

The Gamer's Quarter

2nd Quarter

2005






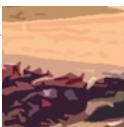


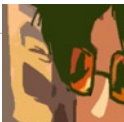


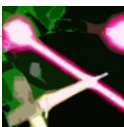
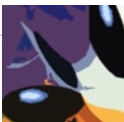
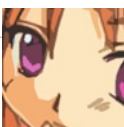

Issue #1

THE
GAMER'S QUARTER
MAGAZINE





Table of Contents

	Staff Page 2	
	Not a Review of Metal Gear Solid 3 Pages 3 - 8	
	On Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater	
	Rolling Up Kommunism Pages 9-13	
	On Katamari Damashi	
	A Subtle Shift Pages 14-19	
	On Resident Evil 4	
	Ottsetl Propaganda Pages 20 - 22	
	On Jak 3	
	Starting from Scratch Pages 23 - 25	
	Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace Game Death	
	A Room With a Hell of a View Pages 26 - 32	
	On Silent Hill 4	
	Warrior Withheld Pages 33 - 36	
	On Prince of Persia Warrior Within	
	S² anamoly discrimination force Pages 37 - 42	
	Games are visceral - read manga	
	To The End of Time Pages 43 - 47	
	On Chrono Trigger	
	Untold Tales of The Arcade Pages 48 - 52	
	An Inquiry Into Old, Obscure and Good Arcade Games	
	The Curse of: "Warning Forever" Pages 53 - 54	
	On the freeware game Warning Forever	
	Dissecting a Hedgehog Pages 55 - 68	
	An In-depth Analysis of Sonic the Hedgehog	
	Doki Doki Idol Star Seeker Pages 69 - 82	
	Treatise, Translation and Advanced Strategy for the import Dreamcast game	
	San Andreas Days Pages 83 - 88	
	120 Days in Compton: Grand Theft Auto	

Staff

Editor's Desk - March 15th, 2005

Putting this magazine together has been quite an interesting trip since its inception on October 10th of last year. I originally wanted to get this first issue out on January 15th, but as the New Year rolled around it became clear that it wasn't going to happen. At that time I was juggling a couple dozen things at once, and sometimes even now it feels like the number of things I've been trying to keep straight has only increased since the beginning.

About a month ago I decided I needed a break from worrying about the magazine, so I picked up Gran Turismo 4. I hadn't really gotten into the Grand Turismo series until 4, but something about the game's cover art really struck me. It is spartan, clean, and bold all at once. Something about the art direction reminded me of Ridge Racer Type 4. Perhaps the strong use of a single color, but I can't be certain.

I'm now 20 hours or so into the game and here I sit, feeling compelled to write about it. I'm at the point where it's really starting to sink in - when I know I'm in love with the game even though I'm only just scratching the surface.

The magazine sits in the back of my mind no matter how immersed in the game I become. Playing a great game is just the stress relief I need and in this case it serves as a reminder of why gaming is such a large part of my life. This magazine has become a similar passion, and I've found that getting together with the staff and spending way too much time on minor things in an effort to nail down these wonderful articles has been rewarding in much the same way as perfecting the tricky corners of GT4's Laguna Seca. It's a lot of hard work, but now that I've finally reached the finish line I've got a great sense of accomplishment and something wonderful to show for it. I can only hope that the fruits of our labor shine through as you read this. Thank you for your support.

-Regards
Matthew Williamson
shapermc@gamersquarter.com
Editor In Chief

All Content © The Gamer's Quarter 2005. All images and characters are retained by original company holding.

2 The Gamer's Quarter Issue #1

Staff Credits

Editor In Chief:

Matthew "ShaperMC" Williamson

Managing Editor:

"Super" Wes Ehrlichman

Assistant Editor:

M. "dhex" O'Connor

Contributing Editor:

Sergei "Seryogin" Servianov

Contributing Writers:

Ryan "Blazehedgehog" Bloom

Amandeep "ajutla" Jutla

M. "dhex" O'Connor

Jeremy "ApM" Penner

Brandon "Rabeewilliams" Richard

J. R. "Mr. Mechanical" Freeman

Sergei "Seryogin" Servianov

Andrew "Mister" Toups

Francesco-Alessio "Randorama"

Ursini

Raphael "Sushi d" Valenzuela

Comic Artist:

Jonathan "Persona-Sama" Kim

Art Contributors:

"Super" Wes Ehrlichman

Benjamin "Lestrade" Rivers

Raphael "Sushi d" Valenzuela

Matthew "ShaperMC" Williamson

Page Layout & Design:

"Super" Wes Ehrlichman

Matthew "ShaperMC" Williamson

Web Site Design & Layout:

"Super" Wes Ehrlichman

A character in a dark suit is rappelling down a thick tree branch in a dense, sunlit forest. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking up at the character and the surrounding greenery.

NOT A REVIEW OF METAL GEAR SOLID 3

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater - PS2
Amandeep Jutla

I finished *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* on December 29th, 2004, at 4:24 pm.

When it was all over; when I had seen that timeline of events tumble down my television screen, telling me with cold accuracy what happened after the story was over; when I was hit by the strangely emotional ending; when I saved my clear data...

I didn't know what to do.

The game restarted. The Konami logo – the ugly new red one – came up and the PS2 controller fell out of my hand. I lay prone in front of my television, jaw slightly slackened. I didn't get up. I didn't *want* to get up, really. I just stayed where I was, looking at my TV, seeing nothing.

Now I'm sitting at my computer, staring at these words and wondering what else to say. What else *is* there to say? Up until now, I half-believed I was going to review this game, but now I realize that I won't. I can't. Writing a review of *Snake Eater* somehow strikes me as pointless. *Snake Eater*, in its own, peculiar way, is almost above reviewing.

A review of this game would fail

to give you an accurate impression of whether or not it is "worth playing." My own subjective ideas about what makes *Snake Eater* good or bad are insignificant, because if ever there was a videogame that could not be considered on the basis of subjectivity, then *Snake Eater* is it. I cannot condense the game into a pithy list of pros and cons, nor could I reduce it to a number. None of this would have any meaning, because, to even begin to know *Snake Eater*, you must experience and understand it. This understanding takes a bit of effort to reach.

In the beginning, you don't understand *Snake Eater*.

The *Snake Eater* DVD case is pretty average – well, perhaps a bit more orange than average. On the back is a neat row of small, green, capital letters: WWW.METALGEARSOLID.COM. Above, a series of small, stylized images: a hammer-and-sickle; a peace sign; three missiles; a bomber; and an exclamation point. When you look at it, one word floats through your mind:

"What?"

It's impenetrable. And the box is just the beginning.

Let's think back to 2001 for a moment.

Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty was out. Say what you like about *Sons of Liberty*'s merits as a videogame; it had what might very well go down in history as one of the most ludicrously cool introduction movies ever. The credits flashed and blinked and flickered their way onto the backs of your retinas; one after another, scenes of Solid Snake righteously killing Russians flew by; exquisitely-orchestrated music played.

And this all happened before you even saw the title screen.

Now, before *Snake Eater*'s title screen, you see the Konami and KCE Japan logos. Then you get a message about Dolby Pro Logic II. That's it.

My reaction when I first saw this was, "Hey, where the hell did my intro movie go?"

Well, it's still there. It just shows up an hour into the game. Once you've seen it, a flag is recorded on your memory card, and, every subsequent time you turn on the system, the intro movie plays, just as it did in *Sons of Liberty*. Yet even when you get to see it, it doesn't feel the same. It's not adrenaline-pumped and *action-packed!* It's a bit more abstract; the focus is on CGI snake skeletons, stylized parachutes, and smooth, sixties-style lounge music.

Play a little longer, and you'll find more like this.

Look at the *Snake Eater* 3D engine. It is all-new, and it shows: where *Sons of Liberty* ran at a continual sixty frames-per-second, *Snake Eater* chugs with thirty. Where *Sons of Liberty* had disgustingly high polygon counts, since most of the game was set in the Big Shell's tiny struts, *Snake Eater*, as the DVD case tells us, is in a "new setting: the jungle;" its environments are larger, and more complex. Its engine chops more; things look rougher. It is a little jarring.

Look at the first ten minutes of cutscenes. Scenes of your character HALO jumping into Soviet jungle territory intercut with long expository discussions explaining exactly why he is doing this. This, well, isn't quite the same as *Sons of Liberty*'s introduction, where Snake jumps onto a tanker *while invisible*, thirty seconds before it is hijacked.

Look at the gameplay itself. Your player character, Jack – also known as Naked Snake, also eventually known as Big Boss – mostly looks like Solid Snake, which is to be expected. They have the same DNA, after all. This Snake, however, is a bit heftier in build. His frame isn't nearly as lithe; his footsteps are heavy and plodding.

Snake Eater is less snappy than *Sons of Liberty*, or the original *Metal Gear Solid*. Then again, of course it's less snappy. It's the jungle.



New Setting: The Jungle!

To understand *Snake Eater*, you have to understand the jungle. Ninety percent of the areas here are large, irregular spaces with vines everywhere, trees in even more places, and knee-high grass liberally scattered about for good measure. There is no more radar, and the tools you have to compensate are pretty piss-poor.

To play properly, you've got to use your eyes and ears. It's good, then, that doing so is pretty easy. Use the right analog stick to move the camera around; hit R1 to see through Snake's eyes. Guards are all over the place, and they can now see more than three feet in front of them; if they hear something suspicious, they will rush to your location and they will investigate. If they find you, you *will* be in trouble, especially early on.

In the beginning, when you're still trying to get used to *Snake Eater's* new look and feel, you will die a lot. Those first few jungle areas – the wide, open places saturated with gun-toting Russians – will be the recurring death of you. It is frustrating beyond belief, and it made me a little angry. I felt the game had been messed up. There are many on the Internet who still feel that way. They say things, things I almost agreed with at first:

"They *broke* Metal Gear Solid by removing the radar."

"The cut-scenes are *boring*."

"The game is *hard*."

"I keep *dying*."

"The camera *sucks* because you can't control it."

These people are both impatient and wrong.

Snake Eater is not, at its heart, something you can jump into and play. It is not even a game you can easily love. It is slow. It is carefully, methodically designed, and, until you come to understand what it is trying to do, you will derive little of meaning from it. And it is aware of this. It is brutal and harsh in the way that it makes *you* aware of it.

The first five small areas of *Snake Eater* are possibly the most difficult parts to sneak your way through. After you've HALO jumped into the jungle, you are essentially told nothing of the changes from previous *Metal Gears*. You are told

little of the new close-quarters-combat system. You are told little of how to well use camouflage, or face paint, or why it is important that you keep your stamina up. *Snake Eater* would like you to figure all of this out by yourself, and so it throws you, headfirst, kicking and screaming, into the thick of things; into the jungle.

You keep getting discovered by guards and violently killed.

You think the game sucks, until you get it.



"Getting it" doesn't happen by itself. You have to work a little. You have to spend some time lying in the grass, watching, waiting, listening. You have to fumble with climbing trees, to figure out how your sonar works, to determine the guards' patrol routes, and exploit them. *Snake Eater* doesn't hold your hand. You have to hold your own hand, out there in the wilderness.

Metal Gear Solid and *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* were similar. Both were high-octane and high-tech. Both tossed plot twists at you with wild abandon, and both involved cool stunts. They didn't please everyone, though.

A certain group of people complained when they discovered that Raiden rather than Snake was the real playable character in *Sons of Liberty*. They hated this "fundamental change" which had taken

place, without any sort of warning, less than halfway through the story.

A few years later, these same people, the ones who hadn't been sacred away from *Metal Gear Solid* completely, were glad that the series apparently seemed to have been returning to the tried-and-true with *Snake Eater*.

Yet now many of them fill Internet forums, complaining, usually without capital letters and with an excess of punctuation, about how "they" broke *Metal Gear Solid*



again.

Snake Eater's introduction of a new structure and new gameplay is just as sweeping as *Sons of Liberty's* introduction of Raiden – hell, it's even more dramatic. Hideo Kojima has not broken *Metal Gear Solid*, but he has changed it. He has stripped it down to its essence.

What is *Metal Gear Solid* about?

One of *Snake Eater's* bosses is a sniper – a one-hundred-year-old man, known as The End. When you fight him, you are thrown into a massive area of the jungle where he is hiding, somewhere. You have to kill him to proceed, but you don't know where he is. All you can do is hide yourself, and look for him. There's a good chance you won't find him at all; that you'll have to move to another map. There's an even better chance that he'll find you first; that a tranquilizer bolt will fly from nowhere and embed itself in Snake's brain.

The fight with The End is protracted and perfect. Lying motionless in tall grass, you look for the bastard, digging out the thermal goggles, scope, AP sensor, motion detector, directional microphone, everything you've got. You have to use this stuff to figure out where he is, and doing so is hard and frustrating. It seems strange – alien, almost. Other games just don't *do* things like this to you.

Nothing in my own gaming upbringing had prepared me for an hour-long battle with an eagle-eyed sniper fought over three enormous maps. I raced through one of these maps, hoping against hope that he wouldn't see me, groping for my map, looking for a good place to stop and survey my surroundings, pausing every so often and listening for his breath. I felt completely out of my depth. I was genuinely scared.

After a while, however, I adjusted. I started to look for him more intelligently. I came to recognize the shine of his head in my rifle's sights, and the green of his parrot became a giveaway. It took a while, but I *got* him.



The battle with The End is *Snake Eater*. It is a microcosm of the game itself. It takes a lot of getting used to, and doesn't apologize for it. Nothing in *Snake Eater* is arbitrary. When you wrap your head around the jungle, and when you understand the way to play properly, then you can see this. Each aspect of *Snake Eater* – from the food system to the cure system to the way you move around – ties into a neat, organized whole. In the face of all of the licensed nonsense out there, the games that use every single button on the controller to no real purpose, the RPGs with hundreds of spells out of which you might ever find yourself truly needing to use only three, there is something tremendously reassuring in *Snake Eater's* firmness, and this firmness is exactly what *Metal Gear Solid* is about.

The original *Metal Gear Solid* aspires to be well-made and coherent; something which makes sense. It succeeds in many ways, although technological limitations cause a few problems. Guards disappear after you kill them; the FA-MAS can't be aimed at something six feet above Snake's

head.

Sons of Liberty fixes these issues, introducing persistent bodies and the ability to aim a gun in first-person mode, yet at times it too falters. When *Sons of Liberty* briefly turns into a platformer as it makes the player cartwheel across the burning remains of a bridge, or when it forces the player to overcome a button-mashing torture sequence, it sacrifices flow and internal consistency.

Yet *Snake Eater* fixes this – it is the real deal, free of *Metal Gear Solid's* practical shortcomings and *Sons of Liberty's* bizarre non-sequiturs. In the jungle, you're no longer a rat running through a nightmarish, high-tech maze. You're no longer constrained by a baroque plot. You just *are*, out there, alone with only your wits and your backpack.

There is no unnecessary baggage here; there's nothing but you and what can only be described as *raw videogame*. *Snake Eater* never becomes soft and lazy; never throws a tired old convention at you without first taking it into some depth.

Ultimately, *Snake Eater* is about what gaming is about: thinking, reasoning, reacting, and, above all, understanding. The fear and panic that fighting The End causes in the player; the frustration caused by sneaking around; the deliberate and unified nature of the inventory system – there is a remarkable consistency here. *Metal Gear Solid* has been torn apart, reassessed, and put back together again so well that it makes me want to cry tears of joy.

***Snake Eater* is pure and immaculate.**

Lying there in front of my television, I had seen what the game had for me. Snake and I had been through a lot; I was angry or frustrated at turns, determined or elated at others. Here, after finishing,

I felt every emotion. I felt the culmination of all emotions, feeling I had played the culmination of all videogames.

It was then, after the game had reset itself, and I had been gazing at the television, seeing, not watching, the first few minutes of the intro movie, that I leaned towards the console and pressed eject.

It was dark. It was silent. My window-blinds were closed; the lights in my room were off; no one else was in the house. I just sat there, on the floor, completely spent. I put the game disc back into its DVD case, and held it.





Katamari Damacy - PS2

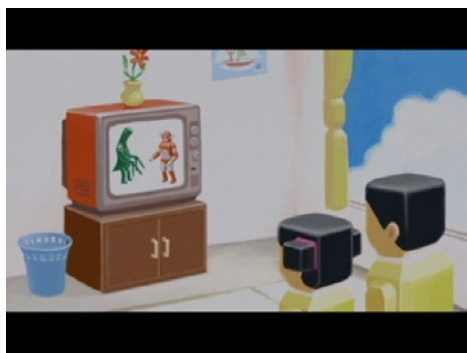
M. O'Connor

Innocent bears enjoy a walk in the park with their favorite balloon while tandem cyclists glide past, sporting unrealistic pompadours. Dogs without escorts and children without knee joints make circles in the permanent sunlight. Though they may be unlikely customers for a small outdoor shopping mall, at least they mind their own business. This is far more than can be said for the hammer headed, green-yellow Prince who comes to slaughter them.

As the son of a violent alcoholic who seems to do nothing but belittle his only child, the Prince of Katamari Damacy is the embodiment of the spineless stooge one finds in authoritarian governments everywhere. After the King of All Cosmos

finishes crushing the solar system during a wine-soaked rampage, his son seeks his father's mercurial approval through the slaughter of innocents. Success is measured by the intensity of the Prince's bouts of obsessive destruction, theft, and murder. In failure, the Prince just falls to his knees, groveling while pelted with rain and insults. He never says a single word, and cannot be provoked by cruel taunts at his appearance, skills, or patrimony - much less the absorption of dozens upon dozens of men, women, and children who are then condemned to the furnace of a constellation.

While this may seem to be a harsh - or unnecessarily insane - light to throw on what is an outstanding game, it's to the credit of its makers that it invites such outlandishly stupid theories in the first place. For example, holding up Katamari Damacy as a criticism of "consumerist culture" seems to be a common online crowd favorite, even though that's a bit like pouring gasoline on your sidewalk between bouts of haranguing SUV drivers for murdering Iraqi children. Another line of reasoning talks about themes of size, of space, of collection and accomplishment - all of which are quite reasonable - but aren't nearly as enjoyable as my mass-murder-simulator-meets-collectivist-horror





chinstroker.

Great games - or great moments in average games - inspire flights of insipid whimsy. Cherish them.

A disturbingly unworthy hero, as his jerk dad might say

Easily the most adorably violent game of 2004, *Katamari Damacy* finds one celebrating state-sanctioned horror through comfortable controls and coherent art design. This vision is built from a blocky, cartoonish style that's a blend of 1950s American pop shtick and *Gumby*. While this is demonstrated during the little vignettes that suitably illustrate the appropriately vapid story, it's elevated to far greater heights in the opening credits as the musical theme of the happy family that's anything but. Or one can point to the very first few hummed bars that drown in a bathtub reverb during the game slot selection screen.

Katamari Damacy is far too self-aware to be called "quirky," an atrocious backhanded compliment which - at least as far as games are concerned - should be reserved for genre pieces which go too far and the products of foreign minds and lands which have nothing going for them but their weirdness. Dating sims, for example, are "quirky" - though "aggressively virginal" is probably a far better description - and *Katamari Damacy* is no dating sim. As we've already covered, it is a rollicking rollerball of monarchist ultraviolence.

So it falls to a milquetoast Prince to put the sky back together again. Pleasing the codpiece-sporting tyrant who created



this mess in the first place involves collecting the detritus of the world with a studded ball you push around, a blessedly simple concept anyone can get behind. And as with any atrocity, the Prince starts small - thumbtacks, candy, dominoes, mice, note cards (there are many unused bundles of stationery about, for some reason) and other household items feature heavily in the earlier stages. When it comes time to rebuild the moon, entire continents fall under the shadow of your katamari, along with ships, giant squid and rainbows, if you're good enough.

The player is forced to learn to collect similar types of objects in the bunches they appear in before tackling larger bits - the breakfast crumbs sitting on a table become the architect of it's eventual doom.

Visual rewards, like *God*, are in the details. For example, when underwater the Prince sports a cute little snorkel and goggle set. Television sets show the action as it happens on one's screen with a "LIVE" watermark in the corner. Swaying geese dance in the background of the *Cygnus* constellation level in time to a crooning love song about rolling up

“into a single star in the sky” and assorted wonderful pap. On that note, the self-referential music is another kind of bonus for being mindful of your time assisting public enemy number one. The soundtrack is distinct in its stylistic spread, a mixture of glitchy techno and bilingual electronic cabana pop with the occasional youth chorus lounge act. A surprisingly fresh cannibalization of dozens of styles, though it’s a shame the Force Inc-inspired track played during the training level is never repeated in the rest the game.

Roll ‘em all and let the King sort ‘em out

There are nine standard play stages for forming stars and nine stages of building constellations. To build a star, one must make the katamari as large as or greater than the required size. The constellation levels are a bit more complicated. Cygnus requires geese eggs, cancer features crab collection, Virgo is (presumably) virgin-laden, and so on. The cow and bear levels require another step beyond this by littering the entire level with cow pylons and tiny bear statues and grading the Prince by the size of the first

object rolled.

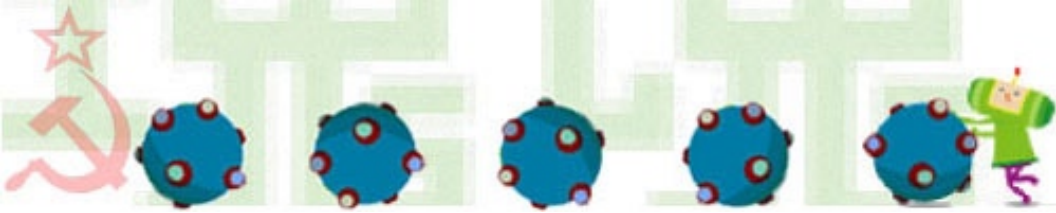
When called upon to collect fish in order to rebuild the constellation of Pisces, the Prince is dropped into a landscape that’s filled with anything remotely aquatic. There are trout trophies, mermen and merwomen (merfolk), and the usual gangs of swimming, jumping and flopping fish arranged throughout the level. They hang out of pipes and off of lines, forcing the player to keep a sharp eye. The slightly out of reach fish don’t serve to make the objective difficult to accomplish - far from it - instead, they simply reward the player’s attention to their surroundings with both a higher fish count and, more importantly, a greater sense of fishiness. That’s what’s most important in a scenario like that - one must feel the fish in, around and about. It’s nice to see something silly which takes itself seriously.

This adherence to coherence makes the mayhem in the background all the more sinister in contemplation, for those inclined to political trivialities. Yet another reason Katamari Damacy gets plastered with “quirky.”

I feel the cosmos

The tactile feedback from the push and bounce of the Prince’s ball of death is a joy to use. It’s not too hard to master and gives information on your katamari’s relation to a potential addition’s size without the use of stats. The first encounter with a large and mobile unicyclist, for example, results in being kicked back into the wall. A few minutes of collection later and the circus freak is





On that note, one great disappointment is that when revisiting old levels with honed skills, there are artificial barriers in earlier stages which prevent you from reaching the ridiculous heights of later episodes. While no doubt necessary from some programming or design standpoint, it places a blockade in front of the satisfying experience of making your tiny ball into a world-shattering sphere. The earlier stages exist to teach the player the mechanics and rules of Katamari Damacy, and in this sense their teasing is understandable. But the forced deceleration, which is most obvious during the three "eternal levels" you unlock, is a glimmer of a great potential passed by.

wobbling, nearly ready to be gobbled up into your rolling cornucopia. This bypasses stats and scores - the gameplay would be completely ruined if each object were marked with a size value - and focuses on feedback that bypasses language entirely.

Head-to-head mode is unremarkable, for the most part, and rewards speed above all. It's an amusing addendum to a game which didn't need anything added. A different approach would have been interesting - large-scale collection battles across giant islands ending with a meet in the middle for a county fair weigh-in, and so forth - but it's a bit much to ask from a \$20 game. It also would have poked holes in my "preciously cute mass murder simulator" theory, which I've grown quite attached to.

