

DREAMCAST

REVIEWED BY:



ALIEN FRONT ONLINE

Developer: Wow Entertainment	# of Players: 1-8
Publisher: Sega	Available: Now

M.S.F.C.

There was a time when Sega fanboys would go on and on about how Namco only existed because they ripped-off Sega's fabulous game ideas (I should know—I was a charter member of the M.S.F.C.: Myopic Sega Fanboy Club). It's been a long time since those heady days, back when we'd get all jacked up on Jolt cola and cruise the local arcades, looking to protect our turf and singing all through, the...wait...no...that's West Side Story...hmmm. Anyway, the moral of this (increasingly pointless) story is that Sega's now exacting some subtle payback in the form of Alien Front Online, Wow Entertainment's newest title and a bona fide Tokyo Wars clone (of course NeoGman keeps ranting in the background that they're both clones of 2600 Combat but I can't hear him, can you?).

For those that haven't played Tokyo Wars, it's a 3D multi-player, arcade-based Combat clo-, err, tank battle game. You cruised around (presumably) Tokyo and blasted the spot out of each other as you would in any self-respecting game involving tanks and wars. It supported up to 8 players linked and ran on (at the time) high-end System 22 arcade hardware.

Running for Office

Like Tokyo Wars, AFO is all about its network play—only this time it isn't via linked arcade cabs, it's via SegaNet. There's also a handy campaign mode (one scenario a piece for humans and mutants), but it's so controller-chucking difficult you'll probably destroy your DC an hour or so after you embark upon it. Seriously, this is excruciatingly difficult stuff, especially for those of us weaned on run and gun affairs—something the campaign mode most certainly is not.

Graphically, AFO is a looker. While it's not living in the high-end 60 fps neighborhood, it's a mostly solid 30 both online and off with nary a shred of slowdown. The alien designs are especially beautiful and some of the backdrops are simply gorgeous—Washington DC, for example, is stunning. Everything in the backgrounds animates brilliantly, and just about everything features destroyable terrain, though I kept wishing I could topple the Washington monument (hey, it's a video game, lighten up patriots) a la Twisted Metal 2's Eiffel Tower.

Latently Obvious

Netplay is all but seamless...at least from what I could see. The caveat is that this could change when thousands of players log on to test their mettle. Good news is that this isn't Quake, speed-wise, so latency should be a nearly non-existent issue. Needless to say, it's probably safe to say that they're won't be too many instances of "where'd that mech go?" like you might find in, say, Daytona USA.

One thing to note: as I mentioned this game is not Quake, so don't expect searing speed and super-fast action. It's a much more deliberately paced affair, and the tanks, for the most part, move like tanks and the mechs move like you might expect a large 50+-ton mech to move, i.e. a lot like your Uncle Ralph after a Thanksgiving dinner in which he consumed most of the turkey and 8-10 gallons of beer. It's a little sluggish, but it gets the job done.

Lock and Load

All in all, this ain't too shabby for those of you that either never got (but really wanted) a console rev of Tokyo Wars or for those of you not quite fast enough to cope with the agility requirements of Quake III and Unreal Tournament. While I can't say it's better than Ooga Booga (it's just not fast and frenetic enough), it's certainly fun in its own right. And for you Namco freaks, it finally gives you a chance to start your own club:

—ECM

ROGER WILCO

AFO is the first game on DC to take advantage of the Seaman microphone to allow players to communicate via voice commands (the game is set to ship with it, so don't go running out to find a copy of Seaman...even if it is really cheap). It's a killer idea, but it's not entirely perfect: the actual voice transmission isn't real-time (which isn't too much of a hassle in a game as slow-paced as AFO) and it is heavily compressed—though it's certainly far from unintelligible. This gimmick alone is sure to guarantee a decent audience for the game, though I'm sure it's going to get very interesting what gets said via this thing (Sega has a handy disclaimer that says they're not responsible for what you hear—smart move).

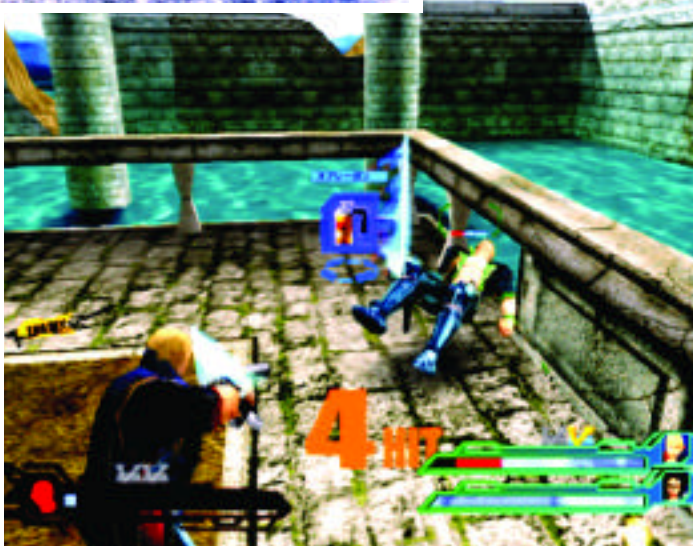




Some people have been describing this as a pseudo—sequel to the Dreamcast's rather poorly received Spawn. "The same but fixed!" they cried. I confess I've never played Spawn so I can't really compare the two. I'm quite sure that if Spawn were nearly as good as this I would have played it, though. This game is really ringing my bell.

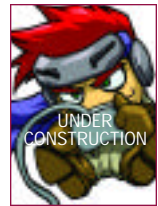
I had planned to give it a miss, but when I saw WASP was on the soundtrack, I had to pick it up. I wasn't even sure what kind of game it was — only that it was gonna have a rocking soundtrack: Megadeth, Halford, Corrosion of Conformity and Entombed are all given top billing. It's strange, then, that two unknowns—Dust to Dust and Cyber-T—are given three and eight tracks respectively, and the headliners are given one each. Considering Sega's financial situation perhaps this is easily explained. The tunes suit the game perfectly, though, so who am I to complain?

