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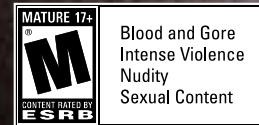




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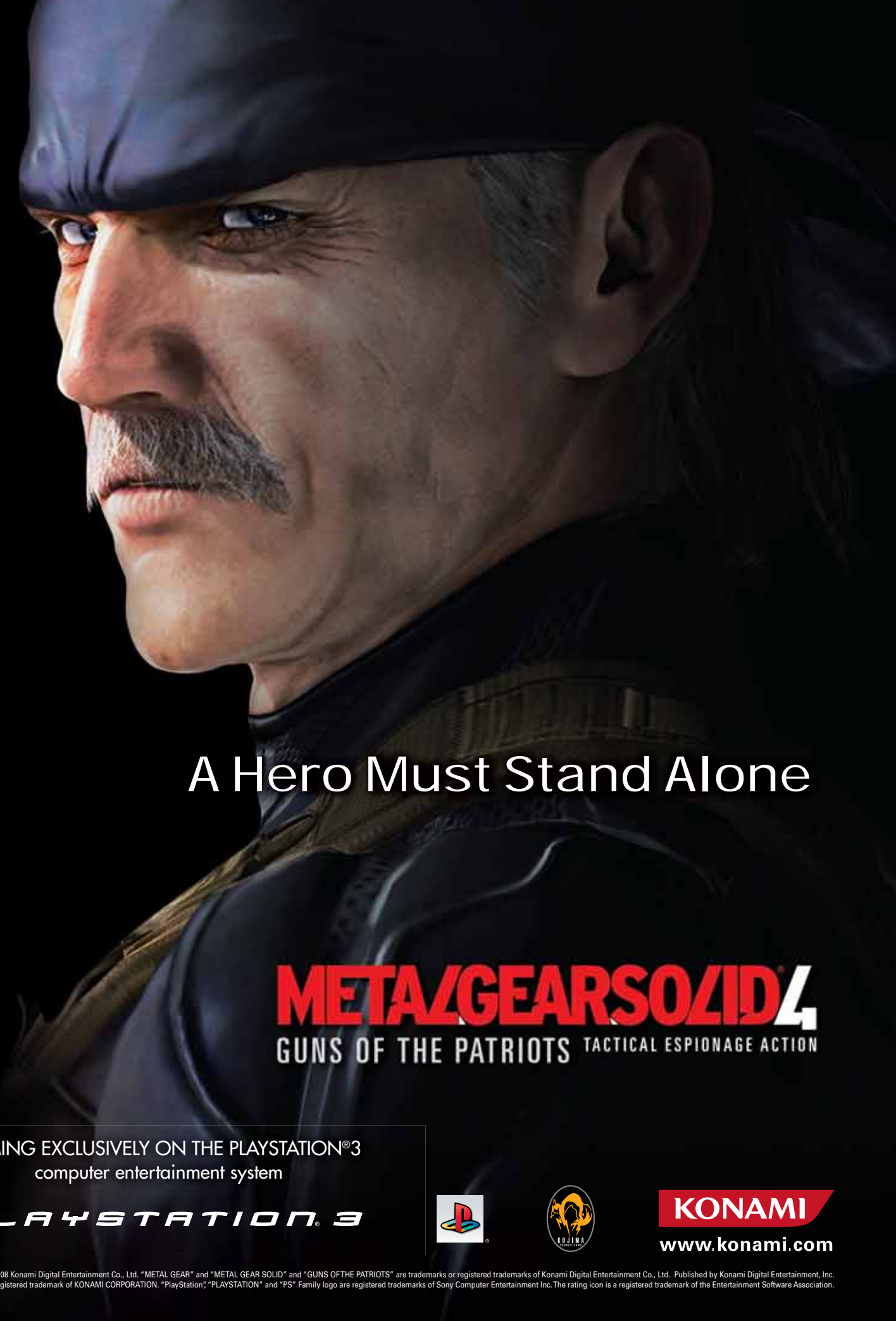
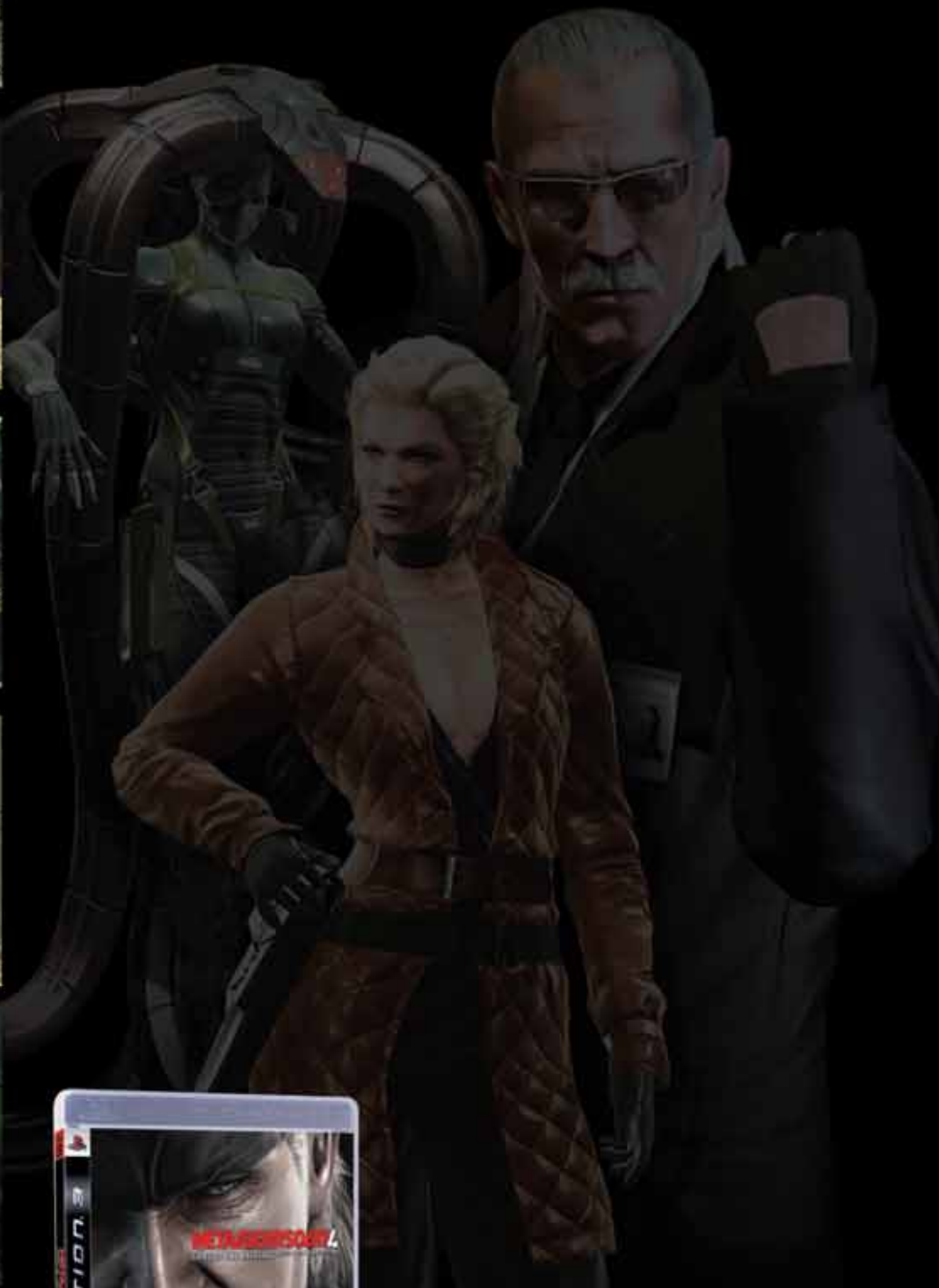


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### DJPubba\_Tim Lindquist

For some reason the Seattle area seems to be a great place to pick up cheap retro computer and game systems. I've been scoring old equipment like crazy lately. Just this month I got an Apple IIgs, an Amiga CD32, a Tandy CoCo3, and an Atari 540ST (all with games and peripherals). I have also gotten some especially great deals on high-end commercial, industrial and medical monitors that look simply amazing connected to these old systems.

Now Playing: *GTA IV* (PS3), *Akumajo Dracula* (X68000), *Flicky* (SG-1000), *Super Putty* (CD32)



### Wanderer\_Thomas Wilde

It's funny. I used to be pretty vocal about how much I hate WWII games now and how sick I am of the subgenre. Apparently the way to make killing Nazis fresh and new again is to let me do it as a werewolf.

Now Playing: *Operation Darkness*, *Ikaruga* (XBLA)



### Racewing\_Geson Hatchett

I didn't do anything for this issue, because I've been busy wreaking my special brand of havoc on HGM Online, and working on the 2007 Fanservice Awards! Thus, I don't have much to say this month, except: if you didn't buy *Sega Superstars Tennis*, then you are Part Of The Problem™.

Now Playing: *Sega Superstars Tennis* (X360), *Mario Kart Wii*



### Hitoshura\_Iaian Ross

I think that not only is *GT5 Prologue* a fantastic game to play, it might even better when it's not being played. I'd feel no shame in hosting a dinner party, pop in *GT5*, and set the demos to only show cars in various bits of exotic scenery. When someone walks by the TV, there's a good chance they'll stop and oggle for a while. It is just *that cool*.

Now Playing: *GT5 Prologue*, *Disgaea 3*



### Sardius\_Danny Cowan

Mini-reviews! *Yakuza* (PS2): Haven't removed the shrinkwrap yet. Box gets a 3/5. *Rune Factory* (DS): Gameplay is amazing. Characters and story will make you feel embarrassed and sad. 4.5/5. *Persona 3 FES* (PS2): By all means, I should hate this. Why don't I? 5/5. *SNK Arcade Classics Vol. 1* (PS2): Inexcusable, recall-worthy garbage. I've never before seen a retro compilation freeze mid-gameplay to load individual frames of animation. 1.5/5. *Mystery Dungeon* (DS): Oh god. Oh yeah. Oh, ohhh...ohhhhhh yeah. 8.5/5. Buying Soon: *Two Worlds*, *Castle of Shikigami 3*



### Roger Danish\_Greg Off

I've been neck deep in *GTA IV* for the last three weeks and pretty much loving every minute of my time with misunderstood thug Niko Bellic. However, when Sony's *Little Big Planet* shows, I'll be ready for a reverse injection of ultra-cuteness. In other news, I'm becoming more and more jealous of DJPubba's massive retro collection. Ask him to show you his pics!  
Currently Playing: *GTA IV*, *Wii Fit*, *Shadow of the Colossus* (again!)



### 4thletter\_David Brothers

I've been copping at least two new albums a week. It's been a while since I was really into music, but this summer is looking pretty hot. Nas, Weezy F., Royce, Juelz, and who knows who else is dropping? I could use some new Scarface.

Now Playing: *Call of Duty 4*



### James\_James Cunningham

I have finally joined the HD age and am very, very happy. I now own a grand total of one BluRay disc, due to the format being horribly overpriced, and while I love how clean and glorious *Ratatouille* looks I can't be bothered with \$30 movies. I can only hope that BluRay's declining sales get the message to the right people that the format isn't worth the expense. Gaming, on the other hand, is always worth it.

Now Playing: *GTA IV* (360), *Boom Blox Echochrome*



### HonestGamer\_Jason Venter

The problem with playing games constantly is that you don't often have time for much else, but that hasn't stopped me from working on some fantasy and science fiction writing, or from reading through most of Agatha Christie's novels these past few weeks in my spare time. It's all about priorities!

Now Playing: *The Dog Island* (Wii), *Emergency Mayhem* (Wii), *R-Type Command*



### Dack\_Steve Hannley

So, I was at an *Hop* the other day and like many patrons know, they serve only fine *Coke* products. Well, that day I felt like having a *Pepsi*, so I jokingly asked the waiter for a glass of it. To my disbelief, the man drove to a Circle K, bought me a 2 liter of *Pepsi*, brought it back, and poured it into a glass. Now, *that* is customer service.

Now Playing: *GTAIV* (X360), *Haze*



### Kitty\_Karin Renoux

I went to a Renaissance Fair recently. They claimed to have authentic costuming, but they lied. No one had blue hair or an oversize sword! Where's the historical accuracy?

Now Playing: *Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core*, *Harvest Moon Cute*



### Wolfie\_Terry Wolfinger

So life is not too bad at the moment. Just saw Ironman when it opened; The suit and Robert Downey Jr. were both awesome! And at long last Grand Theft Auto 4 has finally come out. Ehn... who needs sleep?

Currently playing Grand Theft Auto 4 on my Xbox 360



### Lynxara\_Alicia Ashby

I didn't write anything this month, but my sinister hand lurks behind every page.

Now Playing: *Operation Darkness* (360), *Mystery Dungeon: Shiren the Wanderer* (DS)



### Arlieith\_Thomas Shin

Sleeeeeep. Despite what anybody tells you, there is no drug more addictive than sleep. I've been on a Twelve-Step program for Sleep Addiction these past few weeks- I might be on to something!

Now Playing: *Mabinogi* (PC), *Persona 3: FES* (PS2), *foldit.com* (PC)



### Ashura\_Brady Hartel

Practical Intelligence Quotient, huh?

Now Playing: *Metal Gear Online*, *Smash Bros. Brawl*



### Jeremy\_Jeremy Peeples

In order to pass the time until *GTA IV* hit, I decided to snag some original Xbox classics. To my surprise, they ended up not only do that, but proved to be so addicting that I'm presently enjoying them more than *GTA IV*.

Now Playing: *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath*, *Breakdown*, *WWE Day of Reckoning 2*, *Fire Pro Wrestling Returns*, *New Super Mario Bros.*



### Mads\_Amadeo Garcia III

Mads failed at bios this quarter.











## CON MEI LING

ALLY, BINOCULARS, ALSO CALLED PAIR OF BINOCULARS, PRISM BINOCULARS, AN OPTICAL DEVICE, PROVIDING GOOD DEPTH EFFECT, FOR USE WITH BOTH EYES, CONSISTING OF TWO SMALL TELESCOPES FITTED TOGETHER SIDE BY SIDE, EACH TELESCOPE HAVING TWO PRISMS BETWEEN THE EYEPIECE AND OBJECTIVE LENS TO CORRECT THE IMAGE.

### SOLITON RADAR NIGHTVISION GOGGLES THE SOLID EYE

This is all currently existing technology.

Old Snake's Solid Eye has misled many fans into thinking that *MGS4*'s protagonist is Big Boss, Solid Snake's father and the monocular hero of *MGS3* and *MPO*. While the conclusion doesn't bear up to the facts—the hero is Solid Snake, after all—it leads to an interesting point of comparison.

As the cloned original, Big Boss's character fuses the defining qualities of his three sons: Liquid Snake, the leader of mercenaries; Solidus Snake, the freedom fighter; and Solid Snake, the field operative. The Solid Eye likewise combines three items from previous *MGS* titles in one swoop: infrared goggles, nightvision goggles, and binoculars.

The Solid Eye's Scope function replaces the binoculars from earlier titles, and its Scan function gives a technological justification for some of *MGS4*'s video game conceits. When players surveyed 3D environments in previous games, items stood out in contrasting colors, and little text pointers identified each usable object. *MGS4* only makes this information available when Old Snake has the Solid Eye equipped on Scan mode. Otherwise, much of the area stays hidden in plain view.

Beyond giving a sci-fi justification for *MGS4*'s medium conceits, the Solid Eye's Scan function introduces the possibility of new challenges. Players can run through an area without the Solid Eye—trusting what they see on the screen without Old Snake's help from inside the game—and this makes a variety of play experiences possible. The Solid Eye's ENV mode clarifies your immediate surroundings, much like the nightvision goggles, giving Snake limited visibility within otherwise dark places. Both Snake and other characters stand out as white silhouettes, much as anyone onscreen stood out against the environment when viewed through IR Goggles in previous games.

There's a catch, though: Snake can't see anyone's face in ENV mode. This wasn't a problem with the IR Goggles since nearly everyone was an enemy in previous games, but things aren't that simple in *MGS4*. That white blob

charging at you across the field strip might be your enemy in a particular skirmish, or he might be a scout from your side returning from behind enemy lines. Gun the wrong man down, and your whole platoon could turn on you.

I carried these thoughts with me while nightwalking to my hostel. I could see evidence of an older Japanese identity beneath the surface trappings of a post-Occupation Japan, yet the capitalism enforced upon Japan following World War II has actually become part of its urban identity. Bookstores and convenience stores alike overflow with manga celebrating a mythic culture of war and honor, while the fact of the stores themselves argue that the warrior culture of samurai and clans has deferred to a new society of consumers. Much as you can see the videogame through the screen, you can see old Japan in the new—and that the new has replaced the old.

That struck me as a good way to appreciate what *MGS4* does in the Solid Eye. The game gathers up elements from previous *MGS* titles, mashes them together into a new thing, and creates new ways to understand Old Snake's world.



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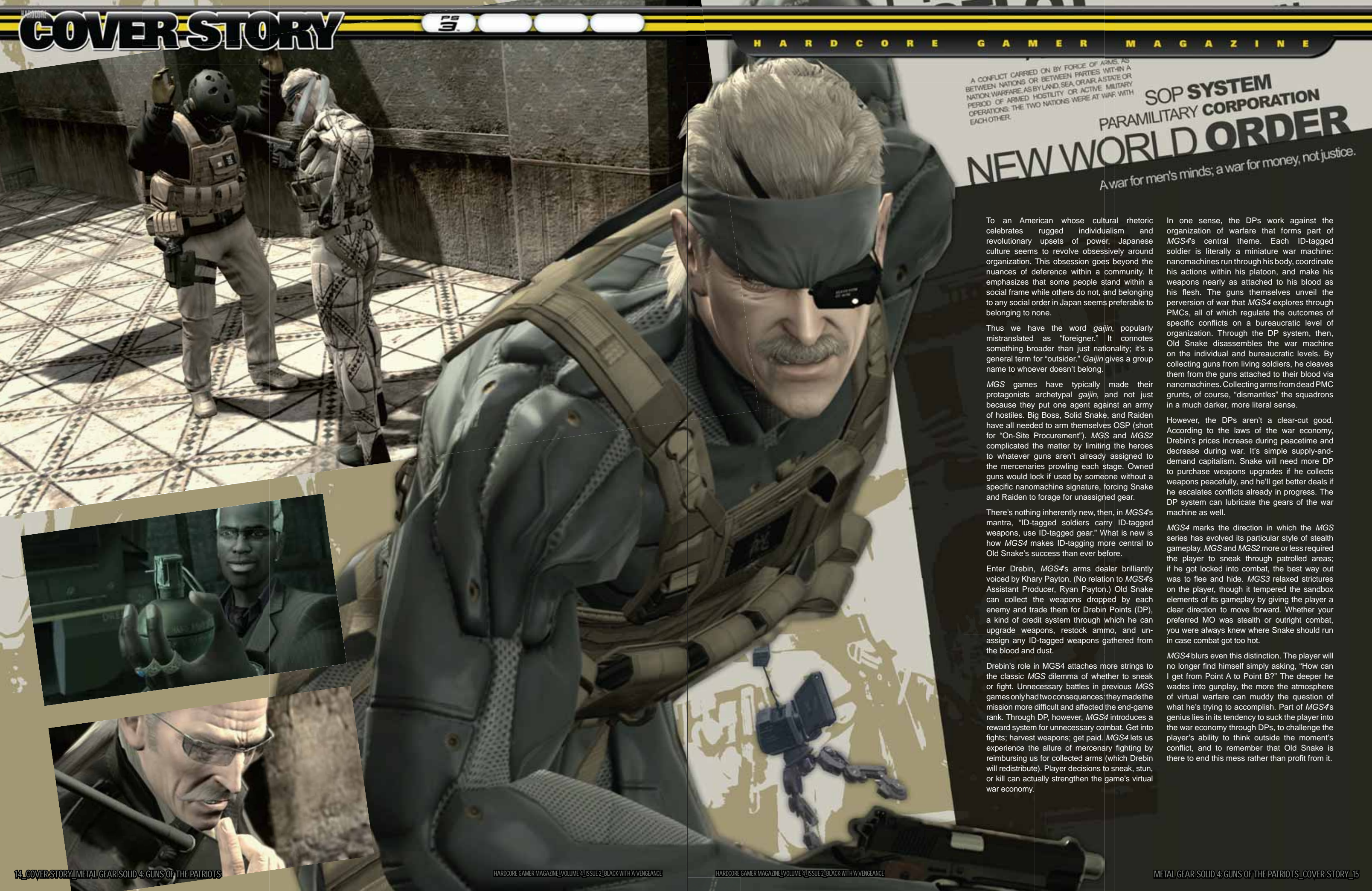
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## SOP SYSTEM PARAMILITARY CORPORATION NEW WORLD ORDER

A war for men's minds; a war for money, not justice.

