new games • old games • console games • pc games • arcade games • portable games • game stuff

HARDCORE GAMER® MAGAZINE

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v1i9 . warm bun

GRANDIA III

7 Pages Of RPG Luvin'!

Plus we show off some of the hot new titles about to burst onto the scene, including:

DRIVER PARALLEL LINES

syphon filter DARK MIRROR

As if that weren't enough...

.Roger exposes the long lost SuperGrafx,
.Lynxara brings order to Generations of Chaos,
.plus, check out the new site Luv2Game.com!

Bug infested issue!
See if you can find them all!. pg.11

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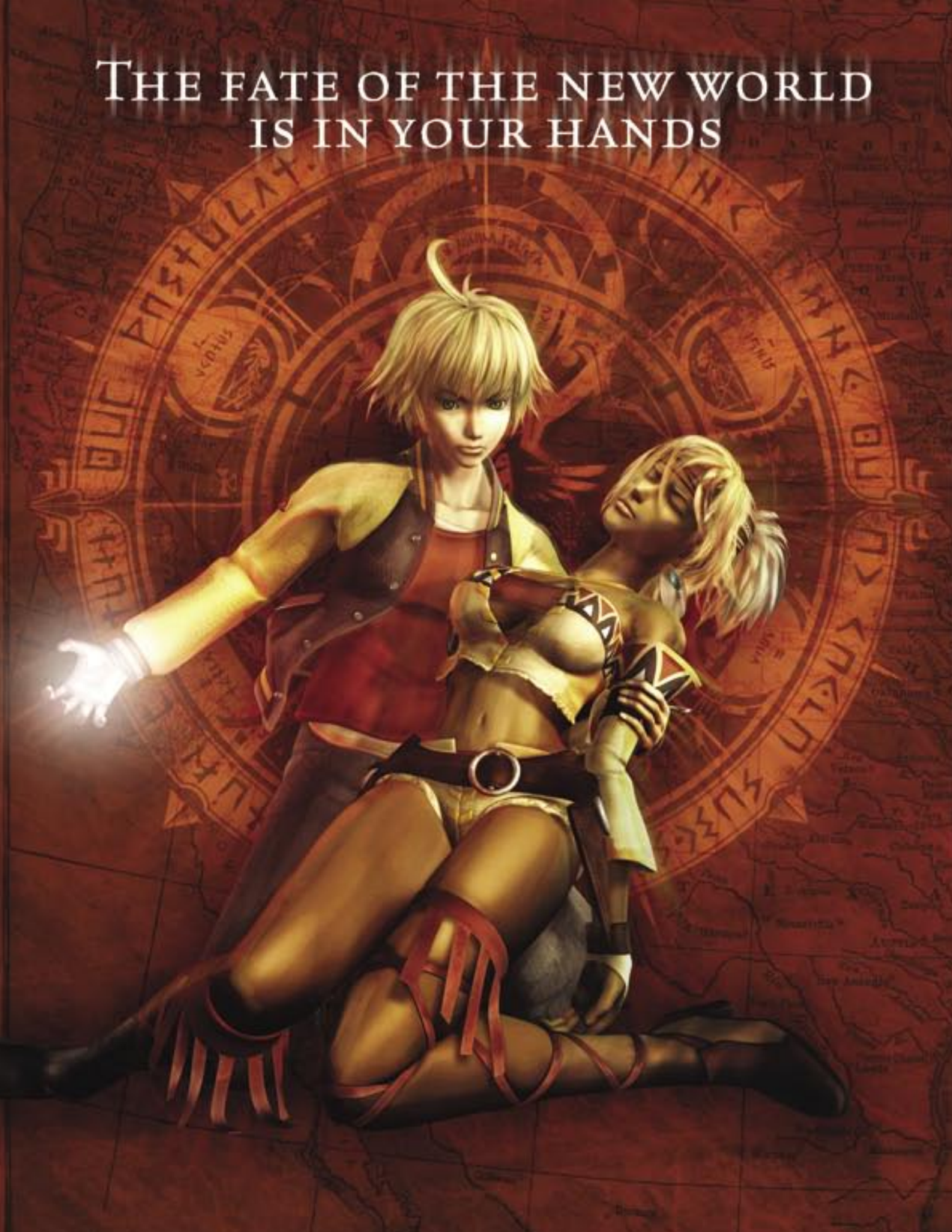
THE FATE OF THE NEW WORLD
IS IN YOUR HANDS

SHADOW HEARTS
FROM THE NEW WORLD



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UNITED STATES

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Crude Humor
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol and Tobacco
Violence

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PlayStation 2

HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE

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Printed in the United States of America

Biographical Data

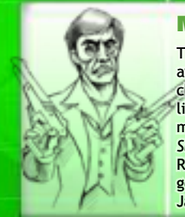
DJPubba_Tim Lindquist

I must apologize. I still haven't been able to do part 2 of the Vectrex article. This time it was lack of time. I've got the bits and parts which I think will do the trick, but regular magazine business has been keeping me away from the wotrkbench. Plus, *Disgaea 2* arrived at DoubleJump Books for strategy guidance and I couldn't not check *that* out.

Now Playing: *Disgaea 2*, *Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow*

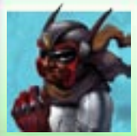
Wanderer_Thomas Wilde

They say gamers have two jobs. I've moved on from that to the point where I have a second *life*. It's actually kind of sad, especially when I find myself treating gym time as a particularly annoying minigame. Of course, when I play video games, it somehow translates to me paying off all my student loans in the course of a single month. I'm *that much better at them than you*.
Now Playing: *Shadow Hearts: From the New World*, *Meteos*, *Max Payne*, *Silent Hill 4*



Mogis_Tim Kinneen

This month I imported a Super Famicom, which is awesome for two reasons. First of all, I've gotten a chance to replay a lot of the classics that I grew up with, like *Mother 2* and *Final Fantasy VI*. Secondly, it allows me try out games that never came out in the States, like *Super Bomberman 3* and *Seiken Densetsu 3*. Navigating RPG menus has been kind of tough, but I think I'm getting the hang of it. Who knows, maybe I'll be reading Japanese a year from now!



Racewing_Geson Hatchett

In the space of a week, both my PSP and my Internet service have broken down, and my computer may or may not be far behind. Wait a second... wasn't my degree in computer science supposed to *prevent* things like this?

Now Playing: *Tales of Legendia*, *Sonic Riders* (Xbox), counting down the days to *Super Princess Peach*

Shoegazer_Dave Hulegaard

This industry requires a fair amount of travel, which is why it's imperative to always take along an ample supply of music for the road. Though my selection varies, the one CD that always makes the trip with me is Midsummer's *Moon Shadow* EP. Check them out on MySpace if your musical tastes fall slightly left of center.

Now Playing: *Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories*, *Grandia III*, *Chrono Cross* (it's a Square-Enix kinda month)

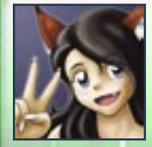
KouAidou_Elizabeth Ellis

Who hyper-focuses? Me. I do.

Now Playing: *Grandia*, *Grandia II*, *Grandia III*

Roger Danish_Greg Off

It's weird to see how so many of our peers in the press get so angry and jaded so quickly. Have they forgotten that they get the privilege and pleasure of experiencing, playing and writing about one of the greatest hobbies that ever was? Sure we have to muddle through our share of stinkers a lot of the time, but at the end of the day, we get to do what we love, which is a rare thing.
Now Playing: *Metal Gear Solid: Subsistence*, *BLACK*, *Kingdom Hearts II*, *Daxter*



Lynxara_Alicia Ashby

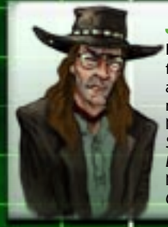
2006 is turning into a weird, weird year. No booth babes at E3? Good *Naruto* games? A deluge of average-to-good PSP titles? It's got me suspicious. We could be living in the end times, people. If there's someone you know that you suspect could be the Antichrist, I'd suggest keeping a close eye on him or her this year.

Now Playing: *Grandia III*, *Generation of Chaos*, *Comic Party Portable*

4thletter_David Brothers

Man, Ubisoft is coming extremely correct this year. *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*, *Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII*, and *Splinter Cell Double Agent* all look extremely sick. Now, someone just needs to buy the rights to *100 Bullets*, spiffy it up with some sort of 2D/3D fusion, and go 360.

Now Playing: *Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence*, *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance*



James_James Cunningham

I bought a $400 game system back in November, and so far the best things for it are $5-$10 games. This isn't a complaint about the quality of the retail games but rather an appreciation of just how cool Live Arcade is. Now if MS can just persuade SNK to put *Twinkle Star Sprites* on there, I'll be a very happy gamer. 4L: *100 Bullets*? I'd be happy for *The Red Star*.
Now Playing: *Need for Speed: Most Wanted*, *Chibi Robo*, *Gunstar Super Heroes*

HonestGamer_Jason Venter

So they delayed *Twilight Princess*. Again. I'm not sure how I feel about that. I want the game to be great. No, I want it to be better than great. If this delay does that, fantastic. If it doesn't... I'll buy it anyway.

Now Playing: *Civilization IV*, *Wild Arms 4*

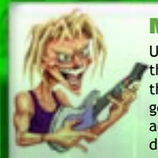
Hitoshura_Iain Ross

Liz took the words right out of my mouth. How else can I explain why I don't have any pages this issue? The answer is I've been focusing solely on one game from the moment I wake up to the moment I sleep. Every day. For almost a month.

Now Playing: *Disgaea 2*

Wolfie_Terry Wolfinger

I'm still playing *World of Warcraft*! The addiction within the addiction has become the in-game Battleground feature, where you team up and go head-to-head against 10 other players (Alliance scum!) in a capture-the-flag scenario (yet another incentive to keep leveling your character). Games I'm looking forward to: *Brady Bunch Kung Fu* (who doesn't want to punch Jan?!), *Jaws* (which I played a bit of at E3), and *The Outfit*, because reducing a town to rubble sounds pretty damn cool. W00t!



Metalbolt_Anthony Mertz

Ubisoft has offended me with the piece of total trash that is *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*. It forsakes everything that makes the R6 games, the R6 games! At least I've still got *Battlefield 2*, and *Bahamut Lagoon* because it's more addictive than any game should be. Byuu? View? Makes no difference to me, as long as I've got my dragons!

Now Playing: All said games, minus *Lockdown*, plus *Red Dog*.

Arfieth_Thomas Shin

I've been out of commission with a couple of projects related to Japan's annual Olympics of Fighting Games: Super Battle Opera. This year, USA gets to send three teams to Tokyo (two for *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike* and one for *Tekken 5: Dark Resurrection*), and we'll be covering it from the inside! Tune in to Luv2Game.com for updates!

Now Playing: *King of Fighters XI*, *Naruto: NarUltimate Hero 2*

Ashura_Brady Hartel

This time I'm back... with actual writing! This month I got to write a rather goofy piece on my most favorite puzzle game evar, *Battle Balls*, and I didn't even make any kind of joke about male genitals! Be proud! My brain is still dripping out of the side of my head from all the *Metal Gear Online* I've been playing, though I devoted some alone time with *Megaman: Maverick Hunter X*. Is it just me or does it sound like he's saying 'Troglodyte' instead of 'Shotgun Ice?' Currently Playing: So much *MGO* that it leads to exploding brains. Oh, and *M: MHX*.

Jeremy_Jeremy Peeples

After neglecting it for a couple of months, I've been hooked on *Mr. Driller 2*. It's got just the right amount of depth to keep me entertained between marathon sessions of *Fire Pro Wrestling 2* and *Project Gotham Racing 2*. To prepare for *Subsistence*, I've also been taking in regular amounts of both *Metal Gear Solid* games. I haven't had this much fun with a Kojima in games since my Tenkoji-Team 3D bouts in *FPW 2*.

Sardius_Danny Cowan

Recipe for Valentine's Day success: surprising her a week in advance with *Bust A Move DS* and a bag of Ghirardelli chocolates. My fiancee loved the game so much she wasn't even all that angry when I ended up eating most of the chocolate! Sorry honey, it had to be done.

Now Playing: *Bust A Move DS*, *Thunder in Paradise* (CD-i), *Homph Glomph* (Chocolate)

HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE

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Previews

Our previews may be cold like Gazpacho, but they sure are tasty! We've got 14 chilled on ice waiting to do a delightful jig on your gaming taste buds. There's something for everyone one is this batch, including *Daxter* and *Syphon Filter*, *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warriors* and *Blazing Angels*, and even a little ditty we like to call *Kingdom Hearts II*. Check 'em, but don't wreck 'em.

10

Feature

We like to chase down our Grafx with a swig of Super and that's what we got goin' on here. Relive The Danish's wonder years, where Axes were Legendary, Keiths had Courage, and JJ & Jeff were two "confused" detectives looking for love in all the wrong places.

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On the cover

There's nothing funny about *Grandia III* in your soup, but a little dab of the old RPG luvin' behind your ears, now that's another story. We're behind the counter, serving it up like it's going out of style. Sidle right up and get yourself some.

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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.

Turn your PSP™ (PlayStation® Portable) handheld entertainment device into a fully loaded multimedia machine. How? With a SanDisk® gaming memory card. It gives you the power to play music, view pictures, watch movies and of course save countless game data, all with one little card. Also available for PC gamers — the new Cruzer Crossfire™ USB Flash Drive. It lets you take your game demos, trailers, game saves and casual games with you wherever you go. The Cruzer Crossfire carries music and photos for Xbox 360™ users.

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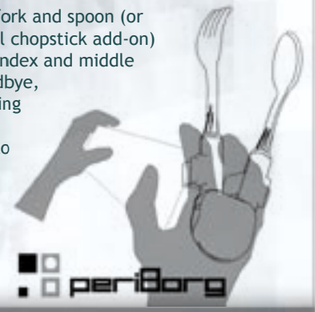
BONO THEFT AUTO

U2's Bono is not a name that may strike you as synonymous with *Grand Theft Auto*, but relatively speaking, Elevation Partners may soon be with Take Two Interactive. Bono's firm, Elevation Partners, is reportedly in talks of a billion dollar buyout of Take Two Interactive, publisher of Rockstar Games's *Grand Theft Auto* series. Elevation Partners has already struck a big chord in the gaming industry when it formed the $300 million dollar partnership of two independent game studios, Bioware (*Knights of the Old Republic*, *Jade Empire*, *Mass Effect*) and Pandemic Studios (*Star Wars: Battlefront*, *Mercenaries*, *Chronicles of Riddick*). Curiously, Elevation Partners's Roger McNamee is listed on Elevation's site (www.elevation.com) as being an investor in Take Two previously. So can the talks, which originally surfaced from a New York Post article, of such an odd couple really be far off? Take Two has had its strange string of unfortunate events, with a nearby fire in its New York office, the resignation of a director and a recent quarterly report revealing numerous lawsuits being filed across the United States over the *GTA: San Andreas* "Hot Coffee" incident. Maybe Take Two's Rockstar could use the humanitarian hand of Bono to bail it out and reform its gaming talent. If not, isn't it the thought that counts?

BIONIC SPAZ-O-MATIC

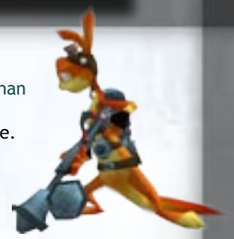
Cyborg Peripheral Button Mashing Eiji Morikawa, a 28-year-old Japanese engineer, has devised a new device to cybernetically enhance gamers' hands — the Ore Commander and Shock-C. The Ore Commander is a device that attaches to your thumb or index finger and vibrates your finger to borg-enhanced speeds. The Ore Commander has yielded up to 22 button presses a second. An add-on accessory, the Shock-C, allows you to eat with a fork and spoon (or the optional chopstick add-on) using your index and middle finger. Goodbye, greasy gaming controllers! Pay a visit to PeriBorg's Japanese site at periborg.com.



News feeds by gamingbits www.gamingbits.com

FIND BUGS WIN PRIZES

What better way to kick off the spring lineup of games than with an awesome contest on our very own www.Luv2Game.com! If you're not already a member of our community, go there now & sign up for free. The exclusive PSP scavenger hunt begins this month on our website and will feature fun challenges involving *Daxter*, *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo*, *Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror* and *Pursuit Force* (all titles for the PSP). Prizes will include a PSP and game packs of the 4 titles. The Scavenger Hunt will run through the end of April. Get off your duff & be the first to complete the challenges. This isn't your grandfather's scavenger hunt!



That's a wrap of this month's news for your itchy gaming finger. For more news bits, check out gamingbits.com.

Have some news you'd like to share? Email alexis@gamingbits.com

GAMERSCORE HIGH SCORES ARE BACK

Got that déjà vu gaming experience recently while playing on the Xbox 360? It came back to me after watching that scene in *Tron* where Flynn is being cheered on by a crowd of arcade game players as he hits the new high score record. Gamers paid less attention to high scores as we entered the 16-bit gaming era. It didn't happen overnight. Our attentions turned to conquering games to see the richly animated endings, RPGs with deep storylines and competing against the best in multiplayer online games. Microsoft has returned us to our gaming roots with Gamerscores. Just like Flynn, people on the Xbox Forums take note of who is leading and breaking the records in Gamerscores. It can even cause an addiction for some to try to get all 1000 gamer points a single game can offer. There is no regulation as to how a game publisher distributes the points, also known as "Achievements," throughout the game. Some are available only through playing online multiplayer games, as in *Perfect Dark Zero* or *Quake 4*. Some are given for simply taking still pictures in *Project Gotham Racing 3*. Others are given when you complete a level, as in *King Kong* (which has been noted as one of the easiest games to achieve gamer points from). Microsoft says over time as publishers become more familiar with the process, how Achievements are unlocked will become more balanced. Gamerscores are the new measure of success, skill and persistence in the Xbox 360 gaming world. While the score itself is not the only way to enjoy a game, it does give the gamer the opportunity to fully explore what the game has to offer. Reaching the ending no longer means you beat the game.

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PlayStation Portable

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Massive 30 versus 30 combat!

Experience real time battles!

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COMING SPRING 2006

TEEN T Alcohol Reference Language Mild Fantasy Violence ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

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DAXTER

Publisher: SCEA
Developer: Ready By Dawn
Release Date: 03/21/06

Genre: Platformer
Category: Wisecrackin' Mascot
# of Players: 1

Preview by Lynxara

A game like *Daxter* eloquently shows off the PSP's slow struggle into maturation. There's no hellish load times or dodgy camera problems here. Instead, *Daxter* brings the 3D platformer to the PSP with style to spare. Every feature you'd expect from a good 3D platformer is in place, from combo attacks to the requisite racing levels. The gameplay will feel familiar to fans of the console *Jak* games, but definitely not identical.

Daxter takes place during the two-year gap between *Jak & Daxter* and *Jak II*, while Jak is stuck in Baron Praxis's prisons. Daxter intends to rescue his buddy, but ends up being distracted by the local pub. For *two years*. That's an ottsel that can really hold his liquor. He even gets a job to pay for it.

Daxter meets up with a man named Osmo, owner of the Kritter-Ridder Extermination Company, who thinks Daxter could be an ideal candidate for helping him fight off the plague of Metal Bugs that have infested Haven City. Armed with an electric flyswatter, a high-tech bug spray gun, and a host of other highly efficient insect demolition devices. In classic platformer fashion, you collect "metal gems" for beating enemies, and can explore each level to find hidden stashes of collectible doodads.

Daxter looks absolutely fantastic, and boasts an enormous amount of voice acting. The backgrounds and character models have fewer polys than their PS2 counterparts, but Ready By Dawn has used some clever texturing tricks to give the world a slick, hyper-detailed cartoon look. Daxter's even got a proper fur texture now!

The stage layouts are designed to take advantage of Daxter's compact and flexible ottsel physique, full of twisting little pipes and dizzying climbs that no other would-be hero could hope to navigate. The emphasis on Daxter's animal abilities and bug splatting antics give the adventuring a feel very different from the scads of other mascot-themed 3D platformers on the market. Action fans starved for something really good for their PSP won't be disappointed when this game hits in March.

HAVEN CITY GAZETTE
DAILY 25¢

BUGS INFEST CITY CENTER!

DAXTER CALLS FOR HELP TO STOP THIS SWARM OF ANGRY INSECTS

Find hidden bugs to earn points at Luv2Game.com for prizes and gear.

As Haven City is overrun with a nasty swarm of oversized arthropods, the city's top exterminator is asking everyone to help "smack 'em down good."

Daxter, aka The Daxtinator, was in his lab testing a new bug potion when a squirming mass of vengeful insectoids escaped his "flyswatter of fury." He called for "an all-out war on bugs," and asks that "bug haters everywhere" take action immediately.

Luckily, Daxter was able to tag each bug with its own ID number before they escaped. Anyone who sees one of these bugs online or in Hardcore Gamer Magazine should immediately:

- Login or register at Luv2Game.com
- Click the "Daxter Bug Hunt" link
- To squash a bug, answer the challenge with the correct ID #

THE DAXTINATOR: "Let the bug hunt begin!"

HAVEN CITY SUES DAXTER FOR BUG INFESTATION

...filed a massive class action lawsuit against ...a The Daxtinator, after a lab accident caused a ...ugs to infest the downtown area. The lawsuit, ...ty v. Daxter the Ottsel, seeks damages to the ...billion zillion dollars." - Continued A2

The first of many sickening spiders.

Daxter is offering a reward in the form of points for each bug squashed. Earn enough points and you can use them to buy cool stuff at Luv2Game.com. The top bug squasher could even win an exclusive prize. Visit the Luv2Game website for details and rules.

When asked whether he's responsible for the infestation, since he let them escape, Daxter responded, "Well, I, um... look out, a bear!" then ran in the opposite direction. There was no bear.

GOT A BUG PROBLEM? CALL THE DAXTINATOR MASTER BUG KILLER

PlayStation Portable

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ÜBERSOLDIER

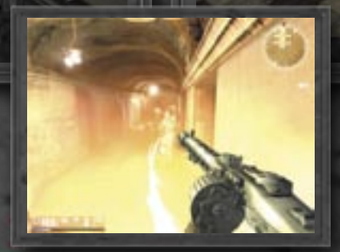
Publisher: CDV
Developer: Burut Creative Team
Release Date: March 2006
Genre: First-Person Shooter
Category: WWII Sci-Fi
# of Players: 1

So, the Nazis experimented with occult technologies to try to gain the edge in WWII. We know that much from *Indiana Jones*, but we also know from history that nothing came of it. The question that *Übersoldier*, a budget FPS from tiny Russian developer Burut, asks, is: what if something had?

As it turns out, the game tells us, one Third Reich scientist came back from a trip to Tibet with the secret to resurrecting the dead. The resurrection process not only makes the subjects supernaturally strong and powerful, but also unlocks hidden psychic potential in the human mind. Naturally, the scientists have it in their heads that they can use this process to create an army of invincible super-soldiers.

Of course, nothing yet says that these soldiers have to serve the men who brought them back to life, and *Übersoldier*'s hero, the resurrected German officer Karl Stoltz, is not exactly the grateful type. He'll have to engage in some hot hot shooter action if he wants to take revenge on the Nazi masters who turned him into an undead experiment.