One of the more constant criticisms of this game is its length. Katamari Damacy is at its best when torn through the very first time. Every single abusive jab can be absorbed with bits of guilty laughter, and every increase in scale can be appreciated with the eyes of novelty. If nothing else, it keeps the schizoid moods of the King fresh, which helps sharpen one's loathing of both the tyrant and his spineless progeny as the game wears on. As an added bonus, these single-shot amusements can almost always be skipped or forwarded through, which again proves how awake at the production wheel the creators were.



While it can be enjoyable to flip back to previous stages, attempting to beat previous records doesn't thrill forever. The extra gifts are purely cosmetic comedy. Scarves and swan floatation devices are cute extras, but the focus is mostly bears and cows and uprooting buildings.



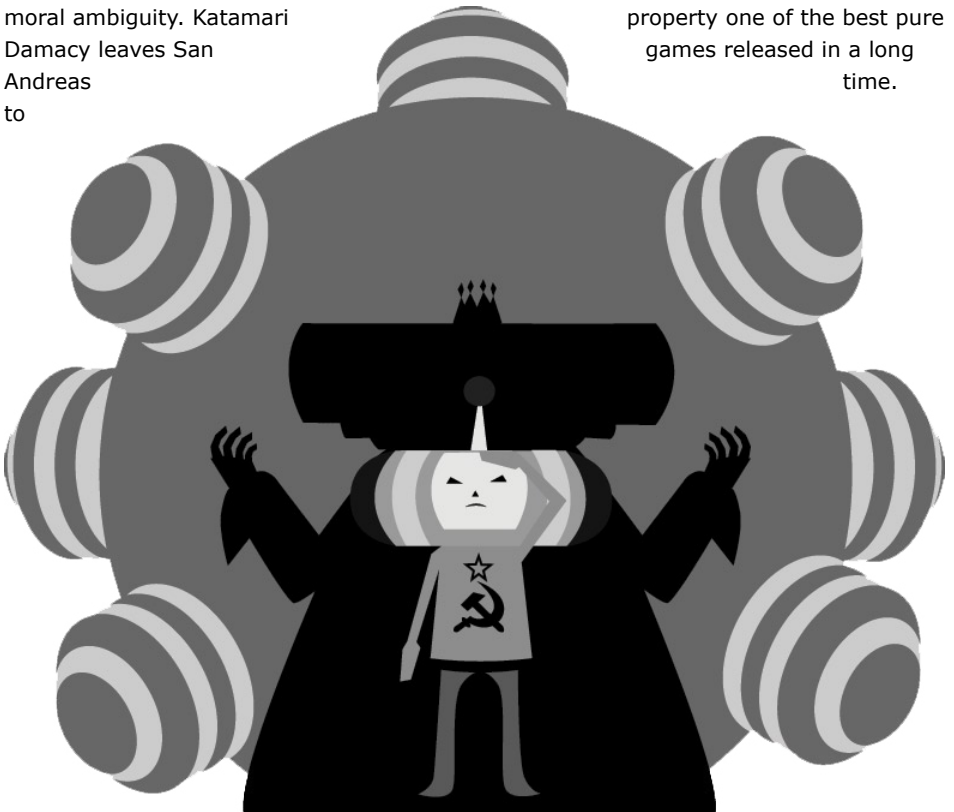
One can only hope that decision makers at other game companies are asking why this budget title is far more cohesive in vision and execution compared to titles twice the price. While Katamari Damacy is obviously a simple game, everything that went into it isn't. The soundtrack in particular is unnecessarily complex. Time was taken to make the little bits work, which may be the luxury of not being a major title.

It's still frustrating, however, to see so much done with so little. Nothing else in 2004 came close to being such an undiluted bundle of fun or demonstrated such subtle moral ambiguity. Katamari Damacy leaves San Andreas to

wallow in its uncouth juvenilia. We too have our fashion accessories.

According to the drooling idiot monkey gods who write for IGN, the sequel will be called Everybody Loves Katamari Damacy. This neat title satisfies at least some of the worry that a ham-handed sequel will blemish the memory of the first - recorded character voicing lurks behind every corner these days. And though the hope of a random level generator or galaxy-spanning collection contests are compelling, far more important is the attention to the perfect little details which

made this blatant disregard for life, liberty and the pursuit of property one of the best pure games released in a long time.





A SUBTLE SHIFT

Resident Evil 4 - GCN

Andrew Toups

If you've been reading the reviews of *Resident Evil 4*, you've probably noticed at least two things — first, the universal praise it has received, and second, the frequent occurrence of the adjective “cinematic” in reference to the game's visual style, typically without much explanation of what that means.

Now, if you've been keeping up with the gaming press lately, you know that survival horror usually doesn't rate too well, and when it does, it is with the qualifier “survival horror fans will love it!” If a Resident Evil game is getting praise like this, recommendations that urge you to play even if you don't care about Resident Evil in the first place, well — something special is happening. Of course the gaming press won't tell you what that is. They will tell you it “has a revamped targeting system”, or it's “chockfull of intense action,” or perhaps even that it's “filled to the bursting point with production values.” They'll talk a lot about graphics and gameplay features, and they'll conclude that it's obviously the sum of those things that makes the game “revolutionary” (if you're a classy publication like IGN) or just a “must-

buy” (if you're Maxim). They'll also briefly mention how “cinematic” things are, without realizing that what makes *Resident Evil 4* so compelling — hell, just what makes it work — is that “cinematic” aspect. Unfortunately, that doesn't tell us anything. Any old idiot who has seen a movie can tell you that *Resident Evil 4* is cinematic. As I read these reviews, I say to myself, *of course it's cinematic, assholes — why don't you tell me why?*

Unlike the gaming press, I am fully willing to indulge in Andrew Toups' desires.

Keep in mind that the core Resident Evil gameplay hasn't changed — there is still a lot of running around, collecting keys, crests, and emblems, and backtracking through (larger than usual) hordes of zombies. Your character still controls like a truck, and you still have to manage your inventory space. A lot of these elements have been streamlined and tweaked, but they are essentially the same. Even the revamped combat system, which plays like a cross between *Metal Gear Solid 2* and *House of the Dead*, isn't a huge departure for the series. Then again, no single element can really be called a “departure” in the sense that many of us expected. Unlike *Silent Hill 4*, a game whose confused lineage and

identity with its parent series I've written about elsewhere, this game can be called, without hesitation, a Resident Evil game.

What, then, makes this game so special?

I'll get to that in a moment. First, a seemingly unrelated anecdote!

For those of you who don't know, I am something of an amateur songwriter. I have a tendency to write the occasional song about videogames, and back when I was in a rock band about a year ago, I wrote a song called "Dear Nintendo, My Life is a Goddamned Mess" (with apologies to Seanbaby). I started the song based on a premise: what if the bizarre logic of videogame puzzles was applied to mundane, ordinary reality? I was thinking specifically of the weird sort of switch puzzles that *Mario 64* would offer, or the things you might find in late SNES platformers, where a certain switch or button has some dramatic effect on the physics and architecture of the game world. The narrative of the song went thusly:

A man falls into a mysterious hole underneath the city and finds himself in a long, narrow corridor. At the end of this tunnel he finds a large lever which is kind of cartoonish and simplified in its appearance. Acting on the same sort of impulsive curiosity that seems to motivate so many video game heroes into pushing random buttons and switches that they obviously have no business pushing, he pulls the lever down. The room around him shakes, as if the entire world was shifting, and he is flung against the wall. Once outside, he realizes that the entire city has literally been turned on its side; even the basic structural and architectural nature of things is not as he remembers: roads that used to intersect no longer meet; he finds that he must stand in and navigate different obstacles. The once

ordered city is now chaotic and without logic. Our hero feels guilty, but defends himself saying "I couldn't resist the switch!"

At the time I thought it was pretty clever, myself.

Anyway, about halfway through *Resident Evil 4*, you encounter a puzzle room that is very similar to the sort of puzzles that I based this song off of. Now, this series has never been a stranger to illogical puzzles, but they have always been grounded in some way in the logic of the mansion or laboratory or wherever. That is to say, they have never amounted to more than simplified PC-style adventure game puzzles, where all you need is items A, B, and C to pass through barrier X. You never need more sophisticated interaction with your environment.

Now, the way this room is laid out, there is a long, winding catwalk running through the center, erected above a huge pit of lava. On either side of the walk there are these huge dragon-face statues that rove back and forth and spit fire onto the walk, and each of them manned by a single Illuminados member hiding behind a huge metal shield. There are also strategically placed shields on the catwalk, so Leon must hide behind these and time when he runs out to the next one. Dividing the catwalk in the middle of the room is a circular platform with a spinning gate, jumping on to which requires even more careful timing with the aforementioned dragon-statues chasing after you. Beyond this, there is a balcony



that infinitely spawns more cult members, who jump out from a door and onto the catwalk at an uncomfortably fast pace. When you reach the end of the catwalk, another statue arises in a gap between the end of the walk and the platform you need to reach to continue.

The first time I reached this area, I was completely stumped. I figured there must be a switch somewhere, or some way to get around that last dragon statue. I'm not proud to admit that I had to look up what to do on Gamefaqs, only to find the solution to be so obvious yet completely out of left field. As it turns out, when you kill the cult member manning a dragon statue, the entire statue falls into the lava and is out of your way. If you destroy the statues on either side of the catwalk, it - oddly - causes treasure chests to appear. If you destroy the one at the end, it falls into the lava, and, I shit you not, a fucking staircase comes out of the lava, connecting you to your destination.

I was stumped because I was approaching the puzzle like a Resident Evil puzzle, and not like a videogame puzzle. As a videogame puzzle, it makes perfect sense - kill all the monsters, and the door opens. That's been around since *The Legend of Zelda*.

Resident Evil has generally shunned these types of puzzles, I suspect because they "break the immersion". More specifically, they don't fall in line with the series logic: having an implied "magical" relationship between your enemies and the environment just doesn't fit with how the series does things. And here *Resident Evil 4* does it without batting an eye.

Amazingly, they've gotten away with it - I've not read one review or had a conversation with one person that complained about sequences like this (there are others); in fact, those that



mentioned the lava room would praise it for how realistic the visuals were. And it's true. When that staircase emerges out of the lava, well. It looks more than just nice - it looks *convincing*. At the time, it didn't even occur to me how ridiculous the staircase-emerging-from-lava-by-way-of-my-destroying-dragon-stature element was. Instead, I worried: those stairs looked hot. You know. Coming out of all that lava, and all.

This sort of identification with your environment as an *actual environment*, not just as a videogame set piece (even when it is nothing but) is, in my mind, this game's crowning achievement. The whole game is convincing in the same way as that emerging staircase. Even when the game is constantly reminding you that yes, this is in fact a videogame, you might find yourself constantly forgetting. This effect is what Hollywood people like to



refer to as “movie magic”. The cinematic connection rears its ugly head again; it is what makes those moments possible.

So what do we mean when we say “cinematic”? I don’t claim to speak for everyone else who has been throwing the word around, though I suspect this is what they were ultimately getting at: that the game’s visual style instills the same sort of immediate, visceral impact that you get from a well-shot film. Good cinematography does more than show you what you need to see; it abstracts yet makes concrete what it shows, to help you identify with it. If a movie is shot well, then regardless of what outlandish things are happening on-screen, they *feel* real.

The question of how *Resident Evil 4* achieves this “cinematic” effect begs

to be asked. Haven’t we had cinematic games before? What about Squaresoft’s “cinematic RPG” *Parasite Eve*? What about the *Metal Gear Solid* series? What sets *Resident Evil 4* apart from these games as being truly cinematic?

It’s the same sort of thing that made *Doom* (or *Wolfenstein 3D*, if you’re picky, or *Ultima Underworld*, if you’re Eric-Jon Waugh) stand out in their time, if a bit more subtle: *Resident Evil 4* is what it crazily is, and can do the crazy things that it does, because it introduces a subtle but crucial shift in perspective. Prior to this, games have been happy to be cinematic during their cutscenes and merely games during gameplay. *Resident Evil 4* does both at once.

Biohazard (as it is known in Japan), when it was first being developed, wanted to apply that “cinematic” effect to a videogame. I know this because it was originally conceived as a first-person game, and in retrospect it’s easy to guess why: they wanted the in-game zombies to seem real and immediate, as they do in film. I imagine part of the reason why that was abandoned is that they wanted you to see your own character and have that horror-movie identification with your avatar as his or her neck was embraced by a flesh-eating zombie; even more likely, they realized the problem with a first person perspective is that you are giving the player the job of cameraman.

Perhaps as evidenced by that the best we can do to describe good cinematography is the word “cinematic,” gamers do not make good cameramen. We run all over the place, getting too close to objects that should really only be shot from a distance, with no concern for composition, flow, or even basic arrangement of on-screen elements. So long as all we have to do is shoot or target things, all we really care about is whether



or not our crosshair is on top of the imp in front of us. Have you ever noticed when playing first person shooters that objects on the far right or left of the screen are stretched and distorted? Probably not. In the mindset of the modern first person shooter, the further things get away from your crosshair, the less important they are. You probably aren't even looking at them.

The directors of *Resident Evil* were clearly concerned with how screen space was used, and granting such flagrant control of it to the player was just out of the question.

In the world of film, there is a thing called a "short lens." When you shoot with a short lens, it focuses everything equally, whether it's right next to the camera or yards away. Shooting with a short lens is difficult, I'm told, because composition becomes much more complex. The cinematographer must be aware of every visual detail, each thing in front of the camera, and make sure they all fit together in a visually pleasing way. I'm also told that if you *do* shoot with a

short lens, your cinematography, though much more difficult in the execution, will be fuller, richer, and more engaging to the viewer.

The camera system in *Resident Evil 4* works on similar principles of composition. In that regard, this game is very true to the Resident Evil franchise – although it cares deeply about how it uses screen space, it has come up with a technical solution that allows for the sort of freedom that us gamers, fussy babies that we are, have come to demand from our action games. It's not too different from the one employed in *Castlevania: Lament of Innocence*, only with more subtlety and grace. The camera is physically far away from the subject, but zoomed in to compensate. This has the effect of decreasing the perceived depth between objects in the foreground and background as well as somewhat narrowing the horizontal scope of what can be seen. (It also has the bonus of reducing that "distortion" that most first person games suffer from). The net result is that the on-screen space becomes quantized to an

extent, and is much more manageable. In *Lament of Innocence* this was used to keep a consistent amount of space around Leon (Belmont, that is) at all times, and it was an elegant if somewhat ham-fisted solution. In *Resident Evil 4*, it is largely responsible for the “cinematic” quality, but it goes deeper than that.

Because the on-screen space is easier to manage, it’s also easier to digest, and it is what makes the targeting system feel so intuitive. It imitates the way we tend to visualize things in front of us: we focus on the area of space immediately in front of our face; within that limited space, a similar effect naturally takes place. Because the camera is shot this way, it can sit comfortably behind Leon, giving us just wide enough a range of vision around him. The space is more manageable and aiming just feels more “intuitive”, because for the first time, our avatar is seeing things the way that we tend to perceive them. The game is in widescreen not just because it looks nice (or, as some have suggested, to keep the framerate up), but because all the visual information we need is always directly in front of Leon — we

don’t need much extra space above or below.

What’s really remarkable about all this is how it unifies gameplay and aesthetics in a totally new and seamless way. The gameplay would not work at all were it not for the way screen space is so expertly laid-out, and, thanks to the smart and detailed environment design, the game world always looks well-shot and well-directed, even as we are playing. Now that a new, more versatile way of viewing the environment has been discovered, Mikami and company are able to take the gameplay in all sorts of different directions. The inclusion of in-game shops, minigames, weapon upgrades, as well as the aforementioned ridiculous videogame puzzles feel like a celebration of new possibilities. Now that *Resident Evil* has solved the problem of perspective, it is free to be a videogame again, all the while still *feeling* like a movie.





Jak 3 - PS2

J. R. Freeman

Ottsetl (ot-sell) *n.*

A small, short-haired orange mammal with a sense of humor.

See also: Comedic relief

What is an ottsetl? A typical question one might think when they first hear the word. Ottsetl. Say out loud, it kind of clicks between the teeth, doesn't it? It's a good word though, and one that is answered before you even hear it spoken.

Daxter, from the Jak and Daxter series, is an ottsetl. The little orange creature that used to be your best friend, but now has been riding on your shoulder this whole time is what the inhabitants of the world of Jak and Daxter would call an "ottsetl." This is a funny little word, if you ask me, but I like it all the same. I find that I enjoy saying it to myself over and over again as I play through Naughty Dog's Jak 3 for PlayStation 2. A game I liked so much I decided to write this review for it.

I read a review for the original Jak and Daxter game in Electronic Gaming Monthly some years ago when the game had first come out. The game got mostly positive scores for its large environments

and zero load times - this was back in the early days of PS2 where load times were everywhere - but it also got a share of uppity, backhanded comments. One of the reviewers even went so far as to say "Adults may want to hold off, because these tricks are strictly for kids."

And what was developer Naughty Dog's response to this? Why, make Jak 2 darker, violent, and harder, of course! I can almost imagine Jason Rubin, head of Naughty Dog, saying, "We'll show them! We'll put guns in Jak 2! And carjacking! And make it like GTA, but with platforming and more explosions!"

I kid, I kid. I've read interviews with the guy and I can assure you Jason Rubin doesn't end all of his sentences in exclamation marks.

Though, I can see where EGM was coming from all those years ago. Outside of being huge and having nice graphics, Jak and Daxter just wasn't compelling. Sure, it was a 3D platformer in the same vein as Super Mario 64, but at the end of the day there was a lot more collecting Precursor Orbs going on than being part of an expanding story with likeable characters.

From where I sat it seemed Naughty Dog had to put something out after leaving the Crash Bandicoot franchise, and



quick. Jak and Daxter was just a foot in the door for them, really; something they could take later and expand on, which is what they did. Through the useful, if lazy, storytelling device of Time Travel they propelled their new characters into the future and delved into the mystery behind the Precursors, as well as the character of Jak himself.

Jak. Jak has had a rough time since I first met him. It was sometime around 2001, I think, when I was first introduced to this young elvan...man-person. At the time he was a plucky, energetic, and oddly mute kid. He lived in a nice little village and was friends with one of the sages, Samos. He had a lot going for him: A cute girl that kinda-sorta liked him, an ornery younger friend who always had a smartass remark, and an idyllic life to grow old into.

Then things just went sour. First, his friend fell into some dark eco and got turned into an ottsel, then an evil megalomaniac tried to destroy the world and Jak was told that - with the help of those ancient, mysterious beings known to us only as the Precursors - he was the only one who could do anything about it. When he finally defeated the bad guys and saved the world, Jak wound up getting teleported to the future where an evil baron who was abusing power performed brutal experiments on him. Jak soon came to the realization that he would have to save the world again, because apparently when it comes to world saving no other hero is as matched to the task as him.

Even after saving the world a second time, I still saw Jak cast out and labeled an enemy. Yes, Jak's had a tough life since we first met.

Jak's gone from being an innocent caught up in a maelstrom of events, to a dark anti-hero fighting Big Brother, to being the savior of the universe chosen by the gods themselves. His story throughout the series has been an interesting and entertaining ride, for the most part, with each game sprinkling in just the right amount of humor and emotion to make his series the summer action blockbuster of videogames. That's the story so far.

With Jak's third game we find him outcast to the desert from the very beginning. In this section, the color palette makes a thematic shift from the oppressive blues and dank hues of Haven City to the soft orange of sunsets and sandy windstorms. The emotion that the game's color brings with it has more of an effect on me than the previous games, making it clear that Naughty Dog's art department has excelled in their use of it. The varied colors found in each new area seem to make Jak's world come alive and into its own.

After completing some initial racing



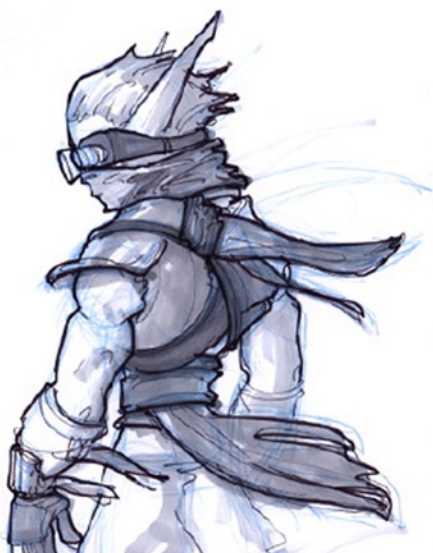


and platforming, Jak 2's Haven City makes its return in a disastrous shape. Whole segments of the city have been destroyed and overrun with Metal Heads, the cannon fodder bad guys of Jak's world, while the Wasteland subtly alluded to in previous Jak games finally makes its full appearance. This time around, the settings and locales have become more dynamically varied since our last visit, running the gamut from a harsh outland desert, perfect for dune bugging, to a demolished futuristic city, complete with the cool hover cars that I first hated, but have come to love since my initial disgust at their appearance.

This time around, the acquisition of special items and the story events have fallen into place like clockwork, which would feel shallow if the other meat of the game weren't so damned enthralling. Rarely bogged down by overly repetitive areas, this visit to Jak's world chugs along at a reasonable pace,, ending just before I am given a chance to overstay my welcome. This isn't to say that the game is short, moreso that the length of time for my first playthrough felt near perfect. By the time Jak's story had finished, I was ready to start up a new game on Hero Mode and guide him around with some of the new toys I'd unlocked.

Jak's gameplay has been superbly mixed with his platforming, which feels a bit more sparse this time around, possibly because of just how well integrated everything else in the game is in relation to each other. Jak's story, his setting, and the overall experience of playing his game gel together perfectly, to make my

stay with him a memorable experience. Jak does his best to accommodate newcomers and veterans alike, giving the game a mass-market, overly focus-tested feel at times - just shallow enough to be delightful. Admittedly, the conclusion to Jak's story could have been deeper, but as it is, it rests comfortably between the action segments and is as involved as is required, making it surprisingly deeper than most action games. Between the variety in gameplay, realistic difficulty level, and great times to be had, this third and final trip to Jak's trilogy provides a nicely balanced romp, both in difficulty and design and taken as an adventure, is an experience which action/adventure fans will want to relive again and again. EGM once said that adults need to hold off on Jak's game, but with the final chapter of the trilogy complete, adults and young alike should finally take the plunge into his world. This is the genre refined.





Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace Game Death

Jeremy Penner

There are two major attractions along the Yellowhead highway - Gopherville, the world's lamest abandoned theme park, and Combine World, whose most visible feature is an old combine placed way up on top of a spike. Gopherville is overgrown with weeds; Combine World, with old, broken down combines. It was between the two that my brother, Jamie, had plugged his laptop into the car's cigarette lighter and had proceeded to play through *Contra*.

I turned and asked him, "How many times have you finished *Contra*, do you think?"

Jamie's not really a gamer; he moved out of the house 12 years ago, and the NES didn't come with him. His PC game collection consists mostly of sports games, and includes such gems as "Multimedia Celebrity Poker" (starring Commander Riker, Morgan Fairchild, and the ever-obnoxious Joe Piscapo). He enjoys his games, but he's not one to look too hard for any new experiences, anymore.

"Within the last ten years? Maybe five." Left unspoken was the notion that within his lifetime, the number was not

one that could even be estimated.

Everyone has their game. Every once and awhile, you'll sit down to it, and play it all the way through, just to see if you've still got it. I've got a couple - *Bionic Commando*, *Out Of This World*. My brother's game is *Contra*.

As it turned out, he didn't really have it in him anymore. It took him 40 lives to get through it.

It occurred to me: Why? Jamie's seen all that *Contra* has to offer him hundreds of times over. Sure, it's still fun, but so are a myriad of other games that he never looked back on. He never bothered to play through *Zelda* or *Dragon Warrior* again. That's not to say he hadn't *tried*. He just couldn't devote the time, and besides, it didn't really match up to his memories of how awesome it was the first time through. So why keep playing the supposedly more shallow game of *Contra*?

* * * *

Think back, way back, to your first brutally hard NES game. That one you had to fight tooth and nail, every step of the way. Think back to that one arcade game you played, over and over, until you'd memorized everything. These games share something fundamental.



