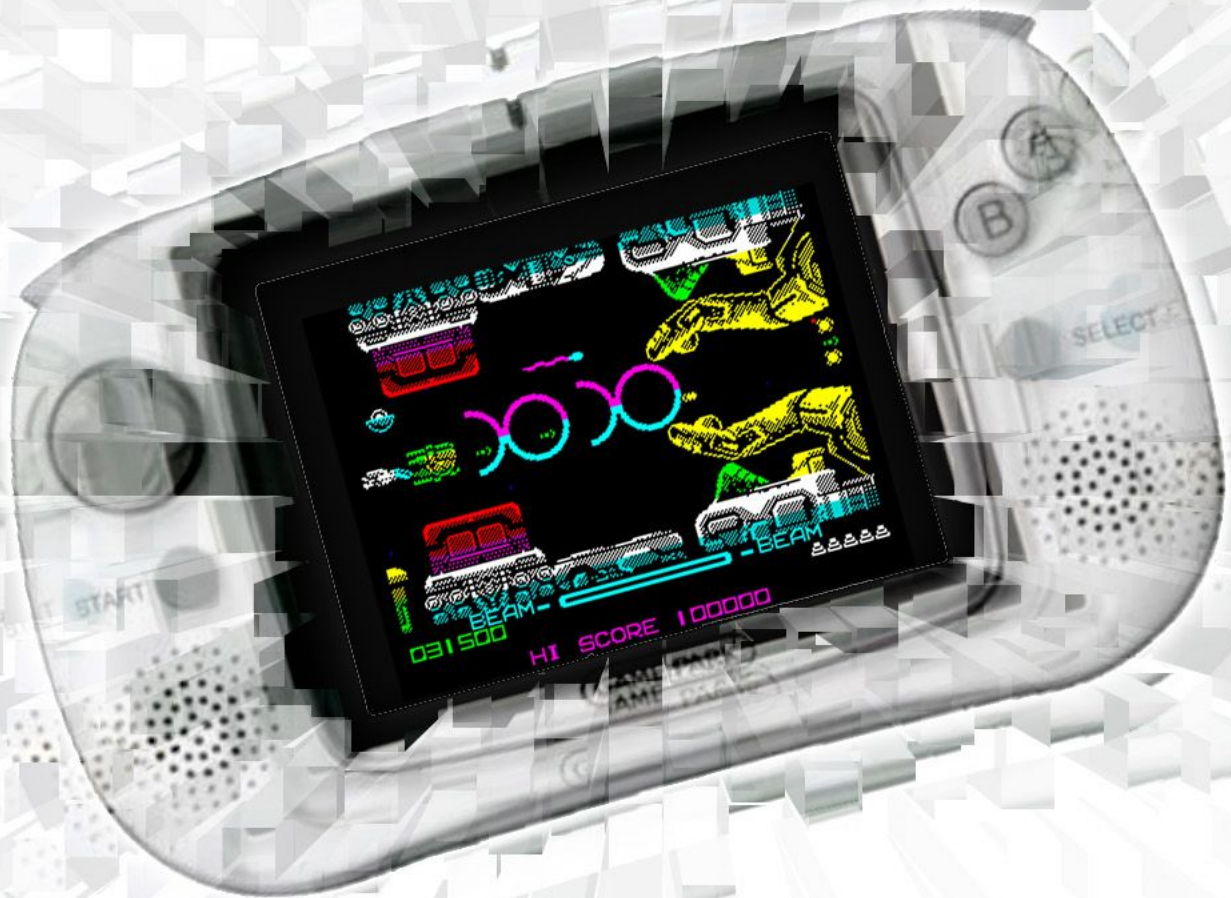


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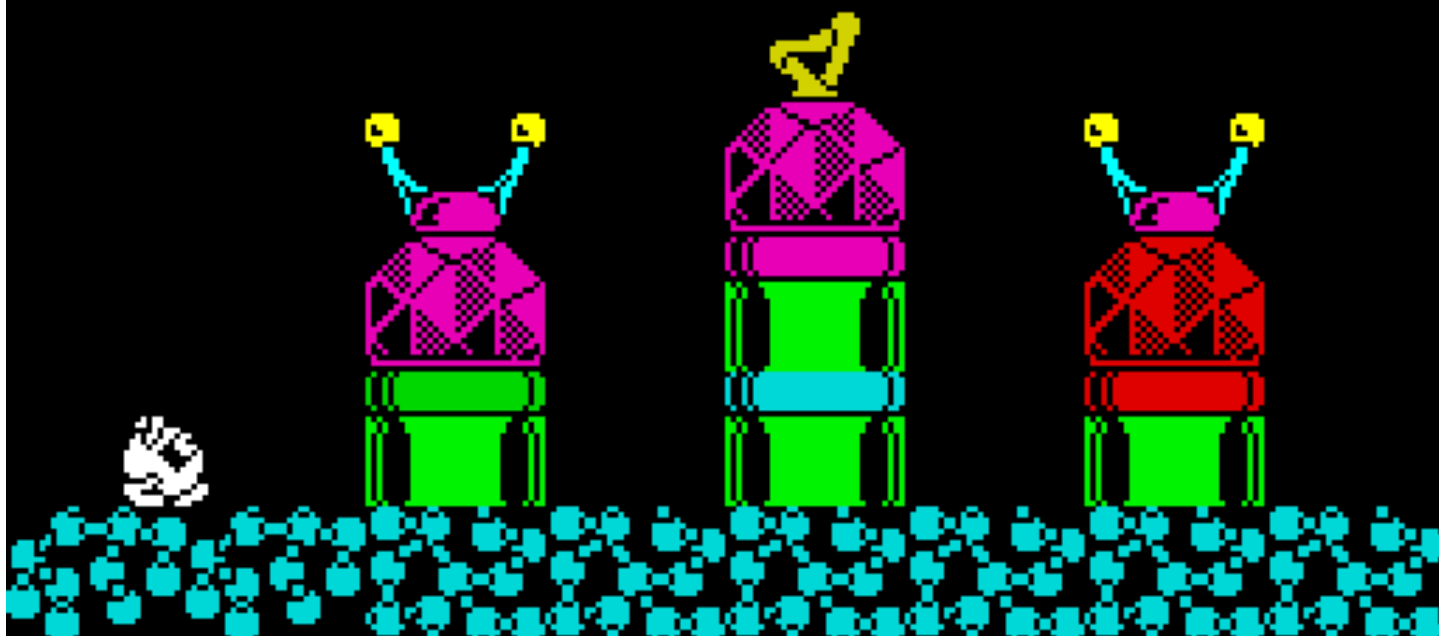


the retro explosion
all hail the
gamepark32

gso⁵

Whilst the whole notion of low-resolution two dimensional graphics dumbfounds newer members of the gaming world, to some it's [still] a way of life; a life where current videogames just don't seem to hold the same magic they once did.

That's why we're so keen on the Gamepark 32. It reminds us why we loved the 'old school' so much, and why revisiting those old gems is most definitely a worthwhile experience - especially given the GP32's inherent portability and friendly, open source community. It's all good - read on.



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BANG YOU'RE DEAD

"There are no grey areas in the behaviour of game characters, and players are rarely required to reflect or make contextual judgements." Kimberley Thompson

"Gonna walk into a cafeteria and kill everyone. Bang you're dead. Oh bang bang, bang bang!"

The God Bullies circa 1991.

With increasing regularity, each time a young individual goes off the rails and uses violence on another (often with fatal consequences) video games are implicated by the media as the cause. Violent and gory video games are seen to increase such tendencies, allowing the player to wallow in fantasy as they take out another helpless victim, blurring the line between reality and fiction. The media delights in quoting relevant scientific research or the personal opinion of those who have studied previous cases. What research exists? Does it stand up under scrutiny? And is the link between video games and violence proven, or are we looking at a by-product of a violent society combined with disturbed individuals?

Violence is the central theme of this article, whether it be real life occurrences or those on screen events whilst a video game is being played. Therefore it is important that we define what violence is, and make the distinction between real life and fantasy. Only then can we proceed and examine if a correlation exists between both realms. By examining studies you realise this is an important aspect that many researchers have overlooked in their initial hypothesis. The majority reading this article would be able to immediately tell the difference between slaughtering a demon in *Primal*, and the violence that punctuates news bulletins and fills column inches. The difference is not subtle, but rather painfully obvious, however Gamesstyle's forays into published research on the subject show that this initial distinction is often completely overlooked. Violence is quite simply an aggressive act that inflicts physical pain or suffering on another living creature. Here we are separating fantasy from the living, fact from fiction, while recognising that violence has many effects and comes in many forms.

