HARDCORE GAMER

MAGAZINE

v1i6 . we've lost our dongles

MATRIX PATH OF NEO

Finally, a game worthy!

Plus, let's knock a knot in a noggin' or nine with
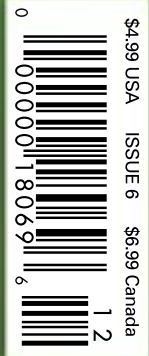
SMACK DOWN vs RAW 2006

Thank XSEED:

WILD ARMS 4

Also note:

The next gen has arrived!

As if that weren't enough…
.A sneaky peek at Blizzcon and the Indie GDC,
.folks dressed as their favorite game characters,
.plus more weird Japanese games from Japan.

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Wölfin '05

PlayStation.2

LIVE IN YOUR WXRLD.
PLAY IN OURS.™

Begin here: a weary traveler on the most hazardous of journeys. All that you've ridden in... milk you've ridden in search of the power to save your one true love. Yet now you find yourself standing in the shadow of a beast who will devastate the tiny insignificant being who dared to disturb his slumber. Unless... The weapon? Your mind. And should you use it wisely, you shall topple a creature whose size is comparable only to your valor. And end here: atop a mountain that cannot be scaled, but must be slain.

Nor can you. Yet you must employ it with every move you have the courage to make. The weapon large enough to slay him. One you cannot see.

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS
www.shadowofthecolossus.com

Biographical Data

DJPubba_Tim Lindquist
We got a very big, 12 week old, German Shepherd puppy named "Okar." Okar was the name he came with. We were going to rename him "Clyde" but we have another dog (a Chihuahua) named Vidalia (like the onion) and her short name (Vi) sounds too similar. We never came up with a better fitting name so Okar has stuck. We mostly call him "Oak" or "The Big Galoot," which both fit well. Galoot-alert!! Also, Shakespeare bit Greg. Sorry Greg!!
Now Playing: *Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow*, *GTA: LCS*

Wanderer_Thomas Wilde
I have been trapped under a large pile of must-have games since early October. Please send help... but if you could wait until I've finished *Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance*, that'd be great. You've got to have priorities.
Now Playing: *RE4* (PS2), *Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance*, *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (Xbox)

Syriel_Adam Pavlacka
What a month. We sent Liz down to Shiny where she used her good looks to get an inside look at the new *Matrix* game. Thomas crashed Blizzcon and got his *WoW* fix, while Greg and I learned all about the WWE on Taboo Tuesday. And now we have to start working on the next issue. Whee!
Now Playing: *Kameo*, *Mario Kart DS*, *Wipeout XL* (PSone)
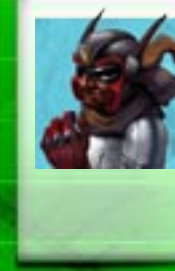
Racewing_Geson Hatchett
You know, I've always considered myself an elitist fighting gamer—hardcore, ex-tournament-level, well-known companies, 2D for life. Why is it, then, that I'm having loads more fun with the new *Dragon Ball Z* fighting game than with *Soul Calibur 3*? Namco, what have you done?? Better yet, Spike, what did you do to make me *like Budokai* for once? Argh! The world is all topsy-turvy now! NP: *DBZ: Budokai Tenkaichi*, *Gunstar Super Heroes*, *Wishing For Playable Great Saiyagirl* (any DBZ fighter)

Shoegazer_Dave Hulegaard
I almost don't even need a calendar anymore. I feel pretty confident in relying on video game releases to help me determine when special dates are near. A new baseball game tells me that my girlfriend's birthday is coming up. A new *Madden* game tells me that my birthday is coming up. A new *Tony Hawk* game tells me that Christmas is almost here. See what I mean?
Now Playing: *Dragonquest VIII*, *Star Wars Battlefront II* (XBOX), *WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2006*

KouAidou_Elizabeth Ellis
I'm not sure what's up with the editors asking me, a simple translator, to do the cover story for this month. Maybe they're crazy, or maybe this whole "hot chick" thing is just backfiring on me. Either way, I did my best. I hope you enjoy it.
Now Playing: *Quest For Glory I: So You Want to Be a Hero*, *Civilization 4*, *The Matrix: Path of Neo* (PS2)

Roger Danish_Greg Off
I would like to use this space to give a final heartfelt goodbye to Glenn Franks. Good luck on your new endeavors. While I'm at it, a quick shout out to Jeff "Puff n Stuff" Milde — next time I WILL hit you with the car, you know this! Finally, last but not least, Phil "Fishman" Rollins. Is that your flowered shower cap I saw in the Bay?
Now Playing: *GTA: LCS*, *Ridge Racer 6*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Metroid Prime Pinball*

Lynxara_Alicia Ashby
Between *Super Robot Wars J* and *Gunstar Super Heroes*, this year has been doing some amazing stuff with the old Game Boy Advance. *Castlevania: Curse of Darkness* is rocking the house, too; possibly the best *Castlevania* score ever. And to think that the Q4 game deluge is just starting....
Now Playing: That stuff I mentioned up above, and a lot of *Hexic* when I'm supposed to be writing.

4thletter_David Brothers
Ninja Gaiden Black is still running things at my house, though *Fire Prowrestling Returns* is aiming to give it a run for my money. There's just something about those *Fire Pro* games that make them twice as good as any other wrestling game. And howzabout that *Mario Kart DS*?
Now Playing: *Ninja Gaiden Black*, *Fire Prowrestling Returns* (import), *Advance Wars: Dual Strike*

James_James Cunningham
I'm invisible! No wait, I'm just not here very much this month. Still, it's important to keep busy so I've been more active than normal over at HGM affiliate www.got-next.com. Other than that, I'm just killing time until I get my shiny new Xbox 360, *Kameo*, and one other game I haven't decided on yet.
Now Playing: *Fable: The Lost Chapters*, *We Love Katamari*, *Guitar Hero*, *Serious Sam 2* (PC)

HonestGamer_Jason Venter
I've come to the conclusion that we need to find Father Time and stick him in limbo, just so he can't keep marching forward. I simply don't have enough hours in the day to play all the great games out there, at least not long enough to get good at them. I'm a sniper, I'm a medic, I'm special forces... I suck.
Now playing: *Battlefield 2* (PC), *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* (GCN)

Hitoshura_Iaian Ross
I've made the following observations over the year: Jack — "You can't handle the truth!". Atlus put themselves on the map. Small but tasty, large yet tasteless, but not so small to go without chewing. Where there's Steam there's Hot Coffee, where there's a bug there's food left over. Twilights are best observed during winter, this will be a brilliant one.
Currently Playing: *DDS 1&2*, *Disgaea*

Wolfie_Terry Wolfinger
So I have been busting out the old school and playing *Command and Conquer: Generals* on my new PC. *C&C Red Alert* has been a long time fav as well, but I'm getting to love the 3D-ness of this newer version. Nothing more satisfying than surviving a seemingly endless assault and still have something leftover with which to fight back. And getting to that one turning point in the game where you just know you've gained the upper hand, like nuking him before he nukes you.

Metalbolt_Anthony Mertz
Uwe Boll is my hero. *House of the Dead* rocked my world, *Alone in the Dark* offended my brain, and *Bloodrayne* is on a train headed straight for Fantasticville! With all of this greatness floating around, someone should have let him make the *Doom* movie. At least then, it would have been entertaining. Soldier on Uwe Boll, someday the masses will understand your genius.
Now playing: *Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks* (Xbox), *Stuntman*, *Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow*

Arieth_Thomas Shin
Blizzcon's been a blast for me, what with the Starcraft and Frozen Throne tournaments going on. You can watch replays of decisive matches at http://www.ggl.com/mediaplayer but you won't get my swag! Also, my Korean blood has been calling me back towards the deep, dark vacuum of the soul called World of Warcraft, but I MUST RESIST! *twitch*
Now Playing: *Ys II: Eternal* (PC), *Front Mission: Gun Hazard* (SNES), *Hiouden: The Demonic Oath* (SNES)

Melf_Ken Horowitz
Gunstar Super Heroes = visual shock! *Moto GP 3* = speed shock! *Shining Force NEO* = sound shock! So many great games, so little time. That's why I tell myself that I don't want anything released this holiday season, ten times each night before bed. Maybe if I say it enough, it'll come true. *Sigh.
Now Playing: all the goodness mentioned above, with some Genesis on the side!

Jeremy_Jeremy Peeples
The past month is all but a blur now. A blur filled with bizarre cutscenes, a self-absorbed King of the Cosmos, and Halloween decor. If it wasn't for the comparative sanity of TNA Wrestling and the greatness contained within the DS, I'd be a pile of mush right now.
Now Playing: *We Love Katamari*, *Fire Pro Wrestling 2*, *Nintendogs*, *Dig Dug: Digging Strike*, *Ico*, *Columns*

Sardius_Danny Cowan
Without Warning is one of the worst games I've played all year, and the fact that it badly rips off the TV series 24 makes it even more insulting. If I had to compare it to a 24 character, this game would be most like Jack Bauer's worthless idiot daughter Kim. Watch out for those mountain lions, *Without Warning*!
Now Playing: *Castlevania: Curse of Darkness* (PS2), *Resident Evil 4* (PS2), *Bio Force Ape* (NES)

HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE

Contents

Previews

You've just waded through a pile of fall releases, you think it's all over... and then *even more* games come out. This month we look at nine hot titles that hit in early 2006: long-awaited sequels with *Kingdom Hearts II*, the return of the first virtual pin-up girl in *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Legend*, and the DS's online debut with *Mario Kart*.

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Feature

The XBox 360 is finally here! Which version should you buy? Do you need a new TV? Which games are for you? To help you relax, we put together a list of everything an anxious gamer might want to know about the system that ushers in the next generation of video games including hardware reviews, software previews, and survival tips for launch day.

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On the cover

MATRIX PATH OF NEO

Walk the *Path of Neo* in our exclusive in-depth feature on the first good game to come out of the *Matrix* movies. Get the word from developer Shiny on how the Wachowskis contributed to the game, why *Enter the Matrix* was so disappointing, and what's up with that new ending you've heard so much about.

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BLIZZCON 2k5

Down in Anaheim, CA, Blizzard Entertainment held their very first convention on October 28-29th, featuring exclusive Q&A discussion panels on design, sneak-peeks at *Starcraft:Ghost* and *World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade*, and an excuse for *World of Warcraft* players around the country to finally meet their Realm-mates face-to-face. With tickets selling like hotcakes despite their cool $100+ pricetag, the opportunity to give Blizzard Developers a piece of their mind and get exclusive swag on top of that proved too tempting for the thousands of gamers that attended. As icing on the cake, Blizzard invited sixteen players from around the world to compete in exclusive tournaments for *Starcraft: Brood War* and *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne*.

By and large, the main focus of BlizzCon was *WoW*. Players got to explore the Elven homeland of Quel'Thalas and the Sunstrider Isles while experimenting with the Horde's newest addition, the Blood Elves. With the ability to debuff enchantments and leech mana from their foes, Blood Elven Mages were already opening all sorts of tactical speculation for PvP combat. The Outlands, ruins of the Orcish homeland of Draenor and ruled by Illidan Stormrage, were still in development, with loads of concept art and dungeon designs displayed at the panels. To give players a fighting chance in these new areas, the level cap will be raised to 70, with new spells and abilities to match. Flying mounts and a new profession, Jewelcrafting, will also be introduced with the inclusion of *Diablo*-esque Socketed weapons. The new addition to the Alliance was still unrevealed, despite much bribing and cajoling of Blizzard executives.

Sexy heroine Nova takes a moment to pose for the camera.

To give WoW players a taste of history, the Caverns of Time will feature new battlegrounds in familiar locations. One of the features will be the Battle of Mount Hyjal, the final battle in *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*, as the Undead relentlessly assault the combined Human, Night Elf and Orc forces in a bid to corrupt the World Tree. We're not sure how Blizzard will deal with the apparent contradiction of alliances in that battle (Undead being on the Horde's side these days), but the design team is intent on reliving the experiences of the most decisive battles throughout the saga's history.

The *Starcraft: Ghost* project, which has gone through several design iterations, also received some of the limelight. The newest major addition to gameplay was the inclusion of multiplayer, with Terran, Zerg and Protoss units and vehicles (yes, this means you can drive Siege Tanks) available on the battlefield. The single-player missions featuring Nova will feature multiple methods of achieving objectives, allowing players to either covertly sneak into enemy fortifications or bust down the doors, guns blazing. The game is still undergoing conceptual development, but it already looks incredibly polished. **(Snarky Editor's Note: it looked pretty polished back in 2003, too.)**
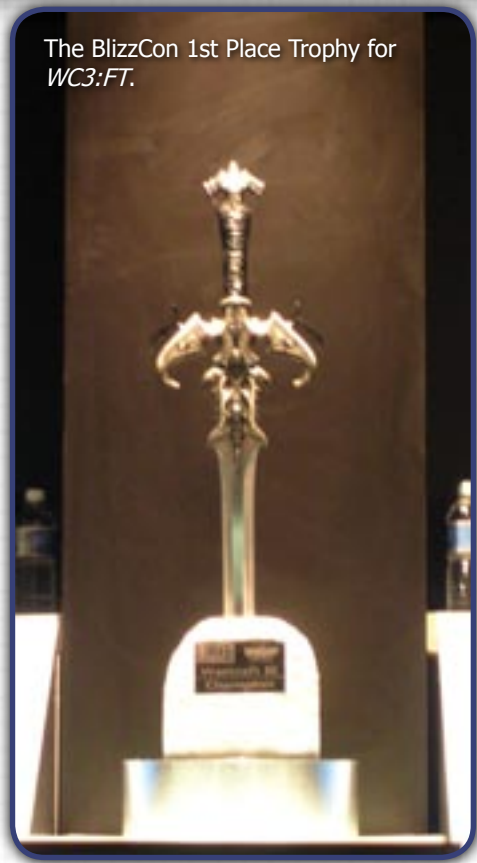
The BlizzCon 1st Place Trophy for *WC3:FT*.

The Invitational tournaments at BlizzCon for *SC:BW* and *WC3:FT* featured commentary from InsideTheGame and WCReplays' Kim "bunny" Vothang. Both tournaments had enormous spectatorship and spanned the entire two-day event, with some of the best players in the world showing their stuff.

StarCraft: Brood War

1st Place - Hong Jin Hoe (KOR), a.k.a. "Yellow" (Zerg)

2nd Place - Park Jung Suk (KOR), a.k.a. "Reach" (Protoss)

3rd Place - Lee Yun Yeol (KOR), a.k.a. "NaDa" (Terran)

The *Starcraft* Grand Finals pitted Reach versus Yellow on the Signal map, Reach having to fight his way through Loser's bracket. Game 1's first major assault by Reach with Protoss Zealots took advantage of an attack upon a small expansion of his by Yellow. Once Yellow's Zergling forces returned to defend, Reach's Zealots backed off... only to eat a Lurker ambush. Taking his time, Reach stormed back and took out Yellow's lead expansion for the win. Game 2, on the Road to Antiga Prime, began after both Reach and Yellow received coaching from their ringside managers while reviewing replay footage!

Yellow, learning from past mistakes, made a pre-emptive attack with Zerglings even before Reach had created a single unit! Reach never recovered from his opponent's momentum, and Lurkers took out his base for the loss. The third and final game took place on King of the Abyss, both players separated by a thin strip of mineral deposits. Reach made an early fortification at the frontline, forcing the slower-expanding Zerg to find another way around... with Overlord transports. A drop rush with Hydralisks took out some of Reach's defenses, and relentless reinforcements pinned down Reach's grasp on the Championship as Mutalisks delivered

On Display: A Gnome sharpshooter and the Night Elven crest.

the finishing blow. Yellow took first place, but this was a great match between two familiar teammates.

Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne

1st Place - Manuel Schenkhuizen(NED), a.k.a. "Grubby" (Orc)

2nd Place - Tae Min Hwang(KOR), a.k.a. "Zacard" (Orc)

3rd Place - Yoan Merlo(FRA), a.k.a. "ToD" (Human)

Zacard, coming up from loser's bracket, played his first Finals match on Twisted Meadows against Grubby, a long-time rival of his. Both players chose Far Seers, Zacard selecting an Alchemist and Grubby choosing a Pit Lord for their alternates, and immediately struck each other's bases. Tactics involved heavy use of Ensnares, Speed Scrolls and Town Portals. After a final clash and many dead heroes on both sides, Grubby emerged victorious. Game 2 took place on Gnoll Wood, with both players choosing Blademasters as Heroes. After small skirmishes in the central Creep area, this half-hour match became a battle of epic proportions. Near the end, Grubby launched a risky assault against Zacard's base, taking out his Altar of Storms at the cost of many units, but it secured his victory and the $10,000 prize for first place!

"Pit Lord is so cute! Look at him run!" - Kim "bunny" Vothang

After the awards ceremonies, throngs of people (you thought I was going to say hordes, didn't you?) rushed out of the Convention center for the finale of BlizzCon, with Level 60 Elite Tauren Chieftain and comedian Christian Finnegan opening for the main show, the Offspring. This was a great way to close out Blizzard's first convention ever, and we'll definitely be anticipating what's in store for next year!

World of Warcraft player Kaori Night decked out in full Night Elf regalia.

INDEPENDENT GAME DEVELOPER'S CONFERENCE

Eugene, Oregon is a city of winding overpasses and one-way streets that seem determined to lead unsuspecting travelers directly to the neighboring city of Springfield. It's also the home of the annual Independent Game Developer's Conference, which celebrated its fourth iteration this October. The GarageGames-hosted event served as a showcase for a development platform known as Torque, a slew of independently-developed games and even the Live Arcade portion of the Xbox 360. Many members of the media were present.

While registered guests grabbed their free t-shirts and sampled individual games by various independent developers at the conference, media folk had a room of their own and a chance to talk with developers and executives from GarageGames. The guest of honor was Torque, the obvious reason for the event's existence.

GarageGames president Mark Frohnmayer explained that Torque is the low-cost alternative to other development tools. Like many others who attended the conference, he expressed dissatisfaction with the direction that mainstream development is taking, and pointed to a time when games were fun to develop and fun to play. He believes that with a $100 price tag, the kit is accessible to anyone with a real interest in creating games. Jeff Tunnell, who helped develop the original *Tribes* engine that Torque is based upon, addressed the matter of profitability. Specifically, he stated that although support for the engine is not yet to the point originally anticipated, the number of people involved is increasing rapidly.

You can use Torque to model soldiers with guns. Sign me up! (photograph by Danny Ngan)

Some independent developers stepped in at this point and introduced their projects. One game demonstrated was *Marble Blast Ultra*, and members of the media were encouraged to try it. The game plays online and allows people to roll marbles around an interactive arena, competing for diamonds and snagging power-ups that allow them to knock other players off the field. Camera rotation felt natural, like it would in any other arena-based game. There were some tense moments as a few people took immediately to the controls, while others had issues keeping up with all of the on-screen action.

The PC version of Marble Blast (shown) isn't "ultra" like its prettier big brother.

We were anxious to see other applications for the engine, and one other title in particular showed that there are broad applications for the kit. *Wildlife Tycoon: Venture Africa* lets players manage a patch of land in the African wilds. By performing certain functions, they can gain flowers that can then be spent on upgrades. Andy Schatz, president of Pocketwatch Games, demonstrated as animals gathered around a watering hole. He placed tempting food on a nearby hill for one animal, then set rabbits to eating the grass between so that the desired beasts would head toward the sustenance on higher plateaus. Meanwhile, an alligator took down a gazelle closer to the water. Flowers sprouted crazily to mark the poor creature's passing.

Yes, you can use it to develop for the Mac, too. Now you know. (photograph by Danny Ngan)

GarageGames executives were very excited by all of this, for a number of reasons. Specifically, they wanted to call attention to the fact that these games, developed by small groups instead of development teams with cash to spare, will be available through both the PC and the Xbox 360 (at launch, in the extraordinary case of the latter). Greg Canessa, Xbox Live Arcade's group manager, was on hand to verify every word of it.

According to Canessa, Microsoft's support for the independent

game developer goes all the way to the top. Bill Gates himself is reported to be "giddy" about the direction Live Arcade is taking, and even was quoted as having said "Wow, now I'm finally going to have something to play." Microsoft points to the number of ways people are playing games now, compared to how they did in the past. The company is aware that many of these people don't even consider themselves gamers, yet they are playing games as much as people who sit down to more traditional console and PC games. Microsoft reiterated that it plans to continue working with GarageGames to bring independently-developed games to the widening consumer base.

Following the initial meeting with the press, GarageGames removed the curtains that divided the area from the rest of the conference. Numerous lectures followed for the general public throughout the remainder of that day and the next, but they didn't reveal much that was new, aside from breaks where we were able to play more of the upcoming games.

Such breaks allowed us to sample a wider variety of titles from other developers who are making use of the Torque engine. One game, *Flash Bios*, saw players controlling a spaceship as it drops droids that work to disable a spreading virus infection. *Big Kahuna Reef* from Reflexive Entertainment was a puzzle title where players formed chain combos to bust crates. *Diner Dash*, a game where a harried waitress must rush around a diner taking orders and cleaning up after messy customers, felt like it would be a natural fit for the Nintendo DS with a few tweaks, while *Determinance* was the most visually impressive title on display. It also featured an interesting mechanic that allows players to swipe the mouse back and forth to direct sword strokes as airborne warriors battle their way through deserts, plains and even snowy mountain passes.
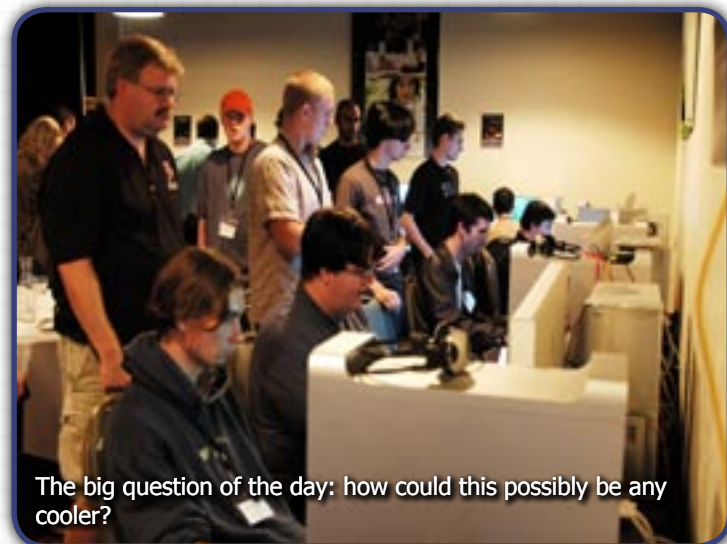
The big question of the day: how could this possibly be any cooler?

Certainly, the overall feel at the conference was one of infectious excitement. Even if they didn't have games of their own to show, developers were anxious to take a look at what everyone else had on display and to ask questions of both GarageGames executives and the Microsoft officials that attended the event. Based on the number of event sponsors, which included Apple Computers and Microsoft, among many others, it's apparent that the independent gaming scene is well on its way to widespread awareness. Odds are good that we'll be seeing a lot more of these games in the very near future. Perhaps we'll even be developing them.

SOCOM
U.S. NAVY SEALs
FIRETEAM BRAVO

Publisher : SCEA
Developer : Zipper Interactive
Release Date : 11/08/05

Genre(s) : 3rd-Person, Squad-Based Shooter
Category : Action
# of players : 16

Preview by Roger Danish

I have to admit, I haven't exactly been enamored with the PSP's first year of software. While there have been a few breakout titles, most have been plagued with a variety of technical issues that range from glitchy controls and excessive load times to bad camera control and an overall lack of original or exciting content.

Thankfully, all is not lost for this handheld marvel, as a steady flow of original, quality content has already started to arrive. Beyond third-party titles such as Rockstar's *GTA: LCS* and Activision's *X-Men Legends II*, Sony has a slate of first-party quality games on the way starting with *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo*.

This original title offers fans of this huge franchise fourteen all-new single-player and wireless multiplayer gaming missions in four different Areas of Operation (which includes Chile, a unique environment only available on the PSP). In addition, multiple players will be able to form clans and take on their friends for team-based combat using the PSP's wireless connectivity with up to ten players via Ad Hoc mode and 16 players via Infrastructure.

We had only a limited time with the reviewable version of the game (it arrived just as we were going to press), but we can say that *SOCOM* faithfuls will have a lot to like with *Fireteam Bravo*. The controls are solid, the gameplay is top-notch, and just about everything found in the PS2 game has been implemented in a

unique way to fit the PSP. In addition, the new, optional headset and microphone are the coolest PSP peripheral yet.

SOCOM: Fireteam Bravo will have been on store shelves for a few weeks by the time you read this, but we can safely say that it's one of the first from a batch of new, solid PSP titles that will be coming your way between now and early next year. Look for the full review next issue.

tThe game that started the kart-racing genre is back and it looks as if it may just be the best version yet. We recently got an early look at the game up at Nintendo's HQ and it plays better than we could have hoped.

Having more in common with the classic SNES game than *Double Dash*, *Mario Kart DS* seamlessly blends the best of old and new into one compelling title. Half of the courses in the game are all new, while the other half are culled from the previous games in the series, forming a "greatest hits" retro course. In all there are 32 different tracks to race on, which is quite the selection.

