

play

NEW EPICS REVEALED

Breath Of Fire V

Wario World

Xenosaga

Unreal II



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spread their wings

Panzer Dragoon Orta

Smilebit's powerful sequel redefines the shooter genre

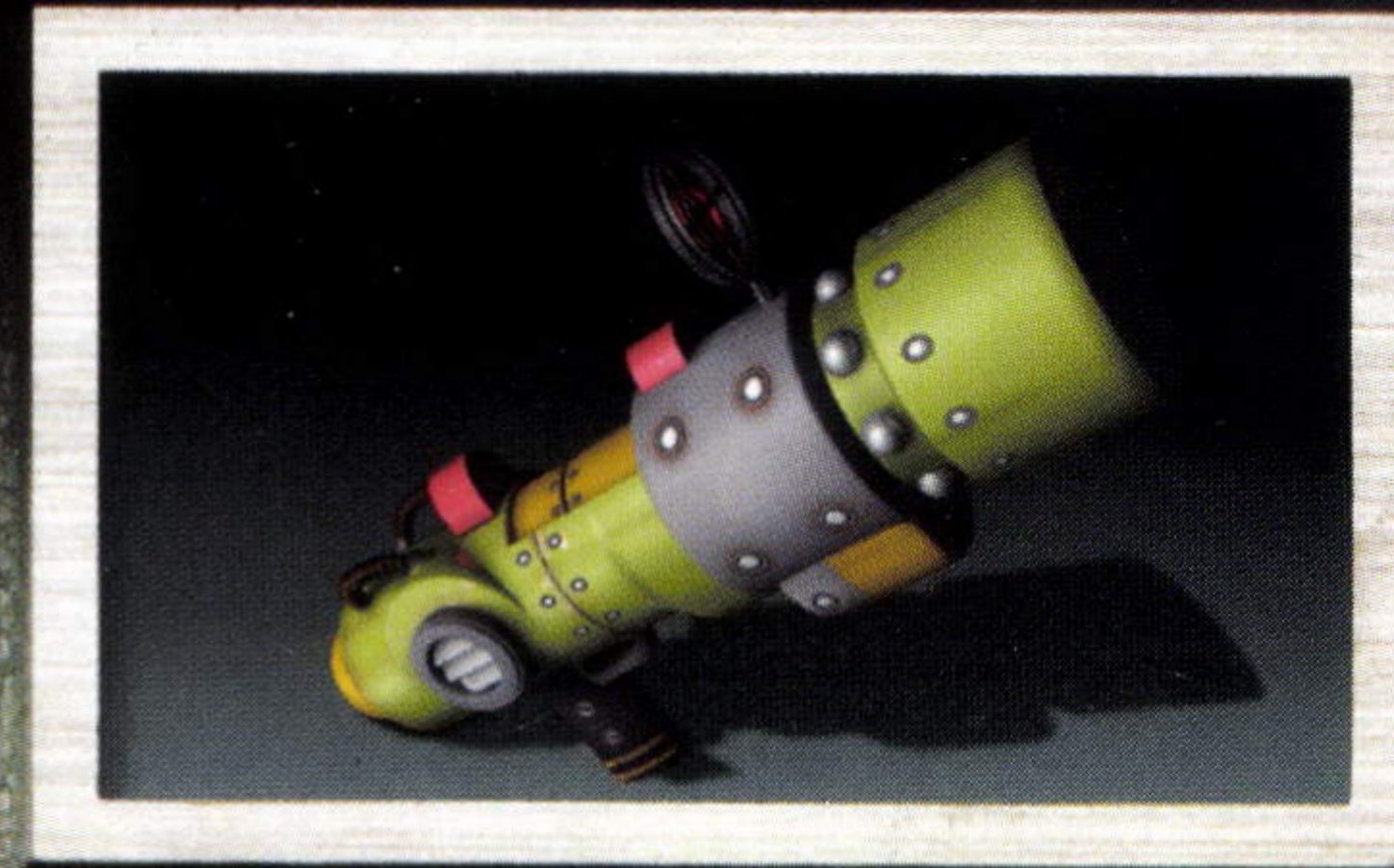




LIVE IN YOUR WORLD.
PLAY IN OURS.™



R.Y.N.O.
IT STANDS FOR RIP YOU A NEW ONE.
GET IT?



DEVASTATOR
COME ON, IT'S CALLED THE DEVASTATOR.
WHAT DO YOU THINK IT DOES?

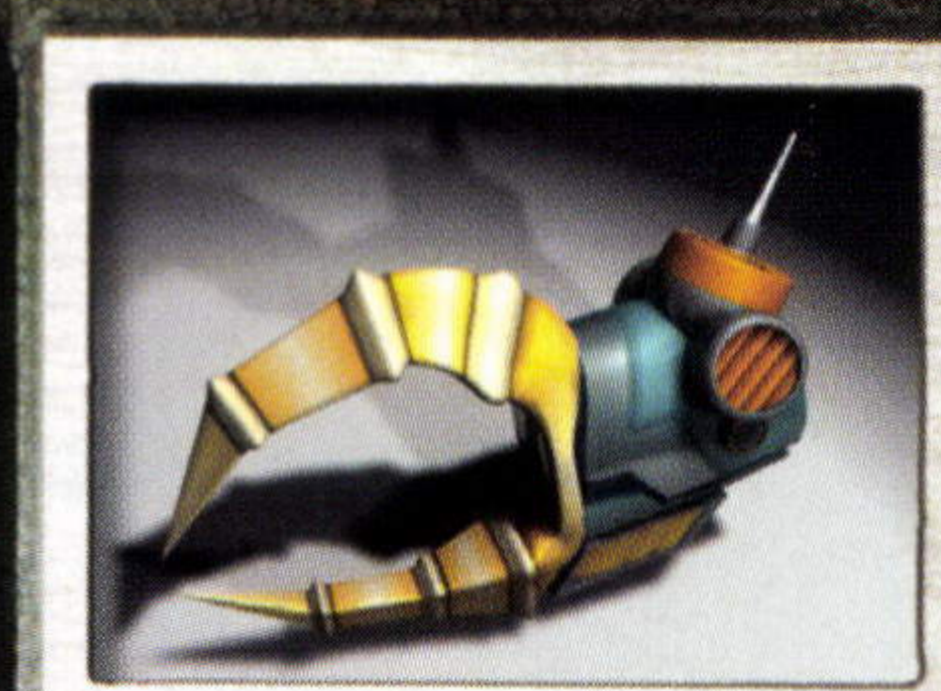
ONE GIANT STEP BACK



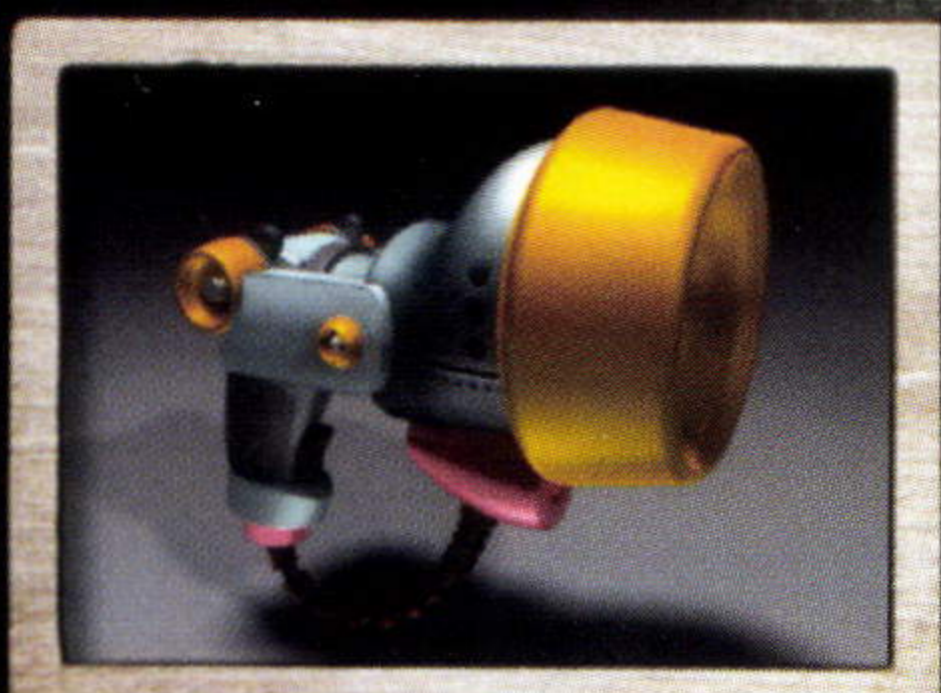
TRESPASSER
YOU NO LONGER HAVE TO PAY
ATTENTION TO THOSE
"NO TRESPASSING" SIGNS.



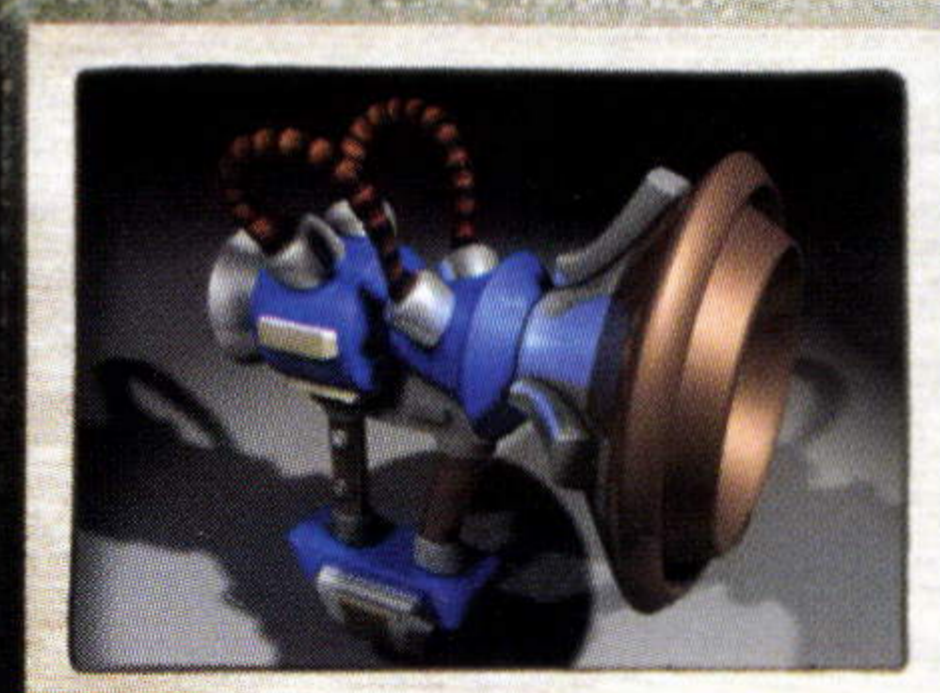
BLASTER
IT'S RAINING BULLETS AND SOMEONE
FORGOT HIS UMBRELLA.



TESLA CLAW
LET'S JUST SAY THE RESULTS
ARE NOT PRETTY.



MORPH-O-RAY
DID SOMEBODY
ORDER CHICKEN?



TAUNTER
"YOUR MOMMA IS SOOOO FAT,
NO, REALLY, SHE IS."
SEE? TAUNTING IS FUN.



WALLOPER
KNOCK YOUR ENEMIES
INTO NEXT WEEK.



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FISH OUT OF WATER!

WARDS FOR MANKIND

RIP THE GALAXY A NEW ONE.
YOU DECIDE HOW.

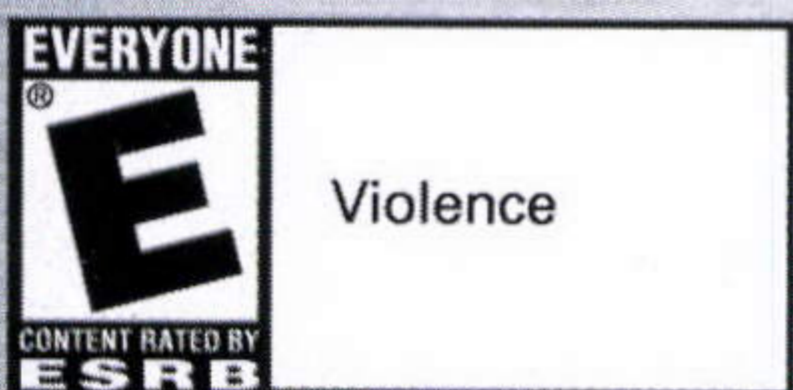
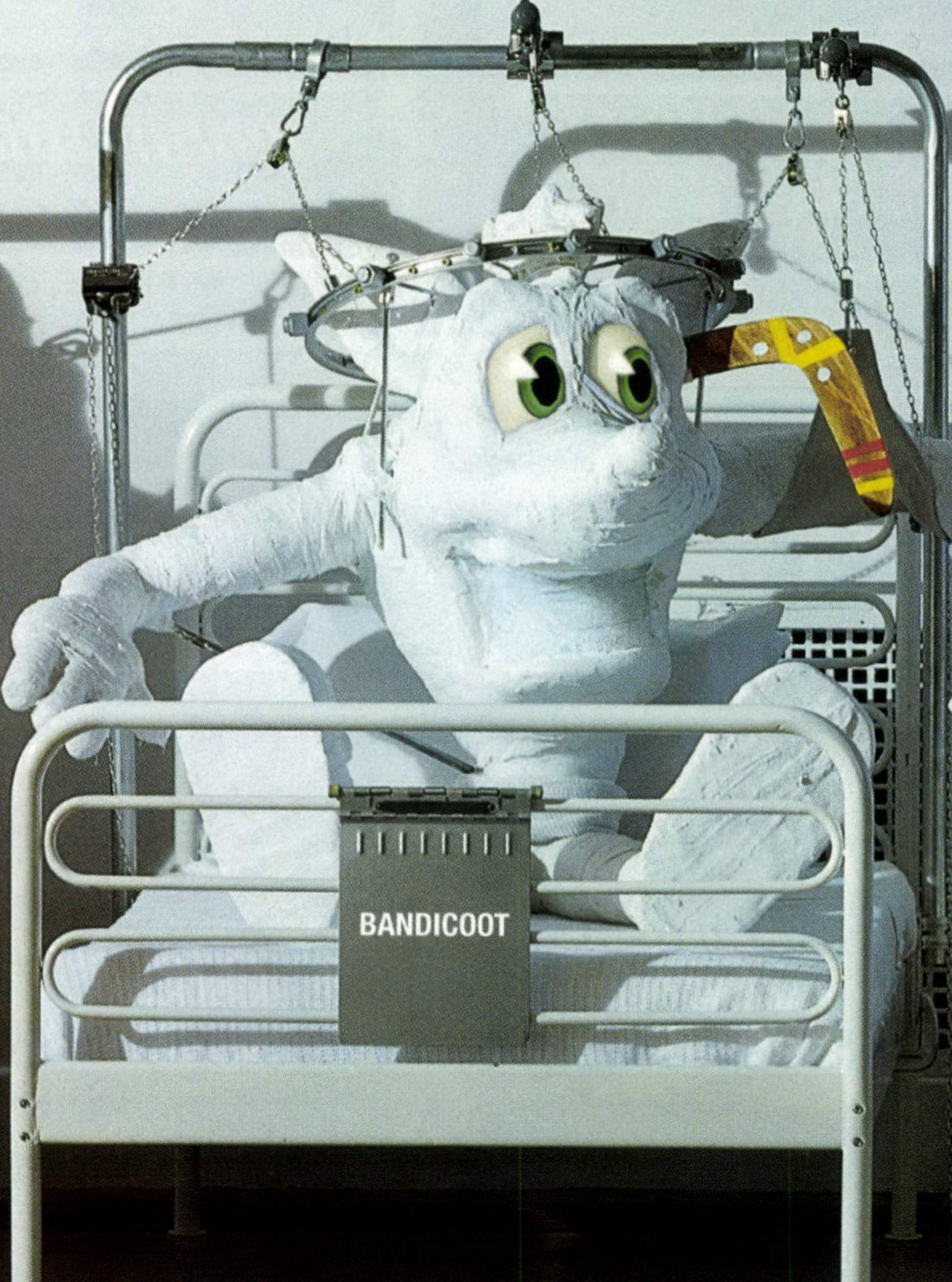
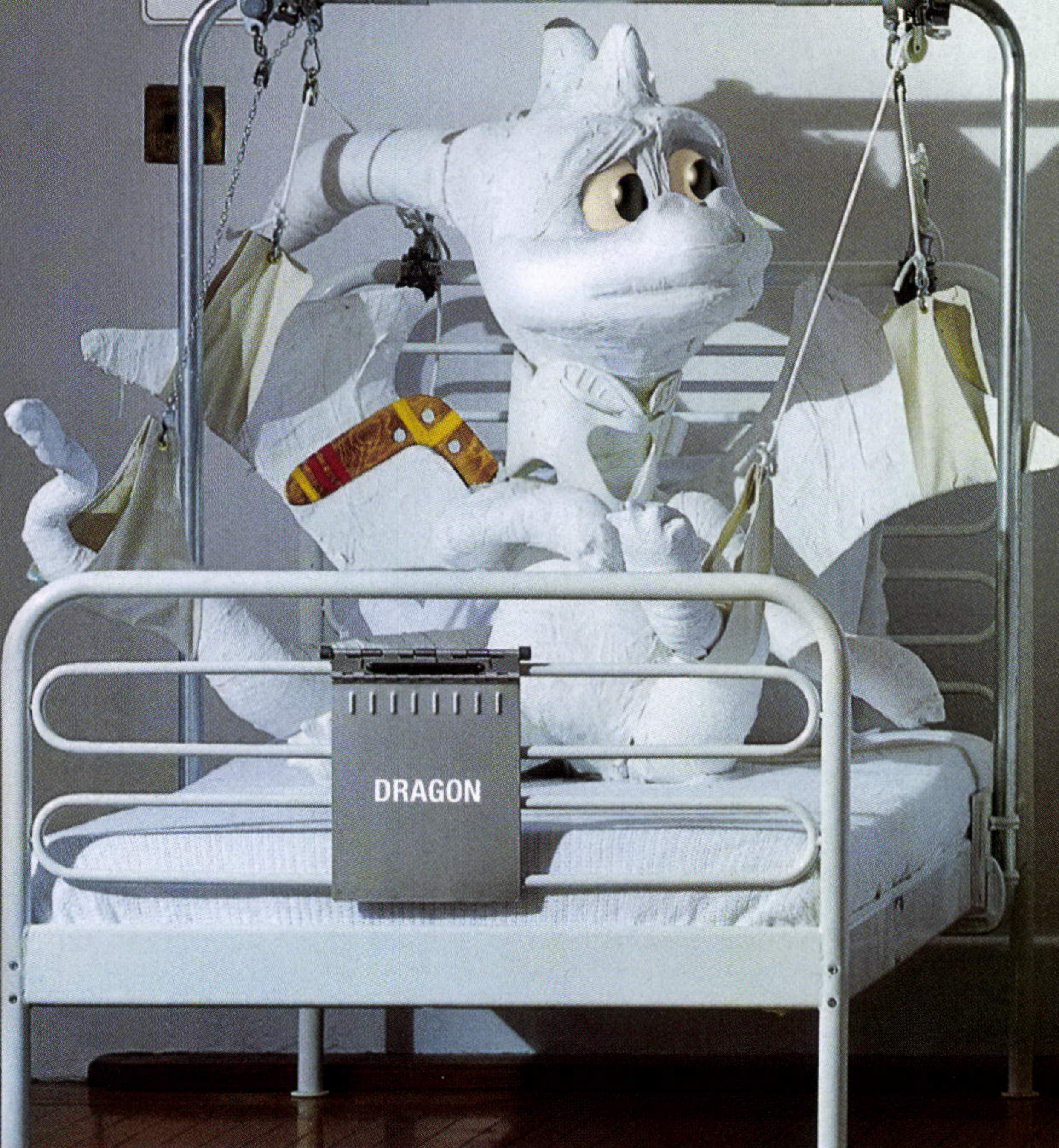


PlayStation 2



Mild Violence

South 2C
Room 204



PlayStation 2



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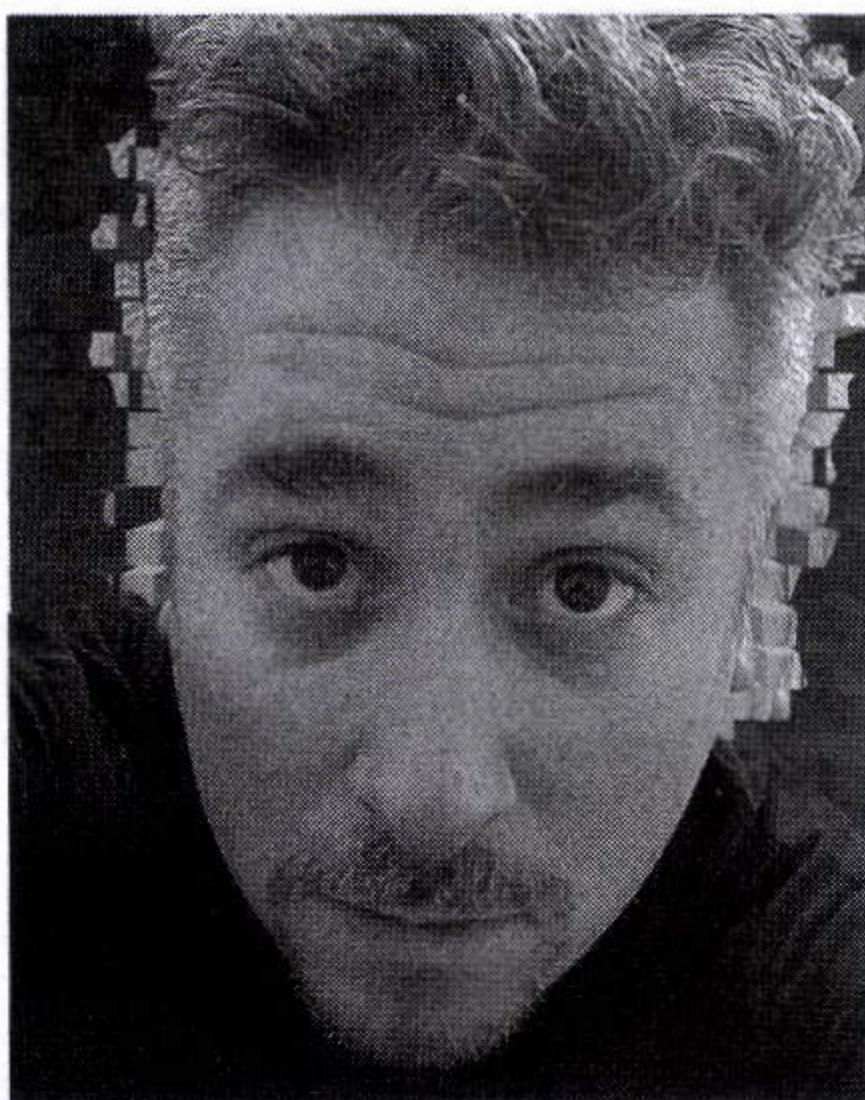
Challenge Everything™

After tossing out the notion of a **play** flooded with codes and all of the mainstream bits and pieces that go with them in last month's editorial, we quickly discovered two things; the people we hoped we were making this magazine for not only exist, but they're organized, articulate, and well, not to sound all ass-kissy but, great, really great. We hear you loud and clear; less media—more games and the edgier the better. After we complete our very special Year in Review issue you'll begin to see a slightly different **play** magazine. Media will remain but switch gears, and music will return, but most of all we're going to pursue some avenues of gaming (and art) that we now know you'll get. Anyway, we'd like to thank everyone who wrote in. We printed them out daily and read many aloud—it was refreshing to say the least. After doing this for a year pleading with advertisers to wake up and smell the real gamers, not the fudged numbers (a battle we'll always lose) it was inspiring to read your views and how much you still care about this amazing but oft-times confused industry.

Now onto business... I'd like to quickly address the festering puss bubble that has become many-a-critic's problem with 3D cameras. Not because I have anything against them, but because I don't want developers to think they need to glue every camera directly behind the player to sell their game.

It seems that these days unless a camera follows novice players around directly guiding them and barking out what to do next, they feel compelled to slam it—which is sad. A game like Mario, or Jet Set, or Gunvalkyrie, in which the camera is free, is meant to give the player a variety of choices while a camera like Devil May Cry's or Rygar's is meant to add a cinematic air to the game. As you become a good player and once you dial in a game's physics, you should be able to feel your environment. Most good players can negotiate platforms coming towards themselves without being able to see the next one, by feel. The beauty of 3D gaming is how it places you in a virtual environment causing you to conform to its altered reality. Sure, there are moments when a camera jam or seep-thru might slightly impair play but it's a small price to pay for the amazing viewpoints we're being afforded these days. If every game had a camera that allowed perfect line of site all of the time, games would suck.

I'd like to address the festering puss bubble that has become many a critic's problem with 3D cameras...



dave halverson
editor in chief

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GAME BOY ADVANCE



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Brady Fiechter
Editorial Director

Brady continues to search for truth, justice, and the American way, even though we keep telling him he's just outside of L.A. where it doesn't exist anymore. Best to move closer to play HQ and lay low until we hit Seattle



Michael Hobbs
Art Director

After Mike's hard drive "crossed over", he tried to escape the pain by driving away in his car. It didn't work. Always back up your work, kids.



Nelson Lui
Assistant Art Director

Nelson likes to play with fart dolls, and then sniff them! Bite into it!



Christina Alexander
Editorial / Administrative Assistant

Chris is back! She's helping us sift through piles of anime and make sense of our wacky office life. Even though she's hand drawn she does the work of a true polygonal model. Hey Chris! Some fax paper would be nice!



Tom Ham
Contributing Writer

T. Ham is settled into his new digs and ready to take on the rest of the world's blondes. Please direct all inquiries through the play offices. And Tom... tray table in the upright position please...



Gabe Swarr
Contributing Artist

Gabe's busy, but not so busy that he can't whip up a little Mode 7 joy each month. Now if he'd only trade in that big wheel for a car... Who's your favorite Mode 7 character? (Say Death Mania)

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XBOX LIVE ONLINE ENABLED



024

panzer dragoon orta

Smilebit gets it so right yet again with their stunning sequel

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rally supertest

codemasters' colin mcrae 3.0 takes on infogrames v-rally 3 in our no holds barred comparison test

MATURE
M
Blood and Gore
Violence
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

You can't fight
what you can't see.



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PlayStation 2

SEGA

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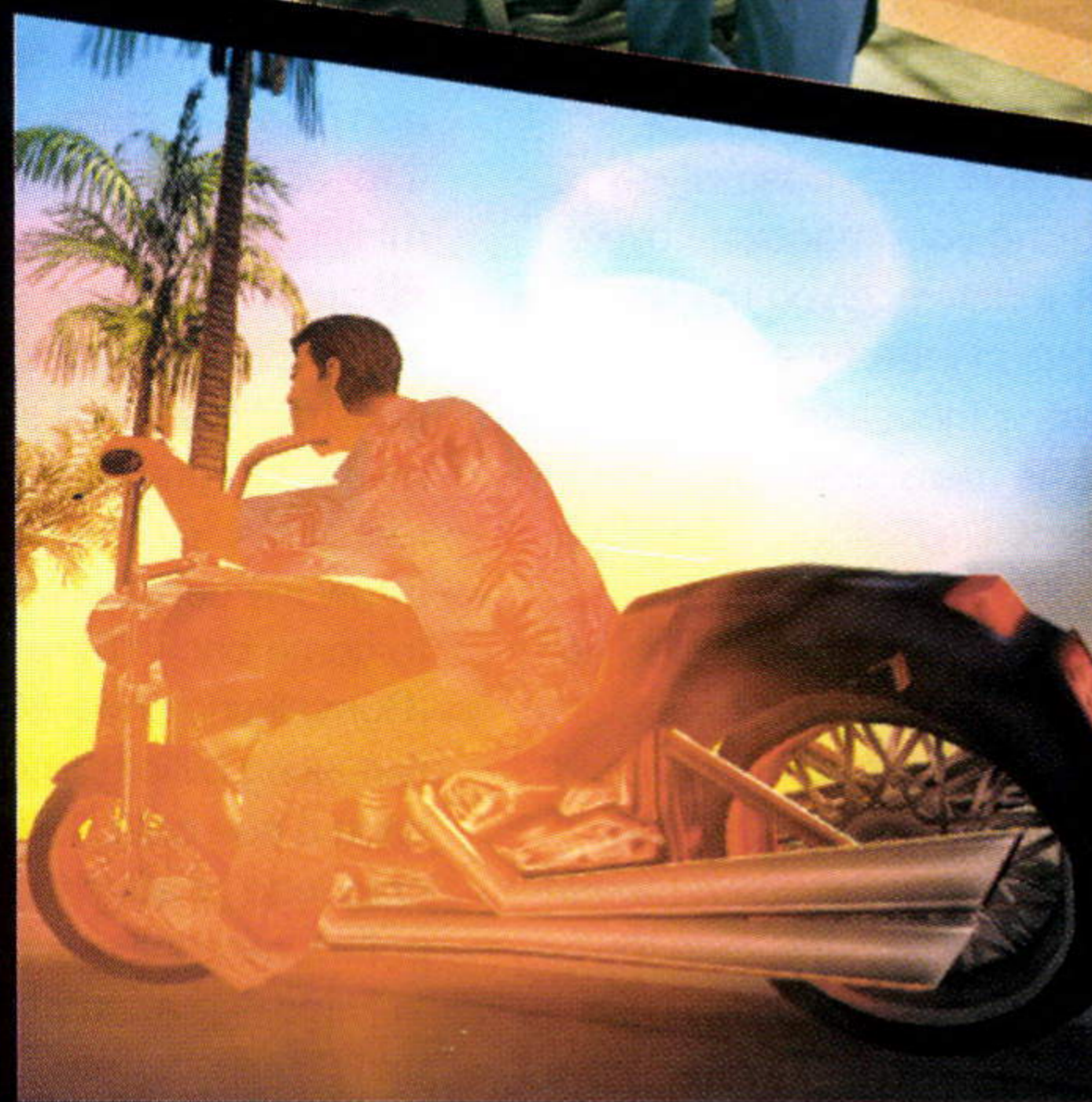
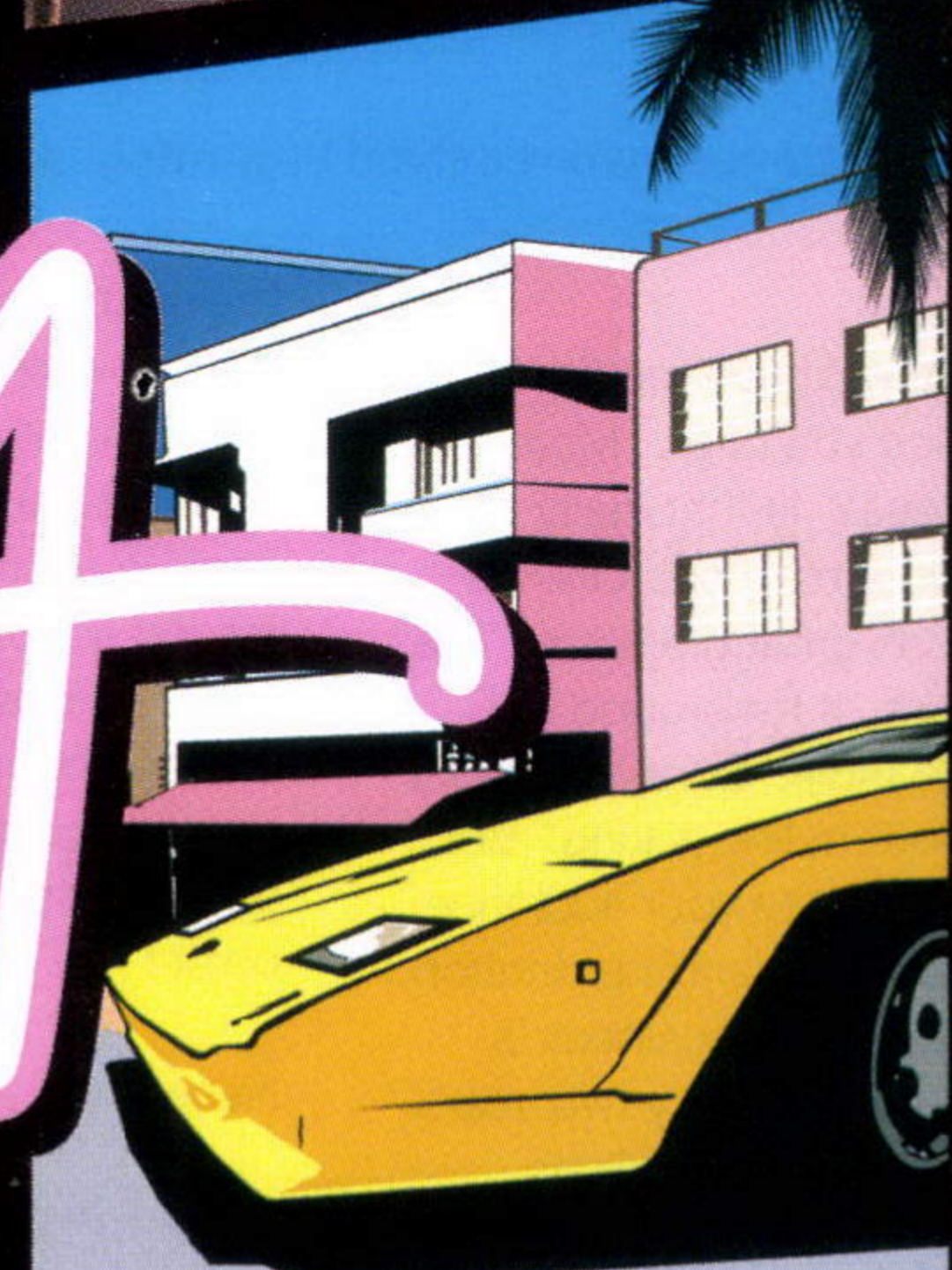
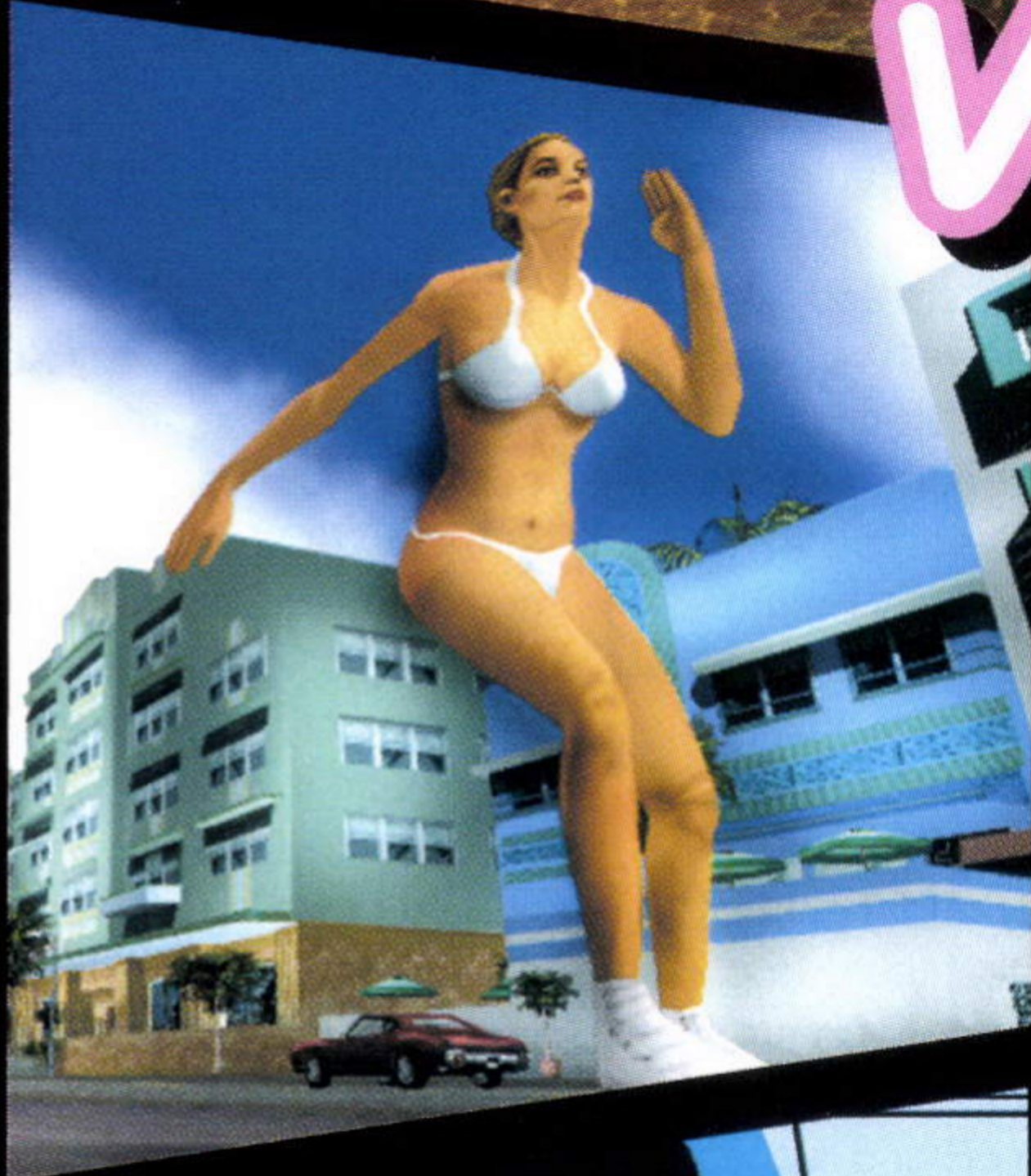
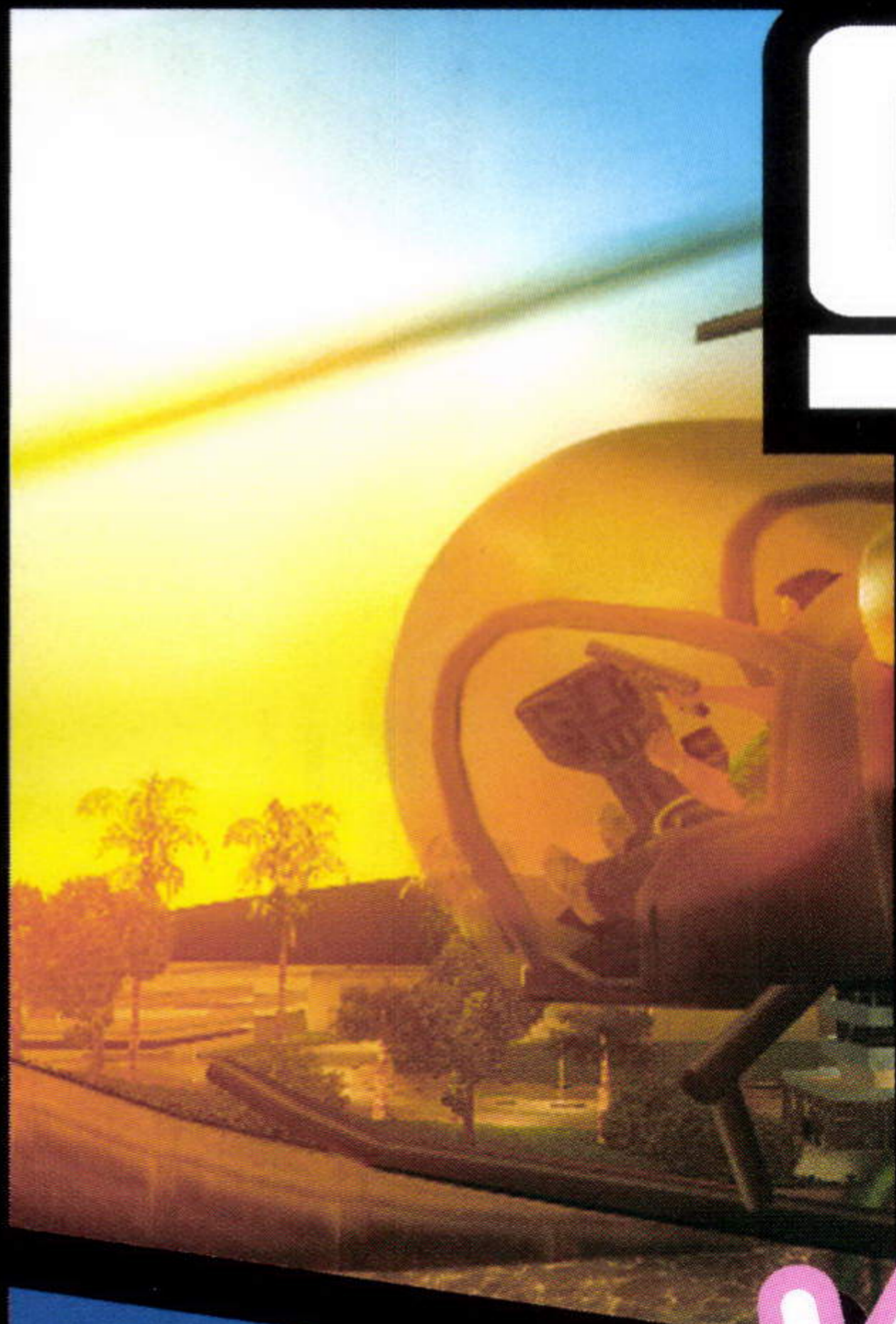
minority report



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playback

Whether you have questions, criticisms—or if you just want to vent—e-mail us at letters@play-magazine.com

Write us the old fashioned way:
29229 Canwood St. Suite 200
Agoura Hills, CA 91301



The outpouring of responses we received regarding last month's editorial was truly inspiring. Here's a sampling of what's on your minds...

SMARTY PANTS

Your December editorial gave me pause. I don't buy the choice you offer. More mature or game codes? Is that really the only choice? I like your mag because it's sophisticated and has great graphics. The reviews are intelligent. It feels good to have it on my coffee table. Sure, you run a business and the bottom line is king. But perhaps you underestimate your audience. I'll be honest. The amazing and fascination thing about the video game business is that it has to reinvent itself every two years to stay afloat. And I'm not just talking about technology. The burning question is where the heck it his juggernaut heading? Wouldn't it be wonderful if **play** was there when the medium came into its own? Here's what I think... Video games are in their infancy. Current games are mostly analogs of ideas from other mediums. Here's a clue. What sells very well but is ignored by those just-out-of-the-womb twitch-fanatics magazine critics?

Think Myst and Sims. Sure, they're boring, but they sell in mega numbers. Could this be a clue? What these 'games' have in common is they offer an immersive environment. But us "too hip for the room" crowd know that there's more to Superman than primary color tights. There are environments other than living rooms and mysterious fantasy locals. What computer games can do very well is to put us into environments that in which we couldn't possibly be—but are real. There's your answer. The next few years will bring computer games into their true forte, the environment business. Think fighting games in zero-G. Think an adventure on

the surface of a moon of Jupiter with low gravity, water volcanoes, and grinding, migrating surface cracks that bring lethal life forms to the surface. I'm not talking hackneyed computer game monsters. I'm talking about mysteries and an environment full of surprises based on the latest scientific information. Here's how video games are going to come into their own. They are going to connect with what that mysterious object just over the horizon: the future.

Henry

POWER GIRL

Recently, as usual, I was in Barnes & Noble looking at gaming magazines (trying to find information on the new Tomb Raider and the Buffy game). After restless paging through PC Gamer (which I am VERY familiar with) I discovered one copy of the 9th edition of **play** behind the official Xbox Magazine. The beauty of the cover (the Contra painting) shook me and I hurriedly picked it up. Ever since then I have been obsessively compulsively buying your magazine every month and have today received my first issue by subscription (play twelve). I must say this magazine is thousand times better than any other. The mere look of it is worthy of the "Picasso and Dali" album shelf. The layout, the pictures, the quality of print, the paper, the layout on the covers, it is all beautiful. In PC Gamer the most beautiful pictures are the ones in the ADS!!!! I would subscribe to the magazine even if it was written in French (I'd probably learn French to read it!). I also, as it happens, love the content, I read it like a book starting with your (editor's) letter all the way to the back. I agree with the opinions completely and love the lack of codes and other technicalities that can be just as easily looked up online for those who need it. As far as the amount of adult content mentioned in your letter. I love the level at which it is right now, more is fine, but don't take it away. After all, it's mostly in the anime section and adult content is a big part of anime to begin with. I think it adds to the charm of the magazine (and I am a strait 17 year old girl, so...) Sorry about the length of the letter, I just really appreciate your work.

-Katya Topolkaraeva (razorblade jinx)

PS - is Lara Croft going to appear on the cover any time soon? that would be cool. Also, I love Blood Rayne thanks for giving her so much attention!

FUTURE MEDIA BUYER... WE HOPE

I'm writing in response to your editorial this month. I know you're probably getting a lot of e-mails from people telling you who they think the "real gamers" are and how you should direct your content. Well, I don't know if I can tell you any of that crap. But what I can tell you is what your magazine says to me every month. Every month I receive your magazine and every month the excitement and thrill of gaming runs through me in a renewed fashion. Finally! Someone out there knows what it means to live for games! Some people out there really do speak intelligently about games! You guys skim over the latest teeny bop shit that developers and advertisers are pumping out by the millions so that Mom and Dad can stumble into EB and request it for Jr.'s Christmas list. You guys aren't ruining the goddamn challenge of a game by publishing maps and codes (God I hate that!). Every month the **play** team bravely goes out there and sorts through the masses of grabass games and finds the real gems. You find the ones that make me throw my controller across the room, only to come back 10 minutes later for more (Gunvallyrie anyone?). The gaming industry is making billions and everyone wants to hitch a ride on it. That can also bring in a crap load of advertising for you, too. The unfortunate thing is that advertisers are only looking at numbers. I'm willing to bet that those numbers are telling them that the money is in kids. Well guess what? The people who live for gaming, like me, are a lot older. They're in the unfortunate position of being a very poor 16-25 years old. Mom and Dad aren't buying for us, so unfortunately, we really get the shaft when it comes to being targeted by advertising and magazine content. I know from experience that advertising can really place a nasty influence on your content. Anyways, I really hope that you guys decide to stick with your current audience of overgrown children, of which I proudly claim to be a member. There's a reason that the guys at work beg me to bring in this magazine every month. Every

issue is dog-eared, coffee stained, and wrinkled because it is very well loved. Best of luck to you guys with your advertisers. And hey, thanks for asking your readers and showing that we count :)

Sincerely,
Carrie Miller

XBOX HUGGERS

Why are there so many XBOX Haters? I work at a game store and own all the console systems. Believe me when I say that the XBOX is the best console on the market. Microsoft are PC Gangsters? Who Cares! They delivered where Sony and Nintendo failed. If I were to put together a PS2 that did what the XBOX does, it would run me a hell of alot more than \$200. You'd end up dropping between \$350 and \$400 on a system that still has nasty aliases, takes forever to load and looks like you patched it together out of spare parts. The Gamecube is nice, for what it is and that isn't a whole lot. The PS2 has more games, SORRY, I DON'T GAME IN THE PAST. XBOX IS THE FUTURE.

A True Gamer Who Won't Accept Second Best.

Marcus "DRACONIAN"

Marcus,
We stand accused of seeing green here at play too, but, it's only because as a gamer, how can you not? Xbox comes with 2 AAA Sega pak-ins, making the console a hundred bucks, and it has amazing first- and third-party support. The Xbox version of a game is always better. It's just the way it is. We love Sony (whose first-party arsenal is still the biggest force in gaming) and Nintendo (who has 10 million-plus GBAs out plus Treasure on the team, not to mention Miyamoto) too; it's just a great time for gaming overall right now. I think people need to move past the whole PC stigma and take a look at what Microsoft is doing for enthusiast gamers, from their work with Sega, to games like Tork, Halo, Psychonauts, and Tao Feng. This is how Sony took the crown, and so far Microsoft is doing it as good or better. The war is most definitely on.

VOTE NOW!

Vote on the following categories...

- GAME OF THE YEAR
- NEW CHARACTER OF THE YEAR
- GRAPHICS OF THE YEAR
- CONSOLE OF THE YEAR

Send votes to:

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We'll include the results in our March issue, so get cracking.

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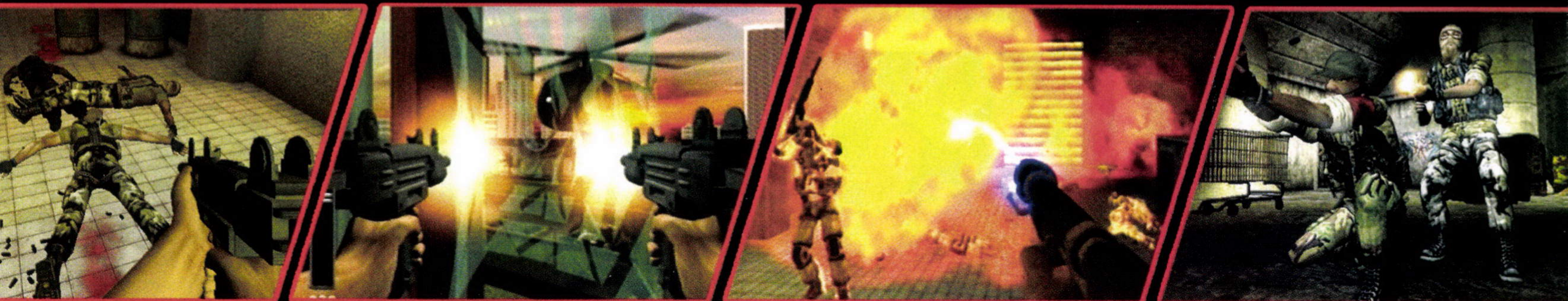


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CAPCOM CUBED

God's gift to third party pub's-gears up for another killer year

In a return of sorts to the glory days of 8-bit, Capcom has announced five original new GameCube titles scheduled for release in Japan next year. Resident Evil 4 (1-3) will have a more ethereal look and for the first time be built on a real-time engine, replacing the prerendered backdrops, and the game stars Leon S. Kennedy as he explores the bowels of Umbrella Corp.

The new action-shooter Product Number 03 (P.N.03) is a fast-paced action game from Shinji Mikami, who promises a cross between Tomb Raider and Devil May Cry with continuously transforming mechs under heavy fire in dodge-and-attack type scenarios. P.N.03 takes place on a planet colony overrun by security mechs gone haywire. The game stars one Vanessa Z. Schneider, a female mercenary hired to fight the mechs responsible for the demise of her family.

Killer 7 (4-6), bearing a slight resemblance to the visual style of Gungrave, is a dark noir thriller about the rivalry between a schizophrenic wheelchair-bound assassin, Harmon Smith, a.k.a. God Killer, and Kun Lan, a.k.a. God Hands—an omni-powerful

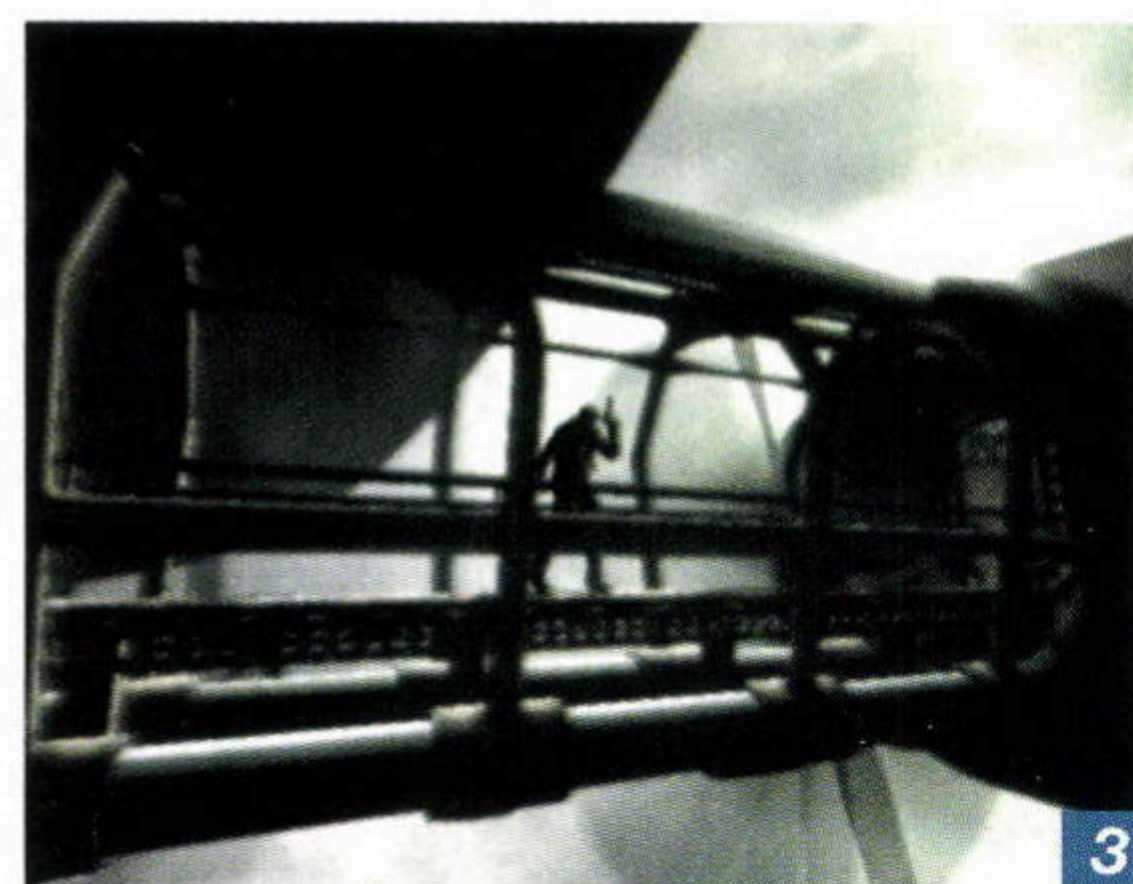
“In a return to the glory days of 8-bit, Capcom has announced five original GameCube titles...”

criminal mastermind. Of course, there's always room for shooters and Dead Phoenix (7) incorporates massively populated skies with Panzer Dragoon-like controls, floating above ancient cities that conjure visions of old Sega shooters like Gynoug and Phelios. Hiroki Kato, the game's director, is working hard to capture a realistic feeling

of flight above anything else.

The most exciting game, however, is the only one that looks like it may stay in Japan—Viewtiful Joe (8-9), a cel-shaded diorama-style fast action game that looks to reinvent the wheel and then run us over with it. The charismatic lead character, a sort of super-deformed cross between a Power Ranger and Shazam! seems to do it all, only with vigor and comic-book flare to burn. Joe seems mighty pleased to be a super hero, as he should: the game looks absolutely amazing. Joe is under the watchful eye of Hideki Kamiya (Devil May Cry), who emphasizes that the player must “fight beautifully.” The game features super speed, *Matrix*-style slow motion, and a cinematic zoom.

1-3 Resident Evil 4 / 4-7 Killer 7 / 7 Dead Phoenix / 8-9 Viewtiful Joe



BLINX: 2 OF NINE ON THE WAY



Before the game was even released in Japan, where Blinx didn't claw his way to retail until 12-12, Artoon has already announced a sequel to hit Q4 2003. Undoubtedly, Naoto Ohshima (co-creator of Sonic the Hedgehog) and company based the decision on two things: feedback from enthusiasts (most of whom love the title), and the overall buzz the character has generated for better or for worse. Anyone who has spent quality time with Blinx already knows that the more you play, the better it gets, but the game is on the difficult side, and there's no denying it would be nice to have the option to play sans the 10:00 minute time limit. Currently it's embedded into the fabric of the game—meant to heighten tension—but undoubtedly Artoon will work on this aspect as well as integrating more story through cinema. The important thing is that Blinx is well on his way to becoming a franchise player—great news for platforming fans who to date have only a few Xbox games to gloat over.

BIG SCREEN GBA

While not the Game Boy Advance development we've all been waiting for, Nintendo's new GBA-GC adaptor will allow you to play all those great handheld games like Metroid Fusion and The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past on your tele. Now we can finally finish Golden Sun!



The next best thing to a backlit GBA?

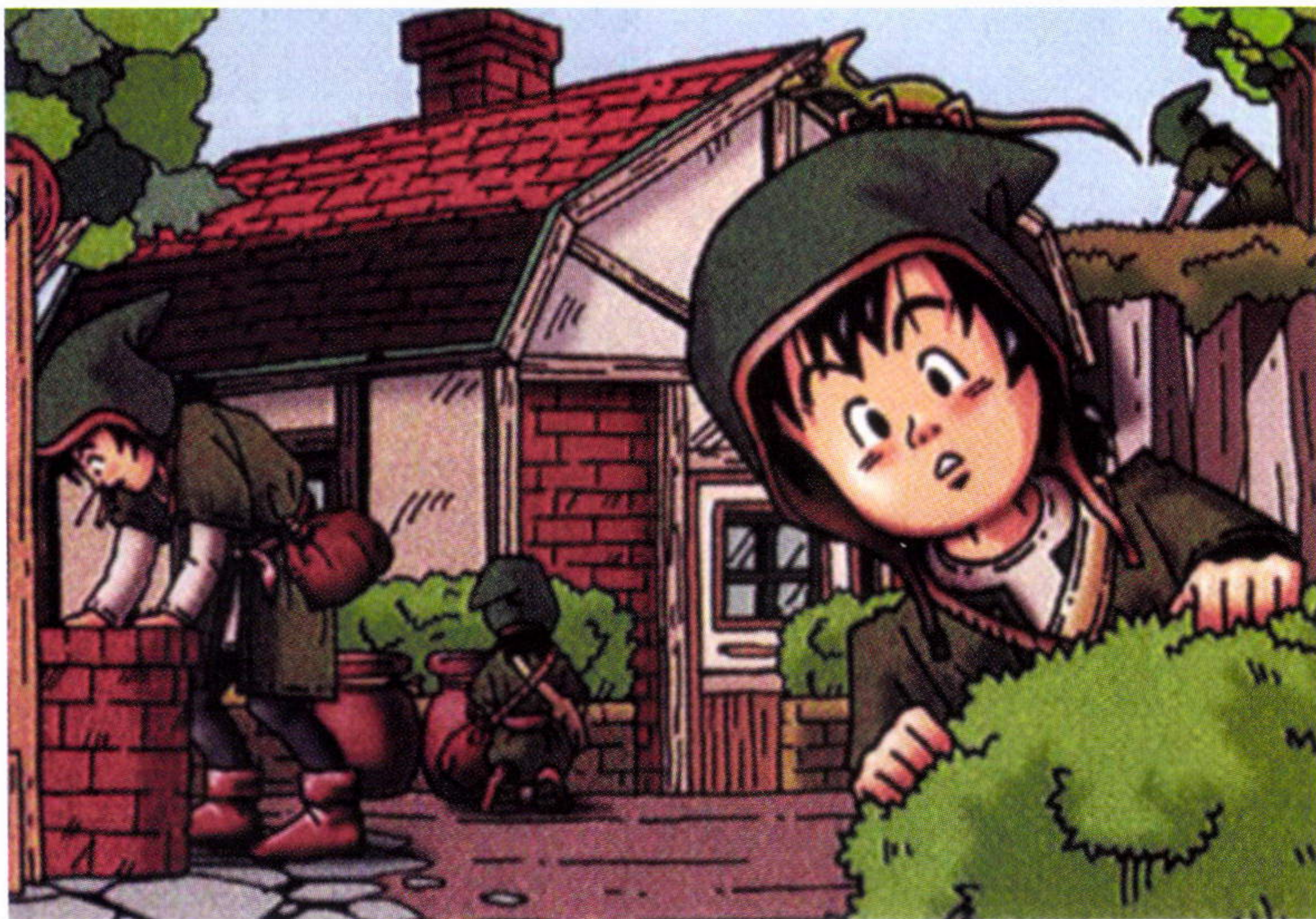
HELL FREEZES OVER, AGAIN

The 800 lb. gorilla that will eat the other 800 lb. gorillas...

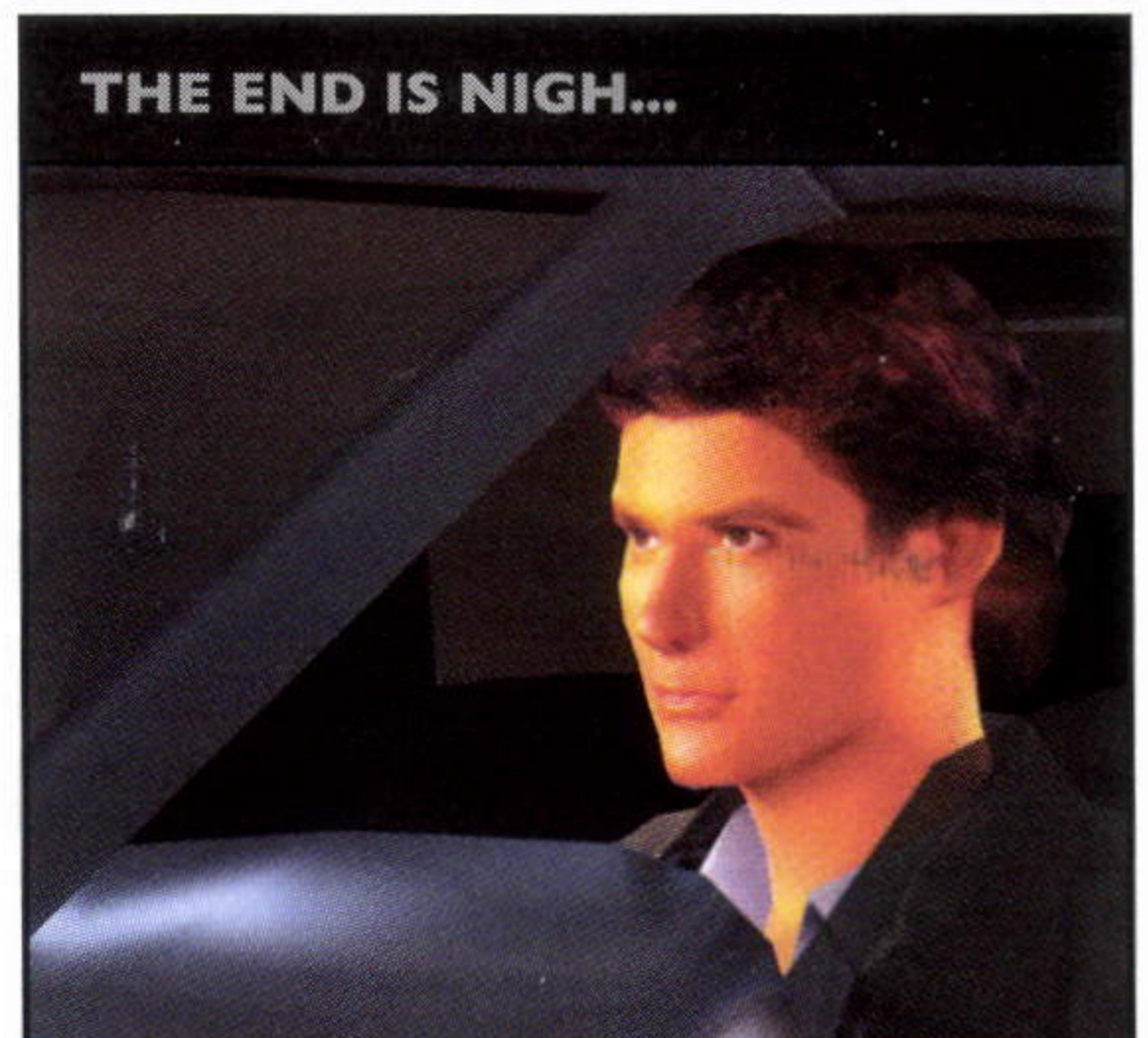
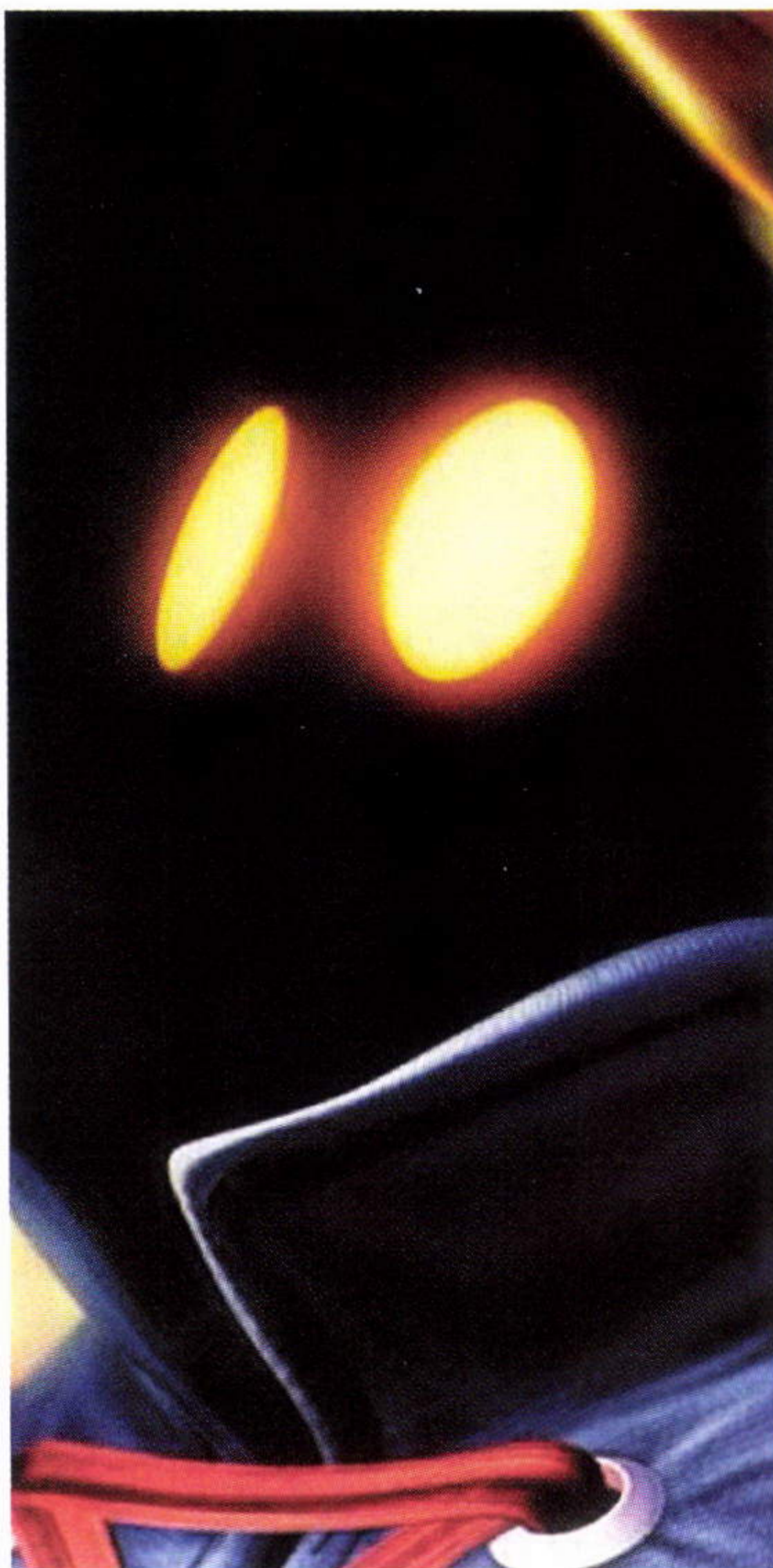
The last few years in the video-game business have seen revelations we'd never have dreamed of less than a decade ago: Sony entering the console wars, Sega leaving them, Rare leaving Nintendo—but this one may have the biggest ramifications yet. In Tokyo on November 26, Enix Corp. agreed to buy Square Co. for 93.2 billion yen (\$764 million) in cash and stock, combining the makers of Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy; that is what you call power. Square has sold more than 42 million copies Final Fantasy games worldwide, and Enix, over 30 million copies of Dragon Quest. Together they equal a force in the role-playing segment of the marketplace that is truly boundless.

It remains to be seen how this union will manifest itself, and on what consoles it will do so, but seeing how Sony had an 18.6 percent stake in Square, and now holds an 8.4 stake in the new entity, it would seem the PS3 will be the main benefactor of this new union. With epic gamemaking carrying a price tag of \$6-8 million, the two super powers are wise to combine forces but will still need to expand their horizons where the U.S. is concerned. This transaction seals the deal in Japan if Square/Enix pitch their tent in the Sony camp, but in America where traditional RPG's are being leapfrogged by more action-oriented epics like GTA and Halo, they'll need to put some action in the pipeline. Can you think

of a better time to bring back Act Raiser? And can you imagine the game these two combined could create? Turn-based RPG's have seen their better days in America, so now's the time. "The merged company will make better games for us and for the industry," said Kenichi Fukunaga, a spokesman at Sony Computer Entertainment (okay, we'll buy that), so the writing seems to be on the wall, in very bold print; "Sony owns Japan."



Two classic series, Dragon Warrior and Final Fantasy, under one roof, but don't expect any crossover between these legendary games.