The game itself might be best described as a third person over—the—shoulder Quake, in small arenas with gobs of weapons. The camera



HEAVY METAL GEOMATRIX

REVIEWED BY:



Developer: Capcom

of Players: 1-2

Publisher: Capcom

Available: Now

always faces your opponent, but with you in the foreground. It's because of this that it's not often facing the direction you're going. At first I found it frustrating and I was yelling at the game to "Look this way, dammit!" After a few rounds, however, you learn the maps so well that you can tell where you're going with ease. Pressing Y instantly switches the targeting onto the next opponent, a function you learn to appreciate fast when you take on two CPU bosses for the first time as they try to sweep you into a pincer.

Combat has two styles: up—close and long-ranged. Capcom saw fit to lavish the weapons upon us, with some surprising variation. Each weapon has a fierce secondary attack too, usually with poorer aim and consuming more ammunition, but effectively doubling the number of weapons. The weapons cover the entire gamut from swords to traps and mines and rail guns and rocket launchers and laser—guided satellite—dropped bombs o' doom. You can only carry one close combat and one ranged weapon at a time and the ammo is limited so rapid discharge and frequent re—arming is the name of the game. You can let loose a stream of anime—styled six—rocket bursts, pick up and plant some traps or explosive mines, then nail your opponent with a flame—thrower when he falls prey to your dastardly tricks.

The graphics are, as can be expected from a late—released game, stunning. Simon Bisley, who you might remember from such games as Loaded, designed the characters. Every weapon is large and well rendered, the characters even more so, showing a surprising variety for Bisley—perhaps to appeal to Japanese sensibilities. The backgrounds are well presented, looking almost as good (and a lot like)

Soul Calibur, but with wildly varying terrain and destructible environment.

It's not a game for everyone: it's a visceral blaster which proudly shows Capcom's arcade roots. The game makes no apologies for what it is. My criteria for games are quite simple: I likes 'em fast and I likes 'em competent, and Geomatrix delivers. Twelve fighters, fourteen arenas, a rocking soundtrack, perfect control and a camera that rarely misses—definitely the best game I've played in a while.

—NeoGman

DREAMCAST

PREVIEWED BY:



BOMBERMAN

Developer: Hudson

of Players: 1-4

Publisher: Sega

Available: September



Which One of These Things is Not Like the Other?

When can a game look like Bomberman, smell like Bomberman and actually not be Bomberman? Well, if you're one of the myriad Bomberman games released after Saturn Bomberman, you're not a Bomberman game. Now I'm sure that the actual games aren't terribly upset (after all, they are inanimate objects), but I sure as hell am! This franchise used to be one of the best in all of gaming. Chapter after chapter on the PC Engine (funny how those titles were left out in a recent online Bomberman history 'feature'... yeah, that's pretty intelligent) and Super Nintendo helped define Hudson as one of the world's best game producers. Perhaps the downward spiral began when the decision was made to make an anime system as the follow-up to the PC Engine: "let's see, we made our rep on fast-paced arcade-style titles and epic RPG's but I want to try something different—how about a system that's only good for playing lots of anime?" This exec is now working on Square's Final Fantasy games.

So what's the early word on Bomberman Online? Worthy successor to the Bomberman legacy, or yet another 're-interpretation' of what some bonehead thinks a 'nextgen' B-Man should be? After all, the recently released Bomberman on GBA wasn't half-bad (if you can make it out without 1.21 gigawatts of sunlight). The early prognosis? Oh boy...

When 2D Just Isn't Good Enough

First off, you've got all the standard fare, 3D chicanery: fully polygonal characters, arenas, etc. all (surprise!) cel-shaded; plenty of rendered cinemas in between each sequence in the story mode; a nice musical score, etc. The actual characters themselves seem a bit blocky, but that's just nit picking—if there's one game that (used to) epitomize the old saw about gameplay over graphics, it was Bomberman. But how does that saying go? If it ain't broke, don't fix it? Yeah, that sounds about right...

It's NOT Broken DON'T Fix It!

Take a look at the screens scattered around the page. Note how it's in a ¾ perspective. Now, why in the name of all that is holy would you set the perspective like that in a game where knowing precisely where you are from second to second is the difference between life and death?! If you can't tell exactly where you're standing, you can't tell if

you're going to be dead the next instant. And in a game that is pure adrenaline, anytime you add in unnecessary distractions you slow down the experience and take out one of the key elements—Bomberman is a game for people with reflexes of lightning, it is not a game that has more than the most rudimentary strategy that can be executed in a split second—not with 3 other players running around all intent on your demise. It's not like there are many places to hide on a single screen game (there's no such thing as 'camping' in a game of Bomberman).

One last nitpick: while I'll catch hell for it, the use of polygonal characters and their annoying habit of cycling through all their frames of animation before moving slows the actual gameplay speed down dramatically from what many of us are accustomed to. No longer will you careen around the screen after picking up three skates at midnight border crossing velocities. Now everything feels a bit too sedate, and a bit too lethargic... please fix this, we beg of thee! Bomberman is supposed to be 'set your adrenaline on fire' stuff. Right now it's more like wrapping it in a wet blanket.

