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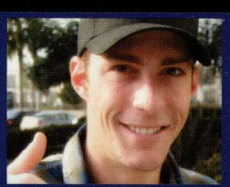

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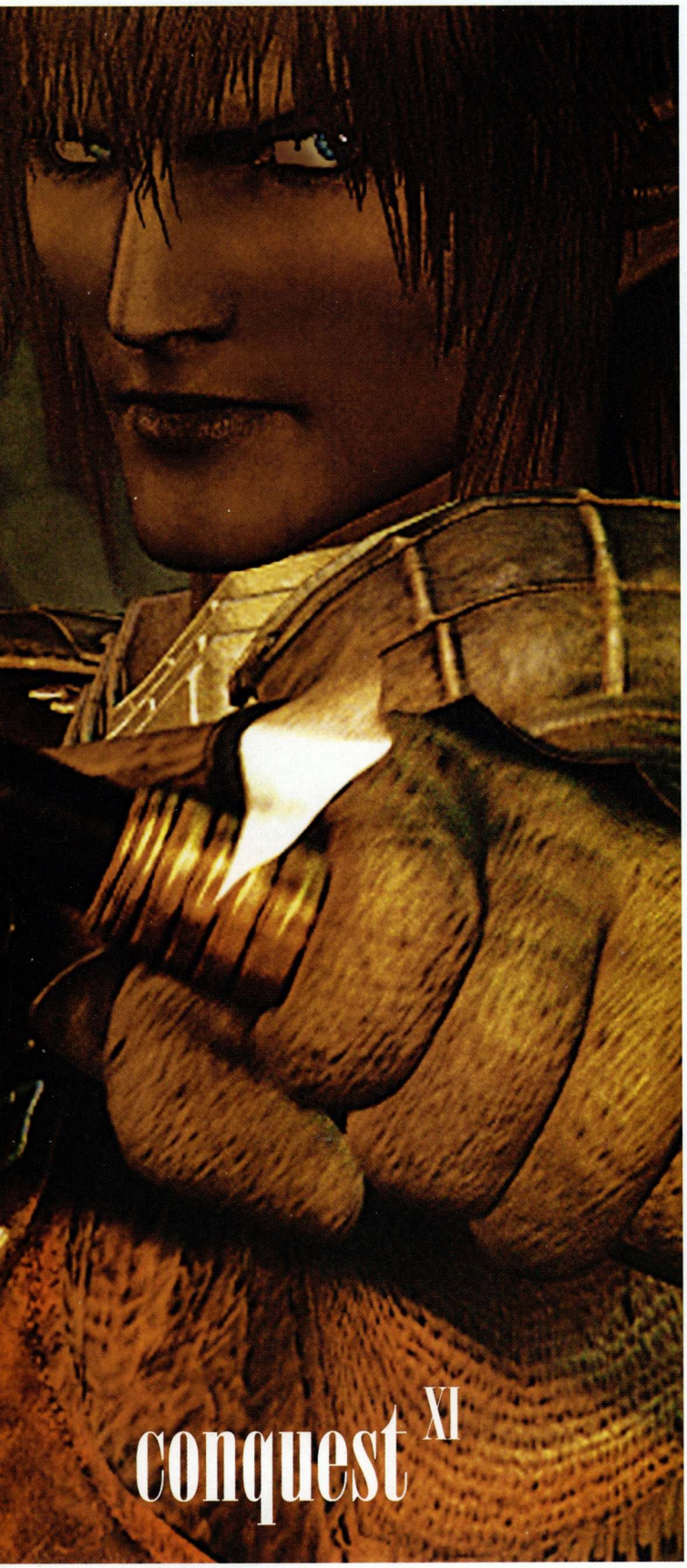

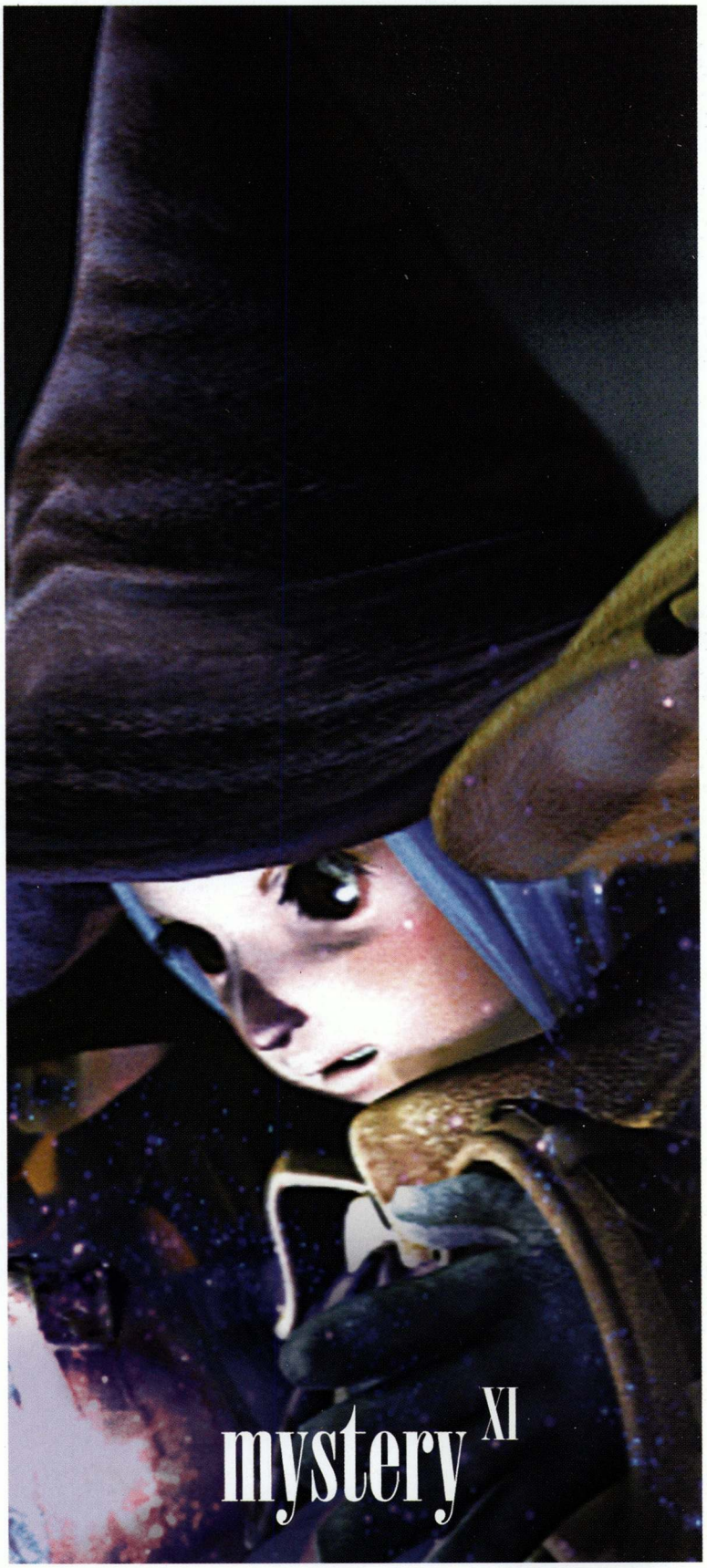

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Issue 27
Volume 3 Issue 3

March 2004

The Mothers of Invention

As I'm sure most of you are already aware, Nintendo has ever so vaguely announced a new handheld/contraption, code-named Nintendo DS (for its dual-screen technology), in anticipation of Sony's portable juggernaut, the PSP. You can read all about it in this month's Ink. While many have already branded the DS a gimmick hearkening back to the ill-fated Virtual Boy, I beg to differ. In the first place, the Virtual Boy had amazing potential. The games the world never saw that we had access to early on would have made all of the difference (there's still nothing like them available), but Nintendo pulled the plug—back when Sega made doing so fairly routine—due to either lackluster sales (which they weren't) or some kid in Japan who walked into a ditch (depending on who you talk to). What I like about Virtual Boy (I play Wario World and a handful of other VB games on a regular basis) and now the DS is the way Nintendo strives to evolve the gaming experience—actually change it—rather than merely making prettier games and piling on non-gaming functionality. The DS's dual display and initial description alone—of a birds-eye view on one screen with a close quarters view on the other—lends itself to a myriad of exciting possibilities. The big question is whether this will be applied to 3D polygon-based technology or enhanced 2D technology, in league with current GBA graphics. And here's where it gets interesting. Since we know the PSP is going to continue Sony's tradition of 3D, wouldn't it be awesome if Nintendo continued its tradition of 2D, taking it a step further by actually evolving the format? For my money, I'd much rather have a dual-screen 2D Castlevania, with the mansion overview open on one screen and the action on the other, than a 3D version, inferior to what the PS2 can muster, on a handheld.

It would also be wise of Nintendo not to try to compete directly with PSP, as we all know it will be the reigning 3D portable champ for many years to come. By offering an alternative gaming experience while remaining true to the Nintendo handheld credo, Nintendo stays in the portable game; while directly competing with the PSP, they might very well repeat the mistake Sega made when they force-fed the Saturn 3D, trying to answer to the PlayStation, ostensibly killing 2D, and their console, way before its time.

Not that 3D isn't the way of the future; it is, and we love 3D, but not at the expense of 2D. There's no reason the two can't coexist. 2D is also the sole format Sony has slammed the door on, making it the last bastion of opportunity in the industry. There's a large built-in demographic praying for a 2D resurgence, so one would think it's only a matter of time before someone smells the money trail. Speaking with developers, I'm told that a mind-blowing 2D game could be developed on current hardware inside of a year for a fraction of what 3D costs, so the opportunity is certainly there. An application like the DS, provided it is a 2D machine, makes that possibility all the more likely.

"While many have already branded the DS a gimmick hearkening back to the ill-fated Virtual Boy, I beg to differ."

Dave Halverson Editor-in-chief
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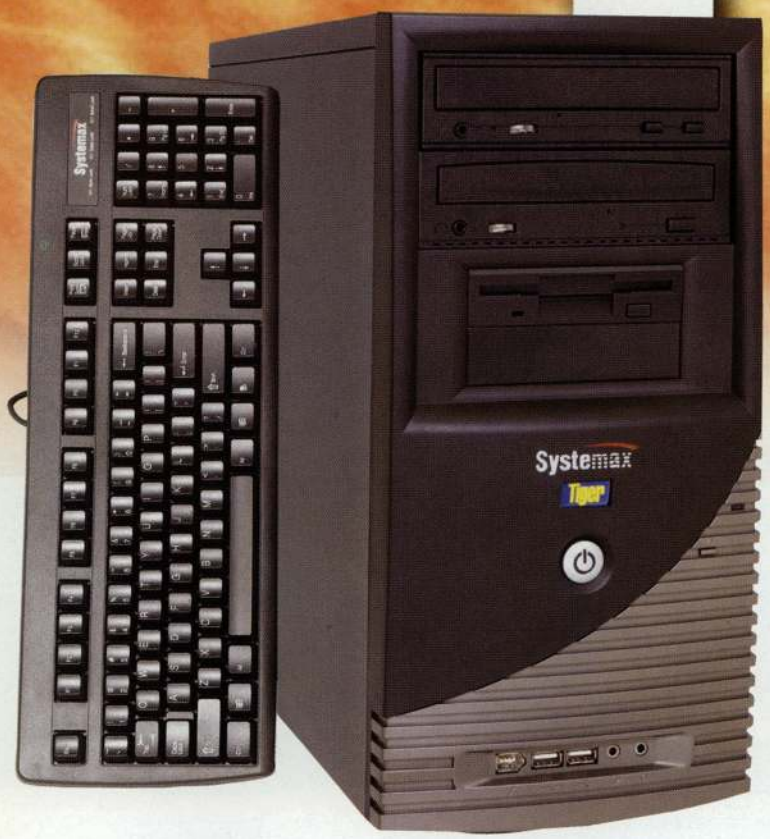

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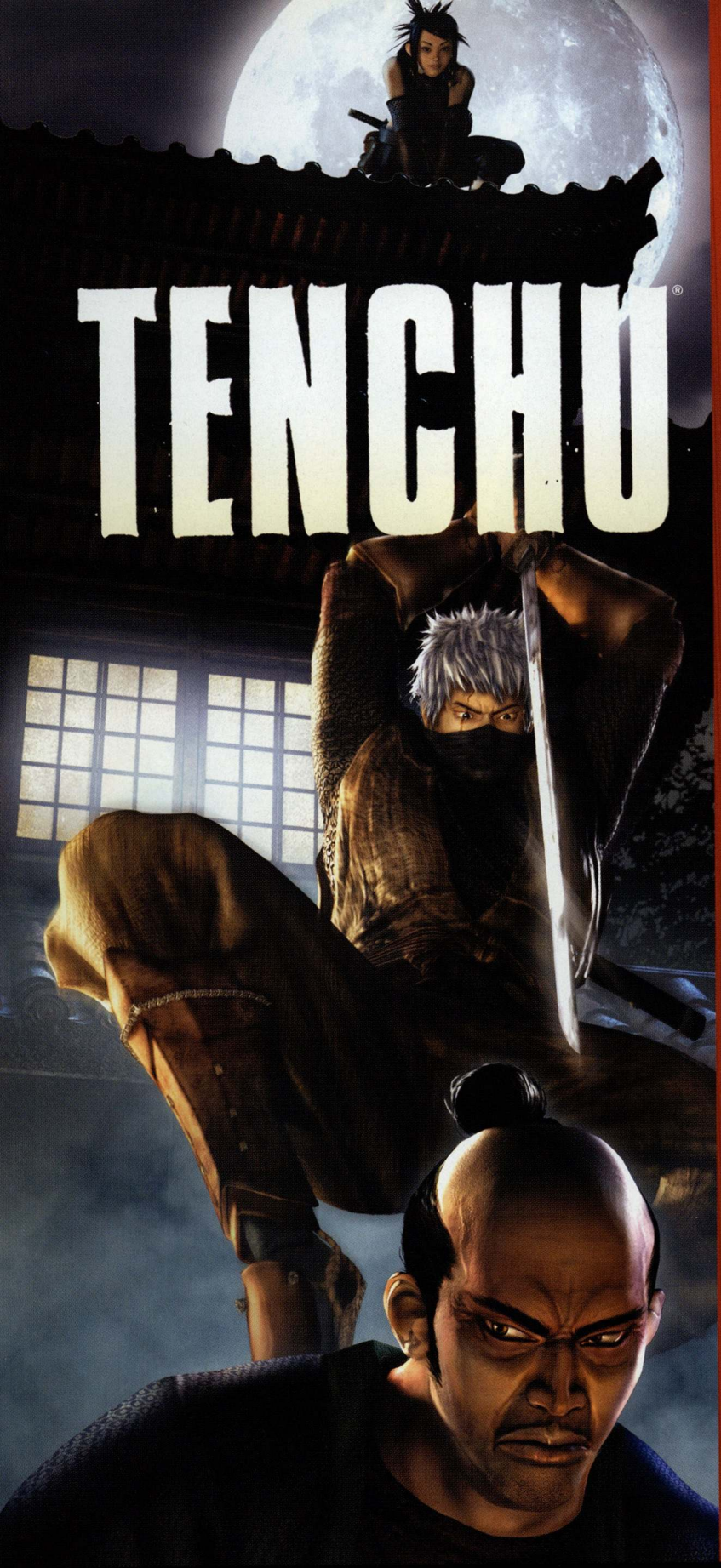
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playback

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Letter of the month

"My question to you as we head into the next, next generation is what do you hope to see with the next round of consoles? Let us be your conduit to the developers; they're all ears these days."

I would like to see a game engine which perfectly models the known universe down to its sub-atomic particles. What would be the "game" then, you ask? Why, discovering the inevitable errors the designers made, the cracks in the space-time continuum, of course. The more evidence you gather that the game universe is not The Real Thing, the more angry thunderclaps you engender from above. Ultimately, you see, the object is to win an audience with the creator, who will only give out his cosmic backstage pass when he is sufficiently convinced that you have succeeded in putting to shame all signs of elegance and grandeur this cosmos was once believed to have had. It would be a play tester's heaven.

Matthew Dickinson

2D or not 2D?

You guys could not possibly be more correct regarding Sony approvals. After the release of Atlus' recent hit, Disgaea, I was compelled to delve more deeply into other potential 2D projects for localization.

Now, I was already well aware of Victor Ireland's (of Working Design fame) difficulty in ascertaining the go-ahead from Sony for the release of Growlanser II, including their condition that he bundle the title with Growlanser III. What I hadn't realized was that this was an ongoing problem with Sony, and their assumption that the future is solely in 3D. After some searching, I realized that many 2D/unconventional/anime fans are, effectively, being ignored. There is literally a plethora of titles that will never see a domestic release, which would completely be of benefit to the general PS2 library. Summon Night 3, Kanon, Venus & Braves, Revel Fantasia, Lost Passage, Metal Slug 3, Atelier Viorate, ALL of the Marl series, Naruto, so many more. At least some (most) of these titles ARE worth our time! (Not to mention the Motion Gravure series for all you guys...) So what is Sony thinking? Did they really think no one would be interested in these titles?

I decided to act. I'm a member of the Gamer Advisory Panel. (For people not familiar with GAP, it's a program designed by Sony as a method of extracting information from their general audience. Think of it as a GIANT discussion forum, based on replying to articles posted by members.) I'd had several articles published in the GAP, as well as a number remain forever "pending." (This is where I actually get angry with Sony.) I wrote an EXTREMELY well-worded article inquiring whether the fans would like to see more 2D or otherwise strange titles for the PS2. There have been NUMEROUS postings of this nature, but never about this particular topic. All of the articles I had written in this fashion, proposing a question, had been accepted. Rather than accepting the post, or even sticking it in the black hole of pending...it was REJECTED.

I'm assuming Sony doesn't even care what we want. But hey! At the same time, Nintendo CEO Satoru Iwata claims: "What people want are simpler, more accessible games that are easier to play and solve." I feel screwed. (Sorry to be so verbose, it's the first time I've been able to vent on this particular subject.)

Thanks for being the best mag out there! No other even comes close.

Sincerely, yet another gamer girl,
Jaime K.

> "So what is Sony thinking? Did they really think no one would be interested in these titles?"

Sonic's Hero

I know you're busy, but I thought I might try to get your thoughts on something. I see that Sonic Heroes is getting a lot of bad scores. This is nothing new to platformers, Voodoo Vince for example, but it is especially sad to see it happen to Sonic. I'm reading some of these negative reviews, they just blow my mind. There is some complaint of collision and a camera that sticks now and then. Then they go on to state that Heroes is the best 3D Sonic game yet, better than Adventure 1 and 2, and then still go on to give it a 3-out-of-5. It's only averaging a measly 73% at Gamerankings. One review even complained that the game was "death by speed. Instant death was okay back in the old days, but not now." What has the gaming press come to? I have yet to buy this game, but I plan to soon. I just hope you are right and they are wrong. I'm betting on your opinion, since you are the most knowledgeable platformer connoisseur I know of. Hearing in your review that this game returns to Sonic's roots while still evolving with bright new ideas and play mechanics sounds like a sure winner to me. I'm also glad to hear that the good Dr. Robotnik is back in fine form. Every game needs a great villain.

Brian out.

We got a bunch of these, all from people who love the game, so you're safe...unless death by speed doesn't entice you as much as it does us.

More Glitches in the Xbox Matrix

I'm writing to you concerning a letter published in your January 2004 issue entitled "X marks the glitch." Like its author describes, I have endured countless headaches with my Xbox over the past year or so, ranging from dirty disc errors to frequent in-game freezes, to strange animated error pages telling me that my Xbox game is a game for the Xbox and cannot be played (presumably this is what is designed to appear if you put an Xbox game in a normal DVD drive). Usually, resetting my Xbox 1 to 15 times will resolve the issue, but there's only so many freezes and resets a person can take, especially when they occur multiple times an hour.

Microsoft's call center representative was less than useful. Obviously, he claimed he had never heard of any such problems, despite how common they appeared to be online. After eventually being referred to someone slightly higher on the call center ladder I was given the admission that this complaint had been heard before, but no specific numbers. I was offered 50 percent off my repairs if I sent my box in to Microsoft to be fixed, which still would have been approximately CAD$100 by the time I had a working Xbox. This seemed quite unacceptable, so I decided to deal with the problems for a little while longer.

I am a big fan of the Xbox. I think it's a great design, the games are rapidly getting better, and the online experience can't be beat. But if the box doesn't work, all that other stuff just ceases to be important at all. Microsoft obviously released a large batch of Xboxes with bad DVD drives, most of them going to the early adopters, and is doing absolutely nothing about it. You would think they would want to support the people who went out on a limb and bought a new system at its highest price, and then loved it enough to recommend it to all their friends. Well, all I can say is, if Microsoft doesn't do something about this issue for its potentially biggest fans, they are looking at losing a good number of them next time a new generation of hardware arrives at market.

Matt

We've stepped up our investigation into this problem. (One of ours does it too.) Look for an update/answer in the next issue.

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Osamu Tezuka Go!

Treasure and Sonic Team will both develop games based on Astro Boy. Seems like Sega is getting back to their Japanese roots...keep going!

Samurai Jack Go!

Below: Samurai Jack getting down with his bad self against the forces of Aku, the shape-shifting demon he's sworn to abolish. Care to help him out? You'll be glad you did!

Sega goes cartoon crazy

Animation old and new take Sega's center stage

If you're a Sega fan—or a fan of great games for that matter—any time Yuji Naka prepares a new project, it's time to get excited. Taking a break from Sonic and Phantasy Star, Mr. Naka and his Sonic Team are hard at work on their latest endeavor, Astro Boy, which will be out for PlayStation 2 later this year. The game, of course, stars Astro Boy, the wildly popular Japanese cartoon and comic-book character introduced to the world way back in 1951 by Osamu Tezuka. Drawing off his signature moves and truly distinct style, Astro Boy uses his rocket punch to dispel all sorts of quirky enemies, from robots to monsters to classically evil villains, laying the smack down in frenetic air battles as well as engaging in some traditional 3D platforming; expect more on this one at E3. Joining it is the Treasure-developed Astro Boy: Omega Factor (see preview on page 73).

Further tapping in to the richly abundant world of animation, Sega also announced the multiplatform March release of Samurai Jack, which arrived for some hands-on impressions just before press time. It's immediately apparent why Sega threw their hat into the ring as you begin to explore this carbon-copy of Jack's cartoon world. Besides swordplay, Jack has a block, lock 'n' roll and a swell double jump, throws shurikens and uses a bow and arrow—quite a few cool play mechanics to pick up on the way to the world hub. Moreover, the game plays tight and feels like a first-party product. If ever an American cartoon deserved the red carpet treatment, it's Samurai Jack, so this was a surprisingly palatable consolation to what we thought was going to be a much more significant announcement. When Sega gathered the whole of the enthusiast press for a live Yuji Naka announcement, we immediately concluded that they were going to roll out a new NiGHTS, but conversations since have lead us to believe that this will never happen, having already been considered and dismissed due to the shift in American gamers diets.

Famicom GBA redux

Following up last year's limited-edition Japanese release of a Famicom-themed Game Boy Advance SP, commemorating the 20th anniversary of the classic 8-bit console that became the NES in the U.S., Nintendo has announced a second round of retro portable gaming goodness. A new Famicom-themed GBA SP is set for release in Japan on February 14, the main differences being a much wider release (the first was only available to contest winners), new coloring (based on the later Famicom model rather than the original) and the simultaneous release of ten classic games ported straight from the Famicom. Although they games aren't being enhanced from their original forms, the list of "Famicom Mini" titles is still impressive, including none other than The Legend of Zelda, Donkey Kong, Ice Climber, Excitebike, Pac-Man, Xevious, Mappy, Star Solider and Bomberman, and the games will even included miniature versions of the original Famicom packaging. Not surprisingly, no U.S. release has been announced.

Nintendo reinvents portable gaming...again. Will the second time be the charm?

Ending months of speculation about what their "innovative, new" hardware announcement would be, Nintendo revealed that they will not be showing off the successor to the GameCube or the Game Boy Advance, but rather a new portable gaming system, currently called the Nintendo DS, at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo in May. Though perhaps not the technological leap forward in gaming that many were expecting, what makes the new machine unique is that DS stands for dual screen; instead of a single screen, the DS comes equipped with two 3-inch TFT LCD screens, which Nintendo hopes will revolutionize the way portable games are played. The DS will be a separate format from existing hardware—games will likely come on small cards, and it won't play GC or GBA games—and will be powered by dual processors, with the primary processor reportedly being the same as the one that powers the N-Gage and the secondary being the one under the hood of the GBA. Wireless LAN capability will also likely be a feature.

"We have developed Nintendo DS based upon a completely different concept from existing game devices in order to provide players with a unique entertainment experience for the 21st century," said Nintendo president Satoru Iwata in a press release.

The full benefits of having a two-screen portable aren't entirely clear, but in Nintendo's announcement, they mentioned being able to view a wide shot on one screen and a zoomed-in perspective in the other, or using one screen for a map or a status screen while the main action plays out on another. Nintendo has also not announced any games for the system at this point, though Shigeru Miyamoto is reportedly hard at work on a launch title, and while no third-party development has been made official, Konami, Namco and Electronic Arts all seem likely to join the cause. While the unusual nature of the device is already prompting many to dub the machine the "Virtual Boy 2," developer comments indicate the machine is very appealing to program for and has substantial potential. Nintendo promised in their announcement that "once fully revealed, players will see innovative advances in game interaction." Nintendo has not yet unveiled how the DS will look or details of the control interface.

DS "We have developed Nintendo DS based upon a completely different concept from existing game devices..."

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Capcom 2004

A powerful line-up for the coming months

At Capcom's appropriately named Press Event 2004, held late January in Las Vegas, the company showed off part of their 2004 line-up (shown below), including the latest in some of their most famous franchises and exciting new prospects, as well as revealed their new strategy for global gaming dominance. According to the chairman and CEO of Capcom, Kenzo Tsujimoto, their games will all have more of an "international slant" going forward. Capcom intends to put more focus on its U.S. studio, since they believe those developers know how to best appeal to the American consumer, and also invest more money and energy into localization. Tsujimoto also affirmed that Capcom still strongly supports a cross-platform approach and even plans to further expand into the PC market (although no PC games were shown).

Mega Man X Command Mission

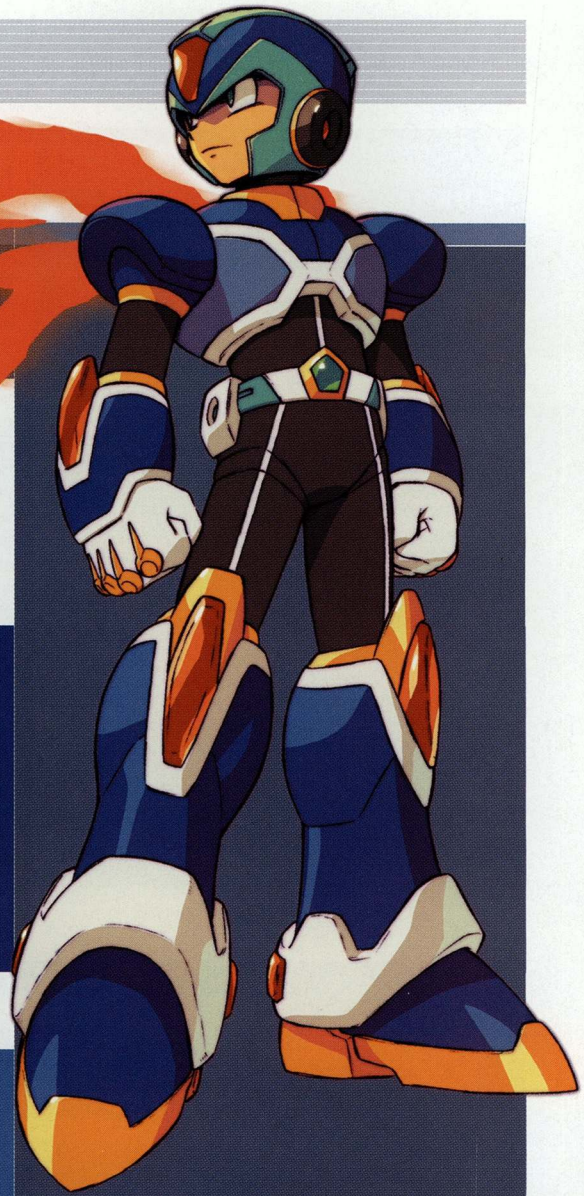
Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this RPG spin on Mega Man X is its battle system. Combat is turn based, but when that turn arrives, you actually control your character's moves with a real-time action-style interface, and you can even chain characters' attacks for spectacular combos. Aside from returning heroes X, Zero and Axl, four new characters—Mashimo, Marimo, Cinnamon and Spider—will be playable in this PS2 and GC summer release.

Monster Hunter

Following Resident Evil Outbreak into the world of online multiplayer fun, Monster Hunter is a PS2 action game set in a prehistoric/fantasy world where your job is to hunt down and kill the dinosaur-like monsters that roam the land. The weapon you choose determines your character class, and you can collect items from the natural world to upgrade your weapons in RPG-like fashion. The U.S. version, due this fall, will likely have enhancements over its Japanese counterpart.

Shadow of Rome

Shadow of Rome was the event's big surprise: a brand-new PS2 action-adventure title bathed in Roman history and created by Keiji (Mega Man, Onimusha) Inafune. The game features not only extremely bloody gladiatorial action stages, but also stealth-heavy adventure levels and cool-looking chariot races. This game exemplifies Capcom's new international-minded strategy—though the U.S. release date is late 2004, it's not even planned for release in Japan.



And...

The Nightmare Before Christmas

Though a preview for Nightmare Before Christmas ran last issue, Capcom revealed an exciting new detail about this October PS2 release—Jack will have the ability to acquire and use new costumes with new abilities. Santa Jack can attack with presents, while his Pumpkin King incarnation uses flame-based attacks. Movement in combat seemed quite slow, but the game is still early in development, so hopefully that will be swiftly corrected.

Very, Very Evil

Even though Capcom showed off the ridiculously highly anticipated Resident Evil 4 and Killer 7, they have threatened painful retribution if we divulge the slightest detail at this time. Damn it. Capcom also suggested that both Glass Rose and Gregory Horror Show are extremely unlikely to come to the U.S., and Hyper Street Fighter II: Anniversary Edition was nowhere to be seen. Double damn it.

Vindication! The tank will roll!

SNK find a hangar for their tank squad...hallelujah!

As predicted in these pages and by many of our astute readers, SNK Neo Geo Corporation announced that they have joined the Xbox third-party program and plan to bring Metal Slug 3 (!) and SNK Vs. Capcom: SVC Chaos to the Xbox in 2004. SNK Vs. Capcom: SVC Chaos will be Xbox Live compatible, and elsewhere, the company is reviewing plans to develop many of their other popular gaming franchises, possibly making many of them Xbox Live compatible as well. "We're fortunate in that we have several titles with devoted fan bases," said Ben Herman, SNK Neo Geo USA president. "Xbox users are serious about their gaming experience and our titles fit the Xbox user perfectly." He didn't go on to say, "as for Sony, well, they can go..." but we're sure he was thinking it.

THQ still tag-teaming with Yuke's

In January, Konami made the startling announcement that its brand-new wrestling game, WWX (see preview in this issue's sports section), would be developed by none other than Yuke's, the creators of THQ's WWE SmackDown series for PlayStation 2 and WrestleMania for GameCube. Now that Yuke's is working for the competition, what does that mean for the future of THQ's WWE games? Wrestling fans can put their fears aside: "I can't get into specifics, but yes, we're still working with Yuke's for the next round of WWE titles," said a representative for THQ. Yuke's is able to develop for both publishers simultaneously due to the fact that there's no non-compete clause in their contract with THQ. For gamers who want to know what THQ is cooking up to deal with the increased wrestling game competition, they aren't revealing specifics just yet, but they're offering these top five reasons to look forward to their WWE titles in 2004:

1. The WWE brand. We feature all the latest and greatest WWE superstars.
2. We listen to the fans when developing our WWE titles. They're always happy to get involved in the process and we love the input.
3. More original plot lines developed by WWE writers.
4. The most complete CAW (create-a-wrestler) system in the business.
5. New game modes like the ever-popular Bra & Panty match (WWE SmackDown! Here Comes the Pain). 'Nuff said.

THQ

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Core sans Croft Circle their wagons

From Angel's ashes, Lara's legions rise again...

It's back to basics for one of gaming's most dynamic duos: Jeremy Heath-Smith and Adrian Smith, the harbingers of all things Croft, have left Core and now have a new game development company, Circle Studio. "It's very exciting to be standing on our own two feet again and we're fortunate to be in a position that allows us to develop our prototypes fully whilst exploring the best route or partnership for publishing," said Adrian, leaving the sting of Angel of Darkness well behind him. While the new team (which includes 35 former Core employees) has several prototypes under development, they weren't at liberty to divulge whether they were leaning more towards old-school Core or something altogether new. They did confirm, however, that while current consoles are a possibility, they will be focusing on PS3 and Xbox 2. In regards to Lara, Adrian would only say that he "enjoyed" working with her over the past several years, but is definitely looking forward to thinking outside the buns. Wonderdog and Chuck Rock were not available to comment.

Wonderdog could not be reached for comment.

Rumors and bits

Could a new version of N-Gage be on the way, possibly something even quite removed from the soft-selling original? Word is E3 reveals all ... Xbox Next, as it's being called, is on the way, with debate as to possible backward compatibility; manufacturing will be handled by different firms this time: ATI Technologies for graphics innards, IBM PowerPC will serve the microprocessor, Silicon Integrated Systems for the chips ... Before the industry gets ahead of itself and rolls out the new systems—big price drops first, maybe sooner than we might expect—Microsoft can take some comfort in grabbing second place in Europe with its strong holiday ... Prince of Persia is getting a well-deserved sequel sometime far away. Meantime, know that Halo 2 is officially coming in the fall, and Half-Life 2 should be here this summer after recovering from the source-code mishap ... Uwe Boll, director of House of the Dead and the upcoming Alone in the Dark, has secured Fear Effect.

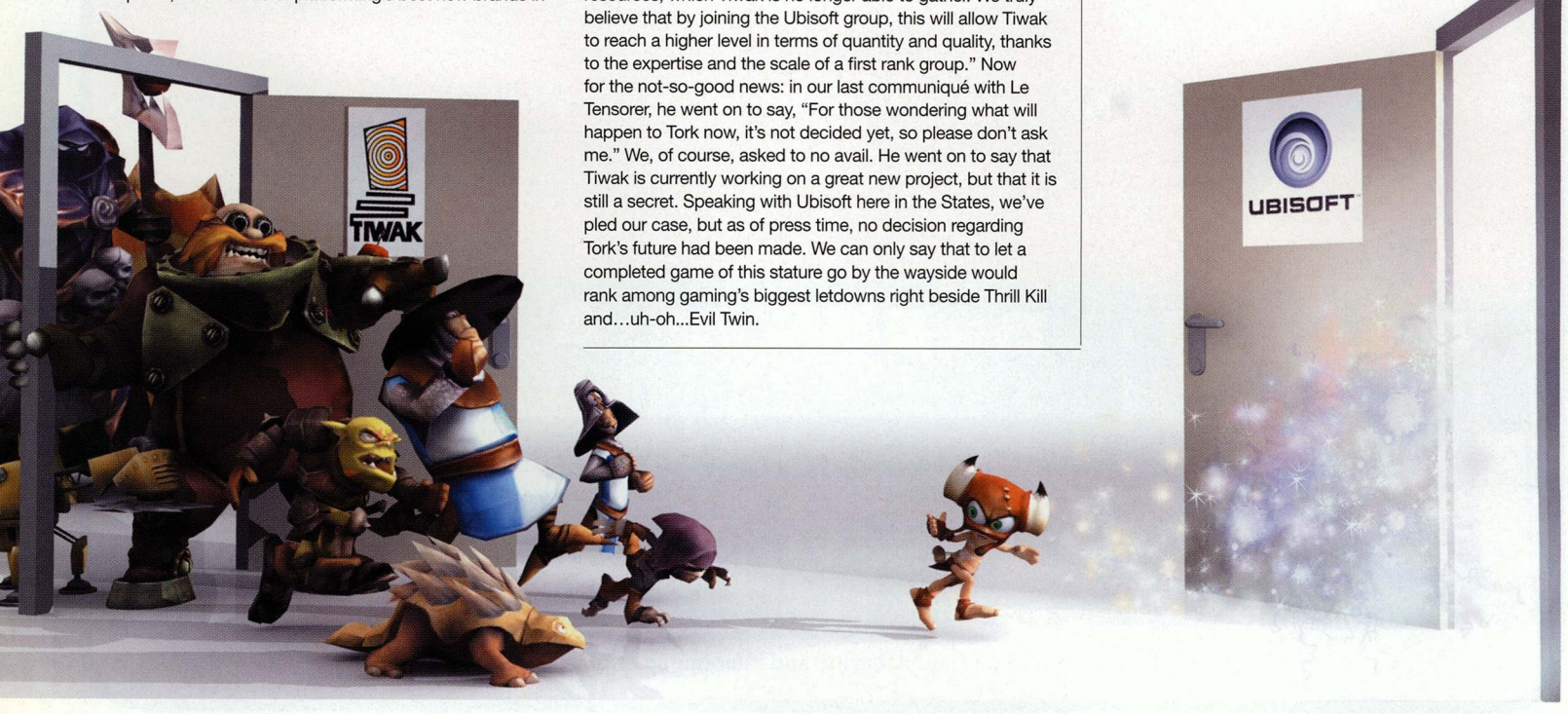
Crystal Xbox

Right about now, the Brits are getting their crystal Xboxes and no doubt bragging over tea about how we Yanks are still fumbling about with our archaic swamp-green models. Coming here? MS USA says yes...maybe.

