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METROID PRIME 3: CORRUPTION



MANHUNT — ADULTS ONLY!

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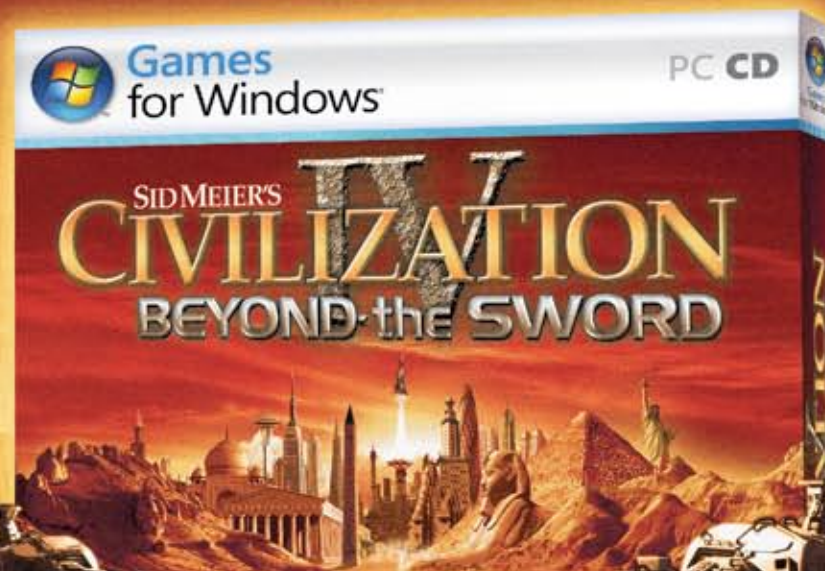
- .a buncha some football
- .inside codemasters's uk scene
- .retro stuff and crazy japanese games

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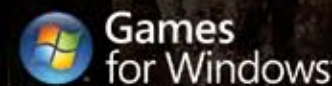


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PLAYSTATION 3



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Printed in the United States of America



DJPubba Tim Lindquist

This month I bought the world's biggest Game Boy. I got it cheap because it was broken, but I managed to fix it right-quick. I also got a big pile of really cheap retro games — like, five or six hundred of them. God bless Craig's List!

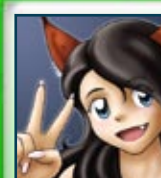
Now playing: a whole lot of retro.



Wanderer Thomas Wilde

...man, f-k Juggernaut.

Now Playing: *Marvel Super Heroes* (arcade), *X-Men Vs. Street Fighter* (arcade), *World of Warcraft*, *Lumines II*



Lynxara Alicia Ashby

What is it about being able to download a game in seconds that makes you feel a sudden, burning need to play it? I beat *Actraiser* when I was twelve and I never liked *Pac-Man* much to begin with... now I'm losing damned sleep over it.

Now Playing: *Pac-Man: Championship Edition*, *Actraiser*, *Etrian Odyssey*, *Grim Grimoire*



Racewing Geson Hatchett

...hee hee. Thomas tried to stop the Juggernaut. However, it is quite known that the Juggernaut is, in point of fact, *unstoppable*. Don't you know who he is?

Now Playing: *Marvel Super Heroes* (arcade), *X-Men Vs. Street Fighter* (arcade), *Tales of the World: RM* (which really, really needed more Chloe Valens. What gives, Namco?)



Daniel Kayser Daniel Kayser

I dreamt that I was in a game and had to board this alien ship with this dude in a dark suit who kept promoting Microsoft every time his *Halo 3* edition Zune would fall out of his pocket. We missed the ship.

Now Playing: *Pac-Man CE*, *MLB 2K7*, even more *Guitar Hero*, with a dash of *DIRT*



KouAidou Elizabeth Ellis

I got sick, again, with the exact same cold that prevented me from going to E3 last year. Fortunately, I don't have any travelling to do this time around, but I *did* get hit over the head with work nevertheless.

Even a year later, though, I still love the DS.

Now Playing: *Picross DS*, *Ouendan 2*, *Heroes of Mana*



Roger Danish Greg Off

DJPubba and I are in a neck-and-neck competition to acquire all of the long, lost consoles from the past. I'm currently in a mad search for a Pippin @World while Tim is lookin' for a GAKKEN. Anyone with either of these systems should ping us at the mag!

Now Playing: *Lair*, *Heavenly Sword*, *Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow*, *The Darkness*



4thletter David Brothers

It's funny, I move to the west coast and get on a southern rap kick. Homesick? Seems like T.I., David Banner, OutKast, Goodie MOB, Ludacris, and Lil Jon do the trick. Is it just me or is Andre 3000 putting everyone to shame with all these remixes he's appearing on? His verses on Walk It Out and Throw Some D's alone are some of the sickest I've heard all year. Peace up, A-towns down.

Now Reading: *Jack Kirby's Fourth World Omnibus vol. 1*, *Coward: A Criminal Edition*, *7 Brothers*



James James Cunningham

Did'ja ever have one of those months that served more to fill up time than anything else? Yeah, me too. On the plus side, I got to see the entire first season of *Dexter* over a couple of days, so it wasn't a total wash.

Now Playing: *Mystery Game That I Can't Talk About* (Xbox), *Dungeon Maker: Hunting Ground*



HonestGamer Jason Venter

It's an awesome time to be a gamer. More games are coming out than ever before, and when you run out of new ones you like, there's a massive library of old classics that are becoming available on new platforms. That isn't really news to anyone, but sometimes it's good to take a step back and look at how good we really have it.

Now Playing: *Dungeon Maker: Hunting Ground*



Hitoshura Iaian Ross

My computer needed to have a pile of dust cleaned out from it. However, I am by no means a mechanical person, so I sent it to the shop to have it done. That's more than can be said for a family friend's computer which got so hot that it caught fire. He took it out back and tried to smother the flames. When that failed, he hit it with a hammer and then shot it. He's the kind of guy when asked how he'd like his steak done, would say "dead."

Now Playing: *Persona 3*



Sardius Danny Cowan

SARDIUS has become famous as the guy who stepped on poop!

Now Playing: *Super Secret Xbox Game of Mystery*, *Taito Legends 2*, *Kororinpa*, *Planet Puzzle League*, *Etrian Odyssey*



Wolfie Terry Wolfinger

By the time this issue hits the stands my *Undead Rogue* will have hit 70! Then its all about arena fights. And the third season of *Top Chef* is finally here! So now my rogue's gotta pack his knives and go...

Now Playing: *World of Warcraft*, *Full Auto*



Metabot Anthony Mertz

Last month, at pretty much a moments notice, I moved to Tennessee. Before that, though, I purged myself of most of the things that make me "hardcore." I filled twelve trash bags with game and anime-related swag that will serve the Earth better recycled than it will my ego by sitting on a shelf.

Now Playing: *Skidsbee*



Arbeth Thomas Shin

After playing some *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* on Xbox Live, and anticipating the flood of games to hit the Wii Virtual Console, I'm now wondering, "Is there still hope for 2D and niche games?" In the meantime, *Senko no Ronde* is a fun, simplified *Virtual-On*, but sixty bucks? It should've been a download.

Now Playing: *Wartech: Senko no Ronde*, *Castlevania: SOTN*



Ashura Brady Hartel

This is my goddaughter. Isn't she cute? She knows kung-fu.



Now Playing: *Senko no Ronde*, *Fist of the North Star*



Jeremy Jeremy Peeples

XBLive Arcade remains my favorite part of gaming's newest generation. It allows me to play *SotN* and then switch over to *Pac-Man: Championship Edition* (easily the most fun I've ever had with a *Pac-Man* game), and I've gotten more use out of it than I have out of normal 360 games. After being disappointed by the original Xbox's Live Arcade, I'm still amazed at how well-done the 360 rendition is.

Now Playing: *Crazy Taxi*, *WWF No Mercy*, *Tetris DS*, *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*



Mads Amadeo Garcia III

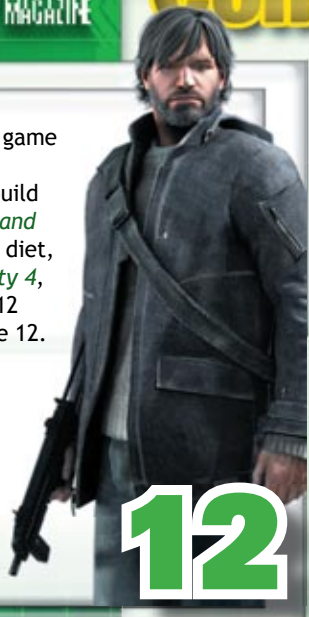
Halfway into the year, and I'm already regretting the decision to make *all* my comics full-coloured, including the weekly ones that go up on the HGM website. Maybe I can still save myself some time by hiring five-year-olds to color for me. They won't do it completely within the lines, but it will probably be an improvement over my usual work anyway.

Now Playing: *Overlord*, *Pokemon Pearl*, *Starcraft: Brood War*, *Counterstrike: Condition Zero*



Previews

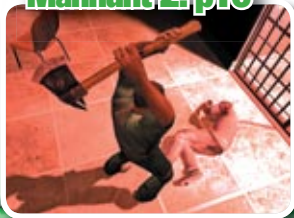
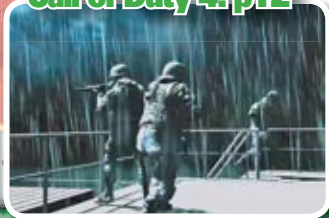
We've got the lowdown on *Manhunt 2*, a game you may never get to play, and world exclusive coverage of the first English build of NIS America's upcoming *Soul Nomad and the World Eaters*. To round out your preview diet, try a little *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, *Call of Duty 4*, and *Metroid Prime 3*. All are rich in vitamin B12 and beta carotene, and can be found on page 12.



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Call of Duty 4: p12

Manhunt 2: p16



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Features

Take a look at what the fine folks at Codemasters are up to in this month's Junket Journal. Then our pal and yours, Daniel Kayser, gives the Vegas odds for best football game of 2007.

Codemasters: p34



There's actually three football contenders this year, and you'd be surprised who the favorite is, too. It all starts on page 34.

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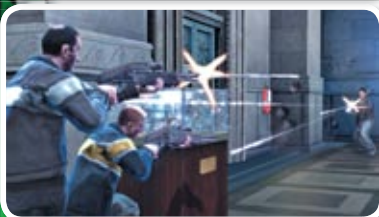
Out to Scout: p44



On the cover

JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD

Woo! John Woo, that is. This month's cover story spotlights *Stranglehold*, a game that comes by its cinematic legacy honestly. Daniel Kayser gives you the scoop on all the giant gunfights, Tequila Bombs, and massive set pieces you can expect to see in this video game sequel to John Woo's gun-fu classic *Hard-Boiled*. The doves are flying on page 38.



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MOVERS SHAKERS

German developer Crytek, currently working on EA's *Crysis*, is not only opening a new studio in Budapest, Hungary, but it has also transformed its Kiev, Ukraine satellite location into a full-blown development house. Both studios are currently working on new titles using the CryENGINE 2 technology and are expanding the number of genres for which they are developing products, meaning some non-FPS titles are on the horizon.

Some of Relic's top people, known for THQ's *Company of Heroes*, have departed and formed a new development studio, Smoking Gun Interactive Inc., which will focus on creating innovative, cross-platform games based on original or company-owned intellectual properties.

Former Human Head CEO Timothy Gerritsen, Art Director Rowan Atalla, Animation Director Jeff Dewitt, and former Midway Technical Director Jason Blochowiak have formed a new development studio, Big Rooster. Its goal is to create games that "delight, inspire, enlighten and entertain."

Independent developer Foundation 9 Entertainment has spun off its Prince Edward Island, Canada-based studio, known for Konami's recent Xbox Live Arcade version of *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. It will henceforth be known as Other Ocean Interactive.

WHO ORDERED THE GAME-MOVIE PLATTER?

Transformers producer Tom DeSanto, who was also the executive producer of the first two *X-Men* movies, has obtained the movie and TV rights for the *City of Heroes* MMORPG. DeSanto states that he sees *CoH* as "the next big superhero franchise." *City of Heroes* is about superheroes teaming up to defend Paragon City from a catastrophic alien invasion and the supervillains of sister game *City of Villains*.



Ubisoft is working on another movie-licensed title, *Beowulf*, to be developed by 4HEAD and 3D-IO. It will be based on Paramount's upcoming remake with Angelina Jolie, John Malkovich and Anthony Hopkins, which is due in theaters November 2007.

Red Mile Entertainment has signed a multi-year, worldwide license agreement to create and publish video games based on the *Sin City* graphic novel series by writer, artist and film director Frank Miller.

20th Century Fox has gained the movie rights to EA's life simulation game, *The Sims*. Brian Lynch (*Scary Movie 3*) will script, while John Davis (*Norbit*, *Eragon*) will oversee the live-action project. Sims studio head Rod Humble will manage the use of the property for EA. Details on possible actors or plot are still unknown.

MANHUNT 2 BEING SHOT DOWN

Rockstar and Take-Two have been responsible for some of the most controversial titles in video game history, but this time, they might have bitten off more than they can chew. *Manhunt 2* became the first title in over ten years to be officially banned by the BBFC, which prevents it from being sold anywhere in the UK. It has also been outlawed in Italy and Ireland, so a negative result was expected from much stricter countries like Australia and New Zealand. To top it all off, *Manhunt 2* received an "AO" (Adults Only) rating from the ESRB, which prompted Sony and Nintendo to issue a statement about their policy of not publishing AO titles on any of their consoles. *Manhunt 2* was originally set for release in early July, but Take-Two has decided to put the launch on hold to "further explore its options."



Hidden in a Warner Brothers Pictures announcement about post-apocalyptic Western *The Book of Eli* was a mention of scriptwriter Gary Whitta working on *Diablo* for Legendary Pictures and Blizzard Entertainment. The project has not been confirmed, but Legendary Pictures's web site briefly listed *Diablo* as a project in development, only to have it mysteriously disappear shortly thereafter.

In our June issue, we mentioned that *300* producer Thomas Tull formed Brash Entertainment to specifically create games based on movie licenses, promising sixty to a hundred titles over the next five years. Having acquired no less than \$400 million in funding, the publisher currently has twelve games in development and another forty already scheduled, with the first two games based on the *Saw* film series and the *300* movie. Brash's *300* titles are not to be confused with Eidos's PSP title based on the same property.



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PlayStation Portable



CALL OF DUTY 4 MODERN WARFARE™



Preview by 4thletter

Aw, another World War II game— oh. *Call of Duty 4* doesn't take place in World War II? It's set in the modern day and ties into current events? *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*? Well, color me interested.

CoD4 is the third entry in the series developed by Infinity Ward, after the original and *CoD2*. The WWII setting is dropped in favor of an unnamed country in the Middle East and a modern-day setting with modern-day tech. You aren't going to be firing an old-school Garand anymore. Long-range sniper missions, up-close infiltration, and running battles are the order of the day.

CoD4 features an impressive graphics engine. The devs we spoke with made a joke about having "stream" technology, and then showed us a stream of water coming out of a pipe that was just as realistically modeled and rendered as everything else in the game.

A ton of little details are thrown into your face throughout the game to make the experience just that much more real. The loading screens are overhead maps of the zone you're dropping into. When the loading is done, the map zooms in down to ground level and you're immediately in the action. Every little thing counts. Soldiers use the same hand signals and back touches that real soldiers use. They watch each other's back, call out locations, and will even spot for you while you snipe.

Keep an eye out for *Call of Duty 4*. It's a break from the usual setting of the series, but it's going to have that same level of quality you've come to expect from Infinity Ward.

Publisher: Activision
Developer: Infinity Ward
Release Date: November 2007
Genre: FPS
Category: Not WWII
of Players: TBA



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SEGA RALLY



Preview by Lyndara

PUBLISHER: SEGA • DEVELOPER: SEGA • GENRE: RACING
CATEGORY: ARCADE • RELEASE DATE: 9/25/07 • # PLAYERS: 1-8

The original *Sega Rally Championship* was one of Sega's all-time most successful arcade games, but Sega's last attempt to translate that success into an original console title (*Sega Rally 2006* for the PS2) missed the mark pretty badly. *Sega Rally Revo* is Sega's attempt to get a console *Sega Rally* title right.

UK-based developer Sega Racing Studios has studied the original arcade *Sega Rally* games and hopes to bring its gameplay sensibility into the next generation with *Revo*. Right now, the game they've built is impressive both as a next-gen racing title and as a modern evolution of *Sega Rally*.

Sega Rally was the original off-road racing title that featured drifting and tight head-to-head action. *Sega Rally Revo* builds on this, with a next-gen track physics engine that lets cars deform the track terrain realistically as they pass over it. Treads in mud, packed snow, or exposed puddles then become hazards for cars that pass over the area

in subsequent laps. In a long race with eight cars tearing up the track, players will have to constantly adjust their lines from lap to lap to compensate for the damage.

Sega Rally Revo uses the same vibrant colors and arcade-style handling of the classic Sega arcade titles. The exotic backgrounds have realistically detailed, but are just a little *too* beautiful to be real places. The thirty-four available rally cars show damage as a race goes on, getting dented or dirty, but never losing their performance potential and never failing to be gorgeous.

The only thing on home consoles even close to the brightly-colored, larger-than-life racers that Sega filled arcades with in the '90s is the incredibly stagnant *Ridge Racer* series. With *Sega Rally Revo*, Sega has the chance to bring the real feel of arcade racing back home to consoles while still offering players something new. Here's hoping Sega Racing Studios can deliver the goods this fall.

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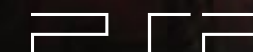
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PlayStation Portable





Publisher: Rockstar Games
Developer: Rockstar Toronto/London
Release Date: This should be interesting.

Genre: Action
Category: Stick a Needle In Your Eye
of Players: 1



Preview by 4thletter

Murder death kill; that's *Manhunt 2* in a nutshell. The grisly snuff film story of the first game is gone, but the feel is still there. This time around, you're an escapee from a mental hospital. You don't have all of your memories, but what you do remember... well, it ain't pretty, let's just leave it at that, okay?

You need to find out what happened, but there are people who want to stop you cold, as in "six feet under" cold. There's some good news, though. You play Daniel, a former scientist, and you're assisted by Leo, another patient. You're going to tear a bloody path through the people that stand in your way.

Just in case you hadn't heard, this brutal game is coming to the Nintendo Wii. Every single thought that flashed through your mind when you read that sentence is true, believe me. If you want to stick a pen in someone's eye to take them out, get ready to jab your remote at the TV. Got an axe and some time to kill? Sneak up on a hunter and make him go to pieces with a few deft swipes of the remote and nunchuck. All the movements you make with the remote and nunchuck are intuitive, i.e., cutting a throat is done with a slicing motion, hacking is done with a sharp downward motion, and stabs are thrusts. Just keep it all in the game, all right?

As we're going to press, word is that *Manhunt 2* is going to sport a not-so-coveted AO rating. Sony and Nintendo do not allow Adults Only games on their systems, nor does Blockbuster rent them. There's a pretty good chance that all this wonderfully gory action is going to get the proverbial axe before you get a chance to check it out. Time will tell how RockStar manages to finesse this one. We don't exactly want a *Thrill Kill 2*, do we?



RISE OF THE ARGONAUTS



Preview by 4thletter

Rise of the Argonauts mixes fiction and, er, fiction to put a new spin on Greek mythology. You've most likely heard of Ray Harryhausen's "Jason and the Argonauts." If not, go see it, or check out the actual myth about the golden fleece. This is something different.

These Argonauts are kind of the X-Men of the Greek world. An all-star cast, including Jason, Hercules, Atalanta, take to the islands of Greece on an epic quest. This game features a deft mix of RPG and action elements, mixing and blending the two in an organic way.

Each island has its own story that must be completed, and perhaps even a lesson for certain characters. After all, angering the gods tends to have certain consequences, doesn't it? Just ask Odysseus.

The version of *Rise of the Argonauts* we saw was very early, but promising. The action seemed reminiscent of a mix between *X-Men Legends* and *God of War*, which are definitely good standards to aspire to. With the gods giving you favor for completing certain actions and sprawling islands with inventive battles, *Rise of the Argonauts* could be quite a ride.



Publisher: Codemasters
Developer: Liquid Entertainment
Release Date: Pending

Genre(s): Action
Category: Overt Action Team
of Players: Pending





Preview by 4thletter



Publisher: THQ Genre(s): Racing Release Date: 9/18/2007
 Developer: Juice Games Category: Glam # of Players: TBA

Picture this: you're screaming down a straightaway, pushing 150, and feeling fine. There is only one problem; the guy in front of you is hogging the road. If this were *Gran Turismo* or *NFS*, you'd have to either outrun them or nudge them out of the way with your bumper. In *Juiced 2: Hot Import Nights*, you tailgate them until they lose their cool, freak out, and spin out of control with a squeal of tires and a shouted curse.

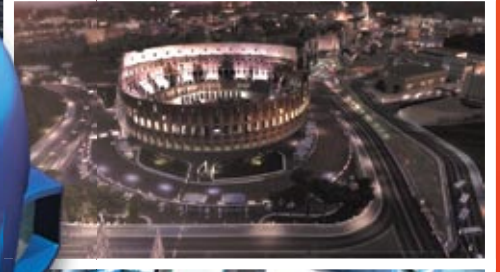
The name of the game is "authenticity." *Juiced 2* is branded with one of the most popular tuner shows in the world, so coming without extensive customization options would be a mistake. Luckily, that's not the case here. There is a heavy focus on customization and personalization.

Your car is all about you. The custom paint jobs and decals let you create a car that is purely your own, so that when you pass that guy for a last minute win on Xbox Live, he knows exactly who just beat him.

Juiced 2 introduces a new feature called "Driver DNA." The game will track your driving style across a large number of options so that it can build a believable A.I. This A.I. can then be given to friends and enemies alike so that they can race against you or add you to their driving team as backup.

Over 90 cars, a deep personalization system, and the promising Driver DNA system all make for interesting concepts. *Juiced 2* brings them all together into one mix to simulate the experience of the tuner lifestyle and Hot Import Nights.

If that isn't enough, there are dancing girls, too. Something for everybody, right?