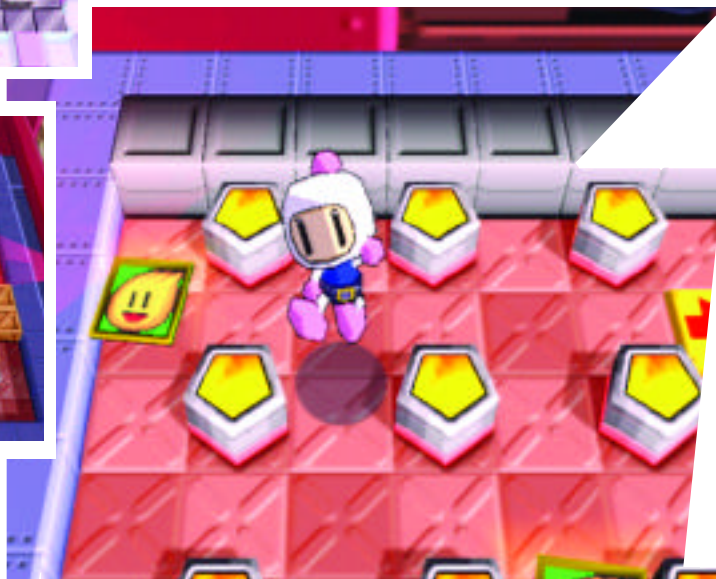
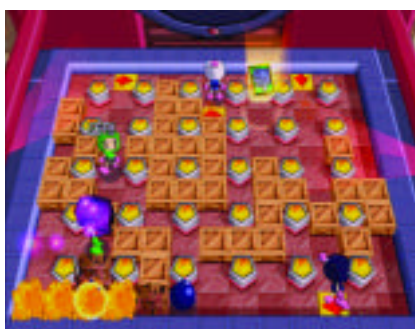


Bombs Away

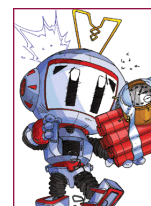
If they don't fix the perspective (which is a lot like hoping that the FF series will rely less on movies as time goes on) this game is a lost cause for anyone that considers themselves a fan. Maybe someday Hudson, the sleeping giant, will

awaken and give us what we really want, but as it is, I'm not holding my breath.

—ECM



REVIEWED BY:



SUPER PUZZLE FIGHTER IIX

Developer: Capcom

of Players: 1-2

Publisher: Capcom

Available: Japan Now

There are basically 3 camps when it comes to Puzzle Fighter: fanatical 'enthusiasts' who will hear nary a harsh word spoken of their precious puzzler; those who would rather drive a corkscrew thru their temple than even look in its general direction; and the mess of us who really don't care either way—myself included.

Essentially, Capcom took Street Fighter & Darkstalkers/Vampire characters, made them all super deformed ("midgety"), and stuck them in a battle against each other to see who is the best at manipulating little blocks of primary colors.

Unlike most puzzle games, the object isn't "3 in a row to clear." 2 mini-gems, joined together, fall at a time. Stack like colors in rows of at least 2x2 and they transform into a large gem.

Here's where it gets messy—you 'crack' the gems by waiting for flashing 'orbs' of the corresponding color to descend and connect with your stack and BLAMMO—the gems explode, sending an attack of 'timer blocks' to your enemy, of varying colors and intensity. (ie. the bigger the gem you built up the more trouble you make for the other guy). Timer blocks are strange devices—a mini-gem in hibernation. Technically you must wait the same amount of rounds as the number plastered on the block for it to emerge from the cocoon and become a beautiful gem, but there are ways around it. There are also diamonds, which remove all gems and timer blocks of whatever color you choose to drop it on.

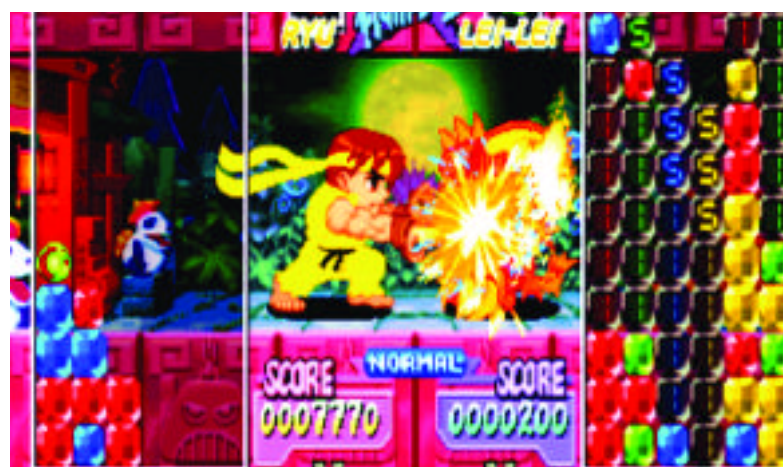
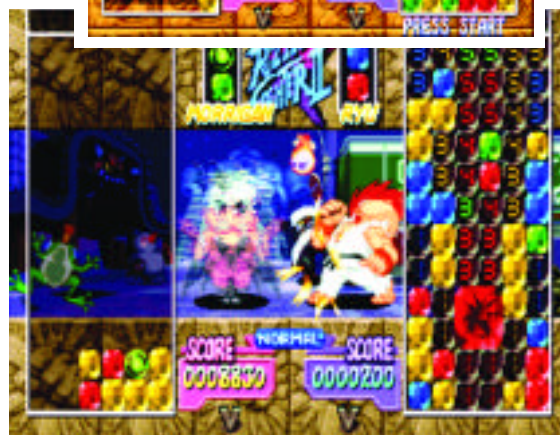
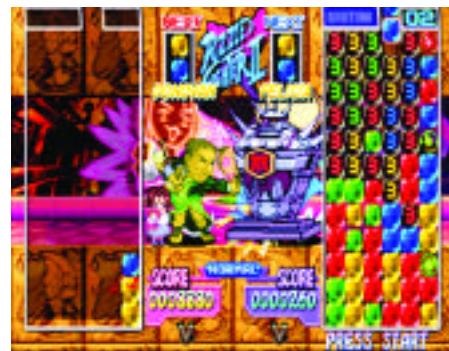
Each of the 8 basic and 4 (?) hidden characters have predetermined patterns for their timer assaults, which you can view before selecting at the, uh, select screen. Some may argue otherwise, but no one character really has an advantage over the others (if you feel masochistic, hold start when selecting a character and all the blocks you drop on the opponent will be the same color. How's that for a challenge?).