To an American whose cultural rhetoric celebrates rugged individualism and revolutionary upsets of power, Japanese culture seems to revolve obsessively around organization. This obsession goes beyond the nuances of deference within a community. It emphasizes that some people stand within a social frame while others do not, and belonging to any social order in Japan seems preferable to belonging to none.

Thus we have the word *gaijin*, popularly mistranslated as "foreigner." It connotes something broader than just nationality; it's a general term for "outsider." *Gaijin* gives a group name to whoever doesn't belong.

*MGS* games have typically made their protagonists archetypal *gaijin*, and not just because they put one agent against an army of hostiles. Big Boss, Solid Snake, and Raiden have all needed to arm themselves OSP (short for "On-Site Procurement"). *MGS* and *MGS2* complicated the matter by limiting the heroes to whatever guns aren't already assigned to the mercenaries prowling each stage. Owned guns would lock if used by someone without a specific nanomachine signature, forcing Snake and Raiden to forage for unassigned gear.

There's nothing inherently new, then, in *MGS4*'s mantra, "ID-tagged soldiers carry ID-tagged weapons, use ID-tagged gear." What is new is how *MGS4* makes ID-tagging more central to Old Snake's success than ever before.

Enter Drebin, *MGS4*'s arms dealer brilliantly voiced by Khary Payton. (No relation to *MGS4*'s Assistant Producer, Ryan Payton.) Old Snake can collect the weapons dropped by each enemy and trade them for Drebin Points (DP), a kind of credit system through which he can upgrade weapons, restock ammo, and unassign any ID-tagged weapons gathered from the blood and dust.

Drebin's role in *MGS4* attaches more strings to the classic *MGS* dilemma of whether to sneak or fight. Unnecessary battles in previous *MGS* games only had two consequences; they made the mission more difficult and affected the end-game rank. Through DP, however, *MGS4* introduces a reward system for unnecessary combat. Get into fights; harvest weapons; get paid. *MGS4* lets us experience the allure of mercenary fighting by reimbursing us for collected arms (which Drebin will redistribute). Player decisions to sneak, stun, or kill can actually strengthen the game's virtual war economy.

In one sense, the DPs work against the organization of warfare that forms part of *MGS4*'s central theme. Each ID-tagged soldier is literally a miniature war machine: nanomachines run through his body, coordinate his actions within his platoon, and make his weapons nearly as attached to his blood as his flesh. The guns themselves unveil the perversion of war that *MGS4* explores through PMCs, all of which regulate the outcomes of specific conflicts on a bureaucratic level of organization. Through the DP system, then, Old Snake disassembles the war machine on the individual and bureaucratic levels. By collecting guns from living soldiers, he cleaves them from the guns attached to their blood via nanomachines. Collecting arms from dead PMC grunts, of course, "dismantles" the squadrons in a much darker, more literal sense.

However, the DPs aren't a clear-cut good. According to the laws of the war economy, Drebin's prices increase during peacetime and decrease during war. It's simple supply-and-demand capitalism. Snake will need more DP to purchase weapons upgrades if he collects weapons peacefully, and he'll get better deals if he escalates conflicts already in progress. The DP system can lubricate the gears of the war machine as well.

*MGS4* marks the direction in which the *MGS* series has evolved its particular style of stealth gameplay. *MGS* and *MGS2* more or less required the player to sneak through patrolled areas; if he got locked into combat, the best way out was to flee and hide. *MGS3* relaxed strictures on the player, though it tempered the sandbox elements of its gameplay by giving the player a clear direction to move forward. Whether your preferred MO was stealth or outright combat, you were always knew where Snake should run in case combat got too hot.

*MGS4* blurs even this distinction. The player will no longer find himself simply asking, "How can I get from Point A to Point B?" The deeper he wades into gunplay, the more the atmosphere of virtual warfare can muddy the question of what he's trying to accomplish. Part of *MGS4*'s genius lies in its tendency to suck the player into the war economy through DPs, to challenge the player's ability to think outside the moment's conflict, and to remember that Old Snake is there to end this mess rather than profit from it.





MULTIPLYING UP OBJECTS TO DECEIVE AN ENEMY, AS BY PAINTING OR SCREENING OBJECTS SO THAT THEY ARE LOST TO VIEW IN THE  
HOLDING UP OBJECTS THAT HAVE FROM A DISTANCE THE APPEARANCE OF FORTIFICATIONS, GUNS, ROADS, ETC.

# STEALTH CAMOUFLAGE OCTOCAM NO PLACE TO SNEAK?

Can't even the mighty cardboard box save you now?

*MGS4's* combat has been by far the game's most publicized aspect, but those who prefer the trademark stealth tactics will find that Kojima Productions hasn't let them down. Snake might be able to break apart a PMC platoon while siding with an insurgent militia, but the PMCs form a pretty stiff opposition if engaged solo. The game often takes *MGS3's* theme of outdoor stealth and camouflage, crushes it into urban environments, and offers a kind of gameplay that requires a whole new range of tactics to sneak and survive.

*MGS4* requires the player to investigate and explore more than the previous games had. The best way around a given blockade might not be the most obvious. Stalking through an area once usually won't reveal all there is to find, though subsequent surveys should provide enough information about the area to suggest a workable strategy. Scouting the area a third time might reveal an innocuous passage over obstacles rather than through or around them.

Still, *MGS4* resists turning formulaic. The PMCs react so variously that no strategy works universally. *MGS4* will rarely lead you into

comfortable habits—a criticism that the series' gameplay has garnered over time. Maps in earlier *MGS* titles might be solvable in more than one way, but getting through each map can turn into rote work once a player figures a consistently successful strategy. *MGS4's* general resistance to routine recalls Kojima's 2005 announcement of his vision for the game: "No Place to Hide." It's not that you won't be hiding in *MGS4*—trust me, you will—but you won't hide assured that the battlefield will follow predictable patterns.

Outside the game, these mental habits proved useful as I headed back to my salaryman's hostel. What alleys could get me past that gaggle of women offering foreigners "free massages" two blocks away? Where could I linger to ditch the strip bar solicitors? *MGS4* stayed with me as the retailers of Roppongi's nightlife offered their vision: "No Place to Sleep."



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# COVER STORY



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## ZANZIBAR LAND OUTER HEAVEN

### NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Can love bloom on the battlefield?



...and there's no place you can't make into home. We've retained the nomadic instincts that our ancestors forged when the word "mastodon" had the same relevance that the word "WiFi" does now. Traveling with one change of clothes doesn't exactly equal Solid Snake's brand of nomadism, but you still have the feeling that you're a fugitive somehow.

MGS4 even connected on this experience. It shows Solid Snake at home, with his guard down (literally). The briefing that follows the Middle East session reveals a side of Solid Snake only hinted at before: his domestic face.

The lateness of this development shouldn't surprise anyone. The conventions that Kojima borrowed from Hollywood action flicks tend not to show John Rambo, say, washing wine glasses. The original MGS begins with Snake's arrest from retirement, and it ends with a vow to settle down with Meryl. MGS2 opens with Snake leaving Otacon at Philanthropy's home base in NYC, and it ends as Snake leaves Raiden to find Olga's child.

MGS4 concludes the Middle East section by giving Snake's role as a homemaker overdue attention. Snake and Otacon interact as the

proverbial odd couple, and we get a glimpse at the child-raising philosophy of the man who has destroyed countless nuclear weapons solo. (Is it any surprise that a legendary warrior renowned for covert disruption ops has a passive-aggressive streak?) Watching the two hash common ground out of their disagreements felt like looking into the next room rather than into virtual space.

MGS4 has more narrative meat than the series' usual fare of conspiracy theories. It shows who Snake is the other 20% of the time. Otacon's question from MGS—"Can love bloom on the battlefield?"—might not cover the full range of problems that issue forth. A better question (one asked by tens of thousands of Americans today) might have been, "How do you live with someone after war?"



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## FINAL MISSION FISSION MAILED? THE LONG WIND DOWN

Mission complete, or mission failed?

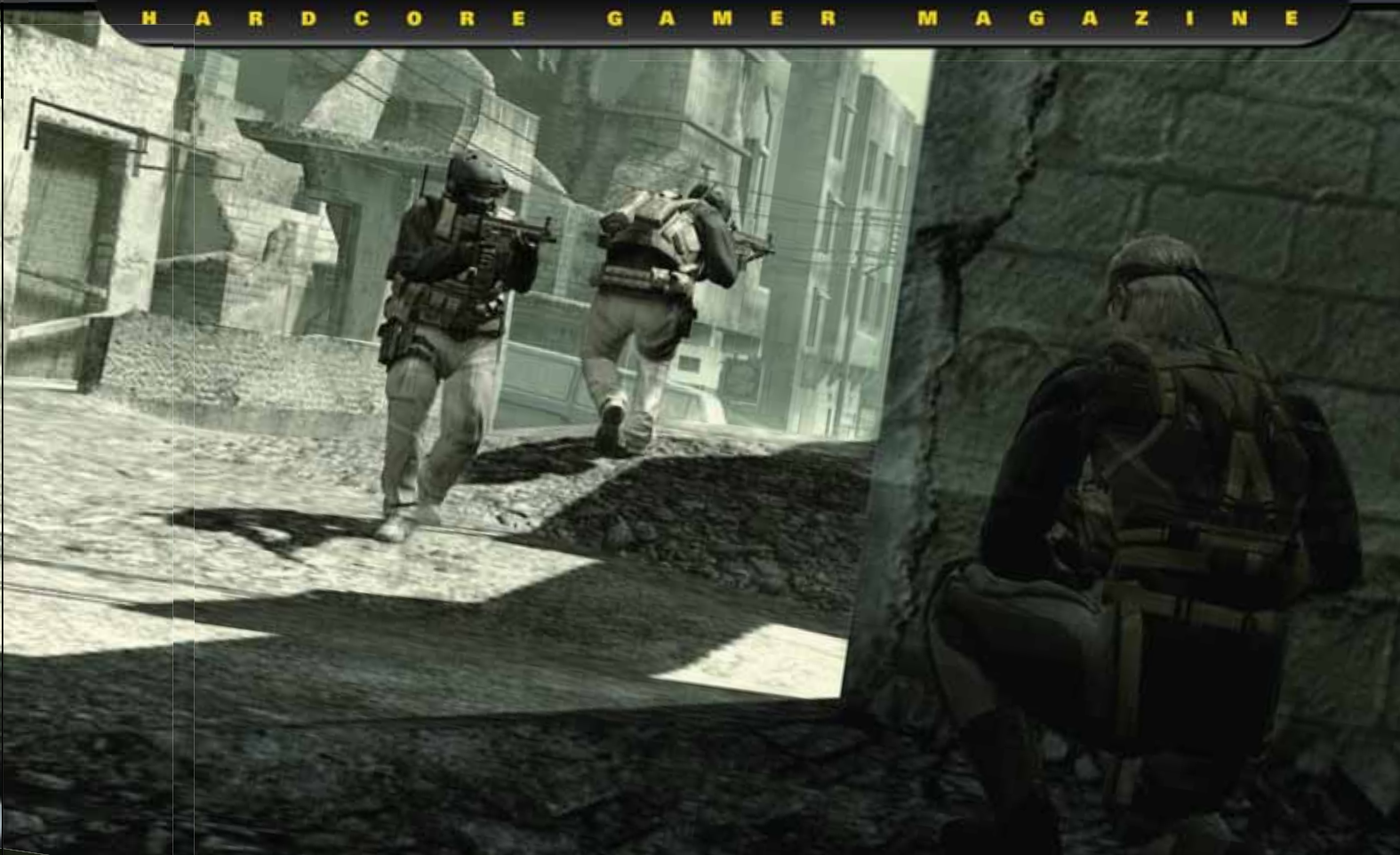
I loaded one of my favorite save points before bidding *MGS4* farewell. Snake and the Rat Patrol were fighting Haven Troopers, the strange frog-women reminiscent of the Arsenal Tengu from *MGS2*'s penultimate battle. Beyond the Rat Patrol's AI's seamless coordination with Snake, it was one of the best places to overload Snake's Psyche and Stress Gauges to get a Combat High..

*MGS4* explores its theme of SENSE by revealing Snake's mental wear-and-tear through his combat performance. After enough deterioration, Snake's stress explodes into Combat High mode. He reacts more quickly; injuries stagger him less; he aims more precisely. Going into a Combat High is like a taking a time machine back to a younger Solid Snake.

The Combat High isn't an absolute good, mind you. After a period of serious ass-kicking, the adrenaline thins from Snake's blood and leaves him sluggish. It's a good time to take cover and recharge Snake's nerves with a smoke, hoping (of course) that the Haven Troopers don't catch scent.

The trip left me exhausted as an overloaded old man. Two transpacific flights plus jet lag had drained my reserves. When I took a break from sleeping, I gained new appreciation for the pace that Ryan Payton and his comrades maintain. Maybe Kojima Productions injects them with nanomachines to compensate for the inevitable loss of food and sleep during the pre-release crunch.

However they keep their bodies going, their hard work shows in the final product. *MGS4* will be the PS3's Combat High. Let's hope that future games keep the hardware's adrenaline flowing.







## SOLIDSNAKE

He was born from a cloning experiment dubbed the Les Enfants Terribles Project, an effort to replicate the greatest soldier of the 20th century—Big Boss. Snake showed great promise early in his military career and soon enlisted in FOXHOUND, a US Army covert ops unit. Immediately afterward, the Outer Heaven Revolt broke out (*MG1*). Snake infiltrated Outer Heaven and learned that the warlord in charge was FOXHOUND's own commander, Big Boss. After Snake destroyed Outer Heaven, he finally killed Big Boss during the Zanzibarland Riot (*MG2*). Snake retired afterward but returned to duty when his clone twin, Liquid Snake, hijacked the latest nuclear threat, Metal Gear REX (*MGS1*). After Snake defeated Liquid, he and Otacon founded an anti-Metal Gear activist group, Philanthropy. Through the organization, Snake was lured aboard a tanker with Metal Gear RAY. He was named an environmental terrorist when the tanker sank in the Hudson River. Snake survived to discover the shadow organization behind everything—the Patriots. In *MGS4*, Solid Snake suffers from accelerated aging as a side-effect of the cloning process that gave him life. He returns to the battlefield as Old Snake.

## LIQUIDOCELOT

Ocelot appears as archconspirator during Big Boss's adventures in *MGS3* and *MPO*. He later appears as Liquid Snake's right hand man during the Shadow Moses Incident (*MGS1*). Ocelot lost an arm during the mission and later had Liquid's attached as a surrogate. Liquid, Solid Snake's twin brother, had wanted to rebuild Big Boss's dream of Outer Heaven, a mercenary state that would lead the world to perpetual war. A residue of Liquid Snake's consciousness apparently stayed inside the arm that Ocelot borrowed, and Liquid's personality gradually overwhelmed Ocelot's. For reasons unknown, Liquid Snake and Ocelot have fused into a single persona: Liquid-Ocelot. In *MGS4*, Liquid-Ocelot is the CEO of Outer Heaven, a PMC with the largest chain of paramilitary franchises in the world. He is Solid Snake's target.

## HAL "OTACON" EMMERICH

"Otacon" is the nickname of Hal Emmerich, a genius engineer whose family has been tied to the development of nuclear weapons for generations. Armstech President Kenneth Baker hired him before the Shadow Moses Incident to build Metal Gear REX. Working under the belief that REX would only fire antiballistic missiles, Otacon inadvertently kept the Metal Gear threat alive. After *MGS1*, he and Snake formed the anti-Metal Gear group Philanthropy. In *MGS4*, he reprises his role as Solid Snake's close friend and field intelligence support.

## ROYCAMPBELL

After his Green Beret unit failed to infiltrate San Hieronymo Peninsula in 1972, Roy Campbell befriended his fellow prisoner Big Boss during their joint jailbreak. His womanizing tendencies have left scars on his past, including his siring a daughter with his brother's wife. When Big Boss disappeared after the Outer Heaven Revolt, Campbell took command of FOXHOUND and served as Snake's Commanding Officer during the Zanzibarland Riot. Campbell returned as Snake's primary support staff in *MGS1*, and a facsimile of Roy Campbell was used to deceive Raiden during *MGS2*. Campbell appears in *MGS4* to personally request that Snake kill Liquid-Ocelot.

## MERYLSILVERBURGH

An avid fan of Solid Snake's legendary exploits, Meryl is the daughter whom Roy Campbell sired with his brother's wife. Meryl and Snake grew close after their shared experiences on Shadow Moses Island, but their relationship did not last. Meryl appears in *MGS4* as the leader of the Rat Patrol, the latest reorganization of FOXHOUND.

## RAIDEN

Born with the name Jack, Raiden's parents were killed by Solidus Snake, the third and last clone of Big Boss. Solidus forced young Jack into war as a child soldier, and Jack's lethality with blades earned him the moniker "Jack the Ripper." He was later brainwashed by the Patriots through VR training to identify himself as a virtual Solid Snake. During *MGS2*, the Patriots used Raiden as a guinea pig for their plan for societal control. Afterwards, Raiden vowed to leave war behind and settle down with his fiancée and their unborn child. His appearance in *MGS4* as a cyborg ninja suggests that these plans did not play out as desired. His experiences between the end of *MGS2* and the start of *MGS4* remain unknown.

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**CHARACTER DOSSIERS**





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# METAL GEAR ONLINE

ver. 2: SONS OF  
PLAYSTATIONS  
By JAMES HOWELL AND  
BRADY HARTEL

The SOP System is an abbreviation of "Sons of the Patriots," but the P might as well stand for "Playstations." The second generation of *Metal Gear Online* combines the lessons that Kojima Productions has learned from the PS2's *Metal Gear Online* and the PSP's *Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops*. In a sense, the new *MGO* splices *MPO*'s system of character customization into the original *MGO*'s foundational gameplay... and then

throws its own innovations into the mix. Now that we've gotten our hands on *MGO*'s Premiere Beta (β), here's a breakdown of what's new and what's been re-newed in KojiPro's latest foray into online combat.