Tiwak comes full circle

Now someone release Tork before we get violent

Tiwak, the splinter cell of Ubisoft France that broke away to do their own thing—namely Tork, which Microsoft baited us with then booted to make room for Vince—have been acquired by...yep, Ubisoft. Although that scenario lends itself to endless streams of witty repartee, we will refrain. The team, which consists of 17 extraordinarily talented people located in Montpellier, created one of platforming's best new brands in Tork, but after being ousted by Microsoft, couldn't make the right deal to keep the fire stoked: "We are very pleased with Tiwak becoming part of the Ubisoft group, as it will give us the means to carry on our work in the world of top-quality video games creation," said president and CEO of Tiwak, Yann Le Tensorer. "Nowadays, creating hits requires considerable resources, which Tiwak is no longer able to gather. We truly believe that by joining the Ubisoft group, this will allow Tiwak to reach a higher level in terms of quantity and quality, thanks to the expertise and the scale of a first rank group." Now for the not-so-good news: in our last communiqué with Le Tensorer, he went on to say, "For those wondering what will happen to Tork now, it's not decided yet, so please don't ask me." We, of course, asked to no avail. He went on to say that Tiwak is currently working on a great new project, but that it is still a secret. Speaking with Ubisoft here in the States, we've pled our case, but as of press time, no decision regarding Tork's future had been made. We can only say that to let a completed game of this stature go by the wayside would rank among gaming's biggest letdowns right beside Thrill Kill and...uh-oh...Evil Twin.

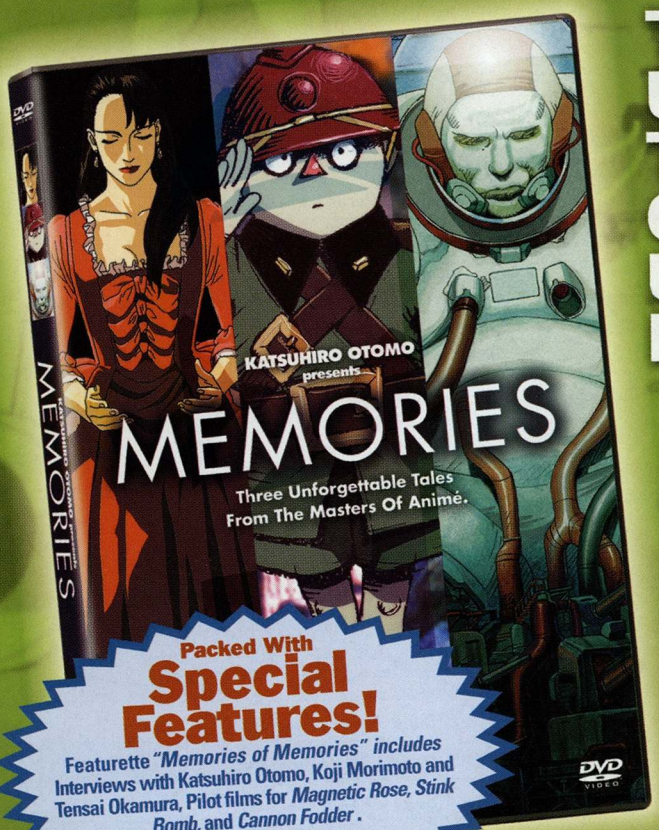


DOA and so much more...

"This is like a dream come true for the fans who can now play the entire DOA series on Xbox," said always-vocal DOA creator and Team Ninja head Tomonobu Itagaki. What's this: DOA officially goes online, and it includes the original and its awesome sequel? Damn straight, and it's now called Dead or Alive Ultimate, to be released in March. The game will be packaged on two discs, with all sorts of new features like expanded arenas, updated visuals and new costumes. Perhaps the coolest thing is the inclusion of the Saturn Dead or Alive. "The Saturn version of Dead or Alive was sold only in Japan, so this will be the first time it will be released in North America, while DOA2 has been completely rebuilt using the latest graphics engine from Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball, ultimately making DOA2 better than our own DOA3..."

EA to tout Time Splitters 3

Wait a sec: wasn't the gradually-improving-to-the-point-of-kick-ass Time Splitters series an Eidos game? Yup, but now the property's being handed over to EA. Free Radical's still coding their slick first-person thrills, so don't worry about a problem with new cooks in the kitchen altering the ingredients too much. What actually will be getting reworked are a brand-new story and multiplayer gameplay. With a release "sometime in 2005," the game may not even be called Time Splitters 3, so don't expect too much on the game just quite yet. This series has enormous potential; here's to EA providing the proper budget and especially time frame with which to work under.



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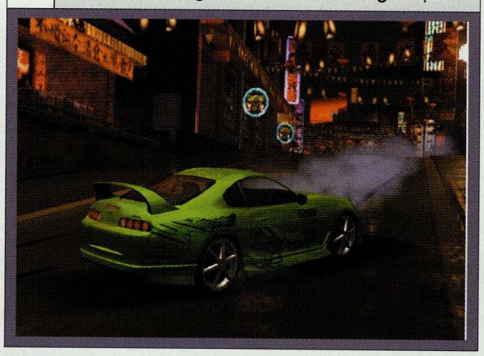
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow** ubisoft / gc, xb, ps2
02	**007: Everything or Nothing** ea / gc, xb, ps2
03	**NFL Street** ea / gc, xb, ps2
04	**Ghost Recon: Jungle Storm** ubisoft / ps2
05	**MVP Baseball 2004** ea / xb, ps2, pc
06	**World Soccer Winning Eleven 7** konami / ps2
07	**Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles** nintendo / gc
08	**Grand Theft Auto Double Pack** rockstar / xb
09	**Mafia** gathering of developers / ps2
10	**Intellivision Lives** crave / ps2

NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Dec. Game Sales

01	**Need for Speed Underground** ea / ps2
02	**Madden NFL 2004** ea / ps2
03	**Mario Kart: Double Dash!!** nintendo / gc
04	**Tony Hawk's Underground** activision / ps2
05	**Dragon Ball Z: Budokai 2** atari / ps2
06	**True Crime: Streets of LA** activision / ps2
07	**Medal of Honor: Rising Sun** ea / ps2
08	**Final Fantasy X-2** square enix / ps2
09	**SOCOM II U.S. Navy SEALS** sony / ps2
10	**Lord of the Rings: Return of the King** ea / ps2



Your Megastore Beckons!

Winning Eleven 7
konami / ps2

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Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow
ubisoft / xb, gc, ps2

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Intellivision Lives
crave / ps2

Relive the glory days of the video game industry with this collection of more than 60 classic games originally for the Intellivision system.

Staff and reader selections

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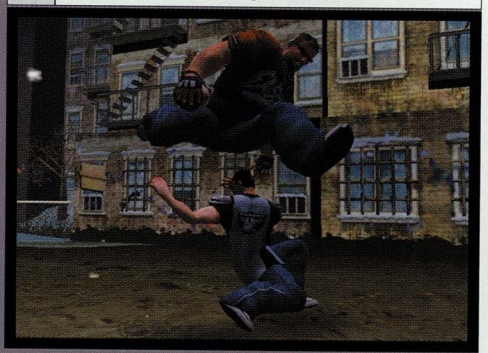
01	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
02	**Gran Turismo 4** sony / ps2
03	**Metroid Prime 2** nintendo / gc
04	**Halo 2** microsoft / xb
05	**Gradius V** konami / ps2

Dave Halverson *editor in chief*

01	**Samurai Jack** sega / xb
02	**Sonic Heroes** sega / xb
03	**Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles** nintendo / gc
04	**Breakdown** namco / xb
05	**Astro Boy: Omega Factor** sega / gba

Brady Fiechter *executive editor*

01	**NFL Street** ea / ps2
02	**007: Everything or Nothing** ea / ps2
03	**Sonic Heroes** sega / gc
04	**Champions of Norrath** sony / ps2
05	**Gran Turismo 4 Prologue** sony / ps2



Chris Hoffman *some editor*

01	**Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes** konami / gc
02	**Resident Evil 4** capcom / gc
03	**Sonic Heroes** sega / gc
04	**WWE SmackDown!: HCTP** thq / ps2
05	**Final Fantasy X-2** square enix / ps2

Michael Hobbs *art director*

01	**Sonic Heroes** sega / gc
02	**Gran Turismo 4 Prologue** sony / ps2 (import)
03	**PSO Episode III: C.A.R.D. Revolution** sega / gc
04	**Final Fantasy XI** square enix / ps2
05	**Sega GT Online** sega / xb

Nelson Lui *associate art director*

01	**Sonic Heroes** sega / gc
02	**Call Of Duty** activision / pc
03	**Sega GT Online** sega / xb
04	**Mario Party 5** nintendo / gc
05	**Need for Speed Underground** ea / pc

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GRAN TURISMO

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Gran Turismo 4

Polyphony Digital is pulling out all the stops in this, the final Gran Turismo for the PlayStation 2

Five hundred cars, 100 courses, online play. What else is there to say? Gran Turismo 4 is looming, and this latest sneak peek should provide some further material with which to drool over until the game's June release.

While fresh details are scarce, we did at least get to sample the game at length. Our play test, which was limited to the single-player Gran Turismo 4 Prologue disc released in Japan, nevertheless highlighted the great strides that have been made by Polyphony Digital in the last two years. Simply driving around the empty courses in this bare-bones demo is more fun than most racing games at their feeble best.

It would not be premature to predict there will never be a better-looking racing game than this on any of the current platforms. It's all well and good to throw additional polygons around and shower the screen in flashy effects, but to us, it always comes down to the artistry of the textures and lighting that provide the greatest link to reality. In this respect, GT4 seems to be from another planet, so decisive is its separation from other racing games. The endlessly researched, expertly placed sound alone cements the connection with these powerful machines beyond what most developers would even attempt.

When we first took GT4 Prologue through its initial paces, the response was: it's real! Yeah, you've heard this banal description before, but it really is disarming how effective the game is at beguiling the senses. Look closer and you see the seams from the visual stitches. But here's where the gamemakers prove a remarkable grasp of their craft: the idea is *not* to look closer, to pick things apart, because what

In-game graphics. Not bad.

LANCIA RACING
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Hybrid Racing

Whatever your taste in cars, Gran Turismo 4 will meet your needs. Concerned about the environment? How about a Prius race to alleviate the guilt?

ultimately matters is how the game grabs you in the proper moments. When you're focused on driving—and this will surely only intensify with the final version—your eyes are completely fooled into believing you are not locked in to a video game. Working brilliantly around their limitations, Polyphony Digital understands where to put the detail and where to place just the right object. Add in the tangible presence of engaging physics and the effect of the visual experience tricks us even more.

Racing games provide an interesting barometer: you can generally tell how much a developer cared about their project by how good the replays are. Games as disparate as Mario Kart: Double Dash!! and R: Racing Evolution illustrate this point rather well. Both feature great replays and both are great games. If what we see in Prologue is any indication, then GT4 is going to be a masterpiece. In short, these are the best replays out there. Not only are the "cameras" placed with a director's eye, but the illusion of watching an actual car race around a circuit is basically never broken.

While the physical brilliance of the game is apparent when you're playing it, you really get to see the physics working during the replays, and you gain a huge appreciation for how far Polyphony Digital are advancing the state of the art. We were amazed at the resolution of this physics engine as we watched the suspension working over a serrated kerb. The wheel moves up and down with stunning realism and with a sort of speed that is just not evident in other racing games. There truly seems to be a connection and the road surface. While this has always been true of the GT series, it's just that little bit better now.

It's certainly much easier to rush to judgment on the game's exterior shine than to detail the results of the track design, but mention must be made to the extreme subtleties that are already evident. Call it a sense, call it a keen touch, call it a gift for translating the ineffable—somehow Polyphony Digital is able to put a curve right where it needs to be on their original tracks. They know how long to hold a straightaway before the bend, where to connect the right curve with the right severity, how to ratchet up the intensity as you pull out of a turn. In a game like this, it's all about getting into the groove, feeling the impact of every turn of the wheel. How do they manage to know exactly how to manipulate that groove with such visceral punch?

It's worth noting that while GT4 will prove to be a very similar game to its predecessors, there are a couple of small and large additions. Firstly, a new penalty feature has been implemented to discourage players from getting good cornering speeds by basically crashing the car through a corner. Now when you hit a wall with sufficient force, you will incur a time penalty that slows your car for several seconds. This may not be the damage model that some players want, but it's a step in the right direction of encouraging proper driving. This is especially relevant as we come to the other big addition to the GT4 formula: online play. Though little is known other than the fact that it will support six players, you can safely assume that this portion of the game will be no less fanatically researched and developed than any other part of it.

Play all of your favorite racing games to your heart's content now, because when Gran Turismo 4 lands, you won't have much need for them.

Michael Hobbs and Brady Fiechter

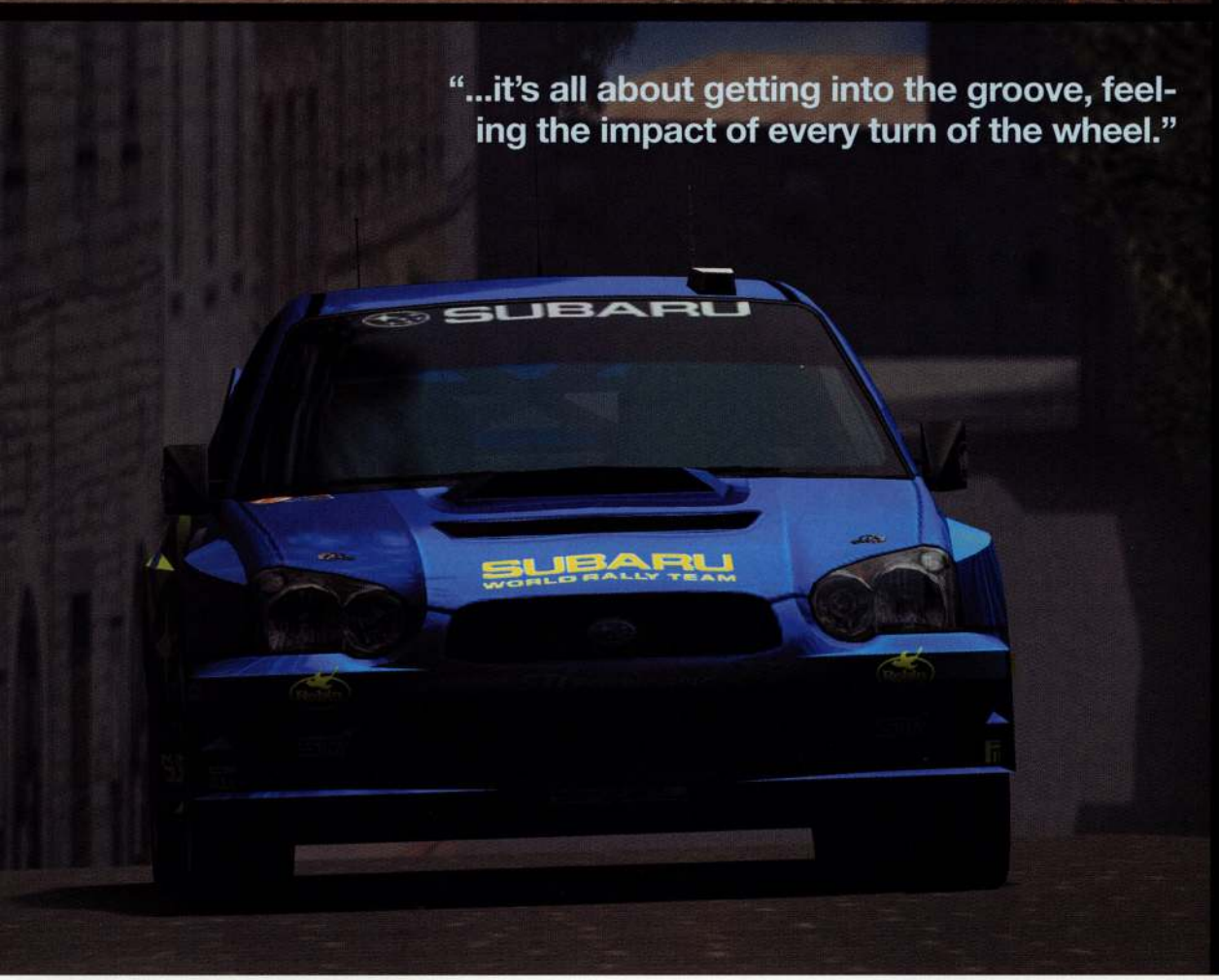
System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Polyphony Digital
Publisher: Sony
Available: Summer

Hyper-realism

The term photo-realistic is often bandied about, but the end result almost never looks this good. Is it live, or is it Gran Turismo 4?

GT 4 Hors de ouevre

Yes, you too can sample Gran Turismo 4. Those lucky enough to have a Japanese PS2 can enjoy Gran Turismo 4 Prologue. While this limited teaser of the game does not allow you to race against other cars on track and features only a small fraction of the final vehicle count, it still offers a stunning glimpse at the updated graphics and physics engine. A U.S. release is currently being discussed at Sony.



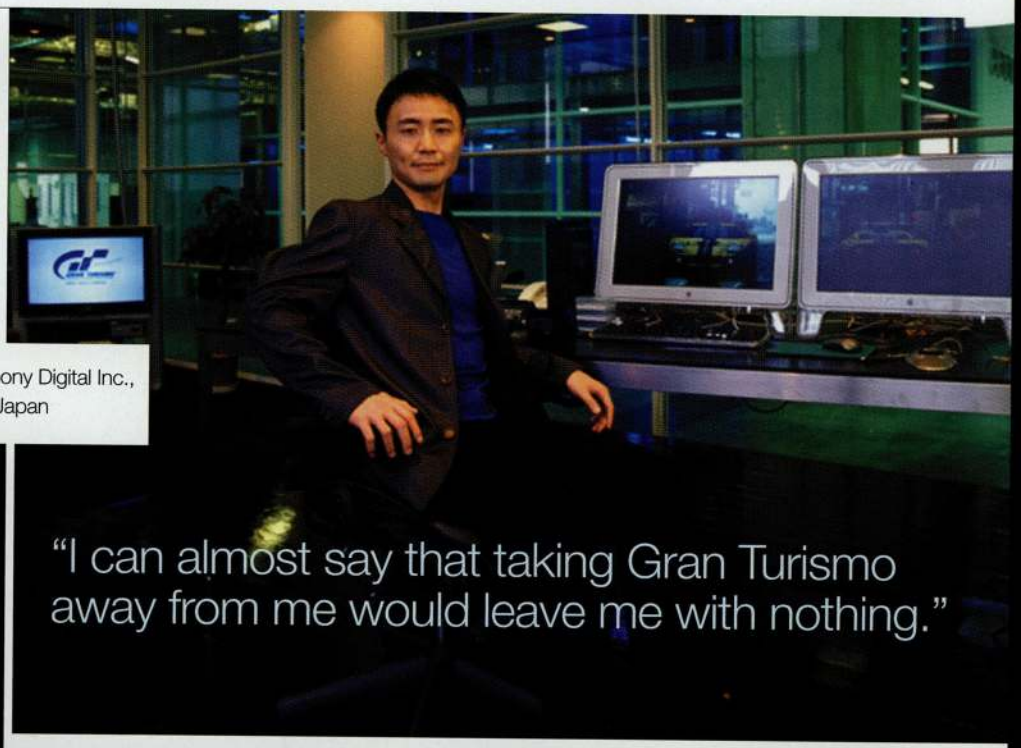
Re-inventing the wheel

A game as resplendent as Gran Turismo 4 is sure to be certainly deserves a new peripheral, and Logitech have seen fit to update their popular force-feedback GT Force. Featuring a better overall design and style than the previous model, it also features a neat rally-style shifting nub right next to the wheel for the ultimate shifting experience!

Interview

Kazunori Yamauchi

Creator of Gran Turismo franchise, President of Polyphony Digital Inc., Senior Vice President, Sony Computer Entertainment Japan



"I can almost say that taking Gran Turismo away from me would leave me with nothing."

play: GT3 was your first effort with the series on PlayStation 2. What major lessons were taken from creating that experience to make this newest GT that much better?

Yamauchi: In GT3, the lesson learned was that the quality of software does not synchronize with hardware performance. When we were developing GT3, we made sure that all technical areas were optimized thoroughly, but when we were finished, we still were not 100 percent happy with the results. We then reviewed the issue to try to find what was missing, what areas could be improved, and the result was not a technical aspect such as how many polygons can be drawn in a second.

A good comparison for hardware performance would be a painting. The performance is represented by the size of the drawing paper and the number of available colors of paint.

The quality of the painting does not necessarily relate directly to the hardware. With that said, improvement of quality for products following GT4 Prologue (only released in Japan, Asia and Korea) will concentrate on segments which are non-related to hardware specifications or quality of code.

How limited do you feel right now? Are you saving a lot of what you want to accomplish with a racing game for the next hardware?

At Polyphony Digital, we never restrict or limit ourselves with development factors.

In fact, up to the late stages of development, if there are discoveries or new ideas, we make sure those aspects are implemented. Obviously, there are some aspects which cannot be accomplished without the new hardware, and those will have to wait.

What's been the hardest part of making GT4?

Since GT4 is so monstrous in volume, and requires various components such as graphics, sound, user interface, system designs, physics model and so on, the quality for all areas must be brought to their maximum quality, and furthermore, all of these components must perfectly balance. Finding the right harmony is a very difficult task.

Have you run into any unexpected difficulties? Maybe new hurdles you had to overcome that never popped up on GT3?

Considering this will be the last Gran Turismo on the PS2 platform, there are so many aspects we wish to include. Sometimes, this overflows the abilities of PS2.

How much can you tell us about the online capabilities of the game?

Please wait until a later date.

How are you catering to the player who has been with this series from the start? What surprises or hooks are in place to thrill that veteran?

We are planning to have a special segment designed for Gran Turismo enthusiasts. The overall title will be correctly balanced to ensure that people from newcomers to loyal fans will have fun, but ideally there will be special segments where players will need to be serious Gran Turismo addicts to enjoy.

What about the guy who is new to GT? Do you make a specific focus to tailor parts of the game to appeal to that person as well?

Though the release of Gran Turismo 4 Prologue is still undecided, this title was originally designed and produced toward the newcoming audience. If this title is released in the U.S. and in Europe, this should be the best answer to your question.

Scaling new heights

Thankfully, the members of Polyphony Digital do not know the meaning of overkill. Appreciate this image as you enjoy the fruits of the effort this summer.

Picture perfect

Just for your reference, the photographs of Japan's Fuji Speedway circuit are positioned above their virtual counterparts.

GT is known for perhaps the finest replication of car physics in a racing game. How in the heck are you able to make these cars feels so lifelike? Maybe that's even impossible to answer, something that is more up to the basic mastery of the programmer.
Purely and logically, we have continuously and seriously approached the theme of "what is a car?" We have also continued the process of creating models based on intuition, as well as the experience of day-to-day driving. The mixture of this has been in the works for almost 10 years.

Is there risk of getting too real? How do you know where to draw the line between a fun experience and something that is just frustrating? That balance must be tough!
As you suggest, balance is always a very difficult aspect. However, cars are essentially something that anybody can drive. We believe that by truly investigating reality, we will be able to provide our audience with something that is easy to drive, is fun and, of course, real.

Name one aspect of GT4 that is quite a bit different from GT3. Have you stayed pretty close to the GT formula?
There are some areas which have followed the GT formula, areas which have been expanded and areas which will be completely new. Regarding details, please wait for the time being. We hope to expand on this at a later date.

GT3 was flat-out an amazing game. How do you top that? And do you run the risk of trying to make perhaps a really different game?
First, thank you for the "amazing" comment. However, there are so many aspects with room for improvement, the same reason we were not completely satisfied with the product as stated previously.

Were there any aspects to GT3 you were disappointed with and told yourself: we have to improve this or change that for the next game? I'm sure there are times when personal perfectionism drives you to be that much better than before.
Looking back on GT3, I feel the overall game design was kept too simple. As a result, some players may have felt as if participating in races was more an obligation, a work-like process... With GT4, I hope to implement unique mechanisms or gimmicks to ensure that players are left with a new and entertaining experience.

That leads me to another question I was curious about: did you feel it necessary to tweak the car physics at all? I'm sure you could very easily simply add new options, tracks and cars, and call it a successful sequel.
The list of segments which need improvement is enormous. It is impossible to simply add new cars and courses and call it a sequel.

Are there any areas of GT4 you look at and say, "I can't believe we pulled that off!"?
This would have to be the atmosphere and the air surrounding the title. I think I can see the new standards for the new Gran Turismo just around the corner.

What is the most difficult, most frustrating part of your job? And what makes it all worth it in the end?
When communicating my objectives to my staff, I am very careful. Will it be technically possible? Is there enough time? Is it worth the time and effort? As a result of the hardships and hard work, and when it is obvious that the product's quality has been improved significantly, that is the moment I feel most happy.

How far in the future do you dream? Are GT5 and the exciting possibilities of yet another chance to make the best racing series even better running through your mind even as you create now? Maybe you have nothing left but to concentrate on this demanding project!
The speed of technology and its advancement is very fast, thus I usually try to look five years ahead and try to evaluate what would be possible then. Based on this evaluation and estimation, I try to modify Polyphony Digital's style of development. I always keep in mind the goals for being the best of racing games, extending into the future as well. I'm a bit of a worrywart, so maybe I am trying to look too far into the future.

You were once quoted as saying that the conceptual basis of Gran Turismo has been with you since the age of 15. If video games did not exist in their current form, how do you think you would have channeled your passion for cars?
That's a tough question. I can almost say that taking Gran Turismo away from me now would leave me with nothing. The amount of time I devote to the development of Gran Turismo is quite significant. With that said, it is very difficult to think how things would be without Gran Turismo. If I were forced to think of something, perhaps the following: a "street racer" who would be racing a very loud car at super-high speeds on the expressways late at night. Or, be a tuning company who is known for making slick and fast cars. One of the two, I guess.

Ford talks GT

Ford are very excited to have their latest machinery in Gran Turismo, so they shared some of that enthusiasm with us.

Interview

Primo Goffi

Project Manager, 2005 Ford GT

With additional comments by Alan Hall Communications Manager, Ford Performance Group

Below: Members of the Polyphony Digital development staff sample the sounds of the 2005 Ford GT.

play: Talk a little bit about your current role at Ford.
Primo Goffi: I'm currently involved in the Ford GT program, and I was with SVT (Special Vehicle Team) for several years. Since the inception of the GT program, I've been involved in putting together the business plan and assembling the program team. The people involved in program management basically do just about everything other than design and development.

This must have been a rather daunting task, as the Ford GT had such a short development cycle.
PG: Very short. If you look at some of our other mainstream products, they require a significantly more amount of time to develop. But we had sturdy constraints placed on us. Basically, our boss, whose name is on the building, wanted the first production car to be available for Ford's centennial. So we had a game day that we couldn't move, we couldn't delay it. It was a mountain that we had to climb. It was a challenge we accepted, and we delivered.
Alan Hall: One of the big things was that what would normally require six to nine months was compacted down into three months. A lot of early work was done on computers and decisions were made based on these computer-modeled simulations. This is a little different from mainstream development, which still uses computers, but often prototypes or pieces will actually be built to physically test them. So the GT team saved a lot of time by making their decisions based on the computer modeling, which is pretty unique.
PG: It's very unique. Along the lines of what Alan was saying, May 1st will basically be two years since we embarked upon this process. Within three or four months after the team was formed, we were doing surface transfer and signing off on the interior and the exterior of the vehicle. And a couple of months after that, about six months after we started with a clean sheet of paper, we had our first functional, drivable prototype on the road. So that accomplishment was monumental in light of the timeframe.

Not only that, but you are also trying to make a world-class super car. What were your benchmarks here?
PG: Well, up front we looked at a lot of different vehicles. We've had different "fingerprint drives," if you will, to try to assess key attributes of certain cars. And while we benchmarked several different competitors, we honed in on the brute force straight-line performance of the Dodge Viper, which was one of our direct competitors, and that was one of the cars that we had to beat. For other dynamic attributes, we looked at the Ferrari 360 Modena. Through our filter process, I think you can say we ended up with, to a certain extent, those two cars.

How much did you have to compromise in order to make the GT a car that could be driven every day?
PG: I'm not sure we made compromises. Having been at SVT a long time, one of the hallmarks of the vehicles we produce is to be able to drive it long distances and not have it beat you up. I've been in racing for a long time and race cars are very stiff and sacrifice a lot of ride comfort for on-the-limit handling. I think because of the nature of

how technology has advanced, tire technology and dampers and what we have learned in the past on our SVT vehicles, the compromise has been very, very little. Our experts here, especially in the ride and handling department, don't feel that we have to sacrifice a whole lot. I think the car is very comfortable and I think the numbers tell the tale. In fact, I think we are outperforming a lot of vehicles that do sacrifice ride and comfort.

AH: The other thing is that the number-one goal of the car was performance, and you might think, "Well, you put a big a engine in a car and who really cares about seating position and all that? It just needs to go fast," like some other super cars out there. The GT team really didn't compromise to get those ultimate performance numbers. One of the things that comes to mind is that they used forward-facing control arms on the front suspension, which allowed for more legroom. I think you can fit a 95th percentile male, which would be in the 6'3" area, very comfortably in the car, and the steering wheel and pedals are right in front of you. In some other super cars, they are offset to the left or the right.

How did you and the Ford GT become involved with Gran Turismo?

PG: For some background, we first met Kazunori [Yamauchi] at the SEMA show and got introduced. This sparked a tremendous amount of interest because we've had a lot of guys here, including myself, who were big fans of the game, and a lot of people here who have raced cars really take to Gran Turismo. It's obviously a lot of fun and in line with the product that we have.

What do you think you were able to contribute to the game?

"I think we got a new appreciation for what the development team goes through..."

PG: It's very important just to be represented in the game. We are very excited to be able to take part in an area we haven't been able to in the past. If you look at the line-up in the game, there's a lot of very unique, fast and exotic cars, however you choose to describe them, and I think up until recently, there were a lot of people that were fans of our product line that were yearning for us to be represented. Just the fact that we can participate is phenomenal and I'd like to think that people who are going to be purchasing and playing the game are ecstatic that we are there.

Were you able to exert any influence on how the car looked and handled in the game, or was this left pretty much in the hands of the designers and programmers at Polyphony Digital?

PG: As far as how the vehicle is developed within the game, I think that's up to the developer.

AH: It is. We basically provided an open book to the team and gave them availability of the car. The minimum requirements that they had just to graphically recreate the car, like several hours of photography from all angles, measurements like height and width, and also capturing engine noises and exhaust noises, were just exhaustive. And we're basically here as an open book to answer questions. We did have the opportunity to have the Sony team along with Kazunori visit, and Primo and his team took them to the track and gave them the opportunity to get hot laps and drive the GT, which gave them an additional amount of insight.

Were you surprised at how much data they did request and how much of the car they wanted to sample?

PG: I was a little surprised at the depth of knowledge and the sort of questions that Kazunori was asking about the car. Obviously we let him drive it, and he was asking about the CG [center of gravity] of the car and the crankshaft centerline distance to the ground and the weight balance and lot of things which play into how the vehicle behaves from a dynamic standpoint. We don't get those kinds of in-depth questions like that from many people at all.

AH: I think we got a new appreciation for what the development team goes through when they were here. They spent a full day in our garage going through about 30 or 40 cars and they are all tached-out at 6000 rpm and there are guys standing right by the exhaust with earphones on recording the sound. A lot of us had sort of a high from all the exhaust gas that was there, and I couldn't believe that the team does this on a regular basis. It's pretty exhaustive and impressive for sure.

Interview

Andy Slankard

Program manager for the 2002-04 Ford SVT Focus

play: Can you describe your current role at Ford?

Andy Slankard: I am the program manager for the SVT Focus, which is a 170 hp, six speed little pocket rocket we've had in production since 2002. My overall responsibilities are basically everything about the program: overall engineering sign-off, cost, timing, all the management activities.

Within the budget that you have, how much can you alter a Focus in order it increase its performance and earn it an SVT badge?

That's a good question. The budget is always something that we have to worry about. First of all, we look at the product and where it fits in the segment. We don't go to the money first, hopefully. We're very functionally oriented. In this case, with the Focus, we went after the Honda Civic way back when and decided that we would like to play in that segment. We came up with the cost of the program and it fit within a budget that Ford required us to maintain, and it had to be profitable. All of our SVT cars are profitable, and I think that says a lot about what we're building.

Have you been happy with your performance relative to the mostly Japanese competition?

Well, the segment is tough, no doubt about it. Are we happy? Yes, we're thrilled. It's our first real attempt at this segment.

You must be very pleased to be making further inroads into this segment by appearing in Gran Turismo.

Oh yeah. I'm a Gran Turismo fan, so to meet these guys was a real highlight. But to get this car in this segment in this game is real exciting.

Were you on hand when the team from Polyphony Digital came to sample the cars?

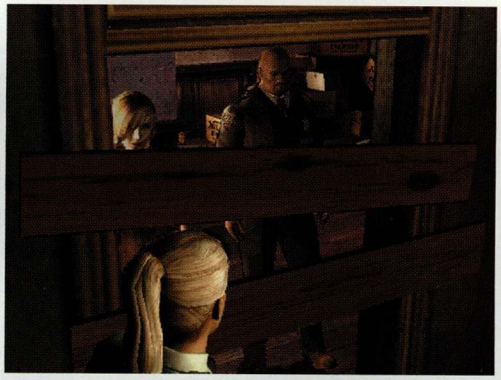
Oh yeah, yeah. I was with Alan [Hall], and we kind of introduced ourselves in Las Vegas at SEMA and we got to know all those folks and we invited them here and had them drive some of our fun stuff to get them excited about it. But, as Alan knows, I'm one of the biggest GT geeks around here. I've completed every game, so I'm anxious for this. To have one of our cars in there is great.

And there is so much care and dedication put into the developing of the game.

I think it's the most accurate racing game out there right now. I really think it allows you to drive some cars that you would never be able to, and I think it's really accurate.

Coming from someone who's driven a lot of different cars, that's high praise.

Let me tell you. I hate to mention a competitor's product, but take the Nissan Skyline GT-R. I don't know how many are in the States, but a few years ago I got the opportunity to drive one in Europe, and it was pretty close to the way the car felt in the game. And I can appreciate what they are doing from a sound perspective, and in terms of feel. Well, as much performance feel as you can get out of a video game.



Resident Evil OUTBREAK

A new type of fear

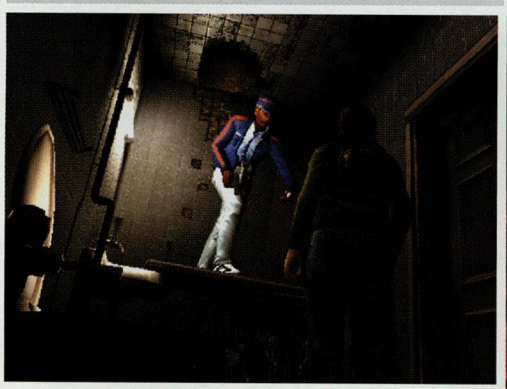
Resident Evil Outbreak takes everything we know about the original name in survival horror and turns it on its ear. This brand of Evil still harbors its trademark relentless monsters and heart-stopping gameplay, but now, it can be experienced in a new way. Resident Evil Outbreak is what director Eichiro Sasaki calls "a new type of fear."

The biggest change, of course, is that Outbreak takes the hair-raising RE experience and reinvents it with multiplayer components. Whether playing offline with CPU allies or online with friends, teamwork is an important new component of Outbreak. Though there's no voice chat—Capcom doesn't want the tension-filled atmosphere ruined—the characters have limited in-game communication options, can share items and will need to watch each others' backs to make it out alive. Fail to protect a teammate and his/her virus gauge will rise; it's separate from the life bar, and if it fills up, that character will turn into a zombie, giving them a few minutes to exact revenge before facing the Game Over screen.