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Preview by **Lynara**

HAZE

Publisher: Ubisoft Genre(s): FPS
 Developer: Free Radical Design Category: The horror. The horror.
 Release Date: 11/23/2007 # of Players: 1-4

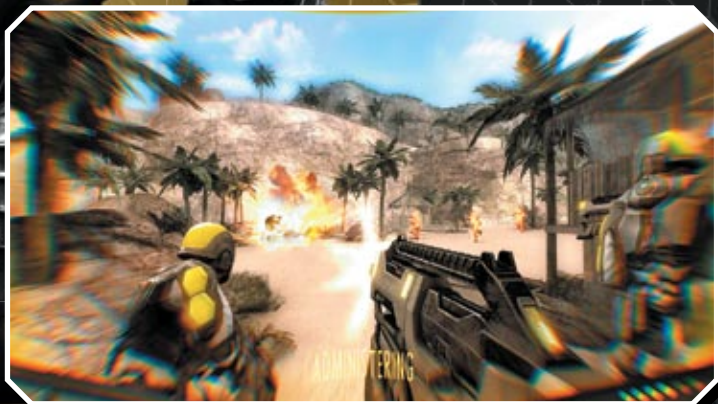
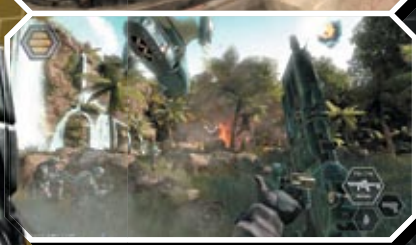
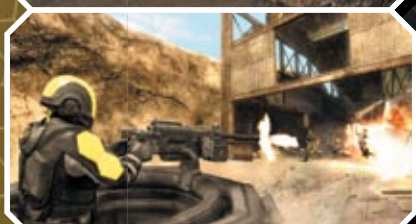
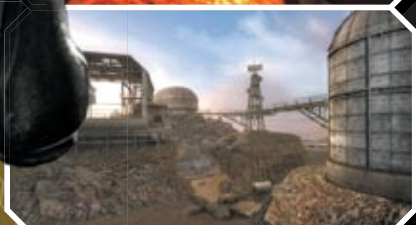
At first blush, *Haze* appears to be a FPS that looks a lot like... well, every other console FPS that's hit it big in the last five years. It's actually quite a bit more interesting than that. *Haze* is what happens when the makers of the fast-paced and light-hearted *TimeSplitters* games try their hand at something serious, complete with a gritty story inspired by *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and other anti-war flicks.

Haze uses its first-person perspective not just as a gameplay device but also as a completely immersive storytelling device. Cutscenes never depart from the first-person perspective of the main character, Sergeant Shane Carpenter. When you play *Haze*'s single-player mode, you should effectively feel like you're becoming that character and seeing the world through his eyes.

Shane is a super-soldier employed in the private army of Mantel Global Industries, fighting wars for governments worldwide. *Haze*'s action is set in an unspecified area of South America, most likely Brazil. There, Shane and his squadmates are fighting a tribe of terrorists called The Promise Hand, headed up by dictator Gabriel "Skin Coat" Merino. (You don't want to know where he gets the skin.)

Mantel specializes in the production of a "nutritional supplement" called Nectar, which lets soldiers fight with the aid of superhuman vision powers and reaction times. It sends you into a sort of souped-up bullet time mode, where the action slows down and enemies are easily spotted by body-heat outlines. You can use as much Nectar as you like, but overusing it drives you into a berserk state where it's impossible to tell friend from foe. Just pointing your weapon at a squadmate causes it to fire. Your squadmates can overdose on Nectar, too.

In addition to its compelling storyline, *Haze* features all the usual FPS bells and whistles: online multiplayer, co-op, online co-op, and vehicles. Much like *Halo 3*, it lets up to two players go online per console. Standard features plus cool story usually equals a big hit in the games industry, and *Haze* doesn't look like it'll be any kind of exception.



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NINTENDO DS

SQUARE ENIX



Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release Date: 2/2007
Genre(s): Open World
Category: We Are a Hedge
of Players: 1

Preview by Lyndora

Back in the early '80s, the publishers of *Shounen Jump* magazine realized that the epic story of a man punching his way through life could hit it big with *Fist of the North Star*. Stories based on that rough template, like *Dragonball Z* and *One Piece*, have clogged *Shounen Jump's* pages for the twenty years since then. Hit anime adaptations and slews of video games usually follow.

Naruto is just one of the many properties cast from this mold, but it's a monstrously popular one. Ubisoft Montreal is, in an unusual move, producing *Rise of a Ninja* as a 360-exclusive game based directly on the North American dubbed version of the anime's first eighty (or so) episodes. Sub purists take heart, though; Ubisoft is promising the final game will ship with a Japanese voice track featuring all of the original seiyuu.

Rise of a Ninja is very different from previous *Naruto* titles, and frankly much better. It's a sort of sandbox game that lets players improve *Naruto's* status as Konoha Village's most hated outcast by proving himself to be a valuable ninja. You accomplish this by having *Naruto* do favors and finish missions for the village's residents. The missions can range from playing hide-and-seek to learning special ninja techniques with Kakashi. The demo ended with a special fight against Neji, that actually showed off a special mini-game that went along with Neji's infamous Gentle Fist fighting style. Instead of a passive super, players could actually attempt to protect *Naruto's* chakra centers and internal organs by quickly dodging Neji's strikes.

Naruto: Rise of a Ninja is such a successful adaptation that playing it is really a lot more fun than watching the show. The cel-shaded graphics easily translate the huge cast of 2D characters into a 3D world without sacrificing any of the anime's style. If you've ever fantasized about pulling off anime ninja tricks like running up walls or generating countless clones of yourself, this is the game for you.

NARUTO

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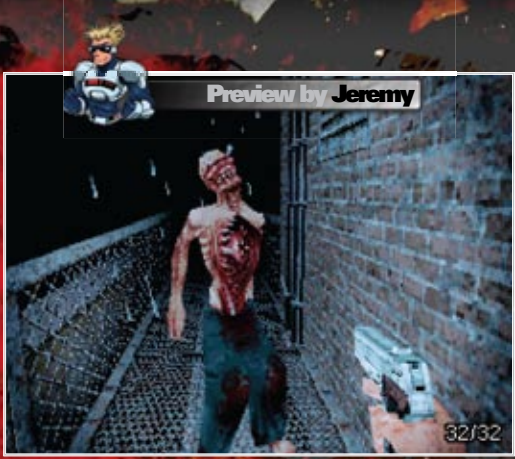
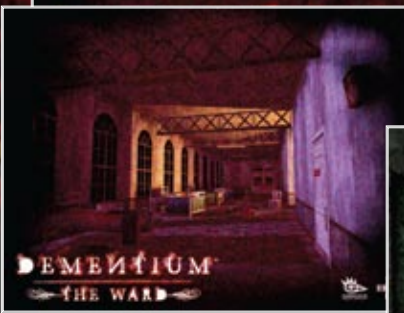
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DEMENTIUM™ THE WARD



DS-owning survival horror fans have had very little to choose from, giving Renegade Kid a chance to satiate the desires of the genre's fans with its disturbing and gory adventure. *Dementium* looks to raise the bar for DS games visually, while adding more variety to the genre's traditional gameplay style by merging puzzle, action-adventure, and first-person shooting elements into its gameplay.

Its story begins with the weary protagonist waking up to find himself alone in a dreary, derelict hospital that has been frozen by the cruel hands of time. Afterwards, he encounters the sickening results of the now-mutilated surgical experiments wandering the halls. Only by conquering them, his deepest fears, and a series of challenging puzzles can he find out the secrets of the hospital that has detained him. If he can do this, he just might escape with his life (and if he's really lucky, his sanity) intact.

Unfortunately, few details have been released about the nuts and bolts of the gameplay. Presumably, *Dementium* will allow you to further maim the surgical victims with weapons in an effort to find clues about why you're there, and allow you to explore the hospital in order to dig up as much information as possible to unravel its mysteries.

While Renegade Kid is a new developer, its crew has a lot of experience, and does seem dedicated to offering up something beyond the standard fare for the genre. If their dedication pays off, we could be treated with a refreshing survival horror game that leads to further innovation for the genre. It looks like they're well on their way to at least crafting the most disturbing genre entry ever created for a portable.

PUBLISHER, GAMECOCK
DEVELOPER, RENEGADE KID

RELEASE DATE, TBA
GENRE, SURVIVAL HORROR

CATEGORY, FIRST-PERSON
OF PLAYERS, 1

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METROID PRIME 3 CORRUPTION



Most previews are written without having had any hands-on time with the game and therefore only provide basic information, with very little opinion about the game's quality included. That will not be the case here. Nintendo recently invited members of the print media to come and play two complete levels of *Metroid* in Seattle, and I was lucky enough to be included.

Based on playing those two levels alone, in my humble opinion, this game is going to rule over all other console shooters ever made. As long as the rest of the levels are as good or better, then my score for this game is going to be high. Very high.

The things that are making it the best *ever* are: the fabulous level design; the wonderful visuals; the great voice acting; the controls; the controls and; the controls. All other console FPS games are f'd by having to use an analog stick to aim. Being a PC FPS shooter aficionado, I am spoiled by the keyboard and its friend the mouse. The lovely aiming joy of the Wiimote alone made those two nearly finished levels of *Metroid* feel like the best quality console FPS gaming available anywhere. The rest will be gravy.

The things that are probably going to keep it from a receiving a perfect score: the story is only decent (I wish more good SciFi authors would get involved in writing game scripts); the action is pretty scripted (once you've played through any given area, if you have to go back because you didn't make it to the save point, you'll be on auto pilot) and; there is no multiplayer (this alone may reduce the score by a half point for some).

Metroid Prime 3: Corruption is the proof in Reggie's pudding: his assertion that Nintendo still cares very much about us hardcore gamers.

Preview by DJPubba

Publisher: Nintendo Genre(s): First Person Shooter
Developer: Retro Studios Category: Sci-Fi
Release Date: 8/20/2007 # of Players: 1

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SONIC RUSH ADVENTURE

Until *Sonic and the Secret Rings*, it was pretty hard to think of a really good 3D *Sonic the Hedgehog* game. Even *Sonic Adventure* and *Sonic Adventure 2*, in retrospect, just feel like "me too" attempts to ride *Mario 64*'s coat-tails. On portable hardware, where developers don't shy away from high-speed 2D gameplay, Sonic's inarguably fared a lot better. There he's starred in the thoroughly decent *Sonic Advance* series, *Sonic Rivals*, and, most recently, *Sonic Rush* for the DS.

Sonic Rush Adventure picks up where the last DS *Sonic* game left off. Once again, players can take Sonic the Hedgehog or Blaze the Cat through a series of old-school, high-speed 2D levels full of pipes, loops, and rings to snag. The characters are still 3D sprites interacting with a 2D world, so Sonic can still use the Trick System to score extra points and other goodies by performing cool moves that cause him to "pop out" of the screen.

Tails is once again present but unplayable, along with a new raccoon-girl character named Marina. Instead, Tails provides Sonic with the jetskis he uses to travel between the game's seven islands, where the action unfolds. These sequences are effectively 3D racing levels, a little reminiscent of *Jet Moto*, where Sonic has to snag bonus rings and avoid obstacles in order to get where he's going.

Sonic's in the islands to fight evil pirates, lead up by a huge fellow named Captain Whiskers who is not Eggman but an incredible simulation. Likewise, while you wouldn't confuse *Sonic Rush Adventure*'s gameplay for *Genesis Sonic*, it also perfectly captures the fun of playing a high-speed side-scroller. As long as Sega doesn't bring back *Sonic Rush*'s irritating bottomless pits, they'll probably have a winner on their hands.

PUBLISHER: SEGA • DEVELOPER: SEGA • GENRE: PLATFORMER
CATEGORY: 2.5D • RELEASE DATE: FALL 2007 • PLAYERS: 1-2



SOUL NOMAD & the World Eaters



Soul Nomad and the World Eaters resembles N1's previous SRPG fare in a lot of ways: 2D sprites on 3D backgrounds, a big emphasis on grinding and power-leveling, and subversive gimmicks built right into the core gameplay. This time the gimmick is the Room System, and it skews *Soul Nomad*'s gameplay into something nearly unrecognizable.

In *Soul Nomad*, you don't use units one at a time; you combine them into groups of four to nine units called a Room. You can equip your Room with items called Decor to grant stat boosts. The leader of the Room can use Skills and Tactics to improve the performance of the Room, while the other characters attack or use certain abilities like magic or healing depending on their position in the Room.

It sounds confusing, but once you've got your hands on the game, it makes a lot of sense. Put the right units together and a single squad can solo most of the game, including the random dungeons. (You didn't think N1 would make a strategy game without random dungeons, did you?) Since you can move all of your units with a single order, clearing levels feels quick and seamless.

Oddly enough, *Soul Nomad*'s story is about as close to ordinary as Nippon Ichi's ever come. You play as a male or female protagonist, who is given a sword that contains the spirit of a world-destroying evil entity named Gig. The World Eaters ravaging your world were once Gig's servants, and your people hope that you can overcome them with his power. Of course, that presumes you can control Gig's malevolent power before Gig controls you.

Soul Nomad's plotline branches at points, giving you five endings and two different stories to pursue. As usual, there's also a bevy of post-game content and hidden characters to find. The real question is whether or not gamers are going to warm up to *Soul Nomad*'s surrealist and disarmingly simple gameplay. It's definitely not what you'd expect from an SRPG.

PUBLISHER: NISA • DEVELOPER: NIS • GENRE: STRATEGY RPG
CATEGORY: 3D, SRPG • RELEASE DATE: 9/11/2007 • PLAYERS: 1

Tom Clancy's
SPLINTER CELL
CONVICTION



Preview by **Lynara**

Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release Date: 11/16/07

Genre: Stealth
Category: Hoodie of Concealment +5
of Players: 1-?

Two years after the events of *Double Agent*, a fifty-three year old Sam Fisher escapes from prison for a stealth mission that completely redefines *Splinter Cell*. With Third Echelon paralyzed by its own bureaucratic incompetence, Agent Fisher has to strike out on his own to hunt down terrorists planning an attack on American soil. With no high-tech gear at his disposal, Agent Fisher's going to have to improvise. This means hiding in the crowds of tourists that line the streets of *Conviction's* Washington, D.C. location, creating distractions, and using whatever objects he can find to get the job done.

What's amazing about *Conviction* is that context-sensitive object interactions are just gone. Agent Fisher can pick up and use anything he finds in the world around him, in any way that seems to make sense. You can hit an enemy terrorist with a chair, use it to barricade a door, or fling it into a crowd to cause a momentary distraction. The entire game takes place in broad daylight, so "sneaking" for Agent Fisher now consists of pulling his hoodie up over his face and disappearing into a crowd of amazingly detailed people with surprisingly realistic AI. When it's time to dispose of your enemies, just slip into the bushes for a silent kill or quick knock-out.

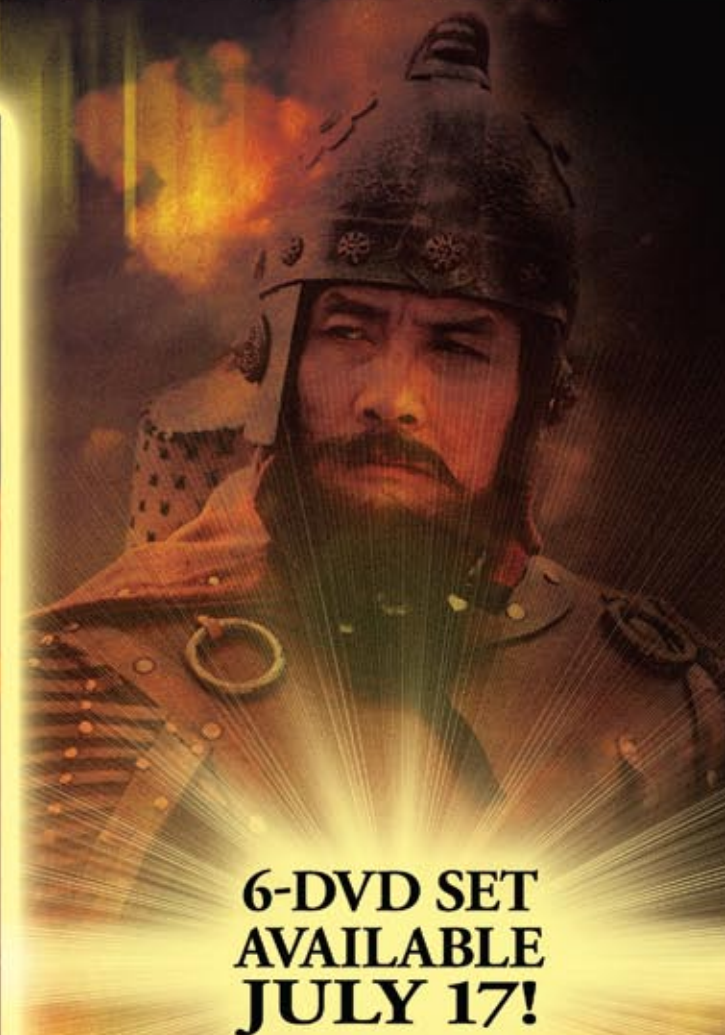
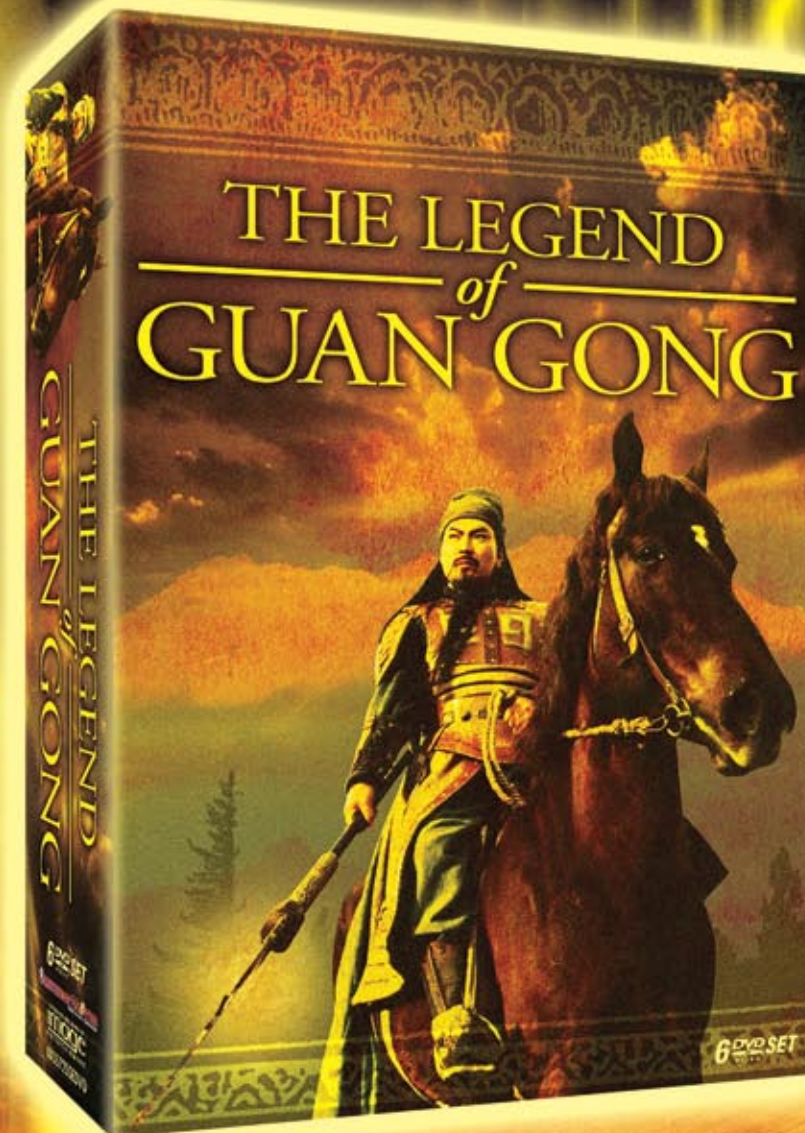
The new Sam Fisher borrows a lot from 24's Jack Bauer, as does *Conviction's* solo mode. Ubisoft is promising a story told in fifteen chapters, which each chapter taking about an hour to complete. After that, players can take the skills they've developed into online multiplayer modes. Information about them is scarce right now, but both co-op and versus modes are confirmed.

Rebuilding a franchise from the ground up isn't easy and most developers wouldn't even dare to try it. Ubisoft Montreal and *Splinter Cell* are usually a cut above that, so there's no reason to expect that *Conviction* will disappoint. If anything, this could be a classic in the making.



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Preview by **Racewing**

Genre(s): **Music/Rhythm**
Category: **One Night Only:**
Judy & The Holograms
of Players: **1-2**

Publisher: **Activision/RedOctane**
Developer: **Harmonix Music Systems**
Release Date: **7/17/2007**

Ahh, the '80s. What's not to love? The King of Pop's reign was untarnished, robots could turn into tractor-trailers, Turtle Power could overcome any obstacle, and Soul Glo would keep *any* unruly hairstyle in check. Oh, yeah, and rock 'n' roll back then *ruled*. Sure, it was slower than today's thrash-fests, but it more than made up for it with melody, harmony, and rhythm. '80s rock was just *catchy*.

Fortunately for gamers, Harmonix agrees: that's why they've rounded up thirty songs from the time period, and put them on a PS2-exclusive collection disc. Don't think this is just some lame cash-in, though. Some of the era's best tracks are waiting for you to shred through. Here's what's been revealed so far:

- Hold On Loosely (as made famous by .38 Special)
- No One Like You (as made famous by Scorpions)
- Only a Lad (as made famous by Oingo Boingo)
- Radar Love (as made famous by White Lion)
- Ballroom Blitz (as made famous by Krokus)
- The Warrior (by Scandal)
- Play With Me (as made famous by Extreme)
- Wrath Child (as made famous by Iron Maiden)
- I Wanna Rock (by Twisted Sister)
- Round and Round (as made famous by Ratt)
- I Ran (by Flock of Seagulls)
- Metal Health (as made famous by Quiet Riot)
- Holy Diver (as made famous by Dio)
- Heat Of The Moment (as made famous by Asia)
- Electric Eye (by Judas Priest)
- 18 and Life (as made famous by Skid Row)
- Balls to the Wall (as made famous by Accept)
- Bathroom Wall (as made famous by Faster Pussycat)
- Lonely is the Night (as made famous by Billy Squire)
- Nothing But a Good Time (as made famous by Poison)
- What I Like About You (as made famous by The Romantics)
- Shaken (as made famous by Eddie Money)
- Synchronicity II (as made famous by The Police)
- Caught in a Mosh (as made famous by Anthrax)
- We Got the Beat (as made famous by The Go Go's)

As you can see (by the absence of some "as made famous by" terms), this version of *Guitar Hero* uses more master tracks as opposed to covers, so you'll be able to feel even more like you're really busting out Flock of Seagulls and Twisted Sister. The characters and venues have even been given '80s makeovers. Honestly, though, in the end, this is more *Guitar Hero*. Who's going to object to that? You'll be able to, like, totally get your rock on come this July.



