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Casual vs. Hardcore

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This issue is dedicated to the memory of KosmikCharley. Game on dood, whever you are.

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Printed in the United States of America

Biographical Data

DJPubba_Tim Lindquist

Ahh, it's been a while since I've written one of these and a lot of things have changed, both for me, and the magzine — some pretty bad, but some pretty good too. Overall I'm as happy as I've ever been, so I can't complain.

Now Playing: *Trivial Pursuit* (Wii), *Punch-Out!!* (arcade & Wii), *Star Trek: Strategic Operations Simulator* (arcade), *Donkey Kong II: Jumpman Returns* (arcade)

Racewing_Geson Hatchett

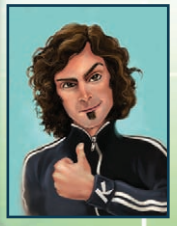
2008 was weird for me — the negativity of most online video game discussion venues sucked the joy out of my chosen hobby something fierce, but I'm fiinally on the road to recovery! To the Internet gaming "community" at large: can we lose the personal taste wars and just start having *fun* again, please?

Now Playing: *Crackdown*, *Sonic Unleashed* (360), *Virtua Tennis 2009* (Wii)

Hitoshura_Iaian Ross

A lot's happened to me in the past 5 years, but a lot more has been happening in the past 6 months. Found out in a strange set of circumstances that I'm also Australian. I might find myself moving there in the near future. Beyond that, I'm not sure what the future has in store, but I do know I'm enjoying the ride.

Now Playing: *Devil Summoner 2*



Daniel Kayser_Daniel Kayser

Summers are meant for butterflies. I don't fly and I sometimes enjoy butter, but more often than not I prefer chamomile and sandstone to anything remotely close to winged animalistic art. Hey, when is The Last Guardian coming out?

Now Playing: Catch up, the part, footsies, and as much *Ghostbusters*, *NHL 09*', and *Star Trek DAC* as I can.

ArBeth_Thomas Shin

You know, the more competitive games I see coming out of Japan, the more I realize that they often have no idea on how to make their game accessible for real-life console tournaments, because Japan is apparently one gigantic arcade the size of California.

Now Playing: *Street Fighter IV, BlazBlue, Melty Blood: Actress Again*

Vivek_Vivek Varadarajan

The Thundercats are not gay, there were just some things that flew in the 80's that don't fly anymore, case in point belly shirts on men. On a side note, live action Thundercats is a bad idea.

Now Playing: *Street Fighter IV Console*, *Street Fighter IV Arcade*, not *Cross Edge*.

Lynxara_Alicia Ashby

Just enjoying life as a married gamer these days. Lately I find myself playing a lot of episodic stuff. Is modern life just more fast-paced, or is my attention span getting shorter as I get older?

Now Playing: *Super Robot Taisen Z*, *Strong Bad's Cool Game for Attractive People*, *Final Fantasy IV: The After Years*.

James_James Cunningham

I'm actually having a pretty good year, making me wonder what horrible fate is lying in wait on 2009's back half. E3 was great, I've got some solid summer plans, and I'm buying a unicycle because, dammit, I want to learn to ride one!

Now playing: *Tiger Woods 2010*, *LocoRoco 2*

OUberLord_Tony Mitera

You know, as a Midwesterner who rabidly buys anything *Harvest Moon* related, I don't think I'm breaking any stereotypes.

Now Playing: *Prototype*, *Team Fortress 2*, *311 - Uplifter*

HonestGamer_Jason Venter

A long time ago, I decided that writing was the main thing I wanted to do with my life. 2009 has seen me putting that decision to work and I've loved nearly every minute of it. What will the future hold? More writing, surely!

Now Playing: *Knights in the Nightmare*, *Star Ocean: Second Evolution*, *Black Sigil*

Ashura_Brady Hartel

Why is it when I think I get a break something else goes wrong? I guess bad comes with the good.

Now Playing: *Left 4 Dead*, *Pokemon Platinum*, *Metal Gear Online*

Dack_Steve Hannley

I'm at the Pizza Hut. I'm at the Taco Bell. I'm at the combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell.

Now Playing: *Wait For Me - Moby*, *Veckatimest - Grizzly Bear*, *everything Animal Collective*.

Jeremy_Jeremy Peeples

This has been the most trying year of my life, but also the most rewarding. Neither gaming or writing have been too high on my priority list for much of it, but I've slowly gotten back into the swing of things, which feels pretty good.

Now Playing: *Adventures of Little Ralph*, *UFC 2009: Undisputed*, *Samurai Shodown Anthology*

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on the cover
free realms p8

Three million people and counting are flocking to a happy-looking MMO called Free Realms, yet it seems like a game that most anyone calling themselves a gamer wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole. Should we then turn away and scorn it or should we take a closer look and see if there's something here worth paying attention to? What the heck, let's have a look.

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Are there games you could go to jail for? Are there games which the people who made them could be arrested for? We're sure there must be nasty, depraved, X-rated (or worse) games out there that'd send you straight to hell for even looking at, but that's not what we're interested in. We're much more curious about how games like Tetris, K.C. Munchkin, or the Great Giana Sisters could be considered illegal and why.

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Not every game is hardcore and not every game is casual. Let's explore games that don't really belong in either category and maybe we'll have some fun along the way!

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Wii

FreeRealms™

story by Lynxara and Vivek

The MMO as we know it is about to change.

It's not a change that's coming out of nowhere. While the eyes of the world focused on *World of Warcraft*'s ascendance to the top of the subscription MMO heap, a quiet revolution was happening in the corners of the gaming internet that hardcore players rarely watch.

Game portals and websites began to spring up, urging people to play MMOs that were entirely free.

Well... mostly free. The way these games worked is that they didn't have the shiniest graphics, or the most content, or the most innovative gameplay, but you could play them as long as you wanted without spending a dime (in theory). If you really got into them, you'd find you could begin accessing exclusive content and grinding faster by paying a monthly subscription fee or spending real money on virtual items that might cost as little as $1 each.

Casual gamers liked the idea of an MMO with no up-front fee. Kids who might not be able to get their parents to spring for monthly MMO subscriptions liked the idea of being able to spend small amounts of money at a time, often through prepaid cards they could buy at local retail stores. Hardcore gamers... they're mostly still playing *WoW*. *Free Realms* probably won't change that immediately, but it is drawing a lot of attention from all corners of the gaming community.

Video games have always been associated with thick-framed glasses sporting, pocket protector wearing social outcasts. It also unfortunate that gamers have had suffer with the associated stigmas for years. However, the definition of a gamer has changed in recent years as whole new audiences have bought into the concept of gaming. People that would never usually play games have started to casually game, thus,

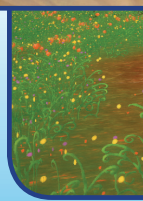
the birth of the casual gamer. Since then, developers everywhere have attempted to lure in casual gamers and to some extent they have succeeded. Nintendo's Wii console has done wonders in attracting new fans yet, in doing so has alienated hardcore audiences. It all makes Sony Online Entertainment's *Free Realms* more of a mystery. Somehow, the hardest of hardcore MMORPG players stand side by side with casual fans

in the same virtual universe. How has Sony succeeded where so many other companies have failed and is Free Realms the archetype for games of the future?

Developed by Sony Online Entertainment, the company that grew out of original *EverQuest* developer Verant, *Free Realms* is an MMO aimed primarily at kids 10-14 and designed to let their parents play with them. It almost seems to bear no resemblance to the company's usual bread-and-butter, hardcore MMORPGs like *EverQuest II*. *Free Realms* can be played for free for as long as you want, but you can get access to exclusive job classes and other goodies by paying a $4.95 monthly subscription fee. You can also spend real money on virtual items ranging from apparel for your avatar to virtual booster packs for the in-game CCG.

The unique thing about Free Realms is that players can make their own experience. A game like *World of Warcraft*, while excellent, can only 'officially' be played in one way. Players have to take quests, find loot, and defeat powerful monsters. In so doing a player will inevitably sink in hours upon hours of time leveling their character and equipping him/her/Orc with powerful equipment. In *Free Realms*, a player can choose to follow this standard play model becoming a stronger and stronger warrior. There are also plenty of classes that support such a model. However, that is not the only way to advance.

Free Realms embraces all genre types incorporating elements of racing and puzzle games so if battling isn't



your thing, you can be a blacksmith, kart racer, or even a postman. The game never forces players into one way of playing and there are numerous ways to progress. Kart Drivers gain points by winning races while miners advance when they complete puzzles or perform well in mini games. In this way *Free Realms* truly gives players the freedom to choose a style of play they enjoy.

It would be easy to dismiss *Free Realms* as SOE's attempt to cash in on the casual gaming trend of the past few years if not for the fact that… well, it's a good game. The game may run in your browser (with a little help from a Windows-based client), but the graphics are very attractive given that they've clearly been designed to run on just about any PC with any old janky video card. There's pleasant music and lots of different types of terrain to explore. The community is friendly and helpful, often typing full grammatical sentences in global chat.

Your avatar can change job classes freely, letting a player log into *Free Realms* and screw around doing whatever you like. The jobs all feature really different types of gameplay, too. Play as a chef and you play cooking mini-games that let you chop vegetables or shake a pan with your mouse cursor. Play as a kart racer and you're suddenly in a solid driving game. Go take care of pets to play a basic life

sim game, go play CCGs, or go fight monsters if that's what you want to do. It's an MMO where you can do whatever you want, however you want to do it.

It's unlike anything SOE has ever made before. Frankly, it's unlike anything we've ever played before. *HGM*'s writers have spent time in the grindiest of grindy Korean and Japanese free-to-plays, but *Free Realms* is

something new and different and better. It's the kind of game that makes you wish you were a kid again, or maybe just that you had a kid to go play it with.

Real Money And Virtual Loot

Because *Free Realms* is free, there is no initial cost to get started. Players around the world can pick it up and play to their hearts content. It is here where *Free Realms* really attracts the casual fan. However, those wanting a more hardcore experience can pay for additional classes and quests. Again each player is free to make their own experience out of it.

If there's one thing hardcore gamers don't like, it's microtransactions in their MMOs. When everyone pays a flat monthly fee to play, it lets gamers imagine that skill dictates who advances the most during that month (actually, it's probably how much free time you have). Introducing microtransactions — letting players spend real money to pick up equipment and items — introduces the unsavory notion that the guy with the most money is going to end up being the best at the game. While we're used to putting up with that in real life, nobody likes it to intrude on their entertainment.

Free Reams does want to sell you items, but it doesn't want the guy with the most money to win. There's a few ways that *Free Realms* gets around this. For one, the game is designed so that the only goals you have to pursue are the ones you set for yourself. In this kind of

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situation, it's hard to feel furious envy or resentment for the guy who's gotten the best raid armor. You may not have any interest in fighting in *Free Realms*. Even if you do, there's no need to feel that you've fallen behind the curve if you've played X number of hours without getting Y special loot drops. Maybe you got bored for a bit and went off to be a go-kart driver, or maybe you tried the CCG and decided you liked that better for awhile.

The other major factor that keeps *Free Realms*'s microtransactions balanced is, well, design. This is not a game where you go to the item mall, drop about $30, and leave with the best weapons in the game already purchased for your character. It's more a game where you go and buy some helpful potions if you're afraid your next foray into monster-battling might come to a bad end if you don't. You go there and buy new outfits for your avatar if you've got some spare cash burning a hole in your pocket and what they've just added to the shop is so very you. Perhaps most of all, you end up buying from the cash store if you've decided to focus on training pets and you've realized that almost all of the really cool unique pets must be purchased with a little bit of cash.

This all still probably sounds like a bad deal to the hardcore gamer… but look at it this way. *Free Realms* is a game meant for the 10-14 set and what's one of the big things that kids that age can't completely control? When they go shopping and what they buy. Maybe parents are handing them an allowance, but a trip to the mall still means begging a ride from a parent (at the very least). Once you're there, you mostly ogle things to ask for when your birthday or Christmas comes around, since chances are your allowance isn't big

enough to cover everything you want.

Now, being able to shop (or not shop) for the things you want in a virtual world? Any kid who's able to pick up a prepaid card on a trip to the local department store can do that. A single prepaid card also would cover all of the most expensive things you could possibly want to buy in *Free Realms*. Being able to spend time playing and leveling up is one thing, but giving kids the chance to act all grown-up with buying stuff is pretty priceless to them. It's even better for parents, who won't have to deal with clutter created by the stuff bought. Even a hardcore gamer might find, on occasion, that just buying the customization pieces you want in the game saves plenty of time that you can use to play other games, too.

Perhaps best of all, being able to just pay for optional things in an MMO sets the game free of the need to try and drag out the gameplay as much as possible. Consider that for the average MMO to turn a profit, it needs to keep you playing for as long as possible. So the conventional MMO has a vested interest in not making anything quick or easy to do, even basic things like travel that just aren't any fun to accomplish slowly.

This is because the moment someone has burned through all of the content in the typical MMO, then unless there's more content on the way, strong PvP, or some high-quality socialization to be had, it's time to cancel the subscription.

Free Realms doesn't need your subscription money, though it's happy to take your $4.95 per month

if you want to hand it over. It just needs you to buy magic boomboxes and totally sweet pants for your avatar every once in awhile. This means, in a curious way, that *Free Realms* has more of an obligation to actually be fun than a subscription MMO. Once you're subscribed to a game, the developers can count on a certain amount of compulsion to keep you from canceling. You might force yourself to play sometimes just because of a sense of obligation. *Free Realms*, though... well, you can play or not play. It's all the same. If you do play, though, then you get to become a magical chef, which in some ways is its own reward.

I, For One, Welcome Our New Free-To-Play Overlords

This is why the game is so successful. Sure it's aimed at younger audiences, but so are other kid friendly MMORPGs like Cartoon Network's Fusion Fall and Toon Town. Free Realms is a unique offering different from the others in that it straddles the border between casual and hardcore always making sure to appeal to both demographics.

While you may be growing curious about *Free Realms* now, you're probably still dubious about our sincerely held belief that *Free Realms* and games like are probably going to spend the next decade conquering the gaming world. So, this is the part of the article where we try to convince you that *Free*

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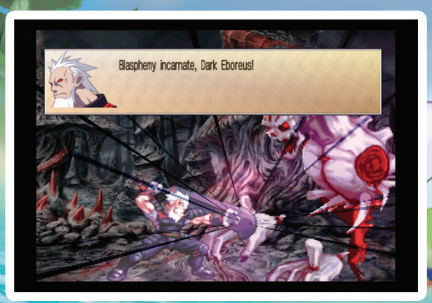

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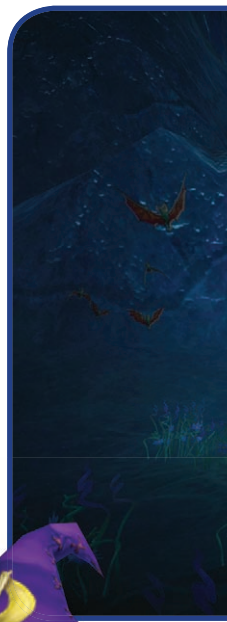
Realms is going to change everything, which it probably will. We just want you to be prepared when you wake up one day and *WoW* has a free-to-play expansion and a cash item shop where you can buy custom haircuts.