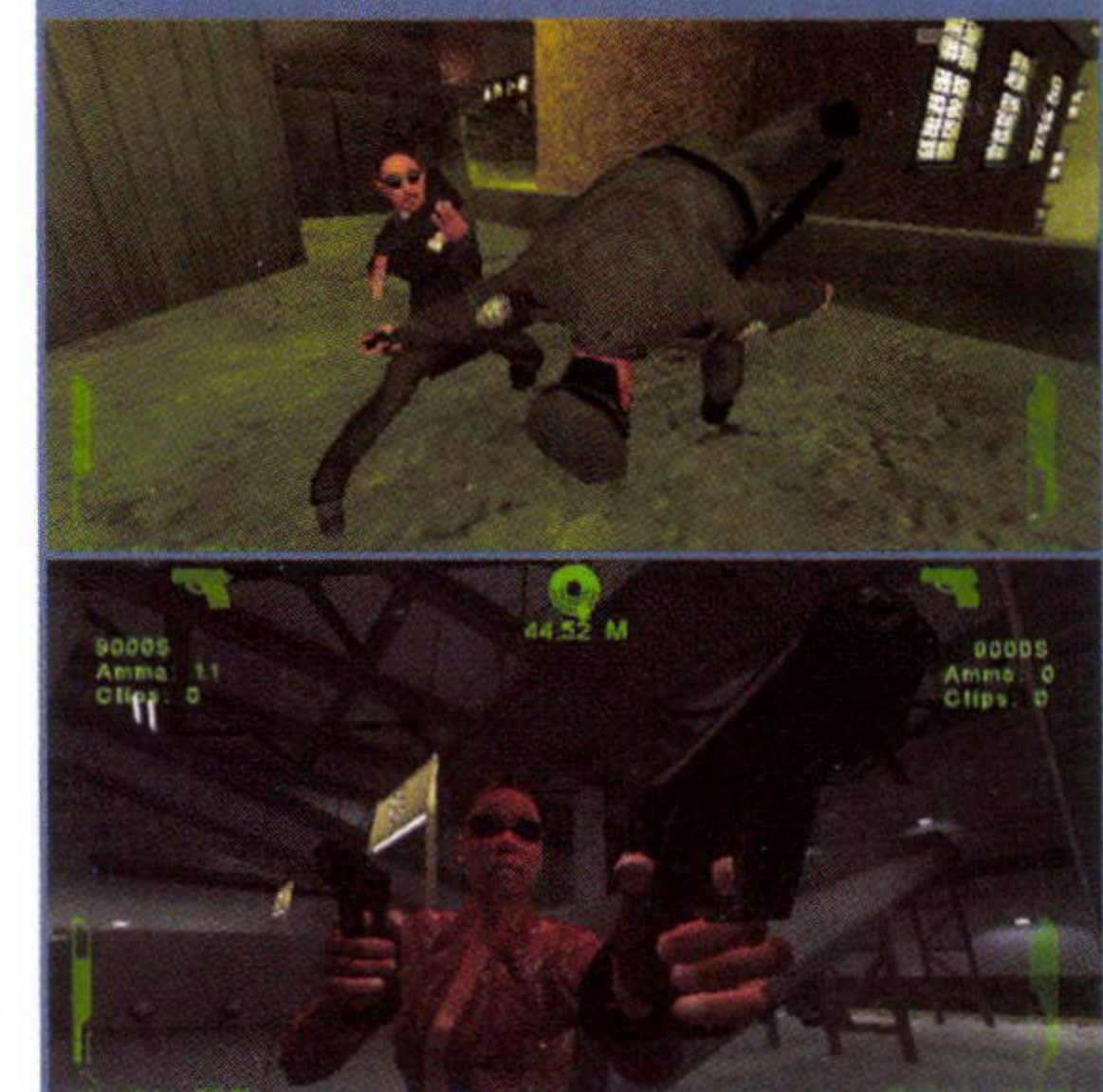
THE END IS NIGH...
 Meanwhile in jolly old London, Davilex Games has released a Knight Rider video game, allowing gamers (or, er, a facsimile thereof) to join KITT on a high-speed adventure, as he and Michael Knight once again fight for the innocent and the helpless! Using KITT's amazing high-tech features, Hasslehoff can scan buildings to track down enemies, make mind-blowing jumps across speeding railway trains with Turbo Boost, and annoy the shit out of thousands more before he succumbs to the rigors of The Hollywood Squares. "Knight Rider offers players a unique driving experience. Its mix of action and adventure, coupled with its instantly recognizable theme, will offer gamers a fun, exciting gameplay experience," explained KOCH Media's Commercial Director, Kerri Davies. No word yet if Michael Knight and KITT will make it to America, but there's always that chance. I can't think of a better time to get the hell out of here!



If Fear Factor didn't kill his career maybe this game will.



MATRIX: NEO GOOD?
 Why are you staring at Jada Pinkett and not Neo or Morpheus? And beyond that, why does the Matrix game look less than groundbreaking, or even up-to-date? It broke too early for one. We looked for the answers behind the screens but came up dry. Perhaps we'll have better luck next time. Wachowski for an upcoming feature.





DEVELOPER TRENCHES

We examine the underbelly of game development, where the spotlight rarely shines...until now

Robb Schoenbacher, Quality Assurance, Product Analyst, Midway games Chicago

So Robb, what is it you do?

The prettier names for what we do are Product Analyst and/or, Quality Assurance, but the title is tester.

What does that entail?

We fill in the video-game creation food chain. It varies in scope depending on the company and the size of the team. You can be anything from a lowly test monkey (a temp) on up to a project lead before reaching management or other departments. The job always encompasses two very important things, regardless of team size or rank: bug-free code and playability.

Is there a future in it?

Most testers get hired on as temps to start for a single project or during crunch mode. After a project is over the staff slims down and a few people will be chosen to remain on board for the next project. There are those who use the job as a kind of a mail-room or foot in the door-type position and then there are those tenacious few who become so acclimated to the day-in, day-out rigors of testing that they stay and

continue to grow by developing acute bug-hunting skills.

As an interim position for a serious gamer, how would you rate the experience?

Just like any other position in any other department of this industry, testing has its ups and downs: you get to play games before the masses, you occasionally get input on the games you work on, and the

“When it all comes together at the end and the product ships bug free and fun, you’ve done your job.”

atmosphere is extremely casual. However, there are some really insane hours during crunch mode forcing you to kiss your life outside these walls goodbye for months, and those elusive crash bugs that appear to be random. Like anything, there’s myriad of other good things and not so good things, but when it works best is when everyone works as a team. When it all comes together at the end and the

product ships bug free and fun you’ve done your job. Of course, this isn’t always the case . . .

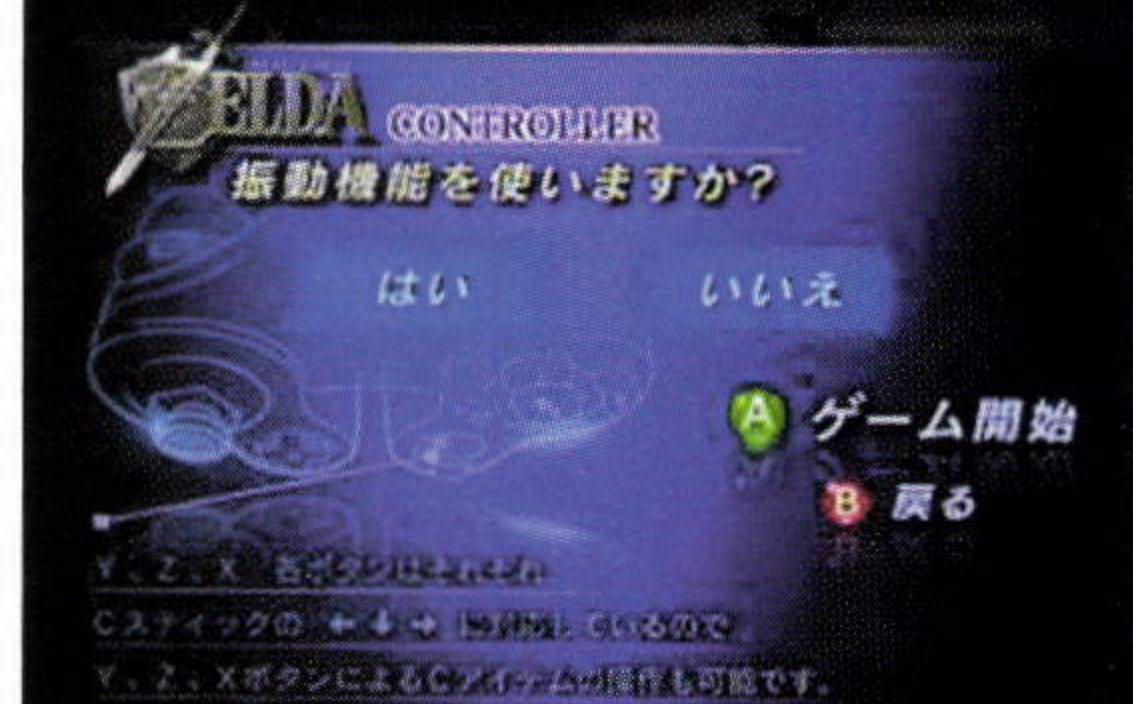
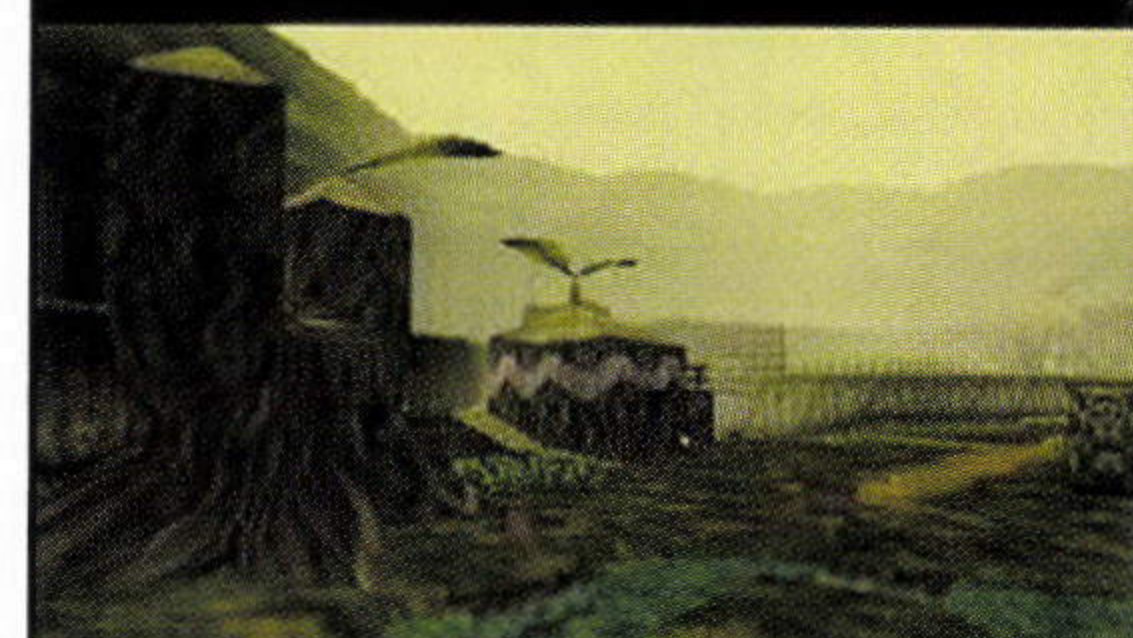
What have you worked on most recently and how did it go overall, beginning to end?

The project that we just completed was Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance. All four platforms (PS2, XBOX, CUBE, GBA) were done in house for Midway. The last

three months of the project were 12 to 16-plus-hour days. Between the small group of testers here in Chicago (15) and the large staff out in San Diego (100 plus), we tracked down many, many bugs and helped fine-tune the gameplay with various input and/or feedback to the design team. We think the game turned out great! Hopefully gamers will too . . .

THE LOST ZELDA?

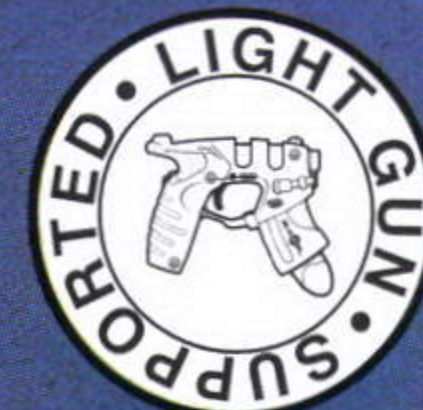
Lucky Japanese gamers will be in for a treat when they open up their copies of Zelda on GameCube. It would seem that the never-before-released 64DD version of Ocarina of Time, known as Ura Zelda, will be included as a bonus disc, fully playable on GameCube. Can we be so lucky when the game debuts stateside?



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THE RULES REMAIN THE SAME:



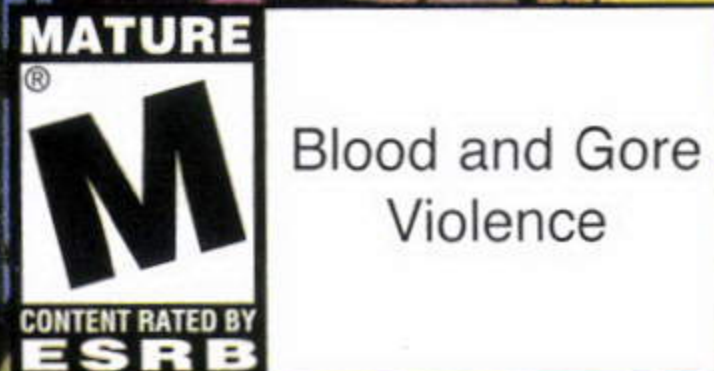
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AIM FOR THEIR HEADS.



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THE HORROR RETURNS!



Wm Stout 2002

THIS CAN'T BE GOOD...

Is that an RPG in your pocket?

Sony Online Entertainment Inc. has announced that the more-addicting-than-heroin online RPG, EverQuest, will be leaving the confines of home and journeying into the streets of our cities via Pocket PC. This means, among other things, that we may actually have to look upon the un-bathed masses who live inside of this devilishly intoxicating universe as they journey for the first time out of their junk-food havens. So if you run across one, here's what to do. First, try flashing a picture of a naked woman. Chances are he hasn't had sex in a good long while. This may distract him long enough to grab his pocket PC while your buddy clubs him on the head and drags

him off to the nearest head shrinker. Otherwise just steer clear.

EverQuest For the Pocket PC gives gamers an isometric view of the action as they become one of four character classes and complete 10 major quests across 15 different adventure areas; the title is expected to be available before Thanksgiving. Michael Lustenberger, director of product marketing, had this to say: "Players will be quickly drawn into EverQuest for the Pocket PC's strong storyline filled with adventure, monsters, magic and melee battles," and went on to add, "Kneel before me children of the Quest, we will soon march on Zion." Okay, so he didn't say the second part.



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Looking for some good educational reading on the web? Maybe a desktop or two... or ten? Then "Banzaigirl" by Jinky Coronado is for you. Banzaigirl is a cool comic book based on a real-life hottie whose nickname is Jinky. You can have a look-see at www.Banzaigirljinky.com, where you can get all of the insight into Jinkydom, read up on the book's creators, shop till you drop at

the Jinky shop, or head over to Glass House graphics for even more edgy comic fare like Mike Deodato's "Jade Warriors" and "Exposure." Besides Jinky, the series' artist, Wilson Tortosa, also drew the new "Battle of the Planets" book for Top Cow. This is recommended viewing online for one and all. Once you drop in, you may never leave.

SMOKING PAINT?

Toasting a bowl of Krylon this month, we have movie and men's magazines that review video games by not playing them. This can't be good. Finally, games reach "the masses," and they get misinformation. Granted, the masses don't play many games outside of T-Hawk, sports, and anything with tits, but still, how hard is it to get this stuff right, and/or at least review games based on playable code? Seeing as how their respective ad revenues have tripled, they should at least pay attention. We go to gamers, and we can't touch the amount of ads these boneheads are getting. We are officially throwing our hat in the ring to help provide solid reviews to the likes of Entertainment Weekly—arguably the best movie magazine in the country—who continue to tarnish their good name with reviews like their recent foray on Metroid, where the reviewer claims "it plays just like a classic 1990's arcade game." Yep, uh-huh, our thoughts exactly. Who can forget all those rapturous 3D FPS games we used to play at the arcades? BMX XXX... Vice City... sure, go for it, those are ripe for commentary, a chimp can play them, but paws off the likes of Samus.



Metroid Prime: just like those old arcade games...

DRAGON QUEST VIII REVEALED!

In other Enix news, the company has revealed the very first image from the insanely popular (at least in Japan) Dragon Quest series. This image highlights the new cel-shaded look, but the interface looks refreshingly true to its roots. Co-developed by Level 5, responsible for Dark Cloud 1 & 2 as well the Xbox' True Fantasy Online, expect great things. Character designer Akira Toriyama returns and as does producer Yuji Horii.



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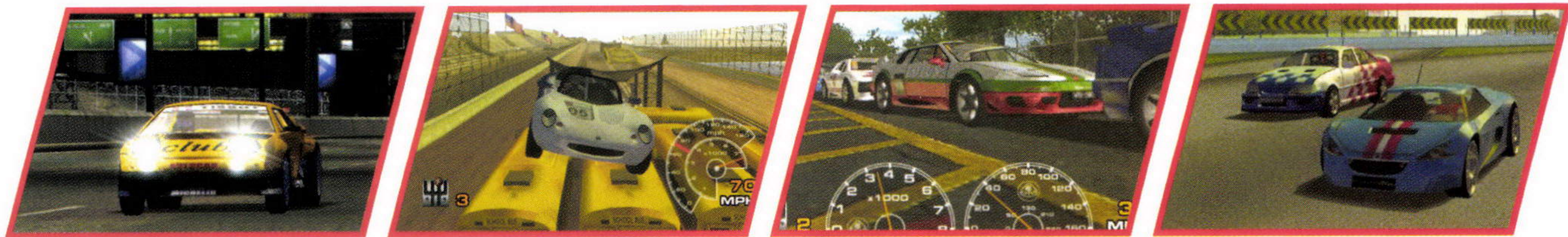
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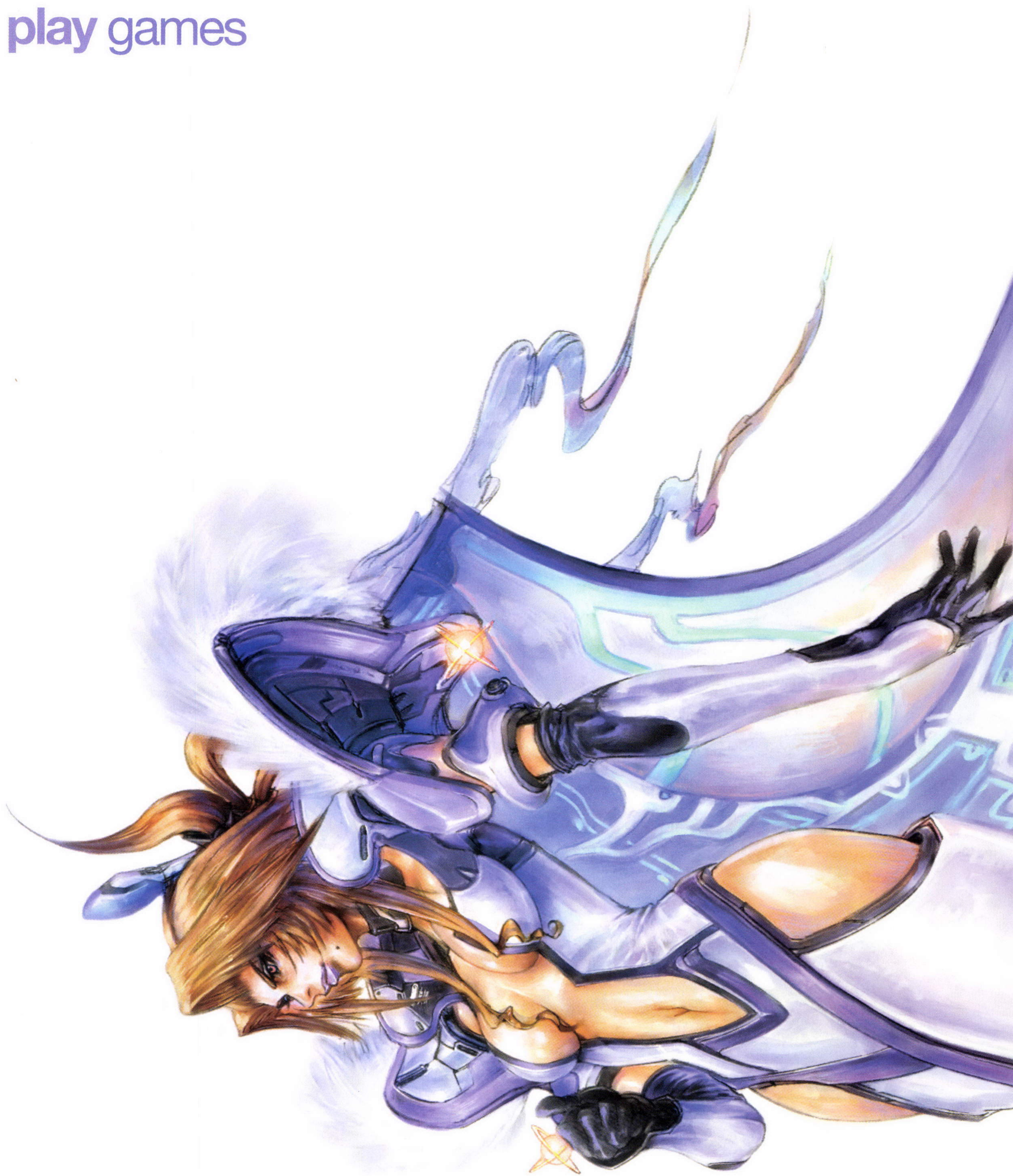


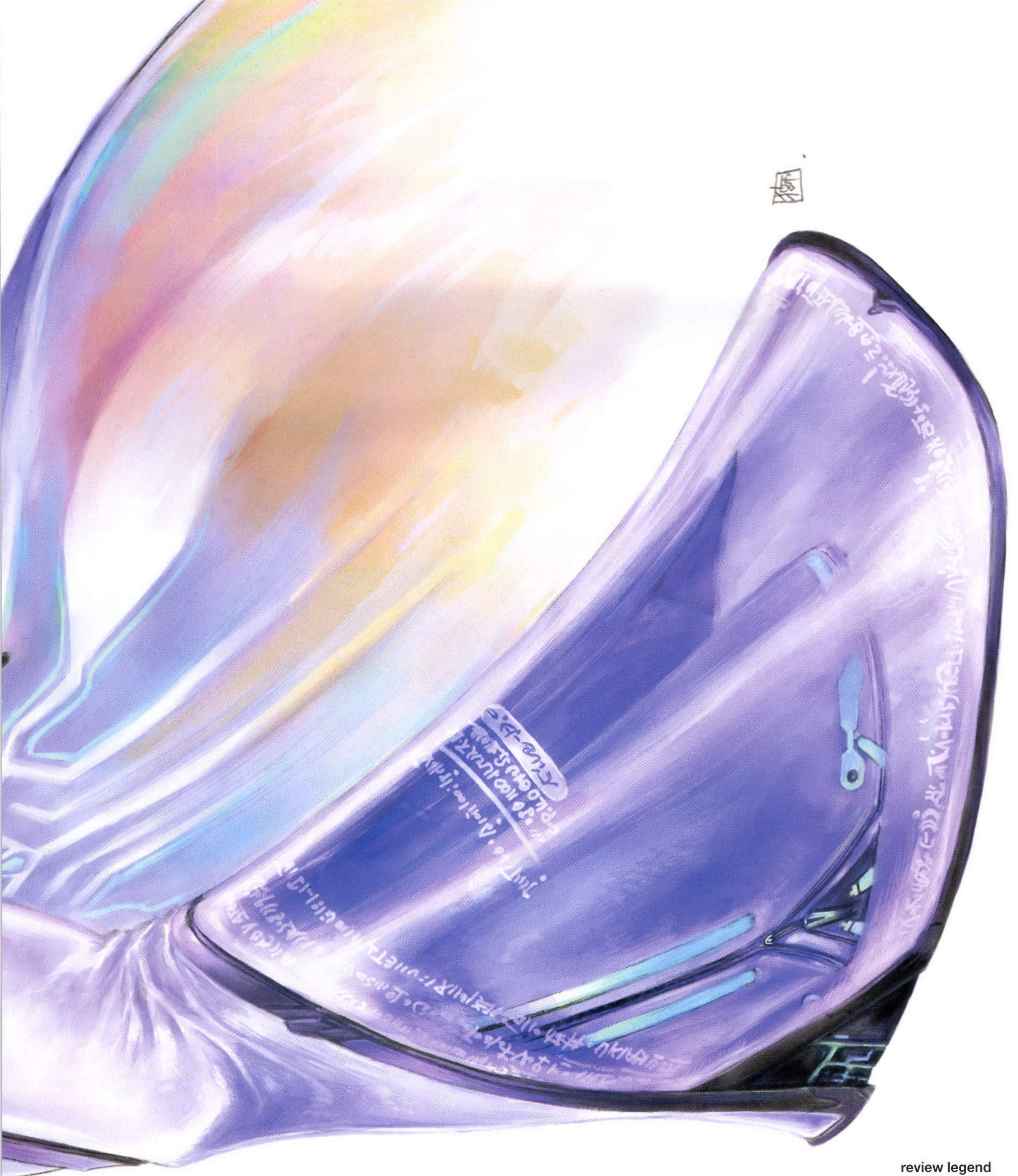
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play games





1878

review legend

●●●●●	perfect
●●●●○	excellent
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Team Andromeda's legacy lives on in this visually stunning fourth entry in the Panzer Dragoon saga

PANZER DRAGOON ORTA

words michael hobbs

"Art is at the core of Panzer Dragoon Orta, and it permeates every facet of the game, from the gross to the subtle."

Artistry. It's the one element that elevates the best games above all others. The Japanese seem to understand this better than any other game-making society. They design games with the grace of a painter's brush, not with the hammer of a craftsman. I won't pretend to fully comprehend the cultural tendencies that have contributed to this rather fortunate state of affairs, but I can be thankful for it just the same.

Such are the thoughts which occupy me as I reflect upon Panzer Dragoon Orta, Smilebit's ambitious, visually stunning continuation of one of gaming's most cherished shooter series. Art is at the core of this experience, and it permeates every facet of the game, from the gross to the subtle.

When I speak of art, the most obvious correlation is to the graphics, but what I am also referring to with equal reverence is the gameplay, which is crafted with the sort of care and precision that only masters of the discipline can achieve. This is a shooter with ambitions far beyond its station.

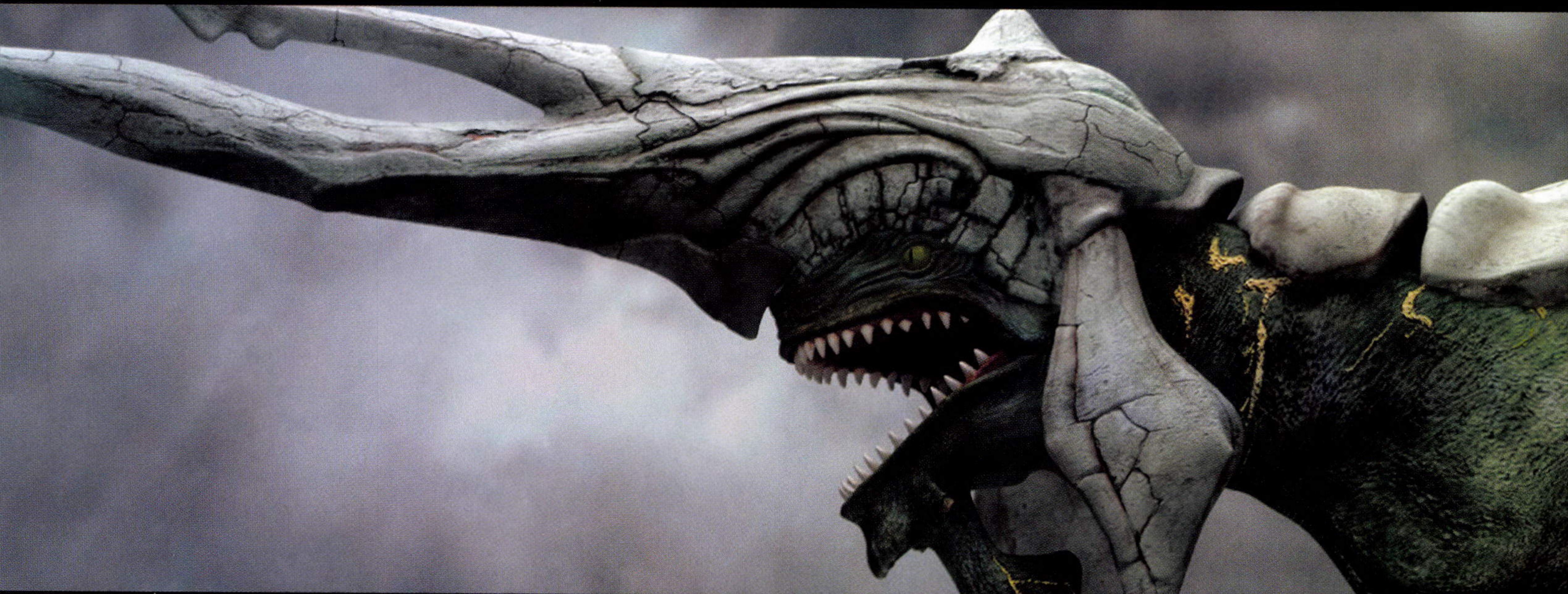
It's the very nature of this game, and indeed, of Panzer Dragoon 1 and 2, that allows this high level of design to be so readily apparent. As before, you fly through the levels "on rails," with no real control over where you go. You simply move up, down, left, right, and a little bit in and out. But it is this limitation which has allowed the game's designers at Smilebit to tune to the nth degree the player's experience. Freed from the

complexities of designing a free-form three dimensional environment, the designers, just as they did in the past, can treat each moment of the game like a painted image, putting things here, moving things over there, all to create a shooter experience that borders on the transcendental.

And like the great shooters of lore, it is in the enemy patterns that the game lives and breathes, and Panzer Dragoon Orta takes in big lung-fulls. It's like a symphony being played out as enemies swirl around you and bosses transform with epic pomp and circumstance. I am astounded at the brilliance of the game's scenarios, with everything within the environments placed in such a way as to create the perfect challenge level and stunning visual crescendos.

Within this basic framework, Smilebit has expanded greatly upon what came before in the previous Panzer's gameplay; they have infused a level of strategy which was missing before. You can now switch between three different dragon forms, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. One can fire a barrage of lock-on projectiles and boost back and forth two measures before requiring a recharge. Another, the brute of the lot, can fire a smaller hail of locked-on projectiles, but the strength of each missile is enormous, making it ideal for doling out damage to the bosses. This form's big disadvantage is that it's slow and cannot boost, making it vulnerable to enemy attack. Finally, there is the compact and nimble third form, which can boost





"Smilebit have created a living universe that was simply out of reach when the series debuted."

three measures and rapid fire, but it can't achieve multiple lock-ons. Knowing which form to use for each situation is the key to success in this challenging game, as is grasping, which forms are more advantageous to level up based on your play style. And boosting backwards and forwards is all important as you tuck in behind enemies or zip ahead and attack from the front. Brilliant stuff.

But Panzer Dragoon Orta is so much more than the sum of its gorgeous parts; it's a state of mind. Raw artistry is one thing, but it's the vision of the game that spans the chasm between great and brilliant. Smilebit has created a surreal, living universe that was simply out of reach when the series first debuted on the Sega Saturn. Details of this world are shown during the game's story, which is interwoven tightly with the gameplay. It never gets in the way, it merely fills in the image of the game out to the very corners.

If there is one element that is lacking, however, it's the music. Though there are a few truly beautiful compositions, nothing reaches the sort of aural high

of the first level of the original Panzer Dragoon, with its sweeping, symphonic arrangement. I was really hoping to be swept away in the same way by Orta's soundtrack, but it never quite happened. Is it unfair of me to single this out in such an otherwise sterling effort? I do it only because it was done better in the past, and everything else has moved on to such a degree that I find it curious that this aspect is not at least equal.

Even so, there's no denying that modern games are entering a new golden era, epitomized in my mind efforts like Panzer Dragoon Orta. I'll concede that gameplay has been evolutionary rather than revolutionary, but because of technology, 3D imagery has finally reached its adolescence, and it is only now that it is sensing the enormous potential and magnificence of the world that lies ahead. We are no longer tolerating the teething pains of 3D; the pop-up, blurred textures, and lousy frame rates. Now, as it was at the height of 2D game design, art is the means to an end. Let it stay this way.

Concerning sub-scenarios and the original Panzer Dragoon...

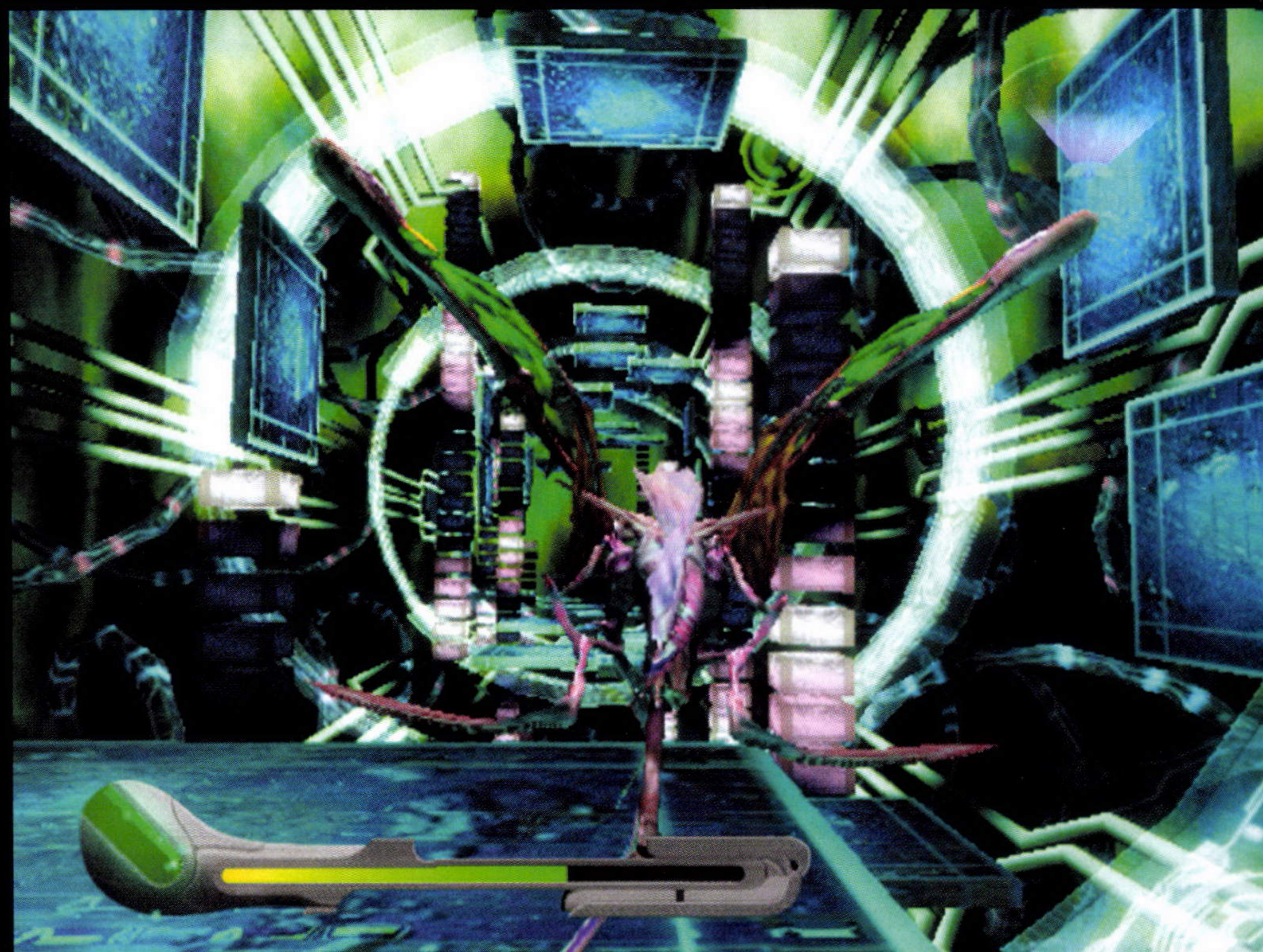
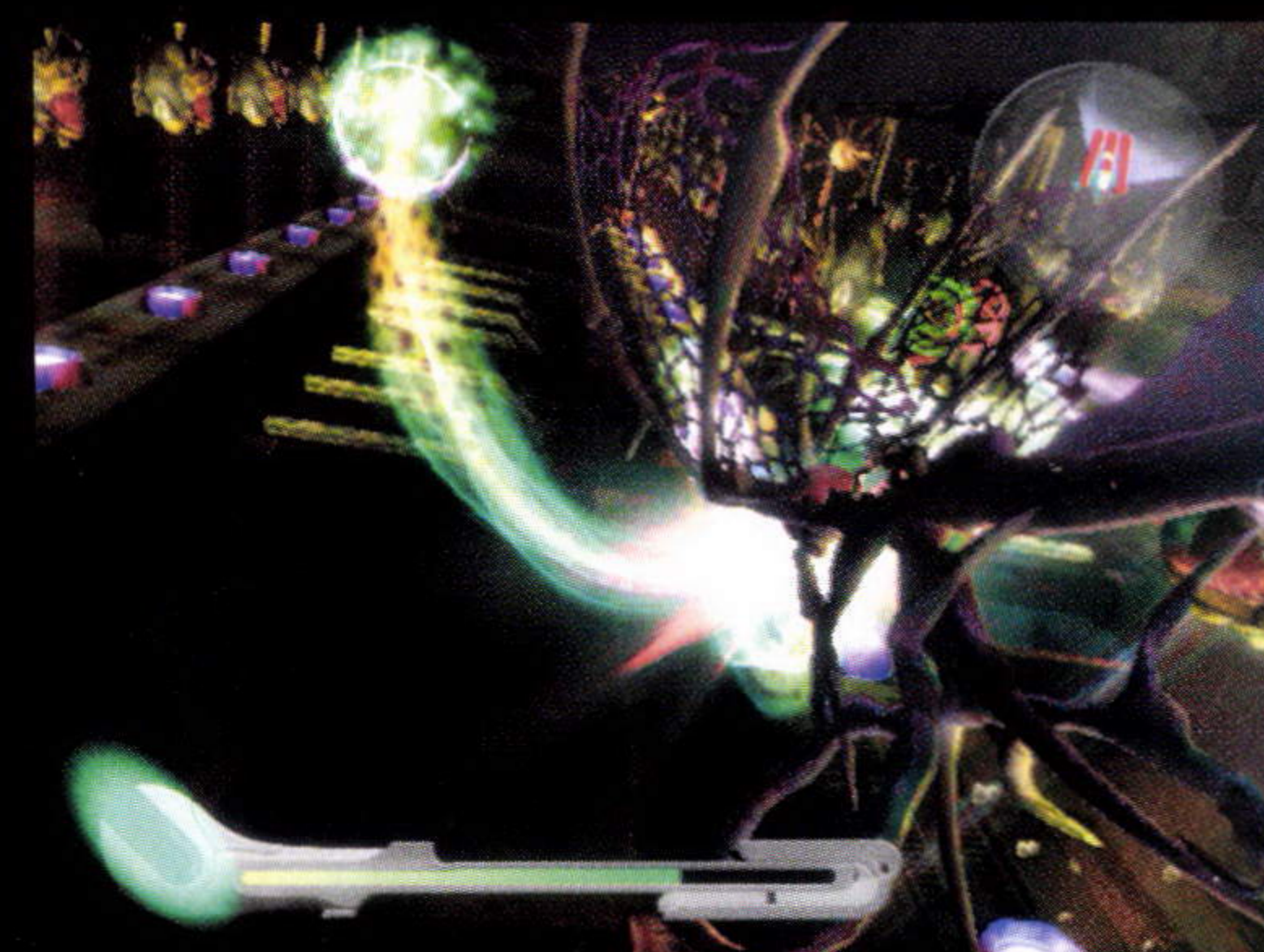
Not content with delivering ten levels of shooter bliss, Smilebit have gone the extra mile and packed Panzer Dragoon Orta with all manner of juicy morsels, starting with the completely original sub-scenarios. Basically an entire side story with its own characters, there is a multitude of shooting and control challenges to further boost the game's long-term appeal. As if this were not enough, you'll also be treated to art galleries, written histories of the world of Panzer Dragoon and even the entire original game.



In one of the game's more visually stunning missions, Orta and her Dragon take to a snow-blanketed level filled with surreal creatures.



In addition to the sub scenarios (which are almost a game unto themselves), Smilebit has also included the complete original Panzer Dragoon.



Panzer Dragoon is an often stunning piece of visual expression. The memory tunnel sequence pictured at left is a great example.

Read our interview with Panzer Dragoon Orta's chief director (overleaf).

panzer dragoon orta

play rating ●●●●●

XB

developer: smilebit / publisher: sega / available: jan 2003

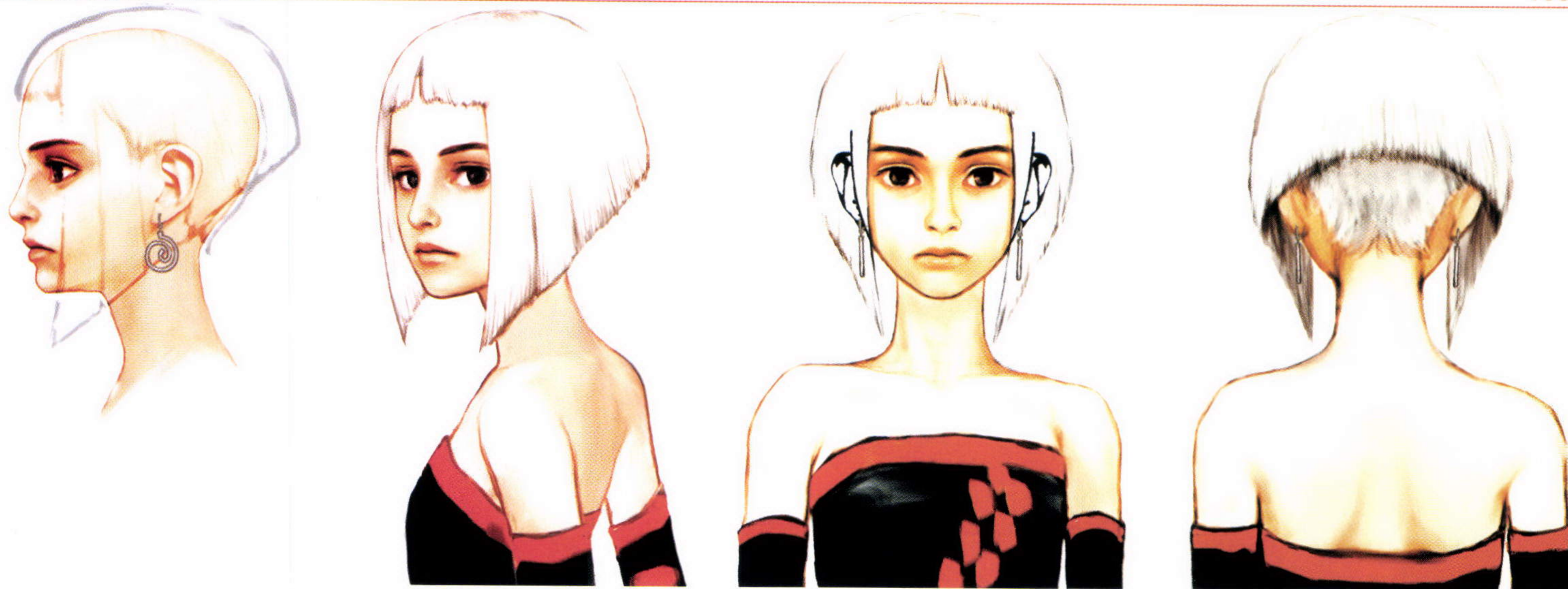
Panzer Dragoon Orta needed to blow me away to satiate my elevated expectations. It has done this.

interview

Akihiko Mukaiyama, chief director, Panzer Dragoon ORTA, Smilebit

by dave halverson

150cm



We can't think of a Sega team more perfectly suited to bring Panzer Dragoon back. Did Smilebit lobby for the development of this game, or was the assignment handed to you?

The game's producer Takayuki Kawagoe had been nursing the idea of creating a new Panzer Dragoon game for a long time. With the Xbox, he finally felt that technology had reached a point where he could bring his vision for Panzer Dragoon ORTA to life.

As for the development team, it's an amazing blend of new blood and original members of Team Andromeda (the studio that created the original Panzer Dragoon games). Many of the new team members already have a lot of experience creating titles for Xbox and have worked on games like Gunvalkyrie and Jet Set Radio Future. Many even joined Smilebit because they were excited about working on a new Panzer Dragoon.

Panzer Dragoon is a series known and loved by enthusiast Sega gamers. Since the amazing Panzer Dragoon Saga however, the video game market has grown considerably. Bringing the franchise to back to America on Xbox, what was your main focus in expanding the Panzer Dragoon universe to match the new hardware spec and the larger audience that Panzer will enjoy?

Our main aim with Panzer Dragoon ORTA was to create a seamless blend of the old and the new. We used the history of the series and the Panzer universe as a guide, and tried to expand upon, rather than completely re-imagine, the Panzer world. We wanted to create a game that satisfied fans of the original games, but was also accessible to newcomers to the series.

As for developing for Xbox, Smilebit has a lot of experience with the platform, having worked on Gunvalkyrie and Jet Set Radio Future, which was valuable. We also have experience developing PC games for SEGA, so we are quite good with DirectX, which made it easy to

jump right into the development environment for Xbox. We used a lot of technical tricks and techniques, but different shader techniques were used heavily throughout the game to create its unique feel.

Orta is a beautiful character—her expression throughout the game is extraordinary—can you tell us about her origins and how you decided on her as the series' new hero?

One of the first things we did when we started working on the game was to create a Web system where we could all post sketches and ideas. This let us review everyone's suggestions without focusing on who made them, or what their position was at the company. This really helped get

"We did not set out to revolutionize the shooter genre, but I do feel that we succeeded in creating an amazing, action-packed, rail-based flying shooter."

the dialogue going and ultimately helped us explore many ideas we may not have otherwise.

Since many of us had very personal ideas about what the new Panzer Dragoon ORTA should be, this helped us make sure everyone's voice was heard. Truth be told, this also made for some very heated and tense discussions about the direction of the game. In fact, like in any good family or team, there were moments where staff members started to get on each other's nerves. Of course, this passed, and by going through such intense arguments, we were able to create some truly stunning, polished art, and an amazing game.

Panzer is as much about art, design, and state of mind as it is superb shooting gameplay. What is the atmosphere like for the team to get them into the proper frame of mind to construct such an epic?

The most important reference material was the Panzer Dragoon series. A close second would be National

Geographic magazine, which was a great inspiration for the game's organic, natural feeling.

You have created three of the very best games available on the Xbox—Gunvalkyrie, Jet Set Radio Future and now Panzer Dragoon Orta. Although these games are truly special, they are obviously aimed at seasoned, more serious gamers. Although these games aren't selling in the millions, (yet) the people who play them cherish them more than you probably realize. What you do is truly inspiring. Is that knowledge enough fulfillment for you? Will you continue to make games of this caliber even though the industry is not yet sophisticated enough to really

make them as huge as they should be?

Of course, we'd love it if all our games were big hits ... but we're also very proud of all the games that we've created and I believe that our attitude toward game development will eventually be understood. If we continue with our uncompromising approach to game design, I think sales will follow.

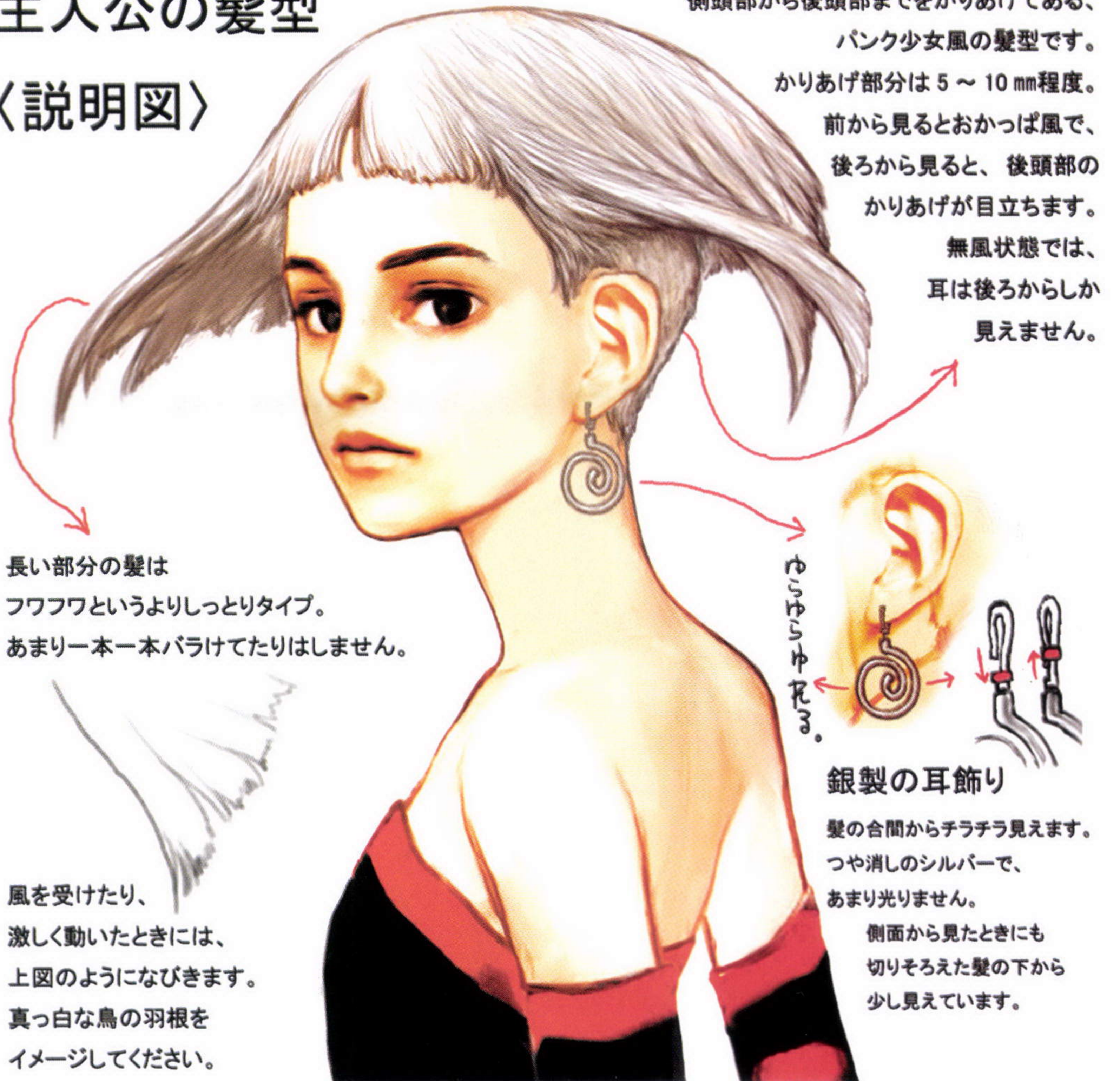
I noticed segments of the game that give the player the rush of floating as you rocket through tight spaces, and also noticed more balance and depth as a result of the evolving dragons and speed variables. What is the ultimate goal you hope to achieve with these new functions? Is this the perfect shooter now in your mind?

We did not set out to revolutionize the shooter genre, but I do feel that we succeeded in creating an amazing, action-packed, rail-based flying shooter. In order to create these fast-paced dramatic moments and stage spectacular

Smilebit's designers put thought into every aspect of Orta's appearance. In this internal art document entitled "Heroine's Appearance," there are copious notes describing the length of her hair, and even the way it's supposed to move. Also notice the detailing of her earring clasp.

主人公の髪型

〈説明図〉



長い部分の髪は
フワフワというよりしっとりタイプ。
あまり一本一本バラけてたりはしません。

風を受けたり、
激しく動いたときには、
上図のようになびきます。
真っ白な鳥の羽根を
イメージしてください。

側頭部から後頭部までをかりあげてある、
パンク少女風の髪型です。
かりあげ部分は5～10mm程度。
前から見るとおかつぱ風で、
後ろから見ると、後頭部の
かりあげが目立ちます。
無風状態では、
耳は後ろからしか
見えません。

銀製の耳飾り

髪の合間からチラチラ見えます。
つや消しのシルバーで、
あまり光りません。
側面から見たときにも
切りそろえた髪の下から
少し見えています。

aerial combat sequences, we needed to place the player on rails. This gave us tremendous power to create thrilling gameplay moments, even though it somewhat limited the sense of freedom that it gives players. We tried to balance the feeling of freedom that players had, allowing them to have great control over the dragon as they fly and fight, but controlling their movements enough so that we could orchestrate these breathtaking gameplay moments. We feel like we were successful using traditional gameplay mechanics in a fresh new way, creating an original experience ... but the flying shooter still has much room to grow, and that's exciting to me as a game developer.

The story is woven into the game masterfully as well. Was this the plan from the beginning or did it evolve as the game developed?

In games, it is nonsense to separate the story and the gameplay. The union between gameplay and story is what makes gaming unique ... it's impossible in other forms of media.

How many sub-scenarios are there altogether and are these ideas that you didn't implement or, simply added elements we might see in future saga's?

There are seven sub-stories about an Imperial boy and five stand-alone sub-missions in the game. We had a great deal of ideas for these side quests and we realized as many as possible within the development time. For example, there was a long story that featured a Worm Rider as a hero but we unwillingly had to abandon it due to the limitation of development time. If we ever make another Panzer game, we'd like to incorporate this scenario – so you never know.

Panzer was to be released a few months back but wisely was pulled back for improvements. Can you tell us what those were?

This sounds strange, but we really just wanted to make the game more expressive. We revised the storyline and tied the narrative closer to the gameplay. We also fleshed out some of the levels, added branching paths and generally obsessed over every detail. We also spent a lot of time just tuning the game, adding finishing touches here and there. Panzer Dragoon ORTA is an important game. We treated it that way.

Altered Genos (very reminiscent of Gunvalkyrie!) and Eternal Glaciers are breathtaking areas, with a serene look and feel. You seem to be doing very special things all your own with Xbox. Do you find that the longer you work with the console the more you can get out of it, similar to the consoles of the '80s and '90s?

Those areas were developed by female designers, so I guess their sensibilities are there ...

Will the series continue? It really must, you know...

We'd love for the Panzer Dragoon series to continue ... but it's up to the fans, not the developers. If Panzer Dragoon ORTA is a hit I'm sure we'll begin talk of continuing the series. I sincerely hope that it will turn out this way.

Have you been approached or toyed with a Panzer motion picture? If Crazy Taxi and House of the Dead are going that direction (why, the world will never know), why not Panzer?

There are various possibilities for the world of Panzer Dragoon and we are thinking about diverse projects. A Panzer motion picture project is certainly one of the options.

Will you have a say in who gets the license if toys are made? The Jet Set figure is an outrage in America and now the same company is ruining Kelly. It's beyond troubling to collectors. Epoch or any number of Japanese manufacturers would love these amazing licenses and make gorgeous figures. Shouldn't you have a say in their development?

Since we hold the art and design of the Panzer Dragoon universe very close to us, if we made collectable figures we would do our best to assure their quality.

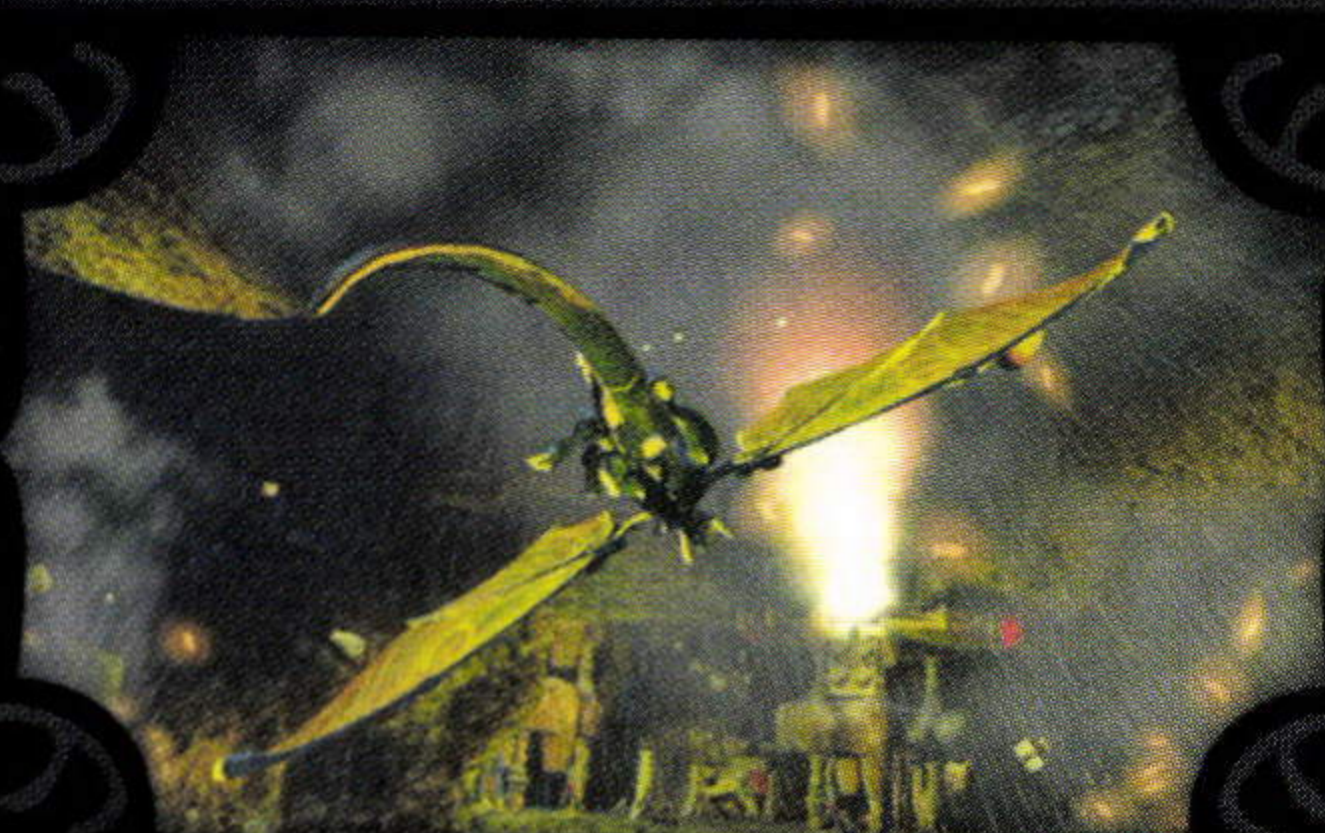
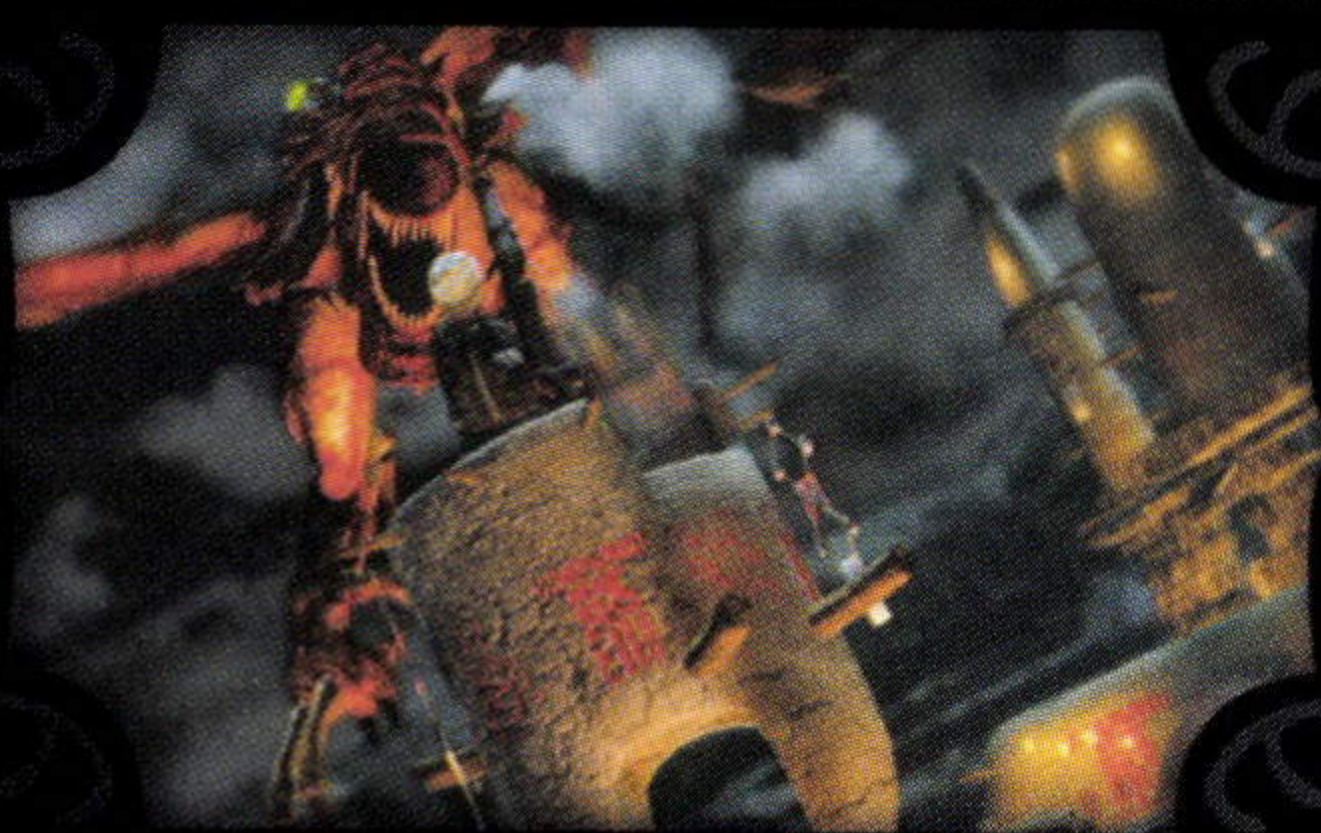
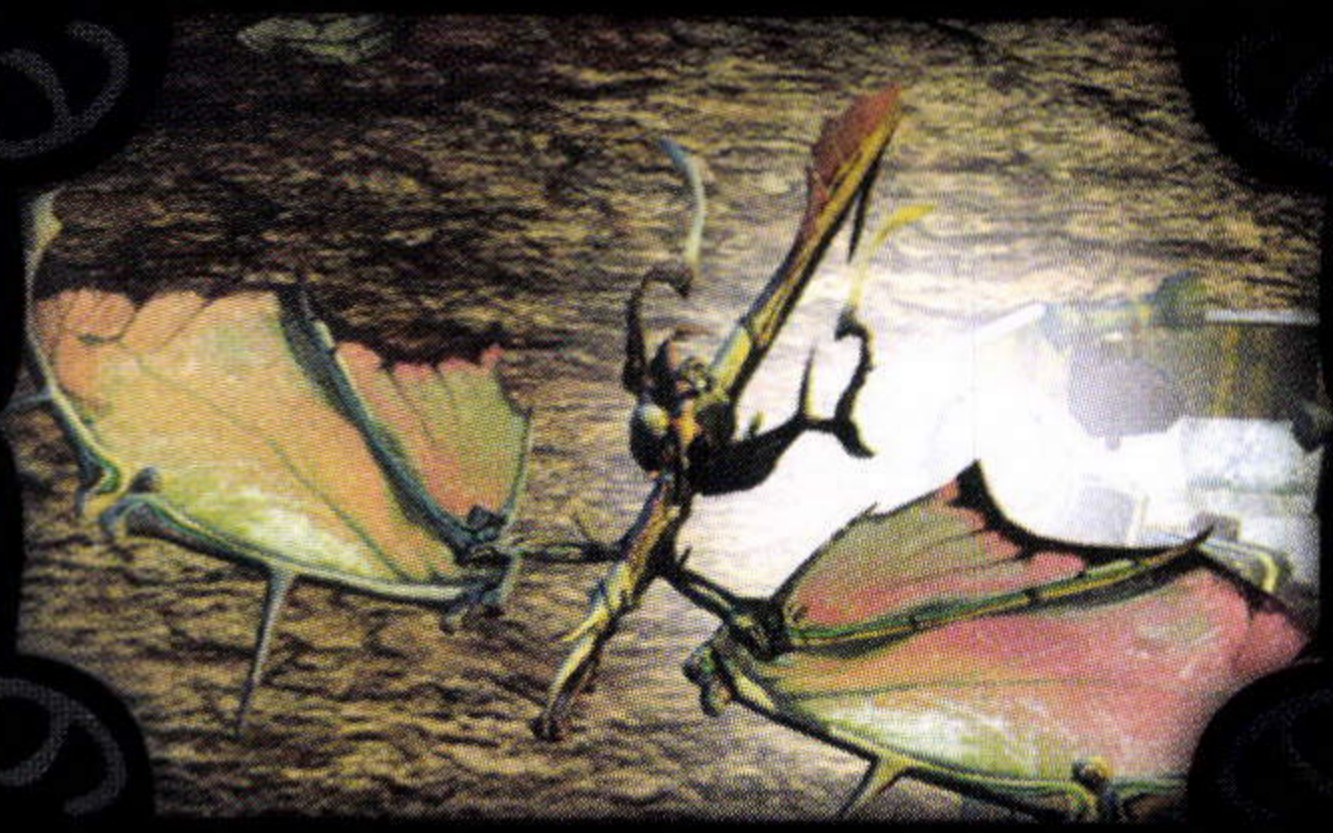
Both Gunvalkyrie and Jet Set Future are among our top choices for game of the year. We know you won't make another GV but will Jet Set live on?

(From Masayosh Kikuchi, chief director Jet Set Radio)
"Currently, there is no plan for another Jet Set game, but I'm of course very interested in making another game. If I have a chance, a new Jet Set Radio title may appear, much like Panzer Dragoon ORTA did."

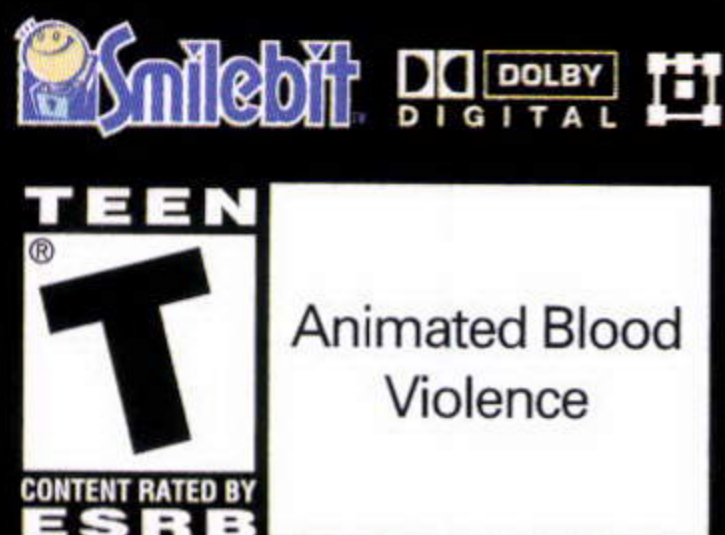
Is there anything in particular you would like to convey to our readers before Panzer hits the US?

