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Printed in the United States of America

Biographical Data

DJPubba_Tim Lindquist

OMG, staff members are moving here. I have to tidy up.

Now Playing: *Discs of Tron* (arcade), *Satan's Hollow* (MAME), *Ghouls 'n Ghosts* (arcade), *Tamagotchi* (Wii).

Wanderer_Thomas Wilde

By the time you read this, Racewing and I will have been roommates for a month and a half. Racewing will have been lying about his repeated and unfortunate losses at *Tekken 5* for a slightly shorter period of time.

Now Playing: *The Lord of the Rings Online*, *World of Warcraft*

Lynxara_Alicia Ashby

So there's a fantasy-themed *Harvest Moon* and a sci-fi themed *Harvest Moon* now. The logical next step? *Harvest Moon: Thug Life*, where you mine crackhouses for bling to forge into grills and chains, which you use to attract one of the game's 11 pimpable Hos. You can attempt to make money farming, but must occasionally fight off police in order to protect your crops.
Now Playing: *Rune Factory: Fantasy Harvest Moon*, *Grim Grimoire*, *Odin Sphere*, *Super Robot Wars W*

Racewing_Geson Hatchett

By the time you read this, Wanderer and I will have been roommates for a month and a half. Wanderer will also, by now, have been too *embarrassed* to admit having lost to *every single schoolgirl* that the fighting game universe has ever had to offer... and Bridget. I can explain, I swear.

Now Playing: *Ouendan 2* (Rival Cheer Girls? There *is* justice in this world.)

Daniel Kayser_Daniel Kayser

I've almost finished installing the web cams inside the "Hardcore Hut" that will soon be housing Wanderer, Racewing, DJPubba and probably several other gaming aficionados. Now, I just need to decide how to promote my first season of "Geeks Gone Wild"...

Now Playing: *MLB 2K7*, *Forza 2*, and revisiting one of the greatest games in recent memory, *Shadow of the Colossus*

KouAidou_Elizabeth Ellis

For those of you reading my Press Junket piece and thinking I'm putting on some kind of ditzy Marilyn act just to sound funny and twee, the answer is: no, I actually *am* that stupid. Thank you, please drive through.

Now Playing: *Harvest Moon: Rune Factory*, *Picross DS*, *Professor Layton and the Mysterious Village*

Roger Danish_Greg Off

After getting the chance to spend some time with Sony's third and fourth quarter titles, I'm all pumped up.
Yes, they still have a long road ahead of them that will hopefully include a price drop for the PS3, but they have some pretty awesome and innovative games coming. I want my *Little Big Planet*!

Currently Playing: *Lair*, *The Darkness*, *Hellboy*, *Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow*

Wolfie_Terry Wolfinger

By the time you read this, "Lost" will have ended the season with its two-hour finale! I'm very much looking forward to it as the last few episodes have been really good. Was anyone else disappointed by *Spider-Man 3*? The movie, not the game....

Now Playing: *World of Warcraft*

4thletter_David Brothers

Thomas and Geson moved to Seattle and I moved to San Francisco. Soon, Hardcore Gamer will split into two rival factions: HGM Seattle and HGM San Francisco. Whose side are you on? In other news, *All-Star Batman & Robin the Boy Wonder #5* is the very **pinnacle** of comics, nay, of English literature itself. Shakespeare and Chaucer are **nothing** before the might that is *All-Star Batman and Robin*.

Now Playing: *The Darkness* (360), *Ninja Gaiden Sigma*, *Crush*

Metalbolt_Anthony Mertz

Anthony is missing.

James_James Cunningham

After months of ragging on the PS3, today I gave in and bought one. It's still sitting in its box, because something is going to have to come unplugged from the tv to make room. I'm thinking the Nuon's time is up but it's a tough call. The Nuon and the PS3 are roughly the same dimensions, so at least it'll slide into the entertainment center easily, but I'll miss *Tempest 3000* and... um... hmmm...
Also, I'm enjoying *Odin Sphere*. So there!
Now Playing: *Odin Sphere* and *Ouendan 2*. It's a slow month, but the few games are great.

ArEth_Thomas Shin

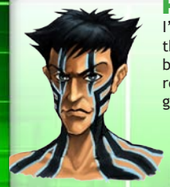
Soon, I will be en route to Japan to accompany two US Teams for Super Battle Opera, as well as compete in the Last Chance Qualifiers for *Melty Blood: Act Cadenza* with Sp00ky. Funny thing about fighting games: they tend to encourage replay instead of selling new copies. That's something to think about.

Now Playing: *Fate/Stay Night* (PC), *Melty Blood: Act Cadenza ver.B2* (Arcade)

HonestGamer_Jason Venter

The Internet has taken the adventurous spirit out of far too many people. We don't hike or fish or hunt or skydive nearly as much as we used to. It's a disturbing trend, and we need to do something about it. Maybe I'll post about it in my blog, once I'm done reading the latest news articles on Google and browsing for new buddy icons.

Now Playing: *Etrian Odyssey*, *Odin Sphere*



Hitoshura_Iain Ross

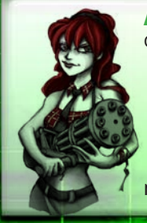
I'm not sure I can explain *Persona 3* to anyone without them looking at me strangely, even moreso because I've been working on the guide for it and I have a high school reunion a few days before its release. I know everyone's going to ask me "So, what've you been up to?"

Now Playing: *Persona 3*

Sardius_Danny Cowan

Would it make a damn bit of difference if I were to beg and plead everyone reading this to not waste their money on the cancer-filled *Odin Sphere* and to buy the incredibly excellent *Grim Grimoire* instead? No? Well... okay. Enjoy your cancer, I guess.

Now Playing: *Chulip*, *Grim Grimoire*, *Ouendan 2*, *The Super Spy*



Ashura_Brady Hartel

Can't write bio, now is baby.

Now Playing: *Knee bouncing baby*, *Jumping Flash*

Jeremy_Jeremy Peeples

I finally opened my wallet up for a purchase more extravagant than a Slurpee and bought a premium 360. I've been incredibly happy with my purchase, as the new controller is more comfortable than even the S-pad, and XBLA rules, as do demos of dozens of 360 games. The Video Marketplace needs "Kim Possible" eps, though. Otherwise, I've got no complaints about my purchase so far.
Now Playing: *Saints Row*, *Viva Pinata*, *Project Gotham Racing 3*, *Uno*, *Aegis Wing*, *Contra*, *Marble Blast Ultra*, *WWF No Mercy*

Mads_Amadeo Garcia III

While writers and editors I admire and exalt (hey, boss!) are bunking together, I can only cohabitate with any number of Pokemon I've met and enslaved through the course of my travels in the Sinnoh region, some of which may or may not resemble a human female. I mean, have you seen those Lopunnies? No jury in the world would convict me!

Now Playing: *Pokemon Pearl*, *Summon Night*, *Counterstrike: Zero Mission*, *Odin Sphere*

HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE

Contents

10 : NEWS
12 : PREVIEW: NIGHTS: JOURNEY OF DREAMS
14 : PREVIEW: BEAUTIFUL KATAMARI
16 : PREVIEW: PERSONA 3
18 : PREVIEW: RESIDENT EVIL: UMBRELLA CHRONICLES
20 : PREVIEW: HEAVENLY SWORD
22 : PREVIEW: DRAGONEER'S ARIA *EXCLUSIVE!*
24 : PREVIEW: MONSTER HUNTER FREEDOM 2
26 : PREVIEW: DISGAEA PORTABLE
28 : PREVIEW: SOUL NOMAD AND THE WORLD EATERS
30 : PREVIEW: LAIR
32 : PREVIEW: HALO 3
34 : FEATURED PREVIEW: BIOSHOCK
38 : COVER FEATURE: PLAYING BEYOND
46 : FEATURE: IS IT HIP TO BE SQUARE-ENIX?
52 : REVIEW: THE RED STAR
54 : REVIEW: TOMB RAIDER ANNIVERSARY
56 : REVIEW: ODIN SPHERE
58 : REVIEW: GRIM GRIMOIRE
59 : REVIEW: MONSTER MADNESS: BATTLE FOR SUBURBIA
60 : REVIEW: CUBE
61 : REVIEW: BROOKTOWN HIGH: SENIOR YEAR
62 : REVIEW: HOT SHOTS TENNIS
63 : REVIEW: PRACTICAL INTELLIGENCE QUOTIENT 2
64 : REVIEW: NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA
65 : REVIEW: HOSHIGAMI REMIX
66 : ARCADE: LET'S GO JUNGLE!
68 : DOWNLOADS
70 : JAPAN: PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE MYSTERIOUS VILLAGE
72 : JAPAN: SUPER ROBOT WARS W
73 : JAPAN: MONSTER WORLD COMPLETE COLLECTION
74 : GRAVEYARD: LUFIA II: RISE OF THE SINISTRALS
76 : MOBILE: TRANSFORMERS
77 : SQUAWKBOX *NEW!*
80 : FAN ART
82 : FUNNIES

Previews

We're proud to present WORLD EXCLUSIVE coverage of *Dragoneer's Aria*, the new PSP RPG from our pals at Nippon Ichi and Hit Maker. Also take a look at *Persona 3*, complete with an interview with Atlus's Yu Namba. Icing on the game cake is early looks at *Halo 3*, *NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams*, *Heavenly Sword*, and more awesome stuff than we can name here!

Halo 3: p32

Dragoneer's Aria: p22

12

Features

More Squawkin' from the Gamecock, more Arcade coverage, and just for fun, we also sent Wanderer out to have a nice long chat with the developers of *Bioshock*. Turn to page 34 to find out why it may be the most original action game yet on the Xbox 360. Then turn to page 46 and read about KouAidou's adventures in Japan at the Square-Enix preview party, where she played enough great upcoming Square-Enix games to make the rest of us sick with jealousy. Stupid Kou!

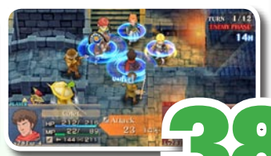
BIOSHOCK

34

On the cover

WHAT NOW SONY?

What's up with Sony these days? What are they going to do about their current position in the marketplace? What can we expect from the software giant that dominated the last two generations? Daniel Kayser sits down and takes a long, hard look at Sony's plans for 2007, including some upcoming games that could change Sony's fortunes radically.



38

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MOVIES AND GAMES

Michael Bay's visual effects company, Digital Domain, is branching out to game development, according to the LA Times. Digital Domain will form its own games unit and is looking to acquire a game firm or two to develop a few titles over the next two years. Michael Bay stays busy, as Jerry Bruckheimer has selected him as director for the movie based on Ubisoft's *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, currently set to be released Summer 2009.

Actor Liam Neeson (*Schindler's List*) will lead the voice-acting cast in Bethesda Softworks' *Fallout 3*, playing the role of the player's father.

Staying on the movie side of things, Sony Online Entertainment is developing a game based on the *Kung Fu Hustle* film, combining the best elements of classic fighting titles and adding character designs, technology and humor from the movie.

DEPARTURES

The flag was at half-mast at Sony HQ as the father of the PlayStation, Ken Kutaragi, announced he will retire from his executive position at SCEI effective June 19, 2007.

Due to re-organization over at Atari, the color of the day was pink, as 20% of its employees got the slip.

CANCELLATIONS

There's sad news for *Metronome* fans, as Swedish developer Team Tarsier revealed that it has put its third-person adventure game on hold and moved onto other projects. *Metronome* was anticipated due to its unique concept, allowing you to record sounds and use them to fight enemies, solve problems and confuse citizens of your city.

Blitz Games has confirmed that production on its survival-horror game, *Possession*, has been halted. Putting you on the other side of the fence, *Possession* lets you control the zombies and wreak havoc instead of just cowering in the corner.

THQ revealed that the previously announced *Saints Row* PS3 port was canceled in favor of launching a full-on sequel simultaneously on the Xbox 360 and PS3.

EA announced that Will Wright's larger-than-life title *Spore* won't see the light of day until early 2008.

Mixing some good news with the bad, Eidos is bringing two of its upcoming action titles, *Kane & Lynch* and *Crossfire*, to the PS3, but the launch for both titles has been pushed back to late 2007 and early 2008, respectively.

SOMEONE IS ACTUALLY BUYING VISTA!?

Having recently shipped its Vista operating system, Microsoft brought in record revenue across the board. Its game division posted a drop in revenue (from $1.2B to $929M) but also lost less money ($402M to $315M). Microsoft's gaming guru Robbie Bach predicted that the Xbox will become profitable in 2008. Expanding its gaming empire, Microsoft will also establish a European office of Microsoft Game Studios.

ROLE PLAYING GAMES COMING SOON

Both THQ and Sega have signed major development contracts for next-gen RPG titles with big development studios. While details are not available yet, Big Huge Games, known for *Rise of Nations*, has teamed up with *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* designer Ken Rolston to work on its new project for THQ. SEGA hooked up with Chris Taylor's Gas Powered Games, known for *Total Annihilation*, *Dungeon Siege*, and more recently, *Supreme Commander*.

VISA CRUCIBLE

In cooperation with First National Bank, Blizzard is offering a *World of Warcraft* Visa card, allowing you to earn 1% credit toward the $14.99 monthly *WoW* subscription fee. This is still a regular credit card, so charges apply, and the plastic will feature graphics from the game.

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Wii

NiGHTS Journey of Dreams™

Preview by James

Eleven years! That's how long we've been waiting on word of a sequel to *NiGHTS*, and Sega has finally delivered the goods. *NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams* will be hitting the Wii late this year, bringing with it the freedom of flight in a beautiful dream world.

The kingdom of Nightopia is being destroyed by the Nightmaren, ruining the dreams of humans and causing all sorts of havoc. This is all the reason needed for the jester, NiGHTS, to fly again, zipping through the skies using either the Wii remote or the analog stick on the nunchuk for control. There's still a thick fog of mystery around the central gameplay mechanics, but several bells and whistles have been revealed.

For example, the seasons in Nightopia can be pulled from the Wii Forecast Channel, dressing up *NiGHTS*'s seven worlds in a fashion appropriate to the time of year. WiiConnect 24 will also be used to allow item-swapping between friends, although what those items will do is another mystery. The big reveal, though, has to do with the masks NiGHTS uses along his journey. These masks allow NiGHTS to transform into new creatures with the special abilities needed to get past the dream world's many obstacles.

A sequel to *NiGHTS* has been a long time coming, despite Sonic Team's jester making a cameo in almost every game they've put out since then. *NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams* is looking amazing, though, and the thought of flying with the Wii remote should be enough to put a smile on any fan's face. This one can't get here soon enough.

Publisher: SEGA
Developer: SONIC TEAM
Release Date: WINTER 2007
Genre: ADVENTURE
Category: FANBOY'S ANSWERED PRAYERS
 # Players: 1-2

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Preview by James

Beautiful Katamari™

Publisher: Namco-Bandai
Developer: Namco
Release Date: October 2007

Genre(s): Romance
Category: Beauty
# of Players: 1-?

Katamari Damacy was a creation of joy and wonder when it landed on the PS2, and its sequel somehow managed to be even better. While the impact of *We ♥ Katamari* was dulled by coming out so quickly after *Katamari Damacy*, it's now been a few years and we can all get excited for the first next-gen iteration, *Beautiful Katamari*.

The King of All Cosmos has done something that, once again, requires the Prince to clean up. While most kids might just raise bail money, the Prince gets to roll a small ball around and amass all the items in the world into a giant clump of stuff. The ball can gather items that are slightly smaller than it, and will bounce off anything bigger, but the more stuff it collects the larger it gets. It may take a while, but every item in a level is fodder for the katamari.

The game basics will remain unchanged for *Beautiful Katamari*, but they don't really need much tweaking. What's new is the sense of scale, with goals getting as large as 10,000 kilometers or more! That's only 2700 kilometers smaller than the earth itself, which helps explain where all the processing power of the new systems is going. While the graphic presentation is basically a higher resolution version of the PS2 style, the sheer volume of stuff to collect should be staggering. Doing it online in the new multiplayer modes will just be icing on the cake. If they can just equal the soundtrack of the original *Katamari Damacy*, it should turn out just about perfect.

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PlayStation Portable

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI® P3 PERSONA3™

Persona 3 takes place over the course of a year, and every day that passes in-game is a day you cannot get back. *Persona 3* begins on April 9th, 2009, and ends on April 9th, 2010. What you do in the meantime is largely up to you. It's so open-ended and nonlinear that it's sort of intimidating.

By day, you're a new student at Gekkoukan High. At night, you're one of the newest members of the Specialized Extracirricular Execution Squad, or SEES, all of whom possess and wield Personas: parts of their personality that manifest as powerful mythological creatures.

(To access the power of a Persona, the SEES are forced to, um, well, use special guns to shoot themselves in the head. It's sort of like how Athena sprang fully-grown from Zeus's brain, but *much creepier*.)

Every night, between midnight and 12:01, the Dark Hour begins. During this time, most humans fall asleep, and the ones that don't, like the SEES, are prey for demons. During the Dark Hour, Gekkoukan High is replaced by the entrance to a constantly-changing labyrinth called Tartarus, and it's your team's job to explore it.

These two disparate halves of *Persona 3* are linked in a bizarre way. Since Personas are part of your character's personality, strengthening his relationships at school also strengthens your Personas.

Half high school sim, half JRPG with a dash of roguelike, *Persona 3* is a weird and innovative entry in a weird and innovative series. I'm not sure what to think about it.

PUBLISHER: ATLUS • DEVELOPER: ATLUS
GENRE: RPG • CATEGORY: MEMENTO MORI
RELEASE DATE: 2007 • # OF PLAYERS: 1

STAFF INTERVIEW

WE TAKE A MOMENT TO TALK TO ATLUS...

*As part of a challenge on **HardcoreGamer.com**, we invited members to submit their interview questions for Atlus concerning* Persona 3. *We took the best questions and put them to Yu Namba, project lead, and Bill Alexander, the lead editor on the translation of* P3. *(For the full interview, check **HardcoreGamer.com**.)*

HGM: Why do the characters summon their Personas by shooting themselves?

Namba: Think about pointing a gun at yourself and pulling the trigger. Even if you know that the gun is fake or is not loaded, I'm sure you'll still feel the fear of death. That causes you to momentarily be aware of the subconscious: the deeper, darker side of you. ... The act of pulling the trigger also symbolizes your courage to fight, rather than succumbing to the fear of death.

HGM: Why did you decide not to bring the Japanese expansion disc to the US?

Namba: *Persona 3* is easily the biggest game I've ever worked on at Atlus USA. We were well into the localization when we learned about *Persona 3* FES (the expansion), and we simply couldn't afford to incorporate all the additions and changes in the middle of the project.

HGM: Given the relative linearity of past SMT games, how did *Persona 3* become so open-ended?

Namba: The game *is* open-ended in some ways, but it does have a definite ending [with] no cliffhanger... The game has a more modern feel than some of the other games in the *SMT* series, but players will discover that *Persona 3* still delivers the dark, serious, and exciting experience that the franchise is known for.

PUBLISHER: CAPCOM • DEVELOPER: CAPCOM • GENRE: SURVIVAL HORROR
CATEGORY: GUN SURVIVOR • RELEASE DATE: 2007 • # PLAYERS: 1

It's a weird time to be a *Resident Evil* fan. The best game in the series to date, *Resident Evil 4*, also unceremoniously kicked the lungs out of the series's ongoing plot. At the same time, the formation and dissolution of Clover Studios has made a number of Capcom projects look like a fast-paced game of musical chairs, and *RE*'s long-time producer Shinji Mikami has apparently left the company entirely.

As such, *Umbrella Chronicles*, the long-awaited *Resident Evil* game for the Wii, is interesting in several ways. It's supposedly a flashback game, meant to close several plot holes and help bridge the gap between *RE4* and the rest of the series's storyline. Many fans criticized *RE4* for not actually showing the downfall of the Umbrella corporation, but that story is apparently the major plot arc of *UC*.

Very little has been shown of the actual gameplay so far, but what footage there is makes it look like an lightgun shooter, similar to *House of the Dead*. Using your Wiimote to point your weaponry, you'll once again pass through a number of zombie-infested locales from past *RE* games, including (of course) the Spencer mansion. You can switch between weapons on the fly, and thankfully, headshots appear to work just fine.

Chris, Jill, Rebecca, Billy, and of course Wesker have all been confirmed to be in *UC* at this point, and a shot of Jill in her *RE3* garb on the game's Japanese website suggests there may be more. For huge *RE* geeks like myself, there's a lot to be excited about here. There had better be more news about this very shortly, or I shall become... irate.