And now, after all that explanation of methodology for standard gameplay, I thought I would mention that the DC rev. includes 2 extra play modes: "Y" and "Z" (and here I thought the 'Super' & 'X' were to poke fun at SSF2X). Y puts a Columns-style spin on gameplay, and Z drops you into Tetris Attack mode. This spin on gameplay is more confusing than entertaining.

And for both of you out there who did not know already, the 'for Matching Service' surname attached to many Capcom releases as of late refers to their online play service. Now, before you get excited, it's proprietary, sort of like X-Band and Dwango on the PC from the days of yore—direct dial into Japanese servers, which is impossible from the States. Curses, foiled again!

I've neer been much of a fan of the series, despite it incorporating a few of my favorite things (SF characters, puzzles, SD goodness and puppy dog, err...never mind)—I used to play it in the arcade to stave off boredom while waiting for my little brother to grow weary of 'taking all comers' at [insert latest Capcom fighter] so we could leave. The DC version sports ZERO load times, so it's already conquered the scarcely played Saturn version on my shelf. Puzzle die hards will eat it up (probably) but for me it's just a pretty (and rare) addition to my pit of clutter.

—Pokey



DREAMCAST

REVIEWED BY:



CULDCEPT II

Developer: Omiya Soft

of Players: 1-4

Publisher: Media Factory

Available: Japan Now



Each player (up to four) constructs a deck of cards from a total amount of about 450. These range from monsters and weapons to status effect modifiers (i.e. allowing you to get a roll of '6' without actually rolling the dice; destroying one of a foe's valuable cards, etc.). With these cards you travel around the board and place monsters down on each of the squares to hold down the fort and slow up and frustrate your opponent who must use his own cards to combat your monsters.

ECM: The Art of Fiscal Destruction

Back when I was a pre-teen (still about the same height, <sob>), I used to vent my frustrations by



routinely obliterating the weak; the infirm; my friends in Monopoly, board game of kings. Through a deft combination of iron-fisted asset management and chance dice rolls I was able, time and time again, to put down any low rent comer in no-holds-barred financial combat. It's

been a long time since I've felt such unadulterated joy at reducing someone to utter insolvency and, in at least one instance, tears (sorry Dad, but a capitalist has but one ally—the almighty dollar), which is why I'm currently in lust with Omiya Soft's Culdcept II—a Monopoly meets Magic the Gathering game for the ages.

Foolishly, I skipped playing the Saturn edition of Culdcept. Why? Got me. Even after witnessing a chap on IRC go on and on about the game for ages, I still didn't bother freeing it from its shrink-wrapped tomb. Shortsighted? I've been called worse...

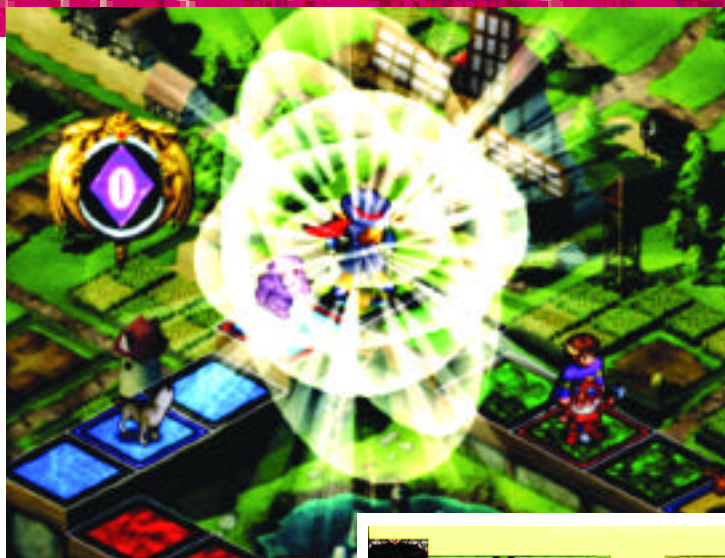
A Little From Column A and a Little From Column B

CII takes all the best elements of Monopoly: hoarding of money (gold, in this case) and property control and Magic the Gathering: monsters, weapons and combat all based on carefully constructed decks of cards. Cards are earned by playing online against other CII players across the globe, which, not surprisingly, mostly reside in Japan (and at least one player in Minnesota—hi Matt!).



Each monster can be upgraded (from your precious reserve of gold), much like upgrading lots in Monopoly from houses to hotels—and some of those monsters are very ugly hotels indeed. As you travel around the board, you'll pass 'Go' and collect a cash reward. The player with the most gold at the end of a set number of rounds wins.





Can't...Stop...Playing

Now I don't know if it's a revenant from my Monopoly days, but I can't get enough of this game. While I've never been one for Magic (mainly because the geek factor terrified me—you think hardcore gamers are nerd-like? You ain't seen nothin', friend), but if it's anywhere near as addictive as CII, I made the right decision by never getting involved.

Best of all, the online play is cheap and plentiful. Sure, you may have to muddle through the game initially by determining which cards do what, but once you get it down, you'll be able to hold your own and show the boys what a gaijin can really do...die...a lot. But at least you'll have fun while you go down in flames.

Solid as a Rock

Graphically and aurally, CII is stunning—super-rich color; brilliant animation on character sprites and a nice mix of 2D and 3D effects. The animated battles between the cards feature all sorts of 3D animations: jaws biting; maces swinging; spells casting, etc. The whole thing looks and feels incredibly slick—it's clear Omiya Soft put a lot of time and a lot of money into making this game tight as a drum.

