

PLAYERS HUNT

#08

REVIEWS:

- » GTA: CHINATOWN WARS
- » MADWORLD
- » THE GODFATHER 2
- » GH: METALLICA
- » DRAGON QUEST V
- » RESISTANCE:
RETRIBUTION

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FEATURE:

THE POWER OF SPEECH

SOME GAMES HAVE THE POWER TO MOVE YOU, BUT
ONLY IF THEY'RE WELL WRITTEN. **WE EXPLORE THE
BEST AND THE WORST** OVER TWO ISSUES.

EDITORIAL

>> Yes, it makes perfect sense.

I've noticed lately that I'm getting a lot fussier when it comes to games, and I can't work out if it is because video games have changed or I have. Admittedly, I'm getting older (approaching thirty), but I still feel that I'm as passionate as ever about the medium; I love working on Pixel Hunt, writing for various publications, and I still have that urge to play whenever I have spare time.

The problem is, with so many titles competing for my attention, I'm getting really sick of completely

average games. There used to be a time when even a fairly crap game could entertain me, simply because there were no other options available. Today's market is the complete opposite, and for every GTAIV there exists a generic open world stinker trying to suck \$110 out of my wallet.

I think part of the problem also stems from my innate desire to try pretty much every game that gets released. I hate the idea of missing out on a fun experience, so for many years now I've tried to experience every release that I can (a mission that is, I must admit, made much easier when you receive games direct from publishers). The other side of this coin is that I feel like my gaming desire is being eroded away by playing all of these below average games – to the point where some days I'm simply uninspired to pick up a controller. Finishing off that game in my

console starts to resemble work more than leisure, particularly if you like to try and squeeze as many achievements/trophies out of a game as possible.

So, in something that is akin to an evolutionary survival tactic, I've become a lot fussier. If it feels like a game's design is cheating me of fun, if a title is full of brain-dead AI, glitches galore etc. I'll simply turn it off, take it out of the console and get rid of it (return it to the hire store or nefariously send it out to a Pixel Hunt writer to be reviewed). And I'm finding that I'm a lot happier for doing so. It's up to developers to impress me now, to make me want to spend hours on their game. Otherwise, I simply don't have the time to waste.

✎ Dylan Burns | Editor



EDITORIAL

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IN THE SPOTLIGHT:

THE POWER OF SPEECH

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It's something that has become a part of most videogames, whether you pay attention to it or not.



INCOMING:

[PROTOTYPE]

DEVELOPERS



AVAILABLE ONLINE SOON!

Our in depth interview with Radical. Sadly, they missed our deadline but look for it on the website shortly.

Web: <http://www.pixelhunt.com.au/>

THIS MONTH

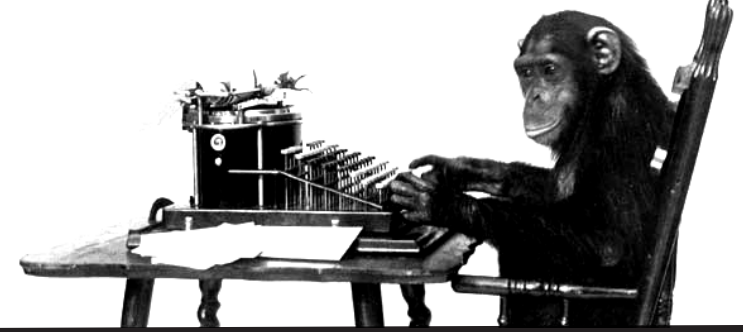
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NOT THE NEWS

>> Vapid lies we tell for our own amusement.



EA TO DEVELOP GAME ABOUT BOETHIUS

Hot on the heels of the assumed success of Dante's Inferno, EA Games recently announced their plans to create a game based on The Consolation of Philosophy, the musings of exiled scholar Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, written in 523 in the lead up to his execution for suspected treason. In the book, Boethius reflects on life, death and God through a discussion with a personified version of Philosophy itself, focusing heavily on the cycles of fortune and the true meaning and pursuit of happiness. The game is set to take a different bent, with Boethius escaping from prison, and going on a quest to recover the 'Potion of 1000 Blades' and going on a revenge quest against Flavius Theodericus, the very man who imprisoned him, wielding a variety of weapons ranging from an old-timey mace to a futuristic laser crossbow. Accompanying him will be the ghostly apparitions of Philosophy and Fortune, transformed in the game into a pair of goth-bikie lesbians played by Tara Reid and Lindsay Lohan, with EA's press release promising that the pair will be "almost constantly f***ing". We contacted EA spokesman Fishman Troutmen for further comment, and he told us simply, "It's basically just God of War again".

DLC TAKES NEXT LOGICAL STEP

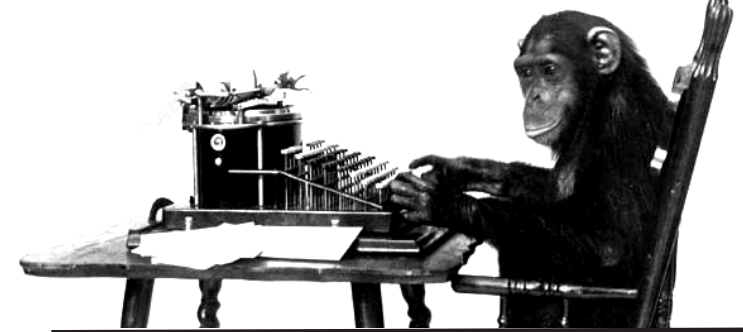
Developers Acidtrip are taking a unique approach to retail with their upcoming fighting game release Arcadia Panic Now!! Justice Punch-League Astronomical Galaxy (Flash Force Seven: Forced Flashed Two). Much like Streeties IV, the game will require you to pay to unlock costumes on the disc. Similarly, you will need to pay extra to access most of the game's characters and stages, and even change the difficulty level. In fact, each separate move for each character, from Dogface Hajiki's low punch to Miyagoro Stitchdick's Flying Swan Crane Thing Super Explosion Blast, will cost you. Development supervisor Heartless Anderson spoke to us exclusively on this exciting development in payment rapeage: "The way we see it, this will be the closest anyone has ever come to really simulating the feeling of plugging more and more coins into an arcade machine. The most genius thing is, everything will work on a subscription service, so you could find that your low kicks or high punches or whatever suddenly stop working mid-match unless you spend more money. We envision tournament play, wherein the champion player will find himself about to launch his Ultra Trigger Death Attack, only to find that his subscription has expired. Of course, we will monitor the best players and make sure their subscriptions are shorter and their charges higher. We just....we hate everybody. We really want people to regret buying this game."

BUNCH OF SEQUELS WITH STUPID NAMES ANNOUNCED

Left 5 Dead. Banjo Threeie. Tom Clancy's Rainbow Seven. Actual Final Fantasy. Army of Three. This joke gets old fast. In more important news, the man responsible for Driver 3's name change (to Driv3r) has finally been tracked down and arrested after a five year manhunt. Gerald Sack, who convinced the team at Reflection that such a name change would be 'totally hip' has been on the run ever since the game's release, with the development team assuring police that his name change was almost entirely responsible for the game's low quality and cheating A.I. He was eventually caught hiding in air vents at Bungie, subliminally whispering 'O.D.S.T.' to the team behind the game formerly known as Halo 3: Recon. If convicted, he is likely to receive the death penalty, which is admittedly a huge overreaction, but then to be fair none of the stuff we're discussing here actually happened.

NOT THE NEWS

>> Vapid lies we tell for our own amusement.



OUR WRITERS CLEAN HOUSE at ANNUAL PIXEL HUNT AWARDS

In April, Pixel Hunt hosted the 2009 Pixel Hunt Awards on the beautiful Bikini Island (just south of the Bahamas). Attended by the world's best games journalists, a selection of the world's most high-class prostitutes and celebrities, the ceremony, hosted by Keifer Sutherland, saw the Pixel Hunt writers absolutely dominate. Unfortunately, the ceremony was cut short when terrorists hijacked the island. Fortunately, James and Keifer managed, over the course of 6 hours, to dismantle the terrorist unit and recover the bomb they had been carrying, only to discover during the seventh hour that Dylan was actually the mastermind behind it all. With Dylan in possession of the bomb, it took a further 12 hours to track him down to an abandoned warehouse, most of the other attendees dying along the way. Taking Dylan into custody, we found out he was actually being blackmailed by an independent army operating out of an oil rig in the Caspian Sea, but Keifer said "Screw it, we've been at this shit for 18 hours already, I'll take care of it another time". Point is, we're awesome.

NINTENDO ANNOUNCE NEW TS-PHAT MICRO-I

Last week Nintendo surprised nobody with their announcement of yet another hardware revision for their handheld system. The latest edition will feature a third screen, which Nintendo describes as "completely superfluous", which will occasionally flash pictures of Satoru Iwata and Reggie Fils-Aime bathing in giant pools of money, laughing insanely and smoking cigars made from ground-up Gamecube discs. According to Nintendo, the new design is aimed at "tech-savvy mums, grandmas on the go, kids who are the in-thing, ladies what know how to shake it and for all those nerds out there who have supported us unconditionally for years, even when we desperately tried to make you go away".

The console will launch with several slightly more expensive ports of original DS games, including M&Ms Racer, Left or Right? and That Other Shitty Hip-Hop Driving Game Thing. The TS-Phat Micro-i will retail for \$499AU and will launch whenever they feel like launching it.



NOT MY GENRE!

>> Proving games journalists actually *DO* earn their (meagre) pay...

Welcome to Not My Genre, a column where each issue one of our writers will bravely go where they've never gone before. Each of us has a particular game genre that, for one reason or another, we avoid like the plague.

This issue we forced Daniel to log into Steam and only play Zeno Clash. He kept looking back at us nervously, his mouse cursor hovering over World at War, but a quick whack across the knuckles with a giant ruler soon got him back on task...



ZENO CLASH (2009)

First-person shooters? I can dig 'em. Brawlers? Down with 'em, too. Surrealist art ala Salvador Dali? Interesting to be sure. How about a tangled mess of first-person fisticuffs in a surrealist world where the father-mother (with sexy lady bits and man bits, too), and its many thousands of nightmarishly disfigured bird-men and elephant-woman children are trying to kill you with fish guns and skull grenades?

That's not quite what I'm used to but, heck, I'm open to the macabre and insane.

As already discussed by the web at large, the visuals in Zeno Clash are maddening. I haven't seen a Source game, nay, any game, with giant elephant-mounted villages, parachuting squirrel bombs, crazies called Corwid that curl up into balls and die or decide it's their duty to be eaten, and bird-men as punching fodder. Progressing through Zeno Clash is like drinking black coffee spiked with absinthe while abseiling down the rabbit hole to Miles Davis' interpretation of Aphex Twin, while an inexperienced actor transcribes a French art-house film into English then performs it, live. Somehow, everything works and, if you've read the Internet, "fever-dream" does a good job of summarising the experience.

Despite the gorgeous visuals, I half-hated the combat. Ghat, the male protagonist, and partner Deadra (Alyx with a furry hat), flee the scene of an unsuccessful homicide attempt on the father-mother. Thus, the scene is set for Double Dragon-style

brawling. As you wander the wild plains, Versus-style splash screens let you know who you're about to kick the shit out of. Then, it's time to lay into the fugly with fists and feet, and sometimes mallets. Left-click and right-click with the mouse swing away and swing away harder. There are luxuries such as combos, throws, blocks and evades but, my God, sometimes they can be difficult to use effectively.

While combos link various straights and hooks, and quick grabs let you drive knees into brains, the lock-on has a tendency to switch on and off seemingly at random. Blocking, while easy to use when facing one opponent, doesn't work so well when Ghat is being hammered on by two or more enemies. And the evade maneuver requires the foresight of a Jedi and dexterity of Mike Tyson to actually use at all.

It's repetitive, like a good side-scrolling brawler, I guess. The boss battles are both imaginative and frustrating and sometimes cheap, too. Yet, I always want to play a little longer in order to see what insanity yet awaits, and what beast wants their face smashed in next.

Weird. That's what Zeno Clash is. Weird, and violent.

✎ Daniel Purvis

MAGIC, CHOCOLATE ICE CREAM & VIDEOGAMES

>> Opinion from the minds of tomorrow's welfare dependents

Ken Lee is the kind of gamer who likes to fixate on a particular experience



I am completely fixated with Street Fighter IV. And it's not because I'm any good at it. It's because I love how enthralling the entire experience has been. And this is a feeling that I haven't felt in a long time. This game has brought back so many memories of childhood gaming, where there was school yard chatter about whether Ken was actually better than Ryu, or about that secret code that would make Chun-Li flash her panties. Street Fighter IV has recaptured some of that magic that I felt when I was a kid, and do not often feel

“

Few games today capture my imagination as it once did. Is it the games that have changed, or is it mainly me?

”

with games nowadays.

I remember sitting on the floor, face pressed up against the television screen, caught up in whichever game was hot at the time. Double Dragon, Streets of Rage, Altered Beast, Forgotten Worlds, Lethal Enforcers... The list goes on. Games that don't really stand up to the test of time yet have left an undeniable mark on me. Those games captured a feeling of magic and wonder for me.

It is hard to quantify what this sense of magic and wonderment exactly is. But it seems that such feelings have become exceedingly rare for me now. It's a sad thing, but too often true. Few games today capture my imagination as it once did. Is it the games that have changed, or is it mainly me?

I suppose that I do not feel the magic anymore because I can see behind the veil. Perhaps the mystery is ever increasingly peeled away as one begins to understand the nuts and bolts behind the game. What used to be magical is now methodical. Rather than just merely playing, it becomes finding ways to game the system, to one-up the system, to

maximise benefit while limiting loss.

A telling difference is in the way I'm playing Civilization 4 now, as opposed to playing Civilization 2 way back then. Then, I was far more concerned with crushing my enemies, seeing them driven before me and hearing the lamentations of their women. Creating a sustainable model of economic growth whilst maintaining an efficient research model was not something I bothered with.

Knowledge of the systems behind the game had no bearing on the enjoyment. But playing Civ 4 now, I'm thinking numbers, costs and benefits. A smarter way to play, perhaps. A more unadulterated fun way, perhaps not. I think the saying 'ignorance is bliss' applies here.

It may even be that I don't value games as much as I once did. It was a rare commodity when I was a child, almost like chocolate ice cream. Once upon a time, chocolate ice cream was the best thing in the world. But the older I get, the more flavours I've tried, and the more freedom I have to acquiring ice cream. Now I can get any flavour I want, any time I want. Games and chocolate ice cream are no longer the same rare commodities they once were.

I can't say that other gamers have felt the way I do. I wonder if this is a stage that everyone reaches at some point. Perhaps this is natural progression. But I would like to think that though I am now at a point where I've become a little bit more jaded, that there is a younger generation that sees videogames with the same wide-eyed wonder that I once did.

INDIE DEVELOPMENT'S JEKYLL & HYDE COMPLEX

>> Opinion from the minds of tomorrow's welfare dependents

Nick Gilbert hosts The Good VS The Bad - ONLY on Comedy Central!



What is it about PC games recently? It seems that everyone with a few dollars to their name is churning out a game with some sort of ludicrous premise.

There's also a seemingly growing propensity to hearken back to the heady days of arcade gaming, by forcing one thing, or indeed group of things, into gladiatorial combat. Take, for instance, Popcap's recent offering, Plants Vs. Zombies. I'm not sure convinced a zombie could correctly identify what a

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Perhaps even more bizarre is the actual content of the game. It features a dancing Stalin.

”

flower is, let alone that it is a potential hazard.

Even more importantly, plants are not known for their combat abilities. Unless, of course, you refer to certain B-grade sci-fi movies, in which case I would say that the sorts of plants you're thinking of would not be the happy smiley plants you see in the screen shots. And they are most certainly NOT the sorts of plants that would fight against zombies.

Of course, by far the better example is Stalin Vs. Martians. If you could only use one word to describe its essential nature, it would be thus: Russian. Which is rather convenient, seeing as that was the place where the game was made. Perhaps even more bizarre is the actual content of the game. It features a dancing Stalin. It features gold coin pickups. It features ridiculous voice acting. And it most certainly does not feature fulfilling, or even painless, gaming. But for a game like Stalin Vs. Aliens, design competency is neither here nor

there. What is more important is why it exists in the first place.

For gamers, the most important answer is this: the PC still

offers the easiest avenue to publication and release of video games, even amidst initiatives like Xbox Live Arcade and WiiWare. If you have the desire, the ability, and the sheer bull-headedness to go and actually MAKE a game, instead of merely playing one, then PC is the best place to do it, especially if your concept is a little wacky, or, in industry speak, 'unmarketable'.

I mean, could you imagine trying to market and sell

something like Stalin Vs. Martians on anything near an industry scale? This is especially pertinent if you have actually played the game. In the traditional understanding of what a mainstream game is, it doesn't even register on the radar.

Titles like Auditorium, Perfectionism, and, dare I say, "AaaaAAaaaAAA – A total Disregard for Gravity"; all these are games where someone's clearly gone "Hey, how about this for a game..", before hurriedly heading off to actually build the thing. So many of the highlights, or indeed lowlights, of the independent scene, on both consoles and PCs, are games that are essentially prototypes, games that revolve around a simple, single, idea.

The problem on PC, of course, is that the tap is always running. Generally, for every innovative and exciting game, there are at least five that fall into either the 'what were they thinking?' or 'what were they smoking' categories.

The relatively open, inclusive nature of PC development can often be its own worst enemy. Sometimes wackiness is an expression of a developer's innovative and left-field ideas, and sometimes they're wacky just because a developer had nothing better to put into the game. Here's hoping we get more of the good stuff than the bad.

I HATE YOU MICHAEL ATKINSON

>> Opinion from the minds of tomorrow's welfare dependents

Tim Henderson takes time to respond properly.



A while ago, back when this column was just a pup, I went on a bit of a rant about how Australia needs an R18 games rating. I also happened to preview Fallout 3 in the same issue, and I had in fact written and submitted both pieces before the news of Fallout 3 being banned started to circulate around the Internet. Just one of those odd coincidences, I guess.

Thankfully, the decision surrounding Fallout was overturned, and a couple of small tweaks seem

“

I hate you, Michael Atkinson. I hate that you know I hate you, and I hate that you want me to hate you.

”

to have seen it make its way into Australia with an MA15 slapped on the cover in place of the R18 it got everywhere else in the world.

Let's be realistic here: how many of us would really consider this game as appropriate for a 15 or 16-year-old to play? Personally, I'm not too bothered by it.

What about a 12 or 13-year-old?

Yeah, me neither, but the current rating system is probably allowing for it. While there will always be parents who are irresponsible enough buy their children copies of GTA4, and while I will always loath them for their wilful ignorance, there are also those who will look at the age restrictions as a kind of general guideline. The words 'general' and 'guideline' are very intentional here, as most people don't see the branded age as a set-in-stone gospel. After all, if there's nothing between the old G8 and an M15 (hell, it now jumps straight from PG to M), then it's likely that most parents will consider that their child is close to fifteen, and thereby well enough suited to a 15-rated game. This is a reasonable

enough line of thinking.

The problem is that many of the 15-rated games in Australia are actually 18-rated games that have had a bare minimum cut off. It's fairly unlikely that the same parent would buy their child an 18-rated film.

I hate you, Michael Atkinson. I hate that you know I hate you, and I hate that you want me to hate you. But what I hate most of all is the evil way in which

you encourage, and then manipulate this hatred that is now felt by thousands of gamers nationwide. I hate this because, within these thousands of gamers, there are bound to be a few quick-to-anger cretins.

I think that what I am trying to get at is that Atkinson knows of the existence of Kotaku, which is something that I really hate...

“I would welcome a challenge in Croydon at the next general election (due in March 2010) about my record on censorship. Any reader who would like to challenge me should write to me c/- 488 Port Road, Welland 5007 and I will send him or her a nomination form to stand for Parliament.”

I would call this invitation entirely stupid, if it weren't for the fact that Atkinson sent it, quite intentionally, to Kotaku. He knows where to go if he wants to build a straw man for himself, and it's of little surprise that the Kotaku posters delivered exactly what he wanted. Let's take a look at the very first response to his 'Letter to Kotaku':

“A challenge? Hahaha, this dude is hilarious... how about getting him to some online COD and just own his n00b ass. And that photo of him... heIIIIloooo ladies!”

I HATE YOU MICHAEL ATKINSON

>> Opinion from the minds of tomorrow's welfare dependents

Tim Henderson takes time to respond properly.



Well, that's just fantastic. Thank you EzyLee, whoever you are, for kick-starting the childish replies. Five minutes after the letter goes up on the website and a collection of gamers are already providing all the fuel that is needed to make the rest of us look like unworthy insects, incapable of arguing our own case. I would chuckle quietly to myself about how all of the time Atkinson is spending on Kotaku is a waste of time, were it not for the knowledge that – juvenile though his behaviour is – it's actually deftly cunning; his shell of polite-but-inflammatory language has generated all of the comments he needs to run gaming's credibility into the ground. It doesn't matter if there were some intelligent responses mixed in with this garbage – if he's going to present any of this to parliament, then he's going to pick only the outbursts that suit his needs, of which there are plenty.

But if nothing else, EzyLee's comment draws out an interesting parallel. His (her?) language is less intelligent, but the tone and message is the same: Both Atkinson and Lee are being immature in their own way, both are insulting the other (although Atkinson is less brutish), and both are suggesting a challenge that is utterly, entirely preposterous.

Atkinson can't be expected to beat experienced

gamers at a round of Call of Duty any more than... well... than your average, experienced gamer can be expected to win a political election against an established rival (with a campaign built around wanting an R18 rating for videogames, to boot). That's just stupid, and the simple fact is that Atkinson may be good at aspects of his job that are, like it or not, more important. This issue may be something that I feel passionately about, but it wouldn't hold great sway over my vote – it's not hard to think of ten things that are roughly ten times more important.

And here lies the cold reality of the fact – this isn't the kind of issue that is going to make or break an election. But many of us act as if it is. It's possible that his entire electorate disagree on his stance towards gaming, but it wouldn't really mean anything either way when going to the polls. But, just because nobody in their right mind would build a campaign around games classification doesn't mean that it's unimportant, and it certainly doesn't make the holes in Atkinson's argument any less significant, or his methods with dealing with it any less immature. Hell, he even pointed this out himself:

“...on the whole, Kotaku seems to be a morass of hatred and abuse...”

Which is, of course, exactly why he was responding there, and taking the time to correct minor grammar mistakes in his responses (“That's number of threats, Gladice, not amount of threats” – do countable/uncountable nouns really matter here?) – it's an easy way to provoke intellectually vapid, tonally violent responses which are easy to argue against. There were some intelligent responses to be found, but it wasn't very hard for him to side-step them.

It's the irony at the end of it all that annoys me the most. This man makes claims about protecting children from harmful material, but so long as Australia is stuck with a maximum MA rating for games, then experience has taught me that the reality is that it's only easier for younger players to get their hands on adult content. Atkinson – I agree in regard to making people aware of the exact content that is in MA15 games, but you have to face the facts: many of these games could (and should) be slapped with an R18, which would automatically make the content ring louder in the ears of anyone who is willing to listen. These games have a right to exist (yes, even the ones that are actually puerile), and adults should be allowed to play them.

It's something that has become a part of most videogames, whether you pay attention to it or not. The voices you hear and the words played across your screen make up a little something called dialogue. MICHAEL PINCOTT takes a look at why this rarely mentioned aspect of videogames is important to the gaming experience.

THE POWER OF SPEECH

by Michael Pincott

One of the reasons that videogames are a sophisticated art form is that they have the potential for a higher level of storytelling than a film or a book. Unlike a film, a videogame can let you control, influence and develop a story's outcome. But there's no point in pushing videogames as the ideal storytelling catalyst they could potentially be when basics like dialogue go out the window. Some game developers recognise its importance and get the writers on board to make it work. Others are content to deal in lazy clichés and stereotypes. But does great dialogue make a game better? Can a game suffer because of terrible dialogue? Let's try and figure it out.

>> WHY SHOULD I CARE?

You might question whether game dialogue is actually important or not. After all, the dialogue is often peripheral to the actual gameplay experience. Ultimately, it comes down to what you get out of playing video games. There will be a fair portion of gamers to whom things like dialogue and story are of little concern, and that's fine. They purely want gameplay, and are likely to skip over cutscenes and story elements anyway. But for a significant proportion of gamers story, and by extension dialogue, is a large component of their gameplay experience. It is plot and character interaction that drives narrative, and it is narrative that drives

most single-player games. What drives narrative? Dialogue.

Obviously, dialogue isn't a concern for games without a heavy plot or need for deep characters. But for everyone else at the table, there's every reason to scrutinize what games do with the words that come out of the character's mouths. As with any medium, there are games that handle this element extremely well, and there are games that are utterly dire when it comes to constructing a snappy sentence or simply making the player buy into the characters by making those characters words believable. I'm not trying to convince you that dialogue is a make-or-break aspect of videogames. But while it may not be the cake, it is certainly a part of the icing, or at least the smarties around the outside.

>> THE GAMES THAT GET IT RIGHT

Grand Theft Auto (series)

Taking significant cues from verbal maestros like Quentin Tarantino, the GTA games have gotten better and better at their adult-oriented witty exchanges between characters, constituting everything from barked commands, cutting insults, sexual come-ons and simple inane chatter. The cutscenes that begin each mission have become



nearly as enjoyable as the missions themselves, drenched with dark humour and satire. If that wasn't enough, there are hours and hours of intensely funny radio programming that Dan Houser and Lazlow have been writing together since Grand Theft Auto 3. A big part of Grand Theft Auto's appeal is its humour, and most of this is conveyed

THE POWER of SPEECH

through the dialogue that drives the darkly funny interactions between its many characters.