Any given arcade game is designed with one thing firmly in mind: you have to die, often. You only got so much time before, that was it, game over, put in another quarter and try again. If an arcade game didn't have money continually being put into it, what was the point of it existing at all? There was no way you should be allowed to sit down at that thing for an hour on one quarter, without at the very least having invested some serious money beforehand learning everything about it.

This model was transposed directly onto the home videogames of the day. This was the only way that most designers had yet learned to make games work.

If a game built around this idea is compelling at all, it begins to literally train the player to replay it. The game is as much about playing it over and over as it is about playing through it. You feel a sense of nostalgic triumph as you breeze past obstacles that, long ago, made you throw your controller in frustration for *hours*. Every playthrough evokes similar feelings as the last; even when there's no longer any struggle at all.

* * * *

"You know, never once have I picked out a Nintendo ROM at random that was any good," my brother said to me. We had arrived at our destination of Vegreville, Alberta, home of the world's largest Ukrainian Easter egg. Vegreville is a small place with nothing much of note; most times, it seems as though there is nothing but desolation beyond the main street. We were there on business; a customer was having problems with a module that our employer had designed

for their air seeders.

"Yeah, I've noticed that too," I told him. "You know that CD I'm putting together for Josh?". I had promised Josh, our 10-year-old nephew, a CD filled with emulated old school goodness from eras long past, starting with games for the venerable Apple II. "I've been trying really hard to get a collection of only stuff that's good. There was a lot of crap that we played when we were young that just sucks. No point in starting off his history lesson with terrible games that he has to wade through."

"I see what you're getting at," he said. "It's a filtering issue."

Later on, when Jamie had gone to visit some friends in Edmonton, and I'd stayed behind, I started playing NES ROMs at random. I realized that filtering wasn't the whole story. When you've got a CD crammed with every Nintendo game ever written, you don't give a game too many chances -- even a game you see potential in. Even when I booted up Blaster Master, which I had previously never played, and which I could immediately sense had earned the respect that it gets, I only played it until my first game over. My overwhelming instinct after that was to just move on.

* * * *

The modern console game has almost entirely moved away from the old arcade way of doing things. Instead, it has moved towards the form that computer games have embraced for years -- the multiple-sitting model. Most modern videogames cannot be finished in a single sitting, no matter how good you are; they're simply way too long. This can



a substantially different training effect on the player -- instead of becoming obsessed with perfecting the familiar, he can become obsessed with leaving the old behind, and breaking new ground.

This isn't true across the board -- the more of himself that a player has invested in a particular place, the more likely he is to want to revisit it -- but in general, once a game that follows this model is done, the player will likely have no desire to play through it again. This is true even if the experience was immensely enjoyable, and even if it didn't rely on the element of surprise, or the player's initial lack of skill. In short, even if replaying the game would, by all rational measures, be just as satisfying, *the player has been trained not to replay it.*

* * * *

On the car trip back home, I started playing Wizards and Warriors. I've had this game in my NES collection for years, but somehow, until that trip, had completely forgotten that it gives you unlimited continues. Unlimited!

I know exactly why I had forgotten, though. It's because Wizards and Warriors isn't a game you replay until you finish it. It's a game that you play until it makes you cry, throwing the controller and shutting off the console in disgust. It's a game that, more often than not, ends with you collapsing on the couch and staring at the blank TV screen, trying to make your NES catch fire through sheer force of rage. You don't tend to come back to such a masochistic game right away.

Somewhere, over the years, I mellowed out a bit. Once I realized

that the game was forcing me to make the decision to shut it off, I attacked it with both a single-minded devotion and serene calmness. If I fell off a platform and undid 10 minutes worth of grueling climbing, I would do it again. I got used to hearing the near-death music more often than the level music. Death was meaningless, anyway.

And, for the first time since my brother borrowed it back when he was a gamer, I prevailed. I pummeled the hell out of a tiny skeleton that became larger and larger the more I hit it, and rescued my last damsel. I remarked to my brother that the damsels all looked exactly the same, and put the laptop to sleep.

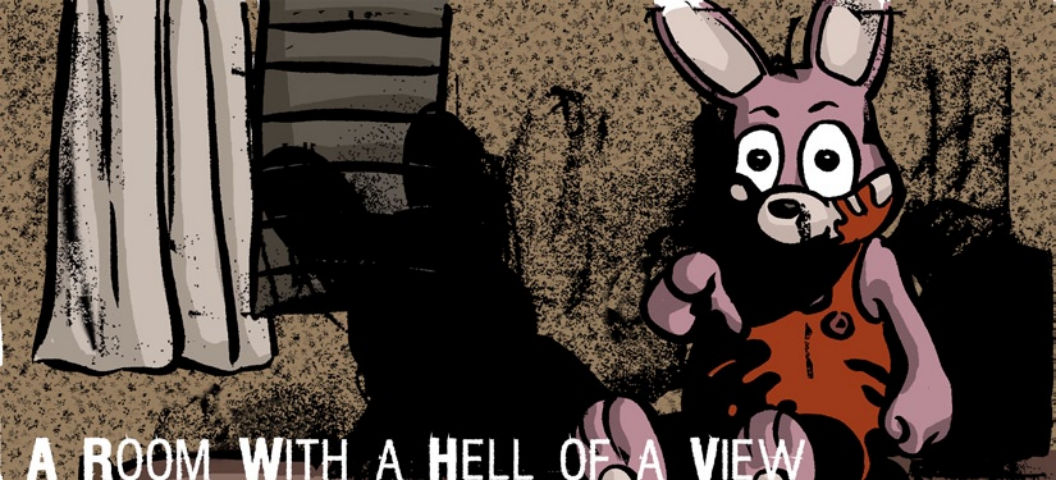
I don't think I'll ever play it again. Finishing it was the end of a story that I'd have to go back to being 8 years old to retell.

* * * *

Replaying a game is a completely different experience than playing it for the first time. Much like watching the same movie or reading the same book more than once, if skillfully done, it can be incredibly satisfying to experience something that you already know.

In the end, it is the relationship you have with it that determines when and where you'll sit down with a game, or a book. Every replay is not so much a retelling of the same story, as it is the continuation of a larger narrative.

You're never really starting from scratch.



Silent Hill 4: The Room - PC, PS2, XB
Andrew Toups

Silent Hill 4: *The Room* is a conflicted game. It wants desperately to be a Silent Hill game. All the surface elements are there; the game goes out of its way to reference events, names, and locales from the rest of the series. All the typical visual motifs (corpses hung up in grated metal boxes, zombie dogs, decaying urban surroundings, etc.) are insistently repeated. Yet it draws much of its atmosphere, structure, and play mechanics from drastically different sources than the rest of the franchise. At its heart, it is questionable whether or not Silent Hill 4: *The Room* is really a Silent Hill game at all; for the first time, we are forced to ask "What is a Silent Hill game?" The frequent visual, aural, and textual references to the rest of the series at times feel like red herrings to throw us off the scent, to distract us from the fear that is at the game's core, so that it may strike us even more off guard.

Now, when I say that Silent Hill 4 may not actually be a Silent Hill game, I'm not referring to its new control scheme and combat system, or its inventory management system, or any of the mechanical elements. Even the

Room itself, though central to the game's structure and drama, is ultimately not what makes this game different. These, in a way, are red herrings in and of themselves. What sets the game apart is the type of fear it delivers.

The Hitchcock Line and The Malkovich Line

Prior to this game, the Silent Hill series has been remarkably self-contained, even incestuous in terms of its fear aesthetic. The Silent Hill idiom was clearly set by the first game, and the subsequent games followed it religiously. Understanding this fear aesthetic is as simple as looking at the street names in part one: Midwich, Koontz, Crichton, etc. The fear in Silent Hill has always ultimately been the fear of the unknown, the fear of what is beyond the borders of reality. This fear is colored differently in the different games -- part two focuses more on melancholy and hopelessness, part three on dread and anger. In its Subway stage, Silent Hill 4 itself references some perennial series influences, Stephen King and David Lynch, but these references are more appropriate for the rest of the series than this game. Again, I smell a red herring.

If they wanted to be more accurate,

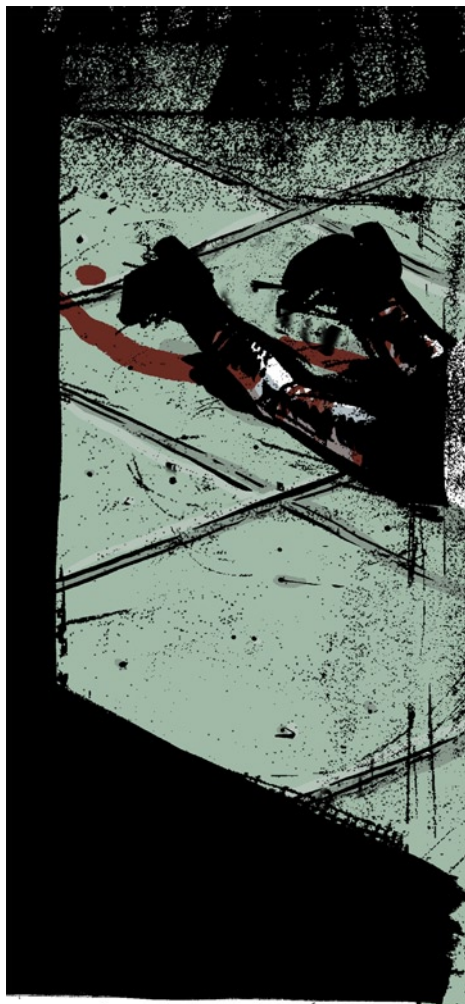
they should have called them the Hitchcock line and the Malkovich line.

Now, the obvious influence of *Being John Malkovich* isn't hard to see. The portals are the most clear connection, but the sheer absurdity of premise, and the similarly bizarre internal logic of that movie reach their way into *The Room* as well. *Being John Malkovich* is a surreal movie. And *Silent Hill 4* is a surreal game. It is surreal in ways the previous games never were. You would never think about comparing *Silent Hill 2*, for instance, to *Being John Malkovich*. But, here we are.

What about Hitchcock? Think about it. Strip away, if you will, the "otherworldly" aspects of the plot. Dispose of the alternate realities, the strange noises, the awful monsters, the inexplicable physics of the game. *Silent Hill 4*'s plot is that of a suspense-thriller, a murder mystery. The most obvious Hitchcock connection, of course, is *Rear Window*^[1]-- this game expertly captures both the voyeurism and paranoia of that film.

Voyeurism and paranoia were never big movements in the *Silent Hill* songbook, until this game. This is an important way in which this game differs from the rest of the series, if not the essential way.

In any case, the heart of *Silent Hill 4* is neither in its plot or its aesthetics. I don't want to imply that the game itself is at heart like a Hitchcock film; its plot perhaps is. Nor do I want to imply that it is essentially the same as *Being John Malkovich*; its aesthetics are, at times. But the usual *Silent Hill* influences are still there, and what's important is that some new ingredients have been added to the stew.



Other Lines of Influence

Silent Hill 4 is also the first game since part one to actively seek influence from actual video games. I mean this as a good thing; while the rest of the survival horror world has evolved, *Silent Hill* has been content to fully explore its unique terror aesthetic, and, as part three's overall lack of dramatic punch suggests, the series has stagnated as a result. I believe that someone close to the top of the chain of command on the development team was playing a lot of *Eternal Darkness*, and

[1] It's only fair to mention that they do, if fleetingly, make a reference to *Rear Window* if you examine the photo of the apartment complex at the right time.

decided that they could do that game one better. And they did.

I say this because the structure of *Silent Hill 4* is fundamentally similar to the structure of *Eternal Darkness*. Both games are based around a hub; in *Eternal Darkness*, the hub is the Roivas mansion, and individual episodes take place as vignettes that Alex reads in the Tome of *Eternal Darkness*. It starts to really get frightening when she gets to the story of her colonial era ancestor, Maximillian Roivas, which takes place in the mansion. The first truly dramatic and horrific moment of the game, sanity effects notwithstanding, starts when you discover the otherworldly city beneath the mansion. This takes place within the frame of Maximillian's story, but when you finish, you are back in the same setting. And you think to yourself: "is that horrible thing still under the mansion now?" The hub, traditionally, is a "safe space" for your avatar; the castle in *Mario 64*, for instance. *Eternal Darkness* gets some of its fear-factor from slowly invading that space, making it something threatening in and of itself, until its safeness is completely eroded.

Silent Hill 4 does the same thing with its titular Room, only it does it better, more intensely, more elegantly, and most important of all, more terrifyingly.

I will address a mechanical issue of the game now because it illustrates my point - the puzzles. The puzzles in this game are dumbed down significantly from previous installments. You won't find yourself doing complex word or math problems, or trying interpret bad poetry scribbled in blood on the wall, or throwing a box of orange juice down a trash chute. It's almost enough to say that the puzzles don't exist, except that they serve a crucial function to the game's dramatic power.

Nearly every puzzle in the game

demands that you return to your apartment room to solve it. They are generally cleverly and organically integrated in ways that make sense, and it doesn't hurt that most of the game's environments are spatially related to your room in one way or another. This is, ultimately, the reason for not only the decreased emphasis on puzzles, but the increased focus on combat (the aforementioned visible life meter and altered combat scheme), the limited inventory, the self-drawing maps, and nearly every other significant alteration to the series' mechanics. *Silent Hill 4* is structured so that frequent trips back to your room are important and central to progressing both the game and the plot. The puzzles are the link between the alternate world and Henry's world, and they are the crucial gameplay mechanic which keeps the game grounded.

This is, of course, because the Room itself is central to the game's and structure and plot. I said previously that the Room, in and of itself, is not what sets this game apart from its predecessors. This is true, but misleading. The Room is indeed the heart and soul of *Silent Hill 4*, and it plays a crucial part in delivering the



fear that makes this game unique.

(The puzzles, by the way, are fun, if not occasionally frustrating. But this is par for the survival horror course.)

What is a Silent Hill game?

A miserable little pile of secrets?

Well, no. That is - perhaps more accurately - a *Castlevania* game. But I am getting distracted.

As said before, Silent Hill 4 is a conflicted game. Let's take a look at some other ways in which it is conflicted, torn between its lineage as Silent Hill and its desire to be its own game.

First, there is the issue of groundedness. The key to Silent Hill's brand of horror is the way it is grounded in reality. Well, not so much reality as plausibility. For instance, in the first game, you start in an entirely plausible town block, and then more and more implausible elements creep their way in (the enormous sinkholes, pterodactyl creatures, etc.) This culminates with transition to the alternate world, which shares the physical structure of the plausible one but with a dramatically altered appearance, and even absurder

obstacles. Then, you fight a boss, and wake up in the normal world again. This ebb and flow characterized the pacing and rhythm of the Silent Hill franchise; it was the device which sustained the unnerving feeling of tension.

Silent Hill 4 is problematic (which is not to say unsuccessful) in this area because it is simultaneously the game most and least grounded in plausibility than any of the others.

It is the most grounded in plausibility because of the Room itself; it is lovingly detailed to be as plausible as possible; if you live or have ever lived in an apartment room, it is not difficult to identify it with your own^[2]. The "blank slate" nature of Henry's character also allows you to better identify with him and his plight. This is really the only way it is grounded in plausibility, but, it is a powerful one; more powerful, in fact, than the simulated city streets, hospitals, and sewers of the previous games.

It is the least grounded in plausibility because, well, this is game is damned ridiculous. Even in the "plausible" space of the game, immediately you find that your door is inexplicably chained shut. Shortly after this, a **goddamned hole** breaks open in your bathroom wall; and it's not just a goddamned hole, it's a **goddamned hole to an alternate reality**. Then there are the alternate realities themselves. The previous games had smooth transitions between the real world and the otherworld. This game frequently jerks you between the two - nearly the full totality of the game's environments are located in alternate world. The game



[2] Last night, as a matter of fact, I had a dream that dark, cracking veins were forming on the wall opposite my bed in my bedroom. Just like the ones that indicate the presence of an evil spirit in the Room. I should note that I never have dreams about videogames, the sole exception being a single, brief dream about *Eternal Darkness*. Which says something to me about what both of these games are trying to do.



and the unreal, *The Room* is uncharacteristically blunt and crude.

Along with this newfound focus on the surreal, the rhythm and flow of *The Room* is ultimately what forms its unique fear aesthetic. Where the first three games relied on fear of the unknown, this game's modus operandi is the fear of the unacceptable, the fear of the absurd, the fear of the surreal (as opposed to the unreal). The aforementioned ridiculous touches - and indeed, the sheer ridiculousness of the game itself - are what gives birth to this fear. They challenge the basic consistency and coherence of the game world. The giant Eileen head, for instance, is effective because it is both unexpected and inexplicable, and on a fundamental level, *just wrong*. How could such a thing *ever be*? Never mind corpses hung up in a cage. Those seem downright *normal* compared to some of the curves this game throws at you. Again, the influence of *Eternal Darkness* is felt here, because that was ultimately the sort of fear that that game aimed for. And again, *The Room* is much more successful.

Now, *Silent Hill 4* is conflicted in other ways. I'm going to make a bold statement: **the monsters were never really an important part of *Silent Hill*.**

This is not to say that they are insignificant - we all know, at least in the first two games, that they held great symbolic meaning. In a way that is kind of my point. The monsters aren't important to actual the game narrative (by which I

continually steps this up, adding more ridiculous touches - the twin monsters, that fleshy snake-like thing in the subway, the nurses who make burping noises when hurt, the animated wheelchairs, the enormous head of Eileen you encounter in the hospital and, finally, the spiritual infestations of your room^[3]. This all results in a game whose dynamics are structured and paced dramatically differently from the previous *Silent Hill* games. It is full of sudden spikes and sharp angles, fractured shapes and figures. Where *Silent Hill* eases the player between the plausible

[3] These infestations, by the way, are the game's answer to the sanity effects in *Eternal Darkness*. Again, they have done *Silicon Knights* one better; the player has no "this is not really happening!" to help shake off the psychological impact. To contrast, at a relatively early part in the game, I was bopping about in the room, minding my own business, when suddenly I see a disembodied head casually float down outside one of the windows. Instead of my character reassuring me by saying "this is not really happening!", I instead found myself saying "did that really just happen?!?"

mean the portion of plot that develops as you play). They are symbols, or better yet, they are decorations. They help explain the backstory. Their importance to the experience is optional, and are neutral obstacles for you to hack through to progress. Sometimes they are scary, but not always.

Contrast them with the zombies in *Resident Evil*. Maybe what I am saying will make a bit more sense then.

Silent Hill 4 is remarkably explicit about this. More than in any other game in the series, a good portion of the enemies are nearly literal decorations. The slugs, for instance, just sort of sit there; sometimes they fall down. You don't even have to have a weapon equipped to kill them, and can just stomp on them. Similarly, the "mushroom" stalk creatures feel more like the shrubbery in a *Zelda* game than a menace. Even the more active creatures are generally pushovers, in more or less the same way the monsters were not difficult in Silent Hill 2. Their significance to the game's backstory is certainly there, but ultimately of secondary importance. In this regard, Silent Hill 4 is very faithful to the dogma of the series.

Except, of course, for the ghosts. They change things, a lot.

The ghosts, even if they were killable, would still be very difficult enemies. You take damage from simply standing next to



them, they are very fast moving, and their actual physical attacks are devastating. They can phase through walls (with what may be my favorite visual effect in all of the Silent Hill games). Sure, Silent Hill 3 had a few difficult enemies tossed in, but the ghosts are incredibly unorthodox for a Silent Hill game.

As opposed to the regular enemies, the ghosts are significant to the actual game narrative. Taking a cue from *Siren*, they all have individual personalities, stories, and relationships to game environments. Perhaps most importantly, the most dangerous and frequent ghosts are the ones of the characters whom you meet in each level that have been murdered earlier in the game. They are successful as dramatic narrative devices, a brilliant (if borrowed) way to tell a story in-game. They serve the same function that the Room serves when you are away from it.

Tying it all together

So, to simplify things a bit, we can say that Silent Hill 4 consists of two parts: elements and influences from the Silent Hill idiom, and the aforementioned influences of Hitchcock, *Being John Malkovich* and *Eternal Darkness*. There are two dramatically different threads of fear running through this game.

Amazingly, it works really well. Instead of just not getting in the way of each other, they complement each other, in something like a **harmony of fear**. I've never felt anything like it.

Perhaps I simply buy into the conventions of the genre too easily. However, I can confidently say that Silent Hill 4: *The Room* is without a doubt the scariest game I have ever played.

I have left out a few things, so I guess I should mention them here. The game's

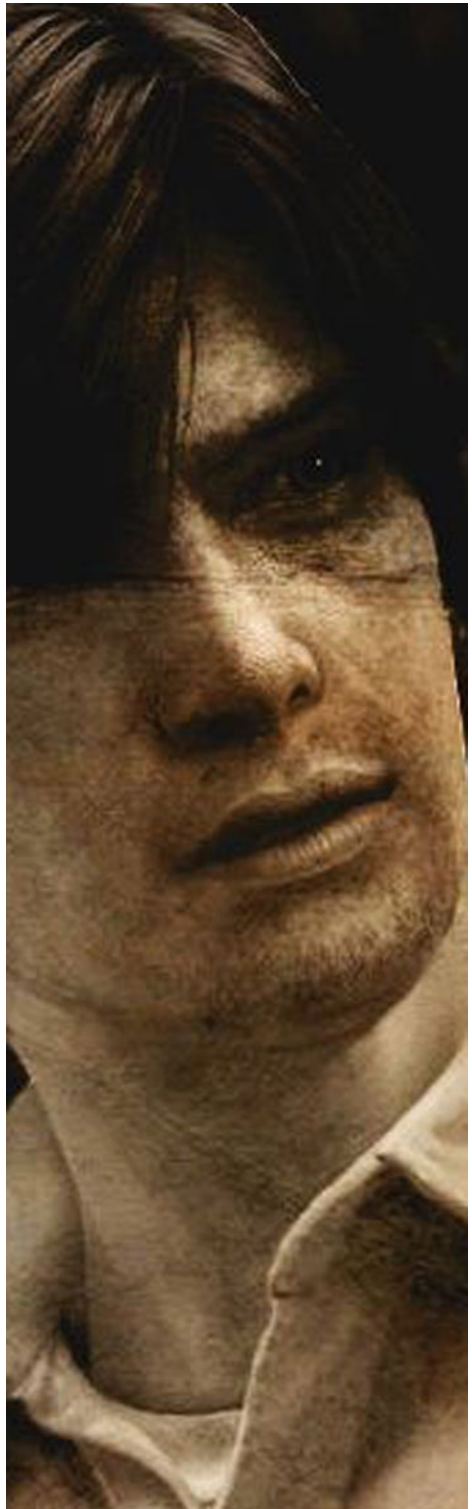
first half is remarkably fun for a survival horror game. The game's second half, wherein you must renavigate all of the game's environments with a crippled partner, is unremarkably tedious for a survival horror game. Neither of these facts are very important to what this game is about. It is equally compelling in both halves. If it can be said to have a serious flaw, it is that the second half of the game is so relentless in terms of fear that progressing further becomes really stressful. It was psychologically difficult for me to finish, but the game was compelling enough for me to push on through regardless. Of course this won't be true for everyone, but I should mention it.

But, those are just details. The verdict?

The game is successful in harnessing the fear that was the previous games' hallmark, while developing a new type of fear which is more subversive, more unexpected, and more disturbing. It's something of a one-two punch; and this is important, because for Silent Hill veterans, it's hard to find the same old tactics very scary anymore^[4]. What this means is that even if you don't find that game itself scary, you will still likely be scared. If you are no longer affected by the usual Silent Hill scares, this game still delivers.

The net result is a game that is intense, compelling, and potentially scary while you play, and downright *terrifying* when you aren't. What's more, it is a complex and sophisticated game, if not in its actual gameplay, then in its structure and pacing.

[4] I imagine this is why they did away with the flashlight and the radio; the series has finally outgrown those conventions. When you think about what Silent Hill 4 is essentially about, they are almost entirely irrelevant. The same could be said about the less detailed sound and environment design, too. I mean, they would have been nice, I suppose. But not much is lost when they are taken away.





