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GameGO! ゲーム語

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Read This First



This section will appear in every issue, with changes made accordingly as time goes by, so always check here real quickly at the beginning of an issue for any updates!

Who We Are

We're a bunch of lucky saps that get to play games for a living, share our experiences and hopefully entertain you a bit along the way. We are not journalists, private detectives, or rock stars.

Furthermore, we are not owed our jobs, and we very acutely appreciate this fact.

We're here to serve you, the reader, first and foremost and aim to do right by you at the expense of ad revenue, our sanity and our relationships in the industry—our integrity is the only thing we have, and we will not sully that.

Readers are our lifeblood; we live and die by you, and if something is what it appears to be, we'll tell you—a spade is a spade, et al. We understand that, in our position, we have an obligation to be as forthright and honest as possible, and we don't take that duty lightly.

Our Rating System

You're either going to love us or hate us, but after sampling a large swath of mail from readers, we've decided to not include a numerical, letter, or any other form of grading scale with our reviews—we will allow the strength of our (hopefully) witty prose do the talking for us. Besides, how do you really assign a numerical value to an experience?

And sure, some of you will think we're copping out and some of you will be utterly confused. However, it all comes down to our belief that the words we write should be of the utmost importance and not the grade we give. This should have the net effect of forcing people to 'listen' to what was said, instead of merely rattling off a letter or number that they believe tells the whole story.

Personally, we can't wait to see some of the early mail we will invariably see asking "where the hell are the scores?!" And as we casually mention "did you happen to read the section entitled 'Read This First'… " we'll all sit back and have a nice chuckle…at their expense.



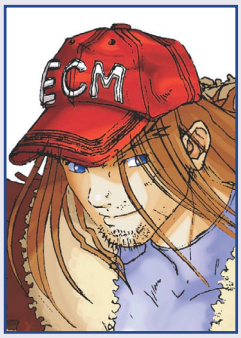
Our Review Philosophy

As each member of our staff is an individual with a wide variety of tastes, experiences and personal biases (yes, you read that correctly, biases), we want to make it painfully clear that our reviews are subjective in nature. Now while most of you are aware of this, we'd like to take a moment and clear this up, here and now, for everybody just joining us.

I usually like to make the point that if the Supreme Court can't remain objective on things, what hope for the rest of us mere mortals? The fact is, people bring pre-conceived notions, biases and opinions to everyday events—we're no different, and we're not going to hide behind the veil of 'objectivity' that so many malcontents use: "After all, beyond identifying colors and reading eye charts, human beings are pretty much incapable of being objective at all"—as one of ECM's favorite columnists is very astute to point out.

For example, if you hate a certain genre, how likely is it you're able to remain objective? Same goes for if you love a genre. Do you enter some sort of Zen-like state and push aside all previous experiences and judge solely on objective criteria—a measure that changes with every person on the planet. The fact is, nothing can truly be reviewed objectively: you need a frame of reference to work from, and it's our hope that you will find an editor to which you relate to and can trust nine times out of ten.

However, even if you can't, that doesn't mean the reviews are worthless: after all, if you find yourself always thinking the exact opposite of what a particular reviewer says, that would be just as strong an indicator of how you would feel about the topic in question.





Where's 'X' Game?!

GameGO! is not about following the pack. Nor are we about constantly regurgitating the same set of games over and over, every month, which just about everyone else happens to be covering. So you won't see rampant coverage and analysis of one screen shot from Metal Gear Solid 2, nor will you see us rewarding games based on how they look from videotape (i.e. no game of show awards for a game we can't play).

Furthermore, we're here to cover the unnoticed, the left out, and the passed over—after all, we all know that whatever

Yu Suzuki's latest game happens to be, it's going to be covered…to death. We'd rather take the space and shine the spotlight on something a bit more low-key, but just as good (as in one of this month's feature stories, Ooga Booga).

Or in the case of whether we devote ample pages to the latest blasé cart racing game: we'd rather take that space and show you something (good or bad) that you won't see anywhere else. Games like Photograph Boy 2 or Culdcept 2, for example— after all, if you want to read about other games, you've got lots of options, <snicker>, to choose from.

Which is not to say we won't cover MGS 2 or the latest Yu Suzuki mega-title: just don't expect to see them get the lion's share of the attention, month-in, month-out for 6 months straight.

This Is Your Magazine

This Is Your Magazine

It's been said millions of times in countless publications, but we mean it: if you want more of something, tell us! If you want less of something, tell us! We have no problem steering the ship into uncharted waters, by the seat of our pants, but some help from the readership on navigation never hurt—as long as Pokey isn't at the helm. So if you want to see some changes, additions, subtractions, let us know!

Errant Bits of Info

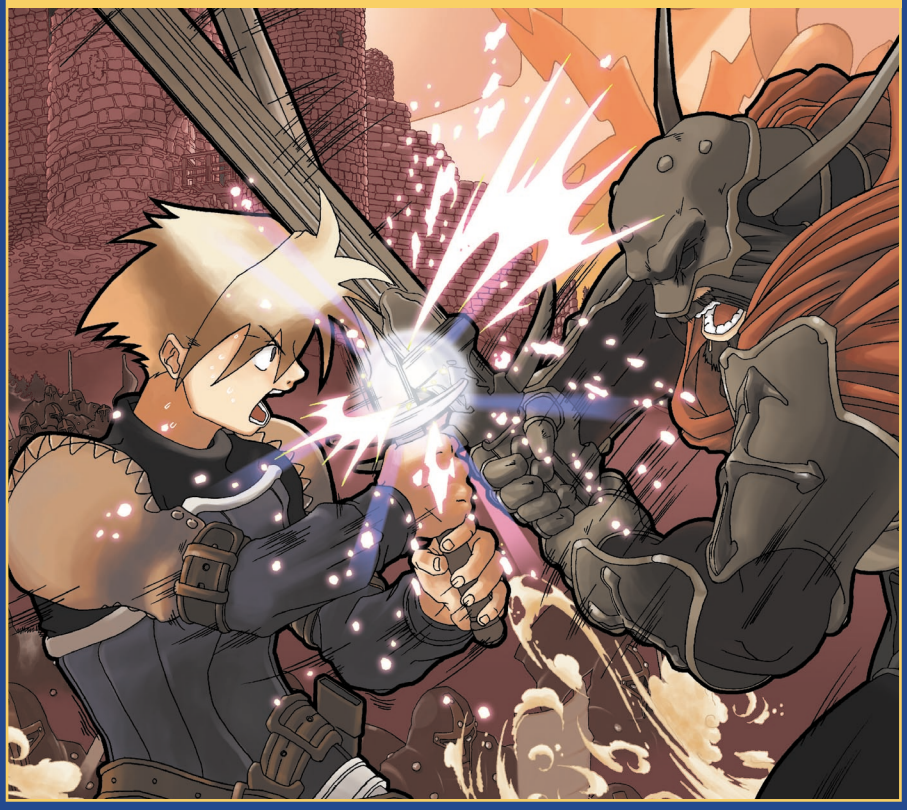
Items deleted by reader request from last issue: centerfold, white space (much to Kasumi's chagrin),

Items added by reader request: more art, less white space (much to Kasumi's chagrin), more screen shots, more ads (go figure), and more pages.

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GameGo! 語

The last thing you want to hear from an industry luminary such as Tomonobu Itagaki (creator of Rygar, Ninja Gaiden and Dead or Alive) on the first day of E3 is "it's going to be a lousy year for games." But sure enough, that's exactly what we did hear. Why exactly would he say such a thing? Well, if you were at the 2001 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), you'd be hard-pressed to disagree judging by what was on offer.

Now don't get me wrong: it's not as if the show was a complete and utter loss. After all Xbox and GameCube made their first official public appearances and that alone is cause to be at least fairly upbeat about the entire affair. Thing is, the Xbox showing was fairly meager and the GameCube display, while more impressive, was hardly equal to that of, say, Sega during E3 2000.

Even more frightening was the fact that while Sega has bowed out of the console race, they still managed to, overall, have the best showing of any publisher at the entire show—and on Dreamcast, no less. Kinda makes that decision to pull the plug a little harder to take for the lucky ones that were allowed into Sega's gaming compound (their attitude of selective admittance being the most foolish mistake any publisher at the show has ever made).

Getting back to Itagaki's comment: why exactly will it be a bad year for gaming? To paraphrase him, essentially, he said that it's going to be a year of virtually no risk, lots of rehashed ideas and very little in the way of advancing the craft of game making (must have a keen sense of irony, then, when his own game is perhaps the epitome of that mentality). And far be it for us to disagree as the show had very few games that our staff can say we were genuinely salivating over.

It's this problem that led us to forego any heavy duty E3 coverage, instead confining it to this little editorial at the front of the magazine. Was it terrible? No. Was it earth-shattering? No. Should it have been? I should hope so..

How often do two new consoles debut at the same exact time—how about never? And given this fact, we were certainly expecting a lot more than what was actually delivered. Yes, we loved Rogue Squadron II and Smash Bros. as well as the amazing Pikmin, but beyond that, there wasn't much in the way of excitement from either Nintendo or Microsoft that was actually playable. Sad? You bet. Still, if you knew where to dig, there were gems to be found.

For example, this E3 marked a turn in the fortunes of the PS2: there is now sufficient good-to-great software coming in the next 6 months to finally make that console a worthy purchase (above and beyond Klonoa and Stretch Panic from last month). We're certainly jazzed about Capcom's Maximo, Sony's Ico, and Sega's Rez among a clutch of other titles.

The lowly PlayStation One even had its fair share of great news: the stunning Hoshigami (which is on our cover for a reason); the long, long awaited Dragon Quest VII; and Koei's Saiyuki all hold great promise—the machine for RPGs? Maybe...<grin>.

While the Dreamcast is now officially a footnote in gaming history (<sob>), the final 6 months or so of its active existence (if retailers and 3rd parties don't kill it sooner than that, the fools) will feature great games such as Ooga Booga (very much overlooked at E3), Alien Front Online, Floigan Bros., and a clutch of others will let Dreamcast go out with its head held high.

In any event, we'll be here to cover it all in a way that only we can, devoting the space to the games that will be overlooked by nearly everybody else in the run up to the holiday season (hey look—another MGS2 preview…kill me)—who else would be insane enough to put a PlayStation One game on their cover, I ask you? Not even the PlayStation-specific magazines—whether this is good or bad, though, we're not quite sure.

Oh, and drum roll please, Shidoshi marks his return to the family he never really left, with his own unique contributions to the guide to what you should be playing. Be sure to check out his freshly minted anime section (because you demanded it) and tell him what a great job he's doing—we'd like him to stick around for a while.

And with that last joyless stab (OK, so there was a little joy—I'm only human), kick back, and enjoy the magazine. Oh, and another thank you to all of you for supporting us in our quest to bring a little excitement back to our chosen hobby—couldn't do it without you guys!

Happy camper,
ECM



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RESIN STATUES

Editors Assemble

This issue we thought we'd let you in on the various and sundr y goals and milestones the staff at GO! have achieved (or attempted) since the last issue. What exactly do the boys at the most laid back magazine on the planet been up to—check it:

ecm@gamegomagazine.com



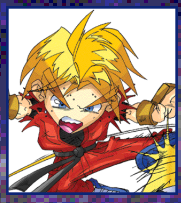
ECM (a.k.a. Eric Mylonas):
ECM passed two milestones, of a sort, this issue. For starters he discovered that he was an Irish, as well as U.S., citizen due to some parent born in Eire chicanery. He can now roam the Emerald Isle (and a large chunk of Europe) as a full citizen, entitled to all the rights such an honor bestows: free medical care; commiseration with whole groups of new peoples; and a sense of belonging that he, heretofore, hadn't experienced. He also managed to pass one thousand posts on the GameGO! message board. We'll give you one guess as to which he took more glee in (hint: it has nothing to do with four leaf clovers, Irish eyes, or pots of gold)—"2000 posts, here I come!"

ECM

TOP 10

1. Culdcept II—DC
2. Growlanser 2—PS2
3. Sengoku 3—NG
4. Hoshigami—PS
5. Tiny Toons B.B.D.—GBA
6. Cleopatra Fortune—DC
7. Ooga Booga—DC
8. Target Earth—Genesis
9. Super Star Soldier—PC Engine
10. DonDokoDon—PC Engine

kodomo@gamegomagazine.com



Kodomo (a.k.a. Matt Van Stone):
Kodomo recently had the 'pleasure' (our word, not his) of attending his ten-year high school reunion. Surrounded by all sorts of successful, happy people, he wondered exactly where were all the horror story people you always hear about at your reunion—no painfully skinny people turned into morbidly obese "fatties"; only one dead person in the entire class (darn the luck); even the class clown that nobody expected to amount to anything turned out to be a cop (dodging warrants at your reunion? Only Kodomo). Yep, it was a disappointing evening all around…at least until he took a trip to the little boy's room. After washing his hands Kodomo finally found the type of people he was looking/hoping for…in the mirror.

KODOMO

TOP 10

1. Sakura Taisen 3 – DC
2. TTT – PS2
3. Red Alert 2 – PC
4. PSO – DC
5. Worms World Party – DC
6. Comix Zone – Genesis
7. X-Com – PS
8. Final Fantasy Tactics – PS
9. Ridge Racer V – PS2
10. Hello Kitty Lovely Fruit Park – DC

shidoshi@gamegomagazine.com



Shidoshi (a.k.a. Eric Patterson):
Shidoshi finally traveled to Japan over the course of completing issue #2, and felt like he'd journeyed to the land to which he should have been born. Unfortunately, unlike ECM's parentage, Shidoshi (much to his chagrin) can't fall back on some technicality to make him a full-blooded Japanese citizen. So, in the interim, he's taken to perusing several mail order bride catalogues in the hopes of starting up a US edition to be shipped east (that AnimEtc. stuff you see is merely practice). The name of the publication? Eligible Bachelor from America Monthly. We're not sure, but we think a more accurate title might be, Desperate Gaijin Seeks Gullible Japanese Wife.

SHIDOSHI

TOP 10

1. DDR 4th Mix—Arcade
2. Top Shop—PS
3. Klonoa 2—PS2
4. Para Para Paradise—Arcade
5. Outtrigger—DC
6. Last Blade 2—DC
7. Project Justice—DC
8. Incredible Crisis—PS
9. Planet Harriers—Arcade
10. Red Alert 2—PC

haohmaru@gamegomagazine.com



Haohmaru (a.k.a. Tom Keller):
This issue Haohmaru managed to get over his initial shock at the size of the print bill for GameGO!, which, if you'd actually laid eyes on it, is no mean feat. Now that he can breathe without a sharp pain in his chest and has adjusted to a diet of water and, uh, water, he's free to pursue much loftier goals. These include: How to pay your mortgage with 300 loose copies of 3DO Immercenary and Virtual Boy Tetris; can you really make money selling your blood and other, viscous, bodily fluids; and exactly how much does a healthy baby fetch, per pound, on the black market. Our thoughts and prayers go out to Kasumi…

HAOHMARU

TOP 10

1. Growlanser 2—PS2
2. Final Fantasy Tactics—PS
3. Outrigger—DC
4. Alien Front Online—DC
5. Ooga Booga—DC
6. Guilty Gear X—DC
7. Elemental Gearbolt—PS
8. Spriggan Mark 2—PC Engine
9. Hoshigami—PS
10. Ys 1 & 2—Turbografx 16

Pokey@gamegomagazine.com



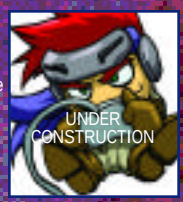
Pokey (a.k.a. Rich Depping):
Pokey isn't what you'd call a goal or milestone-oriented individual—he's one of those guys that kinda lets life eddy and flow around him like a rock in a stream; like a bird in flight; like a guy that would rather be doing anything but working While that sounds nice and Zen, the truth of the matter is that the only real goals Pokey has in life are to get home in time to catch the newest episode of Alien Zim and chatting on IRC. We're confident, though, that Pokey's lack of motivation will pick up next issue. After all, he has 300% more pages in this issue over issue one. Sounds pretty damn impressive till you realize he did (hold onto your seats) one page last issue.

POKEY

TOP 10

1. Phantasy Star Online V2—DC
2. Psikyo vs. Capcom: Net Mahjong—DC
3. Remote Control Colony—PS2
4. Escape from Monkey Island—PS2
5. Shining Force III—SS
6. Skullmonkeys—PS
7. Soldier of Fortune—DC
8. Gunstar Heroes—Genesis
9. Rayman—Jaguar
10. Fight for Life—Jaguar

Neogeoman@gamegomagazine.com



NeoGman (a.k.a.Lawrence Wright):
Since NeoGman is happily married to a Japanese woman and does indeed reside in Japan (listen for the quiet keening of the endangered Shidoshi, sobbing from his lofty perch) his goals are simple: sell lots of stuff on eBay and avoid massive cell phone bills on his handy I-Mode phone. For the former, he hoards all that really cool stuff you hear about and sells to the highest bidder on the 'Net, as opposed to his good friends at GO! But that's OK, the boys back home get their payback. See, Neo pays per character on email sent to his handy little gadget. Probably should have sold ECM that SG-1000, Neo—hope you like War and Peace as an appetizer and the Bible as a main course. Hope that SG-1000 goes for seven figures—you're gonna need it.

NEOGMAN

TOP 10

1. Necronomicon SAT
2. Robotron 2084 ARCADE
3. Metal Slug 3 NEO
4. Last Blade 2 NEOCD
5. Raiden DX PSX
6. Rage Racer PSX
7. Akumajo Dracula x68000
8. Raiden Fighters 2 ARCADE
9. Heavy Metal Geomatrix DC
10. Samurai Showdown IV NEO

CosPlayground



Due to popular demand (who'd a thunk it), we bring you Cosplayers in the only game magazine brave enough to help promote this 'slowly becoming respectable' activity.

And since the costumes just keep getting better and better, we're seriously thinking of getting involved ourselves: ECM as Terry Bogard (if he was Choi's size); Shidoshi as Blue Mary (we're not laughing); Haohmaru as Haohmaru (if he was white and really, really out of shape); and Kasumi as, heh, Kasumi (now that would be interesting).

So to spare all of you pain that would make even the Marquis de Sade blanche, we implore you to send your Cosplay pics to

cosplay@gamegomagazine.com.

For our inaugural CosPlayground, we give you Serge (of Chrono Cross fame),performed by Genjitsu of the ACP. Check out their site at www.acparadise.com and get to sending those submissions- Haoh's currently trying to squeeze himself into a big white sheet and keeps yelling "ora ora ora!" God help us all.

LAST MINUTE MANIA

While rummaging around a local dump, we stumbled upon this image of Mario, Luigi and Donkey Kong. Anybody wanna guess which game it's for? Mario Bros? Super Mario Bros? Donkey Kong? Would you believe Mario Bros…for the Atari 7800. Yes, in what amounts to a twisted residual rights story, when Atari launched its ill-fated 7800 Pro System they held the rights to certain Nintendo properties for use on their menagerie of consoles (the Atari XE also), so we wound up with bastardized Mario and co. My bet is that Shigeru Miyamoto still wakes up late at screaming: "what did you do to my boys?!"





Kasumi's Korner



Many have asked if I ever enjoyed playing video games. Right after my second daughter Gabrielle was born (who was colicky) I became addicted to House of the Dead 2—not sure if the two were interrelated but I find it makes the story more interesting. Besides, ECM says I need to work on my exposition. He's pretty smart…for a smurf.

Anyway, I went through at least 2 guns and hours of game play each day. Every time my little bundle of joy fell asleep, my older daughter, Samantha and I would head to the game room for an hour of House of the Dead 2. Sadly, I had to give up the game—my little one traded napping for near-constant, head-rupturing screaming, which, naturally, really interferes with your aim, ya know. That was probably as close to being a real gaming addict as I will ever get.

I would like to dedicate the rest of my column to the white space that I really liked in the first magazine (ECM's Note: what white space <points to the non-white background>)

—Kasumi

Debra Keller
kasumi@gamegomagazine.com
The brains behind the layout of the mag. She brings over 15 years of print experience to the staff - something that the above group of crazed drooling lunatics don't know much about.

Llamas



eBay Pain

It takes a special kind of imbecile to post an auction on eBay for a game that hasn't even been announced for console release, and yet that's just what silver^falcon of the UK did. Check out the complete item text:

"U R BIDDING ON RADIANT SILVERGUN 2, YES 2! ON THE PLAYSTATION 2. THIS IS A JAPANESE IMPORT AND IS VERY RARE. THIS GAME IS MADE BY THE BEST GAMES COMPANY IN THE WORLD TREASURE AND IS TOTALLY MINT. U GET THE GAME BOXED WITH INSTRUTIONS, CD IS SCRATCH FREE! THIS GAME IS VERY LIMITED IN JAPAN TO 1000 UNTILL IT GOES ON SALE TO THE PUBLIC IN DECEMBER! IT WONT EVEN REACH THE US OR UK UNTILL 2002. IF YOU THOUGHT RS ON THE SATURN WAS GOOD, THIS WILL BLOW U AWAY. PLACE A BID NOW. EMAIL ME WITH ANY QUESTIONS, GOOD LUCK."

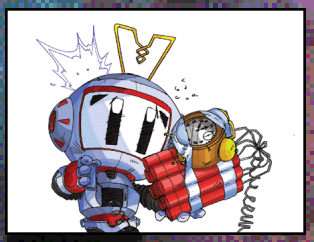
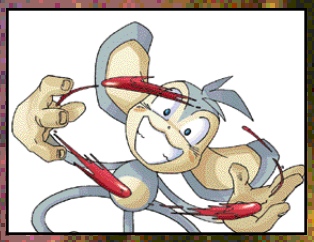
Thank God we now have the inside scoop on RS2. I think ECM will even be able to sleep soundly after hearing that RS2 wouldn't come to arcades—now we know it's already available on PS2! Thank you silver^falcon! We'll rest easier tonight.

Note: we did not edit this message in anyway—the caps and "U R"'s were all his. This bright lad even insisted via email that he was going to get eBay after us after we told him we had already reported him to eBay. We won't reprint our mail to him, as the expletive ridden missive isn't fit for these pages. Needless to say we fully believe that fornicating with your mother is an activity this fellow partakes of quite frequently.

FINAL ANALYSIS

ECM | HAOHMARU | POKEY | THE 6th MAN





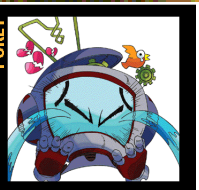
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Reviewed page 44

HAOHMARU



After a few bad 3D Castlevanias, the 15 year old 68000 version will just have to do. No, it's not PC Engine Dracula X, it's not PSX Symphony of the Night, but it IS good ol' 2D Dracula the way it's meant to be. 2D platforming goodness that isn't quite up to the standards of the titles that it spawned, but still far better than the N64 aberrations that followed. The graphics on this Castlevania seem very dated despite the typically rock solid 2D platforming engine that we've all come to expect. Not a spectacular installment in the series--think of it as an hors d'oeuvre or dessert for you to feast on before or after Game Boy Advance Castlevania Chronicle, the true heir to the series that pays respect to its ancestors.

POKEY

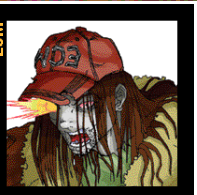


If I stuck a PB&J sandwich in a Ziploc bag, and crammed it under the stairs for 8 years, it wouldn't be hailed as a 'classic', or that it 'aged well'- they would say it's rancid. I know it seems like a bizarre metaphor, but that's exactly what's happened with Castlevania Chronicles. Konami hastily whipped up a Castlevania game based around the old NES engine for the Sharp X68000 computer in the early '90s, and after being buried for nearly a decade they decide to exhume the coffin (ow) and 'remake' it. Then they slapped the original slop and the redone slop on a PSX disc for ¥5800. What really puzzles me is why it was delayed so many times. Would it have killed them to put the NES incarnations on the tons of empty disc space?



Tales of Destiny 2
Playstation
Namco
RPG
Reviewed page 22

ECM



I did indeed enjoy the intial PS Tales of Destiny, but there just isn't enough here for me to get worked up over. Sure, it still has the wonderful real-time combat that's a hallmark of this series, but the snapped character designs (nice sports bra, Reed), contrived story and been there, done that gameplay diminish my enthusiasm.Still, it is a very pretty game, with some very lush 2Dvisuals, but the animation can't hang with BoF IV (though the actual game smashes that pile of boredom) and the best music is confined to the opening them song (which is very well done). If you simply must have every PSRPG you should run out and snap this one up, I guess. Me?I'm going back to lusting over Hoshigami and playing Growlanser 2 till my eyes fall out--you should do the same.

HAOHMARU



Tales of Destiny was a rare offering from Namco, namely an RPG from the founders of Pac Man, Ridge Racer, and Tekken. The real time battle system is evidence that the crafters of the aforementioned titles have extended their influence to this game. Your fighter (Reed) fights with hack and slash skill reminiscent of other real time RPG's, albeit in a simpler fashion. You can improve certain elements of your character in lieu of others, a control feature that's always welcome in titles bearing the name "Destiny"--controlling your own is always a plus. Tales of Destiny 2 isn't for the faint of heart--it's a very difficult RPG that makes you learn the value of stretching your resources. Still, if you were a fan of the first or fond of a challenge, TOD2 will be right up your alley.



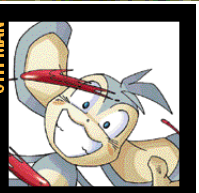
Endnesia
Playstation 2
Enix
RPG
Reviewed page 40

ECM



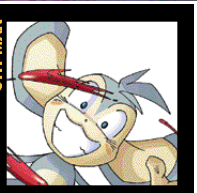
Despite Kodomo's loathing of this quirky little title elsewhere in the book (he's just cranky cause the pills have run out), I think it's pretty great. It's definitely weird, and a lot of people won't get it, but it's a neat little adventure/puzzle game that more than three people should play (me, Kodomo and Haohmaru being the three). The graphics are sharp as a tack and the loopy world, replete with bizarre 'gods,' off-the-wall (but logical) puzzles, and the very nice atmosphere (punctuated by very subtle 'music') all deliver a nice little game that I hope some intrepid 3rd party deems worthy of release. It's playable in Japanese (good luck finding it), but it'd be that much better with a wee bit o' the Queen's English.

6TH MAN



As the designated lackey, I only really get to play the games no one else wants to touch with a ten foot pole --which happens to be 3x ECM's size...conservatively speaking. Once in a while, though, Iget to play something fun; something that actually make my dreary day to day existence worth living. Endonesia is one of those games. While it's probably not for everybody, I certainly got a kick out of the wacky machinations of the lost little boy and his mutant dog-thing. The odd language that the people speak, and the cute puzzles all conspire to deliver a game that more than the staff of this magazine should experience. Of course the odds of that are rather slim, but if you have the chance, take a trip to Endonesia.

6TH MAN



Where did this come from?! It's rare enough that the staff 'round these parts can agree on where to go for lunch, but to agree across the board on a game<checks the thermometer in hell>?! But that's just what happened with Grow2--everybody on the staff loves it...heck, Ithink I even saw game-hating (outside of HotD 2) Kasumi sneaking some time with it. Why on earth the first one was passed over for US release is now a mystery Imust get to the bottom of...well, me or my monkey-based alter ego.Amazing graphics, a stunning and amazing combat system and the theme song!Oh how I love some extra-cheesy pop metal ballads to go with my RPGs.

ECM



This game is utterly amazing. I didn't know what exactly to expect, as I didn't invest in its PlayStation forebear, but if it's anything like part 2, it's probably among the best games on that console. G2 features amazing real-time, turn-based gameplay (you'll have to play it--trust me, it all makes sense) by the fellows that brought us the Langrisser titles (minus the DC disc of pain) so it's got to be good, right? The graphics are stunningly sharp and the Germanic thrust really helps set it apart. This is the best RPG I've played on PS2 and may be the best I've played since Dreamcast was introduced (this includes all PS RPGs). If there's a God, this game will see a US release--please Atlus, I'm begging you.



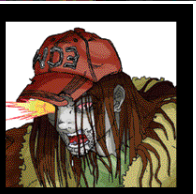
Growlanser 2
Playstation 2
Career Soft / Atlus
RPG / Strategy
Reviewed page 24

POKEY



I can't believe I am actually going to admit I enjoyed a sports game. TENNIS, no less. Hard Hitter is thus far the only tennis title I can think of for the PS2, and it's a damn nice one. Realistic models, detailed players, and decent physics make for great visuals. The player movements seem a bit stiff, but they do not detract from the gameplay. What's even more entertaining tho is the odd play-by-play doled out during the TV close-up' type shots in-between plays. Clearly the writers have had very little experience with US broadcasters as it's peppered with gems like "He seems to REALLY like tennis!" Since tennis isn't a high profile or a Mountain Dew-guzzling XTREME sport, don't look for EA or ESPN/Konami to knock out a tennis title anytime soon, so take what you can get, eh?

ECM

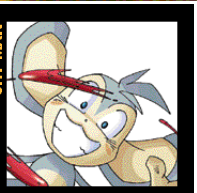


Hey look: a wannabe Virtua Tennis…only not nearly as good. Who else isn't shocked? Listen, if you want to make a good tennis game, at least make sure it has responsive control and there isn't a lag every time you move. Sure, in real life a tennis player might have a hard time pivoting from left to right in mid-stride, but this is a video game-you're supposed to be able to do things you wouldn't normally be able to do to keep it fun and fast-paced. Remember those nerver-fraying volleys in VT? You'll find nothing so much as half as intense here. The graphics are decent and the audio is tolerable but I'd rather play Net de Tennis than this budget (it is a budget title, btw) VT clone--double fault.



Hard Hitter
Playstation 2
Magical Company
Sports

6HT MAN

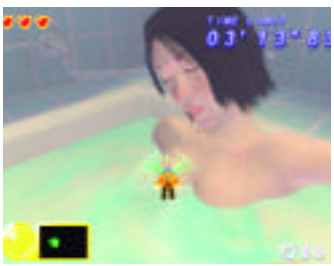


If you had to work withECM every day, you'd quickly come to appreciate his mind-numbing rants on "the dearth of originality in today's games." Whlie Ido get sick of hearing it , the guy actually sometimes get its right:case in point, Mosquito.This game sounded so cool when we first heard about it--you get to play an actual mosquito! We figured this might be Sony's start on a whole series of games based on weird critters. If this game is anything go go by, though, let's pray we never see that rhinocerous sim Ihad my heart set on. This game sucks, period. Forget all the bug-based jokes you could make--Iwon't even bother wasting the energy. Needless to say, another black eye for PS2.

ECM



For the love of God:how can something that sounds so right turn out so completely wrong? I mean an idea as original as this deserves to be nurtured with some TLC--not dumped in a stagnant pond, and left to rot. How is it that a first party PS2 title can be this bad?It looks OK, and the premise rocks but where's the gameplay?!And what's with the 'hot spots'--hit 'em on people and they forget all about you? Wha?! I also love the fact that you can only suck blood from specific points on a person's body, including the blood-rich scalp(anatomy 101 would have been nice). Needless to say this sort of thing would be inexcusable from Joe's Game Studio, never mind one of the biggest publishers in the world.



Mosquito
Playstation 2
Zoom / SCEA
Action
Reviewed page 41

POKEY



Sometimes I forget Irem is still alive. Thank god they check me every now and again with stuff like this. PhotoBoy II is a sequel to the classic but very scarce Photoboy (duh) on PC-E. Press pass and camera in hand, you slowly plod from left to right to grab the best shots you possible from varying locales. You're sent out on a specific mission to nab a specified photo, but you need to grab other shots to pay the bills. With a fast eye and even faster hands you can rack up a high score and earn tons of respect from your editor, or you can go to town getting shots of Godzilla destroying downtown Tokyo and schoolgirl skirts fluttering-it's up to you, photoboy! Grab it before it dissipates, A+!