The BGM, in general, is fantastic and features quite a range of tunes. Oddly, some of the pieces felt a bit too happy and sugary for a game where your ultimate goal is to crush your miscreant of a foe, but on the whole it's well done. I won't be running out to pick up the soundtrack, though (must get Grolanser 2 OST, though!).

Card Captor Culdcept II

One of the best aspects of the game is that as you play you earn better cards for your online deck: as you win matches online, you'll be rewarded with more and better cards which you can then carry into battle with you next time.

Naturally, VMU saves cannot be copied (let's hope they also learned to keep Game Shark type devices locked out, though methinks this sort of game is a bit too much for those simpletons) so duping cards, etc. should hopefully be an idle intellectual concept and not a massive, game ruining problem...Sega.

Lucky Dog

The only overtly negative? Luck seems to play more of a role than it should in a lot of cases. Since the game draws cards for you randomly, you never really know what you're gonna get.

This can be especially frustrating when you keep drawing rats while your friend (err, foe) constantly draws Chimeric Death Machine (OK, so it's not actually a card, but you're with me, right?). This seems to be more of a problem in the one player quest mode, but there's always that element of luck. Then again, Monopoly was always half luck...not that I let anybody ever believe that—including myself.

Buy This Game Now

While you'll need to set up a Dricas account (child's play thanks to any number of websites—just hit Google and enter "set up Dricas account") and you'll also need something akin to a PSO Hunter's License for a measly ten bucks for 3 months play, it is money well spent.

Even if you don't intend to go online, the one-player campaign mode is more than enough to keep you busy for many a moon as you travel the world with your magical deck in hand leveling miscreants and unlocking more cards as you go. Sure, sometimes the AI is a bit dumb, but it's worth it just to see the strikingly rendered

world map and some of the more colorful characters you'll encounter along the way.

Anyway, I think I've made myself pretty clear: if you want a very good game that features real, long term, play value, you've found it. I can see playing this for the next few months as it's that addicting. If you do the right thing and pick up the game, be sure and send me an email and we can set up a match or three—the more the merrier.

I must go now...further conquests await me. Time to make the old man cry uncle one more time...

—ECM



DREAMCAST

REVIEWED BY:



Cleopatra Fortune

クレオパトラ フォーチュン

Developer: Taito

of Players: 1-2

Publisher: Altron

Available: Japan Now

Welcome to the Taito Zone...or what's left of it. Rod Serling once dominated television the way Taito does these days with simple yet amazingly addictive puzzle games that hearken back to the days of Columns on the Genesis (too bad that's about all Taito is excelling at these days). Cleopatra Fortune will seem strikingly similar to <insert Columns/Tetris game of your choice> and for those of the Japanese-crippled set, allow you to dispense altogether with that pesky instruction manual.

The object is to skillfully maneuver descending blocks to 'trap' jewels, pharaohs, and other gems to make them (shock alert) disappear. Naturally, the blocks will descend more and more rapidly and have increasingly difficult combinations to master—which is spelled out here for the youngsters in the audience.



Unfortunately, there isn't a whole lot new here if you've mastered any number of the multitude of Columns clones that are out there. Sure, there's the obligatory story mode that's composed of cutesy characters. These might keep you amused enough a bit, as it does offer you specific challenges for each level in order to progress. You will have to 'solve'

puzzles wherein you need to place each block combination in the correct place in order to get the chain reaction requirement that the story mode is asking you for. The novelty of this wears off relatively quickly, and the need to see the story mode is quickly overcome by a burning desire to switch back to arcade mode.

The game is credited as being created in 1996 by Taito, and it feels as though is should've

been created a lot earlier than that, despite graphics a bit more finely honed than its ancestors. The game has a two player split screen mode allowing for one on one confrontation, so your sister can finally teach you a lesson. The arcade mode

itself gets severely difficult at levels above 30.

As for recommendations, it would have to be said that if you have a U.S. Dreamcast, you'd be far better served picking up a copy of Smash Pack that houses Columns among its collection of a dozen titles. On the other hand, if you're looking for a clean and mildly updated version of Columns with anime characters reminiscent of ancient Egypt or are simply collecting import versions of Dreamcast games that won't cross the Pacific you better belly up to the bar before short-run games like this disappear—either way, it's certainly not a 'gotta have it' game.

—Haohmaru

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PLAYSTATION 2

REVIEWED BY:



ENDONESIA

Developer: Enix

of Players: 1

Publisher: Enix

Available: Japan Now

Being the low man on the GameGO! totem pole, well, sucks. I get no respect and have to take out my anger on the message boards (-200 posts and sinking fast!). I'm called the 'mainstream sellout' with alarming frequency. Worst of all, since the brown stuff tends to roll downhill, I'm relegated to taking one for the team, forever that skinny little kid that got picked last in grade school athletic games. "Write Endonesia? Why, sure, I'd...ugh...love to?"

Actually, I don't love Endonesia, far from it. Visually, it's amusing, clean and better than the shambling 3D messes that generally populate the PS2. What you've got here are some nicely done, subtle, 3D backgrounds, full of vibrant color, with a bunch of 2D character pasted on top (it looks almost as good as the 2nd Ghost in the Shell manga—pick it up now).

Now, as the self-proclaimed 'chemical enthusiast' of GG, I've been privy to some strange goings on, but E (for Endonesia) is by far the most bizarre and downright confusing title I've played in ages. Magic mushrooms, massive green plants and trippy, otherworldly beings populate this wickedly twisted and excruciatingly confusing title.

The story revolves around a little boy who gets warped into an alternate dimension and must then go through a series of puzzles, where you face another puzzle, which opens a new area, etc., etc....my head hurts. Most of the puzzles are amazingly complex: ranging from use the new skill at the new location to using the new item in the new location. Needless to say, you won't need Steven Hawking and Albert Einstein to muddle through these 'puzzles.'

