

HARDCORE

GAMER[®]

MAGAZINE

v1i7 . super duty

Most definitely Alive.

We get down and dirty with Tecmo's long awaited sequel.

Square-Enix's Grandia III makes us giddy with anticipation.



Later we go for a bumpy trot with Steambot — it's funky Atlus goodness!




Drill breathes new life into your Dreamcast — it's super noteworthy, yo.



As if that weren't enough...

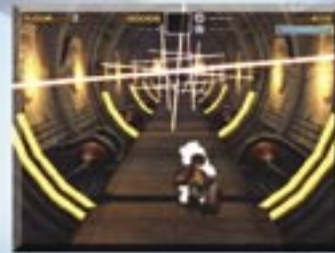
Some crusty old games get a fabulous facelift, .Melf 'splains the laws which govern game hacking, plus Pubba hacks apart a perfectly good Vectrex.

DEAD OR ALIVE 4

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PlayStation 2

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Printed in the United States of America



DJPubba Tim Lindquist

I spent most of the deadline for this issue traveling around the country giving presentations to game companies. It went very well. It was my first time to New York and it was awesome, although I wish I had more time to be a tourist. I did manage to gobble down some White Castle sliders, which I haven't had in 24 years. Yum!

Now Playing: *Conker* (Xbox) and a lot of classic vector arcade games in black and white.



Wanderer Thomas Wilde

Over the course of one week, I've directed an army, shot up some zombies, taken pictures of ghosts, lopped a bunch of sand creatures' heads clean off, taken a rocket launcher to the face of a particularly annoying alien cyborg, and watched the [SPOILER] part of *Quake 4* more times than I'm really comfortable with. Sometimes, being a gamer is a little exhausting.

Now Playing: *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones*, *Fatal Frame III: The Tormented*, *Resident Evil: Code Veronica*



Syriel Adam Pavlacka

Nintendo keeps talking about originality being the key to the gaming experience, and it just might be right. A year ago all the naysayers claimed the PSP would dominate the DS. Instead, the DS has trampled on Sony's system. Can the Revolution be just as disruptive? I can't wait to find out.

Now Playing: *The Rub Rabbits*, *MS Saga*, *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*



Racewing Geson Hatchett

I don't normally do this, but: Hideki Naganuma, if you're listening, please convince Yuji Naka to let you compose a soundtrack for the next 3D *Sonic the Hedgehog* game. Senoue, Julien-K and Crush 40 can help, I guess. A little. But after playing *Sonic Rush*, you, sir, are king. That is all.

Now Playing: *Sonic Rush*, *WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2006*, Singing The Praises Of 2D Drawn Mindy over 3D Render Mindy (*Tony Hawk's American Sk8Land*)



Shoegazer Dave Hulegaard

This is kind of awkward for me. I mean, I've never had to ask for financial help before, but I've grown desperate. You see, I've managed come up just a few bells short this month on my mortgage after taking some bad turnip stock advice, and well, the neighbors are starting to whisper about Tom Nook's new line of chainsaws that just arrived.

Now Playing: *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, *Dragonquest VIII* (Still!), *Kameo*



KouAidou Elizabeth Ellis

For the life of me, I will never understand why politicians see video games and family values as mutually opposed items. My Thanksgiving was spent excitedly discussing the merits of the just-released *Civilization IV* with my family and in-laws. Joe and John liked the improved gameplay. Rebecca liked the cute piggies and playing advisor to her husband. Mom just listened eagerly and proudly, and family warmth and togetherness was had by all.

Now Playing: *Civilization IV*



Roger Danish Greg Off

It's hard to believe we just went through another hardware launch. I've been doing this since the early days of the SNES and SEGA Genesis (yes, I'm THAT old) and, even though you would think I would be jaded by now, every generation does not cease to amaze me. While I am more or less enjoying the first run of titles for Microsoft's new baby, my main playing time has been spent on the freakin' amazing *Geometry Wars Evolved*.



Lynxara Alicia Ashby

Wow, there's actually a lot of games coming out for the PSP now. I guess this means I can't make fun of Sony for that anymore... oh, well. There's plenty of other things about Sony I can make fun of!

Now Playing: *Legend of Heroes*, *Dragon Quest VIII*, *Mario Kart DS*, *MS Saga: A New Dawn*



4thletter David Brothers

2005 was a good year. *Ninja Gaiden Black*, *Indigo Prophecy*, *Ratchet: Deadlocked*, *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones*, and *Mario Kart DS* are all tops. Plus, Ghostface and Trife recently dropped *Put It On The Line* and it is excellent. Favorite track? Either "Ghost & Giancana" or "The Sun."

Now Playing: *Phoenix Wright*, *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones* (Xbox)



James James Cunningham

I was sick this month with my annual cold. While it killed my productivity, it couldn't stop me snagging a midnight Xbox 360 and a points card for Live Arcade. While I've enjoyed *Kameo* and *Ridge Racer*, the true system highlight has been the godly *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*. See you on the leaderboards.

Now Playing: *Geometry Wars 2*, *Legend of Heroes*, *NFS: Most Wanted*, *Guitar Hero*



HonestGamer Jason Venter

Donald Trump should decide which hero gets to save the world next. Orphans are out. So are unpredictable guys with big guns. Hopefuls should gather in a room with a big table, look across it at lawyers and argue their cases. Each episode, one of them could hear those fateful words: "We're looking into other heroes with bigger swords." That would rule.

Now playing - *Shadow Hearts: From the New World*, *Wild Arms Alter Code F*, *Dragon Warrior II* (NES)



Hitoshura Iaian Ross

This past month has been insane. I had more fun reading the *Magna Carta*, than playing the game. The game should've been *Magna Gravititas pro Carta* so as not to confuse people. I picked up *Atelier Iris*, new, which has been largely enjoyable. Then there's *FFIV Advance*, which somehow I must own. However my wallet is hurting, because I also want the *FFXII* demo, and a ton of other stuff I have no money for.

Currently Playing: *Magna Carta: Tears of Blood*, *AI: EM*



Wolfie Terry Wolfinger

So I finally gave in to temptation and have purchased the ultimate time consumer that is *World of Warcraft*. And just as I feared, it has sucked me in! I don't watch TV anymore. Any spare time (haha, like I have any!) is spent training my *Undead Rogue!*

Now Playing: *World of Warcraft*



Metalbot Anthony Mertz

Thank you Sony. Thank you for ruining what was once a really cool experience, by making *Star Wars Galaxies* a total main stream piece of junk. Thank you Microsoft. Thank you for making the Xbox 360, which offers nothing new in the way of gameplay. Thank you Nintendo, no seriously, thank you. Thank you for doing something different and actually getting game developers to rethink how they approach games. You may not be the most popular anymore, but I still love you.



Arfeth Thomas Shin

It's been one hell of a month for me. What with all the Xbox 360 madness, *Dead or Alive 4* delays, and real-world demands, my sleep schedule has now turned into a 32-hour cycle. Bleh. I'm also addicted to *Maple Story* (DIE UNDEAD MUSHYS F5 F5 F5 D=<) If you want to find me online, I can be found on MapleGlobal's Bera server under "Arfeth." And no, I won't be playing *World of Warcraft* any time soon, because paying a subscription to play means that I'll start justifying ways to "get my money's worth" (read: sacrifice sleep).



Melf Ken Horowitz

I need to find a way to get my life back. *Dragon Quest VIII* has consumed me for the past two weeks with its old school goodness. Screw the haters, this game rocks. Once it falls - and it will fall - it's back to *Half Life 2* and *Shadow of the Colossus* for me. Christmas shopping's done, and so are classes, leaving lots of time for gaming. Merry Xmas to me!

Now Playing: *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 80*, *Dragon Quest VIII*, *Shadow of the Colossus*.



Jeremy Jeremy Peeples

With the insane amount of games coming out in the next month or so, I've spent the past four weeks reflecting on gaming days gone by, and catching up on the great games I've missed out on, like *Ico*. Some of the time has been spent playing *Mega Man X* games in preparation for the *Mega Man X Collection*, while other portions have been used to recreate great matches of the late Eddie Guerrero, whose Halloween Havoc '97 with Rey Mysterio Jr. will live on forever in *WCW/NWO Revenge*.



Sardius Danny Cowan

Boy it sure is great living with two roommates who play *Animal Crossing* online all day! Don't mind me guys, I'll just sit over here alone while you write obscene messages to each others' animals and try to make me jealous with all the fun you're having. At least *Final Fight: Streetwise* will always be here to comfort me!

Now Playing: *Beatmania IIDX 10th Style*, *Balloon Fight* (NES), other games that are not *Animal Crossing: Wild World*

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Previews

Who says all the good games come out in Q4? Here's some games you can look forward to in the new year. We've got killer RPGs like *Shadow Hearts: From the New World*, the bizarre new direction of *Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams*, quality demon shooting with *Painkiller: Hell Wars* plus some funky Atlus joy with *Steambot* and RPG satisfaction with *Metal Saga*.



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Feature



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On the cover

DEAD OR ALIVE 4

Beautiful girls! Electrified wrestling rings! Intense on-line competition! *Dead or Alive 4* is here, and Team NINJA's remembered all the essentials of a killer new fighting game. Take an in-depth look at the game play behind this title's pretty face, and see exactly what makes it the greatest DoA title ever.



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i play. i win. i gloat. i kick back. i catch a movie. i hear some tunes. all thanks to one little card.



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XBOX ZERO HOUR



Beanbags are medically proven to facilitate gaming-related insomnia.



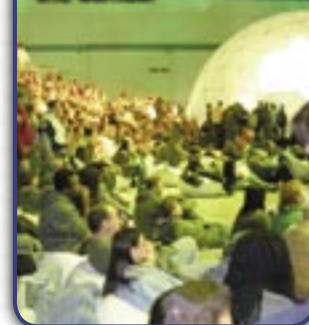
Whatever you say, Microsoft~

Palmdale, California
November 20th-22nd, 2005

After coming back from the beanbag-filled bonanza that was Xbox 360 Zero Hour, we're hoping that Microsoft is launching another console soon so we can do this again! Two days before its official launch date, special invitations to a few thousand select gamers across the nation arrived at the top-secret hangar in the middle of the Mojave Desert. With no signs or advertisements, the only confirmation we had of the site were a row of lonely traffic cones... and the neon-green halogen lights beaming into the sky, visible from miles away like a landing beacon to the extra-terrestrial hardcore gaming universe. As we got there, the visceral beats of a taiko drumming troupe reverberated through our bodies as the colossal gates to the party were about to be unlocked. There was also what was probably the world's largest pile of white beanbags (in the thousands) that was torn into by packs of rabid gamers, brutally massacred in a cloud of styrofoam pellets as a beanbag fight broke out before the opening ceremony. Oh, the humanity!

With the temperature dropping sharply in the arid desert climate, Microsoft had the thankful foresight to supply attendees with sweatshirts... and free 64 MB memory cards. Each person also had the option of buying one, and only one, Premium Xbox 360 console

Pulled away from the demos.



(and there were none of the Core/Premium shenanigans that consumers would later be subjected to) with whatever games and accessories were available at launch. However, gamers had to wait until the evening of the 21st to receive their beloved consoles, so in the meantime, we managed to kill time getting our grubby hands on the launch titles and playable demos of the 360's lineup. And out of all the games that everyone plopped their beanbags in front of, *Perfect Dark Zero* proved to be the hardest game to get one's hands on due to its solid, yet innovative multiplayer component.



Free UFO sighting with purchase.



Dead or Alive 4 madness.

Dead or Alive 4, *Ninety-Nine Nights* and *Call of Duty 2* also got some of the best attention of the event. (Arieth ended up beating the *Ninety-Nine Nights* demo about four times in a row to prove that it was not impossible to beat. Also, Inphy is hot.)

After everyone had a chance to settle down and accommodate themselves (and playing with the *origen.com* bunnies at the tree), everyone flocked to the main stage where the first exhibition was held: Epic's muchly anticipated *Gears of War*. The game was still undergoing development, but with a solid, consistent framerate to live up to Microsoft's 30-fps mandate, it looked plenty good to us. Epic Games' Cliff Blezinsky showed off the hyper-real textures, atmospheric lighting effects, an incredibly advanced AI, and some downright sick-looking tactical options involving an unheard-of level of environmental interactivity. Promising "No ice, no lava, no dropships, and no lesbian squadmates," Cliff did mollify us with the tease of newly designed arms, saying, "Come on, this is coming from the guy who brought us the six-shot rocket launcher!", much to the cheering of the audience. During the Q&A session, it was asked whether or not the Japanese audience would find the game

interesting. As it turned out, the Japanese were estatic: When the game was previewed at the Tokyo Game Show earlier this year, executives in business suits were personally walking up to Cliff and saying, "We really, REALLY like this game."

The next event was the invitational *Quake 4* Deathmatch, where players would be randomly picked to compete in a single-elimination tournament. There was a mystery guest, however: Takemitsu, the Japanese *Quake 4* champion was present to take on his American counterparts. Everyone started out on an even playing field, as people had only two or so hours of experience under their belts. After a crushing 10-0 victory in the first round, Takemitsu was eliminated in semi-finals by the man who would eventually win the tournament... and a free Xbox 360. Upon hearing that participants were chosen at random from the pool of players on the demos, everyone rushed to the *Dead or Alive 4* consoles in hopes that the same sort of opportunity would be available. (It was not: You just got a free faceplate out of it. Booo~)

The end of the first evening closed with a midnight treat: KAIJU BIG BATTEL! While not having anything, anything at all to do with the Xbox 360, it was still fun nonetheless to watch characters like Kung-Fu Chicken Noodle and Dr. Cube performing suplexes, moonsaults and other assorted mayhem in a wrestling ring populated with plywood mockups of buildings. Of all the characters, Super Wrong was our favorite, his disco-fevered antics supplemented with a healthy dose of Glitter Power from his fairy-winged female sidekick. (There was also the late-night burlesque show, but mysteriously, those pictures have disappeared...)

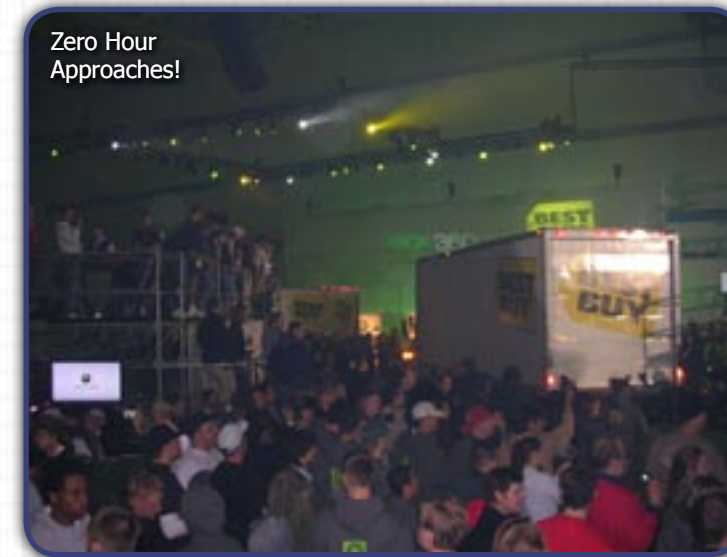
Clash of Kaiju Titans!



For most of us, the next day began by waking up from our beanbag beds and brushing styrofoam out of our hair. With an entire day to kill until the Xbox 360 consoles would be released, we explored some of the other launch titles and previews. While some of the games looked like glorified ports (i.e.: *Gun*), others were impressive enough to warrant a detailed look. *NBA 2K6* was presented alongside its EA counterpart, *NBA Live '06* and provided plenty of memorable moments, while *The Outfit* had an interesting system relying on battlefield "points" accumulated by achieving mission objectives, which could be used to FedEx-Next-Minute-Air brand new toys to your location. Nazi Panzer blocking your way? Buy a Sherman Tank in real-time and watch as your squad hops into their respective stations as you perform some WWII-era *Zerstörung*.

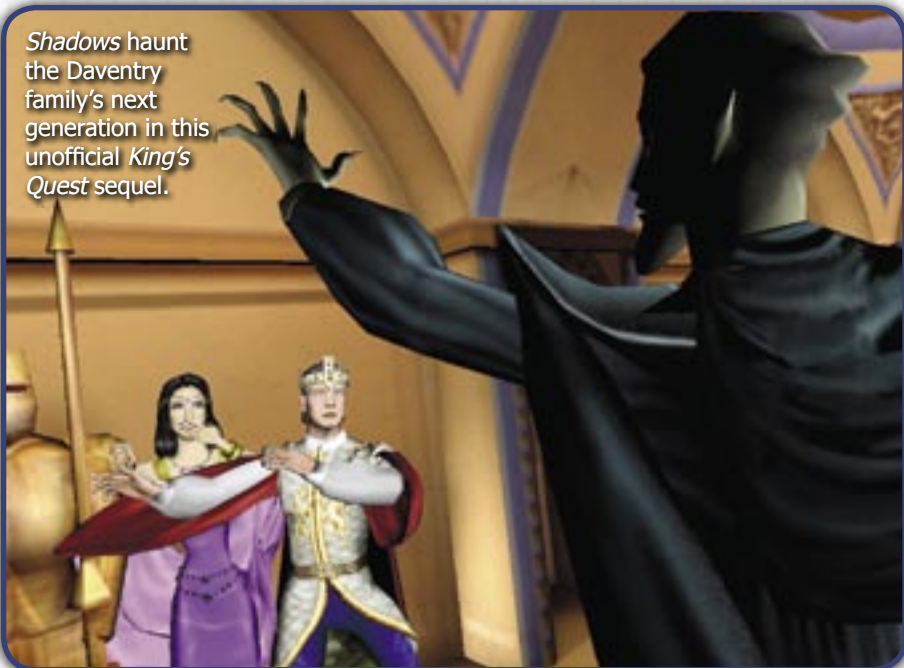
It wasn't until Monday night's launch countdown that the adrenaline really started to fly, after gamers waited in line to reserve their consoles and game selections. Then at 9:00, three Best Buy trucks accompanied by a motorcade slowly crawled into the hangar (yeay diesel fumes) as the horde stood ready to receive their much-anticipated booty. Between our Xbox 360s, the beanbags, and our broken-in 64 MB memory cards from multiplayer madness, the crowd that emerged that night was a tired, but happy one... and we still hadn't even plugged in our Xboxes yet.

Zero Hour Approaches!



RISING FROM THE ASHES

Shadows haunt the Daventry family's next generation in this unofficial *King's Quest* sequel.



RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES

According to a recent announcement from publisher Square-Enix, fans pushing for a sequel to *Valkyrie Profile* are about to get what they want. Tri-Ace is working on *Valkyrie Profile: Silmeria* for the Playstation 2, as well as a remake of the original for the Sony PSP entitled *Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth*.

The original *Valkyrie Profile* was a popular title for the Playstation system and is known to fetch as much as \$100 on eBay. Despite favorable scores throughout the media and extremely positive reception from diehard fans (many consider it one of the best in the genre), there hadn't been any official word on a possible sequel for more than five years.

Both games are expected to arrive this year, with the PSP remake landing in Japan this March. It will feature a movie that connects it with the sequel. The titles for the two games come from the character focus in each. As you might expect, the remake will star Lenneth while the second will feature someone named Silmeria.

Though little is known about the two games at this time, their impending release means it shouldn't be long before the usual rush of screens and juicy details. Watch for it.

First Sam & Max, now King's Quest.
On September 30th, production on fan-created Phoenix Online Studios' unofficial *King's Quest* sequel *King's Quest IX: Every Cloak Has A Silver Lining* stopped after the developers received a cease & desist order from Vivendi-Universal. Phoenix was happy to comply, and production on the game was stopped. The rest of the fans, however, were not so eager to let it rest.

A mad flurry of emails and petitions, sparked by sites such as <http://www.savekqix.org/> and LiveJournal-based recruiting, were sent to Vivendi-Universal over the months that followed. On December 9th, 2005, the studio withdrew its complaint in an official press release.

Taken from Phoenix Online Studios' official site:

"After extensive evaluation, Vivendi Universal Games is pleased to announce that the fan developed trilogy project 'The Silver Lining' (previously known as *King's Quest IX: Every Cloak Has A Silver Lining*), based on characters from Sierra Entertainment's 'Kings Quest' series, has been given approval to continue development. We look forward to seeing the first of its three upcoming chapters, 'Shadows', completed soon."

- VIVENDI UNIVERSAL GAMES

Phoenix Online will be able to resume production on its fan sequel on the condition that it changes the name, simply, to *The Silver Lining*. Production on the game has now resumed, though the developers warn that the stall will cause them to miss their original release date of late 2005.

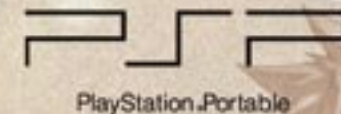
The first part of the *The Silver Lining* trilogy, entitled *Shadows*, is now scheduled for release sometime in 2006. Vivendi-Universal is planning to release an official anthology of the entire official *King's Quest* series on March 30th, 2006.



Hey, what is this, *King's Quest 6: 3-D?*

STRATEGICALLY CHAOTIC!

Portables have been missing strategies...
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The world is in a constant state of chaos. The kings and queens of Lost Ground are determined to restore order to save the world.



Destroy your enemies with spectacular super moves!



Experience real time battles!



Massive 30 versus 30 combat!

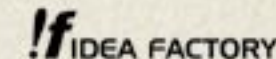


10 different kingdoms to play as, with different stories and endings.



GENERATION OF CHAOS

COMING SPRING 2006



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 Preview by **Sardius**

Publisher: **Capcom** Genre(s): **Action**
 Developer: **Capcom Prod. Studio 8** Category: **Beat-Em-Up**
 Release Date: **February 14, 2006** # of Players: **1-2**

Final Fight's run as the premier beat-em-up series was short-lived during the 16-bit era. One popular arcade release and two sequels on the SNES later, gamers had seemingly had enough of former street fighter/Metro City mayor Mike Haggar and his methods of urban improvement via punching things. Now, years after successfully murdering the series with the execrable *Final Fight Revenge* for the Sega Saturn, Capcom Production Studio 8 seeks to redeem itself by reviving the franchise once again with *Final Fight: Streetwise*.

Streetwise puts you in control of Kyle Travers, underground street brawler and brother to Cody from the original *Final Fight*. After Cody is kidnapped, Kyle finds himself with a mystery to solve and plenty of heads to smash along the way. Players roam the streets of Metro City, beating up random punks for cash and respect. Gameplay is mostly straightforward beat-em-up stuff, with an emphasis on combos and weapon-based attacks. The back-to-basics play style still offers a few surprises, however; throwing pedestrians to stop pursuing enemies is a nice touch.



While the basic gameplay may be similar to the original 1989 arcade release, *Final Fight's* atmosphere has gone through an overhaul for *Streetwise*. The varied locales of the original *Final Fight* have been replaced by a series of dank brown alleyways, and the constant

swearing from every character with a speaking part is often a source of unintentional hilarity. A number of minigames offer an occasional break from the game's forced grittiness, however -- the roach-stomping game in particular is surprisingly upbeat and bizarre.

This kind of quirkiness, along with the recent additions of a two-player mode and Mike Haggar as a playable character, show that the developers are interested in staying true to the series' roots. With some tweaking, *Streetwise* could mark a return to *Final Fight's* former glory.



 Preview by **Sardius**

Publisher: **Capcom** Genre(s): **Action**
 Developer: **Capcom Production Studio 2** Category: **Third Person**
 Release Date: **March 2006** # of Players: **1**

ONIMUSHA DAWN OF DREAMS

Onimusha fans were simultaneously joyed and saddened by the 2004 release of *Onimusha 3: Demon Siege*, as it was to be both the best and the last game in the *Onimusha* trilogy. A surprise announcement by Capcom earlier this year left these fans with something new to look forward to, however. Though the original trilogy had concluded, the series would continue in 2006 with *Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams*, an entirely new game with a story separate from previous *Onimusha* releases, but taking place in the same familiar universe.

This new storyline, oddly enough, seems thus far to be less mature and more kid-friendly than the dark and serious stuff found in the trilogy. Players are assisted by a cartoonish monkey-thing that pees itself to comedic effect, for example. A player-controlled camera has also been added for greater ease of play, and the game's variety of bright, colorful outdoor environments lend themselves well to what could shape up to be a kinder, gentler, and more pee-monkey filled *Onimusha*.



Don't be fooled by appearances, though. Much of the gameplay in *Dawn of Dreams* stays true to its roots, and all of the series' familiar sword-wielding, soul-sapping action can still be found here. New to the series is the addition of a combo system reminiscent of *Devil May Cry*, which rewards skillful demon slaying with health and stat bonuses. *Dawn of Dreams* also introduces an emphasis on cooperation with playable support characters, whose assistance is often needed in order to solve puzzles and clear paths through the game's levels.



Dawn of Dreams looks to continue the *Onimusha* series' tradition of excellence while adding plenty of new stuff to keep things interesting. If these new elements mesh well with *Onimusha's* tried and true gameplay, both longtime fans and newcomers to the series should be pleased.





Preview by KouAidou

Publisher: Square-Enix
Developer: GameArts
Release Date: February 14, 2006

Genre(s): RPG
Category: Fantasy
of Players: 1

GRANDIA III

The *Grandia* franchise has always had a bit of a tough time, what with the various *Final Fantasy*s dominating the turn-based RPG market. Like most underrated classics, though, it's managed to keep a strong following based on its unique style and memorable characters. *Grandia III* looks like it's ready to continue the tradition.

Ever since he was little, Yuki's only dream was to be a pilot... sadly, the only career option for a young man in the island town where he lives is to become a potter. Not even his mother, the spunky huntress Miranda, supports his dreams. What's an adventurous young kid to do? Build a plane and escape to the mainland, of course!

Unfortunately, no coming-of-age is achieved so easily in the world of fantasy RPGs, and pretty soon, Yuki and Miranda find themselves crashing (literally) headfirst into adventure. To keep a young girl named Alfina safe from sinister pursuers, they must journey out into the world, fighting monsters and dealing with a cast of bizarre characters, each with their own agendas.

Grandia III's plot seems like your typical RPG, but its wicked sense of humor will help separate it from the pack. Expressive character animations, clever writing, and a surprisingly lively English dub also help in this respect.

The gameplay throws some variety into the typical turn-based combat system by having the characters move around the battlefield in real space and time during combat. Characters can also perform aerial combos by attacking an enemy that another character has knocked into the air, making a good sense of timing the key to success.

While it probably won't break any sales records, *Grandia III* has a great old-school feel underneath its new-school look. It's worth watching out for.



Preview by Honestgamer

Publisher: XSeed Games
Developer: Aruze Corp
Release Date: 3/2006

Genres: RPG
Category: Turn Based
of Players: 1

SHADOW HEARTS FROM THE NEW WORLD

You've probably heard about previous *Shadow Hearts* releases, but the series is usually mentioned only because of its unique judgment ring system. While that dynamic keeps battles fresh even if you're slogging through a lot of them, people often forget to mention the other reason people look forward to each sequel: they're great games. *Shadow Hearts: From the New World* looks ready to remind people all over again.

Meet Johnny Garland, a young man who lost his parents and his memory in a fire. Rather than live off his generous inheritance, he sets up a detective agency. One day, a man who calls himself Professor Gilbert asks him to find a missing person. Johnny does so successfully, but there's a problem: a monster pops

out of nowhere and gobbles the stranger up before they can share more than a few words. Before it can do the same to Johnny, a mysterious creature descends from above, shatters the skylight and kicks the beast's butt.

To say that the game begins with a bang would be an understatement, and the preview build we played leads us to believe that it'll maintain it the whole way through. In the first ten hours alone, you'll meet a host of new characters, travel to locations spread across America and beyond and witness more plot than you'd expect from a good novel or three.