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THE UMBRELLA CHRONICLES

Preview by Wanderer

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- ***MISTAKE ON HAIRPIN TURN:*** *CLEAN YOUR SHORTS*
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- ***PAINT:*** *HEY, NOTHING LASTS FOREVER*
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FORZA 2 MOTORSPORT

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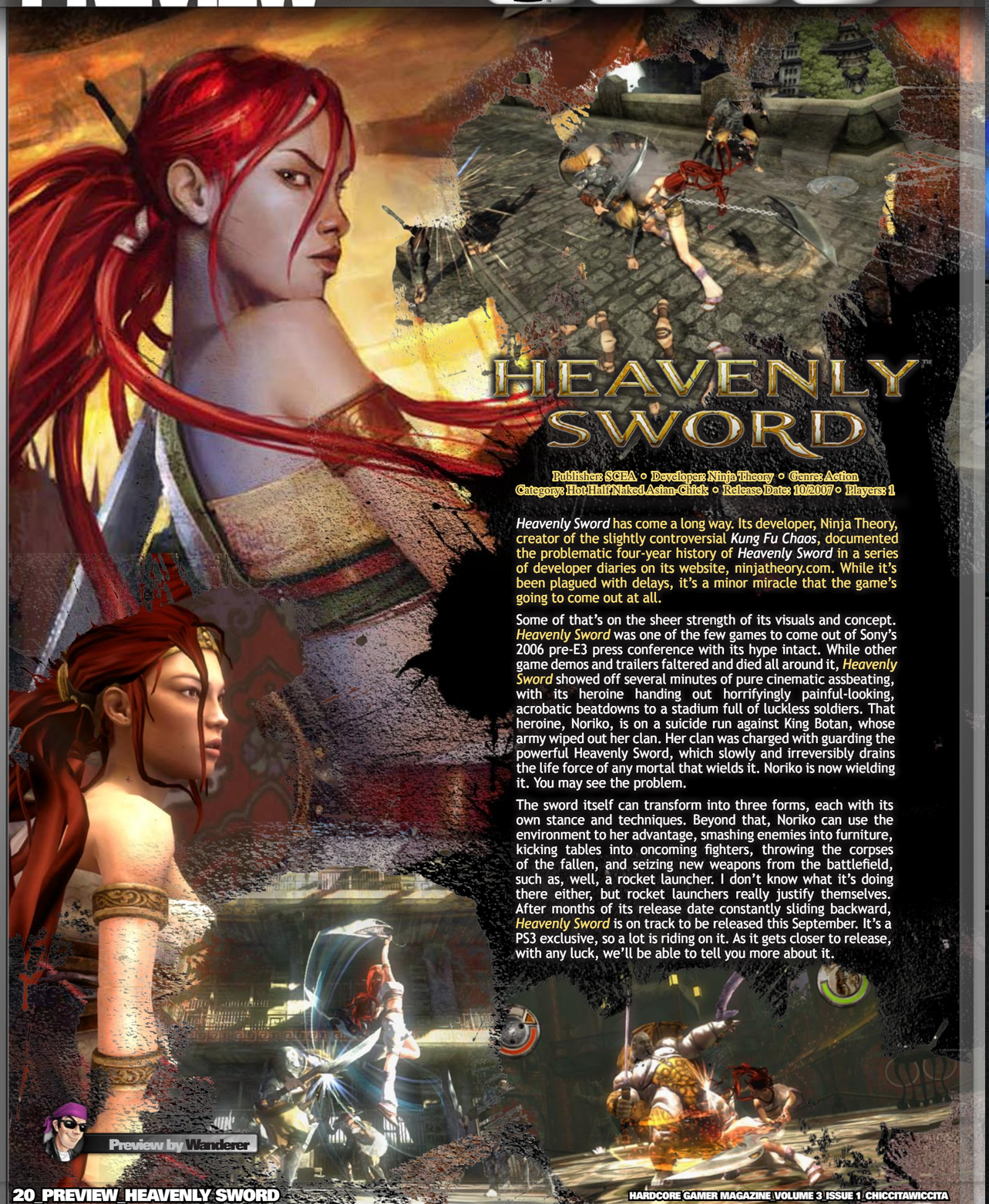

HEAVENLY SWORD™

Publisher: SCEA • Developer: Ninja Theory • Genre: Action
Category: Hot Half-Naked Asian Chick • Release Date: 10/2007 • Players: 1

Heavenly Sword has come a long way. Its developer, Ninja Theory, creator of the slightly controversial *Kung Fu Chaos*, documented the problematic four-year history of *Heavenly Sword* in a series of developer diaries on its website, ninjatheory.com. While it's been plagued with delays, it's a minor miracle that the game's going to come out at all.

Some of that's on the sheer strength of its visuals and concept. *Heavenly Sword* was one of the few games to come out of Sony's 2006 pre-E3 press conference with its hype intact. While other game demos and trailers faltered and died all around it, *Heavenly Sword* showed off several minutes of pure cinematic assbeating, with its heroine handing out horrifyingly painful-looking, acrobatic beatdowns to a stadium full of luckless soldiers. That heroine, Noriko, is on a suicide run against King Botan, whose army wiped out her clan. Her clan was charged with guarding the powerful Heavenly Sword, which slowly and irreversibly drains the life force of any mortal that wields it. Noriko is now wielding it. You may see the problem.

The sword itself can transform into three forms, each with its own stance and techniques. Beyond that, Noriko can use the environment to her advantage, smashing enemies into furniture, kicking tables into oncoming fighters, throwing the corpses of the fallen, and seizing new weapons from the battlefield, such as, well, a rocket launcher. I don't know what it's doing there either, but rocket launchers really justify themselves. After months of its release date constantly sliding backward, *Heavenly Sword* is on track to be released this September. It's a PS3 exclusive, so a lot is riding on it. As it gets closer to release, with any luck, we'll be able to tell you more about it.

Preview by Wanderer

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NIS America announced *Dragoneer's Aria* along with *Grim Grimoire* and *Soul Nomad* a few months back. It's an RPG from the developers of *Blade Dancer*, but this time the RPG vets at Nippon Ichi Software are giving the new kids a hand in development. NIS gave us a little time with an early build, and thus far, *Dragoneer's Aria* isn't what you'd expect given its pedigree at all. The screenshots tell the story: *Dragoneer's Aria* sports unusually realistic and detailed character models for a PSP game, with textures that would be right at home in a PS2 title.

The plot concerns a young man named Valen, who's about to join the elite ranks of the knightly Dragoneers. At the Six Dragon Festival held to mark his induction, a fiendish black dragon appears and wreaks havoc, fighting the six benevolent elemental dragons that protect the world. When the carnage ends, the dragons are missing and it's up to you and the Dragoneers to find them before it's too late. Along the way you acquire the mysterious allies and magic powers that are required when you're on a world-saving quest like this.

The gameplay carries over some of *Blade Dancer*'s style, with similar enemy encounter, item crafting, and save point systems. The battle system has gotten an overhaul, and now emphasizes putting your characters in special "stances" that grant offensive and defensive bonuses, and a materia-like ability customization system. The optional wireless battles with up to three friends are back, allowing players to take items and loot earned in multiplayer back into their singleplayer campaign.

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Dragoneer's Aria™

PUBLISHER: NISA • DEVELOPER: HITMAKER
GENRE: RPG • CATEGORY: OLDSCHOOL TURN-BASED AWESOME
RELEASE DATE: SUMMER 2007 • # OF PLAYERS: 1-4

Blade Dancer was one of the few PSP RPGs that was neither an ancient port nor a flaming train wreck of unplayability, so *Dragoneer's Aria* should at least be decent. Whether or not anyone can care about an original RPG on the ailing PSP hardware right now is the real question.

Preview by Lynxara

Monster Hunter Freedom 2

Oh dear, it's *Monster Hunter Freedom 2*. I wasn't expecting a game to eat my brain today but here it is. If you haven't heard from me in a month, don't bother to send help. It'll be too late.

Monster Hunter Freedom 2 is much like the first *Monster Hunter*, in that players trek through the wilderness looking for giant beasts to slay in order to bring back the gooey internal bits. There are quests to undertake, materials to turn into armor and weapons, and a big world stretching off into the distance that's significantly larger than last year's version.

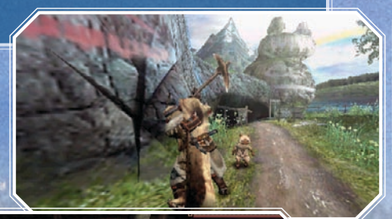
It's a brutal world out there, too. This isn't *Bambi Hunter*: those huge, vicious creatures know how to smack down the cheeky little land-ape that thinks it's all clever because it knows how to use a pointy stick. The meanest monsters drop the best goodies, though, yielding rare parts to throw into the expansive item creation system. Taking down the biggest game without becoming a red smear on the tundra, however, will take lots of practice, and possibly teaming up with friends.

Although there's a large single player campaign, *Monster Hunter* is at its best when a group of four is working together. There's no online, sadly, but local play with a cooperative group is always a good time. *Monster Hunter*'s great multiplayer action has helped make it one of the best-selling PSP games in Japan, and while that has yet to translate to American sales (360 version please!) it's not through lack of quality. *Monster Hunter Freedom 2* offers much more of what made the first games so addictive, giving plenty of reason to keep those PSPs charged this fall.

Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Capcom
Release Date: September 2007

Genre(s): Adventure
Category: Ridiculously Huge Game Hunting
# of Players: 1-4

Preview by James



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Sexual Themes
Use of Drugs

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A few issues ago we reviewed the PSP port of *Disgaea* in our Japan section because there was a very likely chance that the game might not make it across the Pacific. Happily, we can say that after a hop, skip, and a jump from Japan, Guam, and Hawaii the game will be arriving on our shores in the fall. However, there's been no word yet from NIS-America yet whether the limited edition boxed set from Japan that included the soundtrack will make it across as well.

As mentioned in our import review, this port of *Disgaea* is more than just a straight dump. NIS has made several additions to the game. Some of these include slightly improved graphics, an item collection checklist, a BGM selector for Item World dives, and even an all-new scenario with Etna as the main character. However, NIS has taken the unprecedented step of including multiplayer Wi-Fi functionality that was not present in the Japanese version of the game. In this multiplayer mode, players will be allowed to swap items and set conditions for a battle to beat the crap out of each other with surrealistically high numbers.

The level of dedication and care NIS takes in its fan favorite is something few other companies do these days; if you're kicking yourself for missing out on this game's multiple limited print runs, you owe it yourself to keep it on your radar this time. The coming release of *Disgaea* on the PSP just may be the one game you buy this system for.

PUB: NISA • DEV: NIS • GENRE: RPG • CATEGORY: STRATEGY • RELEASE DATE: FALL 2007 • # PLAYERS: 1-2

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Games for Windows LIVE

XBOX 360 LIVE

Whenever NIS America uncorks a new game, a few things are more or less a given. It's going to be somewhat quirky, it's going to have a major twist of some kind, and the power curve will be absolutely ridiculous. *Soul Nomad* qualifies on these counts. The main character has the thankless job of eventually confronting the three golems that nearly destroyed the world long ago. To aid him in this quest, he has his ditzy childhood friend and a sword that contains a "kick-ass" — their words, not mine — evil overlord. That overlord once controlled the golems, and now, will grant the hero the power to destroy the golems in exchange for his soul.

How much of your soul you're willing to give up is the central dynamic of *Soul Nomad*. If you don't want any of the overlord's help, you don't have to take it. If you do, you can give up portions of your soul, up to the point where you're more powerful than the final boss of the game from the moment you start playing... but at the same time, you'll lose control over your own actions. *Soul Nomad* is positioned somewhere between an RTS and a turn-based strategy game, with grid-based combat, a personalized army, and your characters carrying out your tactical assignments in real time. You can also rob and kidnap townspeople, generate random dungeons, and laugh when Walnut from *Phantom Brave* shows up, among other things.

This is a strategy game that Nippon Ichi Software developed, so you *know* we're all over it. The moment we know more, we'll tell you more.

Preview by Wanderer

PUB: NIS AMERICA • DEV: NIPPON ICHI SOFTWARE • GENRE: STRATEGY RPG
CATEGORY: WALNUT MAY CRY • #OF PLAYERS: 1

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L·A·I·R

PUBLISHER: SCE • DEVELOPER: FACTOR 5 • GENRE: FLIGHT
CATEGORY: DRAGONZ!! • RELEASE DATE: 07/2007 • # OF PLAYERS: 1

Lair is a PS3 game that is almost as anticipated as *Resistance* was. Check the scenario; the world has been thoroughly wrecked by natural disasters and constant warfare. You are a warrior; more specifically, a dragon rider. Your dragon can fly (obviously), breathe fire, and attack other dragons.

But, wait; that's not all. You're going to be able to land your dragon for some ground-level fun. Trample, burn, and destroy infantry as you ride on your dragon's back. You'll be able to pick up certain enemies as well. If your dragon is looking a little weak in the knees, eat a few baddies to restore its health. Whoever said red meat was bad for you?

You control *Lair* by tilting and turning the controller. Want to slam into another dragon? Slide the controller. It is definitely interesting but the build we played wasn't quite perfect. Slight variations in angle or direction were taken into account during gameplay, as they should be, but were a little too sensitive.

Lair is a sprawling, beautiful game with a lot of potential. It drops in July, so the developers have plenty of time to tighten up the controls. The grahpics are near-flawless as-is, so that's one less thing to worry about. If you've ever wanted proof of concept for the PS3, check out the humongous landscapes *Lair* brings to your television.

Preview by 4thletter

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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Mild Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol

PlayStation®2

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PLATFORM: XBOX 360

HALO 3

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT | DEVELOPER: BUNGIE | GENRE: FPS
CATEGORY: SWEET | RELEASE DATE: 10/25/2007 | # OF PLAYERS: 1-16

Halo 3 is almost here. By the time you read this, the famous multiplayer public beta test will be long over, with only a few short months left before the game ships to stores. Still, for those of you who didn't make it, the beta revealed much about what kind of game *Halo 3* is going to be.

It's shaping up to be a fast, furiously paced game that eschews recent FPS trends in favor of preserving the original gameplay style of the *Halo* series. There are no predictable new gimmicks like blindfire, bullet time, or huddling behind conveniently placed refrigerators. There is the new Bubble Shield that absorbs bullets while leaving you vulnerable to melee attacks, but that's clearly been in the works for awhile.

Of course, after so much FPS action in the *Call of Duty 2* vein for the 360, readjusting to *Halo* could take some effort. The controls for *Halo 3* are mapped with no respect whatsoever for the basic formula most 360 shooters use. Want to do a melee attack? Don't hit R3; that zooms you in. Hit the A button instead. Don't hit Y to enter a vehicle; just hold down RB like you were picking up a weapon. Once you're past the learning curve, though, *Halo 3*'s refusal to make itself play like everything else already on the market is really refreshing.

Right now the multiplayer is a blast in short bursts, but lacks the depth for sustained play. You can only use three maps and roughly four different game types, and most games never manage more than eight players per session. On the plus side, the new matchmaking interface is fantastic, as are long-needed new features like the ability to mute any individual player's Teamspeak. When the finished game comes our way in September with more maps and features, the multiplayer alone should be enough to keep you playing for months.

Preview by Lyxcara

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PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: Irrational
RELEASE DATE: 8/21/2007
GENRE: FPS
CATEGORY: Undersea Conspiracy
# of Players: 1

On November 5th, 1946, Andrew Ryan founded Rapture, an underwater city where "the great will not be restrained by the small." He built Rapture as the ultimate capitalist dream, where both commerce and science could grow without limits.

Fourteen years later, after surviving a plane crash, you accidentally find your way into Rapture. In the intervening time, Ryan's dream has gone rancid. The entry terminal is heavily damaged and littered with picket signs ("Ryan Doesn't Own Us"), and the only people you see have gone mad. Your only friend in Rapture is a voice over a radio who calls himself Atlas, who's trying to give you the information you need to stay alive, but he's not all that sane himself.

Rapture's scientists, freed from the burden of morality, have created plasmids: injectable genetic cocktails that give the user superhuman powers. Overuse of those powers, however, drives the user homicidally insane. That's exactly what's happened to most of the people, you see. To survive, you must use plasmid powers yourself. The question that no one's asking is whether what you're doing constitutes "overuse."

By Wanderer

All Sides Against The Middle

BioShock is, in a quiet way, a game about choices. None of them are right and, unless the aftermath leaves you dead on the floor, none of them are wrong. No one is a hero, no one is a villain, and no one has the absolute truth.

Every obstacle you encounter has multiple solutions, but once you get past a few introductory scenarios, nothing is highlighted; *BioShock* refuses to hold your hand and show you the path of least resistance. Your environment is your greatest tool, but to use it, you'll need a little imagination. You can hack turrets and security droids, use your newfound genetically-activated powers in several different ways, turn enemies against each other and more, but it's up to you to figure out how best to proceed. The unobservant or ignorant are going to get their faces caved in.

The ultimate expression of *BioShock*'s choice-based gameplay comes from the Big Daddies and Little Sisters, the bizarre duos which stalk through Rapture's hallways. Little Sisters process genetic material from dead humans into a substance called Adam, which can be used to purchase new plasmids. You essentially need Adam to improve your capabilities and survive the game.

To get to the Little Sisters, though, you need to defeat the Big Daddies, which are easily the most dangerous enemies in the game. They're too heavily armored for you to defeat them through the typical shooter tactics. You need to find another way to defeat them, whether it's hacking turrets, turning other enemies against them, luring them into ambushes, or whatever else the environment allows.

Once you've managed to get to the Little Sisters, you have another choice to make. If you kill them, you'll get twice as much Adam, but you've just murdered what looks like a little girl, and infuriated Tanenbaum, one of the surviving scientists. If you let them live, you can cure them using one of Tanenbaum's plasmids and get some Adam in the process, but Atlas insists they're inhuman monsters. What if he's right?

BioShock can be a very complicated game that way, or it can be remarkably simple. It has very few systems that govern its customizability and complexity, but both are still implicit in every action you take in-game. This is easily one of the most fascinating titles I've ever played, in more ways than one.

Bioshock, the Interview

In April of 2007, the press met with Irrational Games in New York City to play *BioShock*'s first level. I managed to get the chance to interview two of the developers.

HGM: One of the things that has struck me since the moment I first saw the game was the retro... I think the word "kitsch" got brought up... of *BioShock*, the fifties and sixties approach. What were some of your influences there?

Nate Wells, technical art director on *BioShock*: I think in some ways, it was being tired of... I mean, even as a video game developer, making the same thing over and over. I think gamers are as tired of the repetition of architecture in playspaces as developers are. We basically went on strike—

HGM: [laughter]

Nate Wells: —and decided that we were going to set a first-person shooter in an environment that it had no business being in, that was just beautiful, and fun to build stuff for, and evocative. We could bring in the music of the era, and the optics of that era, and really have fun with it. It was really self-serving in some ways, but I think it worked out.

HGM: Why the fifties? I heard Andrew Ryan in there talking about the Communists, so obviously you've gotten a lot of mileage out of it, and obviously it's underrepresented [in games], but why the fifties?

Nate Wells: Well, the seminal event in the creation of Rapture is really the detonation of the atomic bomb, and it wasn't just the billionaire industrialist Andrew Ryan who was terrified and thought, "God, how can I escape from this terrifying new world?"

In some ways, it was about the plausibility of that. That was enough of an experience to drive the world's best and brightest away, off to somewhere safe to wait out this terrifying new age.

HGM: Nate mentioned that the setting of *BioShock* is there because you wanted to do something different and break out of the sci-fi mold. What led you in this direction?

Ken Levine, creative director on *BioShock*: I grew up around New York, and I always loved the look of the sixties and these gothic buildings, the Chrysler Building... I love the Rockefeller Center.

The thing about *BioShock* and the philosophy of Andrew Ryan... nothing quite represents that sort of "We're doing these incredible things!" viewpoint as well as the architecture and sculpture of that era. Critically, from a game developer's standpoint, it also looks good in polygons... it all just worked. You look at the game and you understand [the city of Rapture] looks like their ideals. Then the water coming in is the great symbol for the crack in the idea.

HGM: I did get a kick out of the fact that he named his great underwater utopia after the end of the world. Good move, Ryan.

Ken Levine: Well, that's his little joke. This is *his* Rapture, lifting his chosen people off to a special place to wait things out. That's Rapture to him. His people are brought to this place.

HGM: *BioShock* uses the silent, nameless protagonist to represent you. However, I noticed while I was playing the game that [the protagonist] has chains tattooed on both his wrists. Is this something that plays into the game, or is it purely visual?

Ken Levine: That, you'll have to play the game and find out about.

HGM: Oh, so it is a plot point. [pause] [to tape recorder] He's looking at me funny.

Ken Levine: [laughter]

HGM: I noticed that when you die, you respawn in a Vita-Chamber, and it seems like everything you did is left intact, including damage that enemies have taken... why did you make a game that you can effectively die your way through?

Ken Levine: One thing we've done recently, and that's an issue that came up, is this sort of attritional respawning thing. What we've done to deal with that... we have fewer Vita-Chambers in the game.

I'm not a big believer in punishing the gamer over and over, but with things like the Big Daddy, they're so tough... you don't have things like the Big Daddy in regular games. If you die and reload off the Big Daddy, he's like a boss you have to take multiple paths on. You can run away from battles, go and heal up, lure him into an ambush, hack security—

HGM: —bring him into a watery area—

Ken Levine: —and zap him, yeah. That's what the game is all about. Because there are more enemies, the enemies come back, and new enemies come into the space, it's not like you ever really fully clear out a level. With the respawning, the Vita-Chambers are a natural thing to me. The game plays so differently every time that by the time you go to a Vita-Chamber, there could be more enemies and new situations set up. To me, it's really an issue of how many Vita-Chambers there are.

HGM: So it's a little less frustrating, but in a new sort of way.

Ken Levine: Death is always a complicated issue to deal with in games. How do you have it be not too punishing, like the *EverQuest* model, but not trivial? We're trying to find the right place, and it's never going to sound like an exciting feature.

It's a very hardcore game designer problem, but it's one we're dealing with right now, actually, and we went back and forth. Do we charge the Vita-Chambers? Do we do this, or that? You see it happen all the time in games like [*World of Warcraft*]; they're adding more graveyards, they're taking them away...

HGM: Like *Vanguard* nerfing death.

[Note: At the time of this writing, *Vanguard* had recently patched the game to remove its long, *Everquest*-style corpse reclamation runs.]

Ken Levine: Yeah, like *Vanguard*. They had this idea they thought was going to be awesome, and then they found out it wasn't. We tested it, we talked to people...

HGM: I think that phrase defines *Vanguard*, actually. They thought it would be awesome, and then they found out it wasn't.

Ken Levine: That can happen. That's why you've got to test, test, test, test the idea; we never said to people, "Would you like to play a game in an underwater utopia?" but we had people playing through the first level over and over and over again, and we moved things around, we add things, we take them away...

HGM: That's something I was curious about. At the E3 demo I saw last year, the machinery and weaponry had much more of a cobbled-together, slapdash feel. I remember the revolver looked like something that someone had made out of a curtain rod and a couple of typewriter cylinders, but in the demo I just played, everything looks like more period-accurate weaponry. What fueled that change?

Ken Levine: That was me, and if people don't like it, they should blame me.

HGM: [laughter]

Ken Levine: At the end of a day, a shooter player wants cool weapons. They have the same function, but I decided they had to look cool. They didn't look cool enough back then.