There are no battles to speak of, save for the one that ultimately cannot be won: that which pits you against the mighty beast of boredom. Honestly, I've wasted time with flash PC games that were more fun and more compelling. Even Minesweeper has it all over this game.

Yes, it's fantastic looking and has a host of vibrant characters that make this alternate reality come alive, but after the first level I was begging for the pet dog to eat the sad, lost little boy, just to save me the pain of going on. This is one of those games people like ECM say is awesome because it's an import and most people can't



play it—you know what I'm talking about, <cough>Culdcept II<hack>.

As the game's manual so masterfully states: "Dangerous! Do not this!"

—Kodomo



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PLAYSTATION 2

REVIEWED BY:



YANYA CABALLISTA

Developer: Koei

of Players: 1

Publisher: Cave

Available: Japan Now



The Sixth Game

You knew it would happen sooner or later: Jet Set (Grind) Radio was bound to inspire a legion of knock-offs and imitators that would attempt to expand on it, or if not that, cash in on what was set to be the next big thing. Yanya Caballista Featuring Gawoo is de la Jet Set, but tries to build on the formula by adding "Gawoo" (an enemy) to the mix. The really strange things here are the company producing it—Koei, by way of Cave—and the surfboard apparatus that attaches to your trusty Dual Shock pad. Koei deserves some respect for stepping out of its traditionally strategy-centric universe to give us this novel idea—sadly it's one gone horribly wrong.

Almost There...

Yanya has nearly everything going for it: multiple characters, kick ass music, and a menagerie of special moves. Each character has to "prove" themselves via training ground exercises that must be completed prior to starting the 'real' game. The street themed music pumps in the background you must perform a variety of moves to progress further. The entire game has a reddish tint that evokes the feeling of summer and heat in the big city. Character animation is cartoonish fluid bliss and they meld seamlessly with the environments. Koei has gotten the "feel" of the modern Sega classic. Gawoo's are your enemy and you must perform moves and certain combos while landing within their field of control to eliminate them. Again, nicely done.



Hang Ten

Picture the way you'd normally hold your PS2 controller with the top side up and the bottom side down—now rotate it 90° to the left and attach the handily included 'surfboard' doohickey. You steer via the surfboard and use the analog stick buttons to jump, etc.—it takes some practice to get the hang of it...to say the least (that is to say, the very least).

On many occasions, in the heat of trying to finish a "run," the board popped off the pad at velocities roughly approximating Pokey's flight from work—"It's quitting time already? Well, see ya... <sonic boom>." I can't tell you how frustrating it is to execute all the right moves, be 90% done with a stage, and then 'pop goes the weasel'—Pokey wasn't the only thing breaking the sound barrier (and Dual Shocks).

Wipe Out

It looks nice and the actual design of everything hints at greatness. The tunes rip and Koei would have been given some serious credit in that the game could have been something worth getting worked up over...just not this time. Next time skip the gimmickry and give us a game worth playing. After all, if you're going to ape Jet Set, remember to copy some of the fun.

—Haohmaru



PLAYSTATION 2

REVIEWED BY:



PHOTOGRAPH BOY 2

Developer: Irem

of Players: 1

Publisher: Irem

Available: Japan Now

It's a Cold Day In Hell

File this one under 'I didn't see this coming'...ever. What you're looking at right now is a true sequel to the classic PC Engine HuCard, Photograph Boy—a game that, naturally, never made it off the islands of Japan. A game that also inspired the adored-by-children, Pokémon Snap, which, incidentally, supports the philosophical concept that good can beget evil.

Goldman...David Goldman

If you've ever played the aforementioned Pokémon Snap, you already have a good idea of what to expect, gameplay-wise, from PB2. You (as David Goldman, elite photographer) run through level after crazily designed level snapping shots of all the odd goings-on in this twisted take on urban and rural Japan. Everything from dancing buildings, UFOs, anthropomorphic animals and some copyright violating appearances by Superman and Michael Jackson (among others) contributes to this starkly surreal game.

F Stop

Gameplay is simple: you stroll through the streets taking pictures of anything that might prove interesting (the crazier the better, of course). One analog stick controls movement and the other controls the focus of the camera. You snap pics with the R1 button, the flash (to illuminate hidden areas) is activated via L1, and you can zoom via L2. While you're snapping shots willy-nilly you'll also have to be aware of goings-on in the foreground as various objects (skateboards, sponges, fireballs) seek to stun you momentarily and, more importantly, rob you of valuable rolls of film. Run out of film and the level ends—fairly cut and dry, right? Well, wait till you get going...

Needless to say, chaos is rife in the streets and you'll need to have some pretty slick reflexes to jump, dodge and shoot your way to safety. If you get in a bind, the handy flash will eliminate all projectiles from the screen (though it's better to handle those via the camera so you can



score extra film). Each level requires that you score a key shot that'll allow you to advance

to the next level (usually the craziest thing going on in a particular level). There's also a hidden level that's unlockable from each main level that's opened up by getting a shot of a usually well-hidden event—this effectively doubles the number of levels in the game.

Pretty as a Picture

Graphically the game is 2.5D: David controls along the x and y-axis and the camera moves the game in and out of the screen depending upon the level. Everything is drawn in a loopy cartoon style from David's maniacally grinning mug, to the dimples on the butts of the bathers in the bathhouse level (jump up to get a glimpse at the ladies, fellas). The animation is solid and the color palette vibrant. It's a pretty swell-looking game, though it's clear that this isn't even remotely pushing the PS2 hardware, so graphics tarts should stay clear.

Best of all this game requires no knowledge of Japanese to play, so if no super-smart, utterly savvy 3rd party picks it up for a US release (oh please, oh please) you'll get along just fine.