You'll also battle monsters galore. *Shadow Hearts: From the New World* features the same combat system you've known from before, with a few tweaks and additions that franchise veterans are sure to embrace. Battles are quick-paced and reasonably infrequent, which leaves you free to explore a variety of beautiful environments. What we saw left us thirsty for more. Watch this one closely.



SAMURAI WARRIORS

戦国無双

State of War

Publisher : Koei
Developer : Omega Force
Release Date : 2/21/06

Genre(s) : Action/Strategy
Category : Third-person
of players : 1-4

Koei's newest beat-em-up series has returned, with new features and surprises in tow. 2004 saw the debut of the *Samurai Warriors: State of War* series, and 2006 will see it debut on a portable. Essentially *Dynasty Warriors* set in feudal Japan, *State of War* features 37 stages (22 being PSP- exclusives), and all 19 characters from both previous games. *State of War* rewards longtime fans longing for online play by providing four player vs. challenges via ad-hoc Wi-Fi, a first for the series, and something that is sure to increase the life of the game.

Omega Force made even more changes to the existing formula. Instead of skill points to unlock new techniques, you now have to find skill scrolls during battle to learn new attacks. Charms are yet another new addition to the series, and can only be found during the strategy portion of battles. These are unlocked after clearing a space on the grid with a charm on it. Charms boost your strength, increase your health, and can even damage foes, so get them whenever possible. Omega Force also increased the sub-officer (in-game bodyguard) setup from previous games. Now, you've got a whopping 200 of them to choose from, and can take up to four into a given battle with you.

Longtime fans will also be rewarded with a game that not only looks about on par with its PS2 brethren, but takes full advantage of the PSP's wide screen. To better see your foes, you'll be able to have the whole screen at your disposal, and can even toggle the maps on and off to mix things up if you'd so desire. Dedicated fans should find a lot to enjoy here, so be on the lookout for *State of War* in late February.



Preview by Jeremy



Preview by Syriah

FULL AUTO

Publisher : Sega
Developer : Pseudo Interactive
Release Date : 02/21/2006

Genre(s) : Racing
Category : Combat
of Players : 1, Multiplayer

If you've ever quit out of a race and restarted the round simply because you missed a turn or crashed into a wall of cement, then Sega has just the game for you. Debuting on the Xbox 360 late next month, *Full Auto* is the only racing game to have a built in "second chance" thanks to the innovative unwreck feature.

Unwreck allows you to "undo" any mistakes you make simply by pressing a button. On the surface it sounds simple, but after spending some time with the game at Microsoft's recent Zero Hour event, we can safely say that unwreck is a feature we never want to be without.

Combat was a big component of the build we played, as players raced around the course causing damage and attempting to eliminate rivals. The game encourages you to be liberal with the weapons, as just about everything can be destroyed. Need to slow down the pack? Blow up an overhead sign and fill the road with debris!

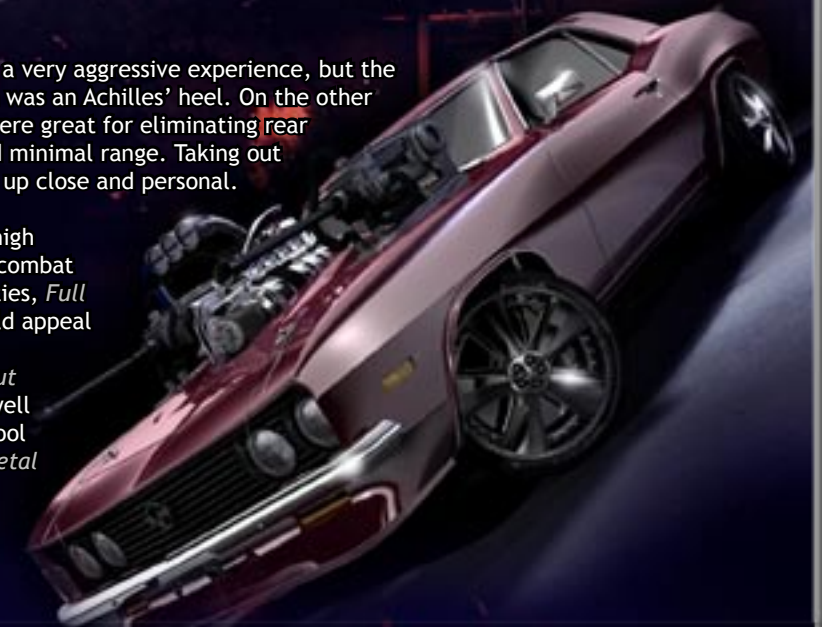
Unfortunately, there were only two cars available for play in the demo version: the Vulcan and the Python. Both came preloaded with weapons. Hopefully the final game will allow for some customization. The Vulcan had a machine gun and rocket launcher, while the Python was armed with a shotgun and mines. Though the cars felt almost identical when tearing down the track, using the weapons was another story.

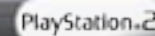


Racing with the Vulcan was a very aggressive experience, but the lack of a rear firing weapon was an Achilles' heel. On the other hand, the Python's mines were great for eliminating rear threats but the shotgun had minimal range. Taking out another car had to be done up close and personal.



With arcade style physics, high speed racing and plenty of combat opportunities, *Full Auto* should appeal to fans of the *Burnout* series as well as old-school *Twisted Metal* players.





Preview by 4thletter

Publisher: Dreamcatcher
Developer: People Can Fly
Release Date: Jan 24, 2006
Genre(s): FPS
Category: Hellbound
of Players: Multiple

PAINKILLER

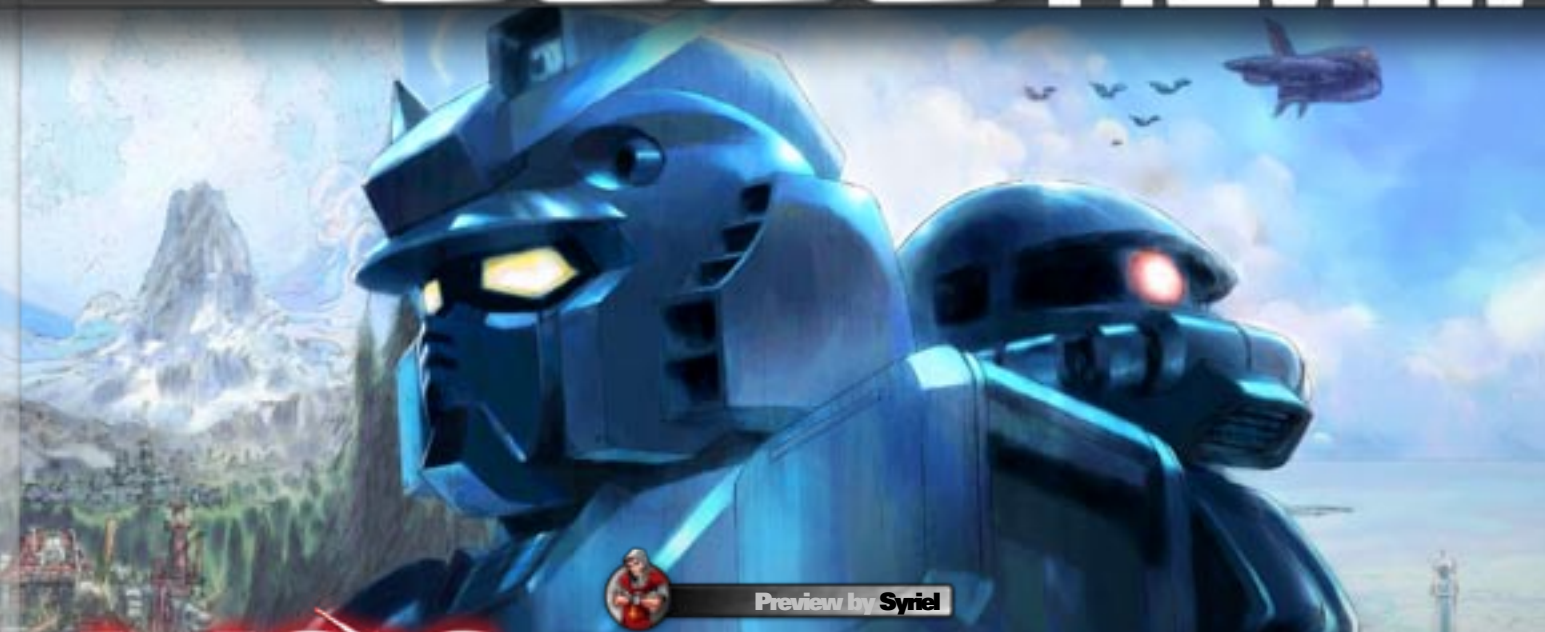
HELL WARS

We've got a glut of World War II titles on the market right now. Does anyone remember when that glut was made out of games that made you go to Hell and back, killing beasties all the way? *Painkiller: Hell Wars* certainly does.

Painkiller, as those of you who played it on the PC know, provides a non-stop variety of action, and it's very welcome here. You're going to do everything from shredding low-level monsters with your spinning pointy death thingy to blasting holes in giant Statue of Liberty-size demons with your shotgun, all while exploring rotted towns, dank prisons, and, of course, Hell. The stages are large and spacious, so you'll be hard-pressed to find monsters running at you single-file so that you can gun them down. Some of them have what it takes to put you six feet deep.

There's some limited "Fetch the Red Key"-style questing, but you're going to be spending 99.9% of your time killing monsters in gruesome (and hilarious) ways. Most of the weapons come with an alt-fire, just to keep things fresh. Your stake launcher turns explosive when you trigger the alternate mode, while your melee weapon fires out a retractable spike. The action is fast and properly arcade-y, too.

Believe it or not, but it has a plot, too. Your character must escape purgatory and that involves killing *lots* of hellbeasts. The more demons you kill, the closer you come to stopping an oncoming Unholy War between Good and Evil. You also get that much closer to achieving salvation. If you're looking for a little bit of the old ultra-violent stress relief, *Painkiller: Hell Wars* is probably your best bet.



Preview by Syrial

MS SAGA

A NEW DAWN

Publisher: Bandai
Developer: BEC
Release Date: February 2006
Genre(s): RPG
Category: Giant Robots
of Players: 1

The past few Gundam titles have been mediocre at best and downright awful at worst, relying more on the license than the gameplay to carry the series. Thankfully, with *MS Saga: A New Dawn* Bandai appears to be taking things in a new and much more interesting direction.

Instead of yet another "big robots battle it out" action game, *MS Saga* is a turn-based RPG set in the future. After an apocalyptic accident, nearly ninety percent of the world's population was wiped out along with much of the technology. Sixty years later the world is just getting back on its feet, when mobile suits start appearing. One night, a black mobile suit destroys an orphanage, leaving two survivors, Tristan and Fritz. Vowing vengeance, the two boys set out on a quest to track down the evil one and make him pay.

Though your initial suits are rather weak, it isn't long before you can start upgrading their parts. The head and torso make up the core of the suit and cannot be changed, but anything else is fair game. This allows for some truly original creations as well as a few *Gundam* classics. Because the game is set in a new universe, expect to see a wide variety of mobile suits making an appearance.

Combat is handled nicely, with each suit sporting both melee and ranged attacks based on their weapon loads. Weapons require a certain amount of energy to use, so powerful attacks cannot be executed straight away. You can see your opponent's energy level and attack type, so choose your moves wisely. Special moves are unique to the pilot, rather than the suit.

With a decent story, solid battle mechanic and plenty of upgrades, *MS Saga* looks like it should appeal to RPG fans as well as the *Gundam* faithful.





Preview by DJPubba

Publisher: Atlus
Developer: Irem
Release Date: May 2006

Genre(s): Adventure
Category: Sandbox
of Players: 2 Players

STEAMBOT CHRONICLES

Games that allow you to go anywhere and do anything usually involve cop-killing and gang-banging, but not anymore. *Steambot Chronicles* (previously the oddly-named *Bumpy Trot*, in Japan) from Atlus provides the same 'little character in a big city' gameplay in a much more anime vein. In fact, if Hayao Miyazaki created a sandbox-style game, it would probably look a lot like this.

You play Vanilla after he wakes up with amnesia (it happens) and meets a girl named Connie. It just so happens that she's in a popular band, and the adventure begins as you meet the rest of her musical compatriots. From that point on, the course the game takes is in your hands. Vanilla can join Connie's band and become a musical superstar, or he can relegate his harmonica skills to panhandling on street corners. With

you behind the wheel, Vanilla can stay arrow-straight or go down the villainous path and take over the world. Even the (voiced) dialogue choices you make determine if Vanilla's friendly, apathetic, or a real jerk.

Of course, the game is called *Steambot Chronicles*, so there is plenty of mech action. Your "Trotmobile" is entirely customizable, allowing you to install different leg parts (wheels, 2 or 4 legs), weapons (blades, hammers, guns, even a chainsaw!), special mission-specific functions, and more. The mech segments are interesting to play and control similarly to *Katamari Damacy's* dual-stick setup. With all of its optional missions, robot customization, and branching dialogue, we barely scratched the surface of *Steambot Chronicles*. If the localization staff at Atlus continues to do what it does best, they may have another gem on their hands.



Publisher: 2k Games
Developer: SCE Cambridge Studio
Release Date: February 2006

Genre(s): Action
Category: 3rd Person
of Players: 1



Preview by Metalbot

It's official:

Jack Bauer's best day will always be lousier than John McClane's worst day.

Playing as Jack Bauer (and friends) is mostly comprised of run-and-gun third-person action, fortunately you're given the option to turn on auto aim improving things tenfold. Mini games are scattered throughout, thrown in to spice things up every few levels: car chases, rooftop sniping, hard drive hacking, door key deciphering and hostage interrogation (which is awesome), to name a few. The version we got our hands on still needs a little work in the vehicle physics area, but with some time left until its launch date, hopefully things will be smoothed out.

Paul Gadd, a producer on the show, was hired as the voice director, making sure that every line of dialogue was spoken naturally; there's no static "I can read from a piece of paper" voice acting here. The actors from the show also lent their voices to the game. On top of this, "24's" composer Sean Callery wrote the music. Close your eyes and you will think you're watching the TV show!

24: The Game takes place between days 2 and 3 of the TV show. The answers to many questions still lingering in our minds will be revealed: who was behind the President's attempted assassination, how did Jack and Chase first start working together, and how did Kim and Chloe come to work at CTU? Yes, this is an official story arc in the "24" universe; the game's script was co-written by Duppy Demetrius, one of the show's writers. The story feels just as engaging and vast in scope, helped along by the the patented "'24' split cam" for those important in-game cinematic moments. For fans of the television show, this game will be a must have.





METAL SAGA

Preview by DJPubba

Publisher : Atlus
Developer : Success
Release Date : March 2006

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Post-Apocalyptic
of players : 1

Metal Max may not be a series that's well known in the US, but it's had a long and successful run in Japan. *Metal Saga* will be the first title in the series released in the states, and from what we've seen so far, it looks to infuse the stale RPG genre with a healthy dose of humor. Considering Atlus's track record with quirky titles such as *Disgaea: Hour of Darkness*, it is the perfect company to publish it.

Set in a post-apocalyptic desert wasteland, the game boasts some of the most creative and bizarre looking enemies we've laid eyes on. Most are an unusual cross between organism and machine. They are the offspring of a gigantic supercomputer designed to solve the world's pollution crisis. Unfortunately, its solution turned out to be the extermination of mankind.

You assume the role of a young bounty hunter determined to follow in his father's footsteps, tracking down the weird robotic "outlaws" that're still following their orders to wipe out humanity. At your disposal is a huge arsenal, including heavy armored vehicles and even cannon-wielding dogs! However, how you play the game is totally up to you. You can spend time hunting down outlaws, salvaging lost technology, modding your tanks, or exploring the vast landscape. The game has a very open architecture, with twelve different mini-games and a variety of endings.

By the name of the series, you're probably wondering if the game has any relation to the *Mad Max* movies. While there is no direct relationship, the environments and design elements do seem to be inspired by those films. However, with its surreal monsters and storyline, *Metal Saga* will take you not just *Beyond Thunderdome*, but also *Beyond the Looking Glass*. If you're looking for a game that's different and doesn't take itself too seriously, then this may be right up your alley.



Preview by Syriel

Publisher: N/A
Developer: Handmade Games
Release Date: Unknown

Genre(s): Shooter
Category: Sci-Fi
of Players: 1



Back when Sega was in its prime, both the Saturn and Dreamcast were home to a number of solid 2D shooters. Requiring lightning fast reflexes and expert skill to complete, the genre has always had a devoted following. It's appropriate then, that one of the latest homebrew titles to hit the Dreamcast is an original shooter.

Drill is set in the near future, when insectoid aliens have invaded and are bent on wiping out all life. After the requisite anime-inspired cinema scene, it's off to do battle. Though the demo version only offers one character, the full game should give players a choice of three.

Shot patterns are determined by how you press the attack button. Tap it for a wide shot, and hold it down for a focused beam. You can also unleash an optional drill attack that devastates the chosen foe, but greatly reduces your maneuvering speed. Completing combos nullifies your opponent's bullets, so there is an incentive to play well.

Though *Drill* isn't as flashy as some of today's titles, it makes good use of the Dreamcast hardware with brief loading times and responsive controls. There's no analog support, but movement with the d-pad is smooth and precise. Audio is crisp and clear, though the death scream could probably be toned down a bit.

Visually the *Drill* demo straddles the line between homebrew product and professional release. Sprites are detailed and well animated, but background designs are a bit repetitive. The font used for the text boxes is also difficult to read unless you're playing the game on a VGA monitor.

It's great to see homebrew programmers supporting the Dreamcast, especially with games of this quality. While there's no word yet on when the full version will get a release, anyone can check out the demo version by downloading it from the official website at <http://www.drill.rr.nu>. Just burn it to a CD-R, drop it into your Dreamcast and play.





By: Kouhdon

QUEST for REMAKES

AGD INTERACTIVE

Hard as it may be to believe nowadays, there was a time when what packed 'em in at the local EB wasn't the latest FPS, stealth platformer, or sports franchise. In fact, throughout the '80s and early '90s, the games featured on all those monitors and cardboard cutouts were of a very different breed: adventure games. These games generally featured very little action (loading up even the most basic screen usually took about five minutes of disk-spinning from the ol' Commodore 64), but instead relied on their stories to keep the player involved, with a focus on interactive environments, compelling characters, and interesting puzzles that the player could solve.

AGDI's KQ1 was a big step up...

As anyone who remembers the time period knows, the corporate giant of that era was Sierra On-Line. Sierra had no less than invented the modern adventure game with Roberta Williams's *King's Quest* in 1984, and continued to stay prominent all the way to their decline with other popular, long-running series like Al Lowe's *Leisure Suit Larry* and Cory and Lori Cole's *Quest for Glory*. Like so many other companies, Sierra had difficulties finding ways to keep their simple little puzzlers relevant to a new wave of gamers that had grown up on console play, and eventually all but abandoned the genre.

Though the big studios have moved on, adventure games still have solid support among passionate fans and disgruntled developers who remember the glory days of story-based gaming. Some of these people have begun to take matters into their own hands, forming their own independent game companies to try to get adventure games back into the public eye. Anonymous Game Developers Interactive is one such company. Also known as Tierra Games, AGDI works at remaking old Sierra adventure games into something that modern gamers can appreciate.

"We were just always fans of Sierra's old adventure games of the 80's and 90's," said Anonymous Game Developer #2, one of the founders of AGDI who still appears as "anonymous" in the game's credits. "When they started to fade into oblivion, we decided to take it upon ourselves to try and recreate some of our favourites and draw some more attention to what was a dying genre."

...but KQ2 blew it out of the water!



AGDI's first release was a straight port of the original *King's Quest*, with the graphics updated and the old text-parser interface replaced by the icon-based point-and-click interface used in Sierra's later entries in the series. The changes were not merely limited to graphics, though. As long-time fans of Sierra's adventure games themselves, AGDI was careful to listen to and fix the nearly universal complaints that fans the games had. In particular, this included game-crashing bugs, "dead-end situations," and puzzles that needlessly punished the player for not knowing about them ahead of time.

"We've [...] read enough rants from frustrated players, saying what they didn't like about the originals and so we've made every attempt to avoid making those same mistakes while giving the fans more of what they do want," said AGD #2. "[...] A frustrated player isn't having fun when they're annoyed at having to restart their game from scratch!"

When asked why they remained anonymous, AGD #2 told us, "We wanted the focus to remain on the games and not draw attention to the developers [...]. These days, most fans know our true identities, but we still like to remain 'anonymous' on our site (and in the game credits) anyway to honor the tradition and stay true to the company's namesake."

Following the success of *King's Quest* (the developers' website claims almost half a million downloads in the first year of release), AGDI's remake of *King's Quest II* took even more liberties. In-jokes and references to later games were added to try and further please the fans of the series (including a hilarious throwaway sequence where the main character takes out his anger on a future annoying mascot). Still, the main thread of the story remains the same.

"In the remake, you'll find most of the familiar characters doing the same things they did in the AGI version of the game; it's just that their personalities have been fleshed out a whole lot more."

AGDI's current project is a remake of *Quest for Glory II: Trial By Fire*. AGDI chose to remake *Quest for Glory II* because it was the only game in the five-part series that has not had a VGA version (the first game was remade by Sierra in 1992 using VGA graphics and the point-and-click interface, but when it sold poorly, plans for a *QFGII* remake were shelved).

This new project has brought a new array of challenges and rewards for the team: in addition to the complex puzzles and interactive settings present in any adventure game, the QFG series throws in a twist by adding in RPG elements: arcade combat sequence, stat-building, and multiple classes that will affect the way puzzles can be solved.

Leisure Suit Graham



"[T]he entire game has been very challenging to program and get everything working properly," said AGD #2. "There are usually a minimum of 3 ways to solve any given puzzle, and each of those solutions requires its own set of graphics, programming, artwork etc. These events all need to be tied to the stats system as well and caution needs to be taken to make sure that one solution does not cause bugs with an alternate solution for the same puzzle."

Although all of AGDI's works have the permission of Vivendi Universal (the company that now owns Sierra), its staff does not intend to create remakes forever. AGDI has expanded to form a second commercial company, Himalaya Studios, which is presently working on a completely original adventure game entitled *Al Emmo* and the *Lost Dutchman's Mine*. Previews images of this game can be found on their website at <http://www.himalayastudios.com/wq.htm>.

AGDI's *Quest for Glory II* remake will be released at an undisclosed point in the future. In the meantime, all of AGDI's other games can be downloaded at <http://www.agdinteractive.com>. They're free, they're legal, and they're a piece of classic gaming history. What more do you need?



We've been waiting to do this since KQ5!



A shameless in-game plug for QFG2

TRIP REPORT TABOO TUESDAY

THE WACKY ADVENTURES OF
ROGER DANISH AND SYRIEL

Here at HGM we attend a number of gaming events where publishers show off their latest games. Sometimes they're local, but other times we have to travel to far-flung lands in order to see what's up. This isn't a problem if you're hyper-organized like KouAidou or Lynxara, but for the rest of us it can be something of a challenge. With the Trip Report we're going to give you an insider's look at what's involved in typical "HGM Business Trip." Read it. You'll laugh. You'll cry. God knows we did.

For the inaugural edition of the Trip Report we sent Roger Danish and Syriell down to sunny San Diego in order to attend THQ's *WWE Smackdown vs RAW 2006* launch event. Held in conjunction with the Taboo Tuesday PPV, the event was designed to show off the final version of the PlayStation 2 game (reviewed in the last issue), give us some hands on with the brand spanking new PSP game and show off the WWE mobile games. And thus, the stage is set.

October 17, 2005

Roger: Hey, Syriell, what are you doing in two weeks? Want to check out this wrestling thing with me?
Syriell: Wrestling? Why bother? It's all fake anyway.
Roger: The divas wrestle in their lingerie.
Syriell: I'm so there!

October 31, 2005

[Roger and Syriell are scheduled to fly down to San Diego on a 4:50pm flight. Roger was at the airport by 2 pm. Syriell, however, ran into some last minute issues.]

1:20 -- As usual, everyone seems to know exactly when I'm in a rush, as the phone just kept ringing off the hook. I meant to be at the BART train by 3:00, finally made it 20 minutes late. Thought about taking a cab, but decided against it. Wondered what was up with the two fire trucks screaming down the street as I walked to BART. -- 3:25 -- Passengers boarding the train in San Francisco's Mission District report that a service station near the freeway exit has just blown up. No, this doesn't happen every day in San Francisco. It's usually a nice quiet city. At least it explains the fire trucks. -- 3:26 -- Thanks self for not taking cab. Had I done so, I would have gotten stuck in the traffic surrounding the flaming service station. -- 3:45 -- Roger calls to find out if I'm at the airport yet. Not quite. Seems they changed the BART schedules on me. Have to connect to another train. 4:10 -- Finally make it to SFO and walk over to security. -- 4:20 -- Roger calls to tell me that the plane has started boarding. I tell him it's no problem; I'm at the front of the line and will be there soon. -- 4:40 -- Finish up with security (mental note, the screeners at SFO seem to make up rules on-the-fly that aren't on the TSA website) and hustle over to the gate. -- 4:45 -- Roger calls in a panic, to tell me they're shutting the door. -- 4:47 -- I walk up to the gate and the agent asks for my boarding pass. Uh oh, I'm screwed. Not quite. He hands me a seat in first class and sends me on my way. Score! Procrastination pays off! -- 4:50 -- In my seat and ready for takeoff. Roger can't believe my luck.

Two of the lovely ladies responsible for bringing the WWE into the world of videogames.



Diva Candice Michelle and Superstar Shelton Benjamin talk about the WWE and Benjamin's love of videogames.



One of the new WWE Cell Phone games!

Superstar Shelton Benjamin autographs the THQ press kit for one of our lucky readers.



The Bra and Panty match pwns joo. We love the hot pink bed in the ring. It's a nice touch.



Later that night we tried to check into the Westin. The exchange went something like this:

Hotel Guy: I've got a Mr. Roger Danish for two nights, but Mr. Syriell doesn't check until tomorrow.
Syriell: Well, can you fix it?
Hotel Guy: Sorry, we're sold out.
Roger: That sucks, dude. Hey, at least it's warm outside!
Syriell: ...
Roger: Well, I'm heading up to the room to get some work done. Good luck!

After further discussion (and some help from the amazingly cool Gretchen over at THQ) Mr. Hotel Guy was able to find me a room at a hotel across town. In the end karma worked itself out, as I was able to get online and get some work done while the Westin had technical problems and was without Internet all night.

November 1, 2005

After waiting for a shuttle that never came, I finally made it back over to the Westin, just in time for the start of the event. It started off with a presentation on the game, before switching into a Q&A with WWE Superstar Shelton Benjamin and Diva Candice Michelle. Though Michelle wasn't a huge gaming fan, Benjamin is, without a doubt, a hardcore gamer and an obvious fan of his PSP. To him, life is a game, whether he's playing on the small screen or playing around with his fellow wrestlers in the ring.

"To me, I'm just a kid being paid to roughhouse with my buddies," said Benjamin.

After the interview, both Benjamin and Michelle autographed the awesomely cool press kit THQ assembled for the event. (Both Roger and I took a photo with the awesomely beautiful Michelle, but it somehow mysteriously vanished from his camera. We think the gremlins took it.) Packed with WWE goodies, the kit includes a copy of the game, a Diva magazine and a Diva DVD. Also, just because you guys are special, we also threw in an autographed copy of a Rey Mysterio wrestling mask! One lucky winner gets it all.

After the event Roger and I spent some time playing with the PSP version of the game as well as the mobile games. Playing the PSP version was quite impressive, as it masterfully replicates the PS2 game in nearly every way. All of the game modes are here, all of the characters are here, almost every mode supports ad-hoc wireless play and to top it all off, the PSP game sports some bonus features. Sweet.

