial* to let people know how the game plays. In their place is a hackneyed plot involving the Majin Buu saga happening *all over again* in Trunks' alternate future for no reason. Get ready to run around low-poly map screens, chasing after the rest of the cast (the game uses the "evil clones" excuse to justify this) and fighting them repeatedly with load times galore to stop them from "destroying cities."

Does any of this sound fun to you? It gets better! The "plug in your powers" style of character customization from the console *Budokai* games has been eschewed in favor of a card-placement oddity that depends just as much on the position these cards are placed on a grid as any sort of actual customization attributes.

In other words, you can't just add attributes anymore; you now have to add them in the right *direction*. Outside of the strange story mode, the game's pretty much no-frills. There's an arcade-style sequential fight mode, and a mission mode where you defeat enemies under specific conditions in order to win... more cards, and money to buy more cards. Wonderful. Had the fighting been a bit deeper, this wouldn't be so bad, but as it stands... yeah. The game looks good, and the voice-acting and music is as good as always, but that's the norm for *DBZ* games.

This game is strictly for total *DBZ* fans who, in addition, are crazy about the early *Budokai* games. However, since the content in this game is surpassed both in depth and quality by *Budokai 3*, there's not much of a point unless you're really hard-up for new *DBZ* action and didn't like *Tenkaichi 2*. Meanwhile, this game gathers together pretty much everything I've disliked both about *DBZ* fighting games, and games in general. Hats off, then.

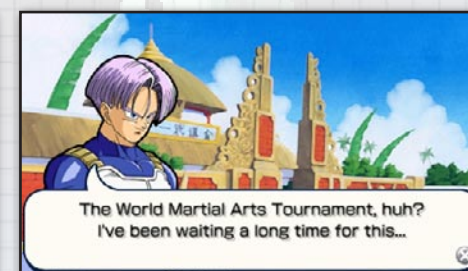
Rating: 2.5 of 5



2nd opinion by 4th letter • Alternate Rating : 2.5 of 5

I enjoyed the early *DBZ: Budokai* games when they first came out, but this feels like a step in the wrong direction. It's decent, but that's about as far as it goes.

FINAL SCORE :
2.5 of 5



ATELIER IRIS 3

GRAND PHANTASM



Publisher : NIS America
Developer : Gust
Release Date : 5/15/2007
Rating : Teen (Mild Fantasy Violence, Mild Language, Suggestive Themes)

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Turn-Based
of players : 1

Atelier Iris 3: Grand Phantasm marks a major departure in style from the first two *Atelier Iris* games. It feels like the result of someone at Gust playing *Final Fantasy XII* and getting inspired. The game's item synthesis system returns from the last game with minimal changes, but everything else has been overhauled.

The game plays out as a series of Quests your characters take from a local Guild in their home city, Zey Meruze. Quests ask you to grant favors to the city's NPCs, usually to the tune of killing monsters or synthesizing items. While the light, fluffy plot still unfolds in a basically linear fashion, there are plenty of optional Quests that let you wander away from the main story.

AI3's dungeons exist in a parallel dimension called the Alterworld, where your time to explore is limited. You can extend that time by finding hidden hourglasses, but eventually it runs out and you'll be evicted from the dungeon. In addition, fighting enemies cuts in to your exploration time if you fail to beat them quickly. Fortunately *AI3* drops random encounters in favor of a "symbol encounter system" where enemies roam the screen and can be easily avoided, or even defeated on the map screen if they're weak enough.

You only get three main characters, but using them is livened up by the "Blades" system. As Iris makes pacts with Mana, you can dress your other characters up in alternate outfits that radically alter their stats and abilities. Nell, ordinarily a speedy fighter, can become a support-oriented magic user, while Edge can trade in his high attack power for a ninja's speed.

The main flaw in the Blades system is that there really aren't as many costumes as there should be given the game's length; there are only five per character. You can gather and fully level them all before you're halfway through the game. Likewise, you've uncovered most of the game's six dungeons by the halfway point, and you only get to discover new areas for them in the game's second half. While the diversity of monsters to hunt and items to make in *AI3* is very satisfying, the game

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5

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

Atelier Iris 3 tries exciting new things and succeeds because it also doesn't forget what made it great in the first place.

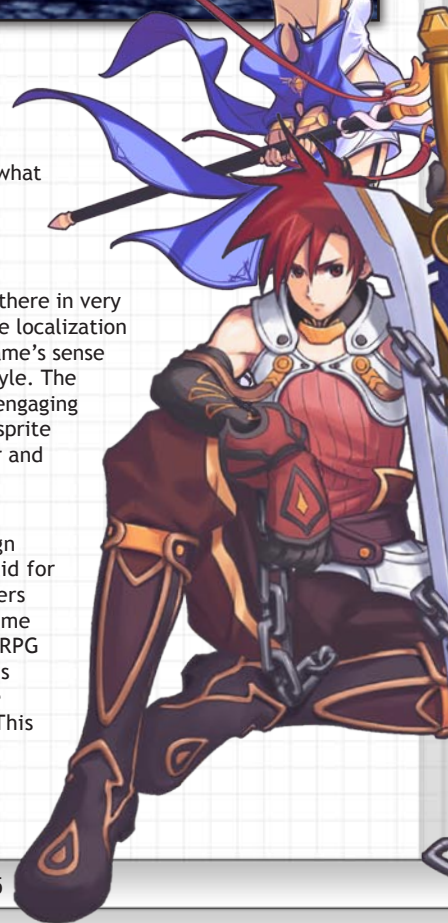


would benefit dramatically from the addition of even two or three more dungeons.

The interaction with the NPCs that live in Zey Meruze is likely what will keep you playing the game to the end. Finishing Quests and synthesizing new items helps develop the city itself, changing the lives of the people who live there in very funny and entertaining ways. The localization is excellent and enhances the game's sense of humor in NIS-A's trademark style. The music is less overwhelming and engaging than Gust's usual work, but the sprite animations are if anything larger and more detailed than ever.