Kimberley Thompson in her study on "Violence in E-rated Video Games" (*Journal of the American Medical Association*) defined violence as "acts in which the aggressor causes of attempts to cause physical injury or death to another character." Clearly Thompson fails to differentiate between real life and fantasy, and automatically assumes that the player (regardless of age) cannot make such a distinction. Any definition of violence is subjective and one must consider the tremendous leaps forward in video games, which many now argue to be an art form, and offer rich pickings for the film industry. This remarkable growth has not been purely a result of marketing; games themselves have developed. Provenzo (1992) commented that "the factor of context (violence) is typically missing in video games. There are no grey areas in the behaviour of game characters, and players are rarely required to reflect or make contextual judgements."

In 1992 Provenzo may well have been correct as few games required players to do anything but run, jump and shoot, but given the severity of changes in the last decade alone, a great deal of research has become outdated and of little use in today's environment. Today a video game without a story is almost unheard of, and many games whilst extremely violent (*Silent Hill*) show the tragic results of violence. Provenzo also concluded that most video games involved little sense of community, and pitted the player on his own against an evil force. Again, this social context has become outdated due to connectivity, hardware advances and the birth of online gaming.

Funk (1993) accepted that video games were very much here to stay in spite of the apparent side effects and recommended that we "should also seek creative ways to increase the acceptance, popularity and availability of games that are relatively pro-social, educational and fun."

A major flaw with the majority of research carried out into the effects of video games stems from the use of laboratory tests and controlled experiments to produce and correlate data.

No matter what steps researchers implement to ensure their accuracy, there is no substitute for gamers playing at home (familiar environment) with friends, blissfully unaware that their actions are being recorded. These tests rely on the principle of controlled and consistent environments; with subjects facing the same length of time playing the same video game, in the same environment. Whilst this approach has shown its validity in other areas of research, it is too rigid and structured to be of use in researching violence and video games.

Gaming cannot be split neatly into timed chunks; it is unpredictable by nature and reliant on several variable factors. Goldstein (1991) believed that studies have failed to investigate why we play video games and consider that players "freely engage in play, and are always free to stop." The act of playing as suggested by Garvey (1991) is a voluntary, self-directed activity and not one that volunteers forced in front of televisions can hope to replicate. A straightforward example would be how players overcome a challenge within a video game, some may persist, others may give up in frustration and a lucky few may complete the obstacle. In all cases the one constant is the video game itself, which reacts to input from the player; it does not tell individual X to lose his temper, rather something within provokes this response. Such responses are worthy of further investigation.

Yet in spite of the flaws, the technique is used to form the basis of research into the effects of video games. Cooper and Mackie (1986) split 84 children ranging in ages from 10-11 years into groups, which were timed for eight minutes. The video games were then introduced to the groups (*Missile Command*, *Pac Man*) and these are immediately playable –





unlike current releases, which have a steep learning curve and lack the instant buzz of arcade titles. However to judge the impact and the effects (if any) of a video game after only eight minutes of play (when the exposure has been negligible) is doubtful. Funk (1993) used a similar technique to determine a short-term relationship between video games and increased aggressive behaviour in young children. Surely this is a trait present in all young children to imitate what they have seen?

Wrestling events and children's television shows as well as video games often show warnings before and after programs to prevent such acts of imitation. There is little mention of the advantages to be gained from playing video games such as coordination, discipline, learning to except defeat and overcoming challenges.

To build a bridge between aggression and video games on this basis, when it could be linked to any number of events/activities is more an act of convenience than any scientific analysis. Professor Karn Dill (Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviour in the Laboratory and Life) believes video games "are more harmful than violent television and movies because they are very engrossing and require the player to identify with the aggressor. In a sense they provide a complete learning environment for aggression."

Surely those individuals that blur the distinction between controlling a character, and actually believing they are that character warrant further attention? The subject matter is not of importance, as individuals are likely to adopt the same response to literature and film as well as video games. Clark (1993) went a step further by claiming that "the more children practice violence acts, the more likely they are to perform violent acts." Could this be the first step towards the violent cases we shall examine in detail later? Karn in the same report (mentioned previously) admits, "video game links to aggressive and non-aggressive delinquency are wholly due to the fact that highly aggressive individuals are especially attracted to violent video games." Shame that The Observer (like so many others) chose to highlight the more sensational conclusions. As Steven Poole suggested "violent kids are more likely to play violent games. Well, duh, of course they are. And they're more likely to steal your lunch-boxes. But lunch-boxes don't cause crime."

Hertz (1997) dismissed most of the available research and its findings purely on the inclusion of adolescent children. These he argued are at a stage of their development when they are naturally violent, aggressive and moody; therefore the research is unbalanced even before it has begun. Dr Gillian Bendelow (lecturer medical sociology, Warwick University) believes aggression comes from a variety of sources "there's a culture of violence – videos, games, television – that kids have access to as never before.

Some blame the breakdown of the family, but it's actually the associated structural conditions related to that: poor housing, high crime. Three million children are still brought up in poverty." It is extremely hard to pinpoint the exact cause of any human psychological trait, and rarely is it due to one single element, but rather a combination of factors.

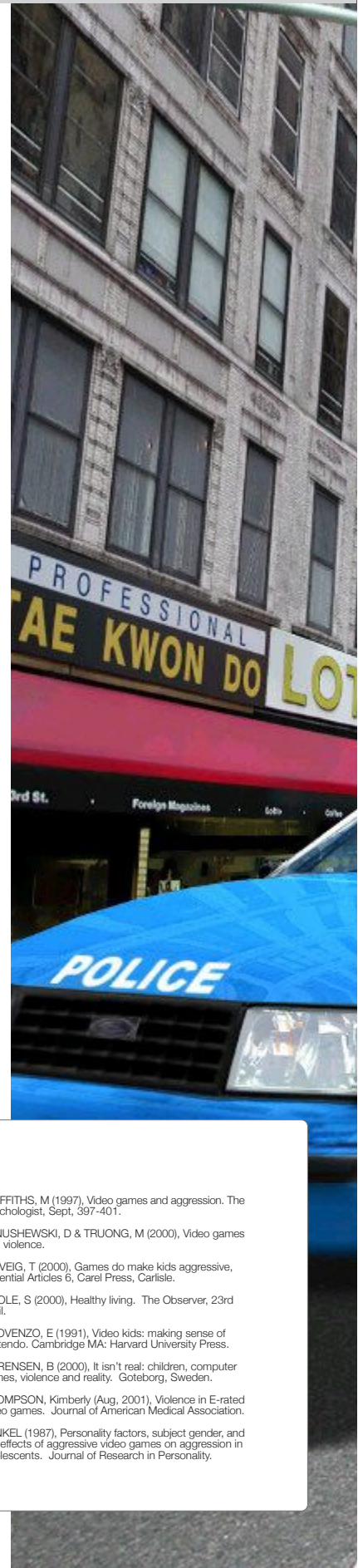
In conclusion we must realise that most of the current research available is outdated and based on tests, which truly fail to ascertain the impact of playing video games. More research needs to be undertaken before any worthwhile conclusions are drawn, and in particular as to why we play video games and the extreme reactions some individuals appear to have from doing so. We must also consider that video games form only a small section of an ever-increasing violent society, which grows in severity with each generation. Professor Henry Jenkins (Director MIT Comparative Media Studies Program) believes that video games are the latest in a trend of tools throughout history that are blamed for corrupting children: rock n roll, books, film, television, internet. Not only this but the physical world offers little appropriate play space for children (crime, urban expansion), who as a result exist more in a safer virtual realm. And finally parents are more aware today (thanks to the widespread influence of the media) of potential risks from video games, creating a preconception and belief that their child is more aggressive because of it, when in reality the only change is in the parent.

In the second part of this feature we shall investigate the role of the media and the infamous (and tragic) cases, which are commonly used to implicate video games as a cause of violence and aggression.

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MACE GRIFFIN: BOUNTY HUNTER

We talk with Warthog about their revolutionary new FPS and discover that the eponymous protagonist was nearly dubbed Hugh Jarsole.

We doubt Henry Rollins would have been keen, though.



Development

How was the Mace Griffin conceived and when did development commence?

Mace is an original title that was conceived entirely by a small core team here at Warthog.

A couple of us had worked on space combat games before, but wanted to venture out into the world of FPSs as we enjoyed the genre so much. We first started talking about the title in April 2000, but development didn't start properly until around 2.5 years ago

Did the change in publisher from Crave to Vivendi Universal Games affect development?

Not particularly. Crave gave us creative freedom and thankfully so have Vivendi. The only thing they insisted on was to lose the hat and cape on Mace, which was a good call anyway.

Having been originally intended for release last year – has the game provided more challenging than originally anticipated?

The game was originally planned using existing technology, but this proved impossible if we were to achieve the seamless transition, and writing a lot of new code cost us time. However we now have a powerful system with which to write future titles.

Mace Griffin is being released on Gamecube, Xbox, Playstation 2 and PC - will each be tailored to suit each machine, and if so is there a personal preference?

The gameplay is the same across all the platforms; the only differences are graphical and control inputs.

The game looks great on all platforms, but my personal favourite is the Xbox as that what we started on and it makes good use of the pixel shaders.

Has it been difficult matching the control system to several different controllers?