The most notable feature is the data swap ability. Players who own both versions of *WWE Smackdown vs RAW 2006* will be able to move their save file seamlessly between the two games. This means if you're in the middle of a season on the PS2 you can just save it, transfer it to the PSP, and then continue on right where you left off. The all-new arcade mode offers three new mini-games, and last, but not least, there is a hidden Superstar that can only be unlocked by playing the game on the PSP.

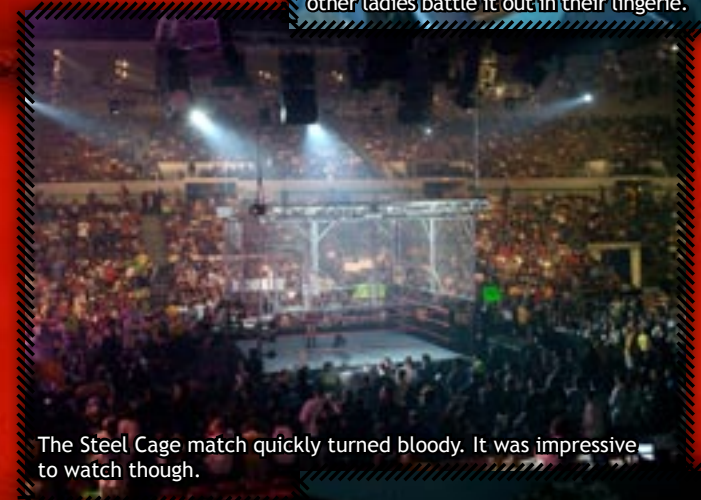
Over on the phones, both *WWE Raw* and *WWE Smackdown* have their own games. Of the two, *WWE Smackdown* is the more impressive beast, with fully animated characters and a fun career mode. *WWE Raw* on the other hand, plays more like a basic beat-'em-up with primitive graphics; even the Divas look like muscle-bound oafs rather than sexy ladies.

Later that night we headed off for the final part of the event, the Taboo Tuesday PPV. Being that neither Roger nor myself had ever been to an actual PPV event (let alone seen a WWE match on TV), it was quite the experience. Even though the action was scripted, the fans were extremely into the action and the physicality could not be denied. In some ways it was like watching an extremely violent (and sometimes bloody) soap opera.

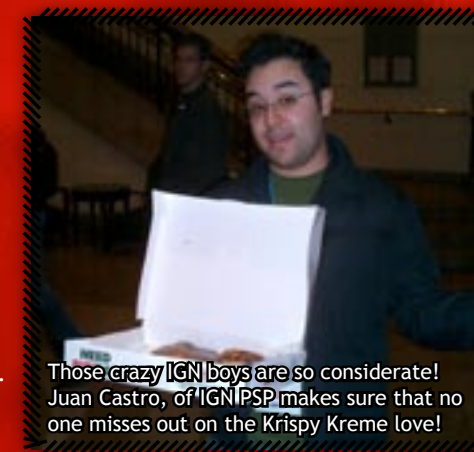
Before heading back to the hotel, we made a pit stop for some Krispy Kreme doughnuts and relaxed with some of the other journalists. We would have gone out and partied, but Roger somehow ended up on the 7 AM flight back to San Francisco. Ouch.



Roger Danish carefully analyzes the Diva Fantasy Match as Candice Michelle and the other ladies battle it out in their lingerie.



The Steel Cage match quickly turned bloody. It was impressive to watch though.



Those crazy IGN boys are so considerate! Juan Castro, of IGN/PSP makes sure that no one misses out on the Krispy Kreme love!



Matt Jones, host of National Lampoon's Gamers, busts a pose in the limo on the way back to the hotel, while the rest of us chow down on Krispy Kremes.

WIN the WWE SMACKDOWN vs. RAW 2006 press kit!

Just send in your Name, Address, Email address and Age to:

Win the WWE press kit!
C/O Hardcore Gamer Magazine
22 Rausch Street
Suite #2
San Francisco, CA 94103

One lucky winner will go home with the official Press Kit, complete with a copy of the game and items autographed by Candice Michelle, Shelton Benjamin and Rey Mysterio! All entries MUST be received by 2/28/2006. If we don't have it, you can't win!

JUST HOW FAIR IS



Feature by Melf

It seems like more and more publishers today are taking hackers to court in an attempt to set a limit to what can be done with their intellectual properties. Whether it's Tecmo fighting to keep the *DOA* girls reasonably clothed, or Sony putting its foot down against hackers and code devices, publishers and hardware manufacturers are unwilling to accept customization of their products by the users. Web sites are being taken offline, stores raided, and hackers jailed. Yes, the modding community has come under fire more and more in recent years.



The thing is, this has actually been going on for ages. Modding has been a part of the gaming industry practically since its inception. Programmers have long reworked, reverse-engineered, and modified existing hardware and software to expand their

use and capabilities, often well beyond the parameters set by the original manufacturers. Remember playing those altered *Pac-Man* coin-ops way back in the day? You know, the ones that let you move at light speed and gave the game a level of intensity the original never had? Well, when those speed chip hacks were first introduced by Artic International in 1982, Midway took them to court, and a Chicago court ruled that the chips were illegal. Power pellets or not, *Pac-Man* would be forced to take things slow at an early age.

galoob

GAME GENIE™



Nintendo showed a similar attitude in 1991, when Galoob released its Game Genie for the NES. Fighting tooth-and-nail to keep unlicensed software and peripherals off its console, Nintendo cited direct and contributory infringement. They argued that the Game Genie allowed gamers to alter games, thus creating derivative works (unauthorized variations). The court eventually ruled against Nintendo, stating that none of the modifications made by Galoob's device were derivative, since none of them could stand on their own. Once you shut off the console and removed the Game Genie, all modifications were lost.

Nintendo's attitude towards modification was commonplace in

the industry, but it still didn't prevent programmers and would-be hackers from trying, a lesson also learned by Sega when Accolade reverse-engineered the Genesis in 1991. Not an official Genesis licensee, Accolade dissected the console to find out how to make games for it and passed their acquired knowledge to their developers, who promptly put the information to use by releasing *Ishido: Way of the Stones*. Sega, already worried about increasing piracy in Asia, presented a redesigned Genesis at the 1991 Consumer Electronics Show, and proudly demonstrated that *Ishido* was no longer compatible. They had included what was called the "TMSS initialization code," a lockout system that would scan the inserted cartridge for four bytes of data containing the letters "S-E-G-A." If the initialization code was found in the correct location, the game would work, prompting the now famous "PRODUCED BY OR UNDER LICENSE FROM SEGA ENTERPRISES LTD" message. Undeterred, Accolade continued its reverse-engineering, and eventually discovered how to include the TMSS code in its games, with the exception of *Onslaught*, which had the code placed in the wrong location. Sega sued, but lost on the grounds that they had no legal control over the functional aspects of their hardware. Since you could not read the object code in their cartridges with the naked eye, it had to be disassembled, either by hand or by machine, and this complex process required copying the code. For that reason, Accolade's reverse-engineering was considered fair use.

It all sounds very confusing, doesn't it? What exactly then, constitutes fair usage of a property? How far can someone legally alter an existing piece of software before the iron hammer of the law bears down upon them? As seen above, history regarding the subject is a tangled mess of legal decisions both in favor and against modification at all levels.

ON WHAT A TANGLED WEB WE WEAVE

It may look like Midway and Nintendo's cases are similar, but they are, in fact, quite different. In Midway's case, the court ruled in their favor, since the chip was something you permanently installed, thus permanently altering the manner in which the game was played. Nintendo, on the other hand, lost their case, as none of the changes created by the Game Genie remained once you shut off your NES and removed it. A clear line was apparently drawn: change someone else's intellectual property permanently, and you'll be sued.

This sounds simple enough, to be sure, but what then of the 1999 decision by a California federal court to prohibit the sale of Playstation Game Enhancers, which allowed play of import games and worked in a fashion similar to that of the Gameshark? The Enhancer didn't perform any lasting change to the Playstation, so it looked like no wrongdoing occurred. Not so. The court sided with Sony, even though the Game Enhancer didn't permanently infringe the original copyrighted work (much like the Game Genie). The court based its decision on the fact that the Enhancer violated the 1998 Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), which stated that it was illegal to distribute technologies specifically designed to get past any type of lock-out measure created by the manufacturer.

Most recently, The DMCA was upheld in a controversial decision by the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled against three programmers who created a free, open-source program to use with products made by Blizzard. Called BnetD, it gave gamers the freedom to set up their own multiplayer games on the internet without having to use Blizzard's Battle.net service. Although the creators argued that their reverse-engineered program was within the terms of fair use, the court thought otherwise.

MANY SUBTLE SHADES OF GRAY

This is the problem with the way the American legal system deals with modification. It prefers to walk the fence and has been performing this balancing act for years. Courts are apparently more lenient towards a mod if it is temporary, for private use, and is distributed for free; as was the case with Galoob (who was lucky to fight its case before the DMCA was around). On the other hand, permanent mods (chips and such) and



those alterations that are sold (like the import-friendly Game Enhancer) are a prime target for litigation, even if you, the gamer, aren't actually the one breaking the law.

For example, take the case of Micro Star, creators of the *Nuke It!* level pack for 3D Realms' *Duke Nukem 3D*. Essentially a collection of homemade levels taken off the internet and sold on a CD-ROM, Micro Star was quickly sued by GT Interactive, Formgen (*Duke's* original publisher) and 3D Realms. Judge Alex Kozinski's decision

was that only the owner of the property could create a sequel, even if the developer included level-building tools in the game itself. Micro Star wasn't actually changing the game themselves, but were held liable for contributory infringement. Providing people with the means to mod their games or hardware is the same as modifying it yourself, in the eyes of the law.

Still, there are many shades of grey here. There are a plethora of sites on the web that will install a mod chip in your Xbox, Playstation 2, and Game-Cube, for a price. These chips are very permanent, and are obviously not a charity write-off for the company that installs them. Why then, isn't the FBI beating down their doors?

That's not all the law has to contend with. Many developers are actually embracing the mod community and are giving them the tools needed to create their own code. For example, everyone knows the origins of Valve's *Counter Strike*, and the support shown by other companies like ID for their *Quake* series has breathed new life into games that would have otherwise been tossed by the wayside long ago. How far does this freedom to create extend? What's allowed and what isn't? This delicate balancing act between support and disdain now blows like a gale-force wind through the holes that riddle U.S. intellectual property law.

Want to make matters worse? Change a copyrighted work and you may tick off a game's creator, even when its publisher has no qualms with you. Under the copyright act, visual artists control the use of their name when it's associated with a modification of their work. These "moral rights" give the creator the power to take you to court if they don't like the way you altered their creation. This would give someone like Tomonobu Itagaki the right to go after the creators of the *Dead or Alive Extreme Volleyball* nude code, even though the suit brought forth by Tecmo against *ninja-hacker.net* was dismissed last May. Believe me, the last thing you want is someone like Itagaki

CONFUSION IS NOTHING NEW

serving you with court papers. By now, your head is probably spinning, and you're most likely wondering what is legal and what isn't when it comes to modding. The simple answer is...that there is no simple answer. The DMCA clearly clashes with existing copyright law. Congress' actions only stir up the mud in already unclear waters, and we may never fully answer the question regarding the rights

to alter personal copies of copyrighted works, and of companies to distribute devices and technologies to aid in said alteration.

Does this mean those of us with modded consoles will have to sleep with one eye open? Most likely not, but there is definitely a degree of risk when it comes to altering your hardware and games. The Man is watching, but due to the lack of clarity in the law, his vision is somewhat impaired.

INTERVIEW WITH JASON SCHULTZ

Jason Schultz is a staff lawyer for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and specializes in intellectual property and reverse engineering. A dedicated defender of open source developers, he has been at the forefront of patent litigation and copyright law for most of his career, and helped found the Samuelson Clinic, the country's first legal clinic in the U.S. to deal with high tech policy issues. Most recently, EFF was involved with the BNETD case, in which Vivendi Universal sued three software programmers who created an open source program that allows gamers to play popular Blizzard titles like *Warcraft* on servers not belonging to Blizzard's Battle.net service.

HGM: Why do you think the courts have decided to walk such a fine line concerning the rights of both gamers and publishers?

JASON SCHULTZ: I think there is an overabundance of concern regarding illegal copying in today's court system. Judges have been led to believe that we should sacrifice any and all other policy goals to try to prohibit what we often call "piracy," but in doing so, we are losing some of the things most precious to America -- the right to tinker, the right to innovate, compatibility between products, and the right to make personal "fair" uses of the games and program you buy. I think we will look back on this time and realize we've lost a lot.

HGM: In your experience, does the law seem to favor individuals who alter their personal copies of copyrighted work, or hardware and software manufacturers?

JS: It depends a bit on the scenario, but the laws are meant to treat each side equally. Lately, though, I think you've seen a trend for courts to preference the manufacturers over individuals.

HGM: In layman's terms, can you tell us how much the DMCA and existing copyright clash? Is it in only a few areas, or has this created large gaps in the clarity of the law?

JS: More and more, companies are putting technological restrictions on the use of software. These restrictions, often called "Digital Rights Management", are protected under the DMCA from tampering. However, sometimes there are legitimate reasons to alter DRM, such as when you want to make a backup copy for safe keeping or a mixed CD for a friend. The way the DMCA was written, it's unclear if breaking DRM for these legitimate purposes is truly legal or illegal.

HGM: In all your experience, are there any cases that stand out?

JS: Yes, several. It would be hard to give a large answer, but the BNETD case, the Skylink case, and the Lexmark case are all important.

HGM: The recent ruling against BnetD could be a big blow to reverse-engineering and modifications in general. What type of repercussions might we expect from this decision?

JS: I can't comment on BNETD's future, because we might appeal, but if this ruling stands, we can expect more game makers to limit any mods or add-ons that consumers want to use in a way the game maker doesn't.

HGM: What do you think will be needed to clarify this issue legally once and for all?

JS: Many good court decisions or some attention by Congress to make it clear that you can break DRM for legitimate purposes.

HGM: Where can gamers get more information regarding the legality of console and game modification?

JS: Stay tuned. EFF is working on a guide.



PlayStation.

VECTOR DREAMS PART 1

So, you've got this friggin' Vectrex that's been buried in your closet for the past century collecting dust. You've played all the games for it 2,408 times already and the thought of playing game 2,409 just doesn't motivate you to dig it out and see if it still works... but you don't want to sell it because you know you'll get that itch someday. Well, maybe that's not you exactly. Perhaps you have two Vectrii and don't mind hacking one up. Regardless of your desire to actually do this or not, we're going to bust one of these puppies wide open ourselves and do something really gnarly. I mean, c'mon. The warranty expired, like, a hundred years ago and you can get 'em on eBay fairly cheap now. Might as well go for broke. *Gulp*, right?

Enough babble; let's begin. Today we are going to transform our Vectrex into a tiny arcade machine capable of playing all of the classic vector arcade games from your youth. How old are you anyway? I'm 37. Oh, you're 12? Well, still, trust me, it'll be neat.

HARDWARE NEEDED

- ZVG (Zektor Vector Generator).**
This is the interface between a PC and a vector monitor. **\$200**
- Via EP1A Mini-ITX PC motherboard.**
The new brain of your new old Vectrex. **\$120**
- Mini-ITX case.**
To steal parts from, like a power supply. **\$45**
- 512 megs RAM.**
Even this is overkill. **\$69**
- 40 gig 2.5" hard drive.**
More overkill. **\$49**
- Misc. cables and whatnot.**
There's always whatnot. **\$30**
- A-Pac.**
The interface between the Vectrex controller and the PC. **\$39**
- Vectrex.**
I'm going to list the cost of this as \$0, since you have that one buried in your closet, still, right?
Total cost: \$552
(labor not calculated)

The first thing to do is make sure that old boy still works.



Yup, it still works.

The key to making this project happen is this weird little circuit board thingy called the ZVG.



...the heck you say?

Yeah, okay, the name alone calls for some more babble. *Zektor* was the name of a very obscure Sega vector arcade game that ran on the same hardware as their *Star Trek*, *Space Fury*, *Eliminator* (also pretty rare), and *Tac-Scan* arcade games (called the G08 system).

Zonn Moore, the founder of Zektor (the company), has been a vector arcade game nut and a pretty talented hardware hacker since way back in the day. He's known fairly well in vector game nut/arcade game collecting circles for his work documenting the hardware for and otherwise preserving the old Cinematronics vector games, such as *Armor Attack* and *Star Castle*. He's a big chunk of the reason for why you're able to play emulated versions of those games on your computer. One day Zonn got it in his head that he would prefer to see these emulated vector games being played on a real vector monitor instead of a computer screen which simply does not do them proper justice. He decided he would build and sell a piece of hardware that would achieve that task: playing emulated games on your computer but displayed on a real vector monitor. Luckily Zonn, being real smart, succeeded in doing it, unlike myself, who had a similar thought but just went back to munching on cheese puffs. And thus ends the bubbly bits of the article.



So rare, they go for more moolah now than when they originally sold.

Feature by DJPubba

⚡ WARNING ⚡

High voltage ahead. Do not attempt to duplicate this hackery unless you are experienced in avoiding getting the living hell zapped out of you around the guts of televisions and other devices powered by lots of electrons moving to and fro.

The first thing we must do is crack open the case. Make sure the thing is unplugged first!!



Five screws removed and it's open, easy as that.

The next step is to safely discharge the CRT (so there is less chance of dying) and remove the anode wire from the CRT (the suction cup). The preferred method is to take a class and learn how to do it using a professional tool designed for the task. I didn't have one of those or know where to find a class, so the first time I ever did it, I just looked up how to do it on the internet. Here, I used a screwdriver and some alligator clips with wire attached and clipped to the screwdriver on one side and the ground wire of the monitor on the other. This is done as a safety measure to avoid death. I recommend you not do this if you've never done it before. Further, neither I nor HGM takes responsibility for you getting hurt doing this if you're dumb enough to try it without learning how first.



Did I mention you could die over a silly Vectrex?

There is a clip under the cup that must be compressed to remove from the CRT, one side at a time.



Compress the clips...



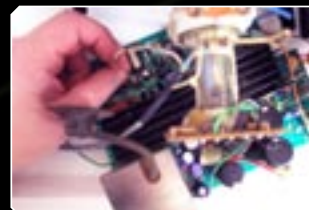
...and the suction cup comes off.

Now that the danger of death has been lessened, the next step is remove the power pcb from its mountings so it is easier to access the spots to which we want to connect the ZVG cable. Remove the two screws from the solder side of the PCB and remove the ground wire which is attached to the CRT mounting screw.



The whole thing won't come free at this point, but it'll be loose enough to get at what needs gettin' at.

Next, we unplug the X/Y and Z cables and plug the ZVG cable in their place.



Refer to the ZVG docs if these pics don't do it for you.

Now, we want to remove all the old unused cables, including the old audio cable, so they're not just hanging around loose inside the thing when we're done. Where the old audio cable was plugged into the monitor power board is where we want to add a new cable going from the PC's audio out to the original connector. Since we're going to avoid making any serious permanent changes to the Vectrex hardware this means plugging audio in here instead of hacking apart the original Vectrex wiring and jiggering the volume knob with solder blobs and other ugliness. That means the original volume control will not work. You'll get one volume level - loud. Make sure you remember to adjust the volume on your PC to an acceptable level before finalizing things.

Since I do this kind of stilly stuff fairly often, I invested in one of these spiffy, yet expensive, connector tools that quickly attaches wires onto connectors with no fuss or muss or even crimping. If you don't plan to do this often, you will probably want to go to the local electronics joint and get some kind of .100" 2-pin connector and a cheap crimp tool to make the connection.

By now you should get around to setting up that PC mobo and getting it running (install the RAM, format the HD, etc.).



A Mini-ITX motherboard.



With this, it was oh so easy to hack the end off a PC audio cable, then put a new connector on the end to plug into the Vectrex's audio connector.

Since DVMAME is a derivative of DOS MAME, we're going to use FreeDOS. Forget about Windows unless you want to spend a lot more money on both the OS and the hardware to run it. The \$120 motherboard/CPU we're using for this project is not up to running the DOS version of MAME in Windows with anything approaching an acceptable speed. Why FreeDOS instead of MS-DOS? Because, well, it's free. <http://www.freedos.org/>

You'll need to temporarily connect a CD drive or floppy drive to install the OS and the rest of the warez you need to make this thing live.

The other software you'll want (DVMAME and VM_MENU) is available from Zektor's web site.

<http://www.zektor.com/zvg>

Download and install them pups and then *cough* obtain *cough* (alt.binaries.emulators.misc) *cough* the ROMs for the games you'll want to be running (see sidebar).

At this point, we're almost ready to be able to get sound and video to appear on the Vectrex. Just a couple of things to do before we can actually play some games (albeit with a keyboard for controls) and test our setup. Go ahead and replace the anode wire (clip/suction cup) on the Vectrex's monitor.

Following the ZVG's manual, configure the jumpers and check out the PC's bios to make sure the parallel port is active and in ECP mode. Make note of its DMA/IRQ numbers. Then we edit our autoexec.bat files to add the correct environment settings ("set ZVGPORT=P378 D3 I7 M29" in our case) and run ZVGTWEAK from the PC. Of course, you'll need a keyboard and a regular monitor hooked up to do this, so borrow the ones from your PC (you can put them back when you're done). Then we enter the Vectrex settings from the ZVG manual into the ZVGTWEAK screen to get things set up on the ZVG for a Vectrex (you could be doing this to a real arcade cabinet instead of a Vectrex, if you so desired). The chances of the picture being perfect at this point are slim, so you'll also want to adjust the pots on the ZVG that are marked X/Y size/center (four different ones) and the brightness knob on the back of the Vectrex (be careful of the high voltage bits if you still have the back of the case off).

Once you have the screen looking the way you want it's time to play some games!

Type CD /DVMAME and then VM_MENU (change that depending on where you stuck your DVMAME directory, of course).

So, if it's working properly, exit out and edit vm.bat and change -nostretch to -stretch. Stick a -ror on the same line as well. That'll fix it so games'll be looking just dandy next time you launch 'em. The only problem is that, currently, there's no way to rotate the front end (VM_MENU) so we're stuck with the menu system sideways until someone writes a new front end — and a new front end it'll have to be, because, apparently, Ian Boffin, the author of VM_MENU, lost the source code. Unless, of course, you don't mind your Vectrex laying on its side to play. Bugs me that way. *shrug*. If all's well, edit your AUTOEXEC.BAT file to launch VM_MENU on boot and that's pretty much all there is for the software side of things.



Your stuff will be sideways at this point, pro-bab-ably.



This alone is worth the price.



Now we're talkin'!

WHAT ABOUT VECTREX GAMES?

Oh, you can play them still. There's an emulator for the PC called MESS that will drive the ZVG (The DOS version, actually). The only problem is that there's no vector front end so you can't play them with the cabinet all buttoned up and looking stock. You've got to have a keyboard and PC monitor hooked up to launch the games. Hopefully some day soon that will change.

Tune in next issue for Part 2 of Vector Dream to find out how we stuff all that PC junk inside the Vectrex and keep it closed without using duct tape, as well as get the original Vectrex controllers working with our new setup. Feel free to pop on over to our message boards if you need advice on anything I didn't have room to go into more detail about. www.hardcoregamer.com

WHAT GAMES WILL I BE ABLE TO PLAY?

Sir, if you modify your Vectrex as we are, you will be able to play the following vector arcade games on it:

Atari

Asteroids
Asteroids Deluxe
Battle Zone (didn't work for us)
Black Widow
Gravitar
Lunar Lander (gives warning message at boot, but works)
Major Havoc
Quantum
Red Baron (didn't work for us)
Space Duel
Star Wars
Tempest
The Empire Strikes Back

Cinematronics

Armor Attack (overlay was messed up when rotated)
Barrier
Boxing Bugs (plays upside-down)
Cosmic Chasm
Rip Off
Solar Quest (didn't work for us)
Space Wars (plays upside-down)
Speed Freak (didn't work for us)
Star Castle (didn't work for us)
Star Hawk (plays upside-down)
Sundance (didn't work for us)
Tailgunner (didn't work for us)
War of the Worlds (Plays upside-down)
Warrior (Plays upside-down)

Sega

Eliminator
Space Fury
Star Trek
Tac-Scan
Zektor

Midway

Omega Race (didn't work for us)

Centuri

Aztarac

RockOla

Demon

As you can see there are still a few issues with the emulation of some of the games. However, since MAME and DVMAME are open source and works in progress, it's just a matter of time before all the bugs are worked out.

THINK LIKE A BRAINIAC. DRIVE LIKE A MANIAC!

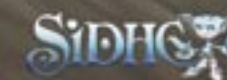
BE THE MASTER OF FASTER.

Gear up for an outrageous mix of stunt driving, puzzle solving and platform action.

Create and customize with the Track Editor. Share with friends through the PSP™ (PlayStation®Portable) system's wireless feature.

Play multiple modes, including wireless multiplayer, challenge, and bonus games.

<http://psp.station.sony.com>



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DEAD OR ALIVE 4

Story by **Arleth**



NEW CHARACTER: Eliot

- Name:** Eliot
- Origin:** British
- Age:** 16
- Birthday:** November 22nd
- Style:** Xing Yi Quan
- Blood Type:** AB
- Height:** 5'6"
- Weight:** 121
- Sizes (B/W/H):** 34-25-33
- Occupation:** High School Student
- Favorite Food:** Tea (Especially Herb and Oolong)
- Hobby:** Harmonica

Gen Fu's young protoge is the only male addition to the cast. He's also the first bishounen (pretty-boy, and we do mean *boy*) character ever created by Team NINJA. Don't be fooled by his pretty exterior, though: despite his shorter reach, Eliot's previous incarnations had to be *toned down* because he was too powerful. He won't be importing Gen Fu's full Xing Yi 'Lihue' Quan arsenal, as Itagaki firmly believes that Eliot should be his own character with his personality expressed in his moves.

Eliot is somewhat perturbed by the fact that someone like Gen Fu would choose him, of all people, to be his first-ever apprentice. Gen Fu's never taken anyone under his wing, so this young Brit is itching to prove himself worthy of the honor.

Fashionably Late >>>

In 2001, *Dead or Alive 3* was featured as one of the launch titles for the original Xbox. Microsoft wanted to honor the importance of that launch title by having *Dead or Alive 4* available for this year's launch of the Xbox 360 in Japan. Team NINJA made the controversial decision to delay the game until December 29th to complete testing and gameplay tweaking for the title. But the question is, will *Dead or Alive 4* be really worth it?

If Team NINJA chooses to take an extra week (or two), it's definitely not a matter of procrastination. This developer isn't the type to hastily slap together moves for an unfinished character or insert a training mode at the last minute. Instead, it's a matter of gameplay balance, a detail that the majority of the fighting game industry is willing to gleefully gloss over (*Capcom Fighting Evolution*, anyone?). A deluge of preview features from the usual suspects in the gaming press have made it clear that every other conceivable detail of *Dead or Alive 4* has already been taken care of, from the lovingly rendered characters to the brutally hostile arenas. This is not a game that is going to suffer from corporate compromising.



Graphics >>>

Dead or Alive 4 is gorgeous from head to toe, in keeping with Team NINJA's famous flair for visuals. Of course, so was its predecessor, last year's *Dead or Alive Ultimate* on the old Xbox. No one should be too surprised that there's not a quantum visual leap between this game and *Dead or Alive 4*; after all, the 360 is still young hardware and it could be years before developers figure out how to fully exploit its potential. Still, the attention to detail that's becoming the hallmark of Xbox 360 visuals is definitely there.

The first thing you might notice after you pick up *DoA4* is the fabric effects. Kokoro's kimono really does shimmer like silk, while Kasumi's denim skirt has the texture of something the girl next door just put on. Hair, scarves, and other elements remain true to *Dead or Alive's* anime-like feel, so there's no real attempt to make the girls look realistic. They're still bright idealizations, with chests ready-made for stunned ogling. Just because the *DoA4* characters can't be mistaken for something real doesn't mean the same can be said for backgrounds, fortunately. From reflective puddles of water on the rough asphalt to misty 3:00 AM fog to the shadows each ivy leaf casts upon the wall, Team NINJA might already be pushing the boundaries of the 360's graphical limits.

