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HARDCORE

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## SUPER SMASH BROS. BRAWL

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**DJPubba Tim Lindquist**  
Too many GDC parties have wore out this old fork. I'm not getting younger any faster... wait... I mean... I'm getting older than I used to... oh, never mind. Other interesting things? After eons of procrastination, I finally succumbed to peer pressure and have joined an online social network (Facebook). Now all I do is look for new friends to invite, post on their walls and play *Dots*, *Wasabi* & *Arcade Trivia* with them instead of working.

Now Playing: Lots of X68000 games, *Vs. Super Mario Bros.* (Arcade) and *Donkey Kong* (Tandy CoCo 3)



**Wanderer Thomas Wilde**  
Hey, you know who sucks? Prince Malchezaar. I hate that guy. He'd better drop Gorehowl soon or I'm going to be irate.

Now Playing: *Lost Planet*, *Portal*, *The Dracula X Chronicles*, *World of Warcraft*



**Racewing Geson Hatchett**  
I gots a NeoGeo Pocket Color. I love this thing. Yet my innate loathing of all things card-based could not be broached, even by *Card Fighters' Clash*. Oh, well, can't win 'em all.

Now Playing: *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, *Mega Man ZX Advent*, *SNK vs. Capcom: Match of the Millennium* (because Karin told me to)



**Hitoshura laian Ross**  
I haven't bought a PC game in years. I bought the gold edition of *Civ 4* recently and I was quite shocked that after cutting down on packaging size, the packing quality has also been cut down. The instruction manuals hadn't been printed. Instead they're on a CD at the very bottom of a stack of five discs. Oh, and none of those discs came with a sleeve at the very least. I think CD care and printed manuals should take priority over unwieldy posters.

Now Playing: *Civilization IV + Warlords*



**Sardius Danny Cowan**  
So there's an Xbox 360 in the house now, and I've slowly been catching up on what the rest of the world has been playing over the last two years. Quick reviews: *Rock Band* is genius, *Portal* would be the best game of 2007 if I'd played it before the Internet memed it to hell and back, and *Crackdown* was a waste of \$15. Oh, and *Yaris* is amazing.

Now Playing: *Curve*, *AJICO*, *The Delgados*, *David Bowie*, *Slowdive*



**Roger Danish Greg Off**  
As a long-time PlayStation fan, it's heart warming to see the beleaguered company receive some good news and positive press for a change. With the Blu-Ray vs. HD DVD war over, and a promising line up of first and third party titles for '08, is it possible that this once mighty giant could actually scratch and claw its way back up to the top?

Now Playing: *God of War: Chains of Chaos*, *No More Heroes*, *Patapon*, *LEGO Indiana Jones*



**4thletter David Brothers**  
2008 is all about Good Decisions for me. No more nonsense, no more stress, no more drama. Can I make this happen? Here's hoping.

Now Playing: *Call of Duty 4* (360), *Orange Box* (360)



**James James Cunningham**  
It's coming. So close I can almost see it, my new wonderful toy is getting one step closer to being in my living room, one day at a time. Yep, it's time to join the HD age, and this spring's tax returns (plus generous \$600 government bonus) are going to enable a new piece of shiny happy tech. That's the best kind!

Now playing: *Burnout Paradise* (360), *Endless Ocean*, waiting impatiently for *Patapon*



**HonestGamer Jason Venter**  
Gaming is too expensive. That comment may come mostly from my fruitless attempts to find a job for three months running, but I hardly think that even the gainfully employed would be inclined to disagree. Games are too expensive and I refuse to buy more... unless they're good ones, of course.

Now playing: *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, *Nanostray 2*



**Dack Steve Hannley**  
You know what I want to do? Work security at the mall. I'll get to shine a flashlight!

Now Playing: *Resident Evil: UC*, *Rock Band*, *Lost Odyssey* and the amazing *Vampire Weekend* in my CD player.



**Kitty Karin Renoux**  
This month, I've seen blizzards, disastrous windstorms, some flooding, and monumental power outages. I've gotten the feeling I'm unprepared for natural disasters. Should I zombie-proof the apartment some more? That might take care of it.

Now Playing: *Resident Evil: UC*, *Mana Khemia*, *Persona 3*



**Wollie Terry Wolfinger**  
Well, WoW. has finally lost the "wow" factor for me; I have not played it in months... I have been on my PC playing online with *Call of Duty 4* and *Team Fortress*. Phenomenal game, that *Call of Duty*! My only complaint was that it was too short. Otherwise, it's brilliant!!

Now Playing: *Call of Duty4*, *Team Fortress*, *Grand Theft Auto: SA*



**Lynxara Alicia Ashby**  
So a friend bought me *Castlevania II* for Christmas, and I find myself playing that more frequently than any modern games I've acquired since then. Make of that what you will.

Now Playing: *No More Heroes*, *Culdcept SAGA*, *Devil May Cry 3*, *The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass*, *Ninja Five-O*, *Castlevania II*



**Arfeth Thomas Shin**  
At press time, I've gotten to see action shots of *Street Fighter IV* and *King of Fighters XII*, and if neither of those two manage to get on ESPN/MLG, I'm going to F,D,DF+P Itagaki through the Tecmo water cooler. Seriously.

Now Playing: *Hellgate: London*(PC), *Twinkle Star Sprites*(Neo Geo), *King of Fighters '98 Ultimate*



**Ashura Brady Hartel**  
I just moved, and I've been working hard the past month on a backend for posting our magazine content online. My brain esplodey. Thankfully, now there's *No More Heroes* so I can make other people's brains esplodey... with lots of blood!

Now Playing: *No More Heroes*, *Devil May Cry 4*, and *Super Mario Galaxy*



**Jeremy Jeremy Peeples**  
As "Dr. Death" Steve Williams has said, THE WORLD'S TURNING!! The HD age is upon us, and in '08, I hope to join it...and get a PS3. Also, I'd like my second 360 to make it the whole year.

Now Playing: *Fire Pro Wrestling Returns*, *Rez HD*, *Carve*, *Beautiful Katamari*



**Mads Amadeo Garcia III**  
The only reason I haven't even touched *Portal* yet is because I'm so scared of the hype ruining it. Otherwise, ever since I discovered that I didn't need to buy a new PC because my laptop could run *Team Fortress 2* just fine, I've been pretty much immersed in Valve's glorious multiplayer setting. AND STOP CALLING MEDICS IF YOU DON'T NEED THEM, GOSHDARNIT  
Now Playing: *Team Fortress 2*, *Advance Wars: Days of Ruin*, *Final Fantasy Tactics: War of the Lions*

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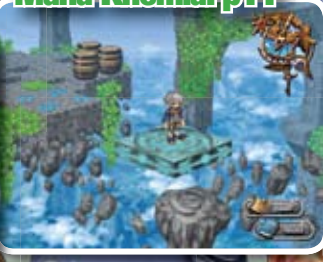
## Previews

We've got a trio of tasty games for you this quarter: *Mario Kart Wii*, NISA's latest in *Mana Khemia*, and Majesco's surprising *Eco Creatures*. Just turn to page 10 to see the goodness. We would've packed more preview pages into this issue, but...

**Mario Kart Wii: p10**

**Mana Khemia: p11**

**Eco Creatures: p12**



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## Features

... we wanted to publish a six-page blowout about small publishers and the systems they're publishing for, now that next-gen is... well, now. After you're all set for your niche games, then flip on and see our massive feature on tournaments and the cash prizes the hardcore won in them in 2007. Get started on page 38.

**Niche Gaming: p38**

**Tournaments: p44**

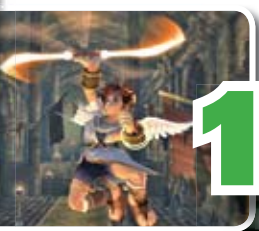
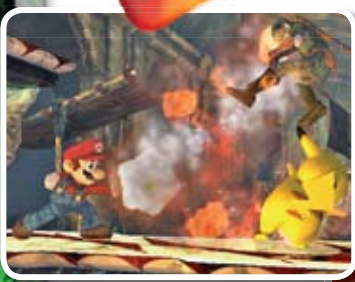


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# SUPER SMASH BROS. BRAWL

## On the cover

Yeah, we also got a copy of *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, and it was basically impossible not to write eighteen tremendous pages of coverage that ferrets out every little thing we could squeeze from the game. Want to know what glitches are gone, what characters are in, which items are the most fun? The battle begins on page 14.



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PROFESSOR LAYTON and the CURIOUS VILLAGE. Solve your way in.

Publisher: Nintendo  
 Developer: Nintendo  
 Release Date: TBA

Genre(s): Racing  
 Category: Kart  
 # of Players: TBA



# MARIO KART

Wii

Preview by Kitty

If you haven't already dusted off your Wii for *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, you'll want to shake the cobwebs off for *Mario Kart Wii* (this name is not final). Slated for release in Japan on April 10th, *Marwio Kart* should see a North American release not too long afterward.

Packaged along with the initial release is the new Wii Wheel (this name isn't final either), something similar to the Wii Zapper. Jam your wiimote into the slot, and it promises to deliver a much more intuitive driving experience than just turning it sideways. The game should work fine without it, though; you can cruise in style and demand your friends bring their own wheels.

The standard cast makes a return, of course, including an option to use one of your Miis as a driver. The different weight classes of karts are still around, from the huge behemoths that pimps like Waluigi and Bowser roll in, to the diminutive karts for the tiny characters. Motorcycles are also going to make an appearance, with their own sizes and styles as well. I guess my Koopa Troopa biker club will finally have characters with which to relate!

*Marwio Kart* also includes some "tricks" that you can pull off in your sweet rides. When you hit a jump, you shake the wiimote like you mean it to pull off some mad air moves. Word on the street is that it also gives you a speed boost, meaning you can bring it in style. If your smooth chopper and Wario jacket aren't impressive enough, imagine how amazed your friends will be when you soar over their heads!

Overall, *Marwio Kart* looks to build on the popular framework of its predecessors, with some fly new looks and features. You will be able to take your game onto Nintendo WiFi and pretend you're racing for pinks with the world. Get out your oil cans and spare tires, and look for *Marwio Kart* sometime in Q2.



# Mana Khemia

Alchemists of Al-Revis

*Mana Khemia* is the fifth installment in developer Gust's alchemy games. For those familiar with the previous games (*Atelier Iris* and *Ar Torneico* among them) it should feel like heading home; *Mana Khemia* builds on the same card-combat, weapon-making systems, with a few twists to keep everything interesting. All this is wrapped up in a beautifully drawn and animated world.

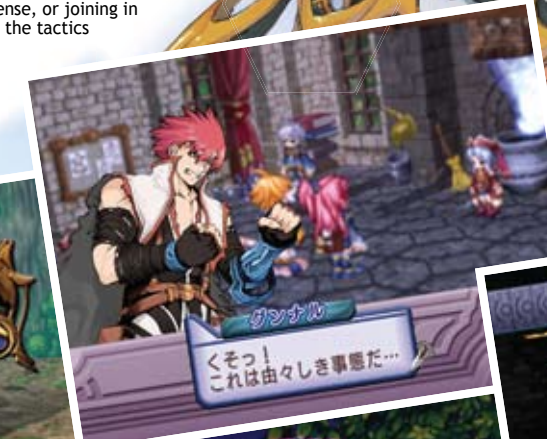
The game revolves around a boy named Vayne and his cat, Sulpher. Vayne enrolls into an academy for alchemy majors, where he meets up with a colorful cast of characters. Players guide Vayne as he progresses through three years at the academy, where he must pass twelve exams in order to pass. The better he does on the exams, the more free time players have to spend doing whatever they want. Vayne can attend lectures on alchemy to gain new recipes, or participate in team events where he helps out his friends. A bulletin board acts as kind of a quest system, and a calendar keeps track of time; the calendar counts down to important events, so players know how much time they have left before finals. First, the Alchemy system makes a triumphant return. Players can construct all kinds of awesome weaponry, using stuff that is just lying around, locked in chests, or stuffed in monster pockets. In addition to useful items, however, *Mana Khemia* does away with the traditional "leveling up" common to most RPGs. Instead, players are allowed to craft their own stats and skills, using a similar system to normal alchemy. With the ability to make anything, the possibility for customization is huge.

Most of the combat systems have new touches added as well. The Burst system from the later alchemy games is back, and it includes a "Finish Burst" attack. By using the Burst attack successfully, the characters can execute a powerful finishing attack that deals even more damage. In addition, a "support" system has backup characters taking hits for added defense, or joining in on attacks to make them even more effective. Using all the tactics at your disposal lets you lay the smack down on the game's monsters in style!

*Mana Khemia* is shaping up to be an enjoyable, action-packed look at the life of an alchemy student. Study hard, or it could hurt!



Publisher: NISA • Developer: Gust  
 Genre: RPG • Category: ComSim  
 Release Date: 3/2008 • #Players: 1



Preview by Kitty



Preview by JPeebles

# eco-creatures

save the forest

Forgoing the commonplace military setting for an RTS, *Eco Creatures* takes place in an enchanted forest known as the Mana Woods. Also, instead of acting as a general and controlling tanks, you're a gigantic orange creature named Dorian, in charge of commanding a small pack of woodland creatures to defend your home land from environmental peril.

Ordering the creatures around is quite easy, as you simply select your creature, then point him towards either your home that needs to be protected, or the enemies trying to destroy it. The simple controls ensure that the game can be enjoyed by pretty much anyone, and I like that the developers included both a right and left-handed control scheme — allowing you to move around with the face buttons if you're a leftie, while right-handed users can use the D-pad.

Players with a desire to take a more active role in the game can do so simply by touching his icon on the screen and then attacking foes with his powerful magic spells. Should you fail to defeat your foes, your homeland will be destroyed, but even if you succeed, it could still sustain some major damage. Fortunately, it can be remedied by simply planting new trees in place of the ones that were destroyed during battle. Thanks to its ease of use, environmental message, and bright color scheme, *Eco Creatures* stands out as an ideal RTS for newcomers to the genre, and a relaxing one that veterans can enjoy as well.



Publisher: Majesco Genre(s): RTS...  
Developer: Lightweight, Co. Category: ...With Woodland Creatures!  
Release Date: March 2008 # of Players: 1-4

# Lost Odyssey

*A thousand years of memories lost. It's time to discover them.*

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TEEN  
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 Use of Alcohol  
 Violence  
 ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

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Jump in.



# SUPER SMASH BROS. BRAWL

## LEAVE ME ALONE, I'M PLAYING BRAWL

COVER STORY BY WANDERER, STRATEGIES BY RACEWING

Trying to write about *Smash Bros.* is a vicious cycle. You have to play it to write about it, and once you start playing it, it's hard to stop. One more game turns into one more hour turns into scouring the back levels of Subspace Emissary looking for one more trophy or one more musical track.

*Super Smash Bros. Brawl* is many things at once. It's the game that, if *Melee* is any indication, will be the go-to party game for the Wii for the next five years. It's a celebration of Nintendo's history, with countless stages, tracks, characters, and trophies commemorating virtually everything the company's ever done, and a few things it hasn't. It's an example of how sometimes, expertly-managed hype can actually work in a game's favor, instead of whipping fans' expectations up to an unrealistic degree. *Brawl* is, for the most part, a single, elegant master class on why Nintendo is relevant today.

Most importantly, it's a hell of a lot of fun.



The *Smash Bros.* series, when looked at in retrospect, is interesting, because its gameplay model has always been in step with what Nintendo's stated goals are now.

It's easy to grasp the point of it; it's King of the Hill with a cast of Nintendo all-stars. It's easy to pick up and play even if you never managed to play *Melee*, and there's an *amazing* amount of variety to the characters. Most fighting games have a sort of baseline character, a Ryu or Terry or Akira, and don't allow much deviation from that template. *Smash Bros.* not merely allows that, but actively encourages it.

Aside from blatant clones like Fox and Falco, the *Brawl* roster is incredibly varied, from simple entry-level characters like Mario to freaky two- or three-in-one characters like Zelda or the Pokemon Trainer. This is a game that is not afraid to break what few rules it has at a moment's notice.

That, combined with *Brawl*'s huge arsenal of items and the relative unpredictability of its stage design, means that a novice and an intermediate player are on relatively even ground. If you've been playing the game for five minutes and you've got better reflexes than the other guy, or you see which way the stage is going, or you manage to grab the Donkey Kong hammer, you're in with a chance. Nintendo has created a very novice-friendly fighting game, which is almost unheard-of in this day and age.



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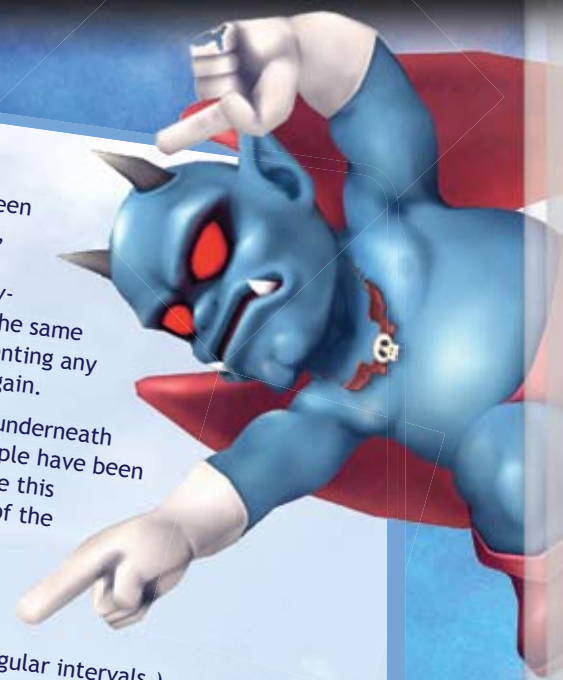
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877.828.4335

Of course, whether it's a fighting game at all is something that some gamers have been arguing about for some time now. *Brawl* isn't going to help that particular argument, either; if anything, it's thrown fuel on the fire. Most of the old tournament tactics from *Melee* have been deliberately excised from *Brawl*, such as wavedashing, and several of the top-tier characters have been pummeled vigorously with the nerf bat. At the same time, though, a strict policy of diminishing returns has been applied to damage, preventing any character from attaining an easy victory by spamming the same move over and over again.