No, because we have always had a limited amount of functions and controls so as not to get in the way of the action. The control layouts on the ground and in space are also very similar, which made the job even easier. I think we have a button to spare on all the different controllers.

What is the TUSK engine and did its implementation provide different challenges on the various hardware?

The TUSK engine is 3D rendering technology that can handle huge interior and exterior environments, and manage seamless transitions between the two. It was developed entirely here at Warthog. The biggest challenge was that we set out to do the game only on Xbox and PC to start with, then halfway through were asked to fit it onto PS2 and Gamecube as well. This has been done very well, but did involve extra work. Apart from having a lot less memory to play with, many of the graphical effects had to be done quite differently on Ps2 and Cube.

The Gamecube has Metroid Prime and the Xbox has Halo, both wonderful titles and the Playstation 2 has Headhunter. How will Mace Griffin stand out from such competition?

The obvious answer is that you can also jump into spaceships in Mace and fly them, which adds a huge extra dimension. Aside from that, the overall scale of our game is much bigger with less repetitive use of level geometry than the games you mentioned, it has a greater variety of characters and the story is far more detailed and intriguing.



Console exclusives are becoming a thing of the past with the multi-format approach proving more widespread. Do you think this division of labour increases workload and dilutes the actual game?

Not if it's managed correctly. The extra revenue should pay for additional staff, and I think a lot of developers are now building in-house technology that works under the hood of multiple platforms.

It makes economic sense. In my humble opinion, the Xbox is a great platform to write big games on like ours, and the PS2 is a little bit weak on memory and hardware rendering. I'm just hoping that the next generations of these platforms have plenty of processing and memory muscle so that developers feel less bound by these constraints.

Will you be taking advantage of the online capabilities of Xbox or Playstation 2? If not, is that a consideration for a sequel?

No, and absolutely Yes!

Warthog has given us Starlancer and Star Trek - both futuristic titles set in space and Mace Griffin continues this tradition. Is there a fascination with space or the future within the studio?

There's a small core of us here who worked on Privateer 2 years ago at EA. When Warthog was starting up we decided to make the first title something we were strong at, so Starlancer was born. I think it's an interesting genre, but for me it has to be 'arcadey', rather than a full space combat simulation. We have certainly made the space sections in Mace very accessible and easy to pick up.

As internal producer what is your role with Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter?

Planning and managing the project. Game design, script writing, level building and interface design. And at the end, talking to the press and fan community, which is probably the fun part.

What other names for Mace Griffin did you consider?

Butch Slaughter, Jake Chance, Ned Dundee and Hugh Jarsole. I'm glad we settled for Mace.

Mace Griffin: the character

How did the involvement of Henry Rollins come about? Are the team fans of the influential Black Flag?

Henry was chosen by Vivendi's marketing team and luckily he was willing and available to do it. A couple of the team are big Rollins fans, and were delighted to hear he was doing Mace's voice.

Did Henry come into the studio to record the dialogue and he offer any suggestions to developing the Mace character?

I wasn't at the recording as my first child was being born at the time, so I'm really not sure if he offered suggestions as such. What I do know is that he delivered the lines in a style all of his own which I think greatly added to Mace's character.

How pleased are you with the results?

Very pleased. Obviously Henry is an interesting and highly credible celebrity to be linked with our game, but most importantly his voice and delivery suit the lead character perfectly. What is strange is that the artist who built the Mace model was actually influenced by a picture of Henry's face, months before we found out he would be doing the voice. Spooky.

One ambitious feature is the smooth transition from FPS to flight combat. How important is this to the game and was it difficult to achieve?

It's intrinsic to the gameplay, in all the missions you will find yourself switching between the ground and space to complete objectives. I can't really comment on how difficult it was to write the code, you'd have to ask our lead programmer, but



let's say it was more than a couple of weeks work. What it did throw up was a bunch of logistical problems, like having to make tunnels down to hangars very wide so that you weren't bouncing your ship around like a nickel in a can. With Warthog having experience in developed space combat games, how does the combat system differ from previous releases?

There is no ship management in Mace, there is less chasing an enemies tail, the hostiles do more formation flying, they take less hits to kill; basically much more 'arcadey' and accessible to the first time space combat player.

Can you leave the flight controls at any time and wander around the ship?

Anytime you like. At some points you will be carrying passengers and you can go to the back of the ship and talk to them.

The main problem with games set in space that involve flying is a sense of position and direction. How have you attempted to overcome such problems?

We were aware of this right from the start, and designed around it. Our space environments are cluttered with asteroids, space junk, stations, lot's of ships, and there is a constant array of space dust and nebula gas to fly through, which gives a constant sensation of movement and direction. Our space missions are also confined to relatively small action spheres,

so if you wander too far from the action you will be automatically flipped around back at it, in a similar way to Rogue Squadron.

How many planets are involved in Mace Griffin, and how much freedom is there to travel to various locations?

There are 13 main locations in the game, spread across planetoids, space stations, nebulas and large carrier ships. You travel to each one in turn, as dictated by your nav map. On a couple of occasions you will return to a location more than once.

An impressive aspect is the variety of missions and locations within the game. How important was it to deliver varied and challenging environments? Do you have a particular favourite mission?

Something that I feel is weak in many other games is the lack of variety when it comes to environments and mission objectives. I'm not sure if this is because people lack imagination, or are just playing 'safe'. With Mace we threw away the rulebook, and if someone had a good idea for a level or mission then it would be in. Thus we have missions set on alien cattle ranches, in a futuristic temple, on a luxury nebula liner, and of course in a strip club. I think people are going to be staggered by the scale and diversity of the game.

What form of save feature will the game utilise – automatic save points like Halo for instance?

There are a number of automatic save points positioned throughout each mission. You will also have one autosave at the last checkpoint you crossed.

Instead of just including corporations, with the Order of Virtual Light you've created a futuristic church, which embraces technology in the 27th century. What role does the church play in proceedings and is it based on scientology?

It is not based on scientology in anyway. Within the game the Order of Virtual Light plays quite a central role, but this does not become obvious until much later. This religion is based upon people's gullibility, and eagerness to be brainwashed (which is stupid) and their need for faith, or some explanation of why we are here (which is natural, and in many cases healthy). I personally sit on the fence when it comes to religion - I've seen good things come from it, but also a lot of ugly stuff. In the case of the Order of Virtual Light, it's actually not what it seems, and is not set up in the best interests of it's followers.

The proliferation of story-led games has led to a situation where gamers often play to see out the story, rather than because the game play is particularly enjoyable itself. How have you overcome this hurdle with Mace Griffin?

By keeping the gameplay solid and challenging right to the end and introducing some new and surprising levels, characters, ships and objectives throughout the game.





What level of interaction is there with environments and residents within the game?

The environments contain a lot of machinery and equipment to manipulate; you can blow up bridges, shoot down stalactites, use floor-mounted guns, and use security cameras, to name but a few things. The characters will interact with you depending upon whether they are friendly, neutral or hostile, and obviously what you do to them. The permutations are vast, but for every action there is a reaction, with no NPCs standing around like statues.

Will Mace Griffin follow a predetermined route of bounty hunting, or will the player have the freedom to pick and choose targets out with the main story?

The player is presented with a number of missions in a preset order, some of which will help to move the story along and others that will be more incidental.

Do you have the choice to bring in wanted felons dead or alive?

Yes, and you will also have the choice to make mercy killings. 16. Is the reward purely one of satisfaction and revenge, or will Mace be rewarded in credits that can be spent on upgrades? The primary motivation will be to find your persecutors and exact revenge on them, but you will also be rewarded with both ground and ship weapons and upgrades as well.

Although set in the future several of the weapons in Mace are very familiar familiar (shotgun, assault rifle etc), how many weapons are there in total? Will any offer a dual purpose?

There are 11 ground weapons, all with a secondary function. There will be 7 ship weapons, but these are single function.

Along with the traditional weapons you will also find some more unusual ones like the sonic shock cannon and the plasma machine gun.

How many weapons can Mace carry at any one time? How easy it is to scroll through options during combat?

If you manage to get them, you can carry all 11 at once. It is very easy and quick to scroll through the weapons with a couple of button presses.

Enemies react realistically (like Goldeneye) to being hit on various parts of the body with some smooth animation. Is this intended to promote more tactical thought from the player, rather than just running in, all guns blazing?

The smart thing is to hit the head or chest for maximum damage. Alternatively you may want to hit the arm holding a weapon to stop the NPC firing at you.

AI is becoming more realistic and challenging with each release, what steps have you taken to ensure Mace Griffin can offer a demanding experience?

Our AI will use different tactics depending upon species, bravery, weapon carried, ammo carried, health, if in a group and environment, which obviously creates a lot of possibilities.

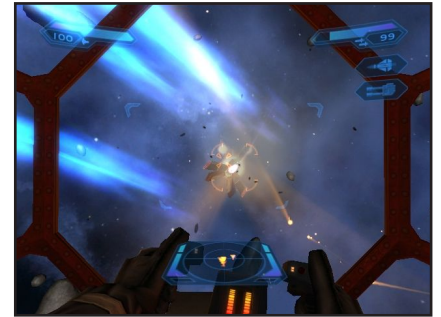
The major strengths of our AI are the variety, the realism and the ability to use cover.