Dead or Live >>>

DoA4 is about to introduce one of the goofiest new features to hit the Xbox Live scene: your own fully customizable home. Players assume cartoony avatars like gators and chickens, and then watch Live *DoA4* matches on a giant screen while they wait their turn to play. If you try to chat with someone as you wait, you'll notice your text appears as part of a comical word balloon. If you want, you can upgrade the television you use to watch matches in progress, start out with a humble little box and potentially ending up with a gigantic DOA-Tron for your drive-through pleasure.

The Live element of the game will also feature Global tournaments, allowing you to pit yourself against the world's best, but due to a pesky thing called lag, it is no substitute for the fidelity of face-to-face competition. Many *Dead or Alive Ultimate* players were lobbying for a tournament at the Evolution 2k5 event in Las Vegas last August, but the base of players was too scattered to prove to the Evo planning committee that these players would be willing to travel across the country. Ben "tragic" Cureton [*ed: a.k.a. "The Count"*], a member of that committee, said, "The majority of the Evo planning committee actually respects *Dead or Alive* as a good 'online' fighting game... [but] why go through the trouble of including *Dead or Alive* to the lineup if we aren't sure if anyone is going to show up? ... You have to get tournaments going and prove that people will travel."



The Arenas >>>

With the Xbox 360, Team NINJA had the chance to make bigger, badder stages than ever seen before in a *DoA* title. The amount of care taken with designing each and every stage is readily apparent, from the angry merchants upset about their ruined fruit stands to the casino interior of the Gambler's Paradise. But the same rule as the older *DoA* titles still applies to falling from heights: once you go down, you can't climb back up. On a stage like Taizan Temple, with its jaw-dropping altitudes, you can be assured that there is a lot of 'going down' to be had.

Even the stages that don't feature multiple areas have their own threats to deal with. This is especially apparent in Gambler's Paradise, a Vegas-style battle on the strip in the face of *oncoming traffic*. It's possible to dodge the cars... but it's also just as possible to kick your

opponent into a speeding taxi and watch her body fly through the air like a neon-lit rag doll before she eats asphalt. It's even possible to be knocked out and lose a match in this fashion. The wrestling ring stage has electrified ring ropes that can be used in a similar fashion, along with a fully detailed crowd and a DOA-Tron showing a live feed of the match on the big screen.

Each character in *DoA4* gets a unique throw specific to their environment for each stage of the game. In DOATEC Grand Hall, for instance, La Mariposa locks her victim into a sick-looking tumble down the stairs, while Zack plants his opponent facedown and uses her as an improvised surfboard as he sails down the steps. In the wrestling ring, characters like Bass, Tina and La Mariposa can perform special moves that use the ropes and turnbuckles, which gives grapplers the advantage you'd expect them to have in a wrestling ring.

However, it seems that a few environmental attributes have been taken out. Snow, for instance, is no longer a factor. Roof Danger zones appear to have been removed as well, as getting launched sky-high in the enclosed Ninja Hideout level resulted in no extra damage. Taking this new safety to an extreme, *DoA4* includes a wide open arena called the Tatami Room that is completely devoid of environmental hazards. This stage was created after repeated requests from Japan's top *DoA* players, who wanted to fight in an arena where no character had particular advantages or disadvantages. We imagine this room will be very popular in the Global Live tournaments.

Gameplay >>>

The first big difference a longtime series fan will notice in *Dead or Alive 4* is the enhanced speed. We don't know if it's the 360's hardware or the streamlined new engine that makes this possible, but the game barely gives you time to think. In fact, by the time the announcer has finished shouting "Get Ready!", you're already throwing the first punch.

Team NINJA's oft-stated design objective was to create a fighting game that allows newbies and experts alike the chance to enjoy the game. Ideally, the experience was to be fun and look good whether you won or lost. Team NINJA mastermind Tomonobu Itagaki actually brought in tournament-caliber players to build upon the foundation of the *Dead or Alive Ultimate* engine, fine-tuning and honing it to competition-level excellence. A high-level *DoA4* battle should as a result look fast-paced and impressive, with none of the dull predictability of, say, *MVC2's* Cable performing five Air Hyper Viper Beams in a row to wipe out an entire team.

To help ensure back-and-forth action on every level of play, many characters have received revamped arsenals. Kasumi, Ayane, Hayate and Hayabusa get new ninja skills to mess around with, for example. While their signature moves are still intact (such as Hayabusa's Izuna Otoshi spinning piledriver), attempting to play these characters exactly like their *DoAU* or *DoA3* counterparts will get you beaten pretty quickly. To win, you need to make sure you're exploiting the full arsenal of moves available to your character.



While we've made much of *DoA4's* fine balancing, don't take this as an assertion that there's no tier list for the game. At low-to-mid range skill levels, you can still expect Kasumi to mop the floor with Bass. But a painstaking level of consideration has been taken to make sure that each character's unlocked potential will allow a highly skilled player to take on all comers. Furthermore, the core mechanics of the game's engine have never been better.

The Defensive Hold System >>>

DoA 1 System: (2 Point) High+Mid, Low

DoA 3 System: (3 Point) High, Mid, Low

DoA U System: (4 Point) High, Mid Punch, Mid Kick, Low

When *Dead or Alive* first came out, the two-option counter system called "Defensive Holds" stirred up quite a bit of controversy. Complaints of scrub-friendliness were rampant, as it was plainly obvious when your opponent was doing a high or low series of attacks and a successful counter could do up to 25% damage to your opponent. This mechanic still persisted until *Dead or Alive 3*, which added a distinction between High and Mid counters. Not to be outdone, *Dead or Alive Ultimate* made separate counters for Mid-level kicks and punches, creating the modern Four-Point Defensive Hold System that is featured in *Dead or Alive 4*. Fortunately, Defensive Holds no longer do the insane damage that they used to, and in fact, some counters don't take the form of an attack. Take, for instance, countering a jump-kick in the Four-Point Defensive Hold system. If your character does not have a specific jump-attack counter move, they will parry the attack and swap places with the attacker. This exposes the would-be attacker's back to a free combo from the defender. Of course, this technique doesn't work equally well on all characters; Christie and Ayane, for instance, actually have a reverse-stance set of moves!



NEW CHARACTER: KOKORO

Name: Kokoro
Origin: Japanese
Age: 17
Birthday: December 1st
Style: Ba Ji Quan
Blood Type: A
Height: 5'2"
Weight: 108 lbs
Sizes(B/W/H): 35-21-34
Occupation: Apprentice Geisha
Favorite Food: Sweet Red Bean Soup, Japanese Fruit Cocktail
Hobby: Piano

This geisha-in-training has some outright *violent* moves in her arsenal. Her moves mostly consist of straight, hard-hitting thrusts reminiscent of Shaolin. Her style is actually a Wushu form called Ba Ji Quan, or the "Eight Extreme Fists", designed to incapacitate an opponent in a single blow. Where she learned this, nobody knows, but it certainly wasn't her mother Miyako, who pleads with her daughter not to enter the *Dead or Alive* tournament because of its unsavory reputation.





The New Role of Strings >>>

Because the *Dead or Alive* engine allowed a player to perform a Defensive Hold counter *even while being hit*, it caused a lot of controversy in the fighting game world. Making the transition from other fighting games to *Dead or Alive* can be a frustrating one, especially considering the altered role of Strings.

Typically, Strings are a series of inter-connecting moves that, once connected, usually results in the rest of the String automatically landing for free damage while your opponent is in no position to stop you. In *Dead or Alive 4*, however, a fully connected String in no way guarantees your safety! This completely violates the traditional definition of a combo in fighting games... or does it?

Combo (kom'bo) pl. -bos.

- 1:** *n.* A series of attacks, which once connected, results in guaranteed damage and continuation of the series until its conclusion.
- 2:** *v.* To connect two separate attacks into one another in a guaranteed fashion.

What *Dead or Alive* really does is redefine the role of a String. Instead of being used to directly deal damage in the form of a combo, it is instead designed to apply offensive pressure and reduce your opponent's immediate options. The attacker can delay certain hits of a String, branch out into different types of attacks to thwart Defensive Hold attempts, or even bait a Defensive Hold and punish it with a Throw to inflict 150% damage (this is known as a Hi Counter Throw). Attempting to use a String as a combo against a skilled player will typically result in you eating damage, even if you were the one who appeared to have the upper hand in dealing damage to begin with.

That being said, there are String combos in *DoA 4*. Whenever your opponent's back is turned (like after performing a forward+Throw cross-over), or while your opponent is airborne, it is impossible for them to perform a Defensive Hold. Some characters can string moves into a launcher, such as Christie's down-forward+Punch -> Kick string, where she does a side-stepping low hand chop and then punts her victim into the air for a launch.



NEW CHARACTER: La Mariposa

Name: La Mariposa
Origin: American
Age: 21
Birthdate: July 20th
Style: Lucha Libre
Blood Type: A
Height: 5'9"
Weight: 117 lbs
Sizes(B/W/H): 36-22-33
Occupation: Luchadora
Favorite Food: Apple Pie
Hobby: Surfing, Scuba Diving

La Mariposa, or "The Butterfly", is a luchadora whose identity is masked in mystery. With spectacular off-the-rope acrobatics and convoluted (read: painful-looking) maneuvers, wrestling fans will find themselves marking out as she performs moves straight out of the Lucha Libre textbooks. Sharp-minded fans of the series may be able to figure out who she really is.



Note that *only after Christie launches her opponent* does the combo actually start! Up until that point, it is a string and can be interrupted if Christie's launching kick is predicted.

Maneuvering >>>

One necessary mechanic for 3D fighters has been the "Eight-Way Run," for tactical repositioning from hazards or sidestepping dangerous moves. *Dead or Alive* made a significant gameplay change to this mechanic, known in this series as "Free-Stepping". Unlike the Eight-Way Run in games like *Soul Calibur III*, where players could step out of the way of an entire series of attacks and approach their opponent's vulnerable back, Free-Stepping only dodges the *first* move of a string. If your opponents mash on Punch to perform repetitive Strings, you won't be able to side-step your way to safety, as their characters will automatically track your position and aim his or her attacks accordingly. It is still useful for dodging moves, but the precise timing required means that Free-Stepping is a tactic reserved for high-level players, since during a Free-Step, you are effectively dodging High, Mid and Low attacks simultaneously.

One other consideration is that of stance. Many characters have alternate stances that affect their ability to dodge or sidestep. Also, the distinction between Closed and Open stance can mean the difference between side-stepping one way or the other to dodge an attack. Closed Stance is when you and your opponent both have the same foot forward (Right Foot/Right Foot), while Open Stance occurs when both of you have different feet forward (Right Foot/Left Foot). Try this out with a friend if you have trouble visualizing this. Certain moves will alter which foot you have forward, and some moves will have better results in Closed Stance.

We managed to get in touch with the founder of Team NINJA, Tomonobu Itagaki for a few brief questions. With his omnipresent shades and his rock-star sensibilities, Itagaki is the man who put the spotlight back on Tecmo — however controversial the methods may be.



Hardcore Game Magazine (HGM): How many costumes does each character have?

Tecmo: In general, female characters have many costumes. For example, Kasumi and Lei Fang have seven costumes each.

HGM: The environments of each stage have become more interactive than before. Can you fight with the animals?

Tecmo: [laughs] No, you can't fight with the rhino. Although it sounds like a fun idea, I'm afraid that some animal conservation groups may complain about it.

HGM: Does *DOA4* have anything to do with *DOAX*?

Tecmo: Of course. The story of *DOAX* takes place after *DOA4*. If Zack becomes a winner (in *DOA4*), he may use his earnings to fulfill his dream.

HGM: How has the online feature of *DOA4* been improved over *DOAU*?

Tecmo: All aspects have been improved and reinforced. While the lobby system in *DOAU* put priority on its functions, *DOA4* focuses on the visual beauty of its lobby. You can spend a long time just by chatting with your friends in the lobby because it's fun. Fighting itself has been powered up. The total number of players who can simultaneously enter the lobby is now 16, that's twice as many as *DOAU*. Also, now 4 players can play the tag battle at the same time.

HGM: Are you selling the costumes of the characters and other in-game items in the Xbox Live Marketplace?

Tecmo: We had such ideas but this time we did not implement them. We may take time to think about these ideas after Xbox 360 has been launched successfully and players have become thoroughly accustomed to these schemes.

HGM: What part of the game engine have you refined? How have you adjusted the play-balance, especially throw and hold techniques?

Tecmo: When you start playing this game, you will instantly recognize that everything about this game has been upgraded. Both Throw and Hold are important attack techniques and both them are dangerously powerful now. The speed of the game has increased by 150%. Now the game is so fun to play, that your brain might overheat from it.

HGM: Did you add any new gameplay? Can you feel any big differences from *DOA3*?

Tecmo: Of course. New game systems are found throughout the game. Those can be felt and mastered naturally by your instinct as you play.

HGM: Can you talk about *Code Cronus* yet? We are very interested in it.

Tecmo: [laughs] We are concentrating on *DOA4* now, and we do not have time to do anything else.

HGM: Can you talk about *Ninja Gaiden 2* a bit?

Tecmo: I know the guy sitting on my left-hand side is writing the scenario of *Ninja Gaiden 2*. I do not know how many versions have been written. He [shows] it to me only when he is completely satisfied with his work. I'm hoping that he'll show me his ideas just as I finish *DOA4*. Until then, I will keep on working on this fighting game.





Okizeme >>>

A meta-game popularized in the *Virtua Fighter* series is that of "okizeme": the art of applying constant pressure on a rising opponent, such that his or her offensive options become extremely limited. Involving both psychological intimidation and technical skill, properly executed okizeme means that once an opponent is knocked down, they stay down.

When knocked down, the defender usually has four options: Low Kick (Sweep), High Kick (Roundhouse), Tech Roll (instant recovery that moves you out of the way), or a character-specific attack. The Low Kick and High Kick wakeups have extremely high priority, so much that they are invulnerable to many attacks. Because of this, it may feel as if it's really the attacker who's at a disadvantage, as they must predict what option the defender will be using. However, certain characters (like Bass) excel at punishing grounded characters, and other characters have moves which completely dominate standard wakeup attacks. Also, the attacker can always attempt a Pounce, which strikes the grounded opponent at a direct vertical angle and can beat wakeup Low and High kicks. The defender usually must use a Tech Roll to avoid a Pounce. Unfortunately, Tech Rolls have their own weakness as well: lacking the temporary invincibility of a wakeup Kick, a Tech Roll leaves you immediately vulnerable to attack, perhaps even a free combo or being kicked off of the stage!

There are character-specific wakeups that hit Mid, or have alternate properties. These moves often depend on position: Are you face down, or face up? Are you feet-first or face-first to your opponent? Are they in closed or open stance? Some wakeup attacks that hit an opponent in closed stance will spin their body around, exposing their back to a free combo! But there are only so many different options available to the rising opponent, and once the attacker learns his opposing character's options (and situations that allow certain options), it becomes possible to bait, out-manuever and crush his victim without giving them a chance to recover. Such is the art of Okizeme.

Boobs and Brains >>>>

Dead or Alive began as a franchise with a dubious reputation, criticized for relying on crude, fanservicey gimmicks like Breast Physics to popularize what was basically a shallow *Virtua Fighter* clone. The original Two-Point Defensive Hold system's flaws didn't help much, either. Team NINJA rose to early criticism and tweaked, pinched, tickled and slapped the game engine until it became something that could support a core of highly skilled tournament-caliber players. With input from these "best of the best" players, *Dead or Alive 4* will hopefully represent the best incarnation of the franchise. Team NINJA is so confident in *DoA4*'s perfection that Itagaki claims he will be moving the *DoA* franchise into an entirely new genre for his next project, *Dead or Alive: Code Cronus*.

Whether *DoA4* will leave a lasting impression on the fighting game scene remains to be seen. The North American tournament scene is still in its infancy and support from Tecmo's marketing division seems unlikely. Ultimately, the players will need to rise to the challenge and take matters into their own hands if *DoA4* is to be taken seriously by diehard fighter fans as a fun, yet sophisticated game. Certainly, Team NINJA has already done its part of the job.

NEW CHARACTER: Nicole-458

- Name:** Nicole-458
- Origin:** SPARTAN Project
- Age:** Unknown
- Birthday:** Unknown
- Style:** Unknown
- Body Type:** Unknown
- Height:** Unknown
- Weight:** Unknown
- Sizes (B/W/H):** Unknown
- Occupation:** UNSC SPARTAN Soldier
- Favorite Food:** Unknown
- Hobby:** Unknown

The most controversial character in the game would have to be the collaboration between Team NINJA and Bungie. That's right, there's a SPARTAN in the game, and her name is Nicole. Bungie has stated that they'll release more details of her identity and storyline later, so no matter how many times you play through the game, you won't be finding out too much about her. As for fears that Nicole would play like a Leon/Bayman clone, these issues have been thankfully resolved, as Nicole comes equipped with her own arsenal (literally) of attacks. No guns involved, but she does have something up her sleeve that has historically been known to piss off Elites. She also gets her own stage, inspired by Nassau Station from Halo 2, with more than its fair share of surprises.

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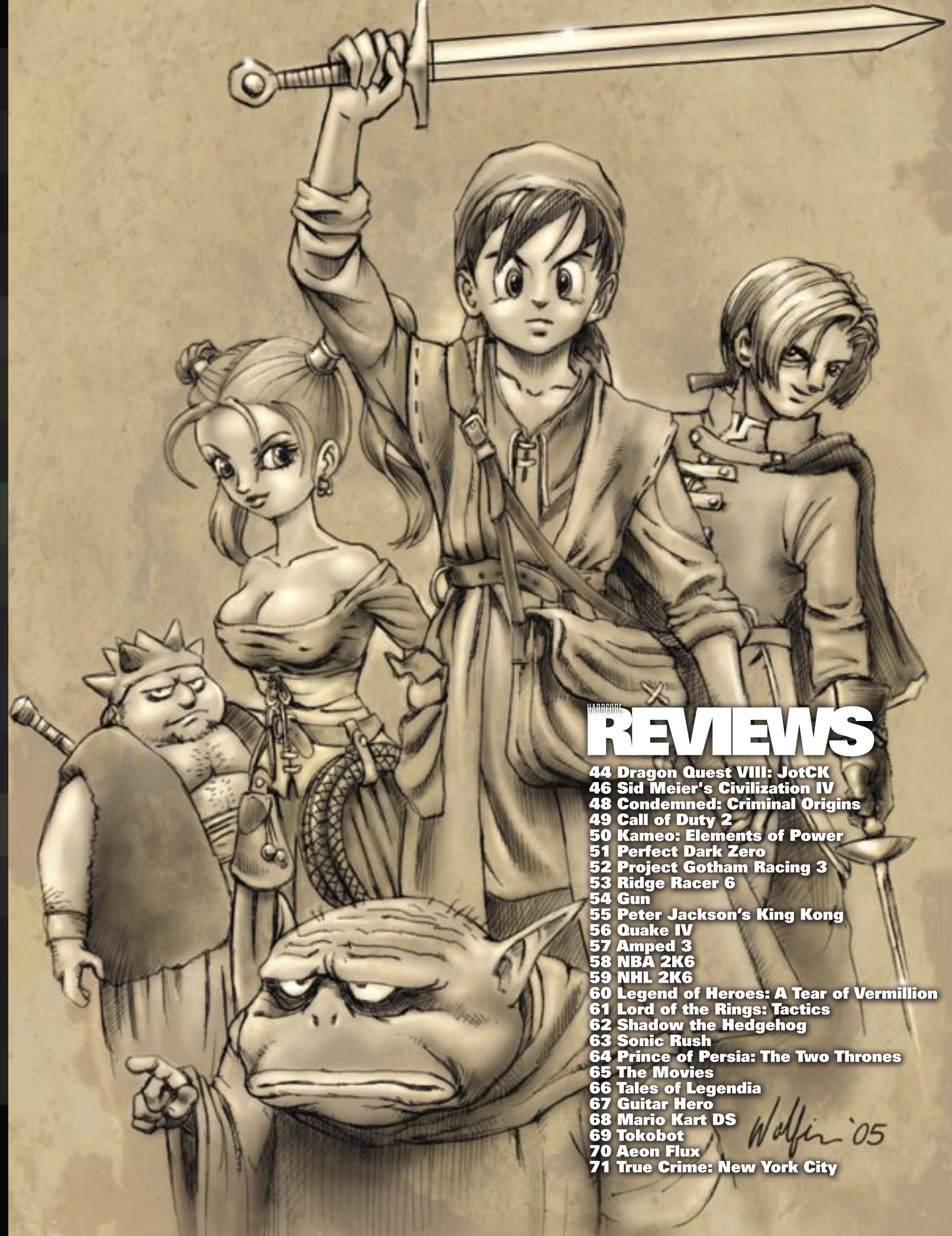


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REVIEW DRAGON QUEST VIII: JOURNEY OF THE CURSED KING

PlayStation 2

Review by Shoegazer

Publisher : Square Enix
Developer : Level-5
Release Date : 11/15/2005
Rating : TEEN; Fantasy Violence, Mild Language, Suggestive Themes

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

The marriage of Squaresoft and Enix back in April of 2003 left drooling RPG fanatics with just one simple question: **When? When would we see the fruit of these two united giant companies' merger? After the initial offerings from the newly formed powerhouse seemed to only raise the ire of even their most loyal fans, Square Enix went into E3 2005 with a message: We're back. While thousands scoured the booth looking for traces of a non-existent Final Fantasy XII, what they found instead was a charming playable section of Dragon Quest VIII.** It took only a few moments with a slime controller in hand to look up at the company logo hanging above the booth and boast with pride: "Oh yes indeed, you're back."

Since the dawn of console RPGs, there have been many repeated clichés, and gameplay elements: A troubled hero thrown into a war that he wanted no part of joins forces with a team of allies that, against all odds, must put their petty differences aside in a tale of revenge and retribution. This quest will take them from town to town sleeping at inns, and buying the latest upgraded weapons and armor. Though clichéd as they may be, I had forgotten just how much I missed these classic moments in RPG



gaming until they were all but extinct.

It is because of this near extinction that *Dragon Quest VIII* stands out ahead of the pack on PS2. Everything about this game feels classic, or "old school," yet somehow fresh again thanks to powerful new tools such as beautiful cel-shading, and original character designs from legendary creator Akira Toriyama. Just to remind you not to be fooled by all the new bells and whistles, the opening scene of the game is injected with a dose of classic *Dragon Quest* humor as your party is ambushed by a one, mere blue slime. What else would you expect? The mostly British voice-acting is top notch, and fits the theme and assumed time period of the game perfectly.

Along with all the positive elements from the old school, you have to also take the good with the bad. The gigantic, lush world is breathtaking. Even destinations that look like water-colored backdrops slowly start to come in-focus as you get closer to them, which gives this game such great draw distance, and scale. You'll want to wander around for miles to explore, but in the end, the simple linear dirt road path to the next check point must be taken. What's even more disappointing is that there is rarely anything found while exploring that was worth your time. Finding and killing all of the rare monsters lurking about does have a sense of accomplishment to it, but won't add anything critical to the experience.

Level-5 is certainly no stranger to making great RPGs. The critically-acclaimed team is also responsible for the often overlooked *Dark Cloud* games, amongst other projects. They have somehow managed to take influence from the best parts of many past RPG favorites such as *The Legend of Zelda* and the original *Phantasy Star*, and expertly apply them to the world of *Dragon Quest VIII*. Oh, and be sure to dust off your old leveling-up skills,

A GLIMPSE OF IVALICE

Included with *DQVIII* is a playable version of the eagerly anticipated *Final Fantasy XII*. Two separate sections of the game can be accessed, giving you a first taste of the much ballyhooed new battle system. A controlled character can now move in real-time while they battle, and the support characters will adhere to pre-selected tactics until you decide to take control of them. Imagine a cross between *FFX* and *FFXI*, and you're almost there.



As expected from a *Final Fantasy* game, all the beautiful environments and Oscar-worthy cut-scenes appear to be well intact, but after the roughly 45 minute demo ends, it's obvious that this is not the same *Final Fantasy* that you're used to. A much-needed change is coming, and it will be very interesting to see how this one ends up. Stay tuned.



a better time. I'm all for the evolution of any style of game, but this game proved to me that not everything from the treasured history of yore needs to be left behind. With four million people in Japan already under its spell, you owe it to yourself to find out why. Especially if you can remember what it was like to need an iron axe that does +4 more damage than your bronze one, and has an attribute of sleep.

Rating : 5 of 5

because these merciless bosses strike hard, and strike often. You will thank all that is holy for Level-5 giving Yangus the "whistle" skill, which will shave hours off of your random monster hunting.

There are simply not enough pages in this magazine to allow me to do *Dragon Quest VIII* the proper review of praise that it deserves. Just as RPGs were seemingly approaching a period of hibernation, along comes this gem of a game to remind even the most hardcore fans of why they ever loved RPGs in the first place. *DQVIII* is a breath of fresh air, and could not possibly have come along at

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

Level-5 has somehow managed to top its magnificent work with the *Dark Cloud* series, and taken the entire genre back to its roots in the process. Do not miss this game.



FINAL SCORE : 5 of 5

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION IV

Review by KouAidou

Publisher : 2K Games **Genre(s) :** Strategy
Developer : Firaxis Games **Category :** Turn-based, worldbuilding
Release Date : 10/25/2005 **# of players :** 1
Rating : E10+

The release of the first *Civilization* catapulted Sid Meier to fame and fortune. Fifteen years and many expansion packs later, *Civilization IV* demonstrates that as long as you keep innovating, you can keep a concept feeling fresh each time out of the box. Though it keeps the time-tested gameplay of the original, *Civ IV* brings all new dimensions to the managing of an empire that will last the test of time.



Why do the sanitary conditions of your city impose hard population limits? Why can't you make specific deals with other cultures? Would a city really sell its loyalty to another culture for profit? And why the heck are cavalry units so effective against pikemen?

Some of these problems were fixed back in *Civ III*, but *Civ IV* has overhauled the entire system, letting go of the needless "video game logic" that plagued the earlier games to create a deeper, more realistic experience. For instance, instead of population growth in a city levelling out at pre-set numbers until you build a specific building, cities now have a sliding "sickness" scale. Certain buildings and conditions around your city increase sickness, while others decrease it to varying degrees. When sickness gets too high, you begin to waste food, which slows your city's growth. This system feels much more intuitive, and gives us a much broader range of options to get around the problem than just building another stinkin' aqueduct.

Technologies have been shuffled around quite a bit, and those who played earlier *Civs* will be surprised to see names like "Paper" and "Music" now sitting on the tech flow chart. Techs now have a much stronger impact on what you can and can't do in the game. Would it surprise you to learn that you can't build mines on terrain tiles until you research the "Mining" technology? How about not being able to sign treaties with other civilizations until you research "Writing"? It's like a continuous string of "Hey... yeah!" moments that make the previous games in the series look positively silly by comparison.

The most anticipated addition to the game is religion, but surprisingly, it does not alter the game significantly (certainly not the way culture did back in *Civ III*). *Civ IV* takes the neutral (yet humorously appropriate) stance that all religions are basically the same, and the only thing they affect is the relationships between people who do and do not share them. If you declare a state religion, you will get certain bonuses from cities where the people practice that religion, but other civilizations won't look kindly on you if they consider you part of a heathen faith.

