HARDCORE GAMER®
MAGAZINE

v1i2 . redeemable for five l33+ points

Castlevania®
Curse of Darkness

11 Page Castlevania Blowout!

Dawn of Sorrow

Interview with IGA

Series History

But that's not all!
.Dance Pad Plan #8 from Pennsylvania
.The Dark Side of Retrogaming
.Strategies and Codes for the Hottest Games

See what we saw at E3!

DJPubba_Tim Lindquist
Slugs as big as popsicles, frogs the size of my head, coyote puppies chasing deer through the back yard... if life is a game, this is a *Frogger* MMORPG. Still, I like it more than the one before — dash from air conditioned car through easy-bake oven to air conditioned office. That game sucks.

Roger Danish_Greg Off
Greg wishes there was a hip-hop, beat-boxing, bio-writing robot, which he could gainfully employ to fill this space every month with its clever musings all the while rocking the house and breaking down some mad beats. If anyone has invented such a thing, please feel free to give him a shout out.

Wolfie_Terry Wolfinger
Imagine 40 rock concerts playing simultaneously in a Las Vegas casino, throw in Disneyland on crystal meth and you'll have some idea of the scope of E3. It was great seeing all my industry friends. Favorite thing I saw was the new Batmobile on display!

Wanderer_Thomas Wilde
This was a weird E3. All of the pre-release next-gen hype couldn't conceal the fact that the graphics have, to some extent, plateaued. I'm looking forward to the classic NES lineup on the Revolution, and to a bright day in the future when E3's registration staff starts actually checking people's credentials.

Lynxara_Alicia Ashby
Alicia Ashby narrowly survived E3 and her epic battle with the trained assassins that guarded Sony's booth. Now she is safe at home, playing *Namco x Capcom*, and trying to remember that the Dig Dug guy can't actually do forty-hit air juggle combos in his own game.

Metalbolt_Anthony Mertz
Between his award-winning series of poultry detective novels and his almost-religious insistence that *The Mask* is the best SNES game ever, Anthony has no time for things like writing his own bio. Sucker.

Syriel_Adam Pavlacka
Now that the E3 hustle has died down a bit Adam isn't travelling quite as much, but he still has a bone to pick with United after it forced him to spend a night in the Washington airport and miss a visit with the parents. A little known fact: part of this issue was written that night.

4thletter_David Brothers
I didn't go to E3 this year. Instead, I put in some quality time with my buddies Matches Malone and Eel O'Brien. We went and caught one of Crusher Creel's wrestling matches, but that was ruined when some scrawny kid leapt into the ring and manhandled him. Poor guy.

Arlieth_Thomas Shin
I've discovered that behind all the fun and games going on at E3, it really does come down to business. This usually requires the use of a business card. I also discovered that food at E3 is stomach-numbingly expensive. I'm making my business cards edible next year.

James_James Cunningham
James grew up in arcades and remembers when *Asteroids* was new. He was left mystified by *PacMan* fever, but at least it meant he could play *Moon Patrol* undisturbed. To this day he can still have as much fun playing a spiffy freeware shooter as the latest big-budget release.
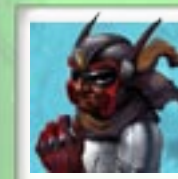
Racewing_Geson Hatchett
Racewing spent his first E3 standing around like a starstruck moron, playing unfinished games, and gawking at just how borderline pornographic some of those booth exhibits were. He has vowed to return, for clearly, it is a magical place he can call home.

Melf_Ken Horowitz
In between treatments for an unhealthy Sega Genesis obsession, Melf spends his days playing with his kids' toys and watching marathon-long sessions of Noggin — which he finds more enlightening than most TV channels out there.

HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE

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Postview E3

Three brand-new next-generation consoles made this year's E3 even more of a madhouse than usual, where the swag and the hype both flowed like wine. Behind closed doors, *Hardcore Gamer* got the lowdown on the next two years' must-have titles, as well as the Xbox 360, the Nintendo Revolution, and the PlayStation 3. We'll tell you what you need to know, and while we're at it, we'll cut through a little of the pre-release crap.

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On the cover

Castlevania
Curse of Darkness

We've packed more *Castlevania* information into these pages than we know what to do with. Whether you're looking to learn more about the forthcoming *Curse of Darkness* for the PS2 and Xbox, read our exclusive interview with IGA, check out the art and screens for this fall's *Dawn of Sorrow* on the Nintendo DS, or geek out with Syriel about the history of the franchise, we've got a little something for you here.
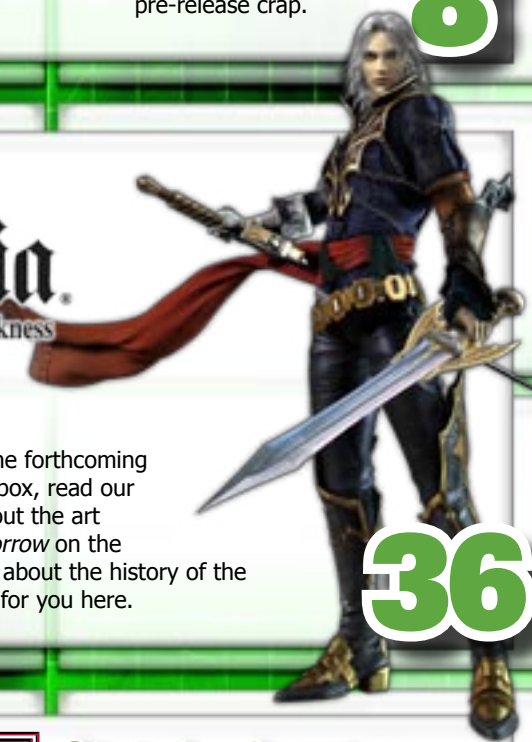
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Strategies of courtesy Prima Games

If you're a drunken squirrel with an automatic weapon, a tormented vigilante fighting crime by night, or a gamer who just wants some freakin' codes, *Hardcore Gamer* has the hookup. Courtesy of our hardworking friends at Prima Games, we're serving up eight pages' worth of the best codes and strategies in the 'zines today. Check out some strats for *Conker: Live & Reloaded* and *Batman Begins*, but stick around for cheats on *Metal Gear Ac!d*, *Devil May Cry 3*, *Constantine*, *Sonic Heroes*, and so many more.

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HARDCORE GAMER

premiered at this year's E3, and we couldn't have picked a better show for its debut. We were able to go hands-on with dozens of upcoming games, but more importantly, we were on the scene for the opening salvos in the next-gen console showdown. Everyone had an opinion, everyone had a thousand claims to make, and not everyone was fully conversant with the actual reality of their statements. Hilarity, as usual, ensued.

These next couple of years will be amazing ones for gaming, whether you're a console cowboy or a PC aficionado. If you're a gamer, of any kind, type, stripe, or preference, get ready to get excited. Over the next few pages, we'll tell you what you need to know about the new hardware, the last games in this generation, and the first games in the next.

ADVANCE WARS

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY 3

ELECTOPLANKTON

CHIBI-ROBO

ANIMAL CROSSING DS

MARIO & LUIGI 2

FIRE EMBLEM: PATH OF RADIANCE

MARIO TENNIS ADVANCE

ODAMA

POKEMON EMERALD

MARIO KART DS

MARIO PARTY 7

METEOS

SCREW BREAKER

BATTALION WARS

METROID PRIME HUNTERS

YOSHI TOPSY-TURVY

DYNASTY WARRIORS ADVANCE

METROID PRIME PINBALL

FIRE EMBLEM: THE SACRED STONES

TOUCH GOLF

NINTENDOGS

TRACE MEMORY

SUPER MARIO STRIKERS

NEW SUPER MARIO BROS.

Nintendo®

The Nintendo press conference left us with more questions than answers. Enthusiasm was at an all-time high thanks to the energetic (and just a bit scary) Reggie Fils-Aime. His announcing style wouldn't be out of place ringside at *WWE Smackdown*, but neither it nor the 5:1 ratio of Nintendo fanboys in the room could change the fact that the 'unveling' of the Revolution was nothing but smoke and mirrors.

Nintendo's president, Mr. Satoru Iwata, proudly displayed a non-descript, medium-sized black prototype that looked like it could have hastily been pulled off the shelves of a Fry's Electronics, and slid it into a similarly non-descript silver sleeve/stand. He stated the final unit will be more compact (approximately the size of three stacked DVD cases) and will not only be backwards compatible with the Gamecube (the self-loading media bay will play both 12-centimeter optical discs used for the new system, as well as GC discs), but it will also be able to download twenty years' worth of games for the NES, SNES and N64.

Most notable was the absence of any real specs for the system, which was a little disconcerting since both Sony and Microsoft revealed what will be powering their next-gen systems. Iwata claimed that Nintendo wished to keep the focus squarely on the games, which was a refreshing option after Sony's technobabble-heavy conference, but didn't say much on that front, either.

As far as games or tech demos, the only thing shown was a quick clip of a CG Samus and a brief flash of *Metroid Prime 3*'s logo. Iwata also mentioned that a new *Smash Brothers* game will be a Revolution launch title, and that Shigeru Miyamoto, who'd been onstage earlier to discuss *Nintendogs*, was working on a brand new game for the system.

What it was ready to talk about though, was wireless Internet functionality. With the Revolution, Nintendo apparently intends to get caught up to the rest of the industry. From the moment you plug the Revolution in, Iwata claims you'll be able to play on the Internet, wirelessly, with anyone in the world. The line of the show came when Iwata noted that this would allow him to beat Reggie at *Smash Brothers*, no matter where Reggie happened to be. Nintendo is also working on new games for the DS, like *Animal Crossing* and *Nintendogs*, which can do the same thing.

Another of the Revolution's stated goals is to make developers' jobs easier. In this console generation, it won't be unusual for dev costs to top ten figures. The Revolution is being built to make development cheap and easy. This could be the magic bullet Nintendo needs to attract third-party support for the system, or it could be a good way to make sure half of Revolution's lineup consists of crappy low-budget games. There's no way of knowing just yet.

Of course, we're excited about the prospects of the Revolution and what it will do, but it was a bit disheartening to see that Nintendo was obviously nowhere near ready to start talking about the specifics of its next-gen system. It has made a lot of claims, and if the company can follow through, it'll stay in the game for the foreseeable future. For now, though, there's very little in the way of concrete information.

On the portable front, Nintendo took a page from Apple and unveiled its new Game Boy Micro. Measuring a mere 4" wide, 2" tall and 0.7" deep, this little gadget weighs 2.8 ounces, and features a 2" backlit screen with adjustable brightness functionality (hallelujah!). In addition, the Micro will support standard headphones and comes equipped with a built-in, rechargeable lithium-ion battery. The GB Micro will only play GBA games. No price-point has been announced as of yet, but it's definitely a cool little toy.

NINTENDO REVOLUTION SPECS:

Release Date:	2006
Price:	TBA
Controller:	Wireless
Graphics Processor:	ATI "Hollywood" GPU
Media Format:	12-Centimeter Optical Discs, 3" Disc, 1.5GB Matsushita (attachment to play DVD movies)
Flash Memory:	512MB (SD Card Expandable)
I/O Connectors:	2 x USB 2.0, SD Card Slot
Internal Processor:	IBM "Broadway" CPU
Features:	Set Vertically or Horizontally, Backwards Compatible, Down-loadable Games
Digital Media Formats:	12-Centimeter Optical Discs
Media Storage:	12-Centimeter Optical Discs, 3" Disc, 1.5GB Matsushita

EYEDENTIFY (PS3)

GENJI: DAWN OF THE SAMURAI (PS2)

APE ESCAPE ACADEMY (PSP)

DEVIL MAY CRY 4 (PS3)

GRETZKY NHL 2006 (PS2)

DAXTER (PSP)

MOTORSTORM (PS3)

JAK X: COMBAT RACING (PS2)

GRETZKY NHL 2006 (PSP)

NEOPETS: THE DARKEST FAERIE (PS2)

GUNDAM (PS3)

SOCOM: U.S. NAVY SEALS FIRETEAM BRAVO (PSP)

THE CON (PSP)

KILLZONE (PS3)

MEDIEVIL RESURRECTION (PSP)

FIFTH PHANTOM SAGA (PS2)

I-8 (PS3)

ROAD TO SUNDAY: SEASON ONE (PS2)
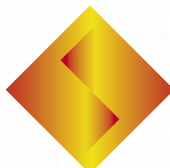
SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT ®

Sony focused its press conference solely on the PlayStation 3, relegating its first-party PS2 and PSP software to the show floor (which, sadly, there wasn't much of). While the next generation "tech demos" that were shown were impressive, most were only able to showcase the system's visual power as they were not actual games but rather scripted events rendered in real time. Even so, seeing the *Final Fantasy VII* intro unfold was enough to get jaws dropping. Perhaps the most impressive demo was an *Unreal* sequence which allowed the camera to move freely. It'll be interesting to see what developers can do once they've had more time with the hardware.

With the PS3, Ken Kutaragi, president of Sony Computer Entertainment, claims he has finally been able to bring to life his original vision of "Computer Entertainment," and has developed an always-on box that will function as the entertainment hub of its owner's living room. With the processing capability to browse the Internet or video chat at the same time you're playing your favorite PS3, PS2, or PSone game, there may be no reason to ever leave the house again.

Also, just so someone's said it: despite what Kaz Hirai would have you believe, this isn't the first time a system's been fully backwards-compatible with two generations of software — that honor goes to the Atari.

There's no definitive release date right now, and no word as to the new system's price point. All Sony has stated is that the PS3 will launch in spring 2006, with no confirmation if this is the date for Japan or the US. The odds are that we won't see a US launch until much later in the year.

PLAYSTATION 3 SPECS:

Release Date:	Spring 2006
Price:	TBA
Controller:	Bluetooth (up to seven), USB 2.0 (wired), Wi-Fi (PSP), Network (over IP)
Graphics Processor:	RSX @ 550MHz — 1.8 TFLOPS floating point performance, full HD (up to 1080p) x 2 channels, multi-way programmable parallel floating point shader pipelines
Media Format:	CD, CD-DA, CD-R, CD-RW, SACD Hybrid, SACD HD, DualDisc, DVD-ROM, DVD-R, DVD-RW, DVD+R, DVD+RW, BD-ROM (Blu-Ray), BD-R (Blu-Ray), BD-RE (Blu-Ray)
I/O Connectors:	Ethernet (RJ45), 6 USB 2.0, CF Slot (Type I, II), SD Slot (Regular, Compact), Memory Stick, Memory Stick Duo, 1 x Optical Audio
Internal Processor:	Cell Processor — PowerPC-base Core @ 3.2GHz, 1 VMX vector unit per core, 512KB L2 cache, 7 x SPE @ 3.2GHz, 7 x 128b 128 SMD GPRs, 7x 256KB SRAM for SPE, * 1 of 8 SPEs reserved for redundancy total floating point performance: 218 GFLOPS
Features:	Backward Compatible with PS2 and PS One, Stands Vertically or Horizontally
Embedded Video Memory:	0MB
Graphics Core Clock Speed:	550MHz
Video Memory:	256MB
Resolution Output:	480p, 480p, 720p, 1080i, 1080p,
# of Controller Ports:	Up to seven (Bluetooth)
Integrated Communications:	802.11 B/G Wi-Fi, Bluetooth 2.0
Internal Storage:	2.5in Removable Hard Drive (size TBD)
Standard AV Output Connectors:	HDMI out x 2, AV Multi-Out x 1, Digital Audio (optical) Out x 1
L2 Cache:	512KB L2 cache, 256KB per SPE
Processor Clock Speed:	3.2GHz
Memory Bandwidth:	25.6GB/s main memory bandwidth, 22.4GB/s video memory bandwidth
Surround Sound:	Dolby 5.1ch, DTS, LPCM, etc. (Cell-base processing)

WARHAWK (PS3)

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS (PS2)

TEKKEN (PS3)

NI-OH (PS3)

SLY 3: HONOR AMONG THIEVES (PS2)

HEAVENLY SWORD (PS3)

FORMULA 1 (PS3)

SOCOM 3: U.S. NAVY SEALS (PS2)

GEARS OF WAR

KAMEO: ELEMENTS OF POWER

PERFECT DARK ZERO

PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3

DEAD RISING

FULL AUTO

NINETEY-NINE NIGHTS
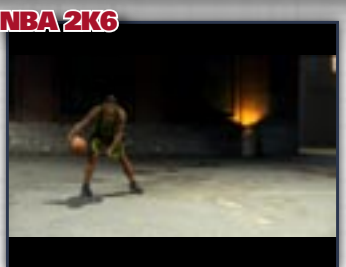
NBA 2K6

CALL OF DUTY 2
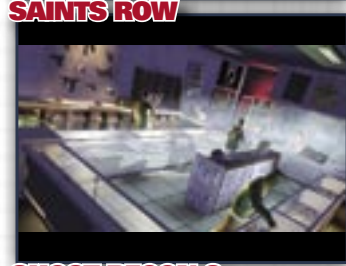
QUAKE 4

Microsoft®

Compared to the competition, Microsoft had the most tangible next-generation information and software showcase at the show. While most of the Xbox 360 titles on display were running off Power Mac G5 Alpha Kits, at least they were in playable form on the show floor. On the heels of the uber-cheesy MTV premiere the week before the show, Xbox execs Robbie Bach, Jay Allard and Peter Moore each spent some time highlighting the different features of the next-gen hardware while an obviously hired audience of actors — sitting in the strategically placed seats around the stage — hooted, hollered and erupted into scripted applause at all the right spots.

Some of the highlights included Square-Enix's pledge of next-gen support, starting with *Final Fantasy XI* for Xbox Live, a full suite of EA titles that will be ready for the system's 90-day launch window (see the list below), backward compatibility, and the ability to customize your system with a multitude of different faceplates. Because the backward compatibility is being done via emulation some titles may not work at launch, but Microsoft assured the crowd that all major games would be working on day one.

From what we saw at the conference and convention, it is evident The House That Bill Built has a long road ahead of it, even with a full half-year head start over Sony and Nintendo. As a whole, most of the Xbox 360 software on demo didn't really seem like a technical leap over the original Xbox system, but the new hardware's specs are definitely impressive, with certain titles, such as SEGA's *Full Auto* and Microsoft's own *Gears of War*, as some of the best games at the show.

TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED

THE ELDER SCROLLS: OBLIVION

DEMONIK

THE DARKNESS

FRAME CITY KILLERS

DEAD OR ALIVE 4

SAINTS ROW

THE OUTFIT

XBOX 360 SPECS:

Release Date:	Q4 2005
Price:	TBA
Controller:	Support for up to four 2.4GHz wireless game controllers
Graphics Processor:	Custom ATI @ 550MHz — 1 TFLOP floating point performance, 10MB of embedded DRAM, 48-way parallel floating-point dynamically scheduled shader pipelines, unified shader architecture
Media Format:	DVD-Video, DVD-ROM, DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW, CD-DA. CD-ROM, CD-R, CD-RW, WMA CD, MP3 CD, JPEG photo CD
I/O Connectors:	3 USB 2.0, 2 memory unit slots, built-in Ethernet port (RJ45)
Internal Processor:	Custom IBM PowerPC-based CPU with three symmetrical cores running at 3.2GHz each, 2 hardware threads per core; six hardware threads total
Features:	Instant, out-of-the-box access to Xbox Live features with broadband service, video camera ready, ability to stream media from portable music devices (as well as digital cameras, and even the PSP), stands Vertically or Horizontally, Backward Compatible with Xbox (limited — through emulation), Custom Face Plates, Media Center Extender
Embedded Video Memory:	10MB
Graphics Core Clock Speed:	550MHz
Video Memory:	512MB UMA (Shared with CPU)
Resolution Output:	480o, 480p, 720p, 1080i
# of Controller Ports:	Up to seven (Bluetooth)
Integrated Communications:	Wi-Fi ready (adapter not included), 802.11a, 802.11b, and 802.11g
Internal Storage:	20GB Removable Hard Drive
Standard AV Output Connectors:	N/A
L2 Cache:	1MB L2 Cache
Processor Clock Speed:	3.2GHz
Memory Bandwidth:	22.4GB/s main memory bandwidth, 256GB/s to eDRAM, 21.6GB/s FSB
Surround Sound:	Multi-channel Output (software driven)

GHOST RECON 3

MADDEN NFL 06

NEED FOR SPEED MOST WANTED

FIFA 06

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 06

THE GODFATHER THE GAME

NBA LIVE 06

CONDEMMED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS

HARDCORE GAMER'S BEST OF E3

Instead of cramming the 1000+ games that were at the show into the limited space we have, we chose to showcase E3 2005's best of the best. Across these next nine pages, you'll find our picks for some of the biggest games at the show. While you may or may not agree with our choices, there's no arguing that these titles are going to be some of the best games on the market this year and early next.

Best GameCube:
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS
(Nintendo — GC)

When Nintendo first debuted footage of *Twilight Princess* at E3 2004, the crowd at the press conference went wild. While there were obviously a few plants in the audience, the majority of the enthusiasm was real and it was borne out at this year's show. Gamers literally waited hours to get inside the special *Zelda* area of Nintendo's booth and it was worth the wait.

Inside were four separate gameplay segments, spanning the course of the game. Players were able to experience combat astride a horse as well as learning about Link in his pre-hero days. The mature, and slightly dark, visual presentation won accolades from all, finally satiating fans unhappy with *The Wind Waker's* cel-shaded style. No *Zelda* game has ever disappointed us (the CD-i games don't count), and we don't expect this one to break the trend.

Best PS2 Game:
SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS
(Sony — PS2)

Hands down, Sony Japan's *Shadow of the Colossus* was one of, if not *the* most impressive PS2 game at the show. Created by the same team that made *ICO*, you play as a young boy (sans horns) who rides horseback across vast lands seeking out a total of 16 gigantic Colossi. Using a magic sword to literally light the path, as well as reveal the beasts' weak spots in battle, you must locate and destroy each one.

Shadow's graphics are pure *ICO*; they're lush, detailed, moody and atmospheric. The gameplay, which ranges from exploration and platforming (climbing, leaping, swimming, etc.) to epic combat, looks to be an unparalleled experience that won't soon be forgotten. With any luck, this game will become the breakout hit it deserves to be.

Best Xbox:
PRINCE OF PERSIA 3
(Ubisoft — GC, PS2, Xbox)

We admit it; when it comes to *Prince of Persia*, we are definitely biased. This classic franchise continues to thrive and evolve, offering superb graphics, intuitive controls, a rich, narrative-driven storyline, and plenty of mind-bending puzzles based on agility and the environment.

It's with this bias that we all eagerly agreed on *Prince of Persia 3* as the best-looking (and playing) Xbox title on display at the show. New to the franchise is a huge, open environment, allowing you to explore the rooftops, streets and underground passageways of Babylon; the ability to play as both the Prince and his dark alter ego, the Dark Prince, each with their own unique play styles and control sets; and new gameplay additions, such as intense chariot races. While the game will be released on all major current platforms, the Xbox version on display at the show just looked amazing.

