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# GSO<sup>7</sup>

gamestyle.net offline magazine



the Xbox's finest moment?



# GSO<sup>7</sup>

The one with the Ninja

Everybody loves ninjas.

*"It feels great to finally lift the veil of secrecy surrounding Ninja Gaiden. This game has been the subject of more rumors and speculation than any other title I've encountered. The original Ninja Gaiden games on the Nintendo Entertainment System sold well over a million copies in the US market alone, so there are a lot of fans out there who have been clamoring for this for a very long time. Everyone we've spoken to has been raving about it."*

Tecmo's Director of Sales and Marketing, John Inada, at E3 last year.





# GSO<sup>7</sup>

The one with the Ninja

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- the full gamestyle review

## Credits

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2D  
Paper Mario uses lots of Gamecube to push lots of sprites



Whilst much of the gaming world is screaming out at Nintendo to produce something original, the recent Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga proved one thing - the Nintendo magic can still work with the familiar 2 dimensional visuals if the story and gameplay are up to scratch.

Whilst PAL gamers never got the chance to get to grips with the Nintendo 64 version of Paper Mario hopes are high for a global release of it's true sequel; recently announced and confirmed with a deluge of screens (and the obligatory exclusive Famitsu scans around the web) but precious little actual information, speculation is once again rife on what Paper Mario 2 is all about.

With Nintendo's usual policy of holding back the important details until later in development, we only know a couple of things about the game: firstly, that it will feature some platforming elements alongside the roleplaying and minigame aspects, and that Mario will be able to fold himself into a paper aeroplane at key points in the story, presumably as a transport method as opposed to simply being bored in the office.

With Intelligent Systems back behind the wheel (the creators of the N64 original and of course, the sublime GBA Advance Wars series) and what looks to be a generous portion of the Wind Waker

engine producing the bulk of the 3D backgrounds (Mario and co will still be in gorgeous flat-o-vision though) everything certainly looks to be in place. A Japanese launch is hoped for before the end of the year, with Western releases presumably early next.

Here's looking towards this year's E3 for the first gameplay details on the game, then.



Something borrowed...  
And lots of Wind Waker to push the 3D bits, it seems





# GSO<sup>1</sup>

## PS2 Preview | Juiced



### Fast and Furious

Juiced shows off its solid-looking car models in this high res render

Too often nowadays, racing games are defined by a solitary experience - their spell broken by online moments or split-screen competition. Juiced takes a different tact to the standardised modes, suggesting real improvisation with its crew-based action. Here you form teams with friends, and set out to win races by employing various tactics (like those seen in Formula One and TOCA). Put simply: if your teammate is outperforming you, then consider the option of blocking rivals to ensure victory for your team.

This scenario - and countless others - looks set to 'juice' up the possibilities of online encounters; creatively bridging the scenic routes offered by the likes of PGR2. Adding further to the flavour is an option to bet on the outcome - or trade valuable parts online (thereby allowing for greater freedom and diversity when upgrading your mechanical beast of the road).

After revealing an early build of Juiced, its developer has now retreated - firmly committed to that September release date.

There is much to do, but already it looks as if Acclaim has the ideal replacement for its departed Burnout series (now under the auspices of EA). Bon voyage... and happy (smoke) trails!

When UK codeshop Rage folded in early-2003, so too did its impressive stable of titles currently in development. Most saddening of all was the axe falling on Lamborghini - potentially the most promising Xbox racer at that time. To make matters worse, many Xbox owners had already sampled its delights courtesy of the exclusive demo which accompanied the Official Xbox Magazine.

Those all-too-brief glimpses detailed a visual panache alongside intuitive handling which was on track to uphold the Lamborghini name. The title was allegedly purchased by Electronic Arts who plan to use the technology for future releases - albeit there is no indication the original game will ever see the light of day, no doubt due to a host of potential licensing problems.

Seeing years of heartfelt endeavour effectively trounced must be disheartening, however the team responsible for Lamborghini have picked themselves up, dusted off their misfortune, and formed a new company. Based in Cheshire, Juice Games is mainly comprised of former employees from Rage's Warrington studio. After finding their feet with some mobile phone games, their first console project is Juiced - a game that promises to take on Burnout and build upon the Lamborghini experience. Acceleration and speed is very much last season's vogue: adrenaline, luscious graphics and flamboyant lighting will only get you so far, and thankfully, the

team behind Juiced recognise this. Unlike most newly-formed outfits, it seems Juice Games have hit the ground running - over fifty licensed cars are set to feature, but in this release they will include realtime damage (an offshoot of the extensive vehicular modelling undertaken for Lamborghini) and enough customisable options to outlast an annual subscription to Max Power magazine. Juiced looks set to entice those long-suffering Tokyo Highway Challenge fanatics and anyone suffering a hangover from the slightly staid Project Gotham Racing 2.

The signs are promising, but what else can another entrant offer above the aforementioned racers or even the Gran Turismo series? For starters, there's more depth - and a feeling that you are a driver; building up your reputation and machinery. Need For Speed Underground may have hinted at this potential, but it was unidimensional and commercially overrun by the glitz of the presentation. Juiced promises a more tangible dynamic and an avenue for 'enterprising' gameplay (or stunts as they're commonly known).

By offering respect points and cash, the game ekes a kudos system similar to PGR2, however it places the driver in a quandary: drive in style and enjoy respect, or throw caution to the wind for monetary gain? Just what other enticements are in place to bolster your unique driving style remain to be seen, but Gamestyle is already practising.



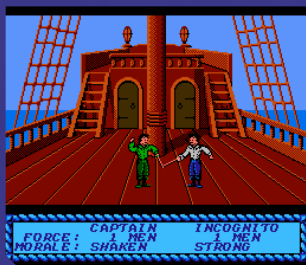


**Snake Rattle and Roll**  
Rare's criminally underrated NES gem deserved more than it got

You know the routine; you pick up the latest issue of your favourite videogame magazine and quickly scan for scores at the bottom of each page - before coming to the bit about gaming platforms from years gone by.

Below the obligatory picture comes the history of the console, mixed in with some technical jargon about what it can do and how it revolutionised gaming back in the day. This is usually accompanied by a selection of hand-picked games for that system - developed by obscure companies and selling on eBay at prices that would shock the real estate market.

So, does the average 'next-generation' gamer have an interest in all these rarities of the golden age? Gamestyle doubts it; apart from the truly hardcore players, most people couldn't care less about building a hundred-strong collection of games for an ageing system.



However, even the most casual of gamers have been known to smile gleefully when someone mentions a game from their youth. With this in mind, let Gamestyle guide you through the sensible side of retro - introduce titles that you might actually play instead of placing on a shelf; and point out those gems of yesteryear which didn't fall foul of limited production runs, only came out in America, or could only be claimed with 300 tokens obtained from a Japanese cereal packet. So, without further ado, let us introduce our first subject for examination: The Nintendo Entertainment System (or NES, to its friends).

Keeping it simple, the NES was - and is - an eight-bit gaming console that runs on cartridges loaded into the front. And is largely responsible for the success of console gaming as we know it.

Fortunately for casual players, most games on the system are still fairly cheap - although as time goes on cartridges become harder to find, and together with the odd re-release appearing on the Game Boy Advance, prices of franchise titles (such as The Legend of Zelda) have been known to temporarily rise. But this is of little importance... the NES has such a wealth of games that if anything costs you more than about eight pounds, you should really be looking elsewhere.

The 'average' next-generation gamer is not going to spend huge sums of money on an old system when they can go out and buy the GTA Double Pack for thirty quid - so the following recommendations are

approximated to equal the asking price for a next-generation game (about forty pounds). Obviously, prices can vary somewhat but Gamestyle has enough experience in these matters to offer an educated opinion on their relative value. So let's start the shopping excursion.

As well as your local independent stores, car 'boot sales' are a good place to find the discarded treasures of the past... though these days they are seemingly filled with people who think their copy of Zelda is worth more than an Xbox.

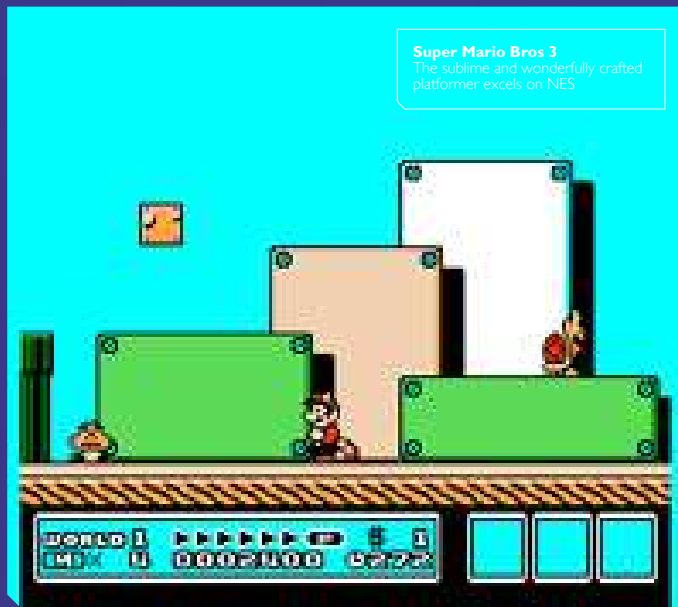
Here's a hint: THEY ARE WRONG. If you should come across such foolishness, try eBay instead, where prices of (boxed) NES games range from about three to twelve pounds. The system itself - fully-boxed and in good condition - should cost you no more than ten pounds. There are a lot of vintage consoles around, so keep looking if someone is charging stupid sums.

This will leave around thirty pounds in your wallet for game purchases - so you can probably get at least five or six games if you are patient and buy shrewdly. So, what to buy?

Gamestyle would argue that most eight-bit games need to have a certain 'pick up and play' appeal, and further provide a fresh alternative to titles already available on the market.

With this in mind, we present a few recommendations of what to buy over the page.





First off, **Super Mario Brothers 3** - a landmark title in platform gaming. The game is fairly huge and enjoyable; due to the numbers sold there are loads of them around, and should cost no more than five to ten pounds (boxed with instructions). What you're getting for your money is a masterclass in level design, and something that should hold your attention for some considerable time. If you find the third (in the series), there really isn't much point to getting the other two... leave such things to collectors (we are shopping on a budget, after all).

Secondly, we have another platform title - **Snake, Rattle & Roll** (see pic on previous page). This game is pure class; developed by Rare, it is a candidate for the most underrated game ever to be released upon any system (let alone the NES). Taking control of either Rattle or Roll, you must make your way through isometric levels eating things in order to grow... all the time avoiding a large assortment of bizarre enemies (including toilet seats and sharks). Levels end when you reach a set of scales that need to be jumped on in order to open the exit (as long as you have eaten enough, that is). With great gameplay underpinned by an excellent soundtrack, it is an outstanding, quirky title readily available and going for around three quid.

Gamestyle's third recommendation is **The Legend of Zelda**. Cheaper and far more enjoyable than the second game, the first console incarnation of the long-running Nintendo franchise is an isometric

adventure built around negotiating some excellently designed dungeons (while collecting items and fighting nasty boss monsters). A tad slow-paced perhaps, but with a good learning curve and loads of innovation, it's a bargain at around eight pounds.