Essentially, the most controversial aspect of *Brawl* is how it's kicked the legs out from underneath *Melee*'s most vocal fanbase: the tournament players. Most of the tactics that these people have been using for the last few years flat-out don't work in *Brawl*. Nintendo has deliberately made this game to appeal to new fans and casual players, at the exclusion of the most vocal fans of the last game in the series. It's a smart move. The fun of *Brawl* is in its anything-can-happen vs. mode, where mindgames and luck can count for as much as pure skill. Many of the new stages are constantly changing their layouts, while others will dump new and bizarre threats on your head without any warning. (One of the new *Mother*-themed stages is particularly bad about this, with a giant pink death cat appearing out of nowhere at irregular intervals.)

There are few better party games on the planet than *Brawl*. It's accessible, and it's got that unique Nintendo mix of adorability, high adventure, darkness, and astonishing moments of weirdness. *Brawl* was actually worth the wait.

There's just one problem.



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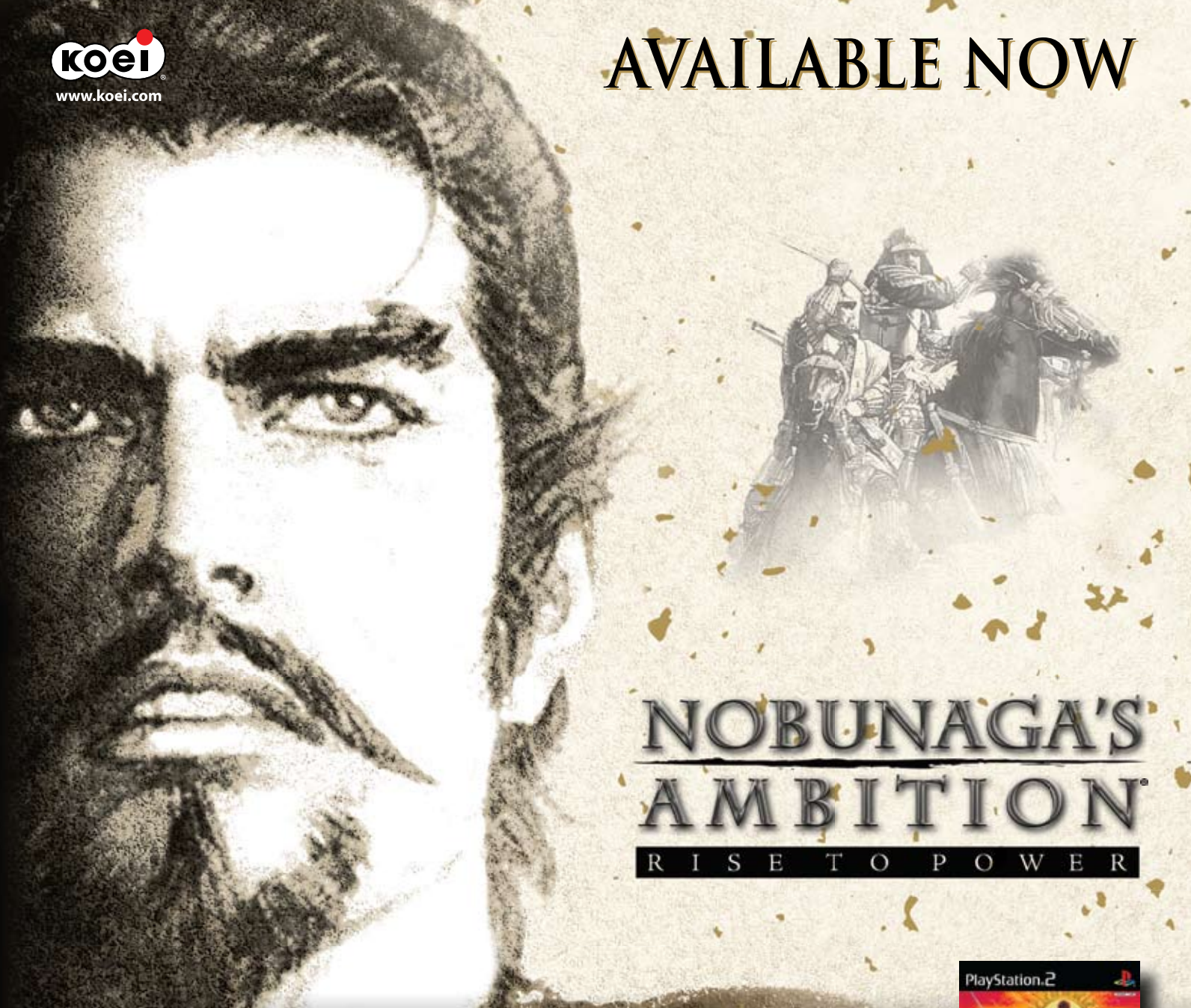
Subspace Emissary is the "story mode" of *Brawl*, which serves to replace *Melee*'s old Adventure mode. It is also one of the single most bizarre things Nintendo has ever produced.

When I say this, please note that this is a company that made its mark with a series of games about a rotund plumber and his brother battling evil turtles and renegade fungus in the Mushroom Kingdom. When you grow up playing these kinds of games your threshold for "weird" suffers for it, and even with that in mind, Subspace Emissary is still *incredibly strange*.

It begins with a simple fight between Mario and Kirby, which is interrupted by the arrival of bizarre new enemies. These robot/demon/shadow things, working in conjunction with established villains like Bowser and King Dedede, turn Princesses Zelda and Peach into golden trophies and make off with them.

This is the beginning of a twenty-hour adventure through a wide variety of side-scrolling stages, which gradually introduces the entire playable cast of *Brawl*. It's a massive crossover epic in a game that was already a massive crossover epic, and it's almost worth playing through just to see what absolutely ridiculous thing will happen next.

It's also a big mistake.



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If there's one thing the 3D generation of gameplay has conclusively proven, it's that one of the worst things you can do to a game is stretch its engine too far. You can see this in dozens if not hundreds of other games released in the last five years, with things like our old nemesis the Forced Stealth Section or, worse, the First-Person Jumping Puzzle. It's the sudden intrusion of vastly different gameplay in an engine that wasn't designed for it, and it's always a bad move.

Subspace Emissary is a side-scrolling 2.5D action-platformer that uses the *Smash Bros.* engine. It doesn't sound like a bad idea on paper, really, and it worked okay in *Melee's* Adventure mode. In *Brawl*, though, Subspace Emissary is easily the most frustrating part of the game.

The thing about *Smash Bros.* in general is that mindgames are half the fun, and the fast and furious play is the other half. It's most successful when it's at its most chaotic, with four players battling it out and a hundred things happening in the background.

Subspace Emissary, on the other hand, is made to be played relatively conservatively, without any of the goofy mindgames that characterize *Brawl's* versus mode. It's hard the way that arcade quartermunchers are hard; each enemy isn't hard to beat, but they often inflict a couple of cheap hits before they go, so by the time you reach a boss you're sucking fumes and almost out of lives. Then the boss one-shots you, and it's back to the beginning of the stage. To win, you have to get very methodical and precise, which is almost against the very spirit of the game.



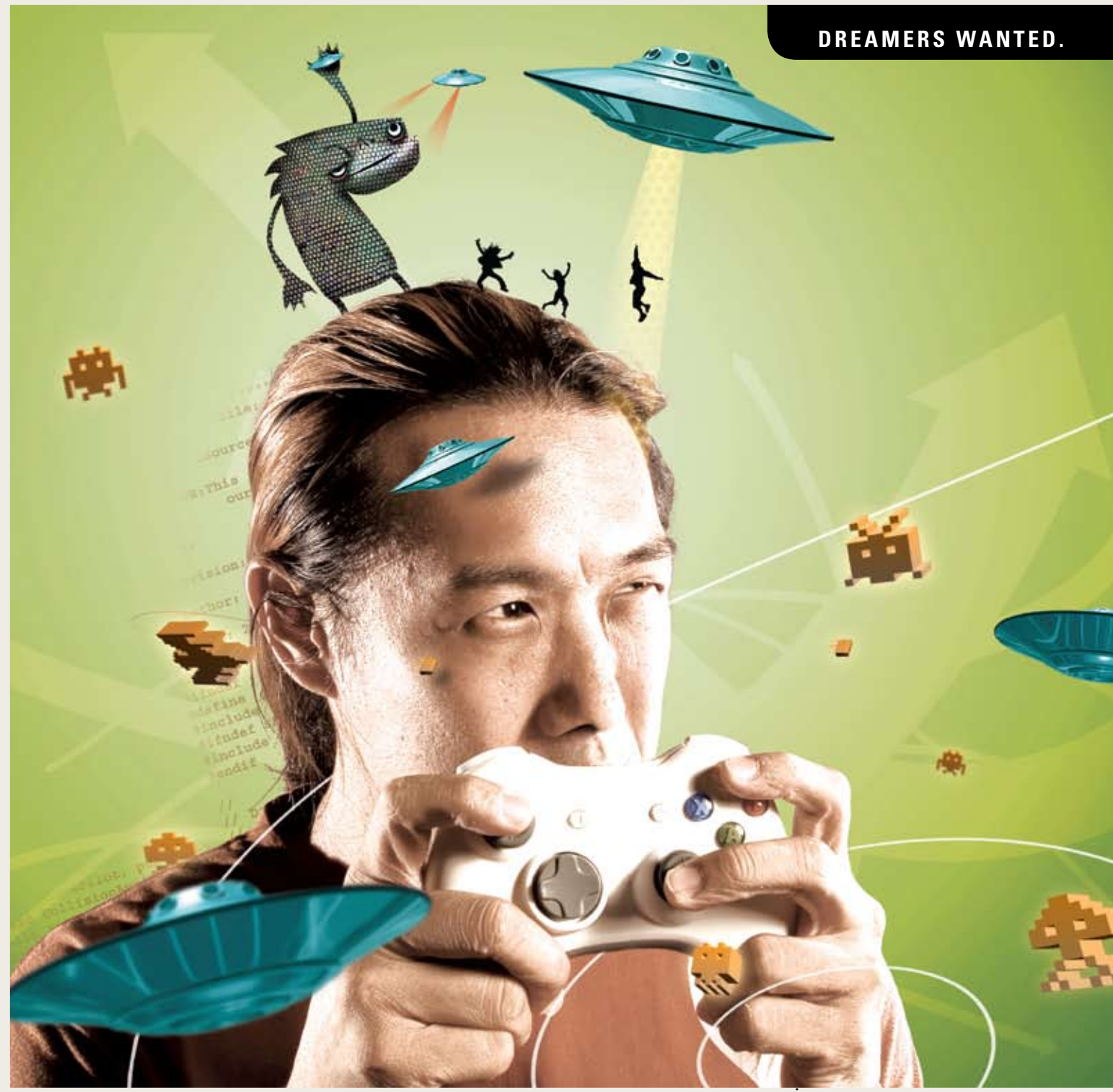
Just to rub salt in the wound, Subspace Emissary blatantly runs out of steam in its last couple of hours, dropping you into a goofy Metroidvania level and forcing you to seek and destroy shadow versions of all the playable characters. It feels like a last bit of busywork, especially after the eighteen hours it took to reach this point.

While Subspace Emissary will make you a slightly better player, since it forces you to use the entire cast at one point or another, it's just poorly designed. The engine is made for fighting other players, and trying to make it work as a platformer is the kind of rookie error I never would've expected to see out of Nintendo.

Of course, it is optional, but beating Subspace Emissary is the fastest way there is to unlock all the extra characters and a good amount of the game's music. It's like a bizarre endurance test of your willingness to unlock certain characters. If playable Sonic hadn't been waiting at the end, I don't think we'd have finished it at all.



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FROM **BRAWL'S**  
**HEART!**  
STAB AT  
**THEE**

My hatred for Subspace Emissary knows no bounds and is constrained by neither space nor time. It isn't a mandatory part of the game, though, and it isn't the whole point of the game, so I'd have to be an idiot to consider the entire experience flawed.

*Super Smash Bros. Brawl* is going to be in every Wii owner's library, and it deserves to be there. More so than any other game Nintendo has released for the Wii, *Brawl* is the perfect embodiment of their new direction as a company. It's great for casual players, great for beginners, great for playing with the family, and great for hardcore gamers. There's no reason not to give this our highest recommendation.

FINAL SCORE :  
**5 of 5**



# STRATEGY,

But of course! Despite all of the madness that is *Smash Bros.*—the items flying around, the unpredictability, the instant-KO techniques, the Final Smashes—*Smash Bros.* is still very much a fighting game. It may lend itself to wild parties more than any other fighting game to date, but it is still a fighting game with techniques, combos, quirks, tactics, and the occasional glitch. Mashing buttons is fun, but knowing just what all of those mashed buttons are doing for you is exactly one percent more fun. So sit back and enjoy this rundown of the game put together by us!

(Special Note: This guide is for more generalized play, rather than following any sort of “tournament rules”. We’re talking about matches that are timed, stock, or coin; items present or non, and any stage. *Smash Bros.* has tons of rules of thumb which are great to know, and especially in a madcap game such as this, knowing your fundamentals holds the greatest key to victory.



## BRAWL NEW WORLD: SIX MAJOR CHANGES IN BRAWL

Every fighting game has its revisions, its upgrades, its sequels. With these new iterations come the inevitable changes to the core gameplay engine. *Smash Bros.* is no different, and several modifications have been made place in the name of balance, accessibility, or, quite possibly, Sakurai just plain messing with us. Whatever the reasons, your ability to adapt will determine how well you do against your friends and online, so be sure to take heed!

### SLOWER, FLOATIER GAMEPLAY



If you have a copy of *Melee* around, feel free to do a comparison. Compared to *Brawl*, *Melee* moved like greased lightning. Characters back then moved faster (even the slow ones), and jumps were merely quick shuttles from Point A to Point B. *Brawl*'s characters, in contrast, move more slowly and methodically, and everyone's got hang time of some sort. You'll notice, though, that with all of that hangtime comes multiple opportunities to land consecutive hits that just weren't present in *Melee*. More importantly, in *Brawl*, since you spend more time in the air as you leap and fall, it gives you more time to maneuver in the air, and to line up your shots. It certainly beats flailing away in the air whenever you make a jump in order to make up for a lack of reflexes. *Brawl* officially has the most air game of any *Smash Bros.* to date, Take advantage of it.

## IN MY SMASH?

SERIOUSLY, IT'S QUITE A BIT MORE LIKELY THAN YOU THINK!

### DESTRUCTIBLE STAGES

Just what the term describes, really; *Brawl* brings destructible terrain to the table. Dish out enough carnage on the walls, floor or even ceiling and odds are, it'll break away, often revealing new chances for knockouts. The Shadow Moses stage is a good place to see this in action. Break away its walls and you can knock people off the sides of the stage instead of just the top.



### SMASHBALLS & FINAL SMASHES



Super Moves have finally invaded *Smash Bros.*, to the tune of Final Smashes! During matches, a Smash Ball will appear on screen, and whoever first manages to hit it so that it breaks will begin to glow (henceforth referred to as “Final Smash Mode”). Pressing B with the analog stick/D-Pad in a neutral position will then allow the character to perform their signature Final Smash. Final Smashes are ultra-powerful, and are good ways to score knockouts in a hurry. Therefore, some doom-sayers may think that these are overpowered free kills, but there's strategy placed all over this concept.

First off, there are two ways to break the Smash Ball—you can rush to it and try to hit it, using either your character's comboability or superior strength (both are taken into account). However, you can also use your character's ability or an item to shoot it open. This tactic leaves you less vulnerable, but you have to be accurate.

## SMASHBALLS & FINAL SMASHES [CONT.]

If someone other than you gets the Smash Ball, you can knock it out of them if you're quick enough by just hitting them a couple of times. Also, if you manage to KO them while they're still in Final Smash Mode, then they've lost that chance to use that Final Smash forever.

The best thing to do, overall, is to know how each and every Final Smash works. A lot of them require correct positioning before activation in order to be effective. Some can also be dodged, or flown over. Therefore, don't ever give your opponent the opportunity to KO you with a perfectly-placed Final Smash! A wasted Final Smash amounts to nothing more than wasted time, and vulnerability once the technique wears off.



## LAW OF DIMINISHING RETURNS

This concept has always been in *Smash Bros.* to some extent, but never before has it been so pronounced and prevalent. The Law of Diminishing Returns reads thusly:

"If thou hath not have the skills nor the chops to use more than one move, then thy game shall deign to make that move less and less useful with each repeated use until thou wisest up."

Gone are spamming Smash attacks with the C-Stick, or using the same special move over and over again (with a couple of exceptions; Sonic, for example, thrives on using repeated move

executions). Try to abuse any move, and over time, it will decrease in both innate strength and launching power. So when that "bread-and-butter" move you've got suddenly starts failing you, now you know why.

## TRIP-AND-FALL

Probably the least welcome new "feature" in *Brawl* at the moment. No one's sure what triggers this, no one's sure how to turn it off, but roughly 1% of the time, characters will comically trip and fall when they attempt to move in some fashion. This, of course, leaves them vulnerable for a second, and throws off just about anyone's groove. Fortunately, in the floaty chaos of your standard *Smash* match, opponents won't be able to take advantage of this very often, but watch out for this nonetheless.