How long do you envisage Mace Griffin will take to complete?

The Xbox and Ps2 should hit the shelves in late June in the US, then July or August in Europe. All the versions have either passed or are in submission now, so for us it's pretty much finished.

Are there any in-built features to increase replay value, cheats, for example?

There are some cheats which will be announced after release, and as the levels are so big, you could play the game several times taking different routes through the levels.



Completion

Now that Warthog have reached the end of the development cycle have you achieved everything you set out to accomplish? Is there one feature you wish you could have included?

Yes, we have generally fulfilled all our initial objectives and stuck to the original game plan. There isn't anything major that we didn't realise.

When a project is completed what are the general feelings of the team?

Relief at seeing our loved ones again! I can't wait to see the title out in the shops and see what kind of response we get. We have worked on the title for a long time and you can't help but become emotionally attached to it. We are also doing post mortems so that we do things even better and more efficiently next time.

Have you decided on your next project?

There are a few possibilities, which are confidential at this point, but a sequel to Mace would be my preferred option.

What do you think will be the biggest development in video games over the next five years?

Industry standard game development software. One of the most expensive (time, money and sanity) parts of game development is writing technology, which does the same thing again and again with an incremental improvement in performance or features. We need to get to where the film industry is, with standard tools readily available and relatively accessible, so that more time can be spent on the gameplay and content, and less time re-inventing the wheel. The process has already been going a while with world building tools for the mod community - it's only a matter of time before stuff like physics engines and AI scripting will be as user friendly and modular. If that hasn't happened in five years I'll eat my hat.

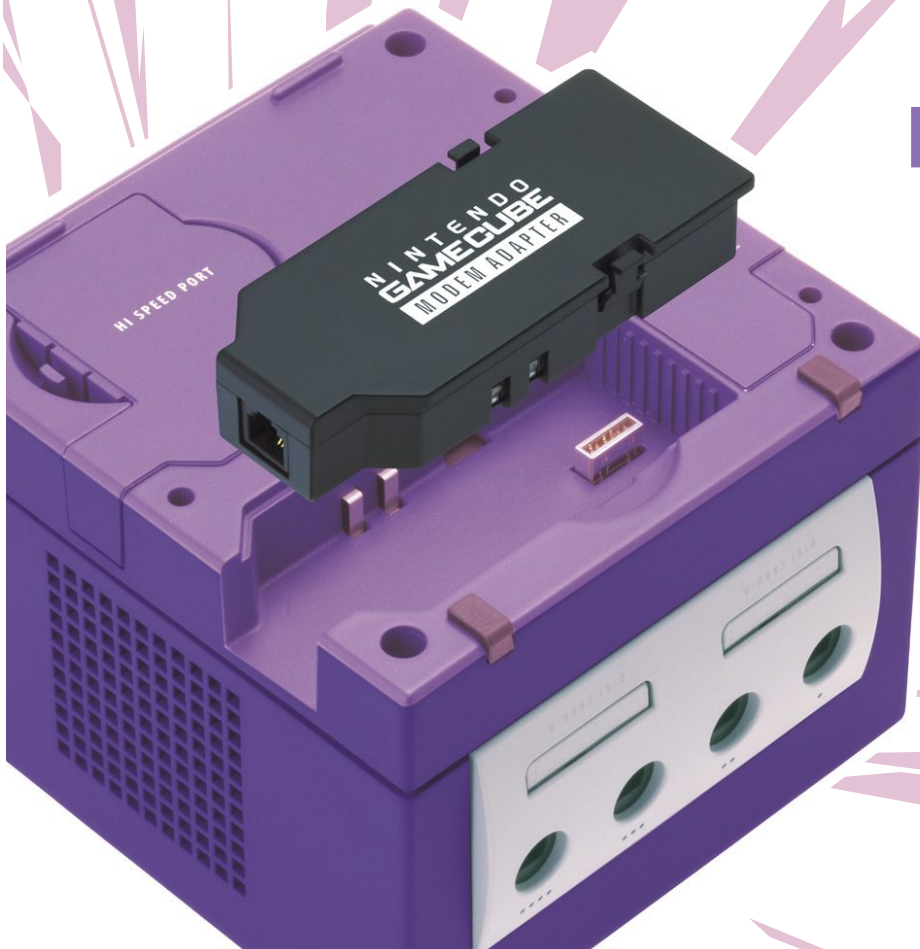
Nintendo has been the recipient of much criticism for its online stance – or frankly lack of. The critics, who may have included myself until recently, see online gaming as the next step in the evolution of gaming. So why the sudden change in opinion? No, I haven't been abducted and brainwashed by the elite fan boy Nintendo North clan, or received a promise of Animal Crossing PAL. Apart from being able to admit the error of my ways, recent experiences have forced me to re-examine my reasons and come to a new conclusion.

Nintendo firmly believes that the online market is frankly a minority, and they do not see themselves as developing games for a minority: especially when most Nintendo releases sell in large quantities without such options. There is no argument against such titles as Mario Party, Mario Kart or F Zero GX, which could be highly playable in an online arena. Without question these, and several more Nintendo franchises would make memorable online releases.

Consider the number of Playstation 2 and Xbox units sold in each of the three territories: Japan, America and Europe. Whilst the actual conclusive figures are open to debate, what is certain is that we're talking about millions, albeit with the obvious exception of Japan and Xbox. Consider further that even in America the number of online users for either the Xbox or Playstation 2 systems has yet to break the magical million barrier, and you realise just how savvy Nintendo has been. Clearly the demand for online console gaming has not broken into the mainstream; yet.

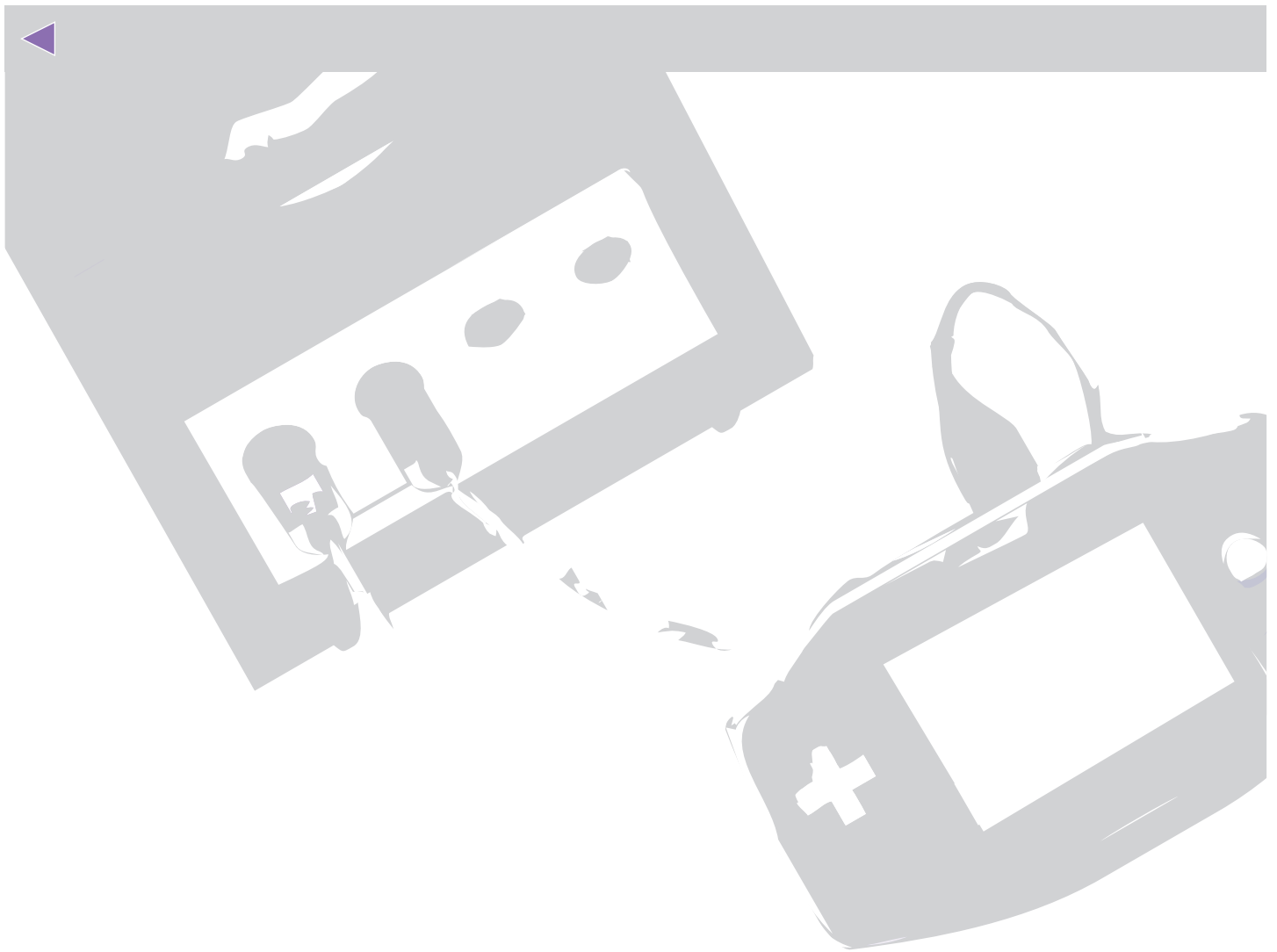
So why hasn't the mainstream embraced the concept of online gaming as it currently stands? For starters we are still waiting on the first killer app to embrace the concept of online gaming and fully exploit its features. The Xbox may have Ghost Recon, Unreal and Moto GP2, whilst the Playstation 2 offers SOCOM, but none of these will capture the imagination of the public in comparison to Gran Turismo, Mario, Halo or Grand Theft Auto. Interestingly Yamauchi-san (creator of GT series) is unsure as he recently commented "the flickering you see is a technology problem... it's not something the team has any control over. My problem with this is that the quality of GT will be reduced. It's not something I'm happy about. Maybe, it's not the direction in which we should be taking the game." From this you can deduce two things, firstly the technology isn't as fully developed as it could be, and secondly how badly GT online is needed by Sony to take its online service above ground.