Fourth on our list is the almost-unheard-of, Rare-developed, **Cobra Triangle** (image above right). Here you take control of a super racing boat in a game that's brimming with variety and enjoyable moments. One level might see you rescuing drowning swimmers, while others consist of blasting huge sea monsters or trying to leap over whirlpools. Excellent controls, good graphics and sound - coupled with highly addictive gameplay - make this a real treat; and the fact that it's fairly unknown means it tends to go for as little as two pounds on occasion.

Next, we come to an odd choice for an eight-bit system - a beat 'em up. **Battletoads/Double Dragon** is the sequel to the classic Battletoads; another Rare-developed title where players get the choice of five differing characters for smashing their way through some nicely-conceived levels full of bad guys, speeder bikes and a strange 'Asteroids-type' shooting clone. The title can be difficult to track down, but a visit to eBay should fetch you one for between five to ten pounds.

Finally, we come to Gamestyle's last recommendation; **Pirates!** - one of the best games for the system. Imagine an eight-bit Grand Theft Auto set upon the



high seas (and crossed with Pirates of the Caribbean) and you would be getting close.

Filled with numerous things to do - and a non-linear approach to attacking ships and towns - helps to distinguish a game that would not feel out of place on the Game Boy Advance. Again, another hard-to-find title that also requires a map for navigation. A trip to eBay will see you 'plundering' a copy for a tenner.

So, there we have it... yes, there are a number of NES games that are more famous, but in terms of value for money and availability, the six titles mentioned should be more than enough to entertain those of you willing to try a bit of old-fashioned gaming.

Simply put: if you're concerned that games such as Final Fantasy, Elite and various others did not make the recommendation, then you're a collector - a member of the gaming elite who already knows what games he/she needs (as you look through your fifty-strong collection of mint-condition, boxed titles displayed in alphabetical order). For the rest of the gaming community, these titles should serve well enough for your taste of yesteryear. Bon appetit!

Gareth Chappell

Snake, Rattle and Roll image: © 2003 Alexey Petrenko - <http://www.nsu.ru/personal/petrenko/games/>

Various game shots: <http://www.vgmuseum.com>

Most so-called 'cult' games are crap. A left-over fanboy splurge, a self-indulgent waste of resources and money; *Treasure-is-God* die-hard's will even defend the interesting but hardly *Treasure* Freak Out until their eyes go red, blue and yellow. *Cult*? Of course. *Crap*? Possibly. There are others, of course, but the defense of sub-par games treads into playground territory; we'll let *other* magazines and websites rant and rave about those.

Look at *Rez* now, without the notion of 'being-there' at the time of release, and you'll wonder what all the fuss was about - sure, there's nothing quite as abstract as stretching out a bosomed lady's behind and slapping her with it, but as far as on-rails shooters go, it's not exactly middle of the road. It is, in fact, about as self-consciously retro as it's possible to get, and yet manages to do so much that's not even been attempted since - it's the very definition of a 'cult' game - short, replayable, *inaccessible* and, to Mr FIFA, just plain stupid.

Which is fine, of course. Sega knew this, and even demonstrated just how niche their once-dubbed Project K really is by a strictly (and harshly) limited release, especially on Dreamcast. A further PlayStation 2 outing might have grabbed a few more converts to the cause, but it's safe to say that most copies in your local GAME were returned to the distributors, rather than picked up impulsively only to return to the bargain bin the next week. eBay bids for the increasingly rare Dreamcast PAL original are testament to that. So why the status? What makes *Rez* so different to the likes of *Freak Out* to it's fans? It's not the music (for the most part Japanese distorted techno and UK Resistance favourite Adam Freeland). It's not the graphics, which resemble a mix of 1982 *Star Wars* and one of Jeff Minter's wildest creations. It's not even the control

and game mechanics, an obvious homage to then U-GA's stable mates responsible for the creation of the Panzer Dragoon series (and, natch, the said *Star Wars* coin-op).

It is, wonderfully, all three. Separately, the music is 2 bar up-your-own-arse art-wank - the likes of which would result in any self-respecting DJ getting the bullet and the graphics, whilst quite lovely in the context of the game don't exactly sell themselves in still frame. The controls are rudimentary to say the least too - one directional control and two fire buttons will confuse any gamer brought up on multi button Controller 'S'. No - when combined, *Rez* becomes everything it has and effortlessly fuses into much more than the sum of it's parts: in motion, the graphics pulse and writhe to the beats, so gloriously locked in to the flow of the game, the







enemies and the surroundings that you wonder whether it's not some super-brain inside the console, rather than supposedly 5 year old technology.

If you've never played, seen or even heard of Rez before, you might be wondering what the game is actually *about*; and therein lies another one of Rez's USPs - the 'story' mode aside (dealing with evolution, love, fear and shooting things), the experience itself is quite unique, and whilst in disparate splinters nothing really seems to make sense and things might not 'click' immediately, after an hour or so, everything falls into place - and then you're hooked.

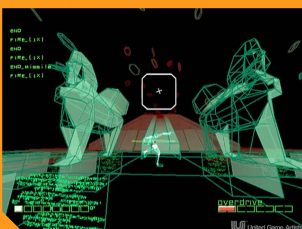
Whilst such a potential masterpiece for Dreamcast, surely a PlayStation 2 port could increase the user base and make more of the general public aware of what they were missing? Sadly, this wasn't the case - stock arrived early (without fanfare)

and was restricted to too few copies to really make an impact.

Despite positive reviews in the specialist (and a frame rate double that on Sega's machine) Rez still didn't perform at retail, and UGA's finest game to date was lost amongst that month's FIFA and Tomb Raiders.

Cult? Yes. Crap? Gamestyle doesn't think so - it's one of our collective all time favourite games, and will most likely remain so for many years, for those of us lucky enough to be a part of the Project.

Until now, because rumour has it that a remake from the team responsible is planned for both Nintendo DS and Sony's PSP machines. It won't be Rez by name (due to copyrights owned by Sega) but it will be Rez by nature. Stay tuned to [Gamestyle.net](http://Gamestyle.net) for updates.



**Turning a hobby into a business is a risky adventure, regardless of your idea, capital and willpower.** For James Macpherson he decided to take his love of video games onto a new level and open his own independent video game store in Edinburgh – Gamestyle (regular visitors may recall) ran a news story to celebrate.

Games & Movies opened in March 2003, and is now over one year old, so for GSO we decided to catch up with James, and over the course of a few hours on a Saturday morning (and cups of Earl Grey) discussed his experiences of having his own video games shop.



**GS: So why did you want to open a video games shop?**

James: Well, I enjoyed games and movies, so it felt like an obvious progression. The main part of the shop is video games, with a small part being DVD's. Another reason to have my own shop was as I worked previously in GAME (whilst studying Business Studies at University) for three years and that was an eye opening experience. I had good ideas whilst working there, but it was such a machine organisation with management controlling every aspect. So with this in mind I decided to open Games & Movies, which I view as a long-term project where we are slowly building up and improving things.

**GS: Walk before you can run?**

James: Exactly, by taking such an approach I can keep costs under control and roll out improvements as things improve.

**GS: How much planning did it take to start up your own business?**

James: When I was at university doing the Business Studies Degree we covered all the various aspects in great detail that you need to consider, which was very useful. Also the GAME experience gave me an insight into how the video game industry

as a whole (from a retailer's perspective) functions, and working for the largest UK operator was the best position to be in. It showed me the strengths of the industry and the weaknesses and issues that I had to consider – and those of GAME as well. Then the trick was to put all of this experience into practice.

**GS: Such as?**

James: GAME has the wonderful ten-day return policy, which unfortunately I cannot afford to do. Customers buy the game, play it, and then return the game to the store – where they just put it back out on the shelf. When we launched in March 2003 the store initially did a loyalty scheme that I hoped would build up a loyal base of customers.

**GS: And it didn't?**

James: No unfortunately I realised that the majority of customers were just using it to obtain a sizeable discount on their first purchase, and never returning. So you learn from your mistakes and adapt – we're all driven by price and love a bargain, so the focus is on price now. But getting back to the ten-day return policy, I'm of the opinion that once something is played its second hand and used – you cannot sell it on again as being new. I can't offer that flexibility.

Customers shopping at Game may (unknowingly) purchase a game that has been bought several times previously even though they've paid the full price for that game. More competitive pricing, mint condition and informative customer service are the things I focus on now.

**GS: Just how hard was it to overcome various obstacles to set up your own shop?**

James: It is very hard, and its no surprise that many businesses do not last past their first year.

**GS: Anything in particular?**

James: I created a business plan and went to the Princes Trust, who told me I would never manage to sell my quota of games. I've managed to beat that quota on a consistent basis since opening. But if institutions like that are created to help young entrepreneurs start up new businesses, and don't help because it isn't fashionable to invest in a video game shop then its no surprise that independents are fading away. Stupid costs are another thing that many probably won't expect.

**GS: For instance?**

James: Well, I don't really have any need for water in a video games shop but it still costs me £500 regardless. Then add the rates and rents (which we've removed from the interview, but these are thousands of pounds) and you have to sell a lot of games just to cover things like these. It would have made more sense to open a sandwich shop as the cost of stock is low in relation to games, and the stock tends to turn itself over on a daily basis.

**GS: Any advice for someone considering starting their own shop?**

James: It can't just be a games shop you need new ideas and features to attract customers, such as Pay-2-Play, which encourages customers to try out games, or experience Xbox Live when they don't have broadband. We also sell refreshments and snacks to make things as comfortable as possible. Also I did most of the work physically putting the shop together – saving on carpenter costs and such like. Save money for the long run. However unless you've got loads of money or great ideas then don't – it's as simple as that.

**GS: What about Pay-2-Play? (For those not aware this is where customers can play a game of their choice on a Gamecube, Xbox or Playstation 2, complete with widescreen television, for a specified amount of time)**

James: It started off in June 2003 as the business was going really well, but summer was approaching, and I thought knowing my luck it will be the hottest summer in ages. So I needed a reason to attract and maintain customer interest, plus it adds life and colour to the shop.

**GS: Most purchases such as furniture, cars and even food you can try before you buy, so it makes good sense.**

James: Exactly. There are many youngsters in the area that cannot afford to buy all the games they want, especially after a manic Christmas release schedule. So this allows them to get out and play a game at a fraction of the cost of the Blockbusters rental. If they decide to buy the game after playing it then we can do a discount, which I think is good service yet again. Overall it's helped greatly during the summer months and even now in January (as the interview was taking place all three machines were being used).







**GS:** You've obviously expanded on this with the competition idea – almost feels like an arcade!

James: True, we hold the competition on a Sunday every fortnight, with a new game being played. The maximum that we allow is sixteen competitors and the winner wins a game of their choice. We also have an overall league to encourage everyone to consistently return and compete – enjoying themselves at the same time. Tomorrow, it's the Halo competition. It also builds friendships amongst gamers, plus the advantages of being held on a Sunday are pretty obvious.

**GS:** How do you compete against the major chains?

James: In a word you can't as everything is balanced in their favour. Things such as marketing, which I cannot afford to, do at the moment. I am always looking to improve the shop and signage is certainly one area of improvement. Dalry Road is an extremely busy street with pedestrians; traffic and public transport passing right outside the door; but getting them to come in is the key. Word of mouth is vital as well – the longer I am in business building things up, the more this will increase.