Fan favorite Battle mode makes a return, with six exclusive courses. Fight it out in a classic balloon battle or go for the gold in a round of Shine Runners as you attempt to collect the shines before others snag them. New to the series is mission mode. Consisting of a number of short tasks, mission mode challenges players to max out their *Mario Kart* skills.

Multiplayer has always been a strong point of the series, and *Mario Kart DS* is no slouch. The game supports up to eight players via local wireless and up to four via the Internet. Local play is doubly impressive because not all players need a cart. Those that have one, can choose their character, while those without have to race as ShyGuy. Internet play is done via Nintendo's WiFi Connection service which is totally free at any McDonald's. You can also play at home if you have a wireless setup.

Though we won't have a full review until next month (after the WiFi service officially launches), we can say that out initial impressions are extremely favorable. This is one game that will likely stay in the DS on a near permanent basis.

MARIOKART® DS

Preview by Syriel

Publisher : Nintendo
Developer : Nintendo
Release Date : 11/14/05

Genre(s) : Racing
Category : Kart
# of players : 1-4 players, 8 players online

"Internet play is done via Nintendo's WiFi Connection service which is totally free at any McDonald's."

WILD ARMS 4

Publisher : XSEED Games
Developer : Media Vision
Release Date : 1/10/05

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

Preview by **Roger Danish**

It's hard to believe, but the western-themed *Wild Arms* franchise has been around now for almost a decade. The first title in the series was originally released on the PS1 way back in '96. Since then, there have been two consecutive sequels published by SCEA (*Wild Arms 2*, and *Wild Arms 3*), as well as a PS2 3D remake of the original published by AGETEC (*Wild Arms Alter Code: F*). Interestingly enough, newcomer XSEED Games, a new publisher comprised of ex-Square execs, picked up the third sequel to the series, *Wild Arms 4*. They'll be bringing it to U.S. shores early next year.

Wild Arms 4 features an all-new cast of characters, an original storyline, and a new strategic battle system. While many new elements are being introduced to the franchise, the developers have been careful not to stray too far from the series's roots. Fans will instantly recognize the mainstays of the Wild Arms world of Filgaia.

The game's storyline revolves around a young teenager named Jude Maverick, who has grown up in an isolated floating town called Ciel, high above the surface of Filgaia. His sheltered world changes forever when he sees the sky break open and enemy ships invade. The resulting adventure will thrust Jude together with a band of others as they travel the war-torn land of Filgaia in search of truth, their own identities, and their individual paths to adulthood.

Attempting to break new ground, *Wild Arms 4* offers some new and innovative gameplay elements that have not been in any of the previous versions. In addition to the ability to perform action oriented moves while out in the field, such as crouching, sliding, double jumping, etc., you can also slow down time to solve some of the game's action-based puzzles. In addition, the game has adopted a strategy-based HEX battle system that adds a new level of depth to the fighting.

We're definitely excited about XSEED's first crop of games (*Shadow Hearts: From the New World* is next, coming in March). Check back next issue for all of the details with our full review.
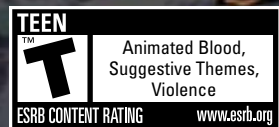
Publisher: Eidos
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Release Date: Spring 2006
Genre(s): Action
**Category:** Adventure
# of Players: 1

Preview by Roger Danish

Back in the day, *Tomb Raider* was the best thing ever. Coming out of nowhere, the original introduced us to a unique mixture of platforming action and puzzle solving while letting us freely explore, climb and grapple around fantastic environments. The game, a 3D amalgam of *Indiana Jones* and *Prince of Persia*, was truly a sight to behold and is what put Eidos on the map as a publisher. Unfortunately, as the sequels piled up, the core elements that made the game so great were completely abandoned. Instead of concentrating on the gameplay and mechanics, the focus was on Lara Croft, how many costumes she changed into, and making her "assets" rounder and larger. By the time we got to the abysmal *Angel of Darkness*, this franchise was all but dead.

Amazingly, Eidos did the unthinkable — they fired Core Design, the creators and developers of all the *Tomb Raider* titles, and moved the franchise into the very capable hands of the *Legacy of Kain* team over at Crystal Dynamics. They also spent the last few years going back to the drawing board and taking their time to recapture the essence of what originally made this franchise so great. Gone are the extraneous characters, the ridiculous urban settings (Area 51? I mean, c'mon!), and the *Splinter Cell* wannabe stealth moves. Returning are the tombs, the classic platforming, and the head-scratching puzzle solving that actually makes you think.

Not only does the gameplay look to be spot on, the visuals are drop dead gorgeous. Lara's poly count and animation set have been increased significantly. In addition, Crystal has revamped the control system, providing intuitive and fluid character movement. The whole, "one step forward, three steps back" leap to jump gaps is a thing of the past.

Tomb Raider: Legend still has a few more months in the oven, which will surely result in some final polish. From what I've seen so far, I can safely say that I am once again excited for the rebirth of this franchise.
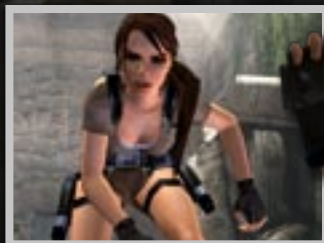
Preview by Wolfie

Publisher: Namco Hometek
Developer: Cinegi Productions
Release Date: Fall 2006
Genre(s): RTS
Category: Battle Royale
# of Players: Multiplayer

Do you ever find yourself watching *Braveheart* and imagine yourself swinging a blade side-by-side with William Wallace? If so, then *Warhammer: Mark of Chaos* is the game for you. This game is all about putting you right into the thick of the battle, close enough to smell the Orc sweat. This game is just plain massive! In it you control an army of not just several dozen, but several thousand troops, with lots of options to customize, like what sort of armor and weapons to equip them with. You can also move the camera from a bird's-eye view where you can see the terrain stretch on for miles, all the way down in between the blades of grass to watch the ground soak up all the spilled blood.

The version I saw was pretty early (I was told it was roughly 50% complete), but even so looked pretty darn good. We are promised more detail in the characters as well as "tons more killing animations, like lopping off heads and limbs." This game has remained very faithful to the long-running *Warhammer* universe and comes with four fully playable armies (Empire, Chaos, Skaven and High Elves) as well as four additional controllable races (Orcs, Dwarves, Vampires, and Goblins). Moreover you can recruit mercenaries and Dogs of War to give your army a customized look and feel.

The gameplay looks really tight, with familiar controls based on the *Command and Conquer*-type games but without all the tedious base and resource management. There are a huge variety of campaigns in both single and multi-player mode, including Capture the Flag and Defend Outposts scenarios, and the expanse and variety of terrains ranges from forests to swamps, and plains to tundra. The final version should also bring some flying units such as dragons and other winged beasties. With the release date sometime in the fall of 2006, there is plenty of time to make this game truly shine.

Preview by Roger Danish

TRUE CRIME
NEW YORK CITY

Publisher: Activision
Developer: Luxoflux
Release Date: Feb. 21st, 2005

Genre(s): Sandbox
Category: 3rd Person Shooter
# of Players: 1

Activision's second entry and second attempt at capturing a share of *GTA's* audience, *True Crime: New York City* is a major step up over 2003's somewhat disappointing *Streets of LA*. Having rid themselves of Nick Kang, the whiny and annoying one-liner-spewing protagonist of the first game, and moving the series to a much grittier and realistic environment, Activision just may come close to their lofty goal.

This time around, you take on the persona of Marcus Reed, the son of a local mafia kingpin who has left behind his back alley thug ways to clean up his life and join the police force. *True Crime's* storyline revolves around Reed's quest to find out who killed his partner on his first day on the job, as well as his relationship between him and his father, who may still be involved in underworld crime.

True Crime's core gameplay has not changed drastically form the original. The game is still mission-based and you have to travel to a variety of locations throughout a detailed recreation of New York City. Like the first game, there are plenty of side missions and random crimes that can be tackled. However, if you decide to let crime run rampant, the city will slowly become run down; shops will close early, trash will litter the streets and the seedier element will take over. As far as the action goes, the controls have been refined quite a bit. Melee combat now features a variety of martial arts fighting styles (kung fu, wu shu, karate, etc.), and the targeting system is much easier to use.

Activision has spent some serious time and money on talent and music this time around. More than eighty songs from a broad spectrum of genres are included in the game, from artists like Bob Dylan, Run DMC, The Ramones, Blondie, the Stooges, Jay-Z, and many more. You've likely heard by now that Redman will be a playable character in the game, and he'll be lending a few original tracks to the soundtrack.
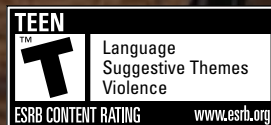
Preview by
Roger Danish

Disney · SQUARE ENIX

KINGDOM HEARTS

Publisher : Square Enix
Developer : Square Enix
Release Date : 2006

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : 3PA
# of players : 1

I will freely admit to anyone who asks that I love all things Disney. Growing up in So Cal., with the Magic Kingdom under two hours away, I spent many a summer taking in the marvels of the "Happiest Place on Earth." Of course, growing up wanting to be a Disney animator and watching the animated movies and cartoons didn't hurt either. So, when the first announcement went out that Square and Disney were working on a project together for the PS2 (before the system launched in Japan), I was already chomping at the bit to see what they would come up with. The result, *Kingdom Hearts*, is still one of my all time favorite games and I have been not-so-patiently waiting for the sequel to arrive.

Unfortunately, there hasn't been a lot of concrete information on *Kingdom Hearts II*, other than that King Mickey will be joining your party at points in the game; Sora, Donald and Goofy will all return; and that there will be many new Disney-themed environments based on their popular franchises and films (as well as quite a few returning from the original game). In addition to environments from *Aladdin*, *Hercules*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *The Little Mermaid*, players will visit the worlds of *Mulan*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Steamboat Willie*, and even the live-action *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Not much is known about the storyline or the main antagonist, but many of the usual evil characters return (Hades, Ursula, Jafar, the Heartless, etc.), as well as what looks like a new villain in the form of Pete, Goofy's nemesis. Unfortunately, limited space and time won't allow me to go into more detail, but we are extremely excited about *Kingdom Hearts II*. It is easily at the top of my most wanted list for 2006.

Atelier Iris
Eternal Mana 2

Publisher : Nippon Ichi Software
Developer : Gust
Release Date : Spring 2006

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Japanese
# of players : 1

Before we begin, NISAmerica asked us to convey the following to our readers:

"Gust and NIS America would like to thank our fans, SCEA, and magazine/online publishers for their amazing support of Atelier Iris." — Harusato Akenaga, President, NIS America

The first *Eternal Mana* game was decidedly pretty, but its heavy focus on alchemy and creating items led to a lot of hit-or-miss feelings. Either you loved it or hated it and there was little middle ground. For the second iteration, Gust takes the series in a more traditional direction and serves up a full-blown RPG that just happens to have some alchemy elements in it.

Instead of following a single character throughout the story, you'll take the reins of two distinct individuals in two different realms. Felt is the action-oriented character, and he travels to a foreign land after a mysterious quake destroys part of Eden, his home. Because Felt's strength is in battle, his alchemy powers are limited. He can only copy existing items. That's where the second character, Veize, comes into play.

Remaining in the land of Eden during the adventure, Veize can create new items from their elemental parts. The two are connected via a magic bag, so you'll use Veize to support Felt. Early on the game determines who you control, but later in the adventure you can swap at any save point.

In addition to the expansive story, *Atelier Iris 2: Eternal Mana* also boasts some incredibly gorgeous artwork, with highly detailed character profiles and colorful SD inspired avatars, the likes of which we haven't seen since the Saturn days. It's stuff like this that makes you wonder why developers seem to have abandoned 2D en masse.

HOW TO CRUSH: POWER GAMING 101

by: Hitoshura & Lynxara

Math is boring. Video games are not. Yet video games are made of math, and a truly great game must be built on very good math. Fanatic gamers like to know everything about their games, so we're going to show you two techniques you can use to try and understand more about how the math in your favorite game works.

The game we'll use for our examples is *Final Fantasy Tactics*, which Square quietly snuck onto the market in the wake of *Final Fantasy 7*. *FFT* wasn't as popular as *FF7*, but fans on the internet and RPG die-hards across the country fell in love with it. There's a document, now archived at Gamefaqs.com, that's the final product of this enthusiasm: the Battle Mechanic guide, which completely dissects the game's inner workings. Our work was inspired by this document, and we hope to offer some insight into how it might have been produced.

Let's start with a fairly simple example. Beowulf is going to whack a bird with his sword for 182 points of damage.

One of *FFT*'s key combat systems is Zodiac compatibility. If the attacker and the target are aligned with certain Zodiac signs, then the effect of their attacks may increase or decrease. Beowulf is a Libra, and so the game's rules dictate that he has a Good compatibility with Pisces and Aquarius.
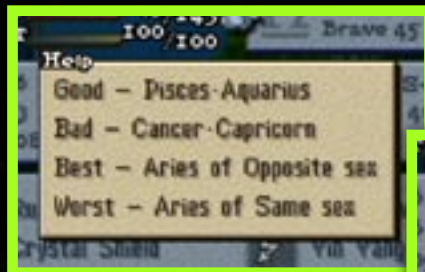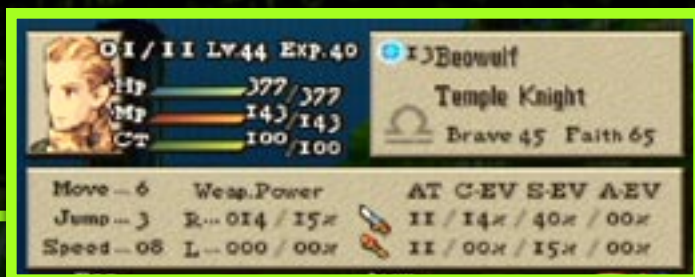
His target is an Aquarius, so Beowulf's attack damage will increase. What we want to know is by how much.
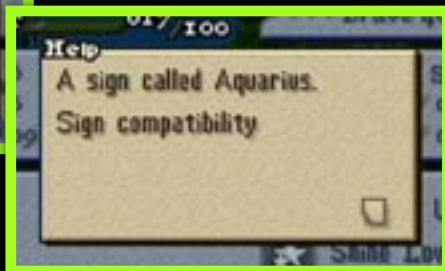
First we'll need to figure out how much damage Beowulf would've done had the Zodiac signs not been a factor. So, let's look at Beowulf's status screen to gather data. As you can see, Beowulf has a Weapon Power of 14, and an Attack Power of 11.

We happen to know that multiplying these variables determines basic damage totals. Doing so yields the product 154. That falls short of the in-game figure by 28 points. So, logically, that extra 28 points of damage must be coming from the Zodiac system's effect. Right?

Looking at the variables we have, notice that one of our variables (14) is a factor of 28. This is not a coincidence, and repeated tests confirm that there's a relationship between the two variables. The hidden variable (2, in this example) combines with Weapon Power to create the extra damage granted by the Zodiac compatibility (28).

Now it's time to put down your game for a bit and pick up a calculator. Try inserting that 2 value into the basic attack damage equation so that it will multiply against 14 to produce 28. We hit the jackpot when it's observed that 14*(11+2) yields 184, a value very close to the answer we're looking for.

This gives us a lead on what the mystery value represents. It suggests the 2 and the Attack Power value of 11 have some sort of relationship with each other. Since *FFT* mostly using multiplying for its math, we'll start by assuming 2 is somehow a product of 11. To find out what produced it, we just simply need to divide 2 by 11, which gives us 0.18 or 18%.

If you test this value with other attackers in similar situations, you'll find the results are close to what the game produces, but not exactly right. So we know we're on the right track, but our percentage value is off a little. A reasonable assumption to make in this situation is that the computer is applying a value close to 18% to determine the Zodiac effect, and the 2 in our example was produced as a result of rounding the figure up or down.

So, let's start with round numbers that are close in value to 18%. Unfortunately, you can apply both 20% and 25% to the Attack Power and get values that are close to 2. How do we know which one is correct?

This is where testing comes in. In a process that could take days or hours, use other characters to attack in similar situations and compare the in-game damage to what you suspect the damage formula is. If you repeat the test enough, you'll find that 25% is the value that most likely represents the Zodiac Effect's influence on the Attack Power variable in a case of Good compatibility. So the damage formula for Beowulf in this case is:

Weapon Power * (Attack Power + (Attack Power * .25)) = Damage.

Our second example deals with some more complex math. For magic-users in *FFT*, the key stat is Faith. Characters with a high Faith do high magical damage, but also take heavy damage from magical attacks. Numerically, the stat can be any value from 0 to 99. Mathematically, this suggests that the best way to model Faith is as a percentage.

We'll use Mustadio for our example here. Right now he's equipped with a magic gun, a weapon that does magical damage based on its Weapon Power. Looking at the status screen we see Mustadio's gun has a power of 22, and he has a Faith of 62.

The target pointed out here, an Archer, also has a Faith of 62.

Since Mustadio's Faith is 62, think of his magic attacks operating at 62% efficiency. For damage equations, it will be a .62 multiplier.

The Archer's Faith stat determines how much of Mustadio's Faith affects her as damage. If we execute the attack in-game, then we know Mustadio is going to inflict 118 points of damage.

As with the previous example, let's take all the variables we know of and multiply them together: 22*0.62*0.62=8.4568. This is not even close to the desired value. The logical conclusion to draw from this is that there's another variable in play that we don't know about.

When using a magic gun in *FFT*, it randomly fires off one of three spells of the same element (in the case of Mustadio's Blast Gun, it's Bolt, Bolt 2, or Bolt 3). In this situation, it's quite likely that spell power is the missing variable in our magic damage equation.

To find it, let's start by dividing our desired value by the incorrect value we just got, to see if it turns up a useful number: 118/8.4568 = 13.95. Since *FFT* deals in whole numbers, we can safely round this to 14. Now let's go back to the original formula and see if this makes the calculation work out.

Gun*Spell Power*Caster's Faith*Target's Faith
22*14*0.62*0.62=118.3952

Rounded down, that's the desired value, 118. Now, we don't know which spell the gun will fire, but if you do some testing on your own you'll find this was Bolt. You can derive the spell power variables for the other spells by using the finished equation.

If you ever wanted an excuse for obsessively replaying a favorite game, this is it. We also suggest publishing your findings somewhere online, so you can get more players testing your theories and advice on fixing formulas that don't quite work. Any gamer with patience, dedication, and a mathematical mind has the potential to create a Battle Mechanics Guide for their favorite title.

So: math is boring, but games are fun, but applying math to playing video games can be *really* fun.

XBOX 360
L A U N C H

Feature by Roger Danish, Lynxara, and Wanderer

If you aren't already an Xbox Live subscriber, Microsoft really wants you to be.

If you aren't already using your Xbox as the central hub of your entertainment center (and shame on you for modding your Xbox! Really! We mean it!), Microsoft really wants you to be.

You've probably heard by now that the Xbox 360 is set up to be an all-in-one multimedia hub, capable of ripping .mp3s, playing videos, storing pictures, and playing games. You've probably also heard that it integrates Xbox Live into gameplay to an unprecedented extent, with every game on the system containing some online element.

Hearing it's one thing. Seeing it in action's quite another.

A lot of the standard-issue 360 experience is comfortably familiar, like the controller, which works a lot like the Controller S. The Black and White buttons are gone, replaced by a pair of shoulder buttons on the top of the unit, and the Back and Start buttons have been moved into the center of the controller. (Expect to do a lot of fruitless tapping on where the Back and Start buttons used to be, when you first pick up your 360.)

The real differences are in the dashboard, and in the gameplay. When you start up your 360, you'll be asked to create a gaming profile. This profile will carry across all the games you put into your Xbox 360, so you can track your achievements as a whole.

Every game will allow you to accomplish certain goals--like winning championships in *Project Gotham Racing 3*--to boost your online Gamerscore. As a 360 owner, you can *say* you're hardcore, but the 360 will let you prove it to the world. Anyone can check out your profile to see what games you've been playing, what games you've won, and just how mad your skills happen to be.
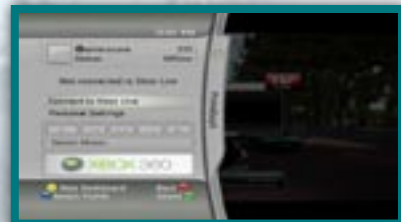
You can press the Guide button on your controller--that's there--to call up your profile at any time. You can select your stored music from this menu, manage which profile's active on the box, and check to see what your latest gameplay achievement's done for your Gamerscore.

The new Live functionality will also let you download demos and trailers right off the net and run them on the Xbox 360, with no additional software required. You can also jump right into some old-school gameplay with the Xbox Live Arcade, accessible right off the dashboard.

Admittedly, this is a bit complex, and it's going to require that you finally catch up with the rest of us and shell out for that broadband connection. It's decidedly innovative, though, and it takes online multiplayer gaming to new heights of connectivity and interaction.

As usual, though, that's just the shiny box. What's inside is going to be what counts. Turn the page, and you'll get to check out what the initial lineup's going to be like for the first system in the next generation.

POST LAUNCH SURVIVAL GUIDE
HANDS ON

OK, you've managed to score an Xbox 360, a game or two, and still have some dough left over for a few essential accessories and peripherals. If you take a moment to read through the best of the lot listed here, you just may avoid coming home with a crappy wireless aftermarket controller, a woody faceplate (please don't tell me wood grain is cool again, cuz it was never cool), and that subscription to *OXM* (not that there's anything wrong with *OXM* — we love those guys). If you're as hardcore as you say you are, then you already know what comes with the two different 360 system variations (*Core and Premium*). Keep in mind that depending on which one you purchased, you will already have one controller (wired or wireless), AV cables (standard or component) and a few other accessories, such as an Ethernet cable, Xbox Live headset and, of course, the 20GB hard drive. So, do you really need to buy any other stuff? Read on.

AV CABLES

All right, let's get one thing straight right now. That Zenith 13 inch '84 TV gots to go! If you're able to buy an Xbox 360 — whether through your own swollen bank account or through the masterful coercion and blackmailing of your parents — then you can afford to play it how it was meant to be played; in High Definition! In order to do so, you will need a pair of solid component cables. If you bought the Core system, you can upgrade the standard AV cables with Microsoft's own branded *Xbox 360 Component HDAV Cables*, which will run you $39.99. They are eight feet long and come with an additional video jack in case you don't have that 42' plasma, but plan on buying one in the next few months. You can also go the VGA route and plug that powerhouse into your PC monitor with a set of *Xbox 360 VGA HDAV Cables*, which also cost $39.99.

CONTROLLERS

We know it's tempting to go outside the Microsoft mothership and buy an aftermarket controller, but it may be smart to hold off for a while before doing so. While most of the usual suspects (Intec, Madcatz, etc.) will have something to offer around the launch window, the standard *Xbox 360 Controller* ($39.99 wired and $49.99 wireless) is your best bet out of the gate. It may take a while for aftermarket manufacturers to produce a quality product and we would like to think that Microsoft has learned their lesson this time around — big is not necessarily better. Unless you are a hermit who lives in a cave by the sea, have a mullet and love Sonic and Knuckles dolls, or live in a plastic bubble (no offense to those of you who fall into any of these categories), then you need an extra controller as it's always more fun to play with a friend. If you have gone the wireless route, then you may want to invest in the *Xbox 360 Play & Charge Kit*, which retails for $19.99. While it basically wires you back to the 360, it will allow you to continue to play while charging your controller. Plus, it comes with a NiMH rechargeable battery pack (versus the disposable AA batteries required to power the wireless controllers), allowing you to charge your controller for up to 30 hours of play before recharging again.

FACEPLATES

You're kidding us, right? You really are going to shell out 20 smackers on a piece of plastic that clips onto your console? We're not buying clothes here people; this isn't fashion — it's a video game system! Unless these suckers come with a cup holder and optional spray nozzle to mist our faces with Evian water, it's a big waste of money. In our opinion, a console should be shiny, sleek and metallic, and that's what we think. Er... actually the fancy blue Hot Rod Faceplate is kind of cool. We said kind of!

MEMORY UNIT

Unlike the original *Xbox Memory Unit*, which turned out to be completely unnecessary, if you purchased the *Core System*, then the 64MB *Xbox 360 Memory Unit* is a necessity to save your games and play on Xbox Live. Unfortunately, it's not cheap. and will run you an extra $39.99. It won't be long before much larger capacity Memory Units appear on the scene at a much cheaper price, but even a few weeks is probably longer than you're willing to play the same levels over and over again every time you power your system down. Bet you're wishing you purchased that *Premium System* now, huh cheapskate?

HARD DRIVE

If you bought the Core System, then you also are missing the 20GB Xbox 360 Hard Drive. In all actuality, the hard drive isn't a necessity if you're the kind of player who prefers to play alone and offline. However, if you're into the whole Xbox Live Community thing, want to rip CDs, are into downloadable content (Xbox Live Arcade has some pretty cool stuff coming down the pike for us old skoolers), or plan on saving gigs of memory space, than you need to bite the bullet and plunk down the extra $99.00. Like the other accessories and add-ons, it won't be long before aftermarket hard drives show up, which will most likely be cheaper and offer more space, so it might be wise to wait if you can.

HEADSET

If you're on Live, then you need the headset. Premium System owners get the Xbox 360 Headset included in their package, but the Core System comes without. For a mere $19.99, you can own one of these lightweight, comfortable headsets that plug directly into the 360's controller. And who knows, if Skype ever comes to Xbox Live, you will already be good to go.

These are just the tip of the iceberg as more accessories from many manufacturers will certainly follow in the weeks after launch. Keep reading these pages, as we at HGM will help you separate the killtacular from the craptastic.