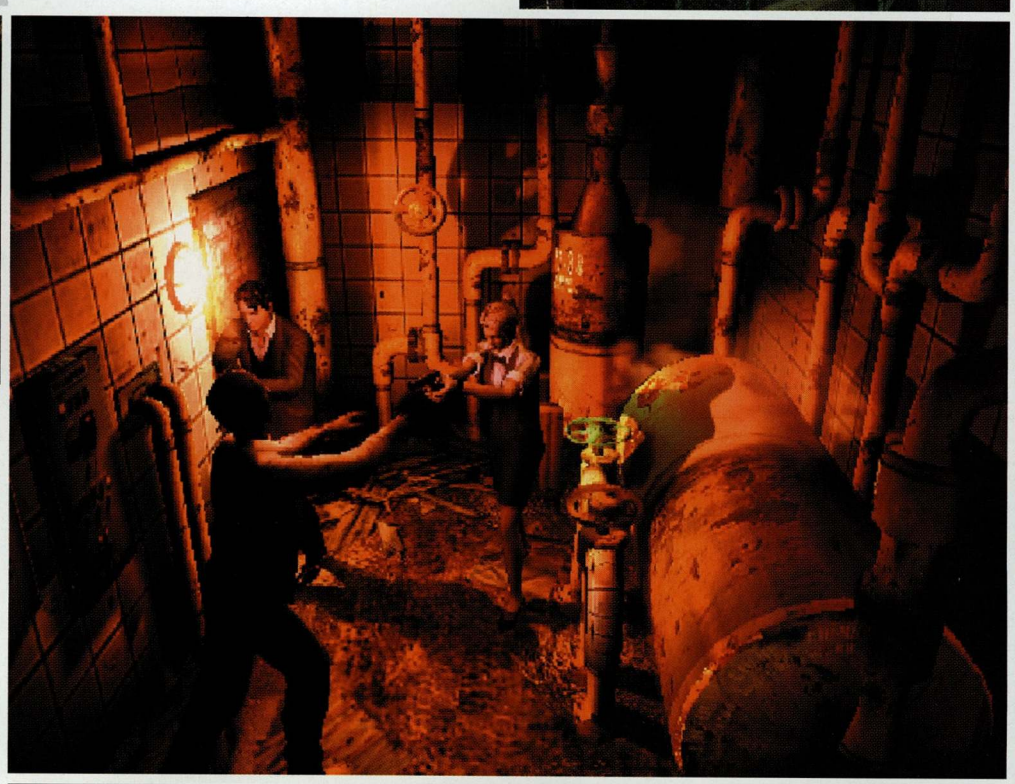
This RE has also been restructured from a massive adventure into five smaller scenarios, each taking place in distinct venues around Raccoon City, from a raging inferno to an Umbrella lab, including some that will be familiar to fans of previous RE games. But unlike those past games, you aren't playing as specially trained STARS operatives this time; Outbreak tells the tale of eight average citizens trying to escape the deadly T-virus over the course of ten days. These citizens aren't completely helpless, fortunately. Items like rocks and brooms can be used as weapons, and each character has a unique skill and item, be it Alyssa's lock-picking, David's weapon repair, Kevin's RCPD-issued handgun or Jim's hilarious ability to scream and play dead. Multiple abilities mean multiple solutions to puzzles and multiple paths through levels; the emphasis is more about thinking for yourself rather than being guided by the game.

Other alterations from the standard RE formula include the removal of item boxes, one-use typewriters that function without ink ribbons and smooth, new direct analog controls—although the old style is still there for purists. Enhanced with smarter, randomly placed enemies, numerous unlockable extra characters and a substantial replay factor, Outbreak is poised to prove the notion that change is good. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: March



"...that character will turn into a zombie, giving them a few minutes to exact revenge before facing the Game Over screen."



Players now have a choice: do you escape through the door or help your ally fight?

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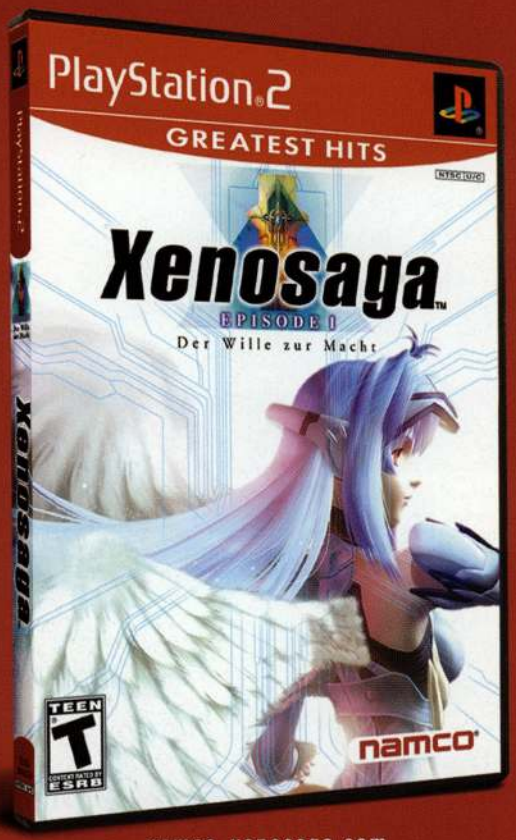
~Official PlayStation Magazine, 4 out of 5



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~GMR, 9 out of 10

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~Game Informer, 9.75 out of 10

"Calling this game epic would be an understatement."
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PlayStation 2

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Neo Contra

Contra's 3D redemption may be at hand

"Their goal is to retain all the concepts…that define what Contra is all about while nudging the gameplay more toward the 3D realm."

For most gamers, Contra needs no introduction. Those who became entranced by its hardcore 2D shooting action back in arcades and on NES already know that the series represents the best the genre has to offer, and those who played its most recent incarnation, Contra: Shattered Soldier on PlayStation 2, recognize that the series is still every bit as relevant, exciting and challenging in the modern era. Konami realizes it too, which is why Contra is back, albeit slightly different, in the form of Neo Contra.

Even though Shattered Soldier was a sales success, the development team has decided to modernize the series even further with Neo Contra. According to producer Nobuya Nakazato, their goal is to retain all the concepts—incredibly intense action, pattern-heavy gameplay, monstrous bosses, a variety of weapons—that define what Contra is all about while nudging the gameplay more toward the 3D realm. The result is a Contra that looks and plays more like a top-down shooter, although the viewpoint can switch on the fly; both side and behind-the-back views, for example, are featured in a creature-riding stage.

Jumping is now a thing of the past. Although that topic was hotly debated among the development team, they decided that in order to increase the ease of switching weapons, jumping wouldn't be included (what that specifically means, however, is yet unknown). Speaking of weapons, players will once again have immediate access to a number of different firearms (as in Shattered Soldier), but this time, the player will select which ones to bring along when each stage begins. Traditional weapons like the machine gun, flamethrower and spread gun will all be there, along with a new homing weapon designed specifically to combat aerial units.

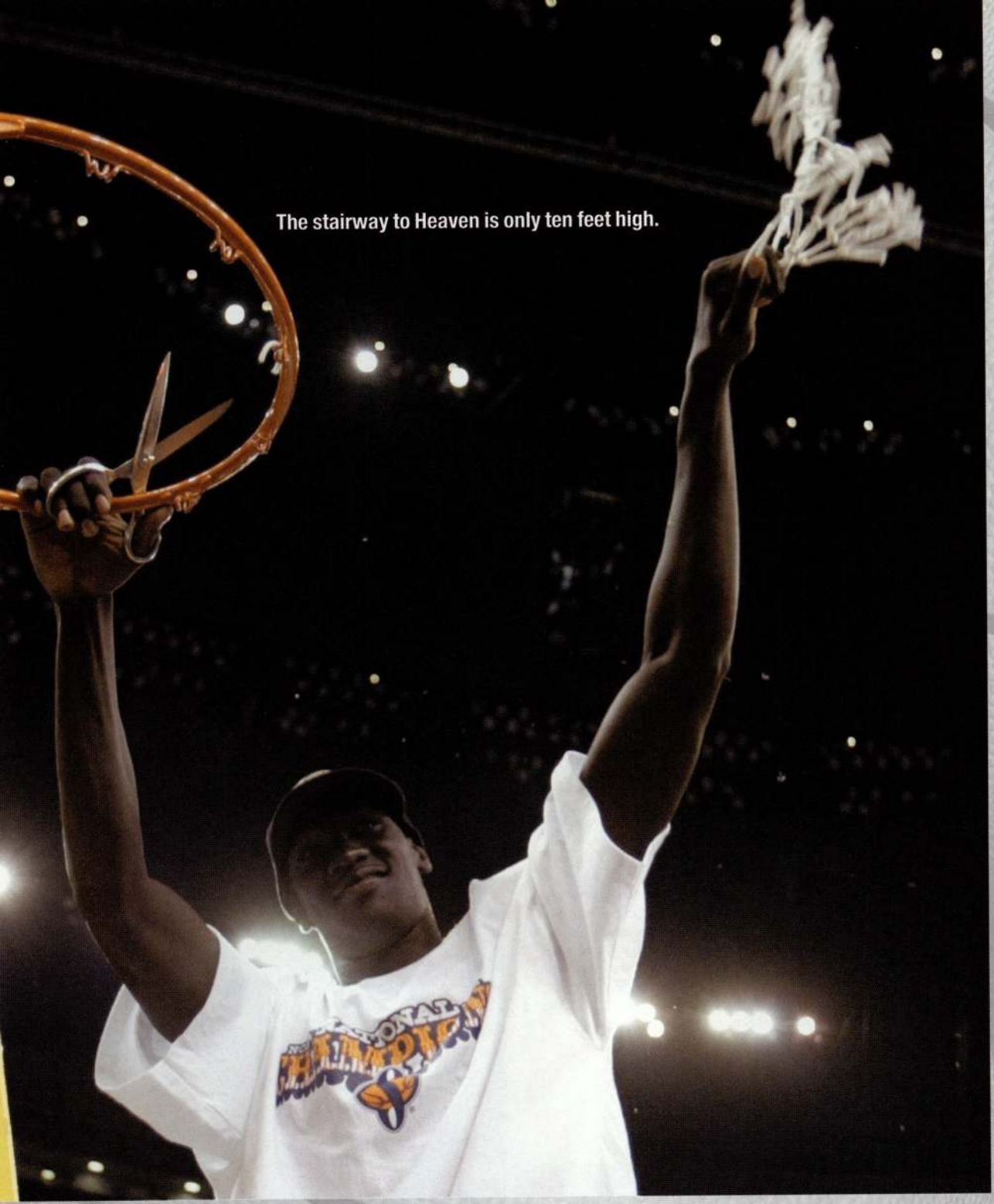
Another new aspect of Neo Contra will be an increased emphasis on story. While the game is still all-out action, CG cutscenes created by the Castlevania: Lament of Innocence team will flesh out the story of returning commando Bill Rizer and his new comrade-in-arms, the futuristic samurai Genbei Jaguer Yagyu.

Though it remains to be seen if Neo Contra truly brings the franchise into a new era (bad memories of the PS1 Contras are hard to erase), the game is, at the very least, looking visually impressive and ferociously action-packed, even at only 40 percent complete.

Chris Hoffman

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: November 2004

Nothing quite says "freaky" like a giant, mutated baby head.



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Silent Hill 4

The Room

The greatest terror is the one closest to home

Welcome back to a world of personalized horror…a world where the familiar becomes the terrifying…where unimaginably grotesque creatures become reality. Welcome back to Silent Hill.

Silent Hill 4: The Room marks a return to the psychological terror that the series is known for, an internalized fear that probably cut its deepest in Silent Hill 2, compared to the slightly more occult-oriented themes of the other installments. Producer Akira Yamaoka is attempting to prey on players' fear of confinement, specifically in an area that might be considered one of comfort…until it starts to become dark and twisted. To be more precise, "The Room" of the game's subtitle refers to the apartment of protagonist Henry Townsend. Henry finds himself locked in his apartment, until hours grow into days and days become a week. A discomforting situation takes a turn toward the bizarre when a hole suddenly appears in Henry's bathroom—a hole that, unfortunately for him, leads not to freedom, but to the macabre cityscapes of Silent Hill, where wretched humans crawl like spiders, zombified dogs hunger and walls may come writhing to life.

Further upping the dread factor is SH4's new first-person mode. When in his apartment, you'll play the game from Henry's viewpoint, never knowing what could be sneaking up behind you. The worlds of Silent Hill that lie beyond the hole, meanwhile, take place in a traditional third-person perspective. This viewpoint is not player-controlled, and the game, according to Yamaoka, is split 50/50 between first- and third-person viewpoints.

Though it seems contradictory to the psychological horror, Silent Hill 4 also features an increased action quotient, complete with more weapon variety and a revamped interface in which players will switch weapons in real time. More non-playable characters will be introduced as well. But most intriguing of all is Yamaoka's promise that his team is re-evaluating what makes people frightened and working to make this installment the most terrifying yet. For the many who find a thrill in pushing their fear tolerance to the limit, Konami's latest experiment in horror can't begin soon enough. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: Fall 2004

"...wretched humans crawl like spiders, zombified dogs hunger and walls may come writhing to life."

Scenes of the twisted and grotesque once again litter Silent Hill's gamescape.

Tenchu

Return from Darkness

Decap attack: take two

Below: Behold the new Xbox Ayame model...yummy.

"...a skillfully balanced fusion of grappling, creeping and hand-to-hand combat..."

The latest banner PS2 title to cross platform lines, Tenchu: Return from Darkness (a beefier Wrath of Heaven), will pick up all of the requisite Xbox trim in the transition. While Return would be some measure better had it been built for the 'box from the ground up, any technological shortcomings are more than made up for via its magnetic gameplay, hypnotic soundtrack and nimble brand of ninja stealth. There's nothing else quite like it.

On the tech side, the list of upgrades includes specular lighting, particle effects in explosions, higher poly-count models, higher resolution backgrounds and reflection mapping, while on the gameplay/design side, new stealth tactics, an improved fighting engine and two all-new levels (totaling 11 single-player maps) have been added, making Return a suitably amped redux.

Still, the stars of this show are the core gameplay and design K2 bring to the series—a skillfully balanced fusion of grappling, creeping and hand-to-hand combat accented by the best stealth kills in the business and enough ninja garb for even the most fervent closet samurai. Various traps, poison rice, stealth bombs, exploding shuriken and other such ninja favorites make each level an open book, yours to assail as you see fit against the hauntingly real AI. Add two-player co-op play via Xbox Live and, well, the transformation is complete. It's always great to see a quality title spread its wings; perhaps a GameCube version isn't far behind. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: K2
Publisher: Activision
Available: March

Seven Samurai 20XX

Seven Samurai in living color

Based on one of the most popular and influential Japanese films ever made—Akira Kurosawa's Seven Samurai, released in 1954—Seven Samurai 20XX presents the same story in a different epoch, moving the tale from 16th century post civil war Japan to a grim, industrial, futuristic era. The film, which employed cinematography and camera work far before its time, chronicles the plight of poor farmers and their quest for survival, attempting to trade protection for food, recruiting samurai to guard them from eminent death at the hands of ruthless bandits. The game unfolds in much the same way—find then fight—only it's drenched in action from the outset and exploding with neo-industrial style. Sammy Studios spared no expense bringing SS 20XX to fruition. In proper tribute to the film, the game was scripted in cooperation with Kurosawa Productions and the late director's son, Hisao, with much of the art and design honors going to world-renowned artist Moebius, perched on a score from Academy Award-winning composer Ryuichi Sakamoto. All well and good, as they say...but is it any good? Well, that depends on how you slice it, or, should I say, hack 'n slash it.

In order to love this game, you need to love the idea of this game as homage to a classic film. SS 20XX is as much about style as it is substance, placing a huge emphasis on character design, settings, ambience and adventure to offset its core play mechanic, which is pure, unadulterated hack 'n slash. Popular opinion might tell you that's a bad thing, but I beg to differ. Done wrong, sans any layers or raw energy, it's bad indeed, but done to its visceral best, it can be a fabulous mechanic on which to hang an adventure. Deep, evolving play mechanics certainly have their place, but gaming was founded on simplicity—games that did one or two things really well and looked great doing so; SS 20XX is much the same. Like Chaos Legion, this is a hack 'n slash I can get behind. The method they've plugged into the madness keeps a smile on your face with each swing of the sword.

You play as the reluctant Natoe, coerced into helping the underling villagers of a city gone mad fend off the Humanoids (replicant beings that look human but possess far superior power)

Below: Beat the mid-bosses and on the second go-through you can use their weapons...hair style not included.

by an aged samurai, Kambei, and Natoe's childhood friend Jodie. Hinata, a silent, mysterious girl being hunted by the Humanoids, Dick, a village representative, and Al, a village orphan with dreams of becoming a samurai, are also part of the initial party. Just five samurai to go; the hunt is on.

The first 30 minutes or so—beyond the initial CG and vague set-up—are misleading, as you slice your way through wave after wave of attackers, getting a feel for the blistering, location-sensitive melee system. But soon after, you're plunged into the real-time events—its rich story, combat and truly memorable boss encounters. 20XX wears its flamboyancy like MJ in court, from the neon-lit misty back alleys of Kowloon to its ornate innards, a neo-Kabuki hodgepodge of Japanese tradition and future decadence; the game drips cool at every turn. The easy-to-navigate map keeps things moving, the voice acting is actually great (triple-A anime cast all the way) and the non-linear elements provide a sense of true adventure.

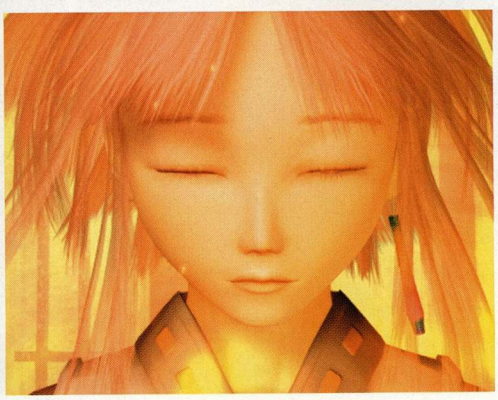
On the downside, the dialogue doesn't change within missions so if you return to the beginning of a scenario after key events, comrades who were actually there will say the same thing as when you set out—a minor detractor that could be flushed out in the final. On the whole though, the swordplay will spoil you, the dialogue engross you, the visuals dazzle you, and the music wash it all down nice and smooth. So what's not to love? Oh yeah, I forgot: hack 'n slash sucks. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Dimps
Publisher: Sammy Studios
Available: Spring

"In order to love this game, you need to love the idea of this game as homage to a classic film"

Reel vs. virtual

Below: Scenes from the classic 1954 film translated into the future gamescape, staying true to the material while shifting the events into a bleak, industrial future.



Nanobreaker

The future of hack-and-slash action

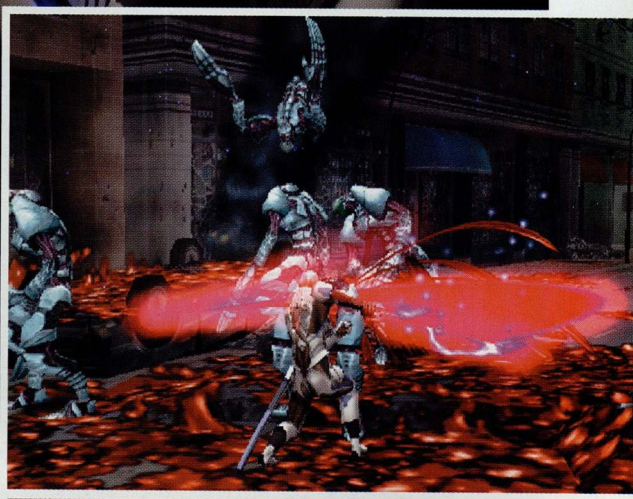
When you hear the name of Koji "Iga" Igarashi, the main thing that springs to mind is Castlevania. After all, he's the man responsible for the beloved Castlevania: Symphony of the Night and, more recently, Lament of Innocence. But now, Iga is trying to make a new mark with an original action-packed title by the name of Nanobreaker.

Nanobreaker is in some ways very similar to Castlevania, and in some ways worlds apart. Iga has clearly learned from Lament, his first foray into 3D action, and transferred that knowledge to make Nanobreaker's melee-based combat just as intense as LOI's was; in fact, Nanobreaker is running on an advanced, evolved LOI engine. Like that game, Nanobreaker's action is primarily based around two types of attacks, but instead of strong and weak, these attacks are horizontal and vertical, and instead of a whip, the weapon of choice is a plasma blade. Furthermore, due to the addition of an "attack modifier" button, a stab move and launch move (think Devil May Cry) can also be used. These attacks aren't just arbitrary; depending on the enemy's height and size, different attacks are more effective, and furthermore, by combining the attacks, a wide variety of combos can be achieved, in which the plasma blade transforms itself into other weapons, like an axe, for that fatal blow. The blade even has a "capture" ability that pulls enemies close; kinda whip-like, huh?

The setting and story, however, are far removed from Castlevania. Nanobreaker takes place in 2015, where nanotechnology, once being developed to create a utopia, has gone out of control and taken over the research island. The microscopic machines begin to self-replicate and create their own entities, frequently from within human hosts, and so the player, as cyborg soldier Jake Warren, is sent in to kick some nanotech ass and destroy the master computer. While most of Jake's mission involves carving up enemies with that plasma blade, he can also collect glowing pink orbs to unleash super attacks, and there are adventure elements too. As the game progresses, Jake learns new abilities, like being able to pull objects with his blade, that grant him access to new areas—the one aspect in which LOI was lacking.

Though only a small bit of Nanobreaker has been shown so far, the game already boasts silky-smooth gameplay, great character designs and an excellent soundtrack. Iga may have another franchise on his hands. **Chris Hoffman**

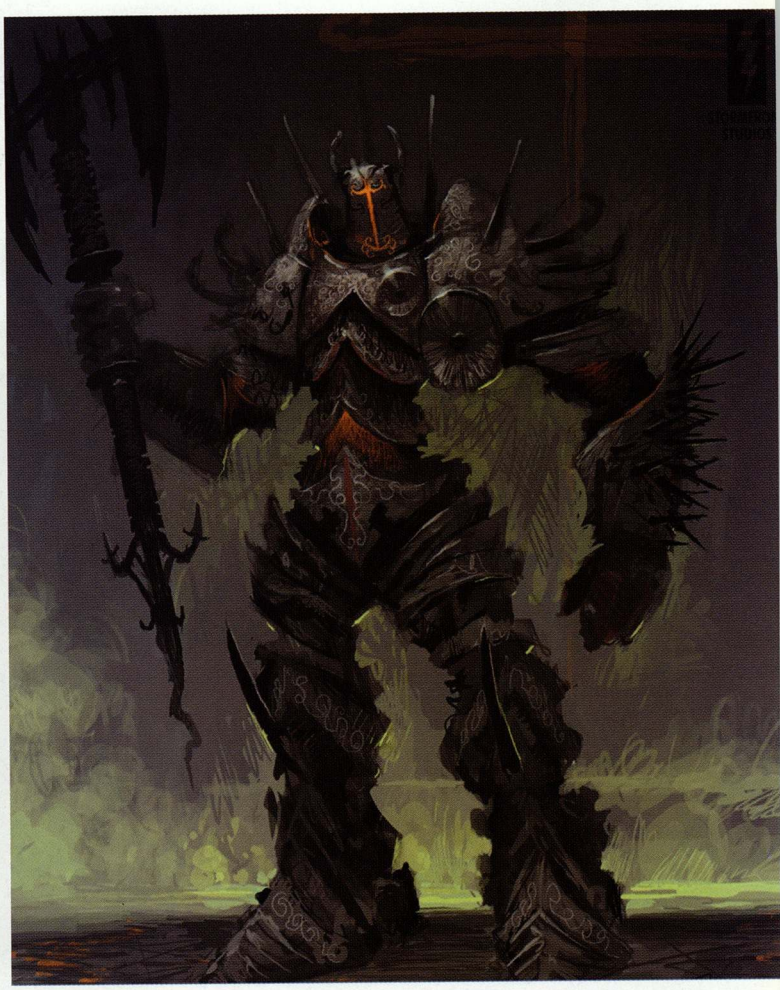
"...instead of strong and weak, these attacks are horizontal and vertical, and instead of a whip, the weapon of choice is a plasma blade."



As Iga explained it: remember, these are cyborgs, so this is NOT blood!

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: Fall 2004

Check out the rogue's invisibility/stealth technique as she hides in the shadows.



Forgotten Realms

Dungeons, dragons and jaw-dropping graphics

"Everything is painterly, amazingly dense and so full of variety..."

As games keep getting better and better, visuals become more and more sophisticated and players keep getting harder and harder to impress—yet Forgotten Realms impressed me. When you are introduced to a game as early as this one and don't really have much of a chance to explore its gameplay potential, a few introductory levels leave a lot to the visual design for early impact. Drawn from the Forgotten Realms sect of Dungeons and Dragons, this fairly linear action title is fed by pure fantasy. One of the levels Atari demonstrated is set in a rich forest region, whose paths fall off the sides of great precipices, encased in rows of waterfalls and a sparkling sky that melts into fog and clouds. Everything is painterly, amazingly dense and so full of variety that it doesn't look like a typical game bound by the obvious technical threads stitching it together. There is a natural pallor over the area that's transfixing.

A few minutes in conversation with the game's producer left me even more excited than what my eyes had seen. These guys really now their stuff, from very specific gameplay approaches to true cinematic technique to how to blend artistry with sophistication. They're even taking the invaluable steps to fully orchestrate and dynamically integrate a score.

The action is basic hack 'n slash, with a minor emphasis on character growth to invoke a spirited sense of role-playing adventure. The battles are waged by a team of three characters—rogue, warrior and sorcerer—who work closely together to provide combos and group attacks. The game does not limit you to whom you must command in a given situation, by simply taking over the AI of the other two warriors you choose to place in support.

Fans of Dungeons and Dragons should be pleased to know renowned series-novel veteran R.A. Salvatore is writing the dialogue. Fans of straight action games should be following this one as closely as anything else on the way this year. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Stormfront Studios
Publisher: Atari
Available: Fall

CRIMSON SEA 2

The Sho must go on

Regarded by many as Dynasty Warriors in space—which, if you throw in team play, a deeper story and a smattering of RPG elements, is pretty accurate—Koei's underrated Crimson Sea has been uprooted from its Xbox-exclusive address and born anew on PS2 where they hope to find a broader audience for their seminal futuristic epic. Given the current PS2 glut and the Xbox's growth since the original, only time will tell whether or not this was a wise choice—severing any fan following that bunkered down for the first (save those who own both consoles)—but if it's any consolation, the team has managed to make the game look and play even better than the original. Few know the PS2 as well as Koei, especially when it comes to packing the screen with assailants.

Since you're more than likely not familiar with Crimson Sea, a crash course: broke (but extremely well dressed) bounty hunters Sho and Yanquin were living a meager existence (think Cowboy Bebop without the ramen) in the Aquarian city of Theopolis until they were approached by the supremely sexy, slim and shady Live-D and her clever ploy to awaken Sho to his god-given psionic powers as the last "Vipa" on Theopolis—their last hope against the invading Muton hordes. Just another bug hunt ensued, interrupted by exciting liquid bosses and featuring team play and role-playing elements among a fairly run-of-the-mill story. Basically Koei doing what they do best, only in space with a tinge of corridor and adventure gameplay.

With CS2, that tinge graduates closer to departure—the emphasis now placed on larger creatures, faster, more spectacular battles, far more diverse missions and nuanced fighting techniques compared to the seemingly endless barrage of bugs that sent Bengay stock through the roof in the original. They've done some renovating too, improving the erratic camera and streamlining the menu/inventory system to go with the new "Time Extend" mode, which slows down time while speeding up Sho, and a new playable character, the lovely Feanay. So, Koei plus adventure plus chick factor equals very cool, right? Well, don't break out the party favors just yet; there's still some tweaking to do. Sho feels like a ship anchor on the downward jump arc and has no walking animation for starters. You can slow his full running animation down to a crawl...but no walk. This needs attention. Otherwise, it's all systems go for the change of pace we've been waiting for from Koei. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Koei
Publisher: Koei
Available: March 30

"...the emphasis now placed on larger creatures, faster, more spectacular battles, far more diverse missions and nuanced fighting techniques..."

Fans of the first game won't miss the watery Mutons for long...

Fear not, series newbies! Every significant moment from the original is available by talking to the team...the untold hours the rest of us hacked away, yours on demand.

Breakdown

Putting the "person" into first-person gaming

After straying from the action formula that made them a 16-bit legend with games like Splatterhouse and Rolling Thunder, it seems like the glory days of Namco action games are slowly reemerging as they get back to their Japanese roots and almost untouchable prowess in league with their racing and, of course, fighting efforts. Five minutes into Breakdown I almost completely forgot about Dead to Rights. Like they have time and time again, Namco Japan is out to raise the bar in yet another genre, this time focusing their efforts on the first-person genre: a category sorely in need of innovation of any kind. Beginning with a fast, efficient engine, great story and compelling universe, Namco take us on a journey quite unlike any other as we see the game as if through our own eyes. You don't just play Breakdown; it happens to you. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: March

Interview

Hirofumi Kami Producer of Breakdown **Namco Limited**

play: Thank you for finally putting the "person" into first-person action. Looking down on a ladder and actually seeing legs has been a long time coming. You've managed to create a perspective quite unlike any other, providing a realistic window into the game. What was your biggest challenge creating the realistic vantage point?

Kami: In most first-person games, you usually don't see the character's face or much of his body. We actually created a model of the main character and placed the camera on his head in order to accurately re-create the minor head and body movements. We think this really helps to immerse the player in the world of Breakdown.

We also needed to realistically represent the character's hand movements, such as when picking up items or eating, in order for the players to feel as if they are actually "in" the game. This feature is not included in most first-person games. The player will frequently see Derrick's hand movements on-screen, and will come to believe that Derrick's hands are their own hands.

What type of R&D was involved in getting the perspective just right?

We started off by creating a detailed first-person viewpoint, and then basically repeated the process through trial and error.

By actually setting a camera on the model's head to realistically re-create character motion, we were able to experiment with several types of images in a first-person view. Eventually we were able to re-create very realistic images of actions such as fighting, picking up objects and eating. Once this was done, we had to consider what type of movement was best suited for Breakdown. We didn't want to use obviously "game-like" motions. Our aim was to make the character behave and move in a realistic, human manner. This idea is continued throughout the entire game, from start to finish, by telling the entire story only from Derrick's viewpoint, without the use of third-person cutscenes.

What gave you the idea to take first-person action in this direction?

The original concept was to create a game in which the player experiences the entire game in exactly the same way as the main character. We decided to use a first-person

"The player will frequently see Derrick's hand movements on-screen, and will come to believe that Derrick's hands are their own hands."

Eat your heart out, Trinity!

viewpoint to re-create the actual body movements as realistically as possible. We wanted the player to experience the feeling of actually being a heroic movie star, while also being satisfied with the overall gameplay experience.

I love the way you handle the story telling (and simulated amnesia) in the game between intel from clipboards and real-time conversation. Did you write a screenplay and then plug in your virtual actor and cast?

First, we decided on the overall outline of the story, and then designed the characters that inhabit the Breakdown world. We spent a long time creating the overall story. As the entire game is viewed from a first-person perspective, we were very limited in the tools we could use to tell the story: for example, we were unable to insert cutscenes or movies to advance the story. We believe we have succeeded in creating a scenario in which the player's only source of information is his own eyes and ears.

The perspective brings about a real sense of peril, especially when Derrick goes up against new forms of T'lan. Are you leaning as much towards horror as you are gunplay, fighting and puzzles?

We want players to feel exactly as Derrick, the main character, does. This includes emotions such as fear, anger, sorrow and pleasure. Besides the scary sections, we have worked hard to include other features in order to make players feel these various emotions.

What has this team worked on in the past?

Galaxian 3: Attack of The Zolgear, Time Crisis 1, 2 and 3, Final Furlong, Ridge Racer V: Arcade Battle.

Is Breakdown being treated as new a Namco franchise, like what Resident Evil (Biohazard) is to Capcom?

Of course!

Is the Xbox gaining any momentum in Japan? As powerful as it is, why do you suppose it's not doing as well as in the U.S. and UK?

I think Japanese players have an image that games on the Xbox are more for American gamers because Xbox is an American game console. Japanese gamers have grown up with Japanese developed hardware, so they have some preconceptions about American-made hardware and games. Foreign movies (Hollywood and Hong Kong) are very popular here in Japan, and I think that Japanese gamers are gradually starting to appreciate and play various types of western-developed games.

Phantom Dust

The creator of Panzer Dragoon continues to explore his penchant for action

The world has been decimated, post-apocalyptic style. Nothing remains the way it was before the disaster, and there's no clue to what caused the meltdown. All you know is that you don't really know anything at all, waking up in an amnesia-induced fog, surrounded by nothing but chaos. Do you run and hide and ride it all out? Of course not; you find a way to add to the decay by fighting back against powerful forces that like to take residence in arenas.

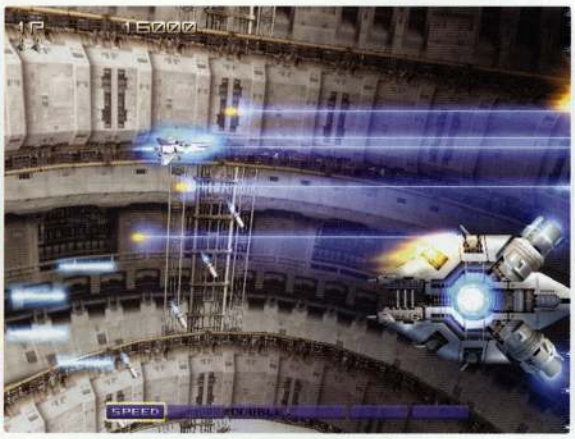
Kill or be killed, so first up, it's time to come to grips with upwards of 300 evolving skills and techniques, forming them to your own personal brand of attack. Maybe you like to defend or use more precision than brute force; maybe you like speed over power. Whatever your approach to the situation at hand, the idea is to simply lay waste to destructible environments and eliminate the many different types of enemies before marching on to the next battle. Along the way, you'll constantly be hoarding powers, which can be effortlessly unleashed with the press of the four assigned central buttons on the Xbox controller. As naturally expected in this type of fast-paced action game, a lock-on button helps maintain a direct line of focus on who you want to pop.

When you're ready to take on a human opponent, Phantom Dust will have you covered online with Xbox Live, or you can stay offline and link up or go split-screen. Not all characters will be created equal, so don't expect so much simplicity of play that all you do is jump in and mash buttons. All sorts of attacks and abilities must be managed. What it all adds up to is about to be formed as the game enters the core of its production cycle. In the meantime, note that Yukio Futatsugi, best known for his work on the Panzer Dragoon series, is the talent who's calling the shots. **Brady Fiechter**

System: Xbox
Developer: MGS Japan
Publisher: Microsoft
Available: TBA

"...it's time to come to grips with upwards of 300 evolving skills and techniques."

The end of the world's looking great; your job is to destroy what's left.



