

Harvest Moon 3Playstation

Developer: Marucome

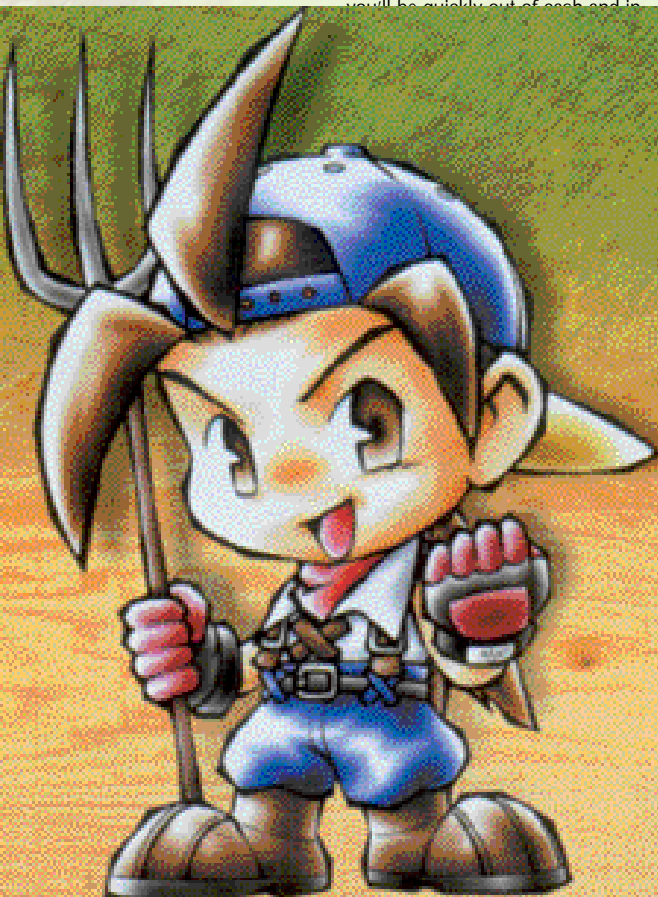
Publisher: Victor

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



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

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



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

stages to survive, but the farming aspect (the heart and soul of the previous chapters) has seen a transplant.

This time the focus is squarely on saving the town and is much more like a traditional RPG in tone, if not in practice. No, you won't fight rampaging hoards of beasts out to slay your livestock or dragons out to burn your crops to the



ground, but the story focuses much more on the people you interact with and your 'quest' to save the town from an evil farming conglomerate run by Kim Basinger (let's see how many of you catch that one).

Still, the lengthy trips to the horse farm or the lake just seem more accurate for a farming community. Everyone has their acreage and that certainly feels correct, if different. There seems to be a larger focus on interaction with other people in the community, something which small towns are famous for. Naturally, the evolution of Harvest Moon to a next generation



platform begets lush backgrounds and a definite step up on the ladder for each of the characters that are rendered, dog included. Also of note: it's apparent that you must 'pitch' your crops and flowers to various townspeople to get the most value from your hard work, again a facet of this title that echoes reality more closely.

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

—Haohmaru

Tales of Destiny 2Playstation

Developer: Namco

Publisher: Namco

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

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

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

The task, initially, is to search for someone who can actually understand this strange woman, and when they do find that person, the fate of Eternia seems as good as sealed. A rift has been developing between the two worlds and is



now eroding the force that holds them together, in a short amount of time, the worlds will collide and that's all she wrote—two out of three clichés present and accounted for, sir.

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



Reed Hershel



Farah Oersted



Keel Zeibel



Meredy



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

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

Still, there are quite a few things that even out that mild excursion into fun and limit TOD2 from breaking out of average range. TP, the points that

allow characters to accomplish special attacks is gravely under abundant—didn't like Rez Evil and it's lack of ammo? Welcome to



the same school of design. Eventually you'll be able to cook food that will allow you to increase your supply of TP (supplementing the gels you can buy for the same effect), but it never seems to be enough. When you're deep in a dungeon and run out of TP and anything that replenishes it, you're boned. Even camping, which you can do at specific points (usually before a dungeon boss), won't bring it back up. Run out and you can only do physical attacks, dooming your party to an early grave.

Graphically, there's very little beyond the excellent opening anime to raise a jaded eyebrow. The world map is dated and foggy, evoking generation one PlayStation comparisons. The characters

have minimal animations and pale next to Breath of Fire IV. The voice acting is sub-par and does little to endear the characters in any effective way.