**GS:** What issues currently concern you with video games industry from a retailing perspective?

James: It so seasonal, especially at the moment post-Christmas when most of us are struggling to reach the January payday. The whole boom and bust scenario is ridiculous, as we're currently talking in January, and it's only around Easter that things will really pick up again. For a business that's too long to wait. Getting back to the major chains or even online retailers such as Amazon, who can sell new releases for

£30 when in reality they are £40. As an independent I can only buy in such releases at that price (£30) before adding any hint of profit to it. So you have to be very selective on what you stock and at times sell at a loss to clear stock and generate more funds for newer releases.

**GS:** No doubt release dates figure as well?

James: Of course, it's a major problem at the moment, and I've found myself calling other retailers telling them not to break release dates. Technically I've broken these

as well, but only when I'm absolutely sure someone else has in the area.

**GS:** So you don't use the unnamed retailer excuse that others do?

James: No I only sell when I am sure, however as I get most of my deliveries on a Thursday it's hard to break release dates in reality. I've lost out greatly because of the major chains, in particular Tomb Raider, Primal, GTA (Xbox), Soul Calibur 2 and Project Gotham Racing 2.

**GS:** Some of the big releases.

James: Yes, and because a chain has their delivery on a Tuesday and has started selling then, my pre-orders have gone elsewhere and bought the game. Customers who have come into the shop, and who I have spent time with selling the game to them.

**GS:** It must be frustrating.

James: Totally. I'm left with stock that I cannot sell immediately because word about so and so breaking the dates spreads like wildfire. Therefore games, which I would have sold over the course of a week or weekend, now take much longer to sell.

**GS:** How would you rectify the problem?

James: Those who break release dates should be fined, but there should also be a criminal prosecution. For instance I was told by Rockstar not to sell GTA on Xbox

until its January release date, but imagine my feelings when GAME started selling it on Christmas Eve. Enforcing the rules would ensure that everyone keeps to the date, I'm sure they do this in other countries such as Holland, and something similar needs to be done here. No favouritism – action regardless of who or what you are. The whole situation used has become much worse over the past year as retailers compete against one another, trying to hit each other's pre-orders. When I was with GAME they used to be really good at sticking to dates, but now it's far more relaxed, but it's not just only them; Comet, HMV and Dixons do it as well. In reality independents have the most to lose by not selling the game early, but we're the ones who are sticking to the dates.

**GS:** How do you compete against some of the exclusive promotions the big chains enjoy?

James: Again, you cannot in reality. For instance HMV are currently selling Soul Calibur 2 for £19.99, which is a great deal, but it's still a full-price game. Either the HMV buyers have bought too much stock or they've negotiated a special deal. In reality it devalues the game, as once its seen on sale for that price, customers expect it to retail everywhere at that price. I have now discounted Soul Calibur 2 to 19.99 as it has now become the official price. (price has dropped since interview)

The Prince of Persia Playstation 2 pack is a great deal at £129.99, which some of the



chains are selling it for. Its RRP was £159.99, but I try to be more flexible in the packs that we sell, offering more choice and further discounts on peripherals and additional games. However consoles are the big sales, but they don't really make any profits as these come from the accessories and games sold in future purchases.

**GS: Choosing your stock must be a serious decision?**

James: It certainly is, as its very hard to tell what to buy in at times, but obviously crucial to the success of the business. You often get a feel for titles in advance, through word of mouth, marketing and reading reviews online or in magazines.

In the case of Dog's Life it was a quirky release, which I believed just wouldn't sell and had received mixed reviews – so we didn't stock it. It is hard to get the right balance, as unlike the majors I cannot stock everything.

**GS: You can't get it right every time.**

James: No of course not, but then you have a title such as Zelda The Wind Waker, which was one of our biggest orders, but it took ages to sell these copies. After the initial interest, sales just nose-dived on that, which we didn't expect at all. Then you have Mario Kart on the GameBoy Advance that continues to sell at £29.99 even though it's an old title now. Then things that happen, which are totally out of our control.

**GS: Such as?**

James: Well for instance SCEE's Primal, which was one of the big releases in the quiet March period last year. I had ordered in copies in expectation of selling these easily but then GAME started selling it early, but also were able to negotiate an exclusive limited edition version in a silver sleeve with free soundtrack CD. The final insult was the limited price of £19.99 for that version. Instantly removing any of my sales and making the normal full-price version useless. It's an unfair advantage that the majors are exploiting with increasing regularity.

**GS: Brands must also play an important part in attracting custom?**

James: Yes, they certainly do. I often find that first-time customers are dubious of us or other independent retailers because we're not a recognised high street chain or famous brand. They think that the goods we sell are of inferior quality, and the prices reflect this when all we're doing is offering better service with better prices.

Here we avoid opening games and using sleeves – I wish publishers would send out dummy sleeves, as I always want to hand over sealed games in mint condition. That



way the customer knows what they are receiving is in untouched condition, not something that has the manual forced in with the CD hanging out. However in reality its hard to obtain point of sale material, which is mad because I don't charge for adverts or instore posters or stands, but trying to actually receive these from distributors is extremely difficult.

**GS: How hard was it setting up relations with distributors and publishers?**

James: I put it into my business plan, so in advance I had contacted the publishers and distributors who I wanted to deal with. What many don't realise is how many there are out there: Centresoft (sony), Gem (Xbox), Pinnacle (EA), Koch (Nintendo), and a wide variety of other third party companies. At first it was complicated but you do need to do business with the main companies, but there are also issues with the majority of them.

**GS: What sort of issues?**

James: Hidden costs again such as minimum orders, which I can understand, but some such as Centresoft have a minimum order of £300+. That is an awful lot for a few restock items, however others can be great, as Pinnacle only ask for £50 which is much better for someone like myself. Then some add on delivery charges, even though

deliveries can be late and in reality cost you sales. All the little costs add up. Unfortunately at the moment its not a level playing field, and I know all about economies of scale, but its ridiculous.

**GS: Ah the old economics theory, care to explain further?**

James: A level playing field is what retailers like me need. We should all be able to purchase games at the same price. But Amazon is able to sell games at £30 and still make a profit despite their overheads. Amazon are often supplied by Gem, who for instance could supply me Project Gotham Racing 2 for £31.20 – even though they supply it to Amazon for less!

So what I had to do was order fifteen copies from Gem to satisfy the initial pre-orders, which were already disrupted by GAME. Then I ordered twenty from Amazon because I was able to save £1250 before even putting them on the shelves. It's pure madness, and unfair trading as it makes you wonder what Amazon is paying for titles, as they have overheads to consider as well.

There is confusion in the industry as games should retail for £40 but thanks to loopholes and tactics customers now believe games should be £30 – putting me at a serious disadvantage because I do not want to rip off my customers.

**GS: What releases have surprised and disappointed you in the past twelve months?**

James: Enter the Matrix was surprisingly popular when originally released, it sold well even though it got some mixed reviews. Just shows what hype can do. I was also surprised at quite how popular Star Wars KOTOR was on the xbox.

Devil May Cry 2 and obviously Primal, were both a little disappointing. Also certain games sold far better on other platforms. For instance Fifa, LOTRs, Medal of Honour and Tony Hawks were all extremely popular on the PS2, however on the Xbox they did not sell well at all in comparison which was odd, as I have a fairly good xbox following in the shop.

I guess Xbox owners were too busy buying Project Gotham, Grand theft, Rainbow Six 3 and of course Star Wars KOTOR.

**GS: When you reach your first year anniversary do you plan to do anything special?**

James: I think I will hold a small party for my best customers and friends who have supported me over the last year.

I will figure something out by end of February so you will have to come along!



**GS: How do you view the formats (Xbox, PS2, GC)? Are there too many in the market? What could each do to improve their sales and status?**

James: I think there is only really room for 2 consoles. Obviously the PS2 set itself up as the market leader through bringing the console out nearly 2 yrs before Xbox arrived. Coupled with brilliant marketing, brand strength and a constant flow of varied new releases the PS2 has not only got over its stuttering start to become by far the most popular console on the market. A large amount of people buy it to play dvds and on occasion games. The Xbox is a funny one it had a very good initial launch and then it just stopped selling due to its high price and lack of games at the time. Despite dropping the price the xbox continued to be outsold heavily by the PS2. It wasn't really until Xmas 2002 that the console started to sell well even though it was being outsold by the PS2. However 2003 in my opinion was a year which xbox

did very well. Competitive pricing and a growing library of games helped the console establish itself. The xbox will never out sell the PS2 but it does seem to have established itself and has some stunning games coming out on it so I think that Mr Gates does not have too much worry about now.

The Gamecube launch was even bigger than xbox's launch. The amazing price and good launch titles help launch the title into the market. Unfortunately a couple of months after release it sales plummeted. Lack of good release, dvd playback and suspicion of failure (after N64) meant the console was lagging in 3rd place. At Xmas 2002 the GC sold dismally. After xmas retailers such as Argos flogged the console off cutting there losses. These price cuts caused a great deal of interest in the console and sales picked up. Unfortunately Nintendo didn't cut there prices and throughout most of the year the console continued to trail. It wasn't until the console finally got

cut 79.99 that it really began to sell. Over xmas GC sales went up over 80%, breathing a fresh breath of life into the console. After Xmas 2003 and looking into 2004, Sony have very little to worry about as they have established themselves firmly as the market leaders. The PS3 will no doubt be a huge success unless Sony do something outrageously silly to it. The Xbox has also managed to prove its critics wrong by entering a very competitive market and establishing itself as runner up in the console market. It will be very interesting to see where Microsoft take the Xbox 2, could it give Sony some serious competition next time round? The Gamecube in my view seems have also established itself as a budget console. My only concern for it is that it can continue to get developers supporting and making new games. I think Nintendo will really have to do something special if it ever wishes to compete with sony or even Microsoft with next gen consoles. I hope they do not lose too much money trying to match the other consoles.

In my opinion Nintendo make some of the best games (sorry Sega!) and so in my opinion belief they should just stick to making games and of course GBA SP which kicks the N Gage's arse any day.

**GS: So what plans do you have for the future?**

James: I am planning a Website possibly which will exist mainly to promote the store itself. Its still in the planning stages but I would envisage this being used to create pre-orders and promote the store to Edinburgh and beyond. On the site front I cannot compete against the likes of Play and Amazon, but I can use this again to spread the word of mouth. There is a Cash Generator nearby that pays peanuts for video games, whereas I always try to give a more favourable price.

Gamestyle would like to thank James for his time and wishes Games & Movies all the best in the future.

## games & movies

### INSTRUCTIONS

Pay to Play allows you to try before you buy, giving you the chance to play any game on any console before you make your purchase for just £2 per hour. This will then be deducted from the price if upon purchasing the title.

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Along with the requisite troupe of outspoken fanboys, each new generation of consoles brings a gleaming new catalogue of racing games. It's hard to beat the visual impact of driving dream vehicles as a way to show off new hardware; assembling an appealing collection of cars - with generous opportunities to put them through their paces - guarantees that "oohs" and "aahs" will follow. On Xbox, Project Gotham Racing followed the formula with technical precision, delivering one of the best launch titles. Flash forward to the present day, where its sequel arrives amid a transfigured landscape. Whilst prior success made this follow-up a foregone conclusion, it did not assure similar results. Racing sequels already face the difficult question of how to take the same basic concepts and make a compelling new game.