HAOHMARU



It's not too often that video games go against what one would think are the results of countless meetings between suits to determine the marketability of a particular title. Photograph Boy 2 succeeds in bucking the trend of 3D FPS rehashes and VF clones. Meander through various environments with your trusty Nikon taking various shots for which you score points. Obviously the "bigger" the event, the more points you accumulate . Of course, certain events aren't as important but timing is. The comical events are guaranteed to make you smile aand you'll find yourself trying to beat previous scores to get to the next level, all to unlock the sub-stages that split off hte main stages. Shoot, shoot, shoot!



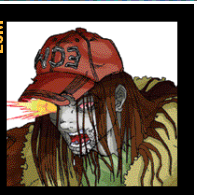
Photograph Boy 2
Playstation 2
Irem
SIM / Parody
Reviewed page 43



Yanya Caballista

Playstation 2
Koei / Cave
Sports
Reviewed page 42

ECM



Wow. This is exactly what happens when you try to extend beyond your limitiations or expertise in one area--after all, nobody wants a gynocologist helping them with a proctological problem (yow, that's cold!). But don't tell that to Koei and Cave who have embarked on a quest to overtake Jet Set Radio and managed to really, really embarass themselves. Just to scare you silly right off the bat: this game requires one of those boards that you snap onto the dual analog sticks--one of those that makes it impossible to play. It controls badly, plays badly and looks decent. If you thought JSR was limited in the tricks dept. you ain't seen nothing.And those poor gawoos...what did they ever do?

POKEY



What a disappointment: Cel-shaded characters along the lines of Jet Grind Radio; skateboard to defeat non-threatening but invading alien forces. Sure it sounds hokey, but who wouldn't enjoy doing away with a pink ghost-looking thing by busting out a hardflip upside its head? Unfortunately, Koei decided cel-shaded kids skating around beating up on weird aliens wasn't enough so they opted to make a 'skateboard attachment' for the controller. You snap this little board over your Dual Shock sticks, and hold the pad sideways to steer. The control just does not work that route. If Koei just caved in and ripped off Tony Hawk this would be an immensely playable and FUN! game, but it's, well, not.



Alien Front Online

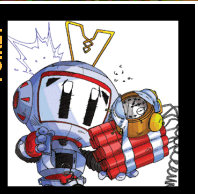
Dreamcast
Wow Entertainment / Sega
FPS
Reviewed page 32

HOAHMARU



Folks are going to think I've gone soft with all of the happy faces that adorn these pages, but damn if this isn't another homage to what could've been for Sega. Alien Front Online is an blaster with a twist--you're in a tank...fighting aliens. They're big, they're tough, and you're armed with the latest in tank technology to save the planet. AFO isn't a tank sim by any stretch--the action is fast and furious. There's arcade, online, and mission based modes (both alien & army) to keep you occupied. It's a visual sensation and a testament to what the Dreamcast is capable of. Solid FPS, multiple vehicles and enemies, team play, online and microphone voice support. Another Johnny come lately that shouldn't be missed.

POKEY



Big tanks, big aliens, big explosions--that about sums up AFO. Choose to pilot either massive 'Tokyo Wars'-esque tanks and defend the earth, or invading alien crafts and wipe out the hairless apes. The game has a strange feel and style seemingly ripped half from the movies "Independence Day" and the other half from "StarShip Troopers," but still retains a style all its own. And if you get sick of arcade mode, there's a massive campaign mode to plow thru, as well as online play where you can utilize the packed-in microphone to communicate with teammates and taunt the other guys. Only detractors: too few levels & no broadband support...and no import release--buy accordingly.



Cleopatra Fortune

Dreamcast
Taito / Altron
Puzzle
Reviewed page 38

ECM



If you read Haohmaru's review elsewhere in this issue you may have got the impression that he's not too thriled with it (he keeps muttering something about "Columns clone")--well I am! The twist here is you have to bury the items you want to get rid of which opens up all new areas of your brain that probably haven't been used--ever. A brilliant game that Haohmaru and Iplayed for 6 hours straight one night (though for vastly different reasons)--it's good enough that I'm actually actively seeking out the JAMMAboard to add to my PCBcollection. Remember kids:if it says Taito on it, it has to be good...unless it's Densha DeGo, <ick>...right JAPJAC?

POKEY



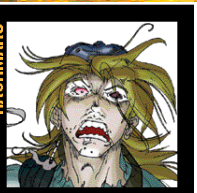
A Taito puzzle game - there's a fresh twist if I ever saw one. 5 years ago Taito released Cleopatra Fortune into the arcades, a year or 2 later onto Saturn & PlayStation (in Japan of course). Now for some reason in 2001 Taito decides - wait, not even Taito - Altron decided the need to license the game from Taito and release it on the desiccated corpse of DC. The thing is, this wasn't even a very good puzzler when it was first released. Half somewhat original and half stolen from Tetris, the main objective is to surround the gems and/or coffins with the granite slabs to eliminate them. It's not very fun, it's pretty expensive--I'd call it a tax write-off, but they didn't press ENOUGH for it to be one.



Culdcept 2

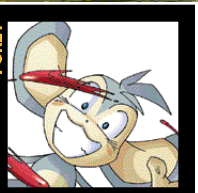
Dreamcast
Omiya Soft / Media Factory
Board
Reviewed page 36

HAOHMARU



While ECMand several of the other moreJapanese-centric staff go bonkers over this, I just don't care. They keep going on about how"it's Monopoly meets Magic"--eh, so what? Monopoly was cool when I was 12 and Magic, well Magic was never cool. Sure, the game looks pretty and has some very nice production values but I really don't care. Maybe I just don't get it; maybe there's some hidden gameplay magic going on that i just don't see; or maybe it's just that it really isn't much of game. Think I'm going to go with the latter, much to ECM's profusely flustering face across the office"but you have to like it--it friggin' rocks, man."This from a guy that could fit on the game board...no thanks.

POKEY



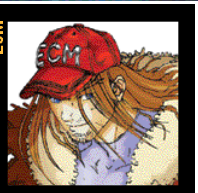
Once again I find myself in agreement with der uber-editor, ECM. What's next? flying monkeys? This game is rippingly cool! The Monopoly meets Magic gameplay is so sweet, it's super-sweet. Log on for some online action--it's not that hard--and you'll be able to play somebody virtually 24 hours a day in no holds barred card combat. A beautiful engine, seamless gameplay (with a touch of randomness to keep things interesting) equal one of the best DCgames yet.I hope and pray this gets ported to GameCube and then localized for US-comsumption, cause games like this should not, nay, cannot be missed by the masses--even though they wouldn't know a good game if it smacked 'em.

HAOHMARU



Think Spawn with smaller environments and fewer camera problems and you have Geomatrix in a nutshell. Kickin' tunes and bad ass weapons make for a game that's as much a state of mind as it is a video game, boasting bigger than life opponents encompassing both male and female, freaks, mutants and misanthropes. While it leaves a bit to be desired in the one player mode (the A.I. has the I.Q. of a doorknob--), the two player mode is good therapy for folks who need to beat up their best friends once in a while. Games like this make the Dreamcast's premature demise even that much more difficult to acknowledge, especially when this game hangs, graphically, with the best of the best.

ECM



It's not bad enough that the DC is dead, but Capcom has to rub it in our faces with this unbelievably good game that will never get the audience it deserves. HMG fixes all the problems Spawn sufferered from (mainly in the camera dept.), cranks up the graphics, adds some amazingly killer tunes, Simon Bisley art, and enough gameplay for even the most jaded gamer to dance in the streets over. Great combos, piles of weapons and utterly beautiful graphics--graphics, Imight add, that would look at home on Xbox. As this is going to degenerate into another "why God, why"rant, let me just say that this is a rocking game that all DC fans (those that haven't abandoned ship) need to check out.



Heavy Metal Geomatrix
Dreamcast
Capcom
Fighting
Reviewed page 33

POKEY



Sega seems doomed to only release the A++ titles after the demise of their consoles: after the Saturn died we received Panzer Saga, Burning Rangers and Shining Force III. Sega announced the death of DC, and we get Sonic Adventure II, Shen Mue II, and Ooga Booga. Ooga Booga is a deranged collection of "party" minigames played out on little 'tribal' islands. Pick your favorite character from the rogues gallery (leprechauns, dudes with massive afros, pirates, midgety savages, etc) and start hucking rocks at anything that moves! Up to 4 players can get in on the action in your living room, or gird your loins and hop online for some Net-based chicanery--good stuff all around, Visual Concepts!

HAOHMARU



Say what you want about Sega and their business decisions, but when it comes to making unique and captivating games, they have no equal in the industry--enter Ooga Booga. Primarily designed for online and multiplayer play, it's an absolute riotfest of "Smakahuna" action. Ride the boar, throw shrunken heads, or use your old fashioned stick to womp on your opponents. Numerous islands and characters like Dottie, Fatty, Pirate, Abe (Lincoln) and many more to choose from are coupled with tribal beats to get the blood pressure up. The only peeve is the small amount of power ups and the like. Absolutely worth the hunt that late release DC games are becoming infamous for.



Ooga Booga
Dreamcast
Visual Concepts/Sega
Action
Reviewed page 28

HAOHMARU



Super Puzzle Fighter II for Matching Service serves up 3 variations on the old Tetris/Tetris Attack theme with a twist. Some of you might've been here before with either the PSX or Saturn versions. However, for those not in the know, Puzzle Fighter is one of Capcom's lesser known series that always seems to get passed over. Super deformed characters represent you and your opponent, but the real battle is on the puzzle side. Arcade, training, versus, network and edit modes round out the various elements of Super Puzzle Fighter IiX and while it certainly isn't new, it's still worth playing...just don't believe ECM when he tries to tell you it isn't a Columns clone.

ECM



It's not a Columns clone, <ahem>. Anyway, this was a fantastic arcade game and just as good on PSand SS, only now it has Net play that we'll never be able to access...damn the fates and their infernal, fickle ways! Yes, well, moving along... It's still a great game and one that everybody needs to take a spin on. It kills me that I have to deal with playing two really great puzzle games in the same month on the same dead platform, but that's life...I suppose. Capcom USAcould do a lot worse in porting this puppy to the states so that it gets to hit a wider audience, though i'd imagine the odds of that are somewhere around zero even though this nice shiny version smashes the previously released editions.



Super Puzzle Fighter
Dreamcast
Capcom
Puzzle
Reviewed page 35

POKEY



It's good. It's real good. I wouldn't go as far as 'breathtaking,' but it's really damn good. It's the best Final Fight clone I've played in the last 5 years. Sadly, there hasn't been that many, due to the rise of the '3D or DIE' marketing mentality pushed by certain, well, 'market leaders.' My only real gripes with the title are the mind-boggling repetition of the enemies-every level is infested with the same hoard of evil samurai ghosts, with the occasional sub-boss and boss thrown in for variation. Due to SNK's current (but temporary) state of affairs, the current holder of the NeoGeo mantle is slowly but surely getting this game out to arcade operators, so it might be awhile before you see it in your favorite haunt.

ECM



The NeoGeo finally gets a new game, and all I hear from people is that it's 'OK' at best. So when I managed to sit down for some quality time I was expecting to be bored off my arse-imagine my surprise when it turns out that it's one of the Top Five Neo games of all time. Sure, the variety in enemies is, well, ass but the game itself is utterly engrossing and features a very slick combo system that obliterates the 'combos' (such as they are) in Final Fight and Streets of Rage 2. This is one beat 'em up where actual skill will separate the stronger players from the weaker players. My only regret: I didn't get to heap praise on it in the full, 2 page review, <sob>. Better than Final Fight?Oh yes...



Sengoku 3
Neo Geo
Noise Factory/SNK
Beat'em Up
Reviewed page 46

HOSHIGAMI
RUINING BLUE EARTH
沈みゆく蒼き大地

Playstation

Developer: Max Five | Publisher: Atlus



Final Fantasy Tactics: The Legend

As anybody that has ever actually played Final Fantasy Tactics will tell you, it was a combination of elements that lifted that game from mere strategy RPG to one of the top RPGs on the PlayStation—period. The complex mix of political and religious intrigue; the stunning, unbelievable score that has yet to be equaled; and an amazing, 60 fps engine that kept everything moving at a stunning pace. Clearly this game was crafted by Square to be the next big thing. Too bad it wasn't…





Hindsight, as they say, is 20/20: what was passed over and filed away yesterday becomes the legend of today.

Without question, Final Fantasy Tactics has reached that legendary status, thanks in no small part to a rabid fan base that evangelized the game to anyone who would listen long after it had been laid to rest. During its first retail life, it didn't even sell well enough to make it as a 'Greatest Hits' title (though I'm sure no one is really mourning the lack of the infernal green bar marring its lovely facade).

Which makes it all the more odd that it's taken this long for somebody to attempt to claim the thunder that FFT failed to capture in its first run for the gold. After all, if publishers had kept their ears to the ground, there would have, long ago, been a follow-up to this amazing series, if not by Square, by someone that understood that there was something truly magical buried in FFT's husk that sales number did not fully bear out.

Something magical that was just waiting for a second chance…

A Moment of Hesitation…

Now, as thousands of people scramble like mad dogs to snap up the recent re-print of Final Fantasy Tactics (those blank discs were a nice touch, Sony), it's nice to know that gamers are getting two games in the very same vein in the very near future…so near, in fact, that you can go get one of them right now: Saiyuki Journey West by Koei. Nice game, solid strategy elements and first generation PlayStation graphics—hey, it can't all be sunshine and lollipops…or can it?

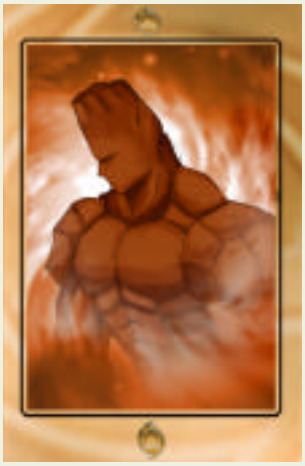
As it turns out, that's merely an appetizer for what another relatively low-key publisher has been tinkering away at for (seemingly) ages. Set for a November release Atlus is nearly ready to bring forth the true heir to Final Fantasy Tactics' strategy RPG throne.

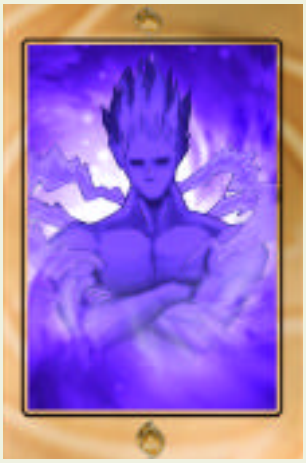
The Story Thus Far…

As was the case with FFT (which was built on ideas pioneered in the Ogre Battle series), Hoshigami's entire story hinges on political



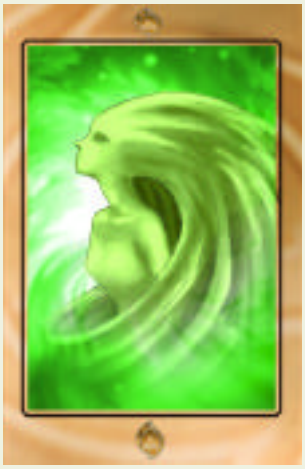


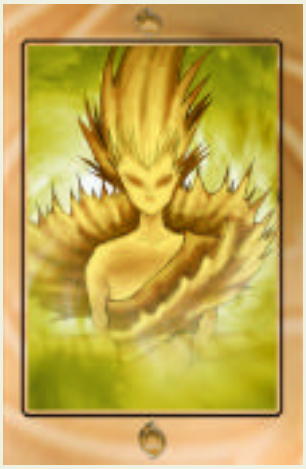












intrigue, sans the usual overtly religious slant that led to a lot of head scratching in Final Fantasy Tactics (if you can explain the entire story of that game to me in less than a thousand words, you're a better man than I).

The story opens with the Valaiman Empire invading the peace-loving people of Nightweld, where our hero's Fazz and Leimrey are well-known mercenaries working for the rather sissified Nightweldian army (a bit too peace-loving for their own good as it turns out). As is the case with any self-respecting mercenary the pair are offered a substantial sum of cash and a fledgling mercenaries to help liberate the ancient Tower of the Wind which is currently besieged by Valaimian forces. Naturally after liberating the tower, you head back home to find the town looted and burned and Fazz' love interest, Tinn nowhere to be found.

As you may have guessed, this leads Fazz, Leimrey and company down a path into the dark and seedy political and militaristic underbelly of the Valaimian Empire and their quest to liberate Nightweld from its iron grasp.

You can probably also figure out precisely where this game is going from start to finish, but what it seems to lack in initial story complexity, things aren't entirely what they seem.

As the plot (quickly) thickens you'll encounter such stoic allies as Alveen, Romleth, and Elena (some of which fit the nice warm and fuzzy clichés that we all know and love) as well as the usual cast of vicious enemies with their own agendas in the form of Blackthorn (the big fellow on the cover dueling with Fazz), and Fernandes, the ambitious power-hungry leader of the Valaimian Empire.

Good Things Come to Those With the Patience of a Saint

Originally, Hoshigami was due out some time ago but it's been delayed a few times…for what will become very obvious (and understandable) reasons. This game is very complex, and its legion of systems (of which we'll barely scratch the surface) make it very clear that this game is more than just a Tactics clone.

Systematic

It seems that every RPG developed these days can't really be considered an RPG without featuring fifteen or sixteen hundred different 'systems.' Hoshigami is no different and features a grip, many inspired by FF Tactics with a clutch of new ones thrown into the mix. These systems are the key to Hoshigami's almost excessive complexity—there is so much you can do in each battle, it's almost unnerving. If you're a control freak, though, you'll bask in some incredibly strategic combat and an unprecedented, almost overwhelming, amount of control:

HOSHIGAMI
沈みゆく蒼き大地

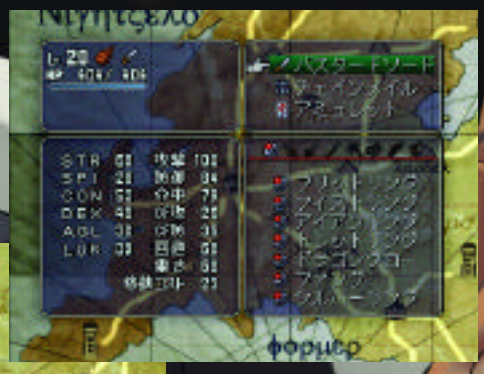


Devotion System

Characters in Hoshigami are aligned with different elemental spirits (gods, if you will) that grant skills as you acquire devotion points during each successful round of combat. Once you 'level up' with enough devotion points, you can select a new skill, with each god granting different skills. As you can switch alignments between sprints, you can acquire a legion of skills across a variety of different elements, and essentially apes the job system of FF Tactics. It's also important to note that the deity you align yourself with will help you in combat against certain opposing deities, so it pays to make sure you're with the right god when you wade into battle—polytheists rejoice.

Attack Session

The Hoshigami web site labels the Attack Session as "the biggest feature of Hoshigami" (silly me, I thought it was the story and overall strategic gameplay). What this allows you to do is "shoot" the enemy into your other characters. By slamming an enemy into another party member who has been placed in "standby" mode, you can essentially bat characters around the screen, delivering blow after armor-shattering blow. For example, Fazz launches an enemy knight into Leimley who delivers a vicious blow which sends that enemy careening into one of your myriad mercenaries also in "standby" mode, who then delivers his own crushing blow—each 'combo' hit causing that much more damage.. According to Atlus, you can keep this going for up to 6 hits, and completely obliterate just about any foe you come across—bet you never thought 10th grade geometry would have any applicability in your day to day life, eh? Sorta makes me wish I hadn't slept through, well, all my classes.







And these four systems are only a few of the elements that make Hoshigami tick—Max Five went ahead and threw in everything, the kitchen sink and your neighbor's kitchen sink. While this may prove initially daunting, the sheer amount of ways you can level the enemy forces will certainly make for some interesting battles and some pretty intense replay value.

Tactics 101

Basic gameplay in Hoshigami is also a bit more then run-of-the-mill. In addition to all the above noted systems, the actual maps aren't set up like they are in most strat RPGs. While most strategy RPGs force you to trek across the map, round after round, before you actually encounter any combat (FFT did this far too often and was probably its biggest flaw), this is definitely not the case in Hoshigami.

Even if the bulk of an enemy contingent is across the screen there are always a few enemies in the immediate vicinity to kick around while the rest of your party works its way into the larger fray. This keeps it from bogging down in turn after turn of complete inaction.



Coinfeigm System

This is the key to Hoshigami's magic system. All spells are cast via coinfeigms (CF) you can buy at the town stores. Each and every character can wield magic to some degree, though certain characters, statistically, are more proficient than others. Each type of coin conveys a certain form of magic based upon the elemental spirit it's aligned with. You can level up coins by engraving seals on them—to dramatic effect. Through careful planning and decoding of the engraving process (looks like 10th grade geometry isn't the only "I'll never use this in real life" math skill you'll kick yourself over sleeping through) you can go from a coin that can barely summon a torch-like fire ball, to a thermonuclear blast that'll incinerate all but the sturdiest enemies and casting a CF that's of the same class as your chosen elemental spirit will cause that much more damage.

R.A.P System

While Atlus seems to think the Attack Session is the most important (and innovative) aspect to Hoshigami, I'm firmly in R.A.P.s camp: Ready-for-Action Point. What this amazing little system allows you to do is draw from a pool of points which can be used towards attacking, healing, movement, spell-casting, etc. Each character has a set number of points to draw from, and once you run out of points, your turn ends. You can use these points in any fashion and in any order, i.e. you can move, attack and then wait and let someone else in your party go, then move and attack some more—all up until your party's turn ends or you run out of R.A.P.s. You can even attack (depending on the amount of R.A.P. your character has) attack up to four times in a row. This takes combat to a whole other level, as not only can you control your party down to the last second, but the enemy also operates with the same behavior. So if you run out of R.A.P.s near an enemy, make sure you use your last bit of juice to "shoot" him away (preferably over a cliff) as when his turn comes up, he'll use all his points to hack you into the Grim Reaper's waiting arms.



This also helps to boost actual strategy considerably: after all, if you decide not to engage the forward (or rear guard), they can prove to be deadly late in a battle, after your troops are depleted and prove to be easy prey for the small gaggle of goons you left to one side at the onset of the conflict. It also doesn't hurt that it's generally a lot more fun cracking skulls than skulking around the map.

HOSHIGAMI
RUINING BLUE EARTH
沈みゆく蒼き大地



Weapon effects are also somewhat different from many RPGs. For instance, you can (and probably will) actually attack your friends. Leimley, for example, wields a very large spear that can hit two squares at once. If one of your allies happens to be between you and an enemy, he's going to catch a swift beating as well. Same goes for archers—if you don't have the right angle to launch an attack, you could just as well catch one of your friends in the eye with an errant bolt. This adds another layer of strategy and was enough to make me utter a string of profanity

Meet Me Halfway

Speaking of the maps, they tend to be quite a bit larger than comparable maps in most other games of this ilk. Not only that, they also tend to be more complex as well, which certainly makes up for Shining Force 3's large but simple maps, and FFT's small but complex maps.

Artwork, in general, is quite good. The actual characters themselves, aesthetically, aren't as well-drawn as those found in its inspiration but the addition of the large character portraits to illustrate key story points makes up for any real shortcoming in the actual style of the characters (they're more cartoony and less 'real' looking than their Tactics counterparts).

Animation is solid across the board, and spell effects are, in parts, awe-inspiring. Naturally, you'll be working for a while before you see gargantuan gouts of flame or Titanic-sinking ice attacks, but when you do it's a nice feast for the ol' ocular nerves. Some of the effects on the Attack Session are very pretty as well, with some nice explosions and solid transparency effects—especially when you pinball an enemy into oblivion.

What's the Score?

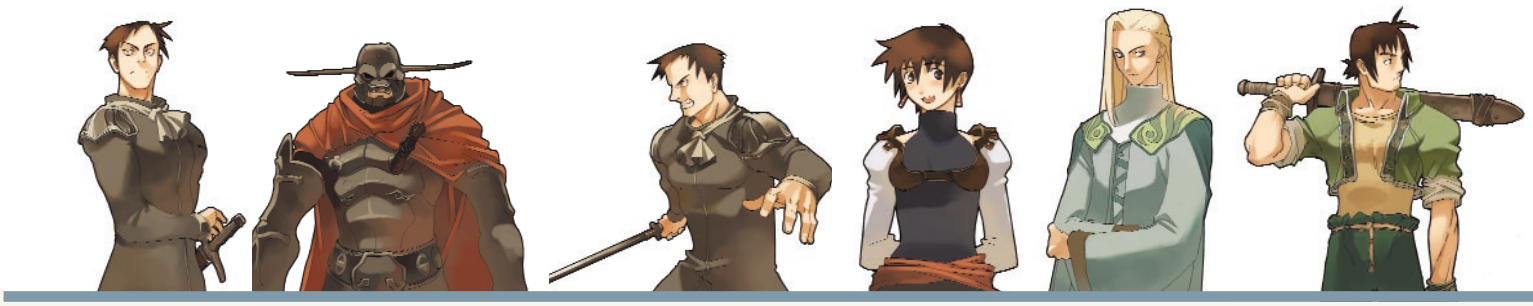
One area where Hoshigami doesn't even come close to matching up to Tactics, however, is the musical score. This isn't terribly surprising as FFT has probably the single best implementation of PCM in the history of











video games, beating out even the mighty Astal on Sega Saturn. The music in Tactics is so well-crafted that it annihilates most redbook audio scores. While the music in Hoshigami is good, it's simply not in the celestial league that Tactics resides in. Which is too bad as the tunes in Tactics enhanced the mood to almost heart-rending levels.

Epilogue

Hoshigami has all the makings of the next coming of Final Fantasy Tactics…and then some. There's a bunch of work yet to be done on the actual translation (these are the guys that did the amazingly well-translated Ogre Battle 64, so no worries there), but all the gameplay seems to be intact in the current build Atlus blessed us with. Hopefully the world realizes this time that they should go out and get this when it's new so we can actually get some more titles in this downtrodden genre (and the best RPG genre by a mile as far as I'm concerned).

Look for the full review in the next issue of GameGO! It's a safe bet that you can expect some nice things to be said—let's hope that foresight is 20/20 for a change, eh?

—ECM



FINAL FANTASY X

ファイナルファンタジーX

.....PLAYSTATION 2

Developer: Square	Publisher: Square



Okay. I'm not a "Square" guy. My video game life doesn't hinge on what their latest release is; how much financing it took to bring their latest products to the shelves; or whether Squall or not Squall is a cry baby. Sure, I liked Tactics. I even liked Vagrant Story, Chrono Cross and Final Fantasy VII and IX…somewhat. Didn't care much for VIII, but that's a big messy gray area that I'm not going to get into right now. Despite all this (especially after viewing the visual masterpiece without a story that was the film), I'm probably not the best guy to review this game, but since ECM wasn't touching it with a ten-foot pole and Kodomo was MIA, the duty fell to me. Now that all the Square fans in the audience are attempting to asphyxiate themselves with their limited edition FFX bandanas, wait just one sec…besides, there'll be plenty of time for that when you wake up from that dream wherein FFVIII is the "best FF."

Final Fantasy X was designed by some of the best artists in the business. As Rick Baker is to apes, Square is to CG – except "X" even outdoes what you've come to expect from Square. Never has a more beautiful game been produced. Never. Final Fantasy X is among the most celebrated and successful series in video game history. Despite some hiccups along the way, it can be argued on many fronts that this series has also been the most carefully cared for over its lifespan and the latest incarnation is no exception. The years that it has spent in development are clearly evident in everything from the eye-shattering visuals to the fact that nearly every important conversation is conveyed via voice--not text. Clearly, a lot of love (and not a little money) went into what could be a PS2 magnum opus.

After the requisite, utterly gorgeous CG and real time intro sequence (that seems to just keep going), you find your character (Tidus) thrown into dreamlike environments only to wake up in a world where you feel as though you are the only decent thing in it. Initially the game play feels linear in most respects and doesn't allow for much exploration. Typically, though, Square masks this with deft precision and one will find that it's fairly easy to ignore the limitations of what you're allowed to do, i.e. you can't stray far from the pre-determined path.

Gone are the maddening random battles every 15 seconds while traipsing across

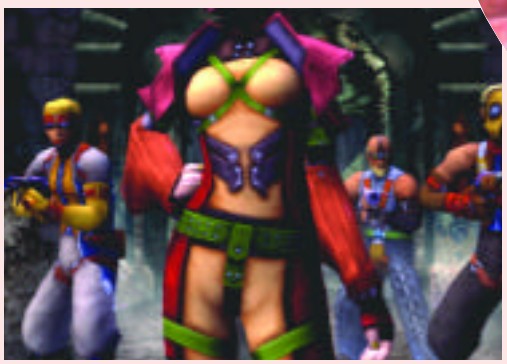




the ‘world’ map with an oversized character traversing a tiny representation of what’s supposed to be a large environment, this being about the only part of most latter day FF games that ECM enjoys. The battles are a mixture between staged events that are triggered by the character or random battles on an environment map (water, desert, etc…). If I had my druthers, random battles would be left in the dustbin of RPG history, and if Final Fantasy X has a weak link, this is it. Randomness just feels lazy, and it’s something that video games should move past—I had high hopes that FFX would finally move beyond this unwieldy throwback, to no avail. That being said, though, somehow FFX doesn’t "feel" all that random, despite being aware of the fact that it is. Doesn’t make much sense? I guess it’s an experience best left to…experience.









Many will herald Square’s latest innovations to their combat system as something truly different. Improved and more interactive would be a better description. Without going into great detail, character abilities can be shared and improved on together. Rather than resorting to the age old experience point/level/hit point/magic point system, this installation requires the use of a Sphere Board where character traits are displayed and linked through the use of points that develop as you get stronger.



Some will complain that the camera can’t be manipulated during game play, all of which is in impressive real time that looks as good as most prerendered stuff, but Square is in control here. You don’t control the viewpoints and for the most part, it isn’t even noticeable and it rarely affects game play. In this light, Square has "cinema sense": it feels as though you are being led down a particular viewpoint with a sense of purpose. Also of note is that the CGI sequences aren’t overbearing in any sense of the word and feel like an integral part of the function of the game, rather than being the most important element (see The Bouncer for the polar opposite).

FINAL FANTASY X

ファイナルファンタジーX



Speaking of flaws that this title doesn't share with other notable Square works (in this case, the film), Final Fantasy X's soundtrack has once again reaffirmed Square's position among the elite in this category. Lush orchestrations dance in the background that always seems appropriate for the situation. One is left, again, feeling satisfied; once again, it matters.



Perhaps the only other nit-pick that I have with the title is the staple Final Fantasy "save point". Here we are again with an age-old RPG standby that is best done away with. There are those that will say that if you can save wherever you want, you'll beat the game too easily. The solution: Ring of Red. You are permitted to save progress between save points as long as you don't die. Once you do, you're back to the initial save point. The idea here is that if you get pulled away from the game, you don't suffer for it.

In any event, the saddest thing about this is that FFX won't be released in the U.S. until early 2002 and despite being very playable in Japanese, the full effect of the story won't be realized until some time next year. Final Fantasy X is the coming out party for RPG's on the Playstation 2, and it's something that no fan of the series, or console, should miss…even ECM.



--Haohmaru







Tidus



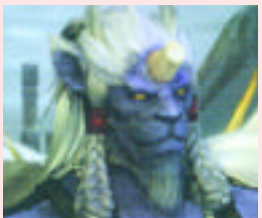
Yuna



Wakka



Lulu



Kimahri Ronso



Auron



Rikku

Harvest Moon 3 .....Playstation

Developer: Marucome	Publisher: Victor



The Playstation 2 is quickly becoming a harbor for sequels to nearly every genre that you can come up with—even super-odd, farm sims that only people like ECM and Shidoshi can love. In any event, enter Harvest Moon 3, a follow up to the GameBoy, Super Nintendo, Playstation, and N64 titles bearing the same name with (some of) the simulation game play that you've come to expect from Victor/Marucome (Natsume in the U.S.).