When you start modding them, I wanted you to see all the cool s--t you can put on them. I wanted them to look good, because they're weapons. You want your weapons to feel cool, so I made that change. I pushed that change. The brilliant artists actually implemented that change. I did the easy part. I said "Make it look cool!"

[We're informed we're out of time, and I can ask one more question. I proceed to be a dork.]

HGM: I was curious about the storyline. I saw that Rapture was founded in 1946, and everything seems to have gone to hell on or around New Year's Eve of 1959?

Ken Levine: That's about right.

HGM: So they've been under there for thirteen years with relatively little problem, and you're coming into this after some spark point that's made everything go wrong?

Ken Levine: Yeah. The problems are building up... What's great about the storyline is if you choose to get into it... you can really get into the backstory if you want, through all those diaries. You can sit there, you'll put it all together, and you'll see the whole chain of events.

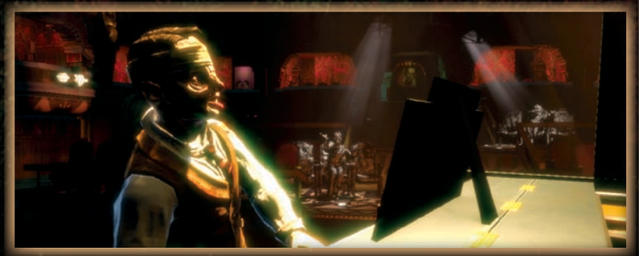
You have these three characters who are sort of the linchpins: Ryan, Atlas, and Tenenbaum. They're all telling you different things about what to believe, and what the world is, and none of them are flat-out villains.

HGM: Oh, come on. Ryan is.

Ken Levine: Y'know, the first thing he says to you as you're coming down is "Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow?" It's a good question, you know? He built this place as a set of ideals, but s--t happens. That's what the game is about. Ideals don't stand up to the light of day.

HGM: He might be a d------d, but his ideals are pretty sound.

Ken Levine: Yeah. He had some decent ideas. He wasn't like, "My goal is to destroy the Earth!" His goal was to create a place where people could benefit from their own work, and what the game's about is what happened to those ideals.



playing b3yond:

story by daniel kayser of gametrailers.com

a deeper look at the current state of the playstation brand

Five years from now, when we look back on 2007, the year could easily prove to be the differentiating factor in who will dominate the current crop of consoles. Even with Nintendo's amazing dominance of the casual market, Microsoft's scientifically-engineered and meticulously executed strategy for the Xbox 360, and what seems like Sony's continual effort to play catch-up dominating this year's headlines so far, the final word on who takes the crown in 2007 remains to be written.

Will the launch of *Halo 3* be enough to stabilize Microsoft's current sales lead over Sony? Will Nintendo ever run out of gas with the cultural phenomenon that is the Wii? And will Sony begin to see a resurgence of its once dominant brand? To answer the last of these questions, we hooked up with Peter Dille, Sony Computer Entertainment America's Senior Vice President of Marketing, to get his thoughts on what every gamer wants to know when it comes to the PlayStation 3, and even some insight into the ongoing strategy behind the PlayStation Portable.

Q: What do you feel has been the single best achievement of the PlayStation 3 as a console thus far?

PD: The PlayStation 3 set a bar so very far and it's a testament to Sony, [Ken Kutaragi] to have the vision to really look out and create a system that is going to drive this market for 10 years. I think it's one thing to say we have a system that is relevant today, and that our competition has systems that are relevant today, but I don't think there is any argument that the PlayStation 3 is the most technologically advanced system of any of the consoles that are out, but again, I think it speaks to the vision of having a 10-year product life cycle which is being proven out with PS2 now again, after we've done it on PlayStation One, then you look at what's going on inside the PlayStation 3 with CELL and Blu-Ray and a lot of people say "Do they need to make such a beast?", "Do they need to do everything they're doing?", but I think all of those benefits are going to come into play and we'll look back and it will have been the smartest thing Sony ever did to put a Blu-Ray drive in the system. And now look at the traction CELL is getting. So, I think that's the single biggest thing, just purely the design of the PlayStation 3 in and of itself.

Q: How have you positioned the PlayStation 3 to enjoy increased sales in the latter half of 2007?

PD: There are a couple of things. Number one is that we continue to teach people about the value of the PlayStation 3. The value of having a Blu-Ray disc drive, of having a hard drive in every box, the value of a free online gaming service like the PlayStation Network, the opportunity to augment their gaming experiences with some of the content you can find on the PlayStation Network, but first and foremost, look at the 15 exclusive titles that PlayStation is coming out with, just ourselves, forget about all the great third party support, we've got a worldwide studio organization that's bigger than Microsoft and Nintendo combined that's making great content for PlayStation 3, games like *Uncharted*, *Ratchet: Future*, *Killzone*, *Little Big Planet*, *SingStar*, I can go on and on, but those 15 titles are real difference makers and I think that they show the real breadth of content, there's really something for every gamer. Our competition has a more limited offering, kind of genre specific, but PlayStation has always been much more inclusive, much more mass market and I think we're going to show that off in our second year within the marketplace while some consoles are still struggling to get their fit on the market for many, many years.

Q: How big of a role do you feel HOME will play in moving consoles over the life of the PlayStation 3?

PD: We're really excited about HOME and what HOME can do. I think HOME really leapfrogs the competition from the point of view of offering a 3D community service that you just can't find anywhere else. When people saw HOME for the first time at GDC, there was a thunderous response and people were just blown away. HOME is going to capture the imaginations of consumers as well as the gaming press that showed up at GDC because it's just very, very cool. The things you can do within HOME, the way you interact with other PS3 gamers by sharing interest, sharing content, [means] it is really revolutionary and from a marketing perspective we're going to make sure we get the word out about what it's all about, show people what it is, and then use that to help drive PlayStation 3 sales.

Q: Regarding HOME, Microsoft's Shane Kim recently stated that he "doubt's Sony's ability to implement it and execute it in a really rich and compelling way." What are your thoughts on this statement?

PD: Weren't these the guys who also said that HDMI wasn't necessary? Are they offering HDMI now? Aren't these the guys who said that Sony wouldn't be able to deliver 1080p games ever during the life cycle of the PlayStation 3? Didn't we deliver those 1080p games at launch? So, ya know, I think those comments are laughable. They should stick to their own business and let us worry about ours because they obviously don't know what they're talking about.

Q: Looking back at the development of the unit and the response from consumers thus far, do you still think Blu-Ray is an absolutely necessary part of the long-term PlayStation 3 strategy?

PD: I think the inclusion of Blu-Ray was a brilliant stroke on Sony's part. People have talked about what [Blu-Ray] has meant for the movie industry, but let's talk about what it means for gamers. Again, going back to launch, within first generation software you had a game like *Resistance* that came in at 16 Gigs, you couldn't even fit it on any other platform. When PS2 came out, people looked at DVD and said, "Wow, are we really going to use all this space?" and within months people were using up all the space. So inevitably, if you give the development community space, they're going to look to fill it up. We saw that with *Resistance* and now we're seeing it with other great content so I think it's a no-brainer. Plus, now we're seeing traction from the Hollywood perspective with consumers voting in [favor of] the Blu-Ray format when you're looking at the Blu-Ray versus HD-DVD sales. So I just think this is a ball rolling downhill, the Blu-Ray format is getting more and more momentum with some analysts talking about how the battle [between the two formats] may be over by Christmas 2007. So people can talk about Blu-Ray in 2006 and wonder what it's value is, but if you go out of here, I think [the inclusion of Blu-Ray] is going to be one of the most important things for the PlayStation 3, not just from an economic perspective, but also from a gaming perspective and what it offers gaming as a whole.

Q: There's been a lot of debate over the true success of the PS3 thus far. How does Sony itself gauge the response to the console and what areas need to be improved in order to increase sales/public perception?

PD: We think the PlayStation 3 is off to a great start. The sales of the PlayStation 3 over the first few months outpaced the PlayStation 2, they outpaced the Xbox 360, and so far we're very happy with where we are and we're also very confident in where we're going. So again, it comes back to the titles we have that will drive the platform, but I think we always have to be sure we're vigilant about telling the story and making sure people understand that there is a lot of value in that $600 system. It's a price point that people aren't familiar with and they need to understand what they're getting. They're getting a great gaming machine, but they're also getting an entertainment device that's going to drive entertainment for the next 10 years. So if you want to do an apples to apples comparison, and ask what a 360 would cost if you tried to put a hard drive in, tried to approximate what Blu-Ray could do, but you can't, so you put an HD-DVD drive in, then you're on par or maybe even costing more than a PlayStation 3. And let's not forget about the fact that we're not charging a subscription to get online, rather, we offer it for free. So from a gamer's perspective, I think Sony is doing a great service for the gaming community by offering a really great device that we're going to stand by for 10 years, you can look at games like *God of War 2* coming out for the PlayStation 2 in year 7 while our competition stopped making software for its own platform [Xbox] after five years.

Q: Moving on to the PlayStation Portable, exactly how much do you expect killer apps like *GoW: CoO* to move the needle in terms of PSP unit sales in 2007?

PD: It's undoubtedly one of the big drivers for PSP this year. It's a franchise that has a huge following and obviously it's a game that gamers love and if you don't have a PSP yet, when *God of War* comes out, it will be something that raises the needle. It's not the only game, but it is going to be a big part of the overall PSP message.

Q: Now that you've had time to evaluate the situation, do you think that utilizing a proprietary disc format [UMD] has helped or hindered the overall success of the unit?

PD: UMD is an essential part of the PSP. There has been a lot of talk and speculation on UMD from a Hollywood perspective, but from a gaming perspective, PSP has sold 25 million units worldwide with about 8 million units being sold here in North America, and it's a great gaming device that has the added functionality of watching other content. I think what we didn't do a good enough job with talking to Hollywood and educating them on the type of consumer PlayStation Portable attracts so they can tailor their content offerings to that demographic. It doesn't make a lot of sense to have content offerings that don't consider what the 18-34 year old guy would care about and that's something we didn't do well enough at launch, but we've corrected that and so now I think you'll see a better strategy coming out of Hollywood in regards to UMD.

PLAY B3YOND™

playstation 4?

no, not a new playstation, but four ways sony can begin to see increased sales of its current playstation 3.

Walking into just about any major retail outlet over the past few months, gamers have probably noticed an odd sight. While Nintendo's Wii is proving tremendously difficult to even find at retail, and Microsoft is enjoying consistent sales of its various Xbox 360 SKUs, Sony's PlayStation 3 sits on the shelf, just waiting to be brought home by skeptical and/or cash-strapped consumers. So, what do the guys at Sony need to do in order to see PS3 sales gain momentum heading into 2008? Here are a few key areas that can help them catch up:

1. price adjustment

Let's face it — the single biggest factor in the underwhelming sales of the PlayStation 3 thus far has got to be the price. Simply put, consumers are not used to spending $600 on a gaming console, even if it does contain all the bells and whistles of the PlayStation 3. But considering that Sony has invested itself in several bleeding edge technologies, specifically the still unproven and costly Blu-Ray disc drive format, it's easy to see why the price point for the console is so high.

Sure, all the talking heads at Sony will tell you that it's a part of the long-term strategy to keep the

PlayStation 3 relevant over the next 10 years, and it just might do that, but Sony is facing immense pressure right now to meet internal expectations and keep pace with both Microsoft and Nintendo.

Considering all of these reasons, the greatest thing Sony can do to boost sales of its latest console is slash the price on the PlayStation 3. In the minds of consumers, an all-inclusive PS3 priced at $499 or even $549 would demand attention. Of course, this is easier said than done. Sony's gaming division alone last year recorded losses exceeding $1.9 Billion (as opposed to a profit of $72.5 million the year before), and although Sony expected to lose money on the launch of the PlayStation 3 for at least a few years, the inevitable price cut might be the only way to move units now and benefit from the licensing fees associated with having a larger install base.

While it doesn't seem likely that this would actually happen any time soon due to the aforementioned high-end tech inside the PS3, biting the bullet to move more units and keep its head above water in the next gen console war might prove to be the best decision Sony can make in 2007.

2. online focus

Ask any Xbox 360 fanboy why they love their console of choice so much and you're guaranteed to hear the word "online" in their response. What started as a pioneering effort by Microsoft to deliver a solid online gaming community in the form of Xbox Live back in 2002 has blossomed into the most robust, feature-heavy and streamlined online gaming experience in the world. Sony's inability to place emphasis on this sector of its overall strategy (PlayStation 2 included) has left the online portion of PlayStation 3 experience feeling rather stale in comparison.

So, what can Sony do? Well. HOME is a start, but judging by many a cynic's comments (Microsoft's Peter Moore not the least of them), it seems as though the 3D avatar-based online community will have its fair share of struggles getting off the ground. While the current PlayStation Network is in essence a fully functional gaming community, and a free one at that, it lacks the depth, simple interface, and attention to key aspects such as online identity, communication functionality, and prioritization of social networking that have made Live such a huge success. After all, over six million gamers the world over have proven that the simplistic, clean, and reliable experience of Xbox Live is worth subscribing to, so perhaps Sony can simply enhance the PlayStation Network to match Live feature for feature and gain a new audience while at it.

3. exclusives

When looking for a competitive advantage in the multi-billion dollar gaming industry, Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo know they need to look no further than one key aspect: securing blockbuster exclusive titles. Interestingly enough, this has become one of the most highly competitive arenas to track over the years as an enormous, high-stakes game has played out with third party publishers such as Rock Star, Capcom, Ubisoft, and EA right before our eyes.

With developers of major franchises seeing green and signing on to produce their titles exclusively for one console or another, it's obvious that the hardware manufacturers must pursue, at all cost, the exclusive rights to key titles in order to gain a distinct advantage in the costly gaming arena. That's why it will be so important for Kaz Hirai (who replaced Ken Kutaragi as Sony's COO this June) to help cultivate third-party exclusives the likes of which could only be dreamed of by Sony fanboys across the world.

Additionally, these exclusives, along with the first suggestion on this list, will help deliver the PlayStation 3 out of a state of expendability and into "must have" status for a huge percentage of the audience who currently feels life without a PS3 isn't so bad.

4. new marketing strategy

I know the PlayStation 3 is cutting edge. I know the PlayStation 3 is the ultimate convergence of digital art and entertainment. I know the PlayStation 3 isn't just a gaming device, but a multimedia powerhouse waiting to dominate my living room for the next 5-10 years. I know it's sleek, sexy, and apparently something I need to own to be considered socially elite. Unfortunately for Sony, I don't know any of this because of its marketing campaign for the PlayStation 3.

All I really know from that is that little girl's dolls kind of freak me out…

Honestly, I believe that one of the main reasons people aren't jumping off their couch to purchase a PlayStation 3 is because they feel either intimidated by the marketing campaign or they're just oblivious to exactly what the PlayStation 3 can do. Sony execs have gone on record talking about how much they need to "tell the story" of the PlayStation 3. That it's a digital hub for our digital lives. Soccer moms and SOCOM veterans alike should have SOMETHING to love about the PlayStation 3. Well, let us know about it.

While cool, slightly entertaining and distinctly odd, the current marketing approach for the PlayStation 3 is failing miserably to deliver "the story" of what the PlayStation 3 means to consumers in 2007. Change this, and perhaps more people will understand and appreciate the value, scope, and capability of the PlayStation 3 in 2007 and beyond.

60GB
PLAY BEYOND™

on the horizon:
ratchet and clank future: tools of destruction

Insomniac's PlayStation 3 launch title, *Resistance: Fall of Man*, is widely regarded as the best game on the system thus far. By showcasing what the PlayStation 3 is capable of technically, and implementing the strategic yet fun gameplay the company has become famous for with its prior titles, *Resistance* helped set a standard for what PS3 owners should expect from the console.

Now, as the first developer to offer up a second title for the PlayStation 3, Insomniac goes back to its roots and delivers the first next-gen version of the popular *Ratchet and Clank* franchise. Titled *Ratchet and Clank Future: Tools of Destruction*, gamers will be treated to an enhanced version of the quirky, innovative and extremely fun gaming experience that has become synonymous with the series.

The story has our gadget-building hero Ratchet and his cyber-sidekick Clank reemerging after some much needed R&R when the former of the dynamic duo begins to question his origin as a Lombax, the velvety, yellow, bipedal, cat-like race from which he descended. As you might imagine, someone else is equally interested in Ratchet's origins: a tyrant of an ancient race of foul insect-like monsters called Cragmites whose name is Emperor Percival Tachyon. Of course, trouble ensues when Tachyon stirs up an age-old grudge and is bent on wiping the last-known Lombax off the universe. Ratchet and Clank are forced to escape their home galaxy when Tachyon's forces invade, but not before stealing Tachyon's imperial warship and setting out on a quest to unravel the mystery of the Lombaxes, and of course have some major destructive fun.

In the demo given during Sony's recent Gamer's Day in San Diego, it's evident that *Rachet & Clank Future*, like *Resistance* before it, will truly showcase what the PlayStation 3 is capable of. The gang at Insomniac has overhauled its proprietary PS3 engine technology to create the most visceral Ratchet & Clank universe yet, made evident by the overflowing of exotic creatures, flying vehicles, and tons of motion in the surrounding landscapes.

And when *Tools of Destruction* has you traveling the galaxy experiencing the humorous and adventurous environments such as a majestic cloud city and a space-age amusement park, you'll notice how there is a distinct sense of life throughout everything in the game.

This is all brought together by increased draw distances, enhanced lighting and shadowing, and more fluid and exaggerated animations than previously possible in the series. (Thanks, CELL Processor!)

One example of this was given during the demonstration when it was noted that Ratchet had previously possessed a total of 112 moveable joints throughout this body in the PS2 versions of the franchise. That number has now been bumped up significantly on the PS3, with 90 moveable joints in Ratchet's face alone. It is the little details like these that are letting us see how next-gen hardware is taking gamers, and our favorite games, to a whole new level of detail.

Of course, the *Ratchet & Clank* series wouldn't be what it is without the entertaining and extremely effective weapons the series has become known for. Once again, Insomniac is going all in by including new weapons such as the Plasma Beast and the Tornado Launcher. In what will probably end up being one of the most widely regarded successes of the game, Insomniac lets you control certain weapons by utilizing the SIXAXIS motion sensor while simultaneously controlling Ratchet with the regular controls. From what we've seen, it looks like this will provide a unique, dynamic gaming experience that will undoubtedly be copied by future titles and will certainly make the chaotic combat of the *Ratchet* series that much more entertaining this time around.

Another area of the game that is being enhanced is found in the inclusion of "on-demand" combat devices such as the Groovitron, which basically allows Ratchet to disperse a portable disco ball that causes enemies within a certain radius to stop, drop, and boogie to classic 70's disco hits. It sounds absolutely absurd, but trust me, once you see the Groovitron and the other "on-demand" weapons in action, you'll realize how everything Insomniac has done in *Tools of Destruction* blends together to create an experience that no *Ratchet & Clank* fan can afford to miss out on.

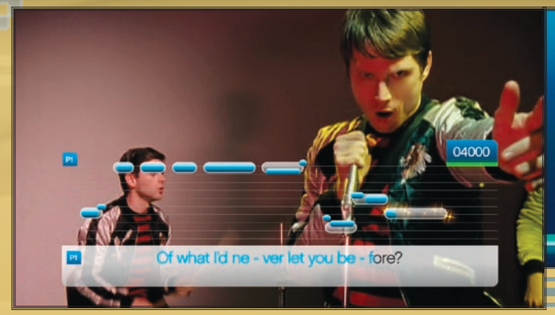
Slated for release exclusively on the PlayStation 3 this Fall, *Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction* looks to deliver one heck of an entertaining action-adventure experience.

uncharted: drake's fortune

Naughty Dog's new project doesn't have Daxter in it, which means they're automatically off to a better start than most of their *other* projects. *Uncharted* is the story of Nathan Drake, a pulp-style hero on the trail of the legendary city of El Dorado.

The good news is that he seems to have found it. The reason no one's beaten him to it is that it's on an uncharted island in the middle of the Pacific. The bad news is that Drake and his companions promptly become stranded on the island with a cadre of hostile mercenaries.

Uncharted was first revealed at Sony's pre-E3 press conference, where its name wasn't mentioned. In action, it looks a bit like *Resident Evil 4*, with the controls switching to an over-the-shoulder view when Drake pulls a pistol. Naughty Dog is working to make *Uncharted* one of the smoothest and most intuitive action games yet. Drake can switch smoothly between gun combat and hand-to-hand brawling on the fly, allowing you to take center stage in a series of fast-paced action setpieces.



singstar

Unreleased outside of the UK, the first *SingStar* on the PS2 was praised for its use of the EyeToy to place the player in the game and for its well-made microphone controller. Now it's set to make its U.S. debut on the PS3, and it will come loaded with new features to keep the improved silver mic in your hands and make sure its extensive roster of tunes are stuck in your head.

The in-game SingStore will allow you to download music and bring the playlist to over 300 songs, including the entire back catalog from the PS2 version. Songs can be saved to either the system's hard drive or a memory stick, and further customization will be offered in the form of menu skins and the ability to use the EyeToy to once again put yourself in the game.

You'll even be able to upload audio and video EyeToy recordings of your best, worst, or most hilarious performances to the game's My SingStar online community, and listen to (or view) them on the go by transferring them to your PSP's memory stick. My SingStar will also allow you to upload photos of your performances and get feetback on your audio and video postings. The comedy potential of that one feature is endless.

SingStar for the PS3 is slated for a fourth quarter release, and unfortunately, no licensed track listing is available right now. One featuring leading artists from around the world in audio and video form has been promised, so the in-game playlist should at least meet the expectations of players. Thanks to its many features, it looks like *SingStar* will be the standard-bearer for PS3 singing games for the foreseeable future. Hopefully it turns out to be worthy of that distinction, and doesn't fall short of its potential.

socom: confrontation

The immersive tactical combat found in the *SOCOM* series on the PlayStation 2 has made it one of the most successful franchises in the industry over the past several years. Well, Slant Six Games and Sony are locked and loaded on the first next-gen installment of the popular franchise and we just got some new intel to share with the troops.