Prince of Persia: Warrior Within - NGC, PC, PS2, XB

Brandon Richard

You are many stories in the air. And it would have been a tiresome climb to make if you weren't so fully adept and in tune with your body. For a moment you stand still, impressed by your recent feat. While basking in the sky's open glory, you feel small watching those puffy white pillows flow by.

But the glorious landscape can't hold back your trail run for long. You must always be on the move, like the clouds, never halting. You continue your run. Your legs dance steadily closer to your destination; a three yard gap, with a nice 18 story freefall to look forward to if you fail. You gather your strength and build courage.

You leap. And gasp. You did not know if such a jump could be pulled off. In the very air itself, you wonder if your hasty judgment in your abilities was foolhardy. You may not make it.

Suddenly the ledge you just catapulted from seems to beckon your return. And you return the sympathy, missing it, yearning for its safety. Your target landing spot is drawing closer, and you're still in mid-air, the wind whipping and taunting

your ears. Let's be serious, now.

Since you won't make the mark you have a change in strategy. The leap was too long for you to make it by traditional means so you must redefine your body, still in mid air, to intersect with your mark by a more inventive standpoint, simply, hanging along it. You're going to grab that cliff's edge for all it is worth, for your life is resting atop it, waiting for you. You hike your knees closer to your stomach, and outstretch your arms to grasp at life; your feet will function as a soft cushion (or a cloud), for the impact of the blow. You are ready.

The edge is rough and scratchy (thankfully) as you come in contact with it. Your arms tense up as they prepare for the extra weight. Your legs come toward their landing next; they bounce against the texturally rough and level vertical plane of the cliffs edge. Then, for that moment, you are stopped. All of your kinetic speed has finally caught up with you. You're halted by your own accelerated intentions. And now you rest, hanging 18 stories away from a miscalculation. You have stopped now. And you couldn't feel more alive.

What Prince of Persia: Sands of Time gave its audience was a full-fledged look at the importance of precession. Those are

moments in games where the suspension of disbelief takes a hold of the player.

Through the controls, the interactions, and the music, and through the very coding and soldier that it took to bring this design into existence, we feel one with our surroundings. And suddenly, levels cease to look like roadblocks and hindrances that hiccup the players progress through the game, but fully realized 'objectives' that must be completed or the status of the world that you're occupying will be halted without hesitancy. Playing a game can be just like this. And that is what Sand of Time was. Every trail the Prince faced had purpose, meaning and weight behind it. And the penalties for failing to complete an exercise were quite high, with death leering around nearly every corner of the levels.

I ask the developers of Warrior Within, were has that gone? You still gave me my multi-faceted and intelligent level design. You've given me yet another gorgeous, serene setting in which to carry out my tasks. You're gracious in giving me the sequel to one of the more emotional games of 2004, but why is this all you have left me?

Time Control

In most games, you aren't given second chances. You are given opportunities to correct an error, but what I'm referring to with second chances is rewriting those errors while the game is still performing in real-time. What would be the point? It is the mission of the developers to prolong their product as much as possible. No one should have the ability to reverse any of their mistake on the spot, as it would affect the games purpose in challenging and testing the player's wits in unguarded scenarios.

And yet, the challenges in Warrior



Within are so weighty and complicated that restarting from some predetermined checkpoint after every faulty mishap is more a test of your patience than your skill. Instant deaths from the game's environmental puzzles occur often. If it looks deadly, it most likely is, and you won't have any other means to test your theories on how you proceed outside of holding your breath and running right through/over/under them.

The traps in this game are merciless, so along with your wits, you're given the handy Time Control feature. And with trying to complete the traps, you'll find yourself using the Reverse Time feature most often. Provided that you have the required Sand Tanks to use a Time Control ability, time can be reversed, and any fall or life draining attack will be undone in real-time as you watch yourself floating back to a ledge you leaped from or regain the health you lost. You control how long or far you want to go back up to eight seconds. One shouldn't feel guilty about overusing these 'leg-ups' that the Time Control feature grants you. During battles, time can be slowed down to a crawl, but still allows the prince his seamless mobility, and you can combine your Sand Tanks in real-time to unleash ground attacks on your foes, so it's all fair game.

Acrobatics

Finally, I can break out of this tangent

and get my hands dirty. How good the prince moves is the most notable presentation of the Prince of Persia series. While most of the Prince's actions are clearly exaggerated, mostly to heighten the excitement and possibilities of the games complex environmental puzzles, the animations for them are not as streamlined as I had hoped. Not that there's no improvement over last year's game, but this brings up a point that I hoped would have been addressed in the game's production.

Previously in Sands of Time, there were very artistic events that happened while playing through a level. Looking past the ambient beauty of the backgrounds and soft textures, I'm referring more to the scripted playing-events that the Sands introduce. To remark on one memory of the Sands, the Prince was outside, and completing a wall run along the castle walls to a seemingly safe ledge. Then, while still along the wall, running top speed, the previous safe landing strip crumbles away and it seems the Prince will fall to his death. I witnessed this, still inbound and running, and contested with my logic, "What could have gone wrong?"

"Maybe the game isn't as linear as thought,"

"Should I save myself the shame of falling and just reverse back to where I started and look for another route?" Still contemplating my options, my fears were laid to rest. As the previous ledge

crumbled away and its dust cleared, another safe landing strip was hiding underneath it. And to my surprise, the Prince was in no danger at all. The previous ledge was just a ruse.

In Warrior Within, there are not many ruses, trickster moments that kept you aware and sharp, small intellectual tidbits that separate the breaks of monotonous lever switch searching. Simply put, it's the boring kind of linear that fails to offer inventive routines and surprises to the Prince's hard-edged quest. The developers seemed more interested in providing a sequel to the Prince of Persia series instead of providing the same artistic (a word I'd like to stress) flair and memorable interaction that the player felt with the games avatar. There's a difference between improvement and refinement.

The environmental puzzles are nevertheless, quite intense. The new dangling rope ability allows players during their wall runs to grab at the rope (in mid-run), swing from it (still in mid-run) and let go, granting the player a second wall run, nearly tripling the length of the run. You cover a lot ground with this maneuver, and judging when you should dismount to complete a puzzle at such rate of progression offers a new challenge.

Next would be the flag dive. Flags are red and can be found hanging against the wall, much like the ropes. Their appearance seems a bit exotic. The top is marked by an emblem and they hang about 13 feet long. They certainly cost a fair rupee to make, and it's a shame you have to drive your sword right down the center of the curtain to slow your descent. Instead of using more ledges to approach lower levels, the flag dive gives you a safer and faster means of deceleration.

Several inclusions to the puzzles do offer more mental challenge than slow-





paced ledge strafing and climbing. These inclusions help in making the Prince faster and the game seem more technical. Clearly Warrior Within was meant to add testosterone and variation to the Prince's attributes. But the presentation feels rushed. There's a tutorial system that gives advice on moves, but it doesn't keep the freshness of the moves from getting stale.

Backhand Attack

The extra weapons engine was a smart way to amp up the games combat. The more often you use secondary weapons, the more weathered they will become, eventually breaking. This forces you to search for another, or simply 'take' one out of a foe's grasp

While the jump button was used during battles to jump over - and behind - your opponent, you're given the much more helpful option of grabbing them. This feature can't be used while you hold a secondary weapon, but you can always toss it away before grappling.

Grabbing does just as it claims; it holds your foe in place, rendering them helpless. Performing this won't halt the assault of any surrounding troops, but with decent timing and luck you can launch your captive toward any enemies in range. I suggest just chucking them down some hole and being done with them, however, as attractive as some of the grabbing moves are, the results aren't rewarding.

Granted, I'm all for a user-friendly bout system that gives me more than one-way to deface enemies, but it's

no contest. You grab, you chuck, and you move on. This sort of investigating leads me to believe that the "Free Form Fight System" in Warrior Within is highly undeveloped. Outside of the large number of combos the system has, the fight style fails as a noteworthy feature with no depth. The learning curve results from timing and learning the often useless combos. Fighting against these poor sparring partners becomes a chore to fill up the time between lifesaving dismounts.

The Reward

Despite all this I look forward to revisiting the levels of Warrior Within, searching for the life-reviving rooms and doing time trails of some of the stages and bosses. But as far as reward-based replay value, the well is quite dry.

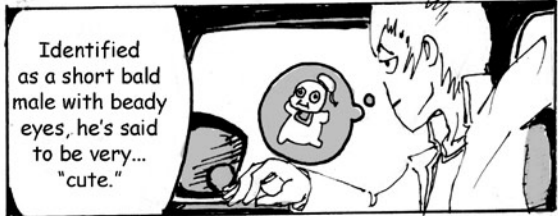
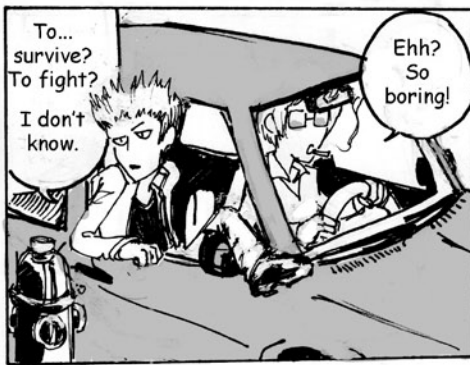
The word that I'll associate with the game's environmental traps is timing. Dauntless timing is a weapon while you're volleying from perch to perch, and it will become your most valuable asset. The puzzles rely heavily on reflexes and external thinking, paying attention to the Prince's surroundings. You'll likely feel very clever when you overcome these scenarios as well, but again, the reward system is entirely personal. There is no chime to reward your feats; there's no worthwhile closure from the game's ending.

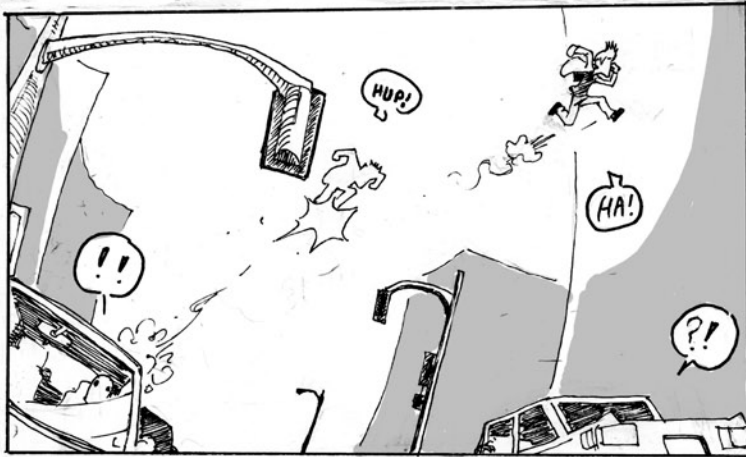
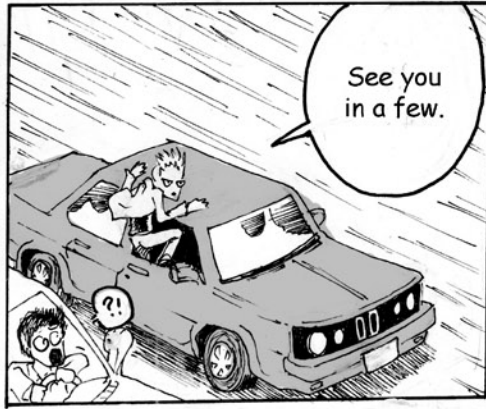
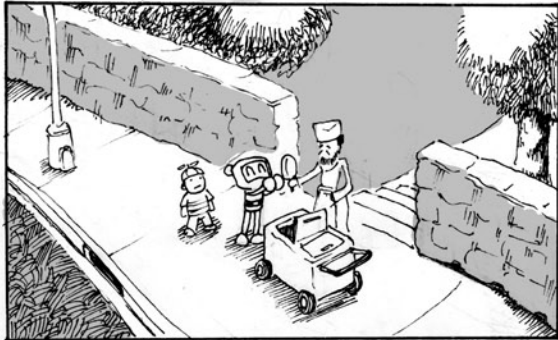
Warrior Within is not a bad game, but it isn't a rightful sequel to a game which built its popularity on the caliber of its imagination.

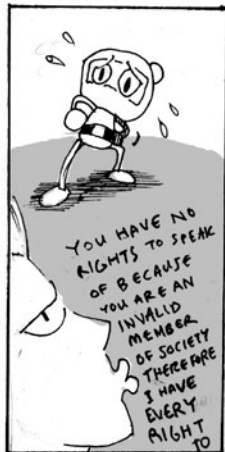
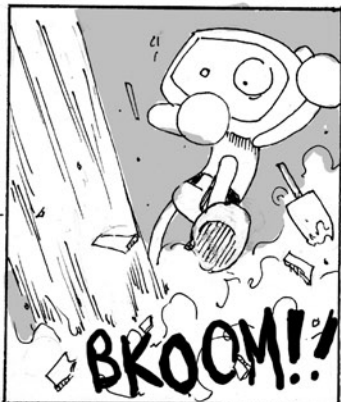
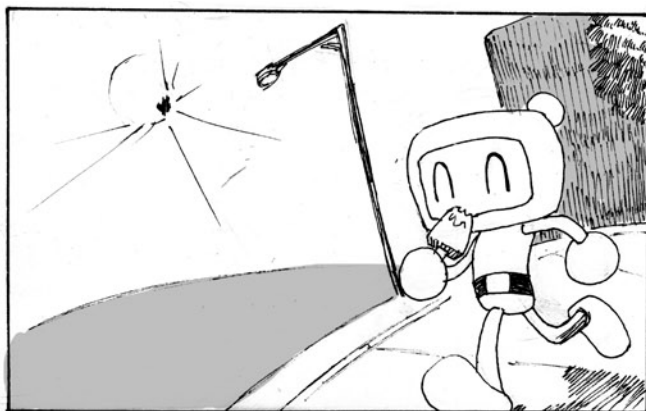
anomaly discrimination force

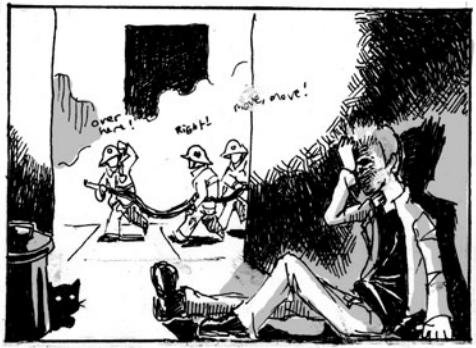
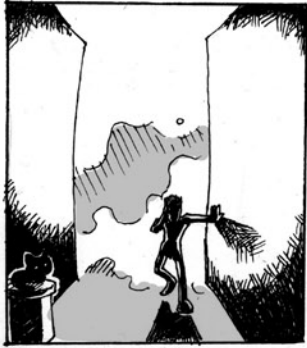
S²

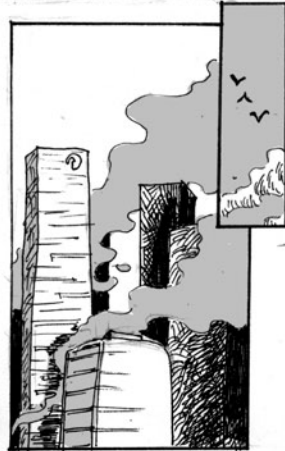
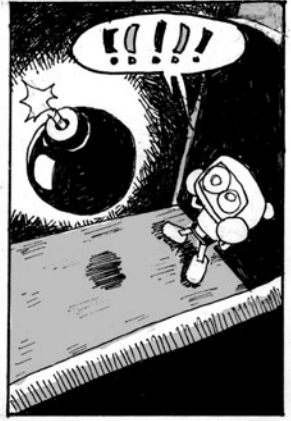














Chrono Trigger - PS1, SNES

Sergei Servianov

Squaresoft's *Chrono Trigger*, with its archetypal RPG cast, hazy, dream-like adventure and delightful world, still has a lot of meaning and depth ten years after its release. It both humbles and illustrates, by the skill of its execution, what's wrong with modern Japanese role-playing games (JRPG) as a genre and an experience. For *Chrono Trigger* as an emotional experience achieves everything it wants to do, by making its goals narrow and concrete. Simply, it wants to charm you into loving its characters and world for a set of simple reasons: it has nice clouds, is one of them. It's almost childish in this regard. Yet completely adult in its understanding of how emotion works and why people play JRPGs in the first place. They play them because their lives lack a certain emotion. This emotion is somewhat hard to describe... though it's something like content melancholy. *Chrono Trigger* certainly has this feeling, yet it ends more hopeful and true than most modern JRPGs, almost like Game Arts' *Lunar* remakes, putting the player in a mood that few other games can. All of the game's elements work to somehow cement this mood onto the player, making

Chrono Trigger more than a videogame, but an emotional journey in game form. In a sea of degenerate stat managing and fetch quests, *Chrono Trigger* is one of JRPGs first *Übermenschen*.

Chrono Trigger is unapologetically short, and, consequently, free from clutter. This gives it a certain focus that modern JRPGs lack, as they're obsessed with dragging out their weepy conflicts to the point breaking the player's will. Even with all the sidequests, *Chrono Trigger* lasts, at most, 20 hours. This would be a sin in modern RPG design, which states that JRPGs have to be as long as *Final Fantasy VII* - meaning twice as long with thrice the sidequests. In its own way, *Chrono Trigger* is the anti-*FFVII*, exuding a healthy contempt for its design principles a full three years before *FFVII* ushered in an era that continues to this day. Despite *Chrono Trigger's* relatively short length, it doesn't treat its subject (time travel) and characters in outline; rather almost all of its scenes work towards one cumulative effect that gains great momentum near the end, with the sidequests working to heighten, rather than dull, that nagging feeling of trepidation that every great JRPG brings about before its conclusion. This is quite a change from most JRPGs where the sidequests destroy the player's

interest by bombarding him with pointless searches for artifacts and other assorted trash.

Many of *Chrono Trigger's* fans and detractors often charge it with having shallow characters. While correct, this observation misses the point. The main character is the adventure itself. The creators wanted to make a game in which a player could have a sentimental journey through time without bogging it down with so-called "depth" (in the *FFVII* sense). They succeeded wonderfully; *Chrono Trigger* is one of the finest-paced JRPGs ever. The player is given just the right amount of time in each era to soak up the atmosphere and the spirit, giving each time period its own unique identity and life. We taste the foggy gloom of 600 AD without choking on it; we feel the alien spirit of Zeal without getting bored of it. Much like the characters, we only glimpse each epoch and its world, knowing them only fleetingly, even affectionately.

About those characters, though, I don't think they're as empty as most *FFVII*-reared players would claim. They certainly aren't "deep" or complex in the typical manga sense of the word. By that I mean they aren't silent, socially inept, wannabe anti-heroes hiding deep emotional scars that pour themselves out in lengthy dialogue scenes in hour twenty. The game is all the better because of it. I applaud Yuji Horii for not turning his characters into walking oxymorons that would make even Graham Greene cringe. This type of thinking, tempered by *FFVII* and its imitators, has led to a wealth of laughable pseudo-psychoanalysis and angsty nerd fanfics. *Chrono Trigger* showed what simple tools in the right hands could do. If anything, *Chrono Trigger* proved that characters don't need to be complex to be exceptional. Though to be fair, the end of the game has you



confronting a whole host of dumb clichés - Lucca's mother losing her legs, Marle and her father, Magus and Schala; these scenes are handled in an immature, yet resonant way and they don't detract from the game as much as they could have. They go by quickly with little dialogue between the participants; with a strong hint that they are internalizing their secret worries. This is welcome. JRPGs have a tendency to sink to pure bathos when dealing with any sort of emotional declaration or display, sullyng any affecting beat with bad dialogue. That doesn't mean *Chrono Trigger's* dialogue is great by any means. It's very much of its time: clumsy. But it's clean and kept to a minimum, maintaining the game's smooth pace. *Xenogears* it is not. Quite unlike Square's other works, *Chrono Trigger* relies on a different set of techniques to introduce and glue its characters to the



player's brain.

We know them not through monologues and lengthy dialogue scenes, but through mannerisms - Lucca fiddling with her glasses is one. Taban is a pretty shallow character, yet everyone remembers him banging that hammer. And don't tell me that you never once thought about jumping in place like Marle. This principle also works for the game's world, especially visible after Crono begins to shift events in time (Everyone treating the "Black Omen" as a dull everyday object like the sun is one example). *Chrono Trigger's* most famous mannerism is, of course, Crono not speaking. This achieves a few purposes; it lets the player project his own personality onto Crono, amplifies what we do know about Crono (his long friendship with Lucca, his relationship with his mother, his quiet affection for Marle) and serves as a little

in-joke. It could also serve as an homage to 8-bit JRPGs in which the player's character was only talked to but never speaks. This, I'll come back too later.

About the only hint of Crono's personality is visible through another one of the game's traits: musical cues used to define personality. The rolling synthesizer beat of Crono's theme ("The Chrono Trigger") suggests an endless drive forward. Hearing it now, I want to run, my head held forward, like Mega Man, fighting "for everlasting peace." The sharp, high woodwinds of Frog's theme capture his chivalry and silent loneliness. Magus's theme is one of the finest placed and paced pieces of music in all JRPGs. When you first face Magus, in the hall where he's summoning Lavos, he says a few lines; all to a low, sharp, lazy melody, when he attacks the tempo rises suddenly. When I first saw this ten years ago I was nervous, genuinely afraid of Magus' mocking, arrogant bitterness. I credit his theme for that. Many JRPGs rely on music to carry their emotion; few put so much trust in it (most muddle it with constant dialogue, over-clarifying and underlining everything so that nothing could possibly go over even the densest of heads). The creators trusted Nobuo Uematsu and Yasunori Mitsuda's music to put life into their characters and time periods - so much so that they poke fun at themselves at one point, even though the work was quite serious. (Mitsuda would talk over every piece with the game's director and worked so hard that he had to go to the hospital). Recall the scene where Dalton is about to take off in the captured Epoch and gets angry when he hears Crono's theme instead of his. That little joke showed how confident they were in their work. They had good reason to be. I remember when I first played the game I had Crono stand on the world map waving his tiny hands

for ten minutes, because I loved 600 AD that much the first time I heard it.

Akira Toriyama's character designs also contributed a great deal to endear *Chrono Trigger's* characters to the player. His simple re-imagining of common fairy tale-manga tropes (frog prince, vampire aristocrat, "punk-hairdo" hero, nerdy girl) and his clean, slightly frivolous style yielded characters that were familiar and elusive at the same time. Music is generally more effective at communicating feeling than words; with Toriyama's characters put to Mitsuda and Uematsu's music, we begin to associate the character with the theme. We are given a glimpse into their emotions and feelings, without the characters explicitly stating them. The player is given enough to let his imagination take over when needed (provided he has one to begin with).

Of course, *Chrono Trigger* has its flaws. It's a JRPG, and as such is filled with the same pitfalls and stupidities that every well-entrenched genre produces. What's impressive about *Chrono Trigger* is how it tries to avoid them. Random battles have been a necessary evil ever since *Dragon Quest's* chief imitator, *Final Fantasy*, made them the calling card of the JRPG without understanding why they were there in the first place. JRPGs now had to have random battles if they were to be JRPGs. *Chrono Trigger*, to my knowledge, wasn't the first JRPG that eliminated

enemies on the world map (thank god, I like listening to the music and looking at the landscape when I'm walking from town to town) or made enemies visible in the dungeons, yet it's the first JRPG to really do it memorably enough for most people to think of it as a main point of reference when debating the utility of random battles. Yet why did *Chrono Trigger* eliminate random battles? I think it's Yuji Horii's influence. Square rarely steps out of its own perceived boundaries, hanging furry relics on their games just to be on safe side of what sold before. Yuji Horii wanted the game to be fun and meaningful, if a game is to be fun, it has to be easy, yet give the illusion of being difficult. Giving the player a constant sense of progress works too. Allowing the player to see the enemies made the dungeons feel smoother, fighting a bunch of random enemies that materialize out of thin air, wrap your characters in hazy pixels and take you to a place that looks nothing like where you were before jars. Have this happen twenty times in the course of five minutes and the apathy sets in. Yet clearing a room of enemies in *Chrono Trigger*, enemies that you've seen before you've fought them, gives the sense that the player has accomplished something. It's revitalizing to go through a room free of enemies, smiling, checking for treasure, watching Crono's kimono flailing as he runs.