AMPED 3

Amped has been trying to be the *Tony Hawk* of snowboarding games for awhile, and its next gen incarnation is going head to head with rival snowboard franchise *SSX* in the race to win the hearts and minds of gamers. The core *Amped* engine has received an overhaul in this iteration, simplifying controls and offering more wild stunts. Sandbox gameplay is also the order of the day in *Amped 3*, adding the ability to rumble with rival snowboarding gangs, build your own snow park, and drive around other types of snow vehicles.
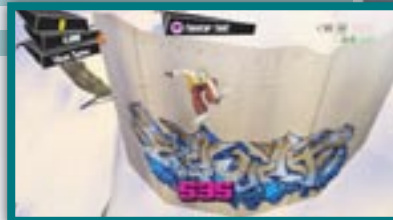
CALL OF DUTY 2

The console port that will be truest to the look of the PC version, while also taking advantage of X-Box Live's online multiplayer options. Despite how saturated the WW2 FPS genre has gotten, *Call of Duty 2* still makes chasing Rommel and dodging bombs with your squad at your back a fresh experience. Enhanced AI will make for a more brutal and tactical experience: enemies will swarm you in organized groups, and make sure to take advantage of turrets and vehicles for providing cover fire.

CONDEMNED

A system without a good survival horror game is like a day without a chilling total lack of sunshine. *Condemned* offers a satisfyingly scary single-player experience, tracing the story of FBI forensics specialist Ethan Thomas. Called to the scene of a disturbing murder, Agent Thomas becomes separated from the rest of his teammates and framed for a murder he didn't commit - or so he thinks. What follows is a frightening journey, all experienced in first-person perspective. The unusual focus on melee combat just makes it all the scarier, as you'll be getting up close and personal with the strange beings that torment Agent Thomas.

DEAD OR ALIVE 4

If you compare still shots of *DoA4* to shots from *DoA3*, you may think you're not seeing much of a different. It's when you play *DoA4* that you see what makes it a real next gen title and a possible killer app for the 360. The framerate, clothing textures, and lighting model have all drastically advanced from the last iteration of the franchise. The character animations are detailed, with free-flowing hair and scarves finally joining the *Dead or Alive* visual repertoire. The gameplay is as fast-paced and solid as ever, with enhanced Live support, making the 360 a must-buy for *DoA* fans.

FIFA 06

Based on the upcoming World's Cup tournament in Germany, *FIFA 06* for the 360 is all about experiencing the thrilling build-up to what is perhaps the world's biggest single sporting event. Control 70 teams from all over the world as you enter the tournament to see which nation has what it takes to win the World's Cup, with all the action flowing at a solid 60 FPS. This title probably won't make or break the 360 in the US, but in the wider world a lot of enthusiasm for the 360 will be resting on just how well fans of that other kind of football take to this game.
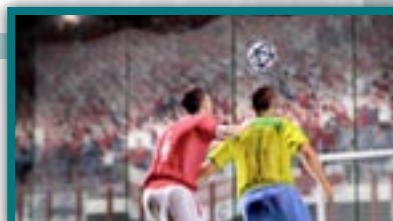
GUN

Saddle up for *Grand Theft Wagon*, partner. Neversoft's Wild West take on Rockstar's favorite cash cow really shines on the 360, where the extra processing power translates into graphics that help bring the game's great atmosphere and spaghetti-inspired storyline to life. Just like the current gen versions of the game, *Gun* takes place in the American west of the 1800's and features a star-studded cast of voice actors. Follow the plot or just enjoy running around a Wild West sandbox, playing poker, stealing horses, and scalping your enemies.

HOW TO SCORE AN XBOX 360 WITHOUT DYING

If you've experienced the launch of a new video game system, you know how problematic it can be when it first hits the stores. Do you get in line the night before, freezing your buttocks off and braving the elements in the off chance that they actually have enough systems to last until you reach the register, or do you resign yourself to paying inflated prices from a reseller and getting stuck with items and software you didn't need or want in the first place? What if, like us, you are a chronic procrastinator and/or suffer from CRS syndrome and forgot that November 22nd was the Xbox 360 launch day? If you've somehow missed the boat, you may not be as screwed as you think. Whle obtaining one of these next generation bits of gaming goodness may be more challenging than just swaggering into your local Target or Wal-Mart and plunking down your Benjamins, our handy dandy tips just may help you navigate through this challenging crisis.

TIP 1: FAST PRE-ORDER PANIC

If you haven't thought about it until reading this article, it is more than likely that it's already too late to get in on the first run of systems that shipped on November 22nd. However, don't give up hope just yet. You may want to run (and we mean *run*!) to the nearest game specialty shop and toss down a deposit immediately. Both EB Games and GameStop will continue to accept pre-orders for each wave of consoles released. Although there is no guarantee that they will receive enough systems for you to be playing the week after launch, there's a good chance you will still be able to get those grubby hands of yours on one before the holidays. Rule #1: The earlier you get your name on the list, the better.

TIP 2: ORDER ONLINE

Even if brick and mortar isn't an option, online ordering and purchasing is still a remote possibility with some online retailers, such as Amazon. com. The big problem with this is that you'll have to pay extra for a package deal, even a week or two after the 360 has shipped. On EB Games, you'll have to shell out at least $600, which includes the Core System, four games (*Perfect Dark Zero, Dead or Alive 4, Kameo: Elements of Power,* and *Project Gotham Racing 3*; $49-$59) and no extra accessories. If you want the *Premium System* with the 20GB hard drive, you're looking at laying down a cool $700.

As of press time, GameStop had already sold out of all of their bundles, including an jaw dropping Omega Bundle selling at $1999.69! Now I ask you, who has that kind of money? If you're feeling really desperate, you can hit up Amazon, who through ToysRUs. com, has a Xbox 360 Pro Player's Bundle for a whopping $1000 and forces you to take eight games, an extra faceplate, and a one-year subscription to *OXM*.

TIP 3: RISK THE RETAIL

If all else fails, you can always attempt to purchase your Xbox 360 from a retailer such as Best Buy, Wal-Mart, or Target. They won't require you to pay for games or accessories you don't want, but they typically sell their systems on a first-come, first-serve basis and will most likely be dry as a bone a day or two after launch. Grab a phone book or get online and do some research to find that one retailer out in the boondocks (and we mean really far out), way off the beaten path of the big city. Sure you'll have to drive for 18 hours and spend another $200 in gas money, but at least you'll have your 360. Who's the loser now?
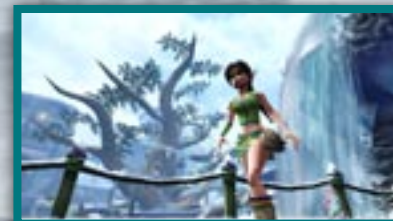
KAMEO: ELEMENTS OF POWER

It is required by law that a launching system have at least one 3D platformer available for it, and Rare's *Kameo* neatly fills that niche. One of the most heavily hyped 360 titles, but rightfully so, *Kameo* lets players adventure as a fairy With the power to turn into cartoonish monsters. Her battle is with the trolls that have invaded her world, and results in a game a lot heavier on combat than most. Kameo's transformations and delightfully simple control scheme create some truly innovative level designs, ranging from rolling down tunnels to flying through idyllic grasslands.

MADDEN 06

Much like its football brother *Madden*, EA's *NBA Live* marks the debut of a new engine for a long-running game series. The enhanced graphics and physics really show in the game's beautiful lighting models and jarringly accurate cloth physics. Whereas the next-gen *Madden* has skewed toward arcade-type gameplay, *NBA Live* marks a return to a more sim-like feel, with slower action and more time to make your decisions. Still, classic gameplay options like create-a-player, quick pick-up games, and a season campaign mode haven't been cut, making sure that *NBA Live '06* has a little something for every fan.

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NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED

Of all the long-standing franchises EA is taking into the next gen for the 360, *Need for Speed* may have made the smoothest transition. The next-gen entry builds on gameplay modes recently introduced into the series to create more "open ended" courses, with multiple courses and potential goals for a race. *Most Wanted* also introduces a career mode that lets you become more influential in the street racing scene as you win races and evade ever-larger packs of cop cars. Best of all, XBox Live will let you take the crashing action online with multiplayer races.

NHL 2K6

Hockey has its die-hard fans in the US, but hockey games rarely get the four-star treatment that football and basketball games do. *NHL 2K6* looks ready to change all that, introducing a bold new array of features and enhanced AI alongside the usual graphics upgrades. Coaching mode also enters the fray, giving you the chance to manage your very own hockey team. Probably the biggest plus for hockey fans will be the new crease control system, which finally lets players accurately control their goalie behaviors. We can't see many hockey fans resisting the 360 now.

PERFECT DARK ZERO

How many years have we been waiting for this? It's finally here, boasting 32-man matches in multiplayer and the first taste of what kind of system-exclusive FPS the 360 makes possible. Keeping the saturated FPS genre fresh is hard, but *PD0* might just have what it takes in the form of weird gadgets and some very unusual weapons. Story-wise, fans have been waiting for another adventure featuring Joanna Dark for so long that *PD0*'s "origin story" take on the character hits the spot just right. This might just be the breakout title of the 360 launch lineup.

PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3

Somewhere between the extremes of sim and arcade-style racers, there exists the *PGR* series, letting even the most casual of fans enjoy sliding around corners in the hottest cars the real world has to offer. *PGR3* adds some truly stunning next-gen graphics into the mix, along with an all-new ability to view the interior of your car as you race. Courses take you through amazingly authentic recreations of racing cities like London and Tokyo, with your choice of 80 of the world's sexiest production model cars to tour in. Next to the costs of a new Ferrari, *PGR3* and a 360 to play it on may begin looking like a real bargain.

QUAKE 4

The granddaddy of all multiplayer shooters, *Quake*'s latest iteration will bring interstellar war right to your 360. The single-player campaign will pick up after the end of *Quake 2*, letting you storm the front lines in the battle against the Strogg. Multiplayer offers huge, open maps that update the classic multiplayer of *Quake 3* for the next generation. The entire roster of classic *Quake* weapons are back, along with a new selection of arms and new vehicle combat options. Thanks to XBox Live, *Quake 4* is likely to be the 360's multiplayer FPS of choice - at least until *Halo 3* comes out.

RIDGE RACER 6

Much like its little brother on the PSP, *RR6* is all about bringing together the best cars, tracks, and music from past *Ridge Racer* titles and blending them together with truly beautiful visuals that show the real promise of the 360's hardware. Race your XBox Live buddies online, or play World Explorer mode and compete in 230 single events. As always, *RR6* is promising a blend of challenging difficulty and arcade physics, letting players enjoy the ultimate fantasy race.

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 06

And what is an Electronic Arts launch line-up without a *Tiger Woods* golf game? For the 360's coming-out party, EA has once again rebuilt the core engine, cutting gameplay options and courses while highlighting superior new physics and graphical performance. Play pick-up matches with friends over XBox Live, or participate in tournaments EA swears they'll be holding regularly. For the single-player game, you can compete in a PGA Tour mode, starting as a rank noob and progressing until you're the guy on the cover of the golf game boxes.

TONY HAWK'S AMERICAN WASTELAND

The venerable *Tony Hawk* franchise isn't bringing a new engine to the 360; instead it's going to let you play the same game your current-gen brethren have, only yours has high-resolution graphics and a giant 16:9 display. Promising no load times between areas, *THAW* will let so you can skate or bike your way through Los Angeles in style. No levels, no missions, just skating with even more tricks, customization options, and slicker controls than ever. Also the first-ever online mode for *Tony Hawk*, letting you complete mission-based goals from *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* along with a friend.

XBOX 360 DASHBOARD
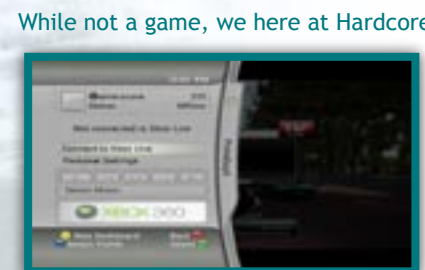
While not a game, we here at Hardcore Gamer Magazine thought you might appreciate the chance to check out the interface you'll be looking at every day if you pick up a 360! To the right is the dashboard, which allows you to scroll through XBOX live, games, media, system settings and the like. To the left is the media page. Brought up by the media button in the center of your controller, it holds your live profile, music, settings, and more!

TIP 4:
AUCTION BABY!

We would only recommend this as a last-ditch, desperate effort. With exasperated resignation, you can point your browser to eBay and get ready to feel what it's like to be shaken by the ankles as your money pours out of your pockets (we had a much better and more graphic analogy, but our EIC said it's not fit to print). **[Editor's Note: Greg, you *are* the EIC. - Thomas]** As of this writing, the Premium 360 packages are being auctioned off in the $500 range (not counting shipping). You'll pay $100 more than you should have to and you won't get any games, but you will be able to get one relatively close to launch time. If history is any indication, we forecast that these prices will likely continue to climb after launch and as gamers (and parents) get more desperate.

As fellow Hardcore Gamers, we know you're the kind of person who just has to have everything right now. We feel you. Trust us. If you haven't already performed any of the tips and steps we've laid out for you, then it's time to take action. Good luck and Godspeed.

BEHIND THE SCENES: LOCALIZATION

There are many dozens of nations on Earth that willingly choose not to use American English as their official language. Hence, when a video game developed in Japan or France or some other country is designated for North American release, it must be localized into English. Just as the video game business has drastically changed in the past thirty years, so has the craft of localization. Converting a modern Japanese game into English takes a combination of translation, rewriting, reprogramming, and rerecording.

After the runaway success of Atlus's 2003 release of *Disgaea: Hour of Darkness*, which introduced the company's unique flavor of tactical-RPG gameplay to American gamers, Nippon Ichi Software quickly established a North American branch to handle publishing duties on future titles like *Phantom Brave* and *Makai Kingdom*. We spoke with NIS America rep Jack Niida, who's working on the North American version of *Generations of Chaos*, about the challenges of modern localization.

Interview

Hardcore Gamer Magazine: Has localization become more difficult as gaming platforms have become more powerful?

Jack Niida, NIS America: I will say yes because as platforms become more powerful, the more text and voiceovers we

One of Generations of Chaos' status screens... in Japanese.

have to work with. On the bright side, the more text and voiceovers, the more fun we can have. Imagine the possibilities that lie ahead with the next-generation consoles. More voices, animation, dual-language support... I can't wait to get my hands on them!

HGM: Do you have the same person or persons translating from Japanese and rewriting into English, or are those separate departments?

JN: For a single project, we have a translator and an editor who works on the script, so it would be a separate department. Basically, what happens is the translator first faithfully translates the original text. Then the editor interprets the translated text into his/her own style. And finally, all of us in the office will proofread to help touch it up. Separating the tasks into three categories really helps to keep the creativity high, and minimizes the risk of text related errors. Plus, we get the pleasure of reading the script before anybody else!

HGM: One theory has it that English localizations of Japanese games have become less irreverent and more faithful to the source material because video games have become less cartoony and more realistic. Do you agree?

JN: I would agree that English localization is becoming more faithful in general. Realism may be contributing to the trend, but I believe it has more to do with the publisher's localization style. Some publishers prefer faithful localizations and others prefer creativity. We try hard to be as creative as we can by giving the editor (writer) the full right to do as he/she wishes with the translation. This method encourages creativity, and I believe it makes a unique script. I understand that some people prefer faithful translations, but most of our fans enjoy our work, so we will continue to do what we do best. Go all-out and make fun, demented scripts!

HGM: What's the deal with single-byte and double-byte characters, and why does it make your job such a living hell?

JN: The single-byte/double-byte characters are the demons of localization. Essentially, what happens is that we (NIS America) type our work in single-byte texts, but Japanese games are programmed in double-byte characters. If we simply incorporate our single-byte texts into a game, it will not run. What we have to do is type the translated text using double-byte code and manually proofread afterward, since spell-check does not recognize double-byte characters. Luckily, we now have a program that can convert single-byte characters into double-byte, but prior to that, it was a living hell. Imagine re-typing 10,000 or 20,000 lines of text... I still get nightmares from it.

HGM: In games with voiceovers, do you attempt to preserve the original Japanese speech whenever possible, and is it a technical challenge to do so?

Another Japanese status screen from GoC.

JN: Yes, we try to keep the original Japanese voiceovers as much as possible. Although we are proud of our English voiceovers, some people simply prefer the original. So it is always nice to have the freedom to choose. Dual-language support has its limits due to memory size and voiceover rights, but as long as we clear all the hurdles, we will keep it in our games.

Depending on the game, programmed voiceovers can be a pain to work with. For instance, some games have a small amount of memory allocated for sound. In such cases, we would have to limit the recording time per line. Another possible challenge is the "rights" to voice recordings. Royalty fees are always a great concern to us because they can potentially cost a fortune. In such cases, we would have to give up on dual-language support-but fortunately, that has never happened to us yet.

A tiny chunk of GoC's English localization.

FAN TRANSLATIONS
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

Now that virtually every commercial cartridge-based game has been dumped into raw digital form and spread across the Internet by the naughty citizens of the emulation nation, several groups of insane people have taken it upon themselves to localize Japanese games that never came to the States, or to re-localize Japanese games which they (rightly) feel suffered from crappy English translations, such as *Final Fantasy IV* and *Phantasy Star II*. The first full translation hack of a text-heavy console RPG was RPGe's hack of *Final Fantasy V*, first released on October 17, 1997.

There have been hundreds more fan projects since then, products by countless groups of dedicated hackers and fans. Modern fan-translation groups such as Demiforce offer websites teeming with English-language patches, which can be applied to a Japanese ROM file in a variety of ways: command line-utilities, automatic patching programs, or hacked into the ROM dump itself. Some of our favorite fan-translations include: Gaijin Productions' hack of *Sweet Home*, Capcom's NES predecessor to the *Resident Evil* series, and Front Mission Translation Project's hack of *Front Mission*, the first entry in Square-Enix's giant-robot strategy RPG franchise.

For more information on the fan translation patches and the people who make them, check out the Whirlpool at http://donut.parodius.com/, which archives tons of patches for download along with information about who made 'em and when. You're on your own for finding ROMs, though.

Final Fantasy V was the first complete RPG fan translation.

THE MATRIX
PATH OF NEO

THE MATRIX REHASHED

If you haven't been living under a rock for the past five years — and, let's face it, even if you have — you probably know at least a little bit about the Matrix trilogy. If nothing else, you've seen the choreography parodied a thousand times, and you've heard countless jokes about the Blue Pill, the Red Pill, and Keanu Reeves going "whoa."

If that's the limit of your knowledge, though, here's a brief rundown of the *Matrix* saga:

The Matrix: Lowly computer programmer Thomas Anderson, known by night as the hacker "Neo," learns that the world he lives in is not real. It is a simulation known as "The Matrix," created by sentient computer programs to keep humanity imprisoned. Humans who are unplugged from the Matrix can unlock amazing powers, and do battle with the mysterious black-clad "Agents" that keep order there. Rumors persist that there is one human being, known as **The One**, who can destroy the Matrix and save humanity. With the help of his friends Morpheus and Trinity, Neo discovers that he is **The One**.

The Matrix: Reloaded: Six months after the events of *The Matrix*, Neo and his friends live in Zion, the last human city on Earth. They soon learn of a plot by the machines to attack Zion directly, and Neo must go back into the Matrix to push for a final battle. There, he learns about the sinister history of The Matrix, including the fact that he, **The One**, was created not to free humanity from the program, but to be a part of its cycle of destruction.

The Matrix: Revolutions: The machines march on Zion, and only Neo can stop them. He has learned that his abilities as **The One** also carry over into the real world — unfortunately, one of the Agents has also found a way to cross over, manifesting as a force of pure destruction and contempt. Neo must engage in one final battle with this Agent, and in the end, sacrifice himself so that Zion may survive.

Ever since the ill-fated release of *E.T.* for the Atari 2600, gamers and developers alike have sought a seamless merge between the highly different worlds of movies and video games. The right label can bring in a huge audience of casual fans just dying to get one more taste of their favorite franchise, while the influence of a truly innovative piece of filmmaking can bring freshness and challenge to the sometimes static world of video game plots and engines.

The Matrix: Path of Neo, based on the mind-bendingly popular *Matrix* franchise and set for release this November, is the latest attempt at this most prized of unions from prominent game developer Shiny Entertainment. Its first try at bringing the *Matrix* franchise to the console didn't exactly live up to the legacy. Can Shiny get it right this time?
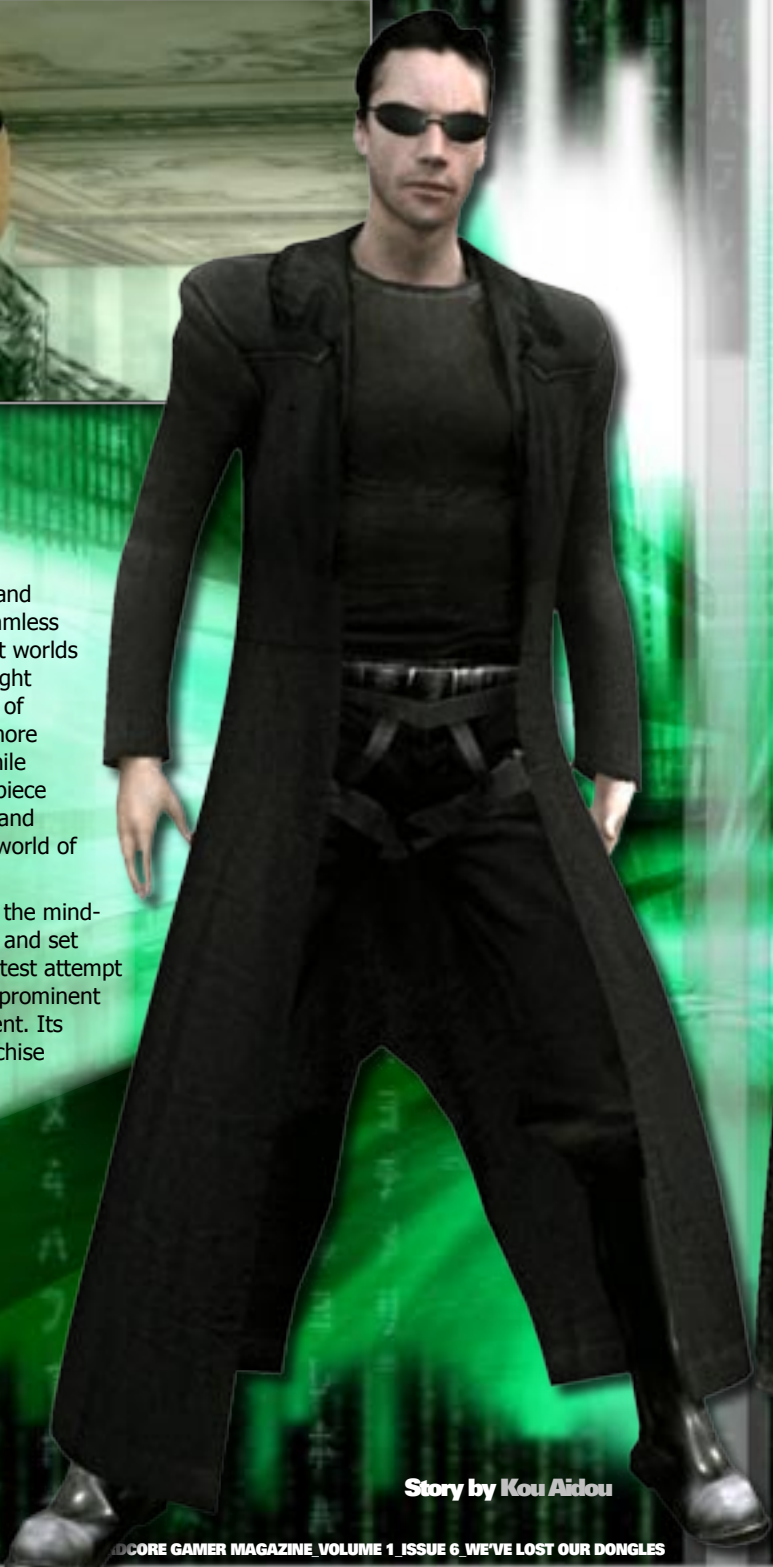
Story by Kou Aidou

SHINY PEOPLE

Shiny Entertainment is no stranger to the franchise game. It's given us such popular titles as *Disney's Aladdin*, *Terminator 2*, and the immortal classic *Earthworm Jim*. Company president and founder David Perry has taken this as something of a badge of honor, even making the importance of quality brand name games a subject of his speech at 2004's Game Developer's Conference.

"Gamers, more than ever, are seeking safety from a $50 loss," he said in his speech. "Brands... can help get them, to still take the plunge!"

When it comes to *The Matrix*, you couldn't find a team more loyal than the one behind *Path of Neo*. Our visit to their headquarters in Santa Ana, CA was like stepping into a *Matrix* convention. While no one was cosplaying outright, there was a certain energy in the studio that only comes from a team of fans working on a labor of love. Maybe it was in the way that game developer BJ Chowelinski mimed out Neo's attacks as he described the game's engine, or the way the animators were referred to as the "ninja team" for their backgrounds in martial arts. Animation director Gabriel Rountree spoke of the movie with the kind of passion only a fan can have, describing the dojo sequence from the first movie as a "work of art."