Today's more mature Xbox landscape - abloom with eye-catching graphics - adds another degree of difficulty to the test. Bizare Creations answers with all the polished poise of a professional; with Project Gotham Racing 2. Or should that be PGR3? Because, chronologically, the series started life as Metropolis Street Racer, back on Sega's Dreamcast. This latest iteration reflects the refinement of its cumulative time in development - but does it finally realise the promise seen in the first game? Predictably, the first step in crafting PGR2 was to offer more: more cars, more

cities and more racing. So much more, in fact, that only the most fanatical of race fans will endeavour to work through every section to the highest level of completion. The main single-player mode - the Kudos World Series - delivers all the racing action of a complete game in and of itself, but the variety doesn't end there. Three modes of arcade racing, two modes of time attack, and an instant action mode give PGR2 enough content to occupy months of competitive gaming. And that's before factoring in Xbox Live - but more on that in a bit.

PGR2 whets the appetite with a broad selection of 102 cars (across 14 classes) straight out of the box. Open spaces for downloaded cars tantalise the hunger; with the mysterious allure of potential future additions. Of particular note: a collection of Ferraris, ranging from the classic 275GTB through to the latest uber-exotic Enzo, making this the finest ever assembled for a videogame.

Whilst keeping with tradition, only two cars are initially available in each class - however the others are not entirely off-limits. An innovative showroom feature affords the opportunity to stroll around (in first-person fashion), inspecting the entire stable of cars as if transported to the world's most exclusive dealership. Fancy a test drive? Hop right in and wrap your taste buds around the flavour of unlockables;

ownership that can only be satiated through competition in the main game.

Once again, Kudos return as the 'car keys' necessary for opening these tempting new vehicles. This third generation sees the system finally honing an elegant trade-off of risk versus reward. For those new to the series, Kudos are points awarded for spectacular driving. While previously only earned with "stylish" manoeuvres - powersliding, catching air and the like - sound racing technique now also pays off in points. This addition opens the door to new and creative ways of extending the combo chain (needed to score big Kudos). A little more forgiving than before, each successive Kudos-earning move adds both points to your stash and a link bonus.

Crashing before your stash is banked loses only the bonus - a penalty yes, but one allowing credit for the completed moves. Even collisions benefit from the new spirit of forgiveness, with some accidental incursions into the wall (or other racers) now possible without penalties. At the successful completion of each race, earned Kudos go towards an overall total that determines your Kudos rank. Each successive increase in rank comes with the reward of Kudos tokens - which may then be used to purchase locked cars for competition.





And that competition sees more of the world than James Bond on assignment. From Stockholm to Sydney, Washington DC to Moscow, a total of ten cities host the races (each with something like six to twelve course arrangements of their streets). Photorealistic describes not only their appearance, but also the manner of their creation. Three-person teams visited each location, recording both digital stills and video diaries of the intended courses. In game, the final result of this extremely arduous modelling process is breathtaking. This graphical nourishment comes with but one compromise - streets are completely bereft of life (outside of the occasional flock of birds). Sadly, zero tolerance of bystanders, opposing traffic or parked cars contributes to a landscape of almost surreal post-apocalyptic atmosphere.

All the globetrotting provides more than just a pretty facade. Each locale imparts a sense of character to the tracks: Barcelona's old world charm and narrow streets demand precision driving, whereas the wide pavements of Moscow lead to more open-throttle tactics. If all this were not enough, in a dramatic departure from the street racing, PGR2 provides one more track - the mighty Nurburgring. Perhaps the most demanding circuit in the world, experiencing all thirteen miles and 73 bends of this lovingly-recreated mountain road/racetrack amounts to racing nirvana.

Enthusiasts might need a gentle tap - to remind them that they can indeed drive the 'apparition' of their dreams the first time it appears on screen. As if driven off the pages of the manufacturer's brochure, every subtle contour, signature grille, badge and detail has been reproduced in exquisite fashion. A stab of the accelerator brings these still images to life. Convincingly-natural lighting plays across every surface, in concert with accurate reflections and shadows, to convey a real sense of motion. Even when clocking speeds in excess of 200 mph, the framerate remains steady. Although Bizarre's decision to lock the action at 30fps drew much criticism, it results in barely negligible lock-ups - and almost 'Zen-like' levels of slowdown-free drivability. Driving skill, as ever, remains in the hands of the operator, and at these speeds contact with walls is all but assured. However, there is no stifling the grimace at the resultant damage. Yes, that's right, damage is modelled graphically - but thankfully only for cosmetic effect, so racing continues unhindered.

With PGR2, the ears have no cause to be jealous of the eyes. One growl of the F40 at full throttle reveals the attention given to reproducing each model's exhaust note perfectly. When combined with convincing tyre effects, the aural sensation of driving at speed is significantly enhanced (and thereto the immersion).



**Barcelona**  
Sun-baked, gothic and 2000 years old, a perfect racing circuit, then.

PGR's signature radio simulation returns too - and adds the finishing touch to this transfiguration of driving through 'real' streets. Over 200 songs (complete with a localised selection of DJs) resides on the disk, or - for the ultimate custom experience - it supports user soundtracks compiled from the hard drive.

Already holding a full hand, PGR2 plays its trump card with Xbox Live. While the service isn't exactly new, its first year of operation passed rather unremarkably. PGR2 changes all that. After years of facing only computer opponents, racing against real competitors from around the globe delivers one of gaming's historically-memorable thrills. Just as the first shots fired in Quake forever changed shooters, racing will never again be the same. But PGR2 goes beyond just online multiplayer. Unprecedented integration of Live into every aspect of the game heralds the arrival of a new era in online gaming. As a broadband-only service, every Live subscriber brings an always-on connection to the Net. PGR2 taps into that resource by establishing connectivity at the start of each gaming session (multiplayer or single). In the single-player game, this allows for realtime updating of every player's best run on each course. Complete a run and almost immediately it compares to the 'Top Ten' list; along with options to compare to scores around it and the Friends' list. Struggling to complete a

challenge? Those Top Ten runs automatically upload to Live's servers and are available for download. Pull down the top two or three scores and get an instant tutorial from the reigning champs. Looking for worthy competition? Download a ghost of the top Time Trial from any circuit and try to supplant it as king.

The almost obsessive attention to simulating everything else leads naturally to the assumption that PGR2 is a racing 'simulation'. It's not. Nor is it entirely an arcade racer either. Evidence of the efforts made to improve realism begin with the cars themselves. Where in prior versions they seemed to float weightlessly just above the tracks, PGR2 conveys a truer sense of appropriate mass. This in turn re-establishes the sense of connection with the ground. In motion, the handling model does an excellent job - with the impression of tyres offering only a limited amount of friction, to be used in either braking or cornering. Try and do both at the same time and they lose their grip, resulting in a slide. Inexplicably, PGR2 somehow fails to apply the concept of weight-shift - the other key component in the cornering equation. Left in limbo between simulation and arcade, the control's initially intuitive feel is deceiving; and requires an awkward struggle to artificially correct the cornering line. Practice soon fosters the skill to master the controls - however incongruous they may be - but it cannot steer around the identity crisis

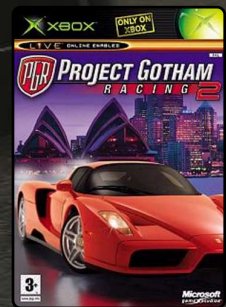
which faces the single-player game. Five medal, or difficulty, levels offer some relief from the high frustration of the previous two versions. Completing all the stages for Steel, Bronze and even Silver proves challenging yet enjoyable. The first signs of trouble appear at the Gold level; computer-controlled opponents revert to their old ways of recklessly ramming and disrupting races. It soon becomes clear that winning requires almost perfectly maintaining the racing line - without the 'stylish' moves that earn the bulk of the Kudos. Even the most avid and skilled players will struggle on the devilishly-difficult Platinum challenges. At that level, failure to beat the pack through the first turn all but assures defeat at the hands of the demolition derby (whilst a single leader pulls away - flawlessly carving every turn).

Crossing the finish line, the troubles 'transfigure' as simply an unfortunate crack in PGR2's windshield - a blemish, but nothing so crippling as a flat tyre. After learning the control regimen, it only takes a few adjustments to drive each model with aplomb - all the way up through the mighty 660-horsepowered Enzo. So, turn up the radio, blast through the streets of your favoured international locale - preferably with a few friends on Live - and PGR2 works its wily magic. In no time at all, it becomes apparent the packaging may require one more label: "WARNING! Product may be habit-forming!"





**Nurburgring**  
13 miles of pure racing heaven, and therefore the last track to unlock!

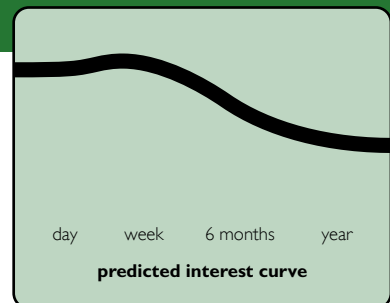


### Project Gotham Racing 2

**Score:** 8/10  
**Reviewer:** Garnett Lee

**Genre:** Racing  
**Developer:** Bizarre Creations  
**Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios  
**Format:** Xbox DVD  
**Region:** NTSC/US

**Players:** 1-4 Players  
Live Multiplayer  
System Link 2-8 players  
**Saves:** Hard Drive  
**Vibration:** Yes  
**Sound:** Dolby Digital 5.1  
**Music:** Custom Soundtracks  
**Live:** Real-time play, content DL  
**Screen:** 4:3, 16:9, HDTV 480p



**Deus Ex: Invisible War has the potential to take your breath away.** Chances are, however, that you'll probably be holding your breath as the game decides whether or not it's going to crash. Gamestyle isn't quite sure who should be fronting the blame, but having thrice replaced its review copy, there's no question that stomach-churning 'bugs' are waging an Invisible War with the player. Every war has its casualties - will YOU be one of them?

Holding its breath for the umpteenth time, Gamestyle reflected. It's hard not to fall in love with the delicious backstory; the tangible icing that so gloriously cakes the conspiracy-filled manifesto of JC Denton. Having thwarted a despotic bid for global domination in the original Deus Ex, UNATCO (United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition) peacekeeper, JC Denton, apparently took leave of his senses...and disappeared for 20 years. Pacifism - or its next of kin - never dies, because Alex D (for Denton) has been co-opted by disparate factions to uncover his whereabouts. For a game that espouses freedom of choice, it certainly divests those choices with the available player-avatars. The manual may boast of "three" male or female identities, but you're essentially getting one (per gender) palette-swapped choice. Bah, and humbug.



Given that Deus Ex: Invisible War is a console-exclusive for Xbox, you'd certainly be expecting some attractive polygons. Well, Alex D otherwise lives up to "her" ambiguous image; she's thoroughly plain and featureless. Not that it matters - outside of the cutscenes, you're essentially working from her optical interface (ie, HUD) so all eyes should be on clean and responsive management. In this respect, Deus Ex 2 doesn't disappoint.

To the left of screen is your Toolbelt and health meter, to the right is your Biomod abilities and EMP (Electromagnetic Pulse) gauge. Biomodifications are like steroids of the future - they genetically enhance your abilities and are upgradeable throughout the game. Unfortunately, they have only three levels of improvement, and when you're maxed out you can't 'modify' the changes (unless you overwrite the ability, which means acquiring new Biomod canisters). Throughout those idyllic sections of bug-free performance, Gamestyle can't say that it had a problem with Biomod infusions. Certainly, the Black Market ability to control bots, cameras and turrets (via view transference) brought a swanky assurance to our side, and similarly, the remote piloting of a Spy Drone made for some brittle moments in the sub-zero clime of Antarctica.