As time progresses the Free Realms model will no doubt become more mainstream. The industry has already taken steps to bridge the gap between casual and

hardcore gamers and with the success of *Free Realms* we can expect more of the same. Face it, it's no longer enough to make games for one side of the gaming universe and *Free Realms* stands as testament to how to effectively bridge the gap.

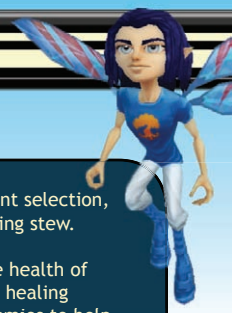
Consider the game's sheer unholy momentum, making it a success the likes of which the MMO space hasn't since *WoW* was first becoming the Next Big Thing. As of this writing *Free Realms* has topped 3 million users and is gaining new registrations at a rate of 500,000 per week. Commercials with high production values are running almost non-stop during kids-and-tweens entertainment blocks. The game has a theme song, written and performed by California pop-punk band The Dares. Reviews from outlets as mainstream as USA Today and hardcore as Eurogamer have been positive.

Free Realms is even moving into the highly lucrative cross-promotion space. The CCG that you can opt to play in the virtual world has a real-world counterpart, manufactured by Topps, now available in stores nationwide. Why bother to buy meatspace versions of cards you may already own in the game, you ask? Well, each starter deck and many boosters are stuffed with promotional loot cards, which have little codes printed on them. You type in the little promotional code and get an item in *Free Realms*. Many of these items are exclusive to the CCG's loot codes and the CCG itself is just as fun with little bits of printed cardboard as it is with the virtual cards. The deal is irresistible once the game has its hooks into you.



The nature of the gaming industry is such that any successful idea is going to be ripped off, possibly for several years, until someone who's in the habit of having original thoughts comes along and has another successful idea. Right now, *Free Realms* is undeniably successful and it's the first truly original idea anyone's had about MMOs in about four years. Seriously, making a game for little kids and girls and parents to play together? That is madness by the standards of conventional logic.

If *Free Realms* stays successful until about this time next year, which is the real test for a new MMO that's gaining heat, then it's officially the Next Big Thing. So it's time to get acquainted with *Free Realms*, hardcore gamers. You may end up playing it, or something like it, much sooner than you think. Even if you can't get into go kart racing and playing CCGs, it's probably not going to be that long before someone's managed to publish one featuring the ganking, elves, and raiding that MMO players are used to now.



Show Some Class

Ever wonder why younger audiences never really got addicted to MMORPGs? Maybe they are too complex, maybe the subject matter is too serious, or maybe there are not enough game play options. Sony Online Entertainment, the studio behind *Everquest, Planetside and Starwars Galaxies*, has taken all these factors into consideration when creating their newest game *Free Realms*.

Free Realms is a browser based, free to play (for the most part) MMORPG geared towards younger audiences. Do not let the kiddy graphics or happy go lucky NPC's fool you; *Free Realms* has just as much depth and variety as any of SOE's other projects.

In fact, *Free Realms* boasts some of the most unique classes ever seen in an MMORPG. Players can choose between traditional battling classes, card duelists, chefs, or even Kart Racers. Depending on the class, the player's experience will be drastically different. As a result, Free Realms is actually an amalgamation of different genres combined into one large online experience. Check out some of the class descriptions below for more information.

The Traditional Classes:
Free Realms doesn't abandon all MMORPG conventions. There are still monsters to fight, dungeons to explore, and loot to collect. Luckily, there are plenty of traditional monster mashing classes to explore.

Those wanting to get up close and personal have the brawler, ninja, and warrior to choose from. All three classes are experts in close range combat, but each has their own unique traits. Brawlers can battle monsters with hammers, clubs, or even their bare hands. They are heavy damage dealers and can battle many creatures at once.

Warriors, on the other hand, are the tank of the *Free Realms* universe. They buff themselves with heavy armors and powerful weapons. Of course they are also capable of dealing damage while using giant swords, axes, and hammers. No party is complete without one of these combat specialists.
While the Warrior and Brawler often charge into battle, Ninjas use stealth to their advantage. They can sneak up on enemies or even vanish completely. They dispose of enemies up close using swords, or fight from afar with shurikens.

Of course not all monster battling needs to be hand to hand. Archers and Wizards can battle mobs from afar using a variety of weapons and spells. Archers use bows that can fire multiple types of arrows while wizards channel the elements through wands. Each is capable of dishing out major damage.

Support Classes:
Like any self respecting online game, *Free Realm's* not only possesses its fair share of warrior type classes, but also has a few support classes. As per standard RPG conventions, support classes are able to augment the stats of other classes or create powerful items.

Medics and Chefs are classes that can directly affect the stats and abilities of other classes. Chefs, for example, can make meals that increase the size of allies or transform them into powerful creatures. However, cooking is no easy task. A good chef has to collect ingredients, prepare them properly, and adhere to complex recipes. Each step of the process involves a small mini-game ranging from ingredient selection, mashing fruits, chopping meat, and stirring stew.

A medic's primary role is to maintain the health of a party. To that end they have plenty of healing spells and items. They can also stun enemies to help attackers finish them more quickly.
Of course there are indirect ways to help other players. Miners and Blacksmiths work together to create weapons from raw materials. The process starts in the mines where miners collect raw materials through a bejeweled style mini game. They are also responsible for melting down these materials and casting them into bars.

Blacksmiths then take the raw material and turn them into powerful weapons and armors. Like the miners, blacksmiths must perform a variety of mini games while crafting items. Each mini game, when performed correctly, gives bonuses to the crafted items.

Driving Classes:
Those wanting to take a break from the typical monster slaying fare, can hop on over to the Kart Racing track. There are two classes that can be explored here, the Kart Driver (which races other drivers on various tracks) and the Demolition Derby Driver (who crashes his car into others to gain points). Regardless of the choice, karts are controlled with WASD, or the arrow keys. Space is used to jump and Ctrl is used to use items that are found in Mario kart style boxes.

Pet Trainer:
The Pet Trainer class is another interesting diversion. As the name implies, pet trainers raise and train pets. They are responsible for all aspects of pet training including grooming, washing, feeding, and training. Each one of the tasks comes with its own mini game that usually involves specific mouse gestures. Training pets for example involves tracing patterns similar to those seen in Okami. The only difference is that the mouse makes them a whole lot easier.

Card Dueler:
The Card Dueler class is arguably the most interesting class in the entire game. SOE has created an online card game that interfaces with a real life card game. Real life cards can be transferred into an online deck via codes on the back of each card. Of course all this would be moot if the card game wasn't fun, and let me assure you it is.

The basic goal of the game is to get to 12 points. There are three types of cards in the game that help achieve that goal; creatures, resource, and action cards. Creatures are your standard attackers that are present in most other card games. Resource cards provide resources, duh, that are used to summon monsters. Lastly, action cards are used to augment the stats of summoned monsters. Points are gained when enemy monsters are defeated. It's a simple system but the sheer number of options makes it surprisingly fun.

Free Realms gives players the ability to switch to any class on the fly. As a result players can experiment with different classes at the same time. For example, a player can go directly from a miner to a blacksmith in order to create a weapon for their warrior. It all but eliminates the need to create a separate character for each class. With all the class options and game play styles, *Free Realms* definitely has something for everyone. Those interested in plunging into yet another new fantasy world would do well to check it out.

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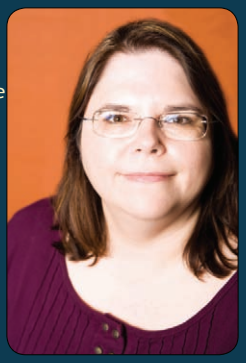
Who created this.. and why?



We had a moment to speak with Laralyn McWilliams, Creative Director for *Free Realms* to ask her some of the questions that were burning in our minds.

HGM: Why did you want to make an MMO for kids, when the traditional crowd for SOE's games is much older?

McWilliams: Part of it is just because a lot of people on the team have kids. Most of the work we do on MMOs, while we're really proud of our work and our games, that's not stuff we can play with our kids. That's part of the motivation. We know that one thing kids would really love in the West is a safe, true MMO environment where they can experience the virtual world and all the great socialization that comes out of that. MMOs work really well for people who are too shy to interact with others a lot or who don't have a lot of opportunities to interact. There really wasn't a true virtual world environment like that for kids where you could have a persistent avatar and have a persistent world and do quests. That was really the primary motivator in really focusing the game on kids, though it's a game parents enjoy as well.

HGM: I've noticed *Free Realms* is one of the few MMOs where you can make a lot of progress without ever engaging in combat. Why was the game designed this way?

McWilliams: The core philosophy for *Free Realms* is that it has a lot of ways you can play. We look at it as four gameplay styles and we look at it as socialization activities, mini-game activities, simulation activities, and combat activities. So it was really important in developing *Free Realms* that you didn't have to do any of that stuff if you didn't want to. What it means is that you had to find ways for you to level up by choosing to play combat or never choosing to play combat. So the decision was made to structure all of our content elements that way as sort of the foundation of everything *Free Realms* is built on.

HGM: Has the game successfully appealed to both boys and girls equally?

McWilliams: So far, and this is as of the 2M player announcement, we're about 33% girls which is higher than the rest of the MMOs so we're succeeding, but we're not succeeding to the extent that we'd like. We want 50% girls. So we want to make sure we aren't making assumptions about what a girl wants to play versus what a boy wants to play.

HGM: What do you have planned to keep players of both genders interested?

McWilliams: Actually all of them. What we did with our features was we looked at the way the feature worked and we aimed that toward a specific part of our audience. It might be female versus male or age-related or casual gamers versus experienced gamers, so all of the mechanics are aimed at one group. But everything that went on top of that was oriented to try and appeal to all of those groups. So racing was oriented toward bboys and experienced players, but

we're about to roll out car customization and all of those things are intended to appeal to both genders. We're not going to assume that people in certain groups don't want to play certain things.

HGM: We know *Free Realms* is a big success in terms of number of players, but how's the microtransaction part of the game doing? Are people buying items?

McWilliams: Yeah, they are. We don't release numbers on that sort of thing though we do want to increase it by offering a wider variety of items. It's an unusual game, there's really nothing like it on the market, so really for us... we're selling really well on things that look cool and also give you a gameplay benefit. We are realizing that we always have fun in Free Realms but when the atmosphere is one where you aren't getting attacked and there's no pressure and you can just hang out with your friends if you want to, people really do want to hang out and create parties. So we're seeing good sales on things like our boombox which you can putdown and it makes everyone around you dance. We're investing in putting more of those fun things in.

HGM: Let's talk a bit about the CCG. What's the general response to it?

McWilliams: It's one of the most popular jobs right now in terms of number people who are playing it and getting it to level 20. The booster packs are also among the top-selling items. It's got that great combination of player versus environment and player versus playre, since you have quests you can play against NPCs, so even if you want to play against other players you need to beat these NPCs to get their cards. It happened to me that I got through all the scenarios and thought I had a great deck and got my butt handed to me by a 12-year-old kid.

HGM: How does it integrate with the physical *Free Realms* CCG?

McWilliams: They're the same game. There's not a lot of integration between the two, you get some codes with the physical CCG that give some of the most unique and best items int he game. Beyond that there's no integration between the two.

HGM: Where did the idea for the open-ended leveling structure come from?

McWilliams: It's from the fundamental decision we made, that was, "We're not going to tell you how to play our game." We didn't want to make assumptions about what you will be doing at any one time. We're still watching what players are doing and steering new jobs toward some of the jobs that are most popular in the game now. A lot of the jobs we come out with for the next couple releases will probably be members-only jobs. The root of it was really in creating a game where you could do what you wanted to do when you wanted to do it

HGM: Which jobs are most popular with players right now?

McWilliams: Our free jobs are all really popular because they're the gateway into *Free Realms*. we have a lot of people playing CCG, ninja, pet trainer, and both chef and miner are popular. On the members side, people are really excited about Wizard and some of the jobs people are getting to after they've played other jobs a little bit more, Blacksmith is one of those. Players will really gravitate toward the jobs that are most interesting to them.

HGM: How are member subscription rates doing? Are people subscribing to the game or just playing for free?

McWilliams: We don't want to talk about numbers very often but we're really pleased with the results so far. We are going to continue to invest in more members quests and members jobs to give it more exclusivity.

HGM: How did the company decide which jobs to include in the game?

McWilliams: Whenever you're doing focus testing, which we did a lot of, really when you're developing a game the choices you make are your best guess about what you think your target audience really wants. It was a mix of looking at what casual players and teens and tweens are doing and the kinds of games that they play.

HGM: What kind of new jobs do you have planned for the game in, say, the next six months?

McWilliams: After launch, then we start to have a little bit more fun and go a little bit more crazy. I can't name any specific ones besides soccer and we're also about to release a new progression for demolition derby driver and driver along with customizable cars.

HGM: What kinds of new features does *Free Realms* have planned for the future?

McWilliams We have a ton, actually. We have a large team and we're still just cranking away at *Free Realms*. We have some long plays on the board but we're continuing to work on housing, guilds is one of those and it's closer than most people think they are, a new area of the game. Shorter term it's all about looking at what players are doing and putting in things they'll enjoy like the ghost pets, some improvements to different gameplay elements, and some short-term jobs we can't mention right now but a couple new jobs. We're still really foucsed on working on *Free Realms*.

HGM: Will we see more freemium titles like *Free Realms* from SOE?

McWilliams: Yeah. We're looking at the numbers really closely. It's definitely safe to say the entire company is looking at it right now. During E3 which always tosses team leadership from different teams into one booth together, one of the biggest topics was all of us talking about how *Free Realms* is doing, pushing memberships and what are people buying. Leadership across the company is looking at *Free Realms* and it's an area that we're really interesting in, games that are free-to-play with microtransactions and membership. *Free Realms* is the first one out of the game to help us understand.

HGM: Could we maybe see something aimed at more of a traditional 18-35 gamer demographic?

McWilliams: Oh yeah, totally, depending on how you look at it. If you look at our portfolio, we're really interested in expanding what people think you can do with an MMO. You can really see that with *The Agency* and with *DC Universe Online*. For those three, that's bringing a little of the *Free REalms* approach to a traditional hardcore online gamer game. It's not clear yet how much or any of the *Free Realms* financial model or other things like streaming technology or mini-games will certainly show up in those games as well. I wouldn't rule anything out we have a lot of thing sin development we haven't even discussed publicly yet.

HGM: As a final question, what are you developers saying about the future of MMOs with a game like *Free Realms*? What does it mean to you?

McWilliams I think while we were developing *Free Realms*, the team leadership was always really aware that we were breaking the mold, is the best way to put it, because we knew we were aiming for an audience that most game developers don't really aim for. Teens and tweens and family have never been a huge focus for anyone except Nintendo and a couple of other exceptions, right? For us the entire process of making the game, we took a hard look at the assumptions people make about what an MMO has to be. We didn't change some things that are just technical fundamentals of an MMO, but we did challenge some other things like, "I have to pick my class when I start the game," or, "I have to go to a store and buy a box and spend hours patching." We said, "No, MMOs don't have to be like that." Those were the most difficult and also the most innovative decisions to make. If you want to see our comment on the future of MMOs, some of them are really subtle, like the unlimited inventory. It has its issues but it really accommodates casual players who don't want to destroy something just to pick something up.

Um, want some secret booty?

If there's one thing we love, it's booty. If there's one kind of booty we love, it's secret booty. When we decided to do an article on *Free Realms*, we asked SOE if we could pretty please have some secret booty. They said yes! Oh yes!!