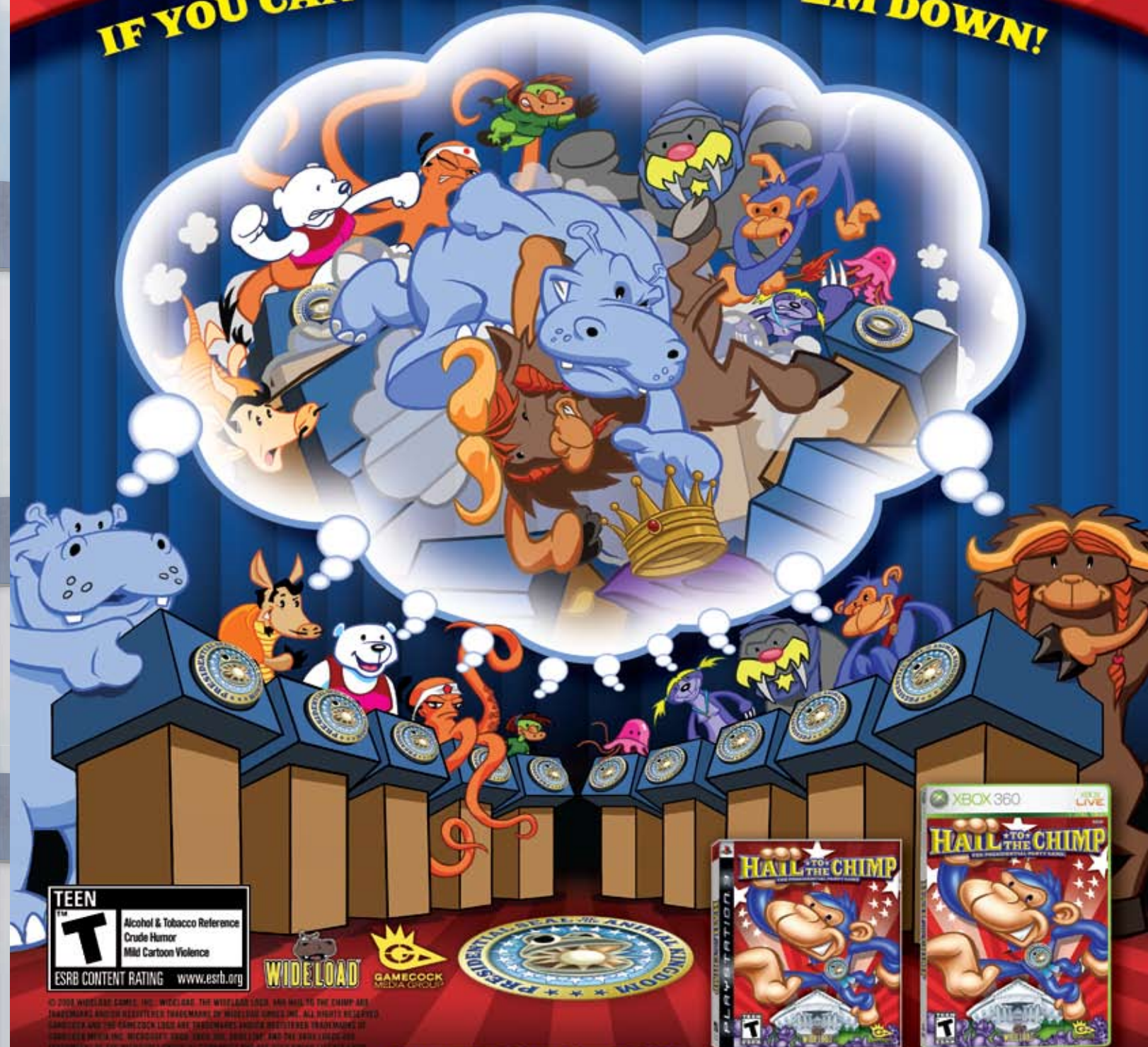
## WALL JUMPING

Walls are everywhere in *Brawl*, so it's great that now characters can jump onto them, stick for a second or two, and then leap back off. It's great for maneuverability, and faking out opponents.

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## UNIVERSAL TECHNIQUES

Remember those fundamentals we were talking about at the beginning of this section? These are some of the best ones to keep in mind. Everyone can perform these, personal speed and weight notwithstanding. Perfect execution of these techniques will bring you that much closer to destroying your opponents.

### UKEMI

Veterans of fighting games or even *Viewtiful Joe* have heard this term before. Been knocked off your keister? For a quick recovery, press the shield button as you come in contact with any surface, be it a wall, ceiling, or solid ground. You'll hop back up and be back in the game without having to wait for your character to revive normally.



### PERFECT SHIELDING

*Street Fighter* fans call them Parries, *Soul Calibur* vets know them as Guard Impacts, other games tend to have their own versions as well. It's all similar in principle, really. Here, tap the shielding button just as someone else hits you, and you'll shield against that attack with hardly any recovery at all.



### SMALL JUMP

Quickly tapping the jump button instead of holding onto it will result in a shorter jump with less height behind it, but less recovery as well. A good way to gauge the type of jump you'll do is to look at your character just before they take off—every one of them will squat for a bit.



### PIVOT GRAB

When you're dashing towards a character, press the direction opposite that dash's direction while performing a grab. The main benefit of this is that you'll be able to grab from further away than usual.

### CHARACTERS



### MARIO

#### BROOKLYN REPRESENT

**SERIES:** Super Mario Bros.  
**STRATS:** Being the all-around character with average movement and stats, Mario's always been a great character to learn the *Smash Bros.* ropes with. His new Down Special move, which involves FLUDD, is a charge move that gives him some much needed pushback power, and his Up Special is good for knockouts. Shoryuken, baby. As long as you get into proper positioning, his Final Smash, the Mario Finale, is very effective. There's a very high chance that whoever gets caught in its stream will be knocked out. This is balanced by it being easy to avoid, so again, positioning is key.



### REPEATED REFLECTORS

Lots of characters have moves that will repel projectiles back to their users. Team Starfox's aptly-named Reflectors are the best-known, but moves like Mario's Cape work just as well. When two characters with this capability face off, Reflector fights can happen in a hurry. If an item is reflected back and forth, it'll keep increasing in power and velocity until it becomes too powerful for one person to handle—in which case, look out.

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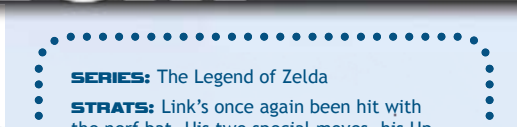


## DONKEY KONG

IT'S ON, LIKE...

**SERIES:** Donkey Kong

**STRATS:** Pound for pound, few combatants have the punching power of Donkey Kong. Even keeping the Law of Diminishing Returns in mind, feel free to abuse his Smash attacks, as they're super-strong. Save his Special attacks, especially his Down Special, for those special moments when crowds of people won't see them coming. His power also means he can pound Smash Balls in a matter of second. A shame then, that his Final Smash, which involves the Bongos, leaves him immobile and has a pitiful range besides. It's best used on smaller stages.



## LINK

WELL, EXCUUUUUSE ME, PRINCESS

**SERIES:** The Legend of Zelda

**STRATS:** Link's once again been hit with the nerf bat. His two special moves, his Up Special and his Up Smash are nowhere near as cheap as they were in Melee. His Up and Down aerial attacks still back a heck of a punch. His Side special, the Boomerang, is now accompanied by a tornado-style attack that makes it much more valuable. For his Final Smash, Link shoots out a super-fast arrow that hits anyone in its line of flight, at any distance, before Link starts wailing on whoever it hits. In the end, Link's another great all-around fighter, with crazy amounts of melee range.



## SAMUS

GOOD 'OLE GIRL POWER

**SERIES:** Metroid

**STRATS:** Good old Samus is still the range queen, rivaled now only by Snake. Her projectiles have been toned down the slightest bit, but they're still just as versatile as in previous installments. Store up Charge Shots for prime moments, and abuse those missiles and bombs. Screw Jump into crowds, but don't go crazy doing so. Her Final Smash works a lot like Mario's, except you can aim the giant beam as it fires. Samus is mind-games and keep-away, through and through.

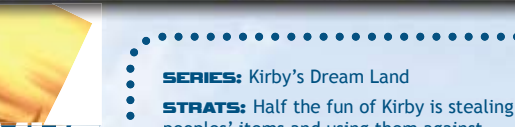


## ZERO SUIT SAMUS

JUSTIN BAILEY'S REVENGE

**SERIES:** Metroid

**STRATS:** This lighter, flightier Samus's Up and Down specials give her two options for aerial recovery: a triple jump, or the ability to hang onto ledges. She's got a little range with her Neutral Special's laser, but most of your time will be spent zipping around the stage. Her Final Smash simply reassembles the Power Suit, but this can damage people in range. To start a match with Zero Suit Samus, simply hold down the shield button as you choose Samus on the select screen. You can also activate this mode in battle by rapidly activating Up and Down Taunts, but it's more trouble than it's worth.



## KIRBY

STAYPINK MARSHMALLOW PUFF

**SERIES:** Kirby's Dream Land

**STRATS:** Half the fun of Kirby is stealing peoples' items and using them against others, but you'd be surprised just how powerful Kirby is all on his own. His moves feel as natural and well-rounded as, say, Mario's, and he's got power and speed to back it up. For the record, his flight-power lets him jump a whopping six times. Oh, and eating people and spitting them off the side doesn't work anymore. Kirby's Final Smash sucks in everything from a certain distance, so if you want to avoid it, get really far away, really fast. Feel free to snipe someone who doesn't see it coming.

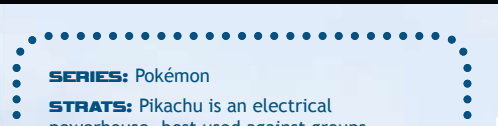


## FOX McCLOUD

BARREL ROLLS

**SERIES:** Starfox

**STRATS:** The Standard Attack button is a Fox player's best friend. These attacks come out like lightning, and along with his dashes, laser blaster (Neutral Special) and deceptively strong Smash attacks, give him a great ground game. Ironically, he's only average in the air. His Final Smash, the Landmaster, renders him invincible, and can be used to knock out enemies with kamikaze and laser attacks. It's pretty slow and clunky, though, so pick your shots.



## PIKACHU

DEUS EX ELECTRICA

**SERIES:** Pokémon

**STRATS:** Pikachu is an electrical powerhouse, best used against groups rather than in one-on-one fights. He's great for clearing out a crowd and stealing kills, and he's super-fast as well. You can juggle enemies with his Down Special if you're timing's good. His Final Smash, the Volt Tackle, is once again great for clearing out crowds, but can be a bit erratic in flight. Usage of the Attack button while flying around will help you make the most of it. Feel free to snipe someone who doesn't see it coming.

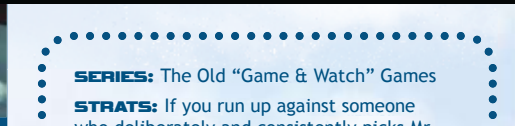


## MARTH

SURVIVED SECOND-DRAFT CUTS

**SERIES:** Fire Emblem

**STRATS:** Marth plays a good deal like Link—a mid-range character with decent reach and speed. He has to get in close to do any real damage, though, which puts him at a disadvantage against ranged folks. His Up Special is particularly sick, and his Down Special is an anticipation counter which is good for faking out enemies on the attack. Other than that, though, standard swordplay tactics apply. Stay in close, and mind the speed (or lack thereof) of your attack arsenal. Marth's Final Smash, Critical Hit, has him dash forward a short distance for the attack. In other words, its range is limited, so position is essential.

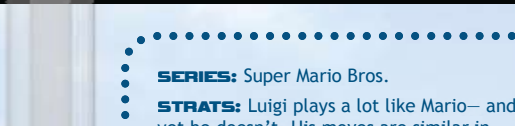


## MR. GAME & WATCH

THE OLDEST ONE HERE

**SERIES:** The Old "Game & Watch" Games

**STRATS:** If you run up against someone who deliberately and consistently picks Mr. Game and Watch, you should probably fear (and watch) them, because odds are, they really know what they're doing. About the best thing you can saw about G&W is that he's deceptively agile. His attacks are fast (especially his Neural Special), and his Down Smash is powerful. He also exercises many maneuvering options after using his Up Special for aerial recovery. His Final Smash turns him into a slow-moving, but invincible, octopus with a decent, but not overbearing, amount of power.

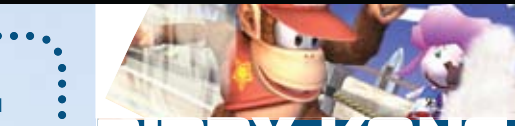


## LUIGI

THE GREEN THUNDER

**SERIES:** Super Mario Bros.

**STRATS:** Luigi plays a lot like Mario—and yet he doesn't. His moves are similar in purpose, but while clunkier, they're a whole lot more useful than Mario's, especially his Down Special, which is an awesome spin attack instead of that FLUDDD nonsense. Mario's Smash attacks seem to be more effective, though. Luigi's Final Smash, the Negative Zone, causes random effects to any enemy inside it. Position yourself so that you can trap opponents, then let it loose.

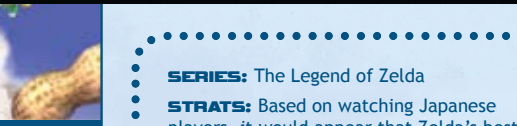


## DIDDY KONG

JOHN WOO'S BANAMANAN

**SERIES:** Donkey Kong Country

**STRATS:** Diddy's another quickest character, able to generate his own banana peels to slip up the enemy. It should be noted that his Up Special doesn't have much forward movement to it, so stay away from cliff edges as much as possible, or you may not be able to recover at all. His Neutral Special, the peanut gun, isn't great on its own, but for some reason, is good for sniping Smash Balls. Said Final Smash, where he fires peanuts all over the place, is decent against crowds, but not all that hot in a one-on-one situation.



## ZELDA

MAGICAL PRINCESS

**SERIES:** The Legend of Zelda

**STRATS:** Based on watching Japanese players, it would appear that Zelda's best offense is a tight defense. The less she has to move around, the better. Simply zone and repel with her various special moves (which is actually pretty easy given her Neutral and Side Specials), and when all else fails, teleport or switch to Sheik. Her Final Smash is a giant arrow that pretty much means instant knockout for anyone who gets hit by it. Just be sure to position yourself.

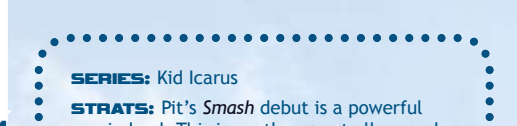


## SHEIK

STRONG ENOUGH FOR A MAN...

**SERIES:** The Legend of Zelda

**STRATS:** Much like Zero Suit Samus, Sheik's main assets are pure speed and unpredictable dashing hits. She's decent in free-for-alls, but awesome in one-on-one matches, where few outmatch her in maneuverability and she can concentrate on a single target. Sheik's Final Smash is the same as Zelda's.



## PIT

MOST UNDERATED N-TEAM MEMBER

**SERIES:** Kid Icarus

**STRATS:** Pit's *Smash* debut is a powerful one indeed. This is another great all around character, with good strikes (his Side Special and Neutral Attack are good, and make decent "walls" against the enemy), a reflecting shield, and the ability to fly, of all things. His Final Smash goes through walls and floors to hit the enemy, making it good for any situation.



## META KNIGHT

CUTCUTCUTCUTCUTCUT

**SERIES:** Kirby's Dream Land

**STRATS:** Meta Knight has tons and tons of combos and strikes. He and the Attack button work great together. However, when it comes to actually knocking opponents out, he's a bit lacking, even with his Smash attacks. To make matters worse, his Final Smash, while powerful, has a very limited range. Basically, to win with Meta, you're going to have to do lots of health-whittling, and steal lots of kills. His Up and Neutral Special moves are good tools to have as well.

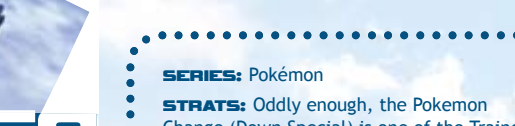


## FALCO

BADASS FOX, AND BLUER, TOO.

**SERIES:** Starfox

**STRATS:** Falco's a little bit different from Fox this time around. His Reflector shoots out a distance, doing damage to whatever he hits; he has more hangtime and less speed (because he's a bird, see), and his Landmaster has far more flight capability. He still, ironically, has a great ground attack game, though. Outside of his distinguishing differences, play him like you would Fox.



## POKEMON TRAINER

ASH KETCHUM? NO, CALL HIM RED

**SERIES:** Pokémon

**STRATS:** Oddly enough, the Pokemon Change (Down Special) is one of the Trainer's best moves. It occurs the instant you input the move, and will remove the Pokemon from whatever harm was about to befall them. It's a great evasion move. As for the Pokemon, Squirtle's fast and has an amazing offense (his Up Special is one of the best uppercut-style moves in the game), Ivysaur has better normal attacks and Smashes than he does specials, and Charizard's got pure power behind him. The Trainer's Final Smash is another beam-type.



## IKE

DEAD RECKONING MEDIEVAL TANK

**SERIES:** Fire Emblem

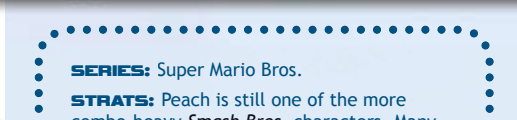
**STRATS:** We're not kidding: Ike really is one of the game's heavy tanks. Every move in his arsenal is designed to dish out maximum pain. This includes his Final Smash, Grand Aether, which renders him invincible, and can hit up to three other opponents if positioned just right. He sacrifices speed for all of this power, though, so keep that in mind.



## SOLID SNAKE

NUCLEAR EQUIPPED WALKING DEATH MOBILE

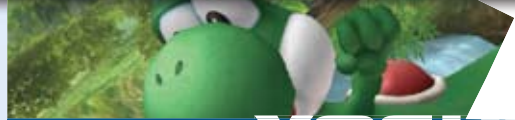
**SERIES:** Metal Gear  
**STRATS:** Oh, man. If you thought Snake did keep-away well, wait until you see this guy. Snake has mind-games galore, from his multiple plantable explosives (Down Smash and Down Special, hand grenades, a rocket-launcher Forward Smash that packs a huge punch, and missiles that he can manipulate in-flight. His Final Smash even takes him off of the playing field as he rains rockets on those present with wanton abandon. He has some decent physical attacks, but your main tactics with Snake will involve seeing just how many ways you can make your enemies go boom.