Gradius V

system: ps2 / **developer**: treasure / **publisher**: konami / **available**: summer 2004

First, the bad news about Gradius V: it's been postponed to an as-yet-undetermined time later this summer. Now the good news: the delay is due to the developers at Treasure continuing to fine-tune the game, taking their time to delicately tweak it to perfection as they create one of the most impressive shooters in recent memory. The special effects look amazing, the bosses are huge, and the seven vast stages, enhanced by the first co-op play in Gradius history, will be filled with strategy and challenge. Old-school gamers should be in heaven with this one. *-CH*

BloodRayne 2

system: ps2, gc, xbox, pc / **developer**: terminal reality / **publisher**: majesco / **available**: october

As evidenced by these screens, BloodRayne 2 is visually improved in every way, but where it will really shine is in the gameplay. The platforming is made better through rail and pole acrobatics, and the combat enriched with deeper melee moves, a new combo system, 12 fatalities like "the cleave" and "stab and behead" and new harpoon functionality—the ability to pull environmental objects down on attackers. Elsewhere, new soft-body physics should clear up the collision woes, while the new experience system lets you upgrade weapons and abilities based on how you play the game. *-DH*

Bujingai

system: ps2 / **developer**: taito/red entertainment / **publisher**: bam! / **available**: march

The first minute you play Taito's Bujingai (featuring design work from the creators of Cowboy Bebop and Trigun) is integrated directly into the opening cinema...a great way to begin a very good game. Though mostly inspired by Devil May Cry, Bujingai (developed by the esteemed Red Entertainment) also incorporates elements from Prince of Persia, Shinobi and Strider, and does so with all the savvy and most of the polish of today's top-tier adventures. Lau can wall-run and vault in every direction, fly for a limited time, lock-on enemies from anywhere and commit obscene spiraling attacks. *-DH*

Suikoden IV

system: ps2 / **developer**: kce tokyo / **publisher**: konami / **available**: fall 2004

The latest installment of this beloved RPG series continues to impress. In some ways, it is a throwback to the Suikoden games of old, with only a single hero and a battle system closer to Suikoden I and II. In others, it's a step forward, with enhanced 3D graphics and the addition of voiceovers. Set in the same rich world as previous installments, Suikoden IV features the return of characters like Viki, Jeane, Lady Leknaat and the renowned Silverberg family as the True Rune of Punishment brings together the 108 Stars of Destiny for a tale of drama and betrayal. *-CH*

ShellShock: Nam '67

system: ps2, xbox, pc / **developer**: guerrilla games / **publisher**: eidos / **available**: summer

Now here's one set to shake your emotions: ShellShock: Nam '67 places you in the powerful role of a rookie soldier on his first stretch of duty in Vietnam. It all branches out from your base camp, where you enter the oppressive countryside to battle the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. With the jungles of Indochina serving as the hotspot, unusual hurdles like tunnel systems and booby traps serve to heighten the intensity. As Eidos states: "ShellShock: Nam '67 provides gamers with the most true-to-life and completely uncensored depiction of the Vietnam experience for the first time in a video game." *-BF*

Pro Race Driver 2

system: xbox, pc / **developer**: codemasters / **publisher**: codemasters / **available**: spring

Pro Race Driver is one of the true sleeper gems of the racing circuits. The follow-up, Race Driver 2, will add to the already rich mix the most diverse range of motor sports ever seen in one game, including GT sports car racing, street racing, rally, DTM, V8 Supercars, Global GT Lights, rally cross, Formula Ford, Open Wheel Grand Prix and classic car racing while journeying through 52 racing circuits at world-famous locations including Laguna Seca, Surfers Paradise, Euro Speedway, Donington Park, Kyalami and Road America. Look for head-to-head online play via Xbox Live as well. *-DH*

Thief: Deadly Shadows

system: ps2, xbox / **developer**: ion storm / **publisher**: eidos / **available**: spring

Devious thief Garret ain't no Robin Hood—he steals from the wealthy and keeps it all for himself. His arsenal is precise: lock picks, a blackjack, multipurpose arrows, wall- climbing gloves, oil flasks, flash bombs, a dagger. His job seems almost necessary; the town he cleans out is filled with shady crooks and corrupt nobles, mired in the misuse of magic and power. It's a dark place indeed, and you get to explore it in a unique third- and first-person perspective: set up ambushes, go in for aggressive kills, rely on a silent search. Good to see this series finally on console. *-BF*

Unreal II: The Awakening

system: xbox / **developer**: tantalus/legend software / **publisher**: atari / **available**: february

Back in February 2002, Unreal II was released on PC—without any multiplayer additions. Early intentions were to include a mode called XMP, which is now being resurrected as a free expansion pack for PC and will provide valuable companionship to the huge single-player campaign on Xbox—the preserved offering from the PC. XMP has been mostly reworked from scratch, with a lot of new angles being implemented to join the core concepts the team originally started with. Vehicles now play a part in the team-based conflict, designed solely for the multiplayer maps. Also of note: maps aren't recycled from the one-player mode. *-BF*

DarkWatch: Curse of the West

system: ps2, xbox / **developer**: sammy / **publisher**: sammy / **available**: TBA

A vampire/western shooter doesn't come around...ever. In its theme alone, Darkwatch: Curse of West is certainly unique, and Sammy is working a number of features in to its upcoming first-person shooter that will hopefully take the originality into the gameplay realm. Vampiric hero Jericho Cross calls on the supernatural for added strength, ripping through his enemies with a number of arcane weapons. When he's not on foot, his horse is added strength and swift transport. Tis a rare thing for a Japanese company to build an FPS, and this one definitely appears separated from the dense pack. *-BF*

Shaman King

system: ps2 / **developer**: kce japan east / **publisher**: konami / **available**: summer 2004

Yoh Asakura, the boy with special powers that let him speak with spirits, is coming straight from the Shaman King manga and anime and into the Konami game of the same name. Shaman King's gameplay is a hybrid of strategy and fighting elements, where players move units around a map in strategic fashion, but then when battles break out, they'll actually get to control the real-time action up close and personal. While characters from the manga are prominently featured, the game will provide fans with an all-new storyline and bosses created specifically for the game. *-CH*

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Van Helsing

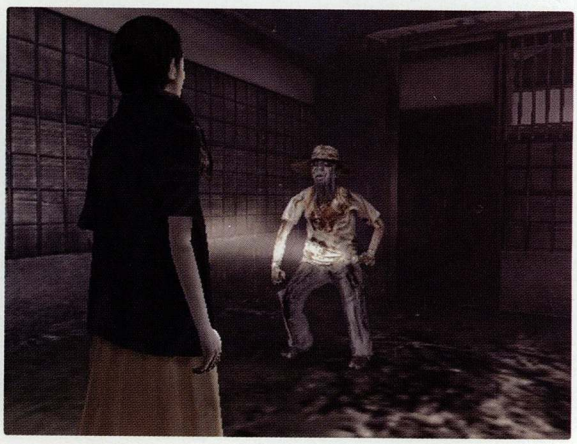
system: ps2, xbox / **developer:** saffire / **publisher:** vu games / **available:** spring

Van Helsing the movie=Van Helsing the game=very cool potential. You take control of Bram Stoker's monster hunter in the third-person, searching to vanquish evil in 19th century Transylvania. While the game draws heavily from locations, monsters and plot points of the film, setting up interactive moments that closely parallel the big-screen production, the development team is working diligently to provide an extended backstory and various situations you won't get from the movie. Journeying to Castle Frankenstein and Castle Dracula...yeah, definitely cool. *-BF*

Siren

system: ps2 / **developer:** scej / **publisher:** sony / **available:** q2 2004

Developed by a new internal Sony team in Japan, which contains members of the original Silent Hill creators, Siren is a survival horror game that takes place during a three-day journey to discover a terrifying evil that's plaguing a small Japanese village. Most the inhabitants have been wiped out, leaving the few survivors to fend off the monsters that were once friends and family. Of course, the developers are going for creepy atmosphere and chilling imagery, but one of the more interesting features in the game is the ability to "sight-jack," or jump into the minds of other characters and monsters. *-BF*



Astal

"Yah-tah!"

System: Saturn
Developer: Sega
Publisher: Sega
Available: 1995

If ever there was a poster child for a 2D resurgence outside of Symphony of the Night, Astal is it. A shining example of what any technology applied to side scrolling can bring, it's all I can do to keep from weeping as I play it. How I ache for games of this nature to live again. Astal follows the most basic of premises (he's out to save his world and his girl), but does so with so much storybook verve it wouldn't matter if it was based on a story about running to the right.

What Astal brought to the table back in '95 (aside from stunning visuals, a beautiful prologue that slays me to this day and the type of character design that's been eroding since) was a fairly deep satchel of tricks. He could huff and puff his enemies down, ground pound with his massive fists, lift and throw things many, many times his size or send his trusty bird out to scavenge for food or annihilate enemies. The same newfound grandeur could be found among Astal's fire walks, crystalline paths, mystical caves and magical gardens. Scaling, mind bogglingly beautiful exercises in sprite technology, the mesmerizing duck-and-cover, erosion techniques, tiered design and breathtaking boss battles all pointed to a glorious new era in 2D...until the PlayStation showed up and scared Sega into force-feeding 3D through a machine that couldn't compete. The rest, as they say, is history. Pepperouchau (Clockwork Knight) and Astal did their valiant best, but in the end, they couldn't save 2D. Had Sega stayed the course and let brands like Mystic Defender, Moonwalker, Golden Axe, Alex Kidd, Shinobi (a real one), Streets of Rage, Dynamite Headdy, Gunstar Heroes and Sonic (we're still waiting for that magical next-gen 2D Sonic) fly, we could very well be looking at a much more diverse gamescape. I say it's never too late, not as long as the people who were there still breathe...but I'm not holding my breath. **Dave Halverson**

"...so much storybook verve it wouldn't matter if it was based on a story about running to the right."

Astal's bat swarms were a sign of the polygonally challenged system's 2D power.

James Bond 007

Everything or Nothing

A stalwart FPS series goes the way of third-person action

Bond may be MIA on the big screen this year, yet his global spy thrills are far from on hold in the big, fast and loud 007: Everything or Nothing. Competently scripted by series-veteran screenwriter Bruce Feirstein and voiced by the likes of Judi Dench, Shannon Elizabeth, John Cleese and Pierce Brosnan, the game churns its slick production values right out the gate. There's even an entertaining title sequence, set to an original theme song by Mya.

You know the drill: spy gadgets, deadly weapons, fast cars, big explosions and exotic locales. The game sets out to create an authentic Bond world, full of the signature style and energy that marks the 007 films, and it succeeds quite well. Perhaps one of its most nagging faults is that, given the source material, it treads too far into unchecked fantasy: an incredibly lifelike Pierce Brosnan takes rocket blasts to the chest, free-falls, switches multiple guns on the fly (that disappearing gun-in-the-back holster is just not good), kills entire armies and rappels burning buildings with the ease and efficiency of a, well, video game character. Brosnan, the actor, can disarm the illusion of disbelief, and he and the other cast's sophisticated texturing flirt with the cheese effect we experienced back in the digitization days.

But man is it all a wild, fun ride once you can look past the awkward realism mixed with outrageous action. Whether blasting reckless thugs with a rocket-outfitted Aston Martin Vanquish or tagging a sniper right between the eyes with a Walther PPK, the dynamic design of the execution and the sharp, highly charged presentation moving the chaos along can be thrilling.

The mixture between third-person action and flying a helicopter, driving off-road in a tank or motorcycling down a freeway straightaway is impressively integrated into the whole of the experience. Everything may control the same and pack the same general form of weapon, but the feeling of diversity is excellent and the simplicity of control is right where it should be in this type of game. And while Bond's overriding mission is to basically shoot everything that shoots back, there's so much to see and a variety of different ways to approach a situation—rappelling is always a blast—that Everything or Nothing skillfully avoids monotony.

The challenge can be steep. Running and gunning without taking cover and finding calculated ways of clearing a path is death. Playing on 00 Agent, where the depths of the missions take full shape, is the only way to full enjoyment. If you find the game a bit artificial and playing off contrived action setups at times, no worries: there's always something entertaining waiting around the next corner.

Brady Fiechter B+

System: Xbox, PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: EA Canada
Publisher: EA
Available: February

Voice talent to the rescue!

Is this a movie or a game? Clockwise from left: Willem Dafoe, Shannon Elizabeth, John Cleese and Mya join the all-star voice cast.

Hand-to-hand combat is a nice touch to break up the weapons action.

"You know the drill: spy gadgets, deadly weapons, fast cars, big explosions and exotic locales."

Interview

Scott Bandy Producer

play: Everything or Nothing is an ambitious step towards where a movie-inspired game should be going. You aren't merely watching cutscenes, interacting around layers of detached story. You are playing an entire original film, sort of living a cinematic adventure. From the inside, what was the one thing you meant to achieve with this game? What was your one vision that formed the foundation?
Scott Bandy: First of all, thanks for the kind words! It has been a long road to get here, and it is always gratifying to learn that your hard work is appreciated!

One of the biggest forces driving the production efforts behind Everything or Nothing this year was the team's desire to fill the void created by the lack of a Bond film this year. While some teams may have looked upon this fact as an obstacle to the game's reception by the public, the Everything or Nothing team took it as a challenge, and was determined to produce an interactive experience that would satisfy the public's thirst for all things Bond.

You had to balance a lot of gameplay elements for Bond, from flying to driving to flat-out shooting. Where did you find the most hang-ups in the design process?
One of the biggest challenges facing any third-person title is camera management.

When we made the decision to switch from first- to third-person, it meant completely tearing out our existing camera system and rebuilding it from the ground up. While there were many aspects of the game that presented a significant challenge (another notable case is the open environments supported in the driving levels), nailing the third-person camera system was the one that probably required the most iteration.

Did you ever consider using different voice actors for the characters? You have quite the all-star cast.
We are indeed fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with as many fine performers as we have in this production. Identifying and finalizing the entire cast list took some months to complete, but one choice was clear from the very beginning: if we are going to have any chance of delivering an experience that could hope to rival that of a Bond film, we had to get the core ensemble of the Bond cast: Judy Dench, John Cleese and, of course, Pierce Brosnan.

Once we had secured these great performers, we were able to fill in the rest of our cast, confident that we had the core elements required to achieve a credible experience. When we were able to add Willem Dafoe, Shannon Elizabeth, Heidi Klum, Richard Kiel, Mya and Misaki Ito, we knew we had all of the cast elements we needed to put together a truly great production.

How do you approach the cinematic qualities of the game? Is it tough deciding where to stop the action and let the presentation and story side take over?
Deciding when and how the non-interactive sequences of the title would be introduced, as well as the appropriate length and content for each sequence, is indeed a very difficult process. In a game like Everything or Nothing, there is an expectation, and indeed a requirement, to tell a certain portion of your story through cinematic scenes. However, there is also a careful balance that must be maintained between these sequences and live gameplay, in order to avoid them feeling invasive or detracting from the minute-to-minute gameplay. We are very happy with the balance we were able to achieve, and of the quality of our cinematic sequences, but it is always a challenging process.

This must have been a huge undertaking. The game is just so full of flash and feels so big!
It has been a long process that has required the dedication and passion of many, many people, both at the two primary Electronic Arts studios, and also with our partners at MGM and Danjaq.

The game is very large, both in terms of the sheer number of levels, and also the variety of experiences the user has in playing through it. Everyone involved in the project felt strongly that we were building something that had the chance to be a really special product, however, and that certainly helped keep us going through the months of development.

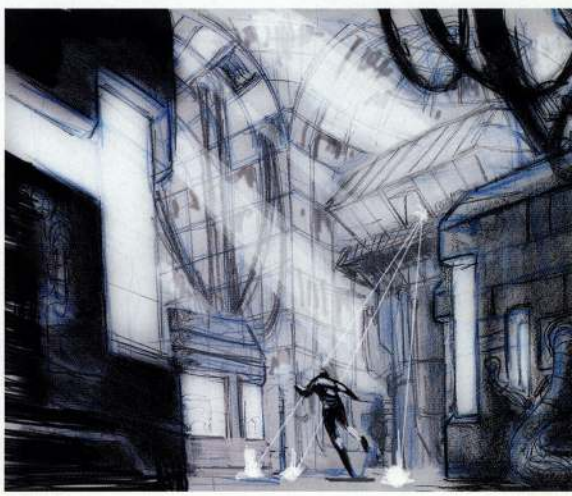
The driving parts are awesome. What part of the game do you like the most?
The driving levels are very impressive, especially when you consider the variety of both vehicles and environments that the user can experience. When you develop a game that encompasses everything from the Porsche Cayenne Turbo to the Aston Martin Vanquish and Triumph Daytona 600, as well as helicopters, dirt bikes and a rally car, you begin to understand the true meaning of the name Everything or Nothing! The team at Electronic Arts Canada really outdid themselves this year.

On the action side, there are again many different experiences present in the game, from stealth and gadget-play to hand-to-hand and firearms combat, but I would have to say my favorite moment in the action side occurs in the level known as "A leap of faith." When confronted with the seemingly impossible task of saving an innocent woman who is plunging to her death, Bond does not hesitate for a moment, but leaps instantly to her rescue. While it is up to the player to ultimately be successful, this is a moment that I feel truly captures the essence of the character and delivers really groundbreaking and exciting game play at the same time.

"As we said early in the production cycle: 'If you're going to *be* Bond, you have to *see* Bond!'"

This series continues to evolve. Why third-person action now? And where do you go next?
As we said early in the production cycle: "If you're going to *be* Bond, you have to *see* Bond!" Once it was clear that we were going to have the ability to use both Pierce's likeness and voice, it was clear that we needed to put him on the screen at all times. The third-person perspective also allowed us to explore many new avenues of gameplay, suwch as stealth mechanics and a more robust hand-to-hand combat system.

As to what's next? You'll have to wait and see!



Metal Gear Solid The Twin Snakes

Tactical espionage action reinvented

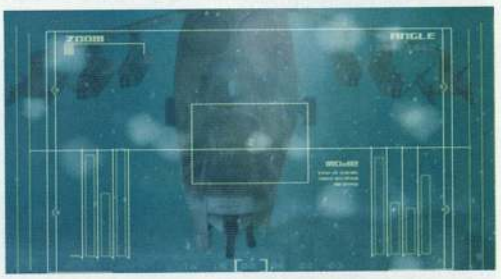
A masterpiece like Metal Gear Solid is nearly impossible to adequately follow-up. As demonstrated by Metal Gear Solid 2, when changes are made to a game of such grandeur, there's always the chance that some of what made the original so resonant with players will be lost. With Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes—which takes the story and framework of MGS and infuses it with the gameplay nuances of MGS2—some changes make the game vastly superior to the original; others don't work quite so well. But no matter how you look at it, Twin Snakes is an excellent gaming experience.

From the moment you see Col. Campbell's command submarine submerged off the coast of Alaska's Shadow Moses Island, it's obvious that one of the biggest improvements to MGS is the graphics. The PS1 original was stunning back in the day, but modern technology makes TS look infinitely better, with detailed hi-res textures, enhanced architecture, exponentially improved character models and a craftsman's attention to detail, like a Mario figurine adorning a desk and realistic frost building up on the camera in frigid areas. Better-looking games certainly exist on GameCube, but seeing this world fully realized, observing these memorable characters with expressive, fully rendered faces, is awesome.

Also improved is the actual gameplay. Though not immediately obvious to those gamers who have been playing MGS2 as of late, the mechanics have evolved greatly since the original game, and the result is a significantly deeper, more challenging adventure. Enemies no longer disappear upon their demise, meaning you'll now have to hide bodies; fortunately, lockers have been added to the environments for such disposals. Solid Snake's moves have also been expanded: he can shoot from a first-person view, climb on top of objects, peer around corners and hang from railings, yielding entirely new ways to sneak through areas and evade (or battle) foes. The Genome army is smarter, too—they feature the same team-oriented AI used in MGS2 and stay on alert longer if Snake gets spotted. You'll be amazed how simple the original MGS seems by comparison.

Had these been the only changes, Twin Snakes would have been nearly flawless, but it is not to be. Some aspects just shouldn't have been modified—like the voices. Although most of the same voice actors reprise their roles, everything has been re-recorded and the new performances just lack the magic of the original. Dr. Naomi Hunter and Mei

Snake sure couldn't peek around corners like this in the original MGS.



"You'll be amazed how simple the original MGS seems by comparison."

Ling now speak without accents, completely stripping them of their distinct personalities, and the ninja, one of the major players who has a new actor, has lost the emotion he once possessed. David Hayter's new Solid Snake is particularly over-the-top: he tends to deepen his voice and growl when he says the last word of each sentence. Note to everyone involved: please reconsider Snake's delivery for MGS3.

Speaking of over-the-top, the other element that shouldn't have been changed so dramatically is the cutscenes. The new Hollywood-style cinematics by Ryuhei Kitamura switch between ridiculously cool and just plain ridiculous—more of the latter, unfortunately. In these new cutscenes, Snake is now Neo, soaring through the air, effortlessly dodging bullets, able to perform impossible feats like kicking missiles back to their place of origin. When this occurs with a character like the ninja, it works great, but when Snake does it, it blows holes in Hideo Kojima's believable, realistic world like a Browning .50-caliber. I'd also like to know why Snake has a seizure and nearly kills Kenneth Baker (the ArmsTech president, not the guy who played R2-D2) when he doesn't know Meryl's Codec number.

Aside from these major changes, lesser things have been altered, too. Among them, a trench in the middle of the M1 tank battle adds more fun and strategy to the conflict, a couple minor action sequences have been deleted here and there and VR training has been scrapped in favor of a boss survival mode.

Of course, every alteration would be for naught if the basic concept weren't so good, the characters so genuine, the story so compelling. Metal Gear's genre-defining premise of sneaking around an enemy-infested base, relying more on skill to avoid detection than an arsenal of weapons to wage war is sheer genius; firing a stinger missile into Rex's maw is a total rush. The original game is certainly more polished—Snake now occasionally butts heads with a wall instead of instantly sidling up against it like he should, and the two-button method to pause the game is nothing short of poor design—but what's here is still a lot of fun. It's too bad that Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes isn't the perfect update of MGS it could have been, but this game is still packed with quality, providing a great experience to MGS rookies and Fox Hound veterans alike. **Chris Hoffman** **B+**

System: GameCube
Developer: Silicon Knights/KCE Japan West
Publisher: Konami
Available: March

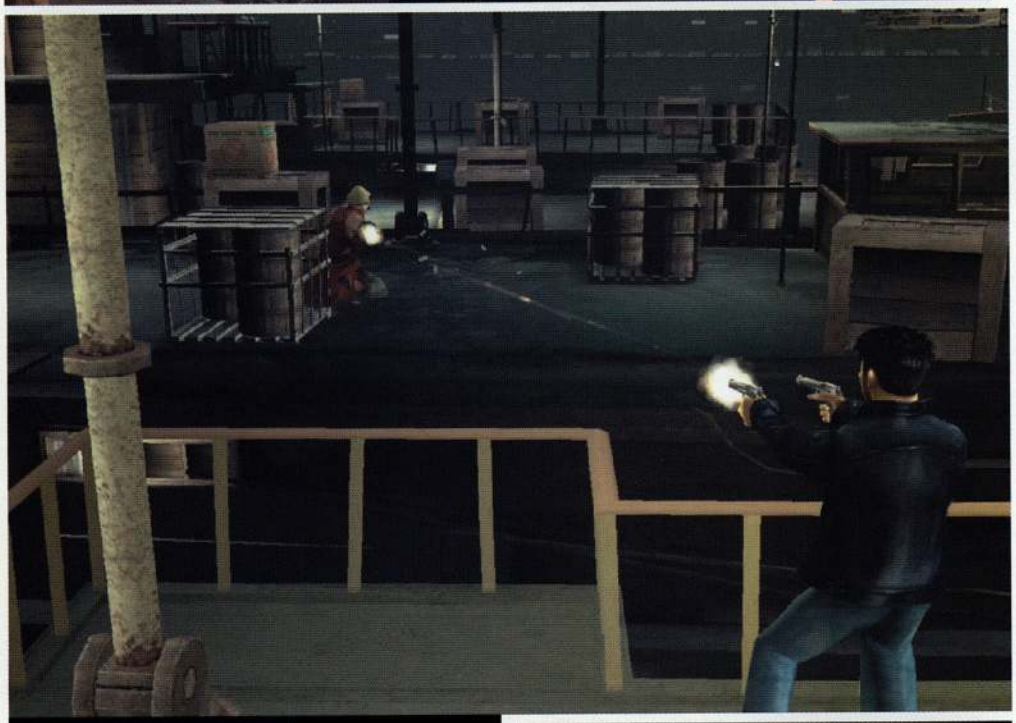
Rise to Honor

Jet Li checks into VR...and bad guys don't check out

SCEA's Foster City dream team (Team Triad for these purposes) has delivered its first internally developed game, forged on a control concept that's been vying for the spotlight since Ape Escape, fight choreography from Cory Yuen (director of The One and Kiss of the Dragon) and the star power of the amazing Jet Li. Who said Chinese couldn't fill you up!? Pure dual analog control has really only been attempted twice outside of said top banana, with Shenmue, where it was simply lost (if not ill-conceived), and Grabbed by the Ghoulies, where it's done right, but unfortunately wasted on a goofball of a character named Cooper. Rise to Honor promises to take our thumbs to soaring new heights, which in this case is mere approval. It's time for this concept to either sink or swim, and fortunately (especially if you're a Jet Li fan) this one looks like floater.

The well-honed gameplay hook is where Rise begins, not ends; as much a cinematic achievement akin with Primal, Lord of the Rings and Jak II as it is a dual analog one, seamlessly integrating story into its flow, sewing the segues and action together so well you can barely see a stitch. Where the game falters, oddly enough, is in the

"Between fighting, gunplay, stealth and dexterity challenges...repetition is kept at bay but do-overs aren't."



It's in the game...

Rise to Honor doesn't just borrow Li as its lead character; the action star was intimately involved, from story to motion capture to theme. And it wasn't always easy. Says Li: "I never thought making a game could be so difficult!"

Team Triad painstakingly recreated the Metreon for the game...but please, no vandalism!

actual acting. Chinese guys with ghetto accents, redundant thug talk, short spurts of phoned-in dialogue, and key dramatic moments played so wooden it's almost criminal cloud the otherwise valiant cinematic effort. Question is: do we care? It's no worse than any Jet Li film, after all. Still, if they were willing to go as far as keeping it real with Chinese and English subtitles, why maul us with a gatling gun of thug clichés like "He's mine!" "Take this!" and "I'll get him!"? The game also suffers a bit from its real world guise, as expected, but this is purely a hardware issue. Any character designer or modeler will tell you that it's way harder to mimic reality than create fiction and Rise is like a case study. Faces look good, if not great at times, but Jet appears wide-eyed throughout and his running animation is stiff with no cadence change on stairs or slopes. Elsewhere, his female counterpart, Kit, while animated beautifully (as are all of the characters), has a face only a mother could love, freakishly molded armpits and rock-solid breasts that never move an inch. Not that any of this should deter you; it's only because of the game's prowess elsewhere that these flaws are evident in the first place. On the whole, Rise to Honor is a handsome game. The mist, reflections, water and backgrounds look staggeringly real, and the integrity of the environments rank among the best on the system.

Getting back to the gameplay, the controls may be simple but the game is not. Between fighting, gunplay, stealth and dexterity challenges (running for cover from the viewpoint of the enemy's gun barrel is especially commendable), repetition is kept at bay but do-overs aren't. Rise to Honor is actually pretty hard. Using the shoulder buttons to dodge, counter, shoot and use adrenaline, in cooperation with the dual analog for punching, grabbing, throwing, aiming, etc., Team Triad have pieced together an action symphony, incorporating spectacular animation with location-sensitive moves and events and keen AI—an intoxicating, fresh approach to martial arts fighting.

Rise to Honor isn't all it's cracked up to be; it's actually a bit more. The mere mention of actual stars and buzzwords like "Hong Kong Cinema" and "signature moves" usually sends me running for cover, but here, those elements aren't forced to carry the game, but merely reinforce it. While I'd rather see this aesthetic applied to a Michelle Yeoh or Uma Thurman vehicle (it's all about female leads these days), I'm now sold on the concept and, perhaps more than anything else, looking forward to this great team's next game.

Dave Halverson B

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: SCEA Foster City
Publisher: Sony
Available: February

Reviews

Rating Scale

Excellent A
Good B
Fair C
Poor D
Worthless F

Game of the Month

Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes p 054

"...providing a great experience to MGS rookies and Fox Hound veterans alike."

Also notice...

Rise to Honor
p 056

Jet Li springs to virtual life in Sony's ode to dual analog control.

Sonic Battle
p 072

Sonic Team's 2D and 3D skills come out to play on GBA.

PSO Episode III: C.A.R.D. Revolution

My love of PSO was matched only by my disappointment that Episode III would be a card battle game. However, my adoration of the PSO universe and my deep respect for Sonic Team persuaded me to give the game a shot. As it turns out, I love it. I love the way it advances the story and expands on the world of PSO, and I love the card battling itself. It's basically a strategy game with the tension and excitement of a good poker hand as you never know which cards from your deck will be dealt up next. Playing online is awesome (even though I've only played with Japanese gamers thus far) with quick one-on-one matches and big, exciting tournaments. **Michael Hobbs B+**

System: **GameCube**
Developer: **Sonic Team**
Publisher: **Sega**
Available: **March**

Lovers of PSO will certainly enjoy the view above. Card battling has never looked this good.

Cy Girls

Cy Girls is the epitome of a solid game: smooth engine, well-balanced gameplay, slick interface. Hi-tech operatives that bust big-time cyber crime, the Cy Girls operate on two very different planes, dividing the game nicely between mostly steel corporate interiors, polished to their reflective best, and the VR realm, which plays like a page right out of Solid Snake's field manual. The duck-and-cover aspects of Cy Girls weigh in on the light side, with the emphasis placed more on shooting—no need to sneak up on foes so easily laid to rest—but the balance is welcome given the girls' cool special moves and Matrix-influenced style. My only real problem with the game is the amount of backtracking involved. **Dave Halverson B-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Japan East
Publisher: Konami
Available: March

Lifeline

I actually really like Lifeline in theory. Controlling a game primarily with your voice, though far removed from traditional gaming, opens up a world of new possibilities and challenges, and there's more timing and reflex-based gameplay here than you might expect. Granted, for the most part it plays like a point-and-click game of old, but the story, character interaction and use of the controller in conjunction with the headset go a long way towards a completely unique, immersive experience. Unfortunately, this is overshadowed by the difficulty of issuing commands. The voice recognition just isn't up to par—it's frustrating during exploration and infuriating during battle. I often found myself begging to just be playing with a standard controller interface. **Chris Hoffman C+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sony Computer Entertainment
Publisher: Konami
Available: March

Scooby Doo: Mystery Mayhem

THQ continues to do right by Scooby and the gang, following up Heavy Iron's near-stellar spook fest with this completely different but just as engaging new adventure. Mystery Mayhem offers ex-stoners and kids of all ages a multi-episode mystery for the ages by pretty much reinventing the old Genesis Ghostbusters in 3D, only with all the extra refinements 3D affords. The capture system, generously aglow in dusty light, is engaged by cracking open the tome of doom and following a button pattern while reeling in each ghoul, a la Ghostbusters. Along the way, switching between Scooby and Shaggy, each themed section is packed with cool puzzles, interaction between the characters, the usual bone-headed clues and, of course, Scooby Snacks! **Dave Halverson B-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Artificial Mind and Movement
Publisher: THQ
Available: March

Nightshade

A little drab, mechanical and laden by an antiquated feel, Nightshade is an on-again off-again sequel to the similarly flawed Shinobi. Some levels are fun; some are so without atmosphere and shoebox in their design that they play like a forced exercise. Like many Japanese games, it all does at least have a precise feel. Initially, your nimble, lightning-fast female ninja is an engaging character to play around with, stringing together exciting tate combos, dashing across walls and jumping from one far-off platform to the next. There's a bit more thrill to the action here than Shinobi, and the characters have more variety and boss impact, but it all tires so quickly without anything inspired to carry the dead weight. Even fans of the last Shinobi may not be able to tolerate Nightshade's antiseptic glow. **Brady Fiechter C+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sega Wow
Publisher: Sega
Available: February

Sonic Heroes

Sonic Heroes, much to my amazement, has been getting less-than-stellar marks as it bounces its way through the diverse American press. Perhaps they're all playing the PS2 version... On the GameCube and Xbox, this is as good a true Sonic in 3D we're ever going to get. The diversity of the team play coupled with the nicely varied level design and distinct Sonic Team feel make Heroes a deep, fun and undeniably Sonic experience. The fact that you can't shake the incessant barrage of annoying voice may take it down a notch (for my initial review it was an unknown), but otherwise this is great stuff...on the Xbox and Cube. At 30fps on PS2, it's not as great, but still good. **Dave Halverson C+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sonic Team
Publisher: Sega
Available: January

Pokémon Colosseum

The fact that Pokémon Colosseum is not just a battling game in the vein of Stadium, but actually a full-fledged Pokémon RPG, make it quite easily the best Pokémon game on console yet. Additionally, the themes are a tad darker, the hero noticeably edgier—no more of that "I want to be the ultimate trainer" business. However, just like the handheld Pokémon games, the graphics seem to be underdeveloped and the gameplay focus is really on catching, raising and battling with the assorted critters, overshadowing the characters and story rather than supplementing them. For the millions who love the Pokémon series, I suppose they welcome the familiarity; personally, I would like to see Pokémon evolve a bit more. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: GameCube
Developer: Genius Sonority
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: March

Guild Wars

Preview

High adventure goes free-roaming

Guild Wars is an online role-playing game being developed by several ex-Blizzard employees, responsible for groundbreaking services and games like Battle.net and the Warcraft and Starcraft series. The game promises a competitive edge and streamlined features aimed at quick accessibility and skills-based gameplay in lieu of grinding level-up tedium. In this first installment of our extensive ArenaNet interview, co-founder Jeff Strain provides insight into the game's story and technical features, and how players will travel and form adventuring parties. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: ArenaNet
Publisher: NCsoft
Available: 2nd half 2004

Interview

Jeff Strain co-founder and programmer **ArenaNet**

play: How do you plan to differentiate Guild Wars' take on the fantasy-world setting from other games on the market?
People keep coming back to fantasy for a reason: it provides a solid foundation of creatures, settings and concepts that are familiar, while still providing a tremendous amount of room for innovation. The world of Guild Wars is built around these principals, and while you won't find elves and fairies flitting around, you will certainly know to run like hell when an undead dragon gives you his undivided attention. We also believe that the setting should support the story and not vice-versa. It's not just about traveling from point to point on a map and encountering fantastical creatures, but also about finding yourself in a truly engaging story that makes you feel like you are part of something epic and meaningful. The world of Guild Wars will feel comfortable to fans of the fantasy genre, but will also have strong themes of struggle, sacrifice and loss on a very human scale.

Will the game feature a CG intro to help convey this story, or any stylized in-game cinematic elements?
We are producing a full CG intro, as well as in-game cinematics. The CG intro will provide a glimpse of some of the locations and enemies in the first chapter of

"The primary design goal for Guild Wars is that you spend your time having fun, rather than preparing to have fun..."

Just one of the many awesome creatures you'll face in Guild Wars.

the Guild Wars story, and will be available for download before the game ships, in addition to being included with the game CD. In-game cinematics will be used throughout the game for mission briefings and to portray key story events.

Tell us about some standout features of the in-game graphics engine. How demanding are these visuals on current PC hardware?
We built the Guild Wars graphics engine to provide the best visuals ever seen in an online RPG, while still running at solid frame rates on "average" systems. We are strong believers in the "eat your own dog food" philosophy of game technology development, and therefore many of our programmers are developing Guild Wars on the same Pentium III-866 machines we purchased several years ago, and most of our developers have GeForce 4 Ti 4200 class video cards. We make heavy use of programmable shaders when possible, and this drives the advanced effects you see in our screenshots, such as our glow technology, high-resolution terrain and realistic cloud and weather effects. The engine is scalable to slower systems, and will continue to provide backward compatibility as we add expansion content that takes advantage of new graphics technologies.

Do environmental conditions have an effect on gameplay?
The weather can change constantly as you move through a mission. Water can change from a brackish swamp that you wade through to completely frozen lakes that you walk upon. You will also be able to fundamentally alter the mission by destroying bridges, buildings and other structures. This is possible due to the mission-based nature of our design, which eliminates the need to maintain the world in a pristine state for the next 10 groups of "heroes" coming along behind you. Additionally, summoned creatures and certain skills may have differing effects based on the surrounding terrain, and shadows will play an important role in Rangers' stealth abilities.

Will you be using any special audio features to enhance atmosphere and gameplay?
During missions, you will hear rich ambient soundscapes designed to give you a strong sense of mood and place. Additionally, the sounds associated with skill casting and effects are not simply magical booms and twangs, but instead are carefully designed to convey the theme of the profession and school of the skill being cast so that surrounding players will have a clue about which skill is being used without having to look.

How will players travel the world and form quest parties?
By opening their overmap and clicking on their destination. This is one way we minimize the amount of downtime between missions. While the notion of a 10,000 square mile contiguous continent that takes 12 hours of real time to traverse sounds good in theory, the reality is that you often wander through hours of boring "content" consisting of random creatures and randomly populated trees in order to get to the next town or dungeon where the cool stuff is, or where your friends are waiting for you. Our goal is that you should be able to play with your friends at any time, regardless of where they happen to be in the world. If we want to go on a quest, and you are in an Outpost on the other side of the world, I can simply open my map and click on your Outpost, or open my Friends panel and double-click your name. Online games are all about playing with (or against) your friends, so we work hard to make that as easy as possible, even when that means breaking from convention.

What kind of services and activities are available in Outposts and towns?
Outposts exist for only one reason: to allow you to efficiently form a party for a specific mission. Every one of the competitive and cooperative missions in Guild Wars has its own associated unique Outpost, complete with story and background for that specific mission. The primary design goal for Guild Wars is that you spend your time having fun, rather than preparing to have fun, and so we put a great deal of effort into minimizing time spent on anything you must do to get into a mission. Towns, on the other hand, are oriented more toward the social aspects of the game, and will be populated with people who want to chat, show off their new armor, or engage in trading and shopping. Each distinct geographic region of the Guild Wars world will have at least one unique town, with its own denizens, shops and items.

Next issue we'll have more exclusive new images and in-depth gameplay information, ranging from Guild Wars' tactical use of Skills in combat to large-scale player-versus-player tournaments and dynamic, patch-free content streaming. In an overcrowded and over-hyped genre of games, all vying for your time and subscription, the ArenaNet team is focused on delivering a beautiful and fast-paced online RPG with an evolving story and absolutely no monthly fee.

Far Cry

Preview

Long-range shooter with point-blank polish

The FPS genre has been the domain of dramatic engine innovation for years. From Quake to Chrome, the genre consistently sets new standards in current-day visual effects, physics and AI routines. Some shooter engines are so impressive they become unique licensed entities that other game makers use to shape the content of their own projects, allowing a reprieve from the often costly and time-consuming development of a new engine from scratch. 2004's heavy FPS contenders, Half Life 2 and Doom 3, are introducing incredible new engines that will become adopted by many developers in all manner of games for years to come. However, these ambitious titles are still some time away from completion, and progression in the genre certainly won't stagnate pending their arrival. Enter Ubisoft's Far Cry: a graphical showpiece representing the maiden run of the powerful CryEngine, a complete development suite years in the making. Developer Crytek has harnessed and released the cutting-edge graphical features supported by the fastest video cards, while crafting a deep FPS experience bolstered by sprawling level design and satisfying enemy AI. Along with several unique features and impressive production values, Far Cry looks to maintain the genre's unrelenting penchant for advancement.