Revealed at E3 for the first time, Microsoft/Epic's *Gears of War* was the one next-generation title that really made us sit up and take notice. Blending the best of tactical action games with the Survival Horror genre, this third-person shooter really shows off the potential of the next-generation hardware.

Using the new Unreal Engine 3 to create cinematic, high-definition visuals and merging them with emotional storytelling (movie-like cut scenes, cinematic camera angles, and in-game story progression), a revolutionary cooperative tactical combat system (all game modes are designed for cooperative fire team play — both A.I. or human), and intense combat (to survive, you will have to create and take cover using interactive and dynamic environments), *Gears of War* will most likely be the breakout launch title when the Xbox 360 ships this holiday season.

Best Xbox 360:
GEARS OF WAR
(Microsoft Game Studios — Xbox 360)

Best PC:
HELLGATE: LONDON
(Namco — PC)

Here's a surprise: an original PC title from premiere developer Flagship Studios that will be published by none other than Namco. For those of you who don't know, Flagship is comprised of a group of ex-Blizzard developers who worked on the *Diablo* series. Their new game, *Hellgate: London*, combines the depth of an RPG with the action of a FPS, while offering infinite replayability and an individualized gaming experience through dynamically created levels, monsters, items and events.

From the demo we were given, it's apparent that *Hellgate: London* offers something for everyone. Sporting dark and moody graphics, the game is set in a futuristic London ravaged by a demon invasion. The gameplay is compelling, requiring you to battle through hordes of demons while completing quests, gaining experience levels, and advancing through the game's branching skill paths. We're really about the prospects for this title, but unfortunately, Flagship is not giving out a release date. Don't expect to see this potential blockbuster until sometime next year.

There were surprisingly few PSP titles on display at this year's E3, which was a little disconcerting, since the system has been available for some time now. However, of the handful of games shown, there were definitely some standouts. At the top of the list was EA/Criterion's *Burnout Legends*, which looked and played every bit as good as last year's *Burnout 3: Takedown* on the PS2.

With this portable version, *Burnout Legends* continues the series' speed, white-knuckle action and attitude while sacrificing nothing to bring it to the small screen. Combining the best moments in the franchise's history, with redesigned tracks from the first three *Burnouts*, along with exclusive PSP-only features like a four-player wifi mode, customizable championships, unlockable surprises, and more, we are chomping at the bit to get this UMD into our finger-smudged systems. Unfortunately, the game won't be out until September, but this one will be worth the wait!

Best PSP:
BURNOUT LEGENDS
(Electronic Arts — PSP)

Best DS:
NEW SUPER MARIO BROS.
(Nintendo — DS)

In the fourteen years since *Super Mario World*, we've seen a lot of Mario. He's had parties, RPGs, altercations with Donkey Kong, and more sports outings than a plumber can shake a wrench at. What we haven't seen much of is the classic side-scrolling gameplay that made Mario famous in the first place. However, at this E3 Nintendo finally gave us what we've been wanting. *New Super Mario Bros.* feels as good to play today as its ancestors used to almost a decade and a half ago.

The move to the DS has brought with it a few new toys, as well as old abilities picked up in other games. Butt-stomping and wall jumping return from *Mario 64*, and there's at least one new mushroom available. Jumping into a "?" block several times can release an enormous mushroom, and running into it turns Mario into a screen-filling behemoth capable of busting through blocks and punching giant enemies out of the way.

Best GBA:
SIGMA STAR SAGA
(Namco — GBA)

Officially a RPG, *Sigma Star Saga* blends elements of two genres to create a game that is both intriguing and compelling. As the story goes, you're a fighter pilot that has been forced into a secret mission to infiltrate and defeat and unstoppable alien race. Not knowing who to trust, you must get to the bottom of the conspiracy on your own.

Adventuring through the world feels much like a classic *Zelda* game, both in substance and style, but once you get drawn into a fight, *Sigma Star Saga* turns into a shooter. It may sound odd, but the genre-bending action works well. This is obviously inspired by the likes of *Gradius*, and you will be able to customize your ship with a variety of weapons. Randomized levels ensure that you'll always face a new threat.

Best Action Game:
STARCRAFT: GHOST
(Blizzard — GC, PS2, Xbox)

Though Blizzard is best known for its PC titles, the venerable developer got its start working on console games. While they've taken a while to come full circle, *StarCraft: Ghost* is shaping up to be a game worthy of the Blizzard name. Developed by the former Swingin' Ape Studios (now Blizzard Console), who took over from Nihilistic, the game is set right after the events of *Brood War* and promises to be one of the best stealth-action games of 2006.

Playing as the svelte and sexy Nova, you not only look good but you can kick ass with style. In addition to her psychic powers, Nova has a full suite of technological goodies at her disposal, including vehicles. With a story full of intrigue, incredibly tight play control and a seamless online mode (Xbox Live and Battle.net for PS2) *Ghost* leaves little room for disappointment. Sam Fisher had better watch his back, there's a new girl in town.

The combination of Peter Jackson's masterful directing with the creative genius of *Rayman* creator Michel Ancel has resulted in one of E3's most impressive demos. Based on the movie of the same name, *Peter Jackson's King Kong* looks to mix both first-person action (as Jack Driscoll, the film's lead) and third-person combat (as the powerful King Kong).

The playable three-part demo showcased an intense fight, pitting a spear-throwing Driscoll against a nasty t-rex and an enormous centipede while his compatriots did their best to help. Next, the crew rode a river raft while shooting at twin t-rexes, which lunged, chased and swiped at their prey. Finally, the player took over as King Kong and fought the Rex in violent combat. Needless to say, the demo was intense and the game looks like it will be an amazing interactive experience when it ships this holiday season.

Best Adventure:
PETER JACKSON'S KING KONG
(Ubisoft — GC, PS2, Xbox, Next-Gen)

Best Horror:
THE SUFFERING: TIES THAT BIND
(Midway — PC, PS2, Xbox)

Torque's no hero, but he's no murderer, either. He's escaped prison and fled into the streets of Baltimore, which is haunted by demons both literal and figurative. Torque's got to contend with the monsters created by urban sprawl, as well as a highly trained team of mercenaries with orders to shoot to kill.

Ties That Bind takes off from *The Suffering*'s neutral ending, and takes Torque out into the streets. Take everything about *The Suffering* and turn it up a notch; this features a larger setting, scarier monsters, smarter antagonists, and, if possible, even more gratuitous bloodshed. This is the kind of game that the M rating was invented for.

Best RPG:
KINGDOM HEARTS 2
(Square Enix — PS2)

A lot of great RPGs were out at this year's E3, and picking the best of the lot was not easy. *Kingdom Hearts II* narrowly edged out the competitors thanks to its superb production values, refined gameplay, and crazy sense of crossover.

It's really the improvement in gameplay from the first game to the second one that clinches the award, though. The gameplay follows the same basic system as the original game, but with a lot of wild new options added into it. Sora can fuse with his sidekicks to form a ridiculously powerful super-Sora. A new "situational" command with the Triangle button lets you pull off spectacular stunts like flying or wedging Cerberus' mouth open, if you hit it with the proper timing. A host of new allies were waiting to join up with you in this game, most prominently Mulan, *FFX*'s Auron, and a surprisingly realistic Jack Sparrow.

Best RTS:
RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS
(Microsoft Game Studios — PC)

After successfully captivating strategy fans with the original *Rise of Nations*, developer Big Huge Games decided to go the fantasy route for the sequel. You'll find technological marvels that look as if they were ripped straight from Leonardo DaVinci's scrapbook, and fantastic creatures pulled from the stories of the *Arabian Nights*. Visually, *Rise of Legends* is no slouch, with an incredible level of detail packed into each city.

Combat takes a turn for the realistic, with the addition of true physics to the game. Suddenly you have to worry about collateral damage when a building falls down, because if it's at the top of a hill, the wreckage might come rolling down the side and crush your attacking forces. It's a new dimension of play and we like it. Magic also has a place in the game, providing an alternate path for those who want to avoid the traditional tech tree.

Best Strategy:
ADVANCE WARS: DUAL STRIKE
(Nintendo — DS)

The best strategy game ever to hit the Game Boy Advance makes the transition to the DS, and it's only gotten better. Battles can now span across both screens, giving you twice as much territory to cover, and the addition of tag-team battles allows players to double up on the CO superpowers. When fighting on two fronts, it's possible to send reinforcements from one screen to the other.

The wireless download function supports up to eight players with a single game cart, and the new real-time Combat mode adds an addictive new twist to the series. Instead of taking turns, you buy up a fixed number of units and then fight it out until only one player is left standing. Rounding out the package is a map editor that is controlled via the touch screen. Suddenly, creating a custom battlefield has never been easier.

Best Sports:
MADDEN NFL 06
(Electronic Arts — GC, PS2, Xbox, PSP, DS, Next-Gen)

Okay, we know what you're thinking. Why give big, bad EA—who snapped up an exclusive five-year contract with the NFL and stole players' licenses away from the competition—the nod for best sports game of the show? Well, dammit, the game is just so good that we have no other choice.

Madden NFL 06 looked great on all platforms, from the Xbox 360 to the PSP, and instead of rehashing the same game with new stats, the development team at EA Tiburon continues to tweak, refine and reinvent the franchise. This season includes new tackles, QB Vision Control (you can control your QB's field of view as he drops back to throw), Precision Placement passing (choose exactly where to throw the ball) and an RPG-esque NFL Superstar Mode.

Full Auto combines everything you've always loved about combat racing games—massive weapons, fast cars and lots of destruction—and then goes one better. It adds a rewind button. The concept is so basic, we found ourselves asking each other, "Why hasn't anyone thought of this before?!"

As you tear through the beautifully rendered city, leaving a path of destruction in your wake you will build up the rewind meter. Make a wrong turn or eat an opponent's missile? Simply smack the rewind button and correct your mistake. Elegant and sublime, the button quickly becomes second nature and enables the sort of reckless abandon you've always wanted. If this isn't in your Xbox 360 on launch day, you needn't bother calling yourself a gamer.

Best Driving:
FULL AUTO
(Sega — Xbox 360)

Best Racing:
MARIO KART DS
(Nintendo — DS)

The big news here is support for 8-player competition via the wireless link. We had a chance to try it out at Nintendo's booth and the simple truth is, it rocks! *Mario Kart*'s strength has always been multiplayer, and when you get eight players going head-to-head, the gaming gets quite intense.

Controls are as tight as ever, with the d-pad handling the steering, the L button using items, and the R button set to jump. In a departure from the "touching" aspect of the DS, there is no touchscreen control. Rather, tapping on the lower screen simply alternates between two map views. Hopefully Nintendo will resist the urge to muck with this setup before release — it's perfect as is.

There were some seriously great first-person shooters at this year's E3, which made whittling the choice down to one a tough proposition. Ultimately, 2K Games's *Prey* won out due to its engrossing storyline, impressive visuals (developer Human Head Studios has done an amazing job with the *Doom 3* engine) and unique, "outside-the-box" gameplay elements (players can leave their body to walk through barriers, walk on walls and ceilings, and fight their way back from death).

The fact that *Prey* was announced and has been in some form of development since as early as '96 also makes this a stand-out title. The game's finally coming to fruition and hasn't made any sacrifices in a rush out to retail. Expect to see *Prey* on PC and the Xbox 360 sometime early next year.

Best FPS:
PREY
(2K Games — PC, Xbox 360)

Best Fighting:
SOUL CALIBUR III
(Namco — PS2)

Namco gets no love from us for making *Soul Calibur III* a platform exclusive, but after seeing how well the second game performed on the Xbox and GameCube, it's easy to understand why Sony would put out mad cash to keep this one all to itself. Though it isn't a visual revolution, the engine has undergone a number of small improvements and even supports progressive scan.

The gameplay was as tight as one might expect, with the demo build already running at a solid 60 frames per second. We were able to explore the ring as returning fighter Mitsurugi (who felt the same as ever) as well as the new green-clad hottie Tira. Zasalamel and Setsuka, the other new characters, were unavailable for play. New to this iteration is the custom character mode, which allows you to design your very own fighter.

Best Online:
HUXLEY
(Webzen — PC, Xbox 360)

One of the more surprising booths at the show was for the Korean publisher Webzen, which had a handful of PC and next-gen games on display that looked and played exceptionally well. The one that surprised us the most was *Huxley*, a massively multiplayer first-person shooter.

With *Huxley*, Webzen is attempting to combine the white-knuckle action of an online shooter with the epic scope and social features of an MMORPG. The game features fierce battles, team cooperation, and large-scale combat, as well as the ability to explore, live and socialize within a huge virtual city. The most impressive part was that the graphic engine is on par with the ids and Epics of the world, and the game is being designed to take advantage of both the platforms it's being designed for (the PC and Xbox 360). This is definitely one to watch.

Best Innovation:
GAMETAP
(Turner Media — PC)

We know what you're thinking right now. You're going, "*GameTap*? The guys who want you to pay for downloading ROMs? To hell with Ted Turner!" In a few moments, you'll toss this magazine contemptuously into the stack that lies next to your riced-out Xbox, to let it fester alongside your ancient issues of *GameFan*.

What *GameTap* offers, however, is the ability to emulate classic games for virtually every platform, even old PC games, with the same relative ease you can now emulate simple platforms like the NES. You can download unlimited amounts of content every month, for virtually any old system you can think of, and create a user profile that points at all of your favorite titles. To enhance the experience, *GameTap* offers exclusive content about the making and marketing of the games it offers.

Best Puzzle:
WE <3 KATAMARI:
(Namco — PS2)

We <3 Katamari would've been okay by us if they'd just thrown in a few more maps and called it a day. They didn't. In addition to the psychedelic and inimitable gameplay, the new *Katamari* features a bizarre cooperative mode, where each player controls one of the thumbsticks. It's simple, but it requires you to cooperate; otherwise, the poor Prince looks like he's having a tiny seizure.

The one thing we can't report on is the soundtrack, which was nearly inaudible on the show floor. If Namco knows what's good for it, though—and history shows it does—the game will provide another fat stack of tracks from the goofier end of J-pop.

Most Improved Franchise:
TOMB RAIDER LEGENDS
(Eidos — PS2, Xbox)

The English language just barely contains the words necessary to explain how much better the new *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Legend* looked than the previous title and franchise nadir, *Angel of Darkness*. *Legend* might actually turn out to be the best *Tomb Raider* game of them all.

Legend has crisp graphics, detailed backgrounds, and very natural-looking character animations. Much of the gameplay we saw was focused on platforming and puzzle solving, all while Lara was actually raiding an ancient South American tomb.

Legend is out to do more than keep Lara's name marketable; it's trying to give gamers an authentic adventuring experience. This alone puts it head and shoulders above the last spate of *Tomb Raider* titles, and Eidos is to be commended for focusing on quality first.

Best of Show:
GEARS OF WAR
(Microsoft — Xbox 360)

Though there was a lot of hype about the next-generation of gaming at E3, one game stood out above the rest in both function and form: *Gears of War*. Built on the Unreal Engine 3.0, the game was an impressive peek at what gamers can expect to see when the Xbox 360 launches this fall.

Led by game designer Cliff "Cliffy B" Bleszinski, the demo showcased an early segment of the game as you encounter the monster-like Locusts for the first time. Landing in a long-abandoned city, it is easy to be distracted by the sheer amount of detail in the environment. Then, suddenly, the firefight begins. Unlike previous Epic efforts, *Gears of War* is more about strategic, as opposed to twitch, gaming.

"This is not a run-and-gun game. It's stop and pop," said Cliffy B. "There is no circle strafing in *Gears of War*."

Environmental interaction is a high point of the game. At one point, we found ourselves in an open courtyard with no cover. Turning our weapon on a nearby pillar, we sent it crashing to the ground, where it made an excellent hiding place. At another point, our hero was forced to push a burning car down a dark road in order to scare off a swam of small Locust creatures in a scene that was reminiscent of the Vin Diesel flick *Pitch Black*.

Going single player is something of a departure for Epic, but if this early demo is any indication, Cliffy B and the team have done it with style. Impressive on all fronts, *Gears of War* was certainly the game to see at E3.

Biggest Disappointment:
PERFECT DARK ZERO
(Microsoft — Xbox 360)

Coming into the show, we had all heard about *Perfect Dark Zero*. However, the game simply wasn't ready to demo. With little more than a basic multiplayer setup to show off, the developers did a good job of explaining their vision but it wasn't enough to wow the crowd. Hopefully Microsoft will let this one spend the extra time in development, so it can mature into the game we know it can be. Rushing it out the door to make an artificial deadline is only going to result in a lot of disappointed fans.

THE DARK SIDE

OF RETROGAMING

by **Sardius**

EVERYTHING YOU NEVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT...

Welcome, one and all, to the first installment of "The Dark Side of Retrogaming," a profound look at some of the worst interactive atrocities committed against mankind during videogaming's golden age. While the games covered here may be painful to look back on, documenting and mocking their existence is an important recovery step for anyone who has ever been exposed to a truly bad game. Finally, it's time for the healing to begin.

So hey, you remember Sonic, right? The little blue blast-processed rodent that briefly delayed Sega's inevitable self-ruination? Yeah, him. Now, while his more recent games have been entirely terrible, back on the Sega Genesis you'd be hard-pressed to find more enjoyable stuff than the original *Sonic* series. It defined a generation of jump-and-run platformers... and inspired countless mascot-driven games in its wake.

The worst of these *Sonic* ripoffs was developed by Sachen, a hopelessly obscure Taiwanese purveyor of "unlicensed" games for the 8-bit Nintendo Entertainment System. Poor, confused Sachen. Without an official software license from Nintendo and no apparent desire to churn out pirate goods, Sachen made a name for themselves by programming original titles that are very, *very* similar to certain popular games of the day. *Jurassic Boy*, then, is Sachen's attempt at a *Sonic the Hedgehog* knock-off for the NES.

This is a worrisome prospect, and the game's awe-inspiring introductory sequence lets you know you're in store for something special indeed. The title screen features an animated Tyrannosaurus Rex who pops up and greets the player with a bizarrely casual "heeeeeyyyyy!" Be advised: it's at this point that you can safely turn off your NES and be none the worse for wear. Buddy T-Rex is the game's sole redeeming feature. Any further exposure to the horrors of *Jurassic Boy* is not recommended.

If you press on, you'll find that *Jurassic Boy* is simply the worst thing to be associated with *Sonic the Hedgehog*, ever. It's worse than those godawful Famicom bootlegs. It's worse than the pirated version of *Speedy Gonzales* for the Game Boy that replaces Speedy with a hacked Sonic sprite. It's even worse than *Sonic Heroes*, if you can believe it. Really. It's *that* bad.

So what's the game like? Well, on the surface, there's technically nothing really *wrong* with *Jurassic Boy*'s gameplay. The game only uses one button, and when you push it, Jurassic Boy jumps, just as he was programmed to. Sure, his jumps only work about half the time, and he jumps about two seconds too late whenever he *does* decide to jump, but hey, the basic controls are at least in somewhat working order.

It's when you start moving that the problems come in. You see, whenever the screen scrolls (which it does *all the time*), gameplay becomes incredibly choppy. The controls are already mushy enough, but when you're also battling with dropped frames in a speed-intensive game, the whole thing simply becomes unplayable. Obstacles and enemies will constantly pop up in front of you as you speed along, leaving you no time to react. All the gameplay eventually boils down to is holding down a single direction on the control pad, mashing a button occasionally, and praying that the game crashes so that you don't have to play it anymore.

It's not like *Jurassic Boy*'s gameplay suffers because its graphics are pushing the limits of the NES's capabilities; very few animated sprites are ever on the screen at any given time, and

there are certainly never enough to tax an 8-bit CPU. The graphics themselves aren't so hot either. Enemy variety is limited to blobs, blobs with legs, blobs that throw other blobs at you, and inexplicably, skulls with wings. The backgrounds are painted in eye-searing pastels, possibly in an attempt to emulate *Sonic*'s colorful visuals. The attempt, however, is only successful in giving players a vibrant headache.

One area in which Sachen's programmers did not attempt to emulate *Sonic* is in its music. *Jurassic Boy*'s music starts off pleasantly enough, and the tune in the first level is almost enjoyable. Don't be fooled, though; *it's a trap!* From there, the music goes from passable to ass-tastic so fast you'll think the developers were just copying random code into the sound
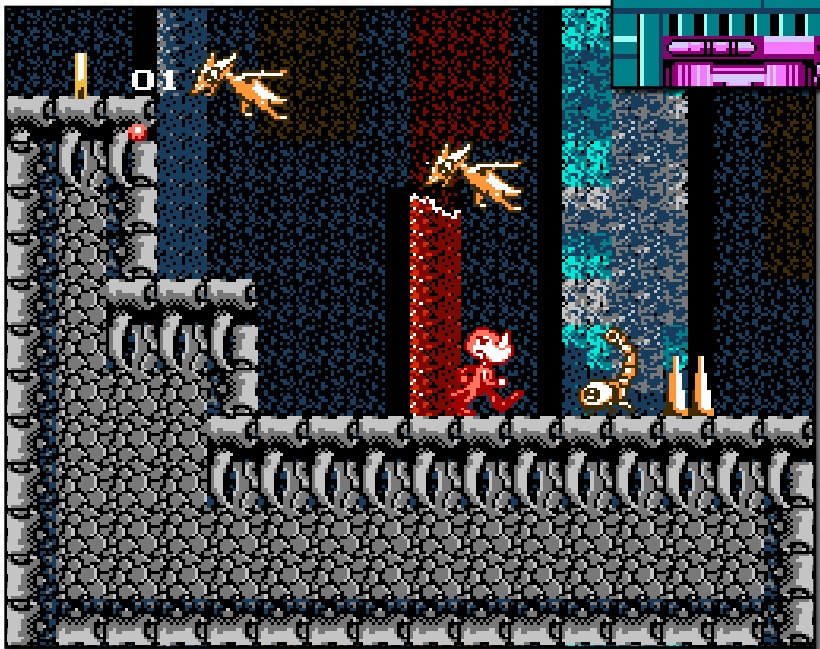
data. This would help explain the indescribably evil music that plays during the last level: thirty seconds of infinitely looped hell that could not have possibly been composed by anyone with ears and a conscience.

The sound effects don't fare much better. There's only about five sound effects total in the game, but the "coin collect" noise--which will plague your nightmares for years to come--is a high-pitched squeal that repeatedly scrapes itself across your *soul*, leaving you emotionally bloody and ragged after only a few minutes of play. Even better, the game will often get confused when you collect too many coins in a row, causing the sound to flip out and randomly cycle through an expansive range of unholy squawks, until either the audio decides to correct itself or the player's head spontaneously combusts in an act of mercy.

Audio glitches are only the tip of the iceberg, though; *Jurassic Boy* is astoundingly bug-filled, even by the standards of unlicensed games. Getting stuck in walls is so common that you eventually come to accept it as a normal part of gameplay. Sometimes the game will simply "forget" that entire levels exist, often skipping you past them to later stages at random. The best glitch, however, is found in the ending, which renders the final text scroll completely unreadable -- all but nullifying any reward to be gained from enduring *Jurassic Boy* to its bitter conclusion.