Harvest Moon has always been a critical success that's been overlooked by the gaming masses for many a year now. To be certain, the farm simulation isn't something that's likely to appeal to everyone, and if you're looking for mind numbing visuals or pulse pounding action you had better look elsewhere. Many gamers will just not 'get it'—that's not a criticism, though, it's the truth. Harvest Moon is a gentle experience that offers one a true sense of accomplishment after spending weeks caring for your land.

Your function in Harvest Moon, in general, is to work the land by clearing it and planting crops that you must carefully nurture to fruition, as they are the means for your livelihood. Ignore that they need water and





disappointed that it's taken a bit of a different direction, though. Gone is the daily ritual of putting your harvested crops in the bin for daily pick up. Gradually upgrading tools the more that you use them also appears to be lost. The workable area of the land is much smaller than you're probably accustomed to. The village is dispersed over a large area that encompasses many different areas – the feeling that it's even a village at all is lost. Sure there are many aspects that will feel familiar—the watering of the crops, the tools used, the television set with various channels (weather included, of course), as well as rustling up grub in the early stages to survive, but the farming aspect (the heart and soul of the previous chapters) has seen a transplant.

This time the focus is squarely on saving the town and is much more like a traditional RPG in tone, if not in practice. No, you won't fight rampaging hoardes of beasts out to slay your livestock or dragons out to burn your crops to the ground, but the story focuses much more on the people you interact with and your 'quest' to save the town from an evil farming conglomerate run by Kim Basinger (let's see how many of you catch that one).

Still, the lengthy trips to the horse farm or the lake just seem more accurate for a farming community. Everyone has their acreage and that certainly feels correct, if different. There seems to be a larger focus on interaction with other people in the community, something which small towns are famous for. Naturally, the evolution of Harvest Moon to a next generation platform begets lush backgrounds and a definite step up on the ladder for each of the characters that are rendered, dog included. Also of note: it's apparent that you must 'pitch' your crops and flowers to various townspeople to get the most value from your hard work, again a facet of this title that echoes reality more closely.



Finally, a U.S. release by Natsume is something I'm certainly looking forward to as a good deal of the story escaped me, but it seems like something that's worth the considerable investment of time that this series has historically required. I'll see you at the crack of dawn.

—Haohmaru

Tales of Destiny 2 .....Playstation

Developer: Namco	Publisher: Namco







An old man stumbles through a forest at night, illuminated solely by the light he carries. He happens across a strange craft of an unknown, but clearly not terrestrial, origin. A young girl appears and they exchange a few, incomprehensible, words uttered in an unknown language. Shortly thereafter, she gets into the craft (pet cat-beast in tow) and he utters a few, ominous words: "We're in serious trouble..."

When an alien craft crashes into your quiet, nondescript world and it's not from Krypton, it's never a good sign. You can bet your jaded, clichéd hide that it will contain a virus that will wipe out the planet, a weapon of mass destruction or a harbinger of doom—and in rare cases, all of the above.

The world of Eternia has one major item hanging over its collective head compared to most worlds…literally. Celestia, world of mages and shrouded in mystery hangs directly above Eternia. North runs North and South runs South and never the twain shall meet...that is, until Meredy crashes her escape pod into Eternia and is found by Reed and Farah.

The task, initially, is to search for someone who can actually understand this strange woman, and when they do find that person, the fate of Eternia seems as good as sealed. A rift has been developing between the two worlds and is now eroding the force that holds them together, in a short amount of time, the worlds will collide and that's all she wrote—two out of three clichés present and accounted for, sir.

With that hanging over your head, it's not going to be a simple path for your average adventurer. Reed who, pre-crash, likes to spend his days looking cool and hardcore in his red sports-bra (Blue Mary...ruined forever...my


Reed Hershel


Farah Oersted


Keel Zeibel


Meredy









eyes...blind) is your standard hack and slash guy with zero magic skills. He's the one that you'll control directly, and will be knee-deep in battle while the other party members run to and fro—mostly fro, though.

This leads into the coolest feature in Tales of Destiny 2—the real time combat system. Think a cross between a very simplified Vagrant Story and the constant mayhem of a Marvel Vs. Capcom 2, and that's just the beginning. Each of your characters has their own skills (such as light fighter/few spells, no fighter/heavy spells or Craymel mage), which you can indirectly control by virtue of customization of 3 specific areas. Want Farah to get in the thick of things? Boost her offense and kicks to '5'. Need her to hang back and heal as you get your head beaten to a bloody pulp (as often happens on the mind-numbingly challenging 'hard' setting), drop the offense to '1' and she'll be your wet nurse—if only I had it so good. The supporting cast can also execute a few specified attacks via the shoulder buttons, allowing you to expertly time an attack and get a combo well above 20 hits.

Still, there are quite a few things that even out that mild excursion into fun and limit TOD2 from breaking out of average range. TP, the points that allow characters to accomplish special attacks is gravely under abundant—didn't like Rez Evil and it's lack of ammo? Welcome to the same school of design. Eventually you'll be able to cook food that will allow you to increase your supply of TP (supplementing the gels you can buy for the same effect), but it never seems to be enough. When you're deep in a dungeon and run out of TP and anything that replenishes it, you're boned. Even camping, which you can do at specific points (usually before a dungeon boss), won't bring it back up. Run out and you can only do physical attacks, dooming your party to an early grave.

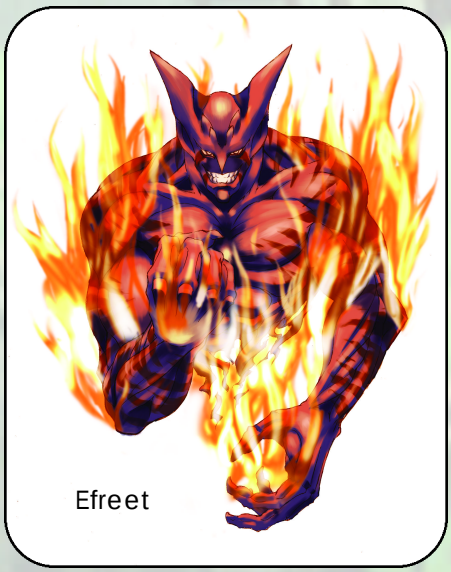
Graphically, there's very little beyond the excellent opening anime to raise a jaded eyebrow. The world map is dated and foggy, evoking generation one PlayStation comparisons. The characters have minimal animations and pale next to Breath of Fire IV. The voice acting is sub-par and does little to endear the characters in any effective way. A few great looking towns populate the landscape, but even with that fact, it's a lot like saying "Kodomo's a nice guy, except for A, B, C, D, etc…" You can only take so much mediocrity before you forget the good and just move on.

What you're left with is an average RPG with a good story, great battle system and a host of other qualities that keep the overall package under the all-important 'must buy' level. If you've played the first Tales of Destiny and enjoyed that, there's a slim chance that this might be right up your alley. For everybody else, though, pursue your destiny elsewhere.

—Kodomo


Undine


Sylph


Efreet

Growlanser 2 .....Playstation 2

Developer: Career Soft	Publisher: Atlus









In the early stages, you're introduced to Wein, the lead character in what amounts to a very effeminately detailed group of male characters. While not overbearing in design, it is a curious distinction for a strategy RPG to feature such oddly chick-like character designs. However, there seems to be a trend towards this type of character style coming from overseas (see: Tidus in Final Fantasy X and Reed in Tales of Destiny 2). In any event, while the character art in Growlanser 2 isn't going to suit everyone's tastes, there is no denying its quality or the strength of the roots from which it was bred.



Think of Darla of the Little Rascals (thanks for bringing 'em back, Bill) standing outside the "He Man Woman Haters Club" getting taunted by Alfalfa, Spanky and Buckwheat. There's nothing quite like the feeling of getting shut out of something to make your desire for it multiply tenfold. Wanting spawns the fire of ambition and Atlus' Growlanser II fits the bill since there are no plans to bring it over here nor is it likely to ever grace the presence of any U.S. PS2 owner. Finding the problem is half the solution and the rest of the solution is coming up with the strength of mind to become comfortable with this despite rudimentary or non-existent Japanese language skills. Get the import and a teaspoon of patience and you're good to go.

Growlanser 2 consists of elements of Masaya's former Langrisser team (you know—the epic saga that spread itself over a multitude of platforms including PC Engine, PC FX, Saturn, Playstation, and the bastard child on the Dreamcast that had nothing to do with the previous installments) that garnered lavish praise by both the gaming masses and critics alike. After the first installment (Growlanser—duh) which didn't do all that well commercially, the sequel is a sight for sore (and surprised) eyes.



However odd it may seem, the environments are rendered in such a way that they look stunning in all their hi-res glory, but you can't quite put your finger on what's wrong. The backgrounds are a curiosity in that they are picturesque, yet oddly stagnant. Torches don't flicker. Shadows are stale and unmoving. The grass and trees don't sway with the breeze (even in a torrential downpour). Despite the weakness (I'm hesitant to admit how long it actually took ECM and I to pick it up, that's how good the backgrounds are. Further proof that a trip to the optometrist might not be a bad idea) Growlanser 2 doesn't seem to suffer much in the presentation department.



A 2D map serves as the world by which you can choose your path to glory and the characters are rendered as traditional 2D sprites. When mission details or the interaction of the story unfolds, you're greeted with anime-ish larger than life representations of your smaller sprite characters. Growlanser 2 attempts to bridge the gap between "old school" RPG's by mixing various elements of games over the past five or six years together. Not surprisingly (for a team such as Career Soft), it succeeds.

The real meat and potatoes, however, lay in the excellent interface for combat across various environments. Obviously, your party grows larger and more diverse as time passes – along with your enemies and "field" environments. Be warned, however, to save at every opportunity, as you're likely to lose battles along the way. The best way to describe the battle system is 'real-time, turn-based' that doesn't feel as though it exists on turns but succeeds in cleverly masking it. It's quite intuitive and among the better and more user friendly systems that I've come across. It feels as though Final Fantasy Tactics is an ancestor from which this evolved. There are random battles, but these aren't of the annoying 'every 15 second' variety. Rather they exist in points along the route(s) that you choose to travel and can serve as a convenient means to level up, rather than something that would sooner push you to suicide than to play lest you face another battle (I'm still recovering from Skies of Arcadia).





Magic points, spells, and weaponry are fairly standard fare. The options available to the main character at the start of the campaign are fully customizable and configurable—you answer a series of queries to determine how your character will begin, stat-wise. As your characters evolve and improve you get certain points that you can assign to certain elements of your character so you can improve aspects that are important to you. Allowing the player to control aspects of character development has always been crucial in my book of good RPG's, and this one is no exception.

One can only hope that Atlus Japan turns around from their recent struggles (unforgivable that titles like Maken Shao go unnoticed) on the PS2 which seems more a result of an apathetic user base than a lack of good software. Growlanser 2 is worth picking up and worth the time investment that you'll need to make to get used to it. Despite indications to the contrary, we sincerely hope a U.S. developer will take the plunge and bring this over here (Working Designs, Atlus…Tecmo?!). Playstation 2 needs more titles like this—one where it's obvious that the heart and soul of the programming team is spread throughout the game. Hell, any platform can use that.

—Haohmaru



Tiny Toons .....Game Boy Advance

Developer: Treasure	Publisher: Conspiracy











An Insider's Look at GBA Development

Publisher: All right. GBA is a raging success—what have you got for me?
Developer: Give us 12-14 months…
Publisher: 12-14 months…
Developer: Yes! Just a year and change and we can have a game that will bring tears to your eyes and riches to your vaults—games that will make the best that 16-bit had to offer pale in comparison!
Publisher: I see…and how much will this run me?
Developer: That's the best part! Unlike the typical seven figure console game price tag and the complete lack of quality that typically creates, we can get this puppy to you for a cool half million dollars! Can you believe it! Just $500,000!
Publisher: I see…well, what else do you got?
Developer: Um, what are you looking to spend?
Publisher: Lessee <fishes around in pocket>: I've got a $1.35, a screw and half a roll of Life Savers…oh, and a year doesn't work for me—I need it in 6 months, tops.
Developer: <crestfallen>, well, I do have this <points to moldering copy of The Ooze 2>—you can have this in six months…even though the graphics are terrible and the gameplay is non-existent.
Publisher: Great! I'll have the contract over to you first thing.

This, in a nutshell, is what occurs between developers and publishers everyday in the cutthroat world of GBA development. Painfully constricted dev times and budgets from 20-40% of a similar console-developed title—it makes 3DO's puppy mill seem like a big-budget, spare no expense, hit factory in comparison.

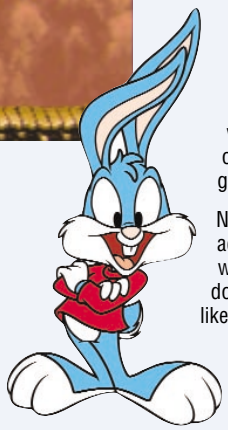






Sludgewerks

In any event, most GBA games will be 6-month affairs ("As it was on GameBoy Color, So it Shall be On GameBoy Advance"), with lots of 16-bit shovelware. However, buried amidst these harried, 'get 'em to the market now' slapdash efforts, there will be developers that can take a lump of coal (their dev contracts) and make them into shiny, perfectly faceted diamonds. Castlevania was the shining star of the initial GBA class, but Tiny Toons Busters Bad Dream might just be valedictorian of the class of late '01.



First off, forget the fact that the license is (at best) questionable and (at worst) utterly inane: we don't play games for their license value or their perceived theme, right? While Buster and company (what? No Go-Go?!) may not seem like the most likely stars of a game released in 2001, who really cares? After all, their 16-bit outings were fantastic on both Genesis and Super Nintendo… which, incidentally, this game's developers had a hand in.

Now I'll spare you the usual hyperbole-stuffed rant that accompanies any new Treasure release (breathe a sigh of relief with me…<sigh>), but let's just say that this game isn't going to do anything for my rep as an unapologetic Treasure whore (hey, like the man says, it's better than being a Square whore, right?).

Danger: Hyperbole Ahead

Now if there was a list of developers you wanted to take the helm of a project that was going to be measured in the single digits in production time, it's probably a safe bet that Treasure would be near the top. My guess is they have an army of designers just sitting in a closet writing design docs for use somewhere down the line, not to mention a whole truckload of great ideas that they didn't get to use before 16-bit fell like Rome on speed (ECM's note: OK, so I ranted about Treasure—sue me!).

Anyway, how does a 2D, side-scrolling, Capcom-esque fighting game with blazing animation and wicked color sound? Pretty good, no? Well, that's exactly what we're getting later this year.

Buster Busts Em' Up

You take the role of Buster Bunny as he beats his way through a legion of bats, snakes, panthers, Elmira (if you remember who she is, you get bonus points—for extra points name the actress that voiced her) and a legion of Tiny Toons enemies spanning the amazing (for its first two seasons) animated series.



Buster's basic attack is simply a punch, punch, punch combo that can be chained into super moves and combo attacks with other Toons characters a la King of Fighters' strikers or Marvel vs. Capcom's helper characters.

So say Buster is lining up to beat the stuffing outta of a rampaging panther: he could use Babbs to fire a tennis ball, thereby stunning the panther, then launch into a flurry of punches to subdue the ornery feline. Naturally, every hit is tallied up via a combo meter, and the better combos you do, the more often you can use super moves.

The super moves are activated via various SF-style motions from the every popular quarter circle (in which Buster pushes a shopping cart into his foes scoring 10 or so hits), to a down-down motion to activate his pile driver move (which will hit all ground-based enemies) among others.



Treasure Bass Fishing







As is usually the case with Treasure titles, about fifteen minutes after you put it down, you're gonna want to run back and play it some more—the play mechanic just feels perfect. You'll be executing double-digit combos in no time, and there's always plenty of action to be had with little to no downtime. If there's one team that knows how to hook ya, it's these boys.

And that's one thing that should be very keenly noted: this is not a platform game in any way, shape or form. The gameplay is straightforward, bare-knuckle action, and if you're looking for something along the lines of the SNES or Genesis game, you'll be sorely disappointed. However, those of you looking for anything in the bleak, empty void that is the beat 'em up genre will eat this up and never look back.

Holding Back…A Little

Graphically, everything is as sharp as you'd expect for a GBA game. The sprites are all very well animated and everything moves FAST. Sometimes there are so many sprites on screen, it's hard to tell exactly what's going on—the relatively simplistic backgrounds help make it a lot easier to sort things out, though.

One thing I would like to see more of in the final is parallax: right now there's a sole layer whizzing by in the background (anyone that has seen Klonoa on GBA knows this machine can do some pretty intense parallax effects). It's pretty apparent that the dev cycle isn't giving Treasure a lot of time to really push the hardware—they apparently have some other stuff in the works, however, that is…

Sounds are clean and crisp, though the music is kinda blah, featuring pretty much what you'd figure would populate a bright and colorful game based on a cartoon. This isn't likely to change before it goes final, as I'm sure this is due to memory constraints (I'd imagine this is a 4 meg cart).

For a freshman GBA development, Treasure has this dialed. Perhaps if more publishers sought out the truly skilled teams to do their projects for them, we'd have less of the dreck that currently consumes GBC development, and which will rear its ugly head on GBA.







—ECM

Ooga Booga



.....DREAMCAST

Developer: Visual Concepts	Publisher: Sega



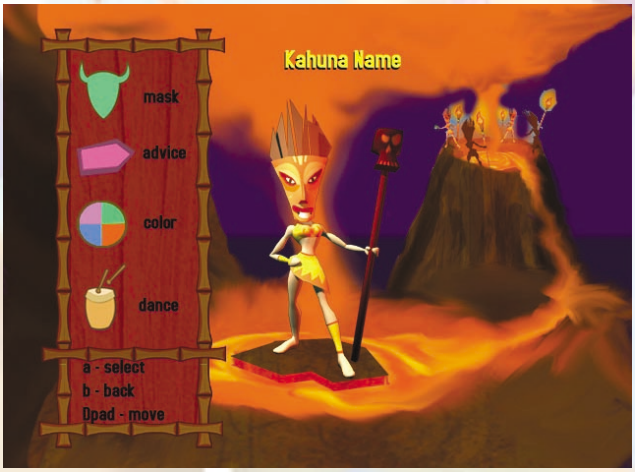
"Wow, it sure is refreshing to see a game like Ooga Booga lavished with praise and affection from all corners of the game magazine biz. I mean everyone could have just as easily covered Gran Turismo 3 again (so what if it's been out for months—what's one more preview: "it's like GT2, but shinier!") or done another Metal Gear Solid 2 watch—"this month Snake's mullet seems a hair shorter—marvel at Hideo Kojima, the great and all-powerful Oz!" These brave souls took out valuable pages and donated them to a game that would have languished in obscurity had it not been for their valiant efforts to get the word out. And to think, I was so blind to ever think that anybody but GameGO! would spend more than a lingering second on a title that would have gotten no help from anyone. I, for one, commend you all."

—ECM, a few hours before the painkillers wore off after a trip to the dentist for a double root canal, just after undergoing a massive (some would say second or third) lobotomy

All joking aside, does it confuse anyone else as to why most magazines focus with laser-guided precision on 6-12 games a year and pretty much push everything else to the side? Maybe the "fringe" wouldn't be so fringe if the powers-that-be actually showed them that there's more to the world than the next hype-driven mega hit-in-waiting. Am I irrational? Well, maybe a little—but I know it's not all just me…right?

Anti-Psychotic

Anyway, all delusions aside, what you're looking at is the latest game from Visual Concepts: a company that's seen it's fair share of hype (and then some) since the introduction of games like the NFL and NBA2K series on Dreamcast almost 2 years ago. Which makes the omission of Ooga Booga a bit harder to fathom…guess with the near-complete implosion of all things DC in the past 3 months (not like I wanted to play Half Life anyway) I shouldn't be terribly surprised after all.



And since no one has actually been attempting to garner any publicity for this title, there's an excellent chance you have no idea what this game is. Which is OK. After all, that's what we're here for—if the other guys actually bothered to dig and badger people for this stuff, we'd have nothing to make fun of, and we can't have that, can we?

In any event, Ooga Booga is a 4-player on or offline battle royale with a cast of characters straight out of a classic Warner Bros. Cartoon, albeit with a tropical spin. The boys at VC tell us that they're inspiration was the mighty Smash Bros., and that's certainly something to respect straight out of the gate: the key here being 'inspiration' not 'shameless carbon copy.'



Island Hopping 101

The easiest way to describe Ooga Booga is part Smash Bros. and part Food Fight, the classic Atari coin-op— Smash Bros. because if features wacky, over-the-top 4-player fighting action and food fight because you must harvest shrunken heads as your basic ammo a la the piles of chow in Food Fight.

The parallels between Smash Bros. Don't stop at the 4-player mode, however. You'll also be launched skyward with alarming frequency, as foes shell you with shrunken heads, rampaging boars and homing heads—many of which generate so much hang-time, you can hi-five the almighty.

Everything in OB is very elastic and kinetic. You're always moving and the concept of camping (from the FPS world) is a death sentence. In Ooga Booga, if you don't move, you're dead…or at least a cartoony facsimile thereof.







Gameplay is simple: first player to a pre-determined number of points within a set time limit wins. Each type of attack, from a simple blow via a shrunken head to the wrath of an angry thundercloud conveys a set number of points. At the end of a round, points are tallied and a new round starts till a victor emerges.

Gameplay feels very basic, initially. You have access to a simple 'punch' attack (the stick); you can harvest shrunken heads from the ground around, err, shrunken head trees; you can pick up various and sundry spell tokens littered throughout the landscape (everything from lightning to land mines); and you can even hitch a ride on a variety of critters which will each deliver their own unpleasant assault.

Combine all of this, though, and gameplay is anything but simple and basic, and take on a fast, way over-the-top battle royale that would make the Rock giddy with glee.

Am I Boaring You?

The range of weapons, 'vehicles,' and implements of divine wrath in Ooga Booga are most impressive. Everything from the ubiquitous shrunken heads to a meteor strike which makes life less than ideal for everybody but you.

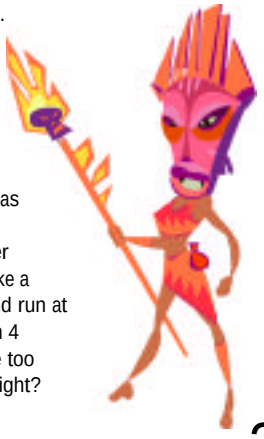
You can ride wild boards and birds (after subduing them with a whack—quick, somebody call PETA, <grin>) but don't get too close to the boars if they're already agitated or they may just turn on you.

There's a bevy of spell tokens scattered randomly about the island and range from the ultra-useful lightning attack to the more patience-oriented land mine. Other spells include the mighty tornado (which is very sharp-looking, graphically) to a personal thundercloud that rains down lightning bolts on everything—including you.





Everything feels so wacky and out-of-control initially, that it's hard to take it all in. But like all great games, once you spend a little time with it, you'll be in fighting shape in no time.



Sites and Sounds of a Tropical Isle

OB is completely 3D, and takes place over several tropical islands that serve as levels. Everything from a tiny "broom closet" isle to the rather spacious Spider Island (which, not surprisingly, looks like a big spider) are all beautifully shaded and run at a blistering 60 fps all the time—even in 4 player split screen mode…but you'll be too busy playing online to check that out, right?

Ooga Booga





That's right, OB is a full-blown Net-oriented affair, replete with a legion of adversaries for you to reach out and smack. The latency is nearly nil and the entire game is screamingly fast even with 4 players running around hocking all sorts of spells and wild, angry critters at you.

The only downside perceptible is that OB might level off a bit too soon in the skill department—there simply doesn't seem to be the depth that you might want from a game you'd want to last for a good couple of months. Sure, you'll have a blast for the first few weeks, but it'll be interesting to see if OB has legs beyond that.



Holiday's Over

Needless to say this is another solid DC game right at the bitter end of its tragic life, and one you should, at the very least, check out before it becomes about as easy to find as willing ladies at E3. I'm pretty happy to see, though, that VC still knows how to make video games…now about that update to One.

—ECM







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REVIEWED BY:



ALIEN FRONT ONLINE

Developer: Wow Entertainment	# of Players: 1-8
Publisher: Sega	Available: Now



M.S.F.C.

There was a time when Sega fanboys would go on and on about how Namco only existed because they ripped-off Sega's fabulous game ideas (I should know—I was a charter member of the M.S.F.C.: Myopic Sega Fanboy Club). It's been a long time since those heady days, back when we'd get all jacked up on Jolt cola and cruise the local arcades, looking to protect our turf and singing all through, the…wait…no…that's West Side Story…hmmm. Anyway, the moral of this (increasingly pointless) story is that Sega's now exacting some subtle payback in the form of Alien Front Online, Wow Entertainment's newest title and a bona fide Tokyo Wars clone (of course NeoGman keeps ranting in the background that they're both clones of 2600 Combat but I can't hear him, can you?).

For those that haven't played Tokyo Wars, it's a 3D multi-player, arcade-based Combat clo-, err, tank battle game. You cruised around (presumably) Tokyo and blasted the snot out of each other as you would in any self-respecting game involving tanks and wars. It supported up to 8 players linked and ran on (at the time) high-end System 22 arcade hardware.

Running for Office

Like Tokyo Wars, AFO is all about its network play—only this time it isn't via linked arcade cabs, it's via SegaNet. There's also a handy campaign mode (one scenario a piece for humans and mutants), but it's so controller-chucking difficult you'll probably destroy your DC an hour or so after you embark upon it. Seriously, this is excruciatingly difficult stuff, especially for those of us weaned on run and gun affairs—something the campaign mode most certainly is not.

Graphically, AFO is a looker. While it's not living in the high-end 60 fps neighborhood, it's a mostly solid 30 both online and off with nary a shred of slowdown. The alien designs are especially beautiful and some of the backdrops are simply gorgeous—Washington DC, for example, is stunning. Everything in the backgrounds animates brilliantly, and just about everything features destroyable terrain, though I kept wishing I could topple the Washington monument (hey, it's a video game, lighten up patriots) a la Twisted Metal 2's Eiffel Tower.

Latently Obvious

Netplay is all but seamless…at least from what I could see. The caveat is that this could change when thousands of players log on to test their mettle. Good news is that this isn't Quake, speed-wise, so latency should be a nearly non-existent issue. Needless to say, it's probably safe to say that they're won't be too many instances of "where'd that mech go?" like you might find in, say, Daytona USA.

One thing to note: as I mentioned this game is not Quake, so don't expect searing speed and super-fast action. It's a much more deliberately paced affair, and the tanks, for the most part, move like tanks and the mechs move like you might expect a large 50+-ton mech to move, i.e. a lot like your Uncle Ralph after a Thanksgiving dinner in which he consumed most of the turkey and 8-10 gallons of beer. It's a little sluggish, but it gets the job done.









Lock and Load

All in all, this ain't too shabby for those of you that either never got (but really wanted) a console rev of Tokyo Wars or for those of you not quite fast enough to cope with the agility requirements of Quake III and Unreal Tournament. While I can't say it's better than Ooga Booga (it's just not fast and frenetic enough), it's certainly fun in its own right. And for you Namco freaks, it finally gives you a chance to start your own club:

—ECM

ROGER WILCO

AFO is the first game on DC to take advantage of the Seaman microphone to allow players to communicate via voice commands (the game is set to ship with it, so don't go running out to find a copy of Seaman…even if it is really cheap). It's a killer idea, but it's not entirely perfect: the actual voice transmission isn't real-time (which isn't too much of a hassle in a game as slow-paced as AFO) and it is heavily compressed—though it's certainly far from unintelligible. This gimmick alone is sure to guarantee a decent audience for the game, though I'm sure it's going to get very interesting what gets said via this thing (Sega has a handy disclaimer that says they're not responsible for what you hear—smart move).



REVIEWED BY:



HEAVY METAL GEOMATRIX

Developer: Capcom	**# of Players: 1-2**
Publisher: Capcom	**Available: Now**

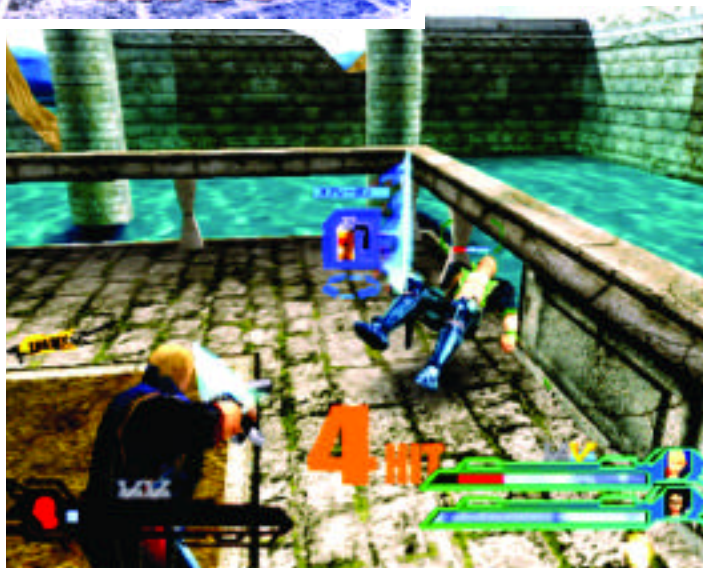


Some people have been describing this as a pseudo—sequel to the Dreamcast's rather poorly received Spawn. "The same but fixed!" they cried. I confess I've never played Spawn so I can't really compare the two. I'm quite sure that if Spawn were nearly as good as this I would have played it, though. This game is really ringing my bell.





I had planned to give it a miss, but when I saw WASP was on the soundtrack, I had to pick it up. I wasn't even sure what kind of game it was — only that it was gonna have a rocking soundtrack: Megadeth, Halford, Corrosion of Conformity and Entombed are all given top billing. It's strange, then, that two unknowns—Dust to Dust and Cyber-T—are given three and eight tracks respectively, and the headliners are given one each. Considering Sega's financial situation perhaps this is easily explained. The tunes suit the game perfectly, though, so who am I to complain?



The game itself might be best described as a third person over—the—shoulder Quake, in small arenas with gobs of weapons. The camera always faces your opponent, but with you in the foreground. It's because of this that it's not often facing the direction you're going. At first I found it frustrating and I was yelling at the game to "Look this way, dammit!" After a few rounds, however, you learn the maps so well that you can tell where you're going with ease. Pressing Y instantly switches the targeting onto the next opponent, a function you learn to appreciate fast when you take on two CPU bosses for the first time as they try to sweep you into a pincer.

Combat has two styles: up—close and long-ranged. Capcom saw fit to lavish the weapons upon us, with some surprising variation. Each weapon has a fierce secondary attack too, usually with poorer aim and consuming more ammunition, but effectively doubling the number of weapons. The weapons cover the entire gamut from swords to traps and mines and rail guns and rocket launchers and laser—guided satellite—dropped bombs o' doom. You can only carry one close combat and one ranged weapon at a time and the ammo is limited so rapid discharge and frequent re—arming is the name of the game. You can let loose a stream of anime—styled six—rocket bursts, pick up and plant some traps or explosive mines, then nail your opponent with a flame—thrower when he falls prey to your dastardly tricks.

The graphics are, as can be expected from a late—released game, stunning. Simon Bisley, who you might remember from such games as Loaded, designed the characters. Every weapon is large and well rendered, the characters even more so, showing a surprising variety for Bisley—perhaps to appeal to Japanese sensibilities. The backgrounds are well presented, looking almost as good (and a lot like) Soul Calibur, but with wildly varying terrain and destructible environment.

It's not a game for everyone: it's a visceral blaster which proudly shows Capcom's arcade roots. The game makes no apologies for what it is. My criteria for games are quite simple: I likes 'em fast and I likes 'em competent, and Geomatrix delivers. Twelve fighters, fourteen arenas, a rocking soundtrack, perfect control and a camera that rarely misses—definitely the best game I've played in a while.

—NeoGman



PREVIEWED BY:



BOMBERMAN

Developer: Hudson	**# of Players: 1-4**
Publisher: Sega	**Available: September**

Which One of These Things is Not Like the Other?