To help differentiate between the original *MGO* for PS2 and the new one for PS3, we will be referring to the PS3 version as *MGOβ*, though the final title may very well just be *Metal Gear Online*.



## CHARACTER CUSTOMIZATION

*MPO* introduced a new degree of character customization to the original *MGO*'s selection from three stock character types, all of whom had the same skill set. *MGOβ* refines *MPO*'s character customization with two major updates. First, you no longer risk losing your soldiers over the network as with most of your *MPO* grunts. Second, your character's skills (such as setting up traps more quickly or improved firearm accuracy) are built through online play alone. As each player becomes accustomed to his particular play style, so does his battlefield persona.

The skills can be broken down into combat- and team-based categories. Skills range from assault rifle mastery to even things like scanning and enemy exposure.

There's obviously great potential here to customize a character to your particular playing style, especially if you're coordinating tactics with your clan or team.

The downside—which is no fault of *MGOβ*'s—is that many players forget that these skills work best when balanced by the team-based skills that take effect through the SOP System.

With that in mind, let's look at how

*MGOβ*'s teamwork system can potentially heal the rift between the headshot queens and team players.

## SOP SYSTEM

*MGOβ* puts players in the position of the same PMC mercenaries whose hyper-coordinated tactics jeopardize Old Snake's life work. The key to a team's success lies in sharing combat information through the SOP System, a kind of ad-hoc nanomachine network that gives you access to each teammate's location and status.

Plugging into the system is easy in theory. Just salute near one of your teammates or tap his shoulder, and the silhouettes of all nearby comrades appear on the screen despite physical obstacles like walls or floors. This immediately tells you where to join your team's assault or where to support their defenses.

When everything works, the SOP System is an excellent way to coordinate your decisions with those of your group. Even without a headset, the SOP System makes non-verbal communication possible when it absolutely counts, such as during Base, Capture, or Sneaking missions.

The downside to jacking in: sometimes you

just can't. *MGO* suffered from limited spawn areas that played to the predatory habits of spawncampers. *MGOβ* solves this problem by offering larger, more detailed levels. However, the increase in size can turn into an inconvenient sprawl that makes contacting your comrades difficult. If, during a Capture or Base match, you die in a mass raid and need to truck back, you'll sometimes find that your team has traveled beyond your ability to catch up. In addition, hitting the Triangle button doesn't consistently tap you into the SOP System. This can leave your mercenary saluting or swinging his arm into space, creating a window of vulnerability lasting several precious seconds.



This creates different problems for different player types. Let's say you're a sniper. Your role is to provide cover fire while your guys escort the Kerotan or GA-KO back to your base. You can't just climb back up on your perch and start ping-ponging heads. The red and blue silhouettes that appear when you plug into the SOP System have replaced the original MGO's red and blue armbands, making it difficult to distinguish friend from foe without SOP System access. You can only identify distant teammates when they're in your sights. Depending on the situation, this could force you to hesitate at the wrong moment or put an accidental shell in your buddy's back.

The SOP System's reaction to Friendly Fire is likewise a mixed blessing. In order to deter teamkillers, the SOP System will lock any soldier's attacks for several seconds if he's guilty of Friendly Fire. This, of course, leaves him vulnerable while he ducks for cover, waiting for his nanomachines to unlock his hands.

While the SOP System obviously wants players to use teamwork, the Friendly Fire punishment can force your player to obey a certain playstyle that a given battle's circumstances won't allow.

Let's say you've got a shotgun. You're blitzing the enemy's goal during the final countdown seconds of a Capture mission, and you shoot the guy holding the frog. He goes down but not out, and you accidentally clipped your teammate in the process. You're locked out of the system and left impotent when your team needs you most. In the SOP System's fervor for perfected teamwork skills, it can encroach upon gameplay at the expense of the down-and-dirty moments on the battlefield.

These are all circumstantial complaints. In general, the SOP System is quite close to realizing the gameplay goals of MGOβ. It bridges the gap between individual combat data ("Who shot me?!") and team coordination. Non-combat character skills improve how well your soldier shares information over the SOP System.



### DREBIN POINTS

Much as KojiPro built the original MGO from the core gameplay of MGS3, MGOβ's multiplayer uses gameplay elements from offline MGS4. Each soldier not only has his own version of Snake's skills; he also has access to the Drebin arms market.

Each player starts each match with a fund of 1000 Drebin Points (DP). He can earn more DP depending upon his solo and team performances. A headshot might net 1500 DP, while securing a camp during a Base mission would net the overall team a total of 1000 DP. MGOβ would then divide these shared spoils evenly among them. In essence, the DP system ensures that no progress in MGOβ goes unrewarded, which is a comforting prospect when facing tough opponents.

Players can spend DP on weapons after each respawn, where they choose arms from a menu of assault rifles, handguns, submachine guns, and more, in addition to their possible customizations. Different guns and their modifications cost more DP, enabling each player to customize his weapons to the needs of each battle.

At first, the guns available at the highest and lowest prices create a sense of imbalance. At the extreme ends of the DP scale—from the lowly AK (1000 DP) to the almighty RPG (10,000 DP)—reside the weapons that suggest the least

effective strategies. The logic here seems circular: in a game that valorizes teamwork, why give those who play like tanks the highest reward?

This actually makes more sense than it seems. At some point, of course, everyone wants the testosterone rush of toting the most destructive weapon in the game. However, a player with a sense of his preferred tactics will likely distribute DP evenly over several rounds. After one respawn, he might have enough to purchase the bare minimum equipment for his playstyle—an M4, a non-lethal sidearm, and a smoke grenade—while the next respawn will see him with a bigger pocketbook. He can customize the M4 with an extra grip to lessen recoil, a silencer to stay stealthy, and a scope to improve his field of vision in FPV. For a player pit against others at the same skill level, each successive round, on average, will restock the DP spent at the start. This allows him to maintain a set of reasonably sophisticated equipment for the duration of the match.

Many players think they need to take a bullet in the skull before they can spend their DP. (This attitude might say something useful about the relationship between financial savings and death.) However, a player can return to his team's base at any point and spend the DP he's earned since spawning. This also lets him restock his ammunition, which is a necessary feature since dead opponents no longer drop ammo once gunned down.

The DP system plays into MGOβ's massive effort to customize gameplay. Players can customize

their PMC grunts on the spot, adding a meaty variety to the whole experience. Since this is the Beta version, we might press KojiPro to offer a little more customization for the guns that aren't assault rifles. Perhaps players could buy an automatic bolt for the Mosin Nagant, or even a mod that gives the shotgun tranquilizer ammo. (Yes, yes, even sleepshot would be lethal when dispensed from a 12-gauge. With soldiers who can walk off a bullet through the knee, however, we've already crossed the threshold of complete realism.)

Does this sound a bit too much like buying a car? Trust me, it feels a lot smoother in motion than it sounds on paper. After a few purchases from Drebin's black market arms, the process will feel as natural as spending cash on a new videogame.





**GAMEPLAY TYPES**

**DEATHMATCH (DM)**

Kill or be killed. This mode is *Metal Gear Online's* moshpit and *the* breeding ground for headshot queens.

**What's New:** All players share a preset number of lives. The match will end before the timer if these all run out.

**TEAMDEATHMATCH (TDM)**

Consider this a thinking man's moshpit where tactical coordination and individual skills converge. Work with your team to take the other team down.

**What's New:** Expanded levels and eight-man teams make this the co-op experience that the original *MGO* never quite realized.

**CAPTUREMISSION (CAP)**

Think of Capture games as goal-oriented TDM. You and your team need to grab the frog (Kerotan) and duck (GA-KO). Bring them back to your team's goal and hold them until the timer counts down.

**What's New:** In *MGO*, each team deposited the frog at its goal and then scattered to secure the area. *MPO+* changed the formula by requiring one player to keep the frog in his character inventory while staying inside his team's goal area. *MGOβ* combines both approaches. One



player needs to play quarterback and hold the frog inside his team's goal area, while the larger number of players per team allows for each team to secure the area around the quarterback.

The duck previously had its own game mode in the original *MGO*: Rescue Missions, in which one team would try to liberate the duck from the other team's grasp. In *MGOβ*, the duck and the frog must share the field, thereby putting two footballs into play.

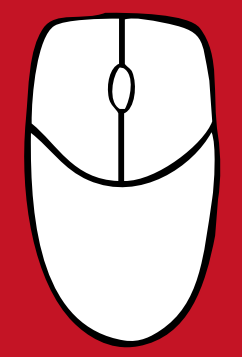
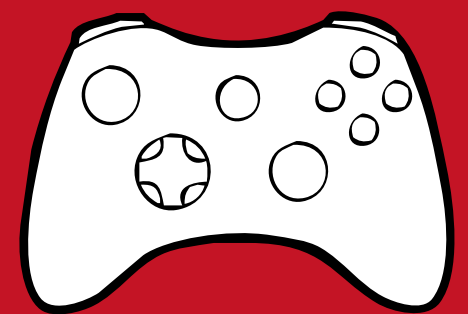
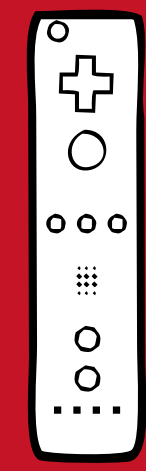
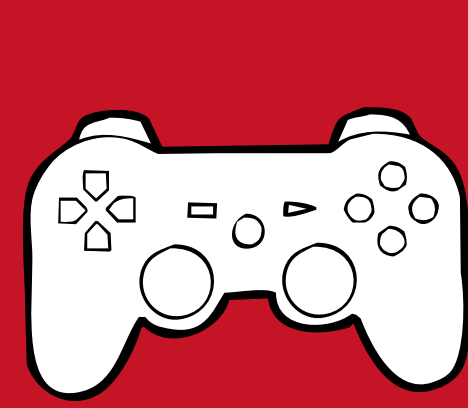
Both critters contribute to a team's countdown if held within the goal area at the same time. *MGOβ* limits each player to one critter apiece, requiring two soldiers to maintain a steady presence in the goal. If a player brings one of the critters into his goal during the other team's countdown, he'll have to wait for his teammates to interrupt their countdown before his will start. First come, first serve.

**BASEMISSION (BASE)**

This is *MGOβ's* addition to the lineage's gameplay menu. Secure the map by colonizing five bases within the level. Stand within a base's borders to transfer control of it to your team. Speed up the transfer time by co-occupying it with your teammates.

Colonized bases serve as spawn points for the team in control, giving them more access to the map. Bases located in the center of the level are ideal tactical positions.

Victory comes in two ways. A team either colonizes all bases on the map before the timer ends, or the timer ends and victory cedes to the team holding the most bases.



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### SNEAKINGMISSION (SNE)

One player controls Otacon's Metal Gear MkII while another takes the man himself, Old Snake. Snake must stun or tranquilize three soldiers and then pat them down for dogtags. The game ends either when Snake loses all his lives, when he collects his bounty, or when time runs out.

**What's New:** Oldschool MGO's Sneaking Missions unevenly pit a team of seven soldiers against Big Boss. For those who never played the original online *Metal Gear*, Big Boss's skull was apparently made from adamantium. He could take up to four headshots before falling. MGOβ evens the odds. Old Snake retains the advantage of stealth, but he's just as vulnerable to headshots as anyone else.

Otacon debuts on the battlefield by proxy of the Metal Gear MkII, controlled by a second player to aid Old Snake. This addition brings a surprisingly lighthearted touch to the fray. It's hard not to laugh when a squadron of nano-linked mercenaries ignore the enemy's bullets and, instead, apparently decide to blow off each other's toes. In reality, they're trying to nail the MkII, a stealth-camouflaged, one-winged robochicken on rollerskates that wields a very tactile electric whip.

Thematically, MGOβ's Sneaking Mission offers an unusual insight into MGS4's offline gameplay. The most players could take away from the Sneaking games in oldschool MGO was the knowledge that Big Boss was one bad mothertrucker. When Snake comes between two PMC platoons during an online match, though, things complicate fast.

A scoreboard at the top of the screen tallies each team's kills, quickly turning a potentially cooperative mission into a makeshift TDM. Teams tend to battle each other rather than look for Snake.

In the process, players re-stage battles from the offline game and enter MGS4's abstracted state of war, killing whoever isn't on their team simply because the targets aren't on their team.

MGOβ's revamped Sneaking Mission might be the best improvement upon MGO yet. New dramatic possibilities arise when each player decides between hunting Snake or the other team, because, whatever he decides, he'll get sucked into the other hunt too—if only to survive attacks from seen and unseen foes alike.

The best online moments come when each team finds Snake at the same time. Players shoot at both their PMC nemeses and Old Snake alike, sometimes even playing one off the other. It's awesome to behold—and even better to engage.



### GAMEPLAY LEVELS

The Premiere Beta didn't unveil all of MGOβ's levels, but we got a chance to prowl at least a few of the maps that will appear in the MGOβ starter pack. Here's a breakdown of the levels and the kind of tactics possible in each.

#### GROZNYJGRAD (GG)

**Origin:** This is a graphically overhauled version of Colonel Volgin's GRU military compound from MGS3. Previously broken into four separate areas due to the PS2's limitations, players can now traipse through the base as one seamless layout. It includes familiar areas (such as the Shagohod's hangar) as well as previously inaccessible spots (such as the guard towers). Judging from the demolished walls and the conspicuously absent doomsday machine, this is probably set after Big Boss's escape in MGS3.

**Combat:** Groznyj Grad appeals to players who enjoy fighting across wide open spaces. Successful teams usually station two or three snipers at any of the map's several perches, and they then provide cover for a five or six man ground unit.

**Best Gameplay Modes:** TDM, BASE, and SNE.

**Points of Interest:** The two Launchers installed near either spawn area can help relieve a team pinned by enemy snipers. Each Launcher can be aimed at two different locations, in the event that the enemy has secured the default landing spot.

Watch towers serve as ideal sniper positions. A team with at least one sniper in each can easily dominate the playing field. However, the towers are far from impregnable. A good sniper can hit almost any spot on the map, but he can likewise be hit from any spot too.

Take advantage of the catwalk surrounding the central hangar as well as strategic ground positions to bring them down. Also remember that they're walking on mesh metal catwalks themselves, leaving them vulnerable to fire from below.

Use the full range of your mobility to navigate Groznyj Grad. An apparently impassable fence can be circumnavigated by hanging, and high walls can be mounted using the buddy system.

The hangar is a haven for teams that find themselves outmatched in long-distance combat. Nooks and crannies in the Shagohod's platform are ideal for ambush assaults when the snipers get bored and descend.

#### BLOODBATH (BB)

**Origin:** Mash all three of oldschool MGO's Killhouse maps together, add a generous helping of mud, and you've got Blood Bath.

**Combat:** This map favors close-quarters combat that demands more reflexes than foresight. The underground passages can create the illusion that you're running through a concrete straitjacket, and the aboveground catwalks expose you to enemy fire from at least two directions at once.

Successful teams typically post two soldiers with Assault Rifle skills on the catwalk while a platoon of six soldiers circulates the perimeter to pick off stragglers from the other team.

**Best Gameplay Modes:** DM, CAP, and SNE.

**Points of Interest:** The broken concrete blocks that litter the perimeter of BB are great shields to help your team advance from one corner of the level to the next. Use them when your team hits the road.

Many players make the mistake of running along the extreme outer edges of the map. They're usually gunned down due to the comparative lack of cover. Teams that prefer to secure an area rather than scout will find that the central underground corridor makes an ideal nest. Soldiers tend to fall through ground level holes, almost always landing at one or the other end of



the hall. Take advantage of the wall's diagonal depressions for cover and for ambush tactics.

The central building's catwalk is probably the safest location for snipers. Unlike the larger, free-standing catwalk, there's always a wall to put your back against. You can usually evade a hot hail of bullets before getting totally shot up, but don't expect to escape too often. Once a coordinated team knows your location, expect them to make a house call.

#### MIDTOWNMAELSTROM (MM)

**Origin:** This is the opening gameplay level of MGS4. MGOβ's online grunts hash out their differences just as the PMC's and the militiamen's battle surrounds Snake during the start of MGS4.

**Combat:** MM lends itself well to a blend of close-quarters and long-distance combat. The streets and alleys align at certain points to give sniper bullets an easy expressway, while the urban environment's indoor settings provide ample opportunity for those who prefer to wrestle, stab, or shotgun their way to the end.

Successful teams in MM typically split into squads of two or three, and each group explores a section of the level. Battles can sometimes grind into long-distance stalemates near each team's spawning base, but MM has enough secret passageways to let even the slowest mercenary slip through an otherwise tight front line.

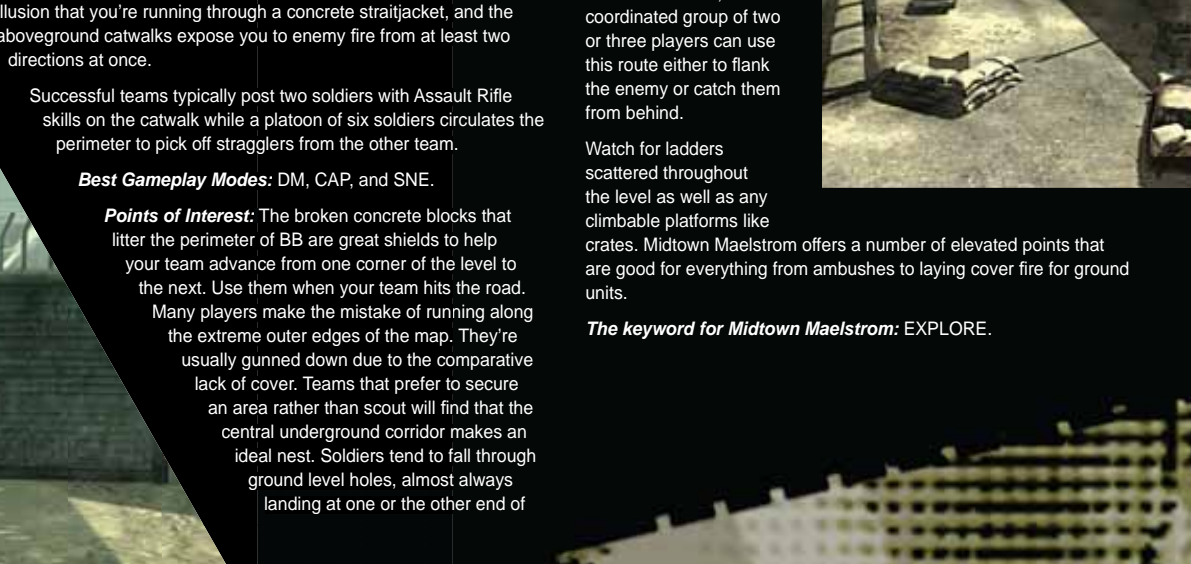
**Best Gameplay Modes:** ALL.