So, since we're not booty-hoarders, we're going to share it with you. We got permission to give out codes that'll let you access the booty too. Oh snap, we almost forgot to say what it is!

Hot to Trot Tots

May we say yum?! Oh, are you getting cold feet? Well, have a munch on these and say goodbye to those chilly little piggies. Just like mom makes 'em!!

Soooooo, how do you get your booty, you ask? Just go to www.HardcoreGamer.com/hot2trot and tell us where to email the code and we'll email you the code! Can we get a BOOYA?!

ILLEGAL GAMES

by Lynxara

Making a video game is hard, especially in today's industry. A single game can involve hundreds of people, budgets in the millions of dollars, and multiple years of labor just to finish. Today's video game publishers and developers want to make sure they see a good return on their massive investments, so it's pretty rare for a game that contains any legally questionable content to make it onto store shelves. When legal disputes do start up, it's usually over titles like Brutal Legend that have complicated development histories involving multiple publishers.

Things weren't always this way. In the days before the Internet, when information moved more slowly and video games were at the cutting edge of technology, many companies weren't sure exactly what they could and couldn't get away with. Nobody was sure exactly what aspects of a game were copyrighted or when someone offering a license was a shady operator. A lot of companies risked their futures on every game they released and sometimes those risks created legal problems with outraged competition.

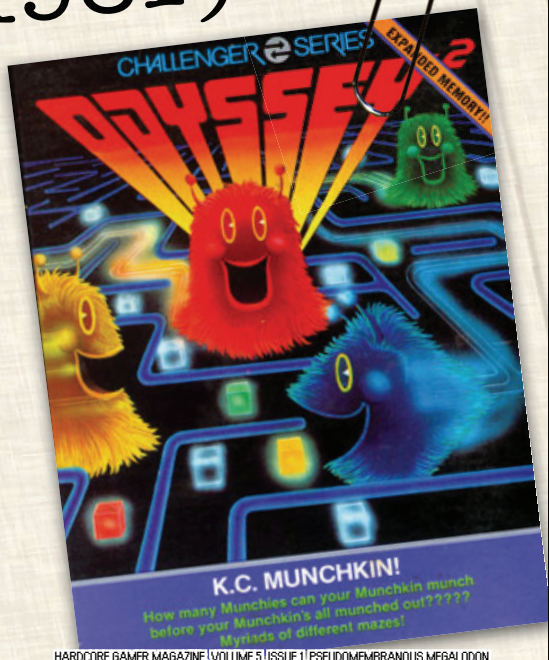
Sit back and get ready to take a trip back to the roaring 80s, when video gaming was entering its awkward adolescence and the industry was a volatile new frontier for both technology and entertainment. All three of the games we're about to discuss aren't the only games to make it onto store shelves just to get yanked back off again thanks to litigation, but they were all part of huge moments in the brief history of the video game industry. If these games hadn't been declared illegal, then the gaming world might be a very different place now.

Case File #1

K.C. Munchkin (1981)

If you're reading a magazine called ***Hardcore Gamer***, then you probably don't need to be told about what a huge nationwide phenomenon Namco's ***Pac-Man*** was when it hit US arcades in 1980. What you may not remember as a reader of a gaming magazine in 2009 is that back in those days, the home console market was driven not by original new games but by home conversions of arcade hits. From the minute that ***Pac-Man*** fever swept the nation, the race was on to see who would be first to release a version that fans would be willing to pay to bring home with them.

It's hard to imagine just how competitive the console landscape was back in 1981. While Atari's VCS, soon to be the 2600, was emerging as the market leader, there were five other competitors on the market. Probably the most robust of them were Magnavox's Odyssey² and Mattel's Intellivision, but a gamer who had the luxury of playing at home might have been doing so on a Fairchild Channel F, APF Imagination System, or Bally Astrocade. The newness of video games created insatiable demand and consumers weren't yet savvy about what they purchased.



Atari sewed up the official rights to distribute a home version of ***Pac-Man*** for the VCS, but not before competitors decided to see if they could capitalize on the ***Pac-Man*** craze by simply creating clones of the game. Some of the clones like ***Hungry Ghost*** or the portable ***Packri-Monster*** were just outright copies of ***Pac-Man***. Other developers tried to lure ***Pac-Man*** fans away to new games that also happened to involve creatures chasing around a maze, eating things and perhaps also avoiding things.

By the modern game industry's standards, this would be the honorable way to go about capitalizing on a big trend. Whole genres are born overnight this way, by taking a popular game and creating what is essentially a variation on it. This was probably all that the creators of ***K.C. Munchkin*** set out to do when they created their variation on what fans would eventually call the "maze chase" genre.

While it would be hard to look at the game and not think about ***Pac-Man*** for a moment, many of the game's rules were completely different. The game certainly didn't bear more than a passing resemblance to ***Pac-Man***, in part due to the display limitations of the Odyssey². The star ***K.C. Munchkin***, named after Magnavox then-President K.C. Menken, was turned around so he faced the screen. His enemies, called Munchers, looked more like octopi than ghosts and there were only three of them. The maze was oriented horizontally rather than vertically and filled with only twelve dots for ***K.C. Munchkin*** to gather.

What really set ***K.C. Munchkin*** apart from ***Pac-Man***, in terms of gameplay, were those twelve dots. Game programmer and designer Ed Averett had the clever idea to make the game more interesting by making ***K.C. Munchkin*** pursue moving dots. As you munched dots, the ones that remained began to move faster and faster. The last dot in the maze would always move as fast as ***K.C.***

Munchkin himself, which meant that catching it involved a certain amount of tactical planning on the player's part. Later levels would add in more hazards from the maze layout itself, like an infamous level that featured invisible walls.

Averett's marching orders were to make something that could compete with ***Pac-Man*** without violating any copyright laws. Magnavox's lawyers were satisfied with his efforts and Averett felt he'd improved on ***Pac-Man***'s basic design. With far more blatant clones of ***Pac-Man*** flooding the market, Atari might have chosen to ignore ***K.C. Munchkin*** if it hadn't been so successful and released so quickly. ***K.C. Munchkin*** hit the market in time for the 1981 holiday season, long before Atari had managed to get their official version of Pac-Man ready for market.

Since ***K.C. Munchkin*** hit in time to take advantage of consumer hunger for a home version of ***Pac-Man***, retailers didn't hesitate to emphasize the similarities. In some areas advertising for ***K.C. Munchkin*** went so far as to call it "as challenging as ***Pac-Man***," or even worse, "a ***Pac-Man*** game." After private investigators working for Atari had copies of ***K.C. Munchkin*** sold to them by retailers claiming the game was just like ***Pac-Man***, Atari filed suit against Magnavox's parent company Phillips.

It took two trials for Atari to force ***K.C. Munchkin*** off the market. The first court that heard the story concluded that ***K.C. Munchkin*** did not violate any copyrights related to ***Pac-Man***. Atari appealed the first decision and the appellate court ruled in Atari's favor. The ruling argued that the changes Averett had made to differentiate ***K.C. Munchkin*** from ***Pac-Man*** only served to accentuate how similar the two games really were. Phillips opted not to appeal the decision any higher. After retailers sold through their current stocks of K.C. Munchkin, no more would be shipped.

Although ***K.C. Munchkin*** disappeared from store shelves long before Atari's official ***Pac-Man*** port for the VCS was available, the cart was so popular during the brief time it was available that it's a very easy game for the modern Odyssey² collector to track down. A sequel, ***K.C.'s Crazy Chase***, actively makes fun of Atari by having K.C. focus on eating portions of an enemy called the Dratapillar that resembles the titular centipede from Atari's famous arcade shooter.

As for Atari's official home version of ***Pac-Man***, well, the company failed to have it out in time for holiday 1981. Instead it debuted in early 1982, with Atari anticipating record demand. The company had 12 million cartridges of the game manufactured despite the fact that only 10 million VCS units were on the market at the time. Atari was staged a huge advertising push and expected the game to drive sales of new systems.

What actually happened is that only about 7 million of the cartridges sold thanks to negative word-of-mouth about the port's quality, rendering the game a costly flop. While nobody would've expected an arcade-perfect port to appear on the humble VCS, the official ***Pac-Man*** port was amazingly bad even by those low standards. It's rumored to actually be an unfinished prototype that the programmer, Tod Frye, showed to Atari execs when he was approached about creating a ***Pac-Man*** port that could go to market ASAP.

Quite a few industry watchers point to Atari's rushed VCS port of ***Pac-Man*** as the beginning of the end of the video game industry as it existed in the early 80's, though it would take several more boneheaded moves from Atari and even more imitators rushing consoles onto an already saturated market to crash the industry in 1983. The Odyssey2 was one of the many victims of that sudden bust, but ***K.C. Munchkin*** has a lot of admirers to this very day. You can't say the same about ***Pac-Man***'s first official home port.

Case File #2

The Great Giana Sisters (1987)

After the great crash of 1983, the arrival of the Nintendo Entertainment System slowly began breathing life back into a video game industry that the business world had long since left for dead. The Nintendo years brought new success to the video game world but also a frustrating new emphasis on console exclusivity. While Nintendo was beginning to really earn its reputation as one of the greatest game developers of all time, the only way to play any of their games was to purchase an NES.

This was a problem for players interested in trying out one of the most celebrated games of the era, ***Super Mario Bros.***, but not interested in buying a console for it. The idea that you'd buy a system just to play its games hadn't really sunk in yet, since at the time most major games were eventually ported to a variety of different home systems. When this failed to happen in North America and Europe with Nintendo's ***Super Mario Bros.***, it became practically inevitable that some other developer would attempt to create a Mario clone for home computers.

The developer that stepped up to the challenge of making a Mario for the home computer set was Time Warp Productions. In 1987 Rainbow Arts published Time Warp's ***The Great Giana Sisters***, one of the most memorable ***Super Mario Bros.*** clones ever created. While it was published on a host of home computers, it's generally the Amiga and C64 versions that are considered definitive. The C64 version's soundtrack is particularly admired by fans of the machine's distinctive analog sound chip, as it was scored by venerable chiptune composer Chris Hülsbeck.

What made ***The Great Giana Sisters*** such a memorable Mario clone was a mixture of blatant theft and absolutely inspired weirdness. You played as either Giana or her sister Maria, traversing worlds where your only real job was to survive as you moved from left to right. A lot of the level layouts are going to be very familiar to the dedicated Mario fan. The jumping controls are much stiffer than in ***Super Mario Bros.*** itself, making for a greater level of challenge. The overall pattern of the game's 32 worlds mirrors the pattern of the original Mario game exactly and quite a few enemies exhibit nearly identical AI. There were even warp zones, too, and a timer that was fiendish by virtue of always being set to 100 seconds.

Most of the game's weirdness entered the equation with the game's huge selection of power-ups. Where ***Super Mario Bros.*** offered only the Super Mushroom and Fire Flower, ***The Great Giana Sisters*** offered over nearly a dozen different power-ups for a player to collect. The most basic one, a sphere, gave Giana and Maria the ability to break bricks by transforming her hair into either an enormous punk rock Mohawk or possibly a giant teased-out perm. The 8-bit graphics are vague on this count and the game's official art has never really sorted it out, either.

From there Giana and Maria could collect power-ups that allowed them to fire one of three different types of projectiles (a standard shot, a bouncing shot, and a homing shot). Different enemies had different vulnerabilities to different types of shots, forcing a player to employ a certain amount of strategy. There were power-ups that froze all enemies on the screen, instantly cleared the screen, or let the sisters walk through lava. A lollipop granted a 1up to the player, as did collecting 100 crystals.

It took very little effort for Nintendo to get ***The Great Giana Sisters*** removed from store shelves, a mere injunction that never really went to trial. The similarities were just too obvious for Rainbow Arts to have a defensible case. History doesn't make it clear exactly how long the game was available for sale, particularly in Europe, but original copies are considered extreme rarities.

The game still has a huge cult audience, though, thanks to the sort of rampant piracy that was only possible on home computers. While Nintendo's cartridge format was difficult to copy, your average computer game could be copied by almost anyone else with a computer. Copies could be copied, too. Most anyone who's ever played ***The Great Giana Sisters*** before the game's first official re-release in 2000 was probably playing a copy of a copy (at the very least). These days the game is easily found online and there's even an enhanced remake for Nintendo DS.

Case File #3

Tengen's Tetris (1989)

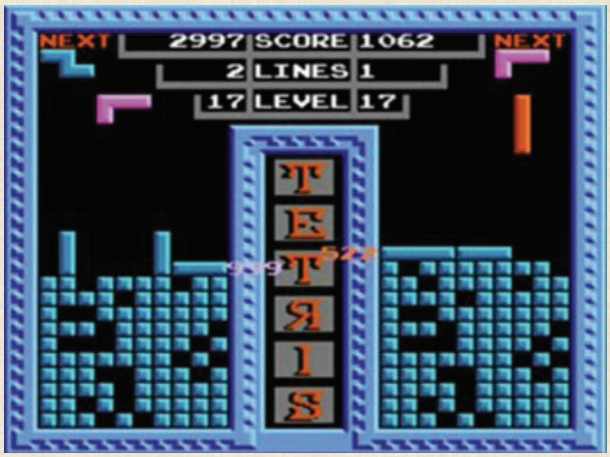
The games we've discussed before were deliberate attempts to clone popular games of the day, but Tengen's ***Tetris*** for NES has a very different origin. This game was the near-direct result of a company believing it had the rights to a game when it, in fact, did not. While Tengen later engaged in some shady behavior regarding Nintendo, in this case the company itself had done nothing untoward. The problem with Tengen's ***Tetris*** is that the company purchased the console rights to the game from a guy who didn't actually have the right to sell them.

The problem with sorting out who owned what rights regarding ***Tetris*** lay in the game's originals. When ***Tetris*** creator Alexey Pajitnov created the game in 1984, he was a citizen of the Soviet Union and an employee of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Had the game been created in America, it would've indisputably been the property of Pajitnov or his employers. Since it was created in the USSR, it wasn't at all clear who actually owned it. The version that initially spread around Moscow was an IMB PC port created by Pajitnov's co-worker Vadim Gerasimov.

The version eventually spread outside of the Soviet Union and came to the attention of a small British software publisher called Andromeda. While the company did attempt to contact Pajitnov and secure Western distribution rights to the game, greed prompted them to sell ***Tetris*** rights to Spectrum Holobyte before they actually had any rights to sell. Spectrum Holobyte assumed all was in order and released an IBM PC version of ***Tetris*** in the US in 1986.

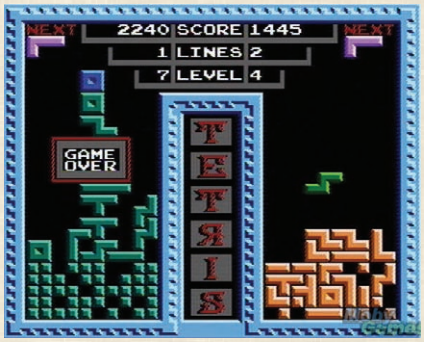
By 1988, ***Tetris***'s popularity prompted the Soviet government to decide that they were the legal rights holders to ***Tetris***. An organization called Elektronorgtechnica (or ELORG) denied that any outstanding rights to the game were legitimate and in 1989 signed the rights to arcade versions of ***Tetris*** to Tengen's parent Atari and rights to all non-Japanese console and handheld versions to Nintendo. While Nintendo moved forward with its version of ***Tetris***, intended as the Game Boy pack-in, Tengen began working on a port of its officially licensed arcade ***Tetris*** for the NES.