A standard but pretty FPS, *Übersoldier* will offer a little variety here and there in the form of Stoltz's psychic abilities: a neat-looking bullet shield and time manipulation. Though its lack of multiplayer mode may disappoint the truly hardcore, its single player mode should have more than enough to offer for the budget price. After all, if *Wolfenstein* taught us one thing, it's that you can never shoot too many undead Nazis.



Preview by KouAidou

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Tom Clancy's GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft
Release Date: March 2006

Genre: Shooter
Category: Futuristic Military
# of Players: 1-16

Preview by 4thletter

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter wants to bring team-based military action back to the forefront in this *Halo*-addled world. This time, the Ghosts are on the streets in Mexico City in a last-ditch effort to save the President of the United States and possibly the free world itself. We spent some time with a multiplayer build of the game and have come back bearing impressions.

You, dear reader, are Captain Scott Mitchell, leader of the Ghosts, a crack team of soldiers. You have at your disposal a number of gadgets and tools that will help you in your quest to save the president. First and foremost is the Cross-Com communication device. It gives you both two-way video chat and access to an aerial drone for scouting out areas that you can't quite get to. Your HUD identifies objectives, friendlies, and hostiles via color-coded outlines, as well.

The action in *Advanced Warfighter* is fast-paced and unforgiving. If you get shot, you're going to go down. You're going to have to learn how to think two steps ahead of the enemy. If you see a group of people standing around, pop two from afar and try to creep to a different vantage point. Head-on attacks will only get you dead. Your enemy is intelligent enough to spot you and keep you pinned down while their brethren move into position to shoot you full of holes.

Advanced Warfighter is sure to give you a run for your money in March. The Cross-Com system is going to help you to play smart. Excellent AI is going to make you play smarter.

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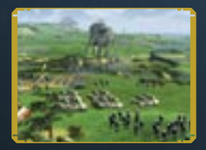

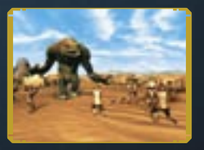

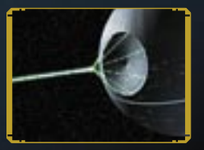

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB — Fantasy Violence

Game experience may change during online play.

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PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE — POWERED BY gameSpy — PETROGLYPH — LUCASARTS

BLAZING ANGELS

★ ★ ★ SQUADRONS OF WWII ★ ★ ★

Every time I swear off video games based on World War II, something new pops up to surprise me and make me eat my words. This time around, *Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII* is what's putting my foot in my mouth.

Blazing Angels wants you to experience all the thrilling danger of dogfighting in World War II without actually worrying about being shot out of the sky. We got to spend some time with the Battle of London and Pearl Harbor stages and can confirm that while *Blazing Angels* may not be historically accurate, exactly, it is fast-paced and frantic enough to keep you oblivious to that fact.

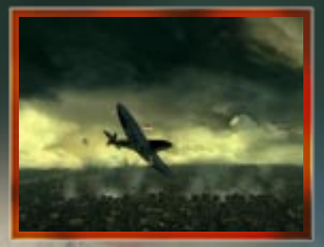
The action is distinctly arcade-y. You can bust out moves that would make most planes stall out and crash with ease. You can go from your first attack run into a chassis-shaking Immelman Turn and then a loop-de-loop for spacing, all in the space of seconds.

Blazing Angels doesn't stop there. It puts you at the lead of a squadron of pilots. You command your squad via the d-pad. Each wingman even has a specialty. One can repair your plane (this feat is performed via a series of button presses on your part), while another can draw fire to give you a breather.

Blazing Angels is a pretty game. Pearl Harbor and London were both extremely detailed and very large. You can even interact with the geometry (read: crash into a building when you screw up). Look for it in March.

Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Romania
Release Date: March 2006

Genre: Aerial Combat
Category: World War II
# of Players: 1-16



Preview by 4thletter

"What the hell," I can hear you saying. "Another ***Grand Theft Auto***-style adventure game, and a ***licensed*** one at that? Nuts to this!"

Wait, don't turn the page yet! If you're not completely sick of the ***GTA*** formula yet, you'll find what's shaping up to be a worthwhile sandbox-style action title in ***The Godfather***. Featuring an original storyline that intermingles with the plot of the novel and the first Godfather movie, you play a wannabe mobster doing his part to expand the Corleone family's reign. You'll also get to drive old-timey cars that make funny noises when you honk the horn!

Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: EA Redwood Shores
Release Date: March 21, 2006
Genre(s): Action Adventure
Category: Mobster
Players: 1

An interesting hand-to-hand combat and grappling system is emphasized here; the right analog stick is used to deliver punches while the left stick shoves grabbed opponents against walls. Fights in ***The Godfather*** are brutal to watch, and make for a much more satisfying way of getting your point across to your enemies than just plain shooting them, though that option always exists.

Aside from the expected driving and shooting missions, the game contains a number of side quests to mix things up, many of which involve beating protection money out of local business owners. Negotiation during these segments often requires some creative muscle on the player's part - the game's tutorial recommends smashing a shopkeeper's head into his own cash register as one example. One can also buy into hidden gambling and prostitution rackets around town, generating yet more money for family needs like guns and ammo.

The Godfather has seen a number of delays since it was first announced, but it should hopefully be done in time for a March release. It's an offer you can't... oh, forget it. Just buy it if I made it sound interesting, all right?

The Godfather™ THE GAME

Preview by Sardius

Preview by 4th Letter

FINAL FANTASY XI ONLINE

Treasures of Aht Urhgan™

Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Square Enix
Release Date: April 18, 2006
Genre(s): MMORPG
Category: Medieval Fantasy
# of Players: 1-1,000,000

You didn't really think that they were going to let you go, did you? Squaresoft, and later Square Enix, have had you in their pocket since 2003, haven't they? You've been through vanilla *Final Fantasy XI*, and you've been through both *Rise of Zilart* and *Chains of Promathia* and you're wanting something more. You need a fix.Consider Square Enix your pusherman.

Treasures of Aht Urhgan (say it like a sneeze) is the latest expansion for *Final Fantasy XI* and it's got what you need. It brings new classes, enemies, and environs for your pleasure. Blue Mages are fighting magicians with a distinctly Middle Eastern style. They're good at both up close and far away, thanks to their use of curved blades and being able to learn the spells that their enemies cast. They hail from the titular Aht Urhgan and are sure to be formidable. The other new class is the Corsair, perhaps better known as a pirate. While it's doubtful (read: impossible) that *Treasures* is going to add ship to ship battles, the Corsairs are sure to be interesting regardless. They use a revolver called a "Hexagun" and luck-based skills. How that works in gameplay is at the moment unclear, however.

There's an entirely new continent to explore, in the form of Aradijah, that lies under the control of the Empire of Aht Urhgan. Look to explore the Imperial Palace, the undead-infested Arrapago Reef, and Mamook, the city that's burned down and rebuilt regularly, in April when the expansion launches for PS2 and Windows-based PCs.

SpellForce 2

Publisher: JoWooD
Developer: Phenomic
Release Date: April 21, 2006
Genre: RTS/RPG
Category: Hybrid
# of Players: #-#

Preview by Jeremy

When *Spellforce* first hit in 2004, it was praised for its fusion of RTS and RPG elements, and lambasted for its interface problems and blasé visuals. Two years later, its sequel is set to hit stores, with fixes and new features implemented to entice veterans and newbies alike.

Our preview build shows off a streamlined interface making navigation simpler compared to the original's clunky and bloated menu setup. You no longer have to jump through needless hoops to get something done, and it does wonders for keeping the interface from getting in the way of the game. Character creation is simple but effective, while spellcasting and character emphasis have been improved.

The previously acceptable visuals have been overhauled as well. While they weren't shabby before, they did look a bit bland. That isn't a problem now, as character and background detail has been increased. Character animation has also improved a bit. These enhancements may have come with a high price, as there is major slowdown in this build. Hopefully it's just limited to the early state of the game. If it isn't, it'll be a crippling problem.

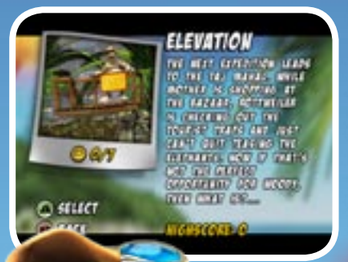
Given that, I'm rather thankful that the audio isn't affected. The music actually has some dimension to it now, although the voice work hasn't improved much. In spite of these apparent shortcomings, *Spellforce 2* manages to be enjoyable. If they can handle the problems with slowdown before the game ships, this'll be fun.

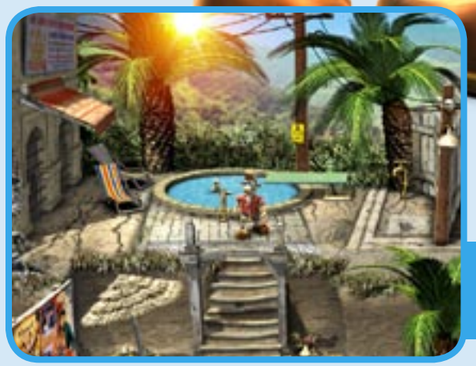
We all know the neighbor from hell. Whether it be an actual neighbor, a roommate, or part of your family, he (or she) is loud, thoughtless, and violent, making strange sounds (and smells) at all hours of the night. Though we all dream of getting revenge on these obnoxious acquaintances, our instincts of self-preservation tend to get the better of us.

Enter JoWood Productions' *Neighbors From Hell* series, featuring our hero Woody. Woody's fed up with the behavior of his own personal neighbor from hell. He's not going to take it anymore, and he's brought along a camera and a reality show TV crew so that we might share in the schadenfreude.

Your job will be to help Woody figure out practical jokes to play on the neighbor using what's on hand, without getting caught in the act. The more pranks you play, the madder the neighbor gets, and the better your ratings. A randy British sense of humor and delightfully Nick Park-ish designs help to soften tricks that might otherwise seem overly cruel. After all, hey, it's only clay.

While the first game limits the action to the neighbor's house, the second takes it on the road (or sea, as it were). The neighbor from hell takes an ocean cruise to enjoy sun, fun, and pretty girls, with Woody in hot pursuit. Locations for mischief include China, India, and the cruise liner itself, and extra characters like the neighbor's mother and love interest Olga will add new dimensions to the puzzling fun.





Publisher: JoWood Productions
Developer: JoWood Productions
Release Date: March 2006

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

Publisher: SCEA
Developer: SCEA
Release Date: March 2006

Genre(s): Action
Category: A Little Stealthy
# of Players: 1

The *Syphon Filter* series has been suspiciously absent from this generation, minus the there-one-second-gone-the-next multiplayer *Omega Strain* on PS2. With *Dark Mirror*, Sony's bringing special-ops badass Gabe Logan out of retirement, along with his partners Lian Xing and Teresa Lipan, to investigate a terrorist group called Red Section.

Gabe's received a much-needed graphical makeover from his PSOne days, and he's picked up a lot of new equipment. In *Dark Mirror*, you'll be able to use the D-Pad to instantly select between not only an arsenal of weapons, but four different types of vision augmentations, from a simple flashlight to nightvision and thermal vision. Of course, he's brought his trusty silenced sniper rifle along for the ride, as *Syphon Filter* retains its occasional emphasis on stealth.

The game looks good and controls fairly well on the PSP, but there's a bit of a catch. Like last year's *Coded Arms*, *Dark Mirror* compensates for the lack of a right thumbstick by using the face buttons for free-look. If you can handle that, you're in for a good time.

I was a *Syphon Filter* junkie back in the closing days of the PSOne, and *Dark Mirror* is a decent sequel. I've just got to get used to these controls.

Me & My Katamari

Preview by Lynxara

Publisher: Namco
Developer: Namco
Release Date: March 21, 2006
Genre(s): Katamari!
Category: Rollin' Rollin' Rollin'
# of Players: 1

Are you the sort of person who was only saved by total addiction to the PS2 ***Katamari Damacy*** games by a need to leave the house in order to work, study, and obtain food? If so, I'm sorry. There's a portable ***Katamari*** game coming out for the PSP. I could say "don't buy a PSP!" but I might as well tell you not to go into a store that sells video games. Once you see it, you know there will be no escape. You will buy, and you will roll. You will roll everywhere you go. Fortunately, your portable doom is going to be a game worthy of the ***Katamari*** name.

In this adventure, the royal family is on vacation when the King of All Cosmos accidentally wipes out an island chain, leaving the local animals homeless. As usual, it's up to the hapless Prince to set things right by making new islands out of katamari. As in *We ♥ Katamari*, he'll have some help from his Cousins, including some new members of the family.

The all-important music for this game is mostly comprised of a blend of tracks from the PS2 games, along with a sprinkling of new songs. You can customize the appearance of the Prince and his Cousins with up to three presents and battle up to three friends to roll up the biggest katamari in the competitive wireless multiplayer mode. Get big enough and you can roll up your opponents!

One big change will follow *Katamari* to the PSP: new controls. The D-Pad and the face buttons replace the twin analog sticks of the PS2 games. To go right, you'd hit right on the D-Pad and the circle button, for example. You can use the right and left shoulder buttons for fine control of your katamari as it rolls, but it still feels very different from the original games. Don't think this change will let you escape the usual *Katamari* effect, though. The closer we get to March, the more you'll feel the uncontrollable need to roll things up.

Publisher: Atari
Developer: Reflections Int.
Release Date: March 3, 2006
Genre(s): Action
Category: Racing
Players: 1

Driver may have been the first franchise of its kind to explore consoles in three dimensions, but it wasn't the last. ***Grand Theft Auto's*** third entry stole the spotlight, which meant the good folk at Reflections Interactive had to adapt in order to survive. ***Driv3r*** was the result. Though critics balked, consumers bought. Despite respectable sales, something needed to change. Some began to wonder if the franchise had peaked, but they couldn't know until the next game released. That time draws nigh.

Driver: Parallel Lines is what you might call a return to the series roots. Though you can still leave your car and create mayhem on foot, the events that transpire while you've got two or four wheels beneath you are again the focus. You'll commandeer delivery trucks, motorcycles, SUVs and hotrods, all in the name of chaos. Not only that, but you'll do so in two time periods.

This unique dynamic is critical enough to the game's appeal that its unveiling can't even be considered a spoiler. Partway into the game, things change. A quarter of a century passes, and the awesome rides you had in the '70s are curious oddities in a world full of sedans. There's one thing that's no different, though: you still drive like crazy.

It's good to see this series headed back to those things that made it noteworthy in the first place. From what we've seen, *Driver: Parallel Lines* is definitely a well-intentioned attempt to get things back into familiar territory without sacrificing a bit of quality. There's plenty of licensed music, too, just to keep things fresh. If the visual splendor and the action aren't hi-jacked again by sloppy controls and objectives, this could be a title to watch upon its impending release. Consider us interested.

Preview by Jeremy

CHROME HOUNDS

Publisher: Sega
Developer: From Software
Release Date: Spring 2006

Genre(s): Strategy
Category: Mechtastic
# of Players: 1-12 players

Sega and From Software certainly aren't strangers to mechanized combat. The *Virtual On* series was arguably the most popular mech battle game of the '90s, while From's experiences with *Otogi* and *Armored Core* earned them critical and commercial acclaim. Now they're making their Xbox 360 debut in what looks to be their most impressive creation to date.

In keeping with their *Armored Core* heritage, From Software enables players to create their own mechs (or hounds, as they've now been christened) for battle. You'll do battle in a more cerebral manner than most mech games. *Chromehounds* relies on a tactical, squad-based style of play that requires planning and foresight to succeed.

Online gaming looks to play a major role here, and you'll have a variety of positions to hold in an online session. You can either command the troops and take charge of your battle, or play as a soldier on the field. In each role, communication is key; you'll have to bark out and hear orders clearly, so be sure to have your headset in working order before going online.

From Software has worked hard to make sure that this is an immersive game, and that extends from the visuals (which almost look as good as their CG movie equivalents) to the online setup. Spring is nearly upon us, and when it hits, we'll be able to see how close they came to creating the ultimate in mech battle gaming.

Preview by Wanderer

TIMESHIFT

Publisher: Atari
Developer: Saber Interactive
Release Date: May 9, 2006

Genre(s): Action
Category: Bullet-Timely FPS
# of Players: 1

The word of the day is "innovation." Saber Interactive has gone well out of their way to make *Timeshift* more than just another FPS, and more than just another game that features gratuitous bullet time. They've designed a shooter that exploits time-travel about as far as it can go.

As Albert Swift, you wind up crammed into a top-secret military prototype called the Quantum Suit after a time-travel experiment goes horrifically wrong. When you get back to the 21st century, you don't recognize it anymore, and must set out to reverse the changes to the timestream.

The Quantum Suit's powers allow you to stop or reverse time in every way except with regards to the suit itself; you cannot reverse time and undo damage you've taken, but you can use it to de-frag a luckless opponent.

Timeshift has been made from the ground up to take advantage of the Suit's time-travel powers, with both puzzles and enemy tactics that force you to use the Suit's abilities. You can reverse time to undo an enemy's missile lock or sneak by an opponent before he sees you, or stop time to avoid a sniper's attention. There are hundreds of applications for your suit's powers, both in *Timeshift's* more than thirty-five levels and in combat.

If nothing else, *Timeshift* is focused on being new and different in a genre full of clones and imitators. You have to appreciate that. (And despite what Saber's CEO will tell you, us media types actually do.)

Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Square Enix/Buena Vista Interactive
Release Date: March 31, 2006

Genre: RPG
Category: Disney
# of Players: 1

Preview by **David Brothers**

Disney characters teaming with Square Enix characters in an RPG turned out to not only be an instant money tree, but a critically acclaimed video game. We first got a taste of *Kingdom Hearts* way back in September of 2002. We were promised a sequel almost immediately. Now, just under four years later, we're getting *Kingdom Hearts II*.

Square Enix is stacking the deck this time around. It's going for the hardcore nostalgia market with both *Steamboat Willie* and *Tron* making appearances. Even Yen Sid (of *Fantasia* fame) shows up. Square Enix wants to corner all the j-pop fans, too, so they rehired bouncy star Utada Hikaru to perform the theme song.

One of the big new gameplay features this time around are "Drives." If you've seen *Dragon Ball Z*, think "Fu-sion-ha!" Sora can fuse with Donald, Goofy, another party member, or any combination thereof to gain new abilities and beef up his physical or magic attacks. Perform a Drive at the wrong time, however, and you'll transform into something similar to a Heartless. Add to this context-sensitve reaction commands, group-based combination attacks, and some new summons, and you've got a recipe for solid gold. Introduce (occasionally) playable Mickey Mouse into the mix and you've got a game that may very well reach classic status and blow its predecessor out of the water. What more could you ask for, besides perhaps a full blown Scrooge McDuck sidestory based on the work of Don Rosa?

Good things come to those who wait... and you've been waiting a long time, haven't you?

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CONSOLE CURIOSITIES: SUPER GRAFX

[FEATURE BY: ROGER DANISH] RESEARCH INFORMATION BY WIKIPEDIA ENTRIES

Back by popular demand, I've once again dug into my collection of console curiosities and have dusted off a personal favorite: NEC's ill-fated answer to Nintendo's Super Famicom, the SuperGrafx.

THE CONSOLE

Manufacturer: NEC
Year Manufactured: 1989
Availability: Limited
Cost: $150-300

For those of you who may not recall the console wars of the late '80s, allow me to regale you with a quick video game history lesson. In the US, it was all about the SEGA Genesis and NEC TurboGrafx 16. At the time, Nintendo's NES was showing its age and SEGA, having scuttled their 8-bit Master System in lieu of the 16-bit Genesis, was capturing a huge market share. In Japan, Nintendo's powerful 16-bit Super Famicom (thanks to the power of the plumber and some nifty hardware tricks) came out swinging, giving SEGA a run for their money. Unfortunately, somewhere in the shuffle, NEC came out on bottom. Having enjoyed a long and prosperous run with their PC Engine (the Japanese equivalent of the TurboGrafx), they knew that the 8-bit machine's time was coming to an end. To compete with Nintendo and SEGA's 16-bit hardware, NEC went back to the drawing board and came up with an answer: the SuperGrafx.

Basically an upgraded version of the PC Engine, the SuperGrafx promised 16bit quality graphics and sound, but more or less failed to deliver on all accounts. Employing a similar chipset to the PC Engine, the console's main strength was that it had much more RAM allocated for its main CPU and a second video chip with its own video RAM. Some of the nifty graphical tricks it could do included parallax scrolling and the ability to have tons of sprites on-screen simultaneously without flicker or slowdown. It also held the distinction of being backward compatible with the PC Engine and could play pretty much the gamut of PC Engine HuCards and CDs (the latter with the addition of the separately sold RAU-30 adapter). On the downside, the system used the same 8-bit sound chip as the PC Engine, which resulted in sub-par music and sound effects that just couldn't compete with the likes of SEGA and Nintendo's hardware.

The SuperGrafx still looks like a modern piece of hardware, with its grey-colored plastic casing, unique rivet design and blue stencil logo proudly emblazoned on the top of the console. It has one port for a game pad, and a slot for HuCards located on top of the system. Expansion ports on the front and back were for extra add-ons (such as the RAU-30 CD adapter), as well as a special "controller" called the Power Console: a huge peripheral that was to slide over the SuperGrafx and featured a flight yoke, throttle and keypad (much like Capcom's *Steel Battalion* controller for the Xbox). Unfortunately, this monster controller never surfaced at retail and only exists in prototype format.

The SuperGrafx's major downfall was that there were only five true SG games produced for the system, and most were disappointing at that. Oddly enough, the system, which used to be rare and hard to find, has become commonplace on auction sites such as eBay, with prices to match. The games, however, can be tough to find and fetch prices upwards of $100 per title.

THE SPECS

CPU: 8-bit HuC6280A with a modified 65C02 chipset running at either 3.58 or 7.16 MHz
GPU: One 16-bit HuC6260 VCE (Video Color Encoder), two 16bit HuC6260A VDCs (Video Display Controllers) and a HuC6202 VPC (Video Priority Controller)
Display Resolution: 256x224
Colors: 512 available with 481 on-screen
Memory: Work RAM = 32KB, Video RAM = 128KB
Audio: 6 PSG audio channels using the HuC6280A CPU.

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CONSOLE CURIOSITIES

[FEATURE BY: ROGER DANISH] RESEARCH INFORMATION BY WIKIPEDIA.ORG

THE games

There were only five actual SuperGrafx games ever produced for the system. However a few other titles, such as *Darius Plus* and *Darius Alpha*, featured enhanced resolution when played on the hardware. Little known fact: Capcom's *Strider* was rumored to be in development for the SuperGrafx but it never saw the light of day. Urban legend tells that the lead programmer went crazy during development of the game and committed suicide. To pay tribute to his death, Capcom had Hiryu throw a teddy bear in Ken's background in *Street Fighter Alpha 2*.

BATTLE ACE

Manufacturer: Hudson Soft
Year Manufactured: 1989
Availability: Rare

Battle Ace was the first game released for the SuperGrafx and was meant to showcase the system's power. Unfortunately, this on rails pseudo 3D space shooter a la *Space Harrier* (although presented in a first person perspective, similar to that of titles like *Subroc* or *Lock-On*) failed to impress, offering blocky enemies, choppy, hand-drawn scaling, and insane level of difficulty with no checkpoints (meaning you had to restart the level from the beginning when you died). I still remember playing this over and over and dying every time I came to the electrical field, which if memory serves me right, was somewhere near the middle of the first level.