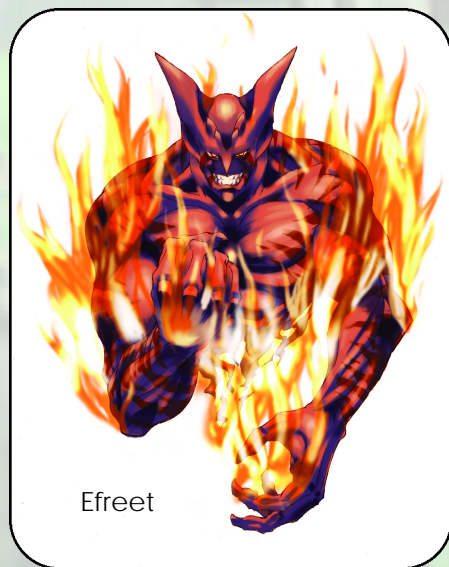
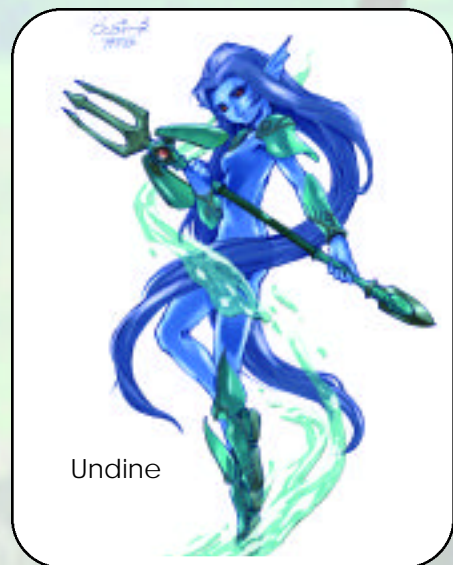
A few great looking towns populate the landscape, but even with that fact, it's a lot like saying "Kodomo's a nice guy, except for A, B, C, D, etc..." You can only take so much mediocrity before you forget the good and just move on.

What you're left with is an average RPG with a good story, great battle system and a host of other qualities



that keep the overall package under the all-important 'must buy' level. If you've played the first Tales of Destiny and enjoyed that, there's a slim chance that this might be right up your alley. For everybody else, though, pursue your destiny elsewhere.

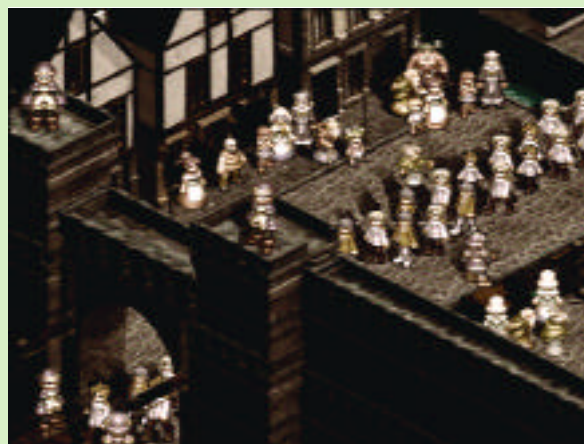
—Kodomo



Growlanser 2Playstation 2

Developer: Career Soft

Publisher: Atlus



In the early stages, you're introduced to Wein, the lead character in what amounts to a very effeminately detailed group of male characters. While not overbearing in design, it is a curious distinction for a strategy RPG to feature such oddly chick-like character designs. However, there seems



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

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

to be a trend towards this type of character style coming from overseas (see: Tidus in Final Fantasy X and Reed in Tales of Destiny 2). In any event, while the character art in Growlanser 2 isn't going to suit everyone's tastes, there is no denying its quality or the strength of the roots from which it was bred.



However odd it may seem, the environments are rendered in such a way that they look stunning in all their hi-res glory, but you can't quite put your finger on what's wrong. The backgrounds are a curiosity in that they are picturesque,

yet oddly stagnant. Torches don't flicker. Shadows are stale and unmoving. The grass and trees don't sway with the breeze (even in a torrential downpour). Despite the weakness (I'm hesitant to admit how long it actually took ECM and I to pick it up, that's how good the backgrounds are. Further proof that a trip to the optometrist might not be a bad idea) Growlanser 2 doesn't seem to suffer much in the presentation department.