As far as Nintendo was concerned, it owned the rights to release ***Tetris*** for the NES in all areas outside Japan. Tengen filed suit against Nintendo, as they felt their rights to arcade versions of ***Tetris*** included the right to release ports of those arcade versions.



The courts ultimately sided with Nintendo in the dispute, ordering a recall of Tengen's version of ***Tetris*** after it had been on store shelves for roughly four weeks. It's not clear how many units of the game sold during this time, but estimates usually fall between 50,000 and 100,000 copies.

While Tengen's ***Tetris*** isn't quite one of the holy grails of NES console collecting, it is considered one of the more difficult carts to track down and usually commands a premium price. Sometimes it appears on multicart bootlegs, which can be a cheaper way to get hold of it if you just want a copy to play. Tengen's ***Tetris*** is generally considered superior to Nintendo's own NES port, offering more features and arguably better music and graphics. In particular, Tengen's ***Tetris*** offers excellent multiplayer, with both a head-to-head mode and a really interesting cooperative mode where two players work together to clear lines.



The Soviet Union eventually fell and Alexey Pajitnov left Russia. He now manages the rights to ***Tetris*** as one of the partners in The Tetris Company, which handles licensing of the games today. Nintendo sold roughly 33 million copies of the Game Boy version of ***Tetris***, which for players of a certain generation became definitive. Atari is still around, though it bears little relation to the company that bore the same name back in the 80's. ***Tetris*** itself, of course, is still one of the most popular puzzle games in the world.

Illegal Fun

Games don't care if they're legal or not, of course. Games merely want someone to play and enjoy them. The creators of these illegal games all probably believed that their projects didn't violate the letter of the law or that nobody would care even if they did. In these cases, at least, the creators were wrong and courts ruled against their creations.

That's not to say these are the only games made as outright clones of other popular titles or with a faulty understanding of the actual licensing rights involved. Copyright-infringing games still get published all the time, but not they tend to go up on games portals or social networking sites. The programmers still hope that rights holders don't notice or hopefully won't care if they do.

It's inevitable that some rights holders are going to care when their games get cloned or otherwise ripped off, though. When they do, though, you can bet we'll see new rounds of litigation designed to get these games declared illegal. If the alleged clones and ripoffs are good games, though, someone will miss them after they're gone... or find a way to keep them playable.

It's Not Too Hardcore. It's Not Too Casual.

IT'S CAS-CORE!!!

By Daniel Kayser

Over the past several years, a new style of game has been developing. Formed out of the desire to combine new school technologies with old school gameplay mechanics, this up-and-coming breed of approachable but deep titles has been brought to life by several different factors. Desiring to appeal to both the hardcore gamer and casual consumer, this new genre tends to offer accessible classic gameplay such as 2D side scrolling, but with the depth and longevity of memorable titles from the 8 and 16-bit eras. They're most often digitally distributed, competitively priced, and oozing with replay value to deliver tons of bang for the buck. They don't have a name per se, but considering the casual approach and hardcore delivery, we're going to give them the title of "CasCore". SWEEEEEEET!

The fact is, many of today's gamers simply don't have the time to explore 60+ hour RPGs, endure multiple hour-long sessions to maintain a decent ranking in their FPS of choice, or even invest a game per night over the course of a digital season to earn a championship in the latest version of their favorite sports game. No, some gamers have too much going on in their real lives to adequately live out their virtual ones, so the advent of "CasCore" is certainly welcome in their eyes.

Below we've highlighted a few games that fit this description. Games you can look forward to delivering a quality experience without sucking the life out of you or causing a divorce. Titles that will take you back to your gaming roots while offering something new, fresh, and fun to dive into. Some might be out by the time your read this, and some are still to come, but they're all games that fit the "CasCore" description and are certainly worth your time…no matter how much time you actually have.

SHADOW COMPLEX

Developed by Chair Entrainment, best known for titles such as *Advent Rising* and *Undertow*, *Shadow Complex* is a downloadable 2D side-scroller that is heavily inspired by classic titles such as *Super Metroid* and *Castlevania*. The game has been developed from the ground up on Epic's Unreal technology and man, does it show. Taking the reigns of the game's lead character in a story that runs parallel to the Orson Scott Card novel *Empire*, players will begin with nothing but a flashlight, but quickly attain power-ups and abilities to become the ultimate death-dealing machine as they unravel a terrorist conspiracy, save the girl, and kick a whole lotta ass along the way. Big weapons, even bigger bosses, boat loads of exploration and tons of upgrades will make the game move at a classic pace reminiscent of some of the best tiles from yesteryear while offering advanced enemy AI, incredible physics-based gameplay and a robust roster of effects to keep the action entertaining throughout. If exploration is your thing, *Shadow Complex* is for you. The devs have hidden an absolute ton of goodies throughout the game's hundreds of

screens (think of "screens" the way you do with *Super Metroid*, where an overview map reveals newly visited ones as tiles on a grid) and went out of their way to make some of them super difficult to attain. Basically, this means you can play through the story straight up and not bother with the sweet, sweet goodies,

or go all Samus Aran and discover everything the game has to offer. We've had hands-on with *Shadow Complex* and certainly are excited to experience the game in its entirety when it ships exclusively via Xbox Live Arcade later this year.

TRINE

Easily one of the more beautiful titles on our CasCore list, Frozenbyte's *Trine* is a physics-based action game where three sorta generic but cool characters allow players to experience clever solutions to environmental challenges created by hazardous puzzles and enemies. The defining factor in *Trine* is that the gameplay is based on fully interactive physics - each character's different abilities and tactics can be used to invent new ways to overcome obstacles and ultimately survive to save the kingdom. As mentioned, the game features three characters; Pontius the Knight, Zoya the Thief, and Amadeus the Wizard. All three offer interesting gameplay while sticking to the traditional melee combat, archery, and spell casting molds you'd expect from a game set within the fantasy genre. But when it comes down to it, *Trine*'s interactive physics are what really help differentiate it from other titles in the genre. *Trine* runs on Frozenbyte's proprietary engine and has up-to-date visual effects, but the best part comes from the solid attachment to the PhysX engine for the physics in the game. Unlike most games, *Trine* uses physics as major a gameplay feature allowing the player to freely create physical objects in the world in addition to normal interaction with physics. What that basically means is that physics in *Trine* aren't just eyecandy, but rather dictate the fact that players simply cannot advance in the game if they don't use the simulated objects or machinery to their advantage. It all sounds a bit technical, but when you see how the physics-based gameplay has been married with an incredibly rich art style and atmospheric score, *Trine* is shaping up to be one of the best titles for CasCore gamers to experience in the year ahead. They can do so when *Trine* hits both PSN and XBL this fall.

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: TURTLES IN TIME RE-SHELLED

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles in Time is widely regarded as one of the best multiplayer arcade titles of all time and soon *TMNT: Turtles in Time Re-Shelled* will deliver an updated version of its greatness to the masses. Rest assured, this isn't just a watered down port, but rather, *Re-Shelled* is delivering

fully 3D-rendered adaptations of all the turtles, enemies, environments and bosses in the game. In addition, your romp with Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello, or Raphael will offer a slight variance on the gameplay featured in the original in that the 3D characters now interact in more of a realistic way. The 2D plane of old that dictated hits in the original is now replaced with a more realistic approach to the combat, allowing players to interact (as in ass-kick) with foot soldiers and any other baddies within a three-dimensional plane. COWABUNGA!

It isn't the deepest game in the world, but when it comes to pure gameplay and fun factor, few titles compare to this arcade classic. Booting this bad-boy up with your buds online or off is a way to almost guarantee a good time. Whether you've played the original or not, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Turtles in Time Re-Shelled* is set to offer a quality experience on both the PlayStation Network and Xbox Live that CasCore gamers can certainly Shellebrate together. (I had to...)

ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

Remember *Smash TV*, one of the most fun and frenetic shooters

from way back in 1990? Well, imagine the top-down aspect of *Smash TV*, but with hordes of the undead soaking up your bullets not too much unlike Valve's amazingly entertaining *Left 4 Dead*. Now, combine that with the accessible controls of *Geometry Wars* and you've got Konami's nifty little shooter *Zombie Apocalypse*. With play for up to four players, the game offers non-stop action complete with assault rifles, flame throwers, grenade launchers, and even chainsaws when ammo runs low. Of course, like any good zombie-themed game, the premise is survival and players will have to outlast the relentless zombie attacks for 55 days, or levels, as they traverse 7 different

environments and utilize their surrounding to inflict mass carnage on the undead. If it sounds absolutely crazy, it's because it is... *Zombie Apocalypse*'s co-op modes work both online and off and are designed to toss you and your pals into the ultimate blood-bath with the hopes of surviving and even unlocking 7 different game modes upon completion. For fans of old-school arcade shooters who appreciate the modern flare and graphical upgrades, it'd be hard to pass up *Zombie Apocalypse* when it soon becomes available on the PlayStation 3, PC, and Xbox 360.

BATTLEFIELD 1943

EA's *Battlefield* franchise is well known for providing action-packed multiplayer gameplay complete with all of the "WOW!" moments you'd expect from one of the longest running FPS titles in the biz. Well, the franchise continues on in the form of the downloadable title *Battlefield 1943*, a new first person shooter focused solely on multiplayer that will launch with three different maps and support for up to 24 players. Gamers can choose to battle as either the U.S. Marines or the

Imperial Japanese as they join up to 12 players per side in the game's only available mode at launch; Conquest. Like previous *Battlefield* modes before it, players will attempt to control enemy territories as they play a virtual tug-of-war complete with vehicular combat allowing players to control tanks, planes

and more. The maps are pulled from the popular *Battlefield 1942* title on the PC and will be making their first appearance on the home console, but have been upgraded to utilize developer DICE's Frostbite engine in order to deliver maximum environmental destruction to pretty much everything you see... including the game's buildings. Honestly, it's kind of hard to believe this is a downloadable title when you see it at first glance. The game looks simple awesome. Despite the lack of maps and modes, it certainly fits the bill for "CasCore" gamers

and will provide plenty of solid multiplayer mayhem on the PC, PS3, and Xbox 360 later this year. Consider that EA will no doubt support *Battlefield 1943* with additional downloadable content post-launch including new maps, new modes, new weapons, and more, and you've got one hell of an excuse to boot up your console of choice for a quick romp on the virtual battlefield.

SECRETS OF MONKEY ISLAND: SPECIAL EDITION

Back in the day, adventure titles such as Lucasarts' *The Secret of Monkey Island* were to gaming what FPS titles like Halo are today. In other words, they were all the rage. Classic story

telling combined with witty writing, interesting characters, and unique gameplay to make *Monkey Island* one of the most memorable and revered adventure titles of all time. Well, Lucasarts will soon be delivering a special edition of the beloved title complete with all of the "next-gen" upgrades you'd expect. Taking on the role of Guybrush Threepwood, PC and Xbox Live gamers will have the opportunity to relive the past while simultaneously enjoying the present. That's because a sweet little feature has been built in that allows players to switch back and forth between the old version and the new version on the fly! That's right, you can play the game in its exact original state one second and then partake of the enhancements the next with just a simple button press. As for the enhancements themselves, Lucasarts has redone the game's graphics entirely, adding new art assets, a more detailed presentation, and a more context sensitive cursor to make interaction with the environment less cumbersome than it was 20 years ago. Toss in a re-mastered musical score, all-new voice work, and a revamped hint system and you have the makings of a classical remake that just may become a classic on its own.

Well, those are just a few of the titles within the "CasCore" genre for you to get excited about. If you're a gamer looking for old-school action with a new-school feel, hopefully you'll find these titles appealing. Luckily, it seems as though this caliber of CasCore gaming is only getting started. Developers see the potential behind these types of titles and have to take far less risks to develop them considering their scale, digital distribution, and an influx of gamers looking for gaming experiences that fit the mold. I know I can't wait to see more titles announced that deliver quality experiences like those above...Titles that focus on the one thing that matters most; the gameplay.

TEKKEN 6

Preview by JPeeples

After a superb fifth installment that brought the series back to its roots and did away with some of *Tekken 4*'s worst-received features, Namco is back with another entry in the legendary series. This entry will bring the latest incarnation of *Tekken 6*, *Bloodline Rebellion*, home, and also brings the series online, and on the Xbox 360 for the first time. A character creation mode also makes its debut and will allow players to craft their own fighter for both off and online play.

The new Scenario Campaign mode appears to be a revamped version of the side scrolling beat-em-up modes from prior *Tekken* home conversions, but with fully 3D movement, the addition of weapons like machine guns and flame throwers, and online multi-player capability. The latter feature is especially exciting given how well that style of gameplay works when more than one person partakes in it. The core gameplay also seems familiar for series vets, but with some massive improvements. An all-new Rage meter has been included, which will give players with low health a power boost when activated. Destructible environments will also make their franchise debut here, and allow players to break through parts of the fighting area and emerge in new areas.

With a roster of 42 playable characters, *Tekken 6* boasts the largest roster in series history. Six new characters join the fray, including a Sambo practitioner named Dragunov, a disgraced martial artist named Bob, Miguel, a man out for revenge for his sister's murder, a graceful female fighter named Zafina, Lars, the illegitimate son of Heichachi, and Alisa, a robot crafted in the image of Dr. Bosconovich's daughter. Between the massive roster, online play, character creation tool, and improved gameplay mechanics, it appears that *Tekken 6* has the potential to be the best entry in the series yet.

Publisher: Namco Bandai • Developer: Namco Bandai
Genre: Fighting... • Category: ...with bears, robots and demons
Release Date: Fall 2009 • Rating: RP • # Players: 1-2

HALO 3 ODST

///// ORBITAL DROP SHOCK TROOPER /////

I'll get this out of the way right now.

Though *Halo 3: ODST* is a new entry into the popular franchise it will be the first to omit the legendary Master Chief character. Set approximately two weeks before the events of New Mombasa at the start of *Halo 3*, the game instead has the player filling the boots of an Orbital Drop Shock Trooper trying to defend the city against the Covenant assault on Earth. You may not play as a genetically-modified super soldier this time around, but you will be playing as a guy who willingly drops into a combat zone via a pod launched from space; that's got to count for something.

The changes to the basic gameplay are numerable, since you are no longer playing a character with the advantage of a suit of sci-fi armor. ODSTs are no pushovers but they do not have shields nor can they flip a tank with one hand, which means that players aren't quite the all-powerful bullet sponge that a Spartan is. ODSTs do however have access to a special vision mode that makes enemies easier to spot, as well as the use of a silenced variant of the SMG to help use some element of stealth to their advantage. The traditional Spartan head-on approach is a sure way to get killed, so flanking enemies and silently taking them down if not avoiding them altogether is the way to go about things.

The plot of the game follows one particular ODST nicknamed "the rookie" who gets separated from his fellow squad members during their drop into the city. Once he touches down he must do what he can to fight his way through Covenant forces spread throughout the moonlit city of New Mombasa to attempt to reunite with his squad, and at times the gameplay switches gears to have you play as those other squad members to see what happened to them. These events are triggered at specific "beacons" spread around the city, and after the first one is found the player must survive the city's perils and find the rest of them to determine what happened to the squad as a whole. Thus, *ODST* is not unlike an open-world game when playing as the rookie. Traditional structured levels take place when you find a beacon and play through the events as seen from a fellow squad member.

