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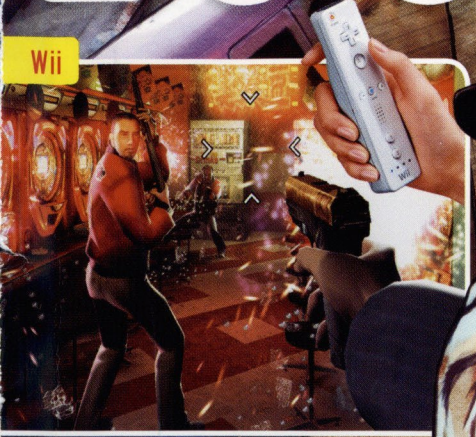

Wii

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New details on the Wii's most promising shooter

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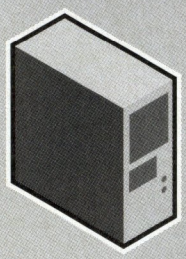

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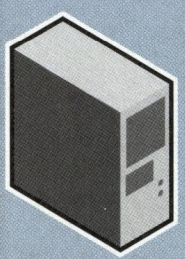

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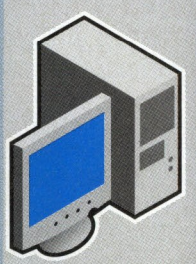

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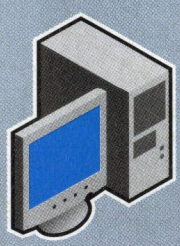

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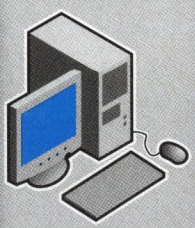

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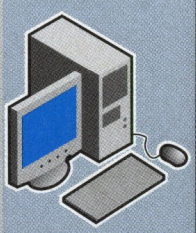

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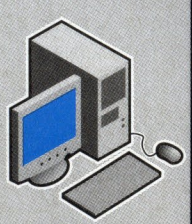

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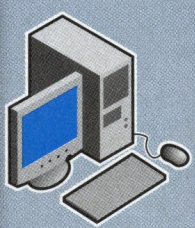

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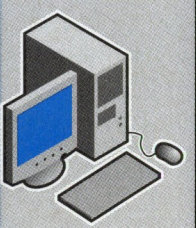

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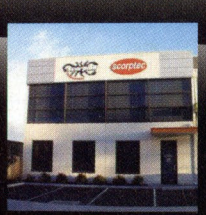

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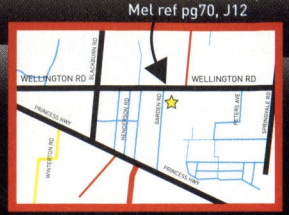

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TECHNOLOGY

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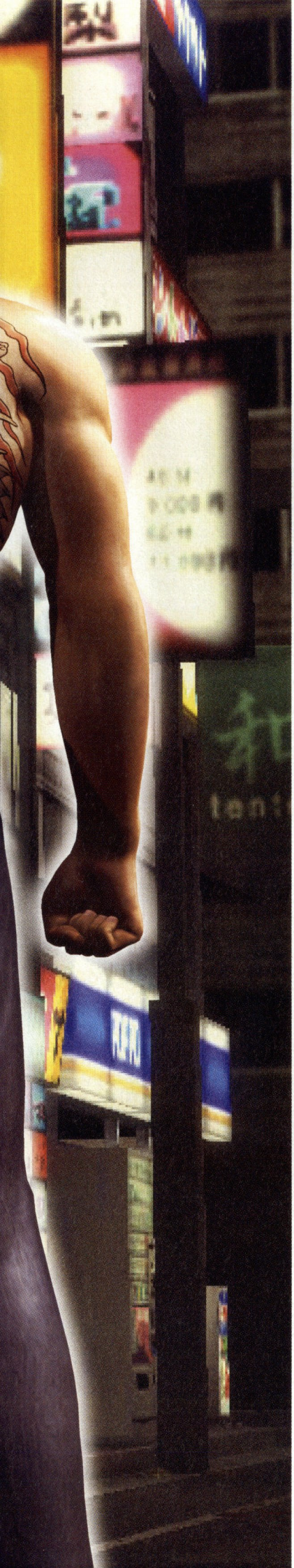

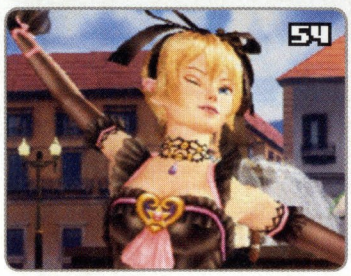

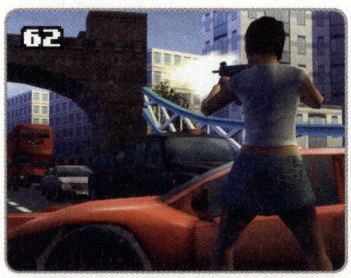

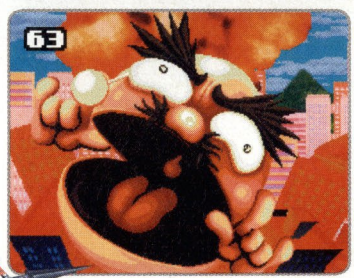

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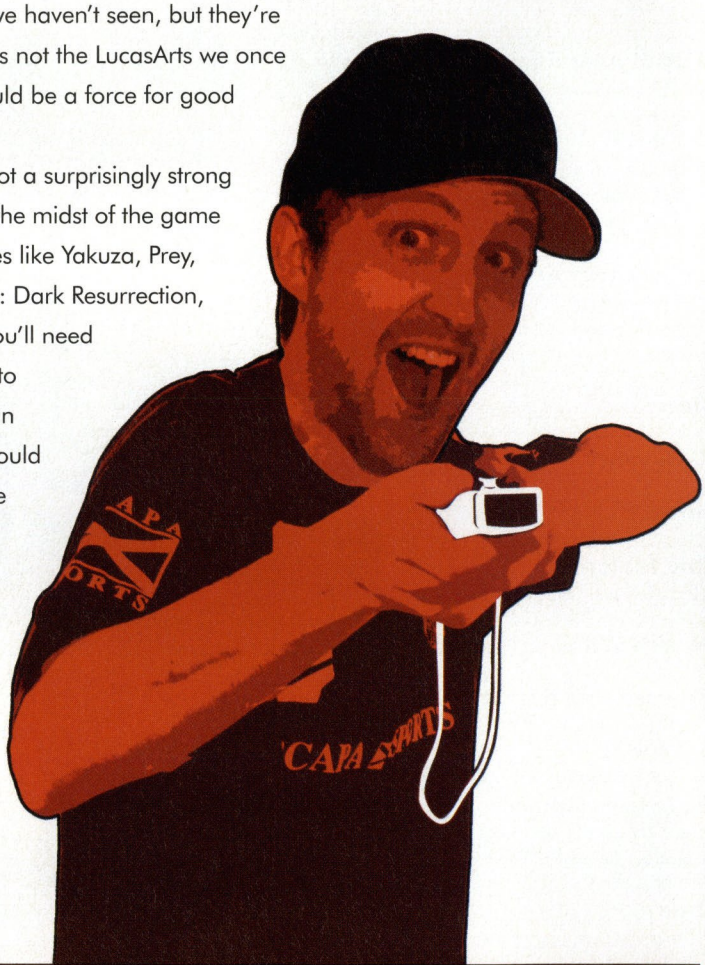
SUBSCRIBE AND WIN A 30" DELL LCD MONITOR PAGE 14!

EDITORIAL

>> It really looks like LucasArts are serious about their next gen endeavours. We'll no doubt learn more about the other titles they're working on soon, but for now Indiana Jones is a great litmus test for how they're approaching next gen development. With George Lucas on board supervising the script, cutting edge middleware technology that will simultaneously increase the believability of the world and the action, while also reducing the labour required for certain aspects of the development process, plus gameplay that's shaping up to be great fun (think solid fighting mechanics with a liberal dose of Asshole Physics 2.0 environmental interaction), this should be more than just another forgettable licensed title. Of course, the game's still early, and there's an awful lot that we haven't seen, but they're definitely on the right track. It's not the LucasArts we once knew, but it looks like they could be a force for good (gameplay) once more.

Elsewhere this issue we've got a surprisingly strong review section. We may be in the midst of the game release doldrums, but with titles like Yakuza, Prey, Kingdom Hearts II and Tekken: Dark Resurrection, there's plenty to go on with. You'll need fluent Japanese to get stuck into Okami, but if ever there was an incentive to learn, this game could be it. Luckily for most of us, the localisation is powering along and it won't be long before it's out on our shores. Enjoy.

Cam Shea >> Editor



HYPER CREW Monthly Top 5 Games

Cam Shea - Crappy t-shirt model
1. Just Cause – Xbox 360
   "Awesome freewheeling fun"
2. Dead Rising – Xbox 360
3. FlatOut 2 – PS2
4. Prey – PC
5. Lego Star Wars 2 – PS2

Daniel Wilks - Wordsmith
1. Yakuza – PS2
   "I am the puppy savingest gangster of them all!"
2. Dead Rising – Xbox 360
3. Titan Quest – PC
4. LocoRoco – PSP
5. Phone tag with my landlord

Malcolm Campbell - Colour-Inerer
1. Sid Meier's Pirates! - Xbox
   "Pirates > Ninjas"
2. Capcom Classics Remixed – PSP
3. Yakuza – PS2
4. Cars – PS2
5. Sensible Soccer 2006 – PS2

Dylan Burns - Resident Gameboffin
1. Oblivion – Xbox 360
   "The shadows are my home..."
2. Prey – PC
3. Shadow of the Colossus – PS2
4. Half-Life 2: Episode One – PC
5. Hitman: Blood Money – Xbox 360

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SEPTEMBER 2006

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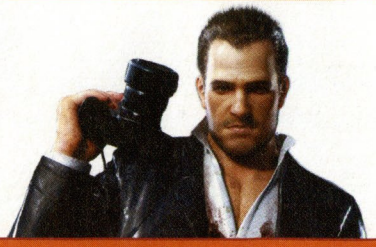


IN THE NEWS: Dead Rising protagonist declared "least likeable lead" by Hyper staff / Valve's Portal leaves wake of blown minds

TUT TUT

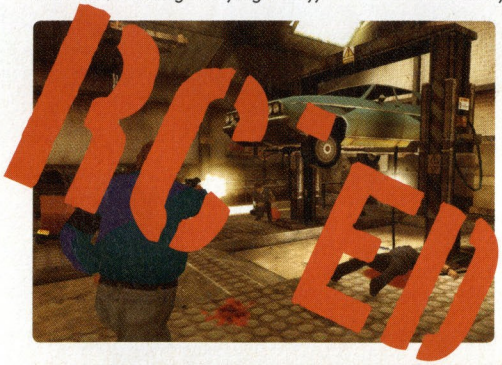
GONE TO THE DOGS

New Zealand finally gets in on the action

Another week, another game refused classification by the OFLC. This time it's Reservoir Dogs, a game based on the Quentin Tarantino film of the same name. The OFLC have denied the game a rating due to the fact that the game contains "frequent depictions of violence that have a high impact", going on to describe the player's ability to "blow the heads off hostages and police as well as execute hostages at point-blank range with a gunshot to the head" as well as torture victims with techniques including "repeated pistol whipping the side of the head with blood spray evident, burning the eyes of a hostage with a cigar until they scream and die, cutting the fingers off a hostage with blood bursts as the victim screams in pain".

[up] Malky hand stamped every issue... he loves those stamps!

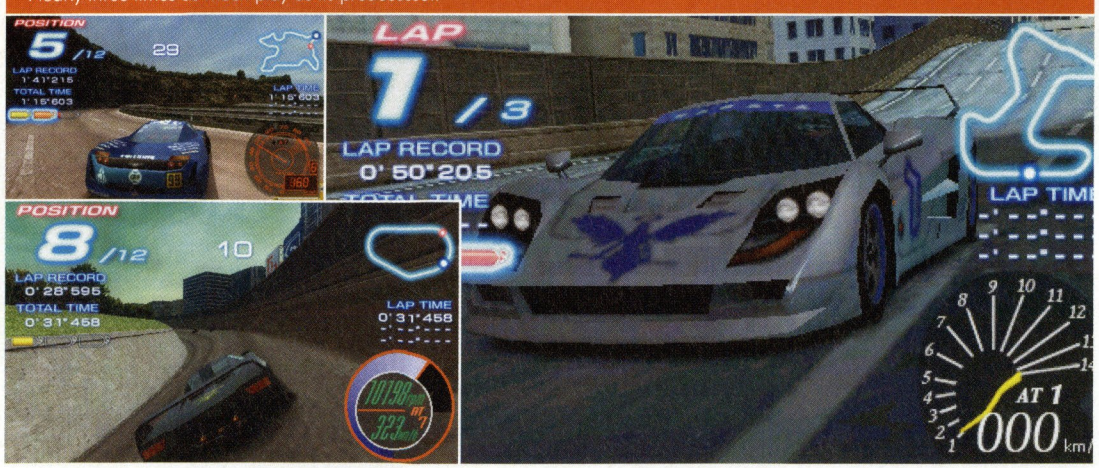
None of this sounds too appealing as far as gameplay goes and from our time with the game at E3 it's not exactly a title that's going to be missed, but once again the decision by the OFLC to decide what we can and can't play overrides the actual quality (or lack thereof) of the title in question. With each game that is refused classification, the more the precedent for further refusals or even game-based legislation is set in stone, making the need for an R 18+ rating for games even more dire. Atari Australia, the publishers of the game have decided not to fight the RC and reissue an edited version of the game. At the time of this writing New Zealand has also opted to brand the game as "objectionable", meaning that people will have to import a copy from England if they want one.

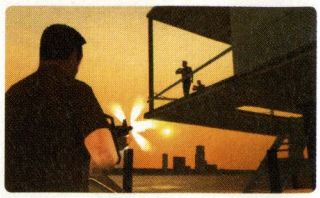


First Look!

DUE: Late 2006

RIDGE RACER 2 PSP • **Developer:** Namco • **The Hype:** "Pure racing, pure speed, pure arcade; Nearly three times as much play as its predecessor."





ATARI

NO TIME FOR REFLECTION

Bring your truck, bring your trailer and save!

As part of Atari's current streamlining, the company has sold the rights and developers of the Driver franchise to Ubisoft for a reported 19 million euro. Playing down rumours that Atari may be going under, CEO Bruno Bonnell said, "We are focusing the energy of the company on a select number of franchises in order to optimise their impact among consumers and increase shareholder value". He went on to say that, "In the driving category, we consider Test Drive our key franchise which will require more resources and attention to build it as a landmark of its genre".

Under the terms of the sale Atari will retain the sell-off rights to the existing Driver games for three months and hold the sell-off rights to the latest game, Driver: Parallel Lines until the end of 2006. The 80 odd members of the development house Reflections are to become Ubisoft employees under the terms of the contract. Yves Guillemot, CEO of Ubisoft has been quick to point out that the Driver franchise, though rather ill received after the first game have an install base of around 14 million units, making it a very firmly established franchise. He has been quoted as saying, "We look forward to leveraging the unique knowledge of the Ubisoft studios to ensure that Driver will be one of the leading brands of the next generation of consoles". Coming from any other developer/publisher we might take that boast to be little more than hot air but coming from Ubisoft we actually have some hope that Driver may have a healthy future ahead.

Bad Cop No Doughnut

DANIEL WILKS - THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS DEPUTY EDITOR

What Happens In Vegas

Apparently it doesn't stay in Vegas, no matter what the advertisements would have us believe. According to a Las Vegas station, Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman along with other Vegas officials are looking for ways to block the release of the Ubisoft game, Rainbow Six: Vegas in November, citing that the game is based on a "false premise" and that it "could be harmful economically". I'm a bit at a loss as to what this "false premise" might be – that there are people in the world who take an extreme dislike to Americans and blow stuff up or that Las Vegas is a city full of casinos, are two possible options.

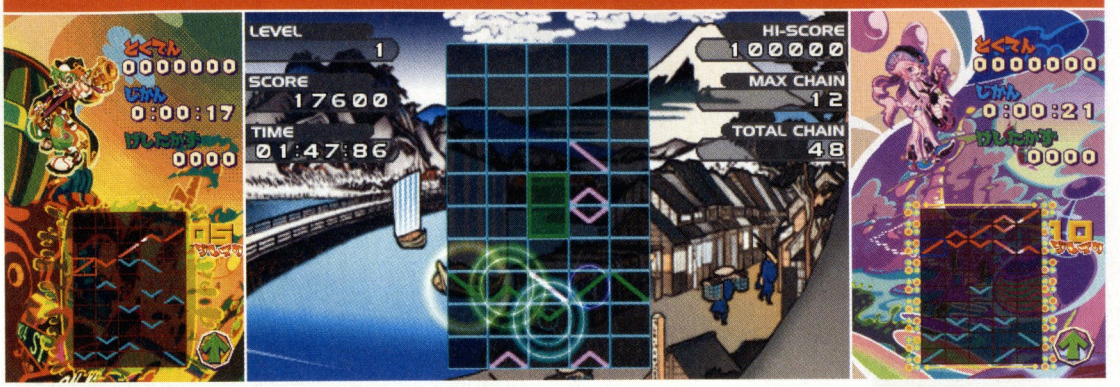
Of course it's most probably the idea that Vegas, one of the most easily identifiable of American cities and an example of what is commonly referred to as the decadent West could possibly be the target of a terrorist attack. We find it a little strange that no offence seems to have been taken to other negative depictions of Vegas – a city where you seem to stand a better than average chance of being brutally murdered every week (CSI), having a run-in with the mob (Casino, Bugsy), drinking yourself to death (Leaving Las Vegas), having spastically acrobatic pool sex with Kyle MacLachlan (Showgirls), having a run in with diamond smugglers (Diamonds Are Forever), a technicolour hell to have a serious binge in (Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas) or even the apocalyptic end of the world (The Stand). Come to think of it, it's probably the fact that the game portrays terrorists operating on US soil destroying well known American landmarks.

Actually I take that back, I do know why they're up in arms about Rainbow Six: Vegas; it's a game and as we all know games are the source of all evil and the best way to grab some attention coming up to election time. Just wait for the release of the upcoming movie Resident Evil: Extinction – it's set in Vegas, is a horror film, has a heavy metal soundtrack and is based on a game. That's like hitting the knee-jerk controversy trifecta.

First Look!

DUE: Late 2006

GUNPEY DS, PSP • **Developer:** Q Entertainment • **The Hype:** The Hype: "Originally conceived by Game Boy creator and legendary game developer Gunpei Yokoi. It has now been re-imagined by the creative minds at Q Entertainment… It is accessible, original, and intuitive, yet a challenge to master. Additionally, it combines the ground breaking music integration that has become Q Entertainment's signature."

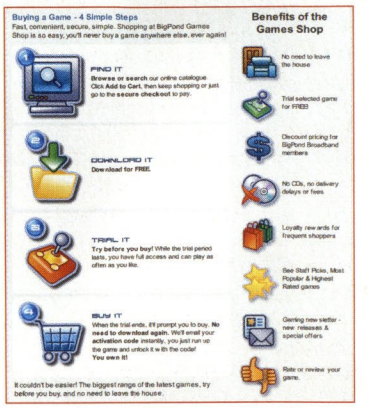


FAILURE

TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

Digital Distribution building momentum

Telstra BigPond has just become the first Australian ISP to offer a download-to-own PC Games service, allowing users (of the service, not necessarily the ISP) to download PC games and trial them for up to 60 minutes before forking out some money for an activation key to unlock the full game. As it currently stands the lineup is mostly comprised of kids and puzzle games but there are some definite modern gems available including Tomb Raider: Legend, Hitman: Blood Money, SWAT 4, Boiling Point and Crashday as well as some great older games including Deus Ex: Invisible War, Empire Earth II, Hitman: Codename 47 and Severance: Blade of Darkness. More titles such as Neverwinter Nights 2, Battlestations: Midway and Just Cause are on the horizon. Games range between $9.95 and $99.95 depending on the title and carry a 20% discount for BigPond subscribers. So far Atari, Ubisoft, THQ and Vivendi have embraced the service — hopefully we will see some support coming from other publishers in the future.



[up] Looks like shopping to me

OVERFLOW

Blizzard are holding an art contest! It's already started so get on over to www.blizzard.com/inblizz/contests/artcontest2006/, and get cracking. They're accepting submissions for Diablo, Starcraft and Warcraft, and entries can be "low- or high-poly, 2D or 3D, amateur or professional".

Looks like Buena Vista Games and Q Entertainment are trying to make Lumines II's soundtrack more accessible to Western audiences. Sigh. The artists confirmed so far include Beck, Black Eyed Peas, Chemical Brothers, Fatboy Slim, Gwen Stefani, Junior Senior, Missy Elliot and New Order. It's not necessarily a bad lineup, just a distinct departure from the vibe of the original. Thankfully three Japanese artists have also made the bill – Mondo Grosso, Ken Ishii and Techriders. It's due out on PSP at the end of the year.

CAPTION THIS!

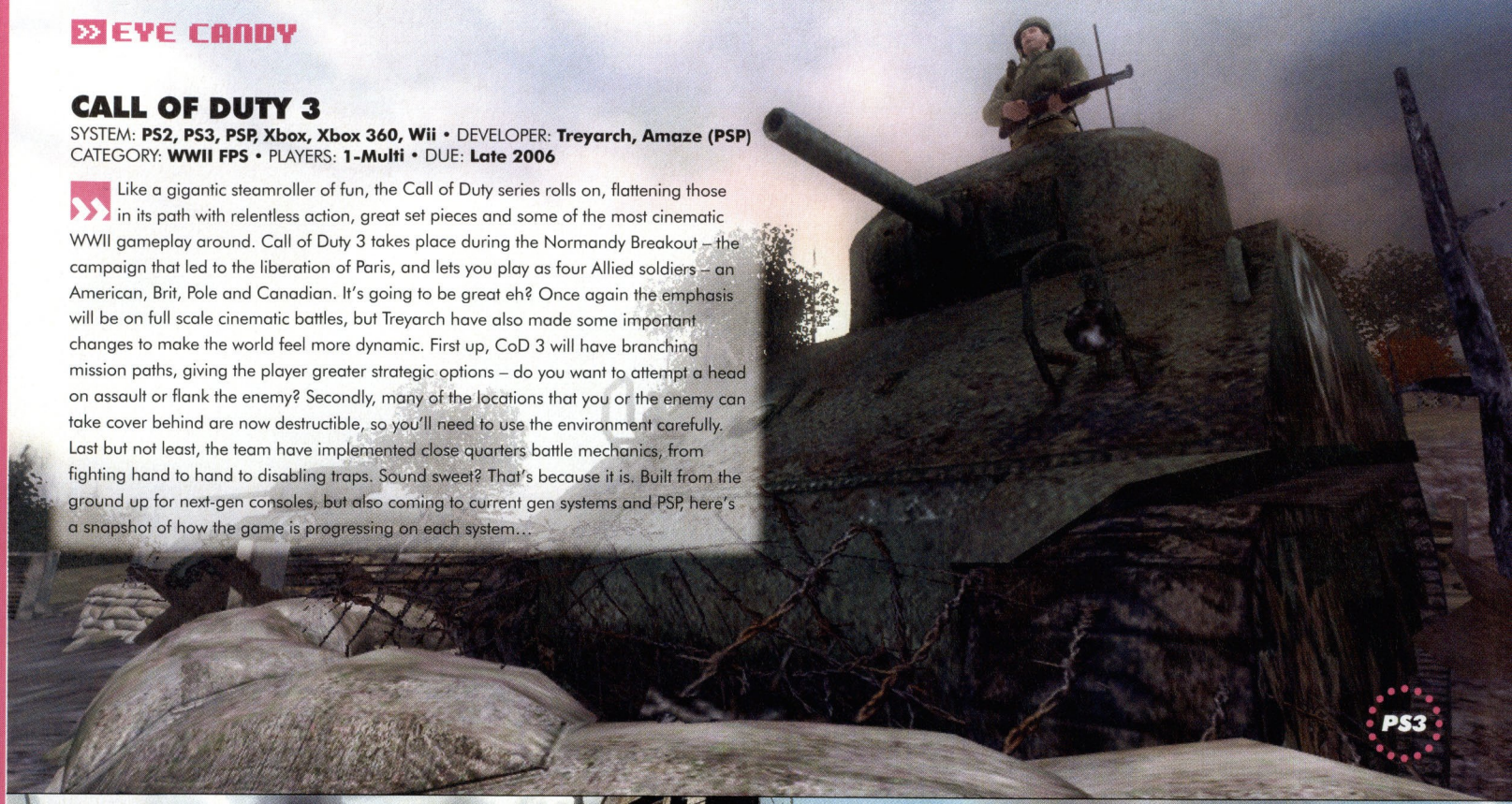
Come on, make us laugh. Just send your funny screen captions to us at captionthis@next.com.au with **Caption This Part 82** in the subject line.

WTHIWWFP?

CALL OF DUTY 3

SYSTEM: **PS2, PS3, PSP, Xbox, Xbox 360, Wii** • DEVELOPER: **Treyarch, Amaze (PSP)**
CATEGORY: **WWII FPS** • PLAYERS: **1-Multi** • DUE: **Late 2006**

Like a gigantic steamroller of fun, the Call of Duty series rolls on, flattening those in its path with relentless action, great set pieces and some of the most cinematic WWII gameplay around. Call of Duty 3 takes place during the Normandy Breakout – the campaign that led to the liberation of Paris, and lets you play as four Allied soldiers – an American, Brit, Pole and Canadian. It's going to be great eh? Once again the emphasis will be on full scale cinematic battles, but Treyarch have also made some important changes to make the world feel more dynamic. First up, CoD 3 will have branching mission paths, giving the player greater strategic options – do you want to attempt a head on assault or flank the enemy? Secondly, many of the locations that you or the enemy can take cover behind are now destructible, so you'll need to use the environment carefully. Last but not least, the team have implemented close quarters battle mechanics, from fighting hand to hand to disabling traps. Sound sweet? That's because it is. Built from the ground up for next-gen consoles, but also coming to current gen systems and PSP, here's a snapshot of how the game is progressing on each system...



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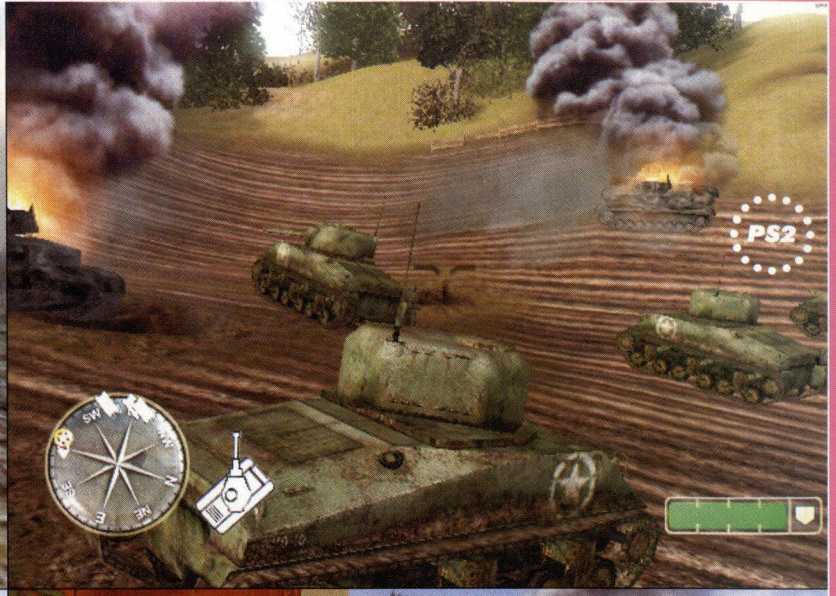
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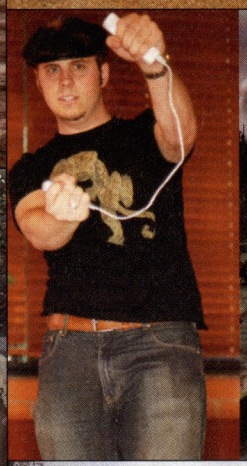

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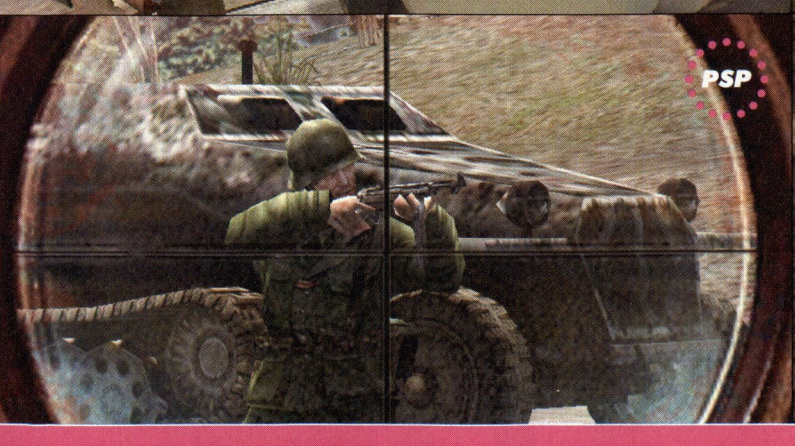
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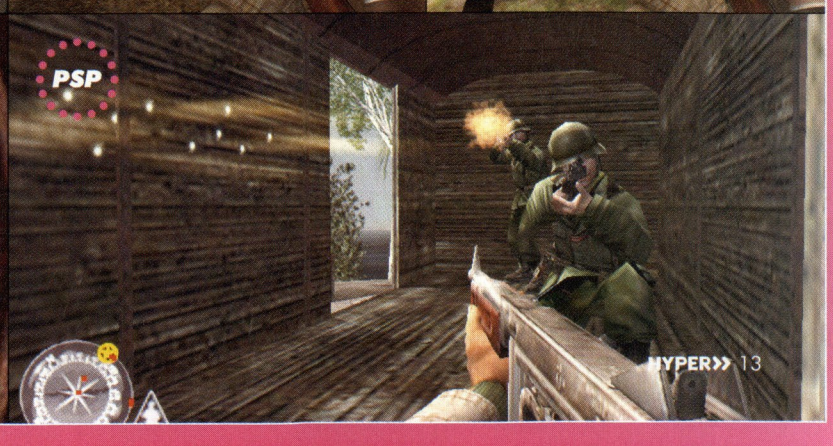
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As I type this I'm quietly weeping into my pathetic 21" monitor. Formerly a source of pride it now looks hopelessly archaic when compared to the mighty Dell UltraSharp 30" Widescreen LCD monitor we have to give away this month. Seriously, 30" is a massive chunk of screen real estate, and with a resolution of 2560x1600, a high contrast ratio of 700:1, great 11ms response time and incredibly vivid colour detail and accuracy, you simply won't want to go back to a lesser screen. The design is minimalist and sleek, and sports a couple of excellent inclusions - 4 USB 2.0 ports and an integrated 9-in-2 card reader for easy transfer of photos and files.

For gamers this screen represents the ultimate immersive experience – your games will look incredible. Hell, even browsing the web or looking at photos will look incredible. Want one? Well thanks to Dell one lucky subscriber this month will soon be the envy of their friends (and the staff of Hyper). What are you waiting for? Get subscribing!

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HYPER» HY0155

WHAT WE'D LIKE TO SEE:
Multiplayer! The gameplay and Hot Set environments could be perfect for a Power Stone-esque arena based fighting mode.

INDIANA JONES

I CAN DIG IT

» CAM SHEA

SYSTEM: **PS3, XBOX 360** ■ CATEGORY: **BEAT 'EM UP/ADVENTURE** ■ PLAYERS: **1** ■ DEVELOPER: **LUCASARTS** ■ DUE: **2007**

» You wouldn't ordinarily think that an adventure game with heavy beat 'em up elements would be pushing the envelope of next generation technology, but that's exactly what LucasArts are doing with the new Indiana Jones game. Through smart use of bleeding edge middleware and a talented team of designers, programmers and artists, LucasArts are truly taking Indy – and gaming – into the next generation.

"Sure, sure, we've heard this before," you're probably saying to yourself, but anyone who has seen the incredible tech demos for this title will know that this statement is far more than just pre-release hype. We're truly excited about this game, and it has the potential to do for beat 'em up adventures what Half-Life 2 did for first person shooters.

ALIGNING THE PLANETS

The first piece of the puzzle is LucasArts' licensing of NaturalMotion's incredible 'euphoria' behavioural simulation engine. Based on their Dynamic Motion Synthesis technology, euphoria does away with all the pre-programmed incidental animations, instead generating them on the fly through simulations of a character's motor control, muscles and biomechanics. So if a character is on a swinging rope bridge, rather than having to animate him keeping his balance as it rocks back and forth, it all happens automatically through euphoria. And if a sudden gust of wind blows the bridge even further, it's through euphoria that the character will reach out and grab on to the rope railing on the side to prevent himself from falling off. If the ropes themselves are cut, sending the bridge swinging into the side of a cliff, it will be euphoria which determines whether he'll get a firm enough grip to hold on upon impact.

As you can tell, the technology applies to everything from the most subtle of movements through to the most over the top. Essentially what we're talking about is the next generation of rag doll technology, but it will mean a great deal to gaming – not only making characters react naturally to a dynamic environment, but in reducing the workload of the development team as well.

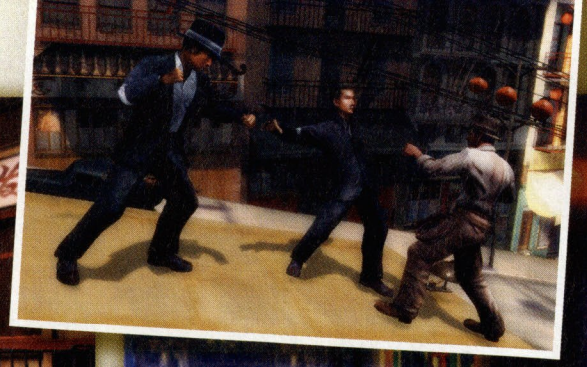
So will euphoria be a technology that will fundamentally change the gameplay experience, or is it primarily a tool for added realism? According to Chris Williams, the project lead on Indiana Jones, "euphoria will fundamentally change gameplay because for every kick, punch, or throw, you will never see the same result twice. By freeing the AI of the constraints of traditional animation and giving the characters an awareness of their surroundings and the ability to react dynamically to the world, we are creating a level of unpredictability and an opportunity for unique surprises never before seen in games. The days of canned, scripted, and easily repeatable payoffs are over – you'll need to cherish every moment because there's a pretty good chance you won't ever see things play out exactly the same way again."

DIGITAL MATTERS

euphoria is certainly an integral component of the foundation for Indiana Jones, but LucasArts haven't stopped there in searching out the coolest tech for their new title. The other piece of middleware that really caught our attention is Pixelux Entertainment's Digital Molecular Matter (DMM). Once again it's designed to automate a significant part of the development process, in this case art assets. DMM handles a whole host of animation duties – moving rope and cloth, objects bending and breaking, even flesh moving.

Just pretend he's Short Round, all grown up...

Not with those shoes son!



In essence it imports an artist's 3D object from programs like Maya and Lightwave and creates a volumetric representation of that object – as opposed to a surface description. While surface textures can be as detailed as necessary, DMM utilises hardware 3D shaders to also show internal textures if an object is broken, and it's in the breaking that the tech really comes into its own. "With DMM," Chris told us, "we can very easily attach physical properties to anything in the environment, and it will react exactly as you'd expect it to in real life – all without a single frame of animation." The way it works is that the system measures the strength of the assigned material and the stress throughout the object to determine how (or if) it will break. All in real-time.

Chris continued, "For gameplay, this makes for the most realistic destructible environments you've ever seen. If, for example, Indy throws an enemy into a plywood door, that door will splinter exactly where and how you'd expect it to, based on the point of impact and the force of the throw. And DMM can be programmed to emulate any substance – so stone crumbles, glass shatters, rubber bends... there's even another team within LucasArts that has a Jar Jar in carbonite that dents thanks to DMM. Once you see both DMM and euphoria in action – and together, only in LucasArts games – you're going to notice their effects missing from the games that don't have it." And importantly, "For the development process, that frees our animators from the laborious task of creating different ways for objects to break and bend, as they do simply by programming DMM into an object."

Perhaps the biggest concern we had initially after seeing euphoria and DMM in action was that they could be hugely processor intensive. Fortunately, Chris allayed our fears about getting good performance out of the PS3 and Xbox 360, "These truly next-gen technologies are exactly the kind of processor-intensive things the new systems were designed to handle – we had euphoria and DMM running well at E3, and we are confident we can deliver them at 60 frames per second when the game ships. Pretty graphics are not why people are buying these systems – they want to experience something truly different, and by investing in these technologies, LucasArts will be delivering on that expectation."

"Indy fights smart and he fights dirty - and he'll use anything at his disposal to fend off enemies"

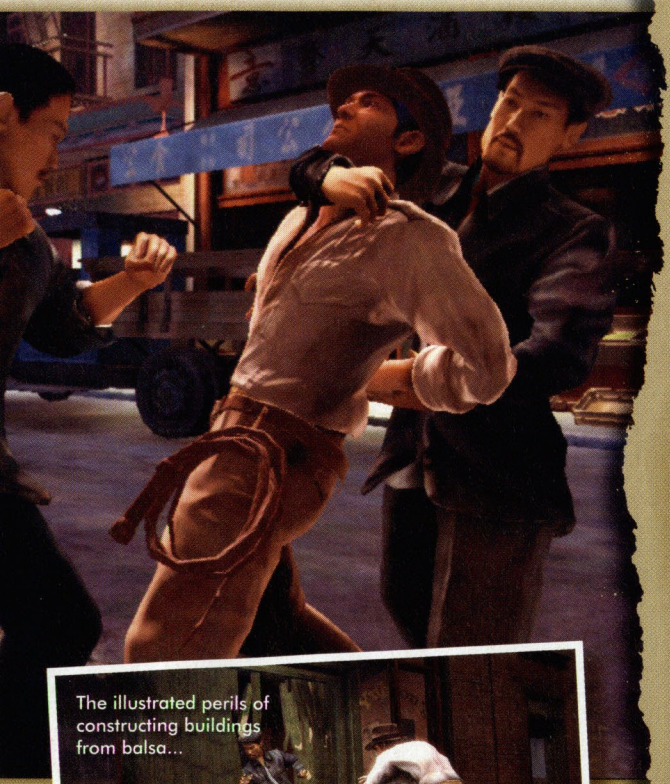
Indy, with the help of some friends re-enacts the infamous Zidane headbutt

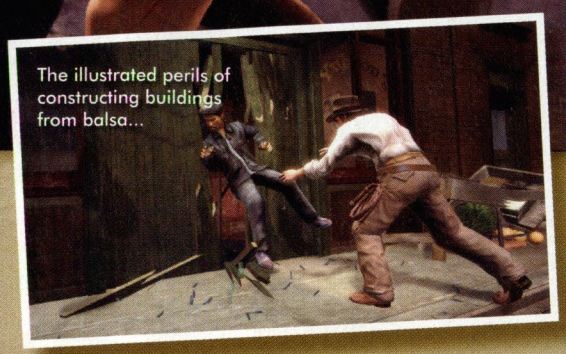
FIST FIGHTER'S PLAYGROUND

What's most refreshing about the killer tech incorporated into Indiana Jones is that it really will serve the gameplay. You can expect some of the best fight scenes ever to grace an action game, partly thanks to the tech, partly thanks to the mechanics and partly thanks to what LucasArts are dubbing the 'Hot Set' environments. What this basically means is that fight settings will be as dynamic as you want to make them. Once again it all falls under the concept of sandbox gaming – where you're given the tools necessary to go nuts in a virtual playground. "We want to go way beyond the current-gen philosophy of having an enemy conveniently stand next to an exploding barrel" Chris explained. "Imagine Indy is squaring off against two enemies. Indy can use his whip to yank out the support of an overhanging scaffold, grab a nearby chair and throw it, pick up a broken table leg to use as an improvised weapon – or all of the above!"

Above all, LucasArts want to remain true to the Indy character, "Indy fights smart and he fights dirty – and he'll use anything at his disposal to fend off his enemies. In order to capture the spirit of Indy, we wanted the environment to feel alive with opportunities for the player. The Hot Set is not a predefined scripted moment, but rather a series of interesting spring-loaded choices for the player to discover with exciting, varied, and over-the-top payoffs."

While the demos we've been given have been quite contained, they've done a great job demonstrating all this in motion. One scene has Indy atop a tram in San





The illustrated perils of constructing buildings from balsa...

Francisco, as it moves down the city's famous hills. A couple of trucks pursue it, pulling up alongside the tram to allow the gangsters to leap across and try to haul themselves up. As Indy belts each opponent they're sent crunching off the side of the tram or tumbling off the back to be run over by the truck behind. One even manages to cling on to the edge as he's sent flying. And if you move Indy too close to the edge he almost loses his balance, wavering precariously as the tram zips along, but also taking care to move a hand onto his fedora – even in game he's not prepared to leave it behind.

One of the other scenes we've seen also takes place in San Francisco – this time in the alleys of Chinatown. This area is very much a Hot Set environment. Indy grabs an enemy and throws him into the side of a car, shattering the windows and leaving the enemy stumbling forward from the impact. He picks him up again and throws him into a plywood door which splinters naturally from the impact. Another thug approaches and gets thrown through a table and over a railing to crumple on a flight of stairs. Things get even cooler, however, when the fact that the fight takes place outside a fireworks factory comes into play. Explosive barrels (yes, they are still in the game) send enemies pinwheeling through the air and one explosion dislodges a massive neon sign which then falls onto a fire escape, leaving the enemies on the walkways scrambling for a handhold as the entire structure collapses.

It's not like we haven't seen scenes like these before, mind you, but rather than being obviously scripted, Indy's world will feel far more like a playground, and because of that, replay value should be there in spades.

The actual fighting mechanics seem fairly basic at this point, but for a game due in 2007 that's to be expected. And of course, it won't just be Indy's fists doing the talking. "The whip and gun will absolutely

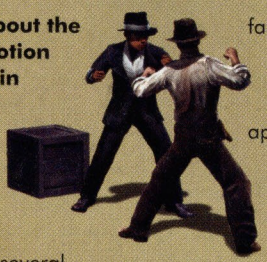
EUPHORIC!

*The CEO of NaturalMotion, **Torsten Reil**, took time out of his busy schedule to fill us in on what euphoria is all about.*

Hyper: Could you tell us about the history of your Dynamic Motion Synthesis technology, and in particular the evolution from endorphin to euphoria.

Torsten: DMS started as research on the body movement of animals and humans, at Oxford University several years ago. We realised that this technology could create a much more interactive type of animation, and decided to commercialise it. The first product was endorphin, a standalone application. endorphin allows users to create animations much more quickly than keyframing and mo-cap, and has been used in many games (e.g. Tekken, Metal Gear Solid) and movies (e.g. Troy, Poseidon).

In March 2006 we announced a huge leap forward with euphoria. euphoria takes DMS directly onto the CPUs of Xbox 360 and PS3, thus allowing the consoles to synthesise animations on the fly, as you play the game.



How exactly does the euphoria system work?

euphoria works by fully simulating the 3D character, including its body, muscles and – most importantly – motor control system. It is very much like robot-control theory, just without looking robotic!

Is euphoria used in conjunction with traditional motion capture?

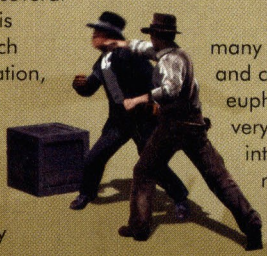
Yes, euphoria is often used for action-intense sequences that require a lot of interaction. Other moves (such as gestures, etc.) are currently still done using mo-cap.

Is all the AI for a character implemented through this system (in addition to elements like environmental awareness and survival instincts)?

euphoria's AI is mainly focused on how the body moves, such as how to balance without falling over. High-level decisions (such as 'walk over there') are usually made by the game's AI (and send to euphoria where appropriate).

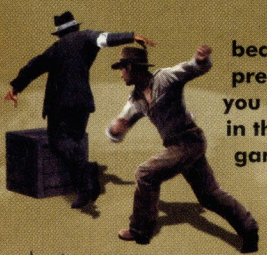
What non-gaming projects would we have seen endorphin or euphoria running in?

endorphin has been used in many movies (e.g., Troy, Poseidon) and commercials (e.g., Pepsi). euphoria, on the other hand, is still very new and is currently being integrated into several titles for release in 2007. So far, we've only announced Indiana Jones.



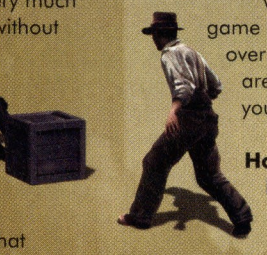
Sandbox gaming is becoming more and more prevalent – what role do you see for this technology in the evolution of freeform gameplay?

euphoria's biggest feature is that it synthesises animations that are different every time. This means that every time you play a game, something different will happen. If you tackle your mate in a football game, you know that tackle has never happened before, and will never happen again – it's your tackle. This also means that games become less static, and can actually surprise you. The development teams we're working with are creating game levels that you want to play over and over again, because there are so many things to try out, and you know it's never the same.



How processor intensive is implementing euphoria in a game? Is this technology that's only possible on next generation machines?

Yes, euphoria is next-gen technology that requires next-gen processing power. That said, we are very happy with the performance of the system. Nice of Microsoft and Sony to pack so much power into their boxes.



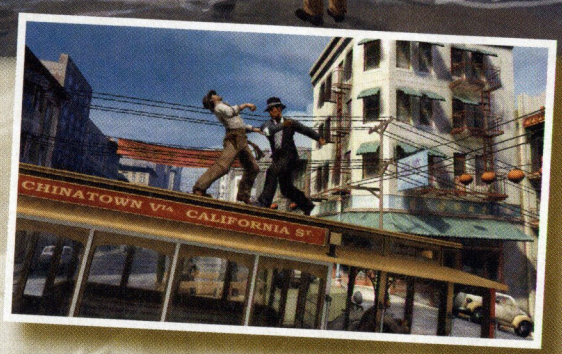
Could you talk a little about the difference between implementing euphoria on PS3 compared with Xbox 360?

Both platforms are very powerful, but each in their own way. This means that we have several people on platform-specific optimisation.