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

The real meat and potatoes, however, lay in the excellent interface for combat across various environments. Obviously, your party grows larger and more diverse as time passes – along with your enemies and "field" environments. Be warned, however, to save at every opportunity, as you're likely to lose battles along the way. The best way to describe the battle system is 'real-time, turn-based' that doesn't feel as though it exists on turns but succeeds in cleverly masking it. It's quite intuitive and among the better and more user friendly systems that I've come across. It feels as

though Final Fantasy Tactics is an ancestor from which this evolved. There are random battles, but these aren't of the annoying 'every 15 second' variety. Rather they exist in points along the route(s) that you choose to travel and can serve as a convenient means to level up, rather than something that would sooner push you to suicide than to play lest you face another battle (I'm still recovering from Skies of Arcadia).

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

One can only hope that Atlus Japan turns around from their recent struggles (unforgivable that titles like Maken

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

—Haohmaru



Tiny ToonsGame Boy Advance

Developer: Treasure

Publisher: Conspiracy

An Insider's Look at GBA Development

Publisher: All right. GBA is a raging success—what have you got for me?

Developer: Give us 12-14 months...

Publisher: 12-14 months...

Developer: Yes! Just a year and change and we can have a game that will bring tears to your eyes and riches to your vaults—games that will make the best that 16-bit had to offer pale in comparison!

Publisher: I see...and how much will this run me?

Developer: That's the best part! Unlike the typical seven figure console game price tag and the complete lack of quality that typically creates, we can get this puppy to you for a cool half million dollars! Can you believe it! Just \$500,000!

Publisher: I see...well, what else do you got?

Developer: Um, what are you looking to spend?

Publisher: Lessee <fishes around in pockets>: I've got a \$1.35, a screw and half a roll of Life Savers...oh, and a year doesn't work for me—I need it in 6 months, tops.

Developer: <crestfallen>, well, I do have this <points to moldering copy of The Ooze 2>—you can have this in six months...even though the graphics are terrible and the gameplay is non-existent.

Publisher: Great! I'll have the contract over to you first thing.

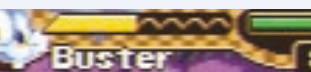
This, in a nutshell, is what occurs between developers and publishers everyday in the cutthroat world of GBA development. Painfully constricted dev times and budgets from 20-40% of a similar console-developed title—it makes 3DO's puppy mill seem like a big-budget, spare no expense, hit factory in comparison.



Sludgewerks

In any event, most GBA games will be 6-month affairs ("As it was on GameBoy Color, So it Shall be On GameBoy Advance"), with lots of 16-bit shovelware.

However, buried amidst these harried, 'get 'em to the market now' slapdash efforts, there will be developers that can take a lump of coal (their dev contracts) and make them into shiny, perfectly faceted diamonds. Castlevania was the shining star of the initial GBA class, but Tiny Toons Busters Bad Dream might just be valedictorian of the class of late '01.



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

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

Danger: Hyperbole Ahead

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

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

Buster Busts Em' Up

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

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

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

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



Treasure Bass Fishing

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

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



Holding Back...A Little

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

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

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

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

—ECM



Ooga Booga

.....DREAMCAST

Developer: Visual Concepts

Publisher: Sega



I know it's not all just me...right?

Anti-Psychotic

Anyway, all delusions aside, what you're looking at is the latest game from Visual Concepts: a company that's seen it's fair share of hype (and then some) since the introduction of games like the NFL and NBA2K series on Dreamcast almost 2 years ago. Which makes the omission of Ooga Booga a bit harder to

fathom...guess with the near-complete implosion of all things DC in the past 3 months (not like I wanted to play Half Life anyway) I shouldn't be terribly surprised after all.

And since no one has actually been attempting to garner any publicity for this title, there's an excellent chance you have no idea what this game is. Which is OK. After all, that's what we're here for—if the other guys

actually bothered to dig and badger people for this stuff, we'd have nothing to make fun of, and we can't have that, can we?

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

Island Hopping 101

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

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

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

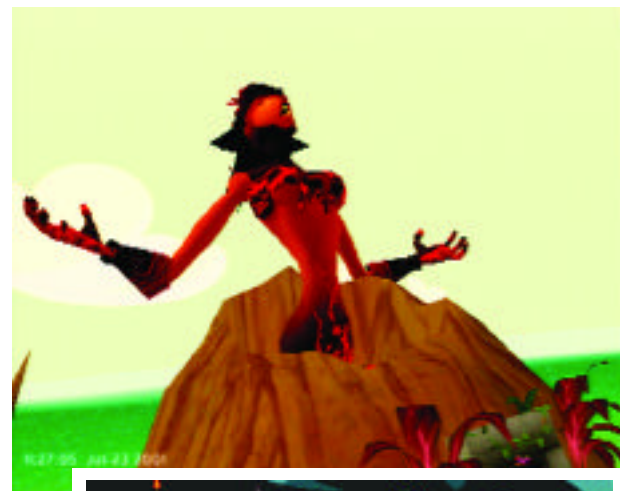


"Wow, it sure is refreshing to see a game like Ooga Booga lavished with praise and affection from all corners of the game magazine biz. I mean everyone could have just as easily covered Gran Turismo 3 again (so what if it's been out for months—what's one more preview: "it's like GT2, but shinier!") or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