Strike a Pose

This game is maddeningly fun! While it doesn't feature much in the way of replay value after you beat the game and have seen every level, it's a blast the first time through. It's easily one of the most fun PS2 titles to date and everyone that's even a little bit into games a bit off the beaten track needs to give this a spin. Now if you'll excuse, I have to go get some pictures developed

—ECM

REVIEWED BY:



CASTLEVANIA CHRONICLES

Developer: Konami	# of Players: 1
Publisher: Konami	Available: Japan Now

First, Some History...

Chances are you've never heard of the Sharp X68000 computer: A Japanese computer released by, you guessed it, Sharp that was fairly popular during the late 80s and early 90s—the simplest way to actually describe the machine is to label it the Japanese Commodore Amiga.

In any event, tons of games were released for this little hot rod: versions of River City Ransom, Undead Line, Street Fighter, even the old school Genesis tank shooter, Granada, exists for this puppy. And, in just about every case, they are more impressive graphically and more feature-rich than their console counterparts (Undead Line, for example, features more levels and more playable characters).

However, the system did play host to a score of original titles that are exclusive to it, the most legendary being Akumajo Dracula X. There's probably a better than average chance that you've heard whispers of this game, second only to the Haunted Castle 'Castlevania' arcade game as the most mysterious and elusive of this oft-venerated series.

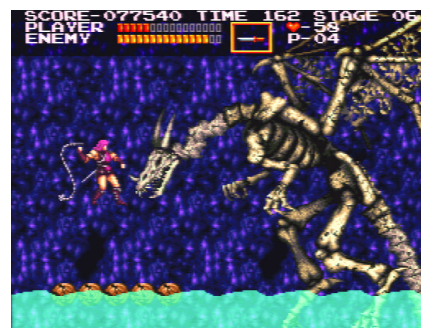
Konami has apparently seen fit, however, to release this game (along with a graphically and aurally upgraded rev) on one PS disc as that system moves into the twilight of its life. Why? Got me. But it's nice to see not only a 'new' Castlevania game, but also one that's entirely 2D (and one you don't have to squint to see).

It's like Two, Two, Two Games in One!

Castlevania Chronicles (as it's known) features the original X68K release and an ever-so-slightly upgraded version to take (very slight) advantage of the superior PS hardware—presumably to make it a little more tempting to those that had already bought the original all those long years ago.



The best way to describe this iteration of Dracula is to sorta consider it the first Castlevania on steroids. There's no jumping onto or off of stairs; the graphics are more reminiscent of the original Castlevania than Super Castlevania IV, Castlevania Bloodlines or PCE Dracula X; and the gameplay is very straightforward, old school Castlevania (more so, even, than PCE Drac X).



This is good and bad: it's good that it's a throwback to the 'good old days' but it's bad because a lot of the time there simply isn't enough to it—I know I have no interest in going back and playing the first Castlevania, and the way this game uncomfortably apes the progenitor makes it fun on a "gee, this is kinda neat" level, but that's about it.

The differences between the two versions are mostly subtle: an arranged

soundtrack here, harder gameplay there (the original is much harder than the arranged edition as it plays by classic Castlevania rules, i.e. you're knocked back when you're hit, etc.). The main character sprite in the updated version is completely re-drawn and some nice effects are added, such as when you destroy an enemy as well as some subtle background enhancements. The key word here is, obviously, subtle.

IQ Plummeting

In regards to the simpler updated edition, it's almost as if you can feel the dumbing down of games over the past 8 years (tell me another one about how the influx of casual users hasn't affected the games we play, <chortle>). It's too bad that you can't opt for the original rules in the updated edition, as most people will burn through the arranged version in fairly short order. If you want a challenge, you have to play original mode.

One more note: oddly enough, I prefer the original soundtrack to the arranged (this soundtrack is not Dracula X, mind you). Not sure why exactly that is, but maybe it's because it fits the graphics and mood better. Then again, maybe I'm just jaded, <grin>.

So what we have here is a pretty solid game with some (very) old school gameplay. For the most part, I was turned off by the ultra-simple style, but I did manage to play through the entire arranged mode and half the original mode and not completely dislike it, so take that as you will.

Now I'll wait calmly and quietly for a 2D Castlevania (a la Dracula X, not SOTN) for GameCube—I figure it's going to be a long, long wait.

—ECM



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ALL THIS AND A WHOLE LOT MORE...

REVIEWED BY:



SENGOKU 3

Developer: Noise Factory

of Players: 1-2

Publisher: SNK

Available: Now (arcade)

So Close...

Sometimes being a long-time fan of a venerable gaming giant just doesn't pay. The long-awaited Sengoku 3 elicits painful memories of studying that most hear-wrenching of literary forms: the tragedy. As much as I try to pull for SNK and the venerable Neo Geo, and as much as I want to ignore its long, slow demise, Sengoku 3's weaknesses can't be ignored—the worst part? It was this close to being 'all that' but winds up falling short of the mark. Damn it. Reviewing a game shouldn't feel like this.



Sengoku 3 offers 4 characters to start with and allows you to choose from 6 as you progress through the game. The character design of these 6 is among the best seen on the Neo Geo side scrolling butt whooping library. Unfortunately, this doesn't extend to the opponents that challenge you throughout the game. After delving into this for over an hour, you've fought less than a dozen unique opponent and even some of those are just Mortal Kombat-inspired palette swaps.



The "story" is pretty much nonexistent and this makes the experience of going through the motions even less rewarding than it otherwise should be. In this aspect, specifically, you begin to get the idea that, perhaps, this title wasn't entirely finished before it made its way to market. I can't quite put my finger on it, but the entire game feels as though something is missing: a decent story line, odd character shading and design, music that's good and then absent completely—guess that's a lot of 'somethings.'