Atelier Iris 3 is a game that fundamentally works on a design level, which can't always be said for its predecessors. It mostly suffers from a lack of engaging late-game content, which is a traditional RPG malady. If you've given previous *Atelier* games a pass, you were probably justified in doing so. This one is worth a second look.

Rating : 4 of 5



2SPICY

Preview by Shaggy

You have to hand it to Sega for doing its part in keeping the arcade scene alive and kicking. While it may have dropped out of the console hardware business, its arcade division has remained strong and vibrant. After its domination of Amusement Trade Exhibition International 2007 and its offerings at Amusement Operators Union 2007, it appears that Sega does not plan on relinquishing its arcade lead anytime soon.

Among the many titles shown off at both the ATEI and AOU shows, *2Spicy* was one of the most anticipated. This isn't just because it featured an HD screen or because it was a light gun game. It's because the gameplay is quite different from the usual light gun fare. *2Spicy* is a one-on-one gun fighting game that makes use of two foot-operated pedals along with the light gun.

The player uses the pedals to move around the arena and take cover. In addition to blasting your opponent with the gun and reloading, there also is a sniper function that you can use to land a quick head shot on your opponent. While there is a singleplayer story mode available, *2Spicy* really shines when two cabinets are linked together for some fast-paced head-to-head combat.

A yellow divider with "Too Spicy" printed on it sits between the two cabinets, so players cannot see their opponent's screen. The cabinets themselves are heavily decorated with art that looks like police tape with "Too Spicy" written all over it. There are a total of six characters to choose from as your onscreen avatar, and several arenas to fight in. Arenas feature completely destructible and dynamic environments, ranging from warehouses to barren wastelands. There's even a ship arena where the boxes you use for cover move around as the ship does, which will keep players on their toes.

2Spicy uses an enhanced version of the Lindbergh hardware to deliver a high-quality next-gen arcade experience. If you're lucky, there's already a *2Spicy* cabinet waiting for you at the nearest arcade, just in time for summer. Get playing!



Developer: Sega Amusements
Publisher: Sega Amusements
Players: 1-2

Genre: Light Gun
Category: 1-on-1 Gun Battle
Release Date: Last week of April 2007



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WAREZ

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CHAOS FIELD

INFO!

Publisher: O3 Entertainment
 Developer: MileStone
 Release Date: 12/20/2005
 Genre: Shooter
 Category: Bullet Heck
 # of Players: 1

As most shooter fans know, the Dreamcast is still alive in Japan... sort of. A few times a year, some small company quietly puts out a 2D shooter for the Dreamcast. Months or years later, an equally small company may translate that 2D shooter for the U.S. Such is the case here.

Like *Ikaruga* and *Radio Allergy*, *Chaos Field* is a top-down shooter, made for fans of the genre by fans of the genre. O3 Entertainment got the license, and put the game out for the GameCube a year and a half ago with a complete absence of anything resembling fanfare. It is probably at your local game store, sitting ignored on the rack next to *Cel Damage*, and it probably isn't priced at more than twenty dollars.

That twenty dollars gets you an interesting sort of bullet-hell shooter. It has a plotline. We're going to ignore it, because you probably are too.

Recent shmups have been experimenting with ways to use incoming enemy fire to your advantage, turning the games into less of an exercise in pure twitch reflexes and more of a skill-based challenge. *Chaos Field* is remarkable because it hands you three different ways to destroy or evade enemy fire, and then proceeds to try to blow your face off any way it can. Each of the three selectable ships is equipped with a pair of energy swords that can destroy several types of enemy bullets on contact, sort of like windshield wipers of *doom*. You can also hit a switch to drop a bomb on the battlefield, which takes a different form depending on what ship you're in, but which always involves some kind of temporary respite from incoming fire.

If absolutely everything else fails, you can hit X to shift into the Chaos or Order Field. The Order Field is easy mode, with less bullets to worry about, but you do almost no damage, whereas in the Chaos Field, your shots hit harder but the enemies are much more intense. During a field shift, your ship's invulnerable and all bullets onscreen disappear. *Chaos Field* hands you all of these tools to work with, and then gets moderately unfair quickly. Simply treating it like any other shooter won't work, as the game doesn't give you that reliable half-second window of safety that allows you to pick your way through the bullets. You need to duck, weave, flog the swords, shift dimensions, and use your bombs, all at once and as the situation dictates.

What complicates matters is that *Chaos Field* is an almost completely unbroken series of boss fights, with three in each level, set to a techno backbeat and animated like you're spinning completely out of control. It's vaguely like *Rez* had a kid with the Japanese shareware shooter *Warning Forever*, and it means that from the word "go," you'll be up to your neck in enemy fire.

Chaos Field is hard as hell, and is made for the kind of people who view the very existence of games like it as a challenge. Odds are that most of those people, unless they're serious import fans, don't know *Chaos Field* is on store shelves in North America. You know what you have to do, folks.