The dialogue of the game's protagonists has evolved too. GTA 3's Claude made not a peep, while Tommy Vercetti and CJ Johnson, from Vice City and San Andreas respectively, were mostly just vehicles for snappy comebacks. But with GTA IV's Niko Bellic, Rockstar nailed it. His weariness and cynicism was conveyed perfectly through his words, a man with a past that contained significant trauma, and even the conversations with supporting characters were quite incredible at times. I can't properly describe the gravity and awkwardness of going bowling with Irish thug pal Packie, only for him to confess during the trip there that he had been sexually abused by his father as a child. It wasn't funny, nor was it what you could call entertaining, but it added a whole new sense of realism to the game.

Mass Effect

Mass Effect's dialogue wheel was essentially a fancier way of having characters converse rather than a new way, but it worked incredibly well. Part of the reason for this was that the dialogue was particularly well written. Having lengthy conversations between Shepard and the various members of his crew became a strength of the game and something that I looked forward to. Mass Effect has a strong emphasis on story,



and by continually checking in with the characters around him, Shepard gradually unveils detailed information and history about those individuals.

Each mission in the main storyline seemed to trigger more and more information, and accessing it all piece by piece with the dialogue wheel was like peeling back the layers of an onion. Each character had insightful and interesting things to say, and it lent the game a depth that many titles lack.

Metal Gear Solid (series)

Over the last ten years we've been treated to

perhaps the most convoluted and baffling plot in video game history in the form of the storyline of the Metal Gear Solid series. Metal Gear Solid has been guilty of many cheesy lines and moments, but there also been a lot of extremely good ones. The sheer amount of dialogue in these games is intimidating, but it's the way the CODEC system is used that warrants Metal Gear Solid's placing in this feature. In Metal Gear Solid you could use the CODEC to

THE POWER of SPEECH

call for assistance when you were stuck on what to do next, but it was a lot more than that.

Mei Ling would discuss philosophy whenever you saved your game, and over time people began to discover the contextual conversations you could have. What happens if you call Roy Campbell while you're in a cardboard box, or after you've just punched a crow? Huge amounts of information on the Metal Gear Solid universe became exposed through entirely optional conversations that the player would have to seek out themselves by calling the right character at the right time.

This element of the game is present throughout the



series and at times even manages to be surprisingly educational. In MGS3: Snake Eater, Snake would discuss classic movies with Paramedic, or the biological effects of the foods he ate. Calling guys like SIGINT or Otacon would yield more information about your weapons than you would ever need to

know. Then there was the truly incredible mindf**k at the end of Metal Gear Solid 2, where Campbell breaks the fourth wall by telling the player to stop playing the game and get some fresh air, and calls up moments later with the oft-quoted line:

"I hear it's amazing when the famous purple-stuffed worm in flap-jaw space, with the tuning fork, does a raw blink on hara-kiri rock! I need scissors!! 61!"

The text dump from Metal Gear Solid games would probably be so substantial that it would rival the Bible. But it's not sheer size that Metal Gear Solid should be credited for, it's quality stuff; I'll never forget Metal Gear Solid 2's



bizarre misstep in this department:

Campbell: There's a terminal in front of the elevator, a node.

Raiden: Did you say 'nerd'?

Campbell: Not nerd - node.

Raiden: Oh.

Ever wondered why people hate Raiden? Now you know.

Fallout 3

Fallout 3 is a game where, like Mass Effect, your dialogue choices can have significant impact on the game. Your character is constantly presented with a variety of choices in what to say, and these interactions will shape how you proceed. Say the right thing to one character and an easier method of completing a mission might become exposed, or you could bypass tasks completely. One of the numeric skills at your disposal is called Speech, which governs just how effective a



THE POWER of SPEECH

diplomat you can be. The books you can find in the game that increase this skill are amusingly titled 'Lying – Congressional Style.' The game attaches a potential success rate to certain statements. You can risk lying to a character to gain an advantage, but a lower success rate means they might not believe you, and the advantage evaporates. Certain perks open up additional dialogue options to women or to children, and dialogue options also become available if you have a high Intelligence rating.

Fallout 3's dialogue system was comprehensive and complex, and it was a big part of why the game was such a good one. Even though your character was essentially a mute, the interactions with all of the Wasteland's strange inhabitants were fascinating because of well-written dialogue and an expansive dialogue tree which could take your game in any number of directions. And let's not forget Ron Perlman's iconic 'War... war never changes...' speech which has occurred at the start of each Fallout game. The weary nihilism of his words is perfect for setting the tone of the game.

The Darkness

'The Darkness deserves its place in this list not only for its mature, adult-oriented and well-executed dialogue, but for the extremely innovative use of its loading screens. Not content to post a simple hint on the game, a still image, or worst of all, a terminally boring loading bar,



developers Starbreeze instead treat the player to some fascinating monologues from main character Jackie Estacado, gradually exposing his character in ways you could never be privy to while shooting up the bad guys.

The Darkness is a fine example of a sophisticated game made for adults, almost the videogame equivalent of a HBO drama (coincidentally the voice of Jackie was provided by Kirk Acevedo, who appeared in HBO program Oz), and these loading screen scenes were evidence that Starbreeze were thinking outside of the box.

In fact, almost all Starbreeze games have great dialogue. The recently released Assault on Dark



Athena contains some truly fantastic performances, despite the use of swear words and vulgarity – it's done in a manner that is consistent with the character speaking the lines.

BioShock

When the player steps into the world of Rapture, it's

THE POWER of SPEECH

a world already obliterated. Important developments in Rapture's story occur long before you arrive, leaving you only with the grisly aftermath. What transpired before your arrival is exposed gradually, bit by bit, by finding cassette tapes on which the rather miserable citizens of Rapture recorded their thoughts on what was going on around them (and those thoughts were often their final ones). It was a surprisingly effective method of exposition and one that Dead Space would later shamelessly plunder, with recordings found by Isaac revealing how the crew of the Ishimura met their violent demise. While Dead Space's recordings consisted mostly of screaming and dying, BioShock's are varied and interesting, covering not only the main thrust of the

initial speech recited by Rapture's founder Andrew Ryan, which, combined with the breathtaking opening sequence aboard the bathysphere, makes for one of the greatest video game openings of all time. The second stand out is also from Mr Ryan, later in the game, but this time it's in person, and it's very, very intense. Without delving too much into the spoilers of the scene, prepare for the phrase "A man chooses, a slave obeys" to be burned into your mind for a long time. It's an incredibly cinematic scene that made its impact not only with the ensuing events of that speech, but the words themselves. For many players the game's level of overall quality dropped after this point. Having reached such a peak it didn't



events that occurred, but the motivations, trusts and actions of the characters you hear from, many of whom you never see in person.

Aside from the tapes, two moments in BioShock stood out in terms of dialogue, one being the



have much alternative.

Prince of Persia

For nearly every moment of this game the player is paired with the sassy and magically acrobatic Elika. It turns out not only is she very helpful at saving you when you're about to plummet to your death, she's not a bad conversationalist either. However, only a small fraction of the dialogue is actually forced upon the player. Everything else is entirely optional and takes place in regular play. With a simple button press you'll initiate a short sequence of dialogue between the Prince and Elika. Usually their conversations are contextual; connected to something that's just happened, relating to the area they're in or the boss they're about to face. In a way it's a simplified version of the Metal Gear Solid system mentioned earlier. Their conversations are often casual but they act to develop the relationship between the two characters. The impressive thing about this approach is how subtly the



THE POWER of SPEECH

game deals with the blossoming romance between the two characters. While the two characters increasingly seem to like one another, it was only very occasionally dealt with in the open and the game felt a little bit more meaningful as a result.

>> ON TO PART 2

Of course, there are plenty of games with great use of dialogue besides those mentioned here, but unfortunately there are just as many who seek to assault your ears with pointless vulgarity, ridiculous clichés and offensive stereotypes. We'll be taking a look at the some of the games seeking to reduce our intelligence in Pixel Hunt's next issue, and determine once and for all the importance of game dialogue.

✎ Michael Pincott



BRIDGING THE GAP »

>> A chat with Peter Barlow, games event organiser extraordinaire.

» DISSECTA

If you have been living in Melbourne in the past few years, you may already be familiar with Dissecta, eGames Expo and the International Digital Entertainment Festival. But you may not be familiar with Peter Barlow, the man behind the efforts to galvanise the gaming public, and to link developers with game fans. I recently sat down with Peter, and chatted about his thoughts and future plans for these initiatives.

Although Dissecta was not originally Peter's concept, he has recently taken over the reins from its original convener, Tim Richards. Richards' idea of starting direct conversations between developers and enthusiasts was a unique and timely one. Convened when Richards was working as a legal consul for Jumbuck Entertainment,



it may seem odd that it would take someone who could be considered an outsider to pull it together. But as Peter explains, that could have been the key factor, "We look at it in a different manner, and we also aren't caught up in the day to day workings of it [games development]. It possibly takes someone a little bit on the outside to be able to pull something like this together."

Peter is enthusiastic in maintaining Dissecta's vision of getting game developers out to talk to people, "One of the things I didn't want to do, coming on board and keeping Dissecta going, was that I didn't want to change the flavour of something Tim had worked very strongly to achieve." Keeping to these principles has helped Peter to shape each new Dissecta event.

Taking over Dissecta, however, was not a happy affair for Peter. Late in 2008, Richards passed on after battling severe pulmonary hypertension due to congenital heart disease, shortly after receiving a transplant. Having met Richards' a few years ago



as he (Peter) was organising the eGames Expo, Peter strongly supported the Dissecta initiative. But as Richards' health deteriorated, the possibility that Dissecta would eventually wind down became increasingly real. Peter was adamant that wouldn't happen, and offered to take over Dissecta until Richards' health improved. "Unfortunately, that wasn't the case," he said.

Although the primary audience for Dissecta has remained those interested in games development,

BRIDGING THE GAP»

there are many areas it can potentially expand into. Dissecta has never been limited to only developer focused events, and Peter notes, "I'm quite comfortable that if an opportunity presents itself... that is something that we want to explore more and more. We don't have a set regimental way of approaching Dissecta." It has previously presented topics of more general interest, and including this into Dissecta's future lineup is part of Peter's plan.

Maintaining and building partnerships also continues to be key to Dissecta's future. It has enjoyed strong support from a number of developers, the Academy of Interactive Entertainment and Film Victoria. The partnership with the State Library of Victoria has been especially crucial in providing a home for Dissecta now. Peter remarks, "It allows me to focus more on the content, and not on the logistics." Building more support for the initiative, and getting more government support remains high on the agenda.

» INTERNATIONAL DIGITAL ENTERTAINMENT FESTIVAL (iDEF) & THE eGAMES EXPO

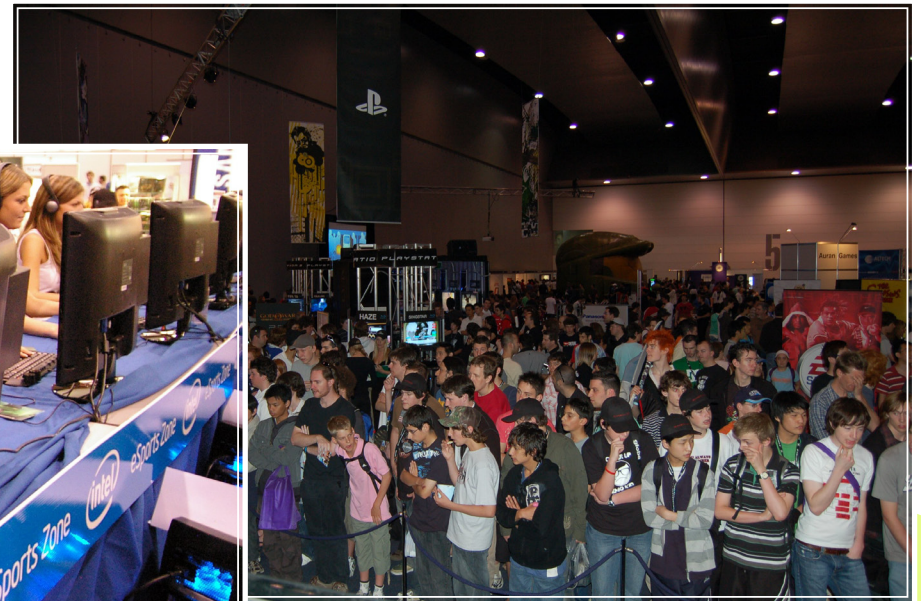
While Dissecta may not have been Peter's own, the eGames Expo and more recently, iDEF, are most definitely his babies. The germination of both began when Peter was operating a couple of LAN cafes within Melbourne. He recalls, "What motivated me more than anything was that I saw dedicated people really working hard to achieve, ultimately, very small recognition for their efforts. I thought that if we could combine all of that effort into one building



at one time, and get all that enthusiasm into one environment, it's going to be a monster."

Launched in 2006, the eGames & Entertainment Expo was conceived as a showcase and a celebration of games. And while the Expo may have a strong consumer focus, Peter has never lost sight of the fans. He says, "The event was built on community. It was built on the opportunity for people to get together. People that don't normally physically see each other, that may well be online community friends."

In 2008, Peter aimed to diversify the Expo to reach a much broader audience. He notes that "having strongly established eGames, it gave us an opportunity to establish a more mainstream or mature show which we called the Digital Lifestyle Show." And packaging both the Show and the Expo together under the one umbrella of iDEF seemed like the best way forward. Peter likens the idea to the concept of the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, where there are a series of events and



activities occurring under one banner. Intrinsic to expanding the reach of the show was incorporating education services and training as the third major component of iDEF.

This year, iDEF 2009 has even more plans to grow its presence. Last year's event saw community events such as cosplay competitions and game tournaments. Increasing the engagement with the community has always been of great importance, and Peter has hopes that it will continue to grow and strengthen in this year's festival. He also hopes that more groups will take advantage of iDEF's open format, and participate in the festival. "Ideally, if other events want to attach themselves or market themselves under the iDEF banner, we're obviously open to that and quite happy for that to be the case... We will work in a manner which will hopefully, ultimately benefit these organisations or groups, because we can create that level of exposure that they potentially won't get access to," Peter comments. Focusing on actual hands-on gameplay will also be a highlight for this year's iDEF.

BRIDGING THE GAP»

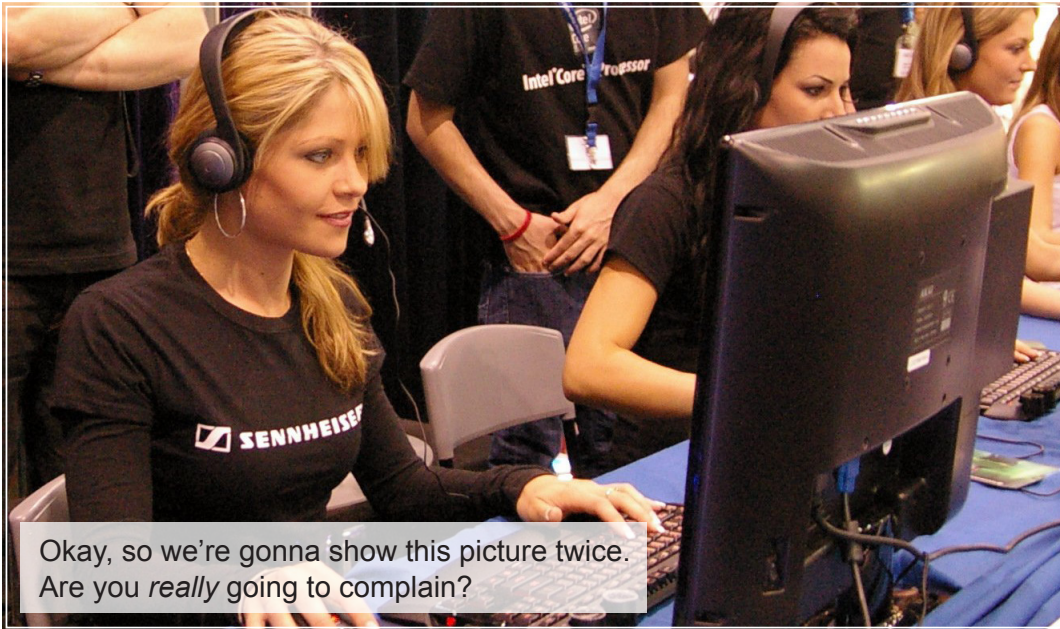
Moving beyond 2009, not only does Peter hope that iDEF remains a mainstay in people's calendars, he hopes that it will become the destination for all gamers. "I think that Australia, or the Australian region, needs its own event... so that people will see us on the map." Although there is the potential to grow the show into a national or regional event, he adds, "We're still a little bit scared that if we move it around, it may water down what it is and what it can achieve. But in the same token, it's not off the cards."

» iDEF 2009

The International Digital Entertainment Festival will be held in early November 2009, at a new venue, the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne. More details on this year's event will become available shortly at its website:

<http://www.ideal.com.au>

Ken Lee



GRAND THEFT AUTO: CHINATOWN WARS

>> Dylan Burns has a red fire engine.

Developer: Rockstar Leeds
Publisher: Rockstar
Genre: Third-person Action/Crime
OFLC: MA15+
Review Platform: Nintendo DS



PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

It's no secret that I absolutely love the GTA series. Some of my best gaming memories involve late nights, more than a few drinks, a bunch of mates and rampages through Liberty/Vice City and San Andreas. Part of the appeal of these games stems from the fact that you can approach the open-world design from a variety of angles, with unexpected hilarity often being

for Rockstar, particularly given the realistic and rich world that was recently delivered to gamers in the form of GTA IV. It's therefore pretty damn impressive to chuck Chinatown Wars into your DS and discover that not one iota of compromise has been made. This is modern GTA, in your hands.

“ *While the other handheld games on the PSP were certainly great, even if they did employ a copy and paste aesthetic, Chinatown Wars is an artistic revisit to the series' roots.* ”

the result. Who knew that running over pedestrians with the fire truck could send a bunch of grown men into fits of laughter? Or that a single well-placed jump could elicit an hour of repeat attempts, trying to get the most impressive launch possible?

>> HOLD MY HAND

GTA's move to the DS could be misconstrued as a step backwards





Crotch beats gun!



When you think about it, the potential was always there for GTA to return to its roots as a top-down experience. While the other handheld games on the PSP were certainly great, even if they did employ a copy and paste aesthetic, Chinatown Wars is an artistic revisit to the series' roots. I say 'artistic' because the game's design – in terms of cramming all of the modern GTA elements into a top-down adventure – is an incredibly creative and impressive achievement.

>> **FLIED LICE**

I'll start with the game's weakest aspects first, as the remaining experience is pretty much gaming crack. Chinatown War's story is, unfortunately, quite bad. Something about a family sword and lots of Chinese gangs fighting each other and, well, it doesn't really go much further than that. If anything can be predictable in GTA games, its that the little man – you – will be betrayed by your 'boss' and have to double cross several acquaintances on

your way to taking over the city.

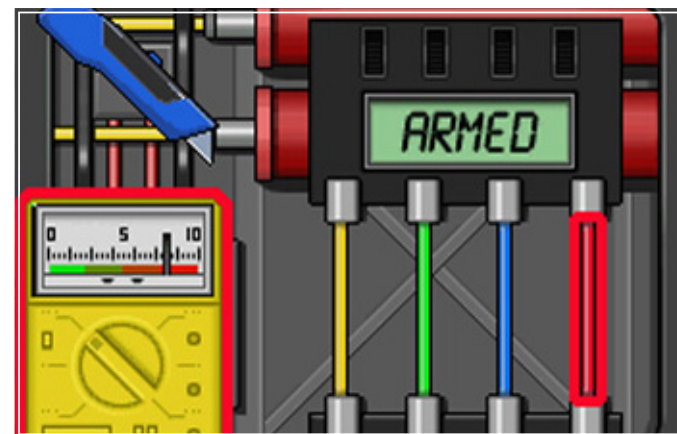
The problem is that the writing is stupid. The characters are shallow, the jokes aren't funny, the main character keeps drawing attention to just how silly each mission's situation is, and it's a real step backwards from the generally excellent writing seen in GTA IV. But then, in many ways the fun of GTA comes from writing your own story in the game, of running amuck and applying your own twisted morality (or lack thereof) to the world, which can help to make up for the lack of a meaningful main storyline.

>> **"IM STILL A VIRGIN"**

Almost paradoxically, the game world is still as hilarious as ever, with enough funny pedestrian mutterings to keep even the most maniacal driver giggling. There's also real incentive to explore in the game, to try out all the side missions and see what kind of reward you might get from completing

each level. One example: once you complete all the fire truck missions your character will be unharmed by fire – once I unlocked this I had a blast with the rampage missions involving the flamethrower!

There are 100 security cameras that you can find and destroy if you wish – with molotovs, which are created at petrol stations via a short and fun mini-game. In fact, the touch screen is used really well in Chinatown Wars.



Not a lot, mind you; most of the on-foot and driving action is controlled via the console's buttons, but when you do use the stylus it's almost always in an enjoyable and intuitive manner – such as hotwiring cars, making molotovs, negotiating your PDA, and buying and selling drugs.

>> HIT ME

Some people find the inclusion of a drug economy rather strange, or even offensive, but I never really found it to be morally problematic. In the game, you need money and riding the wave of the drug economy is simply a means to an end – that end being a shitload of cash to spend on safe houses, weapons and... more drugs.

The heart of the drug trade – and the game in general – is your PDA. You'll receive real-time emails giving you tips on who/what to buy cheap and where to sell for a profit. It's extremely easy to amass a fortune in a small amount of time, so if you don't like the drug side of things you can always ignore the emails and go about your business. The PDA is also

great for broader options, such as placing an in-game marker trail on the road – so you can see the route to your destination. Given the rather limited top down perspective, I found this option to be a real life saver.

>> YOU WANT NOODLE?

It saddens me a bit to read reports that Chinatown Wars hasn't sold all that well on DS, because for me the game is one of the best I've played on the platform. It takes all that I love about GTA games and offers a deep and customisable handheld experience.

The only reason I can think of, for the game's low sales is the fact that a lot of so called 'hard core' gamers may not even own a DS, due to the DS's predominant 'kiddy' image. Either that or they just don't see how a cartoonish version of GTA can beat the realistic presentation that they're used to on their 360 and/or PS3.

If you fall in the former camp, I honestly think this could be a game to buy a DS for. There are hours and hours of content packed into the



cartridge, and you'd be opening yourself up to a whole library of awesome games. If you're of the latter, again I can attest that Chinatown Wars is just as visceral, violent and 'mature' as GTA IV – it just lacks some of the subtle humour and excellent dialogue.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Spending around \$20k on drugs and having the cops bust the deal. Cue a frantic, violent race to reach my safe house. The damn fuzz followed me all the way there and I just made my front door with a sliver of health left – saved!

WE LIKED:



- + Side missions galore
- + Touch-based mini-games
- + PDA

WE DISLIKED:



- Lack of quality in the story and writing department.

VERDICT:

Although portable in nature, this is bursting at the seams with GTA goodness.

MADWORLD

>> Cody Hargreaves washes his scotch down with a little more scotch.

Developer:
Publisher:
Genre:
OFLC:

Platinum Games
SEGA
Action
MA15+



Review Platform:

Nintendo Wii

PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

It's been a long time since I last had the opportunity to make the most of the interactive 'make you feel like you're really there' controls on the Wii. It was Metroid prime 3: Corruption that last gave me that chance, forcing me to draw the living-room curtains before playing, shielding me from the judgmental eyes of passers-by as I attempted to confront a horde of Space

Wiimote firmly to my arm before booting up MadWorld for the first time (having learned that it was designed with similar arm maneuvering antics in mind). You can imagine how excited I was to discover that protagonist Jack Cayman had a retractable chainsaw attached to his arm. Wiimote attached to mine, chainsaw to his—it didn't take a great deal of time to realise that the next few

“ *MadWorld is a game of cartoon violence and off-beat hilarity (generally in that order) that follows the story of Jack as he works his way through the ranks of DeathWatch ...* ”

Pirates while simultaneously opening a nearby door with the kind of arm-maneuvering one might expect to see from a monkey in the early stages of a seizure. Despite the need to sport a sweat-suit and shower six times a day, I enjoyed that playing experience—and the handful of others like it—and I've missed them dearly.