More significant is the overhauling of the government system into a group of "civics" (of which your religious policy is a part). It's your job to decide national policies on trade, government, and worker freedom, and the most liberal ones are not necessarily always the right ones for your civilization. This system is much more balanced, and gives you much more control, by letting you create amusing combinations like a free religious and trade society that still believes

MILITARY MAKEOVER

With *Civ IV*, we bid goodbye to hard attack/defense ratings and simple HP upgrades for veteran military units. Each unit now has a single strength rating, which is altered by bonuses based on unit type (for instance, spearmen get a natural +100% to their strength against mounted units). Other bonuses can be given as promotions when a unit gains enough experience, allowing you to create true specialists.

A few possible promotions:

- Combat I:** +10% Strength
- Medic:** Heals units in same tile +10% damage per turn
- Combat II:** +20% Strength
- Sentry:** +1 Visibility Range
- Shock:** +25% vs. Melee Units
- Blitz:** Can attack multiple times per turn
- Guerilla I:** +20% Hills Defense
- City Garrison I:** +20% City Defense

A few promotions can go a long way towards evening the score...



your aqueducts actually wind their way out through the surrounding hills and plains. Battles are now animated, with so much personality that you may feel small twinges of guilt as your units get mowed down with a cry. Unfortunately, this does mean that the game can get a little buggy if your graphics card isn't up to speed.

Also worth mentioning is the sound: the music is nothing short of amazing, ranging from breathtaking African tribal chants to the Velvet Underground. There are also some nice little touches, like how the *Warcraft*-style voice clips spoken by your units when you select them are all in the language of the civilization you've chosen.

Civ IV is a brilliant game, and a true evolution of the series in every way. If you've been a fan, you'll love it. If not, there's never been a better time to join in. Simply flawless.

Rating : 5 of 5

in the necessities of a slave class.

On top of all this, the game looks great. The amazingly detailed overhead map allows you to see the entire planet from space, then zoom all the way back in to check up on the activities of a single worker in the field. Improvements to your cities are now reflected on the world map, and it's just plain neat to see

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

I'm a newcomer to the *Civilization* series, but I can definitely see where its fans are coming from. It's a mind-bendingly huge, quality game.



FINAL SCORE : 4.75 of 5



CONDEMNED CRIMINAL ORIGINS

Review by **Syriel**

Publisher : Sega
Developer : Monolith
Release Date : 11/15/2005
Rating : MATURE; Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Strong Language

Genre(s) : FPS
Category : Horror
of players : 1



When it comes to setting a tone, a lot of games miss the boat, but every once in awhile you get to experience a game that truly nails it. *Condemned* is one of those games. No matter what you think of the gameplay mechanics that drive this title, it is impossible to deny the disturbing imagery and downright freakish characters that inhabit this world.

Though *Condemned* is played from a first-person perspective, it doesn't have a whole lot in common with the typical first-person shooter. Yes, you can use guns, but they are few and far between. Instead, the game pushes you towards melee weapons which are both plentiful and visceral, not to mention bloody. While wandering around the environment, you're free to yank a piece of conduit off the wall or pick up a crowbar. If you can bludgeon someone with it, you can probably use it.

Combat is relatively basic, with attack, block and counterattack moves, but the implementation is nicely done. Advanced character AI causes enemies to behave realistically as they rush in to attack, or run off to find another weapon when you disarm them. Though your opponents consist mostly of crazies and drug addicts, they can be quite resilient in a fight and will exploit any opportunity you give them.

Facial expressions are the highlight of the game, and they are detailed enough to make you wince as you beat someone to a pulp while fighting. *Condemned* pulls no punches when it comes to violence and it isn't afraid to get up close and personal. The sound design is just as exquisite, as you can hear everything from an opponent's footsteps to the squish of metal against flesh when you plant a pipe in someone's face. Rest assured,

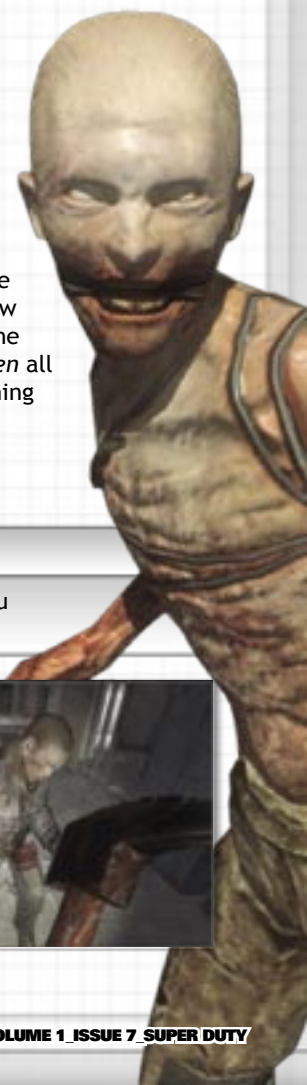
this title earned its M rating.

Oddly the game falters a bit in the environments. Inspired by the film noir look, each of the ten major levels are quite detailed, but they suffer from repetitive textures and color schemes. It would have been nice to see a bit more variety. Character animation could also use a bit of tweaking. It's fine while your victims are moving, but the death positions are simply unnatural, as if rigor mortis set in the instant you killed someone.

Aside from the gore, *Condemned* offers a scripted plot that would be right at home in an episode of *CSI*. Though you get to use a number of cool gadgets, their use is limited to when and where the game chooses. As a result, a potentially cool investigation becomes nothing more than an excuse to toss a few mini-games at the player.

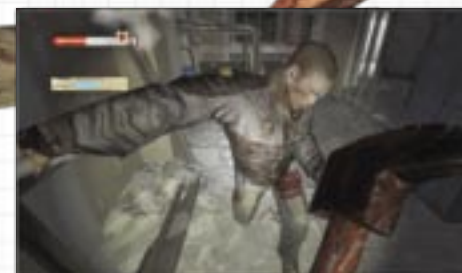
Despite its shortcomings, *Condemned* still shines thanks to its presentation. The real appeal here is in how the story is told, and it's done masterfully. If you're looking to be scared, pop this bad boy into your shiny new Xbox 360, turn out the lights and turn up the sound. In many ways it's like watching *Se7en* all over again, only this time you're not watching the horror, you're playing it.

Rating : 4 of 5



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

Oh, *Condemned*. You are fun and stylish, but I can't love you more until you take longer to beat and are less linear. Maybe in your inevitable sequel.



CALL OF DUTY 2

Review by **Syriel**

Publisher : Activision
Developer : Infinity Ward
Release Date : 11/15/2005
Rating : TEEN

Genre(s) : FPS
Category : WWII
of players : 1, 8 online (Xbox 360), 16 vis LAN (Xbox 360), 32 online (PC)

Two years ago a brand new developer appeared and took the PC gaming world by storm with a little game called *Call of Duty*. Surprisingly immersive, incredibly cinematic and downright fun, the game set a new standard for the World War II genre. In the ensuing time there have been plenty of copycats, but no one has really managed to match the experience provided by Infinity Ward. Rather than simply churn out a sequel though, the team has managed to improve the experience in nearly every way.

Available for both the PC and Xbox 360, *Call of Duty 2* once again draws players straight into the horrors of war. You'll experience World War II first as a Russian soldier, then a Brit and finally an American. Each campaign features a different set of locales, weapons and comrades, but the ultimate goal is always the same—eliminate the Nazis and save the free world. Some might bemoan the lack of a single hero, but by structuring the game as-is, the sense of realism is heightened. You're not playing as some super soldier traveling the different fronts, you're simply a run-of-the-mill guy trying desperately to survive.

The biggest change is the new health system. Inspired by the likes of *Halo*, you no longer have to search for health packs. Instead, when you're hurt the screen flashes red. Get hit again, you're dead. Get to cover and you heal up after a few seconds. Though it's not realistic, it does keep your focus on the mission.

Fighting is just as intense as ever, thanks to the advanced AI system

used for both sides. Enemies will attempt flanking maneuvers to press an advantage, or fall back when outnumbered. Your teammates are intelligent enough to offer covering fire and will operate as a coherent squad when attacking an objective. Solid tactics are an important part of the game.

Control is well done on both platforms, but this is one area where the Xbox 360 actually has an edge. Infinity Ward has spent a lot of time tuning the gamepad and it shows. Running around with the dual analog sticks on the Xbox 360 feels tighter and more natural than using a mouse and keyboard on the PC.

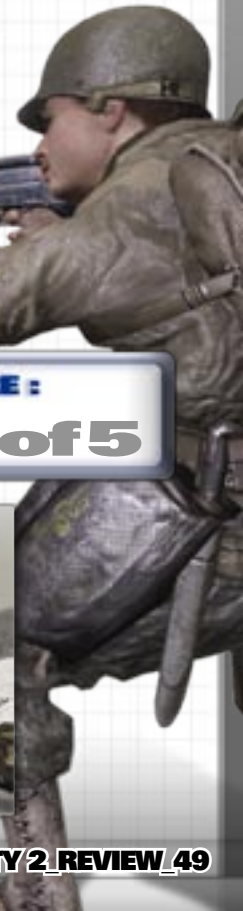
Both versions of the game are incredibly immersive, with full surround sound, sharp visuals and realistic worlds, but unless you have a high end PC the Xbox 360 is once again going to have the edge. Sitting down on your couch with bullets whizzing by your head, bombs going off in the distance and the carnage on display in hi-def, just feels more immersive than playing on a small computer monitor.

Visually stunning and well paced, *Call of Duty 2* is easily the best World War II shooter to date, and quite possibly the best of the Xbox 360 launch titles. Though the online modes aren't quite as robust as those offered by *Perfect Dark Zero*, the single player experience is second to none.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

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

You know a game is great when it invigorates a stale genre like WW2 FPS to this degree. *Call of Duty 2* is our real first glimpse at the potential of the next generation of gaming.



FINAL SCORE :
4.5 of 5



Review by Wanderer

Publisher : Microsoft
Developer : Rare
Release Date : 11/22/2005
Rating : TEEN

Genre(s) : Adventure
Category : Monster Girls Gone Wild
of players : 1-2

Kameo: Elements of Power plays a little more like a tech demo than an actual game, all the more so because Kameo herself looks like one of those faeries that NVIDIA uses to show off video cards.

It's not a bad game, but it's laughably easy, with tips ladled out at every opportunity and a bizarrely misplaced tutorial. It's a great example of what your new system can do, and it's a cool spin on adventure gameplay, but it's a little hollow.

Kameo is the princess of an elven kingdom, and the master of several Elemental Warriors, allowing her to instantly transform into a variety of creatures. With her kingdom under siege, her sister turned traitor, and an ancient troll king named Thorn on the rampage, Kameo must venture into the lands outside her city to regain her powers and gain the strength to challenge Thorn.

Kameo works a little like how I'd imagine the offspring of a *Prince of Persia* game and a *Legend of Zelda* game would. It's set in a vast world full of obstacles and unique enemies, but your "arsenal," so to speak, is fully self-contained.

Each of your monster forms comes with a host of offensive powers and abilities. Linking them together, or figuring out how to use them, is half the fun, and most of the challenge. They're also effective visuals and a ton of fun in their own right, like how Kameo's ape form lets you spike trolls against walls, or the high-speed boxer mockery of the Pummel Weed form.

If there's a common theme in *Kameo's* environments, it's things running riot. When you're told that an army is running amok, you

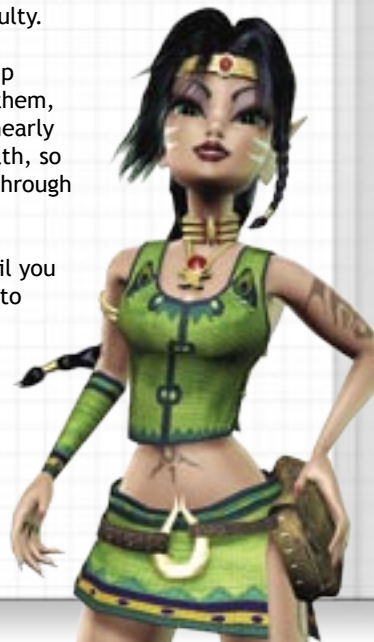


actually see that army in the background, all three thousand of them, crawling over the landscape like ants. Beetles will rush you by the dozen, dragons fight in the skies above you, and open war spreads out across the backdrop behind you. You'll get to ride a horse through an army of trolls, scattering them before you, and despite all this, there's never a hint of slowdown.

There's also never a real hint of difficulty. *Kameo*, after you get past the bizarre introductory level, constantly offers up unsubtle hints. Even if you don't use them, you also get plenty of moves that're nearly instant win buttons and plenty of health, so with a bit of foresight, you'll breeze through the game.

The puzzle design doesn't pick up until you have a lot of different monster forms to play with, and when it does, *Kameo* really comes into its own, and becomes an interesting and varied game. It's merely a question of whether you'll still be playing it by that point.

Rating : 3.5 of 5



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

Kameo provides a beautiful adventure experience, but wouldn't fare well with competition. A decent launch game, nothing more.



Review by Syriel

Publisher : Microsoft Game Studios
Developer : Rare
Release Date : 11/22/2005
Rating : MATURE; Blood, Language, Violence

Genre(s) : FPS
Category : Action
of players : 1-2, 32 online

In a time before *Halo*, console-based first-person shooters were judged against one of two games: *Goldeneye* and *Perfect Dark*. Basic by today's standards, both titles were considered landmark achievements when they originally debuted thanks to a combination of solid singleplayer action and engaging multiplayer. While *Perfect Dark Zero* hits the mark with multiplayer, the singleplayer adventure needs a bit more polish.

Unlike *Halo*, *Perfect Dark Zero* features a heavy emphasis on stealth, especially on the higher difficulty settings. Success often depends on finding the perfect route through a level and avoiding any alarms. Once the guards come running, staying alive becomes much more difficult. You also have to keep abreast of mission objectives, as not completing a requirement will result in mission failure.

The enemy AI is mildly disappointing, especially when compared with some of the Xbox 360's other offerings. While your opponents will use rudimentary tactics, for the most part what's here isn't all that different from the first *Perfect Dark*. It is all too easy to set up a choke point and let the bad guys run through... right into the waiting barrel of your gun.

Then there are the game glitches. Though none are incredibly serious, they do mar the presentation. We've seen a phone conversation that continued after a guard was shot, a dead soldier who fell up a staircase, and your gun scope pointing at the back of Joanna Dark's head while hiding behind a crate. Given the game's long development time, it was disappointing to see issues like these crop up.

Although the single player game feels somewhat bland, Rare has

done impressive things with the multiplayer experience, particularly the co-op mode. Co-op features the same story as the single player, but all of the missions have been tweaked to allow for two players and the player objectives are often different. For example, in one level Dark has to protect her father by sniping enemies from the rooftops. In co-op, player two takes control of her father. As a result, both players take wildly different paths through the level, yet both are forced to work together in order to succeed. It's much more enjoyable than going it alone.

Those that prefer combat over co-op can choose their poison in either deathmatch or dark ops modes. Deathmatch features a number of traditional options, such as free-for-all and capture the flag, while dark ops is home to team based objectives like onslaught, sabotage and infection. Although infection is technically a free-for-all, points are scored by the infected when they infect others and the uninfected score by surviving. It's a new twist on classic deathmatch. All multiplayer modes can be played via split screen, system link or Xbox Live.

With a weak single player story, *Perfect Dark Zero* falls short of being an instant classic, but it makes up for its missteps with stellar multiplayer. If you plan on playing solo, you might want to pass, but anyone going online should have Ms. Dark on speed dial.

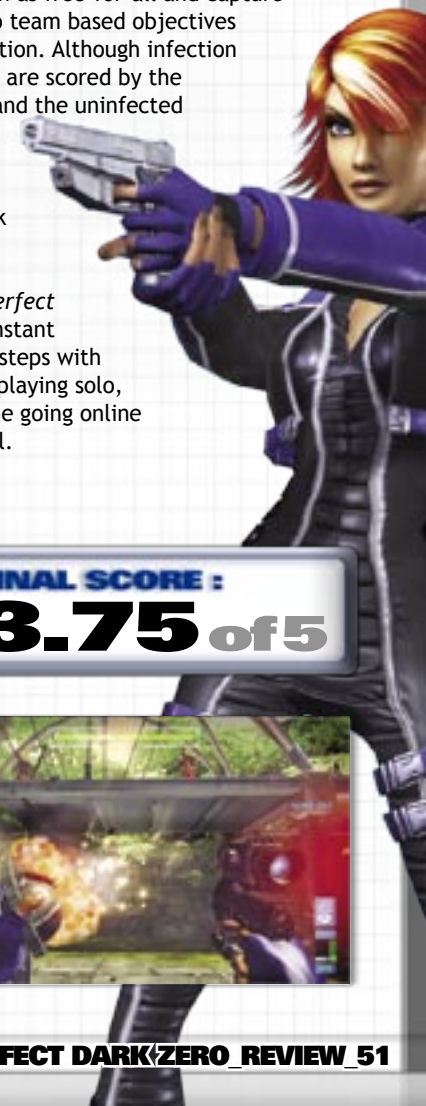
Rating : 4 of 5

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

Perfect Dark Zero is a good console FPS, but creating a good console FPS isn't as technically impressive as it was back on the N64. It's fun for awhile, but something about it feels incomplete.



FINAL SCORE :
3.75 of 5





PGR

PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3



Publisher : Microsoft
Developer : Bizarre
Release Date : 11/22/2005
Rating : EVERYONE

Genre(s) : Racing
Category : Shiny
of players : 1-a lot

If you liked *Project Gotham Racing 2*, odds are that you'll like its sequel. Not much was broken, so nothing's been fixed. Once again, you'll be given some of the fiercest competition, greatest racetracks, and finest rolling steel to race against, on, and in, and once again, you will nearly cause yourself serious injury by attempting to beat Gotham Career Mode on Hardcore difficulty.

Project Gotham Racing 3 offers more than eighty challenges in the offline career mode, and then you can follow it up with a large and well-implemented online career mode, complete with its own trophies. At least half the game is oriented around achievements and online racing, which is as smooth as silk and, above all else, shiny.

That's really the best word for *PGR3*'s graphics. Everything is reflective and nearly glowing with light, from your car to the nighttime streets of Tokyo or London. When you hit the accelerator, the world will speed up and settle into the same kind of soft, slow blur you might usually find in a Monet painting.



FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5

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

While not perfect, *PGR 3* is definitely one of the 360's best launch games. As a next-gen title, it stands out for its visual presentation, but does not push any boundaries in terms of gameplay.



RIDGE RACER 6



Publisher : Namco
Developer : Namco
Release Date : 11/22/2005
Rating : EVERYONE

Genre(s) : Racing
Category : Arcade
of players : 1-2, up to 14 online

Compared to the technical depth of games like *Gran Turismo 4* or *Project Gotham Racing 3*, *Ridge Racer 6* is something of a throwback. Heavy on the drifting and completely ignorant of the laws of physics, the game stays true to its arcade roots, without feeling simplistic. If you're looking for a simulation racer, look elsewhere, but if you just want some old fashioned high-speed fun, this is it.

Those familiar with the series know exactly what to expect and the game doesn't disappoint with its over the top drifting control. The game encourages you to take each corner at the highest possible speed and simply powerslide through. Letting off the gas releases your rear traction and gives you the ability to maneuver precisely; smashing it back down throws the car into a sliding drift. Make sure the front end is pointed straight down the track when the drift ends and you take off like a bandit. It's a system that would make Isaac Newton weep, but it feels oh-so-right when you're on the track.

Cars are split into three drift types: mild, standard and dynamic. Mild cars stick to the track well, while dynamic cars can be thrown into a drift with a simple sneeze. Standard is a nice balance between the two options. Racing in a dynamic car can be something of a challenge, especially in the higher classes and speeds, but if you can master the slip-sliding drift it gives you a much better chance of taking first.

All of the cars in *Ridge Racer 6* are originals, but sadly there is no damage model, visible or otherwise. While we wouldn't expect performance degradation, after all this is an arcade racing game, it would have been nice to see the results of our on track

impacts given that the game practically begs you to use the other cars as buffets when powering around the steepest of corners.

The nitrous system introduced in *Ridge Racer* for the PSP returns, though it has been modified a bit. This time around you earn boost based on the speed, rather than the length, of your drift. It's also possible to burn two or three nitrous canisters at once, allowing for a longer boost with a higher top speed.

Sound has always been a key part of the series, and *Ridge Racer 6* is no exception. The original techno and drum and bass tracks are well done, with most of the soundtrack feeling like it came out of a club rather than a video game. You'll want to give it a listen, even if you already have your own tunes ready to go. The DJ is another story though, as this time around he's more annoying than ever. Thankfully, getting rid of him is an easy fix.

Visually sharp, incredibly responsive and 100% arcade styled, *Ridge Racer 6* hits its target perfectly. It may not appeal to everyone, but what it does, it does exceedingly well.

Rating :
4.5 of 5



FINAL SCORE :
4.25 of 5

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

Arcade racers seem to have fallen out of style lately, but *Ridge Racer 6* proves the genre still has plenty of life left in it.



GUN



Review by Wanderer

Publisher : Activision
 Developer : Neversoft
 Release Date : 11/8/2005
 Rating : MATURE

Genre(s) : Action
 Category : Giddyup Pardner
 # of players : 1



Now this? This is how you do it.

Gun is a sandbox game, but more than that, it's a great third-person shooter in the vein of *Max Payne*. It seamlessly integrates slow-motion gunplay, a useful melee attack, a bunch of minigames, and a vast overworld into a cohesive whole, without seeming derivative or repetitive.

Colton White used to be a hunter and trapper in the woods with his father, Ned. One day, a steamboat raid leaves Colton with nothing except his revolver and a mystery to solve, one that'll pit him up against an evil faux preacher and what would appear to be every Indian raider and drunken outlaw in the West.

There's the first point that should be made: *Gun* rolls its sleeves up and earns its M rating. Not only is it an unapologetically bloody game with a penchant for occasional dismemberments, but it makes no attempt to sanitize the West the way a game like, say, *Samurai Western* does. Yes, you fight Indians; yes, you scalp people. It's not a faithful historical piece, but it isn't one of those oddly bloodless modern Westerns, either.

Colton can follow *Gun*'s main story, learning the truth about Ned and the preacher while exterminating outlaws en masse, or eke out a living on the frontier as a bounty hunter, gold digger, gambler, or pony express rider, among other things. Doing side missions will improve Colton's stats, which makes them invaluable when you're trying to clear certain parts of the main game.

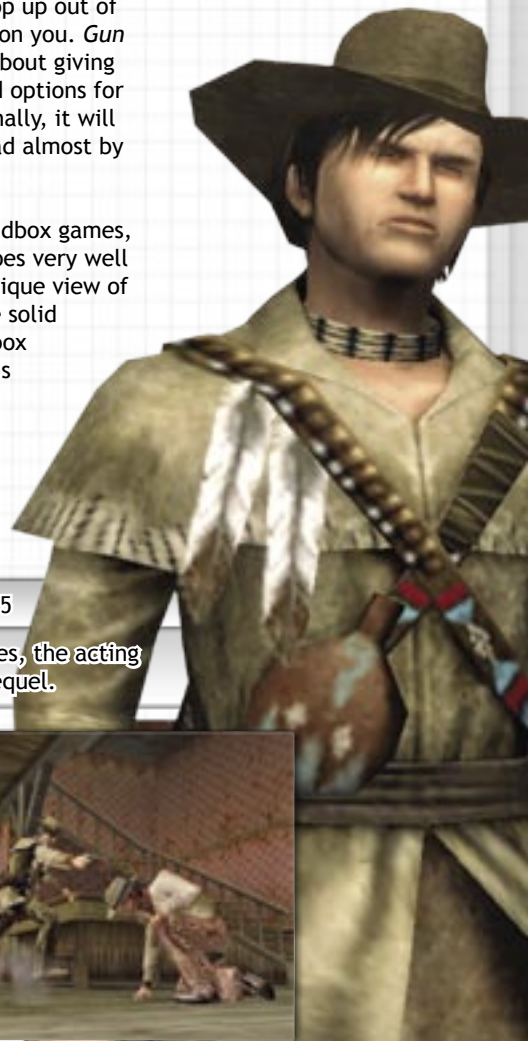
When the action gets tight, you can kick on Quickdraw mode—a first-person slow-motion mode that lets Colton fire off a quick

series of autotargeted revolver shots—or start running people over with a horse, in addition to the usual third-person action. *Gun*'s engine allows for a lot more flexibility in a firefight than you find in, say, *Grand Theft Auto*, so you can peek out from behind cover, throw whiskey bombs, or stagger an enemy with a knife hit before using him as a human shield.

Gun's biggest weak spot as a game is that it's a bit frustrating at times. Colton can drink from his flask (I keep telling you people, whiskey is good for you) to restore his health instantly, but you can be dead just as instantly, especially when six to ten guys pop up out of nowhere and open fire on you. *Gun* is usually pretty good about giving you plenty of cover and options for a firefight, but occasionally, it will make you kick over dead almost by authorial fiat.

Gun, unlike a lot of sandbox games, does most of what it does very well indeed, combining a unique view of the old West with some solid action gameplay. Sandbox gamers and shooter fans alike should be sure to check this one out.

Rating : 4 of 5



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

Gun's bullet-time mode is better done than most games, the acting is top-notch, and it's actually fun, to boot. I want a sequel.



PETER JACKSON'S KING KONG



Review by Syriel

Publisher : Ubisoft
 Developer : Ubisoft
 Release Date : 11/22/2005
 Rating : TEEN; Blood, Violence

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



Movie licensed games aren't known for being exceptionally deep nor are they known for being a whole lot of fun. Rather, they're usually thought of as being nothing more than shovelware crap, pushed out the door in the hopes of making a quick buck. For the most part that notion is true, but when Michel Ancel is developing your game all bets are off. Exceptionally creative, and a master of cinematic presentation, Ancel has taken a generic movie license and turned it into one of the most enjoyable games on the market.

Best known for his work on *Rayman* and the critically acclaimed *Beyond Good and Evil*, Ancel does an excellent job of immersing the player into his worlds. Two of the primary methods used to achieve this in *King Kong* are a compelling story and the complete lack of a HUD. *King Kong* throws you right into the action, without any junk cluttering up the screen.

The first time you play it's almost a bit disconcerting, as there aren't really any cinema scenes. Instead, the characters just talk to you directly, passing along information and asking for help. It's not a matter of *playing* Jack Driscoll, you *are* Jack Driscoll.

Seeing the world through Driscoll's eyes, it is easy to get lost in the lush beauty of Skull Island. Though the path you'll take is relatively narrow and linear, those aren't thoughts that come to mind when you're in the middle of a game. Each segment of play is crafted with a fine sense of urgency, resulting in levels that continually draw you forward, much like a good book.

In keeping with the cinematic aspect of the game, player status is conveyed via in game effects. When you're low on ammo, you'll

hear yourself mutter something about reloading. If you're hurt, your vision blurs and if you're near death an aria starts playing. It's a far cry from the traditional status meter, yet it works perfectly.

Switching from Driscoll to Kong is done seamlessly, with the game simply shifting from one viewpoint to another. Unlike Driscoll, who needs to scavenge for weapons and desperately try to stay alive, Kong is a massive beast who obviously lives at the top of the food chain. Both his movement and his actions convey a sense of power and finesse. Battling it out as Kong is easily the highlight of the game.

Perhaps the most impressive element is the visual performance of the current generation systems. Aside from some minor frame rate issues in the latter half of the game, the PlayStation 2 and Xbox versions are just as stunning as the Xbox 360 build when in motion.

Breaking it down piece by piece, *King Kong* is a simple game that just doesn't feel simple. By crafting an experience that plays on your emotions as well as your reflexes, Ancel has created a virtual world that is incredibly engaging and entertaining. Eat your heart out *Catwoman*, this is how a licensed game is supposed to be made.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

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

King Kong delivers what more games should - action, intrigue, and genuine fear. Prepare for sensory overload, and don't forget the popcorn.