You see, *Chrono Trigger* doesn't want to make you feel like your playing an RPG, even as it indulges in most of the genre's excesses (the amount of battles fought is probably the same as in any JRPG), it wants you to feel like your having an adventure. It doesn't want to slow you down, make you level-up, extend its playtime indefinitely. It wants to make things easy for you. The scene where Crono and company have to chase Ozzie



through Magus' castle demonstrates exactly how much *Chrono Trigger* tries to ease things for you. It would be a very long and annoying affair if it weren't for the constant feeling that Ozzie is within your grasp. You always feel that after "just one more fight" you'll get him. Of course, the whole thing would be pointless if the chase wasn't forcing you to fight constant battles so as to prepare your party for a very difficult boss fight with Magus. Once he starts pummeling you with spells of every element, those extra levels really start to make sense.

Along with trying to correct the JRPG's flaws, *Chrono Trigger* plays with genre conventions throughout the game. The fake save points in Magus's castle are one example. Making a save point an enemy, no matter how weak, is a quaint little joke since a save point is generally hallowed ground not to be fiddled with. Crono's death is another – killing of the main character is a shocking move any way you look at it. Especially, in a game that went out of its way to make you identify completely with the character (remember the boy doesn't speak). This is quite discomfoting and quite welcome.

All of these elements combined to make exactly what a JRPG should be - a journey in a dream world, having little to do with reality, that fills you with hope and longing. The best JRPGs act as a sad glimpse into a world with nothing to do

with reality. In the beginning, I said that JRPGs in their ideal form provide a mix of contentment and melancholy. Those who play JRPGs, rather not just play, but live them, are people who are unsatisfied with life. They have rejected life, because it doesn't correspond to their ideal. Real life has little meaning, adventure or beauty. JRPGs provide the ideal life (I'd argue that JRPGs are inspired mainly by European Romanticism filtered through Japanese eyes) and leaving that ideal is painful. Which is why great RPGs always bring about a bout of cheery melancholy in me: sad to leave the world, yet happy for having experienced it. I don't play these games for their profound stories. Like most RPGs, *Chrono Trigger's* story makes no sense, anyway. You leave the game with enough paradoxes and inconsistencies to give you a headache if you think about them too much. *Chrono Trigger* isn't about thinking, though. Neither is the entire RPG genre for that matter. As is with so many other great RPGs, it is about feeling. Its creators understood this. This is what will save it in the end, when so many other RPGs of that era - and this one as well - will be forgotten.





Untold Tales of the Arcade

An Inquiry Into Old, Obscure and Good Arcade Games.

Francesco-Alessio Ursini

I spent most of my life in a small city northeast of Rome, L'Aquila. My uncle also lives here, and has had a successful arcade since '82. I spent most of my gaming youth in said arcade, playing many titles and having fun with many people: between rounds of *Street Fighter II* and *Puyo Puyo*, I mastered games like *Darius Gaiden* and *Rayforce*. When I was not playing in my uncle's arcade, it was because there was another good game at the arcade of the swimming pool I went to. Sometimes I even went to bars or pizza joints because they had a game I wanted to play. I often found strange and bizarre titles in the weirdest places, like a certain *Chack'n pop* cabinet in a small bar near my old home. With this mention, we can go back in time and spend time with one of my first loves...

CHACK'N POP or: WHY TAITO MAKES "GAMES WITH HEART"

When I was little kid, I lived in another part of L'Aquila. There was a small bar, the kind of place that draws its clientele from the local and peaceful citizens of

the zone. I was a little pest who couldn't resist the draw of videogames. Back in the '80s it was common for non-arcade places that drew crowds (bars, pubs, pizza joints, etc) to have two or three cabs with videogames. Or, more often than not, without videogames since most of the time they were just rented by arcades or distributors and if they didn't work all you could do was curse.

Back in '84, this little bar had a couple of cabs in the corner featuring two interesting games: *Chack'n pop* and *Popeye*.

Nintendo's *Popeye* is a well-known classic...but what about *Chack'n pop*? The game is emulated in MAME but the colours are wrong. I can't recall the exact look, but it must have been a bad ROM dump. The game is basically a mix between a puzzle game and a platformer. The evil monstas have stolen your hearts and you have to take them back to your fiancée... but you often get caught in their trap and end up jumping into a pit.

If it sounds familiar, it's because the game features some of the Bubble Bobble (BB) enemies. The platforms also share the design of BB, and your main character is the cute yellow mascot in Puzzle Bobble games, the "referee" in Vs mode. Your little yellow character can jump and

move left or right, being able to stick to "ceilings" (the upper part of a single platform) as long as they're within your reach. You can also release "gas bombs" that will explode after a couple of seconds, killing all characters within their cloud (including yourself), like in Bomberman.

Your goal is to free the hearts, trapped in scattered cages, from their captivity and make your way to the exit. Since the stage is quickly filled with monstas, this task won't be easy, and you have a limited amount of time or else the evil mage will close the said exit.



Let's get back to '84 then; I was a young kid (6 years old) during this phase of development in the gaming industry. New ideas and games were appearing at a very fast rate, to say the least. As a kid, I was usually attracted by colourful games and spaceships. *Chack'n pop* was the first game that I enjoyed which featured cutesy graphics and what I could label an "anime flavour." I was also learning the basics of English at this time, and once I learned the words of the introduction, "Take back our hearts!" I couldn't avoid falling in love with the game and Mr. Chack's quest. Once the "cutesy graphics" aspect wore off, something else attracted my attention - score.

This game is one of the first Taito games (if not the first) where having more monstas bapped ("killed" sounds so evil for such a cute game!) in a single

explosion grants more points. Once I learned the basics of the game, I started examining various stages to improve my scores, often thinking of possible methods while at school or during other boring activities.

In short, this is the first game that sparkled my passion for score-based gaming...a passion that I then developed fully during the years, mainly thanks to Taito and their "games with heart."

However, my true passion had yet to come into my life as a gamer, but you'll hear about that later, for now let's go two years into the future to meet my first hori shmup love...

HYPER DYNE SIDE ARMS or: THE BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL HAS STARTED!

1986. I was eight and had a lot of spare time for playing games. At the time, I was a swimmer and the bar in the swimming pool complex usually had three or four cabs. I had a habit of coming in an hour before practice began. One fateful day, I met one of my first loves; a side-scrolling shmup by Capcom featuring two hyper-cool mechas and an excellent weapons system. This game was *Side Arms*.

In *Side Arms* you control a mecha which, like the character in Section-Z (also by Capcom), can shoot to its left or right side by pressing the first or second button respectively. You use a third button to choose your weapon - some enemies will release power-ups, which will activate the other weapons at your disposal. You have to shoot the power-up icons to make them change and thus change the weapon upgrade, getting the speed-up (or down) power-up between said weapons.

Now, many gamers associate hori (short for "horizontal") shmups with classic games like *Gradius* and *R-type*. My

experience with this sub-genre, however, is different: *Side Arms* and *Darius* (the three screen mammoth) were the first horis I ever played, so *Side Arms*, for me, was one of the most exciting experiences ever. As a kid growing up in the late '70s and early '80s I watched a lot of sci-fi Anime with giant robots and mechs, futuristic vehicles, and epic battles. When I saw *Side Arms* for the first time I was hypnotized by the possibility of finally playing as a mecha.



Side Arms features some of the fastest and most frantic gameplay of its age, with tons of enemies that pop out from every corner, big bad-ass bosses, gorgeous graphics, and the ability to call in the other mecha to make a super-robot. If you play in two player mode, one player can control the mecha while the other shoots! Not only that, but you can also rack up massive points by finding hidden icons, like a cow, movi-chan (the little white robot), and other standard Capcom icons.

Side Arms is fast. Very fast. Forget slow ships, mnemonic routes and safe spots - this game defined the term "manic" long before Cave started doing their brand of shmups. Most of the time enemies will shoot several fast bullets at you from all sides, something that really made me sweat a lot.

After 18 years, I still think that the

game features the best weapon system ever, even if one of the weapons (the shotgun) is pretty weak, I still think that having a number of different weapons at my disposal is a great idea, especially when implemented well. While most players used the machinegun for most of the game, I used to switch weapons according to the section to be cleared, something that reappeared in later *Toaplan* and *Cave* games, but in a different form.

Since we're already started speaking about scores, *Side Arms* had a lot of secret items, which are revealed by shooting at the scenery. The idea of uncovering bonuses or special power-ups has always been a favourite of mine; it allows some freedom to your scoring strategies and gives the possibility, once you discover new bonuses, to play the game again for score.

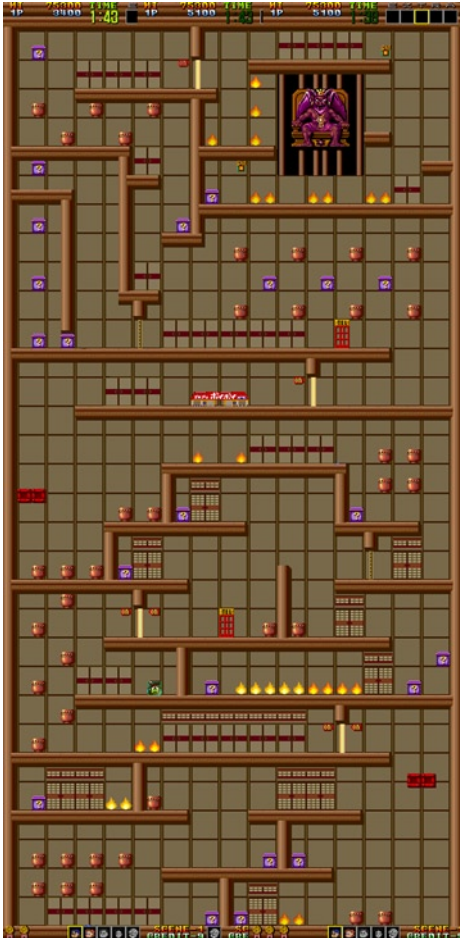
It wasn't until 2002 and 2004 that I discovered two other scoring tricks. In 2002, thanks to the internet, obscure scoring techniques started circulating outside Japan. I won't "spoil" them fully, but I will say that one of them involves suiciding to get extra points...From a historical perspective, I was amazed to discover that such a complex and controversial, for some people, technique was implemented first in one of my most beloved games!

Side Arms was a sort of "loyal companion" for most of my gaming life. I played it a lot back in 1986 and 1987, and had a chance to play it again for a couple of months in 1994. Thanks to emulation, I can play it again and again, discovering new secrets in the third millennium, so to speak. Few titles have "bewitched" me in such a strong manner as *Side Arms*... discovering its secrets little by little has made me appreciate it more and more with each passing year.

And since we're speaking of secrets...

PSYCHIC 5 or LET'S BEAT SATAN!

Psychic 5 is a pretty obscure title. It's one of those games that would be easily overlooked when getting a pizza or going to see a movie. The game has a strong Japanese style (back in '87 it wasn't *that* trendy to praise everything Japanese), brilliant gameplay and a wacky atmosphere. The player basically goes around as 5 ESPers (Extra Sensorial Power...ers) to beat up bad poltergeists who attack them as domestic objects, while they rescue food, and ultimately



attempt to beat "Satan," who lies at the centre of the vast building that the game takes place in.

The game is a free-roaming platformer with an elaborate scoring system typical of games in the '80s. To score, the player had to collect a lot of different bonuses - some of them being pretty complex secret bonuses - while hammering the poltergeist-controlled objects. Your goal is to arrive at the central room and destroy a statue of Satan (yes, THE Satan), so that you can dispel all of the poltergeists.

While doing this you can collect a lot of nice power-ups. You can collect one of these objects by knocking down Zara, your typical ugly witch on a broom and collecting her broom as a power-up. You can also discover secret rooms that contain a typical British phone booth that you can enter to call in your ESPer friends. These are not even the wackiest things in the game.

I really did adore this game, and like its much more famous "colleague", Rainbow Islands, it's at once a good example of Japanese design and a brilliant mix of original game mechanics and a deep scoring system. As you can guess, I was already fascinated by heavily score-driven games by the time *Psychic 5* came out, and with all its scattered food items and secret bonuses, the game featured a lot of different ways to score.

Throw in a wacky plot and '70s anime-like design, and you can easily see why I spent hours playing this game. It had taken months of playing before I could consistently get to the sixth boss when, just as I was beginning to get confident with my skills, my uncle decided to get rid of the cabinet. I was really tempted to kill him, as I desperately wanted to play the game again and finally complete it, but luckily I contained myself.

Let's zoom ahead a few months now.

The game was published in '87, so we're in '88 at this point. I spotted the game in a small pool club and, after a few more months of practice, I was finally able to complete it. I still hadn't uncovered many of the subtleties of the scoring system, but I had enjoyed the long, sometimes "physical" journey to complete it. What I liked most of all were the small details like the food-based bonuses (dishes like Ramen, of course) and truly bizarre enemies, including card shooting telephone cards possessed by poltergeists, and the mighty cigarette vending machine that shoots cigarettes and also wears sunglasses!

CONCLUSION - BACK TO 2005

I've played a lot of obscure, bizarre and great games in my "arcade life." The three games I've covered in this first article are just the three I wanted to talk about when I wrote this. It would be truly difficult to name all of the odd games I've come across. Sometimes I discover that I really liked games because of very trivial factors, like graphics or (in the case of some Taito games and their Zuntata soundtracks) music. There are some games, however, that I will never stop playing, simply because of their excellent gameplay and their ability to age well from a purely "visual and aural" point of view.

After all, truly great games are like fine wine: the older they get, the tastier they become. I'd like to thank you for letting me then be your gaming sommelier and allowing me to introduce you to some of the finest games around.





Warning Forever - PC

Raphael Valenzuela

To those who are not aware of it, Warning forever is a small freeware PC game by Hikoza T. Ohkubo^[1] which was released around the end of 2001 and further polished as the years went by. It is a high-tension, non-progressive, shoot 'em up. Like all shooters, it is a 'pick up and play' sort of game, with simple controls and crisp graphics.

I was enticed by the many labels placed upon it by others who reveled in its glory, most often "free" and "awesome." One couldn't help to be interested in it, and so I succumbed to its magnetic pull. To my surprise, It was an incredibly light and unobtrusive download. Considering I never had any good experiences with freeware games before this, I was really worried this kind of thing would end up being something I would delete within an hour or two and never think about it again. Boy, was I ever wrong...

'Warning Forever' is indeed born from the pure joy of shooters of the past but, at its core, it is made with the distilled adrenaline brought on by your imminent destruction. Instead of a finite number

of lives there is only a timer which slowly ticks down, second by second, until you cease to be. Unlike many other shooters before it, there is no progression, no change of environment, and no evil empires to destroy. Only you and the machine in its digital den. Oh, what a foul demon this mechanized monstrosity is. Following its destruction, it is reborn, ready, able and willing to attempt your defeat yet again - only with an improved and powerful arsenal. And so, the battle between good and evil continues once more.

Ha ha! I have lathered you up good, yes? Well, according to the instructions from my great and powerful shampoo bottle, we are only a third of the way there. The timer plays an important role in this game, as you can gather from my frothy banter. Every death on the part of the player causes a sharp decrease in time, while every victory results in a sharp increase. This time system applies pressure on the player and forces them to dance the "Bullet Barrage"^[2]. Oh, What a lovely dance it is, if performed correctly. This fact, combined with the awesome growth of the arsenal and size of the destructive mechanical creature, only leads to more wonderful ballets. The

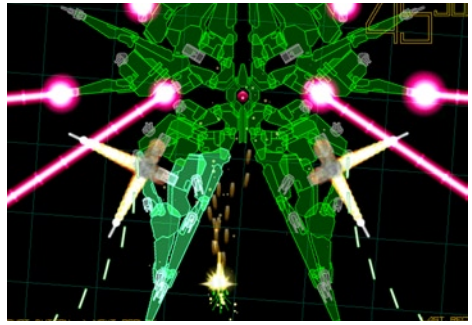
[1] Also known as "Hikware". The homepage is <http://www18.big.or.jp/~hikoza/>

[2] Dance, Monkey! DANCE! *BANG!* *BANG!* *BANG!*

player is limited to the confines of the screen, whereas the enemy creature can travel all around squeezing out fresh and pure 'dances' from the player. It's this kind of depth that makes this game not only enjoyable to play but enjoyable to watch too, which is the reason I like the lovely replay feature included. I find it incredibly refreshing to see a game which, on one hand, is like a monster that tries to "uproot" the young schoolgirl's virgin "flower" with its creepy, slimy tentacles of fear and joy but, on the other hand, is like watching a troupe of cute little monkeys performing a great scene from a silent ballet. You just can't help but to gaze at it in awe and amazement.

My personal experience with this game has been amazing. From the first time I launched it, I haven't been disappointed at all. Upon activating the "game start" option, Warning Forever quickly thrilled me with its blaring sirens and scrolling "WARNING!" signs, along with its quick statistical chart about the next monstrosity. I also immediately noticed the Timer and the utter lack of anything that referenced "lives." At that moment, I became a little nervous as I thought to myself, "This game is going to mess with me."

And then, "it" came in. "It" was small and had 4 little turrets. Quickly, I laid waste to that pitiful thing and was rewarded with bonus points and more time. I felt kind of sad for a moment but soon I was warned again and given the chart, only this time with higher values. Yet again, "it" came back, with a larger mass and more guns. Again I trashed "it" with all my capabilities. It continued that way for a few rounds as it grew larger and amassed more guns. Through this metamorphosis "it" became more skilled. So skilled that the difficulty rose upwards sharply. With its accurate laser artillery,



it sliced my poor ship in half and in my defeat, I lost valuable seconds on the timer. I quickly respawned, and attempted to defeat "it" in retaliation. "

"It" almost mockingly continued to dance with its mighty laser array. But yet again, with skills comparable to "The Gunstar's Action," I vanquished "it" only to have it come back once more. Round after round, battle after wonderful battle, I soon began feeling the pressure, my time was wearing thin and "it" grew to such a size that I had very little space to dodge its every attack. "It" took over the whole screen. so much so that I could only follow its lead as it danced the tango of destruction. And so we danced, from corner to corner, it swiped at me with its long arms hoping to crush me on the wall as it fired off its multitude of weapons that all happened to be pointed at my defenseless ship. Immediately, I started suffering numerous deaths for I could not keep with the frantic pace of its lovely dance.. My ship exploded as I made a final grasp at victory, and the screen slowly faded to black as "it" continued to dance away into the darkness.

Ever since that day, I was caught in its evil spell, and like the final instruction from the wise shampoo bottle, I was destined to "repeat." I often follow this instruction and come back to try to vanquish the creature, but I have yet to see past the 15th round. I can only wonder what is past it.



DISSECTING A HEDGEHOG

An In-depth Analysis of Sonic the Hedgehog

Ryan Bloom

From 1991 to 1994 Sonic the Hedgehog dazzled audiences with high-speed antics the likes of which no other videogame hero has provided since. With each game, Sonic's adventures grew longer, the levels became more complex and the graphics more detailed. But after 1994 Sonic the Hedgehog essentially vanished from the face of gaming. A character who was king, beating out rivals like Mario in popularity polls, and putting countless copycats to shame, began a downward tailspin into the depths of obscurity. The few games that were released which bore the Sonic name were not, in fact, Sonic games, but rather other genres with the Sonic name and characters transplanted into them.

In 1998, as Sega transitioned out of their 32bit console, the Sega Saturn, they revealed a new console - the Sega Dreamcast, and with it, a brand new Sonic game slated for a September 1999 release in America: Sonic Adventure. For

Sonic fans, the world just got a whole lot brighter. Unfortunately, despite its critical acclaim, Sonic Adventure was full of a list of problems: the camera control was terrible, collision detection was questionable, and the voice acting was excruciating just to name a few. Not all gamers could casually brush these sorts of problems aside. In 2001, Sonic Adventure 2 was released and was met with the same sort of mixed



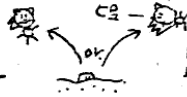
response. The game as a whole only moved the series towards more restrictions of the player's actions. Questions began to arise from the naysayers - could Sonic Team still make a good Sonic game? In 2004, Sonic Heroes further confirmed fan's fears. For every problem it seemed to fix it introduced a handful of new ones. The game was one step forward, three steps back. Even the

Game Boy Advance Sonic games which were traditional sidescrollers were riddled with enough problems to keep them from attaining the status that the previous 2D titles held so valiantly.

We've had three "next generation" Sonic games - in both 2D and 3D formats.

☐ BANPER

出現地 ; 砂漠 ZONE (現代)



踏むとちろか遠くに飛ばしてしょう。

Where did they all go wrong? In this article I am going to speak, to the best of my ability, not only about the problems but also about the inner-workings of the Sonic mechanics in hopes of perhaps shedding some light on things. Identifying exactly where the new games have gone wrong, what the old games did right, and why certain aspects of the new games don't deserve as much flak as they get. This is years of geekdom at work here, folks, so sit back, grab a drink, and get ready for one of the most in-depth articles you'll ever read about the Sonic Series.

Before we get into what went wrong, first you must understand how a Sonic game works. Or rather, how the Genesis Sonic games worked. You see, Sonic himself is a very unique sort of character; no other game ever played like Sonic did when he debuted in 1991. Not just the speed either, everybody always talks about Sonic's speed, but there was something beyond that. Sonic enabled players, for the first time, a sense of momentum. Levels themselves were rollercoaster rides because Sonic had a one-of-a-kind physics engine. It allowed you to run up any

smooth surface, even up walls and, most impressively, along the ceiling, as long as you had built up enough speed to do so. To fully understand why this matters so much, you must first understand the basics of level design.

Flow is the key. Flow is running through World 1-1 of Super Mario Brothers without stopping once, without turning around once, without ever slowing down. You hit every platform, every enemy, right on the money, the first time. Flow is nailing the Blast Barrel sequence in the first snow world of Donkey Kong Country on your first try. Flow is all about timing and forward momentum: the idea that every object in a level is perfectly positioned so that the player can interact with it without having to stop. Flow is completing Green Hill Zone Act 1 in less than 30 seconds.

The Sonic games introduced a brand new dimension of flow. In typical platform games, for the player to go to the left he would have to stop and then turn around. This wastes precious time, and it breaks the flow - in a level all about moving forward, the player would have to turn around and go the opposite direction. Sonic did away with this. Sonic could run up a half-pipe and be shot off in a different direction, in fact, any direction - up, down, left, right and everything in-between. This maneuverability opened the door for limitless possibilities in designing Sonic stages. Zigzags, loops, rolling hills and valleys, Sonic reacted realistically to many different forms of terrain. Running up a steep hill would cause Sonic to slow down and if the incline was too great he would stop and start running back downhill again. This part of the Sonic



BANPER 昔

出現地 : Rock ZONE (古代)



性質 : 上記同様。(カラ-フェンジ)

experience was superbly unique for its time. To this date, very few games have understood this mechanic of the Sonic design, and it is perhaps why the rush of Sonic clones that followed his debut were never met with quite the success our blue hedgehog was given. They may have had the style, but they never had the single most unique quality of a Sonic title: the physics engine.

In comparison, looking at the 3D titles, they ignore this, perhaps the most crucial aspect of Sonic's design. In fact, the 3D Sonic games often penalize you for trying to run up any surface that is not the floor. Very few special items involve running up walls (and most of those were confined to the original Sonic Adventure), and if you try to run too far up a wall, the physics engine glitches out on itself and you're thrown back to the ground (occasionally even through the floor itself). The only time the player ever runs up any surface other than the immediate floor in front of them are on the loops - and those are mostly pre-scripted events, offering the player very little control. Instead of giving the player control and bringing them into the action, they are content in zooming out with cinematic camera angles, removing the player's immersion in the game world. All of this is done, in Sonic Adventure Series Director Takashi Iizuka's own words, "to give the player a sense of just how fast Sonic really is," and that, perhaps, is the main problem underlying the current Sonic game mechanics. The designers are so enamored with reminding us how fast Sonic is that they've forgotten the finer points of what made him feel so fast in the first place.