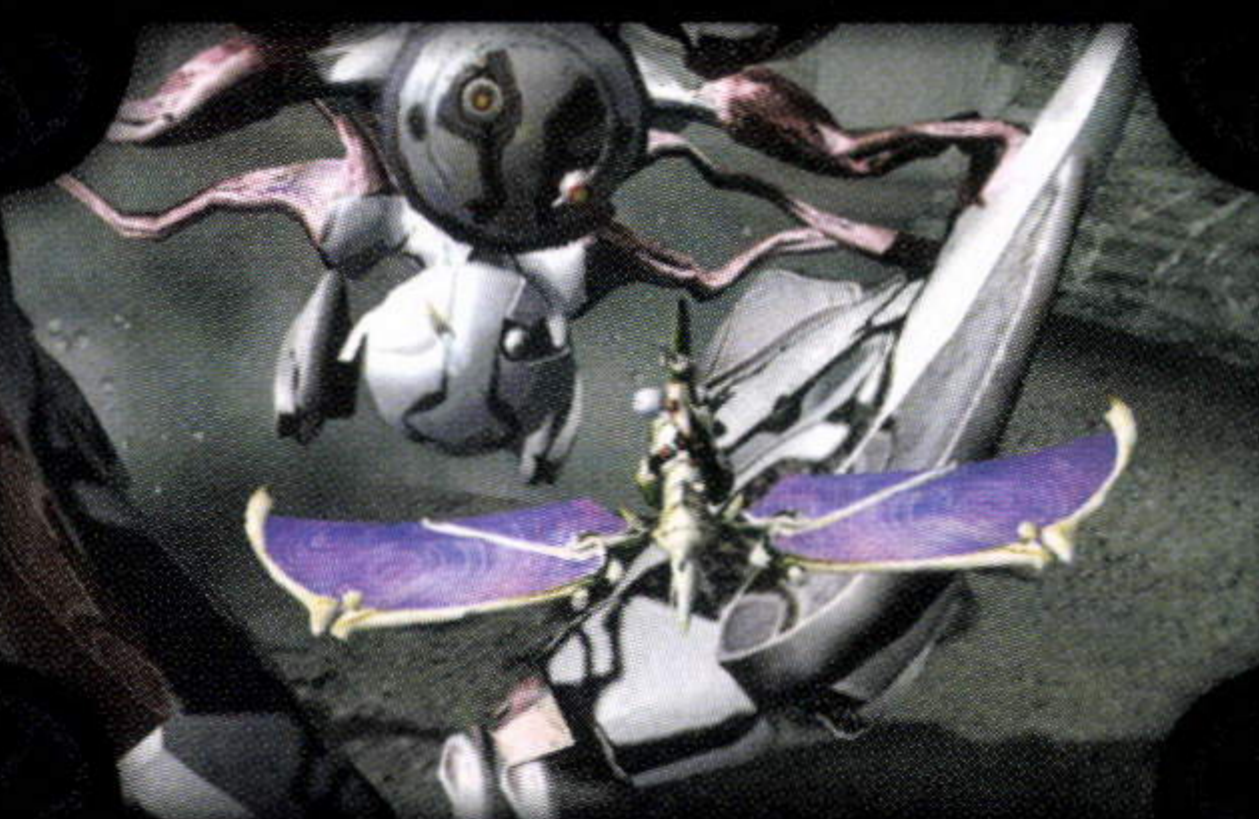
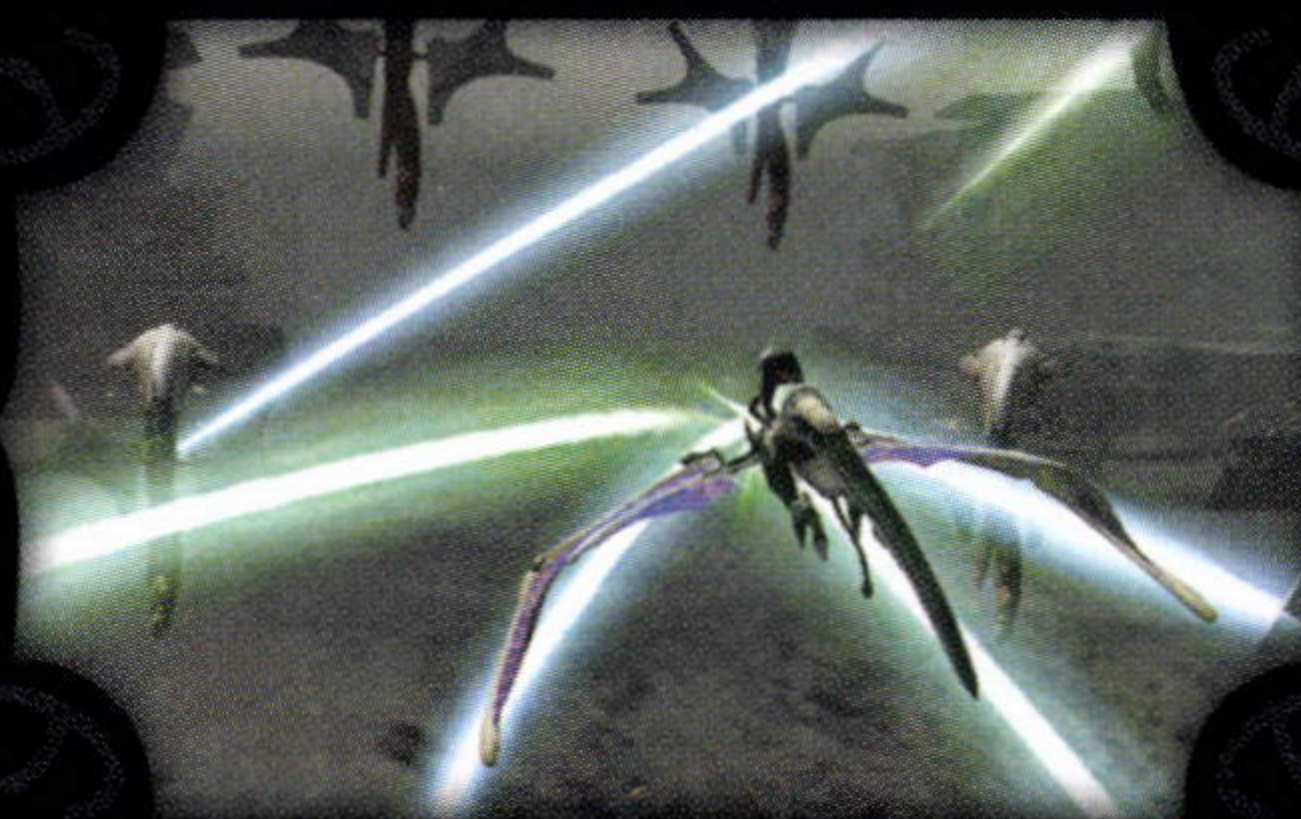
If possible, we'd like to encourage everyone to go back and play the original Panzer Dragoon games. They are tremendous fun, even by today's standards ... but more importantly, they will help you to understand the deep, rich universe that Panzer Dragoon ORTA came from. We realize this isn't possible for everyone, so we've included a lot of information, movies, and even the entire original Panzer Dragoon game within Orta, so new fans can understand what all the fuss is about. **play**

"We'd love for the Panzer Dragoon series to continue...but it's up to the fans, not the developers."



*From the shadows of history,
a legend reawakens.*





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PANZER DRAGON ORTA™

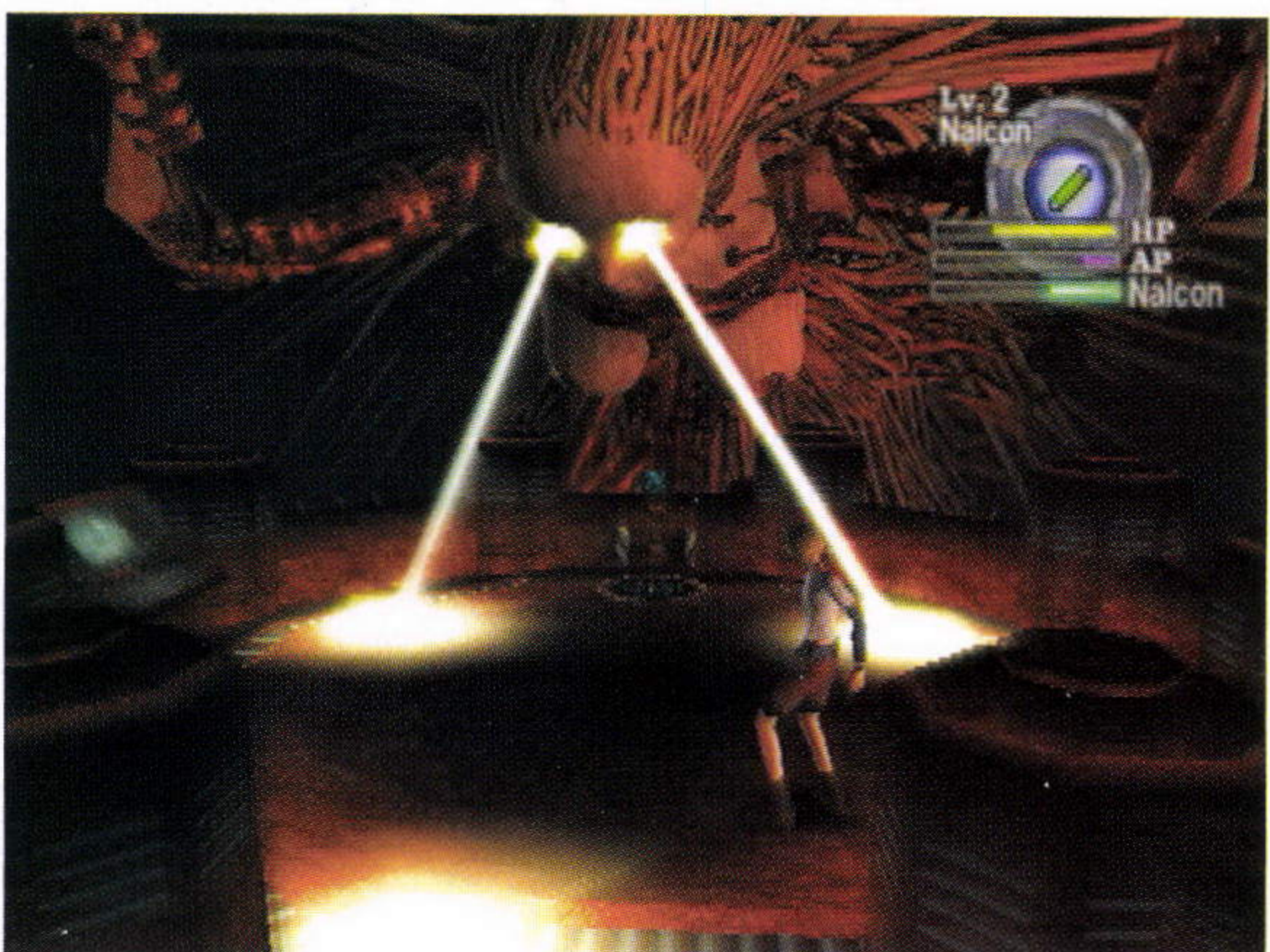
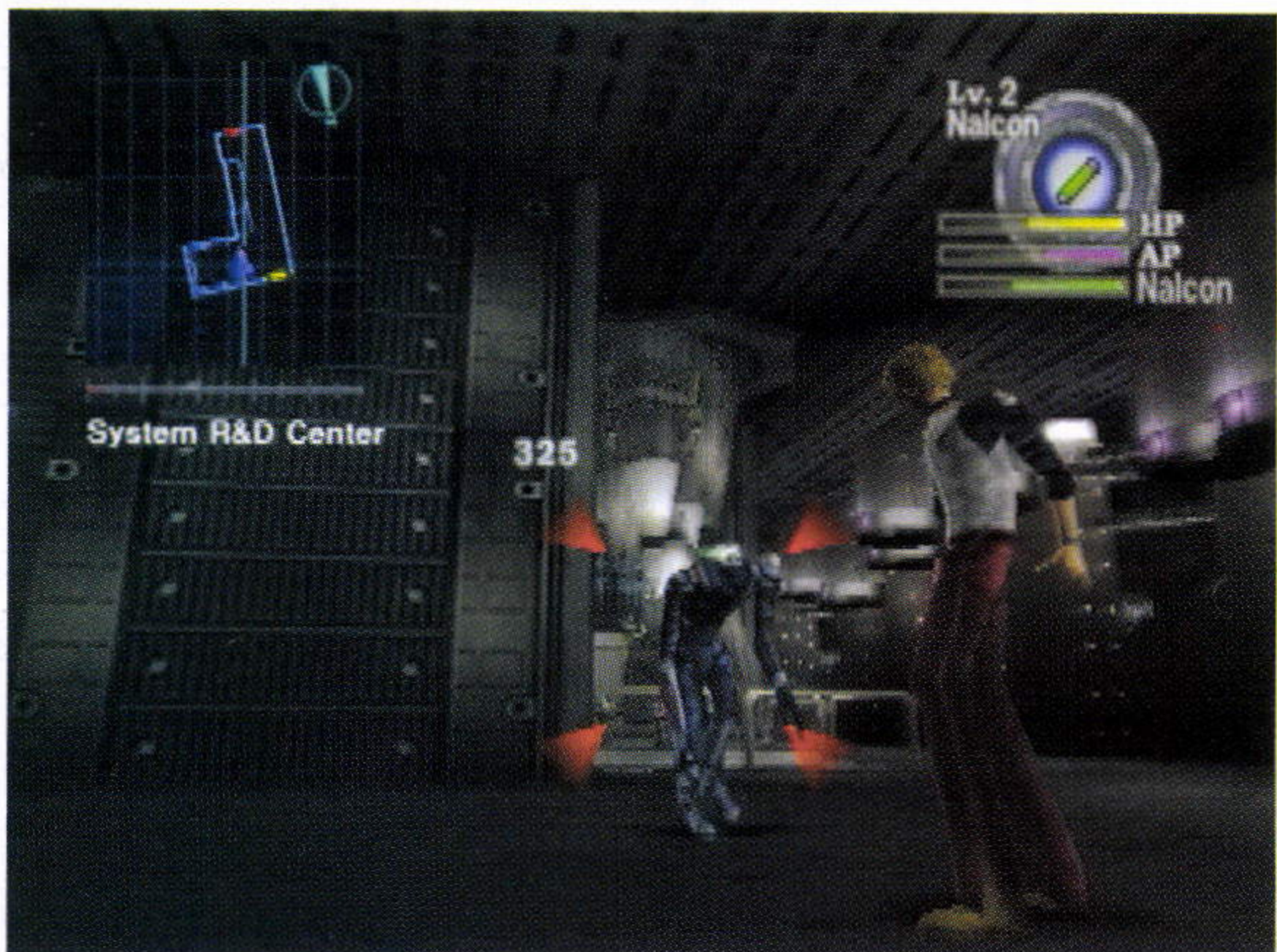
sega.com/panzer



Lets you do the time warp again

GALLERIANS: ASH

words dave halverson



One of the few survival-horror games outside of Resident Evil to have any impact during the PlayStation's lengthy tenure was *Galerians*, largely due to its telekinetic nature and hard-core sci-fi-meets-horror plot, about a race of beings created by a super computer to overthrow mankind. Whether you've played it or not, the first thing that strikes you about this sequel is the psychic weaponry as the prelude unfolds in real-time, bringing you up to speed. Relative to the pain they inflict, the attacks, of varying types and strength, take a toll on the game's lead Galerian, Rion, and they deplete pharmaceuticals he must find and inject into his body. The fighting he must endure to undo his mother's curse on humankind creates a tortured existence within the game that is both unsettling and compelling.

Mother is a genocidal super computer named Dorothy—a fun fact that he discovers just before injecting her with a fatal virus. Dorothy launches one more cataclysmic program before she goes offline, however, inserting into the world a new

“Mother is a genocidal super computer named Dorothy”

crew of Galerians, lead by Ash, to see her plans to fruition. Rion, somehow influenced by his brush with humanity, fights beyond his protocol and his mother, deciding that humanity (namely a beautiful young female, Lilia) is worth saving.

The stage for all of this *Scanners-meets-Terminator* turmoil looks something like *Event Horizon-meets-The Lawnmower Man*, with the benefit of exquisite Japanese character designs. And while the CG models don't translate all that well into the real-time action, they are still fittingly represented among the beautiful metallic corridors and semi-organic confines of the game. Galerian's cinemas are where the real artistry takes hold, deploying a look that in a perfect world take shape in an R-rated CGI film. Hey, I can dream, can't I?

Gameplay-wise, *Galerians: Ash* draws mostly from exploration and lock-on style fighting, which is utilized to great effect and precision, especially when fighting the game's master race; prepare to memorize some sick patterns. **play**

On second thought, I believe I'll pass on the mother's milk.



galerians: ash

PS2

developer: polygon magic / publisher: sammy / available: q1 2003

preview

A great looking sci-fi themed adventure with a story and dialogue to match.



Space. The final boarding park.

Disney's TREASURE PLANET



Ride through portals into other universes and catch air a million miles up as you shred your way through an intergalactic treasure hunt in Disney's *Treasure Planet* for PlayStation. Based on the Walt Disney Pictures film *Treasure Planet*, in theatres now.



Mild Violence

PlayStation®



It's about time we got into it around here

TAO FENG

words brady fiechter

I'm getting bored with Tekken. Virtua Fighter 4 is obviously an accomplished, deep, fastidiously precise fighter, but I really don't find myself playing it much. I've never liked Dead or Alive's style all that much. Poor taste? Nope, just looking for something distinctly new before Soul Calibur 2, like ... Tao Feng?

Thanks to the chieften skills of the co-creator of the eponymous Mortal Kombat series, John Tobias' Tao Feng is indeed a very promising, progressively fresh 3D fighter, juiced up with dynamic touches that have never been implemented this way before. So early is this Xbox necessity that I'm not about to get too excited about the gameplay, but what I've played so far is pleasantly responsive and flowing, feeling nothing at all like a typical american clunker. Instead, we get garishly cool characters popping bones and splitting heads for a violent good time. Here's the kick:

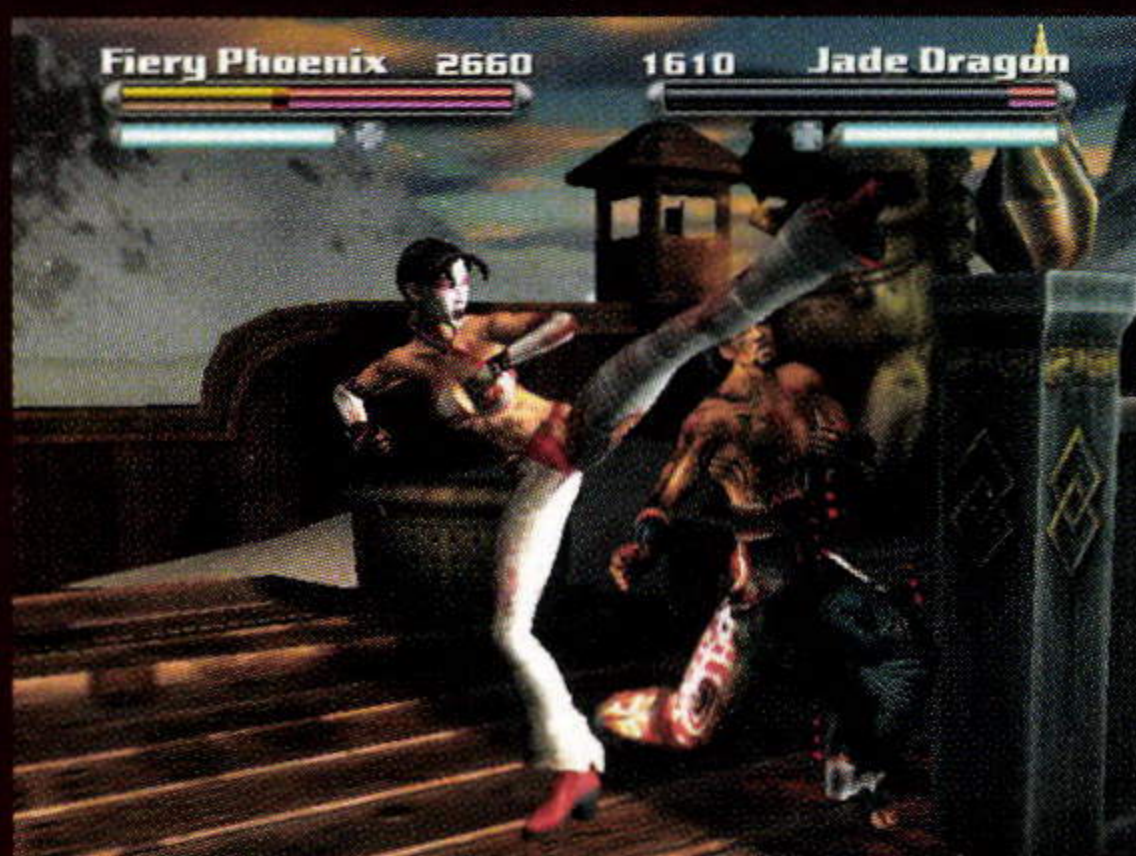
damage shows up on the skin and in the limbs, giving a visual satisfaction to the brutality of your kicks and punches. Cool thing is, the damage is more than just presentation: break, say, an arm, and the fighter weakens and loses movement. Weapons also provide the means for incapacitating damage, which does take time: the fights proceed with an evolving complexity, providing objects to pick up, walls to back your opponent against, floors to bash their face in with, poles to swing from for a drop kick. Time will tell where the balance is placed and if the satisfyingly lengthy bouts get chopped.

The backstory to the game goes like... Really, enough on that: there's actually a 50-page doc for each character that details their background. Who knows what ambitious achievement Tao Feng will evolve into. For now, I'll take a competent alternative to what's out there. **play**



"...cool characters popping bones and splitting heads for a violently good time."

Not only do the environments look great, but they serve as a brutal part of the gameplay.



tao feng

preview

XB

developer: **studio gigante** / publisher: **microsoft** / available: **q1 2003**

While only a few of the characters were balanced and properly playable, Tao Feng impressed with its fresh approach to the genre.



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Mild Violence

PlayStation 2

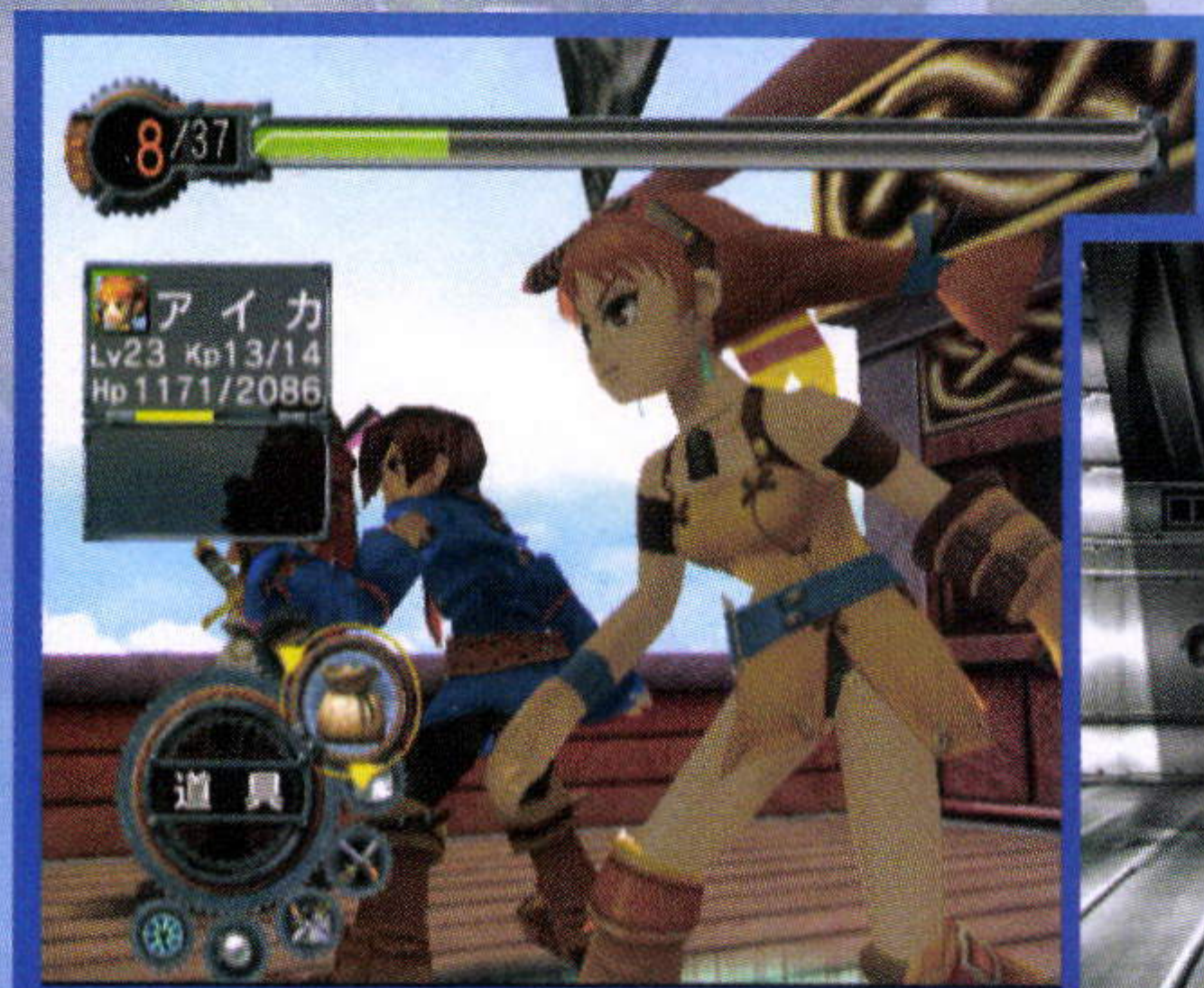
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To Be Continued...



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Do you Kung Fu? You will now

KUNG FU CHAOS

words brady fiechter

Kung Fu Chaos is a game that contains not only kung fu, but chaos. Combine them as Microsoft has for this wild-energy, crazy fun four-player fighting game containing hyper pint-sized fighters as the main attraction and you get an experience that recalls some weird Powerstone/Smash Brothers hybrid in its approach to arena brawling, driving it with an entirely individual style.

Story: Shao Ting is directing a new film and you yearn to become the star who captures the most screen time. To achieve this, you must kick the most butt and remove the other actors from the set. These sets aren't just little arenas, either: everything gets demolished, and the stage

"The game plays effortlessly, yet there seems to be adequate layers of depth."

It's fast and furious, and the visual style matches the fun energy.

is often shifting. The camera pans and tracks, forcing you to stay in the frame while contending with your aggressive opponents.

I didn't have enough time with the game to discover it all, but I really like what I've seen so far. The screen artifacts and hitches, contrasted way down to simulate old film stock. All the detail and impressive variety in the stages played great host to the nicely animated, cartoon-aspiring animal brawlers. And with all your friends pounding away along with you, the action stays heavy, smooth and focused.

The game plays effortlessly through the simple controls, yet there seems to be adequate layers of depth to reward the skilled player, and the gameplay embellishments, like the 3-star super move system, are good fun to execute and watch. Pleasant surprise; the review will reveal its lasting appeal... **play**



kung fu chaos

preview

XB

developer: just add monsters / publisher: microsoft / available: q1 2003

Here is a game anyone can enjoy, but that doesn't mean it's an assembly line effort.

**If you suck,
at least no one
will know who
you are.**



Look for this icon on SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs and other PlayStation®2 games with online capability.



**LIVE IN YOUR W_XR_LD.
PLAY IN O_{URS}.**

Microsoft's first shot at the RPG crown

SUDEKI

words dave halverson



"Sudeki is fast-paced and unfolds on an epic scale, dishing out gigantic spells and seamless action."

For a U.K. developed game the characters seem to have a lot of manga influence—always a good thing.

We had the good fortune this month of getting some hands-on play-time with Microsoft's new in-house action-RPG, Sudeki, and came away very impressed. Switching between two of the game's four heroes—a beautiful sorceress and a steam-punk gunslinger (there's also a shape-shifting huntress and a swordsman)—the game is fast-paced and unfolds on an epic scale, dishing out gigantic spells and seamless action as you switch between characters, healing and dispensing mass destruction among the game's teeming hordes and gigantic bosses. A form of bullet time, made famous by Max Payne and The Matrix, helps drive the visual aesthetic of the fighting sequences, while the player (or players—up to four individual people can join in and play at any point during a game) makes ready spells and such during battle. The game's developers, Climax (it's not *them*), also plan on making the game open-ended, giving the player the ability to download new scenarios via Xbox Live (Floigan Bros. anyone?), which seems the logical next step in the

evolution of the RPG; let's hope this game pulls it off. If not more impressive than the battles, the towns and villages in between are stunning in both design and complexity, and help weave together a story that delves into the darkest recesses of betrayal. Unlike so many Xbox/PS2/GC comb-over's with Sudeki's Xbox only pedigree Climax is putting all of the systems power up on screen: bump mapping, hundreds of NPCs with zero lag, detailed facial animation, and every lighting trick in the book. Sudeki looked better at the half-way mark than many games do out of the box, so we can only imagine what it's going to be like when it's all buttoned up.

To date, the only Xbox RPG worth celebrating (mildly) has been Morrowind, so now, like so many hardware giants before them, Microsoft will launch a brand of its own on which to pin its role-playing dreams, a category that through the ages has made or broke many a console's back. My money's on Sudeki scoring big and shining in the darkness. **play**

sudeki

preview

XB

developer: climax uk / publisher: microsoft / available: q2 '03

After playing the game in its infancy Sudeki's become one of my most wanted titles of 2003

**No one
will mind if you
play naked.**



Look for this icon on ATV Offroad Fury™ 2 and other PlayStation®2 games with online capability.



**LIVE IN YOUR W_XR_LD.
PLAY IN O_UR_S.**

Anyone interested in an outrageous 2D fighter?

GUILTY GEAR X2

words brady fiechter

The 2D fighter has been fading out of existence the past few years. A couple Capcom stalwarts have trickled onto the latest consoles, but there's been nothing excitingly new. Stylishly filling the void early next year is Guilty Gear X2, the carbon-copy PS2 translation of the arcade Guilty Gear XX.

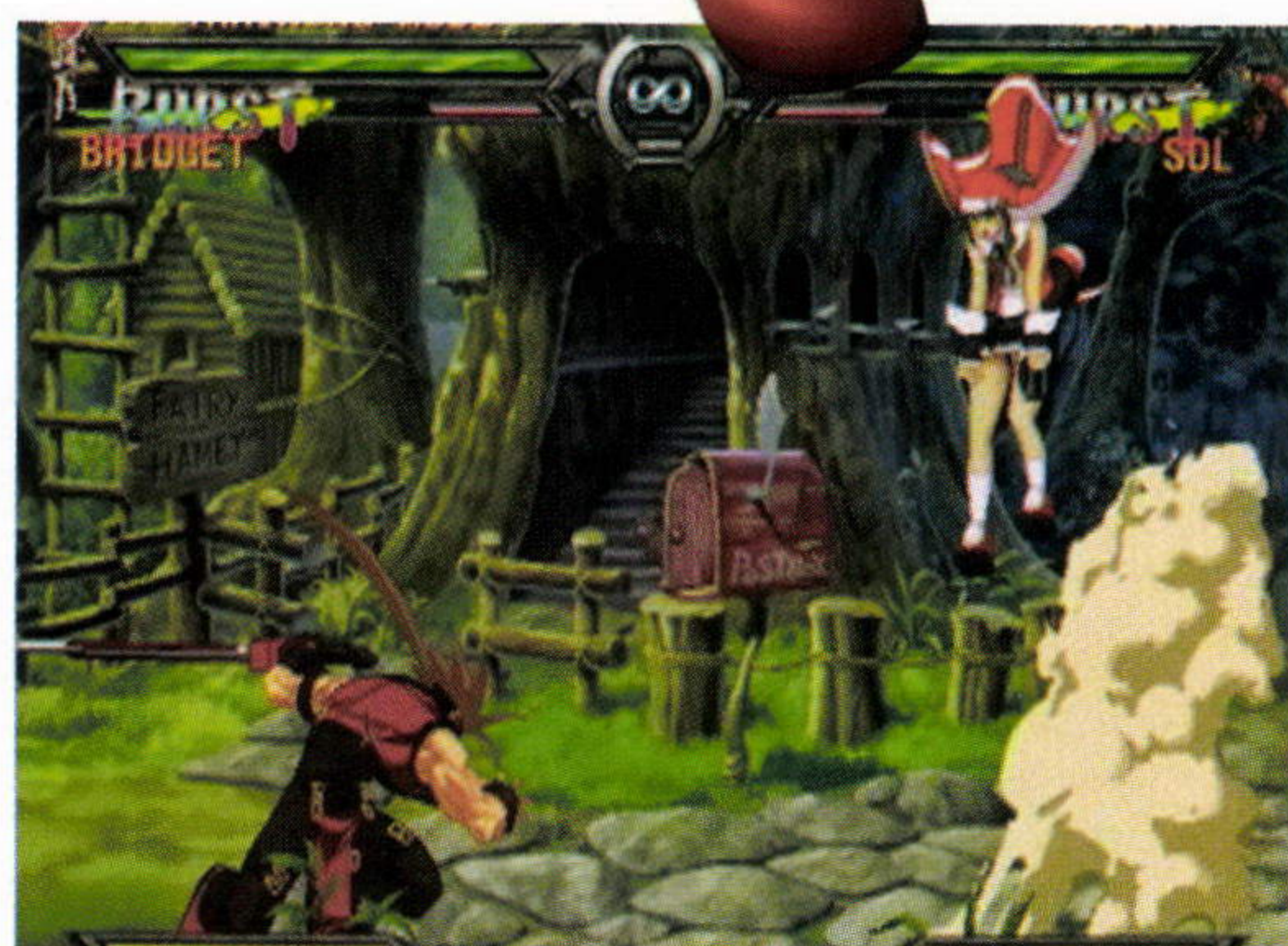
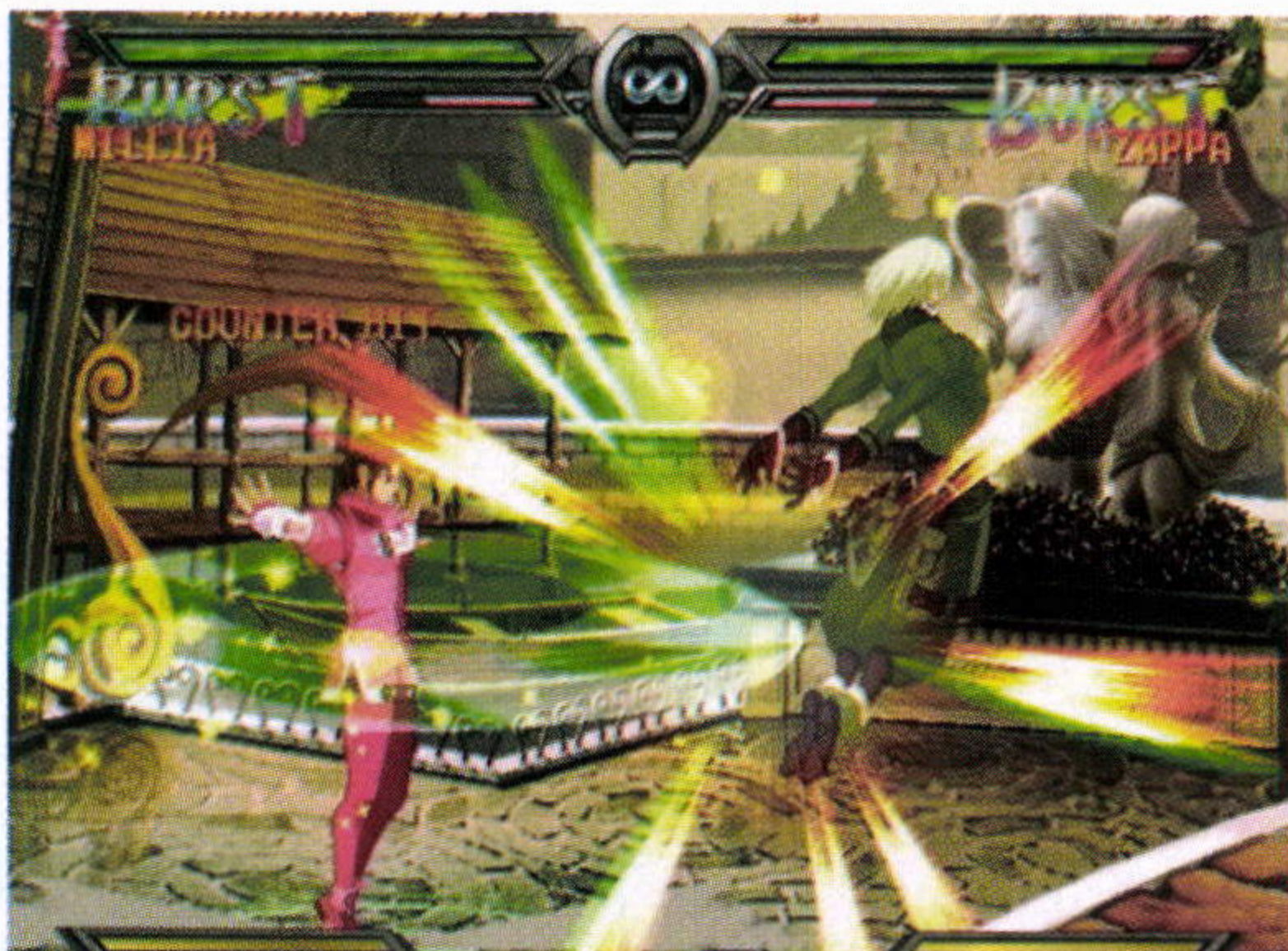
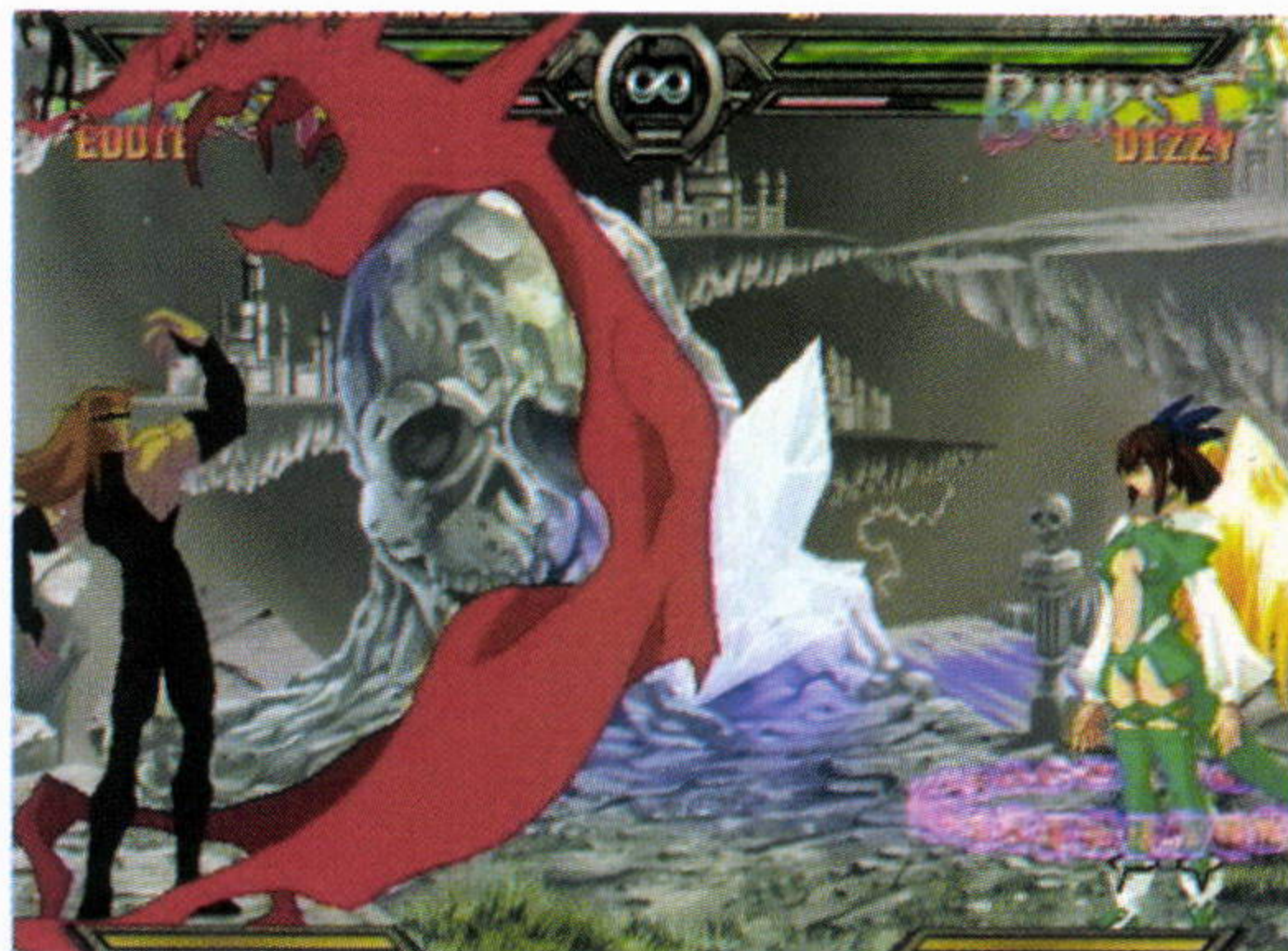
For this massive home fighter, cool extras have been included that make it even more appealing than its already stellar arcade originator; avid fans will sing praise for the inclusion of artwork, galleries, extra modes and more.

It's great to see Sammy taking care to make this more than a straight port—which would have been more than acceptable—but all that really matters is the fact that the heart of the game is beating strong. Mirroring Guilty Gear X on the fighting mechanics level, the game employs a familiar punch, kick, slash and fierce attack system. Some of the changes are subtle—a deeper fighting system owes itself to a few new moves and techniques, like staggers and throws, and the smoother presentation aids in a more satisfying experience. Additions like the combo-busting Burst Gauge and a tweaked Dust Attack intensify the battles once you familiarize yourself with their strategy, and the False Roman Cancel quickly becomes a valuable sort-of counter technique, where animations can be interrupted for recovered offensives. New characters also join the pack, and favorites have had some of their move list rearranged.

Hardcores will undoubtedly savor the finer points of the manic gameplay structure, casuals will enjoy simply learning and toying around with the crazy characters, but what really marks Guilty Gear X2 for me is its marvelous look—extreme, anime-rich, full of energy, color and explosive flavor. And the animation can't be matched by anything out there. Even if the selection were ten times what it is for 2D fighting, Guilty Gear X would still sit at the top. **play**



“Stylishly filling the void early next year is GGX2.”



guilty gear x2

preview

PS2

developer: arc system works / publisher: sammy entertainment inc. / available: february 2003

A lot like Guilty Gear X—just better in every way.

Start your own East Coast- West Coast rivalry.



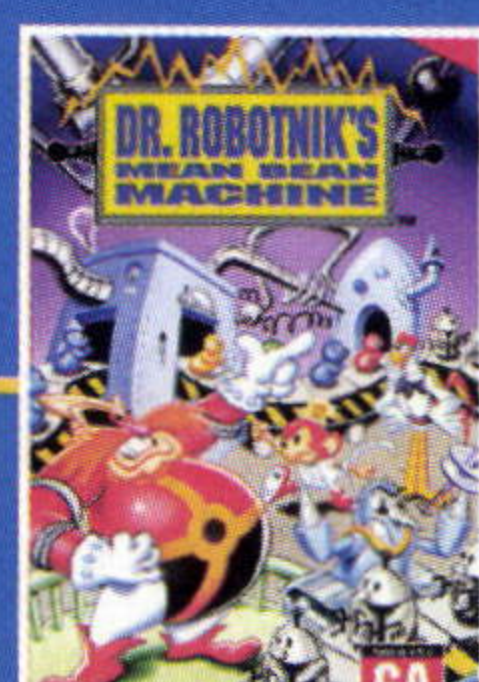
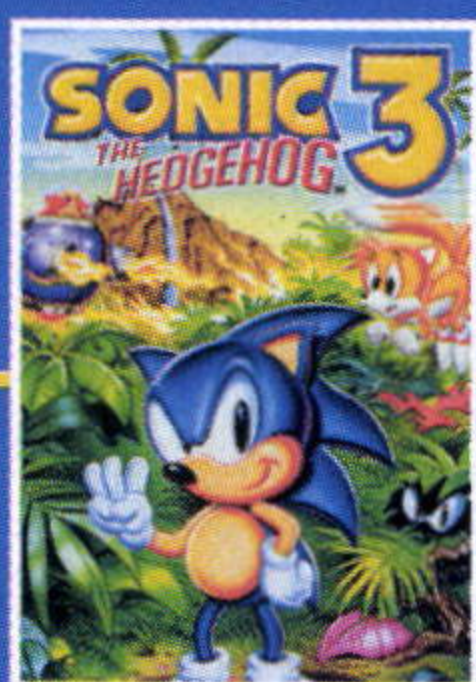
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XENOSAGA

Is there a ghost in the machine?

words brady fiechter



“To deny combat is to deny my very existence,” says the manufactured human, bred to serve its creator with a bloodlust for war. Yes, they can kill with impunity and lethal efficiency, but they show little belligerence, existing with limited emotional capacity. “Basically, they’re the same as infants,” observes a research scientist.

As Xenosaga opens, we are introduced to these automatons, learning of their function first-hand as we go into battle, aided by a unit called Kos-Mos. Leading the charge on the cyborg project is a young woman named Kios, who jumps into a virtual battle simulator with the units, studying their outputs and collecting valuable data from the fights.

Kios is constantly pushing the limits of the program. When we meet her, she takes an exercise dangerously close to the breaking point, nearly losing herself inside the matrix. Right before she is pulled out, a brilliant flash of a stranger girl’s face appears before her.

Kios does not speak of this disturbing manifestation with anyone, but the questions

raised obviously need answers. And so begins the Xenosaga story, an unusually verbose quest into the science fiction of the ghost in the shell: what does it mean to be human, what type of soul might exist in the hollow of the manufactured being?

Xenosaga carries a distinction that is common and aesthetically unique to the Japanese imagination, providing that distant-future detachment they are so adept at evoking. Its themes are typical but not without intrigue. In a medical lab on the giant space ship where the adventure begins, several units are healing and undergoing routine repair. They seem lifeless in their routine “tuning,” but they are treated with an interesting care; the scientists program them to dream a reality, for some reason carrying enough to provide their comfort and some form of meaningful existence.

While the implications of the units and Kios’ visions build, other mysteries are revealed: who are these dangerous Gnosis beings and why are they attacking the colony? What purpose does this ship serve? Why is everyone so concerned

about the planet and the objects being brought onboard?

There is not one central character or location to the game. It is detailed essentially in chapters, slowly and very methodically revealing its conflicts. A sterile, cold future drains the atmosphere of bright emotion, casting a convincing anachronistic anchor to the late 25th century setting. In the turn-based battle with the organic and inorganic forces, large mechs can be utilized, and the weapons and mental attacks make the setup feel like we’re existing inside of some futuristic computer program.

I’ve only been introduced to Xenosaga’s prologue and have little idea where the game is heading next. There are tons of really cool, stylized touches already pulling me in, like the flashy email system that pulls up a virtual interface, and the game seems obsessively focused on telling a story as much as providing classic gameplay. This is certainly a game existing in its own, unique space. **play**

“...they can kill with impunity and lethal efficiency...”



A very distinct, very Japanese tone drives Xenosaga.

xenosaga

preview

PS2

developer: monolith / publisher: namco / available: jan 2003

Xenogears confounded as many people as it impressed. Will the same hold true for this beautiful sequel?



He's-a-Wario. He's-a-gonna win

WARIO WORLD

words dave halverson

Having only played the game once, back in May at E3, I noticed something strangely familiar about Wario's waddle onto the GameCube. The controls and gameplay weren't immediately accessible, like so many of today's franchise games, but once assimilated it gave off a wacky, strangely captivating vibe. I must have stood at that tiny kiosk for an hour (ignoring the mayhem around me over much larger AAA Nintendo fare), as fellow editors and acquaintances walked by and asked, "You like this? I hear it's weird." It wasn't until after the show that I discovered why it had me so engrossed—it's from Treasure (!), makers of Gunstar Heroes, Guardian Heroes, Dynamite Headdy, Mischief Makers, Radiant Silvergun, Sin and Punishment, Ikaruga and a slew of other incredibly deep, complex action games and shooters. It's funny qualifying them, but if you're not familiar with Treasure's games, it's time to go retro and discover one of the finer

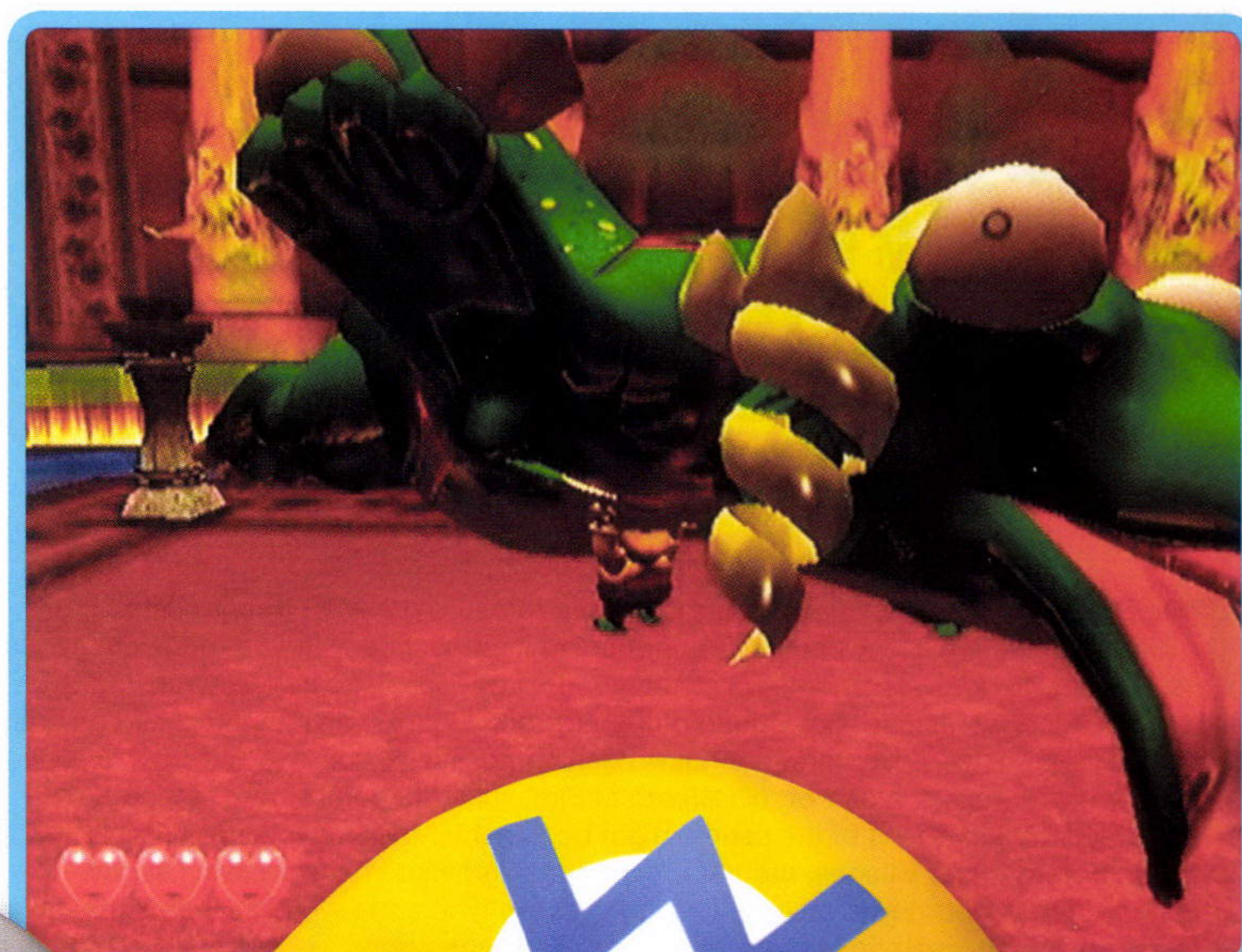
developers in all of gaming.

The castle you see in the game is actually Wario's humble abode where he keeps the immense loot he's pillaged on all of his, er, adventures. A mysterious black jewel, ensconced among the treasures, has a strange power to transform gems into monsters. While Wario is taking some much-needed R&R upstairs, the jewel begins to morph his treasure trove into a host of monsters, turning the basement of Wario's beloved castle into a bizarre parallel universe. Awakening the next morning to monsters instead of treasure, Wario must step into that alternate world to win the treasure back. Talk about "in the money."

The game is of the 2D-in-3D variety, similar to Treasure's banner 64 title, Mischief Makers, although it blows the doors off of convention even further, with a bevy of play mechanics and puzzles that you wouldn't expect from a first-party Nintendo game, especially one starring

an evil fat thief. There's the usual run, punch, grab and pummel, but also a lot of mounting, shimmying (sounds lovely, yes?), and aerial stunts such as mid-air grabs and throws akin to the Treasure aesthetic of linked, fluid action events. They're big on cause-and-effect through timing and reflex action, which is what makes their action games so completely enthralling. The smart money's on Nintendo acquiring Treasure now that Rare has flown the coup, so this may be the first in a string of Treasure games built around Nintendo characters. Could life be that good? We're-a gonna find out soon! Wario World is due out at mid Q1, 2003. **play**

"There's the usual run, punch, grab, and pummel, but also a lot of mounting, shimmying and aerial stunts."



Wario prepares to lay the smack down on some Fraggles. Rock lookin' croc-o-diles.



wario world

preview

GC

developer: treasure / publisher: nintendo / available: q1 2003

I give this game an A plus right here, right now. Wario and Treasure? What could possibly go wrong?

Breathing fresh life into a traditional series

BREATH OF FIRE V

DRAGON QUARTER

words brady fiechter

The Breath of Fire series has never threatened to usurp the RPG throne ruled by the likes of Suikoden and Final Fantasy, softening its presence with two mediocre sequels before gaining new momentum with an overlooked, consistently enjoyable fourth chapter. The story continues with Breath of Fire: Dragon Quarter, an intriguingly themed and substantially redirected adventure that holds exciting possibilities.

While dragons are still a part of this Breath of Fire world, its conflict and setting have moved away from what fans of the series might be expecting. Removing the durable landscape of towns and villages, mountain passages and wilderness travels, Dragon Quarter contains its journey in an underground fortress where the world's inhabitants have fled to escape an apocalyptic ecological disaster. For generations, people have carried out their lives with no contact to the surface, forced into an almost soulless existence under the crushing weight of a shadowy, manufactured city.





One of the more introspective members of society is a Ranger named Ryu, whose sudden, almost spiritual epiphany draws he and his friends to find freedom by traveling to the surface of this new Earth. Of course, penetrating the underground citie's copious layers is not an ascension without endless conflict, and here is where the game takes on a unique form: the party can provoke the enemy with surprise attacks outside the main battle system, and once engaged, the turn-based combat becomes strategically enhanced by requiring careful regulation of the Dragon meter, a special attack gauge that can end the game if pushed to its 100-point limit. If the party perishes, the game resets itself, rearranging dungeons and scenarios while maintaining experience and collected items.

A combo system is another added touch to the unique setup, with traps and decoys exposing the enemy for even more effective offensives. There is a generous freedom of movement during the confrontations, opening up your strategies to allow allies to sneak into strategic positions around the monsters.

Capcom is continuing to toy with the larger details of Breath of Fire V: Dragon Quarter's progressive structure, emphasizing a different approach to the gameplay arc. For someone who's followed this series from the beginning, I like what I see. **play**



"...an intriguingly themed and substantially redirected adventure..."



breath of fire v: dragon quarter

preview

PS2

developer: capcom / publisher: capcom / available: march

I wouldn't have complained if this fifth Breath of Fire followed closely to the past games of the series, but this new approach is a welcome change.

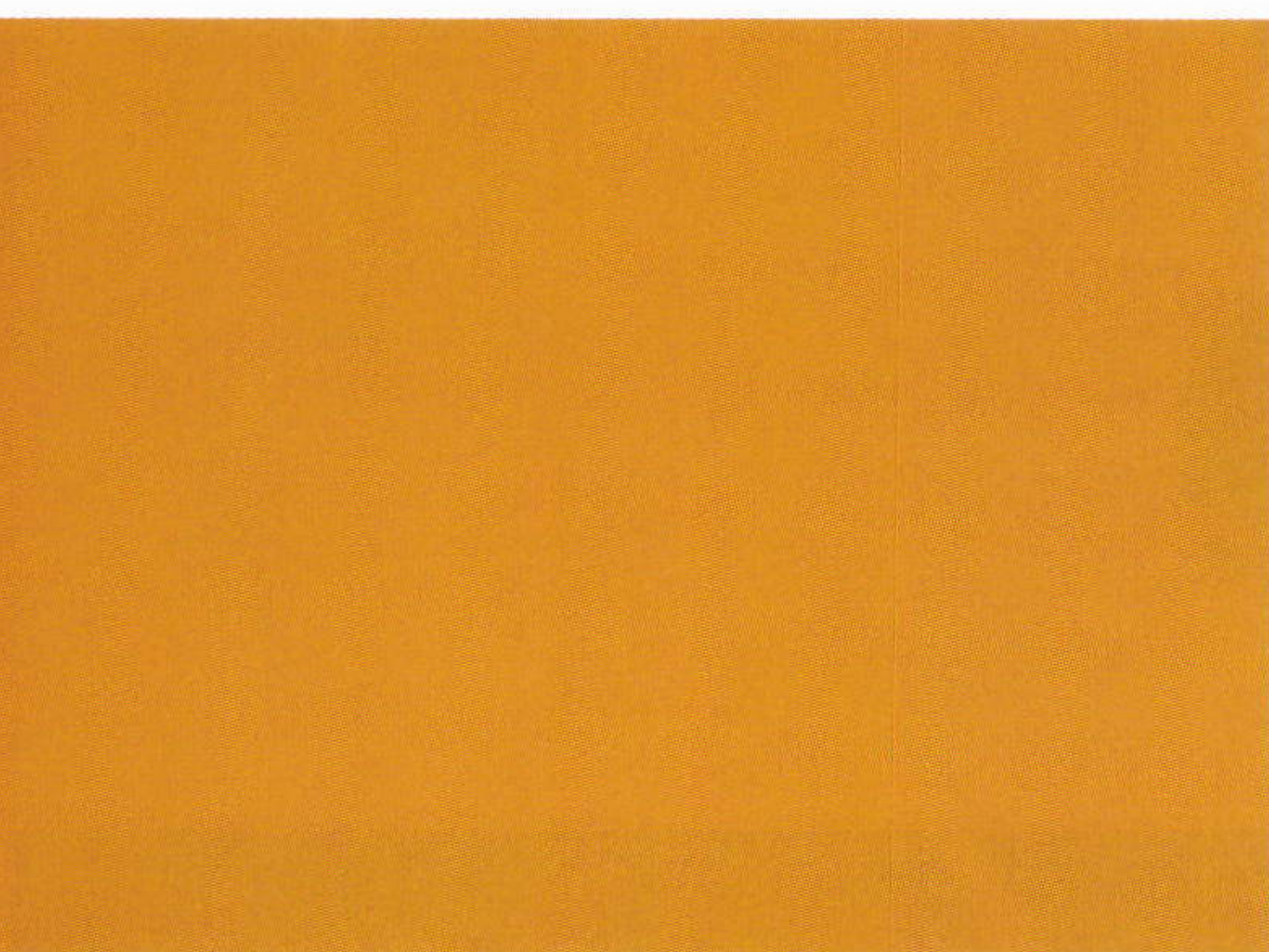
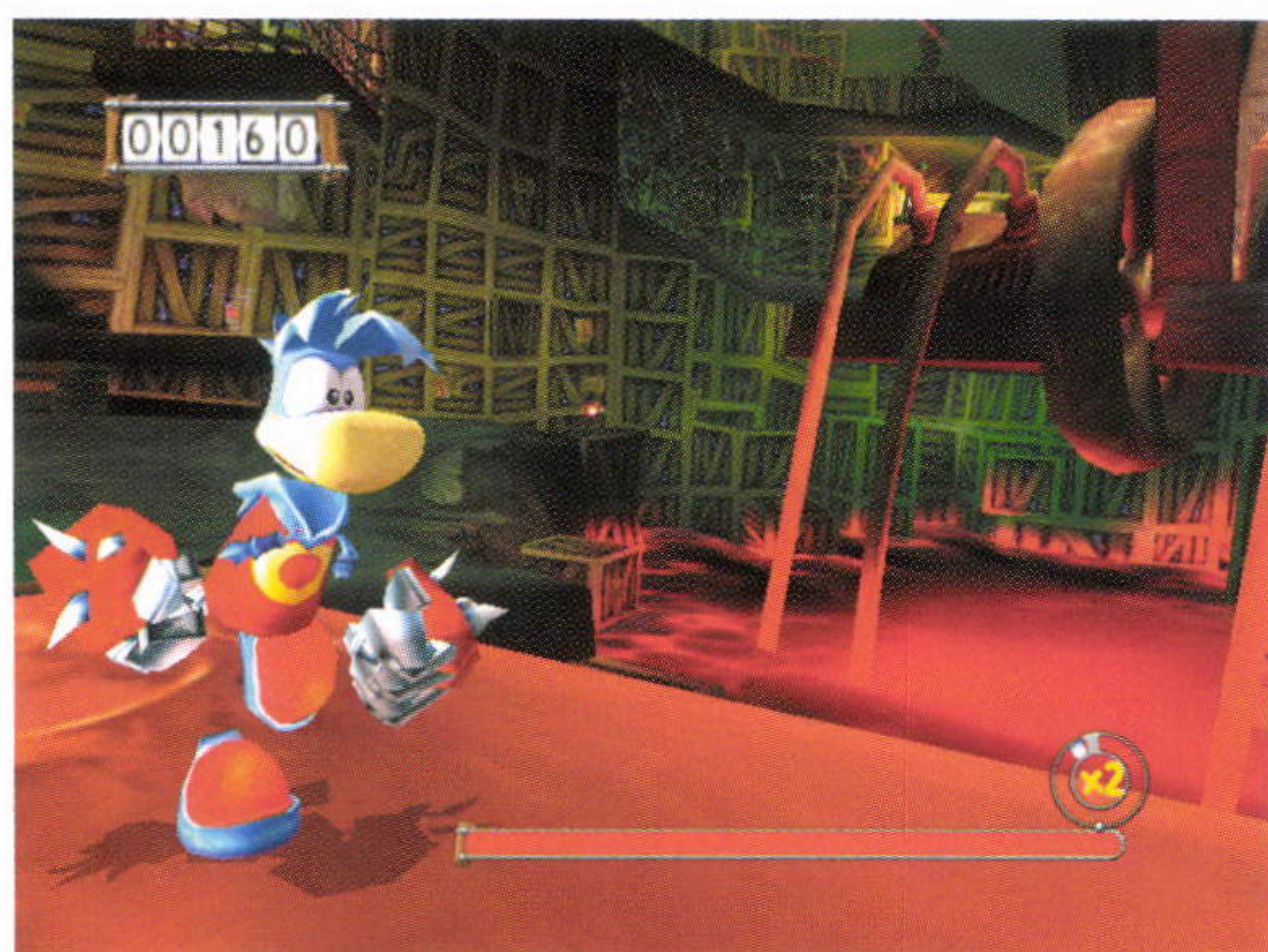
What took you so long?

RAYMAN 3: HOODLUM HAVOC

words brady fiechter



“...peculiar, completely surreal, appealing with a style that is unmatched...”



Looking better than ever and carrying a darker tone.

Rayman's got a big problem. The most evil of evil Dark Looms is corraling his good friends for a plum-juice party. In the strange world of Rayman, plum juice is a delicious, refreshing source of strength, perfect for forming a cadre of Hoodlums who want to end all that is good. Disturbing matters even more, the helplessly innocent Globox swallows one of the Dark Looms. Rayman and Globox are good buddies, so Rayman decides to play hero yet again and thwart the Hoodlums while finding a cure for his infected friend.

This playful setup is typical Rayman, sparking the tone to the excitingly impressive Rayman 3—peculiar, completely surreal, appealing with a style that is unmatched. There is an immediate familiarity to Rayman 3's world, both in structure and scope, but the mood has been subdued, exchanging brilliant cheer with a more sinister, edgier tone.

Rayman 2: The Great escape was an amazing adventure-platformer, but the exit of creator Michael Ancel to his original work, Project BG&E (title's not final), made me question the viability of a retooled sequel. But the more I see of this gorgeous, richly playable game, the more I wonder if I'm playing a superior version of Rayman.

The game is huge, spanning 20 levels of swamps, caves, and clunky fortresses—all the fantastical wonder of a Rayman world. The broad, inventively colorful strokes that would fit admirably in a feature cartoon breathe additional life into the game, revealing the touch of artists with a very special skill for their craft. The game is more condensed than the past, dropping in a lot more stuff to work around and interact with.

Perhaps most impressive is the team's dedication to making a proper sequel—fresh mechanics, tweaked play, enhanced look and feel. Rayman is faster, more responsive, and can carry out all sorts of new moves. The levels are set up with a lot more to do. You'll deal with a lot of platforming challenges and more enemies with increased aggression; boss encounters have been given added focus; there is more urgency and speed in moving through the gorgeous terrain.

Defeating specific enemies imbues Rayman's unique body parts with special abilities. He can shoot whirlwind blasts, grapple to unseen heights, briefly ascend and float with a helicopter technique, apply a metal suit to destroy solid objects. Flying levels also get fun attention: one of the best is an exciting sequence where Rayman and Globox zip around on a speeder, picking off the pursuing Hoodlums.

I still consider Rayman 2: The Great Escape a personal favorite, exceeded only by a select few 3D platforming masterpieces like Mario. That I'm very much impressed by Rayman 3 and see hints of a very worthy sequel says something. **play**

rayman 3: hoodlum havoc

preview

PS2

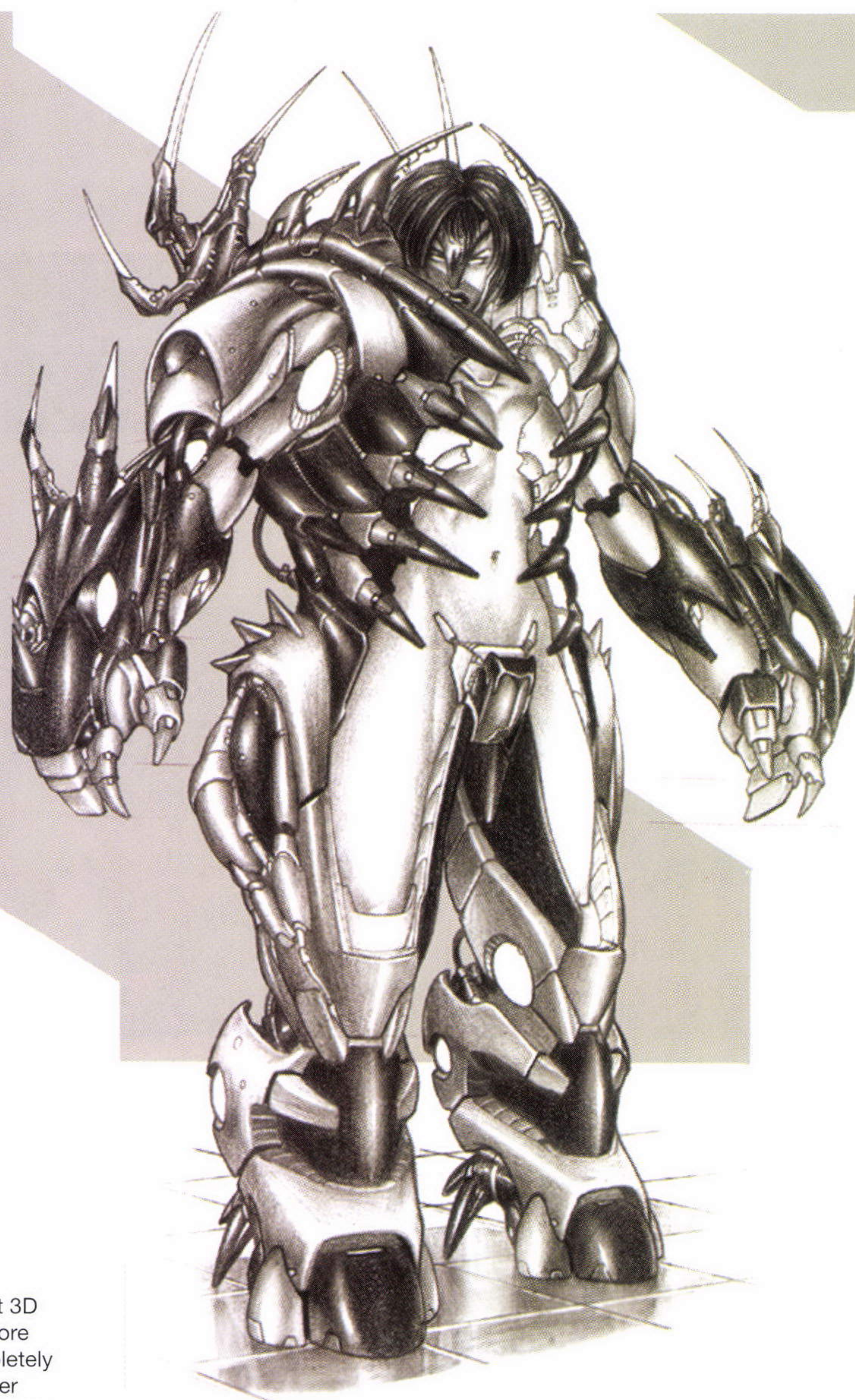
developer: ubi soft / publisher: ubi soft / available: q1 2003

Under guidance of a new leader, this altered Rayman is incredibly appealing.

it's new to you

UNREAL II

THE AWAKENING



words tom ham

Back in 1998, Epic Megagames (now Epic Games) released Unreal unto the world and brought with it 3D action gaming unlike anything we'd ever seen before at the time. Unreal managed to take the genre to a completely new level in terms of scope, graphics and sound. Together with cutting-edge technology, Epic had managed to create the definitive first-person shooter.

Now four years later, Epic is ready to unleash the sequel, Unreal II: The Awakening. Going back to its roots, the developers Legend Entertainment and Epic Games have decided to forgo multiplayer and only go with a single-player experience. Right from the start, the player will be put in a world full of action, suspense and, of course, lots of shooting and killing. Without question, Unreal II: The Awakening will change the face of first-person shooters.

"Unreal II features amazing graphics courtesy of, yes, you guessed it, the Unreal technology," explains Cliff Bleszinski, Lead Designer at Epic Games and Executive Producer on Unreal II. "We briefly considered licensing someone else's engine for the game but quickly realized that we were, in fact, at the top of our game and our tech would suit our needs just fine." After playing through a good chunk of the game, needless to say, we were blown away.

In Unreal II, players take on the role of a Terrain Colonial Authority Frontier Marshall, working for the government to ensure the safety and security of colonists and civilians in a remote sector of space. You patrol your sector via a starship named Atlantis, with a crew of three. There's Ne'Ban, an alien pilot who spews plenty of wisecracks; Isaak, the ship's engineer who he keeps the systems running and maintains the armory, always ensuring that you have the best weapons and equipment available; And finally, Aida the intelligence officer or spook, gorgeous and exotic, this ex-Military Intelligence Operative will monitor what's happening in the sector and keep you in the loop. Throughout the game, the crew will talk





with you, joke with you and even fight with you during the game. "Every time I play the game I look forward to not only the stimulating dialogue and plot development but her enormous, gravity-defying, all encompassing rack," says Bleszinski.