WACHOWSKI MANIA

The Matrix is a great franchise to build a game off of, and Shiny Entertainment is clearly devoted to the idea, but even the best developers working with the best name can create a bad game if the studio simply won't allow them room to breathe.

"[Producers] have the movie license. Their job is to make sure it's consistent with the movie, even if that's not necessarily in line with a fun video game," Rountree said.

In the case of *Path of Neo*, Shiny managed to avoid the issue by going directly to the directors of The Matrix, Larry and Andy Wachowski. While we didn't have a chance to talk to the Wachowskis about their involvement in the game, the Shiny team made it clear that they were still very involved.

HGM: This is the first Matrix game where the player gets to play as Neo himself. Was there any difficulty in getting this concession from Warner Bros.?

DP: Warner was no problem at all. It is indeed strange [that] there's never been a Neo game. There's also never been a game based on the first movie, yet for many movie fans it's one of their top ten movies of *all* time. It's even more amazing that Warner agreed to give us *all three* movies in one game. How often does that happen? Most studios want to milk a property for all it's worth, but in this case Warner was incredibly supportive of the Wachowskis' vision for the game.

HGM: Neo's powerset in the movies covers styles and abilities that have never been explored in previous video games. What kinds of innovations were needed to bring the Neo experience to life?

DP: Developing this game had *many* challenges. Neo needs to be able to shoot (many pistols, rifles, shotguns, etc.), fight with any weapons on the walls (sticks, poles, swords, etc.), perform acrobatics (flying, cartwheels, running on walls, etc.), fight hundreds of Agent Smiths at once, dodge bullets, throw things (grenades, weapons, etc..), stop bullets in the air, fly, fight ([with] many fighting styles), [and] see the world as code at any time! The list goes on, and we have even added in some new stuff, like telekinesis or fighting on top of poles. He's definitely a superhero and his abilities have resulted in one of the most exciting fight systems I've ever seen.

HGM: *Path of Neo* features footage re-edited by the Wachowski Bros. themselves, including an all-new ending. What was the reason for the new ending? Do you worry about backlash from the fans?

DP: The original ending was just no fun for a gamer. "Stand still and die. Congratulations, you've won!" No, no, no, the directors weren't going to do that to the gamers, so they changed the ending. Dramatically! It now contains gameplay too. Personally I prefer it to the movie ending. When you see it, you tell me which you prefer!

HGM: In making a game based on such a popular franchise, you must find a balance between hardcore and casual gamers. How will this game stand in that balance?

DP: Our last game was completely aimed at newbie gamers. This one still has them covered, but it's seriously aimed at the hardcore Matrix fan gamers out there. The fact that I'm being interviewed by 'HARDCORE GAMER' feels good as we must be doing something right.

HGM: If *Path of Neo* turns out to be as successful as Enter the Matrix, what direction would you like the next game in the series to go?

DP: This is our last game in the *Matrix* series. We kinda feel that with this game, we got to do the game we (as gamers) would buy. I'm a massive fan of *The Matrix*, when I saw the first movie, I was *kicking* myself that I passed on making the game. To be able to make the Neo game with the real lobby/dojo/subway scenes etc. was a dream come true.

Next I get to dream again, and I can promise to break more new ground, just like we did with the Wachowski partnership.

"The Wachowskis were *amazingly* clear about the path they saw the game take," Perry said. "They gave us the path, then they immediately went away and re-edited all three movies to fit that path."

Although currently in London shooting the upcoming *V for Vendetta*, the Wachowskis have continued to offer feedback to Shiny through all stages of the game's development. A number of *Path of Neo*'s features are at the direct request of the Wachowskis themselves, including the RPG system that determines Neo's growth, and the addition of melee weapons into the characters' arsenal. Every character present is also at the Wachowskis' request—they even re-shot a completely new ending to the trilogy for the game.

"I think the most important thing is to not mess up the vision of the directors," Perry said. "It's their story, their characters, their rules."

"That said," he continued, "for various game elements like the fighting system, they give us a lot of control and say. So it's definitely a partnership."

When given a choice between keeping the game true to the movies or changing things to make the game itself more fun, the Wachowskis always left things in the hands of the developers.

"They always go for the more fun option," Rountree said. "They're very, very involved in video games, and anime, and cartoons, so when they give us feedback it's right on the money."

"We feel very lucky to have two directors that are hardcore gamers," Perry said.

ENTER THE MATRIX

Shiny was eager to make up for shortcomings in its earlier Matrix project, 2003's *Enter the Matrix*.. Occurring concurrently with the events of the second movie in the *Matrix* trilogy, *Enter the Matrix* focused on the off-camera adventures of Neo's fellow freedom fighters, Niobe and Ghost.

Unlike most franchise games, *Enter the Matrix* was not simply a rehash of the movie, nor was it a superficial extra. Rather, it was meant to be a full-fledged entry in the Matrix franchise. The promotional materials themselves promised the player that their *Matrix* experience would not be complete without the game, as the game's events would tie back directly into the events of *The Matrix: Reloaded*.

The concept (another direct suggestion of the Wachowskis') was undeniably innovative, and hopes were high. Unfortunately, the final release revealed crippling flaws in the game that denied most players the experience that was promised by the hype. Although *Enter the Matrix* was one of the top ten best-selling games of the year (selling over four million copies), the game itself was met with mixed reviews, and many copies were quickly returned to stores.

While few could bring themselves to call it outright awful, many referred to *Enter the Matrix* as the biggest disappointment of the year, citing incompetent AI, a weak stand-alone story, and a bevy of in-game bugs as only a few of the game's problems. Others were simply unimpressed with the Wachowskis' innovation, complaining that their first chance to enter the world of *The Matrix* had to be through the eyes of the rather mundane Niobe and Ghost, rather than the movie trilogy's star players Neo, Morpheus, and Trinity.

Shiny was quick to admit to the game's shortcomings, confirming suspicions that the tight development schedule hindered much of what they had wanted to do with the game. While some games can push back a release date if critical flaws need fixing, *Enter the Matrix* had to be released alongside the theatrical debut of *The Matrix: Reloaded*.

INTERVIEW

Gabriel Rountree,
Animation Director

HGM: How did you achieve the animations for this game?

GR: I think it started way back on the last game, because we did all this motion capture. So we take a mix, when we do our animation. In this case, when we did choreography, we used the best choreographers in the world... you can get the most amazing martial artists, you can hand-key the most ridiculous moves, but what it comes down to is that *vision* of what the fighting should look like.

HGM: Later on in the games, Neo can do some really crazy stuff. How do you handle that, in terms of the motion capture?

GR: I've been asked how much is mo-cap and how much is handkeyed. My answer is usually, like, 70% is mo-cap... the problem is, that's not a *real* answer, because... everything that's mo-capped, we also go in and work on. A lot of it is to get the nuances of the movement, but then we still make it superhuman. From there we're handkeying moves. There's so much in there where we had to re-hand-key it just to make sure it's fun to play.

HGM: Is there a dialogue between the game designers and the animation team, in terms of how it all ties together?

GR: Well, you know, it's both. There are definitely the inspirational moments, but... in general, they know what they want to accomplish, it's all planned out. And then from there we have review meetings as well, where we put everything in and play through the game and we see where there should be something. That's where a lot of the continuer combos came from. Some of them exploded way out further than we expected.

HGM: What was the Wachowskis' involvement in the project like?

GR: We got comments from them, where they're in London shooting *V for Vendetta*, and they're playing the game, and they're sending comments over, like "we love that training level! This is great!" or, "can we make that move bigger??" which is amazing, because I know they're working twenty-hour days. So they're coming home and playing video games... our game? I love those guys. [They're] always about the game, which is great.

HGM: When we get onto the next-generation hardware, do you have any ideas for things you want to start incorporating into the games?

GR: I'm looking at intelligent animation. Right now, we clean animations, where characters blend between animations. We try our best to make sure it fits the situation, but every now and again they do things you really wish they wouldn't. They slide a bit, they pop, or they rotate oddly and their feet slide. The next generation is taking and applying real-time thought into the IK of the characters, so they have an understanding of the world around them. With the current systems, that's so limited, but as soon as you put the adaptive intelligence *into* the animation, I think we can get that level of immersion. We won't be watching movies at that point anymore, we'll be playing video games.

"We had way more ideas for the game than we were able to put in. It was important that we hit the movie release," Perry said. "If we had an extra year, we would have added a lot more stuff.

"But then again, I can say the same for many other games too," he added.

The animation, in particular, was one of the biggest disappointments. The visual style of *The Matrix* was one of the movie's biggest selling points, and the promotional materials for *Enter the Matrix* promised over 1,000 motion-captured martial arts moves. While the game technically delivered on this promise, the animations themselves were choppy and uneven, and the game's hit detection was poor.

"Some of the animation was really beautiful... and we had a really good animation compression system," Rountree said, "but ... the animation got compressed at a 21:1 ratio, and all of a sudden all of the nuances were gone. The flavor of what it was just disappeared."

Another problem was simply a lack of time to tweak the gameplay, owing to the game's ironclad release date.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION

With a two-year development cycle, *Path of Neo* offered Shiny a chance to make up for what went wrong in *Enter the Matrix*.

"This to me almost feels like we're doing the game we wanted to do last time, and we're building upon a foundation, " Rountree said, "going in, we spent a month just figuring out what went wrong, and how to change it ... to make this the game we really wanted."

So, in what ways has *Path of Neo* improved on its predecessor? First of all (as its name implies), it finally gives the players what they really want: a chance to step into Neo's shoes, and follow him over the course of the entire *Matrix* trilogy. Surprisingly, this was not actually the result of fan demand, but simply a natural progression in the Wachowskis' minds.

"With *Enter the Matrix*, they wanted to innovate and make a new game that tells the substory, so if you played that game it... made the whole thing grander," said Chowelinski. "So now the plan is just, 'What haven't we done?' So it's the Neo game."

Far from following the linear path of the trilogy, though, *Path of Neo* incorporates material from the *Matrix* comic books and the animated series *The Animatrix*, as well as giving the player a say in choices that were set in stone for the Neo of the movie.

"You can win where Neo lost in the movie. You can escape where he was captured. You can go places he never had time to go in the movies," said Perry.

The power levels have also been given a shot in the arm since *Enter the Matrix*. Because Neo is **The One**, his presence in the game gives players a chance to control a hero with powers unlike anything they've seen in a video game before.

"Neo doesn't do the typical things that other action heroes do," said Chowelinski.

They can even expect a few surprises from Neo himself. The Wachowskis took *Path of Neo* as an opportunity to give Neo abilities that simply wouldn't work on the scale, or timeframe, of the movies, including, later on, the ability to move objects with his mind.

"The wall-jumping and diving..." said Rountree. "In the movie, they're very impressive superhero moves, but within the size and scope of video games, they weren't superhuman. What [the Wachowskis] really wanted, is that Neo, in the context of the game, has huge abilities."

With all these ambitions, Shiny kept its production practical, and took measures that many felt could have saved *Enter the Matrix*. Its designers and animators had the game's core element completed six months before release, and spent the rest of the time just tweaking of the game.

The team also designed its own customized development tools specifically for the project. This allowed the game's artists to make changes to the game's animations, backgrounds, and lighting themselves, in real-time, rather than having to force a programmer to spend crucial hours changing, compiling, and downloading new code for minor changes that might not even work out.

"We put the control into the hands of the artists, the designers, the animators, the people who have the real passion for that piece," said Rountree.
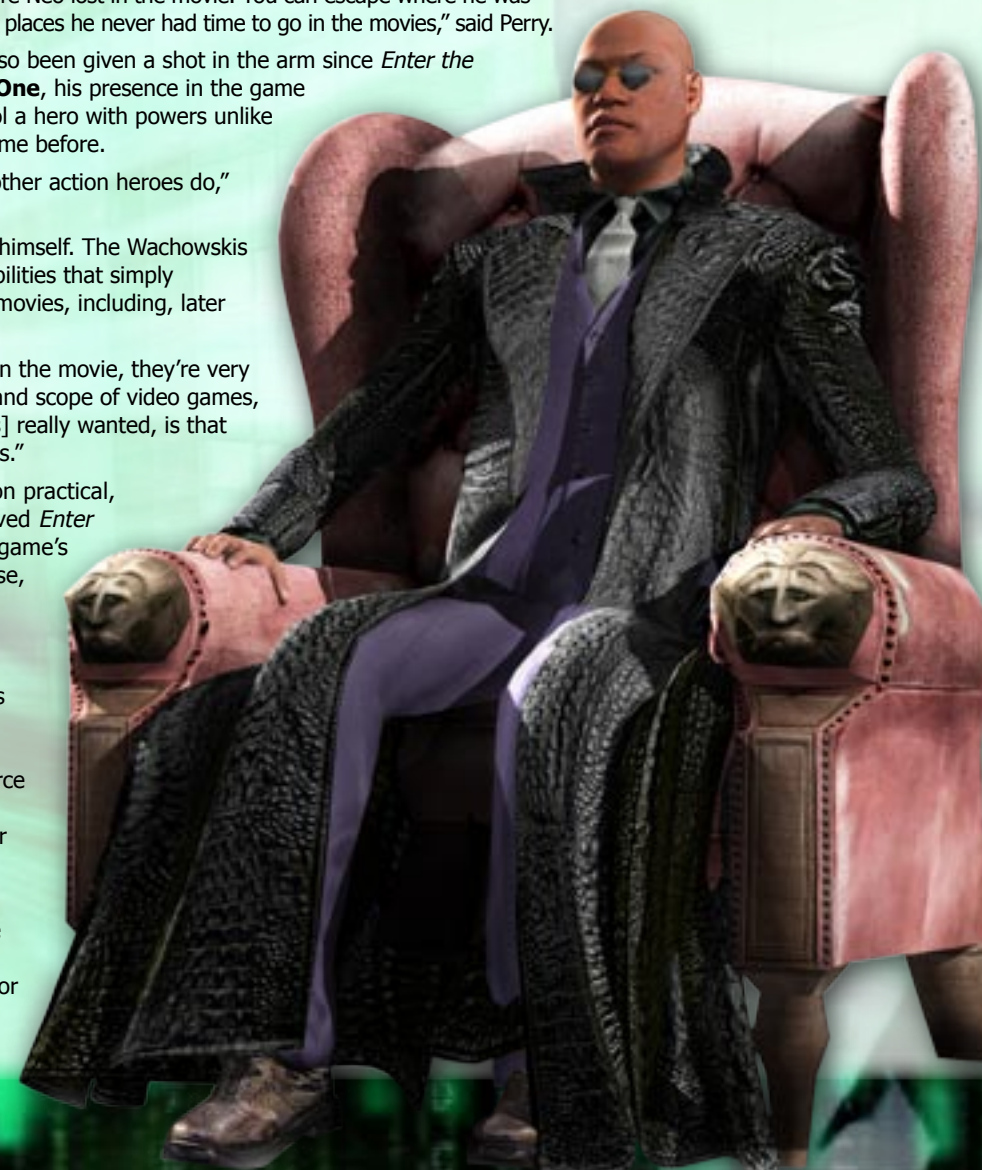
The tweaking has allowed Shiny to fix some of the major flaws from the *Enter the Matrix*, especially the AI. Enemies will hide behind pillars if you have a gun, and learn quickly if you use the same tactics too many times. The level design, the hit detection, and even the lighting show great improvements as the result of this extra time.

Players can look forward to much greater variety and challenge all around.

PATH OF NEO

While *Path of Neo* is still an action game, a few improvements have been added to the fight system, including an RPG system for acquiring Neo's powers, and attacks that branch into numerous different combinations depending on player input.

"The only game I can really compare this to is *God of War*," said Perry, "because we kinda borrowed David Jaffe's take on the old *Dragon's Lair* system, meaning that fight combos present themselves during battle, so if you are on top of things, you can pull off quite amazing combos."

"We then (also like *God of War*) have a full growth system where Neo can be customized and grow more and more powerful. There's an entire tree of stuff to unlock and some of them are quite amazing. The Wachowskis even added their own ones in there for gamers willing to take risks."

Rather than simply having a set list of moves he can perform, Neo learns his abilities gradually, substituting new ones for old ones. Some of these abilities can be chosen by the player at the end of a given level, while others are learned automatically over the course of the game. Many of Neo's most famous moves will also be learned automatically on the levels where they're appropriate, to allow real fans of the trilogy to get the full experience of being Neo.

"Every trademark move, we give you, and we make sure that you get them prior to that level, or in that level," said Chowelinski. "So that might be where you learn it or you do it the first time, or where you need to use it to win, or where you'll have the props to execute it."

Even with the inclusion of the trademark moves, the animation team and the developers worked closely together to make sure that the cinematics never upstaged the gameplay.

"We tend to get carried away [with long animations]," said Rountree "But in reality, we can't use [them] unless it's in a cinematic moment. It has to be broken up into pieces.

"But then from there that's still not fun, because it's just pressing buttons, so it has to branch. From there we just ended up just creating whole trees of fight moves to make sure that it was interactive."

Another new feature meant to capture the cinematic flavor of the movies is the all-new multi-person fighting system. Rather than performing an attack on a single enemy, then turning to a new one and starting a new attack from scratch, Neo can smoothly perform sequences of attacks against multiple enemies. This allows him to do anything from backfisting an approaching security guard to wielding two enemy agents as nunchakus against a third. The development team was particularly proud of this innovation.

"It's a great game to show off," said Chowelinski. "The multi-person fighting is something that I would love to push. It's like watching the movie. It's like being in the movie."

Since animation was one of the major disappointments of *Enter the Matrix*, Shiny worked especially hard trying to deliver in this area this time around. It credits the branch system as a particular innovation that allowed the animators to make full use of the game's almost 4000 high-quality animations.

"This time we came up with the very clever system with the styles and RPG skills, and everything's discrete packets of animation, that's not very compressed at all," said Rountree. "If the player unlocks a new ability ... we take the old ones out of memory and put the new ones in."

The animators have also made use of real-time IK, which causes the arms of two characters who are fighting to meet automatically, creating the image of realistic blocks between characters during combat.

"I think most people take it for granted. In some games it's just 'block high, block low,'" said Rountree. "[But then], it's hard to add in the choreography ... the feel of the fight moving around the level."

Rountree was passionate about creating the experience of the cinematic fight. "It *had* to be, it had to be *The Matrix*, and if the fighting didn't really work, it didn't really fit together, the whole game would be gone."

REVIEW

So after all is said and done, did Shiny get the job done? Did it make a game capable of bringing the *Matrix* experience to hardcore and casual gamer alike? Did it redeem itself from the mediocrity of *Enter the Matrix*? The answer: yes, yes, and yes. From cinematic fighting and next-gen quality animation to crafty opponents and solid play control, *Path of Neo* offers a definitive *Matrix* experience that both hardcore and casual gamers will enjoy.

One of the features that makes it so accessible is the difficulty curve. It's easy to get Neo to do awesome-looking stuff if you just button-mash, but even on Easy, this will only take you so far. Many scenarios require that you pace yourself and think of a way to accomplish a task. Harder difficulty levels don't change the level design, but they make enemies smarter, faster, and stronger. Those who want to master the hardest difficulty level — **The One** — will really have to spend time mastering every aspect of the game engine.

The levels themselves have more variety than one might expect. While most are your basic beat-em-ups, you'll also get to fire a chain gun out of a moving helicopter (simple, but thrilling), and explore an M.C. Escher-like maze that's sort of like a standard 3D platformer with a Matrix twist. There's even some variety to the beat-em-up levels, with different missions having different requirements that sometimes call for real strategy.

One rather surprising feature of *Path of Neo* is a sense of humor. From the minute you load up the game and see a hundred tiny Agent Smiths running around to spell out the Shiny name, you just *know* this is the developer that brought you *Earthworm Jim*. Video game in-jokes abound, including a blooper reel of developer errors, and the Wachowskis even poke fun at themselves in a "cameo" that's one of the high points of the game.

There are some shortcomings. Though the RPG system simulates Neo's growth well, there's less actual choice involved than you might expect, as all the really significant abilities are given to you automatically. Some scenes that seem like they could have made good levels — the freeway scene in *Reloaded*, or the fights on the Nebudchanezzar in *Revolutions* — are glossed over, while others overstay their welcome. At around 12 hours of playtime, the game also feels a bit short, though this does make it replay-friendly if you want to unlock all the secrets.

These flaws are rather minor compared to what the game does offer, though, and the new ending is so absolutely brilliant that the rest of the game could be *Superman 64* and it would still be worthwhile just to see it. With *Path of Neo*, Shiny shot for the moon once again, and while it may not have hit it, it came pretty darn close. If you like *The Matrix* (even just to poke fun at), you *will* find something to love about *Path of Neo*.

FINAL SCORE :
4.5 of 5

HARDCORE REVIEWS

THE WARRIORS

Review by Roger Danish

Publisher : Rockstar
Developer : Rockstar Toronto
Release Date : 10/17/2005
Rating : MATURE

Genre(s) : Beat 'em Up
Category : Action
**# of players :** 2

"Can you dig it, suckas!?"

Old schoolers will recall seeing *The Warriors* when it was first released in the theaters back in the late '70s. For our much younger (and spryer) readers who are not so familiar with this film, it's about a group of gang members framed for murder of a big time gang leader and on the run for their lives. You'll find that Rockstar has taken an unlikely license and has crafted a unique beat-'em-up around it as only they can do. Interestingly enough, the game does not follow the movie's script, with the exception of the few last chapters. Instead, Rockstar chose to create a history around the movie's basic plot and go from there. As such, the game starts out three months prior to the movie's opening scene. From here, we are introduced to all the main characters from the film and learn more about their beginnings.

The first thing you will notice when you start the game is its graphics engine. Visually, *The Warriors* does not look as cutting edge as some of the newer titles out there. Like Rockstar's venerable GTA series, the game has a somewhat "rough around the edges" look and feel (which it should, as it was developed using an amalgam of the *Manhunt* and *GTA* engines). However, their strong suit is innovative and unique gameplay, and I am pleased to tell you *The Warriors* does not disappoint. If you have a penchant for virtual mugging, interrogating, tagging, stealing, killing (both rivals and/or citizens—whatever tickles your fancy), and just causing random wanton violence and destruction, then this game is definitely for you!

The Warriors has many cool features that elevate it way above your typical beat-'em-up, including squad-based (gang-based?) combat. When controlling a character, you are equipped with the ability to execute a variety of "Warchief Commands," which allows you to control your fellow gang members during missions where they tag along. To execute these commands, all you need do is press a button (R2 on PS2 and click down on the left thumbstick on Xbox) to pull up a command list, then use the right stick to select one on the fly. The commands (six in total) include Mayhem, which orders them to destroy whatever is in their sight; Scatter, which orders
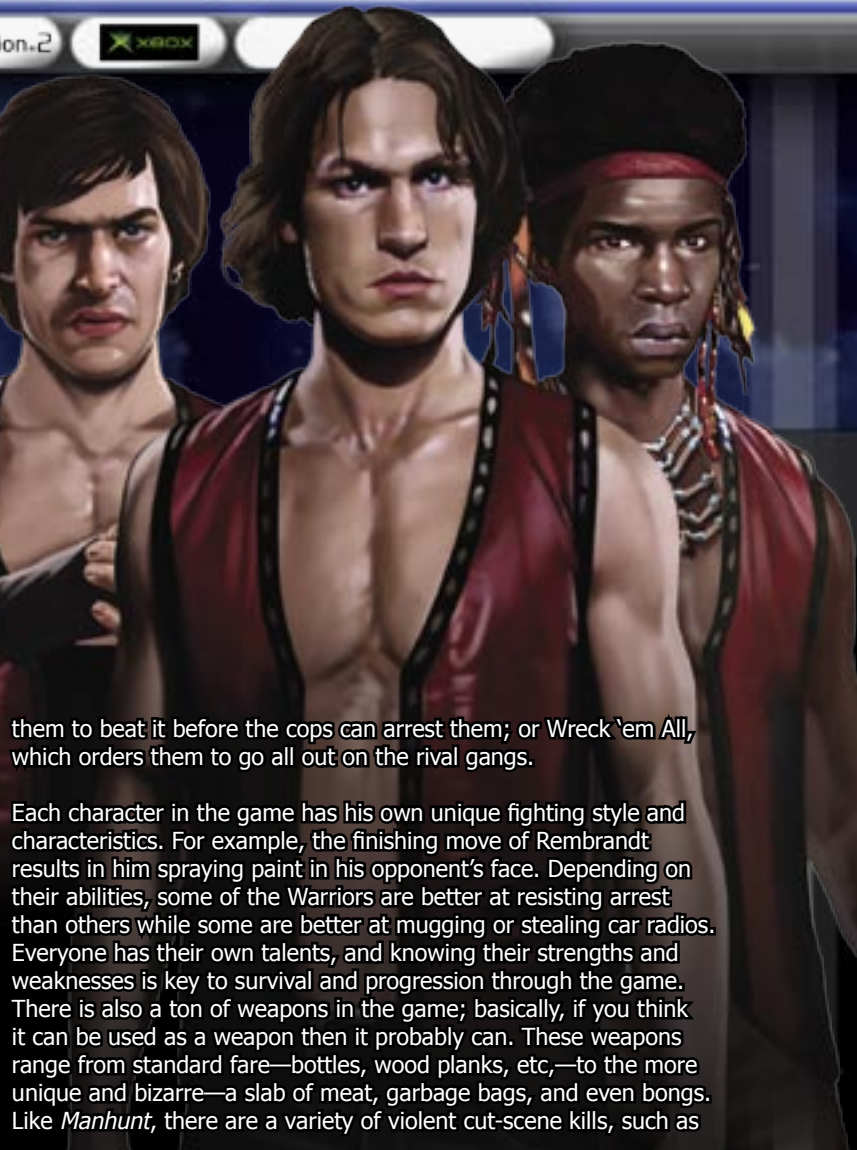
them to beat it before the cops can arrest them; or Wreck 'em All, which orders them to go all out on the rival gangs.