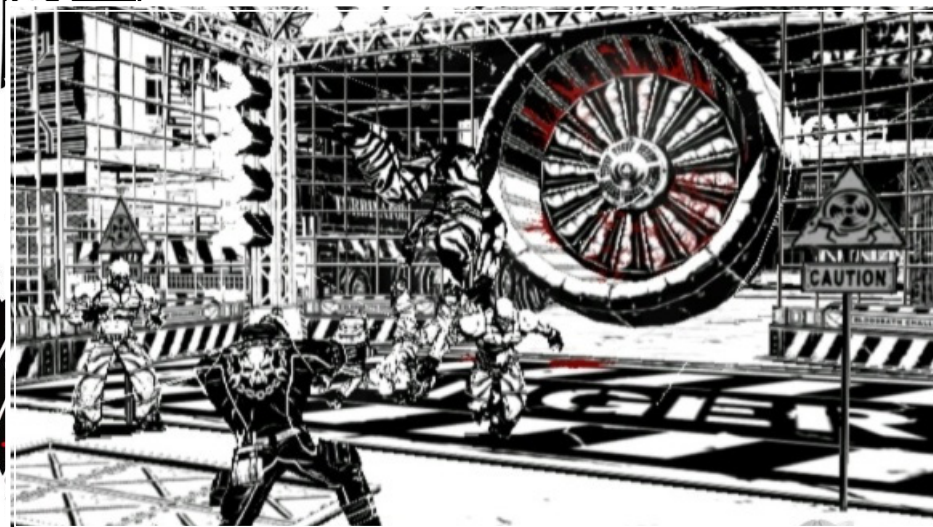
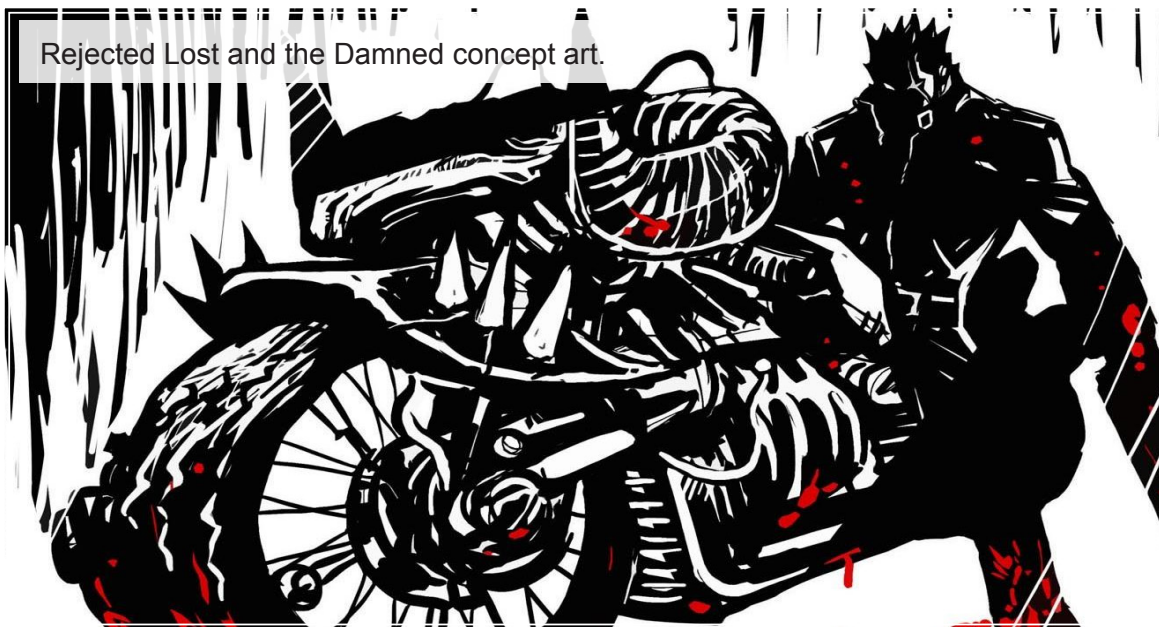
So much so, in fact, that I rummaged through my closet and found that same sweat-suit, and strapped the



?!

Commentators John DiMaggio voices Bender in Futurama and Greg Proops is from Whose Line is it Anyway?

Rejected Lost and the Damned concept art.



hours were going to kick all kinds of arse. And they did; oh they did.

>> IT'S ALL ABOUT THE POINTS

MadWorld is a game of cartoon violence and off-beat hilarity (generally in that order) that follows the story of Jack as he works his way through the ranks of DeathWatch, a game-show for the rich and powerful that more or less revolves around securing a city through terrorist means and forcing the inhabitants to fight for their freedom. As such, most of the game involves steering Jack through various areas of the city by slaughtering the now feral inhabitants, earning 'points' in the process and eventually unlocking a boss battle and the next area.

It is in the earning of these 'points' that the majority of the gaming takes place, as how many are awarded per kill is entirely up to you. Simply throwing an enemy into the air and slicing them

in half on the way down (regardless of how great it may feel with the help of the Wiimote) will only net you a small amount of points, when compared to jamming a tire around them, sticking a signpost through their skull, and slamming them repeatedly against the closest spike-covered wall (lovingly referred to as the Rose Bush). The more points you earn, the more power-ups that are made available, ranging from new weapons that offer a change from the chainsaw, to environmental changes such as spike covered trains, buses, and giant saw blades.

Earning enough points will also unlock special Bloodbath Challenges which offer a welcome break from the monotony of routine violence by adding a whole new flavour of carnage. You might be required to, say, launch enemies into a giant dart board with a baseball bat in the ever-popular Man Darts, or hurl your foes into a giant airplane turbine, making sure to connect with as many others as possible along the way to really stack up the points. Such is the wonderful style

of MadWorld, and it's something that is retained throughout the majority of the game.

>> MUSIC TO MY EARS

Now, while I wouldn't dare attempt to steal the thunder from something as profoundly enjoyable as jamming a bottle of suds down the throat of a zombie, shoving them into a barrel of fire and watching as they fly gloriously through the air



and land in front of a moving train—such experiences are really only half the fun. It's the commentary provided by Kreese Kreeley and Howard "Buckshot" Holmes (John DiMaggio and Greg Proops respectively) that makes MadWorld the wonderful game that it is, by offering some of the funniest puns and witticisms that I've heard in a game to date.

As much as I'd like to, listing some of these wonderful lines here would only serve to take away from what they can offer in the proper context of a given situation, as it's something you simply have to hear for yourself. But it is without a doubt my favourite part of MadWorld, and it wasn't long after I had begun playing that I was motivated to attempt some truly crazy execution methods just to hear what clever thing 'the boys' had to say about it. This was especially true in the boss fights; fights that ordinarily would have been great simply because of the Wiimote controls and over-the-top brutality, achieved an all new level of brilliance due solely to the



insults thrown around in the commentary every time I messed up.

Of course, hear them repeat the same line a few hundred times and it quickly begins to lose its appeal, which brings me to my only real complaint about MadWorld, the repetition. Play for a long enough period of time, and you begin to feel like you've seen it all before. Most areas of the city differ from one another enough to provide a different experience each time; however the kill variety within these levels rarely changes. You'll be sticking sign-posts through the heads of enemies in the first level, and lamp-posts in the last. However, other areas of the levels do change, and it's there that you'll have the

opportunity to express your inner artist, and escape a large portion of the monotony.

The black and white graphics presented in a comic book style suffer a little under scrutiny,



as does the predictable storyline and cheesy characters. But as far as I'm concerned the remaining elements of the game manage to draw everything together, making MadWorld the must-play title that it is.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Kreeley: "You sir, are a f\$*ling idiat-o!" ... **Holmes:** "Thank you for calling me sir!"
Holmes: "One minute left!" ... **Kreeley:** "One minute, exactly how much time your wife spent f\$*ling you on your honeymoon!"

WE LIKED:



- + Everything comes together well
- + Awesome commentary

WE DISLIKED:



- Repetition
- Occasionally temperamental controls

VERDICT:

Hilarious and enjoyable from beginning to end. One of the few must-have Wii titles.

RESISTANCE: RETRIBUTION

>> Stephen Milich couldn't resist.

Developer: Sony Bend
Publisher: SCEA
Genre: Third-person Shooter
OFLC: MA15+
Review Platform: Sony PSP



PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

I keep getting reviews for sequels and spinoffs to games that I either haven't played in a long time or have very little experience with. My interaction with the Resistance series doesn't extend past the PS3 demo, which I didn't really get into, but in a way my lack of experience is good because it allows me to view this game with a fresh perspective. It also means that

breakdown caused by having to kill his own brother who had been captured and partially converted by the invading alien race, The Chimera (breathe – Ed). During his time as a mercenary, Grayson earned quite the reputation for destroying Chimera conversion centres, but he ended up being captured by his own army and sentenced to death for desertion.

“ There's also a large variety of human and alien weapons to use, including rocket launchers and grenades, and you'll also get the chance to man some heavy mounted machine guns to cut down some alien scum. ”

now that I've played and enjoyed it I'm now interested in the series and have to buy both of the PS3 games to catch up on some storyline. Dylan... I need some money.

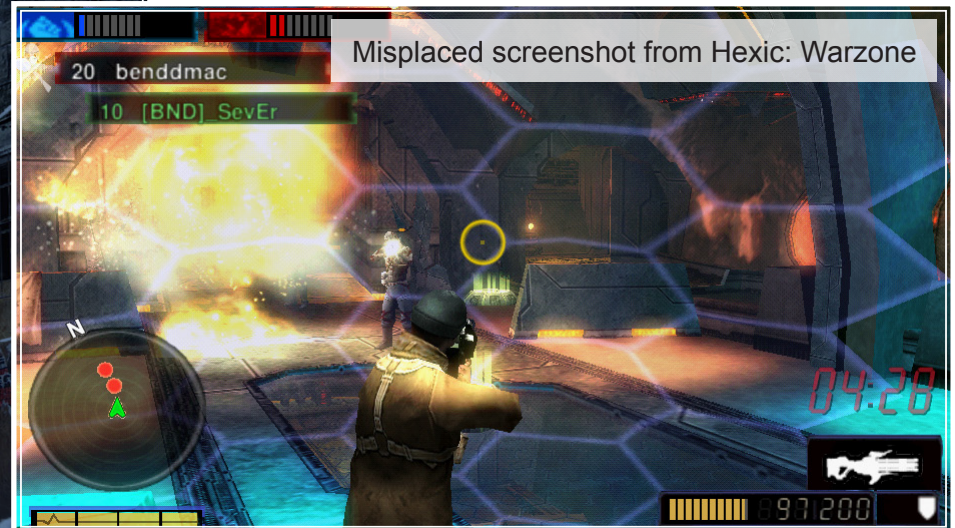
>> POMMY ALIENS

Set after the events of the first game, you play as James Grayson, a former British Soldier who deserted the army and went rogue due to a nervous



You can connect your Resistance 2 PS3 save to the PSP for an alternate storyline.

The snowman death scene is heart-breaking.



You begin the game when Grayson is imprisoned, awaiting his fate at the nasty end of a firing squad. He is given a reprieve when he is asked to join the European Marquis Resistance and use his experiences to help them take down the Chimera who are invading Europe with their new, evolved conversion process.

James Grayson is an odd sort of character, he is driven by revenge for the death of his brother, so while his missions involve helping the Marquis accomplish their own goals, his personal goal is just to kill as many Chimera as possible, no matter what the cost. Despite his hardened edge, he has a dry sense of humour and often throws out funny one-liners when facing his enemies. As you follow his adventures throughout the game you see him transform from a man seeking only vengeance to someone who finally starts to let go of all that hatred and starts to think of more than just revenge.

>> OVER MY SHOULDER

Unlike its parent game and sequel, Resistance Retribution is played from a 3rd person perspective, most likely because the PSP is awful for playing 1st person games (due to the lack of a 2nd analogue nub). The PSP's limited control setup does work against the game because while the analogue nub is used for moving and strafing, you are forced to use the face buttons for turning and looking (in place of a 2nd nub) and it's quite awkward because it's not analogue so it's hard to aim accurately. Luckily, there are some automated controls to ease the pain. There's an auto aim, which works fine most of the time, although can be tricky to get it to lock onto your intended target when there are multiple enemies. There's also an automated cover system where you'll automatically hide behind cover when you get close enough to it. The cover system is essential for a lot of the firefights, quite often you are vastly outnumbered or overpowered so you'll be forced to hide and pick off enemies one by one before you can move on

to the next section. A full frontal assault is just not possible.

Most missions involve making your way through linear levels, shooting down wave after wave of Chimera or drones. Sometimes you are faced with larger boss aliens that will take some heavier weaponry to take down. There is some variety with enemies and as you progress you'll get to meet more powerful ones, such as the Boilers, which are a female variety of Chimera who have large heads that explode into



poisonous gas once they get close enough to you - keep your distance from them.

>> HEAD ASPLODED

There's also a large variety of human and alien weapons to use, including rocket launchers and grenades, and you'll also get the chance to man some heavy mounted machine guns to cut down some alien scum. Then there's the chance to control a Mech as you make your way through some trenches, which is always fun.

Once you get sick of going it alone in the single player campaign there's an online multiplayer mode with all of your typical deathmatch options, such as free for all, capture the flag and team death match. The times that I played online there were a fair number of players online and plenty of matches to choose from so it looks like there's quite a strong online community for the game at the

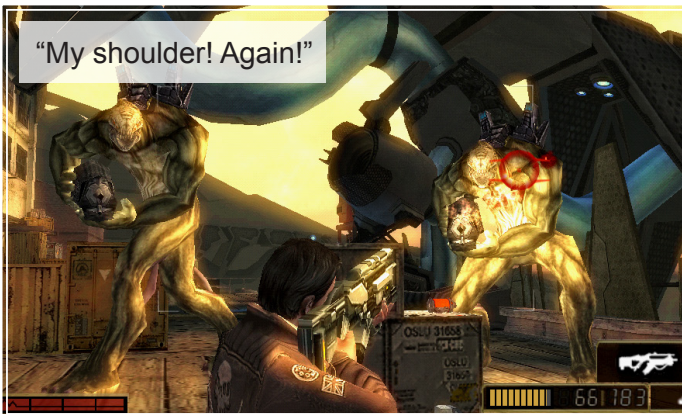


moment, so finding a game shouldn't be hard.

Graphically, the game looks nice, levels don't vary much in look due to the wartime alien setting so expect to see a lot of browns and greys. The character models look good and the CGI cut-scenes between major missions are of a high quality with decent sound so watching the wartime action and having things exploding in your face is quite the cinematic experience.

Fans of the series already know that they'll want this game and despite the controls taking some getting used to, some annoying loading times and the occasional frustrating mission you'll have to repeat.

Resistance Retribution is fun to play, it has an interesting storyline and likeable characters. For action junkies, this is at the top of the PSP's current lineup.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Getting hold of a sniper rifle and popping off the heads of the 'Boilers' who are otherwise a pain to kill with regular guns.

WE LIKED:



- + Driving the Mechs.
- + Grayson's sense of humour.

WE DISLIKED:



- Controls took some getting used to.
- Auto aim wasn't perfect.

VERDICT:

Highly recommended for PSP owners looking for some blasting action.

TENCHU: SHADOW ASSASSINS

>> Michael Pincott writes this review in deadly ninja silence.

Developer:
Publisher:
Genre:
OFLC:

Acquire
Ubisoft
Stealth/Action
MA15+



Review Platform: Nintendo Wii

PS3 | 360 | **WII** | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

Everybody knows that ninjas are awesome. They're fast, silent and deadly. They wield nifty weapons like katanas and nunchucks. Does the fact that ninjas are awesome make a ninja videogame awesome by default? Not quite.

sight, which is portrayed approximately by a thin yellow line that extends from their heads. Avoiding the line means going either above, below or sticking to the shadows. Sources of light like candles and lamps will hinder your ability to slink unseen from bush to bush (the best things for a ninja to hide in, apparently).

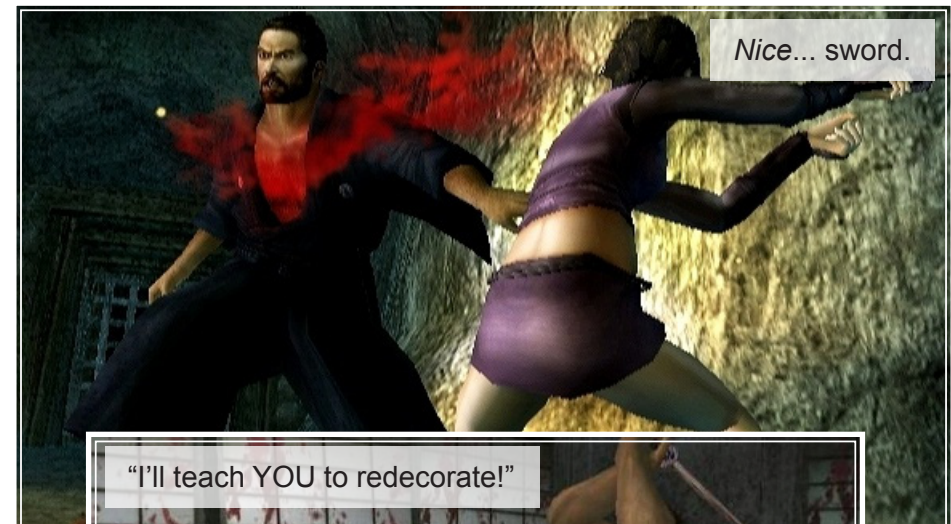
>> **NINJA NINJA**

“

Being a stealthy ninja of course means performing stealthy ninja kills, and this is one of the stronger areas of the game.

”

Shadow Assassins, the eighth game in the Tenchu series, sees you returning to male ninja Rikimaru and female ninja Ayame, playing as the former for the first half of the game and the latter for the second. Shadow Assassins has an admirable, if clumsily executed, stealth system. Your level of visibility is indicated by a moon icon in the bottom left of the screen. When it is clear, you're visible, when obscured by dark clouds, you're not. Naturally it's all about avoiding your enemy's line of



?!

This is the eighth title in the Tenchu series, but only the fourth game in terms of the series' main storyline.

These need to be extinguished from a distance, using either a shuriken or a thin bamboo pipe that functions as a water pistol. The game consistently emphasises its stealth aspect, which is a nice change from the many games that include stealth as a half-hearted and barely thought through exercise that might occupy 5% of the actual gameplay.

>> **HEALTHY & STEALTHY**

Being a stealthy ninja of course means performing stealthy ninja kills, and this is one of the stronger areas of the game. Sneaking along the rafters above a sentry, only to silently drop down and snap his neck is hugely satisfying, as is pulling an unsuspecting guard from the water's edge into the splashy-splashy below. The stealth executions are a lot of fun to do, though they're disappointingly tame compared to a blood-soaked evisceration fest like Ninja Gaiden.

Ninjas in feudal Japan obviously didn't have much in the way of radar but this game provides a fairly handy stealth vision mode by pressing the Z button, that essentially acts as

thermal vision, highlighting enemies, hiding spots and light sources. But it's not easy being stealthy and you will be caught more often than you'd like. If you have a sword when you're spotted, you'll usually be thrust into a brief first-person melee with your opponent in which you're supposed to use the Wii remote to deflect and attack your opponent. The reality is a vague wobble-fest wherein you might win, but probably won't. If you don't have a sword when discovered, your ninja simply disappears in a cloud of dust and feathers and respawns at the start of the area. It's a baffling mechanic.

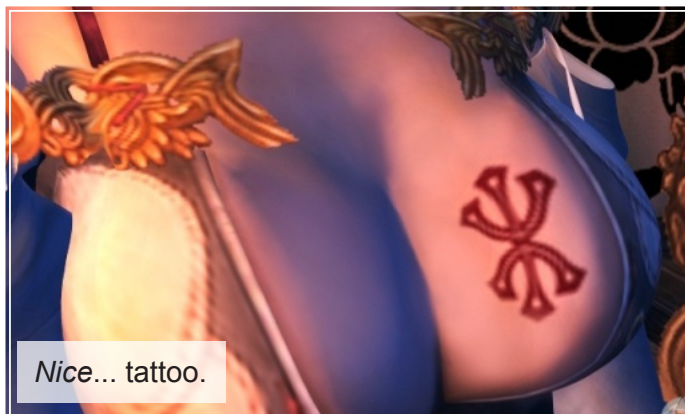
>> **NOT ENOUGH CLARET**

The game's visuals are uninspiring; dark, murky and generic. Disappointingly there isn't even much in the way of blood. It's a merely aesthetic quibble, but when I play a ninja game I expect blood spurts: everywhere, all the time. Some detachable limbs wouldn't go astray either. Again, Ninja Gaiden has spoiled me. I should also mention that the voiceover guy is about the least suitable person for a ninja game ever. He ought to be commentating on beetle



mating habits on the Discovery channel, not providing his droll tones to a game about GODDAMNED NINJAS.

If Tenchu's stealth elements could be combined with Ninja Gaiden's combat elements, we might have the ultimate ninja game on our hands. As it stands, Ninja Gaiden is still freaking awesome, but Tenchu is still just Tenchu.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Creeping along the rafters above an unsuspecting guard, only to drop down and snap his neck in twain with some deft Wiimote wagging. Clean... silent... elegant... NINJA.

WE LIKED:



- + Stealth kills, being a ninja
- + Some solid game mechanics.

WE DISLIKED:



- Not much blood
- Fairly mild violence
- Lacking in polish.

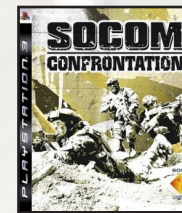
VERDICT:

Some good stealth elements, but this is otherwise a fairly mediocre game.

SOCOM: CONFRONTATION

>> Daniel Purvis pulls the trigger and wonders why he feels inadequate.

Developer: Slant Six Games
Publisher: SCEE
Genre: Survival Horror
OFLC: MA15+
Review Platform: PlayStation 3



PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

Eh, it's alright, I guess.

Honestly, I'd have expected more from one of Sony's prized exclusive franchises, and the first in the SOCOM series to hit the PlayStation 3.

Confrontation plays like a third-person version of Counter-Strike, mixed with the experience-based perks and

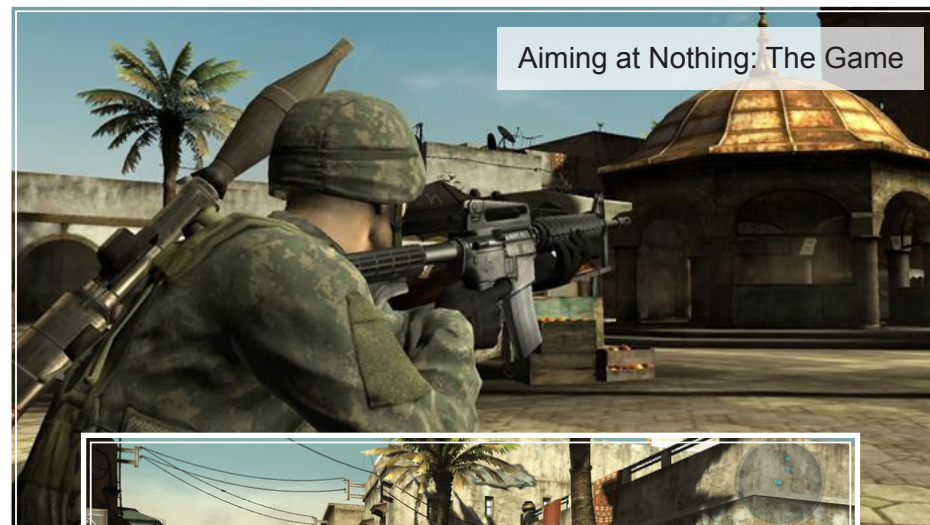
>> INITIAL IMPRESSIONS WERE PROMISING

Confrontation feels very game-y, with a loose, yet responsive arcade-like control system. Sprinting, running, jumping, crouching, shooting and making use of the tactical cover-system will be familiar for anyone with shooter experience.

“ *Confrontations trades rich and complex texturing and environmental details in exchange for a high draw distance, providing snipers with the opportunity to pick targets off from very far away.* ”

weapon upgrades that make recent additions to the Call of Duty series so addictive.

Yet, Confrontations lacks that immediate flair that whips out, grabs your balls, forces you to grit your teeth and hiss “Just... one... more... round.” While many good games can get by without this ephemeral quality, an online-only multiplayer requires this X Factor to remain buoyant in the long-term.



?!

Original SOCOM devs, Zipper Interactive, have moved on to Massive Action Game, which reeks of ambition.

The levels are large, consisting of multiple vertices and a variety of areas that vary in complexity. One particular street level, which reminds me of Dust_DE, provides plenty of tight rooms and corridors perfect for a quick one-on-one skirmish, together with larger arenas that beg for team flanking maneuvers. Confrontations trades rich and complex texturing and environmental details in exchange for a high draw distance, providing snipers with the opportunity to pick targets off from very far away.

Like any good multiplayer game there are a massive variety of game modes, including the typical rescue the hostages, deathmatch and plant the bomb variations. In addition to the detailed stat-keeping and leaderboards you'd expect, there is also an experience-based ranking system that provides bonuses with each level achieved and is designed to keep you interested for the long haul. However, the time it takes to actually make your way past the first rank is ludicrous. Ten full matches in and I'm still stuck at rank 0. Throw me a frickin' bone here. Call of Duty: World at War provides you with that first rank and bonus within a game or two, that small taste of carotene

gets you hooked. Yet, in Confrontations I began to question why. Why all the killing and bloodshed, what was it for? Personal satisfaction? Nope, I want my rewards.

>> WHY SO BLAND?

All these features do nothing to take the game above and beyond. They should be enough to provide a satisfying experience but they don't. Once you're past the matchmaking screen and in the game, there's nothing captivating about Confrontation and I find it hard to quantify why.

So here's my lame justification. Confrontation is merely an upgrade of a game that provided the only online multiplayer shooter experience on the PlayStation 2. It sold because it was, for better or worse, the only game of its kind. In the current climate, with hits such as Call of Duty topping the online charts week after week, Confrontation fails to lift the SOCOM franchise to the level needed to compete with games that have never relied on their platform exclusivity to succeed. It lacks that polish and that passion that comes from a



team striving for excellence.