FULL OF LIFE, BACK IN TIME

While the game is still quite early, the art style is already shining through – San Francisco is full of detail and colour, which really helps give the game a larger than life adventure vibe. Chris filled us in on the research that was done to bring San Fran from 60 plus years ago to life, "The art and design teams have done extensive on-location research of many of the game's exotic locations to ensure an extremely authentic feel to the game. San Francisco was the most convenient since we were able to just take a cab over to Chinatown. That said, there's definitely a part of San Francisco we're keeping under wraps right now that wasn't quite as easy. You'll know it when you see it."

be a part of the action," Chris explained, "but true to the Indy character, we won't be encouraging or motivating the player to use them excessively. The whip will allow Indy to be clever in navigating the world, interact with a very dynamic environment, and disarm or take down enemies. The gun is Indy's get-out-of-jail free card, and the player will use it sparingly, and only against overwhelming odds given the scarcity of ammo. The game will encourage the player to play like Indy – and since Indy is not a gun-toting murderer, the player will want to be selective in when they draw the revolver."



SOMEWHAT SCANT

LucasArts are keeping quiet about most of the details of the storyline, but we do know that the game will be set in 1939, a year after the events of Last Crusade. Indy will be in search of a number of artefacts (no surprises there – artefacts are to adventure games what crystals are to platformers) and his quest will take him to five distinct locations, each of which will have several unique areas.

With rumours of a new Indiana Jones movie swirling around, we can confirm, however, that this will be a standalone title that won't tie in to the film. As Chris explained, "The game is a brand new Indiana Jones adventure written by the LucasArts team with direction from George Lucas. It will provide completely original, exciting, and authentic Indy experiences and innovative gameplay that will make it a must-have title. We know that Lucasfilm is hoping for a movie in 2008, but Indy fans should rest assured that they're getting a movie-quality script for this game shipping in summer 2007. THIS is the next great Indy adventure."

The involvement of George Lucas is quite an exciting aspect for fans. Not only has he overseen the creation of the storyline, but he also sees various milestone builds as the game comes together. In fact, "This is the first time he's taken such an active role in any game story's development," Chris enthused, "and we (including George!) look forward to similar involvement in future LucasArts projects."

EXCITEMENT, ADVENTURE?

So let's go through the checklist. Excellent tech? Check. Thrilling fight sequences? Check. Mr Beardy? Check. What else does a great Indy title need? Nazis! No problem there dear readers, as Chris emphatically replies, "Has there ever been a better enemy for videogames? I mean, has there?" Right on.

In all seriousness though, Indy already has a number of elements in place, but it will need to be more than just a great brawler. To really capture the spirit of the series it will also need to be a great adventure, and this is something the team are keenly aware of. "For a true Indy experience," Chris enthuses, "the world needs to feel like a vast and undiscovered place with mysterious and forgotten worlds to explore." They want to deliver Indy "in his prime in a time when it was still the Golden Age of travel."

That means, "Exploration of the world, interaction with interesting characters, and unravelling the mysteries of ancient artefacts will be blended seamlessly into seat-of-your pants action sequences, including thrilling chases, vicious brawling, environmental hazards, and clever interactions with the world."

In other words, this ain't going to be just another licensed title. It's going to be a rollicking Indiana Jones adventure. We can't wait.

"No ticket!"

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RED STE

SYSTEM: **Wii** ■ CATEGORY: **FPS/ACTION** ■ PLAYERS: **1-MULTI** ■ DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT PARIS** ■ DUE: **Wii LAUNCH**

Red Steel is an integral part of Nintendo's Wii launch lineup, bringing the kind of mature content that Nintendo's first party teams traditionally shy away from. It's also yet another great example of what can be done with the controllers, mixing first person shooting with compelling sword play. To get an inside look at how the game is progressing, we had a chat with the game's Associate Producer **Jean-Baptiste Duval**.

Could you give us a run down of the setting and story for Red Steel?

In Red Steel you embody a US guy living in LA. To save his fiancée caught in the middle of a war between two generations of Yakuzas, the player will have to fly to Japan and fight his way through the Tokyo Mafia. During his journey he will come face to face with their codes, learning new and more efficient ways to use his fighting skills.

How much of the game will take place in LA and how much in Japan? What drew you to the Tokyo underworld as a backdrop for the game?

Approximately a third of the game will take place in LA; but the Japanese side of LA. It will illustrate the Japanese way of life in the US, show Japanese places such as a massage institute, & the Japanese mafia as well.

The rest of the game will take place in Japan. The game is like a tour of very Japanese environments. The Tokyo underground is part of those famous places. It was important to us to be true to this town and to show this side of the life at night that balances... traditional & ancestral aspects of the life there.

It was also very funny to associate this environment to characters. It gave them a lot background and attitudes; such as Mama San who is recruiting Shibuya girls in those dark and dangerous streets to fight for her.

We're told you won't just be fighting the Yakuza but also gaining their respect so they can help you. How important will this be to the game?

In Japan, the honor code concept was already very important to the samurais for centuries. Today the Japanese mafia reuses those values and adapts them to its way of life. As we want to offer the player a complete experience, you can in fact use this value as well and spare your enemy's life. They will then owe you respect for that.

Those choices will help you to progress in the game, rally clans to your cause and be stronger in the end to face you deadly enemy.

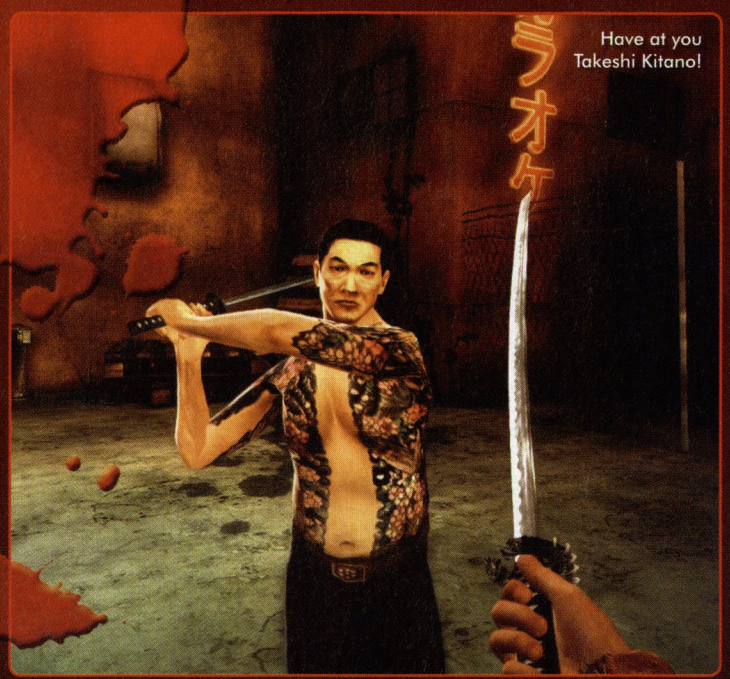
How has the Wiimote and Nunchaku control configuration influenced the design of Red Steel?

The Wiimote and the Nunchaku have been at the core of the idea behind the Red Steel project. The Wiimote is very easy to use. It's easy to aim at the screen and shoot once the cursor is on target. Since the Nunchaku is held in the other hand, moving while shooting becomes natural and self-evident.

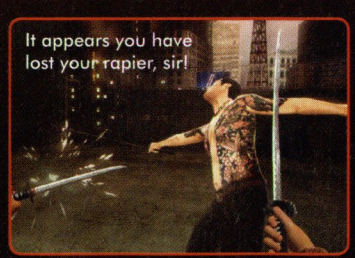
Yet, once first contact with the gear has been made, the player realizes that to master the use of the controllers, he has to concentrate, calmly aim, strafe and take cover, shoot at the right time without making any brusque movement, and generally keep a flowing motion. Such mastery of emotions and moves is related in our minds to eastern martial artists. We wanted to go in that direction because we think it's totally relevant to the way the Wii controller works, i.e. not only acknowledging button-mashing, but, also, spatial movement and aiming towards the screen.

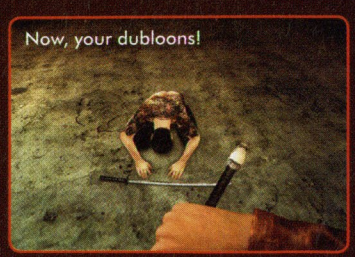
The way the Wiimote movement is recognized makes one think of sword movement. The right move has to be performed at the right time. For example, by parrying, the player will have the possibility of performing a counter attack to disarm or incapacitate his enemy.

From what we played in the demo, the Wiimote doesn't map your movements when sword fighting but rather triggers an animation depending on the direction of the swing. Will your actual movements



"By parrying, the player will have the possibility of performing a counter attack to disarm or incapacitate his enemy"





WHAT WE'D LIKE TO SEE:
How about some Red Steel lifestyle shots? Ubisoft have got you covered - check out pages 92-93...

Westerners really don't like Pachinko

As in real life, the fatty is the first to die

be mapped in the final game? If not, why was this decision made?

The Wii controls are changing a lot especially since the E3 version when we saw people playing for the first time with our game. For us it was the first time ever we could get a huge quantity of important feedback from newcomers to this console.

The system needs a little time to recognize your move but at the end this is your move that is performed on screen. Besides, today on the current version, we have some movement being mapped and some not. Some will stay mapped at the end so that with an accessible move you can unleash an impressive action you would never be able to perform in real life.

Are there any other interesting implementations of the Wii controllers you can tell us about? For instance we've seen that you can open doors by twisting the controller to turn the knob, and tell enemies to get down on the ground by motioning with your left hand.

We will have more interaction of the controller but I can't tell them right now. This concerns the use of weapons, the relations with NPC...

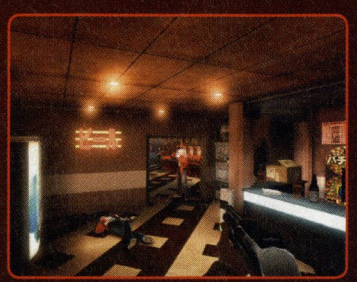
Is there an equal balance between sword fighting and gunplay or is one weighted more heavily gameplay wise? Has it been hard finding a good balance?

At the end, we estimate we will have a balance between sword and gun with perhaps a little more gun. To tell the truth, (and repeat ourselves) the way the controllers work has helped us. Both gameplay are strong and immersive. Gunfight requires precision, good aiming, no abrupt moves, while katana fighting requires swiftness, rough moves sometimes, good reactions and timing of attacks. Since both gameplay ask for totally different movement, it seemed evident for us to alternate sequences in order to catch the player off-balance and offer him a unique gaming experience.

Will you learn new skills as the game progresses?

Definitely, you will learn to master gun & sword fights, for which you can get trained regularly in the dojo or in Harry's Club, but also some more weapons or interaction with your environment. You will discover the mafia rules as well.

> "Shooting and sword fighting have never been so real and immersive as with the Wii controller"



Tell us a little about the AI of enemies in Red Steel and in particular the "clan" system.

Our AI system is based upon a morale meter. Factors that influence positively the enemies' morale are: numbers, knowledge of the player's location, leaders being alive and giving orders. In these cases, enemies will advance towards the player, outflanking him or being able to find a better firing axis. If the enemy is wounded, he will seek cover, retreat, or even flee.

The controllers have enabled us to tune the enemies' movement very precisely. In a standard console FPS, enemies stand relatively still so the player can aim with the pad. In Red Steel, the enemies do move a lot, jump over crates to outflank the player, lob grenades, take cover and pop up to shoot at him, etc...

To pass certain situations, the controller's possibilities will have to be fully used, by moving and aiming on screen with great precision.

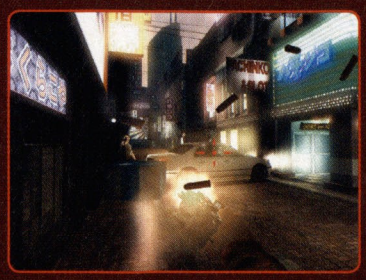
As for clans, we aim at depicting the eastern code of Honor. Why kill someone when he is begging for mercy and doesn't stand a chance? The player merely has to disarm him, and pin him to the ground.

If a leader is bested, he will respect the player, his minions will do too. They might even help him.

If the player kills a leader who is disarmed, his allies will be furious, hate the player and will do everything they can to kill him.

Some scenes can be passed by merely disarming the enemies' leader: the player will then prove

I think the vending machine is the least of your worries champ



his mastery, and his enemies will respect him.

Tell us about the "focus aiming" in the game.

This is an option you can have while fighting well with your gun. You can freeze time and choose either to kill, hurt or just disarm your enemy.

Red Steel is looking very strong graphically - what engine is it running on and what are its strengths?

Red Steel is running on the improved version Unreal engine for the Wii system. A large portion of our team has already worked with the Unreal engine. They are already well aware of its strengths and weaknesses. We have pushed the engine to its limits to offer a rich, colored and different setting to the player. Eastern culture allows for original and seldom seen scenes. We are taking advantage of that.

How are you finding the Wii to develop for in general?

Developing a game for the Wii is a unique opportunity, this for several reasons. The approach is based on the specifics of the gaming system, i.e. its controllers and what they allow for, in terms of game design and game mechanics in a FPS. It has enabled us to focus on what really matters: gameplay and immersion.

With the Wii controllers, we are moving through 'terra incognita'. FPS controls have to be designed almost from the ground up, as we have no previous reference with the controllers. The problems we find are new, and the solutions are really interesting.

Moreover, Nintendo does actively participate in resolving the problems, we are lucky to have very good contact with them. This enormously helps the game development.

For all those reasons, the Wii platform is the one to be developing on right now!

The Wii has been accused of not really being next generation due to the relative lack of processing power compared to the Xbox 360 and PS3 - what are your thoughts on this? Has there been anything the team wanted to implement but couldn't?

Wii is not a next gen system the same way as PS3 and X-360. Wii is not powerful for graphics but in terms of controls this is the most powerful hardware on the market. Shooting and sword fighting have never been so real and immersive as with the Wii controller. And the best graphics ever will never deliver that.

Can you tell us about the multiplayer modes in the game? Will online play be included in addition to splitscreen?

Not yet, you will know in the coming months

Will there be an online or splitscreen co-op mode? How about online one on one sword fighting tournaments?

I can tell you we will definitely have split-screen modes. For the on-line, it will depend on when Nintendo will release its on-line features. We will tell you more about multiplayer modes & controls later!

Can you confirm any of the voice talent attached to the project so far?

No, no specific voice talent, just good actors.

Is there a lot of pressure on you being the first new IP FPS for the Wii?

Indeed. Developing a game, in a short time, on a yet unreleased system with unfinalized hardware, brings many uncertainties and means many a pizza dinner at the office! We are working very hard to make sure we deliver the best possible game for the Wii fans.

However, it is tremendously exciting and motivating to play a part in the release of this really fresh gaming system.

What's next for the Red Steel franchise?

Release the title for the launch of the console, see people having fun playing it, provide them with a new incredible FPS experience that is our primary objective. We are impatient of seeing people's reaction on our game. Then we will see where the franchise will go... ≪

Haze

SYSTEM: **PC, PS3, XBOX 360** ■ CATEGORY: **FPS** ■ PLAYERS: **1-MULTI** ■ DEVELOPER: **FREE RADICAL** ■ DUE: **EARLY 2007**

The year is 2025 and, unsurprisingly, things are not all well and good in the world. There is no more NATO, no more UN, no more guiding bodies in the world. On the brink of financial collapse, numerous countries have been forced to dump their own armed forces and outsource their militaries to the Mantel Global Industries, a vast multi-national company with fingers in every pie ranging from petrochemicals to white goods. Mantel's armed forces and biomedical technology are second to none and thanks to Nectar, a somewhat sinister drug force fed to Mantel soldiers by the Administrator system built into their armour, they are stronger and tougher than anything else on the battlefield.

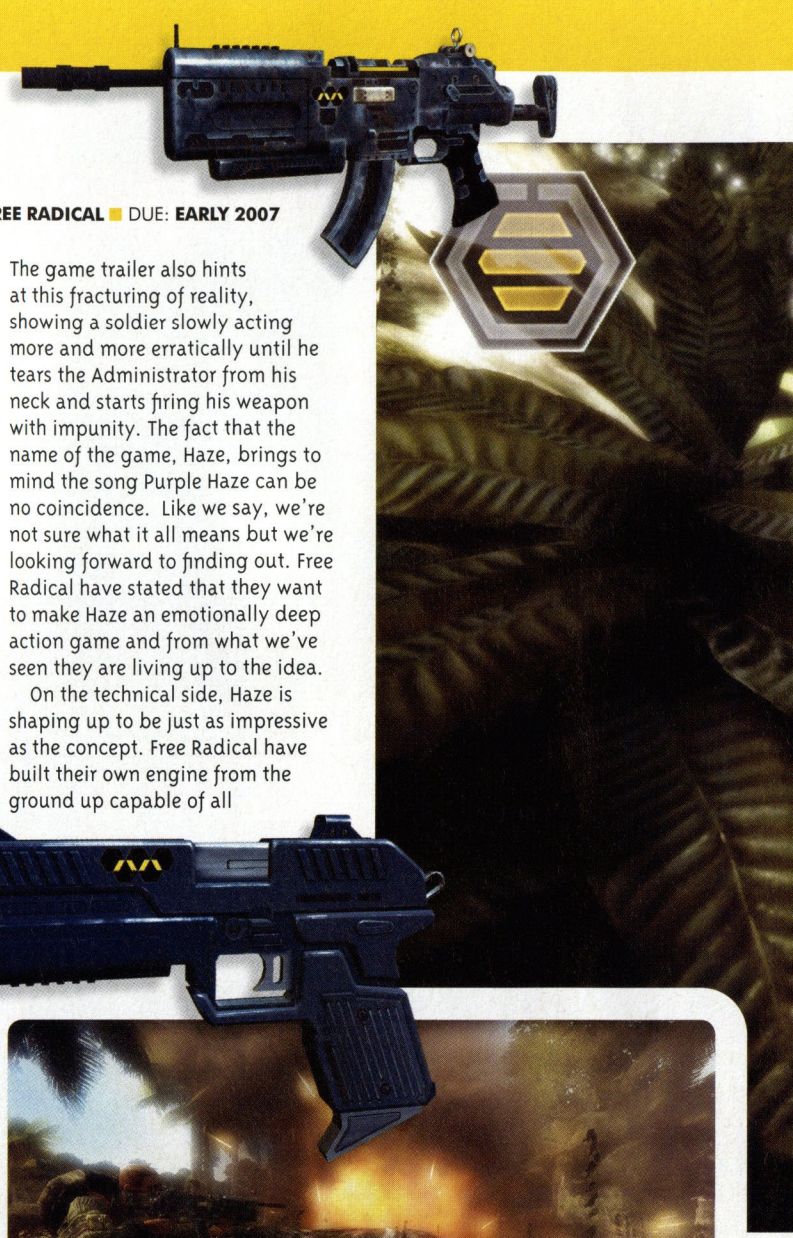
DOWN WITH JC?

Players will take the role of a young Mantel recruit, Jake Carpenter, sent into a war-torn South American country to battle guerrilla soldiers "The Promise Hand" that have staged a bloody coup on the government. The guerrilla leader, a bloodthirsty despot by the name of Gabriel Merino has earned the gruesome moniker of "Skin Coat" for his practise of wearing an outer garment made from the flayed skins of POW camp inmates. He's clearly a very bad man.

Or is he? One of the central conceits of Haze from what we can tell is - what the hell is really going on? From the brief snippet of gameplay we've seen, Administrator and Nectar are more nefarious than your standard, run of the mill super-soldier serum, not only increasing your strength and reaction time but also seriously warping the soldier's sense of reality. From the screens you can see what can only be classed as bloomtastically bloomtacular environments; everything is soft and glowing with ambient light, almost a photorealistic depiction of something that can't exist. Without Nectar the world appears to be a dirtier, darker place and the well equipped and fierce Promise Hand fighters seem to be little more than peasants.

The game trailer also hints at this fracturing of reality, showing a soldier slowly acting more and more erratically until he tears the Administrator from his neck and starts firing his weapon with impunity. The fact that the name of the game, Haze, brings to mind the song Purple Haze can be no coincidence. Like we say, we're not sure what it all means but we're looking forward to finding out. Free Radical have stated that they want to make Haze an emotionally deep action game and from what we've seen they are living up to the idea.

On the technical side, Haze is shaping up to be just as impressive as the concept. Free Radical have built their own engine from the ground up capable of all



I love the smell of bloom in the morning

» Without Nectar the world appears to be a dirtier, darker place and the fighters seem to be little more than peasants «

War is... pretty?

WHAT WE'D LIKE TO SEE:
So much bloom that you can't actually tell what is going on

the modern bells and whistles; shader models 2 and 3, HDR, depth of motion, motion blur and, of course, bloom. The engine also has support for the PhysX PC hardware acceleration physics chip. Finally, Haze will take advantage of a streaming content delivery system that will mean that aside from starting the game, players should encounter no loading times, allowing the player to become more immersed in the world of Haze than would otherwise be possible. Haze is due for release in early 2007 on PS3, Xbox 360 and PC. You can bet your bottom dollar we'll be trying to get our hands on code to bring you an update long before that time. <<

Nice balaclava - did your mum knit it for you?

Cue trippy Dio soundtrack

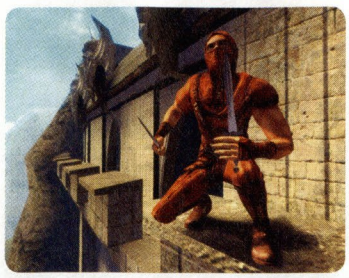
Dark Messiah of Might & Magic

SYSTEM: **PC** ■ CATEGORY: **FPS** ■ PLAYERS: **1-MULTI** ■ DEVELOPER: **ARKANE** ■ DUE: **LATE 2006**

So here I am, creeping through a series of interconnected mines infested with orcs and goblins, my trusty bow at my side, hoping to approach the level like a ninja. I want to move like water, let the shadows be my way, be one with the darkness, walk with the night and all the other assorted bullshit I've learned about ninjas from too many hours watching movies with Sho Kushogi and Michael Dudikoff, or some other forgotten 80s relic spouting pseudo-philosophical, generically Asian sounding "wisdom". Instead I seem to move more like I do in real life – a little clumsily and prone to bumping into things. Stealth don't work so great when you knock over a stack of crates (time to crate approximately 0.6 seconds) and then manage to set some of them on fire. Guards tend to notice that kind of thing. Alerted to my presence the first orc guard attacks, shield held high to deflect my arrows – so I shoot him in the legs. Apparently orcs are allergic to that kind of thing and soon he is staggering after me, screaming that "Human will not get away!" I'm not planning on getting away. There's more killing to do. Two more orcs come rushing into the room; I deliver a swift kick to the first, sending him staggering back into a fire. He screams and runs. The second takes advantage of my distraction and starts whacking away with his roughly sharpened piece of metal that passes for a sword. I panic and try to back up but hit a wall. My adrenalin meter reaches climax and I go into a killing frenzy. With no room to shoot I grab one of my arrows and stab the orc in the face. He keels over. I gloat in my victory for a second but more orcs arrive. I lay one low with an adrenalin powered arrow that sends him staggering backwards into a spiked trap, another comes and is knocked into a ravine by a swinging log trap I trigger with a well aimed shot. Yet two more come. I try to lead them in under a precarious shelf stacked high with crates and barrels, planning on knocking out the support and crushing them beneath the detritus. Plan fails. I don't get out in time. Human paste on the floor. Oh well, time to go at it again. This time I might use magic.

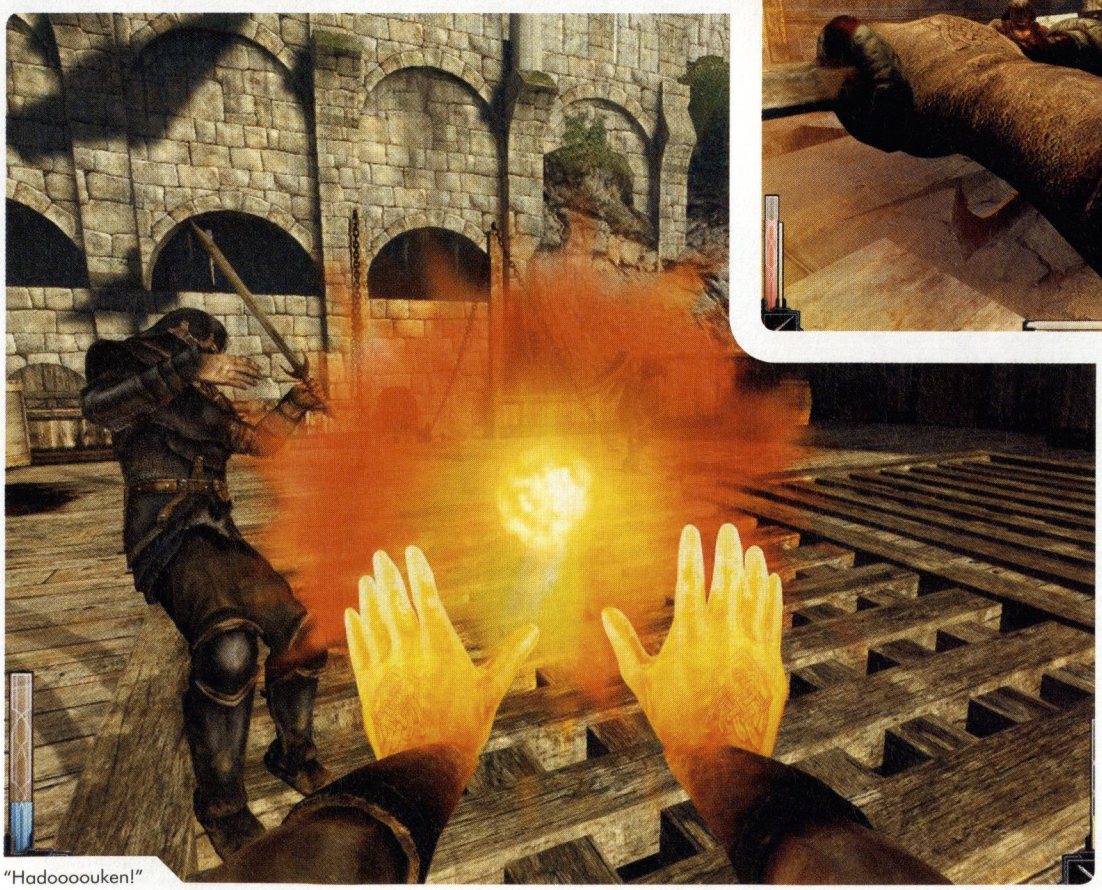
FANTASY SANDBOX?

Those going into Dark Messiah of Might and Magic expecting it to be an RPG in the vein of the previous Might and Magic games may be a little disappointed. Sure, you can tailor your character's skills using a level up system and there's tons of new weapons and gear to collect but that's where the similarity ends. Dark Messiah is a fantasy action game rather than a pure RPG and it's shaping up to be a great title. While inevitable comparisons are going to be made with Oblivion, Dark Messiah of Might and Magic is much closer in spirit to Half-Life 2 – a strongly scripted, beautiful to look at and highly interactive game world dripping in physics. It's unknown whether the mine section we got to play through will actually be in the final game or if it was created specifically for demo purposes but it does give a good feel for the game. Essentially a locked box playground, the level gave us an opportunity to play around with a variety of weapons and play styles.

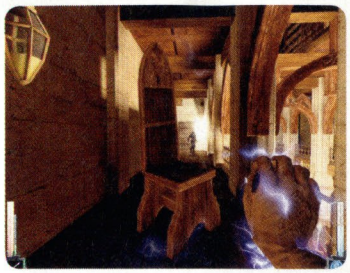


[up] "Whatever Sub-Zero says!"

» It's always good for a laugh to ice up an area of ground near a large fall and lure a charging enemy into it «



"Hadoooouken!"



Melee combat is obviously the most immediate and visceral form of action. We had the chance to play around with swords, daggers and a staff. Basic attacks are triggered with the left mouse button and blocking is triggered with the right. Holding down the attack button charges up a more powerful but slower attack. This charged attack can also be used to instantly kill fallen enemies with a nice visceral thrust. During combat, players charge their Adrenalin meter – essentially a short term powerup that turns them into a superhuman killing machine when triggered. Adrenalin fuelled attacks deal a good deal more damage than their normal counterparts and also have much messier results; whereas a normal sword attack may take some life from an enemy and stagger them a little bit, an adrenalin attack could cleave the enemy's head clean off. All melee weapons also have an option for stealth attacks. As long as you remain unnoticed, sneaking up behind an enemy and holding in the attack button allows for one hit kills, a ready animation triggering when you get in range.

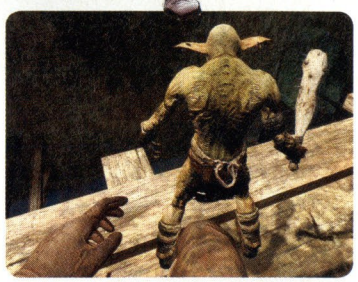
Essentially taking the place of guns in a standard FPS, the magic in Dark Messiah is a premium of bastardry. The basic damage spells, a guided magic missile, an explosive fireball and lightning bolt are fun to play around with but the real enjoyment comes from the more utility spells. We've joked in Hyper a few times that Next Generation = physics weapon; some type of gun that allows you to manipulate the environment in ways detrimental to the health of your enemies. Dark Messiah has this in Telekinesis. On a basic level you can pick objects up and throw them with your mind but when charged with adrenalin players can pick up enemies as well. There's a real visceral thrill to be had picking up a rampaging enemy and throwing them as far as the draw distance will allow and watching them splat on a wall. Shrink allows you to shrink enemies down to miniscule size, either taking them out of combat for a short amount of time or making them ripe for squishing. One of the most fun spells we played around with was the ability to freeze enemies. Once frozen they were taken out of the fight for a short while or could be shattered into a million pieces with a swift kick. More fun still is the ability to cover sections of the ground in ice, making it slippery; it's always good for a laugh to ice up an area of ground near a large fall and lure a charging enemy onto it. You feel like waving goodbye as they slide over the precipice and into the black.

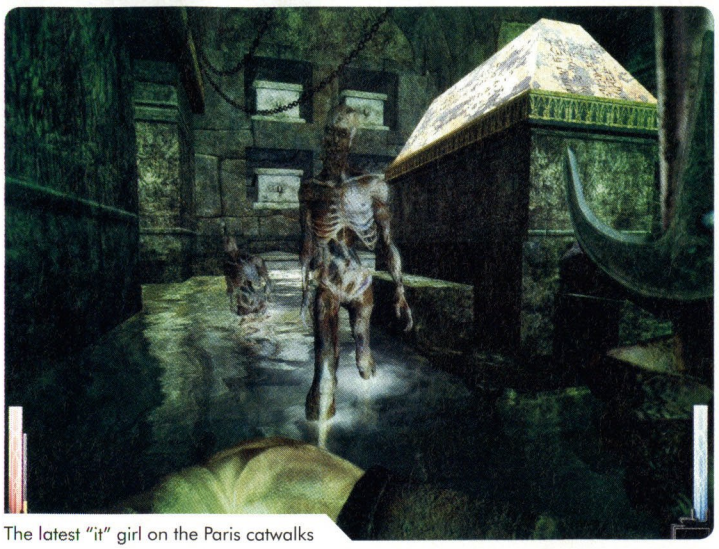
The more the merrier

We haven't been able to test the multiplayer of Dark Messiah as yet but here's what we know; multiplayer will feature up to 32 players in objective based team games. The two sides, Humans and Undead will be essentially the same with the only real difference being skins. One of the game modes we know about will see teams made up of five classes – Archer (a sniper), Knight (melee fighter), Mage (like a heavy gunner), Assassin (stealth and invisibility) and Priestess (healing and support) fighting over five progressive maps. Players will start in the middle map and whoever wins will push the opposing team back one map with the eventual goal being to assault the enemy stronghold. It sounds like a hoot.

Although some of us, myself included, were hoping that Arkane would be making another solid first person RPG like Arx Fatalis, we couldn't be happier with the way Dark Messiah of Might and Magic is shaping up. The action is fast paced and brilliantly replayable thanks to the different combat styles on offer, and the game world is as gorgeous as we could hope for from a game built on the Source engine. We don't know much about the plot as yet but we can't wait to find out. We've been waiting for a good fantasy action FPS for years now. It looks like our wait may finally be over.

Daniel Wilks



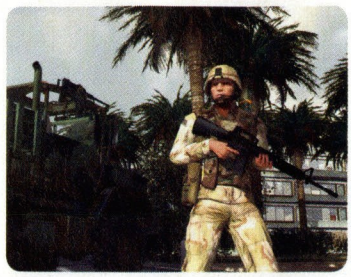


The latest "it" girl on the Paris catwalks

Archery in oven mitts

Armed Assault

SYSTEM: **PC** ■ CATEGORY: **WAR SIM** ■ PLAYERS: **1-64** ■ DEVELOPER: **BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE** ■ DUE: **Q3 2006**



» When it was released five years ago, Operation Flashpoint was an instant cult hit and deservedly so – the level of detail, realism and sheer amount of freedom that it offered was simply jaw-dropping. Sure, it had its flaws – particularly when it came to difficulty and accessibility, but in the grand scheme of things these issues were relatively minor. Put simply, it was and still is the ultimate war sim.

Of course, now it looks a little dated. A sequel – or at least some sort of follow-up – is long overdue. And this is where Armed Assault comes in.

A NEW BEGINNING

It should be noted that Armed Assault isn't Operation Flashpoint 2. Bohemia don't own the rights to that name any more, so they've decided to develop an entirely new game – complete with an original storyline and setting – instead.

Paul R. Statham, PR/Community Manager at Bohemia, gave us the score. "[Armed Assault] has a modern setting. It takes place on a fictional island called Sahrani, which is divided into two separate [nations] – the North and the South. The North is communist, but the South is democratic. Obviously, having two such differing nations so close together [is going to result in] a lot of tension and difficulty."

Considering the fact that they're working on a game that's all about realism, Bohemia's choice to use a fictional setting may sound a little odd. But we're not too worried – after all, they did the same thing with Operation Flashpoint and it worked really well.

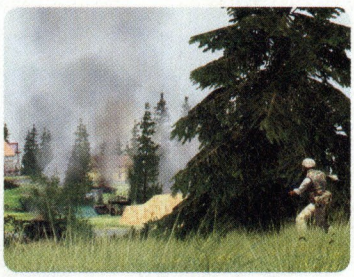
The island of Sahrani sounds like a pretty impressive place – roughly 400 square kilometres in size, it's dotted with dozens of cities, towns, villages and hamlets. It has beautiful beaches and rugged mountains and everything in between, as well as a lot of wildlife. It would the perfect tourist spot if it wasn't for, you know, that whole war thing...

Like Flashpoint, Armed Assault promises to be a desk chair explorer's wet dream. "The gameplay will be very free-roaming," Statham says. "Limiting [exploration] is a frustrating and silly way to develop games." In their view (and ours) it's stupid to punish the gamer for being smart enough to go around and attack from a more strategic angle, rather than fight a tank head on.

Speaking of fighting, Armed Assault should have a decent collection of weapons. The South Sahrani forces will have a slightly modified version of the modern US arsenal. The commandoes get the best gear, "while the regular forces have to make do with the weapons that might seem a little more dust. We're talking weapons like the M16A2, M4, M24 and M249. North Sahrani, being a communist nation, obviously draws its weapons from a more AK-smelling pool. [They use] things like the AK47, AKS74U, PK and Makarov." Both sides also have access to a number of explosive weapons, and "in total, there are roughly 30 specific weapon models available," but when you factor in the different modified versions, you're looking at an arsenal that's made up of about 40 or 50 individual weapons.

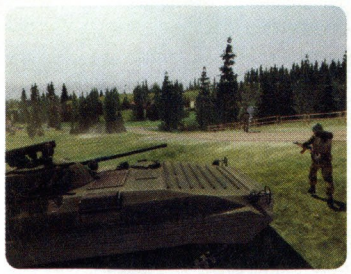
» It's stupid to punish the gamer for being smart enough to go around and attack from a more strategic angle «

Naturally, Bohemia is going out of its way to ensure that each of these weapons feels suitably realistic and



[up] Soldier? Or camo-wearing bindlestiff?

Yes, he is actually looking at you



There's more than a little gun envy in this picture

unique. They're planning on not just accurately modelling recoil, but realistically simulating things like wind resistance as well.

One of the most impressive features of Operation Flashpoint was its huge motor pool, which featured just about everything you can think of – from tanks to attack helicopters. Well dear fans, you can rejoice, as Bohemia has promised to well and truly outdo themselves. Armed Assault will have "cars, trucks, armoured personnel carriers, tanks, trucks, helicopters, boats and bicycles – anything a modern army needs to take over a country it doesn't like."

Statham adds, "We're trying to make a realistic military game rather than an arcade shooter," so they'll be aiming to make the vehicles as authentic as possible. "The way we see it, the game should be balanced in terms of mission content and storyline, rather than in terms of bastardising the vehicle stats in the name of 'gameplay.'"

What this means is that you won't see modern tanks from the South facing off against outdated models from the North in one-on-one battles ala Battlefield 2 – what will happen instead is the North will attack in superior numbers, using the element of surprise to improve their chances.

As fans of Flashpoint would no doubt expect, Bohemia is promising some pretty neat features for the single player campaign. The campaign is in-depth, "with a branching storyline and an interesting function that's available [in] certain nations [that lets you switch between different roles on the battlefield]," says Statham. In other words, you could play through a mission twice – once as a sniper and once as a tank gunner.

That last point is particularly intriguing. One on hand it contributes significantly to the game's replay value, but on the other hand it could very well end up detracting from the intensity that made Flashpoint so great.

GETTING IT ON(LINE)

The multiplayer component is also shaping up to be a lot of fun. "[It] has some great features," explains Statham, "not least persistent online warfare with dozens of people all playing in the same intense battle with AI troops and vehicles. If you like organised, tactical and strategic [gaming], you can probably expect the best multiplayer experience available. That's one of the great things about Armed Assault – you're not just limited to 'serious' gameplay. If you want to play quick, aggressive deathmatch or capture the flag-type [games] you can. Armed Assault really is the exception to the saying 'jack of all trades, master of none.'"

And, wait for it... they're incorporating co-operative play! "With our improved net code, in-built voice communication and enhanced AI, co-operative will be talked around the campfire for years to come."

In case you couldn't tell, we're pretty excited. Bohemia did some amazing things with Operation Flashpoint and we have no reason to expect that they'll disappoint us this time around. Seriously, how many other war games would let you tool around on a bicycle?

Christopher Taylor

They've got a turtle head poking out

Fatal Inertia

SYSTEM: **PS3** ■ CATEGORY: **RACING** ■ PLAYERS: **1-MULTI** ■ DEVELOPER: **KOEI CANADA** ■ DUE: **PS3 LAUNCH**

First unveiled at TGS last year, Fatal Inertia is gradually taking shape. While Koei is better known for hack 'n' slash epics, this new title from their Canadian development studio is being designed specifically for the Western market and wouldn't you know it – it's an anti-gravity racing game.

Set in the 22nd century, the emphasis is on combat and utilising the environment. So rather than just running over a weapon pick up and firing it at an opponent, you'll have much greater scope to be crafty. Do you instead target a rocky overhang and send it crashing down on an opponent – and hopefully those behind him, while you take an alternate path? Or do you fire your tow cable at an opponent, then the other end at a canyon wall, slinging him into the cliff? Yes, physics and experimentation are being touted as a big part of this game.

One weapon is a large magnet you can fire at enemies, causing them to collect debris as they fly, throwing their handling out of whack. It can also be combined with other weapons, although at this stage we're not really sure how that will work.

Red Bull enhances reaction time

Thus far we've seen two settings – a parched and rocky desert and a dense jungle. The team have said that the final game will have seven environments – all themed around untouched, natural environments, and with a huge number of courses contained within. There are four basic vehicle models as starting points – Phoenix (the most balanced ship class), Aurora (maximum speed but sacrificing handling and acceleration), Mercury (excellent acceleration and handling make this class great for evasive manoeuvres) and Titan (maximum thrust and great weapons capabilities), but each will be highly customisable, not just in looks but in performance as well.

Of course, any anti-gravity racer worth its salt also has an intense sense of speed... and that's the biggest question mark hanging over Fatal Inertia at the moment. If the team can up the sensation of speed this will be one to look out for.

Joint Task Force

SYSTEM: **PC** ■ CATEGORY: **RTS** ■ PLAYERS: **1-MULTI** ■ DEVELOPER: **MITHIS ENTERTAINMENT** ■ DUE: **SEPTEMBER**

At first glance Joint Task Force (JTF) might look like any number of other modern military RTS titles, but fortunately it adds an interesting twist to the play mechanics. Since the war in Iraq, the concept of embedded journalists in a war zone has received a stack of attention, and in JTF it will be the media that help determine your funding for future campaigns. While the money itself comes from a consortium of nations, the many reporters on the ground act as watchdogs. If you go around killing civilians, randomly destroying buildings or failing to rescue hostages, the media will report on it, leading to lower levels of financial support. If, on the other hand, you're able to efficiently and cleanly achieve your mission goals, or complete extra humanitarian objectives, you'll have more funding for future missions. It's a neat twist, and combined with its blend of highly tactical combat (no Zerg rushes here), large maps that open up as you achieve objectives, and interactive environments that allow you to use almost anything as cover, as well as letting you commandeer enemy vehicles and civilian cars, JTF should win a few fans both from RTS heads and the modern combat gamers.

Players will have 20 missions spread over five campaigns to work through, from Somalia, Afghanistan and Bosnia, to Colombia and Iraq. Getting your units through each conflict will be critical thanks to the experience system that sees soldiers attain Hero status once they reach level four. This not only means that they'll be tougher and able to further specialise, but also that you can hold onto them between campaigns – something you can't do with ordinary units. Indeed, building a stable of heroes will be critical to having the right variety of skills and experience for the tough missions ahead. And losing soldiers will be costly – literally, as funding will dictate whether you can afford to buy more. Full review soon.

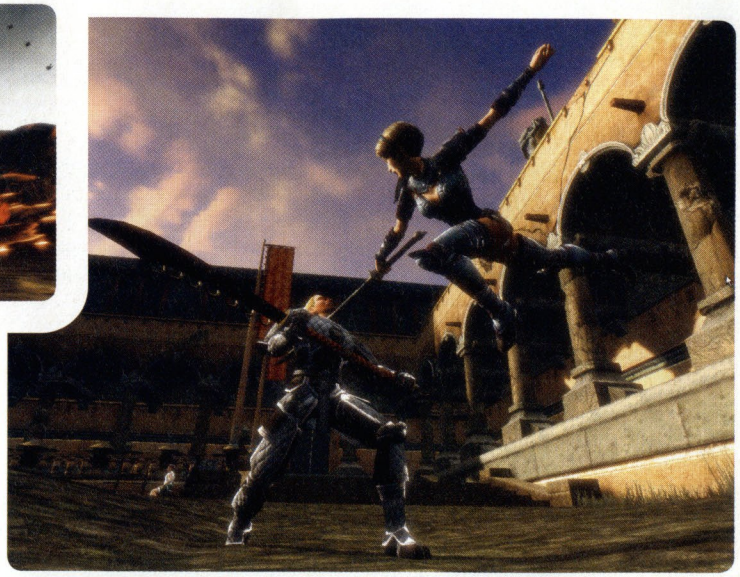
Fury

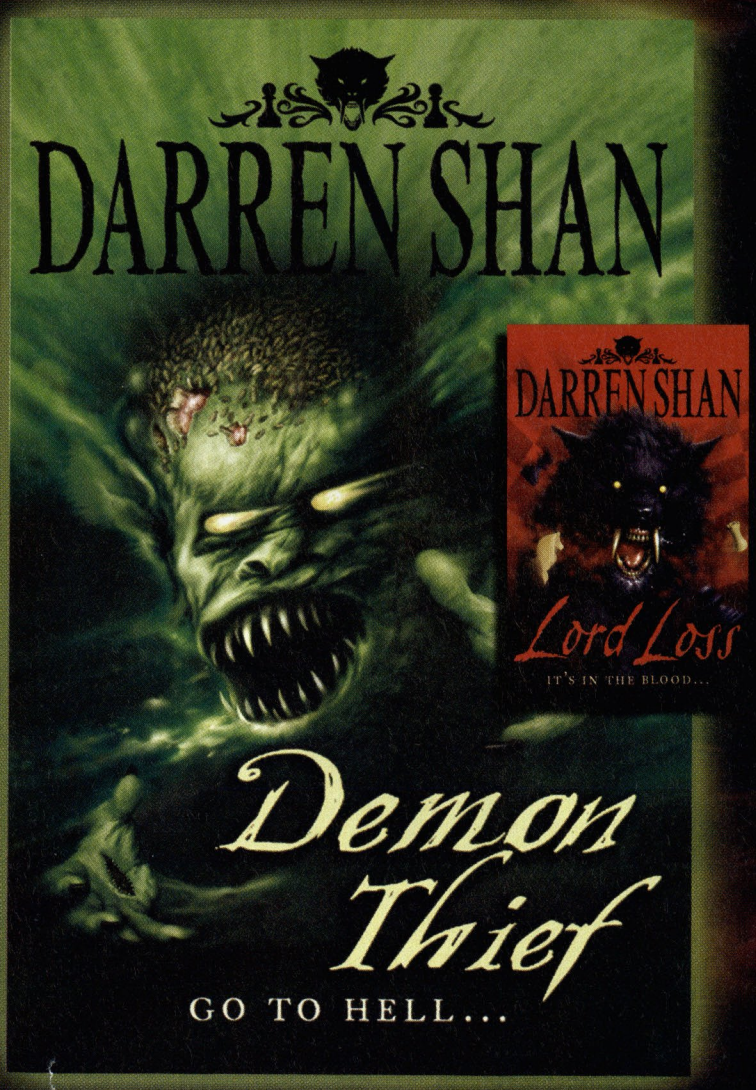
SYSTEM: **PC** ■ CATEGORY: **PVP** ■ PLAYERS: **1-64** ■ DEVELOPER: **AURAN** ■ DUE: **2007**

When we heard that Aussie developers Auran were entering the MMO market our first assumption was that outside of Japan (and a few nebbish Englishmen) a massively multiplayer train simulator wouldn't really have much of a market. Of course we all know what assumption is the mother of. Fury has nothing to do with Auran's past success, Trainz in any way shape or form; it's a fantasy MMO, it's all about PvP and it's looking pretty amazing. There have been MMOs on the market before that have sold themselves as being PvP focused, Guild Wars being a prime example, but Fury is different in the fact that it is entirely PvP focused. There is no PvE grind to level up a character for PvP end game, no PvE quests to get competitive gear. Everything in the game will come from PvP quests, or "Trials" as they are called in the game world. Instead of skill levels, players will unlock new skills from competing in team based trials for between 4 and 32 players a side and these skills can be combined based on a point system to make a truly malleable character.