GRANZORT

Manufacturer: Hudson Soft
Year Manufactured: 1990
Availability: Rare

Granzort is a traditional 2D action platformer where you control three different robots, each armed with a laser sword and the ability to shoot projectiles from its chest. Originally rumored (yet never confirmed) to be the sequel to *Keith Courage* (the pack-in game that came with the US TG-16), this sub par side scroller offers an insane level of difficulty, one-hit kills and brutal boss fights that will ensure you have to play each level over and over until you just happen to get lucky enough to move on to the next. Of the batch of released SuperGrafx titles, *Granzort* is one of the worst.

DAIMAKAIMURA [GHOULS N' GHOSTS]

Manufacturer: NEC Avenue / Capcom
Year Manufactured: 1990
Availability: Limited

In my opinion, *Daimakaimura*, which is the Japanese title for Capcom's awesome *Ghouls N' Ghosts*, was the SuperGrafx's best title. When it was first released, this near pristine port of the arcade original offered pixel-perfect graphics, challenging gameplay, and all of the thrills and chills of its coin-op cousin. In fact, the SG version of *Daimakaimura* is still a blast to play. When compared to the SEGA Genesis version, it comes out on top. The only black mark on this otherwise perfect translation is its music and sound effects, which can't hold a candle to the other versions due to the SG's poor sound chip. If you have a SuperGrafx and don't have this title, we highly recommend you add it to your library.

1941: COUNTER ATTACK

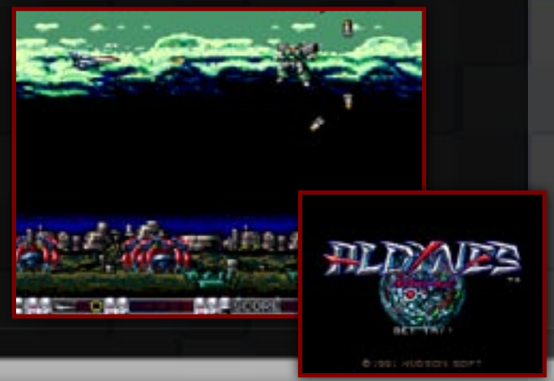
Manufacturer: Hudson Soft
Year Manufactured: 1991
Availability: Rare

1941: Counter Strike was a SuperGrafx exclusive installment of Capcom's long-running *1940* series of arcade shooters. Like *Daimakaimura*, *1941: Counter Strike* was a showcase title that displayed what the SG was really capable of pulling off. This fast-paced overhead shooter displayed vibrant and colorful graphics, tons of enemies and projectiles on screen, and had the ability for two-player simultaneous play – all without a hint of slowdown or flicker. Even the music and sound effects were decent. Featuring six huge, diverse stages of intense shooting action, this is definitely a must buy for those of you who own this system.

ALDYNES

Manufacturer: Hudson Soft
Year Manufactured: 1991
Availability: Rare

A tough game to beat due to the cranked-up difficulty level, Hudson Soft's side scrolling shooter, *Aldynes*, has the distinction of being the last specific title produced for the SuperGrafx. Muted color palette aside, *Aldynes* was definitely a showcase for the pixel processing power of the system, effortlessly displaying huge enemies, tons of projectiles and multiple layers of parallax scrolling in the background without any slowdown or flicker. The gameplay was a lot like Irem's R-Type series, with a multitude of different weapons and power-ups to grab, and its challenge level was high, with one hit kills and a truckload of projectiles, enemies and objects to dodge. *Aldynes* is definitely one of the top three out of the five games produced for the SG and is also one of the rarest of the bunch. Seek it out if you have the means.



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March 2006

SAMURAI WARRIORS
戦国無双
State of War

PlayStation.Portable

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Violence

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めさせ！戦球王

BATTLE BALLS

by Ashura

MOUNTAINS CLIMB CLOUDS ALL THE TIME.

HE'S A MEAN RACOON.

FIREWORKS EXPERT: *PAF*

FATED ARMAGEDDON BATTLE: THE GARDENER VS. THE MOUNTAIN.

BOSS BATTLE GET!

Battle Balls, or *Mezase! Senkyuuou* (*Aim to be War Sphere King*, translated. Really!), is one of those amazingly good games that just fell through the cracks. While not a rare game by any means (heck, Sony Japan even lists that it had a reprint!), a series of misclassifications and just plain obscurity has kept it off of the radar. Although, it's not really surprising when you consider that Seibu Kaihatsu are mainly known for the Raiden series of games.

YES, HE'S A MOUNTAIN. AND YES, HE GOES 'PUU.'

ROSES FOR THE WIN!

It's a puzzle game, and at first it seems like you've heard it all before. You know, it's the one where you're given a grouping of some sort of falling object, like money or fish heads or wacky pants from the farthest reaches of outer space, and you have to match four or more of those objects together to clear out a line or a row or some other predetermined shape.

In *Battle Balls*, your grouping of falling objects is a simple set of three spheres. You can rotate them any way you like, let them drop, and then you get three more to repeat the process. When you touch four or more colors together, they will disappear. Now, I know this already sounds familiar to everyone and their monkey. I won't begrudge you if you're already rolling your eyes, but the the cool part is what happens next: physics. If you set your balls up right, gravity will make the balls settle so that more balls will disappear as other sets of colors connect, chaining a massive combo. The more balls you get together, the more of a combo you rack up. And then, of course, the more crap is spewed on your opponent's screen. This crap (which is a highly technical term), comes in the form of clear balls with little blinky eyes. These clear balls suck up your regular balls, and are not able to be comboed. To turn these blinky eyed balls back you have to initiate a combo next to them, and sometimes if you do it right, turning them back to normal will initiate an even bigger combo. Your opponent has a window of counterattack, though: If they manage to equal your current combo, or best it, the stuff you sent over to them can be canceled out. They could even end up dropping a lot of stuff onto you.

This system of physics, in conjunction with the combo meter, makes Battle Balls a unique game in a genre that, as of late, consists solely of sequels or clones of clones. The back and forth nature of this game is tremendous, and it's one of the few puzzle games where the tables can be turned in a matter of seconds. Unlike Tetris, where being close to the top of the screen means you're more or less screwed, with a little luck things in will turn around completely and your opponent will be the one who is trapped under a rock slide of blinky eyes.

Obviously, fate (or luck) factors into this game greatly. You could match up an expert to someone who's never played it before, and a lucky newbie will be the one who's kicking ass and taking names (bubblegum optional). Younger children can pick up this game quickly, too. It's one of the few games that is so easy to jump into that you can match up a wide variety of age ranges and not have the older person dominate the younger one brutally.

If a cool and unique system of gameplay wasn't enough, the game also packs a varied roster of wacky, interesting characters. You can not only be a gardener, but also a fireworks expert, a janitor, a fat raccoon, an octopus, and a happy blue mountain that jumps up and down and goes 'puu!' Yes, you read that correctly, one of the characters is a happy blue mountain that makes cute noises.

All of these characters have a stunning amount of animation and clarity for a PlayStation 1 game, and one wonders if Seibu Kaihatsu did some soul selling to make the PS1's limited memory push so many sprites. Not only does each character have a series of normal animations, but there's also four or five unique animations you can trigger by doing a combo. While this probably wasn't a problem on the game's original SPI System arcade hardware (Seibu Kaihatsu's own speciality arcade board), you have to imagine that the programmers who were porting the game made some sweet, sweet love to the original PlayStation to make it output something this pretty.

While the arcade version (known as just plain *Senkyuu*) was released here in the States in a limited capacity, the PlayStation version is Japan-only. The double kicker is that hardly anyone has heard of it. This is where the previously mentioned misclassification comes in. You see, instead of being listed as *Mezase! Senkyuu ou*, the few people who do list it usually have it mistransliterated as *Mezase! Ikusa Tama Ou*. Don't let the Japanese-only label put you off, either; speaking moon language isn't required to get full enjoyment out of this game. The menus, while Japanese, are simple to figure out. Even if that still scares you, pressing start two or three times on the title screen gets you to where you wanna go. Honest. Once you get into the matches, it's easy enough to go from there. Navigating the game's menus will become second nature in no time.

The only downfall of this game, and it's a small one, is the background music of each stage is comprised of one, and only one song. It's a pretty popular song, and most everyone probably learned it when they were still in kindergarten. Yes friends, each and every round of this game, you will be serenaded by a rousing performance of "Oh! Susanna." This is the only thing that can get annoying, and when frustrated you can sometimes find yourself singing words along with the song which aren't fit to say around your mother. Luckily, this is why God invented the mute button.

In conclusion, this game not only rocks, but it's awesome. Rocksome if you will. There are few puzzle games out there that I'll recommend so highly to even non-puzzle game fans, and this is one of them. If you manage to track down a copy, infect other people with your love of this game. Take it to a party with you, or play it with your friends. Just get the word out there of its existence. It's one of the greatest puzzle games ever made, and you'll still be pulling it out for parties 8 years later.

I know I am.

Platform: SPI System Arcade Board, PlayStation 1
Publisher: Seibu Kaihatsu
Developer: Seibu Kaihatsu
Release date: Middle 90s
Genre: Puzzle

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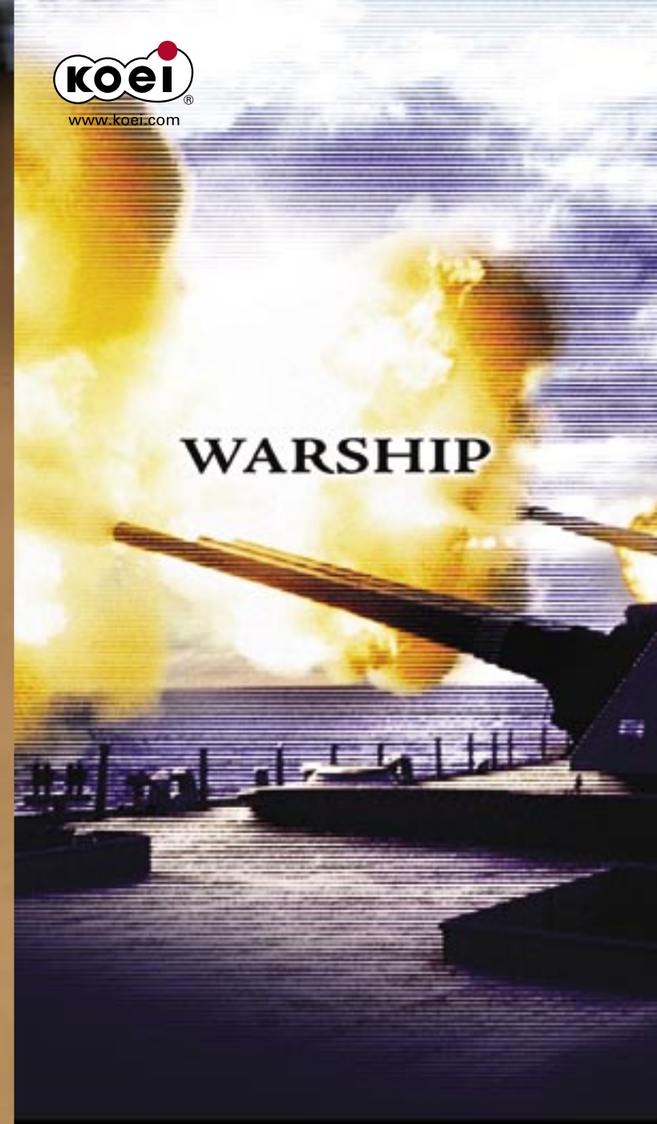

March 2006

WARSHIP GUNNER 2®

PlayStation®2

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Mild Language
Violence

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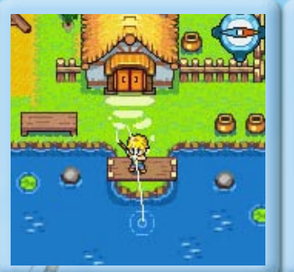
The Shroud

Running a farm doesn't seem like it would be the first choice for gamers but when you throw in battles against evil foes, going on *Zelda*-like quests, solving puzzles and even using the phone's GPS functionality, then it's definitely something worth a look at.

The Shroud is a new mobile RPG that has a familiar ring to it, but still promises to be original. In it, players take on the role of Taro, a smalltime farmer turned unlikely hero as he's thrust into protecting the local towns from mysterious creatures looking to destroy everything in their path. These strange beings are residents of The Shroud, an otherworldly plane that they were banished to many years ago. The only way to stop them is to close the openings in time between Taro's world and The Shroud.



To do this, Taro will need to protect the towns and his own home by taking on many challenges. His journey will find him traveling through 10 stages of mines looking for gems, blazing a path, and ultimately trying to reach the breach keeper who has been letting in enemies from The Shroud. Taro will also need to fight his way through desolate barrens fighting enemies and searching for elusive items.

Still other key activities include taking part in races about town, betting on chicken races, fishing and dancing. A good part of the game will be harvesting. In Harvest mode the goal will be to sustain the farm by helping crops flourish. This involves chopping stumps, breaking rocks, cutting grass, and tilling the soil. When ready, the crops can be sold to make money for upgrades and new items such as shovels and hammers. Collecting and breeding animals will also be part of the farming duties. All activities will yield gold coins to purchase necessary items.

Unique to *The Shroud* is its implementation of GPS functionality. *The Shroud*'s location based game play will give players the ability to generate special in-game challenges. By partaking in the "International Farmers League," players will be allowed to enter into contests at any time by visiting real-world locations. There, they can compete for special items and high scores. This will include an online leader board that will be available to check the rankings, buy and trade items, and share hints and tips with other players.

The Shroud is due out sometime in spring, and it looks to be one of the deepest mobile games ever. Will it prove to be mobile's killer app? We'll just have to wait and see.

Ghost Racer 3D

The competition between racing games continues to heat up as handsets become more powerful. *Asphalt Urban GT*, *Need for Speed*, *Ridge Racer* and *The Fast and the Furious* have all taken a big step forward from the top-down perspective that epitomized the early days of mobile gaming. This time around, we take a peek farther into the future with Hudson Entertainment's *Ghost Racer 3D*.

Now, *Ghost Racer 3D* doesn't deviate too much from the current formula as you would initially think. It features three modes to play, eight cars with distinct style and handling characteristics, and five courses to race in. It also has online rankings and the obvious 3D perspective, but it's also one of the very few that implements downloadable ghost races, hence the name.

With this game, you can upload your best races or download those of other players and compete directly against them to see who's the best. It's not exactly online head-to-head racing, but it's close enough. Of course, you can simply choose to race your own ghost or the computer-controlled cars in the Normal mode.

Part of the allure of this game is that it will have a few extras that aren't commonly seen. By participating in the rankings, the user with the best score each month will get to download an exclusive additional car as a prize. There will also be a Special Event mode, where players will be allowed to participate in each month's special event by downloading a new course. Some months, they will have the chance to download the event moderator's ghost to compete against. New cars will also be made available to those who prove their racing skills.

All of this is moot unless this game actually performs, and that's another positive so far. *Ghost Racer 3D* is designed exclusively for the new Qualcomm 6650 chipset, which is currently available only for the LG9800, a high-end V CAST phone. Not only does this ensure top-notch graphics, but it also features a horizontal screen for landscaped gaming. There's solid detail all around, and this is probably the cleanest racing game we've yet to see on this platform.

As for the controls, they are more *Gran Turismo* than *Need for Speed*. They feel slightly loose for better realism and allow the vehicles to flow well within the game. It seems a little awkward when playing however because of the handset. The D-Pad is positioned on the right-hand side therefore steering and braking are done opposite of what you may be used to.

Ghost Racer 3D is due out sometime around April, and hopefully by then there will be more handsets capable of running the game. We're sure there will also be more inclusions and tinkering under the hood, to make this an even better experience.

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March 2006
DYNASTY WARRIORS 5 Empires
PlayStation 2
XBOX 360
TEEN
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Mild Language
Violence
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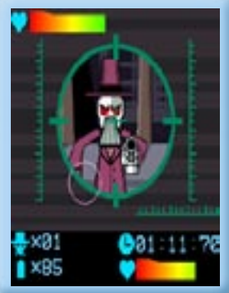


In the not too distant future, O-CORP controls all of the world's media and with it, the world's population through the enforced consumption of O-POP. Trying to break their hold, G-Unit has created illicit music and distributed it through the Net and outlaw radio stations. O-CORP has responded by capturing Tony Yayo and now the rest of the group, 50 Cent, Lloyd Banks, and Young Buck must free Yayo and rid the world from the dominance of O-CORP. How will they do this? By shooting up the town, of course!

G-Unit: Free Yayo is an arcade shooter, featuring the members of G-Unit as they battle the sinister corporation. There are seven levels to play through, including Boss battles, sniper missions, protection missions and car pursuits. The levels are short, but they tend to be more entertaining than most other games in this genre.

Like classic arcade games, you'll be taking out all the gunmen onscreen and collecting items they leave behind. These items will add extra time, extra bullets and more health. To clear each level, you'll have to eliminate the designated number of enemies within a certain time. It's very important to pick up all the items, but even so, the levels aren't that tough.

The game has a unique comic book style and looks very cool; it's not exactly cel-shading, but it's close enough. The colors are solid and give the characters a fresh personality even though they are very slim on animation. The sound adds a lot to the atmosphere by playing catchy tunes throughout, but that means that there are no sound effects available. As for the controls, moving the crosshairs over your target is easy, but it'll tend to shake. You'll need a steady thumb to aim just right.

G Unit: Free Yayo also rewards players for good games. If you happen to score a enough for a medal, you'll win free ringtones or wallpapers. That's a neat incentive for such a simple game. It may not be long, it may not be very challenging, but there is some value to it if you're interested in downloading.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

NBA Live 06 for mobile plays five on five and includes all NBA teams to play with in Quick Start, Play Now and Season modes. Quick Start and Play Now are one-game encounters with teams chosen automatically or to your liking. Season mode is more like a mini-season with 14 games plus the playoffs, and allows you to go for the NBA crown.

Each team will have five starters and five substitutes but they can only be set at the beginning of the match. The teams and players will have a skill rating like their real NBA counterparts and therefore will tend to be as effective on the court, but it really falls on you to perform well. You should be able to find one or two plays that will almost guarantee a score. As long as you keep running them and playing some reasonable defense, you will have a good shot at winning, no matter who the top scorer is. Either way, you can always select a harder difficulty for more challenge.

That's not to say that the defense is nonexistent. There are a few questionable occurrences and the computer is somewhat predictable, but overall the game plays well.

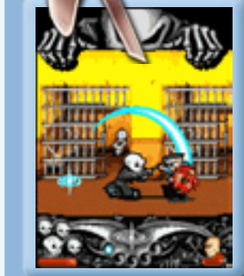
The controls allow for movement, shooting, passing, switching players and blocking. While these are easily done and react somewhat efficiently, passing can be tedious since you can't choose which player to pass it to. Slam Dunks can also be performed if you happen to be on a breakaway or have a clear lane to the basket. These are cool and accentuate the offense.

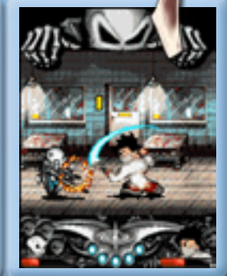
The game delivers the action in three views but you'll mainly be playing from a behind-the-backboard perspective. The camera will always rotate accordingly though it will be difficult to see when you're moving the ball up pass the half-court line. Player animations are nicely done and feature a variety of moves, especially on the dunks. The characters themselves are large and have decent detail as well as the arena. For sound, there's crowd cheers and referee whistles but the best part is voice over commentary.

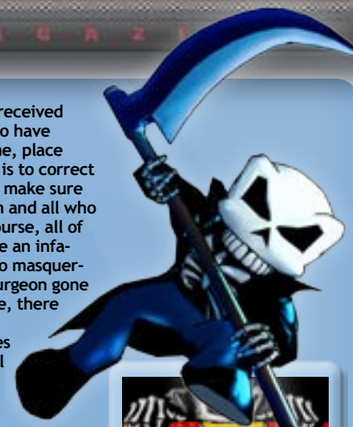
NBA Live 06 is EA's first entry into mobile basketball and it's done a decent job of providing one of the better experiences this year. There are some issues, as with other mobile basketball games, but we found it to be a little more challenging, a little more robust, and quite simply, a little more engaging.

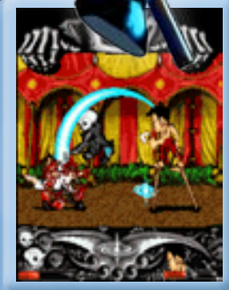
FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

ReaperMan









Playing as the Reaper Man, you've received a list with four names of people who have somehow managed to avoid the time, place and cause of their death. Your task is to correct this disturbance in the balance and make sure they meet their fate by killing them and all who stand in your way. In this case of course, all of them deserve it. The four fiends are an infamous serial killer, a drug dealer who masquerades as a circus clown, a brilliant surgeon gone mad, and a voodoo gang leader. As you can see, there is some redeeming social value to this game.

These four villains will serve as the bosses at the end of each level. To reach them, you'll have to eliminate their henchmen with your trusty scythe. Reaper Man will wield the scythe in various ways including combos, projectiles, and spin attacks. He will also be able to summon special powers that can be used by collecting the souls of the dearly departed. Remember, however, that even though you're an agent of Death, you are still a physical manifestation and therefore can be killed as well. Thus, you can also block and collect hearts for health.

The game can be controlled with only one hand and you'll basically mash the keypad buttons. Enemies come at you at a feverish pace, and you'll only be able to take a breather by clearing the screen with one of your special powers. The powers include stopping time, killing all the enemies onscreen, and a few others. Speaking of enemies, there are only two types per level but they're very aggressive. If you're not careful, it won't be long before the Reaper himself meets his own fate.

Reaper Man has large, cartoon-like graphics that key in on the bloody fun, but unfortunately the sound isn't as compelling. There is also only one continue and if it's used up, it's back to the beginning. There are no save points. If you happen to be lucky enough, a Carnage mode can be unlocked that will have you repossessing souls for as long as you can. Overall, the game can get mind numbing for some folks and it does seem kind of short, but it still has a cool premise and has been fairly well developed. Those fascinated by hack and slash games will have a good time as the Reaper Man.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

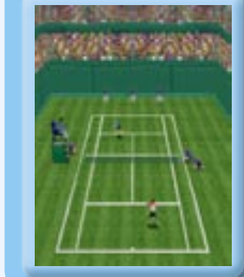
Tennis video games are sometimes no more than glorified versions of *Pong* because, let's face it, that's exactly how they usually play. There's rarely a tennis game that breaks that mold, and while *Virtua Tennis* does only a little to change that, it still is the best mobile tennis experience available. *Virtua Tennis* has three modes to play in, providing training, free matches and tournaments. The heart of the game lies within the Tournament mode where you can participate in up to six of them by taking on five opponents in each. If you win, not only will you move on to the next, more difficult tournament, but you'll also obtain Level-up points to improve your player's abilities in Power, Speed, Reach, Angle and Skill. These abilities will affect how your player performs, though it won't necessarily affect how you play the game.