Each character in the game has his own unique fighting style and characteristics. For example, the finishing move of Rembrandt results in him spraying paint in his opponent's face. Depending on their abilities, some of the Warriors are better at resisting arrest than others while some are better at mugging or stealing car radios. Everyone has their own talents, and knowing their strengths and weaknesses is key to survival and progression through the game. There is also a ton of weapons in the game; basically, if you think it can be used as a weapon then it probably can. These weapons range from standard fare—bottles, wood planks, etc.—to the more unique and bizarre—a slab of meat, garbage bags, and even bongs. Like *Manhunt*, there are a variety of violent cut-scene kills, such as

when you use a bottle as a weapon. When you smash it on your victim, the game slows down and focuses on the carnage as the bottle shatters and a mist of blood sprays forth. Also like *Manhunt*, after a while, this can get old and repetitive.

One of the main issues with this otherwise solid title is its awkward camera. As the action begins to heat up and you are slugging it out

PLAY THE GAME, WATCH THE MOVIE.

The Warriors Ultimate Director's Cut, which shipped to retail on October 4th, delivers this gritty and sometimes unintentionally campy 1979 pulp action flick with a few extra touches. These include tighter editing, a Greek legend introduction, and new comic book-style intro and outro scenes. While you won't find any audio commentary, there are a few informative documentaries with actors David Patrick Kelly (Luther), Michael Beck (Swan), James Remar (Ajax), Deborah Van Valkenburgh (Mercy) and director Walter Hill. Unfortunately, there aren't a whole lot of other goodies to be found on this one-disc DVD, with the exception of a few cast and crewmembers talking about how the movie was made, and a portion of a deleted scene that was used when *The Warriors* was shown on television. If you don't have this movie in your DVD library, or are too young to have seen it the first time around, we definitely recommend you pick it up.

with multiple gang members, the camera will often move to a bad angle or it will completely block your view of the action. Sometimes, when your back is against a wall and you are fighting, the camera will get stuck behind the wall, making it hard to know where your character is in relation to your target.

In Rockstar fashion, *The Warriors* has a lot of cool extras, including a two-player co-operative Story Mode, as well as Rumble Mode, where you fight against the CPU or another player, or you can use your Warriors and fight against another gang. Another cool unlockable is a side-scrolling beat-'em-up a la *Double Dragon*. In all, there are tons of side missions and over 400 secrets to unlock.

It seems as if the beat-'em-up is enjoying a rebirth of sorts, and Rockstar has definitely given this tired genre a shot in the arm. Instead of mindlessly mashing buttons and fighting wave after wave of baddies from beginning to end, you are given a variety of missions to complete, a great story line and characters that you ultimately end up caring about. After playing *The Warriors*, it made me want to run to the nearest store and buy the DVD so I could watch the movie and relive the action.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

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

I loved *The Warriors* from start to finish! Rockstar has evolved the beat-'em-up and resurrected a cult classic in the process.

FINAL SCORE :
4.5 of 5

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

Review by **4thletter**

Publisher : LucasArts
Developer : Pandemic Studios
Release Date : 11/1/2005
Rating : TEEN; Mild Language, Violence

Genre(s) : Third-person Shooter
Category : Science Fiction
# of players : 32

Take the best-selling game in the *Star Wars* franchise, add playable Jedi and hero characters, more classes to futz around with, space battles, and a genuine single-player mode. Tone down the drastically over-effective Wookiees from Kashyyk. What do you get?

Why, you get *Star Wars Battlefront II*!

There are only a few sequels that actually improve upon the original game in every way. *Battlefront II* takes a variety of steps to provide a better gameplay experience than the original. In *Battlefront II*'s Rise of the Empire mode, you play a member of the 501st Legion of stormtroopers. The actual game mechanics are no different from the multiplayer, but the campaign mode does offer a wide variety of cinema-driven scenarios to play through. Each stage has its own special hook, usually banking on some foreknowledge of *Star Wars* lore to reel you in.

The gameplay in *Battlefront II* is comfortably familiar, though there are a couple of notable additions. There's an auto-targeting and lock-on system that helps you to focus on your enemies. It'll put a small reticle just over your target and slide your cross-hairs over their body when you aim near them. It's suprisingly seamless and useful, particularly during space battles. It's much easier to track a ship that suddenly veers off-screen in an odd direction before you get a chance to blow it up.

The other addition is the ability to fight genuine large-scale space battles. Flying is painfully easy to control, since your ships are extremely responsive. It's a small matter to boost out of the way of a bogie on your tail and loop behind him, lasers blazing. The outer space stages are huge enough to actually be slightly disorienting. You'll have to get used to attacks coming from every possible direction. It's very cool to be able to decide your own orientation during flight with no negative penalty. If you want to complete an entire stage while flying upside-down, do so. Just be careful when you come in for landings.

Both the space and land-based battles are nicely immersive. In space, turbolaser shots will narrowly blast past your ship as you barrell roll out of the way

BATTLE IT OUT, ON THE GO by **Syriel**

Battlefront II may be an incredibly popular game on the consoles, but mobile phone users can now get in on the action with *Battlefront Mobile*. This compact rendition of the game drops players into a *Hogan's Alley* style shooting gallery and challenges you to eliminate the targets before they eliminate you. Aiming and firing is done with the buttons on your phone.
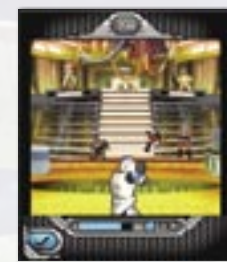
What's intriguing is that all the little battles are connected on a main server. If you're fighting for the Empire and you win, then the Empire gains an influence point in that quadrant. In this way, hundreds of thousands of players are all competing with a common goal, yet you never directly face off against a human opponent.

Unfortunately, *Battlefront Mobile* does have one big downfall, and that is loading time. Because it has to constantly communicate with a server between matches, it seems as if you are always looking at a loading screen, and that's never any fun. If you can overlook the load times, and if you're a Cingular customer, *Battlefront Mobile* is one more way to feel the force.

of the laser fire from other ships. On foot, your field of view is often filled with either attacking enemies or their laser fire. Having the option to go from flying to walking, by way of sneaking onto an opposing ship and dismounting, is a fun (and sometimes necessary) addition.

No game is perfect, of course. The Jedi characters really aren't different enough to be distinguishable from one another. The only differences between them are what force powers they have, their speed, and how they look. They're also pretty game-breaking. If your Jedi has a Saber Throw special move, you can easily take out a decently grouped squad of six or seven enemies at one shot.

"Isn't that unbalanced?" you ask? Yes indeedy. The Jedi are time- and action-limited, so if you aren't fighting in the midst of battle constantly, your timer runs down and you'll eventually be bumped back down to regular troops. The Jedi are still a very cool addition to the game, but extremely dominating.

The only other real problem is that the stages are wide and expansive to the point that you'll often respawn and have to run for a while before you can get back into the thick of it. That breaks up the rhythm of the game a great deal. Once you get into battle, of course, it returns to being hot and heavy. It seems like a minor quibble at first, but it can really take you out of the game sometimes.

Otherwise, *Battlefront II* is a rock solid title. It makes excellent use of its license, improves on the gameplay from the last go-round, and is extremely fun in multiplayer. It's definitely worth a try.

Rating : 4 of 5

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

Battlefront II is even more of a dream come true for the Star Wars faithful. With new character types, improved single player, and few problems, it will please any Star Wars fan.

FINAL SCORE : **4 of 5**

SOULCALIBUR III

Review by **Lynxara**

Publisher : Namco	**Genre(s) :** Beat 'Em Up
Developer : Namco	**Category :** 3D Fighting
Release Date : 10/25/2005	**# of players :** 1-2
Rating : TEEN; Suggestive Themes, Violence	

Soul Calibur 3 gives every impression of being Namco's intended climax for the long-running 3D fighting series, but it also introduces a lot of bold new ideas into the franchise. The arcade story mode is gone in favor of "Tales of the Sword" Mode, which tells the story of each individual character in a format that calls for the player to make choices. Decisions affect what path the character takes to get to their final confrontation with the final boss, Abyss. Unfortunately, some of these "decisions" involve hitting abrupt button prompts in the middle of cut-scenes, a feature the series hasn't incorporated since the original *Soul Edge*. It wasn't much fun then and it still isn't fun now. Otherwise, Tales of the Sword Mode is quite a bit more interesting than most fighting game story modes.

The real heart of the game is the Character Creation Mode and its companion Chronicles of the Sword Mode. In character creation you can pick one of the available fighting styles and then build a custom character around it by picking body styles, clothing, and accessories. You can create a fairly wide range of different character appearances with the editor once you've unlocked all the options, but it's only impressive given the console hardware it's running on. Chronicles of the Sword Mode blends character creation with RTS gameplay and classic *Soul Calibur* fighting action. Basically it's a mission-based campaign where you resolve conflicts between major forces using *Soul Calibur* battles and manage an army of fighters, complete with a hero of your own creation. A similar feature was part of the rarely seen arcade edition of *Soul Calibur II*, sans character design.

Despite obvious attempts to improve and tighten up the engine, *Soul Calibur III* is still a game where just about every character has easy access to

ground and air juggle combos that can decimate a helpless opponent inside of ten seconds. For some characters, spamming a single move can do the trick. This is frustrating in a game where you're expected to invest dozens of hours in play against the computer, if you want to unlock and purchase all the character creation options on top of the usual *Soul Calibur* art,

CREATE A SOUL

It's no *City of Heroes*, but you can bring a lot of different character looks to life with *Soul Calibur 3*'s Character Creation Mode. Here's how it works:

Step 1: Gender
Whether you choose Male or Female doesn't matter, but you've got to pick one or the other. (Sorry, no "hermaphrodite" option.)

Step 2: Job
"Job" is *SC3*'s way of determining your character's body type and what weapons they can use. Most Jobs let a character wield up to five different weapons types, while the Sword Master can use any of the game's forty-one weapon types. Each type has a unique set of fighting moves associated with it, but you can't edit the moves for any weapon in any way. While 24 of the weapon types reflect the fighting styles of the main *SC3* cast, there are 17 original styles exclusive to created characters. There are also 17 "Bonus" characters who each act as the archetype for a particular weapon fighting style. Long-time fans of the *Soul* franchise will want to keep an eye out for Hwang and Li Long, who make cameos as the Chinese Blade and Nunchaku archetype.

Step 3: Dress-up!
By tapping right and left on the D-Pad, you can access different submenus that let you edit your character's appearance right down to their underwear preferences. If you unlock and buy all the costume options from the in-game shops, you'll have hundreds of hairstyles and accessories to choose from. You can also take this opportunity to name your character, select his or her voice samples, and select his or her costume and appearance colors. This is the final and most time-consuming part of character creation—getting a look just right can take hours.

Step 4: Fight!
What comes next depends on what mode you're playing in. If you made your character at the beginning of a Chronicles of the Sword Mode game, then you'll go on to play in that Mode. If you made a character in the basic Character Creation 1P Mode, then save her or him to your memory card. From there, you can import your character into Versus or Soul Arena Mode.

stage, and character bonuses. Once you've figured out the major exploits grinding for unlocks gets dull quickly.

Probably the biggest disappointment about the game is the graphics. While it does run more smoothly and boasts more detail than *Calibur II*'s PS2 version, it's not a drastic improvement. Compared to the GameCube and XBox versions of *Calibur II*, *Soul Calibur III* actually looks worse. While the game as it stands makes excellent use of the PS2 hardware and offers a sweeping score in vibrant THX sound, it's just too easy to imagine the visual enhancements that a version on more powerful hardware could've offered.

All told, die-hard *Soul Calibur* fans will definitely want to pick up this latest installment, and most players will find it a basically enjoyable game full of novel features. However, Character Creation is hamstrung by the unlock requirements, and the gameplay lacks the depth for the intense replaying. Although the new game modes are really enjoyable, it's hard to shake the nagging sensation that different hardware or more work with the basic gameplay engine could've made *Soul Calibur III* an amazing game, instead of merely a pretty good one.
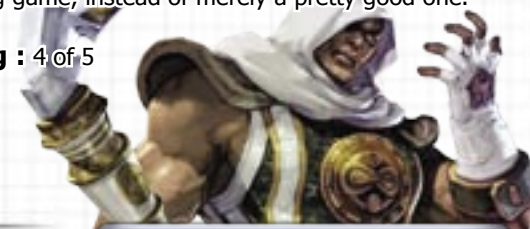
Rating : 4 of 5

2nd opinion by **Racewing** • **Alternate Rating :** 2.5 of 5

Outside of Create-A-Soul, the single-player just isn't fun. *SC3*'s fighting is more skilled than *SC2*'s… but so is *SC*'s, and I don't have to relearn my characters to play that. Pass.

FINAL SCORE :
3.25 of 5

Castlevania: Curse of Darkness

Review by **Sardius**

Publisher : Konami
Developer : KCET
Release Date : 11/1/2005
Rating : MATURE; Blood, Violence

Genre(s) : Action/Adventure
Category : Third-Person
# of players : 1

First, let's get this out of the way: *Castlevania: Curse of Darkness* is not *Symphony of the Night* in 3D. If it's *Symphony of the Night* you're after, you probably won't ever find it in a 3D *Castlevania* game. Accepting this fact is your first step toward being able to appreciate that *Curse of Darkness* is simply one of the best action games of this or any console generation.

Curse of Darkness takes place shortly after the events that unfolded in *Castlevania III* for the NES. You control Hector, a Devil Forgemaster formerly under the tutelage of Dracula out for revenge against Isaac, the man responsible for the death of Hector's beloved. Along the way Hector will form an unsteady alliance with *Castlevania III* star Trevor Belmont, and the pair will seek to rid the world of Dracula's curse.

As a Devil Forgemaster, Hector has a number of "Innocent Devils" (familiars) at his command. These helper characters assist Hector in many different ways while maintaining some degree of autonomy; players can either have the Devils hunt down enemies on their own or order them to perform special attacks that drain their life energy.

The new familiar system aside, *Curse of Darkness* plays very much like 2003's *Castlevania: Lament of Innocence*. This time, however, weaponry isn't simply limited to a whip; Hector is able to forge his own equipment using raw material dropped by defeated foes, resulting in player-created weapon and armor combinations that range from a school uniform and a baseball bat to chain mail and a battleaxe.

As excellent a game as *Lament of Innocence* was, it was a disappointment to many because of a few gameplay quirks that made the experience more frustrating than it should have been. Those who

played *Lament* will recall backtracking through dozens of long, identical hallways all too often in order to get to where they needed to go. The lack of camera control and a tacked-on character stats system also hindered the game.

Fortunately, *Curse of Darkness* addresses nearly every single complaint one could ever have about *Lament of Innocence*. An experience system is in place for both Hector and his familiars, *Lament*'s long empty hallways are nowhere to be found here, and teleport rooms have been added in order to speed travel between areas. Gameplay-wise, both camera control and enemy lock-on have been implemented in order to make controlling Hector a breeze.

Basically, *Curse of Darkness* is everything *Lament of Innocence* was, only without any of the annoying parts. The graphics maintain the beautiful detail found in *Lament*, the music is some of the best the series has ever had, and the action is refined to the point where smashing up skeletons is still damn fun even after playing the game for hours on end. It's no *Symphony of the Night*, of course—if that's what you're after, *Dawn of Sorrow* for the Nintendo DS will be more to your liking—but *Curse of Darkness* stands tall at the top of the action genre as one of the best.

Rating : 5 of 5

FINAL SCORE: 4.5 of 5

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

Though it's action-packed, the game gets you through its massive environments the same way a good RPG does: by giving you lots of stats to boost and plenty of enemies. If you're okay with that, you'll have a ball.

Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories

Review by **DJPubba**

Publisher : Rockstar
Developer : Rockstar Leeds
Release Date : 10/24/2005
Rating : MATURE; Language, Violence, Adult Themes

Genre(s) : Action
Category : GTA, Sandbox
# of players : 1-16

I don't think there are too many of you out there who disagree the PSP has been having a pretty dry run of quality softs since its launch. Oh sure, there have been a few exceptions like the *Hot Shot Golfs*, *Wipeouts* and *Burnouts*, but for every one of these, there's been three or four stinkers in the mix (there's no need to name names, we all know which ones they are). What I'm getting at is there has been no killer app, no hardware seller—nothing that has stood out and given me a reason to want to play my PSP for an extended period of time. Thanks to Rockstar, this has finally changed. *LCS* is pretty much everything you would expect from a *GTA* title.

This return trip to Liberty City (the pseudo New York setting last seen in *GTA III*) puts you in the role of Toni Cipriani, a wise guy who has been on the lamb for a few years cooling off, but is now back and looking to get in on the action. In standard GTA fashion, Tony will have to steal, murder, cheat and pretty much create copious amounts of violence, mayhem and wanton destruction just to move up the ranks. It's all in a day's work.

For those of you familiar with *GTA*, you will be right at home. Rockstar has managed to crunch the sprawling metropolis onto the PSP without loss of detail, crazy load times (one of the biggest achievements of all), or losing

any of the components that make *GTA*, *GTA*. In fact, they've given us plenty more, like the ability to stream your own music via the Memory Stick and Wi-Fi multiplayer modes. However, the game is definitely a mixed blessing, as it still retains the series' trademark "rough around the edges" look and feel, and even more so on the PSP due to the system's control options (or lack thereof). Minor and major flaws include the camera, which is consistently an issue (especially on foot); the targeting system, which has always been the franchise's biggest weak spot and is even more frustrating here; and an unbalanced difficulty level (some missions are ridiculously tough and made more so by the issues stated above).
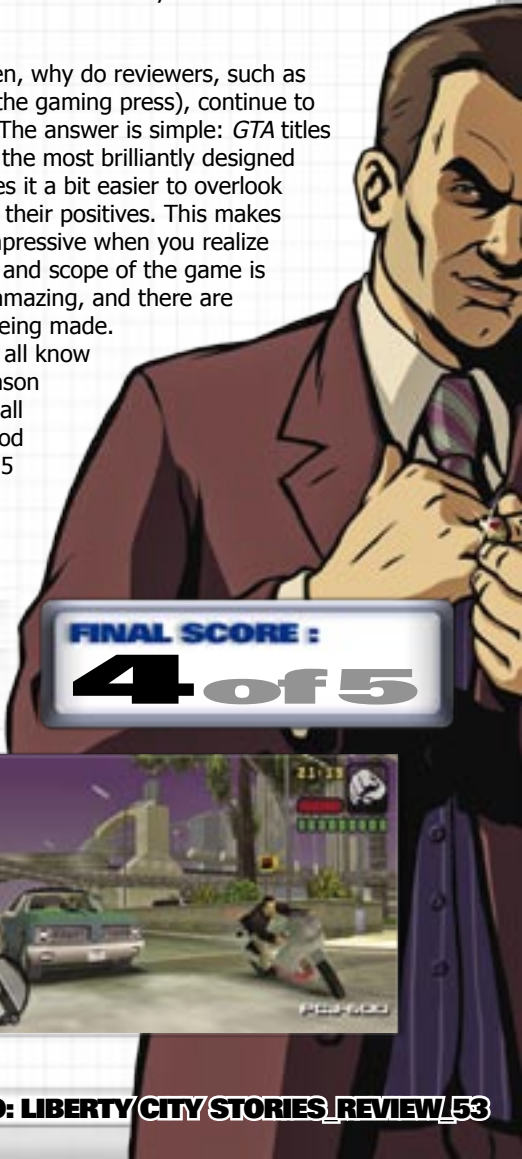
With so many issues then, why do reviewers, such as myself (and the rest of the gaming press), continue to rate this game so well? The answer is simple: *GTA* titles are still, by far, some of the most brilliantly designed games ever, which makes it a bit easier to overlook their flaws and dwell on their positives. This makes this game even more impressive when you realize it's on the PSP. The size and scope of the game is epic, the technology is amazing, and there are relatively no sacrifices being made. It's far from perfect, we all know this, but it's the only reason I am playing my PSP at all right now, and that's good enough reason to get a 5 from me.

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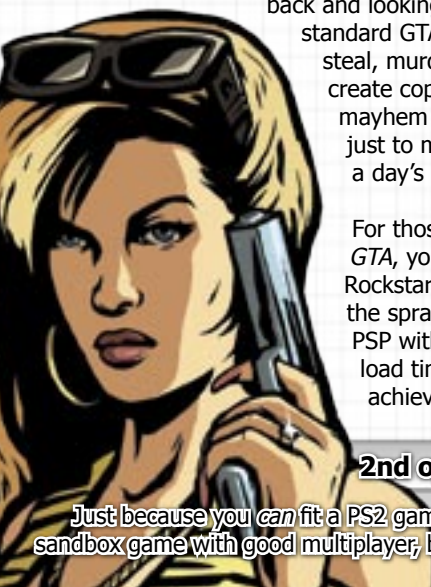
2nd opinion by Wanderer • **Alternate Rating :** 3 of 5

Just because you *can* fit a PS2 game onto the PSP doesn't mean you *should*! *LCS* is a fun sandbox game with good multiplayer, but the controls and missions leave a lot to be desired.

FINAL SCORE: 4 of 5

L.A. RUSH

Review by Racewing

Publisher : Midway   **Genre(s) :** Racing
Developer : Midway   **Category :** "Street"
Release Date : 10/11/2005   **# of players :** 1-2
Rating : TEEN; Language, Mild Violence

L.A. Rush shows up late to a lot of parties. We already went through a deluge of street racing games earlier this year. Urban life's been shamelessly glorified since *GTA: San Andreas* with no sign of stopping. *187: Ride or Die* was bad enough to damn near kill both genres all by itself.

You're a street racer who's made it big off of his winnings, and have a mansion, an empire, tons of girls. However, after crossing the wrong people with the wrong influences, you return from a vacation to find everything you own repossessed except for your first car. With no other recourse, you get a job—sorry. I mean, you use that first car and vow to rebuild what you lost doing the thing you're best at: illegal street racing, as well as finding out who did this to you.

What follows is *Midnight Club: Budget Edition*. Cruise the streets of Los Angeles (painstakingly recreated, to the game's credit), trick out your car, win races, stunt events, and cash, and eventually build both your skills and garage back to where they should have been (sometimes by finding your old rides, no less. Nice touch). Fair enough. You *can* make a good game by repeating an old formula—just look at *Midnight Club*.

However, there's something about *L.A. Rush* that's just... cumbersome. Perhaps it's the controls that work well enough until you stop driving in a straight line. Perhaps it's the sense of thrill that's lost when you accidentally nick another car and end up in a heap. Maybe it's the cutscenes that you're forced to watch, which detail each and every crash you make and last for five to ten seconds. Then again, it just might be how you're forced to roll your eyes when you see that this game has a police-summoning Wanted Star system straight out of the *GTA* series.

The game lacks simple options such as retrying races to avoid loading screens. The loose analog control makes the ability to use the less accurate D-Pad welcome. Finally, although this may be personal taste, the game's announcer annoys the living heck out of me.

The visuals are decent, but they're nothing to write home about, and the voice acting, while passable and thankfully less exaggerated than in most games of this type, sounds stilted, forced, and phoned-in on a lazy weekend. Trying to do anything, from racing to looking at the map screen, results in a loading screen and a long wait. The soundtrack is decent, but putting together a good collection of licensed music is hardly difficult.

This is yet another urban-themed street racer that you can easily pass without missing anything. Stick with your *Burnouts*, your *Midnight Clubs*, your *Need for Speeds*, or even your *F-Zeros*. *L.A. Rush* tries to mix a jumble of elements from several successful games into itself, and falls on its face in every attempt.

Rating : 1.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 1.5 of 5

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

L.A. Rush has *Tipsy* on the soundtrack and isn't any fun. Pass.

NEED FOR SPEED MOST WANTED

Review by Honestgamer

Publisher : Electronic Arts   **Genre(s) :** Racing
Developer : EA Canada   **Category :** Arcade
Release Date : 11/15/2005   **# of players :** 1
Rating : TEEN

If *Need for Speed: Most Wanted* was the only racing game on the market, we'd love it. It has competition, however, and that leaves it in a precarious position at the exact center of the market. Too loose in some places, too tight in others and too lifeless in many, the game only avoids the figurative trash heap because when it does things well, it *really* does them well.

The game takes place in a stereotypical New England town, which equals beautiful sunsets, autumn-tinged leaves, gray rivers, fog and architecture that groans under the weight of a century. Sunlight filters through lush greenery and birds take flight in the distance. The atmosphere is a definite improvement from recent titles filled with nothing but canals and rainy streets. You'll even see series staples like an orchard where stout trees extend to a ceiling of foliage, or snaking tunnels the color of rust.

Law enforcement officials are also back on the scene, motivated and ready to make arrests. You'll frequently find yourself racing along-side three or four vehicles, just gripping your controller and hoping for an off-ramp or a gas station or some other salvation from your pursuit. The police here are slow-witted, prone to ramming girders and oncoming traffic and even each other, but there are enough of them that you'll only just escape one, then immediately find another hot on your heels. Frustratingly, they often come out of nowhere to ram you in the side. Then you're sliding sideways, yanking at the control stick and wondering what happened to your sense of control.