FINAL SCORE :
4.5 of 5

QUAKE 4

Review by Wanderer

Publisher : Activision
Developer : Raven Software
Release Date : 11/22/2005
Rating : MATURE; Violence, Bloodshed, More Violence

Genre(s) : Action
Category : FPS
of players : 1

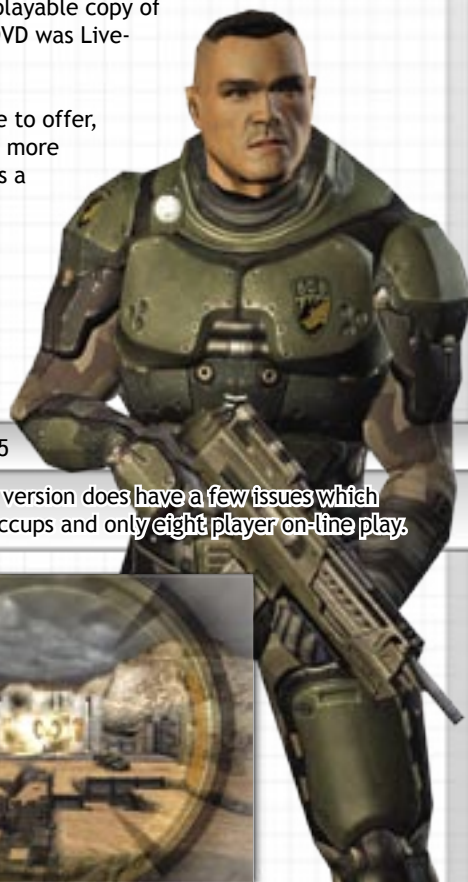


as it's smooth and moves very fast.

The problem is, then, that those same fanatics may feel like they've been here before. Playing multiplayer *Quake IV* is either nostalgic or repetitive, depending on your mood, combining the nod-to-the-classics arsenal of *Quake IV* with several old-school maps and gameplay that feels a *lot* like *Quake III: Arena*. It wasn't broken, so it didn't need fixing, but at the same time, for all this talk about the "next generation," this is weirdly retro.

Quake IV's singleplayer is more satisfying than its multiplayer modes; it feels more like a proper sequel, whereas online play is a little too much like the previous games in the series. (I also wish the playable copy of *Quake II* on the making-of DVD was Live-compatible.)

If the online mode had more to offer, like extra weapons or a few more gametypes, would make this a truly excellent game; as it is, *Perfect Dark Zero* may be the better online game. In singleplayer, *Quake IV* smokes it.

Rating : 4 of 5

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

Quake IV is a solid port of the PC version. However, the 360 version does have a few issues which keep it from getting a perfect score, including framerate hiccups and only eight player on-line play.



AMPED 3

Review by Shoegazer

Publisher : 2K Sports
Developer : Indie Built
Release Date : 11/15/2005
Rating : TEEN; Crude Humor, Mild Violence, Suggestive Themes

Genre(s) : Extreme Sports
Category : Snowboarding
of players : 1-2

There is a saying: "forget what you know and everything you think you know." Truer words could not possibly be better spoken before tearing the cellophane off of 2K Sports' *Amped 3*. When Microsoft cut loose its XSN sports line, the future was uncertain for many recognizable properties, but 2K Sports swooped in to save *Amped* and *Top Spin* from certain obscurity. Was that a good thing?

The recently released *SSX: On Tour* took a lot of heat from the media for trying too hard to be cool. This formula has also been implemented into *Amped 3*, but with about 50% more success. On one hand you have this horribly written dialogue with such hip clichés as "those dudes look sketchy," and "that's it! No more caffeine for Weiner Boy," while on the other hand, you have what will inevitably go down as the most stylish and well made cutscenes for many, many moons to come. They are so genuinely entertaining that you will actually find yourself wanting to progress through the game just to see the next scene. When was the last time you could say that about a game without the words "Final Fantasy" on the box? Speaking of words not on the box, this one is in need of a warning that advises players not to drink anything while playing, or it may shoot out of your nose while laughing.

Graphically speaking, *Amped 3* is about as sound as you would expect from a snowboarding title. Character clothing is incredibly detailed, and ripples briskly while you move, giving a good sense of speed. The gigantic mountains are also well-designed and realistic looking enough to even warrant a shiver.

Where *Amped 3* really excels is in its depth. Everything from an above average (for this genre) character creation function, to the amount of challenges that await you on the mountain. The beauty of it is that it's entirely up to you how you want to progress through the game. You can choose to follow the storyline to a tee, or you can explore the mountain and complete other various challenges, all-the-while building up your reputation, and earning rewards such as new gear and equipment, and even new songs for the soundtrack.

The only hurdle that *Amped 3* struggles to get over is in keeping your interest for very long. While true that there are tons of things at your disposal to do, the basic mechanics of this game are now going on seven years old. Gain speed, jump off of ramps, press trick buttons, nail combos, rail slide, etc. Sound a little familiar? Like maybe you've already done this a hundred times before? That's because you have, and sadly, there is little else here to refresh it other than the occasional sled race or snowball fight.

The bottom line here is simply how much love do you have left for the extreme sports genre? If you are not burnt out yet, then *Amped 3* will be a welcomed dose of the tried-and-true gameplay experience. If you are tired of the genre however, then this title is very easy to look past, which is a shame really, because there is gold buried in-between each challenge in the story mode. The high production values and presentation are almost completely wasted on a title that is guaranteed to be at the bottom of most gamers' Xbox 360 wish lists, and who could really blame them?

Rating : 2.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Roger Danish • Alternate Rating : 3.5 of 5

I loved that the developers at Indie Built dared to be different by taking the typical snowboarding title and coat it with off the wall (read: bizarre) style and flair. It's fun, funny and unique.

**FINAL SCORE :**
4 of 5**FINAL SCORE :**
3 of 5

NBA 2K6

Review by Shoegazer

Publisher : 2K Sports
 Developer : Visual Concepts
 Release Date : 11/15/2005
 Rating : EVERYONE

Genre(s) : Sports
 Category : Basketball
 # of players : 1-2;
 Xbox Live compatible



You can almost see the headlines from the next-gen basketball war already: "EA predicts 55% more realistic sweat for *Live '07*." "2K Sports promises more life-like clothing animations than ever possible before with *2K7*." Along with each advancement in technology, a new developer trick is exploited and becomes the hip new buzz word, or phrase, in the industry. Surely you've heard of sandbox games, rag doll physics, emergent gameplay, bloom lighting, and 3D comic inking, right? Well make room on the shelf for "glistening sweat mapping," and remember that you heard it first here in Hardcore Gamer Magazine.

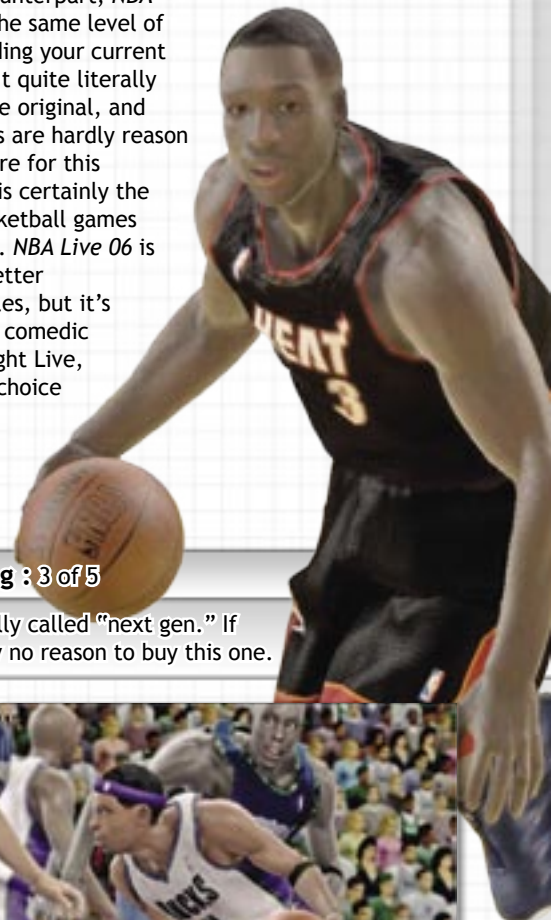
With the power of the Xbox 360, there are cool nuances of the game that are now possible like the realistic rim-rattling of your shot slightly missing the mark, and yes, the way the player's clothing reacts accurately to the player's movement. Though these new pieces of eye candy are certainly entertaining, they are only a few things that you'd find any different from the current-gen versions of *NBA 2K6* available on the PS2 and Xbox. The up-close character models and cut-scenes are all that you could hope for with a new console, but the in-game action looks only incrementally better than current-gen.

The basics are still intact from the move to 360: the right analog shot stick, the Crib, the slightly big brother-ish VIP mode, and the biggest draw of the game, the 24/7 mode, which has been substantially improved upon since last year. Now your created player will get to participate in actual NBA training camps in order to make the squad, and playing well enough could even land you a sneaker contract over time. It's also worth noting that the create-a-player options are about as detailed, and rewarding, as they come. You can even design your own shoes.

With all of the advancements that gamers expect to see from the next generation of video games, *NBA 2K6* unfortunately drags a couple of unwelcome technical issues along for the ride. Expect to see unexplainable frame rate hitches as your player cuts loose from the pack on a break away, or the knee of your player protruding through the character model of another player on a slam dunk replay from time to time. It's hard not to be disappointed, but at the same time, what's one more year while developers fine tune the next installment?

While it's certainly not a bad game, I just can't help but wonder how much more is possible for my hard-earned \$60, and you should too. Unlike its NHL counterpart, *NBA 2K6* doesn't provide the same level of satisfaction by upgrading your current version of the game. It quite literally is a carbon copy of the original, and the improved graphics are hardly reason enough to ask \$40 more for this version. That said, it is certainly the better of the two basketball games available on the shelf. *NBA Live 06* is unquestionably the better looking of the two titles, but it's also as shallow as the comedic talent on Saturday Night Live, making *2K6* the solid choice this year.

Rating : 3 of 5



FINAL SCORE :
3 of 5

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

NBA 2K6 still has a ways to go before it can be officially called "next gen." If you own either the Xbox or PS2 version, there's really no reason to buy this one.



NHL 2K6

Review by Shoegazer

Publisher : 2K Sports
 Developer : Visual Concepts
 Release Date : 11/15/2005
 Rating : E10+; Violence

Genre(s) : Sports
 Category : Hockey
 # of players : 1-4;
 Xbox Live compatible



It's pretty safe to say, after years of video game hockey evolution, that all the fundamentals of hockey have been accounted for. Everything from the button-mashing fights of *Blades of Steel*, to the skillful deke controls of EA's *NHL* series, no portion of the NHL experience has been left behind. So then what does that leave for the next generation of hockey games to improve upon? You might be surprised by the answer.

When reviewing games for a new, powerful console such as the Xbox 360, it's tough initially to not let the "ooohs" and "aaahs" of slick new graphics cloud your judgment about a game's quality. With a PS2 and Xbox version of *NHL 2K6* already on the shelf, it was easy to have low expectations for the 360 version, and anticipate nothing more than a simple port (I'm looking at you, *Tony Hawk*). While there are little differences from the get go, once you first take control of your team on the ice, a bold new world of hockey awaits.

Sure, you could find better looking games to show off your new toy, such as *Call of Duty 2* or *Condemned*, but make no mistake about it: *NHL 2K6* is one darn pretty game. The cutscene character models are about on par with current gen hockey, but the on-ice models are sharp, and much more defined. You can see every detail down to the seams of Detroit's knit-sweaters in beautiful high definition. The on-ice reflections of the arena lights are also simply stunning.

What makes *NHL 2K6* stand out as an Xbox 360 title is the sheer amount of subtleties worked into the game. Down 4-1 to the visiting Coyotes, I rallied back in the 2nd period to tie the game at 4. Upon scoring the tying goal, the players raised their sticks in the air and celebrated, as you could actually see their morale rising now that the win was back within reach. It may not sound impressive on

paper, but when you see it happen in the game, it truly sucks you in and gives you an increased sense of motivation to win.

No review of *NHL 2K6* would be complete without mentioning the eerily accurate play-by-play announcing. In one game, I caught a rebound off the glass while positioned in front of the net, and quickly put a wrist shot into the opposing goal. The announcer actually mentioned the rebound, and said that it looked like the goalie may have had his vision obstructed by his own defenseman. Along came the replay and sure enough, my shot had gone in from behind the lumbering defenseman. Amazing!

Read it and weep: one hockey review completely devoid of any references to making Gretzky's head bleed. What were included however, were many reasons to buy this game, but there are also reasons why you may not want to. For starters, if you already own another '06 hockey title, *2K6* has all the same features, but at next gen prices. If you love your Xbox 360 and hockey equally, then you may safely upgrade with no remorse. If you love the \$20 price tag that you already paid, then stick with your current gen version and give this one a rental. Bottom line, *NHL 2K6* is well-worth checking out.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

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

Like *NBA 2K6*, *NHL* doesn't scream next generation—it more or less whispers. Sure it's got some nice models and textures, but I'm looking for next-gen gameplay. Perhaps next iteration?



FINAL SCORE :
3.25 of 5



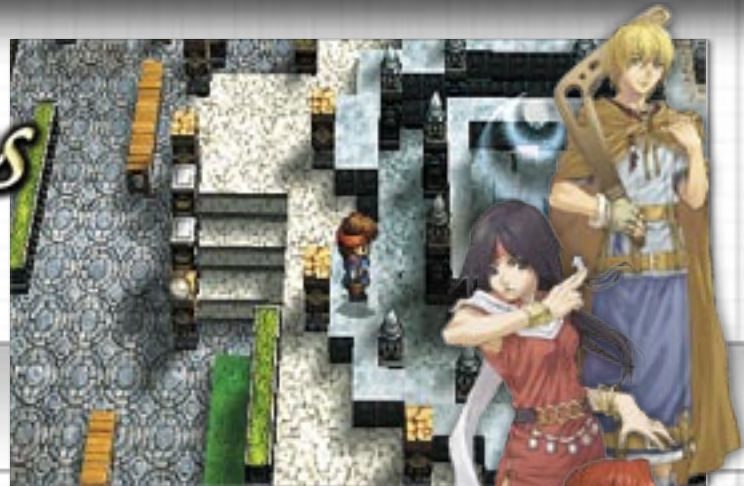
The Legend of Heroes



Review by **Lynara**

Publisher : Bandai
 Developer : Falcom
 Release Date : 11/15/2005
 Rating : TEEN

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



Legend of Heroes is the video game equivalent of comfort food: familiar, non-threatening, and pleasant. It's a port and a first-time localization of a 1998 Falcom PC/PlayStation title called *Eiyuu Densetsu Gargharv Trilogiy IV: Akai Shizuku*. Playing it feels a bit like playing a SNES RPG on PlayStation steroids. This is not necessarily bad, but it will be an acquired taste.

The plot is pretty typical of the 16-bit era, although presented with more visual panache than the humble SNES could've mustered. Basically, Protagonist and his best friend go out to find Protagonist's long-lost sister, save the world and complete fetch-quests along the way. As bland as the plot's concept is, there's a certain heartfelt earnestness to the way the storyline plays out that can really help draw you in. The localization is frankly quite bad, with a lot of inexcusable Engrish and text display glitches, but it's also very literal and obviously faithful to the original game script. It somehow brings out Falcom's infectious enthusiasm for the basic RPG formula better than a wittier, looser Nippon Ichi-style localization might have.

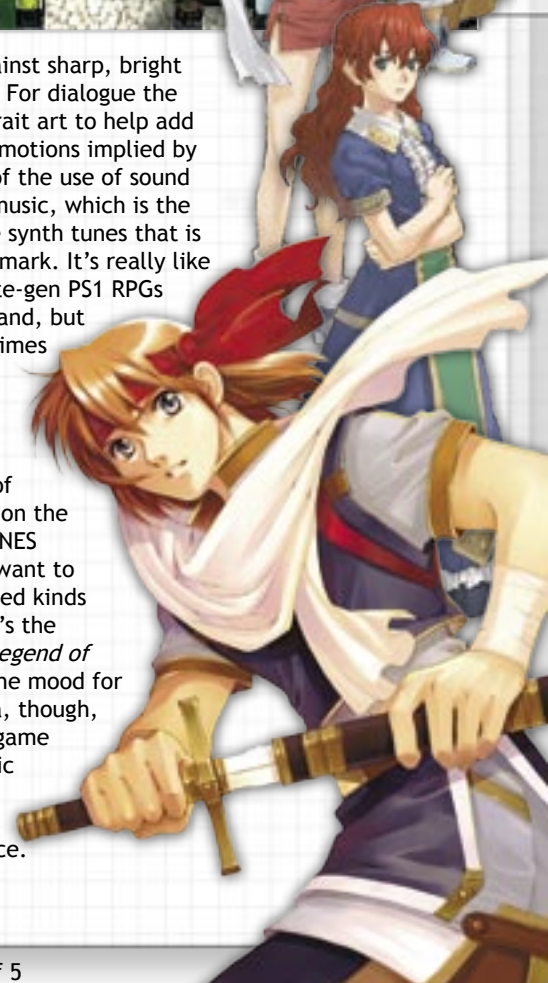
Combat for the game is pretty traditional turn-based stuff, with an assortment of powerful Deathblows, character-specific Skills, and magical abilities for each character. Characters move freely across the field in combat, so if you order someone to attack an enemy who's not in range, they'll just move as far as they can in that direction. Sadly, most combats in the game are so easy that you'll win them in one or two rounds, so you never really get a chance to explore the combat engine in depth.

The sound and look of the game are as retro as its gameplay, but in a good way. For graphics the game uses expressive, high-res 2D

sprites that move against sharp, bright 3D map backgrounds. For dialogue the characters have portrait art to help add some weight to the emotions implied by the story text. Most of the use of sound in the game goes to music, which is the sort of catchy, simple synth tunes that is Falcom's musical hallmark. It's really like holding one of the late-gen PS1 RPGs in the palm of your hand, but with almost no load times to slow down the gameplay.

Of course, a lot of us played the heck out of these kinds of games on the PlayStation and the SNES back in the day, and want to play more sophisticated kinds of games now. If that's the case, steer clear of *Legend of Heroes*. If you're in the mood for a bit of RPG nostalgia, though, run out and buy this game right now. It's a classic title from the last generation, and the PSP port does it justice.

Rating : 3.5 of 5



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

Cute and fun, *Legend of Heroes* is a charming throw-back to old-school RPGs. The battle system will be familiar to any 16-bit RPG fan, and the graphic presentation is nostalgia-inducing. Too bad about the translation, though.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS - TACTICS -



Review by **Lynara**

Publisher : EA Games
 Developer : Amaze Entertainment
 Release Date : 11/8/2005
 Rating : TEEN 13+; Blood, Violence

Genre(s) : Strategy RPG
 Category : Elijah Wood Looking Sad And Vulnerable
 # of players : 1



There's something frustrating about playing a game like *Lord of the Rings: Tactics*. It has the underpinnings of solid gameplay, but needed a bit more work and a bit more QC effort before it was ready for release. With that work never done, though, you're left with a game that faithfully represents the license but has little gameplay value.

LotR: Tactics is an extremely stripped-down version of your usual SRPG. Allied and enemy units move at once in a simultaneous move phase. That's followed by a combat phase, during which you can use ranged attacks (if there are no enemies on adjacent squares) or melee attacks (if enemies are on adjacent squares). You track six regular units through the course of your game, with the occasional "guest unit" like Boromir showing up to help out during a fight. You can play a "Host of Mordor" campaign, but in so doing use six units that are suspiciously similar to the standard campaign's Fellowship characters and go through basically the same missions. There are few character customization options and no discernable system in place for units to aid each other. Most battles progress with fewer than twelve units on the field.

The upside to this is that it keeps battles from going on for hours as they can in other games in the genre, but the downside is that they're shallow and quickly begin to feel repetitive. The damage algorithms for the game are also grossly unpredictable, with every character able to block enemy blows or critical hit for 2.5 times their ordinary attack damage. These events occur randomly but also very frequently. This means the stats the game gives you about damage potential for each character are often meaningless, as are the hints offered about how to beat a level. In a level where you're supposed to protect Frodo and go after the boss

with Aragorn and Legolas, Frodo might end up doing more damage than any other character.

Some camera bugs aside, the game does look very good—in fact, it feels like most of the effort in game design went into creating the 3D maps and making the characters resemble their film counterparts as closely as possible. The attack animations are nothing special, but when Sam throws a rock then by God it looks like Sam throwing a rock. The soundtrack is all sampled from the film OST, and each mission is interspersed with montages of clips from the various films. Weirdly, the clips don't use the PSP's full screen for display, but are instead letterboxed. This makes some footage, particularly of close-ups, frankly look a bit strange. All told, *Lord of the Rings: Tactics* would be a nice little portable RPG if anyone had bothered to put effort into tightening up the combat engine. The fact that nobody did gives the eerie impression that, perhaps, the game was never actually played it before it was released.

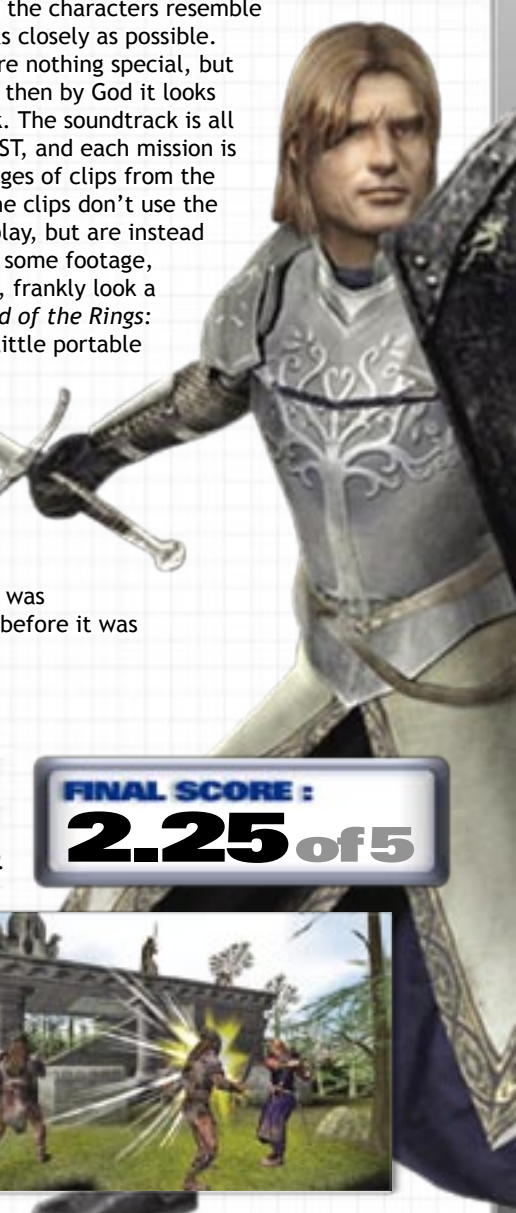
Rating : 2 of 5

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

A self-admitted *LOTR* freak AND a fan of SRPGs, I was able to eke out some enjoyment from *LOTR: Tactics*. It's unfortunate that the gameplay is pretty shallow, but it definitely fills a void on the PSP.



FINAL SCORE : **2.25** of 5



SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG

Review by Racewing

Publisher : Sega
Developer : Sonic Team
Release Date : 11/15/2005
Rating : E10+; Fantasy Violence, Mild Language
Genre(s) : Action/Adventure
Category : Speed, Gunplay and Cheesy Darkness
of players : 1-2

The *Sonic* series never did fully adjust to the third dimension. The engine used in *Sonic Adventure*, while serviceable at the time, had camera and control problems that kept it from being the best it could be. Sega, unfortunately, has stuck with this engine, from the Dreamcast's life on through the current hardware generation. They've been tweaking it with each new sequel—unfortunately, they've never quite seemed to be able to get all of the bugs out.

I'll say this now: many of you will not like *Shadow* because it asks you to try new gameplay concepts while still not fixing the old problems. *Shadow* adds gunplay, melee attacks, vehicles, a fully-controllable camera and a higher degree of exploration to the mix, all at once. Getting used to all of these is a daunting task, especially considering that not a darned one of them is implemented incredibly well.

Therefore, odds are that you will find much to loathe in *Shadow*, and will run to your *Sonic Rush* security blankets. The minute you boot up the game, it drops you, kicking and screaming, into a level that has lasers raining down around you and where nothing makes a whole lot of sense no matter how many buttons you press. Melee attacks are risky, homing attacks are still imprecise, and unless you use your analog stick perfectly, *Shadow's* the slipperiest thing in existence.

Still, those who soldier on and do manage to adjust themselves to the game's quirks and nuances will find a gripping storyline, creative stages, an inventive stage branch system that essentially lets you customize your own game experience, some great music, and drop-dead gorgeous CG. They'll find that using guns in a *Sonic*-style game really does make you that much more of a badass. They'll find that hearing the *Sonic* cast curse is just strange enough to be funny.

FINAL SCORE :
2.75 of 5

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

Interesting ideas muddled by the fact that Shadow controls like he's riding around on a stick of butter. At least there's some rocking cinematics this time!



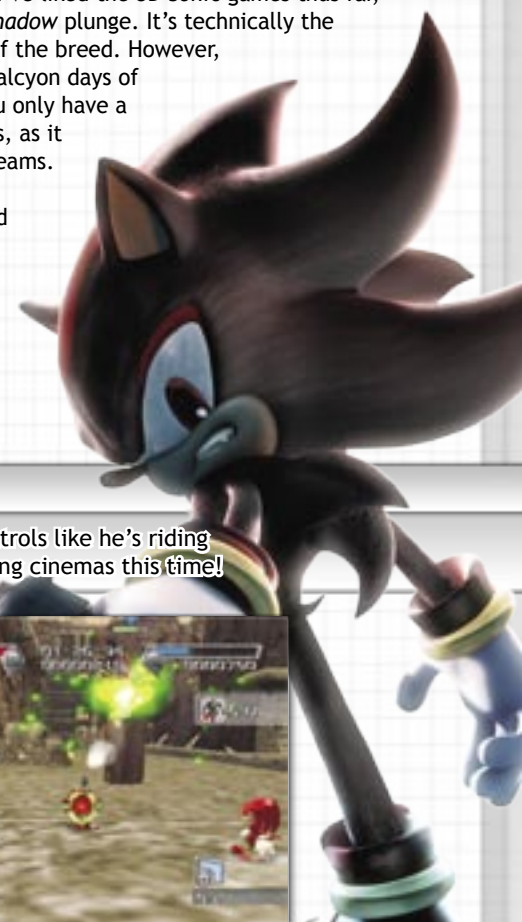
Finally, they'll find a 2-player combat mode... that really isn't worth going into. Ah, well.

As an added incentive, this game officially wraps up the storyline threads behind *Shadow* that have been hanging around since *Sonic Adventure 2*, which this game pays homage to in many respects, from remixed music to some revisited stages.

I'd normally say that *Shadow's* a solid rental, but honestly, if you do get the hang of it, you'll want to see it through to the end, and the game's length is such that it will take more than one rental period. So here's the deal: if you've liked the 3D *Sonic* games thus far, go ahead and take the *Shadow* plunge. It's technically the best and most polished of the breed. However, if you still pine for the halcyon days of Green Hill Zone (or if you only have a PS2), stay away from this, as it will only destroy your dreams.

I managed to have a good amount of fun with this game without realizing it. Your mileage, however, will vary like nothing else.

Rating : 3.5 of 5



Over the years, *Sonic the Hedgehog* has appeared in adventure games, racing games and everything in between. While some of those outings have been fun, the spunky blue speed demon was always at his best when he was moving fast. *Sonic Rush* takes the series back to its high speed roots and gives us the *Sonic* sequel we've been waiting nearly a decade to play.