Think of the broken ending as a finishing blow, a glitchy kick to the genitals after receiving a savage Taiwanese beatdown at the cruel hands of Sachen. Like a T-Rex and a hedgehog trying to mate, no good can ever come from playing *Jurassic Boy*. You have been warned.

JURASSIC BOY: THE STRATEGY GUIDE!

THE ENEMIES

Hoppy McSpike, Deadly Swastika, Crap on Wheels

These enemies will always hurt you no matter what. Many of them hop around erratically, making them pretty much impossible to avoid. You can theoretically dodge them with calculated jumps or by timing your moves carefully, but a more realistic approach — and the one you'll use most often, intentionally or not — involves getting hit by them repeatedly before the game glitches them out of existence.

*Stuff Flinger, Bowling Ball Launcher,
Vaguely Threatening Splotch of Pixels*

These enemies throw things at you. You'd probably think that avoiding their projectiles would be the best course of action, but oh, I guess you thinking that makes *you* the *Jurassic Boy* expert all of a sudden. Fine, you go ahead and try and play this stupid jerk game and beat these guys. Just try. Try your best while I watch and *laugh*.

*Buzz!, Flying Skull Yes Really,
Dumby: The Stupid Pterodactyl Who Could Fly*

These guys fly across the screen while bobbing up and down. They have no method of attack and can be destroyed easily, and yet they will kill you repeatedly thanks to their habit of knocking you out of the air and into other enemies. *Ninja Gaiden* had its angry, ninja-hating eagles; *Jurassic Boy* has Dumby the Pterodactyl.

Blobert, Turd Ferguson, Legged Egg

These enemies are ground based, have no way of attacking you, and are slow to the point of being immobile. These facts only serve to add to the embarrassment you'll feel when you're inevitably killed by a walking metallic egg because the jump button suddenly decided not to work.

THE LEVELS

Level 1-1: This is the most "fun" level in *Jurassic Boy*. Enjoy it while it lasts; gamers less hardcore than yourself will only play this level and assume the game is merely mediocre, never tasting the true horrors to come. For now, don't worry about collecting too many coins or otherwise overthinking the game. Just mash that jump button, let your eyes glaze past the screen, and wonder what other things you could be doing with your life that don't involve slumming with Taiwanese bootleg games.

Level 2-1: This is where you start to lose hope. The first level's pleasant tropical backdrop is replaced by a cave decorated with grimy dinosaur bones, and enemies that were once crappy-looking insects and blobs are now indistinct piles of stuff with legs. Occasionally your gaming trance may be interrupted by Jurassic Boy getting stuck in a wall or two, but it's best to get used to this now since this will happen a *lot* in the coming levels.

Level 2-2: After you finish 2-1, the game will sometimes "forget" that this level exists and skip you directly to 3-2. If that happens, consider yourself blessed. If it doesn't, prepare for hell. This level contains the worst part of the game: a miles-long stretch of deadly spikes that you must cross using a series of rickety platforms that haven't been programmed correctly. Sachen hates you.
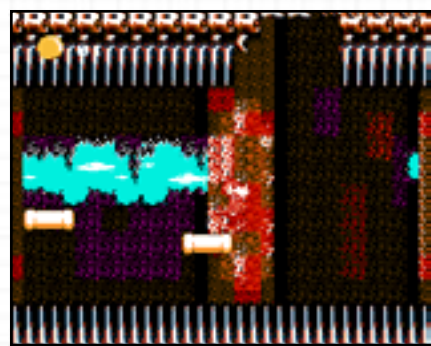
Level 3-1: This level begins with a realistically digitized Karl Marx vomiting clones of himself at you. The onslaught is relentless, but if you enter the third door you find at the halfway point and talk

to the Eskimo inside, you'll find a powerup hidden behind the set of dresser drawers in the corner. Use the enchanted swan-dog to put Marx away for good and win the game!

...actually Sachen forgot to program a level 3-1, and this was all wishful thinking on my part. *Jurassic Boy* contains no powerups, no talking eskimos, and no digitized Karl Marx. Most unfortunate of all, the game does not end here, but in fact continues for three more levels.

Level 3-2: Guess what? This stage kind of sucks! You'll spend a good five minutes dying repeatedly in the first part of the level — an obstacle course of low ceilings, unkillable enemies, and floor spikes in plenty. It wouldn't be so bad if Sachen had the basic human decency to include coins in this part, but they didn't, so you'll have to wade through dozens of potential one-hit deaths before you get to the safety of a batch of coins. The rest of the level is fairly terrible as well; the end is a maze of sorts in which it is possible to get completely stuck to the point where you need to reset the game to get out. FUN STUFF!

Level 4-1: The game will sometimes skip you past this level to 4-2 depending on what day of the week it is and what the weather's like in Taiwan, but unfortunately, this act of mercy is rare. The level itself isn't particularly hard, but it's difficult to make yourself keep playing simply because every element in the game culminates in a concentrated attack on the player here. Enemies somehow seem faster and more annoying than usual. The level design sends you around in circles and comes to dead ends often. And the music... I'm fairly certain the music will eventually eat away at your body's immune system, making death by viral infection a very real possibility. Only the hardest of the hardcore will make it through.
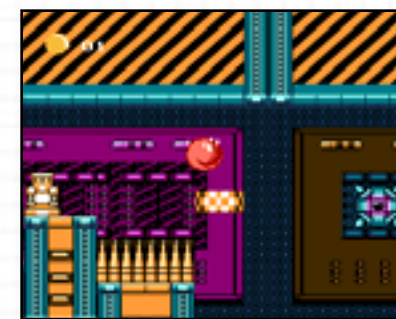
Level 4-2: This is it! The last stage! The relief one feels after finishing this level is akin to the newly-appreciated sense of calm and well-being one experiences after an hour spent pounding one's self in the face with a sledgehammer. *Jurassic Boy* is an experience that will also end in screaming agony, but at this point you've come so close to the end that you might as well finish the job.

THE ENDING

"FOR ESCAPING CHEN'S REVENGE, THE CONTEMPTIBLE CRACHI RUNS AWAY BY HIS MACHING, WHEN CHEN CAN DO IS STANDING THERE AND DOING NOTHING. BUT, WILL CRACHI GIVE IT UP LIKE THIS? TO BE CONTINUE......." (sic)
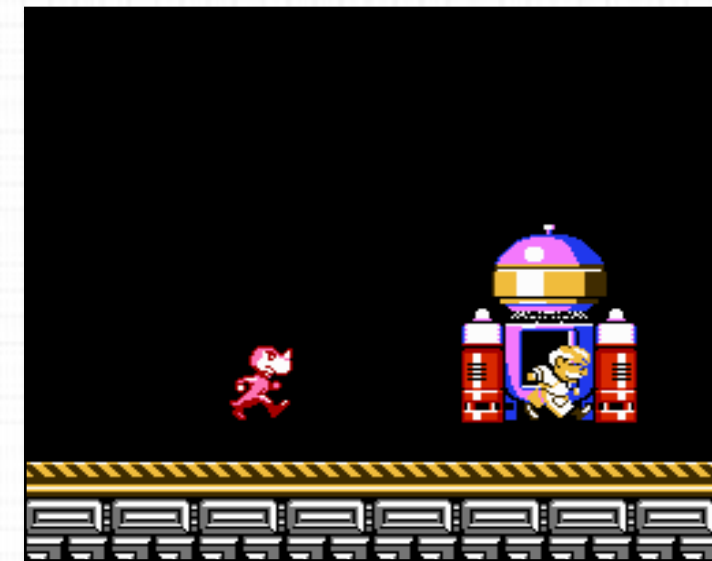
A rough translation courtesy of my Sachlish dictionary: Jurassic Boy (alias: CHEN) was about to give Dr. Crachi the beatdown of his life when the guy just up and took off in his "maching", leaving our hero to stand there like an idiot and let Crachi get away. This is reflected in the preceding scene, where Jurassic Boy — who has somehow gained levitation powers and is walking several inches off the ground — chases an old man into a spaceship, which then takes off for parts unknown.

Apparently Crachi *did* give it up like that, since there never was a sequel to *Jurassic Boy*. Shame, isn't it?

NO MERCY DDR JUSTICE

by **Metalbolt**

DANCE PAD PLAN #8 FROM PENNSYLVANIA

The *Dance Dance Revolution* **series has come a long way. It went from an obscure Japanese import title to an arcade craze almost overnight. Now that we can play it in our homes with our own** *DDR* **pads, life is good. No, life is great! However, once mastered, what are we to do while waiting for the next release? Well, we could just sit around and cry like little babies, or we could get up and do something about it! So we did. I present to you our ten-hour** *DDR* **marathon, without** *DDR***. What's that, you say?** *DDR* **without** *DDR***? Yup! Indeed, we did the impossible: playing any game that isn't** *DDR* **with a** *DDR* **pad. Heaven or Hell? Let's rock!**

2:00pm

Mad Maestro **(PS2)**
Publisher: Fresh Games
Developer: Eidos Interactive
Players: One
Buttons used: All

At first, you may think that playing this game would be impossible, since the main gameplay mechanic makes use of the buttons' pressure sensitivity. Since this is true, one player story mode is a no-go, however, setting *Mad Maestro* to child mode makes things playable. In child mode, it doesn't matter how hard you press the buttons while you conduct, nor does it matter what buttons you press. The song keeps going anyway!

It's like freestyle *DDR*, which is something *DDR* itself has desperately needed since day one. Sadly, a few songs don't work. While songs 2, 3, 4 and 10 don't work well because they have almost no beat, songs 1, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 work brilliantly! Unlike *DDR*'s techno mentality, *Mad Maestro* has classical pieces that everyone knows. Since everyone enjoys classical music (*everyone!*), everyone will enjoy *Mad Maestro* with *DDR* pads... unless you're Kyle, who tried to use more skill than he has. He nearly became the Nutcracker!

Total play time: 2 Hours
Dance Pad Efficiency score: 8/10
Extra fun: Try dancing with a partner. Some songs are slow enough that it is possible. Yes, we tried it. However, since we are nice to our readers, we'll spare you pictures of such things.

Next up, something a little slower to give ourselves a breather:

4:00pm

Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo **(PSX)**
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Capcom
Players: One or Two
Buttons used: left, right, down, triangle, circle

Get ready, street fighter! After changing the pads' left and right spin to triangle and square, respectively, we were ready. Oddly enough, we had no idea how hard this game would be on normal difficulty with a *DDR* pad! After a few attempts, we decided it was best to turn things down a few notches and set the difficulty to one star. We thought it might make things a little too easy. We were wrong. After we finally beat arcade mode on easy, I almost exploded from all of the Capcom chibi cuteness. Soon after, Kyle found me in a corner mumbling something about Morrigan's sexy chibi legs.

Once we had more energy, we decided to challenge one another in Vs. mode. Anthony, the *DDR* hater, wiped the floor with Kyle, the *DDR* master, quite a few times before Kyle finally beat him. Even people who aren't *DDR* vets can thoroughly enjoy this game with a pad.

Total play time: 2 hours, 30 minutes
Dance Pad Efficiency score: 7/10
Extra fun: Have one player use the dance pad while the other uses a controller. We tried it, with Kyle on the pad and me with the controller. Kyle played as Ryu, and I played as Ken: a match up of legendary proportions. So who won? Kyle did, proving once again that Ken fan boys everywhere are, and always have been, wrong.

Up until now things have made perfect sense, but not this:

6:30pm

Contra: Shattered Soldier **(PS2)**
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Konami
Players: One or Two
Buttons used: All

Since we don't hate ourselves we set it on easy: 7 lives, 99 continues. We were out of luck if we wanted to change weapons or stand still while we fired, since the L and R buttons do those tasks, and dance pads don't have those buttons.

After dying repeatedly to the turtle boss at the end of level one, I gave up, leaving Kyle to do his best Rambo impersonation (cue up that Green Jelly song). Kyle amazed himself by not beating the turtle boss. Actually, we were all amazed that we got that far! We did beat it, eventually, and level two was no match for us either. Level three, however, posed a problem when the "ceiling crawling belly fat" boss showed up. After yelling "Who's the boss?" at random intervals, Kyle simply yelled, "You're the boss! I give up!"

Total play time: 45 minutes
Dance Pad Efficiency score: 7/10
Extra fun: Beat it. We dare you!

After all that teamwork, we were once again ready to battle each other, this time to the death!

7:15

Guilty Gear X2 (PS2)
Publisher: Sammy Studios
Developer: ARC System Works
Players: One or Two
Buttons used: All

Kyle may be a *DDR* master, and very good at *GGX2*, but once he stood on a pad to play it, all of that went out the window! As we expected, this was absolute chaos! With the *DDR* pads sliding across the floor, I wiped Kyle across the floor with Jam. They'll be cleaning up Kyle for weeks after the brutal beating he took!

Try not to think too hard about that one. We certainly won't Again, we threw it on easy mode, and the one-player game was playable. Beatable? Probably not. Enjoyable? All the way!

Total play time: 30 minutes
Dance Pad Efficiency score: 5/10
Extra fun: This is a *Guilty Gear* game, it's already "extra fun"!

Now that we had puzzled each other to death, fought side by side in battle and fought one another hand to hand, we once again wanted to dance:

7:45

Superstar Dance Club: Number One Hits (PSX)
Publisher: XS Games
Developer: Warashi
Players: One
Buttons used: x, circle, triangle, square

All the hot anime chicks aside, everyone (even you!) knew this game would be stunning with the pads. Before starting, we both stood back and kept on going. Sicko. Stick with it, though; *Superstar Dance Club* is more like *DDR* than *DDR* is!

We're not done with this one yet!

Total play time: 2 hours, 15 minutes

Back from his "break," Kyle challenged Anthony to a fight in:

10:00

Zero Divide (PSX)
Publisher: Time Warner Interactive
Developer: ZOOM
Players: One or Two
Buttons used: All

Like *Guilty Gear X2* but much slower, this time Kyle wiped me all over the floor. After wondered how this was possible, because this game gets really fast, really quick!

After I gave up on the first level, Kyle was again the man, beating the level after (only) eight tries. From there, no one could stop Kyle on his quest to defeat this game! Kyle's unending determination got him through most of the game. While anyone else would have given up out of sympathy for the hot anime chick getting electrocuted, blown up, punched off screen (by Bruce Lee!) and dragged underground by demons due to numerous failures, Kyle

we took turns losing in one-player mode, Xtal, the final boss, called us both babies and told us to go home to our mommas. We suddenly stopped caring and gave up. Thanks a lot, Xtal. You killed our motivation. Your evil sick plan worked; you beat us before we even got to you.

Total play time: 30 minutes
Dance Pad Efficiency score: 6/10
Extra fun: Hold down Start and Select on pad #2 when you turn the game one to play the first three levels of the flying shooter Phalanx. If you die, Xtal still makes fun of you. You have been warned.

10:30pm

Now Kyle was ready to follow his destiny back to *Super Star Dance Club*. Will he ever stop? How many tries will it take Kyle to beat *SSDC*? The world may never know.

Play time: 1 hour 30 minutes
Total play time: 3 hours 45 minutes
Dance Pad Efficiency score: 10/10
Extra fun: We triple dog dare you to beat this one.

12 AM

Kyle and I are still in mental shock from all the dance pad madness. To this day, we have not been the same people. Maybe it was all the energy drinks; maybe it was the hot anime chick from *Superstar Dance Club* getting killed repeatedly; or maybe we've always been insane and no one ever noticed. Whatever the reason, we loved every second of it and swear to, one day, do it again!

[*Shortly after this was written, we again found Anthony in a corner, this time mumbling something about readers sending in their ideas for games to be played with* DDR *pads. Help us torture Anthony and Kyle; post your suggestions on our forums at* http://www.hardcoregamermag.com.]

R.I.P. NORTH&SOUTH

by Honestgamer

Any NES game based on the Civil War should be doomed to failure. How could you fit an entire chapter of American history into a 32K cart? There's no way to cover everything. Any attempt should feel fragmented and shallow. Yet somehow, *North and South* erases such objections shortly after you turn it on and proves that, with enough creative talent and competent developers, almost anything can be turned into a good game.

The first thing you'll notice about *North and South* is its attention to detail. This isn't just a standard simulation title with Civil War trappings added on as an afterthought. Check out the old uniforms, cannons, horsemen, ground troops, supply ships, bridges and estates, all of which are rendered with appropriate attention to detail, and vibrant colors that outline everything without sacrificing quality. Add a soundtrack straight out of Dixie and the presentation is well beyond competent.

FORTRESS RAID

The more regions that fly your flag, the more funds you're able to secure to build your army. Not only that, but some spaces put you in position for the game's side-scrolling portions. During these events, one player attempts to rob a train or raid a fort with three throwing knives as weapons, while the other sends defending soldiers one at a time to stop the attack before time expires. The only flaw is that it's arguably too simple for a clever human competitor to utilize stalling tactics that turn the events into

TRAVEL THE STATES BY TRAIN
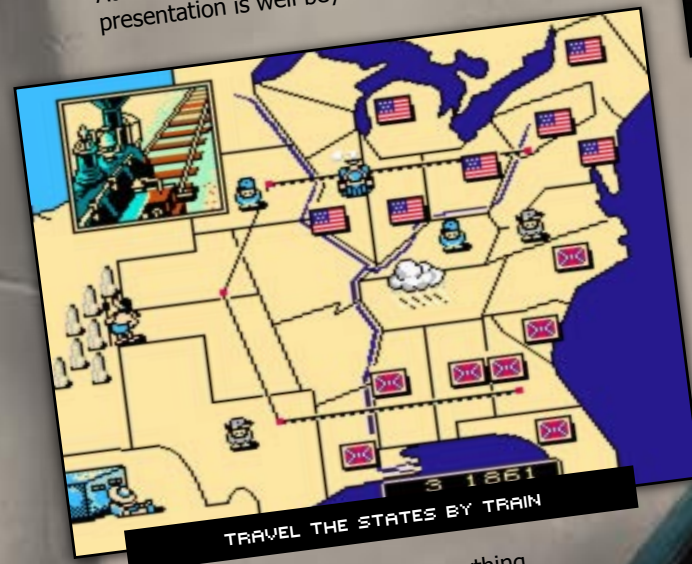
Still, flash wouldn't mean anything if the game was a chore to play. Navigating a simple menu interface lets you choose your difficulty level (if you're going up against the computer opponent, who's never hard to beat), as well as map quirks and even different campaigns. Then, you'll find

yourself dropped onto a map of those states that were involved in the actual Civil War. When it's your turn, you can click flashing icons that represent each of your units, then move them to any of the destinations within your range.

CASUAL WARFARE

THE BATTLE LINES ARE DRAWN... SORTA

THE ENVIRONMENT DESTROYED.

frustrating waiting games the aggressor can't afford to play. Nevertheless, such stages inject *North and South* with variety that prevents the enjoyable battlefield areas from growing tiresome.

Any given battlefield is viewed from an overhead perspective, like the main map, only now you're closer to the action. Here, both players are in charge of opposing squadrons (or in some cases, remnants of two or three separate units that were combined on the map screen). A force consists of a cannon, six gunmen, and three cavalry members. Each player has a box that indicates which division is presently under his control. It's simple to switch between them on the fly, so you're essentially controlling all segments at once, if only by varying degrees. The obvious goal is to completely obliterate the enemy. There are three different landscapes. Two of these have bridges, which can be destroyed by cannon fire. In such cases, a rocky archway or a shallow fjord becomes more

precious than gold. Despite the simplicity of the various locations, it's easy to formulate unique strategies that add a lot of depth to the overall game.

You'll learn to love the battles because they determine who can snag the best ports and the best supply routes. You'll love robbing trains and storming forts because then you'll do better in the trenches. So goes the game, as one element piles on the next and subtly enhances three others. One minute you'll be hustling to move your troops to the enemy fort before he can move down his troops to defend it. The next, you're robbing the train that was to bring your nemesis the relief he so desperately needs. It's this rapid flow from one element to another and the way they interact as a whole that makes *North and South* rise above the sum of its parts, until it suddenly becomes obvious that the only major thing it's missing is the audience it deserves.

GUI CIRCA 1862

TRAIN ROBBERY DISCO PARTY
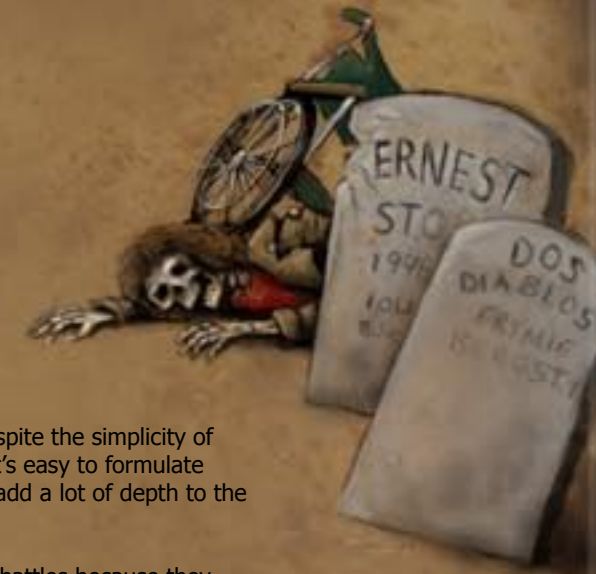
Castlevania®
Curse of Darkness

Story by Syriel

H orror games are a mainstay in today's market, but there was a time when demons and monsters weren't nearly as common in a medium that was once seen as little more than a "plaything for children." While the concept of killing bats and fighting Dracula might seem a little passé for those who grew up on the likes of *Silent Hill* and *Resident Evil*, the horror genre had to start somewhere. It may not have been the first, but Konami's *Castlevania* was certainly one of the best. A landmark in gaming and a verifiable classic in its own right, the game set the standard for all others to follow.

First debuting in Japan on the Famicom Disk System in 1986, *Castlevania* hit US shores a year later on the Nintendo Entertainment System. Although Nintendo of America's overly conservative stance caused some minor editing (religious imagery of any sort was a big no-no, which is how the cross ended up as a boomerang), the gameplay remained intact. Brilliantly balanced, the game walked players right up to the line of utter frustration, yet never crossed it. It was one of the first titles to truly challenge the skills of gamers, though it wouldn't be the last.

Over the years Konami remade the original game for a number of systems as well as developed a number of sequels. With the notable exceptions of the Nintendo GameCube and Sega Dreamcast (see sidebar "The *Castlevania* That Never Was") the series has made or will make an appearance on almost every major gaming platform available since its debut. While there were a few missteps along the way, the series as a whole has maintained a level of quality that most developers strive to emulate.

Perhaps the biggest issue with the series has been the transition to 3D. Originally conceived as a 2D game, *Castlevania*'s move to the third dimension has been a rocky one. The initial attempt on the Nintendo 64 was received with lukewarm reviews by the community and the planned Dreamcast version was simply cancelled outright by Konami for "quality reasons." It wasn't until the 2003 debut of *Lament of Innocence* on the PlayStation 2 that the series started to hit its stride. Even so, the game had some obvious growing pains.