Halo 3: ODST doesn't have a Spartan in the lead role, but that doesn't mean the title doesn't have the strength to carry on the traditions of the franchise. The game promises to be as gripping as any of the previous offerings of the series, but playing as the more vulnerable ODST men and women does seem to lend itself towards a more tactical experience. With cooperative play still intact for the campaign and a new "firefight" mode which pits up to four players against unlimited waves of enemies, fans of the franchise looking for something more than a bit different have much to look forward to when the ODSTs make their drop on September 22nd.

Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios • Developer: Bungie • Genre: First-person Shooter • Release Date: 9/22/2009 • # of Players: 1-4 (Co-op); 1-16 (Multiplayer)

We have it easy nowadays (he said, rocking his chair back while taking a puff on his corncob pipe). Games are our friends; they like us and want to offer every possible helping hand they can in order to help us succeed. Scalable difficulty, intense focus testing, and an overwhelming desire to please everybody, all at once, have combined to create a kinder world of gaming. *Demon's Souls*, on the other hand, is having none of that. It knows we're capable of much more than is asked of us, and it's determined to get it. The brutally tough dungeon crawl is utterly unforgiving of any weakness, but those who stick with it will be well rewarded for their efforts.

King Allant the XII of Boletaria was greedy and stupid. He found an ice shrine that granted him the power of souls, resulting in prosperity for his entire kingdom, but it wasn't enough. His quest for more woke the Old One, who promptly destroyed the kingdom and unleashed a demonic horde to chow down on the souls of its inhabitants. Since then, every hero that journeys to Boletaria disappears forever, but that doesn't stop more from showing up. It's your turn now, and the demons are hungry.

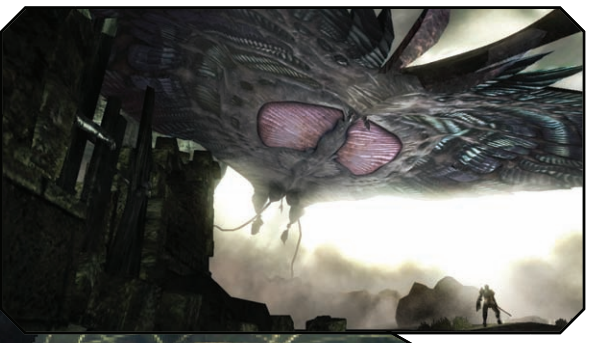
While cleaning the land of their blight won't be easy, you won't be going in helpless. Starting as one of ten character classes, you earn souls by defeating enemies and level up your stats any way you like. The customization options are wide open, and the starting class is no limitation on whatever you decide to grow into. Want a mage in heavy armor with light sword in one hand, wand in another? Not a problem, so long as skills are metered out appropriately. You'll only get one skill point per level, however, so it had better be used right.

Demon's Souls™

Preview by: James
Publisher: Atlus
Developer: From Software
Genre: Dungeon Crawler
Category: Die, Puny Human
Release Date: October 2009

Leveling up is done using the one form of currency in the game—souls. All enemies drop souls when defeated, and these are used to buy levels, armor, weapons, items, or anything else an aspiring dungeon crawler may need. The problem is that it's very easy to lose souls by dying. Death in ***Demon's Souls*** offers a chance at redemption, however, in that you come back as a soul with half your hit points, and you can regain your lost currency by touching the blood splat that marks the place you died. This would be a lot simpler if the level's monsters didn't all respawn, and another death loses those souls forever, but if life isn't fair then death isn't either.

Which isn't entirely fair to ***Demon's Souls***, because despite the difficulty it's actually a very fair game. Enemies fight back using the same skills and tactics afforded the player, and while they may be strong they have exploitable weaknesses. Planning and tactics will go a long way towards clearing out even the worst situations, while impatient button-mashing is rewarded with horrible tentacles through the face. The hero never becomes the god of the dungeon, smacking down enemies with one hit while their strongest attacks bounce off of him harmlessly, and that's not only perfectly fair but also, just as importantly, not boring.



If things get too tough there's always the online component to fall back on, although there's plenty of room for evil there too. Unless you specify otherwise, ***Demon's Souls*** is online. You can see the ghosts of other players running through the level, and they've often left behind helpful or strange messages. They also leave behind blood splats on the ground when killed, and touching them will replay the last five seconds of their life to help you avoid the same hideous fate.

There's also co-op and PVP play, and these work a little differently than normal. Basically, you can only travel to someone else's game when in soul form, and there's two ways to do it. The nice way is as a helpful phantom, called in by a player who still has his body. Defeating a boss with the live player rewards the soul-form player with getting their body back. There's an easier, eviler way to get your body back, though, and that's by becoming a Black Phantom and invading another player's game. Carefully stalk them, wait until the right moment, and then take them down when they least expect it. Being good and taking out bosses pushes the world tendency towards white, calming the monsters down but also lessening their drops, while becoming a Black Phantom makes the world tendency dark, with the opposite effect.

Demon's Souls is a brutal, uncompromising dungeon crawler that will demand a lot from the player. Intelligent play is required, and even that isn't enough to stave off frequent death. There are rewards for those who stick with it, but its unforgiving nature won't be for everyone. For those who have been waiting for some old-school tough-but-fair monster slaying action, however, ***Demon's Souls*** is one of the most anticipated games of the year.

Wii

MURAMASA THE DEMON BLADE

In 2007, 2D sprite-based console games had long since been declared passé in the eyes of the industry.

This allowed Vanillaware to turn heads with an engine that displayed large and beautiful 2D sprites on peoples' PlayStation 2s.

This engine powered two releases: *GrimGrimoire* and Odin Sphere. Both games flexed some serious graphical muscle given their medium and host system, and *GrimGrimoire* actually proved to be a fun 2D real-time strategy experiment. However, based on who you talk to, *Odin Sphere* was either a heaven-sent gift to gamers, or a very shiny game with some very frustrating and shallow combat—a fatal flaw for a title squarely rooted in the action genre.

Vanillaware must have heard the dissenting voices, because *Muramasa: the Demon Blade* takes massive steps to correct the one real flaw *Odin Sphere* might have had. While Vanillaware's 2D engine is still as beautiful as ever, and world navigation appears to be laid out much like that of *Odin Sphere*, combat is now an absolute dream. It's a combo-filled extravaganza whose action sequences are reminiscent of, oddly enough, a supercharged *Legend of Kage*.

Get ready for a mouthful: your controllable characters have dashes, double-jumps, air-dashes, enemy launchers, linkable moves, contextual attacks, defensive parries, counters, projectile-reflections, weapon-changes, full-screen attacks and more all at their command. Many enemies require unique strategies to break through their defenses before you're able to use your arsenal to juggle them around to your hearts content. Strategy requirements apply to bosses as well, many of which have giant health bars, making them fun and challenging to fight. Prepare to remember why you liked side-scrolling beat-em-ups to begin with.

Most of these attacks are mapped to different combinations of the analog stick and the A button. This can wear down your hands a bit if you're using the Wii Remote and Nunchuk, but fortunately *Muramasa* also supports the Classic and Gamecube controllers, so problem solved. If the game's depth of content remains as it was in *Odin Sphere* (a mild point of concern since the cast has been cut down to a mere two playables), then Ignition and Vanillaware have a total winner on their hands. Here's hoping, but what I've seen so far is definitely on the right track. Get ready to slice up some ninja this September.

Preview by: Racewing

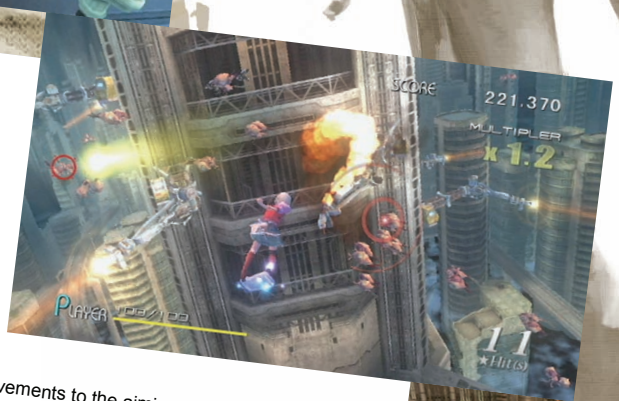
飛天燈夜
竹筒水筒× 3
200\ 200
96
9996

飛天燈夜
(なし)
300\ 300

飛天月光
竹筒水筒
200\ 200
3連斬!!

SIN AND PUNISHMENT 2™

Preview by James



Nintendo loves us! There's no other conclusion that can be drawn from *Sin & Punishment 2*, and its presence on the E3 show floor proves that they're serious about courting the non-casual gamer. Running, gunning, slashing, dodging, and charging up the big guns for major carnage kicks as much ass as in the N64 classic, and the difficulty level looks to be perfectly tuned for the experienced player.

It's a little early for story details yet, but the two selectable characters Isa and Kachi are on the run from an unspecified threat. Monsters are attacking the city, the army is breathing down their necks, and the only things they've got to defend themselves with are incredible agility, a complete indifference to gravity, and unlimited firepower. The shooting action is almost identical to the original game, except the addition of the Wii remote brings its usual improvements to the aiming. Point, hold down the shoot button, and if something gets too close give the fire button a quick tap for a swing of the sword. Shooting is fun, but smacking one enemy into another for major damage is even better.

Each character also has a charge attack, useful for tough situations. Kachi, the girl, comes with a beginner-friendly lock-on laser that targets multiple enemies, while the boy Isa has a single powerful shot with a wide damage radius. The two other major new features involve movement and scoring. Isa and Kachi come equipped with a jetpack and hoverboard, respectively, giving them unlimited airtime. This is put to excellent effect as they not only fly through a ruined city overrun by monster crabs and weird flying sperm-critters, but also in the way it allows them to go airborne in the sections that would normally be on foot. Finally, there's the new score multiplier, which rises slowly as enemies are destroyed and sinks like a stone with every hit taken.

Sin & Punishment was one of Treasure's best games, hampered by its hardware but brimming with insane action in a bizarrely stylized world. *Sin & Punishment 2* is letting the original artistic team show what they can do, and the E3 demo's cityscape crawled with well-designed monsters, a good variety of creative mini-bosses, and everything moving at a crisp, solid framerate. *Sin & Punishment 2's* world looks to be packed full of strange things to shoot in fantastic environments, topped with Treasure's pure-action gameplay skills, and that's something to look forward to with the strongest possible anticipation.

Publisher: Nintendo • Developer: Treasure
Genre: Rail-Shooter • Category: Frothing Demand
Release Date: Q1 2010 • Rating: RP • # Players: 1

Publisher: Raw Thrills
Developer: Specular Interactive
Release Date: June 2009
Genre: Boat Racing
Category: 3...2...1...GO!GO!GO!

In the world of coin-op arcade gaming, there are certain formulas which have been proven to work their magic in the minds of players. We could cite many examples but for the purposes of this article I will refer to a well-known racing game released by Midway back in 1998 called *Hydro Thunder*. It handily fulfilled the needs of arcade operators and players - the game was easy to learn, fun to play, great to look at and it was a little bit different from other fares that graced the coin-op market at the time since most racing games involved four wheeled vehicles. Fast forward to 2009 and Raw Thrills is bringing the same concept back to arcades under a different name but via the same team that gave us the original HT with *H2Overdrive*.

At a glance, the similarities between *H2Overdrive* and *Hydro Thunder* are obvious. You have a steering wheel and no foot pedals to use, all acceleration control is placed into the players hand with a throttle controller to the right of the wheel. The new throttle functions exactly the same as what was used for *Hydro Thunder* (which includes the boost thumb button) but it feels more solid thanks to a thicker build. It should be noted however that the cabinet design itself is different than HT since that game used a *Crusin' USA* cabinet and this was built from the ground up. When the player enters the game they are presented with a nine vehicle choices and just like with *Hydro Thunder*, the type of craft you pick also affects the difficulty. Even the in-game announcer sounds the same, with the same lines such as "3...2...1...GO! GO! GO!" or "Damn the torpedoes!". There are ramps, shortcuts, booster icons and wicked jumps - everything that HT fans will expect and want to see in a spiritual sequel. However *H2Overdrive* takes it up a notch and while it will certainly please HT fans, it is bound to make some new ones thanks to the extra features that were added to the game.

First off, there is a keypad located to the left of the wheel on each cabinet that players can use to save their progress. Players can upgrade each boat separately by leveling up as the play the game. Levels are gained by collecting boosts and smashing your enemies with a level cap set at 40. Once certain levels are attained, new features will be added to the boat, such as a better engine, better defenses and offenses and more. Also, once higher levels are attained the player can begin to pull off stunts for extra points or just to show off. The attack system has been modified - attacks feel stronger, which is helped by the fact the the sound has been beefed up and opponents scream when you knock them off of the track. The end result is that it feels like they mixed *Hydro Thunder* with a little bit of Excite truck and some steroids which results in a truly entertaining experience.

H2Overdrive doesn't hold back when it comes to graphics either. While arcades have come under criticism for under-performing when it comes to graphics in recent years (which is hit-and-miss depending on the game), this game does not hold back and it shows. Online videos with their compression are not adequate enough to convey how good this looks in person with realistic water physics, deep color, vivid level detail and a consistent framerate of 60 fps running on a 42" HD LCD screen. This is complimented by the incredible sound that blasts from the speakers as the game is played and the entire experience leaves you with the feeling that THIS is what playing an arcade game should be like - intense, fun and addicting. By the time you read this, *H2Overdrive* should be sitting at arcades around the country begging for your coins and you attention and for the time being, Raw Thrills has not announced any plans to bring this to consoles so it can only be found at an arcade somewhere near you. If you need help on that front then I suggest trying out http://arcadefly.com, a free site used to find arcades all over the country.

Rating: 5/5

BLAZBLUE
CALAMITY TRIGGER

Companies that develop fighting games are usually known for focusing on a particular series.

Namco has its 3D fighters (*Soul Calibur, Tekken*), Capcom has its old-school brawlers and over-the-top combo-fests (*Street Fighter, Versus Series*) and SNK has its flagship, *The King of Fighters*. Arc System Works is well known for their *Guilty Gear* series, so it was a big step for them to attempt a new franchise and game engine. Typically, on a new game you expect to see a lot of rough edges and design flaws. However, *BlazBlue* (pronounced "BLAY-bloo") is one of the most well-designed, polished fighting games out there, period.

For a fighting game, there seems to be barely enough characters: ten of them, plus two bosses (which are available from the beginning). However, unlike having multiple characters with similar movesets, each character in this game is strikingly individual, each possessing a specialized attack series known as "Drives." Using these, Ragna the Bloodedge can steal life, Carl can manipulate his puppet Nirvana, Rachael can summon a breeze in any direction to push opponents and herself, and Jin can freeze his opponents. Drive attacks can take some time to master effectively, but can be thought of as one-button special attacks. Because of all this, all characters can stand apart on their own merits.