Using the DS's dual screens, *Sonic Rush* paints a roller coaster canvas that replicates the old school style, while adding new play mechanics to keep things fresh. Sonic is free to move between the two screens as he rips past enemies, collecting coins and spinning through massive loops. Initially the ping pong effect is a bit much, but soon your mad 16-bit skills rise to the surface and everything feels completely natural.

One of the biggest changes is the new rush attack, which allows Sonic to instantly get to top speed. This is great for taking out enemies, but it also helps when trying to traverse long distance gaps. Hitting the rush right before you jump a ramp gives Sonic a bit more boost and can mean the difference between making it or falling to the platform below.

Joining Sonic on his adventure is Blaze the Cat. Taking control of Blaze results in a slightly different story, but gameplay is nearly identical. The only real difference between the two is the mid-air special move. Sonic can perform a mid-air dash, while Blaze has the ability to hover.

Though the early levels are rather simple, difficulty quickly ramps

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

I have fallen to my death more times in this game than in every single one of the previous *Sonic* titles combined, including the 3D ones. Thanks, Sonic Team!



SONIC RUSH

Review by Syrial

Publisher : Sega
Developer : Sonic Team
Release Date : 11/22/2005
Rating : EVERYONE; Minor Cartoon Violence
Genre(s) : Action
Category : Super Speedy
of players : 1-2

up. In order to survive, you'll need to have fast reflexes as well as a general knowledge of the level layout. When Sonic is running at full bore, the only way to avoid an enemy is to use the rush and plow right through them. The same holds true for elevated areas with bottomless pits below. If you miss the jump, it's sayonara Sonic. Thankfully, it's relatively easy to earn extra lives in the game so any cheap death is quickly overcome.

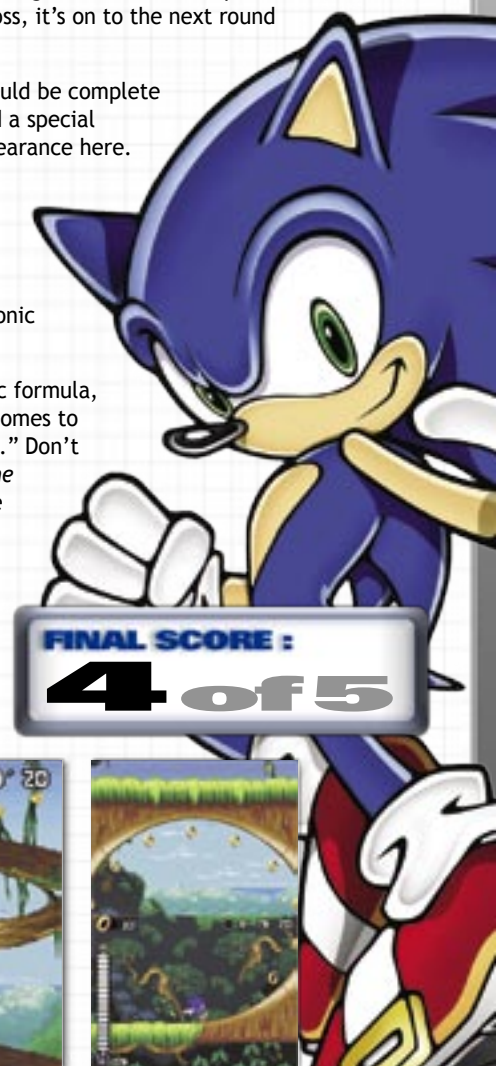
Boss fights break the mold a bit by switching to a 3D view. Arena size is limited and the attack patterns can be a little repetitive, but the short interludes are a refreshing break from the supersonic speed. After downing the boss, it's on to the next round of running.

Of course no *Sonic* game would be complete without Chaos Emeralds and a special stage, so both make an appearance here. The special stage is also where the touch screen comes into play. Much like *Sonic the Hedgehog 2*, the special stage is a half-pipe, only this time you control Sonic by drawing on the screen.

A modern take on the classic formula, *Sonic Rush* is exactly what comes to mind when you think "Sonic." Don't even bother with *Shadow the Hedgehog*. This is where the action's at.

Rating : 4 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5



PRINCE OF PERSIA THE TWO THRONES

Review by **4thletter**

Publisher : Ubisoft
Developer : Ubisoft Montreal
Release Date : 12/1/2005
Rating : MATURE; Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Nudity

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



Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones is, in simplest terms, a return to greatness. *Sands of Time* sported intense platforming, great atmosphere, and a Prince who just wanted answers, love, and safety. *Warrior Within* turned the brightness knob down a bit and things went dark. The once-charming Prince was now a gothy, mean McJerkface who was running from his doom. The platforming was scaled back in favor of a new combat system. *The Two Thrones* finds that middle ground between the two extremes and it is oh so sweet.

There are a few new platforming elements at play here and each of them are solid gold. There's wall panels that you can stab your dagger into for climbing, thin vertical crawlspaces that you can crawl around in, and, among other things, wall panels that you can springboard off to get a different angle on your jump. These, when combined with the elements from the previous installments of the series, all add up to platforming gameplay that is almost as hectic as the fighting. Some of the longer sequences require you to string 90% of these skills together in a row and then kill a few bad guys. The new moves fit seamlessly into the game, and only the dagger panels require a new button to press. Each of them need a bit of the old expert timing and fast reflexes, as you'll be triangle-jumping, hanging off balconies, wall-running, and leaping across gaping chasms nearly as soon as the game gets started.

Combat is a solid mix of the previous games. You can still harvest the Sands of Time from fallen enemies and chop them to bits. You can pull the weapons right out of the hands of weakened enemies and do them in with it. The biggest (and coolest) addition to the game are the speed kills. Creeping up on an enemy unseen is what usually gives you the option to slip into speed kill mode.

Missed timing on your speed kill results in the enemy detecting you, deflecting your attack, and sending you on your way with a smack in the face. Perfect timing nets you a brutal kill, including everything from multiple stabs to a quick-n-dirty throat slitting.

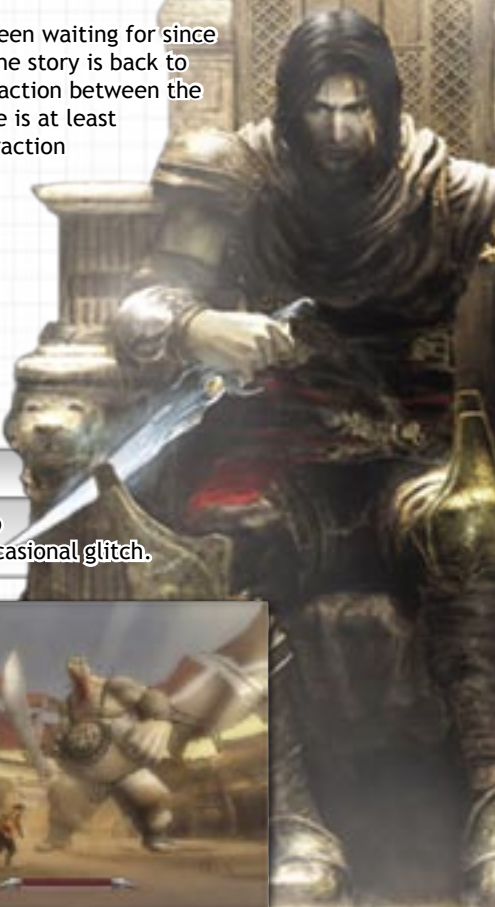
Some segments of the game have you going directly from a series of insane platforming stunts into battle. If you time it right, you can go directly into a speed kill. *Sands of Time* separated the combat and platforming almost religiously. *The Two Thrones* is much more cohesive. You may not have to cut holes in people while hanging from a curtain, but you won't feel like you're playing two wholly separate games any more, either.

This is the game you've been waiting for since the first *Sands of Time*. The story is back to its former glory, the interaction between the Prince and the Dark Prince is at least twice as good as the interaction between the Prince and Farah in the first game, and the platforming and combat will more than whet your whistle. Highly recommended.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
4.5 of 5

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

After the disappointing *Warrior Within*, this is a return to greatness for a quality series. It's only marred by the occasional glitch.

The MOVIES

Review by **KouAidou**

Publisher : Activision
Developer : Lionhead Studios
Release Date : 11/8/2005
Rating : TEEN

Genre(s) : Strategy, Simulation
Category : Movies
of players : 1



Ever get the urge to try and make movies? Hate having to go through all the trouble of getting funding? *The Movies* might just be the game for you, with an emphasis on "might."

Rather than letting you dive right into the role of writer/director/editor, *The Movies* makes you the head of a fledgling studio at the beginning of the 1920s. Aspiring movie stars (and writers, and janitors) will line up at your gates, and you get to choose who gets a job and who gets the boot. On top of this, you're also expected to do your own landscaping, commission your own buildings, and personally oversee movie production. If your stars get unhappy, it's your job to give them a makeover, upgrade their trailer, or de-stress them at the local bar. Oh, and you'll also need to oversee technological research to stay ahead of your competitors. Too bad formless, omniscient studio heads don't get vacations.

Unfortunately, if you fall behind your competitors, it becomes almost impossible to pick yourself up again, since you need that prestige to attract new stars and staff. If you just want to tinker with things, the sandbox mode is a bit more appealing, as it lets you change some settings to get rid of the factors you don't like dealing with, and gives you extra cash to stay ahead of the game.

If you can get comfortable with the game's sheer breadth, and the occasionally frustrating interface (which absolutely requires a mouse with a scroll-wheel for the PC version), the game can be quite fun. The illusion of the studio is truly amazing, as every person on your

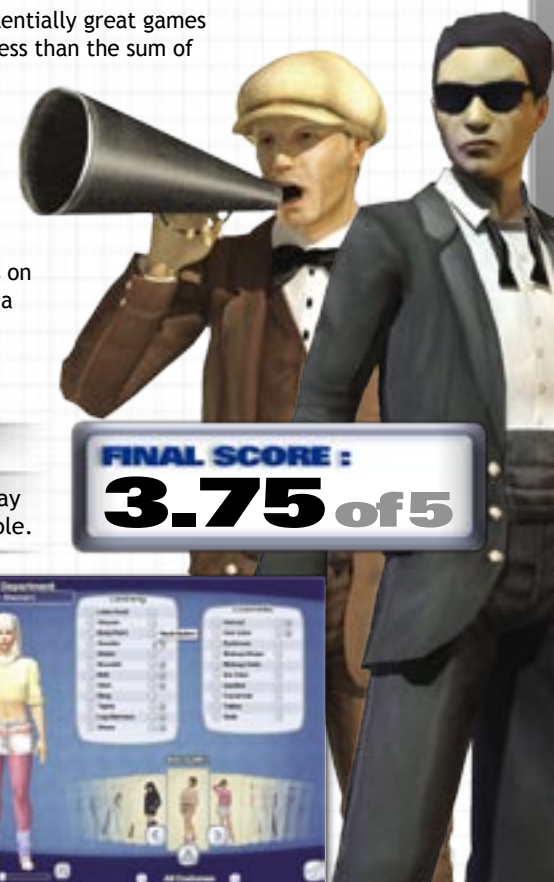
staff, from stars to janitors, will happily go about their lives until you pick them up and make them do something else. The graphics are great, the animations are extremely life-like, and there's plenty to see and do on the studio lot. The music is also very nice, assuming you turn off the obnoxious DJ voiceovers.

The heart of the game is the movie editor, which lets you set, script, and edit your own movies to share online. Characters normally speak gibberish as you film them, but the movie editor lets record your own voice-overs and sound effects to create an entirely personalized film. The interface for the editor gives you a lot of control without being too complicated. Unfortunately, you can only edit movies you've filmed in the main game or sandbox mode, which means a lot of tedious slogging through the sim-game if all you wanted to do was make movies. On the other hand, if all you wanted was the sim-game, the movie editing extras will feel extraneous and annoying.

The Movies is two potentially great games that, combined, are less than the sum of their parts. Still, the value of the game's innovations are undeniable, and people who don't get frustrated will have the tools to make some neat films on the cheap. I'll give it a hesitant thumbs-up.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

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

The Movies contains some revolutionary game design elements, even if they don't always play nicely with each other. Everyone needs to give this game a try once just to see what's possible.**FINAL SCORE :**
3.75 of 5

TALES OF LEGENDIA



Review by Racewing

Publisher : Namco
 Developer : Namco
 Release Date : 2/2006
 Rating : TEEN

Genre(s) : RPG
 Category : Traditional,
 With A Fighting Game Core
 # of players : 1



while you whale on your enemy without fear of consequence. In *Sonic the Hedgehog* terms, you get to unleash Chaos Control on some unsuspecting fools. The result of all this leads to action highly reminiscent of Namco's 3D fighters, while not quite becoming one itself.

You should come for the gameplay, but also stay for the story, and the characters, which aren't half bad. Said characters are designed by one Kazuto Nakazawa, of *Kill Bill* animation fame, and the English dub is professional-grade. Finally, the storyline itself takes itself a lot less seriously than *Symphonia's* did—sure, it's still profound, but it's also full of highly comedic interludes. The first time you run afoul of an Elvis-impersonating superhero and his bombshell wife, you'll wonder what these scripters were smoking, and where you can get some. The only possible nitpick regarding this game is that random battles have returned, but they're implemented in such a way that you may not mind as much as you normally would.

I'll be blunt—gameplay-wise, this game succeeds where *Radiata Stories* failed, and its story dodges the heavy-handedness bullet at just about every point you would think it'd get hit by it. This one's worth picking up.

Rating : 4 of 5

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

Fun gameplay, great graphics, tons of anime cut-scenes: everything I like in a *Tales* game. If you like Japanese RPGs at all, you'll want to pick this one up.

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5



GUITAR HERO

Review by Sardius



NEWSFLASH: You don't have to be embarrassed to play rhythm games anymore! RedOctane and Harmonix have at last crafted a game that captures the essence and soul of a live musical performance, and the resulting product offers a satisfying experience like none other.

It's about damn time, too. In unhappier days, would-be rockers had to deal with the rigid gameplay of *Guitar Freaks*, or pretend to enjoy the utterly lame *Gitaroo Man*. Fortunately, these days are long past. Unlike its predecessors, there ain't no wussy J-Pop to be found here; *Guitar Hero's* soundtrack is full to the brim with pure unadulterated rock. If you're looking for the nancy-boy trance and techno found in other rhythm games, you'd best take your dancemat elsewhere.

The object of *Guitar Hero* is to rock out, preferably as hard as possible. Players jam along to a variety of classic and modern rock'n roll tracks using the included guitar-shaped controller. Simulating a real guitar, notes are played by first holding down the required fret buttons and then strumming to match the rhythms displayed on-screen.

This is similar to the basic gameplay layout of Konami's *Guitar Freaks*, with a few key improvements. *Guitar Hero's* controller features five fret buttons, and while only a few of them are used on lower difficulty levels, Hard and Expert modes will test the skills of even the most experienced rhythm gamers. The guitar controller also features an analog whammy bar for

Publisher : RedOctane
 Developer : Harmonix
 Release Date : 11/7/2005
 Rating : TEEN; Mild Lyrics

Genre(s) : Rhythm
 Category : Guitar Rockouts
 # of players : 1-2

player-controlled pitch bending—an optional but *awesome* feature that creates a convincing sensation of actually playing the guitar.

Guitar Hero's music is perhaps its best aspect. The 30 included licensed tracks are all cover versions, but they all sound so good and the guitar portions are so meticulously recreated that you won't even notice the difference, the only exception being a strangely vocal-less version of Jimi Hendrix's "Spanish Castle Magic." This oversight aside, rock fans of all sorts are going to find something to like here. Tracks from the likes of Ozzy Osbourne and Megadeth will please metalheads, and classic rock fans are going to enjoy songs by Cream and ZZ Top. Likewise, if you're the type to rock out to Boston or David Bowie, well, that's your choice, but we promise not to tell anyone.

The incredible soundtrack is backed by an atmosphere that simulates the thrill of a live concert. In a brilliant move on the part of the designers, obtaining the highest scores requires the use of Star Power, which is triggered by tilting the guitar controller vertically, in true hardcore rocker fashion. The rush brought on by hitting Star Power at just the right moment and hearing your polygonal fans scream in appreciation is unparalleled, and requiring the player to physically rock out as part of normal gameplay speaks worlds about how much fun there is to be found in *Guitar Hero*.

Music games no longer have to languish in the obscurity of descriptors like "quirky" and "niche." *Guitar Hero* is here, and it rocks.

Rating : 5 of 5

2nd opinion by Spinner 8 • Alternate Rating : 5 of 5

It's simple enough for beginners and plenty challenging for veterans, but you feel like you're really rocking out at ANY difficulty. Absolutely get this.

FINAL SCORE :
5 of 5



MARIOKART DS

Review by **Syriel**

Publisher : Nintendo
 Developer : Nintendo
 Release Date : 11/15/2005
 Rating : EVERYONE

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



In the 16-bit days, *Super Mario Kart* defined combat racing. The game's finely tuned balance of speed and skill lent itself well to competitive match-ups, while the single player game was just downright fun. Over the years, Nintendo has tweaked with the formula, but wisely never messed with the core gameplay. *Mario Kart DS* is the pinnacle of that tweaking.

The core of *Mario Kart DS* is the single player game. Split into Grand Prix, Time Trials, VS, Battle and Missions mode, it features a little bit of everything. Gameplay is as solid as ever, with incredibly tight handling, power slides and the turbo start. Just like the prior games though, it's not all about the racing as how you handle your weapons is just as important as how you handle the wheel.

Although item selection is somewhat random, it is influenced by both your kart and your current position in the race. Karts with a high item rating have a better chance to score a good item, as do racers at the back of the pack. This is done to help balance things out and keep any one player from gaining an unbeatable lead.

Battle mode contains two games: Balloon Battle and Shine Runners. In the first, each kart is given five balloons which can be inflated by blowing into the DS's microphone. Pop your opponent's balloons by hitting them with items. In Shine Runners the object is to have the most shines. If a round ends and you have none, you're out.

Missions mode is completely new to the series, and gives you a series of goal based mini-missions. Completing the missions unlocks a boss and beating the boss unlocks the next level. Though it is the

most "gamey" part of *Mario Kart DS*, Missions mode also doubles as a mini-tutorial because each mission indirectly teaches a new driving skill.

This is all well and good, but it wouldn't be *Mario Kart* without multiplayer. Up to eight players can compete via local WiFi, with one cartridge or multiple carts. If each player has a cart, you can compete in both versus and battle competitions. With one cart, you're limited to versus and any non-cart owning player has to race as Shy Guy. This is, perhaps, *Mario Kart DS* at its finest.

Those of you with WiFi at home, or a McDonald's nearby, can hop onto the free Nintendo WiFi Connection and play gamers across the globe. Unfortunately Nintendo opted not to include an online lobby making it difficult to find friends online or form a specific group. Really, all you can do is hop online and play which is a bit disappointing. Ah well, there's always next year.

Combining the core elements of the original *Mario Kart* with the best features that have appeared in all the sequels, *Mario Kart DS* is pretty much the ideal karting game. It's fun, addictive, and aside from the limited online mode, pretty close to perfect.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

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

Mario Kart DS is a love letter to life-long Nintendo fans. Each of the new stages is a work of art and the 16 classic stages are great, too.



tokobot

Review by **James**

Publisher : Tecmo
 Developer : Tecmo
 Release Date : 12/6/2005
 Rating : EVERYONE

Genre(s) : Adventure
 Category : Platformer / Puzzle
 # of players : 1



With *Tokobot*, Tecmo has created one of the most charming action platformers of the year. Filled with ruins to explore, robot transformations, and tons of puzzles, there's a little something here for just about everyone.

An ancient civilization was destroyed a few thousand years ago, leaving behind ruins filled with technology that has yet to be equalled. The hero of *Tokobot*, Bolt, is an explorer for Dr. Canewood of Canewood Labs. One day in a ruin he finds a half-dozen mini-robots, the tokobots of the game's title, and they instantly take to following him around like baby ducklings. Unlike ducklings, however, the tokobots have all sorts of abilities beyond being small and cute, like being able to attack dungeon-dwelling creatures, link up to form bridges and ladders, and even transform into a variety of larger robots.

It wouldn't be much of an adventure, though, if there wasn't a scheme to do something horrible to the world, and *Tokobot's* plot kicks in quick. The obligitary military baddies want to steal the tokobots away to use in their plans to acquire the ultimate weapon, and Bolt gets to do all the usual things involved in stopping them.

Intricate dungeons need to be explored and conquered, with a new puzzle in just about every room. There are enemies to smack around, and many can only be defeated by one of the three formations the tokobots form around Bolt. Progressing through dungeons unlocks new transformations, allowing the tokobots to change into various large machines, some of which attack and others that are used as tools. The Samurai transformation, for example, is great on bosses, while the Crane can only be used in the specific areas where it's needed. Changing into a form costs bolts, though, and those can be pretty scarce in the early part of the game. Additionally, the transformations

only last until their energy is depleted, so they tend to get saved until they're really needed. Every room feels like it needs a new combination of skills to get through, keeping the game fresh from start to finish.

There are a few problems, though. To start with, the translation is just plain bad. Sentences that just sound strange are only the start of it; there are typos all over the place in addition to simple mistakes like using "to" instead of "too". It doesn't affect the gameplay, of course, but a game as well-designed as *Tokobot* deserves better than just slapping some English into place and calling it good. Additionally, the same nagging issue that far too many PSP games have—inadequate camera control—is present, although it's not so bad as some titles. (*cough**Death Jr.**cough*) Many a fight, especially boss encounters, would also benefit from a lock-on ability.

Despite this, *Tokobot* is an excellent game overall. The variety of tasks keeps the dungeons fresh, and there's just enough story to keep the action going without bogging everything down. While Bolt is the standard silent hero, he seems likeable enough, and the tokobots themselves are always fun to see. There are even bonus modes available once the main quest has been completed. While it's not quite perfect, *Tokobot* has ended up being my favorite PSP game so far.

Rating : 4 of 5

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

This game has real potential but needed more polish before release—there's no excuse for the occasionally-incomprehensible localization, camera bugs, and massive clipping errors. Great premise, though.



FINAL SCORE :
3.5 of 5

AEON FLUX

Review by 4thletter

Publisher : Majesco Entertainment **Genre(s) :** Action/Adventure
Developer : Terminal Reality **Category :** Sci-fi
Release Date : 11/15/2005 **# of players :** 1
Rating : TEEN; Violence

I wasn't a fan of "Aeon Flux" as a kid. It was ugly, obtuse, and I really didn't get it at all. The new movie has gone with a more standard look and, thankfully, the tie-in game has followed suit.

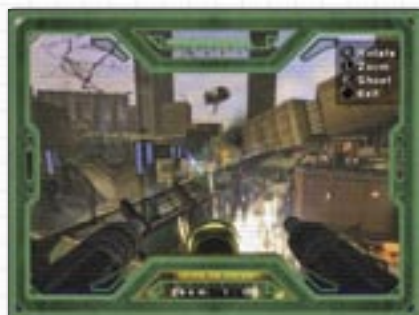
Aeon Flux feels disjointed, at least in terms of story progression. A decent-sized chunk of the story is told through the intel capsules that you pick up, but you have to go into the pause menu to see them. That's more than a little unfun, when many of them could've easily been integrated into the sorely lacking cutscenes. That would've lengthened the game, and made it a lot more interesting.

The cutscenes that are present are of the real time rendered variety, which isn't always a good thing. Some of the tweening on the character animation could've used a bit more work. Some of the characters look like they're popping from position to position, particularly Aeon's buddy Sithandra in the second stage. Even Aeon falls prey to this, which makes combat look somewhat like Aeon and her friends are having a particularly heated voguing battle.

Fighting is simple, but this isn't necessarily a good thing. There are a decent number of combos and fatalities, but combat too often devolves into spamming one attack key, since every attack but the fatalities have about the same effect. Shooting your FUG works by pointing the analog in the general direction of the person you want dead and pulling the trigger. The auto-aim function, though, sucks. It sometimes ends up killing someone who you didn't want to bother yet, instead of the guy with no health left who just needs a little nudge into the afterlife.

Aeon Flux is an odd animal at its core. I hate to say it, but it's almost equal parts *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* and

FINAL SCORE :
3 of 5

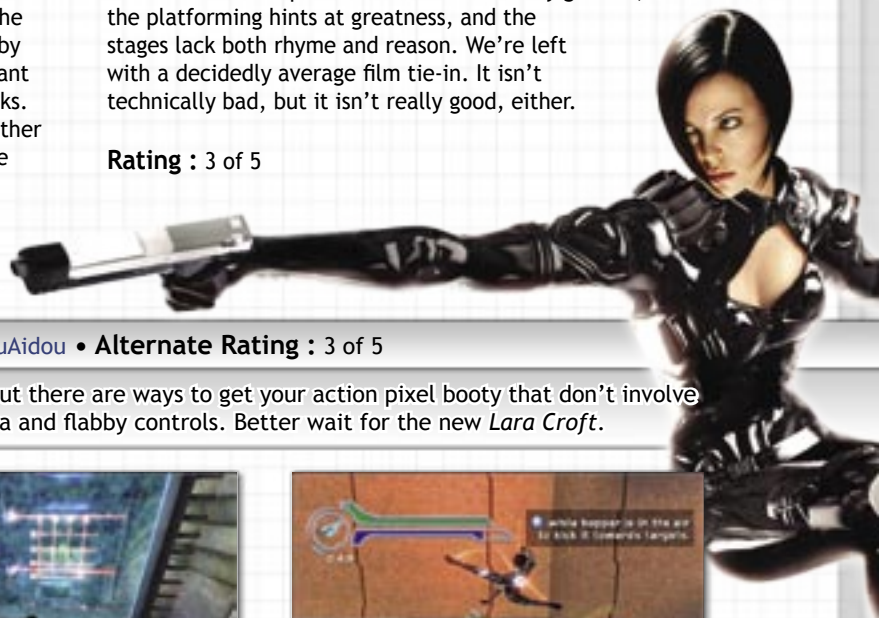


Metroid Prime. Most of the stages have a segment where you either end up inside what looks suspiciously like a morph ball or piloting around a smaller version of it. The larger morph ball lets you pass through security barriers and run down guards with the boost, while the smaller version unlocks doors and turns off traps.

Platforming is the strongest part of *Aeon Flux*, but also one of its weakest. She has a full complement of modern-day platforming moves. Everything from wallrunning to pole climbing is covered. The only problem is, there's not really a lot to do with them. There might be the odd segment where you have to use your skills to get past a trap or dodge something, but that's it. It never quite reaches that fervor that hardcore platforming needs. It's really kind of sedate.

As movie tie-ins go, *Aeon Flux* isn't a terrible game. It's got all the basic bullet points of a competent game down pat, but that's about where it stops. The combat is woefully generic, the platforming hints at greatness, and the stages lack both rhyme and reason. We're left with a decidedly average film tie-in. It isn't technically bad, but it isn't really good, either.

Rating : 3 of 5



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

Aeon's hot and all, but there are ways to get your action pixel booty that don't involve such a clumsy camera and flabby controls. Better wait for the new *Lara Croft*.



Earlier this year, I reviewed *NARC* for another outlet. I said that it was average at best, but it showed some real promise in terms of concept. It could've used more consequences for your actions in-game, but it was all right. *True Crime: New York City* takes everything I liked in *NARC*, adds it into a larger city, a better plot, an awesome soundtrack, and one of the buggiest game engines I've ever had the pleasure of playing.

The story is fairly by the book. You play Marcus Reed, a cop who's attitude can best be summed up by the phrase "I wish you would." He takes crap from no one and won't hesitate to shoot someone dead. You earn points based on your in-game behavior. Planting evidence on an innocent nets you bad points. Performing a righteous bust brings in good points.