SOCOM: Confrontations isn't a bad game, it just has no soul: That inexplicable trait that elevates a game from being good to being excellent.

For some people, good is good enough. Not for me.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Realising the opposition followed the same entrance pattern every round, then sneaking up behind them with a shotgun.

WE LIKED:



+ Turning off SOCOM to play Call of Duty: World at War or Left 4 Dead.

WE DISLIKED:



- Incomprehensible XP system
- Total lack of auto-balance when playing ranked games

VERDICT:

By-the-books adaption that relies on SOCOM brand recognition.

GUITAR HERO ON TOUR: DECADES

>> Ken Lee likes to touch his rock.

Developer:
Publisher:
Genre:
OFLC:

Vicarious Visions
Activision
Music
G



Review Platform:

Nintendo DS

PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

Guitar Hero On Tour: Decades is a very good Guitar Hero game. And I've enjoyed playing it. I want you to keep this in the back of your mind as you continue reading because it may seem as though there are far too many flaws. But despite the flaws, there's a game contained within that is quite enjoyable.

There is no mistaking that this is a Guitar Hero game. That may seem like a glib, throwaway statement, but I do have a point to make. It emulates the Guitar Hero experience very well. The graphics are familiar, the game play is similar and if you have had any experience with any of its brethren, it will not be difficult to pick up.

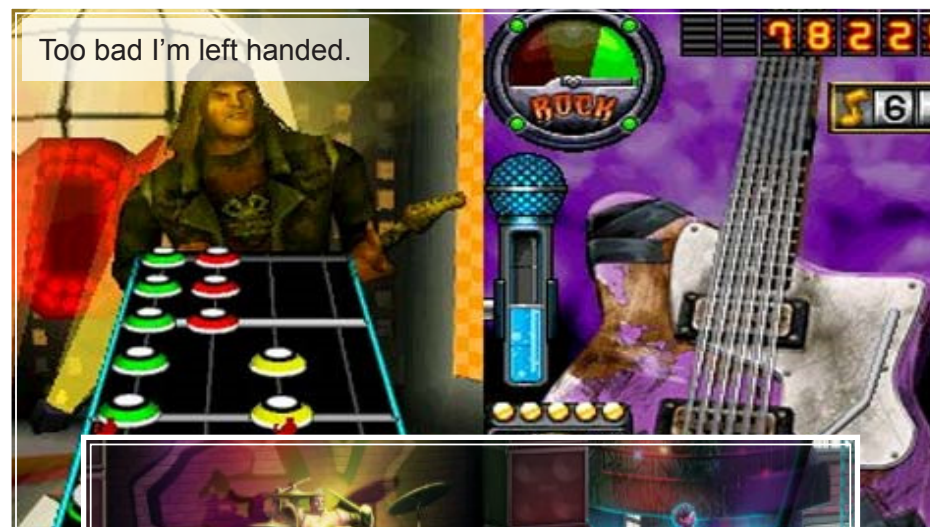
“

The game is billed as having “some of the biggest hits from the 70s, 80s, 90s and today.” I'm not quite so sure about that.

”

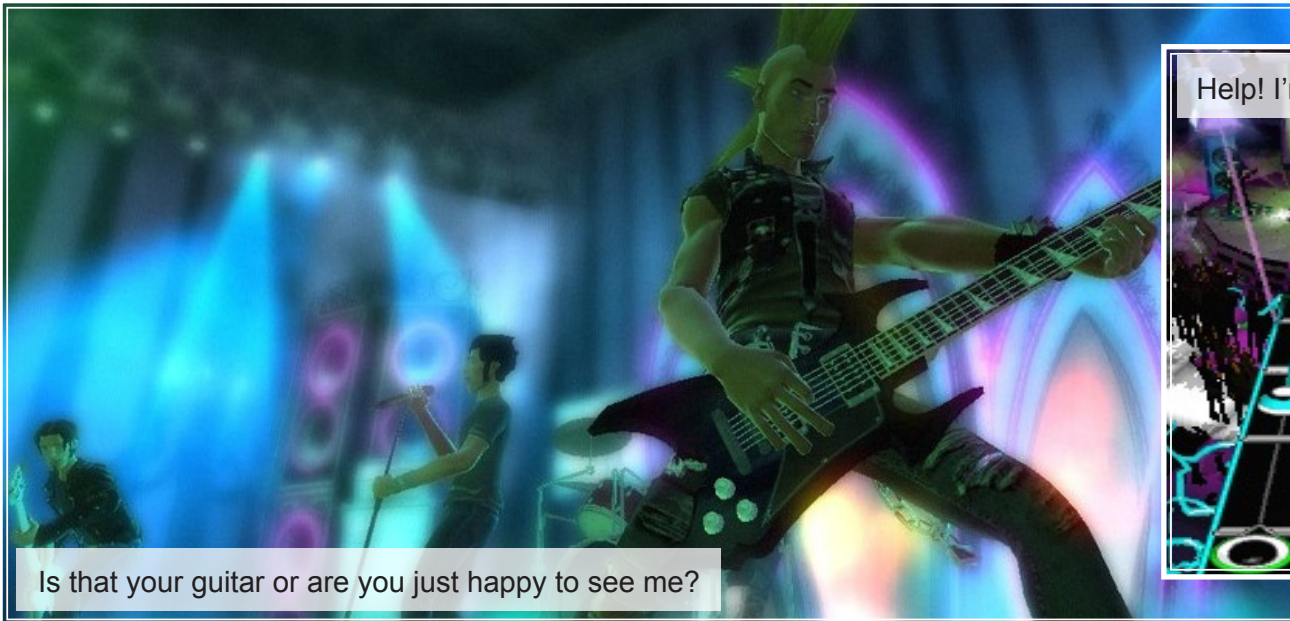
>> IT'S GUITAR HERO, SILLY

I am assuming that you are already familiar with the Guitar Hero franchise, and the play style: Round gems scroll downwards toward the bottom of the screen. When it hits a line near the bottom, hold onto the corresponding note on the attached peripheral and strum your pick on the touch-screen. The gems follow the melody and tempo of the song, which assists as audio cues for when to hit the keys.



?!

This is the second game in the Guitar Hero On Tour series to be released on the DS. A third entry, “Modern Hits” is planned for June 2009.



But the reason that it's a very worthy addition to the franchise is also one of its major detriments. One of the primary joys of playing Guitar Hero is that players can suspend disbelief, and imagine themselves rocking out. And intrinsic to this make-believe experience is the peripheral. The plastic guitar IS Guitar Hero, because for a brief moment one can almost imagine oneself actually skilfully playing a musical instrument.

On Tour: Decades cannot emulate this same tactile feeling because of the lack of a proper peripheral, and thus loses out in the experience department. So while it can faithfully accomplish anything else that its bigger brother can do, it falls short in one key category: It can only emulate the game that emulates playing a real guitar.

>> THAT'S GONNA HURT

In order to compensate the lack of a physical guitar, Decades includes a peripheral that plugs

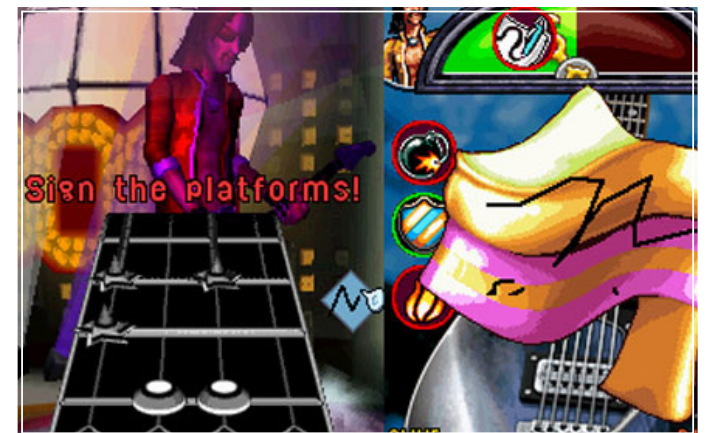
into the GBA slot. While it has only a four-button design, one less than its bigger brothers, this doesn't water down the gameplay. It still offers an excellent range of note variety and finger movement.

Unfortunately, this form factor can pose a problem for some. With players gripping the DS around the main body in a book-style, there is a tendency to angle the screens towards oneself. Playing over extended periods of time really taxes the wrists. This is obviously a problem that has clearly been identified by the developers, as one of the first screens that appears advises that you should take frequent breaks to avoid cramping. Finding a comfortable position may take some one-armed acrobatics. I've found the best position for me is to lie on my back with my hand resting on my (albeit generous) stomach. Not exactly the position one finds oneself when travelling on the morning train to work.

>> PLAY THAT MUSIC AGAIN... AND AGAIN

One of the primary highlights of any Guitar Hero game is its list of songs and Decades falls short in this department. With a total track list of only 28 songs, it won't be long before it begins to feel a little repetitious.

The song choice is a little sketchy as well. The game is billed as having "some of the biggest hits from the



70s, 80s, 90s and today.” I’m not quite so sure about that. I mean, No Rain by Blind Melon was one of my most favourite songs but I’d be a little hesitant in calling it one of the biggest hits of the 90s. There are a number of songs that would be more indicative of its era than the selection contained within this game.

>> THE SOUND OF ONE MAN DUELLING

Of the three single-player modes, Lead Guitar and Bass/Rhythm Guitar are the most similar. The main differences lie in that players follow different audio tracks, and the gems appear in different order. Occasionally, star gems appear which, when hit correctly a number of times, grants star power, giving you a bonus boost in points.

In Guitar Duels, instead of star gems, there are spiked ones. Hitting a succession of these earns players special powers that are used against the opponent. Special powers include doubling the speed of the opponent’s gem track, turning notes into bombs and various other obstacles that obscure the opponent’s view and requires action(s) to recover. At the

end, a Rock meter will determine who is the winner.

As seems to be the pattern, single player Guitar Duelling falls completely flat on its face. There’s no real sense of competition, and no sense that your actions have any effect on the AI. Using powers derives no discernible benefit, and getting powers thrown back quickly becomes an annoyance.

Perhaps this mode is more entertaining during multi-player, where there is a feeling of competition, and a sense of evil glee as you use various powers against friends. But it’s not a viable single-player experience.

>> WHO SAYS ROCK IS DEAD?

Decades’ similarity to Guitar Hero is to its detriment, because it throws the differences into sharper contrast and makes the shortfalls much more obvious. As I stated at the start of this review, there is a good game contained within. The peripheral/touch-screen combination is responsive and it works. The gameplay follows the tried-and-true Guitar Hero



formula, which is an already proven method of play. And when the right song hits, and you’ve got the rhythm going, it all suddenly clicks into place. It’s just a bit of a shame that there are so many impediments to it clicking all the time.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Playing “I Believe in a Thing Called Love” by The Darkness, getting a 150 note streak, hitting a x8 multiplier on a full Star Power bar, singing along out loud whilst fingers were racing up and down the notes. Brilliant.

WE LIKED:



- + The guitar pick shaped stylus that comes with the game

WE DISLIKED:



- Wrist and finger cramps
- Weak song list

VERDICT:

It’s worth playing if you’re new to Guitar Hero.

DISGAEA 3: ABSENCE OF JUSTICE

>> Who is this gayer virgin? Justin Murray, that's who.

Developer: Nippon Ichi
Publisher: SCE
Genre: Tactical RPG
OFLC: PG
Review Platform: PlayStation 3



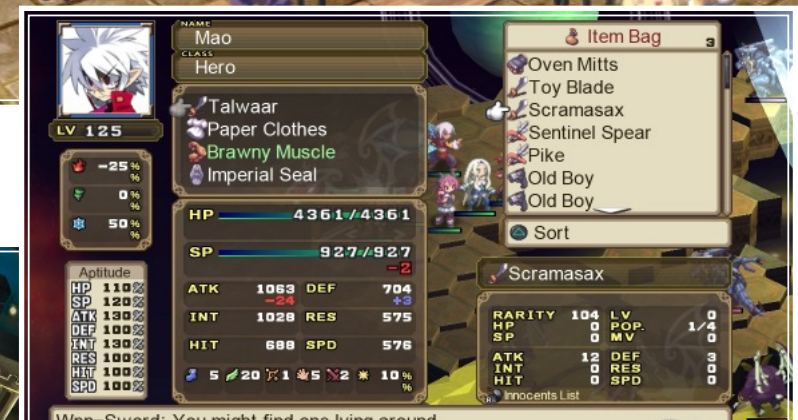
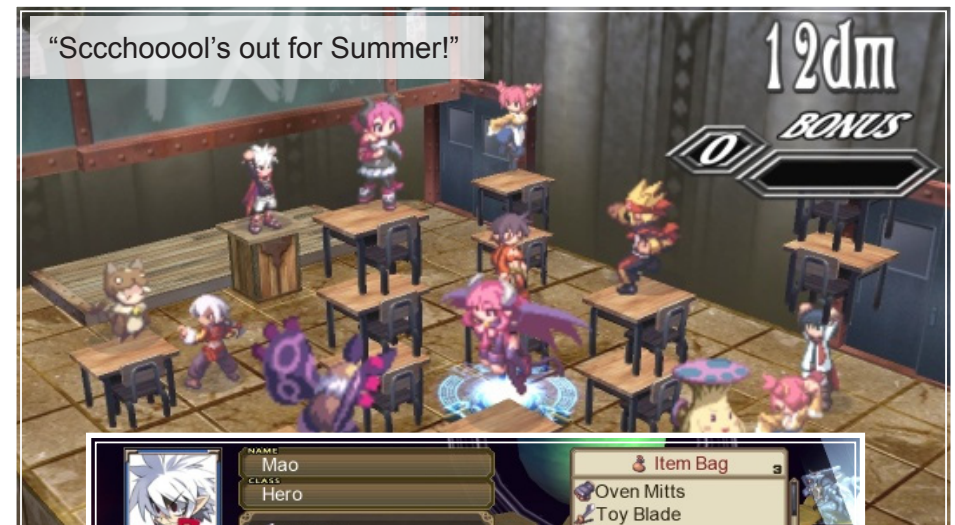
PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

I'm going to be upfront right from the outset and say I am coming to this iteration of the beloved Disgaea series as a Disgaea virgin. I've heard how great the previous games are, and I've always meant to track them down, but never gotten around to it. I reckon, too, that I'm not alone in this, so this review will make mention of the fact that for entry level players, Disgaea 3:

>> WAS THAT YOU ON THE SIDE OF THAT MILK CARTON...?

But persevere, and the rewards are rich. Or at least plentiful. This is no capped at Level 20 RPG. Should you a) wish to and b) have no life, you can level your characters all the way up to level 9,999. That's right, stats freaks. It's levellin'

“ There is a deep, challenging, hardcore strategy game hiding under this somewhat ugly exterior. ”



Absence of Justice has one mother-flippin' overwhelming learning curve. It's not insurmountable, not by any stretch, but any false sense of security you may get from the cute character models, cheesy dialogue and rippingly good musical theatre number that opens proceedings should be boxed up and put away faster than your weird Aunt's Christmas present. A casual game this is not.

?!

Disgaea 3 was integrated into PlayStation Home in April 2009. It's 'spot' included various mini-games that could be played online free of charge.



heaven for you. Just be prepared to sink the time. And disappear from public view for a while.

The story set-up is rather wacky, but almost predictably so. Mao, a 1500-odd year old schoolboy (naturally) has vowed to become the baddest bad-arse in the Netherworld. Of course, doing so means usurping his father, the Overlord of the Netherworld, who has pissed him off by accidentally stepping on his 'SlayStation' and stuffing up his save game files (which, let's be honest, would piss you off – the boy has a case). Such are the vaguely Shakespearean but mostly silly pretensions of the premise. But don't be fooled. In terms of story, Disgaea is almost unfailingly traditional in its adherence to industry standards. It may have dressed things up in a silly costume, inverted the whole hero/villain dynamic, but essentially it's the same thing you've played before. Which may or may not be exactly what you're looking for.

>> **DON'T CALL ME DUDE**

The supporting cast are a fairly predictable rag-tag bunch of RPG stereotypes, and the voice-acting (at least on the English translation) ranges from pretty good (Mao, Raspberyl) to manically awful (most of the others). If one more Prinnie calls me 'dood' I might go elemental on his arse.

In terms of the game mechanics, which is where it's at if you're into the Disgaea take on strategy RPG, the options are vast. The school essentially works as a hub world, with various classrooms/specialist rooms acting as places to set up your party, kit them out or fine tune their battle balance. Each character has two 'Evilties' that can be assigned, according to their job class, to augment their skills in battle, and additional extras can also be bought using mana points. Whilst this means that players can quite markedly speed up the levelling process, it also makes for extra time spent in menus, which can be confusing until you get

used to the layout. Of course, if the Disgaea series is your sex, then extra time in menus might well be your G-Spot.

>> **BLOCK PARTY**

The Geo Block system which forms the basis of the combat takes quite a while to get your head around, even, I'd suggest, for series veterans (apparently this is a new feature). Essentially, blocks can stack



on the playing grid and either aid or vex you, depending on how you manage them.

Graphically the game is something of a let down. It may seem churlish to chide a game whose strength is its monumental strategic depth for not looking like Brad Pitt, but the visuals served up here make you feel like it should have been on a PS2. In addition to that, the camera during battles is downright criminal at times. With battles being waged isometrically on what is essentially a grid of cubes, it shouldn't be that hard to find a dynamic camera that covers the right angle at all times. Nippon Ichi has failed in that regard, unfortunately, leading to many situations where walls of cubes block your view and cause unnecessary frustration. Yes, there are manual camera controls, but no, these do not always help. It just another small presentation issue that lets the game down, and it really could have and should have been avoided.

>> SWEET NOTHINGS...

It's hard to know what to think of Disgaea 3:



Absence of Justice. A bit like the first time you read Shakespeare, or watch American football, or fall in love with a girl, and you're all like 'I know this is good, I can tell this is good, but what the f**k is going on?'. That's the experience this Disgaea virgin has had with this game (and with girls, for what it's worth). I can see the beating heart of a kick arse game in there, but I just wish it would do more to let me in. Series veterans will no doubt poo-poo this review and snuggle up to their copy whispering sweet nothings into its ear, but let me assure you, they'll be in a language no one but them and the game can understand. There is a deep, challenging, hardcore strategy game hiding under this somewhat ugly exterior. Just be prepared to have to work pretty hard to find it.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Embarrassingly, it was winning my first unaided battle. Prior to that I think I had lost six or seven in a row.

WE LIKED:



- + The quirky sense of humour
- + The range of options available

WE DISLIKED:



- The baffling entry level
- The camera during battles

VERDICT:

A deep, baffling strategy RPG that is a must for fans. Others, try before you buy.

PATAPON 2

>> Justin Murray's got rhythm, he's got music. Who could ask for more?

Developer: Pyramid/Japan Studio
Publisher: SCE
Genre: Rhythm/Real-Time Tactics
OFLC: G
Review Platform: Sony PSP



PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

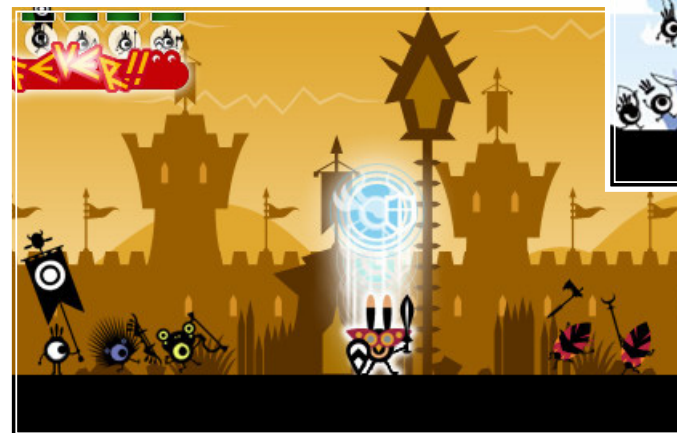
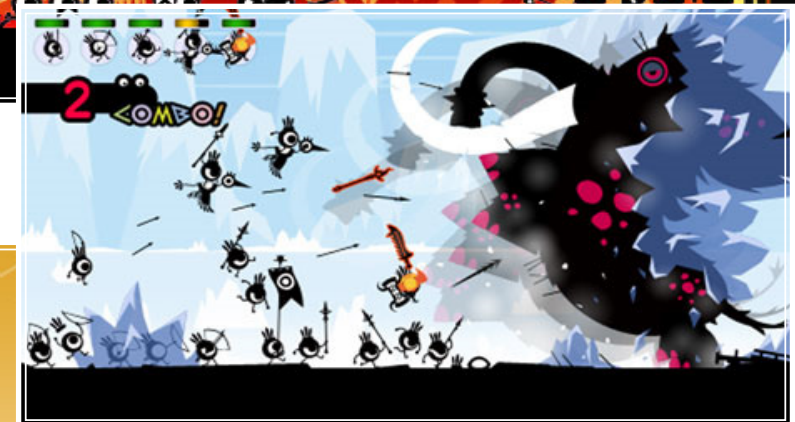
Some games cry out for a sequel. Others – Bioshock, for example – do not. Taking financial considerations out of the equation (yeah, right!), there are many reasons a game might need sequels. Sometimes, logically, a sequel is required simply to continue the story (Beyond Good and Evil 2 ftw!). Sometimes it is to spend more time in a universe that players and

>> THE LITTLE DRUMMER BOYS

The Patapons – cute, eyeball looking creatures – have, in their infinite wisdom, continued their quest for 'Earthend' by sailing off into the sun. Of course, things take a turn for the worst and their ship is sunk, washing them up on a familiar shore. As their God (yes, they will routinely call you this and build an altar

“ *Habeffre cone hocumus unterus senatilliste, intifervis. An sedem ne mod invo, tere cum conit ocaec tertatu quodiu et fatis, achicit. Dam que morum nonscere iaela CuBut Castre cenatus* ”

developers have enjoyed exploring. And other times it is to refine gameplay that, whilst successful first time round, could have been even more so. Patapon 2 falls neatly into this final category. The PSP's delightfully quirky rhythm game/strategy RPG hybrid was good first time round, but it had some shortcomings, not least of which was a certain mind-numbing repetition. Has the sequel addressed these issues? Bang the gong and come along...



?!

To test market statistics for digital distribution, SCEA released Patapon 2 as DLC on the PlayStation Store. All other regions received UMD distribution.

dedicated to you) it is your job to facilitate a rescue. So basically your task, once again, is to help the Patapons survive and thrive as they quest for Earthend. To do this you lead them across 2D landscapes by issuing commands via various 'songs', or beat patterns. Nothing too different so far.

Where the game thrives in comparison to its predecessor is in the variety of upgrades and unit types available to you. You see, whilst the mechanics of the combat might be a basic rhythm game, the pre-battle set-up is all strategy RPG. Knowing how to kit out your force with the best weapons for a mission, exactly what unit types to use, is the key to success. Finishing missions naturally unlocks upgrades and new beat patterns, and the very-well judged learning curve (at least for the first half of the game —there are one or two cruel spikes after that) makes progression a joy.



>> CYMBALISM...

The biggest new addition to the game is the 'hero' power. When assigned to one of your units, it unleashes super abilities depending on the unit. Many of the games later bosses, already tough, would be utter bastards without this ability. Also, the 'hero' generally looks very cool.

With the increased depth to the strategy of course comes increased time spent in menus, and Patapon 2 does a reasonable job of making that process as painless as possible. The nature of the PSPs screen size means things do get cluttered at times, particularly as you collect more and more Patapons, create Rarepons and grow your 'Evolution Tree'. Patapon 2 does do a very good job of helping in this regard, with consistent hints and full access to information on what is required to level up. Handy.



With over 100 missions on offer, a great variety of 'hero' powers and weapon upgrades, and even a reasonably rudimentary multiplayer on offer, Patapon 2 is a great progression in a genuinely original franchise IP. It does for rhythm games what Puzzle Quest did for Bejeweled, and is packed with charm to boot. Highly recommended.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Being worshipped like a God. Oh, you mean during the game? Um...being worshipped like a God. That and unleashing the Robopon. Mecha-Patapons ftw!

WE LIKED:



- + New 'hero' powers
- + Variety of missions
- + Presentation

WE DISLIKED:



- A couple of cruel difficulty spikes
- Does get repetitive later on

VERDICT:

A significant evolution of one of the most interesting new IPs in recent times.

WANTED: WEAPONS OF FATE

>> Carlo Sta Barbara takes his orders from the Loom of Fate ...

Developer:
Publisher:
Genre:
OFLC:

GRIN
Warner Bros.
Action
MA15+

Review Platform:

Xbox 360



PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

Wanted: Weapons of Fate, hardly seems ambitious. Predictably, it's played from a third-person perspective, utilises a Gears of War-like cover system and indulges in bullet-time trickery, only adding minor gameplay twists derived from its source material. Like Timur Bekmambetov's film adaptation, it has its share of bullet-bending hi-jinx, slow-motion

opponents.