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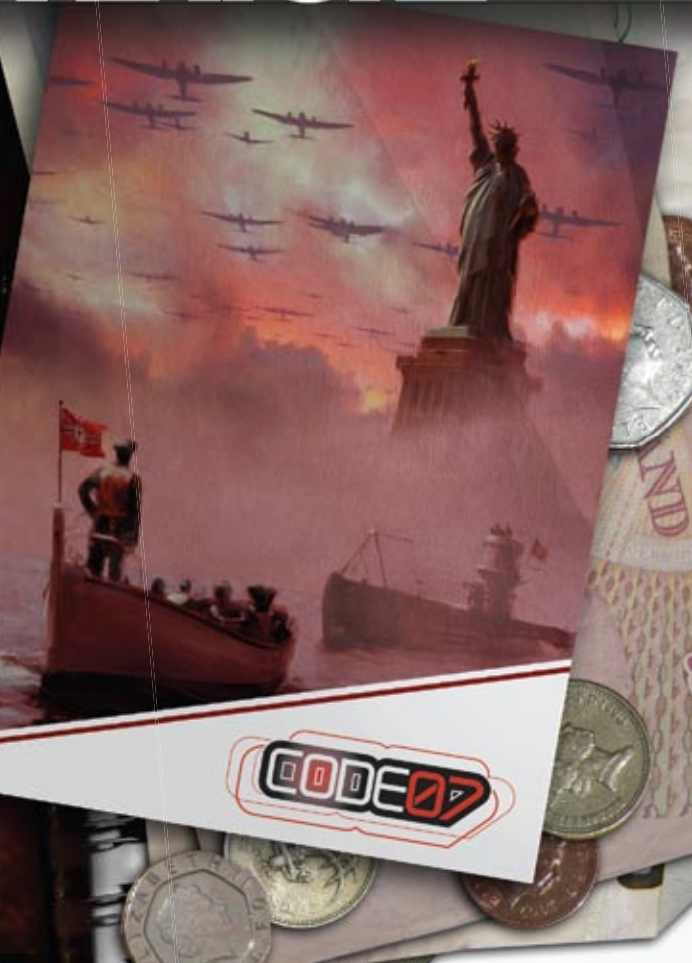
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THE SECRET CODE OF CODEMASTERS A JUNKET JOURNAL AT CODE 07 BY: ROGER DANISH

For the few of us lucky enough to be in the "media" side of the video game industry, press junkets come hand in hand with what we do. Said junkets usually involve flying off to some foreign place, imbibing plenty of alcoholic beverages, getting presentations of the publisher's latest games, and, just sometimes, partaking in a themed event to tie into the genre or game that is being shown. Some notable highlights over my sixteen-year career include dogfighting with real jets over the Nevada landscape, courtesy of Namco for *Ace Combat*; being thrown in a pitch black, rat-infested warehouse for the original *Manhunt*; riding jet skis in Miami off of a yacht anchored to a private island for *GTA: Vice City*; and two week-long, all-expenses-paid trips to Hawaii for UbiSoft's summer line ups. Along the way, trips to Greece for the Acropolis Rally, to Shanghai to meet the *Splinter Cell* team, and to Japan for the Tokyo Game Show have all fallen under the junket umbrella.

Sadly, the "salad days" of lavish junkets have fallen by the wayside over the past few years, as publishers have scaled back on budgets, and ethics have been called into question (what the Los Angeles Times once referred

to as "Playola"). The days of all-expense paid-trips to the South of France have been substituted for generic "Gamer's Days" where we are ushered from room-to-room and cube-to-cube to get the latest game demos and information. Sure, this works just as well as spending the night in a medieval castle or learning how to drive an F1 car at racing school, but I have to admit, I do miss the fun and excitement generated from these events.

Thankfully, there are still a few publishers willing to pull out all the stops when showing off their wares. Codemasters is one such company. Recently, they flew a group of journalists to the UK for "Code 07," a brand-new, annually planned event where their fall and winter lineups are showcased in a cool and unique setting. The event was held at the Millbrook Proving Ground in Bedfordshire, to which we were flown over from Heathrow



airport via helicopter. The proving ground is a vehicle testing center where the latest vehicles, both production and concept, are taken through their paces and tested. Millbrook has a variety of courses that simulate different driving conditions from hills and city courses, to speedy straights, and high-speed bowls. During our day at the ground, we were taken as passengers along all of its courses, power sliding around corners, racing at speeds topping 120 MPH, and driving along banked raceways.

Of course, there were games to be seen as well, and Codemasters had a surprising lineup. Mostly known for their *Colin McRae*, *TOCA*, and *Micro Machines* franchises, this successful UK publisher is breaking out of the mold with a handful of unique and original titles that span multiple genres. On tap at the event were *DIRT: Overlord*, *Race Driver: Create & Race*, *Operation Fall of Liberty*, *HEIST*, *Clive Barker's Jericho*, *Operation Flashpoint 2*, *Race Driver One*, and *Rise of the Argonauts* (the latter three were shown as teaser trailers only). The following are brief previews for some of their games just on the horizon.

Turning Point: Fall of Liberty

Platform: PS3, Xbox 360, PC

Genre: FPS

Release Date: 4th Quarter '07

In 1931, Winston Churchill was hit by a taxi in New York. In the real world, he survived, and went on to rally the British people to fight the Nazi threat. In *Turning Point: Fall of Liberty*, Churchill didn't make it. Set in an alternate universe where the British failed to halt the Nazi blitzkrieg through Europe, this WWII-era shooter shuns the typical military FPS trappings and delivers a unique twist to this tired formula. Taking place on US soil in the early '50s, you play as a construction worker and regular joe named Danny Carson who inadvertently gets caught up in the American resistance.

as you battle your way through a war-torn New York chock full of the Third Reich. Developed by Spark Unlimited (known for *Call of Duty: Finest Hour*), *Turning Point* is a game that should be on your radar.



Race Driver: Create & Race

Platform: NDS

Genre: Racing

Release Date: 3rd Quarter '07

Race Driver: Create & Race brings Codemasters's spot-on racing simulation to the Nintendo DS. Not only does this game give you the ability to test drive the most formidable sports cars in the world on the world's most prestigious circuits, it also lets you create your very own circuits with a full track construction kit. Using the stylus on the touch screen, the game's track editor allows you to select and place a multitude of racetrack elements, such as hairpin corners, long straights and chicanes, to design your own unique circuits. Once all the pieces are placed to perfection, you can take to the track and experience the thrill of racing and the need for speed.

In addition to the track editor, the game features thirty-two real-world circuits and twenty-five officially licensed racecars, including the Koenig GT, the AMG Mercedes C Klasse DTM, and the Chevrolet Silverado Truck. It also makes use of the DS's wi-fi capabilities, allowing you to challenge others to races on the game's official tracks, as well as the circuits of you and your friends create.



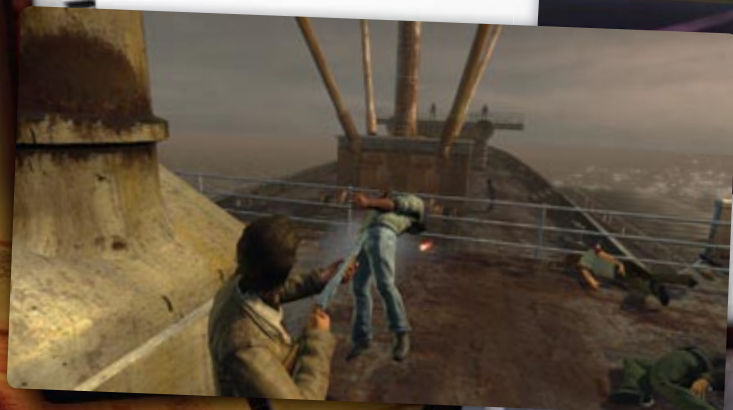
As a single-player, story-driven game, *Turning Point* sweeps the player up in a roller coaster ride of "oh s--t" moments that look to keep you on the edge of your seat

HEIST

Platform: PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Genre: Bank Robbing
Release Date: 4th Quarter '07

If you're a regular HGM reader, then you already know all about *HEIST*, which was the subject of our cover feature back in our April issue. Developed by InXile Entertainment (2004's *The Bard's Tale*), this free-roaming sandbox game allows you to take on the role of Johnny Sutton, a bank robbing lifer fresh out of a five-year stint up the river. Together with his Uncle Sal and reunited crew, you must pull off dozens of heists across San Francisco's financial institutions, which will inevitably make a name for Johnny as the greatest bank robber of all time.

Set in the late '60s with an *Ocean's 11* vibe, *HEIST* allows you to cruise the streets of SF as you control your bank robbing gang via squad-based commands in an attempt to gain notoriety and lots of cold hard cash. In addition to knocking off banks, there are a variety of local establishments that you can rob to hone your skills. These include bars, restaurants, strip clubs, armored cars, and more. In addition to heists, white-knuckle car chases will be part of the game's core mechanics.



Clive Barker's Jericho

Platform: PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Genre: FPS
Release Date: Fourth Quarter '07

Penned by the legendary horror writer and filmmaker Clive Barker (*Candyman*, *Hellraiser*), *Clive Barker's Jericho* is an original squad-based FPS that allows you to control a seven-man strike team as they take on the supernatural and other hellish creatures throughout periods in time. The storyline revolves around a mysterious reappearance of a lost city in a remote desert and an evil form that has resurfaced from the dawn of time.

Trained in both conventional warfare and the arcane arts, each member of the Jericho strike force will have their own unique talents, which will be called on throughout the game in order to succeed and survive.



There's Frank Delgado, a Pyromancer; Simone Cole, a Reality Hacker; Xavier Jones, a Seer; Abigail Black, a Telekinetic; "Billie" Church, a Blood Ward; Father Paul Rawlings, an Exorcist; and Devin Ross, a Ghost. You will be able to jump from character to character with the press of a button, and even combine their abilities together to create devastating effects.

Designed as an action horror title, *Jericho* looks to up the stakes in visuals and next-gen special effects. Mingling the darkest elements of Barker's horror fiction and films with an ambitious story for mature gamers, fans of Clive Barker and horror fiction enthusiasts won't be disappointed.

JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD™

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit Midway's Chicago offices for the chance to get some updated hands-on impressions with *Stranglehold*, the highly anticipated John Woo-themed action game that puts you in the middle of the most intense action sequences this side of Hollywood. While I had previewed the game before and all the basics of *Stranglehold* have been well documented, this was my chance to explore some never-before-seen areas and truly see how the vision of recreating a John Woo action flick was translating into video game form. Thankfully, I wasn't disappointed.

Sitting down with Midway Product Manager Jack VanLeer, we began to discuss the overall vision for the game as he attempted to dispel any pre-conceived myths about the project. "It's not just gun porn," laughed VanLeer, who seemed barely able to contain his excitement. "We've been hard at work and we're really ready to show off the environmental interaction, the puzzle elements found in the game and the fact that there's so much more to *Stranglehold* than what people have seen so far."

Of course, I was pretty excited about the prospect, but before picking up the sticks we decided to let Jack walk me through a few levels so I could get up to speed. Booting up the sprawling outdoor Taio level, the first thing I noticed was the emphasis placed on the game's cut scenes. While still a WIP (work in progress), you get the sense that through these cinemas Midway and John Woo himself have really gone above and beyond to create an immersive storyline that engages the player while setting the stage for plenty of amazing action sequences. *Stranglehold* takes place a few years after the events of the John Woo film *Hardboiled*.

It contains plenty of twists, turns, and themes of loyalty and brotherhood, and takes gamers from Hong Kong to Chicago and back as they assume the role of Chow Yun-Fat's infamous character Inspector Tequila (voiced by the man himself).

contains six levels, all of them are *really, really big*. The game is said to have eight to ten hours of game play for experienced players (not including finding all the unlockable content) so with six levels to distribute that amount of time between, you can imagine how big each level must be.

The game contains six levels, all of which are based on real-world locations, and include the previously seen Tea House environment, a claustrophobic enemy-infested parking garage, fully destructible slums, a famous Chinese restaurant called the Mega (well, called something else in real life, but close enough), and more. The one thing the team at Midway is adamantly trying to get across is that although the game only

HANDS-ON PREVIEW

By Daniel Kayser of GameTrailers.com



Once the action got underway, it was immediately evident that your trigger finger best be up to snuff once *Stranglehold* finds a home in your Xbox 360, PS3 or PC. "Intense" only begins to describe the action. Fortunately, the development team is doing their best to make sure the gun battles aren't just intense, but accessible and fluid for the user. "With so much going on all the time, we wanted to give the player a go-to button, something they use through the whole experience that will help keep the action smooth," said VanLeer. That button, on the Xbox 360, is the Left Trigger. One pull of what will become your polished, ergonomic godsend will help navigate Tequila through the environments, be it by sliding along objects like banisters or railings, swinging from chandeliers, cruising down zip lines or so much more. "You can never overuse the Left Trigger," said VanLeer, a statement made evident as he guided Tequila down the banister of a stairwell, taking out enemies with cinematic flair.

Combining the simplicity of the all-purpose Left Trigger button with the automated activation of Tequila Time (where the action goes into slow-mo, ala *Bullet-Time* from *Max Payne*) when enemies enter your targeting reticule, recreating amazing action sequences becomes nearly effortless and all the more fun. "John (Woo)'s style of film making is definitely evident in *Stranglehold*," said VanLeer. "There's a very graceful quality to the action, sort of like ballet, an artistic representation through motion."

It's this smooth, cinematic experience that the developers have sought to create since the beginning of the project, and one that makes *Stranglehold* almost as much fun to watch as it is to play. Even better, the ability to interact with the environment opens up tons of options, making it possible to execute some pretty outlandish and creative acrobatic displays while taking down the swarms of baddies that are thrown your way.

Like any great action game, *Stranglehold* enhances the core mechanics with a few old-fashioned goodies. The better you become at utilizing the environment and quickly dispatching the bad guys, the faster your power-up meter will enable what the developers call "Tequila Bombs." Aside from being extremely effective during game play, these three enhanced special moves are more or less a tribute to John Woo and provide the game with an over-the-top cinematic feel. Mapped to the D-Pad, you'll be able to initiate the "Spin Attack," "Barrage," and "Precision Aim" Tequila Bombs once you've boosted your meter enough to do so.

There's a bit of strategy in play here, as holding off use of one Tequila Bomb or another may help you pass through later, more challenging areas of a given stage. As the most difficult to acquire, but certainly the most cinematic, Spin Attack will allow you to take out all the enemies within a certain radius through a very polished, detailed and quickly executed ballet of bullets (complete with flying doves). Behind that is Barrage, which allows you to more or less go insane for a brief moment of time and take down scores of enemies that might be clogging up your path. Precision Aim is perhaps the coolest of the Tequila Bombs. When activated, the screen goes into a semi-sniper perspective, allowing you to pinpoint your target and the specific place on their body you want to aim for. With over twenty different hit points on the body that will result in realistic responses from the enemies, Precision Aim is sure to deliver the "wow" factor the developers are looking for. "Most people aim for the crotch," said VanLeer. "Go figure," I replied. A quick health boost is also mapped to the D-pad. When used, it will use up some of your Tequila Bomb meter, but it's awfully handy when a health pack is nowhere to be found.

Another game play mechanic featured in *Stranglehold* is the Mexican Standoff. This ultra cinematic

confrontation is usually introduced through a cut scene and kind of flips the tables on Tequila, slowing down time for your enemies and forcing you to dodge their bullets while firing off shots of your own. It's a very dramatic, intense exchange that seems to not only break up the game play, but compliment the overall feel of the game. In addition to this sequence, you'll find a few completely different scenarios peppered throughout. One of which placed Tequila inside a chopper circling an island at intense speeds while you man the onboard machine gun to lay waste to the environments and enemies... fun stuff to say the least.

At this point, the game play in *Stranglehold* seemed like a pretty straightforward affair. Missions begin with a cinematic cutscene that places you in the action, and you'll only be able to advance the game by fulfilling objectives. Although there are some options afforded to the player, generally speaking, the mission structure is linear. Just like a John Woo flick, you'll most likely feel immersed in a story, but you won't have much (if any) control over it. Basically, Midway wants you to be able to follow the narrative and live out and interact with the fun parts, and it is this portion of the game that delivers most on expectations.

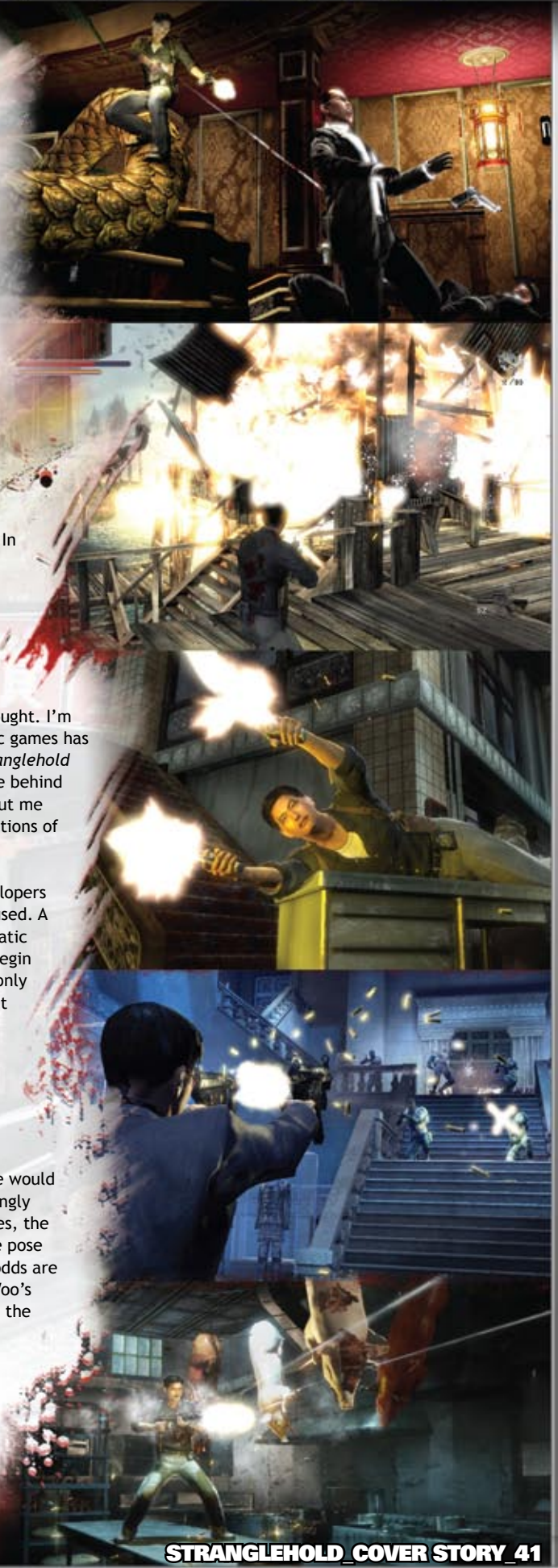
With all the action on display right before my eyes, it was finally time to give it a go myself. As Jack rebooted the Taio level, I prepared to shoot first and ask questions later. The controls were extremely responsive and after a few minutes stopped just short of the "think it-do it" intuitiveness ever game designer aims for. In mere minutes I was jumping off walls, sliding down rails, leaping over railings and flinging myself backwards to create a smaller target for my enemies as I took them down one cinematic shot after the other. Honestly, I thought it would take longer to get my bearings, but the streamlined control afforded me the opportunity to dive right in with guns a'blazin'.

Interestingly, I found that years of playing more stealth oriented games like *Ghost Recon* or *Rainbow Six* didn't hinder the intense nature of the game as much as I thought. I'm what I like to refer to as a "cautious" player, meaning my affinity for more strategic games has taught me to do anything *but* run into a room with both fingers on the triggers. *Stranglehold* held up well though, allowing me to use the well-implemented cover system to hide behind walls, add just a little strategy to my attack, and take out enemies en masse without me feeling penalized. Sure, I played "slower" than Jack did or how previous demonstrations of the game have portrayed, but to me it was a testament to the game's flexibility.

Since interacting with the environment is such a key part of *Stranglehold*, the developers saw the need to alert players when they are in proximity of an object that can be used. A slight sheen or lighted path highlights the object. While it breaks the overall cinematic nature of the game, it makes the gameplay feel more fluid, and after a while you begin to predict your acrobatic possibilities before even noticing the assist. This doesn't only apply to objects that you can maneuver around, but also objects in the environment you can interact with. One example comes from when I was faced with a group of enemies behind an enclosure. Looking above their heads, I saw that several boulders were being held up by a rickety structure, which I promptly shot to pieces. Soon after the first of these encounters, you begin to look for similar environmental interactions to help you along and from what I've seen it looks as though Midway has incorporated these puzzle-esque elements quite nicely.

The one question I had going in to the game play session was how difficult the game would be. I'll be honest, the game is designed to let you romp, so don't expect any amazingly difficult challenges from your foes. Midway informed me that as the game progresses, the enemies will use bigger, more effective weapons, increase in number and otherwise pose more of a challenge. Even with that said, *Stranglehold* definitely ensures that the odds are in your favor when looking to relive your favorite cinematic sequences from John Woo's films. That's not a bad thing, but certainly something to keep in mind when judging the experience of *Stranglehold* as a whole.

While there's still tweaking to be done (tons of work has been done to the camera system) and even a whole lot more to learn about the game (multiplayer, anyone?), it's evident that gamers looking to get a *Stranglehold* on a next-gen action experience don't have to look much further than Midway's latest when it lights up the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and PC this August.



STRANGLEHOLD Q&A

The team behind *Stranglehold* has been working for years to deliver a truly amazing action experience on the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and PC. To find out a bit more about exactly what

went into the development of Midway's first next-generation title, I caught up with the game's director, Brian Eddy, and producer Alex Offermann.

HGM: Heading into the project, what was the overall sensation you wanted to deliver to the player?

The overall sensation that we knew we had to deliver to players was basically the look and feel of John Woo's Hong Kong action films. When we first started the project, we would gather the whole team together for lunch and to watch John Woo's influential films, like *Hard-Boiled*, *The Killer* and *A Better Tomorrow*, and afterwards we would discuss what made them great. We quickly generated a list of items we had to have in the game, Tequila Time, Massive D, over-the-top death animations, dramatic gun

to fix the problems that only showed up in slow motion. However, it was worth it because in the end it turns out that many things actually look even cooler when viewed in Tequila Time!

HGM: Why [did you decide] to make Tequila Time automatic?

We wanted to make the game fun and easy to pick up for players at all skill levels, so we didn't want to bog players down with having to manage too many controls at the same time. ...early on we looked for ways to simplify the controls without dumming down the game and in looking at other games we realized that players were already

HGM: Both technically and creatively, what type of work went into developing and then executing the various Tequila Bomb special moves?

Like most elements in the game, the Tequila Bombs were a combined effort between art, programming, animation and design. [The art department] had to create full screen post effects to give each bomb a different feel, create special effects for the weapons and enemies and setup dramatic cameras and lighting to show off the dramatic action. Programming had the challenge of creating each of the bombs, which amounted to mini-games within the game, and



battles, cool environmental interactions and of course Chow Yun-Fat himself, and we are happy to say that we've managed to deliver all of those in *Stranglehold*.

HGM: How difficult was it to get Tequila Time feeling just right for the end user?

Actually this was quite challenging, as it involved bringing a lot of elements together. How much should we slow down time for enemies, what is Tequila's rate of fire versus everyone else's, do we increase the player's weapon damage when in TT, do we decrease the enemies' accuracy, what is a good full-screen special effect that gets the mode across but doesn't hinder the player's view and how do we make sure that everything looks great even in slow motion? We spent a lot of time tweaking Tequila Time to balance it in the game, and we are very happy with the results, and the final screen effect was locked down some time ago, but that last one was a much bigger challenge than we ever expected. Most games cover glitches in animations when swapping out one object for the broken version of it, but because you can see all those things in slow motion in *Stranglehold*, we had to do a lot of extra work to make sure that all those transitions looked smooth and didn't pop. Many times we'd add something to the game, like a car exploding, and it would look great until we viewed it in Tequila Time, at which point we'd have to go back and do a lot of detailed work

used to controlling movement, aiming and firing at the same time, so the two elements we had added that most games don't have, interactions with the environment and Tequila Time ended up being prime candidates to address. Automatic interactions didn't work so well, as often the player would be forced to do something or go somewhere they didn't want, so Auto TT was tried and even the very first rough implementation of it turned out to be really fun, so we kept it, but for the hardcore players out there who want to have manual control over it, there is also an option to turn off Auto Tequila Time.