Those problems I mentioned, though? They're big ones. *True Crime's* controls leave a lot to be desired. The auto-aim function is nice, but it's completely worthless when it just focuses on the person closest to you during a crowded mission. That's how you rack up dead civilians. The hit detection is twitchy and clumsy, as you'll often hit the arrest button three times before the game realizes what you want to do. Don't even get me started on how you grab empty air more than often than not when trying to frisk a citizen.

The camera, in a word, is bad. Pray that you never get surrounded by bad guys, because you're going to spend a good number of seconds spinning around and trying to get a bead on the guys at your back.

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

While *TC: New York City* is a definite improvement over *Streets of LA*, it still has too many issues to reach elite status. A good rental, yes, but may not be worth plunking down your hard-earned cash.



TRUE CRIME NEW YORK CITY

Review by 4thletter

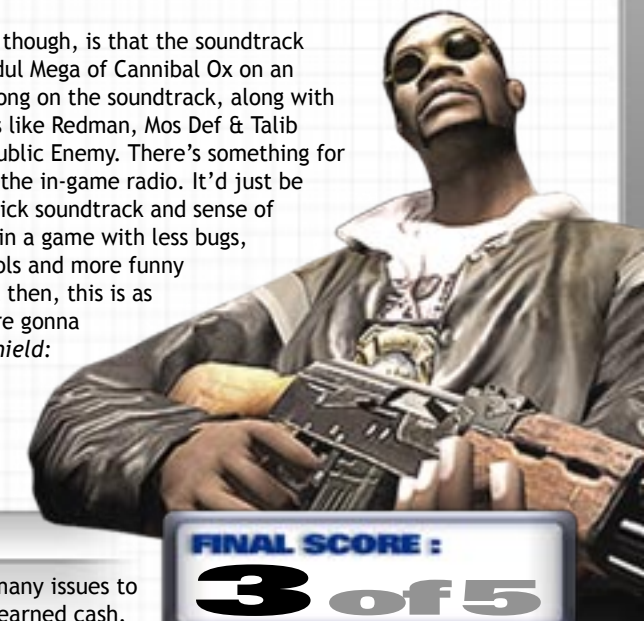
Publisher : Activision **Genre(s) :** Third-Person Action
Developer : Luxoflux Corp **Category :** Sandbox
Release Date : 11/16/2005 **# of players :** 1
Rating : MATURE; Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Strong Language

There's pop-in, too, and even worse than the pop-in is the slowdown. If you attempt a tricky turn in a car, then you might be treated to a bit of the old unintentional slow motion. This is bad news, kids.

On the other hand, there's quite a bit to like about the game. There's a sly sense of humor underlying all the f-bombs and headshots. The various crimes you get called on to stop vary from an insane arsonist who won't hesitate to blast you with his flame thrower to my personal favorite, enraged vegans wrecking a vegetarian restaurant for daring to serve meat. There's a fair amount of idle chatter from the citizens and from Marcus. A good bit of it is coarse, of course, but it's the thought that counts. Marcus even pops off a one-liner or two when arresting a perp. Christopher Walken's character is solid gold, too.

What's tops, though, is that the soundtrack includes Vordul Mega of Cannibal Ox on an unlockable song on the soundtrack, along with rap stalwarts like Redman, Mos Def & Talib Kweli, and Public Enemy. There's something for everyone on the in-game radio. It'd just be nice if this slick soundtrack and sense of humor were in a game with less bugs, better controls and more funny crimes. Until then, this is as close as we're gonna get to *The Shield: The Game*.

Rating :
3 of 5



FINAL SCORE :
3 of 5

We had to use these pages for other purposes last issue so this time 'round we've packed twice the hardness into the same amount of space. We apologize in advance if this causes any problems with you turning pages or rolling up the magazine because of the extra stiffness that all of the additional hardness imparts. (Yes, we're talking out of our arse just to fill space).

Microsoft Xbox 360 VGA Cable

Video Cable
Price: **\$39.99**

Review by Syriel

Features
VGA output,
Digital audio port,
Stereo sound

High definition TVs are new and swanky, but if you're not living on the bleeding edge you might not have one of these bad boys in the house. Chances are good though that you've got a SVGA monitor around. Typically supporting resolutions well in excess of HDTVs, a monitor is an excellent, not to mention economical, way to get the best picture out of your Xbox 360.

Getting the system up and running is as simple as plugging in the cable, but to get the best picture you'll have to configure it in the system properties. The Xbox 360 supports a number of resolutions, up to and including 1280x1024 and 1360x768. This is important for LCD users as you'll want to match the native resolution of the screen. About the only downside to the cable is the fact that only has a male plug on the end. To use it with a monitor that has a fixed cable you'll also need to pick up a female-to-female VGA adapter.



Nintendo Nintendo Wi-Fi USB Connector

Online Adapter
System: PC
Price: **\$34.95**

Review by Syriel

Features
Small size, WinXP compatible,
Instant DS Access Point

Now that Nintendo has gone online with *Mario Kart DS*, DS owners everywhere are clamoring for some Internet action. If you've got a Wi-Fi router at home (or a nearby McDonald's) you're set. If not, Nintendo has the solution with its Wi-Fi USB Connector.

Designed to work with the DS and Windows XP, the connector is a plug-and-play solution. Just install the drivers, plug in the device and connect with your DS. The software automatically configures your computer to act as an access point and shares your existing Internet connection. The whole process takes less than five minutes. Sadly, you cannot use the connector as a generic access point for other devices -- it only works with DS systems -- but it does its job well. An excellent choice, even for computer novices.



Microsoft Microsoft Laser Mouse 6000

Gaming Mouse
System: PC
Price: **\$49.95**

Review by Syriel

Features
5 buttons, Scroll wheel, Ultra thin
cord, Laser sensor

Most computer users don't think twice about their mouse. After all, it's just a pointy-clicky thing that opens up the pretty icons on the screen. For gamers though, it's a different story as a mouse needs to be both precise and ergonomic in order to work well. Microsoft's Laser Mouse 6000 scores high on the first count, but fails miserably on the second.

The two side buttons are placed near the front of the mouse, in an area that is near impossible for a mere mortal to hit without finger contortions (or unnaturally long thumbs). The "gaming toggle" allows you to record a macro and apply it to a button on the mouse, though it isn't persistent. Reboot and it's gone. Odd, and annoying, behavior. Another issue has to do with the magnifier -- it doesn't work with DirectX programs (i.e. GAMES). Pretty stupid to have one of the two major features on a *gaming* mouse not work in-game.

Although Microsoft has a solid reputation for PC gaming hardware, the Laser Mouse 6000 feels like a basic business mouse that was simply renamed. If you're looking to game, pass on this one as there are much better options out there.



Sony Media Software PSP Media Manager

Application to organize your PSP media
System: PC
Price: **\$19.95**

Review by Syriel

Features
Supports the AVC video format, Tracks
podcasts, Manage photos, music and
save games

The PSP may be a decent media player, but getting your videos onto the dainty thing is often easier said than done. A multitude of conversion programs have cropped up over the past few months, and now Sony itself has entered the fray with the PSP Media Manager. Though it promises to handle all your PSP needs, the program feels a bit rushed -- shining in some areas and faring poorly in others.

With support for the AVC video format, the PSP Media Manager can output some amazingly good looking video files. It is easily one of the best options in terms of quality. Oddly though, there are no options to rename your videos, choose a thumbnail for display or sort them on your unit. The program is also limited to 320x240 output, rather than encoding the video at the PSP's native resolution. No doubt, this is to ensure that UMD videos still have a slight edge.

While many major formats, such as DVD's MPEG-2 are supported, the popular Divx codec is not. The program simply refuses to convert Divx AVI files. In another oddity, you cannot convert a video to the PSP format unless your PSP is connected to the computer. As a result, you can't just grab a movie as you run out the door. It takes around 3 hours to convert a 2 hour movie on a 3 GHz PC. Better plan ahead.

Music conversion is another oddity, as the program only supports MP3 output although the PSP can play back a number of formats. Not giving the user a full suite of options is a huge oversight. Thankfully, both the podcast and photo options work great, and the save game manager offers an easy way to back up those all important save games.

In the end, it's hard to recommend the Media Manager software. Though the video quality is great, the software itself feels incomplete and basic. If Sony wants us to pay for functionality, it needs to be exceptional. What's here should have been included with the PSP in the first place.



Microsoft Xbox 360 Controller for Windows

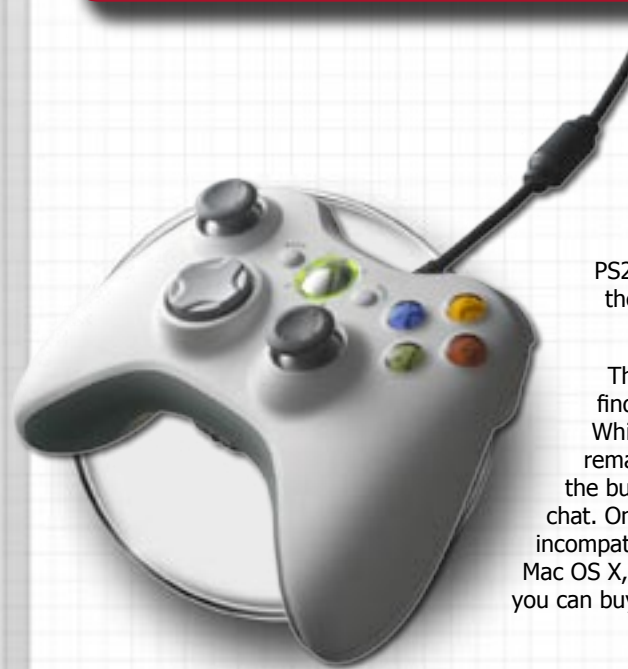
Game Controller
System: PC
Price: **\$39.99**

Review by Syriel

Features
9 foot cord, USB connector,
Breakaway cable, Vibration motors,
Dual compatible with WinXP and
Xbox 360

Say what you will about Microsoft's software divisions, but when it comes to hardware the company is typically top notch -- especially in the PC gaming arena. For the longest time Microsoft's Sidewinder was *the* gold standard when it came to PC gaming but in a world of dual analog control, even the Sidewinder was starting to show its age. Realizing that many people were already using hacked PS2 and Xbox controllers on their PCs, Microsoft took the next logical step and made the Xbox 360 gamepad dual compatible.

Though it ships in a PC branded box, this is the exact same controller that you can find in the gaming aisle. Plug it into a PC, install the drivers and you're up and running. While most games don't recognize the controller directly, it is a simple matter of remapping the buttons in your game of choice. The controller is great for MAME, and the built-in headset jack means you can use your favorite cell phone headset for VOIP chat. On the downside, it is impossible to remap buttons on the controller itself making it incompatible with older games that don't have direct joystick support. It also doesn't support Mac OS X, which is a shame. If you have a PC though, it is easily the best all around gamepad you can buy -- and when you're done it doubles as a backup controller for your console.

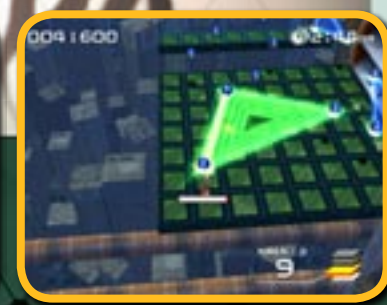


Preview by **Wanderer**



Publisher: SCEI
Developer: Media Vision
Release Date: 10/06/2005
Platform: Playstation 2

Genre(s): Puzzle
Category: Fantasy
of Players: 1



This isn't the most import-friendly title I've ever played, but it's a compelling puzzle game in its own right. Just when you start to think it's easy, it turns up the gain and starts kicking your face in.

As one of three characters, you begin a level of *Mawaza* standing on a flat plain, one of several that're suspended high above some surrealistic city that I presume is about to get flattened by a meteor. Your job is to grab and rotate triangular shapes until they crash into each other, which'll destroy them. When you've destroyed a set number of triangles, you'll move on to the next stage. Then, you start having to construct those triangles from orbs that're spawning and rolling towards you at a maddening rate. You cannot make a triangle unless you can draw an unbroken line between each of the three orbs you want to use, which can be a pain if there's a big ol' preexisting triangle right in the center of the screen. This gets even harder later on, when you run into black orbs that cannot be used as the rotation point for a triangle.

Then, when the three-minute timer on each level runs out, the floor of the stage starts to slowly but surely crumble underneath your feet, turning each stage into a hell-for-leather race to survive. *Mawaza* is, like all the best puzzle games, easy to learn but difficult to master. It has its own peculiar rhythm; as it gets harder, you need to take commensurately greater risks. Sure, you could make little triangles and shatter them one at a time, but that's just not going to do the job as you get towards later levels.

You need to create huge triangles, pull off big combos, and link your shapes together in a sort of full-contact geometry. It's a little like spinning plates on top of sticks... while the floor's shaking... and when some of the plates are glued to the ceiling. That simile kind of died on the runway, but I hope you get what I mean. The gameplay here is a lot to take in. Frankly, I suck at *Mawaza*; after a certain point, you have to keep so many little variables going in your head at once that it breaks my brain. There aren't many extras or bonus modes in *Mawaza*, but what's here will keep you busy for some time.

Mawaza presents a series of challenges that're about as hardcore as it gets. Only serious puzzle fans need apply, but those serious puzzle fans will be on cloud nine.

WORTH IMPORTING?

This would be an excellent PSP title. It seems a little short for a PS2 game, but the sheer bizarre nature of the game makes it a must-have for a certain kind of gamer. If you're a former master of games like *Pipe Dreams* or *Intelligent Qube*, *Mawaza* will hook you up with that same kind of relentless challenge.

It doesn't hurt that D.D. is a future Internet icon in the making. I mean, just look at him! Lookit the panda!

FINAL SCORE:
4.00 of 5



Review by **Lynara**

Licensed By: Manga / Bandai
Production: Bandai Entertainment
ADR Production: Animaze

Genre(s): Action
Release Date: 11/22/2005
Format: UMD Video

The core demographic for the PSP just so happens to be the core demographic for R1 anime releases, and this has lead to a flurry of anime-on-UMD releases pretty much from the day the PSP was available in the US. So far the UMD anime offerings have mostly been re-issues of series that did well on DVD, rather than the dual-format releases that the Japanese market has been experimenting with. For a lot of anime fans who own PSPs, the question has become "Why buy the same series twice, when I can just plop encodes on my Memory Stick?" After all, virtually all of these releases seem to target people who are already big fans of these shows, and who probably own DVD versions of the anime in question already.

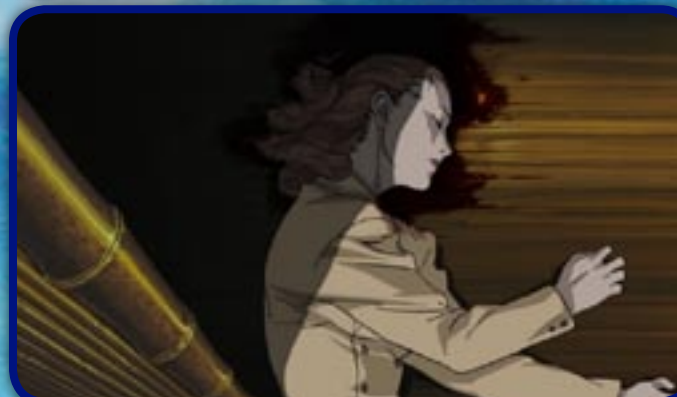
Judging from *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex's* UMD release, the main argument in favor anime on UMD over encodes is the ability to switch freely between the Japanese and English language tracks as you watch. You can also switch subtitles on or off. While the video quality on the UMD was slightly better than the encoded episodes we compared it with, it wasn't really enough to justify the UMD's price tag. What was convincing was the superiority of the UMD sound mixes, which were much

louder and more atmospheric. The series itself is an excellent watch on PSP, blending stand-alone "detective story" episodes with more complex storylines that run in multiple-episode story arcs. *SAC* was produced in widescreen format, so it feels somehow more expansive and alive on the PSP than it does when viewed on a conventional television set.

SAC's UMD release mirrors the DVD release exactly in terms of episode count, but it does drop the creator interview bonus segments. Instead we get what should've been trailers for Bandai's other UMD anime offerings. "Should've", because the trailers on the disc are actually just re-encodes of the trailers for the DVDs added. The trailer for the *Escarflowne* movie isn't even in fullscreen format, and the *Endless Waltz* trailer actually ends with the tagline "Coming Soon in 2001"! This is does not inspire someone to think she's just spend the best \$20 of her life, especially if she looks at it before the much higher-quality episode encodes.

Still, the *Stand Alone Complex* UMD is still a much better value than a lot of competing UMD offerings. Geneon's *Gungrave* UMDs, for instance, only contain a ridiculous two episodes per disc. While it would still take very deep pockets and an extraordinarily passionate devotion to *Ghost in the Shell* to make someone want to buy the whole series over again if they already had it on DVD, the UMD could be a nice low-cost alternative for people who caught it on Cartoon Network and want a high-quality version to watch on the go.

FINAL SCORE:
4.00 of 5





beatmania IIDX 10th style

Preview by **Sardius**
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Konami
Release Date: 11/17/2005
Platform: Playstation 2
Genre(s): Rhythm
Category: DJ Simulation
of Players: 1-2

Beatmania is one of the most successful and longest-running series you've probably never heard of. Though it may be relatively unknown to most American gamers, Beatmania is responsible for making the rhythm genre what it is today. Dance Dance Revolution, Guitar Hero, and most other modern rhythm games owe their existence to Beatmania's shifting of the genre away from the restrictive story-based stuff of yesteryear to a boundless arcade-style format.

Dozens of Japan-only arcade and home releases later, Beatmania is finally set to see a US release in March of 2006. The question is: how will Beatmania's first US release stack up in comparison to a series that, in Japan, has steadily evolved since 1998 and is still going strong today?

Beatmania's gameplay is deceptively simple. Using a controller consisting of seven keys and a turntable, players are challenged to play a series of notes in order to fill in a song's missing beats and melodies. These notes are displayed on-screen, and the corresponding keys on the controller must be hit in proper sequence as the notes fall and cross a red line at the bottom of the playfield. The turntable comes into play in a similar manner, and must be scratched when appropriate. Unfortunately, freestyling is penalized, so while random button pressing may have gotten you far in PaRappa, that ain't gonna fly here.

The game's premise remains the same throughout, with few changes or surprises, no matter what song or difficulty level is chosen. Progress is determined only by increases in player skill, and much of your enjoyment will come from watching yourself get better and passing songs that had previously appeared impossible. The overall sense of creating music is also very convincing, and hearing a song come together as a result of one's skill is both rewarding and fun.

Beatmania IIDX's difficulty cannot be understated, however, and is perhaps the series' greatest fault. Even in the easiest difficulty mode, there are no songs that can be considered "easy" by most standards. The penalty for missing notes is so great that first-time players are likely to fail more songs than they pass, and the game's timing is so strict that it could take months or even years of playing before a player's achievements become worthy of being assigned the game's highest "AAA" rank.



each new release, Konami caters to veteran IIDX players whose skills are constantly improving and in need of testing. 10th Style reflects this in a number of ridiculously difficult song selections, some of which require over 1500 button presses in under two minutes to complete successfully. Needless to say, you'll need a hell of a lot of practice before you can claim to have mastered this game.

10th Style also features a somewhat lacking selection of songs compared to previous PS2 Beatmania releases. While there are a good number of tracks available, far too many fall under the category of "generic trance", which can become repetitive. The game does include a few excellent Gradius remixes, however, and Silent Hill composer Akira Yamaoka is responsible for some of 10th Style's best tracks. The less said about the non-music produced by Slake, though, the better. In all, 10th Style's soundtrack is enjoyable enough, but there is a sense that a large number of songs are created with the intent of being difficult rather than fun.

If you adore rhythm games and are a masochist willing to invest months into getting your ass kicked by extreme difficulty, buy 10th Style without hesitation. Practice and your efforts will eventually pay off -- the more often you play, the sooner you'll be getting awesome scores to rub in other peoples' faces. If you are not sure whether you have this kind of dedication, test the waters with a cheap used copy of the infinitely easier 3rd Style instead, or wait for the US release of Beatmania in March, which should hopefully be less hostile toward beginners. It takes a special kind of gamer to enjoy Beatmania to its fullest,



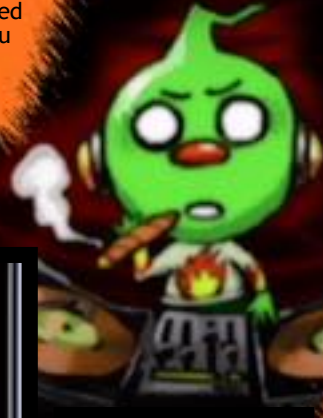
Beatmania IIDX 10th Style in particular is a difficult game to evaluate with the beginning player in mind. While 10th Style's interface is the prettiest the series has seen and the game contains a variety of options not found in any previous release, the fact is that the game is built specifically with expert players in mind. With

but providing you have what it takes, you'll be amazed at how much fun it is being constantly reminded that you suck at IIDX.



turntables FOR FAKE FAKE DJ

Like many rhythm titles, Beatmania IIDX 10th Style is best played using its own expensive controller that is incompatible with most other games. The controller features seven keys and a turntable, and is sturdy enough to handle months worth of button mashing. After some time, however, keys may begin to stick and cleaning may be necessary, which is a rather huge pain that requires opening the controller and modifying its innards. Konami promises that an improved controller will be packaged with the US version of Beatmania, featuring a more rounded design and spring-loaded keys. As long as it's still the right shape and size for Air IIDX Guitar, we'll be happy.



WORTH? importing!

Difficulty aside, Beatmania IIDX 10th Style is very English-friendly, and can be played fully without understanding a lick of Japanese. The series also has a massive English-speaking fanbase, providing both ample competition and support for one's failings.

FINAL SCORE : **4.00** of 5

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.hardcoregammag.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@hardcoregammag.com.

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Title : Chibi Ryu
Artist : J.P.
Age : 23
Location : Orlando



Title : Selkie
Artist : Aaron Millsaps
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Undisclosed



Title : Good? Bad? I'm the Guy with the Gun.
Artist : Ryan Bloom
Age : 22
Location : Colorado



Title : Sonya Blade
Artist : Jigsaw
Age : 20
Location : Sweden



Title : Heather
Artist : Wahay
Age : 17
Location : Canton, Ohio



Title : SF2 Group
Artist : J.P.
Age : 23
Location : Orlando

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Cos-play (kos-plä) v. A combination of the words costume and play. People known as "cosplayers" dress up as their favorite characters from anime movies, and video games.

SUB-ZERO
AFTER EATING A RADIOACTIVE POPSAKLE, J.P. FOUND HIMSELF WITH FREEZING POWERS. HE THEN REALIZED THAT HE IS NOW THE "COOLEST" GUY IN TOWN, LOOKING AROUND FOR A GIRL AS "COOL" AS HE IS HE RAN INTO SHOW WHITE. J.P. aka SUB-ZERO RIPPED OFF THE HEADS OF THE 7 DWARFS AND STOLE SHOW WHITE'S HEART. WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITIES.

SCORPION
WHILE TRYING TO COPE WITH THE TRAILING SMOGGER, HEAT, MANUEL DISCOVERED A SCORPION AMULET BENEATH AN OLD MINING CLIFT. WHILE IN HIS POSSESSION, THE SCORPION AMULET STRUCK MANUEL, GRANTING HIM DARK WINDS POWERS, BUT ALSO DESTROYED HIS MORAL SOUL. HE IS NOW KNOWN AS SCORPION BY THOSE WHO FEAR AND OPPOSE HIM. SCORPION FEARS ONLY ONE... SUB-ZERO!!!

REPTILE
NO, HE WAS NOT BITTEN BY A RADIOACTIVE LIZARD. HE BIT THE INDO-ACTIVE LIZARD! EDUARDO WAS REALLY HUNGRY THAT DAY. NOW HE HAS A REALLY LONG TONGUE THAT HE USES IN MANY WAYS. SOME THINGS THAT HE DOES WITH HIS TONGUE ARE QUESTIONABLE AND EVEN SICK. WATCH OUT, HE'LL CHEW YOUR FACE OFF.

KANO
ROBBY HAD THE LEAD ROLE IN "THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA" WHEN HIS MASK GOT STUCK ON HIS FACE. SINCE THEN HE HAS TRAINED TO THROW KNIVES AT PEOPLE THAT MAKE HIM MAD. WHEN HE WAS ROBBY HE HAD THE REP OF STEALING GIRL'S HEARTS. NOW THAT HE'S KANO, HE IS KNOWN FOR RIPPING OUT HEARTS. GO FIGURE.

Website: <http://jpzilla.deviantart.com>

Pictures by Chellene Alferez

Sub-Zero, Scorpion and Reptile design and creation: J.P. Perez, Manuel and Eduardo Rodriguez

Kano design and creation: Bobby Wade and Momma Wade

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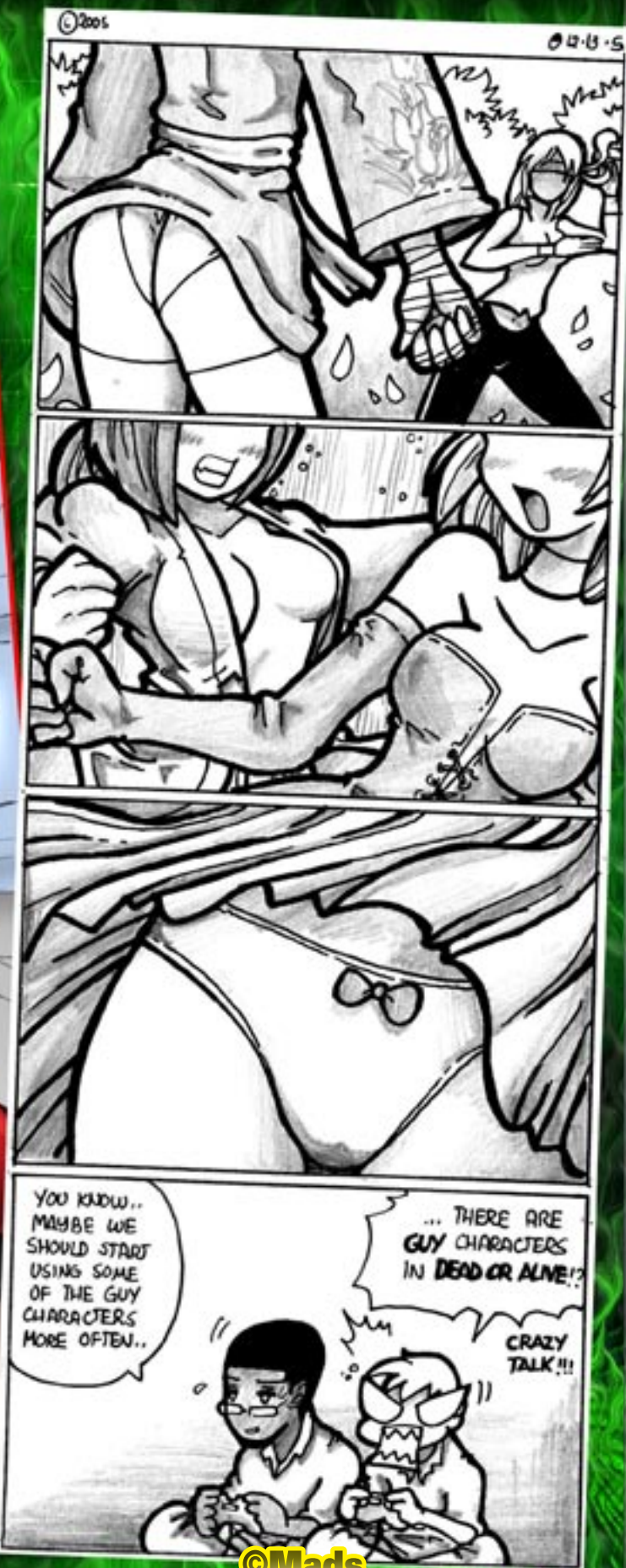
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