#### Points of Interest:

Keep your eyes peeled for narrow alleys and corridors that the other team has overlooked while securing their base. One alley runs parallel to the main center of combat, and a coordinated group of two or three players can use this route either to flank the enemy or catch them from behind.

Watch for ladders scattered throughout the level as well as any climbable platforms like crates. Midtown Maelstrom offers a number of elevated points that are good for everything from ambushes to laying cover fire for ground units.

**The keyword for Midtown Maelstrom:** EXPLORE.





# Free Games!

## Massively Multiplayer, Without the Massive Pricetag

We can all agree on the fact that Massively Multiplayer Online games are huge. A cursory examination of MMO databases lists a staggering assortment of titles, in excess of 200 games. These games draw in millions of players every day, players that will sink hard-earned cash and long hours into virtual playgrounds. Some play to prove they're better than the rest, others grind away the hours looking for powerful game equipment, and even more play just to hang out with friends. It's obvious that this genre has a voice, and it is a very loud one.

Online games run the gamut from shooters to role-playing, from racing to drilling; their prices are also as varied as their content. While the titans of the genre—like *World of Warcraft*—draw in big crowds and big money, pay-to-play games are difficult to pull off successfully. Meanwhile, free-to-play games number in the hundreds, and seem to be doing well for themselves, despite smaller player bases and no guaranteed income. Free-to-play games often offer only a handful of servers, and the graphics engine is rarely anything to give even two-year-old PCs a workout. Many free-to-play online games are translated into English from a different home language, leading to often-hilarious (and sometimes incredibly frustrating) character dialogue. Free-to-

play games are not usually as mechanically "deep" as pay-to-play titles; and, yet, players are still flocking to them in droves.

What makes free-to-play games so attractive? While a price tag of "nothing" certainly helps, perhaps the biggest draws are the sense of character that a title provides. Many are beautifully drawn and animated, and offer gameplay experiments that can't be found outside of the MMO giants. Would *World of Warcraft* have been successful if it was about Azeroth Golf? Would *Final Fantasy XI* enthrall fans if it were only Chocobo Racing? I highly suspect that they would flop out the door before stumbling and dying in the street.

Free-to-play games generally have a few things in common. They have fantastic promotional and concept art, easy-to-learn gameplay, and a reward system mediated by paying extras. While you can

generally unlock all the content in a given game by constant dedication, most free-to-play games offer the ability to get an edge by laying down some cash. The advantage is usually enough to tempt a purchase, without being too overpowering; which is a rather clever way to cover costs.

The follow pages contain a collection of notable free-to-play online games, and why they are worth a look.



While *Ragnarok Online* has shifted to a pay-to-play model (along with an item shop that involves real money), it started out in the free-to-play category. *Ragnarok Online* is important, however, because it set the standard for games to follow. There is a great deal of games out there with a very similar format, even down to the same character creation system.

The premise for *Ragnarok Online* is simple enough. It capitalizes on the world of a popular graphic novel, with two-dimensional sprites set against three-dimensional backgrounds. While the graphics are a little underwhelming, the cute sprites and fantastic art add character to an otherwise bland game world.

While *Ragnarok Online* started as little more than a level treadmill, the open beta attracted both casual players and hardcore gamers. *Ragnarok Online* offered a free place to socialize for the gaming community, and its casual gameplay meant that players could log in and out with no time lost between sessions. The combat wasn't involved at all, meaning that players (in the beginning, at least) could go on auto-pilot while chatting away with friends. The ability to solo or group with players of any level meant that pickup groups were actually a viable style of play.

Compare this sort of casual gaming to the giant of the time, *Everquest*. Depending on the time of day, and any given character's class or equipment, *Everquest* players could expect to spend a significant deal of downtime coordinating group efforts—planning raids, organizing groups, looking for a group, waiting for monsters to respawn, etc. Logging in or out at any given location would almost certainly end in a player being inconvenienced by character death, which, by the way, means a long, equipment-free trek to recover a body from a hostile area, along with an experience penalty. Often, this was a costly waste of character resources, not to mention valuable game time; remember, players are paying for each in-game minute!

Meanwhile, *Ragnarok Online* characters could die whenever they felt like, and resurrect with virtually no penalty. Despite some loss of progression in a dungeon, groups were hardly inconvenienced by character death, even if the whole party was wiped out. This model of casual play became the standard for free-to-play games; they carry enough customization and mechanics to keep things interesting, but are accessible enough to pick up or drop at a moment's notice.

Ragnarok Online





Rappelz



Yes, *Rappelz* is another RPG—that should say something about the Massively Multiplayer genre—but it is a very *pretty* RPG. It's also a good example of the kind of experimentation free-to-play games exhibit.

On the surface, *Rappelz* is very generic. It has the usual combination of race and class for the character creation system, and other such standard RPG elements. The most notable feature, however, is the Pet system.

When I say "pets," I really mean "summoned creatures that will tear things up." Pets add a completely new dimension to combat, effectively turning any given character into a two-man team. Pets are widely regarded as the main source of damage dealing for many characters, and the emphasis on their utility is what makes *Rappelz* stand out from most other games.

While some other MMORPGs have played around with classes that involve one or more summoned monsters, pets are not a game-making mechanic

for most titles. While control of a summoned creature isn't a very new thing in and of itself (as the *Shin Megami Tensei* and *Pokémon* series can attest to), pets are a somewhat new gimmick for online games. This sort of experimentation, while not groundbreaking, is vital for

renewing a genre that seems to fall prey to swords-and-sorcery stereotypes.



*Gunz* is a strange mixture of first-person shooters and third-person sword combat. Players face off in a guns-and-swords death match, and use in-game currency to purchase better equipment. While adding melee components and a behind-the-shoulder camera to shooters has been done before, it isn't what makes *Gunz* special.

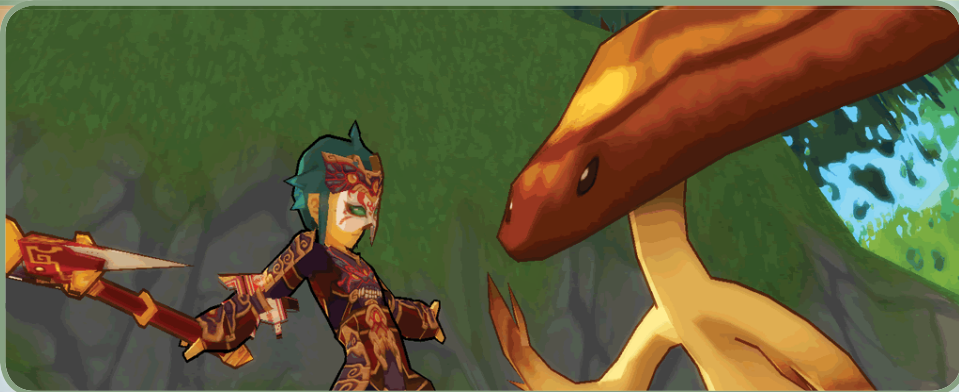
Instead, *Gunz* takes advantage of a rather interesting set of physics. *Gunz* characters engage in a lot of tumbling, from simple diving shots and quick dashes, to double-jumping in mid-air and running up walls. Adding a vertical dimension to regular movement is enough to make a game somewhat (though mildly) "revolutionary" on its own, but the applications of these features is astounding.

*Gunz* is, obviously, a rather Korean game. A localized version of the game had been released before the international version, giving Korean players a chance to discover and exploit system glitches. Naturally, these glitches were terribly imbalanced; players exploiting these glitches could travel faster than other characters, and were capable of using both melee and ranged weapons simultaneously;

shotgun swords, if you will. The glitches required such technical skill to pull off, that eventually the exploits gained their own "style," and were accepted as a legitimate style of play. Korean Style, or "K-Style," was initially regarded unfavorably, but was intentionally left in the international version of the title.

This strikes me as a very progressive move for the online genre. As you may recall, the early fighting games invented combination attacks on accident. The "combo" wasn't part of the intended play,

and occurred mostly through glitches in the game mechanics. The level it added to conventional play, however, deepened the fighting genre as a whole, and allowed for more complex expert play. Arguably, this limits high-level play, which is regarded either as a godsend or as an inconvenient rules change, depending on what side of the glitch you stand. Still, "K-Style" has helped to change *Gunz* from a title of little consequence to a much discussed (and therefore regularly played) technical work.



*Dream of Mirror Online* is a prime example of what a little different thinking can accomplish. All of the game art is in a cell-shaded style, which instantly provides a unique feel, especially when compared against either of the other traditional online styles—that either strive for the realistic, or are content with 2D sprites. *Dream of Mirror Online* uses this unique art style to stand out, and it's one of the reasons why the title is worth trying. The game world is beautifully presented,

and it's hard not to marvel at a game that takes this approach on a PC platform.

What *Dream of Mirror Online* aims for, however, is much more significant than a pretty game. Instead, it capitalizes on one of the key components of online

games—the community. It uses a unique mechanic to adapt in-game relationships between players, in order to provide new gameplay options.

Depending on the interactions between friends, characters can enter into bonds within the context of the game world, which actually provide in-game benefits in the form of special attacks. The three kinds of relationships are that of master and student, friends, and lovers. While these are gratifying from a community standpoint, the added offensive capability is a nice twist to suspend further the sense of disbelief that is inherent in any virtual world.

There's just something special about using the bonds of friendship to kick ass.

Oh, and did I mention that you can fly using nothing but your sword? That's a pretty sweet deal by itself!



*Last Chaos* also seems to fall into the stereotypical MMORPG swords-and-sorcery fodder. For the most part, it stays true to the proven online formula.

In fact, it really doesn't stand out in terms of graphical ability or content, though it is well-animated and offers much.

What it does, though, is implement something called the "Guardian system." Essentially, it allows a higher-level player to team up with a lower-level player, so

that they can team up and slaughter monsters, find loot, etc. Most obviously, it facilitates character advancement, but what it also provides is a way to bridge the gap between players and help strengthen the sense of community.

It's a terribly frustrating experience to try and join a group of friends on any given online game, only to be incapable of doing anything for three months while struggling to gain enough power to actually team up with said friends. The level disparity is often brutally enforced, either by monster threat (the likelihood of any given enemy attacking a specific character) scaled by level to eliminate weaker players first, or by vastly diminishing experience point returns for

either (or both) levels of players—which leads to a sense of wasted effort. Penalizing a group for trying to cooperate seems counterintuitive to the goal of most online games (which is to provide a unique social experience). Certainly, it's also much easier to learn the game while under the protection of a more powerful player, which makes sense from a realistic standpoint, as less skilled artisans were always apprenticed to masters in the field. This sort of "initiation" of less powerful players is something that should be considered, especially if you want more people to play any given game.



Dream of Mirror Online

Last Chaos



Trickster

Within seconds of starting up *Trickster*, you should have doubts about why it's in this article. Almost everything, from initial character creation, to the job system, to even the tutorial island looks like a straight port from *Ragnarok Online*. Well, it might very well be, right down to the equipment and skills menus, but that's not why it's interesting.



What's so great about *Trickster*? The drilling, of course!  
For whatever reason, the game lets you have a drilling implement, and dig to your heart's content. Drilling is sort of a mini-game that is detached from the rest of the online experience, although it's possible to enjoy drilling with your friends. It's a very satisfying mini-game component, and the humorous nature of a drilling with a cartoonish tool fits perfectly into the setting.  
To be perfectly honest, many of the online games take resource gathering for granted. Players are content to

click skill buttons, watch a simple animation, and then wait for some kind of payoff. Often, creating an item goes no further than selecting the right ingredients and pressing the "combine" button. What they don't seem to consider, however, is that such an activity can be engaging in and of itself.  
While a bare, automated simplification of the system can help to relieve the monotony of making the same item one hundred times, a quick mini-game and

slightly larger payouts would achieve the same effect. As long as we're staring at the screen watching our avatars do something, we might as well be engaged ourselves. While going overboard on mini-games can also be negative, either by having too many or making them too complex, there should always be room for more "game" in a title.



Maple Story

*Maple Story* is unique in itself, but it illustrates how far a simple concept can go, given enough time and interest. *Maple Story's* gameplay consists of 2D sprites on flat background, and some class-based, platform RPG action. The characters have short, squishy bodies and large heads, and fight a collection of similarly cartoon monsters. It's rather simplistic, and the free-to-play model is supported by a collection of cash items that updates regularly.

While it is easily dismissible by most hardcore audiences (for a variety of reasons, ranging from the game being "too easy" to "too childish"), the casual market took to it like nothing else. In fact, *Maple Story* became so

popular that parents began to grow concerned that their children were spending too much time on the game, and several nightly news reports covered the event with rather grim headlines. Any publicity is good publicity, however, as *Maple Story* boasts one of the largest in-game population of players.

Apart from the game's content, *Maple Story* quickly proved that there was a sizeable market for casual titles. Despite lacking the support of a pay-to-play model, there's no arguing that *Maple Story* was an economic success. There's even a version of *Maple Story* headed to the Nintendo DS. Despite being a mostly-overlooked genre, free-to-play games are making a name for themselves.



A long time ago, an online golf game came out of Korea. It featured quirky characters, colorful landscapes, and a very solid golf system, including a variety of wacky clubs and amazing trick shots. Everything from the choice of caddy to the clothes a character wore impacted game stats, making customization a key part of the experience. The golf simulation itself was surprisingly complex, and offered engaging levels of difficulty for even the skilled golf pros.

That game was *Pangya*. Eventually, it gained enough popularity to be converted into a Wii title that saw international release. It is known in North America as *Super Swing Golf*.

*Pangya*—the online version is called *Albatross 18* for North America—is the prime example of the kind of success a free-to-play game can achieve. *Albatross 18* has nothing to do at all with the other MMO giants, as it doesn't have long quests, swords, or any significant amount of sorcery, except for the few witches on the cast, of course.

Despite breaking away from any sort of MMO tradition, *Albatross 18* is a remarkably well-crafted game; the golf system borders on high amounts of realism, with enough trick-shots and goofy items to add a fanciful charm. Even the medium difficulty holes are a challenge for the uninitiated, but *Albatross 18* provides plenty of ways to get ahead or facilitate better play; there are all sorts of possible wacky



strategies built into the environment, and the game includes a somewhat exhaustive tutorial system—that even includes a reward for successful completion.

The title almost oozes character. Each playable avatar has her own unique animations that are very entertaining to watch; score a hole-in-one with your favorite and you'll be treated to a rather spectacular victory animation—continue to take the lead in a match, and your character will show a confident spring in her step as she tees off. Conversely, if you hit the ball into a bunker, you can expect your character to be just as disappointed as you are.

The animation is fantastic, the gameplay is solid, and the free-to-play system works without overbalancing the game. While it's possible to earn everything, spending a little cash can give a player access to better and brighter content—though not excessively

powerful compared to earnable items. If anything, the paying content is more stylistic than competitive, so players that don't shell out cash hardly ever feel slighted. This terrific balance is what makes *Albatross 18* a fantastic title, and is the hallmark of a well-made online title.

While there will always be a market for leveling up and crawling through dungeons, the casual online game is not something to be ignored. Experimentation can be very rewarding, to say nothing of the delight in variety. Massively Multiplayer need not always prefix RPG, and even if it does there's a lot of invention to be had for as simple an addition as summoned monsters or flying spears. While holding my breath for an *Azeroth: The Drilling Mini-Game* title will probably prove fatal, there's no reason not to imagine a brighter, more diverse future—even if we're not subscribing for it.

Albatross 18





# Drugs for Gamers

## Background

In competitive gaming, players have turned to an arsenal of sources for improving every conceivable aspect of their game.

From the classics of Sun Tsu and Musashi for strategy, to modern, user-produced sources such as YouTube and GameFAQs for game-specific tactics and techniques, dedicated players can easily put themselves on the right track. The only barriers left are the cost of equipment and physical advantage. The former is quickly becoming a moot point in console gaming, with developers like Microsoft and Sony constantly slashing prices and subsidizing the cost of the console down to a few hundred dollars, instead of the \$1,000 or more that it probably cost to produce. That leaves us with physical advantage.

time, coordination, and stamina—both mental and physical. By and large, caffeine and sugar are the primary sources we turn to today for these needs. However, they come at a high price. Jittery nerves, impatience, and sugar crashes are common, and their effects circulate throughout the entire body, instead of the brain, where they are most needed. Furthermore, caffeine takes a tremendous toll on the body's chemistry, with its diuretic properties causing you to run to the restroom every half hour. Since coffee and soda relied on caffeine and sugar alone, something better had to be made.

Strength, height, and build (or legs, for that matter) are irrelevant when controlling a virtual character with a plastic controller. The physical attributes most important to a player are reaction

**DISCLAIMER:** Arly is a writer, not a doctor. Consult your physician before taking any of these products, especially if you have a history of heart disease or stroke. If you take any medications, some of these substances can adversely react with drugs!



## Energy Drinks

For the most part, the concentrations (and quality) of supplements in these drinks are almost not worth mentioning. While they may be helpful to gamers in some ways, they may prove useless or even detrimental in others. Red Bull, Monster, and Rockstar (and by the sheer economic might of Coca-Cola, Full Throttle) remain on the top of the mountain in this market. By and large, they share similar formulas of B-complex vitamins, taurine, caffeine, and ginseng, varying with some of the more esoteric ingredients such as

inositol and ginkgo biloba. Sugar-free versions make carbs a non-issue for concerned gamers. The high amounts of caffeine still ensures frequent trips to the restroom, but at least the drinks resupply your body with the B-complex vitamins consumed by stress and excreted in excess by urine. Of the main three, I prefer Rockstar Punched due to its decent ginkgo biloba content, but the other stuff looks like gibberish to me. We'll take a look at the effects of these substances to figure out which ones actually matter.

## Modes of Action

Apart from essential vitamins and fatty acids, substances beneficial to gamers can be classified into five types: Stimulants, Vasodilators, Neurotransmitters, Adaptogens and Antioxidants. The last one isn't immediately important for gaming performance, but it will prove useful for marathon gaming sessions, such as tournaments.

**Stimulants:** Increases heart rate to raise blood pressure and, thus, blood flow. Caffeine is by far the most well-known stimulant. Many stimulants, caffeine included, also constrict blood vessels by the same mechanism, known as adenosine antagonism. Going overboard will cause the jitters, however, taking your fine motor control with it.

**Vasodilators:** Relaxes the muscles surrounding blood vessels to lower blood pressure and improve blood flow. Theobromine (found in chocolate), vinpocetine, and ginkgo biloba are examples. **WARNING:** The use of vasodilators with caffeine may increase complications with stroke sufferers.

**Neurotransmitters:** These are used by the body to carry signals through your nerves. Acetylcholine is used for voluntary contraction of muscles, while GABA relaxes muscles instead. Most neurotransmitter supplements are taken in the form of precursors, their raw materials.

**Adaptogens:** Noted for having a normalizing, balancing effect on the body to reduce fatigue and counteract stress. Eleutherococcus and ginseng are used for this effect, but they will disrupt sleep if taken improperly.

**Antioxidants:** Prevents cell damage and death from use of oxygen. Doubly important when oxygen use is increased with stimulants, as the brain uses 20% of the body's supply. Many vitamins (C and E) and herbs have this property. Glutathione is the primary antioxidant in the human body.



## For Gamers, By Gamers?

For comparison, I'll list Rockstar, an energy drink, and Focus Factor, a mental performance supplement, alongside three 'gamer supplements' you can find out on the internet: FPSBrain, Game Suppli, and Mind FX.