"With *Lament of Innocence*, it was the team's first effort in 3D so there were still things we were learning," commented IGA, producer of the series. "That is why we went without a level up system and made it into a hub system."

For the latest version of the game, which is set to debut on the PlayStation 2 and Xbox later this year, IGA and the team have taken what they learned on *Lament of Innocence* and put it to work in order to produce a game that combines the freedom of a 3D world with the open-ended style of the oft-acclaimed PlayStation release *Symphony of the Night*.

"It will return to a little bit of the old system from *Symphony of the Night* where, by leveling up and getting new abilities, you will be able to traverse more of the map," IGA said. "Ultimately you will be able to go anywhere."

Dabbling with the Dark Side

Despite the fact that members of the Belmont clan have been the traditional heroes of the series, more than one game has featured someone other than a Belmont as the lead character. The aforementioned *Symphony of the Night* had players taking up the reins as Dracula's honorable son Alucard, while 2003's *Aria of Sorrow*, released on the Game Boy Advance, had gamers playing as the innocent reincarnation of Dracula himself. For *Curse of Darkness* though, players will be taking on the role of Hector, a former lieutenant in Dracula's army and one of two Devil Forgemasters.

Set in 1479, three years after *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*, the game picks up as a disillusioned Hector is trying to lead a normal life in obscurity. After Hector left the dark lord's service, Trevor Belmont managed to enter Dracula's castle, Vallachia, and dispatch the count. As a result Hector's former friend and compatriot, the Devil Forgemaster Issac, saw his abandonment as the ultimate betrayal and blamed Hector for Dracula's death. Determined to deprive Hector of any shred of happiness, Issac arranges for Hector's beloved, Rosaly, to be convicted of witchcraft and burned at the stake. Fueled by rage and a burning desire for revenge, Hector takes off for Vallachia with one thing on his mind — making Issac pay.

So why dance with a devil as the main character? The answer is simple — fan feedback.

"One thing that people requested was 'we want more weapons,'" said IGA. "If we stayed with the Belmont family that would have been a little problematic — which is why we went ahead with the creation of a new hero, Hector."

Of course, that's not to say that the Belmont family won't be represented in the game, as IGA confirmed that Trevor will be making an appearance. What he refused to confirm was whether or not the famous Belmont will be a friend or foe. Despite the lack of an official statement, chances are good that gamers will find themselves at odds with Trevor rather than fighting side-by-side. The one famous face we will not see, though, is Alucard.

"Alcuard is already asleep [following the events of *Dracula's Curse*], so you won't see him," said IGA.
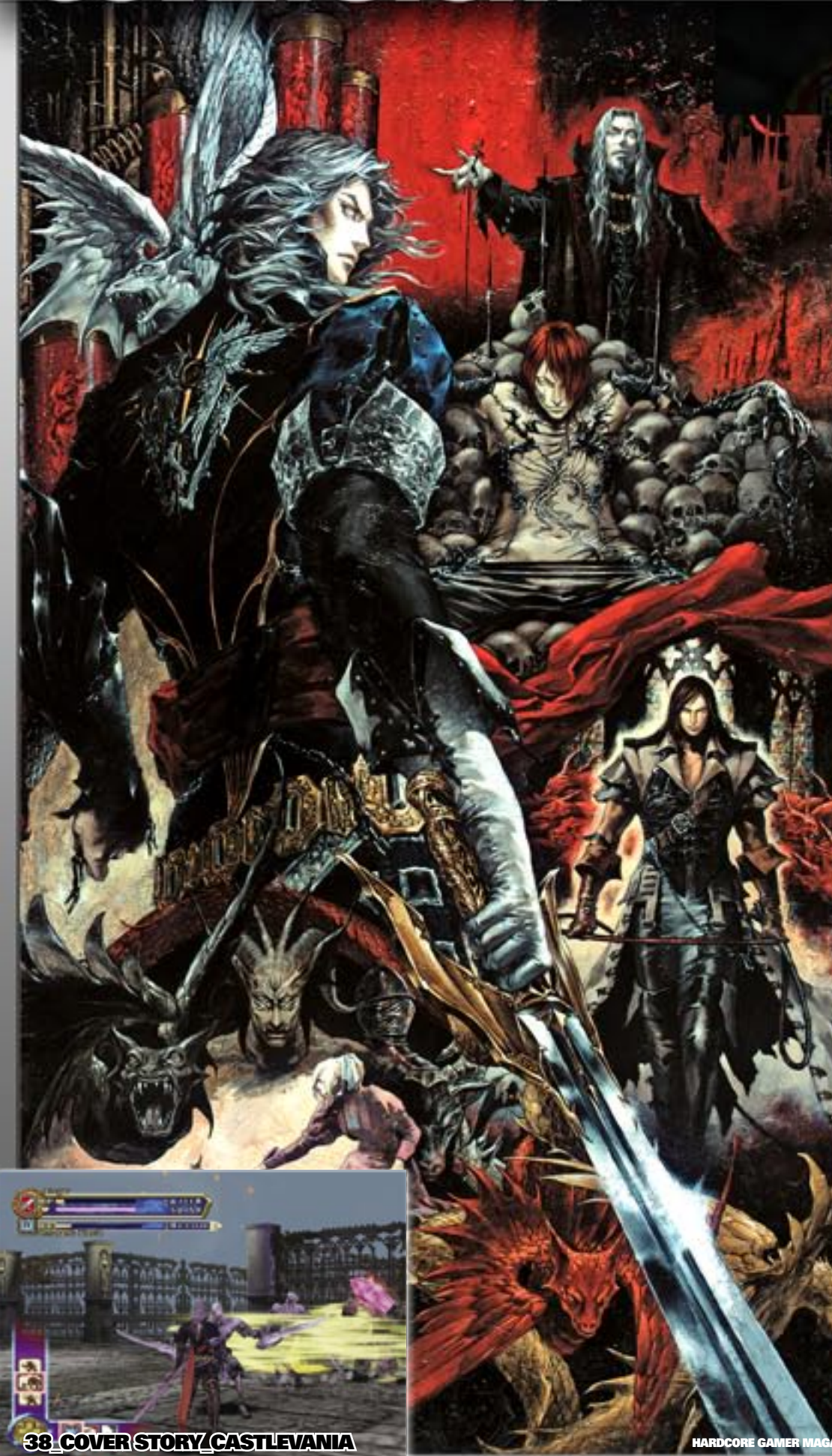
Running with the Devil

It is a given that Hector will have plenty of cool weapons to play around with, but anyone can use weapons. What makes our new anti-hero stand out from the pack are his abilities as a Devil Forgemaster. As Hector you can tap into raw magic essence and create an Innocent Devil — a creature with the powers of a demon, but completely bound to your will. Used properly, these Innocent Devils can be amazingly powerful support characters that will make or break your chances for survival.

You will not control the Innocent Devil directly. Instead, you'll be responsible for giving it commands. Because they play the role of supporting character, part of the challenge is choosing the right devil for the job because while the commands are the same, not all Innocent Devils are created equal.

The three main commands available to the player are Auto, Support and Defense. Choosing auto will set the devil to an aggressive mode and it will roam in the general area of the player, taking on enemies as it sees fit. Support causes the devil to focus on assisting the player, so instead of attacking creatures on its own, the devil will pair up with you and concentrate on whatever you are fighting. Defense causes the devil to go into a defensive posture, but it's a little different than you might expect. Instead of defending the player, the devil will defend itself. At first glance this might not sound all that useful, however creative players will soon discover it is a key skill.

For example, one of the first devils we saw was a golem. In auto and support mode he was a capable fighter, but his defensive posture was one of his best assets. When the golem went into defensive mode he created an impenetrable barrier for Hector to hide behind — perfect for taking shelter from projectiles from above.

"It will be up to the player to discover which of those three commands to use to help them get through the various obstacles placed in their path. It depends on the type of Innocent

Devil," said IGA. "With this type of Innocent Devil [golem], yes, you can use it as a shield. Using the bird type as a shield, though, is probably not all that effective."

In addition to the golem, IGA showed us bird and pixie Innocent Devils. The bird type was used to assist Hector in reaching out-of-the-way platforms, while the pixie type is a support character whose power is healing. Instead of fighting on the front lines, it is designed to ensure that Hector's vitals never drop to dangerous levels.

Specific action commands (such as "charge up" and "stomp" for the golem) can be given to the devils, but at the cost of hearts. These actions will be executed immediately and are great to use in the heat of battle. Special devils will be able to create magic symbols on the ground. You can use these symbols to transform, for example shrinking down to the size of a mouse, to fit through cracks in the walls and reach new areas.

Visually the devils will all be somewhat familiar to players as they are based on existing *Castlevania* demons, however, all the art is original. The devils will not share models with any enemies in the game.

Using the Innocent Devils will cause them to level up along with Hector, so it will be imperative that players use them all. Mastering this game will be very difficult without a devil by your side. Although you can collect all of the devils in the game, you can only have one summoned at any given time. They can be switched freely, but only at special summon points scattered throughout the game.

Powering the Pixels

The gameplay isn't the only aspect of *Castlevania* to get an upgrade for *Curse of Darkness*. The engine itself has gone through a complete overhaul. Borrowing technology from previous Konami titles, the *Curse of Darkness* engine incorporates elements of both the *Silent Hill 4* and *Nanobreaker* rendering systems, as well as boasting a number of upgrades specifically introduced for this title.

"How the models are actually displayed on screen is taken from the

Castlevania. Dawn of Sorrow™

hile most of the hype has been centered on the upcoming console title, it isn't the only *Castlevania* game in the works. *Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow* is scheduled to debut on the Nintendo DS this fall.

A direct sequel to *Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow*, the game picks up one year after the conclusion of the Game Boy Advance title, where Soma Cruz discovered he was the physical reincarnation of Dracula. After defeating the chaos power within Dracula's castle, Soma was able to repress the dark lord's soul and live a normal life, or so he thought. An evil cult wants Dracula reborn, and they will stop at nothing to accomplish that goal, even if it means sacrificing Soma. With no other options, Soma must venture forth and destroy the cult before they destroy him.

Building on the soul domination system found in the first game, *Dawn of Sorrow* preserves the three types of souls: bullet, guardian and enchant. However, collecting multiple copies of the same soul now serves a purpose. Certain souls can now be powered up past their initial state, allowing for stronger attacks. Excess souls can still be traded to friends via the wireless connection on the DS.

The gameplay is strikingly similar to *Aria of Sorrow*, with multiple paths to explore and branching areas that slowly open up as Soma acquires the necessary items. Navigation through the world is even easier than before thanks to the second screen on the DS. Now, instead of flipping back and forth between the map screen and the main screen, you can check out both at the same time. It is a subtle advantage, and one that isn't really noticeable until you play *Dawn of Sorrow* for awhile and then switch back to *Aria of Sorrow*. Suddenly the lack of a constant map is an incredible annoyance.

Visually, the game benefits from the extra horsepower of the DS with more detailed sprites along with smoother animation. Subtle details, such as a multi-colored, transparent trail that follows Soma abound, with the end result being one of the most colorful *Castlevania* games ever.

Incorporating the touch screen into gameplay was a bit of a challenge, but the developers have managed to do so in a way that works without feeling overly hokey. So far, we are aware of two different ways that the screen will be used. The first is when fighting a boss and using a "magic seal." The seal is a pattern that has to be drawn on the screen in order to banish a demon completely.

If you don't match the pattern, the boss will regain a small bit of health and you will have to whittle it back down. Players will also use the stylus to break ice blocks at certain points in the game. By breaking the blocks in a certain order, you can create makeshift stairs which will open up more areas of the castle.

The only real shortcoming with *Aria of Sorrow* was its length. A relatively easy game, it could be completed in a weekend. If *Dawn of Sorrow* can provide a bit more playtime, along with the other promised improvements it will likely land on every DS owner's "must buy" list sometime later this year.

Silent Hill engine," said IGA. "The effects system used is from the *Nanobreaker* engine."

Graphically the new game is no slouch, giving the artists working on the title plenty of room to explore. Even in the early build we played, monsters were packed with detail and the end-of-level boss, a giant red dragon, was a sight to behold. It moved towards Hector with quite a menacing tone and it obviously had a great deal of weight behind it.

Areas in the game are also much bigger now, thanks to the improved engine, allowing for more flexibility with map design and castle layout. This is an important point to note since *Curse of Darkness* will not be using a hub system for the levels. As a point of reference, the smallest area in *Curse of Darkness* is larger than the biggest area to appear in *Lament of Innocence*, the Garden of Time.

To help players deal with the larger areas, an additional camera mode had been added. You now have the option of sticking with a tethered camera or using a free look mode to manually move the camera around.

In many ways, *Curse of Darkness* is both a departure from and a return to the classic roots of the series. It is obvious that IGA and the team behind the game are not afraid to try new things, but at the same time they have not forgotten what made the series great in the first place. Assuming that all the pieces come together, *Castlevania* fans will be happy campers this fall. Oddly enough though, with all the new goodies in the game for Hector to play with, the one thing we didn't see was our hero wielding a whip.

"That's something you'll find out when you buy it," laughed IGA.

A Conversation with IGA

As the man behind the latest generation of *Castlevania* games, IGA is the official keeper of all things *Castlevania*. After our play time with Curse of Darkness, we sat down with IGA and talked about the progression of the series.

HGM: What makes a Castlevania game *Castlevania*?

IGA: The easy answer is the atmosphere. The world is *Castlevania*. It's gothic.

HGM: What would you say are the key aspects of the classic *Castlevania* games and how have you brought those into *Curse of Darkness*?

IGA: With each release of *Castlevania* there have been places where it changed dramatically. For example, the first *Castlevania* was about the whip and how you used the whip effectively even with the lag time it takes for it to come out. The first *Castlevania* was about "How do you defeat that one enemy that is right in front of your face?"

IGA
Producer — Castlevania

IGA keeps the Vampire Killer close at hand during his presentations -- just in case any undead journalists try to rush the stage.

Probably around *Symphony of the Night*, that idea changed dramatically. It started with the PC Engine game, *Dracula X: Rondo of Blood*. In the earlier versions when you made a jump, you couldn't back out of that jump. You were committed. Those were the previous *Castlevanias*. When you were committed, you were committed. From about *Rondo of Blood* onward, it turned into "How do you give more control to the player?" That's where

it really started: giving more control to the player and having the player enjoy having that control.

Not to say that all the essence of *Castlevania* has changed — what is still the same? One of the things that is still present in all the *Castlevania* games is the interplay with the enemy. Seeing what they do and how you react or how you attack them before they attack you. That interplay is still there.

HGM: As a follow-up to that, you mentioned *Dracula-X: Rondo of Blood* as a game where the series took a major turning point. Being that the game is a favorite of fans the world over, yet never saw an official release outside of Japan have you ever considered doing an update or a re-release of the game similar to the MSX port that made it to the PlayStation as *Castlevania Chronicles*?

Dracula-X: Rondo of Blood

IGA: Certainly. I know that *Symphony of the Night* sold really well in the U.S., but that's a sequel to *Rondo of Blood*. A sequel to a game that never came out!

HGM: Do you have a particular favorite in the series?

IGA: Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse. That's the one I really felt had a strong narration and a strong story. You have no idea how different *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest* was in Japan. All the villagers only told lies! (laughter) There is just no truth in that game.

HGM: Are there any plans for a *Castlevania* game on the PSP?

IGA: It's something I'd like to think about... making a 2D game for the PSP.

HGM: There is a *Castlevania* comic book series. What kind of involvement do you have with that?

IGA: Checking the contents and making comments. I get to approve all of them. We provide the timeline and the history of the *Castlevania* games to the editors and then they come back with story ideas.

HGM: With all the different *Castlevania* games and characters spanning so many different years, how difficult is it to keep it all straight?

IGA: It's a pain in the ass! [laughter] It's complicated. The basic story is Dracula is reborn; go defeat him. It happens every hundred years, but that limits you. You have got to figure out how that works because you cannot have him appear more than every hundred years. We actually did create a detailed timeline specifically for *Symphony of the Night* but never released it.

HGM: What do you play when you're not working on *Castlevania*?

IGA: Harvest Moon. I used to play *EverQuest*, but ever since my son was born I cannot play *EverQuest*. Whenever I play *EverQuest*, he cries.

Will the real Dracula-X please stand up?

If you're a *Castlevania* fan, you've likely heard about the PC Engine (TurboGrafx-16 in the US) version of *Dracula-X*. Subtitled *Rondo of Blood* the game was released in 1993, exclusively in Japan. Available on Super CD-ROM², the game boasted amazingly detailed visuals, an orchestrated soundtrack, multiple endings, a number of hidden levels and even a hidden playable character.

The development team working on the game was so passionate about creating the ultimate *Castlevania* experience they even recorded the opening cinema sequence in German and subtitled it in Japanese. As you might expect, with this level of dedication behind it, the resulting game was a masterpiece. It is often considered the best *Castlevania* game ever, and it'll run you around $150 or so for a used copy.

Dracula-X: Rondo of Blood

When Konami announced that *Dracula-X* would be coming to the Super NES, American gamers were thrilled. Finally they would be able to play the game that everyone was talking about. Those that plugged in the cart on release day were in for a surprise though. The game was not a port, but a remake, and a rather mediocre one at that.

Dracula-XX (Vampire's Kiss)

Released in Japan as *Dracula-XX* and in Europe as *Vampire's Kiss*, the game featured similarly themed levels, but that was about it. Nearly everything that made *Rondo of Blood* so appealing was missing from the Super NES version. It wasn't a bad game; it simply could not compare to its namesake.

If you have the means, we highly recommend tracking down a copy of *Dracula-X: Rondo of Blood* and a TurboDuo to play it in. It is well worth the cash and it's still plenty of fun. It holds up surprisingly well, even when compared to the high-definition games of today.

Trivia: The PC Engine CD add-on had a number of different System Cards, but *Rondo of Blood* could only play on a System Card 3.0 or later. Normally trying to load a game on an earlier card would simply produce an error, but that wasn't enough for the team behind this game. They actually created a one level mini-game featuring a super-deformed polygonal Richter that is only playable if you boot the game with a System Card 2.0.

The Castlevania That Never Was

Perhaps the most talked about *Castlevania* game is the one that was never released, *Castlevania: Resurrection*. Originally scheduled for Sega's up and coming (at the time) Dreamcast console, the game garnered quite a bit of pre-release buzz based on some early screenshots seen in various gaming magazines. The visual design wasn't the only reason people were talking. *Resurrection* was to be the first *Castlevania* game designed entirely in America.

Shortly after the first round of previews, word started to leak out that all was not well with *Resurrection*. The game suffered a number of delays before finally being cancelled for quality reasons. That would have been the end of the story, if not for the persistence of fans. Rumors abound on the Internet about the game and whether or not any playable code ever made it out of Konami. If it does exist, it is undoubtedly the Holy Grail for the most rabid fans.

So where does this mystery game fit into the *Castlevania* timeline?

"It never came out so it does not exist," said IGA. "While I am the producer, *Castlevania: Resurrection* will never see a resurrection."

Castlevania History

Castlevania (1986; Famicom, MSX, NES)
This is where it all started. Simon Belmont's original adventure first appeared on the Famicom before making its way to the MSX. It made its North American debut on the NES in 1987.

Castlevania II: Simon's Quest (1988; NES)
After the death of Dracula, Simon must seek out the vampire's body parts to lift a horrible curse. *Simon's Quest* introduced several RPG elements, mixed with the typical side-scrolling action.

Haunted Castle (1988; Arcade)
It may not have "Castlevania" in the title, but its Japanese title — *Akumajou Dracula* — shows its roots.

Castlevania Adventure (1989; GB)
Christopher Belmont takes the lead in this adventure, set many years before the events of the first two installments. It rapidly becomes nothing more than a rushed amalgamation of the first *Castlevania*.

Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse (1990; NES)
Widely considered the best NES *Dracula's Curse* takes place more than two hundred years before the events of the first game. Trevor Belmont is summoned to protect his hometown, and with his allies in tow, will inevitably confront the Count himself.

Super Castlevania IV (1991; SNES)
The first *Castlevania* installment on the SNES was an alternate version of Simon Belmont's first adventure, with improved graphics and sound, and some groundbreaking level design.

Castlevania 2: Belmont's Revenge (1991; GB)
The Game Boy's second installment to the series was a big improvement. Christopher Belmont once again enters Dracula's castle, this time to rescue his son, Solieyu.

Dracula-X: Rondo of Blood (1993; PC Engine Super CD-ROM², Turbo Duo)
Not many people have seen this game. It's expensive, if not rare, and a lot of gamers aren't aware of its existence. Like *Dracula-X* on the SNES, this stars Richter Belmont, who's out to rescue his girlfriend Annette.

Castlevania: Bloodlines (1994; Genesis)
The Genesis's *Castlevania* game took a very different route from the other games. It's the first game in the series to feature two selectable main characters, and its setting — various places in turn-of-the-century Europe — was a far cry from another run through Dracula's castle.

Castlevania: Dracula X (1995; SNES)
One of the more controversial installments of the *Castlevania* series, *Dracula X* was supposed to be a port of *Rondo of Blood*. Instead, it's sort of a retelling, with markedly different level design. Richter Belmont enters Dracula's castle to rescue his girlfriend, Annette Renard, and her sister Maria.

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night (1997; PlayStation, Sega Saturn)
Symphony of the Night literally begins where *Rondo of Blood* ends. Four years after Dracula's defeat at Richter's hands, Dracula's son Alucard enters Castlevania in search of answers. Widely considered one of the best games on the PlayStation, with one of the best soundtracks of all time, *Symphony of the Night* is a high point for the series and its genre.

Castlevania Legends (1998; Game Boy)
The first *Castlevania* to feature a female protagonist, *Legends* is set in the late 1400s. Sonia Belmont must once again hunt down Dracula, with both assistance and interference from a young Alucard.

Castlevania 64 (1999; N64)
The first 3D *Castlevania* has a worse reputation than it deserves. As either the vampire hunter Reinhardt Schneider or a young girl named Carrie Fernandez, gamers explored a larger and more cinematic castle than any of the others to date. Unfortunately, dodgy graphics and some bad platforming kept most players from the end.

Castlevania: Legacy of Darkness (1999; N64)
Set eight years before *Castlevania 64*, *Castlevania: Legacy of Darkness* is the story of the werewolf Cornell, who must rescue his sister and some innocent children before Dracula can use them to regain his full power. One of those children, Henry, will grow up to become the armored hunter from *Castlevania 64*; you can also unlock and play as Reinhardt and Carrie.

Castlevania Chronicles (2001; PlayStation)
An old-school kick in the teeth, *Chronicles* a port of 1993's Japan-only, Sharp X68000 version of *Castlevania*, as well as a retouched, remixed edition with new music and visual tweaks.