[up] Super Happy Special Effect Attack!

Character creation is set to be a fluid process with only name and gender being locked in stone. Set in a fractured land, players take the role of an amnesiac "Chosen", a warrior who has been reincarnated countless times to fight the good fight. Rather than choosing a class, players are free to create and save up to 200 incarnations of their characters with different skill sets and gear loadouts that they have gained through trials and may freely switch between incarnations any time they enter a non-PvP game area. Running on the Unreal 3 engine, Fury is looking rather spectacular – stay tuned for our interview with Auran in a couple of issues.





'The master ..., is at his bloodcurdling best.'
Publishing News (UK)

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TimeShift

SYSTEM: **PC, XBOX 360** ■ CATEGORY: **FPS** ■ PLAYERS: **1-MULTI** ■ DEVELOPER: **SABER INTERACTIVE** ■ DUE: **LATE 2006**

Time control is nothing new in videogames – bullet time has been a staple of the action genre for years, and series' like Prince of Persia took things even further, giving us the power to slow time, see the path ahead and even rewind mistakes. It may be a common theme, but there's little doubt that when executed well, time manipulation is a powerful and compelling toolset for modern videogames.

TimeShift is another title hoping to wow gamers through its integrated time tinkering. As Michael Swift, a Chrononaut with a 3 billion dollar Quantum Suit, you're the only one who can bring down a totalitarian regime. In fact, you're the only one who can remember what the world 'should' be like. During a US Government testing program for the experimental suit, Swift drastically alters the timeline, finding himself in an utterly alien present – a world ruthlessly controlled by a fascist regime. Time to shoot your way back to the world as it should be.

IS HE WITH SPEC OPS?

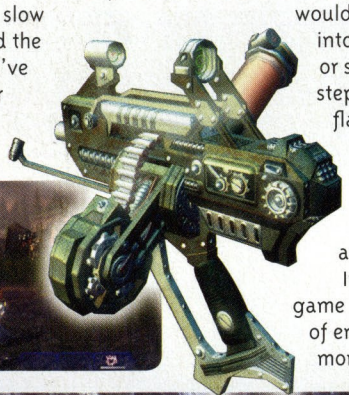
Swift has three core time abilities – slow, stop and rewind. Each requires power to activate – slow the least and rewind the most, and after you've used an ability your suit will slowly recharge, leaving you a little vulnerable.

What's different about TimeShift is that when the player manipulates time, he remains unaffected. Thus, if you fall to your death, you can't rewind yourself back up to safety. In fact, if you're not careful you can make things worse – get hit by a rocket then rewind time and you'll still have the damage. In fact, if you don't get out of the way you can get hit again, and take double damage from the one rocket.

Your time powers do open up some interesting choices, however. Do you charge into a sortie with slow time activated, hoping to use your speed advantage to take enemies out before they can return fire? Do you stop time and quickly steal the weapon out of an opponent's hands while leaving a sticky grenade on the back of another? Or do you stroll in, check out where the guards are, then rewind time to before they saw you, taking a more strategic position so you can easily take them out?

Above and beyond the regular fire fights are a host of 'puzzles' built around your powers, such as reversing time to get through a section with massive turbines that would otherwise suck you into a gibby demise, or stopping time to step through seering flames. You may even be penned in by a tank, with the only way to progress being to slow time and run like hell.

In our time with the game the vast majority of enemies were little more than grunts – and easily exploding grunts at that. There were, however, a couple of more challenging enemies. Thunder Guards wield guided rocket launchers, so stopping time and shooting the missile out of the air or slowing time to get out of the way are invaluable. Perhaps the coolest enemies we came across, however, were the Flash Guards. These soldiers possess their own brand of time suit, speeding up their movements and making them impossible to track at normal speed. To take them out you'll have to look for them zipping from one spot to another, then freeze time and unleash as much firepower as you can. We're also told there will be other high level enemies such as Warp Guards who can teleport away from you to a better position, and Storm Guards who have a large shield on



Never bring a super soaker to a gunfight

Yeah, like you're going to kill the guy in the $3 billion suit - COME ON!

Time to barrel - 0.4 seconds

> What's different about TimeShift is that when the player manipulates time, he remains unaffected

their front, so you'll have to find a way to get around behind them. Maybe something involving time manipulation? Just a thought.

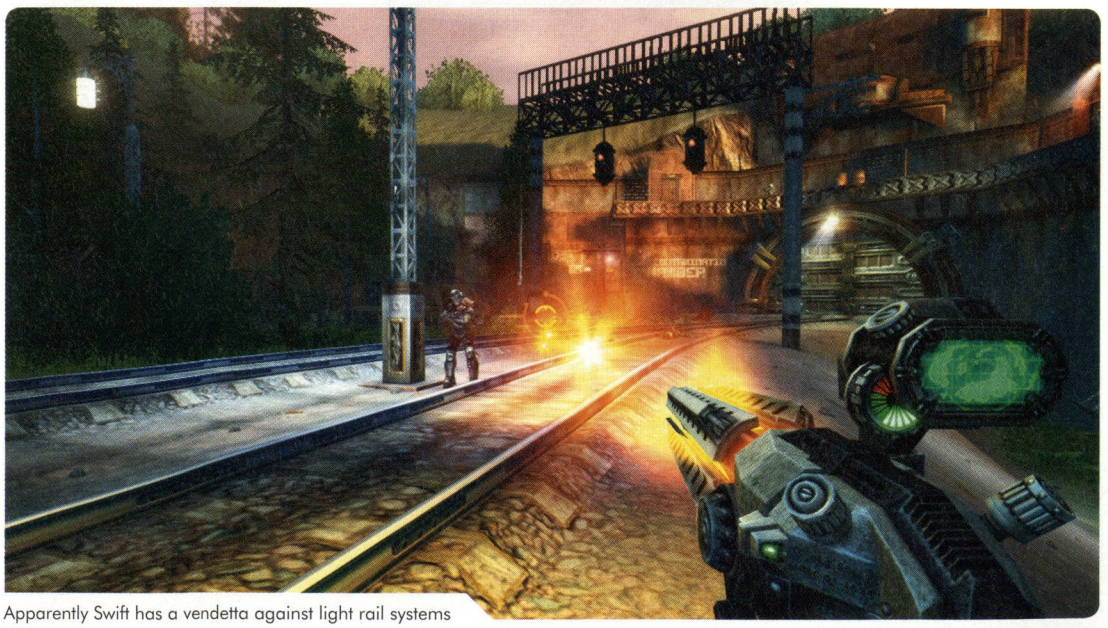
Saber Interactive haven't unveiled all the weapons yet, but the ones that were present in the build we played were fun, if a little unspectacular. There was the M74 Bloodhound, a shoulder mounted rocket launcher with an alt fire that allowed you to guide the rocket's path, the insanely powerful Krossbow (their spelling, not ours) that fires an electrical ball capable of instantly transforming an enemy into a shower of gibs, and the HellRazer, a gun that shoots incendiary bullets in its main fire mode and is a short range flamethrower in alt fire. While nothing new, it's still pretty cool firing bullets of malevolent flame and setting enemies alight. Plus, setting someone on fire, then reversing time to watch them flailing in reverse, before setting them on fire again? Well, that's just good old fashioned fun.

TIME TO CRATE

Admittedly we've only seen a small slice of the game, but there are a few worrying signs for TimeShift. Your powers don't feel as vital as they probably should, with a lot of the action feeling like a rather generic FPS, and some of the game design is really dated. There's nothing we hate more, for instance, than doors that mysteriously unlock themselves after you do something unrelated, or doors that you can never go through because they're there solely to spawn guards. And for a protagonist that can pause time and steal the gun right out of an enemy's hands, it seems absurd that he can't climb over a fence, or jump over a two foot high roll of barbed wire on the ground. Plenty of games have these kinds of restrictions of course, but they're really noticeable in TimeShift which is a shame. That said, there's also a stack of potential here – let's just hope the final game lives up it.

Fielding Wellingtonsworth

WHAT WE'D LIKE TO SEE:
We've just heard that Michael Ironside and Dennis Quaid will be doing voices for the game – let's hope the story is strong enough for us to care.



Apparently Swift has a vendetta against light rail systems

Saint's Row

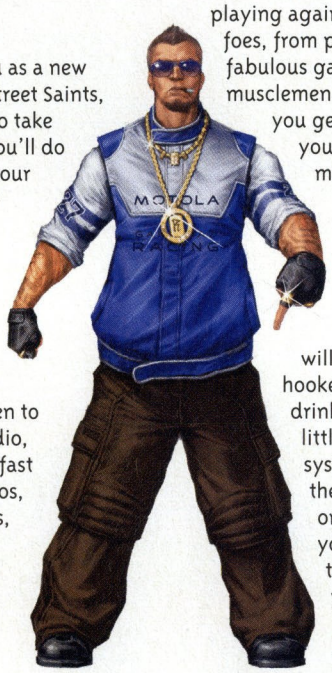
SYSTEM: **XBOX 360** ■ CATEGORY: **OPEN-WORLD** ■ PLAYERS: **1-12** ■ DEVELOPER: **VOLITION** ■ DUE: **SEPTEMBER**

When we spoke to Volition about Saint's Row late last year, they weren't shy about the inspiration for their Xbox 360 open-world title, and now that we've got our hands on preview code, it's no wonder. Saint's Row is very very similar to the GTA games. Eerily similar you might say. This in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, but will Saint's Row have enough of its own style to emerge from the shadow of its inspiration?

NEXT GEN GTA?

Saint's Row casts you as a new recruit into the 3rd Street Saints, a gang determined to take control of the city. You'll do this through killing your enemies and earning respect, taking over neighbourhood by neighbourhood. Along the way you'll jack vehicles and go on epic rampages across the massive city, listen to comical talk back radio, buy weapons, eat at fast food joints, get tattoos, erase your heat levels, visit clothing stores and wake up out the front of the hospital when you die. Yes, it's all very GTA, but there are a few next gen inclusions that we noticed right off the bat.

One nice touch is that Saint's Row lets you create your own highly detailed character to use in game. Whether you want to play as Fat Albert or Rico Suavez, you can do it, and this immediately brings you into the game. It also means that the online multiplayer modes will have a whole lot more personality – suddenly you're not just duking it out with carbon copies, you're playing against highly individual foes, from pimped out ghetto fabulous gangsters to beefcake musclemen. Thankfully, if you get sick of staring at your character's ugly mug, there are plastic surgeons in game that you can utilise for a complete face and body lift.



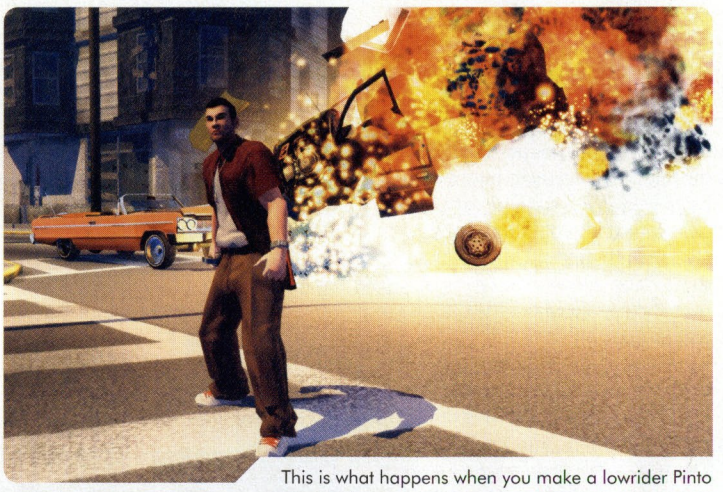
Another area where Saint's Row will make the life of a hooker killing, Hennessey drinking gang banger a little easier is in the GPS system. Simply pause the game, set a marker on the map for where you want to go and the game will guide you. Simple!

Saint's Row also has more accessible combat mechanics. If you've played a third person action game, you can play this. Rather than locking on you'll be aiming manually, but with decent camera movement it seems to work well. Plus, your gang buddies can help you out when you're going up against enemy gang members in numbers. They're pretty proactive too, shooting who you shoot, stomping who you stomp (yes, even if you just attack a passer by for no reason). You're also able to call in homies, who rock up in a car and accompany you on missions.

> Your gang buddies can help you out when you're going up against enemy gang members in numbers

Perhaps the most appetising part of Saint's Row is the huge number of side missions you can undertake. Once again, it's just like GTA, but there are a few fresh inclusions that should distinguish it. The full range is comprised of: Racing, Escort, Drug Trafficking, Hitman, Insurance Fraud, Demolition Derby, Chop Shop, Mayhem, Hijacking, Loan Shark, Tagging and Snatch, where you abduct hookers from rival pimps. No really.

We'll have review code for next issue and it will be interesting to see what gets tweaked. At the moment it's almost impossible to get your heat levels up. After driving around in a truck big enough to destroy cars simply by running into them, leaving ten solid minutes of carnage in my wake, the absence of the police was kind of spooky. Where's my comeuppance? Where's justice? Mind you, the police were more vigilant when it came to breaking into a CD store, cracking the safe and making a break for the local pawn shop. Killing people? Not a problem. Stealing the latest Michael Bolton disc? Send in the SWAT team!



This is what happens when you make a lowrider Pinto

WHAT WE'D LIKE TO SEE:
The leader of the Saints Julius sounds for all the world like he's channeling Cyrus in The Warriors. Will he say "can you dig it?" We can only hope not.

Fully sick bullet-hole stickers maaaaate

Need for Speed Carbon

SYSTEM: **EVERYTHING** ■ CATEGORY: **RACING** ■ PLAYERS: **1-MULTI** ■
DEVELOPER: **EA BLACK BOX** ■ DUE: **NOVEMBER 2006**

The Need for Speed juggernaut rolls on, and for the latest instalment EA have turned their attention to Canyon Racing. What's Canyon Racing? Imagine screaming along perilous mountain passes – gunning around hairpin turns with an opponent on your tail, where one poorly judged turn can leave you with wheels spinning in the air, and a one way trip to the bottom of the mountain.

Of course, the whole game won't be set in the mountains. You'll start out in the city in an all-out racing war, fighting to take over rival neighbourhoods block by block. Once you've proved your mettle, the races will move to Carbon Canyon and much higher stakes. It's a smart move on EA's part, with drift racing culture starting to find a hold in the west, and the tight turns and narrow roads of downhill racing will mean a great sense of speed and lots of powerslides. Just the way we like it.

Carbon is coming to every system under the sun and according to EA will feature the next generation of car customisation thank to their Autosculpt technology, which will let you design and extensively tweak your crew's cars. Sounds cool and we'll have more on it soon.

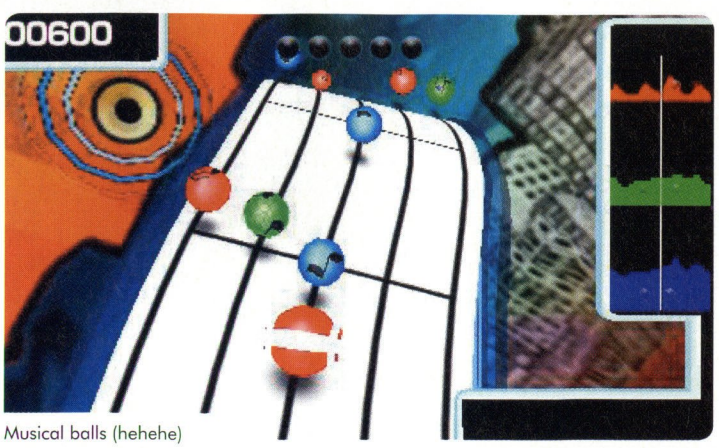
Traxion

SYSTEM: **PSP** ■ CATEGORY: **RHYTHM GAME** ■
PLAYERS: **1** ■ DEVELOPER: **KUJU** ■ DUE: **LATE 2006**

Now this just sounds hot. Remember in Vib Ribbon how you could put your own audio CD in and the game would create a world for you to traverse based on the music? Well Traxion is taking that concept and integrating it into a really diverse sounding piece of software for your PSP.

There will be over 20 mini-games and interactive displays in Traxion. These include: Vortex, a mini-game that at first glance looks a little like Frequency – you move along a curving musical staff, switching lanes to avoid obstacles and collect notes in time with the music; Karate-oke, use three attacks and defensive stances to "fight a series of musically generated opponents"; and Beatdrop, which is more of a puzzle game where you must clear blocks that arrive in time with the music. The game will also have visualisations for when you want a break and interactive drum kits.

Like Vib Ribbon, the game will come with its own soundtrack, but you'll also be able to use any music stored on your memory stick. In addition to analysing the music, Traxion will also check your mp3s' ID3 tags and alter the game world accordingly. If the track playing is tagged as jazz, for instance, the background will be different than if it was tagged death metal. Should be awesome.



Musical balls (hehehe)

Twins of Evil

Made Man

SYSTEM: **PC, PS2** ■ CATEGORY: **OPEN-WORLD** ■ PLAYERS: **1** ■
DEVELOPER: **SILVERBACK STUDIOS** ■ DUE: **SEPTEMBER**

You may remember that before Acclaim went belly up one of their last game announcements was a title called "Interview With a Made Man". Well, Acclaim may have been whacked, but Made Man, as it's now known, lives on and is due for release in September. Developed by Manchester based Silverback Studios, Made Man is being hyped as the ultimate mob videogame. Realistically it's going to be interesting to see how it compares with EA's The Godfather release, as both titles charge you with working your way to the top in New York City, but the game does have a couple of points of differentiation on its side. For one, the game spans three decades, from your character's tour of duty in Vietnam in the 60s all the way through to the 80s. Secondly, the script and scenarios in the game have all been written by author David Fisher in collaboration with Bill Bonnano, a former high ranking member of the Bonnano crime family, so Silverback will be able to craft their own narrative while still trying to be as authentic as possible. In gameplay terms, most of what we've seen so far has been action based, but the ability to jump to cover and create your own cover, plus the integration of picture in picture are both solid inclusions.

Will it be good? Who knows, but we'll find out soon enough.

FUTURE OF XBOX 360

U.S.A

Seamus Byrne talks to **Peter Moore**, Corporate Vice President, Interactive Entertainment Business Entertainment and Devices Division, Microsoft.

The Liverpool hard man of Microsoft Interactive Entertainment gives Hyper an insight into how they'll go the nut on their incoming competition.

You've announced that you're on track for 10 million Xbox 360 units?

Yeah. A 10m units head start before the other guys get into the marketplace.

I imagine you'll have no problems getting to 20m, about what you sold for Xbox?

It becomes a snowball rolling down hill, eventually, I mean you get into a virtuous cycle. You deliver on that and you know it feeds upon itself. So yeah, we're feeling confident. You would hope you get to 20m if you get to 10m.

How do you get beyond that? How do you widen the Xbox audience?

Well, hopefully we'll show things like Arcade, Viva Piñata and, perhaps more importantly, Live Anywhere, have a very non-intimidating experience, regardless of whether you're on your Xbox 360 or your Vista PC or your mobile phone. I think that really is another way that drives console adoption. People see the core of it as still being the Xbox 360 and I think that this idea, of elevating the platform experience, and of the device. But, yeah, we continue to grow and grow and grow and grow, I mean once you get to 10m you get to 20m and unless you're doing things that are cutting you off, if your pricing is too high or your content is not attractive or your online experience is too hardcore, it's all goodness at that point.

You mentioned Piñata there. Shane Kim said recently he feels it's going to be a really important title for you in this effort to go mainstream.

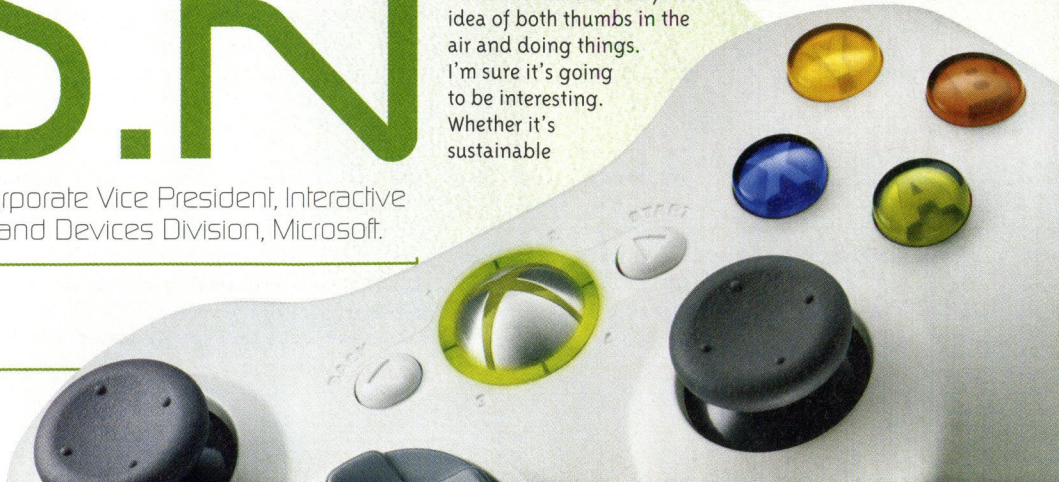
Yeah, Viva Piñata I saw two and a half years ago in its infancy when the guys at Rare were starting to think it through. Xbox Live had just got going at that point, and how we get this idea of younger folks coming in and playing, lets call it online gaming, which is still pretty hardcore, and utilising great characters.

Any interest in bringing a motion controller onto Xbox?

We did one six years ago, the Freestyle. Been there done that. Consumers went "yeeaah, it's interesting..." [said in a bored way].

But the technology was very basic at that time.

I don't know. Never knock anybody for trying. Nintendo has obviously shown this idea of both thumbs in the air and doing things. I'm sure it's going to be interesting. Whether it's sustainable



over 800, 1,000, 1,500 different games, I don't know. I think that the idea of doing the innovative thing is great, but whether they actually turn into incredibly powerful mass market devices is yet to be seen. The Sony controller I haven't picked it up, I do believe they've taken force feedback out of that. I cannot believe you would do that. I don't know about you but I love force feedback.

It could be a response to the legal action.

I would have settled a lawsuit with Immersion rather than take force feedback out which I think is an integral part of the sensory elements of gaming. You know those guys have got enough to worry about, they'll figure it out.

Sony's been really successful with peripheral-based games, will that be an area that Microsoft gets into?

Yeah I think that utilisation of the camera is going to be a big deal in the future and you know they've got some innovative stuff with EyeToy and we intend to take it one step further. I think poker is a huge deal. The concept of just Texas Hold'em seems to be just monstrous and every teenage boy seems to be a poker player all of a sudden. Being able to see each other is integral to the gameplay of poker, so I think it's a big deal. But, honestly, we've got a lot more going on so we'll be talking about that.

But you're right this idea of peripheral based gaming is something that Guitar Hero, Singstar, those things, particularly in Europe, it's caught the imagination of gamers.

So, what is best showing off this new 'second generation' of Xbox 360 games?

The one that obviously took everyone's breath away was Gears of War. That I think is probably the precursor to the next wave. Ghost Recon, most recently, is one of those titles that benefited from four or five months of extra polish. Even our good friend Lara Croft looks great, you know she wasn't there at launch but it's starting to feel next generation.

I think the question is we're feeling good about the quality of our games. Can Sony show games that are worth $300 more? You could talk about Blu-Ray all you want, but to the gamer we're delivering the ability to have third party games like I showed on my left arm [GTAIV] that neutralises any benefit then, you know, it's a whole new ball game this next generation.

How is Bungie coping with the huge expectations of Halo 3?

Bungie is Bungie. Doors are locked, nobody's coming out. They are used to the grind and getting it done. I've been there, even I have trouble getting them to show me stuff but trust me that what you're seeing is indicative of what the game is going to look and feel like. They're busy, needless to say.

What's your take on Sony's price point?

Let's be clear, any console always sells its initial run. I ran Sega here in the US, we sold 1.8m units of Dreamcast very, very quickly and then it's not so much what you do at launch, or even the six months after launch. It's year two, year three, when you're on a price cascade curve, you've got to get your cost reduction in line and you've got to be hitting mass market pricing levels. And if your cost reduction is not there and if your competitor is ahead of you in the curve, you know, watch out because you've got your math wrong. Unless you can prove to the consumer how much it's worth more than your competitor then you've got a challenge. That's their problem to sort out, not mine.

Do you feel that there will soon be a hard drive size increase?

Yeah we're looking at that. The more stuff we continue to have available on marketplace, the more you have to look at it. People have to manage their hard drives, which people do very easily, but yeah it's not to say that down the line you'd look at a larger capacity hard drive, you know you don't rule that out, that's why it's a removable hard drive. A lot of it's to do with pricing. But we'll keep a very close eye on, yeah.

The integration with media centre style activities certainly demands capacity.

Yeah that's one thing that a lot of people are discovering is that I, like a lot of people, actually put my storage in my media centre because I've got a 250GB there and I worry less about it on my 360. Put all your high def stuff on that hard drive, and with your media centre extender built into the 360 you could just stream that directly from your MCE.

You have purchased Massive recently. How much research has been done as to how much advertising gamers will tolerate?

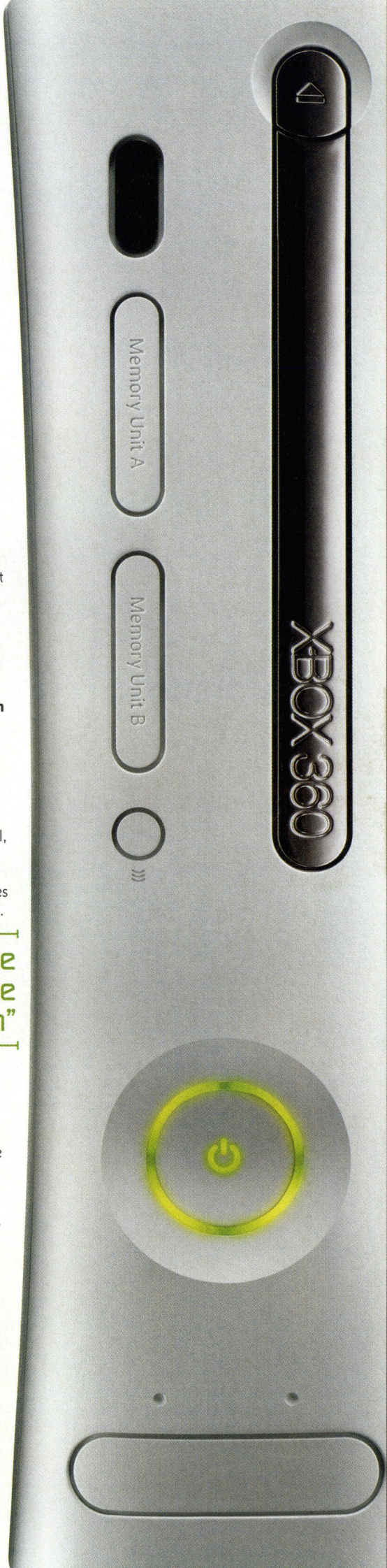
There's a lot, it's going to be relevant. There's genres where it doesn't make sense, there's clever ways you can do in-game stuff that's dynamic, that the billboards change when you drive down the street, there's stuff that you can do that is product placement which is very important as well, it's got to be relevant. Gamers will tell you that if they're in PGR3, Coca-Cola is better than Fred's Cola on the billboard, and so if it actually enhances the reality of the game experience they're all for it.

> "Can Sony show games that are worth $300 more? It's a whole new ball game this generation"

You know at Sega we, and this is how things have come full circle, we did a game called Crazy Taxi and I remember we actually paid Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pepsi. We were paying for it in those days! Now those are the same guys now that are knocking. "Can we come in? And what's it going to cost us to come in?"

Games are big by the numbers now, but how will the games market attract better cultural recognition for the future?

I have a 20 year old son who was born with a controller in his hand and knows no life other than having an interactive entertainment experience with his TV. You're going to have in the next six or seven years a complete generation that's brought up connected. A different cultural consumer that feels it's very natural to do this. Eventually you're going to have a President of the United States who has been a hardcore gamer all his life. I mean that's how things take time to weave themselves through culture.



Takahashi Sensui is a man with the toughest assignment at Microsoft — selling the Xbox 360 on Sony and Nintendo's home turf. We spoke to him about his assignment, and got the inside track on just how different Eastern gamers really are.

FUTURE OF XBOX 360 JAPAN

Seamus Byrne talks to **Takahashi Sensui**, Xbox division manager, Microsoft Japan.

You've got a pretty tough job, selling Xbox into the Japanese market.

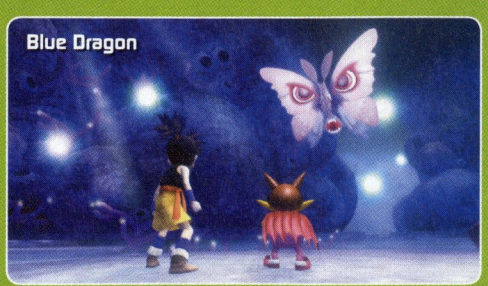
We never thought that it would be easy to capture market share in Japan, right. Because Japan is a competitor's home market and the consumers in the market have a distinct taste for the videogames which is somewhat different from the Western tastes, so again, we never thought it would be easy.

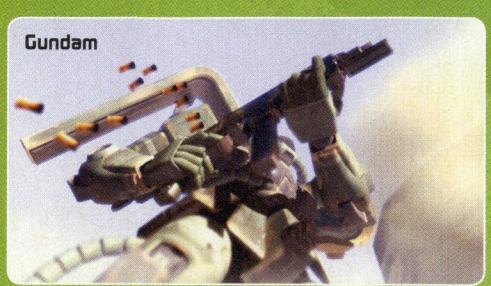
What kind of assumptions are you trying to overcome in terms of what people think Xbox is versus what you are now doing with it?

When you take the data from the market, the top two genres in the Japanese market are RPG, of course, and sports, particularly soccer and baseball. And those are the genres that we were weak in on Xbox 1. So generally speaking, people had an impression of Xbox as the gaming platform for shooting games and Western games, from Northern American and European markets.

The top titles on Xbox were Team NINJA games, like DOA and Ninja Gaiden, people very often associated the game console with those particular titles. That is the image that we are trying to overcome with RPGs that we are developing with Sakaguchi, and also in partnership with Tri-Ace, who created Star Ocean. So we're definitely going to have a lot of breadth and depth in the RPG genre, and in terms of sports we have soccer games - of course we have FIFA soccer game and a new soccer game coming out from Namco this month and also 'Love Football'. It's a new type of soccer game, you can become one of the players on the field. It's a new type of game and of course we will have Winning Eleven coming out in the future so the soccer is covered. We also have baseball covered with a title called Professional Baseball Spirits, from Konami, which is one of the best selling baseball titles in Japan. The rating from Famitsu was higher for Xbox 360 than for PS2, because of the graphics and of course the atmosphere the titles can create on Xbox 360.

With those genres covered I think we have a good chance of getting more consumers convinced that Xbox 360 is viable.





What are the biggest franchises in Japan?

There's Dragon Quest, Final Fantasy, Mario, Zelda, Winning Eleven, Dynasty Warrior, those are the million sellers, really.

There's always hope of finding a system seller of your own. Do you think it might come through one of these new partnerships in the RPG space?

What we're trying to do with Sakaguchi-san is really to establish a new franchise in the RPG space, which is going to drive console sales just like any of those franchises I just mentioned. With Blue Dragon coming out this year it's a good start. And we have Last Odyssey coming. So those titles will help to become key franchises for the platform and console driving franchises.

So how is it all going so far? Have you started to turn the corner and build an Xbox audience in Japan?

It's getting kind of interesting because, half of those who bought Xbox 360 are new users to the Xbox platform, right. I believe that is a result of the new franchises to the platform, namely we had Ridge Racer 6 at launch and Final Fantasy XI beta version was bundled with the console, so that drove new users to come on to the platform.

Winning Eleven is going to be a key title amongst the established franchises. We also have Gundam from Bandai Namco. With those titles in established franchises too, I think we have a good chance of capturing a good proportion of the market share.

Will we see some of these titles developed for the Japanese market hitting Western shores?

Some of our important missions are to really bring in Japanese titles from Japanese publishers and developers into the Western markets, including Australia, as well as bringing foreign titles into the Japanese market. We do have titles like Enchanted Arms which is being distributed by Ubisoft outside of Japan. It's a great RPG title and I hope that the users outside of Japan will try that game because it's a great game. There are a lot of games that really didn't get to the markets outside of Japan but are really, really great titles.

What Western titles might be 'bridging' titles, that might bring Japanese gamers to Western style gaming?

That's a very difficult question because there's already a perception among Japanese consumers that Western games are not suitable for them. So it's really difficult to overcome that barrier, but titles like GTA have done pretty well. Even though it has spurred some controversy amongst the parents and local governments. But those type of games that offer freedom of play rather than you following a certain scenario is going to do relatively well. And Halo has had a really good feedback. Even though the Japanese users are still not used to the first person shooter, Halo is definitely going to be a good type of franchise.

In some ways it might just be a matter of time?

Titles like Viva Piñata, those will definitely appeal to the younger audience, and titles like Fable 2, the Fable franchise has gotten really positive feedback from Japan and Fable 2 will definitely be a key franchise, one of the franchise that may do well in Japan.

What is the PC games market in Japan like? Or is it very console centric?

The PC game market is sort of limited in Japan right now. But it is a fact that there are more PCs out there than gaming consoles, so again as we are trying in the Western markets we will try to revitalise the PC gaming markets with Games for Windows and particularly with Windows Vista. With the interaction with console gaming platform, namely with Live Anywhere, it's going to be very interesting to see how the PC gaming market changes in the future.

Winning Eleven

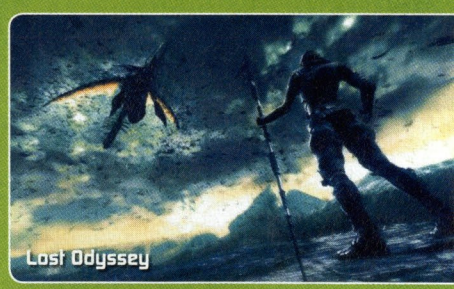
Japan's mobile market is huge, right? So Live Anywhere could really play a big role.

We have gotten a lot of interest after the announcement of Live Anywhere from the Japanese customers and consumers that integration of gaming console, PC with Windows Vista and mobile devices is a very appealing story for the Japanese consumers.

What is important is it's not only that such an integrated platform can provide you with a different style of playing than conventional games, but a new platform has a potential to host new types of games that can be played from gaming consoles, PCs and mobile devices in different ways, so it can provide a lot of freedom and a lot of opportunities for the creatives.

The new platform can really provide new ways of playing games. As Nintendo is trying to do new type of controls, we're trying to do that with providing breadth of devices and platforms so that creators can come up with completely new types of games on the platform.

Viva Piñata


Lost Odyssey

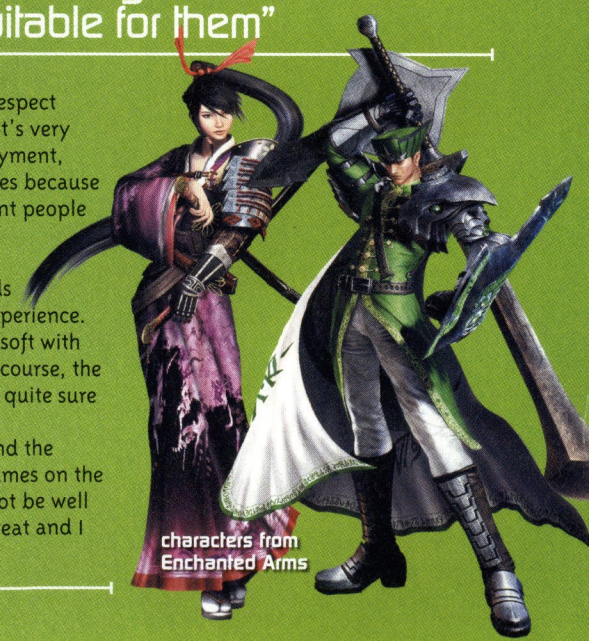
> "There's a perception among Japanese consumers that Western games are not suitable for them"

How is the Wii remote being received in Japan?

People are curious but not yet sure. It's a very interesting idea. I really respect the approach that Nintendo's taking. I think it's very important to come up with new types of enjoyment, new types of fun. Fun is in playing videogames because if you keep providing the same type of content people eventually get tired of it.

I think one of the distinct characteristics of this new generation is that each platform holds a unique strategy of providing the gaming experience. Nintendo with the new controller versus Microsoft with this breadth of devices and platforms and, of course, the online service. And, frankly speaking, I'm not quite sure how or where Sony's trying to go.

So, anyway, I hope the users in Australia and the region would try out some of the Japanese games on the Xbox 360. We do have great titles that may not be well known outside of Japan but they are really great and I hope that you enjoy those games.


characters from Enchanted Arms

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An awesome adventure in wolf's clothing?

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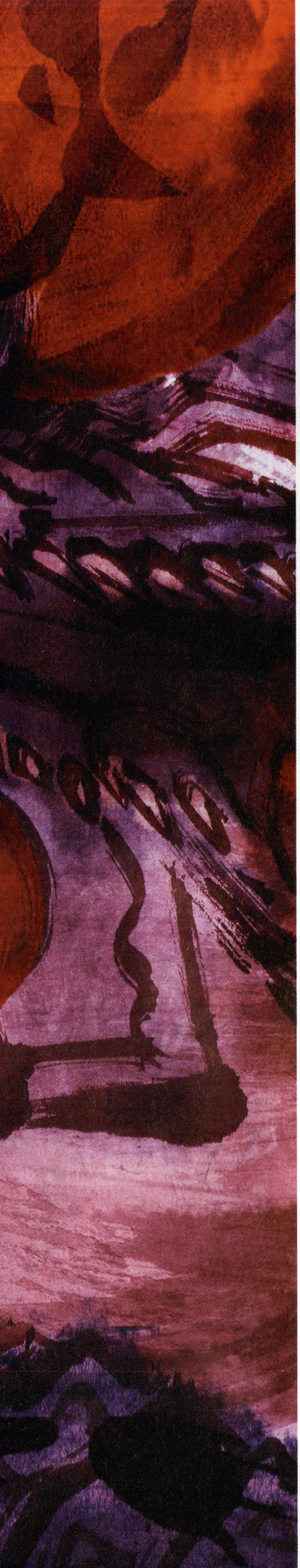


Reviews

Game Theory

SEAMUS BYRNE

Everywhere Live

Live Anywhere could very well become Microsoft's crowning achievement if the full potential of the service is realised. Sure, that line — if the potential is realised — fits the bill for so many great ideas that have now wasted away to the bit rot of gaming pipe dreams. But if developers can use it well, we are looking at a revolution in gaming far beyond the realm of a Wii wand.

What this could do is help us move mundane 'gameplay' to mundane times of day. All that tweak and inventory work in so many games could be whiled away on as you sit with your mobile handset on the daily commute. In turn, you actually get to stick to the fun stuff when you sit down and get with it at the PC or the console.

There is so much talk around on time poor gamers. As the average age shifts ever upward, there are more gamers who don't have as much time to sit down to have fun anymore. Through Live Anywhere, that gamer could get through the boring stuff at a time of convenience — and you can easily do this grunt work in a fistful of two minute bursts.

MMOs are an obvious target. I can't wait to take my persistent world with me. Sending and checking in-game messages, trading at the auction house, checking quest logs. All this would mean come time to sit down and play for real, I could jump right in and get down to business.

Racing sims have potential too. Create a few tuning profiles on the bus, run some diagnostics, and then when you get home you just sit down and drive. They didn't work great? Mess about with the settings again tomorrow. For now, just enjoy the race!

So many games could be much more fun with an extended game experience, but there may turn out to be a downside to all this on a social level. We already hear a lot about game addiction — founded or not — and the idea of taking your virtual experiences wherever you are could lead to more bad anecdotes thanks to a nutjob minority.

I can hear the headlines now: "Man kills baby and kittens while gaming and driving." Or people losing jobs because they can't stop checking in on some virtual realm.

If the experience goes everywhere with you, and you love that virtual domain, how long would it take for that shift to where the virtual becomes more important than the real world?

Again, it is the handful of *tards that will deliver these arguments to conservatives, and who knows where lines will get drawn — no doubt this stuff will be banned from schools in the blink of an eye.

On a different level, the entire handheld gaming scene could be in for a shake up. Would you rather play Tetris, Super Mario, LocoRoco, or play a version of PGR4, perhaps, that ties back into your main game back home? In the long term — this will take some time to mature — I think we could see less of the 'kill time' games appearing, as that category is taken over by 'grind work' mobile game applications. These will feel more like an app than a game. But right now that is what quite a bit of time spent playing games feels like already. Push that grind across to a mobile platform, and at the time when we really want to play we can jump straight in and get busy with the fun.

THE HYPER SCORING SYSTEM - What's it all about?

0-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90+
There has to be stuff at the bottom of the bell curve - and these are it	Slightly above, but no less shameful, are these titles	You could almost introduce these games to your family... almost	Slightly more respectable, these games lack a certain something	Games in this range can give you an attack of the happies	The creme de la creme - play them, love them, devour them!

Okami [IMPORT REVIEW]

JONATHAN IKEDA dances with wolves.

Japanese folklore is a rich place where the seeds of great videogames grow in abundance. In Okami's case, Capcom has harvested a yarn of the finest quality. You take the role of Atamerasu, a god-wolf (the title is a pun: o-kami means 'God', okami means 'wolf') who has taken the form of a majestic wolf to bring colour and life back to a world which has been darkened by powerful demons. In a typical scenario of this sort, most game developers would give you limited tools with which to fight through a boss-heavy world; Okami is different - it gives you choices and freedom.

PAINTING A PS3 WON'T WORK

One of the best choices you have is to use ink. Hold the R1 button and Okami's screen will freeze, shift perspective just slightly to give you an advantageous viewpoint, and equip you with a traditional Japanese fudei (paintbrush) with which to splash great washes of ink across the panorama. Depending on what you paint (and where you paint it), your artistic endeavours can take on real form to become part of the actual game world. For example, there's a vast river but only a severed rope bridge - what to do? Simple: just get into position, don your beret, and paint a steady bridge across the ravine. Then walk across your watercolour creation to continue on your way.

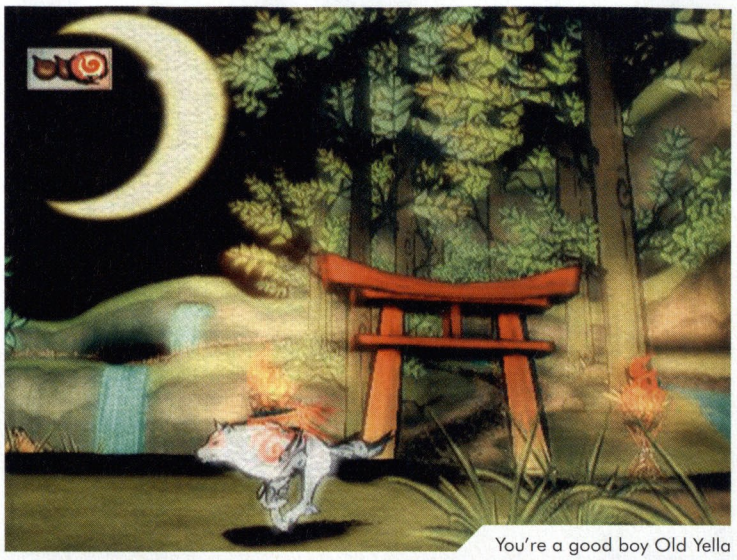
Atamerasu faces plenty of challenges, but not all of them can be resolved with brush strokes. There are enemy creatures and mini-bosses, often operating in tandem, roaming the countryside of Okami's lush, ye olde Japan dreamscape. Atamerasu has standard attacks at its disposal and these are useful in both low-key encounters and proper boss battles. Usually, when it's time to fight a significant enemy or boss, the screen cuts to a roughly circular area and the foe takes centre-stage; it's your job (in an obvious nod to Zelda battles) to find and repeatedly attack opponents' weak points while avoiding their own repetitive patterns of attack.

[up] The littlest hobo

[up] "Timmy's fallen down a well!"

Battles can also be decided by using the paintbrush to make a quick stroke through the heart of your enemy, leaving it wounded and susceptible to further attacks. Okami's fight scenes are just as intuitive as, say, those in Ocarina of Time, and there are some fantastic bosses (giant, fluorescent spiders and other freaks of nature) to meet. The greatest thrills in Okami, however, are in exploration and completion of puzzles.

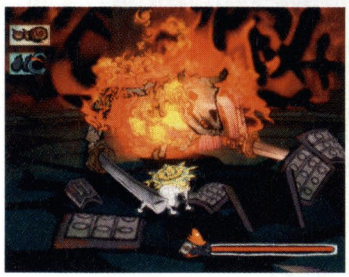
There are few, if any, PS2 game worlds which look as good as Okami's. Ico and its sequel, Dragon Quest VIII and Final Fantasy XII all come close, but ultimately, for its uniqueness, Okami is in a league of its own. The use of colour in Okami is sublime: bold contrasts between monochrome and prime colours can be seen virtually everywhere, and progress gradually increases the splendour and strength of Okami's rainbow of an alternate Japan. It's the kind of game which you'll want to play just to immerse yourself in its beauty. Not to be too sappy about things, Okami is beautiful

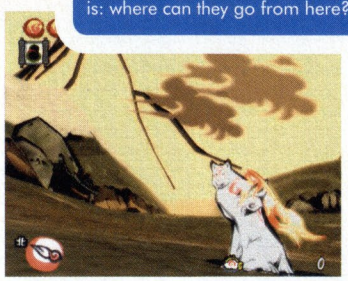


You're a good boy Old Yella

Atsushi Inaba and his team, now under the name of Clover Studio, had their first hit with their first release. Viewtiful Joe, another unique work. Question is: where can they go from here?