The story unfolds through a host of combat missions interwoven with a narrative framework of cinematics and in-game scripted sequences. Each mission will feature a different tactical situation. These range from hostage rescue and civilian escort to assaulting an enemy base and defending a structure or area. There are also missions involving stealth infiltration and reconnaissance. Between missions, players return to their ship where they receive instructions and information on the next mission, talk with crewmembers, research items/weapons and rearm.

But what struck me about Unreal II was the variety in the gameplay. Unlike previous games where it's the same thing over and over again, Unreal II plays out more like a science-fiction movie, and you're the star. Not only is each mission unique, you'll encounter over 25 different kinds of enemies. "The Skaarj are back and badder than ever," continues Bleszinski. "This time, they've figured out the whole 'blocking' thing and they'll deflect your bullets with their blades. It is really quite unsettling to have your shots shrugged off by a pissed-off 800-lb reptilian alien as it closes in on you. It is more unsettling to feel its razor-sharp blades sink into your abdomen as you scream "mommy."

"There's also the Izarians; they're the Skaarj henchmen. They're affectionately referred to as space monkeys, due to their movement and strange howls. (I was secretly hoping we could have called Unreal 2 "Space Monkeys Must Die" but no one in marketing was feeling it.) You'd almost think they were cute until they try to run their spears through your colon."

And when you combine all the cool new enemies, with brilliant AI and wicked weapons and spectacular scripted sequences, the end result is the most compelling PC action game since Half-Life. "I love the weapons, I love the story and the graphics, and the overall experience of the game is truly memorable," boasts Bleszinski. "People are really going to love this title." **play**

"You'd almost think they were cute until they try to run their spears through your colon."



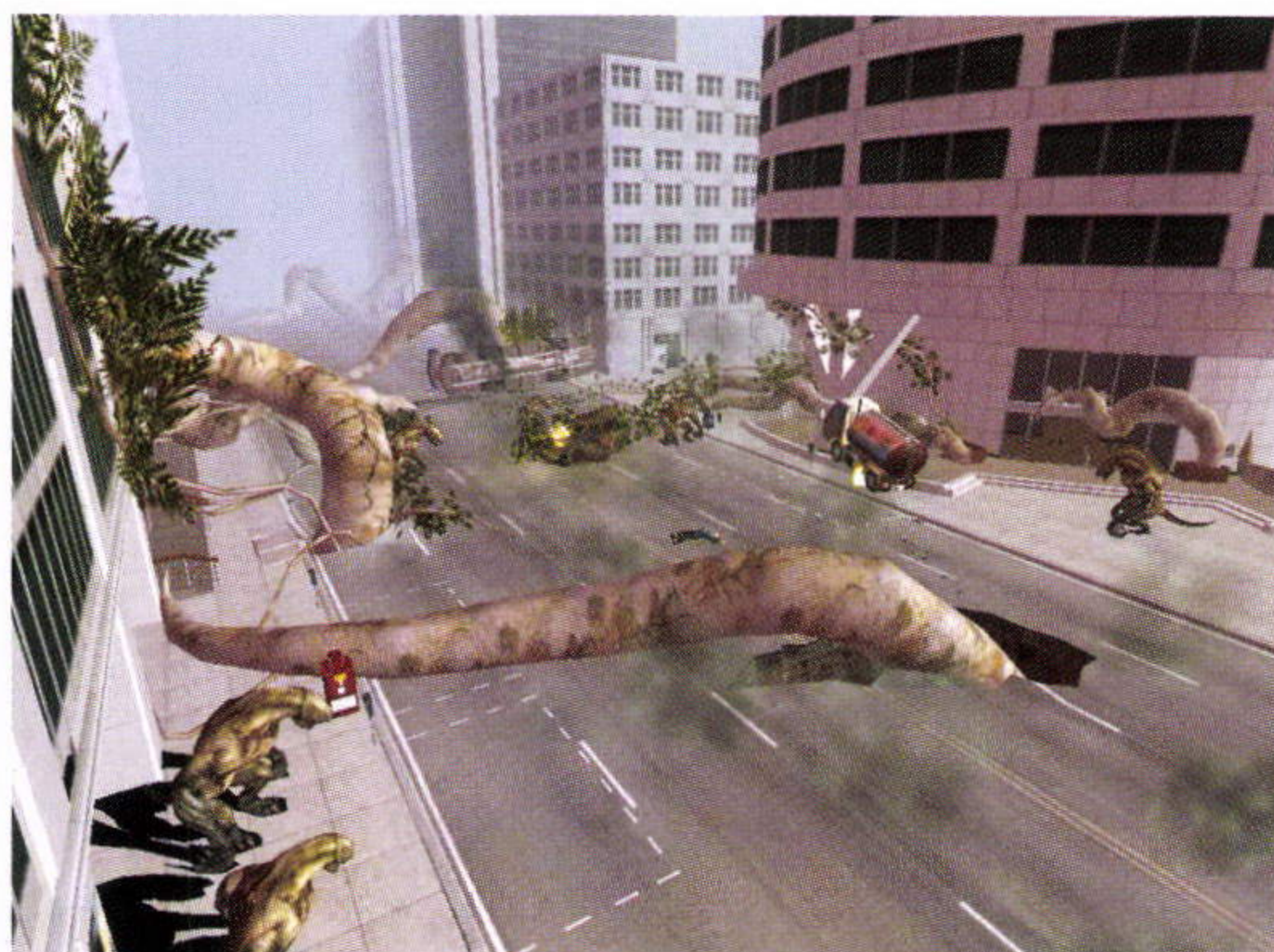
unreal II: the awakening

preview

PC

developer: legend entertainment and epic games / publisher: infogrames / available: january 2003

Forget about Unreal Tournament; this is the real deal in mind-numbing first-person mayhem.



A Sound of Thunder

system: ps2
 developer: computer artworks
 publisher: BAM!
 available: q1 2003

There are three rules in time travel: Don't mess with the past; don't leave anything behind; and most importantly, don't bring anything back. Somebody obviously really f***ed up. Bam! rarely disappoints, so start getting pumped for this one.



Robocop

system: playstation 2
 developer: titus int.
 publisher: titus
 available: q1 2003

Someone's gone and made a good Robocop game, namely Titus. Somewhere Paul Verhoven and Peter Weller are grinning... maybe even Dick Jones. Oh wait, I forgot, he's dead. We'll have a hands-on in Feb.



Big Mutha' Trucka's

system: playstation 2/xbox
 developer: eutechnyx
 publisher: empire int.
 available: dec.

Bet right now you're goin', "What the...?" So did we when we laid eyes on the world's first real-time trucking RPG. Behind-the-wheel is a surprisingly strong game and the story, bodacious! Hot mommas and super hicks!



Black & Bruised

system: playstation 2/xbox/gamecube
 developer: digital fiction
 publisher: majesco
 available: tba

Currently in the tweaking stages, Majesco's cel-shaded boxing spoof should be available soon. Let's hope they add some much-needed jiggle to the festivities, since the game shows some real promise otherwise.

Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven

system: playstation 2
developer: k2
publisher: activision
available: q1 2003

Tenchu will soon sneak into the next generation in impressive style with Wrath of Heaven, rigged with new and improved stealth play, the lovely Ayame as a playable character, and one of the best soundtracks around.



Vexx

system: playstation 2/xbox/gamecube
developer: acclaim austin
publisher: acclaim
available: feb.

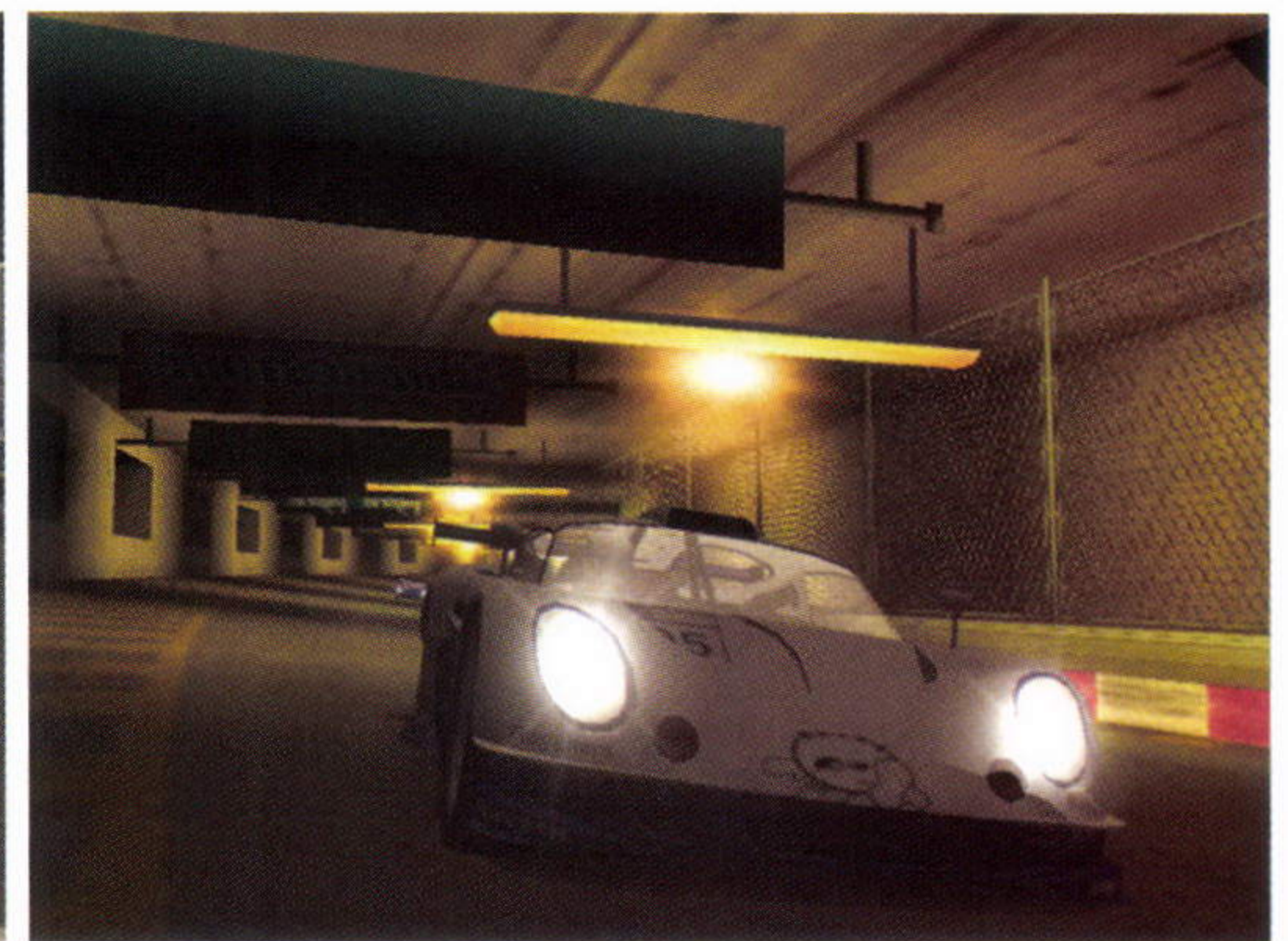
After a slight delay to make the world of Vexx a bit more palatable, Acclaim has fixed their sites on a Feb. release. Currently the Xbox game looks great, but the PS2 game needs mucho help. Both games need frame rate tweaking as well. Cross your gauntlets.



Lotus Challenge

system: xbox
developer: kuju
publisher: xicat
available: q1 2003

If you're into Lotus, Xicat has your racer. An all-inclusive Lotus experience, complete with Xbox bells and whistles awaits, and you don't need financing or insurance, just skills ... and an Xbox.



Murakumo Mech Hunter

system: xbox
developer: from software
publisher: ubi soft
available: fall

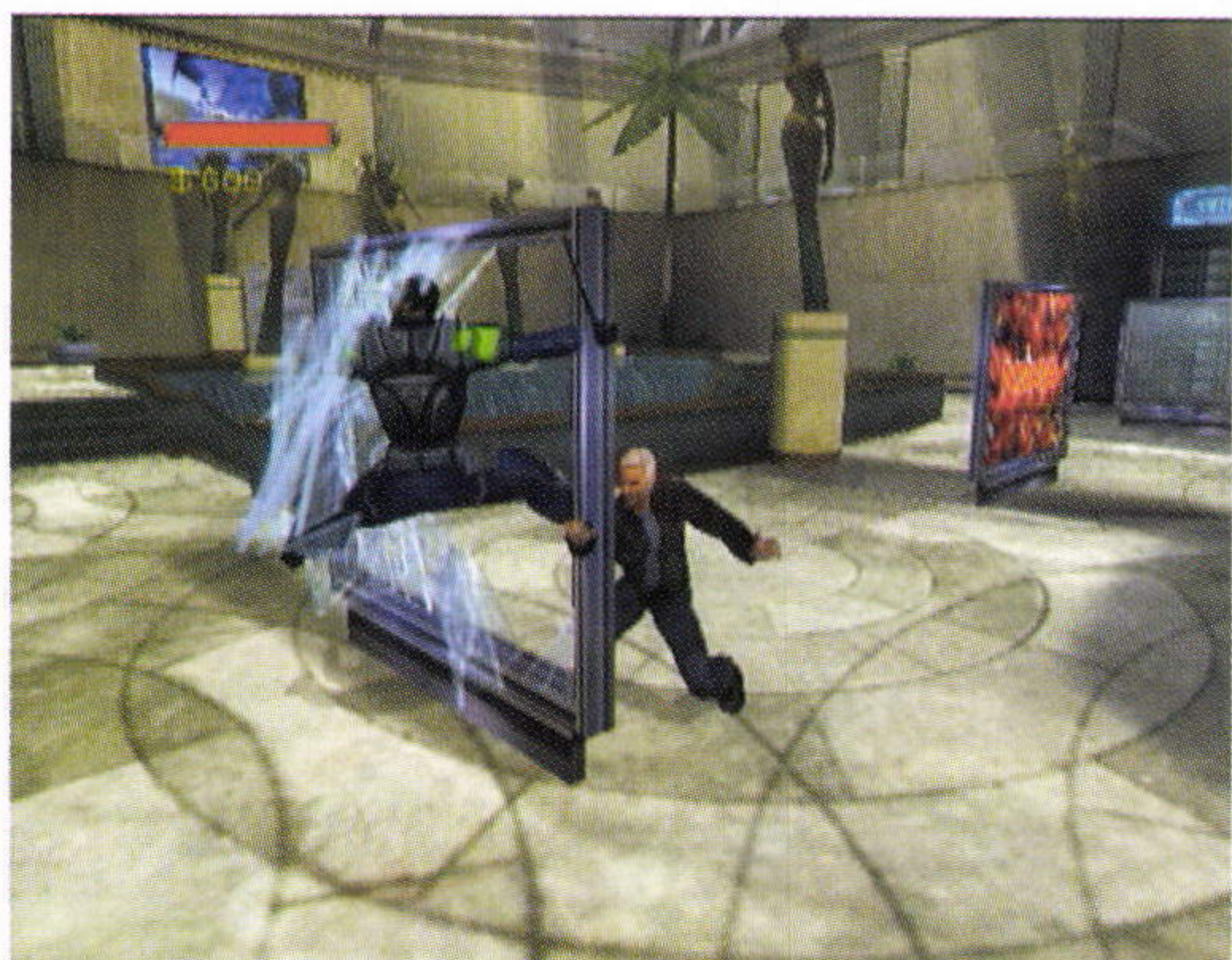
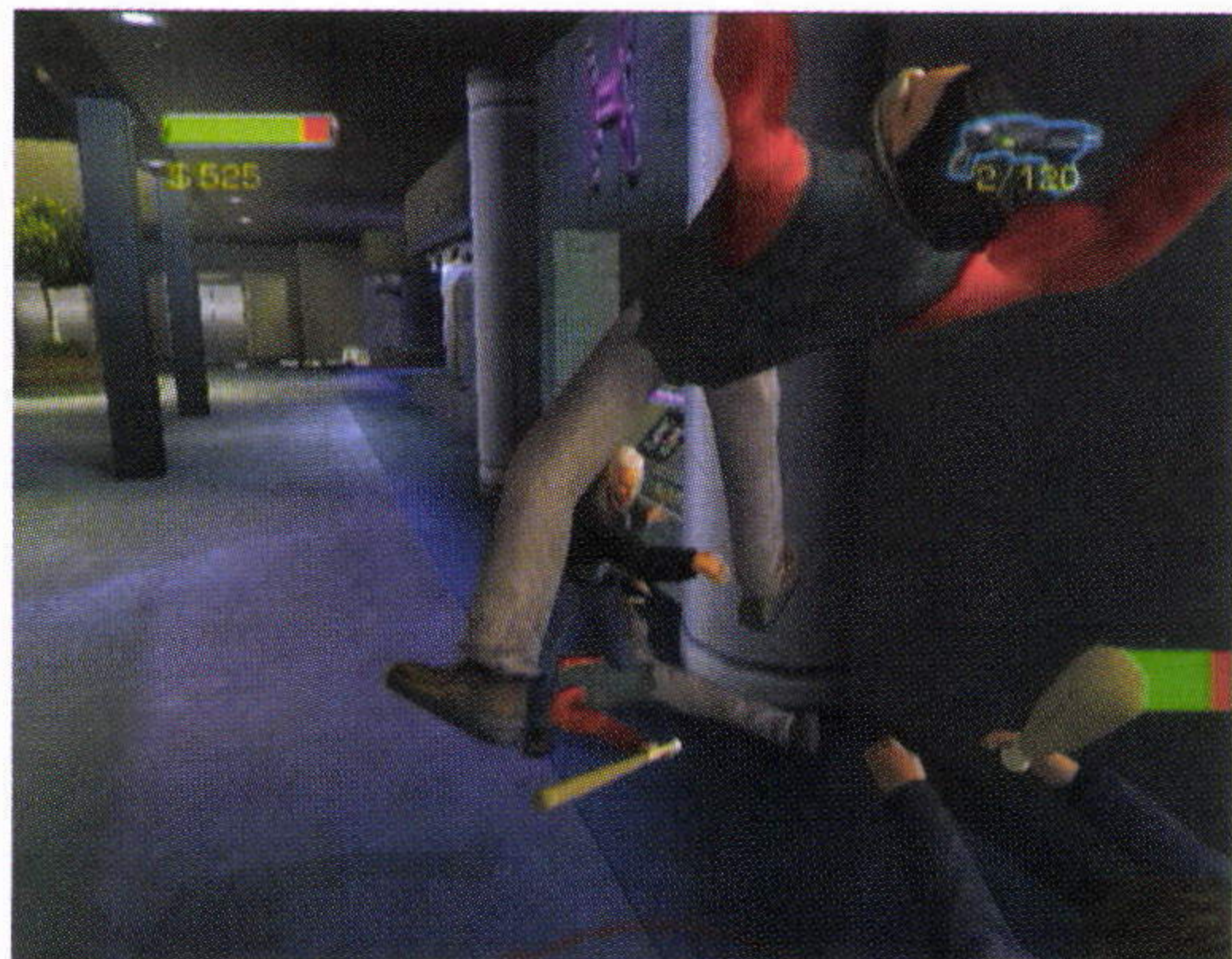
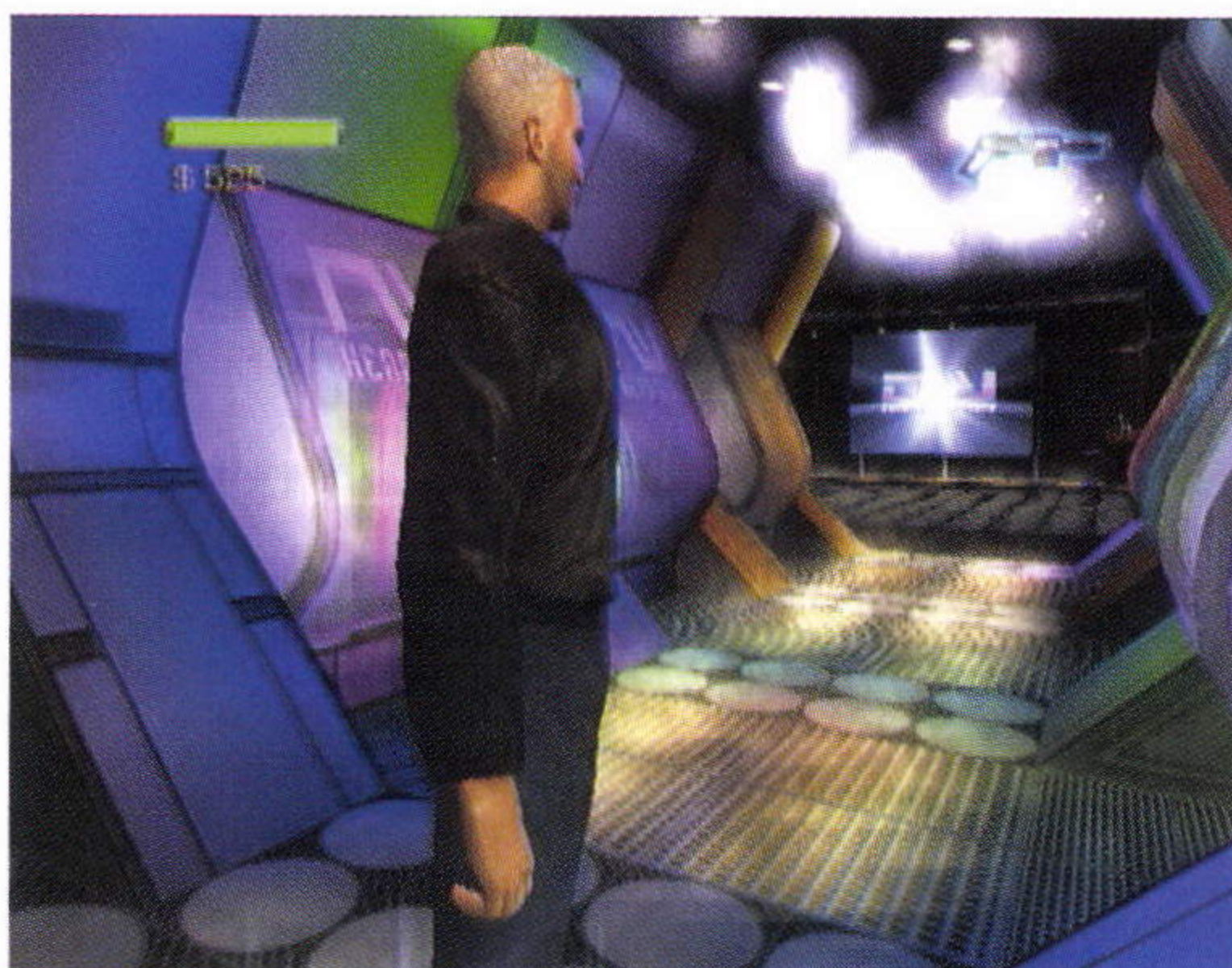
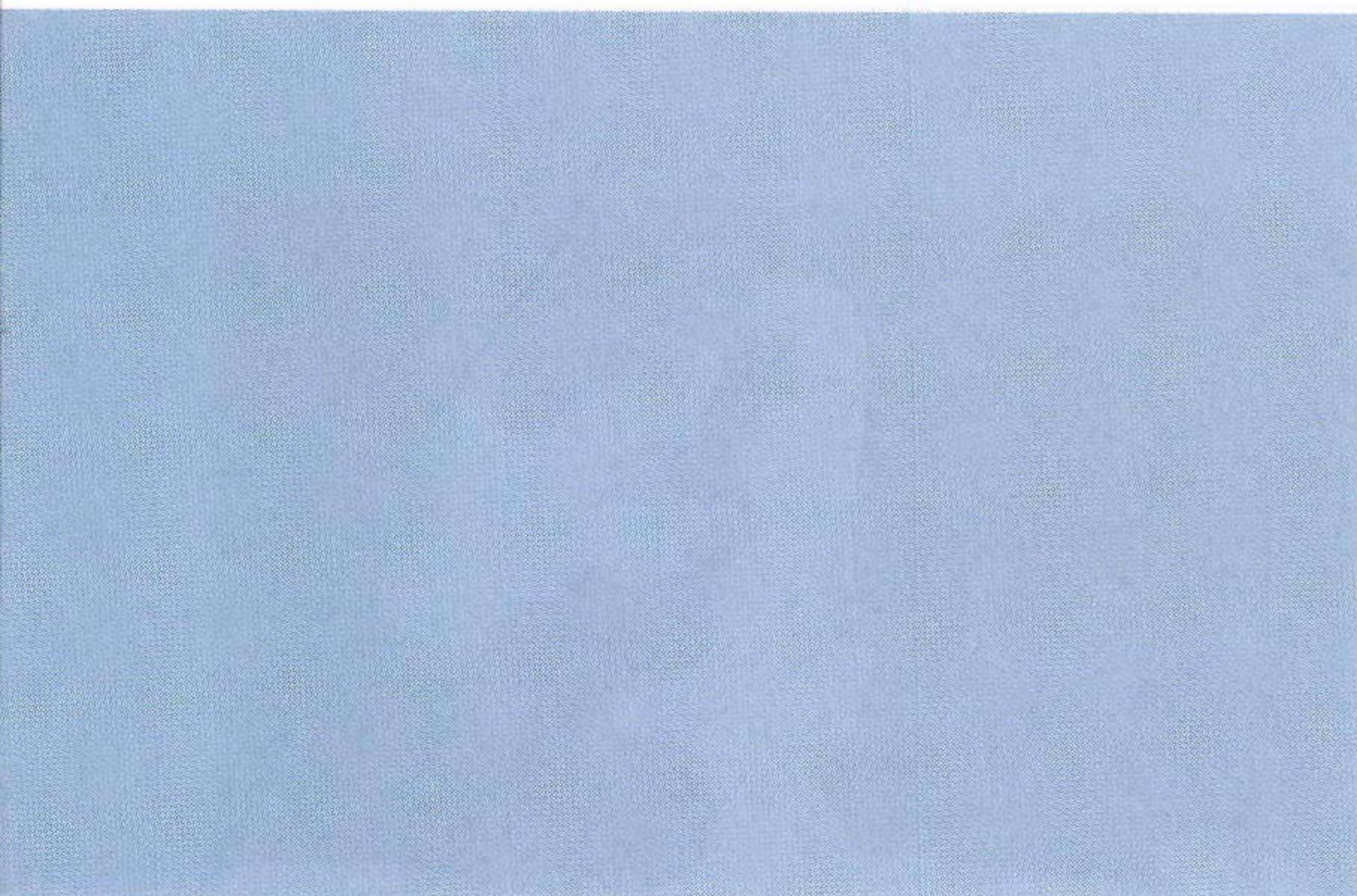
Ubi's readying From Software's unique Mech chase for Xbox for it's US debut. If they can smooth out the rough edges, this unique mission-based shooter may strike a chord with the American mecha and anime faithful...



There's a good game in your future

MINORITY REPORT

words dave halverson



Much like the film, *Minority Report* the game drops you directly into the action, no dramatic opening cinema, no nada. You begin by chasing a would-be perpetrator and bringing him down before he commits murder—a simplistic mission meant to set the stage for the rigorous challenges ahead. Not having read the manual (you know you never do), you'll find the gameplay easy enough to grasp, with punches, kicks, a block, and a jump on the buttons, leg sweeps on the left trigger and firearm aiming on the right. Easy as pie. But don't get too comfy; soon after, the newly modeled Jon Anderton (played with mild charisma by Clancy Brown—the immortal who killed Heather in *Highlander* and brought down the big brain bug in *Starship Troopers*) will have a much harder go of it. Dispensing with the graphics before we mildly pummel the game's play mechanics, imagine the sheen of the Spider-Man engine, all shiny and metallic, adorned with layer upon layer of breakable glass, destructible everything, and covered in digital billboards selling everything from Happy Flush Toilet Bowl Cleaner to Brobot dancing droids. Treyarch has really outdone themselves, making *Minority Report* look just right.

The gameplay, too, has its strong points. Besides the impressive animation and variety of moves given to both Anderton and his attackers (it's refreshing to see fat cops,

skinny cops, executives, etc., all with varying attack patterns), you can pick up and drag, toss, use as a shield, or just kick the crap out of anyone you've knocked out. This comes in especially handy at heights, evening up the odds by letting a few bodies fly. Unfortunately, ammo is hard to come by, and you're often way out-gunned, calling for lots of strategy within a framework that doesn't support it, resulting in the game often becoming artificially hard. Because Anderton doesn't have stealth capabilities or a fluid jump, precious loss of life is often the result—a sign of rushed development rather than player error. Power-up and hidden item placement helps, but there's still a fair amount of do-overs in your future, and no matter how deep you are in a level (they're pretty short, though, so it's not so bad), it's back to the beginning, even if you die at the back door. On the other side of the equation there's the nice graphics, excellent effects (glass shatters, emissions burn off, lights glisten), solid fighting engine, and cool movie-inspired jet-pack play, so the good does outweigh the bad, but just a couple more months in the shop and this game could have been great.

And so it was with *Draconus*, *Max Steele*, and *Spider-Man*. Treyarch needs to take two years on a game; I think they've earned it. Bottom line, *Minority Report* is better than *Spide-Man*, but it still could have been better. **play**

“Minority report is better than Spiderman, but it still could have been better.”

I do believe this is the first game to have corpse play mechanics.

minority report

GC PS2 XB

developer: treyarch / publisher: activision / available: now

play rating ●●●●●

Subtle flaws keep *Minority Report* from a 3.5- or 4-star review. It's recommended, though, especially to movie gamers.

SHE PRESSED AGAINST HIM
HE COULD NOT RESIST HER NEEDS
HE WOULD DIE FOR HER



"I COULDN'T PUT IT DOWN."
-ELECTRONIC GAMING MONTHLY

"...ONE OF GAMING'S MOST SENSUAL BABES..."
-PLAY

"...A FAST AND FURIOUS ACTION/
ADVENTURE THAT OOZES STYLE."
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PlayStation 2

MATURE
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Strong Language
Violence



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Lghts, Cameron, action

JAMES CAMERON'S DARK ANGEL

words dave halverson

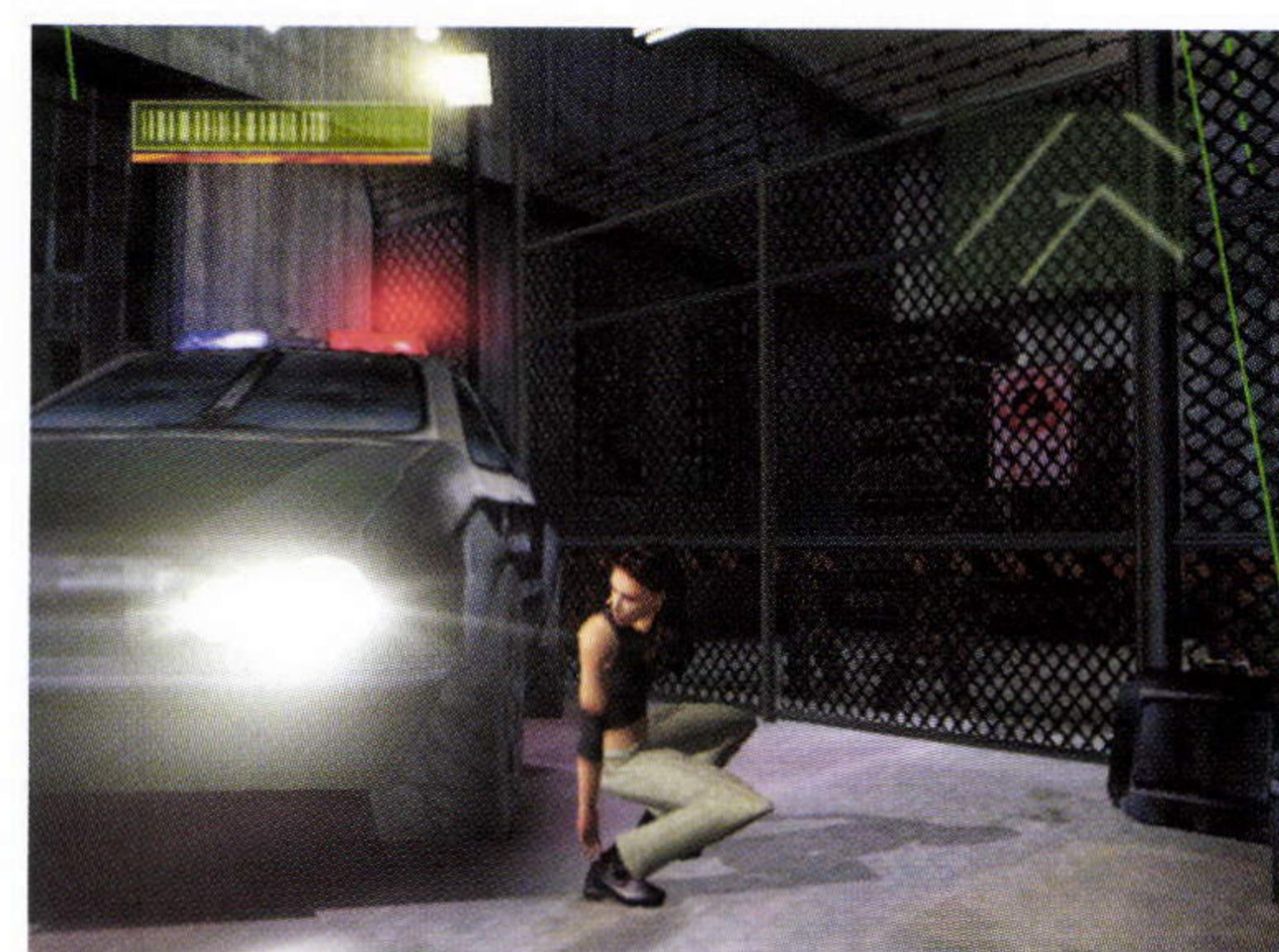


Why this game is arriving after the series has gone cold will have to remain a mystery for now, but perhaps it's fitting that it live on as a video game franchise. With Jessica Alba and Michael Weatherly attached, the dialogue is certainly up to snuff, but moreover, the game is surprisingly strong overall, taking its place among a string of quality '02 movie titles. Do I see a pattern developing? Has the curse of the movie title finally been lifted? apparently so.

Dark Angel jumps directly out of its TV skin into the Xbox and PS2 with an almost seamless transition, encompassing all of the series best assets including the lovely Mrs. Alba who is done complete justice in the polygonal realm. Radical Entertainment snuck in a little extra wizardry along the way too, adding a little extra McG inspired Charlie's Angels style camera play into the already pitched action.

Max' plight unfolds against the backdrop of a post-apocalyptic Seattle, where the genetically enhanced super-soldier is on a mission to reclaim her past by finding her sister and fellow genetically altered escapees. Her super human moves are put to good use in the game and

implemented for maximum ass kicking pleasure as Max' array of moves is truly one for the butt kickers hall of fame. Besides the usual jabs and kicks she packs a host of aerial maneuvers, several combo's--including multi-hit off the wall type--enhanced vision, stealth, and a rage bar which when activated sends her into a pummeling frenzy... like Metal Gear Lara with a pinch of Fox camp and Cameron gleam... strange bedfellows, but nice offspring. The deeper you go, the more inner soldier bubbles to the surface until you find yourself on the controller side of one mean Maybelline wearin' super chick. The game utilizes a MGS like item interface to aid Max on her mission as well as a com-link to her warm and fuzzy computer pal played by Mr. Weatherly. There's ample diversity to the missions, with stealth and jumping aplenty, and the gritty backdrop is well laid with a high level of detail and passable textures. A spot of bump mapping would put the Xbox game further over the top but, the level of street combat and stealth gameplay make it well worth a look, sans picture-perfect textures. Radical Entertainment was kind enough to take some time and answer our queries about the latest and so far greatest Cameron based game to date....



"The deeper you go the more inner soldier bubbles to the surface."

interview

David Seymour, Lead Designer
Radical Entertainment

“Dark Angel had a very aggressive design and feature set: stealth gameplay, a great fighting game, a cohesive storyline and 30 minutes of high production value cinematics.”

Tell us you at least asked Jessica if you could motion capture her... or did you?

We asked! Unfortunately, Jessica was not available for motion capture. We found a great Vancouver actor and gymnast to do the mocap, and she did a fantastic job. Much of the motion capture was exhausting and tedious; the average “stealth walk” will have your thighs burning in about 30 seconds, so imagine going back and forth across a room for half an hour!

Making a TV series derived game what are the steps? You immerse yourself in the show, and then what?

The steps would be:

- 1) Watching and re-watch every episode of the show, including advanced copies of the season ahead, to understand the character, the future direction of the story and the abilities or traits of the character that best translate into gameplay.
- 2) Meet with the writers and creative directors of the show. Visit the set where the show is filmed. Take lots of pictures.
- 3) Read the fan groups, fan-fiction sites, and really find out what people like about the series and try to elicit what they would like to see in a game. Some of the fan sites had specific descriptions of how a Dark Angel game should be designed.
- 4) Pray the series doesn't get cancelled before you release!

Did James Cameron have any interest in the games development? Did you have to adhere to any specifics?

We did not work directly with James Cameron, although we sent him materials for his approval. We worked mainly with the people at Lightstorm, which is James Cameron's production company. This was our contact point for the writers of the TV show.

Your combat system just feels good... Did it take a lot of tweaking to get just right?

A very talented and dedicated game designer spent 6 months tuning and tweaking the fighting system. He had the efforts of two animators, plus the feedback of everyone on the team. That being said, it ultimately came down to him taking the precise loving care to set up every move and every combo to come out at just the right time, have the right speed, weight and feel that makes it so enjoyable to dole out the hurt.

Have we seen this engine before or is it new?

We re-use as much technology as possible. The core engine was tailored to Dark Angel, and components that came from other titles in house (such as the fighting system) were evolved to a new level. Parts of Dark Angel's technology will make a very dramatic appearance on store shelves in the next 12 months!

Did you get to work with Jessica? Have a hand in her one-liners? They're actually good, which is quite shocking.

Jessica came to Vancouver to record all of the voice over for the game, as did Michael Weatherly. At the beginning

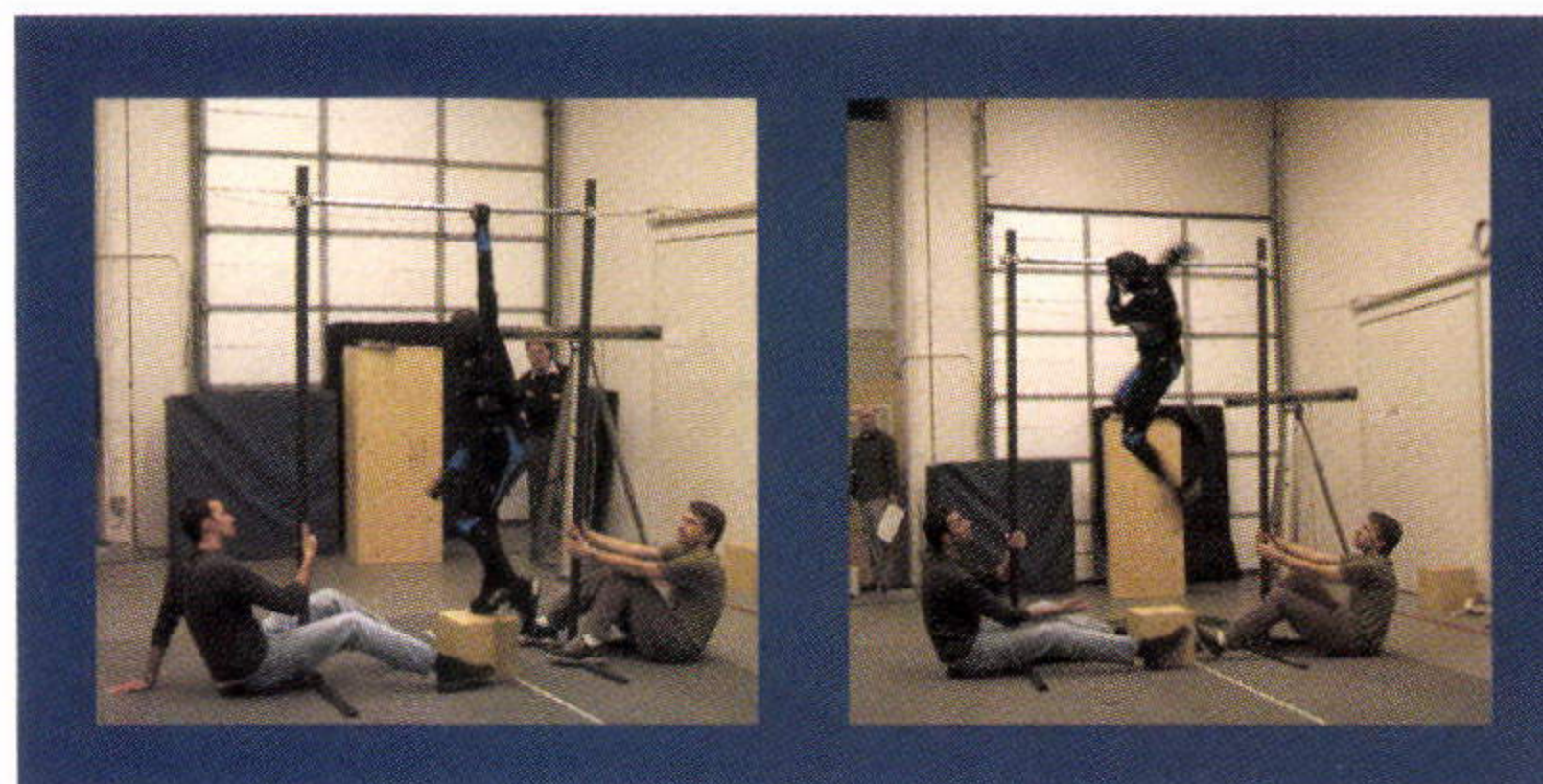
of the project we had a script writer to assist the design group, and as the game evolved the design team edited and re-write dialog as needed to stay consistent with missions and with gameplay.

The texture quality in the Xbox version looks identical to the PS2, was the game originally slated as a PS2 exclusive or did Sierra just not green light an upgrade?

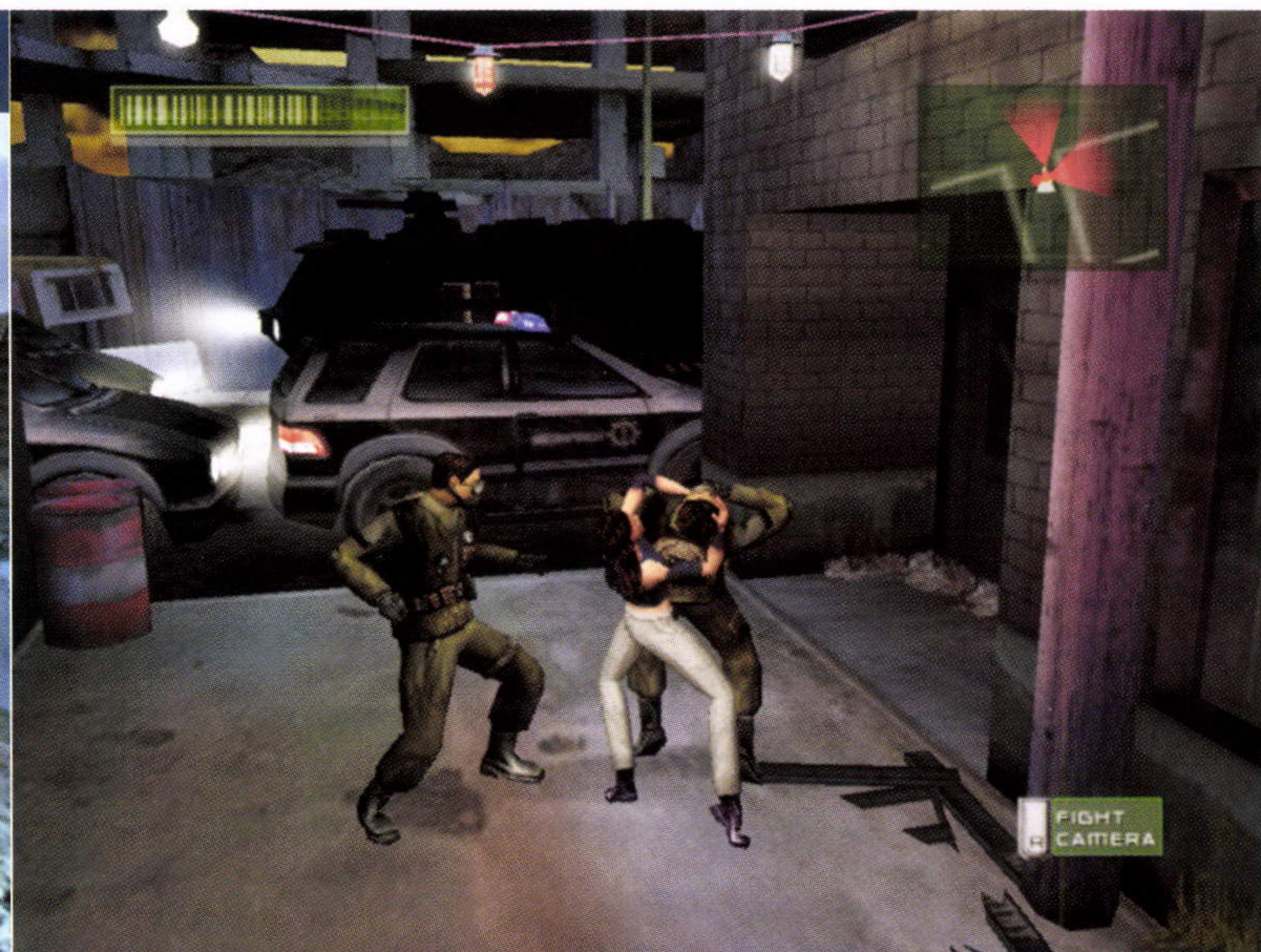
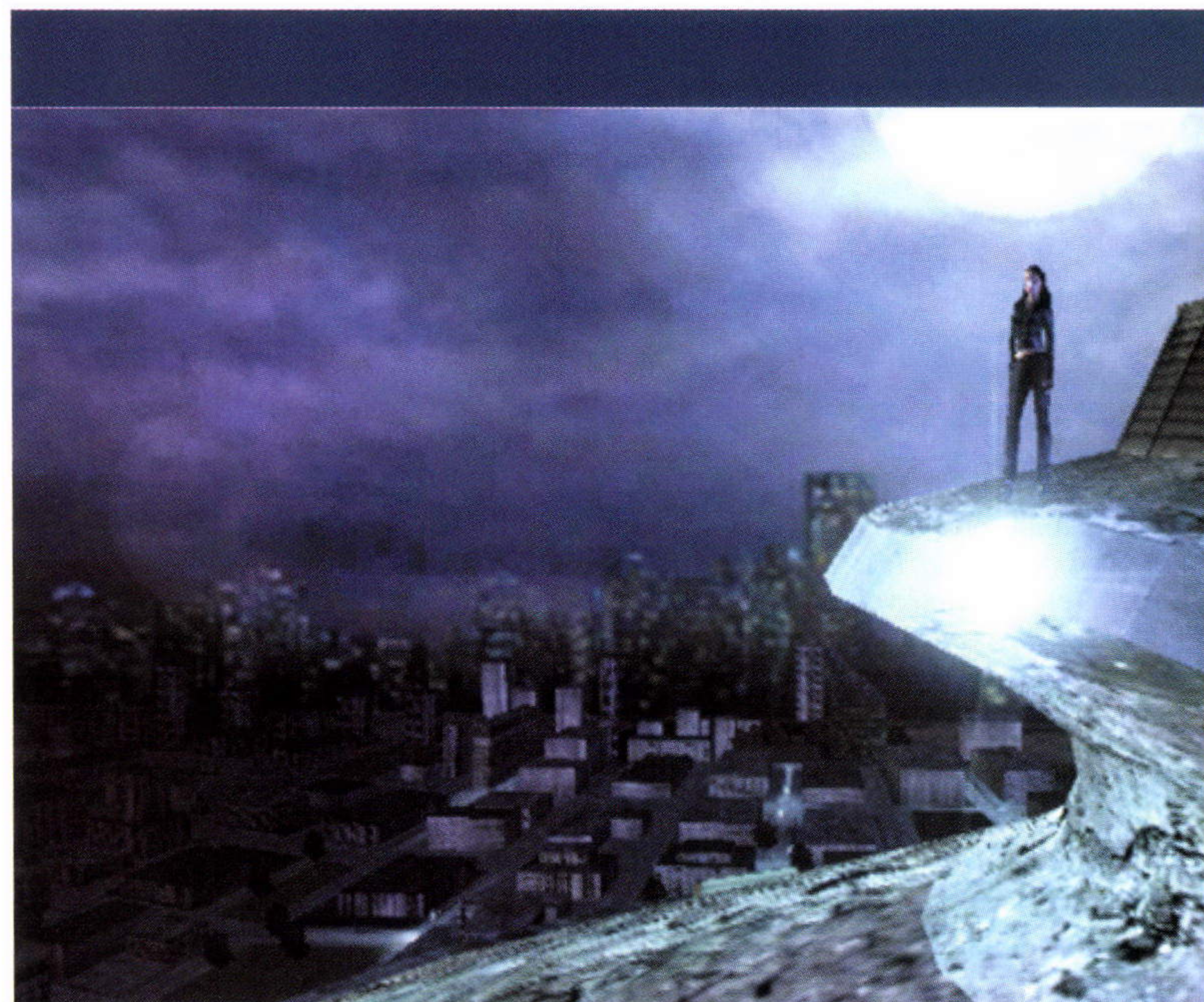
Dark Angel had a very aggressive design and feature set: stealth gameplay, a great fighting game, a cohesive storyline and 30 minutes of high production value cinematics. Dark Angel also had a time frame of only 18 months, meaning that we had to develop our content to be optimal on the primary platform. As such, the art is nearly the same on both consoles. We were very happy with the look of the game on both, although the Xbox achieved a higher frame rate.

So, you've turned a Cameron series into a game, a really good game! What's next?

Our whole team is very excited about the next project, but I cannot reveal what it is. I think it will be a game with great appeal for console gamers. Stand by for E3!



“The motion capture was exhausting; the average “stealth walk” will have your thighs burning in about 30 seconds, so imagine going back and forth across a room for half an hour!”



Max' next victim looks on as she puts the stealth moves on his soon to be dearly departed pal

james cameron's dark angel

play rating ●●●●●

PS2 XB

developer: radical entertainment / publisher: sierra / available: q1 2003

for a game that came out of nowhere Dark Angel delivers the prime time goods and then some.

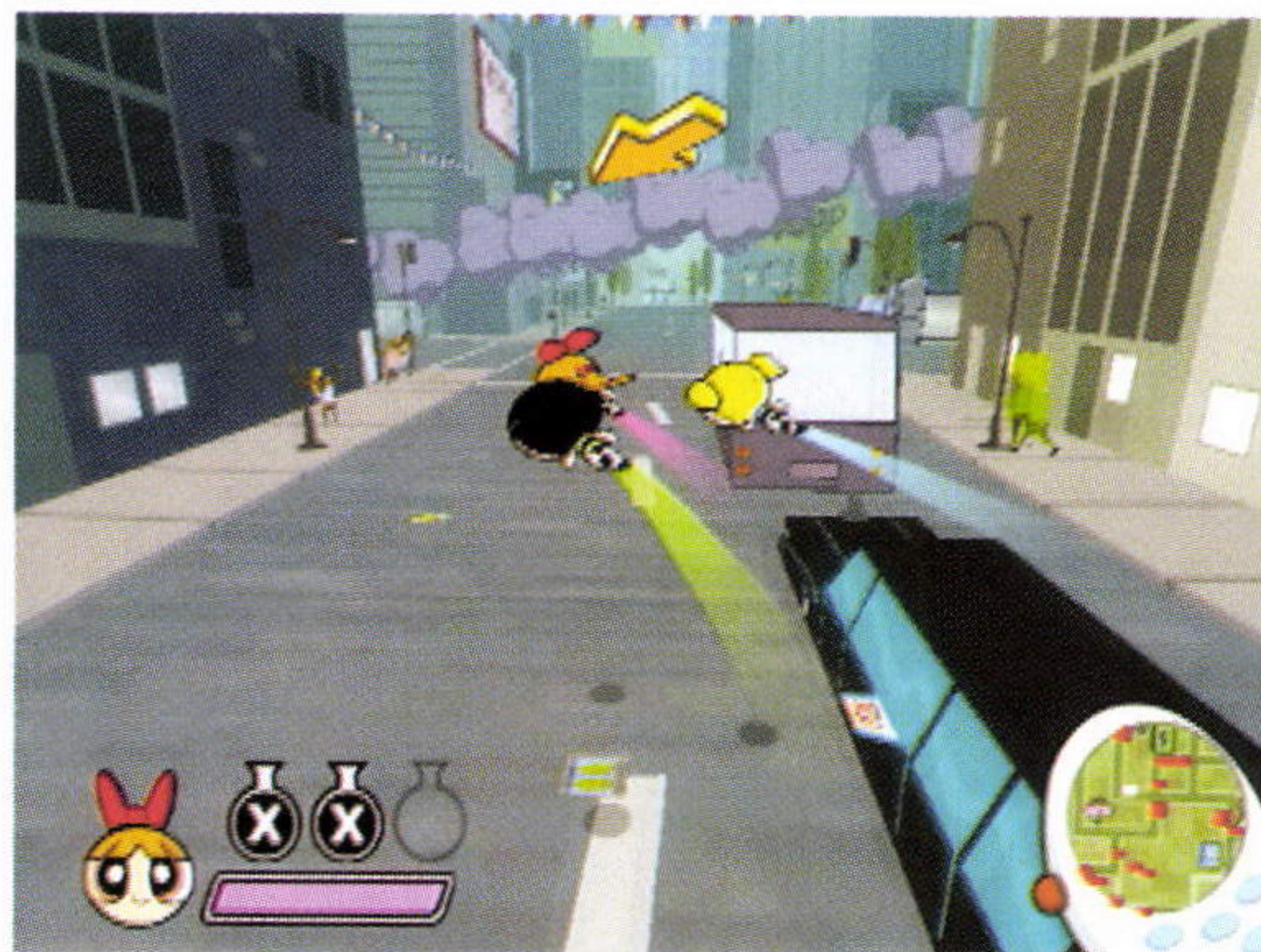


Hold on to your pickles people...

POWERPUFF GIRLS

RELISH RAMPAGE

words dave halverson



When Mojo Jojo begins bustin' out bad vibes on the Townsville election process, brainwashing citizens into casting their vote simian-style by turning them into banana tossing freaks, it's definitely time for some Powerpuff pounding action. No ordinary crime fighters can stop this level of madness, especially when Mojo straps helmet transmitters to his minions and surrounds the city with loud speakers, emitting more bad vibrations than a perpetual Kenny-G concert. Will Mayor Mayor finally lose office? Will the people of Townsville go for Mojo's promise of free money over Mayor Mayor's promise of free pickles? And what of the evil pickle aliens? Once they get wind of pickle popularity on Earth, there's no stopping their pickle parasites from taking over and turning everyone into toxic spitting pickle people! What a pickle!

Luckily, this game is a kick to play and a real demographic crowd pleaser, like a Powerpuff version of Jet Set Junior. The visuals are spot-on, a dead ringer for the series, awash with blinding pastels, retro automobiles, and a perfectly modeled virtual Townsville, which you rocket around thwarting evil at a blazing 60-fps. Using all three puffs, you shoot, lock-on and pummel, dispensing trademark special moves on a collection of freaks and geeks that'll have you in therapy for weeks to come. Split into four episodes, each longer and more diabolical than the last, it's a mission-op bathed in cartoon craziness, littered with enough collectibles to keep the kids (and maybe even you) coming back for more and more and, yes, even more! **play**

Here's what Nobby Barnden, Game Director at UK-based Vis Entertainment, had to say about his brush with Puffdom:

Speaking of flat shading—great work on capturing the flavor down to the last detail, script and all, and great models. Sometimes they look 2D, although they're obviously dimensional. How closely did you work with the series' creators? Right from the outset we knew we should make the game look as much like the TV show as possible so players felt like they were playing in the cartoon. It was important to get as much reference as possible. We received Cartoon Network's "Official Style Guide" material, and we spent hours watching every episode. From these we took thousands of reference screenshots. Every part of the existing Powerpuff Girl world that we used already existed, and was built directly from reference.

In the meantime, the storyline of the game was being developed with input from *The Powerpuff Girls*' scriptwriters. From this came the new, original material in the shape of the evil Pickloid invasion, which meant the need for original characters and hardware to be designed. By now everyone at VIS IOW was totally immersed in the Powerpuff Girls world. The art process was made easier by our senior 3D modeler and animator traveling to L.A. to spend time with the Cartoon Network artists.

How constrained (if at all) were you regarding the material? Are there strict guidelines to follow making a PPG game?

As like most licensees, Cartoon Network's main concern was that we stay faithful to its brand. At all times we had to bear this in mind when developing the story, and deciding what we were going to have the girls, and other game characters, do in the game. These rules manifested themselves in documented form (for example, which girl uses which special power), and, in general, advice or requests for changes from the CN/Warner Bros. executives and show scriptwriters. Most of the time, staying faithful to the brand was a matter of making common-sense decisions based on extensive viewing of the cartoon. It's true that working with another creative studio's property added an additional layer to the complexity of developing a game, but at the same time it proved to be an interesting and useful exercise in game design discipline.

Finally, you know you guys could make one helluva' South Park game. I'll talk to BAM! ... Now there's a racing game: "Timmy Turismo!"

Mojo Jojo's one crazy monkey, but at least he knows a cool hat when he sees one!

"The visuals are spot on, a dead ringer for the series"

powerpuff girls: relish rampage

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

developer: vis / publisher: bam! / available: now

Think your too old to play with Powerpuffs? Pull up a pickle and get into it.

It's what's inside that counts.



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With 350 new cards, the *Onslaught*™ expansion is the perfect entry into the **Magic: The Gathering** Online game. And the new Morph mechanic allows you to keep a poker face as your opponents lose their heads. That's because you play Morph cards face down. So they won't know what's lurking underneath, except that it's going to be one nasty surprise.



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A most frightening and effective ghost story

FATAL FRAME

words brady fiechter



"...the power of its imagery can't be denied..."



Zombies are disgusting, but that's just creepy.



Grotesque images of death and brutality will forever be the inspiration to horror, but for lasting, truly disturbing terror, it is the unseen that can take the psyche to the abyss. Gamemakers don't often like to play off the power of subtlety and the unknown, going for shock and immediate thrills. What makes Fatal Frame such a dark treat is its insistence that mood and shocks come slowly and subtly, building to an internalized sense of fright. This quietly powerful game approaches survival horror from a fresh, inventive angle, and while it fails to take its ideas into more intelligent, bold territory, the power of its imagery can't be denied.

Its source of conflict are spirits that live in an old, dilapidated mansion, where visitors routinely get swallowed by its evil, never to return. One such loss is the brother of the young Miku, who travels to Himuro Mansion to investigate the disappearance. The mystery of this intriguingly envisioned place builds as more ghosts are exposed and the clues to the disappearances of others surface.

How can a disembodied soul possibly be captured, let alone driven from its resting place? In Fatal Frame, the only weapon is a very special camera, which captures the

essence of the spirit in the frame as the viewfinder builds its supernatural charge. Some ghosts suddenly materialize and lazily float in retreat, providing a creepy tone simply through their presence in the room; some attack in a fit of rage, aggressively following your retreat as you attempt to keep them locked in the viewfinder. There is rarely an indication of the time and place a ghost might appear. The pervasive sense of despair and mystery, the way the ghosts so creepily show their form around the decay, leaves no moment of reprieve.

How does this camera really work? Is it somehow connected to the belief that a person's soul is absorbed into the image, somehow carrying this physical aberration over to the spirit world? Go with that idea—any idea other than the banal revelations at hand—and the game would have been an extraordinary balance of effectively engaging storytelling and psychological chills, gaining far more strength from a compelling understanding of the reason for the world you are in than is typically provided in the genre. Ultimately, the house, its sights and its fantastically drawn ghosts become the vehicle for fright; Fatal Frame is at times chilling and grandly atmospheric, and for that alone, it's a success. **play**

fatal frame

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

XB

developer: tecmo / publisher: tecmo / available: now

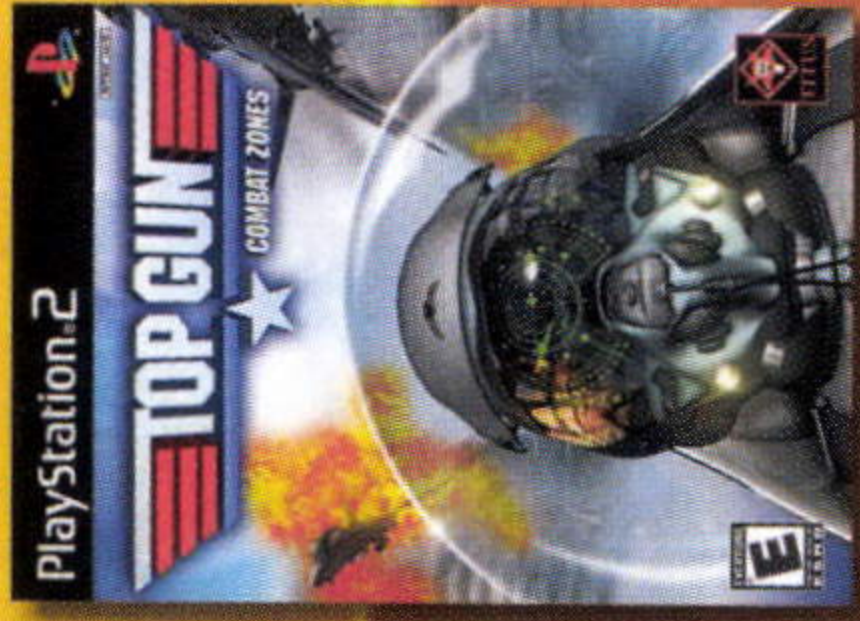
Fatal Frame doesn't reach the heights ascended by Silent Hill or Resident Evil, but the game thoroughly entertains with its building tension.

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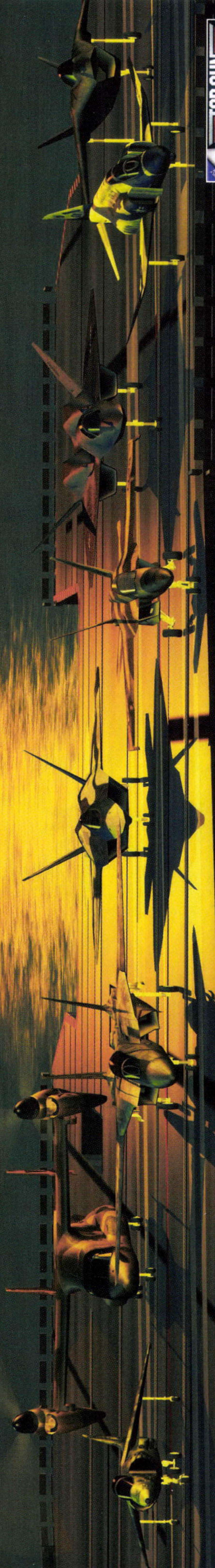
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Wet and wild

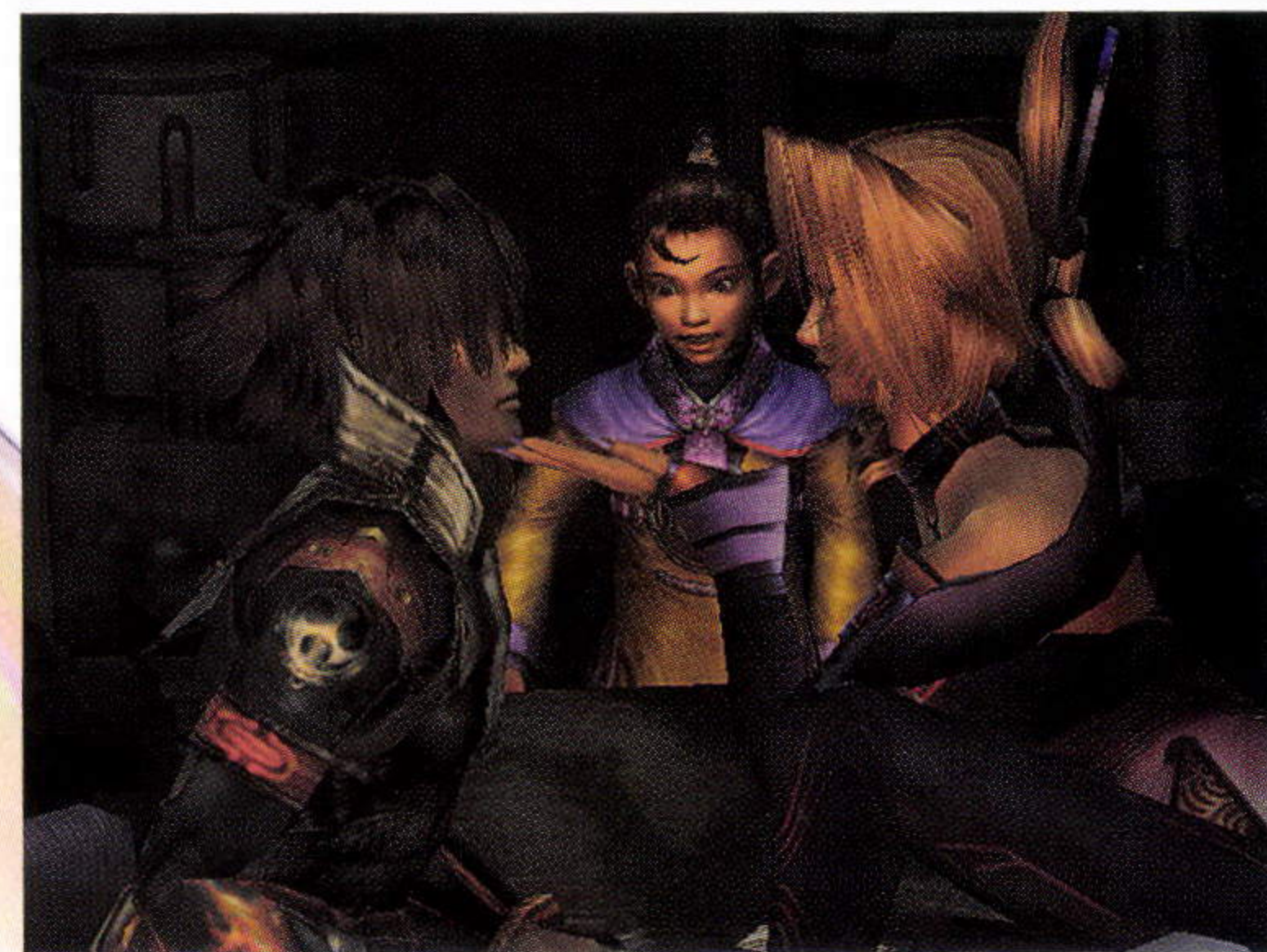
CRIMSON SEA

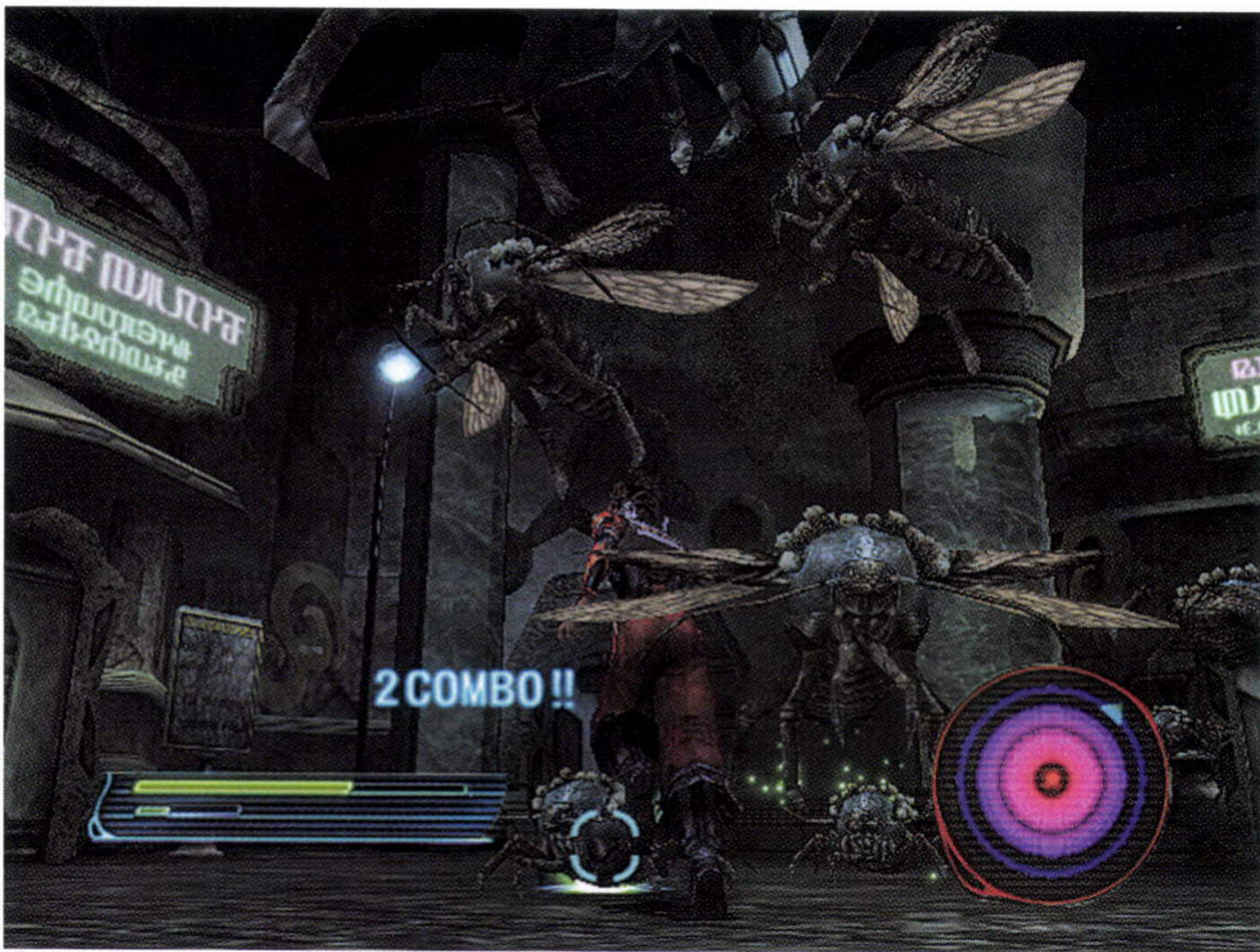
words dave halverson



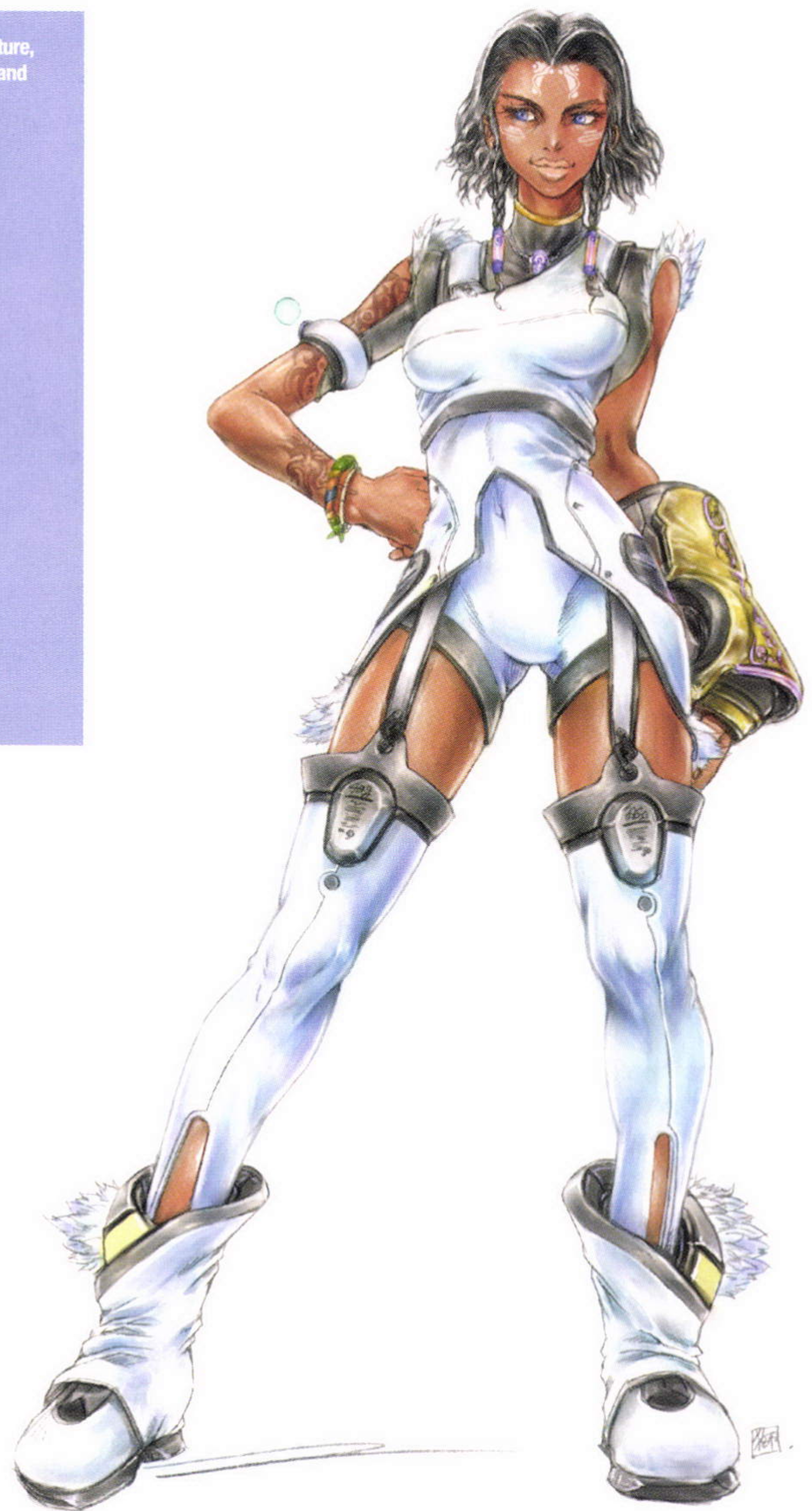
Koei owns it—even has a name for it: the Group Control Engine. No one puts more onscreen and makes a game of it like them. Thing is, or was, that until now, the games they applied it to have been limited to straight-forward action and historical simulations, and while they're the best of their class, this shift is both welcome and needed. With *Crimson Sea*, Koei put their patented technology to work in a thrill-a-minute sci-fi action adventure filled with some of the most detailed characters and environments we've seen on the Xbox...so far. For anyone who celebrates the art of gaming, exquisite works such as this go a long way—games as rich in concept and design as they are in gameplay (a shrinking commodity these days). And while *CS* is not a perfect game, what it does it does with remarkable style.