Since that subject came up, understand that you can't use the D-pad to maneuver your vehicles. This leads to sometimes jerky controls. My wife perhaps put it best: "I don't like the stick. I hate the stick." It would have been nice if Electronic Arts had included an alternate control scheme that took such a common sentiment in mind. Alas, they did not. They also neglected to include any real sense of speed. Often, the only way you'll even know that you're going fast is the trail of mist that appears behind your car as its engine noise turns to a gentle hum. Then a police cruiser hits you from the side and you're wrestling with the controls again as that tepid rush you felt jumps out the window.

Not every mode features such distractions. You can often remove the police presence entirely. However, that can make for a dull experience. Despite numerous shortcuts and sharp turns, courses grow tedious if you don't have something to distract you from their occasionally redundant nature. Alternate game modes include a tollbooth mode (you race an unforgiving timer from one checkpoint to the next), challenge modes (one might ask you to elude the police for five minutes while another requires you to wrack up damage to city property) and a drag race feature, but these are short-lived diversions that quickly wear out their welcome.

In the end, you can't fault *Need for Speed: Most Wanted* for lack of effort. It mechanically goes through the motions. Even so, it sometimes loses its way in the middle of all the polish. Definitely give it a shot if you like the series. Just don't expect to be left breathless.

Rating : 3 of 5

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

With A.I. so brutal and unforgiving that I had flashbacks of *Driver 1*, this game isn't for the faint of heart. *NFS* vets, however, will appreciate the return to its roots.

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

BLITZ THE LEAGUE

Review by **Melf**

Karaoke Revolution PARTY

Review by **Sardius**

Publisher : Midway Games
Developer : Midway Games
Release Date : 10/17/2005
Rating : MATURE; (Language, Violence)

Genre(s) : Sports
Category : Football
# of players : 1-2 Offline and Online multiplayer

Publisher : Konami
Developer : Harmonix
Release Date : 11/8/2005
Rating : E10+; Mild Lyrics, Suggestive Themes

Genre(s) : Rhythm
Category : Singing
# of players : 1-8
Notes : EyeToy, Dancemats

Remember *NBA Jam*? Remember how awesome it was to play against a friend, yet how infuriatingly cheap the computer could be? Well, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Midway's newest arcade sports game harkens back to those days of over-the-top hits and no-holds-barred gameplay. Finally freed from the restrictive shackles of an NFL license, *Blitz: The League* is a new take on the sport that's sure to turn a few heads. It is the game of football unbound by strict and safety-laden regulations, and it relishes its newfound freedom.

Long story short, the season—story mode—is where all the action is, and as the owner of a last-place team, you've made some shady deals on a quest to reach the top. Customize everything from the logo to your very stadium; nothing is considered illegal, especially performance-enhancing chemicals, and you'll find that it's often better to "juice" an injured player for a play or two than to simply treat his injury normally. Hey, they're well-paid, aren't they? Let 'em walk it off! A few well-placed under-the-table wagers, and you're off!

I originally thought I'd be put off by the lack of real teams, players, and stadiums, but they weren't missed in the slightest. Great care has been taken to make the single-player campaign as deep and involved as possible, including a top-notch storyline. *Blitz* explores the dark side of professional football and to certain extent, glorifies it. This is not your father's football, and not since the days of Midway's own *High Impact Football* series has the game been so brutal. Late hits, sleazy tactics, and team physicians of questionable moral fiber are all part and

parcel of this new face of professional football.

While games of this type are definitely enjoyable with a friend or online, playing against the computer is something else entirely. The A.I. is notoriously cheap at times, often pulling off back-to-back return touchdowns on kick-offs or having its quarterback scramble for eighty yards with only ten seconds left in the game. I seriously recommend biting down on something hard when playing, so as to not grind your teeth into dust. Even building up your clash meter doesn't always mean success. Successful plays charge it, allowing you to perform devastating hits or evade multiple tackles with superhuman prowess. Just be sure to engage it before the computer does, as the A.I. has a nasty habit of negating its effects quite easily. Still, it's so nice to see a tackle leave the player with a nasty bone-shattering injury, which is shown via some grisly x-rays!

These may be my only complaints, as everything else has been done quite well. The gameplay is as tight as the presentation (shades of *Grand Theft Auto*!), which makes *Blitz* the ideal alternative for pigskin fans who don't want to buy *Madden* or are looking for some simple arcadey action.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

***Karaoke Revolution* as a series has been long content with its lack of innovation. Aside from adding Duet Mode in last year's *Karaoke Revolution Volume 3*, the core gameplay has remained unchanged since 2002's original release. With *Karaoke Revolution Party*, developer Harmonix at last tries to spice up their game with several new modes and features. Most of these additions are silly at best, and downright pointless at worst, but silly and pointless is exactly what a good party game needs to be. In this sense, *Karaoke Revolution Party* succeeds greatly.**

Party marks an attempt to turn the series into an entirely multiplayer affair, and does away with the previous versions' single-player Showtime Mode in the process. Lone vocalists can still get their solos on in certain modes, but most other aspects of the game require two or more players.

Many of the new modes are gimmicky as hell, but incredibly fun to play. Take the new "Sing and Dance" mode, for instance—connect a dancemat to your console, and the game will generate steps for you to dance to while you sing! This mode is enjoyable when set to "Easy" difficulty, but higher difficulty levels will challenge your stamina, leaving you barely able to wheeze out lyrics while stepping to the beat.

If you think dancing while you sing is going to make you look like an idiot, you can now see for yourself via Sony's EyeToy. Exclusive to the PS2 version of *Karaoke Revolution Party*, the EyeToy displays live video in the background of certain levels, and also plays into the new character creation mode. In addition to being able to create and play dress-up

with a bunch of default characters, you can now use the EyeToy to map your own face onto a polygonal body that will sing and dance in-game. The result is no less than terrifying, and not recommended for the faint of heart.
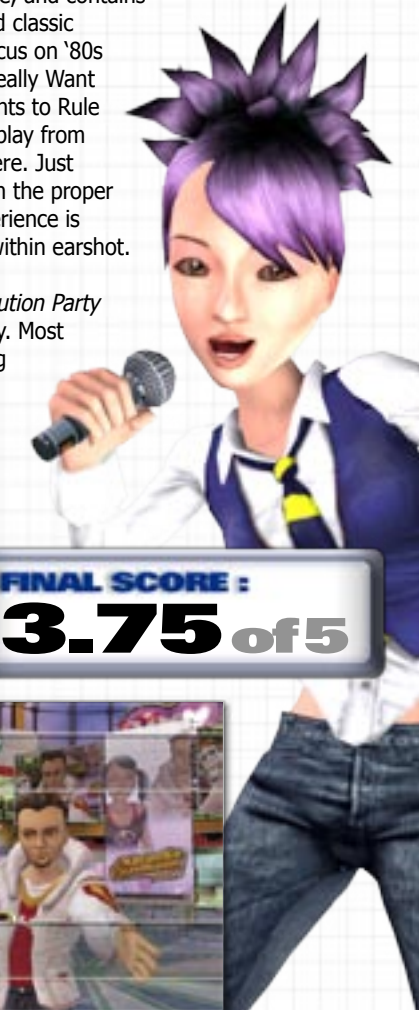
Also new to *Party* are competitive voice-driven minigames. The beach volleyball title is especially neat; two players play a *Pong*-like game where both paddles are controlled by each player's vocal pitch. It works very well, and is a simple but fun diversion from the main game.

If the new modes don't appeal to you, there's always good old fashioned singing to fall back on. *Party* features a songlist bigger than that of any previous *Karaoke Revolution* game, and contains a good mix of 50 modern hits and classic standards. There's a particular focus on '80s music, with tracks like "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?" and "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" bound to see a lot of play from all the twenty-somethings out there. Just don't try and sing "Take on Me" in the proper octave if you're a dude. The experience is painful for you and anyone else within earshot.

As its title implies, *Karaoke Revolution Party* is best enjoyed as a group activity. Most of the additions will mean nothing to a solo gamer, but if your party needs more people making fools of themselves, this game will definitely do the trick.

Rating : 4 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
2.75 of 5

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

A lot of potential is shamefully wasted here. It may sport a fresh new look and story mode, but underneath, it's just the same old *Blitz*.

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

Karaoke Revolution tries hard, but right now it's still less fun than plain old karaoke. Getting enough microphones to enjoy the multiplayer modes can be a real pain, too.

FINAL SCORE :
3.75 of 5

BATTLEFIELD 2
MODERN COMBAT

Review by **Honestgamer**

Publisher : Electronic Arts
Developer : DICE
Release Date : 10/25/2005
Rating : TEEN; Language, Violence

Genre(s) : First Person Shooter
Category : Online
# of players : 24

Most people will purchase *Battlefield 2: Modern Combat* **for the online play that our PC-owning friends have been gloating about for months. Up to 24 people can assault one another online as they represent each of four dominant nations. Action is fast and frantic. Much blood is shed for honor and country. If you have the right hardware, you owe it to yourself to give the mode a try. If you're going it alone, though, don't despair just yet; the game's 200 single-player missions also rock.**

Picture this scenario: you're on a map, one member of a squad that was dropped in to accomplish its mission. Objectives may include reconnaissance, escorts, sabotage or old-fashioned attacks. Whatever the case, you'll have friends along. They're not just eye candy, either. Most of the time, they actually behave intelligently. Suppose you jump aboard a vehicle. You'll generally be driving while the computer mans a gun turret, but you can press a button to switch roles. Either way, your partner is surprisingly self-sufficient. As a driver, he typically keeps moving so as to avoid becoming a stationary target (helpful when enemy choppers gang up on you), while an artillery-minded comrade hits enemy targets with decent frequency.

Because the AI is so proficient, maps are alive with activity. One later mission involves retaking a helipad that the enemy forces have secured. You begin by riding in a fast-moving convoy toward a fortress area, bust through the gates, then scramble for a tower so you can snipe people from a safe distance. As you dash through the courtyard, shrapnel flies and rumbling explosions rock the cobbled area as your commander shouts about the enemy troops that are flanking you. Bullet trails whiz by your face and there's scarcely a

moment where things slow even slightly. It feels very much like it does when you play online.

The obvious disadvantage here is that you can't shout commands to your buddies. There's no system to issue commands directly to your troops, either. However, this is remedied by a swapping feature. If you see a soldier you'd like to control, just press a button and the camera will fly to that person in a blur. Suddenly, you're in a new body, right where he was a split-second ago. Just like that, you could very well have a new set of weapons available. Early on, this is cool but confusing. Later, you'll be jumping all over the place, sniping from the rooftop one minute then zipping down to the middle of some crossfire the next. It's exhilarating and intuitive.

Even if you don't have a modem, *Battlefield 2: Modern Combat* is an amazing game. It looks and sounds gorgeous at all times, controls like a dream, and seldom slows to anything less than a blissful blur. Add in the single-player campaign and suddenly you have one of the best military shooters ever crafted. If games like this are your thing, you just found one of the very best. Buy it now.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

2nd opinion by 4thletter • **Alternate Rating :** 4.5 of 5

The hotswap is by far the coolest feature to hit an FPS since WASD. That, and the ability to snipe while parachuting, make *BF2:MC* at least fifteen kinds of awesome.

TONY HAWK'S
AMERICAN WASTELAND

Review by **Racewing**

Publisher : Activision
Developer : Neversoft
Release Date : 10/18/2005
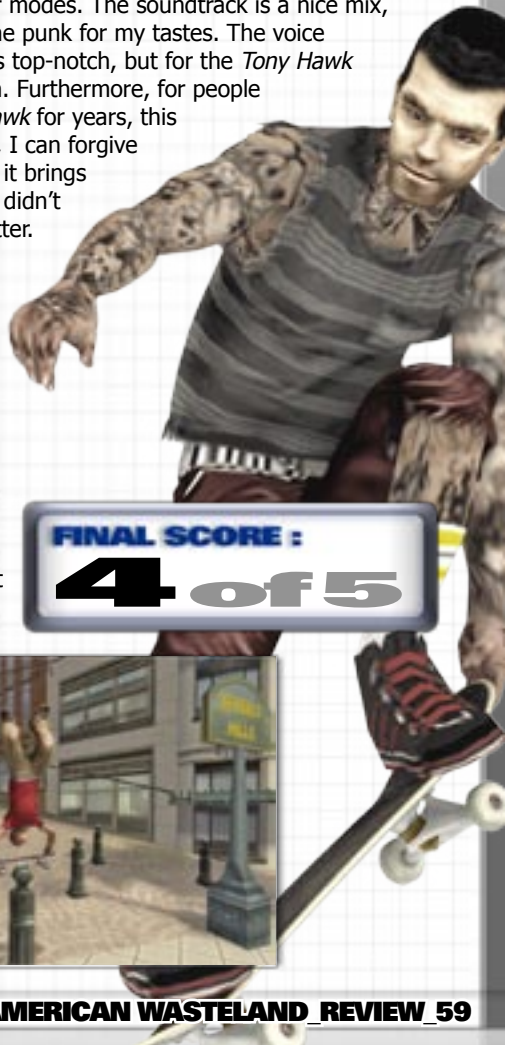**Rating :** TEEN; (Language, Violence)

Genre(s) : Sports
Category : Skateboarding, BMX
# of players : 1-2
(Online on PS2 and Xbox Live)

I don't know how they do it. Even after seven installments, Neversoft somehow ends up making every *Tony Hawk* **game released worth spending your money on.**

This year's edition allows you to free-roam a skater-ized version of Los Angeles, from Downtown and Beverly Hills to Hollywood, East L.A. and back again. There's no load time, aside from a millisecond's worth of pause when you move from one territory to another, and the fact that there are small skate-tunnels that serve to mask loading. But hey, they're combo-able, so no gripes from me here.

THAW is a melding of all of the good parts of past *Tony Hawk* games. You've got the tried-and-true gameplay from the *Pro Skater* games, both in the main story mode, and over in the game's Classic Mode as well. Classic Mode comes complete with all the old-school two-minute trick challenges, and is made up mostly of retooled maps from the older games.

From the *Underground* games, we finally once again have likeable characters, with none of that Bam Margera garbage from last year (incidentally, note to Neversoft: *give whoever created Mindy a promotion now*), a nice ground-up story, and challenges which strike a balance between destructive mayhem and skating skill. Your goal is to rise in the ranks from a lowly novice farm boy to a skating star, all while gathering things to make up the ultimate skate park along the way.

As with any *Hawk* game, there are a number of new moves—the most significant on the skater side of things is the Bert Slide, a

move that scrapes your board across the pavement for high-speed turns. It's very useful. The off-board system has also been given an overhaul; people are now more or less ninjas on foot. Double-jumping, wall-running, and shimmying over surfaces are the order of the day. Finally, as if that weren't enough, you can ditch your skateboard for a BMX bike for even more challenges and variety in gameplay. Unlike the crazy vehicles in *THUG2*, the bike actually controls well.

Customization still abounds. You can create your own skater, skate park, tricks, or graffiti. There's also online play and co-op Classic Mode. Unfortunately, you can't create your own skater from scratch for the story mode. You have to build off of five given templates, all male; I miss my *THUG* heroine. At least you can build your own skater for real in the other modes. The soundtrack is a nice mix, though a little heavy on the punk for my tastes. The voice acting for the characters is top-notch, but for the *Tony Hawk* games, it always has been. Furthermore, for people that have been playing *Hawk* for years, this game is far too easy—still, I can forgive the short learning curve if it brings in new players. The game didn't get worse, we just got better.

American Wasteland is the quintessential *Tony Hawk* game, perfect for newcomers and a gift to all but the most jaded old series fans. Buy it.

Rating : 4 of 5

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

Neversoft continues to show that new things can be done with this franchise without straying far from what made it fun in the first place. *Wasteland* has everything a skater could ever want, except for the band aids.

Suikoden Tactics

Review by **Lynxara**

Playing *Suikoden Tactics* is like eating a bowl of oatmeal lightly sprinkled with raisins. It's kind of satisfying, and it's got fun weird chewy bits, but ultimately it's still pretty forgettable.

The story is a prequel of sorts to *Suikoden IV*, chronicling the tale of an adventurer named Kyril and his guardians Andarc and Seneca. Kyril is investigating weapons called Rune Cannons in memory of his father, who was tragically turned into a bestial anthropomorphic fish-man by a Rune Cannon malfunction. No, seriously! *Suikoden Tactics* constantly confronts the player with bizarre, almost nonsensical plotlines like this. The characters can be compelling, but the game is often hurt by the fact that 95% of its core cast is returning from *Suikoden IV*. This is not bad in itself, but since *Tactics* assumes you've already beaten *Suikoden IV*, it doesn't bother to develop or even introduce most of the 100+ characters you recruit. You'd better hope you haven't forgotten anything.

Combat is very straightforward. Battles take place on a map grid, and characters can use items and magic Runes to give tiles on the map elemental properties that may help or hinder units. You can customize characters a bit with equipment, Runes, and Skill selections, but only a few of these decisions are really important. Characters can build Good Will with each other by talking at certain points during combat, which grants boons like stat boosts and the ability to perform ludicrously powerful Cooperative Attacks. There's a half-hearted attempt at implementing permanent death a la *Fire Emblem*, but only units that are irrelevant to the storyline can die when defeated. Story characters just withdraw, so there's no reason to use

anyone else. Battles themselves are simple and for the most part unchallenging.

The game offers a solid score and entirely decent English voice acting, but the graphics are disappointing. Despite supporting a 480p progressive scan mode, the game's poly count is ridiculously low given the system hardware. Static backgrounds feature some well-rendered details, but the cut-scene character models are so simple they lack even articulated hands or faces. Battle graphics are even more simplistic, each character represented by a tiny cel-shaded polygon blob that performs basic motions and creates a few simple light effects when attacking or using magic. Staring at such boring visuals for the dozens of hours it takes to play through the game is not easy.

Dull graphics and simple-minded gameplay don't give *Suikoden Tactics* much to recommend itself. It can be finished in less than 30 hours, with only a feeble excuse for a New Game+ mode tacked on after that. Die-hard *Suikoden IV* fans might enjoy this game just for the chance to revisit the world and its characters, but most other players should approach with extreme caution.

Rating : 2.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
2.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Honestgamer • **Alternate Rating :** 2.5 of 5

What really sets this one apart is the element-based battle system. If you master it early, battles will be less tedious. They're still tedious, however. The only reason to plow through them is the game's twisting plot.

SMACK DOWN! VS RAW 2006

Review by **Shoegazer**

It would appear that the team behind the *Smackdown* series has been playing a healthy dose of EA Sports games during the off-season.

I will say this loud and clear for all of the die-hard wrestling fans reading this: *SD! Vs. Raw 2006* is *the* closest to actual TV-style presentation ever seen! The in-game cut scenes are well-voiced (by all the real people), well-animated, and create new storylines previously unseen. The way the commentators and crowd noise play perfectly into it all, just as they would on TV, significantly blurs the lines of reality. When Triple H declares himself the best in the business, Jim Ross will offer rebuttal commentary such as "Oh please. Get over yourself." The crowds will actually boo and cheer at all the right times during an interview segment! The wrestler's audio portions are integrated to sound like actual promos, where as last year it was obvious that the voice acting was done in a sound booth, and then pasted in.

The familiar series controls have been slightly tweaked to keep the series fresh. The clean and dirty tactics from last year specifically have been given a solid upgrade and expanded upon greatly, and each now has its own move sets. If you enjoy tormenting the baby faces with kicks to the groin, and grinding your boot in their face, you'd better be very careful because the referees will actually issue you warnings for foul play and eventually disqualify you. Nice!

However, the grand daddy of new features is the new General Manager Mode, where you get to play as a virtual Vince McMahon and bring

either Raw or Smackdown to victory over the other. You'll have many decisions to make about choosing your match card, assigning title defenses, managing contracts and salaries, and even filling promo spots on the card to let two rivals continue their feud. The interface is a bit messy and could really use some consolidation, but you'll be able to look past it after you get used to it. A few more tweaks next year, and this mode will be even better.

Do you have a PSP? If you do, then you'd better check out the PSP version of the game coming in December. Uploading the data from your PSP game save will be the only way to unlock legend Jake "The Snake" Roberts in the PS2 version. As Carlito would say, "Now that... that's cool."

The main area of concern with *SD! Vs. Raw 2006* is its length. Obviously this game is meant to be played through several times to see everything, but even still, where's the excitement in forging your legacy if you get your big Wrestlemania main event shot after just a few hours of play? The pacing definitely needs some improvement. I'm going to throw out a suggestion to Yukes for next year: spend time checking out *Madden 06's* NFL Superstar mode, and then let your imagination run wild with how that kind of mode would work within the WWE setting.

Rating : 4 of 5
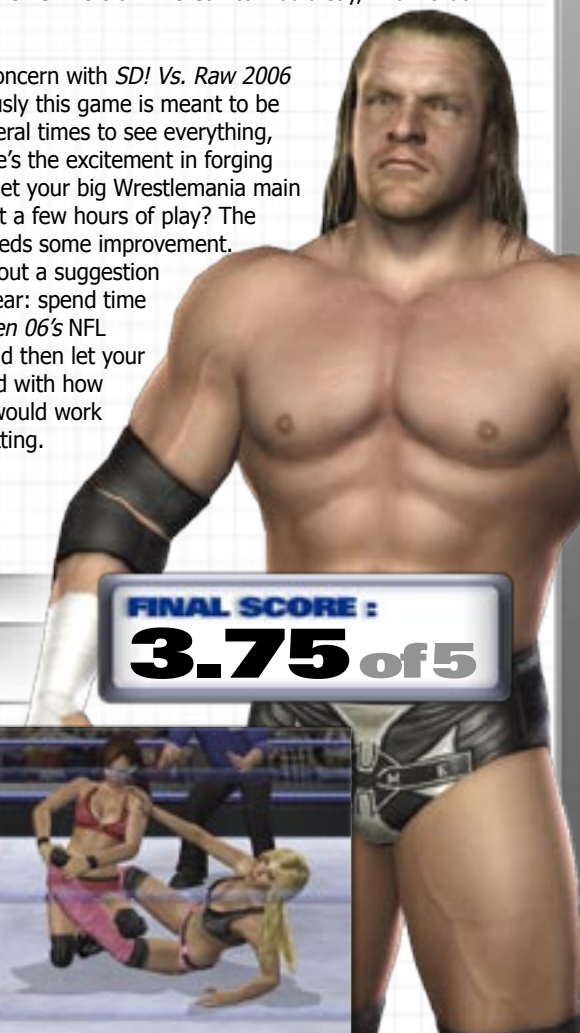
2nd opinion by 4thletter • **Alternate Rating :** 3.5 of 5

SD! Vs. Raw 2006 is a fun game with a quality story mode. It's well worth checking out.

FINAL SCORE :
3.75 of 5

PLATFORM GAMECUBE

PLATFORM PlayStation 2 XBOX

VIEWTIFUL JOE RED HOT RUMBLE

Review by **Shoegazer**

WITHOUT WARNING

Review by **4thletter**

Publisher : Capcom
Developer : Capcom Production Studio 1/Clover Studios
Release Date : 11/8/2005
Rating : TEEN; Comic Violence, Suggestive Themes

Genre(s) : Fighting
Category : 2D
# of players : 1-4

Publisher : Capcom
Developer : Circle Studio
Release Date : 11/1/2005
Rating : MATURE; Blood, Language, Violence

Genre(s) : Third-Person Shooter
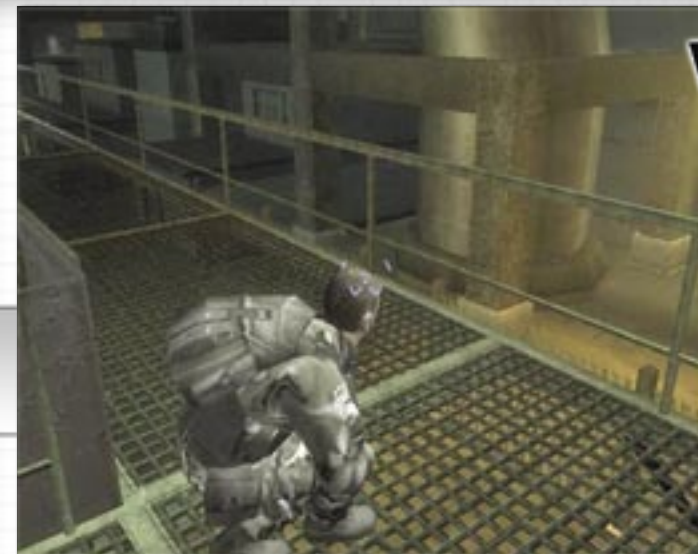**Category :** Generic
# of players : 1

It's definitely that time of year again, when all of the elite publishers of the gaming world finally begin to release updates to their biggest franchises in a battle for your hard-earned dollars. Capcom is bringing back *Viewtiful Joe* for a third go-around, but not in the traditional sense that you've come to expect from the super-stylish series. Do you think you know *Joe*? Then *Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble* is about to take you to school.

Even from just the anime intro movie, there are no doubts that what you're about to experience is slightly left of center from what you're used to. Jam-packed with zany characters and goofy dialog, Red Hot Rumble almost has something of a campy aesthetic to it, and that's even before you ever press the start button! The presentation makes it difficult to put a finger on exactly which age demographic they're targeting since the anime and writing style are very reminiscent of a certain other family-friendly Capcom icon (HINT: he's blue), but there's also some slightly suggestive themes mixed in here as well. Just a friendly warning to the more sensitive parent readers: the "T" on the box is not just for the punching and kicking.