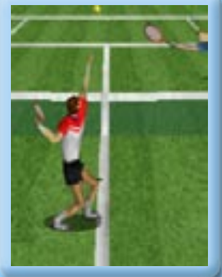
To control the character, the D-pad will be used for movement and the OK button will be used to swing the racket, nothing more. There are no special movements to perform or swings to take. The only way your volley will be affected is by the position of your character in relation to the oncoming ball. If you are positioned to the left of the ball, you will hit it back to the right, and vice versa. This *really* simplifies the game play, but allows for enough control to affect the outcome. Of course, you're still only running back and forth across the screen.

The character models have good size and their entire movement is very smooth. This makes animations like serving and diving great to watch. The game itself has three different perspectives that can be selected and an instant replay camera has been included to show superb plays. The only issue we found is that the ball may be too small when the game is zoomed out. The sound, likewise, is fairly well done, with decent music and effects.

SEGA's *Virtua Tennis* is one of the elite tennis brands in the console world, and does a solid job of serving up the action on a mobile phone. A few items are annoying, like the inability to save a tournament while competing in it (so if you have to leave the game for something you will lose all of your progress) and that you can only gain Level-up points after winning an entire tournament. Some players might also not like the fact that you cannot choose a specific type of swing, but we find that this suits mobile gaming much better. If you do enjoy tennis and want a solid experience to play with on your handset, *Virtua Tennis* is the way to go.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5





RPG fans nowadays have it good. Between releases of *Final Fantasy*, *Kingdom Hearts*, *Dragon Quest*, *Shadow Hearts*, *Atelier Iris* and *Disgaea*, it's hard to find a gamer whose personal needs *aren't* satisfied by one or more of the titles coming out in the near future. Of course, things weren't always so easy. Back in the early days of the PSOne, fans had to make do with the limitations of what they were given; or, if they weren't satisfied with that, actively petition companies to bring their beloved RPGs from the other side of the Pacific.

This is how the first game in the *Grandia* series eventually made it to our shores: as a PS1 port of the original Saturn game. Now, almost eight years later, the upcoming release of *Grandia III* requires no such drastic measures; the series has proven itself, and has a lasting and dedicated fanbase that is basically guaranteed to make it into a hit. For those of us who may have missed the boat on the franchise, though, we have to ask: what is it that makes *Grandia* so great? In a world where a fantastic, groundbreaking RPG is released every other month, what is there to get us excited about this one?

What *is* Grandia?

Before we get to the question of what *Grandia III* is, we need to address the question of what *Grandia* is. All of the games in the *Grandia* series (*Parallel Trippers* aside; see sidebar) are autonomous stories, featuring different sets of characters and events that take place across entirely different worlds. If that's the case, though, what exactly is it that makes a *Grandia* game what it is?

Gameplay

One of the most distinct and widely touted aspects across all the *Grandia* games is its gameplay, the most innovative aspect of which is the battle system. The traditional *Grandia* battle system presents a pleasing fusion of classic turn-based and real-time gameplay that has continued to evolve with each installment. Enemies and allies are set up in realistic formations around a gridless field, and have to move in real time and real space to execute attacks, magic, and special moves. The action stops only briefly to allow the player to issue commands.

During combat, character icons continue to cycle on the IP (initiative point) gauge, and commands can be issued when a character's icon reaches a certain point. Once a command is issued, it takes time to perform the task. Some actions may take longer to execute than others, depending on the type of action, and the user's skill. Certain attacks allow you to cancel an opponent's action while it's being prepared; if successful this will send the enemy's IP counter back to the beginning of the gauge. Of course, this applies to both sides, so the actions you take in combat always require a careful strategic balance of speed, power, distance, resources, and opportunity.

Each of the games under the *Grandia* name have kept some variant on this system, and with each installment, the system has evolved to become more complex, balanced, and engaging.

"From the very first *Grandia,* we kept the same vision for the battle system. In the first one, we put that vision in partially, and in the second one we could have an enlarged, expanded, improved battle system." said Hidenobu Takahashi, *Grandia III*'s director.

For *Grandia Xtreme*, the previous installment in the franchise, the system was given added complexity and a sleek new makeover, changing the bulky IP gauge into a dial to give more space to the action on the screen, and adding in combination attacks that could be performed by multiple characters.

"We basically did the 'extreme battle system,'" Takahashi said.

Other, more superficial aspects are the inclusion of items like Mana Eggs and Skill Books, and the random encounter-free system, although the specifics of how exactly these work changes from game to game.

HISTORY OF GRANDIA

Grandia I

A bright and optimistic adventure, *Grandia* appeared as something different at a time when RPGs seemed set on becoming darker and angstier. The plot is simple at a glance. Our hero, Justin, wants nothing in the world but to be an adventurer like his father. Though a new continent, Elencia, has recently been discovered, and legends exist of an ancient civilization known as the Icarians who possessed fantastic technology, people tell him there's nothing left in the world to explore. The Icarians are just a myth, and at the end of the Elencian contintent is what people know to be "The End of the World": a giant, ancient, impassible wall.

Obviously, if there's just a wall that marks where the world stops, there's couldn't be anything behind it. Right? Justin isn't so convinced. Neither are the Garlyle forces, a military organization with mysterious motivations for hunting the secrets behind the Icarian legacy. Along with his childhood friend Sue and professional adventuress Feena, Justin makes his way to the new world — and beyond — to discover the secret of the Angelou civilization and live up to his father's legacy.

Story

Another trait of the mainline *Grandia* games is a focus on telling character-based stories. All of the games have some mandatory turnover in your party's composition, and you're usually given a lot of time to get to know a character before he departs, which has led to some resentment from fans about "killing off the good characters." Takahashi responded to this:

"They don't die, they just exit for something else. If you think of it, a good character can complete their story in the game. If you can't complete their stories, then you don't need to follow them."

Some who play the *Grandia* games have also noticed certain aspects in common between the stories. The worldsettings, for instance, typically center around a medieval-style culture at the dawn of an age of exploration. There's a heavy emphasis on religion and mythology, usually involving an ancient civilization that was destroyed or forgotten in the distant past. In the end, the heroes learn that the past must be acknowledged, but humans must ultimately live for the present and the future.

According to *Grandia II* producer Katsuki Saito, this is because the primary theme of all the games is humanism, and sending a message to gamers. Sometimes this message is based strongly on current events, like the Korean man who dedicated himself so much to an online game that he killed himself.

"Being in the gaming industry, we see a lot of people who are totally enclosed in the gaming world... but I want all the gamers to remember that the most important thing is your life. So even though you're playing the game, you have to enjoy your life. Being in the human world is a great thing," Takahashi said.

Grandia III

With the latest installment, *Grandia III*, the *Grandia* series reaches new heights in animation, storytelling, and pure entertainment.

"It's like the way people say 'movies are great entertainment,' we wanted fans to feel the same way. 'Games are great entertainment.'" said Takahashi.

The story focuses on Yuki, an ambitious young kid who lives on an isolated island and wants nothing more than to build an airplane and escape to see the world. He gets his wish when one test flight crashes into the forest, interrupting a group that is pursuing a girl named Alfina. As it turns out, Alfina is a Communicator, who can speak to the world's ancient race of Gods known as "Guardians." The person who was supposed to take up the Communicator role, her brother Emelious, has mysteriously vanished, so Alfina must return home to convey the Guardians' words and bring comfort to her people. Yuki is more than happy to accompany her, and brings his mom along for good measure.

Like previous *Grandia* games, *Grandia III* is set in a world on the brink of a technological revolution. In this case, the focus is on the emerging technology of air travel. For now, airplanes are only used by those brave enough to build and pilot their own, like Yuki's hero Captain Schmidt, but there is a sense that they are on the verge becoming a commercial enterprise. Takahashi explained to us why the airplanes were so important to this game.

"One secret theme for this title was "world and nature." We wanted to show people oceans, mountains, trees and other natural things, [but] we realized that it's really difficult to convey their beauty just by walking around. So getting on the plane and looking down from the sky, people can realize how great it is, how big the world is, and how difficult it is to live in that world."

It also resulted in a lot of free airplane trips on company money for the production team, he joked.

Directors Katsuki Saito (Grandia II, Game Arts) and Hidenobu Takahashi (Grandia III, Game Arts) and Composer Noriyuki Iwadare (Grandia I, II and III)

Production

Creating *Grandia III* took the efforts of about 400 people — roughly 120 more than the original *Grandia* — over three and a half years of work. A great deal of that time went into defining and creating just the right visual style for the characters. For this new generation of gaming, the team decided to go for a more realistic style.

"*Grandia* is known for 2D anime-style games ... which are kind of soft, and not actually realistic," said Takahashi.

"I thought that manga style makes everything look so unreal [...] it makes it hard for the development team to physically convey emotions," he added.

The developers wanted to create a more realistic style without sacrificing the familiar softness of the original *Grandia* games, or the production's unique Japanese feel. To this end, the team didn't employ standard motion-capture technology for their 3D animations, and chose to hand-key the entire production instead. After first using traditional 2D animation to animate the character motions and expressions, a CGI art team was able to model the 3D character animations over the top of it.

"That makes the game look so unique and different from any American animation you're used to," Saito said.

"People who love Japanimation should play this game," said the game's composer, Noriyuki Iwadare.

Still, Takahashi told us, it was a lot of hard work. Now that the game is finished, though, the parting is a bittersweet one.

"You can imagine, like, you have a girlfriend who always fights with you every day, and you are so sick of it. Then one day you decide to break up, and then you miss her so much, and there's this big hole in your heart," said Saito.

Grandia: Parallel Trippers

The only game in the *Grandia* series that connects directly to another, *Grandia: Parallel Trippers* was released for the Game Boy Color in 2000. It was meant to tide over hungry *Grandia* fans before the release of *Grandia II*. Unfortunately, it was never released in America.

Parallel Trippers stars Yuuhi, Shiro, and Mizuki. They're typical Japanese students, until one day a mysterious accident at their school sucks them into the world of the first *Grandia*. (Anime fans might argue that this is hardly *a*typical for Japanese students, but we won't comment.) Yuuhi is separated from his friends in the process, and the controller of the world, Liete, tells him that he must reunite with them and find the "Three Keys" to the world of Grandia if he wants to return home safely. Fortunately, Justin, Sue, and the rest of the original *Grandia* gang are there to help him out.

When it comes to describing the characteristics of a *Grandia* game, *Parallel Trippers* is often the odd man out. Due to the technology gap between consoles and the GBC, much of the classic gameplay was left behind in favor of classic Game Boy fallbacks like card-collecting and monster training. Though the IP system was there in a limited form, the game's primary draw was clearly the return of the original *Grandia* protagonists and villains, many of them recruitable for the first time.

HISTORY OF GRANDIA

HISTORY OF GRANDIA

Grandia II

If *Grandia* was a return to simpler, happier times, *Grandia II* was as far in the other direction as it could get. The history of *Grandia II* tells of a great battle between the god of light, Granas, and the god of darkness, Valmar. According to the legend, the battle went on for eons, until Granas finally sealed Valmar with a great blow that also cut the world in half. Ages later, Valmar is reviving, and the attempt by the followers of Granas to fix the seals has gone horribly awry. The priestess attending to the exorcism, Elena, is now possessed by the Dark God's power, and must now journey to the holy land to find a way to save her soul.

All this sounds like a job for a group of willing heroes, right? Unfortunately, all Elena gets is Ryudo, a cynical bounty hunter who is far more interested in making a profit than in saving the world. They end up setting out together, trying to re-seal reviving parts of Valmar and dealing with Elena's dark god alter-ego, Millenia. Along the journey, they learn that not all is as it seems with Ryudo, the dark power that possesses Elena, or the history that she trusts implicitly.

By the way, if you thought the PS2 version was bad, it was because of a lousy port. The Dreamcast version is excellent.

Battle System

Thankfully, when it comes to *Grandia III's* gameplay, GameArts hasn't messed with success. The battle system at work in *Grandia III* can be seen as the final evolution of the IP combat system.

"We kind of toned it down from *Grandia Xtreme* but still, each battle gives the same satisfaction that you would get from *Grandia Extreme*. It's just the perfect, the best battle system that we could create," Takahashi said.

Many of the superficial aspects of *Xtreme* were retained, including the action dial and the Mana Egg fusion system. Others, like combination attacks, were sadly removed.

One of the most significant new additions to the *Grandia* battle system is the in-game tutorial and battle hints system, which as Saito tells us, are to help attract newcomers to the series without alienating the hardcore gamers who love the complex battle system.

"We wanted to make it easier for casual gamers to enjoy, so we came up with better ways to show how battle system works. It's just a combination of good, detailed battle system that attracts both kinds of gamers," he said.

Another is aerial combos, which are performed by knocking an enemy into the air with a cancel or counter-attack, then attacking the enemy while he's in the air. This results in extra damage, and potentially, extra after-combat goodies if the combo results in a finish.

Other improvements to the gameplay include a mini-map, an area detection ability for finding treasure chests and interaction points, and the ability to swing your sword on the field to stun monsters before engaging them in combat.

Next Gen

When asked what improvements the team would make in moving *Grandia* to the next generation, Takahashi responded,

"There would probably be so many more things you can do with a next generation console, but it's not an important part for... a developer like me, because the most important thing is [making] a really good game to attract a gamer. Gamers will be pleased with the new technology, so that's the most difficult part that each development team needs to decide whenever they work on new games in the future."

Iwadare added that he thought the most important aspect of next generation technology would be the music.

"Visuals, using physics or AI systems have been kind of increasing constantly, so it's not that drastic a difference, just because the game is available for the next gen console. But if the game is available, full-time, 5.1 channel, it's just amazing. Or 7.1, 10.1... it's almost like 3D sound."

Interview

Noriyuki Iwadare, Award winning game music composer for Grandia I, II and III. His previous work includes the music for the Lunar series, Radiata Stories, Rogue Galaxy, and many more.

Noriyuki Iwadare,
Composer for the entire Grandia series

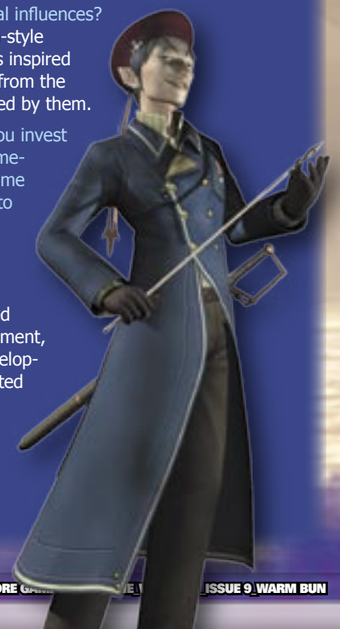
For this interview, we invited our members at Luv2game.com to ask some of the questions.

HGM: Did *Grandia III* allow you to explore new ideas that you might not have used in past projects?
NI: Overall, creating the music has been the same way as in other games, because usually they give me great freedom to create music. But in *Grandia III* in particular, I had to create a gypsy song for the Dahna character, so even the lyrics are made up words, which are completely unique and different, but it was fun.

HGM: Is there a process to every game? Do you look at the game, does the game get somewhat completed before every game?
NI: Usually the only information I get is the concept sheet, scenario, and text. And then there's a request that says "please make a song appropriate for this text," or one sheet of art. But for *Grandia III*, the team provided me with videotapes, in-game videotapes.

robi85: What are your musical influences?
NI: I wanted to create French-style music for *Grandia III*, so I was inspired by Da Vinci and Ravel, artists from the impressionist era. I was inspired by them.

robi85: How much time do you invest in creating the music? Is it something you work on until the game is completed, or are you able to complete it pretty early on?
NI: Three years, for *Grandia III*. Game Arts already asked me to join at the beginning of development, so I was involved from the beginning of development, and finished at the end of development. Most of the time I devoted was for the opening movie, and the main theme song. I created seven different types of opening movie songs, and only one was used.



HGM: Did you get to use the other ones?
NI: I wasn't allowed to.

DeathxFromxAbove & cheech79: How did you become a video game composer? Is that something you set out to do, or did you end up doing it maybe by chance?
NI: I was just a keyboard player hoping to get a job in the music industry, and then one of my friends asked me out to get a job in the game industry, because my friend was already doing composing for games. That friend is still in the industry.

HGM: For other musicians who would be interested in doing something like this, how would you recommend that they get started?
NI: I get all these questions like that from people who come to my website, and what I always recommend is "read good books, so many books" and "see great art as much as possible" and always practice to translate those stories or art into music. Keep practicing that translation into the music. And another thing I should tell all these younger people is, recent game music composition is really tough and complicated, so study a lot. Imagination is the key. So what is the music for this situation, interviewing in the conference room? If you can't think of the music, you can't become a game composer.

Angelous: We've been talking about how the *Grandia* series always has a theme. Is this true for the music as well, do you always find a theme for the music?
NI: Actually, the theme song from *Grandia* through *Xtreme* was actually the same. For *Grandia III* we created a new one, but once again, I tried really hard to incorporate the humanity which is the basic theme of the game, so that through the music, people can feel accomplishment of finishing the game or trying new things. But on top of that I personally wanted to add encouragement to the gamers.
I think that while I was creating this music for *Grandia III*, I was looking at the world, and Japan, too. There are so many people who cannot try new things or try them very actively. A lot of people are getting shy or being antisocial or being on their own towards the world, so I wanted to give those people encouragement, just give them one push to be out there and be active and be themselves.

eternalblue81: What music do you like?
NI: I listen to any type of music, but I like listening to music that's really light and cheery.

Review

When playing *Grandia III*, a number of words come to mind.

The first is "gorgeous." The soft, hand-keyed style of *Grandia III* really gives us the best of both cartoonish and realistic styles. To say that the game looks like an anime would be doing it a disservice; anime hasn't looked this good in fifteen years, assuming, that is, that it ever did. While the cutscenes do run long at times, they're so amazingly well-animated, and so skillfully directed, that they could only be brought down by horrible voice acting. Fortunately, though they can be a bit dry at times, the voice actors (with a single painful, tone-breaking exception) actually seem to know what they're doing. No scrambling for the mute button this time around, unless you just absolutely cannot stand dubs.

The second is "streamlined." In terms of gameplay, *Grandia III* gives you the essentials you need to get through the story quickly and efficiently. The camera has been improved greatly, and an area-scan ability and mini-map means no more struggling through endlessly confusing tunnels. Towns are smaller, with fewer places to explore, and fewer talk-heavy sidequests. Skills power up based on how much you use them in combat, eliminating tedious points-spending in the field, and the dungeon crawling:town:cut scene ratio feels just perfectly fine-tuned. Best of all, there's only one minigame, and it's one that you're not even required to play. *Ever.*

"Exhilarating" is another word, and it describes the combat system to a T. This really is the final evolution of the IP system introduced in the first *Grandia*. All the classic concerns for distance, speed, and timing are still there, but combat is now faster and weightier, avoiding the trap of tedious "lay down the controller and wait"-style ability animations in favor of a system where you're really rewarded for strategy instead of skill-mashing. Each character not only has different skill sets, but actually moves differently in combat, meaning that a great deal of your combat success will come from learning your individual characters, not the system around them. Also, having a character who is a sniper actually *means* something in this game.

The word "innocent" comes to mind regarding *Grandia III*'s plot. Its plucky, never-say-die heroes and almost naively black-and-white views of good and evil are a refreshing callback to the original after the overly dark and murky *Grandia II*. The fact that the mother-child relationship is dealt with actively through the early part of the adventure creates a set of character conflicts and themes rarely seen in a genre where protagonists are so often orphans, and it gives real weight to Yuki's coming-of-age tale. His sincere desire to protect Alfina from the beginning (rather than trying to make them a classic "bickering couple that doesn't realize they're in love") is also refreshing; if the game has any twists at all, it's only in its complete lack of twists.

Grandia Xtreme

Another bridge between official *Grandia* games, *Xtreme* was created by GameArts primarily to test the PlayStation 2's technology. The story was practically non-existent, so that the weight of the game could be focused on dungeon crawling and number-crunching.

Xtreme focuses on Evann, a young ranger who is not really excited about being a hero, but is forced into it. The land is being ravaged by "the elemental disorder," an imbalance in elemental forces eminating from the ancient ruins of Locca. Evann must journey to various elemental hotspots around the land with his own team of military misfits to bring a stop to it.

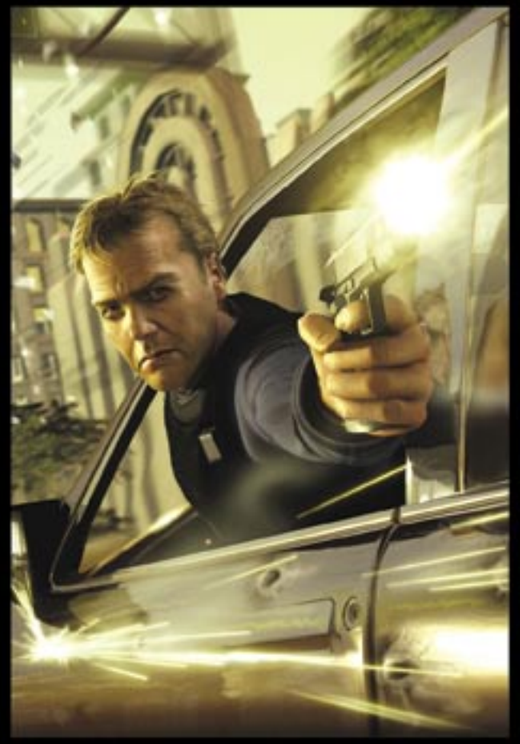
Unfortunately, in acknowledging this, we must also acknowledge some of the words that *don't* come to mind when talking about *Grandia III*. "Epic" is one of these, and "deep." Even "satisfying" comes only after a lot of grudging consideration.

The fact is, though it is a triumph of programming and an amazingly entertaining product, *Grandia III* fails simply by not giving us *enough*. The opening animation lures us in with the promise of a wide world full of adventure, and giving us a main character whose dream is to explore the world in an airplane seems to make that a guarantee. When we finally board that plane, though, the story remains linear. The aerial sequences are beautifully realized, with realistic weather effects and radio conversations you can listen in on, but there is no actual interaction in the air, and it's disappointing to learn that there are so many places you can only see and never go. When all is said and done, the world that Yuki wants to explore so badly becomes disappointlingly small in the service of a plot that must inevitably become more concerned with saving it than with seeing it.

This streamlining of the plot also means that a lot of character development (mostly among the villains) is left to be taken on faith and understanding of anime archetypes. Much is made of the villainous Viletta's love and devotion to Emelious, but *why* does she continue to love him, even at the risk of her own life? Well, because she's an evil, scythe-wielding, scantily-clad RPG girl in the service of a hot, mysterious RPG villain, and that's what they do. Of course.

Whether or not you consider these to be really serious flaws, of course, will depend on your own view of RPGs. You may be tired of "epic" and "deep" and just want something fun, new, and uncomplex that will keep you fully engaged, without a looming shadow of an 80 hour commitment to make the game feel *really* "finished." If that's what you want, you'll find heaven in *Grandia III*, which offers all these things with sweetness, polish, and style to boot. If not, you really should still play it; the eventual plot may not live up to expectations, but the sheer craftsmanship that went into the game simply demands your respect.