For many developers the prospect of creating a console release which features online play is not only new, but also not financially viable. The prime example of this is Final Fantasy Online, created by Japanese giant Square Enix. With no experience of developing an online title, the first few months of the game were beset with server and code problems – resulting in constant updates. For such a high profile game (released on the market-leading platform) it took well over a year before the game reached profitability, and it still remains unreleased in other territories. If this was the case for a huge company such as Square Enix, then the majority of American, British and Japanese studios would struggle even more so.



NINTENDO

The future is
still offline



Beyond merely software, further problems exist that need to be overcome before online gaming can be considered mainstream. Broadband penetration in American is fairly standard, but Japan and Europe are playing catch up. There is little price competition in the UK, with the current monthly broadband charges ranging from £25-£30 on the whole. The cost is prohibitive - even if you are able to receive broadband in your area. Add to this the fact that many online releases will involve a monthly or annual fee, and then you are looking at sacrificing a game per month in order to fund your online habit.

The key philosophy for Nintendo is connectivity and followers of E3 will notice that this has been the firms' buzz word. Nintendo excels at creating offline multi-player experiences and has done so ever since the SNES. The Nintendo 64 delivered the first four player games and established the first steps towards linking with Game Boy Colour - now fully realised with the Gamecube and GBA. The Gamecube design does allow for a broadband adapter, but this has been left to third party developers to exploit. Nintendo instead will use the device to facilitate LAN releases, which promises to bring a new dimension to franchises such as Mario Kart: Double Dash. Many (mostly American) will criticise the lack of online developments from Nintendo, but I cannot help but feel that they are right. Other new experiences await; many have overlooked the possibilities displayed through realistic AI (Halo) or communication (Seaman). The latter release builds itself around an idea, which Nintendo could easily take onboard and develop further.

Online gaming might well be invigorating and competitive, but on current experience it cannot match the environment of sitting amongst friends and playing. The interaction and nature of events becomes far more personal than any online release. Here you cannot lose, and it's an enjoyable social activity. Nintendo understands these social or family values, more than anyone. Given the choice between an online evening or having some friends around - which would you choose?

My own experience of Playstation 2 online has been completely overwhelming - in the negative sense. Unlike most Telewest and NTL subscribers who can connect to the network with the minimum of fuss those of us who have USB modems (supplied by BT fact fans) face a difficult task. BT is the largest broadband supplier with over 1.8 million subscribers (and counting) that supplies its customers with a standard USB ADSL modem such as Speed Touch. Unfortunately this is unable to plug into the USB socket on your console, well technically you could, but it wouldn't do anything as the network adapter is on the reverse side, and it requires certain software.

So you are left with the option of instigating internet sharing on your PC, which with XP is straightforward enough, but a little more complex for other operating systems. Also required is a cross-over cable that will set you back £10-£20 depending on the length required. Sounds simple doesn't it? In theory yes, but given that I'm reasonably proficient with PC's and several friends work in related industries guess how many of us has managed to get this option up and running? A big fat zero. Believe me it isn't for the want of trying and phoning the

technical support at Sony, who were as friendly and informative as possible - even though it seemed they were discovering compatibility problems with network cards all the time. Going online with the Dreamcast was never as painful as this.

One of the main problems is the fact that Sony cannot supply the technical details such as DNS and ISP, which can only come from your Internet service provider. Not only that, but they cannot comment on your PC or offer advice here, because that is down to Microsoft. Initially I did wonder if Microsoft had built into XP some anti-Playstation 2 software, but you can see the complex problems that this option creates. The final solution (for many it will be a step too far) is to purchase a USB router, which BT will gladly sell you via its Playstation 2 solutions page for £100.00. Bear in mind that for most of us the direct cable, which comes bundled with your network adapter won't be of sufficient length; therefore you'll need to order one at a similar cost to the aforementioned cross-over cable. Is it worth the cost to experience only SOCOM and Twisted Metal: Black Online? Currently the answer is most certainly no.

Now after such an experience (which no doubt is being replicated all over the UK) you can see why I've rethought this whole concept of online gaming. The masses won't stomach such problems, as gaming is meant to be a leisure activity, and not one that equals the hassle of daily life. Until the hardware manufacturers can create a simple method of connection that does not involve additional equipment, then I can only agree with Nintendo. *The time is not now.*

YOUR TOP 100

Over the course of a week back in April, readers of Gamestyle were invited to email their top 10 games, here's the result of all those lists.



- | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 100: Tekken 2 | 90: Bust a Move | 80: Perfect Dark | 70: Pong | 60: Deux Ex | 50: Panzer Dragoon Saga | 40: Horace Goes Skiing | 30: Soul Calibur | 20: Super Mario Kart |
| 99: Silent Hill 2 | 89: Pikmin | 79: Doom II | 69: Cannon Fodder | 59: Bomb Jack | 49: Colin McRae | 39: Chase HQ | 29: Sonic | 19: Street Fighter 2 |
| 98: Realms / Haunting | 88: Dungeon Master | 78: Radiant Silvergun | 68: Wipeout | 58: Micromachines | 48: Castlevania | 38: Back 2 Skool | 28: R-Type | 18: Shenmue |
| 97: Virtua Tennis 2 | 87: Jungle Strike | 77: Bangai-O | 67: Tomb Raider | 57: Burning Rangers | 47: Advance Wars | 37: Gran Turismo | 27: Silent Hill | 17: Counter Strike |
| 96: Atak Atak | 86: ISS 64 | 76: GT2 | 66: Sonic 2 | 56: Splinter Cell | 46: Escape Velocity | 36: Pro Evolution Soccer | 26: Rez | 16: Pro Evolution Soccer 2 |
| 95: Max Payne | 85: Tony Hawk 3 | 75: Escape Monkey Island | 65: Red Alert 2 | 55: Yoshi's Island | 45: The Last Express | 35: Outrun | 25: Baldurs Gate | 15: Metroid Prime |
| 94: Indy 500 | 84: Stunt Car Racer | 74: Metal Gear Solid 2 | 64: Maximo | 54: Thief | 44: Secret of Mana | 34: Sega Rally | 24: Zelda: LTP | 14: Civilization 2 |
| 93: IK+ | 83: Maniac Mansion | 73: Daytona USA | 63: Lemmings | 53: SSX Tricky | 43: Resident Evil CV | 33: Gran Turismo 3 | 23: Super Mario Bros 3 | 13: Phantasy Star Online |
| 92: Jax & Daxter | 82: Ridge Racer | 72: Blast Corps | 62: Guardian Heroes | 52: Shinobi | 42: Mario Kart 64 | 32: Ghosts and Goblins | 22: Elite | 12: Grand Theft Auto 3 |
| 91: Amped | 81: Resident Evil Zero | 71: Chu Chu Rocket | 61: Double Dragon | 51: Project Zero | 41: Kick Off 2 | 31: Speedball 2 | 21: Tony Hawks 2 | 11: Championship Manager... |





And so it's finally over. The votes are in and the list is compiled - the Gamestyle Top 100 video games of all time are revealed. Rather than being a compilation of staff votes, the doors were thrown open to allow everyone to contribute. As the Marquis De Sade would say - the more the merrier.

Is this the definitive list? Honestly, there is no such a thing as a definitive list, unless you base it on sales, which as we all know defeats the purpose. Yet in light of many of lists we've seen recently, this is more balanced and includes the concept of retro. The concept of a Top 100 is extremely fashionable at present with magazine features and television programmes allowing us to categorise everything. The obvious flaw is the bias towards recent releases in any field. Q magazine would have us believe that we should own every single Radiohead album ever, and film magazines are dominated by Star Wars in spite of Slint's epic Spiderland LP or the spine chilling The Haunting.