When can a game look like Bomberman, smell like Bomberman and actually not be Bomberman? Well, if you're one of the myriad Bomberman games released after Saturn Bomberman, you're not a Bomberman game. Now I'm sure that the actual games aren't terribly upset (after all, they are inanimate objects), but I sure as hell am! This franchise used to be one of the best in all of gaming. Chapter after chapter on the PC Engine (funny how those titles were left out in a recent online Bomberman history 'feature'…yeah, that's pretty intelligent) and Super Nintendo helped define Hudson as one of the world's best game producers. Perhaps the downward spiral began when the decision was made to make an anime system as the follow-up to the PC Engine: "let's see, we made our rep on fast-paced arcade-style titles and epic RPG's but I want to try something different—how about a system that's only good for playing lots of anime?" This exec is now working on Square's Final Fantasy games.

So what's the early word on Bomberman Online? Worthy successor to the Bomberman legacy, or yet another 're-interpretation' of what some bonehead thinks a 'nextgen' B-Man should be? After all, the recently released Bomberman on GBA wasn't half-bad (if you can make it out without 1.21 gigawatts of sunlight). The early prognosis? Oh boy…

When 2D Just Isn't Good Enough

First off, you've got all the standard fare, 3D chicanery: fully polygonal characters, arenas, etc. all (surprise!) cel-shaded; plenty of rendered cinemas in between each sequence in the story mode; a nice musical score, etc. The actual characters themselves seem a bit blocky, but that's just nit picking—if there's one game that (used to) epitomize the old saw about gameplay over graphics, it was Bomberman. But how does that saying go? If it ain't broke, don't fix it? Yeah, that sounds about right…

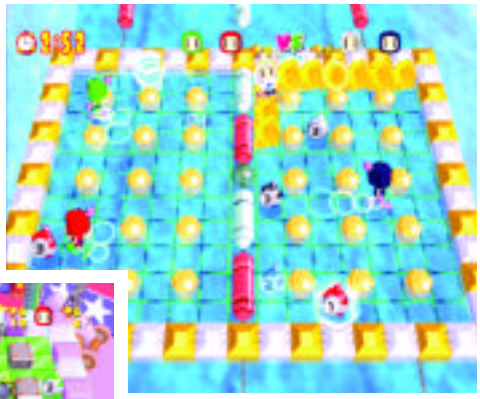


It's NOT Broken DON'T Fix It!

Take a look at the screens scattered around the page. Note how it's in a ¾ perspective. Now, why in the name of all that is holy would you set the perspective like that in a game where knowing precisely where you are from second to second is the difference between life and death?! If you can't tell exactly where you're standing, you can't tell if you're going to be dead the next instant. And in a game that is pure adrenaline, anytime you add in unnecessary distractions you slow down the experience and take out one of the key elements—Bomberman is a game for people with reflexes of lightning, it is not a game that has more than the most rudimentary strategy that can be executed in a split second—not with 3 other players running around all intent on your demise. It's not like there are many places to hide on a single screen game (there's no such thing as 'camping' in a game of Bomberman).



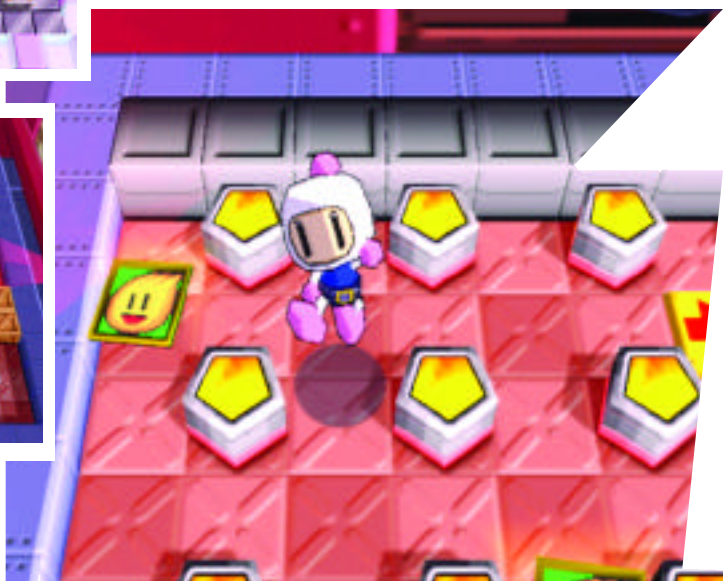
One last nitpick: while I'll catch hell for it, the use of polygonal characters and their annoying habit of cycling through all their frames of animation before moving slows the actual gameplay speed down dramatically from what many of us are accustomed to. No longer will you careen around the screen after picking up three skates at midnight border crossing velocities. Now everything feels a bit too sedate, and a bit too lethargic…please fix this, we beg of thee! Bomberman is supposed to be 'set your adrenaline on fire' stuff. Right now it's more like wrapping it in a wet blanket.



Bombs Away

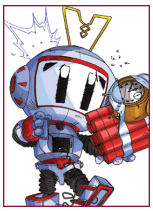
If they don't fix the perspective (which is a lot like hoping that the FF series will rely less on movies as time goes on) this game is a lost cause for anyone that considers themselves a fan. Maybe someday Hudson, the sleeping giant, will awaken and give us what we really want, but as it is, I'm not holding my breath.

—ECM





REVIEWED BY:



SUPER PUZZLE FIGHTER IIX

Developer: Capcom	**# of Players: 1-2**
Publisher: Capcom	**Available: Japan Now**



There are basically 3 camps when it comes to Puzzle Fighter: fanatical 'enthusiasts' who will hear nary a harsh word spoken of their precious puzzler; those who would rather drive a corkscrew thru their temple than even look in its general direction; and the mess of us who really don't care either way—myself included.

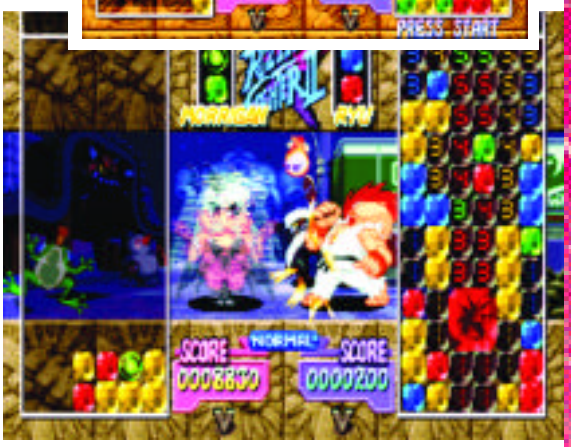
Essentially, Capcom took Street Fighter & Darkstalkers/Vampire characters, made them all super deformed ("midgety"), and stuck them in a battle against each other to see who is the best at manipulating little blocks of primary colors.

Unlike most puzzle games, the object isn't "3 in a row to clear." 2 mini-gems, joined together, fall at a time. Stack like colors in rows of at least 2x2 and they transform into a large gem. Here's where it gets messy—you 'crack' the gems by waiting for flashing 'orbs' of the corresponding color to descend and connect with your stack and BLAMMO—the gems explode, sending an attack of 'timer blocks' to your enemy, of varying colors and intensity. (ie. the bigger the gem you built up the more trouble you make for the other guy). Timer blocks are strange devices—a mini-gem in hibernation. Technically you must wait the same amount of rounds as the number plastered on the block for it to emerge from the cocoon and become a beautiful gem, but there are ways around it. There are also diamonds, which remove all gems and timer blocks of whatever color you choose to drop it on.



Each of the 8 basic and 4 (?) hidden characters have predetermined patterns for their timer assaults, which you can view before selecting at the, uh, select screen. Some may argue otherwise, but no one charactaer really has an advantage over the others (if you feel masochistic, hold start when selecting a character and all the blocks you drop on the opponent will be the same color. How's that for a challenge?).

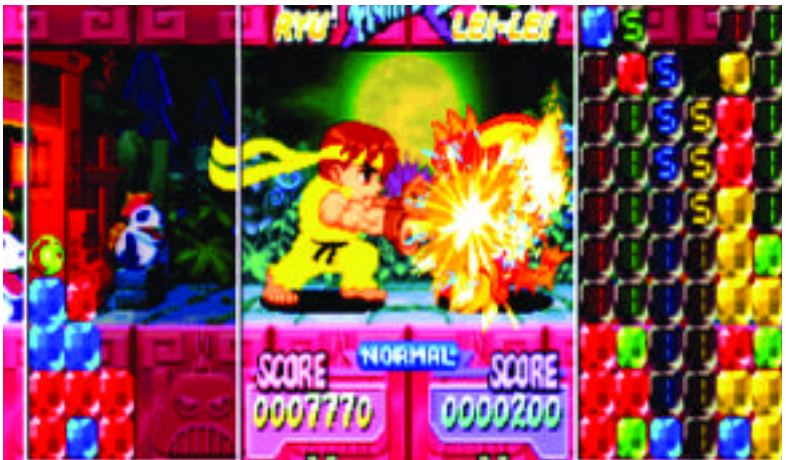
And now, after all that explanation of methodology for standard gameplay, I thought I would mention that the DC rev. includes 2 extra play modes: "Y" and "Z" (and here I thought the 'Super' & 'X' were to poke fun at SSF2X). Y puts a Columns-style spin on gameplay, and Z drops you into Tetris Attack mode. This spin on gameplay is more confusing than entertaining.



And for both of you out there who did not know already, the 'for Matching Service' surname attached to many Capcom releases as of late refers to their online play service. Now, before you get excited, it's proprietary, sort of like X-Band and Dwango on the PC from the days of yore—direct dial into Japanese servers, which is impossible from the States. Curses, foiled again!

I've neer been much of a fan of the series, despite it incorporating a few of my favorite things (SF characters, puzzles, SD goodness and puppy dog, err…never mind)—I used to play it in the arcade to stave off boredom while waiting for my little brother to grow weary of 'taking all comers' at [insert latest Capcom fighter] so we could leave. The DC version sports ZERO load times, so it's already conquered the scarcely played Saturn version on my shelf. Puzzle die hards will eat it up (probably) but for me it's just a pretty (and rare) addition to my pit of clutter.

—Pokey





REVIEWED BY:



CULDCEPT II

Developer: Omiya Soft	**# of Players: 1-4**
Publisher: Media Factory	**Available: Japan Now**





ECM: The Art of Fiscal Destruction

Back when I was a pre-teen (still about the same height, <sob>), I used to vent my frustrations by routinely obliterating the weak; the infirm; my friends in Monopoly, board game of kings. Through a deft combination of iron-fisted asset management and chance dice rolls I was able, time and time again, to put down any low rent comer in no-holds-barred financial combat. It's been a long time since I've felt such unadulterated joy at reducing someone to utter insolvency and, in at least one instance, tears (sorry Dad, but a capitalist has but one ally—the almighty dollar), which is why I'm currently in lust with Omiya Soft's Culdcept II—a Monopoly meets Magic the Gathering game for the ages.

Foolishly, I skipped playing the Saturn edition of Culdcept. Why? Got me. Even after witnessing a chap on IRC go on and on about the game for ages, I still didn't bother freeing it from its shrink-wrapped tomb. Shortsighted? I've been called worse…

Each player (up to four) constructs a deck of cards from a total amount of about 450. These range from monsters and weapons to status effect modifiers (i.e. allowing you to get a roll of '6' without actually rolling the dice; destroying one of a foes valuable cards, etc.). With these cards you travel around the board and place monsters down on each of the squares to hold down the fort and slow up and frustrate your opponent who must use his own cards to combat your monsters.





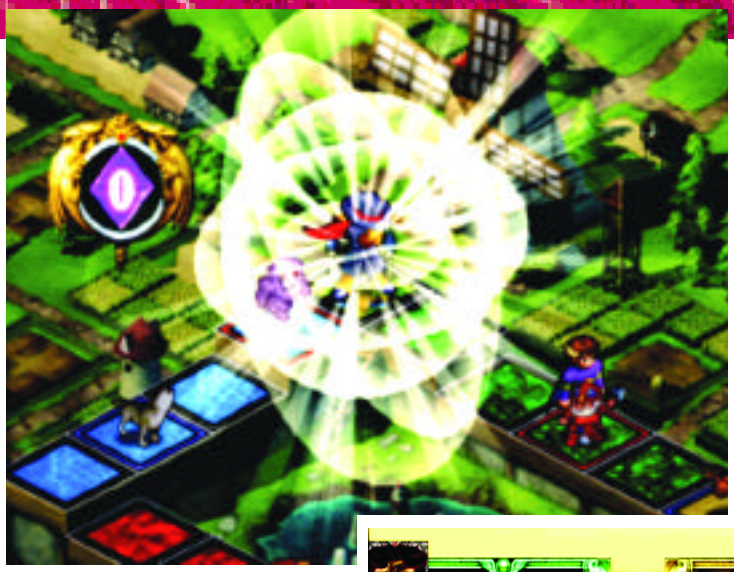
Each monster can be upgraded (from your precious reserve of gold), much like upgrading lots in Monopoly from houses to hotels—and some of those monsters are very ugly hotels indeed. As you travel around the board, you'll pass 'Go' and collect a cash reward. The player with the most gold at the end of a set number of rounds wins.



A Little From Column A and a Little From Column B

CII takes all the best elements of Monopoly: hoarding of money (gold, in this case) and property control and Magic the Gathering: monsters, weapons and combat all based on carefully constructed decks of cards. Cards are earned by playing online against other CII players across the globe, which, not surprisingly, mostly reside in Japan (and at least one player in Minnesota—hi Matt!).





Can't…Stop…Playing

Now I don't know if it's a revenant from my Monopoly days, but I can't get enough of this game. While I've never been one for Magic (mainly because the geek factor terrified me—you think hardcore gamers are nerd-like? You ain't seen nothin', friend), but if it's anywhere near as addictive as CII, I made the right decision by never getting involved.



Best of all, the online play is cheap and plentiful. Sure, you may have to muddle through the game initially by determining which cards do what, but once you get it down, you'll be able to hold your own and show the boys what a gaijin can really do…die…a lot. But at least you'll have fun while you go down in flames.

Solid as a Rock

Graphically and aurally, CII is stunning—super-rich color; brilliant animation on character sprites and a nice mix of 2D and 3D effects. The animated battles between the cards feature all sorts of 3D animations: jaws biting; maces swinging; spells casting, etc. The whole thing looks and feels incredibly slick—it's clear Omiya Soft put a lot of time and a lot of money into making this game tight as a drum.

The BGM, in general, is fantastic and features quite a range of tunes. Oddly, some of the pieces felt a bit too happy and sugary for a game where your ultimate goal is to crush your miscreant of a foe, but on the whole it's well done. I won't be running out to pick up the soundtrack, though (must get Growlanser 2 OST, though!).

Card Captor Culdcept II

One of the best aspects of the game is that as you play you earn better cards for your online deck: as you win matches online, you'll be rewarded with more and better cards which you can then carry into battle with you next time.

Naturally, VMU saves cannot be copied (let's hope they also learned to keep Game Shark type devices locked out, though methinks this sort of game is a bit too much for those simpletons) so duping cards, etc. should hopefully be an idle intellectual concept and not a massive, game ruining problem…Sega.

Lucky Dog

The only overtly negative? Luck seems to play more of a role than it should in a lot of cases. Since the game draws cards for you randomly, you never really know what you're gonna get.

This can be especially frustrating when you keep drawing rats while your friend (err, foe) constantly draws Chimeric Death Machine (OK, so it's not actually a card, but you're with me, right?). This seems to be more of a problem in the one player quest mode, but there's always that element of luck. Then again, Monopoly was always half luck…not that I let anybody ever believe that—including myself.

Buy This Game Now

While you'll need to set up a Dricas account (child's play thanks to any number of websites—just hit Google and enter "set up Dricas account") and you'll also need something akin to a PSO Hunter's License for a measly ten bucks for 3 months play, it is money well spent.

Even if you don't intend to go online, the one-player campaign mode is more than enough to keep you busy for many a moon as you travel the world with your magical deck in hand leveling miscreants and unlocking more cards as you go. Sure, sometimes the AI is a bit dumb, but it's worth it just to see the strikingly rendered world map and some of the more colorful characters you'll encounter along the way.

Anyway, I think I've made myself pretty clear: if you want a very good game that features real, long term, play value, you've found it. I can see playing this for the next few months as it's that addicting. If you do the right thing and pick up the game, be sure and send me an email and we can set up a match or three—the more the merrier.

I must go now…further conquests await me. Time to make the old man cry uncle one more time…

—ECM



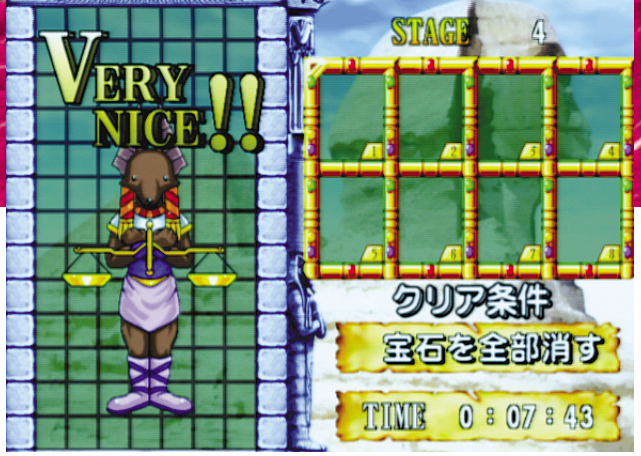
REVIEWED BY:



Cleopatra Fortune

クレオパトラ フォーチュン

Developer: Taito	# of Players: 1-2
Publisher: Altron	Available: Japan Now



Welcome to the Taito Zone…or what's left of it. Rod Serling once dominated television the way Taito does these days with simple yet amazingly addictive puzzle games that hearken back to the days of Columns on the Genesis (too bad that's about all Taito is excelling at these days). Cleopatra Fortune will seem strikingly similar to <insert Columns/Tetris game of your choice> and for those of the Japanese-crippled set, allow you to dispense altogether with that pesky instruction manual.

The object is to skillfully maneuver descending blocks to 'trap' jewels, pharaohs, and other gems to make them (shock alert) disappear. Naturally, the blocks will descend more and more rapidly and have increasingly difficult combinations to master—which is spelled out here for the youngsters in the audience.





Unfortunately, there isn't a whole lot new here if you've mastered any number of the multitude of Columns clones that are out there. Sure, there's the obligatory story mode that's composed of cutesy characters. These might keep you amused enough a bit, as it does offer you specific challenges for each level in order to progress. You will have to 'solve' puzzles wherein you need to place each block combination in the correct place in order to get the chain reaction requirement that the story mode is asking you for. The novelty of this wears off relatively quickly, and the need to see the story mode is quickly overcome by a burning desire to switch back to arcade mode.





The game is credited as being created in 1996 by Taito, and it feels as though is should've been created a lot earlier than that, despite graphics a bit more finely honed than its ancestors. The game has a two player split screen mode allowing for one on one confrontation, so your sister can finally teach you a lesson. The arcade mode itself gets severely difficult at levels above 30.

As for recommendations, it would have to be said that if you have a U.S. Dreamcast, you'd be far better served picking up a copy of Smash Pack that houses Columns among its collection of a dozen titles. On the other hand, if you're looking for a clean and mildly updated version of Columns with anime characters reminiscent of ancient Egypt or are simply collecting import versions of Dreamcast games that won't cross the Pacific you better belly up to the bar before short-run games like this disappear—either way, it's certainly not a 'gotta have it' game.

—Haohmaru

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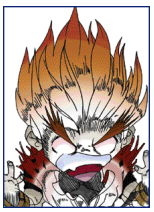
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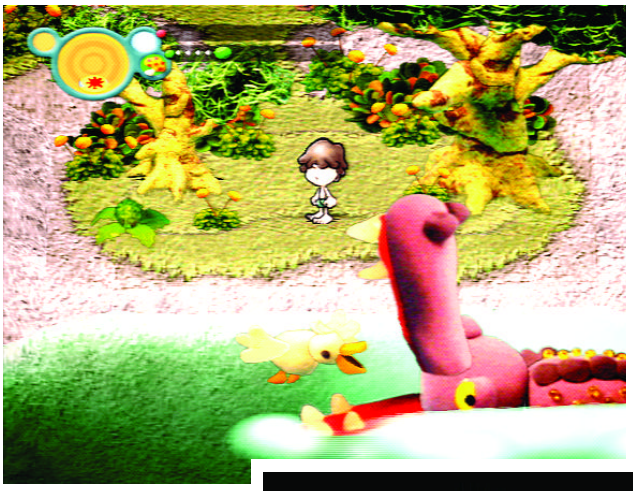
ENDONESIA

Developer: Enix	# of Players: 1
Publisher: Enix	Available: Japan Now



Being the low man on the GameGO! totem pole, well, sucks. I get no respect and have to take out my anger on the message boards (-200 posts and sinking fast!). I'm called the 'mainstream sellout' with alarming frequency. Worst of all, since the brown stuff tends to roll downhill, I'm relegated to taking one for the team, forever that skinny little kid that got picked last in grade school athletic games. "Write Endonesia? Why, sure, I'd..ugh...love to?"

Actually, I don't love Endonesia, far from it. Visually, it's amusing, clean and better than the shambling 3D messes that generally populate the PS2. What you've got here are some nicely done, subtle, 3D backgrounds, full of vibrant color, with a bunch of 2D character pasted on top (it looks almost as good as the 2nd Ghost in the Shell manga—pick it up now).



Now, as the self-proclaimed 'chemical enthusiast' of GG, I've been privy to some strange goings on, but E (for Endonesia) is by far the most bizarre and downright confusing title I've played in ages. Magic mushrooms, massive green plants and trippy, otherworldly beings populate this wickedly twisted and excruciatingly confusing title.

The story revolves around a little boy who gets warped into an alternate dimension and must then go through a series of puzzles, where you face another puzzle, which opens a new area, etc., etc….my head hurts. Most of the puzzles are amazingly complex: ranging from use the new skill at the new location to using the new item in the new location. Needless to say, you won't need Steven Hawking and Albert Einstein to muddle through these 'puzzles.'

There are no battles to speak of, save for the one that ultimately cannot be won: that which pits you against the mighty beast of boredom. Honestly, I've wasted time with flash PC games that were more fun and more compelling. Even Minesweeper has it all over this game.

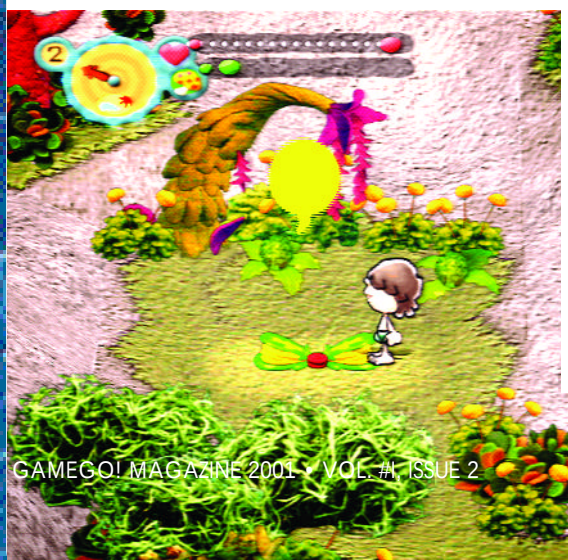
Yes, it's fantastic looking and has a host of vibrant characters that make this alternate reality come alive, but after the first level I was begging for the pet dog to eat the sad, lost little boy, just to save me the pain of going on. This is one of those games people like ECM say is awesome because it's an import and most people can't play it—you know what I'm talking about, <cough>Culdcept II<hack>.



As the game's manual so masterfully states: "Dengerous! Do not this!"

—Kodomo







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REVIEWED BY:



YANYA CABALLISTA

Developer: Koei	**# of Players: 1**
Publisher: Cave	**Available: Japan Now**



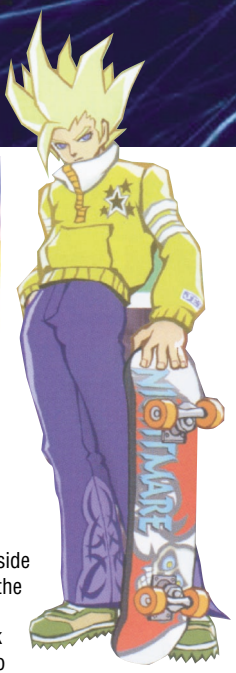
The Sixth Game

You knew it would happen sooner or later: Jet Set (Grind) Radio was bound to inspire a legion of knock-offs and imitators that would attempt to expand on it, or if not that, cash in on what was set to be the next big thing. Yanya Cabalista Featuring Gawoo is de la Jet Set, but tries to build on the formula by adding "Gawoo" (an enemy) to the mix. The really strange things here are the company producing it—Koei, by way of Cave—and the surfboard apparatus that attaches to your trusty Dual Shock pad. Koei deserves some respect for stepping out of its traditionally strategy-centric universe to give us this novel idea—sadly it's one gone horribly wrong.

Almost There…

Yanya has nearly everything going for it: multiple characters, kick ass music, and a menagerie of special moves. Each character has to "prove" themselves via training ground exercises that must be completed prior to starting the 'real' game. The street themed music pumps in the background you must perform a variety of moves to progress further. The entire game has a reddish tint that evokes the feeling of summer and heat in the big city. Character animation is cartoonish fluid bliss and they meld seamlessly with the environments. Koei has gotten the "feel" of the modern Sega classic. Gawoo's are your enemy and you must perform moves and certain combos while landing within their field of control to eliminate them. Again, nicely done.





Hang Ten

Picture the way you'd normally hold your PS2 controller with the top side up and the bottom side down—now rotate it 90° to the left and attach the handily included 'surfboard' doohickey. You steer via the surfboard and use the analog stick buttons to jump, etc.—it takes some practice to get the hang of it…to say the least (that is to say, the very least).

On many occasions, in the heat of trying to finish a "run," the board popped off the pad at velocities roughly approximating Pokey's flight from work—"It's quitting time already? Well, see ya… <sonic boom>." I can't tell you how frustrating it is to execute all the right moves, be 90% done with a stage, and then 'pop goes the weasel'—Pokey wasn't the only thing breaking the sound barrier (and Dual Shocks).

Wipe Out

It looks nice and the actual design of everything hints at greatness. The tunes rip and Koei would have been given some serious credit in that the game could have been something worth getting worked up over…just not this time. Next time skip the gimmickry and give us a game worth playing. After all, if you're going to ape Jet Set, remember to copy some of the fun.

—Haohmaru







REVIEWED BY:



PHOTOGRAPH BOY 2

Developer: Irem	**# of Players: 1**
Publisher: Irem	**Available: Japan Now**



It's a Cold Day In Hell

File this one under 'I didn't see this coming'…ever. What you're looking at right now is a true sequel to the classic PC Engine HuCard, Photograph Boy—a game that, naturally, never made it off the islands of Japan. A game that also inspired the adored-by-children, Pokémon Snap, which, incidentally, supports the philosophical concept that good can beget evil.



Goldman…David Goldman

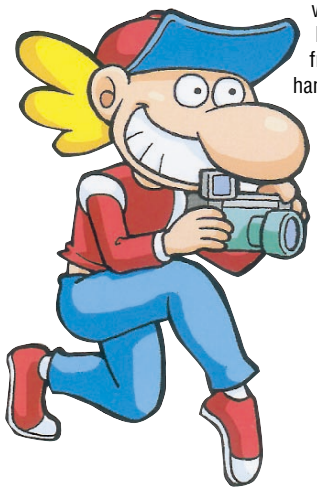
If you've ever played the aforementioned Pokémon Snap, you already have a good idea of what to expect, gameplay-wise, from PB2. You (as David Goldman, elite photographer) run through level after crazily designed level snapping shots of all the odd goings-on in this twisted take on urban and rural Japan. Everything from dancing buildings, UFOs, anthropomorphic animals and some copyright violating appearances by Superman and Michael Jackson (among others) contributes to this starkly surreal game.



F Stop

Gameplay is simple: you stroll through the streets taking pictures of anything that might prove interesting (the crazier the better, of course). One analog stick controls movement and the other controls the focus of the camera. You snap pics with the R1 button, the flash (to illuminate hidden areas) is activated via L1, and you can zoom via L2. While you're snapping shots willy-nilly you'll also have to be aware of goings-on in the foreground as various objects (skateboards, sponges, fireballs) seek to stun you momentarily and, more importantly, rob you of valuable rolls of film. Run out of film and the level ends—fairly cut and dry, right? Well, wait till you get going…

Needless to say, chaos is rife in the streets and you'll need to have some pretty slick reflexes to jump, dodge and shoot your way to safety. If you get in a bind, the handy flash will eliminate all projectiles from the screen (though it's better to handle those via the camera so you can score extra film). Each level requires that you score a key shot that'll allow you to advance to the next level (usually the craziest thing going on in a particular level). There's also a hidden level that's unlockable from each main level that's opened up by getting a shot of a usually well-hidden event—this effectively doubles the number of levels in the game.





Pretty as a Picture

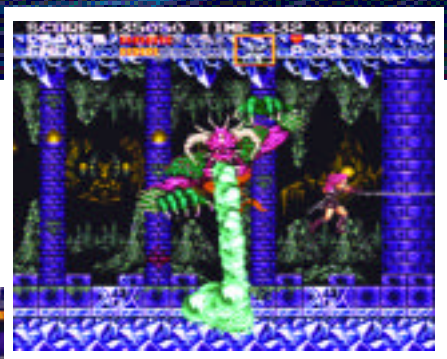
Graphically the game is 2.5D: David controls along the x and y-axis and the camera moves the game in and out of the screen depending upon the level. Everything is drawn in a loopy cartoon style from David's maniacally grinning mug, to the dimples on the butts of the bathers in the bathhouse level (jump up to get a glimpse at the ladies, fellas). The animation is solid and the color palette vibrant. It's a pretty swell-looking game, though it's clear that this isn't even remotely pushing the PS2 hardware, so graphics tarts should stay clear.

Best of all this game requires no knowledge of Japanese to play, so if no super-smart, utterly savvy 3rd party picks it up for a US release (oh please, oh please) you'll get along just fine.

Strike a Pose

This game is maddeningly fun! While it doesn't feature much in the way of replay value after you beat the game and have seen every level, it's a blast the first time through. It's easily one of the most fun PS2 titles to date and everyone that's even a little bit into games a bit off the beaten track needs to give this a spin. Now if you'll excsuse, I have to go get some pictures developed

—ECM

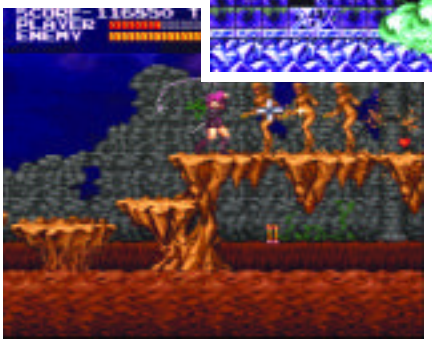


REVIEWED BY:



CASTLEVANIA CHRONICLES

Developer: Konami	**# of Players: 1**
Publisher: Konami	**Available: Japan Now**





First, Some History…

Chances are you've never heard of the Sharp X68000 computer: A Japanese computer released by, you guessed it, Sharp that was fairly popular during the late 80s and early 90s—the simplest way to actually describe the machine is to label it the Japanese Commodore Amiga.

In any event, tons of games were released for this little hot rod: versions of River City Ransom, Undead Line, Street Fighter, even the old school Genesis tank shooter, Granada, exists for this puppy. And, in just about every case, they are more impressive graphically and more feature-rich than their console counterparts (Undead Line, for example, features more levels and more playable characters).

However, the system did play host to a score of original titles that are exclusive to it, the most legendary being Akumajo Dracula X. There's probably a better than average chance that you've heard whispers of this game, second only to the Haunted Castle 'Castlevania' arcade game as the most mysterious and elusive of this oft-venerated series.