Far Cry's protagonist is Jack Carver, a man with a hazy past who has dropped out of society to operate a small-scale charter boat service in the relaxing South Pacific. A female reporter named Valerie Cortez approaches Carver, and the lure of cash has him accepting a covert charter to a tropical island in Micronesia that Ms. Cortez intends to investigate. Jack believes he is bringing Val to this island to snap some shots of WW2-era Japanese military ruins, but in truth, the reporter has tracked a subversive scientist named Krieger to a research facility somewhere in the area, where he is conducting secret experiments. As the charter completes its route, the vessel comes under fire from Krieger's well-trained guards, Val is kidnapped in the ensuing chaos, and after Carver's boat is destroyed, he is left for dead. As the smoke clears, we see our man Jack is very much alive, and he takes great exception to having his paycheck kidnapped and his boat trashed. And so the stage is set for an epic rumble in the tropical jungle within Far Cry's absolutely massive environments.

The CryEngine powering this shooter is extremely robust and versatile, and has been crafted to compliment and enhance gameplay, not merely dress it up. Its most striking and defining feature is the overall draw distance: an absurd amount of environment and geometry is in view at any given time in outdoor areas, as giant island vistas far off in the distance remain rendered and almost completely intact. The effect is heightened by the prevalence of long-range attacks and reconnaissance, using rocket launchers, scope rifles, vehicle cannons and high-tech binoculars to immolate and explore from virtually hundreds of yards away. Zooming in close with the binocs "tags" guards such that they appear on radar, and also activates a voice isolator which allows you to hear the guards' conversations—providing new clues about Krieger and other story elements. Far Cry's skilled artists have provided lavish texture work with excellent mapping effects and detail, and the lush Micronesian jungles are brimming with vegetation and rusted shells of wartime vehicles and artillery hardware. The abundance of objects marries itself perfectly to FC's open-ended gameplay. You may decide to clear an enemy encampment with crouching line-of-sight stealth, throwing pebbles to distract and eliminate guards, then scant moments later you're exchanging vicious rocket volleys with a tower guard in the distance, using boulders to block the incoming explosives. The less-emphasized indoor sets, a ramshackle revamp of old military compounds by Krieger's men, showcase interesting design and effects like dynamic shadow-casting from overhead lights. Regardless of the environment type, enemy AI is equipped to attack you in coordinated fashion, circling and flushing you out or laying down suppressive fire, and if they're nearby you can hear squad leaders barking specific orders that the grunts then execute. The engine suite is completed by Far Cry's use of full rag-doll reactive physics, low latency multiplayer code, advanced event scripting and superb 5.1 environmental audio.

Far Cry has quietly emerged from the shadows of extensive development, an unexpected triumph of technical expertise, quality level design, well-paced gameplay and intuitive control. The mind boggles at the potential of this engine applied to other themes and time periods, such as sci-fi. **Mike Griffin**

First you spy on 'em, then you shoot 'em dead.

Developer: Crytek Studios
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: March

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Battlefield Vietnam

Review

The allure of large-scale team combat prevails

2002's Battlefield 1942 and its subsequent expansions became an online phenomenon with the diehard multiplayer FPS crowd. A huge array of WW2-inspired environments, weapons and equipment at its core, BF 1942 offered intense team-based multiplayer action and possibly the finest implementation of vehicles to date in a first-person shooter. Digital Illusions integrated loads of detailed military elements and expansive land and seascapes with wild, pure action gameplay—low on overall realism, but high on octane and visual panache. Along comes the expected sequel, Battlefield Vietnam, thrusting players into the role of a U.S. or Vietnamese soldier, using all manner of realistic equipment in arcade-frenetic war galleries along the Ho Chi Minh trail and beyond.

With a completely rewritten rendering engine designed to handle the dense jungle geography, noticeably better bot AI in the single-player game and tweaks to the flag-capturing system and control, BF Vietnam stomps upon any notion that it is a glorified expansion pack. The new engine is especially impressive, loading up gritty landscapes with tons of vegetation. And while the effects and physics aren't quite as spectacular or buttoned-up as some contemporary first-person shooters, they are nonetheless effective and clearly optimized for multiplayer efficiency. Where BFV often compares favorably to its brethren in the genre is in its character and vehicle modeling. The U.S. and Vietnamese soldiers, selectable in various skin tones and uniform schemes, look fantastic, as do their weapons. There are more than 20 vehicles, ranging from the F4 Phantom jet, M551 Sheridan Tank and PBR attack boat on the U.S. side to the Russian-built MIG 21 and Mi-8 combat helicopter used by the Vietnamese—and they're all impressively designed, textured and scored by a symphony of superb mechanical effects and sharp weapons fire. Much like BF 1942, all vehicles and vessels share a very similar control scheme, and while some obviously require more finesse to maneuver than others, the instant familiarity feels great when you climb into a new vehicle in the midst of heated combat and get right to work, moving and blasting with relative ease. Battlefield Vietnam is all about mobility, too. With less static gun placements and near-constant troop movement (complete with hotkey radio commands) to new conquest flag points on the map, often separated by bridges and narrow rivers, BF Vietnam is a more dynamic and flowing game than the original.

Transcending the manic action, the game's presentation and themes demonstrate a certain wit and sensitivity to the history and events surrounding the Vietnam War. Loading screens provide an objective and stark recounting of wartime details from both the U.S. and Vietnamese perspectives, neither side receiving greater support or embellishment. The developers seem to be saying, "Our war may be good looking, but war is never pretty." Taking a cue from popular Vietnam films, BFV features a licensed soundtrack of mid-'60s hits from the likes of CCR, Deep Purple, Canned Heat and others—and you can pipe those tunes through your vehicle's radio. The menu music is noteworthy as well: a great remix based on Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit," with clever sampled wartime quotes in place of the original track's vocals.

Battlefield Vietnam is a very good sequel and acquiring it should be an afterthought for BF 1942 fans. Despite some imperfect physics and collision, the powerful rendering engine and intelligent level design definitely compliment team-based gameplay and frequent vehicle use, both of which are executed well. And remember: after you're done with the single-player modes, the price of admission will be paid back tenfold if you enjoy intense multiplayer online gaming.
Mike Griffin B

Developer: Digital Illusions CE (DICE)
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: March

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MTX Mototrax

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Left Field
Publisher: Activision
Available: March

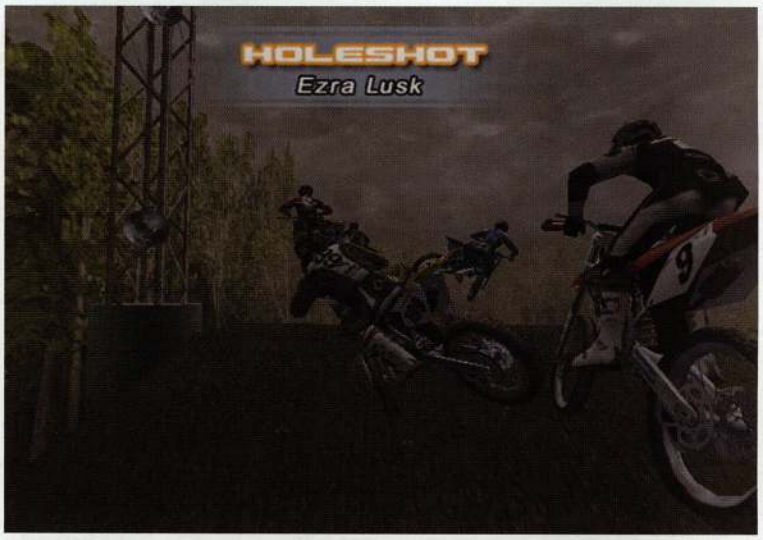
It's almost impossible not to compare MTX Mototrax to MX Unleashed, even though they are so diametrically opposed. Rainbow Studios manufacture flow and fast tracks that emphasize rhythm, leaving any simulation aspects to the competition, which in this case may be their toughest yet: Left Field (creators of Excitebike 64), who have chosen to pick up that ball and run with it. In MTX, after molding your rider's face, hair and gear, you're given a PDA—your link to your manager, sponsors, email and cycle news—and turned loose in a full-blown MX RPG, earning and spending money, deciding which teams to join, gear and parts to endorse and venues to challenge. These elements are further compounded on the track as Left Field plug their own brand of flow into the MX mold. Think Excitebike was cool? Wait 'til you get a load of this.

The difference in style is fairly clear. Where Rainbow's bikes lean and rocket, MTX's slide and pivot, and while clutch work makes a difference in both, it plays a more pivotal role in MTX. The pump is different too; in Unleashed, holding and releasing the left analog sends you further aloft, while in MTX, pressing and releasing the button in one consistent motion (you can use the analog, but it lacks the snap needed to clear pivotal sections) is the path to the sickest air. Elsewhere, MTX's outdoor venues are more tactical where Unleashed's are more balls-out, and so it goes. MTX also boasts course fly-bys and a full-blown announcer in the booth. Most importantly, both games plug you into their own brand of rhythm, both belch out 60 fps and both look spectacular.

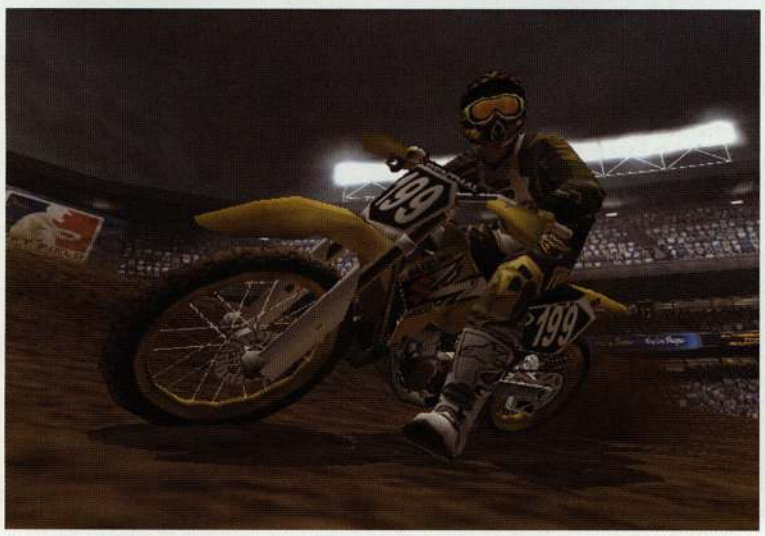
Where MTX's RPG elements come back to nip it in the butt is in the rough edges they beget. The rider model off the track leaves much to be desired, the gear textures are a bit muddy, and the trophy presentations hearken back to the N64 era. They'd have been way better served to have these done in CG. You're supposed to want to squeeze the trophy girl, not run from her. That said, the fact that these elements exist far outweighs the fact that they appear wooden, as they don't carry over or affect the racing in any way.

Leaving that spot of negativity in the dust, where Left Field shine, and do they ever shine, is in course design, AI and control. MTX is a gas to see and play, especially riding behind the bar cam, the one thing Unleashed doesn't have (sorry, helmet cam doesn't count). As an ex-racer, never have I felt as plugged into the action as in this near-perfect rider's-eye view. This camera, along with the course design and the simulation elements (and the fact that I played ATV until my fingers bled), put MTX over the top for me; although I'd be lying if I said I could live without either.

Not to be outdone, MTX features the usual deluge of distractions (namely Free Ride and Freestyle) that I'm told motocross games must incorporate to perform at retail. And while I must confess I'm not a fan of any extras that take time away from tweaking the racing, or in this case the ancillary features, they're pretty cool here, especially Travis' compound. The bottom line is that Left Field have succeeded in entering the upper echelon of the racing elite; the only question now is where they'll take it from here. As a motocross fan, I hope it's right back into the dirt. **Dave Halverson** A-



"In MTX, after molding your rider's face, hair and gear, you're given a PDA...and turned loose in a full-blown MX RPG..."



interview travis pastrana

play: First the obvious: how instrumental were you (really and truly) in the development of MTX in terms of physics, terrain, flow, rider animation, etc.?
I helped the team work on capturing the feel of motocross, from the physics and details of the bigger tricks to how it feels to do a 200-foot jump…like how long you are in the air. Luckily, the guys at Activision rode as well, so the starting platform was already good.

Are you into video games? What are some of your favorite games?
With my injuries, I have plenty of time to play. My favorite games are the Tony Hawk series, Rally Sport Challenge and True Crime: Streets of LA.

Where do you feel current console hardware fails in terms of perfecting the motocross genre? In other words, what do you think we'll see on the next generation of consoles? What couldn't you do?
(Answered by producer Jeff Poffenbarger) One thing that comes to mind is the ability (or inability) to recreate the sheer scope of the sport in terms of size. The playing field in an actual MX or SX event is filled to the brim with riders. On current platforms you can't render 20-plus riders and expect to have a framerate above seven. Another aspect is the art/track design. While the current generation of games do a serviceable job of recreating the look of the sport, they are limited in the detail that goes into it. For instance, in a motocross event there is dirt and mud flying everywhere. As the race continues, lines are drawn in the mud creating actual changes to the course. Next-gen (I can't believe I am saying that already) consoles might lend more to deformable terrain, hyper-particle systems (I made that up, it's mine), and finite details in dirt and dust. That is where the brunt of my interest lies. The sport is dirty; I want to feel dirty playing it.

Which do you prefer between freestyle and motocross and why?
Freestyle is pure fun. It allows you to be really innovative—from the lines you choose to the tricks, it's all about style. With motocross, you have to put your heart and soul into it…whoever is first across the line wins. Motocross is more physically demanding, and to me is almost more satisfying because you have to go through so much to win.

Hanging your name on a brand is a double-edged sword. Did you make sure the quality was going in before your name went on? How's it been working with Activision and Left Field?
With Activision, I feel like they want to put out the best product, and it's great to work with a company that has their priorities straight.

When I was racing during the glory days of Indian Dunes, Saddleback, etc., racing AME and CRC, we had three parks in So-Cal alone to practice and race on. What would you suggest to kids with motocross aspirations nowadays, especially from the West Coast?
Ride as much as you can and always have fun with it. With more and more kids into the sport, more places are tolerant. [Motorcycle County Park in Santa Clara, CA is a good place to start. -Ed.]

These detailed handlebars almost didn't make it in, but thanks to a great producer/developer relationship between Activision and Left Field, the MTX bar cam is now 100 percent awesome.

WWX Rumble Rose

Hellloooo, ladies!

Konami has announced WWX: Rumble Rose...and the world of pro wrestling video games may never be the same. Not based on any real-life wrestling promotion, WWX is an all-female wrestling title—certainly the first to ever come to the U.S.—where hard-hitting moves and sex appeal contribute equally to the game's allure. As the game's producer, Akari Uchida, clearly explained it: "We think this is a game that any guy would love to own!"

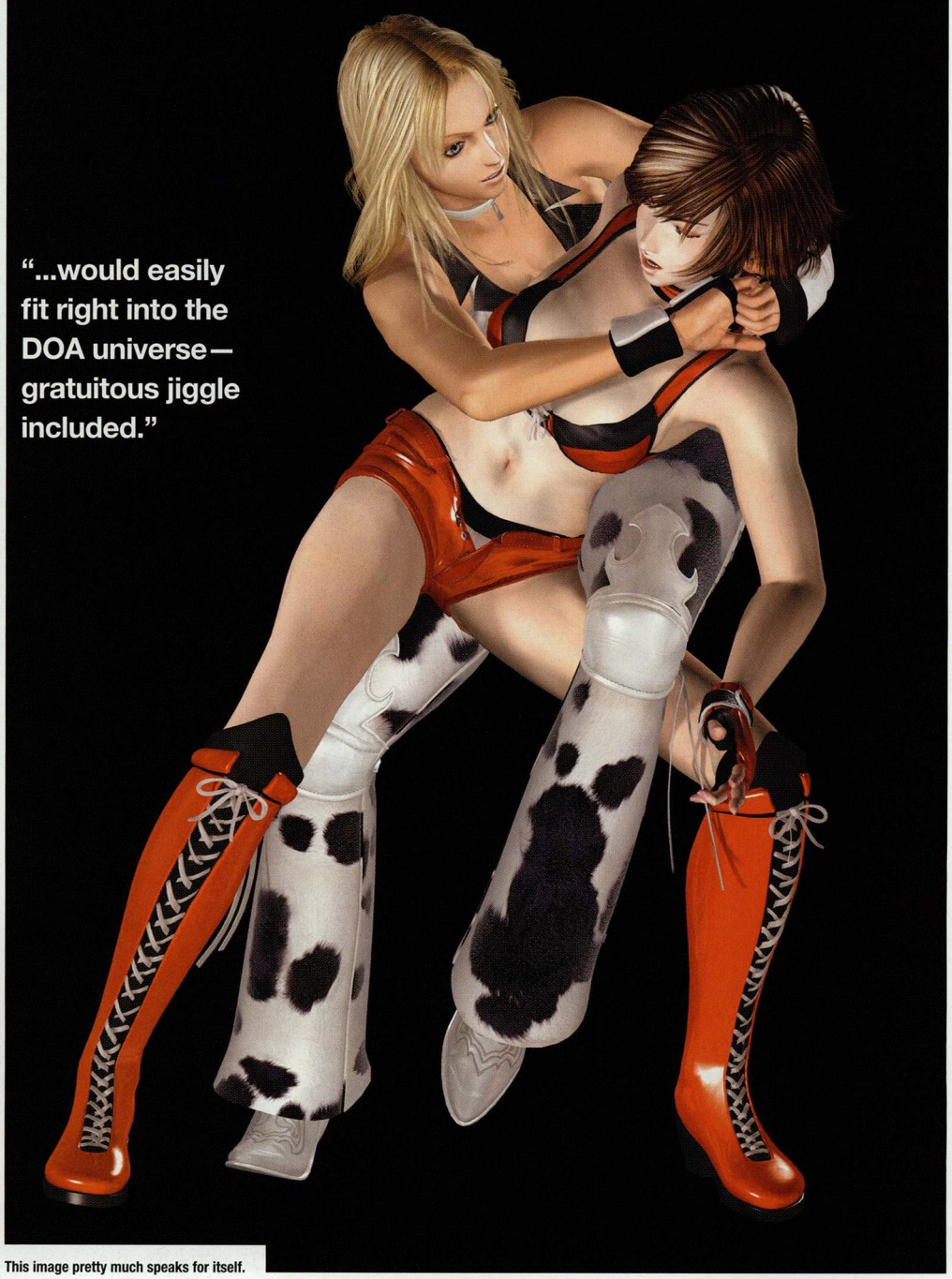
To maximize the game's representation of the female form, Konami went straight to the masters at Polygon Magic, the same folks who created the character models for Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball. From what's been shown so far, the characters look absolutely amazing and would easily fit right into the DOA universe—gratuitous jiggle included. The downside to having what Uchida calls the "ultimate 3D polygon models" is that it will limit how many characters will be on-screen at once, and no custom character feature is planned.

Nevertheless, there's a good chance that WWX would sell thanks to the lovely ladies alone; even so, visuals are only half the package. The gameplay is being handled by none other than Yuke's, best known for their excellent WWE SmackDown! series. Without the restraints of the WWE license, Yuke's will be free to make WWX their most raucous game yet, with over-the-top moves and the ability to humiliate your opponent. Additionally, players will create their own storylines through their actions in the ring (for example, humiliating an adversary could result in a feud), which will also determine if their character is a face or a heel. Essentially, two versions of each character will exist, each with a different appearance and alternate moves. Given these innovative features and the impressive pedigree of the game's developers, WWX may have all the assets to climb to the top of the wrestling game ladder.

Chris Hoffman

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Yuke's/KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: November 2004

"...would easily fit right into the DOA universe—gratuitous jiggle included."



This image pretty much speaks for itself.

MX Unleashed

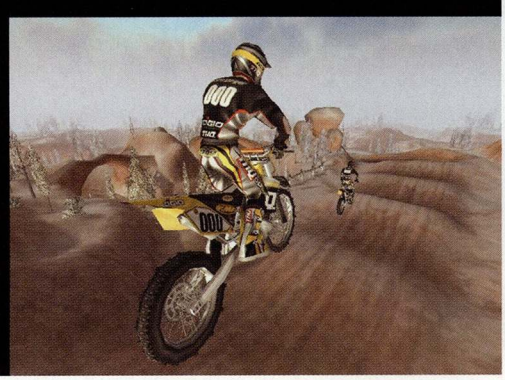
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Rainbow Studios
Publisher: THQ
Available: February

Rainbow Studios have made a living churning out AAA extreme racers, parlaying the amazing ATV Off-Road into a console empire. This most sought-after speed tribe in all of racing began on PC, with motocross oddly enough, but it wasn't until reinventing four-wheeled fun that they became a household name within the development community. Since, they've made Star Wars racing respectable and getting wet illegally fun, leading up to their return to the toughest of all racing categories: motocross. Refining the ATV engine for two-wheeled pandemonium they have, of course, done it again, especially if you like your racing fast, flowing and arcade fun.

MXU rides the rail somewhere between simulation and arcade, supplanting most of the control to the left analog and how well you snap it in conjunction with the terrain and the line you've chosen, either riding the outside for speed or staying inside for the more tactical approach. This seems easy at first, but as the topography becomes more treacherous, the brutality of this play mechanic etches itself onto your brain—the mark of a truly great racer. MXU's pump is to Ridge Racer's powerslide. You need to sustain perfection in order to win in MXU, and races are often determined by your focus on the last lap, but as pure adrenaline goes, you can't touch this. The animation is flawless and the visuals par for the Rainbow course: stunning. As you master the clutch and cornering, further dimension is added, especially in the stadium venues, but for the most part, this is an intricately balanced arcade racer, at least until the career dust clears. In the case you like wide-open madness, these happen to be the guys who coined that too. Tearing a page from their old Motocross Madness tome, they've inserted a beefy mission-based free-roamer into the mix, allowing you to essentially go f'ing bananas between venues.

Some might say it's a little too ATV, and maybe it is, but if that's a bad thing then I'm a shut-in that spends all of his time...oh shit. **Dave Halverson** B+

"As you master the clutch and cornering, further dimension is added, especially in the stadium venues..."



Colin McRae 4

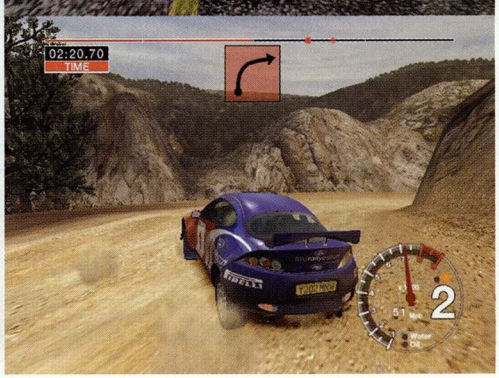
System: Xbox
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Codemasters
Available: March

Seeming to follow the lead of Sega GT Online, Codemasters will release Colin McRae 4 for the Xbox this March for the low price of $19.99. Why price it so low? Who knows! Just be thankful that they did.

Those familiar with the series will certainly know what to expect with this sequel: great graphics, great physics, and the best re-creation of the involving sport of rally racing. Codemasters have made improvements in all areas, most notably in the graphics and sound. There's a little bit more detail everywhere, and all those great and peculiar sounds of a rally car careening around a circuit have been enhanced even further. An expert championship mode has also been added, giving hardcore rally racers a steeper AI challenge and a more fragile damage model.

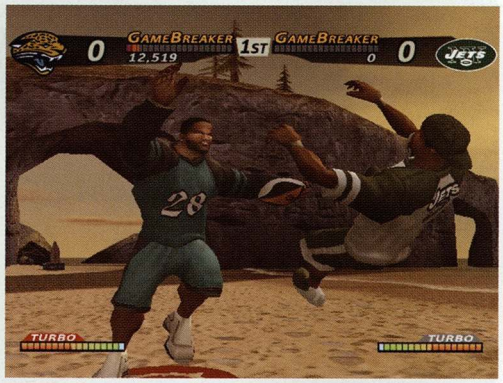
However, of greatest excitement may be the addition of Xbox Live capabilities. As rally racing is stage- and time-based, you will easily be able to track your skill level with instant online rankings. This will no doubt increase the game's addiction factor greatly.

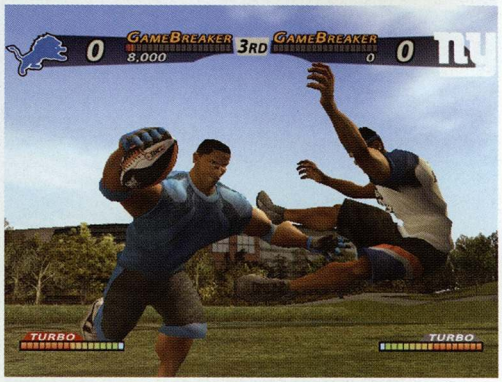
Perhaps the biggest question then is how will Microsoft's own Rallisport Challenge 2 compare with the mighty McRae. Perhaps a shoot-out is in the cards? Michael Hobbs



NFL Street

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube, Xbox
Developer: EA Tiburon
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: January





With the success EA Sports Big has had with their NBA Street titles, it was only a matter of time before they tackled another sport. NFL Street is seven-on-seven, hard-hitting, arcade-style football—sorta like Midway's ill-fated NFL Blitz, but a lot tighter and a lot more fun.

Being a street title, there are no refs or penalties, so basically anything goes. What's interesting is that the creators totally abandoned the kicking game, so extra point conversions are handled a bit differently. Players will start a few yards out from the end zone and dependant on how they score will determine the conversion. Running the ball in will get you one while passing will get you two. Since there isn't a game clock in NFL Street, games are won by reaching a predetermined score—so picking when to go for the two point conversion adds a little bit of strategy. All of the NFL teams are represented with over 300 current NFL starts and legends. Since the same seven players play both offense and defense, picking a well-balanced roster is crucial if you want to win.

Gameplay in NFL Street is fast and furious and, at times, unrelenting. Never before has a football game made you lateral, fumble, jump, spin, dive as much as this game, and the inclusion of Style moves adds a distinct flavor to the mix. With some practice, players will be able to execute no-look passes, perform dance moves and juggle the ball in the air. Similar to NBA Street's dunking moves, the more Style moves you do, the more points you earn, which, in turn, increases your all-powerful Gamebreaker meter. Once you activate the Gamebreaker, your team (whether offense or defense) is virtually unbeatable for a full possession.

The heart and soul of NFL Street is the NFL Challenge. Here players take a generic scrub team and have them compete against the better NFL teams in various challenges and ladder tournaments. The better you do, the more points you earn, which can be used for development points. These points can be used to improve your team's appearance, skill levels and specific stats. As players complete divisions and move up the ladder, bonus teams will be unlocked as well. My biggest gripe about the game was how short it was—the single player game only lasted about 12 hours. For shame.

As we have come to expect from EA Sports Big, the visuals are brilliant, especially the player models. Sure the body parts are a little exaggerated (pumped up arms, neck and legs), but they hold their own quite nicely. The various animations are also worth mentioning. Every tackle, juke, catch or slam into the wall is incredibly fluid and seamless.

EA Sports Big definitely has something going with their "Street" titles. Let's see how long they can keep going. **Tom Ham B**

"Gameplay in NFL Street is fast and furious and, at times, unrelenting."

"...without a doubt, the most definitive soccer game ever released."

World Soccer Winning Eleven 7 International

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: February

Just when you thought you had played the best soccer game on the planet with Winning Eleven 6, Konami comes out with next game in the famed soccer series. Featuring 64 club teams, 21 stadiums and improved player models (if you can believe that), Winning Eleven 7 is, without a doubt, the most definitive soccer game ever released.

The biggest change to the game is with Master League mode. This time around, there are four regional leagues. After players pick which region they want to play with, they have to work their way through each division and reach the ultimate goal of Champion League. Customization has also been improved. Players now can choose colors for your club's uniforms, your team's flag design and even how your stadium is going to look. There is a new Shop mode added to Winning Eleven 7. As players earn points during games, they can use these points to purchase locked items such as special teams and players. All of the franchise aspects such as salary, trading of players and stat tracking have remained in place.

A cool addition to the Master League is an in-game search engine. This allows managers to search through the entire league by certain criteria. For example, you can search by name, position, height, age, overall ability, salaries, etc. It makes trading and looking for players a lot easier.

The visuals have also been improved for Winning Eleven 7. In addition to more realistic faces and body builds (you can actually see the arm and leg muscles), the overall animation system as been improved as well. From passing and shooting to heading and blocking, every animation has been tweaked to perfection. Even just watching a player run down the field while dribbling the ball is just plain awesome to watch.

Gameplay hasn't changed one bit from Winning Eleven 6. Players can still change defensive and offensive strategies on the fly and passing is still as much of a finesse move as it ever was. I would even go so far as to say the AI is a little harder than before—it's ever so challenging.

My only real gripe with the game is no online play. You would think with FIFA 2004 offering online gameplay, Winning Eleven 7 would follow suit. Unfortunately, the online component is only good for roster updates, player stats and graphic updates. Hopefully Konami will add this in for next year.

In the meantime, if you're itching for some of the best soccer action around, look no further than Winning Eleven 7. **Tom Ham A**

Dream Mix TV World Fighters

Worlds collide in this fighting extravaganza

First there was Fighters Megamix. Then came Super Smash Bros. and Marvel vs. Capcom. Now, there's Dream Mix TV World Fighters. Taking the same appealing angle of plucking characters out of their individual games and tossing them into a fighting free-for-all, Dream Mix culls its warriors from the Konami, Hudson and Takara universes, resulting in madcap fighting that permits match-ups you thought you'd never see: Simon Belmont vs. Solid Snake, Bomberman vs. Optimus Prime, Master Higgins vs. Twinbee. Smash Bros. clearly served as the inspiration in terms of the gameplay, where multi-tiered action, simple controls and a non-traditional 2D battle system combine with the sheer coolness of being able to pit such beloved characters against each other to create a highly entertaining title. However, where Smash Bros. overflowed with its depth of play, Dream Mix trickles with a surprising lack of modes and options. Characters have very few moves, the primary single-player mode is both short and easy (with no difficulty select), and only a brief objective-based mission mode provides variety. The controls could also be a little tighter, and it's too bad that certain characters didn't make the cut: where are Goemon and Bonk, for crying out loud? Nonetheless, Dream Mix has a lot going for it simply based on its heritage alone; too bad it isn't nearly as good as the competition. **Chris Hoffman**

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2
Developer: Hudson
Publisher: Hudson
Available: December 2003 (Japan)

Star Soldier

Should have stayed in '86

For the most part, Sega Ages has been a bust. Space Harrier and Fantasy Zone are okay, Monaco GP and Bonanza Bros. are crap, Golden Axe is passable, Phantasy Star Generation 1 is great (but presently all Japanese) and Columns still works best as a doorstop; my fingers remain crossed for Gain Ground. NEC's refurbished value line is (or should I say "was") fairing somewhat better (Bonk was delicious) until they decided to redo the Famicom/NES Star Soldier instead of the PC Engine/T-16 Super Star Soldier. Bright colored space do-dads from the old carom table dancing in the sky interrupted only by a big floating head and predictable bosses does not a good shooter make. While SS isn't necasarily a bad game, it's certainly a lost opportunity. The game has a few semi-bright old-school moments, but overall this redux is just so much space junk. I'd rather play Truxton or Phelios again. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Hudson
Publisher: Hudson
Available: November 2003 (Japan)

Sonic Battle

Review

Thanks to Sonic Team, Sega Blue is now back in style

This is the kind of surprise Segaphiles live for: a true 32-bit Sonic action-RPG blessed with dazzling 2D art and captivating 3D arena-based action-fighting. Somewhat along the lines of Mega Man Battle Network, the game unfolds on two distinct planes: an overworld map (fixed isometric zones host to the best hand-drawn incarnations of the Sonic alumni perhaps ever) and fighting arenas where the game's 3D battles take place. Linking up to four GBAs together (and this is a game actually worth doing so for), you can select between Sonic, Knuckles, Shadow, Cream, Rouge or Eggman and get down with the game's deeply nuanced fighting—the best of its kind on handheld, if not anywhere—or settle in for Sonic Team's very special Story Mode, which has Sonic and company, along with Sonic's adopted robot Emerl (a defective Eggman 'bot that you can edit for fighting as the game progresses), out to unravel Eggman's latest diabolical scheme.

The great thing about Sonic Battle...is everything. The fighting constantly evolves and always has an angle beyond mere versus encounters, the graphics are some of the best on GBA, easily eclipsing Nintendo's brand-based action RPGs, and the pacing and overall design are honed to handheld perfection. Sonic Team certainly excels on Nintendo hardware, no doubt about it. Between this and Sonic Heroes, Sonic is finally looking like his old bad self. **Dave Halverson B+**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Sonic Team
Publisher: THQ
Available: January 2004

Check the little spray of sand wisping up. Ah, the joy of 2D animation.

Spy Hunter

Review

Tapwave's Zodiac lays down the 3D

Don't let Nokia's disengaging N-Gage deter you from test-driving a Zodiac. The polar opposite in terms of design and functionality, the Zodiac is engineered for maximum ease of use and is elegantly designed. The wafer-thin machine has a giant (for a handheld), crystal-clear screen, dwarfing the N-Gage and the SP, and looks and feels sturdy and well made, with tight, clicky buttons and a nicely placed low-profile analog nub. I especially appreciate the flip-top leather screen protector and on-board stylus—standard-setting features for handhelds to come.

Until now, however, the jury has been out on how good a gaming machine the Zodiac is, but if Midway's Spy Hunter is any indication, you can rest assured there are some ponies under the hood. The best way to describe the game's 3D graphics are as smoother, albeit fairly less detailed PlayStation, taking into account it's a first-generation title from an unknown developer (Vasara Games). In the hands of a formidable PS squad, the Zodiac may really surprise us. Pressing the green button to bring the camera behind the car, pop-up is kept to a minimum, trackside polys look smooth and the colors rich, and in terms of gameplay, well, it's Spy Hunter: a very good portable Spy Hunter loaded with everything you'd expect on last-generation console with the exception of in-level music. The music elsewhere is great, so whether this is a choice or limitation remains to be seen. With Sega classics like Altered Beast and Golden Axe on the way, along with 3D offerings like Tony Hawk, Doom II and Duke Nukem Mobile, the Zodiac is definitely off and floating, but there's a big jaggy rock called PSP looming somewhere down river. **Dave Halverson B-**

System: Zodiac
Developer: Vasara Games
Publisher: Tapwave
Available: November 2003

Mega Man Battle Network 4

Preview

Set against the backdrop of a Net Battling tournament—in which your performance in the matches affects the game's storyline—Mega Man Battle Network 4 could be a step above what we've seen from the series so far. Although the strategic battles and RPG-style gameplay remain squarely intact, this installment has enough new elements that it climbed to the top of the sales charts in Japan. The main new feature is the Soul Unison system, in which Mega Man can acquire the souls of his adversaries and then transform into new forms with new abilities. As in the third game, there will be two versions of MMBN4—Red Sun and Blue Moon—each with different Soul Unisons, as well as differing storylines, enemies and battle chips. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Summer 2004

Astro Boy: Omega Factor

Preview

Ordinarily, one might not be particularly excited about a game based on a 50-year-old manga, but that's certainly not the case when the property is the legendary Astro Boy and the developer is Treasure. Now officially slated for the U.S. in conjunction with the new anime, Astro Boy looks to be an action tour de force filled with glorious pattern-heavy gameplay. The beloved atomic-powered robot is armed with crazy fighting moves—punch and kick combos, an air dash and, better yet, he can transform his arm to use his finger beam and arm cannon. Other stages concentrate more on aerial action, and the game becomes more of a side-scrolling shooter. Awesome screen-filling bosses also factor into the equation, along with selectable power-ups and cartoon cutscenes. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Treasure/Hitmaker
Publisher: Sega
Available: Summer 2004

Shining Force

Preview

The Shining Soul games have been decent enough, but now players are finally getting the game they really want—the legendary Shining Force is finally coming to GBA. The original Genesis classic set the standard for strategy-RPG gameplay back in the day, and this remake brings it all back—the weapons, the magic, the various character classes and the tale of war against the villainous Darksol. Only now, it's enhanced with far superior graphics, finely tuned difficulty and a new card system that bestows special abilities and bonuses in battle. The story has also been slightly modified so characters may now join at different times, and three brand-new characters join the crew of more than 30 warriors. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Sega
Publisher: Atlus
Available: June

Shaman King

Preview

Other than the fact that it's a 2D side-scrolling action game and it looks pretty cool, Konami isn't saying much about the portable version of their recently acquired Shaman King license. So instead of grasping for info, let's review the basics about the anime and manga on which it's based. The main character: Yoh Asakura, fairly average kid (except for his unworldly fashion sense). His secret: he has shaman powers—meaning he can communicate with spirits. His ally: a ghost named Amidamaru. His goal: to win the Grand Tournament, which takes place every 500 years, and obtain the title of Shaman King. Yoh's shaman powers will be a big part of the GBA game, where he'll be able to control ghosts and spirits to defeat his enemies. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: KCE Japan East
Publisher: Konami
Available: Summer 2004

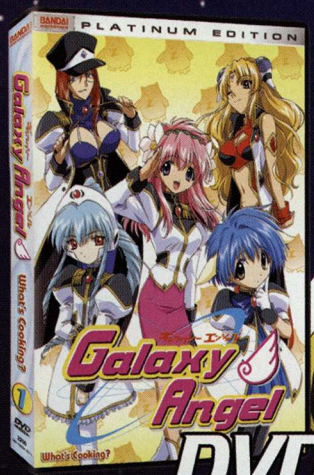
anime.[YiR].2k3

year in review

Anime, like any filmed or digital entertainment, is a highly subjective medium; however, exceptional work transcends familiarity, and that's what this list is all about. Between the 10-15 years each of us has been watching and critiquing anime, we're confident that we've assembled a balanced compilation of the best 2003 had to offer. If you're not already watching anime, what you may not have realized is that, like video games just a few years back, anime has begun to pierce the veil of niche status and break into the throngs of mass-market pop culture. What shows like *Cowboy Bebop* and *Spirited Away* began, a new breed of hybrid anime has already continued to propagate, closing out the year with stigma-busting shows like *Last Exile* and *Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi*. And things are just getting started. (Please note that series beginning in 2002 and carried over to 2003 were not eligible.)