Recent releases dominate the top ten positions, with the obvious exceptions being Sensible Soccer, Tetris and Super Mario Bros. The last two generations of hardware dominate with only Halo and ICO from the current batch featuring in the big ten. Does this highlight the lack of bona fide classics recently released? A sign of too many releases and quantity over quality? Gamestyle would agree with such sentiments and the generally feeling of apathy across the formats. Those great gaming moments have been too and far between recently, with Halo and ICO (correctly) nominated as the obvious exceptions.

Interestingly the Grand Theft Auto series failed to break into the top ten, even though it dominates recent sales charts and the Playstation 2. A common thread that links each of the top ten games together is they all managed to push the boundaries of what was expected at their time of release. Final Fantasy VII might not be the finest RPG ever, but it did set a new standard for production values and story, hence it is remembered fondly despite many of us playing it only once to completion. Tetris is the old man of the pack, no doubt helped by its various appearances ever since, but is there a better thoroughbred available?

Word of mouth is the most powerful marketing tool, and one that Electronic Arts or any other publisher cannot hope to replicate through advertising. We talk. We communicate. Word gets around fast. As a source of reference (when voted for by the public) such a list as the Gamestyle Top 100 is a useful buying guide and the instigator of much debate in the forum.

Halo certainly isn't perfect, or in my own opinion the greatest video game of all time, but how to you create a sequel to that? We'll find out shortly, but will this deflate the original vision? Should sequels only appear when a new format is released?

We live in an age of choice, where we can gouge ourselves on almost anything in the vain attempt to cover everything. It is an impossible task.

- 10: **SUPER MARIO WORLD**
- 9: **SENSIBLE SOCCER**
- 8: **TETRIS**
- 7: **MARIO 64**
- 6: **ICO**
- 5: **FINAL FANTASY VII**
- 4: **HALF LIFE**
- 3: **GOLDENEYE**
- 2: **LoZ: OCARINA OF TIME**



1:
HALO



DIGGING FOR FIRE

Times are changing: with TV coverage and stacks of identikit monthly publications on our favourite pastime, video gaming is reaching saturation point: mass market bloatedness.

Finally Spring is a memory - perhaps your finances buckled under the strain? The stampede to get product out before the end of the financial year is turning into an annual shakedown as publishers clear out their respective cupboards. Whilst such manoeuvres might be ideal for companies, the rest of us are left to play catch up driven on by advertising and high scores. This incessant demand for bigger, bolder and better games continues unabated.

Recovering from this gold fever isn't easy, stuck in a room with little daylight, game boxes littering the floor - the abomination that is Steel Battalion dominates the table. Even though preparing to play the limited edition release of 2003 is an experience in itself, those £200 plus Ebay bids are plain crazy.

Completion will be mine. Ikaruga has only been fleetingly played, despite its obvious quality. Metroid Prime remains relatively unused and Raith still haven't reached Europe in Championship Manager. This scene is no doubt repeated across homes everywhere.

There is no need to discuss time and the growing pressures of life because that's old ground. Not completing games is an obvious issue, with many reasons. My interest is the search for quality, how do we decide which games to purchase? What factors or indicators do we use in the quest for fire, AAA and great gaming moments? Is there a certain strategy, or is it just blind luck?

Originally you could rely on the arcades to be stamping ground of quality, and an indicator of a possible great home version. How many Sega Saturn's were sold on the basis of five minutes in a grubby arcade locked in combat with Virtua Fighter or flooring Daytona? Without question more than we can imagine,

as word of mouth was an effective tool. Yet today the influence and accessibility of arcades has dwindled, so much so I cannot recall the last time I visited such an establishment. Nowadays arcades are more likely to be jammed packed with gambling machines, which are more profitable than expensive arcade cabinets. The skill of rummaging through your father's jacket, or behind the sofa, for ten pence pieces has been lost.

We've lost these places in which we can congregate, inform, discuss, and display our skills. Although figures showing the decline of British arcades have proved evasive, an excellent report by Eugene Martin Christiansen (U.S. Trends in Coin-ops and Video Games) confirms my theory. In America the number of locations reached a peak of 460,000 in 1988 and has eroded to 230,600 in 2002. The number of video games in outlets reached an all time high of 2.5 million in 1992 and by 2002 had fallen to 1.3 million.

Despite the overall decline in the number of vendors the overall theme is one of consolidation, as suggested by Harold Vogel (Entertainment Industry Economics). This is backed up by the number of video games per operator, which rose from 86.7 in 1982 to 500 in 1992. Unfortunately more recent statistics for this category are unavailable, but the trend is clear and uniform to that of cinema's, which have been swallowed up by larger chains, resulting in centres in each main city or town. These establishments are centres of excellence offering a wide range of games that cater for most needs.

Trying to fill the void are dedicated retailers, where you can engage in some discussion: passing and receiving information. Even these places are exceptionally rare, you may find some solace in the Game chain, but overall knowledgeable gamers

working in retail without a hidden agenda are thin on the ground. As ever, support your local independent store, otherwise like the arcades, before you know it there won't be any left.

Those with access to the Internet can utilise the various web sites and forums that exist. The latter in most cases are extremely segregated, cliched and offer a blinkered outlook on the gaming scene. Arguments, cross platform fighting and new levels of zealot extremism are common. Great forums are the product of a finite balance, which relies openness and debate, but it only takes a few individuals to topple this act.

Despite such occurrences, word of mouth is still a favourable technique in deciding what games to purchase. Many at time I have received a phone call from a friend, who is in the middle of a store, confused over what to buy. In such situations you can only offer suggestions as everyone has personal preferences.

The great medium of our age, television, remains relatively uninterested in the gaming phenomenon. The industry and retailers may have supported the recent Game Stars event on ITV, but it failed to attract the interest of the consumer or gamers in general. The muddled categories and all too convenient nominations failed to capture the spirit of gaming or the cream of releases.

For instance the Best Sports Games category included Pride FC, WWE Wrestlemania X8 and Sega Soccer Slam. An odd combination, but a common theme of recently released games, or those about to be released being nominated was evident throughout. Yager, Pride FC, Vexx, V Rally 3 and Primal all





received at least one nomination. Most worrying of all was the Favourite Game Heroes category, which included The Rock, Harry Potter, Mark Hammond and Vexx, but overlooked Mario.

The hunt for the UK's greatest gamer was decided on a single bout of Tekken 4, which seemed unfair. This perhaps was a result of the awards ceremony overrunning and instead an intense competition was sacrificed in favour of luck and more adverts. Overall the whole programme came across as a lavish marketing event, designed to sell more units and promote more games.

A common method to seasoned gamers was buying on the basis of the developer alone. This was particularly true during the spectrum era when anything went and quality control was a concept that did not exist. Ocean and US Gold were known for their conversions, with the former acquiring any license, with varying success.

Ultimate Play the Game (see GSO #4) are perhaps the most fondly remembered label, constantly pushing the boundaries of the format. Their releases may have cost almost £10 per title (a massive sum back then) but it wasn't grudged, because you knew your money was being well spent. The addition of a Sega, Rare, Capcom, Nintendo or ID logo was often a seal of quality and an assurance that your money was being invested safely.

Now with development duties being subcontracted and licensed these logos are almost meaningless. For instance you may have bought Sega Soccer Slam thinking that it was a Sega game, when in fact it was developed by Black Box Games.

Atari – perhaps the most famous brand of all now adorns all releases from what used to be Infogrames. The French publishing giant promised to only lavish its logo on releases of quality, but looking at shelves in early 2003 revealed Splashdown and Stuntman. Still, at least both are an improvement over that E.T. release.

Cross platform releases hamper our quest even more. The infamous ID stamp may appear on every version of their enviable software catalogue, but how involved was the team from Texas? Certainly if you played Quake 3 on the Playstation 2 you realise how little input they had. To their credit ID do approve releases, and if something doesn't do the original justice, then it will receive the knock back, but such instances are rare. When ID release a new title, it is a special moment, and we realise it. However in general, the cross platform approach mocks gamers. The run up to the release of Halo was an agonising wait, just as Zelda The Wind Waker has been.

As gaming has risen from the underground slums into the mainstream, the media coverage has changed dramatically. Scores are king; just like winners on disappointing award shows. It's an old chestnut but most readers will head straight for the final score, then decide if the review is worth reading.

Somehow the majority still think a game scored lower than seven can be viewed as a disappointment. This is not the case. Five is average and this is something we believe in at Gamestyle. Even games, which score lower, may contain a nugget worth savouring; reviews after all are a matter of opinion. The latest Monsters Inc release may not hold any worth for myself, but for someone else it could be a fun and lively

purchase. There are a multitude of sites and magazines that score games, and for every good review, you can rightly find an opposite viewpoint. We all have a limited amount of spending money and it's in our best interests to spend it wisely. Gamestyle would like to think it strikes a good balance and to aid information seekers we've introduced our scores manifesto (briefly outlined below), which breaks down what each score means to us, and hopefully you.