**A case for Mulder & Scully?**  
X-Files style Greys mix with near-future architecture in Deus Ex: IW





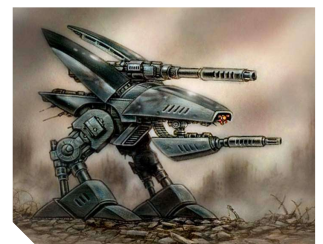
Deus Ex: Invisible War isn't wholly convincing as an emancipatory experience; locations are quite often sparse and desolate and the developer appears to be infatuated with volumetric space. For no good reason, there is a preponderance of packing crates, or dumpsters, or ladders and ventilation shafts. And then there are the loading screens...LOTS of loading screens. You don't actually 'travel' to new areas, you circumvent a series of transient interruptions (or crashes, natch) before the action continues. But when it does, you'll be thanking the gods of gameplay for such quintessential delights.

Like Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, conversations can be struck with literally every character in the game; secondary goals abound and there is a quite tantalising dalliance to be had with a 'virtual' pop star (ie, NG Resonance) who is accessible via realtime kiosks. While your confidence is stoked everytime you complete one of her virtual objectives (and she does claim to acknowledge you - if only from afar), it's a somewhat acerbic and sobering reality that 'bytes' when you finally DO cross her path. And of course, should you make it to the UNATCO Ruins on Liberty Island (and transport the Flag of Freedom to Manderley's bathroom, thereafter flushing the loo), you'll be whisked away to the 'DX2 Wrap Party' - where every principal avatar in the game can be caught dancing (including NG Resonance, whose knickers are finally visible).

Elsewhere, a nod is given to the Havok middleware engine, which allows for 'ragdoll' physics that certainly ramp up your enthusiasm. Forgive Gamestyle its avuncular musings, but wading through the flotsam of lifeless bodies (see: Mako Ballistics Laboratory) certainly revived images of a gentler time; when the likes of Lara Croft could literally pass through the disengaged textures. It may sound macabre, but Gamestyle couldn't resist shuffling the bodies...receptionists in particular proved comedically agile.

In many ways it's criminal that PAL code has proven to be buggy, because Deus Ex: Invisible War fairly screams at replay value. For starters, there's the option of playing through again as the opposite sex, and because you're free to choose allegiances, many of the game's fringe locations (and missions) are easily missed. There are four degrees of difficulty (adjustable in-game), and AI proved particularly responsive to sound cues and player prompting; as did the emergent dialogue (reportedly drawing from a vocabulary of 15,000 words). Lights and shadows were suitably immersive, although we did note the unwelcome spectre of aliased edges on objects.

In light of its prevailing problems, Gamestyle would advise that you save manually to hard drive, and do so regularly. As incredibly ambitious and well-plotted the execution, Deus Ex: Invisible War falls slightly short of towering. If only those crash bugs and loading times were near-invisible, we'd be unapologetically, opaquely positive in your praise.



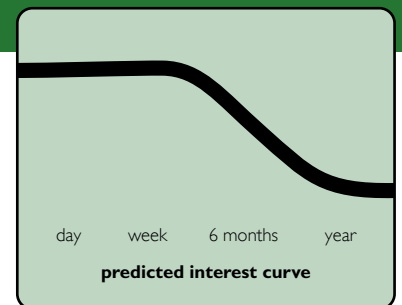
### Deus Ex Invisible War

**Score:** 8/10  
**Reviewer:** Steven Wragnell

**Genre:** FPS/RPG  
**Developer:** Ion Storm  
**Publisher:** Eidos  
**Format:** Xbox DVD  
**Region:** PAL

**Players:** 1

**Saves:** Hard Drive  
**Vibration:** Yes  
**Sound:** Dolby Digital 5.1  
**Music:** Default only  
**Live:** None  
**Screen:** 4:3, 16:9



# GSO<sup>7</sup>

## GBA Review | Iridium II



It's unquestionably true that games which may be considered average on a home console can breathe more easily on the GBA. After all, when you're relaxing on the sofa with your feet up, your standards will undoubtedly be higher than when you're crammed into a sweaty tube train inhaling the underarm odour of some pot-bellied commuter. It's fair to say that if Iridium II had appeared on a home console it may well have floundered in the realm of mediocrity, but when housed on Nintendo's plucky handheld it becomes an entertaining affair that only disappoints when you realise how close it comes to brilliance.

Although Gamestyle realises that great graphics alone do not make a game, the graphical prowess of Iridium II is really a sight to behold. It's hard to believe that the beautifully-realised 3D backgrounds are not polygon-based, but instead cleverly constructed using sprites. The fact that the visuals are easily the match of anything seen on the PSone - and would not seem terribly out of place on the current generation of consoles - is testimony enough to the achievements of developer Majesco. A more gorgeous GBA game you will not find.

This, however, merely magnifies the crime that is Majesco's decision to implement a password save system. Such a constraint would've been poor (yet more forgivable) on a home console, but on the GBA the necessity to either remember or record a password whilst on the move is ludicrous. Fortunately, Iridium II is enjoyable enough that Gamestyle was just about able to overcome this gripe.

Whilst Iridium II will never be a match for the Ikarugas or R-Types of this world, it nonetheless remains a thoroughly enjoyable shooter. More importantly, it remains an accessible one - although this proves to be very much a double-edged sword. While the aforementioned titles are challenging

to all but the most experienced of gamers, Iridium II is far less challenging. The easy setting can be cleared with relative ease, and whilst the hardest setting will prove a challenge to most, it may well prove a pus hover for shoot-em-up veterans.

Unfortunately, this problem is even greater during the end-of-level boss encounters. If the player has managed to collect and store all of their smart bombs throughout a level, then bosses can sometimes be eliminated without any work whatsoever - since three smart bombs are often enough to destroy them without a single shot being fired.

Also frustrating is the near-superfluous weapons upgrade system. Six weapons are available, and each can be upgraded three times. The differences between them are fairly inconsequential in practice: certain weapons will be preferable to others on a few of the levels, but on the whole the choice of weapon is mainly determined by the player. Although up to two of your weapons can be upgraded in each level, it's generally better to focus on one weapon and use the remaining power-ups to charge your shield. In an unusual step, all upgrades are lost at the end of the level - a move that almost reduces Iridium II to a collection of shoot-em-up mini games. Surprisingly though, this format works remarkably well on a handheld and does not detract from the game in the slightest.

It seems however that Iridium II's graphical supremacy comes at the price of precision. There are times when your ship's collision detection seems a little suspect - the game uses a perspective that sees you advancing into the distance, meaning that the play area narrows as you approach the top of the screen. This leaves you less room to manoeuvre and accentuates the collision issues. The lushness of the backdrops also means that on some of the levels enemies are not spotted until you've collided with them... though this hardly

constitutes a problem on the whole because Iridium II rewards a player for perseverance. Once the 16 levels of the Story mode are completed, a further two game modes become available - and then your 'real' challenge begins. Arcade mode sees the player take on any chosen level with only one life, and the emphasis is shifted to scoring points rather than survival. In Challenge mode, the goal is to clear all of the game's bosses with a single life; and whilst boss battles can feel a little uninspired at times, there's no denying that it's an awesome challenge. Unfortunately, high scores aren't recorded on the cart - with Majesco instead offering a net-ranking facility. Although this may appeal to some, it's far from ideal for a handheld title. Also, once you've completed the Story mode it then becomes locked; because the subsequent password is needed to open up Arcade and Challenge modes. This means the player can sometimes be required to remember two passwords (depending on which part of the game they wanted to access), something that is totally unacceptable. Yet, despite its somewhat onerous limitations, Gamestyle would not hesitate in recommending Iridium II to any shoot-em-up-loving GBA owner - a

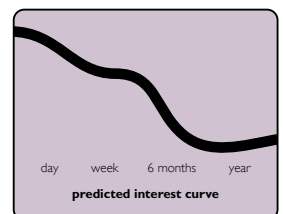
statement that is testament itself to the quality of play. The fact remains: long after you've clocked the game and seen all that's on offer, you'll still be going back for the odd go here and there, and at the end of the day, that's the best recommendation indeed.



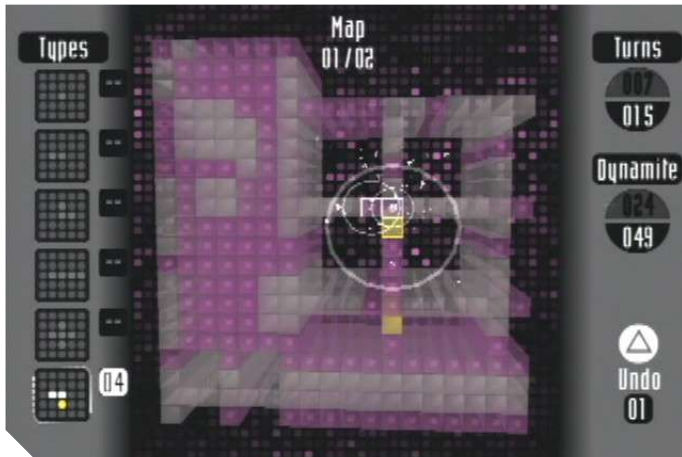
### Iridium 3D 2

**Score:** 7/10  
**Reviewer:** Ben

**Genre:** Vertical shooter  
**Developer:** Majesco  
**Publisher:** VU  
**Format:** GBA cart  
**Region:** PAL  
**Players:** 1







A majority of videogames deal with the destruction of everything that's within striking distance of the game world. Detonator therefore comes as a refreshing change - as it removes the munitions from the mind of the player and instead draws exclusively on their brainpower. Yes, Detonator is merely another 'puzzler', but one that lights an irresistible fuse.

As with the better releases in the genre, Detonator owes a debt of gratitude to games that have come before; namely Tetris and Mr Driller. Taking on board the strengths of these particular games, Detonator unsurprisingly involves blocks (of dynamite) and a stacked challenge. Each map is laid out in the framework of a building that is earmarked for destruction. As you place each block it explodes, and like Namco's enjoyable series - subsequent to location and adjacent blocks - this can spark a chain reaction throughout the entire structure. The aim is to complete the challenge within set parameters and receive your reward - a basic cut sequence that shows the building being destroyed.

However, as easy as it sounds there is a great deal more to Detonator than just piling a few blocks onto a map. Firstly, the learning curve of the Main mode is well-paced, as more complex structures are tackled over numerous maps. Rather than worry about which block will randomly arrive, the developer has given the player a full range of options - from choosing which blocks to select from, and being able to rotate each block in turn, the challenge is determined through the number of blocks you can use and this acts as a barometer of performance. On reflection, the Main mode serves as training; as it lays out the skills that are required for the more complex challenges that await.

Not merely content with the ever-increasing complexity of buildings, new blocks are introduced with special abilities that will test a player's confidence. Crack-inducing

dynamite blocks can be laid out to spark a chain reaction across an entire map - however the number of times you can place such highly-explosive blocks is predetermined (adding yet more pressure upon the player). Further consideration must be given to the types of blocks that are already in place, as some can be prematurely damaged or made from harder material. The latter can pose severe problems - as they prove even more stubborn than the infamous Top Gear Mitsubishi 4X4.

Despite the intricacies of the Main mode, nothing can prepare you for the insane challenge of 'Challenge' mode. With ninety-nine stages to circumnavigate - and no respite in the form of save points or lives to call upon - failure to clear a stage here means ultimately repeating the stage. It's all or nothing, and to make matters worse each stage is pitted against the clock. Not only does Challenge mode become a source of frustration - and ultimately a test of skill - it's a monumental memory challenge (where trial-and-error paves the way).