>> ASSASSINATING THE ASSASSINS

An extension of the Wanted feature film and Mark Millar's comic book series, Wanted: Weapon of Fate is set in a ridiculously over-the-top universe

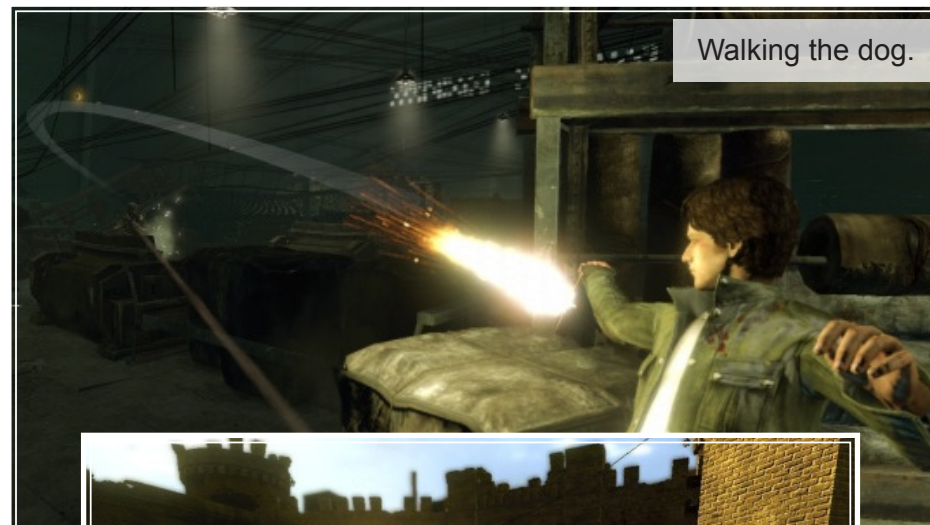
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The game's main protagonist, Wesley Gibson, more Jason Bourne than Marcus Fenix, cuts only a slightly intimidating figure at first glance.

”

assassinations and relentless action sequences – hyper-stylised murder-porn with the substance of a Coca Cola ad – only now with a discernible loss in escalation and fidelity.

For brief moments it screams for your attention with its brash attitude and fancy new tricks, but Weapon of Fate ultimately succumbs to a debilitating monotony induced by, repetitious gameplay, unremarkable level design and undemanding, tactics-less



Walking the dog.



Hah! Missed.

?!

According to imdb, Wanted 2 is due in 2011.

That's one hot finger.



revolving around a centuries-old secret guild of physics-defying, superhuman assassins – the Fraternity – who take out targets determined by a binary-speaking Loom of Fate. The game's main protagonist, Wesley Gibson, more Jason Bourne than Marcus Fenix, cuts only a slightly intimidating figure at first glance. A once meek office-worker he is now capable of incredible feats of strength, coordination and agility – a near indestructible professional assassin on a mission to locate the assassin guild's fanatical French chapter and uncover the truth about his mother and father (who is playable in back-story filling flashback missions).

Of course, the silliness of the Wanted-universe (see: Loom of Fate) and its overarching plot is barely consequential – it is merely setting for wild, body-bending stunts and impossible bullet trajectories. Picture this: a cadre of enemies swarms the Fraternity headquarters. You take cover behind a nearby bullet-riddled wall using blindfire as a distraction, maneuvering unnoticed to the bookshelf to your right. Taking out two (out of

three) targets with ease, one with a boot to the leg and a knife to the chest, your charged adrenalin meter becomes evidence of your handiwork. The last man stumbles behind cover, hidden from your line of sight, but you realise you can bend a bullet impossibly around the wasted debris.

Slow-motion blood splatter.

Level complete.

>> THE KILLING SCREENS

It is clear that Wanted: Weapon of Fate is trying desperately to set it itself apart from other cover-based shooters by providing a sense of variety – blindfire, bullet-time, bullet-curving, one-button melee kills, explosive ammo. A smart decision as these out-of-the-box options, and their resulting on-screen carnage, somewhat alleviate the grinding tediousness of fighting waves of aggressive but simple-minded enemies who do not attack with the

tactical variety of the Locust in Gears of War 2 or the mobility of the Black Ops in FEAR 2: Project Origin. That slow motion camera following your curving bullet through the air into your enemy's brain and that ear-piercing crunch from a shin-breaking melee attack – instant gratification.

Eventually, however, you realise that style is hardly a substitute for substance. Enemy character types are indistinct, save for perhaps a different weapon or a fondness for bulletproof shields, and their inability



to react to a frustrated assassin stubbornly charging in for an instant up-close kill allows for unchallenged progress with little need to explore the boundaries of the game's useful shooting mechanics. Lost in an endless cycle of cover-shoot-cover-shoot, the bullet-curving and bullet-time mechanics hang in stasis, never utilised in creative or unexpected ways.

The constant recycling, and overall blandness, of level design adds to the malaise as you are funneled from start to finish through French villas, rooftops and airplane cabins full of conveniently placed explosive objects but with little room for improvisation or exploration.

>> HIDE AND SEEK

Unlike Gears of War 2 or Uncharted, once attached to cover, you will find it difficult to become unstuck – literally, because of the stubbornness of the game's cover mechanics, and figuratively, because running around

the game's dingy environments often feels slightly slippery and awkward. Instead, you can almost traverse levels exclusively from cover to cover, context-sensitive actions allowing you to shift quickly to cover-points to your left or right, in front of you and diagonally. A trade off between free movement and predetermined travel, it's, at once, debilitating and invigorating.



Turret and sniper sequences wisely break up the ennui of the cover-aim-fire-repeat cycle but, being simple point-and-shoot exercises, lack enough ingenuity to be memorable. They revisit what has been done innumerable times before in games of this ilk, occasionally gifting players quick, frustrating deaths should their attention wander slightly.

In contrast, some of the game's quicktime events, particularly the on-rails shoot-out aboard a nose-diving plane, more effectively combine dynamic action sequences with

reaction-based gameplay. These elaborate in-game set-pieces mimic those in Bekmambetov's film, juddering between slow-motion shooting and fast-paced stunts impossible to pull-off in standard play. But a few moments of exhilaration come at the cost of control, the player doing little more than guiding a reticule to a nearby target before a timer winds down.

>> THROWING A CURVE-BULLET

Fortunately, at under ten hours in length, Wanted: Weapon of Fate does not dwell on some of its shortcomings. The murky visuals, for example, limited in their range of colours, and rendered cutscenes that look dislocated in comparison to the sharper in-game engine are mere annoyances, rather than frustrations.

There is, too, the feeling of comfort. Serviceable shooting mechanics allow you to take cover and aim with little effort – a system that has clearly benefited from the near three years of next-gen learning since Gears of War spawned an army of imitators.

Yet, while Wanted: Weapon of Fate reaches the baseline standard, it never threatens to surpass it. Too quickly it discards its out-of-the-box ideas, trading in variety for soulless repetition.



Wesley takes BJs far too seriously...

FAVOURITE MOMENT:

The first time a curving bullet finds its intended target – right between the eyes – and you'd swear you were as skilled as James McAvoy's movie persona. The second time is not so bad, either. Not quite true for the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth ...

WE LIKED:



- + Effective cover system
- + Bullet-curving mechanics
- + Stylish killing sprees

WE DISLIKED:



- Tactics-deficient enemies
- Repetitious and grinding shootouts

VERDICT:

A competent shooter worn down by second-rate design and unchanging gameplay.

STORMRISE

>> Carlo Sta. Barbara whips it all over the place ...

Developer: The Creative Assembly
Publisher: SEGA
Genre: Real Time Strategy
OFLC: M



Review Platform: Xbox 360

PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

At first glance, Stormrise looks so terribly generic: the bland science-fiction artwork, the post-apocalyptic setting, the forgettable name, the contrived storyline. Yet it promises real-time strategy with “intuitive, fast paced” control – the Whip Select system streamlining unit-selection and coordination – and, because it’s by The Creative Assembly (makers of Total

society), the latter more mutant than man.

But despite the sci-fi veneer, Stormrise is a strategy game gone haywire, plagued by an ill-conceived unit-selection system and stilted, unrewarding battles.

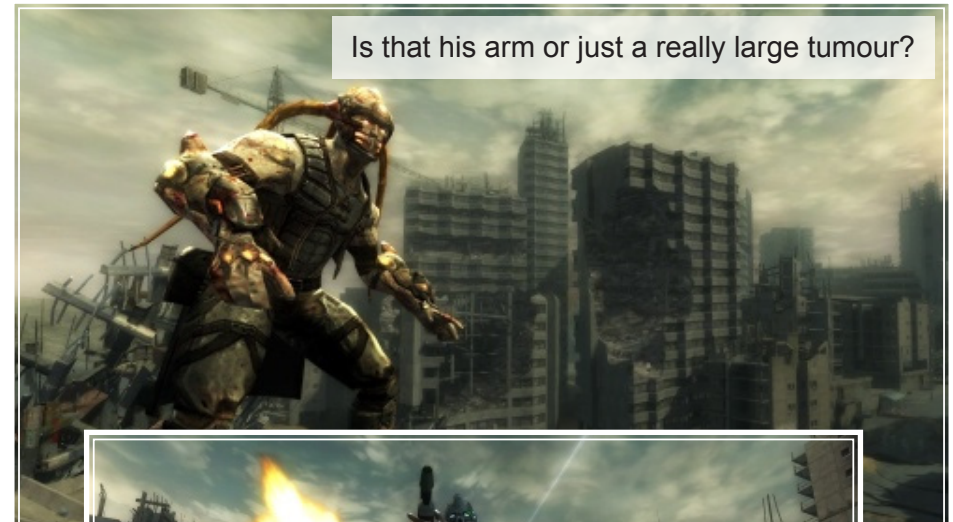
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A failed experiment, Stormrise is evidence of the difficulty in fashioning a from-the-ground-up console-centric control scheme.

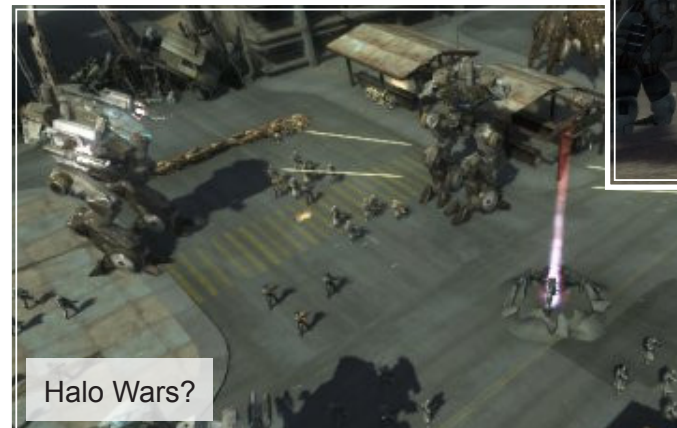
”

War), you’ll believe it.

Unremarkable appearance aside, the Stormrise-fiction at least provides us with the requisite diametrically-opposed warring factions each having their own version of infantry, tanks, snipers and air vehicles battling over warp points and building refineries. Meet the Echelon and the Sai: the former fond of Robocop-style garb (“safeguarding the future” they might argue as remnants of the old advanced



Is that his arm or just a really large tumour?



Halo Wars?

?!

This is one of the very, very few - maybe the only - bad games to come out of The Creative Assembly.

>> CONFLICT OF COMMAND

For a while, the Whip System performs adequately – you point your right stick to your desired unit, let go and you switch over to that unit’s perspective. Small-scale battles are reasonably manageable with a low number of units failing to clutter the screen, providing a clarity of choice and forgiving a certain degree of clumsiness.

However, as most strategy games go, the action escalates. Larger-scale battles introduce even more units on-screen. As your units spread across the map, icons fill the screen margins, overlapping at certain points and indistinguishable at others. Ill-suited to sifting through the morass of small, jumbled icons, your “whipping” right stick begins to too easily select the wrong units in the general direction of your intended unit sending your perspective careening mistakenly across the map. Confused and disoriented, you’ll spend half the time figuring out where you’ve

travelled to.

Even the slightest degree of inaccuracy becomes insurmountable as switching to the wrong unit leaves your intended choice, and your fumbling-self, unable to efficiently react to attacking enemy forces. Incapable of coordinating a large number of units efficiently, let alone in any complex manner, you will become resigned to exposing the unsophisticated enemy AI, who will sometimes fail to respond to ranged attacks as if waiting for someone to give them stage-direction (or trip a magical trigger point).



Unsettlingly, it is almost as if Stormrise encourages such rudimentary tactics. Units cannot be grouped

in any significant number. A limited third-person perspective, preferred over the more conservative top-down view, provides a narrow range of vision (unless you’re commanding a unit perched high above the battlefield)

and aggravates your inability to effectively direct units to and from far-off locations. Your units will shuffle across the map without any sense of direction, failing to skirt the level geometry. More infuriating is their inability to react to incoming attacks, taking precious seconds to recognise enemy units, take aim and fire.

>> DAY OF DEFEAT

A failed experiment, Stormrise is evidence of the difficulty in fashioning a from-the-ground-up console-centric control scheme. Commercially successful games like Halo Wars fail to eschew the usual RTS tropes and conventions. That The Creative Assembly even attempted to do so should be applauded.

There are, undoubtedly, vague hints of promise (in small-scale squad battles, for example, resource nodes, unit-management and environment-traversal are far less unwieldy) that require elaboration as this series continues. But, in its present form, Stormrise ironically only exacerbates the problems it intended to cure.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Survey the battlefield and deliver destruction from the heavens as you command the Sai’s preeminent flying unit, the Rift Worm. This is as exhilarating as this game gets.

WE LIKED:



- + Convention-defying ideas
- + Serviceable sci-fi universe

WE DISLIKED:



- A broken unit-selection system and the mess it leaves behind

VERDICT:

A curious, but fundamentally flawed, attempt at a console-centric RTS

DRAGON QUEST V: HAND OF THE HEAVENLY BRIDE

>> Dylan Burns chooses to roll the dice.

Developer:
Publisher:
Genre:
OFLC:

ArtePiazza
Ubisoft
RPG
PG



Review Platform:

Nintendo DS

PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

And here we have the second of my RPG assignments for this issue (see Persona 4 for my personal tale of woe). Don't let the fact that Dragon Quest V a DS game fool you – there's easily a hundred hours' worth of play here... if you stick with it for long enough. That probably sounds a bit harsh, but DQV is a remake of a decidedly old game (17 years or so),

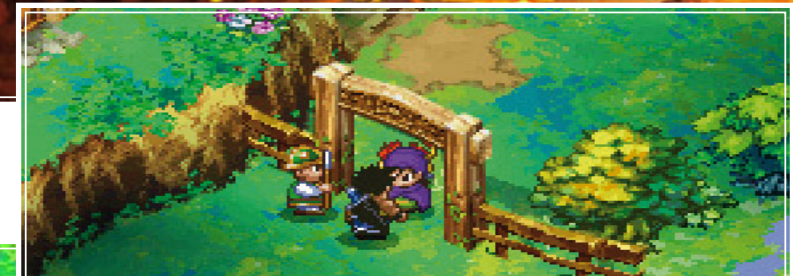
the mechanics and grind mentality of random battles – but the fact that they happen so damn often. Moving out into the world to explore risks becoming a chore every time because you can't take more than a couple of steps before the next battle occurs. While this is all well and good for gaining XP and loot, having to battle every two seconds ends up turning even a modest dungeon trip into

“ DQ5 is definitely worth a look if you loved the previous game(s) and aren't afraid of sitting down for long periods of play. ”

and this has quite an impact on how modern gamers will react to what may seem like unnecessary and annoying elements.

>> ONE STEP – BATTLE

For me, the annoyance of random battles almost undid a lot of the enjoyment to be had from Dragon Quest V. It wasn't the battles themselves – I'm well versed in



ババ「この旅が終わったら
父さんは 少し
落ち着くつもりだ。」



?!

Dragon Quest V is reportedly Yuji Horii's (the series' designer) favourite of the lot.

an hour long grind.

Subsequently, you'll be sinking at least ten or fifteen hours into DQV before you even get to the 'good stuff', which may just be a little too long for most people. Even I have to admit that some nights I just wanted to get on with the story – but instead spent my entire playtime battling countless random monsters, only managing to move the story forwards a fraction.

>> THE PAYOFF

The funny thing is, it's actually worth all the effort. Eventually, you'll be so powerful in certain areas that battles only last a few seconds, and while they're still annoying the game itself contains some fantastic gameplay moments. At first, DQV seems almost identical to the recently released DQIV – it has the same graphics, the same presentation, same save system, same items, same battle system – but where DQIV offered several different characters' stories, DQV follows one character throughout – starting out as a young boy, through to adulthood and beyond.

After a few introductory missions, such as defeating the head haunt of a ghostly manor and travelling to an alternate fantasy reality, DQV unfolds and offers the player several unique things. The first of these is a kind of Pokémon-esque monster collection game, whereby you can enlist defeated monsters and have them fight within your party. Eventually, you'll gain a caravan in which to keep up to eight party members, with each one gaining XP as you go. With over 70 monsters to find, capture and level up, there's almost an entire game just there.

But that's not all; you'll also need to keep an eye out for collectible T 'n' T tickets, as these can be used to gamble in the casino mini-games, as well as to enter a life-size board game of chance. You can also train a slime monster, send him/her into battle and bet on the outcome. There's so much in the game that even my personal annoyance at the amount of grinding that's needed is overcome by all the cool, fun things you can do.

DQV is definitely worth a look if you loved the previous game(s) and aren't afraid of sitting



down for long periods of play. It takes a while to get started but once you're there the choices of what to do are almost endless. An RPG-lite this certainly ain't.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Battling a boss and having no idea how close I was to killing him. It got to the point where I had to decide between trying to save/heal my main character or go in for the attack. I chose to attack. Thankfully, in the last moment, I defeated the bastard.

WE LIKED:



- + The variety of things to do
- + Interesting characters

WE DISLIKED:



- Too many random battles
- Very long initial phase

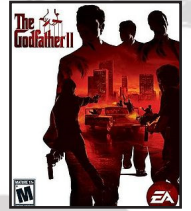
VERDICT:

Grab this if you love RPGs, but be aware of the grinding required.

THE GODFATHER 2

>> Dylan Burns always fancied himself as a made man.

Developer: EA Redwood Shores
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Genre: Action
OFLC: MA15+



Review Platform: Xbox 360

PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

The Godfather II, the game, is only related to the epic film trilogy in name. Sure, the characters and one or two key plot elements are included in this interactive experience, but I suspect that the only reason EA picked the name was because they already had a mildly successful run with the first Godfather title and 'Mafia' was already taken. Either that or they realised that

position is yours from the start and you will be tasked with looking after Corleone interests in New York, Miami and Havana.

To complement your newfound status, the game is built around the in-game map screen called Don's View, which basically gives you a strategic, birds-eye view of the city – complete with

“ If you liked the first Godfather title, there's enough here to keep you hooked for a good ten hours, and that's before you try and rob all the banks and crack all the safes. ”

'Don Simulator 09' doesn't quite have the same ring to it.

>> FAMILY BUSINESS

You play as Dominic Corleone (yes, Dom the Don), who must step up to the plate soon after Aldo Trapani is assassinated in Cuba. During The Godfather you were working your way up the food chain to become the Don of New York. In the sequel, this



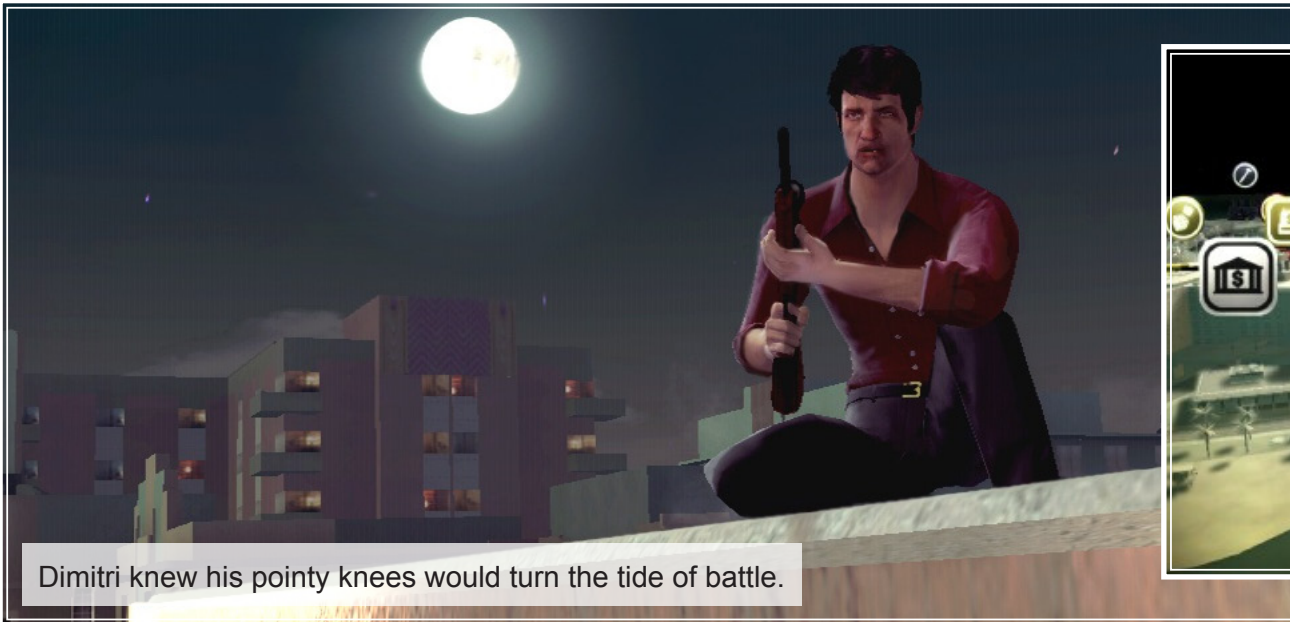
It all started over a comment on Jeff's sideburns.



Floating execution.

?!

Not once did I get a mission that involved dumping a body.



Dimitri knew his pointy knees would turn the tide of battle.



information on businesses, guard numbers, rival families, favours, corrupt officials and the hideouts of your enemies' made men. The Don's View is a great mechanic and it almost brings an RTS element to the open-world design. As you take over more and more businesses, you'll gain the ability to order your underlings to bomb rival rackets or send one of your made men to defend a business that is being attacked.

A Made Man is a member of your 'family', and each one is recruited by you throughout the campaign. Made men are tough sons of bitches but you'll still need to nurture them (via upgrading their skills) throughout the game in order to form a tight and effective team with which to storm rival compounds and completely destroy the other families. To give your 'recruitment' a bit more of a tactical edge, there are various skill sets that prospective family members specialise in, each of which will help you in certain situations. For example, the bruiser is able to kick down doors, and you'll be locked out of some businesses until you find one to join

your family. The same goes for cracking safes, as you'll need a made man with the safecracker skill, and an explosives expert will help you to blow through the back entrances of business to reach a cowering store owner. The medic is perhaps the most useless class, but that's primarily due to the easy nature of the game.

>> SHIT, IT'S THE FEDS!

You'll rarely break a sweat when taking out a bunch of aggressive goons. Not only are most of the guns in the game overpowered, but the cover system makes routing the enemy an easy task, particularly as they're not the smartest virtual goons that we've seen. Just hide behind something and wait for them to make the first move.

This is not to say that the game isn't fun, because it is. Rolling up to a business, jumping out of a car and pumping some surprise shotgun rounds into the guards outside a business, instigating a

takeover battle, is exhilarating stuff. And it's made all the more engaging by the feeling you get leading your own gang. Your made men are generally quite excellent at watching your six, leaving you free to search the interior for the owner so you can lay some beat down and take the premises over, gaining extra cash and expanding your empire.

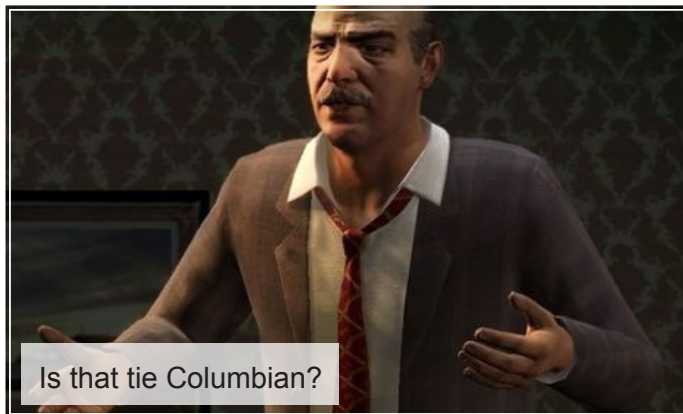
From a gameplay perspective, nothing much has changed from The Godfather. You still need to intimidate business and racket owners in order to get



them to work for you. Each one has a weak spot – such as being thrown against the wall, having their stock destroyed or simply hanging them over a high ledge until they crack. Finding these bonus weaknesses can be fun, but it also makes the game highly repetitive, as it's essentially all there is to the game. There are a handful of main story missions, but these often boil down to someone telling you to keep taking over the city and check back when you own enough real estate. I actually managed to speed up most of these checkpoint scenes by concentrating on owning everything that I possibly could in each area.

>> NOT AS GOOD AS THE SOPRANOS

Godfather II does bring a couple of interesting innovations to the open world genre. Firstly, I really enjoy the strategic element that the Don's View brings to the table. Being able to send an underling to handle a turf war – and be confident that he will succeed – is a cool feeling to have in a videogame and it really does help create an aura of control. If you play your cards aggressively, you'll rarely be inundated with too many attacks, so sending a couple of your best men works quite well, leaving you free to keep attacking unclaimed areas.