Running out of famous dog references





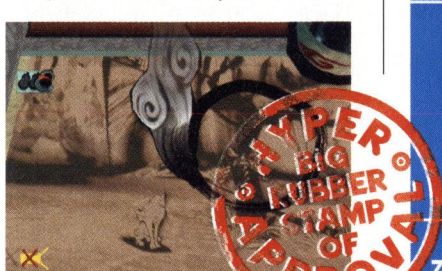
to its core. Even the game's soundtrack - a blend of taiko-driven, traditionally Japanese tunes which wouldn't be out of place on an Akira Kurosawa movie score, and chilled Ambient with koto, shamisen and other Japanese instruments - is something to savour.

IT'S THE KIND OF GAME WHICH YOU'LL WANT TO PLAY JUST TO IMMERSE YOURSELF IN ITS BEAUTY

UNUSUALLY PERSONAL

Happily, it has the substance to go with its perfect style. There are no multiplayer options or gimmicks, but there is an almost perfectly conceived adventure here which requires at least 30 hours to complete properly. It's time well spent. As you get deeper into this world, characters become old friends and Atamerasu in particular becomes a close companion. Perhaps it's because of the superb animation (Atamerasu moves with grace, like a creation from Hayao Miyazaki's Princess Mononoke anime) or perhaps it's due to the careful use of sound effects to convey sentiments and styles of speech, but Okami is an unusually personal experience. The developer's attention to detail is second to none - all the little things, which make Miyamoto's games so special, are cared for here to the same extent.

It's clear that everything has been thought through. The inventory and power-up systems are such that you can increase Atamerasu's abilities as you wish, apportioning collected 'Happiness Points' to any aspect of Atamerasu's character. There are plenty of items to discover, many of which can only be obtained by going to out-of-the-way areas, thereby gently encouraging you to be adventurous and not simply to dash through the game from the first boss to the last. Really, to do that would be pointless. Okami has been created for you to inhabit as much as it has been made for you to complete. Take your time, investigate every corner, soak up the dreamlike atmosphere; Okami rewards play time with immense satisfaction. It's a bit special. <<



AVAILABLE ON:
PS2 / XBOX / PC / GCN

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Adventure
PLAYERS: 1
DEVELOPER: Clover Studio
PUBLISHER: Capcom
PRICE: ¥6,800
RATING: M •**AVAILABLE:** Now (Japan), late 2006 (here)

HYPER VERDICT:

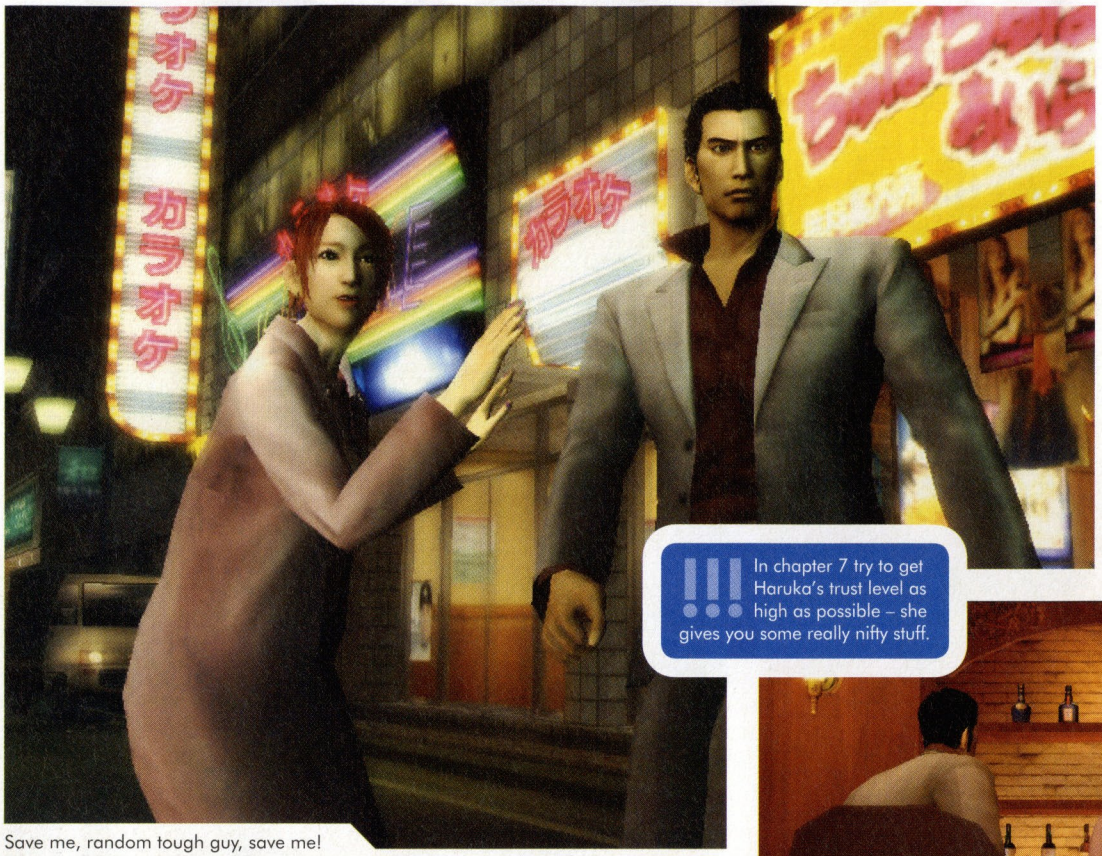
PLUS: Sublime visuals and audio, paintbrush feature is inspired.

MINUS: Challenges are never that difficult, some may find it overlong.

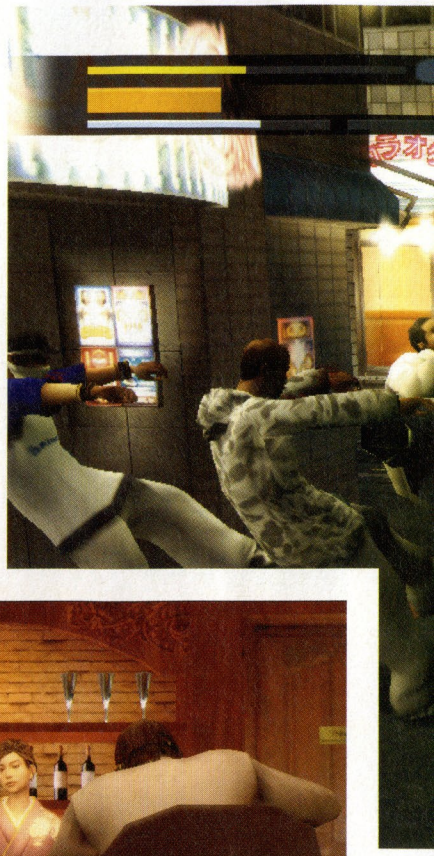
VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
95	90	90

OVERALL
93

Gameplay that rivals Zelda for its intuitiveness.

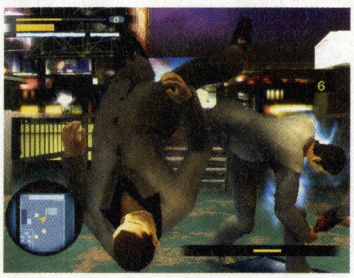


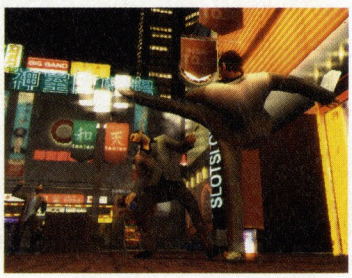
Save me, random tough guy, save me!



!!! In chapter 7 try to get Haruka's trust level as high as possible – she gives you some really nifty stuff.

Sassy Japanese Rachael Leigh Cook





Yakuza

DANIEL WILKS is the puppy rescuing Yakuza

If the game Yakuza was real life it would go something like this; you're walking down the street with a little girl you aren't related to in tow when suddenly (every three steps or so), a homeboy letting out an exclamation that sounds something like an angry chicken runs up to you, calls you a few choice names and then proceeds to start trying to beat seven shades of shit out of you. You retaliate and do something cool – really cool, like connect with a three hit combo which turns into a throw at the end, catch the guy on the rebound and introduce his face to a wall – in slow motion. Things are looking good until you suddenly decide the wall is far more interesting to look at than the crowd of friends armed with baseball bats that your now facially challenged ex-opponent brought as backup. The wall, being the fascinating bit of scenery it is manages to hold your attention for quite a while, perhaps due to the calming baseball bat massage being delivered to the back of your head, but eventually you realise that you're being rude and turn your attention back to the dreaded swarm of "homius profanitii" (the Greater Swearing Homeboy, a species of great ape prone to dropping the f-bomb and running in packs) and beat them to death in short order. Then some guy shoots you. You try to run to him but think looking in the opposite direction might be the best way to approach him. You get shot again. You pick up a nearby garbage bin and slam it onto his head like a smelly party hat and then, just as he's about to thank you for the impromptu millinery punch it off his head. He drops his gun and you pick it up, fire the solitary shot in the wrong direction because actually shooting the guy would be mean spirited and drop the gun again. Instead of doing something cruel and underhanded like shooting the guy you instead choose to stomp on his head until he stops moving. Then you rescue a puppy.

[up] Time to crate - 3 seconds

If the above makes Yakuza sound like an exercise in frustration due to a terrible camera you're absolutely right, it is. But Yakuza is also something else; it's a well written, compelling and genuinely enjoyable game that manages to transcend its many and varied flaws by sheer dint of having more good stuff than bad. Sure the camera hates you and your family but the fighting engine is really good. Maybe the voice acting is a crime against nature but the script itself is really strong. Maybe sometimes working out what to do next may have you

Can you hear me or shall I use...SIGN!

There will be an angry chicken nearby

Energy drinks heal bullet wounds

[up] Batter up! (thanks Hottie Funbags)

AT HEART YAKUZA IS A FREE ROAMING BEAT 'EM UP BUT SUCH A DESCRIPTION IS A LITTLE TOO SIMPLE

wanting to gouge out your eyes with the detachable wrist-rest thing on your keyboard but you want to complete the mission anyway to see what's going to happen next. Most of the boss battles may be exercises in brain numbing frustration but the production design is gorgeous. And above it all, Haruka is adorable – you just want to complete the game to save her adorable little life.

10 BILLION YEN

I should probably go back to the beginning; Yakuza casts the player as Kazuma Kiriu, a tough as nails soon to be ex-Yakuza who takes the fall for a crime he didn't commit, the murder of his oyabun. After ten years in the slammer he returns to the underworld to find it much changed; the two friends he grew up with in the orphanage, Yumi and Nishiki, have disappeared and turned into a soulless criminal respectively, the cop that tried to put Kazuma away before he took the fall has now become his partner, the old Yakuza heads are being bumped off one by one and a little girl called Haruka needs his protection. Oh yeah, 10 billion yen have also gone missing and the little girl may be the key to finding it. You see, Kazuma Kiriu isn't your average badder than bad-arse curb stomping gangster killer, he's the orphan rescuingest, puppy savingest badder than bad-arse curb stomping gangster killer. He's the archetypical killer with a heart of gold, capable of killing untold numbers of enemies (well, 953 in my first play through so not technically untold) whilst still making time to play with a little girl, save a puppy and rescue sweetly naïve hostesses from their stalkers and virginity.

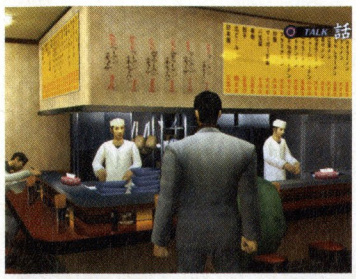
At heart Yakuza is a free roaming beat 'em up but such a description is a little too simple. Sure, the bulk of the game may be taken up with fighting (or more precisely, loading screens between fights) but aside from the visceral action there is a lot to do in the game. Set over a few blocks of a fictional Japanese city heavily based on the Kabuki-cho district of Shinjuku, Yakuza sees Kazuma running about following the labyrinthine story of betrayal, honour, loyalty and revenge as well as taking part in a number of side quests ranging from beating up people on the street to fighting in underground deathmatches to gambling and chatting up women in hostess bars, the eventual goal of which is said hostesses giving you a steamy night of 3000 experience points. Comparisons to Shenmue are inevitable but once again they're not quite right. In truth, Yakuza can most easily be compared in structure to The Bouncer in that it is a series of fight scenes connected by a story and some mini-games but with one significant caveat; Yakuza is actually fun.

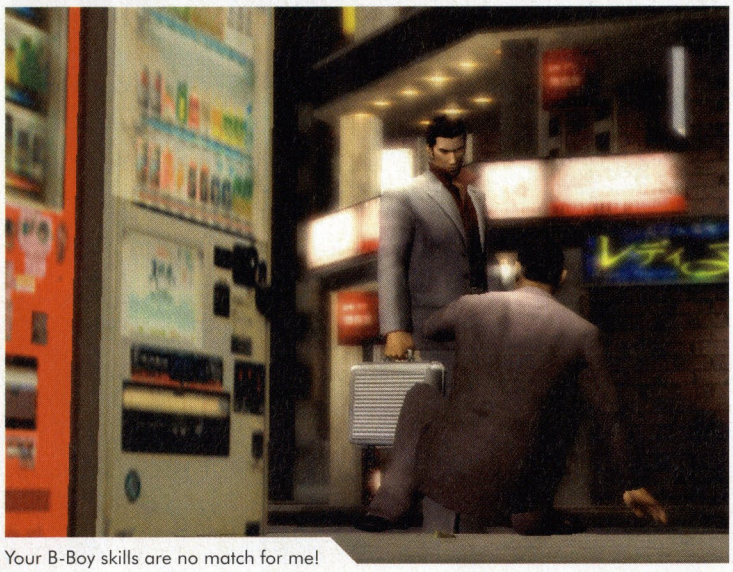
WAX ON WAX OFF

The fighting engine, initially simple with only a few combos really opens up when you level up your skills through experience and find yourself a martial arts trainer to teach you a few moves. You can also pick up most things up to and including the size of a sofa to whack people with. There's a lot of fun to be had finding out

>> **PREMIUM BOX -** **After completing the game players unlock the Premium Box, a feature that allows you to experience parts of the game without having to play through the whole thing again. With the Premium Box unlocked players can set up fights with any of the character in the game with a variety of conditions ranging from time limits to flaming arenas, they can play though all of the side quests without having to play the main game and finally they can watch all of the cutscenes unlocked in their first play through.**

Yakuza
continued...





Your B-Boy skills are no match for me!

"I wear my sunglasses at night..."

all of the special moves you can perform with these environmental weapons when your heat meter is full - a power meter filled by fighting which enables you to pull off more powerful attacks when full. Where the fighting engine falls down is the camera, plain and simple. The player has absolutely no control over the camera at any stage in Yakuza, the game instead utilising the often touted but rarely successful "cinematic" approach, changing the camera angle depending on where on screen the player is. It may sound good on paper but in play what it means is that the camera may swing around in the middle of the fight throwing the enemy you're trying to target off screen, obscuring everything behind a pillar or changing angles so greatly that your controls seem to have absolutely no relation to what is happening on screen. While the game does feature a lock on function all it really seems to do is lock you into the rough direction of the enemy rather than the enemy themselves so you'll often see your combos fly off into mid air after your target decides to wander a few degrees off course.

[up] Ask for "Bound Housewives"

DUSHKU VERY MUCH

While the production design and animations of Yakuza are top notch, the English vocal track is pretty terrible for the most part. A number of roles smack of "who can we get that's semi-famous to do this part" desperation so you end up with someone like Racheal Leigh Cook as sassy barmaid with a dark secret Reina, and Michael Madsen phoning it in as a violent Yakuza boss. Thankfully Michael Rosenbaum (Lex Luthor from Smallville) does a decent job as Nishiki and the dependable Mark Hamill turns in another good crazy guy performance as a sadistic underboss. What is worse is the incredible level of profanity in the game. We here at Hyper swear with the best of them but the repetition of swearing really grates on the nerves. If feels as though in an attempt to localise the soundtrack for Western audiences Sega have simply turned it into an urban nightmare. We somehow doubt that a well dressed and polite Yakuza soldier will suddenly spout of a stream of expletives in a quasi-ghetto jive after making his angry chicken cluck before attacking someone. Of course, not being polite, well dressed Yakuza soldiers we can't say that with any authority.

It's hard to review a game like Yakuza; there is a lot wrong with it so anything on paper may come across as more negative than we would like. Yes, there are a number of flaws with the game that may hinder your enjoyment but there is even more to like. The action is fast, furious and fun (and apparently prone to alliteration if this sentence is to be believed), the characters are good enough to transcend their voices and the script is wonderfully melodramatic and compelling. Give it a shot and soldier on through the bad bits. It's well worth the frustration. <<

AVAILABLE ON:
PS2 / XBOX / PC / GCN

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Action Adventure
PLAYERS: 1
DEVELOPER: Sega
PUBLISHER: Sega
PRICE: $99.95
RATING: MA 15+
AVAILABLE: September

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Great fighting engine, compelling story, Haruka is adorable.

MINUS: Pointless profanity, voice acting, camera hates you.

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
90	73	88

OVERALL
86

Guaranteed to frustrate but well worth the effort.

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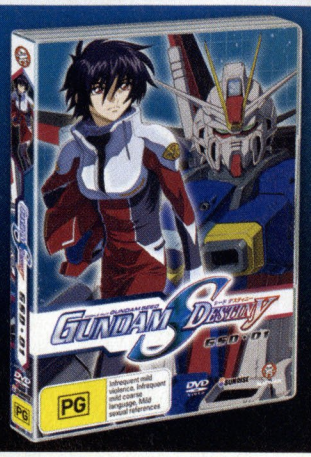

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-HE-MAN

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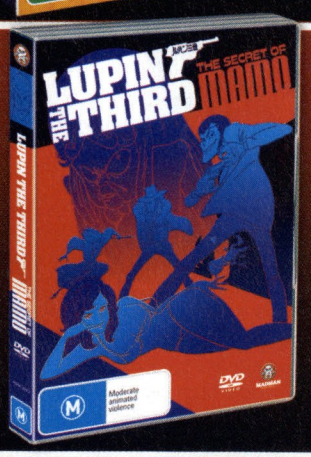

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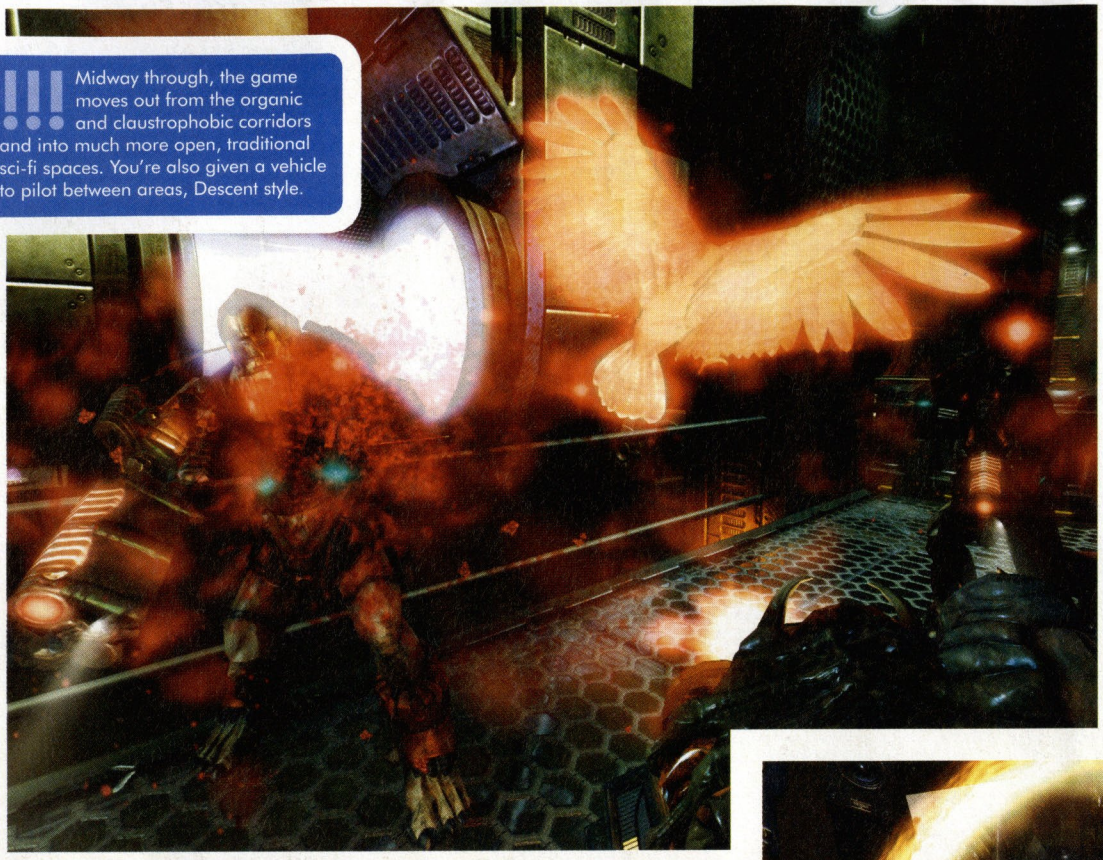
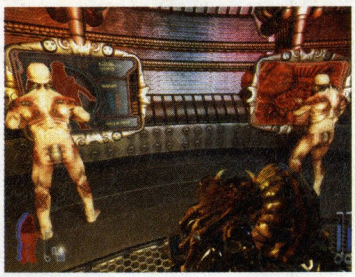
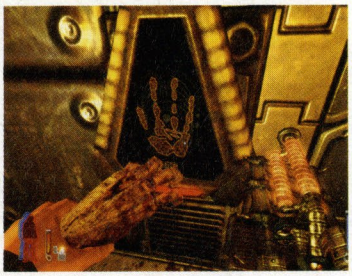


Midway through, the game moves out from the organic and claustrophobic corridors and into much more open, traditional sci-fi spaces. You're also given a vehicle to pilot between areas, Descent style.





Before you die you'll see the Ring(s)

Prey

CAM SHEA is off in the spirit world

Oozing, dripping, pulsing. The lighting dim, you creep along corridors that seem to clench in upon you, as spongy and squishy as the ground beneath your feet. Sparking a lighter to better see your surrounds, the mottled browns and greens give way to bright crimson as a thick and bloody mucus passes continuously through a clear tube to one side. Edging on, a doorway opens like a giant sphincter before you, providing passage to the next room, where the dank and organic is replaced by a more clinical form of hell – a metal walkway and glass viewing window, beyond which a production line of cocooned humans zips along, carried by rails in the ceiling to meet their fate. It's at this moment that a portal opens nearby and an enemy sentry surges through...

A GIGERIAN NIGHTMARE

Part Doom III inspired claustrophobic corridor shooter and part sci-fi epic, Prey casts you as Tommy, a Cherokee Indian who feels divorced from his heritage. In an ironic twist of fate, Tommy gets his wish to get out of town with his girlfriend Jen to start a new life when an alien mothership starts hoovering up the neighbourhood. Suffice to say, Tommy finds himself loose on the ship, while Jen is in need of a good rescuing.

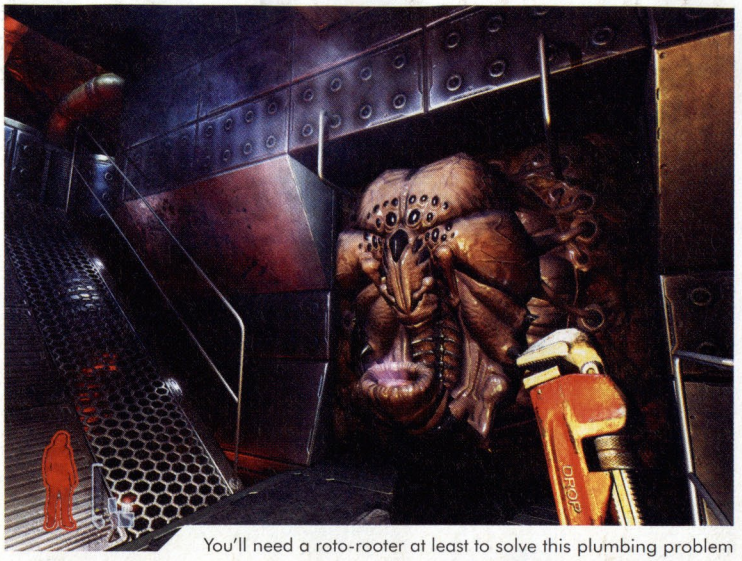
It's not exactly Pulitzer prize winning stuff (neither is this review mind you), but the setup is used well – Jen is always just out of reach, and in your quest to find her you'll realise there are others like you, and see enough atrocities on the ship to really want to kick some alien butt. And kick it you shall.

For all the hype about its mechanics, when it comes down to it Prey is a pretty straight up FPS is many ways – you progress along a basically linear path, shoot the shit out of anything that moves and maybe solve some puzzles along the way. What portals, spirit walking, gravity paths, gravity flipping, Giger-esque environments and organic weaponry bring to the game may not be a revolution, but they're all designed to slightly unsettle the player, to keep them guessing about what's next, or how to interact with their environment. And in that sense Prey is a success.

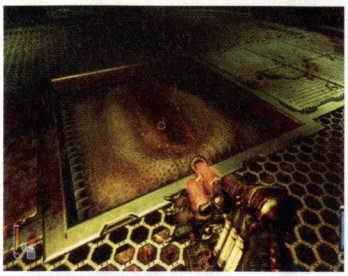
You probably know all about the more unique aspects of Prey by now, but we'll run through them quickly again. The portals are perhaps the most infamous, allowing you to step through (or shoot through) to spatially separate environments. It's cool tech, and while at times portals feel like little more than conventional doors, at others they're used well, serving both the atmosphere and the puzzles. The fact that portals can only be seen from one side only adds to the surreal atmosphere of the game, and there are plenty of secret portals to discover. Plus, Human Head get extra points for including a couple of situations where you can use portals to shoot yourself. Score!

[up] Get ready for probulation

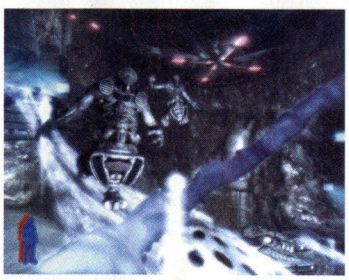
Portals are also used for spawning



You'll need a roto-rooter at least to solve this plumbing problem



Get off the dang roof!



[up] The (hard) spirits realm

HUMAN HEAD GET EXTRA POINTS FOR INCLUDING SITUATIONS WHERE YOU CAN SHOOT YOURSELF

in enemies, and not necessarily on the same plane as you. In many areas of the world there are illuminated patterned walkways running along walls and the ceiling – these are gravity paths you can follow, and while shooting someone from the ceiling is much the same as shooting someone from the floor, they're still a valuable inclusion to help make you feel disorientated as you move through the world. Cooler still though, are the sections where you can dynamically switch the gravity in a room, forcing you to use the walls and ceiling to find a way out or cross a gap.

Tommy's heritage also factors into the gameplay, allowing him to enter the spirit realm - a place that co-exists with the material plane and can be used to your advantage; allowing you to pass through surfaces your physical body can't, take paths you normally can't see, scout out areas ahead, and even kill enemies with bow and arrow.

CHALLENGE?

As cool as all these elements are, however, Prey doesn't really take them far enough, nor integrate them into modern feeling gameplay. The use of spirit walking, for instance, quickly becomes routine later in the game. Every time you see lasers scanning an area ahead, you know you have to go in there in spirit form and turn them off. As much as Human Head shift things up over the course of the game, they also let concepts grow repetitive as well, which is a shame. FPS veterans really won't have much trouble blasting their way through this game either – there are only a handful of enemies, and given their rather basic AI and propensity to portal in directly in front of you, you'll mow them down in a steady stream. Prey really had a chance to become the ultimate puzzle-FPS title, but instead it caters to mainstream accessibility, which we think is a real missed opportunity.

Even so, Prey is a game that will likely have you hooked for the entirety of its 8-10 hour play time, it's just a pity that for every attempt to escape the bonds of the traditional FPS, there are numerous areas in which it is tethered to the past. <<

>> **DECODER WING - During the game you're also accompanied by the spirit of a hawk, who will attack enemies, giving you a window to take them out, alight on important objects in the environment and even act as a decoder, allowing you to translate the alien language (Mother is growing! Bless the mother!). This in turn factors into a couple of minor puzzles.**

AVAILABLE ON:
360 / PS3/ Wii/ **PC**

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: FPS • **PLAYERS:** 1-8
DEVELOPER: Human Head (PC), Venom Games (Xbox 360)
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
PRICE: $89.95 PC, $99.95 X360
RATING: MA 15+
AVAILABLE: Now

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Some cool mechanics...

MINUS: ...that don't change the gameplay enough.

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
91	90	83

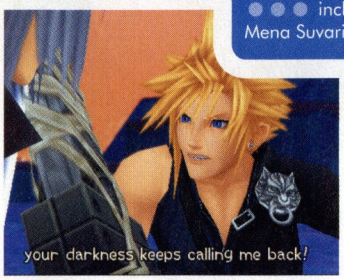
OVERALL
86

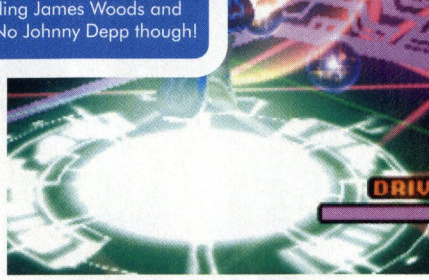
Entertaining, but not as innovative as we'd hoped.

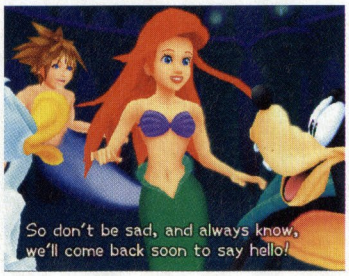
Whose girly hair will reign supreme?

KH II features an ensemble cast of quality voice-actors, including James Woods and Mena Suvari. No Johnny Depp though!

Mickey still takes offence to being called a rat



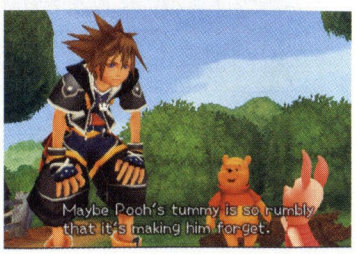




Kingdom Hearts II

DANIEL STAINES travels to Awesome Town

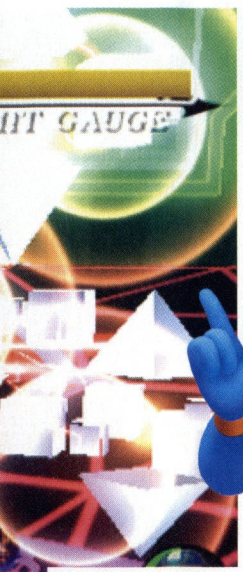
Here's a brief summary of the first five hours of Kingdom Hearts II: AWFUL. And here's a brief summary of everything after those first five hours: RAD. The upshot? Stick with it. Just grit your teeth and keep on playing. Even when it seems like the torturous procession of boring cutscenes and ridiculous mini-games will never end – don't give up. Square-Enix has placed a golden ticket to Awesome Town in the bottom of a bubbling cauldron of crap. All you need to do is dunk your hand in there and fish it out as quickly as possible. And as unpleasant and exasperating as that is – you can trust me when I say that the payoff makes it all worthwhile. Kingdom Hearts II is an excellent game. And it's way better than the first one.

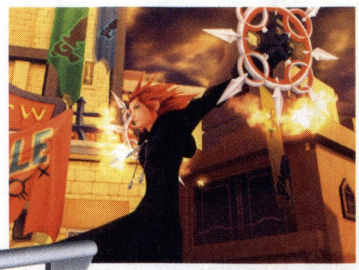


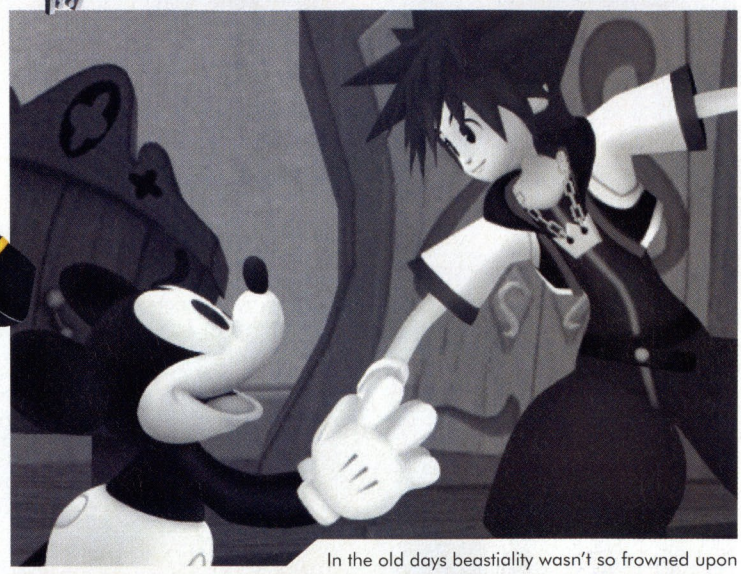
WAAAAAAYYY BETTER

Of the many ways in which Kingdom Hearts II improves on its predecessor, two stand out as the most significant. The first is the camera. If you've played the original Kingdom Hearts, you will probably remember how incredibly frustrating the camera was. Not only was it positioned way too close to the action, it also had this annoying habit of going nuts whenever it came near a wall or was locked-on to a larger-than-normal enemy. But that's all been fixed now. Positioned at a reasonably high vantage point, the camera in Kingdom Hearts II is essentially flawless. It stays where you want it to stay, it doesn't wig out when locked-on to stuff, and it doesn't get stuck on walls and crates. In short, it's exactly what a camera in a third person action-RPG needs to be.

The second main area in which Kingdom Hearts II improves on the original is in combat. To be honest, I really didn't like Kingdom Hearts that much and I suspect the main reason for this is because fighting in that game was a ceaseless chore that effectively sucked the fun out of exploring the gameworld. Kingdom Hearts II rectifies this in three ways. First, it makes combat far less frequent and less important to character development than it was in the original. Second, it introduces a variety of new enemies that change as the story progresses to keep encounters feeling fresh. And third, it incorporates a number of interesting new moves and abilities







In the old days beastiality wasn't so frowned upon

Careful coordination of atacks is key (sigh)

THE DEVOTION TO DISNEY SOURCE MATERIAL IS ACTUALLY ONE OF THE BEST THINGS ABOUT KH II

that emphasise and exploit the dynamic nature of real-time combat.

You know how in the first game you could win most fights just by hammering the X button? Well that doesn't fly so well in this one. You have to pay attention – especially in the boss battles. If you don't learn how to use Limit Breaks and master context-sensitive Reaction Commands, then the bigger bad guys will simply beat the crap out of you. Does this make Kingdom Hearts II a harder game than the original? No. But it does make it much more involving. And that's definitely a good thing.

OMG SPOILERS!

In addition to rectifying its flaws, Kingdom Hearts II also improves upon what made the original a success in the first place. The amount of (non-sexual) fan-service in this game – for both Disney and Square zealots – is truly remarkable. One thing I particularly like is the way that each world contains a mini-narrative that is basically a tweaked and condensed version of the Disney movie the world is based on. Go to Pride Rock and you'll help Simba depose Scar a la the second half of The Lion King. Go to Atlantica and you'll be forced to participate in a series of unfortunate rhythm games that follow the plot of The Little Mermaid. Replete with annoying Jamaican crab.

This faithful devotion to Disney source material is actually one of the best things about Kingdom Hearts II. When you go to these worlds – and there are many of them (some of which are totally rad) – you generally get to do just what you'd WANT to do. Sure it can feel a bit stale if you've already seen the movies, but come on: you get to go to TRON-land and ride Light Cycles. LIGHT CYCLES. What more could you possibly want?

Oh! Right, yes: Final Fantasy stuff. Okay, well, there's lots of that too. Much more than the first game. I'm not going to spoil it by naming names, but I will say that the entire cast from the original returns and is joined by a good selection of newcomers. Also, Final Fantasy characters are no longer limited to being NPCs – some will actually join your party and fight alongside Sora, Donald and Goofy. You can even tweak their abilities and such. Is it any wonder the fanboys and fangirls in America and Japan are so in love with this game? It's basically everything they wanted it to be.

However, that doesn't mean you have to be a Final Fantasy or Disney fan to enjoy Kingdom Hearts II. Even if you can't tell a Sephiroth from a Jack Sparrow, you will still find much to like in this game. Horrible beginnings aside, it is a well-designed and pleasantly vibrant action RPG that is both easy and rewarding to play. And, yeah: you get to ride Light Cycles. Woo! LIGHT CYCLES!

AVAILABLE ON:
PS2 / XBOX / PC / GCN

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: RPG
PLAYERS: 1
DEVELOPER: Square-Enix
PUBLISHER: Square-Enix
PRICE: $99.95
RATING: PG
AVAILABLE: September

HYPER VERDICT:

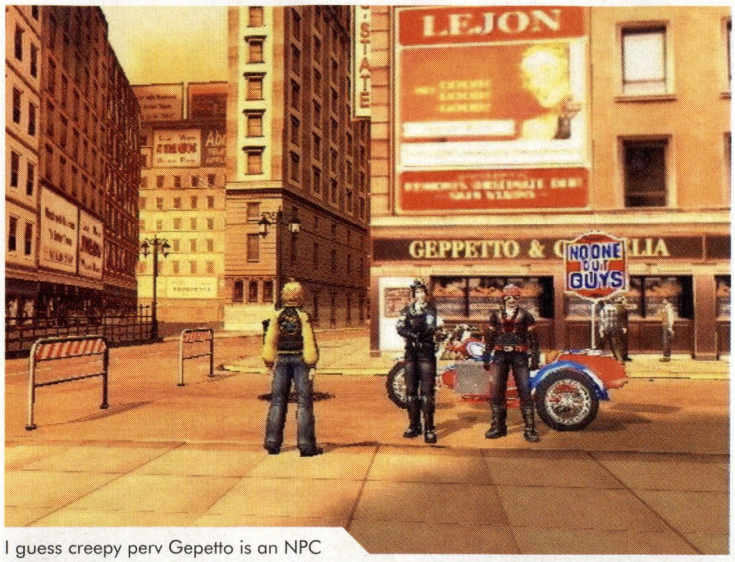
PLUS: Involving combat, engaging world, camera, LIGHT CYCLES.

MINUS: The first five hours, that damn Jamaican crab character.

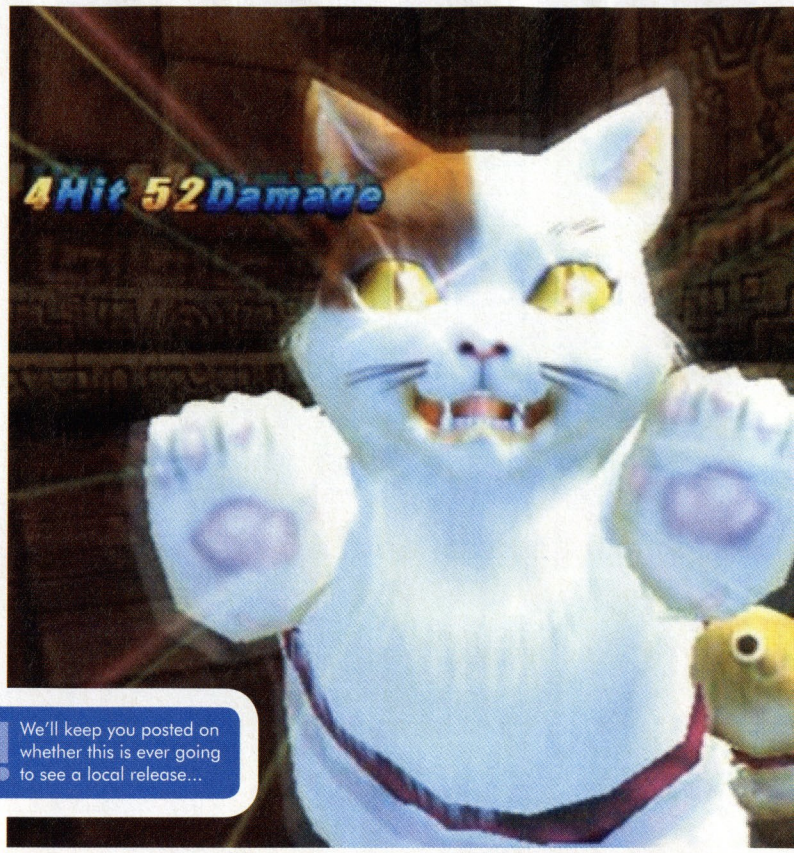
VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
90	90	84

OVERALL
89

An excellent sequel with a disappointing opening.

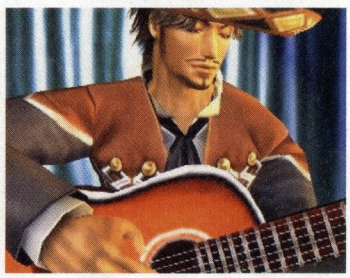


I guess creepy perv Gepetto is an NPC



Stellar magic, as opposed to the rather lackluster kind

!!! We'll keep you posted on whether this is ever going to see a local release...



Shadow Hearts: FROM THE NEW WORLD (IMPORT REVIEW)

SALLY WOELLNER talks about boobies

When you begin playing a game, and the question "Is that camel toe, or just a really odd pants seam?" springs from your lips unexpectedly (and it's also entirely plausible that it's the former and not the latter)... you're probably playing Shadow Hearts: From the New World. It's also probably the only game you'll ever play where you'll be treated to a gratuitous and lingering arse shot of one of the ugliest characters in the whole game within the first half-hour. Once again, this series gleefully elevates equal-opportunity fan service to a veritable art, as well as making us all wonder what on earth they put into the water in Japan.

Indeed, if you have a fan service preference, there's a good chance that this game may cater to it. Gothic lolita, guys that look like Antonio Banderas, boobs (and a whole heap of them), chiselled abs on tanned buff men, effeminate leather boys who try to molest your young male lead, ninjas in fishnets, and giant talking cats. Although - yeah, let's not think about that last one. And From the New World prances this wonderfully eclectic cast through alternate-universe American history like a small imaginative child hopped up on way too much sugar.

BEWARE THE DRUNKEN FIST

Although this game is the third in the Shadow Hearts series, it's not a direct sequel - From the New World introduces an entirely new cast of characters, and is set in America, fifteen years after the events of Shadow Hearts: Covenant. The story follows young Johnny Garland, an amnesiac teenager who runs a detective agency in New York City. Unfortunately, the man he's been hired to search for unexpectedly has his face eaten off by hideous monsters from another dimension right before his eyes, and Johnny himself only survives through the intervention of Shania, a young woman who can wield the power of elemental spirits. Gathering their cast of incredibly odd companions, they journey across depression-era America to unravel the mystery of Killer and the Lady, the enigmatic figures behind the increasing chaos.

Determined to one-up its predecessor, this game goes all out to introduce the wackiest possible cast of characters to you - with a few odd exceptions. Bizarrely, the designers appear to have fallen asleep during the design of New World's protagonist, and allowed their Automatic Character Design-o-Tron 3000 (TM) to default to Blonde American Kid With Attitude But No Personality Who Will Appeal To The Youth! Some of his companions are truly inspired however, such as the giant talking cat who runs Al Capone's mob business when Al's out (and who's a master of the really painful-sounding Drunken Fist martial art), Frank Roosevelt the Brazilian-trained American ninja, and Hilda, a vampire whose attack attributes vary depending on her weight.

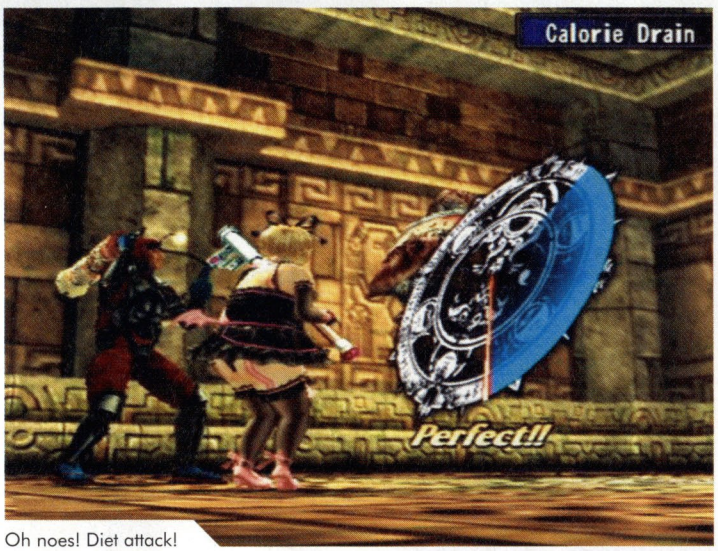
Unfortunately, two of the remaining main characters almost never utter a word. Perhaps the budget for voice-actors ran a little low? And whilst the supporting cast is fun, you sometimes get the impression that they're trying a little too hard to live up to the series' wacky reputation.

Despite the curious silence of some of the cast, though, the characters' visual design is absolutely stunning. Each one has a unique and beautifully detailed appearance, and watching them throughout the game is really a joy. Well, especially so if you like the boobs that are consistently and prominently displayed throughout any cutscene, and also during Shania's magical-girl style transformation sequences.

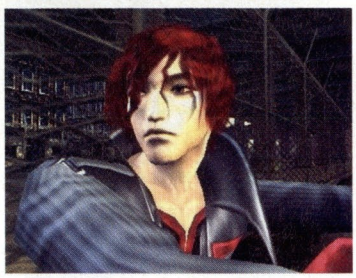
Boobs aside, the unreliably varying quality of the characters is unfortunately matched by the uneven pace of the rest of the game. Though its predecessors were rooted firmly in a deliciously unnerving dark style with highlights of absurd humour, New

>> MEN OF THE WORLD - Throughout the series, your main character has always been tailed by a number of friendly lads, eager to help your pretty male protagonist. In the first game, Wandering Meiyuan the expert acupuncturist worked on your characters to up their weapons stats and hit areas. The game itself notes that he "likes good looking men", and the noises made by your unnerved male characters when subjected to his care were very unnerving themselves. Shadow Hearts 2 was famous for the quest which required you to find "Stud Cards" hidden across the world - raunchy postcards featuring scantily-clad men, which you traded with Pierre and Gerard (your overly-friendly neighbourhood dressmakers), for dresses to upgrade your character's magic. The New World doesn't disappoint either, as Gerard and Buigen (poor Pierre!) follow you happily around the world, just trying to get closer to Johnny, and carve some new holes into his magical Stellar Chart. Yes, all the innuendo mentioned here is just as bad as it seems.