HGM: What kind of work had to be done to ensure that Tequila Time wasn't overused or too much of an advantage for the player?

There is a limit to the amount of Tequila Time energy players have, and when they use that up, Tequila Time turns off. However, Tequila Time regenerates at a fairly quick rate, so players are still able to enjoy the fun of diving and interacting in slow motion a lot, while at the same time not being able to abuse the advantages it gives you: being able to aim and fire at an almost normal rate while enemies are slowed down. We've experimented a lot with the amount of Tequila Time energy players have and how fast it depletes, even doing tons of focus testing to see how people who haven't been playing the game for the last two years like what we have done and we think we've arrived at a good balance.

solving the many technical problems surrounding them, like making sure when a player initiates a Barrage right before an in-game cinema, that the game handles that case eloquently. Animation had to plan, motion capture, clean up and massage hundreds of hit reactions and special Tequila Bomb only animations. And finally design had to work with everyone to bring the bombs together, balance, polish and make each of them fun. We are lucky to have a team that works very well together!

HGM: How do the various Tequila Bombs deliver what players can consider to be a John Woo-like experience?

After studying Woo's films very closely we distilled some of the most memorable moments into three unique features we give the Player. The first is the absolutely iconic 'Spin Attack' which shows Tequila spinning in a 360 degree motion and taking out all the bad guys in the room. The next is 'Precision Aim' which emulates Inspector's uncanny accuracy w/ firearms, and was inspired by two scenes in *Hard-Boiled*, the first where Tequila shoots the head of a bullet to escape a room he's trapped in under the hospital and by one where he shoots a guy directly in the eye. Finally we have 'Barrage' mode which captures the frenetic chaos of an over-the-top, unlimited ammo, storm of gunfire that we see in so many of John Woo's films where Chow Yun Fat mows down wave after wave of bad guys.

HGM: How difficult was it to ensure Tequila Bombs were a balanced game play mechanic?

It was difficult, because as mentioned before, design had to work with all the other disciplines to not only get the Tequila Bombs working as planned and looking good, but also making sure they were balanced in all the areas in the game. For instance, how do you make it so the player can't use a Tequila Bomb to cheat and get by a boss, but at the same time doesn't make the player feel cheated when they use a Tequila Bomb but it doesn't kill the boss instantly like it will with the regular game enemies? They had to design a whole system around this, establishing which bosses were more or less vulnerable to each of the Tequila Bombs. It was definitely a challenge but one they lived up to.

HGM: Massive D has always been a big part of the mission statement for the game. What are the ways in which you think the game's destructible environments enhance the overall experience?

The first way is that it is just a whole lot of fun to see everything in the environment get destroyed. When people play the game, you



The designers had a huge role in creating the authentic cinematic John Woo experience that we've achieved in *Stranglehold*. From the beginning our development philosophy on *Stranglehold* was to give designers powerful tools that would allow them to make that exact kind of game, and that includes giving them the ability to setup up and script any action sequence you'd find in a John Woo movie or pretty much any that they could imagine. That said, a big part of the design philosophy behind *Stranglehold* was to actually make each area of the game a sandbox for players to pick and choose the toys they want to play with in. In effect that gives players with different styles the ability to play each area of the game they way they want to and the result is that they get to recreate their own unique John Woo style cinematic action sequences. The designers just give players the tools and inspiration to create cool experiences.

HGM: Considering how empowered Inspector Tequila is throughout the game, how have you ensured that the game provides a significant challenge for veteran gamers?

Veteran gamers will find that while the game is easy to pick up and immediately fun to play, it is a challenge to truly master, especially at higher levels of difficulty. In addition, we've made sure that there are plenty of unlockables and achievement that players can find and earn. We think that *Stranglehold* has a lot to offer all levels of gamers, from the casual to the veteran hardcore players.

HGM: What has been the biggest challenge in creating the fully destructible environments featured in *Stranglehold*?

The two major challenges were process and performance. For process, the art staff initially had to develop our own tools to support the Massive D feature. We developed interfaces and systems to give both Art and Design the flexibility to really integrate this feature into gameplay. As the tools developed we began to do more and more interesting things w/ destruction in the game. The second huge challenge was performance. This was a huge issue because you're asking the hardware to handle additional collision, physics, effects and audio to provide the player with the kind of results they would expect. Destroying something like a massive statue or a 60" plasma TV can require hundreds of small fragments, numerous effects and quite a bit of 'destruction logic' to pull off effectively.

HGM: From an artistic perspective, what "little things" have had to be done to ensure

a cohesive experience that might not even be noticed by the player?

The art staff went to great pains to include lots of little details. Examples: When you shoot a wall near an enemy, he will 'cringe' to cover his face from the debris. When you shoot an enemy, they will bleed at the exact location the bullet hit them. When Tequila is shot, his face crunches up in agony and you can actually see the wrinkles on his brow animate. We have tiny subtle stuff like Tequila's boss, Inspector Lee is always a little bit sweaty, and the Russians have bad dental hygiene. There are tons of other little details and nods to fans of both John Woo and Midway.

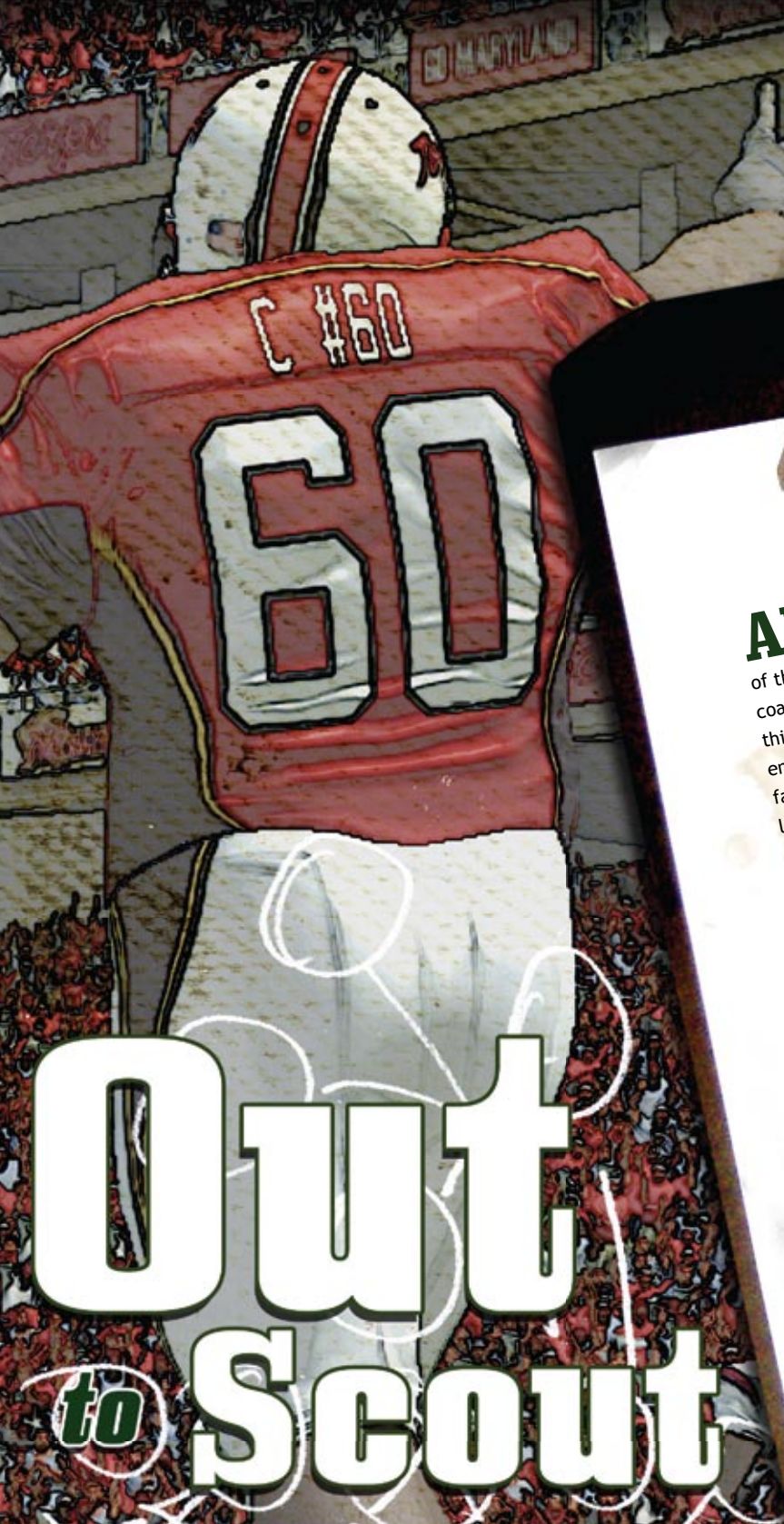
HGM: How have the resources of the next-gen platforms helped fulfill the artistic vision for *Stranglehold*?

Since this is Midway's first next-gen game, when we began it wasn't clear exactly how far we could push the technology in service of the artistic vision. We have really tried to maintain a consistent high-quality visual style to the game, even while providing a huge variety of unique spaces to explore. We paid special attention to

the materials in the world, the motions of the characters and the overall 'look' of the game so it would be both beautiful and unique. Having the additional horsepower over previous generations really allowed all of the artists to push their individual discipline in ways that are completely new for our medium.

HGM: What key aspects of the game are you most proud of?

How it really makes you feel like you are staring in a John Woo Hong Kong Action movie. This was only achieved by all the individual disciplines working together to create this vision. We are very proud of the look of the game. The artists did an amazing job creating stunning environments that players can completely destroy. We are also very proud of the design of certain game-play features like Auto tequila time, Massive D, World interactions and the fact that pretty much anyone can pick up the controller and immediately start having fun. The programming that went into making the game is also very amazing. We are doing things with the Unreal Engine that even Epic is surprised at and this along with endlessly iterating on all the game play features makes the game technically impressive and fun to play. This was only possible because all the different disciplines on the team, Art, Design, Programming, Animation, Concept Art, Cinematics, and Audio, were able to come together to make such a fun gaming experience.



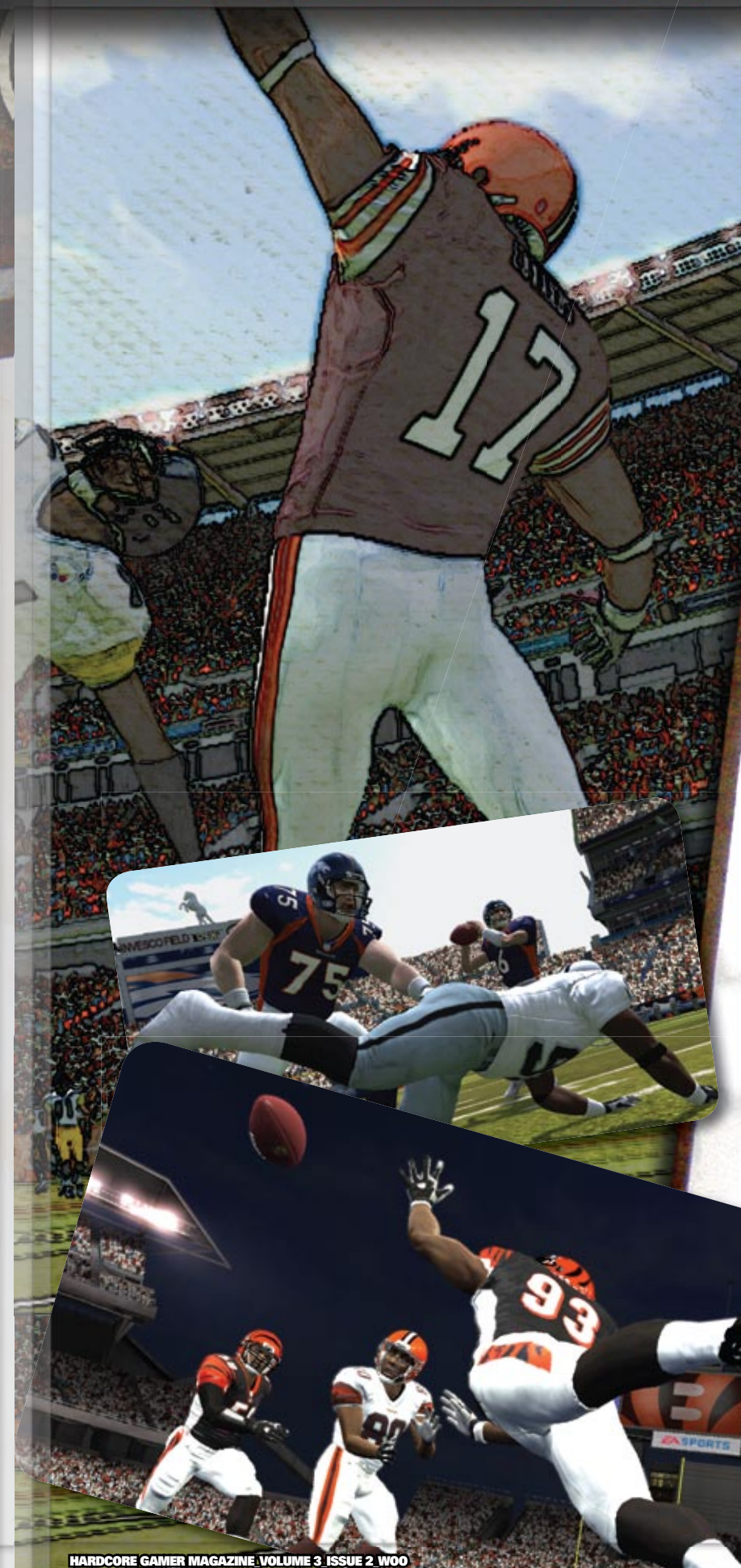
A detailed look at this year's top prospects in the world of football videogames

a feature by **daniel kayser** of **gametrailers.com**

Ah, the open air, the smell of the grass, the sound of helmets cracking, pads smashing, and coaches' whistles ringing in your ears. Football is a wonderful thing, and each year, the profound sense of opportunity energizes anyone tough enough to compete. While these factors hold true in all football circles, they also permeate the landscape of football video games. When looking at this year's contenders for "Best Football Game of the Year" on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, it's necessary to look at each title on the table, and consider a number of factors.

Like it or not, EA Sports has dominated the market for what seems like forever. Having exclusive rights to both the NFL and NCAA licenses (although considered unfair by many) makes EA the odds-on favorite simply because its games are the only ones that feature everyone's favorite teams. There's always room for an upset, though, as EA's old rival, 2K Sports, is finally back in the action after a three year hiatus and is suited up for a competitive season on the virtual gridiron. Without the benefit of the official NFL license, 2K Sports instead acquired the rights to historic NFL legends like Jerry Rice, Joe Montana, Barry Sanders, John Elway, and about 200 others for the launch of its upcoming *All-Pro Football* franchise. Though fans of football video games plenty to sink their teeth into with the all-star lineup, it'll take a lot of open-mindedness for them to ditch their familiar mainstay (*Madden*) for a date with diversity.

With that said, it's time to break down the three contenders for this year's "Football Game of the Year" title. Of course, it will take many play sessions, hours of online testing, and a season's worth of reflection to ultimately determine who gets the crown, but like any good football season, half the fun is in speculating about the prospects.



Madden NFL 08
Publisher: EA Sports
Developer: EA Tiburon
Platforms: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Release Date: August 15, 2007

EXPERIENCE: Make no bones about it: when it comes to football videogames, the *Madden* franchise is the definition of the word "veteran." The series has been around in various forms since the early 1980s, and with the upcoming release of its third "next-gen" installment, fans who felt shortchanged by the previous attempts at next-gen *Madden* may finally get the experience they've been waiting for. EA Tiburon has stated that it's been building up a foundation over the past two years (despite selling those "building block" titles at full retail price), as part of a three-year plan for providing the definitive next-gen football experience. Finally, that plan has come together. Nearly every complaint from the enormous *Madden* fanbase has been addressed in *Madden NFL '08*, including the long-awaited return of Owner mode, showing that EA Sports has finally recognized that the most important aspect of video game football is pleasing the players.

KEY ADDITIONS: Where to begin? New "Twitch Game Play" mechanics, an all-new Player Weapons system that's designed for both the hardcore and novices alike, Hit Stick 2.0, a modes and features list deeper than Tom Brady's black book, all-new branching animation technology that fixes many problems of the past, and a whole lot more. Even before the football video game season begins, it's safe to say that *Madden NFL '08* walks away, hands down, as the winner of the "Most Improved" title. Considering how long it took to get there, though, the "Most Improved" moniker seems more "overdue" than it does "overachieving." Even with that said, a robust offering of modes, features, and gameplay additions make *Madden NFL '08* worth playing, even if it's just because the experience is so different this time around.

GAMEBREAKER: There are two potential gamebreakers with *Madden NFL '08*. First, the new gameplay style feels faster, more fluid, and more dependent on the player's skills. Even though this is all really good, it feels very different, and series vets who have spent years learning the nuances of the game might need some time to adjust. Also, the new Player Weapons system is interwoven throughout the game, so even if you don't like it, you can't remove it from your *Madden NFL '08* experience. Fortunately, the system feels well-balanced. This revamping of the gameplay and addition of a pivotal new mechanic are risky moves for a franchise built around familiarity, but they might still pay off for EA in the long run.

EXPECTATIONS: Although the monotony of *Madden* has turned plenty of sports gaming enthusiasts off, *Madden NFL '08* looks like the best installment the franchise has seen in quite some time. Simply put, the expectations are huge. If the final product delivers on EA's promise to keep the gamers in control of the action, and the key additions work as they should, *Madden NFL '08* has to be considered the odds-on favorite to take this year's football gaming crown.

NCAA '08

Publisher: EA Sports
Developer: EA Tiburon
Platforms: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Release Date: July 17, 2007

EXPERIENCE: Just like its older brother, EA Sports's NCAA football franchise has been around for a really long time. Experience is a key attribute in any sport, and the team behind this year's iteration of *NCAA* takes its game plan from past success while adding in some forward-looking gameplay prospects. This franchise has always been about capturing the collegiate football experience, and though the critically acclaimed *Dynasty Mode* has been expanded to include things like High School scouting, the real strength of this year's *NCAA* game lies in its personalization. This year's game introduces your own personal shrine to house your unlockable achievements and trophies, showcase in-game photos, and even run videos of your favorite school on the jumbotron.

KEY ADDITIONS: Thankfully, the team behind *NCAA '08* focused on improving the gameplay. All-new animations, quicker and deeper play calling, and a focus on using squad leaders to rally players enhances the already solid experience of years past. The enhancements made to *Dynasty Mode* allow for a more streamlined process of scouting, and help to further personalize the already in-depth recruiting process. The additions to the core gameplay don't compare to *Madden*, but *NCAA* had more meat to begin with. The new features that do appear are solid, to say the least.

GAMEBREAKER: With everything *NCAA '08* has to offer, most fans of college football will find it more than adequate to their needs. The only question is whether or not the game can actually do all of things the developers promise. Will it manage to push the promised 60 frames per second? Will the branching animation technology, gang tackling, and revamped AI truly impact the overall feel of the game? The *NCAA* franchise has always managed to encompass the qualities of college football, but will these new improvements push the game that much further over the top, or will the phrase "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" come back to haunt the team at EA Tiburon?

EXPECTATIONS: When it comes to getting bang for your buck, *NCAA '08* might still be the best value among this year's crop of football titles. With tons of teams, insanely in-depth *Dynasty* and *Campus Legend* Modes, and solid gameplay both online and off, the latest installment of the popular franchise has a lot going for it. As is the case every year, it will really come down to how much gamers enjoy and appreciate the nuances of the college game compared to its NFL counterpart.

All-Pro Football 2K8

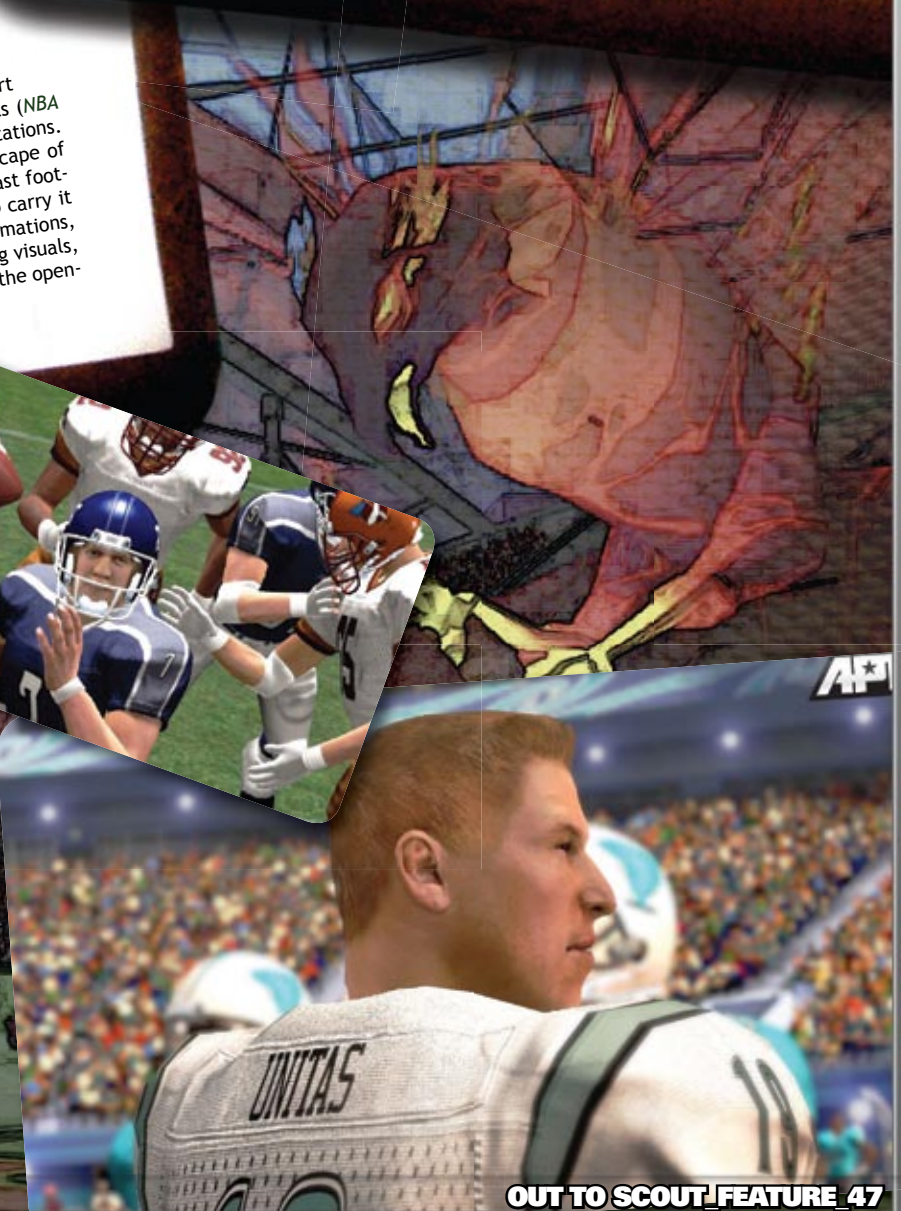
Publisher: 2K Sports
Developer: Visual Concepts
Platforms: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Release Date: July 16, 2007

EXPERIENCE: Several years ago, the landscape of the football video game market was as competitive as the real NFL. This was largely because of the amazing strides made by the teams at Visual Concepts (VC) and 2K Sports with their flagship sports franchise, *NFL 2K*. After the highly-publicized and extremely controversial exclusivity deal between EA Sports and the NFL, 2K Sports's critically-acclaimed franchise was benched for the season. Football fans have demanded its return, and now, 2K Sports football is back with the release of *All-Pro Football 2K8*. For many gamers, the best part about 2K's previous football products was the quality of the game engine. Embodying a completely different feel than industry powerhouse *Madden*, *NFL 2K* developed a cult following on the Dreamcast and then steadily built up its fan base to ultimately rival EA on the virtual field. There's no question that the guys at VC know what they're doing when it comes to making a great football game. The only question is whether or not the ravenous football gaming fans will be able to truly enjoy 2K's latest product without the full backing of current NFL teams, players, and stadiums.