Right off the bat, it's evident that you're controlling and interacting with some of the most impressive in-game models ever constructed, and although the camera can be a bit jumpy at times (the framerate is remarkably almost too high), the environments, especially as you progress, are equally stellar, with soft light, rich textures and, of course, swarms of attacking alien creatures literally pouring out at you. The gameplay is both familiar and new—familiar in that you use close-range sabers and firearms called Neo-Psionics to lay waste to alien hordes, and new in the way in which you detect their location and manage the team around you. The members of your squad often fight by your





Crimson's architecture, character designs and voice acting are all top-notch.



“The character designs throughout are among the year’s finest.”

side, with you responsible for their positioning and offensive tactics, and the enemy is not always visible. They often blend in to the surroundings and can even change form, so the only way to trace them is often through vibration and sound (Dolby Digital 5.1 surround, of course), adding tension and drama to the otherwise frantic nature of the game. Once the enemy begins swarming, prepare for long, intense battles. As many as 1000 enemies attack at once—no joke—with masses so thick they blanket the ground. Other times, smaller swarms surround massive foes armed with beam weapons and pounding close-range attacks—an overall action buffet that absolutely no adrenaline junkie should be without.

Beyond the gameplay, the integral story, played out in stunning cinemas, is both compelling and completely

gorgeous. The leader against the counter measures—our hero Sho's boss, Live-D (stare left)—drips sex appeal. The character design throughout (reminiscent of *Phantasy Star Online*), is among the year's finest, comparable to the best from the likes of Smilebit, Tecmo and Capcom, and the bosses—massive, often liquid-based blobs—are genuinely menacing.

Crimson Seas is at its core a fast-paced action shooter, with added intrigue and story elements, making it a unique adventure-shooting amalgam. Devoid of platforming, there are no lame puzzles to speak of (you need keycards, but they often come from corpses—not real hard to find) or collectibles to find, other than currency and the odd health potion. This is pure search-and-destroy gaming, where you only need to know one thing: where they are. **play**



Within one of the game's inner sanctums, Sho clears a path.

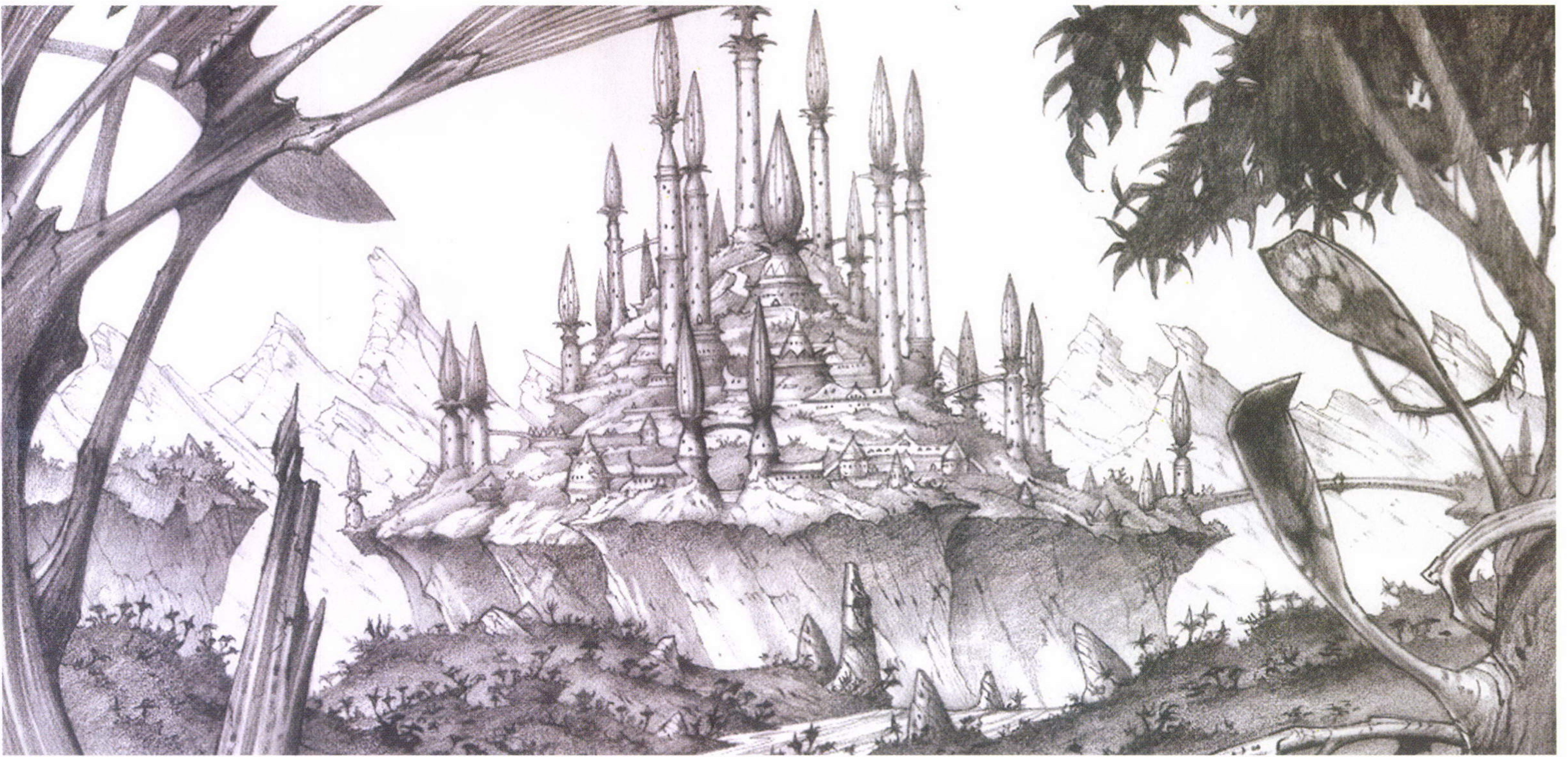
crimson sea

play rating ●●●●●

XB

developer: koei / publisher: koei / available: now

Pure action and adventure stuffed with gorgeous models and adrenaline-charged action. Koei continue their domination of the population game.



Traveller's Tales finally make their masterpiece

HAVEN

CALL OF THE KING

words dave halverson

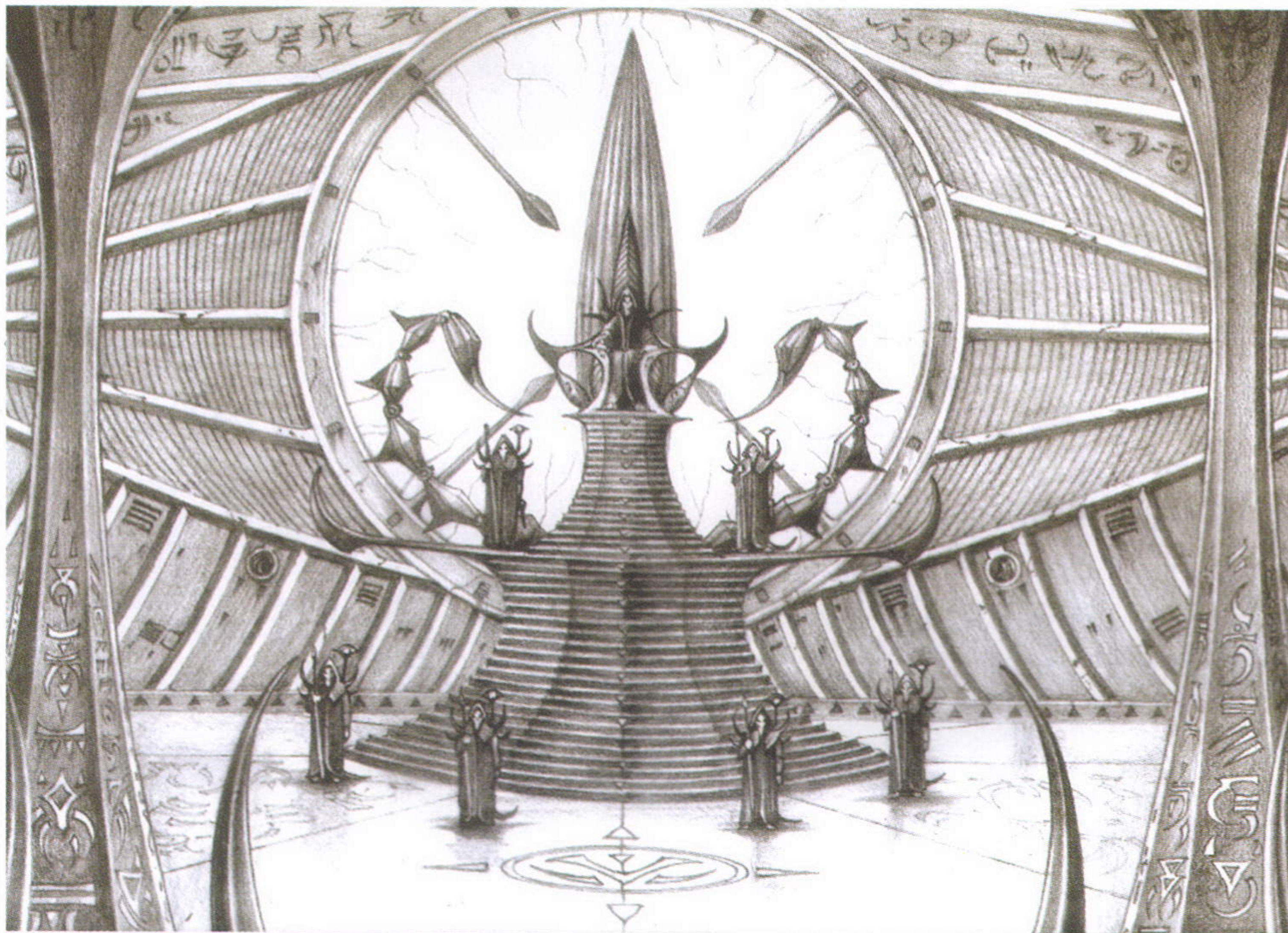
King Athellion flew the coup a millennia ago to go and fight in an intergalactic crusade, leaving his people to fend for themselves. He did leave a number where he could be reached in case of emergency—a massive bell, the Golden Voice—atop the Mount of Sighs, but it's of little consequence after Lord Vetch arrives and enslaves the entire populace. Forcing them to work in the mines, gathering ore for his orbiting space station, Vetch infects the population with a deadly virus for which he dispenses the antidote as insurance and, as for the bell, he surrounds the mountain with high security and makes sure the people know nothing of its existence or the King's promise. Everything is going as planned until a common slave, Haven, begins to have strange dreams envisioning the bell and the King, and the fun begins. Vetch gets word of Haven's apparitions from one of his spies and moves to have him executed, but Haven escapes, and it's game-on.

A compelling story? Well, that depends on how you look at it. If it were merely to frame the action—no; as such, it's pretty standard stuff, but in this case, you play the role,

partake in the events, and take the helm of a seamless quest from beginning to end. Haven is a like novel in game form—one massive level that is Haven's life-or-death struggle. Traveller's Tales has spent the better part of two decades making games for other people, working from visions other than their own, and doing so at a fever clip, producing quality more often than not. Haven, it seems, is their homage to themselves, a game that encompasses the skills they've honed over the years, and as a result, it's a fantastic voyage. If nothing else, it should be considered a testament to the power of modern game design—a fully fleshed out world (and its surrounding air space, for that matter), seamless from end to end, where the character interacts with inhabitants and solves problems in real-time, using an array of tactics and elements from his immediate vicinity. Aside from Haven's weapon and grappling device, the Mag Ball, he works through the world using a network of pots and available transports, like jet pack, speed boat, glider, hover plane, bi-plane, quad racer, and sun surfer. Imagine elements of Halo's driving, Pilotwings' gliding,

"...a testament to the power of modern game design..."





The amount of work poured into the landscapes really comes through.



Colony Wars shooting, and Mario's platforming, all rolled into one massive adventure set to an epic soundtrack and with a fully articulated script. It's fantastic stuff, bounding past the likes of Jak and Daxter and Ratchet & Clank in terms of "world" play. Not to say that Haven is a better game overall, just different, especially the ending, which is arguably the most risky ever.

If anything is standing in the way of Haven's greatness, it's Haven himself (or not, depending on how you look at it). He's a funny lookin' dude with massive eyebrows and a Disney-esque look of wonder about him, who's having a really bad hair game—not bad in terms of technology, but bad in that he's a white guy with bright red corn rows. Everything else about him is pretty neat:

outfit, accoutrements, movement, facial animation, it's just those damn corn rolls. Luckily, when it begins to rain he raises his hood; it's a shame you can't keep it on. The environments on the other hand are quite beautiful. Using 220,000 in-game polygons per frame (13.2 million per second), with one-pass fogging and point lighting techniques (in other words it looks really f***ing great), the team is able to put amazing touches on every inch of the environments, which are massive throughout, and thankfully, never load. TT commissioned fantasy artist Rodney Matthews (best known for fantasy art books such as "In Search of Forever," along with album covers for the likes of Asia and Rick Wakeman) to do the honors and it has certainly paid off. The feel of this game is a notch

above what we've come to expect from fantasy gaming even at the top of the scale. The end result—buttoned up to near perfection—is suitably epic.

Running the gamut of solid level design, vast playability, diversity, and max immersion, Haven is the next step in the evolution of the modern video game where the player and the lead become one, living vicariously through each other, like enjoying a great film in which you're playing the leading role. It's heavy on the shooting side at times, and needs a spot more platforming where I'm concerned, but on the whole, Haven is a huge slam-dunk for Midway. Is it the shoes!? **play**



haven: call of the king

play rating ●●●●●

GC PS2 XB

developer: travellers tales / publisher: midway / available: now

A spectacular, inventive, wondrous adventure. The lead is a bit of an odd-ball, but everything else is the stuff of dreams. (PS2 game reviewed.)

deadlier than ever

MORTAL KOMBAT

DEADLY ALLIANCE

words tom ham

Mortal Kombat has lived a profound existence. Ever since debuting in the arcades in the early '90s, it's built a somewhat notorious reputation.

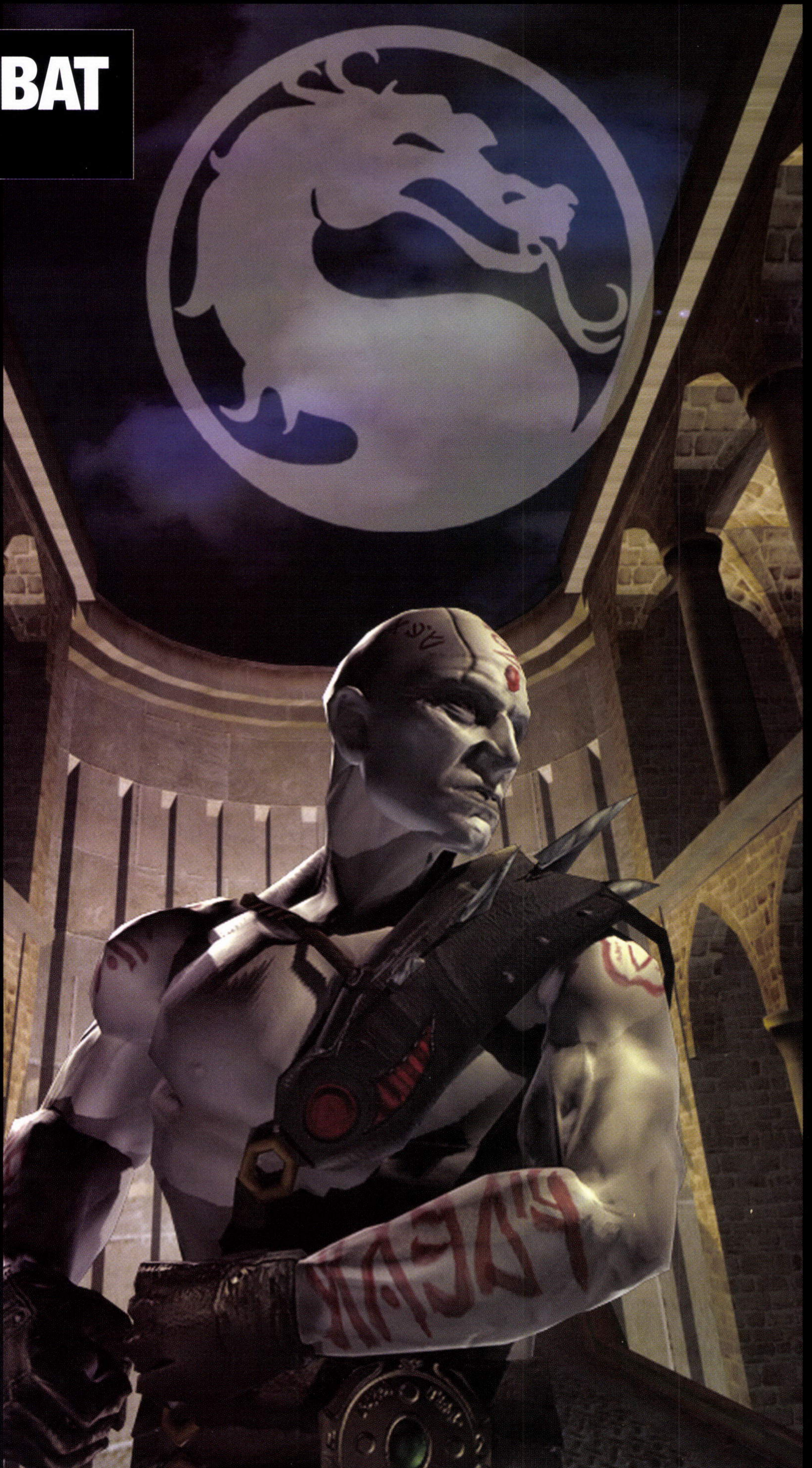
Although the industry hasn't seen a decent Mortal Kombat game in years (my favorite was MK3), the franchise still manages to keep trudging on, spawning two movies, a television show, a comic book, action figures and who knows how many cult followers. So when one of Mortal Kombat's original creators decides to reinvent the series for the next-generation consoles, we have to pay attention. Showcasing an all-new fighting engine, revamped graphics and enough blood to fill up a football stadium, Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance puts the famed fighting franchise back on top of the competition.

In addition to shifting the game into 3D, without a doubt, the biggest improvement is the ability to switch between fighting styles. Each character has two unarmed fighting stances (which are actual martial arts disciplines) and one weapon stance. Players are able to switch between the various fighting positions with a press of a button. What's cool is that many of the longer combo chains require the player to switch fighting styles during the execution of the combo itself. Challenging? You bet, but not impossible. Since players use the digital pad in Deadly Alliance, it is easy to execute the special moves. And what's brilliant about the fighting engine is that you can dream up combos as you see fit. With some practice you'll be able to juggle opponents and execute 10-hit combos without breaking a sweat.

Even though there are only 23 fighters in the game (not the biggest cast of characters we've seen in a Mortal Kombat game), it is without question^o the most balanced it has ever been. Almost all the classic Mortal Kombat characters are in Deadly Alliance including Sub-Zero, Shang Tsung, Quan Chi, Scorpion, Sonya, Jax, Kitana, Kano, Cyrax, Kung Lao, Johnny Cage, Raiden and Reptile. And yes, you guessed it, no Liu Kang. If you want to know what happened to him, you're just going to have to pick up the game to find out. Filling in the other roster slots are new characters, all of which fit perfectly in the MK universe.

Another major component of Deadly Alliance is the Krypt. The Krypt is basically a huge hall with close to 700 unlockable coffins. Each coffin has a value associated with it. Players can earn Kombat Koins while in Arcade and Konquest modes. For example, defeating Shang Tsung in Arcade mode will reward you with 500 Sapphire Koins. The more koins you get, the more you can spend in the Krypt. In addition to hidden characters, players can unlock stages, conceptual art, costumes for fighters and a whole lot more. Although cool in design and concept, most of the unlockables in the Krypt are kinda lame. Do

"The Krypt is basically a huge hall with up to 700 unlockable coffins."





Posers.



we really care about an early concept drawing of a character's costume? Or some fan art? Come on Ed, work with us here! The game's most impressive feature is the visuals. Everything from the player animations to the fighting arenas to the textures – it's all spectacular. Although the visuals look their best on Xbox, the PS2 and GameCube versions are beautiful as well. Deadly Alliance also has a pretty complex particle system. Watching the sparks fly as two swords clang together is a sight to behold. And a Mortal Kombat game wouldn't be a Mortal Kombat game if it didn't have a lot of blood, and Deadly Alliance delivers by the gallon. A well-placed hit will not only spew blood on the ground, but you'll see blood trickle down on the character's face and body. And what's cool is that the blood stays on the ground throughout the course of the match. And yes, there are new fatalities. Too many to list here, but trust us, they're wickedly cool.

So if you feel kinda weary about picking up another Mortal Kombat game, don't be. Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance is unlike any other 3D fighters on the market. Midway has done an exceptional job of creating a brand new Mortal Kombat experience while still maintaining the old-school flavor that so many of us are familiar with. If you're bored with Virtua Fighter 4 and Tekken 4, check out Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance; the game kicks ass. **play**



mortal kombat: deadly alliance

play rating ●●●●●

GC PS2 XB

developer: midway / publisher: midway / available: now

The infamous franchise that started the violence in video games gravy train still has something to say... "Fatality!"

Bond, guns, action and flash

007: NIGHTFIRE

words brady fiechter



Bond has been so shaken and stirred throughout the decades that you begin to wonder just how much juice could possibly be left in the mix. Apparently a lot. Classy spy thrills and gratuitous female chills will always refuse to fade out of style, and as long as those interminable movies continue to run white hot, the videogames inspired by them will harness the steam.

One of the best Bond games yet is the adrenaline-soaked NightFire, a slick and ceaselessly explosive first-person shooter that is ignited by the same surface spark of the movies. Nothing here is inventive or revolutionary, but everything is so well produced and tightly constructed that it really doesn't matter how worn the template really is.

The game opens with an originally produced Bond song, complete with sexy babes floating in phantasmagoric colors and oozing production effects. This could have been a disasterously contrived springboard to the virtual world of Bond, but it comes off so polished and fun that you can't help but want to immediately dig into whatever EA has in store for actual gameplay.

And that gameplay is staple first-person goodness: shoot bad guys on the ground, open a door; shoot bad guys on towers, climb up and open a door; shoot bad guys hiding around corners, open a door and drop a grenade. Like Medal of Honor, NightFire draws off its theme and presentation for its ultimate appeal, painting an awesome 007 setting that plays the perfect part.

Yes, the game is familiar in its approach, but the skill with which all the pieces have been placed together is exceptional, engaging you from the first shot of the secret-agent-enhanced sniper rifle. Death animations look great and the modeling of the terrorists is fantastic, making their presence within the stage more engaging than the raw action would support on its own. Cutting up the first-person shootouts are several driving sequences over land and under the sea, successfully implimented by a separate

design team.

The chase scenes are good to very good, but their presence feels limited and compromises the flow of the game, making a short experience seem even shorter without more levels of the much more entertaining first-person chaos. Some of you will love the opportunity to storm a city with an Astom Martin while unleashing missiles, Q-charges and dual-mounted machine guns, and indeed there's no denying the quality and energy of the missions, but if it were up to me, I'd be playing the inevitable sequel without the vehicle angle.

One of the more effective and subtle accomplishments in NightFire is its exceptional art direction, which works so well not necessarily for its obvious detail, but for the unusual sophistication of its tone. The game has a razor-sharp edge that creates space and mood with the slickness of the big-budget films from which its ideas were borrowed. Presentation rules in NightFire, and the more you see of the game, the more you appreciate how EA effectively ramped up the action within the visual appeal. A good example of this is a later level where Bond is dumped on top of a building, revealing an incredible view of the oil complex around him. There is so much integrity and volume to everything that you can actually study the layout and enemy positioning to a newfound degree, pulling you farther into the action. Snipers call out your location within the level, commanding guards at certain points to take fire, and there are so many little nooks and crannies to move around that you feel intensely alive to the area.

This was easily one of my favorite locations, showcasing the best of what makes this Bond a fierce first-person ride: swiftness of play, boiling action, superb presentation and smart level design. It may lack the ambition of a Halo and the invention of a Red Faction, but no matter: NightFire holds strong against the best FPS out there. **play**

"Classy spy thrills and gratuitous female chills will always refuse to fade out of style..."

The game looks so freaking good at times, and its energetic presentation can't be beat.

007: NightFire

play rating ●●●●●

GC PS2 XB

developer: ea / publisher: ea / available: now

It's basic structure needs a mixup, but Nightfire still smokes.



The Protectors
of all that is good....

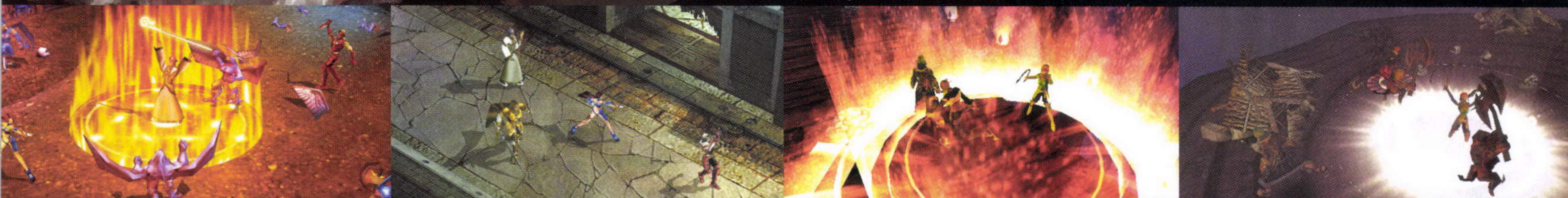
are ready to open
a can of whup-ass
on all that is evil.

You've been summoned by the White Wizards into a deadly game of kill or be killed. The bravest of the brave, you must protect the three 'Towers of Elements' from an army of Orks, Lizard Men and demons sent by the Lord of the Underworld. And that's just before lunch. You'll need to sharpen your sword on Mad Ravens, Goblins, Zombies and other hideous creatures before you get to take a whack at the Dark Lord himself. But, fear not, because the more scumbags you annihilate, the more tricks you'll stuff up your sleeve and the more magical Black Stones you collect, the more deadly you become... It all makes for an interesting journey through the mythical land of Zedan.

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BlackStone

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RALLY SUPERTEST V RALLY 3 vs COLIN McRAE 3

Two awesome Rally games; two powerful consoles. Everyone wins in this year's bid for king of rally!

V RALLY 3

Eden Studios put the PS2's pedal to the metal

words dave halverson

system: playstation 2
developer: eden studios
publisher: atari
available: now

play rating ●●●●●



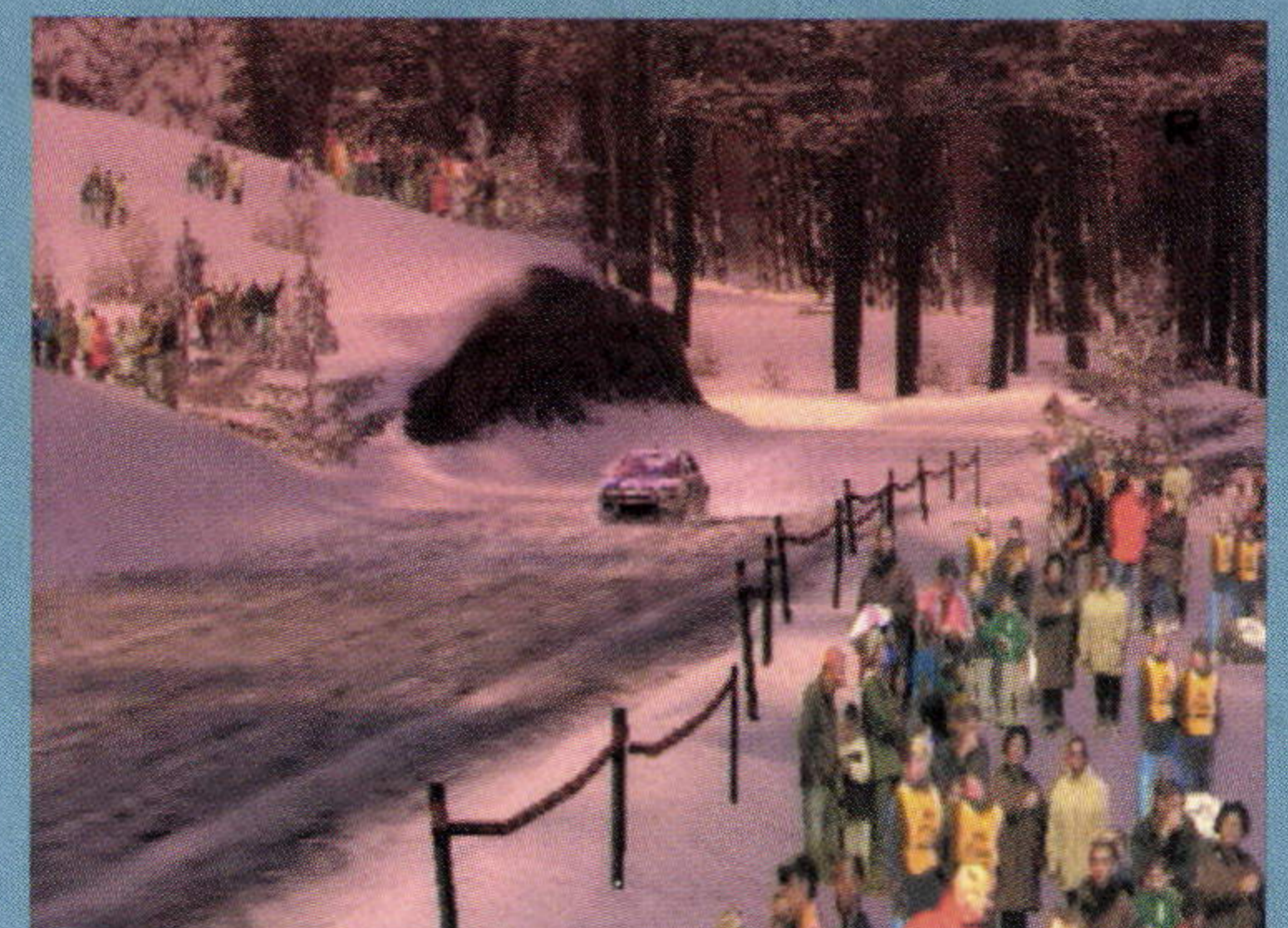
Above all, a racing game must do one thing to achieve greatness—and that's pull you into its grasp. Through presentation, graphics, sound, and physics, there's nothing like getting into the flow of a good racer. This year, in the futuristic arena two games did the job—Quantum Redshift and Wipeout Fusion. On the simulation side, Sega GT 2002 and Gran Turismo topped off our tanks—motocross took a year off—and now at year's end the two heavyweights of Rally battle for supremacy, bringing with them a level of realism seldom, if ever, seen. V Rally 3, my entry for Rally champion of 2002, features a deep career mode, along with some of the most intense behind-the-wheel action you've ever experienced. Beyond the contract signings, full-office access with e-mail and personal records, team testing and

recruiting, and 1.6 FWD and 2.0 FWD rallies spanning six countries, Eden Studios has gone out of their way to put you in the car like never before.

Aside from the usual—parts loosening and eventually falling off, real-time deformation, etc.—the cars in V3 accumulate dirt, mud and snow, in real-time including build up on the windshield that fades in progressively as you complete each leg. Moving into the replays, the same applies, with views from all around and inside of the car depicting your exact run, from the squeaky clean start to the dented mud-covered finish. Then, at race end, crowds gather around your team camp where the mechanics receive your car, jack it up and begin working on any repairs you order, in the time allotted. Back on the track, the sensation of motion and physics is outstanding, with terrain that looks and, more importantly, feels rutted and pitted by wear and weather, down to the sensation of a wheel leaking over an edge or into a slight camber. Very slight clipping is the only miniscule point to pick on with VR3, but given the thickness and vastness of the surroundings, along with the detail in and around the cars it's a tiny price to pay for one of the best rally games ever produced.

"The cars in VR3 accumulate dirt, mud and snow, in real-time including build up on the windshield"

Pictured left, the view from behind the wheel. Below, a look at some replay action.



There are things to recommend in both of these great Rally games, but how do they stack up when compared head to head? Find out below...

1. GRAPHICS

While it's unanimous VR3 puts more up on-screen, the trade off (some clipping and a slight hit in the frame rate) is evident. VR3 is a more colorful game as well. With McRae you get solid, realistic visuals with nary a hint of clipping and the textures are superb. Both games have real-time deformation and accumulation with McRae taking a slight edge in both.

Winner: Tie

2. CONTROL/PHYSICS

Dave likes the arcade feel of VR3 while Mike prefers the hyper precision that McRae offers, as a true simulation. Both games control well akin to the varying weather conditions and environments but McRae's terrain has more erosion and shape. Control being highly subjective, both games control extremely well. Due to its truer simulation aspects however, a slight edge goes to McRae.

Winner: Colin McRae 3

3. REALISM

Well, this is McRae hands down. From the superb modeling of the interior and exterior of the vehicles, the realism of its courses, and the precision of its control, McRae looks and feels just like the real thing. The dust and water effects are also noteworthy. VR3 however has great weather, reflective puddles, and faithfully recreates every nuance of Rally racing.

Winner: Colin McRae



COLIN McRAE RALLY 3

Third time's a charm for this venerable series

words michael hobbs

system: xbox, playstation 2

developer: codemasters

publisher: codemasters

available: now

play rating ●●●●●

“Codemasters have delivered one of the best playing and best looking racers available on Xbox.”

The rain effect in Colin McRae is one of the many visual touches that bring the game to life.

What makes a great racing game? In my mind, it's very simple. You need but two elements: control and graphics. No matter if it's a rally, Formula 1, or sports car racer, these two factors are everything. What happens outside the actual driving of the car is the icing on the cake. Gran Turismo, for example, would be worthless if the basic driving action was not engaging and it didn't look good.

So it is with great satisfaction that I sank my teeth into Colin McRae Rally 3. Being Codemaster's third go at this series, they've been able to do everything that they wanted to do when the game debuted on the PSOne, and in doing so, they've delivered one of the best playing and best looking racers available on the Xbox.

One thing is for certain: Codemasters has gotten the physics dead on. Striking the perfect balance between playability and realism, the sensation of driving a rally car is more well represented here than ever before, besting even the admittedly arcade-biased but brilliant Sega Rally. Whether on loose gravel or tarmac, the physics model in this game is beyond reproach. In concert with the amazingly true-to-life graphics and sound effects of tire chatter and



gravel spray, the game achieves a level of virtual realism that is only possible on today's superconsoles.

Helping these matters along is the game's inscrutable attention to visual detail. The way in which dust accumulates on the cars is truly stunning. We've seen this effect since Rally Cross on PS One, but finally, the effect has transcended the gimmick and taken on the appearance of reality. So too with the streaks of water on the windshield as it rains, and in the subtle and delicate ways the car's body can show damage. And you'll be amazed at the level of detail inside the car, both on the fully animated pilots and in the internal structure of the machine.

In short, this is a great rally racing game. It plays like a dream and it's gorgeous. There's my criteria filled.



4. SOUND

A fight to the death! Both of these games are silent running but have equally impressive interfaces accompanied by trance-hop. In terms of car noise both games are great but McRae is way more realistic. The tire chatter and the squeaky sounds of cars on the limit in McRae is pure rally. The music goes to VR3 but the sound effects, McRae.

Winner: Tie

5. ENTERTAINMENT

McRae offers the singular thrill of competing in a real-life rally event, with the deep, challenging, and rewarding control to go with it. V Rally 3 too offers the rigors of a full career including team management, a full pit crew, career highlights etc., all managed through in-game e-mail. The courses are imagined however, which doesn't instill the same level of realism, but makes for more lush and colorful environments.

Winner: Tie

OVERALL WINNER

Colin McRae 3

It was a close call, but the depth of Colin McRae's physics model and its profoundly solid overall feel give it the edge.



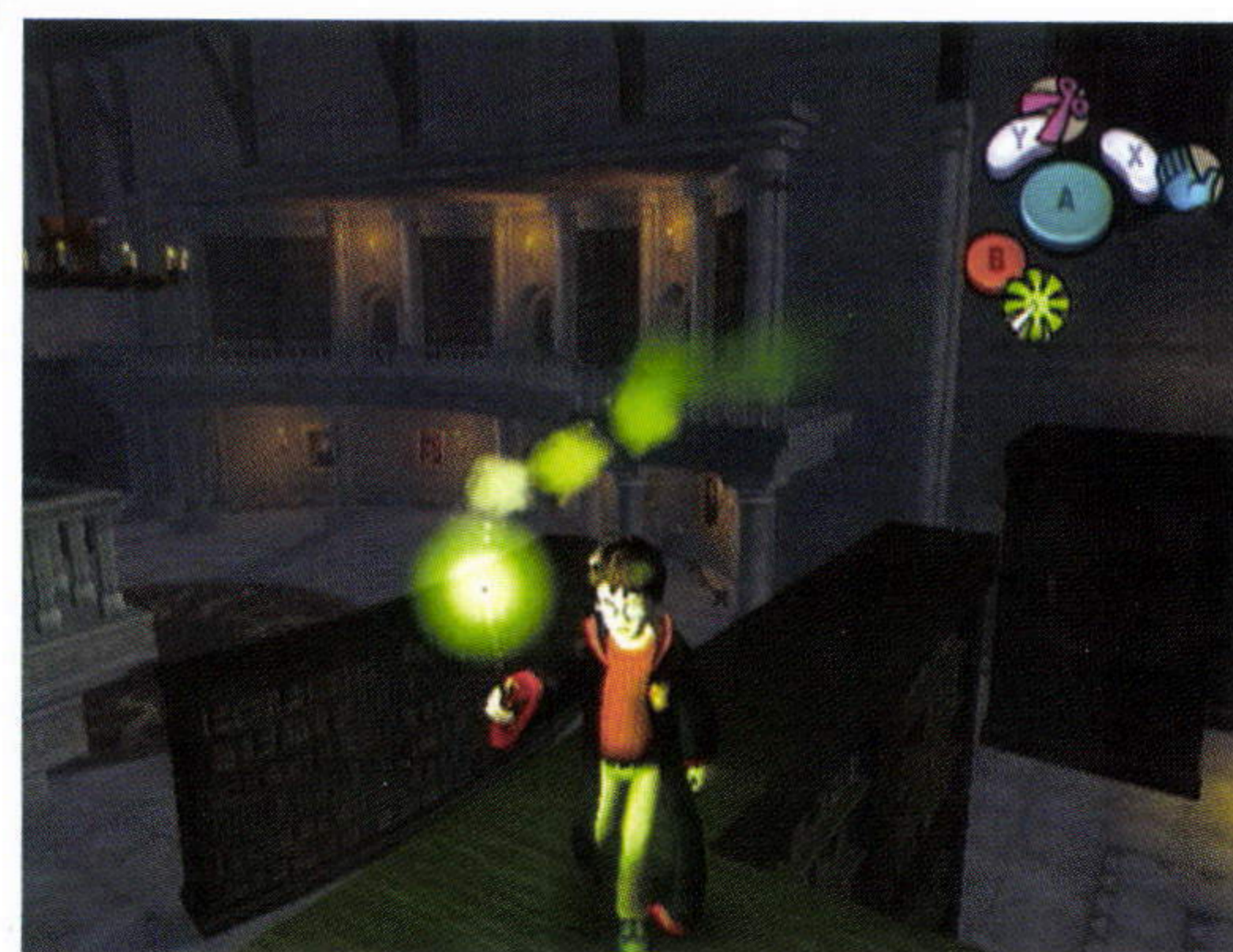
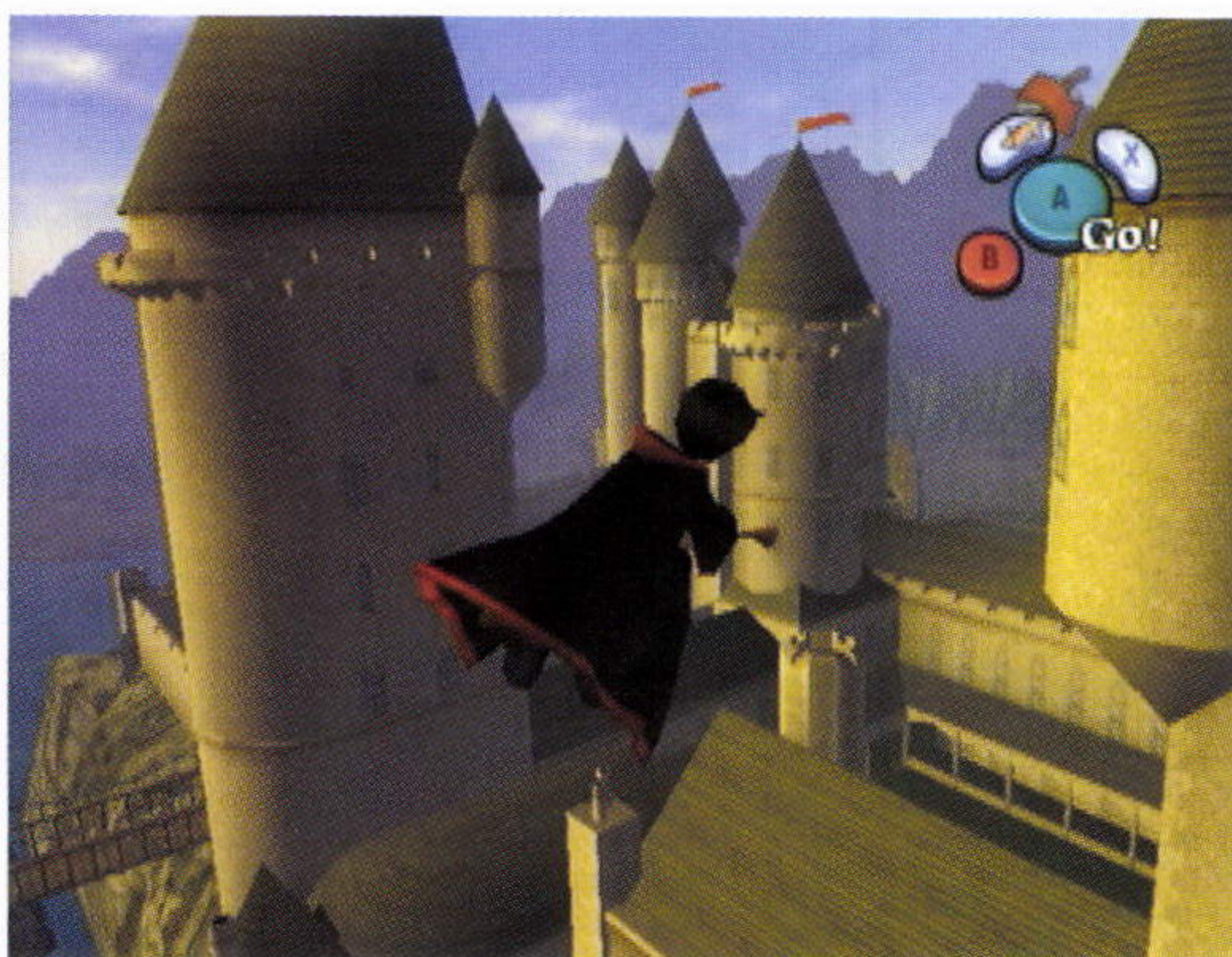
Harry Potter & The Chamber of Secrets

system: xbox/gamecube
 developer: ea
 publisher: ea
 available: now

Dumbledore himself would be proud of how much less the GameCube and Xbox versions of Chamber load compared to the PS2 game. He may, however, pelt it with Bertie Botts Beans when he discovers that the grounds of Hogwarts have been Flipendo'd right out of the game. Not that it really matters though; in fact, I think it's better without the slow, open field of the castle grounds, having to run great lengths to reach short pockets of gameplay. The important part, which is the ability to fly freely on the Nimbus 2000, one of the cooler aspects of the PS2 game, remains intact in both of these versions. Of the three games, the Xbox version is the clear winner, with perfect frame rates, the lowest load times, the best resolution and the best textures, but the 'Cube game runs a close second, a refreshing turn of events. All of the Potter gamers are fantastic, and serve as great companion pieces to the new film, although that PS2 loading really got under my skin.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●



Darkened Sky

system: gamecube
 developer: boston animation
 publisher: ssi
 available: now

Coming to the 'Cube by way of the PC, Darkened Sky is underwhelming from a graphics standpoint compared to today's top adventures, but still worth a peek if you're fond of a good parody or just really like the backside of a shapely female. The cute-ish Skye—a lowly herder looking for the answers behind a mysterious talisman left to her by her mother—sends up the genre well, as she traverses the puzzle-laden land of Lynlora, along with a funny little gargoyle named Draak, working to unite the kingdom by restoring the rainbow with Skittles (yes, the candy, apparently it was once sacred). A solid magic system and quality writing help make this a pretty cool little entry-level romp.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●



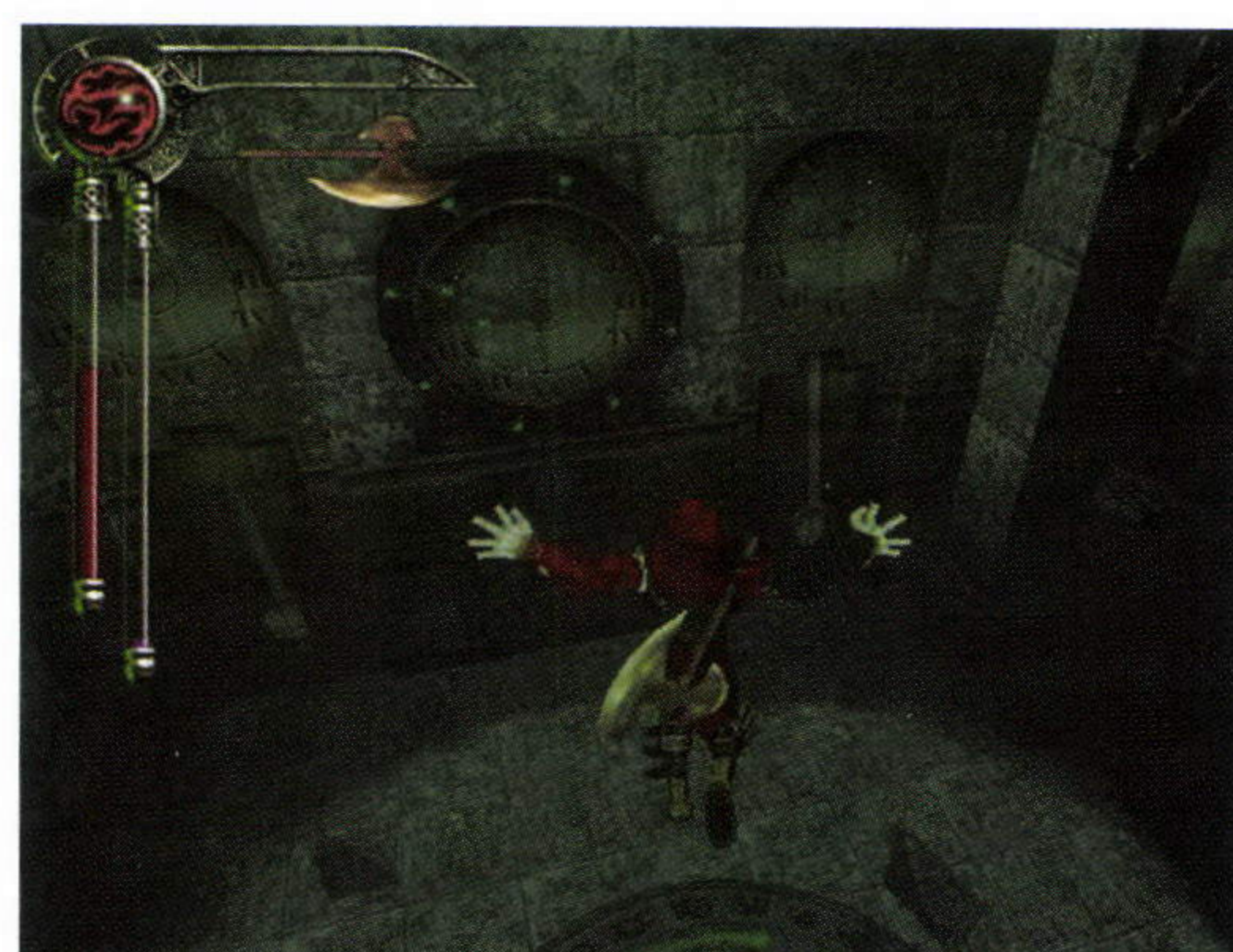
Dynasty Warriors 3: Xtreme Legends

system: playstation 2
 developer: koei
 publisher: koei
 available: now

This isn't a whole new sequel to Dynasty Warriors 3. Think of it more as an append disc, and if you loved DW3, you'll love this enhancement. Set to sell at a lower than normal price, Xtreme Legends offers up all the enormous, screen-filling action that is expected from this series, while including several new player characters unlocked from the very beginning and all-new scenarios. Perhaps the best new feature is the custom bodyguard, an A.I. character who can fight alongside you, allowing for the devastating combo attacks that were once only the province of the two-player split-screen mode.

MICHAEL HOBBS

play rating ●●●●●



Blood Omen 2

system: gamecube
 developer: crystal dynamics
 publisher: eidos
 available: now

Blood Omen 2 is a disappointment when placed next to the elegant, darkly inviting original, and the inferior Xbox port to GameCube hurts it even more. While the game has the general tone of the Kain universe down, it has a garish sheen and a cheap comic-book aesthetic that compromises the areas the artists and designers handled keenly. Despite some of the best voice work in games, even the dialogue sounds forced, which is a huge loss when compared to the engrossing, intelligently written exchanges in the other games from this universe. Kain is stiff when mutilating the townspeople, and the clunky character designs collapse the mood even more.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating ●●●●●

A Vacation Getaway

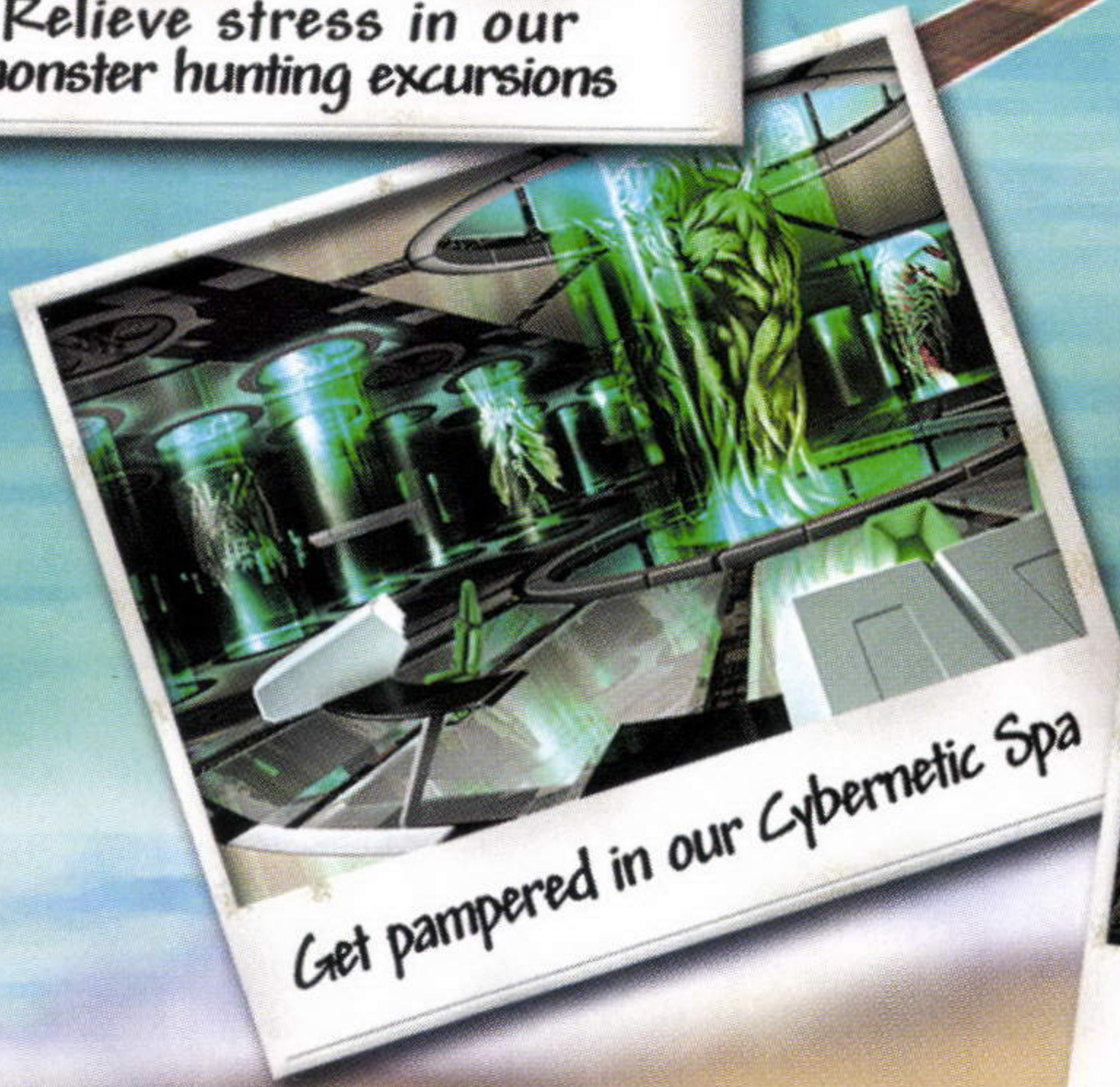
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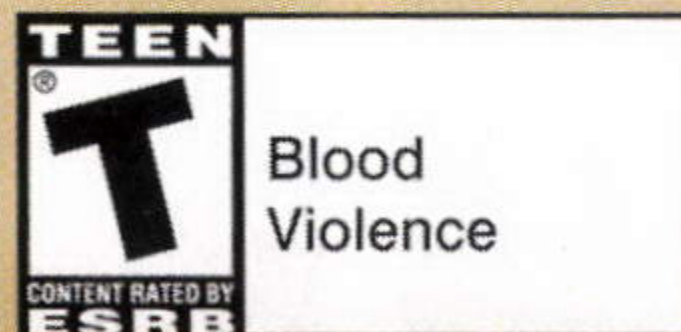
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Rally Fusion

system: xbox/ps2
 developer: climax motorsports
 publisher: activision
 available: now

A deep, gorgeous, somewhat alternative view of the Rally genre, Climax Motorsports' Rally Fusion has a lot going for it, but first thing's first. Jump right in and have a go at a Quick Race in Antarctica, and be amazed, be very amazed. The Xbox firing on all eight cylinders is simply a beautiful thing. Back in the real world, beginning your career in C Class, the game takes you on an excursion through match races, desert rallies, rain-swept forests (I swear, that's real mud) and tests of skill as you assail the ranks of the Race of Champions by your lonesome or with a team of your own design of up to three players. Very impressive; these guys are good.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●



Drome Racers

system: playstation 2
 developer: attention to detail
 publisher: ea
 available: now

In the future, racing has become a huge event, and the cars are constructed of LEGOs. There's your setup, here's the general mechanic: choose from an array of LEGO cars based on the 2002 LEGO Racers construction toy range, drive them fast, shoot missiles and utilize powerups, win. While there just isn't anything exciting about controlling these nondescript racers, the racing is handled competently enough that a younger audience will especially appreciate the look and feel, and the dragging stretches are a fun idea. Everything you'd expect from a solid PS2 engine is here, implemented just well enough.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating ●●●●●



Outlaw Golf

system: playstation 2/xbox/gamecube
 developer: hypnotix
 publisher: ssi
 available: now

Outlaw Golf is sexy and irreverent and manages to do so without humiliating us with lame innuendo, so bravo for that. The game has great visuals, too, from the models to the courses themselves. And while I really like beating the crap out of my caddy (girl on girl never looked so good), I wish the interface had a few more nuances and a more comprehensive putting mechanism. Having shot projection on the wands is cool, but there's a tendency to hook the ball if you don't follow through just right. Adjusting the arc of the ball is nil as well. This is a series well deserving of a slightly tuned sequel.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●

Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

system: gamecube
 developer: black isle
 publisher: interplay
 available: now

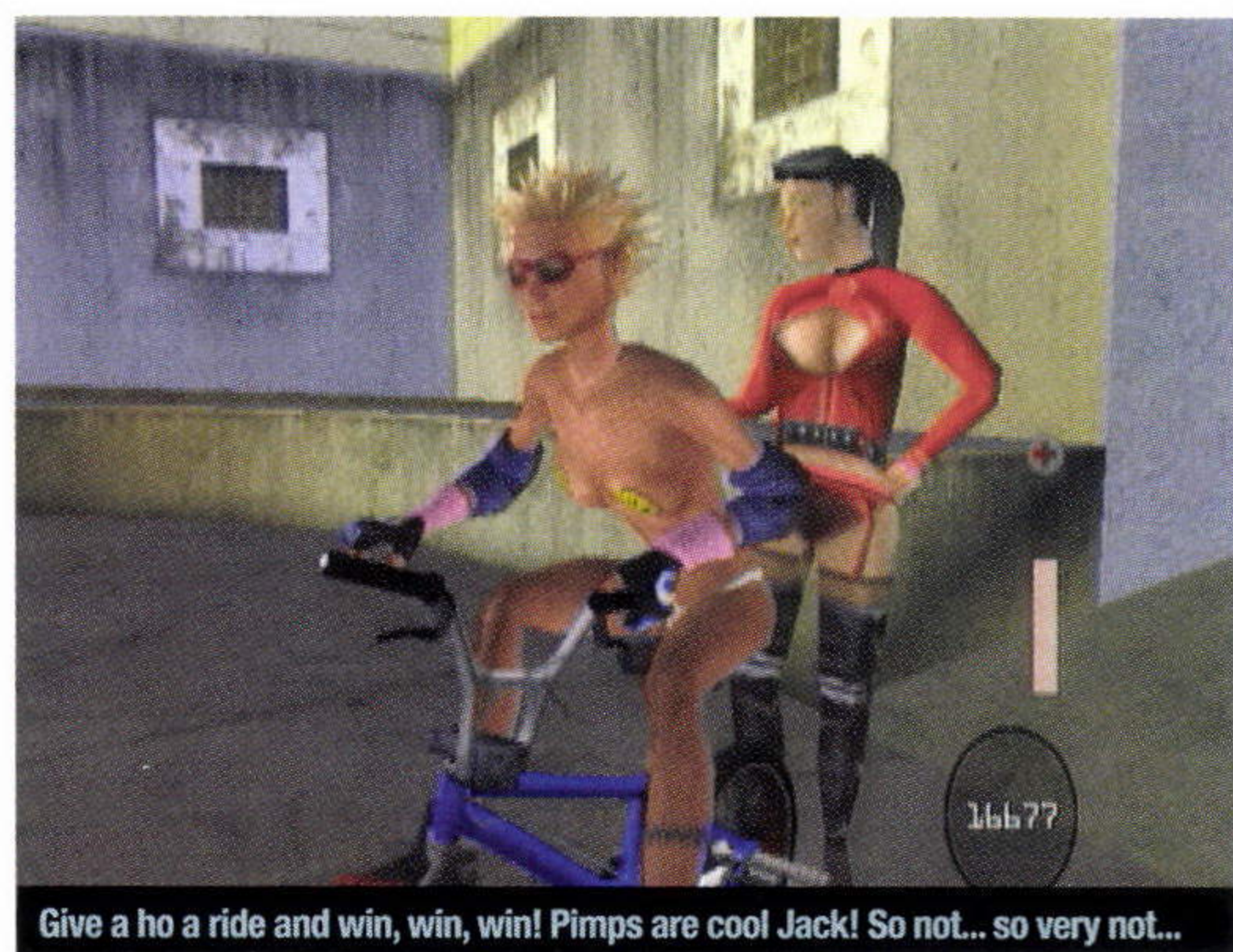
Inspired by AD&D, this marvelously detailed, richly atmospheric action-RPG is a ceaselessly entertaining example of how valuable highly focused, simplistic adventuring can really be. Commanding either a dwarf, archer or sorceress, you hack and slash and cast magic through gorgeous fantasy settings that spill over with an army of fast little mutants, rats, beasts and ogres. Some of the larger enemies are menacing and awesomely constructed, showing off a tremendous attention to detail and rich fantasy designs. The top-down perspective keeps the action swift and tightly wound, allowing for so much onscreen chaos that you can hardly see the ground when a room has been cleared. It's tremendously satisfying to see all the carnage build up, and the experience earned, while basic, adds nicely to the character management system. Invite a friend into the quest and Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance is even better.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating ●●●●●



Isn't that a Treyarch logo on the right... hmmm



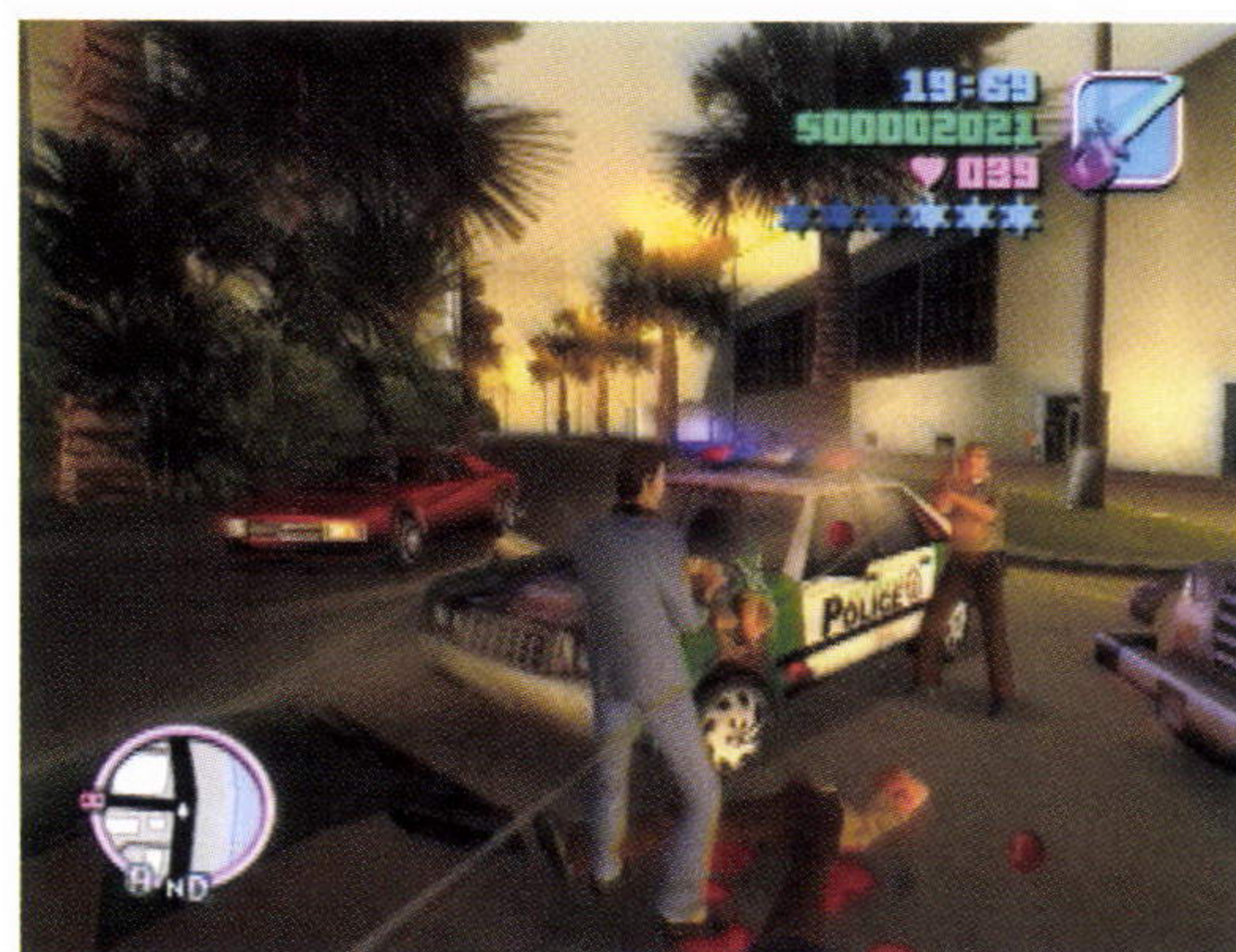
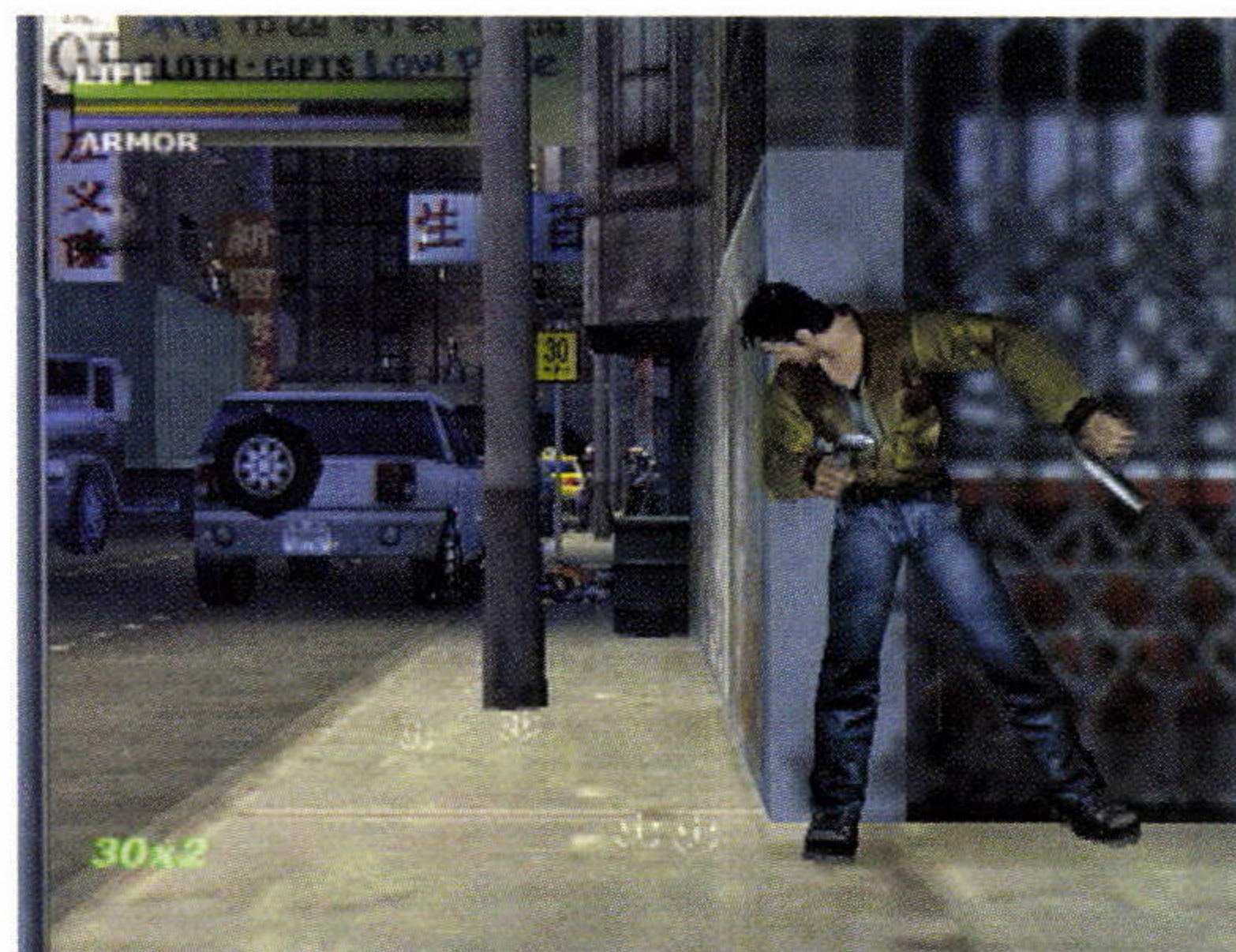
BMX XXX

system: playstation 2/xbox/gamecube
 developer: z-axis
 publisher: acclaim
 available: now

Don't dislike BMX XXX for its gratuitous sex, pandering to the guttural instincts of juvenile delinquents, or for applying a thick coat of sludge from bowels of society onto BMX. No, dislike it because it's a tired game on a tired engine. You could press those boobs against the screen and it still wouldn't make this game any good. With or without clothes on, Z-Axis has the same problems they always have: the bikes just don't control right; it's hard to stop, hard to quick turn, and too hard to ride with any accuracy. Not hard as in to-do, but hard as in, it's not effortless, as it should be. The environments look okay, and the models aren't terrible (misshapen, but not terrible), but the timed, short, unoriginal, often completely offensive missions are simply not cool. The jokes are idiotic—really beyond bad, and the narration isn't just aggravating but infuriating. The guy who repeats "didn't I see you on World's Worst Bikers" I want stoned to death, and in the event you do come across a slightly cool scenario, the resulting cinemas are laughably cheap. You may be able to control a misshapen, nearly naked chick on a BMX bike, but there's simply nothing sexy about XXX. It's so steeped in white trash I had to Windex my controller. Gaming can be beautiful, fun, a rush, or sometimes, like now, just plain ugly.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●



Dead to Rights

system: playstation 2
 developer: namco
 publisher: namco
 available: now

Dead to Rights is no Max Payne. It tries to be when it's not being a mediocre mélange of mini-games or a reheated crime story, but for the most part it's just generic. Need a key? Bet the last guy you kill in the room will have it. Need to get off of death row? Hey, just rough up an inmate, he's bound to have "keycard A." The dog is an okay touch, and I'll admit parts of the fighting are kinda neat, like using human shields, but the bullet-time rip, mediocre models and by-the-numbers puzzles make Jack a very dull boy. This just isn't a Namco game, m'kay. Bring back Rolling Thunder and Splatterhouse and then we'll talk.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●

HSX

system: playstation 2
 developer: eden studios
 publisher: majesco
 available: now

In my eyes, the futuristic racing genre begins and ends with Wipeout. Thus far, no game has come close to matching the style, and more importantly, the physics of that series. It just feels so right as you flow around the twisting courses. This is a sensation that HSX sorely lacks. Sure it's fast and the courses have all the dips and loops that one would expect, but there's no satisfaction in the piloting of the craft. Only an incredibly easy-to-use track editor makes HSX worthwhile, but even this original and well-done feature isn't enough to save its tepid play.