Titled *SOCOM: Confrontation*, this online-only romp supports up to 32 players at one time, which includes regional combatants or teams from around the world. Sony is referring to Confrontation as a "global-scale experience" and it's backing it up with the opportunity to duke it out with players from the United States, Europe, and Asia.

Players will have access to seven different gameplay modes on each of the game's maps with fully featured load out, encumbrance, and unique uniforms helping to add some customization to the battlefield. There will also be support for Clan Ladders, Tournaments, and Leader Boards making the already crack-like addition of *SOCOM* that much more enticing.

So far, the game simply looks like a high-def version of previous *SOCOM* titles, but a closer look reveals new advanced physics, ballistics, impact and destruction modeling and richer environmental detail that help take this franchise into the next generation with style. Also adding something new to the series will be inclusion of SIXAXIS functionality, which so far only promises to "offer greater control," so we're not exactly sure how it will be implemented. While the visuals look nice, and taking advantage of PS3-specific hardware is great, this game is all about providing console gamers with the ultimate online warfare experience. With the inclusion of advanced player matching, advanced voice communication, facial and physical customization, and support for up to 32 players from around the globe, *Confrontation* should deliver everything it takes to please any fan of tactical shooters...except an immersive single player story that is.

The game ships this fall with five North African-themed maps, but Sony is promising updated content, including new destructive playgrounds, to be available within the PlayStation Store shortly thereafter.

When Sony and Media Molecule announced *Little Big Planet* back at GDC in March, the gaming world stood up and took notice. Although the game comes off as little more than a tech demo for the impressive capabilities of the PlayStation 3, it's quite possibly one of the coolest and cutest tech demos the gaming world has ever seen.

Utilizing the PlayStation Network as the backbone of a community-based experience, *Little Big Planet* invites players to create, share, and play with their self-made levels. It's simplistic, really, but when you factor in the impressive advanced physics models, nearly limitless customization, and a well thought-out process for sharing and participating in user-generated content, *Little Big Planet* could prove to be the system seller that finally helps Sony expand its user base for the PlayStation 3.

Appealing to hardcore and casual gamers is no easy task, but it looks like the team behind *Little Big Planet* has implemented a good system for breaking players in to this rather untraditional style of game play. Because the game starts with players simply learning about their characters' powers and physically interacting with the environment, you'll seem to always be learning something new about the game world and its characters from the moment you pick up the controller. Having multiple players is where it's at though, since all of the places to explore, creative resources to collect and puzzles to solve will require some serious brain power and most often a large amount of collaborative teamwork.

With a focus on creativity, community and pure fun, *Little Big Planet* looks like it will be a huge addition to the PlayStation 3 roster when it is released early next year.

little big planet

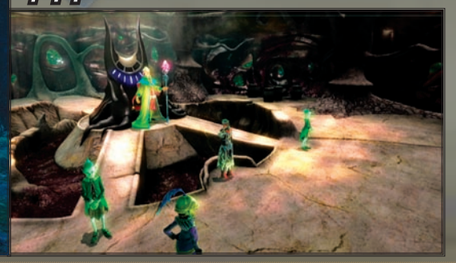
Folklore has been through quite an odd little journey in its lifespan. It was originally pitched as part of the *Monster Kingdom* series, then changed titles to *Unknown Realms* and the rather unwieldy *Folks Soul: The Lost Folklore*. Now, it's simply *Folklore*.

Keats is a practical man stuck writing for a third-rate Occult Magazine, when one day he receives a call for help from a woman in a remote village, only to find her murdered upon her arrival. There, he becomes involved with Ellen, a young woman with a mysterious past who appears to have some connection to the victim. Though the two of them go their separate ways to investigate the murder, they both soon find themselves drawn into the Netherworld in order to investigate the true story behind it.

Folklore possesses the kind of strange, dream-like plot and non-linear gameplay innovations you might expect coming from Yoshiki Okamoto, creator of the *Shin Megami Tensei* series. It's a fantasy-adventure, with creatures based off of real-life legend: in this case, the mythology of folklore and fairy tales. Playing as Keats or Ellen, players will experience that character's individual view of events, and have to employ different strategies in combat based on that character's own skillset.

As a PS3 exclusive, *Folklore* makes use of Sony hardware, giving you seven beautifully-rendered realms of the Netherworld to explore, and makes full use of the SIXAXIS by requiring different sorts of motions to properly draw out a spirit's soul after you defeat it. Absorbing a spirit's soul gives you control over some of their powers, which you can then use. PSP connectivity will also be employed in an as-yet unannounced capacity.

folklore



on the horizon: the hottest upcoming games for sony's psp

jeanne d'arc

Level-5 is following up *Rogue Galaxy* with, of all things, a take on the story of Joan of Arc. *Jeanne d'Arc* is a turn-based strategy game that retells the story of the Hundred Years' War as a struggle to once again seal away long-dormant demon kings before they can destroy the world.

You're placed in the role of Jeanne, who is commanded by the voices in her head to go forth and do battle. You'll fight against both historical and actual monsters, such as ogres, dragons, and hopefully the notorious serial killer Gilles de Rais. (Read about him sometime. That guy was *crazy*.)

Jeanne can recruit up to fourteen other characters to join her battalion, seven of which can be used in a given battle, and each of which can use a specific weapon type and can thus use a variety of special skills. You can also combine characters' skills for powerful team-up attacks, and customize them with more than a hundred and fifty abilities.

Each battle in *Jeanne d'Arc* must be completed within a set number of turns, which should add a certain degree of challenge to the proceedings.

parappa the rapper psp

Though rhythm games like *DDR* are popular nowadays, they were a risky novelty back in the earliest days of the PlayStation era, when people were still struggling to break free of the classic RPG and platforming molds. One of the first games to turn against the tide and help usher in the new era of gaming was Masaya Matsuura's *PaRappa the Rapper*, which is set for port to the PSP in July.

PaRappa the Rapper follows the eponymous PaRappa, an anthropomorphic puppy with a penchant for beatboxing. His dream is to become a famous rapper and win the heart of his unrequited love, an anthropomorphic flower named Sunny. To accomplish his goals, he'll study under the tutilage of such characters as an onion-headed karate master, a lazy junk-selling frog, and a cool roach MC. The character designs were done by illustrious graphic artist Rodney Greenblat, so before you ask, this isn't weird. It's *art*.

As PaRappa studies under his teachers, you must first mimic their raps in the now time-worn process of pressing appropriate buttons in the correct timing sequences. If you acheive the highest level of success here (U rappin' COOL), you must then improvise your own songs based on that teacher's "template." Though there are only six levels to play in the main game, the new port makes use of the PSP's wireless functionality to increase replay value. 4-player head-to-head play offers multiplayer potential, and five new levels will be offered for download from the network.

Will this once revolutionary title maintain its freshness now that the genre it helped create has become ubiquitous? Only time will tell.

socom: tactical strike

In the heat of battle, it's good to be flexible. When it comes to waging war on the countless Tom Clancy games and other tactical shooters on the market, Sony's *SOCOM* series hasn't shied away from mixing up the battle plan, especially on the PSP.

Case in point, *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Tactical Strike*, the follow-up to the rather impressive *SOCOM: Fireteam Bravo* on the PSP, isn't so much of a follow-up as it is a completely new game. Designed from the ground up for the PSP and in conjunction with the U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command, *SOCOM: Tactical Strike* aims to offer the most realistic portrayal of special operations' team tactics and strategy seen to date. How, you ask? By bringing a new gameplay format to the *SOCOM* franchise that allows players to assume the role of an entire team of elite Special Forces, evaluate their situation from the SEAL's perspective, plan their approach, and execute their strategy using the innate expertise of their four-man SEAL team. Think original *Full Spectrum Warrior*, but with more of an emphasis on action and the ability to issue commands to individual soldiers, fireteam elements, or their entire fireteam.

In *Tactical Strike*, players will be given the option to play as international Special Forces from the UK, Australia, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, South Korea and the Netherlands, and since developer Slant Six seems to be all about the details, each of these Special Forces units are supported with their individual native languages.

The game is set to feature nine non-linear missions based in South America, where the US ambassador has been abducted by radical insurgent forces. Your team drops in and you'll guide them through urban, industrial, and jungle environments on your quest to deliver Panama from utter pandemonium. Pretty generic narrative here, but at least it sets the stage for some pretty cool game play environments.

Taking the game online, you'll be able to square off against up to four players though the PSP's ad-hoc or infrastructure mode. Each player will control a team of four soldiers as they aim to kill in an effort to build up their skills, weapons and equipment.

With a new gameplay approach, needed enhancements to AI, and pretty meaty experiences both online and off, *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Tactical Strike* will look to ration off a significant amount of fun for PSP owners when it ships this October.

god of war: chains of olympus

Previously only hinted at in *GoW II*'s manual, the official announcement of *God of War: Chains of Olympus* shocked skeptics who doubted that the series could be done on a portable. The first screens and video released for *Chains of Olympus* revealed that the fast pace and epic scale of the first two games would be retained.

Development duties have been handed over to Ready at Dawn, the developers of the much-beloved *Daxter*, so any worries about this new entry not living up to the first two should be assuaged. Everything shown thus far for *Chains of Olympus* makes it clear that it will carry on the tradition of having Kratos slaughter anything in his path in as grizzly a manner as possible.

While the gameplay, story, and to a lesser extent, music shown off thus far indicate that God of War will be done justice on the PSP, there is some concern that the PSP's control setup won't be able to work for some vital gameplay elements, like enemy targeting with the right stick. It seems like RaD will at least have to re-map that function, which could affect the gameplay a great deal.

Story details are in short supply, but it is known that it will take place during the ten years that Kratos spent serving the gods, and that the story is planned to be something that can both stand alone and act as a bridge between *God of War*, *GoW II*, and the hopeful but unannounced, *GoW III*.

Right now, it looks like most of what's made the series great is definitely going to be carried over, so as long as nothing horrible happens between now and its release, this game will be well worth the time and money of everyone who has enjoyed the series thus far. *Chains of Olympus* is shaping up to be another killer app for the PSP, and the biggest one of '07 by far.

syphon filter: logan's shadow

The *Syphon Filter* series is often derided (mostly by idiots) as *Metal Gear Solid* lite, but the original trilogy was one of the most satisfying action series on the PSOne.

After the deservedly forgotten *Omega Strain* and the virtually uncontrollable *Dark Mirror*, *Logan's Shadow* hopefully marks a return to greatness for the series.

Logan's Shadow features a story written by Greg Rucka, one of the authors of DC's weekly hit *52*. ("Does this mean there'll be lesbian detectives?" - Lynxara) We can only hope. Gabe Logan is called back into the field to investigate (and by that we mean "shoot") a dangerous new band of terrorists. Along the way, he uncovers information that may lead him to discover Lian Xing, his partner, has become a double agent.

Syphon Filter's combat mechanics have been updated for the next generation with Havok physics, new moves, and 360-degree underwater action. Gabe has acquired the ability to take human shields, and can fire blind to make enemies dive for hard cover. His already-enormous arsenal of firearms has been enhanced with more grenades, including smoke bombs and flashbangs. (There is as yet no word as to whether he's still *extremely flammable*, as he was in the PSOne games.)

IS IT HIP TO BE SQUARE-ENIX?

A JUNKET JOURNAL AT THE SQUARE-ENIX PARTY BY: KOUAIDOU

Day 1: 到着 (Arrival)

The first mistake of any business trip is letting your friends convince you that you need to go souvenir shopping while you're there. The second mistake is agreeing to take your friend's massive hardtop suitcase to better suit that purpose.

Though I've been to Tokyo before and know its train system rather well, I somehow managed to forget that the Yamanote line, the main train line that runs through Tokyo, doesn't provide escalators.

My first destination was Shinjuku, where I thankfully checked in without a hitch, then took the train to Harajuku for some dinner and pre-event shopping. It was there that I learned the third mistake of any business trip: when breaking in new shoes, do it before the trip. With blistered feet and sagging spirit, I turned in early to prepare for the next day's press conference.

Day 2: 会見 (Press Conference)

The next day, I crammed into a small, hot room with about fifty other journalists, where we got the standard sequence of speakers and game trailers announcing big upcoming releases. Though headsets were available to interpret for the international press, I was caught in the advanced Japanese learner's dilemma: I knew enough Japanese that they wouldn't spare me one of their limited supply of headsets, but not enough to understand everything that was said. Fortunately, the material spoke for itself.

Yamagishi Yoshinori was first up, announcing remakes of the first two *Star Ocean* games (with all-new hand-drawn animations) and the production of *Star Ocean 4*. Amidst the technical difficulties of a stumbling Chocobo cosplayer and some presumably unrehearsed lighting shenanigans, Shinji Hashimoto and Yuki Yokuyama announced the release of a new *Chocobo's Mysterious Dungeon*, with a trailer far more badass than any game about chocobos really deserves. Akitoshi Kawazu and Toshyuki Itahana announced two new games in the *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles* franchise, as well as *Final Fantasy XII: International Zodiac Job System*.

The highlight of the press conference, though, was not any of these franchise teasers, but an original RPG for the PS3 and 360 called *The Last Remnant*. Though the trailer showed dazzling field sequences and cinematics that played with the boundaries of the uncanny valley, it was clear that those powerful next-gen system processors weren't just pushing pretty graphics, but gameplay unlike anything earlier systems have been capable of. The battle demo showed your character leading an army regiment, focusing on your own turn-based combat while having to pay heed to the greater picture. Reinforcements, sneak attacks, and unit morale all seemed to come into play. If this game lives up to its promise, it may be the best case yet for those bloated next-gen price tags.

That night, S-E's publicity personnel treated all who showed to a traditional eight-course Japanese dinner at Yume no Shizuku. The service wasn't the best, but who can say no to soy milk hot pot and all-you-can-eat fried octopus? You may think I'm being sarcastic, but seriously, I'm *not*.

Day 3: 休憩 (Rest)

This was to be a day off for the journalists, since we would have to make the move from Tokyo to Chiba for the expo the next day. Apparently, Tecmo had decided to take advantage of having all the international journalists in town and was holding its own press event in Shibuya. Unfortunately, it didn't reckon with the sheer amount of travel Square-Enix was putting us through, nor did it reckon with the awesomely impractical size of my suitcase. Despite promises of live-action ninja shows and the return of *Tecmo Super Bowl*, I was forced to take it easy and remain in my hotel room for the night, eating convenience store onigiri, and watching the sun set spectacularly over Tokyo Bay.

Day 4: 見物 (Looking Around)

My first day at the Expo was marked with stress. I knew that it was taking place in Makuhari Messe, which was connected directly to my hotel about a 5 minute walk away. I thought it would be easy enough to find the place: after all, how hard could it be to miss an event with thousands of attendees?

As I quickly learned, the fourth mistake of any business trip is not learning the layout of the place you're supposed to be. What I had failed to realize is that the Messe was actually made up of two buildings quite far from each other, and that a sports convention was taking place in the closer one. After running around for about an hour in panicked confusion, I eventually managed to find a S-E employee directing people to the proper location. I rushed through check-in and arrived with only ten minutes to spare before my first interview of the day.

The exhibition floor itself, while not exactly E3-caliber, had a Disneyworld atmosphere, with people packed into lines waiting to play demos of upcoming releases. The time to play some games reached up to a hundred forty minutes for the more popular titles. There were wireless DS hotspots, and a number of breathtaking art displays, including one for the fifth anniversary of *Final Fantasy XI* and another for the twentieth anniversary of the *Final Fantasy* series itself. Both featured extensive timelines of series' evolution, as well as stunning full-sized prints of original Yoshitaka Amano paintings.

At 4:00, I was able to enter the giant, imposing trailer dome, which advertised, first and foremost, the latest trailers for all three entries in the upcoming *FFXIII* triptych, *Fabula Nova Crystallis*. The trailers were high on bang and low on content, and there's nothing I could tell you about them that you couldn't learn from downloading last month's issue and reading Shoegazer's preview. Instead, I'll concentrate on some other games that caught my interest.

Final Fantasy IV DS

FFIV is getting the same treatment that *FFIII* got for the DS, including in-game 3D graphics and CGI cutscenes complete with voice acting. I have to admit, this trailer was the most exciting part of the expo for me. *IV* has long time been my favorite *FF*, and hearing the lines of the opening sequence actually spoken just highlights what a work of art its script is. When Rosa breathed the words "my beloved Cecil," you could hear the gooey, nostalgic sighs escaping from all the girls in the audience.

It's a Wonderful World

From the makers of *Kingdom Hearts*, this DS game follows Neku, a Japanese youth who wakes up one day in Shibuya with the ability to read people's thoughts, and an imperative that he must survive there for seven days. Gameplay videos suggest a strange sort of beat-'em-up, where you control Neku on the touchscreen with the stylus, and a second character on the top screen with the D-Pad. The trailer (which, like modern movie trailers, appears designed to spoil the game's entire plot) highlights Neku's character growth from a lone wolf to someone who can rely on other people. If it makes it to US shores, this stylishly original game will definitely be worth a look.

Final Fantasy: Crisis Core

After a ton of sequels and sidestories, we're finally getting to explore the backstory of the actual main characters of *FFVII*, and I have to admit, this one got my fangirl senses tingling. *Crisis Core* follows Zack, Cloud, Sephiroth, and the other members of SOLDIER as they undergo the first Mako experiments and interact with a very young, very sweet-looking Aerith. Assuming the game's action-based gameplay actually carries its weight, this might be the first real incentive for a lot of people (myself included) to buy a PSP.

Final Fantasy Tactics A2

The follow-up to *FFTA*, *FFTA2* for the DS concerns a student from our world who gets dragged into Ivalice, but prefers to see his strange circumstances as an adventure instead of a burden. In an interview, through the incredibly broken English of Kawazu's interpreter, we managed to glean that the judging system from *FFTA* would be present, but altered, and that *A2* would leave behind a lot of the classic epic plot of most *Final Fantasy* titles to focus on a light-hearted story that was just about having fun and enjoying the moment.

Dear HardCore Gamer,

I, the exquisite Etoile Rosenqueen have reserved this space to bring your attention to the many superior products I am bringing to the RosenQueen Company, just in time for summer!

Firstly, I present to you our wonderfully delightful Kimono Covers for the DS Lite. These highly-crafted, beautiful covers are the only covers elegant enough to grace my DS Lite. And when combined with the wildly adorable Bling-a-ling Jewelry Seals, you can express your inner Miss Marl Kingdom, and compete against your friends!

We'll also give you a new choice in Prinny Plushies. You know, she's not in my league, but Big Sis is as cute as Prinnies come. And, you can never go wrong with a loyal, classic Prinny around!

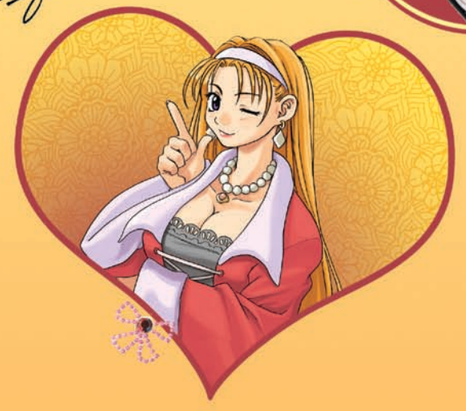
For those of you who have been anxiously waiting for an RTS-style game to grace your PS2s, we proudly present GrimGrimoire™. You can follow the story of Lillet Blan as she attends a famous magic academy. She's not as interesting as me, but then again, I'm rich!

And finally, we present to you the Disc Case 8P for the PSP. With its 8 UMD capacity, it's perfect for keeping your collection with you on the go!

With all the excitement coming this summer, stock up on all of your gaming and accessory needs! I wish you all a happy and healthy summer, and try to get out a little.

Your Beautiful, Bikini-clad, Summer Dreamgirl,

E. Rosf



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Itadaki Street
Mario's getting himself into some pretty crazy crossovers lately. First, he's competing in the Olympics with the *Sonic* crew, now he's travelling around a board game with the cast of *Dragon Quest*. At this rate, can the existence of a real *Mushroom Kingdom Hearts* be far behind? We can only pray.

Day 5: 遊戯 (Playing Games)
In order to make up for the day before, I woke up at 7:00 AM in order to make the early press entry in the hope of actually getting my hands on some games. The convention hall was a completely different place an hour before the floodgates broke, and I managed to get some time in with a number of choice titles.

Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings
Fran and Balthier have given up their mantles as world-saving heroes to return to their life as sky pirates, and they've taken Vaan and Penelo with them. I was excited about this game, given my adoration of the *FFXII* cast, but the limited demo available for play seemed to indicate a disappointingly simple real-time strategy game based around the touch interface. The cutscenes were certainly breathtaking, and I don't think anyone can complain about more Fran and Balthier, but as far as the system goes, only ime will tell if this one lives up to its premise.

Dragon Quest Swords
Dragon Quest Swords feels a bit like a traditional lightgun game, moving you along a track as enemies pop out at you from all sides. You use the Wiimote as a sword to slay them. I was initially skeptical of the remote's precision when I watched this game from a distance, as a number of players seemed to have difficulty targetting the proper area of the screen. Once I got my hands on the controller for myself, though, my opinion did a complete 180. The sword's controls are actually quite clean, and it's easy to get yourself lost in the moment once you start swinging successfully. This one will be a must-buy for kids and kids at heart.

Final Fantasy Chronicles: Ring of Fate and The Crystal Bearers
This pair of entries in the *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles* franchise have a very different set of aesthetics. *Ring of Fate* for the DS takes us to a traditional fantasy setting with pair of young fraternal twins, while *Crystal Bearers* for the Wii seems targetted to a more mature audience, with a more futuristic aesthetic and older protagonist. Though *Crystal Bearers* wasn't yet available for play (they've promised us a demo in time for the Tokyo Game Show), *Ring of Fates* had a presence in single-player and four-player multi-player modes, both of which offered fun, simple hack-and-slash action. In an interview, Kawazu declared that there would be no connectivity between the portable and console game this time, due to negative fan reaction to this gimmick for the original GameCube game. We have, however, been promised **Extreme Moogle Painting**, for those people interested in such things.