KEY ADDITIONS: It's tough to analyze additions made to a franchise that has been riding the pine for the past several years. The last iteration of 2K football was released three years ago (*ESPN NFL 2K5*), and technology has changed significantly since that time. *2K8* is 2K's first next-gen effort with a football game, but its next-gen products in other key sports (*NBA 2K7* as a prime example) should serve as a barometer for fan expectations. The game offers an experience that is totally unique on the landscape of football gaming, allowing for the creation of a team made up of past football legends. As new and exciting as this is, though, is it enough to carry it through a full season against *Madden NFL '08*? Despite the new animations, new gameplay features, unprecedented level of depth, and amazing visuals, the ultimate success of 2K's football experiment relies primarily on the open-mindedness of sports gamers.

GAMEBREAKER: Gameplay, gameplay, gameplay. If *All-Pro Football 2K8* can beat *Madden NFL '08* in terms of sheer enjoyment on the field, this game, as the ultimate underdog, has to be considered for Football Game of the Year. Fast, fluid and simply more fun than the competition, 2K's previous football efforts gave gamers a lot to love. Whether or not that formula can hold up against a totally revamped *Madden*, though, remains to be seen.

EXPECTATIONS: For fans of football video games, the expectations for *All-Pro Football 2K8* should be absolutely huge. The teams at VC and 2K have had several years to work on this project, meaning that anything less than a refined, fluid, bug-free gaming experience should be simply unacceptable; after all, "Football Resurrected" is the slogan for the game. Likewise, "Beat EA" has been the mantra at 2K Sports since the genesis of this classic video game rivalry. Fans can only hope that getting cut off at the knees by the competition has fueled this "must win" mentality, and that it's translated into a tireless effort to deliver the greatest 2K Sports product yet. Still, the lack of real teams, stadiums and current players is a gigantic obstacle that could keep many fans from even trying *APF2K8* out. If the gameplay is solid, and the experience is unique and fun enough to keep people playing, *All-Pro Football 2K8* might just signify the official return of competition in football gaming.



Madden '08
Interview with David Ortiz

You've heard it all before... the promises, the hype, the expectations. It seems like every year around this time fans of football video games get a playbook full of propaganda as they anxiously await the next iteration of the *Madden* franchise. After getting hands-on time with *Madden NFL '08* on the Xbox 360, I think it's safe to say that we are finally seeing the first true next-generation title in the series. David Ortiz is the Project Lead on *Madden NFL '08* for next-gen consoles and the leader of a development team that's looking to go the distance. I chatted with Ortiz to shed some light on the development of *Madden '08* and here's what he had to say.

HGM: Heading into the development of *Madden NFL '08*, what was the single greatest goal for you and the team?

DO: Well we wanted to get gameplay back to the point where there was no question whatsoever that it (*Madden '08*) was undisputed as the best-playing *Madden* game ever. Going from where we were last year, we thought we really made strides to make people say that without question next-gen is a really great football playing experience.

HGM: The previous two editions of *Madden's* next-gen installments have been more or less building blocks to fully deliver the franchise into the next level of gaming. Do you feel that has finally been accomplished in '08 and if so, how?

DO: Yeah, I think we finally have taken *Madden* to the next generation of gameplay and at the same time continued to make it better every year which is pretty much what this franchise is all about. [...] While we think we've been doing good stuff the last couple of years, we realized that we hadn't reached everything that *Madden* gameplay could be and that it needed to be on next-gen to really satisfy our users, but I think for sure, we're there now.

HGM: Over the past two editions of the franchise, what has been the most popular request amongst fans of the series and how have you addressed that request for this year's version?

DO: I think the biggest thing coming into this year's version, believe it or not, wasn't the gameplay because we had a lot of guys who were on next-gen and liked the way it played. [...] The biggest request that we got from people was to get Owner Mode back in the game and we did that this time around.

HGM: What do you feel the Player Weapons mechanic brings to the series that has been absent in the past?

DO: I think the biggest thing about the Player Weapons mechanic that's been absent is that it forces us to really say, okay, with our rating system, this guy is a little bit better than this guy, this guy is a little bit faster than this guy, but [with the Weapons system], this guy can do things that these other guys just can't do and he can do it on a consistent basis because that's what separates him. [...] [The rating system] has never quite been enough to really define those players, and I think we've finally taken that step to really make sure that, you know, this guy is going to make a huge difference in your line backing core [...] and it makes it worth the money and the time you've spent to acquire him.

HGM: Many pessimistic gamers think the changes made each year to *Madden* are too insignificant to warrant an annual purchase. What do you have to say to this crowd?

DO: Well, I would say to them, you know, in some cases they've been right. In some cases we haven't done enough to make them completely happy [...] but I think we deliver a strong product every year. [...] We made huge jumps from '06 to '07 so I think that definitely warranted the purchase, but going from '07 to '08 I think we're delivering something incredible. So I guess the best thing to say to them is 'Hey, pick up the game and you won't be disappointed this year'.

HGM: With the industry void of any competing NFL-licensed games, what drives you to continually make a better product year after year?

DO: I think what's different about us than probably a lot of teams out there in the industry that make games is that we play the hell out of this thing. We play the game, this is the game that we have to live with for the whole year so we don't put stuff in there just for the fans, we put stuff in there because we want to play it and if we don't get it right we don't get to play the game that way for a whole year. [...] So I think that's what drives us every year, the fact that we want to play the ultimate football game.

HGM: How big of a role did the return of 2K's Football franchise play in your overall approach to *Madden NFL '08*?

DO: Well we respect competition, you know, there was competition there last year if you want to consider (Midway's) *Blitz*, so there is always competition out there within the football space. Right now there's not another NFL game, but we have a multi-year plan for what we want to do with the franchise and we continue to bring in feedback from either new designers or recommendations that come from the community and we're always driving to make the best game ever. [...] If fans feel like it's an odd coincidence and they feel like this is the best *Madden* ever while at the same time 2K shows back up, that's fine, as long as we deliver the best *Madden* ever.

HGM: This year's *Madden* uses EA's partners like ESPN in new and creative ways to impact the gaming experience. What is your ultimate dream scenario for using outside sources to impact a *Madden* player's experience?

DO: [...] I can't really tip my hat to the things we've got in store, the things to come, but I think more real time syncing up of what's actually happening in the NFL during game day and the ability to play along more with things as they are happening or even recreate events and have that tie into some sort of greater community are things that I think can help push the franchise forward.



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HANDS-ON MOBILE™

REVIEW

PANDEMONIUM!

Pandemonium is a mobile port of an old, yet highly addictive PlayStation platformer. You get to play as either Nikki or Fargus, members of an acrobatic team trying to set the world right after some careless spellcasting releases an evil beast. The story definitely takes a backseat during the game, but it's so fun that story doesn't really matter.



Pandemonium puts you through different worlds, and the frantic gameplay varies enough to keep it from getting boring. The game plays like a typical platformer with lots of jumping from pillar to pillar and onto baddies to get rid of them. Beyond the endless platforming, there are a couple of awesome huge boss fights.

Of the two playable characters, Nikki is probably preferable because she has a double jump which, to say the least, is a lifesaver. Fargus looks cooler, but his ability to perform a roll attack is practically useless. In a couple of levels you even transform into creatures such as a frog and a rhino, each with their own abilities.

The graphics for this game are some of the best seen yet on a mobile game. *Pandemonium* plays like a 2D game, but the camera pans around you constantly giving you different and fresh perspectives of the action and successfully providing a pseudo-3D experience. The framerate suffers some slowdown from time to time, and it sometimes causes a missed jump, but comparable mobile titles usually suffer more severe slowdown issues.

There are eleven different worlds to play in, and each world has an average of four levels, so you definitely get your money's worth. If you're hankering for a classic 2D sidescroller and are a fan of platformers, there is definitely a lot here for you to like: frantic action, clever level design, variety of gameplay, cool bosses, and great graphics.



Publisher: Eidos Mobile
Developer: SNK Playmore
Release Date: 12/31/2006

Genre: Platform
Category: Action
of Players: 1

FINAL SCORE:
4 of 5

METAL SLUG 3 MOBILE

The third *Metal Slug* mobile title has blasted its way onto wireless handsets, but this time around things are a bit different. You no longer do battle as one of the elite Peregrine Falcons. Instead, you command Sgt. Allen O'Neill of the Rebellion Armed Forces, the outfit that the Falcons are usually fighting against.

In a twist of fate, the always-invading aliens have turned on their human allies and are now converting the Sergeant's soldiers into zombies. The Sarge is now on a mission to save his own troops. It's a cool change of pace, but the game's thirteen levels of gunfights and boss battles remain very much *Metal Slug*.



The Sergeant makes his way through battlefields, on top of trains and through city streets, blasting away zombie soldiers and aliens with all sorts of weapons. Along the way, he rescues other soldiers and picks up items. The only difference now is that since it isn't the Peregrine Falcons in action, there are no Slug vehicles to command. Some fans may dislike that choice, since vehicles are an integral part of the series. You'll find that in a mobile game like this, it doesn't really matter. The game is still full of humor and flying lead.

The controls feel a little weird, in that the best way to play the game is to use both hands. One uses the keypad and the other the D-pad. This isn't just for comfort, but jumping and shooting in different directions just isn't possible with one hand. It becomes more of an issue when needing to shoot at enemies below you.

Still, *Metal Slug 3* is a fun romp even without the Slug vehicles. It's nice to see the storyline changed up a bit without destroying the franchise's charm. It's certainly the best *Metal Slug* on mobile to date, so those who like shooters won't be disappointed.



Publisher: I-Play
Developer: SNK Playmore
Release Date: 6/13/2007

Genre: Shooter
Category: Action
of Players: 1

FINAL SCORE:
3.5 of 5

REVIEW

REVIEW

DUKE NUKEM ARENA



Duke Nukem Arena 3D is a new version of the previously released mobile first-person shooter known simply as *Duke Nukem 3D*. Actually, it's pretty much the same game with a few notable additions, specifically the ability to play against others online.

Arena's three main modes are Single Player, Nukem Dead!, and Multiplayer. Single Player has four difficulties and is further divided into two game versions: Mobile 3D is the original game and its 21 levels while Depth of Evil offers ten entirely new levels to play. Nukem Dead! is a survivor mode where you play until Duke dies, and every kill on your part is counted up to be uploaded to a leaderboard.

Multiplayer is exactly what you'd think, and allows up to three players to take part in an online fragfest.



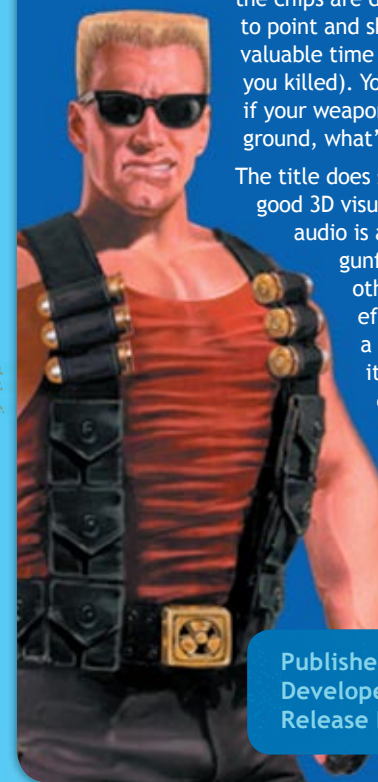
The game is your typical FPS in terms of moving around corridors and streets to waste bad guys looking to do the same to you. Weapons are plentiful and so are enemies, but you may find that the levels themselves are quite short. On the easiest difficulty setting you can mow through quickly but it's a different story when you're playing in Nightmare.

The trickiest part of all is getting used to the controls because, quite frankly, the phone just sucks for this type of game. First, you must get comfortable with the D-pad

only to figure out that you also need to use the keypad to keep the gun aimed at the right height. As usual, the phone only accepts one input at a time, so when the chips are down and you need to point and shoot, aiming eats up valuable time (and can easily get you killed). You can strafe, but if your weapon is pointed at the ground, what's the use?

The title does sport some pretty good 3D visuals, however, and the audio is also slick with meaty gunfire, explosions and other appropriate sound effects.

Arena actually does a pretty good job for being a true FPS on mobile, but too bad that the platform itself can't do it justice. The controls slow the game down and kill the fun. The game is good, but the handset just isn't up to snuff for it.



FINAL SCORE:
3 of 5

Publisher: Skyzone Entertainment
Developer: MachineWorks Northwest
Release Date: 6/14/2007

Genre: Shooter
Category: FPS
of Players: 1-3

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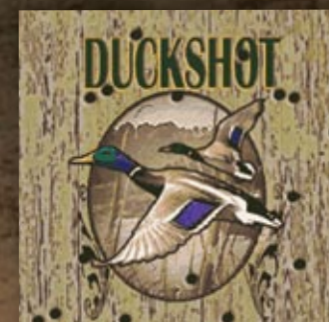
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HGM REVIEW GAUGE

5 = Really Good
 4 = Good
 3 = Average
 2 = Bad
 1 = Really Bad

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THE DARKNESS

Publisher: OK Games • Developer: Starbreeze
Genre: FPS • Category: Image is everything
Release Date: 9/20/09 • Players: 1-2

There have been surprisingly few quality comic book-based video games. Sure, at least one has shown up on almost every major system, but how many good ones have there been? Maybe two per system at best, and that's counting mediocre, but interesting, fare like *The Death and Return of Superman* and *Iron Man/X.O. Manowar in Heavy Metal*. Good news, everybody: *The Darkness* is shockingly good.

The story is about as classic as it gets. Mob enforcer and hitman Jackie Estacado turns 21, is betrayed by his boss, and dies, all in one night, but that isn't the end of the story. Jackie's bloodline is cursed, or gifted, with The Darkness. It's a demonic entity that just loves man being unkind to man. Does Jackie control it or does the Darkness control Jackie?

You would think that that would be the crux of the story and the most interesting bit, but it really isn't. *The Darkness* is a story-driven FPS. It's a revenge story, a love story, and a redemption story. The cast isn't large,

and it's made up of fairly simple stereotypes (corrupt cop, wicked gangster, childhood friend turned girlfriend, and so on), but the character work is very cool. You believe in the relationships that Jackie makes. When bad things happen to the people he loves, such as in an assault on a certain house, you really feel it. The game makes it a point to portray Jackie in such a way that his relationships define him. This is unlike most FPS titles I've seen, where you get the main character, the main villain, and that's really about it. That's not to say that those aren't in *The Darkness*. The game is, at least story-wise, about dismantling the operation of the man who wronged you. The Darkness just makes that process just a little more efficient... and monstrous.

The Darkness is some kind of demonic entity and you've got almost the full range of its powers at your beck and call. Summon a tendril to stealthily scout out areas from a worm's eye view. If you spot some baddies, you can pop one of their hearts out and eat it with the press of a button. You can even summon a small bit of The Darkness that immediately collapses in on itself, forming a black hole.

You can manifest Darklings, which are essentially imps, that fight on your side with a wisecrack and a sadistic grin. There are four kinds; Gunner, Kamikaze, Berserker, and Lightkiller, each of which are customized for certain actions. Gunners are, obviously, equipped with a particularly heavy rifle that fires hundreds of rounds per minute. Kamikazes can open up new pathways when they go out with a bang. Berserkers are old school; they'll just beat you to death. Lightkillers come equipped with an old electrical pack so that they can zap enemies and



short out lights.

Light plays a big role in *The Darkness*. Jackie is a good gunman in his own right, but sometimes he needs that edge. The problem comes from the fact that the Darkness is allergic to light. It'll fade your powers and evaporate your Darklings. Strategic light management becomes very important as you progress through the game. Sometimes, it's easier to kill the lights in a room and let your Darklings do your dirty work for you.

That's not to say that Jackie's hands stay clean. Attacking an enemy in close quarters treats you to an execution kill. Jackie will, depending on his weapon and position, kill the enemy in a special, and bloody, way. Close-range shotgun blasts, single rounds to the head, and other special kills await.

The Darkness is a pretty fun ride. It's got an open map system, allowing you to choose your own pace to a certain extent, and integrating a (small) subway



system was a pretty great idea. It successfully mixes fast-paced first person action with some genuinely moving emotional scenes. In the end, you wind up playing the game not to see how many bad guys you can kill with one clip, but to see what happens to Jackie and his ersatz family. Good show.

Score: 4.5 of 5

Review by 4thletter



Darkest Night

The Darkness comes with a multiplayer mode, as well, but it feels a little barebones. You get a fistful of maps and some FPS-standard gametypes: DM, Team DM, CTF, and Survivor. The twist comes in the gameplay: you play as a random hitman or cop, not Jackie. You can, settings permitting, switch back and forth between human and Darkling, opening up the game to new strategies.

It feels a lot like the old *Aliens vs Predator* series from PC, which was a good game. It isn't particularly deep, as the main thrust of the game seems to be the single player mode, but it is fun with friends.

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

It's rare to play an FPS with gameplay this creative and exciting. *The Darkness* proves FPS can do amazing things when developers stop ripping off *Halo* and start coming up with their own ideas.

FINAL SCORE :
4.5 of 5

Sword of the New World

Granado Espada™

Publisher : K2 Network Inc. Genre(s) : MMORPG
Developer : IMC Games Category : Elizabethan-Era Fashion Show
Release Date : 7/10/2007 # of players : MMO
Rating : Teen



Review by 4thletter

I've followed the development of *Sword of the New World* for a good while now. I got pretty sick of the Tolkienesque settings of your *Warcrafts* and *Everquests* after a few short months, so an MMO done in a Elizabethan style, or at least a loose facsimile thereof, is cool by me. Lots of ruffles and flares and tight clothes means very few dwarves and elves. The story is simple. A new world has been discovered, Granado Espada, and it needs exploring. Luckily, you and scads of other players are on-hand to thoroughly explore and loot this new continent.

SotNW is one of the prettiest games I have played, hands-down. I don't mean that in the "Wow, look at all the polys being rendered on that figure and the gigawatts used to calculate the blah blah blah." *SotNW* is pretty in the "This game is really fun to look at" sense. The character models, male and female alike, are simultaneously sexy and elegant. The characters are permanently posed and feature impossibly coiffed hair, too.

The costuming is something else. It's theoretically Elizabethan, I'm guessing, but at the same time, it's modern. Showing off a third as much skin as they do in this game would've likely gotten you thrown into prison for perversion back in the day. What else can you get when you mix high-collared jackets, blouses left half-unbuttoned, and long pants? What about a traditional sailing outfit, the kind with the enormous round shoulder pads, thigh-high go-go boots, and daisy dukes? Toss a ripped-up mesh shirt into that mix, those poofy dresses women wore in the Old West, and full suits of armor and you've got one seriously eclectic mix of fashion. Yet, it all comes together to make for a seriously visually interesting game.

The gameplay is interesting, too. Instead of controlling just one character, you've got three player characters at any point in time. These characters are part of your family and can be swapped out

if need be. Your family can feature up to 36 characters, so you won't ever be bored if you put your mind to it. You can even gain Unique Player Characters, who are essentially playable special guests. It's easy to mix and match your cast and tailor them to the task at hand. It's a little like playing a console RPG with a sprawling cast.

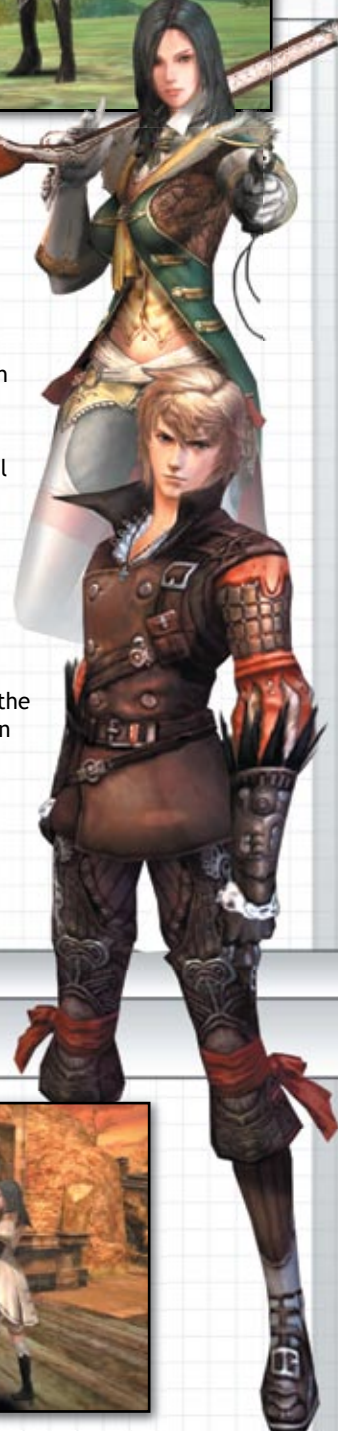
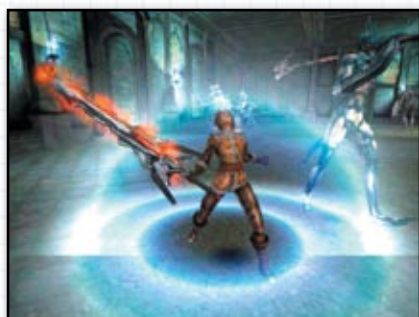
Your three-person team functions in an automatic combat sort of way. You control one specific character, while the others follow you and attack when needed. It's kind of like having your own party at your beck and call whenever you like, only these characters actually do their job and don't leave you hanging.

The gameplay in *SotNW* is very good, if a little same-ish after a while. Regardless, the quests, enemies, and general visual design are a treat, and *Sword of the New World* provides a fun alternative from elf-based titles. It's cheap to play per month, and free in certain cases, so it couldn't hurt to try it out. It's like candy for your eyes.