ギャラクシーエンジェル
Galaxy Angel

**Saving the galaxy..
one planet at a time!**



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Street Date: May 2004

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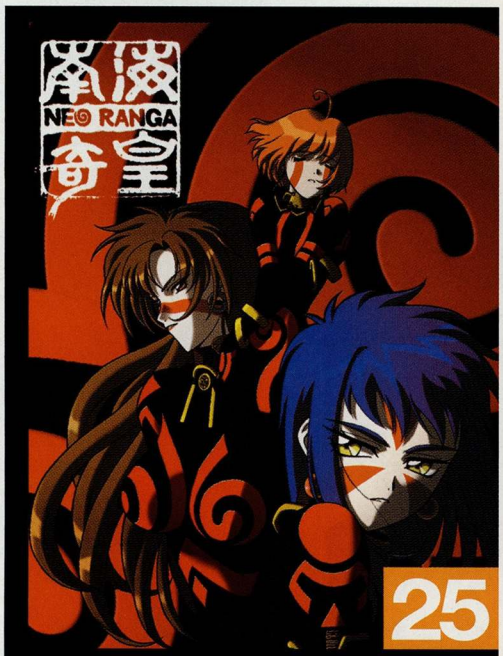
2003 anime top 25



25

Neo Ranga

This distinctive series about three beautiful sisters, one ancient god and the mysterious link between them was the surprise ADV series of 2003. If *Orphen* deserves a sequel, *Neo Ranga* begs for a quality OVA.

adv films
rating 15 & up

Android Kikaider

Bandai's tale about a lost android boy torn between his human-like heart and cyborg core: Jiro's struggle for acceptance, while being pursued by his own kind and misunderstood by those he loves, hit home.

bandai entertainment
rating 13 & up

24

23

Patlabor WXIII

Included in a box set together with MiniPato "digital paper puppet theatre" and two hours of supplemental material, the year's most underrated epic saw two detectives thrust into an international web of deceit and unspeakable biological monstrosities.

geneon entertainment
rating 13 & up

21

Initial D

What do you say to a kid that's the best driver there is, in a society where street racing is king, only he doesn't know it? That's where *Initial D* begins; where it ends is further reason not to miss it.

tokyopop
rating 13 & up

22

Argentosoma

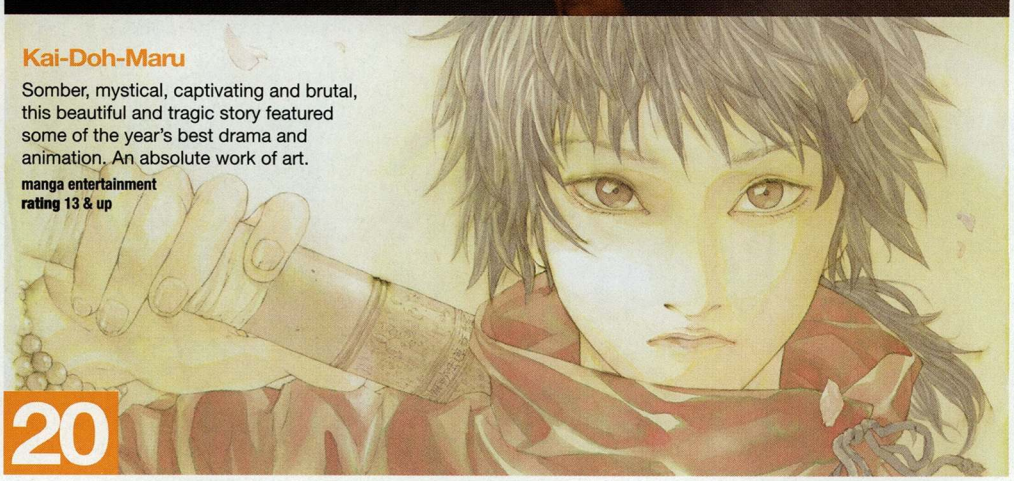
Alien mecha, revenge and a little girl. Bandai's *Argentosoma* is an excellent and unique addition to this genre that shows that giant alien robots have feelings too.

bandai entertainment
rating 13 & up

Kai-Doh-Maru

Somber, mystical, captivating and brutal, this beautiful and tragic story featured some of the year's best drama and animation. An absolute work of art.

manga entertainment
rating 13 & up



20

END OF A SAGA, BEGINNING OF A LEGEND!

Galaxies collide! An empire crumbles! An entire planet is flooded! Yamato's crew is attacked and defeated! And that's just the first 15 minutes! ***FINAL YAMATO*** is not only the concluding chapter of the ultimate anime series, it's also one of the biggest SF adventures ever conceived—the one that cemented *Space Battleship Yamato* into the ranks of legends. It is the year 2203. The ancient planet Aquarius, which once gave life to the Earth by flooding it with water, has been diverted from its long orbit around the galaxy by the fearsome Dinguil Empire. Using their powerful warp technology, they are now driving Aquarius straight for Earth to flood it again, wiping out all of humankind forever! His confidence broken by his first defeat at the hands of this enemy, Kodai steps down from the Captain's chair of *Yamato* and loses his fighting spirit…until an unexpected hero steps out of the shadows to lead *Yamato* on its last, greatest voyage! Brimming over with the excitement and majesty that are the hallmarks of the *Yamato* series, ***FINAL YAMATO*** provides some of the most heart-stopping moments and finely-detailed animation ever brought to the big screen. Still the record-holder as the longest animated film in history, every minute of this masterpiece is more breathtaking than the last as *Yamato* approaches its destiny!

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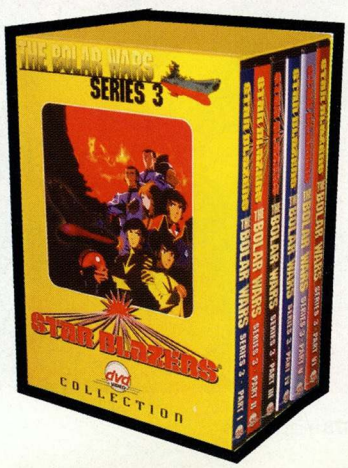

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19

Animatrix

The benefit of being closely associated to and released with the hit series of *Matrix* films has given *The Animatrix* the ability to become one of the few creations to help introduce anime to a widespread audience here in North America. First available free for download online, then released in its entirety on DVD, few masterpieces short of Miyazaki's works have garnered such attention from Americans who are not necessarily anime fans. Containing cutting-edge 3D animated shorts with awe-inspiring stories, *The Animatrix* proves that anime is not all big eyes and giant robots.

warner bros.
rating 13 & up

Najica Blitz Tactics

Saving androids from certain death, thwarting mobsters and dealing with the latest in technology in Neo-Tokyo... working for a cosmetics company is more exciting than you think. *Najica* not only brings the action, but the gratuitous panty shots as well.

adv films
rating 17 & up

18

17

Gatekeepers 21

Together with the help of several mobile phones and a computer, Ayane uses her considerable gate power to snare evil invaders. Who knew cell phones could have so many uses?

geneon entertainment
rating 13 & up

16

Angelic Layer

Angelic Layer: a fast-paced fighting game of the future where high-tech dolls are controlled by the mere thoughts of their users. Clamp does it again with a deep and addictive story.

adv films
rating 13 & up

Full Metal Panic

What happens when the school socialite possesses special powers that the evildoers of the world will kill for? Mithril, of course—the ultimate bodyguards. Oh, and giant robots, hijacking, death, sexual tension, destruction...all of that stuff too.

adv films
rating 13 & up

15

Reign

With character design from the creator of *Aeon Flux*, massive gratuitous violence and a retelling of the story of Alexander the Great, *Reign* is truly a unique creation. Besides, where else are you going to get to see a man-eating horse?

tokyopop
rating 13 & up

14

One of the Top 20 Most Popular Anime - Newtype USA Magazine

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Witch Hunter Robin

Anyone looking for a place to go after *Hellsing* needed only check in with Robin, trading in the neo-vampiric for neo-witchcraft. Bandai's new, dark series is infused with as much character development as it is unearthly chills and untimely death.

bandai entertainment
rating 13 & up

13

Mahoromatic

She cooks. She cleans. She catches bullets with her bare hands. After loyally devoting herself to fighting for humankind, the high-tech battle android, Mahoro, decides to spend the remainder of her shortened lifespan serving as a maid for a very special person. *Mahoromatic*'s fun concept is very similar to that of *Cat Girl Nuku Nuku*'s, but with a bittersweet twist: the more energy Mahoro expends protecting her master, the faster she loses her preciously short operating time.

geneon entertainment
rating 13 & up

12

12

RahXephon

Oh, it's just an *Eva* clone, right? Wrong. Beyond the use of giant robots and a few religious references, *RahXephon* stands fully on its own considerable merits. With a deeply bizarre story and animation by BONES, *RahXephon* is excellence in the giant robot genre.

adv films
rating 15 & up

Voices of a Distant Star

You may never look up at the sky the same way again after taking in Makato Shinkai's heart-wrenching tale of love separated by space, as two teenagers that only have each other drift farther and farther apart, until the space between them transcends time. The melancholy it so profoundly expresses makes it one of the most insightful animated works of our time. If Voices was a motion picture, it'd be up for an Oscar—providing someone could produce live action as compelling and artful as this.

adv films
rating 13 & up

10

天地無用! TENCHI MUYO! GXP

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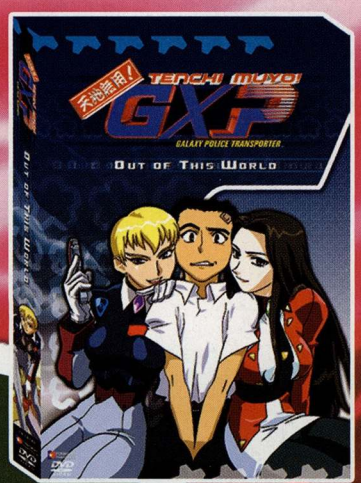

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--Rob Bricken - Anime Insider Magazine

From the director of Excel Saga!

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09

Noir

In Paris, as assassins go, Mireille Bouquet is as deadly as they come. Need to have someone efficiently and thoroughly "taken care of"? Mireille is the woman you call. After receiving a mysterious e-mail, she meets a young girl named Kirika who can wield a gun and execute targets with frightening adeptness. Mireille realizes that by allowing Kirika to be her partner, she might solve a mystery involving her past. A unique take on the whole girls-with-guns genre, *Noir* easily lives up to its name, dealing with the black subject of murder in cloak-and-dagger fashion.

adv films
raing 15 & up

08

Sakura Wars: The Movie

What do you get when you take a highly successful anime title, give it a new, solid stand-alone story, then hire Production I.G to come in and give the animation their magic touch? You get *Sakura Wars: The Movie*. Not only is the story well written enough for both veteran fans and newbs to enjoy it thoroughly, but the 2D and 3D blended scenes are literally jaw-dropping. *Sakura Wars* stars the members of the Imperial Flower Division not only fighting to keep their jobs, but also to protect Japan from a suspicious American firm.

geneon entertainment
rating 13 & up

07

Spirited Away

Anime master Hayao Miyazaki's Oscar-winning epic hit DVD early in 2003 and propelled anime ever further into the fabric of American pop culture, its imbedded message of glutony and the perseverance of the human spirit spreading to an ever-widening American anime audience.

walt disney home video
rating 13 & up

06

Heat Guy J

In a future city where guns are outlawed and criminals sentenced to a fate worse than death, Daisuke Aurora and Heat Guy J are the only thing standing between the citizens, a criminal justice system that's anything but and organized crime run by a diabolical kid with a penchant for cold-blooded murder. Part *Robocop*, part *Bebop*, and dripping with cool, *Heat Guy J* weighed in as the year's most stylish new series. Great cast, great character development, great stories.

geneon entertainment
rating 13 & up

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05

Haibane Renmei

Rakka dreamt of falling before she broke out of her cocoon and was "born" into the world as a young member of the Charcoal Feathers. Grey wings sprouted on her back and she was given a halo, but in her town, that's not such an odd thing. She is simply one of the many Haibane living among humans. Unfortunately, Rakka doesn't know why she is here or where she came from. First *Serial Experiments Lain*, then *Niea_7*, and now *Haibane Renmei*...series creator Yoshitoshi ABe has shown that he's more than just a remarkable artist. *Haibane Renmei* is a brilliant blending of ABe's breathtaking art and extraordinary imagination.

geneon entertainment
rating 13 & up

04

Cowboy Bebop: The Movie

There are few anime titles that have the animation quality, charisma and musical perfection to stand with *Cowboy Bebop*. The creators of CB took the sci-fi space genre, turned it on its side, gave it a bit of a spaghetti western touch and helped to once again redefine exactly what anime is. So it was with a sigh of relief that this dynamite title was not plagued with a substandard movie as so many series are. We join Spike and friends in between episodes 22 and 23 as a virulent biological weapon is unleashed upon the citizens of Mars. When the authorities issue a massive bounty for the suspect, Spike and Jet decide to join in the hunt for the mysterious man seen at the scene of the crime. Yoko Kanno returns to give *Knocking On Heaven's Door* an unforgettable soundtrack, while the familiar quirky/immersive writing from the series is superbly expanded to fit a two-hour format. The result is a super-sized episode of *Cowboy Bebop* with more of what you loved about the series.

columbia tri-star
rating 17 & up

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03

Read or Die

The unlikeliest of heroes always make the best characters (Harry Potter, assorted Hobbits), and in *Read or Die*, Yumiko Readman, a.k.a. The Paper, takes this hypothesis to soaring new heights. *Read or Die* marries Bond style, English frumpiness and science fiction to fluid animation, extraordinary character design and great performances, landing Manga Entertainment yet another instant classic in league with their most elite titles like *Ghost in the Shell*, *Wings of Honeamise, Blood: The Last Vampire, End of Evangelion* and *Ninja Scroll*. Working as agent for the Special Operations Force of the British Libraries may not sound so exciting, but when genetic samples from the World Genome Archive start turning up as super clones, things definitely get messy. Sent to investigate, Yomiko and her two comrades, Miss Deep and Drake, embark on one of anime's very best covert-ops and our second runner up for the best anime of 2003.

manga entertainment
rating 13 & up

02

Last Exile

Oh man, do the people at Gonzo Studios sure know how to draw a cloud! *Last Exile*, their latest creation, takes us to a fantastical world where human culture is deeply intertwined with the sky. Small, light courier jets flit through the air, while slower warships ponderously maneuver through the billowing clouds, preparing for battle. Claus and Lavie are two van ship pilots who survive by shuttling messages and packages from one place to another, but when they aren't working, they're trying to make their vehicle into the fastest van ship in the air. While taking part in a rather important race, they almost collide with another pilot desperately trying to flee from something. Realizing that he is badly injured and can no longer complete his mission, the pilot begs Claus and Lavie to take on his task and deliver a strange girl to her destination. *Last Exile* confirms beyond a shadow of a doubt that Gonzo has indeed arrived. Their melding of 2D and 3D animation is both delicate and flawless, and the entire mysterious world is positively captivating.

geneon entertainment
rating 13 & up

SPACE PIRATE

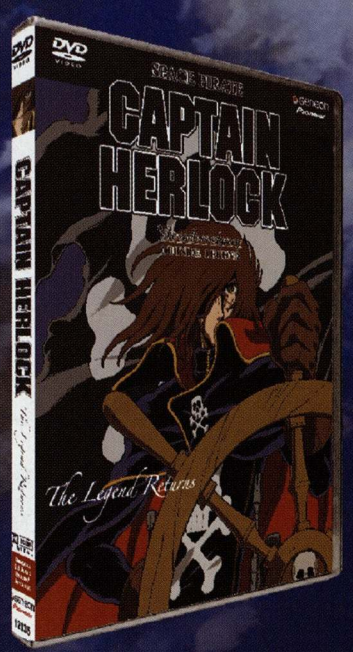
CAPTAIN HERLOCK

The endless odyssey

If you want to be a real man, board my ship.

The Legend Returns
Volume 1 Available February 2004!

Tendrils of Fear
Volume 2 Available April 2004!



DVD Features:

- 5.1 channel surround sound English and Japanese audio!
- 2 Subtitle streams- signs -only & English translation of the Japanese dialog
- DVD Extras: Non-credit Opening & Geneon Entertainment Previews
- Limited edition interlocking mini-pencil boards (while supplies last)!
- Directed by: Taro Rin (Metropolis, X/1999, Reign: the Conqueror)
- Script by: Sadayuki Murai (Cowboy Bebop, Perfect Blue, Millennium Actress)
- Character Design by: Nobuteru Yuuki (Heat Guy J, Escaflowne)
- Music by: Takayuki Hattori (Nadesico, Slayers)
- Animation Studio: Madhouse (Chobits, X, Patlabor WXIII, Ninja Scroll, Trigun)

SUGGESTED 13 UP

Based on the comic "Space Pirate Captain Herlock" by Leiji Matsumoto © LEIJI MATSUMOTO/Kobunsha • VAP • NTV © 2002 VAP • NTV

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geneon Pioneer

01

Magical Shopping Arcade
Abenobashi

You'll laugh, you'll laugh some more, and then you'll wet your pants. If you know someone in a coma (hypothetically speaking, of course), pull up a TV and put *Abenobashi Magical Shopping Arcade* to the test; it might just wake them up. Save it to say, *Abenobashi* is funny...very, very funny. But it takes a lot more than hyper-exaggerated toilet humor and bouncing boobs to garner anime of the year. It takes a truly visionary work—part comedy, part adventure, part fable, part video game and all certifiably brilliant.

The thing about *Abenobashi* is that only Gainax could make it. Like James Cameron, Peter Jackson, David Finscher or Oliver Stone, their stamp is on it. You can feel the animator's strokes and completely relate to the humor, as any and all ties to wherever you are fade away. This is a world to get lost in, just as its protagonists Arumi Asahina and Sasshi Imamiya are: two seemingly normal 12-year-old kids who at a pivotal juncture in their lives are swept away into a succession of parallel universes. It's *The Wizard of Oz* meets *Alice in Wonderland*...for adults, by Gainax, the most profound thinkers in animation the world over. Right when you think you've got your finger on the pulse of *Abenobashi*, they reach into your living room and shake you some more. We all (well, most of us) remember a time when animation was pure lunacy, no holds barred, pure unbridled fun; this is a return to that wonder for American audiences. Japan's never left.

adv films
rating 17 & up

"You can feel the animator's strokes and completely relate to the humor, as any and all ties to wherever you are fade away."

JoJo's
Bizarre Adventure

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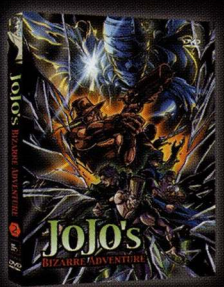

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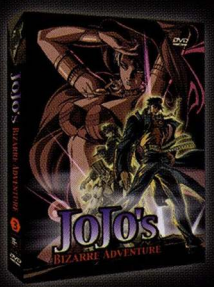

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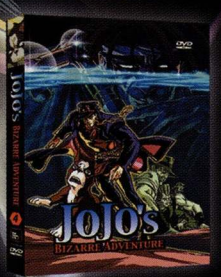

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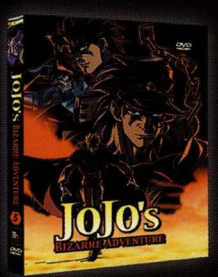

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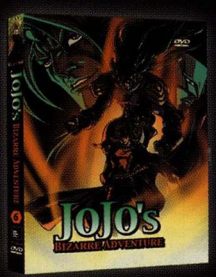

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SUGGESTED 16 UP

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2003 anime breakout categories

Outstanding Female Performance

Jessica Boone
Arumi Asahina // Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi

Veteran voice actress (yes, there's such a thing) Jessica Boone went out of body to play Arumi Asahina, but perhaps most commendable is that she managed to keep a straight face while putting a freaky accent on freaky little girl in a bunch of really freaky places.

Runners Up

- **Kimberly Yates**
  Yomiko Readman // Read or Die
- **Cynthia Martinez**
  Mikako Nagamine // Voices of a Distant Star

Outstanding Male Performance

Patrick Rodman
Takuto Kaneshiro/Ryu Soma // Argentosoma

Playing dual roles as Takuto Kaneshiro and his alter ego Ryu Soma in Bandai's *Argentosoma*, Patrick Rodman did a superb job capturing the anguish of a gifted young man whose body becomes the vessel for his own revenge.

Runners Up

- **Andrew Philbot**
  Alexander // Reign
- **Steve Cannon**
  Daisuke Aurora // Heat Guy J

Outstanding Cover Design

Neo Ranga
ADV Films

A distinctly native logo and font on a swirl of red and black interlaced with the curves and tribal markings of three beautiful sisters, ADV's *Neo Ranga* was the year's best box.

Runners Up

- **Voices of a Distant Star**
  ADV Films
- **Haibane Renmei**
  Geneon Entertainment

Outstanding DVD Box Set

Last Exile
Geneon Entertainment

Essentially sleeves for their respective series, box sets are all about the art and the extras. *Last Exile*'s beautiful art—over a brushed metal-looking foil case—would have sufficed, making the included figurine and mouse pad a collector's dream.

Runners Up

- **Samurai Deeper Kyo**
  Media Blasters
- **Najica Blitz Tactics**
  ADV Films

Outstanding Game Related

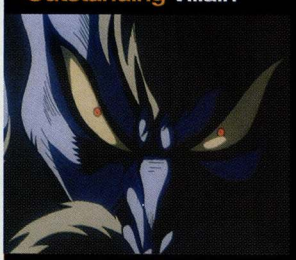
Sakura Wars The Movie
Geneon Entertainment

Great Dreamcast games, great anime. *Sakura Wars: The Movie* flawlessly married CG and traditional animation.

Runners Up

- **.hack//SIGN**
  Bandai Entertainment
- **SiN: Director's Cut**
  ADV Films J

Outstanding Villain



Dr. Hell
Mazingkaiser

Not even hell hath fury like Dr. Hell! It's not enough he's resurrected an ancient army of mechanical monsters to conquer the world; he's even evil to his minions!

Runners Up

- **Vincent**
  Cowboy Bebop: The Movie
- **Professor Gill**
  Android Kikaider

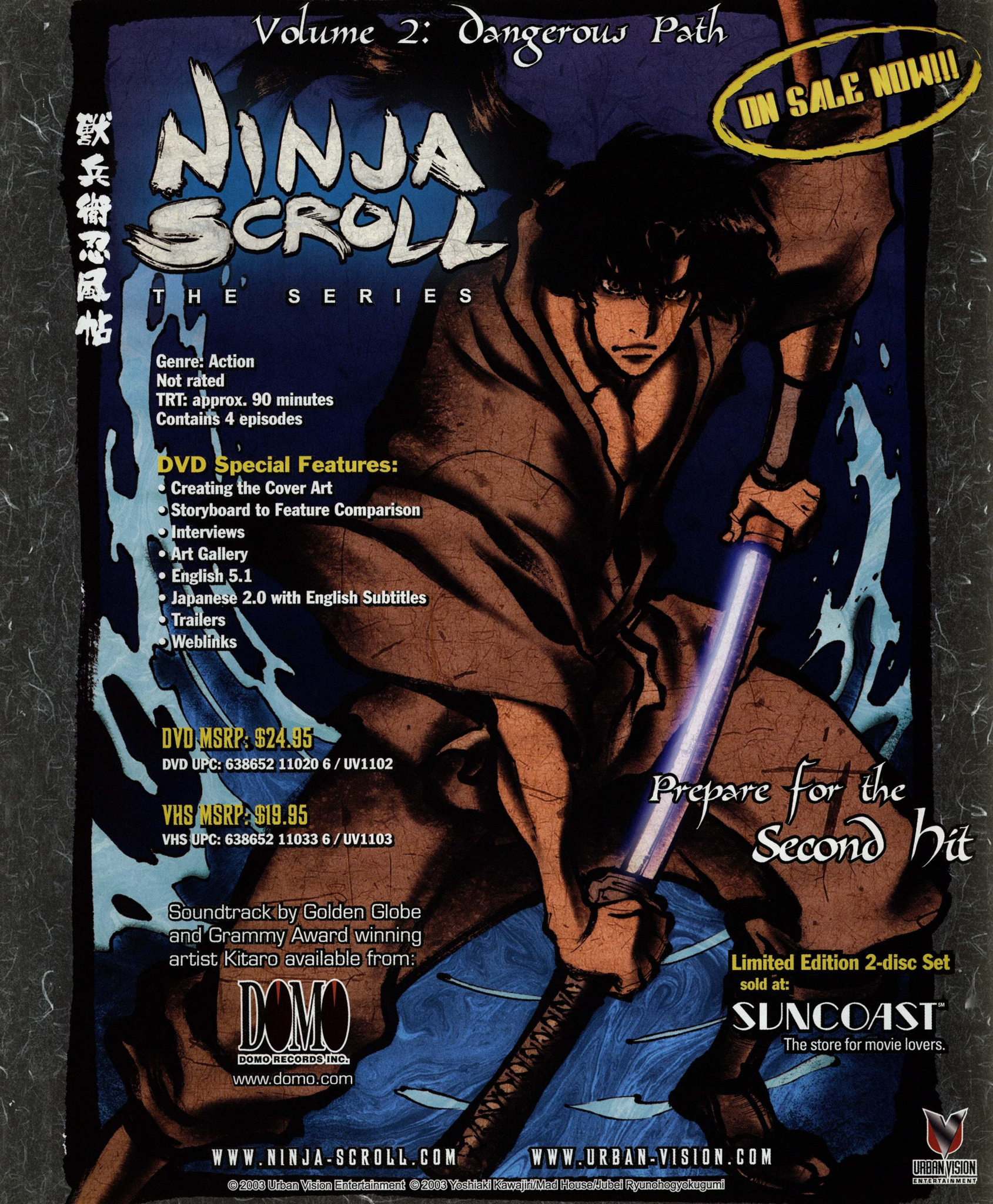
Outstanding Reissue (VHS to DVD)

Venus Wars
Central Park Media

Nobody, anime fan or otherwise, should be without this DVD. It took forever to make the jump from VHS, but as old-school anime goes, *Venus Wars* ranks among the very best. Timeless animation from an all-star creative team.

Runners Up

- **New Dominion Tank Police**
  Manga Entertainment
- **Fist of the North Star**
  Manga Entertainment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Outstanding Animated American TV

Samurai Jack
Cartoon Network

If you're over 13 and not watching anime, chances are you're watching *Samurai Jack*, the closest thing American animation has to a cultural phenomenon. As Jack battles against the evil shape-shifting Aku (and all that stand in his way), each frame is like a work of art.

Runners Up

- **Teen Titans**
  Cartoon Network
- **Kirby: Right Back at Ya**
  Fox Box

Outstanding Scene

M.S.A. Abenobashi
ADV Films

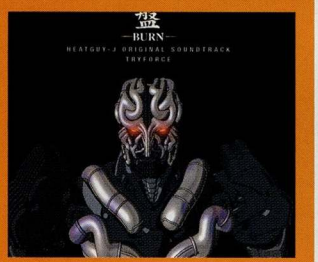
Tell you what. Instead of trying to describe how funny this scene is, why don't you make it your excuse to experience *Abenobashi* for yourself? All you have to be is awake, that's all we ask.

Runners Up

- **Sakura Wars: The Movie**
  Initial launch sequence
- **Last Exile**
  Episode 03: The Musket Squads

Outstanding Theme Song

"Face"
Heat Guy J



There were prettier and bouncier (lots bouncier) theme songs this year, but a great theme song is one that sticks with you, and aside from Kawajiri's Jubei theme, which just missed the cut, Try Force's super cool "Face" is like crazy glue.

Runners Up

- **"Shell"**
  Witch Hunter Robin
- **"Cloud Age Symphony"**
  Last Exile J

Outstanding New Female

Yomiko Readman
Read or Die

Yomiko Readman is into books...really, really into books. But underneath all of that nerdiness lie amazing powers (what she can do with paper defies description) and a body that won't quit—essentially every geek's wet dream.

Runners Up

- **Robin Sena**
  Witch Hunter Robin
- **Ayane Kamina**
  Gatekeepers 21

Outstanding New Male

Sasshi Imamiya
Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi

Sasshi Imamiya takes a lot of crap...his parents gave away all of his stuff while he was away at camp, he's been killed and healed many times over, had to kill a giant end-boss with a rubber sword (or try, at least) and is known for uncontrollable bouts of pissing... that's meritorious enough for us!

Runners Up

- **Ayato Kamina**
  RahXephon
- **Daisuke Aurora**
  Heat Guy J

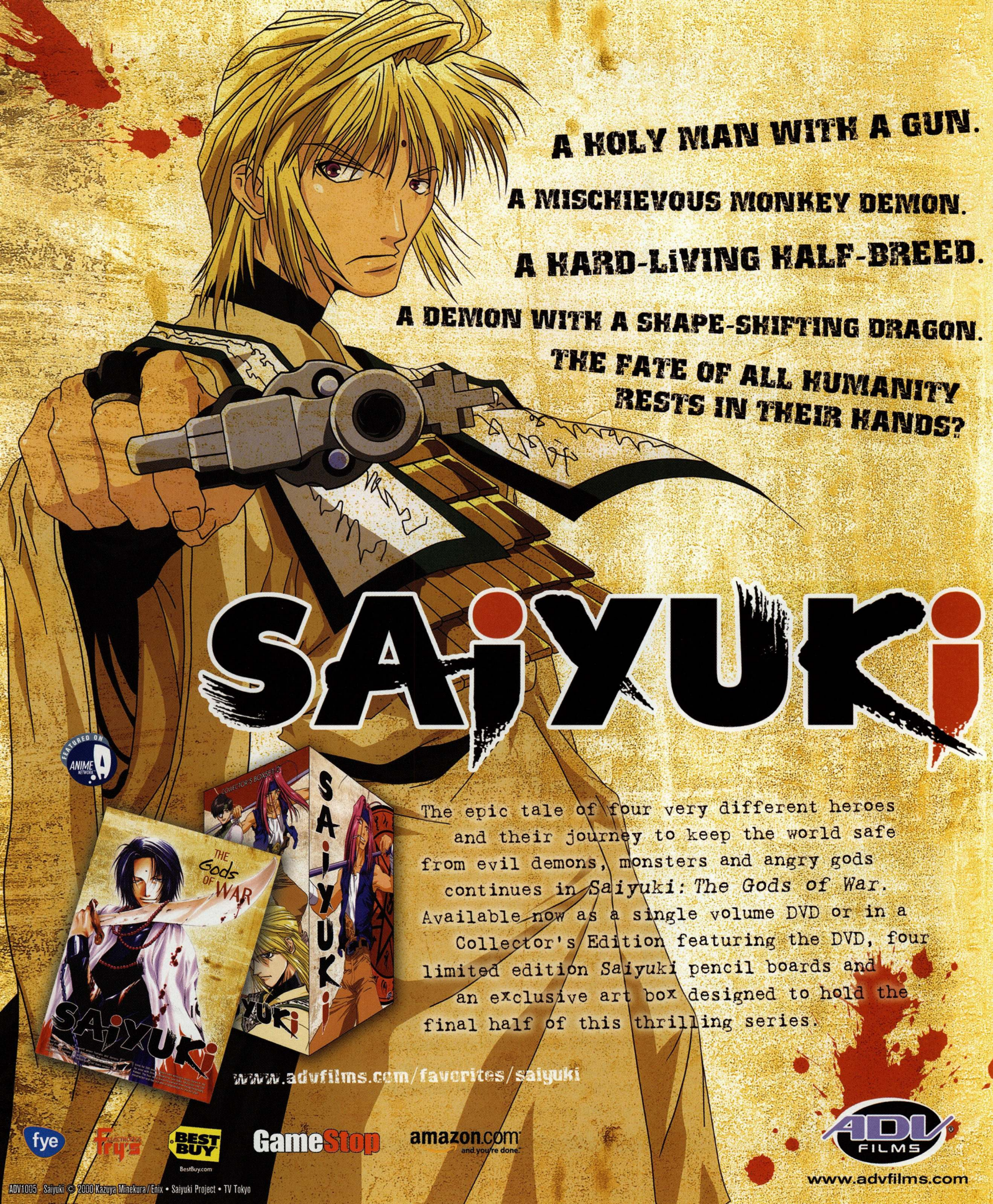
Outstanding Wanton Naughty Bits

Magical Shopping Arcade
Abenobashi
ADV Films

And again! *Abenobashi*! Why? Two words: Mune-Mune. And two things: her breasts, which Gainax seem to take unusual pleasure in animating. Well, that and a pile of underwear and nasty business too colorful for these pages.

Runners Up

- **Najica Blitz Tactics**
  ADV Films
- **Mahoromatic**
  Geneon


A HOLY MAN WITH A GUN.
A MISCHIEVOUS MONKEY DEMON.
A HARD-LIVING HALF-BREED.
A DEMON WITH A SHAPE-SHIFTING DRAGON.
THE FATE OF ALL HUMANITY RESTS IN THEIR HANDS?
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2003 anime personal top 10

"What I love about anime is that it's all one big special effect; whatever the storyteller can imagine, he or she can put on the screen."

Dave Halverson

Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi
ADV Films

01

02	**Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
03	**Heat Guy J** *geneon entertainment*
04	**Read or Die** *manga entertainment*
05	**Full Metal Panic** *adv films*
06	**Venus Wars** *central park media*
07	**RahXephon** *adv films*
08	**Voices of a Distant Star** *adv films*
09	**Cowboy Bebop: The Movie** *columbia tri-star*
10	**Mazinkaiser** *adv films*

Listening to the current debate over whether *Mystic River* or *Return of the King* is more Oscar-worthy (obviously *LOTR* takes it), I find the idea that special effects are somehow a detriment to filmmaking ridiculous. Sure, they can be—just look at *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*—but not any more than bad acting can have adverse effects on non-effects-driven films. The goal, regardless of technique, is to entertain the target audience, whom are likely paying 500 percent mark up on cold popcorn because they prefer whatever genre is up on screen. What I love about anime is that it's all one big special effect; whatever the storyteller can imagine, he or she can put on the screen. Whether it's a love story with an alien twist or a serious coming of age drama that transcends the space/time continuum, anime is no-holds-barred entertainment. And moving into the digital age, mixing CG with traditional characters...the sky is the limit. After you're done watching the parade of mostly plastic people this year, dip into my top 10 and see what you've been missing.

After the massive popularity growth of anime in 2002, it seemed almost impossible that we could have another year like it, let alone an even better one. *Spirited Away* pulled off the animated film award coup of the century by taking home the Oscar and defeating Disney's *Lilo & Stitch*. The 3D animated short compilation, *Animatrix*, was released alongside the second installment of *The Matrix*. And in Tarantino's newest film, *Kill Bill*, anime received another massive nod of approval from Hollywood as Production I.G was hired to create the animated scenes. As the demand for quality anime increases, studios like Ghibili, Gainax, Gonzo and Production I.G have risen to meet that challenge. Just a few years ago, 2D seemed to be on its way out as 3D was the way of the future, and attempts to blend the two without stylistic clashing were somewhat unsuccessful. However, releases like *Last Exile* and *Sakura Wars: The Movie* have shown that not only can Japanese studios meld the two mediums successfully, but do it in such flawless fashion that American filmmakers must take notice. Everywhere you look, signs are appearing that prove anime isn't just a fad.

Christina Alexander

Spirited Away
Walt Disney Home Video

01

02	**Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
03	**Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi** *adv films*
04	**Read or Die** *manga entertainment*
05	**Haibane Renmei** *geneon entertainment*
06	**Animatrix** *warner bros.*
07	**Cowboy Bebop: The Movie** *columbia tri-star*
08	**Angelic Layer** *adv films*
09	**Mahoromatic** *geneon entertainment*
10	**RahXephon** *adv films*

"...not only can Japanese studios meld the two mediums successfully, but do it in such flawless fashion that American filmmakers must take notice."

"More than ever, artistry and visual flair were the hook for me this year and Geneon provided it in spades."