As far as the learning curve goes, *BlazBlue* is surprisingly well-designed and easy to pick up. Since almost all characters have a basic chain of attacks and at least one simple combo finisher (Ragna's triple uppercut, Jin's rapid-slashes), it's fairly easy to mash out combos on the fly. Also, almost everyone has some sort of high-low mixup and opportunities to inflict damage after a successful grab. But what the game *really* does well is to tell you what you did wrong. If you incorrectly block certain moves or if you are being grabbed, color-coded exclamation points over your character's head will tell you immediately what your status is. As such, you can quickly learn whether you had to block a particular move high or low, or if you did not correctly defend against a throw. Furthermore, the window of opportunity to defend against a throw attempt is *much* larger than most other fighting games. This only scratches the barest surface of *BlazBlue*'s game mechanics, but all of these features help to make the game feel less 'cheap' and frustrating.

That is not to say that this game lacks frustrating elements, but this is only truly evident at the highest levels of play. The ability of characters such as v-13 and Arakune to fill the screen with sharp and dangerous objects is unrivaled, but requires a large investment of training. *BlazBlue* is one of the deepest 2D fighters out there, and that is a good thing. But be prepared to put in at least a hundred hours of play (seriously) before you find yourself becoming decently proficient. The advanced combos alone will require days of practice (for each character), and you'll need to have a minimum level of proficiency before being able to take on other competitive players online. But what is notable is that *every* character can do amazing things (or amazingly corny, if you're Bang) with enough creativity and skill, and most importantly, you feel rewarded for all of your hard work when playing against other opponents. If you really want to get into competitive play, the Limited Edition package of this game also comes with a tutorial DVD with commentary and strategy by some of America's top players, as well as footage of matches and combos. But even if you can't get your hands on the DVD, that won't limit your access to top-level play, thanks to the online features available.

Blazblue's online area leaves almost nothing lacking. There is only one small gripe I have, and that's the inability to view inputs while watching replays. (Then again, *Street Fighter IV* players on PSN have the same problem.) However, you can easily download replays (sorted by character) on the leaderboards, and *there are lobbies*. Anyone online can create a lobby of up to six total players, and while two of the players are fighting, the other four get to watch as spectators! It also features a disconnect rating on each player's profile to weed out rage-quitters (a pox on all of you, seriously).

If you're not yet ready to become a "Major-League-X-Class-Competitive-Professional-Tournament-Serious-Business" player, that's okay. *BlazBlue* comes with a visual novel included as "Story Mode." Quite frankly, this feature needs to be in more fighting games, and Aksys went above and beyond the call of duty with how well it turned out. Oftentimes, features like these get cut out from foreign localizations because of the expense involved in translating and voicing them, but no corners were cut for this game. Story Mode features many hours of gameplay, full English and Japanese voice acting (and the English voices are great), and a well-developed storyline with several hilarious detours. After playing through it, you'll understand why Taokaka goes "Squiggly Justice PUNCH!" against Arakune, or why Litchi yells "Hands off the Panda!" during fights with Noel. These character interactions were a great touch already, and understanding the meaning behind them is priceless.

All in all, *BlazBlue* makes for a pretty complete package. It's got single player modes, an intriguing story, a strong game engine and well-designed online play. If you're a fan of the *Guilty Gear* series or a fighting game player looking for something new to play, there's really no going wrong with this game. It'll be around for a long, long time as well, as it will take at least another year for the game's full depth to be discovered. Just you watch.

Note: In the making of this review, Arlieth earned the "Carpal Tunnel" achievement, requiring over 25 hours of logged in gameplay.

Review by Arlieth • Score: 5 of 5

Publisher: Aksys Games • Developer: Arc System Works • Genre: Fighting • Category: Guilty Pleasure • Release Date: 6/30/2009 • # of Players: 1-2 • Online

零超兄貴 Zero Cho Aniki

Review by Goban

Slip on your best Speedo, oil up your muscles, and grab a big handful of your favorite performance-enhancing substance. After 7 years of wandering in the wilderness, everyone's favorite scantily clad bodybuilding duo, Samson and Adon, are back! *Cho Aniki*, Japan's famous protein-fueled sausage festival, returns with its first new game in 6 years with the PSP release of *Zero Cho Aniki*.

Those not familiar with the series may be in for a bit of a culture shock. Debuting in 1992 on the PC Engine, *Cho Aniki* or "Super Big Brother" is a series of horizontally scrolling shooters in the same vein as *Gradius* or *R-Type*. However, instead of featuring futuristic outer space drama, *Cho Aniki* is a lighthearted spoof of macho bodybuilding culture. Instead of massive motherships and robotic fighting machines, *Cho Aniki* offers waves of nearly naked men in suggestive poses.

Zero Cho Aniki serves as something of a series reboot. After original developer Masaya (also of *Langrisser* fame) went out of business in the early 2000s, the series languished. The last title, the PS2's *Cho Aniki: Seinaru Protein Densetsu*, was released all the way back in 2003, with no new games following since. *Cho Aniki*'s new developer, extreme Co. Ltd, has decided to go back to the series' roots, with the new PSP title returning to the style of the original 1992 PC Engine game.

The game's heroes, Itaden and Benten, are your typical magical warrior couple. Accompanying them are their faithful sidekicks, Adon and Samson, the forever smiling banana-hammock-clad oily musclemen and official mascots of the *Cho Aniki* series. Mika and Eru, demonic looking chubby cherubs, also lend their support.

Publisher: GungHo Works, Inc.
Developer: extreme Co., Ltd.
Genre: Horizontal Shooter
Category: Action
Release Date: 3/19/09
# of Players: 1

This team of hunky heroes take on the evil Bo Emperor Bill, who has invaded neighboring galaxies in order to sap them of their precious protein, which is apparently the lifeblood of the a bodybuilding civilization.

The game moves at a more leisurely pace, as opposed to the frantic combat of many shmups, You will not be overly exposed to the "bullet hell" that many Japanese shooters love to sadistically put gamers through. This allows the players to fully appreciate the truly bizarre creatures that inhabit Samson and Adon's world. Enemies range from the comparatively tame Thomas the Tank Engine-inspired train cars to series mainstays like a spaceship crowned with Elvis' torso. Throw in a naked man riding inside of a watermelon, a naked man lounging in a half moon, a naked man... well, you get the idea.

Zero Cho Aniki's gameplay is typical shooter fare, solid but unspectacular. You choose either Itaden or Benten (and later, a hidden character named Shoten) and a support character, either Adon or Samson, who will follow your character onscreen to add a little extra firepower and even act as a limited projectile shield. Your character is armed with a standard peashooter that increases in potency as the game goes on. Also available are the typical screen clearing megabomb and a special "Man-Beam" doubleteam attack.

Zero Cho Aniki, as it always has, chooses to forgo complicated gameplay in favor of it's unique atmosphere and visuals. Veterans of the series have probably seen it all (especially if they've played the particularly bizarre *Cho Aniki: Kyuukyoku Muteki Ginga Saikyou Otoko* for the Saturn), and won't experience anything shocking or new, but will probably welcome the return of the cult classic. Newcomers may feel a little confused as first, but if you aren't bothered by a little *Ambiguously Gay Duo*-style tongue-in-cheek humor, than you'll find a very unique experience.

Gamers with no Japanese language skills will have little trouble enjoying *Zero Cho Aniki*, as there are no complicated menus to navigate or text heavy story to wade through (and really, who plays shmups for the story anyway). If *Zero Cho Aniki* does not fully satiate your desire for glistening musclebound shooter goodness, the original PC Engine version of *Cho Aniki* is also available on the Wii's Virtual Console.

Rating: 3 of 5

(Rhythm De Run Run Run)

リズムDEラン!

Review by Taragan

Sprinkle in some *Ouendan*, add a dash of *Electroplankton*, mix in some *Rhythm Tengoku* with just a pinch of *Metro Cross* and what do you get? *Rhythm De Run Run Run* for the NDS from Alpha Unit. With all the right ingredients you would think this would be an instant classic. But something is missing…

Like most rhythm games, the concept of *Rhythm De Run Run Run* is quite simple. You tap the screen in time with the music to progress through the game. Where *Rhythm De Run Run Run* is a little different from the standard fare is that your taps actually control the protagonist as he/she navigates an obstacle course to the finish line. A quick tap in rhythm will dispense with the smaller obstacles whereas a perfectly timed tap and hold will overcome the larger ones. Depending on the stage the obstacles will very from *Dragon Warrior*-esque monsters to giant penguins to UFOs and everything in between. Yes, there is a lot in between giant penguins and UFO's but that speaks to the variety of zany stages in *Rhythm De Run Run Run*. One moment you're defrocking ninjas on a movie set. The next you're a gaggle of cavemen hunting a wooly mammoth.

What makes the game challenging even for rhythm game veterans is that a stage's difficulty will adjust on the fly depending on how well you are performing. The better you do, the faster the music gets until it gets so fast that you can barely decipher the blur of visuals flashing across the screen.

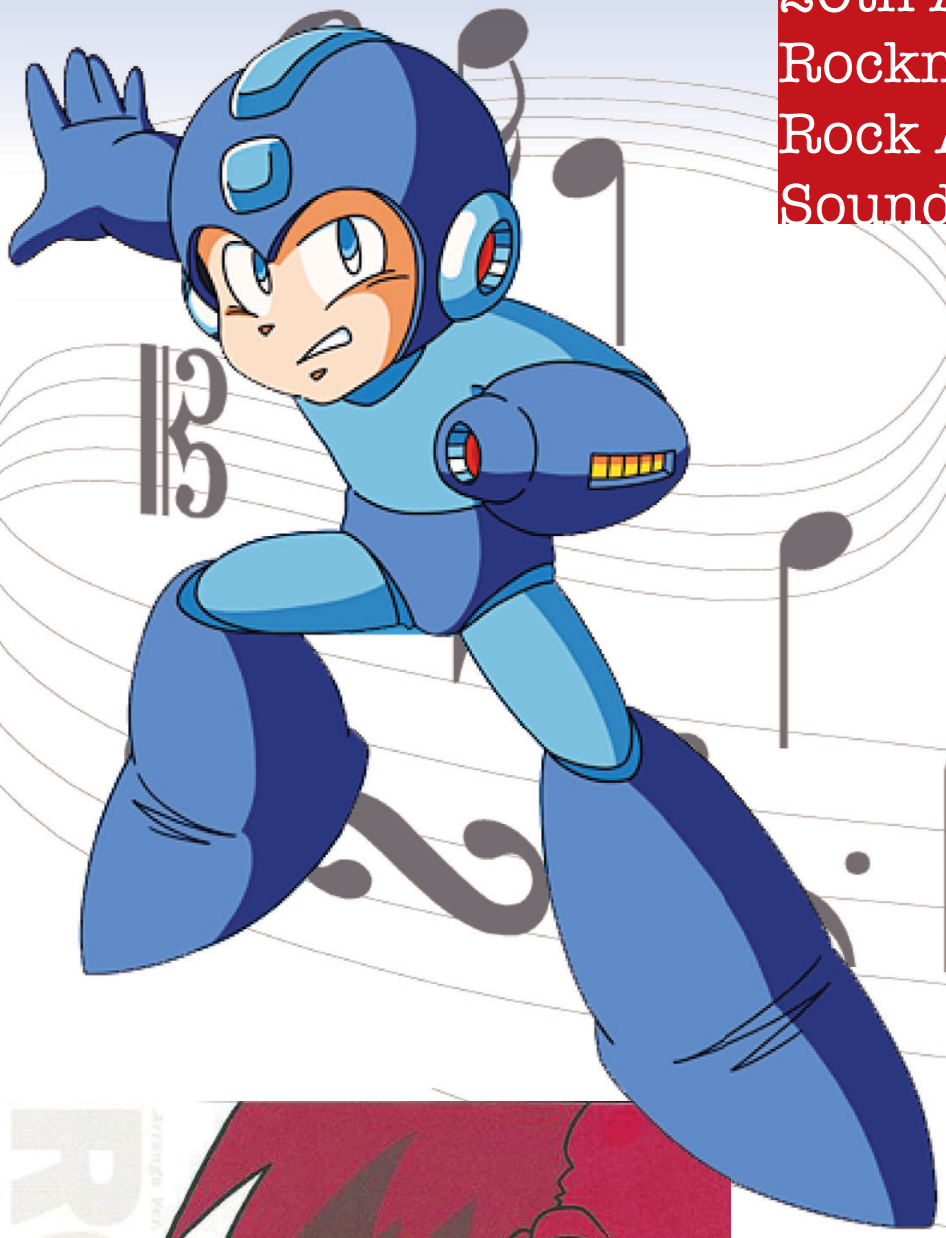
So what's the missing ingredient alluded to above? Great music. And without great music, you simply cannot have a great rhythm game. The majority of the songs sound as though they were ripped straight from the bank of sample tracks of an old 1980's Casio keyboard found at a garage sale. At least a third of the songs are classical music (strike one). None of the songs feature lyrics (strike two). And some of the midi loops are so short that the developer simply repeats the track three or four times to create the auditory illusion of a song (strike three).

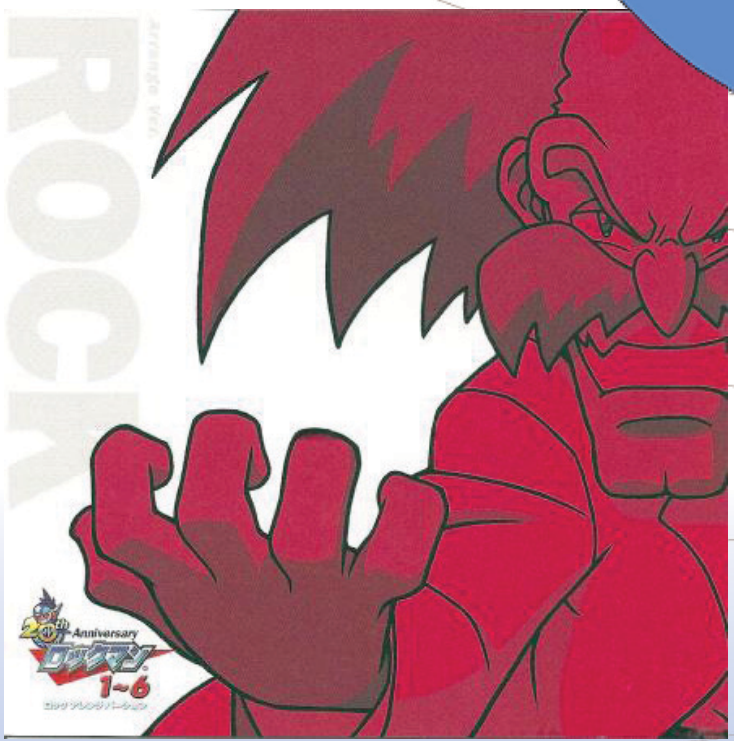
Alpha Unit did include one interesting feature to partially compensate for the game's poor audio. After you beat a stage, you can record a brief two second sample using the microphone on the DS, which the game will then use in a remix of the stage's standard track. Depending on your sample, this feature can work pretty well. Certainly, many will find hours of amusement in being able to create their own custom tracks of words containing approximately four letters.

Overall, the *Rhythm De Run Run Run* is a decent rhythm game that could have been a good one with better music. To be fair, Alpha Unit did pack in a lot of features and a variety of game play options and some of the stages are quite entertaining. *Rhythm De Run Run Run* is a good filler until the next *Ouendan* or *Rhythm Tengoku* comes along.