MIKE HOBBS

play rating ●●●●●

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

system: playstation 2
 developer: rockstar nrth
 publisher: rockstar
 available: now

There simply does not exist a game that offers this level of freedom and connectivity with its audience. Molding the new game around the old engine, Rockstar has polished their '80s Auto to a glistening sheen, and laced it with the likes of Burt Reynolds and Ray Liotta—just too f***ing smooth. It's gritty but never offends, funny but never too over the top, and it sends up the '80s right, which is not easy (sans Boston and Journey no less). I can't say it's perfect, though, as these models are somewhat archaic (especially the chicas) but hey, they need something to shoot for. Maybe next time they'll give us a crack at it before *Entertainment Weekly*.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●

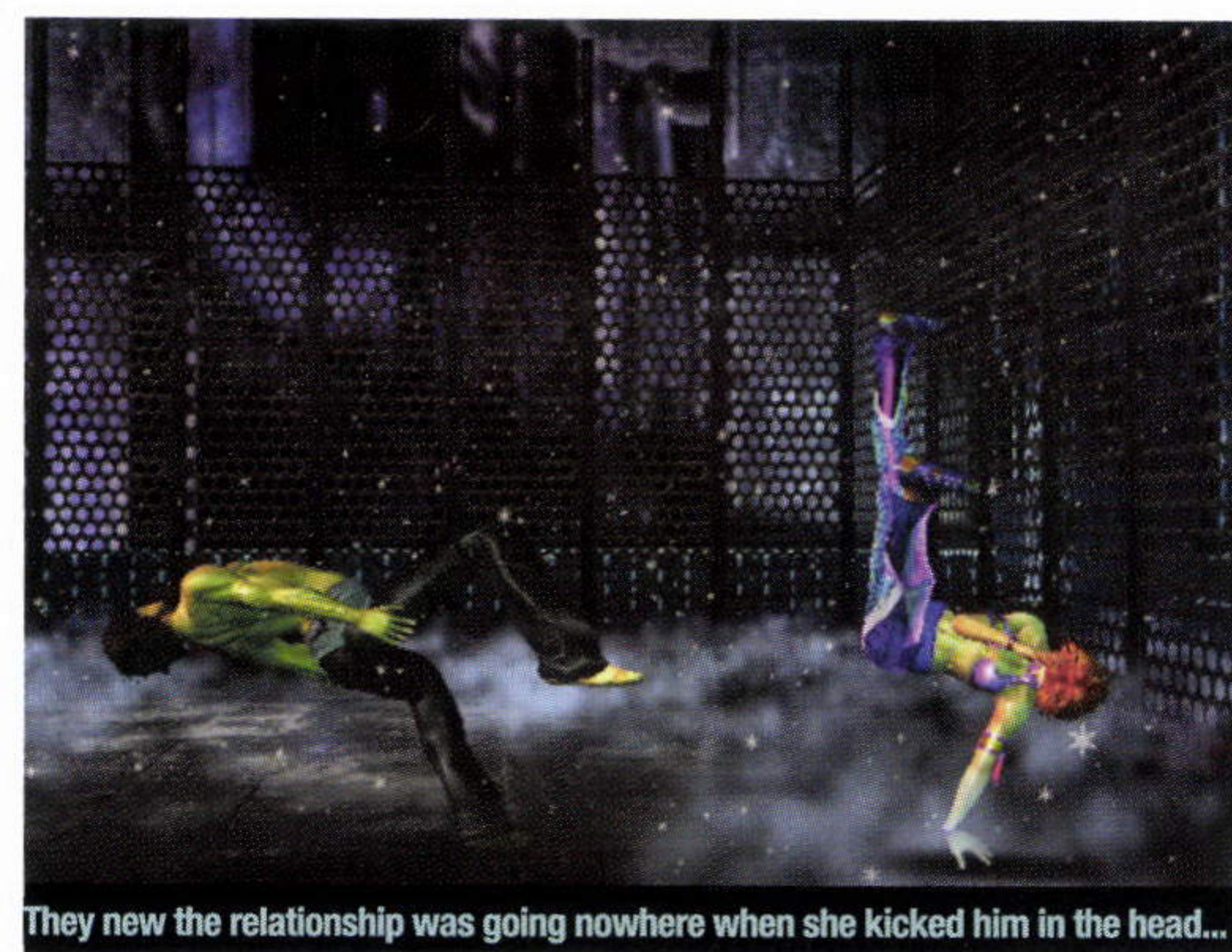
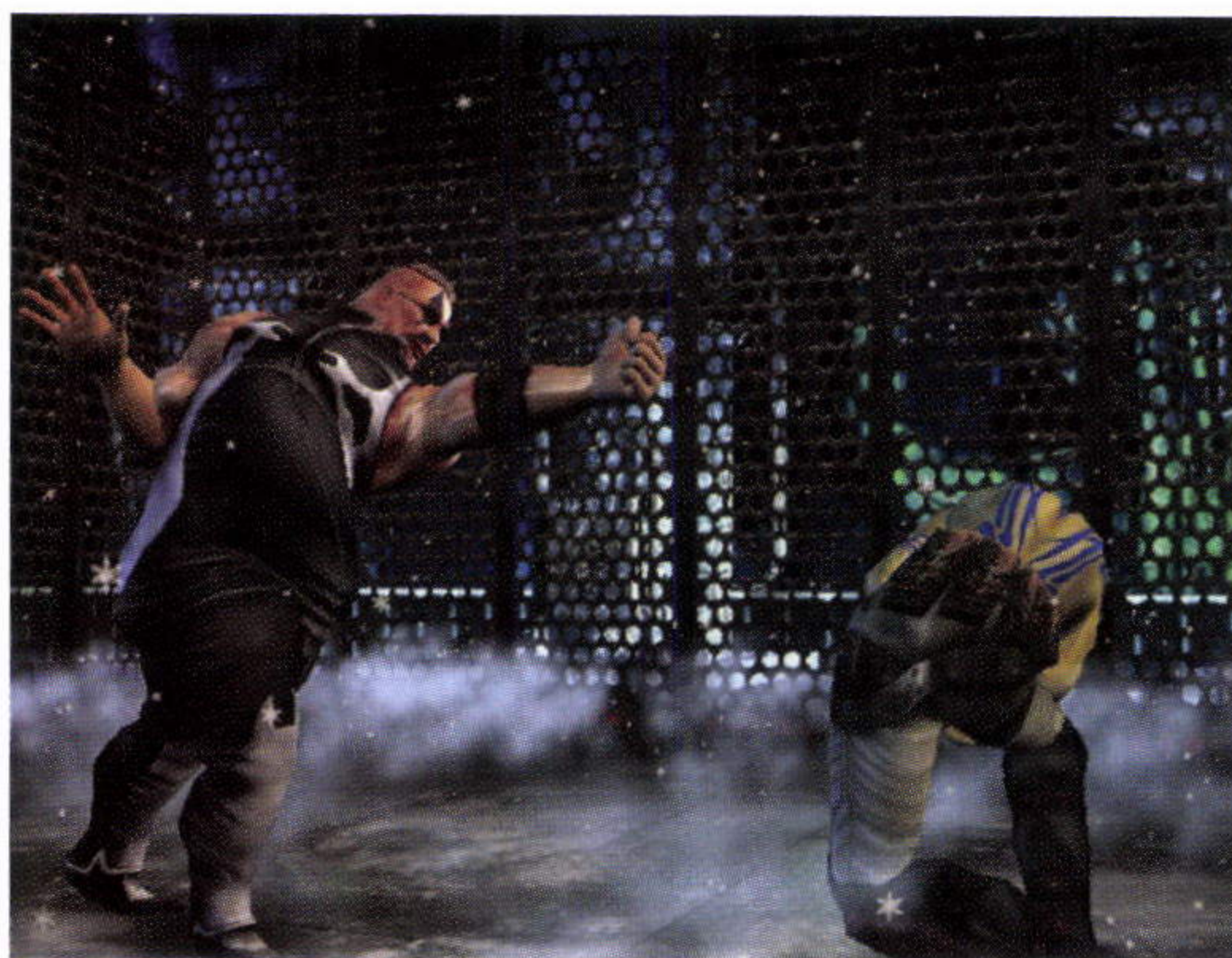
Kakuto Chojin

system: xbox
 developer: dream publishing
 publisher: microsoft
 available: now

I remember not long ago when Capcom and/or SNK purists used to commit major portions of their lives to mastering every pixel of hand-drawn fighters like *Street Fighter 2* and *King of Fighters*. Since that era, the 3D fighter has carried the torch, becoming more of a showpiece; the depth is sometimes there if you really look for it, but for the most part, these games are about cool characters, backgrounds, animation, and moves, lots and lots of bone-crunching moves. Play *Kakuto Chojin* for all of those reasons. It has wicked juggles, mind-numbingly gorgeous characters that do a special dance for you as the credits roll, and a soundtrack worth listening to outside of the game. *Tao Feng* is the evolution of 3D fighting beyond this, but in the meantime, *KC* is a beautifully brutal fighter—a shining example of how incredible modern game models can look, and how powerful the Xbox is. Man it does nice boobs.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●



They new the relationship was going nowhere when she kicked him in the head...



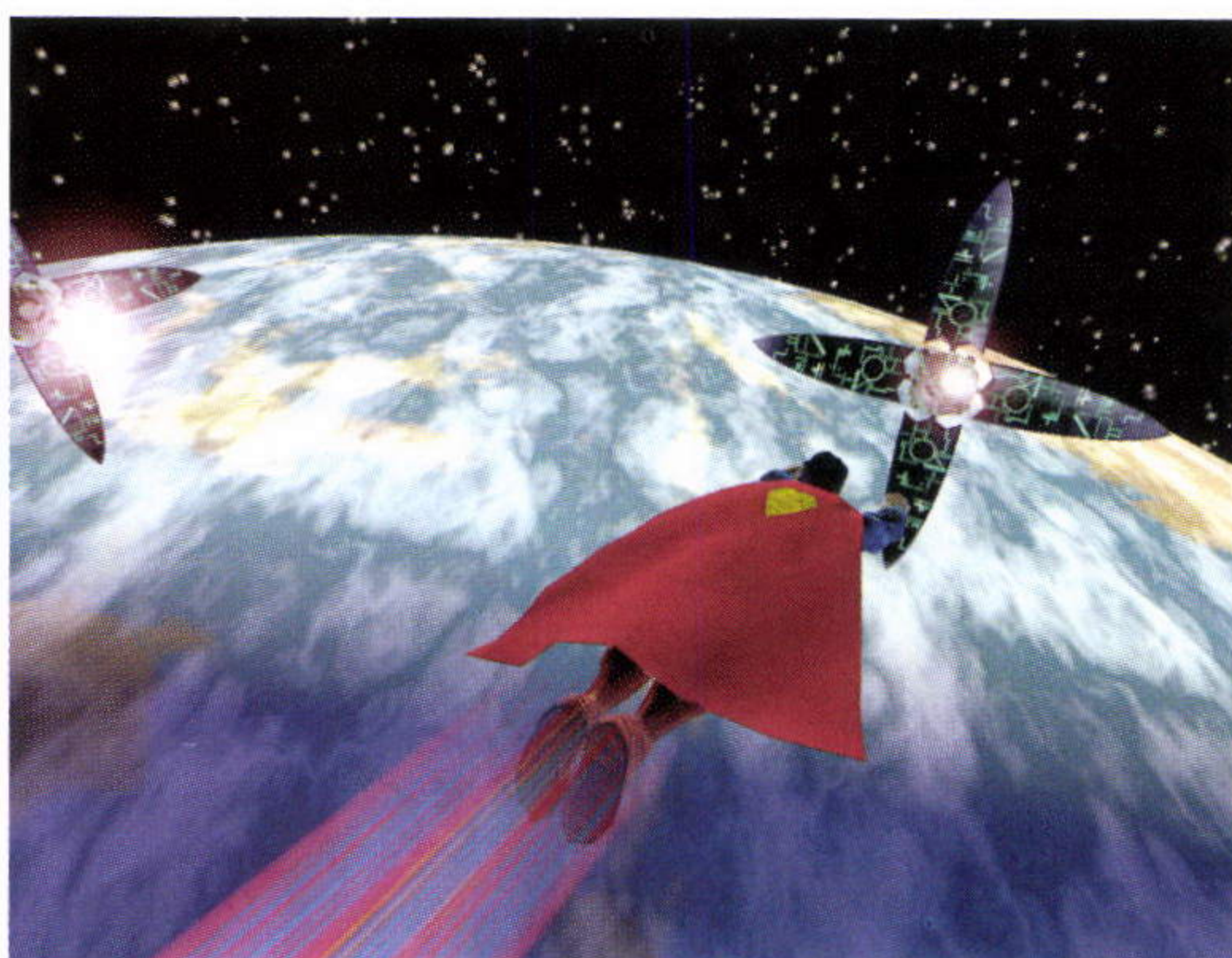
Star Wars Bounty Hunter

system: playstation 2/gamecube
 developer: lucasarts
 publisher: lucasarts
 available: now

A game starring Jango Fett seems a rather inspired idea (even if his name always conjures in my head the fabled guitarist Jango Reinhardt). As the father of fan-favorite Boba Fett, Jango had his coming out party in *Episode 2*, and now he's got his own game. It's a pity then that he isn't more well represented. For starters, he's modeled and colored in such a way as to look like he's wearing blue jeans, and the surrounding game isn't much better, with flat control, annoying fish-eye perspective, and a schizophrenic camera that never settles down. Quite a disappointment. Where's *Factor 5* when you need them?

MIKE HOBBS

play rating ●●●●●



Superman: The Man of Steel

system: xbox
 developer: circus freak
 publisher: infogrames
 available: now

I realize that licensed games like this aren't necessarily meant to be masterpieces, created for a very specific audience who will likely look past the flaws and are looking for a very specific type of experience. But when these flaws are so broad and inexplicably pervasive that the game becomes annoying to even watch, there's no forgiveness. Every task is spelled out. Superman's world is flat and lifeless, and the arthritic man of steel does indeed move as if he were indeed made of the substance. For the dialogue alone, which I guess is supposed to recall the silliness of a high-energy cartoon, there is no enjoying this latest Superman misfire.

play rating ●●●●●



Dragon's Lair 3D

system: gamecube
 developer: dragons lair llc
 publisher: encore
 available: now

Twenty years ago I begged my parents for the two dollars it cost to play *Dragon's Lair*, which set comfortably in the corner recreational area of the Hollidome. Fortunately, in this competent, faithful update to the granddaddy of classics, you don't have to throw in a case of quarters to get past level one. *DL 3D* is similar to the ancient original: move through rooms, avoid traps and hazards, deal with action puzzles of gradually building complexity. The game looks good, paying nice attention to the look and feel of the original, and the new characters designed by Don Bluth (he brought us the lovely *Iron Giant*) are a wonderful addition.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating ●●●●●



Disney Sports Skateboarding

system: gamecube
 developer: disney interactive
 publisher: konami
 available: now

Oh Konami, why doest thou forsake me? Why does the house of Metal Gear, Z.O.E., Contra, Silent Hill, and Castlevania need to bestow upon us such mediocre kiddie fare as this? Granted it's a notable license but the game falls way short of a Konami pedigree with a poor frame rate, slow gameplay, and it's privy to some of lamest narration ever spoken. Do kids even laugh at this stuff? I wonder. The models themselves are impressive and the animation is okay, but you have to ask yourself why anyone over the age of 7 would purchase this game with T. Hawk 4 occupying the same shelf space. Give us a 2D Castlevania for the 'Cube, and stop this madness.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●



Hunter: The Reckoning

system: gamecube
 developer: digital mayhem
 publisher: interplay
 available: now

Vampires and zombies are perfect candidates for mass mutilation, especially when the gang inflicting the punishment pack cool stuff like machine guns, chain saws, flamethrowers and magic spells. Something about chunks of flesh and dismembered limbs that is so inviting; Father Cortez, a prison chaplain, is a good character to lead the raid. Three of your friends can join him in the mayhem, too, which is really the only way the game should be played. The bosses are cool and Hunter has an expectedly grimy, dark edge, but it looked and felt better on Xbox.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating ●●●●●



X-Men Next Dimension

system: gamecube, ps2, xbox
 developer: paradox
 publisher: activision
 available: now

I'll take my mutants hand drawn thank you very much. Besides a real lack of polish on the models and backgrounds in Dimension, it just feels mediocre when stacked against competition like DOA, Kakuto Chojin, and MK Deadly Alliance. The story mode is a good idea, but the CG that binds it together suffers from misshapen rubbery X Men. The longer I played I noticed the game slightly tugging at the fan boy in me and I like the DOA style tiered levels but overall Paradox just don't have the fighting game skills. Unless you're a die hard friend of the Mutant there's not much reason to go here. Oh, and the boobs don't bounce; that's a no-no.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●



Ghost Recon

system: ps2, gamecube, xbox, pc
 developer: red storm
 publisher: ubi soft
 available: now

PC games often make poor console games when viewed through the eyes of someone like myself who hates convoluted menu screens and endless mechanics and authentic attention to the details of the real world. Ghost Recon is another one of those big games loved by the PC world, accomplished and full of meticulous ideas, complicated to play yet rewarding in its impressive execution. Initially Ghost Recon comes off as a miscalculated attempt at deeply interacting military strategy-action, but revealing its finer points immerses you in the heat of increasingly engaging combat. Caution and calculated planning provide the most satisfying rewards, taking the single-player experience into some unexpectedly satisfying territory. Tedium can set in, which is the best time to get into the more functional multiplayer aspects. Choices like strafing that depends on the mobility of an actual human soldier saps the practicality of a fun, faster paced shooter, but the choices the game makes are intentional and not necessarily poor design. Esoteric but still rewarding.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating ●●●●●

@

play online

ONLINE REPORT CARD: PHANTASY STAR ONLINE EPISODE 1 & 2

system: **gamecube** / developer: **sonic team** / publisher: **sega** / available: **now**

play online rating ●●●●●

So just how is it playing *Phantasy Star Online*, well, online? Nothing short of brilliant. If you never played the Dreamcast version online, prepare to experience a level of addictiveness that will leave loved ones cast aside like so much flotsam.

I've logged 70 hours on the game so far, and I'm nowhere near quitting. Sure, I've finished the game many times already, but the game's structure of almost endless goals keeps me coming back for more every single day.

Though I still play the game offline on occasion, usually just for a quick bit of item hunting, it is online that the game comes to life. Like all online experiences, the difference between

playing with real people as opposed to AI routines makes a profound difference in terms of your level of involvement in the game. Especially when playing with friends, there is a sense of adventure and accomplishment which goes beyond offline gaming. And unlike most online affairs, this is predominately a cooperative experience.

No doubt the action is repetitive, but you are always gaining strength and finding new items. Add to that some of the most brilliantly drawn and textured environments ever conceived, (specifically in the GameCube exclusive Episode 2) and you have a recipe for online bliss not to be missed.

MICHAEL HOBBS

"Prepare to experience a level of addictiveness that will leave loved ones cast aside like so much flotsam."

NEW MECHASSAULT CONTENT GOES LIVE

As promised, downloadable updates are on the way!



One of the great promises of Xbox Live has always been downloadable content, and *MechAssault* is set to receive its first batch of new goodies starting in January. First up will be an all new level, Hell's Kitchen, which is pictured above. All five current game modes will be available for play on this new map, including Destruction, Last Man Standing, and Not It. Also coming are new play modes including the much requested Capture the Flag. Rounding out this update are two new mechs, the Raven and Corvus. There will be no additional fees for this updated content.

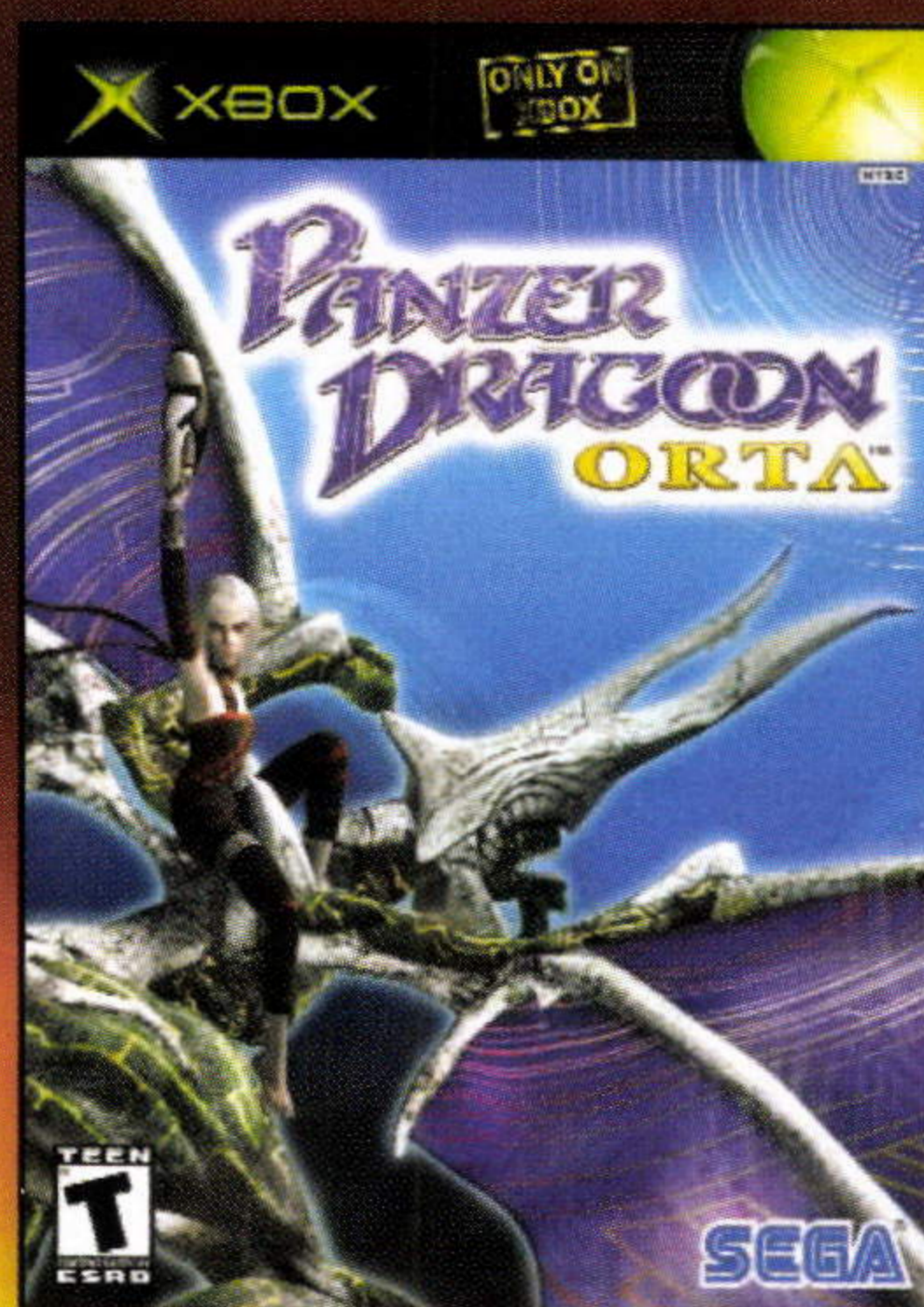
system: **xbox** / developer: **day 1 studios** / publisher: **microsoft** / available: **now**

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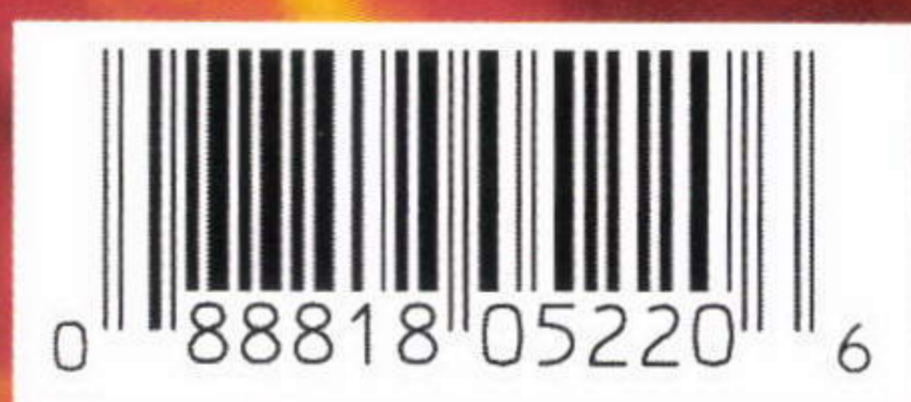


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NHL 2K3

play rating ●●●●●

PS2 XB GC

developer: 989 sports / publisher: sega sports / available: now



Not resting on their laurels, Sega Sports has created the superlative hockey simulation this year with NHL 2K3. New for 2003 is a Franchise mode where armchair managers can adjust rosters, trade players/free agents and recruit rookies. Coupled with incredible stat tracking, this is a welcome addition to video-game hockey. NHL 2K3's biggest accomplishment is without question the AI; it is absolutely brilliant – especially the goalie. The graphics aren't as polished as EA's hockey title, but they get the job done. The ESPN/National Hockey Night signage and logos also add to the overall realism of the game. Sadly there is no online multiplayer on the PS2. If you want to play NHL 2K3 online, Xbox is the way to go.

Tom Ham

NCAA Final Four 2003

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

developer: 989 sports / publisher: scea / available: now



Without question, this has been a rebuilding year for 989 Sports and their latest college hoops games shows definite signs of improvement over last years. Following a cue from their Shootout 2003 title, Final Four has a fairly deep Career mode. Players are able to go from a Graduate Assistant all the way up to Head Coach – definitely a nice twist to the

typical college game. Graphics look better than before, however there's always room for improvement. Animations are lackluster and the new juke and spin moves need a lot of work. The game's most glaring flaw? Idiotic AI. If 989 can get this right, they might be able to play with the big boys next year.

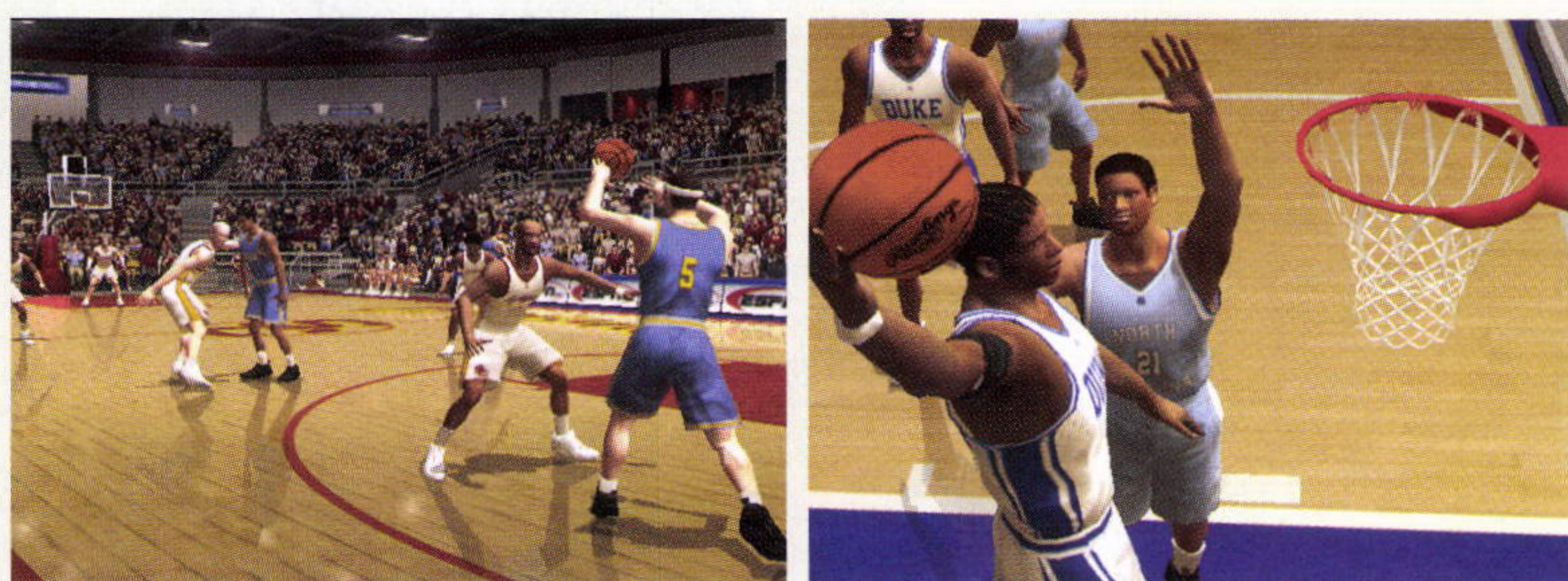
Tom Ham

NCAA College Basketball 2K3

play rating ●●●●●

PS2 XB GC

developer: kush games / publisher: sega sports / available: now



Sega Sports has one upped the competition again, this time with their NCAA College Basketball 2K3. Best feature? Hands down the Legacy Mode. Similar to Franchise mode in their NBA game, Legacy mode allows players to recruit the top players in the country and then create a team in hopes of going to the NCAA Championship. The Legacy mode is incredibly comprehensive and

it's something that'll keep players busy for hours on end. But what makes NCAA College Basketball 2K3 the best is the gameplay. Passing has been improved, AI is incredibly competitive and the online play on the PS2 and Xbox is fantastic. Together with top-notch visuals and great sound, NCAA College Basketball 2K3 is the ultimate in college hoops.

Tom Ham

NCAA March Madness 2003

play rating ●●●●●

PS2

developer: ea sports / publisher: ea sports / available: now



This year EA Sports showed they still had what it takes with their awesome NBA Live 2003 and their latest, NCAA March Madness 2003, shows they still have the skills to put out a great college basketball game too. This year's game sports a new Dynasty mode. Although not as inclusive as Sega's game, it's a great effort. Players not only can recruit top high school players in hopes of reaching the Final Four, but they can also play in the EA Sports Roundball Classic high school All-American game. Gameplay is exactly like Live (with EA's exclusive Freestyle Control), so players can expect fast, adrenaline-pumping gameplay.

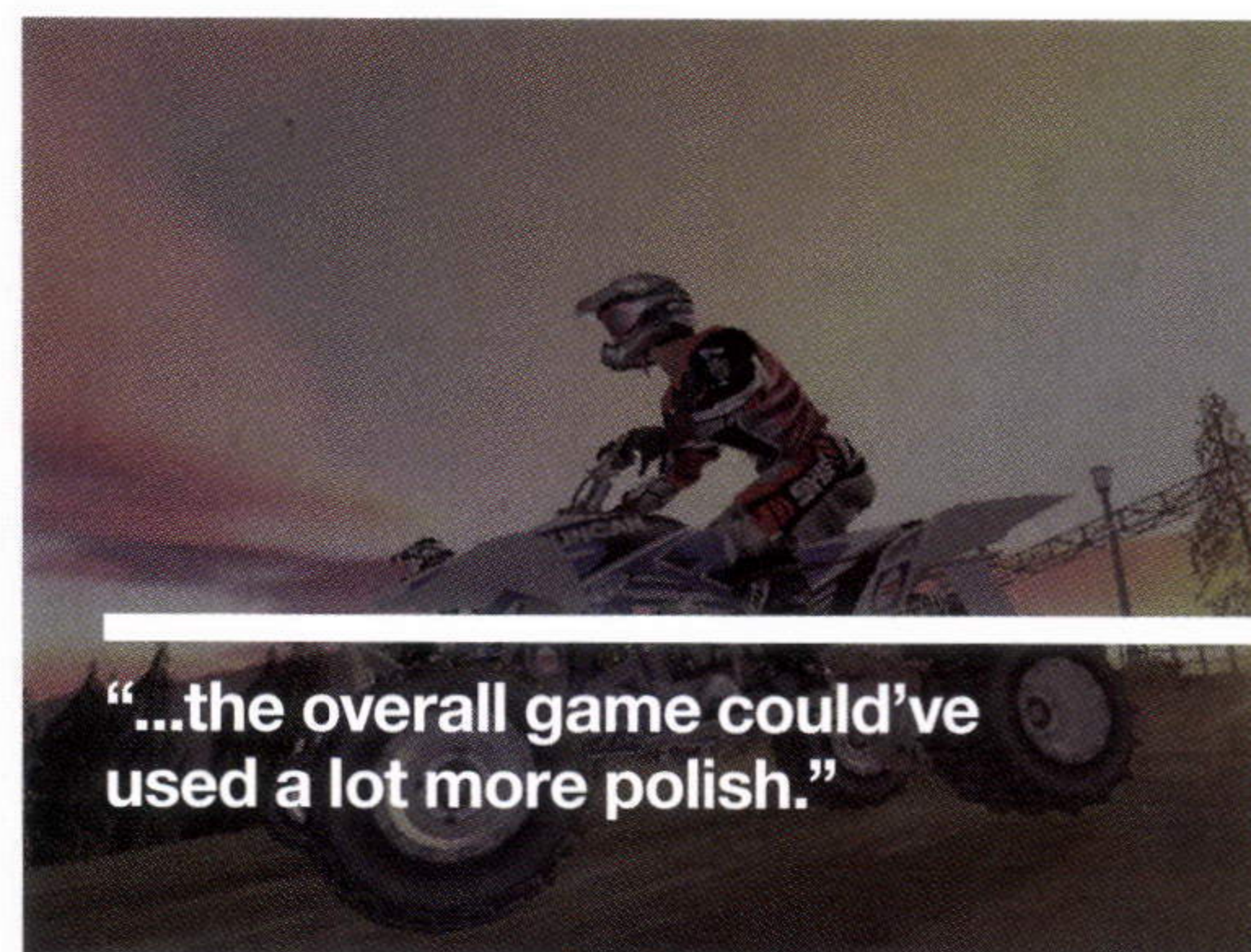
Tom Ham

ATV OFFROAD FURY 2

words tom ham

Even though ATV Offroad Fury 2 offers some new trappings and an all-new online mode, sadly for fans (and myself), it's pretty much the same game that was released last year. Just as before, the heart and soul of Fury 2 is the races. You'll spend most of your time placing in various races to unlock ATVs, riders and gear. Players can either have a one-off race or compete in a championship series. There is also a freestyle mode where you can perform aerial stunts, but with only 24 tricks, this gets old real fast. The multiplayer modes, however, are where Fury 2

partially redeems itself. Games like Tag, Treasure Hunt and King of the Hills are highly addictive and extremely fun. Surprisingly, Fury 2's online gameplay is severely lacking. There are only two modes available, race and freestyle and get this; you can race with only four people. Some of these tracks are absolutely massive. Having additional players would've improved the game greatly. From a graphical standpoint, there is really nothing awe-inspiring about it. Although the riders and ATVs look a little more detailed, the overall game could've used a lot more polish.



"...the overall game could've used a lot more polish."



atv offroad fury 2

PS2

developer: rainbow studios
publisher: scea
available: now

Still a fun game that has practically no competition, but too much like the first.

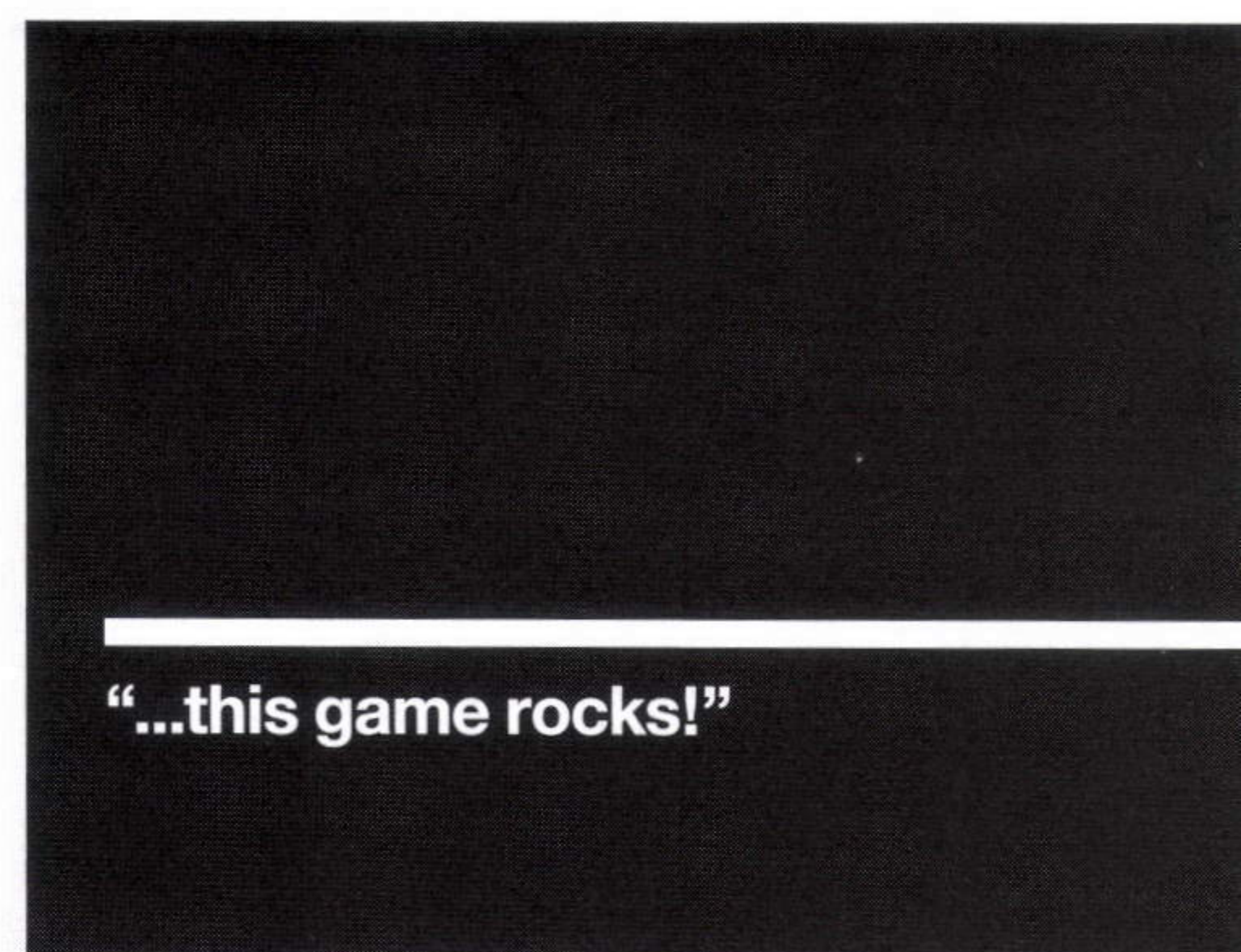
play rating ●●●●●

ROCKY

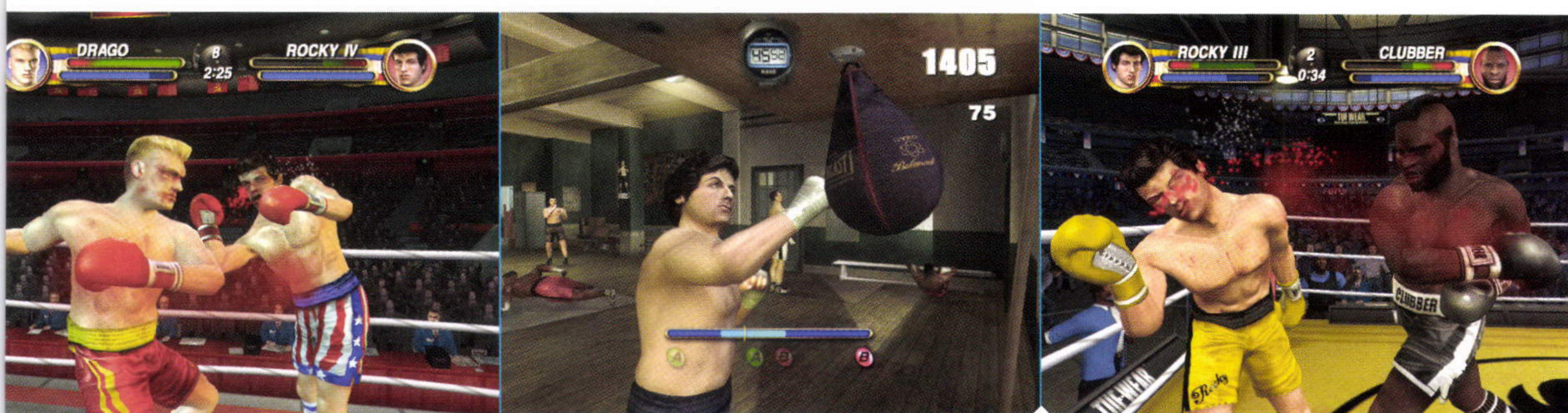
words tom ham

Now before you start rolling your eyes at the thought of another video game based on a movie, listen up. Rocky is not only a great tribute to the Italian Stallion himself, but it's an excellent boxing game in its own right. Most of your time will be spent in Movie Mode (go figure). Broken down into five parts (each based on a particular Rocky movie), players will face 20 fighters in all including Apollo Creed, Clubber Lang, Ivan Drago and Tommy Gunn. Leading up to each Boss fight are three preliminary matches. What's interesting here is that every fighter in the game was in a Rocky movie. Whether they were mentioned in passing or had cameos, the developers have done their homework and

they're all here. Boxing purists who were let down by Knockout Kings button-mashing style will definitely appreciate how much more skill and finesse is required in Rocky. Never before has timing of your punches been so critical. Once you get the fighting mechanics down, you won't go back to any other boxing game. Visually, Rocky is a mixed bag. The player models, though nicely detailed, look too cartoonish and big-headed. On the flip side, however, the facial damage system is spectacular. You can actually see the damage you're inflicting on your opponent. Yo Adrianne! This game rocks!



"...this game rocks!"



rocky

PS2 GC

developer: rage studios
publisher: ubi soft
available: now

A surprisingly good boxing title.

play rating ●●●●●

CONTRA

words brady fiechter

“...the nostalgia factor quickly drains away.”

The idea of Contra: Advance is initially undeniably appealing: Contra from the Snes glory days—my personal favorite version—gets squeezed onto the capable GBA, for a somewhat new Contra. The execution isn't so appealing; the key word is “squeezed.”

Taking me back to what was once my favorite action series on 16-bit, the game has its moments, but I couldn't help but wonder if the old Contra looked this muted and flat, and the nostalgia factor quickly drains away. A few levels more and the realization

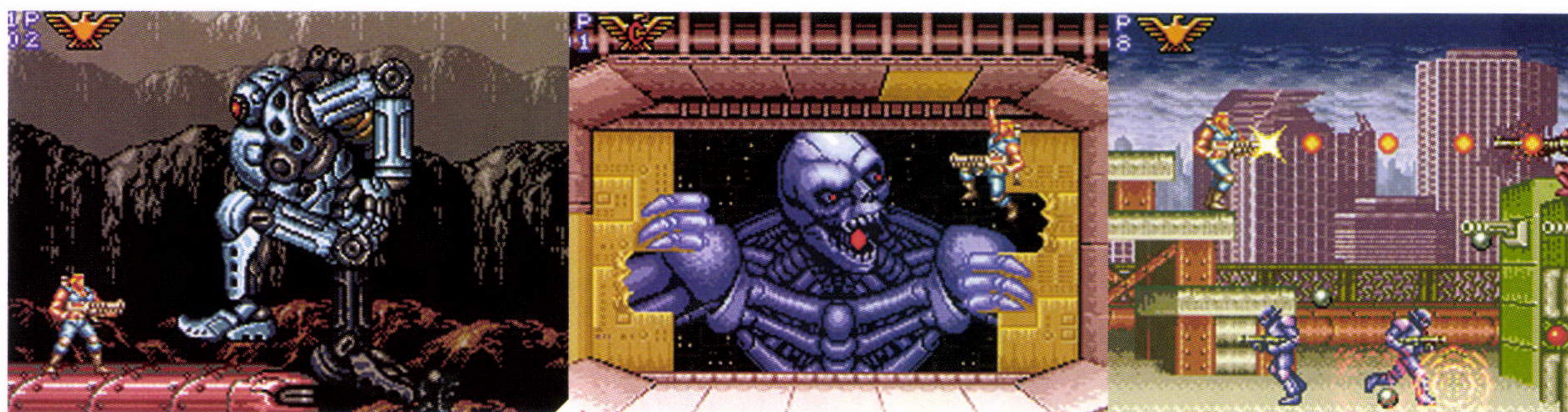
that this isn't the Contra I so enthusiastically remembered sets in, and the game starts to stall. Part of the problem is the high difficulty, made worse because of the small screen and Konami's unwise decision to mess around with the balance and weapons system. The game is not without value and provides an adequate diversion for the fans like myself who enjoy revisiting the past, but it's time to move on and play Contra: Shattered Soldier on PlayStation 2.

contra: advance

developer: konami
publisher: konami
available: now

Only gamers with a Contra upbringing will be satisfied with this shaky mini-version.

play rating ●●●●●



Come any closer and I will break out the vice grips!

JAZZ JACKRABBIT

words dave halverson

“...the gameplay is as straightforward as it gets.”

Anyone looking to go old-school, I mean like really old-school (like Amiga old-school), should put down the bong and break out a little Jazz Jackrabbit. The premier PC platformer starring a bionic bunny with a big gun (actually many big guns) has finally hopped on to a handheld. The gameplay is as straightforward as it gets: sprawling vertical and horizontal themed 2D levels populated with baddies and power-ups, culminating in big bad boss encounters,

at times towering two screens high. I just described half of the 16-bit era, God bless it. Run-gun-duck-jump and blast your brains out. The animation is fluid, the art's right outta toon town, and the music's meatier than rabbit stew. Hey, it's simple but it still works. Jazz also supports four-player link up with one or more carts, so you can make rabbit's feet out of your friends.

jazz jackrabbit

developer: jaleco
publisher:
available: q1 2003

It's old school, really old skill, with a hint of GBA sheen.

play rating ●●●●●



I used to have a rabbit as a pet, but it died.

HE-MAN: POWER OF GRAYSKULL

words dave halverson

Let's face it, most of today's isometric action games are little more than exercises in futility, running around following a trail of loot, whacking the odd sprite in your way until your thumb bleeds; the great iso-games of yesteryear like Steamgear Mash and Skeleton Krew are now distant memories. Could He-Man actually have the power to rekindle my love for finger indentations? He says he has it, and to my surprise, he actually does, adding yet another quality isometric actioner to the stack, making it two. In Masters, Taniko does three things right: give the enemies some actual intelligence,

paint a really pretty picture, and shellac it with robust music. There's some definite meat on these bones, with old-school eye candy and the music and gameplay to back it up. The brunt of the game is spent pummeling Skeletor's minions as you make your way from Castle Grayskull to Snake Mountain, sectioned off by riding the Battle Cat or Battle Hawk.

"...there's some definite meat on these bones."



I hear he has the power...

he-man: power of grayskull

developer: tdk
publisher: taniko
available: now

A surprisingly good isometric actioner for the Advance.

play rating ●●●●●

CRASH BANDICOOT: N TRANCED

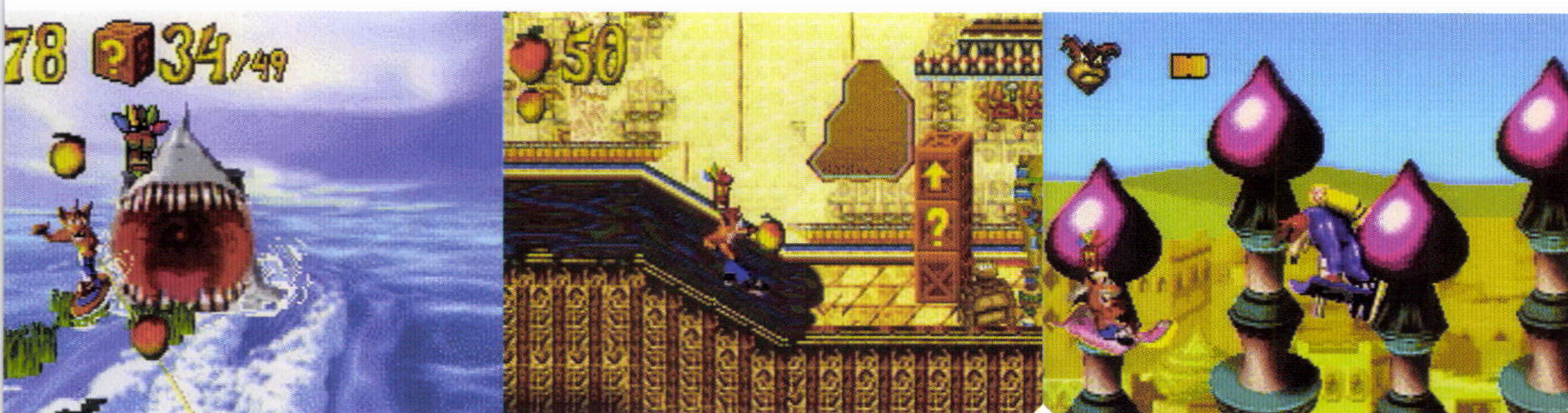
words dave halverson

As if they're trying to tell us something, Universal's follow-up to Crash's Big Adventure, N Tranced, came swiftly, and pretty much does everything better than its predecessor, beginning with Uka Uka enlisting the more menacing N. Tropy to rid the universe of one Crash Bandicoot. It's good to see the franchise finally move beyond the massive melon of Neo Cortex, who was ripe for retirement.

The side scrolling is more thought out (more Crash—far less generic), but most notably the game has been blessed with some

fantastic marble madness-type levels fresh from The Wrath of Cortex, along with some nifty 3D. In fact, I'd venture to say that the chase levels in N Tranced exhibit some of the best the pint-sized 3D on record, especially in Lagoony Tunes where the water is what handheld dreams are made of. Spread across the game, riding on a much-improved Warp Zone, N Tranced has steeper difficulty level, more of the pattern-based madness we fell in love with in the first place and for you cable junkies out there, two link modes, AtlaspHERE and Racing.

"...more of the pattern-based madness we fell in love with."



Crash trades in his jeep for a magic carpet (better mileage).

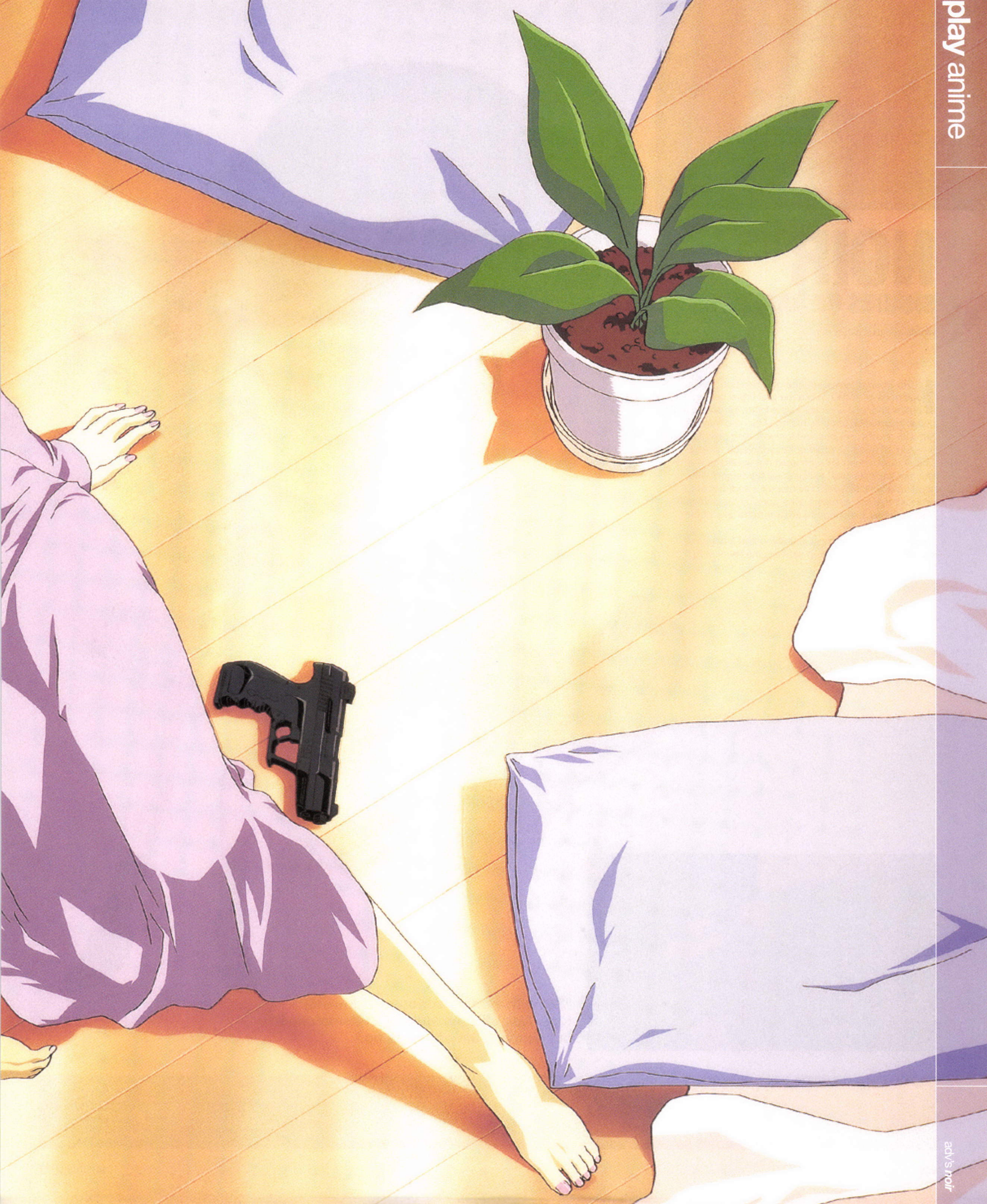
crash bandicoot: n tranced

developer: vicarious visions
publisher: universal interactive
available: now

This Bandicoot's got plenty of gas left in his belly. Sometimes it smells, other times, it's fresh as a daisy.

play rating ●●●●●





Cloak and dagger anime-style!

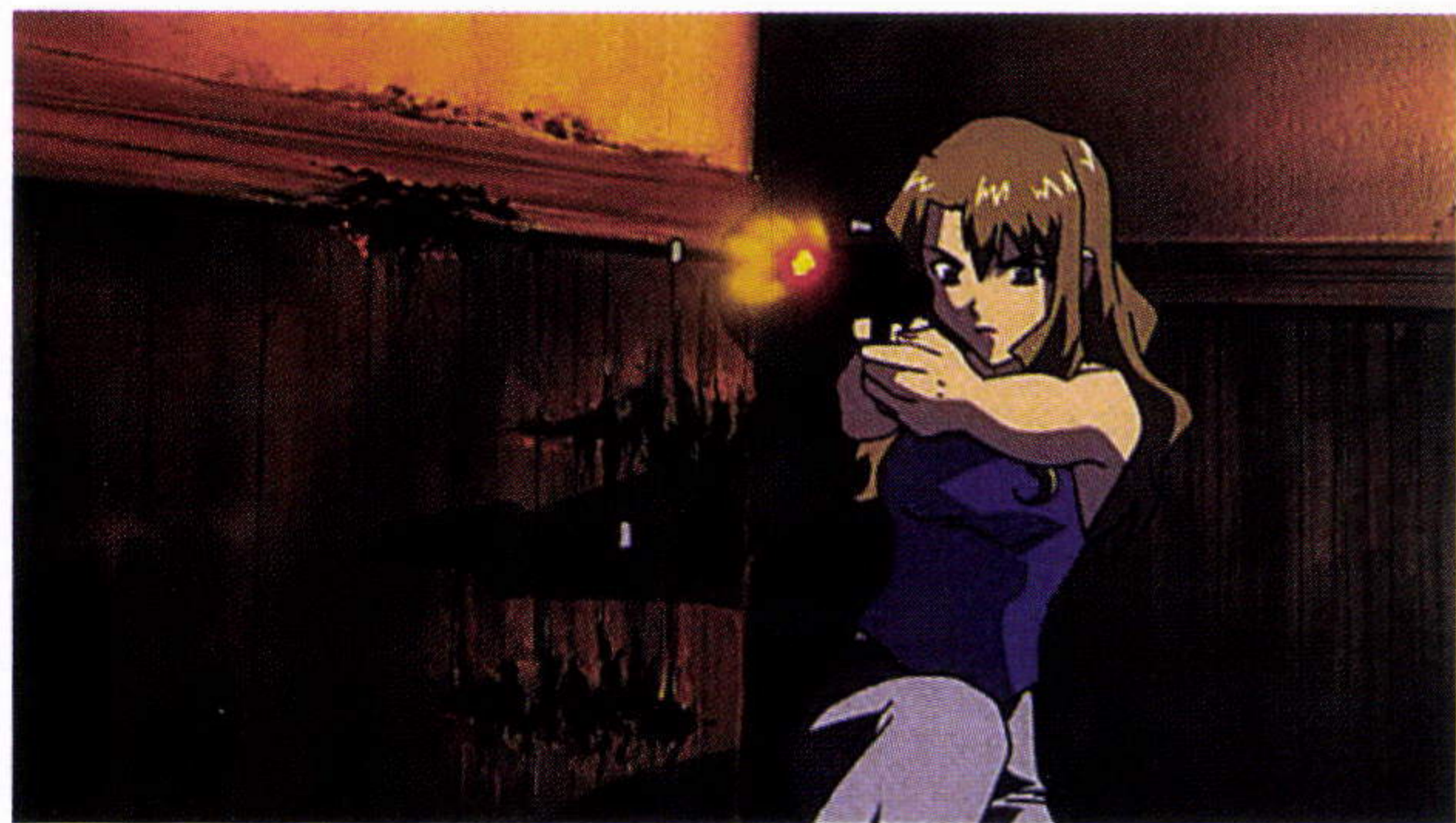
NOIR

SHADES OF DARKNESS

words christina alexander

In the world of anime, dangerous girls and dangerous guns go together like the proverbial peanut butter and jelly, and *Noir* is looking to be one of the better incarnations of this infamous blend of flavors. Set with a rather serious and low-key tone, *Noir* tells the story of a mismatched but deadly team of assassins. A quiet young girl who does not understand why she has the instinctual ability to kill her targets with startling efficiency seeks the help of a sophisticated professional lady assassin, who goes by the name of Noir. Together they hope to answer questions about both of their pasts.

With beautiful, seamless animation and a haunting soundtrack, this promising series is the jewel of ADV's 2003 lineup. **play**



"Set with a rather serious and low-key tone, *Noir* tells the story of a mismatched but deadly team of assassins."

noir vol.1: shades of darkness

preview

studio: adv films / rating: 15 & up / running time: 125 minutes

Great music. Intriguing story. This unique upcoming release from ADV just might have it all.

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It's Christmas at Hinata Inn, which means gifts, parties, and utter chaos! While sneaking around for gifts, Su and Sara discover a letter in Naru's room, "I Always Loved...", What does this mean? Who does Naru love?! The plot thickens as Keitaro is spotted going out with Mutsumi! A day of celebration! A night of miracles! The holiday spirit is in the air and there's gonna be a whole lotta lovin' goin' on!