Konami has apparently seen fit, however, to release this game (along with a graphically and aurally upgraded rev) on one PS disc as that system moves into the twilight of its life. Why? Got me. But it's nice to see not only a 'new' Castlevania game, but also one that's entirely 2D (and one you don't have to squint to see).

It's like Two, Two, Two Games in One!

Castlevania Chronicles (as it's known) features the original X68K release and an ever-so-slightly upgraded version to take (very slight) advantage of the superior PS hardware—presumably to make it a little more tempting to those that had already bought the original all those long years ago.



The best way to describe this iteration of Dracula is to sorta consider it the first Castlevania on steroids. There's no jumping onto or off of stairs; the graphics are more reminiscent of the original Castlevania than Super Castlevania IV, Castlevania Bloodlines or PCE Dracula X; and the gameplay is very straightforward, old school Castlevania (more so, even, than PCE Drac X).

This is good and bad: it's good that it's a throwback to the 'good old days' but it's bad because a lot of the time there simply isn't enough to it—I know I have no interest in going back and playing the first Castlevania, and the way this game uncomfortably apes the progenitor makes it fun on a "gee, this is kinda neat" level, but that's about it.

The differences between the two versions are mostly subtle: an arranged soundtrack here, harder gameplay there (the original is much harder than the arranged edition as it plays by classic Castlevania rules, i.e. you're knocked back when you're hit, etc.). The main character sprite in the updated version is completely re-drawn and some nice effects are added, such as when you destroy an enemy as well as some subtle background enhancements. The key word here is, obviously, subtle.

IQ Plummeting

In regards to the simpler updated edition, it's almost as if you can feel the dumbing down of games over the past 8 years (tell me another one about how the influx of casual users hasn't affected the games we play, <chortle>). It's too bad that you can't opt for the original rules in the updated edition, as most people will burn through the arranged version in fairly short order. If you want a challenge, you have to play original mode.

One more note: oddly enough, I prefer the original soundtrack to the arranged (this soundtrack is not Dracula X, mind you). Not sure why exactly that is, but maybe it's because it fits the graphics and mood better. Then again, maybe I'm just jaded, <grin>.

So what we have here is a pretty solid game with some (very) old school gameplay. For the most part, I was turned off by the ultra-simple style, but I did manage to play through the entire arranged mode and half the original mode and not completely dislike it, so take that as you will.





Now I'll wait calmly and quietly for a 2D Castlevania (a la Dracula X, not SOTN) for GameCube—I figure it's going to be a long, long wait.

—ECM

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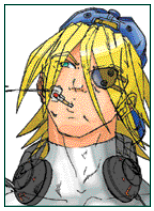
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REVIEWED BY:



SENGOKU 3

Developer: Noise Factory	# of Players: 1-2
Publisher: SNK	Available: Now (arcade)



So Close…

Sometimes being a long-time fan of a venerable gaming giant just doesn't pay. The long-awaited Sengoku 3 elicits painful memories of studying that most hear-wrenching of literary forms: the tragedy. As much as I try to pull for SNK and the venerable Neo Geo, and as much as I want to ignore its long, slow demise, Sengoku 3's weaknesses can't be ignored—the worst part? It was this close to being 'all that' but winds up falling short of the mark. Damn it. Reviewing a game shouldn't feel like this.

Sengoku 3 offers 4 characters to start with and allows you to choose from 6 as you progress through the game. The character design of these 6 is among the best seen on the Neo Geo side scrolling butt whooping library. Unfortunately, this doesn't extend to the opponents that challenge you throughout the game. After delving into this for over an hour, you've fought less than a dozen unique opponent and even some of those are just Mortal Kombat-inspired palette swaps.



The "story" is pretty much nonexistent and this makes the experience of going through the motions even less rewarding than it otherwise should be. In this aspect, specifically, you begin to get the idea that, perhaps, this title wasn't entirely finished before it made its way to market. I can't quite put my finger on it, but the entire game feels as though something is missing: a decent story line, odd character shading and design, music that's good and then absent completely—guess that's a lot of 'somethings.'

The glorious aspects of Sengoku 3 are the methods of attack that span weapons, bare fist, throw, special moves as well as an escape move that you can use just once. The special moves consume part of a power bar that's built up by scoring combination (bare fist + weapon) on your opponents. You'll find these effective to use on your opponents even if completing them is somewhat awkward for a beat 'em up (down, down + attack). Supers require that you fill up your power bar twice and is barely worth the effort to execute, both in effectiveness and graphical payoff. The combinations, however, are surpass any other title in the genre and a testament to the fact that Noise Factory was trying to add more to a style of game that had little room to grow.

Spirits of My Ancestors

Many will recall a simpler time, a time when the Neo Geo was fresh and Final Fight-style games (such as the original Sengoku) arrived on the scene. Beat 'em ups such as these were easy to play and easy to forget and then equally easy to return to later. Sengoku 2 was marred by poor distribution and short duration, but it was a (then) graphically impressive game…if you could find it.

Enter Sengoku 3. Initially there were rumblings that this game wouldn't see the light of day, period. After months of delays and a multitude of rumors surrounding the near-mummified husk of SNK, the Noise Factory-developed Sengoku 3 was in our hands—albeit months late. Now I don't know if it should have stayed deep down in the turgid earth.



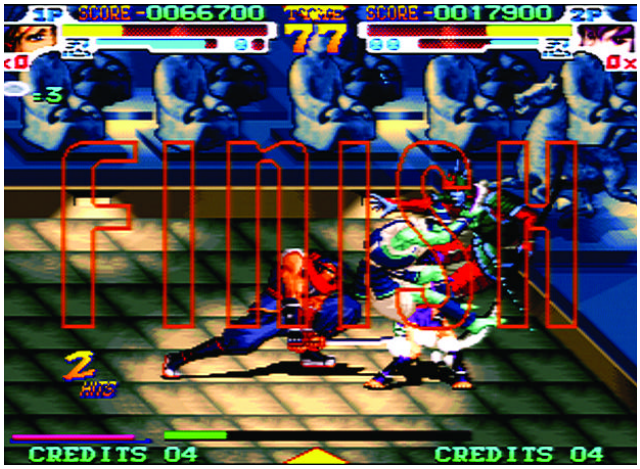


A few will also criticize this title for its unlimited continues and shortness—in the immortal words of Le Capitan, ECM, "don't use 'em, newbie." In truth however, the end boss of Sengoku 3 is so cheap it even makes other SNK end bosses seem feeble. This guy is a quarter sucking monster for the ages. Let it be said that if you can beat THIS boss without a continue, then you are more of a man than I.

Sengoku 3 might be more remembered for how difficult it will be to find than for the really good time it provides. Suffice it to say that I wasn't expecting all that much from it and, in truth, probably got more from it than I initially reckoned. In the end, however, Sengoku 3 feels like a title that was pushed out the door because it was close enough to being finished. I guess 'you gotta do what ya gotta do' to stave off the reaper—too bad it was at Sengoku's expense.

—Haohmaru









SHMUPS

REVIEWED BY:



RAIDEN DX – PLAYSTATION

Developer: Hamster	**# of Players: 1-2**
Publisher: Major Wave	**Available: Now**





Seibu Kaihatsu's Raiden series has long stood as the very pinnacle of shooter design. The first Raiden featured a decided lack of glitz and featured instead the kind of understated gameplay other developers could only dream of implementing properly. The weapons were few, only two different shot types and two kinds of missiles, and with this we were expected to clear eight waves of bad guys. Simple and to the point, the game was a really tough nut to crack. It was one of those rare experiences where every single time you died you knew it was your fault. The computer never cheated, it never presented you with anything you couldn't overcome, it was just eye-tearingly difficult.



Raiden's simplicity was the key to its longevity, I think. Everyone likes Raiden. The simplicity of the gameplay made it immediately accessible to everyone, and it was not at all uncommon to find a girl playing Raiden either. The appeal was universal.

Seibu followed with a sequel imaginatively titled Raiden 2, which featured (besides new levels, baddies and bosses) only one change: a new weapon. A squiggly squirrelly hose of a weapon that locked on and did very little damage. And yet the game was still every inch as good as the first—Seibu were establishing themselves as masters of the craft. When Sony's PlayStation was released, Seibu was presented for the first time with a home console powerful enough to render in the home an arcade perfect version of both Raiden 1 and 2. The Raiden Project was Seibu's first home console game programmed in-house, and it was an instant classic. They followed it up a short time later with what I believe is the best Raiden game in the series: Raiden DX.





Raiden DX is basically Raiden 2+. At its core the game is not significantly different from Raiden 2, no new weapons were added, the levels only moderately different and the enemies familiar. They packed in the extras too: two additional soundtracks (New Version is the very best shooter soundtrack around, ranking up there with Sokyugourentai), three game modes, a boss-only mode, a playable demo of Battle Balls (the very finest puzzle game since Tetris) and the most amazing thing, the Master of Raiden.



The levels closely parallel what you see in Raiden 2. The first stage features the other side of the crater you fly over in Raiden 2, in fact, giving the impression you're flying a parallel path. One new addition to the game is the decaying-value bonuses. Instead of simply laying in wait for you, the bonus point items become darker and less valuable as they scroll down the screen. Just before they become more or less worthless, they pulse brightly and for a half second are worth double their original value. Racking up the big points means you have to keep track of even more details than before. Also new are hidden "radar" sites,







effort was recorded for your viewing pleasure, and it's simply stunning to behold. He completes the entire level unscathed, with every radar site uncovered in the correct order, every enemy killed, nearly every bonus collected. No matter how good you think you are, this guy's better, and it has made me crazy over the years trying to measure up.

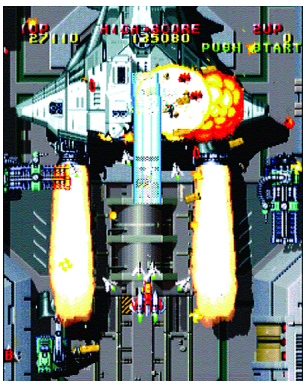
Raiden DX was a pleasant surprise for me. I managed to swap a crummy old Neo cart for a barely-played copy of this fine game



when it was first released, and it hasn't left my side since. It supports a vertical monitor mode, too, so that you can experience the game in the arcade-perfect way it was meant to be played.

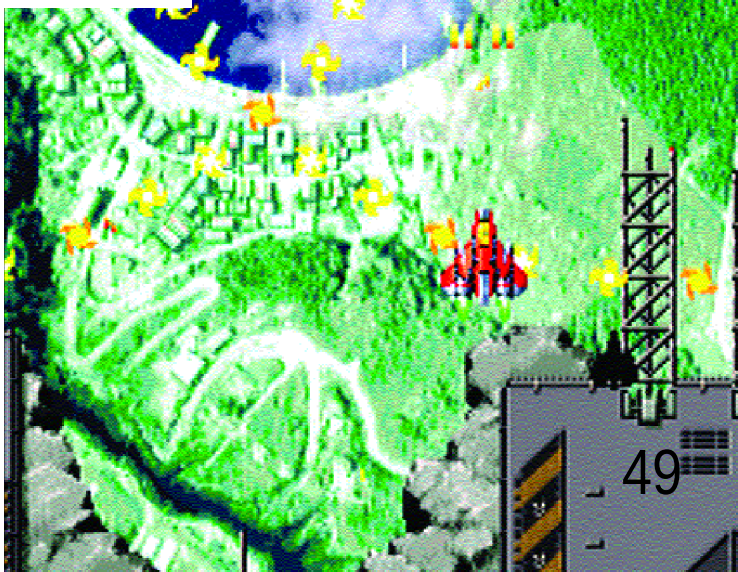
Raiden DX is the perfect addition to any shooter fan's library. Crank the sound up, tip your TV over, and groove to the finest shooting action ever from the masters of the craft. Since the game was re-released in Japan as a budget title, you can pick up the import for a very reasonable price. It's worth the effort, for you'll rarely find a game this solid, this polished, or this good anywhere else.

—NeoGman



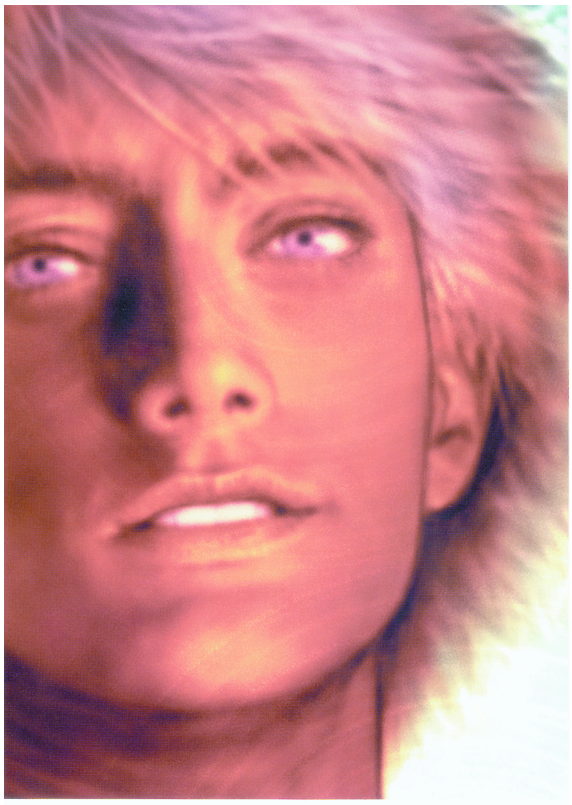






bumps in the ground that rise up and are destroyable when you fly over them.

The training stage is an amalgamation of several levels from the standard game. The stage is as long as three or four regular levels, but has only one boss at the end. Once you've beaten a few things and you've unlocked the Master of Raiden, you can see the training level played perfectly, and this is one of the nicest surprises the game offers. The Master of Raiden is an apt name for whoever played this level through. Their entire



1 K' 描き下ろし
2 霧気撥
3 2000年



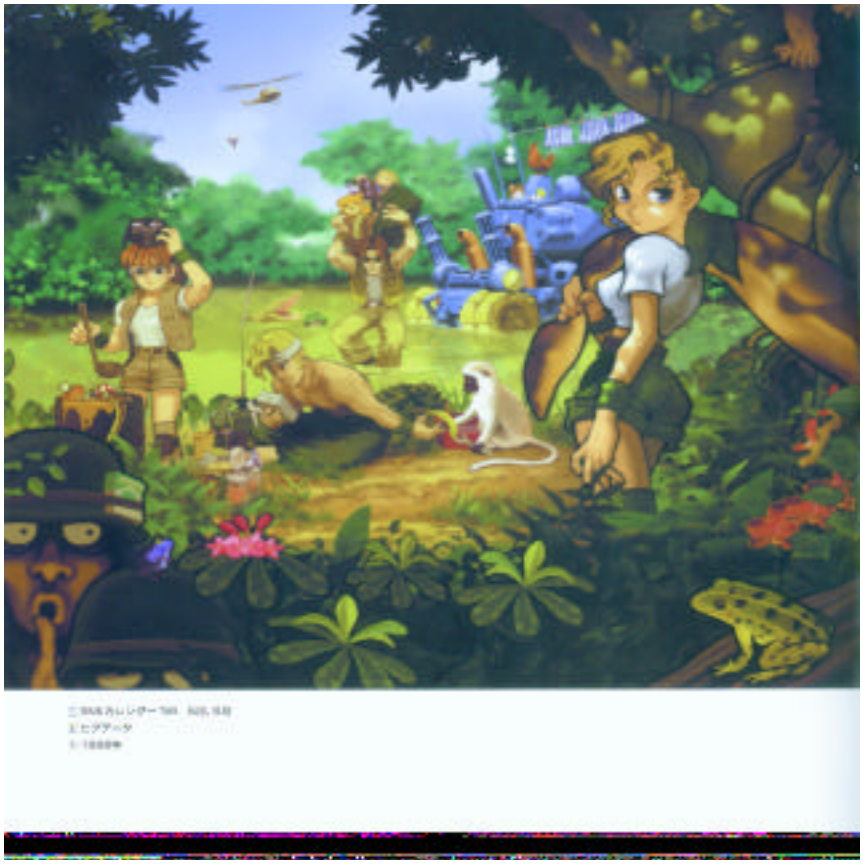
1 舞 描き下ろし
2 霧気撥
3 2000年



1 DC版 将来図像 月華の剣士 刹那&雪
2 TONKO
3 2000年



1 ネオジオフリーク2000年6月号 表紙 集合
2 NAOQ、北千里、TONKO、ヒロアキ、白井影二
3 2000年







[1] 餓狼 MARK OF WOLVES　ネオジオフリークポスター用
[2] TONKO
[3] 1999年



GAMES 101: SHMUPS

If there's one genre that is horribly misunderstood these days, it's the venerable shoot 'em up a.k.a. shmups. You know what I'm talking about: review after review comes back stating that they're horribly repetitive and way too easy…while either neglecting to mention that the reviewer in question consumed more continues than the gross national product of Japan to pass the 3rd level or set the difficulty on 'baby' (how apt) and called it a day. Well, for those of you that aspire to be a bit more l33t (God, how annoying is that?), welcome to Games 101: Shmups Flight School.



Flight School
Keep Your Eye on the Prize

Rule #1 for would-be shmup aces: keep your eyes on your ship—I can't stress this more fiercely. How many times have you caught yourself watching something on the screen other than the general vicinity of your sprite only to watch your ship go down in a ball of fire cause you were too busy admiring the animation on a boss. Needless to say, you should always be watching your ship unless you're a mutant and can take in the whole screen and all its myriad details at once—I hear the carnival will pay top dollar for someone with your skill...alamone.

Know When to Walk
and When to Run

Another basic skill you have to internalize is the simple notion of economy of movement. In a shmup, less is more—there is no need to careen around the screen at amped up velocities to dodge a volley of enemy fire when a simple move to the side will suffice. For the most part, most of those ugly boss battles you get into that feature wave after wave of unrelenting firepower can be navigated successfully if you just relax and only move the ship in tiny increments. If you start ripping around the screen like Kodomo on crack (it ain't pretty, trust me) you might as well sign the death cert now.

Memories, All Alone
In the Starlight

Another key skill is memorization. Most shooters require at least some of this—especially when you get into some of the more advanced techniques. And I don't mean just memorizing the patterns of enemies on screen. I mean committing

What follows is a simple guide to help you get a bit more out of your shmups so you don't have to be like one of the aforementioned babies and use umpteen continues in order to carry the day.

Furthermore, if you follow these simple little tips, you'll not only get better and get further on one credit, it'll also allow you to save those lives (and continues, if need be) for when you really need them: at the end of the game when all reason breaks down and the programmer decided that you're going to die now… "I want him to die in the games, Sark."

Note: these tips, in many cases, are for playing to beat the game—they don't necessarily apply if your ultimate goal is high score. But seeing as how that seems to be a fairly dead art, we'll concentrate on beating a game first. Also, going for score tends to vary greatly from shmup to shmup, unlike this set of rules which is applicable to 95%+ of the titles out there.





to memory, in minute detail, firing speeds, enemy placement and power-up drop speeds. You need to know every last detail of what you're facing so that you're prepared for when the hurricane starts.

Greed Kills

You all know where this is going: you're cruising along, snapping up power ups, pick ups, etc. and you just have to have that one last power up, coin, doodad, etc., even though, in the back of your puny mind, you know it's a fool's errand. But it doesn't matter, you wade into the thick of it to rescue that one last coin and <BAM!> you're dead and all because you thought "just one more…" Incidentally, this also applies to games like Bomberman. Moral of this story: do not get gold fever—it isn't worth the frustration.

Top Gun In Your Face!

If there's one tactic that shooter jocks (actual and wannabe) under use, it's the concept of encroachment, i.e. getting in an enemies face and ramming both barrels down his throat—after all, if he's dead, he can't very well kill you, can he?

For example, as the screen scrolls, most of the time, you should be as close to the top (for verts) or the right side (for horizontals) whenever possible and whenever your skill level will allow. The logic here is simple: if an enemy can't get onscreen, he can't kill you. Also, as in most shooters, chances are you can fire more shots the quicker the earlier shots are off screen (or in your foe's hide).

In later levels, this can get very dangerous, so just make sure that you're on top of enemies as soon as humanly possible so they're out of the loop before you are. It may feel like you're playing by the seat of your pants (and you are), but if you can master this you'll be that much more unstoppable.

By playing like this you eliminate enemies before they become a threat. This is something you should constantly practice in your shooters, and can make harrowing experiences (such as Gunbird 2) much less so. Be warned, though, this can be a very frustrating road if you haven't memorized some basic things about the enemy in question (see above) and don't have a very solid set of reflexes.



Epilogue

I'm sure some of you are thinking "duh" to a lot of these tips. Good for you if that's the case. You apparently are a bona fide shmup fiend and more power to ya. For the rest, though, I hope this has been at least a little enlightening and might just make you a little more eager to take another crack at that shmup you deemed impossible just the other day. And hey, if nothing else, you got to listen to me ramble for two pages—that's gotta be worth something, right?

—ECM



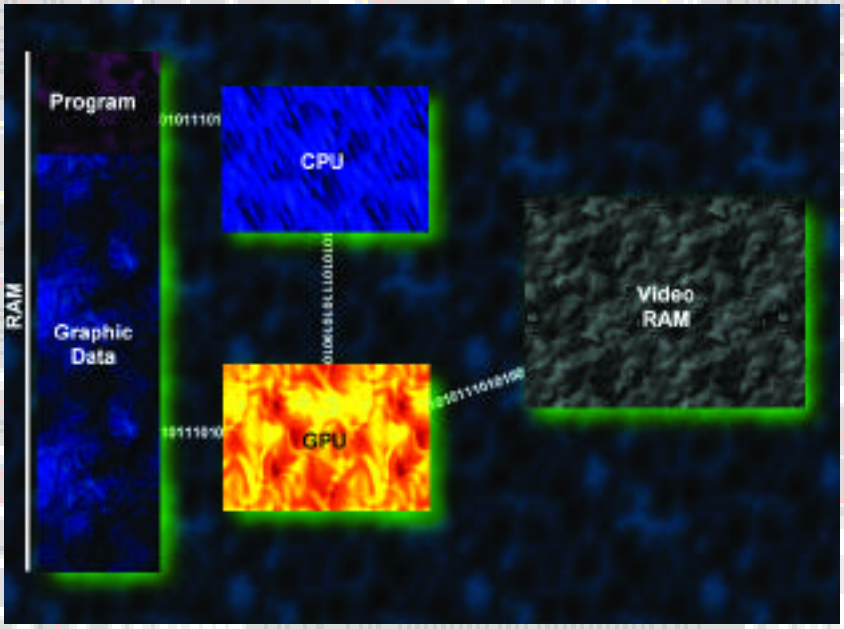


TECH SUPPORT

Part of the fun of running a technical website (www.gamesx.com) is answering questions from clueless people. I don't necessarily mean that in a bad way, but it's true - a lot of these people simply don't have a clue about the things they're asking about. Which is of course why they're asking. Asking questions about things you don't understand is the first step to picking up the knowledge necessary for understanding.

One of the most common questions involves video, or more specifically, doing things to the video output by your favourite console. Few people understand exactly what happens between the game CD ROM or cartridge and the screen in front of you. Here's a bit of a breakdown, divided into two parts: how the image is assembled inside the console, and how it's transmitted to the display screen.

Part the first:



Forgive me if I cover anything you already know, we're gonna start with the basics and work our way up. Your average game console isn't a lot different than your average computer, except that it's made as cheaply as possible by having everything not strictly necessary removed. If you took a standard desktop computer and chucked out everything not used for gaming, you might end up with something like this. It would contain a Central Processing Unit (CPU), some memory to work with (RAM), a Graphics Processing Unit, and a few other odds and ends to handle controller input, CD ROM access, etc. A simple, single-purpose computer.

Most consoles function the same way when creating a game. The main CPU oversees everything, tells the CD ROM chip when and what to load from the CD, ensures that controller input is shuttled off to the right place at the right time, etc. It also handles game logic, things like race-car physics, enemy intelligence, powerup locations and so on. One of the things a modern console CPU doesn't do is handle the graphics directly. Instead, as you see in (Figure 1), the CPU simply tells the Graphics Processing Unit what to do. The GPU then does as instructed - shuffling bits of background, player and enemy characters (Sprites), effects and whatnot into a special area of RAM devoted to the onscreen display. In the older consoles the CPU and GPU were quite slow, and when the limited amount of time available wasn't enough to accomplish their goals you got things like flicker and slowdown. These display artifacts are a result of the program asking for more than the hardware can deliver. It simply can't put the proper data in the screen RAM in time for the screen to be shown to you, the user.

Computers almost invariably handle graphics the same way internally: by pixels and by the colour of each pixel. A pixel is a PICture ELement - one square on the screen is one pixel. Each pixel is described by its Red, Green and Blue (RGB) value. These three primary colors make up every colour in the rainbow, and by mixing and matching them, you can create the colors needed for the graphics on the screen.

Once the picture has been created and shoved into the video RAM, it needs to be converted into a signal your display can handle. Most Graphics Processing Units output an RGB signal, one that sends each colour along a separate wire and is almost as pure a signal as the data the computer handles internally. And that brings us to...

Part the Second:

Now that the image on the screen is assembled and transmitted as an RGB signal from the video chip, it needs to be modified into something the average TV can use. Most of you have TVs that accept an RF adaptor, or Audio + Video (AV) cable. Some of you have a TV that accepts S-video, and a few of you even have one of those new fangled TVs that accepts Component Video. You might wonder which is better, and more importantly, why. Here's why.

Every time you process a signal, you change it. You may not change it much, but you'll change it nonetheless, and every change lowers the quality a bit. Inside a colour TV there are three electron-spitting "guns" that sweep back and forth, launching electrons at the screen on your TV. These electrons slam into the screen's coloured coating of phosphor, making them glow. That's how your TV works, one gun for each of the Red, Green and Blue signals. If you could wire the RGB output from the video chip directly into the guns on the back of your TV, you'd have the most perfect display possible.

Unfortunately, RGB wiring is almost totally unused in North America. The extra cost involved in cabling (more wires, complicated connectors with more pins, etc) and the lack of a connection standard have limited its acceptance. European and Japanese users have always fared a little better with the adoption of a standard RGB connector, which is built in to many TV sets. Most modern consoles also have an RGB cable available, making it easy to get the best picture possible but while most of us have RGB monitors at home in the form of a VGA monitor, sadly they operate at a far higher speed and resolution than modern game consoles. With the exception of the Dreamcast (and a possible, unreleased accessory for the PS2) all consoles require an expensive converter (See last month's review of the XRGB-2) before a VGA monitor can be used.

For most of us, the best we can get is an S-video connection from our console to our TV. An S-video signal requires a little processing to generate, however, and as you'll recall this drops the quality of the signal a little. S-video carries two signals: Brightness and Colour, also known as Luminance (Luma, or Y) and Chrominance (Chroma, or C). The names of the signals aren't totally relevant, but now you can bore your friends at parties. Transmitting the picture this way eliminates most of the dreaded crossover you get with the next two signals, which is why it's so clear. Crossover occurs when two

electrical signals mix and overlap each other, and while a more expensive TV can help reduce crossover it won't eliminate it entirely. Crossover can be seen most clearly by the amount of "dot crawl" present on your screen. If you've ever seen the wavy edges of pixels sliding vertically up or down your TV screen, you've seen the dot crawl introduced by crossover. S-video eliminates this problem by keeping the signals separate so crossover is greatly reduced. S-video is still too expensive for some manufacturers, so they fall back to the old standard, composite video. Composite video is that wire attached to the yellow connector included with your NES or SNES. It carries the RGB data, converted into S-video, and then further converted into a single signal. As you can imagine, the signal has at this point suffered terribly and while it has suffered some dot-crawl and blurring compared to the previous two signal types, it's a lot better than the next one, the awful and revolting...

RF. RF sucks. That auto-switching box that connects between your TV and your cable or antenna is designed for convenience, not quality. It has taken the ugly composite video line and further insulted it by forcing it to run at a certain channel frequency (usually 2 or 3) and also stuffed the sound information in there as well! This poor signal is a far cry from the blissful purity of RGB available inside your console, and should only be used by people visiting relatives or stuck in a hotel.

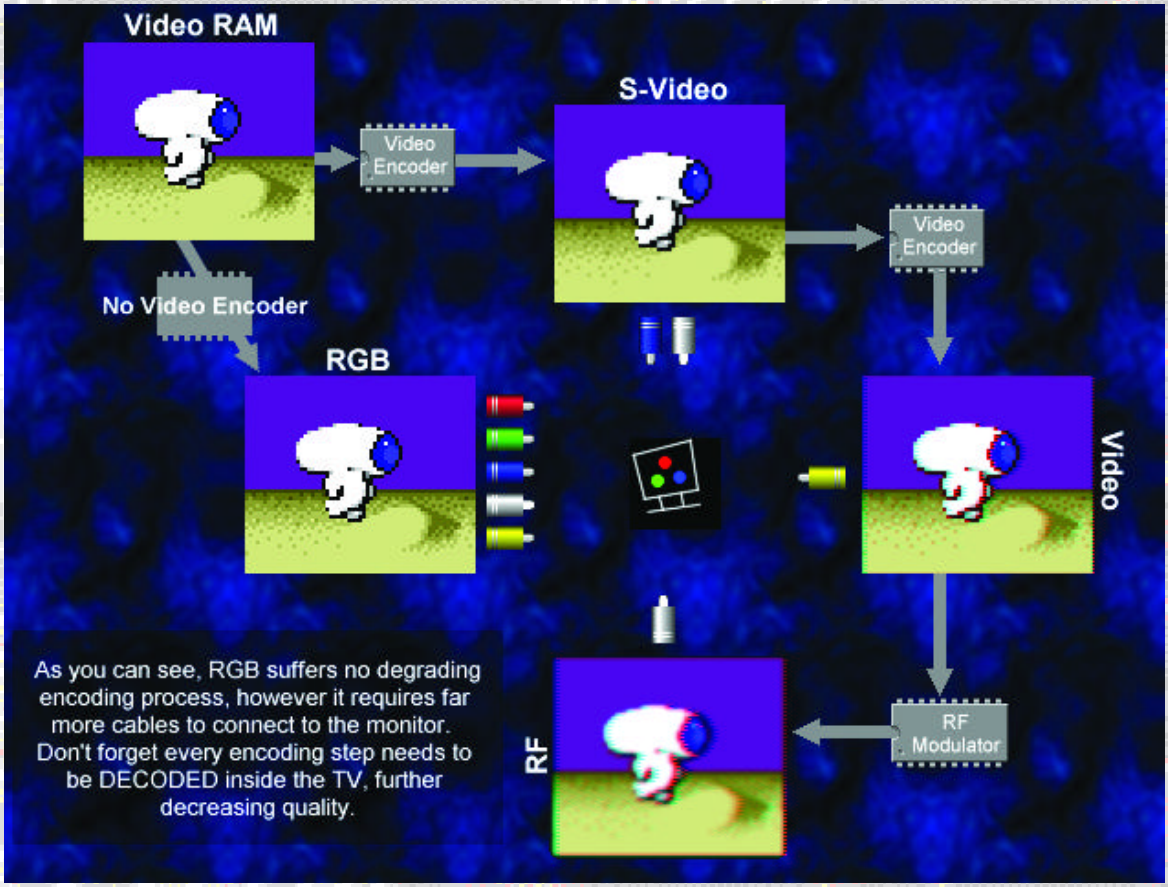
That brings us to the last oddball of a signal, Component Video. Component is a bit of a misnomer, since RGB and S-video are also component formats - video transmitted by its components, not all squished together like composite video or RF. It's also known as Colorstream, Colour Difference, and YRB. Don't be confused by the Red, Green and Blue connectors they use either - that's for ease of identification, it doesn't mean it's RGB.

Component video has a lot more in common with S-video, and quality-wise can appear anywhere between S-video and RGB depending on the source. It's most commonly seen on DVD players, because that's how DVDs store their information. Component video requires a lot of calculation by both the transmitter and the receiver (your TV). It's made of three streams: Y, R-Y and B-Y. The first one is the same as S-video - a high resolution signal containing only the brightness information. The other two are mathematically generated; the first is Red minus the brightness, the second is Blue minus the brightness. The green is kind of whatever's leftover after the red and blue are removed. The two colour data signals are compressed, and usually contain half the data of the black and white signal. This means you get a crisp, clear black and white picture sloppily painted over with the colour data at half the resolution. It's a messy, tricky solution with no clear quality answers - a lot of variables are involved.