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5



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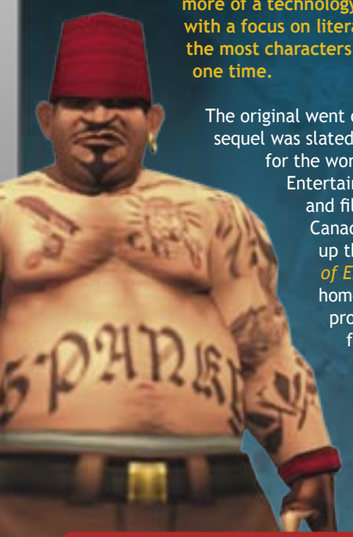
STATE OF EMERGENCY 2

Review by Roger Danish

Publisher : Southpeak Interactive
Developer : DC Studios
Release Date : 2/14/2006
Rating : **MATURE**; Blood and Gore, Drug Reference, Intense Violence, Strong Language

Genre(s) : Third-Person Shooter
Category : Action
# of players : 1-2

With the original ***State of Emergency***, which released back on Feb 12th, 2002, the Scottish developers at VIS Entertainment got a free pass thanks to the notoriety of its publisher, Rockstar Games, and the success of ***Grand Theft Auto III***. It's not that the first game was bad (it garnered average to good reviews in the enthusiast gaming press), but it didn't quite live up to the hype that surrounded it. Focusing on havoc and destruction, the original was more of a technology demo than a fleshed out game, with a focus on literally filling the screen with the most characters ever seen in a video game at one time.



The original went on to sell well at retail, a sequel was slated, and then things took a turn for the worse. VIS was bought out by BAM! Entertainment, BAM! went belly up and filed for bankruptcy, and then Canadian-based DC Studios picked up the project. Thankfully, *State of Emergency 2* has found a good home at Southpeak Interactive, the proud publisher of the title, and from the review copy with which we've been spending our time, it looks as if they have a solid, yet slightly flawed game on their hands.

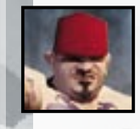
Just like real life, *State of Emergency 2* takes place four years after the original and reunites its trademark characters (Spanky, Bull, MacNeil, Libra and Freak) as they once again take the to the streets in an attempt to give it to The Man. Capitol City is yet again under the firm grip of the oppressive Corporation, an evil corporate dictatorship whose ultimate goal is the global enslavement of the masses. In order to stop the madness, these unlikely heroes will have to carve their own swath of death, mayhem, chaos and destruction under the guise of the Freedom movement.

For those of you who have played and are familiar with the original, *State of Emergency 2* is actually a bit of a departure. The first game focused on time-based action where you were given a limited amount of time to earn points by completing objectives. It was also light on story and heavy on action, combining both projectile weaponry and "unique" hand-to-hand combat (you could pick up pretty much anything in the environment and use it as a weapon, including body parts). *State of Emergency 2*, however, plays more like a story-driven shooter. Gone are the sandbox-style environments, the hand-to-hand combat, and the time-based gameplay. In their place, DC and Southpeak have added a ton of new gameplay features, which include the (limited) ability to command gangs (when controlling Spanky), a variety of vehicles to control (helicopters, tanks, speedboats, etc.), interrogation mini-games, and a ton of Arcade challenges.

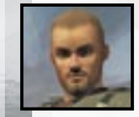
The levels in *SoE 2*, while long and interesting, are now a linear affair, but they do offer quite a bit of diversity and variety; you'll be doing something different all the time. There are twelve levels in total in the main game, although there are also 15 unlockable Arcade challenges, as well as five multiplayer modes (via split-screen, not online). In any given level you can be piloting a vehicle, commanding your gang members, operating a mounted gun, and, of course, mowing down waves of enemies while crowds of civilians run around inciting riots and havoc. In addition, stealth and strategy now come into play; you can lean out from corners to pick off snipers or gun turrets, and switching characters on the fly allows you to save health, as well as use each member's unique ability (Bull can smash through doors, Spanky can enlist and command gang members, etc.). While the hand-to-hand combat is missed (a melee attack when the enemies get in close would have made the game better), the shooting mechanics are solid, responsive and fun.

Speaking of shooting, there are a ton of weapons to wield, and once you pick a weapon up, you get to keep it indefinitely, although you still need to replenish your ammo. Weapons include pistols, shotguns, sniper rifles, machineguns, grenades and grenade launchers, rocket launchers, remote mines, and even Molotov cocktails. While you can no longer pick up non-projectile weapons, the civilians can and will. These include baseball bats, crowbars, hammers and monkey wrenches.

FREEDOM—HEROES FOR A NEW GENERATION



Hector Soldado, a.k.a. Spanky, is the leader of the feared Cordova Posse, once the biggest gang in Capitol City's Ghetto Zone. The unofficial poster boy for the Freedom movement, when the Corporation first took control, it targeted the gangs as a major threat and Spanky found himself an unlikely recruit.



Known to his friends simply as Mac, Roy MacNeil is an ex-cop, ex-revolutionary and soon to be ex-con. He was an uncompromising Capitol City detective when the Corporation first took over and began replacing the existing police force with its ruthless Enforcers. Out of a job, and seething with resentment towards the Corporation, he joined the Freedom movement and played a major role in the overthrow of the first Corporation.

Going by the nickname Bull, Eddy Raymonds was known to his team-mates, fans and friends as an all-American pro football player. Refusing to participate in a Corporation-sponsored match-fixing scam, he was on his way to prison when the first revolution allowed his escape. He eventually found his way to the Freedom movement.

Libra, Anna Price, has been a successful attorney in Capitol City for years. Since the Corporation retook control of the city, she's worked directly for them. What they didn't know is that she's also spent the last decade as Libra, the leader of Freedom, using her position and influence to engineer ever more daring strikes at the Corporation's infrastructure.

Ricky Trang, a.k.a. Freak, has been a hacker and criminal since adolescence. While in school, he was orphaned when his parents were 'removed' by a Corporation death squad. He's spent every day since trying to make the Corporation pay.

Visually, the game retains the same over-the-top, cartoon-style gore and violence and style as the first. The engine doesn't seem much different than the original, but what it does, it does it well. One of the things that strike me as odd, however, is that the environments are much less interactive and destructible as the first. Maybe it's because I've been playing a lot of *Black* lately, but I wanted to see buildings blowing up, huge explosions, and lots bits and pieces flying everywhere. Sadly, this is not the case.

My main complaints are that the difficulty level seems a tad uneven—some levels and areas are brutally hard, while others are a breeze—and a few of the vehicle-based portions tend to drag on a little too long. However, given that this game is selling at the bargain price of $29.99 and that it offers a ton of satisfying gameplay, these deterrents can be overlooked.

Rating :
3.5 of 5

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

It's a departure from the original, but it's an improvement. If you like shooters, you've come to the right place.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

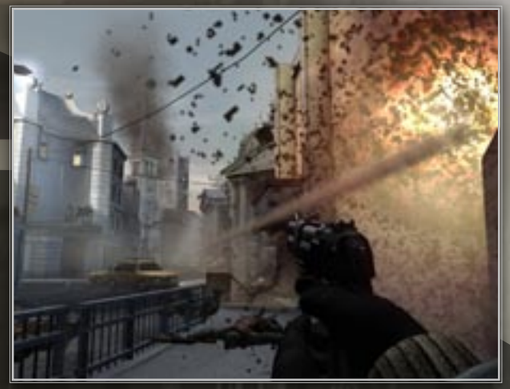
BLACK

Review by 4thletter

Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: Criterion Games
Release Date: 02/28/06
Rating: Mature (Strong Language, Violence)

Genre(s): First-Person Shooter
Category: Gun Porn
# of players: 1

How do you like your violence? If you like it excessive, messy, and over-the-top, *Black* may be the game for you. It's been described by its developers as "gun porn." There's no actual nudity, of course, unless you count the naked glee that's to be found in firing six hundred rounds a minute.



There's a lot to like about *Black*. You've probably already read all about the destructible environments and massive firepower. Everything that you've read is true. If you see it, you can shoot it full of holes or blow it up. There's a particularly slick scene where you're required to cross a graveyard and find cover while being harassed by a sniper. Gravestones explode around you as you slowly make your way to a building even while your backup is telling you to take cover. Once you get inside and deal with the enemies inside, you get to play with a nearby sniper rifle. There's great fun to be found in seeing a foe duck behind a gravestone to hide and blowing his cover to bits with a well-placed shot.

The guns are every bit as awesome as you've heard. Alternate firing rates tend to be extremely useful, as a few focused three-round bursts to the chest can take a fellow down just as easily as unloading a full clip but missing 75% of the time. Note that I said a *few* focused bursts. The majority of the enemies that you're going to go up against are wearing body armor. It's easier to get through some segments of the game by using single shots to distract your enemies, so you can get close and beat them to death with your gun's stock.

You can hit certain items with enough ordinance to make them explode, then watch a new path open up for you, or perhaps a number of enemies will bite the bullet, so to speak, all at once. The enemies often don't realize that hiding behind wooden boxes, gasoline drums, and trucks filled with explosives is not a good idea. This is good fortune for you, of course, and wonderful eye candy.

That's actually pretty bad news for the game's AI, however. A few missions have you rolling with a number of teammates. These special-ops warriors are quite possibly deaf and blind, though they definitely aren't dumb. They'll call out enemy positions for you incessantly, even after you've acquired the baddies and sent a few shots in their general direction. They're still pretty stupid. It's entirely way too common to see them run into a room full of enemies and just kind of hang out, missing each of their shots, causing you to have to run in and save their bacon. The squadmates are useful sometimes, as they'll let you know when an enemy has crept up on you, but that's fairly rare.

The enemy AI isn't much better. They'll duck, cover, and provide suppressive fire, but that's about the extent of their tactics. All the suppressive fire in the world won't do them any good if their buddies don't bother to properly flank you for the kill. You'll all too often encounter enemies who will run at you while not firing or duck to reload when they spot you coming around a corner. Even better are the enemies who know that you are pinned down by enemy fire... but still hang out behind their (probably explosive) cover.

On the flipside of this, of course, is the sometimes efficient enemy AI. Here's an experiment. There's a bit early in the second stage where you have a silenced pistol, plenty of cover thanks to trees and a low fence, and three enemies patrolling in different directions dozens of feet away. Take the silencer off your pistol, aim carefully, and pop one of them in the head when the others aren't looking. See how long it takes for the two that're left to zero in on your position. If you make a proper amount of noise, step into view, or do something stupid, they'll spot you and engage. The last thing you want is every baddie in town coming down on your head, so be wise.

Black, from a pure gameplay standpoint, is loads of fun. The guns are loud and impressive, and the enemies are stupid sometimes, but will display brilliance just often enough to give you a solid challenge. You'll get killed quick-like if you try to play *Black* like it's *Rambo*. You're going to learn to duck and cover. You don't have to pace yourself exactly, since ammo is plentiful, but the last thing you want to do is hop directly from confrontation to confrontation.
You'll have to watch your health constantly.

If I had one complaint, it would be that the stages tend to be wonderfully large, but the objectives that you have to accomplish tend to be of the "Find this tiny thing in this hut off the beaten path" variety. You can beat an average stage in around forty-five minutes, but hunting out each objective will greatly extend that time, and not necessarily in a good way. Otherwise, *Black* is a ball. Big guns, big explosions, and plenty of combat.

Score: 3 of 5

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

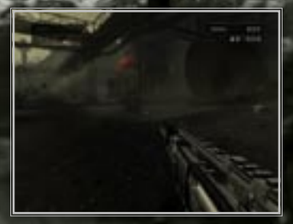
Call me old-fashioned, but ***this*** *is what a shooter should be: Beautiful, pick-up-and-play controls, and above all else,* ***fun****! The lack of online play sucks though.*

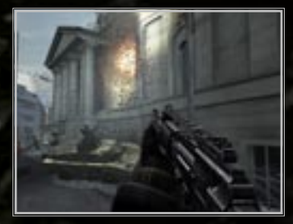
FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

BLACK HISTORY

Black sports something rarely seen nowadays: full motion video. Now, before you flash back to the Sega CD and 3DO, understand that *Black*'s FMV is nowhere near that horrendous. It is jump-cut, edited like a music video, and full of various filters and jitter effects, but it works.

You're given the opening story via a series of interrogations. You are Jack and you are in trouble deep. You're given an option: cooperate or be sent to jail for the things that you did in your country's name. The interrogator wants to know exactly what went down and how the sitution went from green to SNAFU and all the way up to FUBAR. From there, the adventure begins. You find out what went happens at the same time as the interrogator. What is Seventh Wave? Why is an American operative being accused of being one of the world's most dangerous terrorists? This turns *Black* into a story-within-a-story, which is something we don't see often enough.





Publisher : 2K Games
Developer : Sony Cambridge
Release Date : 2/28/2006
Rating : MATURE

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

24: The Game **is difficult to rate. Some portions are awesome, like when you're blowing a helicopter out of the sky from the rooftop of a high building, or you're sniping terrorists that want to assassinate a public official. These moments make the game worthwhile. Unfortunately, disappointing driving sequences and spotty camera controls interfere. The end result, a mishmash of good ideas and occasionally sloppy execution, is difficult to recommend to anyone but Jack Bauer's most ardent fans.**

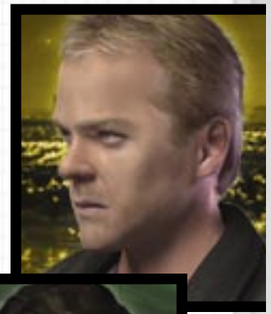
Fans of the television show will find plenty to like. The developers remained true to its feel. Between action sequences, you'll watch the story unfold in various windows and there's the thunderous click of seconds while the clock counts down to certain key moments. Kiefer Sutherland's voice is on hand to let you know when each event transpires, even when the story switches to someone else's perspective.

There are several repeating game modes, with diversions such as a hacking mini-game where you're breaking software encryption, or the aforementioned sniping stage. Sometimes you're controlling Jack and blasting your way through swarms of guards. Elsewhere, you might control someone who prefers a stealthy approach. Early on, the constant switch between play styles effectively keeps you enthralled, and the twisting plot provides regular incentive to find what happens next. By the time "noon" rolls around, though, the game has lost its luster.

The driving areas are one of the worst offenders. Your vehicle lacks power steering and an engine block capable of taking it over forty. When you're just racing the clock through the twisting city streets, this is merely cumbersome. When you're trying to elude police

officers and they're ramming you from all sides, or effortlessly catching up to you when you have the gas floored, it's tempting to throw the controller out the window. Artificial intelligence here is effective by virtue of your inability to find a car that can actually be maneuvered.

Other problems arise in the standard shooting stages. Your enemies are as dumb as posts. They'll watch helplessly as you walk just outside their range and refill your life, but if you don't see one coming because you're moving through winding hallways, they can kill you almost instantly while you try to turn the camera to see them. An on-screen radar sometimes gives away their location, but trial and error will serve you better.



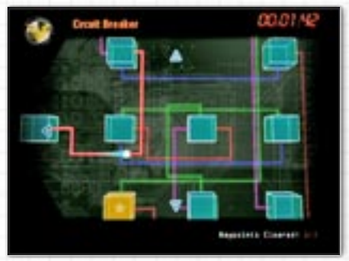
It's sad that this game ended up the way it did. The bright spots suggest that a little more time in development might have worked wonders. As it is, *24: The Game* lacks the fun you can get from watching the show on television or DVD. At least there, your worst problem is a troublesome remote.

Rating : 2.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 2.75 of 5

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

24's presentation is so spot-on that fans of the show (like me!) might overlook the occasionally sloppy gameplay. Needs more Chloe, though.



RESIDENT EVIL® Deadly Silence

Review by Wanderer

Publisher : Capcom
Developer : Capcom
Release Date : 2/6/2006
Rating : MATURE; Blood and Gore, Intense Violence

Genre(s) : Adventure
Category : World of Survival Horror
# of players : 1-8

Pretend you're a game company. One of your franchises—an indisputably popular series that's sold millions, spawned two inexplicably successful movies, and touched off its own subgenre—is turning ten years old. What would you do to celebrate its anniversary?

If the answer is to dust off the original game in the series, give it a few updates, and release it on a handheld system, then you must be Capcom. *Resident Evil: Deadly Silence* is a new version of the original PSOne *Resident Evil* from 1996, complete with the original voice acting, slightly updated controls, and slightly smoother graphics.

In Capcom's defense, this isn't just a rushed port. You can play the single-player game in either Classic Mode, which is the original game, or Rebirth Mode, which implements a number of touchscreen-based puzzles, challenges, and battles, including one brand-new, mandatory boss fight, a knife-only brawl against the Yawn. Rebirth Mode also throws the random headshots from *RE: Director's Cut* into the game, giving you a small chance of instant zombie decapitation when you're wielding the Handgun, and will occasionally drop you into random first-person battles where you must fend off monsters by stabbing them with your stylus.

In either mode, the game's controls have been improved with a quick-turn, skippable cutscenes, a manual reload, and the knife being made available at all times with the L button, like it is in *Resident Evil 4*. Overall, it makes the game much more playable and user-friendly than the original 1996 game could've ever hoped to be.

Winning either Rebirth or Classic Mode will unlock characters for use in the online multiplayer game, which bears a slight resemblance to the old battle game from the Saturn port of *RE*. In co-op mode, you and a few friends can work together to clear out the monsters; in adversarial mode, killing certain monsters will cripple the other team in certain ways. Either way, it doesn't have much in the way of a shelf life; with three levels and seven characters, it wears out its welcome quickly.

At the end of the day, though, this is still a ten-year-old game. If you're a fanatic about the original *Resident Evil*, this breathes enough new life into it that it's worth a playthrough, and newcomers to the series may want to pick this up to see *RE*'s humble beginnings. No one else, especially *RE4* junkies looking for a fix, need apply.

Rating : 3 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 2.75 of 5

2nd opinion by 4thletter • **Alternate Rating :** 2.5 of 5

Capcom's remakes have turned into a running joke, but *RE:DS* isn't a bad game to pick up for long bus rides. It wears its age on its sleeve, though.

Review by Racewing

Prince of Persia Revelations

Publisher : Ubisoft
Developer : Pipeworks Software
Release Date : 12/6/05
Rating : "M" for Matue (Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Sexual Themes)

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

Analyzing ***Prince of Persia: Revelations*** can be likened to a game of baseball. In fact, I keep getting this nagging feeling that someone's already done it before, but whatever. In any case, let's get started! The game's at bat; how will it fare?

Strike one! This is an enhanced port of ***Prince of Persia: Warrior Within***. Now, before you turn the page, I already know that everyone whines about ***Warrior Within***, so I won't do the same. In fact, I totally respect and like it. However, facts are facts: it's still the weak link in the ***Prince of Persia*** series. It's got the most disjointed gameplay, uses backtracking to confusing ends, contains hardly any humor, and makes the Prince all emo.

Through all this, however, ***Warrior Within*** delivered all the quality brain-busting gameplay the series is famous for. ***Revelations*** also sports a smattering of super-hard rooms that weren't in the console version for people who have already conquered ***Warrior Within***. These rooms are brutal and you will lose many lives in them, guaranteed. Unfortunately, in the end, this is still ***Warrior Within***, and that's going to turn a lot of folks off. Why Ubisoft didn't just start with enhancing the classic ***Sands of Time***, we'll never really know.

Strike two! Loading. There is so much loading here. While it's not as bad as ***Midnight Club 3***, it's still very much enough to annoy. Expect to wait a few minutes when first booting up the game, and when loading saved games. Stray too far from automatic checkpoints before dying, and you've got up to a minute's worth of loading time there as well.

The game doesn't control too badly with the analog nub, the camera system has been converted well, and the gameplay is just as rock-solid as its big brother... or at least, it would be if the framerate weren't so wishy-washy. This brings us to strike three: whether it be the lack of the PSP's power, or just a shoddy port in general, the framerate is inconsistent enough to make previously elementary parts of the gameplay hard as heck. There are also very serious game-freeze bugs and audio-sync issues. Nothing's worse than having the game completely crash, forcing a cold reboot just as you're about to finish that room that's been frustrating you for almost an hour.

All of these factors combine to create a package that's pretty safe to pass over unless you're a total ***Prince*** freak. It's a shame, really; being able to take a series of this caliber wherever you go should be a much more enjoyable undertaking than it turned out to be. Pass this one up and go play any given ***Prince of Persia*** on the consoles instead. Your brain cells will thank you.

Rating : 2.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 2.75 of 5

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

Like Ubi's *King Kong* for PSP, *Prince of Persia: Revelations* is sloppy port with some serious glitches. Still, it manages to entertain and fills a large genre gap for the handheld system. For serious fans only.

Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure

Review by Sardius

Publisher : Atari
Developer : The Collective
Release Date : 2/14/2006
Rating : MATURE; Blood, Strong Language, Violence

Genre(s) : Action/Adventure
Category : Graffiti
# of players : 1-2

Now ***this*** is refreshing. ***Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure*** deserves special recognition for being an urban setting-based game that, for once, is not a pandering, embarrassing exercise in stereotypes and cop killing. It's unfortunate that the game's setting places it in proximity to crap like ***Crime Life: Gang Wars*** and ***25 to Life***, because ***Getting Up*** is a rare title that portrays urban life in a positive light, emphasizing self-expression where others glorify murder.

Getting Up also humbles other urban games in terms of gameplay, crafting an enjoyable experience that builds on elements found in titles like *Prince of Persia* and *Jet Grind Radio*. Much of the game is spent trying to figure out how to reach certain out-of-the-way spots to tag with graffiti while working within the limits of your character's physical abilities. This is where the game is most fun; all the climbing and wall-jumping moves are easy to pull off, and even the stealth portions are well done.

It always seems like combat breaks things up whenever the game thinks you're having too much fun with exploration, though. *Getting Up's* fighting engine could've used a lot of work; enemies tend to block any move that doesn't drain your special attack meter, and weapons do way too much damage compared to other attacks. You probably won't bother using more than a few basic moves for much of the game either, as many attacks require too much thumb work to perform and only result in a sliver of damage to an opponent.

Then there's the game's centerpiece, the graffiti tagging. Now, as impressive as it is to be able to tag on almost any flat surface in the game, there is simply nothing here that makes tagging at all exciting or fun. Whereas *Jet Grind Radio* took a simplified approach to graffiti in order to keep the game flowing at a quick pace, tagging in *Getting Up* is a slow, laborious process that boils down to painting over an outline. Awkward controls make this even less fun than it sounds.

Also of note is that for a game about self-expression, it's really strange that *Getting Up* does not allow you to design your own graffiti tags. The default tags in the game give plenty of ideas for hilarious possibilities—a personal favorite is one that simply says "BALLS" in huge capital letters—but the lack of a tag creation mode means that one will never be able to bomb the streets with curse words and poorly-drawn genitalia, as was very much possible in *Jet Grind Radio*.

Getting Up offers a moderate amount of fun, but it has its fair share of problems. *Jet Set Radio Future* is still the king of its genre, but this is the next best thing.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3.75 of 5

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

Fun platforming, Nina Simone on the soundtrack, and cool-looking graffiti? I could get used to this. Highly recommended.

"FULL SPECTRUM" WARRIOR TEN HAMMERS

Review by honestgamer

Publisher : THQ
Developer : Pandemic
Release Date : 3/22/06
Rating : "M" for Mature

Genre(s) : Shooter
Category : Shooter
# of players : 1

Full Spectrum Warrior **began life as a military training program designed to acclimate Army recruits to the stress and strategy that come with urban warfare. *Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers* is the inevitable sequel. It retains much of what drew gamers to the original, while adding new features to improve playability and depth.**

As before, action is secondary and strategy is key. You aren't responsible for every step your soldiers take or every burst of ammunition they fire. When your squad appears on the battlefield, which is often a claustrophobic sort of environment filled with sand-flayed brick walls and dust clouds, you can't just start running forward while holding down the 'fire' button. The control scheme won't allow it. Instead, you must carefully conduct movement as you might in a tactical RPG.