Castlevania: Circle of the Moon
(2001; GBA)
A GBA launch title, *Circle of the Moon* returns to the "Metroidvania" model seen in *Symphony of the Night*. Nathan Graves, the inheritor of the Vampire Killer whip, must prevent Dracula's resurrection and the sacrifice of his master. Due to its dark color pallette, this game was nearly impossible to play on the original GBA.

Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance
(2002; GBA)
Juste Belmont, Simon's grandson, enters the ruins of Dracula's castle to find his missing friends. *Harmony of Dissonance*'s brighter graphics made it much easier to play than *Circle of the Moon*, but the poorly-balanced magic system made it far too easy.

Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow (2003; GBA)
The best *Castlevania* since *Symphony of the Night*, *Aria of Sorrow* is set thirty-six years after Dracula's final defeat. In 2035, a college student named Soma Cruz passes out during a lunar eclipse, and wakes up outside Dracula's castle. Equipped with the power to absorb monsters' souls, Soma sets out to escape.

Castlevania: Lament of Innocence
(2003; PS2)
The first *Castlevania* for the PS2 tells the story of Leon Belmont, the founder of the family. After abandoning his knighthood and lands to pursue his wife's kidnappers, Leon finds himself in a mysterious forest. Here, he'll be given the whip that will become the Vampire Killer, and will dedicate his life and his descendants' lives to hunting vampires.

Castlevania: Curse of Darkness (2005, PS2, Xbox)
Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow (2005, DS)

CANCELLED: Castlevania: Resurrection (DC)
Originally intended to be a launch title for the Dreamcast, *Resurrection* was repeatedly delayed before being canceled in 2000. It was reportedly set in 1666, and starred two separate time-traveling Belmonts. One, Sonia Belmont from *Legends*, was brought forward from the 15th century, while the other, a brand-new hunter named Victor, was brought back from the 19th.

CANCELLED: Symphony of the Night
(Tiger Game.com)
Although it never amounted to more than a rolling demo, the Game.com port of the PlayStation classic impressed all who saw it. Had it come to fruition the game may have kept the system alive, but chances are good the hardware simply could not keep up with the demands of the dev team.

Spin-offs

Captain N the Game Master (TV, 1989)
...look, we really don't want to talk about it.

Konami Wai Wai World (1988, Famicom)
One stage of this Konami-themed adventure game was set in Castlevania, with Konamiman and Konami Girl questing to rescue Simon Belmont.

Kid Dracula (GB)
Kid Dracula, only released for Game Boy in America, was a self-parodying spinoff of the *Castlevania* series.

Dream Mix TV: World Fighters (2003; PS2, GameCube)
Simon Belmont appears in this four-player brawling game from Hudson Soft, which also featured characters like Bomberman, Master Higgins, Optimus Prime, and Yugo from *Bloody Roar*.

Timeline

1094 – *Castlevania: Lament of Innocence*	1748 – *Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance*
1450 – *Castlevania: Legends*	1792 – *Dracula X: Rondo of Blood/ Castlevania: Dracula X*
1476 – *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*	1796 – *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*
1479 – *Castlevania: Curse of Darkness*	1830 – *Castlevania: Circle of the Moon*
1576 – *Castlevania Adventure*	1844 – *Castlevania: Legacy of Darkness*
1591 – *Castlevania 2: Belmont's Revenge*	1852 – *Castlevania 64*
1691 – *Castlevania / Castlevania IV / Castlevania Chronicles / Haunted Castle*	1914 – *Castlevania: Bloodlines*
	2035 – *Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow*
1698 – *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*	2036 – *Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow*
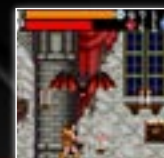
There are also cell phone ports of the original game. http://www.konami.com/mo/castlevania.php

HARDCORE REVIEWS

MAKAI KINGDOM
Chronicles of the Sacred Tome

Review by Wanderer

Publisher : NIS America   **Genre(s) :** Strategy
Developer : Nippon Ichi   **Category :** RPG
Release Date : 7/19/2005   **# of players :** 1
Rating : TEEN; Language, Cartoon Violence

This is a Nippon Ichi strategy game, with all that implies. It's gloriously 2D, relying on hand-drawn sprites and still art to tell its story, and if you're a rabid completionist with a head for math, you'll get more playtime for your money with this than with almost any other game out there. *Makai Kingdom* is fun from the moment you hit the Start button.

It's not quite so much so as its predecessors, though. *Makai Kingdom* mixes *Disgaea*'s bizarre sense of humor with the updated battle mechanics from *Phantom Brave*, but there aren't as many bells and whistles. It's easy to lose track of time while you're playing it, but there are a lot of petty frustrations strewn throughout.

In *Makai Kingdom*, you play the leader of the Overlord Zetta's forces as you fight to capture a new netherworld for him. A magical mishap destroyed his old one, and left Zetta trapped inside the near-omnipotent Sacred Tome. On the battlefield, Zetta, as a book, must rely on you and your fellow lost souls to do his fighting for him.

The biggest change to the gameplay is the new invitation system. Zetta can summon vehicles and entire buildings onto the battlefield, enabling you to build your own base camps or mobilize a column of tanks and mechs.

It's not as cool as it sounds, though.

Because of the gridless map system introduced in *Phantom Brave* (which is still just as wonky as it was in that game), fortifications mean exactly nothing. Anyone can just hop over them, or over your front line of beefy meatshields, and run over to kill your spellcasters. The buildings are only good for providing some hefty bonuses, and are only strategic assets if you place them as bait.

The vehicles are genuinely awesome, especially when you get giant robots or drill tanks, but you can only have four of them out at a time. For whatever reason, *Makai Kingdom* caps your available forces at eight characters and vehicles.

If it didn't, though, you'd roll over the game. I don't know why, but *Makai Kingdom*'s AI is rock stupid. The only time it becomes dangerous is if you're faced with an opponent who's got ten levels or more on you. Otherwise, the CPU only uses rushdown tactics, constantly flooding your ranks with disposable goons on suicide missions. Between that and *Makai Kingdom*'s heavy reliance on randomly-generated dungeons, this feels like it was rushed to market.

Makai Kingdom's not as long, involving, or addictive as its predecessors, with too many problems for me to give it an unqualified recommendation. I had, and indeed am having, a lot

TRANSMIGRATION

Makai Kingdom handles transmigration differently than past NIS games. It's still a vital part of your strategy, but it's easier to pull off.

Before a character can be reincarnated, you'll need to build up their Mana. You'll earn a small amount of Mana for finishing an enemy off. If you have Zetta delete an item, facility or character, your current leader will inherit the item or character's Mana supply.

Now comes the tricky part: killing your intended transmigrator. You can sacrifice a character by having them wish for a new facility. The next time you make a new character, you'll have the option of reincarnating the sacrificed soul into a new body. Pay attention to an item's stat mods before you choose it for your character; fighters should use rocks, while spellcasters are better off with plants. Keep in mind that only characters confined to an item with a Star Bonus can use the Reincarnation wish without having to build a facility.

of fun with it, but every positive has a corresponding negative. It'd be great for people who've never played an Nippon Ichi game before, but the rabid *Disgaea* fans hoping for a true sequel may want to keep waiting.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

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

I've honestly had more fun with *Makai Kingdom* than I did with *Phantom Brave* or *Disgaea*. The AI should have been better, but otherwise I found *MK* entirely pleasing.

FINAL SCORE :
3.75 of 5

Conker
LIVE & RELOADED™

Review by 4thletter

Publisher : Microsoft Game Studios
Developer : Rare, Ltd.
Release Date : 6/21/2005
Genre(s) : Action
Category : Platforming
# of players : 1-16 (Link & Live)
Rating : MATURE; Blood & Gore, Intense Violence, Mature Humor, Sexual Themes, Strong Language, Use of Drugs & Alcohol

Conker: Live & Reloaded may well be the first game that could've been rated J for Juvenile: Forbidden to Non-minors.

Take your average funny talking animal cartoon. Add a few shots of booze, a healthy dose of ultra-violence, a decent smattering of curse words, and a bit of lewd innuendo. Now you've got a mix that almost begins to describe *Conker: Live & Reloaded*.

The game is divided into two wholly separate portions. There is the single player, which is a remake of the 2001 title *Conker's Bad Fur Day* on the Nintendo 64, and the multiplayer, which is a wholly new team-based third-person shooter.

Conker's Bad Fur Day is full of potty humor. I mean this both literally and figuratively. A lot of the characters curse like sailors, complete with TV-style beeps. If your taste in comedy runs in the "Spell icup!" range, you'll feel right at home. Scatological humor is also the order of

the day, as the game sends you on quests like feeding cows prune juice so that you can harvest their feces, fighting an operatic crap monster, and rolling relatively large poo-balls around. Beyond that, you'll meet such varied creatures as voluptuous sunflowers, angry barn implements, and a purple dinosaur. The game sports a large cast of characters, most of them awfully crude, but wonderfully executed. Crude

How d'you think I keep this lovely grin?

humor is still humor, and *Conker* is a funny game, if only in a sophomoric kind of way. *Conker* sports the kind of comedy that makes parents' brains explode.

The controls in *Conker's Bad Fur Day* are basic. You've got a jump button, a crawl button, a button to draw your weapon, and a button to swing your weapon. Throughout the game are various context-sensitive pads, each of which do something different whenever you press the B button. The analog sticks are precise, which is excellent, since you'll encounter more than a few situations which require perfection. The camera is transparent in most situations. It turns at just the right speed, not too slow and not too fast.

Conker's BFD is a platformer, so expect lots of tricky jumping and climbing. Don't be surprised when you run into a section that requires pinpoint accuracy, lest you be chopped in half, fall onto spikes, or simply fall to your gooey death.

I CAN PUT THIS WITH THE REST OF MY DEAD PRESIDENTS.

Conker: Live & Reloaded isn't just a remake. The new multiplayer mode, playable via split-screen, system link, and Xbox Live, is worth the price of admission alone. The game delivers a class-based, story-driven multiplayer mode with eight distinct stages, all of which are pop culture parodies. You even get 15 bots, just in case you don't have any friends for multiplayer. The action stays hectic, but always remains fun. The different classes are actually *different*. You have to pick a class and then play the role that class represents. Long Rangers have no business on the front lines, for example, and retrieving a flag with the Demolisher is usually a bad idea. It adds another level to the game, elevating it beyond simply "Shoot it 'til it dies!"

Conker isn't perfect, however. The potty humor can get to be a bit much, particularly when the bulk of the first few hours of the game revolves around fecal matter. Having a sun-shaped cog tell you to "&$&@ off!" fifteen times in a row is ten kinds of overkill. The game could've benefitted from a more detailed quest system, as the directions can be a bit vague early in the game. There are a few areas in the game that skew towards the "needlessly frustrating" side of the difficulty spectrum. The save system is a little too transparent, as there's no notice of your game being saved at all.

The pluses far outweigh the minuses, however. The multiplayer is on point and the single-player is quite good, despite being sometimes horrifically juvenile. *Conker: Live & Reloaded* is an excellent ride, regardless of whether or not you've played the Nintendo 64 release.

Rating : 4 of 5

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

I've got a real low tolerance for potty humor, so to my eyes, *Conker's* about half as funny as it thinks it is. Decent platformer, okay shooter, but it's too self-consciously tasteless.

FINAL SCORE :
3.25 of 5

JUICED

Review by **Syriel**

Publisher : THQ
Developer : Juice Games
Release Date : 6/12/2005
Rating : TEEN; Mild Lyrics, Simulated Gambling

Genre(s) : Racing
Category : Modder's Heaven
# of players : 1-6 online, 2 players split

Originally set for release last year, *Juiced* **was thrown into limbo when Acclaim announced its bankruptcy. After the dust settled, THQ swooped in and picked up the game, but instead of simply pushing it out the door, the publisher sent it back for more time in the proverbial oven. The extra time was an obvious help, as the resulting game is a marked improvement over what came before.**

The racing component of *Juiced* successfully blends arcade-style street racing with a solid physics engine in order to produce a sense of control that is unerringly natural without feeling forced. As a result, you're free to perform any trick in the book, though they'll do little more than slow you down during a race. You're better served by following the racing line and jockeying for position.

Your computerized opponents are worthy of note, because they're surprisingly human-like in their actions. This is in stark contrast to *Gran Turismo 4*'s A.I., which follows the racing line like a pack of robots. Each A.I. car in *Juiced* is actively competing with one

another, which gives you ample opportunity to look for an opening. That said, the A.I. also watches how you drive, and if you start bouncing off your competitors, you'll not only suffer damage, but lose respect.

In addition to "proper" races, you can also compete in showoff challenges which require you to prove your worth by performing a certain number of tricks within a limited amount of time. For those that prefer a little one-on-one action, you can phone up anyone in your contacts list to race at any time.

Along with the racing aspect, *Juiced* also offers up a tightly integrated car modding and reputation system. Developing a good reputation allows you to enter more races, start holding your own

and eventually even build up a crew of your own. Building a crew allows you to race in team-based challenges as well as take a back seat to some of the singleplayer races. Instead of hopping behind the wheel you can have a team member enter and then place a bet on the outcome of the match-up.

Back in the garage, *Juiced* offers a full suite of parts for every vehicle, giving

THE ORIGINAL JUICED

After playing the final version of *Juiced* we went back and spent some time with the version that Acclaim was planning to release. The difference was like night and day. While the premise was certainly there, the Acclaim version of *Juiced* both looked and played much like an unfinished beta. The A.I. was rough, the user interface incredibly plain and the control much stiffer.

Looking at it in a vacuum, Acclaim's *Juiced* would have likely gotten a number of average reviews but it doesn't compare to THQ's *Juiced*. Letting the game spend the extra time in development before shipping it out was an incredibly smart move on THQ's part. Take a look at some of the images on the rest of the page to see how far the game has come.

(Note: All of the sidebar images are from an unreleased version of *Juiced*.)

you the ability to fully pimp your ride. It's possible to spend hours in this mode, doing everything from choosing the right upgrade to applying custom decals. If you're the sort that would rather pass on the garage and just get back to racing, an included "auto-upgrade" allows you to skip the modding portion of the game.

Initially your selection of parts is limited, though as you complete race after race you will unlock higher quality components. While it is tempting to simply buy the "best stuff" part of the strategy is tricking out your car so that it reaches the top of a particular class, but doesn't cross over into the next. For example, a VW Bug with 199 HP will be a rocking competitor in class 8, but at 200 HP that same car will be forced into class 7 where it will be a very poor performer.

Ultimately, the goal in *Juiced* is to build up your car collection, by purchasing new toys or betting for them, both online and off. Either way, when you put your pink slip on the line, you had best be prepared to deliver. If you lose the race you lose your car. Permanently.

While *Juiced* looks a bit dated visually due to its long development cycle, the underlying gameplay is well tuned and quite enjoyable. Take it out for a test drive and you won't be disappointed.

Rating : 4 of 5

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

Juiced is proof positive that a judicious delay can do wonders for a game. It may not be *Midnight Club 3*'s equal, but it's still a damn fine racing game.

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5

DESTROY ALL HUMANS!

Review by **Honestgamer**

Publisher : THQ
Developer : Pandemic Studios
Release Date : 6/17/2005
Rating : TEEN

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

Picture this scenario: after using your telekinetic powers to suck the brain stem out of a roaming housewife, you sprint toward where it lies quivering on the street. Suddenly, a black sedan skids onto the scene, brakes screeching. The rear tire smacks the brain, which rolls along the pavement, towards the smoldering ruins of a house you destroyed with your flying saucer's death ray.

You have a choice. Do you run for the brain and the DNA points it contains; stand your ground and fight the government agents that're about to pour from the car; or do you use your jetpack to fly to the roof of a nearby building?

Destroy All Humans! is a refreshing game loaded with such decisions. In it, you play an alien being named Crypto. He's the intergalactic equivalent of a British secret agent. Instead of using gadgets designed by an old scientist, he uses his mind, his guns and a spaceship. There's another important difference: Crypto isn't here to save mankind. Rather, he'd like to leech our valuable DNA in order to help rebuild his own race's strength.

Crypto makes his entrance at a turnip farm, where he tries to discuss the invasion with the race of animals that he feels shows the most intelligence: cows. They don't really help, but the scene makes for a great tutorial. Living creatures can be targeted with the left shoulder button, which generates additional options. Players can hypnotize animals and people, suck out brains, scan their thoughts or send them flying. Another button changes Crypto's appearance if he is within range of an appropriate human. You won't have any trouble adapting to this setup.

Crypto's mind isn't his only weapon. He also can zap his enemies with alien guns. Later on, he'll grab an assortment of ray guns that can vaporize his opponents, and he can also take to his spaceship to destroy cities on a larger scale when the need arises. This really adds depth to the game and makes it easier to ignore its few flaws.

The worst offender is occasional redundancy. *Destroy All Humans!* is stingy with the new stages. This means you'll be wandering through the same locales more often than you might like. However, each environment is massive. They're also filled with pods that you can collect to quickly increase your DNA points, which finance those weapon upgrades.

MOBILE MAYHEM

So you've spent hours upon hours blowing up the silly humans, but it's not enough? Well then you best investigate the "Crypto, Phone Home!" option in the archives. Tucked away unobtrusively inside the game's menu system are a series of codes that are designed to be sent via text message on your cell phone. Send the right code and Pox will text you back with download links for mobile phone goodies, including a playable *Destroy All Humans* cell phone game, custom ringers and wallpaper.

A top down affair, the cell phone game is a scaled down version of the main story. You will alternate between ground based missions, which often involve Crypto disposing of humans in various ways, and UFO missions. Hopping into the UFO is a great way to cause mass destruction on a mobile scale.

Running around town as Crypto is an enjoyable diversion, though the missions which have you killing humans are decidedly more fun than the abduction jaunts. If you're looking for a good way to blow off some steam in five minute bursts, this is a great way to do it. As for the ring tones, well there's just something highly amusing about having the phone belt out "Incoming transmission from the supreme overlord!" every time mom calls.

there are plenty of ways to amuse yourself. Three thousand brain stems later, you'll be smiling just as much as you did the first time you played. It's never been better to be bad.

Rating : 4 of 5

The massive environments step on the game's other flaw. If you die in battle—and you will as the game's difficulty increases—you return to the main menu screen. There's no quick restart of the stage you were playing. Often, you'll spend most of a minute waiting to return to action.

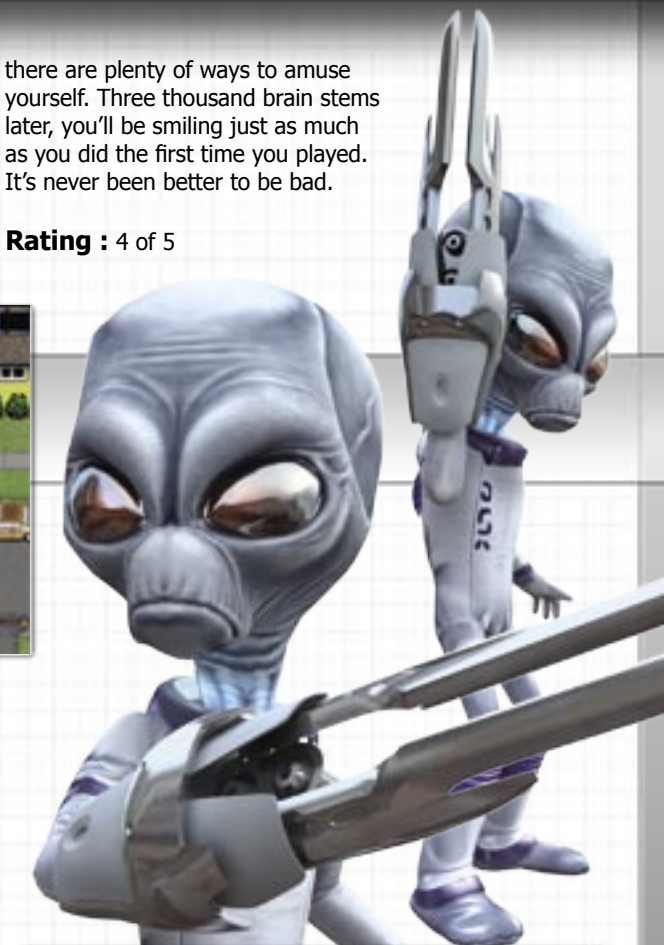Still, the game is a riot. Even when you're not accomplishing your true objective,

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

DAH! has the right combination of black humor and open-ended gameplay to keep you playing for weeks. It's a little repetitive, but you have to love any game that lets you probe people at random.

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5

SAMURAI WESTERN

Review by **Wanderer**

Publisher : Atlus
Developer : Acquire
Release Date : 6/07/2005
Rating : MATURE; Blood, Violence

Genre(s) : Action
Category : Beat-'Em-Up, Samurai
# of players : 1

This may have one of the best titles in gaming history, and indeed, the first few levels do not disappoint. *Samurai Western* **is really cool, both in concept and execution, but suffers from a combination of uneven level design and occasionally monotonous gameplay. It's a solid rental, but only the most serious of beat-'em-up fans—such as those who rush out to buy every** *Dynasty Warriors* **game—should go for the purchase.**

Gojiro Kiryu has come to the Wild West to find and kill an outlaw named Rando. Almost from the moment he arrives, he's forced to gut every gunman on the frontier, either because they've got the bad manners to attack him, or because they work for an arrogant land owner named Goldberg.

Samurai Western is set in an anime universe, where swords can effortlessly stop bullets and half your enemies are carrying weapons that won't be invented for thirty years. Gojiro is up against six-shooters and throwing knives, but he's also got to face men with Tommy guns, shotguns, rifles, and, on a couple of memorable occasions, a Gatling gun. There are also dynamite midgets. Don't ask.

To defend himself, Gojiro can spin out of the way of incoming gunfire, pick up corpses or items to block it, or cut the bullets out of the air, sending them back at the man who fired them. Playing *Samurai Western* is a process of constantly jockeying for cover and spacing, as you try to guide Gojiro through a hail of bullets so he can smoothly cut people in half.

This puts the badass factor through the roof, obviously. Combined with a healthy dose of solid graphics, good voice acting, and a well-executed if formulaic Western plot, the presentation and sheer style count for a lot.

The problem is that when the rubber hits the road, presentation and style are all that *Samurai Western* has going for it. This is one of those games where the first few stages are fun, both to watch and to play, but as you carve your way through another legion of faceless banditos, the gameplay gets either monotonous or frustrating.

The monotony is simple: you don't have that many offensive options. Gojiro can gradually acquire more swords, as well as accessories like cowboy hats, but every move in his arsenal still boils down to flogging the Square and Circle buttons like a rented mule. With no way to attack at range or switch weapons on the fly, and without any real combos to speak of, Gojiro's offensive arsenal consists entirely of dodging and slashing, over and over again.

The frustration factor sets in when you get past the first few stages, and the enemies get better hardware. You can easily dodge or block bullets from a few guys with revolvers, but when you're surrounded by machine gunners *and* dynamite midgets, it stops being fun, fast.

Samurai Western has a solid concept, and it's genuinely entertaining. It simply needs more variety to spice up its gameplay. As it stands now, it's perfect for maniacal beat-'em-up fans, but for more casual gamers, it'll get old in a hurry.