As a side note, don't forget that every step down needs to be re-converted inside your TV, back to RGB for the three guns to draw from. This means your RF signal started as RGB, dropped to S-video (A necessary step when creating composite) and then to composite video, and then frequency altered and combined with the sound data. Then it was reversed inside the TV - the sound was stripped out, the video located and removed, then separated into the Luma and Chroma streams, and then further separated into RGB and fed to the guns. That's a lot of mucking about, and that's why in this author's mind, RGB is the only way to play.

While it's true that gaming looks best using RGB, it can take a lot of effort to make the move and generally isn't going to be as rewarding to anyone but the hardcore. That's most of the GameGo readers, I think. In the next issue we'll cover what kind of hardware is needed - if you don't want to drop two hundred and fifty bucks on an XRGB-2 (What I like to call the easiest and most versatile route) I'll tell you how to bang your head against the problems of monitor selection, cable connection, and mental perplexion.

—NeoGman



RetroVIEW NEC/TTi







What Happened to TT i

"Americans are tired of fighting games."

—Top Japanese NEC Executive

If that doesn't speak booming, ear-splitting volumes as to why NEC and the TurboGrafx-16/Duo never stood a chance, I don't know what would. This kind of thinking would haunt NEC as they morphed (with Hudson in tow) into Turbo Technologies Inc (a.k.a. TTi), the company 51% owned by NEC and 49% by Hudson in I992, to pick up where NEC proper had completely fumbled the ball. But first, a little back story…

Only Room for Two

From the outset, it was pretty clear that NEC didn't really know what to do in the US market. Despite having a capable US-based staff, NEC did what many Japanese companies do to their US subsidiaries—micro-managed and second-guessed them to death.

In any event, NEC summarily ate it—even though they should have and could have technically been in it up to when Sonic the Hedgehog arrived in mid-91 (Sega hadn't managed to do much at all with Genesis to this point, either). Sadly, NEC didn't capitalize in any way on a staggeringly huge library of quality titles found on the Turbo's Japanese counterpart, the ubiquitous PC Engine. Foibles with the box art (which might have worked in the Museum of Modern Art) and rampant confusion with the CD-ROM add-on (a bit too far ahead of its time for the US market) didn't help matters. The awesome Turbo Express (weighing in at $300) certainly couldn't hope to crack the low rent district of the GameBoy even though it was (and still is) an amazing piece of hardware.

It was clear that as the launch of the Super Nintendo approached, Sega and NEC had to do something fast lest they get crushed by the big N, a company with massive amounts of momentum, tons of hype and more money than God behind them. Sega came up with Sonic, a game which clearly had what it took to fight the impending Nintendo juggernaut. NEC, however, went an entirely different route...

The Birth of TTi

When it was becoming increasingly clear that NEC didn't have the marketing savvy to combat an invigorated Sega and a gargantuan, entrenched Nintendo, they took what would prove to be (ultimately) a losing proposition: instead of focusing on the TG-16 and/or exiting market, they decided to bring the Turbo's big brother from Japan—the Duo—to US shores for combat in '92. The new company formed to market and sell the Duo in the US would come to be known as Turbo Technologies, Inc. and was a fresh start for a company that had, to this point, failed to make much noise.

With a new hardware piece (that very thinly acknowledged its ties to the TG-16), a new price point ($299.99 for the hardware and a software bundle), and a new lease on life, TTi set out to make its name in the console arms race. Big games were announced, including the mighty Dracula X, but the biggest problem would continue to be Japanese execs.

For starters, NEC and Hudson duked it out for control of the fledgling entity. Though Hudson technically had the minority stake, they emerged with more day-to-day control. The fact that NEC was taking a bath in many of their other divisions (consumer electronics et al) didn't help their focus on TTi, and it probably worked out for the better that Hudson took the reins.

The problems didn't stop there, though. For example, the marketing budget for the Duo was very weak—they only had enough cash to effectively advertise the machine in five major markets, which is all fine and dandy if you're in Japan, where 2 cities comprise 90% of the market. The budget they allocated for five markets must have seemed like a fortune to the execs back home, clearly proving that they had about as keen a grasp of geography as the average American high schooler.

Compared to the marketing budgets behind the Sega CD, Sonic the Hedgehog 2 and the Super Nintendo, the meager amount of advertising possible couldn't even be measured as a drop in the bucket—more like a pin prick to a blue whale.

Show Me the Games!

Another problem was lack of funding on the software side. TTi simply wasn't given enough money to license and bring over the biggest titles from Japan that could have very much helped the Duo at least stay competitive. Two of the biggest titles by far-a fantastic port of Street Fighter 2 CE and the stunning Dracula X-simply required far too much of an initial upfront fee to license—money that TTi was not provided with by its Japanese parents.

Another major hole in their game plan was a failure to woo integral 3rd party support to the platform, despite that many of the publishers that produced Genesis and SNES games also produced PC Engine games in Japan. All of this, sadly, could be attributed to a lack of funding and/or interest by NEC and Hudson—can you imagine a hardware producer today not attempting to snag as much support as humanly possible?

Clueless

It was becoming increasingly clear that TTi was doomed to fighting two battles: one against their competitors in the marketplace and another against the home office in Japan. Sadly, nobody listened to the impassioned pleas from the crack staff at TTi, and the company slowly sank out of sight and completely closed its doors in the summer of '94.

The sad fact of the matter was that the corporate suits behind TTi simply had very little to any understanding of the US market and it showed in every mis-step and gross miscalculation. It's unfortunate, too— who knows where NEC would be today if the Duo had managed to penetrate even half the homes that Sega and Nintendo did with their respective 16-bit platforms. It's hurts to even contemplate…

—The 6th Man

Special thanks to Steve Garwood and Larry Aldrich for their help in putting this article together.

Turbo Tidbits

- The PC-FX was never considered for a US release despite what you may have read.
- Turbo Zone Direct (www.tzd.com) still sells brand new Turbo/Duo gear, including Duos and Turbo Express units.
- Up until 1997 there were still new games coming out for the Duo. The last title? Dead of the Brain on Super CD.
- The factory that produced HuCards (TurboChips) shut down in '93 with Legend of Hero Tonma and Bonk 3 as the final titles. This didn't help people that really needed a new System Card at the time.

The Lost Titles

Here's some handy cover scans of the games that were never meant to be (apparently). Now you can pay through the nose for just about all of them on eBay—lucky you.









32X: The Lost Titles

Some came out in Japan, some came out in Europe, and a few didn't come out at all. The following games (two of which were completed) were never available for American consumption and, in the case of ROTK, it were available in severely limited numbers in Japan — same goes for Darxide was a similar story in Europe.

Not surprisingly, you can find the prototypes for Virtua Hamster and X-Men floating around on eBay from time to time, but Darxide is almost as difficult to score (I had to, at one point, track down the company that produced it and ask for a copy…which I have yet to collect—d'oh).

Anyway, take a gander at what 'could have been' and wonder if it was really worth it. After all, even the Sega CD had more than five good games to its credit—can you say that of the 32X?

Romance of the 3 Kingdoms IV



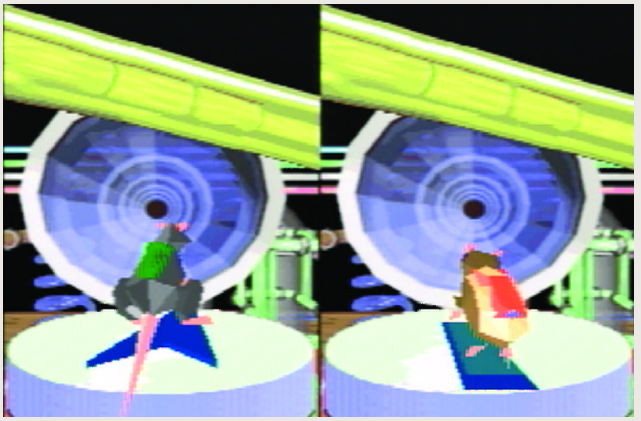
This 32X take on Koei's venerable, re-unification of China, sim (minus the bloodshed), is really nothing more than a port of the more colorful and better-sounding (than the Genesis rev) Super Famicom/SNES version.

You're still out to re-unify ancient China, albeit in Japanese. Needless to say, unless you have a keen grasp of the Japanese language or like playing trial and error with a billion souls (OK, so there weren't a billion Chinese back in the day—work with me) be our guest. Only for the completely psychotic completist 32X gamer…all two of you.



Virtua Hamster





The killer about Virtua Hamster is that it's so far from complete that you're left wondering exactly what it was going to turn out like. You play a hamster (ostensibly—if a gaudy collection of shaded triangles can really be called a hamster) racing through a Habitrail tube…and racing and racing, and racing and racing—think the Atari Games' classic S.T.U.N. Runner (looks-wise) with almost no gameplay. Collision isn't activated and there's nothing more than your 'hamster' jetting along at a brisk pace. You can also shoot, but, uh, there's nothing to really shoot at.

There's a 2-player mode, but that amounts to a split screen with two bundles of triangles racing through a Habitrail tube…racing and racing, and racing and racing, and, uh, that's about it. The game actually has a storyline in it that refers to your heroic exploits but unless those exploits center around turning off your Genesis/32X combo, I'm not interested. Another sad reminder of what could have been…





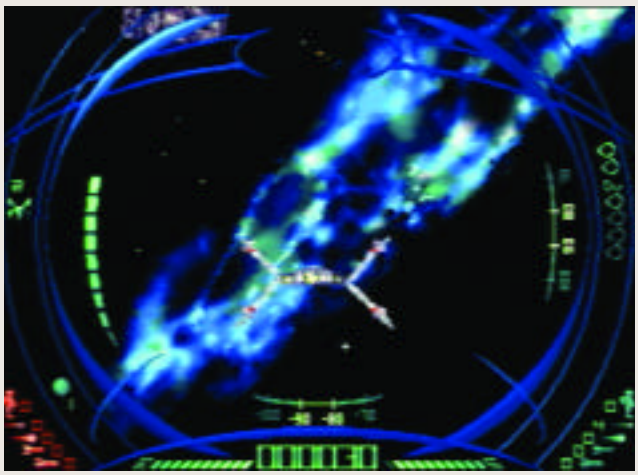


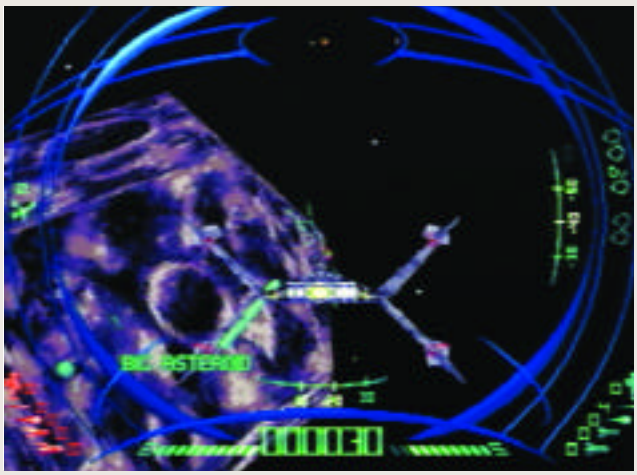
X-Men

It looks like they had planned to let you select from Bishop, Iceman, and Rogue, but Bishop is the only one you and actually use. The first 3 levels are all in a dojo or temple filled with ninjas—I'm assuming you had to fight your way to Silver Samurai to enlist the aid of Clan Yoshida or some such nonsense. Rogue's level has characters and collision, but Iceman & Bishop's levels are both unfinished and both seemingly part of Arcade's Murderworld with a pinball motif (Arcade's level is listed but not on the cart, <sigh>).

The gameplay takes place in what appears to be a psuedo-Guardian Heroes perspective, with multiple lines to attack from. Unfortunately the game was so unfinished that (oddly) there was only collision on the first few levels of the 'game' and you only had access to Bishop's guns.

Had Sega finished and released this.... well... 32x would have died anyway. But it's a pity this went down incomplete—excellent control and visuals for what was there, and one of Scavenger's last high profile projects before they went down the drain.





Darxide

The question floating around Frontier Developments when Darxide went into development must have been "does the world need a 3D Asteroids?" The answer, for good or ill: "yes." And that's precisely what this 100% complete game is—a 3D Asteroids with a few tweaks here and there.

Darxide only saw a (very limited) release in Europe and is very hard to find…period. The game is set in large belts of Asteroids and you need to repel the alien invaders while dealing with massive, ship-smashing stones hurtling around the 3D world. The game looks very nice—superior, in fact, to many early (and even late) Saturn games. According to Frontier, they managed to get software texture mapping running on 32X in software that could slap around hardware textures on Saturn.

This game is the brainchild of one of the original developers of the immortal Elite (you get a gold star if you're not European and you remember it), but Darxide falls a bit short of that legendary title. Still, it's complete, it's pretty and no one has ever heard of it…just expect to dig and pay not a little for it.

Gone But Not Forgotten

It's really a shame some of the other announced 32X titles never even saw the light of day as prototypes (at the very least). It would have been nice to get home versions of Alien vs. Predator (the Capcom arcade game) and Konami's Dracula X (though I'd imagine that would have been a port of the not-so-good SNES rev). Not to mention an entireAnd while I'm at it, how about a copy of SuperGrafx Strider and Saturn Sonic Xtreme and…

—ECM

RetroFIT Target Earth

The Road to Shangri-La

Long ago, before I trod the road to gaming enlightenment, back when imports were the type of car my Dad drove and the Japanese language was an unintelligible mass of scribbles in stereo manuals (come to think of it, that hasn't changed much), you could still walk into your local gaming store and find a virgin gaming experience— something unaccompanied by volumes of hype, three thousand separate reviews, and "L@@K RARE" plastered all over the place.

This is how I experienced titles such as Herzog Zwei, M.U.S.H.A., Ghouls N' Ghosts and a spate of others—back before memorizing the hardware specs of countless game machines (how many sprites can a TG16 display? And what size?), back when the games mattered more than what made them tick or how much life could be wrung out of a fifteen minute demo. Some would say a kindler, gentler time.

It was the summer of '90, and I was a fresh-faced lad still in high school. On a rainy day trip to the mall, I hit my usual haunt: the Danbury Fair Mall Electronics Boutique (back when the carousel was still there, <sob>) looking to expand my new universe of 16-bit games while my friends' toiled away in the salt mines on planet NES. That's when it first caught my eye…Target Earth.

Target Genesis

Target Earth (known in Japan as Assault Suit Leynos) is the first title in the legendary NCS/Masaya series that spanned Genesis, Super Nintendo, Saturn and even a chapter on PlayStation. While there aren't direct ties between Target Earth and Cybernator (the SNES' spiritual brother of TE a.k.a. Assault Suit Valken), they are clearly cut from the same mold.

TE is a relatively straightforward action shooter, much like Contra, Metal Slug, etc. You play the role of an ace mech pilot and (will be) savior of the human race against a vicious alien armada inspired by the first Star Trek film—not the first time a Hollywood plotline has been borrowed, and it wouldn't be the last.

The story is displayed via small in-game cinemas that take place along the bottom of the screen replete with character pic and amazingly well translated text. There isn't a lot of it (it is a shooter) but it all makes sense and none of it features a shred of broken, off-kilter English.

These cinemas help make you feel like your part of a much larger force and thus the game doesn't suffer from one man against the world syndrome. At any given time, your allies and enemies are chattering away on your com-link and it adds some heavy-duty punch to the gameplay—it's doubtful that I'd have such strong memories of it without such a well-done sense of immersion in a greater cause.

Along with the cinemas come some thinly veiled mission-based gameplay. While most of it simply requires you to get from point 'a' to point 'b' while managing to stay alive, some missions require you to guard shuttle craft, load allies onto an escaping space craft, etc. It's a nice twist, and goes that one step further to differentiate the series from Contra and its ilk.

Amazingly the graphics still stand the test of time: everything is well animated (some of the animation is amazing for a 4 meg Genesis game circa '90) and the colors (as is the case with most classic Genesis title) really stretch the feeble limitations of the machine. The hues used on both enemy (emerald green) and allied (brown and white) units are all very vivid and bright, with almost no dithering anywhere. Less is more would be a good way to describe the visuals. Another way would be to quote Haohmaru: "wow, I forgot how good this game looks."

Packing Heat

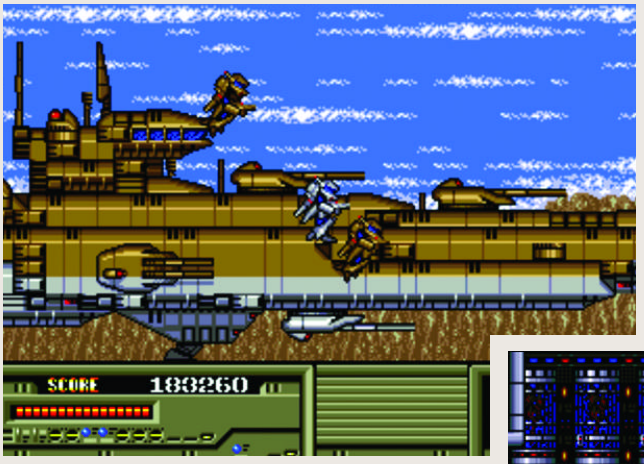
The action is more deliberately paced than, say, Contra. Your mech does not move at a Gunstar Heroes-type pace and moves with the gait and speed you might expect from a large, hulking robotic mech.

You can jump, and aim your gun up and down at varying angles to catch just the right shot to reduce a nearby foe to molten, fiery ruin. Best











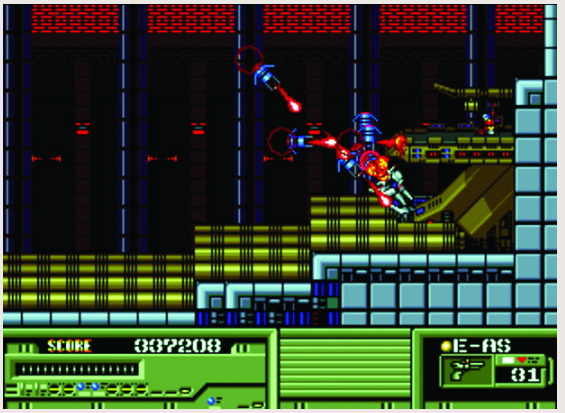


of all, depending how well you accomplish a given mission, you'll earn a veritable arsenal of enemy-eradicating ordinance. Not only is it a nice reward, but it adds significantly to the replay value—especially for this, one of the most difficult games ever (see box-out).

Enlightenment

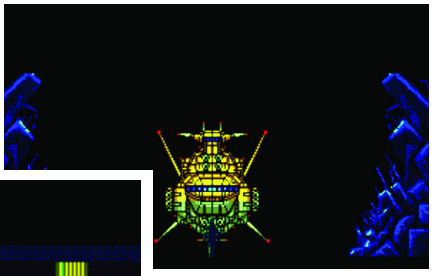
Oddly enough, Target Earth isn't too hard to find, despite being of the same class as Ghouls N' Ghosts and Herzog Zwei: early Genesis titles that were created pre-1991 P.S. (pre-Sonic). It can be had for peanuts on eBay and most used game stores. Without question, any gamer that considers him (or her) self a big fan of Genesis games needs to check this title out. Meanwhile, I'll be seeking to channel a higher power so that I can earn the parasite weapon…without codes.

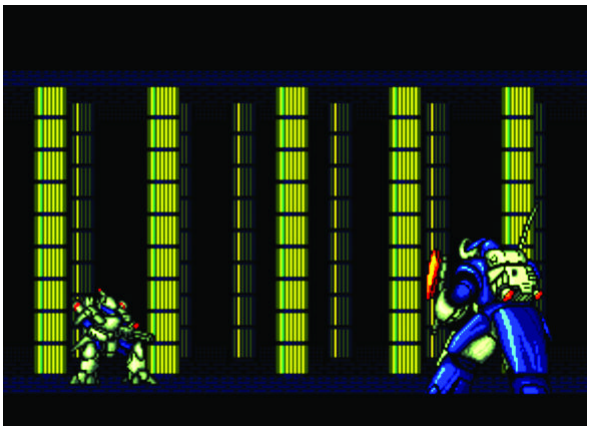
—ECM

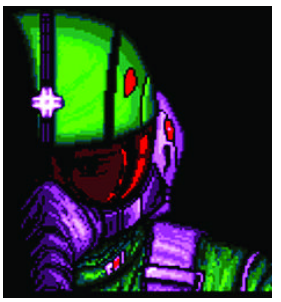


The Best Ending Ever?

First off, if you can best this game legitimately you are a member of the gaming elite. This game is hard as nails and I don't think I know anybody that has beat this game 'legally' (i.e. sans codes) outside of myself—an admission which generally draws cries of "yeah, right" and "my ass." In any event, it's a very, very, very hard game. But, there is a light at the end of the tunnel.







While most developers put as much thought into their endings as Pokey puts into work, this ending is amazing. Sure, there's not a shred of CG nor is the soundtrack orchestrally scored, but this was top stuff in '90. Even now, the emotional impact (completely conveyed visually, sans any text) is a force to be reckoned with, accompanied by well-drawn cinematics and a rousing closing overture.

Feast your eyes, then go and cheat, err, beat the game on your own—it's a site to see…

RetroFIT Phantasy Star



The Beginning

It might be hard to believe, but I used to be a hardcore Nintendo fan. For me, the NES was the next best thing to God, and I even went so far as to convince one friend who was perfectly happy with his Sega Master System to sell it and get himself an NES. Somewhere along the line, however, my thoughts started to change. Maybe the SMS wasn't such a bad little system either. Sure, it was no NES, but it might be good to have one too. I talked my father into getting me one for Christmas, and I did have some fun with it. Then, however, a game would come along that changed my gaming life forever.



1988



Thirteen years ago. It seems so long ago, but that was when IT came out - the game that had a profound affect on me. It was in 1988 that a game called Phantasy Star was released, the game that single-handedly made me a "gamer." Well, okay, that's a lie - Beserk was the game that made me a gamer. What Phantasy Star did was make me the type of gamer that I would be from that point on.

What was it about Phantasy Star that was so special? What was it that grabbed hold of me and refused to let go? Simple: storyline. What game before Phantasy Star really put a lot of care and work into a decent storyline? Save the princess, kill the evil king, the end. Sure, Phantasy Star was still about killing the giant evil in the end, but it wasn't that cut and dry. We talk about "epic" games these days, games that have a storyline and scenes that feel larger than life, like they were pulled from a timeless book or a great big-budget movie. It was this very game, however, that I feel started it all.

Phantasy Star set the stage for games that had that awe-inspiring feeling of becoming part of something far larger than you could have imagined. To someone that thought a game like Zelda was big, suddenly here was something with its own solar system, complete with 3 planets and each with their own unique feel and landscape. And where typically we would set forth to save the fair maiden, this time it was the fair maiden who was doing the saving.

As she watches her brother mercilessly struck down before her eyes, we are introduced to the young Alis Landale. After losing both her father and her brother to the tyranny of a once-great king now gone wrong, Alis finds she has no choice but to take up their cause and try to bring an end to Lassic's evil reign herself. So, not only did we have this great, epic game before us, but such a game also gave the starring role to a female? An amazing feat, and one that really wouldn't be repeated again until Final Fantasy IV.

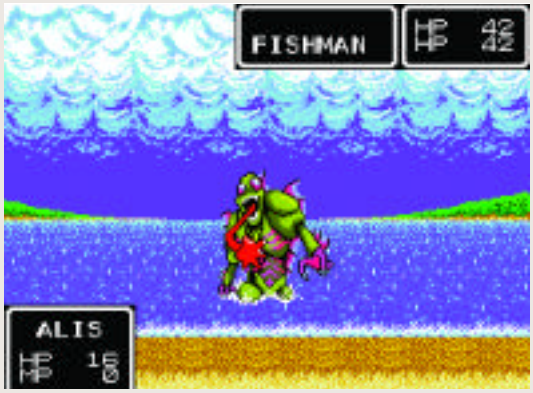
Looking Good

It wasn't just Phantasy Star's storyline that stood apart from the rest of the pack: technically, it was an astounding game. With Phantasy Star, the hardware superiority of the SMS was never more tangible, as the rich, bright color pallet of the game made everything on the NES look dark and drab by comparison. And where Dragon Warrior presented us with battles made up of a small, 1/4th sized box with a stationary background and lifeless creature, Phantasy Star's battles were full screen, with gorgeous (at times animated) backdrops and huge creatures with liquid smooth attacks. Every new enemy you met was something fresh, and who can forget the very first time they ran into one of the infamous sandworms on Motavia and saw the beautiful animation of their attack? With a great storyline, cast of characters, and graphics to die for, that would have been enough - but it wasn't, for Sega.

Phantasy Star has what I think is still one of the best game soundtracks ever. I've always said that I typically don't notice the music in a video game, so if I do, it is something special. To this day, I can STILL clearly hear at least four or five of the musical tracks from the game in my head, as if I had just played the game yesterday.









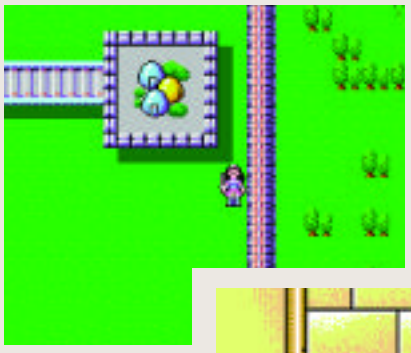
Phantasy Forever

For being one of the first real video game console RPGs to come out in the US, we couldn't have asked for a better beginning than Phantasy Star. Not only that, but I maintain that Phantasy Star is still, to this day, one of the best RPGs ever released in the US. Sure, the graphics are a bit outdated, the music can't hold up to fully orchestrated redbook music tracks, and the storyline isn't "complex" next to Square's latest RPG.

Still, even today Phantasy Star is a great game to play, and I can think of a number of RPGs released in recent years that aren't up to the quality of this little title released thirteen years ago. It saddens me that so many gamers today don't have a history with the older consoles, so that they probably haven't played Phantasy Star. If you haven't, I really recommend that you do, because it will give you a whole new appreciation for the RPG genre.

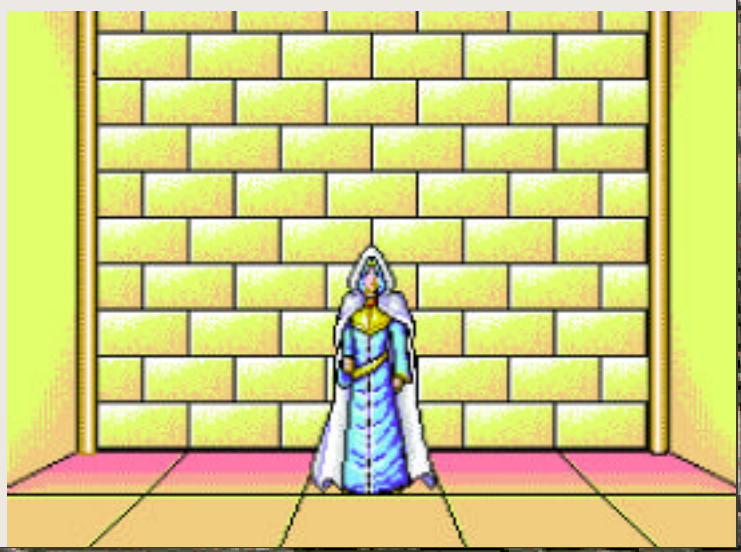
As long as I love video games, I'll love Phantasy Star, and the adventures of my favorite video game heroine, Alis Landale. In fact, Phantasy Star still sits comfortably at #2 on my personal list of my favorite games ever, only having been bumped from the #1 spot by Silent Hill. If Sega loved me, we'd get an update to this game on the DC with Skies of Arcadia-esque 3D, or even better, a gorgeous 2D update on the GBA. Come on Sega prove that you love me. Please?

—Shidoshi









RetroFIT Crystalis





100 years have passed. Most of the earth has become dominated by mutated creatures. People worked together to rebuild their villages and their lives, but they still lived in fear. As they feared the rebirth of evil, they remembered the construction of the tower and of its consequences once activation had begun. Once evil emerged, would they still have a chance?

...

There was still one hope...



November 1990. Dragged along by my parents to yet another faceless wholesale warehouse store, I break away as soon as possible and head for home electronics. Target: Nintendo section. Not that I can afford anything, mind you, but it's still fun to window shop. "Golgo 13, have it. Contra, have it. Castlevania, <blech>. Crystalis... huh, what's this?" Picking it up, I investigate further: "Fight the evil, swords, magic," blah blah blah. The company sounded vaguely familiar... Didn't they make Ikari Warriors? (It wasn't for another 8 months that I would become acquainted with their $599.99 console and $189.99 cartridges). When I saw the price—$11.89—it was hard to argue the expected quality any further. It was time to find the parents and beg and plead like there was no tomorrow. Hey, NES carts under $30 were a rare commodity where I lived, even after the arrival of Genesis & TurboGrafx-16. When I got it home and fired it up, I was at a loss—I couldn't decide if I wanted to kick whoever decided to so badly undervalue this amazing game, or kiss them for having put it within my means.



Crystalis is the epitome of 8-bit action RPGs. Many have tried and failed to approximate the fun of Zelda, but Crystalis succeeds where others have failed, and maybe, to some (like me), actually surpassed the originator.

The story goes that on 10/1/1997 World War III broke out, ravaging the earth to the point of knocking the planet off-axis and creating widespread radiation-spawned mutations. In the aftermath the 'elders' banded together and erected a giant floating tower, with the assumption that somehow this would ward off future evil.

Ray Bradbury, this is not. You, a synthetic human, were created in case of evil returning to the world, eternally sleeping in the side of a mountain in a stasis chamber. And to prevent the game from being a. boring and b. abruptly ending, you are awoken and charged with the holy mission of vanquishing the re-emerged evil.

What sets Crystalis apart from others, and in my opinion makes it vastly superior, is the massive areas you can wander in without pause. Zelda pauses every time you move to another 'room', be it in the overworld or in a dungeon (most likely stemming from its origins on the FamiCom Disk Drive) which is frustrating for a spaz like myself that craves action. Crystalis, as a rule, has roughly an 8x8 screen area to wander without loads/transitions. Not to mention your man is no wuss like Link—he



doesn't need to be scratch-free and 100% healthy to shoot 'enchanted' blade projectiles like that princess-whipped whelp, all he needs is to stand still for a second to charge up and away he goes!

Your weaponry and armor are a bit bland, but they keep it focused. There are 4 swords, all element-based (wind, fire, ice, lightning), which can be enhanced by their respective crystal balls, and maximized by locating the corresponding bracelets. The 'balls' allow you to vanquish obstacles in some situations (i.e. destroy a weak wall, create an ice bridge, melt an ice wall...) while the bracelets launch an elemental attack on the surrounding enemies, while bilking you for some magic points.

I cannot think of any other game EVER with a telepathy spell, where you can sacrifice magic points to teleconference with your choice of mentors you meet during the course of the adventure. Then again, I doubt you turn on the game and expect your spiritual guide to say 'I don't want to talk to you. Leave me alone!'

The locales your adventures take you thru are amazingly diverse as well: from villages, to massive city-states, small pygmy tribes tree fortresses. Even the deserts and the frozen mountains and tundra of the north (ironically to the south as well as north in the game) are well laid out.