I also think that the favour system, whilst flawed in how you go about it, is a great idea. As you learn more about your rival families – the Granados, Manganos, Rosato and Almeidas – you'll be able to do favours for random people on the street in exchange for information, such as the kill condition for each family's made men. This is handy in theory, but strangers on the street that know more than a Mafia Don? I don't think so. This system of doing favours for people, and then receiving information or favours in return (such as calling off police or allowing your crew to instantly recover from their injuries after being incapacitated) is a really interesting mechanic, but you'll rarely get stuck into it due to the completely incongruous execution of the idea. You'll never be forced to use it because the game never gets so difficult that you need to formulate any kind of Plan B.

The Godfather II also doesn't do itself any favours in its overall design. Each city map is fairly flat and lifeless, with constant – and at times shocking – pop in of vehicles and pedestrians. It also suffers from limited story missions, with much of the game padded out by real estate acquisition. It doesn't look that crash hot (except for some spectacular explosions), the AI is limited and the overall design is a bit budget. To illustrate, I spotted the exact

same cars drive around in Cuba as in New York – complete with the same businesses painted on the side – a sure sign of a copy and paste approach.

Despite all of the negative points covered above, I actually had an absolute blast with the game. The addictive nature of taking over every single square inch of the map had me hooked from the beginning and I particularly enjoyed the feeling of power that came from rolling with your own gang. I also must admit to the guilty pleasure of enjoying my virtual intimidation of gangsters, lowlifes and racket bosses.

If you liked the first Godfather title, there's enough here to keep you hooked for a good ten hours, and that's before you try and rob all the banks and crack all the safes. It's a much more focused title than The Godfather and this game's three main maps feel less intimidating than the entirety of New York that you were tasked with taking over in the first title. The Godfather II is a fun experience, and one that deserves a look from fans of the open world genre.

FAVOURITE MOMENT:

The entire addictive nature of taking over each city. I played the game for two days straight, completely hooked on this mechanic.

WE LIKED:



- + Being a Don
- + Don's View
- + Telling everyone I'm the Don

WE DISLIKED:



- Botched favour system
- Lack of story missions

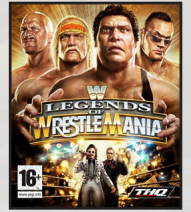
VERDICT:

A somewhat by-the-book sequel with enough interesting innovations to warrant a look.

WWE LEGENDS OF WRESTLEMANIA

>> Michael Pincott dons spandex on special occasions only

Developer: Yuke's
Publisher: THQ
Genre: Wrestling/Sports
OFLC: M
Review Platform: Xbox 360



PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

There's been a truckload of wrestling games over the years, but with the extinction of WCW it was reduced to the steady flow of the long-running Smackdown series (now Smackdown vs Raw). Legends Of Wrestlemania diverts from the Smackdown! series to indulge in a new premise: reliving the glory years of professional wrestling, the era of the eighties and early

Create-A-Wrestler system is identical, as are the pre-match menus, the online play layout, the character select screen, so on and so forth. Oddly enough, however, the gameplay is completely different. Onto that, then.

“ The best of these [Hall of Fame Modes] is the Relive mode, where you must literally attempt to replicate a real match as it happened. ”

nineties dominated by iconic figures like Hulk Hogan and Andre The Giant, whom even non-fans would recognise.

The roster is very healthy, with 42 'Legends' at your disposal, and of course the token wrestling game ability to create your own. Interestingly, Legends of Wrestlemania retains an awful lot of the layout and presentation of its modern cousin, Smackdown vs Raw 2009. The aforementioned



Even gymnast's find this hard to do.



We wax at WWE.

?!

You can import nearly all of the wrestlers from SVR '09, more than doubling the roster size!



>> **BODYSLAM! LEG DROP! TESTICULAR GROPE!**

Wrestling in the eighties was a slow, plodding affair, and in that sense it seems appropriate to employ a slower, clunkier system of gameplay to better represent how wrestling actually was. Unfortunately, just as the wrestling wasn't flashy then, the gameplay system isn't much fun. The controls have been heavily simplified to the point where it just feels like a sluggish arcade game. One button is for striking and another for grappling. Holding or tapping the button determines whether you'll execute a strong or a quick version of the grapple or strike. Further to that you have a meter that fills up throughout the match. It begins at level one, allowing access to a particular range of moves. By filling up the meter you can get to level two, which will upgrade all of your moves into better ones. Filling up level two gets you to... guess what... level three, and it's from here that you can use each wrestler's special move to finish your opponent off and get that elusive three-count.

Once you use your finisher the meter will deplete back to level one.

Each match is essentially a race to fill up the meter to level three so that you can execute your finisher and take the win. The other core gameplay element is the chain attack. This is a glorified quick-time event that puts both wrestlers through three or four stages of a wrestling sequence, presenting various opportunities to gain the upper hand by hitting the prompted button first. These pop up quite often, and though they're not all that fun, they at least give the match a more realistic feel by presenting a smooth sequence of different moves that couldn't occur in regular gameplay. These chain sequences are also responsible for executing your finisher, though the lead up moves in the sequence are often disjointed and look silly. The gameplay is, in the end, shallow but adequate. It's a long way from the fast and fluid Smackdown, but it's easier to pick up and gives you a decent representation of a wrestling match via the chain sequences.



>> **LIVING IN THE PAST**

Legends of Wrestlemania lacks the career mode that has traditionally appeared in Smackdown games. What it does have though is an entertaining Hall Of Fame mode in which you recreate classic past Wrestlemania matches in a variety of contexts. The best of these is the Relive mode, where you must literally attempt to replicate a real match as it happened. Prior to each match you can watch a



video package which explains the story and background of the match using archival WWE footage, including some footage of the match itself. Once you kick the match off you're given a list of tasks to complete, many of which relate to actual moments in the match that you become familiarised with in the video. You can play the match however you see fit as long as you incorporate completing the challenges. It's a lot like the Xbox 360's Achievements system. Some matches require sequences specific to that bout, like Stone Cold throwing the Rock into the Wrestlemania XV set. Others have more generic goals like hitting a finisher a certain number of times, making your opponent bleed or jumping on them from the top rope.

If you're a WWE fan, these matches are a lot of fun. It's just unfortunate that there are only a dozen or so of them to do. There are two variations on the Relive theme called Rewrite and Redefine that offer less specific challenges, because as the names



suggest, these modes are about making the matches your own. The game also has an endurance mode that isn't much good for anything other than testing your patience. Beyond that is the typically vast array of wrestling match types, like Cage, Ladder and Royal Rumble matches. It's worth noting that this game's Royal Rumble is far and away the best that's ever been in a wrestling game. How it took them this long to get it right I'll never know, but fans of that match who have been disenchanted with poor representations in the past can feel good about it in this title.

>> SHINY PECTORALS

The appearance of the wrestlers is somewhat unrealistic; everybody is big, bright and shiny. But when you think about it this approach makes a lot of sense in the context of the game, whether on purpose or not. It's about reliving those glory years,



and that means looking at things through a rose coloured lens... even if it means that Hulk has a lot more hair, the rather portly Dusty Rhodes looks like a chiselled muscleman and Ultimate Warrior... well actually he still just looks really dumb. This is a title that, while more accessible in terms of gameplay, is more specifically catered to the wrestling fans who'll actually know who these has-beens – ahem – I mean 'Legends', are. The end result is a competent wrestling title that does enough to fill the void until Smackdown vs Raw 2010 arrives.



The new face of Ex-Lax.

FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Reliving the classic match between Bret Hart and Stone Cold, where Stone Cold passes out in the middle of the ring, blood all over his face, while locked into Bret Hart's Sharpshooter submission hold. It was a great moment in wrestling, and it made for a great moment in this game.

WE LIKED:



- + WWE fan service
- + Strong roster
- + Entrances and theme music

WE DISLIKED:



- Poor lifespan
- Simplistic gameplay
- Narrow appeal.

VERDICT:

Will give WWE fans a buzz for a while, but there's precious little for everybody else.

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: PERSONA 4

>> Dylan Burns is a bit of a social snob.

Developer:
Publisher:
Genre:
OFLC:

Atlus
Ubisoft
J-RPG
M



Review Platform: PlayStation 2

PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

I was talking to James about leaving this review until last, and he said something to me which I think is quite true, "Reviewing RPGs is hard!" All at once the universe's meaning was clear and I could see the truth: I should have gotten someone else to review all the RPGs this issue!

tell already that I haven't discovered even half of what's on offer here. As James said, reviewing RPGs is hard and I hope you'll appreciate my honesty in disclosing my relatively short playtime.

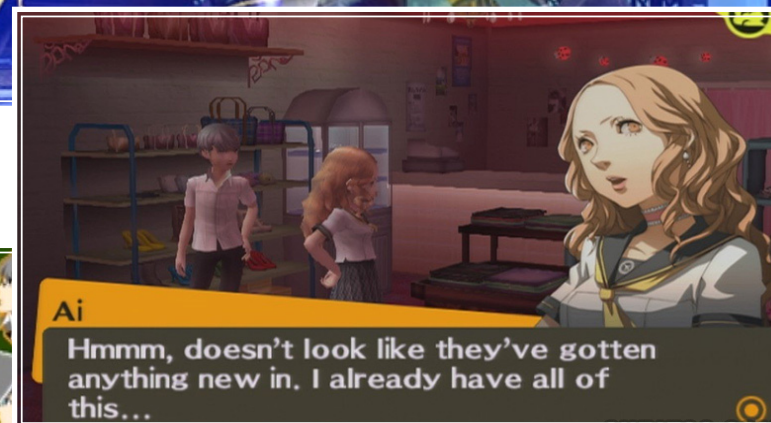
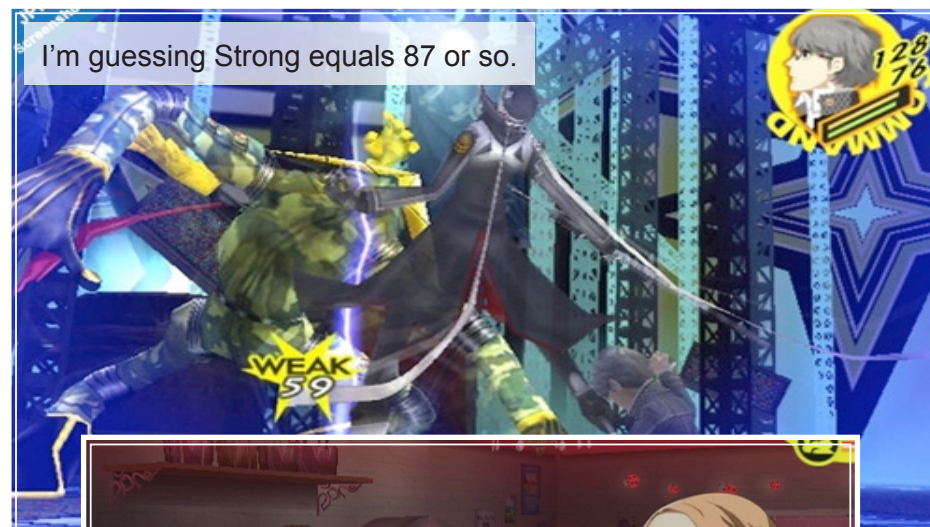
>> **WILL YOU BE MY FRIEND?**

If you've played Persona 3 then you'll

The thing is... I really don't want that,

“ At heart, the game is a dungeon crawling RPG, but it's also so much more than that – to the point of being an absolutely massive game. ”

because Persona 4 is a fantastic game and one that I suspect will be quite hard to get hold off soon. Then again, I'm almost not qualified to review this game seeing as I still have Persona 3 sitting unfinished on my shelf, having put it into my 'to do' pile – a pile that seems to be growing exponentially these days. I should also let you know right now that I've only sunk around ten hours into Persona 4. While that seems to be the average amount needed to review most games, I can



?!

This is the highest selling Persona title – 560 000 copies worldwide.

have a good idea of what to expect here. At heart, the game is a dungeon crawling RPG, but it's also so much more than that – to the point of being an absolutely massive game. There's the potential to spend endless hours here.

It's a detective story that revolves around a bunch of school age kids developing strange new powers and the ability to enter televisions, to a dimension called the Midnight Channel. After an extremely long tutorial (I'm talking hours before you actually get into the game proper), the game's story really starts to take off. A mysterious fog is appearing at regular intervals in Inaba and whenever it clears someone is found dead.

It's not long before the game's protagonist (you) and his friends work out that the Midnight Channel is where these people are being trapped and killed – and it's up to you to try and save them before the fog clears.



>> WANNA HANG OUT?

Competing for your time are all the other things you can opt to do in Persona 4, almost all of which are focused on personal relationships. As you form bonds with people – firstly by just hanging out with them but later on by making conscious decisions to focus on your link with a person (related to your personal stats in areas such as Intelligence, Courage etc.) – you gain extra perks and powers, mainly relating to combat.

The last major gameplay component is the use of Personas. These are magical companions/avatars that can perform special abilities. Their abilities and strength are tied to your social relationships, as well as how well you manage to level them up through combat. A large part of your time will be spent unlocking and combining Personas (in the Velvet Room), as well as levelling each one up as much as



possible.

If you think this is just another grind fest, it isn't. Persona 4 is a mature and exciting title that contains a deep and enjoyable narrative hook. Also, each area that you explore in the Midnight Channel is linked to a person's psyche, so there are some fairly mature issues that get explored here.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Answering questions correctly in class. It's like going back in time, but this time I'm actually paying attention.

WE LIKED:



- + The variety
- + Mature themes
- + Bonus soundtrack CD

WE DISLIKED:



- Needed more save points
- Extremely long

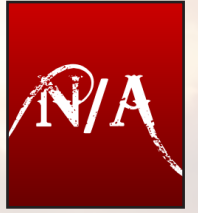
VERDICT:

Don't let the fact that it's a PS2 game put you off. An instant classic.

PUZZLE QUEST: GALACTRIX

Developer:
Publisher:
Genre:
OFLC:

Infinite Interactive
D3 Publisher
Puzzle
G



Review Platform:

XBLA

PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

>> James O'Connor is jealous of the rhyme and the rhyme routine.

To start with, a simple question (depending on your gender and sexual preferences, make a mental circle around the appropriate person): How many times has Penelope Cruz/Gerard Butler accidentally had sex with you? As in, they've stumbled in on where you sleep, engaged you in incredible intercourse, and then wandered out, realising that they're in the wrong bed?

>> YOUR HERO IS NEAR DEATH

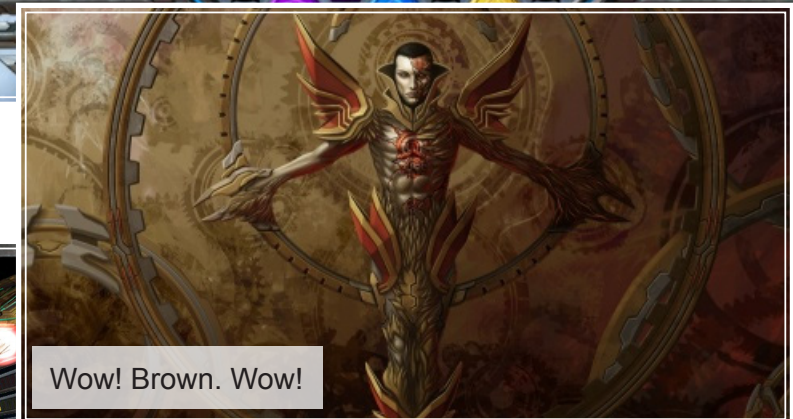
The first Puzzle Quest game was, in this writer's humble opinion, the single best game on Live Arcade. The perfect blend of puzzling and RPG elements meant that the somewhat mundane nature of standard block-matching was completely overcome by the focus on equipping your character properly and working

“

Puzzle Quest has the potential to be one of this generation's very best franchises, and a huge coup for the low-budget indie developers who have given us so much lately.

”

If your answer is anything less than “Woah, do you mean....per week? Because giving you an exact figure would be impossible,” you may not possess the ridiculous amount of luck that Puzzle Quest: Galactrix often expects of you. In fact, Galactrix is the kind of game that generally asks for far more than it gives back in return.



?!

NASA are hoping for a permanent presence of humankind on the moon by 2024.



to a strategy. It was a relatively simple game that potentially allowed for more advanced and clever strategies. Galatrix, on the other hand, is overcomplicated and places much more emphasis on puzzling prowess than its predecessor. As before, your character is outfitted with weapons and attacks they can unleash mid-play, but they tend to play a lesser role in battles than before.

The actual board has changed, so that now every piece has six sides, and matching up gems happens on horizontal, vertical and diagonal planes. Gems shift from four different sides depending on the direction you shift your tile in. It only takes about fifteen minutes to get used to, and operates pretty well as far as block-matching puzzle boards go. The addition of gems that add to your shields are an especially nice touch. The more concerning errors come from the actual nature of launching an attack on the board. You can deal direct damage by matching up bombs on the field, each one of which has a different value damage assigned. Match up a 5, 3 and 1, that's

9 damage. If you manage to get a good combo going on the board, multipliers start to occur, and things start to get ridiculous. A good combo is almost always fluked, and can potentially end the match immediately. A single bomb match-up when multiplied can take off all of your or your opponent's health, and since you cannot foresee which gems will drop in to the field, there is no way of doing this on purpose. So many battles come down to blind luck it's ridiculous, but it's also completely necessary in the early stages, where your opponents absolutely dominate you in strength and weapons. The lack of balance is a major concern.

>> THAT WASN'T A HEROIC EFFORT

Then there are the leapgates. To access new planets, you need to hack open the leapgates between them, which involves matching up blocks of specific colours within a time limit. During these all too frequent sequences, the RPG element is

completely thrown out the window and it all comes down to how well you can tile-match. In the early stages hacking leapgates is much more common than actually engaging in battle, despite being far less interesting. It's essentially the core game with the fun ripped right out of it, and the gates with a difficulty above 'easy' soon turn into a horrible ordeal. Luck once again luck plays far too large a role – sometimes matching up three of the designated colour isn't possible without doing about five other moves first, and all the while your time limit is ticking



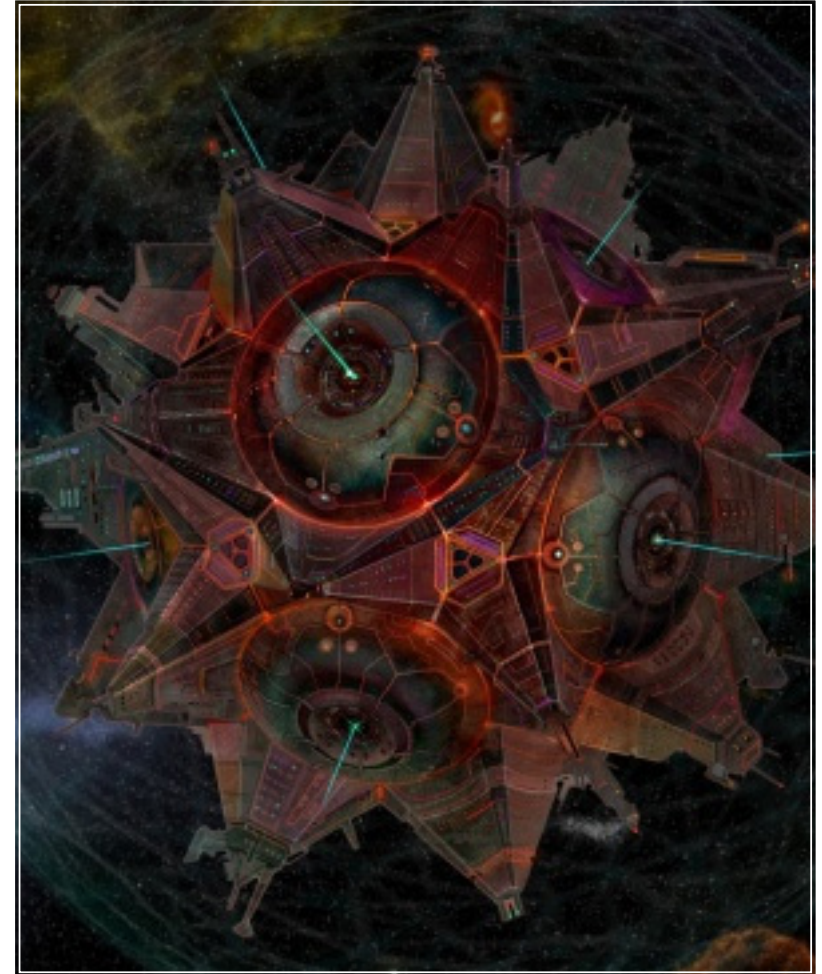
away. These sections seem to represent a fundamental misunderstanding of the series' appeal, effectively turning one of the most expensive games available on Live Arcade into something you'd expect to be free on a flash site.

Aside from opening these gates, the amount of stuff you need to do in Galactrix seems to be continually piling up. You might need to search asteroids for materials to mine (which also involves a boring, but less intrusive, mini-game), sort out your dealings with various factions, follow vague mission instructions or navigate through the terribly unclear map system. In terms of presentation, Galactrix is once again a huge step down from the first Puzzle Quest. The music and sound effects are wholeheartedly boring, between-mission stills are as ugly as a Mike Meyers look-alike convention and the plot is absolute, undiluted shit. What happened to the charming and tongue-in-cheek approach that Infinite Interactive nailed last time?



**>> BUILT LIKE STEAKHOUSE;
HANDLES LIKE BISTRO**

Early on in the game, after being destroyed by the same opponent for the seventh time, I had to stop for a moment and consider the possibility that I might actually hate Puzzle Quest: Galactrix. All things considered, 'hate' is too strong a word, but the disappointment experienced here is intense. Puzzle Quest has the potential to be one of this generation's very best franchises, and a huge coup for the low-budget indie developers who have given us so much lately. The first one evolved the genre, and made us completely rethink the potential for puzzlers. Next to it, Galactrix feels like a miscalculated formula, a failed expansion on the hypothesis of innovation. A huge misstep that Infinite Interactive hopefully won't make again.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Playing a game against Pixel Hunt's own Justin Murray, realising that we kept losing in bullshit ways, and going back to the first Puzzle Quest. This game is great for reminding you just how wonderful the first one was.

WE LIKED:



+ Sometimes, it sort of clicks.

WE DISLIKED:



- Mostly, it doesn't. A huge missed opportunity.

VERDICT:

Absolutely pales in comparison to the first one. Don't bother.

GUITAR HERO: METALLICA

>> Dylan Burns is Mr. Fixxxer

Developer: Neversoft
Publisher: Activision
Genre: Music
OFLC: M

Review Platform: PlayStation 3



PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

I guess I should make one thing absolutely clear: I am a MASSIVE Metallica fan. So much so that, many years ago now, I actually commissioned a luthier to build me an exact replica of James Hetfield's explorer guitar (I'm left-handed, you see, so sourcing an actual instrument was difficult). Same wood, same pickups, same shape – yep, I am and

>> YES AND NO

Of course, the main limitation of Guitar Hero is in its peripheral being essentially one string. Mapping power cords to the plastic guitar feels okay, but when you have a band with complex, dynamic note ranges – as is the case with Metallica – you're going to have moments that just

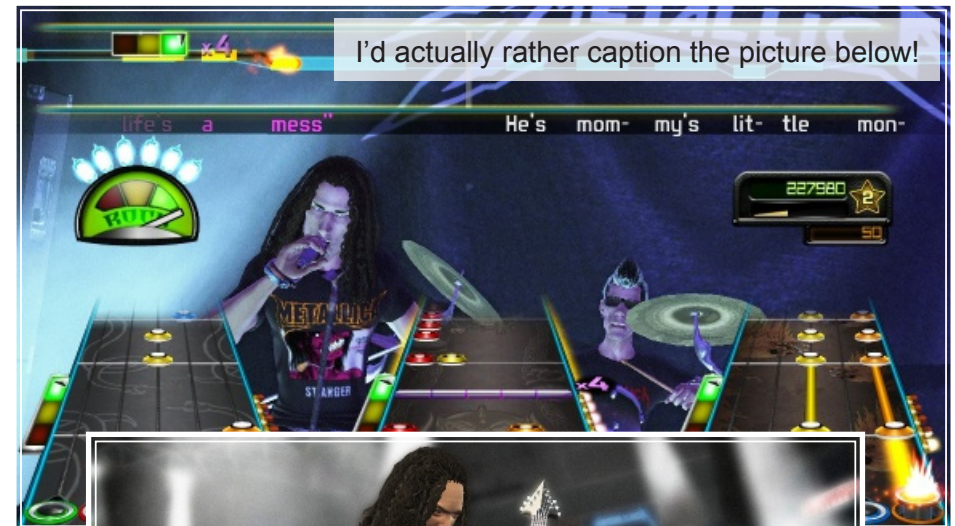
“ Each instrument is a challenge on the harder difficulties, so even if you're not a massive Metallica fan you should find it fun, either in a band situation or by yourself. ”

always will be a Met-head.

I tell you this because it actually allows me to speak with a little bit of authority. Having learnt, practiced and played pretty much every Metallica song there is (sometimes in a live setting), I am positioned to comment on whether or not Neversoft has managed to recreate the actual 'feel' of playing these songs on guitar.



See, even this guy's pointing at Kirk's guitar wanking.



I'd actually rather caption the picture below!



?!

Expert+ is a new difficulty level and will turn your legs to jelly. Fact.



don't feel right. I've pretty much learnt to accept that.

My main complaint with the GH franchise has always been in its inconsistent difficulty levels. You might play a song on hard and only have to actually pick every second palm mute (which just feels wrong), but bump it up to expert and, to be quite honest, I find it easier to go and just play the song on guitar. It just stops being fun.