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ON THE DOWNLOAD

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BOOKWORM ADVENTURES



Developer: Popcap Games • Platform: PC Shareware
Genre: Wordplay • Category: Annelid RPG • # of Players: 1
Price: \$29.95 • Get it at: <http://www.popcap.com>

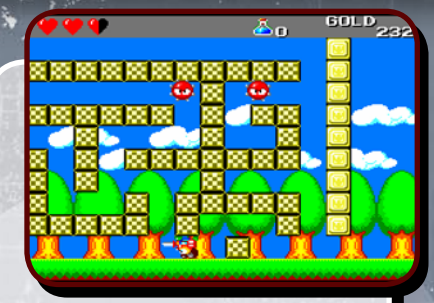
In *Bookworm Adventures*, Lex the librarian worm has set off to rescue the kidnapped Cassandra. He must battle across ancient lands using the power of a four by four grid covered in random letters, fighting the creatures he encounters in standard turn-based fashion by making words from letters in the grid. Each letter adds to the word's attack power, and certain modifiers can increase the word's punch as well. When Lex has the Bow of Zyx in his inventory, for example, any word using X, Y, or Z gets a damage bonus. After the game gets underway, gem tiles are introduced that not only



increase the word's power but have an effect such as healing Lex or poisoning the enemy. Learning when to use a shorter word with a gem letter instead of a longer one without adds a good touch of strategy to things, although you can't beat showing off with an eleven-letter monstrosity. In the meantime, the enemies are fighting back. They just do straight attacks, no word creation involved, frequently with status effects that can hit both Lex and the letter grid. Healing items are common, though, so the real battle is between you, the available letters, and your vocabulary. If things looks too grim you can get a new set of letters with the Scramble button, but that gives the monster a free attack.

There's a lot of depth to *Bookworm Adventures*, with many small, extraneous details adding to the charm and fun. Anyone who can read, or finds playing with words even somewhat entertaining, should at least check out the free demo of this amazingly addictive game.

SCORE: 4.5 OF 5



Developer: Hudson • Platform: Wii
Genre: Action RPG • Category: Platformer
of Players: 1 • Price: 600 points (\$6.00)
Get it at: Wii Virtual Console

Dragon's Curse is a Monster World game, meaning that it's a free-roaming action platformer RPG, and an excellent one at that. Our disturbingly Aryan hero has been transformed into a monster, and must wander the lands and fight its dragons to break the curse. Each dragon turns him into a new



DRAGON'S CURSE

creature with new abilities, making for some clever level designs and combat. The lizard shoots fireballs, the mouse-man can walk on certain walls, the fish-man swims, and so on. The central village hub grants access to all the levels and their secrets, and while it's possible to wander off the beaten path, it's liable to be deadly.

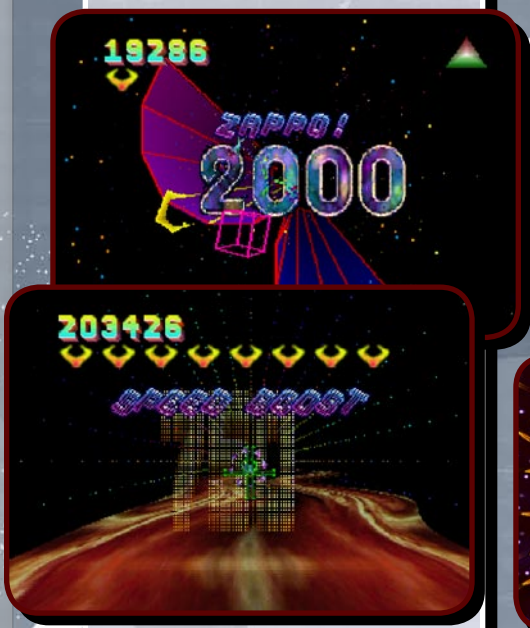
Death can be cheap and easy, and the save points are far from the boss battles. It's still a lot of fun though, and the *Monster World* games deserve all the attention they get.

SCORE: 3.5 OF 5



Developer: Llamasoft • Platform: PC
Genre: Arcade • Category: Web Domination
of Players: 1-2 • Price: Free(ish)
Get it at: <http://www.medwaypvb.com/>

Emulation is a wonderful thing, especially when the game authors don't mind their creations spread far and wide. Such is the case with *Tempest 2000*, one of the shining lights of the Jaguar era.



Jeff Minter's update of the Dave Theurer classic is a legend that not too many gamers got hold of back in the day, but now it's years later and *T2K*'s earning potential is nothing but a fond memory. As far as Minter is concerned that makes it freeware, and Atari doesn't seem to care at all.

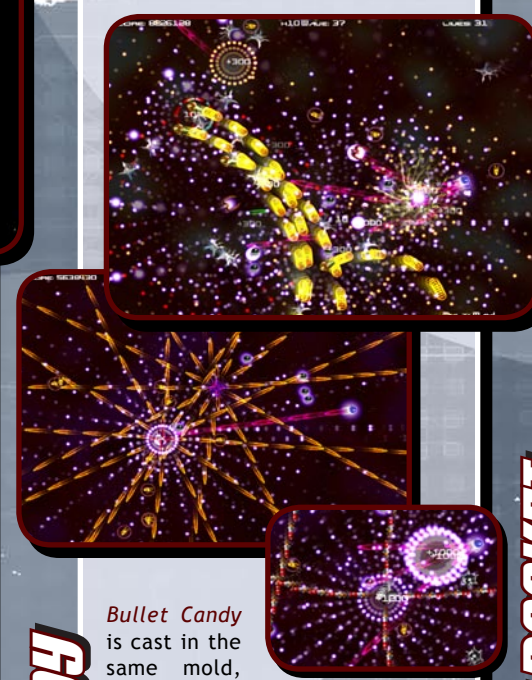
Snag an emulator of your choice, whether it's the old Project Tempest or Dio's lightning-fast T2K Emulator (found at the same URL as the ROM) and find out what happens when a yellow claw roams free atop a series of webs packed full of dangerous, abstract geometric critters.

SCORE: 4.5 OF 5



Developer: Charlie's Games • Platform: \$10.00
Genre: Arena Shooter • Category: B'Heil!
of Players: 1 • Price: \$10
Get it at: <http://www.charliesgames.com/>

One thing that set *Robotron* apart from today's arena shooters was that, when the level began, everything was there on screen. One second of rez-in time was all that was available to see which enemies were where, plot a line through the pick-ups, and combine them into a plan for survival.