Score 3/5

20th Anniversary Rockman 1-6 Rock Arrange Soundtrack





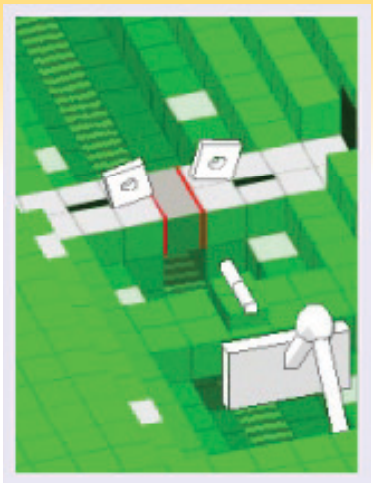
Rockman knows how to rock, man! Any retro gaming fan no doubt spent countless hours playing the grueling levels of the *Rockman* (*Mega Man* in the US) series, blasting away Dr. Wily's minions. While video game music has changed from the simple chiptune sounds of the 80's to the fully orchestrated soundtracks of today, the classics never get old.

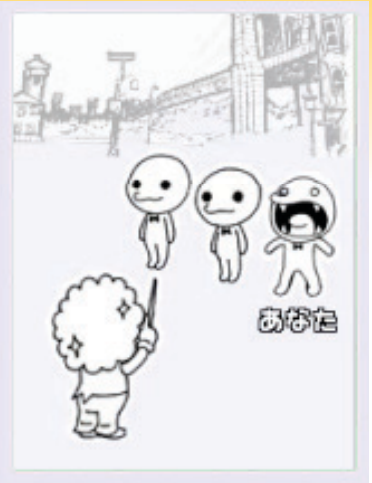
To celebrate the 20th Anniversary of *Rockman*, Capcom released a whole suite of merchandise in Japan to commemorate the event. From t-shirts to gashapon sound drops and almost everything in between, the Blue Bomber got the royal treatment. Capcom also released two arrange soundtracks in Japan, featuring Rock and Techno remixes of classic *Rockman* music.

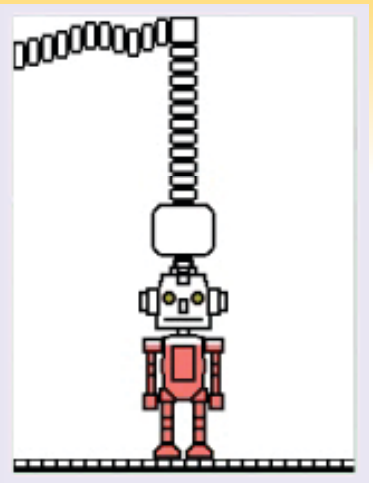
The *20th Anniversary Rockman 1-6 Rock Arrange Soundtrack* features rock remixes of classic *Rockman* BGM. From the high energy Cutman mix to the fast paced Shadowman mix, the music is an appropriate tribute to the glory days of retro gaming. As one might expect from a franchise with characters name Rock and Roll, the music of the Rockman series lends itself well to the rock genre. The tracks really come alive when played on the electric guitar.

The gems of this soundtrack are the two medley tracks; one of the various title themes and one consisting of music from selected boss battles. Both are roughly six minutes in length and showcase everything gamers love about the classic *Rockman* music. The inclusion of the original 8-bit tracks that were the inspiration for the remixes is was a nice touch to round out the arrangement. For fans of the series, this CD is the perfect compliment to any *Rockman* or *Mega Man* collection.

Soundtrack coverage by Kozo







RHYTHM TENGOKU GOLD

Rhythm Tengoku Zenkyokushu (Complete Song Collection)

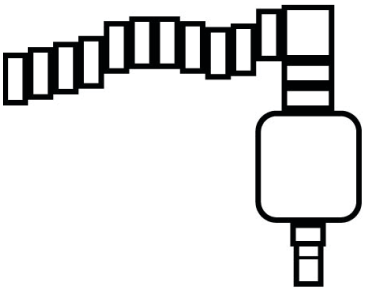
What makes a good rhythm game? Great music, of course! And very few rhythm games have better music than Nintendo's *Rhythm Tengoku* series.

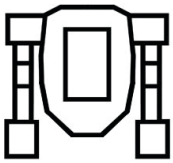
The music of *Rhythm Tengoku Gold* is simply amazing to listen to. Ranging from slow electronic jazz to Japanese pop music, the game features a wide variety of musical genres that still manage to blend together to form an overall sound. The three-disc set features 150 tracks, including music from the original *Rhythm Tengoku* for GBA and *Rhythm Tengoku Gold* (or *Rhythm Heaven* as it's known in the US) for the NDS. From the standard tracks to the "perfect" versions to the remixes, the music is simply addicting, urging even the most rhythm-less gamer to unconsciously tap his/her foot as they become enveloped in the music's whimsical melodies.

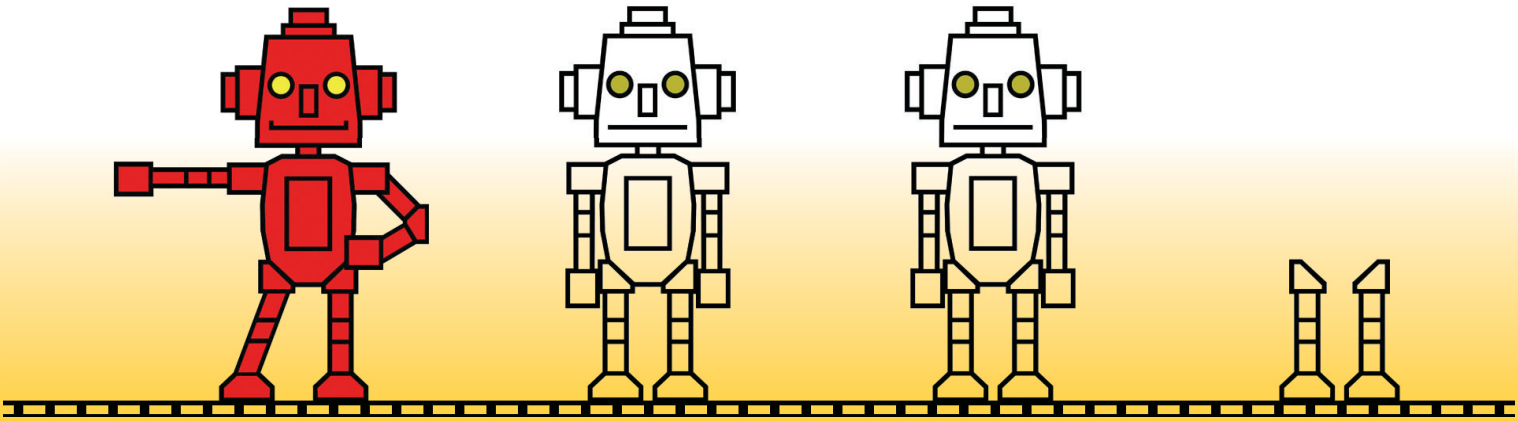
The music in *Rhythm Tengoku* was produced by Japanese music icon Tsunku, most famous for his work in producing and writing the songs for J-pop idols Morning Musume. *Rhythm Tengoku* features a nice blend of vocal and instrumental tracks that fit well with each other and complement the games quirky style.

The music of the *Rhythm Tengoku* series blends seamlessly together as most tracks are relatively short but still manages to be entertaining throughout the whole three-disk collection. For gamers who have only played the U.S. version of the game, there is an added bonus: all the lyrical tracks in the collection are (of course) featured in their original Japanese. Although the English versions in *Rhythm Heaven* are decent, something is certainly lost in translation and these quirky tracks are best enjoyed in their native language. With its exhaustive collection of tracks and bonus content such as remixes not heard in the game and even a sticker sheet featuring all of your favorite rhythmic friends, the *Rhythm Tengoku* soundtrack is a must-own for fans of the series.

Soundtrack coverage by Kozo







On the Download

Horticultural

Plants vs. Zombies

PC • http://www.popcap.com • $19.99

Developer: Popcap Games • Genre: Tower Defense
Release Date: 5/5/2009 • # Players: 1

The zombies... are coming! They know there's a tasty brain waiting inside your house, and the only thing between them and it is a grassy yard five spaces wide by nine long. It's good fertile earth, capable of supporting a wide variety of lethal plants looking to turn the undead into so much fertilizer.

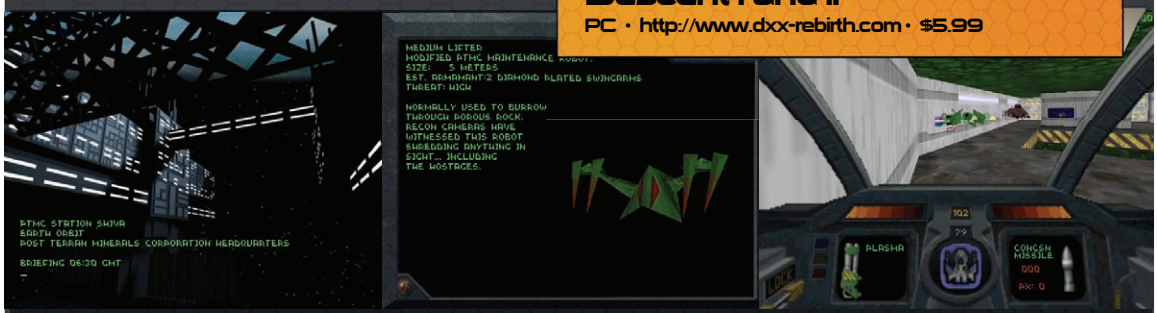
The basic concept is pretty simple- plants need sun, which sometimes drops from the sky but is more often generated by Sunflowers. Each sun icon is worth points, and each instance of a plant in the yard has an initial cost. Once planted they take care of themselves and any advancing zombies, but it requires a decent strategy to ensure a good return on the initial sunny investment. PeaShooters are nice to begin with, but kernel-pults have a good chance of freezing zombies with a pat of butter to the face. On the other hand, you can plant a Torchwood in front of a PeaShooter and light their projectiles on fire for extra damage. Decisions, decisions...

In the meantime, the zombies are doing their best to be more than cannon fodder by arming themselves with screen doors, traffic cone helmets, zambonis, helium balloons, etc. They also attack under cover of night, in the back yard (complete with swimming pool), and even on house's sloped roof. Each area required new plants to defend it, with very little repetition in attack style. There's a large variety of settings, challenges, and mini-games, and endless strategies to deal with them all. *Plants vs. Zombies* is a huge game with a great sense of humor, and while it tends to play itself once a strategy is completed and the field of fire constructed, putting it all together and experimenting with the possibilities stays fun for a long, long time.

By: James • Score: 4 of 5

Descent I and II

PC • http://www.dxx-rebirth.com • $5.99



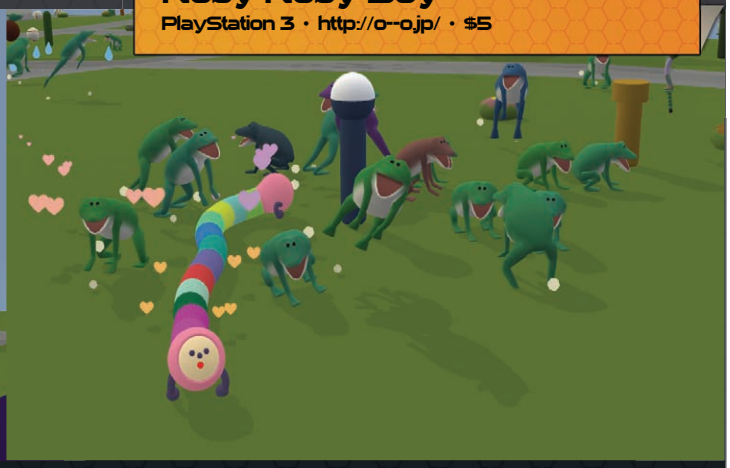
Developer: Parallax Software • Genre: FPS
Release Date: 3/13/1996 • # Players: 1-8

Back in the days of *Doom* 3D was the wave of the future, and nothing tackled the idea in the same way as the *Descent* series. Gravity is nice for those trapped on the ground, but level design free of its concerns opened up a new world of possibilities. Enemies that can dodge on all planes of movement, hidden areas off any surface, and complex levels that sprawl in every direction with rooms connecting in unexpected ways differentiate *Descent* from its FPS contemporaries. The story is paper-thin, about a mercenary hired to clear out mining robots gone rogue after they got infected with a computer virus, but that's not what you play this kind of game for. It's all about shooting robots backed up by the power of full freedom of movement, and *Descent I and II* allows this in a way no other FPS ever matched. Additionally, it only takes a minute to pull the necessary files from the install and put them in *DXX-Rebirth*, a program that brings the graphic engine up to speed while adding full modern gamepad support. *Descent I and II* is a total blast, runs beautifully on any PC, and is a true classic of the genre.

By: James • Score: 5 of 5

Noby Noby Boy

PlayStation 3 • http://o-o.jp/ • $5



Developer: Namco Bandai • Genre: ???
Release Date: 2/19/09 • # Players: 1-4

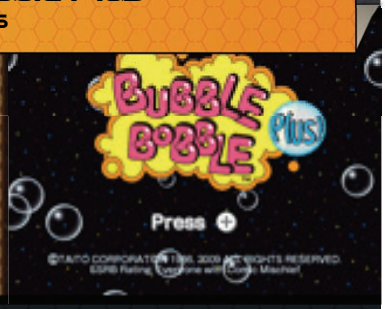
Noby Noby Boy is weird, but that's ok. Less game than activity, there's no point other than what you decide there ought to be. Feel like eating people and then pooping them out? Go for it. How about eating a person and an animal and internally merging them to create a mutant hybrid? Or stretching dozens of meters long and tying up everything in the level until a car drives through your body, cutting it in two, so you eat your own butt and then it regenerates out of the head-half of

the body's bloodless cartoon stump? Well now you can! *Noby Noby Boy* is a giant playground filled with toys, and while the goal of adding distance to Girl in order to aid her quest to wrap her body around all the planets in the solar system simultaneously is always present, it's hardly a driving force. Still, thanks to the bonus multiplier from Lucky Week applied to the distance everyone in the world reported Girl, Mars is now open and there are more weird things than ever to play with. Next stop: Jupiter!

By: James • Score: Pi*r² of 5

Bubble Bobble Plus

Wii • WiiWare • $6



Developer: Taito • Genre: Platformer
Release Date: 9/25/2009 • # Players: 1-4

Bubble Bobble Plus manages to be both a success and a failure in one handy package, updating the original gameplay with a decent amount of new features and levels but blowing it completely as a remake. There are two primary gameplay modes available- Standard and Arrange. Standard is the original game recreated with the shiny new engine, while Arrange offers all-new levels with new monsters and sloped surfaces that cause the dinos to shoot at an angle. The basic formula is unchanged, with plenty of single-screen platforming as Bub and Bob work to clear each level of monsters by trapping them in bubbles, then popping them to collect the fruit they drop. The problem is that small changes in control, which are fine for the new Arrange levels, don't translate well to the level designs of Standard. A tricky jump from bubble to bubble out of a thin well only took a bit of practice in the NES game, but it's close to impossible with the new engine's slightly touchier bubbles. Bubble groups don't pop as easily, leading to smaller and less exciting bonuses, but at least there are online scoreboards. *Bubble Bobble Plus* is a decent update, but the 23-year-old original is still the better game.