Understandably, Gamestyle has yet to savour the fruits of the final stage - and will doubtless be spitting venom when it fails miserably - but this mode is always there, ready and waiting for the bravest of souls to contemplate. For those who enjoy similarly heady releases, this will prove a constant source of annoyance and enjoyment. For those lacking the patience of a saint, or with particularly low thresholds for pain, Detonator will devastate; it's simply not recommended.

The last featured mode seeks to introduce some much-needed multiplayer mayhem - ideally to balance the solitary confinement of the torturous solo experience. Disappointingly, there is only a single Versus mode spread over four maps, which are randomly generated to prevent unfair advantages. There is no provision for co-

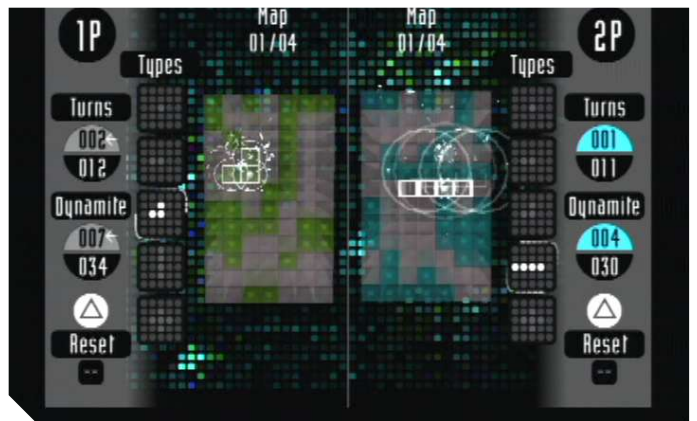
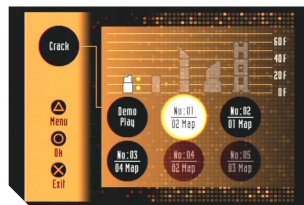
operative play - where players might've worked to demolish substantial portions against the clock. Perhaps such issues could be tackled in a sequel?

Visually, Detonator follows a futuristic theme - with functional graphics and a sterile feel that mirrors the level of concentration required. There is nothing on screen to detract from the experience; instead a simple framework allows the player to focus on the tasks at hand. Even the accompanying audio and 'computerised' voice samples enhance the atmosphere.

While there is much to fathom and indeed overcome in Detonator, it is a limited release that could have benefited from a few more strings to its bow. An obvious example might've been the chance to

design your own maps and upload these for other players. On the subject of uploading, what could've been better than online combat in a vein similar to Amplitude?

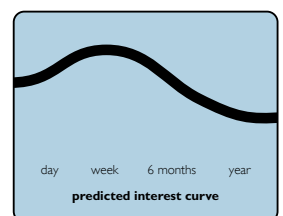
Without question though, Detonator represents extremely good value for money - for here is a concept that is superbly executed. The best puzzle releases share an addictive quality that cuts straight to the heart of gaming, and Detonator derives the same lifeblood. The fact that it retails for less than £15 is simply stupendous, and should not be judged against its overall quality.



### Detonator

**Score:** 9/10  
**Reviewer:** Jason

**Genre:** Puzzler  
**Developer:** Kadokawa Shoten  
**Publisher:** Midas Interactive  
**Format:** PS2 DVD  
**Region:** PAL  
**Players:** 1





# GSO<sup>7</sup>

Xbox Review | Prince of Persia



Persian royalty last visited the land of videogames four years ago, after an absence that spanned a generation. While by no means a bad game, Prince of Persia 3D found little purchase with its (PC) audience; perhaps missing the magic of its predecessors in an increasingly console-oriented world. Unrecognisable to most today (and a distant memory to the rest), the character credited by many as the originator of action-adventure videogames returns with a fantastic tale to reclaim his lost glory.





**Balancing act**  
Not shy of a few tricks, the Prince can move with the best of them

**Prince of Persia: Sands of Time** seizes the imagination immediately - with the exotic allure of ancient middle-eastern lands. Inherently permeated with a sense of mysticism, wondrous adventures spring to mind without any conscious effort; a perfect stage for this classically styled tragedy of treachery and redemption that begins when his father's traitorous Vizier (Gamestyle Word of the Day™ - a vizier is a councillor of state; a high executive officer in Turkey and other Muslim countries) fools the Prince into using a powerful magic dagger to unleash the cursed Sands of Time from their enchanted hourglass. These sands sweep through the castle, wreaking destruction and twisting every living being into fearsome sand creature parodies of their former selves. Spared this horrible fate by the dagger's power, the Prince sets out to return the sands to the hourglass and thwart the Vizier's evil plan.

For anyone concerned that the formula was growing stale, guiding the Prince on his ensuing trek affirms its ability to deliver an unforgettable experience in the hands

of a master. Acrobatic feats, puzzling environments, frantic melee - pieces that had come to feel commonplace in many games - regain their lost lustre. Ironically, much of their rejuvenation comes not from some spectacular innovation but simply from the near-perfect pacing of the game; its comfortable flow (regularly punctuated by save locations never placed too far apart) alleviates the artificial tension generated from the dread of replaying the same area in countless tedious attempts to reach the next save point. Instead, the game itself supplies all the excitement. Each save point also offers a psychic vision of the challenges awaiting the next section - a devious way of achieving the "just one more level" knife-edged exhilaration to play a little more. Returning the titular sands takes the Prince on a winding journey through the treacherous maze of crumbling architecture and hostile sand creatures that the palace and its grounds have become. Play alternates between two distinct styles - exploration and combat. While repetitive, the sequencing allows each portion to stand on its own without distraction.

Remembered glimpses (from the save point visions) help to ignite a search of the environment; the Prince tentatively scouting the path ahead for ledges, balconies, ropes and anything else suitable on which to cross. Acrobatic displays that would be the envy of circus professionals follow in short order, thus picking up the pace. It reaches a crescendo in the tumbling, black-flipping, scimitar-slashing blur of clearing away hordes of sand creatures from the new area's save spot before restarting the process again. And always throughout, a natural flow developing from the consistent focus on the Prince's athleticism.

Brilliantly-conceived sections of the broken palace - all masterfully designed to take full advantage of the 3D world - pose a daunting challenge. The Prince must call upon a deep repertoire of acrobatics to move up, down, over and around the many obstacles in his path. Prince of Persia eschews the videogame penchant for requiring arcane button combinations to execute the most important moves, instead favouring simple and intuitive controls. This



approach makes pulling off breathtaking feats more a matter of getting in tune with the character than learning a complex control string. Two adaptive action buttons produce all the moves; from running along walls (Matrix-style) to swinging rope-to-rope like Tarzan (as befits the situation). Vaulting about the palace soon becomes second-nature - leading to eager anticipation of the next section.

Similarly straightforward combat emphasises an instinctive feel over controller technique. A perfect fit for the battles, that customarily sees the Prince beset by three, four or more opponents at once. A single-attack button slashes with the scimitar, while the adaptive action button produces escape moves. Together they allow the unleashing of a flurry of strokes while tumbling around opponents. The combination of motion and aggression creates an unparalleled sense of fluidity; using the controller as a baton, conducting this bladed symphony - with a flick of the stick here and a stab there - orchestrating the action with all the instrumental flair of a practised recital. Yet it is as free-form as an open 'jazz' session.

The dagger that caused all of the trouble becomes not only an indispensable aid in the Prince's quest, it also solves one of gaming's all-time greatest vexations. As the controller of the sands, the dagger has the ability to draw them up and then expend them in various manipulations of time. The Prince finds the first (and most useful) of these powers the moment he picks it up - the ability to rewind time. This one ability removes the single-greatest impediment in adventure games: frustration. Miss a jump, mistime a leap; whatever the source of an untimely demise, a simple pull of the left trigger rewinds ten seconds before the event (thus allowing it to be avoided). And thus lifts the threat of a reset after death, restoring the element of fun to exploring and experimenting.

The dagger also comes in handy in combat where it can freeze opponents like stone, slow the world to a crawl, or ultimately enable the Prince to take out several enemies in the blink of an eye. Proceeding

through the story, challenges smoothly increase alongside one's ability; keeping everything balanced. Increasingly difficult parts of the palace and more intense battles are countered by the dagger's parallel capacity to hold the Sands of Time (and expend yet more abilities).

The visions provided at save locations highlight tricky sections, particularly ones that require new moves. Once learned, these new moves gradually acquire more use until they become second-nature. The balance attains the sweet spot of enough resistance to uphold the challenge while never grinding play to a halt.

A magnificent visual performance sets the crown atop this Prince. This is one of those games where the uninitiated stand transfixed; watching in awe, contemplating, assimilating the fact that a simple 'game' could look so beautiful. All the Prince's actions transition one to the other with natural grace, a real sense of weight and inertia to his movement enhancing the effect. Fastidious attention to detail - throughout every square foot of the castle and grounds - heightens the sense of immersion. And no, Ubisoft has not quite implemented the 'perfect' camera required of a third-person adventure - although their placebo version more than adequately keeps pace with the action. A first-person view and very wide-angle lens (aka 'landscape' view) is also provided, and soon compensates for any spatial issues; providing ample means to choreograph the next set of moves. Environmental sounds (via Dolby Digital) complete the immersion in many areas, although the rock-sitar music heard during combat comes off as decidedly console-ish and forgettable.

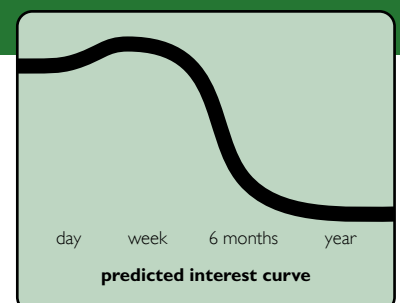
By the end of his tale it becomes 'crystal' clear that the Prince has indeed returned - and with the skill of a King. Regardless of title, Prince of Persia: Sands of Time has entered the high court of gaming's royalty. Pretenders and rivals to the throne take note: a new standard by which all adventures shall be measured has been set. And it doesn't include a big set of 'guns'.



### Prince of Persia: the Sands of Time

**Score:** 9/10  
**Reviewer:** Garnett Lee  
**Genre:** Action / Adventure  
**Developer:** Ubisoft Montreal  
**Publisher:** Ubisoft  
**Format:** Xbox DVD  
**Region:** NTSC/US

**Players:** 1  
**Saves:** Hard Drive  
**Vibration:** Yes  
**Sound:** Dolby Digital 5.1  
**Music:** Default only  
**Live:** Aware  
**Screen:** 4:3, 16:9, HDTV 480p







Gamestyle predicts that the success of the original (GBA version) of Made in Wario was a surprise, even to Nintendo. An even bigger shock was the full release of the title, then considered too 'Japanese' for western tastes, not only in the States, but also over here in Europe too.

Thankfully the game was well recieved by most, grabbing favourable reviews pretty much across the board, with most magazines and sites being able to look past the basic graphics and often one-button gameplay to find a true addictive gem.

Fast forward to now, and the same is about to happen on the Gamecube. Whilst Gamestyle has been happily playing the Japanese import of Made in Wario for some months, it's good to see that Nintendo are aware of the requests of domestic gamers wanting a piece of the multi-player action. The US version has just hit shelves in the last couple of weeks, and the European version is due soon. It's minus the wacky pink packaging of the Asian version, but the game is the same.