BULLET CANDY

Bullet Candy is cast in the same mold, and it's a great take on the genre's basics. Shoot, collect, and survive are the big three imperatives, with an added bonus of trying to keep an eye on the ship amidst all the crap flying around. Fortunately, enemy bullets are relatively slow, but the sheer volume is more than enough to turn your ship into scrap. *Bullet Candy* can be a bit generous with the extra lives, but with this much firepower filling the screen it's hard to complain.

SCORE: 4 OF 5



Developer: Bizarre Crt. • Platform: XBOX 360
Genre: Rhythm • Category: Kaboom!
of Players: 1-2 • Price: 800 points (\$10)
Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

Boom Boom Rocket, besides having one of the best names ever, is a fun little game about blowing up fireworks to the beat of techno-classical music. The rockets rise up from the bottom of the screen, heading towards the bar at the top, and are both color-coded and marked with an arrow to indicate which face button explodes them. Getting a chain of successful fireworks bumps the score multiplier up, and when it's maxed out, there's one chance per song to kick in to scoring overdrive for a limited time.



BOOM BOOM ROCKET

The music isn't bad and the gameplay is fun enough, but the track list is fairly short with only ten pieces. *BBR* is pretty enough, and going for a good grade on all three difficulty levels will extend its life a bit, but it's still too short and simplistic to keep your interest.

SCORE: 3 OF 5

KONAMI CLASSICS PORTABLE

A RETURN TO THE CLASSIC GENERATION OF SHOOT SHOOT, AND SHOOT S'MORE.



A RETURN TO THE CLASSIC GENERATION OF SHOOT, SHOOT, AND SHOOT SOME MORE



[=SALAMANDER PORTABLE=]



[=PARODIUS PORTABLE=]



[=TWINBEE PORTABLE=]

KONAMI CLASSICS PORTABLE

AN IMPORT FEATURE BY SARDIUS



PUB./DEV: KONAMI . GENRE: HYBRID SHOOTER . CATEGORY: MISHMASH . RELEASE DATE: 1/25/2007 . # PLAYERS: 1-2

[=SALAMANDER PORTABLE=]

Problem: You'd like to release a compilation for a classic series, yet this "series" consists of only two and a half games. What do you do? Konami's solution: fill the remainder of *Salamander Portable* with rare, forgotten classics in the hopes that shooter fans will forgive the fact that only two of its five games bear the name printed on the cover. *Salamander* originated as a spinoff of the *Gradius* series, released in the interim between the 1985 debut of *Gradius* and *Gradius II* in 1988. Despite many similarities between the two series, it wasn't long until differences became apparent. *Salamander's* weapon powerups were immediately available for use upon pickup, in contrast to *Gradius's* traditional charging system. *Salamander* also contained a number of (somewhat poor) vertically scrolling stages, and death in *Salamander* was much less of a damning prospect than with *Gradius's* strict, checkpoint-based continue system.

In fact, *Salamander* as a whole was much more forgiving than *Gradius*, and even novice players likely had little trouble credit-feeding to the end. Several months later, however, all of that would change. First released in North American arcades in 1986, *Life Force* was a reimagined *Salamander*, featuring redone graphics that reflect a consistent biological theme, along with a *Gradius*-like powerup system. It also didn't allow you to continue after you lost all your lives, which meant no one who played it could expect to get past level 5 or so. *Salamander* wouldn't find a true sequel until 1996, which saw the release of *Salamander 2*, a graphically impressive horizontal/vertical shooter blend that managed to outclass both *Salamander* and *Life Force* in every way. Then, Konami forgot about the series until classics compilations became a surefire way to make quick money with little effort, and here we are.

With *Parodius Portable* and *TwinBee Portable* featuring five games each, though, Konami had little choice but to pad out the rest of *Salamander Portable* with titles that have nothing to do with the featured series whatsoever. These games are an upgraded port of the MSX home computer version of *Gradius 2* (which is an entirely different game than the *Gradius II* seen in arcades and in last year's *Gradius Collection*) and *Xexex*, an obscure horizontal shooter arcade release from 1991.

These titles may sound like throwaway filler, yet they manage to provide the overall package with its greatest appeal. *Gradius 2* and *Xexex* are true rarities that have never seen a port to home consoles or portables before, making *Salamander Portable* not only a great collection, but also one with significant value for hardcore Konami shooter fanatics. *Xexex* in particular is a forgotten gem of a game. Mixing mechanics from *Gradius* and *R-Type*, *Xexex* is a challenging, gorgeous experience, and shooter fans of all sorts owe it to themselves to check it out.

Despite, or because of, its hodgepodge nature, *Salamander Portable* manages to be the best of Konami's most recent PSP shooter compilations. *Salamander* is a great game. *Salamander 2* is fantastic. *Xexex* and *Gradius 2* are not to be missed. *Life Force* is... well, you can pretend that *Life Force* doesn't exist. *Salamander Portable* rules. Buy it.



THE SCORE IS 4.5 OF 5



KONAMI CLASSICS PORTABLE

A RETURN TO THE CLASSIC GENERATION OF SHOOT SHOOT, AND SHOOT S'MORE.

AN IMPORT FEATURE BY SARDIUS

KONAMI CLASSICS PORTABLE



PUB./DEV: KONAMI . GENRE: HORIZONTAL SHOOTER . CATEGORY: SEXY . RELEASE DATE: 1/25/2007 . # PLAYERS: 1-2

PUB./DEV: KONAMI . GENRE: VERTICAL SHOOTER . CATEGORY: CUTE AND DUMB . RELEASE DATE: 1/25/2007 . # PLAYERS: 1-2

[=PARODIUS PORTABLE=]

So, OK, you've played *Gradius*, right? Imagine what *Gradius* would be like if the Vic Viper was replaced with a bunnygirl straddling a grinning missile. Now replace the enemies with evil space penguins, add in a healthy love for boobs, and ditch the biomechanical motif in favor of stages made entirely out of candy and kittens.