## PEACH

SUPER PRINCESS

**SERIES:** Super Mario Bros.  
**STRATS:** Peach is still one of the more combo-heavy *Smash Bros.* characters. Many moves have the ability to juggle into another, making her good for one-on-one fights, but average in free-for-alls. Experiment with these moves to find follow-ups that work for you. Still, in those free-for-alls, her Final Smash is great, rendering most opponents on the stage sleeping babies, just waiting to be KOed.



## YOSHI

STILL LAYING MANLY EGGS

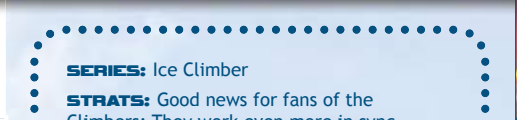
**SERIES:** Yoshi's Island  
**STRATS:** One disadvantage to using Yoshi is that he doesn't have an Up Special that helps him recover in the air like all the other characters. In compensation, he has a higher double jump than most, is very floaty, and can attack multiple times in midair with decent range. Learning to master the power of Yoshi's Side and Down specials, and the speed of his Side Special, is as must. His Smash Attacks are quick, but only average in terms of knockout potential. His Final Smash is actually very good in one-on-one matches, allowing him to juggle opponents with fireballs as he flies around the arena.



## GANONDORF

NOW WITH "CYBER!"

**SERIES:** Legend of Zelda  
**STRATS:** Just as in *Melee*, he's a reverse Captain Falcon. Thus, you may wish to refer to his section. The 'Dorf is heavy and slow, but surprisingly maneuverable, and any hit he lands will pack a wallop. His Final Smash even works like the Blue Falcon, but has a little bit more range to it.



## ICE CLIMBERS

LITTLE HAMMERS

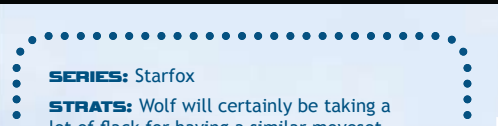
**SERIES:** Ice Climber  
**STRATS:** Good news for fans of the Climbers: They work even more in sync than they did in *Melee*. Nana will follow Popo's moves with a slight but significant lag, allowing players to set up crossover traps. Not only have all of their moves been upgraded in power and versatility, but their Final Smash takes up almost an entire typical stage, and will drain energy from opponents while the Climbers are free to move around for the kill.



## KING DEDEDE

BIG HAMMER

**SERIES:** Kirby's Dream Land  
**STRATS:** DeDeDe's arguably the slowest guy in the game, and of course, he's got the power to back it up. He's so slow, however, that most people won't like him, because the only good time to attack with DeDeDe is when you're 110% sure you'll hit. On top of that, his Up Special won't let him maneuver in midair for recoveries. His Final Smash only hits on the ground. Still, those who persevere will find the King a powerhouse and a tank, with one really dirty trick. His Neutral Special lets him suck the enemy in a la Kirby, but unlike the puffball, he spits out straight ahead.



## WOLF O'DONNELL

CLONE FOX

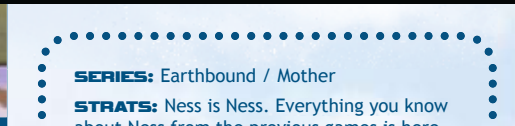
**SERIES:** Starfox  
**STRATS:** Wolf will certainly be taking a lot of flack for having a similar moveset to both Falco and Fox, but wouldn't you know it, he's the only one of the *Starfox* representatives to have both a decent air and ground game in his attack moveset. He also has a wider Reflector, and a faster Up Special. He has a pitifully slow laser to compensate, and a Landmaster just like the other two, but otherwise, Wolf's actually a good character to pick up.



## LUCARIO

MEWTWO'S REPLACEMENT?

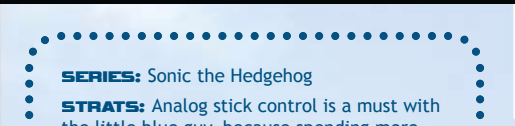
**SERIES:** Pokémon  
**STRATS:** By all accounts, Lucario seems to be Mewtwo with different move directions, and to be frank, his Smash Attacks are far more useful than any one of his Special moves, save for his Neutral, which has him launch a decent fireball attack. He also has a decent Final Smash—a beam-type, but one which allows him to rain death from above.



## NESS

...DIES IN EPISODE 8

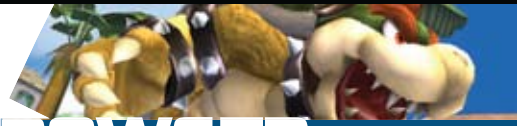
**SERIES:** Earthbound / Mother  
**STRATS:** Ness is Ness. Everything you know about Ness from the previous games is here *Brawl*, outside of his mega-cheapness in the original *SSB*. For those new to him, he's a psychic fighter. His Side Special, PK Fire, hits multiple times and can be spammed. PK Thunder, his Up Special hits both enemies and himself, which is the only way to use the move for aerial recovery. Finally, he comes factory-equipped with the Home Run Bat, one of the best Smash Attacks in the game. His Final Smash, PK Starstorm, is good for clearing out groups.



## SONIC

FASTEST THING ALIVE

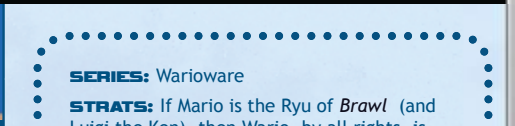
**SERIES:** Sonic the Hedgehog  
**STRATS:** Analog stick control is a must with the little blue guy, because spending more than two seconds going in any one direction means you'll run yourself off the stage. Attacks of note include his Up and Down Smashes, the only attacks that keep him in one place and still do decent damage, and the Homing Attack (Neutral Special). Sonic's Final Smash, Super Sonic, is one of the best. It's like Pikachu's Volt Tackle, only you have total flight control. Part of why analog control is a must, though, is that you're also twice as fast.



## BOWSER

NO LONGER A JOKE

**SERIES:** Super Mario Bros.  
**STRATS:** Bowser is a lot like he was in *Melee*, except now his moves are actually useful, and he's not quite as slow in relation to the other fighters. He's still a power character, though, and as such, you should focus on knockout hits such as his Smashed to win. His Down Special is great for clearing out groups, though it's not so hot on autoscrolling stages. In the end, he's best used in open areas where he can set up his huge hits.



## WARIO

SHOULDN'T BE THIS COOL

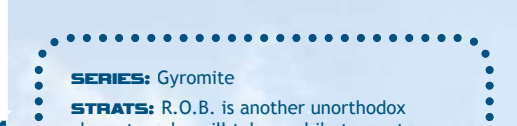
**SERIES:** WarioWare  
**STRATS:** If Mario is the Ryu of *Brawl* (and Luigi the Ken), then Wario, by all rights, is the Sagat. No one saw it coming, either. His movelist are strange renditions of Mario and Luigis, from his multi-hit uppercut, to his versatile bike that can be both ridden and thrown at the enemy, to his spinning Up and Down Smashes, to his Final Smash, Wario-Man, which increases his speed and strength. Expect Wario to become one of *Brawl*'s most popular characters. He's just that good.



## TOON LINK

WELL, EXCUUUUSE ME, TETRA

**SERIES:** The Legend of Zelda: Windwaker  
**STRATS:** It sounds like a cop-out to say that Toon Link is like normal Link, only smaller, but, well, if it walks like a duck, talks like a duck, and quacks like a duck... Toon Link plays mostly like Young Link from *Melee*, in fact. He does get a little bit more in the speed category than Twilight Princess Link, so use it to your advantage. He has less range on his Final Smash, however.



## R.O.B.

ROBOTIC OPERATING BUDDY

**SERIES:** Gyromite  
**STRATS:** R.O.B. is another unorthodox character who will take a while to master. To get you started, two of his better moves are his Side Special, which sends him whirling towards his opponent, and his Down Smash, which lets him stay in the air while repeatedly striking foes. His Final Smash lasts an abnormally long time, and while it's not much of a knockout move, it's very good at draining opponents' energy, so stay near other people while it's going.



## PIKMIN & OLIMAR

LEMMING-FU MASTER

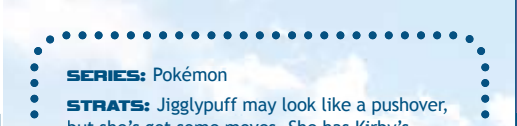
**SERIES:** Pikmin  
**STRATS:** Since Olimar uses his Pikmin for his attacks by way of tossing them, that means that all of his Smash attacks save for his aerial Down Smash) automatically have added range to them. It also makes his throws tough to see coming. Thus, Olimar is right up there with Snake when it comes to playing mindgames with the enemy. As for his Final Smash, End of Day? It may actually be overpowered. When the rocket takes off, it's impossible to avoid damage, but the fall back to earth can be dodged if you're fast. You'd do well to do so, too, as that falling rocket can KO you in a hurry.



## CPT. FALCON

SHOW HIM YOUR MOVES

**SERIES:** F-Zero  
**STRATS:** Falcon's just as fast and powerful than ever, and with the new Reverse Falcon Punch (achieved by holding the controls in the opposite direction of his windup), he's got more versatility and fake-out potential. Otherwise, the Falcon Kick is great for dealing death from above, and he's one of the few characters who excels on both the air and the ground due to his above-average speed and balanced strength. His Final Smash, the Blue Falcon, can be a bit tricky to land with (you have to be right next to your victims, even if they're in the air), but if you can manage it, it's guaranteed tons of damage, and looks awesome to boot.



## JIGGLYPUFF

WILL DRAW ON YOUR FACE

**SERIES:** Pokémon  
**STRATS:** Jigglypuff may look like a pushover, but she's got some moves. She has Kirby's flight factor. She's got a decent Down Attack in the air that does multiple hits, and Rest is still the best knockout move she's got—provided you can actually land the blasted thing. Your opponent has to be overlapping you in order for it to hit. Her Up Special, Sing, causes your opponents to sleep longer if they have higher damage, which can set up some nasty traps. Finally, Jigglypuff's Final Smash has her grow to the size of most entire stages, making her almost unavoidable.



## LUCAS

THE DIGGER... WITH DRILLS?

**SERIES:** Earthbound / Mother  
**STRATS:** Lucas plays more or less like a Beginner's Ness. His PK Thunder travels more slowly, making it easier to aim, but ironically tougher to use as a aerial recovery. His PK Fire doesn't yield as many hits, and he also has a longer throw reach than his counterpart. Otherwise, he really is Ness 1.5. Just like Ness, Luca's PK Starstorm Final Smash is good against groups, but iffy in single-player combat.





# NICHE GAMING

and the  
**PLAYERS of the LOST ART**

a feature by lynxara



aming used to be simple for a hardcore gamer who liked to play stuff that lay off the beaten path. Buy a PS2 and every single weird fighter, shooter, or RPG you'd ever want to play would eventually fall in your lap. To diversify, pick up a GBA (or a few years later) a Nintendo DS. Everything else took care of itself.

The market that confronts a gamer in 2008 is very different. PS2 releases are drying up, slowly but surely, and with them the once-reliable stream of cult delights like *Odin Sphere* and *Persona 3*. No clear replacement for the PS2 as the niche gamer's system of choice is emerging, either. The 360 and Wii are locked in a fierce battle for market share while the struggling PS3 is starting to catch up.

We sat down to talk to actual niche publishers about their plans for 2008, to help you decide which system is most worth a niche gamer's time and money. It's always easiest on a hardcore niche gamer to own every system on the market, but the reality of the situation is that most gamers can only afford at most one or two systems. It's important to pick the system where most of the software is going, or you can be stuck for months with nothing to play as you save up money to correct your mistake.



## THE PS3: LARGER than LIFE

If the recent past belonged to the PS2 when it came to niche gaming, you'd think the future would belong to the PS3, wouldn't you? The reality, though, is that the PS3 demands large development budgets that are at odds with its relatively small number of users. The PS3 has been getting a new lease on life thanks to the growing popularity of Blu-Ray and a new lower-cost (if feature-stripped) model, so by this time next year the situation may be different.

At least, Atlus seems to think so. "The PS3 is certainly a platform we are interested in publishing for, although there are no projects to announce at this time," says Bill Alexander. "The system is starting to hit its stride, and with more and more quality games seeing release, there is no question that the future will bring opportunities for Atlus to contribute to the system's library of titles." Aksys Games also promised some PS3 projects would be announced later this year, though couldn't yet name names.

Still, by far the most important niche title on the horizon for the PS3 is Nippon Ichi's *Disgaea 3*. While *Disgaea 2* didn't duplicate the sheer scale of the original *Disgaea*'s success, it was a popular enough title to suggest that *Disgaea* could easily become a franchise built around its deep and heavily customizable gameplay system. So starved is the PS3 for interesting niche content that while *Disgaea 3* isn't even out in Japan yet, American fans are already looking toward the game's release to 'justify' an investment in the PS3. It's this kind of enthusiasm that can drive a small publisher to take a risky gamble on a big system.

"First we would like to say thank you to all our fans for their unprecedented support. Without their help we would have never been able to develop *Disgaea 3*. Thank you and we truly appreciate all the support," says Jack Niida of Nippon Ichi Software America. "As the Japanese release of *Disgaea 3* approaches closer and closer we are hustling to get ready to localize the game, just as soon as we receive the assets. The full localization of an RPG title can take up to 10-12 months, but we are expecting our timeframe to be shorter. After three *Disgaea* titles we have enough experience and know how to improve our localization efficiency. Our goal is to release sometime in the third quarter of this year, so please look forward to the game." While it's clear that for some people *Disgaea 3* can't come out quickly enough, some fans are already angry that their favorite small publisher's next title is going to be exclusive to an expensive system that otherwise offers little of interest to hardcore RPG fans. Jack Niida believes the PS3's recent price drop is key to success for *Disgaea 3* because of this. "PS3 sales have picked up quite a bit since the price drop and we feel that many of the hardcore gamers that were hesitant at first are beginning to pick up the console. Therefore, we believe there is a market for a hardcore SRPG title despite the lack of top-tier RPG titles."

There is, finally, the contingent of fans convinced that *Disgaea 3* doesn't "justify" being a PS3 title, not pushing the system hardware far enough. There are even accusations that *Disgaea 3* could've easily been a PS2 title. Jack Niida is philosophical about such complaints. "I believe the same criticism was made when *Disgaea* appeared on PS2 for the first time. Many people felt that *Disgaea* should have been for PSOne, but we released it for the PS2. This was done in order to improve the level of game quality and playability."

So the reason why *Disgaea 3* went to the PS3?  
"The main reason why N1 opted to go for PS3 was its processing power and memory size. Many people might not realize, but compared to PS3, the PS2 has a limited amount of memory that can be used to process 2D info, thus limiting the creativity of the developers. PS3 allowed us to expand what we could express within the 2D format and further evolve the battle system," says Niida. "Blu-Ray is a fantastic format, but what we really sought after was console performance."

## WHAT is "NICHE"?



You may be asking yourself: what's a niche game, exactly? This is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. Our modern understanding of "niche game" is best typified by the PS2 game *Disgaea*. It inspired millions of posts and heavy hype online, but it really only moved around 200,000 copies.

Anything that inspires hardcore devotion despite being likely to suffer relatively low sales and low print runs fits the definition of niche we're using for this article. The most common genre for niche titles is RPGs, so you'll read a lot about them here, but other niche genres include adventure games, 2D fighters, puzzle games, and shoot 'em ups.



If the memory difference is so drastically important to Nippon Ichi, it may be important to other developers, too. Niche gamers are usually more forgiving about "poor" graphics than their mainstream counterparts, but they are quick to criticize shallow or broken gameplay mechanics. If increased system memory can make the already-deep *Disgaea* experience even better, then *Disgaea 3* may be the title that convinces other small developers and publishers to take the risk of working with the PS3... provided, that is, that gamers are willing to follow them there.

## THE 360: BIGGER and BETTER

Perhaps the most telling of the upcoming niche releases for the Xbox 360 is *Operation Darkness*, a traditional SRPG developed by Success and set to be published by Atlus. If this game was released even two years ago, it would no doubt be on the PS2, one of the many SRPGs that tried to follow in *Disgaea*'s wake and capitalize on a new American taste for the genre. Its subject matter is typically (if delightfully) Japanese, a tale of an alternate World War II as fought by B-movie denizens like dragons, werewolves, vampires, and zombies.

The game's approach is pulpy and fun, and altogether there's nothing else in the 360 library that's even loosely comparable.

Atlus isn't worried about this offering seeming too exotic to the 360 user base, which has in the past seemed starved for Japanese content. "Getting people excited shouldn't pose a very big challenge. Moreover, the game features a terrific localization with fantastic voice acting, not to mention a great multiplayer mode. We're also working closely with the developer to improve upon the original Japanese release," says Aram Jabbari.

He has a point. Even relatively shoddy or mediocre titles like *Enchanted Arms* and *Bullet Witch* did far better there than they might have in a more crowded market, and none of them had a localization on par with what Atlus was doing on the PS2 even three or four years ago. Perhaps more so on the 360 than any other console, *Operation Darkness* is going to stand out as something unique. If it is successful, then more small developers have reason to believe that the traditional gamer's console is going to lead them to the niche audiences that want their games, too.

## YEAR of the PORTABLE?

If the console situation is getting you frustrated, here's a little tip: you could just skip consoles altogether. The Nintendo DS alone has enough amazing hardcore titles set to ship in 2008 that you could really just spend the whole year playing them. If you factor in the PSP's widening library, then there's really no need to buy new consoles until the inevitable 2009 price drops start to hit.

The reason why the DS is dominating is simple: volume. There are a lot of DSes out there, which means it's a system that most small developers end up wanting to gamble on with unusual projects. "Whenever a system achieves the kind of success and popularity the DS has, it usually translates into more and more developers choosing to create their games for the platform, getting their interactive entertainment in the medium that offers the greatest exposure rate and can reach the largest audience," says Bill Alexander.

XSEED is also committing to the portables while the console situation works itself out. "We like the PSP for its technical capabilities of providing a PS2-like gaming experience with amazing graphics and capacity for a lot of voice-overs, while the DS is more suited to a different kind of quick pickup and play experience with the additional opportunity to do something truly unique with its touchscreen controls and dual screens. We expect to announce titles for both systems this year," says Ken Berry.