Rating : 4 of 5

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

As 4th put it, *Sword of the New World* is a nice diversion from the traditional fantasy-themed MMOs while being just as engrossing. We like!



FORZA 2

MOTORSPORT



Review by 4thletter

Publisher : Microsoft Game Studios Genre(s) : Racing
Developer : Turn 10 Studios Category : Newbie-friendly Sim
Release Date : 5/30/2007 # of players : 1-8
Rating : Everyone

How do you like your racing? Do you like it fast and furious, so to speak, or a little more realistic? If you're into the latter, *Forza Motorsport 2* is the game for you.

As far as sophomore titles go, *Forza 2* is a worthy follow-up. The suggested line feature, which tells you when you should brake and accelerate, is back, in addition to the deep customization and paint options. *Forza 2* is just as realistic as the first game, but what's really shocking is its ease of use.

You see, *Forza 2* is really, really good to new players. In a lot of games, no matter the genre, you have to really work to get some kind of reward; for instance, the super-hard *Ninja Gaiden* on Xbox gave you the original game after you collected fifty scarabs. In *Forza 2*, all you need to do to start getting cool cars is to win one race. The benefits pop up immediately and often. You can go from a hoopty to an S-Class car in twenty minutes if you play it smart. You don't finish a series and get nothing for it.

The suggested line is another great touch for new players, especially when combined with the adjustable difficulty settings. Turning on the settings that make the game easier reduce the amount of money you get from races. However, as you race more and get better, you can slowly disable these settings and earn more and more dough. *Forza 2* lets you grow, rather than being stuck in the trap of Easy, Medium, and Hard.

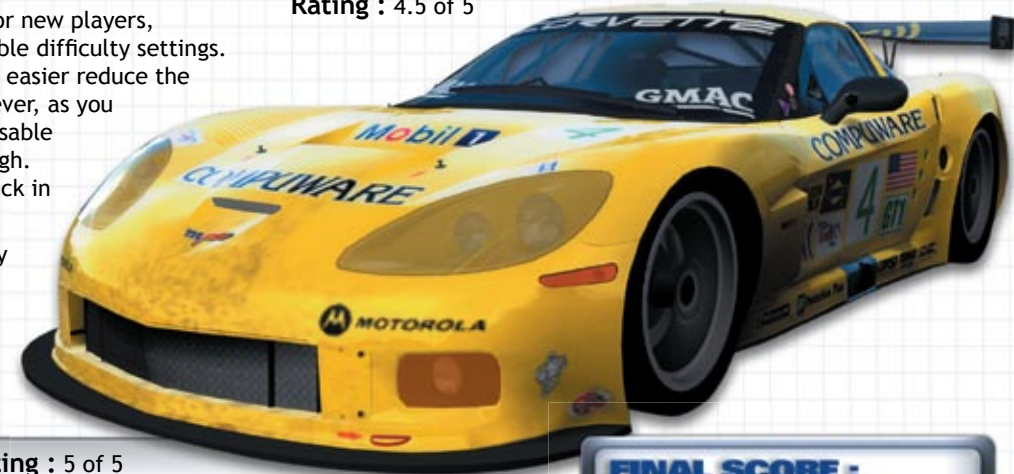
The car customization system is wonderfully deep. You can have a ton of individual layers and decals, resulting in some pretty awesome custom paint jobs. Check out the Blue Beetle paint job on the VW Beetle in the screenshot below for an example.

Thanks to XBL gametag LLJK Revol for the use of his ride. The racing is top-notch, of course, and the graphics are very good, as well. Cars have realtime reflections and the car damage is pretty accurate. The game moves along at a silky smooth framerate, too. Driving toward the sun drops a pretty impressive glow onto your car. All of the courses are immaculate, down to the paint on the track at the Nürburgring in Germany.

Forza 2 has a very beautiful menu system, but also one that falls a bit flat. The white backgrounds and style are very cool, but the loading times between menus are fairly irritating. The game itself takes a while to load, as well, which seems a little odd.

Overall though, *Forza 2* is the total package. The ease with which new players can get in and start racing high-powered cars is wonderful in a sim game, and a nice olive branch to players more inclined to *Burnout*.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

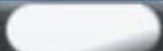


2nd opinion by Lynxara • Alternate Rating : 5 of 5

It's hard to imagine a racing game that's better than *Forza 2*. It's faultlessly fun and beautiful, both solo and multiplayer. If you're releasing a competing title later this year... well, it sucks to be you.



FINAL SCORE : 4.75 of 5



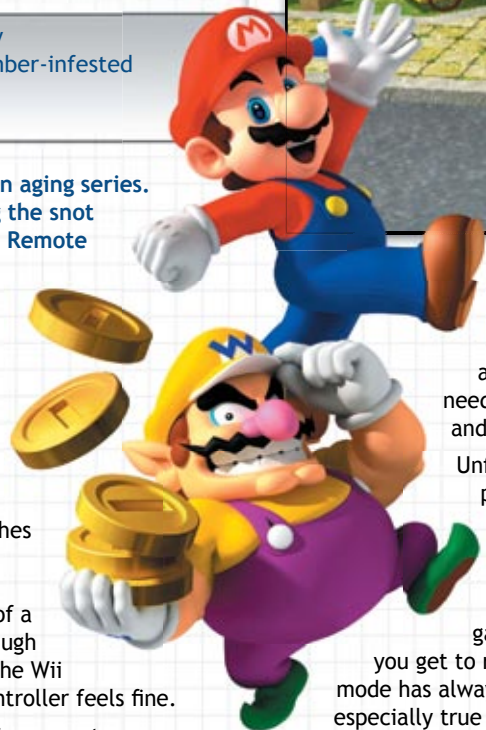
MARIO PARTY 8



Review by **Honestgamer**

Publisher : Nintendo
Developer : Hudson Soft
Release Date : 5/29/2007
Rating : Everyone

Genre(s) : Party
Category : Plumber-infested
of players : 4



Mario Party 8 represents a fresh start for an aging series. Past games have always been about beating the snot out of your controller, but this time the Wii Remote offered developers the opportunity to innovate. They did precisely that, but not as much has changed as you might expect.

The franchise's main attraction has always been its minigames. The ones available here differ in execution, not theme. Instead of rotating the analog stick like mad, you might pump it up and down in the air or hold it sideways like it's an oar and you're paddling across a lake in a canoe. Many matches ask you to point at the screen and fire. They require quick timing the analog stick never delivered and are perhaps the best example of a style of play that wasn't possible before. Though not every selection makes innovative use of the Wii Remote, even using it as an old-fashioned controller feels fine.

Much was also made of the game's ability to incorporate your Miis for some personalized gaming, but that never quite gelled. You can use them, sure, but only in unpolished games that feel like an afterthought (as they probably were). *Wii Sports* did bowling with more personality than you'll see here, and the races make one year for *Rad Racer*.

At least the available boards are worthwhile. One lets you race to the front of a train as opponents land on action spaces that shuffle the cars around and wreak havoc on an orderly rush for the star in the lead car. Another finds you investing in real estate and watching archaic hotels blossom into fine tourist attractions, all with bonus

stars at stake. Each board brings a different dynamic to the experience and keeps the formula as fresh as possible. Rounds usually last around a half-hour, but if they're dragging and you need to break for lunch, you can also save your game and resume it later.

Unfortunately, there will be times when you want to play the game but can't rustle up some friends.

You might tell yourself that it's worth trying out the single-player game, since it's required anyway if you want to unlock more content.

When the urge strikes, though, resist it; the game plays just fine without that extra stuff, and you get to retain your sanity. The dedicated single-player mode has always been the franchise's Achilles heel and that's especially true here. Fortune smiles on your computer-controlled opponents as you race them around the board in one-on-one grudge matches, then stomps all over your turn. Worse, you seldom even play the minigames. The single-player version of the party mode is better and has selectable difficulty levels, but what's the fun in gloating to a static television screen?

Even though the single-player modes are a wash, social gamers should consider *Mario Party 8* a worthy addition to their Wii library and a great way to party with friends for hours at a time. Don't forget the popcorn!

Rating : 3.5 of 5

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

My first *Mario Party* ever left me underwhelmed. Some of the minigames are fun but the board game that frames the whole experience relies far too much on chance. There are better party games out there.

FINAL SCORE :

3.25 of 5



Dragoneeer's Aria



Review by **Lynara**

Publisher : NIS America
Developer : HitMaker & Nippon Ichi
Release Date : 10/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Turn-Based
of players : 1-4

Dragoneeer's Aria is a comfortable game, designed to make you think of all the PS2 RPGs you've played before. It's not overly-similar to any particular game, but honors the generic style of PS2 RPGs in almost every way except the nuts and bolts of its combat system. There, **Dragoneeer's Aria** is more similar to HitMaker's previous *Blade Dancer* than anything else.

Dragoneeer's Aria is also far more difficult than your average PS2 RPG. Encounters with the "common" enemies who wander the map in *Dragoneeer's Aria* take on a complexity that most RPGs only reserve for boss encounters. Fighting bosses verges on difficulty rarely seen outside the best Atlus RPGs.

Characters can use their own Dragon Skills, magic spells gained by equipping items called Luscē, their personal Stance ability, or simply guard through attacks. Guarding demands you play a timing-based mini-game to see how much damage you take, while your active skills consume mana. Instead of a static mana point system, *Dragoneeer's Aria* has players generate mana by using the default "attack" command to damage monsters. Your default attacks rarely do enough damage to chip strong enemies to death, so combat is about building up mana and using it to pay for the right skills or spells. Victory often hinges, MMO-like, on making sure you've crafted optimum equipment for the area. Recipes for the best items are usually locked in chests that can only be opened after you've crafted particular items or powered up the right Luscē by using it in combat. You may also need to level up before you can use a particular item.

This challenge adds depth and satisfaction to the game when

the storyline doesn't. It's certainly not bad, and it's definitely more engaging than *Blade Dancer's* barely-extant plotline; the characters in particular are easy to like and the script is well-localized. *Dragoneeer's Aria* is still a very 8-bit tale, where bad guys are destroying the world because that's what they do, and your heroes are trying to save it because that's where all their friends live. The beautiful graphics, both in and out of the cutscenes, encourage you to keep playing. The designs are the work of Juno Jeong, art director of *Lineage II*, but its appeal goes beyond beautiful people in flashy costumes. The monster models are unusually detailed, and have convincing, fluid animations that never grow tiresome. The entire in-game world benefits from higher levels of detail than most PSP games even attempt.

If there's any level where *Dragoneeer's Aria* just doesn't work, it's as a portable game. The beautiful graphics demand long (if infrequent) load times, and there's no quicksave function to let you put down the game in the middle of a long battle. Like most PS2 RPGs, *Dragoneeer's Aria* is paced for hours-long sessions of focused play, so while there is a special multiplayer dungeon for up to four players, called Dragoneeer Mode, you're unlikely to ever find anyone to complete it with. *Dragoneeer's Aria* is best enjoyed on the couch, with your PSP securely plugged into the wall outlet, and perhaps with a favorite TV show on in the background.

Rating : 4 of 5

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

Dragoneeer's Aria is so RPG it hurts. It's solid, it's hard, and it somehow manages to look like a PS2 game on the PSP. It just doesn't have that one unique oomf that pushes it to the top.

FINAL SCORE :

4 of 5



Dungeon Maker Hunting Ground

Review by HonestGamer

Publisher : XSEED Games
Developer : Global A Entertainment, Inc.
Release Date : 6/19/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+

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



If you've ever played an RPG and thought to yourself that you could design better dungeons with a crayon, XSEED Games has a suggestion. It's a game called *Dungeon Maker: Hunting Ground*. One might say many things about the game, but chief among them is that you were probably right.

Dungeon Maker provides the tools to prove your claim, and even lets you send your creations to a friend over wi-fi. Several available room types allow you to construct your dream dungeon. The goal is to use an assortment of elbows, 'T's, fountains, bedrooms and chapels to lure the strongest monsters from the realm, slay them and win the day. The better you do, the tougher the beasts you'll attract and the more smoothly your game will go.

This simple concept goes a long way toward making *Dungeon Maker* one of the most interesting RPGs around. You don't have to worry about crafting a world map or populating your creation with inane characters who talk about magical keys and a world in peril. You simply construct.

Construction entails dropping yourself into a dungeon and running until you hit a wall, then adding the feature that can turn your developing abyss into something truly special. Monsters like you to keep things interesting, so you can't just make a lot of straight corridors and expect results. After all, you're rated on your ingenuity, which in turn affects the quality of the population and the items they leave behind when you slay them. You also must do battle with the very creatures to whom you've extended a virtual invitation.

That's where *Dungeon Maker's* chief flaw comes into play. There simply isn't as much variety as you might expect. You'll spend your first ten hours and quite possibly longer fighting the same few skeletons, thieves, goblins, bats, spectres and wolves. They'll drop the same goodies and you'll take them back to the same merchant to sell them for more pieces so you can make your domain spread and attract more of the same fiends. Even when you accept a quest from a character back in town, it still means repeating the same tasks. Thanks to a level progression system that relies on items instead of combat, you can battle hundreds of monsters and not grow any stronger than if you defeated three or four. It's all a little pointless if you stop to think about it.

Fortunately, the construction concept lends *Dungeon Maker* such an interesting hook and such an enjoyable way to spend your time that you'll likely forgive its main flaw and appreciate everything else. *Dungeon Maker* will have you hovering near a wall socket so that you don't have to stop playing when the battery dies, and is one of the PSP's most engaging RPGs. Some reviewers may focus on the game's minor flaws and allow them to ruin their personal experience, but RPG fans should at least take a close look before siding with detractors. If there's never a sequel, I'll cry.

Rating : 4.5 of 5



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

DM is a bit repetitive, with simple combat and fiddly dungeon-editing menus, but the two forms of gameplay support each other so that it doesn't really matter. I'm addicted, and *must play more!!!*



TALES OF THE WORLD Radiant Mythology

Review by Racewing

Publisher : Namco Bandai
Developer : Namco Bandai
Release Date : 7/17/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Straight Outta
Fanfiction.Net, Yo
of players : 1



Enjoyment of *Tales of the World* depends almost entirely on how big of a fan you are of the series. It's also a testament to the power of the human ego. In this installment, you create a character that represents you: gender, name, a decent voice, everything. Once you start the game, you're thrust under the World Tree, a source of power in the *Tales* universe. You're told that you're very special, having come from said World Tree itself. You're told that you're the Chosen One(tm) with the power to save the world.

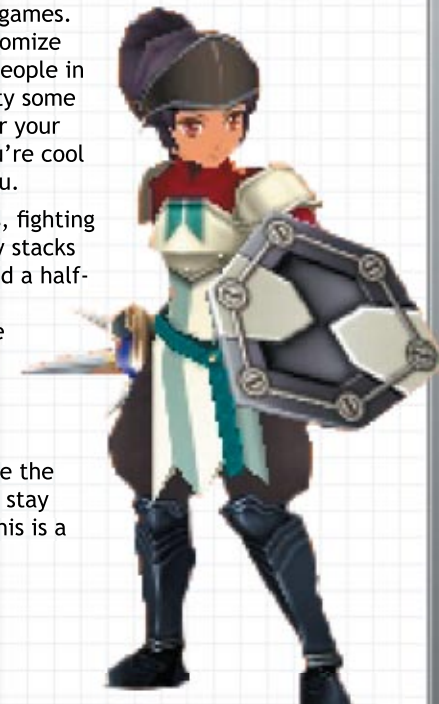
By the time you've found all of this out, you've met Chester and Arche from *Phantasia*, and Raine, Genis and Kratos from *Symphonia*. All this before even getting your first bite to eat! Why are they all here? How'd they all get here? Since when did the *Tales* worlds become interconnected? Nobody knows, but hey, *look!* It's Tear from *Abbyss*, and Senel from *Legendia!* I can't believe they remembered *Legendia!* No one liked it but me!

I'm sure you've called it by now, folks: *Tales of the World* is a huge mega-crossover, consisting of most of the *Tales* games characters thrust into a single world. Eventually, after some social sim-esque ordeals, you'll be able to recruit these cel-shaded celebrities into your party for sheer coolness factor, with "you" leading the charge. People who know what they're getting into here would do well to know that the power tiers and structure of the previous *Tales* games has been thrown out of the window. This would be because many of the characters in here are from 2D battle systems. *Tales of the World* places everyone into the same *Symphonia/Abbyss*-esque 3D battle system, for better (the *Symphonia* and *Abbyss* crowd, of course) or worse (most folks from *Eternia* and *Destiny*, naturally—oddly enough, the *Phantasia* people don't really lose much in the transition).

The game's set up a lot like *Final Fantasy X-2* in terms of exploration: instead of traversing a world map, you pick your destinations from a list, and explore dungeons from there. Said dungeons tend to be repetitive, yet they're still easy to get lost in, with respawning enemies that you can avoid if you're good enough. There's a class/job system in place that allows you to use certain weapons and magic spells, some lifted from earlier *Tales* games. With this system, you can customize yourself, and recruit generic people in order to give your current party some class variety while you wait for your favorite character to think you're cool enough to take orders from you.

This hodgepodge of characters, fighting systems and storylines actually stacks up pretty well. Feel free to add a half-point to my score if you're a big honking *Tales* fan. If you're not, this is still a pretty solid choice for a PSP RPG, especially given what the pool for the genre on this system is presently like. People who hate the 3D *Tales* battle systems should stay away, but for everyone else, this is a decent time.

Rating : 3.5 of 5



2nd opinion by Wanderer • Alternate Rating : 2.5 of 5

Kingdom Hearts meets a boring MMO meets *Tales*, and the result is strictly for hardcore fans of the series.

FINAL SCORE :
3 of 5



REVIEW

FREE STYLE STREET BASKETBALL

PC

Publisher : Sierra
 Developer : JC Entertainment
 Release Date : 5/15/2007
 Rating : Everyone

Genre(s) : Online
 Category : Street Basketball
 # of players : 1-6



FreeStyle Street Basketball is a weird little game. In a way, it's just like every other MMO in that it's built around a community and customization of your character. On the other hand... it's a basketball game. It's a curious mix, and not something we've really seen so far in the States.

That's not to say that it's a bad idea, of course. *FSB* is a niche title, but kind of a cool one. It's definitely more casual gamer-based than pretty much any ball game you could care to name. Control is handled via the arrow keys and a handful of keys on your left hand to control actions, shots, blocks, and camera angles. A controller/gamepad option wasn't evident, even after a bit of poking around, but as you play, you unlock more key combos for slick moves.

The gameplay feels a little slow compared to the fast-paced ball games out now, which speaks to the casual angle. You won't get dominated right out of the gate. It's easy to pick up and the controls are simple enough that you can be good within a few minutes. The learning curve isn't steep at all, so it's a pretty good deal for new players.

The graphics are cel-shaded, while the menus feature more anime-ish characters. Both are in an interesting style, and while the game isn't quite the super hi-res monster you might expect of a modern PC game, it gets the job done. Again, *FSB* is really all about the customization.

That's really what it's best at. After creating your character (and you've got male or female options there), selecting a position (Guard, Center, Forward), and picking out a set of clothes, the customization begins. As you play

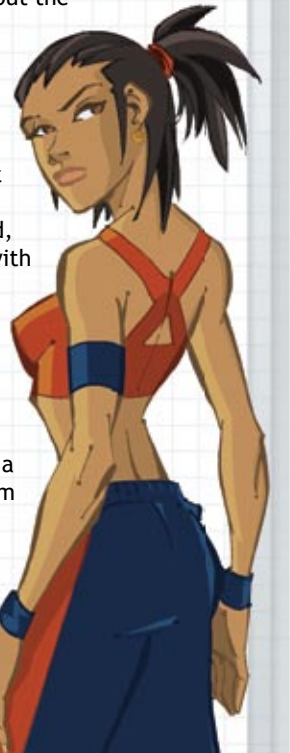


and win matches, you can spend dough on items or skills. Skills make you a more effective player, obviously, but the items are the golden part of the game.

You can use items to completely customize your player's appearance. If you want your female baller to be a little more high class than the others, hook her up with the latest fashions. Is your baller missing something, but you can't quite figure out what? Try a couple tattoos and see how he looks. With *Ecko Untld*, *G-Unit*, *Avirex*, and *Zoo York* being affiliated with the game, you're pretty much guaranteed to find something that looks good.

The free-to-play, pay-for-premiums model is a cool one and an easy way to get people interested. *FreeStyle Street Basketball* is a neat little package, and a good change of pace from the hyper-competitive MMO fare you tend to run into these days.

Rating : 3.5 of 5



FINAL SCORE : **3.75** of 5

2nd opinion by [Wanderer](#) • Alternate Rating : 4 of 5

I preferred the early version. It wasn't quite so self-consciously "urban." Still, this is a good sports game for people who don't like sports games, i.e. me.



REVIEW

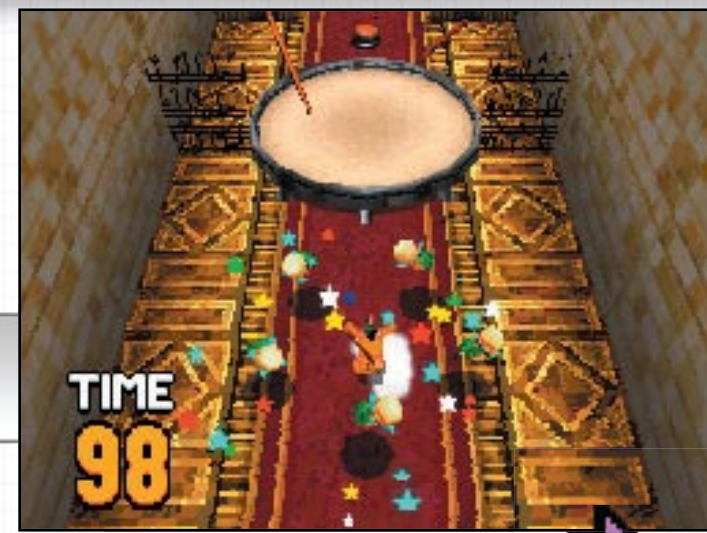
NINTENDO DS

Cookie & Cream

Review by [KouAidou](#)

Publisher : Agetec Inc
 Developer : From Software
 Release Date : 7/10/2007
 Rating : Everyone

Genre(s) : Platformer
 Category : Irritating
 # of players : 1-4

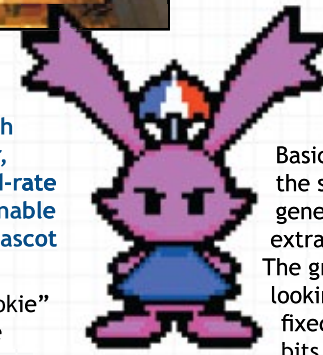


Part of the fun of the DS is the way it can take us back to an earlier age of gaming. *Cookie and Cream* is no exception, but the way in which it invokes its nostalgia is not a good one. Rather, *Cookie and Cream* recalls the glory days of third-rate shovelware platformers, complete with questionable physics, generic landscapes, and unappealing mascot wannabes. I didn't like it.