Parodius was a short-lived but awesome *Gradius* spinoff series that began life in the late '80s and peaked during the early PlayStation era. Following a rocky start on the Japanese MSX home computer system with the release of the original *Parodius* in 1988, the series found greater popularity in arcades with *Parodius Da!* in 1990. 1994 then saw a sequel in *Gokujou Parodius*, and one year later, the console-exclusive *Jikkyou Oshaberi Parodius* brought a much-needed feature to the shooter genre: a pair of shrill announcers who make fun of you every time you screw up.

In 1996, Konami released the finest entry in the *Parodius* series, *Sexy Parodius*. Featuring only moderate amounts of sexiness and a double-shot of the uniquely twisted humor that *Parodius* was infamous for (one level even parodies *Castlevania*), *Sexy Parodius* remains one of the best in its genre thanks to its fun, mission-based gameplay. Unfortunately, *Sexy Parodius* was the series' swan song, and the franchise has yet to see another sequel in arcades or on consoles in the years since.

With *Parodius Portable*, every game in the *Parodius* series is presented together in one package for the first time. Each is perfectly emulated, except for the MSX version of *Parodius*, which has been given a graphically enhanced remake. All five games will give you a fun, sexy time, and all are good for about a half hour to an hour's worth of gameplay each, if you're the type to credit-feed to the finish.

As great as these games are, though, it's a shame that all of them are so similar to one another. Sure, each game has its share of wacky moments, but I'd be hard pressed to tell you which moment comes from which game. *Sexy Parodius* is memorable for its boss fights involving swollen tanuki testicles, and *Jikkyou Oshaberi Parodius* will have its rat bastard announcers taunting you from inside your head for days after you play, but otherwise, all five games just kind of run together once you've played through them all.

That's enough hate, though. The fact of the matter is that every title in this collection is a genuinely good game in its own right, and if you've never played a *Parodius* game before, *Parodius Portable* should be a priority purchase. Hardcore shooter fans may be put off by an overall lack of difficulty compared to the *Gradius* or *Salamander* series, but otherwise, *Parodius Portable* is an accessible, fun collection that any fan of the shoot 'em up genre will enjoy.



THE SCORE IS 4 OF 5

[=TWINBEE PORTABLE=]

As a series, *TwinBee* has a lot going for it. Every *TwinBee* game has cute graphics, an upbeat soundtrack, and intriguing, *Xevious*-like gameplay that puts an interesting spin on the typical vertically scrolling shooter formula. *TwinBee* has seen a number of sequels in arcades and on various consoles, and it's enjoyed a good amount of success over the years. That's nice.

As a collection, *TwinBee Portable* reflects the best the series has to offer. Included on the disc are ports of *TwinBee* (Arcade, 1985), *Detana! TwinBee* (Arcade, 1991), *Pop'n TwinBee* (Super Famicom, 1993), and *TwinBee Yahoo!* (Arcade, 1995), along with a PSP-exclusive remake of *TwinBee Da!* (Game Boy, 1990), featuring updated graphics and redesigned gameplay. That's also nice. This is all well and good (and nice), and the creators of *TwinBee Portable* should be commended for stuffing so much gameplay onto one UMD. The thing is, I just plain don't like *TwinBee* very much. I never have, and I probably never will. I place the blame entirely on the broken power-up system, which requires the player to shoot falling bell icons a certain number of times until they turn different colors, which correspond to a variety of weapon upgrades and ship enhancements.

In theory, this allows the player to choose his or her own power-ups and customize gameplay in a way that is rarely possible in shooters. In reality, though, the mechanic of having to juggle a moving target multiple times before it turns into something useful just bugs the living hell out of me. How are you expected to fire a very specific number of shots at some bouncy thing while dozens of enemies are buzzing around and trying to kill you? Man, how many times have I accidentally shot a bell *thirteen* times instead of the necessary twelve – causing it to switch back to its initial, worthless shade of yellow – after which I have to start shooting it all over again? Arggh!

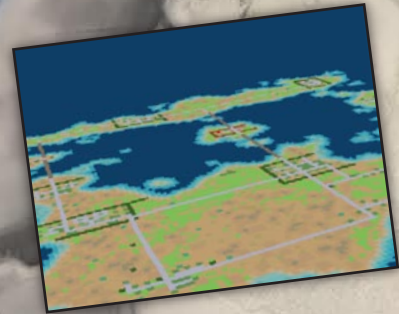
The later entries in the series are much more forgiving with this mechanic, but it's an incredibly stupid idea to begin with, and should have been eliminated in the first sequel. Those damned bells also infest the *Parodius* games, but at least *Parodius* only includes them as mostly optional bonuses. In every *TwinBee* game, you're stuck with a slow ship and a single-shot cannon unless you can somehow learn how to obtain bell power-ups reliably. I say *nuts* to that.

It's also unfortunate that the compilation in no way represents a complete *TwinBee* collection. The Famicom-born *Moero! TwinBee* (released as *Stinger* in the United States) and *TwinBee 3* are missing, as is the Super Famicom platformer spinoff title *TwinBee: Rainbow Bell Adventure*. It would have been nice to include a platformer and break up the monotony of five very similar and frustrating shooters, but as it is, *TwinBee Portable* is hard to recommend to anyone who isn't already a fan of the series. If you like *TwinBee*, hey, go nuts. If you don't, there's little here that will interest you.



THE SCORE IS 3 OF 5





RETURN FIRE



While the 3DO was a system with issues it just couldn't overcome, it wasn't a total loss for great gaming. The best versions (at the time) of *Samurai Shodown*, *Star Control 2*, *Road Rash*, *Super Street Fighter 2 Turbo*, and a few other odds and ends graced the machine, making those of us who'd dumped the cash feel a little more justified. Most of its best games eventually made the jump to the original PlayStation, though, such as the long gone but fondly remembered *Return Fire*.