Something that became apparent while playing GH: Metallica is that hardly any effort has been made to change the series. Whilst being able to unlock new songs based on your star rating (the better you do the faster you'll plow through the setlist) is a nice evolution, I'd be more interested if the fundamental structures of gameplay were re-examined.

>> SWEEP PICKIN'

For example, the implementation of an open note for the bass guitar should be applied to the guitar. Hitting or palm muting an open E string on guitar (with a similar bar visual across the fretboard as is used for bass) would free up the neck a lot more. Similarly, having to hit both cymbals on drums to activate Star Power is a completely stupid exercise in confusion (not to mention the fact that both hits barely ever register). Neversoft should just take a leaf out of Rock Band's books and allow the drummer to activate Star Power at the end of drum fills.

Of similar annoyance is the way in which the two guitar tracks – which in Metallica's case are distinctly split into rhythm and lead – are simply squashed into one experience in the game. I would have loved the option to just play as James or Kirk. This whole business of eschewing the backing riff of a solo is a personal gripe, as they're often the



most fun to play. Sure, solos are awesome too – but surely by now Neversoft has the ability to allow an extra band member to step in and take on rhythm duties. I can't be the only one with a worryingly large collection of plastic instruments.

>> THE THORN WITHIN

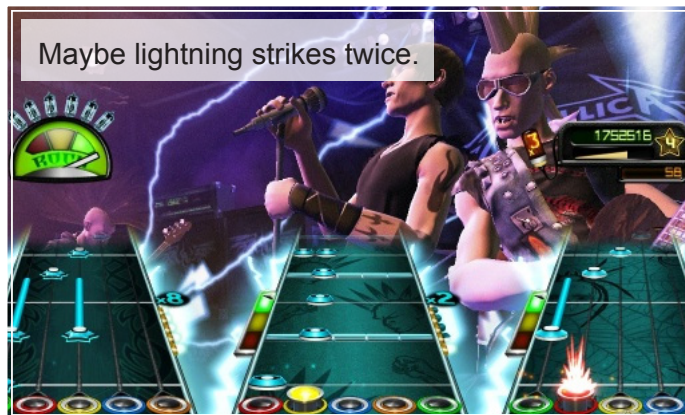
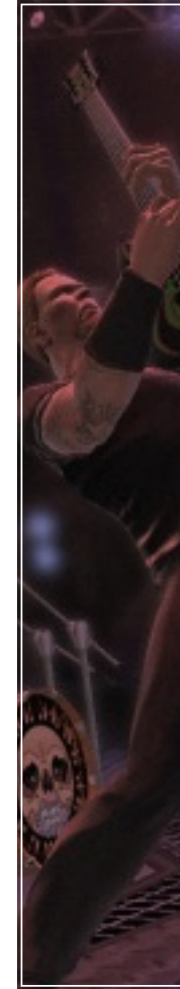
Rant aside, this really is the best Guitar Hero game that Neversoft has made. Each instrument is a



challenge on the harder difficulties, so even if you're not a massive Metallica fan you should find it fun, either in a band situation or by yourself. A lot of effort has gone into motion capturing the band members performing each song, and you can tell from the song selection that they had a lot to do with the creation process. Still, it's almost criminal that Bleeding Me and Outlaw Torn aren't included.

There are around 50 tracks all up (not including the Death Magnetic DLC which is recognised and inserted into the game). Selections cover all of Metallica's albums but it is, I must admit, weighted heavily towards their earlier material – so if you only really started to like them after hearing Mama Said or something you might not get as much out of this as a fervent fan. In addition, you have songs from other bands – such as Slayer, Motorhead, Bob Seger and Alice in Chains, to name a few – that have influenced Metallica or generally been part of their career. The variety, which includes live tracks as well as re-recorded material, is quite impressive.

I guess the question you have to ask yourself is this: Do you like Metallica and Guitar Hero at the same time? An affirmative answer means you've already got the game on pause while you have a quick skim of this review. A somewhat hesitant 'Maybe' or 'No' means that you're reading this to try and help make up your mind. I think most people will get a blast out of Guitar Hero: Metallica. There are enough strong melodies, head banging moments and shredding solos to keep even the most casual music lover happy. Let's just hope that Neversoft starts to evolve the series, because I'm personally just about done with the whole band game thing.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Having a mate challenge me on the spot to have a go at Sad But True on Expert+. Thankfully, it's not too hard a song to try on that difficulty and I managed to get through it – the look on my mate's face was priceless.

WE LIKED:



- + Song selection
- + Unlockable band footage

WE DISLIKED:



- No evolution of the series
- Limited DLC support

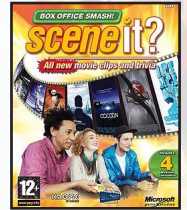
VERDICT:

A definite purchase for all you Met-cats out there. Fun in large groups.

SCENE IT? BOX OFFICE SMASH

>> Patrick Lang unlocked 50G for writing this review.

Developer: Krome Studios
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Genre: Game Show
OFLC: PG
Review Platform: Xbox 360



PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

Microsoft's inevitable and unending push to conquer the casual gaming market over family favourites Nintendo continues with the release of Scene It? Box Office Smash! Whether this is a genuinely new direction for the company or a serious case of Me Too Syndrome™ is a discussion (read: flame war) for another time, but there's no arguing that casual gaming on

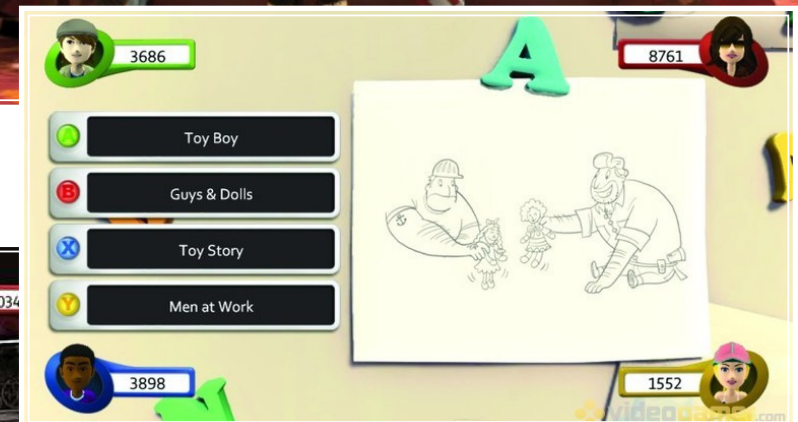
>> **GET READY TO FEEL THE POWER OF ATTORNEY!**

Scene It? BOS! is the second game in the series, following on from 2007's Lights! Camera! Action!

LCA (man, are you sick of these acronyms yet?) did a lot of things right – it had a huge selection of questions

“ One last notable point – if you're an achievement points junkie, you need to own this. ”

Microsoft's big box is here, and here to stay. The last six months have undoubtedly proved this, with SingStar – sorry, Lips – EyeToy – sorry, You're In The Movies – and Buzz – sorry, Scene It? Box Office Smash – being released. Jeez, you'd think that by now one of Sony's many lawyer monkeys would have worked up an international law suit, huh?



?! The official term for the study of trivia (or, alternately, seeds) is spermology. Steady, Freud.

and clips, and the bundled buzzers were great – but it was also slow moving, often highly irritating (with a voice over which made nails on a chalkboard sound like Mahler’s 4th, by comparison) and lacking that important sheen which casual games need to be successful with a broad (even non-gaming) audience.

Thankfully, BOS has managed to eliminate most of its predecessor’s flaws. Most importantly, the previous voiceover has been given the boot, and while the new guy has the potential to be irritating, occasionally some of his jokes are actually – gasp – funny, utilising humour that requires more than a passing interest in film to understand.

Most of the same rounds are present in one form or another – guess the film from the picture, pop culture quizzes, descrambling images – but everything is just a little bit better than before. The whole thing moves much faster too, which is really a necessity for these kinds of social games. It all looks nice, especially with the inclusion of Mii – sorry, Avatar support. It’s great fun watching your guys jump around a virtual couch as you undoubtedly do the same thing in real life.

>> **FRANKLY MY DEAR, I DON’T GIVE A DAMN...**

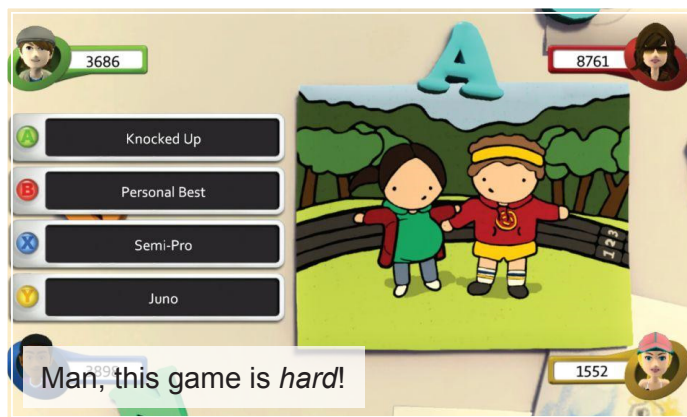
Unfortunately, the only place where BOS doesn’t do better is in its selection of clips. Now, I know that there must have been a budget to deal with, but the selection is fairly meagre and, at times, infuriating. LCA managed to cram a pile of different films from various time frames and countries into it, whereas BOS has clips that are largely US only, and seemingly limited to (mostly) 1980s Steve Martin movies. They’re not funny, and they repeat. The only possible use they have is to remind you of why you’re ashamed to have been born in the 80s. Promised downloadable question and clip packs (the first of which is available now on XBLA, for the moderately reasonable sum of 560 points) go some way to alleviating this problem, but it’s a shame, particularly when so much of the rest of the game is so damn good.

Also, the inclusion of competitive online multiplayer is a first for BOS, but it’s kind of pointless... The whole thrill comes from screaming at friends in your living room and, with no microphone support that I could find, it



feels strangely sterile playing against a random avatar.

One last notable point – if you’re an achievement points junkie, you need to own this. I’ve played more than a few rounds of BOS, and I’ve yet to complete a single one without unlocking an achievement of some description. It’s a cheap tactic, but I’m not going to deny that it’s an effective one.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Discovering that I’ve now unlocked more than 800 achievement points from merely a dozen or so casual play throughs. Hilarious.

WE LIKED:



- + Avatar support is cool
- + Shiny and fun
- + Screaming at friends

WE DISLIKED:



- Repetitive and limited clips
- Not much fun if you don’t like films (but who doesn’t?)

VERDICT:

Perfect for laughing at your friend’s spermological inadequacies.

THE WHEELMAN

>> Steven Milich wheely apologises for this pun.

Developer: Midway Studios/Tigon
Publisher: Midway
Genre: Driving/Action/Sandbox
OFLC: M



Review Platform: Xbox 360

PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

On the surface, Wheelman appears to be the result of a kinky night spent between GTA, Crazy Taxi and Burnout Paradise. Imagine it, naked DVD cases and spare controller batteries flung around the room of the seedy motel, nothing but the sound of grinding discs, buttons being gently massaged and someone getting a Red Ring of Death. In the morning, the participants hastily

James is allowed to write nonsensical reviews that don't go anywhere so I am forced to tell you about this game in full detail. Despite my therapy inducing introduction, Wheelman is not the worst game I have ever played, but it definitely not in my favourite list.

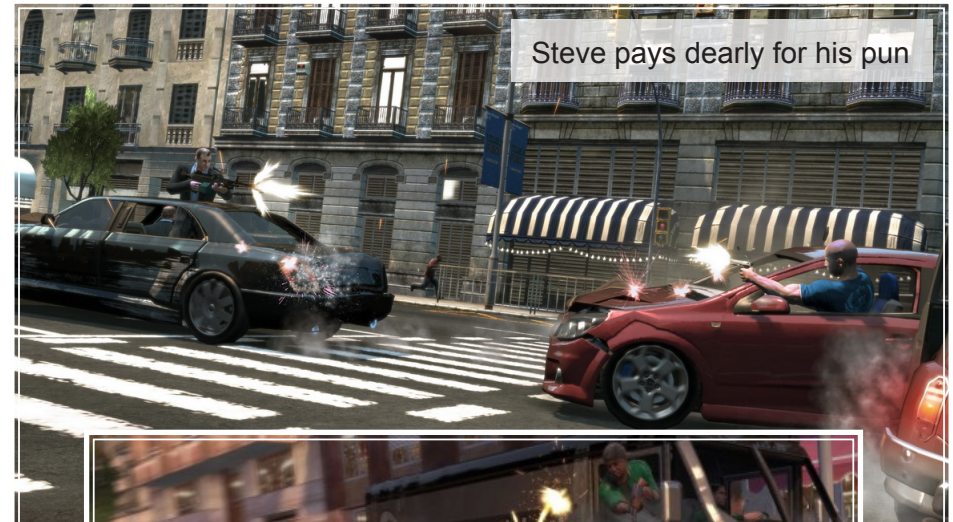
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[Gameplay]: Another fun part of stealing a car is being able to do it mid-drive while speeding along.

”

say their goodbyes before heading home to their families, leaving their unfortunate spawn of their tryst sitting on the bed. When the cleaner comes in to do his job, he picks up the copy of Wheelman but little does he know the horrors within.

A dramatic introduction to a review I'm sure, but it's better than my other plan of writing 900 words of Vin Diesel Facts. Luckily for you, only



?!

This game is serving as a prequel to a film, also called Wheelman and starring Vin Diesel.



Looks like my drive to work.



I don't think she's gonna miss but... Vin is full of surprises!

>> SERIOUSLY, I'M WHEELY SORRY

Starting with the introductory mission, Wheelman looks like a pile of fun. You're presented with a bright colourful city (Barcelona) with many destructible environments, you get thrilling chase scenes, you can take shortcuts through buildings, you have the ability to smash other cars about and you get to do crazy stunts in a large selection of vehicles. Unfortunately the experience is not very polished. While the driving is very arcadey this works against you in missions where you need some precision (such as riding a motorbike in a subway tunnel and avoiding the trains while shooting people on surrounding bikes). Going smash crazy is fun at first, but it gets old very quickly when you are under constant attack by an ever persistent stream of baddies and all you want to do is drive from point A to point B.

As is typical with open world games, you are presented with a large city with some areas not immediately available, and it's through completing

missions that you get to explore the whole city. You're also given a pile of side missions (such as stealing certain cars, time trials etc) which will help you earn money and get extra goodies. While the city is bright and cheery (no 'realistic' brown filter here) there's nothing particularly memorable about it, most streets and building look the same so there's no motivation to get out and explore, and you don't really have to because starting a mission is a simple matter of selecting it on the map rather than manually driving to your starting point.

>> HE EATS GRAVEL FOR BREAKFAST

Storyline wise I found it hard to stay interested. You play as a guy called Milo, who looks, sounds and acts suspiciously like Vin Diesel and every character he has ever played. He's an expert driver, infiltrating the criminal world in Barcelona for your typical scumbag elimination reasons. As you meet different characters and gangs during missions, you are presented with a file on who

they are and what they do, but the problem is that these characters lack any charm and are completely unmemorable. Half the time you won't really understand why you have been given a particular task or what your motivations are so you only really end up doing missions for the sake of finishing the game rather than wanting to find out the next part of the story.

While I did have some issues with the driving sections, the on foot shooting sections caused much



frustration. You can shoot freely or use a lock on camera, but sometimes it would refuse to lock onto the guy in front of you shooting you in the face, instead opting for some other guy in the distance who is of no threat to you because he's very far away and standing behind a crate. You'll also be fighting the camera to pan around to see who's shooting at you moments before you're dead, and if you do manage to get a handle on the controls it's very repetitive action, running into a room and shooting the handy explosive barrels that several people happen to be standing next to, before moving onto the next room. The AI isn't too flash, sitting somewhere between drunk monkey and Pixel Hunt contributor, enemies don't seem to react until you get within a certain distance so if you stay out of range you can shoot them and they'll just stand there and take it. In missions when you're meant to be following NPC drivers to a destination they will get in your way, get stuck on corners and get into accidents. The game is also a bit buggy, at one point, despite



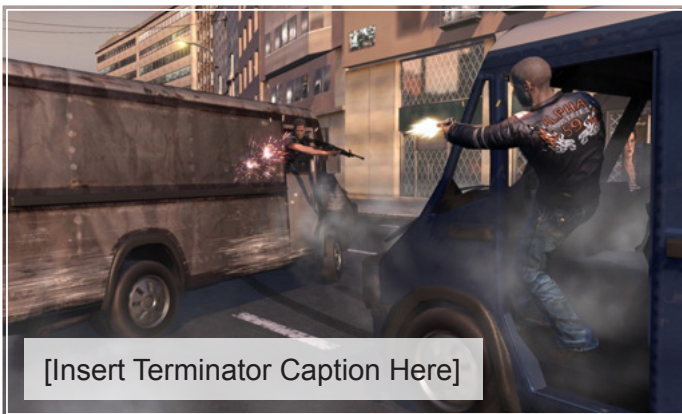
the destructible environments I managed to get stuck on a pile of trash and James was telling me how he even managed to die in a cutscene!

Typically you have the ability to steal cars, the best part is that if you hit the 'hijack' button while a car is speeding past, the driver will actually slam on their brakes to lovingly allow you to steal their car then act surprised when you do. Another fun part of stealing a car is being able to do it mid-drive while speeding along. Get close enough to your intended target and Milo will be able to leap out of his current car, land on the one in front, kick the driver out and take over. It's completely insane and will make you laugh when you see it, I could only imagine being a cop witnessing that little event and having to call it in over the radio.

If you scoop your brain out and leave it on the



coffee table before playing then Wheelman will be fun for a short period. I managed to waste a few hours just cruising around the city seeing what I could smash through. Once you get into the meat of the game it may begin to wear thin very quickly, so definitely try the demo or give it a hire first if you're thinking about buying.



[Insert Terminator Caption Here]

FAVOURITE MOMENT:

The introductory mission as the thrill of cruising down streets smashing cars into walls is nice when it's new.

WE LIKED:



+ Speeding through the city and smashing into stuff is fun for a while

WE DISLIKED:



- On foot sequences
- Shooting mechanics
- Dull story and characters

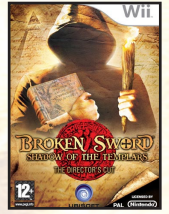
VERDICT:

Fun at first but its faults quickly assert themselves.

BROKEN SWORD: SHADOW OF THE TEMPLARS (D.C.)

>> James O'Connor will make it to France one day.

Developer: Revolution Software
Publisher: Ubisoft
Genre: Adventure
OFLC: PG
Review Platform: Nintendo Wii



PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

In February 2004, I finished Broken Sword 3 on my newly acquired Xbox. The very first thing I did once the credits had rolled was jump online, track down Revolution's website, and search for news of a sequel. I ended up sending a congratulatory e-mail and having a back and forth with one Tony Warriner, discussing the first game's GBA port, the future of the franchise

in slightly upgraded form, still hold the same power it did upon release?

>> IF THE SWORD'S NOT BROKEN...

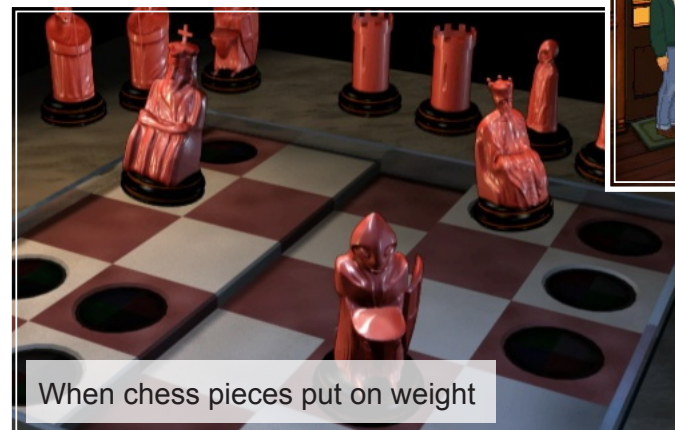
For the uninitiated, Broken Sword is an old-school point 'n click adventure game, full of item use, long conversations and

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Broken Sword is one of gaming's best examples of a linear story told well.

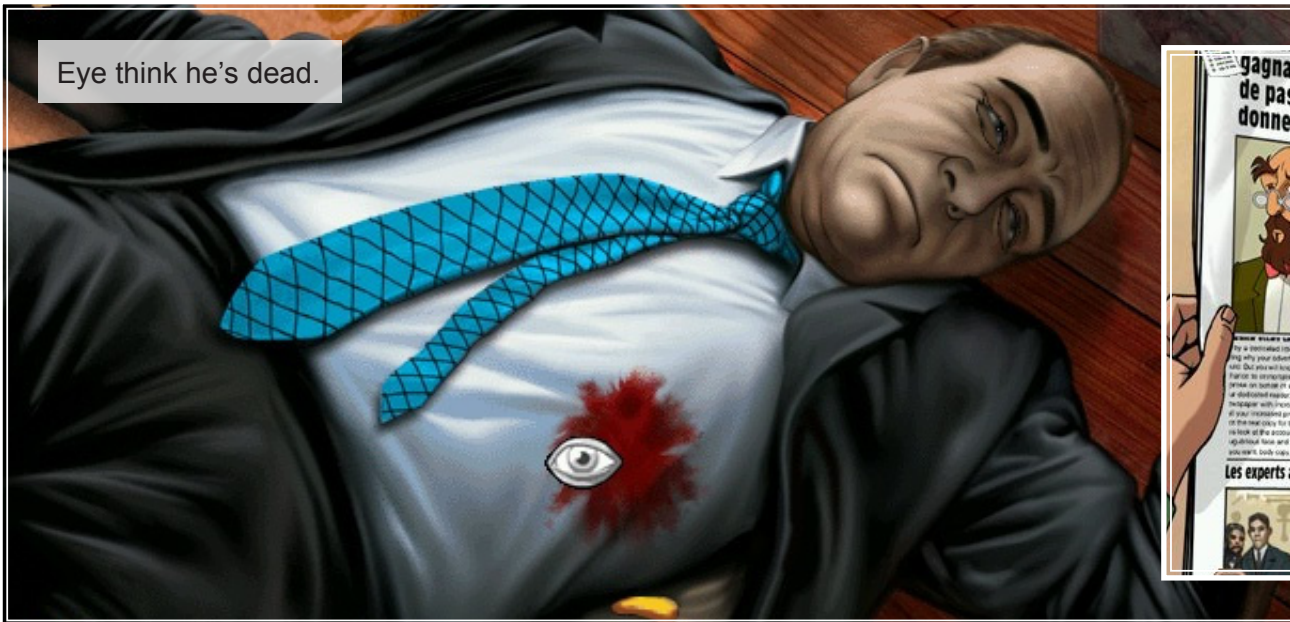
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and the company, and general gaming news and events. The aforementioned GBA iteration of Broken Sword was, in fact, my introduction to the adventure genre, and it's perhaps because of this that I hold the franchise so dear. Still, Broken Sword is a thirteen year old game. As I write this, a recently eBayed copy of the fourth Broken Sword (already a few years old) game, and the Broken Sword 2 file nabbed from GOG.com, await my attention. Does the first game, now available



?!

Every other release of the game has featured potentially game-ending glitches. This one doesn't.



generous pixel hunts (snap!). For those familiar with the franchise, the Director's Cut, staying true to its name, doesn't exactly go to great lengths to differentiate the Wii version from the original release. The main additions come from Nico's side quest, worked into the early stages of the game before unfortunately disappearing before you've even hit the game's halfway point. There's some new art here and there (although nothing too substantial), some re-recorded dialogue, the removal of those irritating death scenes, some ironed over glitches and a smidgen of Wii-remote rotation thrown into a couple of puzzles, but mostly it's the same old Broken Sword. This release ultimately serves as a definitive version of Broken Sword rather than a remake, meaning that anyone who has recently played through the game or still has their PC version lying around is likely to be disappointed. The rest of you, on the other hand...

>> NICO'S A BABE

Broken Sword is one of gaming's best examples of a linear story told well. Although many of the minor characters are poorly voiced caricatures, the overall level of writing here, both in character dialogue and environment inspection, is excellent. Even though he's ultimately a bit of a jerk at times, main character George Stobbart is one of the most likable American tourists you're ever likely to encounter, whilst Nico Collard brings with her a sense of sexy charm that has been steaming up nerd glasses since the original game's release. Plus, now, thanks to remake-exclusive artwork of each character's face during conversations, she's considerably better looking than she was in the original.

Broken Sword is a game you watch and listen to as much as you play. A good portion of your time is spent in conversation, simply picking what the characters will talk about next. It doesn't get boring, however, simply because every character

has something to contribute to the story, and every possible conversation branch is made worthwhile – if not with plot development, then with amusing dialogue. The game is very well written, and unique dialogue has been recorded for the vast majority of situations when you show an item to a character, no matter how irrelevant it is to your current situation or investigation. Towards the end it starts to feel slightly lazier, with less extensive interactions being available, and as things begin to wrap up you're left unable to visit a few characters whom you would



have enjoyed one last conversation with, but essentially the game has one of the most enjoyable scripts you're likely to experience.

>> COMBINE FUN WITH FRUSTRATION

Funnily enough, the puzzles ultimately aren't the meat and potatoes of Broken Sword. Often the tasks set out by the game are either painfully

necessarily going to work in-game, purely because George refuses to try them. However, these situations are in the minority, and because the game is so well written most players won't mind trying every different possible combination until a ridiculous solution becomes clear.