The portables are an especially nice deal for the gamer on a budget. While DSes are in short supply as of this writing, you shouldn't end up paying more than the \$129.99 MSRP of a new DS lite to pick one up. The PSP has gone through a series of design changes to emerge as a cheaper, lighter, sturdier machine you can obtain for \$169.99. Both units together cost slightly more than a Wii (sans cost of extra controllers), and less than a new 360 or PS3.



## Wii: the HARDCORE SWIM the BLUE OCEAN

There's no denying that Nintendo's Wii and its new casual-friendly publishing strategy has been a runaway success, already neck and neck with Microsoft's 360 despite hardware shortages and less time on the market. Hardcore gamers, though, tend to have mixed feelings about the Wii. It's easy for a goal-oriented gamer to quickly tire of *Wii Sports* and *Link's Crossbow Training* after awhile, and meatier games only seem to show up perhaps once a month.

For niche publishers, this is a golden opportunity. The Wii's popularity makes it something a hardcore gamer wants to own, with little interest in the casual fare that dominates release charts between major Nintendo exclusives. It's simply a matter of having games ready for them, and making sure it's not something they can just snap up on another system. "Exclusivity as well as a unique gaming experience only possible on the Wii are crucial to reaching the hardcore demographic," says Gail Salamanca. "That's not to say there aren't 'hardcore' gamers out there with Wiis, but you really have to give them a reason to pick up your game over other similar titles across other platforms."

While the Wii is a simple system, it does promise the potential for much better graphics than a comparable PS2 release. Take Atlus's *Baroque*, for instance, where the Wii screens show a tremendous improvement over screens of the PS2 SKU set to be released at the same time. This gives the game legs when otherwise it's a title utterly out of place with the Wii's family-friendly image. *Baroque* is a roguelike dungeon crawler with macabre enemies, gothic atmosphere, and stiff difficulty. Atlus is counting on bored hardcore Wii owners to carry the title to success. "We're confident there are a lot of Wii owners out there craving a more intense, more gritty, more demanding gaming experience, and we're seeking to deliver that for them with *Baroque*," says Atlus's Aram Jabbari.

Another unexpected Wii title is *Castle of Shikigami 3*, the console version of the latest in the long line of popular top-down arcade shooters about unstable flying psychic magicians and the curtains of multicolored bullets that hate them. Interestingly, the Wii *Castle of Shikigami 3* is right now confirmed for US release before the 360 port of the same game. "It's definitely a niche title for sure, especially on a console not known for its hardcore audience," Gail Salamanca at Aksys says, when asked about his company's decision to bring a hardcore shooter to the infamous waggie system. "But, they are out there and we're confident that Shikigami will find an audience on the Wii." It's clear other small publishers are looking into the possibilities of the Wii, too, although they may not be ready to announce specific titles yet. When asked about the possibility of NISA software on the Wii, Jack Niida is content to tease. "We have an exciting line-up this year and we believe some hardcore SRPG fans will be quite delighted with our upcoming Wii title."

## PS2: I'M NOT DEAD YET!

What are your options in the brave new world of gaming in 2008? Well, for one, you can just hold on to your PS2. While support for the console is dwindling, its install base is so large that even small publishers can see themselves continuing to produce games for it in the immediate future. Atlus is, after all, set to release last of *Baroque* for the PS2 alongside the more recent Wii port, while NIS America is set to release last year's *Mana Khemia*, which is for all intents and purposes *Atelier Iris 4* (previewed in this issue!).

Aksys Games scored a hit with *Guilty Gear XX Accent Core* on the PS2, a fighting game that actually sold more poorly on the Wii. "I do think price was one of the main factors in the difference between the 2 SKUs, where the MSRP for the Wii version was \$40 as opposed to the \$30 on the PS2. The other factor could be that the hardcore gamers who follow and play the game religiously already had their favorite controllers and joysticks on the PS2. If they bought the Wii version they would probably have to buy a new joystick which would further add to the cost of the game."



"The system has had an amazing run, and is very lucky that its successor, the PS3, seems to be targeting a slightly different demographic, what with its multimedia capabilities and tremendous processing power. The PS2 remains a great value, with a huge roster of titles to choose from and a number of developers still interested in working on the console," says Atlus's Bill Alexander.

Jack Niida also confirms that NISA is going to continue to support the PS2 through at least 2008. "We believe that PS2 still has a strong market. Our numbers show that PS2 titles are doing well and should continue to do so for quite a while. Therefore, as long as there are quality titles that our fans can enjoy we will continue to support the platform."



## BUT the WINNER IS?

When all's said and done, the Wii seems to be emerging as the niche console of choice for future publishers. The modest system specs keep licensing costs low, and the ever-growing install base makes sales inevitable if a publisher can find the right product. XSEED games, for instance, is up front about their publishing support going primarily to the Wii in 2008.

"Since we license games that have been released outside of North America or at least well into development already, the high development costs associated with Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 makes titles on those platforms without already confirmed North American support few and far between. Most games for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 have the backing of a large multinational publisher behind it even before development begins to ensure that the high development costs can be recouped across all territories," says Ken Berry, XSEED's Marketing Manager.

The Wii also allows niche publishers to try out releases that otherwise would stand no chance of working at all. *Wii Boxing* is one of the more popular entries in the *Wii Sports* package, so why not offer fans a more robust motion-controller boxing experience? That's why XSEED took a gamble on *Victorious Boxers*, a game with otherwise over-the-top anime style graphics. That's because it's actually a licensed title, based on the critically acclaimed *Hajime no Ippo* series. While the anime came out in the US to poor sales under the name *Fighting Spirit*, *Victorious Boxers* acquitted itself just fine as a quirky (if poorly-reviewed) sports title.

"We really enjoyed playing the game and following the *Hajime no Ippo* story within the game, so we decided the general American audience may enjoy it as well. Though the license is not that well known in the US, the game does a very good job of telling the entire story from the beginning so we didn't think that would be an issue. It was just a fun game, regardless of if it was based on a license or not," says XSEED's Ken Berry.

XSEED isn't the only company throwing itself wholeheartedly behind the Wii in 2008, though. Majesco, once-niche holder of the successful *Cooking Mama* license, is also devoting all of its publishing energy to Nintendo's console and the portable DS. "As a company we focus on designing and publishing fun games that are easy to pick up and play. The fast-growing demographic of the Wii and DS aligns very well with this strategy, but we will follow it to other platforms when it makes sense to for us. This strategy is certainly more effective by the lower development costs on the Wii and DS platforms which allow us to release products more quickly and cost effectively," says Liz Buckley, Director of Marketing at Majesco.

Perhaps earlier than any other publisher, Majesco consciously realigned themselves to take advantage of Nintendo's new "blue ocean" strategy. The unexpected financial success of *Cooking Mama* on the DS and Wii made it clear where the industry was heading. "The casual market is among the fastest growing segments so there's a lot of potential market opening up and they're looking for new experiences," says Buckley. Now Majesco as a publisher is looking for more *Cooking Mama*'s, niche gems that can be polished into mainstream offerings.

Buckley articulates Majesco's strategy. "In a hit driven business, I think every publisher wants to find an 'undiscovered gem.' Our strategic objective as a company is to release a wide range of casual and family oriented games for the mass market. Here and there in our lineup we do have a more niche title, but that's because we also opportunistically pursue titles that we think can perform well at retail. If the economics are viable and we think a product has a place on shelf, we'll bring it to market."

The PS2 can support titles for now, but the decay has already set in. Atlus had to go back to 2006 to find the version of *Baroque* they'll be releasing for that platform, and Aksys is forthright about PS2 releases now needing price drops to be appealing. It may not happen in 2008, but perhaps in 2009 or 2010 the system is simply not going to be viable anymore. Majesco decided to get out of the PS2 business before the market went soft. "We refocused our corporate strategy to focus on the casual gamer, and hence the Wii and DS, more than a year ago, so we've already weathered the transition so to speak."

Now the future belongs to Nintendo as far as Majesco is concerned. "We believe that the casual game audience will continue to grow and so will our opportunities to bring games to consumers across a variety of platforms. That being said, we believe that the Wii and DS will continue to offer some of the best game experiences in the marketplace and already have plans to support them well into 2009."

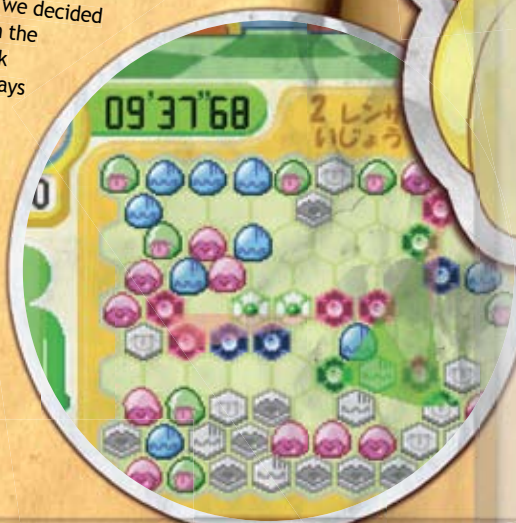
Majesco isn't the only small publisher where niche and casual gaming are beginning to dovetail. When speaking of NISA's 2008 DS puzzle title *Puchi Puchi Virus*, Jack Niida says, "Puchi Puchi Virus will be published under a new NISA division that focuses on casual games. A new NISA logo with more passionate coloring and design has been created to set these games apart." "Our main focus is to localize and publish RPGs, and that will not change," Jack Niida continues. "However, like all game freaks, we love exciting puzzle games, action games, etc. We figured it wouldn't hurt to venture off a little to a different genre. *Puchi Puchi Virus* is a distinct and addictive puzzle game, and we're quite certain many casual gamers will enjoy it."



## NICHE GAMERS and the QUEST FOR FUN

Niche gamers are ultimately like every other kind of gamer: they want to have fun. The only thing that separates them from casual and mainstream gamers is what they find fun, which are usually genres others might accuse of being boring, outdated, or simply too difficult to enjoy. Well, it takes all kinds to make both a world and an industry, and the growing games market of 2008 isn't going to forget about niche gaming in the rush to get other types of games to the market.

The PS3 needs niche games to grow its system library. The 360 needs them to prove that the system can deliver unique Japanese content to American gamers. The Wii needs niche titles to prove that it's a system that can deliver hardcore games to hardcore gamers. 2008 is set to be one of the most diverse years in gaming history, and ultimately, it's niche gamers who'll win no matter what else happens, with a greater variety of niche games coming from small publishers across all platforms.



# Tournament CASH PRIZES of 2007

With all the attention and coverage that tournaments like the Championship Gaming Series have received, I became curious as to just how much money there really was in competitive gaming. But given the difficulty of tracking down the details of sponsorship contracts for professional teams like Complexity and Pandemic, this article focuses mainly on the easiest value to quantify: cash.

Hopefully, aspiring professional gamers will realize that the money from tournament prizes are just one thing out of many that determine whether or not it's worth devoting their days and nights to this line of work - and *it is work* - to maintain the caliber of skill and the dedication necessary to remain competitive against the rest of the world. However, tournament prizes are an easily measurable watermark for the amount of funding, attention and significance that professional gaming receives today. The more money that is at stake in a competitive scene, the more that is invested into it, through ways like training, equipment, coaching, and even management. Serious players are encouraged to read about techniques, leadership and developing a winning attitude. Industry veterans like Dave Sirlin have even written books on the concept of winning itself, based upon the foundation of Chinese martial doctrine known as the *Art of War*, and there are companies devoted to nothing but high-caliber equipment such as Razer and Fatal1ty/Creative that are comparative to Nike, Adidas and Reebok.

## Criteria for Inclusion

We divided up the games into four main categories: Fighting/Combat, First-Person Shooter, Sport/Music and Real-Time Strategy.

Some excellent games turned out to lack cash prizes, *Guild Wars* being one of the best examples. Had *Guild Wars* been included in the list, then paired with *World of Warcraft* and *Defense of the Ancients*, it would have warranted its own category for RPG Combat. However, tournaments for *Guild Wars* awarded gift certificates, thereby excluding it from this list. As a side note, if *Hellgate: London* has a competitive tournament in this vein in the future, it would fit right in with *DotA* and *WoW*.

There are two very important rules to be aware of. Only tournaments that had pre-determined prizes were eligible for this list. It would be impossible to track down every tournament that was simply a distribution of prize money to first, second and third rankings, and such figures are also more difficult to verify. This rule also excludes the 2008 Pontiac G5 (MSRP: \$18,000) in

last year's *Guitar Hero III* tournament.

Second, only tournaments in English-speaking regions were counted, as the barrier of entry towards tournaments in Asia and South America can be quite difficult.

As many readers are aware, South Korea's budget for *Starcraft: Brood War* tournaments probably exceeds the GDP of several American states combined. However, we simply don't have the capability to track them. There were a few tournaments taking place in Europe; prize amounts were converted from British pounds or euros to US Dollars.

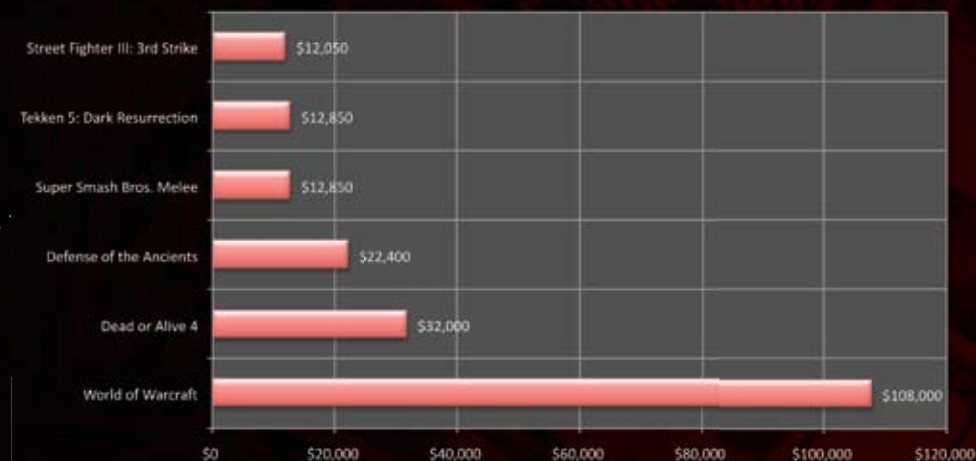
Feature by Arieth

# FIGHTING/COMBAT

Average (Excluding Outliers): \$20,025.00

As expected, fighting games got the short end of the stick. With the exception of *Dead or Alive 4*, every 'normal' fighting game was mostly funded by the annual Evolution tournament hosted by Shoryuken.com. On the other hand, *DotA* and *WoW* have extremely strong competitive bases. The online gaming factor plays a huge role in

accessibility to competitive play, but for many fighting games, the technology or programming available simply isn't fast enough to compensate for lag. As much as we love Xbox Live, it's impossible to play decent games of *Street Fighter* on it, unless they implement a peer-to-peer client such as the GGPO standard (GGPO.net) developed by the Cannon brothers. Here's hoping that *Street Fighter IV* revives the scene.



# FIRST PERSON SHOOTER

Average (Excluding Outliers): \$121,914.25

First-person shooter games remain the bread and butter of the North American competitive gaming scene. Coincidentally or not, these games often have the highest investment requirements. With gargantuan video cards costing more than an Xbox 360, 1800+DPI precision mice (your typical mouse has 600-800) and surround-sound headphones serving as a surrogate radar system, it's little wonder that hardware companies also put the lion's share of promotional funding here. This is because in the PC professional FPS scene, the onus of hardware requirement is on the player, not the console developer. For that matter, you could expect *Crysis*, with its insane spec requirements, to receive a boost from the industry.

However, this theory doesn't explain the predominance of console FPS games, despite their limitations due to lack of professional hardware (mouse/keyboard players will beat a console player every time). The only explanation is the combination of market share (copies sold) and accessibility: both top console titles, *Halo 3* and *Gears of War*, are on Xbox Live. There may be a market for professional FPS console controllers in the future, if current league regulations remove the ban on modified or 'non-standard' controllers.

What's up with *F.E.A.R.* featuring so much cash? This game's tournament funding seems to be solely determined by the CPL (Cyberathlete Professional League). Does Sierra own the CPL now?



# SPORTS & MUSIC

**Average (Excluding Outliers): \$22,750.00**

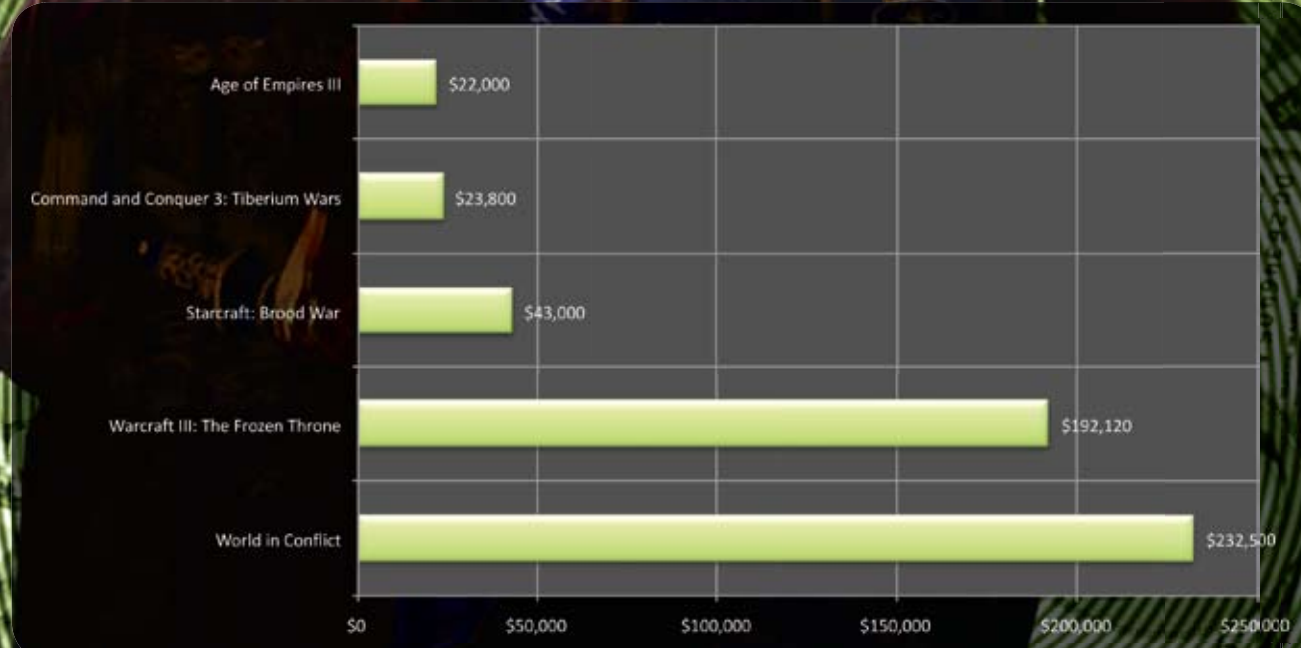
For some odd reason, *FIFA Soccer* tops this list. We don't even play soccer... err, 'football' in America. Much. Anyway, *real* football (AKA 'Dat *Madden*') is near the bottom of the list. Our research shows that the vast majority of *Madden* tournaments are conducted at gatherings of people's houses, and organized through, of all things... MySpace. And while *Guitar Hero* doesn't seem to fare much better at all, the local tournament scene for it is extremely well-organized through the official website. Besides, one kid won a Pontiac G5.