### Focus Factor

Manufacturer: Vital Basics, Inc.  
Website: [www.focusfactor.com](http://www.focusfactor.com)

Active ingredients: Omega Fatty Acids (including DHA), L-Glutamine, Bacopa Monnieri, Inositol, L-Tyrosine, Boron Citrate, Phosphatidylserine, Choline, Bilberry Extract, Grape Seed Extract, Hyperzine-A, Vinpocetine, GABA, DMAE.

Vitamins and Minerals: A,C,D,E,B1, B2, B3, B5, B6, B7, B9, B12, Calcium, Iron, Iodine, Magnesium, Zinc, Selenium, Copper, Manganese, Chromium, Molybdenum, Potassium.



While it contains an almost complete cocktail of substances imaginable, there is absolutely no disclosure as to the amounts contained in each tablet. The calming effect of GABA is contrary to high-performance needs. Some of the ingredients like Bacopa, Huperzine-A and Vinpocetine seem pretty effective, though. If nothing else, this stuff can't hurt, but the Vinpocetine is the only vasodilator present and there are very few, if any, stimulants. If I were feeling stupid, I'd chug it down with a Rockstar. (I've done this.) It does seem to have a beneficial effect, but that might be from the tortuous requirement of swallowing *four* of these pills at a time. To make matters worse, they'll try to sell you a membership.

### Rockstar (Punched)

Manufacturer: Rockstar, Inc.  
Website: [www.rockstar69.com](http://www.rockstar69.com)

Active ingredients: Taurine, Ginkgo Biloba, Caffeine, Guarana, Inositol, L-Carnitine, Panax Ginseng, Milk Thistle  
Vitamins: B3,B5,B6,B12



It actually has a decent amount of Ginkgo Biloba, which is surprising. If you have no other choice but to buy an energy drink, Rockstars are probably the best for gaming. However, be prepared for the sugar crash, and don't drink it all at once, or you'll overdose and hit the 300mg mark on caffeine for sure (the guarana contributes towards the caffeine content). And don't forget to brush your teeth.



## What's in this stuff?

### FPS Brain

Manufacturer: Tomarni, Germany

Website: [www.fpsbrain.com](http://www.fpsbrain.com)

Active ingredients: L-Tyrosine, L-Glutamine, Choline

Vitamins and Minerals: C, E, B1, B2, B3, B5, B6, B9, B7, B12, Selenium.

This current formula is slightly different from the previous one, in that it contains no caffeine. Based on the ingredients, it doesn't seem like it would do much for enhancing my gamer skillz, and after taking one, my suspicions were confirmed. This is *not* worth twenty Euros.



### Mind FX

Manufacturer: MindFX Science

Website: [www.mind-fx.com](http://www.mind-fx.com)

Active Ingredients (Energy): Cacao fruit extract, Guarana, Green Orange extract, Eleutherococcus, Rhodiola, caffeine (byproduct).

Active Ingredients (Performance): Ginkgo Biloba, Taurine, Glutathione, Soy Phosphatides, Huperzine-A, Vinpocetine

Now this one came as quite a shock. Mind FX was started in 2002 by Robert Krakoff, the founder of Razer, as a secret edge for his recreational games of tennis. It's somehow managed to escape the Internet's radar for the most part, despite features in Wired Magazine and other publications. The contents of the formulas are available on their website. It's mostly been in pill form this entire time, to mixed reactions (the stigma of pills being drugs is difficult to shake), but I got to sample the new powdered formula with some interesting results.

It's recommended to take both formulas simultaneously, and the Performance formula is taken every four hours of competition while the Energy formula is taken every eight hours. I poured the innocent-looking powders into a glass of water and watched it turn radioactive before chugging it. Compared to the pill form, which is slower-acting, I felt a heady rush within minutes. While I *felt* more competent and quicker to react, I still didn't get to double-perfect my opponents during a **Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike** tournament. That component of 'the Zone' seems just as psychological as it does physical, though I definitely liked what I was feeling.



### Game Suppli

Manufacturer: CyberGadget, Japan

Website: [www.cybergadget.co.jp](http://www.cybergadget.co.jp)

Full Ingredient List (Blueberry): Powdered sugar, blueberry extract, sorbitol, cane sugar, citric acid, stevia, milk.

Full Ingredient List (DHA): Fish oil, safflower oil, gelatin, glycerin, Vitamins C and E.

If you can actually read the label, you'll find that the DHA supplement is no different from the kind you could buy at a pharmacy. The blueberry supplement comes in tablet form and is really nothing more than blueberry candy with four different sweeteners. There's not even a cute little mascot to go with it. Go eat a blueberry muffin instead.



### Conclusion

I have not delved under the table and tested prescription medications (Adderall being the most prevalent these days). While there are no regulations in professional gaming against the use (or abuse) of these substances, becoming dependent on them is a sure way to shoot yourself in the foot when they do become regulated through drug tests. There's also no better way to

improve your physical performance than by cardiovascular exercise, which will improve your stamina with far better results than any supplement by itself; that's why they're called supplements. If everything else is covered, the right supplements may give you just the edge you need to take home the championship.

### Chemical Components

#### DHA (Omega-3) and other Omega Fatty Acids

(n-3) Promotes the growth of brain cells.

(n-6) Promotes cardiovascular health.

(n-9) Found in olive oil, produced by the body.

#### GABA (Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid)

Primary neurotransmitter for relaxing muscles.

Has calming effects but may affect memory. Not recommended during high performance events.

#### Choline

Precursor for Acetylcholine, the primary neurotransmitter used in the somatic nervous system for voluntary muscle control and reflexes.

#### DMAE (Dimethylaminoethanol)

A precursor for acetylcholine. Improves attention and mood, but has side effects in larger doses and should only be used occasionally.

#### L-Tyrosine

Amino acid that reduces the effects of stress during high-pressure environments. No effect on mood under normal circumstances. A precursor for several neurotransmitters.

#### Glutathione

The most prevalent antioxidant in the human body. Improves muscle performance and recovery, but difficult to absorb if taken orally.

#### L-Glutamine

Amino acid mainly used by the body during injury and trauma.

Alternative source of energy for the brain and can be converted to other substances like glucose.

#### Inositol

Assists in the guidance of nerve signals and the breakdown of fats. Produced by the body and comes in an alternate form as Vitamin B8.

#### L-Carnitine

Amino acid supposedly used for fat metabolism and muscular performance. Produced in the body naturally with the use of Vitamin C.

#### Vinpocetine

Extracted from periwinkles, it directly improves blood flow to the brain at very small doses. Has a half-life of roughly two and a half hours.

#### Huperzine-A

Inhibits the breakdown of acetylcholine and stimulates the central nervous system. May have cognitive-enhancing effects.

#### Phosphatidylserine

A phospholipid nutrient that possibly slows mental decline. Related to other soy phosphatides.

#### Taurine

Repairs nerve conduction and reduces muscle fatigue and anxiety.

### Caffeine

A stimulant that also constricts vessels. Its diuretic (urination-promoting) properties can deplete the body of water-soluble vitamins like B-complexes. Takes effect in 30-45 minutes and peaks at 4 hours. 300mg or more can cause side effects.

### Theobromine

Both a metabolite of caffeine use and naturally present in chocolate. While a stimulant, it also has vasodilatory effects, contrary to caffeine.

### Herbal Components

#### Bacopa Monieri

Antioxidant. Improves energy through ATP action and may improve motor learning ability.

#### Bilberry Extract

Used by Royal Air Force pilots in WWII to sharpen their night vision, but its effectiveness is unproven.

#### Blueberry Extract

Contains high amounts of antioxidants and may reduce the decline of memory.

#### Guarana

A natural source of caffeine from South America, it also contains small amounts of other substances such as choline and theophylline.

#### Cacao Fruit Extract

Stuff from chocolate. It has a much higher concentration of theobromine than other sources of caffeine.

#### Green Orange Extract (Citrus aurantium)

A primary source of synephrine, a stimulant now found in some metabolism-enhancing diet products. Possibly increases adrenaline levels.

#### Grape Seed Extract

Contains high amounts of antioxidants and possibly protects against blood vessel damage. May inhibit blood clotting.

#### Eleutherococcus

Has adaptogenic and antioxidant properties. Used for increasing endurance but may cause drug interactions.

#### Panax Ginseng

An adaptogenic herb. Some evidence for improving mental performance.

#### Ginkgo Biloba

Vasodilator. Improves concentration, attention and blood flow to the brain. Also inhibits blood clotting, which is a possible medical drug interaction. Also an antioxidant.

#### Rhodiola

An adaptogen known for its fatigue-reducing effects by regulating serotonin and dopamine levels. May conflict with MAOI anti-depressants.





# Back to school, back to taking over the Netherworld

By: Hitoshura & Charmwitch

After a one-year hiatus (with a little *Soul Nomad* to tide us over) *Disgaea* is back with the title of (who'd have guessed?) *Disgaea 3: Absence of Justice*. This time, though, it's graduated to the PS3. We've been playing the tar out of the Japanese import for a while now and we figured it's about time for a beefy preview and a short but savory interview with NIS America's Jack Niida.

The first thing we noticed about *Disgaea 3* is that its graphics will not win any awards. Then again, that's been the case with the previous games as well. It's possible to play this game on an old standard TV, but you wouldn't want to, since trying to play it using the PS3's supplied composite cables may actually give you a headache. This game needs to be played in progressive scan mode, otherwise the flickering, shimmering, and apparently aliased visuals will make your eyes bleed. In 480p or higher everything is fine. It's not eye-poppingly awesome, but at least you can sit down to play and enjoy it like its predecessors.

Oddly, *Disgaea 3* plays unlike either of the previous games. In fact a lot of things from *Disgaea* and *Disgaea 2* have been removed or drastically overhauled. Weapon Mastery? Gone. Geo Symbols? Gone. Learning Skills? Gone. Dark Assembly? gone. Even though these things have been stripped out for *Disgaea 3*, they've been retooled enough to be a significant departure to what *Disgaea* fans have grown used to.

**"A lot of things from *Disgaea* and *Disgaea 2* have been removed or drastically overhauled."**

Weapon Mastery in the previous games allowed characters to equip any weapon and learn any skill they wanted to from them. Certain characters would learn skills and become more powerful faster with a weapon that they were better suited to. This time around, characters can still equip any weapon they want, but the concept of constantly using that weapon to gain more skills and higher stats has been removed. In its place, you simply buy skills from a shop using Mana acquired from defeating enemies. Every character now has their own unique selection of skills that they can purchase from the store. You can set up to sixteen skills to be used in battles, provided your character has an appropriate weapon equipped.

Another change that's been made to the skills is the method by which you can improve them. Previously, you had to use skills *ad nauseum* to make them more powerful. This process was painfully slow, so the designers sped this up by allowing you to purchase skill upgrades using Mana. This process greatly increases a skill's power and cost, allowing you to upgrade them at a very satisfying pace. Magic-using characters rely on these upgrades, because it's the only way to improve their spells' range and area.



Netherworld Honor Student  
**DEMON MAO**



Netherworld Delinquent  
**DEMON RASPERYL**



Publisher: NIS America • Developer: NIS • Genre: Tactical RPG • Category: Overlording • Release Date: 3Q 2008 • # of Players: 1





**TOTAL DAMAGE 28102**

The Dark Assembly has been replaced by a Student Council, as the game's home base this time is a Demon Academy for young demons. The Student Council is actually a part of the new "Home Room" system in *Disgaea 3*.

The Home Room is a place where you can customize certain numbers of troops and organize them into clubs. These clubs confer bonuses to the characters involved along with a special bonus to the club's leader. Depending on which desk you seat your characters at when you're signing them up for clubs, they may get other bonuses too, such as an increased chance of a team attack if they happen to be sitting next to each other. It's through the Student Council in the Home Room that you can establish clubs and customize or expand your Home Room, along with all the usual things that players have come to expect.

All this new stuff is really just the tip of the iceberg. The story even seems to be incredibly bizarre. In the game's first couple of chapters, the story is flat out surreal. In *Disgaea*'s upside-down world we have the uber-geeky adolescent demon Mao, who's obsessed with super-hero comics. His plan is to take over from his father by mimicking the do-good super-heroes from his comics. This draws the ire of Raspberyl, who bills herself as the Demon Academy's #1 delinquent by being all things good. She self-righteously believes being good to be the ultimate wrong, and thus sets out to put a stop to Mao's plans. The story gets even stranger when Mao captures Almaz, who's a human

calling himself a Hero. He becomes an object of intense curiosity for Mao, as Mao wants to learn everything about him to realize his plans. Almaz tells Mao that he has to look within himself to become a hero, and things become even stranger. Mao has to literally journey inside his heart and soul, via a heart bank, to find what it means to be a hero. As is the case with all NIS stories, things quickly get more bizarre the further the plot progresses. *Disgaea 3* seems to pull out all the stops in this regard, and looks to be far more entertaining than *D2*'s semi-serious nature.

Fans can also be pleased to know that Tenpei Sato is back again with another exceptional musical score. There's a good amount of vocal songs, including the main theme which plays inside the Demon Academy. There's also an increased usage of piano pieces, and several different modern interpretations of Japanese melodies that work to give *D3* a unique atmosphere. That's not to say the *Disgaea* feel in the music has been sacrificed, but further explores it like the game's scenario is doing.

In order to better understand where *Disgaea 3* is going, and why it was produced for the PS3, we asked NIS a few questions. NIS America's Marketing Manager Jack Niida provided a few insights into its development as well as a bit of news regarding future titles from NIS. Special thanks goes to Nao Zook for setting us up.

LAME HERO

**HUMAN ALMAZ von Armadin Adamant**

## Interview: Jack Niida

HGM Scores an exclusive interview with NISA's Jack Niida about *Disgaea 3*, innovation, hi-res sprites, and the future!

**HGM:** Why the jump to the PS3 for this iteration of *Disgaea*?

**Jack Niida:** The jump to PS3 was mainly due to the developmental limits of the PS2 system. Many people might not realize it, but compared to the PS3, the PS2 has a limited amount of memory that can be used to process 2D info, thus limiting the creativity of the developers. The PS3 allowed us to expand what we could express within the 2D format and further evolve the game system. The PS2's a great platform, but in order to make a truly fun game, the PS3 was necessary.

**HGM:** What's the set-up for the story this time around?

**JN:** In a world where evil is good and good is evil, young demons are trained at demon universities to become the next overlords. These demon universities are run by powerful devils, but few ever witness these demon professors. Demon students roam and do whatever they wish within the school, creating chaos, violence, and bloodshed.

This time, the main character is a demon prince named Mao and upon reading a badass comic book, he suddenly decides to become a hero in order to defeat his overlord father. Mao quickly captures Almaz, who claims that he's a hero, as his experimental guinea pig while Raspberyl, fearing that her claim as the "No. 1 Delinquent" is being challenged, tries to "talk" Mao out of becoming a hero.

**HGM:** Can you tell us a bit about the new protagonist?

**JN:** Mao is a mad scientist researching ways to destroy his overlord father. He hates humans and good guys, but he's interested in super heroes as his experimental guinea pigs.

**HGM:** What about the supporting characters, such as Raspberyl?

**JN:** Raspberyl is an interesting character. She is the worst delinquent demon at the demon school, meaning she's a good person by human standards. Her goal is to become the single greatest outlaw in the netherworld, so she continues to do volunteer work and help the weak.

**HGM:** What is the idea behind the "Home Room" system, and how did it develop?

**JN:** Since the game takes place in the Netherworld academy, we felt it would be more appropriate to have a new classroom setting, rather than using the overlord's castle. The overlord's castle remains, but the character creation and some of the event scenes will take place in the classroom, and what hotheaded governing body could be more sinister than the student council?

**HGM:** Will it take four million hours to complete? [Ed. note: This is a tongue-in-cheek question referencing the back of the Japanese copy's case.]

**JN:** Let's hope you'll be done playing by the time the next *Disgaea* comes out.

Jokes aside, *Disgaea 3* has many new features that should keep players hooked for countless hours of game play. The most notable change is the addition of a new puzzle element, called Geo Blocks. These puzzle blocks are placed strategically on the battle map and add a tetris-like block erasing element to battles. Combining the new elements with the Item World and downloadable maps/characters/items, players will have plenty to enjoy.

**HGM:** Should fans expect improved visuals for the current generation systems in the future?

**JN:** We have several titles up our sleeves and you can expect better visuals. We learned how to make smother moving and higher res sprites for the PS3, so we will apply techniques we've acquired to the current generation systems.

**HGM:** What's next for N1 after *Disgaea 3*?

**JN:** There's an interesting title under development and it's not an RPG. I can't give out any more info now, but we have a press event coming up this June, so please look forward to future announcements. It's going to be an interesting year for N1.

Check back with us later for more about *Disgaea 3* as it nears its summer release in North America.

"The PS2's a great platform, but in order to make a truly fun game, the PS3 was necessary."



GENTLEMAN BUTLER  
**DEMON JIYA**





**I'll get this right out of the way at the beginning of this feature. I'm not your typical Dragon Ball Z fan.**

To be honest, while I enjoy watching anime as a whole and appreciate the medium for its style, unique stories, and interesting character designs, I've never fully committed to it like so many rabid fans. So, when an opportunity comes along to write about a long-standing and beloved anime franchise such as DBZ, I typically pass it on to someone who is more familiar with the source material. I know this is not a winning endorsement for someone who is about to wax on for the next handful of pages about this very same subject, but I can say that I appreciate a good fighting game, and *Dragon Ball Z: Burst Limit* definitely falls in this category.

storyline, and splashy effects makes it one of the most suitable franchises to be turned into a game series. It has enjoyed dozens of video game releases across over twenty systems. In essence, the *DB* franchise is as close to evergreen as you can get. *Dragon Ball Z: Burst Limit* is the first DBZ title to come out for both the Xbox 360 and PS3. While it's not necessarily a huge leap over the past few *DBZ* titles, it definitely makes for a fun time.

For those of you inexplicably not in the know, Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Ball Z* is the second of the three *Dragon Ball* series. It was preceded by *Dragon Ball*, a retelling of the Monkey King legend, and succeeded by *Dragon Ball GT*. *Dragon Ball* is a cult classic on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. Its knockdown brawls, wild

*Burst Limit* takes advantage of many of the PS3 and Xbox 360's expanded capabilities, all without going overboard with gimmicky special effects. The most obvious feature is how amazing it looks. The graphics engine has been overhauled to look and feel like you're controlling the anime, rather than in a video game facsimile of it. In fact, the engine is being used for both gameplay and the opening and interstitial cinematics, giving the game a high quality, and uniform, look. There are even cases where the game is more visually attractive than the anime itself.

# A NEW LIMITO A NEW START?

We get an inside look at Atari's new *Dragon Ball Z: Burst Limit*. Is it a new start for the company, or the same ol', same ol'?

By Roger Danish and the Off Base Players

# DRAGON BALL Z BURST LIMIT

ドラゴンボール  
バーストリミット



Publisher: Atari/Namco • Developer: Dimps • Genre: Fighting • Category: Grunting • Release Date: 6/10/2008 • # of Players: 1-2



# THE NEXT LEVEL

## COULD IT BE? DRAGON BALL Z, PUSHED TO OVER 9000!?

Another new feature in *Burst Limit* is multi-regional online gameplay. In plain English, this means that you can team up with your friends on a cooperative adventure or challenge your greatest enemies to a Super Saiyan deathmatch no matter where in the world they're playing from.