FiFXII International: Zodiac Job System
Here is a game that seems designed to make everyone on this side of the Pacific tear their hair out in frustration. Not only does it fix the number one flaw in *Final Fantasy XII*'s gameplay, it's added a number of other enhancements that make the game feel infinitely more complete. There are more Gambits and treasure chest options. There's a speed-up button. Guest characters are now fully controllable. Most importantly, the licensing system has been completely rehauled: instead of each character having identical license boards, there are twelve individual boards corresponding to various jobs that you can assign your character. Sounds great, eh? Here's where the hair-pulling comes in: even though International version makes use of the English dub, we won't be getting it in America. Stay tuned to HGM for a full-on import review when the game gets released in August!

Day 6: 出発 (Departure)
After the shocking success of Day 5 and no gigantic blunders made, I was naturally due for some earth-shattering trouble on the day of my departure. The sixth mistake of any business trip, you see, is leaving your passport in your hotel room on your way to the airport on your last day in a foreign country. On the plus side, though I got to practice my frantic, panicked, over-the-phone Japanese, which is the most important form of a language you can know.

All in all, a very educational business trip.

Find more pictures and other stuff on Kou's blog at www.hgmblogs.com!

52 The Red Star
54 Tomb Raider Anniversary
56 Odin Sphere
58 Grim Grimoire
59 Monster Madness: Battle For Suburbia
60 Cube
61 Brooktown High: Senior Year
62 Hot Shots Tennis
63 Practical Intelligence Quotient 2
64 Ninja Gaiden Sigma
65 Hoshigami Remix

HGM REVIEW GAUGE
5 = Really Good
4 = Good
3 = Average
2 = Bad
1 = Really Bad

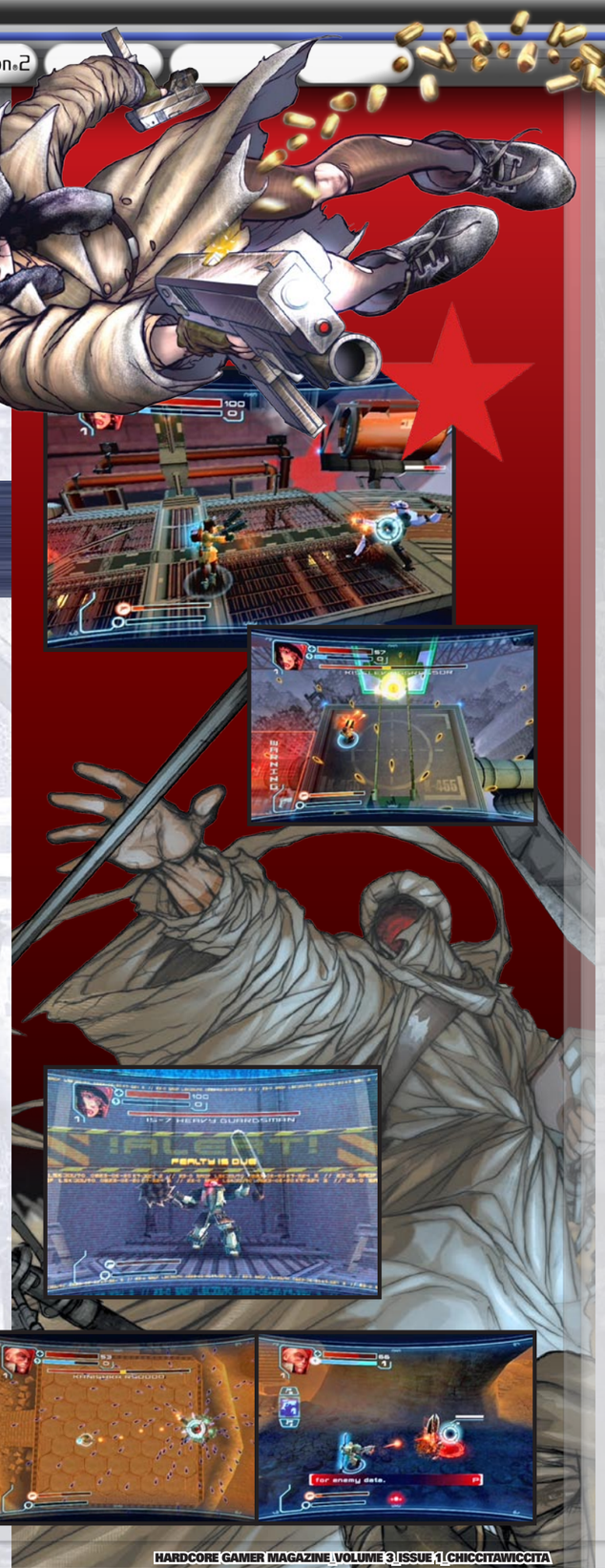
THE RED STAR

Publisher : XS Games
Developer : Acclaim Studios Austin
Release Date : 4/24/2007
Rating : Teen (Animated Violence, Strong Language)
Genre(s) : Brawler/Shooter
Category : Genre Mashup
# of players : 1-2

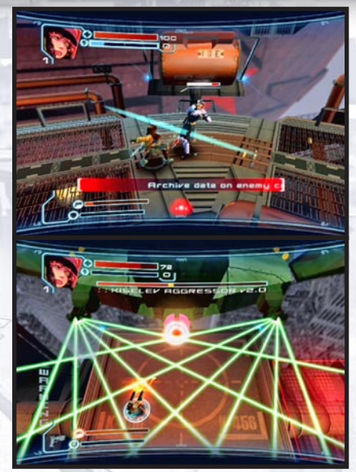
Acclaim was always an odd publisher. On the one hand they'd put out the most godawful junk, but then turn around and publish games like *RC de Go*, *Darius Gaiden*, or *Power Shovel*. It was like a pressure valve that prevented them from exploding from the craptacular force of a thousand *BMX XXX*s. Acclaim's redemption game for 2004 was going to be *The Red Star*, an old-school brawler that also incorporated bullet-hell shooter elements. The demo came out for both Xbox and PS2, and then Acclaim got eaten alive by bankruptcy mere weeks before *The Red Star* was due to hit stands. The situation, to put it bluntly, sucked.

Assuming you aren't one of the developers stiffed on pay, however, the injustice of *The Red Star*'s death has finally been reversed. It's three years late and doesn't look quite as spiffy now as it did in '04, but the gameplay rocks hard, there's a ton of replay value, and the low price of $20 practically demands that you purchase it if you've ever enjoyed chaining a combo. It also doesn't hurt that *The Red Star* is the best classic-style brawler I've ever seen.

The action is just ridiculously fun, no matter which of the three characters you choose. Light and fast Makita is great for hit and run tactics, dashing in and throwing a flurry of hits before swiping the enemy into the air and smashing them down again. Kyuzo, on the other hand, is the tank, strong and brutal. He's loaded with grab attacks that can clear a room fast, but has the usual slow speed for his type. Then there's Maya, the sorcerer, who's unlocked once the game is beaten the first time. Her strong magic is great for ranged attacks, either throwing out a force bolt or pulling back the baddies for some air juggling, and when used in conjunction with her fast chained melee attacks makes her ridiculously powerful. Each controls differently enough that it's worth playing the game three times to see what they can do, and trying to transplant the combo patterns of one into another will just end in pain.



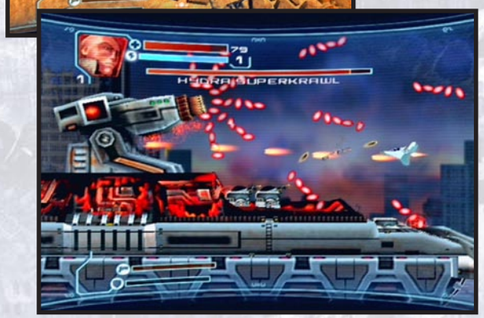
They do have some features in common, though. A limited shield makes each character completely immune to melee attacks for a short period of time, but bullets chew through it pretty quick. Each character also has three guns to cycle through, even though the starting gun's concentrated firepower tends to be the most useful. Two meters keep track of your gun and shield strength, and while they replenish pretty quickly, it can be nervewracking waiting to use them again.



All that power isn't much good without swarms of enemies to use it on, though, and *The Red Star* happily tosses them out by the truckload. While one by himself doesn't usually pose much threat, in a large group they can do scary and horrible things to your health bar. All it takes is a pair of the guys in red and their fast double-blade strike, a couple of gunners or grenadiers off to the side, and maybe a shield guy for good measure to cut you down to size. New enemies are introduced almost constantly, even on the final level, and their attack patterns vary enough that the addition of only one unfamiliar unit can change the required tactics for an otherwise-standard encounter.

While the melee attacks are great for handling the hordes of normal enemies, the guns really start pulling their weight in the numerous boss encounters. These are where the shooter elements come in, with complex fields of fire making life difficult. Criss-crossing bullet patterns, webs of lasers, or thick swarms of firepower emanate from trains, tanks, planes, turrets, and anything else that can have a gun bolted to it. The lock-on function points your return fire in the right direction, but paying attention to the gun's overheat bar while watching out for the occasional enemy soldier keeps things from becoming a "hold down button and dodge" affair.

There's even more, of course. The end-of-level bonuses are put towards stat increases, an arena mode opens up once the game is completed the first time, beating the arenas with an A rank opens up cheats and an extra-hard difficulty, and there's even co-op multiplayer. The fast, responsive controls make every encounter a blast to slice, pound, crush, and shoot through, and every hit I took felt like my fault for not playing better. *The Red Star* is an amazing game; it's fast, fun, and loaded with variety. That it sat unpublished for three years is unfortunate, but missing it now that it's here would be a crime.



Rating : 5 of 5

The Second Opinion!

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

Man, Acclaim Studios Austin sure had a big old boner for Treasure. Incredibly, though, *The Red Star* manages to outclass a good majority of Treasure's library, and is thus far the best game of 2007. If you don't buy this, you're an idiot.

What On Earth Is This All About?

The Red Star is based on the comic of the same name, originally from Image but now self-published by Christian Gossett's Archangel Studios. It tells the story of a mythical modern-day Soviet Russia, the URRS, and what happens when they suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of the ancient protector of Al'istaan. The sorceress Maya lost her husband when the immortal Kal Dathra wiped out over 240,000 troops in a single day, but Marcus's soul is saved from being fodder for the traitor Imbohl by the mysterious Red Woman. After the initial four-issue setup, the series deals with military issues in the weakened URRS and Maya's discovery that her dead husband is only mostly-dead.

The Red Star is also about some truly stunning artwork. The cold, utilitarian machines of the URRS are brought to life using computer models that are perfectly incorporated into the Gossett's fine-line style. The coloring by Snakebite does an amazing job with light and shadows, perfectly justifying the story's slow pace due to its many two page panoramas. The Red Star is a treat to both read and see, and tracking down the two graphic novel collections is highly recommended.

★★★★★

FINAL SCORE : 5 of 5

Review by Racewing

I have a confession to make. Gather around, because I'll only say this once; it's something I'm very sensitive about.

Up until a few days ago... I was a *Tomb Raider* virgin.

It's true! I had never known the wonders of Lara Croft. Oh, I'd hear about her in hushed tones amongst my male colleagues in my high school computer lab. Apparently, she wore short-shorts, wielded a pair of guns, and could fit into *any* passage. Sometimes I'd even guiltily sneak a peek of her (gasp!) raiding tombs in all of her hundred-polygon glory as a friend manipulated her model on a nearby computer. For some reason, though, I held off, declining to play the game or its sequels, which I would often hear reports of declining quality with each new release.

Up until a few days ago, I wasn't sure why I never took the *Tomb Raider* plunge like all my friends did. Now I know. Clearly, I had been saving myself... for this. Is it everything I ever dreamed of? Just about.

Having worked wonders with *Tomb Raider: Legend*, which rebooted the then-convoluted franchise while fixing the gameplay and themes, Crystal Dynamics's second outing with Lara is a heavy remix/re-imagining of the original 1996 classic. The results are about as good you would expect. The *Legend* engine, along with Lara's new abilities and a complete face-lift for the levels and puzzles, results in a game that lives up to — and dare I say, surpasses — the standard set by the original *Tomb Raider* all of those years ago.

There's just so much that this game gets right. You've got Lara's aura of cool — the twin guns (along with other assorted weaponry), superbly-animated acrobatics and well-done voice-acting establish it quite handily. There's the feeling of mystery and suspense in spelunking through ancient ruins in search of artifacts, and the feeling of complete control you have over Lara as she runs, climbs, jumps, and shimmies everywhere she can. There's the sense of accomplishment brought about by solving puzzles that are tough, but not *too* tough, provided you look absolutely *everywhere*. In addition, you're forever aware that, as cool as she is, Lara is human, and thus fragile in the face of bears, dinosaurs, and heights. Mortality is her greatest enemy, and her only weapons against it are her wits, strength and nimbleness. She has a variety of moves for avoiding death and getting out of harm's way, but they're realistic and full of risk.

All of these things allow whoever plays *Anniversary* to see why Lara Croft is one of videogaming's icons, even in this late era of electronic entertainment. The *Legend* engine also does its part, bringing some very impressive graphics to the aged PS2 in the form of large, detailed environments, and animation that brings Lara to life on the screen.

LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER ANNIVERSARY

PUBLISHER: EIDOS INTERACTIVE • DEVELOPER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS
RELEASE DATE: 5/22/2007 • GENRE: ACTION/ADVENTURE
CATEGORY: CALL IT A COMEBACK • # OF PLAYERS: 1

Some enemy character models fare worse than others, though.

Mind you, there are a few hiccups here and there which keep this game from perfection. The camera sometimes has issues with not always wanting to point where you want it to point, but since this is a game involving more methodical adventuring than fast-paced action, it's easy to take your time and get your bearings. Of course, when you're involved in a shootout, that same camera goes absolutely *bonkers*.

In fact, the whole combat engine could have used a few extra tweaks before release. Along with the aforementioned bonkers camera, the Adrenaline techniques (see sidebar) are cryptic when it comes to executing one properly. The moves and motions that initiate these techniques are slow and imprecise, even though the rewards are still worth attempting one. Forget about trying to land one when there's more than one enemy in the area, however. The interactive "button-sequence" cutscenes, on the other hand, get a thumbs-up from me.

In the end, though, it's a testament to the game's quality that even in the face of the imperfect camera and combat, the wonderful adventuring aspects manage to make up for whatever other shortcomings this game may possess. Having lots of great exploration mixed with a lesser amount of mediocre combat didn't stop *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* from achieving greatness. This is no different.

If you've fallen off of the Lara train after being burned by one too many *Tomb Raider* sequels, this (and reportedly *Legend*) should be enough to bring you back into the fold. If you're entirely new to the series (like me, though I'll admit we're a rare breed), this is the perfect title to start with — especially since now you won't have to deal with graphics from ten years ago.

Here's to you, Lara. You've just earned a new convert. I enjoyed myself; let's do this again sometime.

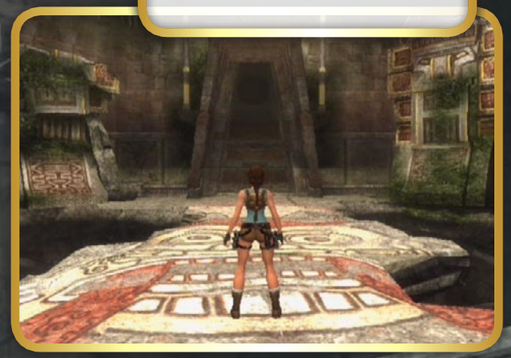
Score: 4 of 5

Tomb Raider: Anniversary may be based on the original late-90s classic, but it's not a 1:1 retread in the slightest. Anniversary presents brand new challenges, and thus, Lara herself has evolved to meet them. Get to know her new abilities, and you'll walk off with the Scion in no time.

Grappling Hook Lara can use her grappling hook to hang on at specific points. From there she can swing or run along walls where applicable. Unlike many games that utilize this aspect, the speed of your swing is controlled entirely by the left analog stick. Lara can go from stillness to full-swing with the right back-and-forth timing.

Perching Lara can use very small platforms as footholds by jumping onto them. While she naturally won't be able to walk on said platforms afterwards, she can balance pon them long enough to make another jump.

Adrenaline This is the biggie, and what elevates Lara from a firing fool to a graceful killer. Pump enough bullets into an enemy at a high enough rate and from a certain range, and a marker will appear over them. That's your cue to move in and use your Adrenaline techniques. Time will slow temporarily, and twin reticules will move over your enemy. When they converge and flash red, fire your gun for a one-hit kill. It's especially good against bulky animals, like those pesky bears that take about two full pistol clips to defeat and do tons of damage while they're alive. It's also best used during one-on-one fights. Nothing's worse than having an enemy rush you from the side, screwing up your Adrenaline attempt.



2nd Opinion

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

Wow! So *this* is what the original *Tomb Raider* would've been like if it wasn't so crappy! Those guys were really on to something!

FINAL SCORE : 4.25 of 5

PLATFORM: PlayStation 2

Odin Sphere

Review by Sardius

Publisher : Atlus
Developer : Vanillaware
Release Date : 5/22/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : RPG Brawler
Category : Inside A Book
# of players : 1

To like an Atlus game is a challenge. Atlus seemingly prides itself in publishing games that I want to like very badly, but are often flawed in critical ways that make each a crushing disappointment. Witness the sad tales of could-have-beens like *Metal Saga*, *Steambot Chronicles*, and now *Odin Sphere*, all of which have a world of positives in their favor, but are bogged down by frustrating gameplay that ends up sucking out a lot of potential fun.

I especially wanted to like *Odin Sphere*, if just because it's so damned beautiful. Large sprites boast impressive amounts of detail. Backgrounds are flush with color, yet never seem garish. Characters share a unique, joint-based animation style that creates fluid movement throughout. *Odin Sphere* is all kinds of gorgeous, even despite its inconsistent and sometimes laughable character design.

Odin Sphere's gameplay seemed even more promising. Don't be fooled by its RPG-like trappings: *Odin Sphere* is a brawler through and through. Battles take place within a series of side-scrolling, interconnected stages, all of which are filled with enemies to pummel. Effective beatdowns are awarded with items, which range from edibles to alchemic potions to seeds that you can plant during battle, which then grow to fruition as enemies are killed.

Odin Sphere had been content to remain a stylish, unsophisticated brawler, it might not have turned out so badly. On-the-fly item management and farming sound fun in concept, but in reality, trying to mix ingredients and eat food in the middle of battle often results in your character getting the crap kicked out of her. Imagine if Haggar and Cody tried to have a cookout in the middle of the slums in *Final Fight* and you'll have some idea of what *Odin Sphere* is like.

Even once you learn how to effectively manage your items, however, combat is still a repetitive pain in the ass. More often than not, you're restricted to using the same four-hit combo over and over on a series of identical enemies against a backdrop that rarely changes. Battles are also where the game's detailed graphics become its undoing, as huge sprites fight for screen real estate in what often becomes a muddled and confusing mess. There's a few techniques you can use to mix things up and even the odds, but for the most part, combat feels oddly braindead and yet overwhelming at the same time.

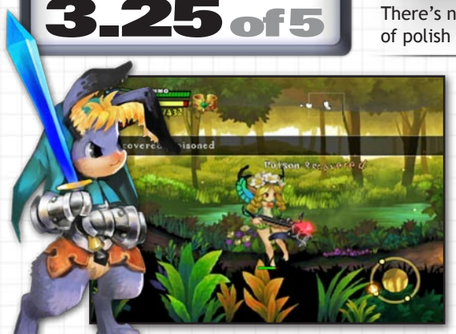
For all of *Odin Sphere*'s innovations, few manage to have a meaningful impact upon gameplay, and the experience fails to gel into a cohesive whole as a result. It's not all bad; rare moments of gameplay clarity provide short bursts of fun, and the localization is right up there with Atlus's best. With a dumb-as-rocks story that takes itself entirely too seriously and a needlessly complex combat system, however, *Odin Sphere* falls far short of expectations.

Rating : 3 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3.25 of 5

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

There's no way *Odin Sphere* is a finished product, it plays too much like a demo. Another six months of polish easily could've elevated this into a stellar title.



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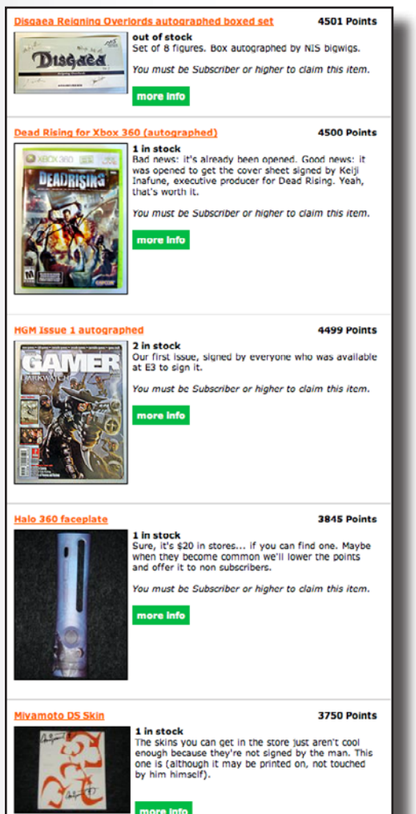

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PLATFORM PlayStation 2

Grim Grimoire

Review by Lynxara

Publisher : NIS America
Developer : Vanillaware + Nippon Ichi
Release Date : 6/26/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+

Genre(s) : RTS
Category : Lillet Blan and the Philosopher's Stone
# of players : 1

***Grim Grimoire* is a game with two faces, and one is very beautiful indeed. Vanillaware seems to have handled the bulk of the development in its co-production with Nippon Ichi, as the game's aesthetic features the same pitch-perfect 2D visual presentation also seen in this month's *Odin Sphere*.**

Grim Grimoire's premise is a simple, thorough ripoff of *Harry Potter*, hosed down with the cutesy anime fanservice and lesbian subtext that now appears to be required by law in Japanese games. Lillet Blan comes to magic school to improve her skills, but unfortunately shows up five days before *someone* resurrects the Archmage Calvaros. At the end of the fifth day, everyone in the school (including Lillet) is horribly murdered. Lillet subsequently wakes up from what is apparently a dream, and seems to find herself repeating her first five days over again. (It's kind of like *Groundhog Day*, but with less Bill Murray and more devil worship.) *Grim Grimoire* is essentially the story of Lillet's attempts to prevent the complete disaster that awaits the school at the end of each cycle's fifth day. Her efforts are funny and often bittersweet, and allow the plot to reveal itself and its characters in surprising, engaging ways.