Red Hot Rumble does right by making itself a very accessible game to any skill and/or patience level. Choose a character, select a game mode, pick a stage and you're off. There is even an option to skip the story portions in-between stages if you aren't interested in that sort of thing, and just want the carnage to continue.

The combat system is really going to be the make-or-break point for curiosity-piqued gamers. While the presentation obviously seems to be tailored towards a niche audience, the control style is somewhat of a huge question mark here. *RHR's* combat features a good

balance of both strategy and simplicity, much like the mighty *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, but then dumbs it down even more. The end result is a lot like putting *Tekken* in front of a die-hard *Virtua Fighter* fan.

The game's very sleek anime-style graphics have been retained from the previous Joe games, and lend themselves well to the frantic pace of the chaotic battles. Despite crazy amounts of things happening on-screen all at once, you'll never once see even a hint of slow down. *Joe* veterans will also appreciate the inclusion of new characters from the game and anime series, plus the huge helping of unlockable characters and various other goodies.

Since the dawning of the Nintendo GameCube, *Super Smash Bros. Melee* has sat at the top of multiplayer must-have games without even so much as a challenger to its throne. *Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble* is definitely a worthy alternative, but it's not going to convert any *Melee* fans. *RHR* has got style in spades, and the VFX Battle mini-games and stage-ending boss fights are great new additions to the genre. However, the bottom line is simply that *Red Hot Rumble* is more like an entry-level version of *Power Stone* for newbies.

Rating : 3 of 5

Okay. *Without Warning*. I've read the press releases. I know that it's supposed to integrate a kind of simultaneous time system, where you play the game from various perspectives that all eventually intersect in some way or another. I know that you're going to be fighting terrorists even as you try and rescue civilians from peril. How well did it turn out, you ask?

Well, *Without Warning* is a perfectly competent, arcade-style third person shooter. There's the standard button that alternates between walking and duck-walking, and you can even take cover behind (destructible) objects. The problem is that *Without Warning* is extraordinarily lacking in the "compelling reasons to play" department. Each character you play has a specialty and one kind of gun. You can pick up health and ammo packs along the way to refill your ammo, but you're given such a generous amount that you don't really have to worry about running out. Being able to raise your gun without firing is a nice touch, but ultimately pointless. You can't make enemy combatants surrender, or frighten them, or do the normal things people do when they see raised guns. The lock-on system is very nice, up to and until the point where you kill the man you were firing upon. Then, your reticle just kind of sits there until you sight and re-lock-on to another enemy. Being able to toggle the lock-on, rather than simply holding the key, would've been a better idea.

The enemy AI is annoying at best and prescient at worst. You can

snipe a terrorist from far away, behind cover, and in the dark, and his buddies will *always* know exactly where to go to find you and kill you. Some of the early stages are disturbingly like shooting monkeys in a barrel: you're going to hit something even if you fire with your eyes closed. The game is also pretty shameless about spawning random enemies behind you after you complete certain tasks. This is more annoying than anything, honestly.

When you think hard about *Without Warning*'s features, you realize that it's a clear case of "One step forward, two steps back." Every good idea is hampered by two bad ones. Multiple perspectives in a shooter is a great idea, but here you're stuck with paper-thin archetypes. Insertion into a hostage situation is a great idea, but you're stuck fighting palette swaps and doing irritating minigames to unlock doors. Do you see where I'm going with this?

Do you remember *Contra*? The whole point of the game was to show off and nail the high score. *Contra* used competition to hide the fact that it was an absolutely repetitive, one-note game, though through no fault of its own. *Contra* gets a bye because videogames were baby-faced back then. This is the 21st century now. What's *Without Warning*'s excuse?

Rating : 2 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
2.75 of 5

2nd opinion by Syriel • **Alternate Rating :** 2.5 of 5

Red Hot Rumble shows a lot of promise but basic controls and poor UI issues (no player indicator during Battle Mode) relegates it to pure button masher status.

2nd opinion by Sardius • **Alternate Rating :** 1 of 5

Without warning, this game sneaks up on you and sucks in every way possible. Horrible controls and frustrating gameplay make even a rental pointless. Avoid.
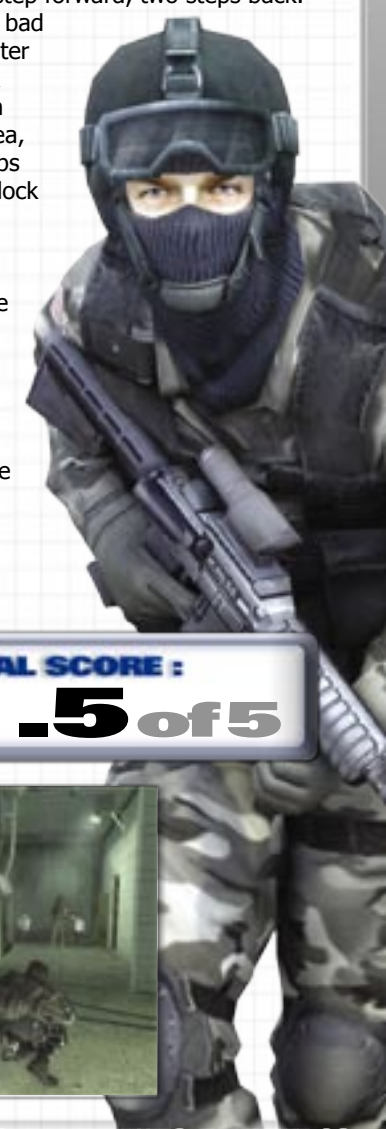
FINAL SCORE :
1.5 of 5

MYST V
END OF AGES
Review by **KouAidou**

Publisher : Ubisoft	**Genre(s) :** Adventure
Developer : Cyan Worlds	**Category :** Fantasy
Release Date : 9/20/2005	**# of players :** 1
Rating : EVERYONE	

The games in the *Myst* series have offered their challenges (and frustrations) to an entire generation of PC gamers. *Myst V: End of Ages* finally brings the franchise to a close, giving players one last taste of the hair-pulling puzzles and breathtaking sights that they've come to expect from the *Myst* name.

End of Ages brings you back into the *Myst* world (though not to Myst itself) for the last time. You're on the tracks of Atrus's daughter Yeesha, who journeyed into the underground city of D'ni to try to restore what her family destroyed. The events of her past were covered in the previous games, but the way they are presented in *End of Ages* seems designed to be accessible to newcomers, presenting them as yet another mystery rather than something the player should have already known.

The gameplay has always been one of the distinctive elements of the *Myst* series, and final installment doesn't mess with the system. Unlike most adventure games, *Myst* isolates you, and leaves you to your own powers of observation and common sense to figure out how and when to use the various alien mechanisms you encounter on your journey. *End of Ages* does add a twist into the system with the addition of the "slates," which can be written on freely to communicate with the mysterious Bahro creatures who inhabit the world. The question of how to use the slates and what purpose they serve, though, is left up to the player to determine.

Helping along the way is Esher, a D'ni ghost who gives you information on the various realms you will visit. Hidden in his speeches are clues to how to solve certain puzzles, but understanding these clues—sometimes, even realizing that he's given them to you—is harder than a cryptic crossword.

The result is something of a mixed bag in terms of difficulty. Some solutions can be easily reached with a bit of clicking, while others seem entirely arbitrary, making it difficult to imagine that *any* application of common sense could lead you to the solution the game expects. Fortunately, some puzzles are just right, and there's a real feeling of elation when careful observation and logical thought bring you to a tricky solution all on your own.

The graphics are, of course, absolutely gorgeous. All of the worlds you visit are brilliantly designed, from a great hall spiraling into the depths of the earth to an observatory that paints a stunning view of an alien cosmos. It's almost worth buying just to try and see everything, but whether you feel that the puzzles you need to solve to proceed are an amplification of the experience or just an annoying hindrance is—like so many other things in the world of Myst—entirely up to you.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
3.5 of 5

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

I've been spoiled by the easy "puzzles" found in most other modern adventure games. I had a lot more hair before I started playing *Myst V,* but the art direction almost makes it worth it.
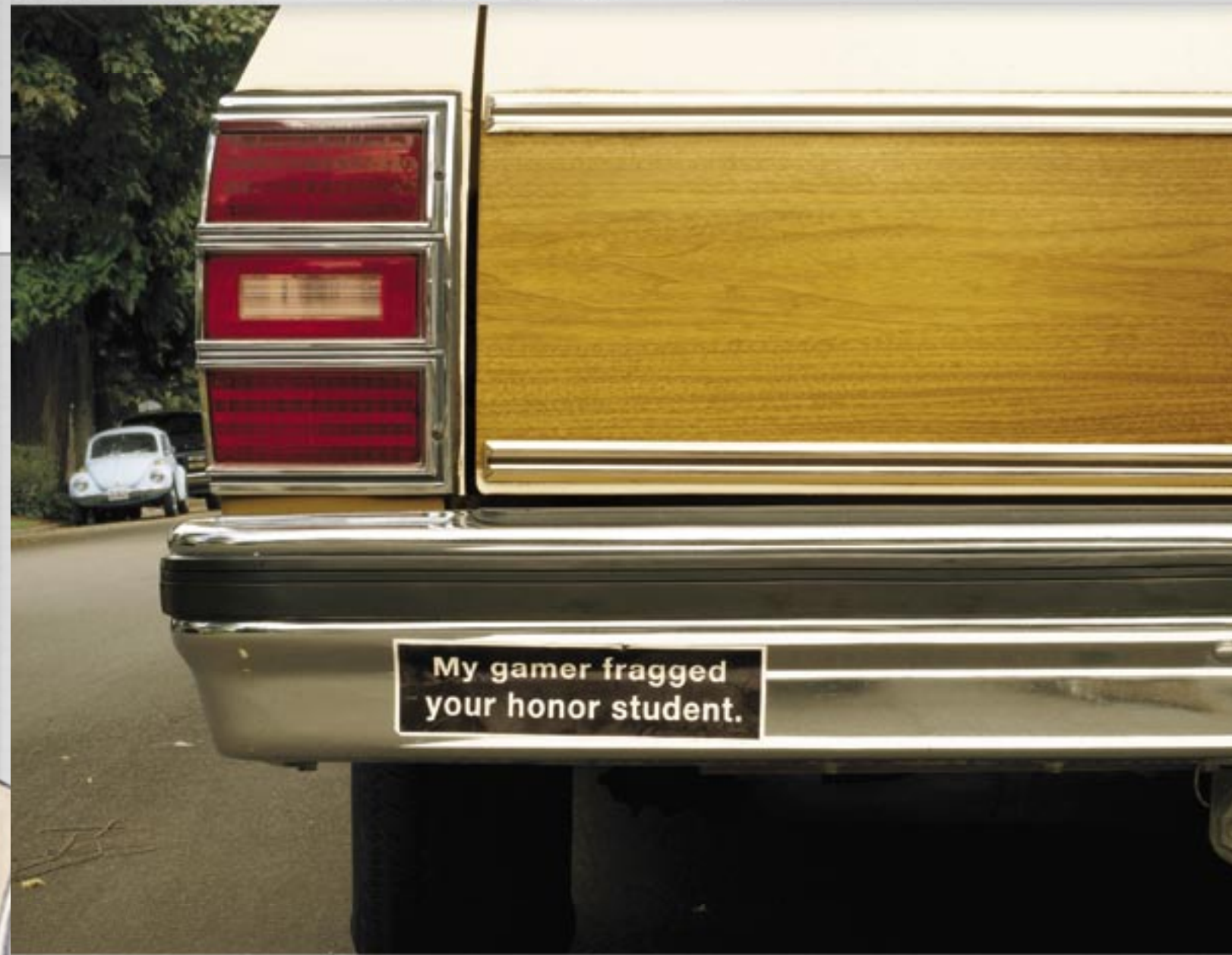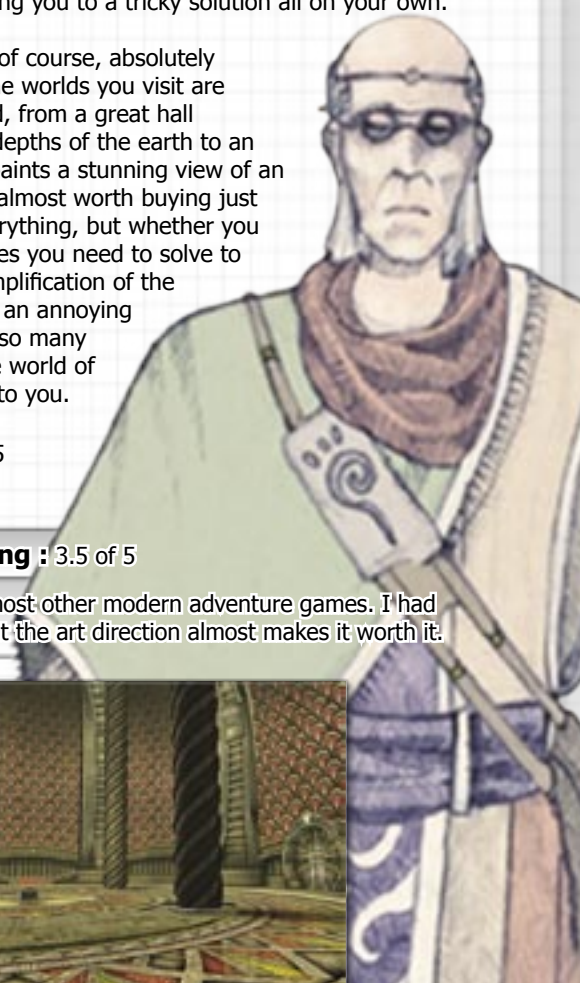
STUBBIES

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

Review by Wanderer

Publisher : SCEI • **Developer :** SCEI • **Release :** 10/18/05
Rating : TEEN; Fantasy Violence • **Genre(s) :** Adventure
Players : 1 • **Platform(s) :** PlayStation 2

Despite some of you refusing to buy *Ico*, we've gotten a sort of spiritual sequel in *Shadow of the Colossus*, one of the most purely beautiful and surreal games on the PlayStation 2. Playing it's like playing some kind of interactive fairy tale, where you must track down and slay a series of enormous giants. A little bit of frustration can sink in, but everyone—and I mean *everyone*, you get over here and you play this—should check *Shadow* out. There's nothing quite like it.

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

LUNAR DRAGON SONG

Review by James

Publisher : Ubisoft • **Developer :** Japan Art Media
Release : 9/28/05 • **Rating :** E10+ • **Genre(s) :** RPG
Players : 1-2 • **Platform(s) :** Nintendo DS

Lunar: Dragon Song's heart is in the right place but its brain has been lobotomized. The semi-tactical battle system of old has been replaced with a system that involves hitting the attack button, hoping that the AI will choose the appropriate monster to target, and wishing for more control over the characters. The exciting new "feature" of losing hit points while running is equally lame, but it *is* *Lunar*, and the story and characters manage to save it from being a total waste. Barely.

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

MAGNA CARTA

Review by Wanderer

Publisher : Atlus • **Developer :** SoftMax • **Release :** 11/14/05
Rating : TEEN; Fantasy Violence, Language, Suggestive Themes
Genre(s) : RPG • **Players :** 1 • **Platform(s) :** PlayStation 2

If I had to guess, *Magna Carta* is going to have a small group of faithful, hardcore fans who swear by it, and the rest of the world will pretend it doesn't exist. It boasts a complex combat system with plenty of options, but it's difficult to master. The steep learning curve and the bizarre character design (I don't care what his voice sounds like; Calintz is a girl) push *Magna Carta's* score down a bit. It's definitely something different.

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

RPG Maker 3

Review by Kou Aidou
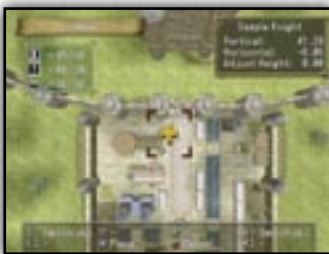
Publisher : Agetec, Inc • **Developer :** Enterbrain • **Release :** 9/21/05
Rating : E10+ • **Genre(s) :** RPG • **Players :** 1
Platform(s) : PlayStation 2

Like its predecessors, *RPG Maker 3* gives you the tools to create and play your very own RPG. There's a palette of lovely sprites, portraits, and animations available to you in a range of styles. Unfortunately, there's little in the way of real customization available, so no matter what you do, your game will always look fairly generic. The platform is an issue, too, as trying to enter the amount of text you'll need with the PS2 controller gets old fast, and saved games take up a lot of room. *RPG Maker 3* is worth looking into if you don't mind telling a story within its tight restrictions, but even then, you'll need a lot of patience (or expensive peripherals) to follow through.

FINAL SCORE : 2.5 of 5

PHOENIX WRIGHT Ace Attorney

Review by Ashura

Publisher : Capcom • **Developer :** Capcom • **Release :** 10/10/05
Rating : TEEN • **Genre(s) :** Graphical Text Adventure • **Players :** 1
Platform(s) : Nintendo DS

Phoenix Wright follows the cases of a rookie attorney of the same name. Handling cases that go way over his head, Phoenix must turn them around by using evidence and pressing testimony. The interface is simple; everything is on the touch screen, from investigation to questioning witnesses. Unlike the dry *Law & Order* games, a hilarious storyline and quirky characters are what make *Phoenix Wright* work. There's nothing to object to in this game.

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

METROID PRIME PINBALL

Review by Roger Danish

Publisher : Nintendo • **Developer :** Fuse • **Release :** 10/25/05
Rating : EVERYONE • **Genre(s) :** Pinball • **Players :** 1-2
Platform(s) : Nintendo DS

Nintendo's *Metroid Prime Pinball* is a refreshing surprise. As a big fan of the old-school TG16 *Alien Crush* and *Devil's Crush* pinball games, I was completely hooked. The graphics are sharp and detailed, the gameplay is a perfect balance of being easy to pick up yet difficult to master, and the multiple boards, bonuses and various modes ensure you won't get bored after a few plays. While it may seem like a cheap license tie-in, *Metroid Prime Pinball* is the perfect handheld game.

FINAL SCORE : 5 of 5

Dig Dug Digging Strike

Review by Syriel

Publisher : Namco • **Developer :** Namco • **Release :** 10/18/05
Rating : EVERYONE • **Genre(s) :** Arcade • **Players :** 1-2
Platform(s) : Nintendo DS

In this update of the classic arcade game, players have to battle underground enemies as well as worry about monsters wandering the surface. Normal enemies can simply be inflated until they blow up, but larger bosses must be defeated by forcing them into the ocean. Collecting items helps you unlock special weapons, which come in handy when fighting in the later levels, and certain power-ups start mini-games that have you flying a chopper or racing around in a homage to *Rally-X*. Ultimately, *Dig Dug* is a great way to waste an hour or so, but the repetitive gameplay grows tiresome after awhile. Pick it up for some retro fun, but don't expect a deep gaming experience.

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

LOST in BLUE

Review by John Doenut

Publisher : Konami • **Developer :** Konami • **Release :** 9/27/05
Rating : E10+; Mild Violence • **Genre(s) :** RPG • **Players :** 1
Platform(s) : Nintendo DS

What would you do if you were stranded on a desert island? That's the basic premise behind Konami's newest action-RPG. You'll have to survive, *Robinson Crusoe* style as you hunt, fish and explore your way around the island, attempting to find a way home. Fortunately, you're not alone. By combining your talents with another survivor, you can accomplish tasks that couldn't be done solo. *Lost in Blue* makes good use of the DS's unique features, requiring you to do things such as "cooking" food by putting a lid on your pot and searching through the sand with your stylus. At times the pace is a bit sluggish, but it's never dull. Replay value is solid, as there are two hidden modes that must be unlocked.

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

SSX on tour

Review by JPeeples

Publisher : EA Big • **Developer :** EA Big • **Release :** 9/19/05
Rating : E10+ • **Genre(s) :** Sports • **Players :** 2
Platform(s) : Xbox

EA BIG is back with the fourth installment in the *SSX* series. As should be expected given its pedigree, the game provides a lot of fast, trick-laden fun. New to this entry are optional skis, allowing a new way to play, but also causing the otherwise smooth controls to suffer. The usually poor EA TRAX are surprisingly enjoyable here. Another improvement comes from the removal of *SSX 3*'s poor online elements, shifting the focus on the offline modes. There isn't much new here, but what's here has been vastly improved. Long-time fans should pick this up, while newbies should at least give it a rental.

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 06

Review by Shoegazer

Publisher : Electronic Arts • **Developer :** Electronic Arts
Release : 9/20/05 • **Rating :** EVERYONE • **Genre(s) :** Sports
Players : 1-4 • **Platform(s) :** PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

The *Tiger Woods* team at EA has long subscribed to the simple formula of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." That strategy has helped the series continue to stay ahead of the pack, and *Tiger Woods 06* is certainly no different. Everything that you've come to love about the series is back in tip-top shape, and there are just enough improvements to justify upgrading to this year's version. The new Rivals Mode is quirky but fun and the new dual-analog shot-shaping controls are a cinch to get the hang of. Unfortunately, it's the game's relative ease that will keep it from exceeding your expectations. Once you've conquered the controls, you can pretty much mail in the rest of the game.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

GRETZKY NHL 06

Review by Shoegazer

Publisher : Sony Computer Entertainment • **Developer :** Page 44 Studios
Release : 10/11/05 • **Rating :** E10+; Violence • **Genre(s) :** Sports
Players : 1-8 (w/Multitap); Online • **Platform(s) :** PlayStation 2

It's amazing that Sony continues to release a new hockey game each year, despite how they get progressively worse. *Gretzky NHL 06* certainly boasts many new features to the series, but they're nothing that EA and 2K Sports haven't already done, and done better. The only exception is the laughable new Wayne vs. Wayne mode which tries valiantly to recreate arcade-style hockey, but will ultimately leave hockey game purists feeling downright abused. The graphics are outdated, and the controls are so janky that you'll wonder if this game is really finished. Sadly, it is. The game's stellar presentation has been completely wasted. With two other solid choices for hockey available, this one is surely not *The Great One*. It just has his name on the box.

FINAL SCORE : 1.5 of 5

NBA LIVE 06

Review by 4thletter

Publisher : Electronic Arts Sports • **Developer :** EA Canada
Release : 9/26/05 • **Rating :** EVERYONE • **Genre(s) :** Sports
Players : 2 • **Platform(s) :** GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox

Something's lacking, here. *Live 06* is perfectly fine on the surface. The menus are sharp. The graphics are good, though not the best. The new Superstar control is nicely handled, if a bit vague in practical use, and the controls are crisp. The problem comes from the sometimes awkward animations. It's off-putting to see a Center slide to a proper dunk position, pause, then dunk. It's even worse to try to move around someone and stop as if you've hit a brick wall. A few glaringly obvious framerate problems (notably when possessions change) aren't helping the case any, either. The quality announcers help the game, but not by much. As-is, it's just nothing special.

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

SOCOM 3 U.S. NAVY SEALS

Review by 4thletter

Publisher : SCEA • **Developer :** Zipper Interactive • **Release :** 10/11/05
Rating : MATURE; Blood, Violence • **Genre(s) :** Third-person Shooter • **Players :** 1; 2-32 online • **Platform(s) :** PlayStation 2

The *SOCOM* series, like the PS2 itself, is showing its age. Gameplay-wise, it's about what you'd expect from the series. The vehicles are fun to tool around in and fairly intuitive. Your crew watches your back in combat situations and follows your orders to the letter. In that sense, *SOCOM 3* is solid. The graphics are where it falls apart. The foliage just doesn't work. There's nothing that takes you out of a game faster than trying to walk past a tree, a bush, or a rock and getting caught on its invisible hitbox. It happens more often than you'd expect, and therefore much more often than is forgiveable.

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

BROTHERS IN ARMS: EARNED IN BLOOD

Review by James

Publisher : Ubisoft • **Developer :** Gearbox Software • **Release :** 10/4/05
Rating : MATURE; Violence, Language • **Genre(s) :** First-person Shooter
Players : 1-4 • **Platform(s) :** PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood is a deep, rewarding FPS for those willing to take the time to learn what's needed for victory. In addition to the standard guns and grenades of the WWII era, it's vital to properly command your squads to suppress, flank, and overrun the enemy. Taking the time to aim when firing, good usage of the Situational Awareness 3D map, and intelligent tactics are the only things keeping you from being just another D-Day casualty in the French countryside.

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

Tom Clancy's RAINBOW SIX LOCKDOWN

Review by Shoegazer

Publisher : Ubi Soft • **Developer :** Red Storm Ent./Ubi Soft Montreal
Release : 9/6/05 • **Rating :** MATURE; Blood, Language, Violence
Genre(s) : Action • **Players :** 1; 1-16 w/PS2 Online & Xbox Live
Platform(s) : GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox

Lockdown drops you in exactly where the last *Rainbow Six* title left off: right in the thick of a chaotic firefight, armed to the gills with your other squad members in the war against terrorism. It'll get your adrenaline pumping at first, but soon, it will be difficult to shake that "been-there-done-that" feeling. In fact, most of the content within *Lockdown* fails to impress because it was built using technology that was cutting edge over two years ago. The multiplayer option is the main reason to pick this one up because of the robust online career mode. That's not to say that the single player campaign here isn't enjoyable, but note that the game is not called *Rainbow Six 4* for a reason.