You play as a pair of rabbits, named, I guess, "Cookie" and "Cream." There's no intro whatsoever for the game, so I'm going on faith that Cookie is the yellow one with the flowerpot on its head, and Cream is the angry one in the dress that shakes maracas. It doesn't really matter; it's an arbitrary name scheme with no purpose other than to sound cutesy and defame one of the best ice cream flavors with insidious video game commercialism.

The central mode of the game is the "story" mode. You control Cookie through a series of three-dimensional platforming stages using the D-pad and buttons. Cookie needs to complete the course within the time limit, but occasionally, he will come up upon obstacles, such as viscous guard alligators, or walls too high for him to jump over. At these points, Cream steps in, with his (her?) crazy underground machine(?) to provide you with some kind of touchscreen-related task to help you clear the path.

Depending on the roadblock, these tasks can involve anything from using the stylus to pull a rope to blowing on the microphone to inflate a balloon. The interconnectivity between the two modes



of play is kind of fun, but there's not necessarily any obvious logic telling you how these puzzles relate to the "real world" of the platformer half. You just kind of take the game's word for it, things happen, and you proceed, I guess, because the game says you can. Every couple of stages, you fight a boss.

Basically, everything about this game, from the characters to the stages to the minigames to the bonus material, is so dull, generic, arbitrary, unintuitive, and unlikable that trying to extract enjoyment from its stages becomes a herculean task. The graphics are so muggy that it's difficult to tell what you're looking at at times. The hit detection is poor. The game's fixed camera often leaves important objects hidden behind bits of scenery, and turns long jumps (of which there are many) into blind leaps of faith.

The game's gimmick is an interesting one, and the rare puzzles that require some brainpower and/or simultaneous action between Cookie and Cream can feel rewarding. Had the premise been used to its full potential, the game might have been salvageable, but as it is, any memorable elements are crushed under the horrible weight of poor game design. Sundry multiplayer modes are also available, including a two-player co-op and a battle mode, but like everything else about the game, they just invoke the phrase "why bother?" It's hard to escape the feeling that the developers were thinking the same thing.

Rating : 2 of 5



2nd opinion by [Racewing](#) • Alternate Rating : 2.5 of 5

I can see the novel ideas going on here, but this game needs some serious extra time in the oven. Also, an analog stick.

FINAL SCORE : **2.25** of 5



WARTECH

SENKO RONDE



Review by Ashura

Publisher : Ubisoft
Developer : G.REV
Release Date : 5/24/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : Shmup of Fighters
Category : Ignore the Crappy Boxart
of players : 1-2 + online



Answer me this: if the heroic ships from games like *R-Type* and *Gradius* decided to fight each other, and not the oncoming hordes of Nazis and floating Easter Island heads they normally battle, what would happen? This question, my friends, is what *WarTech: Senko no Ronde* was designed to answer. While the ships in *Senko no Ronde* are more mecha-oriented than the two aforementioned games, *SnR* essentially smashes together your classic anime-style shoot-'em-up with a 2D fighting game. You have ships, lasers, a life bar, super gauges, special moves, and everything else you'd see in both of those genres. They may have cuter, cleverer-sounding names in *SnR*, but believe me they're all there.

Instead of vertically or horizontally scrolling like a normal shooter, your ships (ironically called Rounders) orbit around each other (see: irony) and battle to the brightly colored, *explodey* death! Your ship is surrounded by a pair of rings, the purpose of which is twofold. Firstly, and most simply, when segments of these rings are red, they indicate how much firepower a specific weapon has left before it needs to reload. Secondly, and less simply, crossing your opponent's rings changes your attack type. Outside? You will use projectile attacks, such as primary/secondary weapons, special attacks, and whatnot. Primary and secondary are usually lasers or missiles, while special attacks tend to be specific button combinations that cause pretty bullet patterns instead of fancy karate moves. Now, inside? Your ship switches from projectile to melee attacks. These surprisingly powerful strikes are very much in the style of *Virtual On*'s melee, and you can pull off different combinations by alternating presses of the primary and secondary weapon buttons.

Your ship also has other abilities, like dashing, overdrive, and "vanish" modes, but the coolest extra ability are the boss attacks. Whenever you trigger a boss attack, your ship literally transforms into one of those huge, screen filling metal monstrosities that spews millions of geometrically patterned bullets like you see at the end of most shooter stages... unless you played *Gunbird 2*, which ended with a *dancing elephant with a trumpet* for some reason. Your hitbox is pretty much the center mass of your craft, but unlike most shmups you have a power bar and one hit doesn't kill you. Even more like a fighter, each ship plays in a completely different manner,

and your skill in the game can get as nuanced, and in depth as you want it to be. If you want a good place to start learning the game, check my blog at hgmblogs.com for links to dai jo bu's awesome beginners guide and the official Japanese website for a move list.

The modes offered are also the standard fighting game repertoire (like single player, training, gallery, etc.), though the standout feature is battling online through Live. You can play against your friends, or pretty much anyone in the world. I primarily went up against a Korean player, and the overseas lag isn't as bad as you might think. Just be warned: this game came out in Japan eons ago, so you may get completely obliterated by little Japanese schoolgirl ninja masters.

The only other thing to note is that the story mode ends in a pretty straight shoot-'em-up boss battle. This battle revokes your melee and boss attacks, and it may get a little frustrating if dodging the bullet isn't your thing. Personally, I think removing melee in this stage isn't fair, but otherwise it's an easy game to pick up for newcomers. Despite this single complaint, everything else in the game is as awesome as the concept. If you ever wanted to test your bullet-dodging skills against someone else, especially online, this is the game!

Just be careful. Cuilan is a trap.

Rating: 4.5 of 5



IF THE GOVERNMENT HAS ITS WAY, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY HALF THE GAMES IN THIS MAGAZINE.

FINAL SCORE :
4.25 of 5

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

WarTech is a great game for those looking for a multiplayer online experience, but its limited single player leaves the package feeling skimpy. It's a unique experiment with a lot of depth for those willing to donate the time, though.

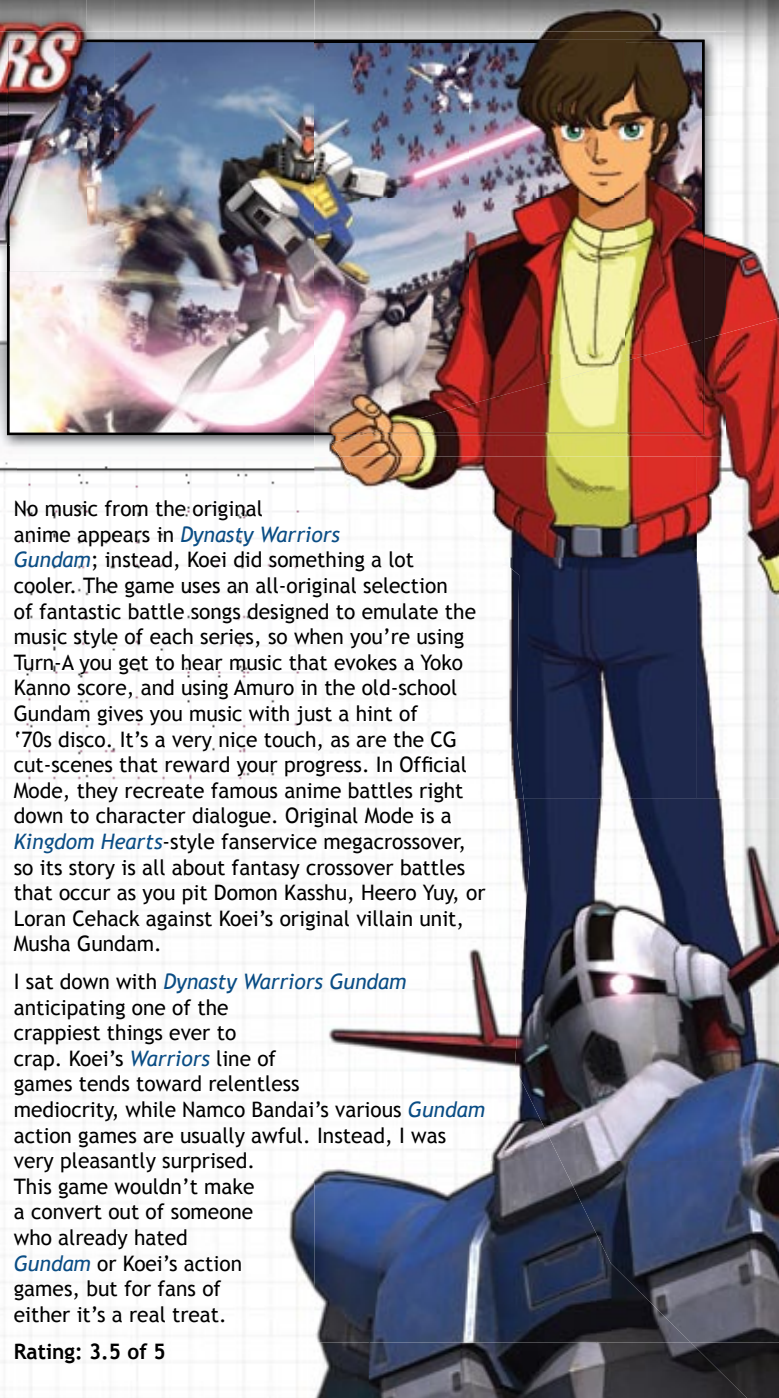


DYNASTY WARRIORS GUNDAM

Review by Lyozara

Publisher : Namco Bandai
Developer : Koei & Omega Force
Release Date : 8/28/2006
Rating : Teen (Fantasy Violence, Mild Language)

Genre(s) : Beat-'Em-Up
Category : Sci-Fi
of players : 1-2



Dynasty Warriors Gundam is a far classier effort than your average *Gundam* game, with better gameplay than the last few *Dynasty Warriors* titles. It's not quite as good as *Samurai Warriors 2*, but is also a very different take on the Omega Force formula. Where *Samurai Warriors 2* was about battlefield strategy, *Dynasty Warriors Gundam* is about surviving brawls with super-powerful elite units.

While the generic troop AI is no more aggressive or interesting than usual, basically any unit piloted by a named character has the potential to seriously mess you up. Replaying stages to hone your reflexes, refine your strategy, level up your mecha and pilots, and gain new skills and customization parts is absolutely essential. Every mobile suit and pilot in the game has very different strengths and weaknesses, and you need to learn them all. The strategies that win battles for Kammille in *Zeta Gundam* aren't going to apply to Amuro in the original *Gundam RX-78* at all; they may not even work for Judau Ashta in the *Zeta Gundam*.

Each Mobile Suit has a basic melee attack and a ranged attack. Combining them yields a variety of powerful combos specific to that combination of unit and pilot. When your SP gauge is full you can use a super move, or you can team up with an elite ally unit (controlled either by the CPU or a friend). You also need to make skillful use of the Guarding and Boost abilities to avoid taking damage in fights with enemy elites. While beating these elite units is very satisfying, it can also lead to some frustrating gameplay. Gaining ground through most of an hour-long battle just to get creamed at the very end isn't fun.

License-wise, *Dynasty Warriors Gundam* includes characters and units from the original *Mobile Suit Gundam*, *Zeta Gundam*, *Gundam Wing*, *G Gundam*, and the as-yet-unreleased *Gundam ZZ* and *Turn-A Gundam*. For once, Bandai has managed to localize a *Gundam* game right; the script is excellent, and actually includes both English and Japanese voice options. Both tracks reuse the original actors who played the characters on TV whenever possible. So not only can you hear the classic *Gundam* seiyuu, but fans who prefer their *Gundam* in English get a tantalizing taste of what dubbed *Turn-A* or *ZZ* might be like.

No music from the original anime appears in *Dynasty Warriors Gundam*; instead, Koei did something a lot cooler. The game uses an all-original selection of fantastic battle songs designed to emulate the music style of each series, so when you're using *Turn-A* you get to hear music that evokes a Yoko Kanno score, and using Amuro in the old-school *Gundam* gives you music with just a hint of '70s disco. It's a very nice touch, as are the CG cut-scenes that reward your progress. In Official Mode, they recreate famous anime battles right down to character dialogue. Original Mode is a *Kingdom Hearts*-style fanservice megacrossover, so its story is all about fantasy crossover battles that occur as you pit Domon Kasshu, Heero Yuy, or Loran Cehack against Koei's original villain unit, *Musha Gundam*.

I sat down with *Dynasty Warriors Gundam* anticipating one of the crappiest things ever to crap. Koei's *Warriors* line of games tends toward relentless mediocrity, while Namco Bandai's various *Gundam* action games are usually awful. Instead, I was very pleasantly surprised. This game wouldn't make a convert out of someone who already hated *Gundam* or Koei's action games, but for fans of either it's a real treat.

Rating: 3.5 of 5

2nd opinion by 4thletter • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

This is the definition of a niche title. Fans of either series are going to dig it... other gamers, maybe not so much. It's fun for a little while, but not really that great.



Preview by Adam Pratt of arcadeheroes.com

When *Dragon's Lair* appeared in arcades in 1983, it set a precedent for a new style of arcade game that brought gamers in droves: the "interactive movie." While those early laserdisc games were billed as a movie that you could play, the experience generally turned into a memorization exercise where the game simply used pre-recorded footage as an interactive background. Cecropia, a start-up company comprised of former Disney animators, is single-handedly attempting both to revive and redefine the interactive movie genre with *The Act*.

The Act runs on a hard drive mounted in a custom Linux PC. The cabinet itself is stylish, sporting a 26" 1366x768 resolution LCD monitor and a specialized internal daughterboard that interfaces the PC with the coin-op hardware. The Act's unique controller is an innovative optical sensor knob that could revolutionize interactive movie gameplay.

By using the knob, the player directly controls Edgar's personality. Altering his emotions and actions takes him through eight different scenarios. There are two scenarios where the player will use the knob to guide Edgar's actions, but most decisions are focused on manipulating someone's feelings.

Cecropia developed the unique knob controls both to make its game stand out, and to make sure the gameplay appeals to the widest possible audience. Positions on the knob are mapped to different behaviors and emotions, and also allow you to control the intensity of each behavior or emotion. For example, if Edgar is presented with a situation where he meets a beautiful woman, the player can use the knob to determine whether he's charmed or indifferent, and exactly how intense his reaction is.

Manipulating Edgar's type of emotion and its intensity triggers the potential branches in the storyline. A "perfect" game takes an hour to complete, but the branching storylines makes it possible for players to clock over twenty hours on a given machine. There is no scoring or other goal-oriented system in place, to further make the player feel like they are playing an interactive movie.

When asked about his decision to support coin-op as opposed to the home console or PC market, Cecropia CEO Omar Khudari replied with laughter. "That's the question I always dread, but it's fairly simple. An arcade machine can reach people in the mainstream market that a game console normally doesn't touch. If you're walking along in a bar and you see the game, it may interest you much more than if it were buried in the game console aisle at the store, which is a place certain people never visit."

Release information isn't yet available for *The Act*, as Cecropia is working out the details of manufacturing game cabinets. It has already gone through successful location testing, drawing crowds of interested players both casual and hardcore. Hopefully many arcades will pick up *The Act*, and players can experience something a little more fulfilling than just another racing clone.

For more information and news related to arcades, visit Shaggy's blog at ArcadeHeroes.com

Manufacturer: Cecropia
Developer: Cecropia
Genre: Interactive Movie
Release Date: Q3 2007
Players: 1



In *The Act*, you play the role of Edgar, a shy window washer that accidentally ends up having to pretend to be a doctor. The player's job is to help Edgar keep up "the act" throughout the



ON THE DOWNLOAD

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Developer: NC Soft • Platform: PC
Genre: MMORPG • Category: Instanced • # of Players: Many
Price: Free / \$ for perks • Get it at: www.dungeonrunners.com

Dungeon Runners is supposed to be NCSoft's spoof of high fantasy MMOs. In practice, this mostly means silly names and wacky NPC voices. The gameplay is straight-up *Diablo II* with an online hub system lifted from NCSoft's *Guild Wars*. All items are generated randomly, as are the instanced dungeons you can enter by yourself or with a group of friends you meet up with in hub areas. If you bring buddies, expect a tougher dungeon. Play as one of three classes: Fighter, Ranger, or Mage.



You can begin playing the game for free, but around level 5 or so you'll really start feeling like a second-class citizen. Your major reward for finishing quests is a type of currency called the King's Coin, which you trade in for ludicrously powerful equipment... that a free subscriber can't use. Your efforts quickly begin to feel pointless after that.

Once you're willing to pony up your five bucks a month, though, *Dungeon Runners* becomes a surprisingly addictive time-waster. There are plenty of silly quests to pursue, and the wide variety of super-broken equipment awards is enough to keep you clicking away at monsters for hours. Right now, *Dungeon Runners* is strictly casual PvE, but NCSoft is promising PvP and a host of other additions (including a transition to a class-free, skill-driven character system) in upcoming patches.

DUNGEON RUNNERS

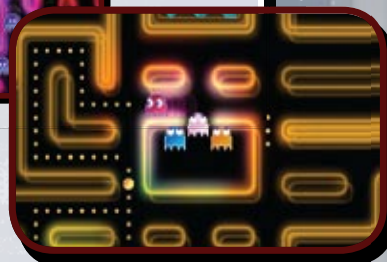
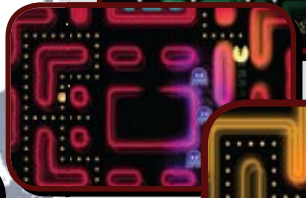
Downloaded by Lyncara

SCORE: 4 OF 5



Developer: Namco-Bandai • Platform: 360
Genre: Maze • Category: wakawakawaka
of Players: 1 • Price: 800 points (\$8.00)
Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

Toru Iwatani, *Pac-Man*'s creator, has retired from making video games, but he didn't go quietly. He's returned to his roots one last time with *Pac-Man Championship Edition*, and it's the single best thing Pac-Man has ever starred in. It's an all-new game with dozens of new mazes, and a timed score-



run that's all about managing risk and reward. The longer Pac lives, the faster he moves, and the more each dot is worth. Clear out all pellets on the left or right side of the screen and a bonus item appears. Eating it causes the empty half of the maze to redraw itself in a new configuration on the fly. It's a non-stop, high-speed score run that's a blast to play, and the "just one more go" addiction sets in fast and hard. Simply put, this is required gaming.

PAC-MAN CE



Downloaded by James

SCORE: 5 OF 5



Developer: Quintet • Platform: Wii
Genre: God Sim • Category: Side-scroller
of Players: 1 • Price: 800 points (\$8.00)
Get it at: Wii Virtual Console

A god's work is never done. Whether it's cleaning out dungeons, fighting bosses, or tending to the endless



needs of his followers, resting on the seventh day just isn't going to happen in *ActRaiser*. After waking from a demon's curse, the god of the land discovers that the world is overrun by monsters and nearly devoid of human life, and fixing it will require two completely different styles of gameplay. Roughly one-third of *ActRaiser* is spent running through side-scrolling dungeons, directly smiting evil with mighty swings of the godly sword. The other two-thirds involves clearing land for the mortals, leading them to clean out monster nests, and swapping discoveries back and forth between the various tribes to solve whatever problem is bothering them today. While it's undeniably short, *ActRaiser*'s dual nature makes it one of the more interesting and fun games from the SNES library.

ACTRAISER

SCORE: 4 OF 5



Developer: XBLA Intern Team • Platform: 360
Genre: Shooter • Category: Co-op
of Players: 1-4 • Price: Free!
Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

Just because a game has a single-player mode doesn't mean it should be played alone. *Aegis Wing*, an XBLA freebie designed last summer by three Microsoft interns, is a perfect example of this. The singleplayer mode is weak, but the multiplayer is a great bit of co-op fun. Up to four players work together to clear the stages, and their ships can



link together to form a mega-powered dreadnought that ups the abilities of the special weapons to a ridiculous degree. One player steers, shooting straight ahead like usual, while the other players can shoot in a full 360-degree arc. The larger the ship gets the less maneuverable it is, though, so intelligent use of the specials becomes much more important for the group's survival. Despite being a bit basic in its presentation, *Aegis Wing* is a fun shooter for any group that can work together.

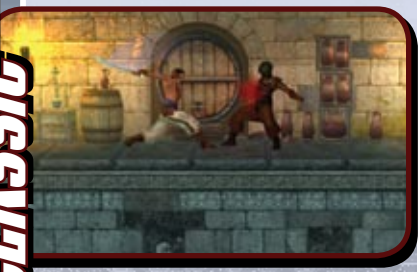
AEGIS WING

SCORE: 3.5 OF 5



Developer: Gameloft • Platform: 360
Genre: Adventure • Category: Jump'n Run
of Players: 1 • Price: 800 points (\$10.00)
Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

One hour isn't a lot of time, but it's all the Prince has got to save the Sultan's daughter from Jaffar's offer of marriage or death. Starting out in the palace's deepest dungeon, he'll run, jump, and slash through all the faithfully recreated levels of the Apple II classic. *Prince of Persia Classic* is a gorgeous remake, preserving everything from the original game while adding a small number of helpful tweaks to the gameplay. Exploring the palace while avoiding its many traps, such as spikes, gaps, collapsing floors, and razor-sharp chomping gates is as fun as it ever was thanks to the



smooth controls and animations. There's a reason the Prince is still popular almost twenty years later, and this is it. Just remember to turn off the newly-added guide butterfly, unless you really like having your hand held through every step of a game.

PRINCE OF PERSIA CLASSIC

SCORE: 4.5 OF 5



北斗の拳

FIST OF THE NORTH STAR

Get Bonus!

Fist of the North Star comes with a really cool DVD with a bunch of stuff on it. Among them is a half-hour beginner's guide to playing the game, as well as advertisements for the game itself and the new anime that's coming out soon! Just be warned, it's in Japanese, and you'll need to be able to play a Region 2 DVD.



"You are already dead"



Publisher: Sega
Developer: Arc System Works
Genre: 2D Fighter
Category: YOU WA SHOCK!!!
Release Date: 07/00/00
Players: 1-2



Review by Ashura

is the mantra of *Fist of the North Star*, and the fighting game Arc System Works has created embodies this mindset to a T. The game is Arc's love letter to '80s anime and '90s fighters, both of which are genres that are very dead. Today's fighters are fast-paced, dial-a-combo, and usually 3D, but not *FoTNS*. People who pick this game up might complain that it's slow or that it feels old, but that's the point.

For the three people who don't know, *Fist of the North Star* (AKA *Hokuto no Ken*) follows the exploits of Kenshiro, the most badass martial artist to ever get his license in badassery. Kenshiro lives in a <ct:Italic>Mad Max</ct>-esque post-apocalyptic world, but instead of being a driven-over-the-edge cop played by Mel Gibson, he punches things with his martial-artyness until they explode in an gratuitous bloody mess. Things happen, twists are revealed, characters come and go, but it's the over-the-top violence and epic man-to-man battles that has continued to draw people to the series for over twenty years. You'd think Sega-Sammy would've created a fighting game as soon as they got the *FoTNS* license a few years ago, but for some reason they figured a bunch of pachinko games were more important. Some wild executive finally thought out of the box, though, so now we have a *FoTNS* based fighting game, complete with bloody wonderful 2D sprites!