Return Fire is a war game designed around two-person competitive multiplayer. There's a single-player campaign, of course, but it's repetitious and only mildly challenging. Get a friend and

safely back to home base. There are well over a hundred maps to choose from, ranging from a small island or two to huge, sprawling chains of smaller and larger land masses. The action is viewed from above, with the flat terrain scrolling past as you guide your chosen vehicle to the heart of enemy territory. Each of the four vehicles have their own strengths, weaknesses, and (most importantly) musical score. In fact, it can be said with no exaggeration that *Return Fire* has one of the greatest soundtracks ever put to a game. The pure orchestral classical music complements the action perfectly, leaving you wondering why more games don't do this.



Are you listening, *Boom Boom Rocket!*? Right, vehicles, four of them. First up is the tank, which combines strong firepower with average speed. The rotating turret is great for strafing enemy fortifications, and it's accompanied by Holst's "Mars." The other heavy hitter, the armored support vehicle (ASV), trades speed for power, but rockets pack the most punch of any weapon, but it's also the least maneuverable vehicle in the game. The ability to lay mines makes up for



start blasting and sabotaging him, however, and *Return Fire* immediately becomes an addictive experience that kills hours in a way that would be disturbing if it weren't so much fun.

In single-player mode, you start with three each of four different vehicles. There's a flag hidden somewhere on the map, and like all enemy flags everywhere it needs to be ripped from the enemy's hands and brought

that in multiplayer, though, and its armor lets it soak up the damage that lack of speed won't let it avoid. The ASV is backed by "Hall of the Mountain King," and you'll be wanting to find as much chaos as possible when the chorus kicks in.

The faster vehicles are the helicopter and humvee. The helicopter shoots both regular bullets and rockets, the latter being the way to remove a mine that doesn't involve sacrificing a vehicle. While the helicopter has very little armor, its ability to turn, strafe, and zip along at speed make it excellent for hit and run tactics. There's only one piece of music that's appropriate for the helicopter, and that's "Ride of the Valkyries."

After the big guns of the tank, ASV, and helicopter have done their work, it's time to send out the humvee. It's small, fast, takes damage like it's made of tinfoil and popsicle sticks, and is the only thing capable of grabbing the flag and bringing it home. All it takes is one stray rocket to turn the humvee into scrap, and losing all three means instantly losing the battle. The humvee zips along to "Flight of the Bumblebee" until it gets the flag, and then it's the "William Tell Overture" all the way home.

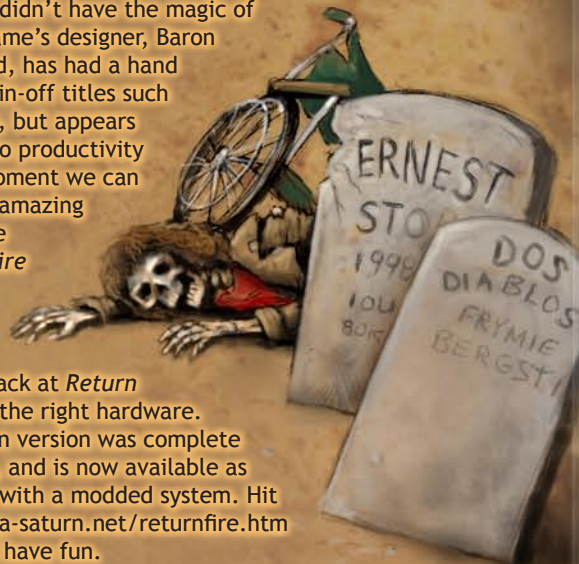
In single player that'll be an easy trip, too. There are only three threats to deal with when played alone: gun turrets, mines, and helicopter drones. Driving along and blasting turrets saps fuel and ammo, but refill stations along the way sort that out, and low armor can be taken care of with a trip back to home base. Clearing a level becomes a matter of sorting out a path for the humvee and blasting it clear of threats, plus obstacles such as trees and buildings. After blasting a building with a rocket or two, a small squad of guys will run out tossing grenades behind them. They're no threat, but since they make such a great 'squatch!' sound when you run over them, it's almost impossible to let them go. Once the path is finally clear of threats and obstacles, it's just a matter of bringing the flag back to home base. There are dozens of maps to play on, but the basic strategies don't change between one map and the next and repetition sets in quickly.

It's in multiplayer, though, that *Return Fire* comes alive. Multiplayer is played with P1 on the left and P2 on the right. Each player has a base and a flag, and the gun turrets and fortifications from the single player mode are still active. The real threat, of course, is from a smart human opponent who's pulling every dirty trick he knows while you do the same to him. Dividing time between pushing into enemy territory and stopping your opponent from doing the same to you is just ridiculously fun, especially when you manage to drop a few mines on his base exit.

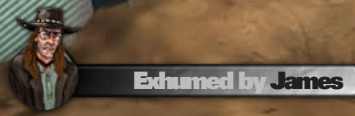
Return Fire started life on the 3DO and eventually found its way

to PS1 and PC. The PC-only sequel, *Return Fire II*, just didn't have the magic of the original. The game's designer, Baron R. K. Von Wolfsheild, has had a hand in several media spin-off titles such as the *Shrek* games, but appears to have moved on to productivity software. At the moment we can only dream of how amazing an Xbox Live Arcade version of *Return Fire* would be.

Wishful thinking aside, it's still not too late to get a crack at *Return Fire* for those with the right hardware. The canceled Saturn version was complete but never released, and is now available as freeware for those with a modded system. Hit up <http://www.sega-saturn.net/returnfire.htm> to snag a copy, and have fun.



Platform: PlayStation
 Publisher: Time Warner Interactive
 Developer: Prolific Publishing
 Release Date: January 1996
 Genre: War
 Category: What is it good for?
 # of Players: 1-2



Edmund by James

REVIEW

RAYMAN KART

It's Rayman's turn to get behind the wheel of his own kart in this racing game. With six characters to choose from, eight areas to race in, and thirty-two races to scamper through, it's easily one of the best kart racing experiences yet for mobile.