Rating : 3 of 5
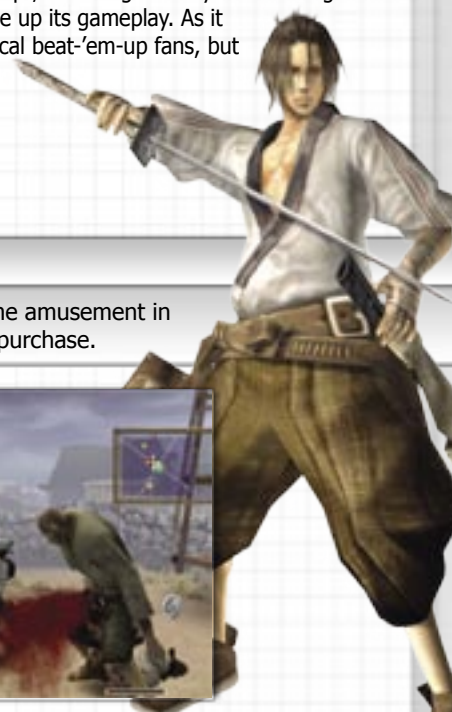
2nd opinion by FateBreaker • **Alternate Rating :** 2.5 of 5

Samurai Western isn't a complete failure, and it does offer some amusement in the first hour or two, but not enough to warrant a forty-dollar purchase.

KOF MAXIMUM IMPACT MANIAX

Review by **4th letter**

Publisher : SNK Playmore
Developer : Noise Factory/SNK Playmore
Release Date : 6/07/05
Rating : TEEN; Suggestive Themes, Violence

Genre(s) : Fighting
Category : 3D
# of players : 1-2 Players on Xbox Live/Offline

"Galactica Phantom! *A real man's punch!*" **This, friends, is why Ralf Jones wins the Quote of the Decade Award.**

King of Fighters: Maximum Impact Maniax is a lot like an old kung-fu movie. Just like the Wu-Tang pictures of yore (or thirty years ago), the action in *Maximum Impact* is fast-paced and entertaining, the character design varies from inspired to insipid, the English dub is unintentionally hilarious, and the story falls on the "leave it" side of "take it or leave it."

Let's be clear on one thing. This is a *King of Fighters* game. In true *KoF* fashion, 90% of the cast has no bearing on the plot whatsoever. The only ones that matter are Alba and Soiree Meira, twin orphans, and Lien Neville, sexy British super-assassin.

The character designs were done by noted Japanese artist Falcoon. Each character has two separate models with unlockable colors, though there are more than a few odd stylistic choices. For example, pick Mignon Beart's second model is a skimpy catgirl outfit, which is sure to please just as many fans as it creeps out. The character animation is well done and gives each character a truly different feel. Mai Shiranui's bouncy, laid-back personality shows in her stance, the same as Mignon's over-the-top, but still somehow timid, cuteness shows in her fighting style. There are no cookie cutter characters here.

The English voice acting is hit-or-miss, but when it hits, it's excellent. Terry Bogard, Mai, and Ralf Jones are all perfect. The rest range from

good to average. Very few are cringe-inducing. If you're into such things, the Japanese voices are available in the options menu. The music is very nice, as well. It's easy to listen to, and is great fighting music.

The fighting itself is fairly simple. It's fast-paced, but not so fast that it's uncontrollable. The controls are crisp and characters respond with a minimum of lag time. If you're new to fighting games, there'll be a very slight learning curve as you get the hang of how the controls work, but that's simply a match or two. *Maximum Impact*'s easy control scheme helps quite a bit. The four face buttons give you normal attacks, and, when combined with the d-pad, deal out special moves.

The fighting engine is far from perfect. There are a few oddities present, including the first attack giving an instantly full bar of super meter and super attacks that can seemingly be stopped by a hard sneeze. The smooth animation is also a hindrance, as certain moves have fairly lengthy start-up and wind-down times and leave you vulnerable. The final boss fits the "SNK Boss" archetype perfectly: he's cheap, highly damaging, and has ridiculous priority. Don't even mention his infinite super meter.

King of Fighters: Maximum Impact Maniax has got fast, fun fighting, a great cast (even if some of the costumes are a bit blah), and a quality soundtrack. It feels a bit generic sometimes, and the engine problems can be frustrating, but it's well worth a play.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

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

KOF's first steps into 3D are unsteady, but it's good for a couple of laughs. Don't expect a satisfying Xbox Live experience, though, unless you really like getting nailed with 90-100% combos.

PLATFORM PlayStation.2

ADVENT RISING

Review by **Syriel**

Publisher : Majesco Entertainment
Developer : GlyphX Games
Release Date : 5/31/2005
Rating : TEEN

Genre(s) : Action Adventure
Category : Sci-Fi Epic
# of players : 1

One of the more ambitious video game projects in recent memory, *Advent Rising* is the first installment in a three part epic chronicling mankind's future among the stars. To say it starts out with a bang is an understatement. No sooner have you finished the training level, than an alien race known as the Seekers appears out of nowhere and starts laying waste to humanity.

The game's strength is in its plotting—the story was authored by Orson Scott Card—and presentation. Epic in scope, the action unfolds like something out of a blockbuster movie while challenging you to make some tough choices. In the first hour alone, you have to choose between saving your brother's life or your fiancé's.

Advent Rising's sound design is equally impressive, with an orchestral score that puts most game music to shame. We wouldn't be surprised if you're already scouring BitTorrent for the soundtrack. It's that good.

For all it does right, *Advent Rising* also suffers from a few glaring flaws that are nigh-impossible to ignore, most notably an incredibly choppy framerate. Whether you're indoors or out, be prepared for a good deal of graphic stuttering. It isn't limited to the gameplay, either; some of the cinematics suffer from the same issue.

Thankfully the low framerate doesn't hamper play, due to the game's "flick-targeting" control scheme. In short, to target an enemy you simply flick the right analog stick towards your opponent. The game will establish a target lock and you can fire away with impunity—circle-strafing's got nothing on this. As

you use each weapon, your proficiency will increase, eventually unlocking new abilities.

The flick-targeting fails during those times when it's in your best interest to turn tail and run like the wind. When enemies are swarming you, any movement of the right stick will trigger a target lock and change your orientation to match. As you might expect, this isn't the best of ideas when health is at a premium. A similar problem occurs when you try to pick up a weapon on-the-fly because your left hand shares the same button as the evade command. It can be incredibly annoying to be right on top of a much needed weapon and then jump out of the way at the last second.

If you can look past the technical shortcomings, there is a lot to like about *Advent Rising*. Unfortunately, the ambition of the development team seems to have outstripped the power of the hardware, leaving us a diamond in the rough rather than a true masterpiece. We can only hope that the future installments will make use of the next-generation consoles and allow the developer's original vision to shine through.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
3.0 of 5

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

Advent Rising starts out with a ton of potential and promise, but once you get into the meat of it, falls way, way short. Full of bugs and weird technical glitches, this is one game that needed a little more time in the oven.

COLOSSEUM
—ROAD TO FREEDOM—

Review by **Shoegazer**

Publisher : Koei
Developer : Goshow
Release Date : 7/19/05
Rating : MATURE; Blood, Violence

Genre(s) : Action
Category : Fighting, RPG
# of players : 1 or 2

It's time to go dry-clean that toga, because we're going back to the days of the Roman Empire, this time courtesy of Koei. Unlike Capcom's *Shadow of Rome* title from earlier this year however, *Colosseum: Road to Freedom* doesn't concentrate on a deep story with lots of plot twists, or stealth gameplay mechanics. This one is all about visceral fights for survival between bloodthirsty gladiators, and the beaten combatants that lie in their wake.

For those who like to know the reason for the action onscreen, the story slowly unfolds as you play, though it's clearly not the focus of the game. You are a slave that has been purchased for the sole purpose of competing as a gladiator, and you've been offered your freedom if you can pay back the sum of your price tag. I'm not sure how the exchange rate would translate into the present day, but regardless, it's a lot and you'll be playing for a while if you hope to pay it all back.

Colosseum is perfectly tailored to the gamer that wants complete character customization. Do some push-ups for arm strength, or dodge a swinging board for increased dexterity. How your character progresses is entirely up to you. That said, all of this extracurricular training sets you up for crushing disappointment.

The gameplay is simple: you will be thrown into one of six different battle modes, and then proceed to hack 'n' slash mercilessly until the fight's over. The battle system almost completely abandons

strategy, as fights can be won by simply randomly mashing your attack buttons. Players willing to take the time to learn the rich combo system will certainly enjoy the game more, but will ultimately have about the same success rate as a button masher.

The intuitive controls are easy to learn, and are also the game's biggest flaw. The unforgivable omission of a lock-on feature sucks out about half of the fun. You'll be lucky to hit your intended target half the time, and even luckier if you don't get killed from behind because you couldn't stop your current combo to defend yourself.

The other major problem with *Colosseum* is in the presentation. The graphics are a bit muddy, and in general, the game appears to have been bleached by a never-ending sunset. There are in-game cutscenes that advance the story once in awhile, but there are also many non-story-related scenes, which are repeated so often that it makes the game drag.

In the end, *Colosseum* is an incredibly deep game with lots of good ideas, but the execution leaves something to be desired. If you can stomach the clumsy collision detection during the chaos onscreen, then you'll find enough here to keep you busy for a weekend or two. If you're craving something a little more diverse with a gripping story, you'd be better served to check out *God of War* instead.

Rating : 2 of 5

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

Though definitely not for everyone, *Colosseum* does offer a deep enough experience to keep hard-core players happy. However, the inconsistent combat system can cause much aggravation.

FINAL SCORE :
2.25 of 5
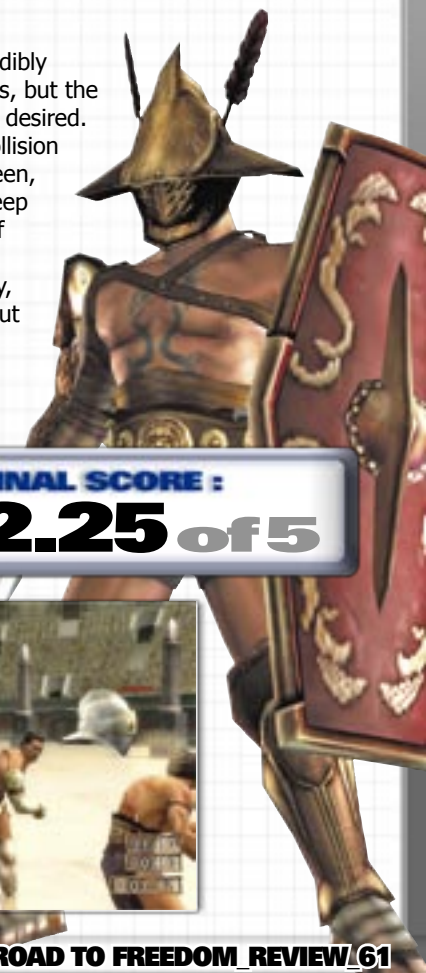
Review by **James**

ENTHUSIA
PROFESSIONAL RACING

Publisher : Konami
Developer : Konami
Release Date : 5/04/2005
Rating : EVERYONE

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

With *Enthusia Professional Racing*, Konami is aiming for the high-end car sim crowd. These gamers are supposedly looking for the most realistic racing physics possible, taking effects into account like tire grip and inertial forces. The car's movement should then be calculated using arcane equations involving these forces, then dividing by any input the player might make to, eventually, arrive at some approximation of gamer control over the vehicle. It's hard to believe, but there are people in the world who find this fun.

Realism is the name of the game in *Enthusia*, with 200 real cars waiting to be unlocked. It's true that most of the courses are fantasy tracks, but they're generally well designed and scenic, so that's not really a problem. Each car has a good selection of instantly available stats, including engine size, horsepower, torque, and weight, with even more info availabe in the Spec menu. The car models look good and are nicely detailed, but unfortunately that's the nicest thing that can be said about the game.

Enthusia's biggest problem is that, for every interesting idea it has, there's something attached that leeches all the fun out of it. A prime example of this would be the Enthu points, by which the game keeps track of one's skill as a driver. Racing clean, without hitting walls or other racers, means the points won't go down, but no amount of fancy driving will ever win them back. If the Enthu points dip down to zero, the next week in the game's calendar will be taken off while they regenerate, while the racer presumably sits in a corner and thinks about the bad things he's done. On the plus side, once the Enthu points are knocked down to zero, there's no reason to try to race clean any more, meaning a first-place victory is much easier to attain. It's not how the game is meant to be played, but more often than not, it's how it will be.

Though there are several play modes, like the typical Time Attack, Free Racing, and Versus Racing, the meat of the game is found in Enthusia Life. Enthusia Life isn't just about winning races; it's also about choosing the right car. Each car is ranked on its odds of winning, and winning with a lower-ranked car means earning a higher overall ranking. Unfortunately, changing cars means knocking a week off the in-game calendar, although that really doesn't end up meaning much beyond getting a different selection of events to choose from.

The final game mode is Driving Revolution, and it's as close to a tutorial as the game offers. Markers are placed around a track, with the object being to go through them at a certain speed. It's set up to let the player make an optimum run through the course, but like the rest of the game it ends up feeling more like homework than a fun challenge.

Enthusia has the seed of a good idea, but in the end it just doesn't have the game to back it up. Aggravating and slow races, serviceable graphics, ignorable audio, and a steep learning curve that doesn't give the player any sense of accomplishment all combine to make a game that's more trouble than it's worth.

Rating : 1.5 of 5

2nd opinion by 4th letter • **Alternate Rating :** 1.5 of 5

There is such a thing as being "too sim," and *Enthusia Professional Racing* is it. Too much function, not enough fun.

STAR WARS
EPISODE III
REVENGE OF THE SITH
THE VIDEO GAME

Review by **Melf**

Publisher : LucasArts
Developer : The Collective
Release Date : 5/04/2005
Rating : TEEN; Violence

Genre(s) : Action Adventure
Category : Third-Person, Hack-'N-Slasher
# of players : 2
Notes : Dolby Digital 5.1, 480p Support

LucasArts has been riding a *Star Wars* **high for the last couple of years now. With hits like** *Knights of the Old Republic* **and** *Battlefront*, **they've been slowly bringing the license back to the glory it had in the early '90s. Thus, the hype machine was in full gear pending the release of the final movie in the new trilogy and gamers everywhere were expecting the best title yet with Revenge of the Sith. What they got was less than fulfilling, to say the least.**

Revenge of the Sith fails on so many levels while desperately struggling to hold itself up to the expectations the license automatically presents. The Collective, of *Indiana Jones & the The Emperor's Tomb* fame, have tried to emulate Electronic Art's magnificent *Return of the King*, one of the premier hack-'n-slashers of recent years. In fact, it's almost as if they used Jedi mind tricks to sit in on EA development sessions and beta tests of that title.

Take for instance, the horrible lock-on feature. Picking a foe is easy enough, but switching to the closest one is often an unnecessary chore. Yes, I actually want to hit the enemy *closest* to me, please. This needless frustration is compounded by a combo system that is simply broken. Try to string together more than four moves in sequence and you'll plow right past your opponent, leaving yourself wide open for a counter attack. Of course, the Sith have no such trouble with their own attacks, and are quick to take advantage of your constant and infuriating vulnerability.

Another area where *Revenge of the Sith* falls flat is in providing a workable camera. This wouldn't be so bad if it weren't always in a fixed position, leaving you without any options at all. Again, the bad guys seem to be aware of this, and enemies simply love to hide behind ray shields — of which there are an excessive amount — and are happy to blast you from off-screen, obligating you to perform a series of Force pushes just to advance to the next area. Honestly, if being a Jedi is really this tedious, I can't blame Anakin for going over to the Dark Side.

While it follows the film closely enough (there are some nice cut scenes straight from the film between each stage), you aren't really drawn into the plot any more than you were sitting in that darkened movie theater. The beautiful backdrops and solid character models never really get the chance to grow on you, and it's almost as if the game doesn't want you to like it. Obi-Wan's annoying one-liners and Anakin's arrogant comments grow stale very fast, and the mundane objectives in each stage do nothing to enhance the experience. Oh my! I've been cut off from R2 and Obi-Wan! It's a good thing I have that *new objective* message to tell me to find another way around to them. I'd have been lost otherwise. Maybe I'll just impale myself on my lightsaber instead.

Again, the bad far outweighs the good here. There are just too many problems to keep *Revenge of the Sith* from ever advancing past rental status. *Star Wars* fans will undoubtedly gobble it up, but those looking for the best game in the genre of late would be better served with a copy of *Return of the King*.

Rating : 2.5 of 5

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

In spite of some glaring flaws, *Revenge of the Sith* does provide an enjoyable, if hollow experience. *Star Wars* die-hards will surely love it, and everyone else isn't missing much.

FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST 2
CURSE OF THE CRIMSON ELIXIR

Review by **FateBreaker**

Publisher : Square-Enix
Developer : Racjin Co.
Release Date : 7/12/2005
Rating : TEEN

Genre(s) : Action-RPG
Category : Alchemic Action
# of players : 1

It was a bit of a gamble for Square-Enix to release an action-RPG based off of the wildly popular "Fullmetal Alchemist" anime series, but it wound up paying off. While Fullmetal Alchemist wasn't the best action-RPG experience around, it was true to the anime series, and was a fun little adventure for fans. The gameplay was so simple that anyone could enjoy it for a day or two.

Fullmetal Alchemist 2 is not much different; in fact, it's nearly identical to the first game. What else did you expect from a sequel that comes out six months later?

For those of you who are familiar with the setup of the first Fullmetal Alchemist game, you can skip the next two paragraphs. You play as Ed, the spunky little guy that gets an attitude whenever someone mentions his height. Ed and his younger brother Al have an accident after experimenting with alchemy: Ed needs a new arm, while Al needs a new, mechanical body.

From here on out, the majority of their adventure is to find a way to bring Al back to life, and to solve the rest of the alchemical problems in the world. The story in this adventure has a similar structure to the first *FMA* game, but it's not as well done. It's interesting and much more suitable for a game, but the plot wasn't as enjoyable and satisfying as the first.

The gameplay doesn't take a very different path from its predecessor either. *Fullmetal Alchemist 2* has an identical combat system with only a few minor upgrades. You still control Ed, with Al as your trusty sidekick. (Think of *Kingdom Hearts's* allied combat, with a giant mechanical boy instead of Goofy and Donald Duck.) The main

difference between this and any other action-RPG is, as before, the diversity in picking up the weapons that're laying around the levels; weapons, such as guns and spears, are created by using your alchemical powers on simple items. In *FMA2*, you're now able to draw the weapons you've acquired at any time, and you don't have to search for one after you dropped it. Fighting in general is much easier and fun this time around; the balance between fights and exploration is much more varied. Boss battles, likewise, are equally as entertaining.

The new graphics engine is probably the most noticeable upgrade of the game. The simple 3D textures of the first game have been replaced with a welcome cel-shaded style, which enhances the entire experience. Throughout each fight, the framerate stays high.

Some of the problems in the first installment still weren't addressed. The game is still quite short, reaching around the 10-hour mark. The voice acting is decent, but doesn't seem to have as much emotion this time around. The music's also a miss; while it's not bad, the score isn't at all memorable.

It's quite simple to decide whether you should purchase *Fullmetal Alchemist 2*. If you are a hardcore *FMA* fan or liked the first installment, odds are you'll enjoy this as a nice weekend rental. Otherwise, make sure that you really like action-RPGs before trying this one out.

Rating : 3 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
3 of 5

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

FMA fans don't want to miss this one. If you're not an *FMA* fan, though, you've got better things to play.

FIRE EMBLEM
THE SACRED STONES

Review by **Honestgamer**

Publisher : Nintendo
Developer : Intelligent Systems
Release Date : 5/23/05
Rating : EVERYONE

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Strategy
# of players : 1
(4 with system link)

The kingdom of Renais existed peacefully at the center of a fantastic world known as Magvel. Then soldiers from Grado invaded, slaughtered numerous innocents, and became the scourge of the planet. Now you must help the brave princess Eirika and her brother Ephraim unite the remaining countries against this unexpected threat. So begins *Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones*.

It's tempting to dismiss both the plot and the game as unoriginal. Certainly, scheming politicians and kingdoms in peril aren't new themes. Likewise, magical stones and the threat of an ancient evil have been covered countless times. So have the game's basic mechanics, which revolve around leading units across maps bristling with enemy troops.

With that said, there aren't many games that have thrown the aforementioned elements together so successfully. When you're issuing orders and watching your troops wipe out enemy forces, you won't care that you're covering old ground. There's a certain thrill in taking out each enemy unit, whether you're doing it for the first time or the thousandth.

Much of that can be attributed to the game's presentation. Watch from a ringside seat as enemies exchange fearsome blows. Witness lethal strands of black magic rise like serpents from the ground and crush armored soldiers. Vibrantly illustrated world maps and backgrounds establish fantastic atmosphere. Throw in a stirring soundtrack and some impressive sound effects (in places, you can even hear wind gusting) and you're looking at a package fit for a king.
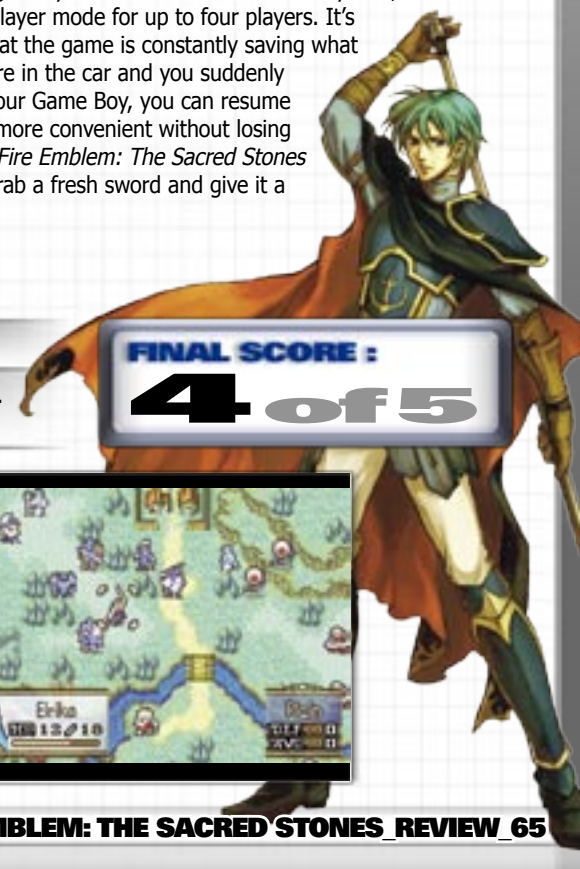
Besides the impressive visual front, battles are imbued with a sense of urgency. Many maps give you special objectives that force you to spread your troops thin over some sort of reward. The game is all about risks. If you try to save innocent victims from getting caught up in the tragedy that is battle, you might lose some of your own troops. Watching your favorite character fall in battle can be heartrending, not only because it means the remainder of that skirmish won't go as well, but also because you'll never see the unfortunate character again. Those who turn to corpses stay that way.