This game needs more gay masked wrestling vampire superheroes



Oh noes! Diet attack!



NEW WORLD VEERS FROM WACKY COMEDY TO DARK AND THREATENING AT THE DROP OF A HAT

World veers from wacky comedy to dark and threatening at the drop of a hat, somewhat ruining the game's attempt to develop a consistent atmosphere.

Happily, the battle and magic systems remain largely unchanged from the previous games, as I assume the game designers decided not to mess with such a good thing. The Judgement Ring is the crux of the unique battle system, and determines whether your attacks and actions are successful. It's a circle with one arm which sweeps around its surface, like a clock, and each character's ring (yes, insert joke here) has different hit and strike areas. You need to employ a well-timed button-press to land a hit in each hit area as the arm passes through - if you do, your attack is successful. It's a fun system that means even the normally tedious random battles can be quite entertaining, as you have to pay attention every time to land your attacks or spells. It's also maddeningly fun for completists to attempt to get a perfect ring, hitting each smaller strike area successfully for a more powerful attack.

However, one seemingly small but actually quite important addition to this game is that of the stock bars, which fill as you give and take damage. Stock is required to execute more powerful moves, such as double attacks, or combo attacks (which could previously be used at any time). Managing stock becomes quite essential, as the enemies you face have stock bars as well, and can execute the same crippling double and chain attacks as you. In boss fights, using techniques to manage the enemy's stock is crucial, and even a normal random battle can turn painful if you're not paying attention. It's a great addition that makes the combat more strategic, and forces you to use your combos less often and more carefully.

THIS IS JUST A TRIBUTE?

It's always hard creating a follow-up to such a successful series, as you're going to be living up to some utterly gargantuan expectations from fans and newcomers alike. As a result, flaws in this sequel are possibly somewhat unfairly highlighted, and the plot and character problems stand out in contrast to its predecessors. It doesn't help either that Shadow Hearts: From the New Word borrows quite a lot from Shadow Hearts: Covenant, to the point that fans may begin to feel an odd sense of deja-vu.

In the end, it's a bit of a mixed bag. The combat system was excellent to start with, and has only been improved by the addition of the stock bar system and a few other tweaks. The character designs are stellar, and despite the occasional tediously designed dungeon, the environments are lovely. But on the other hand, the game is let down a bit by shoddy story pacing, sometimes-annoying dungeons, and the bland male lead. If you're new to the series, I'd recommend picking up Shadow Hearts: Covenant first, but either way, this should still provide a funny, entertaining and enjoyably insane experience - especially if you like your fan service. <<

AVAILABLE ON:
PS2 / XBOX / PC / GCN

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: RPG
PLAYERS: 1
DEVELOPER: Nautilus
PUBLISHER: Azure
PRICE: $TBA
RATING: TBA
AVAILABLE: On Import, now

HYPER VERDICT:

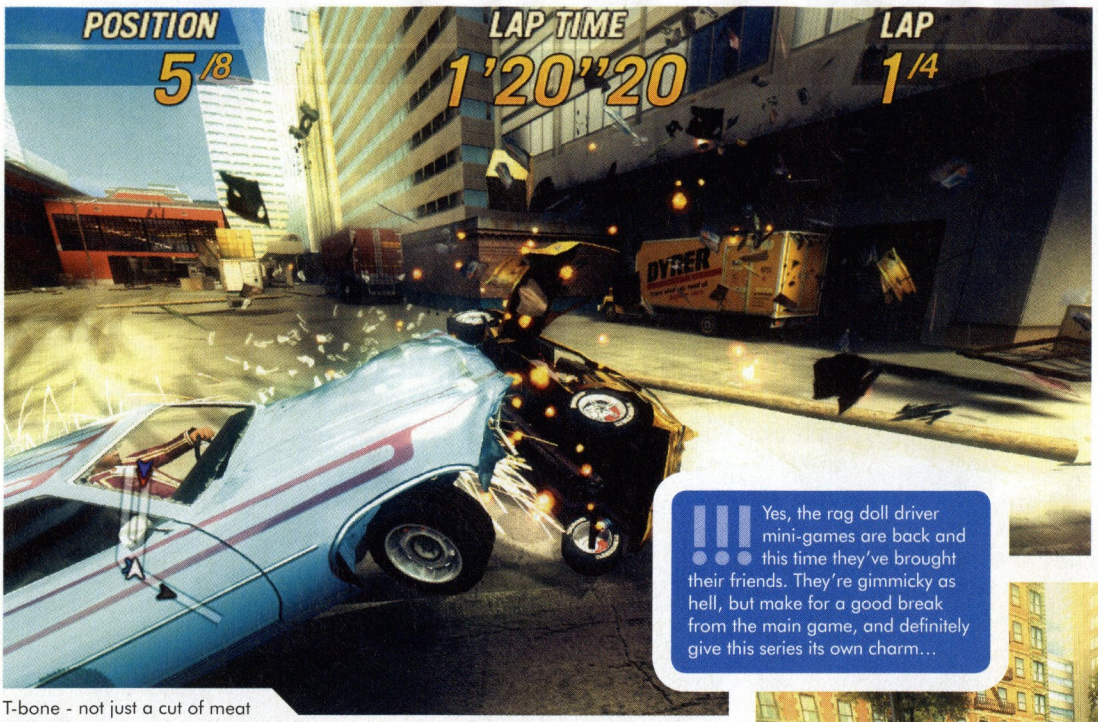
PLUS: The Judgement Ring, hands down.

MINUS: Issues with pacing and characters.

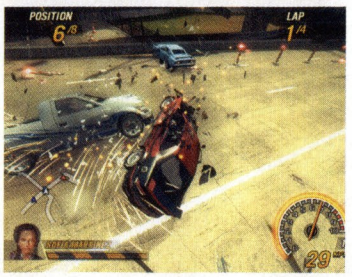
VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
85	79	83

OVERALL
81

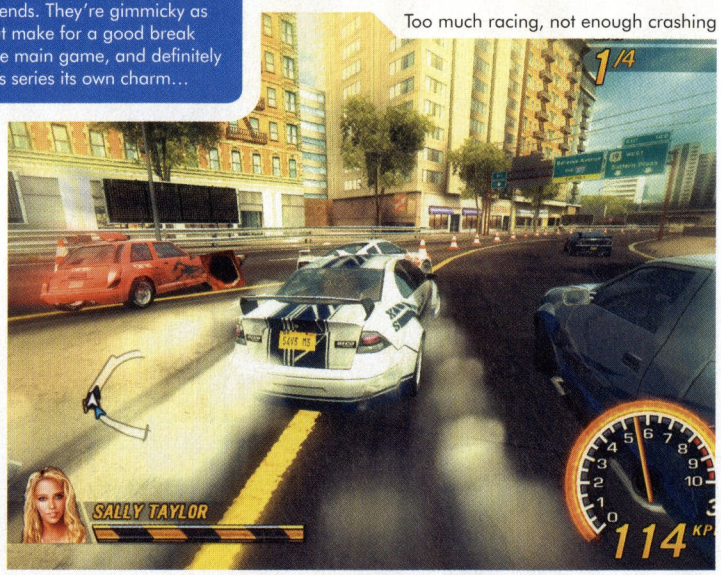
Not quite as awesomely awesome as the last one.

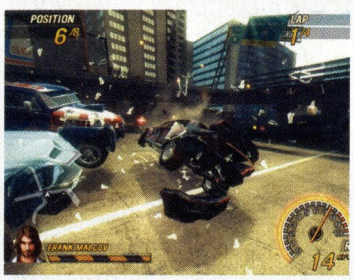


T-bone - not just a cut of meat



Too much racing, not enough crashing





!!! Yes, the rag doll driver mini-games are back and this time they've brought their friends. They're gimmicky as hell, but make for a good break from the main game, and definitely give this series its own charm...

FlatOut 2

CAM SHEA starts the Rag Doll Liberation Front

While FlatOut may best be known for its rag doll driver physics, where running into a wall would see your avatar flung through the windshield, and where you could compete in a series of mini-games all designed around launching said driver as high and as far as possible, the reality is that the game was far more than that; it was also a highly competent racer. And now FlatOut 2 has arrived to show that the first time wasn't a fluke.

BUCKET OF BOLTS

Mind you, FlatOut 2 isn't hugely welcoming to newcomers. If you were to play this game at a kiosk in a games store you'd probably walk away disappointed. This really is a racer where you start with a bucket of bolts and gradually kit it out with better parts, before upgrading to a new car and starting again. The initial handling is mushy, and you'll be spending a fair bit of the early races fighting against oversteer as your car swings out wildly from one side to the other. Fortunately, even in the early going there's a sense that this is a diamond in the rough, and it isn't long until you're getting into the spirit of the game and mastering the handling. And once you've upgraded to a new car a couple of times, suddenly the feel of the game comes together and you'll start to enjoy it all the more.

So what is this "spirit" of the game I just mentioned? Well, FlatOut 2 is very much a combative racer. It's about rough and tumble driving – clashing with opponents, smashing through barriers that get in your way, knocking stuff over, taking alternate paths and generally belting along at speed through farm yards, construction sites, stormwater drains and city streets. With nitro at your disposal to hit even higher speeds (or, more likely, to line up opponents so you can slam them), and a nifty 'reset on track' option to reduce frustration levels, there's a lot to like about FlatOut 2.

While placing well in races is necessary to progress through the main structure of the Career mode, which is comprised of a host of tournaments for each of the three car classes and the final open class, the credit system is really the heart of the game. Winning races earns you credit, but so too does aggressive driving. Ramming an opponent at speed will net you points, as will flipping their car, while perhaps the coolest offensive move is when you ram an opponent so hard you send the driver flying out of his car. At the end of each race your points are tallied up, then additional points are given along with awards in four categories rewarding the fastest lap, the most aggressive drivers and even who chewed through the most scenery.

As you'd expect credits are used to purchase and upgrade your cars, and there's always an engine upgrade or a new set of cars around the corner to spur you on – not only to win but to drive aggressively to max out your credits. It's a treadmill, but it's a compelling one, as developers Bugbear have done a great job ensuring that you'll really notice the improvements as you upgrade cars and move through the classes. Perhaps our only major complaint is that the races can begin to feel a little samey after extended play. Even so, this is well worth a look. <<

AVAILABLE ON:
PS2 / XBOX / PC / GCN

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Racing
PLAYERS: 1-Multi
DEVELOPER: Bugbear
PUBLISHER: Empire
PRICE: $79.95 PS2, Xbox, $49.95 PC
RATING: M
AVAILABLE: August 17

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Distinct style, fast, good racing mechanics.

MINUS: Can be too much crap on the course, can feel a little samey.

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
85	79	85

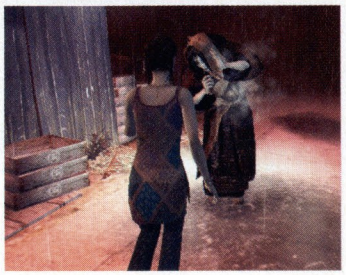
OVERALL
85

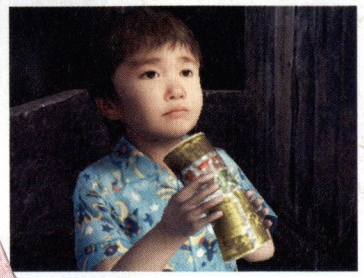
It's not glitzy, but FlatOut 2 definitely has heart...

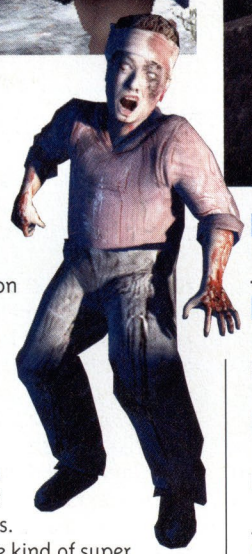
Time to use pantomime voice

!!! We gave the original game 55% for much the same reasons. Some developers never learn...

Not blood - spaghetti for dinner







Forbidden Siren 2

Emphatic is **DANIEL STAINES'** middle name

Forbidden Siren 2 is a bad game. I'm saying that first and I'm saying it plainly because it's the most important part of this review. It's the part that I want you to remember – the part that should stay submerged in your sub-conscious until you see this game for sale, at which point it will suddenly resurface and steer you towards buying something you'll actually enjoy. Have I made my point? Here it is again for good measure: FORBIDDEN SIREN 2 IS TERRIBLE. DO NOT BUY IT.

AND HERE'S WHY

Like its predecessor, Forbidden Siren 2 is based on a promising premise. The idea is that it's supposed to be a Silent Hill style survival-horror in which the player has control of multiple characters, each of whom has their own thread in an interconnected narrative web. But that's just the idea. The reality is that the aforementioned "narrative web" is actually a tangled mess that fails to provide the player with any semblance of sense or purpose. In a misguided effort to engender a sense of confusion and dread, the developer has destroyed their game's ability to keep people playing it.

Where's the motivation? The story makes no sense, the characters are completely opaque, and the gameplay is comprised of what seems to be an endless series of tedious tasks that are as pointless as they are arbitrary. Why should anyone bother with a game like that? It's like fumbling around for a bar of gold in a dark room littered with bear traps – the payoff simply isn't worth the pain required to obtain it.

And the narrative isn't even the worst part. The gameplay in Forbidden Siren 2 is so clumsy and frustrating that it's like some kind of anti-achievement, forcefully negating the few things this game actually has going for it. So-called "sightjacking" – the ability by which you can see through the eyes of other beings – has been implemented in the poorest way possible. Using it to avoid enemies is mostly pointless because you usually can't tell where monsters are unless they're within your field of vision anyway. And if the monsters DO spot you – well, you might as well just reload there and then. The zombies you encounter aren't ordinary zombies. They're like some kind of super zombie that is both indestructible and incredibly accurate with a wide variety of firearms. The goddamn Terminator wouldn't stand a chance against these things, so how are the weaklings in this game supposed to cope?

Forbidden Siren 2 could've been a good game, but only if it were completely different in almost every way imaginable. As it stands, it's just awful. I'm sure some people will excuse its many flaws on the basis of its admittedly excellent atmosphere, but I'm not one of them. Go watch The Ring if you want Japanese horror with great atmosphere. If you come here to get it... well, don't blame me when you cop a hand full of bear trap. <<

AVAILABLE ON:
PS2 / XBOX / PC / GCN

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Survival Horror
PLAYERS: 1
DEVELOPER: SCEI
PUBLISHER: Sony
PRICE: $79.95
RATING: MA15+
AVAILABLE: Now

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Good atmosphere, nice graphics.

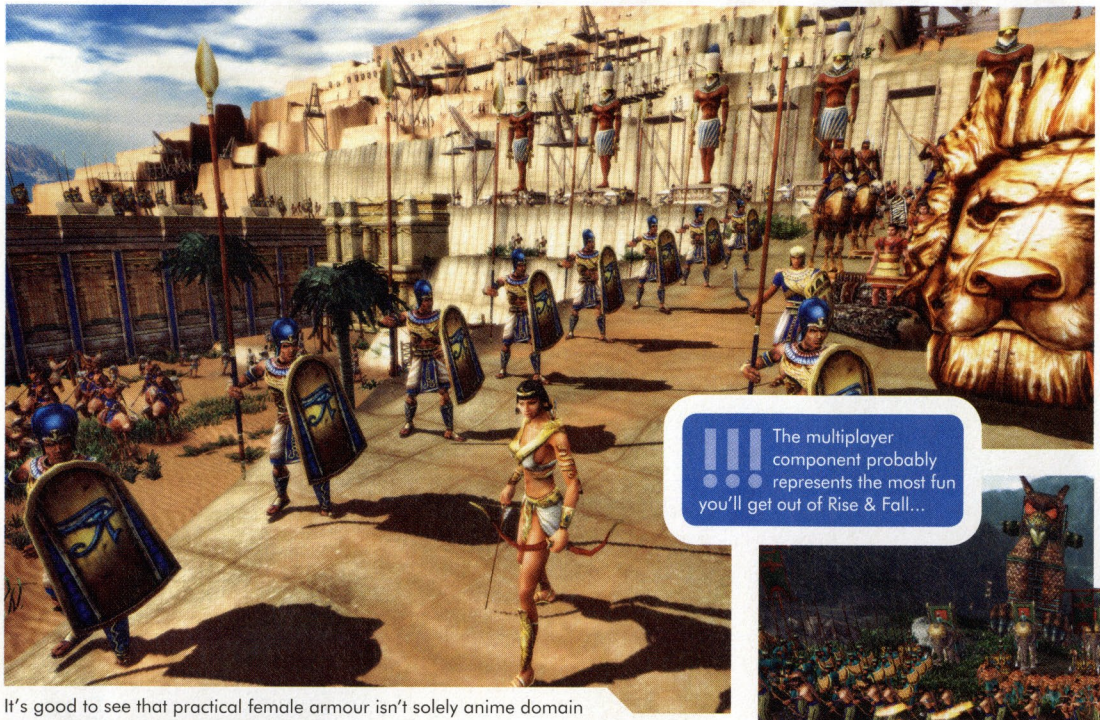
MINUS: Gameplay, narrative, overall game design.

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
80	80	40

OVERALL

45

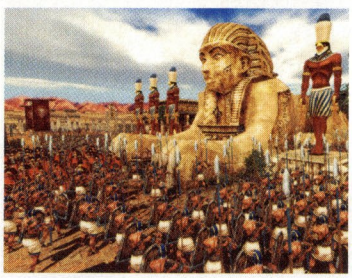
Forbidden Siren 2 is a bad game.



It's good to see that practical female armour isn't solely anime domain

!!! The multiplayer component probably represents the most fun you'll get out of Rise & Fall...

If you need me I'll be in the fortress



Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War

KOSTA ANDREADIS is at war with button mashing

Spamming the attack button whilst standing amongst a large group of enemy archers is fun in the sense that they all die in a matter of seconds, as does just about every other foe you might find yourself up against when controlling Alexander the Great in this game's lame excuse for a campaign mode. Hold on a second, isn't Rise & Fall a strategy game? You know the type – build a base, build an army, tech them both up, attack guys on opposite side of map, wash, rinse, and repeat. Sure is, but this is the one, you may of heard of it, that lets you control a specific unit whilst in the thick of a large scale epic battle. Awesome! Not.

MASHTASTICALLY GAME KILLING

On paper it sounds like a good addition to the fold, mixing in action oriented gameplay with strategy warfare, to be able to literally take charge of a small army and lead them into battle. How could they possibly screw this up? As it turns out, pretty easily, as controlling your hero character results in little more than a poorly executed hack and slash game that's more like the mind numbing Dynasty Warriors than strategy gold like Rome: Total War. The biggest problem with this is that as you take control of your hero you can wipe out 10, 20, or even 50 enemy units in no time, quickly turning the tide of most battles in a mere few seconds leaving you to wonder why you even bothered building walls, archers, and performing other defensive 'strategic' maneuvers moments earlier.

Although you can't control your hero unit at all times during a battle, the game simply ends up being a case of waiting for your stamina to build, pressing 'q' (to enter hero mode) then spamming the left-mouse button like there's no tomorrow. Which is nice if all you're looking for is a button masher, but when you're talking about a game built on a strategy foundation, its inclusion, although being the title's selling point, is annoying to say the least.

On the strategy side of the fence things are a lot better, with solid mechanics and some well implemented features such as the ability to create formations on the fly and being able to use your naval units the way you've always wanted to, to ram into enemy units and structures. But all is not well here either with some poor AI on both sides with units acting like crazy ants moving around not knowing how to perform simple tasks like walking around a tree that happens to be in your way.

That's not all - the game simply feels like it should have been released 2 or 3 years ago as it struggles to make sense of its 3D engine resulting in a game that's as bland to look at as it is to play. Sometimes a game's load sequence and menu screens are an indication of the overall gaming experience. Rise & Fall loads up with heavily compressed video footage of poorly animated real-time action which continues to play in the background whilst choosing one of the game's play modes from a single screen. <<

AVAILABLE ON:
360 / PS3/ Wii/ **PC**

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Strategy/Action
PLAYERS: 1-Multi
DEVELOPER: Stainless Steel Studios/ Midway • **PUBLISHER:** Midway
PRICE: $99.95
RATING: M
AVAILABLE: Now

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Large scale battles, exploding camels for some reason.

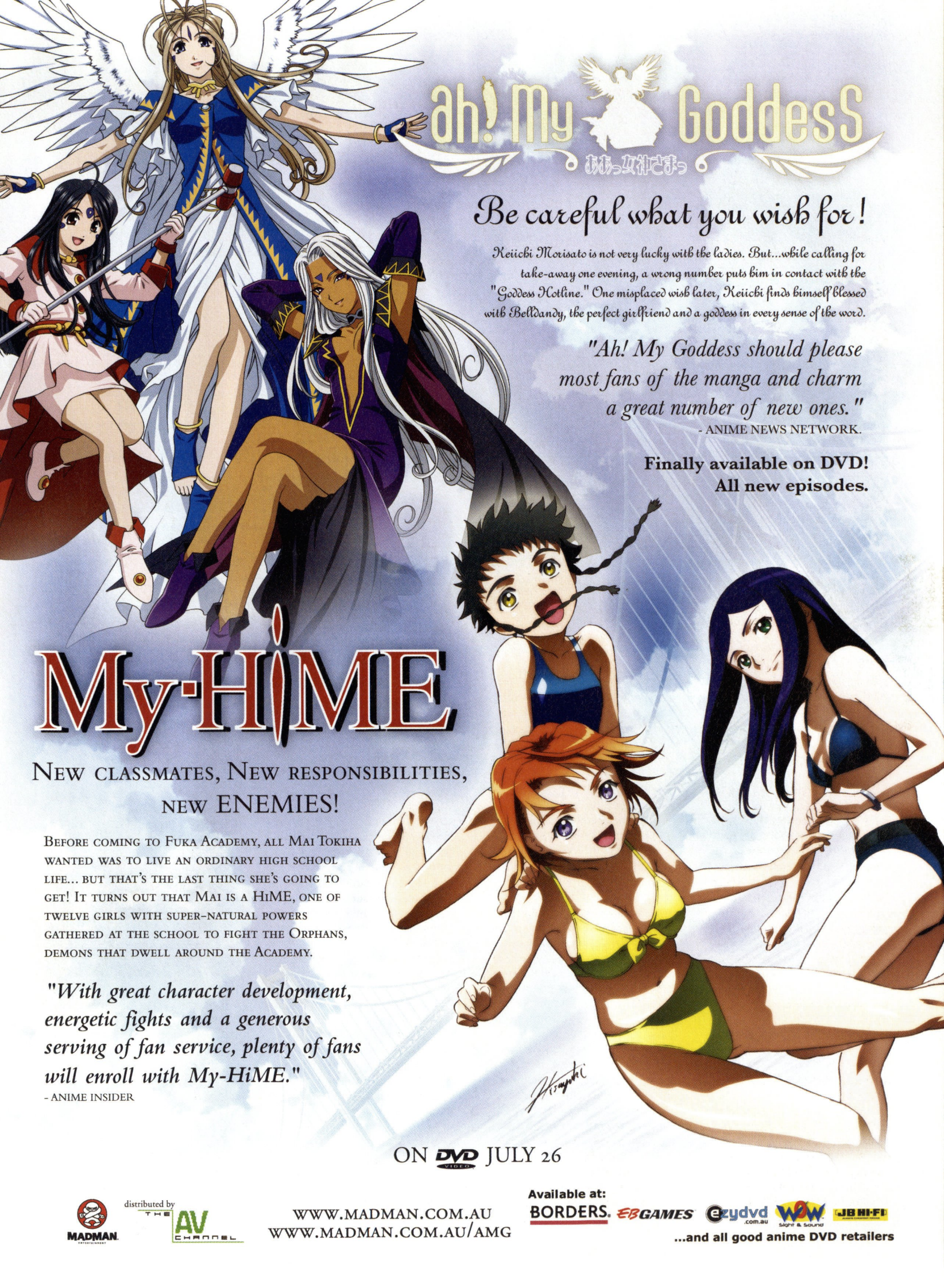
MINUS: Third-person mode sucks.

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
65	70	60

OVERALL

59

A mixed bag of gameplay styles that fails to deliver.


ah! My GoddesS
ああっ女神さまっ
Be careful what you wish for!
Keiichi Morisato is not very lucky with the ladies. But...while calling for take-away one evening, a wrong number puts him in contact with the "Goddess Hotline." One misplaced wish later, Keiichi finds himself blessed with Belldandy, the perfect girlfriend and a goddess in every sense of the word.
"Ah! My Goddess should please most fans of the manga and charm a great number of new ones."
- ANIME NEWS NETWORK.
Finally available on DVD!
All new episodes.
My-HiME
NEW CLASSMATES, NEW RESPONSIBILITIES, NEW ENEMIES!
BEFORE COMING TO FUKA ACADEMY, ALL MAI TOKIHA WANTED WAS TO LIVE AN ORDINARY HIGH SCHOOL LIFE... BUT THAT'S THE LAST THING SHE'S GOING TO GET! IT TURNS OUT THAT MAI IS A HIME, ONE OF TWELVE GIRLS WITH SUPER-NATURAL POWERS GATHERED AT THE SCHOOL TO FIGHT THE ORPHANS, DEMONS THAT DWELL AROUND THE ACADEMY.
"With great character development, energetic fights and a generous serving of fan service, plenty of fans will enroll with My-HiME."
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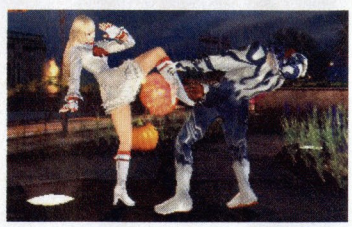
"That's for calling me a Bruce Lee clone!"

Namco takes their punishment for Death by Degrees

!!! Namco haven't skimped for PSP, DR features 19 stages and over 30 characters... not to mention all the game modes!

Tekken: DARK RESURRECTION

BRYCE MCDONOUGH is well and truly "tekken" by this release



3D fighting franchises on portable consoles are a virtual non-entity, mainly because 3D fighting games represent some of the most powerful arcade hardware to be found, whereas portable hardware, until recently at least, was always a little... dinky.

Sony is out to break the mould, and Namco is the brave company to be making the first attempt at a fully-fledged 3D fighting game for the PSP. Tekken: Dark Resurrection (DR) is coming and believe me, people are going to sit up and beg for more.

BRYCE AND THE "SCENE"

Tekken is now 10 years old and still kicking on, with T:DR being the sub-sequel to Tekken 5, which we all enjoyed so much on PS2 last year. Hitting arcades a solid 8 months ago locally, the game has been around long enough to be tried and tested, and has stood up to the critics wonderfully – the competitive scene under DR is still very healthy.

Dark Resurrection brings with it all of the gameplay tweaks we saw in Tekken 5 – walls were standardised, floors evened out, wall-push taken away. In came the 'Crush' system, long-range throws and a sidestep/sidewalk worth using. On top of that, for the first time in a Tekken game we were able to customise our characters' outfits with accessories that varied from the cool to the absurd. Winning percentages and a ranking system, all stored on an IC card at the arcade (or a memory card at home) made for a fighting game that let you add your own personal touch to your character. Dark Resurrection adds another two new characters, a bunch of new customisations, new stages and a slightly tweaked damage system. Wall juggles for example have been slightly toned down, though still form an important part of any comeback.

The conversion itself to console has come along with a bucketload of options and features. Apart from Story Battle (cutscenes and ending movies) and Arcade Battle (make gold and rank up), we have a Quick Battle mode (good for a nothing-at-stake battle, and the only mode you should let your friends near), a complete and familiar Training mode, Network mode with Ad-hoc, Gamesharing and more, and Dojo mode (visit a Dojo, fight your way through the ranks to the top, then move on). Attack mode gives us Time Attack, Survival, plus a new one – 'Gold Rush', where essentially every attack you land equates to Gold. Since all the customisations cost Gold in the thousands, this mode is a very welcome addition. There are also a couple of mini-games which will be unlocked the more you play – some of which will look very familiar to long-time fans of the series.

Gratifyingly, Dark Resurrection looks absolutely stunning. Given that the PSP is still relatively young, it's great to see it being pushed harder, and with DR we're given a real eye candy fest. The characters are not monstrous, but are spot on in size for the machine, allowing sufficient view of both characters and the surrounding environment. This is important in DR since a well-judged juggle to the wall can easily double the damage you inflict. The backgrounds have definitely lost a touch of the depth they had in the arcade version – if you look closely the distant backdrop looks suspiciously like a 2D image (it isn't, but only one step better), however the illusion is far more

Nomco is now a playable character...

DARK RESURRECTION BRINGS WITH IT ALL OF THE GAMEPLAY TWEAKS WE SAW IN TEKKEN 5

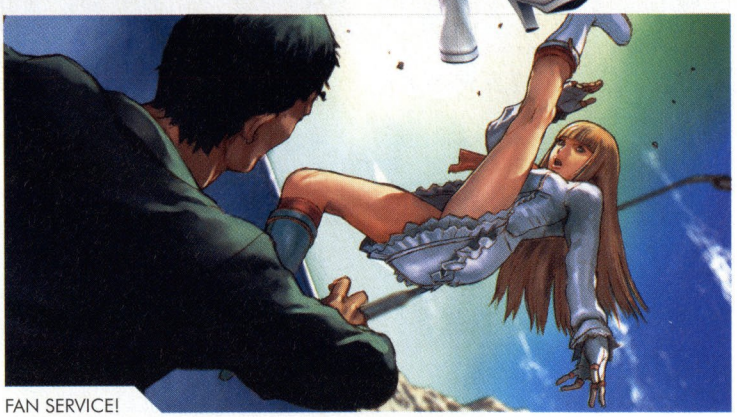
complete than in the early PSone days. What is done very well – and an integral part of enjoyment of Tekken – is the framerate, which is solid and smooth in-game. The character intros may run at 30 FPS, but during actual gameplay this feels like real 60 FPS Tekken, and we couldn't ask for more.

On the subject of gameplay, DR is actually streets away from what we expected. The AI in console ports has always been rather miserable, but this version will at least offer a challenge to any level of player. It is very refreshing to see a CPU controlled character punish properly, and then follow up with a damaging juggle. It's not the same as playing another person, but it's much closer than it used to be.

JUST FRAME?

The only gripes to be found anywhere with this game rest entirely with the hardware. Firstly – wireless is a great idea and makes multiplayer fun and immediately accessible to everyone. But for a fighting game where 1/60 of a second can make all the difference, the occasional lag spikes detract from the genuine competition. For a laugh or two on the train, it can't be beat, but it is no substitute for a proper console release. Secondly – the controls.

>> STRAP IT ON - The controls on the PSP aren't entirely useless for Tekken, but they aren't great either. One thing Namco have done is to release a D-pad add-on which will stick on top of your existing 4 way D-pad and provide a smoother and more precise control method. Supposedly. Capcom had one which they released in Japan with Street Fighter Alpha, which was received with mixed reviews. We don't yet have access to one here at Hyper, but we are excited about anything that could improve the playing experience, and will definitely let you know when we can get our hands on one.



FAN SERVICE!

Always important in a fighting game, the D-pad especially suffers from difficult-to-reach diagonals, and the buttons also are that little bit smaller and tighter than on the Dual Shock controller, making quick and double button presses downright impossible sometimes. Good use of the shoulder buttons helps to alleviate this, and hey, we can't love everything, but this is definitely one of the harder things to deal with.

Portable, arcade-perfect gameplay and a plethora of game modes and options make this the best single player Tekken experience available to date. Multiplayer takes a hit, but is still playable and anyone looking for a good fighting game, on any console, would be hard-pressed to go past this one. I know I won't. <<

HYPER BIG RUBBER STAMP OF APPROVAL

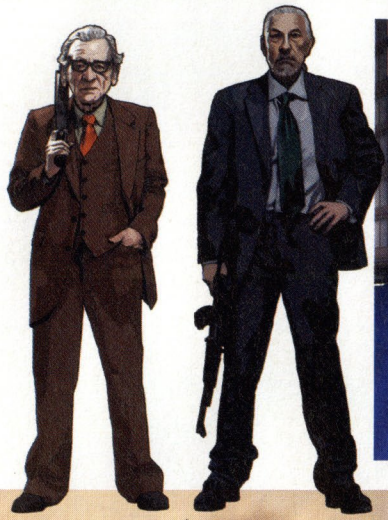
AVAILABLE ON:
DS / **PSP** / GBA

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Fighting
PLAYERS: 1-2
DEVELOPER: Namco
PUBLISHER: Namco
PRICE: $79.95
RATING: TBC
AVAILABLE: September 7

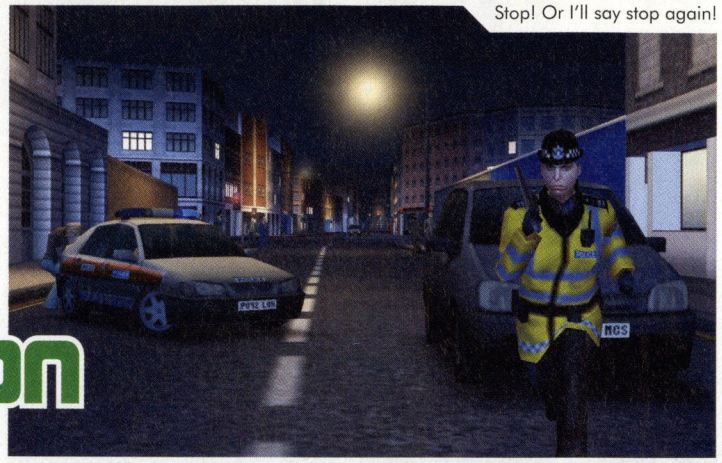
VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
93	88	90

OVERALL
91



!!! In 'Tourist' mode, a random bystander tells you "hitting up 13 times will unlock 'Hot Tea' mode." "Take that, GTA," cried SCE London. ...And no, it's not real. Sorry, guys.

Extreme window washing



Stop! Or I'll say stop again!

Gangs of London

PATRICK KOLAN puts on his cockney accent...

After two bouts of The Getaway on the PS2, both of which were pretty mediocre, SCE Studios London has launched a PSP spin-off with Gangs of London. Is it third time lucky? Well, they're getting closer.

ALL KINDS OF STREET

The single player experience is vaguely interesting – graphic novel-inspired cutscenes with excellent voice acting flesh out a tale of warring factions vying for control of London's streets, drugs, hookers and weapons. After aligning yourself with one of the five racially stereotypical factions, it's off to the mission selection. As you complete each mission, you'll eventually eat into other gangland territories until all of London is yours for the plundering.

All of this equates to about 60 missions, which is about as much of this repetitive mission structure as you'll want, really. You've likely played it all before – break in, kill someone, ram the car off the road, take out the rival gang – not a whole lot of innovation there. Sure, you can switch between up to three other members of your gang to make use of their weapons, but there is very little incentive to do so, mission structure-wise.

Like The Getaway, Gangs of London features a full 25 km² of London mapped out. It was big on the PS2, and even next to Liberty City Stories, it feels overwhelmingly large. But I'm not taking issue with size – merely the sloppy steering and inadequate character controls that make it a bit of a chore to get around. Why is it that after three titles, targeting and steering are still a pain in the derrière? For godsakes, why can't I look up or down? This is partly poor design and partly poor hardware.

The PSP's single joynub, the joystick's inbred cousin, just doesn't cut it. With it, characters can move and rotate. By holding R, they strafe. However, the R button also allows you to lock on to an enemy. Which is all well and good if they're stationary or dealing with a single target. Rarely is this the case, and what results is a lot of accidental strafing and random, haphazard targeting. Driving with the nub lacks finesse and there's a slight but definite delay between input and on-screen action – the D-pad drastically understeers.

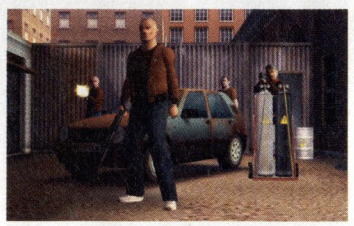
It's one thing to have lovely, well-populated cities, but we'd take a game that is half the size for a revamped control system. The current arrangement works, but just barely.

All is not lost however. In addition to the main story, there are a full 14 other modes to sink your bicuspids into, and this is where Gangs finally breaks through the 'takes itself too seriously' barrier and makes way for creativity and – finally – fun.

Under the aptly-titled 'Free Roaming', you can tweak the game settings to your liking, including the time of day, number of pedestrians and police presence. Other sub-modes let you explore London as a Hawaiian shirt-wearing tourist and snap pictures, be a Bobby and knick rioters, be a cabbie, cause as much havoc as possible or, my personal fave, kill a city full of zombies in a mode called 'Four Weeks Later – a nod to the film 28 Days Later. Tops.

In the 'Pub Games' section you can play darts, skittles, very solid recreations of US and UK 8-Ball and a nifty take on everyone's favourite cell-phone time-killer, Snake, in the Arcade mode. There's even a very comprehensive version of the board game Risk also in there, too.

Is it worth the price of admission? Half the game is a formulaic and pedestrian GTA jaunt, and the other half is supreme fun and perfect for short journeys. So maybe that's the best way of looking at Gangs – a tasty, filling meal of mini-games and extra modes that are perfectly suited to pocket gaming, with a small, undercooked side order of GTA.



[up] Hank Hill would be proud

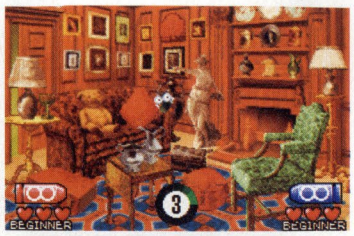
AVAILABLE ON:
DS / **PSP** / GBA

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Action
PLAYERS: 1-5
DEVELOPER: Sony London
PUBLISHER: Sony
PRICE: $79.95
RATING: TBC
AVAILABLE: September 7

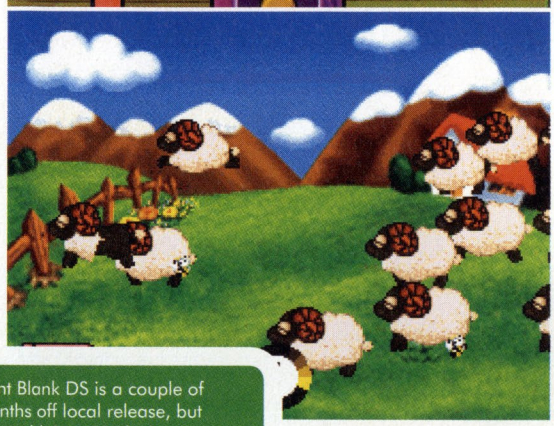
VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
82	76	80

OVERALL
80



[up] Wilks' boudoir (hehe)

[up] Where's Plucka when you have a gun?



!!! Point Blank DS is a couple of months off local release, but we couldn't resist playing it early... shame it's a bit of a letdown.

Point Blank DS

KOSTA ANDREADIS quickdraws his DS...

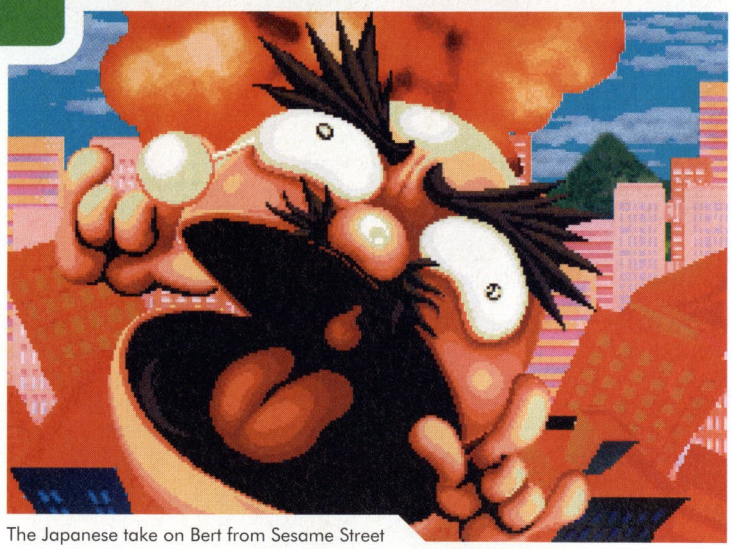
Playing Point Blank on the DS is exactly how you'd probably imagine it - instead of a light gun one uses the stylus to tap the screen and shoot objects in the game's many mini-game shooting scenarios. Without the added fun of holding a gun the act of frantically 'shooting' red targets, birds, skeletons, ninja cardboard cutouts and other nonsense somehow loses its charm and before long becomes somewhat of a carnival attraction – one that won't hold your attention for any great length. Well that about covers the review portion of the write-up, with plenty of room to spare... perhaps a little too much. Maybe we should delve deep into the inner working of Point Blank DS? Who knows what we'll find, will it be buried treasure, a headless zombie playing the piano, or a car that talks and by chance lands a role in a Pixar film? Either way the point is there really isn't much to this game.

OR IS THERE?

Unfortunately the inner workings of Point Blank DS don't extend much further than mindlessly tapping the screen in the game's many familiar scenarios. Apart from the 'Arcade Mode' which should be familiar to anyone that's ventured into or walked past a videogame arcade in the past decade there's the interestingly titled 'Brain Massage' mode which aims to test the player's wits and smarts and other brainy stuff they might posses, a museum mode that resurrects games that belong in a museum, and a VS mode. Divided into categories, 'Brain Massage' essentially takes the various types of Point Blank mini-games, categorises them and somehow manages to interpret tapping the screen to shoot red instead of blue as some sort of brain exercise. Of course it's not that bad, but really the only thing this mode does apart from giving you a score using a randomly insane scoring system is take the exact same mini-games from the arcade mode and kinda clumps them together in same-ish groups.

Now up until now this review has been on the negative tip, so it's time to wax a positive lyrical message to all the young gang bangers out there – i.e. those that may perhaps one day play Point Blank DS. First up, the game looks identical to its PlayStation counterpart, which is surprising in the sense that many non-Nintendo developed DS titles look a bit crummy, and runs well enough to be able to decipher the act of a mad man tapping like a maniac on the touch screen with impressive accuracy. Also the VS mode, like a beacon of shining beacon goodness, takes the title out of mediocrity to place it in the all too familiar "average" review score zone thanks in part to it being quite fun to tap the screen with others.

So in the end much like the arcade game, Point Blank is not much fun when you're shooting stuff on your own and only comes into its own with friends. However when you subtract shooting with tapping on the screen, what you're left with is really not much fun - either way. Something along the lines of 'for fans only' would probably suffice in most cases, but somehow it would seem a little strange to be a Point Blank 'fan' as opposed to a 'casual admirer'. But anyway, here goes - for fans only. <<



The Japanese take on Bert from Sesame Street

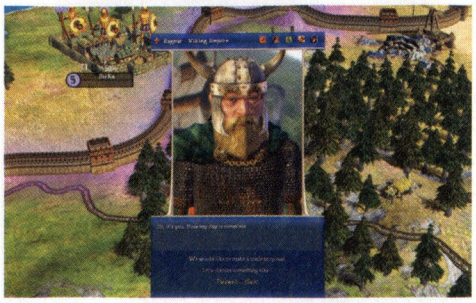
AVAILABLE ON:
DS / PSP / GBA

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Screen tapping sim
PLAYERS: 1-2
DEVELOPER: Namco
PUBLISHER: Namco-Bandai
PRICE: $TBA
RATING: G
AVAILABLE: Q4

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY
75	65	60

OVERALL
61



Civilization IV: Warlords

If there's only one thing that this expansion is good for, it's that it gets you playing Civ IV again. With a number of new tweaks to the main game, as well as adding seven unique scenarios, it's kinda irresistible. There's the chance to unify China, see how great you are as Alexander, destroy Asia as Genghis Kahn (Kaaaahn!), put up with the Peloponnesian war, raise (or raze) Rome, vanquish stuff as Vikings, and finally, destroy all of civilisation as those pesky Barbarians.

If you start a normal game, you'll also find a handful of new civs, as well as some new leaders for the old ones. Say hello to the Celts, Vikings, Zulus, Carthaginians, Koreans and the Ottoman Empire – along with their unique units and structures.

You'll notice that a Warlord can now be born as a Great Person, allowing you to attach them to a specific unit for a greater chance at winning a stoush. You can now also subjugate another civ and make them a vassal state, which will save you time and money on the road to complete domination. Of course, if you try to polish off a weak civ, take care that you're not attacking a vassal or you'll find yourself at war with big daddy too.

The Warlords scenarios are all interesting, but they also dump you into a map that's already partially developed, so if you like starting from scratch then don't expect to do so here. They're mostly about dealing with a difficult situation and digging your way out to achieve a particular objective, so it's a mixed bag. The Barbarians challenge, however, just involves roaming the map (using a mobile camp that generates units) and destroying stuff – fun, but ultimately a bit shallow.

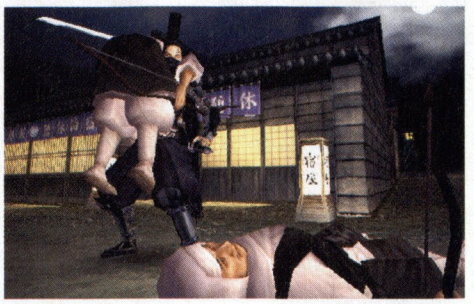
While the scenarios could have done with more polish, the tweaks to the main game are welcome.

Eliot Fish

AVAILABLE ON:
360 / PS3/ Wii/ **PC**

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Strategy/Sim / **PLAYERS:** 1-12 /
DEVELOPER: Firaxis / **PUBLISHER:** 2K Games /
PRICE: $49.95 / **RATING:** PG / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
85	82	95	87



Shinobido: WAY OF THE NINJA

Another ninja game from the creators of Tenchu. Although we initially shuddered at the prospect, Shinobido proves to be a lot better than Acquire's ill fated earlier Ninja series thanks to an interesting hub structure rather than the tried and true progressive mission structure favoured in the Tenchu series.