# REAL TIME STRATEGY

**Average (Excluding Outliers): \$86,306.53**

Unfortunately, there are no Asian tournaments on this list. The European scene is still extremely competitive in this genre, and the battles between the Korean elite and Europe's team of the Four Kings are top-caliber. We may see *Supreme Commander* show up this year on the competitive scene, but from what we've heard, the bandwidth load for a multiplayer game is so intense that most PC cafes refuse to offer it for online play. Again, the big surprise here is Sierra's *World in Conflict*, almost exclusively supported by the Cyberathlete Professional League through Sierra Games.



**What's Coming in 2008?**

It looks like things are going to become bigger and badder this year around. With a \$1,000,000 tournament for *Halo 3* in the summer, Major League Gaming's newly signed deal with ESPN, and *Street Fighter IV* looking to revitalize the fighting game scene, we're looking forward to tournament-caliber play of all kinds on prime-time television. I personally watched last year's Super Battle Opera tournament through a live internet broadcast from Tokyo, outputted to my television. I would gladly have watched this via Pay-Per-View, and perhaps via ESPN, such features may become available.

To prepare yourself for this coming renaissance in professional gaming, you may want to learn how to hold your own local tournaments to hone your skills. If you're not quite experienced in this field, check back with us at Hardcore Gamer while we show you how to start your own championship scene!



## Missing Genres

Sadly, the scene for competitive puzzle gaming is non-existent in the United States. Also missing from this list are flight simulators, which have pretty much died out as a genre since *Freespace 2*. The puzzle genre is among the highest in appealing to both male and female gamers, but a major movement for tournament play hasn't existed since the *Tetris* revolution in the late '80s.

## Verdict

All together, these tournaments add up to over two million dollars. This sounds like a lot, until you realize that this accounts for the total accumulated prize pool, not the award for winning first place. And typically, the larger the pot, the more people the money goes to, spreading out from the top three to the top eight instead. Finally, if you're playing a team game like *Counter-Strike*, be prepared to split the earnings five ways; six, if you're counting Uncle Sam (don't forget, your winnings are taxed). Truthfully, the prize pools for the Sierra games hosted by CPL really made me reconsider my choice of gaming.

What does this mean for the professional gamer? The same thing that it means to any professional athlete: more victories means more exposure, and more exposure means possible endorsements. Professional clans like Complexity make their bread and butter through their sponsorships, and winning tournaments is just icing on the cake. There's also Fatal1ty (Johnathan Wendel), the first western gamer to achieve "pro-athlete" status with his successes, both in tournaments and in business. These are exceptions to the rule, and video games still have a long, long way to go before reaching the same level of legitimacy that a professional sport enjoys. Still, there is hope.

Professional gaming is only but one of many paths that provide a path to personal development. Taken past its often violence-laden exterior of machine guns, sword slashes and explosions, one can find a medium that is unrivaled in its integrity and fairness. In a properly maintained setting, there are few allowances for judgment calls; a knockout is a knockout, a headshot is a headshot, a win is a win. Furthermore, physical handicaps are by no means an absolute barrier to professional-caliber play. You can be missing a hand, a foot, or even be partially paralyzed, and still somehow find a way to remain in the game. Tournament gaming is much more accessible than the height requirements to be in the NBA, or the physical speed and muscle for the NFL, because it is skill that ultimately determines victory. It is this competitive ideal that will continue to attract more people towards the field of professional gaming in the future... and with it, perhaps, a paycheck.



## Major Tournaments

If you're interested in seriously pursuing your game of choice, here's a list of some of the world's biggest events and their hosted games.

Championship Gaming Series:  
www.thecgs.com

*Project Gotham Racing, Counter-Strike: Source, Dead or Alive 4, FIFA '08, World of Warcraft*

World Cyber Games:  
www.worldcybergames.com

*Age of Empires III, Command and Conquer III, Dead or Alive 4, Counter-Strike 1.6, FIFA Soccer, Gears of War, Need for Speed: Carbon, Starcraft, Project Gotham Racing 3, Warcraft III, Carom3D, Tony Hawk's Project 8*

Evolution Championship Series:  
www.evo2k.com

*Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike, Tekken 5: Dark Resurrection, Super Smash Bros. Melee, Marvel vs. Capcom 2, Guilty Gear XX: Act Cadenza, Virtua Fighter 5, Capcom vs. SNK 2, Super Street Fighter II: Turbo*

Blizzard World Invitational:  
www.blizzard.com

*Warcraft III, Starcraft, World of Warcraft*

Intel Extreme Masters:  
www.es1-world.net/masters

*Counter-Strike 1.6, Warcraft III, World of Warcraft*

Cyberathlete Professional League:  
www.thecpl.com

*F.E.A.R., World in Conflict*

Major League Gaming:  
www.mlpro.com

*Halo 3, Rainbow Six, Gears of War*

Electronic Sports World Cup:  
www.esworldcup.com

*Counter-Strike 1.6, WarCraft III, Quake 4, Pro Evolution Soccer 6, Trackmania Nations*

ASUS Winter Cup:  
http://cyberfight.org/site/asuscup/

*Counter-Strike 1.6, Warcraft III, Defense of the Ancients, FIFA '08, Starcraft, Quake 3*

Multiplay i32:  
i32.multiplay.co.uk

*Counter-Strike: Source, Quake 4, Call of Duty 4, Crysis, FIFA '08, Team Fortress 2, ET: Quake Wars, World in Conflict, Battlefield 2, Supreme Commander, Code of Conduct*

QuakeCon:  
www.quakecon.org

*Enemy Territory: Quake Wars, Quake I-IV*

WC31 (Electronic Sports League):  
http://www.es1.eu/eu/wc31

*Warcraft III*

# HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE TOURNAMENT COVERAGE



**HGM REVIEW GAUGE**

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

# DRAGON QUEST SWORDS

The Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors



Dragon Quest Swords is a tough title to review. It's Square Enix's first big action RPG on the Wii, so it's got some measure of hype behind it. Considering the fact that Square Enix is known for being basically the biggest, baddest RPG maker on the block and that Dragon Quest is to Japan what Final Fantasy is to the States, DQS is kind of a big deal. DQS is a spin-off of the main Dragon Quest series, rather than a true sequel. Think of it as being similar to Final Fantasy X-2 and you'll be close to the right track.

DQS has an attractive visual style. Akira Toriyama is popular for a reason, and though some of you may be growing weary of his distinctive style by this point, it still looks good and interesting enough despite some drab character design. There are a few flashes of, if not brilliance, quality design sense, but the majority of them fall into your standard RPG tropes.

Dragon Quest Swords's gameplay is interesting. It's a first-person RPG that's made to utilize every facet of the Wii remote. This means that you move, attack, and access your menu with just one hand. The movement and menu access works about how you'd expect. Pressing the D-pad up and down moves the hero character forward and backward, while left and right turn the character.

You won't be doing much turning, however. The pathways you're going to be traversing are fairly linear, to the point that, if not for the fact that you control your forward motion, it'd practically be an on-rails RPG. It is an odd choice, and actually kind of irritating. Recent video games across basically every genre but sports have encouraged a "free roaming, explore everything, and travel everywhere" style of gameplay. DQS feels like a step backwards. The little arrow on the minimap that tells you where you need to go is both a help and a hindrance. It's nice to be guided, but a pop-up, an arrow, and dialogue cues seem like a bit much.

The combat is handled via swinging the Wii remote. Diagonal, vertical, and horizontal slashes result in the appropriate action happening on screen. Where and how you slash matters, as a vertical slash with the remote pointing to the left will slash on the left-hand side of the screen. You have to have pretty decent aim to get by, though the game is fairly forgiving. If need be, you can point at the screen and select a focus point, so that any action you perform will happen there, instead of according to where you actually swung the remote.

PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX • DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX  
GENRE: RPG • CATEGORY: FIRST-TIMERS' CLUB  
RELEASE DATE: 2/19/2003 • # PLAYERS: 1 • RATING: CEEN



Review by 4thletter

It's a weird system, though almost completely intuitive. Swinging a sword at an enemy is easy, obviously, but making the adjustment involved in real-life swinging and where the swing happens on the game can be tricky. Sometimes, you'll just miss because you don't quite make the connection in time. At other times, you can just swing like an idiot and succeed. Blocking is done similarly, though based on position rather than motion.

Sometimes enemies will line up in neat little patterns, so that you can take them out with one stroke. It might be diagonal, horizontal, or vertical, but it gives the player a chance to take out a group of enemies with one quick stroke, rather than having to slash multiple times. During times when you've got a few enemies in the foreground and archers in the background, this can mean the difference between life and death. The trick is recognizing the pattern as it forms, as it doesn't last very long on-screen. Therein lies the problem with Dragon Quest Swords. It feels like Fisher Price's My First RPG. The linearity, the combat, and the story are all way too simple for anyone who is into action RPGs. It's a little too easy, as well. You are going to just slash, slash, and slash until the end of the game sneaks up on you.

This makes the game hard to get into for anyone but a newer gamer, which I suppose is part of the point. Part of the fun of most games is being pushed back when you push, even for casual gamers. A little challenge goes a long way. It invigorates the player and gives him something to come back for. The problem is that DQS is too short and simple of a game, unless you're new to the RPG field.

To an experienced player, that is going to be a huge turnoff. There isn't much to dig into and really chew on. It feels like your hand is being held throughout at best. You're given the story setup, the potential of the control system, and a sharp visual style... but it comes with training wheels. The only reason why you wouldn't basically breeze through the game is if your aim is consistently off during combat. Otherwise, you're in for an easy time.

## SECOND OPINION

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

Yes it's basic and super simple as far as RPGs go, but it's still a satisfying and fun game. Fans of the DQ franchise and younger Wii owners will find Dragon Quest: Swords perfectly suited for the console.

FINAL SCORE :  
**2.75 of 5**

# REVIEW TEENAGE ZOMBIES

"INVASION OF THE ALIEN BRAIN THINGYS"

Review by 4thletter

Publisher : Ignition Entertainment  
 Developer : InLight Entertainment  
 Release Date : 4/15/2008  
 Rating : Everyone 10+

Genre(s) : Platformer  
 Category : Camp  
 # of players : 1



make it through the game (mostly) intact. Lefty, the fallen star of the girls' basketball team, can leap across gaps, extend her arms for that extra bit of reach, or pick up a nail gun and go to town. Half-pipe can skate under low, low ledges, launch himself off pipes, or hit things with his skateboard. Fins can climb nearly any wall, traverse wires, and attack in three directions at once.



If you're anything like me, you look back on *Zombies Ate My Neighbors* with fond memories, and perhaps even wish for a sequel or big budget next-gen remake every once and a while. Well, I've got some good news and some bad news... *Teenage Zombies: Invasion of the Alien Brain Thingys!* is pretty much the spiritual successor to *ZAMN* in tone and humor. The problem is that it's been crossed with *Lost Vikings*... no, actually, that isn't a problem at all, is it?

Like *ZAMN*, *Teenage Zombies* uses a '50s monster/sci-fi movie aesthetic to set the stage, complete with the goofy sound effects and overwrought monologues that made that decade infamous. *TZ* goes completely over the top with it, of course. Calling the villains, the eponymous invading alien brain thingys, caricatures is being a bit too nice about things. They are movie monster aliens taken to their (ill-)logical extreme. The story is told through comic book panels and a surprising amount of voice acting. It's a funny little game, and nothing shows that more than its plot. When alien brain monsters invade... the only ones who can stop them are a trio of recently zombieified teenagers. It's a movie monster collision and absolutely ridiculous on the surface, but strangely interesting.

The teenaged zombies, Fins, Lefty, and Half-pipe, each have their own unique abilities, and working as a team is really the only way to

Basically, *Teenage Zombies* is a platform slash puzzler. There may be areas that only Half-pipe can get through, which lead to a power-up for Fins, which will open an area that features a platform that only Lefty can access. They are simple puzzles, and nothing overly complicated, but still plenty of fun to figure out.

*Teenage Zombies* is pretty much the perfect portable platformer. The stages are short and sweet, with just the right mix of platforming action and puzzles. There are a wealth of minigame challenges to be found, and therefore plenty of replayability. The sense of humor helps a lot with making the game experience compelling, too. It's just on the delightful side of corny, and manages to walk that line for the entire game. Good show.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Roger Danish • Alternate Rating : 4 of 5  
*Teenage Zombies* is a cute, fun little game that is well suited for a portable platform.



# REVIEW NINJA GAIDEN DRAGON SWORD



Publisher : Tecmo  
 Developer : Team Ninja  
 Release Date : 3/25/2008  
 Rating : Teen

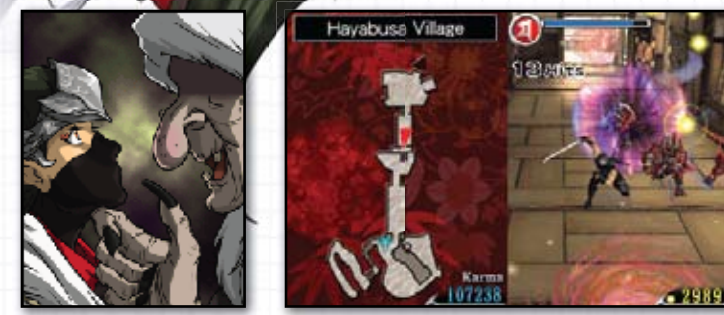
Genre(s) : Action/Adventure  
 Category : Ninja  
 # of players : 1

*Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword*, while keeping the "DS" subtitle of the first wave of DS games, is something brand new and simultaneously refreshing and frustrating. In a way, it's a lot like the original Xbox game that it was spawned from.

*Dragon Sword* takes place some months after *Ninja Gaiden* and features a new visual style and a few new cast members and a few old favorites. Momiji is the ninja girl and damsel in distress for the game, Muramasa will still sell you goods, and Ryu is, once again, the baddest ninja that ever did it.

The story takes a backseat, of sorts, to the gameplay, however. Not only is *Dragon Sword* the first true sequel to *Ninja Gaiden*, it's the first one to hit a non-next gen system. The DS doesn't have the processing power or control capabilities of the PS3 or Xbox, so the big question is "How does it play?"

Surprisingly well, actually. The DS is held like a book and the stylus generally controls everything. There are exceptions made for blocking, but *Dragon Sword* will have your stylus down to the touch screen for essentially the entire game. Shurikens are thrown by way of tapping your target with a quick touch. They're a must against archers,



# REVIEW NINJA GAIDEN DRAGON SWORD



Publisher : Tecmo  
 Developer : Team Ninja  
 Release Date : 3/25/2008  
 Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : Action/Adventure  
 Category : Ninja  
 # of players : 1

which are sometimes otherwise inaccessible. Slashes with the stylus result in regular attacks, which can be stacked and repeated for a higher combo count.

There are a few special attacks, as well. The classic Izuna Drop is done with a simple tap-drag-drag motion. It's just easy enough to do reliably, but not so easy that you can dominate the game with repeated uses. Ninpo makes a return, and has gone through a few changes. The fire ninpo, for example, is activated by pressing a button on-screen, tracing a symbol, and then directing the fireball in the direction you want it to go. It's extremely fluid and well-integrated to the game, and a welcome break from the hectic action.

The action is appropriately tough and hectic, though sometimes a little hard to see. There is a lot to keep track of, and sometimes the combination of hit sparks, enemies running on screen, and your hand getting in the way of the action can be a bit much. Often you'll just be blindly slashing at whatever moves on screen and throwing style or restraint to the wind.

*Dragon Sword* is a good game. It's an interesting evolution of the brawler, a neat implementation of DS controls, and a worthy successor to its notorious forefather. The change in style and control did it a favor: it's just different enough from *Ninja Gaiden* to be able to be judged on its own merits, but similar enough to be part of an already classic lineage.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

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





LITTLE KNOWN VW OPTION: FLIGHT

# Beetle Adventure Racing!



THOSE ARE SOME GIGANTIC ANTENNA BALLS!



DARN, I'M NOT BUMBLEBEE, HE'S YELLOW.



THE SACRED ENTRANCE TO HOOTERS RESTAURANT



...IT'S BEEN THREE DAYS SINCE MY LAST CONFESSION...

One of the big problems with racers is that they tend to be products of their time. PC games like Sierra's *Nascar 2003* and *Grand Prix Legends* have managed to stay alive thanks to a devoted fan base and more user-generated content than even a member of the Professional Stick-Shaker's Guild could shake a stick at, but console racers rarely have any kind of shelf-life past the generation they were released in. It's one of the genre's big problems, but not one that *Beetle Adventure Racing* suffers from.

reason to explore every side road, despite very few of them actually being shortcuts, because bonus boxes are everywhere.