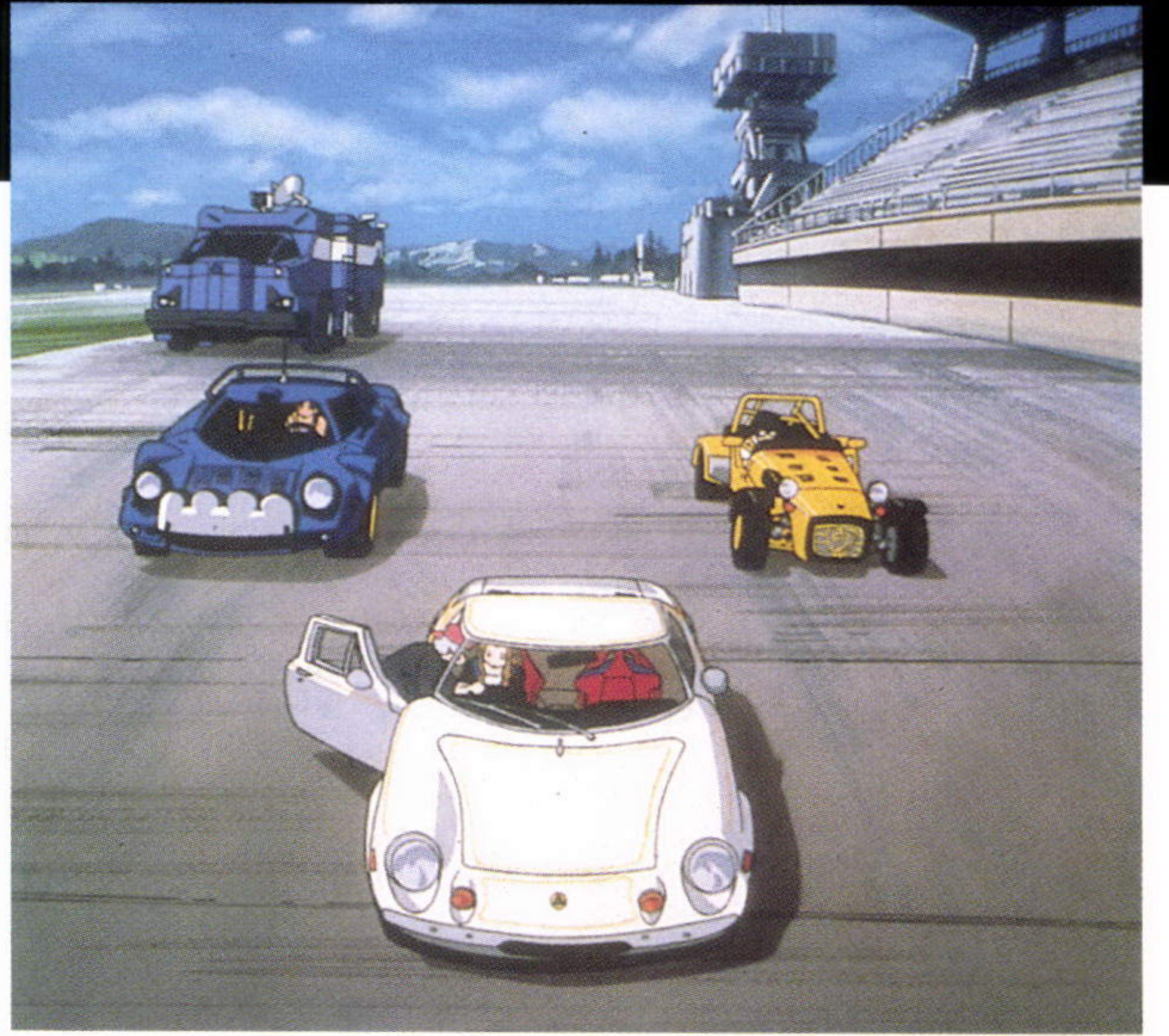


They'll drive you wild!

eX-DRIVER

CROSSROADS

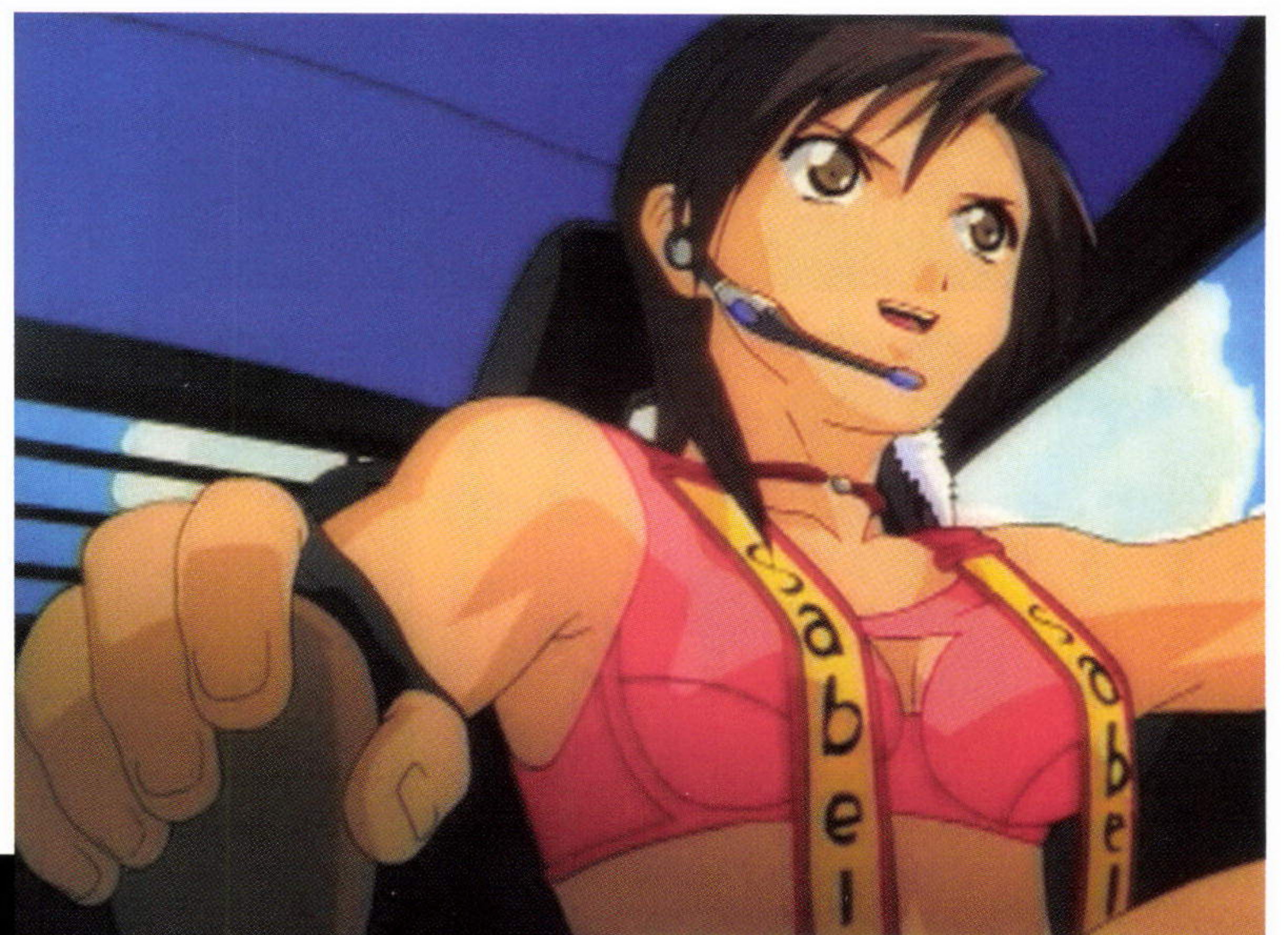
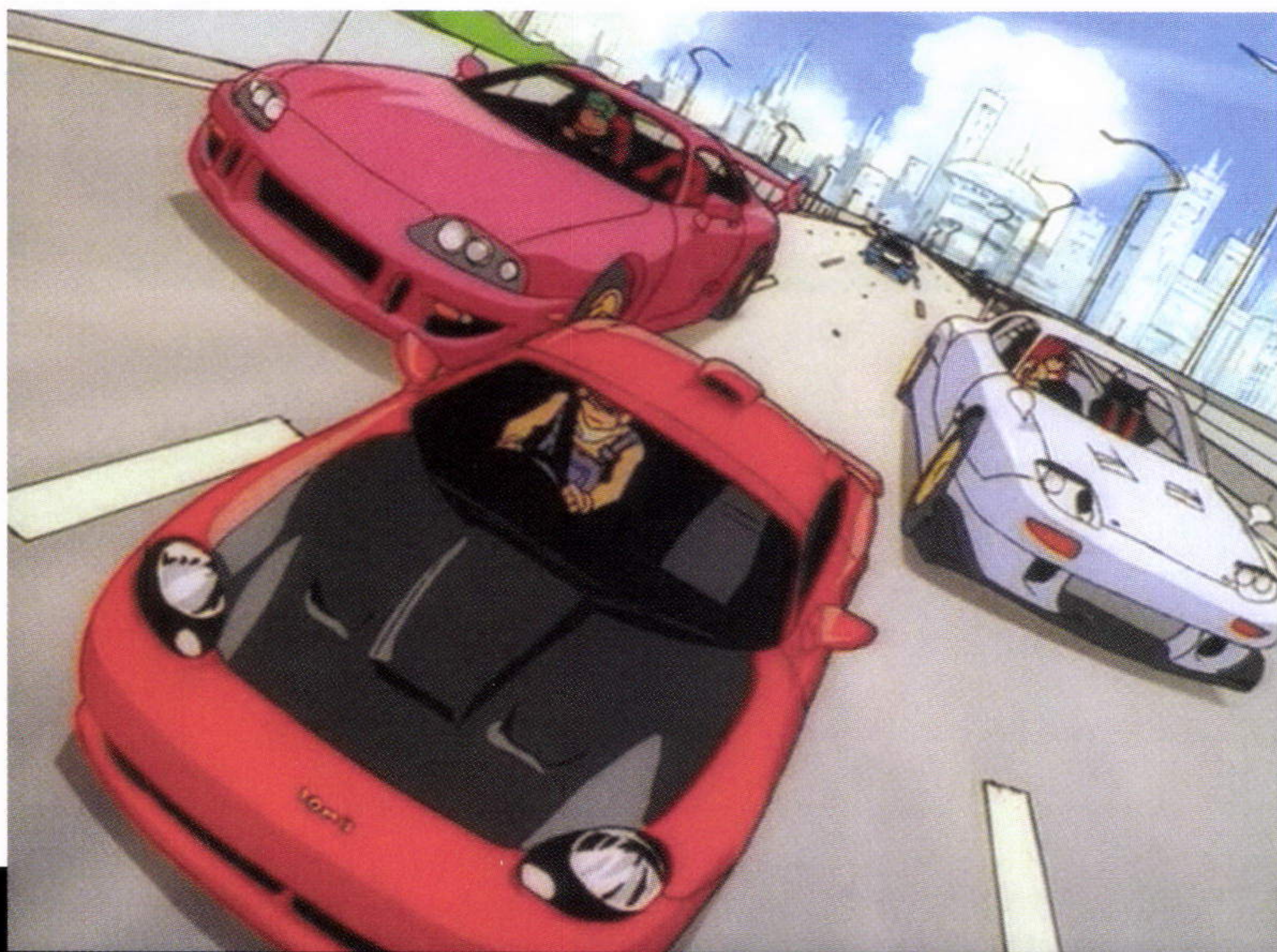
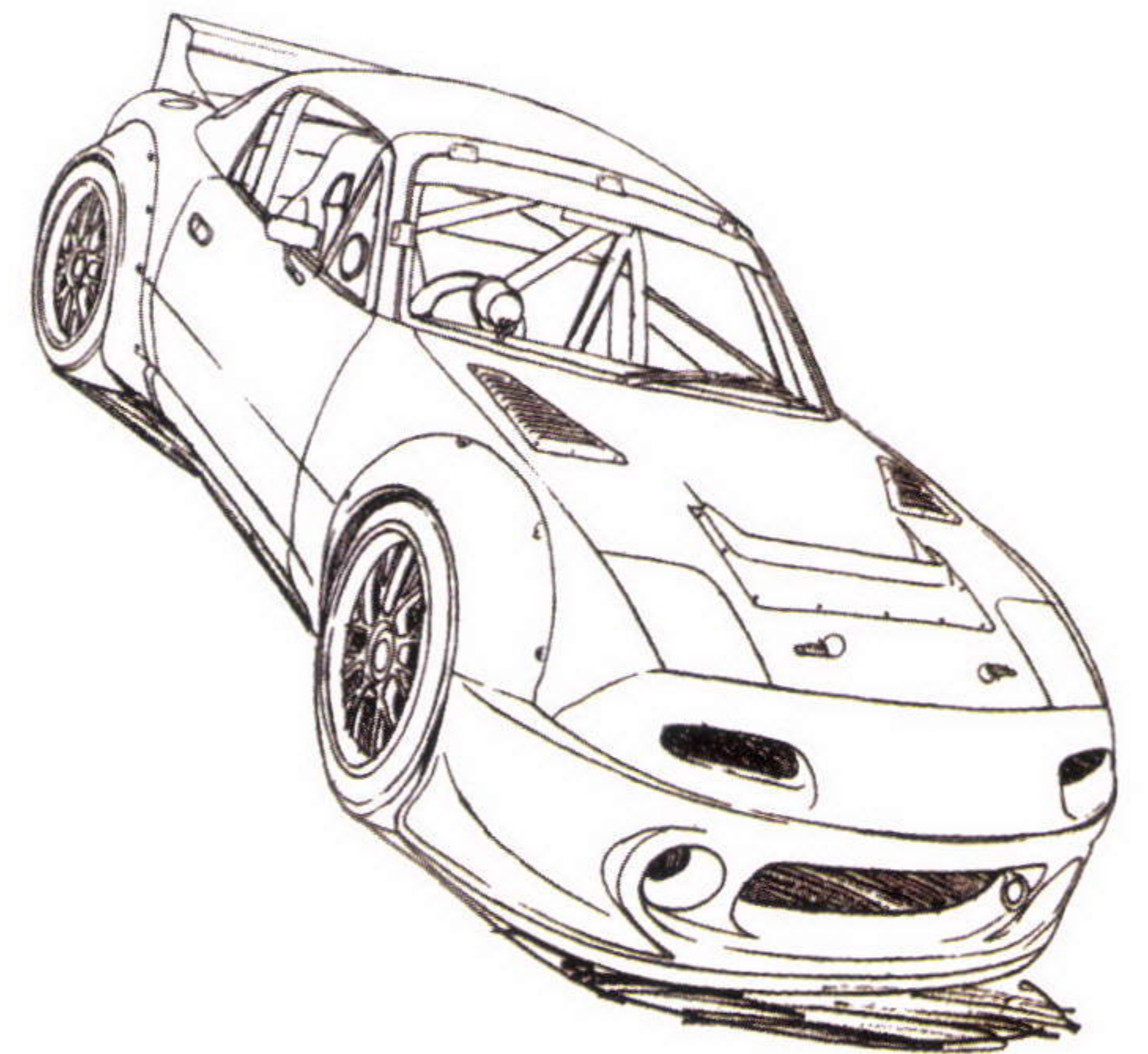
words dave halverson



“The level of detail is simply remarkable, down to the Ducati’s on/off switch.”

eX-*Driver* is the very definition of short but sweet. From beginning to end it’s the most solid popcorn OVA you could possibly hope for. No deep storylines, not much drama or intrigue, just hot cars, bikes, chicas, and dudes, all vying for supremacy in an age where enthusiast driving is all but wiped out. Lisa, Lorna, and Soichi are the eX Drivers—the last three people in modern society to drive “gasoline cars,” needed when AI cars go berserk, which luckily for them, they often do. Racing to the rescue, the eX-Drivers shoot goop over the Johnny Cab-like cars AI sensors, sending them to a screeching halt, but this time out the usual rules don’t apply. When two smart cars go haywire at the same time the city’s traffic program is brought to its knees, rendering even the eX-Drivers helpless. This is when we meet the ultimate woman—Rei Cosuma,

a Ducati riding free-agent Ex Rider with a killer bod, mad racing skills, and zero inhibition (I said the perfect woman). Later, as the show comes to a close, we meet even more new and interesting characters and, for the first time, experience some mild peril to go along with the usual hijinx. When all is said and done, however, even the worst threat the eX-Drivers face is averted without tragedy, and things turn out all right, as the sun sets on one amazing six-episode series, with free-wheeling go-karts buzzing in the breeze. The level of detail in this volume is simply remarkable, down to the Ducati’s on/off switch and mono-shock suspension. And the character design—it just doesn’t get much better. *eX-Driver* is anime for everyone, and the movie is still waiting in the wings. If ever a series was ripe for merchandising, this is it. We’re waiting... **play**



ex-driver vol.2: crossroads

play rating ●●●●●

studio: anime works / rating: 13 & up / running time: 90 minutes

eX-Driver’s a candidate for OVA of the year. Everything about this 6-episode showstopper is sheer perfection.

Not play acting

SAKURA WARS

RETURN OF THE SPIRIT WARRIORS

words christina alexander

From the second the dynamically animated opening brightens the screen until the final scene fades to black, *Sakura Wars* presents itself with a beauty and style that I wish all anime could reproduce. As the sequel to the first *Sakura Wars* OVA released by ADV, this new installment is every bit as appealing.

It's been an exciting and dangerous time with Japan's Flower Division, but now Captain Ohgami has decided that the moment has come for him to leave. While packing his belongings, he fondly remembers the times he has had with the team-members that he now considers his closest friends. Return of the Spirit Warriors focuses less on an overall plot where a nameless evil entity must be dispatched, and more on the personal lives of each member of the team. You'd think that this would mean that the excitement level is somewhere on the level of watching grass grow, but fear not, the action starts right after your index finger hits the play button. Luckily for us, the members of the Spirit Warriors did not lead boring lives.

Complimenting the top-tier storytelling, the art and animation are nothing short of eye-popping. *Sakura Wars* really shines in the animation department, and being able to see every single swipe of Sakura's sword as she deflects enemy bullets brings tears to your eyes. No cheating or shortcuts here! The ultra-vibrant colors and expert digital effects with stories that are at once both engaging and fun make for an anime that easily rises above the rest of the mediocre masses. **play**

"Complimenting the top-tier storytelling, the art and animation are nothing short of eye-popping."



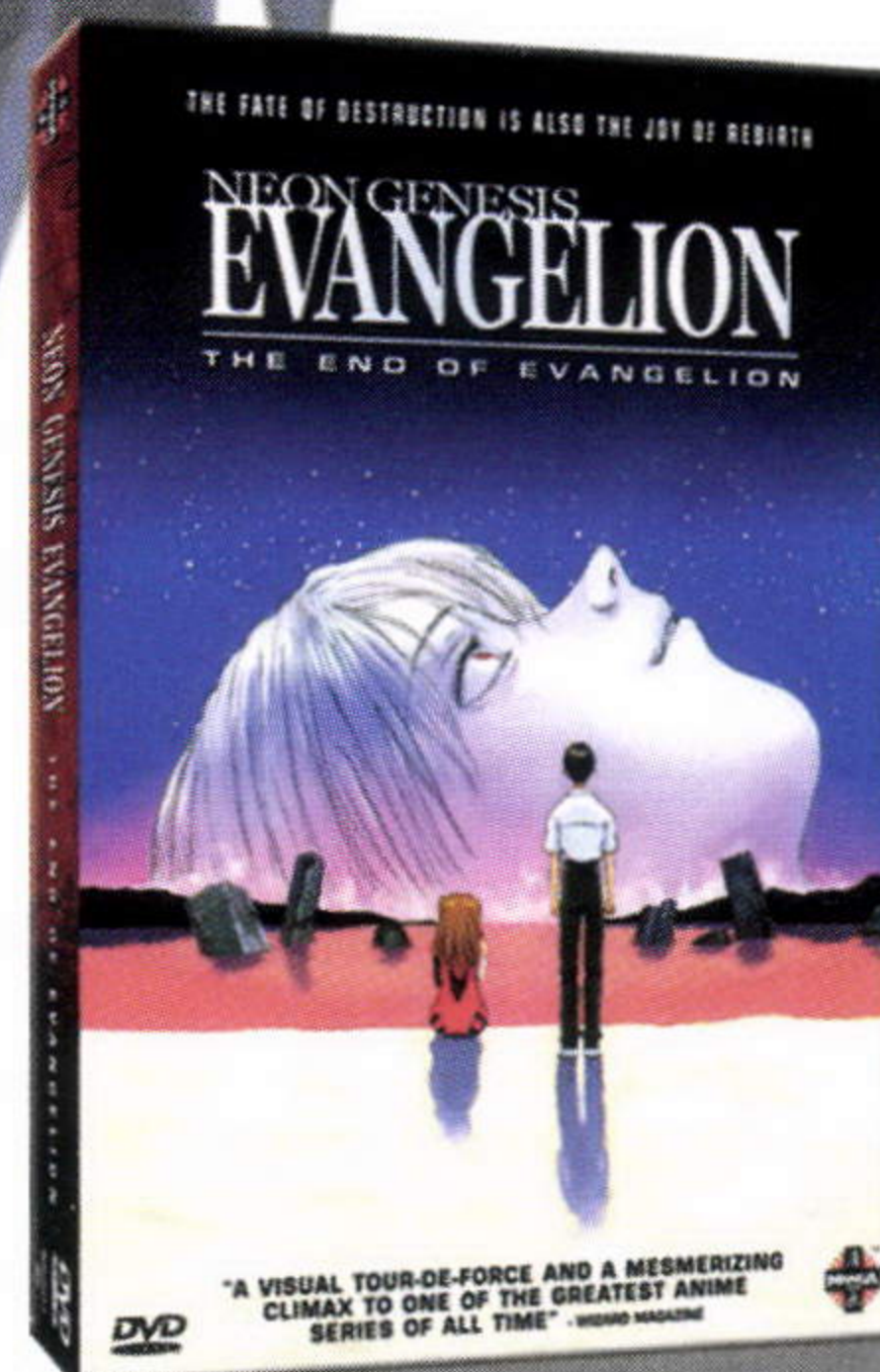
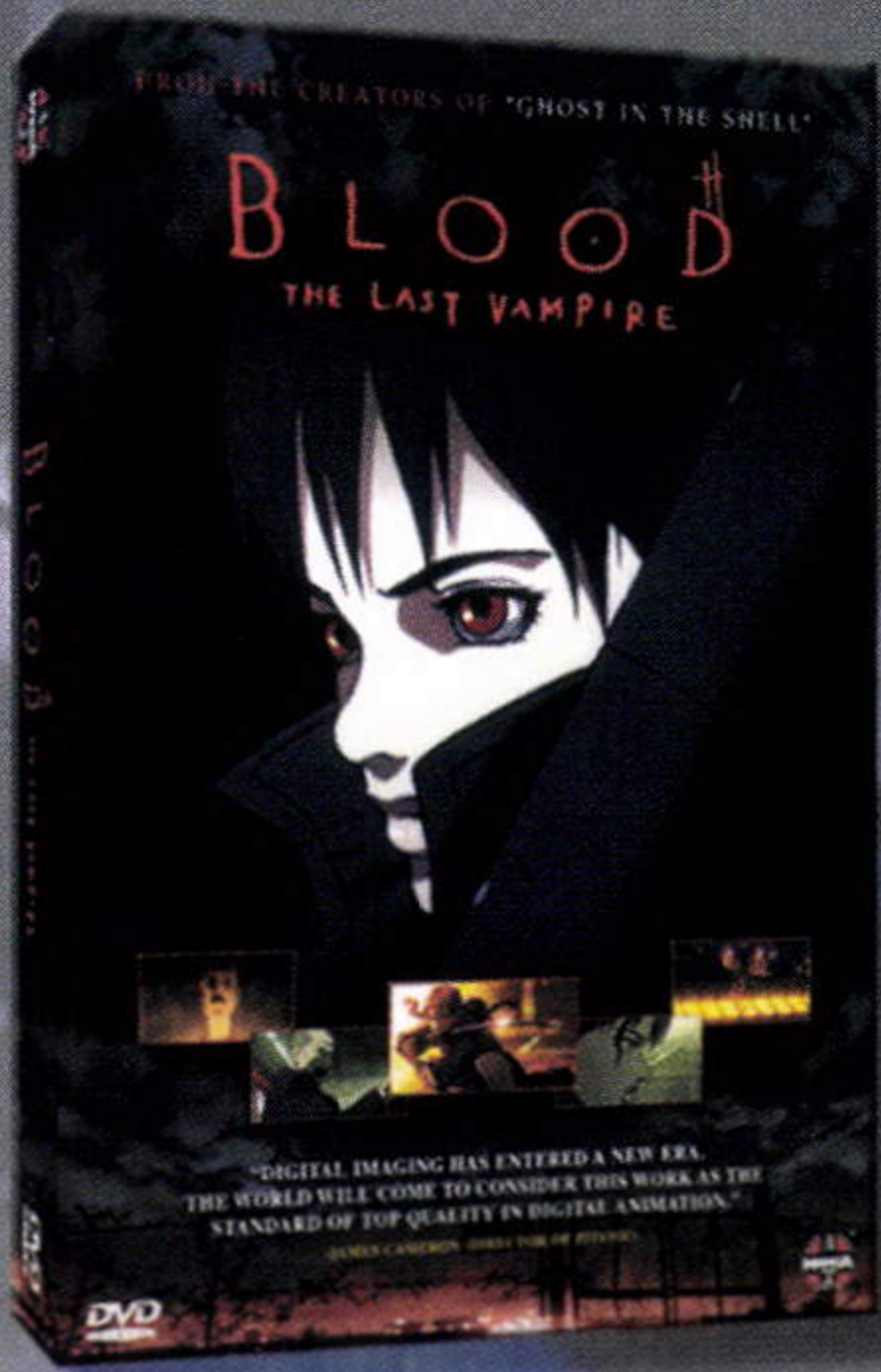
sakura wars ova 2 vol.1: return of the spirit warriors

play rating ●●●●●

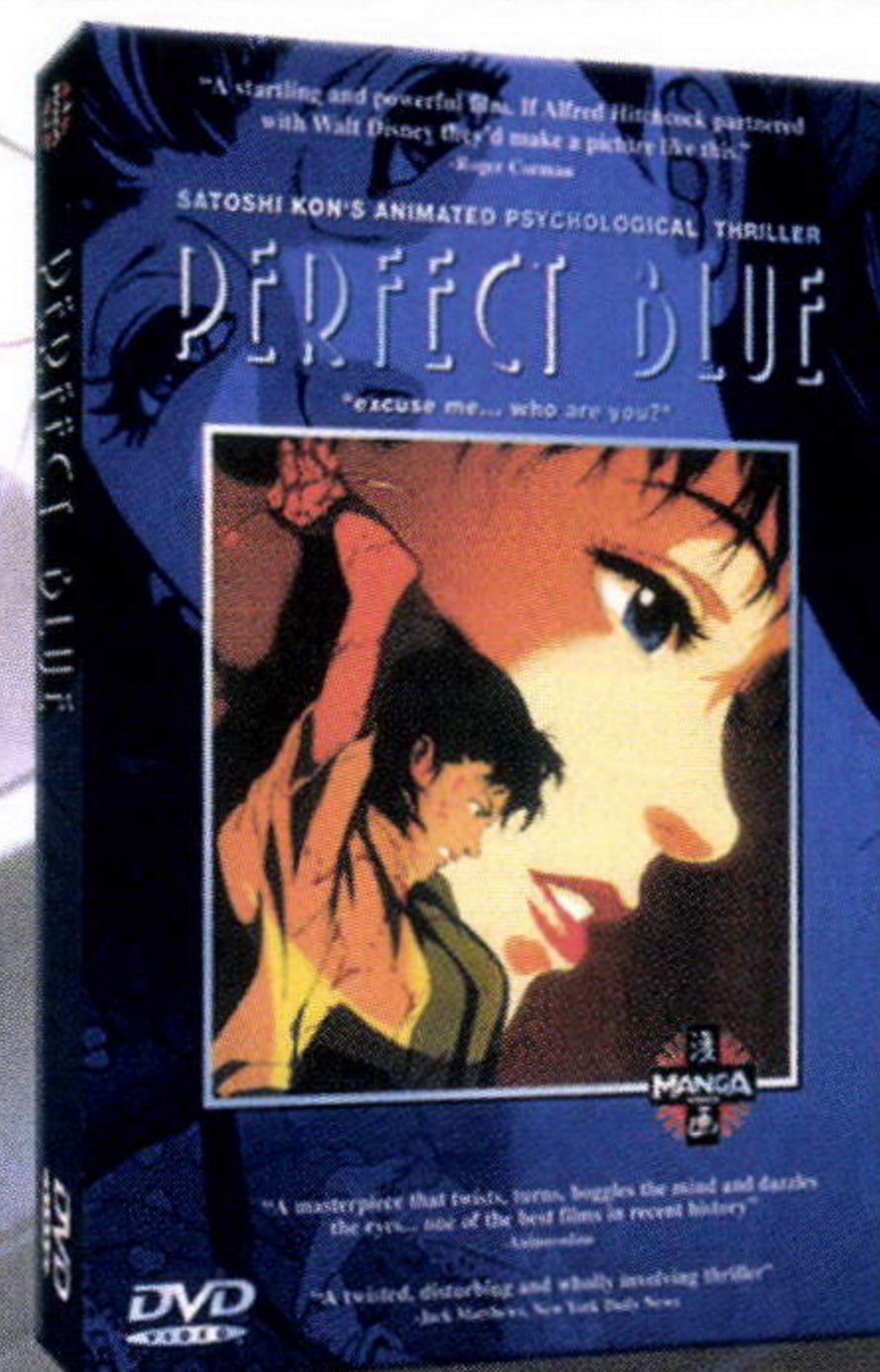
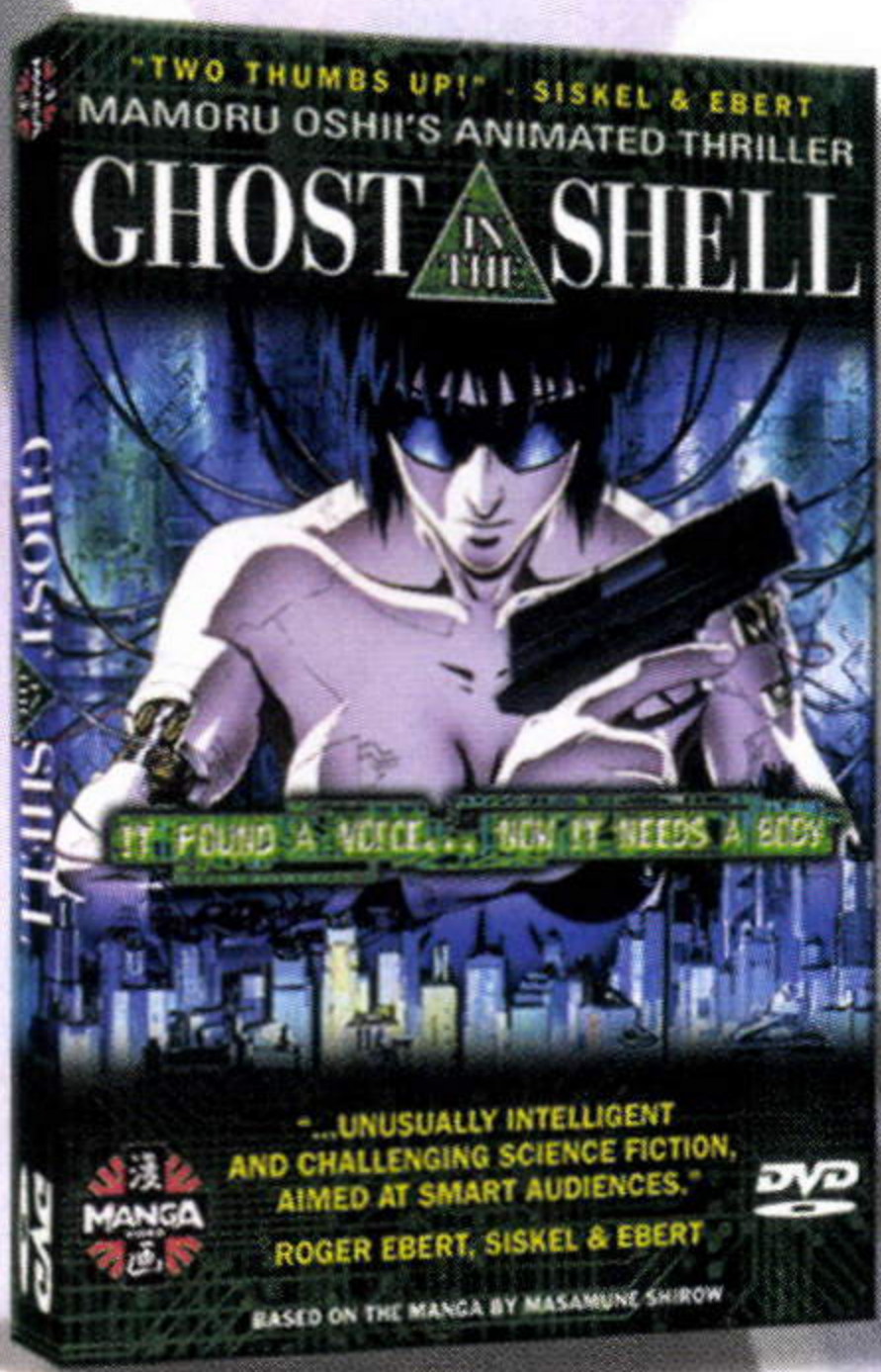
studio: adv films / rating: 3 & up / running time: 90 minutes

Lightning strikes twice as the next installment of one of the most popular game-to-anime translations delivers in a big way.

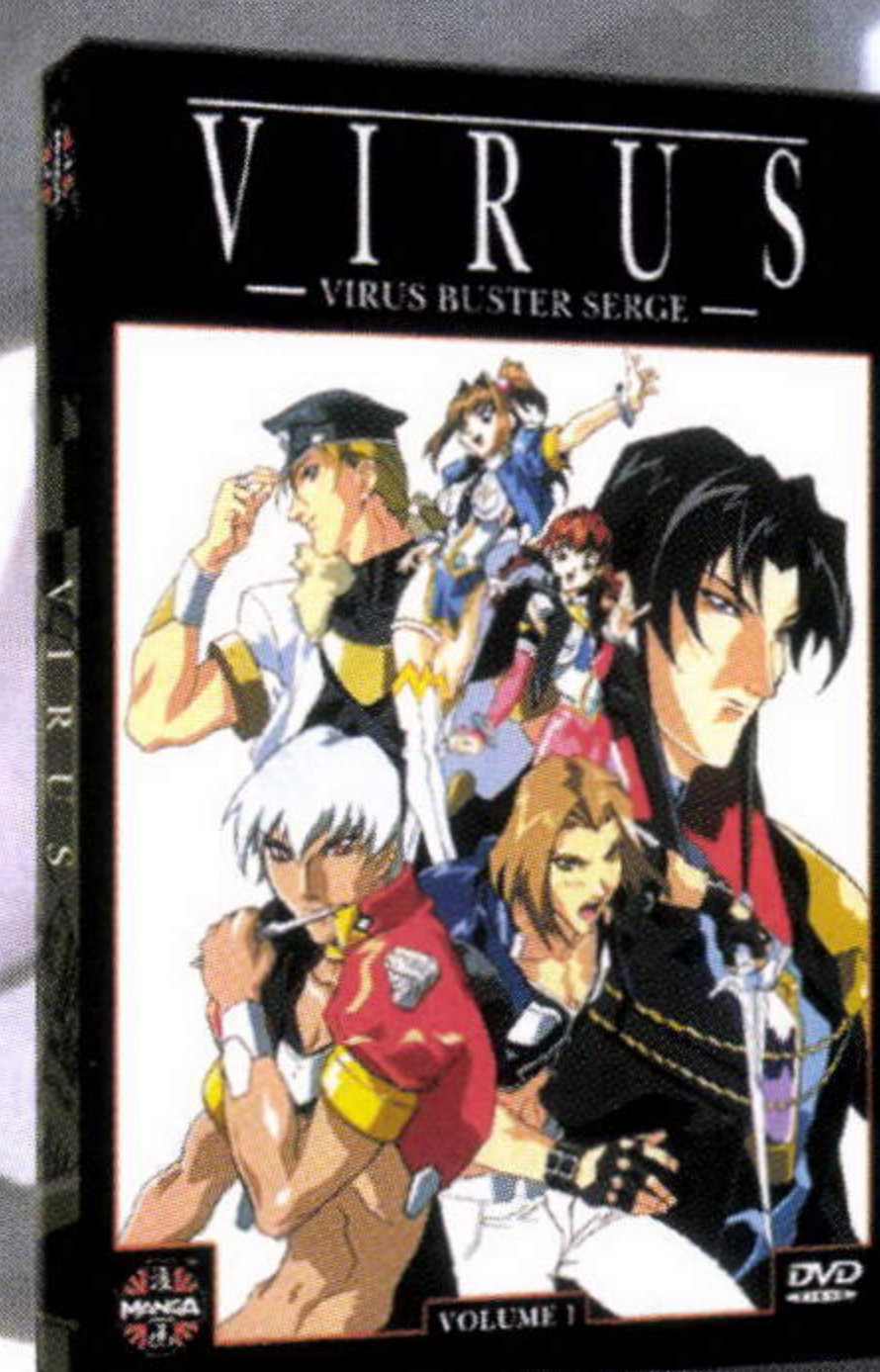
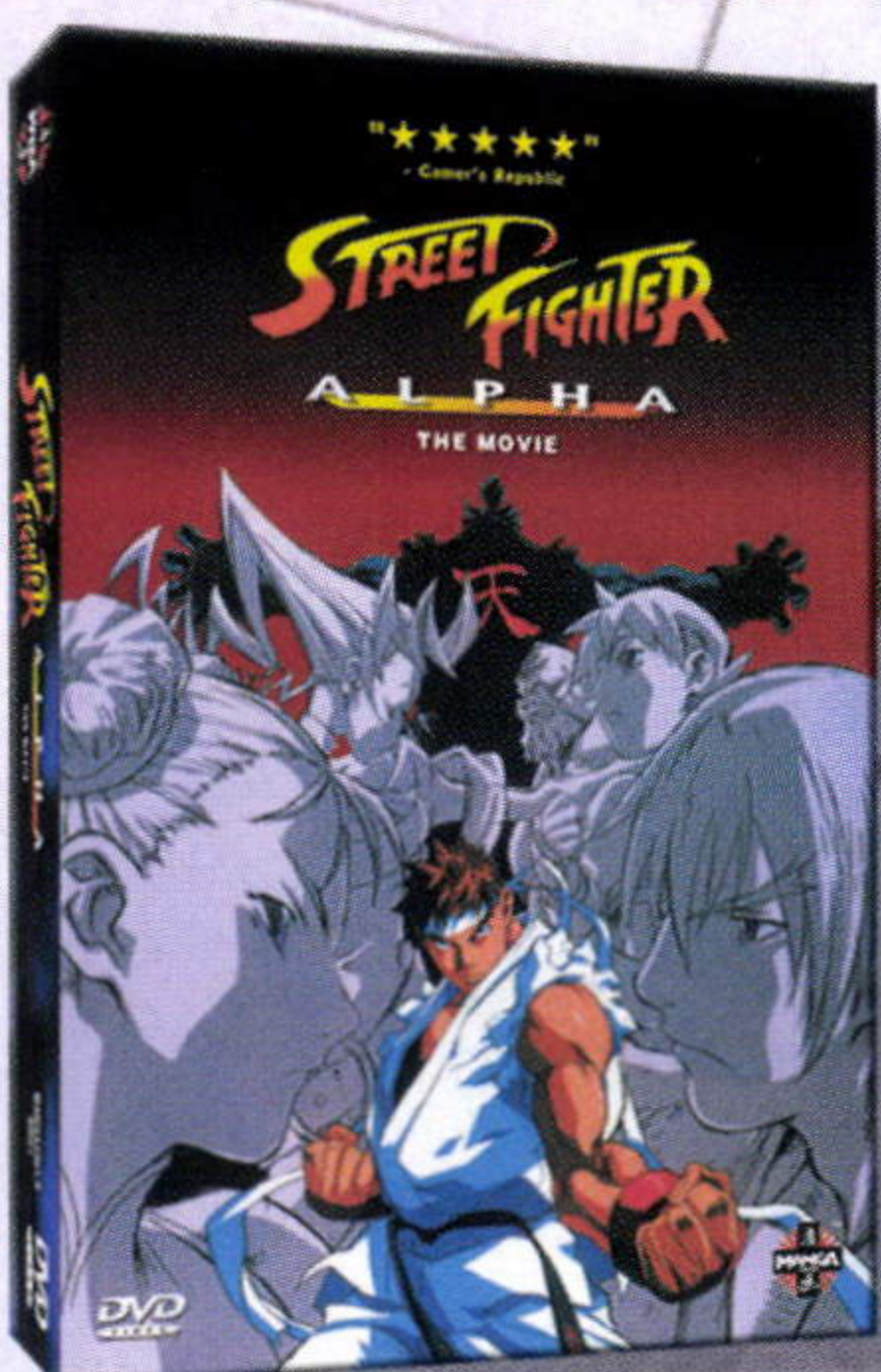
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Mother's Day will never be the same

SPACE PIRATE MITO

CALL ME MOM

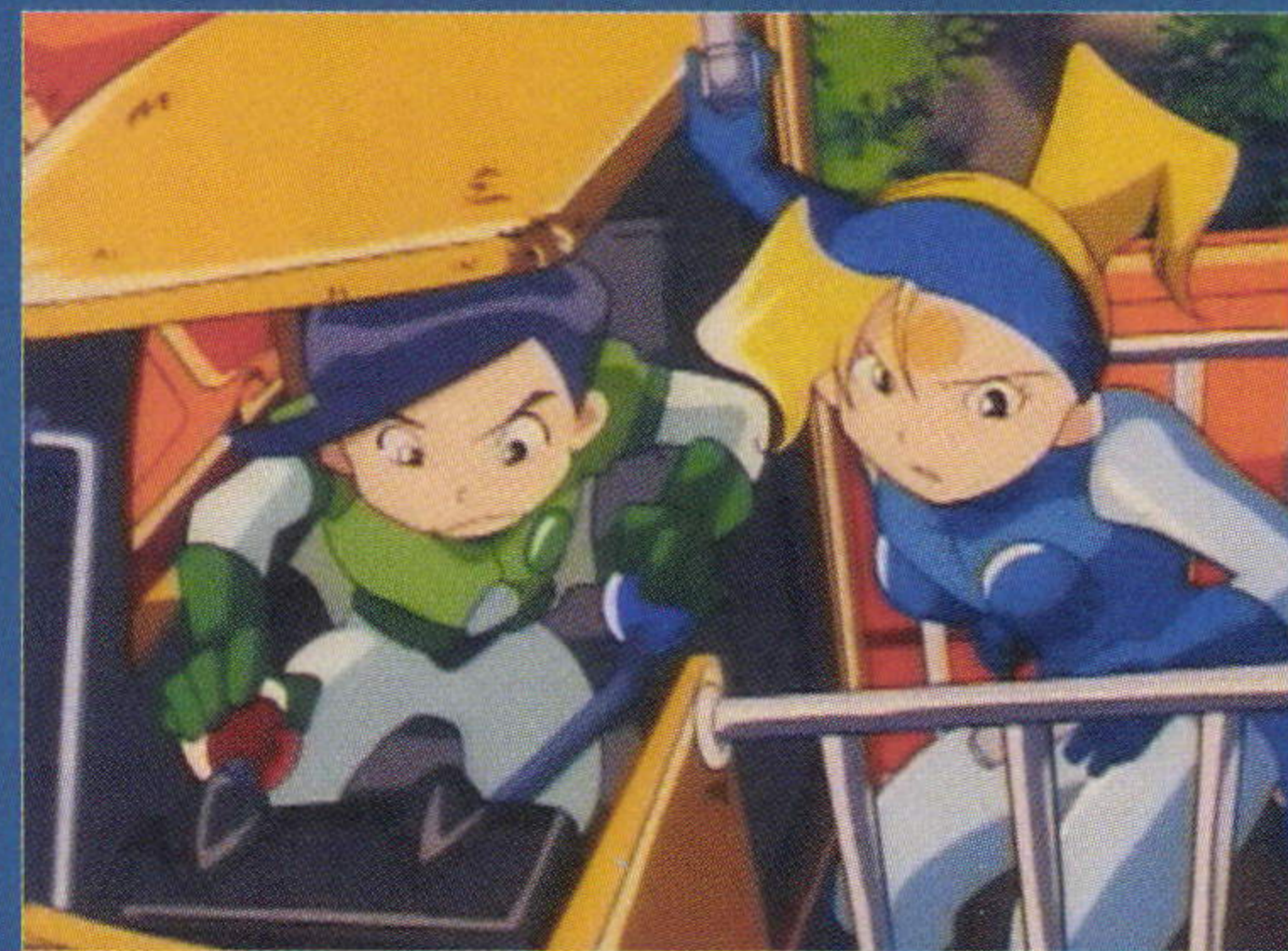
words dave halverson

Space Pirate Mito is yet another unexpected delight from AnimeWorks, who seem to have developed a talent for sniffing out high-quality titles that slide in under the radar without too much hoopla. Not knowing what to expect, *Mito* took me by surprise with its quirky-cool (and surprisingly unique) story and, most of all, its distinctive look, a cross between a Treasure video game—with mecha and characters resembling Gunstar Heroes—American comics, and traditional Japanese exaggeration—pretty spectacular.

Like probably everyone that has and will pick *Mito* up, I instantly fell in love with the character on the DVD case—Mito, I presumed: shiny round butt, nice rack, long, flowing orange hair—a yummy character. We soon discover, however, that the hot bod is merely a shell for a three-foot-tall childlike alien space pirate, who at some point in time got it on with an Earthling and had a kid, Aoi, who thinks that shell (Mito has many mommy models in the collection) is his mom—a business woman who goes off on lots of business trips. It's safe to say that Aoi is in for a big surprise: Mommy dearest is not only the most wanted criminal in the galaxy, she's an adult in an alien child's body! All Mito wants is to be a model parent, all Aoi wants is his normal life back, and all the galactic patrol wants—a sorted bunch—is Mito's ass! With junior along for the ride, things begin to get pretty crazy. *Space Pirate Mito* is sexy, funny, and just a bit unnerving—like a breath of fresh air followed by a blow to the head... **play**



"Mommy dearest is the most wanted criminal in the galaxy."



space pirate mito: call me mom

play rating ●●●●●

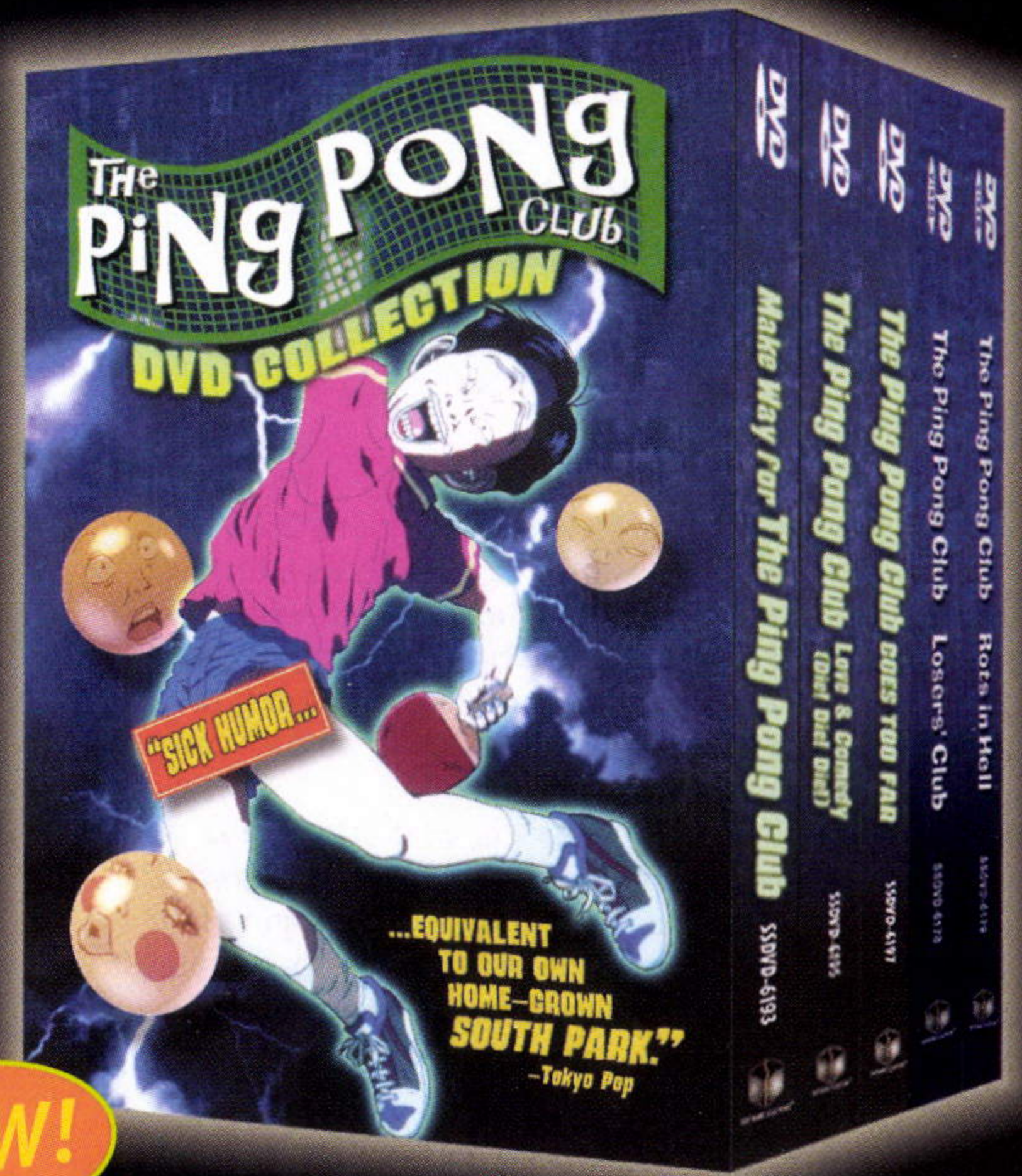
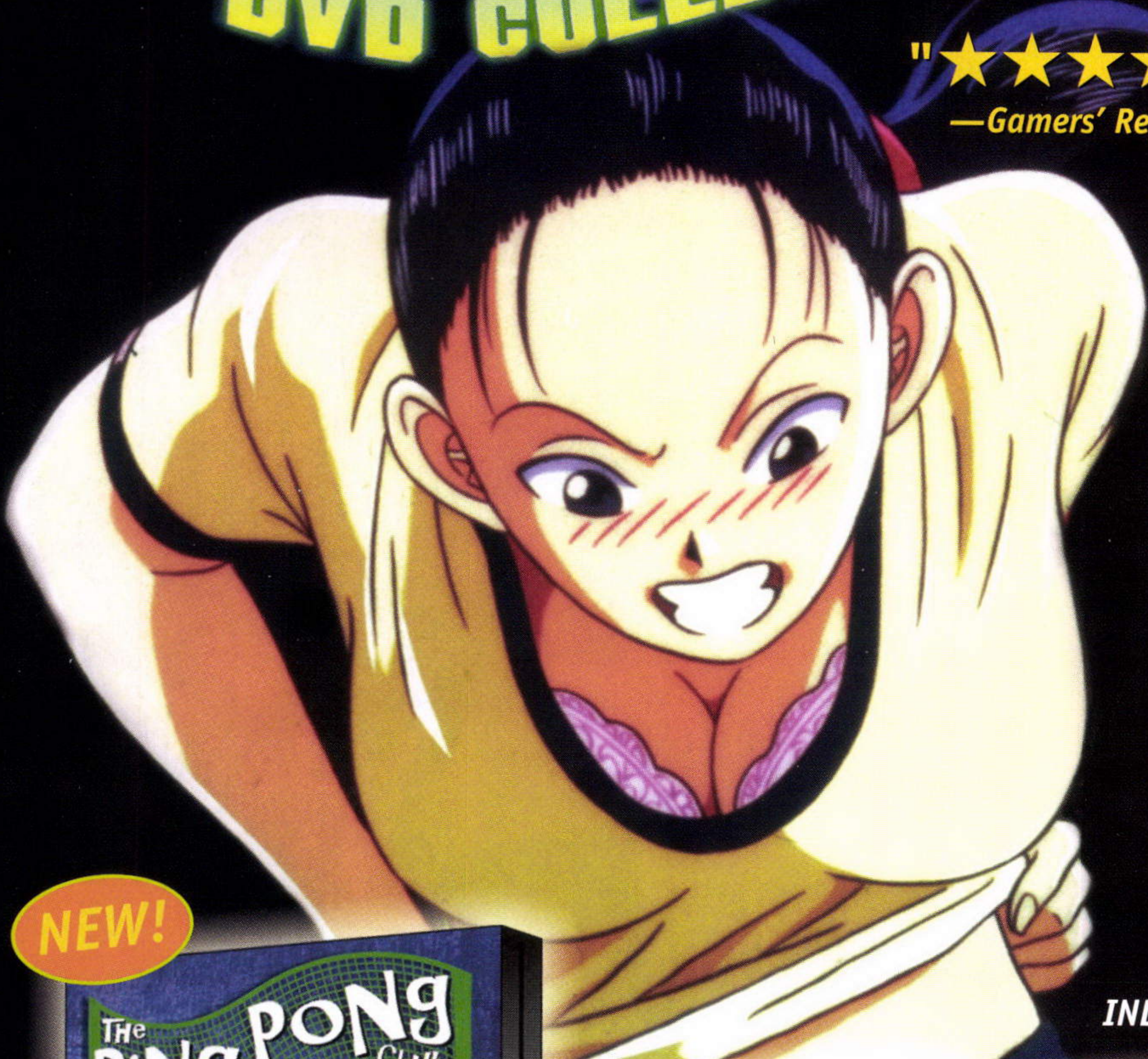
studio: anime works / rating: 7 & up / running time: 100 minutes

One of the surprise series of the year. Do not under any circumstances miss *Mito*.

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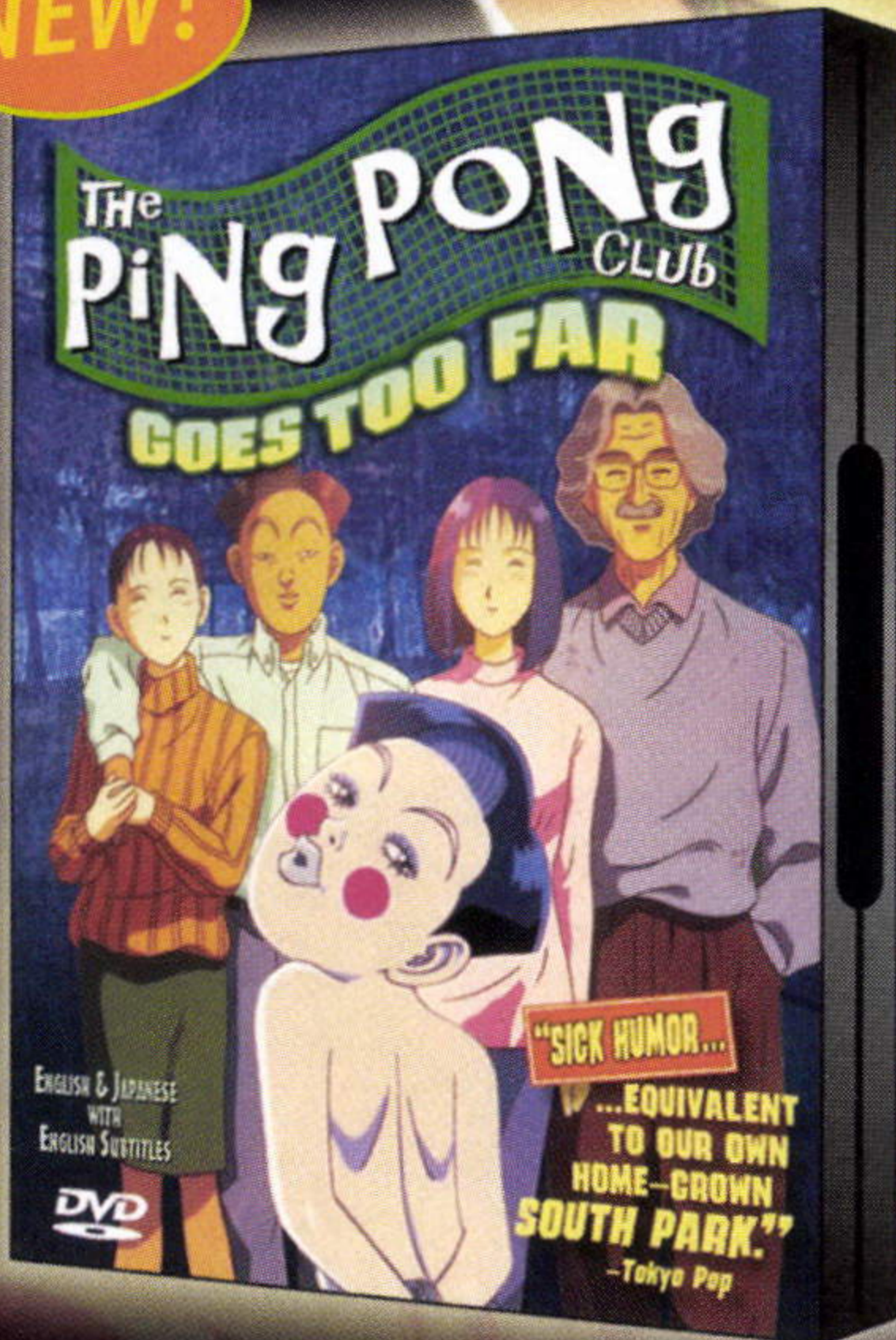
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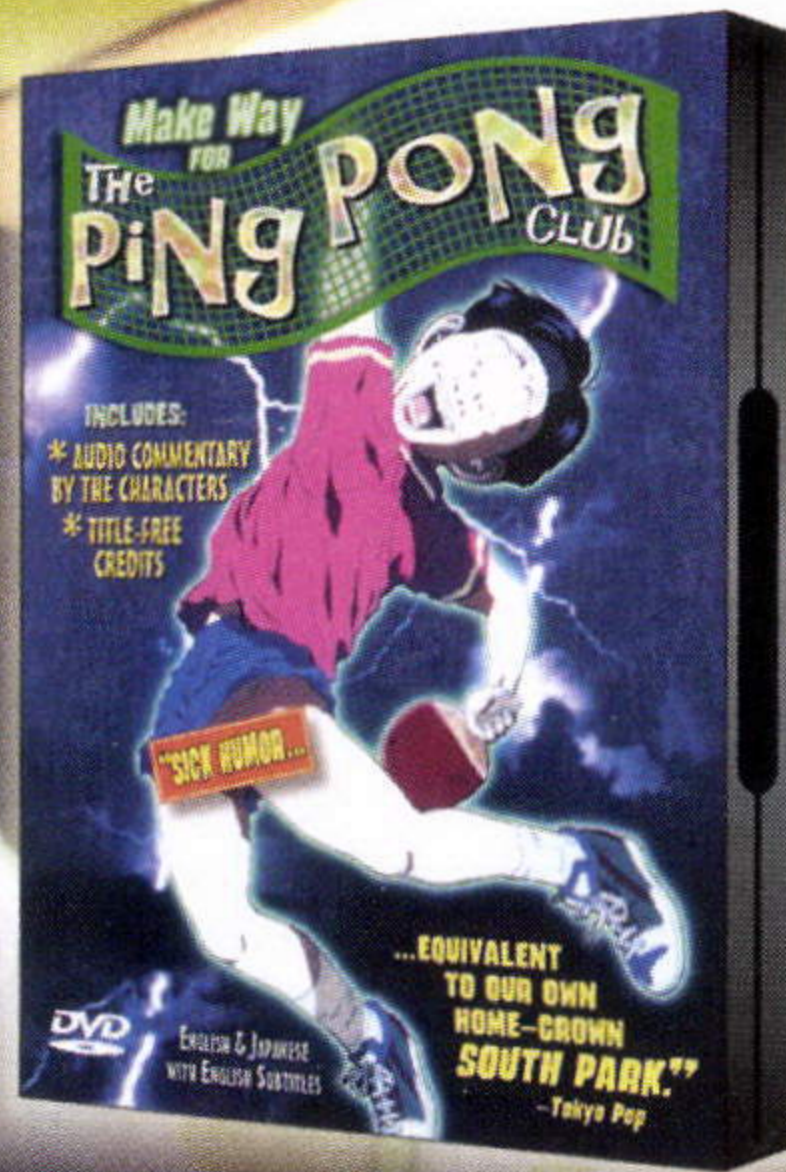
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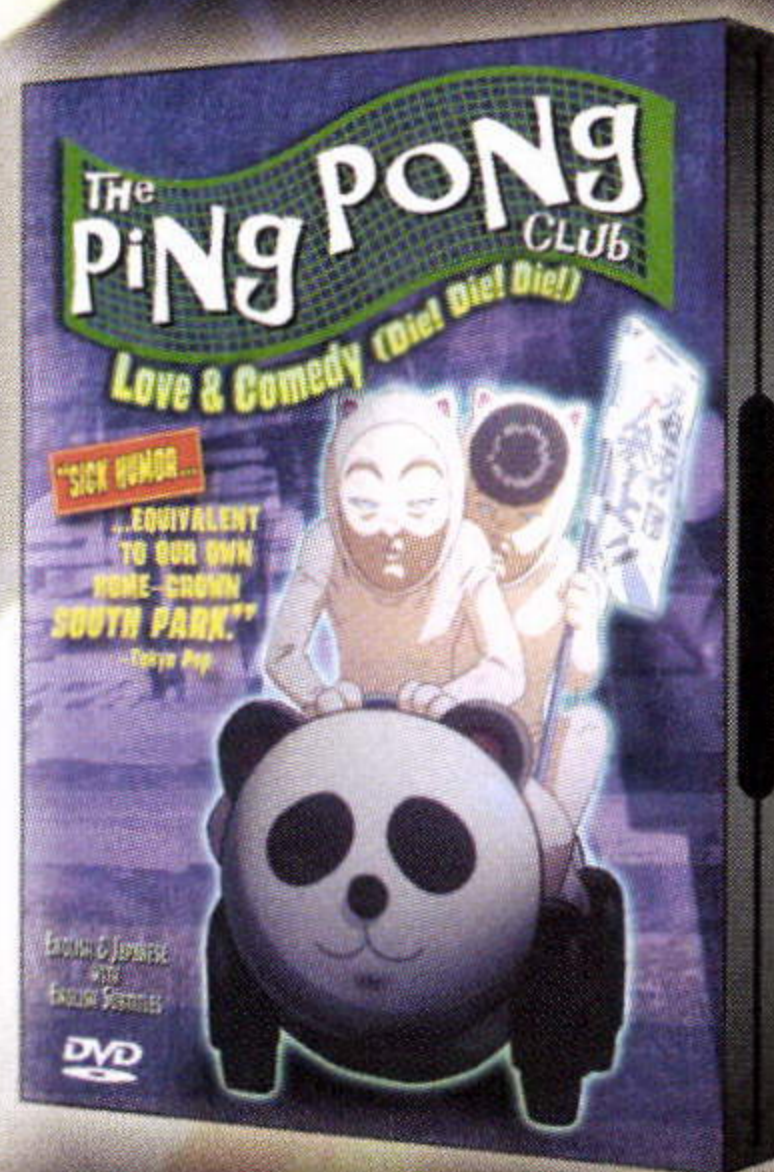
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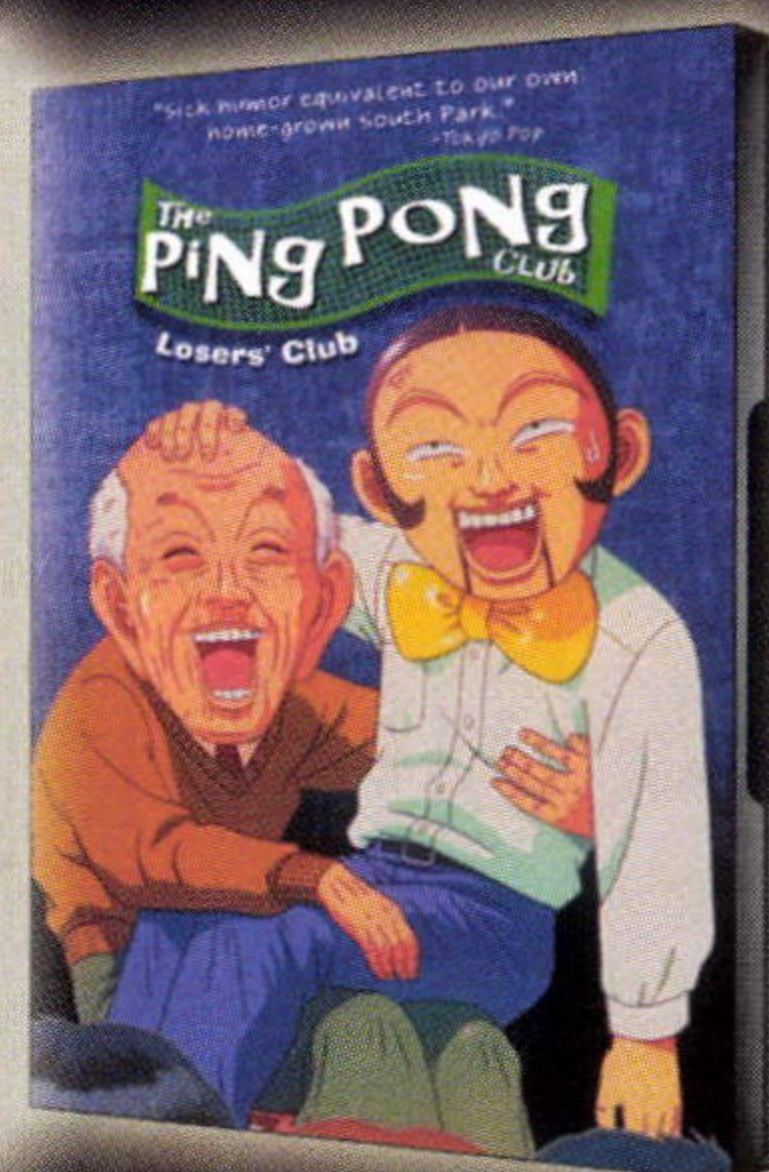
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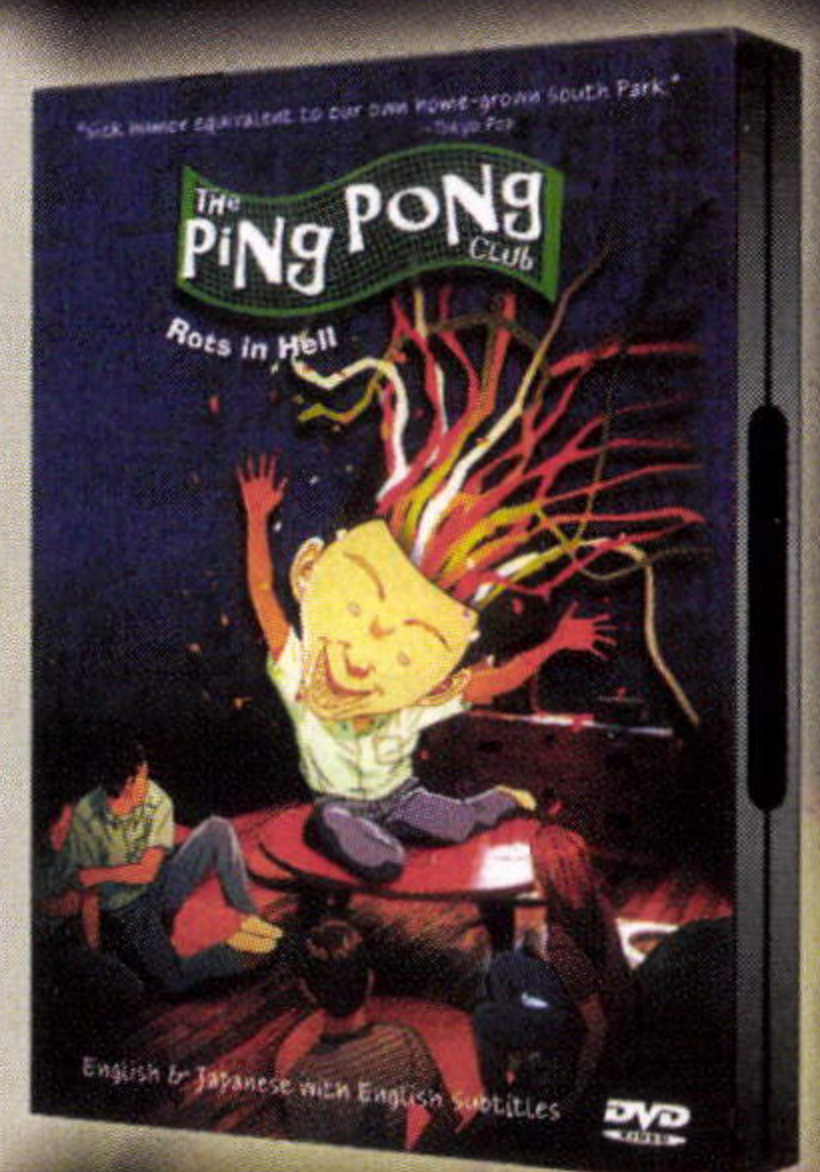
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Z.O.E. DOLORES, i

COUNTDOWN TO DESTINY

words dave halverson

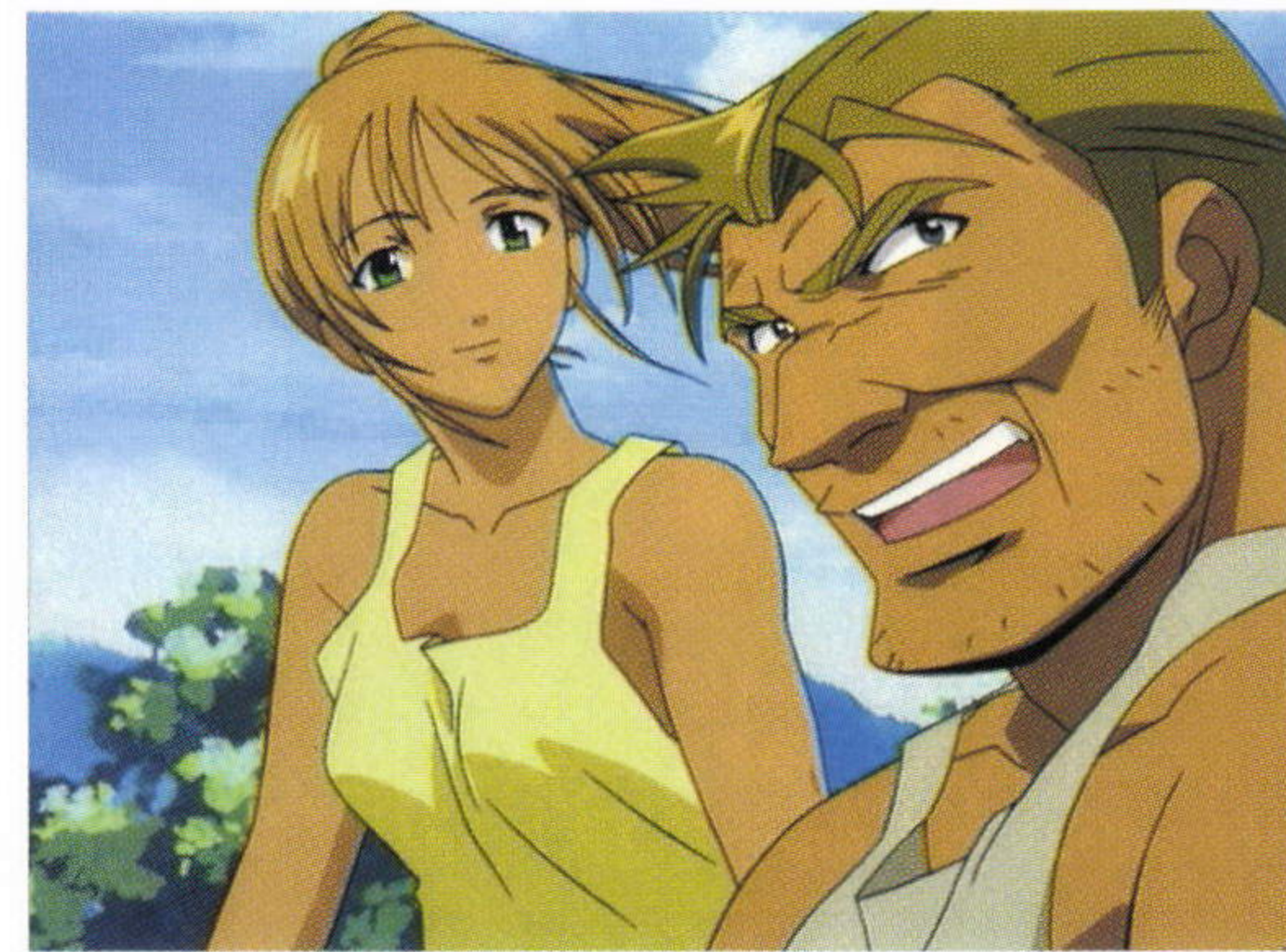
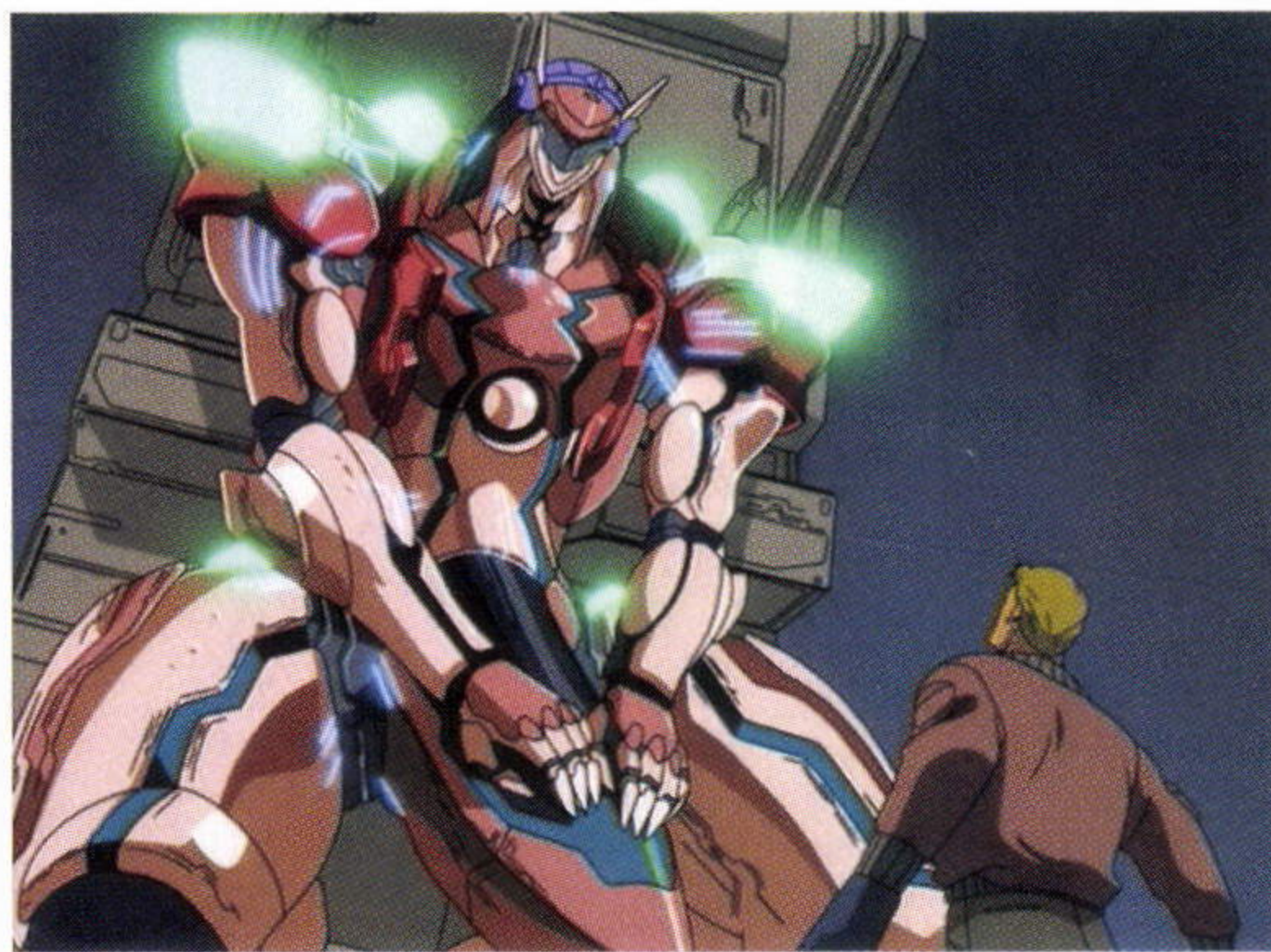
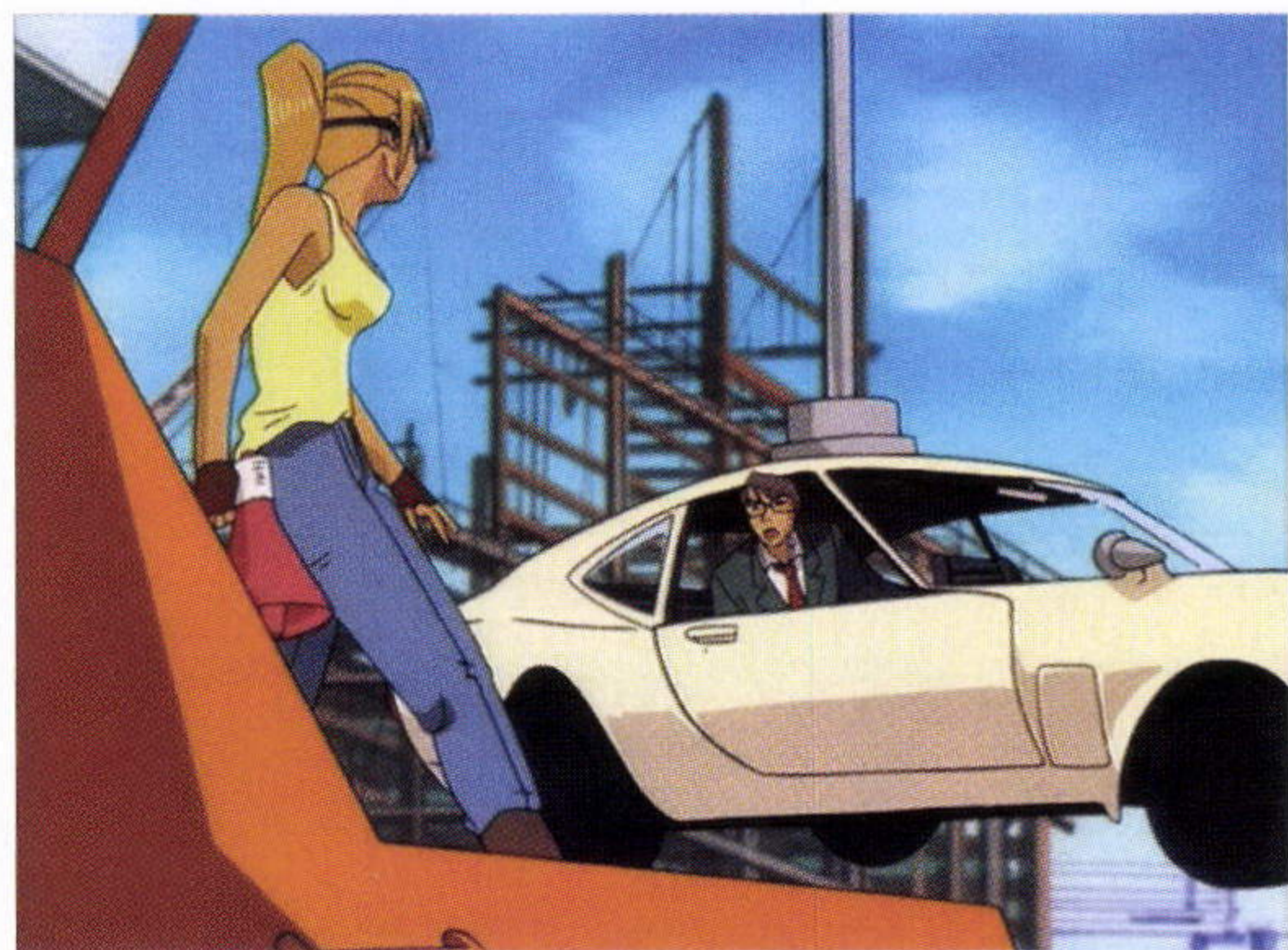
After the hyper-serious Zone of the Enders OVA, *Idolo*, I wasn't sure what to expect from Dolores i, the first volume in the TV series, but I can tell you what I didn't expect: a light-hearted, over-the-top tale about an intelligent super weapon with a heart of gold, playing off of an alcoholic, down-on-his-luck dysfunctional dad; but that's what I got...and it works.