A good example would be placing Mario in a Sonic level. To make it easier on ourselves, we'll remove the loops - in their place, flat ground. Now, imagine Super-Mario-World era Mario wandering around, say... Chemical Plant in Sonic 2, or Sonic 3's Launch Base Zone. Mario can't run up walls like Sonic can, so obviously Mario could not easily make it to the end of a stage. Now, throw the 3D Mario we saw in Super Mario Sunshine's bonus levels (IE - Sans water pack, just flat out platformer Mario) into a Sonic Adventure 2 stage. In most stages (save for one or two) he'd have few problems navigating to the finish line, because a large portion of the abilities that set Sonic and Mario apart have been toned down, or flat-out removed.

Not even the Sonic Advance games can escape these problems. While they obviously take advantage of Sonic's "run in any direction" ability, they tend to mercilessly throw our fuzzy blue hedgehog straight into traps. Oftentimes you will hit a wall and before you have time to react a set of spikes will pop out of the ground and damage your character. And if it's not that, then you're being thrown head-long into an enemy or off of a cliff straight in to a bottomless pit. This design leads to





many "that wasn't my fault" deaths, and going by the rules of game design that just isn't right. When the player dies, they must believe it is their fault, and you must give them room to improve their skills. While arguably, the player could memorize every aspect of the level's design, on their first go through they're going to be subject to every trap and pitfall laid before them - if they are thrown off of a platform to their doom because they could not see the cliff before they went over the edge, that is not their fault. In comparison, the old games rarely put the player into these sorts of situations - you always had more than enough time to react to a given situation while still feeling as if you were going fast. And when the game really did kick into overdrive, sending Sonic running so fast the scrolling could hardly keep up, there was rarely an obstacle in his path.

One of the main complaints about Sonic games nowadays is they add in too many extraneous characters. The latest Sonic game, Sonic Heroes, boasts a total of 12 playable characters separated in to 4 teams of 3. The argument, is of course - this is a Sonic game, not a Knuckles/Tails/Amy/Shadow/Big/Cream/Vector/Charmy/



Espio/Rouge/Omega/Sonic game. Indeed, it seems that perhaps there are too many supporting characters who get in the way of playing a Sonic game.

The truth is, nothing has changed. With Sonic 1, we played as just Sonic. Sonic 2 introduced Tails. Sonic 3 introduced Knuckles. These characters were designed in a way to provide an alternative experience from playing as Sonic (and thus, extending the replay value of the game) - Tails, for instance, was the slowest of the three characters - but to balance out that weakness, he was given the ability to fly, and, depending on the game, he could jump the highest (besides Super Sonic, anyway). Knuckles - while not as fast as Sonic, was faster than Tails, but had the lowest jumping height of the three. He could also latch on to surfaces, climb up them, as well as glide over long distances. Sonic, of course, was Sonic - fast, relatively normal jump height, and depending on the game, could use the InstaShield to extend his damage radius for a split second. The reason Sonic 3 & Knuckles is as fun as everybody remembers it, is because there were certain areas -- certain character-specific routes that utilized these three move sets very well. It made traversing the same level three separate times a lot more fun - you'd come upon an area you can't access, and would be eager to go back with someone who could break that wall or over take those spikes to see where it lead you.

Sonic Adventure simply tried to continue this tradition - the addition of Amy, E-102 Gamma and Big the Cat, each with their own stats and separate play-styles.



Gamma played like an on-foot version of Panzer Dragoon, Amy was a lot slower and did not spin when she jumped (but she had a hammer for long-range melee), and Big let you play a stripped-down version of Sega Bass Fishing. There was nothing wrong with this - while obviously some play styles were better and more refined than others, Sonicteam was just following the trend: a greater roster of characters, each with their own move sets. But, people complained; Amy's speed was far too slow (and her game far too short) and Big's fishing game was too simple and just did not belong in a Sonic game. Sonicteam listened to complaints, and in the next game - they went back to the tried and true formula: Sonic Adventure 2 presented us with three different play styles. Racing, Hunting, and Shooting, and six characters total. Sonic and Shadow were Racing, Knuckles and Rouge were Hunting, and Tails and Eggman were Shooting. But, all was not right. Racing levels were too straight forward and linear, Hunting took longer than it needed due to some features being removed, and the Shooting stages suffered from clunky control. An admirable idea marred by some unfortunate problems.

Sonic Heroes tried to put a new spin on things: You controlled a team of three: Speed, Power and Flight, and switched between them on the fly. This too, seemed like a good idea in practice - but between the four teams of three, there was not enough variation: Team Sonic played like Team Dark, Team Rose and Team Chaotix, with some very slight changes; changes that were not drastic enough to really modify how one played the game. It was



almost like going through all the levels in the game four separate times with new player skins.

The main problems with these mechanics is the fact that they rarely utilized separate characters abilities. Half the fun of the old games was finding a new route exclusive to character X in a level you'd already been through with character Y. Both Sonic Advance and Sonic Adventure practically ignore the unique abilities of each character while tacking on extra moves that the characters never needed in the first place. A prime example of this are the moves given to Tails and Knuckles in Sonic Adventure (which have remained in their moves roster for later games). Knuckles can Punch, and Tails can do a sort of tail-whip move. Both moves pretty much force you to a stop if you use them, in which you must re-accelerate again from a standstill. It's a very counter-intuitive for a game that's supposedly about moving forward. And when you remove the fact that they must stop moving to use these moves -- what are you left with? A move that replaces the standard Sonic roll/spin? Where's the innovation in that? As common in this section of creating a Sonic game: It's the same thing



with a fresh coat of paint. Same effect, different animation. Why not just let them use their rolling animation, if you're going to do that? It certainly would make the player feel more at home with traditional Sonic Game play.

Sonic Heroes does the same thing: Why can Knuckles punch? To smash walls? Why do those walls even need to be there? Easy - to justify Knuckles punch. It's artificial Game play; the wall is there, so the player must press a button on the gamepad to destroy it. They could remove the walls altogether, and save the player time and hassle. "But," you say "Isn't that what Game play is? Pressing a button and getting a reaction?" - That's a difficult question to tackle. Think of it like this: In the original Sonic games, Knuckles never HAD a punch move, because it wasn't needed: He had knuckles on his fists, and the general action of swinging them forward while running was implied enough to the point where breakable walls would crumble just by him touching them; no need for Knuckles to roll at all. He just walked right through them. Why, then, suddenly, do we need to press a button to do this very same action, especially if

it breaks up the player's flow? The whole point was that Knuckles did not have to roll to break walls Sonic would have to be in a spin to take down. It was an advantage Knuckles had.

Perhaps the only moves from the 3D Sonic games that were worth while were the moves initially given to just Sonic. The Homing Attack, and the Light Speed Dash, both most notably, were unique additions that served great purposes. And in Sonic Adventure 2, they remained the only two moves truly "improved": the Homing Attack was made less of a "gimmie" move; in Sonic Adventure you could just double jump anywhere near an enemy and Sonic would automatically lock on and kill it - Sonic Adventure 2 injected a little bit of "skill" in to the move; it forced you to aim at the enemy you wanted to Homing Attack. Once Sonic was vaguely facing the right direction, he would home in on it. The Light Speed Dash in Sonic Adventure too needed improvements: To use it you had to sit through a 2-or-3 second long charge up sequence that forced Sonic to a standstill while he did it. Sonic Adventure 2 gave the move a rebirth in the name of the "Light Dash" - it negated the charge sequence all together; instead, you merely tapped the spindash button near a string of rings and Sonic raced a long at un-told speeds. Both moves served to aide and streamline the 3D platformer process: No longer was hopping on enemies heads a difficult task; you just had to be near enough to them and Sonic took care of the rest (while looking pretty cool in the process) - and the move sported added Game play benefits, to boot (stringing enemies out over a pit and forcing the

回転してはる。



player to homing attack across them in sequence). It is unfortunate that the rest of the cast was stuck with such a mixed bag of often moves, moves that broke up Game play flow or just never made any sense - especially compared to how they handled in the classic games.

And perhaps even worse; the next generation of Sonic games fail to utilize the player character's separate abilities in ways that they were in the old games. Sure, you could fly as Tails in Sonic Adventure: but what for? You were accessing Sonic's levels through Tails' controls. There were very, very few Tails-specific items littered around the levels (the only ones I can recall offhand are the dash rings in Windy Valley). The Sonic Advance games do the same thing: you are playing Knuckles running around Sonic's level. There is no place for Knuckles to fit in, for him to find his groove. Yeah, you can reach a couple of secret items if you climb up a wall or two, but generally, Sonic can reach those, too. It's this kind of level design that I think fosters the sort of "Who needs these supporting characters?" complaints - they might play differently, but there's no reason for them to really be there. You can play them almost exactly like you play Sonic because the level design is tailored to Sonic; therefore, who cares if Knuckles can climb? Who cares if Tails can fly? You don't need to. You can blitz through the level at the exact same speed as Sonic (thanks in part to all the dash pads that litter even these 2D stages that force you to top speed).

Even worse still is the case concerning Super Sonic. Born in 1992's Sonic the Hedgehog 2, Super Sonic was a sort



of parody; at the time, Dragonball Z was airing in Japan - and obviously, Super Sonic was some form of homage to Super Saiyan Goku. After collecting all seven Chaos Emeralds, the ability to become Super Sonic was within your grasp -- a up-turned-spike golden yellow version of Sonic; Super Sonic was basically what you get when you take Sonic and enable all power-ups on Sonic all at the same time: Incredible speed, and invulnerability to any attack; plus the highest jump height. Super Sonic let you blast through stages doing nothing but enjoying scenery - you didn't have to worry about enemies, obstacles, or traps. You just went as fast as you could. He made a return appearance in 1994's Sonic 3, and in Sonic & Knuckles later that year, we were introduced to Hyper Sonic - an even faster seizure-inducing rainbow-flashing version of Super Sonic, whom served the same purpose Super Sonic did, except for a Sonic-and-Knuckles era game: He could blast through walls without having to spin, and was given a double-jump move much like Sonic; except Hyper-Sonic's destroyed every enemy on screen in one blinding flash. Since Sonic Adventure, and the birth of a more story-driven Sonic title, Super



Sonic has been "phased out" so to speak - Chaos Emeralds are collected, and for one very brief boss fight, we get to fly around as Super Sonic. That's all - And perhaps that is one of the keys to the problems we face in Sonic level design: Sonic 2, Sonic 3, and Sonic & Knuckles had stages that were designed with Super Sonic in mind: they knew, that if you wanted, you could fly through these levels at maximum velocity, but you had to work for that. The 3D Sonic games almost forcefully hurtle you through stages at blistering speeds - often times the player doesn't even have to bother accelerating, because the game has already automatically thrust him off in the direction it wants him to go.

We need that, again. We need a Sonic game that gives us gameplay beyond just speed -- leave the "pure non-stop speed" to Super Sonic, but give the players - as Sonic, as Tails, as Knuckles - give them gameplay that fully utilizes the abilities given to them in a non-artificial way.

So one of the big problems nowadays is that we refuse to let go of the old Sonic and embrace certain changes in the new

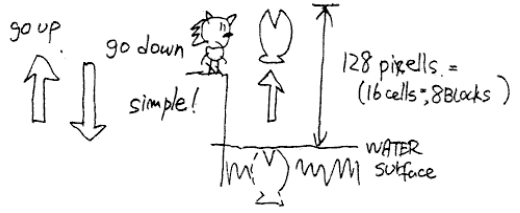
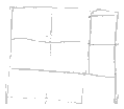


Sonic. Some people don't like things like Sonic's shade of blue, or the fact that he's taller now, or the fact that Eggman doesn't look outrageously fat anymore, or whatever. I say that these are problems people shouldn't concern themselves about. But what about those problems which we legitimately fear? They deserve noting. They deserve fixing.

First up would probably be Sonic Heroes' problem: its storyline. For years now, ever since Sonic Adventure, Sonic Team has vowed, one game after another, to be "returning Sonic to his roots". Sonic Heroes tried to embrace this mentality perhaps the most of any game since. The rolling checkerboard hillsides from Sonic 1 returned in full force, and to go along with that, Sonic Heroes' storyline got cut down to be "simplistic", like the rest of the game. But Sonic Team just didn't get it right - rather than painting a simple (and classic) "Eggman's going to rule the world" plot, they decided to over-complicate things with a little bit of a mystery, another left-over of the previous two 3D Sonic titles (in which there was a lot of mystery surrounding the antagonists). For, in the last moment of the game, we discover that it was never Eggman, it was, in fact, Metal Sonic, who orchestrated the whole mess. We'd been given glimpses of him every now and then throughout the game. And thus, the final confrontation is against an enemy who we've maybe seen 30 seconds total of - 15 of which were spent on a small portion of exposition and a long transformation sequence. And that's not the half of it.

The game starts a handful of plotlines it never resolves, perhaps in the sake of

FISH 2.



simplicity. We are introduced to a cloning factory in which there are millions of clones of the Anti-Hero, Shadow (from the previous game, Sonic Adventure 2). We never learn why there are Shadow clones, and we never see them in action. They are on screen for all of 10 seconds; in which they are presumably all destroyed. Additionally, another plotline involving Shadow never gets resolved. At the end of Sonic Adventure 2, Shadow regains his memories and fulfills his promise to Maria by giving hope to humanity. In the final sequence, after Shadow's "death", we are given perhaps the most emotion the corporate big-wigs will allow Sonic to show: As he is the last person to leave the Space Station, he says his final goodbye to Shadow. You can almost hear his voice crack as he says it, threads of emotion seeping through (at least, if you're listening on Japanese vocals). Sonic and Shadow had been through a lot together, although they started out as bitter enemies, together, by combining their strength as a team, they vanquished the final boss and saved the planet. Together. They were on the same side. In Sonic Heroes, when Sonic and Shadow meet up a second time - Sonic doesn't bother with any sort of "hey, you're alive?!" pleasantries; both of them, without batting an eyelash, start a knock-down drag-out fight with each other. Why? We don't know. Simplicity, and all.

For those quick to crop up that Sonic was never about plot, it's this type of "simplicity" at the core of the problems we face in the 3D Sonic titles. We are promised simplicity, but instead we are met in the face with the same gameplay

from Sonic Adventure perhaps mixed up a little bit (and wouldn't that just be added complexity?). And if it isn't that, we're just given things that simply don't belong. Simplicity? In the eyes of the current developers simplicity seems to be defined by "taking what we already have and subtracting functionality". They give us flat, linear level design for the sake of simplicity. They give us a plot and then get rid of all the interesting bits for the sake of simplicity. They remove the player from the immersion of the game world, limit his control, and even take it away, for the sake of simplicity.

Sonic 2 was simple. Sonic Heroes is not. Holding down and pressing jump to spindash is simple. Hitting jump a second time while in mid-air to execute a special move is simple. Assigning eight separate special moves to two buttons is not simple. Standing in front of a wall I cannot cross because I have not pressed a button to cycle through a list of characters just so I can press another button, break the wall, and then cycle through the list again to get back to the character I was playing as is not simple. Removing useful functionality is not simple (well, it is, but for the wrong reasons). All of what I have





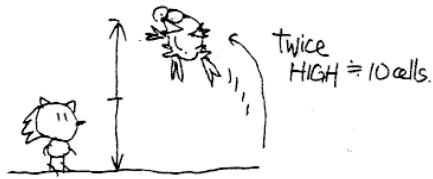
described is simply more frustrating and cumbersome than it is simple or intuitive.

If the game is simple and easy to understand, shouldn't the player be able to do these things without the game forcing him in the right direction? Without the game holding his hand, always telling him what to do? If there is one thing studying marketing trends has taught me, it is that people, especially children, do not enjoy being talked down to. So why make a game that practically plays itself? Are we too stupid to understand what we are trying to do? If so, that's not really simple, is it? And if it is simple, and Sonic Team is still holding the player's hand - leading him by a leash - then they're just wasting time? Sonic's not about wasting time.

I read an article on a website, some words by a very intelligent man named Tim Rogers. In it he discusses Sega/Treasure/Hitmaker's Astroboy GBA game, released in the USA under the title "Astroboy: The Omega Factor." In this article he discusses choice: The fact that Astroboy himself has a variety of moves of which to dispose enemies, all of which had the same end result, (destruction), but which gave the player was choice, or freedom within the limited game world. Astroboy could lead in with a kick and go to a finger beam, or do it completely backwards. Sometimes he punched enemies to death. Sometimes he used his mounted guns to stun the enemies first. It was up to the player to decide. If Sonic can go fast, that does not mean he should go fast. Let the player decide - don't throw him along a pathway. If he wants to slow down, stop, and smell the flowers, let him. Give the player the ability to go fast, and

give him the choice to use it when and wherever he wants. It's freedom of choice. Choice leads to the player feeling as if he has a greater sense of control over what he's doing. It helps the player's immersion in the game world. So what if Sonic doesn't go around every single loop at top speed? What if the player doesn't want to? What if something happened near the loop that made the player slow down so that he could see what was going on? It doesn't matter. It's up to the player to decide. What if the Player wants to stop at the loop, walk through the bottom portion of it, and come out the other side without ever running up, around or upside down? One of my favorite levels in the original Sonic Adventure is "Emerald Coast." - This level is tropical, and very wide-open. One of my favorite areas in this level is at the very end, just before you reach the capsule that ends the level there is a medium-sized stretch of sandbar that leads up to it. What's there? Nothing. A few rings, maybe that's it. I like it, because it's one of the first and only extended stretches of land you can run on as just Sonic. There are no dash plates, no enemies, no platforms, just you and speed. There are times when I run laps around this sec-





tion if I'm bored enough. The game never forces me to traverse this part of level. I can do whatever I want.

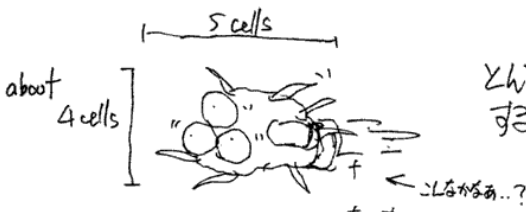
Some would be ready to tell you that such freedom within the game world is dead: in today's market, gamers want games with simple controls that equal big flashy effects. I'm not going to deny that playing to this crowd is a good way to make money; RPGs like Final Fantasy have built their entire franchise on this premise alone. But to that, I do not say that freedom is dead - games like Grand Theft Auto plo p you down in the middle of the city and let you tackle missions completely in your own way. Or, you can ignore the missions and do menial tasks like put out fires, become a Vigilante Cop, or ferry people about the city in a Taxi Cab. The MMORPG craze is currently in full swing, with games like Everquest 2, Lineage 2, World of Warcraft, City of Heroes, The Matrix Online, Shenmue Online, Final Fantasy XI, Starwars Galaxies, and Ragnarok Online -- most of which employ open-ended Quest systems. Indeed, the gaming industry is seeing a surge in games that allow the player freedom to tackle a goal from multiple angles (or just not tackle it at all), meaning the concept



of freedom in a videogame, freedom like we saw in what gamers consider the "golden era" of 16bit gaming, is far from dead.

So, if that's what's wrong with the Sonic games, how exactly does one fix that? If you would, please allow me to indulge my own egotism on the matter. Everybody will have their own vision, undoubtedly, of how to "fix" a situation such as this. It's a question that pops up with anybody who's a fan of something. If, by a fortunate twist of fate, I found myself as the creative lead behind this project, what would I do differently? While I make no claims I have the idea for the perfect Sonic game, here is a list of things that I wish were part of the current series. This serves as a nice wrap-up to show how all of my claims from above wrap together in to a nice, cohesive package. Basically, I'm going to gush like a lowly fanboy now, so, if you want, you can go ahead and skip this part.

For starters, we'll adhere to the complaints of fans: this game will feature just Sonic, Tails and Knuckles (If the creators are really dead-set on it, we'll include Cream & Cheese, too. They've always worked as a sort of nice "easy mode" for younger players in the Advance games) This number of characters resolves what Players have been complaining about. Not too many characters, but not too few, just enough for a good set of replay value. Sonic will retain his two most useful innovations: an aimed Homing Attack and the Light Dash. Beyond those two,



とんできて ちがったものを落とす。おと、ハブが発生してしまう。



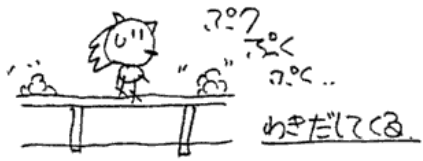
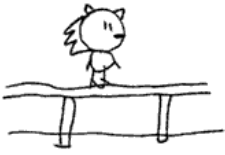
return to the status-quo of being a big, bad Villain. Too often in the recent games has Eggman been used as comic relief, I realize he is supposed to be a wacky Mad Scientist, but when every project he makes literally overpowers him and uses him as a doormat, you start wondering why he tries to control anything he obviously has no power over. So, obviously, if I had control of the next Sonic game, Eggman would re-take his place as being a proper, ominous, dastardly-deed-doing super villain. No servants, no slaves, no ancient prophecies, just Eggman being cool again. Emphasis on badnik characterization and personification would return; as would the typically diverse group of enemies we used to see in Sonic games of old. (Less "Generic Grunt" type badniks and more "personalized to fit the stage" style)

he will have the Spindash/Roll. Nothing else; no Ancient Light, no Mystic Melody, no Summersault Kick. Knuckles will be able to climb, glide, roll and dig. Tails will be able to fly - but in a move combining how he functioned (outside of his mech) in Sonic Adventure 2, and in Sonic Heroes, Tails will get a "flight bar" of sorts. He will be able to hover in place without depleting this "flight bar", however, pressing A will make him boost upwards. Each boost will deplete the bar X amount until he runs out. Moving while hovering will also deplete the bar, but at a much slower rate than boosting. Perhaps boosting would also serve as an attack. Super Sonic would return true to form: Either after completing the game (or beating all the Special Stages, if any) Super Sonic would become unlocked and playable in every level of the game, just as he was in the previous Sonic games. He would play exactly like Sonic, just with faster acceleration, faster top speed, and complete invincibility to all hazards (except being crushed and falling off into bottomless pits). Super Sonic would be the focus on non-stop all-out speed; he would not have to stop for anything if he did not want to.

Storyline would be written by Asahiko Kikuchi, who wrote the story for Sonic Battle (presumably, at least. He is listed as "Story Mode Planner"). Sonic Battle had one of the best, most well-thought-out and thoroughly enjoyable storylines in a Sonic game since Sonic Adventure; characterization was spot-on, jokes were clever, and the method of storytelling was just phenomenal, especially for a GBA game - needless to say, that's how I want all storylines in the Sonic series to be written. Music would be largely composed by the group who did Sonic Heroes' music, but perhaps a little less Jun Senoue. I love waiting guitars as much as the next guy, but Jun's work as of late has seemed flat and uninteresting. He did awesome music for the original Sonic Adventure, but none of the music he's done since

In this game, Doctor Eggman would

SONIC が止まってるよ ..



that soundtrack has quite had the "punch" that Sonic Adventure contained. I felt his work in Sonic Adventure 2 was boring and repetitive - random guitar chords strung along a beat with no real "tune". To me, a good videogame tune is something you can whistle while you take a shower. When I listen to the Sonic Heroes soundtrack, most of my favorite songs were done by people other than Jun Senoue - Mariko Nanba, Tomoya Ohtani, Naofumi Hataya, and so on.

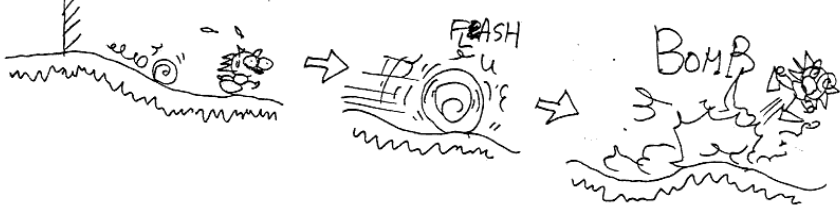
The camera would have three modes. Two from Sonic Adventure DX - Free, which lets the player control the camera, and Auto, which tries to find the best angle automatically. And the new mode would be a "Locked" Camera Mode; this would lock the camera behind the player at all times (of course, there'd be a little leeway; a smooth-scrolling pan to keep itself behind the player, not some tight, stiff camera that's crammed behind the player). The camera itself wouldn't be solid (unlike the cameras for most platformers) - meaning it would be able to pass through walls. When on the other side of a wall, the wall itself would appear invisible as not to obstruct view from the player. These three camera modes would finally make everybody happy, I think.