*Burst Limit* drops you into the action at the beginning of the Saiyan Saga and takes you all the way through to the end of the Cell Saga. As you progress through the story mode, called Z Chronicles, you'll watch story-advancing cinemas at the beginning and end of each battle. As with the past *Dragon Ball Z* games, the stories mirror the progression of the anime, though over the course of considerably less time.

Even the most die-hard fans of the anime and manga may find their fair share of surprises. To begin with, you'll begin with just three of the classic DBZ cast unlocked. You can play as Goku, Krillin, and Piccolo in Versus mode, or you can take to Z Chronicles and proceed to unlock an additional eighteen characters along the way. *Burst Limit* boasts a total of twenty-one characters in its default line-up. This isn't the biggest roster in the history of *DBZ* games, but the smaller roster allowed the dev team to really fine tune the combat differences between say, Goku and Super Saiyan Goku.

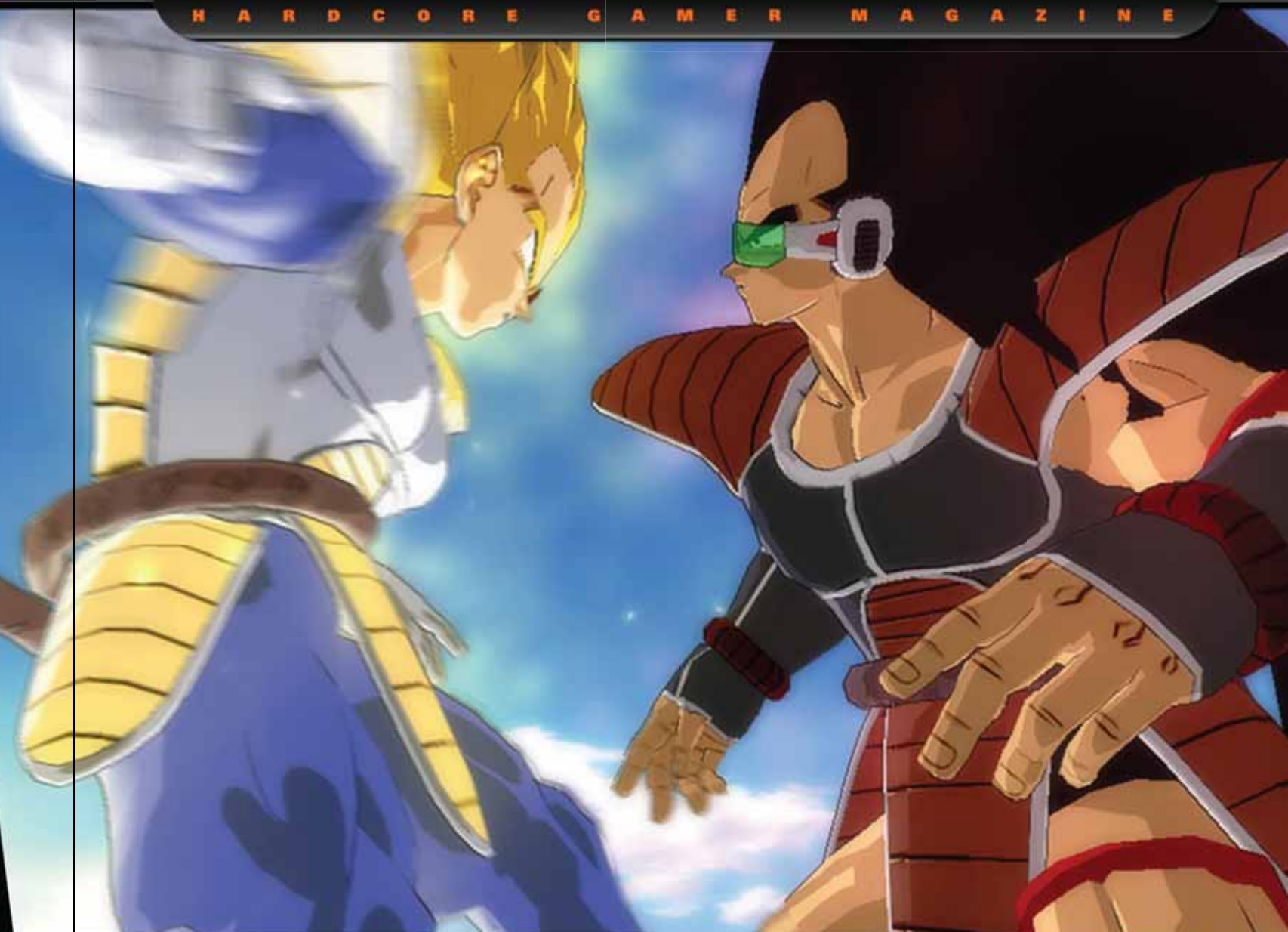
Outside of Z Chronicle, there are four other game mode options that will keep you fighting. Versus is available for both on- and offline play. Tutorial will teach you all the moves you need to know to decimate your opponents. Training mode will give you an unlucky target to practice the new game mechanics on. Finally, Trial mode will put

everything you have learned to the test in a grueling survival challenge.

Fans of the original *Budokai* entries in the series will be happy to hear that the franchise has been brought back to Dimps, the designers of *Budokai* 1, 2, and 3. However, don't think that just because we've got a familiar developer that this is the same old game. *Burst Limit* is running off of an entirely new engine that packs even more Kamehameha wave action onto your game disc.

*Burst Limit* eschews the wide-ranging and environment destroying insanity of the *Budokai Tenkaichi* titles in favor of a more intimate setting. The characters now exist on a 2D plane in a 3D world. You can move into the foreground and background to dodge attacks or rotate around your enemy, but the majority of the action takes place in a standard fighting game field of view.

The biggest addition to the fighting engine are Drama Pieces. These are anime-style cut-ins, for lack of a better phrase, where a character will jump in, perform an attack or give you a bonus, and then leave. If you think of them as being similar to the Strikers of the *King of Fighters* series, you're on the right track. Unlike Strikers, however, Drama Pieces are not triggered by button commands. Instead, each of them have a number of conditions that must be met before they are activated automatically. If you dodge an attack or your health reaches a certain level, for example, a Drama Piece will be triggered. Generally, you have three slots for Drama Pieces, though this can vary depending on what you select or what's given to you by the game.



The gameplay is incredibly fast, without being disorienting. The countering system is all timing-based. Tech rolls and dodges can be activated with a press of a button. You and your foe can trade Instant Transmission counters at a rapid pace, turning the game into a battle of wits where both skilled players and newbies alike can get away with having a rocking fight.

Another new feature is the Aura Spark. You know the bit in the anime where the guys stand around, grunt, and their energy flares up? That's an Aura Spark. It increases the damage done by your attacks and actually makes certain attacks much stronger. Your character becomes faster and stronger, and low-powered ki blasts simply bounce right off their skin.

The ki gauge doesn't require charging any longer, either. It now recharges automatically, at varying speeds, which makes fighting much more fun. Instead of having to knock enemies away and hope you have enough time to charge up for your next attack, you can just wait out the charging period and attack normally.

We spent some time playing around with the game in the office. A couple of tournaments and a few dozen multiplayer matches later and we realized one thing-- the game does an excellent job of being engaging and keeping the momentum up. People who had been playing the game for hours had just as much fun as those who leapt right into the mix. We had more than a few battles come down to a sliver of health on both sides.

It's nice to play a game that manages to be fun for the hardcore and casual alike. The flashy graphics will attract the casual, while the sick counter system will keep them hooked. The story mode switches up whether you play as a good guy or a bad guy, and the fights you unlock after beating the game feature some pretty cool extra characters. All around, all of us are pretty pleased with *Burst Limit*. It's breathed new life into a series that was starting to feel a little old, and it did it by going back to the original installments and beefing up the basic concept. It's well worth your time.

SCORE: 4.5 of 5



# COURAGEOUS SAGAS

291 EPISODES OF BACKSTORY, HERE'S JUST A LITTLE.

For those of you who are inexplicably new to the DBZ franchise, all this talk of sagas and buff martial artists with weird names may be a little confusing. The main character of the *Burst Limit*, and pretty much every story relating to *DBZ*, is the kind hearted Son Goku. More than just a professional martial artist, Goku can perform an impressively huge array of physical attacks using his ki. In fact, he has more power than any human on Earth. This crazy amount of power actually comes from the fact that he's not human at all. He's a Saiyan, a warrior race of human-like aliens that have the ability to transform into giant apes when exposed to the light of the moon. Take Superman and add in a were-ape, and you're close.

## Saiyan Saga →

Goku had never met anyone else like him for his entire life. That all changed when Goku's brother, Raditz, crashed his relaxing afternoon and demanded he rejoin his native race, which is on the brink of extinction. When Goku refuses to join Raditz and wipe out humanity, his brother kidnaps his son, Gohan, and threatens to kill him if Goku doesn't do what he says. Raditz also warns Goku that he is not the only Saiyan coming to Earth. Vegeta, the powerful and easily angered prince of the Saiyans, is on his way too. Thus the Saiyan Saga begins.

## Namek Saga →

Needless to say, our brave and kind hero comes out on top at the end of the Saiyan Saga. His family is safe, his planet has been saved, and his enemies have been spared. As is the case in most fights between super alien species, there were some civilian lives lost and some friends defeated. Usually this isn't a huge problem since the dead can be wished back to life with the power of the Dragon Balls. (By the way, did we mention there were magical Dragon Balls that when collected grant wishes?) Unfortunately, Piccolo and Kami (they're really just two halves of the same person) are the beings that allowed these Dragon Balls to work on Earth, and were part of the Saiyan Saga's causalities. In order to revive his fallen comrades, Goku must now travel to Namek and find another set of Dragon Balls.

## Frieza Saga →

Goku was not the only one who had his eyes on the Namekian Dragon Balls. Vegeta, whose life Goku spared during their previous battle, and Frieza, the galactic tyrant who wanted to wipe out the Saiyan race, both wanted the Dragon Balls. The three of them, plus a whole lot of other characters, meet on Namek and fight for the right to have their wishes granted with the precious Dragon Balls. On Namek, Goku had to deal with a furious Frieza. Their fight was epic and lengthy, and



resulted in the destruction of Namek. Luckily, everyone except for Goku and Frieza were able to leave the planet before it blew. This included Vegeta, who decided that maybe going back to Earth for a bit wouldn't be so bad. When the planet exploded, Goku fared much better than Frieza and was actually able to stay alive through the help of some friends. These friends taught Goku a new technique that allowed him to instantly move through space and back to Earth.

## Cell Saga →

Just when everyone was happily back on Earth, Frieza (who was miraculously saved after his battle on Namek through cybernetic technology) and his father, King Cold, crash the party. Goku and his friends, including Vegeta, ready their attack against King Cold when a mysterious Super Saiyan enters the scene and wipes out the sudden threat. This Saiyan happens to be Vegeta's son from the future, Trunks. After killing Frieza and King Cold, Trunks warns Goku of a far greater threat. In three years, powerful android beings will threaten all of humanity. Goku takes this warning to heart and when the androids arrive, Earth is prepared, but no one was ready for the menacing being that followed the androids: a creature known only as Cell. This creature's story makes up the Cell Saga. This is the longest saga yet and covers so much information that your head would explode if I tried to cram it all into this extremely summarized format.



## Interview: Ryo Mito

We get a word with the Producer of Dragon Ball Z: Burst Limit, and get some insight into how the game was made!

For this feature, we got the chance to visit Namco Bandai's Tokyo offices in Shinagawa and sit down with Ryo Mito, the producer for *Burst Limit*, as well as a handful of previous *DBZ* titles. After a brief walkthrough of the game and its modes, Ryo spent some time talking about what's new, the goal for this game, and his experience working on such a big franchise. Here are a few of his thoughts on *Burst Limit*:

On what sets this game apart from the other *DBZ* video games:

"Since this is our first *DBZ* game on next gen consoles, we put a lot of emphasis and effort on substantially updating the graphics engine over the PS2 and Wii. Also, the biggest difference between the others in the series has to be the worldwide Online Battle feature. This is the first time gamers and *DBZ* fans across the world will be able to challenge each other to online battles."

On which system he and the team preferred to work on:

"We feel that both systems have their specific strengths and lend themselves well to our game and engine. The PS3 and 360 versions were simultaneously in co-development, so each benefited from the other's development."

On how North American and European fans influenced the game:

"Overall, our fans have been asking for an online feature, which was not possible with the last generation of systems. This was a big focus for us with *Burst Limit* and we are happy with the outcome."

On whether *DBZ* will transcend other genres, such as an RPG/fighting game hybrid:

"Our challenge is to find ways to keep the franchise and game fresh while not straying away from the essence of the animation. While we've thought about the possibility of producing some sort of *DBZ* RPG, we ultimately feel the franchise lends itself more to a pure fighting game, as that's what the series is all about."

On how do they decide which characters go in and which get cut:

"For this game, we put our concentration was on updating the engine and game modes. With this in mind, we put the focus on the major characters in the game, using the Saiyan Saga and Cell saga storylines."

On the possibility of downloadable content via Xbox Live and PlayStation Network:

"There is plenty of unlockable content in the game that becomes available as you play and proceed through the story mode (Drama Pieces, new characters, etc), but at the moment, we do not have any downloadable content planned."

On Akira Toriyama's involvement in the game:

"We don't work directly with Toriyama-san, but we do work closely with Toei Animation and our licensors to ensure the quality and consistency of the franchise. We have a long-standing relationship and we both work together to make the best game possible."

On the addition of Drama Pieces and how they affect battles:

"We wanted to recreate the drama and action of the series and infuse it into the game. Typically, cut scenes don't affect gameplay. This time around, several variables will come into play that affect gameplay. For example, a partner will come and support you, resulting in your attack power going up and your fatigue going down. It's our goal to entertain both the *DBZ* fan and gamers. We hope to achieve this by entertaining the *DBZ* fan with cutscenes, but also gamers with their interactive gameplay."







check out the zoos new big cat box scooper!

# POWER SHOVEL

Exhumed by James



You should see the size of the dishwasher they use to clean that shovel!



Maybe engine repair isn't really the right job for this tool.



All we are is dust in the wi-iiii-nd... Whoa, oh-oh!



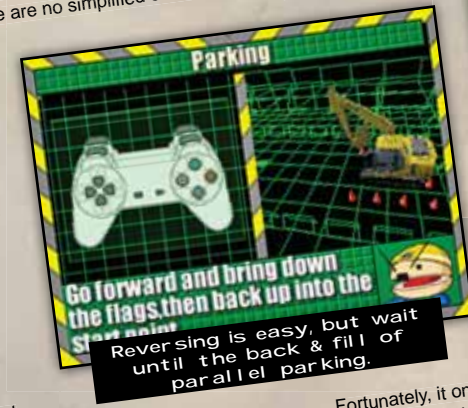
what's all this noise? were trying to play super mario next door!

There's a certain kind of game that's about mastering complex controls and using them to perform feats that, while hardly heroic, are necessary to keep the world running. Driving trains, flying planes, and even working a power shovel won't fend off the aliens or rescue any princesses, but doing a job well is its own reward. This is especially true when the game loses the simplification and presents what looks like a straightforward task as a series of complex interactions between multiple interlocking mechanical bits.

The appropriately named *Power Shovel* takes the job of operating the eponymous piece of heavy construction equipment and learning how it actually moves. There are no simplified controls, no quick time events, and no way to hit the Scoop button to make the shovel dig in to a pile of dirt. Instead you need to work all three joints of the shovel's arm simultaneously to accomplish a variety of tasks ranging from pulling down buildings to catching turtles, and it's a lot tougher than it looks.

It's best to think of the power shovel as a giant arm with the elbow on sideways. The joint closest to the shovel's cab is the shoulder, controlled by the Triangle and X buttons. The joint

The opening levels are only difficult because learning to use the scoop is completely different from any previous gaming task. An outline of the shovel with controller diagram shows you which buttons to hit and what the result will be, walking you through the motions twice on the theory that that's enough. After several failures, it's time to reload the level and start over, and then maybe



Reversing is easy, but wait until the back & fill of parallel parking.



How can Bub be cheaper than generic Power Ranger clone?

once more until you can dump four loads of dirt into a truck without beating it to death with the scoop. There's a level of flailing in the early stages that's almost embarrassing.

Fortunately, it only takes a good chunk of practice and swearing before you begin to realize your hands are learning what to do, and that the shovel is actually becoming effective. This is where the fun starts, and it becomes possible to start really playing the game. There are three modes initially available with unique challenges in each, and an unlockable fourth mode for those who want to prove their mastery.

Arcade Mode has two sets of challenges in it as well as the multiplayer game. The training levels let you try

in the middle is the elbow, controlled by up and down on the plus pad, while the wrist at the scoop is worked with Square and Circle. The only thing that's easy is left and right on the control pad, which make the cab swing in the appropriate direction. Moving the entire vehicle is performed by the shoulder buttons, with R1 and R2 controlling the right caterpillar tread for forward and back, and same again for the left. Operating

everything in unison is a learning experience that's going to require a good amount of practice, but the sense of satisfaction in controlling a giant piece of machinery with grace and efficiency makes it worth the effort.



Getting of the poles knocking down happy yes!

Platform: Sony PlayStation  
Publisher: Acclaim  
Developer: Taito  
Release Date: July 2001  
Genre: Some Kind of Sim, Maybe?  
# of Players: 1-2

**Result**

Demerit mark	-14
Other demerit mark	0
<b>Total score</b>	<b>86</b>

So, so. Try harder next time.

Do or do not, there is no try.

out each of the three sizes of power shovel, ranging from small to huge, with special tasks for each one. These are straightforward construction jobs such as moving dirt piles, digging holes, and tearing down buildings. Part-Timer mode is the meat of the game, though, and this is where things start getting bizarre.

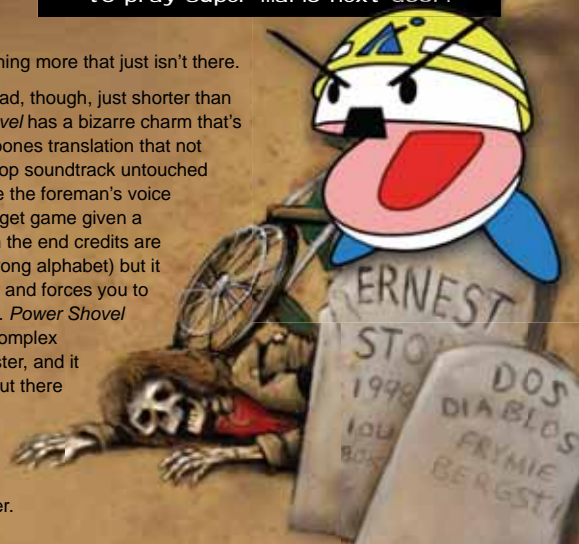
Part Timer is a series of challenges ranging from standard to just plain goofy. Digging a deep hole can segue into serving the right kind of curry for toy sales, and then beating a limo into scrap. It's pleasantly bizarre and, once you've gotten the hang of moving the shovel with some kind of reliability, not that hard, but the real challenge comes from maxing out the score by completing each job quickly. If you blow it, though, which will happen often, *Power Shovel* will pat you on the head and offer an easier version of the level. The trick to not feeling patronized by this is to not fail so much.