Which, to anyone familiar with the Gameboy version, means few surprises outside the minigames (which are carried over faithfully from the GBA cartridge). The one player game may retain 99% of that in the original but it's in multiplayer where the new title starts to show it's true colours: selecting from a number of doors (each representing one of the main protagonists from the one player mode) presents a few distinct game 'modes'. They all revolve around the same microgames present everywhere else, but are wrapped differently depending on the character.

For example, select Dribble and Spitz and you'll be asked to balance on turtles inbetween minigames; win the minigame and your opponents get another turtle added to the stack, making balancing for



the 5 or so seconds even tougher. The actual player of each minigame is first determined by a quick (and brand new) 4-player game, such as shuffling across a dojo to pick up a cup. If it sounds complicated, don't worry, it's probably easier just to try it for yourself.

Naturally, then, Made in Wario for Gamecube relies on having a few people over to get the most out of it. Without friends you'll get little more enjoyment than the GBA version, but with 3 others the game really comes alive and proves to be a great laugh after a couple of beers. It's a shame the graphics couldn't have been tidied up a little from the blocky original (the new 4 player games and titles are in high resolution, though) but it doesn't really matter when the fun kicks in.

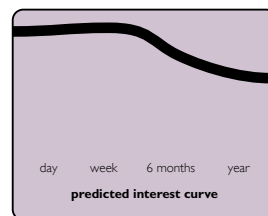
With stacks of replay value and perfectly balanced gameplay, this is great stuff.



**Mad in Wario**  
Nintendo's typically enigmatic advertising for the Japanese release

### Made in Wario (GC)

**Score:** 8/10  
**Reviewer:** Alex  
**Genre:** Party  
**Developer:** Nintendo  
**Publisher:** Nintendo  
**Format:** GC  
**Region:** NTSC/Japan/US  
**Players:** 1-4







**A Princely move**  
Ryo shares a few wall-running moves with Royalty in the new Ninja Gaiden



**Bad-ass ninjas sit pretty high up in the pantheon of videogames.** Among them Ryu Hayabusa probably looks familiar from his appearance in Tecmo's signature fighting game series Dead or Alive where his ninja-like skills stood-out amongst the other more renown umm...."assets". Along with that recognition might come some vague notion of his legendary stature earned in an earlier era and the name of a game - Ninja Gaiden. Back in the days when windows were still panes of glass, Sony was famous for TVs and the 8-bit Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) reigned supreme. Ryu forever defined martial arts adventure in a trio of Ninja Gaiden games. But in the modern world where an NES is about as familiar as an 8-track tape player a series whose last debut was in 1991 found itself quickly becoming a museum piece. Exactly why it took over a decade to see his return may forever remain a mystery but one thing is for certain. He's back, and from the looks of it beating up on scantily clad women kept him in pretty good shape.

Forgive him the not so traditional off-season training program during his hiatus from the more serious super ninja business. That conditioning gets thoroughly put to the test (to say the least) soon enough by the new chapter that calls him back into action. A saga of two opposing mystical swords whose destiny inescapably intertwines with the Hayabusa clan achieves the necessary

(if somewhat predictable) epic feel. This Hollywood perfect script for a ninja legend finds the Dark Dragon Blade stolen from the clan after generations have safely guarded it from falling into the wrong hands. Honour bound to recover it and save the world from a terrible evil Ryu then sets out wielding the rival Dragon Sword. Other ninjas of videogame fame would crave such a scenario as their chance to reserve a spot in history; and indeed it makes a potentially triumphant return for Ninja Gaiden, but Ryu won't get to enjoy it. Instead fate conspires to lend him the grim resolve of a steely heart intent on revenge against the thieves who did not just dishonour his clan but massacred them and razed their village.

The ensuing adventure demonstrates Tecmo's complete commitment to providing both newcomers unaware of the originals and dedicated fans alike an authentic Ninja Gaiden experience. A quick glimpse back to the golden age of 2D reveals a common style giving games across a variety of genres a similar structure. Designers tied together fantastic environments with a hypnotic rhythm of challenges and opponents always culminating in the level ending boss showdown. These elements are still evident as an influence in current games; however the essence got lost in the move to 3D gamescapes. Even classic remakes promising to use the old formula as a map for their







trip down memory lane failed to capture it. Ninja Gaiden finally realizes the expression of the form completely - not like a 3D game made with some 2D sensibilities but as a 2D classic built using modern tools.

Actually "modern tools" sells short the cutting-edge production quality that is anything but retro. Rather than an over-styled attempt to make the look "old-fashioned" Team Ninja follows in the footsteps its forbearers walked a decade ago creating a show that makes others in the generation envious; and like those ancestors the result elicits the same slack-jawed stares from anyone who catches sight of it. Much of the allure comes from an amazing attention to detail evident from the first moment in control of Ryu. Accustom to the usual stature of characters onscreen his imposing presence makes a strong impression. Unafraid of what might be seen (or noticed missing) the camera is allowed to freely close in revealing every stitch in his outfit and contour of his muscles. Panning out the surroundings maintain the quality with convincing textures filled with rich colours (but never oversaturated) all without a trace of polygon seams or jagged edges apparent anywhere.

A pretty picture to stand and admire, but few lulls in the action leave time for that. A silky smooth framerate comes to the rescue of amateur art critics offering a little

appreciation on the go; but the fluid fighting it allows steals away almost all the attention. If Ryu looks wax statue perfect standing still, put in motion he comes to life. He flows from one form to another through an enormous repertoire of gymnastic moves with natural grace never suffering a suddenly awkward transition (from missing animations or technical glitches). Combine that with the excellent graphics and few visual cues remain to disrupt falling into the illusion of being in the game and not just playing it. Smooth transitions take advantage of that blurred line to seamlessly sweep from game play into the breathtaking cinematic cut scenes that advance the story.

That story turns out to be a wild ride comprised of 16 chapters never struggling for a moment to provide ample material deserved of the elaborate graphics. At times feeling as much like an adventure as an action game (especially with the third-person perspective) environments run the gamut from rural to urban to mystical and everything in between. Riding in an airship, prowling through catacombs and assaulting a military base just to name a few, Ryu's next step never feels mundane. But an equally broad variety of opponents from rival ninjas to demonic fiends that make getting around more of a challenge than just exploring leave little doubt that action is king. Groups lay in wait around most every corner, pushing Ryu to master his technique in order to survive - an important





lesson to learn because the daunting end level bosses offer no mercy. Yes, in the grand tradition they follow patterns and have specific weaknesses; but finding and exploiting them depends entirely on skill.

Initially the perfectly tuned controls' intuitive response gives the impression that button mashing could be a viable approach to play, a thought that completely evaporates within the first hour. Survival past that point means learning a variety of techniques (several of which are unique to each weapon) and how to use them to hit the different adversaries' weak spots. Tecmo drew from the pages of both adventure and fighting games to create a system suited to the task by marrying the directional control of the left analogue stick (ideally suited to exploration) with the precise action input of the face buttons (naturally the domain of attack combos).

Their only slip comes from an ill-advised attempt to solve the continuing dilemma of camera control in games viewed from third person. To remove the distraction of fiddling with adjustment the only camera positioning option is a pull of the trigger to instantly recenter the view over Ryu's shoulder. The right thumbstick (usually used for free camera control) switches to a stationary first person view used for precise aiming of ranged weapons. While the system works acceptably for the most part anyone who's played this style game instinctively hits the right stick to look around. Instead that brings a screeching halt with an abrupt change of view - annoying while exploring, but potentially fatal in the heat of battle. In the arena style boss fights things get more problematic. The constant recentering necessary to maintain a useful view of the fight snaps the camera around in a vomit inducing whirl.

Some time in the thumb gym clears up most of these issues. That does not pose much of an inconvenience because Ninja Gaiden evokes one last aspect of the earlier generation that already makes regular workouts part of the equation; it packs a serious challenge. In fact for the average

gamer this will be one of the more difficult games they ever play. Just meeting the blazingly fast ninja action in the body of the game requires focus and be forewarned that the bosses step it up significantly. Hard, but not frustrating, and that is why no one should be dissuaded from a purchase. Every hurdle can be overcome with practice; and the process of continuously evolving that finesse needed to advance yields a most Zen-like pleasure.

Few gaming experiences warrant such quasi-philosophic musings. Even fewer deliver the unrivalled feeling of playing a classic in its own era while already knowing it to be one. Ninja Gaiden does both.

Where other series updates simply flirted with retro styling it defines neo-retro gaming. A treat best savoured over time, find a comfortable pace and drink deep of this vintage. While with any luck the next will not be another decade in the making - one never knows...



**Boss Drum**  
Ninja Gaiden's bosses really ramp up the difficulty, except for this one.



### Ninja Gaiden

**Score:** 9/10  
**Reviewer:** Garnett Lee  
**Genre:** Action  
**Developer:** Team Ninja  
**Publisher:** Tecmo  
**Format:** Xbox DVD  
**Region:** NTSC/US

**Players:** 1  
**Saves:** Hard Drive, Memory Card (8)  
**Vibration:** Yes  
**Sound:** Dolby Digital 5.1  
**Music:** Default only  
**Live:** Content, Scoreboards  
**Screen:** 4:3, 16:9, 480p



day week 6 months year

predicted interest curve



There is no doubt that Ninjas are cool. There is just something about them that lends itself to walking around speaking in some of the worst accents known to man - saying things like, "You killed my father!" or "You have insulted my honour".

You see, Ninjas are mysterious and magical, almost superhuman (which makes them ideal for videogames). Indeed, back in the days where every other film going straight to video was one where some American bloke would train to be a ninja and defeat some evil Japanese master, the gaming market was filled with endless Ninja games.

A large amount of these titles were utter rubbish. Think back - how many can you remember? Shinobi? Probably. Last Ninja? Maybe. And of course Ninja Gaiden; after that, it all seems to blend into a mass of unplayable rubbish (or pizza-eating pet shop rejects).

To start with, the plot seems rather straightforward - after all, this was the time before games really needed such things.

The story goes that the Dragon Ninja village has been completely destroyed and a magical scroll taken. Enter Ryu Hayabusa, the last surviving ninja who must get the scroll back before it destroys the world. After each level the plot is updated, and although the old 8-bit system manages to add a few twists and turns that engage the player (and make you want to push on to see how it all turns out), clearly this title appears to be more than just a rushed ninja cash-in.

Being on the Master System, graphics are a touch small but that doesn't take away from the action. Characters are always clear, and there is no slowdown or other nasty graphical glitches to spoil the fun - it's just you against them, and whoever can react the fastest will win.

Ninja Gaiden is not really about the graphics, and although the backdrops and locations are all nicely done, it is the gameplay at the core of the title that proves Ninja games - when programmed well - positively shine. The levels in the title scroll from left to right, with the occasional bit of climbing from time to time. Each area is a good blend of action and platform-jumping precision - all carried out with a huge injection of style.

Okay, so in terms of fighting, you haven't really got that many moves (limited as you are to sword slashes and a few special weapons) but that is arguably all you need - as once the initial levels have been cleared, the focus is very much on working out how to reach platforms that seem just out of reach.

Our nimble hero can hang under ledges, rebound off walls, and jump a fair distance in order to make his way safely through the levels. Though only given a few moves, it is the way in which you must use everything at your disposal to progress that impresses (and even reminds one of how the 'basics' have been adapted for contemporary releases like Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time).