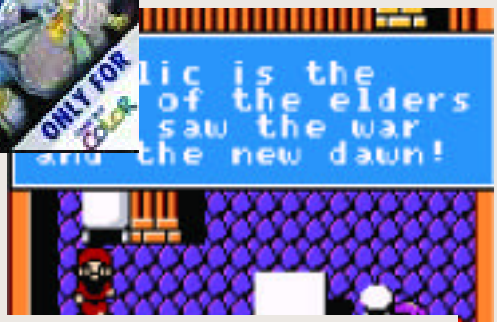
Sadly, the sequel SNK promised to be in the works for many many many many MANY years never seemed to make any progress and quietly disappeared from release lists. Which is probably a good thing, as SNK would have more than likely opted to release it on one of their own consoles instead of NES or SNES, and there was no possible way I could come up with $700 for a NeoGeo system and the game, short of selling my organs in Tijuana. I like Crystalis, but I like my spleen even more, if you follow me...



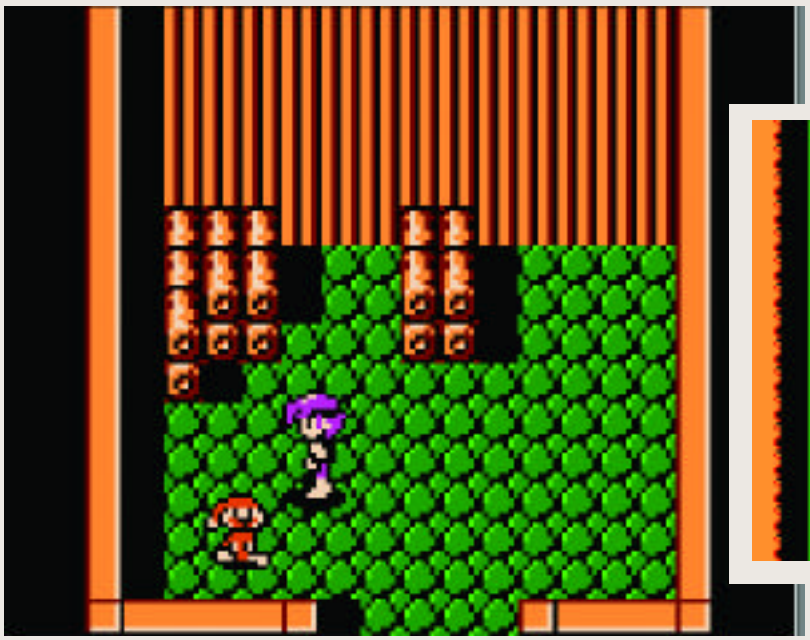
I'm guessing that I wasn't the only one that was overly impressed with Crystalis, because in 2000 Nintendo of America ported the NES classic to GameBoy Color so the current generation could enjoy it. Personally I liken it more to a remake, as they changed the story around to remove the apocalyptic demise of the current world and just skip straight to the semi-medieval time the game occurs in. If you had never played Crystalis before you would not even notice the reworking, but for a hardened fan like me it was a bit of a shock. Other little irritable details like the much lower resolution detract from the GBC version, but it's the only one you could really walk off the street at this point and purchase.

So how 'bout it SNK—going to give us a sequel this decade?

—Pokey

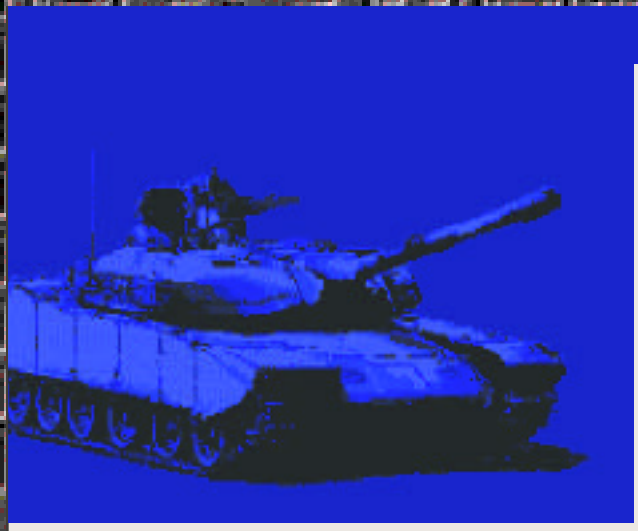


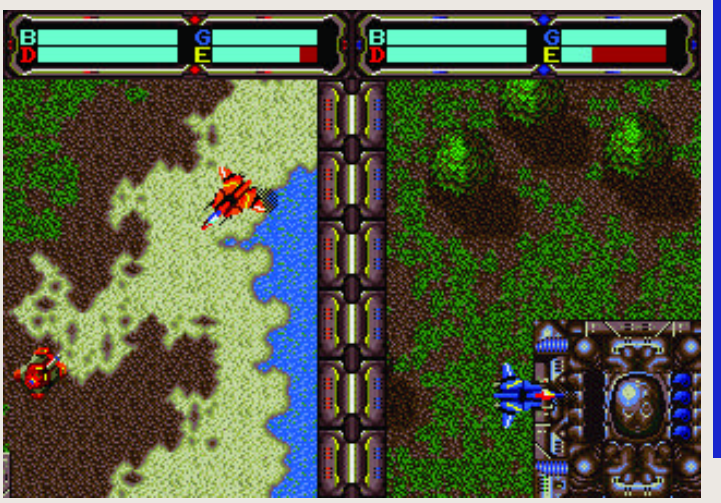




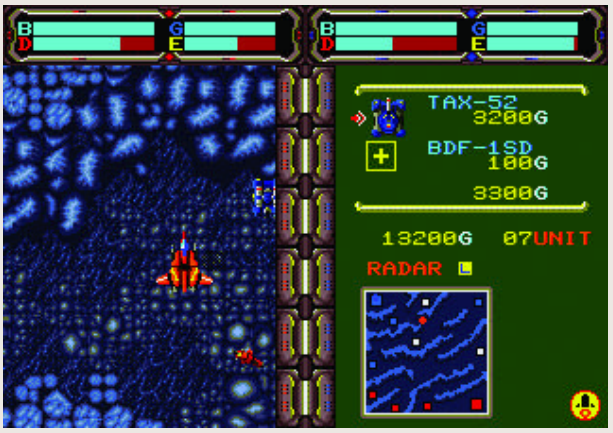


RetroFIT Herzog Zwei





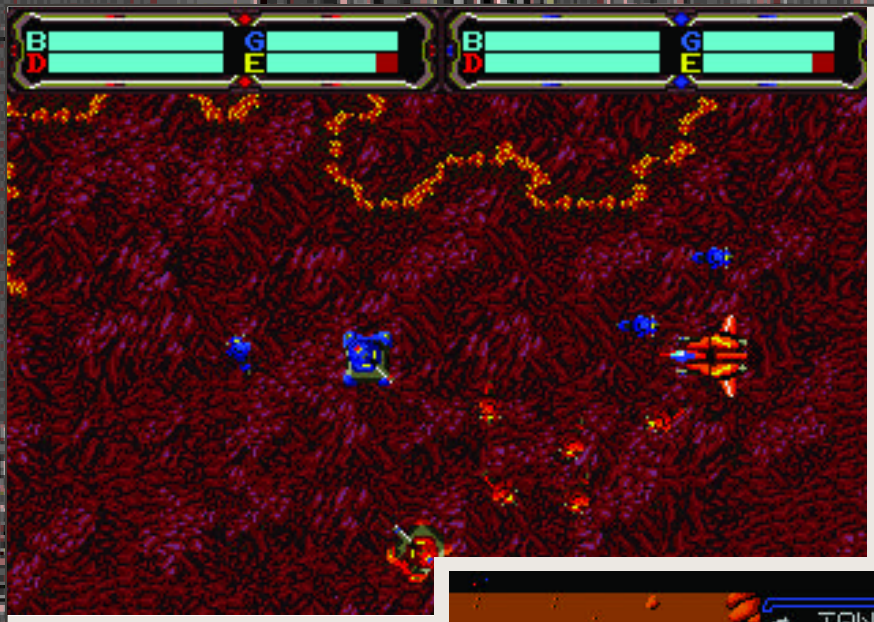




There was a game released a long time ago, for a console still in its infancy, by a company largely unknown in North America. The system was the Genesis, the company was TechnoSoft, and the game was Herzog Zwei. Herzog Zwei means "Dukes Two" in German, and it indicates not only that it's a two-player game, it's also the sequel to Herzog—an even lesser known game for the Japanese MSX computer. The original game was similar in concept — fight a computer or human opponent for dominance of the map by building and deploying various fighting units. Herzog Zwei one of the first—if not the very first—Real Time Strategy games, and those who played it know how amazing it was. At the time, I described it to my friends as a high-speed chess game with no grid and no turns. You and the computer or a friend create and deploy units in a frenetic attempt to conquer the map.

Herzog Zwei was an exceptional game, a true classic on a system that arguably didn't have as many classics as it should have. Most people know it only from one single boring picture from an EGM magazine many years ago. Remember that this game was pre—Sonic, so it suffered a low production run since very few players had yet to buy the system. It also received no advertising support and sadly, as the first of its genre, it was hard for gamers to wrap their head around the whole concept. It wasn't at all like the Koei strategy games they knew and it was too cerebral to be called a shoot 'em up, so few people took the risk. Those who did were more than amply rewarded, however.

It's very simple compared to the modern real-time strategy game—the object was simply to shoot the other player's base enough that it exploded; simple, right? Well there was more to it of course, but it was no Starcraft, and it was no Red Alert. There were only eight kinds of unit to produce with no flying units at all, but there were different programs to assign the units, which made for a surprising amount of variety. The game not only defined the RTS genre, it introduced concepts never repeated. As a player you weren't simply pointing and clicking, you were actually on the battlefield. As a transformable flying and walking robot, you could pick up units and place them where they would do the most good or drop down and shoot a few baddies mano a mano. You couldn't attack the enemy's bases yourself however, which meant you had to get your units in close to fight for you. The game was phenomenally well balanced—you couldn't fly



if a little light on the effects. A flat scrolling background covered in sprites was as fancy as it got here, no parallax or pulsing backgrounds to distract you.

The game has aged quite well, far better than most games of its era. The flaws in the computer AI mean that you either play with a friend or you simply count the minutes until your victory — inevitably it would come if you knew the pattern. When first I imported this game, the learning curve was very steep. The manual was nigh incomprehensible in Japanese, and I spent the better part of a week working out exactly what the hell was going on. Once that was mastered I was digging into all eight maps and four difficulty levels, and loving every minute of it. I recommend spending some time to teach your friends though, as the computer won't keep you challenged for long.

To this day it's one of my top five games, and with only one exception, no one can beat me (ECM's note: oh we'll see Mr. Safely in Japan). This exception has just celebrated over eleven hundred StarCraft wins, so I don't feel too bad about losing. I'll take the rest of you on any time you're in the neighborhood though, so go find yourselves a copy and practice up some. This is Genesis gaming at its finest.

—NeoGman

all the way across the map while carrying something, and your units didn't have enough fuel to make it on their own. This forced you to take smaller steps, clearing and seizing the smaller bases en route to the enemy's HQ.



There were six programs available, and not all units could use all programs. Selecting one was as simple as picking the right icon; nothing complicated. The programs available were varied and useful: a program could have a tank simply sit still and fire at anything close enough, or have it approach the nearest enemy base, or attack the other player's home base. Different programs had different costs, and you had to balance the programming price against the cost of the unit and the money you had available. Making a stack of small tanks that didn't move was cheap, but the same stack programmed to attack the enemy's base would double their cost.

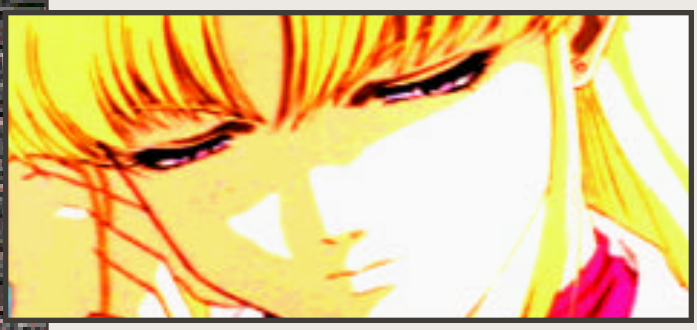
Each unit took time to produce — the bigger the unit, the more time it took. Making a large tank or turret could take more time than you could spare. You could create a unit from anywhere on the map, and pick it up from any of your bases simply by flying over it. Each player was allowed a maximum of fifty units, but the slow speed of the Genesis meant that in reality you'd be suffering slowdown and chop after a combined total of seventy to eighty units was reached.

Capturing bases was easy: if you created four infantry with an Infiltrate program and managed to sneak them inside an empty or enemy base, that base would become yours. Each smaller base you captured increased the amount of money you made, but spread your forces out a little thinner.

The music was phenomenal, as we came to expect from later TechnoSoft releases. Some of my all—time favorite game soundtracks were from this game, and they easily equal tracks in the Thunder Force series. The graphics were on par with most TechnoSoft titles,



RetroFIT Elemental Gearbolt



Say what you want, but we ain't Working Designs whores like some (who shall remain blissfully nameless). Which makes this tale all the more special. Gather around, ye that might have missed the treasure known as Elemental Gearbolt.

Yeah, I know what you're saying, "1998, in Retrofit? What's up with that?"

See, Retrofit is as much about things that are lost as it is about things that are old and marinated in nostalgia. At E3 in '98 there was a small booth in Atlanta displaying a few titles, some under the now defunct "Spaz" label (Thunderforce V, for the curious) and hidden among the wreckage of that E3, in that small booth, was a gun game for use with the relatively new Guncon—a game like no other…

It was a small title by a small publisher that was displayed in a crowded exhibition hall overrun by people and surrounded by deafening displays of "mine's bigger than yours." Elemental Gearbolt serves as a painful reminder of something that should have been, but wasn't. Sony passed on publishing their own game (released in '97 in Japan) and Working Designs picked up the slack for a title that they obviously felt warranted a look by US-based gamers.



If you take Gearbolt and insert it into your PSX or PS2, the score will instantly instill a sense of inspiration that's almost religious. You feel compelled to explore further. "This is a gun game?" you inquire. Yes, but did you happen to catch the anime introduction and the bold characters that comfortably glide along to the haunting themes? No? Did you notice after you started the game that you felt like you were playing an RPG, except for the fact that you were holding a gun in your hand? Experience points? Levels? Cast of characters? Animated cinemas for events? Yep, you bet.

Funny thing about this unholy combination: it works. And more so than just a little; it works perfectly. As you travel through forests and towns laying waste to your enemies, the atmospheric and cinematic qualities serve to engulf your sense of doubt about this marriage and prod you to move ever further, ever deeper with a greater sense of purpose. The score throughout the title is among—the best integration of music and gameplay to have ever come to light on console.

Elemental Gearbolt is a title that is well worth the hunt that you might need to undertake to get it. Keep an eye out for it used at your local game haunt to pick it up. It's an experience that no one should miss.

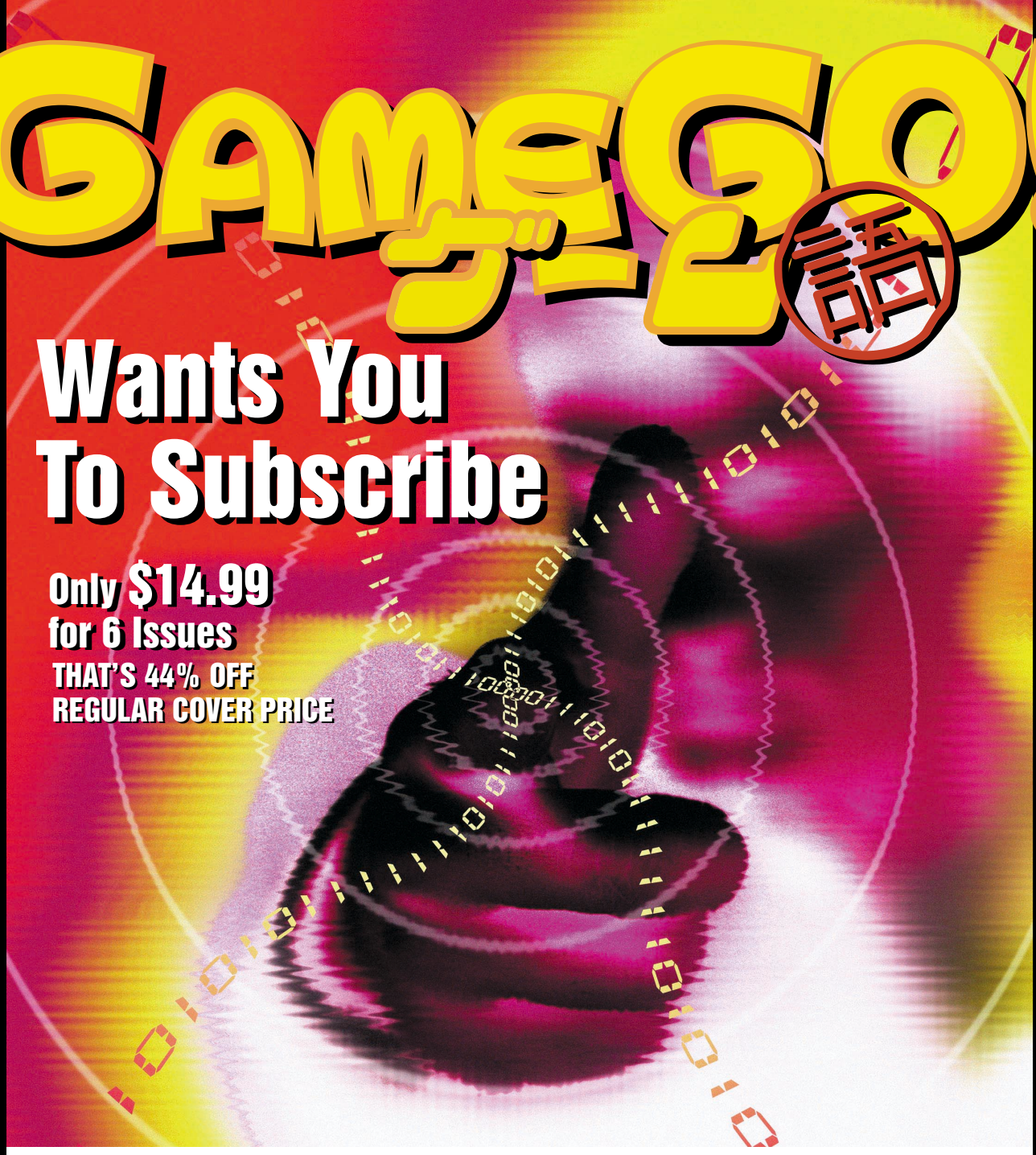
—Haohmaru







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AnimEtc.

この日本語はめっちゃ無意味です。

anime · manga · J-pop · asian live action · otaku culture



Page One: News & Goodies



Cho-youkoso

Welcome, boys and girls, to AnimEtc. For those of you who were part of the GameFan days, I'm sure you're already familiar with who I am and what I do. For those who weren't, I'm Shidoshi, and this is GameGO's little anime section. The thing is, however, AnimEtc. isn't just anime - it is manga, Japanese music and entertainment, Asian live action movies, "otaku culture," and just about anything else that would go along with those things. You won't find just a few pages of slapped-together reviews here, however. AnimEtc. is about bringing you as much fun and interesting content as possible; hence the "Etc." part of the name. But... for AnimEtc. to live on, you've got to speak up. Some people have put doubt in the minds of those higher up when it comes to an anime section in the mag. So, if you like the idea of AnimEtc., and you want to see it continue, you MUST say so! E-mail ECM, or send mail to Posty, and let them know that AnimEtc. needs to - no, MUST - be in every issue of the mag.

- shidoshi@gamegomagazine.com

The J-pop invasion

J-pop in America. It doesn't exist... or does it? You may not know it, but there have already been a handful of J-pop CDs released here on our shores, and even better, more are on the way. I've tried to pull together a list of the releases from some of the "bigger" names of J-pop and J-rock, but of course this list may not be totally complete. Dreams Come True - *Eternity* was on the *Swan Princess* soundtrack back around 1995, and they had another song on the Disney *Atlantis* soundtrack. Also, DCT will release the album *This Monster* here in the US come fall. L'Arc ~ en ~ Ciel contributed the end theme, *Spirits Dream Inside*, to the *Final Fantasy: the Spirits Within* soundtrack, and their album *Clicked Singles Best 13* was released in the US last May. It isn't easy to track down, so you might have to check a music store which gets in or can order harder to find stuff, or try to find it online. Same deal with the US release of *Spike* from Puffy, or Puffy AmiYumi as they are called here, that came out in June. Back to movies, Utada Hikaru shows up on the *Rush Hour 2* soundtrack with a joint effort with Foxy Brown called *Blow My Whistle*. Being honest, what blows is the song - but still, it is noteworthy. Kuraki Mai (called Mai K in the US) seems to have had some sort of release before for the single *Baby I Like*. She'll also have a full re-recorded in English album come out this fall, which will have all songs from her *Baby I Like* single as well as other songs. The company putting out this album will also release an English-language album from another Japanese singer, Aika Ono.



So, as you can see, the J-pop market in the US still isn't big, but it is certainly growing. However, to keep it growing, we fans need to do our part. Releasing an album in the US from a Japanese group or singer is a big gamble, and typically, record execs have little interest in dealing with such acts. So, when such a release does happen, how the album sells is VERY important. One example of this is Coco Lee. Her US album seems to have had very poor sells, and some are pointing the blame straight at Napster. Her music gets tossed up on Napster, and everyone just downloads instead of buying the CD. When a band like Metallica complains about Napster, it may fall on deaf ears - they are making millions, and their record deals are safe. For the smaller acts who desperately need sales to get a record company to care about them, things like Napster can be their death. So, if you care about J-pop and J-rock coming to the US at all, get out there, and support the artists with your money.

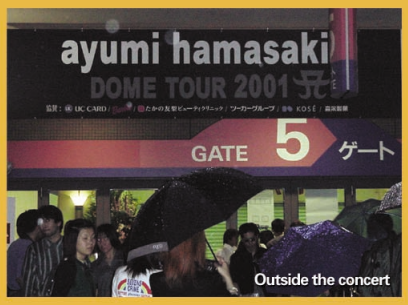
Recent Headlines



Okay boys and girls, let's play a game of "cram in as much news into a small space as possible!" Miyazaki: According to the Internet Movie Database, the latest Miyazaki animated movie - *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* - grossed $15.8 million its opening weekend in Japan, which broke the record that *Mononoke Hime* held for highest opening by an animated film in Japan. Cartoon Network: Starting September 2nd, CN will premier "Adult Swim," a new block of animation targeted at an older audience. Showing Sunday through Thursday 10pm to 1am, Adult Swim will include, among other things, *Cowboy BeBop*. By the time you read this, CN will probably already be showing the original DragonBall series, and they are also planning on showing *Pilot Candidate / Candidate for Goddess*. Tenchi Muyo: More *Tenchi* is indeed coming. A third *Ryo-Ohki OVA* series should hit sometime in Spring 2002 in Japan, as well as a *Galaxy Police* OVA and TV series. Personally, I think *Tenchi Forever* was a great ending for *Tenchi*, and it didn't need to go on from there. New Titles: Loads of new titles were talked about at the recent Anime Expo '01. Here are a selection of them. Pioneer - *Adventures of Mini-Goddess*, *Ah! My Goddess Movie* (oh yeah baby), *NieA_7*, *Soul Taker*. Bandai - *Char's Counterattack: Mobile Suit Gundam*, *Giant Gorg*, *Kikaidar*, *Kazemakase Tsukigage Ran*. ADV - *Aura Battler Dunbine*, *Eden's Bowy*, *Puni Puni Poemi*, *Sakura Wars TV*, *You're Under Arrest TV Specials*, *Zone of the Enders* TV and OVA Media Blaster - *Beserk*, *Fortune Quest*, *Level C*, *Y's I & II*. Synch-Point - *FLCL*, *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*. Viz - *Inu Yasha*. Newtype: A US version of *Newtype* magazine?! Talk about such a project is beginning to crop up all over the place. Supposedly planned for a Spring 2002 launch, this US version of *Newtype* would be skewed more towards the Japanese anime scene, so that we can all see the great stuff we can't yet watch, but hopefully will be able to in the future. From what has been said about the plans, it sounds like the people in charge want to model the US version very much after the Japanese version. God bless *Animerica*, but the US REALLY needs another anime magazine for better balance. Wizard's new anime mag seems to be going in its own strange direction, and I question if anyone else has what it takes to give us a real alternative anytime soon. So, I hope that *Newtype* US is indeed coming.



Huge "Sen" poster in Fukuoka



Outside the concert

Ayu Dome Tour 2001

Getting to spend a month in Japan was already good enough for me - when my host mother presented me with tickets to go to Hamasaki Ayumi's 2001 Dome Tour concert, I nearly had a heart attack. In a world... best day of my life. Fukuoka dome was HUGE, and there were around 30,000 people there. Ayu put on one hell of a show, and I walked away a happy man. And, look below at what I purchased: Ayu manga! Yes, Ayu and her life in hand-drawn form. Must... have... more... Ayu... goods!!!



JapanCHECK!

Shidoshi recently had the chance to spend a month studying in Osaka, Japan. So, for the first installment of CHECK!, we look at a few aspects of life in Japan.

CapsuleCHECK!



Put your money into a capsule machine in the US, and you'll get a Backstreet Boys sticker or a cheap fake ring. In Japan? Hardcore toys like Tron Bonne (above), Golgo 13, Lupin, Namco gals, and even ..real girl's phone numbers?!

BemaniCHECK!



Japanese arcades know the score - typically each has an excellent "music game" selection. Those lucky Japanese now have *DDR 5th Mix*, as well as *Para Para Paradise 2nd*, *Guitar Mania*, *Shakka Tambourine*, and so on.

BeverageCHECK!



First, one of the cool Japanese *Coke* can/bottles. Anyhow, Japan has some great drinks. *C.C. Lemon* (my favorite), *Pocari Sweat* (for you active people), and *Calpis / Calpico* (a fermented milk drink... actually very tasty). Check your local Asian market - they may carry them all.

MangaCHECK!



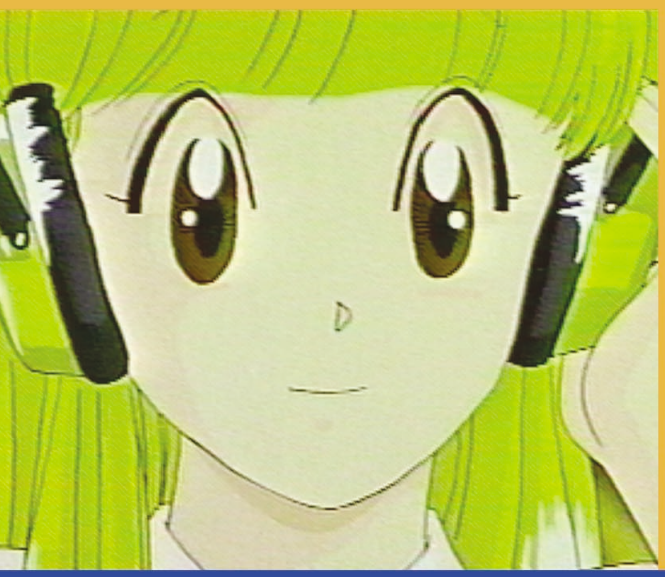
Until you visit Japan, you CANNOT imagine how much manga some stores have. You could spend hours just checking out what all they have for sale. If you're a big fan of manga, Japan is absolutely your heaven.





review by: Shidoshi · comedy · ova [2] · the right stuf · 60 min · 12+ · english dub

Assemble Insert



I've got an addiction for "strange" comedy. Be it anime like *Elf Princess Rane*, movies like *Real Men*, or online comics like *Jerk City*, I often laugh at things most others just scratch their heads at. Now, we have *Assemble Insert*. *AI* has been around for a few months, but I'm willing to bet that most of you never even heard of it due to it being a rather low-key release. The premise already begins to show that something isn't right with this show - the police are being beaten at every turn by a somewhat-sinister band of thieves called the Demon Seed. The small group of officers given the task of being a special anti-Demon Seed unit are out of options, and turn to a backup plan; find someone who will battle the thieves while becoming a popular idol singer. Yes, in the grand tradition of Minmie, the "idol singer savior" is back. Maron is a shy, quiet girl, who just happens to have superhuman strength. So, we basically have 60 minutes of a cute girl being a pop idol, beating up a bunch of half-wit thieves, a group of cops more interested in Maron's singing career than her crime fighting, and... live action commercials. While at times some of the jokes feel a bit forced, I can't help but like *Assemble Insert*. If you're the kind of person who likes your comedy bizarre and at times nonsensical, give dear Maron a shot. For the rest of you, you'll wonder what medication I was on when I found myself enjoying such a show.

In Depth: Anime · Live Action





action · theatrical movie · dai3i · 12+ · 108 min · japanese · preview by: Shidoshi

Gamera 3
The Revenge of Iris

A movie with a person in a rubber monster costume is a movie with a person in a rubber monster costume. That, in a nutshell, was what I always thought. Don't get me wrong, I love *Godzilla* and the rest. But when one of my classmates from Japanese class handed me *Gamera 3* and told me, "this one is different," I just kind of smiled and nodded. I took it home, and it sat there, and sat there, and sat there. Finally, I broke down, and I watched it. Boy... was I wrong. I was wrong to have waited, and I was wrong about big monster movies. As silly as other movies you've seen might have been, as cheezy as Japanese big monster movies may sometimes be, *Gamera 3* is different.

Remember the US *Godzilla* movie a few years ago? *Gamera 3* is what that movie SHOULD have been. I mean, absolutely, honestly - this movie is amazing. I never liked Gamera himself before, but after this movie, the idea of a giant mutant turtle is suddenly cool. *Gamera 3* is a definite advancement in special effects, to a point where it isn't about people in rubber monster suits anymore - it is about giant monsters trashing the hell out of Japanese cities. If you've ever liked this kind of movie, or if you think you could like such a movie, you MUST see *Gamera 3*. ADV, thank the lord, is bringing it to the US. Full review then, I promise.







review by: shidoshi · album · J-pop · Toshiba-EMI · 13 tracks · Japanese



Utada Hikaru

Distance / 宇多田ヒカル

This is only Utada Hikaru's second album. I have to keep saying that to myself over and over, because to be honest, it is rather hard to believe. So long as I've been a fan of J-pop, she's been there. So, to me, I can't think of J-pop without Hikki. Also, her first album was released a little over two years ago - an amazingly long amount of time in the J-pop world. So, how does her sophomore effort, *Distance*, sound? Some have said that her newer work just doesn't have the same feeling. I, however, think *Distance* shows a more matured Hikki, music with a bit more richness of sound and personality behind it. Sometimes it still trips me up that J-pop songs hit as singles long before they are on an album - the opening song, *Wait and See ~Risk~*, for example. After that, we are hit with what I think is by far the best track on the album, *Can You Keep a Secret?*. *Secret* is one of those songs that you just can't help but move to the music with. The rest of *Distance* is almost like Hikki trying to prove that she refuses to be locked into one music category; *Distance* has a lighter, more poppier sound to it, *Sunglass* is unquestionably R&B influenced, *Drama* breaks out into heavy rock chords, and *Eternally* is a soft, melodious ballad. If you don't expect all J-pop to be Morning Musume or MAX, then Utada Hikaru's *Distance* is a must for your collection. Great music for relaxing on a warm summer night.