Your squad moves in quick, coordinated rushes. You choose where it halts. For example, you might be advancing through an alley with buildings overhead. Sandbags and stone walls will provide cover from enemy fire, but each movement could leave your men exposed. As such, you have to move the cursor to safe points. When you do so, circles appear on-screen to display where your men will stand in relation to effective cover. Once you execute the command and they stumble to the new location, the soldiers will crouch and await new orders. You can instruct them to fire at enemies, if any are available, or to throw a frag or smoke grenade, or to make a rush to the next bit of cover.

Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers differs from its predecessor by allowing precision gunfire when it's necessary. You can select from healthy squad members and switch briefly to a first-person perspective that allows decent precision. It's the closest the game ever comes to first-person shooting, though action-craving gamers will find it a poor substitute for complete control. Besides that, Rambo-like heroics aren't advisable unless you've instructed your teammates to provide cover fire.

If you like ordering about squads, though, this is your game. You'll often command multiple groups of soldiers as they flank enemies, storm multiple routes, or bring their comrades to the medvac for healing measures. It's relatively simple to switch between each group, and you'll have to do so quite frequently. Only by enforcing teamwork can you lead your men to victory.

This unfaltering requirement makes for a memorable game. Players partial to direct control will likely swear almost as much as the foul-mouthed soldiers they order about, while more patient gamers will be rewarded with plot advancement and character development atypical of the genre. If you fall within the appropriate camp, this should be right up your alley. Go get it, soldier!

Rating : 4 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

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

The first game was good and this one is better. If you want a change from the usual shooters, give it a go.

SONIC RIDERS

Review by Racewing

Publisher : Sega
Developer : Sonic Team
Release Date : 2/21/2006
Rating : EVERYONE; Comic Mischief, Mild Cartoon Violence

Genre(s) : Racing
Category : X-Treme HoverSnowBoarding GX
# of players : 1-4

Sonic Riders **is about as ironic as you can get.**

It's the first 3D *Sonic* game that allows you experience the total speed rush that is *Sonic the Hedgehog*, without any crazy engine complications... and yet, it's not even a traditional *Sonic* game. Here, the cast rides "Extreme Gears," which are boards that hover on air, all totally stolen from the year 2015. These boards can achieve speeds faster than Sonic himself, and when three new birds known as the Babylon Rogues manage to show him up with their sweet rides, Sonic enters Eggman's Extreme Gear tournament to show everyone what true speed really is.

Strangely enough, Sonic Team's taken parts from other games (most notably *F-Zero GX*, both in speed and graphic style; *SSX*; *Tony Hawk*; and *Snowboard Kids*) and put together something original that works. It's got steep learning and difficulty curves, but much like *F-Zero*, even when you're getting served by the computer, it's still incredibly fun.

The racing system centers around "air"; your hoverboards are powered by it, and should they run out, you're stuck running on the ground until you can refill them. Refilling is done either by performing tricks, or by using your characters' special power of speed (grinding), power (violence), or flight (flying through special accelerator rings). These powers are also used to access various shortcuts on the racetracks.

The other major part of the air system is "turbulence," which is sort of slipstream on crack. When other characters hit top speed, they leave behind little half-pipes of air which you can ride on, allowing you to travel much faster than you would normally. You can use turbulence to overtake the person who created it in the first place, making *Sonic Riders* a novel and frantic game of cat-and-mouse, where no lead is ever truly safe.

This game sports a story mode modeled after the previous 3D *Sonic* games, a special mission mode, Grand Prix, and multiplayer modes, including a demented game of Chaos Emerald tag (very fun), and an arena battle mode somewhat modeled after *Mario Kart*'s (not quite as fun). All of these modes, and the fun racing therein, ensure that if you've got a group of friends, this disc will be in your system for hours at a time.

Finally, if you've only got a PS2, worry not; its rendition of *Sonic Riders* keeps up with the others at 60 frames per second in single-player mode, while going at a respectable (and consistent) 30 FPS in multiplayer. This is good news considering how badly *Heroes* and *Shadow* turned out on that system.

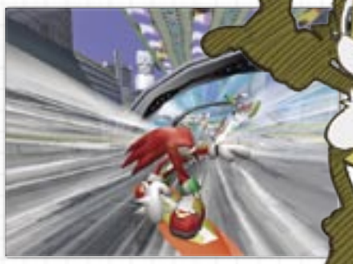
Sonic Riders is one of the most significant and fun racing games ever made. While not perfect, and somewhat difficult, *Sonic R* has been dethroned, with a vengeance, as the Sonic racing game of choice.

Rating : 4 of 5

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

An intriguing idea slightly muddled by loose controls and a sometimes unfollowable camera, *Sonic Riders* is at least a better attempt at a game than *Shadow the Hedgehog*.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5



FINAL FIGHT "STREETWISE"

Review by Sardius

Publisher : Capcom
Developer : Capcom Production House 8
Release Date : 2/21/2006
Rating : "M" for Mature

Genre(s) : Beat-Em-Up
Category : "Urban"
# of players : 1-2

Final Fight: Streetwise is not a good game. Far from it. *Final Fight: Streetwise* is, in fact, the worst kind of bad game; it's the kind of bad game that tricks you into thinking that it's a good game. Upon first glance, it shows incredible promise, reinvents a genre, and revitalizes a franchise long thought dead.

Then, about eighty percent of the way in, you're fighting drug zombies.

Final Fight: Streetwise is actually a very good game for the first four hours or so. During this time you'll be enjoying a game that revels in its own ridiculous urban grit; it rarely takes itself seriously, and you might even catch yourself laughing at a couple of particularly funny parts. You'll cheer when old *Final Fight* characters are introduced and given their own part in what is initially a very interesting story. You'll love the minigames - silly as they are - and enjoy the limited fighting for the stupid fun it is.

Then, everything falls apart.

What was once a search through the urban sprawl for your lost brother inexplicably turns into a brawl against the doped-up undead. Enemies that could once feel pain and were possible to fight are now unflinching drug zombies who will knock you to the ground three or four times in a row before you're given the chance to attack. The understated hip hop soundtrack is replaced with Slipknot, Soulfly, and other unlistenable noise. Soon you'll find yourself on the game's first mandatory escort mission, protecting characters who will walk right into the path of exploding monsters, forcing you to repeat half-hour long gameplay segments over and over again when they die.

Suffer through this and you will be punished. It's at this point that you are charged with beating up the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, newly resurrected as Super Drug Zombies.

Though you can get up to this part in three hours or so if you hurry, the four fights with the horsemen will take you much longer. This is not because they are long, involved boss battles; it's because they are the cheapest, most infuriating fights you'll ever have playing video games. You will have to fight them again and again, absorbing cheap hit after cheap hit, until you finally get lucky and win or quit in a rage. I couldn't beat the final boss. After two hours of trying, I don't want to.

Final Fight: Streetwise is not a good game. Anyone who tells you otherwise has either not played through it until the end, or they can't bring themselves to admit that such a fun game could be so completely ruined by artificially bloated game length. The last twenty percent of *Streetwise* nullifies any good the first eighty percent accomplishes, and it does so in a spectacular fashion. This, however, is not a spectacle you want to see for yourself. Rest in peace, *Final Fight*.

Rating : 2 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 2.25 of 5

2nd opinion by 4thletter • **Alternate Rating :** 2.5 of 5

This is by far the most fun I've ever had with such an average game. The minigames and dialogue make it worth at least a cursory look.

STREET SUPREMACY

Review by James

Publisher : Konami
Developer : Genki
Release Date : 3/1/2006
Rating : EVERYONE

Genre(s) : Racing
Category : Street
# of players : 1-2

Racing is a hard genre to be unique in, but every once in a while a game comes along with a nifty new idea. A few dozen sequels later, though, and we get something like *Street Supremacy*.

Street Supremacy is the newest game in the series best known as *Tokyo Extreme Racing*. The central gameplay revolves around "spirit bars," which would be health bars if this were a fighting game. Two cars race, and the car that falls behind starts losing spirit off his meter. Overtake your opponent and the hemmorhaging stops, but hitting walls or the infrequent traffic can knock a nasty chunk off the bar. The winner is the one who either manages to preserve his spirit the longest or, very rarely, crosses the finish line first.

As the game begins, you join a racing team that owns a small quadrant of the map. You're given a sack of cash and access to both a car dealership and tuning shop, but no matter what you end up with, it will have all the handling and acceleration of an average aircraft carrier. As the game progresses and better cars and tuning options become available, speed and acceleration improve decently while handling gets upgraded to "garbage scow" class.

At first *Street Supremacy* is highly frustrating. The crap cars and expensive upgrades make it feel like progress is more trouble than it's worth, but sticking with it will eventually earn a pile of cash large enough to buy the single best car available. After that it's a simple (if expensive) matter of outfitting it with the best upgrades. Eventually the car will be powerful enough to overcome the team leader, opening up the strategy portion of the game.

As team leader, you can recruit a defeated opponent. Convert enough racers in a quadrant and it can be taken over in a five-on-five face-off, which sounds fun but actually isn't.

When you're just a lowly scrub, you're given the lead-off position in the team battles. Race some guys until you start losing, hopefully get a nice pile of cash, and let the computer finish up. As team leader, though, it falls to you to be the final racer if your underlings fail. This means waiting through at least four and up to eight races for a chance to play, assuming your guys don't complete it on their own. This is boring, especially when taking load times into account.

Those load times are the final nail in *Street Supremacy*'s coffin. They're too long, happen far too often, and kill all the momentum this game should have. I'll grant that it's an oddly addicting experience in a slow-paced kind of way, but there's no excitement here. This is a shame, because there's a good game hiding in there trying to get out. Maybe next time.

Rating : 2 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 2.25 of 5

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

SS is a competent pocket-sized racer that perfectly captures the spirit of Genki's own *Tokyo Xtreme Racer* series. It's somewhat stale by today's standards, but otherwise solid.

FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 3

Review by 4thletter

Publisher : Capcom
Developer : Electronic Arts
Release Date : 2/21/2006
Rating : "T" for Teen

Genre(s) : Sports
Category : Boxing
# of players : 1-2

The *Fight Night* series is about the only boxing game in town right now. *Fight Night Round 3* premiered as a PS3 tech demo at E3 2005. Viewers were shocked when they saw the sweat splash off a boxer's face when he was rocked by a punch... and then even more shocked when they were later told that it was going to look comparable on the 360. Fight Night Round 3 is one of the best-looking boxing games out there, period, though most especially on Xbox 360.

In fact, let's go ahead and get this out of the way. The Xbox 360 version of the game is graphically heads and shoulders above the other versions. This is the one where you can see pores, hair stubble, and sweat dripping off your boxer. The crowd, corner man, and faces all look about as close as you'll get to real life for the next couple of months. It looks stellar, particularly in high definition.

Otherwise, though, the games are essentially the same across the various systems. EA Sports gives you a good variety of modes to play in, though you'll probably spend the most time in Career mode and ESPN Classic mode. Career mode gives you the option of taking either an original or real boxer and fighting your way up to the top from the very bottom. You'll face a variety of both fake and famous boxers on your way to the belt. The more people you beat, the better you do, and the more likely you are to face someone who can unlock accessories and styles for you.

Opening up ESPN Classic mode gives you the ability to replay the classic rivalries of yesteryear. You'll find fights ranging from Sugar Ray Leonard vs Roberto Duran to the epic Ali vs Frazier. It would've been nice to get more fights in this mode, but what we have is good. There are plenty of fights for you to change history in, and lots of classic boxers to boot.

All is not rosy in *Round 3*, however. Each boxer enters the ring to the tune of a very small pool of music and a number of stock animations. Would it have been so hard to go the wrestling route and give at least the classic boxers their own theme or entrance cutscene? Add jerky transitions between rounds, instant replays, and entrances (all of which are most noticeable on the 360) and you've definitely got a few issues.

These detract from the gameplay, but not a great deal. The core is still rock solid. All the *Fight Night* mainstays are here, from the Cutman to the devastating Haymaker punches. The Total Punch Control is still in effect, but you can always switch it to use the face buttons or a mixture of the two if you don't dig using the analog stick. Pop this title into your console of choice and see how many boxers you can get to say "No más."

Rating : 4 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

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

The graphics are great and the boxing's smooth, but for me, the create-a-boxer mode makes the game.

beatmania

Review by Sardius

Publisher : Konami
Developer : Konami
Release Date : 3/28/2006
Rating : E10+; Mild Lyrics, Suggestive Themes

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

It's taken eight long years, but at last Konami has decided that American gamers are ready for *Beatmania*. Predating even the original Japanese release of *Dance Dance Revolution*, *Beatmania* is a series that has continued to enjoy success in Japan since 1998. Unlike its import-only brethren, however, this first American version of *Beatmania* caters to beginners, and offers more variety in terms of music and gameplay than any recent Japanese release.

Don't be fooled by marketing hyping the game as a DJ simulation—*Beatmania* plays most similarly to titles like *Guitar Hero* and *Amplitude*, with play revolving around pressing buttons when prompted in order to create music. This is done using the included turntable controller, which has seen much improvement for the American version of *Beatmania*; the scratch pad is much easier to spin, and buttons no longer sink far enough into the controller to get stuck. If for no other reason, hardcore *Beatmania* fans should invest in this installment for the improved controller alone.

Gameplay is split between two different modes: the five-key Beatmania and the seven-key Beatmania IIDX. If you're just starting out, you'll probably want to tackle the five-key songs first, as it's only with much practice that you'll be ready for the much more difficult IIDX mode. This mode will take months to master, but you'll have a much easier time doing so with this release than with anything available in Japan.

The too-steep difficulty curve that has existed in every import release of *Beatmania IIDX* has been smoothed out here, giving beginners a much better chance of having fun without being assaulted by impossible note patterns from the very beginning. The game's strict timing remains intact, but grading is now much less harsh and more forgiving of mistakes. Songs vary in difficulty from easy to moderately difficult; if *Beatmania* has any real shortcoming, it's that there are few songs that will challenge veterans to the series.

The songs themselves display a remarkable variety in terms of genre, with thankfully much less reliance on generic trance than many import versions of *Beatmania IIDX*. Most tracks are Konami creations recycled from older Japanese releases, though there are a precious few licensed tracks specific to this version. The inclusion of "Funkytown" cements the game as a must-buy, but incredible remixes of "Toxic" and "You Really Got Me" only make the deal sweeter.

Longtime fans may complain about *Beatmania's* neutered difficulty, and they'll piss and moan about minutiae like the lack of results screen artwork and how easy it is to get an "AAA" rank compared to the Japanese *IIDX* releases. Ignore it. This game isn't for them. Konami has expertly crafted a perfect introduction to the *Beatmania* series, and from the moment you pick up the turntable and start scratching, you'll find yourself hooked for life.

Rating :
4.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

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

I want to like this game, but there's something really off about the way it scores performance. Beating a stage is rewarding but I often have no idea why I did.

AND 1 STREETBALL

Review by Shoegazer

Publisher : Ubi Soft
Developer : Black Ops
Release Date : 3/26/2006
Rating : Pending

Genre(s) : Sports
Category : Street Basketball
# of players : 1-2; Online

Well, isn't this interesting? The house that Tom Clancy built is offering up the high-flying athleticism of the AND 1 street ball league for the world to see. If you just said "And what," then immediately go scour your local video store for one of the highlight reel quality DVDs, observe, and then come back to read this review. It's okay. I'll wait.

Are we good now? Excellent! Now before you get too over-zealous with your expectations for this game, it's important to note that this is being brought to you by the same development house responsible for 2002's mediocre *Street Hoops*. While there are noticeable improvements overall, many of *Street Hoops*'s problems are still here on display: there's a huge emphasis on being "street," but lacking that same level of detail for the basketball action itself, and completely missing the mark on defense balancing. The AI plays tremendous defense against you - rarely ever missing a block or a steal opportunity - but you won't find that same luxury when you're on the other side of the ball. Seriously, just push the steal, or shove, buttons repeatedly and watch as your player never makes contact while the CPU player just racks up ankle breaker points. This can, and will, lead to many frustrating losses.

The game's most hyped feature, the I-ball control (think EA's right analog "freestyle" control), is also one of its most useless. Even the in-game tutorial isn't quite sure how it works, resulting in a guessing game as to how to get the most benefit from using it. You'll quickly discover that using the random I-ball move button is a more dominant piece of your arsenal anyway, which then begs the question: "why did I even bother?" It's not just limited to the I-ball controls either. The control scheme in general is far too convoluted to feel natural, and performing the cooler moves in the game, such as the self-alley-oop pass, often requires you to look down at your controller to make sure you're pressing the right button combination.

Looking past its flaws though, there is a lot of game here to dive deep into. There are many game modes, online play, create-a-baller, and the cool I-ball move creation tool. Creating your baller from scratch and playing your way through the streets, and eventually to the AND 1 Mix Tape Tour, is definitely the most compelling part of the game. You can earn cash to power-up your baller's skills, or buy new clothes and accessories to add your personal touch a la *Def Jam: Fight for New York*. *AND 1* is also a very nice looking game. Great textures and animations are ever-apparent.

Judgment is hard to pass on this game since it will be accepted differently by different gamers. Someone with a passion for the AND 1 league will love having access to the real players, and will most likely learn to deal with its faults. For everyone else though, all that's here is an unoriginal and uninspired game heavily dwarfed by *NBA Street V3*. Even that would be easier to stomach if the game's controls had been designed with a sports gamer in mind instead of this cruel mental exam that reads like office furniture assembly instructions.

Rating : 2 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 2 of 5

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

I used to love the And 1 videos as a kid. Seeing them give birth to such a mediocre game hurts. I hate to say it, but stick with *Street 3*.

MEGA MAN MAVERICK HUNTER X

Review by Racewing

Publisher : Capcom
Developer : Capcom
Release Date : 1/31/2006
Rating : E10+; Violence

Genre(s) : Action
Category : Super Fighting Robot
# of players : 1

You know how whenever Hollywood movies or classic video games get remade, there are always some crazy people ranting that the new product destroys the "purity" and "integrity" of the old? (Seriously, did you know there are people out there who kvetch about ***Super Mario All-Stars***? I'm just as scared as you!)

Guess what? They can't say a thing about *Maverick Hunter X*. It's impossible. If they tried, they'd be exposed as the whiners they are. All remakes should be like this. Heck, all PSP games should be like this. This is literally the very first PSP game that I was unable to put down—the first PSP game that's allowed me to look upon the system as a true asset to gaming, rather than an overpriced uncontrollable flimsy thing.

Mega Man's creator, Keiji Inafune, has decided to retool the *X* series from the ground up, enhancing, retconning and fixing anything he wants. *Maverick Hunter X* is the first fruit of those efforts, and it's a joy to behold. The graphics are redone in the 2.5D style of 2004's awesome *Mega Man X8*, and the soundtrack has been remixed competently (barring some total misfires like Armored Armadillo's stage; get ready to cry there). The dialogue has been redone, as has some story progression—expect events to progress very differently than they did in the original SNES *Mega Man X*. The game's even been given voiced cutscenes, with English dubbing done by Ocean Group, responsible for the great cast voices in *MMX8* and *Command Mission*.

All of these things combined would already have made for a great remake, but Capcom and Inafune decided that wasn't enough, and went the extra mile. Along with giving the game a Hard Mode, beating the game once will unlock a full separate game starring X's mech-piloting rival, Vile. In addition, you'll also unlock *The Day of Sigma*, a 29-minute anime OAV which details the backstory of the main characters and the first Maverick revolt.

As an added bonus, this game manages to avoid the sin that the PSP is most notorious for: load times. They amount to only 2-4 seconds when you get them, which honestly isn't often.

Quite possibly the only mark against this game (aside from the aforementioned few remixed tracks that bombed) would be that if you're one of those folks who played the SNES original to death and have it down to a science, you'll still blow through every single mode that this game has to offer in three days, tops. Even so, it's still a mandatory experience for *Mega Man* fans, and people who just enjoy great platforming action wrapped in a shiny shell. The low price point seals the deal.

Get this game. Get it now. Or Sigma will haunt your dreams.

Rating : 4 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

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

A solid remake of a solid game. Though it may be a little too familiar to those who have played the original, let's hope that this is just a prototype for something bigger and better.

STAR WARS EMPIRE AT WAR

Review by KouAidou

Publisher : Lucasarts
Developer : Petroglyth
Release Date : 2/16/2006
Rating : "T" for Teen

Genre(s) : Real-Time Strategy
Category : Star Wars
# of players : 1-8

As a former Lucasarts adventure game junkie, it absolutely *boils my blood* that I would be made to go and pay tribute to the company's most recent ***Star Wars*** game, ***Empire at War***. Unfortunately, after playing it, I am forced to admit with a heavy heart that it really is a pretty cool game.

It's set some time during that murky period between Episodes III and IV, when the Empire and the newly formed Rebel Alliance were vying for control over as many star systems as possible. As an officer in one of these factions, you get to particpate in famous conflicts, recruit a number of familiar faces, and maybe rewrite a little bit of history in the process.

The game's main story mode is split into classic RTS-style gameplay (in land or in space), and a resource mangement mode that lets you collect cash and plan tactical strikes against enemy planets. These three scenarios are inextricably linked: the troops you send to a planet will be available as reinforcements during battle, and success in an orbital battle means you'll have those ships available to perform bombing runs on the surface. The troops that survive tactical engagements will be available for deployment elsewhere, so your ultimate dominance over your enemy is highly dependent on careful management of all three modes. This can make for some interesting strategies, particularly in the game's online multiplayer mode.

Still, while the resource management mode is an interesting addition, it's not terribly deep, and mostly serves as a stage for the RTS battles. These are different from most RTSes in that your focus is on capturing strategic points rather than building structures. Any troops you construct have to be deployed at reinforcement points, which must first be taken by eliminating any surrounding enemy troops and leaving an allied presence nearby. They can be taken back just as easily, so if you don't protect your strategic points, you'll find yourself severely crippled in battle. Just beware of spreading yourself too thin.

On top of this, there's a few bells and whistles thrown in in the form of planetary weather (which can affect troop efficiency) and native species (which take sides). One of the game's most interesting additions – in *theory* – is the cinematic camera, which lets you view inter-squad combats from a soldier's eye view. This is such a great idea that fails so badly due to random cinematography; more often than not you'll end up zoomed in too close to see anything, or cutting away just as something dramatic was about to happen. Since the graphics aren't worth zooming into in and of themselves, battles are just better seen from the bird's eye view.

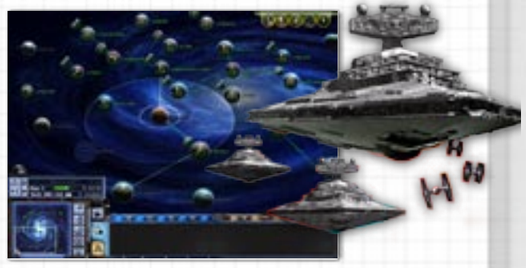
Despite some disappointments and a few clunky controls, though, ***Empire*** does what it set out to do. It accurately depicts the flavor of ***Star Wars*** combat, brings new dynamics to the RTS genre, and forces me to utterly betray all my principles. This isn't over, Lucas!