Nelson Lui

Haibane Renmei
Geneon Entertainment

01

02	**Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
03	**Tiny Snow Fairy Sugar** *geneon entertainment*
04	**Card Captor Sakura Movie 2** *geneon entertainment*
05	**Figure-17** *media blasters*
06	**Noir** *adv films*
07	**Someday's Dreamers** *geneon entertainment*
08	**Angelic Layer** *adv films*
09	**Mahoromatic** *geneon entertainment*
10	**Animation Runner Kuromi** *central park media*

Can I be any more predictable with my Top 10? More than ever, artistry and visual flair were the hook for me this year and Geneon provided it in spades. What a strange coincidence that they would license the shows that click with me the most. *Last Exile* has the CG skills that only the best digital artists can dream up; *Haibane Renmei*, led by ABe's enigmatic vision and ideas, was one of the most aesthetically pleasing shows I have ever seen, and *Figure-17* and *Someday's Dreamers* were rich with gorgeous colors and animation. Thus, the tradition continues as Geneon (formally known as Pioneer) takes the crown yet again in my personal Top 10. No runaway winners this year, but in a good way—the elite were all equally entertaining.

The World of

Narue

Love, alien style

If you like your romantic comedy/drama/coming of age mini-series with a side order of sci-fi, better check out CPM's latest genre explosion, *The World of Narue*. It all begins when a cute, bubbly middle school student, Nanase Narue, rescues a classmate, Kazuto Izuka (loser extraordinaire) from a space terrorist disguised as a puppy (which, in case you're wondering, is not a pretty sight). So desperate, pathetic, wimpy and oddly perverted that he's not at all fazed, Narue is an alien, the two hook up, and the genre-bending begins.

It's common knowledge that for every space alien living among us, there is a bitter human bent on exposing it, but in this case, Hajime Yagi, a.k.a. Professor Sci-Fi (a latch-key kid with a cinder-block-sized chip on her shoulder), is more interested in proving the opposite. Jealous that Narue is an alien, Hajime's out to prove that her extraterrestrial claim is merely a clever ploy to attract boys, and so the first episodes go; as the happy, young couple teleport to and fro, going through all of the requisite puppy-love motions, Hajime and Naruo (the resident Don Juan and Kazuto's best buddy) take chase.

Thankfully this sappy crap doesn't last too long (although it rears its ugly head a bit much) before all heck breaks loose, alien style. On the one side there's Narue's long-lost little-big sister (it's a space-time thing), and on the other, the head inspector: the Narue equivalent of 3rd Rock's Big Giant Head. Outer space evildoers want the Narue Project off Earth, and so invasions are mounting. Unable to remove them by force, the inspector's only hope is to somehow trick the Narue family (their dreary dad is here as well) into leaving of their own free will, and so the rain of cyborgs begins—cute girl cyborgs, that is—to throw a monkey wrench into Narue's love life and her little-big sister's newfound friendship with none other than Hajime.

Available as a four-DVD collector's box set complete with director's commentary, art and sketch galleries, Japanese commercials, voice actor interviews and other assorted do-dads, *Narue* is also the first CPM series available simultaneously as an Anime Test Drive title (you get episode 1 and 45 minutes of trailers for $7.99), so you can decide whether *Narue*'s world is one you want to visit.

Dave Halverson

Studio: Central Park Media
Rating: 13 & Up
Running Time: 300 Minutes

"...so the rain of cyborgs begins —cute girl cyborgs, that is..."

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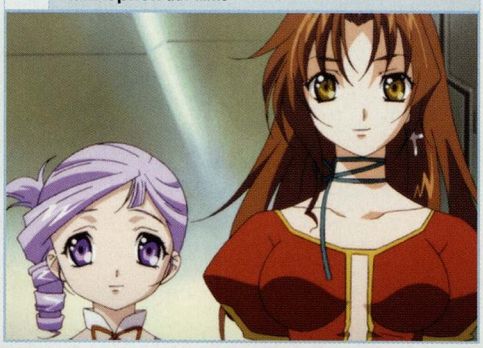
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Millennium Actress** *dreamworks*
02	**Initial D battle 3** *tokyopop*
03	**Ninja Scroll 10th Anniversary** *manga entertainment*
04	**Vampire Hunter D Bloodlust** *urban vision*
05	**Card Captor Sakura The Movie 2** *geneon ent.*
06	**Final Fantasy Unlimited V2** *adv films*
07	**Castle in the Sky** *buena vista*
08	**The Big O Collection** *bandai entertainment*
09	**.hack//SIGN V4** *bandai entertainment*
10	**Wrath of the Ninja** *central park media*

Play Magazine Top Ten

01	**Kiddy Grade** *funimation productions*
02	**Yukikaze** *bandai entertainment*
03	**MSA Abenobashi** *adv films*
04	**Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
05	**Space Pirate Captain Herlock TLR** *geneon ent.*
06	**Haibane Renmei** *geneon entertainment*
07	**PreTear** *adv films*
01	**Full Metal Panic** *adv films*
09	**Sadamitsu The Destroyer** *anime works*
10	**RahXephon** *adv films*



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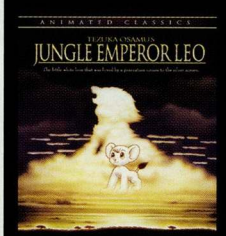


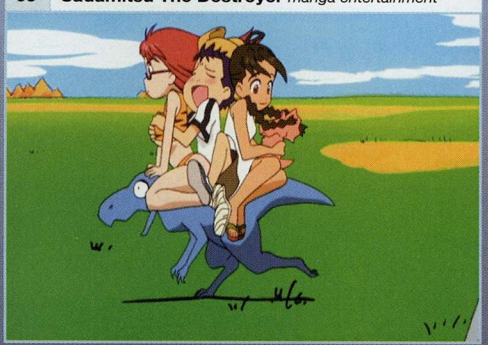
Jungle Emperor Leo
media blasters

Tezuka's modern-day sequel (originally released in Japanese theatres in 1997) to Leo (Kimba in the U.S.) the White Lion has Leo defending the jungle from money-hungry humans in search of the treasured Moonlight Stones. Definitely required viewing for, dare we say, the whole family.

Witch Hunter Robin / bandai entertainment
Paranormal activity has never been so compelling as in Bandai's outstanding new adventure/horror series.

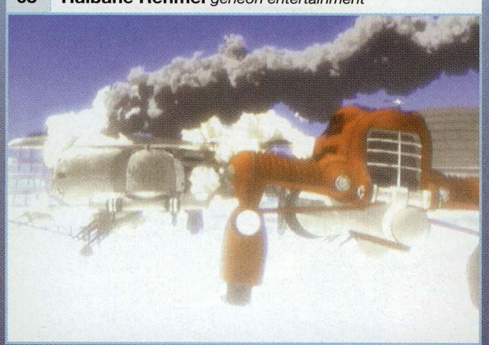
Dave Halverson

01	**MSA Abenobashi** *adv films*
02	**Kiddy Grade** *funimation productions*
03	**Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
04	**Space Pirate Captain Herlock TLR** *geneon ent.*
05	**Sadamitsu The Destroyer** *manga entertainment*



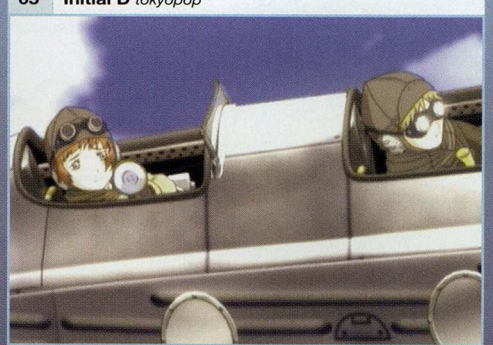
Christina Alexander

01	**Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
02	**Spirited Away** *walt disney home video*
03	**Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi** *adv films*
04	**Read or Die** *manga entertainment*
05	**Haibane Renmei** *geneon entertainment*



Nelson Lui

01	**Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*
02	**Kiddy Grade** *funimation productions*
03	**Yukikaze** *bandai entertainment*
04	**Najica Blitz Tactics** *adv films*
05	**Initial D** *tokyopop*



Reader's Anime Top Five

01	**Initial D** *tokyopop*
02	**.hack//SIGN** *bandai entertainment*
03	**Ninja Scroll 10th Anniversary** *manga entertainment*
04	**RahXephon** *adv films*
05	**Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	**Kill Me Kiss Me** *tokyopop manga*
02	**Sgt. Frog!** *tokyopop manga*
03	**Les Bijoux** *tokyopop manga*
04	**Full Metal Panic** *adv manga*
05	**Faeries Landing** *tokyopop manga*

Play Magazine Music Top Five

01	**FLCL OST 1** *geneon music*
02	**Neon Genesis Evangelion OST** *geneon music*
03	**Hellsing: Ruins** *geneon music*
04	**WXIII** *geneon music*
05	**Chobits Original Soundtrack 001** *geneon music*

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GameOver

For Game Over, the game is just the beginning

Ever wanted to know what happens in the lives of your video game characters after the game is over? Well, they raise families, deal with daughters desiring dates and bigger breasts, boys who fall in love, neighbors who won't lay off the random kung fu. The family pet taunts other pets, threatening to expose their "un-Christian-like things." They just have to deal with the absurdities of their backward lives. Check out their adventures in the new UPN comedy, "Game Over," which kicks off March 10. Mean time, check out what DKP Effects, the 3-D animation and VFX company bringing it all to life, is up to: Dan Krech, president and executive producer, and John Morch, VP business development. But first off, get the lowdown from "Game Over" producer Dave Goestch. Brady Fiechter

Dave Goestch: I gotta tell you, I'm a big fan of **play** magazine. One of the first issues I saw of you guys was Ratchet and Clank. And I was just like, Oh my God, this is beautiful. At that time, that's when we were working on "Game Over." And what we were trying to do is what you guys were trying to do. You know, game technology is looking so good and animation is so good; to have a sleek, smart, stylish magazine that really promoted it was so in line with what we wanted to do with "Game Over." This thing should be mainstream; machinima should be something real, and there should be more appreciation for this stuff.

Hey, thanks. What you're saying is exactly right, though. Your show doesn't seem to condescend, it takes the audience seriously. People still don't seem to get it. It's still a little risky, huh?

Totally. One of the hurdles we've faced was trying to make a show that gamers would enjoy, but you have to sell it to nongamers. So in the first couple episodes, we had to really lay stuff out there. And some of it is just weird. Like the second episode, where you have the anime girlfriend. It's just so weird. We just love that stuff.

That the tone you were going for from the start?

Oh, definitely. I mean, we want to make a show that gamers feel like they have a part in it. That where there are references that just gamers get. In the pilot episode, when you see Abe from Abe's Oddysee, he just walks across the screen as the van passes in to the toxic waste dump. The kind of thing where you might miss it, but it's just a little treat for gamers. It looks great, but we don't want to make an Abe joke.

Yeah, and that's the thing. Watching the show, I feel like you guys have an important feel for gaming.

Well, two of the four of us actually have Ms. Pac-Man machines in our house. But that's because of our wives. With my wife, we were talking about getting this split Galaga/Ms. Pac-Man. But she's a purist. And she said, "Well, we can get another machine, but why get the combo?" Seriously, we were all gamers growing up, and we just wish we had more time to play more now. We do have a video-game intern. His name is Fish. In Episode 3, Alice doesn't want to go to gym. When you go to gym, it's on a beach, and DOA Extreme Volleyball is influencing it. So we need someone to play these games all the way through.

But we love games. David Sacks, one of the other writers, just really appreciates these games, he can just watch them unfold. He can just sit and watch Zelda for hours. You're watching animation, you know?

You're going for a specific audience. But you can't just be all video games. There's universal stuff here.

We realized you could just make a show that's just for gamers and only gamers are gonna get it, but you won't sell it to the net-

"You can't insult the audience. The gaming audience is pretty much smarter than everybody."

work, and we didn't think you could make it as popular as we thought this show could be. So our trick was to start out with a show that gamers would like and people who don't play games would also like, and wouldn't be intimidated by or turned off from. We have gamer references and stuff, but we wanna have jokes that anyone can get, you don't have to have the reference point.

But it's that reference point that will ultimately put the show over the top. There's a smart balance to achieve that's not easy to do.
That's true, and I guess the message we want to send to gamers is as our show becomes more successful, we want to get even more into the gaming culture, but it's hard to frontload a pilot when it's being tested and it's going through all the hoops—and there's so many hoops.

Something you've got going for you is that you're really the only one doing something like this.
Oh, thank you very much. I think it's insane there haven't been more fictional storytelling touching on the world of video games. Games to me are the one thing that unites everyone under the age of 40. Because everyone has had that moment, whether they were eight or waiting for Halo 2, where the game just takes you to another place and it's so much fun. People who don't play games just can't understand how you play through Xbox live, through the internet, how we can interact, how old college buddies can play together. We had a four-TV, 16-person Halo game the other week in the office. It was just a blast.
Everyone has that experience. I remember when I was in third grade, I had to give something up for Lent, and it was the Atari Pac-Man... But by about day five, I just started crying, I'm gonna go to hell, I have to play this. Then she said, you know, go ahead, you're not going to go to hell. Go play Pac-Man.

Yeah, there are just so many people playing games and have some great memory. Everyone's playing.
One of my favorite statistics I read is that 100 percent of college kids have played video games. And it's true. Who hasn't played a video game? There's always this statistic of nongamers versus gamers. But I think it's more like hardcore gamers as opposed to casual gamers. Passive gamers, those who just show up and maybe to watch.

And finally someone recognizes this and want to distill it into a show.
Yeah, there are so many visual jokes. We have the next-door neighbors...the Shaolin monks, the ninjas, everyone's always getting attacked. On the other side of the house is a first-person shooter guy. And all we ever see is his perspective. So you see him, he has a rifle he points around, speaking to people like a friendly neighbor. And then you hear a "chk-chk," and the weapon turns into a beer can or a rake. That first-person shooter image, it's become iconic. People have played these games for hundreds of hours, lived in these worlds.

And you aren't going overboard. It could be numbing if you went too far.
Yeah, if we did that, why not just play the game? You can't insult the audience. The gaming audience is pretty much

smarter than everybody. You have to have good characters, good stories. With all this reality TV on the air, fictional shows need to be shows that just can't be reality. Come up with a premise that there's no way it can be done. And one of those is the everyday lives of video game characters.

The show's very off-kilter at time. Kind of reminds me of "The Family Guy." But you don't want to be assaulting. Tough to know when to pull back?
Well, that's why there are four of us. And we really rely on each other to build the tone. What we like to do is when we write the scripts, we come up with an outline. Then we'll split it up, and everyone goes off to write it. That means everyone gets a little bit of something put into the script, but no one has a feeling of singular ownership... Once you get it down, something "The Simpsons" did so perfectly, you really can start rolling out other episodes. We certainly want to appeal to the "Family Guy" viewers, 'cause we feel they got so ripped off when Fox canceled it. Working with UPN, they wanted this family to feel real. One thing we had to wrestle with is that these guys live in a video game, but they really need to feel like they exist.

You go back to the first season of "The Simpsons"; they had some growing pains to come to grips with. It took a while to get in the groove and Fox stuck with it. I do like where you guys are trying to go. I hope you guys can get a chance to allow your show to breathe and find its way.
Thank you very much. And you know, what you guys write makes a difference. And that's the thing that we take to the networks and say, look at this amazing magazine that is at the center of the movement. And you've gotta stick with us. You're right and that's one thing we talk to people about, you forget: the first season of "The Simpsons" looked different. And because we're working in Maya, and you can do so many upgrades, our show is just gonna get better and better. The lighting will get amazing, the renders will get better, the riggings on the models will improve. This first six we have made is like one big pilot. We really want to get the input from the gaming community. You gotta make the show you want to make, but you have to make a show everyone is going to like.

You guys seem really up on the culture of gaming.
We're passionate. You can't not know this world.

And yet I meet so many people who pitch these shows but just don't get it. The people who are buying certainly don't.
It's insulting at times.

Yeah, it really is.
But we are just so into it. We flew up to Seattle and met with Gabe Newell at Valve. And we tried to do a television show in machinima. He was developing the Half-Life 2 engine, and he gave us the tour. It was so incredible. Everything looked amazing. But he said if you put this stuff on TV, it just wouldn't look this amazing, fitting it into the television pipeline, scaling it down. Now, we thought, we have to make a machinima sitcom. But for the time, this idea was just crazy... But it is the future, and we hope this show is just the start of a new wave of animation production, new techniques.

Hey, keep on dreaming. We need this attitude.
You learn, but you want to do something different, you want to move things forward. I know if we get this thing right we'll be going there.

Interview Part 2 // Dan Krech and John Morch

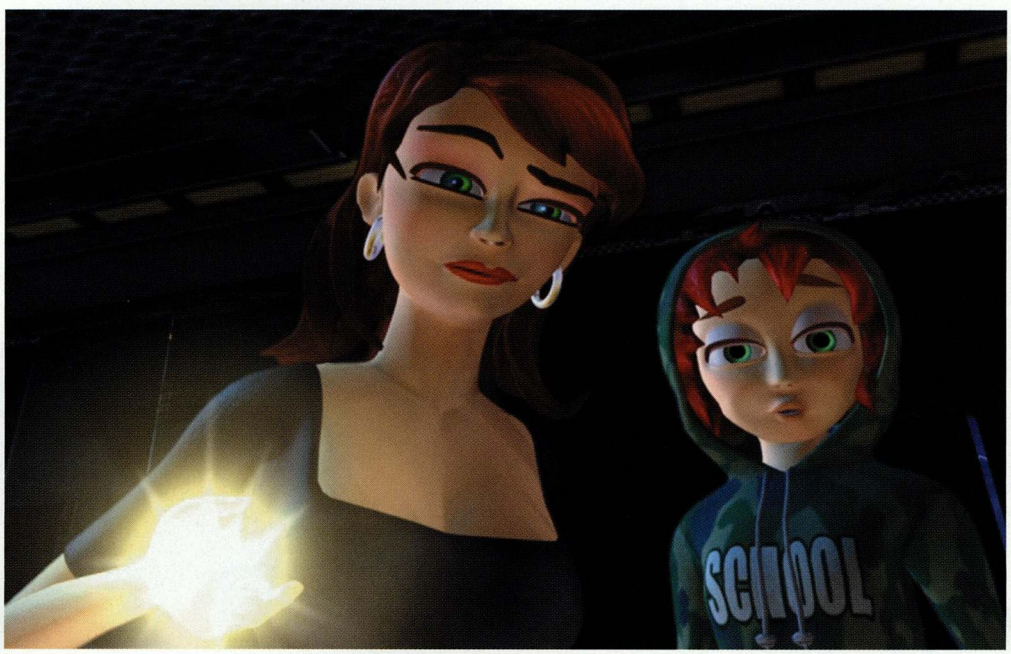
Gamers can be pretty hardcore, pretty fickle when it comes to authenticity. Must be a tough job to take on.
Dan Krech: It is. It really is a tough job. But the scripts are so well written. And Carsey-Warner-Mandabach ["3rd Rock from the Sun," "That 70's Show"] are great partners to work with. I know when they're writing the scripts, when they write the gags you see, it makes our job a whole lot easier. When they're writing the scripts, they have a person on staff who does nothing but play games all day.

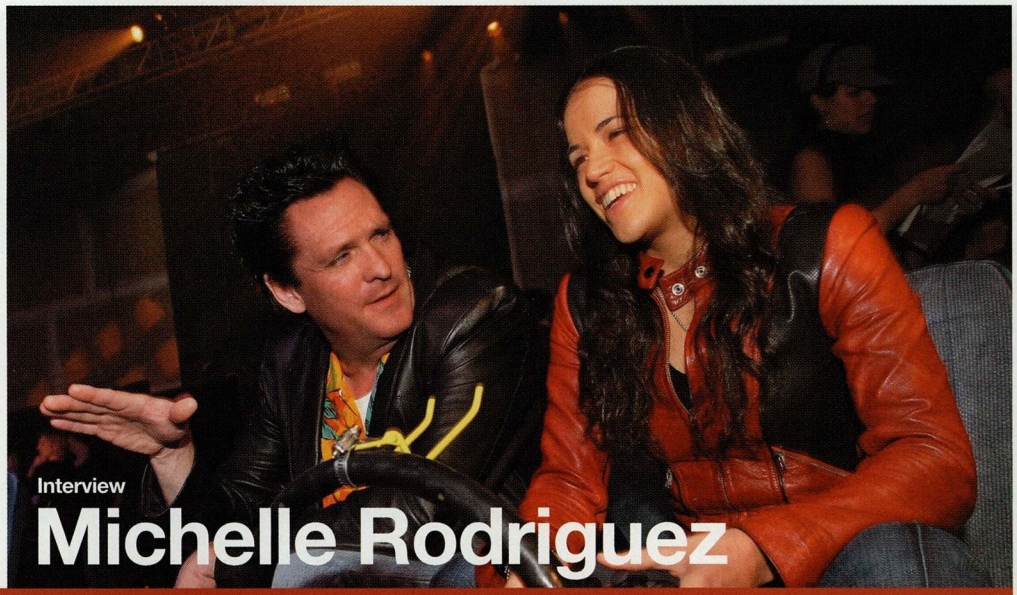
How does the creative process work over there?
A lot of the creative happens in LA before we see it. There are storyboard teams for every show. And the writers are the executive producers as well. So they have input, and there's storyboard pitches. When everything gets here, that's when our creative juices take over. We have input, we put a lot of different things in there. It's evolving right to the end. It's not really that cut and dry, it's not like "here's the show, here's the angles and animate it." It's sort of a sculpture where it continues to be molded until it's finished.

Must be fun too. You've got that extra freedom of imagination. There's this reality they live in, but you must have all these different places you can go you wouldn't have with live action.
It's an incredible amount of fun. I mean, I think we're fortunate as a company. We have to have one of the best gigs in the world right now. Working on this show, it's the first prime-time CG show, it has a lot of character, it has great voices, great writing. Who wouldn't want to work on this show?

How long does it take to put the episode together, from the moment you get the materials in and finish the render?
Well, we do them simultaneously; we put together six episodes in about eight months. It's really hard to say what's the linear progression for one episode. Building the models, building all the assets is half the work. We've done over 280 characters and I don't know how many backgrounds. We have a huge library right now. We had a crew nonstop doing that. Going forward, that was a big investment on our part, and we should be able to do the show much quicker now.

You guys have done a lot of stuff. You see the process, the technology changing the way you work?
John Morch: Yeah...Technology is changing incredibly. But it's more about, I keep looking at this process we have called the Grid (Graphical Realtime Information Display), and it allows all these individual artists do what they do best, which is make art. So all the way through the pipeline, from the storyboarders to the writers to the animators, in the end, hopefully the tools allow them to do what they're good at rather than having to push buttons. We gotta get six episodes in eight months. Episodic TV is tough; sitcoms are especially tough. There's a lot of rewrites, a lot of reedits, a lot of recutting. The Grid, it allows changes to be done much later, allows everyone to be much more creative. I guess that's the innovation I see. It's more process and procedure than technology.
Krech: It's the kind of thing where computer animation was its own artform for a long time, and it still is. The art is built around the computer. But when you're doing episodic television, networks and production companies don't want to hear that and they don't want to understand it. So we have to adapt to the live-action method. And we have to change our industry and our technology to fit within the realities of that television guideline. There are table reads just as in a live-action show. There are differences of course, but the time frames, the time lines, those are set in stone for the networks. If the animation companies can't adapt to [that certain] way of doing things, they'll just do it live action.
Morch: We developed this with Carsey-Werner. It's pretty interesting: no one thought it could be done. Most people have not done this in such a time frame.
Krech: It's never been done.
Morch: Yeah, not on prime time. There's kid shows and stuff, but there's a whole level of quality and finish and obvious a humor, a comedy that's never been done... The way we make this show is not as a traditional feature film or normal visual effects style. It really is made very similar to the way video games are made. It's basically a video-game style pipeline, in terms of how we build the models and how we set up the characters. So that's a neat connection to the video game world.





Interview

Michelle Rodriguez

Many gamers were first introduced to Michelle Rodriguez as ass-kicking STARS team-member Rain Ocampo in the *Resident Evil* film. From there, her ties with gaming tightened as she played the role of Rosie in Activision's True Crime and now as Calita in Atari's Driv3r. We sat down with Michelle (pictured here with Michael Madsen) at a recent Driv3r event to chat about her role in the game...and her real-time role as a big time gamer!

play: Pretty cool party for a video game, huh?
Rodriguez: You're not kidding! You would think this is some Hollywood premiere or something. It's all very cool.

Well, you're here aren't you? You're Hollywood!
Nah, I don't see myself that way. I'm just happy to be doing what I love to do. I'm really fortunate.

So you've done True Crime and now Driv3r, which one was the better experience for you?
This one! [laughing] Am I bad for saying that?! [laughing]

No, you're bad. What made this one so much better?
The guys are cooler, the setting is cooler and my character is simply bad ass.

Can you tell me about your character, Calita?
She's a kick-ass car smuggler that doesn't take shit from anyone. She boosts them then sells them, you know. She's kinda evil too. I liked that about her. [laughing]

So you mean the woman in the video we just saw?
You mean the real big bitch?

Right on. Right on. Good times!
Totally! [sticking both thumbs up in the air]

Why did you like working on Driv3r over True Crime?
It was a lot of things. First of all, it was a cooler script than True Crime—it was more creative and edgier. As far as the character, in True Crime it was all about the guy character. I wanted to be him more than I wanted to be Rosie! [laughing] You know what I mean? It was just a matter of what I like. I like action, I like having fun and I like being free and those are the things I thought Calita had. You'll see later on how all of that gets taken away [laughing], but you know, I don't want to give anything away.

What kind of games do you like to play?
SOCOM, Metal Gear Solid, Splinter Cell and Rainbow Six. I'm a big chess player so when I play a video game it has to give me a challenge. I like fighting games too, like Virtua Fighter and Tekken. I have real good hand-eye coordination but after my hands start to hurt, I have to change the game.

So you like Rainbow Six? Interesting. That's a pretty complex game.
I love how precise it is. It's all about timing, being patient and, above all, intelligence. You can't go storming into a hostage situation with your guns blazing. You gotta think about where you're going to go in and take out the bad guys. I love that.

Man, you rock my world.
[laughing] Seriously, I love Rainbow Six. I also can't wait for the next Splinter Cell.

So which platform is your favorite? If you could only choose one, which one would it be?
Xbox right now has the better graphics and I know they're working on getting more exclusive content like Sony did with PlayStation 2. You know how Sony is, "I'm keeping all of the games and you're not getting any!" You know what I mean? That's kinda f***ed up. I think this coming year, PS2 and Xbox are going to be neck and neck. GameCube, I'm sorry to say, is mostly for kids—not my deal. And Sega—you know, it hurts to see where they're going. You know, it's like they're already gone. It's sad.

Is there a game that is coming out or that you know of that you would like to be a part of? Is there one dream game for Michelle Rodriguez?
Hmmm, I'd like to be the female version of Solid Snake. I would love to be in a Metal Gear game where I played the lead character. That would rock. They could call me Serpent or something. [laughing] That would be hot, man!

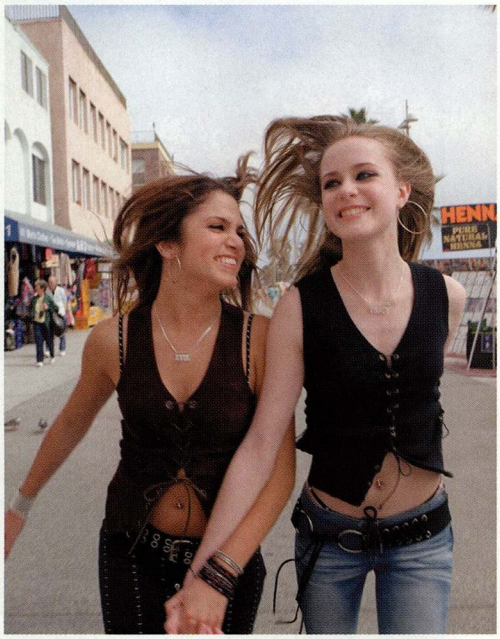
Did you ever play Resident Evil?
Of course, huge fan. When I found out they were making a movie, I called and found out who was involved and asked if I could have a chance to be a part of it.

So you called...
Yeah man, they weren't looking for me. I had to call them! I was so psyched to be a part of Resident Evil.

OK, one last question. If [S.W.A.T.'s] Chris Sanchez and [Resident Evil's] Rain Ocampo were to meet face to face, who would win?
Rain?

Why?
Because she's an ex-Navy SEAL. She'll be like, "Alright bitch, what else you got?" She kicks ass.

"...I'd like to be the female version of Solid Snake. I would love to be in a Metal Gear game where I played the lead character. That would rock. They could call me Serpent or something."



Thirteen

Starring: Evan Rachel Wood, Nikki Reed, Holly Hunter
Director: Catherine Hardwicke
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: R

For all who argue the world is no worse than it was a century before, let the heavy drama of *Thirteen* shake your convictions. This raw look at a pair of teenage girls in LA struggling to find their young way in life is unblinking and disturbing, but it never resorts to the grime of melodrama. Drugs, sex and defiance rule the lives of the so, so sad youngsters—they cry for help underneath the subtlety of the script, revealing the deepening sadness all around them; it's not just kids who are in need. *Thirteen* is unblinking yet perhaps too assaulting in the end; so brutalized are these hapless girls' surroundings that you begin to question if a reality like this really reflects the lives of modern American youth. Not everyone's flipping out under the shine of the Hollywood sun.
Extras: Director and co-writer Catherine Hardwicke gives an interesting read into her caustic film. Nikki Reed, the young actress who also penned the script, joins Evan Rachel Wood and Brady Corbet. 10 deleted scenes don't play interestingly outside the film; empty 6-minute featurette.
Brady Fiechter
Movie: B- **DVD:** B

Runaway Jury

Starring: John Cusack, Gene Hackman, Dustin Hoffman, Rachel Weisz
Director: Gary Fleder
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: PG-13

Runaway Jury is one of those films that plays much better on video than it did in the theaters—a marginally entertaining drama that floats between good TV and contrived, competent filmmaking. The hyperactive story, altered from the John Grisham novel, paints its characters with convenient yet bright color; they're all fun to watch flow through the energetic machinations of the drama. The setup: a disgruntled co-worker mows down almost an entire floor of an office, prompting one widow to sue. Time to take on the gun makers who provided the instrument for murder. Millions are at stake, the jury is initially hand-picked—one of the film's more enjoyable scenes—and then disrupted from the inside by cons looking to score a multimillion bribe from whichever side bites first. The film works as swift, surface entertainment until the end, when too much strained message mixes in with a safe, underwhelming conclusion.
Extras: Informative director's commentary, occasional boring scene breakdowns by Hackman and Hoffman. Handful of featurettes fall in the evergrowing category of fodder.
Brady Fiechter
Movie: B- **DVD:** C

So Close

Starring: Qi Shu, Vicki Zhao, Karen Mok, Seung-heon Song
Director: Corey Yuen
Released By: Columbia Pictures
Rated: R

So Close: Charlie's Angles for Hong Kong, taking itself maybe a little bit too seriously but never without delicious style. Really nothing short of a fun ride. Directed by action choreographer Cory Yuen, *So Close* is filmed with a freedom of fantasy that only cartoons tend to embrace. In fact, there's not much about *So Close* that doesn't feel surreal in some way. The story follows the conflict of two assassin sisters who survive a gang of assassins and fight back by taking over the family computer surveillance company to aid their ability to kill. What this means is we get such crazies as a sexy lady catapulting to the ceiling and hanging from retractable spikes in her boots as she unloads a dual pistols while hanging upside down. It's actually a little elegant at times. And it's all a lot bombastic and a little too in love with excess style, yet *So Close* is a surprise entertainment.
Extras: Um, not even a commentary?
Brady Fiechter
Movie: B **DVD:** F

Wonderland

Starring: Val Kilmer, Lisa Kudrow, Kate Bosworth, Dylan McDermott
Director: James Cox
Released By: Lion's Gate
Rated: R

In 1981, LA police discovered a quadruple murder on a street called Wonderland. Porn star John Holmes became an unlikely suspect. In Wonderland, two stories spin outward from the scene of the crime, telling completely different versions of what might have been the truth. It's interesting following the four-day path of the lives of these aggressive, drug-addled characters spiraling to their ultimate, desperate fates. But you feel as though you are watching these characters from a distance much more than feeling them. The director works unnecessarily for style but does nothing to elevate the substance of a script that isn't concerned with sharp characters as much as quickly brooding situations. By the end, I really didn't have much interest in where Holmes was going and the lives of those he took down with him.
Extras: The extras are better than the movie, with highlights including an informative 2-hour documentary and analysis of the real-life crime. Hyper director commentary gets old fast.
Brady Fiechter
Movie: C **DVD:** B-

Hip Hop Gamer
Bow Wow

No longer Lil, the artist now known simply as Bow Wow continues to please fans of all ages with his unique blend of R&B-infused hip hop. A little older and wise beyond his years, he dropped by EA headquarters to help unveil the recent Harry Potter: Quidditch World Cup game and the tournament that sent one lucky youngster to England to compete in the world championship. With his new album Unleashed being produced by heavyweights like the Neptunes, Swizz Beats and Lil Jon, and with appearances by Jagged Edge and Baby and getting some pretty positive press, Bow Wow took some time out to chat with play about growing up, being blessed and trying to be a normal kid—albeit one who sells millions of records. Lucas Mast

We get the whole trench coat thing, but what's with the kid on the left? Check the budget smock and the air conditioned pants...must be from Hufflepuff.

"I love Madden! But then again, I love video games, so it is hard to nail down favorites."

play: How did you get hooked into the event today?
Bow Wow: I have always been a big fan of gaming and especially one of EA Sports. When they mentioned that they were going to be planning an event that was very focused on kids—who are some of my biggest fans since I am still one myself—I jumped at the chance to be a part of it.

What are some of your favorite games?
I love Madden! But then again, I love video games, so it is hard to nail down favorites. I suppose I would have to list Medal of Honor, NBA Live and SOCOM as top picks too.

You grew up in the spotlight from a very early age. How has life changed for you over the years?
I think the hardest thing is that it is not easy for me to go to everyday places like the mall or the movies or even the grocery store because people now recognize me. But I am truly blessed and know that a lot of people would trade places with me in an instant. But the good things definitely outweigh the bad—I get to meet a lot of cool people and get some pretty great privileges that I would not get if I was not who I have become today.

What do you like to do for fun when you are not in the studio or on tour?
I like to do pretty normal teen things—hanging out with my friends at the mall, working out, playing basketball, driving around. I am a 16-year-old man, after all, so I'd have to rank girls pretty high up on my list!

You were recently on the red-hot MTV show "Punk'd." Since they got you then, do you get to turn it around and return the favor to one of your friends?
Yes indeed. A future show will let people see that I got my revenge—B2K had better watch out!

Any plans for you to be on Cribs? It seems like a natural fit...
I am actually going to be on the third season. I have a pretty big place in Atlanta, although I spend most of my time in LA for business reasons.

Can we assume you have some nice rides?
I love my cars. I have a Maserati, a Mercedes Benz G500 and a new Nissan 350Z.

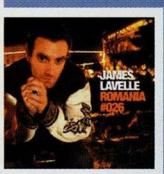
What are you listening to now?
I just picked up the new Jay-Z and the new G-Unit album. I buy so many CDs, but I feel like I need to support my fellow artists—so they will return the favor!

Are you still tight with Snoop?
He's always been like my big brother and mentor. Like me, he's a video game fanatic. But I can still usually whoop him most days!

What other projects are you working on?
I am currently working on my new WB television show called "Saving Jason." Also, since the album dropped, I have been doing a lot of press and preparing for an arena tour to support the album early [this year].