Like most traditional kart racers, the courses feature all sorts of obstacles like falling debris and chasms to jump over, but most importantly, power-ups along the tracks to use against your competitors. Some of these are rockets, tornadoes and other destructive weapons, while each character also possesses a special attack of their own. This creates a mad free-for-all where the lead can change at any given moment.

The two main modes to race in are Arcade and Free Play. At the start, Arcade is where most of the racing is done and here you travel through all areas, each with four types of races to win. For each race you complete, you earn Lums, and these unlock all sorts of extras including new areas, more characters, new courses, and different types of vehicles. Once you've earned a certain Lum amount, Free Play becomes available where you can also race in Circuits, meaning, the typical kart style where you earn points depending on what position you finish in a race. Win the Circuit, and a new one opens.

The karts accelerate

automatically and the rest is controlled with the keypad or D-pad. The only difference is that the keypad provides extra buttons for drifting. This is hardly necessary, but it adds a little more technique and might give you a speed boost at the right time. In any case, the controls are nice and tight, so barring any unforeseen attack, that ability to maneuver effectively is what will carry you to the finish. This also goes for the presentation of the game, which has a great look and also features whimsical tunes.

Rayman Kart allows you to burn rubber and has an abundance of play features like no other kart game for mobile before it. It's still only for a single player, but nevertheless provides the real kart experience. Until something better comes along, *Rayman Kart* sets the bar for mobile kart racing.



Publisher: Gameloft
Developer: Gameloft
Release Date: 4/12/2007

Genre: Racing
Category: Kart
of Players: 1

FINAL SCORE :
4.5 of 5

INDEPENDENCE IS NOT WEAKNESS

As the physical embodiment of Gamecock, the first question anyone in the video game know asks when they see me strutting down the street is "You named your company what?!" That one's easy enough to answer. We gave our company a ridiculous name because ultimately no one cares who the publisher of a game is, but you do want to know who developed it. That's why we're here, declaring loud and proud the return of the independent developer.

More often than not, however, this response brings up an interesting follow-up question, one that's not as easy to answer in a few sentences. That question is, "Why do I want games from an indie studio?" I'm not sure how it happened, but somewhere in the last 20 years the term "independent developer" has changed from meaning able to do what you want to meaning... well, small and weak.

To prove my point, try this: picture an independent developer in your mind right now. I'm betting you dreamed up something akin to a few people in a dimly lit, cramped basement, hunched over their computers, programming a crappy freeware game that they hope will be get them hired by a huge studio. Wasn't too far off, was it?

Like every other entertainment industry before it, the video game industry has moved from many small groups with differing visions to a handful of large conglomerates that exist solely to make profit. I'm not saying that making money is a bad thing, but when that's your only goal - which is entirely the case with any public company - then creative concerns and willingness to take risks fall to the wayside.

For example, think about *Grand Theft Auto*. *GTA3* took a huge leap into the 3D world, and was massively rewarded by becoming one of the best-selling games of our generation. Now look at where we are, only six years and something like eight iterations later. Rockstar cranked out trilogy packs, Xbox versions, *GTA* on GBA. Who would have thought a PSP game would be ported to PS2?! But, they need to do that to keep the company's investors happy.

When I think of the video game business in its current state, I'm reminded of something Hunter S. Thomson wrote regarding the music industry many years ago. It's "a cruel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free, and good men die like dogs. There's also a negative side." This is the environment that most developers work in. A place where originality is discouraged, and new ideas are smothered by fiscal concerns. Look at *Madden*, shutting down the competition by grabbing the exclusive NFL license, all to keep their investors happy. It's going to sound ironic coming from yours truly, but this kind of atmosphere turns everyone into a bunch of chickens.

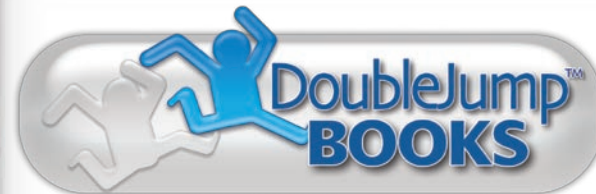
But what if we took away this crushing need to always please investors? What if there was a place where all developers had to worry about was making a great game because - let's face facts - nine times out of ten, a game is a blockbuster because it's simply fun. Imagine a place where the marketing dollars a small studio needs to compete with the big boys are put behind titles not because it's a sequel or a sure thing, but because the people creating it are living their dream and putting all their passion behind it. Gamecock aims to be that place.

There are a ton of great ideas out there, and there are visionaries like Will Wright doing their part in creating the next evolution of creative games. There are also teams of extremely talented people working on not so great games patiently waiting in the wings for their chance to create the next killer idea. I'm fortunate enough to have some of them under my wing - like Alex Seropian and Wideload, the guys at Firefly, and some new start-ups that will be making a name for themselves in the very near future. All of these folks got on the map by developing their own original games that were critical hits. Why would we want to stop them from doing what they do best?

I, the Gamecock, am here to tell all developers and to tell all of you this: independence is not weakness, it is strength. As the most creative, most passionate and most visionary force in video games, it is developers who should be given the reigns to our gaming future. They, more than anyone else, are keenly aware of where we're at and where we should be going.



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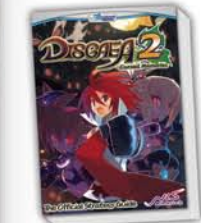


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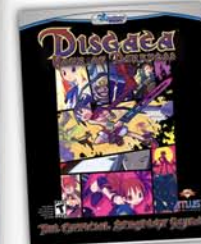
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EVIL CREW PRODUCTIONS



Photo credits:
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BEHIND THE SCENES

Hardcore Creation: Fan film
Hardcore Title: *Project Resident Evil: Operation Mad Jackal*
Hardcore Creators: Max Lando, Rebecca Lando, Sean Keller, Kit Pennebaker and Travis Vengroff
Hardcore Spendings: \$8,000
Hardcore Website: www.evildcrewproductions.com

Evil Crew definitely means business when they put a fan film together. There is a lot of hard work and dedication involved in producing such a solid fan film. It's not every day that you get to (legally) shut down a city street for the fan film that you're making. Convincing thirty businesses to shut down for a day so you can make "some zombie film" is no easy task!