Rating : 4 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

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

The reinforcement points take a page out of ***Star Wars Battlefront*** and add a neat dimension to this game. I just wish the graphics were a bit better.



THE KING OF FIGHTERS 94 RE-BOUT

Review by Wanderer

Publisher : SNK Playmore
Developer : SNK Playmore
Release Date : 3/7/2006
Rating : TEEN; Animated Blood, Suggestive Themes, Violence

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

Up until this point, it was harder than usual to get your hands on a decent home port of *The King of Fighters*, the 1994 game that started the *KOF* franchise. This is the game that SNK eventually came to stake its reputation on, and a lot of fans of the series haven't had a chance to play it until now.

When you pick this up, you'll get the original Neo-Geo *KOF*, as well as the fully reanimated *Re-Bout*, one of the first SNK games made to run on the new Atomiswave arcade hardware. Both are almost perfect adaptations... and that's the problem.

Re-Bout is most notable for how it looks. All the characters have been reanimated with varying degrees of success (Takuma Sakazaki appears to have breasts and Benimaru looks even more metrosexual than usual, but most of the fighters look better than they have in a while), and all the backgrounds are evolving backdrops. As the fight goes on, night falls, the spectators and weather change, the scenery scrolls by, and so on.

The gameplay's the real problem here, honestly. *The King of Fighters* is a twelve-year-old game, and the basic *KOF* formula didn't hit its stride until *KOF97* or *98*. SNK-Playmore has made the baffling decision to leave the gameplay in Re-Bout virtually unchanged, so this is strictly a graphical makeover.

That means that a lot of tactics and moves that were fixed or modified in later *KOFs* are back in force in *Re-Bout*, making them exactly as they were in 1994. The Kyokugen fighters get back their Haohshokohken super fireballs as standard moves, Yuri Sakazaki's Hundred Slaps is a command throw, Kyo Kusanagi is once again a Shotoclone, and CPU grapplers can hit a special grab move immediately after getting nailed with a jump kick. Land a j.D on Ralf or Clark; they'll instantly level you with the Super Argentine Backbreaker.

For those who aren't fluent in *KOF*-speak, the original *KOF* was broken or mediocre in many ways, such as the notoriously ridiculous commands for special moves. For *Re-Bout*, SNK has made everything just as it was. This includes the broken parts, and it seems to have added a few more in for spice.

As a fighting game, *King of Fighters '94 Re-Bout* is frustrating, and after playing the later *KOFs*, a good example of how far the series has come. This collection looks good, but it's mostly useful as a way for *KOF* fanatics to complete their collection. I doubt anyone else will be willing to put up with it.

Rating : 2.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 2.5 of 5

2nd opinion by 4thletter • **Alternate Rating :** 2.5 of 5

It's *so* nice to see Team USA again, but, wow, this game feels like going out hot-rodding with your grandpa: nowhere near as fun as it would be with your younger, cooler friends.

SHONEN JUMP'S NARUTO CLASH OF NINJA

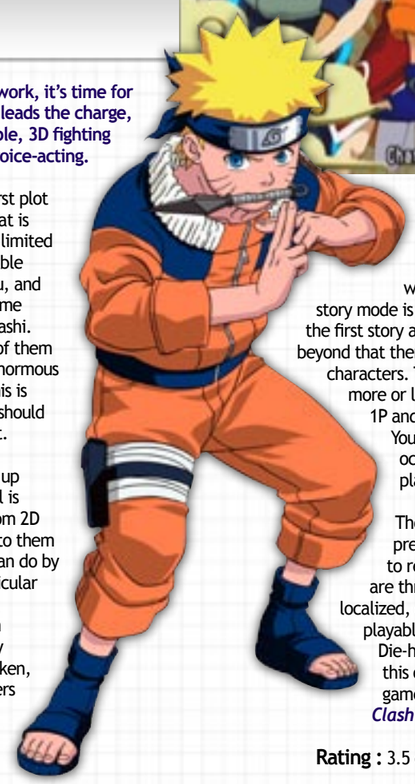
Review by Lyncara

Publisher : D3 Publisher
Developer : Tomy
Release Date : 3/07/2006
Rating : "T" for Teen
Genre(s) : Fighting
Category : NINJAS!!!
# of players : 1-2

Now that *Naruto* is scoring big ratings on Cartoon Network, it's time for the deluge of licensed games to begin. *Clash of Ninja* leads the charge, and it's a pretty good place to start. It's a solid, if simple, 3D fighting game with beautiful cel-shaded graphics and tons of voice-acting.

Storywise the game is a direct adaptation of ***Naruto***'s first plot arc, the battle with Haku and Zabuza. This results in what is really the game's most severe drawback: a really, really limited character roster. You'll start with a roster of seven playable characters: Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke, Kakashi, Iruka, Haku, and Zabuza. Three more characters can be unlocked with some effort: Rock Lee, Fox-Demon Naruto, and Sharingan Kakashi. Still, that's only ten playable characters in all, and two of them are just alt-forms of other characters. Given ***Naruto***'s enormous cast of characters even in the early parts of the story, this is disappointing. No self-respecting modern fighting game should have a cast so small, whether it's a licensed game or not.

Fortunately, there's a very solid fighting engine to make up for the limited character selection. ***Clash of Ninja***'s feel is somewhere between Dead or Alive and old-school Capcom 2D fighters. Each character has a range of moves available to them by tapping the A and B button, and variations that you can do by hitting a button while pressing the analog stick in a particular direction. There's an X-button throw to use for escaping from opponents who are pressing on you, and a Y-button super move. The combos you can execute are absolutely spectacular, full of crazy leaping techniques, flying shuriken, and teleport-dodges. It makes more traditional 3D fighters like ***Soul Calibur*** and ***Tekken*** seem slow and staid in comparison. I'm not the biggest ***Naruto*** fan in the world, but I still found myself getting a real kick out of the fighting.



Unfortunately, the fun you can get out of this title is still really limited. Once you've mastered the system, there are some stages and bonus materials to unlock along with the bonus characters... and that's it. The story mode is purely concerned with a loose retelling of the first story arc and can only be played as Naruto, and beyond that there's only a story-free 1P mode for the other characters. There's some other gameplay modes that are more or less what you'd expect from a fighting game: 1P and 2P arcade modes, time attack, and survival. You can unlock an extra-high difficulty level to occupy your time, but it's hard to imagine most players sticking with the game that long.

The underpinnings of an excellent 3D fighter are present in ***Clash of Ninja***. Still, it's simply hard to recommend this game knowing that there are three more titles in the series waiting to be localized, each with exponentially greater numbers of playable characters and features that this one lacks. Die-hard ***Naruto*** fans may find themselves picking this one up just to ensure that the later, better games in the series come out. For everyone else, ***Clash of Ninja*** is at best a weekend's rental.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

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

Clash of Ninja is very much niche game, but there's rock solid gameplay here that's easy to pickup and enjoy. Needs more characters, though.

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Logitech
Review by Mogis

G7 Cordless Laser Mouse

■ Gaming Mouse ■ System: PC ■ Price: $99.99

If the mouse section of your local electronics store were a car dealership, then Logitech's G7 Laser Mouse would be a Ferrari. Its curves hug the palm of your hand, and the paint job looks sleek and professional. The mouse is deadly accurate while gaming, and lag isn't even an issue.

Out of the box the G7 comes with two Li-Ion batteries, so provided one of them is always in the charger a game session will never get cut short. Switching batteries takes about as long as reloading a clip in an FPS, so you're back in the game in no time flat.

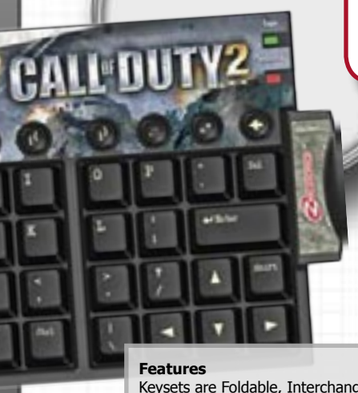
The G7's biggest downfall is its price, which is head and shoulders above a lot of other mice on the market today. Serious gamers who shell out the dough will know exactly where the money went, but casual PC fans will be better off with a cheaper option.

Features
2,000 DPI Laser Engine
2 Li-Ion Batteries Included
7 hour Battery Life Per Charge
Intelligent Sleep Mode
2.4 GHz Wireless

Ideazon
Review by Mogis

Zboard

■ Gaming Keyboard ■ System: PC ■ Price: $49.99



In a nutshell, the Zboard is a computer keyboard designed with gamers in mind. The hook is that it uses interchangeable keysets, or unique button layouts that lock into a universal base.

The Gaming Keyset features action buttons that are place ergonomically around the directional keys. The layout looks flashy, but isn't a complete paradigm shift; it's essentially the WASD method with nicer, labeled buttons. The Standard Keyset is an everyday keyboard, though it does have an impressive number of Windows shortcuts. Both sets do their job well, but constantly switching between them can get annoying fast, especially if you're only jumping online for a quick deathmatch.

If you're new to PC gaming and want to get a feel for the button layout, then a Zboard will work wonders for you. But if you've been gaming for years on a regular keyboard, don't feel bad about skipping the Zboard.

Features
Keysets are Foldable, Interchangeable
Gaming and Standard Keysets Included
Additional, Limited Edition Keysets Available ($19.99)
Ergonomic Design
Windows Shortcut Keys

Logitech
Review by Mogis

Cordless Action Controller

■ Wireless Controller ■ System: PlayStation 2 ■ Price: $39.99

Features
2.4 GHz Wireless
50+ Hours of battery life
30-Foot Range
Vibration Function
Propriety Power Management

Of all the major console makers, Sony is the only one that hasn't tapped into the wireless controller arena. Luckily for free-spirited PS2 fans, Logitech has cut the cord with their Action Controller.

The weight of the controller is just right, and feels substantial in your hands. The face buttons are sturdy, vibration functionality is strong, and both analog sticks offer great resistance. On the downside the directional pad feels a little clicky, especially if you've been weaned on Sony's Dual Shock.

The Cordless Action Controller looks nice and plays well, all without a hint of lag. Be warned, though: using it might make it tough to back to the world of wires.

Pelican
Review by Mogis

Fan Stand

■ Cooling System ■ System: Xbox 360 ■ Price: $19.99

Microsoft found itself in some hot water when the Xbox 360 was released, having to fend off complaints that their console was overheating. Pelican rushed to the drawing board, and is attempting to cool off the situation with their new Fan Stand.

The stand looks simple but elegant, and matches the console nicely. Its internal fan is quiet, and circulates surprisingly cool air through the 360's ventilation holes.My system didn't overheat during testing, though it's impossible to tell if it was completely thanks to the Fan Stand. It definitely couldn't have hurt, so if thoughts of a malfunctioning Xbox keep you up at night, you'd be hard pressed to find a better cooling solution than this.

Features
Forced Air Cooling System
Storage Space for Accessories
Stand Adds Stability

Mad Catz
Review by Mogis

DS Kit Pro

■ Accessory Package ■ System: Nintendo DS ■ Price: $19.99

The DS Kit Pro is a great find for anyone who takes handhelds on the road a lot. It comes with eight plastic game cases – four for the DS and four for the GBA – which will save your cartridges when they're floating around in your backpack or pocket.

The system case looks classy, and will make sure your DS stays in one piece if it crashes to the floor. The kit also comes with a fine-tipped metal stylus, which rounds out the package nicely.

The best part about this kit is its price, which you can find for as low as $9.99 if you shop around. This is a must have for gamers who like keeping their collection in tip-top shape.

Features
Car Adaptor
Metal Stylus
8 Game Cases
Protective "EVA" System Case

BLUEPRINTS FOR YOUR SURVIVAL

AVOID DESTRUCTION THROUGH THE CLEVER USE OF THE MASTER PLAN

DO NOT BE THE ARCHITECT OF YOUR OWN DEMISE

strat·e·gy n, pl -gies 1) The science and art of using all the forces of a nation to execute approved plans as effectively as possible during peace or war. The science and art of military command as applied to the overall planning and conduct of large-scale combat operations. 2) A plan of action resulting from strategy or intended to accomplish a specific goal. See Synonyms at plan. 3) The art or skill of using stratagems in endeavors such as politics and business.

Architect: Lynxara
Platform: PlayStation Portable

BLUEPRINTS FOR:

Generation of Chaos

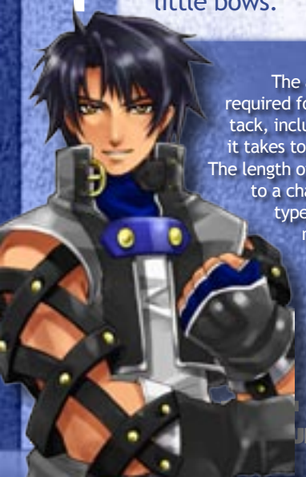
SUBJECT: FRAME CANCELING

Generation of Chaos is unusual among strategy RPGs for its real-time battle system. This and the game's 2D graphics combine to introduce a very important element into battles: hitstun and frame canceling. Exploiting this properly lets you win battles even if your unit is pretty underpowered. When you're fighting bosses like the Dragon Kings, it can end up being the *only* way to win.

Before we can get into frame canceling, though, let's go through some basics. **Hitstun** is a concept that should be quite familiar to anyone who's ever played a 2D action game, particularly a 2D fighting game. As a character takes damage, he or she becomes temporarily immobile and becomes trapped for a few fractions of a second in a "getting hit" animation. In *GoC*, each character on the field is subject to hitstun when damaged by an enemy attack.

Once you're in hitstun, you're gonna be stuck there for awhile.

It just takes too long to aim those little bows.



The **attack cycle** is the period of time required for a character to complete an attack, including their wait period and the time it takes to complete their attack animation. The length of the attack cycle varies according to a character's SPD stat and their unit type. A high-SPD archer like a Marine may still have a longer attack cycle than a low-SPD Knight, simply because archers have more frames of animation to get through before they can start dealing damage. Hitstun is a significant factor in *GoC*'s combats because entering hitstun forces a character to restart their attack cycle from the beginning.

Frame canceling is a trick for avoiding damage you can pull off by carefully exploiting the way the attack cycle works. Any given attack cycle culminates in **damage frames**, the precise moments in the attack animation where the opponent takes damage. A curious element of *GoC*'s battle engine is that damage is not subtracted from your opponent's HP total until after your damage frame has connected, the opponent has entered hitstun, *and* the damage total numbers have appeared above his or her head. If any given frame of this process is interrupted before the damage numbers appear, then the attacker must restart his or her attack cycle as if they had entered hitstun and no damage is dealt to the opponent.

The battle stops as you make your decision.

It's entirely possible for one of your troops to hit an opponent at just the right time, and frame cancel by abruptly forcing him or her into hitstun. Taking damage in *GoC* always takes priority over dealing damage. The problem with relying on your troops to produce frame cancels is, of course, that your troops aren't directly under your control. Whether or not their attacks happen to have the right timing for a frame cancel is entirely a matter of chance.

The best ways to achieve a frame cancel is by using **interrupting events** — Items, Skills, and Supers. The menu you access these commands from is causes all action onscreen to freeze — effectively, giving the menu priority over all other combat actions. If you simply exit the menu the attack cycle will proceed normally, but if you use the Item, Skills, or Super commands, then that event interrupts **everything** else happening on the battlefield. These events are themselves completely uninterruptible and cannot be cancelled.

See all those attacks not connecting? That's lost damage.

Which of your options you pick and what it does makes no real difference in terms of frame canceling your opponent's attack. A weather-change Super or a healing Item cancels just as well as a massive-damage Skill or Super. It's smartest to use the most abundant resources you can for canceling. Super meter builds automatically throughout the battle, so it's best to cancel with Supers when you have the option. If you can't use a Super, then resort to whatever Skills your commander has available. Canceling with an Item should be a last-ditch desperation move, unless it's something like Soul Contract where you benefit more from using it earlier in the combat.

Bear in mind that interrupting events like Supers, Skills, and Items can frame cancel your own actions as well as those of the enemy. If your commander is finishing his attack cycle but hasn't yet gotten to his damage frames, then triggering an interrupting event duly cancels his attack. It's easy to avoid doing this to your commander, but it's a bit harder to make sure you aren't needlessly canceling your own troops' attacks when you go to frame cancel. Before trying to use frame canceling heavily in battle, make sure you have a very good grasp of roughly how long your troops' attack cycles are and what their damage frames look like. It's simply a waste to use an interrupting event to frame cancel if your troops were about to cancel the attack anyway.

There's a big exception to this caution if you're using a *long-range unit*, like a Magician, Marine, or Gunner. *GoC*'s combat engine interprets the attack cycle of long-range characters in an interesting way, with the projectile launched by the character functioning as their damage frames. The projectiles, however, exist persistently, while the damage frame of a melee-range character exists only for as long as it takes them to cycle through that part of their attack animation.

Think of that little ball of a light as a traveling damage frame.

If you're using a long-range unit, it's entirely possible to have your unit launch their attack projectiles, quickly use an interrupting event to frame cancel whatever the enemy is doing, and then watch as all the attack projectiles hit the helpless enemy after the event finishes. When fighting a long-range unit, you need to remember that you have to frame cancel the enemy's attack before they reach the part of their attack cycle where their projectile appears. it's too late to try and cancel once the enemy's projectile has begun its approach. It is possible to cancel damage from projectiles by letting them hit you and then quickly triggering an event before the damage total appears, but the window of time for doing this is so short that it's difficult to pull off consistently.

SUBJECT: SUPERS

Many factors define a unit's usefulness in *Generation of Chaos*, but perhaps the greatest is what selection of Super attacks are at that unit's disposal. Particularly for fighting bosses, the primary thing that determines the outcome of the battle is going to be which Supers are at your unit's disposal and how well you use them.

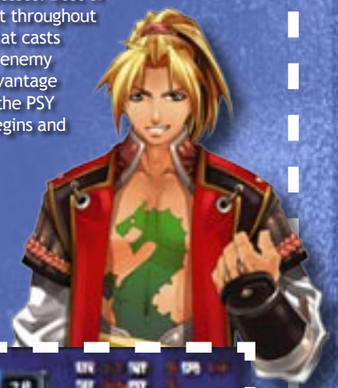
What follows is a list of the five best generic Supers in the game. Characters with these Supers are the ones you want to groom as your elite fighters and boss-killers. Also keep an eye out for character-specific Supers that have effects similar to these top Supers, as they'll also indicate characters really worth investing in.

SUBJECT: FREEZE EYE

Freeze Eye with a Super that has a base 70% chance of restricting your opponent's ability to use Supers and Skills in

> Does this bug you? Does this bug you? I'm not touching you....

battle. There is very little you can do in *Generation of Chaos* to give yourself the advantage that works quite as efficiently as successfully using Freeze Eye on your opponent, particularly when fighting bosses. Best of all, its effects are persistent throughout the turn. Even if the unit that casts Freeze Eye is defeated, the enemy still won't be able to cast Supers if another of your units can immediately attack it. The only real disadvantage to Freeze Eye is its 70% success rate, which is further influenced by the INT of the unit that uses it and the PSY of the target. If you're in dire enough straits, giving your unit an ACY boosting Item before the battle begins and using it immediately can help make an enormous difference.



SUBJECT: DIMENSION CHANGE

You've got to be a little bit careful with this one, but it can have some amazing effects when used in the correct situation. Dimension Change has a 70% chance of inverting your character's primary battle stats. If you're a magic-user, then suddenly your damage will be

> A dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind.

determined by PWR instead of INT. For physical attackers, it's vice versa. At the same time, it inverts the function of the target's two defensive stats. ENY, which normally is the defensive stat vs. physical attacks, suddenly becomes the defense against magical attacks. PSY, the usual magic defense stat, suddenly applies to defense vs. physical damage.

The usefulness of swapping the offensive stats is obvious - by forcing the opponent to reduce with a weaker damage stat, you reduce their damage output. Still, if you create a situation where a magic-user is suddenly defending against your unit's physical attacks with a potentially hefty PSY stat, the fight may actually become harder to win. You also want to keep in mind that even if the enemy is successfully Dimension Changed, their Supers and Skills won't be affected - they'll still use their usual damage-dealing stats for determining effectiveness. Despite all these potential drawbacks, Dimension Change's ability to cripple the enemy's damage output is so much to your advantage that it's worth all the risks.

SUBJECT: BETRAYAL

Betrayal is a Super that has a 70% chance of reducing enemy MRL by 30%. A unit that's suffering from MRL penalties suf-

> No idea what this has to do with betraying anybody, but you can't argue with results.

fers from commensurate penalties to its damage output, and takes a commensurate amount of extra damage. Betrayal can be used multiple times during the course of a battle, and *its effects stack*. It is entirely possible to reduce enemy MRL by 90% or more by hammering Betrayal. What's doubly amazing about this is that Betrayal is an incredibly common Super, something you can always expect to find on a good half-dozen or more of the units in your army. Stack an ACY-alteration on it to improve its base chances of affecting the enemy, and you have a near-foolproof method of setting bosses up for a mangling.

SUBJECT: BRAVE VOICE

> Bravery alone can turn 100% into 130%.

The AI is not quite so fond of bombing MRL as you probably will be. Still, there are plenty of ways for your units to lose MRL, particularly when you're going up against Dragon Kings, and this is one of the very few ways at your disposal to get it back. Brave Voice has a 70% chance of boosting allied MRL by 30%, and can keep boosting until your MRL bar is red and your unit is getting bonuses to damage reduction and output. It is invaluable when dealing with certain bosses and in the endgame, and rare enough that you'll have to put some effort into recruiting and leveling up units that have it.

SUBJECT: FALCON WING

This particular Super is only ever found in the possession of the Birdman race, but it's the *kind* of Super it is that

> The only thing better than hitting a guy is hitting him three times in rapid succession.

bears talking about. Falcon Wing is a damage-dealing Super that has the potential to damage a single enemy character up to three times, with the subsequent attacks becoming more powerful but less likely to connect. There are many character-specific Supers that work along these same basic lines, but they're often much more powerful. Even Falcon Wing itself can do enormous damage even in the hands of a unit with relatively poor stats.

The reason is a quirk of the *GoC* engine: a commander's base stats have more influence over final damage totals than the inherent power level of a damage Super. So, a character using a multi-stage damage Super with level 4/5/6 damage potential will do roughly double the total damage that same character could inflict with a single-stage level 7 Super. Multi-stage Supers are remarkably efficient ways of rapidly eliminating an enemy's troops, and can even heap significant damage onto powerful enemy commanders and bosses. Boosting the unit's ACY can boost a multi-stage Super's damage potential even higher

How does one classify *Kururin Squash*? Maze game? Maybe, but it's not like they don't provide a map. Puzzle? Not really, it's got more to do with manual dexterity than solving anything really tricky. Spinny stick game? Perfect, although it's not a genre overflowing with competition.

In *Kururin Squash*, you get to play as a blue chicken piloting a ship that slowly spins like the blades of a helicopter, navigating through treacherous passages in search of his missing family members. It seems a mad scientist duck has kidnapped them, and only the powers of advanced maze navigation can bring them home. Add in cut-scenes designed to look like a cardboard puppet show (complete with sticks coming from the bottom of the screen to animate the arms) and it's one enjoyably weird little package.