You have accomplished quite a bit for someone still so young. What else would you like to do?
I'd love to be in my own video game. Are you listening, EA? [laughs]

Music Reviews



James Lavelle
Global Underground #26: Romania

As one half of the world-renowned Unkle and head of groundbreaking label Mo Wax, James Lavelle makes his second appearance in the popular Global Underground series. Featuring hard-to-find remixes he has done for Queens of the Stone Age and South, as well as a number of original Unkle tracks and remixes by the likes of Sasha, Romania is a must-have for fans of Lavelle, DJ Shadow, Quannum and other downtempo pioneers and innovators. **Lucas Mast**

El-P
High Water (Mark) [Thirsty Ear]

Mixing it up with the Blue Series Continuum, famed hip-hop producer El-P dips into some jazz to create a wonderful bridge between the two worlds. Showing that music can be a seamless voyage, El-P's skills blend effortlessly with the horns and piano sounds of the Blue Series Continuum. High Water Mark shows that El-P can take the foundations across genres and serves as an introduction to a whole new audience for both participants. **Lucas Mast**

Marques Wyatt
Horizons (Om Records)

In a world where new music overwhelms the masses, few people have their pulse on what people want to hear better than Marques Wyatt. As one of the biggest names and smoothest styles in domestic house music, Wyatt offers up the latest in his bag of tricks. Featuring big names like Louie Vega and Mark Grant, as well as introducing lesser-known but stellar artists like Los Hermanos and Antonio Ocasio, Wyatt takes the listener on a soulful journey from which they never want to return. **Lucas Mast**

Ultrazoom camera

Olympus C-750 Ultra Zoom

www.olympus.com Price: $599.00

Olympus digital cameras have a reputation for delivering stunning images, and their latest is no exception. The C-750's claim to fame is that it's the world's smallest 10X optical zoom, 4.0 megapixel camera. With its sleek, compact design, the C-750 is perfect for the outdoorsman or sports fanatic who wants to get that all-important "money shot." The state-of-the-art viewfinder shows image information (resolution, flash and shooting mode). This saves precious battery life. The 10X optical zoom is equivalent to 38mm to 380mm—a number unheard of for all-in-one digital cameras. Being 4.0 megapixel, users can not only take pictures good enough for publication, but can have brilliant quality printing on large sizes up to 11" X 14". Importing images to your PC was as easy as plugging in a USB cord and dragging and dropping. **Tom Ham**

Advanced wireless phone

VTech i5881 and i5801 Color Handset

www.vtechphones.com Price: $179.99 for i5881 $79.95 for i5801 (sold separately)

Packed with high-end features and coming in at a price point all of us can afford is VTech's latest cordless wonder. With a whopping 5.8 GHz range of use, integrated digital answering machine and one of the best-sounding speakerphones on the market, the i5881 has all the extras for well under $200. Both the base and handset feature caller ID as well as call waiting ID and Sound Select technology that allows for clearer reception and performance. Users can transfer calls from the handset to the base (and vice versa). Not only can the i5881 support up to six handsets, but users can talk handset to handset as well. What will the 5.8 GHz give you? Crystal-clear sound quality that will rival any cordless phone on the market. With the addition of the i5801 Color Handset, users at home can finally get picture caller ID. Just plug it in to your PC via USB and you can upload pictures and custom ringtones (even MP3s) to the handset. **Tom Ham**

MP3-CD-Radio

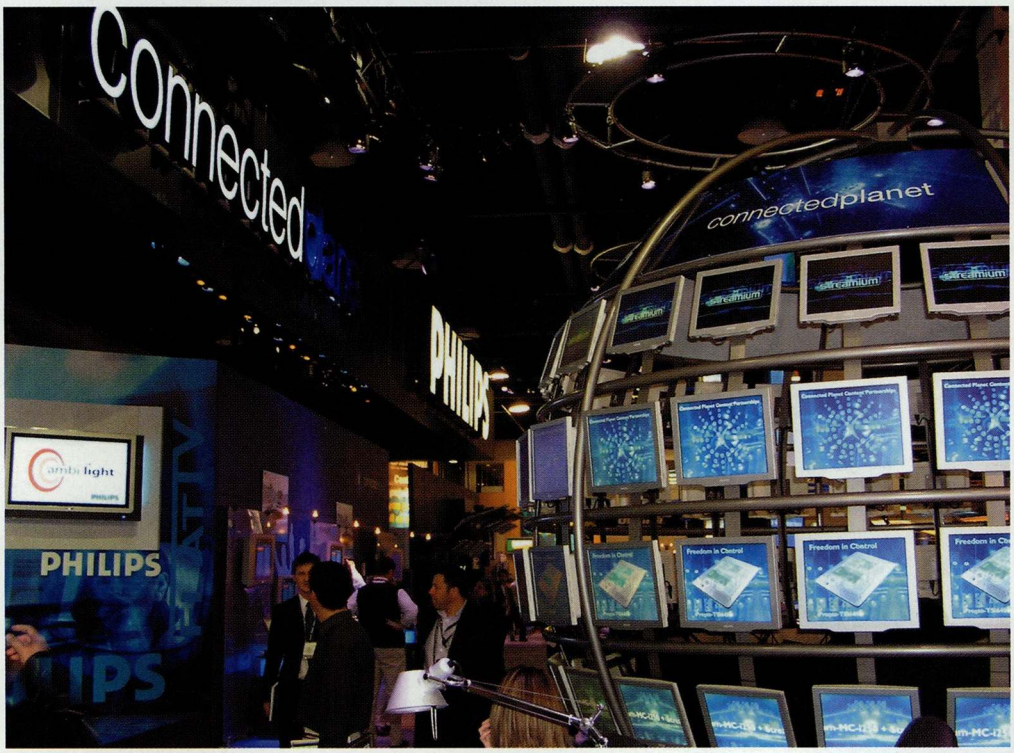
Cambridge SoundWorks "SoundWorks" Radio CD 740

www.hifi.com Price: $399.99

Normally, a clock radio wouldn't quite fit in the Gear section here at **play**, but every once in a while a product comes along that totally kicks ass—something that everyone should check out. Some folks may have heard of Cambridge SoundWorks from their excellent PC speakers, but in addition to PC audio, they have home audio products as well. The SoundWorks Radio CD 740 is the perfect blending of form and function into one slick package. What makes it so special? Aside from the typical clock radio functions, the CD 740 is the only CD clock radio that plays MP3 CDs. In addition, the 32-character display not only shows CD and MP3 text information but also radio station information (RDS) as well. The motorized, front-loading CD slot is also a nice touch. But to fully appreciate the CD 740 is to hear it. With the built-in powered subwoofer, the sound is not only booming, but incredibly clear. The bass is so resonant. The wide-dispersion speaker makes you believe you're hearing something that is much bigger than it actually is. **Tom Ham**

CES 2004

January 8-11, Las Vegas

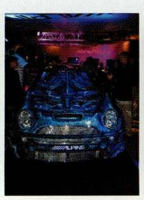


Held each year in the city that never sleeps, the Consumer Electronics Show is the premiere showcase where the creators of the latest and greatest gadgets and technology roll the dice and hope that their products will become tomorrow's next big thing. Spanning across 1.38 million net square feet of exhibit space, 2,230 companies and over 117,000 attendees, this year's show was the biggest ever.

"The innovation, phenomenal products, convergence of technologies, people and excitement were unprecedented," said Gary Shapiro, president and CEO for the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA), the producer of the International CES. "While it may have been 'plastics' in the 1960s, this era's technology is consumer electronics as leaders from IT, cable, broadcasting, entertainment, education, transportation and government converged in Las Vegas for CES."

Convergence and your personal media was the big thing at the CES show this year. Every company wants consumers to leave their desktop computers and move into the living room and beyond. With the help of Microsoft's Media Center, companies want you to check out your digital pictures on your TV in addition to watching streaming and recorded content and even listen to your MP3s. Or imagine watching a DVD from your home library across the country on a little portable screen—wirelessly. Other hot technologies included thinner, bigger and flatter LCD and plasma displays, more affordable media servers and recordable DVD players. Without a doubt, it was a great show.

And as always, we here at play scoured the booths and walked the blister-inducing show floor to bring you our Best of CES Round-Up—all the while keeping your bank account in mind (yeah, right)! Our Top 10 products run the gamut from home video and car stereo to digital imaging and ultra portability. All we can say now is "start saving your pennies." **Tom Ham**



Best of Show

Creative Zen Portable Media Center

Details: Imagine having a portable device that measures 5 and 11/16" X 3 and 3/8" and can play virtually any format—digital music, video and images. Powered by Windows Mobile Software for Portable Media Centers, the Creative Zen is the ultimate in personal entertainment. Users connect the Zen Portable Media Center to their PC via USB 2.0 and sync up whatever data they want. The 40GB hard drive can hold up to 175 hours of video, 10,000 songs and as many as 100,000 pictures. Microsoft even has a deal with CinemaNow for future Portable Media Center users to purchase or rent WMV movies specially formatted for the screen. We can't tell you how much we loved this thing.

Availability: Fall 2004

Price: $500 - $600

DirecTV HD DVR

Details: If you ask anyone who has HD and owns a TiVo what's on top of their wish list, more than likely it's a TiVo that records in high-def. Well, after being somewhat of a pipedream last year, high-def digital video recorders are finally coming out soon (like this month). The DirecTV HD DVR will have a 250 GB hard drive which will allow you to record up to 30 hours of high-definition programming. If you want to, record regular programming—up to 200 hours. What's cool is that you can record four high-def programs at the same time. In addition, the HD DVR will incorporate a High-Definition Multimedia Interface (HDMI) connector with High-bandwidth Digital Content Protection (HDCP). The outputs may be configured for 480i, 480p, 720p or 1080i formats.

Availability: First quarter 2004

Price: TBD

Alpine IVA-D300 Mobile Multimedia Station

Details: Alpine has always pushed the envelope, and their latest technology is extraordinary. Shipping with the IVA-D300 is a seven-inch touch screen monitor that uses what Alpine calls "PulseTouch" technology. It is the first screen that provides tactile, force feedback-like sensation to your finger. So instead of wondering if you hit a button or not, you'll "feel" it in your fingertip—yeah, we know this is cool. You can even feel the edges of each key on screen. Why is this cool? This will allow users to locate buttons easily while keeping their eyes on the road. Simply brilliant.

Availability: April 2004

Price: $1,500

Sony Location Free TV

Details: Combining a 12.1-inch wireless touch screen LCD monitor and a base station, Sony's Location Free TV utilizes the industry's first dual band wireless connection and high-speed Ethernet port to transmit data. What does this mean to you? It will allow users to view television and video, browse the web, stream video, send email and view digital photos—all without a PC. In addition, you can control most major brand A/V components in your house as well. It's like something about of Minority Report; imagine walking around your house with a screen (that's about as thick as a magazine) and watch DVDs or a recorded television show.

Availability: Fall 2004

Price: TBD

DISCover PC Game Console

Details: What's the biggest problem with PC games? You pretty much have to play them chained to your desk. Enter the DISCover PC Game Console. About the size of a DVD player, this machine allows you to play PC games on your TV. There isn't any installation required—just plop in a game and wait for the game to boot up. DISCover's Drop & Play technology handles everything. What's great is that all installation and updates for games is handled seamlessly. Users don't have to lift a finger; it's handled automatically. In addition to playing games, the DISCover PC Game Console plays DVD movies, audio CDs (including MP3s) and lets you view JPEG photos as well.

Availability: Second quarter 2004

Price: $300-$400

SmartSkin by Wildseed

Details: While CES isn't really the show for the latest in cell phones, one company debuted something that was pretty damn cool. SmartSkin lets users do what they wish they could do with their current cell phone—change its personality. When used together with Identity, a revolutionary new wireless phone from Curitel, users are able to choose from a variety of SmartSkins—each with their own unique style. You just snap a SmartSkin onto the Identity phone and have immediate access to screen themes, music and ringtones, video clips, pictures and games. How it works is each SmartSkin is embedded with its own unique smart key that houses all of the content. So if you were to get a custom Korn SmartSkin, all of your screen themes, ring tones, etc. will be Korn related. If you used the Nelly skin, all of your items will reflect a bling-bling attitude. Pretty slick.

Availability: Second quarter 2004

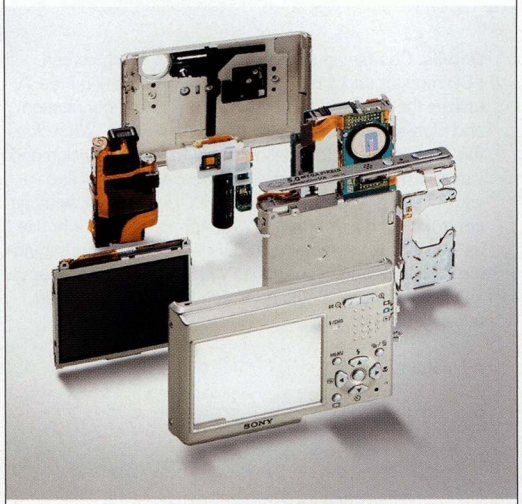
Price: TBD

Sony CyberShot DSC-T1

Details: Sony is once again changing the face of digital imaging with its latest CyberShot wonder. About the size of a deck of cards, the DSC-T1 is the first "credit card"-style digital camera from Sony. What makes the DSC-T1 so damn cool is the large 2.5-inch LCD viewfinder. It covers about two-thirds of the camera's back surface area. And with Sony's patented Real Imaging Processor circuit, the DSC-T1 can shoot full-resolution images in one-second intervals and can capture four high-speed burst shots in less than two seconds. But do you know what the kicker is? This baby is five megapixels, complete with a 3X optical zoom! Trust us, you'll want this camera.

Availability: Now

Price: $550.00

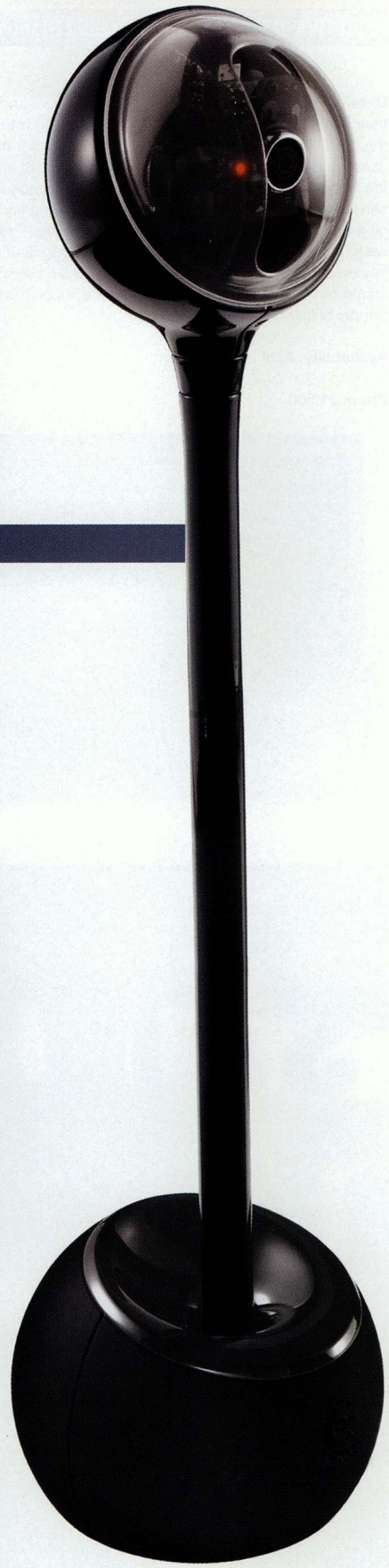


Logitech QuickCam Orbit

Details: Looking like something out of a sci-fi flick, Logitech's latest webcam is truly a looker. What's unique about the Orbit is that it physically moves to keep the user's face automatically centered. It can turn 128 degrees side-to-side and 54 degrees up and down. In addition to being a webcam, the Orbit doubles as a 1.3 megapixel camera. Not only can it take still photos, but it can also capture 640X480 videos.

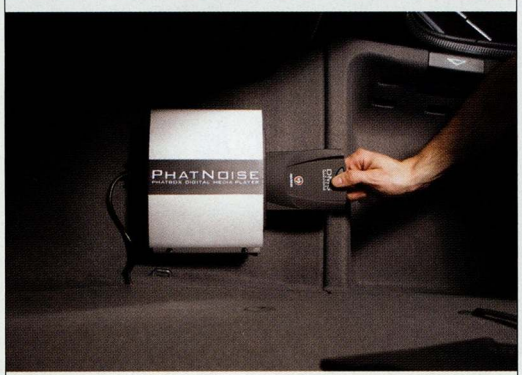
Availability: Now

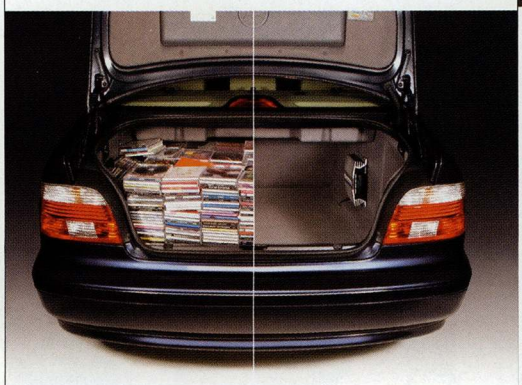
Price: $129.95

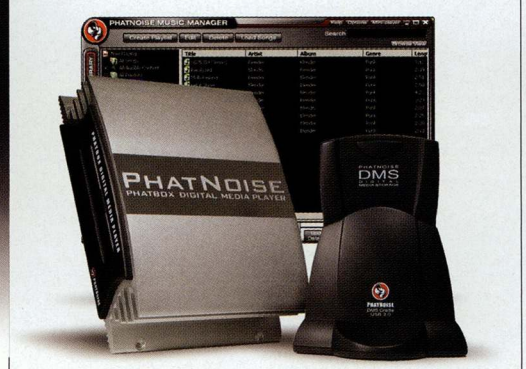


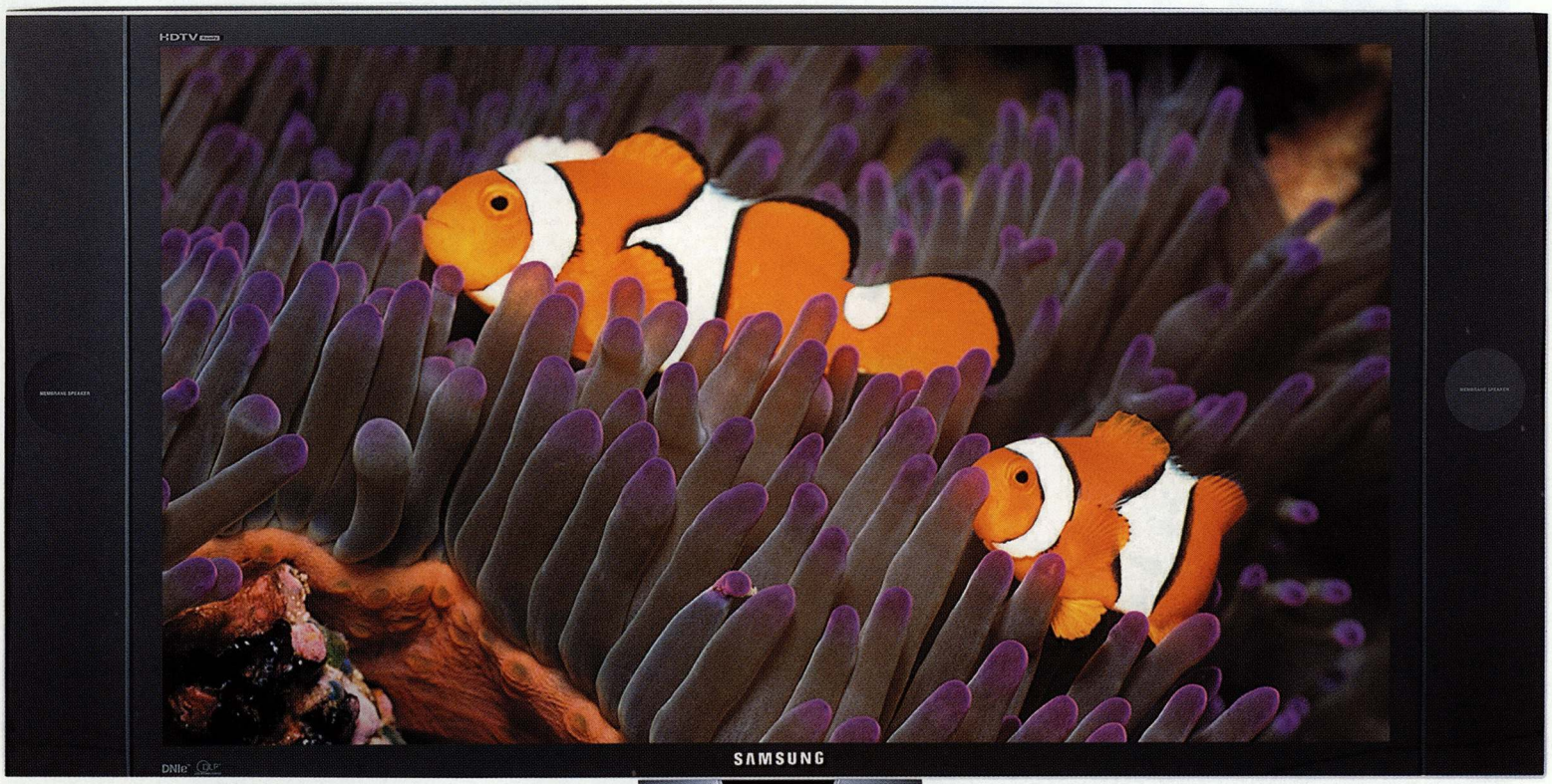
PhatNoise Line of Products

Details: You probably haven't heard of PhatNoise, but they're one company that deserves mention. PhatNoise wants to change the way you listen to digital music at home, in your car and on the go. Their flagship product is the PhatBox, a hard drive-based digital music player that lets users store thousands of songs on a small cartridge that is inserted into a trunk-mounted player. All you have to do is use your car's CD changer controls to quickly browse through your collection of music. At CES, PhatNoise unveiled their PhatNoise Home Digital Media Player and the PocketBox. Using the same cartridge, users can listen to music on their home stereo or on the go.







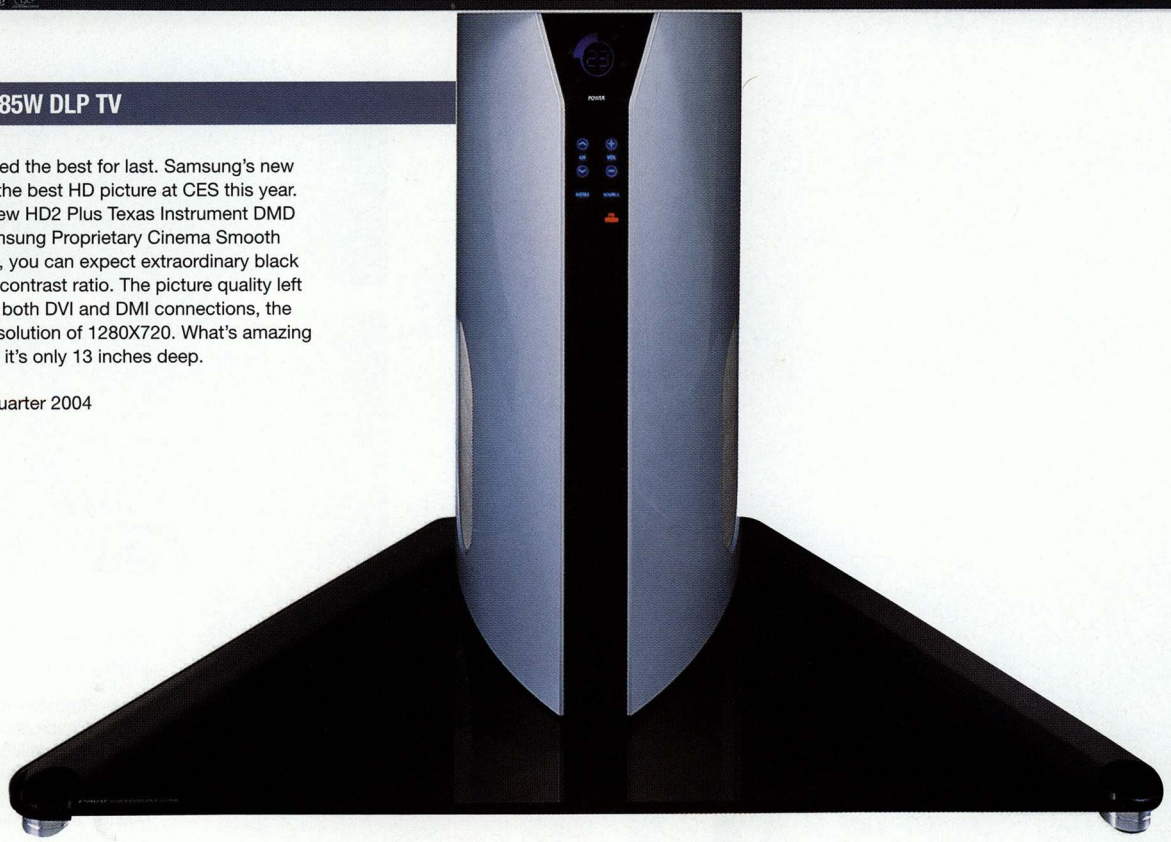


Samsung HLP5685W DLP TV

Details: And we saved the best for last. Samsung's new DLP TV showed off the best HD picture at CES this year. Designed with the new HD2 Plus Texas Instrument DMD Chipset and the Samsung Proprietary Cinema Smooth Gen 4 Optic System, you can expect extraordinary black levels with a 3000:1 contrast ratio. The picture quality left us speechless. With both DVI and DMI connections, the HLP5685W has a resolution of 1280X720. What's amazing about this set is that it's only 13 inches deep.

Availability: Third Quarter 2004

Price: $5000



Artificial

But not intellgent...

Van Helsing & Hellboy

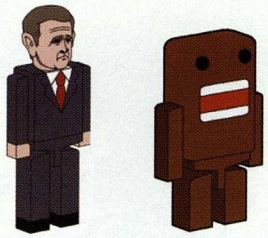
Collectibles as fine as these can only mean one thing: Sideshow Toys are up to their usual tricks, blurring the lines between 12 inches and reality. For information on Hellboy, Van Helsing and a bunch of other stuff, you'll really want to dial them up on the web at: www.sideshowtoys.com

20th Anniversary Optimus Prime

It's the Transformers' 20th anniversary, and Hasbro's celebrating with this incredibly detailed, cartoon-perfect, foot-tall, die-cast version of Autobot leader Optimus Prime—easily the coolest Transformers toy ever. The full-length smokestacks are only on the Japanese version, but the U.S. version has extra battle-damage paint apps. Cost: $75. www.transformers.com

I'm looking for a Japanese Girlfriend. Our most popular wacky Japanese T-shirt ever, it reaches out to all Japanese females who see it with a bizarre, fun message. And who knows? It could be the start of a beautiful relationship!

Hentai Manga & Doujinshi. J-List carries hundreds of quality hentai manga and amateur doujinshi comics, featuring virtually all famous artists and studios. Come and browse our extensive selection.



Block Design T-shirts. Show your uniqueness with these bold parody T-shirt designs from talented artists in Japan. Totally wacky and fun to wear, you're sure to stand out with one of these shirts on.

Japanese 18+ Magazines, Photobooks. J-List carries a great selection of magazines and high-quality hardcover photobooks from Japan, including items that are impossible to find anywhere else.

Japanese Snacks. Japan is home to a huge array of zany but delicious snack foods, like Pocky stick snacks, Gummi Sushi, Black Black caffeine gum, Pocari Sweat and more. J-List stocks over 100 varieties for you!

Beware of Perverts. Men touching women on trains is a big problem in Japan, and there actually are signs that say "Beware of perverts" (*Chikan chui*). Our wacky T-shirt is sure to get you lots of attention, for better or worse. Printed in USA.

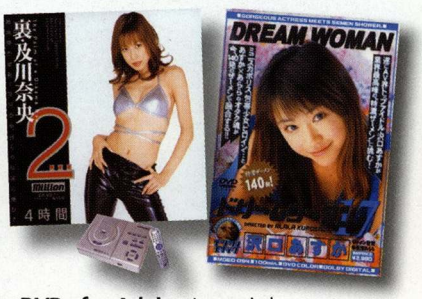
Magazine Subscriptions. Get a piece of Japan every month with our revolving magazine subscriptions. We offer anime mags like Megami Magazine, Tokyo street fashion mag FRUiTS, Gothic & Lolita Bible, and more – over 40 different titles!

Hoodies, Shirts for Girls. Enjoy our wacky Japanese messages in the colder months with long-sleeved shirts and hoodies, both fashionable and very warm. Also, we have selected shirt designs available in fitted girls' sizes that will enhance all the right lines.

Shirow Stuff. We also carry a wide selection of Ghost in the Shell creator Shirow Masamune's bilingual manga, poster books, hentai artwork and more. Highly collectible and very hard to find.

Unique Toys. We also stock many rare toy items from Japan, including Kubrick figures, Japan-only Hot Wheels vehicles, and Domo-kun items. Great stock of miniature toy and gashapon toys as well!

No Tattoos Allowed. In Japanese public baths, there's always a sign stating that customers with tattoos (e.g. yakuza) are not allowed in. This was such a bizarre concept, we captured it on a T-shirt for you!



DVDs for Adults. Japan is home to some dynamite adult stars, and J-List brings them all to you. Most DVDs are "region free" and will play in any DVD player (but we sell region-free players too, just in case).

Baka Gaijin. Two words a foreigner living in Japan learns pretty quickly are *baka* (stupid) and *gaijin* (foreigner). We put these words together for you — dare to be stupid with this bizarre Japanese T-shirt!

Dating-Sim Games. Enjoy Japan's rich tradition of interactive dating-sim games, with our extensive line of English hentai games for Windows. Also check out **Brave Soul**, the first full-featured fantasy RPG for adults.

High School Uniforms. J-List also sells authentic high school uniforms, made by the famous Matsukameya of Nagoya. All uniforms are custom made to your size. Great for cosplay at anime conventions!

Just Plain Wacky Stuff. From the popular Japanese "mannequin drama" **OH! Mikey** to bizarre products like Hello Kitty toilet paper and more, J-List is happy to sell just about any crazy thing from Japan you can think of.

J-List is a wonderful toybox of things from Japan. If you love Japan, as we do, then you'll find a home at J-List — we hope to see you soon! We also recommend our optional "Gaijin's Life in Japan" e-mail newsletter. It's like getting a postcard from Japan every week!

www.jlist.com
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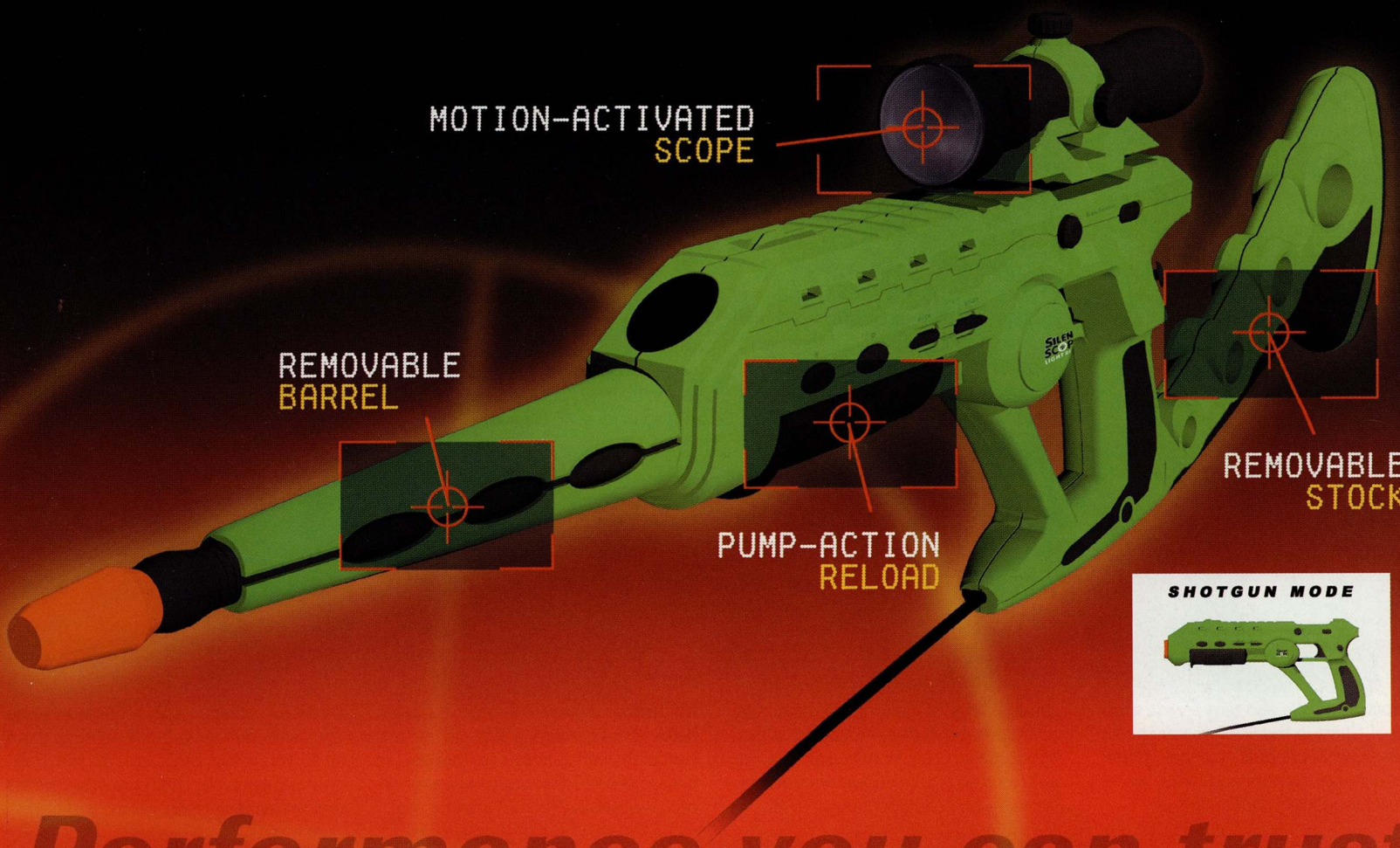

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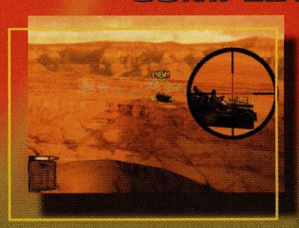

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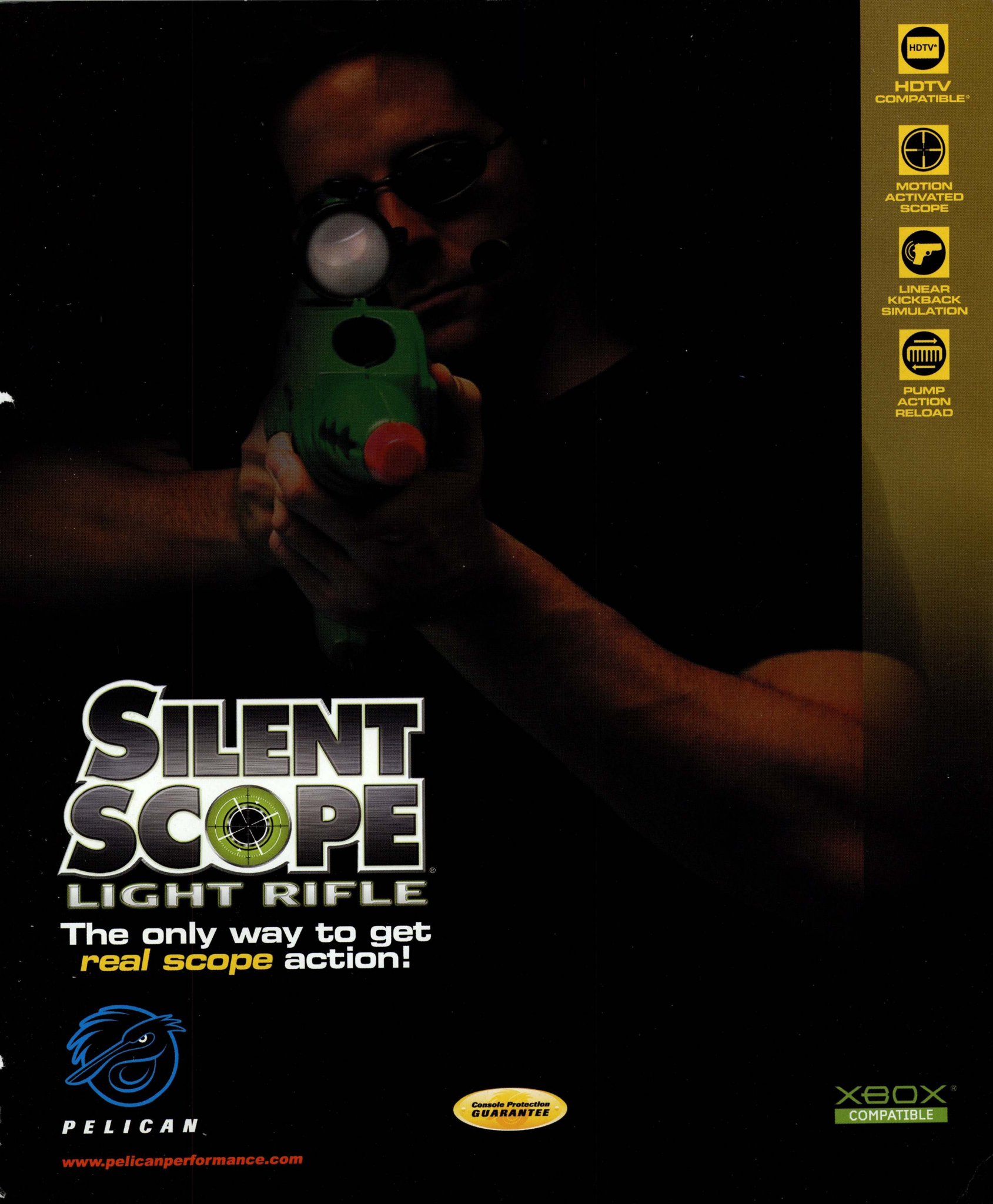
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