High-speed game play mechanics would be based more on racing games: Sonic would have some weight - maybe a tiny bit of drift - as he turned at high-speeds. However, the player would still have enough control over Sonic to where they wouldn't be sliding in to walls constantly during turns. The deeper mechanics would mimic racing games such as F-Zero GX and Rollcage. Games that



allowed the player to stick to pretty much any curved surface as they drove; you could drive on the ceiling, up and down the edges of half-pipes, pretty much anywhere that the track allowed you. Sonic games require this mechanic, and, if I were in control, I would love to emphasize this in level design.

One idea I've toyed with for a long time in my mind, came from when the PS2 game, Jak & Daxter was first re-released: the removal of "levels," and the introduction of, more or less, "areas" and "locations." In actuality, what this means, is you connect all the levels together as one, giant, inter-connected never-ending "world." Ever since Jak & Daxter (and the subsequent sequels) have been released, I've always pondered this idea, wondering just how effective it would be within a Sonic setting. Using this concept I think would be more along the lines of a fully-matured "Adventure Field" from Sonic Adventure: enough action within them to be considered challenges, while still retaining an adventure element. It would also help emphasize the fact that backtracking through levels would, indeed, be essential, and could open up the door wider for chal-



lenges involving the physics engine.

Level designs themselves, if even called that, could open up wider as in *Sonic Heroes* to give the player more room to maneuver. Design emphasis would be on choice. Imagine a corkscrew segment where there would be two openings to go around, forming a sort of solid "tube" between the two corkscrews. The "every level is suspended over a bottomless pit" mechanic would be toned down, with more stages taking place on wider, more comfortable arenas - that, as the game drew to a close, would become narrower and raise higher into the sky (eventually, reaching into space itself, obviously). Pre-scripted, cinematic loops would be de-emphasized, and player interaction with the levels would be paramount, to tie in with the newly re-envisioned physics engine. Sections where the player must run up a wall but remain in control of where Sonic is going to hit a spring or avoid an obstacle would be abundant, and there would be a section of a level, perhaps separated into areas that only certain characters could access, that would cater to their specific gameplay mechanics. Long portions of highways would exist for Sonic to run on, some platforms that are perhaps too high in the sky to reach would be there for Tails, and a section of wall too long to be flown across and can only be climbed would exist for Knuckles. Classic Sonic mechanics would return in full form: Swings, slides, tubes, monkey bars, and more.

Think of it like a big playground. As a child, the playground was the cool place to be. You were given a set of structures - swings, slides, monkey bars, etc. and

you were given free reign to use them as you pleased. You were supposed to slide DOWN the slide, but I don't think a child exists that hasn't tried to climb up the slide backwards. And what about the swings? Surely we've all swung as high as we could, only to jump off at the peak of the swing and see how far we could go before landing? Some of us had even had contests doing this - I-bet-I-can-jump-farther-than-you-oh-no-you-can't sorts of affairs. The current 3D Sonic games take you to this playground and force you to go down the slide in the same way every time: feet first, sitting upright. You are not allowed to climb back up the slide backwards, and if you want to go on the slide again you have to come back tomorrow. That's a big problem that shouldn't be there.

Here's how you fix the problem: Give the game back to the player. Let him play in the playground as he chooses to.





Doki Doki Idol Star Seeker - DC

Francesco-Alessio Ursini

I grew up watching many '80s anime series focused on the adventures of various Idols, my favorite of which being Maho no tenshi Creamy Mami (The Enchanting Girl Creamy Mami, more or less). Creamy, like other characters in this genre, had magical powers but the main focus of her show was the Idol's life and experiences - as well as panty shots and little erotic elements. These erotic elements weren't censored in the Italian version, which is a curious thing.

As a kid, I enjoyed this genre of anime, since they were a good way to learn things about a distant country and a different culture. I was also already developing into a little pervert, and enjoyed the occasional erotic moments which were

pretty light in retrospect. Most of the time they were "erotic" only in the strictest sense, as most was left to the imagination - of which mine was, thankfully at that moment, slightly wild. Lust aside, I couldn't help falling in love with Creamy Mami and her lavender hair - a staple of this genre is the impossible hair color of the main characters!

Doki Doki is based on the same simple plots that I liked so much as a child. There are three potential "idols" (starlets of the Japanese musical scene, who last a couple of seasons and then disappear from the market), and one talent scout has to reveal their potential. The game draws inspiration from many "shojo manga" and a few classic anime from the '80s and '90s. Consequently, the game's soundtrack gets its inspiration from the same place. It can be best described as "j-pop" with elements that can be traced to more sophisticated forms of pop. One of the themes sounds like a Ten Thousand Maniacs homage, which isn't at all surprising given the game's retro anime atmosphere. Interestingly, Norihiro Furukawa, an ex-Taito and ex-Zuntata member, whose works include Grid Seeker, Light Bringer, Arabian Magic and Cosmo Warrior Zero, composed the music. Although my favorite Zuntata members remain OGR and Yack (the



former has done all the Darius soundtracks, the latter Metal Black and Border Down), I've always appreciated Furukawa for his ability to do "classic-like" scores like Light Bringer's. This soundtrack surprised me a bit, since I didn't expect Furukawa to be able to compose excellent and light-hearted j-pop, something I associated more to other Zuntata members, namely Karu, the lady behind Puzzle Bobble.

In Doki Doki every character has her own theme, which allows you to choose your song when choosing a character on the Dreamcast mode. Yui's theme aside, the other three themes are very nice and well done. The best parts of the soundtrack are the various themes found in the story mode. Most of these have a shortened exposition in the game (40-60 seconds), but if you trigger the BGM mode you can listen to the full versions. "Run and Go!" (The ending theme) is probably the best song, and the more "Zuntata-ish" in style, as it's a nice dance fusion theme with a saxophone and percussions. In short, all of the themes revolve around the same core of "retro" idol anime, and work well off each other.

The acting is excellent, probably one of the most talented in-game dubs that I've ever heard, and animates the game even if you don't understand Japanese. The sound effects are easily understood and appropriate, though the warning siren grates the ears.

Even with the warning siren, though, I still played the game for around 5 months, with long pauses in-between, clocking in roughly 100 hours. As with any game I really love, there have been moments where I wanted to destroy Doki Doki. But its intriguing gameplay, nice graphics, and excellent music make it one of my favorite puzzlers ever. What kept bringing me back was the same reason that I enjoy all good arcade games: the challenge. Doki Doki

can be quite hard at times. Even so, I had loads of fun chasing down good scores, sometimes having to resist the temptation to snap the disc in two! Even though the game's best extra is the BGM mode



I must admit that clearing all the game's modes to get the image gallery was well worth the time. Umm, some of the sexier pictures were quite...exciting.

While my favorite 1-player puzzle game remains Mr. Driller Great, I'd say that Doki Doki is one of the best around. The game isn't cheap, nor easy to find; it usually costs about 6000 yen on yahoo.jp auctions, so its final cost is around \$50-60 USD. As a Taito fan, I'm happy some of their ex-programmers have been able to make a challenging game in my second favorite genre, the arcade puzzle game, and even happier that they were able to use the "Idol" theme in an elegant manner. I grew up with shojo manga and idol-based anime, and was thrilled to see it used in a game I could enjoy.

Doki Doki Idol Star Seeker Advanced Strategy and Translation Guide



0.0 FACT FILES

0.1 THE MENU AND THE CHARACTERS

0.1.1 GAMING MODES

0.1.1.1 STORY MODE

0.1.1.2 REMIX MODE

0.1.1.3 BONUS TRACK MODE

0.1.2 OPTIONS MODES

0.1.2.1 OPTIONS

0.1.2.2 DEMO MODE

0.1.2.3 BONUS MATERIAL MODE

1.0 BASIC MECHANICS

1.1 STAR SEEKING

1.1.2 TIME

1.2 SCORE MECHANICS

1.2.1 CHAINS AND TIME

1.2.2 NO MISS BONUS

1.2.3 SECRET BONUS

2.0 ADVANCED MECHANICS

2.2.1 QUICK SCANNING

2.2.2 DIFFERENTIAL SCANNING

2.2.3 ALTERNATE SCANNING

0.0 FACT FILES

Doki Doki Idol Star Seeker is a 1-player puzzle game. The point of the game is to clear the stage by completing the puzzle provided. It is considered a "classic" puzzle game, as opposed to a "competitive" puzzle game like Puyo Puyo. Doki Doki is pretty simple: as in the classic Minesweeper, you must find hidden objects (stars, hence "Star seeker") below a grid of hexagonal panels. There are a number of game mechanics that make the game more complex and "arcade-like" in the Dreamcast remix compared to the original release on the NAOMI arcade system. It also features a 2-player co-op mode, where you have to clear the levels by helping each other find the stars.

2.2.4 DYNAMIC CHAINING

3.0 STAGES

3.1 TYPES OF STAGES

3.1.1 DISTRIBUTION TYPES

3.1.1.1 TYPE 1 ("RANDOM BASIC").

3.1.1.2 TYPE 2 ("RANDOM PATTERN")

3.1.1.3 TYPE C ("DENSE STAGE").

3.1.2 PACE TYPES

3.1.2.1 TYPE A ("QUICK STAGE")

3.1.2.2 TYPE B (" SLOW STAGE")

3.1.2.3 TYPE C ("DENSE STAGE").

3.2 A GUIDE TO MODES AND STAGES

3.2.1 STORY MODE

3.2.2 REMIX MODE

3.2.2.1 EASY MODE

3.2.2.2 NORMAL MODE

3.2.2.3 ARCADE MODE

3.2.2.4 ADVANCE MODE

3.2.3 BONUS TRACK MODE

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

0.1 THE MENU AND THE CHARACTERS

The opening menu features 3 options per side. "Game mode" can be found on the left and "Options and Extras" on the right. "Game mode" offers three possible modes of play, while "Options and Extras" is obviously the menu that allows you to change settings and access extra features. Obtaining certain requirements will open these extra features.

0.1.1 GAMING MODES

Before unlocking anything, the game starts with Story mode and Remix mode (left column), plus options and demo play (right column). The gaming modes are:

- **STORY MODE**
- **REMIX MODE**
- **BONUS TRACK MODE**



0.1.1.1 STORY MODE

Until a level is cleared, "episode 1" will be the only Story Mode option, and you need to clear it on one credit to open "episode 2." By completing stages, up to 5 episodes can be unlocked, which completes the entire Story mode. The plot is about girls who get recruited to become idols, face some challenges, and finally become famous in the end. All Story mode episodes are three triplets of stages. On every stage, you are given a time limit that is roughly equivalent to 1/3 of the total time (but higher than the warning siren time), after this limit an image of the Idol telling you to be faster is shown instead of the standard plot-related image. If you can raise your total time above this limit, the image will change back but the time limit value will rise. Be fast! Once you complete all episodes, you will unlock the gallery mode and the BGM menu in the right column of the option screen. You must complete the stages with the standard images to open them in the gallery mode. Story mode is specific to the Dreamcast port, as it is divided in three triplets per episode and has a plot, as well as a new way to score called the "Secret bonus."



Difficulties are given in a scale of 7, 1 being the easiest and 7 being the toughest:

- **Episode 1 is 1/7, and has 9 stages.**
- **Episode 2 is 2/7 and has 9 stages.**
- **Episode 3 is 3/7 and has 9 stages.**
- **Episode 4 is 5/7 and has 9 stages.**
- **Episode 5 is 6/7 and has 9 stages.**

Story mode is specific to the Dreamcast port.

0.1.1.2 REMIX MODE

The remix mode begins with three levels: Easy, Normal, Arcade. Upon clearing the Arcade mode (including the Alpha stage) on one credit, you will open the Advance level. If you can get at least 21M before the 20th stage, you will get an extra final stage called the "Alpha stage." Clearing this stage will reward you with the true ending. Before choosing a course, you can also choose your idol; each Idol has its own musical theme, so Idol selection is mostly about choosing your favorite song to play with.



- Easy mode is 1/7 difficulty and has 10 stages.
- Normal is 3/7 difficulty and has 15 stages.
- Arcade is 5/7 difficulty and has 20 stages: if you can get at least 21M before the 20th stage, you will open the Alpha stage.
- Advance is 7/7 difficulty and has 20 stages: if you can get at least 21M before the 20th stage, you will open the Alpha stage.

Remix mode is specific to the Dreamcast port. It features random photos of natural landscapes instead of the Idols' images, and has the "Secret bonus" scoring method.

0.1.1.3 BONUS TRACK MODE

Bonus Track Mode is basically the arcade version (Doki Doki Simple mode), but with the added "Secret bonus" method of scoring. In this mode, you are shown the Idols' images instead of landscapes, and the Secret bonus is reset every 5 stages (out of 15). Its difficulty is 4/7.

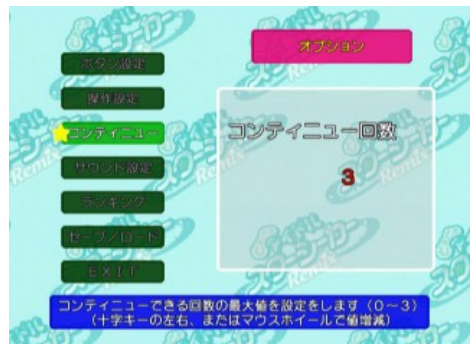
0.1.2 OPTIONS MODES

These modes cover the extra features, options and "omake" (bonus gifts, more or less).

0.1.2.1 OPTIONS

These modes cover the extra features, options and "omake" (bonus gifts, more or less).

- Change button configuration
- Volume
- Number of continues



- **Audio balance**
- **Records**
- **Save/Load**
- **Exit**

0.1.1.2 DEMO MODE

The Demo mode option will play a short movie explaining how to play the game.

0.1.1.3 BONUS MATERIAL MODE

The Bonus Material mode has three menus. From top to bottom, they are:

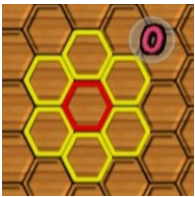
- **Gallery mode**
- **BGM menu**
- **sketches mode**

The first two are opened by clearing the Story mode or Arcade mode, and the latter by clearing Advance mode and the Bonus track mode.

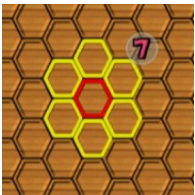
1.0 BASIC MECHANICS

The two fundamental things to know about the game are how to find stars and how the timer works. Once you know these, you can complete the game on one credit by simply being very fast and precise. Let's analyze these two aspects then.

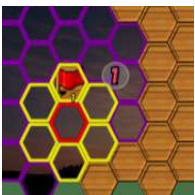
1.1.1 STAR SEEKING



In Doki Doki, all of the stages are divided into hexagonal panels. You control a "scanner" that is also hexagonal in form, and is composed of one central hexagon and one hexagon on each of its sides. To the right of the scanner you have a variable value, which states how many stars are hidden below the panels covered by your scanner. This means that, if there aren't any stars under your scanner, the value will be "0", and the surrounding panels will also flash.



If your value is 7, all panels scanned have stars.



Once you know where a star is hidden, you have to place a flag on it: this is done by moving the central hexagon of the scanner to the star's location and pressing the B button.

After the flag has been set, keep the central hexagon of your scanner on top of the flagged hexagon and press A. This action will remove the panel and reveal the star. Now, if you haven't placed any flags, you can use this function for another purpose: clearing the screen of star-less panels. This is done by simply by moving your central hexagon to a starless panel and pressing A. The panel will be removed and you won't have to remember if the panel is hiding a star or not. If there aren't any stars under your scanner ("0" value) you can press A and uncover all 7 panels.

This implies that, unless you're playing for points and thus applying for the secret bonus, the best thing you can do is look for "0" zones and uncover more panels with one move. This is especially useful if you can work on borders. The scanner is not rigid and, if focused on borders and angles, can be reduced in size (down to 4 hexagons). In many cases it is easy to find 4 starless panels at the angled corners of the game board.

1.1.2 TIME

Now, since this is an arcade game, you don't have an infinite time to clear a stage. There is a timer located on the left-hand side of the screen (right if you're the second player) that will tell you how far you are from the "game over" screen. If you are slow in your star seeking action when playing Story and Original arcade mode and allow your time to fall below the "change" line (fig.ssd03) you will receive an image of the Idol girl telling you to be faster when you've cleared the level. For each star you find you will get an extra second, but for placing a flag on a panel that does not contain a star and uncovering it you will lose two seconds from the timer. As explained in the 1.2 section, your time increase will be higher than one second if you do chains. Last but not least, each stage lasts around one minute, longer or shorter depending on the pace and the amount of time you get back for finding stars. Now, let's cover the other aspects of the game.

1.2 SCORE MECHANICS

Most of your score will come from two related aspects: the No Miss bonus and the Secret bonus. The remaining portion of your score will come from the time and chains bonuses. Let's start by teaching you about chaining.

1.2.1 CHAINS AND TIME

Chaining is pretty simple, once you're sure you've found 5 stars, you move the center of the scanner to any one of them and press A. While the star is being revealed, quickly find other stars and place flags before the star has been fully revealed to create a chain. In this example, if you find a 6th star while the second and third stars are being revealed, you can place a flag on its location and extend the chain to 6 stars. The score reward for chaining is simple: you are given points equal to the sum of the



chained stars multiplied by 500, or:

$$N(N+1)/2 \times 500 \quad N = \text{number of chained stars}$$

Chains are also very good for your time bonus, you are given extra seconds for your chains according to this principle: for a chain of up to four stars, you get a cumulative x2 per star (4 stars: $4 \times 2 = 8$, thus 1 second x 8, or 8 seconds). The value will increase by 1 for every 4 extra stars in the chain. This means that with a chain of 5 stars, you will get a +3 bonus for the fifth star, 1 second x 11 or 11 seconds.

Here is a guide to time bonuses:

- **1-4 stars: +2 to multiplier per star**
- **5-8: +3 to multiplier per star**
- **9-12: +4 to multiplier per star**
- **13-16: +5 to multiplier per star**

And so on. With 15 chained stars you would get a "x51" multiplier: almost the entire stage time!

Now, the other simple aspect of scoring is time. A different time bonus is given at the end of the stage depending on the stage you've completed and the remaining time. This value is equal to a fraction of the remaining time, meaning that if you complete the stage with half of the time still at your disposal you will get half of the bonus. For exact values, please refer to this table:

STAGE	POINTS All modes/Arcade and Advance mode
1	100k/72k
2-10	72k/48k
11-19	48k/36k
20	36k/24k
Alpha	50k

1.2.2 NO MISS BONUS

Not surprisingly, the No Miss Bonus is obtained by clearing the stage without making any mistakes. There are two types of mistakes:

A) Place a flag on a star-less panel and then remove said panel. A big red X will appear and you will lose some time. The amount of time lost follows the chains principle, so if you place a series of wrong flags, you can easily doom yourself to defeat. Be careful! The Idol's animation will indicate her pain, as she will be struck by lightning. Don't hurt her with silly mistakes!

B) Remove a panel with a star WITHOUT placing a flag first. This will cause the star to

be revealed, but the panel to remain. Not only that, but if you've removed panels near the incriminated one, they will be put back again (in a radius of 5 hexagons). The star will appear as a "shadow" on the panel, and you will still be forced to place a flag before it will be revealed. The Idol's animation will be that of surprise, and she will make a gasping noise.

The No Miss bonus is progressive in value, but it will be reset if you make a mistake. The formula is this:

$$1*100k+...+N*100k=N(N+1)/2*100k=N(N+1)50k$$

Since the bonus is rewarded on a cumulative basis, you will see "No miss bonus: 100k...N*100k" according to the number of stages in a row you've cleared with a No Miss.

For instance, if you get the No Miss bonus on stages 1 to 14, miss on 15, then get the bonus again from 16 to Alpha. You will get:

$$14(14+1)/2*100k+0+6(6+1)/2*100k=12,6M$$

Note that the counter resets after stage 14 and began cumulating again as the final six stages were completed without missing any stars.

If you get all of the No Miss bonuses from stage 1 to Alpha, the bonus is:

$$21(21+1)/2*100k=23,1M$$

As you can see, the No Miss bonus can be considerably large and screwing up can really damage your score! A final consideration: it's better if you learn to consistently hit the No Miss bonus before starting to play for Secret bonus. It's also better to be fast and do small chains if you're not absolutely sure of the stars' positions.

$$N(N+1)/2$$

1.2.3 SECRET BONUS

This bonus only exists on the remixed DC version. If you get good, you will understand how to find stars without removing panels. If you can clear a stage without removing star-less panels, you will get this bonus. Unlike the No Miss bonus, this source of points isn't cumulative, and doesn't get reset if you don't get it on a given stage.

This means that you can avoid going for the secret bonus on stages you're not confident with without being penalized. This is very useful on stages you're not confident with! The bonus per stage is simple to compute:

$$N*100$$

For instance, in the previous example, where you got a miss on stage 15, you also lost the Secret bonus. If you would have gotten the secret bonus on all possible

stages, your bonus score would have been:

$$(1+\dots+14)*100k+0+(15+\dots+21)*100k=21,6M$$

With a good stage 15, it would have been:

$$(1+\dots+21)*100k=23,1M$$

As you can see, skipping one stage for secret bonuses isn't a big issue, which is a good way to balance its tricky nature (trust me, it requires a lot of practice to consistently get it).

Once we've covered all the scoring opportunities and the basic mechanics, it's time to learn a few tricks to help you play the game as it was meant to be played.

2.0 ADVANCED MECHANICS

These are the techniques that you will need to master if you want to consistently complete the game and get good scores.

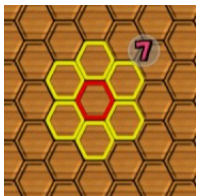
2.2.1 QUICK SCANNING

This is the first thing you should learn to do. It's a pretty simple technique: you have to learn to scan the field very quickly, so you will be able to get a quick idea on stars' positioning. This technique, combined with others, will also make you save time, which is a fundamental aspect of the game, especially on some stages. Performing scanning is easy; start from the upper-left angled corner and press the joystick downward to scan three columns at a time all the way to the bottom of the game board. When you reach the bottom of the board move the scanner to the right by three columns and continue scanning from the bottom to the top. A very useful variant consists of scanning one column at a time, knowing that the other two columns are star-less. This is especially useful in fully-random stages, as you can scan a column (knowing the other two are star-less) and easily mark all of its stars.

2.2.2 DIFFERENTIAL SCANNING



This is tricky to explain, so let's start with an example. Say you are in a corner and you know that there are 4 stars in the four scanned hexagons (since you can only scan 4 panels from the corner).



Move to the upper-right, and from this location you can scan 7 panels.

If, in this location you now get a "7" as the value, this means that there are 3 more stars in the three extra panels you've just added to your scanner: obviously, if you scan three new panels (without stopping to scan the first 4) and you get three new stars, the newly highlighted panels will have stars. This trick is very useful in Advance mode, but also in all other modes. It has variants, of course, but what you really must pay attention to is that you're comparing the number of previously scanned panels to the number of newly scanned panels to get a number of stars equal to the added number of panels.

2.2.3 ALTERNATE SCANNING

This is a variant of differential scanning that works in a slightly different way, hence the different chapter. Basically, this is a method to help avoid getting cornered by stars which are close each other and keep giving you a value of "1" because of their proximity. The basic idea is this: if there are stars in a column, or a row, or even a diagonal, and there's one panel of distance between them (like: star-nothing-star), you will get a value of "1" if scan around them using every edge of the scanner except for the central row. If you use the central row of the scanner and have the star-less panel in the middle, you will have a value of "2." This is very useful on some specific stages that have alternate stars in a row (or column), since it will resolve the problem of not knowing what to do when the constant value of an area is "1."