During the cut-scenes that tell the story, the emphasis is on large, detailed character art that moves a bit like flash animation, complete with gestures and lipflap. While not as impressive as *Odin Sphere*'s large sprites, it's still a major step up from the cheap still art that Nippon Ichi and other small-budget Japanese developers traditionally use. Characters in *Grim Grimoire* never lack the right expression for a given moment in the story, and aren't frozen into incongruous positions. The English voice acting is far above NIS's usual standards, full of lively performances inspired by the voice acting style of American animation moreso than anime dubbing. *Grim Grimoire* is probably NIS's best overall best localization to date, with a script that embraces the melodramatic nature of the plot and gives the actors plenty of nuances to layer into their performances.

Behind *Grim Grimoire*'s beautiful face lurks a second, uglier one: the terribly flawed gameplay. *Grim Grimoire* is a true RTS, if a 2D one, easily comparable to *Worms* or even *Lemmings*. Like most attempts at console RTS games, *Grim Grimoire* ends up badly crippled by its own interface before it can even try to present players with interesting battles. You can't give units very complex orders, or give them efficiently to a large (fifty-unit) army. You can't even give orders to more than one unit type at once, and forget about trying to set waypoints or set up precise group attack strategies. Goals in *Grim Grimoire*'s battles are kept very simple to compensate, and the result is a strategy game where strategizing is strictly optional.

Grim Grimoire is an aesthetic masterpiece, and a good reminder of the storytelling potential inherent in video games. Even at the price of its deadly dull gameplay, you really want to know what happens next. A truly great game, of course, wouldn't let the gameplay suffer in the name of aesthetic fluff, so at the end of the day, *Grim Grimoire* can't be called great, or even very good. It's a really interesting misfire, though, and the vast majority of video games never even make it that far.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

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

I really dig *Grim Grimoire*'s simplicity. The interface has its shortcomings, sure, but there's an SNES-era gameplay vibe going on here that I like a lot.

PLATFORM XBOX 360

Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia

Review by Shoegazer

Publisher : South Peak
Developer : Artificial Studios/Immersion Games
Release Date : 5/15/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : Action
Category : ZOMBIES!
# of players : 1-4

You know you've been gaming for a long time when up-and-coming, young development teams are creating games influenced by the gems from your past. Such is the case with *Monster Madness*, which unabashedly showcases the developer's love for the 1993 classic, *Zombies Ate My Neighbors*.

Monster Madness is full of goofy one-liners, occasionally witty dialogue, pop-culture references and a healthy dose of product placement. As you can probably tell by the art style, this game takes you about as far from survival horror as you can get. The story, which is unveiled through slick comic book-style panels, begins innocently enough as Zack's attempt to woo fellow classmate, Carrie, is continually interrupted by the arrival of other students ringing his doorbell. Just when Zack is ready to snap from all the interruptions, the doorbell rings again, only this time, it's a vicious horde of the undead. The fact that they rang the doorbell first shows you how much more polite the zombies are here than the ones of Raccoon City.

The gameplay is similar to games like *Gauntlet*, *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*, and *Champions of Norrath*. Though it is a tried-and-true gameplay design, it carries with it the same downfalls as other titles in the genre. The biggest offender, of course, is repetition.

Essentially, *Monster Madness* is a hack 'n' slasher at its core, but doesn't retain all of the usual RPG-influenced attributes such as leveling up. You'll collect item drops from fallen enemies, as well as weapon parts scattered throughout the levels, which can all be traded later on in the game to create new weapons and items for even greater fire power.

Where *Monster Madness* truly shines is in the implementation of compelling multiplayer game modes. In addition to being able to play with four players online through the story mode cooperatively, there are also many player-versus-player skirmishes to be had as well, which do wonders for the game's replay value. Trust me when I say that you need to seek out and use the UFO before your opponents do! There are some great vehicles to be had in the game, but none more useful than that one.

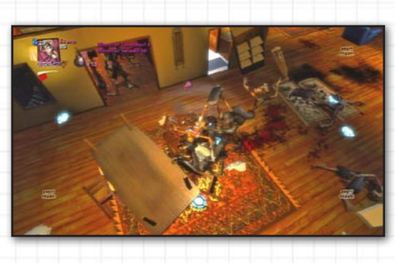
As charming as *Monster Madness* is, however, there is one fatal flaw that keeps it from being mentioned in the same breath as say, *Gauntlet*: It carries absolutely no value whatsoever as a single-player experience, and that's unfortunate. In essence, it feels like you're only getting half of a game. This would've been a great game for $39.99, but is very hard to recommend at $60. Pick this one up only if you need a new multiplayer game in your collection. Otherwise, it's best to leave the battle for suburbia to the online community.

Rating : 2.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

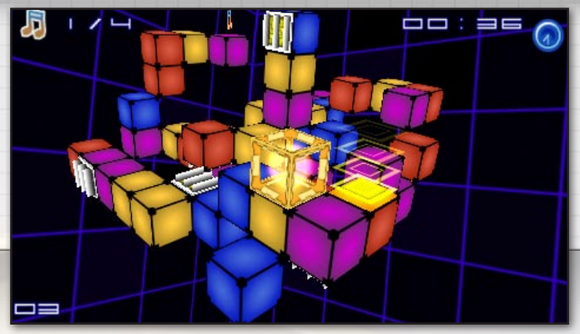
2nd opinion by Lynxara • **Alternate Rating :** 3.5 of 5

Shoe's being way too hard on this one. So what if the singleplayer is dull? The 360 is all about multiplayer, and *Monster Madness* succeeds at being a lot of fun with a good group.



CUBE

Review by James



Publisher : D3 Publisher
Developer : Metia Interactive
Release Date : 4/24/2007
Rating : Everyone

Genre(s) : Maze Puzzle
Category : 3D Brain Twist
# of players : 1-2

3D is a tricky thing. We live our lives in it every single day and yet we still have trouble getting decent 3D camera action in a game. If half the cleverness shown in *Cube*'s level design was put towards solving the camera issue, we'd never have to worry about it again.

Cube is an appropriately named game consisting of lots and lots of, well, cubes. Your cube rolls along a maze made of cubes, so one move of the cube always sends it one unit down the path. There are several keys on the maze as well as an exit and a clock that's slowly counting down. Getting all the keys and clearing the exit in time gets a gold rank, but it's still possible to gather most of the keys at your own pace and not worry about perfection.

It seems simple enough, even with the usual array of obstacles getting in the way, until you take the 3D design into account. The maze isn't a traditional network of walled paths, but rather a 3D construct floating in space, with no gravity or sense of up, down, left, or right. Rolling over the edge or onto a wall causes the entire level to swing around, turning the new surface into the floor. Keeping track of where the keys and paths are while the world twists around can be an interesting exercise in spatial relationships.

The levels are cleverly designed, too, but this is where the camera issues start bogging the game down. Because everything is made of cubes, all angles are 90 degrees. This causes more than a few deaths by camera, as obstacles over the level's current edge turn from things to be carefully avoided into functionally invisible death traps. Rotating the camera isn't hard, but it's impossible to move in a straight line while adjusting the view at the same time, and forcing you to stop dead to deal with camera issues while seconds fall off the clock just isn't good game design. To *Cube*'s credit, the player's view of his cube is never obstructed by walls or other obstacles, but being able to see the thing that will kill you is pretty important.

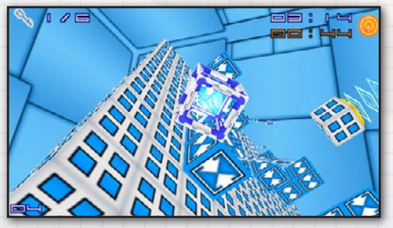
Other than that one little game-killing issue, *Cube* is a clever and almost fun puzzler. True, the graphics are a bit bland, and a few different enemies outside the endless spiky balls and quicksand tiles would be nice, but the challenge of sorting out *Cube*'s towering, sprawling 3D paths through the sky can be pretty satisfying. There are one hundred thirty-five regular levels plus an extra ten bonus mazes, and even a level editor for those who just can't get enough, so there's no shortage of content. All the clever levels in the world won't do much good, though, after the dozenth aggravating death by hidden trap makes you toss the game aside.

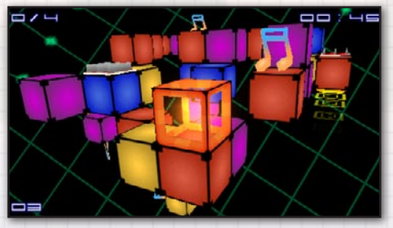
Rating : 3 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

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

Cube's inept camera and sluggish interface mean the game is best enjoyed in small doses, but it's still something puzzle fans and great thinkers won't want to miss.





Brooktown HIGH

Review by Racewing

Publisher : Konami
Developer : Backbone Entertainment
Release Date : 5/22/2007
Rating : Teen (Sexual Themes, Simulated Gambling, Strong Language)

Genre(s) : Social Simulation
Category : Not Another Teen Datesim
# of players : 1

On the surface, *Brooktown High* seems to be the answer for anyone who didn't like their high school years. I know it sounds impossible, but here we are. It's a school filled with sixteen kids, a couple of teachers, and an alien hall monitor with a stun gun. A single class lasts an entire week, and it's your job, as a guy or girl, to socially make the most of your senior year via extracurriculars, chats, dates, and events while also keeping your grades up and applying to college.

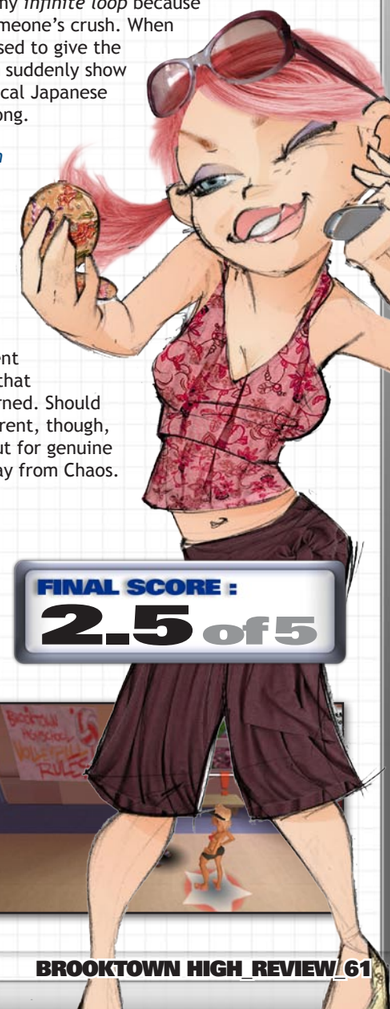
The fun comes in the fact that the student body is bizarre, in a good way. Everyone's an overblown parody of basic teen archetypes. Beeman's a guy who wears a "pwnzor" shirt and who's got the entire school's gossip network electronically wrapped around his finger. Jody's an extreme-sports girl who philosophizes about the time slow effect that takes place when you take a header off your bike. I, personally, have managed to get into a steady dating relationship with Catherine, the computer-art geek who tells *everyone* to call her "Chaos." She has a fantasy-geek best friend that she's just a *little* too close to, to the point of the entire school knowing it. (I *love* it when games do my work for me.) They're all written well, and well-voiced to boot. There's boatloads of humor and charm in this game.

Unfortunately, a few hours of play is all it takes to realize that while *Brooktown High* aims for the stars, it never reaches the clouds. The students ride their quirks and character traits to a fault, leading to "right-or-wrong" choices that have serious consequences. Is your "creative vision" better than keeping your best friend since forever? Chaos would tell you that it is. Trying to make "safe" or "general" conversation in this game will get you nowhere fast, as you have to guess at the "allowed" traits for each character, and play them up to the fullest. However, this tactic can also backfire, or sometimes have no effect at all. Even real teenagers aren't this random.

For playing Personality Musical Chairs, your reward is some amazingly repetitive conversations at times. I've gotten this game to repeat personal lines of dialogue, students' lines of dialogue, entire phone calls, and entire *dates*. I've even managed to put the game in a friendship/enemy *infinite loop* because I was mild friends with someone's crush. When characters who are supposed to give the illusion of human emotion suddenly show the non-traits of your typical Japanese RPG NPC, something's wrong.

When it works, *Brooktown High* is a fresh, if not all that new, gaming experience, and a social interaction game that's actually got tons of wit and character behind it is an idea that easily warrants a sequel. Unfortunately, in its present state, it doesn't work all that often, but hey, lesson learned. Should you find this cheap or for rent, though, it's still worth checking out for genuine amusement. Just stay away from Chaos. She's *my* steady.

Rating: 3 of 5



FINAL SCORE : 2.5 of 5

2nd opinion by honestgamer • **Alternate Rating :** 2 of 5

It's easy to get behind the game's concept, but not its trial-and-error gameplay, tedious repetition, frequent load times and unattractive character models. Yes, that's shallow, but so is *Brooktown High*.

PlayStation.2

HOT SHOTS TENNIS

Review by Honestgamer

Publisher : Sony
Developer : Klap Hanz
Release Date : 7/17/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+

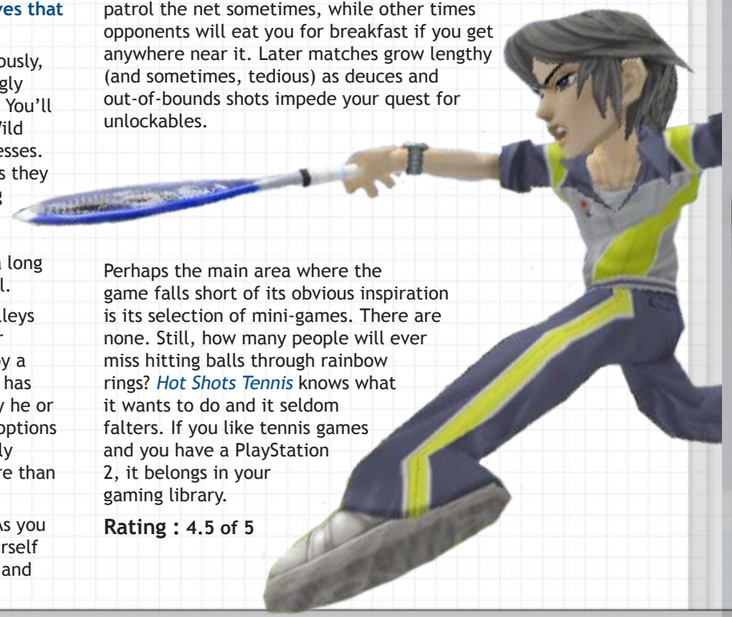
Genre(s) : Sports
Category : Tennis
# of players : 1-4

***Hot Shots Tennis* obviously resulted from someone looking at Nintendo's sports library and saying, "Hey, we can expand from golf to tennis, too!" Some companies might attempt that and fail miserably, but Klap Hanz was clearly up to the challenge. Though it doesn't revolutionize the genre, *Hot Shots Tennis* is one of the most enjoyable tennis games around and proves that fresh ideas aren't a requirement for great games.**

The game works so well because the developer took it seriously, right down to visuals and sound. Each tennis player is lovingly rendered and each distinct tennis court has its own charm. You'll witness rushing waterfalls, polished wood floors, a train, Wild West buildings and more. The sound department also impresses. Characters brag mercilessly and make appropriate noises as they dash around the court. The ball really sounds like it's being batted about by tennis racquets. Even the soundtrack's infectious beats impress. A lot of that may seem optional and perhaps unimportant on an older console, but it goes a long way toward making the *Hot Shots Tennis* experience special.

Similar care was also taken to provide a deep system of volleys and backhand shots. The analog stick moves your character and also determines where the ball will head once struck by a racquet. At least, it usually does. The more your character has to work to connect with the bouncing target, the less likely he or she is to line up that shot you had in mind. There also are options for lobs and low shots, all of which mean that you can really strategize on the fly and turn the game into something more than a series of back-and-forth strikes.

The artificial intelligence on display is also quite devious. As you advance through the different tournaments, you'll find yourself pressed harder as you work to unlock new arenas, umpires and players. Each character has his or her unique play style. You must learn how each opponent functions if you want to succeed. A single strategy won't last you the whole game. You have to patrol the net sometimes, while other times opponents will eat you for breakfast if you get anywhere near it. Later matches grow lengthy (and sometimes, tedious) as deuces and out-of-bounds shots impede your quest for unlockables.



Perhaps the main area where the game falls short of its obvious inspiration is its selection of mini-games. There are none. Still, how many people will ever miss hitting balls through rainbow rings? *Hot Shots Tennis* knows what it wants to do and it seldom falters. If you like tennis games and you have a PlayStation 2, it belongs in your gaming library.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

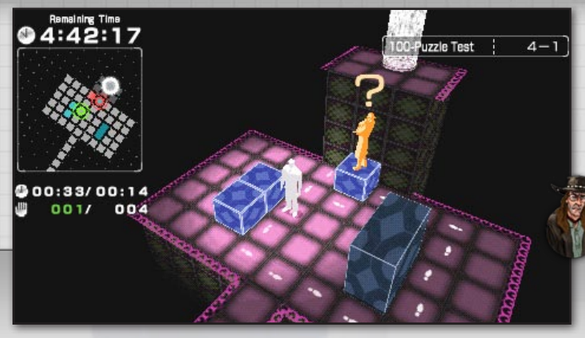
FINAL SCORE : 4.25 of 5

2nd opinion by KouAidou • **Alternate Rating :** 4 of 5

When making a sports game that'll appeal to casual players, presentation and intuitiveness are the most important things, and *Hot Shots Tennis* has them in spades. I liked it.

PIQ2

PRACTICAL INTELLIGENCE QUOTIENT 2



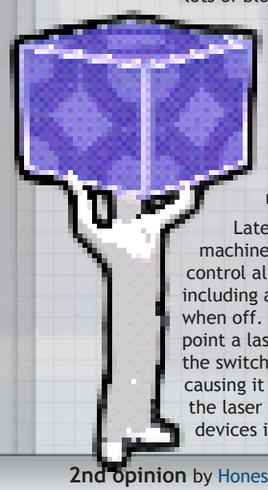
Review by James

Publisher : D3 Publisher
Developer : D3 Publisher
Release Date : 6/14/2007
Rating : Everyone

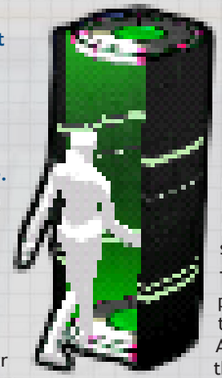
Genre(s) : Puzzle
Category : Block and Maze
# of players : 1

There are two ways to look at *Practical Intelligent Quotient 2*, one of which makes it a relatively decent puzzler and the other turns it into an utter waste of time. All you need to do is completely ignore *PIQ2*'s scoring aspect and it turns into a fairly decent, if somewhat sterile, game of blocks and mazes. It's too bad, then, that the scoring is so prominent that ignoring it involves blowing off the point of the game.

PIQ2 is set up as yet another brain training game, using a series of 3D block mazes filled with gadgets and traps. The puzzles are pretty clever, too, involving lots of block manipulation, lasers that can't be walked through, teleporters, policemen patrolling a beat, and much, much more. The faceless avatar can push, pull, carry, and step up or down one cube's height, and figuring out how to arrange all the items in a level to ensure a clear path to the end can be a nice mental workout.

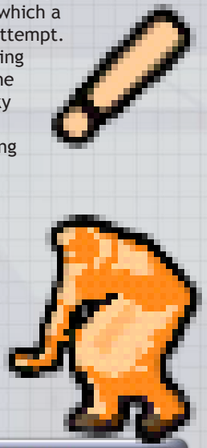


Later levels even have you constructing simple machines. For example, a colored switch will control all the same color devices in the stage, including a platform that raises when on and lowers when off. Set a yellow switch on a yellow platform, point a laser at it, and it'll activate. This raises the switch above the laser's beam, deactivating it, causing it to sink back down and reactivate when the laser hits it again. In the meantime, all yellow devices in the level are also pulsing on and off, including doors that open and close. The switches are one block high, though, so they might need to be arranged as stairs in order to reach the bit where the doors are. It's evil, tricky, and can be very satisfying to solve.



There are lots of puzzles, too. They're broken up into several categories, the main one being the 100-puzzle test, but the shorter five puzzle and themed puzzle tests are good for quicker blasts of gaming. The problem is that everything is timed, and that makes no sense for this kind of game.

The puzzles are the same each time they're played, meaning the only point at which a timed ranking matters is the first attempt. After that it's just a matter of rushing through the motions to maximize the score, and the controls are a little flaky for that. When one second is the difference between an A or B score, accidentally stepping on top of a cube instead of stopping in front of it can invalidate an entire level. *PIQ2* is themed around measuring intelligence, but all it ends up doing is testing rote memorization and dexterity. Even if it worked as it should, *PIQ2* would be testing cleverness rather than intelligence. Ignore that and you've got a pretty decent puzzler, but seeing as that's the theme of the whole game it's hard to do.

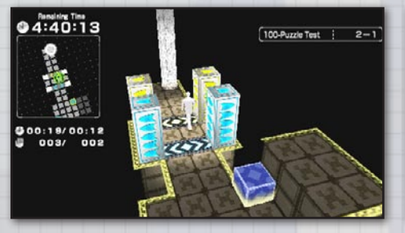


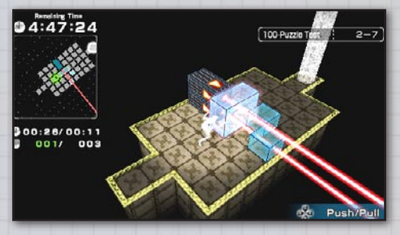
Rating : 3 of 5

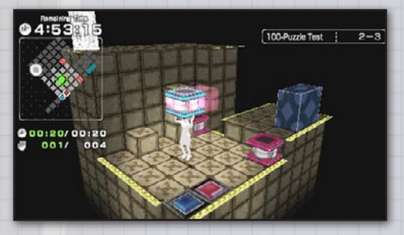
2nd opinion by HonestGamer • **Alternate Rating :** 2 of 5

If you've always wanted an RPG that eliminates the actual role-playing and just lets you play an endless wave of the irritating puzzles like those you've encountered in countless dungeons, *PIQ2* is your game.