Making your way across a screen can involve any number of jumps and bounces while flipping between different levels of the platforms; at the same time having to take out enemies mid-movement to avoid being knocked to your doom. Luckily, the controls are responsive enough to cope - meaning every death is fair.

Ninja Gaiden holds up remarkably well against newer titles. It may seem a little bit restricted by the screen, but the challenge is perfectly-balanced and ultimately requires levels of pure skill and dexterity to get through.

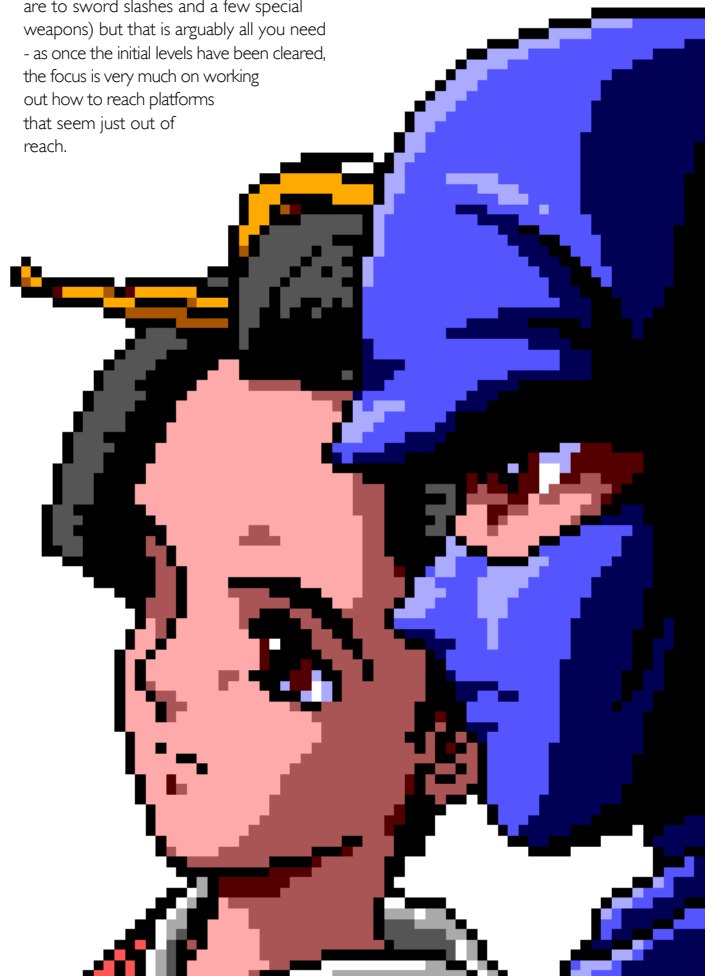
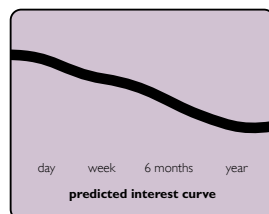
Highly recommended.



### Ninja Gaiden (Master System)

Score: 8/10  
Reviewer: Gareth

Genre: Horizontal fighter  
Developer: Sega  
Publisher: Tecmo  
Format: MS cart  
Region: PAL  
Players: 1



# GSO<sup>7</sup>

## Feature | Cross town traffic



**The ongoing trend in the driving genre is realism, which was kickstarted by the debut of Gran Turismo.** However, the actual truth when examining these videogames is the exact opposite - while the Gran Turismos, Project Gothams, Colin McRaes and other wannabes all claim to be realistic (and offer dynamic handling based on detailed physics and research), in point of fact the 'realistic' nature of the experience commences with engine sounds and concludes with the car models faithfully reproduced on screen.

Developers have been pursuing the wrong targets for several years now.

This realisation comes to Gamestyle as it takes the Struie road (B9176) to Ardgay. These thirteen miles of driving nirvana comprise a formidable stretch of road that pans out across the highlands of Sutherland. This is a road where the driver cannot afford to become distracted or lose concentration - because it is a challenging and unforgiving beast. Rather than just offering a twisting circuit of narrow country lanes with limited visibility, this road manages to pack more variety into its short length than any challenge on any gaming system.

Steep climbs, followed by several twisting and narrow descents, as you reach the bottom of the gorge; where a one-lane bridge awaits negotiation. Before you can settle into this pattern you find yourself on the highland moors, which offer a stark contrast to the forestry from whence you have emerged. This section lacks any signage, and in certain places, any warning of the dangerous corners or even road markings. New dangers await would-be drivers in the form of cattle grids - which, for that split second, remove any form of grip; and local wildlife/livestock appearing from beneath the heather:

Those travelling northbound emerge near the end with a fantastic view of Kyle of Sutherland, and one that persists for miles. Yet there is little chance to enjoy the vista, as your destination looms in the distance: another circulating descent, followed by an ancient bridge before disappearing into the forestry once again. The final trek is a dash across a minor road that follows the shores of the Kyle of Sutherland, before you enter Ardgay.

Over the Christmas 2003/04 period, Gamestyle travelled this route on several

occasions - and no experience was ever the same. Night and day is the obvious exception, but given its altitude and location, one sodden interlude of driving in the rain (and the associated dangers of little drainage) was replaced by snow and ice the next day. It did not matter what vehicle you were driving - here the road is king, and simply commands respect (something that developers have seemingly failed to grasp).

No matter how many times you experience each metre of the thirteen miles, focus and ultimate skill of the driver will be tested at some point; regardless of driving experience.

Providing players with realistic-looking cars is a purely cosmetic enhancement that does not influence the game itself. This distraction from the core experience, if you will, has contributed to wave upon wave of habit-forming expectation: more cars and more realistic models. Consumers may relish such statistical tweaks, but honestly does it make for a better game?

No, of course it doesn't, and some of the most enjoyable and challenging driving releases only offer a handful of vehicles.

These are distractions that need to be put to one side.

A videogame can never hope to challenge the real thing - regardless of its simulated aspirations. The current generation of technology (never mind the limiting views) will not allow for such unfettered creation - or recreation - no matter how many peripherals are thrust under our noses. Progress has certainly been made in terms of audio and handling (as Colin McRae 4 and Gran Turismo 4 will attest). These advances are tempered by environments that force players to drive around unrealistic and blandly-created circuits - much like goldfish stuck in a bowl. The emphasis placed on videogame design is essentially wrong; we are forced to drive only to win more cars or to ensure progression. There is no appreciation for the driving experience, of what the circuit can offer; and therefore the mastering of it.

Again, we place emphasis on how many circuits a release contains, rather than the quality of each circuit. Gamestyle would rather drive on five above-average tracks (that challenge and ultimately satisfy) than another hundred or so near-identical street



**The B9167**  
Get Platinum on all levels of PGR 2 in under a week and it's yours.





circuits. Each of the current releases is a blatant exponent of this problem. Project Gotham Racing 2 is more about the realistic sights that surround each driver than any erstwhile circuit. Gran Turismo 4 also includes various sights and lavish details - which enhance the eye candy but do nothing else. The actual tarmac itself is left till last. How ironic, that given the work on faithfully replicating streets and buildings, developers kindly overlook its inhabitants and street life. Auto Modellista was perhaps the worst culprit, dipping everything in a cartoon lacquer that became the only real reason to experience the game. Capcom overlooked the circuits, the driving model and the actual gameplay. Gamestyle wants to do more than pass through these environments; pretty pictures can be found in an art museum - there needs to be more interaction and influence stemming forth from the surroundings.

Rally games have challenged the problem by incorporating gravel, mud and weather conditions - factors which have hitherto been ignored. Developers were previously able to sidetrack such 'realism' by including a night and day mode; essentially window-dressing the game in black or white

distraction. Little thought was given to the range of possibilities that weather and tarmac could bring to the videogame foundation. The Struie road never changes its layout, yet this never diminishes its appeal. Only the realm of natural influence changes the conditions, which thus affects the decisions the driver needs to make. Add to this other considerations; such as the vehicle you are driving, luggage, passengers, fuel and you have potentially broadened the gaming vista, which forces the player to drive - rather than being in control of events.

The connection between man and machine needs to be strengthened, and Gran Turismo 4 - with its frankly brilliant use of a force-feedback wheel - is a step in the right direction. Ultimately however, its effect will be diminished by the same structure that has dominated previous releases: sterile circuits, with optimal driving conditions and rewards based on position; rather than the passage of time and (accurate) conditions. One of the most enjoyable aspects of Colin McRae 4 is the feeling of relief when you cross the finish line (the car in varying degrees of condition). The feeling was magnified when starting a section in a badly-

damaged vehicle, which required the driver to compensate and make 'realtime' judgements. Hardly a groundbreaking idea, but commonsensical all the same - and one that has hitherto failed to catch on. Another attraction of Colin McRae 4 (and rally games in general) is that it revised the 'Americanised' stereotype of driving games presently available, and that in itself was a refreshing change. Alternatively, Tokyo Highway Challenge not only appealed to the boy-racing fraternity, but also felt like a 'Japanese' driving game; and in this respect it was unique.

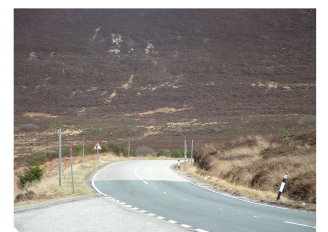
Perhaps with the arrival of a hard drive in console gaming, a new thoroughbred driving game will appear. This game would not rely on the number of tracks or the number of cars, but instead would introduce several variables in compliance with a long section of road - which would entice the player to go out again and again, beating the nearest comparable time and conquering not only the tarmac, but also nature itself. An option to race against the clock or competitors would be included to satisfy our competitive instinct, yet what is wrong with purely interacting? In a world where driving is highly stressful, dangerous and at times a

chore we endure, it is up to videogames to relieve such pressures and remind us why driving can in fact be enjoyable. From Turbo Esprit to Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, players have enjoyed driving without limits - without the need to be first; free to explore and to drive freely.

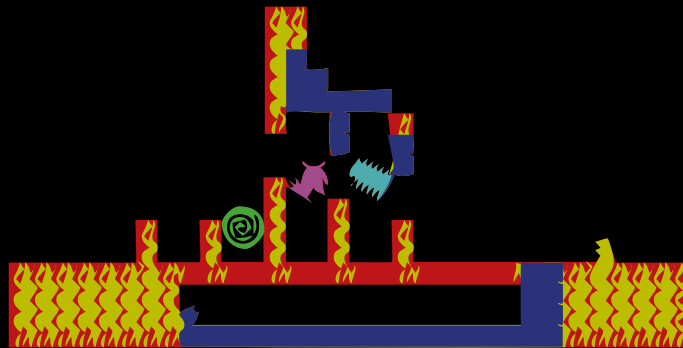
Project Gotham Racing 2 represents the pinnacle of what is possible with a driving game in today's climate. It has the numerous car choices and tracks that players so desire, with the promise of more downloadable through Xbox Live. The ability to go online and race other competitors is a fait accompli in programming, and for this generation of driving games the final hurdle has been cleared. What else do you require? Even more cars? Yet more cities? Greater visuals?

Undoubtedly, a counter-argument to all of this would be that these games sell - and more importantly, continue to sell - but already some are becoming tired of this vicious circle. Until the next round of driving games then, Gamestyle will try to 'steer clear' of losing all interest in the form... and looks forward to returning to the highlands.

Jason Julier



UNTIL NEXT TIME...



it's been emotional...