More now than ever, buying a release that you will enjoy is fraught with danger. Impulse and risky purchases are a rarity, despite favourable quotes and widespread advertising. However rewarding releases are out there; Phantom Crash, Ring of Red, Ico and many others are deserving of your time. Identifying others is not so easy and there are no quick solutions. We must it seems, suffer, for our art.



Gamestyle Overall Review Score Policy

A guide to our 'overall' scores used at the top of each current review on Gamestyle.com

10 : Stunning - A score of 10 doesn't necessarily represent a 'perfect' game, but basically - if you own the console and like the genre, a game scoring 10 is absolutely unmissable.

9 : Excellent - You can be sure that a game scoring 9 can be considered an worthwhile purchase across the board.

8 : Very Good - An enjoyable game experience with solid mechanics and structure, quality graphics and sound - enough to warrant critical acclaim for the title.

7 : Good - A 7 score is often used to signify a missed opportunity. Either the game just falls short in a couple of key areas or it's been done better before elsewhere.

6 : Above Average - Good examples of a game scoring 6 include lazy ports and unenhanced arcade conversions that don't always take advantage of the host format.

5 : Average - You can read an 'average' game score two ways: either it's a half-decent game with a number of serious flaws; or that half of all gamers will like the game, and half won't.

4 : Below Average - A game scoring 4 shouldn't be purchased without serious thought, even for fans of the genre, and more

often that not a rental should be your first port of call.

3 : Poor - Gamestyle cannot truly recommend a purchase of a game scoring 3, and we strongly suggest that a rental should be your main line of thought.

2 : Disappointing - Objectively, a game scoring 2 out of 10 is, in a word, disappointing. It's not often that a game arrives that's so poorly developed that it's not even worth playing, but it does happen.

1 : Dreadful - £40 is an awful lot of money to ask for most games, but when we score a game 1 out of 10 you can safely assume that 40p is too much for that particular title.



The Game Park 32 (to give it its Sunday name) is a stunningly designed piece of kit - on paper around 10 times the horsepower of the GBA SP, and best of all? It's open source. Development kits are not only freely available; bedroom coding is actually encouraged.

We've not witnessed a scene like this since the Amiga; and without intentional hyperbole - the retro scene is once again alive and kicking: the GP32's home coding gurus have produced not only fully playable (and impressive) homebrew games, but also some 100% perfect ports of emulators, opening the door (finally) to portable retro gaming.

Spectrum, C64, Master System, NES, even the Atari ST - all here, all full speed. All absolutely wonderful.

BRAND NEW **RETRO**

£150 for the ability to play every game you ever remembered?

£150 for the ability to play all those games in the bath?

£150 for retro heaven? *Gamestyle had* to have one.



Sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? Initial impressions are underwhelming, though: the box isn't going to trouble Nintendo's art department, and due to the GP32's Korean source there's precious little English once you actually switch the machine on.

There's also the initial hour with the machine - fumbling around the Korean installation (which requires a web connection to download some software) doesn't really fall within the boundaries of 'fun' by any means. Once you've registered your machine (and a unique username and password) you're good to go, though. Assuming, of course, you've also been wise enough to purchase a Smart Media Card (the GP32's storage media) otherwise you'll be left staring at a rather useless menu screen.

Smart Media Cards (SMC) form part of the reason why the machine has been adopted by so many though - through a fairly simple Windows USB interface it's possible to copy whatever files you require direct to the console, thankfully such software is in English (or at least, there are hacked ports) but it's straightforward enough either way. The first thing required is the installation of the Free Launcher - a simple piece of code that sits between the GP32's own front menu (that offers MP3 playback and the aforementioned PC-link mode) that allows you to run the multitude of homebrew games and applications (including the emulators). The Free Launcher installation is automatic, but from there on in the directory structure on the SMC is up to you to understand and maintain.

Much like a PC (of sorts) different files sit in their own directories - most of the emulation software lives in the same folder, and then the roms and so on another directory deep, keeping the structure simple to get your head around, and current versions of most emulators filter out each other's files, so you won't waste time trying to load Bubble Bobble for the Commodore 64 from inside the Spectrum emulator - a simple feature but one very much appreciated once you've installed quite a few games.

Without wanting to end up reviewing each emulator, it's worth mentioning a few of the stand out ones. The principle pull of the GP32 for Gamestyle was the ability to play some classic Spectrum games on the move - and Tyrell's wonderful Speccy4k doesn't disappoint; at the time of writing he's up to version 0.5 which runs 99% of all 48k and 128k games perfectly, at full speed, with perfect sound emulation.

Those worrying about the lack of the keyboard on the machine will find that most emulators feature a 'virtual keyboard' (usually prompted by one of the two shoulder buttons) - whilst a little unruly for the text adventures, they're just perfect for entering high scores and whatnot, and the Spectrum emulator maps the Sinclair, Kempston and Cursor keys to the GP32's d-pad (you can select which via a menu) and also allows you to set redefined keys to the same buttons - coupled with the GP32's four face buttons most of the time you'll have no problems with any Spectrum game interfaces.

Save states are also a welcome feature - meaning should your bus arrive at the destination early you can save the current position and then continue at a later time exactly where you left off - half way through the last level of Outrun, in the plane in Monty Mole, or on screen 12 of Manic Miner...

One of the more technically impressive emulators is Castaway, a superbly accomplished piece of coding that runs almost all Atari ST games perfectly. The pleasure of revisiting Stunt Car Racer is one thing, but playing it full speed on a handheld is another - Castaway is consistently brilliant, and the author is always working on tweaks and improvements to the interface and engine, each successive update offering another few features; save states are now implemented.

Of course, because of the GP32's high resolution (320x240) screen, emulation of these machines is at full size, there are no scaling or scrolling issues, unless it's the Game Gear emulator which allows you to zoom in to fill the screen!

With it's powerful processor, the GP32 development scene has also produced a number of ports of existing software, the most popular at the moment is Craig's (of gbax.com) Doom - it literally smokes the GBA version - it's smooth, high resolution and without compromise - it's actually equivalent to running the original on a PC it was designed for, and the controls are mapped just fine despite the apparent shortage of buttons on the console compared with the PC keyboard.

It doesn't stop there, though - regular coding competitions means that there are ports of the classic Rick Dangerous, a smooth vector version of Asteroids and a whole host of original homebrew games, many of which are available free. So, whilst the GP32 isn't exactly going to trouble the Gameboy Advance's huge original software library, the simple fact that you can play 10,000+ old retro titles (and counting, with new emulators appearing daily - including SNES and Megadrive) means that, for fans of the old school, the GP32 outshines the competition.

Get over the initial hurdle of the less-than-user friendly way of thinking, and the rest is simple and intuitive, and because the scene is such a friendly, open one you'll always find help from owners familiar with the system.

Buying a GP32:

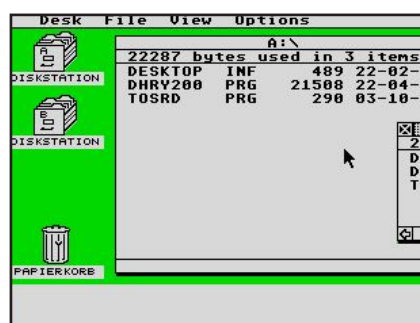
We found www.gbax.com to be friendly, reasonably priced and damned quick (we got our GP32 the next day). You'll need the GP32 console and a Smart Media Card, with VAT and postage (special delivery) it's roughly £150 if you go for a 64 meg card, which is plenty big enough. If you want a front-lit screen, it's a little more expensive.

News and downloads:

Probably the best English-language site is www.gp32x.com - it has lots of free downloads, daily news and a lively, friendly message board. There are others, namely www.gp32emu.com and www.gp32news.com, but each site seems to feed off each other and share the news, so pick your favourite and you won't go far wrong with any of them.



The amazing GP Engine - a full speed, highly compatible PC Engine emulator.



The ugly but functional green desktop of the Atari ST - Castaway plays most ST games at full speed.



Commodore 64 emulator Frodo playing Commando, one of many great C64 games.





GP32 at last years ECTS
source: gp32x.com

asterix*

Posted: Jun 25 2003, 08:28 AM

Hi GP32x.com,

I'm currently putting together issue 5 of our pdf magazine and the main feature is the GP32 - I'm just posting this to see if there's anything anyone would like to say about the GP32. Basically we've got room for some fan soundbites so if anyone has any little quotes, paragraphs or whatever they'd like to see in print (if you will) about why the machine is so wonderful just post away.