There are three kinds of boxes to find, and driving through them collects the goodies inside. The nitro boxes are the most helpful when you're actually racing, giving out a short burst of speed that shrinks down the distance between you and the front of the pack quite nicely.



WHO BUILT THIS TRACK, M.C. ESCHER?

There are also flower boxes, which are hidden and unlock cheat options for those good enough to both find them and complete the race. The most common and troublesome one, however, is the bonus box. This is a crate with a number on the side, and they come in three values. Two-pointers are all over the place and very easy to see. Five pointers are much more scarce, and the rare ten point boxes require some serious exploring and driving finesse to turn up.

Each course has one hundred points to find, and those points have two uses. Getting all one hundred points in one race opens up a new arena for Beetle

The current incarnation of the VW Beetle launched in 1998, and it was less than a year before a game took advantage of its popularity. That *Beetle Adventure Racing* turned out to be one of the best racers of its generation came as something of a surprise, but there's no denying the sheer long-lasting fun of a great arcade racer. Solid controls, creative tracks, and a car loaded with personality turned what could have been a no-frills racer into a complete blast.

There's no way to deny the seeming lack of content in *BAR*. Although there are three different sets of statistics for each of the three classes of Beetle, it's still only one car, without even the original VW Bug for variety. Single race or tournament are the only two racing modes, there's

one bonus car-combat multiplayer mode called Beetle Battle with a variety of unlockable arenas to duke it out in, and that's it. To top it off there are only six race tracks in the entire game. That doesn't seem like much on the surface, but the tracks are huge, and filled with so much variety and challenge that they're always a complete blast to race through. *BAR* absolutely shines with variety in its environments, and each track has a huge array of detours to find. There's good



ISLAND HOPPING TO SNAG ONE OF THOSE SCARCER BONUS BOXES



HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM.

Platform: Nintendo 64  
Publisher: Electronic Arts  
Developer: Paradoxim Entertainment  
Release Date: March 1999  
Genre: Arcade Racer  
Category: Exploration  
# of Players: 1-4

Edumed by James

Battle, but getting fifty points in Championship gives out a valuable continue. While this isn't all that necessary in the Novice or Advanced circuits, continues get a lot more useful once you hit Professional.

At the start of *BAR*, the Novice circuit is open and there are two courses available for a single-race challenge. The Novice circuit is three courses long, and even if you somehow manage to not come in first, completing it will add the third course to the single race menu. Beating Novice in the top spot, however, opens up Advanced, which is the three Novice tracks plus a new one, and then on to the Professional and Bonus circuits to open up the last courses. Seeing as the

length of a single three-lap race can range from six to ten minutes, it's a task that requires some marathon gaming.

This would get repetitious fairly quickly in a game with less creativity, but *BAR*'s courses have so much variety they refuse to wear out their welcome. Take the volcanic *Inferno Isle*, for example. Starting at the beach, the path quickly enters the jungle where you can either drive through a t-rex infested park or take a detour through the swamp, complete with a jump that smashes through a hut in the middle of the water. This is followed by the s-curves and jumps of the Mediterranean-style town on the hill, with a very tricky shortcut bypassing most of the curves but ending in a dangerous T-junction. There's nothing quite like seeing the result of all that clever driving being an exploded Beetle.



HAZARDOUS CHEMICAL SPILL AT THE SIMPLE GREEN FACTORY



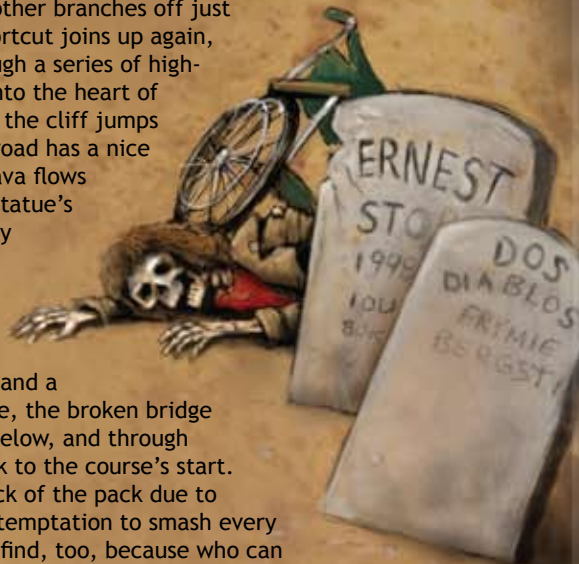
I HEARD THAT THIS GAME COULD EAT YOU FOR LUNCH...

Once you're out of town, there's a choice of two detours. One is a series of jumps off a pier, onto an island, and then connecting back with the main course, while the other branches off just before the first shortcut joins up again, taking a path through a series of high-flying cliff jumps into the heart of the volcano. While the cliff jumps are fun, the main road has a nice hop past a set of lava flows before entering a statue's mouth into the fiery volcanic inferno.

Once past that there's a few thin catwalks over instant death and a drive past an estate, the broken bridge with hidden cave below, and through the fort to get back to the course's start. Probably at the back of the pack due to the overwhelming temptation to smash every bonus box you can find, too, because who can resist all those lovely points? It's going to take many, many playthroughs of each course to learn the best racing line, combining both speed and point accumulation, and the fun of discovery keeps each round exciting. While *Beetle Adventure Racing*'s visuals have gone the way of all N64 titles, its ability to be pure damn fun hasn't faded a bit.



ONE BEETLE + TWO J.A.T.O. BOTTLES = A DARWIN AWARD



# W-WARE

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ALMOST AS CHEAP AS FREE

Discounted by Asura

## NEO GEO BATTLE COLISEUM

### INFO

Publisher: SNK Playmore  
Developer: SNK Playmore  
Release Date: 12/11/2007  
Genre: Fighting  
Category: Pixelicious  
# of Players: 1-2

*SVC Chaos* marked the last true hurrah for the vs. series type fighting games, but in an effort to continue tapping the same market without the same licenses, both Capcom and SNK decided to create mashup fighters exclusively featuring characters from their own franchises. It was at this point that their ideas vastly diverged; Capcom's own effort in *Capcom Fighting Evolution* only managed to evolve into ass, while *Neo Geo Battle Coliseum* was, its critics be damned, a true attempt at something worthwhile.

While *Fighting Evolution* decided to rehash the same damn sprites all over again, the roster is where *NGBC* shines. Following the trend of pulling together strange and unique characters established in *SVC Chaos*, *NGBC* pulls from SNK's favorites to the obscure, and when they didn't already exist in fighting form - this is a model concept here, Capcom - they created new sprites from scratch. Thrill, to shock and amazement! If you thought Mars People was cool in *SVC Chaos*, be amazed as Marco drops a Metal Slug right on your face! It's always good to see the *Last Blade* characters getting some screen time (a new LB game, plz SNK?), but pulling in characters like Kisarah Westfield and Cyber Woo is a welcome surprise. Asura and Shiki? It's good to see you in 2D, too. The only way this game could've been better is if they would've included Load Ran and Realy Till from *Twinkle Star Sprites*.

System wise *NGBC* is a tag fighter, and that portion - the tagging and the fighting - are exactly what you would expect out of modern SNK. The engine is pretty much a progression of the ones used in *SVC* and *KOF2k3*, and the semantics of how the super bar works or what kind of slam and jam tag antics you can pull off are really just spice. The gameplay is about as solid as a mashup fighter can be; it works without being too unbalanced or bent-overly broken.

While the game mechanics remain tried and true, the curveball with *NGBC* is in the arcade mode's match mechanics. You are essentially thrown into a survival match, given three hundred seconds to compete against as many fighting pairs as possible, and when that time limit is up you fight whatever final boss you qualify for. The better you do, the crazier the boss you fight, the better the ending crawl. The survival battles are divided into three rounds, against three teams of two, but unlike most other tag fighters you only need to slay one of the two team members of said team to progress to the next team. Confused yet? You are given opportunities to regain time and energy to prolong the battle between every group of three teams - much like the continue service in other SNK fighters - and if you play your cards right you can make that three hundred seconds last a long time.

As you can imagine, this system makes *NGBC* fast and frenetic - Mowing through characters quickly and efficiently is the name of the game, conserving your health and using as many D-Assaults (as I said, the "spice") and as few bonus services as possible being the key to triggering the different final bosses. If you do well enough your opponent will be Goodman, though any of the bosses in this game kick puppies and eat babies, so don't think it's going to be easy any way you slice it.

You also get all the other normal fightery stuff here; survival, practice, versus, blah blah blah, it's all pretty much as you'd imagine it. The load-time issues and other shulldit from the Japanese version have been fixed in the US rev, making it technically superior in all but one respect. Unfortunately, they accidentally left out the 480p progressive scan option since the code is based on the PAL version, but honestly, the game is well worth its small price even with this minor oversight.

Funnily enough, it feels like this game was destined for this section. You see, the clandestine "WareZ Conglomerate" - an obvious jab at the rampant Neo Geo piracy which necessitated the move to the Atomiswave hardware at the time of development - is the impetus for the tournament featured in *NGBC*'s duct-taped together, threadbare plot. You get what you pay for in *NGBC* - a solid fighting game, even if the match mechanics contain some wacky hijinx. It's fun for anyone who isn't anal-retentively anal, and for \$10 how anal can you possibly be?



## FIRE-PRO-WRESTLING RETURNS



Since its creation in 1989, the *Fire Pro Wrestling* series has been about having dream matches that would never happen in real life. While the earliest installments lacked either the roster or deep gameplay to do justice to the concept, the 16-bit and beyond entries have done just that, and *FPR*, the newest entry, does the best job yet at allowing players to not only have as many dream matches as they want (or simply recreate classic ones), but also create classic titles, federations, factions, rings, and even referees.

So if you've ever wanted to see Japanese icons like Kenta Kobashi and Mitsuharu Misawa do battle with American stars like Kurt Angle and Hulk Hogan, you can. The depth of the gameplay means that you can accurately recreate classic, simplistic matches like Hulk Hogan vs. Andre the Giant from *WrestleMania III* or the Jimmy Snuka vs. Don Muraco cage match from Madison Square Garden.

More complex classics that blend technical wrestling together with high flying action, like Ricky Steamboat vs. Randy Savage from *WrestleMania III*, or more modern-day ones, like Kurt Angle vs. Shawn Michaels from *WrestleMania 21* or AJ Styles vs. Samoa Joe vs. Christopher Daniels from *Unbreakable '05* can also be replicated with ease.

Thanks to the inclusion of weapons (like barb wire bats, light tubes, chairs, broken tables, Singapore canes, and scythes), exploding barb wire-rope time bomb matches, and a classic chain-link steel cage, fans of bloodbaths and explosion-filled spectacles can have matches so violent, they would make hardcore icons like the Sheik, Mick Foley, Terry Funk, Bruiser Brody, and Abdullah the Butcher cringe.

Beyond just replicating classic pro wrestling matches, you can also have legendary MMA battles, as Spike included a decagonal cage for cage-fighting classics, while classic K1 and PRIDE fights can take place in the ring. Much like the default roster of wrestlers, the MMA roster in *FPR* is diverse and inspired by legendary fighters like Mirko Cro Cop, Don Frye, Ken Shamrock, Frank Shamrock, and Fedor Emelianenko.

If a wrestler/fighter you like isn't in the game, you can simply make them with the character creation tool. Its accuracy is sometimes scary, as some creations (like Christian Cage and Kurt Angle) can come out so well that you'd expect them to be intended for the game. Thanks to the federation creation tool, you can make a TNA Wrestling roster full of people already in the game (like Sting, Jeff Jarrett, AJ Styles, and Petey Williams) along with these creations and have your own, customized TNA roster in the game.

*FPWR* is a dream come true for wrestling fans longing to have video game matches involving companies that never got their own game (like Mid-South or World Class), as the character creation tool allows you to make excellent Bill Watts, Junkyard Dog, Jim Duggan, Butch Reed, Mr. Wrestling II, Magnum TA, Terry Taylor, Ted DiBiase, Bob Roop, and Buck Robley creations to go alongside the default roster's "Dr. Death" Steve Williams and have an accurate Mid-South group.

World Class fans will be delighted to see Terry Gordy and Bruiser Brody already in the game, while others, like the Von Erichs, the other Freebirds, Chris Adams, and "Gorgeous" Jimmy Garvin can easily be made. The ring creation tool allows you to make fairly accurate rings as well, adding a layer of authenticity when recreating the classic Von Erich vs. Freebirds wars.

With its \$15 price tag, a default roster of 320 characters, 500 slots for player-created ones, the ability to create classic federations and factions, and an extensive mode lineup that allows for just about any kind of match you could possibly want or imagine, *Fire Pro Wrestling Returns* is a must-have for anyone interested in either a deep pro wrestling or satisfying mixed martial arts gaming experience.

### INFO

Publisher: Agetec  
Developer: Spike  
Release Date: 11/13/2007  
Genre: Wrestling/MMA  
Category: Dream Match Heaven  
# of Players: 1-8

Discounted by JPeoples



# THE DARK SIDE OF RETROGAMING

Feature by Sardus



Hello, and congratulations on your purchase of *A Week of Garfield: Garfield*, licensed exclusively for use in Japan for the Nintendo Family Computer console. We appreciate your support, even though you may not have any idea of who Garfield is, and probably thought that you were buying a game about Doraemon's orange brother or something. In any case, thank you, and as you say in Japan, *orrikato!*

## Precautions

- Please treat your *A Week of Garfield: Garfield* cartridge with care.
- Do not melt it, submerge it in liquid, or crush it into powder and rub it in your eyes.
- Garfield is made of sophisticated parts and electronics to simulate "cattitude," so please take 15-minute breaks after every hour of gameplay.

## Story

Oh no! Garfield has had enough of that lovable Odie's antics and wants to murder him! Luckily, Odie detects Garfield's concealed malice and flees in terror.

Garfield narrows his eyes, swearing that Odie will not live to see next Monday. Can you guide Garfield through a week-long sleepless journey to sate his thirst for blood?

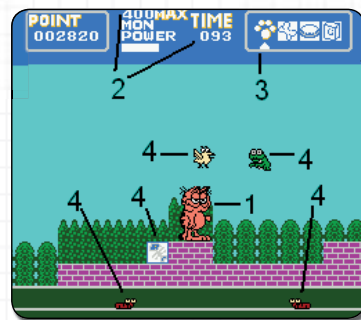


## Getting Started

To begin the game, insert the *A Week of Garfield: Garfield* cartridge into your Famicom and turn on the power. You should see the title screen. If you don't see the title screen, remove the cartridge immediately and trade it in at your local GameStop for up to five percent of what you originally paid in non-transferable store credit.

At the title screen, press the Start button. You're now playing *A Week of Garfield: Garfield*! Unfortunately, we didn't have enough cartridge space for a tutorial, so you'll probably never figure out that you can move Garfield with the D-pad and make him jump with the A Button. We apologize, and we plan to correct this oversight in our next release with a ten-minute-long unskippable tutorial cinema voiced by shrill British children.

## The Gameplay Screen



- 1) This is Garfield. He hates Mondays.
- 2) This is the timer, which displays your time and time limit as two separate numbers to help your child with his or her developing math skills. It also tells you what day it is. (Shown: MON, for Monday. Garfield hates Mondays.)
- 3) Items. [see: THE ITEMS, page 4]
- 4) Things that will kill you.

## The Faces of Garfield



Press Up to make Garfield do this. It doesn't do anything.



Press Down to make Garfield transform into a tiny mutant cat with five legs.



Press A to make Garfield WHOA, what the hell?

## The Items

- Stupid Dog Bone - Flies straight forward. Never hits anything.
- Glitchy Exploding Pie - Explodes in a million different directions. Never hits anything.
- I Don't Know - Do you know what this is? It's a spread gun! Duh!
- Moldy Lasagna - Makes Garfield invincible for two and a half seconds. Garfield likes lasagna.
- Super Speed Boots - Garfield is fat (which is funny), so he can't run very far before he gets tired.
- Power Coffee, Health Milk - Delays the inevitable.
- Fish Corpse - Only Garfield can hear its cries of pain. This is his blessing, and his curse.
- Key - One's hidden in every level. How do you find them? Buy our *A Week of Garfield: Garfield* official strategy guide! Only \$9.99! Features tips like "Level 4 is hard!" and "Don't get fooled by 'Won't Get Fooled Again' on Expert!"

## The Enemies



Destructor Mouse CaTaffy - Appears from nowhere. Kills with deadly speed.

Crawl Master Slug - Do not underestimate.



Jump Jump Frog - Jumps, then jumps again. Careful!

"Mite-y" Dust Mite - Why'd we make it so small?



Brutal Baseball - The cat's natural enemy.

Fish Dude - Do not sympathize with his condition; he is the enemy.



Spider Falcon - Deadly spider. Attacks revengefully.

Falcon Spider - Deadlier bird version of spider. Has wings.



Naughty Folks - Killer cat out to stop Garfield. Throws...wait, are those knives? Awesome!

Boss Cat "Nyamco" - Odie's last line of defense. Will dream and friends prevail?



## The Stages

Guide Garfield through seven increasingly impossible levels, each representing a day of the week. At the end of every stage, stare expectantly at Jon's crotch and listen to his helpful advice.



MONDAY: Garfield hates Mondays.  
JON HINT: "WHAT HAPPENED?"

TUESDAY: Travel through the park. Watch out for spiders!  
JON HINT: "DID YOU FIND ODIE?"

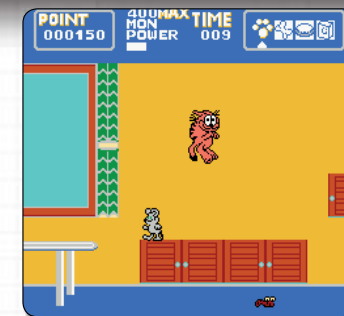
WEDNESDAY: Garfield goes to church, but finds no salvation.  
JON HINT: "HUNT FOR ODIE DOWNTOWN."