The film itself only took a few days to shoot, but pre-production and post-production lasted nearly five months (total). Travis, one of the founders of Evil Crew, had this to say about pre-production: "Most of the time here was spent revising small points in the script, getting a permit to use Main Street, and calling every helicopter company from here to Arizona to see if we could deploy the UBCS on the street in a Black Hawk. We almost got one, but it was ultimately too costly." Yeah, you read that right: a Black Hawk! Evil Crew is Hardcore, for sure!







- During the shoe store scene, the orange tips of the air-soft guns were starting to wear off. To paint them black again, one of the UBCS actors took them to his car, in a busy parking lot. Someone saw a guy dressed as a soldier, carrying several weapons, and called the police! Several teams of police showed up, and there was a very uncomfortable moment before they were convinced that it was just for a movie.
- Henry Hall, the creator of the Nemesis and Licker costumes, got in a car crash on the way to the set. Prepared for his day on the set, he was in full zombie makeup. When the paramedics came to pick him up, they thought that he was severely wounded! He tried explaining that he was on his way to shoot a movie, and was playing the part of a zombie, but they thought that he was suffering from severe head trauma and didn't believe him! He looked so bad (or is that good?), that they were going to airlift him, but the weather was not cooperating. Once at the hospital things got cleared up. Henry almost didn't make it to the last day of filming!
- Travis has admitted that he mixed up the G and T viruses, for the dialog. He plans to fix this, and as an apology, is giving the audio better balance. He messes up and we benefit: what a nice guy!

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In Mass Effect your actions can alter the direction of the story in real time.



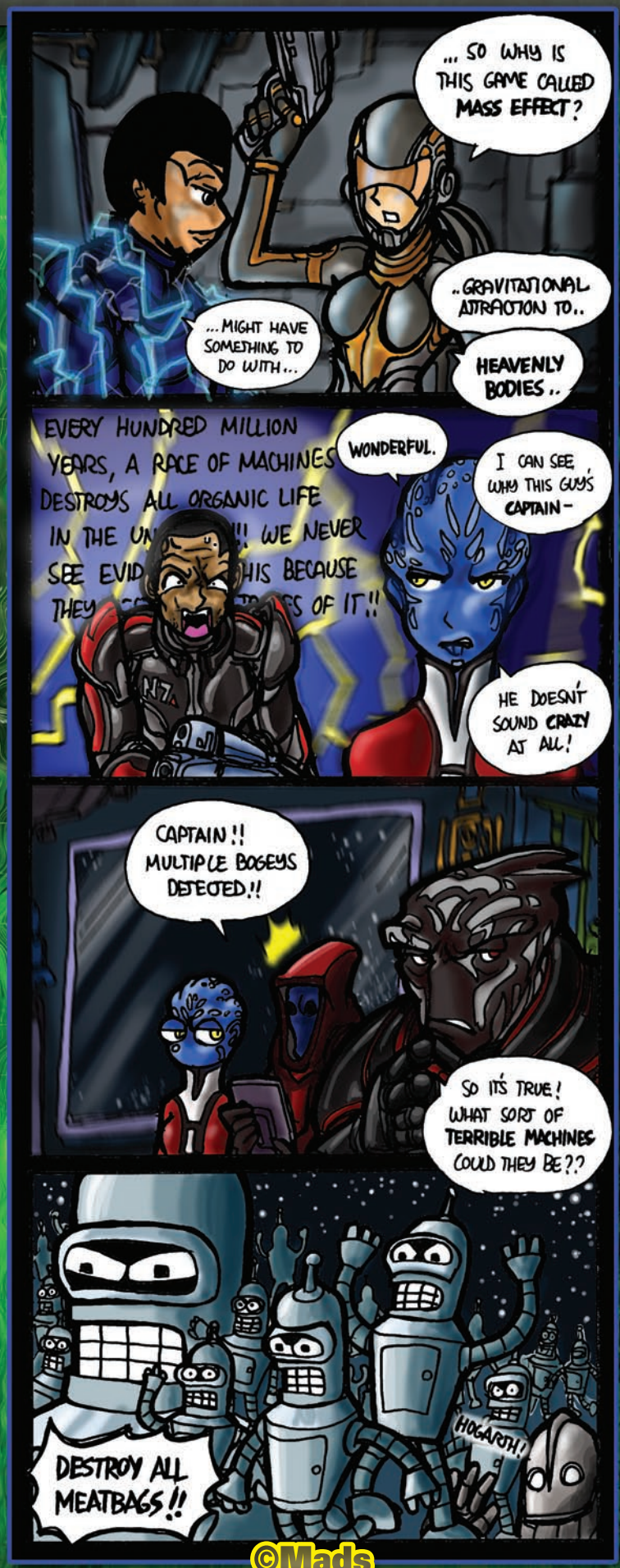
THE MISSION OBJECTIVE DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING ABOUT CIVILIANS, SHEPARD.

WE CAN'T ENDANGER THE MISSION FOR A BUNCH OF MINERS...



ON THE OTHER HAND...

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SO IT'S TRUE! WHAT SORT OF TERRIBLE MACHINES COULD THEY BE??



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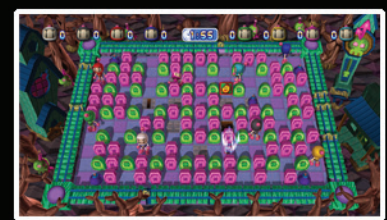
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