In Depth: J-pop · Manga

anthology · monthly · $4.99 · Mixx Ent. · 10+ · 128 pages · US format · review by: shidoshi

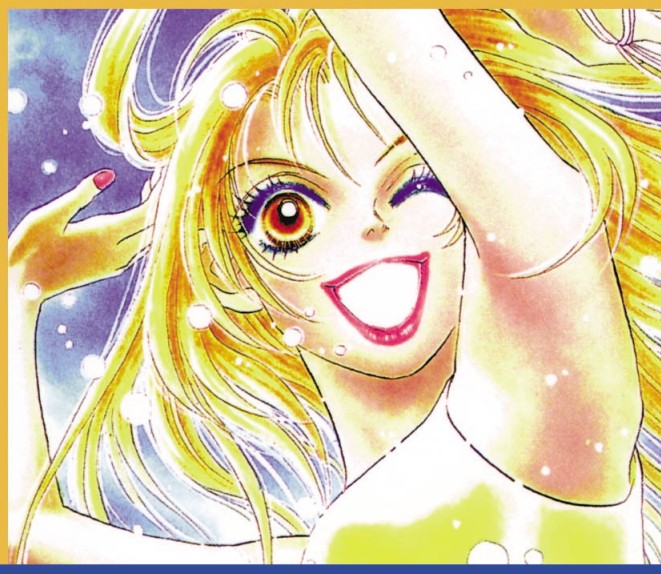




Smile

Monthly Manga Anthology

You'll have to pardon me for a moment, because for some of you this will be totally old news. However, I never had the chance to talk about the "new" *Smile*, so gosh darnit, I'm going to. While I held a grudge against Mixx for what they did to *MixxZine* for a long time, in a strange twist of fate, they made just as drastic of a change to another of their publications that couldn't have been better. *Smile*, from the start, was supposed to be a girl's magazine - it talked about "girlie" things like make-up, boys, fashion, and what-not, and it carried "girlie" manga like *Sailor Moon*. Being brutally honest, though, the mag was terrible. Then, however, it went through a transformation. *Smile* is now a monthly manga anthology based around shoujo - or girl's - comics. Don't let the name fool you, though - these comics are for anyone who loves manga, not just those of the fairer sex. Included in the round up are the continuing adventures of *Sailor Moon SS*, the somewhat darker action of *Juline*, and shidoshi's beloved shoujo title, *Peach Girl*. Cute ganguro kogal = big love from me. Another title, *Clover*, was part of the line-up, but it was taken out to make room for some new upcoming titles. *Smile* is a fabulous anthology, and a must purchase each month. Kudos to Mixx for helping support shoujo manga in the US.

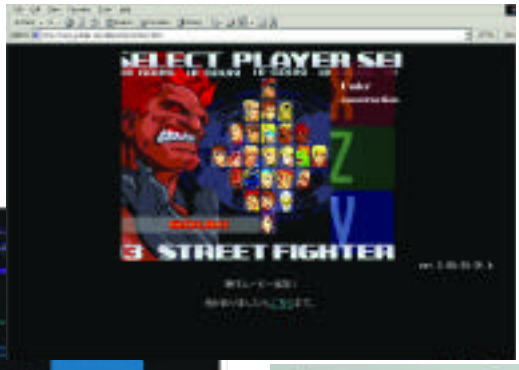


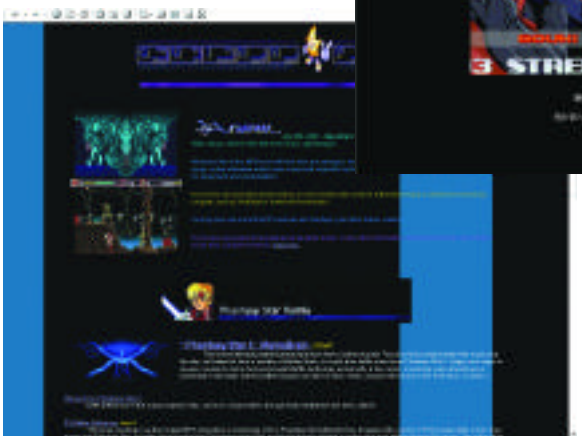
Holy Website Batman!

Now this is how you do a video game website. This Japanese site based on Street Fighter Zero 3, replete with character select screen and full SFZ3 tunes is amazing. Click on any character and you'll get relevant web page links and combo movies for each character. While it's clearly a work in progress, what's there is utterly amazing. Be warned, though, it's a large download and it has a nasty habit of crashing your browser.

GO!: http://www.g-finder.com/albert/zero3/zero3.html









Music For Our Ears

Not surprisingly, after we ran last months Leftover on DJ Pretzel, we got inundated with requests to feature more game music websites. So here are two more for your delectation: Quinn Fox' Sega Re-mix page and KFSS Studios which features Final Fantasy remixes. Good stuff all around and certainly worth a few downloads—if you have any other sites we should know about, people, fire them our way.

GO!: http://www.quinn.50g.com

GO!: http://www.kfssstudios.com/

Furious

As we're official sponsors of CGE 2001 (the yearly classic gaming convention in sunny Las Vegas—coverage next issue), we figured we'd toss you some info on one of the new games featured there: Ms. Space Fury for Colecovision (released by Joe Santulli @ www.digitpress.com - a highly recommended read for classic game afficianados)! It's a follow-up to the classic Sega/Gremlin vector coin-op title Space Fury, circa '81. We hope this neat little collectible spurs GameGO! fan Caféman to get to porting Intellivision Discs of Tron over to the Atari 5200 for the next CGE—looks like Coleco wins this round, Caf.





GameGO! Gets Together

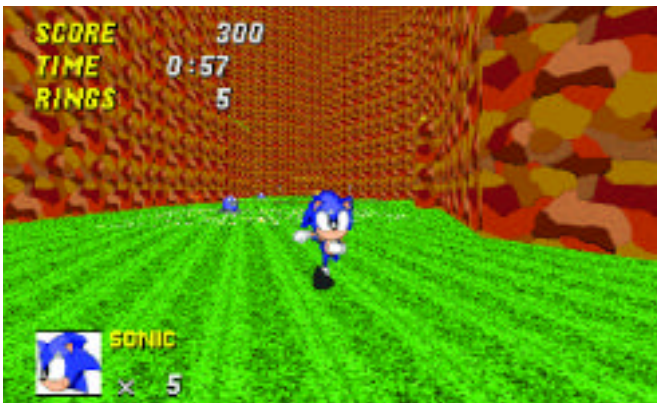
Since our first issue was completed just prior to E3, we didn't have time to flash a pic of our pre-show get-together. We had a raucous good time that included a trip to Universal City Walk, (bad) arcade games, food and drink (plenty of the latter, in fact). For a magazine that didn't even exist yet, we're pretty happy with the small turn-out of people for a no-holds-barred, unsanctioned event. So feast your eyes on GameGO! editors and fans alike—can you spot ECM, Shou-sama, and Kodomo?

Tidbits

Ikaruga Watch: Not only is the game not going to Dreamcast (as our man on the inside insists), but now it's becoming exceedingly questionable that it will ever see the light of day in Japanese arcades. We're praying it's not so (it's always nice to see a non-fighting/non-racing game in arcades these days, <sigh>) and ECM is currently clutching his teddy bear and sobbing quietly.

Fresh Brewed

Starting next issue, we'll be dedicating hard space (rather than just this brief snippet) to the wonderful world of homebrew games across all platforms. Along with Ms. Space Fury (above), this is what a heavy duty homebrew project is about: Sonic Robo Blast 2. There is a positively huge Sonic fan community on the 'Net and they make scads of Sonic-inspired games from 2D (!) Sonic titles to one of the best found in this title. You can grab it at http://www.srb2.org/main.htm and spread the word that GameGO! wants howebrew titles! If you've got a homebrew game and you want it featured in these pages, let us know at freshbrewed@gamegomagazine.com.



Don't Call Them Hardcore

Don't Call Them Hardcore

Well, you asked for it so you're getting it: an expanded and full-blown 'hardcore' section where you, the reader, can submit your over-the-top gaming stories each and every month. Any and all submissions (pics with you in them are best) should be sent along to hardcore@gamegomagazine.com. So, without further ado, away we go!

Evicted



Darren Chase (a.k.a. PaCrappa) is a rare breed—someone that is so passionate about bringing better games to the masses that he started a game shop…at the expense of his apartment. That's right, he was recently evicted so that he'd have cash to start the game shop. All is not lost, however, as last we heard he's living in the store (now that's what we'd call going all the way).

He's also a mad system modder and the included pic shows the battle scars he's earned in this quest to bring import gaming to the masses. Careful, though—ECM once dropped some molten hot solder on his leg and it stunted his growth (at least that's what he tells us)—soldering irons are hot, Darren. That's just a friendly tip from the boys at GameGO!

GT 3x3



Eddie Sun, resident of the Great White North (that's Canada for the illiterate), shows us that the only way to really play GT3 is to go all the way: 3 TVs, 3 PS2s, 1 wheel, and 1 gamer all linked for some Ferrari F355-style action. Maybe ECM would have liked the game more if he could have pretended it was a Sega game...but probably not. We salute you, Eddie, it takes a special kind of head case to go through that much trouble to play GT2, err, 3.

Jaguar-itis



Some people collect rare PC Engine and Saturn games. Others have to have as much rare game hardware as they can get their sweaty little mitts on. Kevin Manne, however, suffers from a much more insidious malaise, however—he's a Jaguar fan. Yes, the Atari Jaguar.

Kevin's quest to own every rare piece of Jag-centric merchandise has led to some exorbitant expenditures: Brett Hull Hockey prototypes on CD and cart ($550 for the cartridge on eBay; $300 for the CD), cause ya know, it's not enough to just have one or the other, <shrug>.

Next up was insane amount of Jag-related lunacy: a prototype Jaguar Voice Modem,

System Test Cartridge, Developers Flash ROM cartridge(s), and an early beta cart

of Rayman—what about the Jaguar boxer shorts and matching briefs?

To top it all off he even managed to track down a working Atari Jaguar kiosk for a mere $200—lucky for him he'll be able to live in that when he gets removed from his apartment (talk to Darren—I'm sure he can rent you an awning or somesuch).

Normally someone with this sort of feline fixation would have been locked up, long, long ago, but since we appreciate anybody that spends this kind of money on a system that isn't even 64-bit (that's a joke, Jaguar Interactive regulars—don't hate me), we have nothing but respect. Viva la Jaguar! Or something…

Overheard

As a regular feature in the mag, we thought we'd start pulling choice quotes from wherever they might be found and adding our own unique take on things. We'll also be sure to skewer ourselves if we manage to screw up—all's fair and whatnot. So if you have a quote that you think should be featured in the mag, fire it along to quotables@gamegomagazine.com.

"I'm so cheap--I'm the reason good development teams and game concepts go under."

-Vern911

ECM's Note:Not much more you can say to this—it's people like Vern that kill companies that take risks and try to innovate. You best be buying a copy of Stretch Panic if you want to remain on good terms with us, Vern—no excuses.

"Guilty Gear X is a 2D fighter with Street Fighter 3's pacing."

-Game Spot

ECM's Note: Really? Street Fighter 3's pacing you say? As if this comment in and of itself wasn't comedy relief enough, taken with our next quote it just goes to show you that a. nobody really plays these games and b. they don't have a clue.

"An opinion is not an opinion unless it is backed up with some kind of evidence. Its sad you haven't learned that yet."

-Anonymous Square Gamer Poster

ECM's Note: While I could go on for days about the absolute foolishness displayed in a statement like this, I won't. Do me a favor, though: go look up the dictionary definition of 'opinion' then come back and laugh at their expense.

R E N D E R Z



Dylan Benson (a.k.a. Someone) brings us the Metal Gear Solid ninja (a.k.a. Grey Fox) looking pretty sweet in pen and ink.



Julian brings us Ramza and Delita ready for some bloodletting straight from FF Tactics. Good stuff, Kaneda, err, Julian, <grin>.







Respect to J. Morgan for his depiction of DonDokoDon (sweet!) vs. Bubble Bobble. He also brings us a clever rendition of ECM's Alien vs. Predator board committing suicide a la its 'suicide' battery—shortly thereafter ECM shared the same fate.



Straight from San Juan in lovely Puerto Rico (I'll get there someday, JJ) comes these two ace renderings by resident art expert JJ Esteban. Keep it coming, chief.

There's just something about Ivy, and this rendition by Freddy Valazquez shows us a side of her we never thought we'd see—namely the battered and bruised, erm, side. Thanks Freddy—Kodomo has this pic handy for when he gets lonely…which happens, well, all the time.



R E N D E R Z



Kim Chase brings us this lovely rendering of Chun-Li, from one gaming addict's wife to another (Kasumi being the other). Thanks Kim—we'll take some more when you get a chance.

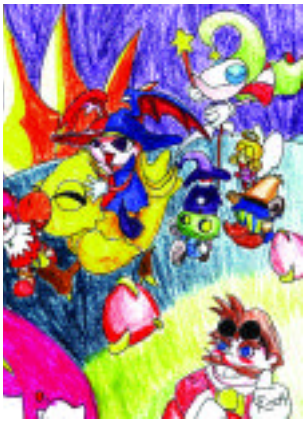


The "almighty Pimptrot" (his words, not ours) come from our webmaster, Jacon Rens (a.k.a. Kenshin). We know a few FF fans that should be introduced to this bad motha—show him the way, Kodomo.



Hero (of The Next Level fame: www.the-nextlevel.com) brings us his take on, we'd imagine, his PSO character. Very, very cool, Hero—we'd have liked to fit more of your stuff in, but we're equal opportunity 'round these parts. Great job!

This sweet drawing of Shyna of Silhouette Mirage fame makes up for the tinkering done to the US version. Thanks Finch, keep it coming.



You can't ever go wrong submitting Darkstalkers art to GameGO! and Larry Thompson keenly appreciates this fact with this sweet shot of John Talbain. We love the cast and crew of Night Warrios, for future reference.



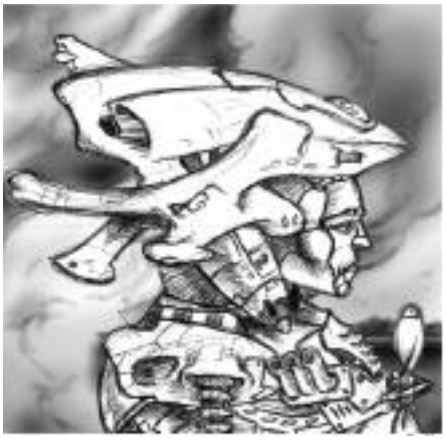
Nick Minor hooks us up with Kid from Chrono Cross—Haohmaru thanks you very much, Nick.



Shingo swings by from the GameGO! message board with a very swell take on Shingo Yabuki. Very sweet, Shingo—more please.

- AJ -





John Martel brings us his Post-It rendering of a "Shmup God"—sounds good to us, John. If this is what you can do on a Post-It, let's see what you can do on a full page.

Just wanted to shoot a letter over to let you know what I thought about the first issue of GameGO! Magazine. All in all...I thought your debut issue was OK. I could do without all your editors and writers being reduced to little manga caricatures...too cutesy. There were also some contradicting opinions offered about Gran Turismo: Two editors thought it was so-so, while the main review stated how nothing could possibly beat its racing experience (but this is okay...first issue jitters and all...look at the Official Dreamcast Magazine...I thought it was juvenile at first...but learned to appreciate it immensely...). I assume that you would appreciate the masses buying and playing games that you deem more worthy ("What you should be playing")...yet you cover games that I don't think the masses will ever come across...or like for that matter. Now, before you get all peeved, I will state that I kinda dug seeing all that cool Japanese stuff...but I'm what you'd call a medium-core gamer...I love videogames, but I don't go out and buy everything. Your magazine is geared towards hardcore gamers...I'd like to think they already know what to buy. I think your magazine will appeal to this crowd and this crowd only...not the masses. I also didn't appreciate the dig you made about EGM. Those guys are hardcore...but they also give the masses what they want...more info about U.S titles and titles the masses are more likely to pick up. They also cover the great titles out there as well (and, I might add, the occasional import!). I will, however, be objective and continue to pick up your mag to give it a proper chance. Great article on Stretch Panic...that title looks great! Love the paper you print on. Thanks for listening.

Don Coxe

Though the power held within the pages of this tome of gaming wisdom you hold within your sweaty, controller-worn mitts is great indeed, there's just no way to agree with everyone…therefore, we don't even try. In fact, our editors aren't even required to agree with each other – imagine that! Contradicting opinions on Gran Turismo? Well, buckle up junior…because there's a lot more dissention where that came from! I understand how, phonetically, our magazine might remind you of a "safe, mainstream" gaming publication that tries to please everyone…but trust me, that ain't what you can expect from these ink-saturated pages, every issue.

Furthermore, your defilement of the term "hardcore" has stripped it of all its meaning and therefore, it must needs be stricken from the vernacular of gaming, completely. The phrase "give the masses what they want," was never meant to exist in the same sentence as the word "hardcore." Your blatant disregard for this time-honored adjective has defiled it, utterly...and for this, a plague of blisters upon your thumbs, and a thousand coffee spills upon our competition's pages for dulling your mind with their milquetoast brand of "editorial!" Devour these pages, feed your mind and be edified. Perhaps the words contained herein can purify your blighted gaming soul…And let this be a lesson to those of you who would entertain such foolish notions: Garbage in, garbage out!

Posty,

This may be a dumb question but are you the same Post-Fu master of the now deceased GameFan magazine? I am really excited about GameGO! What happened to the rest of the GameFan team? I see ECM, Kodomo, You (if it is indeed the "real" Posty to which I address this letter), but I must know, where can I find The Judge, Eggo, Fury, and Reubus? Another thing I've been pondering is the 6th Man, I bet that is just an editorial name given to all the guest reviewers. Am I right? I understand that you must get a ton of mail but I beg you to please respond to and address all the questions I have. I thank you and I have faith that this magazine will get off the ground and rule above all others.

Nzo

Though many have tried to infiltrate the dank interiors of my cavernous abode, in the vain hope of bearing witness to the world's greatest living Post-Fu master practicing his craft, none have succeeded. Through hushed tones, acolytes of the Postal arts share tales of a most guarded technique, unknown to all but the Master…the chameleon-like ability to shift both his personality and his appearance, making any identification impossible. I assure you, however, that your letter has reached the nigh-legendary hands of the one whose Post-Fu fist is smooth to the bone.

However, as you know, not everyone from our old stomping grounds made the trip to GameGO! Magazine. Life has a funny way of helping people change tracks; sometimes, it gives you the nudge you needed to move in a different direction. Many of our compatriots found new challenges to pursue…new frontiers that demanded exploration. Some remained in the video game industry, many did not; either way, their legacy remains, etched in the memories of game players around the globe. For their contributions, I salute them all and respect their privacy by keeping their current whereabouts a closely guarded secret!



O' Postmeister of Ultimate Magnificence,

I hope this gets to you. I couldn't find your e-mail address on the GameGO!Magazine website. I regret that no Waffle Chips accompany this e-mail, but it simply is not possible via digital media. Know that the Waffle Chips are with you in spirit, o' great Posty.

Anyway, let me just express my sincere joy that the "old" GameFan is back! I think you know what I mean. I was a loyal reader of the GameFan magazine from day one! I bought every issue, and I personally loved the website as well. Like every loyal reader, the "Express" incident left me writing in agony upon the floor. Words cannot describe my hatred of the foul company and they'll never get so much as a dirty, cola-stained penny from my miserly grasp. GameGO!, on the other hand, already has my payment for a 6-month subscription! EXCELLENT magazine. I LOVE your review premise that includes no number system at all. Brilliant…just brilliant.

I'm pretty sure you won't publish this letter, thanks to the many legal hassles contained therein. I just wanted to say that it is nice to once again have a good game magazine to turn to. I rarely base my buying decisions on a magazine's reviews. I just like to READ them! Too many magazines just churn out the same mindless drivel every month. Heck, *I* can churn out mindless drivel with the best of them! I want the good stuff, and GameGO! delivers. Keep it up, and don't give in to The Man!

-Aelfraed

Never ones to let the proverbial Man keep us down, the Money staff of GameGO keep it real at every opportunity. Free from the clutches of a foe even more formidable than the infamous BlowMeister Games, we are free to wreak our signature brand of havoc on the industry, no holds barred! The details of our previous publication's demise were obviously well publicized, so there's no need for me to expound upon it here…you did that with all the skill and grace I could have mustered, as it is. Suffice it to say, your well wishes—and those of the multitudes who've e-mailed and posted on the website—have been heard and are greatly appreciated.

You have my oath as practitioner and purveyor of the penultimate Postal precepts that mindless drivel shall never spew forth from the pages of GameGO! Magazine. Now that you've planted the seed in my head, it's about time I tracked down some of those satisfying and eternally fresh Waffle Chips…the crisp morsels whose intense flavor and decadent scent induce seizures in lesser mortals. The mere mention of them has made my gob moist with anticipation. Salivation is mine!

LETTER HEAD



Posty!

I think you should've run for president! You know you could've beat Dubya! Long Live The Post Fu Master and GameGO!

Pitch113

Every news outlet around the nation made it clear during the tie which Florida eventually broke, that only 49% of the American public weighed in with a vote for George and Al. What they didn't tell you is that 51% of Americans wrote-in a vote for the one and only Postyr! In a cover-up worthy of the X-Files, this fact was buried and will probably never be revealed to the public at large…but the truth is, we should now be living in the first Postal Presidency in America's history. There is no justice.

Mark my words: Four years from now, Dubya can look forward to a far greater challenge than stringing two coherent sentences together…

Dear Posty,

We've got a strange and disturbing scenario to recount for you...

We booted up our PlayStation 2 and we accelerated the graphics, increased the load speed and inserted The Interactive CD Sampler Disc Volume 4 (one of those demo disks that comes packaged with the PlayStation, or at least used to).

Once it booted up, we clicked on the Ace Combat 2 demo and began playing. It ran normally, the music and the standard messages accompanied by words, such as Altitude Low Pull Up etc…

But then, a very odd thing happened: after a short time (you only have a few minutes to play in the demo) you start to hear VERY STRANGE, deep alien-like gibberish sort of words, that in no way coincides with the gameplay...it sounded as if they may be subliminal messages. The voice is unlike any we have heard in the game before, and we've never heard them on the original PlayStation, only the PS2. Since we do not own the full version of the game, we are unable to see if this happens with it. What are these strange voices saying?

All-knowing one, we come to you with this letter because you have never steered us wrongly before. What are the origins of these subliminal-esque messages?

Rob & Chris

As one might expect when confronted with a letter like this, my first reaction was one of shock and confusion…that someone could possibly have so much free time is a phenomenon that bears further investigation. However, we'll stick with your question about the potential for subliminal messages within Ace Combat 2.

Through a rigorous testing process, I have managed to replicate the conditions you've outlined above. Recording the garbled sounds and reversing them using traditional "back-masking" methodology, passing the resulting waveform through a series of amplitude and pitch filters, I was able to uncover the message that someone has taken great pains to hide. What was the message? Put simply, it's one of the eternal truths that all men should forever acknowledge, repeated over and over:

"Ozzy rules."

Now, do yourselves (and us) a favor, and go get a job. The world shudders in fear of what insanity your combined boredom might spawn, next…

Posty,

I just finished reading the premiere issue of GameGO! Magazine and all I can say is "Thank You!" Thank you for returning "The Magazine of Champions" back to the shelves (even though it has a new name) and thank you for curing me of what I called "GameFan withdrawl." I've been an avid reader of GF since '95 and I haven't missed an issue since.

I would faithfully buy an issue from the EB in the mall every month on my way to work. I finally decided to send in a subscription slip only to have it returned to me stating "No such address!" Then I went to the website and it wasn't up anymore! I thought I was going to have a heart attack! No GameFan was like Buffalo Wings without blue cheese! And no one tell what was going on! The employees at EB and Software etc. had no clue, I even went to the boo stores and comic shops, yet they had no answer or me.

For six horrible months, I had to read EGM and GamePro, magazines in which I stopped reading when I first laid my eyes on a colorful front cover of GameFan! I was in EB just three hours ago about to buy an EGM when I saw the amazing artistry of "Spaz" Spaziante, I pick it up without a second thought! All I had to see was the phrase, " From the editors of GameFan" and I bought it!!! After getting it home I have read it from cover to cover twice already! My subscription is in the mail! Thank you.

Jayson S. Brown

It seems the Emperor's new clothes are garnering rave reviews from the faithful…

WELCOME BACK, GUYS!

I really missed you! It was sad to see GameFan die (I tried to get a subscription to the magazine, but found out that it was canceled weeks after I mailed it), especially since there is no one else on the newsstands that stands up for the way gaming is supposed to be. I want to thank you for being the only magazine to warn me about Final Fantasy 8 and the PS2, as well as reacquainting me with shooters! While everyone else is too caught up on the bells and whistles of awesome graphics for the sake of awesome graphics, blood & gore and other 'mature' themes, you guys have kept the focus on good gameplay, and I thank you for it.

Much success to you guys on GAMEGO! Magazine.

Phillip Watts Jr.

This is what GameGO! Magazine is all about. Our reader is all about the pure thrill of playing video games. It's not a numbers game, where polygon counts or fill rates are king. It's not about sales figures or marketability. It's not about what's popular or what's accepted by the mainstream. This magazine is all about the games we feel you should be playing but might not be, since the competition won't give 'em the coverage they deserve. It is a magazine for the discerning game connoisseur. It is not a magazine for Johnny Q. Public, begging his parents for enough money to buy the latest safe, formulaic, cookie-cutter "electronic entertainment product," based on its television commercial. We aren't here to shift units, think outside the box, or maximize the sales potential of the latest "genre-busting franchise." We just want to point out the gems you might have missed, awash in a flood of utter mediocrity. It is our way



PARTING SHOT

Parting Shot is your chance to rant and rave about something that you want to get off your chest, so each and every month we turn this page over to one reader, industry pro, or bum off the street to give ease to his or her troubled soul. Without further ado, here's Faith vs. Science by GameGO! reader Craig A. Knauff.

Faith vs. Science

Whenever a game is announced, people start forming their own opinions almost immediately. These opinions are formed in response to questions such as "Who's the developer?" and "What genre is it?" or "What has that team done before?" These thoughts are perfectly natural, but the controversy over them is not if they are natural, but if they are "fair". One side shouts for the other to quit pre-judging games ("You haven't played the game, how would you know?"). The other touts past experiences they've had with the developers or a past incarnation with the game itself ("The last one was pitiful/awesome and this game will be too"). Those who try to be "fair" are the Science Gamers, and those who value past experiences are the Faith Gamers. The battle between them rages on message boards and chat rooms across the Internet. But what exactly is a "Science" or "Faith" gamer, how do they anticipate games, and what do they look for in a review?

Before I really delve into this, let me just say that if you want the best evidence of this battle of epic proportions, simply get ye to the GameGo! message boards (the people there may seem homicidal, but that's just because after months with no proper gaming guidance, they lost the ability to play well with others… just a little joke, folks).

To start, let's look up the definition of Science Gamer in our handy dictionary.

Science Gamer (Latin name: Trustis Nooneelsis): has the self-perception of being cool, levelheaded, and fair. They have a natural habitat that may include statues of Buddha and posters of Supreme Court judges (some locales may show only the shredded remains of said posters). Science gamers, when presented with information on an upcoming game, will take that info and put it in a special section of the brain. This section houses information and separates it from all other knowledge in every other section of the brain. This part of the mind is called the Denileia Oblongata. As a result, Science Gamers show neither enthusiasm nor agitation for any unreleased game—period.

A Science Gamer will trust only what he has seen, or what a seemingly "bias-free" publication has told him (there are plenty of those to choose from). An example is the recent 39 out of 40 Final Fantasy X was given by Famitsu. Science gamers, not having played the game or willing to pre-judge it based on VIII, assumed the game at least had the potential to be the best Final Fantasy ever if it was good enough to garner high marks from this magazine (especially since it was the highest rating Famitsu had ever given a Final Fantasy). Their personal feelings for VIII and the obvious similarities between the two games never came into play. Science Gamers respect other's opinions, but only when that opinion is based on hard 'facts.' Trust is virtually non-existent. They refuse to draw their own inferences or trust the inferences of others. They wait until someone else has reviewed the final copy or they have rented/borrowed the game before deciding whether to buy a game or not. They sacrifice their own past experiences and feelings on the altar of fair play.

A 100% pure Science Gamer could see some potential that the next Army Men could be the pinnacle of computer entertainment. I can pretty much guess that everyone else would die laughing if they heard that. So let's say the day arrives and the Science Gamer buys Army Men: The Best Game Ever (followed shortly by "Hell Freezes Over" the movie). Everyone else would completely miss out. That would be an advantage, but it's more likely Army Men would be uhmm… less spectacular. Science gamers also want reviews that are 'bias-less' and aimed at everyone. They want a game to get a score (they love their scores) that is the "Final Judgment". The review will then be universally recognized by Science Gamers as fact. As a result, when a game gets a score lower than they think it deserves, they are the first to complain (<cough>Chrono Cross 9.5<cough>). In the end, though, is being a Science Gamer a good or bad thing?

Now, let's check our dictionary to see what is says about the Faith Gamer:

Faith Gamer (Latin name: Completicus Fanboyicus): has the self-perception of knowing exactly how good a game will be based on past experience with a prior game, reviewer, or development team. They tend to attach great value to the words and actions of those who have impressed them. Once impressed, they will actively crusade to defend the honor of that person or corporate entity. They may even go so far as to physically attack others for slandering their beloved idols. The exact biological cause for this is unknown, but sociologists explain it as the human need to be a part of a larger group.

A Faith Gamer trusts his past experiences and the reviews of those he usually agrees with. Let's use the Final Fantasy X Famitsu score as an example again. Faith Gamers would either 1. Look forward to FFX because they trust Famitsu 2. Look forward to FFX because of its similarities to VIII or 3. Be wary of FFX because of its similarities to VIII. If, in the mind of a Science Gamer, the sequel to a disappointing game is innocent until proven guilty, then that sequel would be guilty until proven innocent to a Faith Gamer. Unfortunately, Faith Gamers tend to be extremely faithful at times, and devolve into the dreaded fanboy.

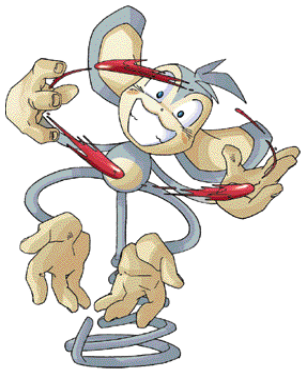
When a magazine gives a game, one they already decided they like, a lower score, they are the first to complain. Why? Because Science Gamers have to play the game and decide what score it deserves, while fanboy Faith Gamers don't need two seconds with a game to decide it's "rightful score". Faith Gamers are also occasionally burnt by their beloved companies. But don't you worry, because 100% fanboys will still think that that company is the best thing since sliced bread(everyone makes mistakes, right?). A Faith Gamer allows his natural biases to lead him. Contrary to what you may have heard, biases are not completely bad (and they're not completely good, either). Think for a minute how your biases are formed.

Go to a dairy store, and look at the ice cream selection. You may not know exactly what you want, but you sure as hell know what you don't. Don't like the looks of that new chocolate flavor? Why? Because you have had chocolate before, in one form or another, and it just didn't tickle your fancy. Faith Gamers think no more of judging games than of judging ice cream. The difference is that no one is yelling at them for pre-judging some ice cream. There is a chance; however, that you might have liked that chocolate ice cream. So what do you do? You ask for one of those small spoons of ice cream. Faith gamers can sometimes be up to 99% percent sure they will like/dislike something based on past experiences or the opinions of a trusted person, but there is always that 1%. That's why the best advice I can give both Science and Faith gamers is to try before you buy (Whenever possible of course).

Of course there are roughly two sides to each type of gamer. The anticipation side and the review side. You could have a person who refuses to pre-judge a game, but when it comes out, turns to a trusted reviewer. You could also have a person who draws their own inferences towards an unreleased game, only to turn to an "un-biased" publication for the "Ultimate Judgment". Truth is, there are very few 100% percent Science Gamers and very few 100% Faith Gamers (OK, so maybe there are quite a few fanboys running around). Pretty much everyone is a hodgepodge of these two groups, most of the time with a dominant side and a recessive side.

If you read this article hoping I would side with one group, I'm sorry to disappoint you. The more you think about it, the more you realize there is no right answer. You certainly shouldn't be a 100% Science Gamer or 100% Faith Gamer. In fact, a combination of beliefs that are exactly half Faith and half Science probably isn't the best either. Best yet, though, respect other's opinions as views you simply can't comprehend.

Best Regards,
Craig A. Knauff



Got something to say and nowhere else to say it? Send it to us at partingshot@gamegomagazine.com, and if you're really lucky (and have been a good little boy or girl) we may actually print it.



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