Players take the role of a mysterious and apparently soulless amnesiac ninja by the name of Crow who, from his ramshackle riverside hovel sets out on a number of missions for three different feuding warlords to destabilise the opposing warlords and hopefully recover the eight gems that can restore his memory and soul. Although the mechanic of having three rival warlords vying for Crow's skills and offering up a number of different missions, in reality there are only really three types of quest offered, with Crow delivering parcels in enemy occupied land, stealing something or assassinating a target.

In keeping with its heritage, Shinobido relies more on stealth than combat, a fine idea but one brought low by some rather imprecise and shoddy controls that manage to simultaneously feel too light (making sprints and wall-jumps difficult) and too clunky (sneaking can be a slow and painful experience). Still, there's a quite lengthy single player campaign to immerse yourself in and there are no other ninja games currently on the market so if you've got a jones for some Japanese pyjama warrior action you could do worse.

Dirk Watch

AVAILABLE ON:
PS2 / XBOX / PC / GCN

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Stealth/Action / **PLAYERS:** 1 /
DEVELOPER: Acquire / **PUBLISHER:** Sony /
PRICE: $79.95 / **RATING:** MA15+ / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
73	68	65	64

Total War: Eras

Total War: Eras isn't a game you review, it's a box set you pimp. Look what's inside the box and you'll understand what I mean; all three Total War games as well as their expansions, including the brand new Rome: Total War Alexander expansion. As well as the games, the box set contains five collector's cards, a 52 page art book, a soundtrack CD and a behind the scenes DVD documentary called "The Total War Story".

If you're unfamiliar with the Total War series then you should slap yourself for missing out on one of the best strategy franchises around but here's a little précis; the Total War series of games combine turn based management and huge scale real time battles to make a wholly amazing experience. Shogun: Total War and its expansion Mongol Invasion launched the series with 2D sprites but the games really open up with the advent of Medieval which introduces real 3D battles, offering up a scope of tactics and sheer scale unavailable in the previous incarnation. Rome: Total War takes the franchise one step further still with more intricate turn based management options and seriously gorgeous 3D graphics.

With Medieval 2: Total War just around the corner, the Total War: Eras boxed set is the perfect way to get yourself into one of the great strategy franchises. If you are already a convert then it's a perfect present to yourself. Just buy it.

Daniel Wilks

AVAILABLE ON:
360 / PS3/ Wii/ **PC**

HYPER BIG RUBBER STAMP OF APPROVAL

DETAILS:
CATEGORY: Strategy / **PLAYERS:** 1-8 /
DEVELOPER: Creative Assembly / **PUBLISHER:** THQ /
PRICE: $99.95 / **RATING:** MA15+ / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
84-94	86-90	90-94	93

Rush for Berlin

Having established its WWII credentials with Codename: Panzer, Stormregion now offers a few twists on more of the same. Rush for Berlin is an accessible RTS that offsets low realism through terrific pace, an excellent interface and some very impressive environments. Germany, Russia, the US, Britain and France fight it out across four well structured campaigns, all of which hang together nicely through solid briefings and a well presented storyline. The basic multiplayer features are bolstered by a couple of innovative game modes, and the absence of resource gathering won't disappoint anyone.

Unit production is handled through a small number of key buildings, with most of the onerous management duties out of the way early in each mission. Infantry, armour and supply units can be bolstered by indirect fire and air power if things get exciting, and officers (heroes) bring performance bonuses and special units. Troops gain experience from mission to mission, but the relatively generic nature of WWII forces means you don't get too attached to them - no tears on the road to victory! The control system is traditional RTS, supported by well designed and presented menus.

Rush for Berlin brings a reasonable challenge in most missions, thanks to good level design and decent friendly AI. The terrain elements are better than average, offering plenty of concealment behind some neatly disguised channelling, and unit pathfinding generally works well. Damage modelling and enemy AI are less impressive, with inconsistent firing results, some dodgy tactics and what seem to be random unit vulnerabilities, but the pace is fast enough to carry it off and the overall effect is still pretty good.

Des McNicholas

AVAILABLE ON:
360 / PS3/ Wii/ **PC**

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: WWII RTS / **PLAYERS:** 1-Multi / **DEVELOPER:** Stormregion / **PUBLISHER:** QV Software / **PRICE:** $89.95 / **RATING:** M15+ / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
85	80	75	78

Super Dragonball Z

We haven't covered many of the 25 Dragonball Z games that have been released on various platforms over the years for one pertinent reason – most of them have been crap, so when Super Dragonball Z appeared in our present hole we were dubious about even putting it into our debug machine to give it a go. Thanks god for a little beer and a lazy afternoon. Upon putting the game into our nearly dead PS2 debug we discovered, much to our delight (and chagrin) that not only is Super Dragonball Z not crap, it's actually quite good. Taking a lead from Powerstone and Street Fighter II (no wonder; the project lead for the game was Noritaka Funamizu, the producer of SFII), Super Dragonball Z is pared back 3D arcade fighting with hidden depth for those willing to put the time into learning how to do something other than button mash.

With only 18 playable characters, Super Dragonball Z might not have the scope of some of the previous Dragonball fighting games but this more streamlined approach does wonders for gameplay as all of the characters are better balanced than before and have a wealth of combos, quarter-circle attacks and more arcane specials and supers. Developers of anime based fighting games should take note – having a craptonne of characters may appeal to the fanboys but compelling gameplay will appeal to gamers.

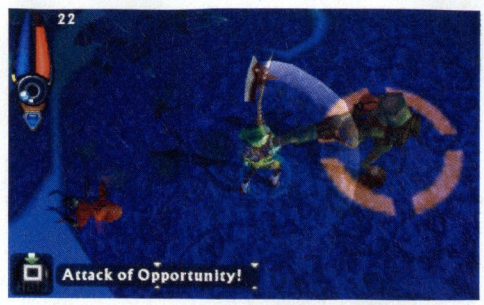
Frank Dry

AVAILABLE ON:
PS2 / XBOX / PC / GCN

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Fighting / **PLAYERS:** 1-2 / **DEVELOPER:** Namco-Bandai / **PUBLISHER:** Atari / **PRICE:** $49.95 / **RATING:** PG / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
82	78	78	79



Untold Legends 2: The Warrior's Code

Untold Legends 2: The Warrior's Code is more of a game than its button mashing predecessor but unfortunately that still doesn't mean that it's much of a game.

Set in a rather generic fantasy universe in which an evil warlord has taken over and is systematically hunting down changelings (shape-changers), players take the role of one of five of these rogue changelings, determined to overthrow the evil warlord by mashing the X button about a billion times.

To be fair the developers have tried to open up gameplay with the addition of charge attacks (holding down the X button for a powerful area effect attack) and attacks of opportunity keyed to the square button that can be used when the enemy drops its guard for a few moments. Unfortunately these attacks really do little in terms of gameplay and there are only a few instances in which mashing the X button doesn't work as well as, if not better than the two added attacks. Still, it's a fairly attractive if somewhat generically anime flavoured game with a lengthy single player game, enlivened by some decent multiplayer modes and a good co-op game.

Inevitably Untold Legends 2 will sell enough to warrant another sequel - in fact, there's already a new title being developed for PS3; hopefully next time around the developers will be able to inject a little bit of life and individuality into the series.

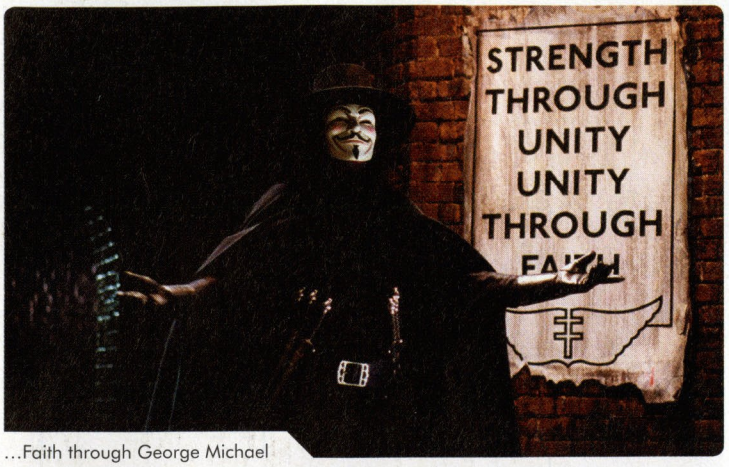
Daniel Wilks

AVAILABLE ON:
DS / **PSP** / GBA

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Action RPG / **PLAYERS:** 1-4 / **DEVELOPER:** Sony Online Entertainment / **PUBLISHER:** Nintendo / **PRICE:** $79.95 / **RATING:** PG / **AVAILABLE:** Now

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
80	76	68	66



...Faith through George Michael

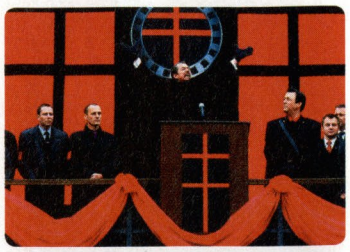
V for Vendetta

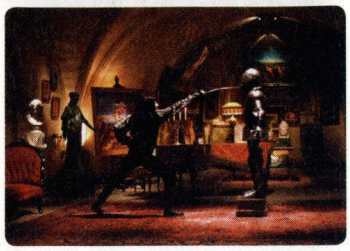
WARNER BROS, MA 15+

» It's quite amazing that an American movie would use the story of Guy Fawkes as the central image and hook but this is the case in *V for Vendetta*. Before anyone gets their nose out of joint saying that the Guy Fawkes story was central to the *V for Vendetta* graphic novel, we know, it's just that we're amazed that in the current Hollywood climate of massacring comic book plots and back-stories (witness *Catwoman, Fantastic 4, Electra, Aeon Flux, Hellblazer*) to appeal to the market that the studios would greenlight a project with the central motif being based around a person who only a fraction of the viewing public would actually know about. Thank god they did.

Set in a totalitarian future Britain, *V for Vendetta* is a story about politics and violent change, something very topical in today's climate. V, a masked vigilante dedicated to the overthrow of the fascist government rescues a young woman, Evey from rape at the hands of the police and slowly indoctrinates her over the course of a year to the morality and practise of the violent overthrow of the government. It's all very heady stuff but kept under a tight leash by director James McTiegue who keeps the action flowing smoothly over the two hour running time and ensures that there is always something to keep your attention. Whilst not the best comic book movie out there (that honour still goes to *Sin City* or *Hellboy*), *V for Vendetta* is far and away the best film based on Alan Moore's work to date.

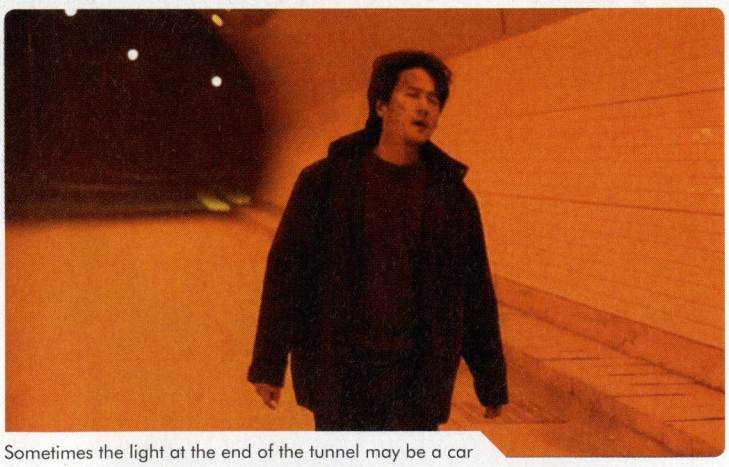
Daniel Wilks





[up] This caption should feature alliteration

MOVIE: 8 / EXTRAS: 5



Sometimes the light at the end of the tunnel may be a car

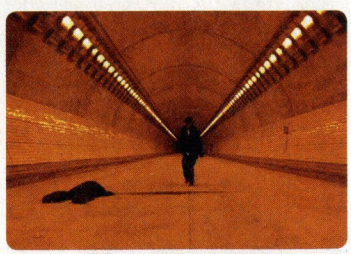
Spider Forest

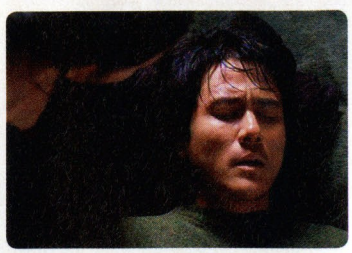
EASTERN EYE, MA 15+

» A beautifully shot and densely plotted noirish thriller, *Spider Forest's* main downfall is that it's a little too clever for its own good with the labyrinthine series of events hinting at a far more interesting conclusion that we actually end up with. Kang-Min is a TV producer who wakes up in an old shack in the middle of the titular Spider Forest to discover the body of his boss, hacked and stabbed 40 times. Upon further exploration he discovers his girlfriend dying of stab wounds, a neat feat considering she was meant to have died in a plane crash a year previously. To make matters worse, Kang-Min discovers the killer is still in the house and gives chase, wielding the sickle used to murder the two victims. In short order he's beaten unconscious by the fleeing murderer and finds himself running down a tunnel once he regains consciousness, only to be hit by a 4WD and rushed to hospital for emergency brain surgery.

From that point on, *Spider Forest* becomes a strange, rather languid story of a murder investigation and amnesia told from the point of view of an amnesiac making for a rather deliberately disjointed, though entertaining tale that loses a little steam in the middle but picks up in the final third. Though not the best example of new wave Koream filmmaking, *Spider Forest* is certainly different enough to warrant a viewing.

Daniel Wilks



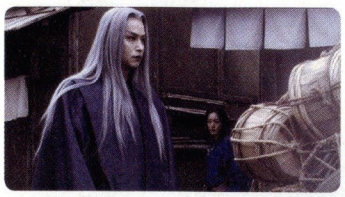


[up] Must've been bitten by a forest spider

MOVIE: 7 / EXTRAS: 5

Shinobi: Heart Under Blade

EASTERN EYE, MA 15+



[up] Better watch out for spiders...

We've all wondered what it would be like if you took the star-crossed lovers of Romeo & Juliet, transformed them into warriors from rival ninja clans and set their doomed affair in amongst epic CGI assisted ninja battles. Up until now we've just had to dream of what such a movie would be like but thankfully *Shinobi: Heart Under Blade* takes away this tiring necessity to use your imagination. Part tragic, grounded love story, part over the top live action anime action, *Shinobi* is one of the most wildly entertaining Japanese films to have been released since *Versus*, *Wild Zero* or *Junk*.

Gen-no-Suke and Oboro are two ninjas from the rival Iga and Koga clans who fall in love at first sight but are forced apart when a paranoid Shogun, worried that the ninjas may be working against him ends the 400 year truce between the ninja clans and exhorts them to kill each other. As luck would have it, Gen-no-Suke and Oboro are both chosen as the head of the combat squads for their respective clans so conflict is inevitable. The romance between the two leads keeps the story grounded, allowing the spectacular, magical ninja battles to really shine.

Daniel Wilks

MOVIE: 8 / EXTRAS: 8

Floaty Ninja Moon Attack!

Searching for spiders

Supernatural SEASON 1

WARNER BROS, MA 15+

Two early 20s brothers road trip across America in search of their missing father as well as the demon responsible for the death of their mother and the youngest brother's (Sam) girlfriend, hunting monsters, ghosts and other things that go bump in the night along the way. It's a fun premise and one that delivers well throughout the first season.

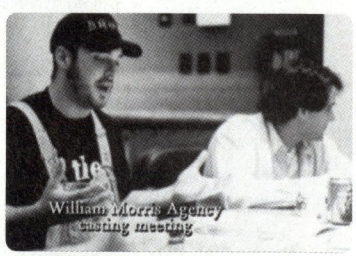
Comparisons to both the *X-Files* and *Buffy* are inevitable but they are also fair; the show seems to sit somewhere in between the two series' with the episodic investigative nature of the former and the pop-culture referencing teen friendliness of the latter. This is not a bad thing at all. Although structured similarly to the *X-Files* with the monster of the week and maybe a few hints towards the meta-story, *Supernatural* approaches the action in a very different way. Sam and Dean are professional and experienced monster hunters, so as a result usually know what they are up against and know how to kill it. It's a small point of difference but an important one as the show is more concerned about the monster hunting action than any philosophical pondering as to the nature of good and evil or if something is really out there. The first season definitely has its ups and downs but shows strong promise for a second and subsequent seasons.

Daniel Wilks

SERIES: 7 / EXTRAS: 1

Overnight

IDT, M



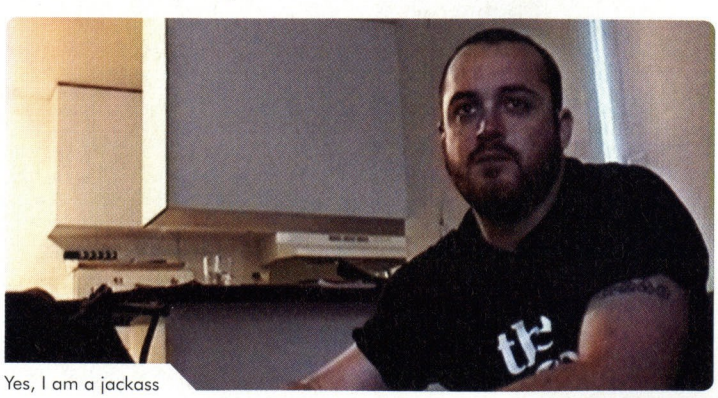
Troy Duffy couldn't write a better movie villain than himself. Picture this; a 20-something bouncer manages to sell a script to Harvey Weinstein for $300,000, secure himself a job directing the film, convince the uber-producer to buy the bar in which he works so he can become co-owner and even secure a recording contract for his band to release an album and perform the soundtrack. The story of how *Boondock Saints* was made should be one of rags to riches, or a local boy done good, or the underdog winning but it is not. It is the story of Troy Duffy, one of the most overbearing, arrogant, self-aggrandising bastards ever put to film. And he's no work of fiction.

Overnight chronicles Duffy's well deserved fall from grace as over the course of a few short weeks he manages to alienate everybody, make enemies and effectively have himself blacklisted from Hollywood.

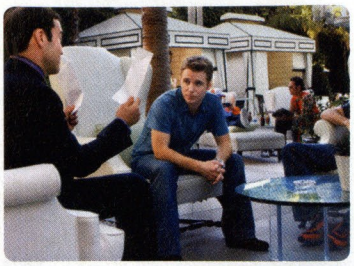
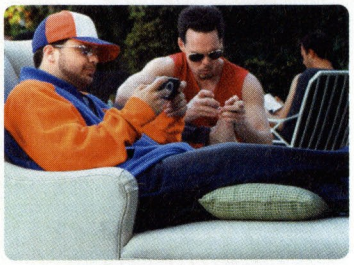
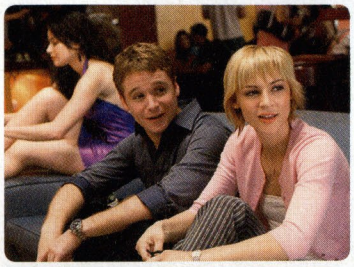
Although the documentary was shot and cut by friends of Duffy's there is a definite sense that they are casting him as the villain – we see nothing to soften our opinion of him. From step one to his inevitable fall Troy Duffy is a monster, albeit a very compelling one. Although he is definitely hard to watch, Troy Duffy is a cautionary tale in human clothing.

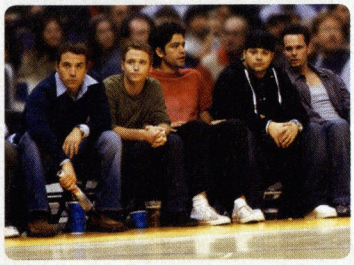
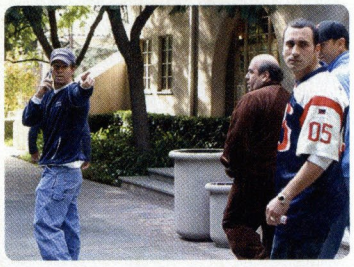
Daniel Wilks

MOVIE: 6 / EXTRAS: TBA



Yes, I am a jackass

Entourage SEASONS 1 & 2

WARNER BROS, MA 15+

If you mixed a shot of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* with a generous helping of *Swingers* and an equal part of *The Player*, you might have something approaching what *Entourage* is all about. Based loosely on the rise to fame of executive producer Mark Wahlberg, *Entourage* opens with Hollywood's next big thing, Vincent Chase, on the cusp of major stardom. Along for the ride are his childhood friends from Queens; Eric, Turtle and older brother Johnny Drama. Vince and his crew live the high-life full of beautiful women and hot parties, but essentially *Entourage* is a show about friendships tested by the pressures of success.

This is yet another series with the magic HBO seal of quality. *Entourage* feels like an authentic look at behind-the-scenes Hollywood, from the numerous stars-playing-themselves cameos (an all grown up Ralph Macchio as a family man sneaking out to the Playboy Mansion is just one highlight), to the extensive use of location shots in and around LA, some of which are epic in scale. Get past the eye candy though, and the writing is the real star – great characters, dialogue that is sharp, funny and full of banter (the Turtle versus Johnny and Eric versus super-agent Ari exchanges are gold) and a great balance of comedy and drama, especially in the second series.

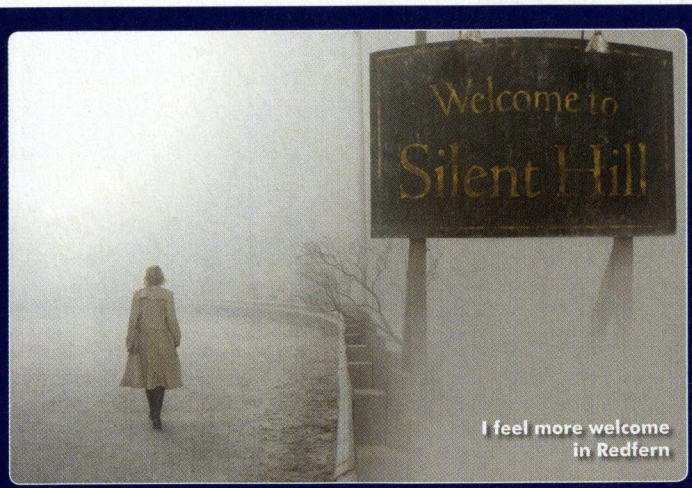
Each episode of *Entourage* is only 25 minutes in length and highly addictive, making these compilation DVDs a real gorge-til-your-eyes-hurt pleasure. It's a pity that the extras consist only of a few commentaries and interviews, but this should be plenty to keep *Entourage* junkies happy until season 3 arrives.

Malcolm Campbell

SERIES: 9 / EXTRAS: 2

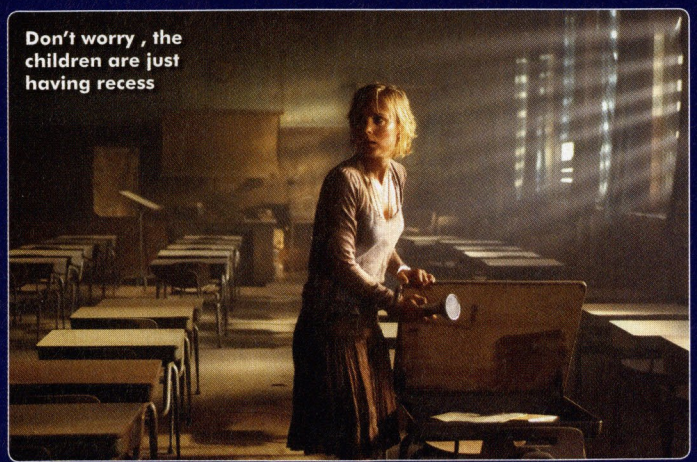
Silent Hill

UIP, MA 15+



I feel more welcome in Redfern

Christophe Gans has a great eye for atmosphere. Witness his other genre films, *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, *Crying Freeman* and the first segment of the Amicus style anthology, *Necronomicon*. All three are exercises in incredible atmosphere and cinematography, conjuring up dreamlike fantasy images that stick with you long after the film is over. The same is true of *Silent Hill*. Imagery and mood is king. Unfortunately Gans doesn't seem to be as good with telling a coherent story as he is with evoking mood. This is both the saving grace and downfall of *Silent Hill*. The story, to begin with is simplicity itself; Rose (Rhada Mitchell) and Chris (Sean Bean) have an adopted daughter, Sharon, who is afflicted with an illness that nobody can explain. In an effort to find Sharon's blood parents and maybe a clue to her ailment, Rose follows the only clue she has, Sharon mumbling the name Silent Hill when she is in her trance like state, and takes her daughter to the seemingly abandoned West Virginian mining town. In short order Sharon goes missing and Rose sets off in pursuit, aided by a female cop. Cue creepy monsters, an amazing day/night cycle, creepy cultist survivors, bugs, gas masks and the awesomely unnerving Pyramid Head.


Don't worry , the children are just having recess

Ironically the point at which *Silent Hill* loses the plot is when it tries to actually deliver one. The first hour is a wonderfully moody exercise in style over substance but as things draw to a close the plot is artificially injected, even resorting to the hoary old device of a character sitting down the protagonist and literally saying, "this the story and why everything has happened". Unlike the rest of the film the final act is not organic and moody but rather clumsy and overblown. Still, the first hour is good enough that you can make excuses for the last 30 minutes.

Rhada Mitchell is a likeable lead but the majority of kudos has to go to Alice Krige as Cristabella, leader of the Silent Hill survivors; she is without a doubt the creepiest woman in horror sans makeup. Rumours abound that Gans will be directing an Onimusha film in the near future. He has the talent, the experience and the potential to make it great.

Daniel Wilks

FILM: 7

AT CINEMAS AUGUST 31

Eureka Seven VOLUME 1

ANIMATION: **STUDIO BONES**
GENRE: **SCI-FI/MECHA**

Volume 1 of *Eureka Seven* is one hell of a ride – literally. Anyone who loved the incredible aerial dogfights of series' like *Macross Plus* will have a huge amount to enjoy here, not just in terms of combat but in the joy of flight itself. You see, *Eureka Seven* effortlessly melds transformable mecha (or in this case, LFOs) fighting it out in the skies and on the ground with a bizarre futuristic extreme sport where mechs and humans alike can harness Transparence Light Particles, or trapar waves, to "lift" – essentially surfing the sky. Throw in awesome LFO designs by Shoji Kawamori (the co-creator of *Escaflowne* and most of *Macross*) and you've got a solid foundation for a flashy but shallow series. Thankfully, if Vol 1 is any indication, *Eureka Seven* is going to be far more.

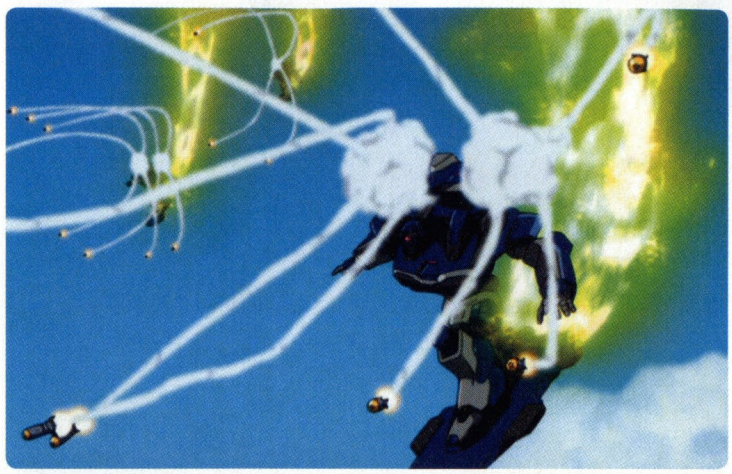
As is the way of anime, the lead character in *Eureka Seven* is 14 year old Renton, the son of Adrock Thurston, a researcher heavily involved in the LFO technology who became a hero to all mankind when he died saving the world. Renton is obviously destined for great things as well, and when he helps awaken the true potential of LFOs in the first couple of episodes, his dreams come true - he becomes a crew member aboard the Gekko State, a ship led by his hero, the lifting icon Holland.

While Renton is a familiar character, he's surrounded by a thoroughly eclectic crew, and much of the first disc is concerned with his longing to be close to Eureka, the mysterious young pilot of the Nirvash LFO. She's definitely shaping up to be one of the most interesting characters; a little off centre, she can talk to machinery, sensing their moods and wishes, and the hints that are given about her past – she left the military with the Gekko's doctor, leave us anxious to know more.

Obviously there's a lot more going on, but we don't want to spoil it for you. Stunning animation and art direction cap off an engaging world making *Eureka Seven* one of the hottest new releases this year.

Cam Shea

ANIMATION: 9 / STORY: 7
EXTRAS: 5 / OVERALL: 9



If only this book were as interesting as the other image

Lupin the Third: Secret of Mamo

ANIMATION: **TMS**
GENRE: **ACTION/ADVENTURE**

Lupin the Third is one of the most enduring figures of anime, and it's not hard to see why. The master thief is also a master character – as slippery as an eel, he's energetic, daring and inept with the ladies. His creator, Monkey Punch, also put together a great ensemble cast with the potential to play off each other wonderfully: Jigen, Lupin's partner in crime and weapons expert; Goemon, their samurai backup; Zenigata, the obsessed cop determined to bring Lupin to justice; and Fujiko, Lupin's femme fatale who is something of a slippery character herself.

In animated form it all came together in one of the all time greats – *Castle of Cagliostro*. Little wonder either, with Miyazaki's brilliance stamped all over it. For fans of that film, however, it comes as something of a shock to see that the real Lupin is a lecherous chain smoking bad boy, as opposed to the more chivalrous chain smoking gentleman thief in *Cagliostro*. It's Monkey Punch's Lupin in *Secret of Mamo*, and if anything this brings more energy to proceedings, with the action scenes and gags flying thick and fast.

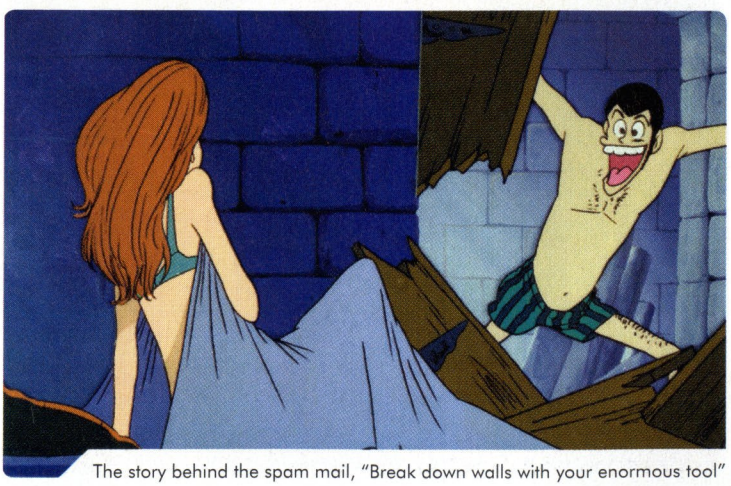
Pity then, that *Mamo* simply isn't as entertaining a film. Lupin works best when the action and story are grounded in a reality that is stretched to absurdly comical extremes. In *Mamo*, we have a flamboyant 70s plot that flies to science fiction and surrealism, but simply lacks enough of a grounding for it to be cohesive.

We're also not fans of the awful new dub for this release. While Lupin and Jigen are okay, Zenigata sounds like a drill sergeant (we kept waiting for him to say "LUPIN! What is your major malfunction?") and Fujiko sounds like a porn star with dreams of acting. Disappointing. To make matters worse, while the dub is a full 5.1 mix, the Japanese audio is dual mono. And we have to wonder how much license has been taken with the translation too – the dub is completely different from the subtitles.

Even so, *Secret of Mamo* is still a must-see for anime fans.

Dirk Watch

ANIMATION: 7 / STORY: 5
EXTRAS: 3 / OVERALL: 7



The story behind the spam mail, "Break down walls with your enormous tool"

hyper's top 10 psychological thrillers

Anime is more often known for giant robots, bouncy women and over the top action than it is for expertly crafted psychological thrillers; titles that blur the line between reality and fantasy, and often leave you with more questions than answers. They're out there though, and some of them are compulsory viewing for the anime otaku. Here's our Top 10...

8 Jin Roh

ANIMATION STUDIO: **PRODUCTION IG**
MADE IN: **1999**

SETTING & CHARACTERS: Kazuki Fuse is a member of the "Capital Police", a secretive, highly trained and armed police force dedicated to wiping out insurrection in post WWII (which the Germans apparently won) Japan. After an encounter with a young female revolutionary who blows herself up instead of risking capture and torture, Fuse is used as a scapegoat and demoted back to training. There he meets Kei, the sister of the dead revolutionary and begins a relationship with her. Behind the scenes, high ranking members of the Capital Police and the regular police begin formulating a plan that will involve Fuse and Kei. Things end badly.

WHY WE LIKE IT: Rarely does something come along that is so compellingly bleak that it will have you yelling at the screen trying to prevent the inevitable.

10 Requiem from the Darkness

ANIMATION STUDIO: **TMS**
MADE IN: **2003**

SETTING & CHARACTERS: An author, Momosuke, who is collecting ghost stories stumbles into the path of a strange trio of individuals dedicated to rooting out moral corruption. Along with Mataichi, a strange monk, Nagamini, a monstrous hulk who is paradoxically a master of disguise and Ogin, a beautiful woman, Momosuke scours the land learning the truth behind the folklore, discovering the worst recesses of the human psyche and meting out just retribution.

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Requiem from the Darkness* plays a bit like *The Outer Limits* by way of EC comics giving us macabre stories with ironically just punishments. It's a nice approach to the standard ghost story formula that manages to evoke more atmosphere due to the greatest monsters being human beings.

7 Petite Cossette

ANIMATION STUDIO: **DOUMU**
MADE IN: **2004**

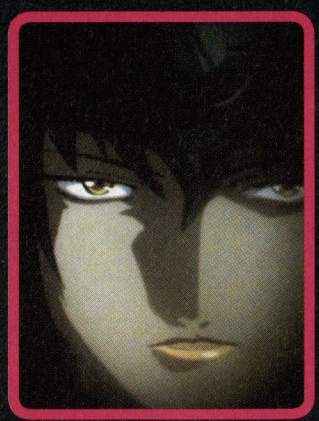
SETTING & CHARACTERS: Art student Eiri becomes obsessed with a beautiful young girl named Cossette, whose life he can see played out in the surface of a glass from the antique shop in which he works. Trapped there for hundreds of years after being murdered by her fiancee, Eiri is determined to help her, but to do so he'll have to pay a steep price.

WHY WE LIKE IT: A gothic love story, this three part OVA series is distinctive for its sense of surreal horror and excellent animation. Cossette, while pandering to loli-ism in looks, is actually quite a compelling character, forced to simultaneously seek her retribution and her release through Eiri.

9 Boogiepop Phantom

ANIMATION STUDIO: **MADHOUSE**
MADE IN: **2001**

SETTING & CHARACTERS: A blazing light shoots its way into the sky over a Japanese city. At first nothing seems wrong but it's not long before school kids start disappearing and committing suicide, and strange rumours about Boogiepop – the angel of death, and a creature called "the Manticore" start spreading. Each episode centres around one student, with the individual narratives overlapping to gradually form a whole.



WHY WE LIKE IT: Capturing the uncertainty and alienation of the city's youth through depressing storylines that combine the psychological and the supernatural, as well as a muted, hazy visual style and chunky cut up soundscape, *Boogiepop Phantom* can be slow going at times, but is ultimately satisfying.

6 Texhnolyze

ANIMATION STUDIO: **MADHOUSE**
MADE IN: **2003**

SETTING & CHARACTERS: Taking place mostly in the gritty subterranean city of Lukuss, a tenuous balance of power exists between rival gangs and other, more mysterious organisations. That balance is about to shattered and at the centre will be Ichise, a former underground fighter coming to terms with his past and uncertain of his future, Onishi, the boss of the most powerful syndicate in Lukuss, and Ran, a psychic girl who is intimately tied to the city. At the heart of *Texhnolyze* is the question of what the next evolution of humanity will be, and indeed whether humanity even has a future at all.

WHY WE LIKE IT: At times nihilistic and explosively violent, at others trancelike and moody, *Texhnolyze* paints one hell of a bleak picture. The story, while somewhat complex, is more often conveyed in collages of images than in dialogue, and the viewer is inexorably sucked in as events spiral out of control.

5 Gantz

ANIMATION STUDIO: **STUDIO GONZO**
MADE IN: **2004**

SETTING & CHARACTERS: A bunch of people are resurrected/teleported at the moment of death to a room in an apartment somewhere in Tokyo dominated by a black sphere that houses a comatose man and has a fondness for 1930s exercise tunes. It also can't spell very well. It also likes to take those resurrected people and send them on suicide missions against bizarre aliens who live slightly out of synch with modern day Japan.

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Gantz* is an absolute mind f**k. Nothing is explained save for the very basics leaving the viewer to decide what exactly is going on. No character is safe so you're always on your toes as to who is going to die next.

4 Serial Experiments Lain

ANIMATION STUDIO: **TRIANGLE STAFF**
MADE IN: **1999**

SETTING & CHARACTERS: Lain is an introverted high school student who, after receiving an email from a dead student, turns more and more to "The Wired" – the online world. Watched by shadowy characters in the real world and uncovering a powerful secret organization in The Wired, Lain's sense of self starts to fragment - it seems there's a separate, extroverted Lain taking over her life and world.

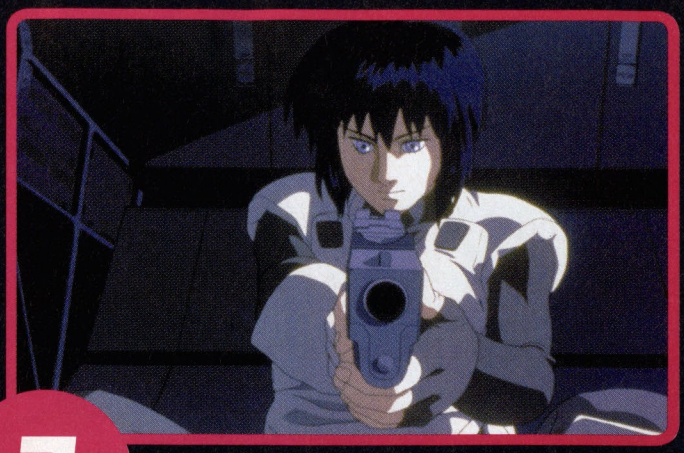
WHY WE LIKE IT: Psychological cyberpunk, *Lain* is a rumination on the blurring of boundaries between the real and the virtual, and as such, everything is open to interpretation. It can be quite complex and challenging, but in a good way - the slowly evolving storyline is engrossing, and the series as a whole is an aesthetic triumph.

3 Perfect Blue

ANIMATION STUDIO: **REX ENTERTAINMENT**
MADE IN: **1997**

SETTING & CHARACTERS: Mima Kirigoe decides to leave her life as a pop-idol behind to pursue her fortunes as an actress but the transition does not go smoothly. A disgruntled fan may be stalking her, someone has set up a website called Mima's Room that reveals her deepest secrets and the lines between the film she is in "Double Bind" and real life begin to blur. There's also a serial killer stalking the streets. Isn't that always the way?

WHY WE LIKE IT: Satoshi Kon has apparently channelled the spirit of Dario Argento (although he's not actually dead) in the making of *Perfect Blue*. The pace is perfectly measured and the inter-cutting between real life, dream sequences and the film within a film leaves the audience struggling to keep up; in a good way of course.



2 Ghost in the Shell

ANIMATION STUDIO: **PRODUCTION IG**
MADE IN: **1995**

SETTING & CHARACTERS: In the dystopian cyberpunk world of the future man and machine are indivisible, leading some people, like Major Motoko Kusanagi to ponder what it really is to be human; is it the flesh or is it the soul and if so, can a machine have a soul? In the midst of this pondering, Kusanagi and her partner Batou must track down a terrorist who goes by the name of the Puppet Master. Philosophical musings, action scenes and psychological torture ensue.

WHY WE LIKE IT: Kusanagi is a wonderfully compelling main character, the philosophy doesn't come across as incoherent whiny rambling (we're looking at you *Evangelion*) and Batou kicks an extraordinary amount of arse. One of the all-time greats of anime.

1 Paranoia Agent

ANIMATION STUDIO: **MADHOUSE**
MADE IN: **2004**

SETTING & CHARACTERS: With a huge ensemble cast, Paranoia Agent nominally follows the police investigation into a spate of beatings – all seemingly perpetrated by a young boy on inline skates, and all seemingly when the person in question simply couldn't take any more of life's stresses. Each episode tends to explore a different character or theme, taking the series to some weird places – inside a chivalric fantasy world, into an idealised past, behind the scenes of an animation studio, into the split personality world of a tutor by day, hooker by night, and along on an outing with a suicide pact group. As the series progresses, the disparate stories cleverly start to overlap and gradually come together.

WHY WE LIKE IT: Like all of Satoshi Kon's projects, the characters and world feel utterly fleshed out and real, giving the viewer a firm grounding, despite the frequent leaps into fantasy and magic realism. The content is inventive, clever and compelling, and the production values are absolutely top notch. This is simply one of the greatest series' of recent years.

WinWinWin

Win STREET FIGHTER ALPHA ANTHOLOGY for PS2!

8 COPIES UP FOR GRABS!

>> Now that we have our own custom Hyper arcade stick (see issue 149 pages 36-39), the Street Fighter games have once again become a mainstay of our office gaming habits, and with Alpha Anthology we've got a five in one package. Yes, SFAA isn't just an awesome acronym, it's also a veritable treasure trove of 2D fighting goodness, packing Alpha, Alpha 2, Alpha 2 Gold, Alpha 3 and Super Gem Fighter. What's even more appealing for the fans, however, are the hidden options, such as Hyper Street Fighter Alpha that lets you mix and match different versions of all the characters and go at it in versus mode, as well as a whole heap of secret options that allow you to alter very specific settings and play certain arcade revisions. Sweet. Thanks to THQ we have eight copies to give away, and to be in the running all you have to do is answer this simple question:

>> Which Street Fighter character was featured on Hyper's very first cover?

Send your answer, with your name and address to: **The Street Fighter Club, c/o Club President Malcolm Campbell, Hyper, 78 Renwick St, Redfern, NSW, 2016**, or email your entry to ***hypercomps@next.com.au*** with the comp name in the subject line. One entry per person please.

THQ

Win EUREKA SEVEN VOL. 1 on DVD and more!

10 PRIZE PACKS UP FOR GRABS!

>> As you'd know if you read our review, we're expecting big things from Eureka Seven. Coming from Studio Bones (who you probably know from Fullmetal Alchemist and Wolf's Rain) it's one of the most enjoyable new anime series' we've seen in ages, with interesting characters, fantastic direction and a world that you just want to be immersed in. It's also the only anime we've seen that combines kids piloting giant mechs and extreme sports and actually makes it cool. Seriously, what are the chances?

Thanks to Madman ten lucky readers will get the chance to find out what all the fuss is about. Each prize pack contains the Eureka Seven Collector's Box which comes with the Vol 1 DVD and a Eureka Seven manga, plus a Eureka Seven trucker's cap. To be in the running, just answer this simple question:

>> Who is the lead character in Eureka Seven?

Send your answer and your name and address to: **I've Got It!, Hyper, 78 Renwick St, Redfern, NSW, 2016**, or email your entry to ***hypercomps@next.com.au*** with the comp name in the subject line. One entry per person please.

Terms & Conditions: 1) Entry is open to residents of Australia and New Zealand except employees and immediate families of Next Publishing Pty Ltd and its agencies associated with the promotion. 2) Only entries completed with these terms and conditions will be eligible. 3) Competition begins 9am August 1 and entries close at 6pm September 13. 4) In determining eligibility the judge's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. 5) The winner will be drawn at 9am September 14 at Next Publishing Pty Ltd, 78 Renwick St, Redfern NSW 2016. 6) Prizes must be taken as offered and are not redeemable for cash. 7) The promoter is not responsible for misdirected or lost mail. 8) The winners names will be published in the November issue of Hyper on sale October 4. 9) 8 winners will each receive one copy of Street Fighter Alpha Anthology for PS2 (RRP $49.95). 10 winners will receive one Eureka Seven Collector's Box (RRP $44.95) and one Eureka Seven trucker's cap (RRP $29.95). Total value of competitions is $1148.60. The promoter is Next Publishing Pty Ltd ABN 88 002 647 645 of 78 Renwick St, Redfern NSW 2016.

TNT

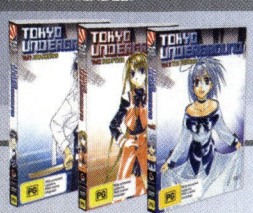
PRESENTS:

Deep under the ground of the capital city of Tokyo
exists a forgotten sunless world called...

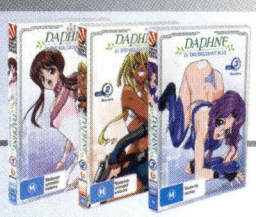
TOKYO UNDERGROUND

VOL4: ASSAILANTS

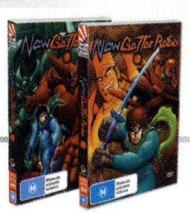
ALSO AVAILABLE:



TOKYO UNDERGROUND
VOLUME 1-3



DAPHNE
VOLUME 1-3



NEW GETTER ROBO
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INNO3D GEFORCE 7950 GX2

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WWW.ALTECH.COM.AU

Spending over a grand on a video card can hurt, especially with the rate at which the technology progresses – it seems like every time you whack a new card in your PC there's something bigger, better (hotter and louder) on the horizon. In such a situation there's only one of two things you can do – buy yourself something cheap and nasty to constantly fill the gap or get yourself an absolute beast of a card that will remain not necessarily cutting edge but definitely capable of pumping out the polygons for quite some time. The mouthful that is the Inno3D GeForce 7950 GX2 is such a card, plenty powerful for all of your needs whilst still managing to come in a little cheaper than some of its contemporaries. We don't have much of a test bench here at Hyper so we walked a good 15 feet down the hall and absconded with the PCPP test rig (which we have unfortunately been forced to give back – bastards) boasting an Athlon FX-60 running on a DFI-Lanparty nF4 SLI Expert with 2GB of DDR RAM. Running a standard suite of 3D Mark 05 (at 1024x768 no filtering) and 3D Mark 06 (at 1280x1024 also no filtering) we came up with scores of 12521 and 7798 respectively.