By: James • Score: 3.5 of 5

strategy then.

strategy now.

doublejump.com

DoubleJump BOOKS

Exhumed by HonestGamer

R.C. PRO-AM® II

RACE THROUGH 24 UNIQUE LEVELS

YEEEEEHAAAAAW!!!!!

Think back to the early NES days and perhaps to the posters that came with nearly any Nintendo-published title that you cared to buy. Even if you didn't play it, you probably remember seeing images of *R.C. Pro-Am*. As the title implies, it put gamers in control of radio-controlled cars as they zipped around various tracks. There were some definite limitations, but the game was rewarding enough that many a youth spent hours trying to reach the final rounds while dodging puddles, bombs, skulls and other hazards and deterrents. There are people out there who still wish the game got a sequel. What those fine folks don't realize is that it did!

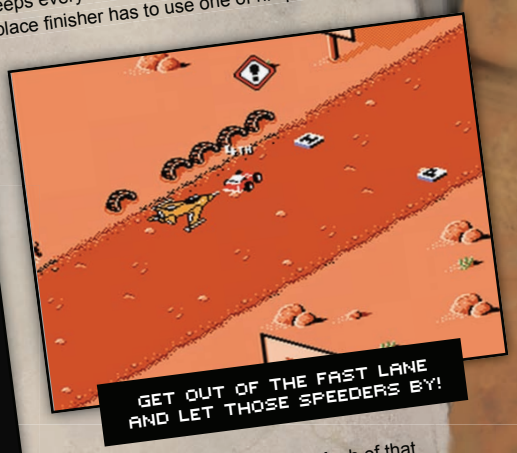
R.C. Pro-Am II came on the scene at an unfortunate time and with a few strikes against it. The NES was already becoming a dated piece of hardware. Worse, the company responsible for publishing it, Tradewest, wasn't capable of exerting the marketing muscle that Nintendo had used to drive the first installment to such success. Shelves were already cluttered with games for 16-bit systems, so you really had to seek it out if you were interested in the poorly advertised sequel. In a perfect world, that wouldn't have mattered because the game was thoroughly excellent. We don't live in a perfect world, though, so the result of Rare's toils was a polished 8-bit racer that almost no one played. It soon was relegated to bargain bins before finally disappearing altogether.

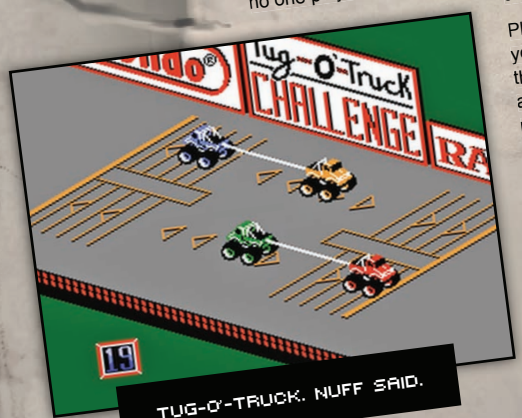
NO DOUBT THE COOLEST GRAPHIC IN THE PRO-AM FRANCHISE

Play the game now, though, and you'll wonder what people were thinking. *R.C. Pro-Am* was fun, after all, but this sequel tops it in nearly every conceivable fashion. It's astonishing how aggressively *R.C. Pro-Am II* moves to correct every one of its predecessor's shortcomings.

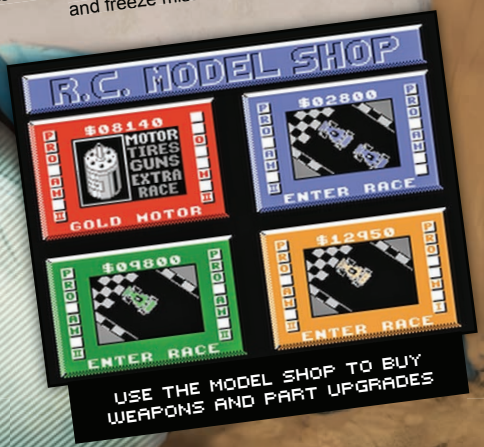
The most obvious improvement is the switch to a multi-player experience. Many a youth wished that he could race against his friends in the original, even if he wasn't sure how that would be accomplished. Here, that wish was granted. What's particularly surprising is that as many as four people can play at once if the proper hardware is available. Vehicles all have to stay on one screen, so any that trail too far behind will be brought unceremoniously forward in flickering and weakened form. This mechanic keeps everyone "in the game" until the finish line, where the fourth-place finisher has to use one of his precious continues in order to keep playing.

Importantly, *R.C. Pro-Am II* offers a great deal even as a single-player experience. Much of that is thanks to some of its newly-acquired depth. In the previous game, vehicle upgrades were obtained by passing over icons littering the tracks. If you wanted better tires, you needed to hit several related icons that appeared only in specific places throughout. Missing them put you at a distinct disadvantage, so long-term success required memorization of every track and pick-up location. Here, that system has been updated. Now you collect money (both from placing well and by finding bags scattered all over the tracks). You can purchase the upgrades that suit you, including new engines and even a broader assortment of weapons that includes buckshot (good for robbing cash from others) and freeze missiles.


GET OUT OF THE FAST LANE AND LET THOSE SPEEDERS BY!



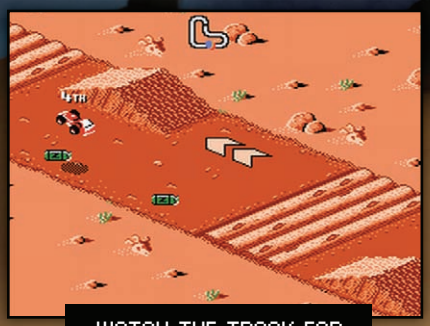
TUG-O'-TRUCK. NUFF SAID.



USE THE MODEL SHOP TO BUY WEAPONS AND PART UPGRADES

Platform: NES
Publisher: Tradewest
Developer: Rare
Release Date: December, 1992
Genre: Racing
Category: Action
# of Players: 1-4

HONE YOUR SKILLS OR END UP IN THE PILE OF DING DONGS



WATCH THE TRACK FOR HAZARDS AND GOODIES

A FOURTH PLACE FINISH WILL COST YOU A CONTINUE

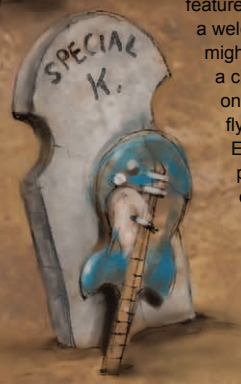
Tracks also show more variety than ever before. There are three separate themes: prairie, city and desert. They each feature their own hazards and distinct designs, which is a welcome change from the always-green fare that you might recall from the original *R.C. Pro-Am*. Even within a circuit, there's range in design as tracks loop back on each other or cross shallow streams or send you flying up ramps and barreling beneath underpasses. Environments definitely feel more organic, even before planes pass overhead and try to pepper you with dangerous gunfire.

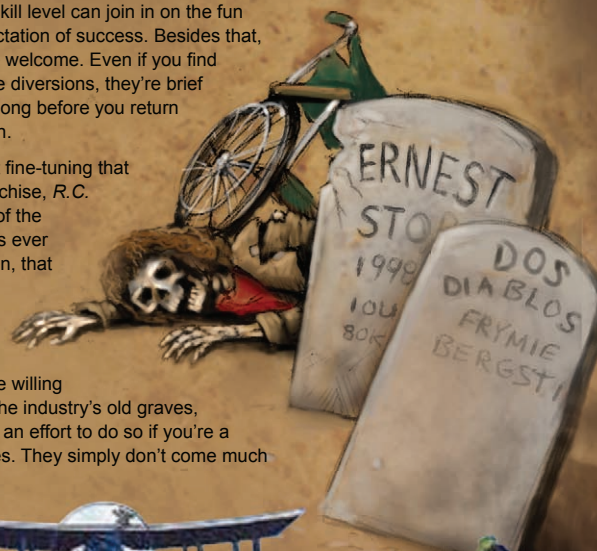
Those who recall spending much time with *R.C. Pro-Am* very likely remember growing disgusted with the sometimes cheap AI. Finishing in the top three became quite challenging around halfway through the game. Even advancing past the 16th race proved a more difficult task than many could muster. The orange vehicle would suddenly start chirping like a pleased sparrow and would cruise around the course much quicker than your vehicle ever could, ensuring that you would finish fourth if you didn't keep ahead of the remaining two challengers at all times. If you had been careless with your missiles, you had no way to counteract this phenomenon. There were an abundance of other hazards too, like oil slicks that you often couldn't see coming. These often would cause you to crash and to be passed just seconds before the remarkable orange fellow engineered the race's conclusion by crossing the finish line. It required prohibitively extreme gaming skills and memorization to consistently succeed late in the game.

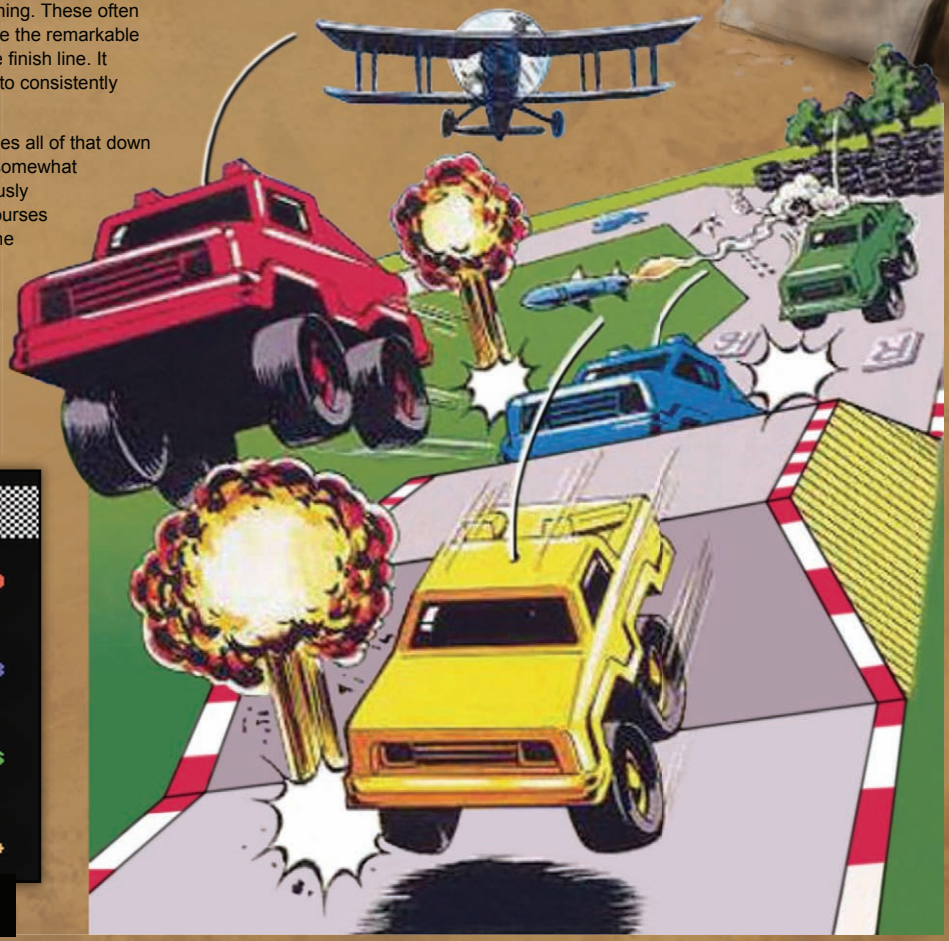
Without suddenly making things too simple, *R.C. Pro-Am II* tones all of that down considerably. Completing the first circuit of eight tracks, while somewhat challenging, isn't anywhere near as infuriating as it was previously (particularly if you're smart about upgrades). The next set of courses also goes fairly well, with the third and fourth batches upping the difficulty considerably so that you still have to excel in order to succeed. The last eight tracks are actually selected from the first 24, but now they're much challenging since all of the racers have beefed up vehicles. Reaching that final checkered flag is quite the accomplishment.

A final tweak to the franchise formula is the inclusion of mini-games that occasionally crop up throughout the experience. These include tug 'o war with trucks, plus a drag race. Though they both amount to nothing more than rapid mashing of the 'A' and 'B' buttons, they're fun because gamers of all skill level can join in on the fun with a reasonable expectation of success. Besides that, the prize money is quite welcome. Even if you find yourself not enjoying the diversions, they're brief enough that it won't be long before you return to the main racing action.

Thanks to the intelligent fine-tuning that Rare applied to the franchise, *R.C. Pro-Am II* remains one of the most worthwhile sequels ever created. How tragic, then, that it represented the last time the company would ever visit the franchise! You can still dig it up if you're willing to excavate enough of the industry's old graves, though. Definitely make an effort to do so if you're a fan of retro racing games. They simply don't come much better than this one!







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GO LOOK HURRY

games america forgot

A bit.... Miyazaki, huh?

You're right, that is some sexy goo.

At least you didn't say 'Hey, Listen!'...

Go back to the Long Library, dangit!!

Forget Japan, this is European and fan-translated gaming. The English stuff you've never heard about. The Games America Forgot.

Publisher: Enix * Developer: Almanic * Genre: RPG * Category: Raising Simulation * # Players: 1 * Release Date: 12/09/1994

Wonder Project J

by james

There's a good reason certain games never hit the US, such as how back in the SNES days nobody thought we'd want to play something like Wonder Project J.

A game about guiding a character from a state of ignorance to becoming a fully-functioning being would have looked a bit odd, no matter how clever and charming its presentation. So *Wonder Project J* languished in Japan until the fan translation community got a hold of it.

Basically, it's the story of Pinocchio, except with an anime twist. The inventor Dr. Gepetto perfects his new model of robot (called Gijin in this world) that's closer to human than ever. It uses the revolutionary new J circuit, but before Gepetto can activate the robot boy he's dragged away by the guards under the command of Massala. Gepetto had built a smaller fair-type robot named Tinker to be his guide for the robot boy, but with nobody to guide her she has no way to help. Tinker then does the only thing she can, and that's to directly ask the player on the other side of the controller to take command as she guides the robot boy, default name of Pino, on his journey to awaken the seven heart chips that will activate Circuit J.

In the beginning, Pino knows nothing. He's just as likely to try eating a book as reading it, and even if he flips through the pages of the alphabet book he'll only make out a few of them. This is where the repetition comes in, as it's necessary to not only have Pino perform whatever action he needs to learn many times in a row but also to either praise him or scold him depending on the situation. Kicking the book earns a scolding, attempting to read it deserves praise, and Pino learns from each response how he's expected to interact with the world. Try to push him too hard, too fast, however, and he'll get sulky and unresponsive.

Eventually Pino will learn to read, fight, engage in sports, pick locks, and much more. His adventure takes him across the land with you guiding him every step of the way. Dungeons involve a hands-on approach, while major scenes rely on you having trained him properly in the required abilities to succeed. Failure can result in something as simple as a loss in Pino's Confidence stat or as major as being knocked out for three days and losing 3000 Corlo in cash. Poorer but wiser, Pino can then be trained properly to get it right the next time.

What makes Wonder *Project J* notable, however, is the wonderful 16-bit charm radiating from every event and screen. Everything is well animated in bright colors, the world is nicely designed and charming, and it's honestly funny as well. *Wonder Project J* is a fun little journey, a bit repetitious when training Pino but so incredibly likable that it's always worth the effort just to see what happens next.

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