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

All joking aside, does it confuse anyone else as to why most magazines focus with laser-guided precision on 6-12 games a year and pretty much push everything else to the side? Maybe the "fringe" wouldn't be so fringe if the





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

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

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

Am I Boaring You?

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

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

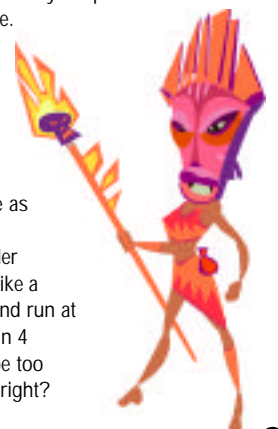
There's a bevy of spell tokens scattered randomly about the island and range from the ultra-useful lightning attack to the more patience-oriented land mine. Other spells include the mighty tornado (which is very sharp-looking, graphically) to a personal thundercloud that rains down lightning bolts on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



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

Sites and Sounds of a Tropical Isle

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



Ooga Booga



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

The only downside perceptible is that OB might level off a bit too soon in

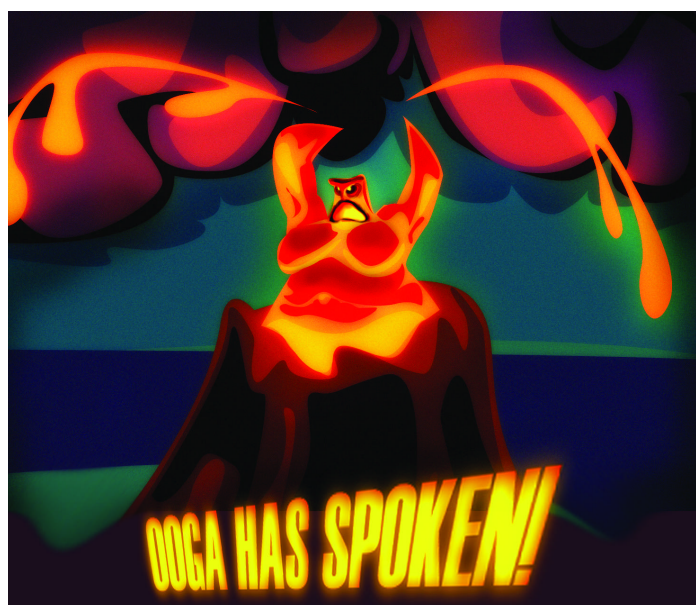
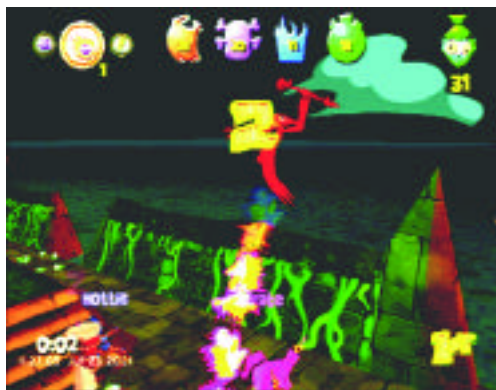
the skill department—there simply doesn't seem to be the depth that you might want from a game you'd want to last for a good couple of months. Sure, you'll have a blast for the first few weeks, but it'll be interesting to see if OB has legs beyond that.



Holiday's Over

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

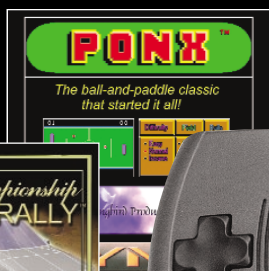
—ECM



RULE THE JUNGLE.

Songbird Productions™

<http://songbird.atari.net>



**ALL NEW
GAMES ON**

NOW!

Songbird Productions • 1736 Chippewa Drive NW • Rochester, MN 55901

TURBO ZONE DIRECT

ALL NEW, FACTORY SEALED
MERCHANDISE.

• **HARDWARE** • **SOFTWARE**
• **PARTS** • **ACCESSORIES**



CALL US!

818-786-5789

VISIT US!

WWW.TZD.COM



DUO



TURBO DUO