Without having a bunch of other cards to compare with the 7950 GX2 numbers really mean nothing so we put the card to the test doing what we do best – playing games. Once again we stole the games from PCPP, checking their stacks for those that they use for benchmarking. As a result we ended up with Doom 3 and F.E.A.R. Although we could have simply run the game in a benchmarking loop we opted to actually play the games (for scientific purposes of course). Doom 3 set on Ultra High Detail mode at 1600x1200 with 8x anti-aliasing was actually playable. Not amazingly so, notching up average framerates in the mid 30s with the occasional hiccup – usually coinciding with a spring-loaded cat style scare. Bumping the resolution down to 1280x1024 netted us a silky framerate that fluctuated between 70 and 90 f/ps. This is the way Doom 3 is meant to be played. Smooth and beautiful – it's just a pity that the card isn't actually powerful enough to make it a better game. F.E.A.R. on the other hand is both a beautiful and fun game, especially running at max settings at a resolution of 1600x1200. With everything pushed to the max we still managed to get steady framerates in the high 60s making the game remarkably playable.

Unfortunately with all the good there is a little bad that offsets it. The 7950 GX2 is a beast of a card in size as well as in power. Wilks though he'd nab the card for a weekend to give it a shot in his home box but it wouldn't actually fit in the architecture (and no, he's not dumb enough to try and cram a PCI Express card into an AGP slot) so you may want to do a little hunting online to see if there could be some installation problems before you fork out your cash. The card also comes bundled with Delta Force Xtreme, which is kind of like trying to sell a new DVD player by showing you a film of your parents having sex.

MEDIAGATE MG-35 & MEDIAGATE MG-350HD

RRP: $299 (MG-35), $399 (MG-350HD) / WWW.ANYWARE.COM.AU

The MG-350HD is the latest model in Mediagate's series of digital media players. While largely the same as the MG-35, it totes a number of improvements, most notably wireless network functionality, a redesigned remote, a slightly prettier menu system and more outputs on the back. Thankfully, that's all you'll really need.

Both the MG-35 and MG-350HD are excellent pieces of hardware, and – for us at least – make our home entertainment systems just a little more versatile and accessible. Set up is incredibly easy – open it up, plug in an IDE 3.5" HDD (set to master), then connect it to your network or computer. From there it appears as a drive and you just copy your video, music or photo files over to it. Simple. Once it's crammed full of data, you can run it out to just about anything – a normal TV, HDTV, projector, whatever. The MG-35 has component, composite and S-video outs, while the 350-HD has all those plus DVI. Both systems have both analogue and optical audio outs.

Getting the settings right is straightforward and we had it running through a projector at 720p (they can output at up to 1080i) in no time. Navigating the menus is simple, and while it takes a second or two to load up a video file, once it has playback is basically faultless. With support for a huge range of codecs we couldn't find a video file it wouldn't play. You can even rip a DVD straight to the HDD and play it with all the menus etc intact. The real test, however, was running high def videos. We downloaded and cued up a couple of movie trailers and they played flawlessly on our high def projector. Nothing like HD!

If you have a wireless LAN network setup at home, then the 350-HD model will be the one to go for, as it allows you to stream straight from your PC. You don't even need a HDD in the box.

While both models aren't small, they're definitely portable, and taking them around to a friend's is a simple matter of packing the unit, power and AV cables in a bag. For us though, the real attraction is having access to a huge archive of videos without having the hum of the PC in the background. And if you have your PC in a separate room to your home theatre, and are sick of cables trailing everywhere, this will make life a whole lot easier. It's a bit of a luxury, but it's a damn nice one.

QUASICON

RRP: $TBC / WWW.QUASIMOTO.COM • WWW.QUASIMOTO.COM/QUASICADE/QUASICON.PHP

Holy crap would you look at the size of this thing! That was pretty much our first impression of the QuasiCON, the game control panel from QuasiMOTO. You probably know them as the company that does a whole range of cabinet systems, and that's just what this panel is – a two player, all-in-one set up, taken from one of their upright cabinets. There's talk of releasing the CON as a standalone product out here to go up against the likes of X-Arcade, so we thought we'd check it out.

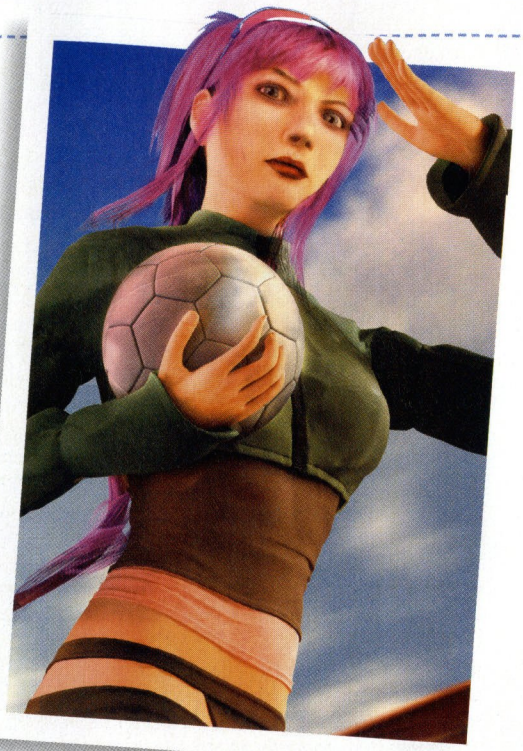
On the plus side, this baby has an abundance of functionality. Out of the box it comes with adapters for all the current gen consoles, as well as PC. Xbox 360 and PS3 adapters are on the way. Designed for two players, each side has an arcade stick, 13 pressure sensitive buttons and two analogue sticks. Yes, analogue sticks. And so you don't forget which buttons are which, the panel ships with little cards highlighting the button correlations for each system. Simply slip the card for the system you're currently playing in under the backlit panel and away you go.

Sounds great right? Well, it is and it isn't. When it's not locked into a cabinet it's so big it feels really unwieldy, and we have to say that using more than one of the analogue sticks in conjunction with a set of buttons is basically impossible. In other words, this system should be fine for Mario Kart, but not for Metal Gear Solid, so it really depends what you want to use it for. The layout itself isn't hugely comfortable either and we were constantly knocking into each other trying to play two player. Still, there's nothing else quite like this on the market, and no doubt the design will be refined in future iterations.

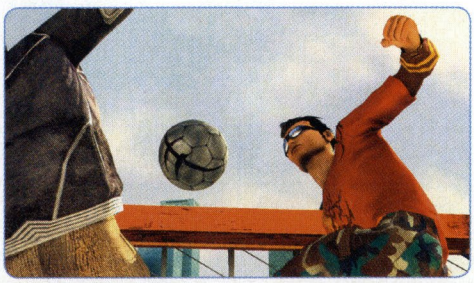
Like we said, however, this may not come out here, but if you'd like to enquire about it, you can shoot off a mail to the prospective distributors at sales@insidethelens.com.au.

SOCCER FURY

System: **PC** / Category: **MMO Sports** / Players: **Multi** / Developer: **NCSoft** / Due: **2007**



What do you get when you cross the beautiful game and martial arts action? Shaolin Soccer, or maybe any match that Vinnie Jones played in during his (in)famous career. Well, we're not talking about the movie or soccer hooliganism but rather Soccer Fury, yet another online game in the lineup from NCSoft. Rather than hacking your way through dungeons, Soccer Fury sees the player duking it out in frenetic three on three multiplayer-only urban freestyle soccer matches. While we have railed in the past about why we want everything to stop being urbanised, Soccer Fury is a little different. Rather than maintaining the faux ghetto urban chic that Western developers seem to have clung onto for dear life in the last few years, Soccer Fury instead has a decidedly Eastern urban flair; rather than feature a lineup of wannabe gangsters, characters in SF look like rejects from a Final Fantasy game (minus weapons bigger than their bodies) crossed with extras from The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift. It's garish, impossibly cool (for the sheer fact that it is so outlandishly wanting to be cool) and dead sexy thanks to a powerful and detailed graphics engine.



KILLER KICKS

Aside from the look, what really sets Soccer Fury apart from all the other impossibly cool urban Asian themed online 3-on-3 soccer games (of which there are so many it's hard to spit without hitting at least one) is the fact that it's not a game about playing fair. Although the requisite ball skills are required to play, characters in Soccer Fury also have access to an arsenal of motion captured martial arts moves. That's right; there's not a red or yellow card in sight so fighting should play an almost equal role to actual ball handling. From the limited play we've seen, the action, all rendered using the game engine, looks both impressive and bone crunching. From what we understand the AI will take the role of the goalkeeper so players can concentrate on the bashing and kicking aspects of the title. Players will be able to customise their character in a variety of different ways including hairstyle, outfits, tattoos and signature moves. Throughout the course of their careers, players will also be able to learn new ball handling and martial arts skills, giving a steady sense of progress.

Most interesting of all, Soccer Fury will utilise the NCSoft free to download and play but pay for additional/premium content distribution method. We're not sure what form said premium content will take but it can be fairly safely assumed that it will include a number of different arenas/fields, special moves that can only be purchased with filthy lucre and the best clothing/haircuts. Due out some time in 2007, Soccer Fury definitely looks like one to watch out for. 3-on-3 soccer is a blast, so is beating people up, and you definitely can't argue with the price tag.

DUNGEON RUNNERS

System: **PC** / Category: **MMO** / Players: **Multi** / Developer: **NCSoft** / Due: **TBC**

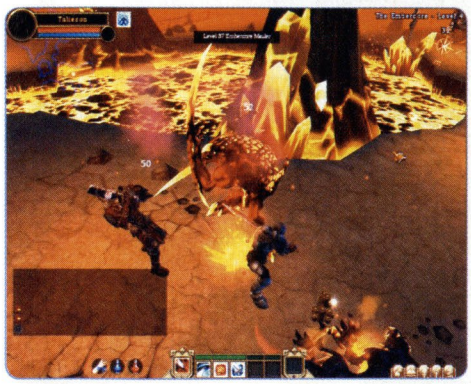
In an industry dominated by high retail prices and monthly subscription fees for online titles, NCSoft's approach for many of their upcoming games seems a little out of whack. Crazy even. Titles like Dungeon Runners, Soccer Fury and Exteel will be free to download and play, with revenue generated through premium content that players can purchase. It's a bold new model, but whether it will pay off remains to be seen.

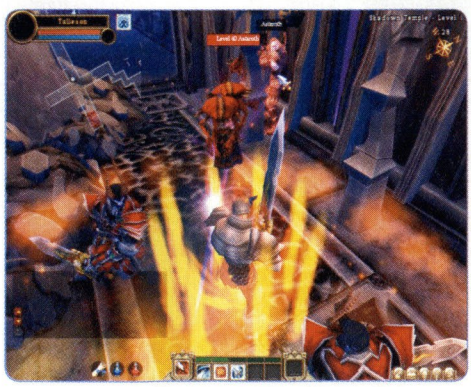
GIMME!

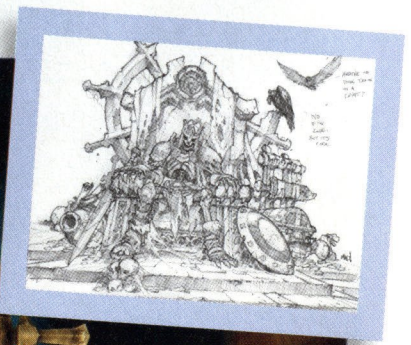
Essentially an MMO for people without the huge amount of time on their hands required to progress in a traditional MMO, Dungeon Runners essentially combines the action of Diablo and the aesthetic of World of Warcraft into a very appealing looking whole. Players will be able to create their character from a limited pool of three classes: Warrior, Warlock or Ranger, but will be able to customise them through talent trees and gear choices. As far as we can see there really is no plot to speak of in Dungeon Runners, rather a flimsy excuse to venture into instance after instance to reap rewards and kill things. This is acquisition driven gaming at its purest and that's not necessarily a bad thing.

In the grind for experience and gear, Dungeon Runners should be able to keep things fresh and fun by having all instanced content randomised. Every dungeon run in the game will be different from the last, the only similarities being the aesthetic and monster choice which is determined by the style of dungeon the players choose. These randomised dungeons should also dynamically scale with the level of the player (it is fully possible to play the game single player apparently) or with the average level of the party. The level of item drops (something very important in Diablo style games) should also dynamically vary depending on the levelling and gear of the group or individual delving into a dungeon, so players will be able to get a real sense of achievement and character progression. There was also talk at E3 of being able to set time limits on dungeons so players with limited time to play will be able to bash their way through a 90 minute dungeon and still feel like they've done something, but we're currently unsure as to whether this is a feature the developers are planning on implementing or PR agents talking out of their arses to get extra exposure for their title.

As far as premium purchasable content goes, few details have been released as yet but we do know that paying customers will have access to some premium dungeons as well as some powerful items. We don't know at this stage if players will be simply able to buy the premium items or if they will simply have access to areas where said items will drop, but we hope it will be the latter; simply being able to buy the most powerful items in game would negate a lot of the point of this style of game. Why play a game about acquiring new items if you can simply put them on your credit card and be done with it?

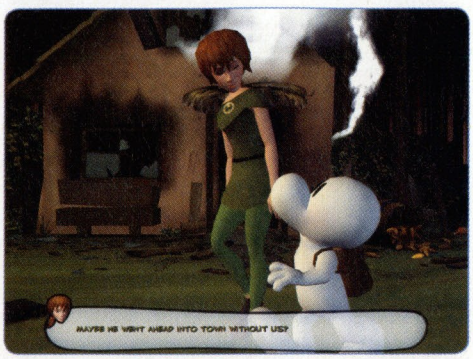






BONE: The Great Cow Race

It's commonly known that **Tim Henderson** is afraid of farms



For those just entering the series, Bone: The Great Cow Race is actually the second chapter in the Bone saga, which is being delivered as episodic content structured around Jeff Smith's graphic novels. It's not wholly self-contained, and like its predecessor, Out from Boneville, it's rather short. It's also better.

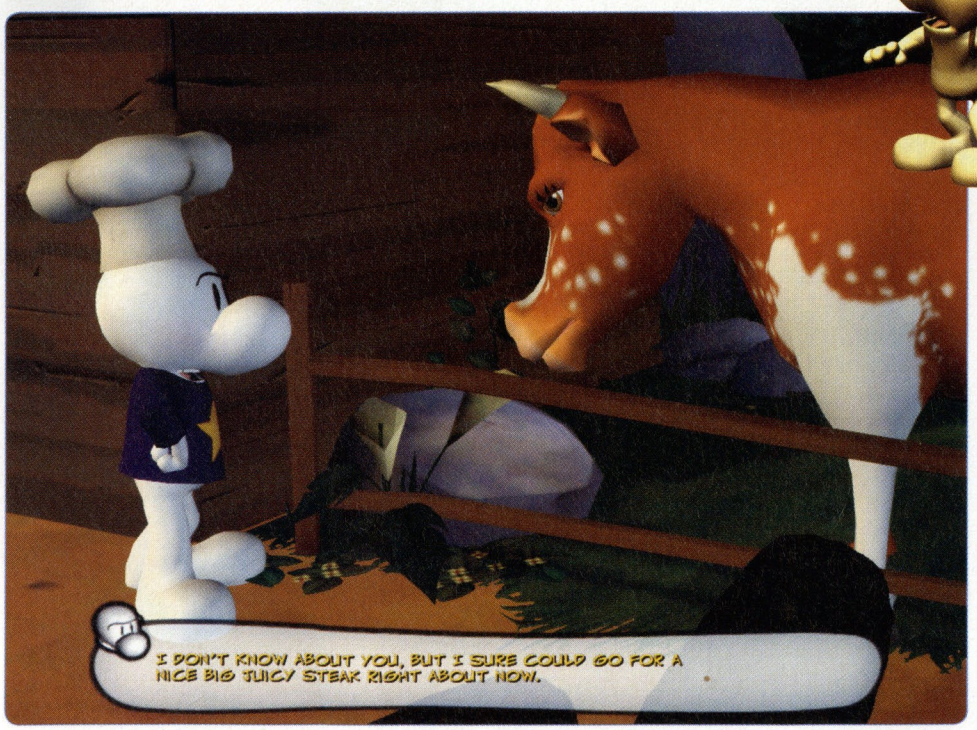
NO RISK COW RACE

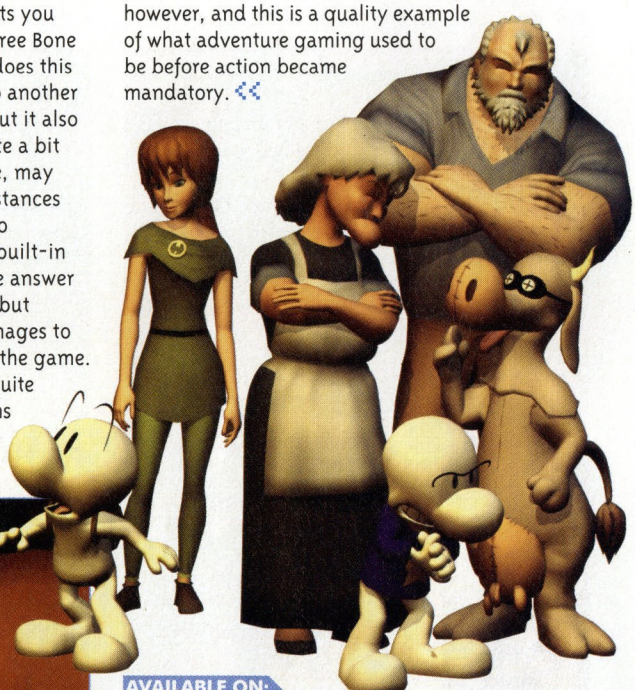
Out from Boneville was a charming little adventure, but it suffered in a few areas, most notable of all being its difficulty. Its puzzles were very straightforward, and it was simply too easy as result. Puzzles are the meat and potatoes of an adventure game, and if it can't manage a series of creative object and logic puzzles, then it's in danger of feeling a lot like an interactive storybook. Boneville came dangerously close to this at times, but Cow Race is at absolutely no risk. Using the same self-explanatory mouse interface that takes upon itself the task of separating what can be looked at, spoken to, or interacted with, The Great Cow Race certainly isn't out to confuse newcomers. This makes the game immediately accessible, but it's the character breakdown that makes it interesting.

The first Bone game, as well as most adventure titles of past and present, only provided multi-character play on a very superficial level: Play as one character for a bit, finish a set of puzzles, then play as another character for a while, and so on. The difference between characters is merely cosmetic, and since the interface always stays the same, puzzles are dictated by the location rather than any specific ability. Well, The Great Cow race does away with the taking turns logic, and instead lets you play as any of the three Bone characters at any given time. Not only does this allow you to move from one situation to another to prevent frustration when stumped, but it also increases the interest of the puzzles quite a bit as the actions of Fone Bone, for instance, may well help to change some of the circumstances surrounding Smiley Bone. If this gets too troublesome, then the game features a built-in hint system, edging players towards the answer without giving it outright. It's a simple but utterly ingenious idea that actually manages to remove all elements of frustration from the game.

!!! Check out Telltale's website – ***telltalegames.com*** – to try out the demo, download the full game, or check out a trailer for an upcoming Sam & Max sequel. Yes, that franchise is still struggling to live on... Like fruitcake!

The story follows the Cow Race comic quite closely, differing and extending situations just enough to make sure that it isn't a complete cakewalk for those who have read it. The visuals are full 3D, but they do a rather likeable job of keeping it smooth and simple, which is just how Bone should be. There's honestly not a lot at fault here, but it's perhaps worth noting that loading times can be harsh, and although the voice acting is quite well done, the recording quality at times leaves a bit to be desired. The overall production values are fantastic for an Indie title, however, and this is a quality example of what adventure gaming used to be before action became mandatory. <<





AVAILABLE ON:
PS2 / XBOX / **PC** / GCN

DETAILS:

CATEGORY: Adventure / **PLAYERS:** 1 / **DEVELOPER & PUBLISHER:** Telltale Games / **PRICE:** US $12.99 (direct download) / **RATING:** N/A / **AVAILABLE:** Now

HYPER VERDICT:

PLUS: Multiple playable characters actually well implemented, resulting in some nifty puzzles.

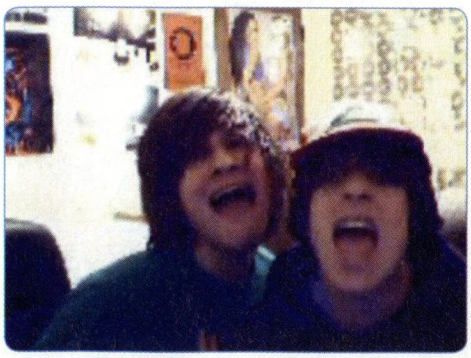
MINUS: Loading times. Low quality voice recording.

VISUALS	SOUND	GAMEPLAY	OVERALL
82	82	84	84

Probably the single best adventure game about a cow race ever.

LINKS

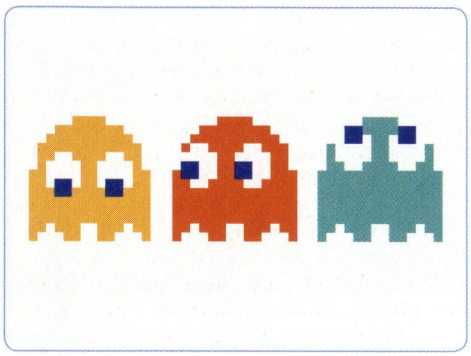
with your host, **Kosta Andreadis**



Videos, Videos, Videos

- ***http://www.youtube.com/index***
- ***www.fbi.gov/wanted.htm***

There's only one site out there that lets you see clips from shows like Chappelle's Show, Alf and other fine comedies, as well as provide home video versions re-enacted by what can only be described as 'sluggish witted yanks' and that's YouTube. It's opened up streaming video technology and content on the Internet in a big way and you can't visit a forum or blog anywhere without some sort of embedded YouTube hot linking going on. It's even one-upped Google video which is pretty cool - if you're a nerd. There's an easy way to tell, yell out "Google" and anyone who says "I just Googled your name and got taken to the FBI's Most Wanted Site" is a nerd and should be killed for knowing too much.



Easy Money, Like Totally!

- ***www.randi.org/research/index.html***

Apparently all you have to do is prove any sort of paranormal or supernatural behavior and you're in for a cool million. Uh, hello, how come nobody told me about this yet? Because, I am like sooo psychic! This one time my best friend Brenda came to school wearing a pink sweater and I totally wore a blue sweater that day knowing she was going to wear pink! Also this other time we were at the mall buying clothes at the, err, Gap and we umm – someone please make it stop! Actually, being possessed by an adolescent American teen girl could land me the million dollars. And this could be the proof!

Parallel Midgets

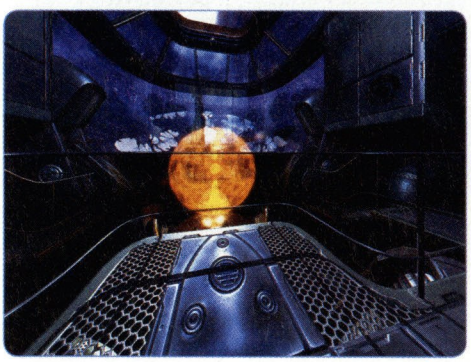
- ***worm.bluesfear.com/***

How big is the Internet? Glad you asked Timmy (that's right, your name is Timmy now) – because the Internet is large, really large. Not quite as big as the universe we currently live in but perhaps a smaller parallel universe filled with midgets who drive around in tiny cars and drink tea out of tiny cups. In the midget universe they also have the Internet, and it's also quite large, about as big as our universe. How's that for a paradox!? Of course, I'm making this up. Or am I – how's that for a paradox!? Hmm, all this talking about paradoxes is making me hungry. Strange that I'm not thirsty, how's that for a paradox!? I like the word paradox.

Russians Still Bitter

- ***www.prodisney.ru/clones.php***
- ***en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communism***

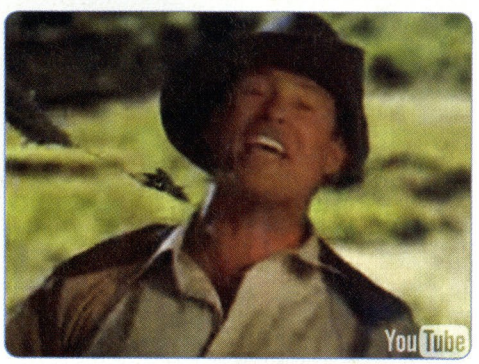
It seems that the Russians didn't take losing something like the Cold War lightly - in fact they're pretty upset about it and have aimed their sights on the heart of American culture, Disney. In what is clearly communist propaganda this Russian website claims that Disney have skimped on production costs and have re-used the same animation cells over and over across the same and other movies. It's an interesting theory and the photographic evidence is as airtight as, err, something that doesn't allow air to pass through it, but the fact remains that this so called 'conspiracy' stems from Russia. Russia!



Panorama

- ***www.panogames.com/***

Some say widescreen gaming is the future whilst others, like the guy who lives in the alley behind my house, say that the government has a network of spies that live inside your teeth and tell you to drink cheap wine and yell at the moon for being lazy. So really, who knows what to believe? Perhaps widescreen gaming is the future and sure the screens that claim to be wide on the market today are longer than they are tall but who decided that was wide enough? In my opinion screens should be so wide that the ends touch each other. But hey, I'm picky, here's a link of some nice panoramic gaming moments.



Hasslehoff Sings and other stuff

- ***www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/feature/36588/Staff_List_100_Awesome_Music_Videos***

MTV has forever changed the way pop music and music in general is sold to the general public, mostly for the bad. But on the plus side they did give us Punk'd, Ashton Kutcher's groundbreaking show where he gets to move his baseball cap on a slight angle and yell out "you got Punk'd". Apart from that MTV is a sewer of badly filmed "hip hop" and "rock" videos by pre-teen ass clowns and middle aged shills. But over the years there have been some pretty sweet music videos like David Hasselhoff's "Hooked on a Feeling" which you can watch on page two of this link.

The WOW Chronicles

Instances I have known and loved.

ELBASTARDO

Instances are dungeons, called this because they isolate and remain static for the group that is in them at the time. They are the high points in the challenging combat in World of Warcraft as well as being some of the strangest, most interesting settings.

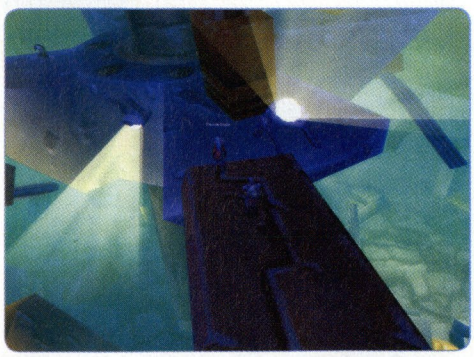
They are also the place to go and get the filthy phat lewt that every single one of us craves in our dirty hearts. More power! More money! More women!

DEADMINES

Deadmines is a challenging instance for characters in their low levels. The good thing about Deadmines is that it mainly features human opponents, no monsters with strange powers. It's like boot camp for dungeons, teaching you all about working together, preventing monster runaways and adds. Also, you fight an evil fishman who works professionally as a cook. I got lucky here in that I worked with a fine warrior called Rhodal. Also, this seems to be wholly inspired by the seminal drama 'The Goonies'. Score! As a plus, you fight a goblin in a battlemech with spinning blades for a hand.

THE STOCKADE

There's nothing quite like acting as the riot police for a corrupt fascist power and that's what the Stockade is all about: executing prisoners. The whole narrative, role-playing element is emphasised in the Stockade as several quests paint a picture of civil disobedience and secret societies. I'm sure it's all very moving but the only thing I read when getting quests is 'Reward'. Also, this is very, very small, loaded down with things to do. And it's easy. We like easy.



[above] Deathmines: RAZORHANDX0R!
[above right] The Stockade: Civil Disobedizzzzzzz
[right] Wailing Caverns: Lobstrocity!

WAILING CAVERNS

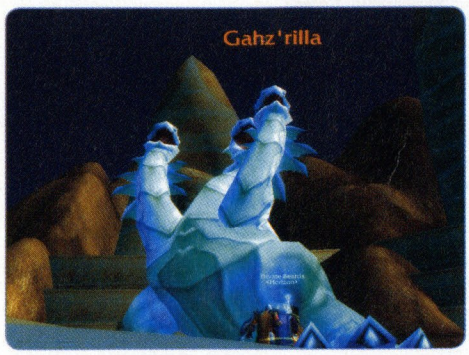
This is a Horde dungeon, the second that they are sent to. By the time the Alliance is in a position to even know where the damn thing is, they're already way too tough for it. This is good because, if you're a little man like me with a chip on his shoulder, the fake sense of power you get from cutting down giant bog men and hopelessly effeminate evil elfs is... heady. Almost sexual. I recommend it.

GNOMEREGAN

This place is awful. I honestly believe it is rated three or four levels too low for its difficulty ratings. The Gnomish capital city has been taken over by the mean and nasty subterranean race called Troggs. The Gnomes flooded it with radiation before they fled, mutating the monsters within and sending the trapped gnomes mad. What this means is, this enormous frigging dungeon goes on for miles, robots run up to you screaming 'WARNING! MONSTERS! COME SWAMP THIS STUPID PLAYER AGAIN!' Also, gnomes are tiny, tiny little fellows. They are hard to see, let alone fight. What's more, not a single bit of useful magic weapons or armour dropped for me here. I hate Gnomeregan and I can only wish a slow, sad death to the entire Gnomish race.

ULDAMAN

Now this is the finest dungeon that I've been in so far. Grossly stealing from Indiana Jones, it's an ancient complex the Titans, giant space gods, used as an experimental lab. It has a host of different monsters, a specialty quest for enchanters, a wide variety of landscapes for different tactics and techniques in battle and it's loaded down with things to loot from the bodies of your foe! I wish all dungeons were as good as this one. Of course, at the end, there's some nonsense about dwarves being the most perfect being in creation. Good for fans of the back story, bad for people like me who are dubious about tiny drunken Scotsmen being the favoured children of the Gods. Of course, the finest group I ever worked with took me through here. Hello Miriamage, Stonesdwarf and Mei.



ZUL'FARRAK

In the deserts of Tanaris, a race of crazy-ass frigging trolls live in a city where they worship a gigantic hydra and have gladiatorial games. They also carry nothing worth looting, run away all the time, bringing massive amounts of adds with them and use a variety of powers it can be difficult to counter. Crazy voodoo Aztec architecture makes this dungeon fun to play in but all there is to fight is trolls and one giant lizard and that gets real old real quick. Unfortunately, lots of quests require repeat visits to the damn place. Worse, oh so worse, there's two specific magic swords in Zul'Farrak that are particularly ace. Each has less than one percent chance to drop from one of the bosses here. If you have both, you can combine them into one super sexy sword. Don't try it. Just don't. After three weeks, neither one dropped for me and now I need calming medication. Just don't.

[above left] Gnomeregan: floodlit and too hard
[far left] Ulderman: featuring the World's Tallest Dwarf
[left] Zul'Farrak: not Godzilla

Next month – *The long slow painful climb to fifty*

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bGamer www.bgamer.com.au	Online Retailer	PS2, PSP, MP3 Players
Burn Direct www.burn.com.au	Online Retailer	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, Gameboy, GBA
Devoted DVD www.devoted.com.au	Shop 5, Rovergom Village, South Marrang VIC. Ph: 03 9436 4566	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA
Dick Smith Electronics / Dick Smith Powerhouse www.dse.com.au	http://dse.findnearest.com.au/	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, Gameboy, GBA.
DVD Crave www.dvdcrave.com.au	Shop 1/471 Payneham Road, Felixstow SA. Ph: 08 8365 5231	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA,
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Games Wizards www.gameswizards.com	22 Stores located in NSW, VIC & ACT. Ph 1300 131 670 for your nearest store.	PC, PS2, DS, Xbox, Xbox 360, PSP, Gamecube, GBA, Mac
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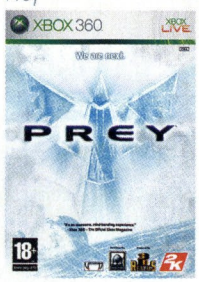
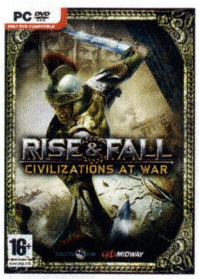


PC
Rise & Fall



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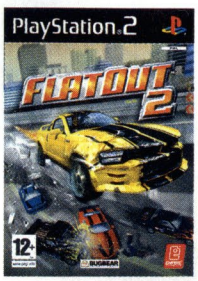
FlatOut 2



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VIRTUA FIGHTER 5

This month we were lucky enough to talk to **Makoto Oskai**, the Producer and General director of Virtua Fighter 5...

HYPER: For Virtua Fighter 5 one of your goals is to break away from a two dimensional fighting system. Could you tell us some of the game design elements that will help you do that?

Oskai: The fighting system (offence and defence) of conventional Virtua Fighter is basically 2 directions, front side and back side. In the case of VF5, offence and defence from 4 directions becomes possible since we changed the various effects of attacking from lateral directions.

How will this change the "feel" of the game?

Beginners will be able to enjoy VF5 without thinking about it. The skilful players can generate more pressure and damage to their opponents because of different effect of the techniques from the front side. The player who is about to be attacked from the lateral direction has to prepare different choice from usual.

Tell us about the two new characters Eileen and El Blaze. What are their strengths and weaknesses? Are they designed for advanced players or for everyone?

El Blaze is specialized in the characteristics for anteroposterior movement and action. His attacks from running are all powerful. The techniques for close fighting are also easy to perform. But, his short reach is his weakness since he is a smaller character comparatively.

Eileen is the character you can attack your opponents with using main techniques in combination while you keep moving. Since she has a lot of speedy techniques, you can make your own fighting rhythm while you prevent your opponents' attack. But her offensive power is moderate and her weight is light, so there is a possibility that she may lose her health in a breath when the opponents make a rush on her.

And both characters are created for all players. Even if you've never played the VF series, you can play El Blaze easily. In case you have played some fighting games, you will be able to use Eileen sooner. However, I think the best way for progress is to select a character whom you feel the most comfortable.

How many polygons are there in each character model and arena? How does this compare to previous titles?

We don't tell you the exact polygon numbers, but it's about double from Virtua Fighter 4. Actually, the increase of texture capacity is more than the one of polygons. A lot of texture data is used for next generation graphics such as Normal Mapping, Specular Mapping function.

How easy will it be to port the game to PS3? Is the Lindbergh hardware comparable to the PS3 or Xbox 360?

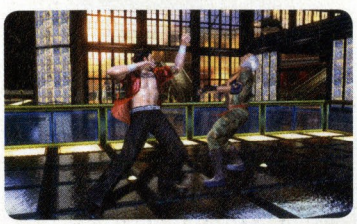
The CELL CPU of PS3 is powerful, but the architecture is much different from the one of Lindbergh, so we have to make an effort for that reason when porting. A different way of thinking and a quest for unknown techniques is required. When comparing the next generation consoles such as PS3 and Xbox360, we can't say if the performance of Lindbergh is equal to them since each console has both merits and demerits, but the graphic processing capability is almost the same.

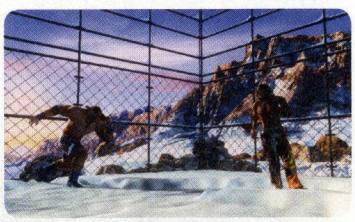
The IC-CARD, replay kiosks and character customisation kiosks for VF5 at arcades are a fantastic idea. Are there any plans to bring these to arcades outside Japan?

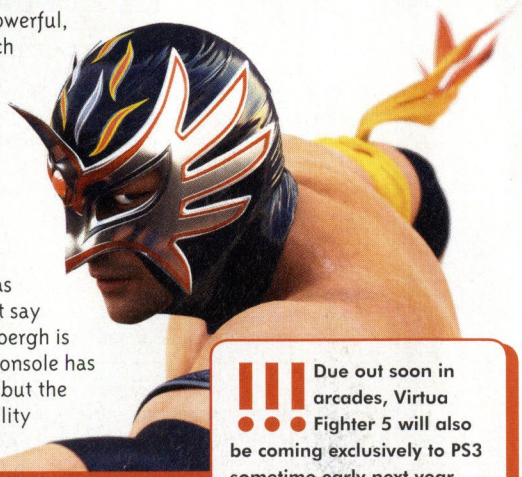
We don't have specified plan at a moment.

How many hours of playtesting goes into a new VF to ensure that the game is balanced?

We of course perform test play, but the importance is to set up certain directionality when creating the techniques, which takes quite a lot of time. To create just one technique, we discuss internally its match with the character and the directionality of the techniques which we will create, and then decide it. We can't say exact time for these works, but we are creating the techniques for each character in such a way. <<







!!! Due out soon in arcades, Virtua Fighter 5 will also be coming exclusively to PS3 sometime early next year.

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Land of the Rising Fun

With Hyper's Japanese Correspondent **Jonathan Ikeda**

おはよう。

Hello, readers (and non-readers), and welcome to the first of my frequent-ish reports from the "nation of a billion vending machines", Japan. I live in beautiful Kyoto, just a few miles away from Nintendo's impregnable HQ, and I've been here for the past two years. Before that, I spent most of my time writing about games and music in my native Britain. But the weather's bad there and the food's dull, so I decided to book a one-way flight to Osaka. It was a trip worth making. After all, it means I can now provide a Japanese service to your beloved Hyper – what could be more worthy than that? Let's be friends and let's eat lots of raw fish – yoroshiku onegai shimasu.

Bargain of the moment

The Xbox 360 is not at all popular here in Japan. I mean, no one cares about it and even fewer actually own a system. (Well, okay, there are about 130,000 Xbox 360 owners across Japan, but compare that with 12 million PS2 owners or 11 million DS owners and you can see how insignificant Microsoft's position is). Anyway, for those of us who do have a Japanese 360 unit, in some ways the console's unpopularity is good news. Especially when shopping for Xbox 360 games. Sofmap, one of the leading electronic store chains in Japan, as well as most indie retailers, have cut the prices of titles from the Japanese 360 launch to just Y2,800 (around $33 Australian). Cheap-o! Although I still wouldn't buy Perfect Dark Zero for that price, Ridge Racer 6 becomes essential.

TITLE: **Ridge Racer 6**
FORMAT: **Xbox 360**
BARGAIN PRICE: **¥2,800**
WHERE: **Almost everywhere**

Magazine of the moment

Weekly Famitsu is the Big Daddy of Japanese game mags. It has a circulation just short of one million copies (incredible for a weekly release) and it's been going strong for 20 years. In fact, the magazine celebrated its 20th anniversary last month with a slew of prime-time TV ads (which pictured Famitsu being used as evidence in a mock Japanese court trial) and a few special editions. This golden beauty (pictured) included all sorts of historical feature articles, including a chronological account of games in Japan from 1989 to 1994 (complete with countless photos of boomtime Japanese gamers) and a huge piece on the evolution of sports games developed in Japan. All nostalgic stuff, of course, which made for a great read. Shame Famitsu's reviews are so short (each writer is limited to a single paragraph with which to critique a whole game), but still, this is a part of Japanese culture – and not merely videogame culture, as everyone here knows about Famitsu – which shows no sign of going away.

TAG: **Weekly Famitsu**
PUBLISHED BY: **Enterbrain**
PRICE: **Y390**
FREQUENCY: **Weekly**
PAGES: **210**

(background) The sun sets behind the mountains which encircle Kyoto.

IKEDA'S EYES

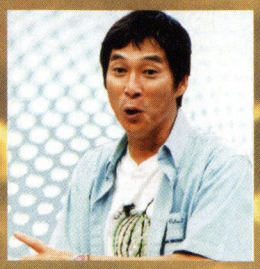
This is where I show off my recent photographs to give you a glimpse of life in Japan. Enjoy.

In Gion, Kyoto, famous for the geisha and maiko girls who walk its streets (but, technically, are not streetwalkers), cherry blossom pours over detailed walls.

TV show of the moment

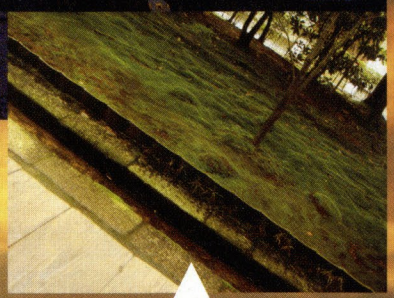
Sanma is a mega-goofy Japanese comedian-cum-presenter with his own variety show on Fuji TV. There's a part of his programme which is dedicated to members of the public who have a desire to give a karaoke performance for the benefit of Sanma's millions of (mostly female) viewers. To say it's a big laugh would be like saying that Godzilla is quite tall. My favourite entry this month was a supremely camp recital of a forgotten enka – a slow Japanese ballad, mournful in the extreme – which was concluded by the gentleman responsible for it with the most fey arigatou gozaimasu I've ever heard. It got Sanma laughing so hard he ended up rolling around on the studio floor. Check Youtube (type 'sanma') – there's bound to be some proof of this great comic's insanity caught in the Net.

NAME: **Sanma**
CHANNEL: **Fuji TV**
WHEN: **Sunday evenings, from 7pm**



The Kyoto Station building, fronted by bold neon, looks like a design from a Kubrickian future. In fact, it was designed by a Frenchman.

The sun shines on Osaka's Den Den Town, the electronic heart of Kansai and rival to Akihabara for the position of Japan's Otaku Capital.



Moss grows everywhere in Japan; here at Kyoto's Ryoan-ji it carpets the floor and glows when rain falls.

Album of the moment

Ryuichi Sakamoto has been based in New York for the past decade or so, but he's still flying the Japanese flag of avant garde composition (if such a flag exists) after playing a key role in Yellow Magic Orchestra (Japan's own Kraftwerk) throughout the 1980s. These days Sakamoto is exploring acoustics and textures with the likes of Alva Noto. Revep is the latest Sakamoto collaboration, in 20-minute EP form on the German label Raster-Noton, and it's one of the most beautiful things you'll hear this year. With 'ax Mr.L.', the last of three pieces here, Sakamoto's classic Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence theme song even makes a weird cameo which sounds audacious (and inspired) against the brushes of sublime electro-acoustic tone which paint the rest of the EP.

TITLE: **Revep**
ARTISTS: **Alva Noto + Ryuichi Sakamoto**
LABEL: **Raster-Noton (www.raster-noton.de)**

THE REAL DEAL

BY DYLAN BURNS

With the latest technology enabling games to seem closer to real life than has ever been possible, realism in games is becoming the focal point for both developers and consumers. But what exactly is realism?

Philosophically speaking, to assert a realist position is to say that objects are mind-independent, i.e. they exist even if you cease to do so and are fixed parts of the world. Other boffins, anti-realists, argue that objects are simply creations of our minds and that the 'real world' exists solely as representations within our minds – the Matrix effect. Generally speaking, we usually accept what our senses tell us to be real, as in the real world we live in. If it tastes like steak, it probably is steak.

REPRESENT

Games present an interesting case for realism as there is something called the representative theory of perception. Basically, what this theory maintains is that our knowledge of the world, and hence meaning, is derived from our own subjective experiences. Under this theory, there is no real difference between dreaming of a white rabbit and actually seeing one, it is simply the cause of the experience that is different. In the case of games this would suggest that images on the screen cause the same kinds of emotions and epistemological gains as real life experiences, except that the causes are different. However, games throw in the extra phenomenon of action; they are not simply observed, like films or art, they are played and therefore physical action and involvement is required. This interaction serves as a conduit or link between the realistic representations on-screen and the player and may even serve to deepen the experience, making it more real.

As games become increasingly realistic - visually, aurally, morally and in terms of breadth and scope - gamers naturally come to expect more for their gaming dollar. No longer are titles taking place in fictitious worlds such as Candy Land or Redfern, but realistic locations such as New York, Los Angeles, London and... well, actually just those three cities. Players are invited to step into the technological re-creation of actual geographical areas. To aid this developers are increasingly encouraging their artists and level designers to study photographs of real locations or use satellite imagery and field trips for inspiration. For Call of Duty 2 (PC), the whole design of what a French village should look like changed after a team trip to key locations from the game, impacting upon the end user experience dramatically.

There are many ways that realism can be measured in games: physics, graphics, vocal and lip synching, large gaming worlds and artificial intelligence - the list goes on and all of these elements interact to make a game seem more realistic. In the end you sit before the finished amalgamation of all these separate elements. Behind the façade of pretty visuals are many contributing underpants gnomes. A great looking game without any kind of physics engine or which is totally devoid of coherent level design is really only one step away from an impressive screen saver. Take away game objectives, plot or scripting and there ain't much there to keep you interested. Making games so realistic that gamers don't even notice how much effort has been put into them is actually very time consuming and expensive, hence increasing development costs and intriguing design directions such as releasing games episodically, a la SiN Episodes, so that future installments can be shaped to consumers' reactions and desires.

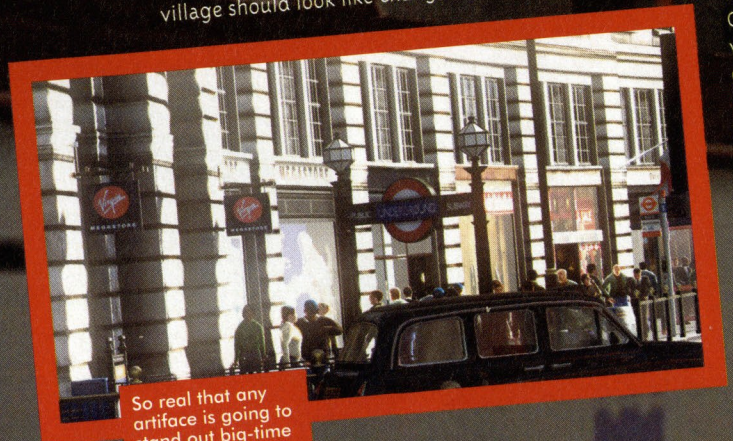
There also exist several game design structures that are sacrosanct. Things like including a HUD, allowing you to heal or have extra lives, the ability to save and pause the game and so on. Developers really are balancing on a razor's edge because if they fall too far into realism then games become too complicated and confusing, yet the lack of inherent complexity is something that causes just as much angst.