Once the game is completed either by running out of continues or succeeding at everything, it's time to ring up the paycheck and go shopping for a few extra levels or some audio goodies. Cleaning out the store won't take too long, though, even with the exorbitant prices on some of the better goodies, at which point *Power Shovel's* big weakness becomes apparent.

*Power Shovel* is a clever, unique game that has its own special appeal, but the content-light feel from its arcade heritage is hard to ignore. As fun as it is to master the complex controls, the jobs get familiar a bit too quickly despite the variation in level layout that shows up in the higher difficulty levels. The level editor is too basic to offer the replay value that it should have, and pretty soon

you'll be wanting something more that just isn't there.

That doesn't mean it's bad, though, just shorter than it should be. *Power Shovel* has a bizarre charm that's accentuated by a bare-bones translation that not only leaves the light J-Pop soundtrack untouched but doesn't even change the foreman's voice to English. This is a budget game given a budget translation (even the end credits are untouched and in the wrong alphabet) but it tries something different and forces you to meet it on its own terms. *Power Shovel* successfully models a complex system that's fun to master, and it plays like nothing else out there throughout a variety of creative challenges. Its only real crime is leaving you wanting more than it could deliver.



When a mommy turtle and a daddy turtle and a power shovel love each other very much...

Get it with the Power Shovel!

1 BGM	2 BGM	3 BGM	Continue Credit 2 credits
1 New Part Limbo	2 New Part Limbo	3 New Part Limbo	?

Price of Goods \$ 300,000  
Money on Hand \$ 0

Select X: Decision Δ: Cancel

You can get pretty much anything you want with a power shovel.



PC30MR

PC100

PC1100



## Kyouko is missing! It's up to super mahjong idol Shouko Misaki, a.k.a. Suchie Pai S, to find her.

Armed with the power of the Suchie Stick and awesome mahjong skillz, she sets out to discover the whereabouts of her predecessor.

*Suchie Pai IV* is the most recent game in the incredibly long-running *Suchie Pai* series (an arcade mainstay; its first home installment was released on the Super Famicom). Moving away from Any-Machi, Japan, the story unfolds in the otaku-soaked streets of Akihabara. The premise is simple: wander around in search of maid cafes, challenge the proprietresses to a friendly game of 1-on-1 mahjong, win, Huh?!, and finally PROFIT by taking lewd photos of said young lady in an outfit of your choosing. Is the photo-op less perverted than the nudity found in the prior games? Well... some of the "costumes" are, let's say, "only in Japan." The cast features a predominantly new host of girls with a handful of returning favorites.

Things begin with Shouko challenging the player to a quick game. The operative word here is *quick*, because Shouko will annihilate you with extreme prejudice (in future play-throughs, this is skippable). After Shouko bolsters her ego, you must select a partner. Each partner has a special power (read: cheating) that can be called upon to augment one's hand.

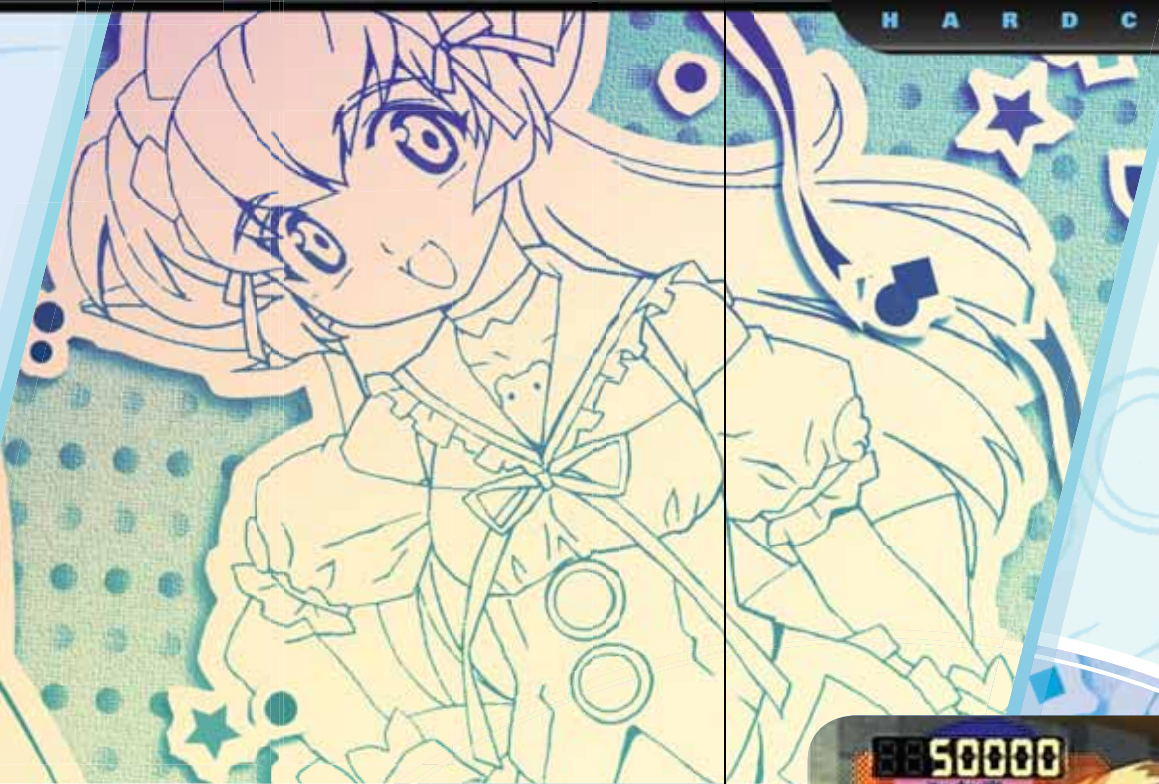
The partner, therefore, is the first real opponent. Having been beaten, the now team-of-two must proceed from cafe to cafe, beating all of the other characters. Completing the game with each partner in tow is required to unlock the many hidden options/modes in the game. *SPIV* uses the standard 2-player videogame mahjong variant, so there's no restriction on calling Chi vs Pon or an open Kan. Each round will come to a close after thirty-four tiles are discarded (seventeen from each player), assuming no winning hands. For those unfamiliar with the terminology, please refer to the sidebar for basic definitions.

Perhaps the largest appeal of the series (outside of the cheesecake) is the ability to cheat like hell! After each winning round, the player is presented with a tile-matching game. Each match grants one of many special abilities; such as the Fire Sekkan (which can cancel an opponent's Ron) or the Suchie Stick (an instant Ippatsu). In the prior installments, these power-ups were a rare commodity and best saved for the later levels when the opponents became stupidly difficult. Since *SPIV* practically gives these away, the game's difficulty is completely dropped, and the AI isn't nearly as aggressive as it was in the prior titles. Now factor in the completely broken power-up that is the White Shuusei (prevents an opponent's Tsumo) and Remi's partner ability (creates an instant Tenpai with a Chii Toitsu hand), and the result is quite possibly the easiest mahjong videogame available. Arguably, the drop in challenge does make the game very n00b-friendly, so for those that haven't played mahjong, this is actually a very good place to start. That being said, the unlockable modes do offer significantly stronger adversaries.

The *SP* series has always featured high production values, and the fourth entry is no exception. Kenichi Sonoda (*Bubblegum Crisis*, *Gunsmith Cats*) reprises his role as lead artist, with assistance from Poyoyon Rock (*Popotan*). All of the character art is high-res and featured prominently on-screen. No longer is the view of an opponent restricted to a bust shot in the center; the girls now stand proudly, filling nearly a third of the screen in all their *moe* glory. Increased presence and detail is joined graciously with loads of animation and vocalizations. Jaleco really knows how to play their audience like a drum.

*SPIV* comes in two flavors: regular and limited edition. The regular edition includes a drama CD while the limited edition includes a small Shouko figure, a mini-artbook, and a revision of *Suchie Pai III* (that's right, a full second game). Clearly, the limited edition is easily the superior value.


  
 IDOL JANSHI Imported by Kiken
   
 Publisher: Jaleco • Developer: Jaleco • Genre: Mahjong • Category: Cafe Maid Oggling • Release Date: 10/11/2007 • # Players: 1



## The Great Wall: A starting point for those who want to learn just how to play these things called Mahjong games.

### New to Mahjong? Here's some help.

Mahjong is something like Rummy but with tiles. There are three standard suits, each containing four sets of numbers 1 through 9:

Man-Zu (10,000s), Pin-Zu (dots), Sou-Zu (bamboo).

Then there are the character suits, each of which has four tiles:

Ton (East Wind), Nan (South Wind), Shaa (West Wind), Pei (North Wind), Haku (White Dragon), Hatsu (Green Dragon), Chun (Red Dragon).

A player's hand is constructed of thirteen tiles. During each turn, the

player takes a fourteenth tile to see if it can complete a winning hand. If it doesn't, a tile must be discarded. Play continues in a circle, with each player either taking a tile from the wall (the rows of stacked tiles) or from an opponent's pond (their discard pile). A basic winning hand contains four triples and a pair.

Triples can either be sequential numbers of a similar suit (i.e., 3-Man, 4-Man, 5-Man) or three of the same tile (Shaa, Shaa, Shaa).

A pair must be two of the same tile (i.e. Haku, Haku). There are more complicated hands that do not necessarily adhere to these rules, though (such as the Kokushi Musou).

### Basic Japanese mahjong terminology:

Tsumo: Claiming a win from a tile drawn from the wall.

Ron: Claiming a win from a tile drawn from an opponent's pond.

Chi: Claiming an opponent's discarded tile to complete a sequential triple.

Pon: Claiming an opponent's discarded tile to complete a uniform triple.

Kan: Declaring 4 of a kind (can either be from one's hand or from a discarded opponent's pond).

Riichi: Declaring that a hand is in Tenpai (must not have claimed any tiles from an opponent).

Tenpai: A hand one tile away from winning.

Ippatsu: A one shot win after declaring Riichi (the next tile claimed from the wall is a win).

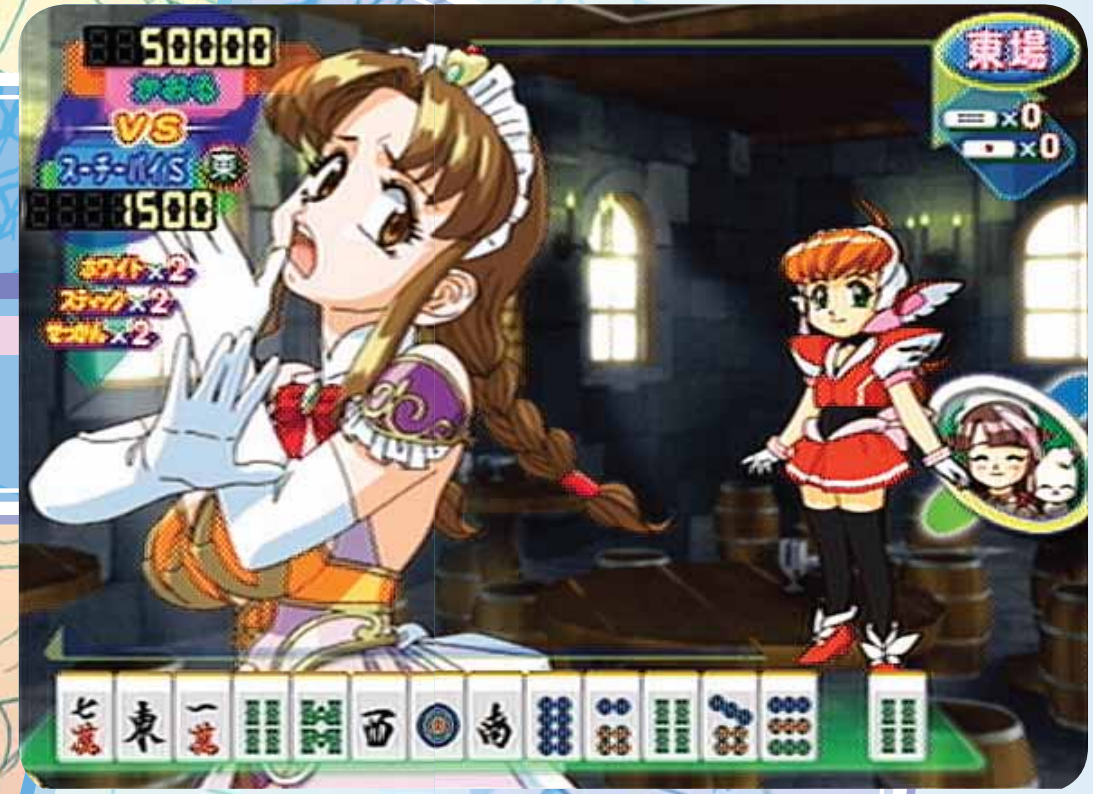
### Need more help? Some further reading:

Jaleco's official Suchie Pai website:  
<http://www.suchie-pai.net/>

For an extremely detailed explanation of Japanese mahjong rules, including images of all the tiles mentioned above, visit:

<http://ofb.net/~whuang/ugcs/gp/mahjong/mahjong.html>

To learn more about Suchie Pai:  
[http://changevworld.com/suchie/suchie\\_Museum.html](http://changevworld.com/suchie/suchie_Museum.html)





# WINE GAMER

## Saints Row 2 by BigWyrn

THQ recently invited a slew of journalists to visit their 'hood (San Francisco) for an informative gamers' day event.

While there were plenty of great games on display, I spent most of my time playing *Saints Row 2* co-op. With all of the hype surrounding the recent release of *GTA IV*, it's easy to blow off other 'sandbox' titles. But if there is one facet where *Saints Row 2* outshines *GTA IV*, it's definitely the online cooperative mode.

Although co-op was set up over system link at the event, it will be available online in the final version of the game. However, there won't be any co-op lobbies to peruse, as the mode is only available to people on your friends list. That's a small price to pay for the ability to play special missions, freeplay, and the entire campaign cooperatively! That's right; now you and your bro can 'gang up' on rival gangs, perform drive-bys, defend your turf, beat up old ladies, and more!

After watching my fellow journalists create some of the most hideous characters imaginable by using the expanded character creation tool (like a 300-pound woman sporting a pink Mohawk, bikini top, biker boots, and sidebums), I settled on a comparatively tame Asian dude with scars and a soul patch. Then I joined my partner-in-crime and we set off to create some four-fisted havoc.

Our first missions tasked us with taking out all the gang members in a small building and then blowing up several makeshift drug labs. Fortunately, our hosts set us up by unlocking all weapons and giving them infinite ammo. Saweeit! As a result, the entire building was riddled with bullets and rocked by explosions by the time we were finished. It was around this time that I discovered a new weapon, satchel charges! These handy explosives work like WW2 sticky bombs and adhere to practically any surface. Stick 'em to car bumpers, motorcycles, boats, helicopters and even people for a volatile salutation.

Budding explosives experts can set multiple bombs at a time and detonate them simultaneously, which is how my homie and I took out the first three drug labs. Apparently, gang members don't like having their cash flow interrupted, so they swarmed after us in droves. After respawning, I decided to take the easy route. While my partner ran in with guns blazing, I sat back with the rocket launcher, carefully aimed between buildings and pedestrians, and let her fly! Baboom! The last few labs went down quickly.

The next mission we undertook involved protecting a car from enemy vehicles trying to blow it off the road. We were given a helicopter and we took off with my compadre as the pilot while I manned the weapons. He seemed to have some difficulty with the controls at first, but quickly got the hang of it. We chased the friendly car and blasted the hell out of numerous vehicles on the road before we lost track of our target. Oh well, we went and got another helicopter and started exploring the city. Fortunately, players aren't forced to stay within a certain vicinity of one another in co-op, so we flew wherever we wanted. My pal didn't notice me inching up behind his helicopter until explosive rockets and machine gun fire pelted his chassis. For the next thirty minutes, it was free-for-all carnage as we shot and blew up everything in sight.

This is just an incredibly small sampling of what is possible while playing *Saints Row 2* co-op mode. A nearly infinite number of viable strategies become available when a second player is thrust into the story missions. I'm really looking forward to playing this mode extensively, so feel free to hit me up online after the game is released and we'll do some virtual gangbanging!



# Global Defence Force



Earth Defense Force 2017 hit the 360 last spring and was one of the most fun games of the year.

It's a pure frantic run & gun action romp with giant enemies, fully destructible environments, and huge amounts of firepower. It's also a remake, and Europe got the PS2's superior sequel in *Global Defence Force*.

The bugs have returned to continue their ravaging of Earth, which is pretty rude seeing as we've only just rebuilt after the last time. It's up to the Global Defence Force to protect our planet again, fighting in new environments and against new enemies, and there's even a second playable character to spice up the familiar action. Pale Wing joins Storm One in repelling the aliens, and while her defense is weaker, she makes up for it by being able to fly. The other primary difference between the two is Pale Wing's weapon loadout, which consists of energy weapons that are a bit short on range but pack serious punch. Pale Wing is designed to get in close and use her agility to avoid damage while turning bugs, robot walkers, flying saucers, and not-Godzillas into well-fried fertilizer. She's fast, nimble, deadly, sports a protective mini-skirt, and is a ton of fun to play.

Like *EDF:2017* before it, *GDF* is a fast-action game with enemies that have just enough AI to attack. They arrive in huge waves to make up for their lack of brain, and the fun comes from moving fast and thinking just enough to survive while reflex takes over. Giant ants spit acid while spiders have movement-inhibiting webs, and giant robot walkers shoot fans of laser fire and explosive plasma balls. There's a lot going on and it's all deadly.

When an enemy goes down, it may drop one of three things. Health is instantly useful, but Armor and Weapon packs don't take effect until after the level is over. Each Armor pack adds one point to HP, but the real treat is the Weapon packs. Each character has well over one hundred weapons that he or she can earn, although they can only take two into any battle. The right mix depends on the level, and sometimes it takes some experimenting to figure out what works. Homing weapons are much more useful in a field than a cave's tight corridors, but it's always fun to drop a grenade over the edge of a precipice and hear the spiders squeal.

*Global Defence Force* is a blast in multiplayer and packed with replay value; the only real drawback is that it's a tricky game to get running on a US PS2. It requires a modded system, of course, but that won't be enough to make it playable on an NTSC TV. You'll need make an .iso of the CD, apply a program called PAL2NTSC, and re-burn it. It's a bit of a runaround, but absolutely worth it to play one of the best run & gun games ever.

Nothing to do with the screenshot, but yeah, we don't know why the title is spelled "defence" either.



Take that, gigantic evil rock thing of doom.



Big monsters are big. And lots.

Forget Japan, this is European and fan-translated gaming. The English stuff you've never heard about. The Games America Forgot.