Weapons are similarly fragile. Any blade or spellbook you find has a limited shelf life. The last thing you want to do is to charge into battle with a lance or a blade that's on the verge of breaking into useless pieces. Thanks to this system, you'll have to do a lot of micromanagement. While some might dread diving into menus, it's not enough to kill the game's strategic thrill.

That's good news, as you'll be busy with this epic for a long time. The single-player campaign will take you all over the massive continent that serves as the game's setting, and you'll need to fight optional side battles if you want to strengthen your weaker warriors. Not only that, but there's a multi-player mode for up to four players. It's also worth noting that the game is constantly saving what you've done. If you're in the car and you suddenly have to switch off your Game Boy, you can resume the quest when it's more convenient without losing any progress at all. *Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones* is classy like that. Grab a fresh sword and give it a stab.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Wanderer • **Alternate Rating :** 4.5 of 5

From the recycled graphics to the basic strategies, this *Fire Emblem* is a *lot* like the last one... which I'm a crazed fan of. So I'm cool with this.

FINAL SCORE :
4 of 5

ATELIER IRIS
ETERNAL MANA

Review by **Lynxara**

Publisher : NIS America
Developer : Gust
Release Date : 6/28/2005
Rating : TEEN

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Turn-Based, Simulation, 2D
# of players : 1

Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana is the latest part of NIS America's drive to bring quirky Japanese games from independent Japanese developers to the US. Atelier Iris is in particular the product of a development company named Gust, which is mostly known for producing a new Atelier game every year. All of the *Atelier* games are simulation/RPG hybrids, which never would have been localized for US release in the days before *Disgaea* was such a big hit.

Atelier Iris is not a perfect game, but it is still extremely enjoyable and pleasantly strange. The game is dominated by a multi-tiered alchemy system that is a bit too complex to properly explain in a one-page review, but you basically use it to create a wide variety of items that you can equip, sell, or use in battle. The bulk of your time in the game will be spent on managing your alchemy inventory, since doing so progresses several minigames that you can fool with throughout your game. The minigame rewards you both with resources and the ability to develop plotlines involving NPCs in more depth. These are very linear, but the challenge of unlocking events to progress the storyline does have a certain addictive charm to it. The game's stories are funny and light-hearted, and do a good job of encouraging you to invest more time in the game. You also do the typical RPG adventuring in *Atelier Iris*, but the combat system is neither as deep nor as engaging as the item alchemy. Still, it can be pretty fun once you've played the game long enough to have a lot of character skills and Mana Items to juggle in battle.

Graphics and sound for the game are quite good. The soundtrack is rich and varied, with a lot of compositions showing a strong Celtic influence, while the voice acting for both language tracks (Englsh and the original Japanese) is solid. The graphics are predominantly based around 2D sprites, using an isometric view to give the location maps depth. The world map is a 3D view that limits exploration somewhat, but this is just another part of the game's linearity. There's a bit too much sprite-recycling in the game for my tastes, but it's forgivable given how detailed the existing sprites are. For dialogue sequences, portrait art of the characters is used to help give a feel for how the character is emoting. This works well when the characters have a wide enough range of art poses, but a lot of the cast noticeably could have used more art. This is a flaw that's hard to forgive, since still art isn't particularly hard to implement.
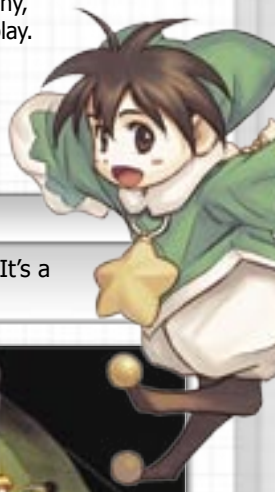
Atelier Iris probably won't please people looking for the next *Final Fantasy*. If anything, this game seems to have been explicitly made as an alternative to modern Japanese RPGs. It's a funny, quirky title that promises about 50 hours of gameplay. It's involving and enjoyable, although the flaws make it less replayable than it could have been.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
3.25 of 5

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

I wouldn't recommend *Atelier Iris* to anyone who's susceptible to insulin shock. It's a lot of fun in its own weird way, but it's one of the fruitier games out there.

Thanks to our friends at Prima Games, *Hardcore Gamer* is pleased to offer one of the more in-depth strategy, hint, tip, and code sections in present-day print publications. Whether it's that gigantic tendril-flapping boss with the orange flashing weak spots you still can't defeat, or the one-and-a-half hours of game time you need to finish a game in to obtain that rocket launcher, even the most twitch-happy gaming protagonist needs a quick smattering of secrets.

This month, we destroy blood-filled plush toys with various killing equipment and serve up a platter of *Conker: Live and Reloaded* tips for both the shockingly rude single player, and hellishly violent multi-player modes. Afterwards, we talc ourselves down and struggle into black spandex to really hone the top strategies for *Batman Begins*. Finally, we shove as many cheats as you can handle with a round-up of this month's best codes.

Conker LIVE & RELOADED

TOP TEN STRATEGIES

1. TAIL...THINGIES (Single-player)

After your first encounter with Greg the Grim Reaper, look out for big, swishy dismembered tails hanging from hooks around Windy. Each tail is the equivalent of one life, so the more you collect the more lives you have. Every time you lose your last chunk of chocolate, one of your lives goes with it. Lose all your lives and you'll have the rest of eternity to shoot the breeze with Gregg. In summary: collect tails!

2. MISSION: IMP-OSSIBLE (Single-player)

The world of Windy is stuffed with spike-sprouting Odd Little Imps, all hell-bent on sending Conker on a one-way trip to Gregg the Grim Reaper. Always brandish your bat and clear an area whenever you visit it for the first time—thankfully, they don't return for another piece of the action.

3. TOP ME UP (Single-player)

In some locations, you find underwater air vents, spewing bubbly oxygen into the area. These make a handy alternative when it's impossible to resurface at a particular spot— simply swim over and Conker automatically sucks up a few bubbles.

4. RUNG FOR YOUR LIFE (Single-player)
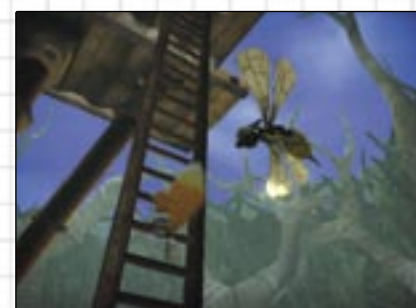
Conker grips hold of ladders automatically as he approaches— cunning use of these wooden marvels can protect you from a horrible end if you fall from a great height. Hit Ⓐ to activate your helicopter tail on the way down and attempt to steer Conker to the nearest ladder. If you succeed, you've saved yourself a life. If you fail, at least you can say you tried—through a mouthful of broken teeth.

5. HIDE AND SNEAK (Multiplayer)

Sneekers can use their Cloak ability to disappear into thin air. Remember though—stroll around soft surfaces, like sand or snow, and your footprints are going to give the game away pretty swiftly. Good Sneekers are careful and cunning—always consider your surroundings before making your move.

6. PLAYING DUM-DUM (Multiplayer)

Grunts can switch their Sturm 21 weapons to Dum-Dum mode and pierce abandoned kerosene barrels around the environments, causing massive explosions. Look out for these barrels in heavily populated enemy areas or next to key military targets for rapid, and messy, destruction.

7. TERMIN-ATE (Multiplayer)

Like everything else in multiplayer mode, Special Ordnance and Mobile Units terminals don't flourish in enemy cross-fire. You'll have a serious advantage if you take out enemy terminals early on in a mission with some heavy Demolisher artillery. Alternatively, toss a less permanent spanner in the works and use a Sneeker's Hacking Device to reprogram opposition terminals for use by the Allied side.

8. KNOWERS ARC (Multiplayer)

With all that artillery whistling around the place, important stuff is going to get damaged sooner or later. Use the Demolisher or Sky Jockey's Arc Weld for emergency repairs on terminals and Mobile Units. Simply point one at your target, squeeze Ⓑ and let technology work its magic.

9. GATE SET, GO! (Multiplayer)

Gatemakers are great for making long-distance one-way journeys and are invaluable during capture-the-flag style missions. Simply drop your out-point somewhere in your base and deploy the in-gate as close to enemy quarters as possible. Carrying Special Ordnance items severely reduces your speed so employ a couple of Grunts as backup when you travel.

10. EJECT AND WRECK (Multiplayer)

You can eject from an airborne unit at any time by hitting Ⓧ. Tap and hold Ⓧ again while plummeting to earth to release your parachute, securing a soft landing. With practice, its possible to exploit the eject feature and send your abandoned ship crashing toward enemy targets, causing untold damage on impact.

BATMAN BEGINS™

TOP TEN STRATEGIES

1. WALK / DON'T WALK

If you want to get around quickly, you've got your standard walk and run modes at your disposal. However, it's unwise to rely on them until you're absolutely sure an area is free of enemies—remain stealthy until you've assessed your surroundings. Opponents always spot your position when out of stealth mode thanks to your increased profile—this can be devastating if you blunder unprepared into an area occupied by armed assailants.

2. SILENT BUT DEADLY

Sneaking up behind an enemy and attacking when in range makes it possible to incapacitate an opponent without attracting the attention of other adversaries in the vicinity. This is great for bypassing an area when no environmental objects are available to trigger fear events. Furthermore, it's possible to use stealth attacks and eliminate armed guards, increasing the vulnerability of unprotected enemies in the area.

3. TAKE ME HIGHER

You can reach objects normally out of your grasp by performing Batman's double-jump. Tap the jump button then repeat while in the air to raise your altitude and boost your leaping distance. The double-jump is an invaluable tool when crossing particularly wide gaps and can be a lifesaver if you misjudge jumps and fall short of your intended target.

4. CAPE ESCAPE

Some gaps are too great to cross using your standard arsenal of moves. Luckily, you can gain a massive increase in your travel distance by putting Batman's cape to use. While in mid-air, press and hold (XB:Ⓑ/PS2:●/GC:🔾) to release your cape and glide slowly down toward the ground. You can stop gliding at any time by letting go of the button or coming into contact with a platform or obstacle.

5. FRIGHT NIGHT

Intimidation of your enemies is vital if you want the upper hand in combat. Orchestrate fear events using your surroundings and unnerve your opponents before engaging them in combat. There are numerous ways to terrify your foes, but all involve creating a disturbance while your enemies are still oblivious to your presence. Fear events can range from toppling crates to bursting pipes, all of which will disarm guards carrying heavy weaponry, increasing their fear levels and your own reputation.

6. GAINING A REPUTATION

The more fear you instill in your opponents, the greater your reputation. As word travels between enemies of their terrifying encounters with Batman, their general apprehension and, subsequently, terror increases when you're spotted. In turn, they're more susceptible to fear and become easier to defeat in hand-to-hand combat.

7. CREEP AND PEEP

Use your optical cable frequently while you're on the prowl. Follow the on-screen prompt when you approach certain doors to activate the gadget, enabling you to survey the room on the other side of the door inconspicuously while assessing it for danger. Never enter a new area without evaluating it first—chances are, you'll stroll right into the path of an armed guard who's more than happy to send you straight back to the previous checkpoint.

8. UP IN SMOKE

Collect smoke grenades from military crates as you stalk the night and unleash them on your opponents to confuse and disorient them individually. Unarmed guards demonstrate reduced combat skills until the smoke dissipates while armed guards are temporarily unable to use their weapons. Pick your targets wisely—smoke grenades are only effective against enemies under the influence of fear.

9. FLASH AND BASH
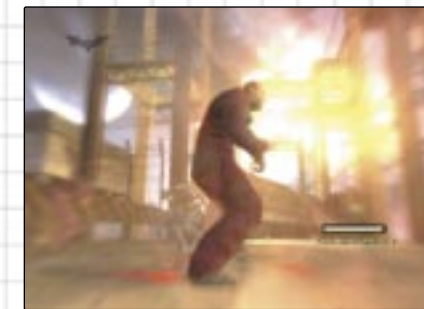
Equip Flash-Bang grenades and lob them at your enemies to blind everyone within the blast radius, making them unable to counter-strike during combat. Watch out though—the on-screen meter slowly depletes once a grenade has exploded, indicating the amount of time left until your assailant's eyesight is restored. Bring your opponents to their knees quickly if you want to keep the advantage.

10. SPEED DEMON

Many of the Batmobile-bound missions require serious amounts of speed to meet your objectives. You can save precious time by making judi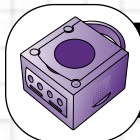cious use of the vehicle's jump function when approaching heavy traffic. Time your leaps correctly and it's possible to skip straight over other vehicles without any reduction in velocity!

CODES

GAMECUBE

Fight Night Round 2

UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Mini Fighters	At the choose Venue screen hold ↑ until you hear a bell ring.
Unlock Fabulous	Create a character with the first name Getfab then cancel out and Fabulous will be available for Play Now and Career mode.
All Venus	At the game mode select screen hold ← until you hear a bell.
Unlock Little Mac	Create a character with the first name Macman then cancel out and Lil Mac will be available for Play Now and Career mode.

Golden Eye Rogue Agent

TO ENTER THESE CODES GO INTO THE EXTRA MENU.

All Multiplayer skins	Down, Left, Up, Left, Right, Down, Left, Up
Paintball Mode	Right, Left, Right, Left, Down, Down, Up, Up
All Levels in both Multiplayer and Single Player	Down, Right, Down, Right, Up, Down, Up, Left
One Life Mode	Left, Down, Up, Right, Up, Right, Left, Down Unlock
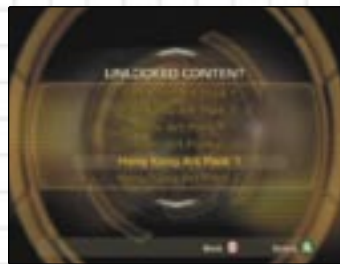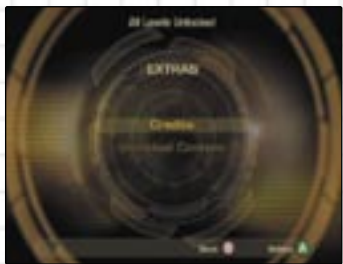
MVP Baseball 2005

CREATE PLAYERS WITH THESE NAMES.

Bone Scaling Cheat	Kenny Lee
St. Patrick's Day Jersey for the Red Sox	Neverlose Sight

Sonic Heroes

UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Metal Characters	After you chose a level for 2 player mode hold Ⓐ+ⓧ.
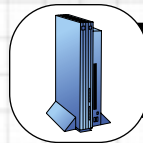
PLAYSTATION 2

Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30
UNLOCK ALL LEVELS AND DIFFICULTIES
Create a profile with the name BAKERSDOZEN

Call of Duty: Finest Hour
Unlock all levels	Hold up on controller two at the level select and enter with Start, Select, Select, Square with controller one.

Constantine
Press Select to open your journal and enter these codes.
UNLOCKABLE	CODES
Big Headed Demons	R2, ←, →, ←, ←, →, ←, R2.

Devil May Cry 3
Enter at the Main Menu.
UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Unlock Everything	Hold Down L1, L2, R1, R2 and rotate the Left Analog Stick until you hear Devil May Cry.

FOR 1,000'S OF CODES MORE, PICK UP PRIMA'S CODES & CHEATS BOOK—$6.99!

13,000 SECRET CODES 6⁹⁹ **CODES & CHEATS**

FIFA Street
| UNLOCKABLE	CODES
Mini Players	Pause the game and hold L1+▲ and press ⇧, ⇦, ⇩, ⇩, ⇨, ⇩, ⇧, ⇦.
Normal Size Players	Pause the game and hold L1+▲ and press ⇨, ⇨, ⇧, ⇩, ⇩, ⇩, ⇨, ⇦.
All Apparel	At the main menu hold L1+▲ and press ⇨, ⇨, ⇦, ⇧, ⇧, ⇧, ⇩, ⇦.

Fight Night Round 2
UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Mini Fighters	At the choose Venue screen hold ↑ until you hear a bell ring.
Unlock Fabulous	Create a character with the first name GETFAB then cancel out and Fabulous will be available for Play Now and Career mode.
All Venues Unlocked	At the game mode selection screen hold ← until you hear a bell.

MTX vs. ATV Unleashed
Enter in the cheats menu.
]UNLOCKABLE	CODE
50cc Bikes	Minimoto
Unlock all freestyle tracks	Huckit
Unlock Everything	Toolazy
1,000,000 Points	Brokeasajoke
All Gear	Wardrobe
All Machines	Leadfoot
All Riders	Wannabe

MVP Baseball 2005
UNLOCK BOSTON RED SOX ST. PATRICK'S DAY JERSEY
Create a player with the name "Neverlose Sight."

Create a character with these names.
UNLOCKABLE	NAME
Player has a huge bat	Keegan Paterson
Player has a huge bat	Jacob Paterson
Player has a huge bat	Isaiah Paterson
Unlock Everything	Katie Roy

Narc
Enter these codes while playing do not pause the game.
UNLOCKABLE	CODE
All Drugs	Repeatedly press L1 + R1 + L1 ↘
All Weapons	Repeatedly press L1 + R1 + L1 ↘
Infinite Ammo	Repeatedly press L1 + R1 + ⇩ (Only for the weapon you have equipped.)
Invincibility	Repeatedly press R1 + L1 + ✕
Show all Drug Stashes	Repeatedly press L1 + R1 + ⇦

Nano Breaker
Enter code during game.
UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Mini Map Shooter	⇧, ⇧, ⇩, ⇩, ⇦, ⇨, ⇦, ⇨, ✕, ●.

Rise of Kasai
Enter the following codes at the Press Start screen.
UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Invincible Rau	Square, O, X, Square, O, Square, X, O, X, Square, O, X
Infinite Ammunition	X, O, Square, Square, X, Square, O, O X, Square, Square, X
Weaker Enemies	X, O, O, Square, X, Square, Square, Circle

Sonic Heroes
UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Metal Characters	After you select a level for 2 players hold ✕+▲.

LEGO Star Wars

IN DEXTER'S DINER, GO TO CODES AND ENTER THE FOLLOWING. THIS WILL UNLOCK CHARACTERS FOR PURCHASE IN FREE PLAY MODE.

Battle Droid	987UYR
Battle Droid (Commander)	EN11K5
Battle Droid (Geonosis)	LK42U6
Battle Droid (Security)	KF999A
Big Blasters	IG72X4
Boba Fett	LA811Y
Brushes	SHRUB1
Classic Blasters	L449HD
Clone	F8B4L6
Clone (Episode III, Pilot)	BHU72T
Clone (Episode III, Swamp)	N3T6P8
Clone (Episode III, Walker)	RS6E25
Clone (Episode III)	ER33JN
Count Dooku	14PGMN
Darth Maul	H35TUX
Darth Sidious	A32CAM
Disguised Clone	VR832U
Droideka	DH382U
General Grievous	SF321Y
Geonosian	19D7NB
Gonk Droid	U63B2A
Grievous' Bodyguard	ZTY392
Invincibility	4PR28U
Jango Fett	PL47NH
Ki-Adi Mundi	DP55MV
Kit Fisto	CBR954
Luminara	A725X4
Mace Windu (Episode III)	MS952L
Minikit Detector	LD116B
Moustaches	RP924W
Padme	92UJ7D
PK Droid	R840JU
Princess Leia	BEQ82H
Purple	YD77GC
Rebel Trooper	L54YUK
Royal Guard	PP43JX
Shaak Ti	EUW862
Silhouettes	MS999Q
Silly Blasters	NR37W1
Super Battle Droid	XZNR21
Tea Cups	PUCEAT

PSP

Gretzky NHL

In the Gretzky Challenge go into Unlockable and press Start.

UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Unlocks Everything	SHOENLOC

Metal Gear Acid

Enter in the passwords Menu.

UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Gives Card No.173 – Viper	Viper
Gives Card No.178 – Mika Slayton	Mika
Gives Card No.182 – Karen Houjou	Karen
Gives Card No.184 – Jehuty	Jehuty
Gives Card No.199 – XM8	Xmeight

NFL Street 2 Unleashed

Enter in the cheats menu.

UNLOCKABLE	CODES
AFC East All Stars	EAASFSCT
AFC North All Stars	NAOFRCTH
AFC South All Stars	SAOFUCTH
AFC West All Stars	WAEFSCT
EA Field	EAField
Fumble Mode (Other team fumbles)	GreasedPig
Gargantuan Players	BIGSmash
Max Catch	MagnetHands
NFC East All Stars	NNOFRCTH
NFC North All-Stars	NNAS66784
NFC South All Stars	SNOFUCTH
NFC West All Stars	ENASFSCT
No Fumble Mode	GlueHands
Reebok Team	Reebok
Unlimited Turbo	NozBoost

Tony Hawk's Underground 2 Remix

GO TO GAME OPTIONS, CHEAT CODES AND ENTER THE FOLLOWING:

Tightrope	Perfect Rail Balance
Birdman	Unlock Tony Hawk from Tony Hawk Pro Skater 1

Twisted Metal Head On

These codes work during gameplay.

UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Invulnerable	Right, Left, Down, Up and finally press L & R together
Infinite Weapons	Triangle, Triangle, Down, Down, L + R

## Hot Shots Golf Open Tee

EASY LOYALTY

To gain loyalty much quicker than playing an entire round of golf, start a match play game under challenge mode. Give up on the first three holes by pressing Select then Start to forfeit those holes. After the match you will still gain loyalty for your character.
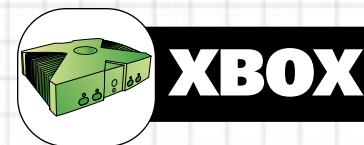
XBOX

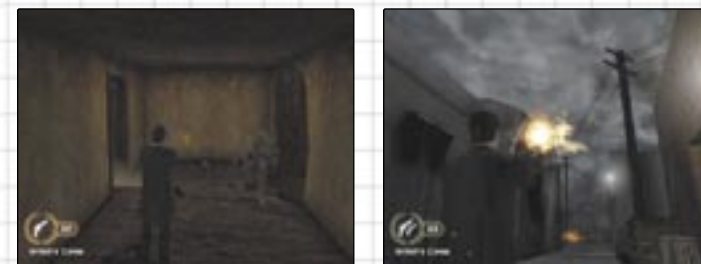## Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30

UNLOCK ALL LEVELS AND DIFFICULTIES
Create a profile with the name BAKERSDOZEN
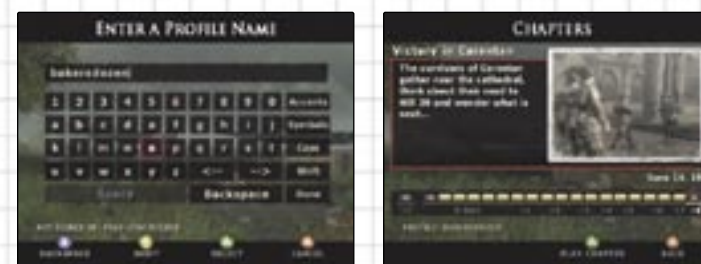
Constantine

To enter these codes press the back button to open your journal.

UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Big Headed Demons	(controller icons)
Big Weapon mode	(controller icons)
Explosive Holy Bomb	(controller icons)
Rapid Fire Shotgun	(controller icons)
Shoot Fireballs	(controller icons)

Fight Night Round 2

UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Mini Fighters	At the choose Venue screen hold (button) until you hear a bell ring.
Unlock Fabulous	Create a character with the first name GETFAB then cancel out and Fabulous will be available for Play Now and Career mode.
All Venus	At the game mode select screen hold (button) until you hear a bell.

LEGO Star Wars

In Dexter's Diner, go to codes and enter the following. This will unlock characters for purchase in Free Play mode.

UNLOCKABLE	CODE
Battle Droid	987UYR
Battle Droid (Commander)	EN11K5
Battle Droid (Geonosis)	LK42U6
Battle Droid (Security)	KF999A
Big Blasters	IG72X4
Boba Fett	LA811Y
Brushes	SHRUB1
Classic Blasters	L449HD
Clone	F8B4L6
Clone (Episode III, Pilot)	BHU72T
Clone (Episode III, Swamp)	N3T6P8
Clone (Episode III, Walker)	RS6E25
Clone (Episode III)	ER33JN
Count Dooku	14PGMN
Darth Maul	H35TUX
Darth Sidious	A32CAM
Disguised Clone	VR832U
Droideka	DH382U
General Grievous	SF321Y
Geonosian	19D7NB
Gonk Droid	U63B2A
Grievous' Bodyguard	ZTY392
Invincibility	4PR28U
Jango Fett	PL47NH
Ki-Adi Mundi	DP55MV
Kit Fisto	CBR954
Luminara	A725X4
Mace Windu (Episode III)	MS952L
Minikit Detector	LD116B
Moustaches	RP924W
Padme	92UJ7D
PK Droid	R840JU
Princess Leia	BEQ82H
Purple	YD77GC
Rebel Trooper	L54YUK
Royal Guard	PP43JX
Shaak Ti	EUW862
Silhouettes	MS999Q
Silly Blasters	NR37W1
Super Battle Droid	XZNR21
Tea Cups	PUCEAT

Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition

UNLOCKS THE LEXUS GS430 AND CADILLAC CTS-V
Enter Rimbuk as a nickname in Career Mode.

Here we go with another look at peripherals, accessories, and all the extra hardware you've had your eye on. We've risked life and limb opening these $%&!ing boxes and we're passing our opinions on to you.

We're always looking for more information about new, bizarre, and/or great new peripherals, from useful deals on extra controllers to the weirdest swag coming out of Japan. If you've got something you'd like us to cover in a future issue, pay us a visit and drop us a line at www.hardcoregamermag.com.

Pelican
HD System Selector

Review by **DJPubba**

High-def multi switch
System: Any
Price: **$24.95**

Features
3 component, 4 s-video and 4 ethernet inputs
1 component and 1 s-video a/v cable

High-def enabled gamers with more systems than they have component inputs on their TV now have a good, cheap way to switch between them without unplugging a tangle of cables.

A/V switches that support both high-def and ethernet have traditionally been in the $100 range. Pelican has cut costs by eliminating the optical-audio support and such fancy extras as LEDs, but they did not sacrifice picture quality in the process. Comparisons between a direct connection versus connecting through the HDSS, using our high-end component video capture hardware, showed no noticeable degradation in video quality whatsoever.

If you're looking for a cheap way to switch three high-def component video systems with no loss of picture quality, this is it.

Lasr Accessories
GamePak

Review by **Wanderer**

Carrying case
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox (reviewed), GameCube
Price: **$39.99**

Features
Side panels for system ventilation
Extra pockets for magazines and games
Protective rubberized panels
Extremely durable

It's a bit on the expensive side, but the GamePak's a really solid piece of work. (Insert "Xboxes are Huge" joke here.) It's a carrying case, but it's constructed so you can hook your console up to a TV without having to take it out of the bag. If you, like me, have to cart consoles around all the time, this is a solid way in which to do it.

My advice: buy this the next time you're in the market for a backpack. The extra features are just icing on the cake.

Jakks Pacific
EA Sports TV Games

Review by **4thletter**

System: Stand-Alone
Price: **$19.99**

Features
Two separate sports games
Plugs into A/V jacks on any TV or VCR
Built-in memory for season mode/stats saving
Requires 4 AA batteries

Eleven years ago, *Madden NFL '95* and *NHL '95* were popular. Jakks Pacific wants to give a new generation a chance to play these games.

I'll be frank. Neither of the two games looks, sounds, or plays well. They're both practically ancient, graphics-wise, and the monoaural sound doesn't impress, either. The controller is shaped like the old Sega Genesis three-button pad, but feels very loose. This isn't a painful set to play, but it isn't any fun, either. Good idea, poor choice of games.

Fanatec
Speedster 3 ForceShock

Review by **Syriel**

Steering Wheel
System: Xbox
Price: **$149.99**

Features
Force Feedback
Custom Tuning Setup
Programmable Shift
Memory Card Slot

Fanatec may not be a household name just yet, but if the German company keeps producing accessories as good as its Speedster 3 ForceShock wheel, that may change sooner rather than later.

Released just in time for *Forza Motorsport*, the wheel boasts an impressive number of features as well as rock-solid build quality. You have the option of securing it to a table or flipping open the leg guides and playing with the wheel sitting on your lap. Control is precise, with a dead zone that can be adjusted to near zero. In fact, most settings on the wheel can be customized. Onboard memory allows you to save up to four separate configurations, which is great if you have multiple games configured, or if more then one person uses the wheel and you each prefer as different setup.

While it doesn't support true force feedback (blame it on the Xbox, not the wheel), the Speedster 3 does an excellent job of interpreting the rumble channel and converting that into the proper feedback. It's not exact, but it's a close approximation.

You're going to have to lay down some cash, but if you do, rest assured that it is money well-spent. If you're looking for the ultimate in sim options, there is no better way to play *Forza* on the Xbox.

Monster
iSpeaker Portable

Review by **Syriel**

Portable Speakers
System: Anything with a headphone jack
Price: **$59.99**

Features
Flat panel speakers the size of a dual CD case
Eight hour playback on 4 AA batteries
Three foot audio cable

Utilizing flat-panel speaker technology from NXT, the Monster iSpeaker Portable packs a set of stereo speakers into an extremely portable package. Powered by 4 AA batteries, setup is simple; install the batteries, plug in the audio cable and turn it on. Volume is handled by your source as there are no controls on the speakers.

Though they look stylish, the iSpeaker suffers the same poor bass response that is endemic to all of NXT's consumer oriented designs. Had Monster increased the size of the case in order to accommodate a small port this could have been mitigated, but for some reason it chose space over sound. As a result, the speakers work well when playing back movies with limited dynamic range, but music playback is merely average.

While the batteries fit neatly inside the speaker case, there is no place to store the audio cable. It's not a major issue, but it would have been incredibly convenient, especially for the more forgetful among us. The omni-directional nature of the speakers projects volume in all directions, making placement a non-issue.

If you're looking for an on-the-go option, the iSpeaker's compact size is attractive and the hard plastic casing is sure to take scuffs and bumps like a champ. For those that want to use the PSP as a desktop stereo though, there are better choices out there.

Gungrave

Volume Five: *The Protector* (Episodes 17-20) — Review by Lynxara

Licensed By : Geneon Entertainment (USA)
Production : Madhouse (*Abenobashi, Reign: The Conqueror, Trigun*), Project Gungrave
ADR Production : Bang Zoom! Entertainment (*Figure 17, Magic Knight Rayearth, Here is Greenwood*)
Release Dates : March 15th, 2005
Genre(s) : Action, Drama

I put volume 5 of *Gungrave* into my DVD player with some trepidation, as Geneon neglected to send us volume 4 for review. Skipping volumes with most anime TV series is basically harmless, but with *Gungrave* there was no telling what could have happened in the episodes I missed. This is, after all, a show that managed to hop genres four times inside of the 12 episodes I reviewed roughly one-and-a-half issues ago. Frankly, if I had popped in volume 5 and found that the series had managed to mutate into *Magical Zombie Mafioso Grave-chan*, I can't say I would've been surprised. In retrospect, I also think that would've been more entertaining than what I actually ended up watching.

It seems that volume 4 finished up the backstory arc of *Gungrave*, allowing volume 5 to segue into an adaptation of the plot of the first video game. Episode 17 re-introduces Mika, because it's been so long since her last appearance that even fans of the games might have forgotten about her by now. Because Mika is the daughter of late Millennion head Big Daddy, new head honcho Bloody Harry wants to kill her so that she can't pose a threat to his control of the group. Mika flees from Harry's thugs after they kill her mother, and this eventually leads to the events of the first episode unfolding once again in episode 18. Episodes 19 and 20 focus on fights with, Bob Poundmax and Bunji Kugashira, enemies from the games. The sense of pacing is odd, given that Poundmax is the game's third boss and Bunji the sixth, but that's really the least of the problems these episodes have.

Compared to the content on the volumes I reviewed a few issues ago, the episodes contained on volume 5 are abysmal. Animation throughout the volume is extraordinarily cheap. Episode 17 is almost nothing but stills, long pans, and cheap digital effects; even depictions of lipflap animation are studiously avoided when the direction can get away with it. Episode 18 is almost entirely composed of footage recycled verbatim from the first episode, but set to more poorly-chosen BGM. I can give episode 19 credit for putting some reasonable effort into animating the Poundmax fight, but that's about it. Episode 20 is probably the best-looking of the lot, but still featured some unpleasantly off-model art. The breakdown in visual production would be excusable if the story was still good, but most of the content in this volume is dull exposition strung together with fight scenes. Episode 20 was the only episode that was entertaining at all, since the fight with Bunji was decently written and echoed the strong characterization of the early episodes.

FINAL SCORE : 2 of 5

Geneon's actual DVD presentation is still quite good, basically identical to what we saw in earlier volumes. It's a shame to see this kind of effort being lavished on material I would change channels to avoid seeing, let alone want to pay for. Future volumes of the show may be more watchable if episode 20 is any indication of what to expect in the future, but overall this volume manages to capture a snapshot of *Gungrave* at its worst.

BANDAI AND NAMCO TO MERGE

The announcement that Namco and Bandai will merge their management into a single operation, tentatively called Bandai Namco Holdings and effective as of September 29, 2005, heralds the creation of what will be the third-largest publicly traded toy-game company in Japan. They're only smaller than Sega Sammy and Nintendo. Gamers are likely to know Namco's reputation as a developer and publisher, as the company can claim a string of game successes ranging from the original arcade *Pac-Man* to multiplatform franchises like *Ridge Racer*. Bandai is probably a less familiar name, but in Japan, it's famous for producing toys and animation based on a wide variety of characters. Together, Namco and Bandai will represent an impressive combination of merchandising muscle and game design skill.

There has been confusion from the American market about the basic nature of the

KONAMI PARTS WAYS WITH TAKARA

Konami, the minds behind such franchises as *Castlevania* and *Metal Gear*, sold their 20% share in Japanese toymaker Takara in the end of April. This ended Konami's five-year "capital alliance" with Takara, with Konami citing Takara's poor sales performance as the reason for terminating the joint venture. The shares were immediately bought by Index Corp, a company that specializes in mobile and internet content.

Despite being Japan's #2 toymaker, Takara's last significant hit was the 2001-2003 *Beyblade* franchise. Although it also controls other toy-based franchises, such as the *Transformers* brand name, the latest waves of *Transformers* merchandise have been only moderate successes and its overall sales have been in sharp decline. Much like Bandai and Namco, Takara is being hit hard by declining Japanese birth rates, and has not succeeded as well as Bandai in exploiting foreign markets and older consumers.

In 2003, Takara acquired Atlus, makers of fan-favorite RPGs like *Shin Megami Tensei*, and Broccoli, an anime studio that specializes in cute character franchises like *Di Gi Charat* and *Galaxy Angels*. Although both firms have done well with their respective audiences, they simply lacked the size to make up for Takara failures like the poorly-recieved *Battle B'Daman* line of marble-shooting robots.

merger, particularly regarding the misconception that Nintendo was somehow involved. It is true that Nintendo has a long association with both Bandai and Namco, who have been making software for its gaming systems since the days of the NES. Bandai and Namco were among the first third-parties to be allowed to manufacture their own NES cartridges, and until 1993 Bandai was the European distributor for all Nintendo products. Both Bandai and Namco have supported Nintendo's GameCube with exclusive releases, and Namco even developed the latest *StarFox* title. However, Bandai and Namco remain independent companies, and Nintendo played no direct role in this merger.

The official reason cited for the merger in Namco and Bandai's press releases is a combination of intensifying competition in the Japanese toy-game market, coupled with a drastically falling birth rate in Japan. Toy and game manufacturers can look forward to a smaller customer base in the future, and will have to fight more fiercely to get sales. The arrangement is a true merger and not a Bandai "buyout." Bandai president Takeo Takasu will be president of the new holding company, while Namco Vice Chairman Kyushiro Takagi will become the chairman and director. Bandai shareholders will convert their Bandai shares to Namco Bandai Holdings shares at a ratio of 2:3, while Namco shareholders will convert at a 1:1 ratio. This merely reflects Bandai's stronger market performance in Japan, although news of the merger has reportedly caused Namco's stock price to spike.
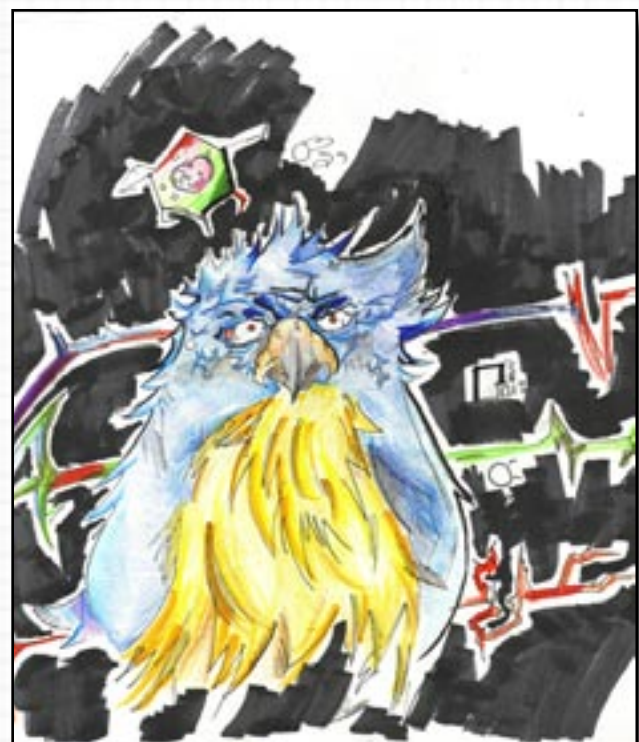
In mid-May, following announcement of the Bandai/Namco merger, Takara announced it would merge with number 3 Japanese toy maker Tomy. The merger is being orchestrated by Index Corporation, with Tomy becoming the surviving company. The Takara brand name will effectively cease to exist, although Takara chairman Keita Sato will become vice president of the newly combined Tomy Co. Together, the three companies hope to pool their resources in order to revitalize their various toy and character franchises. How this merger will affect Takara-owned subsidiary firms like Atlus is unknown at this time.

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

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

Title : Iori Yagami from King of Fighters
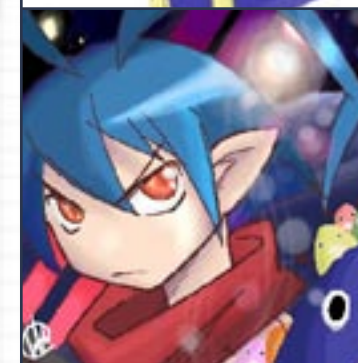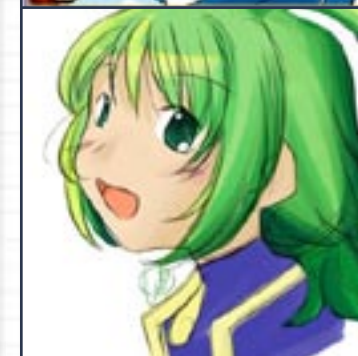**Artist :** DigitalCactus
Age : 23
Location : The DesertOasis

Title : Ohnoszzz
Artist : Sour Penguin
Age : 15
Location : Seattle

Title : Akira from Rival Schools: Project Justice
Artist : DigitalCactus
Age : 23
Location : The DesertOasis

Title : Serph Megaten
Artist : Carsten Bradley
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Atlanta, GA

Title : Street Fighter's Chun-Li
Artist : Raymond "aka" Dead to Rights
Age : 20
Location : City of Angels

Title : Mega Man X: Command Mission
Artist : Lady Maverick
Age : 22
Location : San Diego

Title : The Maiden of Dark
Artist : AbyssXII
Age : 19
Location : In your ear...

Title : Kyo Kusanagi from King of Fighters
Artist : Jigsaw
Age : 19
Location : Göteborg, Sweden

Title : Trenia, Marona & Laharl
Artist : Marionette
Age : 18
Location : Puerto Rico
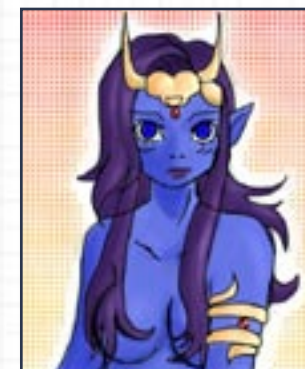
Title : Yaksini
Artist : apathy_turnip
Age : 18
Location : Undisclosed

Cos-play (kos-plä) v. A combination of the words costume and play. People known as "cosplayers" dress up as their favorite characters from anime movies, and video games.

Some say it's geeky. Some say it's stupid. We say it's a damn shame that those people don't appreciate it. It's cosplay and we love it! While you may be thinking that dressing up as a fictional character for next to no reason is silly, try to think of it like this: Sure, some people end up doing a bit of role playing, but those are the crazies. Most are just doing it to loosen up and have a good time.

by **Metalbolt**

Say it with me: "Ulala!"

No, that's NOT the Vampire Killer.

His brother may not love him, but we do!

"Walking sucks."

At Otakon? Oh the irony!

Henshin-a-cosplay, baby!

Shiny just like a real reploid.

A haunting melody.

Look, it's not the size that matters...

You can make us part of your army any day!

FUNNIES

Thanks for readin'

©Wolfie

©Mads

©Otherdane

Seeya next issue... HGM Staff

©Mads

His name is Gojiro Kiryu...
and he's bringing justice back to the old west...

Be a samurai or a Gunman! Unique 2 player mode allows you to play as both!

"Bushido Sense" allows you to dodge and deflect bullets with superhuman skill!

Over 100 unlockables including over 25 playable characters, 70 accessories and 20 weapons!

"This is not your everyday action game."
- Play Magazine

"Incredibly fast paced, stylish fights..."
- VGO Network

SAMURAI WESTERN

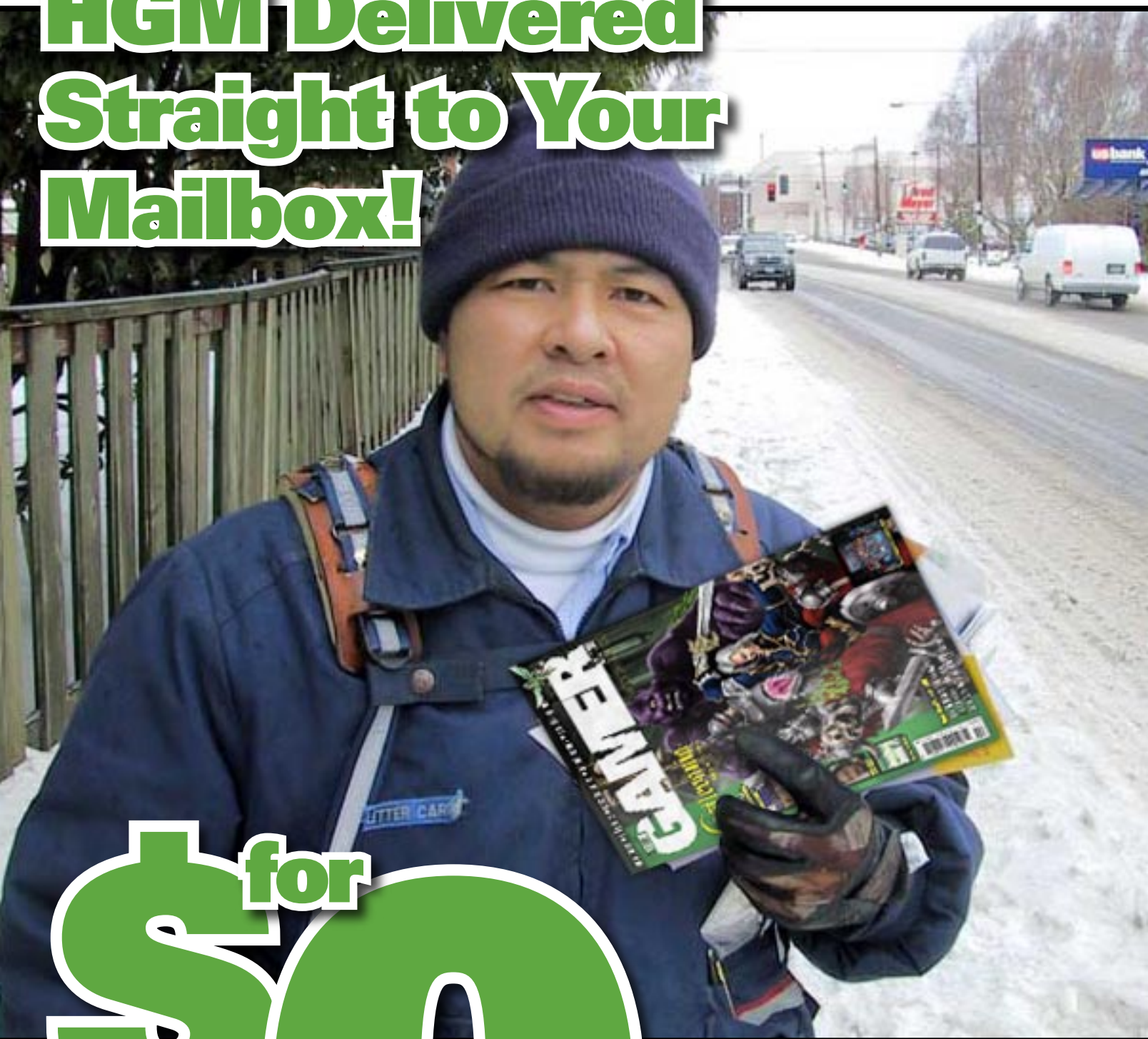Intense Samurai action from the makers of the "Way of the Samurai" series

PlayStation 2

Spike

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