The glorious aspects of Sengoku 3 are the methods of attack that span weapons, bare fist, throw, special moves as well as an escape move that you can use just once. The special moves consume part of a power bar that's built up by scoring combination (bare fist + weapon) on your opponents. You'll find these effective to use on your opponents even if completing them is somewhat awkward for a beat 'em up (down, down + attack). Supers require that you fill up your power bar twice and is barely worth the effort to execute, both in effectiveness and graphical payoff. The combinations, however, are surpass any other title in the genre and a testament to the fact that Noise Factory was trying to add more to a style of game that had little room to grow.

Spirits of My Ancestors

Many will recall a simpler time, a time when the Neo Geo was fresh and Final Fight-style games (such as the original Sengoku) arrived on the scene. Beat 'em ups such as these were easy to play and easy to forget and then equally easy to return to later. Sengoku 2 was marred by poor distribution and short duration, but it was a (then) graphically impressive game...if you could find it.

Enter Sengoku 3. Initially there were rumblings that this game wouldn't see the light of day, period. After months of delays and a multitude of rumors surrounding the near-mummified husk of SNK, the Noise Factory-developed Sengoku 3 was in our hands—albeit months late. Now I don't know if it should have stayed deep down in the turbid earth.





A few will also criticize this title for its unlimited continues and shortness—in the immortal words of Le Capitan, ECM, "don't use 'em, newbie." In truth however, the end boss of Sengoku 3 is so cheap it even makes other SNK end bosses seem feeble. This guy is a quarter sucking monster for the ages. Let it be said that if you can beat THIS boss without a continue, then you are more of a man than I.

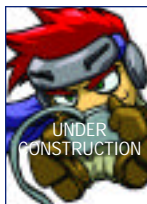
Sengoku 3 might be more remembered for how difficult it will be to find than for the really good time it provides. Suffice it to say that I wasn't expecting all that much from it and, in truth, probably got more from it than I initially reckoned. In the end, however, Sengoku 3 feels like a title that was pushed out the door because it was close enough to being finished. I guess 'you gotta do what ya gotta do' to stave off the reaper—too bad it was at Sengoku's expense.

—Haohmaru



SHMUPS

REVIEWED BY:



RAIDEN DX – PLAYSTATION

Developer: Hamster

of Players: 1-2

Publisher: Major Wave

Available: Now



Seibu Kaihatsu's Raiden series has long stood as the very pinnacle of shooter design. The first Raiden featured a decided lack of glitz and featured instead the kind of understated gameplay other developers could only dream of implementing properly. The weapons were few, only two different shot types and two kinds of missiles, and with this we were expected to clear eight waves of bad guys. Simple and to the point, the game was a really tough nut to crack. It was one of those rare experiences where every

single time you died you knew it was your fault. The computer never cheated, it never presented you with anything you couldn't overcome, it was just eye-tearingly difficult.

Raiden's simplicity was the key to its longevity, I think. Everyone likes Raiden. The simplicity of the gameplay made it immediately

change: a new weapon. A squiggly squirrely hose of a weapon that locked on and did very little damage. And yet the game was still every inch as good as the first—Seibu were establishing themselves as masters of the craft. When Sony's PlayStation was released, Seibu was presented for the first time with a home console powerful enough to render in the home an arcade perfect version of both Raiden 1 and 2. The Raiden Project was Seibu's first home console game programmed in-house, and it was an instant classic. They followed it up a short time later with what I believe is the best Raiden game in the series: Raiden DX.

Raiden DX is basically Raiden 2+. At its core the game is not significantly different from Raiden 2, no new weapons were added, the levels only moderately different and the enemies familiar. They packed in the extras too: two additional soundtracks (New Version is the very best shooter soundtrack around, ranking up there with Sokyugurentai), three game modes, a boss-only mode, a playable demo of Battle Balls (the very finest puzzle game since Tetris) and the most amazing thing, the Master of Raiden.

The levels closely parallel what you see in Raiden 2. The first stage features the other side of the crater you fly over in Raiden 2, in fact, giving the impression you're flying a parallel path. One new addition to the game is the decaying-value bonuses. Instead of simply laying in wait for you, the bonus point items become darker and less valuable as they scroll down the screen. Just before they become more or less worthless, they pulse brightly and for a half second are worth double their original value. Racking up the big points means you have to keep track of even more details than before. Also new are hidden "radar" sites,



accessible to everyone, and it was not at all uncommon to find a girl playing Raiden either. The appeal was universal.

Seibu followed with a sequel imaginatively titled Raiden 2, which featured (besides new levels, baddies and bosses) only one



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effort was recorded for your viewing pleasure, and it's simply stunning to behold. He completes the entire level unscathed, with every radar site uncovered in the correct order, every enemy killed, nearly every bonus collected. No matter how good you think you are, this guy's better, and it has made me crazy over the years trying to measure up.

Raiden DX was a pleasant surprise for me. I managed to swap a crummy old Neo cart for a



barely-played copy of this fine game

when it was first released, and it hasn't left my side since. It supports a vertical monitor mode, too, so that you can experience the game in the arcade-perfect way it was meant to be played.

Raiden DX is the perfect addition to any shooter fan's library. Crank the sound up, tip your TV over, and groove to the finest shooting action ever from the masters of the craft. Since the game was re-released in Japan as a budget title, you can pick up the import for a very reasonable price. It's worth the effort, for you'll rarely find a game this solid, this polished, or this good anywhere else.

—NeoGman

bumps in the ground that rise up and are destroyable when you fly over them.

The training stage is an amalgamation of several levels from the standard game. The stage is as long as three or four regular levels, but has only one boss at the end. Once you've beaten a few things and you've unlocked the Master of Raiden, you can see the training level played perfectly, and this is one of the nicest surprises the game offers. The Master of Raiden is an apt name for whoever played this level through. Their entire