2.2.4 DYNAMIC CHAINING

As we already mentioned, if you start a chain and put flags on the correct panels when the chain hasn't ended yet you can extend the chain. This is a useful technique when dealing with speed-based stages, which are usually focused on getting an ongoing chain to quickly clear the stage and avoid running out of time. It is also very useful on completely random stages, and when used along with quick scanning it can grant you some extra (and useful) time.

Now that we know all the basic techniques, we can analyze all of the various modes and stage types.

3.0 STAGES

Of course, your goal is to find the stars. The basic idea is that the game mixes a few different types of stages, with every stage being more difficult than its predecessor. Another element is, however, highly subjective: you can develop a preference or an idiosyncrasy to a type of stage. In my personal experience, I have found that type 5 (see below) can be very difficult in some cases (example: stage 19 of advance mode). Let me explain the various types:

3.1 TYPES OF STAGES

The stages and their types are based on the combination of two principles: distri-

bution of stars and pace. The former principle is based on how stars are distributed, i.e. in a more or less organized (patterned) way; the latter on how fast you need to be to clear the stage. Most of the time, you get mixed types: for instance, stage 1 is always A type (1,C), i.e. stars are random and their number is not too high, on a relatively dense field. They're listed with this principle: the first type is one extreme, the second one is the complementary type of the first one; the third type is the logical combination of the two.

3.1.1 DISTRIBUTION TYPES

The distribution types are based on how stars are distributed. The basic idea is that distribution can be completely random, or completely ordered (patterned). If you combine the two types, you get the third type, which has small patterns randomly distributed on the screen. Their common aspect is randomness: even if the stars are completely patterned, the pattern will be random, for instance: on stage 5 of Arcade mode, you can have 4 possible figures, but you can be sure, once you understand the pattern, that it is always the same. They're marked with numbers (1,2,3).

3.1.1.1 TYPE 1 ("RANDOM BASIC")

This stage is simple: random disposition of stars, not too many of them. Nothing mind-boggling, regardless of the stage. The basic idea is that every star is random, there are no true patterns.

3.1.1.2 TYPE 2 ("RANDOM PATTERN")

This is simple or incredibly difficult, depending on stage and memory. Basically, you get a random pattern: stars are organized in a figure thus allowing you to quickly place flags and do big chains if you can recognize the figure. If you don't, it can be very tricky. The basic idea is that the entire set of stars is random in its structure, but all stars are structured together.

3.1.1.3 TYPE 3 ("RANDOM PATTERNED")

This can be thought on later stages. The basic idea is that you have basic groups of stars that are random, and not single stars. For instance, you can thus have two columns of stars (in fixed points) and 2 random triplets of stars in other places. The idea is that you have a few subsets of patterned stars to make the whole stages, but these subsets are randomly distributed.

3.1.2 PACE TYPES

The pace types are organized by how fast the stages are meant to be. The idea is that the ratio "stars/hexagons" can be low or high, and the time to clear it is thus proportional to this ratio. If you combine the two types, you will have a type with a low time value, and a high ratio. Their common aspect is time reward: the higher the

ratio, the lower the time reward for finding stars (and the longer the chains are meant to be, to be safe).

3.1.2.1 TYPE A ("QUICK STAGE")

This type is pretty simple. You need to quickly find the few stars around, you always get back more time than the standard, and chains will usually avoid any time-related problems. In this stage you can be very fast because every star will give you back a lot of time.

3.1.2.2 TYPE B (" SLOW STAGE")

There aren't a huge number of stars in type B stages but the field is denser than in Type A. The number of stars can occasionally be somewhat high (up to 70), but the hexagons' density doesn't get high enough to cause major problems. The idea is you don't need to be as fast, but since there are a lot of stars, you need to do at least small chains to ensure your progress.

3.1.2.3 TYPE C ("DENSE STAGE")

Type C stages can be nightmarish. There are many stars in a very dense stage, so your clearance speed depends on how quickly you can find all the stars (or create a very long chain). It's more or less easy to find stars, so the time decreases very quickly. Long chains and quick clears are the key to victory.

3.2 A GUIDE TO MODES AND STAGES

In this section I'll give a brief description of stages by classifying them from a typological point of view and giving a few hints.

3.2.1 STORY MODE

Stages in story mode are actually simple as they have more or less the same progression. It can be argued that on some episodes there are small differences, but I'll simply list Episode 1's types to give an idea. The differences among episodes are only related to difficulty.

1-1 type (1,A)	2-1 type (1,A)*	3-1 type (1,A)
1-2 type (1,C)	2-2 type (2,C)	3-2 type (1,B)
1-3 type (1,B)	2-3 type (1,B)	3-3 type (1,C or B)

*On Episode four, you just have to put the flag in the center; it is an example on the Secret bonus.

One note on story mode: the last two episodes, 3-2 and 3-3, can be tricky if you're not too fast, but for the others, the difficulty is not exactly the same as the Arcade mode. Good scores are above 9M (All No Miss and Secret Bonus).

3.2.2 REMIX MODE

Remix mode is divided into four levels. I will list the types directly:

3.2.2.1 EASY MODE

1 type (1,A)	2 type (1,A)	3 type (1,A)	4 type (1,B)	5 type (2,B)
6 type (1,A)	7 type (1,C)	8 type (1,A)	9 type (1,C)	10 type (2,B)

3.2.2.2 NORMAL MODE

1 type (1,A)	2 type (1,A)	3 type (1,A)	4 type (1,B)	5 type (2,B)
6 type (1,A)	7 type (1,C)	8 type (1,A)	9 type (1,C)	10 type (2,B)
11 type (1,A)	12 type (1,C)	13 type (1,A)	14 type (1,B)	15 type (1,B)

3.2.2.3 ARCADE MODE

1 type (1,A)	2 type (1,A)	3 type (1,A)	4 type (1,B)	5 type (2,B)
6 type (1,A)	7 type (1,C)	8 type (1,A)	9 type (1,C)	10 type (2,B)
11 type (1,A)	12 type (1,C)	13 type (1,A)	14 type (1,B)	15 type (2,B)
16 type (1,C)	17 type (1,B)	18 type (1,A)	19 type (1,B)	20 type (3,B)
Alpha type (1,B)				

3.2.2.4 ADVANCE MODE

1 type (1,A)	2 type (3,B)	3 type (1,A)	4 type (1,B)	5 type (3,B)
6 type (2,B)	7 type (1,C)	8 type (1,A)	9 type (1,C)	10 type (2,B)
11 type (2,B)	12 type (1,A)	13 type (1,B)	14 type (1,A)	15 type (2,B)
16 type (1,C)	17 type (1,C)	18 type (1,A)	19 type (1,C)	20 type (3,B)
Alpha type (1,B)				

3.2.3 BONUS TRACK MODE

Bonus Track Mode is based on the normal mode of the arcade game, but with the secret bonus.

1 type (1,A)	2 type (1,A)	3 type (1,A)	4 type (1,B)	5 type (2,B)
6 type (1,A)	7 type (1,C)	8 type (1,A)	9 type (1,C)	10 type (2,B)
11 type (1,A)	12 type (1,C)	13 type (1,A)	14 type (1,B)	15 type (1,B)



Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas - PS2

J.R. Freeman

Minutes seem like days. The clock seems to slow with each passing tick. Carl Johnson, the main character in last year's Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, is crouched in the bushes alongside the Los Santos highway just off the southbound exit ramp outside of "Idlewood", a rival gang neighborhood. I'm sitting there right next to him. There is a billboard across the way up above him, too far away for me to read. Birds fly across the scene. Traffic gets on and off the highway. The sun has just risen, and the sky is a light yellowish-orange, pure white on the horizon. CJ is crouched in the bushes taking aim with a hunting rifle. My breath quickens as a car approaches and CJ steadies his aim with my help. Looking over his shoulder, we aim the rifle at the approaching car, a Glendale I think, and take a shot at the driver through the windshield.

The glass cracks but the car speeds off. I missed my shot.

"That's okay." I think to myself. "Another car will come along in a moment; I'll hit the driver this time."

Part of the draw to San Andreas, and the Grand Theft Auto games in particular,

is that it is really a lot of smaller games within one game, and it gives you enough room to make your own game as you go along. Sometimes I camp out on the side of a major highway with just a hunting rifle, not a sniper because those have scopes and make it too easy, and just sit there waiting for a car to come along. I then take my best shot at hitting the driver. Sometimes I miss, sometimes I don't.

Sometimes I find myself swiping a BMX bike from someone and riding it all the way up to the tallest point in the game, the summit of Mt. Chiliad, then ramping my bike off of the side. As I fall, the screen blurs more and more as the bike picks up speed, making it difficult to land properly - properly as in not falling off of the bike halfway down the mountain and killing myself. I've landed it once, I think. The first time I tried it. I haven't been able to land it since then.

Sometimes I find myself wandering about one of the many small towns that dot the landscape, just taking in the local color and seeing the sights. At times like that I feel like a tourist, like I'm on vacation. I'll find myself wandering in a given direction until I hit a body of water, usually the ocean, at which point I'll swim out a ways. Bobbing up and down with

the current I feel very small. Many of the things I find myself enjoying about the game actually have little to do with the "game" portion of it. I find that beautiful.

Back to CJ, still crouched with rifle in hand. I watch the cars pass on by until I look up and see something. Small, black little blips of people are crossing the overpass. I can see their heads and upper bodies just barely, outlined against the bright, early morning sky. They are walking along, minding their own business, content to live out their days in the background of this grand epic that I paint for myself. Seeing them from so far away they almost look like ants. CJ and I move the targeting reticule of the rifle up and over them.

We shoot. And miss, the first few times at least. Then a tall one goes down. I don't really see him (or her, it's hard to tell from here) fall; they just blip out. I know that they are lying over there behind the low concrete wall of that overpass, somewhere on the sidewalk, in a pool of blood. However, I can't see them and thus cannot see the weight of the situation.

We move the reticule over a bit and shoot again. Then again, and again.

The other part of the draw to San Andreas is that it's not really a game at all, it's an experience to be had. Some said that Grand Theft Auto 3 revolutionized everything, or that it almost did, as if it was even trying to. Grand

Theft Auto 3 simply tried to create an experience, not a game, which a person could partake in and enjoy. You don't have to play videogames to enjoy a game like Grand Theft Auto 3, much to the chagrin of some of the more "hardcore", and that is exactly what makes it so special.

San Andreas simply paints a more complete portrait of what Grand Theft Auto 3 attempted, and what Vice City ultimately failed to do, creating a more worthwhile experience in the process - worthwhile in the sense that you never feel like you're wasting time. When I pick up the controller I know I'm not just sitting there in my room staring at my television. I'm in the great state of San Andreas, I'm playing a role sometimes, or being an observer if I please. It isn't so much a "game" as it is a framework to what happens when you interact with it. The "game" portion of it merely provides a context for this interaction.

It isn't that I'm shooting people on an overpass with a hunting rifle that's so interesting, it's that I was doing one thing one moment and then something else the next. The transition between moments is smooth and fluid - natural feeling. The cars and the people and the gun are all inconsequential here. It could just as easily be a medieval fantasy setting where I'm trying to shoot fish in a stream with a bow and arrow, and then look up and notice the birds in the trees.

Now I'm in a car, a muscle car called a Buffalo, and I'm driving north, away from all the problems that plagued me in Los Santos. Away from all the gangbanging, double crosses, and crooked cops. I'm leaving it all behind, radio blaring Skynyrd's Free Bird, flying down the highway.

The orange dusk of the evening sky gradually turns a dark blue, and then black, as I enter Red County. In my



Buffalo with Carl at the helm we see a dirt path and drive off the main road a bit before coming to a rest in a clearing. CJ gets out and through my control looks up at the night sky, fresh and clear, completely discordant from the thick, pollution filled skyline of Los Santos. There is a new moon out. A new start. I equip the hunting rifle even though I know there aren't any animals in the forests. I have heard rumors of Big Foot though, so it doesn't hurt to be prepared.

When you equip the hunting rifle, or any weapon for that matter, and press R1 to target, if there is no perceived threat in your immediate vicinity then a reticule will show up rather than auto targeting someone. The camera zooms in a little with some weapons; it zooms in a lot with the hunting rifle. You can move around while targeting too, which is a nice addition to the series that you couldn't do before, and it makes the game feel that much more tangible.

Moving, looking, and aiming your gun at just anything is a much-needed commodity for this type of game. Surprisingly it wasn't a feature in the last game. When you create a world as big as this it is important to make it as immersive to the player as possible. That's the impression the game gives me. That the world is there for me to fall into and lose myself in. San Andreas offers many new gameplay tweaks that accommodate this line of thinking.

This iteration in the series is also the first to allow complete control of the in-game camera. You move it with the right analog stick on your Dual Shock PS2 Controller™, and it makes the game world come alive so much more. Walking and looking at the same time is almost like playing Shenmue 2, if Shenmue 2 were about crime and the total disregard for human life. Controlling the camera is



important to the experience, though, as anyone who has ever played Shenmue 2 would know.

Walking through the woods proved uneventful; however, we do come across a small town, one of the aforementioned many that dot the vast landscape. I unequip the hunting rifle for now and climb from a dumpster to the top of the building it is sitting next to. As I squat near the edge, I equip the hunting rifle again and ponder why the series didn't feature the ability to climb over anything in the environment until now.

How did people ever put up with not being able to climb over anything? In the last two games you could only jump over obstacles. This led to a more restrictive world in terms of areas could be accessed. It made people more creative in getting to these inaccessible areas, yes, but ultimately was one of the artificial feeling barriers that kept the game from feeling more alive. It is possible that people put up with such limitations because they could see what the games suggested, which hasn't actually started coming to a more full realization until now.

As I watch the people of this small country town go about their nightly business, I realize that San Andreas is just the beginning of something much bigger. Two people stop to talk to each other at the corner of the block while in the background a police Ranger, a police fashioned SUV that you see quite a bit in

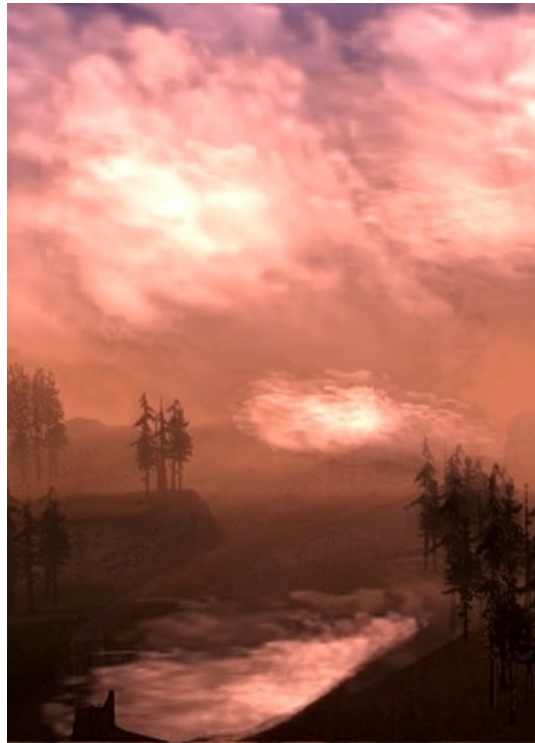
the countryside, chases a Harley look-a-like down the freeway.

I press R1 with the hunting rifle and my view zooms in. I track the car chase down to the corner of the building I'm currently sitting on top of. The motorcyclist cuts around the building and onto the sidewalk, narrowly missing the talking couple, who now cower in fear after having had a near death experience, while the chasing police Ranger plows through and running them both over in one motion, finishing off what the motorcyclist had taunted them with.

The chase continues down the road as I sit there and focus on the two people lying on the sidewalk. A small crowd soon gathers around them. Just a moment ago they were talking about the trifles of their daily lives and now they lay before me and everyone else around in a pool of blood that slowly spreads outward. What is compelling is that I know these aren't real people I'm looking at, they are just numbers running inside a program. Nothing more than simple geometrical shapes fashioned to look vaguely like real people would look, or at least how one would expect real people to look.

I keep staring all the same, though, because if I don't who else will? In this facsimile of a world based on reality I am the only thing in here that carries real emotion, real weight to the situations I create. It is easy to forget this and lose myself but I always come crashing back to this realization when I see two people that look exactly like the recently deceased among the crowd of onlookers, gathered around the bodies. That's when I realize it's time to move on.

So what was that big realization I was almost on the verge of experiencing a moment ago before all of this drama happened? If San Andreas is a picture of something larger then what is this larger



something? This bigger portrait that I am only able to glimpse at here and there, as if through the fog that develops off of the coast of San Fierro, San Andreas, or in the Back O' Beyond in the early morning hours. I'm missing something, I know it.

Moving on. I hop back down onto the dumpster and off the building, putting my hunting rifle away in the process, and start down the street on foot. Walking, I realize that San Andreas shares a trait common in a growing trend among many American game developers: It tries to offer freedom over liberty. Tim Rogers touches on this in his Astro Boy review from insertcredit.com, and probably explains it better, but bear with me.

See, the Japanese would design a game based around the concept of giving the player liberty to play around in the game world. Games like Metal Gear Solid or the new Astro Boy game on for GameBoy Advance explain the rules and



then let you use whichever means are at your disposal to progress in the game. Sure, I can sneak past the guards in MGS but I don't need to. I can kill all of them in a bloody shootout if I want to, the point is the game accommodates both kinds of play, and it accommodates them quite well I might add. Astro Boy is like this too, I could play the whole game without ever using any of Astros special moves. This isn't to say that his special moves are unnecessary, because the game would be very difficult if you attempted to play it like that, but that it's possible.

However, most American, or rather Western, developers try to give the player freedom, real freedom. Freedom in a sense that the players options are limitless and game world knows no bounds. If Metal Gear Solid were designed by an American developer it would probably come out looking more like Splinter Cell. Another game in the action stealth genre,

Splinter Cell ultimately gets caught up in its own conventions. Whenever I play it I get the feeling that the developer is standing over me breathing down my neck, a problem in design that is pleasantly absent from Metal Gear Solid.

The game claims to offer the player freedom but this type of design inevitably leads to restrictions within the game itself, one example of these is not being able to swim when logic dictates that you should. These restrictions became very apparent when Grand Theft Auto 3 came out. It offered an unheard of freedom that gamers had never quite experienced before, but the limits of the world shone through easily.

San Andreas attempts to alleviate some of this by letting you swim, climb, etc. Things you should have been able to do in the previous games but couldn't. While this brings us closer to the freedom end of the spectrum it still has that can of worms. Faults in the in game world logic show up, usually in missions where the designers have intended you do specific tasks their way. The missions start with a scripted set of weapons, the ones the designers want me to use, rather than the ones I already have. True freedom would allow me to use the weapons I've already got even if they may make that particular mission easier. I took the time to acquire them; shouldn't I be able to use them when I need them most? This inherent flaw of the design shows through, and is forgivable to an extent if you enjoy the world the game creates for you as much as I do.

A game like Metal Gear Solid would never cheat like that. Its logic dictates that if the player has a weapon in his inventory he should be able to use it whenever he wants in gameplay. Everything in the game serves to further immerse the player, right down to the in-

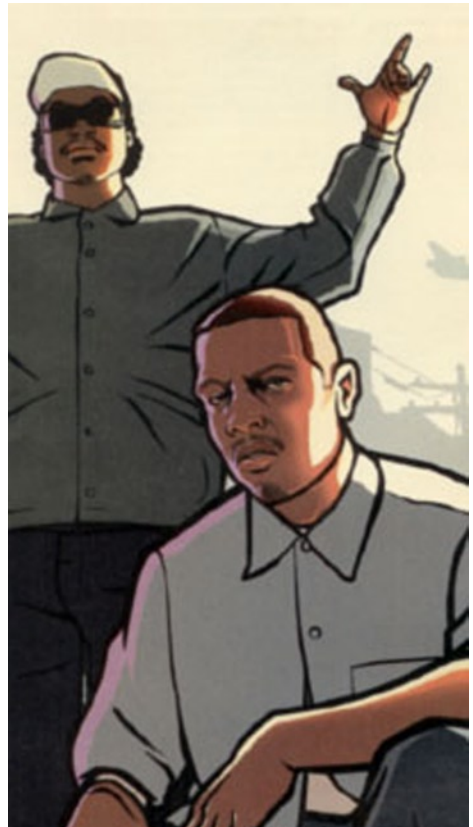


game logic that makes up the boundaries of the environment. When I play MGS I know I'm playing a game in stages, even though at times it doesn't feel like it. Rarely does it jar me from the experience it is attempting to create.

This just means that the designers and developers have to be more clever in their design, and Metal Gear Solid is a shining example in this respect. When I see an instance of GTA breaking its own logic by taking away your weapons for the duration of a mission or not letting you participate in a race because you aren't using the pre-selected vehicle then returning everything to normal when the mission ends, it tells me that the designers just got lazy. Or that they just aren't on the same wavelength as their Japanese counterparts. When there is a noticeable difference in cohesion between the world logic of when a player is doing a mission and when a player is not, it kills the atmosphere a little, which is the last thing this game wants to do.

Earlier I said Grand Theft Auto was not a game, but an experience. Well, I lied right there a bit. Grand Theft Auto is a game. It is a game that tries to be more than a game and at times succeeds gloriously, yet at other times fails miserably. There are times when it greatly satisfies me, and there are others where it almost infuriates me to no end. Yet it still compels me, and after all this I'm still not exactly sure why.

After walking to the end of the street I wait for a passing car to come by. When one does I steal it from its owner and drive for a while. Driving relaxes me in this game, for some reason. It is almost therapeutic. I drive until I reach the coast. After parking on the beach, I get out and walk into the ocean. Swimming out a ways, the sun starts to rise, the light reflecting in the water. Further out, the tide bobs CJ up and down while the sun continues its ascent, causing the night sky to turn lighter and lighter in shade, until eventually turning a light morning blue. I sit there, letting the current carry me, and in these moments the game morphs into an experience again and all is right with the world.



THE MAGAZINE END...
THANK TO OUR WRITERS,
THE WORLD IS SAFE AGAIN.
RIGHT? WRONG?
NO ONE CAN SAY.
BUT AS LONG AS HUMANS
RULE THE WORLD...
THE GAMER'S QUARTER AWAKENING
IS NOT SO FAR AWAY...
IS HUMANKIND TOO LATE
TO AVOID DESTRUCTION?
WHEN THE AMBITIONS OF MANY
DRIVE THE WORLD
TO DESTRUCTION..
TO STOP THIS, THE GAMER'S QUARTER EXIST.
THE GAMER'S QUARTER... GOD'S MESSENGER?
PERHAPS...
MAY BE HUMANKIND IS AT FAULT.
HUMANKIND.
AMBITIOUS, CRUEL, AND RESILIENT.
BUT IT CANNOT BE FORGOTTEN...
THE REAL ENEMY IS NOT THE GAMER'S QUARTER.
HUMANKIND'S REAL ENEMY?
WE'VE SEEN THE ENEMY,
AND IT IS EGM...



IT IS TIME FOR SOMETHING NEW

The **Gamer's Quarter** is a new quarterly publication devoted to offering readers a more **sophisticated** alternative to mainstream gaming magazines. We aim to publish writing that is **not** merely informative but also **insightful**; writing that digs deeper into the potential of the medium of **interactive** entertainment. Inside this magazine you will **not** find exclusive previews, up-to-the-minute news stories, pages of screenshots and cheat codes, or succinct review scores. You **will** find many pages of **thoughtful** criticism and analysis, **entertaining** editorials, and **fresh** perspective on the best games of today and yesterday.



www.gamersquarter.com

Multiplayer

The Gamer's Quarter magazine is a collaborative project between dedicated gamers who don't just play games, but experience them. Rather than sitting in a lonely room plowing through a game just to attach a few numbers and witty quote for the box art, we play the games we want and write about how and why they attach themselves to our hearts and minds in a way that no other form of media is capable of. It is our intent to publish honest, provocative, and entertaining writing which reflects our belief that video games can be more than mere vehicles for entertainment, but also creative, meaningful works.


BOOK™