Cheers guys,

Alex

EvilDragon

Posted: Jun 25 2003, 09:11 AM

Finally a way to take game classics like MULE, Spindizzy Worlds, Rock'n'Roll, Turrican, Sonic the Hedgehog with you wherever you go

zimba

Posted: Jun 25 2003, 10:09 AM

The GP32 from Gamepark is the perfect handheld console for any retro game lover.

clawski

Posted: Jun 25 2003, 10:20 AM

gp32 a great way to watch porn on the lool!

abbibi

Posted: Jun 25 2003, 11:01 AM

It might be good to point out that once you've bought the GP32 and a blank SMC, there's nothing else to buy (other than commercial games and programs). To get silimar capabilities on a GBA (homebrew games, movie playback, mp3 player, etc) you have to buy a whole bunch of \$30 to \$100 accessories.

davek22

Posted: Jun 25 2003, 11:59 AM

Portable SNES, Megadrive, PC Engine, Game Gear, Atari ST and Doom 1 & 2 all without changing a cartridge on a machine the size of GBA? What is there not to like!! Get one today!

Omizzay

Posted: Jun 25 2003, 12:09 PM

Nintendwho?

StudioX64

Posted: Jun 25 2003, 12:26 PM

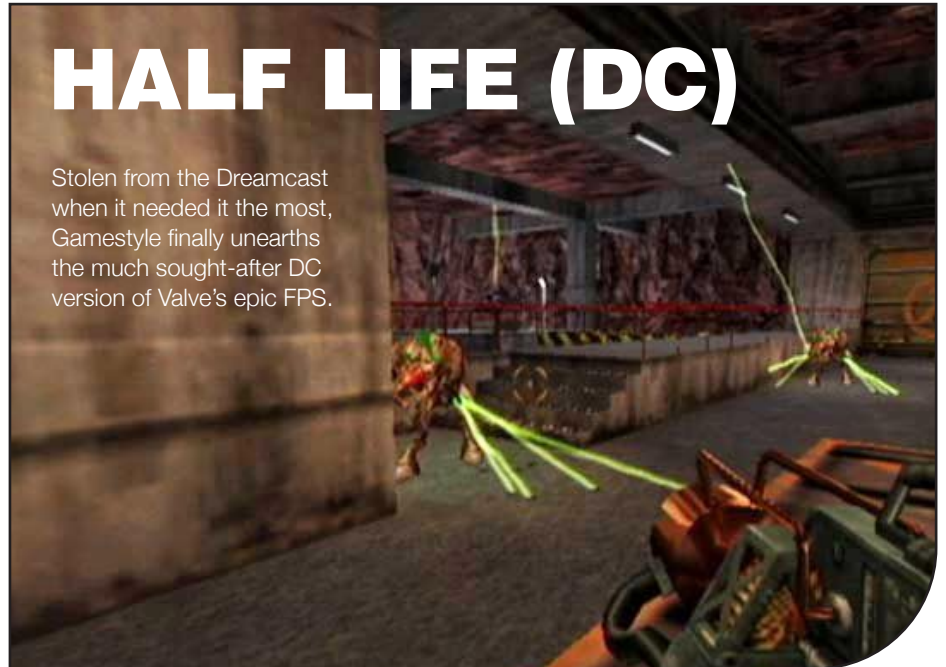
"A programmers dream come true. Finally a portable computer with a freely available software development kit, both functional and easy to use". The good 'ol days of games programming are back at last!

Swiss_Cheeseman

Posted: Jun 25 2003, 12:33 PM

Be careful when it comes to emulation, as its pretty much illegal, unless you use homebrew roms (heh, unlikely).

Castaway has legitimate uses though, and ports of Doom, Day of the Tentacle etc are legit. Also, a the divx player can be used legitimately (however, its being taken down soon, hopefully a homebrew project will be able to replace it).



HALF LIFE (DC)

Stolen from the Dreamcast when it needed it the most, Gamestyle finally unearths the much sought-after DC version of Valve's epic FPS.

If there was a pivotal moment in time that encapsulated the chagrin, the mortification, of Dreamcast owners everywhere, it was the day their beloved Half-Life was canned. Touted as the last 'great' game for the system, it was this precognitive announcement which perhaps set the tone for Sega's wholesale abandonment of its hardware, ie, the switch to multiplatform development. Yes, the scalping of Half-Life really was that significant.

And on the evidence of the unreleased beta, which has somehow miraculously surfaced after two lost years in hiatus, it's easy to see why. Even in a pre-alpha (ie, pre-production) state, the game's tempo is brisk, penetrative and moody, perhaps mirroring the qualities of its largely estranged console audience. That it also possesses the classic traits and high watermarks of its PC parent should be a given too, because there isn't a great cornucopia of available FPS experiences - at least on Dreamcast - that 'give' as much as Half-Life.

With the behemoth that is Half-Life 2 looming large in the monocular scope of Valve's followers, it doesn't bear repeating the first exploits of Gordon Freeman, the everyman hero. But for the benefit of those presumed living under a rock (which by association must include Dreamcast owners, j/k), here's a brief recap. You, the player, are Gordon Freeman. You're a scientist. You work for the Black Mesa Corporation. You handle 'anomalous' materials. On your way to work one morning, something happened... you tripped and fell; your anomalous materials ripped a hole in the fabric of the (unknown) universe. Aliens are now among us. Black Mesa disavows knowledge of your actions. You are deemed a threat, a liability. You must be silenced. You must survive.

Twee. Survival horror with a big bang theory, and punctuated with a lab flask of manual dexterity. These are the days 'opined' and pined for by Dreamcast owners everywhere. Days denied, dreams defiled, and long NIGHTS (sic) spent reimagining the past. The melancholy ends here. This is Half-Life. This is Dreamcast. This is now.

Ironically, what should've been the last great game for Sega's embattled console was the first great game for Valve Software, a Seattle-based codeshop presided over by Gabe Newell and Mike Harrington, both ex-Microsoft program analysts whose avowed distance from videogame convention has allowed their first venture to eschew safe and predictable boundaries. Indeed, once inside the pressurised, homogenised world of Gordon Freeman, players are at risk of playing too much. Call it a blessing or a curse, but the oft-maligned ability to quick-save your progress can lead to obsessive, insidious bouts of repeat endeavour - your foreknowledge of events actively goading you; conditioning you to do 'better'.

And fair play to the events. As the drama unfolds - and paramilitary forces (aka Black Ops) take freakish delight in checking your progress - your own progress can be checked via any number of sonic barriers. From the outset, voice direction is a key part of the adventure. Whether it's Black Mesa scientists barking in your ear, the comforting automated tone of your 'Rad Suit' monitoring system, or the overheard clatter of enemy comms forewarning you of an ambush, it's all masterfully implemented and provides layers of immersion which pan out like nothing else on Dreamcast.

As a token of how truly great this conversion COULD have been - had it received commercial release - Valve co-opted the support of Gearbox Software to upgrade the character models and clean up the textures. When viewed in SCART resolution or better (ie, VGA), these crisp clean lines certainly belie the age of the engine. It's becoming cliché nowadays, but as the shock of the 'new' subsides, more and more players are coming to grips with Dreamcast's forgotten potential.

Even the remapped controls for Half-Life fit like a glove (sic). By default, it's a faux imitation of Halo - ie, looking with analogue, moving with the facial buttons - and works just as efficiently as any comparable product on the system (think Unreal Tournament, Soldier of Fortune, Kiss: Psycho Circus for examples).

In fact, for an unfinished beta, those laggy frames compare favourably too. For the most part, the game runs well, but Gamestyle did encounter odd moments of collision bugs (Gordon getting caught on scenery), unfinished line-of-sight beneath water, crude smoke effects, and one instance in particular where 'Gargantua' - one of the leviathan aliens - simply refused to move, his logic trigger apparently misfired.

Speaking of triggers: In these post-Halo days of elegant weapon design (with assorted reload and incidental animations), it's hard not to be impressed with Half-Life's 'pre-Halo' attention to detail. Gordon knowingly caresses his laser-activated tripmine; he purposefully toys with a remote explosive device; he gaily teases you by brandishing a silly Alien weapon. What's more, your targeting reticule automatically dances back and forth, faultlessly drawing a bead on anything that moves. It's inspired minutiae.

And the trimmings don't end there. In what must rate as one final understated concession to Dreamcast owners (well, to those who have located the beta), Half-Life arrives with an entire 'mission pack' in tow. Coded again by Gearbox (also responsible for the PC add-on, Opposing Force), Blue Shift is a self-contained game comprising some 30 levels with the player taking control of Barney Calhoun, one of Black Mesa's security guards. The story runs in tandem with Gordon's, although new locations and events unearth a wealth of playable options.

And that, in the end, is the undisputed high-point of Half-Life's tragic and unceremonious existence; it is now finally PLAYABLE on Dreamcast, it has now finally come home. Granted, its intended audience may've been caught napping - and its once-betrothed publisher needs to sleep with the fishes - but for an otherwise cognitive market, Half-Life for Dreamcast is one dearly-marked tombstone.

Gamestyle score: 9/10
Steven Wrangell

gso⁵

CREW

Art Design/Editor
Alex Carroll

Chief Writer Contributions
Jason Julier Steven Wrangell, Dean Swain

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