The game also almost never expects you to backtrack and find a piece of evidence you missed somewhere the first time through, meaning that



“ *The artwork and character designs are still largely great, bright and cartoonish, but during cutscenes and the final chapters, things fall apart.* ”

obvious or somewhat obtuse, solutions only being uncovered once logic has been exhausted and weird combinations are attempted. As with most adventure games, solutions you devise in your own head aren't

when you stumble upon a difficult situation chances are high you'll have everything you need to solve it on you. There are a handful of puzzles that have been reworked to make the use of the Wii remote, but for the most part

it distracts more than it immerses. When twisting an object, the game neglects the fact that the Wii remote isn't going to be held exactly still if you stop to reposition your wrist, leading to a few awkward moments where your motions really don't feel like they match up with what is happening on screen. While there are only two puzzles that actually require you to rotate the remote, they're both quite irritating. Waving the Wii remote across the screen searching for things to interact with is generally very effective, and

ultimately the game would have been better if it had been left at that.

From a presentation standpoint, we've come to expect more from games. The artwork and character designs are still largely great, bright and cartoonish, but during cutscenes and the final chapters, things fall apart. These sections feel every bit as old as they are, the finale especially creaking to a closure in a way that is hugely unsatisfying to the modern gamer. A new, retouched cutscene right



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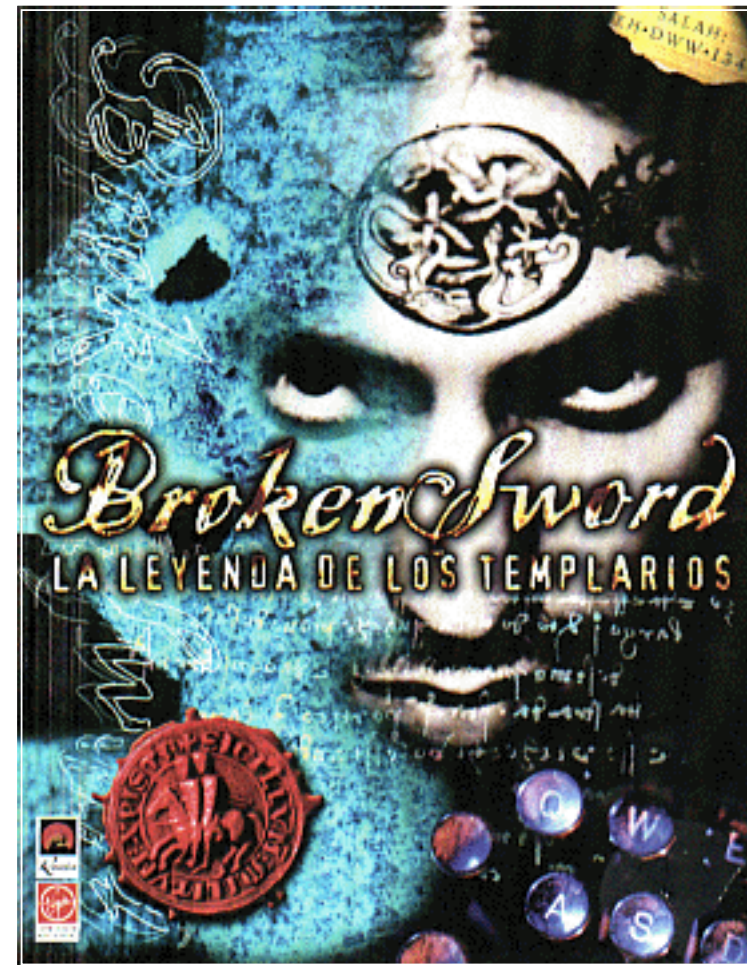
The new artwork of characters' faces is done by Dave Gibbons, best known for his work on Watchmen.

at the very end does little to make up for the ugly, static scenes endured a moment before. It's a sour way to end what has up until that point been a game that has managed to mostly overcome its age. While the music is as great as ever, the dialogue could have done with a complete re-record. The difference between new dialogue added for this Director's Cut and dialogue lifted from the original is all too clear, with the older dialogue sounding crackly and muffled. Music is great throughout, albeit completely unchanged, although going by the audio levels in Broken Sword 2 it seems likely that the default volume has been lowered slightly to allow for clearer dialogue, which is certainly a good thing. You can't help but wish that Revolution had given the entire title a touch-up in these areas though, because everything else about it holds up very well.

>> **FOR GAMEPLAY, SEE MAG'S TITLE**

For the last few years, it's been easy to review point and click adventure games. Because they were a dying genre, fans of this style of game were keen to lap up just about anything

that came out, and games like Still Life and Dreamfall were able to amass cult followings. These days, it seems like you can't throw a stone without hitting a Phoenix Wright, Sam and Max or new indie release, and thanks to the Wii a bunch of the shittier PC adventure releases are gaining new life. However, even with such a lazy Director's Cut effort, it's difficult not to recommend Broken Sword: The Director's Cut, even when you can pick the PC original up online for about \$10. It's got more charm than it knows what to do with, a fun story and great characters; it's the video game equivalent of curling up in bed on a rainy day with a great, funny book, one of the best examples of why we needed an adventure game renaissance. More importantly for some, it feels right at home on the Wii despite its age, and is placed perfectly for everyone out there who has dabbled in the genre and wants to dig into one of the genre's mainstays. Now, how about Broken Sword 5, Revolution?



George admired the elaborate outdoor dunny.

FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Trying the hand buzzer on every person you meet. The various responses and excuses people come up with for not shaking George's hand are hilarious, making the eventual practical use you find for it all the better.

WE LIKED:



- + The characters and story
- + Being mentally stimulated and relaxed at the same time

WE DISLIKED:



- Lazy effort in many ways
- Occasionally obtuse puzzles

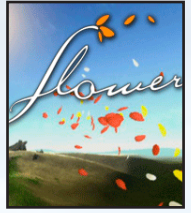
VERDICT:

A lazy 'Director's Cut', but still huge fun, very memorable and a great fit on Wii.

FLOWER

>> Tim Henderson is smitten.

Developer: ThatGameCompany
Publisher: SCE
Genre: Poetic Adventure
OFLC: G



Review Platform: PlayStation 3

PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

It's a sad personal truth that, as a general rule, I only really remember the more frightening dreams that I had as a child. While I am certain that there were many happy ones as well, it was those that would cause me to wake up in a cold sweat that have stayed with me, that I can remember clearly. I've often wondered is this indicative that fear is simply a stronger emotion

early nineties – pale, florescent blue with splashes of even brighter orange and yellow. It was a fashion low if ever there was one, but in this museum that my mind had created, this parker had developed a strange ability to fill with some kind of magical air that would allow me to float from the ground and hover around the glass dome of a ceiling.

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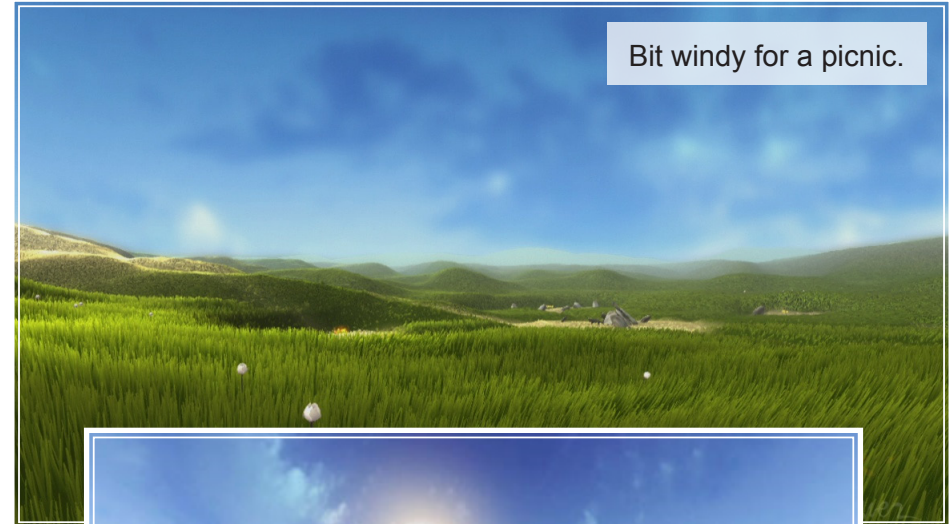
For all the frailty of its delicate visual presentation, the sense of empowerment is immense...

”

in me than joy or any of its more welcome brethren. Thankfully, there is one exception to the rule that has helped to keep my self-perception sane.

>> FLIGHT

In my dream, I am in some kind of museum, and I'm wearing a horrible parker that was probably not uncommon for a young child in the



Bit windy for a picnic.



Pink as a really pink thing

?!

In Holland during the 17th century, a single tulip bulb was worth more than most precious metals.



The first moments were terrifying. That much I remember clearly, but I also recall the fear subsiding and a simple joy settling in and taking its place, and although this dream was – as all my dreams are – a disembodied experience, the sense of flight remained thoroughly visceral.

As this dream-state progressed, I eventually learned how to control my flight, and irrespective of how silly I looked, I took great pleasure in flying over my house and exploring the endless stretch of eucalyptus out back. The sense of happiness that washed over me as this dream progressed was profound and pure – there was no greed in this dream, just a strange kind of perfect freedom of movement. The feelings that this dream generated remain difficult to describe to this day.

Therefore, Flower is, in spite of its lack of complex characters or a developed plot, one of the single most emotive experiences that any form of media entertainment has ever given me.

This is because it does what it sets out to do so beautifully. Lead-in to gameplay is at an absolute minimum, and then there you are, a little puff of air with a flower petal floating around it. Curiosity and instinct are all that you will need from this point onward.

Tilt the controller and you steer and swivel around the picturesque landscape, press a button and you will gain momentum. Take this mechanic of free flight and apply it to some absolutely gorgeous locations and you have the ideal tech demo. Use some flowers to create the suggested, musical flight paths and that tech demo crosses a loosely-defined border and can be defined as a game, as pure and simple as any that has ever been made.

>> **CAUGHT IN THE BREEZE**

A part of what makes Flower so great is actually that it gives you an excuse to look at lots of pretty scenery – by simply offering things to chain



together and flowers to discover, it has delivered to its players a sense of focus that allows for its aesthetics to be marveled at without the risk of boredom.

The other part, however, it that is genuinely creates a sense of flight. Flying is really all you do, and you can feel your presence as you go about doing it – flower petals get caught up in your stream of wind, grass parts as you slice through it and the audio does its part in ensuring that you always feels



separated from the ground.

As such, like a dream where you are blissfully happy for no reason other than the actions in which you are partaking, Flower is, above all and everything else, a pleasure to play. You're given an objective to keep you from getting bored, but it's one that strives only to be harmonious with the experience – it facilitates enjoyment, and the result is often that a level will be completed not because the player has actively tried to complete the objectives, but simply because they've been completed as a matter of course.

The offering is slight (most people will probably finish it in a couple of hours), but the rewards are immense. The experience initially begins with some trepidation, but it opens up as confidence grows, and for brief snatches of time it becomes possible to forget yourself and experience nothing but a pure sense of free motion. For all the frailty of its delicate visual presentation, the sense of

empowerment is immense – to experience what this game offers is to feel liberated, even if only for the shortest of moments.

Flower may present a series of play mechanics, but all that it really asks of its players is a love of motion, and the capacity to feel pure, untainted happiness. That it succeeds makes it a striking achievement – it's the game that NiGHTS Journey of Dreams was supposed to be; it's a game that facilitates childlike joy without being itself childish. It's a game that will move you, and it will do this by asking you to do nothing more than move the controller.



It all starts from a single petal.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Returning to earlier levels with newfound ability and flying around with assured confidence.

WE LIKED:



+ Being reminded that sixaxis controls don't have to suck

WE DISLIKED:



- The odd moments where we instinctively tried using the thumbsticks

VERDICT:

Victory in simplicity – a genuine pleasure to play.

LOCOROCO 2

>> Caitlin Kavanagh is a little loco roco too.

Developer:
Publisher:
Genre:
OFLC:

Japan Studio
SCE
Platform/Puzzle
G



Review Platform:

Sony PSP

PS3 | 360 | WII | DS | PSP | PS2 | PC

While playing LocoRoco 2, many friends asked me what the game was about. My answer only left them more puzzled: 'Well you're this bouncing blob, right. And you have to eat these strawberry things and you get fatter. And you collect fruits, and musical notes, and stamps, and sing and you gotta beat the Mojas.' 'Riiiiight,' they'd say, glancing at each other knowingly,

new ideas to keep it interesting for old LocoRoco lovers. Continuing with the same 'narrative', the ridiculously cute LocoRocos must defeat the evil Mojas. But this is really a platform game, as it's near impossible to follow the narrative, especially the cut-scenes which are non-sensical, but quite hilarious. LocoRoco 2 keeps the original gameplay elements, ferrying LocoRocos through

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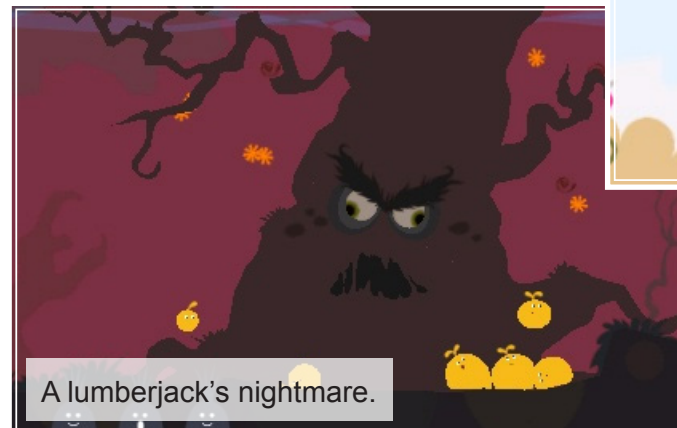
There are both familiar and new themes on offer, including underwater levels, industrials worlds, and you may spend some time inside a penguin.

”

before quickly excusing themselves to go off and do anything else. The premise of LocoRoco 2 may sound to the uninitiated utterly absurd, but once played, you quickly understand its charm.

>> ROLLIN' ALONG

Remaining similar to the 2006 original, LR2 allows new players to jump onboard, while still providing enough



?!

In addition to the already six LocoRoco from the original, a purple LocoRoco was put in for this release.

different levels by tilting and flipping their world. Retaining the basics of the original control scheme, which was slightly clumsy and irritating, LocoRoco 2 feels slightly improved in this regard, delivering more control to the user, whilst still providing a satisfactory level of difficulty in each level. In fact, this time the levels are more complicated but just as creative, bizarre and beautifully designed. You come across owls that swallow you and spit you back out in odd shapes; trumpet-beaked birds that shoot you through the levels; and a whole array of mechanisms that will send you scurrying, sliding and swimming through visually stunning worlds.

>> DO THE LOCO-MOTION

This time you also get more of a chance to interact with the catchy and boppy music, as musical notes are hidden throughout the levels. These are found in plants and animals, which are rejuvenated once you collect the notes from them. They can also be awarded to you when you play a rhythm mini-game, whereby you must tap along to the beat of the music. While this new addition doesn't quite bring a drastic

change to the game, nor overly reward you, it is fun. And that music is brilliant.

Each level has its own theme and visual aesthetic. The worlds are placed side-by-side in the menu screen, which I found was not a very intuitive layout. There are both familiar and new themes on offer, including underwater levels, industrial worlds, and you may spend some time inside a penguin. There is also a wide array of mini-games on offer, which will cost you your hard earned Pickories to play. You can choose to race other LocoRocos, except you don't actually do any of the racing. Rather, like horse-racing, you just choose who you think will win, which is a fairly pointless game – a bit like horse racing, really. However, there are others that are more rewarding and complicated, including Loco Chuppa, and a Wac-a-Mole derivative.

>> KAWAII 5.0

Essentially, this is the same game as its predecessor, and while sadly it has half as many levels, there are enough new additions



to provide a bellyful of excitement for new and old LocoRoco players. It also offers ample content for those who have the autistic need to unlock everything within the game. LocoRoco 2 administers as much charm, humour and visual mastery as the original, and is essentially the essence of kawaii culture.



FAVOURITE MOMENT:

Getting eaten by the penguin. Need I say more? Well, I probably should, as there's more space here, but now I've just ruined the effect of... you know, I'll just stop now.

WE LIKED:



- + Awesome music and visuals
- + Same Loco-licious gameplay

WE DISLIKED:



- Iffy controls at times
- Pointless mini-games

VERDICT:

A perfect game for the PSP that puts cheeriness well and truly above blariness.

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

>> Because we all have busy lives.

BANJO-KAZOOIE: NUTS & BOLTS (2008)

When Banjo Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts was released last year I was slightly baffled that it received such a critically lukewarm reception. The platforming element had been almost entirely aborted and replaced with vehicle-based gameplay, and reviewers lamented Rare's risky shift in focus. Nuts & Bolts is undoubtedly a different beast to its predecessors, but it's just as strong in its own way. Not only is it full of fourth-wall-shattering humour and resplendent visuals, it also has a fantastic vehicle creation system that gives the player complete freedom and encourages lateral thinking.

At its core, Nuts & Bolts is a series of vehicular challenges, the completion of which will gain you access to more challenges. In some of these you're required to use a set vehicle. But in most of them, you'll be given entirely free reign to create whatever the hell you want in the game's vehicle creation system, and it's this freedom that really makes the game shine. The creation system itself is easy to use, logical and intuitive. Movement requires wheels or propellers, motion itself requires

an engine, and an engine requires fuel. Aside from these core rules and some restrictions in which parts can connect to which, the player has no limitations to what they can create. Progressing through the game unlocks more and more parts, allowing for the player to exercise their creative licence in increasingly interesting ways.

This is a game built on potential, a unique prospect in itself. You literally get out what you put in. If you invest the time and effort into creating great vehicles, you'll have a great time. If you wanted, you could just stick to the game's pre-made blueprints, but you would really miss out on the spirit of the game. The tools are all there, you just have to pick them up and use them.

The way that Nuts & Bolts encourages lateral thinking is a sad rarity in videogames, and it's the most significant reason to shine a spotlight on this title. Sure, there are excellent titles like Portal and Braid that will alter your perception of conventional gameplay in order to solve puzzles, but the challenges they present are linear; ultimately everybody proceeds in the same way. Nuts & Bolts forces you to find your own way outside of the box



in order to succeed. Experimentation is fostered and encouraged. The game wants you to fail, figure out where you went wrong and learn from it, to take your newly built speed machine into a race only for you to meekly roll down a hill as you realize you forgot the fuel. They want you to go crazy, and say 'What will happen if I put this part here?'. Rare gives you a test track for that exact purpose.

There were a lot of challenges on which I spent significant chunks of time designing a vehicle specifically for the purposes of that one challenge. One challenge presents you with a circular area full of huge dominos. There is a small space in its centre. You're offered one touch to knock down as many dominos as you can. It's a puzzle based on logic, engineering. I had stubbornly convinced myself that simply ramming them would do the trick if I had sufficient size and power. With each failed attempt I made modifications, until my vehicle had evolved from



IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

>> Because we all have busy lives.

BANJO-KAZOOIE: NUTS & BOLTS (2008)

an immense tank into a tiny helicopter, shaped like a cross with guns affixed to each of the four arms. I landed in the middle of the circle, fired the four guns simultaneously and managed to take out most of the dominos. I had gone from trying to get the biggest run up possible to not actually driving an inch. But this is only one solution; there are myriad other ways to accomplish the same goal. There aren't many games that place the onus on the player's ingenuity and effort like this game does.

Nuts & Bolts is a playground, an opportunity to bring a virtual Lego set to life, to set your wildest ideas to virtual use. In some ways, it's a game you play with your head more than your hands. What you do with your building blocks is always up to you, and Rare deserve serious kudos for giving the player the freedom to make that choice.

✎ Michael Pincott



MMO MELTDOWN

>> Me need mo money

It's been a slow month in the world of MMOs, much like last month really, and the month before that, too, now that I think about it. Or perhaps it hasn't, and I've simply grown tired of being force-fed the same sweets in different wrappers, and haven't the willpower left to trudge through yet another tween-filled world of poor manners and naughty language. Whatever the case, I spent very little time this month playing MMOs, and instead found my gaming desires fulfilled playing the PS2, and the wonderful Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4.

they really aren't much alike. Unlike Persona 4, Megaten is set in a post-apocalyptic sci-fi fantasy world overrun with demons, however like Persona 4, these demons can be coaxed, tamed, or beaten into submission, combined together to become more powerful, and then used to do your every bidding.

This includes using them as mounts to get around, and as allies to crush your foes into a buttery pulp, and it serves to breathe new life into the aging and overused mount system found in basically every other MMO on the market. The combat in Megaten is also somewhat innovative in the MMO verse, allowing you to do

more than simply click on an enemy and wait for them to die. You can dodge, block, parry, counter, and rush enemies during combat, offering a paper/scissors/rock themed system that—if nothing else—ensures that you at least stay awake for the majority of your battles.

Also, much like the offline versions of SMT, Megaten is one of the few MMOs to include an active and developing storyline, complete with cutscenes and semi-interesting characters. However, the lack of a PvP system limits player interaction to simply working together to complete quests, making it somewhat like a co-op RPG rather

than an MMO. It's not going to change your life, but for fans of the series craving a little more story and some human interaction it's a good way to kill a few hours, and as it's completely free to play, you're unlikely to lose anything out of the deal... except maybe your vocabulary, but you're probably better off without that anyway.

✚ Cody Hargreaves

“

Unlike Persona 4, Megaten is set in a post-apocalyptic sci-fi fantasy world overrun with demons.

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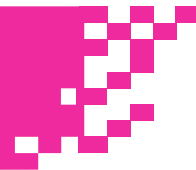
Not having played the previous titles in the series, I instantly fell in love with the fresh take Persona 4 had given the slowly fading JRPG genre, and quickly found myself back on the PC searching for a little back-story to my new favourite game. You'll never guess what I found:

>> **SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: IMAGINE ONLINE**

That's right, hiding under the guise Megaten (clever, no?) publishers Aeria Games released this completely free-to-play MMO late last year, and while there are several similarities to be found between the online and offline takes of the game



COMPETITIONS



PIXEL HUNT

THE FREE AUSSIE GAMING EZINE

>> I wonder if this counts as community service?

» WIN! GUITAR HERO METALLICA

HERES HOW:

Thanks to Activision, we have three copies of Guitar Hero: Metallica to give away on Xbox 360.

To win, all you need to do is be a subscriber to Pixel Hunt (current and new). We'll draw the winners at random.

Subscribe to Pixel Hunt now!

<http://pixelhunt.com.au/subscribe>



» WIN! PROTOTYPE

HERES HOW:

Our second competition is also from Activision and is, as you may have guessed from our cover and Q&A (available online shortly) for Prototype on Xbox 360.

We thought we'd do something a little different this time. Instead of answering a boring question, we're asking you to pass the word to your friends (either online or off) about Pixel Hunt. In order to win, you simply need to email us and tell us who you recommended Pixel Hunt to and what their reaction was – this can be in the form of a quote, feedback etc. Extra kudos will be given to larger lists and/or detailed (constructive) feedback.



PRIZES COURTESY OF OUR FRIENDS AT:

ACTIVISION®

TERMS & CONDITIONS:

Both competitions are open to Australian residents only (sorry other readers, as they are PAL copies), with the exception of Pixel Hunt contributors and their immediate family. The competitions commence immediately and will end on the 15th of August, 2009. **Comp 1:** Prizes: three (3) winners will each win one (1) retail version of Guitar Hero: Metallica (360 version – game only), published by Activision. This is a random competition. **Comp 2:** Prizes: three (3) winners will each win one (1) copy of Prototype (360 version), published by Activision. This is a competition of skill. The judge's decision is final. The judges will comprise of the Pixel Hunt Editor and Deputy Editor. Pixel Hunt is not responsible for lost or damaged mail and the prizes are not redeemable for cash. We reserve the right to substitute any of the prizes but will always do so for a prize of equal value. Only submissions sent to comps@pixelhunt.com.au will be eligible. Pixel Hunt reserves the right to change the terms and conditions of this competition at any time. Winners will be notified by email and may have their winning submission printed in a future issue of Pixel Hunt. Failure to reply to emails within 20 days will result in the prize going to another winner.

Send all entries to comps@pixelhunt.com.au to be eligible.

NEXT ISSUE

>> Find out what goodies are in store next month!



PIXEL HUNT

THE FREE AUSSIE GAMING EZINE

WHAT'S ON NEXT MONTH?



Things seem to be falling into a fairly steady rhythm, and while we all have regular jobs in order to pay the bills and what-not, we're confident in being able to deliver an issue of Pixel Hunt every two months. Here's what to expect in Issue 9, out in August.

Reviews: It's an Xbox Live Arcade deluge, as we bring you reviews of The Dishwasher, Lode Runner, Banjo Tooie and Outrun. Tim plays the first two episodes of the Wallace and Gromit adventure game and Steven busts out his tight Wolverine uniform to give the game a run for its money. We'll also give our verdict on inFamous, Bionic Commando, Terminator Salvation and more!

Feature: Michael Pincott treats us to the second part of his feature on game dialogue; this time focusing on what games got it oh so wrong.

Plus: New editions of all our regular stuff - opinion columns, Not The News, Not My Genre, and more. All for FREE!

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