FINAL SCORE : 2.5 of 5

SNIPER ELITE

Review by Melf

Publisher : Namco • **Developer :** Rebellion • **Release :** 10/18/05
Rating : MATURE; Blood & Gore, Intense Violence
Genre(s) : Action • **Players :** 1 • **Platform(s) :** PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

World War II games are practically a genre unto themselves, and it's nice that Rebellion has done something different, even if it does have a few flaws, most notably the difficulty. Sniping Soviet baddies from afar is mad fun, but the gameplay can sometimes be as cold and unforgiving as Moscow in winter. Enemies, which have obviously been trained at the *Medal of Honor* School of Marksmanship, are way too good under even the worst of conditions. This means you'll be reloading saves often. Even so, it's still great fun to knock the grey matter out of someone, and *Sniper Elite* is a refreshing and new twist on a quickly tiring subgenre.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

Publisher : 2K Games • **Developer :** Croteam • **Release :** 10/11/05
Rating : MATURE; Blood and Gore, Violence • **Genre(s) :** Shooter
Players : 1 **Platform(s) :** Xbox, PC

Review by **Racewing**

If you like your shooters charged with adrenaline, comedy, and nothing else, *Serious Sam 2* is for you. Just be warned—if you've been weaned on the latest, greatest normal-mapped million-polygon visual masterpieces, you'll be jolted back to 2003 faster than you can say "Duke *Who*?" Sam's back with twice the humor, twice the budget, twice the weaponry, twice the onscreen baddies, and a Cortana ripoff, but it's not twice the fun; it's one-and-a-half times at best. The controls are spotty, especially on the Xbox, but once you find out that having your own gun turret can actually *lower* your chances of survival, the game's merits suddenly shine through. *Sam 2* gets its points for its laughs and great action. Everything else is best left unmentioned.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

Publisher : Ubisoft Montreal • **Developer :** Ubisoft • **Release :** 9/30/05
Rating : MATURE • **Genre(s) :** First-Person Shooter • **Players :** 1-4
Platform(s) : Xbox

Review by **JPeeples**

Jack Carver returns in this sequel to the 2004 PC smash. Built from the ground up for the Xbox, *Instincts* is one of the most beautiful, immersive, and loading-free games on the platform. The singleplayer campaign is equal parts challenging and frustrating. The Xbox Live modes are few in number, but are all executed well, and make great use of the map editor. If you have a serious jones for FPSes, you'll love *Instincts*. It provides one of the most intense atmospheres yet, and keeps you hooked to the screen with action. Outside of a few slight problems with the vehicles, this is a resounding success. Both long-time FPS junkies and new fans to the genre will find something to enjoy here.

FINAL SCORE : 4.5 of 5

Publisher : Capcom • **Developer :** Digital Eclipse • **Release :** 9/27/05
Rating : TEEN; Violence • **Genre(s) :** Compilation • **Players :** 2
Platform(s) : PlayStation 2, Xbox

Review by **Wanderer**

The cynical among you will note that Capcom's making us pay for *Street Fighter II* again, but there are at least four must-have games on this collection. *1943*, a proper arcade version of *Final Fight, SF2 Hyper Fighting*, or *Forgotten Worlds* would be worth the purchase by themselves. In a $20 package with a host of other arcade classics, they're a steal.

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

Publisher : Nintendo • **Developer :** Kuju Entertainment
Release : 9/19/05 • **Rating :** TEEN; Violence • **Genre(s) :** Action
Players : 1 • **Platform(s) :** GameCube

Review by **Shoegazer**

To truly enjoy *Battalion Wars*, you must first forget everything you know about its strategy-RPG cousin, *Advance Wars*. While you will notice some similarities, the gameplay experience could not be more different. There are advantages in taking the time to properly manage your strategies, but it's usually just as effective to mindlessly "Rambo" your way through each mission. Though it's rated "T," *Wars* never seems to stop holding your hand, and it's tiresome. The controls are more complex than they should be, not to mention unresponsive, and the lock-on function is completely broken. The game's saving grace is in its addictive variety of gameplay and mission objectives. Without *Zelda* this year, this is one of the better alternatives to keep you gaming through the winter season.

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

Publisher : Activision • **Developer :** Treyarch • **Release :** 9/21/05
Rating : TEEN; Blood, Suggestive Themes, Violence • **Genre(s) :** Action/Adventure • **Players :** 1 • **Platform(s) :** GameCube, PS2, Xbox

Review by **Wanderer**

You'd have to search for a long time to find a bigger Spider-Man fan than me, and with Brian Michael Bendis providing the script, this game seemed like a sure thing. It isn't. As long as you're just swinging around the city, *Ultimate Spider-Man* is lots of fun as a sandbox superhero sim. If you try to pursue the story, though, it bogs down into a morass of cheap bosses and ridiculous chase sequences. It's about as entertaining as a root canal.

FINAL SCORE : 2.5 of 5

Publisher : Electronic Arts • **Developer :** EA Canada/Nihilistic
Release : 9/20/05 • **Rating :** TEEN; Blood, Suggestive Themes, Violence
Genre(s) : Brawler • **Players :** 2 • **Platform(s) :** PS2, Xbox, GameCube

Review by **4thletter**

You'd think that *Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects* would be fun. You'd be wrong. It was a mistake to brand this title a fighting game. It owes more to *Final Fight* than it does to *Street Fighter*. It's a brawler, albeit one that's plagued with iffy fighting, a poorly implemented story mode, and often annoying boss battles. Don't get me started on the repetitive stages and lack of characterization. In its defense, however, it does have fantastic graphics, great character design, quality voice acting, and rocking animation. Everything else, though, you can do without. I'm a fan of the comics and I couldn't even soldier through it.

FINAL SCORE : 2.5 of 5

Publisher : Buena Vista Games • **Developer :** Capcom
Release : 10/11/05 • **Rating :** E10+; Fantasy Violence
Genre(s) : Adventure • **Players :** 1 • **Platform(s) :** PlayStation 2, Xbox

Review by **Shoegazer**

The Nightmare Before Christmas is exactly what you would expect from a game based on characters from Tim Burton's classic film. It's your standard third-person platformer that involves lots of mashing attack buttons and double jumping around like crazy in-between fetch quests and surprisingly interesting boss fights. Luckily, the traditional "collect-a-thon" gameplay element takes a backseat here. At its core, the game's actually not too shabby. However, the true nightmare lies within the ultra-stiff controls and the lack of a free-roaming camera, which makes this one feel like little more than a glorified side-scroller running on rails. If you're a fan of the movie, you will undoubtedly find what you're looking for here. Everyone else should probably look elsewhere.

FINAL SCORE : 2.5 of 5

Publisher : THQ • **Developer :** A2M • **Release :** 9/12/05
Rating : EVERYONE; Cartoon Violence • **Genre(s) :** Platform
Players : 1 • **Platform(s) :** GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox

Review by **Syriel**

Scooby and the gang are back, and they've brought plenty of Scooby snacks. This time around Scooby has the ability to don a number of super suits, all of which give him a special ability. Toss on a Robin Hood suit, and the Scoobster can fire off plunger arrows, while a bat-suit grants Scooby the ability to fly. Unfortunately, you can only play as Scooby; the rest of the gang serves strictly as backup. The levels are your standard platform fare, with plenty of areas to explore. A limited number of action levels, such as when Scooby is caught in a fast moving river, provide a welcome break. Though it lacks depth, and sometimes crosses the line into unnecessary repetition, *Scooby-Doo! Unmasked* has an undeniable charm. Fans will dig it.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

Our guides aren't for everyone.

(Some people don't play video games.)

ART BY THE PEOPLE FOR THE PEOPLE

Fan art is all about giving exposure to aspiring artists who might not otherwise have a way to get their artsie parts seen. If you are one such artist, point your web browser toward **www.hardcoregamermag.com** and check out the Fan Art section of our message boards. That is where you can post your arts to get them considered for this section. You may also email submissions to **fart@hardcoregamermag.com**.

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

HGM PICK!

Title : Cammy
Artist : Del Borovic
Age : 19
Location : Mentor, OH

Title : Zelda Excalibur
Artist : Kevin OConnell
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Undisclosed

Title : Kurenai
Artist : Jason "Kurenai"
Age : Undisclosed
Location : California

Title : Kuroko
Artist : Dain Quentin
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Undisclosed

Title : Dark Prince
Artist : John Karp
Age : 21
Location : Arroyo Grande, CA

スーパーロボット大戦J — SUPER ROBOT WARS

ACTIVE UNIT ROSTER:
Mobile Suit Gundam SEED
Mobile Fighter G Gundam
SPT Layzner
Brain Power'd
Martian Successor Nadesico
Tekkaman Blade
Full Metal Panic!
Mazinkaiser
Combattler V
Voltes V
Super Beast Machine God Dancougar
Hades Project Zeorymer

Import Review by Lynxara

Publisher: Banpresto
Developer: Banpresto
Release Date: Sept 9th, 2005

Genre(s): Strategy RPG
Category: Cute SD Robots
# of players: 1

For over a decade now, *Super Robot Wars* has been chugging along as the *Madden* of the strategy RPG scene. There's at least one new game every year, introducing new engine refinements and an updated roster of robots from classic and popular mecha anime. The resulting games are usually decent, sometimes dreadful, and occasionally outstanding. *Super Robot Wars J* is, happily, one of the outstanding ones. It's easily the best of the six *Super Robot Wars* titles produced to date for the GBA.

You'll pick an original pilot to be your main character at the start of the game, and then assign them to one of the three original robots available. After some introductory text, then it's on to the mission battles. Each battle sequence takes place on a traditional map grid, and progresses the game's main storyline. The flow of battle is typical turn-based strategy RPG stuff, and the controls and options will be quite familiar to anyone who knows the genre well. Instead of making your own characters as in many strategy RPGs, instead you'll use units with pre-set abilities drawn from the various anime series in the roster. This gives battles a chess-like quality, as knowing a unit's basic abilities well is often more important than how much you've leveled up the pilot or how much you've upgraded their machine. The best missions and "Tsume Super Robo" minigames require some brain-teasingly precise problem solving abilities to win with what you have on hand. The worst missions are, unfortunately, tedious grunt-bashing exercises.

When attacking, you can opt to watch anime-style "demos" of your attack and the enemy's reaction, shown in the 2D side-scrolling perspective used in *La Pucelle* and other *SRW* games. Usually a GBA arrangement of song from that robot's TV series will play during the video, but you can go into a BGM editing menu to set which songs you'd like to play during your units' attack demos. The graphics in *J*'s demos are phenomenal, somehow pulling PlayStation-caliber 2D graphics out of the modest GBA hardware.

The roster of robots for the game is predominantly pulled from modern mecha shows like *Full Metal Panic!*, *Mazinkaiser*, and *Gundam SEED*. This results in a game that feels like a much fresher experience than many previous outings in the franchise, which had overused certain classic anime until they felt stale and dull. The result is something fresh for diehard *SRW* fans to appreciate, and a good jumping-on point for players curious about the series.

機体選択

グランティード
HP 6500
EN 180
移動力 5
運動性 85
装甲 1500

能力確認
決定
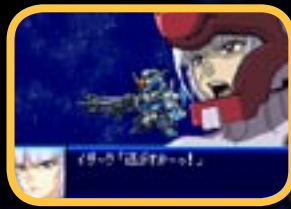
WORTH IMPORTING?

This is a worthwhile purchase for any anime-loving strategy RPG gamer who's familiar with something from the series roster, offering at least 40 to 60 hours of gameplay for most players. GBA games aren't region-coded, so you can play it on any US GBA or DS. Fan-translation support for the game, however, is a bit on the sparse side. Be prepared to play FAQless for some portions.

FINAL SCORE: 3.50 of 5

STREET FIGHTER ALPHA GENERATIONS

Anime Review by Lynxara
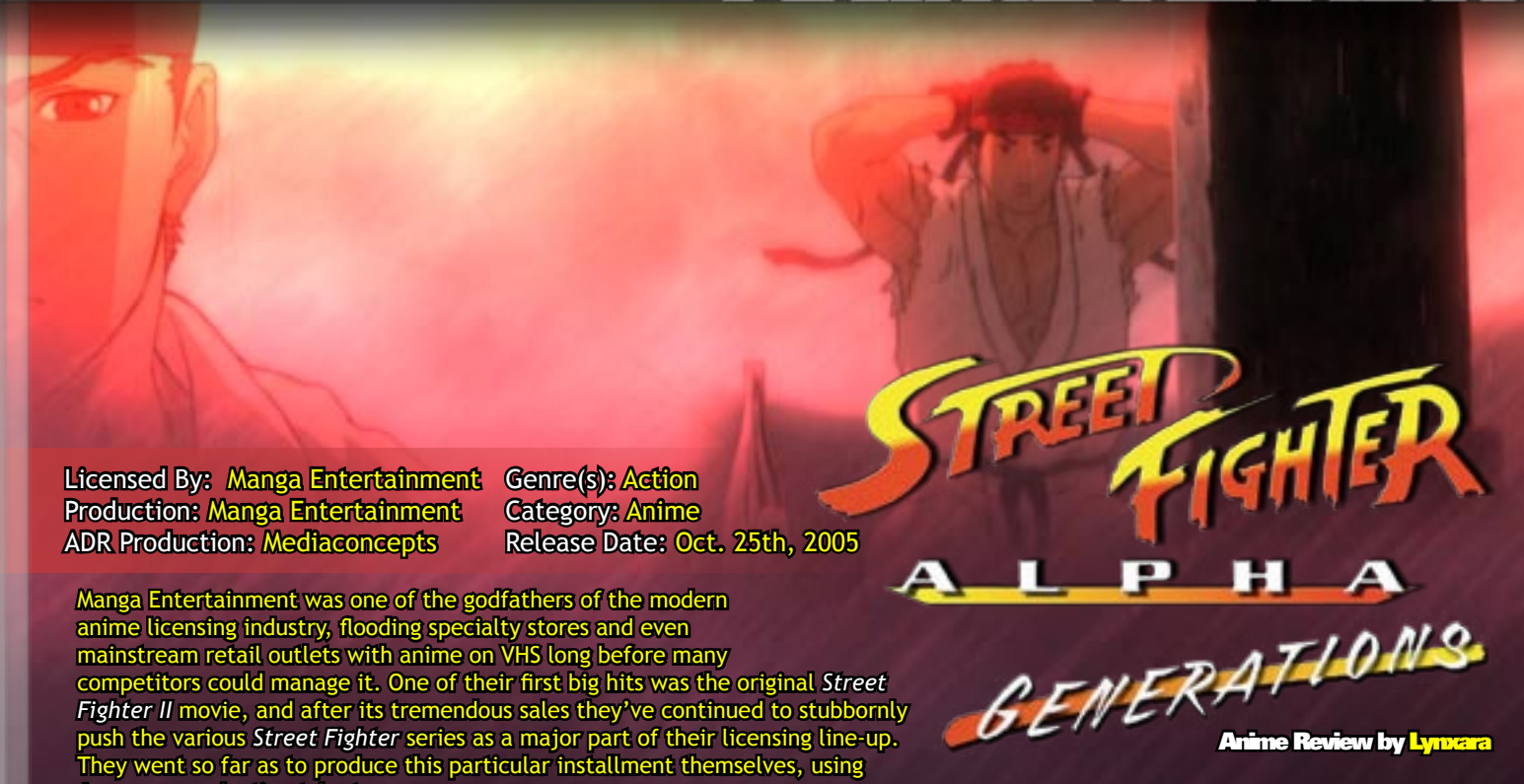
Licensed By: Manga Entertainment
Production: Manga Entertainment
ADR Production: Mediaconcepts

Genre(s): Action
Category: Anime
Release Date: Oct. 25th, 2005

Manga Entertainment was one of the godfathers of the modern anime licensing industry, flooding specialty stores and even mainstream retail outlets with anime on VHS long before many competitors could manage it. One of their first big hits was the original *Street Fighter II* movie, and after its tremendous sales they've continued to stubbornly push the various *Street Fighter* series as a major part of their licensing line-up. They went so far as to produce this particular installment themselves, using Japanese production talent.

The storyline is, like the *Alpha* games, a prequel to the events of *Street Fighter II*. It might also be a prequel to other games; it's honestly hard to tell, because the plot is nearly incoherent at points. It attempts to tell the story of how Gouki was seduced to the Dark Side of shotokan karate, and how Ryu also became tainted by the evil Hadou power. In practice, it comes off as the saga of Ryu achieving mastery over his potentially-evil QCF fireball. It's impossible to take seriously, and it isn't an aspect of the *Street Fighter* story that really needed exploration in more depth. Forty-five minutes of Ryu and Vega slapping each other around would've been far more entertaining.

A plotline this thin could be excusable if it lead to good action sequences, but *Alpha Generations* was clearly produced on a miserably poor budget. The character models are never consistent from scene to scene, and the fights often have the choppy, jerky quality of '60s Hanna-Barbera animation. It's impossible to follow them very well, let alone enjoy them. The best visuals *Alpha Generations* manages to produce are lingering, CG-rendered still shots—not really a desirable trait in a *Street Fighter* anime.
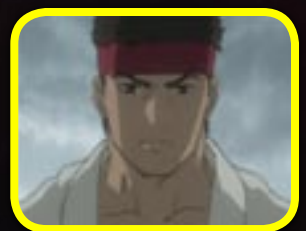
About the best thing about both the OAV and the DVD release is the audio mix and use of sound. Both the Japanese and English tracks get 5.1 audio mixes that sound wonderful, along with vibrant 2.0 mixes. Unfortunately, the DVD transfer suffered in our copy, particularly from compression artifacts in large dark areas and transitions from slow pans into movement. The menu also leaves much to be desired, with a counter-intuitive interface and loading times that take unreasonably long. The Japanese language track makes for good listening, but the English language track suffers from almost laughably wooden acting. Finally, the subtitles are plagued by obvious, inexcusably sloppy timing errors. All you get to make up for these errors in the way of extras is an admittedly interesting special about the Japanese voice actors, but more attention paid to the presentation of the OAV itself would've been nice.

Street Fighter Alpha Generations is the kind of thing that might've been marketable in its current form about ten years ago, when the market was less saturated with material and people simply expected less out of anime releases. In this day and age, its shortcomings are painfully clear. All told, a high-quality rerelease of the original *Street Fighter* movie would've been a much better use of Manga's time and customers' money.

FINAL SCORE: 1.50 of 5

RAIDEN III

Publisher: Taito
Developer: Moss
Release Date: Sept. 22nd, 2005
Genre(s): Shooter
Category: Vertical Scrolling
# of Players: 1-2

Import Review by
Hitoshura

Arcade games were designed to suck quarters out of our pockets. They were brutally difficult, and if you lost, you'd have to insert another coin if you wanted to continue playing. Many of these games were addictive and fun exactly because of this. *Raiden* was one of many simple games that lured people into arcades time and again, beckoning like a Siren. *Raiden II* came along a few years later, adding new weapons and greatly improved graphics. Nobody cared that it was more or less the same game as *Raiden*, because it was still an amazing game. Seibu Kaihatsu, the original creators of *Raiden*, went on to create a number of spin-offs, but they never named any of those games *Raiden III*. Earlier this year, twelve years after *Raiden II* hit arcades, Taito unveiled *Raiden III* for release in Japan's still thriving arcades. A PS2 port followed at the end of September, so now home gamers can succumb to their nostalgic memories, too. This is exactly what *Raiden III* is all about.

Since *Raiden III* was deisgned for arcades, its display is taller than it is wide. The home version presents four display modes that try to fit the game onto a conventional television screen. Two modes use vertical letterboxing, one uses one-third of the screen for a display, and the other uses half the screen. There are also two arcade display modes that display the picture horizontally. The game is unplayable in this mode unless you happen to have a computer monitor that can rotate its screen. *Raiden III* also sports an interesting feature for the crazy obsessive gamer whereby you can control both player's ships with a single controller.

Aesthetically this game is a jaw dropping experience. Everything flies by fast and smoothly, with flashy, satisfying explosions and special effects. An example is gratuitous use of slow motion and motion blur when a boss is defeated, making it one of the better looking shooters around. *Raiden III* plays on a 2D field, while the backgrounds are all in 3D and scroll in different directions at different speeds as you progress. The fifth stage in particular is truly a sight to behold for vertical shooter fans, because of a clever use in tying the backgrounds into the gameplay. The music is classic *Raiden* fare. It's unobtrusive, yet it's always audible. The music is atypical for a shooter because it doesn't get your adrenaline running; instead it aims to keep you calm under pressure, which you need to be in order to dodge the hailstorm of bullets that this game throws at you. Don't panic!

There are a bevy of bonus materials waiting to be unlocked; unfortunately you acquire them by completing the game on the practice difficulty setting, which means no enemy will fire a single shot at you. So about fifteen minutes after plopping in the game you can unlock and examine everything: artwork, 3D models, near-perfect full playthrough videos, all the different play modes, and even unlimited continues. It's as if the developers simply did not care to make the player actually work for these bonuses. It's a shame, because some of the production goodies are worth their weight in gold. Once everything is unlocked there's not much point to playing the game aside from trying to achieve perfection, and that's a very hard thing to do. *Raiden III* is brutally difficult on Normal – which is still easier than the original Arcade difficulty level – thanks in large part to the speed and volume of bullets being thrown at you in crazy, almost imperceptible patterns.

When playing *Raiden III*, classic *Raiden* fans may feel that something isn't clicking. The memorable Plasma Homing Laser has been replaced by a Proton Beam that bends left or right when you move. Frustratingly, it often bends so much that you can miss enemies at point blank range. *Raiden III* has just one type of bomb compared to *Raiden II*'s two. In earlier games there was a short delay before bombs exploded, which forced the player to use them creatively. In *Raiden III* they explode immediately, making the game feel more simplistic and less inspired.

Raiden vets may also be irked when they find that *Raiden III* has just seven relatively short stages, instead of the traditional eight long stages. In these short stages, the ship's movement feels intolerably sluggish in comparison to the incredibly fast bullets. Playing the game is a bit more difficult than one might expect. *Raiden III* is more enjoyable than than the original *Raiden* thanks to the Radar Missile sub-weapon, which passively homes in on targets. However, Moss ignored much of the progress original developers Seibu Kaihatsu made in the development of *Raiden II*. While *Raiden III* feels very much like a *Raiden* game, it lacks the improvement one would hope to see in a true sequel.

Raiden III is an awesome game to watch and play for the short time it lasts. However the ease with which you can unlock everything kills the lasting appeal it should've had. The PS2 port is clearly geared to obsessive perfectionists and even shooter fans may be disappointed at *Raiden III*'s playability. If you're up for a good challenge and want to add a decent shooter to your library *Raiden III*'s a good choice, but there are far better shooters out there, not the least of which is last year's *ESPGaluda*. Don't expect it to improve upon *Raiden II*, because it's really half a step backwards if anything.
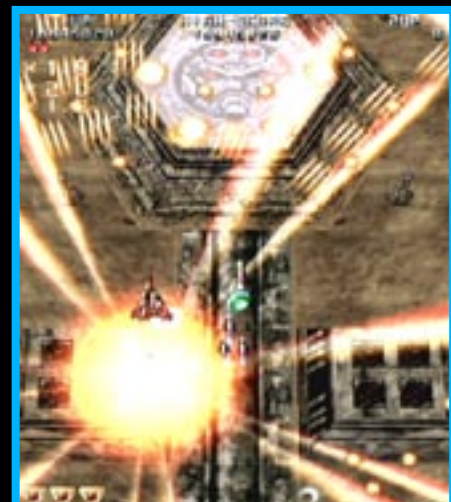
WORTH IMPORTING?

Raiden III is a tough sell. Thankfully for importers, half the menus are in plain English, and those that aren't are easy enough to understand. Even if you have little to no knowledge of Japanese you should be able to play this with ease if your PS2 is compatible.

FINAL SCORE:
2.50 of 5

Heaven or Hell?
Let's Cosplay
cosplay interview

Cosplayers: Del M. Borovik and Patrick Fram

Location: Mentor, OH

Website: www.orangejellyfish.com

HGM: How long have you been cosplaying?

DB: Six years, my first time was at Ohayocon, I went as Lain.

PF: Only three years. Del convinced me to start doing it.

HGM: Why Sol and I-No?

PF: Originally, I was planning to cosplay Ky, but since Del looks like I-no, and we wanted matching characters, I switched to Sol.

DB: That, and there aren't enough male Sol cosplayers out there.

HGM: Ever think of starting a "Les Paul for Del's I-No" fund?

PF: I'll leave this to Del…

DB: I think the "Let's Feed a Del" Fund will have to come first!

HGM: Are you two actually any good at *Guilty Gear*?

DB: I'm okay, but not as good as Patrick is.

PF: I'm all right. I can beat all my friends, but I don't think I could compete.

HGM: *Guilty Gear: Isuka*; another solid *Guilty Gear* or complete crap?

PF: Well, I wouldn't say it was crap, but it was definitely not as strong a game as the others.

DB: We have this discussion a lot. I'm really hoping the next installment takes all the best stuff from *Isuka* and *XX*, and then gives us some more!

Thanks, guys, and thanks for the cool chibi-art as well!

Look for this deadly team of art and cosplay next year in Otakon's ArtistAlley; you won't be disappointed.

Photo(s) by Del M. Borovik and Patrick Fram

Is he really the only one?
(Sol Badguy - Guilty Gear Series)

You know, do you now?
(I-no - Guilty Gear Series)

FUNNIES

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