FINAL SCORE : 2.5 of 5



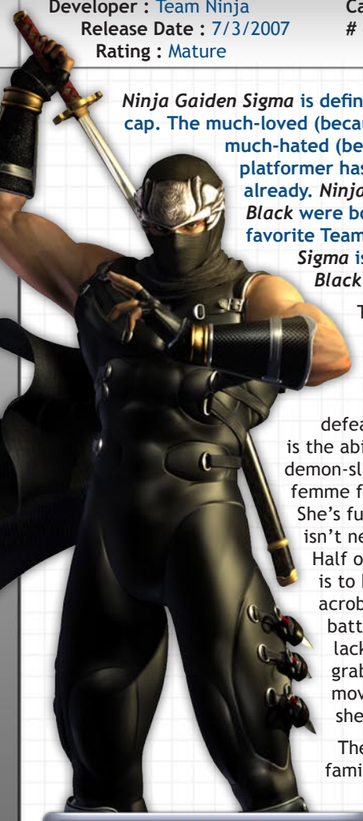




NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA

Publisher : Tecmo
Developer : Team Ninja
Release Date : 7/3/2007
Rating : Mature

Genre(s) : Action Adventure
Category : I Am Ten Ninjas
# of players : 1



***Ninja Gaiden Sigma* is definitely a feather in the PS3's cap. The much-loved (because of the difficulty) and much-hated (because of the difficulty) Xbox platformer has gone through two iterations already. *Ninja Gaiden* and *Ninja Gaiden Black* were both hit titles from the fan-favorite Team Ninja development team. *Sigma* is a remake and revamping of *Black* and exclusive to Sony's PS3.**

There are a lot of new things in *Sigma*. You're going to go up against new enemies, new bosses, and check out some new areas in your quest to defeat Doku. Of particular note is the ability to play as Rachel, the demon-slaying, warhammer-wielding femme fatale from the original game. She's fun for a while, though she isn't nearly as maneuverable as Ryu. Half of the appeal of *Ninja Gaiden* is to be found in the outrageous acrobatics you get down to during battle, so Rachel feels a little lacking. She's got a Scorpion-style grab move and plenty of sweet moves with her warhammer, so she is a welcome addition.

The rest of the game is both familiar and new. Enemies will ambush you from around the same corners as before, but these enemies are faster, smarter, and meaner. Black Spider ninja are no joking matter. The difficulty is still intact, too. I played quite a bit of *Ninja Gaiden*, to put it mildly, and there are still a few surprises to be found. The motorcycle soldiers in particular are fun to fight.

The new weapons, particularly the dual katanas, are very, very nice. They both look cool and dispatch enemies with ease, but there is something to be said for the good old-fashioned Dragon Sword.

The graphics are great, mostly. Some of the pre-rendered cinemas look fairly low-res and blocky in hi-def, almost as if they were ripped straight from the Xbox version without being upgraded. The textures and animations, though, are nuts. There is running water, floating leaves, and all the detailed concrete and rocks you can shake a fist at.

Sigma, gameplay-wise, is just as good as its sister titles. It is fast-paced, hard on a level rarely seen these days, and can be poetry in motion if you're experienced. On the downside, the graphics dip and dive in cinemas, there are a few too many mid-stage (and mid-battle, which is inexcusable) loading times, and, well, it's hard as crap. It's a great game and worth a try if you're brave and/or a masochist.

Rating: 4.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 4.5 of 5

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

It's fast, it looks amazing in HD, and the gameplay is spot-on. Sure, it's more or less what you've already played before, but a second ride to ninja town is worth the price of admission.

HOSHIGAMI RUINING BLUE EARTH REMIX

Review by Jeremy

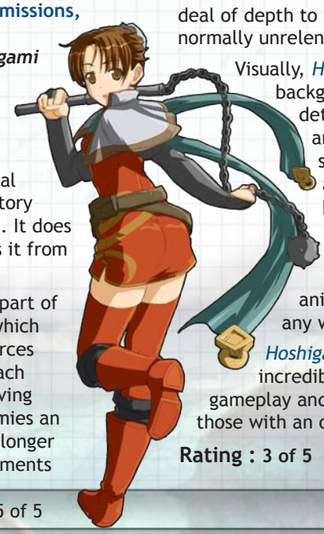
Publisher : Aksys Games
Developer : Arc System Works
Release Date : 6/18/2007
Rating : Everyone

Genre(s) : Strategy RPG
Category : Remake
# of players : 1

The original PlayStation release of *Hoshigami* was ignored by many due to a notoriously steep learning curve and a classic case of bad timing. It came out in 2001, after many had gone on to the PS2, and long after *Final Fantasy Tactics* had briefly reinvigorated the SRPG on consoles. Roughly six years later, it's finally seeing daylight on a viable modern-day platform, with two easier difficulty levels to lessen the learning curve, and some DS-specific enhancements (like new missions, a new character, reworked character art, and those new difficulty levels) give existing *Hoshigami* players a reason to pick up the remake.

Like many other SRPGs, it suffers from a lackluster plot that exists only to get it and its main characters from point A to B. This one has a bland war-based plot full of one-dimensional characters and far too many plot twists, as the story quickly becomes too convoluted for its own good. It does have some branching paths, though, which keeps it from being totally stale.

Luckily, the battle system is the most important part of the game. It's centered around the RAP gauge, which limits how much you can move your party and forces you to carefully think about how far you move each party member. Going over the bar's limits by moving your characters around too much gives your enemies an advantage, as you'll be left open to attack for a longer period of time. Generally, going with short movements and allowing your foes to come to you works best, as it prevents you from being vulnerable for extended periods of times and allows you to quickly position your troops around a single foe to pick him/her off quickly.



There's also an attack power bar system in place that allows you to charge up a blow and send opponents flying, and possibly kill them within one turn by either combining a few lesser-powered attacks, or landing one huge sweeping blow that maxes out the bar. The former rewards wise strategic movements, while the latter rewards a sharp eye and fast reflexes. Both add a great deal of depth to *Hoshigami Remix* and can aid you to defeat the normally unrelenting AI if used correctly.

Visually, *Hoshigami Remix* is a blend of rich, colorful backgrounds and colorful, but bland sparsely-detailed sprites. Repeat character graphics are annoying and can lead to problems due to small size of the battle screen as characters and similarly-colored background elements blend into each other. Also, like other portable SRPGs, it would benefit from allowing you to skip through the lengthy spell animations, since they end up wasting battery life and the animations themselves don't benefit the player in any way.

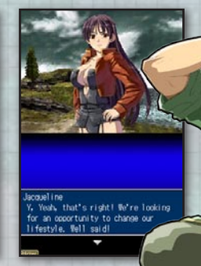
Hoshigami Remix ends up being a frustrating but incredible rewarding experience thanks to its deep gameplay and sadistic AI. Any gluttons for punishment or those with an open mind for SRPGs should enjoy it.

Rating : 3 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3.25 of 5

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

HR isn't the be all, end all of SRPGs, but what you do have is a solid, accessible game (thanks to the selectable difficulty levels) with lots of hours of gaming and a fairly entertaining story.



Let's Go Jungle!

Developer: Sega AM2
Publisher: Sega
Players: 1-2
Genre: Lightgun
Category: Bug Blasting
Release Date: March 15, 2007

Review by Shaggy of arcadeheroes.com

Gamers who frequented the arcades of the '90s probably remember one of the few cockpit games of that time, based on the ever popular *Jurassic Park* movies. That game still can be found in plenty arcades today, but now it has a spiritual successor that looks to replace those aging *Jurassic Park* cabs. That new game is *Let's Go Jungle*.

The heroes of the story are Ben and Norah, who have made a cheap trip to an unnamed jungle island that seems peaceful at first. Things soon turn deadly when their tour group is attacked by giant mutant spiders and hornets. At that point, all they can do is shoot first and ask questions later. This is where the player takes control.

Let's Go Jungle provides a theater-like experience for the players, placing them in a large cockpit cabinet that houses a 62" DLP screen, surround sound, cushy seating and two large guns that are mounted on the cabinet. There are even curtains installed on each side of the cabinet so you can completely block out the surrounding environment while you play. A window in the back lets potential players watch the action as they wait.

Let's Go Jungle features six different stages of bug blasting mayhem, but the player will only venture through five of them. One point in the game forces you to choose between two different paths to take. Reloading is not a worry in this game, as you get unlimited ammo. There are a couple of times where you lose your guns, and must temporarily wield either a slingshot or an oar, depending on which path you take.

The guns are a little heavier than they appear. Using them is manageable, but it can be a little difficult to quickly move the gun to the other side of the screen if you're dealing with fast-moving enemies. It's especially troublesome in single player mode, as Sega made the bittersweet decision to design *Let's Go Jungle* primarily around two player co-op. That includes bonus points for joint shots, as well as participating in action sequences together. There are three types of action sequences: one where you both point your guns in a certain direction at the same time, a second that has both players tap their action button as fast as possible, and a final one that has both players tap buttons in unison to avoid danger. If you happen to play *Let's Go Jungle* solo, you're only getting half the experience.

The boss battles are as good as could be expected from a Sega arcade game. The bosses include a tarantula, a mantis, a frog, a Venus flytrap and a butterfly. During a boss battle, you have to target and shoot certain points on the boss quickly, or you'll take damage.

Graphically, *Let's Go Jungle* is one of the best-looking and most colorful games you can find in a modern arcade. The high-resolution screen brings out the game's great contrast and textures, thanks to the PC-based Lindbergh hardware. Character models are highly detailed, and the game is capable to throwing a huge number of enemies on the screen without any slowdown.

Let's Go Jungle is a fun game that attracts a lot of attention, and it is not difficult to learn how to play or enjoy. The single player experience isn't much fun compared to co-op, but can still be enjoyable.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

IF THE GOVERNMENT HAS ITS WAY, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY HALF THE GAMES IN THIS MAGAZINE.

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ON THE DOWNLOAD

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

CALLING ALL CARS

Developer: Incog Inc./Sony • Platform: PS3
Genre: Car Combat • Category: Green MPH • # of Players: 1-4
Price: $9.99 • Get it at: PlayStation Store

Calling All Cars is a must-have. That's my review. Go download it comma the end. I could tell you about the great and cartoony graphics, but c'mon, the gameplay is impeccable. You play a bounty hunter that's scooping up escaped convicts and delivering them back to prison. Rival hunters will try to get them before you do, but you can use a number of weapons to pop the prisoners out of their cars and then drive over them to pick them up yourself.

The action is fast and never really slows down. It's a constant game of both tug-of-war and chicken, with you trying to keep other cars away from your prisoner while you're trying to jack prisoners yourself. Once you grab a prisoner, taking them back is a matter of driving through a few gates, each of which gives you a certain amount of points. The person with the most points at the end of the game wins.

Calling All Cars harkens back to a simpler time where games did one thing and did it very, very well. There are a limited number of maps, but the fun factor obliterates that minor complaint. This is *Twisted Metal* all over again. *Calling All Cars* is to the PS3 what *Hexic HD* was to the Xbox 360.

Downloaded by 4thletter

SCORE: 5 OF 5

CATAN

Developer: Big Huge • Platform: Xbox 360
Genre: Board Game • Category: Sheepbrick
# of Players: 1-4 • Price: 800 points ($10.00)
Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

Catan is a classic board game about settling a hexagonal map while building settlements, cities, and roads. Each hexagon that makes up the larger hexagonal board is a resource with a number attached, and when that number comes up on any player's die roll you get to harvest the goodies it

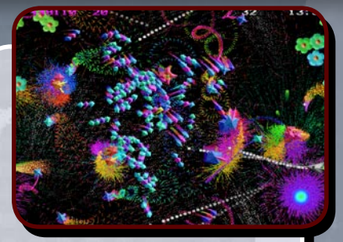
contains, if you've got a settlement next to it. Resources allow building, and that leads to sweet, sweet victory.

What makes *Catan* work is that it's a social game of strategy, involving both working with and screwing over the other players. The relatively simple rules can be picked up with a quick round of the helpful tutorial, and then it's time to start playing online against real people. *Catan* is strategic, fun, and lets you screw over your friends, making it a perfect online party game.

Downloaded by James

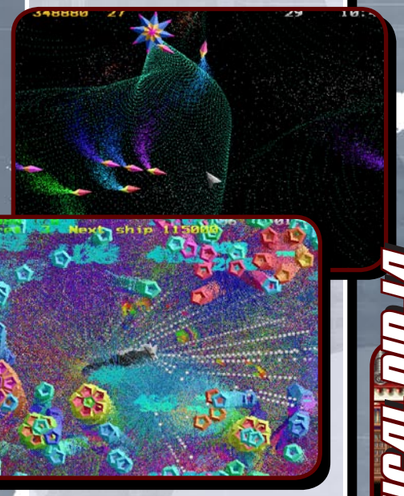
SCORE: 4 OF 5

SPHERES OF CHAOS



Developer: Ian Mcleod • Platform: PC/MAC/Linux
Genre: Asteroids Clone • Category: VisOvrld!
# of Players: 1-2 • Price: $10.00
Get it at: www.spheresofchaos.com

Spheres of Chaos has been out for a few years now, but it's still the single best *Asteroids* clone ever.



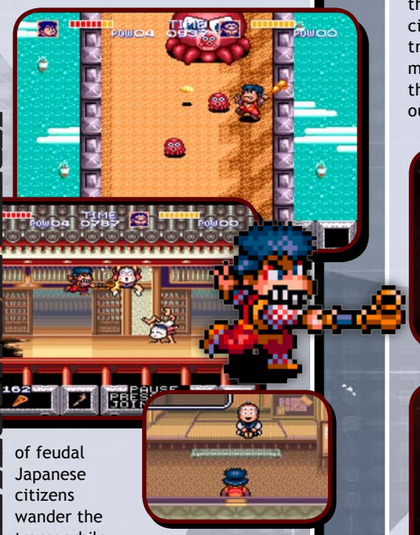
Dozens of enemy types, each making its own ambient sound when shot, couples with a visual overload to create an oddly peaceful barrage of pure mayhem. Enemies that chase, shoot, mine, or merely clutter up the screen combine in swarms to make life as difficult as possible, but a huge variety of powerups helps with thinning the herd. They only last for a limited time, but the powerups' effects range from nearly useless to screen-clearingly deadly, and they can be combined for some insane effects as well. Toss in a huge variety of tweakable game parameters, covering everything from powerup appearance odds to activating gravity, and you've got a game that can be played for years after the initial addiction wears off.

SCORE: 4.5 OF 5

LEGEND OF THE MYSTICAL NINJA

Developer: Konami • Platform: Wii
Genre: Adventure • Category: Goofy
# of Players: 1-2 • Price: 800 points ($8.00)
Get it at: Wii Virtual Console

It was a pleasant surprise to get a *Goemon* game on the SNES, and despite a few name changes there was no Americanizing the incredibly Japanese *Legend of the Mystical Ninja*. It's a hodgepodge of game styles, with the standard 2D side-scrolling levels being connected by towns and wilderness played in a head-on isometric view. Caricatures



of feudal Japanese citizens wander the towns while ghosts and goofy monsters inhabit the levels, but they're all enemies no matter how innocent they look. Kid Ying (as Goemon is called in this game) wanders from town to town following the pleasantly bizarre plot, smacking everything in his path, and playing a large variety of minigames that even include the first level of *Gradius*. *Mystical Ninja* is a decent bit of silly fun, and Konami is more than welcome to bring the series back whenever it wants.

SCORE: 3.5 OF 5

GYRUSS

Developer: Konami • Platform: XBOX 360
Genre: Shooter • Category: Dizzying
# of Players: 1-2 • Price: 400 points ($5.00)
Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

Gyruss never managed to attain the popularity of other shooters of the time such as *Galaga*, but it deserved better. It has the classic level structure, with enemies attacking from a central formation, but the player ship rotates around the outside of the screen while the enemies swarm from the center. The ship's ability to travel the entire circumference of the circle means it's impossible to be trapped in a corner, but that also means there are 360 degrees of threats as well. Enemy ships fly out fast and shoot faster, backed

up by indestructible asteroids and pods that cast force fields. The one odd thing about *Gyruss*'s new lease on life is that, while the shiny new graphic upgrade looks good, the original graphic set is clearer and more playable. A quick menu change back to the classic style shows that *Gyruss* is still a great single-screen shooter.

SCORE: 4 OF 5

レイトン教授と不思議な町®

PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE MYSTERIOUS VILLAGE

Publisher: Level-5 • Developer: Level-5 • Release Date: 2/28/2007
Genre: Puzzle • Category: Logic & Riddles • # of Players 1

Professor Layton's Mysterious Village is part of a very small, select kind of game that existed very briefly in the US in the mid-'90s, and then all but died out. Games of this sort, which include such once-revered titles as *The Castle of Dr. Brain* and *The Seventh Guest*, center around the solving of classic puzzles and riddles, which are strung together by a mysterious narrative. Solving puzzles successfully opens new pathways in the game and unlocks clues to the larger mystery.

Professor Layton and his student, Luke, are heading out towards an isolated village to investigate the death of one of its most wealthy citizens and Layton's good friend, Mr. Leinford. When they arrive, they learn that the people of this village love nothing more than a good riddle, which means that, in order to get any information from anyone, they'll have to engage the townsfolk in continuous battles of wits. Fortunately, Professor Layton is an expert at this kind of thing, and he and Luke are more than up to the task.

The world that Layton and Luke travel through is a wonderful, whimsical one, which looks and feels like a cross between Miyazaki, Tezuka, and *The Triplets of Belleville*. The occasional cutscenes are done in full 2D animation, complete with voice acting, and the scenes you travel through are also drawn in classic style. You'll interact with these scenes using the stylus, which you tap anywhere on the screen you want to investigate. In this way, you can talk to people, acquire information, and discover new items.

When you talk to a person or click on certain areas of the screen, you'll often be forced to solve a puzzle or riddle tangentially related to the situation at hand. These puzzles are also controlled with the stylus, which you can use to move items, write numerical answers, or take notes on the screen while you're thinking. Most of this could have been done well enough using a D-Pad interface, and the DS screen doesn't really provide sufficient room to take good notes, but this interface adds a slightly more personable touch to a game that's all about personality.

Each puzzle has a certain maximum number of points you can receive for solving it, according to that puzzle's difficulty. If you answer incorrectly, you can try the puzzle again later, but each time, the amount of points you receive will decrease (naturally, getting all the points in the game unlocks something special). If you get frustrated, you can also use a hint medal (which are found throughout the world) to unlock a hint, but whether or not these hints are actually useful is sometimes questionable. It's a bit frustrating to spend your medals to hear something you'd already figured out.

The actual puzzles that you'll need to solve are of the classic sort of logic puzzle. You'll be pouring a lot of water into different sized vats, moving a lot of matchsticks, and arranging brothers who feud in extraordinarily organized ways around a dinner table. Some of these are, almost verbatim, puzzles you probably heard when you were younger, which offers the game a certain nostalgic charm. With about one hundred fifty puzzles in the game, though, it's unlikely that you've heard them all (especially the riddles based around Japanese kanji), so even the dedicated puzzle aficionado should find a few things to enjoy.

You'll also spend a lot of time collecting items for the game's ongoing puzzles. You'll need to collect pieces to a jigsaw puzzle, parts of a strange machine, and furniture for Layton and Luke's hotel rooms. Furniture arrangement is a puzzle, too: you need to find out what characteristics each of the two like in their furniture, and arrange the rooms such that both parties ultimately have everything they want.

Though, in the end, *Layton*'s gameplay breaks down rather simply, the enjoyment factor comes as much from the game's personality as anything. It would have been nice if the hint system had been a bit more effective or if the main plot had been less linear (therefore making it more practical to lay down a puzzle and come back to it later), but the gameplay is ultimately quite clean, and the original and charming world aesthetic is enough to make it a highly worthwhile experience.

The promotional documents for *Layton* make a big deal out of its two lead actors, You Ooizumi and Maki Horikita, the voices of Layton and Luke respectively, though neither name probably rings a bell for American audiences at all. Who are they, and what are they doing here? All mysteries will be solved!

You Ooizumi: Ooizumi is an established dramatic actor, singer, and radio personality. *Layton* is perhaps his first major foray into voice acting, though he has had a few minor roles in Studio Ghibli's most recent films (*Spirited Away*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, *The Cat Returns*) as well as the animated movie *Brave Story*.

Maki Horikita: Horikita is a promising young talent who recently entered the world of dramatic acting, who began her acting career in 2003 and won the Japanese Academy Award for Best Newcomer in 2006 for her role in the film *Always: Sanchome no Yube*. She has also appeared in numerous dramas.

WORTH IMPORTING?

Normally this game wouldn't be worth recommending to anyone who wasn't fluent in Japanese, due to the fact that the entirety of the gameplay is based on reading. Fortunately, there is a very nice, spoiler-free translation FAQ up on GameFAQs. If riddles and logic puzzles are your thing, it's definitely worth an import given how badly these games have fallen out of style on our side of the ocean. Just don't be expecting the kind of awesome hundred-hour RPG epic that Level-5 is usually known for. This is a sweet, gentle, silly game for people who are still in touch with their inner nerdy child.