THURSDAY: Downtown is full of stores advertising FOODS, but don't get distracted!  
JON HINT: "WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?"

FRIDAY: The forest! Beware: Naughty Folks breathe fire here.  
JON HINT: "MAY I HELP YOU?"

SATURDAY: Back to town. Which is also a forest now!  
JON HINT: "STILL LOOKING FOR ODIE?"

SUNDAY: Will Garfield finally get his revenge? Only if you abuse emulator savestates!  
JON HINT: "LET'S CHALLENGE."



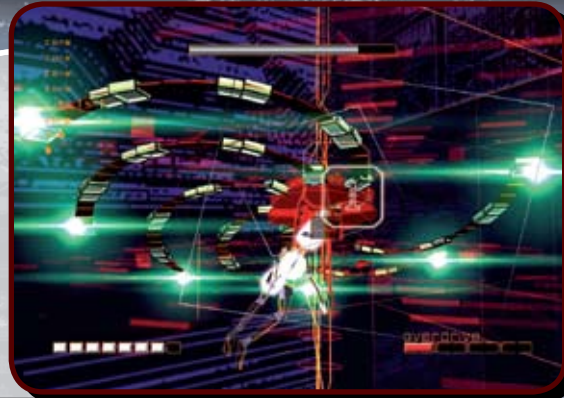
## The Ending



Thank you for your playing!  
Presented by Mars Corp  
Copyright 1989 The Joke is That He's Fat Inc.

# ON THE DOWNLOAD

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



Developer: Q Entertainment • Platform: Xbox 360  
Genre: Shooter • Category: Musical • # of Players: 1  
Price: 800 points (\$10) • Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

Just in case you don't know what *Rez* is, here's the deal. Enemies fly at you in a wireframe rendition of cyberspace. Lock onto them and fire, and music happens. It's great music, too, all of the techno persuasion. Shoot to the beat, or feel free to make your own; in the end, the result is a fun game that always sounds great, and contains killer atmosphere to boot. The game's made an appearance on the Dreamcast and PS2 thus far, but this is easily the definitive version of the greatest rhythm-shooter ever made (sure, it's by default, but that doesn't take away from its awesomeness).

*Rez* allows you to play the original game, or a beefed-up mode with a higher resolution, and



audio/visual effects that you can apply yourself (reverb, bloom, glare, tiling, sepia tones, etc.), to your liking. However, by far the game's coolest feature is the ability to use any or all extra Xbox 360 controllers lying around your house as makeshift Trance Vibrator accessories. If you don't know what a Trance is... well, let Google educate you on that one. Just trust me when I say it's a really good thing.

The best part is, none of these features take away from the proven gameplay in any way. They're all bonus icing on an already-sweet cake. Go ahead and spend the points on this, regardless of if you have an older version, or even if you somehow haven't heard of *Rez*. Seriously, you'll love it anyway.

SCORE: 5 OF 5

REZ HD



Developer: ABA Games  
Platform: PC • Genre: Arena Shooter  
Category: Super-Fast  
# of Players: 1 • Price: Free  
Get it at: [http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/xna/mm/index\\_e.html](http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/xna/mm/index_e.html)

A new game from the prolific Kenta Cho is always cause for celebration, and *Mazer Mayhem* is no exception.



After a bit of messing around getting the XNA environment set up, *Mazer Mayhem* turns into a lightning-fast shooter. A little tank in an arena is being attacked by orange balls throwing out heavy firepower, and when destroyed the balls leave behind a small pile of green particles. Collect a hundred greens and it's overdrive time, at which point *Mazer Mayhem* becomes a nearly psychotic rush to collect as much green as possible. The particle tally turns into a bonus multiplier while in overdrive, but it depletes fast, so it becomes a race to kill and collect as much as possible to max out the score. It's a simple setup, but the smooth gameplay makes for an addictive little gem that's perfect for a short, satisfying round of adrenaline-fueled blasting.



SCORE: 4 OF 5

MAZER MAYHEM



Developer: Chair Entertainment  
Platform: Xbox 360 • Genre: Twin-Stick Shooter  
Category: Moist • # of Players: 1-16 • Price: Free  
Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

Microsoft chose to give everyone a free XBLA game to make up for the horrendous service of Xbox Live during the 2007 Christmas season, and it may be the worst apology I've ever received. *Undertow* is an obnoxious, aggravating mess that, while trying something clever by combining a 2D twin-stick arena shooter with team-based gameplay,



fails to be any fun whatsoever. It doesn't matter which of the four player types you choose; the enemy will simply overwhelm you with firepower no matter how careful you are, and your teammates are no help at all. Gameplay devolves into scouting for one of the map's multiple bases, shooting a few of its defenders, dying, and endlessly respawning to try again until you either run out of points or bases under your control. The multiplayer version is a little better because you can strategize with your team, but single player just plain sucks. Thanks, MS; it's the thought that counts.

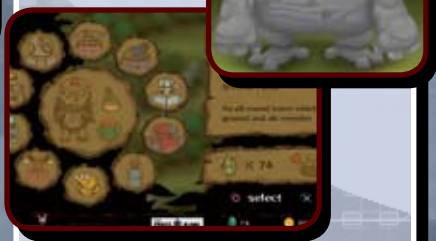
SCORE: 1.5 OF 5

UNDERTOW



Developer: Q-Games Ltd. • Platform: PS3  
Genre: Puzzle • Category: Strategy  
# of Players: 1-2 • Price: \$7.99  
Get it at: PlayStation Network

It's about time someone turned *Tower Defense* into a full-sized game. *Pixeljunk Monsters* gives a few tweaks to the popular formula of setting up a gauntlet of firepower strong enough to defeat the monstrous horde. A parade of creatures travels down a wooded path towards a hut where the cute and delicious little forest people live, and their protector runs around transforming trees into the many towers that rain death from above.



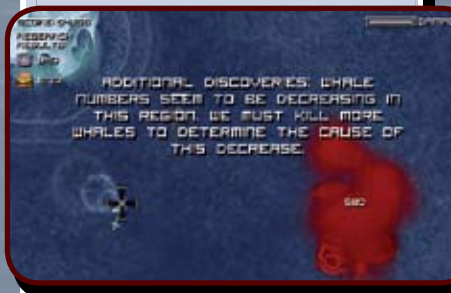
Towers range from slow and strong cannons, to faster arrows, to a variety of powerful magic effects. As they kill things the towers go up in level, or you can use a rare blue gem for an instant upgrade. Those gems might be better saved to research stronger towers though, and good magic doesn't come cheap. *Pixeljunk Monsters* is a constant struggle to properly allocate gold, gems, firepower, and time as the horde advances single file, with each level being more addictive than the last.

SCORE: 4 OF 5

PIXELJUNK MONSTERS



Developer: Scarsoft • Platform: PC  
Genre: Maze/Puzzle • Category: Brain Crusher  
# of Players: 1 • Price: \$14.99  
Get it at: <http://www.scarsoft.com>



Those proud researchers of the Japanese whaling industry finally get a game acknowledging all the trials they endure in *Harpooned*, a vertical shooter illustrating the eternal struggle of wrestling science from nature by the time-honored means of examining mountains of slaughtered animals corpses. A fishing boat travels up the screen armed with explosive-tipped harpoons, harvesting whale meat for research and then, to ensure nothing gets wasted, converting it into cat food and delicious whale burgers. Activists and news choppers try to interfere, and shooting or ramming them cuts down on what little profit science brings in, but carefully harvesting a species chain and keeping the meat combo counter alive generates huge cash bonuses. While *Harpooned's* gameplay is only decent at best, it gets its message across with a brutally funny and disconcerting sense of humor that justifies the download.

SCORE: 3.5 OF 5

HARPOONED

# ASH

ARCHAIC SEALED HEAT  
アルカイク・ジールド・ヘート



Reviewed by **Hitoshura**



*Archaic Sealed Heat* is the first DS game to come from *Final Fantasy* father Hironobu Sakaguchi's Mistwalker. It is also the first to use the new 2Gb DS cart. The size of the cart really isn't that important, nor is it really that impressive. It's only about one-third the size of an ordinary compact disc. However, *ASH* is a strategy RPG created by the same man who made *Final Fantasy* games famous. What could possibly go wrong?

The most promising aspect of *ASH* is its story. Those of you who've played *FF* games before the PSX era will get a sense of nostalgia as the story progresses. Even if you don't understand Japanese enough to know what's going on, the feel and atmosphere is much like *FF2*. It's dark, oppressive, and a lot of characters die. This is a game that demands localization, or some crazy fan to at least publish a translated text of the script, because the story is everything an old *FF* fan could want.

There is voice acting in *ASH*, though it is oddly limited. Only the introduction is fully voice acted; afterwards, it's just popular anime catchwords at random intervals. In a welcome change, the protagonist is female. Unfortunately, she's a princess wearing half a bridal gown, is armed with a rifle, and speaks in a squealing voice. She's hopelessly immature from start to finish. Thankfully, the supporting cast is full of fantastic characters such as Dan and Maritie, who make ignoring that insufferable princess so much easier. In any case, the voice acting is completely unnecessary because there's barely any of it.



There is no doubt where nearly all the space in the cart for *ASH* went, however, because the most impressive thing is its graphics. The reason why *ASH* needed to be on the largest DS cart is that every single battle is in FMV. To be more precise, the battle scenes are all fully FMV, while the 3D maps you move around on are comparatively pathetic. The DS can do 3D really well, but the maps look like a prototype Saturn game, and the sprites are around NES quality. It's quite jarring to command and watch battles play out in full FMV when the other half of the game makes your eyes bleed.

Speaking of battles, Mistwalker has come up with an interesting and original system. You create your characters from their ashes, and then you organize them into groups of three. The main characters are locked in as leaders of these groups. You can control each of these characters individually, but it takes away action points from that character's group. The turns cycle through groups based on their given number, and you're free to end the group's turn at any time. What makes this interesting is that when you initiate an attack against an enemy group, the relative distance between each character and enemy determines how effective their attacks will be. If an enemy is close, then the attack will hit with full force, but it may fail or be much weaker if the distance is too great. Therefore, the positions of all your characters relative to each other and the enemy on a map are a crucial aspect to winning a battle.

Publisher: **Nintendo**  
Developer: **Mistwalker/Racjin**  
Release Date: **10/04/2007**  
Genre(s): **RPG**  
Category: **Strategy**  
# of Players: **1**



There are a few unfortunate side effects that govern the way the system works. Due to the fact that once you initiate an attack there's no turn limit inside the battle, you will feel compelled to win it. That compulsion means that once you've decided to attack an enemy group, you can be sure that the opponents are going to be defeated, partly because you can see their weak points, but mostly because levels in this game are far more important to character strength than equipment is. That's doubly disappointing, since the level cap is 30 and you'll normally reach it by the end of the game. Another annoying feature is that boss battles will always be anti-climatic because you can only fight the boss with one group at a time like any other enemy. Add in the inherent compulsion to avoid losing a fight, and the other groups just end up standing around doing nothing. It's absurd deploying four groups for the last battle, when you're only allowed to fight with one of them at a time.



*ASH* falls apart further under its own perceived grandeur, as there are a number of annoying things about it. For starters, it's menu driven, yet you cannot use the face buttons—it's stylus-only—while the shoulder buttons manipulate the camera in a limited fashion. Secondly, there are only seven creatable classes—a surprisingly small number. Never mind that you'll only have room to create ten characters. You only get five group leaders with two free character spaces each. For more than half the game however, you're stuck with three group leaders, and during that time you'll be stuck in a single location. That's no joke; the game has 32 chapters in it with each chapter having anywhere from one to three maps to fight on and half of them have the same background palette, the same music, with the same enemies. The game becomes a chore to play since the battles will abuse a reinforcements gimmick to an absurd degree. You can rest assured that when you start a map you are only seeing less than half of all enemies that you will have to defeat. The rest will appear on the map when certain enemy groups are defeated or when a character steps past a certain point on the map. There's not even a single side-quest in the game to break up the monotony. You're on rails to the very end, with limited opportunities to play on a map again. Though why would you play a map again after slogging through reinforcements ad nauseum?

Bizarrely, *ASH* has a New Game+ feature. Unfortunately, this isn't a game you'd want to play through a second time. The only thing of importance that gets carried over is all the money you earned previously. *ASH* is very pretty (ignoring the maps) and has an intriguing story with a great supporting cast, but the monotony of the battles just ruins an otherwise inspired game.

## Worth Importing?

*ASH* can be found cheaply, because it didn't sell well. If you're only looking for a good story in a Japanese game, then *ASH* fits the bill nicely. Do be warned that there are some dreadfully boring bits called playing.

# Score: 3 of 5





GETCHA! GOTCHA! OOOH~

# ONLINE GAMER

Editorial by BigWym



Paradise doesn't have a crash mode, we create our own. Have you ever seen seven vehicles speeding towards the same intersection from four different directions? Oh the carnage, /drool. If everyone activates Showtime, which lets players string crashes together similar to the old-school crash mode, the metallic massacre is practically never-ending.

I have always considered myself to be the long-lost Duke boy, and while my... err... natural padding prevents me from sliding on the hood of cars in real life, catching air in Paradise City is especially fun for me. Needless to say, I can spend hours just trying to pull off cool stunts and then show them off to my online crew. One of my favorites is a basic 180, where you harshly turn the steering wheel in one direction while hitting the handbrake at the top of a jump, rotate 180 degrees in the air, land backwards, and quickly hit reverse for a smooth getaway. Performing a full 360 is nearly impossible, but feel free



to hit me up and show me how it's done. Another exciting challenge is trying to slam into each other in midair from two different jumps.

As if that isn't enough, taking out other players online initiates a Mugshot, where the Xbox Live camera takes a snapshot of the player's reaction in real life and displays it onscreen. Sure, this feature has the potential for serious exploitation, so be forewarned, any naked-crotch shots will garner an immediate ban from my friend's list (unless you happen to be the rarely-seen but highly sought-after hot girl gamer).

In the past, the Burnout series was limited to standard online races, but Burnout Paradise opens up the whole city and lets players do what they choose. Now that I think about it, it does sound like paradise.

# BURNOUT Paradise

The Burnout series has come a long way from its humble beginnings. While Acclaim introduced the world to this over-the-top racer, EA has turned it into one of the leading franchises of the decade. And while Burnout Revenge was, and still is, a great game, the developers have taken Burnout Paradise to new heights. Not only does it sport a new gaming engine under the hood (resulting in gorgeous visuals and more detailed damage models), but it also lets players tear up the streets of Paradise City while playing online.

Rather than forcing fanatical drivers to quit out of the single player mode to join online matches, they can simply press a few buttons and immediately jump to Freeburn Online. This open-world mode lets up to seven lead-foot drivers form

a virtual 'posse' and drive around town causing intense mayhem and destruction. In addition, the host can initiate competitive races and cooperative challenges whenever they choose. It's even possible for the host to create their own race, which offers obvious advantages. Just when you think you have Paradise City's roadways memorized, someone creates their own race and you have to figure out a new route at 140 MPH.



I find the most fun comes from driving around town with my crew looking for super jumps and causing as much damage as possible. We also like to create new games, like BALLZ (a variation of HORSE) and Crumple (see who can damage their car the most in one crash). Since Burnout

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(Some people don't play video games.)

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# NASCAR

EXCLUSIVE NASCAR LICENSE

## Racing

**Developer:** GLOBALVR  
**Publisher:** GLOBALVR  
**Players:** 1-10 (WITH LINKED CABINETS)  
**Genre:** START YOUR ENGINES!  
**Category:** RACING!  
**Release Date:** SEPTEMBER, 2007



Review by Adam Pratt of ArcadeHeroes.com

There is no better place to play a racer than in the arcade. Ever since they began combining mounted steering wheels with sitdown cabinets nothing a console could do would match the arcade racing experience. As such we've had racers in arcades since the 70's and that continues until today with one developer capitalizing on the popular phenomena of NASCAR racing and bringing that experience to the arcade.

EA *NASCAR Racing* attempts to recreate the NASCAR racing experience as best as it can, which includes cars and drivers such as Dale Earnhardt Jr., Jeff Gordon, Tony Stewart and 9 other drivers for up to 12 selectable drivers total and 6 different tracks based on real locations such as Daytona, Talladega and Indianapolis speedways. When you begin the race, you always begin in last place (which puts you in about 31st place) and you need to do everything you can to reach first place by the end of the set laps (the cabinet I played at had it set to five laps). The game features difficulty that adjusts itself depending on how well (or badly) you are playing, much like GVR's *America's Army*. You gain speed by drafting (following a car directly in front of you) and after drafting long enough you get a speed boost which helps you pass the others even further. To compliment the racing, they included some nice alternative rock tracks to which you can adjust the volume by pressing a button on the front panel. The player can also race with either an automatic shifter or manual. After completing a race one can enter their initials into the game to keep track of their high score on that track they just raced on.



Graphically, *NASCAR* is quite nice and uses good textures with a lot of detail on each car in attempt to make each car look as authentic as possible. There also are some nice effects such as reflections off the cars, motion blur, particle effects (for when you slam into another car or wall), and a solid frame rate. The only thing it lacks is anti-aliasing so there are a number of jaggies. The cabinet uses a nice widescreen LCD monitor, sizes vary depending on the type of cabinet (standard uses a 32", deluxe = 42" and motion deluxe = 57"). Each cabinet looks quite nice, especially the deluxe version which includes a rollcage.

While the game is a lot of fun in singleplayer, the game really shines in its multiplayer mode. The game can have up to ten cabinets linked together and thanks to a pretty affordable price it should be easy to find this game in any arcade with multiple units available to play.

*NASCAR* is a great game that should find itself a place in many arcades. It probably helps that one of the people involved in the games development was also responsible for another excellent arcade racer, *San Francisco Rush 2049*. Between great gameplay, nice graphics, excellent music and solid control *NASCAR* is a winner.

FINAL SCORE:  
**5 of 5**



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THE PITTS OF HELL DEMAND ITS PLEA, THE DEMON OF THE AEGEAN SEA.



IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS DARKNESS.

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