Publisher: Essential Games • Developer: Sandlot • Genre: Run & Gun • Category: B-Movie Invasion • # Players: 1-2

## Global Defence Force

by james

Rating: Page 12



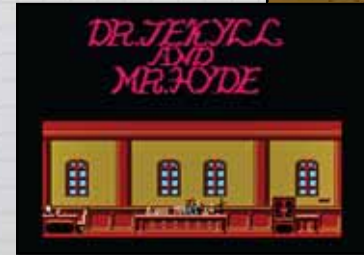
by Sardius

# THE DARK SIDE OF RETROGAMING

In an era where tutorials are mandatory and pressing the Start button triggers an intelligence test more often than it begins a video game, little confusion remains in the world of interactive entertainment. Thanks to the invention of the Nintendo Wii, many have only recently learned that video games are things that you can play. Even armed with our newfound knowledge, though, a few games from the NES era still mystify us. These games have achieved a rare transcendence. They are *inscrutably bad*, and I love them for it.

## Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is the worst game to ever be released for the NES. Don't debate me on this. In my mind, *Dr. Jekyll* handily trumps infamous unlicensed garbage like *Cheetahmen II* and *Action 52*, because for all their defects and general incompetence, I can at



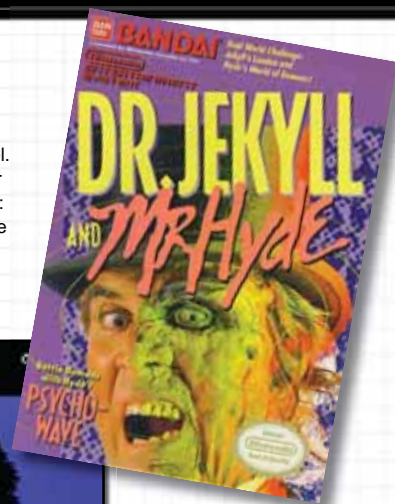
least understand why those games are the way they are.

See, unlike its unlicensed brothers in crap, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* wasn't an elaborate scam perpetrated by a fly-by-night company headquartered in the Bahamas. It was published

by Bandai, a very successful publisher that persists today thanks to the fact that people will buy anything if it has an anime license attached to it. Before we proud Americans fell to the terrible effeminate might of Inuyasha and Naruto, though, Bandai had to find some other license to exploit to gain a foothold in the western world.



That license was, of course, a hundred-year-old Robert Louis Stevenson novel. Look, you have no idea how popular his stuff was back then. I saw it all: the Black Arrow cosplay, Treasure Island snap bracelets, Long John Silver x Dr. Jekyll x Mr. Hyde crossover slash fanfiction traded



through BBSes that ran on firewood... man. It was *insane*.

Inexplicable origins aside, playing *Dr.*

*Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* will leave you even more confused. As Dr. Jekyll, you move from left to right, jump with the A button, and poke stuff with your cane using the B button. No part of this works in any way you'd expect, though. Jekyll's slow walk makes him easy prey for each level's swarms of angry townsfolk. His jump takes him several feet in the air, but only a few inches forward. His cane attack — if you can believe it — actually causes damage to *himself* when used on enemies.



I've come to accept that *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is an awful game. I've played all the way through it, and I've even seen both endings. Neither leaves me with a feeling of resolution, though. Instead, I'm left with unanswered questions. Why does this game exist? Why does it play so very badly? Why has nobody on our obsessive modern Internet cared enough to scan or transcribe its instruction manual? I may have beaten *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, but until I uncover the source of its evil, have I truly won?

## Atlantis no Nazo

In many ways, the Japan-only Famicom release of *Atlantis no Nazo* ("The Mystery of Atlantis") is the anti-*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Whereas *Dr. Jekyll's* goals are straightforward enough but its mechanics are jacked to hell, *Atlantis no Nazo* plays decently but has the strangest expectations for progress I've ever seen in a video game.



It seems simple enough at first. Run to the right. Throw bombs

at enemies. Try not to get crapped on by mutant birds who squirt poison poop. Soon, you'll find a door. Enter it, and you're on the way to level two! Yeah! Somewhere along the journey, though, things take a detour into crazytown.



Take this level, for example:

You can't go out to the left or the right, you can't go back through the entrance, and bombing every single pixel reveals no hidden doors. So what do you do? You fall into the gap on the right, throw a bomb at your feet, and



kill yourself — that's what you do. As you fall off the screen, your limp, lifeless body goes through a hidden door, which transports you to the next level, alive and unharmed.

*Atlantis no Nazo* is full of fun stuff like this. Some levels are unlit, leaving

platforms and pits invisible against a solid black background. Take a bad route and you'll end up at a "BLACK HOLE!" stage, which repeatedly drops your character into a bottomless pit until your supply of lives is completely drained. Best of all, the last level is almost unbeatable unless you find an easily missable invincibility item midway through the game.

There are one hundred levels in *Atlantis no Nazo*. Half of them feature unimaginably



retarded solutions, and the other half will drag you through the depths of platforming hell. Some will kill you before you have a chance to react. Some can't even be accessed without cheating.

Naturally, I love this game to death.

## Takeshi no Chousenjou

Ohhhh man. It doesn't get any better than this. *Takeshi no Chousenjou* ("Takeshi's Challenge," named for its creator,

film director "Beat" Takeshi Kitano. Don't ask) is a special little bundle of horrible joy. Unlike *Dr. Jekyll* or *Atlantis no Nazo*, *Takeshi no Chousenjou* isn't content to be merely bad, difficult, or obtuse. This game is *spiteful*, and intentionally so.



*Takeshi no Chousenjou* places you in the role of a down-and-out salaryman who has been given an unexpectedly small yearly bonus from his company. To win the game, you must quit your job, go to a karaoke bar and get drunk, then black out and wake up at home. Afterwards, the correct course of action is to divorce your wife, abandon her and your kids, and spend your meager severance pay on a trip to a distant island in search of hidden treasure.

Yeah.

This says nothing of the supreme difficulty involved at every step of the way. Passing the karaoke bar scene requires the player to *actually sing* into the Famicom controller's microphone until the game detects a perfect performance. It's not uncommon for this to take several hours. At some point afterward, a blank screen appears, and the player is told not to interact with the controller in any way for another hour, under penalty of complete erasure of progress. On the way to the island, you'll enter an extremely hard horizontally scrolling shooter segment, in which your ship can move down, but not up.

Survive this, and you're rewarded with an arduous exploration segment as you search for treasure. By this point, your voice is hoarse, you've spent an hour of gameplay staring at a blank screen, and your thumbs are bloodied from retrying the shooter sequence hundreds of times. In your fatigue, you may have chosen the wrong option at the password screen, which results in *instant death*.

Hours later, if you're still alive and coherent, you may find the legendary treasure. At this point, Internet legends tell that you will face a boss that can only be defeated if you punch it twenty



thousand times. This is false; the truth is even worse.

At the end of *Takeshi no Chousenjou*, you will find no boss. You'll get no closure. Instead, all you'll see is a screen that says — in Japanese — "Good job."

I badly want this game to

be in English. Fan translators of the world, I am willing to pay \$100 for a full English translation of *Takeshi no Chousenjou*. This is not a joke. Do this and you will be rewarded.

You don't understand. I *need* this.





On the Download

Just a little glitch in the system...

## Metal Arms: A Glitch in the System

XBOX Live Arcade • 1200pts (\$15)



Developer: Swingin' Ape • Genre: Run & Gun  
Release Date: 4/21/2008 • # Players: 1-4

*Metal Arms* came out back in 2003 and promptly got buried in the Christmas rush, along with *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*. Unlike its cohorts in financial failure, *Metal Arms* was almost instantly forgotten despite being of equal quality. Like many cult classics of the last gen, it's getting a second stab at life and you owe it to yourself to see what you (probably) missed.

*Metal Arms* is a third-person run-and-gun action shooter that sees the little robot Glitch blasting the living hell out of all comers. While he's got the usual guns and explosives for the hands-on approach, the

more subtle weapons are the most fun to play with. Tossing a Recruiter grenade into a pack of low-level enemies and having them provide backup is always fun, but even better is using an EMP grenade to knock out one of the huge Titans, then circling around back to hit him with the Control Tether. Many enemies can be taken over by the Tether, causing Glitch to collapse into a pile of parts while he controls the commandeered robot, and it's hard to go wrong stomping through levels as a behemoth with rocket launchers and chaingun arms. Controllable vehicles, decent physics, and even some destructible architecture bring the world

to life, in a game that was made before these were standard features. *Metal Arms* is an excellent shooter even by today's standards, filled with rock-solid action and an excellent challenge level. Whether downloaded or fished out of a bargain bin, *Metal Arms* deserves its second chance.

By: James • Score: 4.5 of 5

## Super Stardust HD Solo Pack

PlayStation Network • \$5



Developer: Housemarque • Genre: Twin-Stick Shooter  
Release Date: 4/15/08 • # Players: 1

The best game on the PS3 just got better with the release of the *Super Stardust HD Solo Pack*. While it's little more than four new game modes, they address most of the pacing problems with the original while adding a new enemy or two to the mix to keep things fresh.

Endless mode is a non-stop series of ever more frantic waves, Bomber challenges the player to max out the score using only (duh!) bombs, Survival packs the screen with orbs that can be shot to move out of the way but can't be destroyed, and Time Attack is a high-speed race to level's end.



Each mode is designed for fast play, making it very easy to sit down for a quick five minutes or, more likely, an obsessive hour or two of Just One More Try! This is twin-stick shooting at its best.

By: James • Score: 4.5 of 5

## Trackmania Nations Forever

http://www.trackmania.com • Free



Developer: Nadeo • Genre: Stunt Track Racer  
Release Date: 4/21/2008 • # Players: 1-8

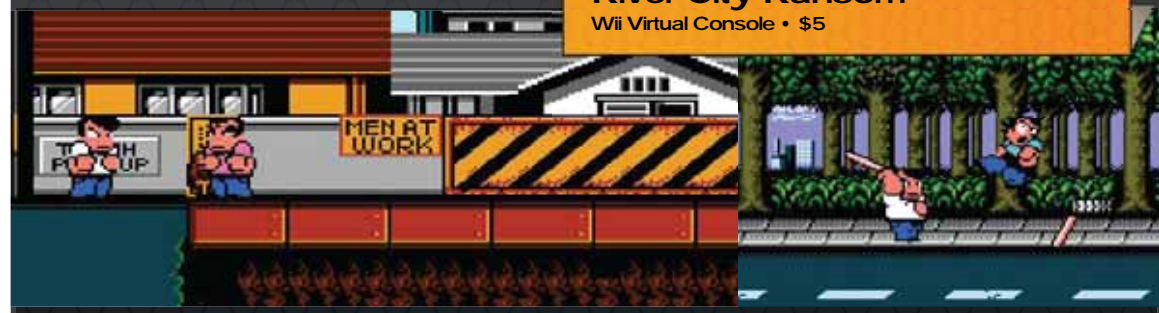
*Trackmania Nations Forever* is the free version of the stunt track racer that keeps on giving, packed with more content than most retail games and with an incredible amount of user-generated goodies. *Nations* is a more limited product than the retail version, of course, having just one environment and car to play with, but the amazing track designs more than make up for it.

Jumps, loops, bottlenecks, and an unforgiving timer all conspire to make earning the gold a feat of pure speed and precision. There are only a few physics cheats, and it can be frustrating to watch the car bounce all over the track after a bad landing, but there's a huge sense of satisfaction in rocketing a car over a one hundred foot gap in a half-pipe to a pinpoint-perfect landing. *Trackmania Nations Forever* is fun, frequently maddening, and never stops giving.

By: James • Score: 4 of 5

## River City Ransom

Wii Virtual Console • \$5



Developer: Technos • Genre: Side-scrolling brawler  
Release Date: 4/21/2008 • # Players: 1-2

Gangs of street punks ruled the late '80s urban landscape, kidnapping the girlfriends of tough guys everywhere. Nobody knows why they did this, because almost every time it happened the tough guy ended up cleaning up all organized crime in the city. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in *River City Ransom*, the

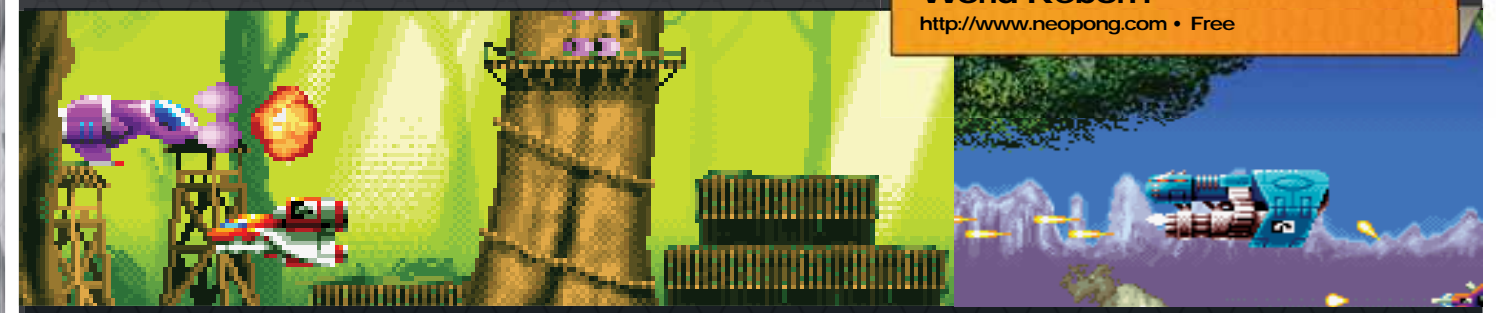
epic game pitting Alex and Ryan against an entire town of punks and thugs in possibly the greatest side-scrolling brawler ever. Defeated goons drop cash that can be used to buy food and magazines to up our heroes' stats and give them new skills, but *RCR* is a simple game at heart. A few weapons enhance the punch-kick-

jump gameplay, with style and humor pushing it into True Classic territory. *River City Ransom* is simple but perfect, and everybody should play it at least once in their life.

By: James • Score: 5 of 5

## World Reborn

http://www.neopong.com • Free



Developer: NeoPong Software • Genre: Horizontal Shooter  
Release Date: 3/22/2008 • # Players: 1-2

Sometimes things don't work out as planned. Today's example is *World Reborn*, a horizontal shooter that didn't quite find a publisher. *World Reborn* has multiple ships and pilots to choose from, each with their own strengths, weaknesses, and special abilities, and

their skills level up as they're used. A branching story drives the missions along, with anime-styled characters spouting intentionally-cheesy dialogue.

The gameplay is standard horizontal fare, complete with weapon pickups, obstacle-

lined paths, and enemies that actually target the player rather than worry about the intricate geometry of their bullet patterns. It unashamedly runs through all the old cliches, but seeing as most recent shooters bludgeon the player with underaged overpowered girls navigating

bullet hell, that's something of a relief. *World Reborn* is a decent shooter with an RPG twist, and would have been a decent little entry to the GBA's lineup.

By: James • Score: 3.5 of 5



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### Gamer Graffix Hardcore For Halo Challenge Winners announced.

We at Hardcore Gamer challenged you to show us how hardcore for Halo you really are. What you showed us was exemplary - every submission we received was very impressive in showing how much Halo really means to you. But three submissions were utterly

outstanding and well deserving of the amazing prizes their submitters will be receiving.

Winners:

Essay Challenge Grand Prize:

- 3 FOOT GAMER GRAFFIX HALO 3 MASTER CHIEF WALL GRAFFIX™
- 4 FOOT GAMER GRAFFIX HALO 3 MASTER CHIEF WALL GRAFFIX™
- 2 18 X 24 INCH HALO 3 MASTER CHIEF WALL GRAFFIX™
- XBOX 360 (Halo Edition)
- HALO 3 GAME
- THE OFFICIAL NOVELS OF HALO
- RED VS. BLUE - SEASONS 1,2,3,4,5
- HALO GHOSTS OF ONYX - NOVEL
- HALO GRAPHIC NOVEL
- Gamer Graffix Xbox 360 Skin (Death Card)

Essay Challenge Grand Prize Winner: Xtra Sugar

Runner Up Prize:

- HALO GHOSTS OF ONYX- NOVEL
- Gamer Graffix Xbox 360 Skin (Death Card)
- 3 Foot Halo 3 Master Chief WALL GRAFFIX™
- 1 18 x 24 inch Halo 3 Master Chief WALL GRAFFIX™
- 5 Gamer Graffix Handheld console Skins

Runner Up: Javycucamonga

Hardcore for Halo Photo - Grand Prize:

- 3 FOOT GAMER GRAFFIX HALO 3 MASTER CHIEF WALL GRAFFIX™
- 4 FOOT GAMER GRAFFIX HALO 3 MASTER CHIEF WALL GRAFFIX™
- 2 18 X 24 INCH HALO 3 MASTER CHIEF WALL GRAFFIX™
- HALO GRAPHIC NOVEL
- 5 Gamer Graffix Xbox 360 Skins
- 5 Gamer Graffix Handheld Skins

Hardcore for Halo Photo - Grand Prize Winner: cpu64



Congratulations to everyone who submitted content, and thanks for making this contest such a success!

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by Adam Pratt of ArcadeHeroes.com

# PRIMEVAL HUNT™

Arcades always excel in over-the-top shooting action, whether you are shooting aliens, machines or dinosaurs.

Sega dabbled with dinosaur blasting when they released *Jurassic Park: Lost World* back in 1994 and they have decided to bring it back with *Primeval Hunt*. This comes at a time where hunting games are the most popular titles on the arcade scene.

There is no clear storyline to the game; you are simply hunting dinosaurs in an exotic location that also happens to include human-made ruins over a number of twelve days.

When you begin, you can pick between three different weapons to carry — a rifle, a shotgun or a crossbow and occasionally you can obtain a rocket launcher power-up. Each weapon has its own characteristics and amount of ammunition available for it, and once you run out of ammo, the game is over unless you insert more coins to continue. The player thus must focus on accuracy and strategy instead of non-stop trigger pulling.

Bonus points are given for head and heart shots, which sometimes must be landed quickly, as a delay in taking the dinos down means that they will begin to hunt you. There are a number of dinosaurs you'll be hunting, mostly the kinds that we are all familiar with since childhood, including brontosaurus, triceratops, stegosaurus, velociraptors, pterodactyls and T-Rexes. It was interesting to see how dynamically they behave throughout the game, from grazing in the field, to fighting with each other, stealing dinosaur eggs or even scratching their backs on the ground like a dog.

The graphics, powered by Sega's Lindbergh platform, are fairly good although there are a couple of issues with collision detection (not with your shots fortunately but you will end up walking through walls on occasion). The environments are quite lush and colorful and the textures through most of the game are pleasing to the eye.

Unlike most other light-gun titles which happen to be on-rail affairs, Sega pulled a page from both the Nintendo DS and the Wii in its control scheme. The game uses two light-rifles which include hardware for on-screen tracking as well as a speaker built into the butt of the gun. It also uses a touch screen controller where the player can plot their movement throughout a level with their finger as well as track each dinosaur and their stats. It is an interesting feature but has proven to be worrisome for operators concerned with the extra price it adds to the machine, along with the potential for damage. If the touch screen does break, however, there is an option to play the game without it. There are two cabinet variations of the game out there, although currently, the deluxe version is the only one available in the US.

*Primeval Hunt* is a likable game that stands out from other arcade light-gun games thanks to the control scheme which allows you to explore the area and plan out a strategy as opposed to reactionary blasting.



Publisher: Sega Amusements • Genre: Light Gun • Category: Hear Me Roar  
Developer: Sega Amusements • Release Date: 3/2008 • # of Players: 1-2

Final Score:  
**4.5** of 5



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