Review by KouAidou

SCORE: 4 of 5

IMPORTS SUPPLIED BY PLAY-ASIA.COM

Publisher: Banpresto
Developer: Banpresto
Release Date: 3/1/2007

Genre(s): SRPG
Category: Chicks Still Dig Giant Robots
# of Players: 1

Review by Lyxara

The original *Super Robot Wars* game in 1991 was a cheapo joint for the original spinach-screened Game Boy. Sequels immediately moved on to console hardware, and the portable *SRW* titles have been caught in their shadow ever since. Either they're experimental games meant to test out new features (like the Wonderswan's *Compact 2*), or disastrous shovelware programmed by encephalitic monkeys (like the Wonderswan's *Compact 3*). Even the GBA games tended to suffer from poor balance and uneven writing. *OG* and *OG2*, which Atlus localized, are really the best of the lot.

This makes *W* all the more surprising, because it's probably the first portable *SRW* that can measure up to the console titles in every major way. The interface has gotten a much-needed overhaul, aside from the obvious changes to accommodate the dual screens. Now you spend a lot less time wading through sub-menus to find just the right part or spirit command. The sprite-based attack demo animations are complex and fluid, and even incorporate some flashy features like Dynamic Kills (which grant a special animation when you kill an enemy unit with an attack). The post-game content is dramatically enriched with bonus difficulty levels, additional scenarios that appear on replays, and even an alternate ending. Playing *W* is as much fun as *SRW* ever was, but the whole experience is just more fine-tuned than ever before. Even the stylus controls work unusually well, although most players will probably find themselves defaulting to the buttons and d-pad out of habit.

As far as most Americans are concerned, though, *W*'s more subtle enhancements are just icing on the cake. *W*'s real selling point comes from the series roster, which contains the first appearance of the Super Robot most Americans love most, *Go Lion* (aka *Voltron*). Now, before a die-hard *Voltron* fan runs out to play this game just for *Go Lion*'s sake, bear in mind that while *Voltron* was cool, *Go Lion* was a very different (and crappier) show despite using the same animation. You won't hear *Voltron*'s heroic march when *Go Lion* goes to attack; you'll hear *Go Lion*'s chirpy polka, which the robot appears to dance to during certain demo animations. The *Go Lion* cast are also very different characters, and, well, a *Voltron* fan is probably going to leave *W* disappointed. Don't say we didn't warn you.

Otherwise, though, *W* is more worth your time than basically any other licensed *SRW* portable. The gameplay is sometimes distressingly easy, but the pace of the scenarios is usually quick enough to make this forgivable, and you can alter the difficulty level on replays. The worst you can really say about *W* is that the game balance from series to series is a bit bizarre (Astray Red Frame outdamages Genesic GaoGaiGar? *Bwuh?*), but even a very finicky fan like me can only take this as the picking of giant titanium nits. *W* is a very pleasant exercise in light SRPG fare, and that's something *SRW* does better than any of its competitors.

WORTH IMPORTING?

Sure. *W*'s plot and interface are well-documented for folks who can't read Japanese, and you'd have to suck extraordinarily (or have ridiculous expectations) to get frustrated with it. Just don't pick it up because you think *Voltron* is cool, and don't hold your breath for a localized version.

FINAL SCORE: 4 of 5

IMPORTS SUPPLIED BY PLAY-ASIA.COM

PUBLISHER: SEGA • DEVELOPER: SEGA/WESTONE • GENRE: RETRO
CATEGORY: PLATFORMRPG • RELEASE DATE: 3/8/2007
OF PLAYERS: 1-2

"It's good enough." This is the philosophy behind many recent retro compilations. You say you don't remember your original cartridge of *Phantasy Star* crashing so often and erasing your saves? Who cares! *It's good enough.* What's that about *Mega Man*'s jump and fire buttons being switched, making it unplayable? Never mind! *It's good enough.* Terrible sound in *Sega Genesis Collection*? Games running too fast in *Midway Arcade Treasures*? Corrupted ROM sets in *Capcom Classics Collection*? Don't worry your pretty little head about it. These products are good enough for the mass market, and only the jerks who actually care about the classics and buy retro collections in the first place will notice any problems. Screw them, right?

It's become obvious after years of consistently mediocre emulation quality that shovelware peddlers like Digital Eclipse subscribe to the "good enough" philosophy, accuracy and playability be damned. Recent Japan-only releases in the *Sega Ages* series have been different, however. With custom emulation routines and an impeccable eye for accuracy, games like the excellent *Gunstar Heroes Treasure Box* have set new standards in translation quality that other developers have chosen to ignore.

The latest *Sega Ages* release, *Monster World Complete Collection*, is the best retro compilation I've played in years. Not only are all of the included titles almost perfectly emulated, but features like input recording, save states, and a variety of display options (ranging from 240p to 480p) make for a robust package. Most significantly, the collection also includes multiple ports of each game, ranging from arcade releases to titles originally released for the SG-1000, Master System, Game Gear, and Sega Genesis. More than a dozen ports are featured in all, and — importers take note — many feature fully translated English text.

The games themselves are quality stuff, too. *Wonder Boy* is an enjoyable side-scrolling arcade platformer (you may have played the Hudson-licensed version, *Hudson's Adventure Island*), while its sequel, *Wonder Boy in Monster Land*, blends platforming with adventure elements. The follow-up, *Wonder Boy III: Monster Lair*, was a weird but not altogether bad attempt at melding shoot'em up gameplay with the *Wonder Boy* formula, but the series then hit a high point with the awesome *Monster World II* (*The Dragon's Trap*). *Monster World II*'s free-roaming, nonlinear platforming (ala *Metroid* and *Symphony of the Night*) continued to evolve with *Monster World III*, and then the series reached its peak with the sadly Japanese-only *Monster World IV*, an overlooked classic that is a must-play for any fan of 2D action games.

The only problem with the collection is that it's by no means "Complete." The series's TurboGrafx-16 ports (*Dragon's Curse*, *The Dynastic Hero*, *Monster Lair*, and *Bikkuriman World*) are missing, as is the English Master System version of *Monster Land*. Despite this, though, *Monster World Complete Collection* is a wonderful compilation of overlooked titles that are incredibly fun to play, and most importantly, all of them are presented with the kind of love you'll never see from the likes of Digital Eclipse.

Yes! Import it! Vote with your dollar and tell developers that you care about emulation quality! Don't buy sub-par crap! Rise up against your corporate slavemasters and kill all the nonbelievOW OW OW stop kicking me guys okay I'll stop jeez.

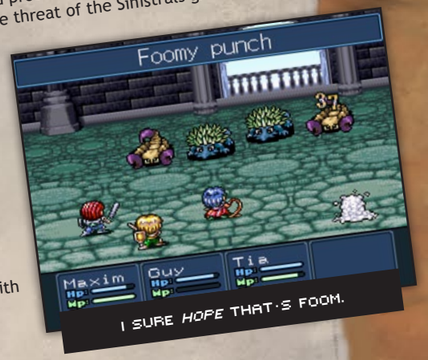
Worth Importing?
Score: 4.5 of 5

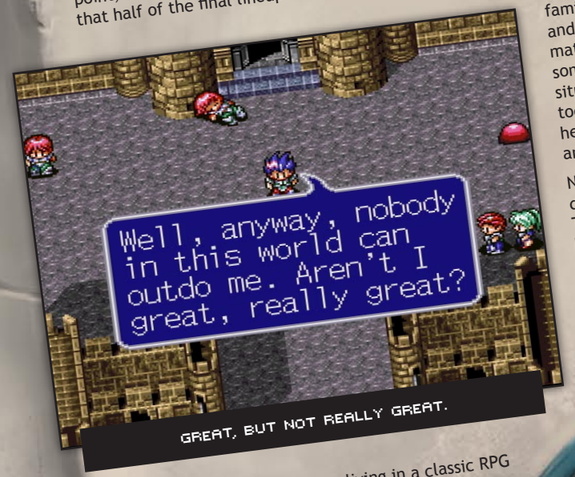
Review by Sardius

Lufia II: Rise of the Sinistrals

Lufia and the Fortress of Doom wasn't a very good RPG. It had some basically likable characters going through the usual plot of saving the world, but the endlessly repetitive gameplay featured an insane random encounter rate. Reaching the ending was a triumph of sheer bullheadedness over tedium. It did, however, spawn a sequel that managed to overcome its heritage and become one of the best RPGs on the SNES.

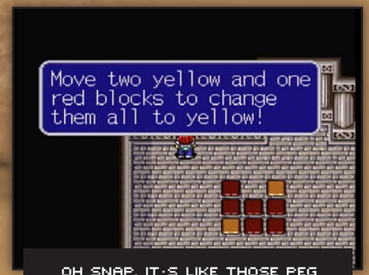
Lufia II: Rise of the Sinistrals is a direct prequel to *Fortress of Doom*. At the start of the first *Lufia*, four heroes confront the Sinistrals and defeat them, but not without cost. Guy and Artea manage to escape the flying island, but Maxim is trapped with his mortally wounded wife, Selan. *Lufia II* is the story of how they got to that point, and is surprisingly fun and upbeat despite knowing that half of the final lineup has a death sentence.





Maxim is a monster hunter living in a classic RPG world. A series of small kingdoms divided by water or mountains all manage to co-exist peacefully, with only the occasional monster problem to make life difficult. One day, while cleaning out a strangely troublesome group of critters, he gets hit with a bad case of prophecy from a mysterious woman: you will travel the land and grow more powerful to confront the coming threat. Seeing as Maxim's the kind of fighter who's always looking for ways to get stronger, and defending people is what he does, this isn't really a bad thing. So he sets off across the lands, accompanied by Tia, a magic-using woman whose affection Maxim is oblivious to, venturing from town to town and solving their monster-related problems. New characters join and leave the party as the threat of the Sinistrals grows, and there's even time for Maxim to get married and father a child so his descendant can star in the first *Lufia*. It's a fun plot with good characters in a comfortably familiar setting, and manages to maturely deal with some emotional situations that today's RPG heroes would angst about for hours.

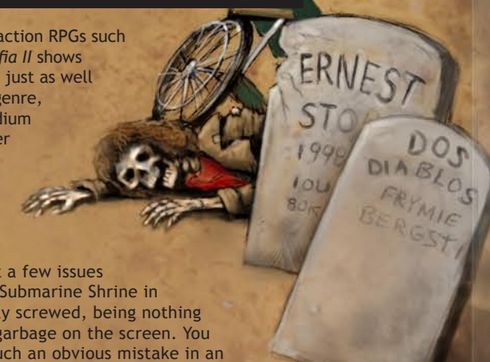
Nice as the plot is, most of *Lufia II*'s time is spent in dungeons, where there are two parts to the gameplay. The combat is pretty normal, being the standard turn-based affair with weapons, magic, and items. Choose an attack for each of the characters, point it at the appropriate monster, and then sit back and see what happens. The one wrinkle that sets it apart is the IP gauge, which fills as the characters take damage. Many items have a spell bound to them, and using it takes IP. Weapons frequently have elemental attacks, while



armor and accessories are more support-oriented. Not every piece of equipment has an ability bound to it, and it's often worth going with a slightly weaker weapon to get that extra punch when it's needed. Combat is generally not too tough, and magic is plentiful later in the game, but the IP abilities are lifesavers early on and against tough bosses.

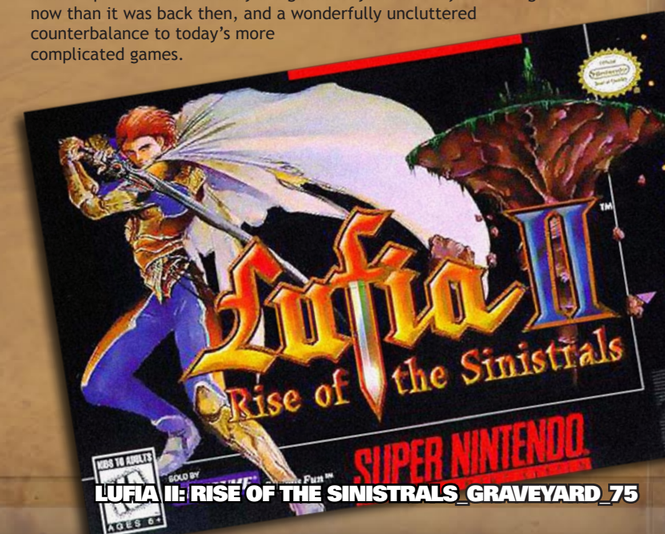
The Capsule Monsters, which are hidden throughout the world, are also a big help. These are AI-driven monsters that, once found, will fight by the party's side. They take care of themselves in battle, attacking a random monster with abilities ranging from weak to insta-kill, and can do great things to speed up combat. They gain experience just like normal party members, and go up in level in the usual way, but also have several evolutionary stages to grow through. They get new forms by eating, and absolutely love the taste of expensive magical weapons and armor. Evolving them can be pricey, but they get new and stronger skills in their new forms, plus it's fun having a giant vicious beast fighting by your side.

The other half of *Lufia II*'s gameplay is the puzzle dungeons. The caverns and towers are practically labyrinths, with hidden areas and tile puzzles scattered througout. Switches, pressure tiles, hidden passages, and more block Maxim's progress at every turn, and solving them complements the monster smacking nicely. If there's a pressure switch that requires a monster to stand on it, a quick room reset puts things back to how they should be. New tools acquired in certain dungeons open up new areas, such as bombs for blowing through walls or arrows to stun monsters in place. Puzzle dungeons are more normally found in action RPGs such as *Alundra*, but *Lufia II* shows how they can work just as well in the turn-based genre, eliminating the tedium that can set in after the thousandth enemy encounter in a row.



While *Lufia II* is an excellent game, it's still got a few issues to deal with. The Submarine Shrine in particular is totally screwed, being nothing more than visual garbage on the screen. You can beat it, but such an obvious mistake in an otherwise amazing game is is mind-boggling. There are some strange text issues in the menus as well, but thankfully they're easily blown off and don't affect the story.

Despite some technical issues, *Lufia II* still stands as a great RPG. The fast battles, clever puzzles, and enjoyable story come together to make a game that can stand with the best Squaresoft could provide at the time. RPGs have changed a good bit since the SNES days, with the heroes getting ever younger and more emotionally dumb, and playing through a story with mature characters makes for a refreshing change. It's easy to look back at the 16-bit RPGs with the pleasant haze of memory making them all seem wonderful, but finding something that stands up to modern scrutiny is significantly harder. *Lufia II* is as good now than it was back then, and a wonderfully uncluttered counterbalance to today's more complicated games.



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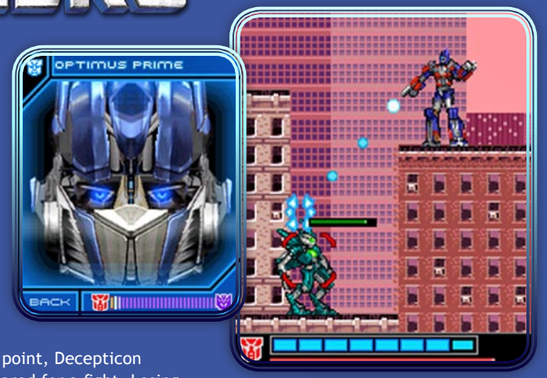
TRANSFORMERS REVIEW



In *Transformers*, the Earth is caught in the middle of an intergalactic war between the Autobots and the Decepticons, both of whom are racing to find the Allspark, the ultimate source of Cybertronian power.

Users play as Optimus Prime through this adventure as he fights the Decepticons, both in robot and vehicle form. In some instances, he enlists the help of other fellow Autobots, including Ironhide, Jazz and Ratchet, to accomplish certain tasks. You don't get to control them, just call them into action to handle things like breaking down reinforced walls, but it's still nice to see them in the mix.

Battles take place in three areas around the globe, like the Hoover Dam and the Arctic, and each has sub-levels to clear. In each area, you move the Autobot shield to various points that represent a level where you can fight Decepticons, gather intelligence, or warp. At some point, Decepticon shields also wander the map randomly. If they cross with yours, be prepared for a fight. Losing these random battles, or having to continue a stage if failed, sets you back in the race for the Allspark. Race progress is gauged by a meter at the bottom of the screen.

Optimus has a unique system that enables him to fight in close combat or at farther ranges without having to switch weapons or fighting styles. When Optimus is in close range, he'll use his fists, while at farther ranges he will automatically switch to weapons. This is engaged with only the press of the action button and disengages with one more press. Blocking is automatic when combat is toggled off. This makes for a simple control scheme but at times it can be a bit confusing if you're used to pressing the button more than once to strike an enemy.

Most enemies can be dealt with using fists, weapons, or both, but they will attempt to block your attacks. You'll have to figure out the right approach to take care of them, like waiting to counterattack or dashing in to stun them before unleashing a super punch. Of course, you can always just choose to mow down enemies by transforming into truck form.

This type of fighting action keeps *Transformers* from becoming monotonous in battles and the game as a whole is nicely polished for the mobile experience. It's got great visuals, pretty good sound and even alternate endings. The game could have used a little variety in the type of action, but it still delivers a fun enough time to warrant a download.

Publisher: Glu Mobile
Developer: Glu Mobile
Release Date: July 2007

Genre: Action
Category: Adventure
# of Players: 1

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

E3: EVERYONE ELSE EXCLUDED

The Electronic Entertainment Expo was originally created as a reaction to the video game industry being treated as a second-class citizen. Continually relegated to the dark corners of the Consumer Electronics Show, our industry stood up to the establishment and let them know that if we weren't going to be seen as an equal then we were going to go our own way. The organizers of CES refused to give video games their rightful place, so we stuck to our guns and formed our own event.

In the years that E3 was around, it grew from a risky experiment to a grand showcase, the Mecca that all gamers aspired to make their yearly pilgrimage. If a developer had a game, it was essentially a given that they would have an opportunity to have it somewhere around E3. With every publisher being there, hotel spaces all around, and the outside-the-main-show spaces, journalists and industry folk got a peek at virtually every game in development.

By the very nature of our business, we're a competitive lot. Naturally, we all started to use E3 as a chance to one-up each other. Booths got bigger, lights got brighter, babes got hotter, and sound systems got louder to the point where everyone suddenly realized this spectacle we'd created was getting out of control. The money required to even have a presence there was exorbitant, and the whole reason for even having the show — a place where all the people in the video game industry could meet, show their wares, and discuss business — was getting lost in all the razzle and dazzle.

Alas, it was time to kill the bloated beast. "But don't worry," we were told. "A new E3 will replace the old. This new E3 won't make the same mistakes, and will stay true to the original vision."

What a load of crap!

The Entertainment Software Association's new E3 is the equivalent of a kick in the groin to 75% of the video game industry. Only the largest publishers will be given floor space, and only those deemed worthy by the ESA will be allowed to attend. Beyond all belief, in just over a decade the video game industry has completely forgotten its vision, and is now choosing to treat many of its own as second-class citizens. Independent developers and publishers are being pushed to the wayside to keep the spotlight only on companies that have stock traded on Wall Street. How does the ESA expect there to be innovation without experimentation and fresh ideas?

Countless publishers and developers used the massive foot traffic that E3 generated as their shot to get their game discovered. To allow only the biggest companies entry at our annual gaming showcase sends the message that if you're not on the New York Stock Exchange, then you can't possibly create a game worth anyone's time. In all reality, could this be any further from the truth? I mean, let's be realistic here. Some of the most critically acclaimed games of the last few years have been independently developed and published. This strikes us as a low point in the industry's history.

There are hordes of tech-heads sitting in their self-funded offices, programming away to make the next great something. If it's fun and plays well, who is to say they shouldn't be given an opportunity to show their goods? It is a catch-22: the industry needs people to hear about the games to want them, but they aren't allowing that venue to exist. Shouldn't a game's entertainment value be put ahead of who funds it?

Our industry has had to continually battle the world to survive. We've had to overcome being seen as a bar novelty, fight our way into family's living rooms, work through crashes in the marketplace, strive to be seen as something other than kids' fare, and face political and social controversy again and again. Now we have to fight against ourselves?

Gamecock isn't going to let this happen without putting up our dukes and providing a solution. We've got a better idea. One that we hope every other publisher and developer that didn't get the ESA's golden ticket will steal. We're going to throw a little party at the same time as E3 where we'll allow our independent developers to showcase their awesome titles, and we're going to invite everyone. Come on by to hang out and play some games with us. Help us bring a sense of community, and an appreciation for the talented artists that work so hard to create entertainment for us, back to the industry.

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

HGM Pick!

Title : HGM Kids
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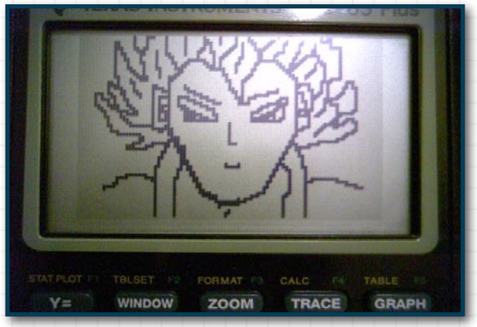
Location : Fontana, CA

Title : GooGoo of War
Artist : Timmy Nguyen
Age : 18
Location : Fall River, MA

Title : Untitled
Artist : Miguel Chan
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Tallahassee, FL

Title : Kratos tribute
Artist : Liviu Matei
Age : 21
Location : Romania

Title : Balrog from Street Fighter
Artist : Jay Ogden
Age : 26
Location : Woonsocket, RI



Title : Untitled
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Age : Undisclosed
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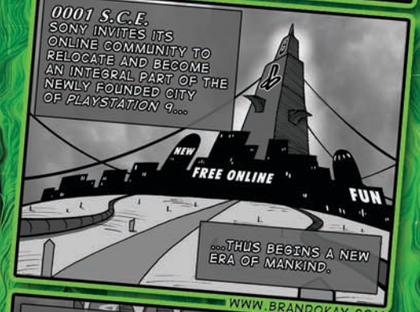

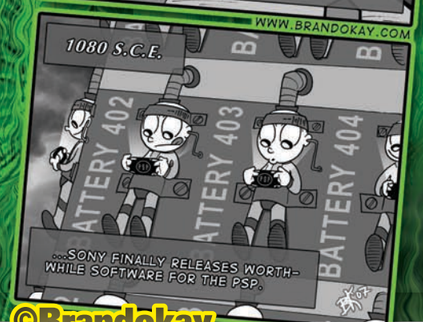

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