Of course none of these elements are actually realistic or ever present in real life. We don't say to ourselves "How much health do I have? Hang on I'll just bring up my HUD in front of my eyes. It's okay, I'm on 94%. I knew I shouldn't have eaten that curry puff. Inventory? That's fine too: a truncheon, two lollipops, blonde wig... and I just auto-saved my life, so I should be right to stick my head in the microwave and see what happens". We recognise these elements to be unrealistic, yet they make sense to include in games because otherwise we probably wouldn't bother playing them. We need to know how much health we have, how much ammo or supplies are left and the ability to save is something that is simply essential in this age of short attention spans and surprise visits from relatives.

PLEASE EXPLAIN

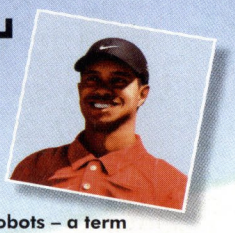
In order to make these essential packets of information seem realistic writers often put in some story quirk to accommodate the inventory or HUD features of a game. Gordan Freeman's hazard suit explains the on-screen visualisation of his health and energy levels and any game where you play as a human/cyborg character simply has to resort to the old computer-display-hooked-into-your-retinal-nerve spiel. If the game is played in third person then the inclusion of game statistics on-screen does little to distract you as it's already been established that you aren't experiencing the game from an explicitly subjective position.

Driving games take a similar direction by adopting circular speedometer readings and other car-specific screen elements to make you feel like you're behind the wheel. Next time you're playing a game, take a few minutes to study the layout and format of your

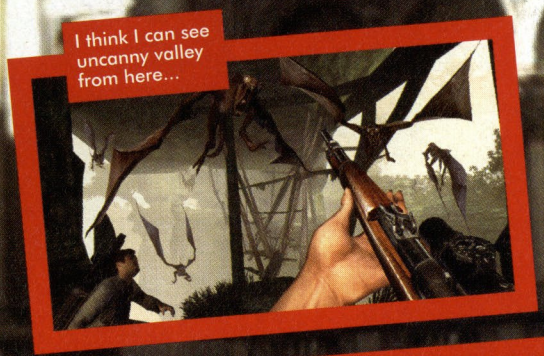


So real that any artifact is going to stand out big-time

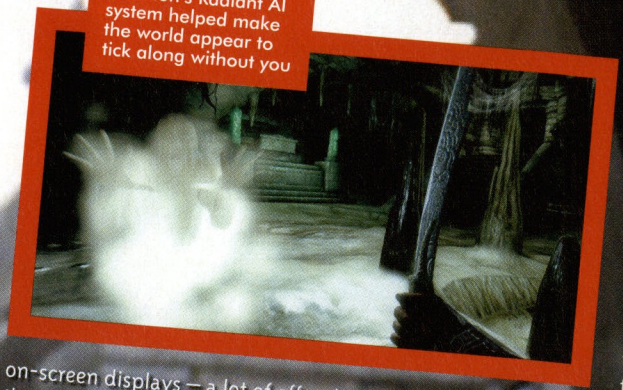
THE UNCANNY VALLEY



No, it's not a reference to Pamela Anderson's cleavage, but a term coined by one Dr. Masahiro Mori, a Japanese roboticist, to describe the sudden dip in empathic responses to human-looking robots – a term that is equally applicable to any artificial representation of human beings. As a robot/model becomes closer to looking human, our emotional responses are piqued, but there lies an area - the uncanny valley or 'bukimi no tani' - where the reaction actually becomes repulsive; the image just seems plain creepy. However, as a more realistic representation is offered beyond this point, our reactions again become positive and empathic. This certainly helps to explain why many CG and in-game characters don't seem quite right - and most probably those of many future games as well.



A GREAT LOOKING GAME WITHOUT ANY KIND OF PHYSICS ENGINE OR COHERENT LEVEL DESIGN IS REALLY ONLY ONE STEP AWAY FROM AN IMPRESSIVE SCREEN SAVER



Oblivion's Radiant AI system helped make the world appear to tick along without you

on-screen displays – a lot of effort has (hopefully) gone into them. Of course you're not expected to notice them until you need them; they're designed to accommodate as smooth an adventure as possible. The balance between information and screen clutter must be one that causes many hair-pulling design meetings the world over.

It's also true that games are constantly evolving, either through individual innovation or emulation, so that certain features become the norm for particular genres - games that only allow you to carry two weapons, for example. Many players at first thought this a bit strange and restrictive. We just assumed that our character hid his/her weaponry in some kind of inter-dimensional attaché case, Mary Poppins style, or stuffed within unmentionable orifices. The design restriction of two weapons is now common for the FPS. In fact, we hardly question it. Instead of hoarding every weapon and maybe only using the big guns in a couple of tight situations, it becomes fun to find your favourite combination with limited weaponry.

Recent games, including the aforementioned Call of Duty 2 and King 'longest official game name ever' Kong, have followed another path, doing away with health notices and ammo counts in an attempt to immerse players deeper than ever and removing that need for a quick eye flick to the health bar and ammo count. At first disconcerting, this move makes a lot of sense and once you get used to it may even find you cursing games with health bars. Not only are you immersed in the game but there comes a need to play even more cautiously than before. Graphical effects such as bloody flashes across your vision or heavy breathing certainly make you feel more vulnerable and close to death than in games where the health bar simply reaches zero with little or no damage effect up until then (although who didn't love the pained expressions on your marine's face in Doom as his health dropped to near fatal levels?).

Other games go even further in terms of bodily damage. In Boiling Point, become too wounded and your gait becomes a laboured limp until you can heal. In Morrowind, whenever you fall from a great height or are knocked down by a particularly nasty opponent, your character is momentarily winded or stunned. Little effects like this certainly help, though there is a fine line between coolness and annoyance. As has already been stated, too much realism can be just as bad as too little. Though some players love micro-management with a worrying passion, others simply can't be bothered having to decide the exact nutritional content of each in-game meal or how many yams it takes to keep a neighbouring dictator happy.

Call of Duty - highly immersive, but it often felt scripted

AN ESCAPE?

With the dawning of the next generation of consoles, game realism is going to be rammed down our throats like asylum medication. Photorealistic graphics are closer than ever, as is truly emergent and player-influenced gameplay - where you are the one shaping major points of the game narrative. AI, physics, graphics, scripting and destructible environments all look set to be tweaked and upgraded beyond their zenith.

Interestingly, this push for realism seems almost at odds with a form of entertainment that is at its core supposed to allow us to escape from reality. Games and reality are like two converging lines getting ever so close to each other. Will they merge or intertwine? Do we want them to? Interesting questions, as not only may we find our ability to discern between reality and games weaken; arguments about videogame violence having an effect on mental states may also become fueled by future games that depict incredibly realistic violence. Our common catch cry of it just being a game is somewhat weakened the closer games embrace realism.

Is game realism therefore both a blessing and a curse? The theoretical argument comes in two flavours: firstly, you have players who are gobbling up game realism faster than technology can push the boundaries; secondly, you have outside forces that look upon games as becoming far too realistic and hence morally dangerous. When a title is touted as a real world training tool, and there are quite a few military and squad-based games that do so, things can become troublesome. Gamers appreciate the intricacies of these game worlds and the fact that you can't get any closer to warfare without physically suffering injury, but naysayers will find these games the perfect target for attacking all games in general.

The representative theory of perception would say that there is little difference, in terms of visual cues and aural experience, between a player shooting someone in a game and a soldier doing so in real life. However this position is hard to maintain, as you could equally argue that a dream about a massive firefight is just as dangerous as some violent game, or look to films as equal instigators of moral dubiousness. In the absence of further investigation, the jury will always be out when it comes to this kind of stuff.

It seems an impossible task for gamers to convey to outsiders that they are not in fact psychopathic serial killers (unless you are, in which case my argument falls to pieces). Pinch-faced prudes will always misunderstand our passion. Let's just hope that realism doesn't end up to be the moral downfall of games. <<

THIS PUSH FOR REALISM SEEMS ALMOST AT ODDS WITH A FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT THAT IS AT ITS CORE SUPPOSED TO ALLOW US TO ESCAPE FROM REALITY...

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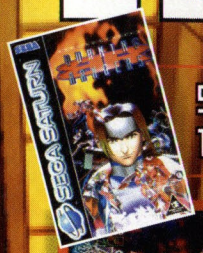
ICE MAN

BURNING RANGERS



SEGA SATURN
1998

by Tim Henderson

Sometime in the future, it seems that some engineering researcher from Japan got herself caught up in a bushfire while on holiday in the Blue Mountains. This resulted in a bizarre abnormal fear that gripped her entire homeland, and significantly influenced their further developments in technology.

And so it came to pass that, while the rest of the world kept on secretly developing nuclear weapons, all the while denying their existence and blaming everyone else, when push came to shove a ditzy blond with a sash declared world peace, and so all of these advanced weapons were deemed useless and as such catapulted into the sun. The Japanese, however, were laughing, as they were now the world leaders at rescuing people from burning buildings and destroying mutant flowers, which had since become the greatest threats to face mankind. Or something like that. Whatever the case, Sonic Team considered advanced fire-rescue to be a pretty good idea and so started development in late 1996 on a game that would incorporate it.

BURNING HEARTS

Eventually released on the flailing Saturn in 1998, Burning Rangers was delivered with much enthusiasm but met with little. While the team had at one point sounded incredibly enthusiastic about producing a follow-up game, mixed reviews and sales that come nowhere close to those of NiGHTS saw this game fade into relative obscurity. Which is a shame, because it's actually quite original and enjoyable.

Taking place in a future scenario like the one already described, Sonic Team set out to design a game that revolved around saving people instead of killing them. As such, players assumed the role of one of two rookie rangers: Shou and Tillis, and were thrown head-first into dangerous complexes where they would have to dodge and put out fires, collect crystals, and rescue as many hostages as possible before taking on the inevitable end-of-stage boss which would somehow be the cause of the disaster.

To do this, firefighting was turned on its head. After all, while Sonic Team may have had one real firefighter at the Tokyo Game Show tell them that their portrayal was inaccurate, they knew that they were making a game, something that should be fun, and so threw realism out the door and only focused on what they deemed to be the 'good bits'. This got taken to a superhuman extreme, as while attempts at motion capture were made, only walking ended up getting used as it was simply impossible for an actual human to produce the sort of movement that was desired for the game. Firefighting was beyond the real also, and didn't even rely on water. Instead, the Burning Rangers, being the hip technophiles that they are, became equipped with specialised pulse lasers that could not only do away with the colour-coded flames, but also conveniently did so by absorbing their energy and turning the fire into crystals. Unless a shot was charged, which would result in crystals transforming into a shower of fragments instead. Crystals, as you may have guessed, acted very much like rings in the Sonic games and protected players from harm accordingly, although here they also had a secondary purpose as power for some teleportation thingy. You see, it's a bit of a hassle having to carry people out of a building one at a time, so the Burning Rangers were rigged up with magical transportation devices to get the persons in distress out of trouble in a matter of seconds, so long as they had at least five crystals to power it. Rescue someone with ten crystals and players would also be awarded a bonus continue.

PSYCHIC DOLPHIN TALKING POWARZOR!!

Typical of many Sonic Team outings, doing things swiftly came with rewards, or rather a lack of punishment, as may be the case here. While there's no direct time limit per-se, the limit gauge (a sort of 'trouble & risk of this place exploding'-o-meter) is best watched, as this thing essentially keeps players updated on the stability of the situation. Let it get above 20% and flames will start erupting all around the place - and progressively again in blocks of twenty after that, encouraging players to be careful in how they balanced exploration and efficiency. Flames would also burst out from walls at other times, but on these occasions a little fancy gymnastics would be enough to dodge out of harm's way, thanks to a tap back on the d-pad (which, unfortunately, was more effective than analogue control). The experience of navigating the four stages in this game was often a tense one because of this, and the inclusion of a grading system and the desire to rescue more people in hope of getting a little present from them when you receive mail from them afterwards only helped to up the ante, not to mention the game's bewildering ability to become more fun the more you re-visited it, rather than less. It remains a fantastic example of getting a gamer to weigh-up options and try to refine their approach.

The control at times, although functional, did feel a little stiff and the same could be said of the visuals. It's quite obvious that Sonic Team were aiming for a distinct anime shmick, and this style drips from all corners of the game from the impossible character movement to the surprisingly high quality anime cutscenes, highlighted in the Japanese by a number of veteran anime voices. The visuals in the actual game were also appropriately colourful, and it's impossible to look past the amazing lighting and transparencies, not to mention a cool underwater ripple effect and respectable camera. Unfortunately, Burning Rangers was as much a technical disaster as it was an achievement and featured a jerky framerate and some truly horrid clipping problems.

TYPICAL OF MANY SONIC TEAM OUTINGS, ACTING SWIFTLY CAME WITH REWARDS

All complaints aside however, Burning Rangers was a great game trapped in an unfortunate period in time. Releasing it for the Saturn saw it reach a dwindling audience, but had Sonic Team waited a little and ported it over to the Dreamcast instead then they would have been competing with their own Sonic Adventure. It is a flawed game in many respects, but it's still a whole lot of fun that, despite its short initial playtime, contains tons of replay value and added bonuses that came with rescuing Sonic Team staff in game (not to mention Claris & Eliot from NiGHTS). It may be only half of what it was intended to be, but this game still fittingly represents a fantastic development team at their absolute creative peak. <<

MAIL HYPER!

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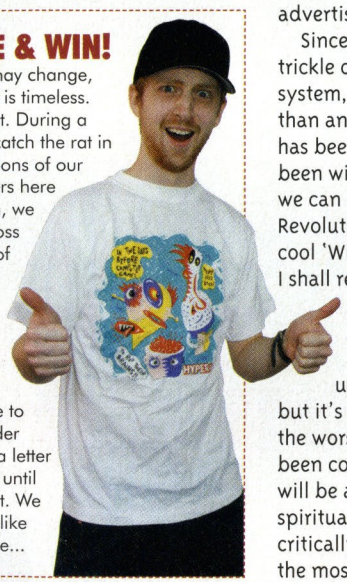
freakscene@next.com.au

WRITE & WIN!

Fashion may change, but Hyper is timeless. Maybe not. During a game of catch the rat in the dungeons of our ivory towers here in Redfern, we came across a couple of boxes of ye olde crappy Hyper T-shirts. We'll be giving one to every reader who gets a letter published until we run out. We hope you like Extra Large...



UROLOGICAL PUNS

A few months have passed since Nintendo's shock announcement of the name for their new console. It feels like an eternity. My initial reaction was like many; a mixture of utter puzzlement and howling disapproval. Revolution was the coolest name I'd ever heard for a console, and it seemed so fitting. Thus, I was wondering what kind of wiid the marketing department had been smoking the day they thought of the new name.

But several months and millions of urological jokes later, I have realised that this could be one of the greatest marketing moves in world history. The machine itself has taken even the most grizzled critics by storm, but that alone is not enough. Those three simple nonsensical letters have created a maelstrom of interest and discussion that no amount of advertising can buy.

Since E3, there has been a steady trickle of leaks concerning the system, and more infantile humour than an issue of N64 Gamer. Most has been just wiik, but some has been wiily good. On the plus side, we can at least replace the 'Vive la Revolution!' slogan with the equally cool 'Wii Will Rock You!'. Personally, I shall resist the temptation to make a list of appalling puns, and discuss the actual system.

The technology is undoubtedly revolutionary, but it's the games that matter. And the worst kept secret in gaming has been confirmed; Twilight Princess will be a Wii launch title. As the spiritual successor to the most critically acclaimed game ever, and the most hotly anticipated title in history, its success is assured.

Whether using the Wii-mote to control swords/bows/fishing rods etc will work is yet to be seen, but it opens up fascinating possibilities for new takes on many established genres. Soul Calibur, anyone? Or perhaps a hack'n'slash RPG like Diablo? Because we all like to have a slash.

Then there's the other certain mega-hit in the new Smash Bros. The inclusion of Kojima's brainchild is a surprise, and the continuing absence of Diddy Kong is criminal, but I'm sure it will rock our collective worlds harder than a collective world-rocking device. I only hope that Solid Snake's inclusion is not too intimidating for casuals, who may find he makes it harder to Wii.

The Virtual Console alone will sell the system like money's going out of fashion. My only concern is whether casuals can be directed through thousands of titles to find the real classics. I would love to see games like Mario All Stars, Super Mario World or even Ocarina of Time included free of charge.

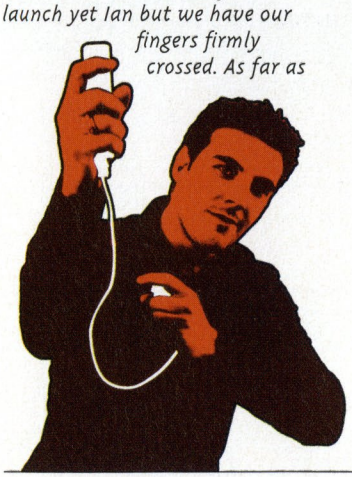
As if all that were not enough, the online play, SD card expansion and DVD playback are the icing on the cake. When the inevitable Pokemon Stadium Online is released, the world is in danger of running out of banknotes.

Here's hoping Nintendo opt for a true global launch. I would like to see it in continents across the globe by the end of November. Regardless, I'm sure the Wii will be pure gold. So gamers have to make up their mind which camp they're in. Will they embrace the innovative new experiences on offer, or stand back and continue to hurl jokes at the name? Either way, it seems wii'll all be taking the piss. Kind Regards,

Ian Casey
Ninty Fanboy
Future Nobel Prize Winner

p.s. Do I get one of those funky Hyper t-shirts?

We're not sure about a global launch yet Ian but we have our fingers firmly crossed. As far as the T-shirt is concerned, if you replace the term "funky Hyper t-shirt" with "crappy old Hyper t-shirt we found a couple of boxes of", then the answer is yes.



SEQUELOLOGY

First off, I've been collecting your mag since issue 22 (missed 65 - 94 as I was overseas) and I must say, issue 154 was one of the best. I felt as though I was a bit disconnected from the next gen consoles, but this issue really whet the appetite for my future purchase of a shiny PS3. The story about MGS4 was quite possibly the funniest preview i have ever read, and have since changed my answering machine message to "Michael-is-not-at-his-desk."

Now to the crux of my reason for writing to you. Now dont get me wrong, im not a fanboy of any console in particular, I usually weigh up which console has the games I am most interested in and purchase that one, having a PS1, NES, SNES, Megadrive, PS2 and a DS. One thing has struck me though, and that is the game lineup for every new Nintendo console. In your preview of the 100 games for the next generation, I was really excited about some original PS3 and xbox360 titles coming up, but the nintendo lineup was truly disappointing. I mean, come on nintendo, after 15 years of playing your consoles, you still expect me to get excited about yet another installment of mario brothers or mario golf or mario tennis or mario kart or mario basketball.... oh but wait, for a bit of diversity, lets throw in another installment of wario, luigi and yoshi!!! yeah that'll get the heart rate going!! .... I mean sure, the pretty cartoon graphics are all souped up and u got a fancy new way to move mario around the screen... but seriously, there is not one game that would pursuade me to purchase their console.

Not even a new installment of zelda does the trick anymore...

If there are people out there who feel the same as me, then Im pretty sure the appropriately named Wii will live up to its name.

Thanks for listening,
Michael.

CAPTION THIS!

Our email system was practically clogged from the veritable flood of entries this month, but in the game of Caption This, there can be only one winner, and that winner is **Arget Wildman**. Nice name dude...

Plumbing the depths of bad character design. Fortunately, he's 'armless

Hey Michael, if you look at the E3 lineup every developer is guilty of trotting out the sequels but at the launch of a new console this is a very sound business tactic. People are already going to be taking a gamble with a new and relatively untested console at launch so a tried and true franchise makes a more appealing purchase than a new IP. You're also guilty of lumping in DS games with Wii games – if you look at the ratio of new PS3/PS2 and PSP games to sequels you get about the same ratio.

BITTERSWEET

OMG. I can't believe the Nintendo Wii is going to be less than $250! I think of myself as a hardcore gamer but lately my wallet hasn't been able to keep up with my hobby. Finally for the first time in my life I am able to buy a console on launch day without resorting to some sort of heist at the local EB or whoring myself to the masses-no one can deny my sexy charms... Well anyway back to the point. To me everytime a new generation of consoles arrives it is usually a bittersweet event. I get all the facts right get the launch date, specs , games, etc. But when I first see the price, my jaw drops and my wallet weeps for mercy, while I scream at God, "why have thoust forsaken me, have you no heart?". Only to soon abruptly shushed by the person sitting next me at the internet cafe. But in the case of the Wii i literally pissed my pants in disbelief at the cost (sorry I only wanted to do it once). Then, after a quick change of clothes I checked again, yep it still said less than $250. I think this generation of gaming will be much better than the last one, when I hung out at Big W for hours playing the kiosks while the people behind me began to cough and murmur insults of which I do not speak of. Then when I finally got my hands on my precious second hand consoles I played and played and played until my wallet could not take it anymore. I have now decided that I am going to purchase a Wii on launch day as well as a host of other assorted Wii related items. Maybe when my have enough money saved I might buy a XBOX 360 as well. Now before my journey into the magical land of the Wii i would like to ask a few questions:

1. Did you notice any control lag because numerous other reports claim there is but i cant notice it in videos and the such?

2. Would recommend the best games to buy for wii when it launches?.(Although i might just buy all of them)

3. Will nintendo get some real screenshots and demo videos because I am sick of ploughing through tons of videos to find some Japanese chick having more time on the screen than the actual game?

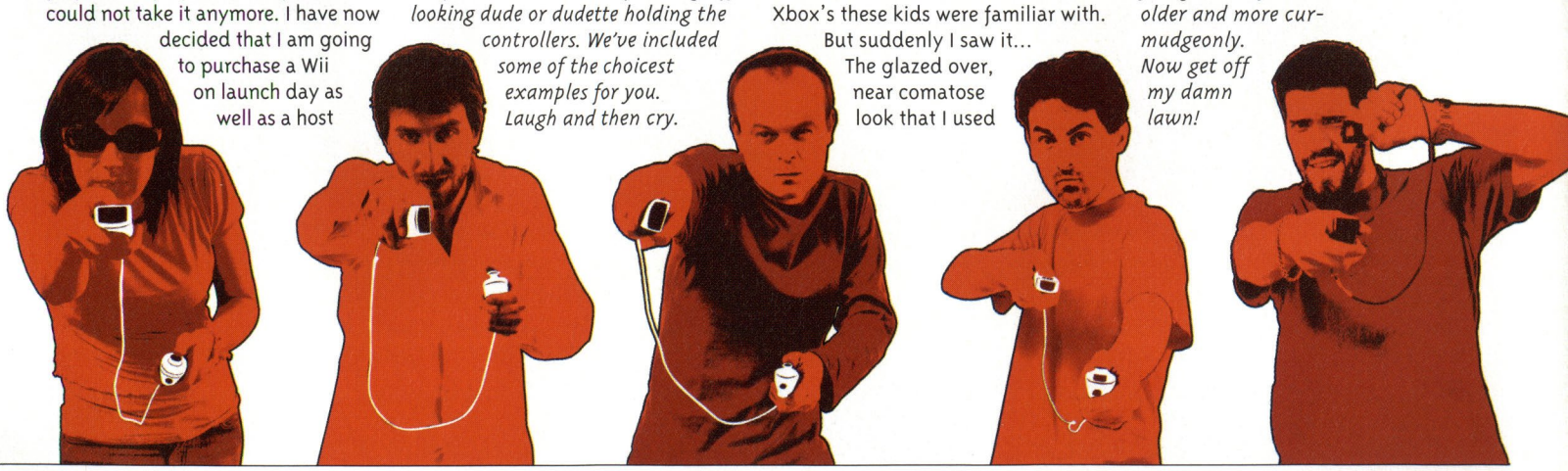
Matthew The Amazing Gaming Hobo

Heya Matt – before you get too excited the $250 mark is USD so here the console will probably cost around $400 (give or take a little for shipping and PAL conversion). Even at that price it still comes in a craptonne cheaper than the 360 or PS3. Now onto your questions;

***1)** There was a little but the machines were still beta and had been set to a very baseline calibration so the consoles on the show floor weren't the best indicator of the control scheme.*

***2)** We'll make our recommendations when the console comes out and we've actually had a decent amount of time to play the games.*

***3)** We hope so. As you may have noticed it has been Nintendo policy to show someone playing the game (or more accurately – pretending to) alongside the game. Yes yes it's a new control scheme we get it – but give us some damn images! So far they've released only a handful of screens which is frustrating to say the least. They also seem to be impressing the same restrictions on third party developers – every image we got for Red Steel this month had a separate attachment of some goofy looking dude or dudette holding the controllers. We've included some of the choicest examples for you. Laugh and then cry.*



KIDS THESE DAYS

Whilst in my local EB the other day I was listening to two young lads talking about how much they can't wait to play the latest Sonic game. Extreme Sonic Radical Air/Hover/Graffiti or something, I can't remember. I was asked to reach it for them from the top shelf as they could not do so themselves.

I gladly handed it down to them and smiled at the memory of buying my Megadrive/Sonic combo back in the day.

The little tykes asked me if I had played the latest Sonic game and I answered the little ragamuffins with a stern but affable no. I believe Sonic reached perfection with either Sonic CD or Sonic Adventure (why does every system I love die?). They looked at me like I had just fornicated with their dog and started whispering amongst themselves. Eventually the taller of the two asked me what system were those games on. I told them the Mega CD and my beloved Dreamcast, to which they just stared at me blankly.

Well here was my chance to educate some young minds on the history of our noble pasttime! I started at the Atari 2600 and slowly worked my way up to the eight bit wonders. By this time several others had come over to listen to my tale of cassette tape games and crazy control methods. I pushed on up through the breakthrough that was the sixteen bit systems that blew everyones minds with their vivid colours and sounds. Next up was my retelling of the ill-fated Amiga CD32, (Is it me? Am I a curse?) the so-so Mega CD and the laughable Jaguar.

Time was getting on so I quickly dashed through the PSX revolution that brought the mainstream to the gaming community. The ill-fated Saturn and Dreamcast were rushed through as I thought I might cry and at last I came to the PS2's and Xbox's these kids were familiar with.

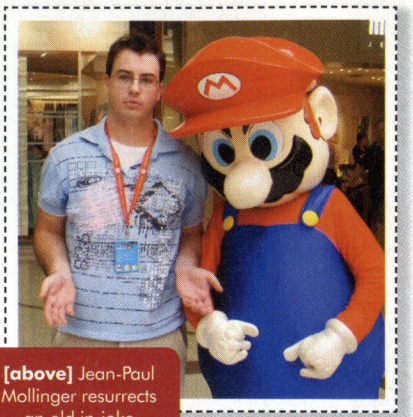
But suddenly I saw it... The glazed over, near comatose look that I used to give elderly people during their stories.

OMG!!! I was reminiscing and boring some youngsters! Me! When the hell did I get old? To add insult to injury I heard one of the kids yell out to his mum that "There is this old dude telling us about games from your time." The mother was in her late Fourties! Im only twenty-six! It was all capped off when the EB guy behind the counter asked me what a Saturn was... I thought he was my age!

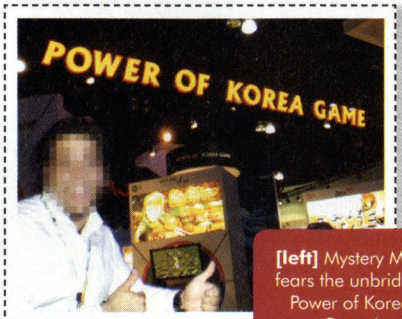
What the hell was my point? Oh yeah! Never help anyone with anything...? Ah I cant remember, Im just gonna go have a nice lay down, bloody kids, its all the drugs and the rap...

Rob

Take heart Rob, no matter how old you get Malky and Wilks will still be older and more cur-mudgeonly. Now get off my damn lawn!



[above] Jean-Paul Mollinger resurrects an old in-joke



[left] Mystery Man fears the unbridled Power of Korea Game!

The Passion of the Gamer

The Premature Release

By Dylan Burns

Two things really get up my nose: old people and game release dates. The first one is obvious, the second less so. Allow me to elaborate.

I am, most of the time, quite aware of game release dates. It's nice to know how long I have to wait until I finally get to explore the latest and greatest and it helps me to plan how to lie about how much money I have – so I can get it on the sly!

This is all well and good – if the games actually get released at their promised times. Release day should involve a moment of beauty as an innocent fresh rosebud of digital entertainment is set free unto the world, left to soar on the updrafts of critical acclaim or be left for dead by efficacious excoriation. Whatever the outcome we passionate gamers are ready to take these newborn titles gently into our arms if they prove worthy of our expectations... or ignore them cruelly if they disappoint.

However, unlike film release dates, game release dates are uncertain things; at one time concrete, the next vague and ambiguous; at one time an occasion for excited planning and celebration, then sadness as they are pushed back. It's almost like there's some grand scheme to mess with our sad lives.

It's not that I inherently dislike the fact that games get pushed back – most of the time I am all for getting something right before it's released. A perfected game is certainly worth waiting a few extra months for. No, what upsets me most is when the opposite happens: games get released AHEAD of time. This can be a disaster as not only does it upset our delicate expectations about the world and how things work but it then becomes possible that some snot-nosed little bugger gets to play the game before me!

It may seem strange to complain about games getting released early but think about it: for months, years and/or innumerable sleepless nights you've thought about the impending release of a coveted title. It's received many previews and interviews with key developers and is actually starting to sound better than a night of guilt-free euphemistic 'fun' with a pair of blonde Icelandic babes. Hey, you might even have time to take them up on the offer, but that game sits there niggling in your mind, a kernel of mounting excitement and anticipation. Sometimes there will be multiple kernels building up over time and your head becomes something of a metaphoric popcorn machine as release dates draw near.

My gripe is not with big titles, which manage to stick to their release dates: gamers the world over stand in line, punctual to the release date (said date being perhaps the only event in their lives which has managed to drag them from the pungent dungeons that they call bedrooms). They may even remember to spray some deodorant, or even better brush their teeth – really, game developers are doing families worldwide a huge favour.

No, my gripe is with those titles that simply appear on store shelves days or even weeks before their release dates, totally upsetting passionate gamers' delicate bank balances and forcing them to rush out early and buy them. Movie tie-in games seem to be particularly guilty when it comes to appearing magically on store shelves, ostensibly to 'enhance' the experience of a film but more often than not they enhance the bottom of bargain bins within weeks. If gamers forget to sanitise their putrid underarms or omit to touch toothbrush to coke-stained teeth, it's not their fault. Shops become filled with horrible unwashed gamer smell, second in stench only to dog breath. Internet forums buzz with talk of a broken street date and the reaction is as tumultuous as a freshly kicked ant hill. The existence of a virgin game draws us to it with unceasing passion. It seems gamers have an uncontrollable urge to deflower a new game and then brag to their mates.

There's also the growing direction of episodic and online releases, where it's entirely possible for your supercilious mate to play a game before you've even managed to save enough for its 'physical' release. But at least online streaming is one way to address the issue of us Aussies always getting games dead last (or so it seems) after the rest of the world. The knowledge that a million Yanks are playing something is perhaps even more painful than your stingy mate not sharing his online spoils with you.

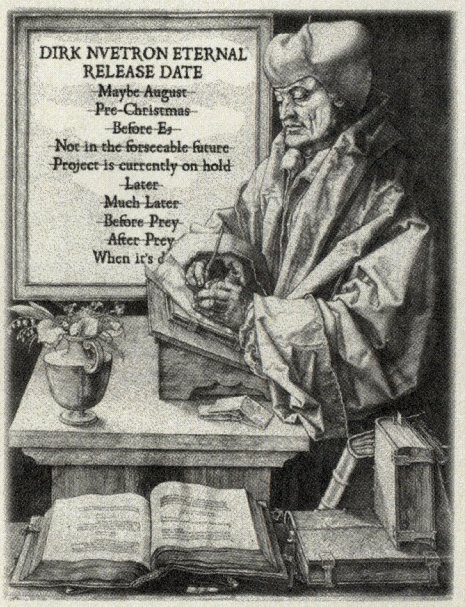


Fig 1. *At an unnamed Game Developer...*

This brings me to the crux of my somewhat circular argument. Despite being quite happy with the original release date of a particular game, its premature release, like any such encounter in life, only serves to totally shatter the excitement and anticipation of the moment. We're left to clean up the mess of our spent energies, to salvage whatever dignity we have, grab our wallets and, in as unexcited a manner as possible, go buy the damn thing. For you see it simply is not possible to know that other people are playing it without experiencing it yourself. Perhaps it's the master plan of such precipitous releases to shock us into action, to make us never feel secure in the way the game industry works.

I posit that we actually enjoy being teased with an impending release date. It becomes a matter of only x-more sleeps to go. We all know how that type of excitement dwindles rapidly as we get older. Why cheat us of our x-sleeps count? It may be the only tenuous link we have remaining to our troubled yet secretly yearned for childhood. It's just plain cruel.

Gamers are also cheated of their excited night-before sleep, the type where you never quite enter deep sleep and drift always at the surface of consciousness, thoughts of the next day, when you get to play the new game, forever repeating through your mind.

Unfortunately I have no words of wisdom to rectify this situation as even my vast influence cannot change the workings of the game industry. Just like Darryl Summers, premature game release is a problem that will never disappear, always rearing its ugly and annoying head just when you think it could not possibly return. Passionate gamers must learn to adapt to such problems.

Forgive the industry its small annoyances; it can't help but exist in a consumer market. Continue marking those dates on your calendar and going through your pre-release rituals. In the slightly reworked words of an excellent film: 'They may take our lives, but they will never take our PASSION!!'

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The Official Australian Games Chart

Compiled by GfK in association with the IEAA

TOP 10 PlayStation 2 Games Over $50

W/E 9th July 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	◆	Cars	Adventure
2	▲	Guitar Hero	Family
3	▲	Buzz: The Big Quiz Bundle	Family
4	▲	SingStar Rocks! Bundle	All Other
5	▼	FIFA 2006 World Cup	Sports
6	▲	FIFA 2006	Sports
7	▼	Over the Hedge	Adventure
8	▼	NFS: Most Wanted	Racing
9	▲	Black	Action
10	▲	V8 Supercars 3	Racing

TOP 10 Nintendo DS Games Over $40

W/E 9th July 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	◆	New Super Mario Bros	Adventure
2	◆	Dr Kawashima's Brain Train	Family
3	◆	Cars	Adventure
4	▲	Hasbro 4 Game Fun Pack	Family
5	▲	Shrek Slam & Madagascar	Compilation
6	▼	Mario Kart	Racing
7	✪	Big Brain Academy	Family
8	▼	Nintendogs Dachschund	Simulator
9	▲	Over the Hedge	Adventure
10	▼	Nintendogs Lab & Friends	Simulator

TOP 10 Game Cube Games Over $50

W/E 9th July 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	▲	Mario Party 7 w Microphone	Family
2	◆	Cars	Adventure
3	▼	Mario Smash Football	Sports
4	◆	Pokémon XD: Gale Darkness	RPG
5	◆	FIFA 2006 World Cup	Sports
6	▲	Starfox Assault	Adventure
7	◆	NFS: Most Wanted	Racing
8	▲	Pokémon Colosseum	RPG
9	▼	Mario Party 6	Family
10	▲	Ice Age 2 The Meltdown	Action

TOP 10 Xbox Games Over $50

W/E 9th July 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	▲	FIFA 2006 World Cup	Sports
2	◆	50 Cent Bulletproof	Action
3	▼	NFS: Most Wanted	Racing
4	✪	Hitman Blood Money	Action
5	▲	X-Men 3 The Official Game	Adventure
6	▼	Black	Action
7	▼	Ice Age 2 The Meltdown	Action
8	▼	V8 Supercars 3	Racing
9	▼	FIFA 2006	Sports
10	▲	Rugby 2006	Sports

TOP 10 PC Games Over $20

W/E 9th July 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	◆	The Sims 2: Open Business	Strategy
2	◆	The Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff	Strategy
3	▲	The Sims 2: Nightlife	Strategy
4	▲	The Sims 2	Strategy
5	▼	World Of WarCraft	RPG
6	▼	The Sims Deluxe	Strategy
7	▲	Cars	Adventure
8	▼	The Sims 2: University	Strategy
9	▲	The Sims Full House	Strategy
10	▲	GTA: San Andreas DVD	Adventure

TOP 10 Xbox 360 Games Over $50

W/E 9th July 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	▲	Genuine Wireless Fun Pack	Compilation
2	▼	FIFA 2006 World Cup	Sports
3	▲	NFS: Most Wanted	Racing
4	▲	Fight Night Round 3	Sports
5	▼	Over G Fighters	Simulator
6	▼	Call Of Duty 2	Action
7	▲	Elder Scrolls IV Oblivion	RPG
8	▼	Ghost Recon 3 Advanced	Action
9	▼	Project Gotham Racing 3	Racing
10	▼	Table Tennis	Sports

TOP 10 All Format Games Over $50

W/E 9th July 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	◆	Cars	PlayStation 2
2	◆	New Super Mario Bros	Nintendo DS
3	▲	Dr Kawashima's Brain Train	Nintendo DS
4	▲	Guitar Hero	PlayStation 2
5	▲	Buzz: The Big Quiz Bundle	PlayStation 2
6	▲	SingStar Rocks! Bundle	PlayStation 2
7	▼	FIFA 2006 World Cup	PlayStation 2
8	▲	Cars	GBA
9	▼	Cars	Xbox
10	▲	FIFA 2006	PlayStation 2

TOP 10 PlayStation Portable Games Over $40

W/E 9th July 2006 RETAIL SALES

1	▲	NFS: Most Wanted	Racing
2	◆	FIFA 2006 World Cup	Sports
3	▲	FIFA 2006	Sports
4	▲	WWE Smackdown vs Raw 06	Sports
5	▼	GTA: Liberty Cities	Adventure
6	✪	Daxter	Adventure
7	▲	The Sims 2	Strategy
8	▼	Loco Roco	Family
9	▲	Crash Tag Team Racing	Racing
10	▲	T Hawk Undergrnd 2 Remix	Sports

✪ New Entry
◆ Non Mover
▲ Up from last week
▼ Down from last week

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the unappreciated

>> Ben Yahtzee Croshaw

We all know and love the iconic gaming characters. We all know our Marios and our Gordon Freemans and our generic smoking hot improbably proportioned women. But how often do we look back on and remember the less prominent cast members of our favourite games? The ones who, while not especially memorable or beloved, did the best they could with the role they were given and enhanced the gaming experience in their own little ways? I'd like to take a moment to remember some of those unappreciated characters from video gaming.

The Merchant From Resident Evil 4

Where did he come from? Where does he go? Why does he sell you treasure maps for a tiny fraction of the treasure's eventual value? Why do the bad guys tolerate his presence when he's providing most of your kit bag? The merchant is an enigma, and his motives for cloning himself umpteen times and hanging around enemy strongholds are cloudy at best. Perhaps he is an eccentric philanthropic millionaire arms dealer pirate who has taken a shine to you. Perhaps he belongs to a race of enigmatic Time Lords who travel throughout the world in their magic time travelling shooting galleries to help mankind. He could even be one of the game's other characters in disguise; he's so bundled up in clothing he could be anyone. Saddler, Dr. Salvador, Ada if she can get her hands on a really good voice synthesizer... he could even be an aspect of Leon's own personality, made manifest by some kind of psychotic breakdown, and you're actually buying all those guns from a novelty vending machine with a Cockney accent.

The Barnacle From Half-Life

One wonders how the barnacle was able to survive before the resonance cascade that transported them to Earth, since they apparently subsist entirely on a diet of idiot scientists. The barnacle doesn't eat other Xen monsters, so either it relies on stranded astronauts turning up frequently in their back garden or they all suddenly became extremely fussy eaters on the way over. But the barnacle doesn't have much in the way of a defense mechanism. If you get grappled by one, all you have to do is shoot upwards a few times, or wait for it to pull you up before blatting it on the nose with a crowbar as you would a dog with a rolled-up newspaper, and it dies crunching like a sockful of eggs. Nature's answer to the unbaited mousetrap relies a little bit too much on unwary scientists who just wave their arms and legs gormlessly in the brief period between their feet leaving the ground and their heads leaving their bodies.

The Monster That Gets Raped By Pyramid Head In Silent Hill 2

Pyramid Head was something of a fan favourite in the Silent Hill series, and the confirmation that he's due to appear in the upcoming film underlines this. So at the time it must have seemed like a great career move to get the big love scene with him. But it turned out that the guy wasn't what you'd call a sensitive partner, and he seemed to be trying to rape not only you but the wall behind you as well. Then he drops you like a hot potato when the movie deal comes through. And I can only imagine how catty the other monsters must have gotten. "Oh, you think you're so cool, just because the big man broke you in half over the kitchen worktop," they would say, if their mouths weren't sewn up. Running around after chainsaw-wielding protagonists is difficult enough without an aching heart and an aching arse.

The Very First Goomba From Super Mario Brothers 1

For many of our generation, the very first goomba on stage 1, world 1 of Super Mario Brothers 1 was our introduction to committing murder in videogames. Like the children of the aristocracy ritualistically blooded at their first fox hunt, a gamer's innocence was lost once and for all as they manipulated Mario's toughened Mediterranean buttocks onto the goomba's fragile skull. Yes, reducing a living, breathing mushroom into a squealing greasy stain on the floor was the precursor to emptying an enemy soldier's brain case onto the wall behind him with an unrealistically high-powered sniper rifle twenty years later. Also, when you factor in inexperienced players and those occasions when your mum would have a go, the Very First Goomba has probably killed more players than any other in the game.

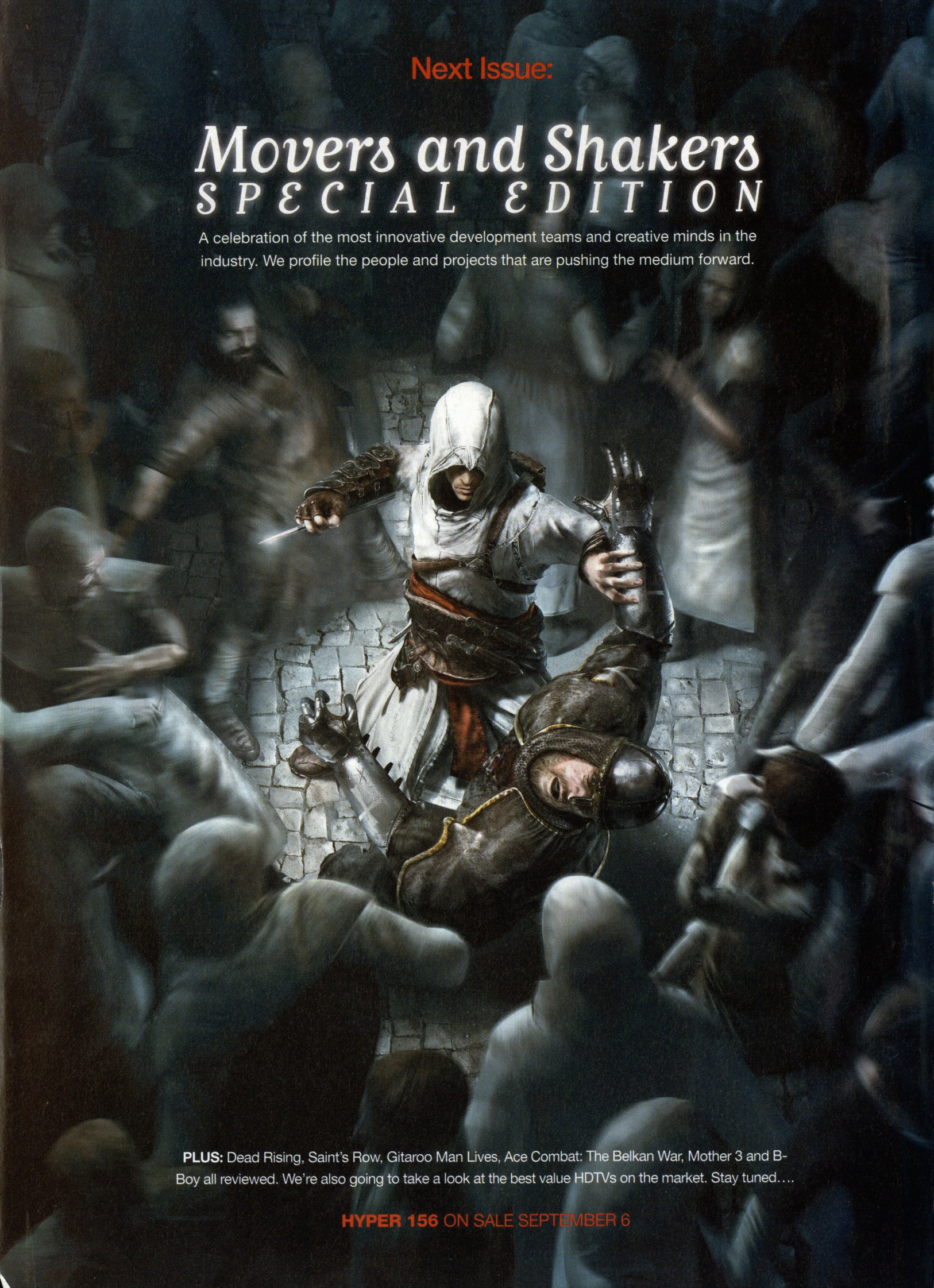
The T-Shaped Tetris Block

Of course, it's the straight line block that gets all the good press in Tetris. It's the only block that can knock out four lines in one go, and many a Tetris player is filled with joy when a straight line block appears just in time to clear away a troublesome buildup. But the straight block is the prima donna of the Tetris world, frequently not even deigning to show up for tens of pieces at a time, while the T-shaped block is just a hard-working all-rounder piece unjustly robbed of the spotlight. Can a straight line block fill a one-square gap? Well, yes, but you end up with a three-block tower sticking up like an unwelcome erection that you have to work around. The T-shaped block fills up that and any number of other awkward gaps. I like to think the T-shaped block watches the face of the player light up when that whore straight line makes an appearance, and it harbours thoughts of murder.

Next Issue:

Movers and Shakers
SPECIAL EDITION

A celebration of the most innovative development teams and creative minds in the industry. We profile the people and projects that are pushing the medium forward.



PLUS: Dead Rising, Saint's Row, Gitaroo Man Lives, Ace Combat: The Belkan War, Mother 3 and B-Boy all reviewed. We're also going to take a look at the best value HDTVs on the market. Stay tuned....

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