Basically, as stated earlier, *Kururin Squash* is a candy-colored manual dexterity test. The mazes are bright, colorful, and filled with objects, and they get brutally hard. While the paths are nice and open to start with, eventually the walls go jaggy and close in tight, often with only a spare pixel or two between the ship and the wall. The ship is constantly rotating, which makes things harder, but the pinpoint precise analog control makes even the hairiest corridor possible. Not easy, barring the early levels, but with a bit of practice the maze can be navigated with style and speed. This is a good thing, seeing as there's a timer. While only a bonus goal, getting the best time and collecting all the coins adds a great touch of replay to the game.

In addition to the standard maze navigation, each area has two levels with a specially-enhanced ship. The river levels have a craft that can submerge for a few seconds, for example, while the snow levels have one running along a preset track and armed with flamethrowers. These ships are also used to great effect in the boss fights, which are nicely challenging without being maddening.

The thirty-five levels of the story mode are supplemented by forty-plus time-attack levels. The no-frills levels are just as devious as the story-based ones, but without any reason to do them beyond the maddening fun of going for the perfect time. There's also a GBA link-cable game, but it's a simple pattern-matching thing that's amusing for about a minute. It might be more fun in four-player, but I kind of doubt it.

Kururin Squash is simple at heart, but the best games frequently are. It gives the player a task to accomplish and the perfect controls to do it with, and no matter how evil the going gets it's never actually unfair. The addictive gameplay is supplemented nicely by plenty of replay value, and there's even some customization available in the form of a shop where new ship skins can be bought. Very few games let a blue chicken pilot a cow ship with a horn that goes "Mooo!", but if they're going to be this good, then maybe we could use some more.

Review by James

くるりんスカッシュ!

(Kururin Squash)

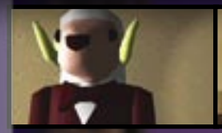
Publisher: Eighting
Developer: Nintendo
Release Date: 2004

Genre(s): Maze Navigation
Category: Spinny Stick
# of Players: 1-4

WORTH IMPORTING?

Kururin Squash is a lot of fun, and with almost no Japanese beyond a few menus it's a perfect candidate for importing. While the story will be lost, it's nonsensical enough not to matter much. It's an addictive little beastie worth the time of anyone who appreciates pick-up-and-play gaming.

FINAL SCORE : 4.5 of 5



Hiding among all the big-name anime fighters and horizontal/vertical shooters, a smaller genre tosses out low-budget titles every now and then in the hopes of getting a little bit of love. While it's had its day in the sun (everyone loves *Lolo*!) that time is now long gone, with only games like *Frantix* to fill the void. Yes, I'm talking about maze-based puzzlers here.

The Lost Golem tells the story of a king who's gone missing and the golem sent after him for protection. While probably good enough at running a country, the king isn't too skilled at saving his own skin, so the golem has to do it for him. Unfortunately the golem can't just pick up and lug the king around, so instead moves the maze walls to create a path to the exit. Careful planning is required, though, because the king will happily walk past an open door and into a pit if guided wrong.

In addition to walls, there are also posts throughout the maze. These act as two types of wall connectors. The regular ones just make for a long, unbroken wall while the posts with a ball on top allow the wall to turn 90 degrees. On top of that, each maze has one red wall that has to survive until the end of the level. When the king reaches the exit, the golem consumes the red wall and any other walls attached to it by the posts. If you have too few walls connected together, the level's a failure. Proper management of walls, posts, and the king are all required to survive to the next area.

Lost Golem is a fairly slow-paced game. The king walks forward one space at a time, and once a path has been figured out it's easy to set it up well in advance of his arrival. There are a few tricky parts, like timing a rotating wall to swat the king over a pit, but for the most part the challenge comes from figuring out what to do rather than racing to get it done.

And while a good test of brainpower, *Lost Golem* isn't the prettiest game on the system by a long shot. Everything is very low-polygon, including the king and golem, and even the cut-scenes are presented in a slide-show style. There's also no zoom, rotate or pan controls, although to be fair they aren't really needed. All the level information is clearly presented, and very few mazes are larger than a screen in size. Though the game isn't really harmed by its visuals, a little graphic polish wouldn't have hurt any.

All told, *The Lost Golem* is an enjoyable little puzzler. The difficulty curve is just right, slowly introducing new elements at the start while getting amazingly tricky later on, and there's even room for improvisation in tackling the challenges. It's a fun little obscurity, and worth tracking down for the Dreamcast owner looking for something a little more thoughtful than the next arcade shooter.

Review by James

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

Publisher: Caramelpot
Developer: Caramelpot
Release Date: 1998

Genre(s): Maze/Puzzle
Category: Idiot King Guidance
# of Players: 1

WORTH IMPORTING?

While a fairly nifty little game, *The Lost Golem* isn't really going to set anyone's world on fire. It's got very little Japanese beyond the cut-scenes, though, so if you're into low-budget games with soul then give it a go.

THE LOST GOLEM

COME ON BABY
THE AKA-CHAMPION

Review by Sardius

Publisher: D3 Publisher
Developer: ExPotato
Release Date: 12/29/2005
Platform: Playstation 2

Genre(s): Olympic
Category: Child Endangerment
# of Players: 1-2

"What in the name of God is this thing? *WHAT IS IT??*" was KouAidou's exact response when this game arrived here at HGM. You can't really blame her; seasoned importers have likely been witness to all sorts of Japanese weirdness over the years, but the mutant freak babies of *The Aka-Champion* will haunt even the most jaded import gamers for life.

The Aka-Champion—Volume 94 in D3 Publisher's budget-priced Simple 2000 Series—contains ports of the 1999 arcade game *Come On Baby* and its sequel. Created by South Korean developer ExPotato, *Come On Baby* is a *Track & Field*-style button melter wherein a bunch of super-powered babies compete in various events for (assumed) wealth and glory.

Abstracts do nothing to describe just how truly frightening this game is, however. You might think that an infant take on the Olympics genre would make for good clean fun, but brother, you couldn't be more wrong. During the game, you will see deformed babies subjected to all sorts of scary and inappropriate situations, and after every stage they will pull down their diapers and shake their baby dongles at you in victory. Trust me, this is a sight that you are not prepared to see.

Gameplay in *Come On Baby* mostly follows the style of *Track & Field's* "push these buttons as fast as possible, then push this other button" events, with the added bonus of uniquely twisted and disturbing backdrops. One event, for example, begins with two babies being thrown into a lake with weights chained to their ankles; the object is to swim to the surface... or *die*. Other events involve running from a hungry polar bear, jumping an electrified rope, and skydiving without a parachute.

Blatant disregard for child safety aside, there is an unfortunate lack of gameplay depth to be found in *The Aka-Champion*. As direct arcade ports, both *Come On Baby* titles can be completed in less than half an hour each, and the simplistic button-smashing gameplay is hardly satisfying on any level. Don't count on the console-exclusive Adventure mode extending replay value any further, either; it's just Arcade mode with a map. The game itself has also suffered for its PS2 conversion, as there's a shocking amount of slowdown and choppiness not found in the arcade original, and the DualShock is no substitute for the arcade cabinet's huge domed buttons.

Played alone, it's hard to ignore the thin gameplay behind *The Aka-Champion's* bizarre visuals. If you're the type of gamer whose collection consists of oddities you can scare people with, however, this game is a must-buy. A copy of *The Aka-Champion* and a "Hey, check *this* out!" could be all it takes to scar your friends for life.

WORTH IMPORTING?

Odds are that a baby abuse simulator doesn't stand a chance of being published in America, so don't go looking for a domestic release anytime soon. While an easily navigable interface and a budget price makes importing tempting, just be aware that you probably won't be enjoying *The Aka-Champion* for conventional reasons.

FINAL SCORE: 2 of 5

In 1999, Aqua Plus released a new PC game called *Comic Party*. Like a lot of "visual novel"-style simulation games, it included porn to help make sure it'd sell. *Comic Party*, however, was the rare visual novel that had the story, characters, and challenge it took to succeed as something more than fap material. A porn-free, enhanced version of the game was ported to the Dreamcast in 2001. This version proved more popular than the original, so it was ported back to the PC in 2003 as *Comic Party DCE*. This was followed up in late 2005 by the game we're reviewing now, *Comic Party Portable*: an enhanced PSP port of a PC port of an enhanced clean Dreamcast port of a PC porn game.

I love you, Japan.

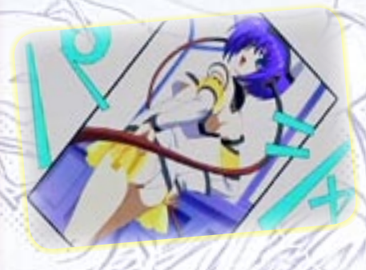
Review by Lynxara

Anyway, *Comic Party Portable*'s been enhanced with some PSP-specific features like saving unlocked bonus images right to the memory card, and all-new art that features the *Comic Party Revolution* designs. Despite this, it more or less tells the story covered in the original *Comic Party* anime. Kazuki is a young artist who gets strong-armed by his bombastically geeky friend Taishi into attending a giant Japanese geek convention the characters call Comic Party. It's modeled after a real-life convention called Comiket where fans get together to swap fan-made goods of all kinds.

FINAL SCORE: 4 of 5

WORTH IMPORTING? This is one of the best titles its genre has to offer, but the sheer amount of text can be daunting and the pace is a little slow. With no localization in sight, we can best recommend this game to people who've seen and liked the *Comic Party* anime. Everyone else, shake your fists in fury until Sony lets someone localize it.

Comic Party focuses on fan-made comics, or doujinshi, and the many conveniently adorable single girls who are involved in their production. After attending Comic Party, Kazuki agrees to form a group with Taishi so they can publish their own doujin to sell at the next one. Unfortunately, his current love interest Mizuki found Comic Party a horrifying wasteland of unwashed nerds, and is furious at Kazuki for wanting to go back. To win the game, you not only have to successfully have a doujin printed and ready to take to Comic Party, but make sure that Kazuki's love life doesn't go all to hell in the process. You can try to mend his relationship with Mizuki, or try to build a new one with any of the other girls in the game.



Publisher: AquaPlus
Developer: AquaPlus
Release Date: December 29, 2005
Genre(s): Sim RPG
Category: Datesim, Comic Making, Rampant Geekery
# of Players: 1

This is a daunting task. Kazuki has only so much time during the day and weekend to devote to creating the actual comic, and he also needs time to rest, socialize, and work. If you fail to have a comic ready in time for Comic Party, it's game over, and getting Kazuki a girlfriend is right out. While the game is graphically unimpressive, there's tons of voice acting and the script is hilarious. The actual gameplay is a bit slow-paced but addictive in the way that only a well-done simulation game can be. If you like sims or liked any of the various *Comic Party* anime, you're sure to get a huge kick out of this game.

こみっくパーティー
COMIC PARTY
PORTABLE

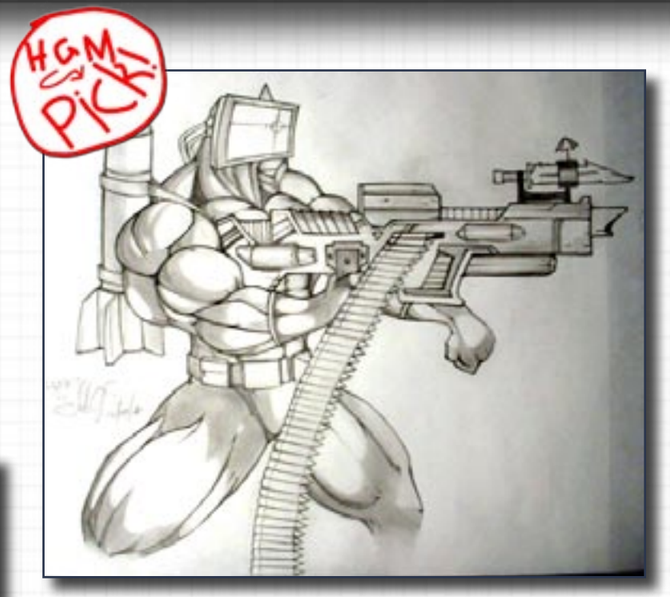
FANART

ART BY THE PEOPLE FOR THE PEOPLE

Fan art is all about giving exposure to aspiring artists who might not otherwise have a way to get their artsie parts seen. If you are one such artist, point your web browser toward **www.luv2game.com** and check out the Fan Art section of our message boards. That is where you can post your arts to get them considered for this section. You may also email submissions to **fart@hardcoregamermag.com**.

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

Title : Kirby Sig
Artist : Phear
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Jackson, MI



Title : Roger
Artist : Douglas De Guzman
Age : 22
Location : Las Vegas

Title : Yunnie
Artist : Michelle Phan
Age : 18
Location : Tampa, FL

Title : Felicia
Artist : Jason Durden
Age : 31
Location : Wooster, OH

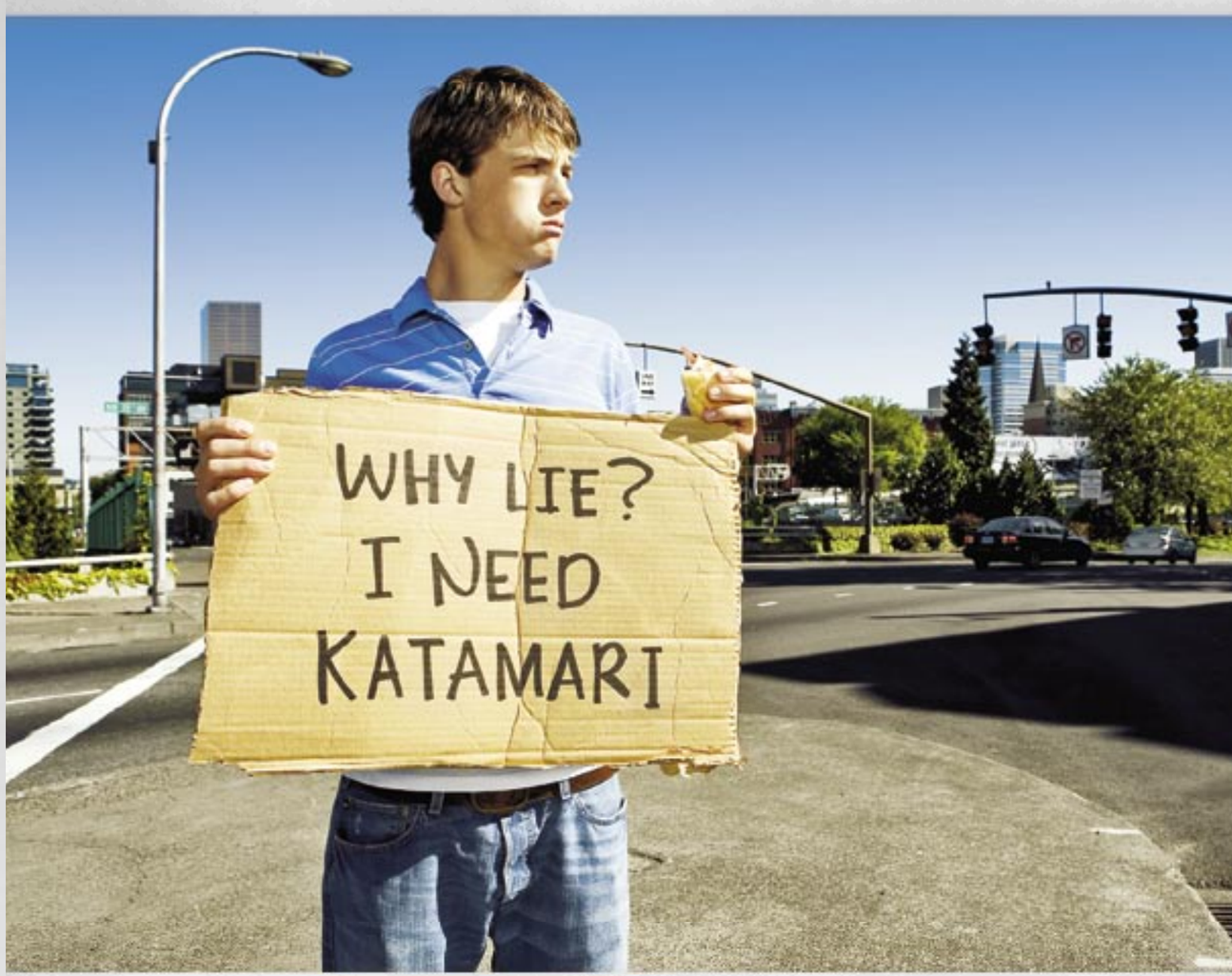
Title : Sly Cooper's Face
Artist : Melhavic
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Flint, MI

Title : Bomberman Haet Chuck
Artist : MPHtails
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Albion, MI

Title : !
Artist : Mia D.
Age : 22
Location : Texas

Title : PacMan Pirate!!
Artist : javycucamonga
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Fontana, CA

game crazy
We understand.™



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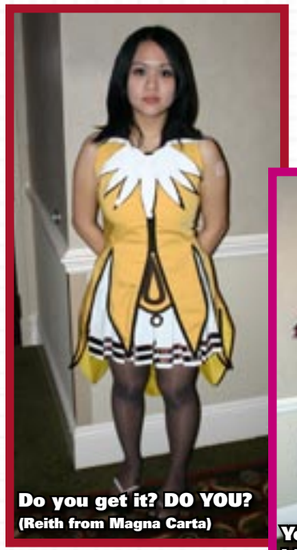
COSPLAY

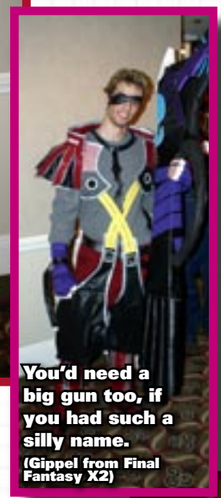
COSTUME PLAY

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.

MAGfest wasn't meant to be a cosplayer's convention, but that doesn't stop cosplayers from showing up anyway! This year most of them came from the "I can sew real good!" group of cosplayers, rather than the "I'm real handy with PVC and epoxy!" group. It makes no difference to us, we just like us some great cosplay!



Do you get it? DO YOU?
(Reith from Magna Carta)



You'd need a big gun too, if you had such a silly name.
(Gippel from Final Fantasy X2)

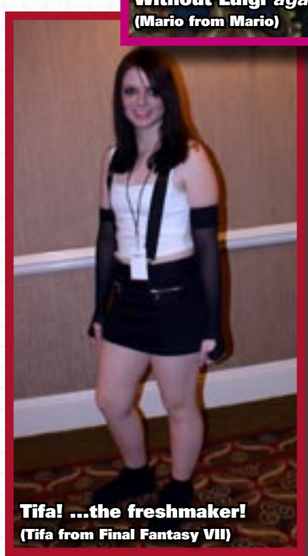
Who knew?
(Cammy from Street Fighter 2: The New Challengers and Princess Peach from Mario)

Don't make fun of his bear, he's killed for less.
(Bridget from Guilty Gear)

Without Luigi *again*?
(Mario from Mario)

Everyone knows her guns are fake!
(Lara Croft from Tomb Raider)

Zombies! What zombies?
(Luis and Ada from Resident Evil 4)



Tifa! ...the freshmaker!
(Tifa from Final Fantasy VII)

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Q. What makes a hardcore gamer?
A. An undying love for games.

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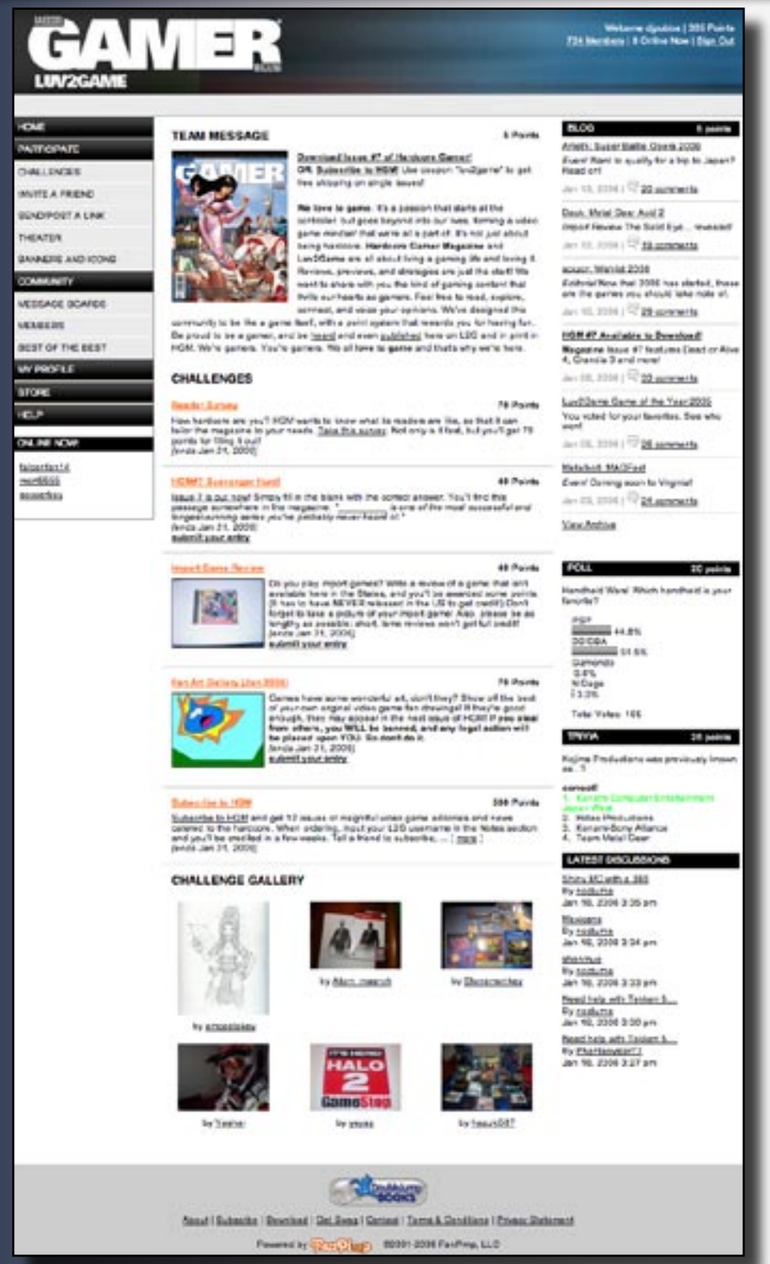

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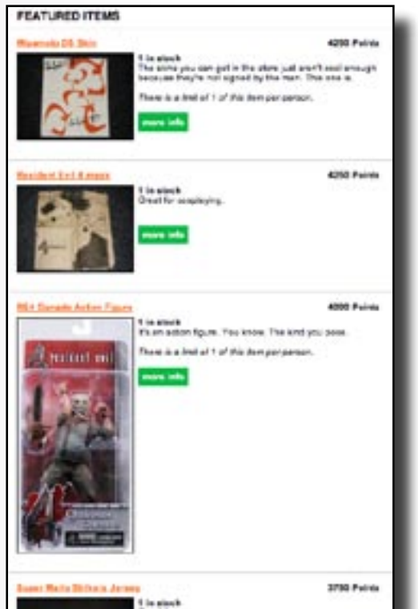

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