The hi-res sprites in the game lovingly recreate the *FoTNS* cast in all of their ultra-tall buffness. This being Arc System Works, you may expect that some of the animations won't be as fully 'tweened-out as the likes of *Third Strike*, and

honestly, they're not. Sometimes it gives off a really weird *Street Fighter II Plain Non-Turbo Normal Edition* feel, meaning either the sprite artists at Arc were lazy or they were really going for the homage. You have to figure it's the latter, since right from the game's intro it feels as if the game was specifically designed to boil the blood of a fighter from generations past.

In fact, the intro is one of the most glorious things created by man. Eschewing the most-likely outsourced, heavily produced animation fests you see in tons of other fighting games nowadays, the intro to *Fist of the North Star* gives off a wonderfully classic SNK feel. Gigantic sprites with limited animation slip'n slide all over the screen as Crystal King belts refrains of 'YOU WA SHOCK!' in the background. Yes friends, they actually used "Ai o torimodose!!" from the original *Fist of the North Star* anime from 1984. It doesn't even sound remixed.

Furthermore, the pre-fight intro to *FoTNS* is one of the most epic ever created. If you thought 'Heaven or Hell... LET'S ROCK!' wasn't enough, then prepare your pants for the outright epicness of 'THE TIME OF RETRIBUTION. BATTLE ONE. DECIDE THE DESTINY!!!'

This intro is intoned in a voice so deep and manly, in fact, that there was probably a *Deep Voice Search and Apprehension Committee* formed by the *Fist of the North Star Fighting Game Committee* to find a Japanese guy who could enunciate the game's lovingly-English narration in a deep enough timber. Seriously, the way the guy says *Mistahr Haerrt* ignites so many childhood memories of other fighting games it's unbelievable. This doesn't even include the character portrait stuff that happens *before* the pre-fight intro, and if you decide to watch the demo matches in the attract mode, the pre-fight gobbledegook is actually *longer* than the fights themselves. It's that awesome, friends.

Playing *FoTNS* feels like they started with *Guilty Gear XX* and then stripped out half the speed and replaced the frantic combos with ones based more on meaningful timing. After that visceration, the game is left with mostly the same button configuration (P, HP, K, HK, as well as a new boost button), but the pace and timing are a much different beast. *FoTNS* will remind you more of *King of Fighters '94* than *XI*, and it may take a bit of getting used to for people more in tune with current fighting games. It's really not as slow as people have made it out to be, however, and the aforementioned dash button and its gauge help even out the slightly sluggish feeling. Everything you ever wanted to do with a *FoTNS* game you can do, too. You want to punch someone a hundred times, in that special way only Kenshiro can? Hit them, and then have them instantly die after a countdown timer escalates to zero? Yes, friends, it happens. You can do it all. In fact, I did that last thing like forty times in a row in the Practice Mode just because I could.

Speaking of instantly dying, that brings us to the Fatal KO. The Fatal KO is a big part of the game's system, and moreover, how it's balanced. There's a gauge of stars under each combatant's life meter called 'The Seven Stars of Hokuto,' and getting hit by certain moves depletes this bar's stock. Once this stock of stars is gone, a 'Death Star' (ha ha) appears

below the now-empty bar, and the unfortunate combatant is vulnerable to a Fatal KO. You get hit by a Fatal KO? Instant kill. Some people complain that this can give the winner of round one too much of an advantage in the second, since the amount of stock left in this bar carries over to the next round. In reality, this is a game based on a series where one well placed hit can blow a person's entire head off, so could they really have done it any other way? Honestly, the way it's handled in *FoTNS* is a big improvement over *Guilty Gear*, which allows instant kills pretty much right off the bat. Here, you have to work for your instant kill, and if you mess up you lose pretty much all of your super bar and other reserves. Personally, I think it spices up the otherwise monotonous fighter formula with a little bit more tension.

Otherwise, it's your pretty basic fighting game, including combos, supers, boosts, cancels, and all that other stuff you expect. It's the same with the modes of play, really; you get arcade, versus, practice, and of course the game's gimmick mode. The gimmick mode in *FoTNS* is called History Mode, and essentially you have to fulfill certain requirements (like connect certain move combinations) to complete each of the 'Historic Moments.' Going through all of the seventy-seven moments unlocks the final boss as a player character... woo. There are only ten characters on the roster, but the inclusion of all of the heavy hitters and some nice cameos makes it all worth it.

North Importing?

However, there's just something about this game that tickles my memories of yore without being tricked too much by a haze of nostalgia. It's good, just a different kind of good.

FoTNS is very much for the fighting game veteran looking for an older feel. If that's not you, look elsewhere. Score: 10/10

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO • DEVELOPER: IMIS
GENRE: RHYTHM • CATEGORY: OUENDAAAAAA
RELEASE DATE: 5/17/2007 • OF PLAYERS: 1-4



Moero! Nekketsu Rhythm Damashii Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan 2 is the third game in one of Nintendo's best new franchises. Ouendan, the first game in the series was only released in Japan, but heavily imported by gamers in the United States. The popularity of the title in both Japan and America lead to Nintendo's decision to release an American version, Elite Beat Agents. The gameplay was the same, with the exception of a few new features like being able to skip opening scenes. Ouendan had a soundtrack full of popular Japanese songs, while Elite Beat Agents featured popular American tunes. Ouendan 2 takes the brightest spots of both games and combines them, featuring a great Japanese soundtrack while at the same time implementing the updated features of Elite Beat Agents.

Ouendan 2 brings back the same great, simple gameplay that players of the previous titles fell in love with. On the touch screen,

colored circles show up with numbers in the middle of them. You must tap the circles in the order of what number is in them, as a circle outline set to the beat of the song closes in on the circle. Once in a while, a spinner will show up on screen. You'll have to move your stylus around in a circle on the screen as fast as you can to pass this portion of the song. Although there's no spiffy music peripheral included with Ouendan 2, tapping away on the touch screen is surprisingly fun and gets you in the groove of the music just as well as any plastic instrument would. The songs in the game are generally the full version of the original tune, so you can expect songs to last about three minutes.

Every song in Ouendan 2 tells its own story, centering around a character that has a major problem and breaks down, screaming for help. You play as the Cheer Squad, showing up and helping the person in need turn things around by cheering and dancing to music. Each song is split up into three to five small segments. If you do well on a segment and keep your status bar out of the "danger zone," you get a short cutscene where you see something go right for the character you're helping. If you are about to fail the song, you instead get a cut scene with the helpless person getting into even more trouble. The game's situations and distressed characters are hilarious, ranging from trying to rescue a kidnapped idol singer to helping a sumo wrestler win a competition. New to Ouendan 2 is a rival gang of cheerleaders dressed in blue, a force to be reckoned with. The game's nineteen songs are split into two towns, one for the original Cheer Squad and one featuring the new rival squad.

Moero! Nekketsu Rhythm Damashii: Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan 2 is a magnificent game. The Ouendan franchise games are hands-down the greatest portable rhythm games ever released. Whether you are new to the series, or have been hitting colored circles for a few years now, Ouendan 2 is a must-buy DS game.



WORTH IMPORTING?

Yes. Ouendan 2 is the best game in the Ouendan franchise, and deserves to be imported. Although the game is straight out of Japan (and full of Japanese), it's perfectly easy to understand regardless of age or nationality.

SCORE: 5 OF 5

So, *Odin Sphere*. The kids seem to like it. I didn't particularly care for it. To me, *Odin Sphere* felt like a mess of half-baked ideas thrown together with little regard as to how well they worked together, resulting in a frustrating experience that could only be fully enjoyed by people who hate themselves. After I played *Princess Crown*, however, all of *Odin Sphere*'s failures started to make more sense.

Princess Crown was originally released in 1997 for the Sega Saturn, a console packed to the brim with fantastic Japanese newness that never basked in the warm American sunshine. Several months back, Atlus saw fit to port *Princess Crown* to the PSP in anticipation of the upcoming release of its spiritual successor, *Odin Sphere*.

Like *Odin Sphere*, *Princess Crown* features much more action-oriented gameplay than its RPG-like exterior initially suggests. You'll talk to townsfolk, buy and use items, and go on a fair share of fetch quests, but what makes the experience unique is that random encounters closely resemble a one-on-one fighting game, complete with combination attacks and counters.

These battles are where *Princess Crown* truly has the edge over *Odin Sphere*. Whereas combat in *Odin Sphere* often felt like a series of out-of-control jugglefests full of cheap, barely avoidable hits, *Princess Crown*'s fights reward more strategic play, and feature much more deliberate and sensible pacing than *Sphere*'s. Button-mashing won't get you far, as many enemies require well-timed counterattacks and the patience to wait for an opening to exploit. It's a far cry from *Odin Sphere*'s frantic multitasking, and it comes off as being more fair, solid, and satisfying in practice.

Soon, you'll begin to realize that almost all of *Odin Sphere*'s more frustrating elements were simply holdovers from *Princess Crown* that didn't fit into the context of *Sphere*'s inherently different gameplay design. *Princess Crown*'s large sprites work better because there's never much happening on-screen at any given time. Eating food during battle is a gamble worth taking more often than in *Odin Sphere*, since you'll always know where your opponent is, and there's no risk of being hit by an off-screen enemy that seemingly spawned from nowhere. *Princess Crown*'s stamina meter encourages you to use more strategy during battle, rather than serving as an out-of-place annoyance, as was the case in *Odin Sphere*.

Princess Crown isn't a flawless experience. The character movement feels stiff, the limited inventory is annoying, and there's a lot of long-winded dialogue between action scenes — and while it lacks *Odin Sphere*'s ambitious and innovative gameplay, it feels like a much more complete and finished product. *Odin Sphere* could have been something great if it had simply built on *Princess Crown*'s solid gameplay foundation, or if it had ditched *Princess Crown*'s more unwieldy features in favor of more modern, workable solutions in regards to combat and inventory management. It's unfortunate that *Odin Sphere* turned out to be a disappointment on almost every level, but *Princess Crown* remains a worthwhile experience regardless.

WORTH IMPORTING?

It's not going to be translated anytime soon (if ever), so if you enjoyed *Odin Sphere*, you should import *Princess Crown* as soon as possible. Get the Atlus Best Collection budget rerelease if you can. It's cheap!

PRINCESS CROWN

プリンセス クラウン



Review by Sardius



Publisher: Atlus | Developer: Vanilla Ware | Release Date: 9/22/2005
Genre: THE PERFECT GAME | Category: 10 OUT OF 10 | # Players: 1

FINAL SCORE: 4 of 5



MANY CONSIDERED THE EPA'S NEW ANTI-POLLUTION PENALTIES A TOUCH EXTREME.



The early days of 3D weren't pretty. Low polygon counts combined with ugly textures and framerates well below 30 FPS to produce a lot of games that were a brutal assault on the eyes, even if their hearts were in the right place. There's a reason that the 2D/3D argument lasted as long as it did, after all. Some genres, like flight sims, benefited so much from 3D graphics that it was worth slogging through the problems to play them.

The shooting starts quick, too. You get a low-level fighter and a map filled with things to blow up, and it's time to start blasting everything you see. The paper-thin scenario of the Acorn version has been jettisoned in favor of making the missions VR training, and the only thing between you and the action is a briefing screen before each level. Then it's just a matter of disengaging from the mother ship and planning the avenue of attack on the waiting planet below.

One of the really fun things about *Starfighter* is that each level takes place on its own planet. The worlds aren't exactly huge, but they are wide open. You can even fly above the planet's atmosphere and engage in some high-altitude dive bombing. The draw distance is excellent, with no fog to grey out the world and lamely try to mask the draw-in. *Starfighter* handles draw-in with an always-visible base planet, buildings popping into view as the landscape continually fills itself in. This is hardly noticeable when skimming the surface, of course, but even at high altitudes it's easily ignored. You'll be too busy shooting to get hung up on little things like that.

If you're not familiar with classic flight sim controls, though, it'll take a bit of practice to get to blasting things. While the reversed vertical controls are standard for this kind of game, there's no yaw at all. Left and right control roll, and turning involves juggling rotation and pitch at the same time. It's a bit tricky at first,



SPAGHETTI LASER: SUCCESS! RAGU MISSILES: NOT SO MUCH.

Starfighter started life as *Star Fighter 3000* for the Acorn Archimedes, but was ported over to the 3DO two years later. It's got all of the problems listed above, but manages to rise above them thanks to its clever ideas, good controls, and a great "destroy everything!" mentality. It's hard to complain about Lego-block textures (with Duplo-sized pixels) when you're using laser fire to carve a valley through the heart of a mountain.



Exhumed by James



EARTHQUAKE-SAFE ISN'T THE SAME AS CONCENTRATED LASER FIRE SAFE.



IN-AIR DOCKING: MORE FUN FOR THE FIGHTER THAN THE MOTHERSHIP.



CANCEL OPE & ANTHONY, WILL YOU? TAKE THAT!

and unusual for arcade-style gaming, but a lot of fun once you've mastered the art of not oversteering straight into the ground. Thankfully, level one is a no-threat mission where you can fly around, shoot up some buildings, and power up the ship to your heart's content.

Taking the starfighter from a tin can armed with a BB gun to a fast and agile death-dealin' machine is going to require some effort. Almost all buildings are destructible, and they leave a few crystals behind afterwards. Gathering crystals powers up the ship, but they need to be the right ones. Two red crystals powers up the laser while two yellow ones enhance the shield, just as the instruction



THAT'S NOT GOING TO DO NICE THINGS TO THE PRICE OF GAS.

manual says, but the rest are a mystery. Figuring out that you need, in order, a purple, light green, purple, and light green crystal for the beam laser is why FAQs were invented. Once the starfighter has some muscle behind it, the fun really begins. As entertaining as it is

to just fly around, take in the sights, and blast through narrow gaps using full afterburner, there's hordes of bad guys who won't be shooting themselves. Tanks, planes, missile launchers, laser emplacements, enemy motherships that launch fighters, and even satellites in orbit all need a strong application of firepower, and they aren't shy about throwing it back. Most levels are of the "seek and destroy" variety, with only a tiny bit of escorting now and then.

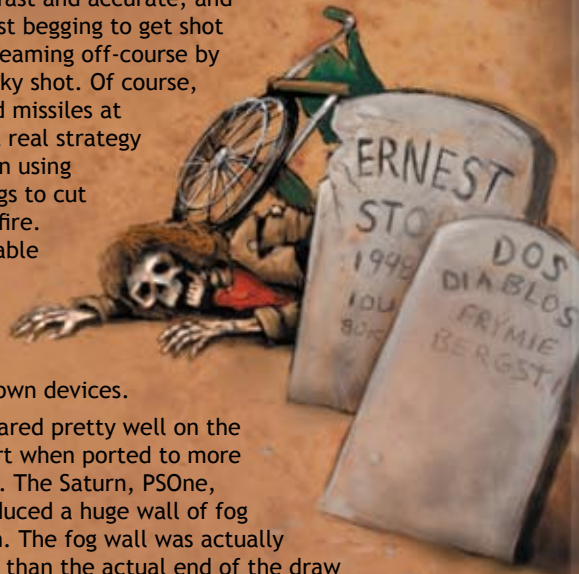
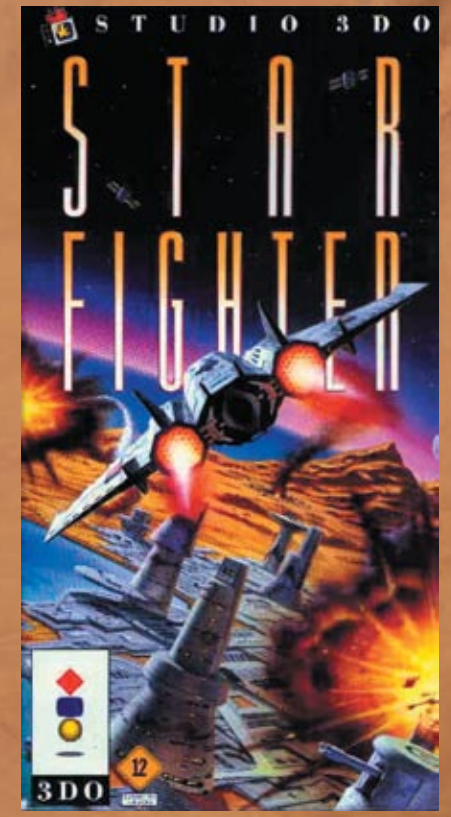


THE BLUE ANGELS... OF THE FUTURE!

turrets, you'll have to compensate for the constant stream of fire and SAMs that's sure to be coming your way. Enemy fire is fast and accurate, and wading into it is just begging to get shot down... or sent screaming off-course by an especially unlucky shot. Of course, you can just unload missiles at enemy targets, but real strategy in *Starfighter* lies in using terrain and buildings to cut off enemy lines of fire. Wingmen are available to help you in some levels, and they can be very effective even when left to their own devices.

While *Starfighter* fared pretty well on the 3DO, it all fell apart when ported to more powerful machines. The Saturn, PSOne, and PC ports introduced a huge wall of fog to hide the draw-in. The fog wall was actually much closer to you than the actual end of the draw distance, and gave the game an unpleasantly claustrophobic feel. It also gave the game a dreary, gloomy look, taking away from the fun of destroying things. It's amazing how one simple change can suck all the joy from a game.

Starfighter was one of the best reasons to buy a 3DO after the system's first few price drops. 3D was still trying to come into its own and *Starfighter* did a great job of showing why we should care. It combined arcade shooting with just a touch of sim, giving it enough depth to hold up over the years. A modern remake, now that game systems have the horsepower to match *Starfighter's* great gameplay, is something I'd love to see.



THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

In today's political climate we are all too often reminded that freedom isn't free, the implication being that there's a price to be paid for our independence – whether it's in labor or cash. The same can be said for the current state of the video game industry.

Having true creative freedom in a marketplace dominated by genre copycats and sequels is a risky proposition to say the least. Achieving and/or maintaining independence is a constant battle where you have to make hard decisions that could permanently alter not only your life, but the lives of everyone you work with. It's easy to see why many developers choose to be bought. Not having to stay awake at night worrying if your next game will sell enough copies to keep you employed and happy is certainly a big perk.

As 19th century humorist H.L. Mencken wrote, "The average man does not want to be free. He simply wants to be safe."

What's funny, though, is that ultimately it's not publishers who decide what types of games are being released, it's you. You're the one who's putting your hard-earned cash on the line to play video games, and every dollar you spend is an economic vote for what direction this industry is taking.

If you don't like what you see on the shelves, it's time for you to cast your votes for what you want. But how exactly do you do that? Here's the best ways to use your power to keep this industry from treading farther down the recycled rehash path that it's currently on.

Buy Good Games - This one's obvious, but it still bears saying. If you don't buy games from developers doing quality work, then they go out of business. Take Clover Studios and its swan song masterpiece, Okami, as the perfect example. You can talk, hypothesize, and advocate for a game all you like, but until you plunk down the cash to buy it, the guys that made it receive no reward for their sweat and tears.

Know Your Developers - If a developer's last three games have been amazing, then chances are their fourth will be equally fantastic. A lot of publishers are fans of keeping you in the dark regarding who actually did all the hard work to create the masterpiece you're experiencing, so if you really liked a game, dig through the manual or check online to see who's behind it. Be sure to take a gander at the games they've made in the past, and see what they've got coming down the pipeline.

Take a Chance - Even the biggest first-person shooter fan in the world will play a game in another genre once in a while. By the same token, no matter how diverse your gaming tastes may be, there's probably been some point where something about a new title has interested you, but ultimately you decided to pass. In today's super sharing world, this is crazy. Rent the game. Borrow it from a friend. Find someone online who's played it and see what they thought. The only excuse for not at least checking out a game that piques your interest is that you already have 100 others you haven't looked at piled next to your television.

Tell a Friend - If you've played something that was unexpectedly mind-blowing, then you need to let everyone know about it. This sounds easy in practice, but I'm sure there's plenty out there that are still keeping their love for *Hello Kitty: Happy Party Pals* a very tightly held secret. If you think a game is cool, then it is cool, and it's up to you to show others why.

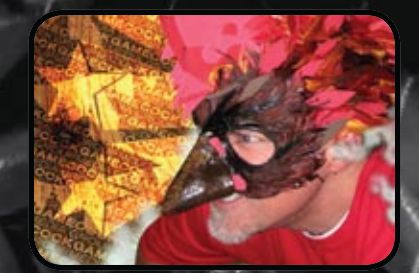
Don't Steal - There's always been software piracy in video games, but there's certainly a concern that in the future gaming could see a level of "sharing" equal to the music industry. Unlike bands, developers don't have alternate sources of income such as touring, so if everyone starts to play for free, video games will have to radically change to continue on... and it's doubtful any of us will like these changes.

Tell the Developer - A quick search on any message board about any game will reveal the universal truth that it's easier to criticize than praise. Anyone in the game business has countless stories about all the amazingly rude experiences they've suffered through, but ask them for a heartwarming story from a fan and they'll have, if they're lucky, one or two. If you've really enjoyed a game, send the people who made it a nice email to let them know how much you liked it and why. I guarantee you, these kind words will drive people to work harder to deliver a great gaming experience than a pile of cash ever could.

So now that you know what it takes, do you want to be free or safe? Before you answer, let me throw another quote at you, this time from Benjamin Franklin. "They who would give up an essential liberty for temporary security, deserve neither liberty or security."

It's time for all of us to get to work. We're just sayin'...

Here, here!
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Dear HardCore Gamer,

I, the exquisite Etoile Rosenqueen have reserved this space to bring your attention to the many superior products I am bringing to the RosenQueen Company, just in time for summer!

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We'll also give you a new choice in Priny Plushies. You know, she's not in my league, but Big Sis is as cute as Prinnies come. And, you can never go wrong with a loyal, classic Priny around!



For those of you who have been anxiously waiting for an RTS-style game to grace your PS2s, we proudly present GrimGrimoire™. You can follow the story of Lillet Blan as she attends a famous magic academy. She's not as interesting as me, but then again, I'm rich!



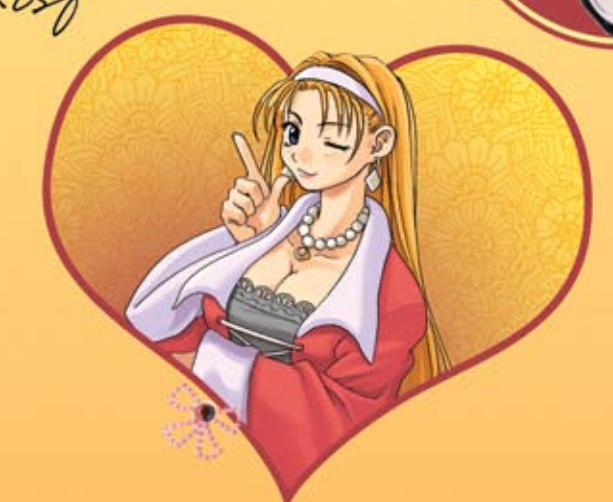
And finally, we present to you the Disc Case 8P for the PSP. With its 8 UMD capacity, it's perfect for keeping your collection with you on the go!



With all the excitement coming this summer, stock up on all of your gaming and accessory needs! I wish you all a happy and healthy summer, and try to get out a little.

Your Beautiful, Bikini-clad, Summer Dreamgirl,

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(Some people don't play video games.)

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Next!

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