James Linx is a lowly space trucker who spends his time reading self-help books on how to make his grown-up kids like him (they blame him for letting their Martian mom flee the family circle, and head for Mars to do top-secret research on a new Martian weapon system) between one-night stands and drinking binges. Imagine his surprise when he discovers his latest cargo is that weapon, programmed by his wife who's supposed to be dead; suddenly he's inherited a big pink Orbital Frame, Dorothy, with the disposition of a little girl and enough firepower to literally end worlds. No time to dwell, though: the Martians want Dolores back, and James—framed for murder while protecting her—is on the run from a mad police chief bent on his demise, who wastes no time implicating his kids. It's one big dysfunctional family on the run with a giant robot in tow.

As weird as it sounds, the episode structure is balanced in a way that you come to care deeply about James, Dolores and his kids, Leon and Noel, by volume's end (well, maybe not Leon, he's a whiny bastard). The animation, score, opening and closing, and especially the production, are outstanding for a TV series making *Z.O.E. Dolores, i* far and away the best game-to-anime TV crossover to date. Arriving just in time to usher in the video-game sequel, the stage is set for Z.O.E. to blossom into a full-fledged franchise. **play**



“A light-hearted over-the-top tale about an intelligent super-weapon and a dysfunctional dad.”

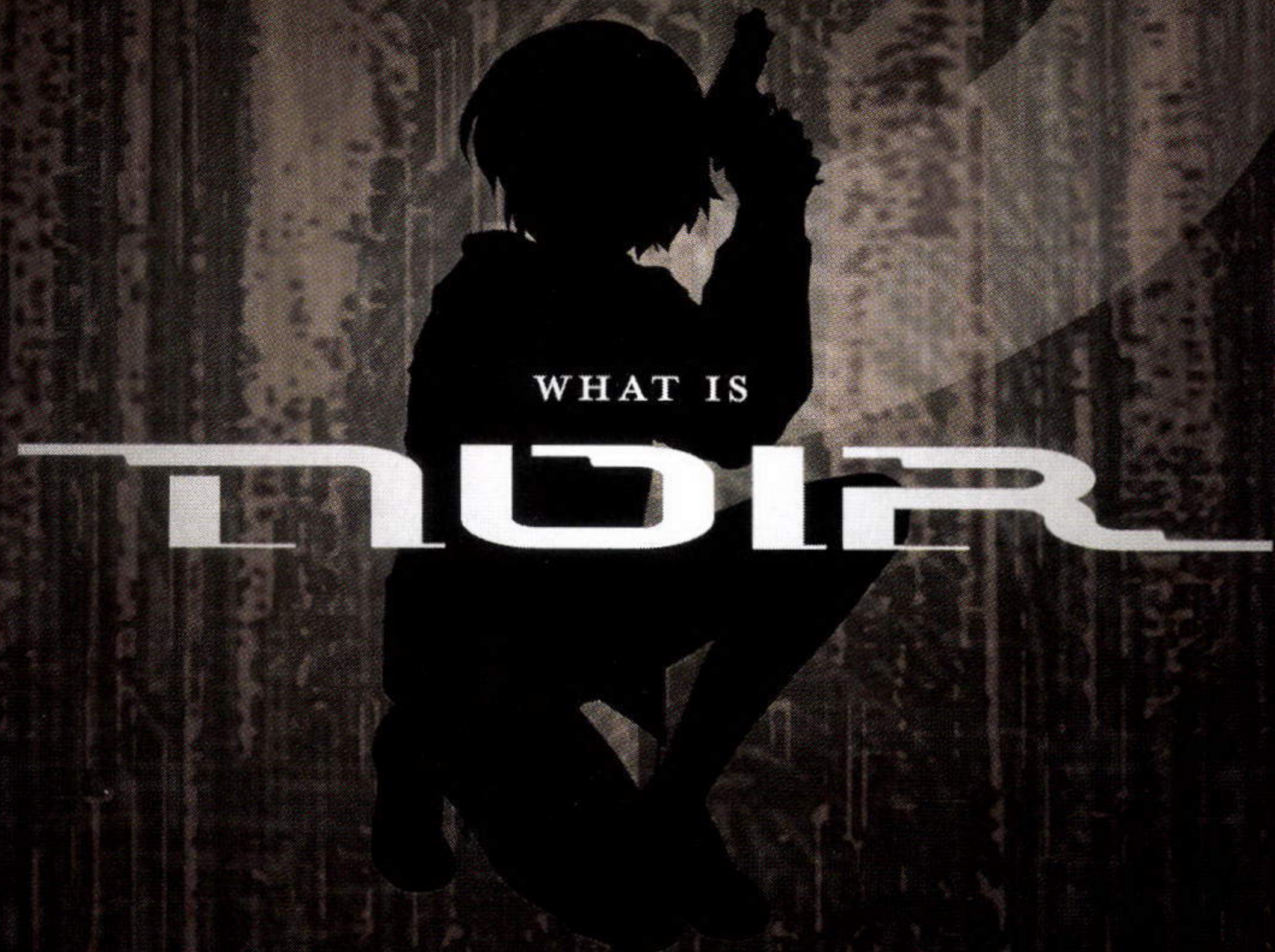


zone of the enders dolores, i vol.1: countdown to destiny

play rating ●●●●●

studio: adv films / rating: 15 & up / running time: 125 minutes

This show far exceeded my expectations. *Dolores, i* is easily the best game-based series anime to date.



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Hotter than hell

DOOMED MEGALOPOLIS

words dave halverson

Tokyo: 1908. Two-thousand years have passed since Tario No Masakado rebelled against the Imperial Court, hoping to create a utopian society where Tokyo now stands. Killed in the process, he's since been considered the guardian deity of the city, his restless spirit lying in wait for the one who would risk sure damnation by releasing him from his purgatory. That man is the evil sorcerer Kato, an army lieutenant, dead for 20 years, who fell from grace, far from grace. Kato wants everyone in Tokyo dead, pure and simple, and he wants Masakado to help him do it. Choosing a host for the resurrection, Kato needs a human who has seen the gates of hell and lived to tell, which he finds in a beautiful young girl, Yukari, brought to the brink of death by her incestuous brother, Tatsumiya, who also happens to be in charge of the modernization of Tokyo.

This sets the stage for a holy war that would make Marilyn Manson weep tears of joy—so dark and beautiful that it's hard to look away, even for a second. The character designs are sheer perfection (save for a penis-monster, which I hope to never see again) and there is nary a glimpse of jollity. Evil courses through every frame of this show, which flows initially much like *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. A rare recommendation, I implore you to honor the 17-and-up rating in this case, as rape, sacrilege, greed, full-on debauchery and religious symbolism exist at every turn, as the story plummets deeper and deeper, passing through Yukari to her demon spawn, Yukiko, when Kato—after Masakado rejects Yukari as a vessel—impregnates her with his demon seed; fresh meat for the master. Then things really get ugly.

Directed by Rin Taro (*Metropolis*), *Doomed Megalopolis* is a classic reborn that demands your attention if you're a fan of horror, animated or otherwise. It's pitch-black and wears it oh-so-well. **play**

"A holy war that would make Marilyn Manson weep tears of joy—so dark and beautiful it's hard to look away."



doomed megalopolis

play rating ●●●●●

studio: adv films / rating: 17 & up / running time: 175 minutes

Rin Taro's *Doomed Megalopolis* is horror perfected. It's a shame there's not more in the box, but who's complaining; having it on DVD is gift enough.

FULLY LOADED FOR 2003

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X TV vol.2

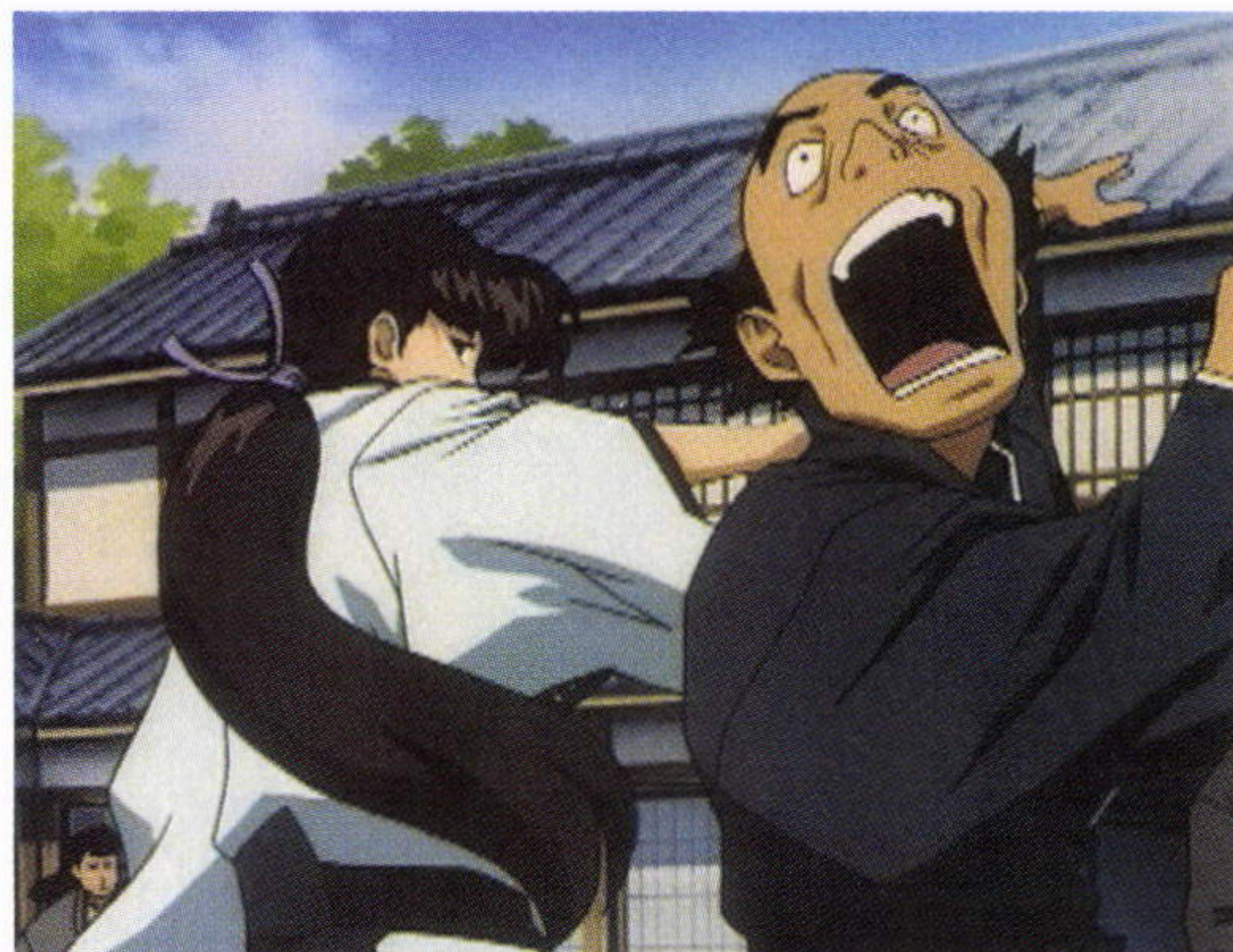
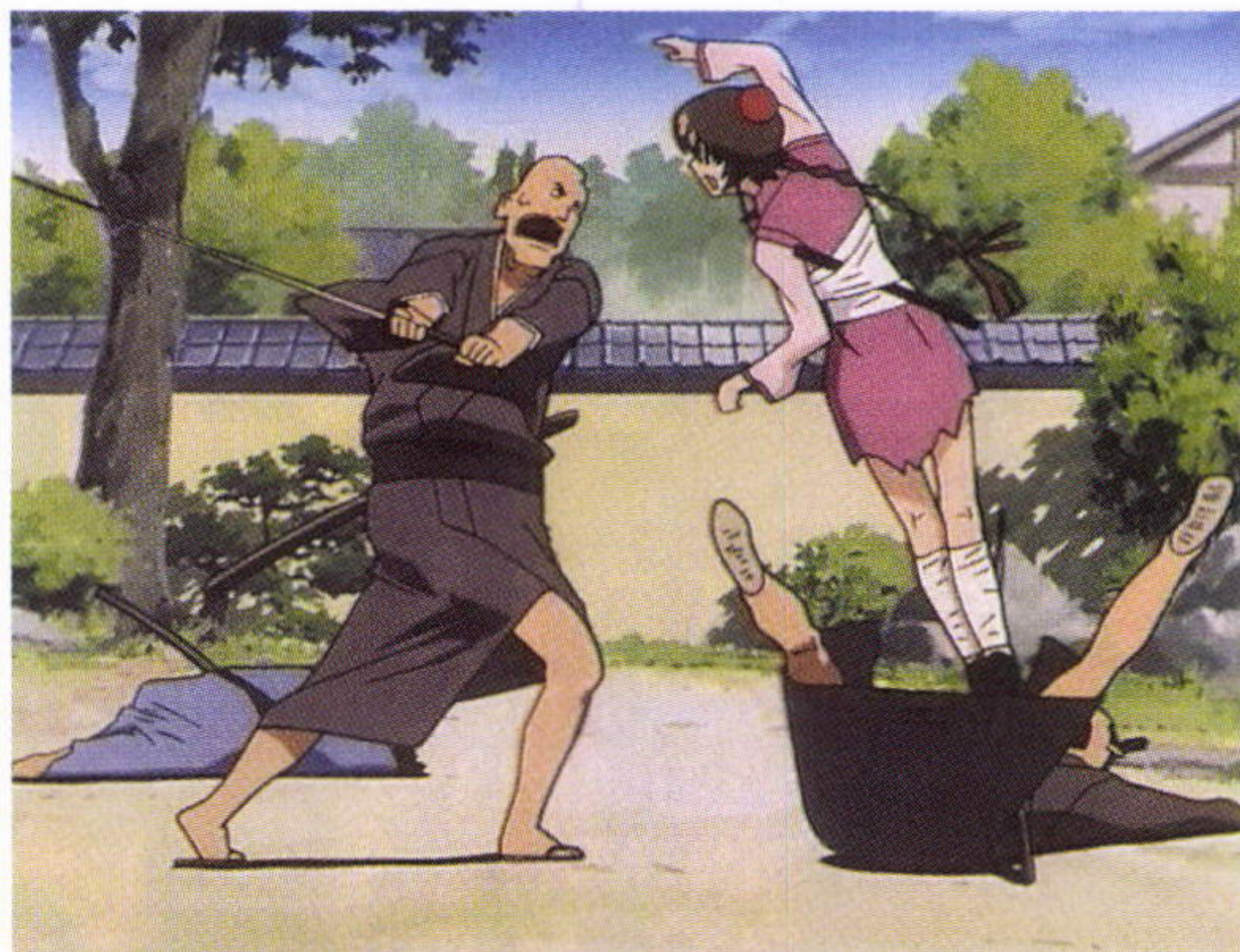
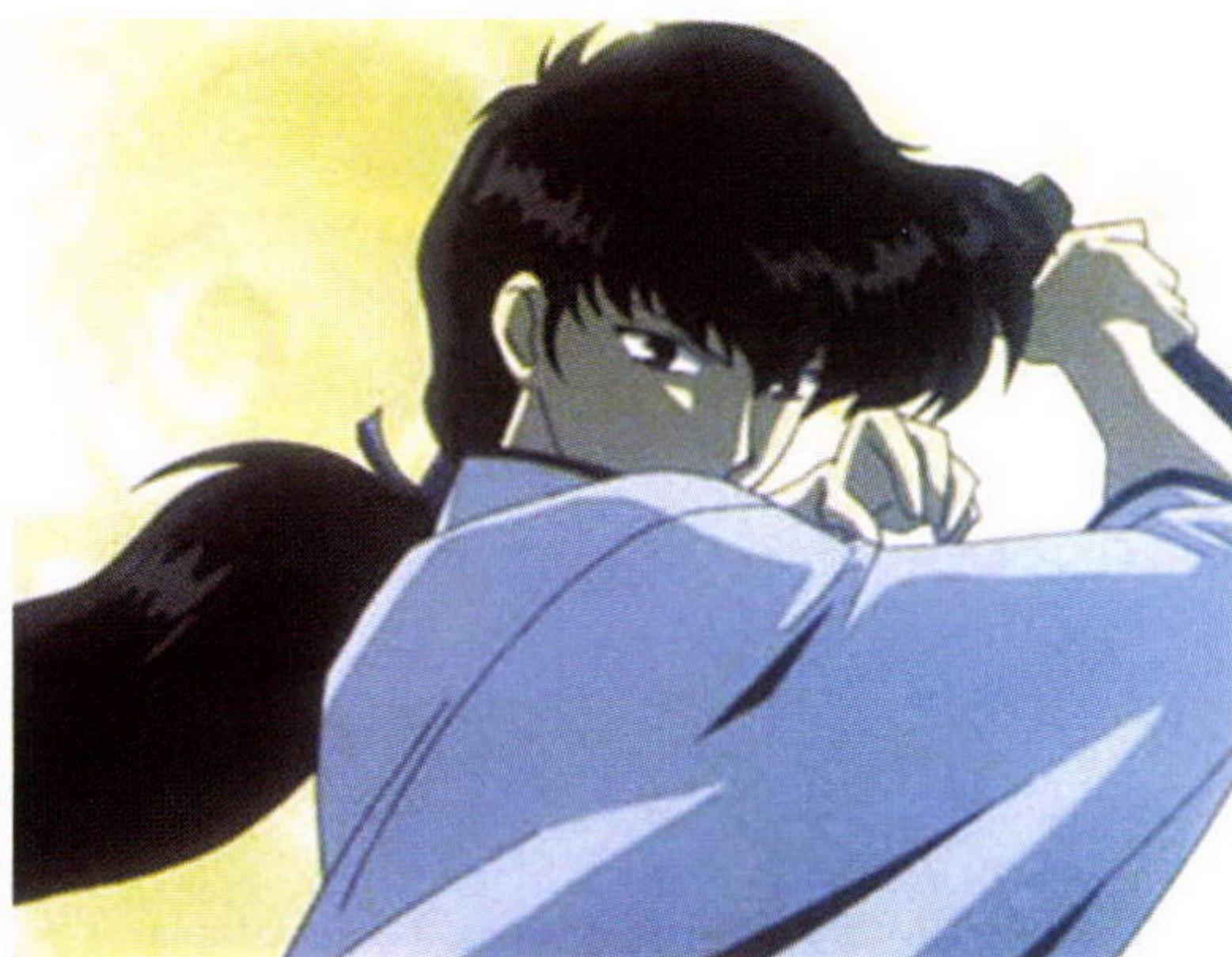
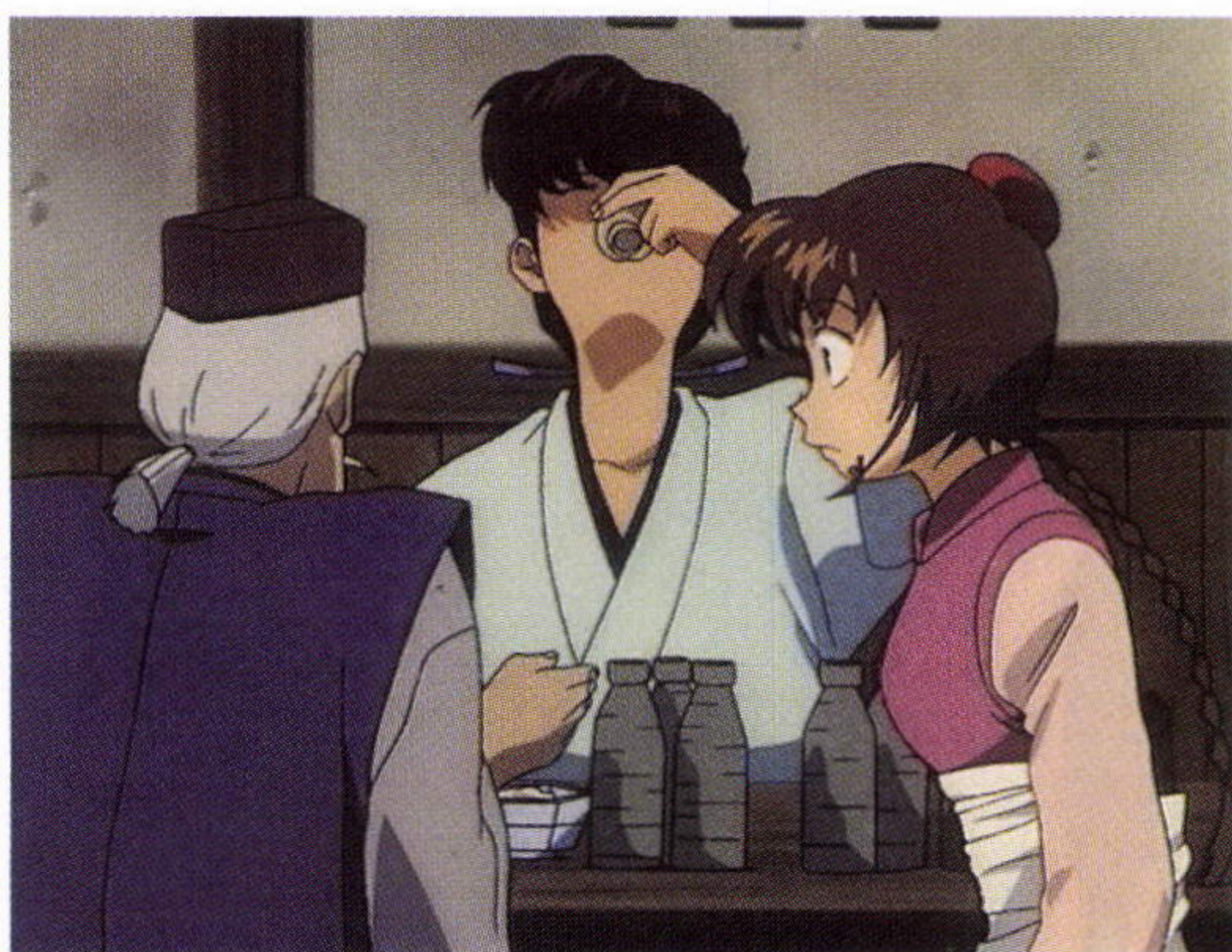
studio: pioneer entertainment
 rating: 13 & up
 running time: 75 minutes

In a flurry of mystical swordplay, and elemental discord, the 2nd installment of this highly anticipated series from CLAMP has arrived. As the violent Dragons of Earth suddenly start to wreak havoc, the Dragons of Heaven (the protectors of the world) convene in the presence of Princess Hinoto to show Kamui his dual destiny. Clued into exactly why his mother died by a woman claiming to be his aunt, Kamui cannot accept the fact that mommy may have chosen to die as a shadow sacrifice on his behalf. Princess Hinoto attempts to confirm this information for Kamui while trying to convince him to use his considerable might to lead the Dragons of Heaven to victory thus saving the world as we know it. Sensing the half-truths he has been told, Kamui turns his back on Hinoto to ponder this new information.

This new series of X, manages to capture the beauty and intricacy of the manga in a way that the movie never could. The writing not only manages to interpret the simplistic and ageless battle between good and evil, but the idea that the line between the two forces is not always cut and dry. Surprisingly, in the migration from movie to TV series, X has not lost a single bit of its visual beauty. CLAMP's famous large-eyed, long-legged character designs flow across the screen with stunning fluidity.

CHRISTINA ALEXANDER

play rating ●●●●●



Tsukikage Ran vol.2: Shocking Secrets

studio: bandai entertainment
 rating: 13 & up
 running time: 75 minutes

There's a lot to like about Tsukikage Ran—alot. It breaks taboos, spits in the face of convention, and does the whole Samurai credo a world of good. It's the old Kung Fu TV show with a female (samurai) lead, serious comic flare, and a few gallons of sake on the side! Ran travels from town to town ghosted by her sidekick Meow the "Iron Fist" a bumbling, self absorbed, martial arts expert with a propensity for all things mischievous. Ran on the other hand is cool, calm, and collected--drunk or sober, of which she prefers drunk. This time out they get sucked into an art scheme, which of course leads to a sinister plot; mistaken for murderous bandits, which leads to a sinister plot, and we discover that it was the Japanese who actually discovered electricity, which may lead to a sinister plot depending on how you look at it. In between, Volume 2 is filled with the same high level of quality fight scenes as the first—reason alone to watch the show—and the writing and dialogue is once again, top notch.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●

Dr. Wily and his gang of robots are trying to take over the world! Who can stop them?

MEGAMAN

A Hero is Born



MEGAMAN
A Hero is Born

more than just a super-fighting robot! He's mega man!

Get all 13 full-color episodes in one mega-fun package!

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A HERO IS BORN

ADU
kids

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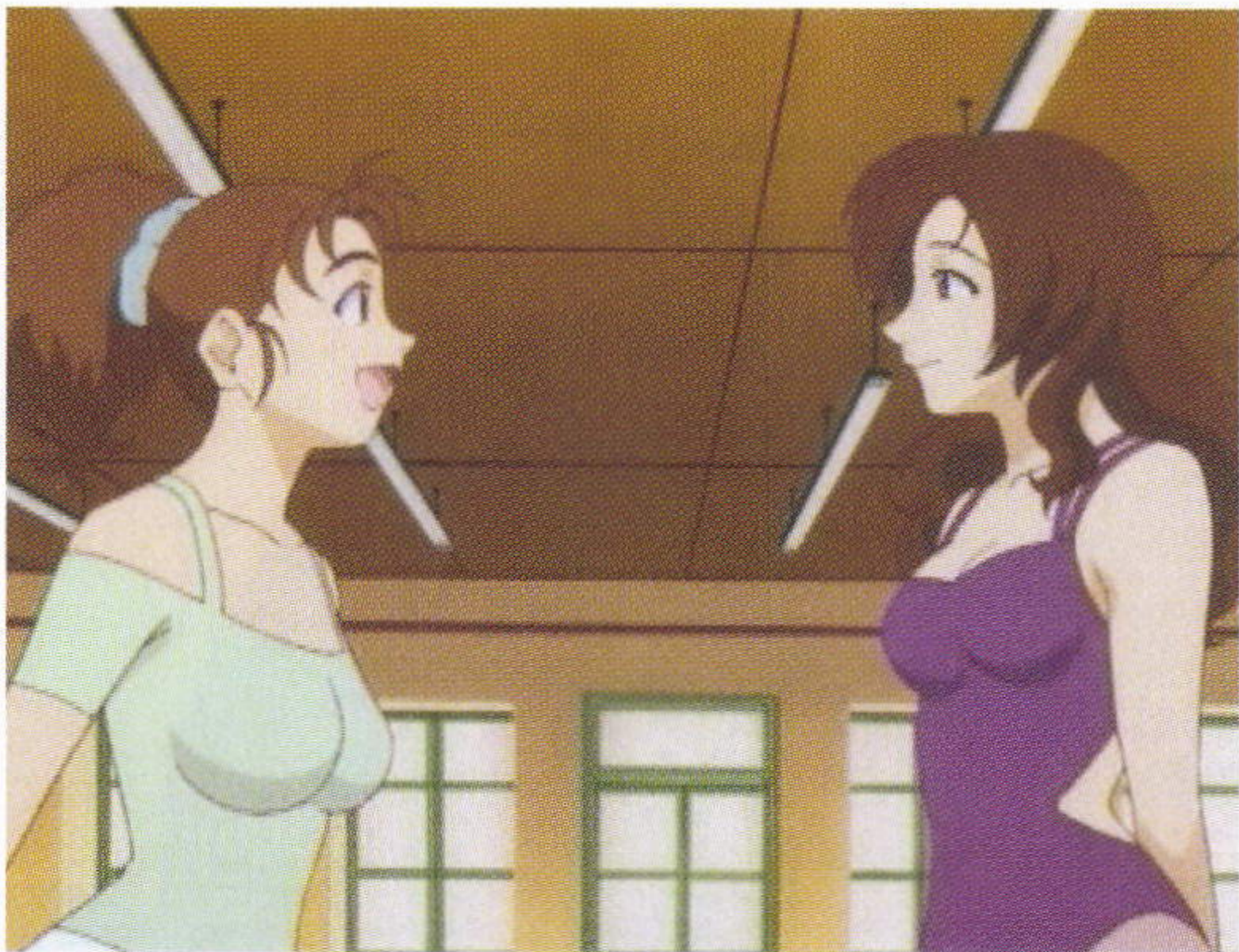
SUNCOAST
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fye
never stop playing

WHEREHOUSE
MUSIC
WHEREHOUSEMUSIC.COM

GameStop

BEST BUY
Turn On the Fun
bestbuy.com



Chance Pop Session vol.1

studio: adv films
rating: 12 & up
running time: 125 minutes

In real life wannabe pop idols can be obnoxious, nauseating, self absorbed freaks, American Idol proved that. As fate would have it, the same apparently applies in the animated realm. At the heart of ADV's Chance Pop Session, a vanilla rags-to-riches fable chronicling the rise to fame of three cute girls, lies a story reserved for pre-teen to teenage girls; the line is not blurred. Breaking away from being completely reality based, at the core of the show lies an ancient legend; Somewhere in the land of music is an angel and only those the angel smiles upon will become stars. Yeah, whatever but you can sleep around too... I hear it works just as well. In real life that angel is manager extraordinaire—Mrs. Kisaragi who runs a talent school where she honed the chops of an orphan girl transforming her into the mega-star known as Reika; a pop idol with bright yellow hair frozen in a wind blown frenzy. Now just imagine the old TV show Fame, sans males with an even fruitier goody two shoes veneer and you've arrived at Chance Pop Session. What this series has going for it is mass appeal to its core audience and little else. The animation quality is bear minimum and the music for the most part, makes Brittney sound edgy. Buy it for your little sister, it runs the gamut on teenage taboos and lessons learned.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating ●●●●●

Love Hina X-mas Movie

studio: bandai entertainment
rating: 13 & up
running time: 75 minutes

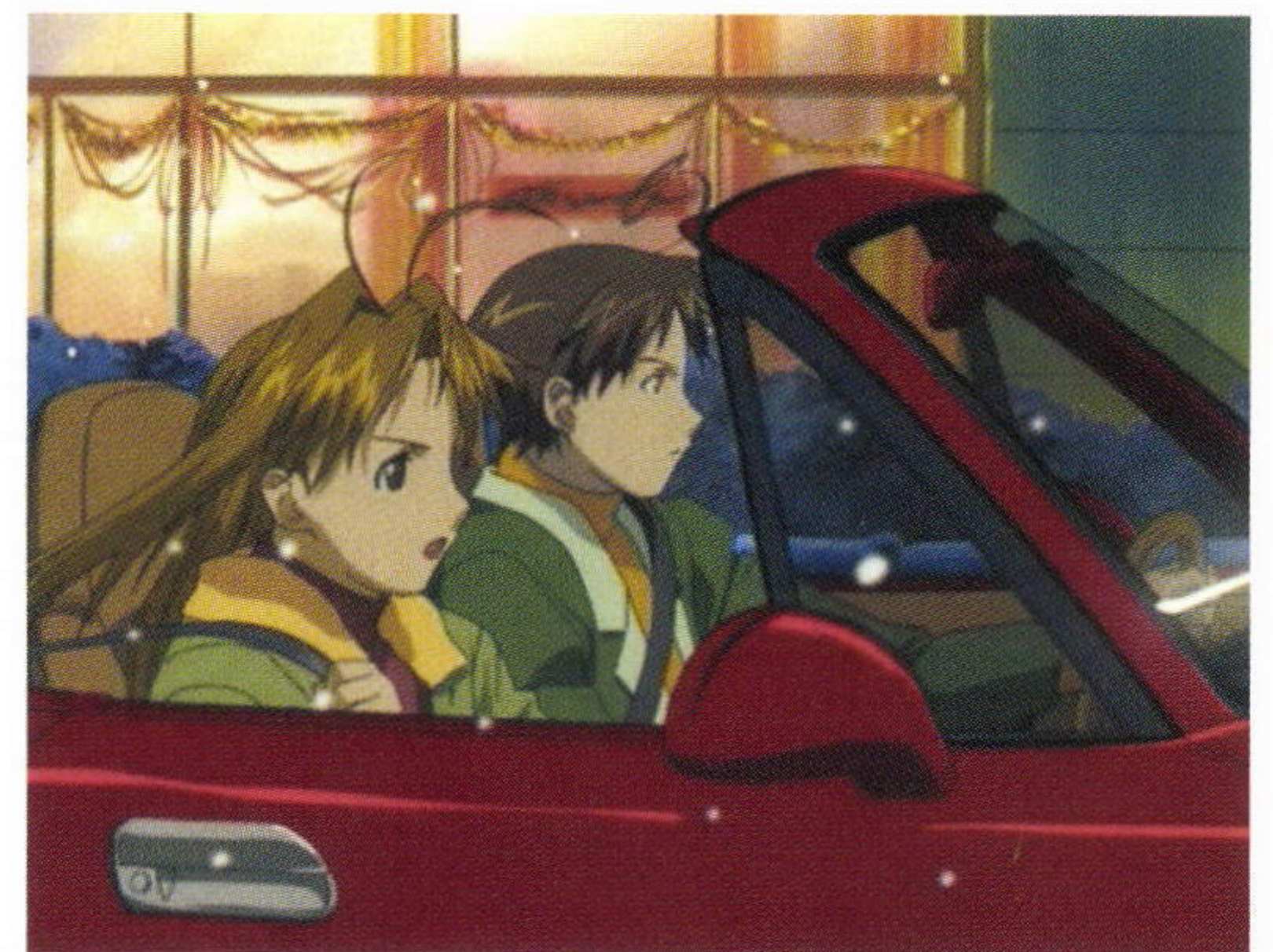
So you've seen the series several times over. You've illegally downloaded the Spring Special from the net, and you've got a plushie Tama Turtle sitting on your desk. What next? Well thanks to Bandai Entertainment, Love Hina fans can treat themselves to an extra-large, extra-sweet helping of their favorite series via the LH X-mas Special. Made with the same charm and high production values as the regular series, this heaping serving of Love Hina is not to be missed. In the world of the Hinata Inn, it's almost Christmas Eve-The day that two individuals may profess their love for each other and stay together forever.

Acting on an incorrect tip concerning the cute but violent Narusegawa, Keitaro decides that this Christmas is the perfect day to profess his love to her. Unfortunately for Keitaro, this might not be exactly what his supposed ladylove had in mind.

Just when you thought the Love Hina series couldn't get any more saccharine, this X-mas special will have even the toughest Hell's Angel "awwwwww-ing" at the sheer overflow of cute-ness. Flawless animation (thank God for Production IG), a solidly entertaining story, and a DVD packed with extras, make the Love Hina X-mas special a worthwhile investment.

CHRISTINA ALEXANDER

play rating ●●●●●





F**king Osbourne Bobbleheads

NovelTOY's caricature-style sculpts of Ozzy, Sharon, Kelly and Jack come as 7-inch non-talking and talking Bobble Heads, 3-inch mini Bobbers, Bobble Head air fresheners, and even Bobble Head pens. It's bobble freakin' mania. Each talking Bobble quips such "Osbourne-isms" as: Ozzy: "I love you all, but you're all f**king mad!" Sharon: "Minnie ... Minnie Minnie ... I Love Minnie!" Kelly: "Jack, stop telling people you're Ozzy Osbourne's son to get into places 'cuz you're a f**king loser!" Jack: "Shut up and leave my room now!"

Look (or listen) for them at Spencer Gifts, Tower Records, Musicland, Newbury Comics, Gamestop and other trend retailers, and God help us all.

play MEDIA



xXx: building a better bond

columbia/tristar
rated pg-13



Look ma' no blue screen!

The release of *xXx* on DVD is particularly significant, since a lynch mob of hypocrites kept audiences at bay while they scrambled to come to grips with the fact that someone had actually made the action film they'd been calling for since Connery vacated the Bond role. Annoyed at how easily Cohen and Diesel pulled it off, they said nay to one of the best super-spy thrillers in years. Nay to gorgeous locations, nay to the plausible stunts and backstory, nay to the sexiest (and strongest—sorry *Jinx*) female cohort in years, and nay to sexy, smooth in-your-face action like we haven't seen in a PG-13 since, well, since I can't remember (not to mention all the great cameos). As a result, a film that should have coasted to at least 200 million domestic box office did less—which wouldn't be so bad if the poser Bond film wasn't raking in so much.

xXx offers believable action (within the confines of the super-spy credo), a charismatic lead that's believable in the role, a strong catalyst on which to build the franchise, wasn't completely reliant on blue screen, CG, and camera trickery, and wasn't backed by a merchandising blitzkrieg...truly the anti-Bond.

Reputable critics seem to be jumping on the Bond bandwagon simply because Halley hits the beach in a wet bikini. I liked it too (okay, loved it) but have they checked the ensuing dialogue? The trouble with *Die Another Day* is that it's trying to be *xXx*-meets-*Charlie's Angels*, which makes it *Austin Powers*. As a rule of thumb, only McG can do McG. I know it's all the rage to copy him (and the Wachowski brothers), but their imitators usually end up coming off as doubly desperate for a clue. The pathetic state of the miniatures didn't help Bond either (I could have built a better ice fortress) nor did the Beach Blanket Bingo blue screen, tell-tail CG, or completely nonsensical action. Even if Bond did have the tools to unhinge the canopy off that snow speeder and somehow surf a tsunami with it, how'd he climb onto the back and get the parachute, let alone rig

it? And why does James need wire cutters to cut through chain link? He has an invisible car and a laser watch, but he needs wire snips from Home Depot? Never mind that he can outrun a jet and board it (with a friend) through the landing gear, without getting dirty. Then of course there's the old Chinese dude who has himself done-up as Conan O'Brien as Johnny Cage and...well, you get the gist.

Some of the stunts in *xXx* border on impossible—border, while others are totally do-able. Somewhere there's a guy that with enough practice (and balls) could grind a rail on a turkey platter. Hinging on the barely-believable-but-possible is the catalyst for this genre—something Cohen obviously understands. The highlight of *Die Another Day* is the opening credits; *xXx* keeps on giving.

All I'm trying to say is that if you're big on super-spy action (hot chicks, fast cars, witty dialogue, exotic locales, and over-the-top action), *xXx* is the ticket. It's the best the genre's seen since *True Lies*, and deserves all the hoopla that it so vigorously eluded. All it needs now is to become an R franchise, and a decent console game.

The extras on the disc, especially the visual effects "How Too" and "Designing the World," run the gamut and provide amazing insight into what goes into making a film where so much of the action is real. Overall it's a disc worth owning for the features alone, which also include Director's Commentary, A Filmmaker's Diary Documentary, Diesel Powered Featurette, "The GTO is Back" Featurette, Deleted Scenes with Optional Director's Commentary, Building Speed: The Vehicles of *XXX* Featurette, Storyboard Comparisons, Multi-Angle Deconstructions, The Gavin Rosedale video *Adrenaline*, and Widescreen anamorphic format. It's also Vin Diesel's coming-out party in his bid to become the next Arnold. Something tells me he'll go even farther. **play**

movie ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

"Hinging on the barely believable but possible is the catalyst for this genre"

Minority Report

universal
rated pg-13

Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* shows that a movie can be a visual triumph without sacrificing ideas and smart dialogue for numbing action and giant set pieces that explode with nifty CG effects. What makes *Minority Report* such a spectacular ride is that its science fiction is as dramatic as it is wondrous to look at, grounded in modern-day references while showing visions of what we might see in our future.

I believe Spielberg's *AI* is a much more powerful, introspectively challenging film, yet *Minority Report* is more free and exuberant, recalling the energy of *Indiana Jones*. It isn't weighed down, as it was in *AI*, by the pressure to be true to Kubrick's original vision, allowing Spielberg to make a film that is entirely his own glossy style.

The year is 2054. Traffic takes the shape of speedy capsules that zip up towering skyscrapers and wind around the Washington setting like a infinite network of slot cars. Virtual customized advertisements project from cereal boxes and accost shoppers who walk into a clothing store. The choice for drug abuse is an injector that attacks the visual cortex of the brain.

Built around a short story by acclaimed sci-fi novelist Philip K. Dick, the film involves an edgy cop named John Anderton, who presides over a crime division that can signal a murder before it has even occurred. Through the psychic visions of three human test subjects known as Pre-Cogs, the cops are alerted to the time and location of the inevitable crime, storming the area to arrest the assailant before the murder can take place.

The system is virtually flawless,

disregarding the ethical implications of locking these apparent killers—who never actually committed the act—in a sea of capsules that look like the design of a future morgue. Complicating matters is the shocking revelation that Anderton himself will be a future killer.

And so he runs, and the film takes off into several exhilarating chase scenes, showcasing Spielberg's mastery of staging action. The only way Anderton can avoid his fellow Pre-Crime agents is by replacing his eyes with a dead stranger's, averting the intrusive scans of tiny mechanical spiders that can identify anyone in the city. Watching these little CG marvels scamper around is one of *Minority Report*'s many awesome scenes, culminating in a tense bathtub sequence where a bloody, bandaged Anderton attempts to hide in silence.

Playing the Pre-Cog leader Agatha is the extraordinary Samantha Morton, who says little with words yet transmits a poignancy through her trembling emotions. In an incredible two-shot, we see the fright of a child in her eyes that shakes us, intensified by Spielberg's knowing camera.

Spielberg began toying with diffused, heavy lighting in *AI*, and here cinematographer Janusz Kaminski goes extreme, often washing every corner of the screen with a surreal glow; there are scenes where the light coming through windows is so exaggerated and washed out that we seem to be looking at a surreal landscape existing in a dream. Spielberg was born to do sci-fi.

movie ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●



“Spielberg was born to do sci-fi.”



Gorillaz phase one: celebrity take down

Zombie Flesh Eaters
rated 12 & up

A band created specifically for that special segment of society that would like to see each and every manufactured boy band air-dropped into the middle of Iraq with an “I ‘Heart’ America Kicking Your Ass” T-shirt on, the Gorillaz have released their first DVD, and it's everything you'd expect in a twisted cel-shaded excursion through the confines of the world's most twisted toons (who happen to produce their own unique brand of music—a fusion of rock, pop, house, and hip-hop).

The journey begins with the included parchment, a map that you'll need to navigate the DVD's brilliant routing, which is easily the best I've seen on the format (the menu, not the map, although it's pretty cool too). When venturing out to purchase

this DVD, by the way (which I suggest you do immediately), be sure and seek out the special edition with its 52-page art book, sticker sheet and interactive CD. Within its polygonal framework, aside from animatics, storyboards, and final cuts of the band's peculiar videos—a fascinating look at what goes into bringing 2D, Noodle, Russell, and Murdoc to life—you'll find a documentary charting the insanity of the Gorillaz creators, as their cartoon counterparts push them over the brink of sanity; a cornucopia of utter weirdness; and something particularly wonderful that, in a perfect world, would be the shape of things to come.

This loveliness is found in Murdoc's room, a look at flat-screen CG represen-

“...a twisted cel-shaded excursion...”

tations of the band performing live with audience members sitting around dimly lit tables behind an un-moshing mosh pit. This is what the future was supposed to be like; to Hell with Bon-Jovi live-in-the-plaza with Katie and Matt, damn it, I want my GTV! Moving to the interactive CD, even more animated tinkering awaits, including two killer Gorillaz mini-games (killer for DVD-inclusive mini-games, mind you), art and screensavers for your newly found rebellious nature, and assorted press and other media on the band. All together, it's an opportunity you simply cannot afford to pass up, and the ultimate under-50-dollar gift, without a doubt. With any luck, toys, video games, and a film will follow. The kids have Spongebob, we have Gorillaz.





STITCHING IT TOGETHER: PART ONE

The creators of *Lilo & Stitch* tell the behind-the-scenes tale of the film that defied the way things were done at the House of Mouse—and succeeded far beyond expectations

words chris sanders

Any discussion of *Lilo and Stitch* inevitably leads back to 1995 and an apple orchard in Vermont. It had been roughly ten years since animation had returned to prominence at Disney studios and Michael Eisner had invited a group of us there to talk about the future. Roy Disney was in attendance, as was Tom Schumacher and several story guys and animators. Two revelations came out of the retreat. The first was that Michael Eisner knows all about growing apples, and thus would be a useful individual even if civilization collapsed. As for Dean and I, after a few weeks of telling stories around the campfire and making cave paintings, we would be eaten by the rest of our tribe. The second thing we learned in Vermont was that there was a feeling amongst everyone present that our films might be missing something.

With the growing success of our movies came the inevitable desire to improve on what we were doing, and in the slow-motion world of animation the opportunity to perfect things is all too available. But with all this polish, were we engineering away the quirks and idiosyncrasies that made the films of our past so charming? Could we make *Dumbo* today? We decided that we could, but to do it we would need to radically alter the way such a film would be made. Everyone present realized that such a feat could only be accomplished by a small, skilled crew

traveling quickly. But they would need the right story, one with more emotional content than characters.

Within a year, a candidate emerged. I had a rusted bit of a children's book I had abandoned in 1985 that I thought might have a better chance on film. Dean was enthusiastic about it, and I pitched it to Tom in the closing days of our story work on *Mulan*. Tom immediately saw its potential, but wisely insisted on developing it in secret, due to its rather delicate nature, lest it be drug over the internet coals before its time. For over a year it was known only as "the stealth project," and it immediately fulfilled our first ambition to keep it within only a small circle of story people until it was ready to roll into production.

But where to make it? California was booked, but the Florida studio had a gap they were waiting to fill. Originally used to assist the California facility in feature production, it had slowly been refining itself into a very capable place. It had grown smart—but not large—and this was important since we were planning to pay for our story freedom by keeping our production budget down. *Mulan* was created almost entirely there, and the entire studio had shown a great capacity to try new things. Its remote location also insured some level of privacy that would be good for us.

Actually, most things about *Lilo* can be traced back to *Mulan*. The story of *Mulan* was epic, and its adaptation to the screen

took quite a while due to its sensitive nature. There are several groups of people in the front-end of an animated film, and communication between them takes a certain amount of time. Directors might pass information to the writers, who send pages to story crews who pitch them to directors who send them to editorial who show them to directors, writers, and story crews who then launch into colorful conversations of a personal nature that can last several days, whereupon you might begin the process again. Now, this is good in that it actually is an engine of great creativity. But it also takes time, and runs the risk of examining itself to the point that you might lose some of the very idiosyncrasies we wanted to protect. So Dean and I made the choice to attempt writing, directing, and storyboarding as much of the film as possible. This sounded like a good idea right up to the first time we were both awake at three o'clock in the morning trying to finish our boards before the next morning's pitch. So it was sometimes stressful, but it worked; we were able to make changes in a matter of days or hours as opposed to weeks.

The extra time Dean and I saved in production we used in attempts to kill ourselves. During a scalloping trip to Dead Man's Bay, Dean managed to lose track of the boat we came on and finally had to climb on to someone else's boat and begin driving around looking for us. Dean was shocked to find Ric Sluiter (our art director)

and I happily chatting, having mistakenly decided an hour ago that someone else we saw snorkeling was, in fact, Dean, who could have been well on his way to Cuba inside the belly of a shark by the time we would have figured out he was gone. Months later, Dean and I disagreed as to whether a huge, black shape we saw in a lake was a piece of wood or an alligator. I insisted it was wood and proceeded to prove it by swimming out to it for close-up identification. A hundred yards out, it turned toward me, thus confirming Dean's alligator theory. It was a *long* swim back.

So now that I have gone on and on about where the film came from, I'll let Dean talk about where it went. For a project that was so radically different from any we had worked on before, it was by far the most fun. Any limitations in the budget or schedule were compensated for by the very design of the film. The effects artists, for example, could handle the daunting surf sequence partially because our characters hardly ever cast a time-consuming shadow, and you wouldn't notice the lack of shadows because the art direction and backgrounds were designed to give the effect of soft light that wouldn't cast shadows in the first place.

The Vermont theory proved correct; we could indeed travel back in time if only we were bold enough to change the way we did things.

"I had a rusted bit of a children's book I had abandoned in 1985 that I thought might have a better chance on film. For over a year it was known only as 'the stealth project...'" —Chris Sanders

STITCHING IT TOGETHER: PART TWO

words dean deblois

For the past few months, Chris and I have been scrambling, cramming, and hurriedly trying to figure out what exactly we're doing next. Our world of possibilities seems wide open at the moment and because of *Lilo's* success, the powers that be seem interested and eager to hear new project ideas. There are several stories on the workbench and we've been spending the bulk of our time pounding them into shape and getting them into pitching form. In typical fashion, we've been bouncing from moments of excitement and revelation to paralyzing bouts of complete mental impasse. That's our process, I suppose. We have both come to believe that the story already exists, waiting to be discovered, and ours is the daunting task of helping it along without getting in its way. Ultimately, we have to somehow get the engine running. After a certain point, the story refuses to be manipulated—it takes on its own life and we merely become its service technicians, answering to its every need. Someone once told me that when asked about his approach to sculpture, Michelangelo replied, "I just cut away the pieces of marble that are not the sculpture." Not that our stories are comparable to Michelangelo's art—I just like his answer.

Every now and then I find it useful to just stop and look around. At the moment, there is a lot to be noticed. The environment both within and beyond the Walt Disney Feature Animation Studios has been noticeably altered from the early days of *Lilo and Stitch*. Back in 1997, computer animation was not the daunting box-office behemoth that it is now and

there was no concern that a traditionally drawn animated film might be overlooked simply because it was ... traditional. Quite the opposite; with the success of *The Lion King* only a couple of years past, we had ourselves believing that all traditional features in its wake would be received with great anticipation. It was a time of financial and artistic indulgence within our industry and the films were getting steadily bigger and, of course, more expensive.

When we set out, there was no safety or promise in the notion of attempting a film with "atypical" as its marching banner. Disney conventions had proved so fruitful that it seemed foolish to veer from the path. So in order to receive the studio's blessing, Chris and I promised to keep the costs down and deliver the film faster and with a smaller crew. Those were big promises for two guys who had never directed anything before, but we were fired up and willing to put our necks on the block for a chance to test a theory—that a well-told story will always compensate. Up until that point, majestic epics with large casts seemed to dominate the roster. With the grandeur and high price tags came the need to somehow guarantee returns. Enter the time-tested formulas. We had spent the bulk of *Mulan* doing our best to avoid conventions and yet they were scattered like land mines because of the familiar components of the story. When Chris had pulled me into a room and talked me through his concept for *Stitch*, I breathed a sigh of relief and thought, "Finally!" Something different had been born.

It's not that *Lilo and Stitch* is completely free of familiarity, but it starts where most

of our stories leave off, with the capture of a villain—and that alone was enough to get me excited. It felt like a fresh palette and it seemed to set the "unexpected" expectation for the rest of the film. Another relief was the story's anti-epic scope. It was the antithesis of what we had just worked on. The small, intimate scale is, by nature, character driven. I knew we would have no choice but to focus in tight on the personalities and their relationships. No room for crappy sidekick one-liners and tired slapstick gags. We made a commitment to each other to push and tug the story material until it yielded humor or warmth that felt sincere and born out of the moment. Too often we've seen pasted-on humor in an attempt to hide sloppy story work and/or shallow characters.

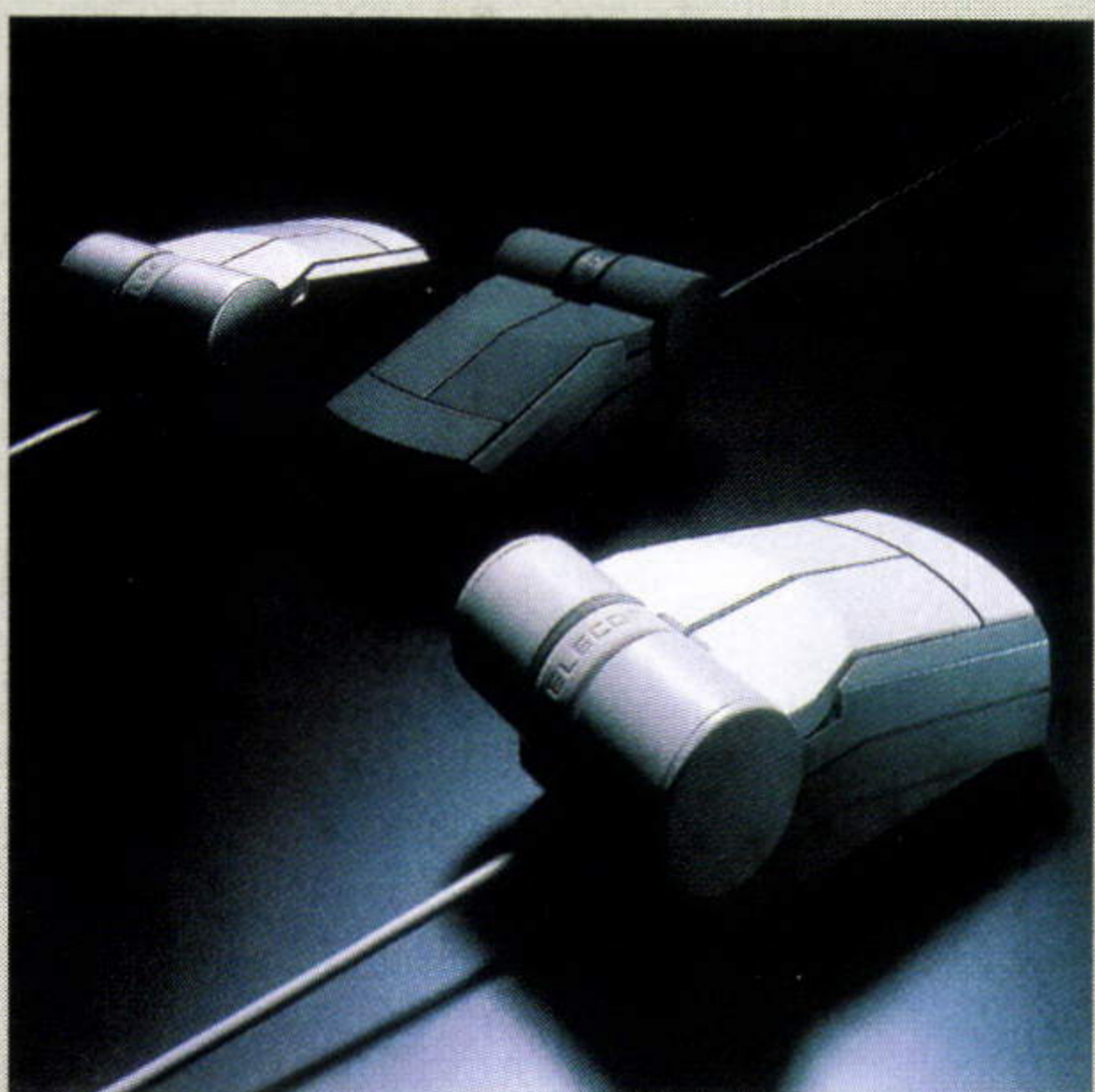
We also decided against a hyper-dimensional look and other visual bells and whistles that had become the norm, mostly because there was a bigger philosophy at play. Our mission was to make a film that relied solely on the emotions and whimsy of the story itself. We had opportunities to test that theory during the making of *Mulan*, so it seemed entirely plausible to us. I've seen amazing, lush, exquisitely produced animation that dazzled the eye but otherwise left me feeling nothing because the story stunk or simply trudged along in a bland, predictable way. The latter is even worse, in my opinion, because so many failed story attempts have fresh ideas that were poorly executed. Safe storytelling is just ... non-committal. Unfortunately, it's all too common. It was really that frustration that fueled the quest for something unusual.

As I mentioned earlier, taking the occasional look around can be very helpful for me. I can gauge just how far we've come and whether or not it feels like progress. In the case of *Lilo and Stitch*, it does. Chris and I were after one thing: to open a door for unusual, quirkier, and in many ways, simpler stories. We thought if we could go out and not only compete, but succeed in a world of polished looks and dazzling film wizardry, then we will have proven our "story always wins out" point of view. Luckily, *Lilo* accomplished just that, and in the face of stiff competition. I remember the trade papers tracking an apparent heated battle for the box-office ... and our competitor was *Minority Report!* I thought, "How amazing is this?! We're actually neck in neck with a Steven Spielberg/Tom Cruise summer blockbuster!" Obviously, we were honored.

In the end (and it's still chugging along), *Lilo and Stitch* delivered on its promise and surpassed the studio's expectations. It's the first Disney hand-drawn feature in quite some time. More importantly, it seems to have genuinely struck a chord with audiences and the press—both domestic and international. There's no better measure of success than having someone tell me that they liked our work. The encouragement has gone a long way towards building our enthusiasm to generate more ideas and get them made. The world is wide-open, everything has changed, and I don't think I could ever go back. The experiment was a success—it lives! And now ... back to the kettle. **play**

"It's not that *Lilo and Stitch* is completely free of familiarity, but it starts where most of our stories leave off, with the capture of a villain—and that alone was enough to get me excited." —Dean DeBlois

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The mouse is the gateway to any personal computer, so why not enhance the user experience with a device of deep quality and stylish design? Especially these two examples, the top one being designed by Masamune Shirow (Ghost in the Shell) and the bottom one, Katoki Hajime (Gundam mechanical designer). Mice don't get any cooler than this.

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Recordable DVD/40GB HD
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The VCR won't die until products like this cost less than \$300, but the end is certainly near. Panasonic's DMR-HS2 is not only a DVD-R/DVD-RAM optical recorder, it also contains a 40 GB hard drive, allowing it store up to 52 hours of video internally in the Extended Play setting, which you can then burn onto a DVD-R or DVD-RAM for long term storage. Think of it as a TiVo with a DVD burner attached. But being all of a piece, the Panasonic can do so much more. A

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\$999

firewire port allows a digital video camera to be connected directly to the unit, allowing you to store your home videos on the hard drive for later burning. And you can even take your recorded programs and do a bit of non-linear editing, shifting scenes or episodes around at your whim. Finally, a front mounted PC card slot can accept Memory Stick, SD Media, CompactFlash, and Smart Media devices for the viewing and archiving of images from your digital camera.

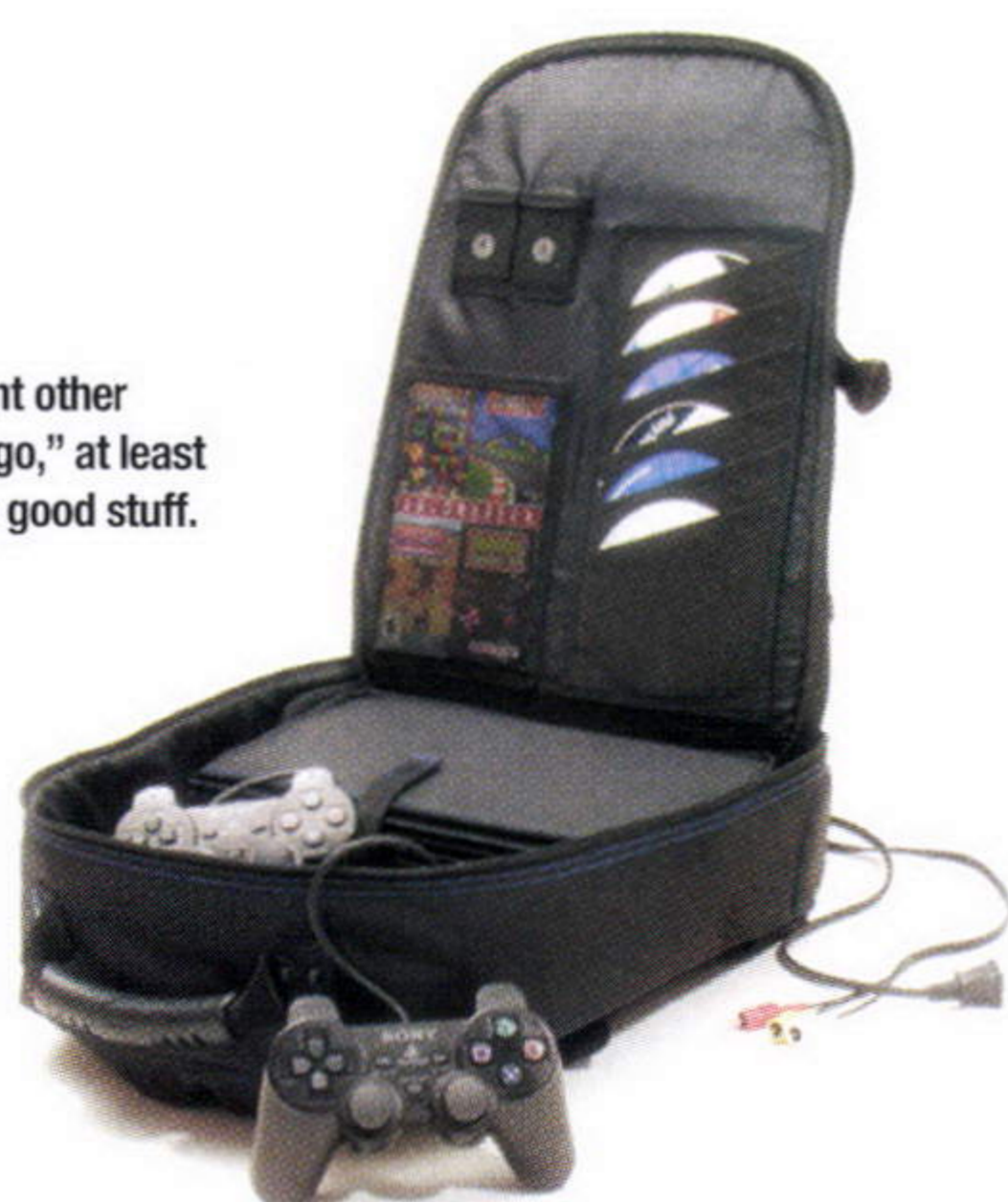
System carrier
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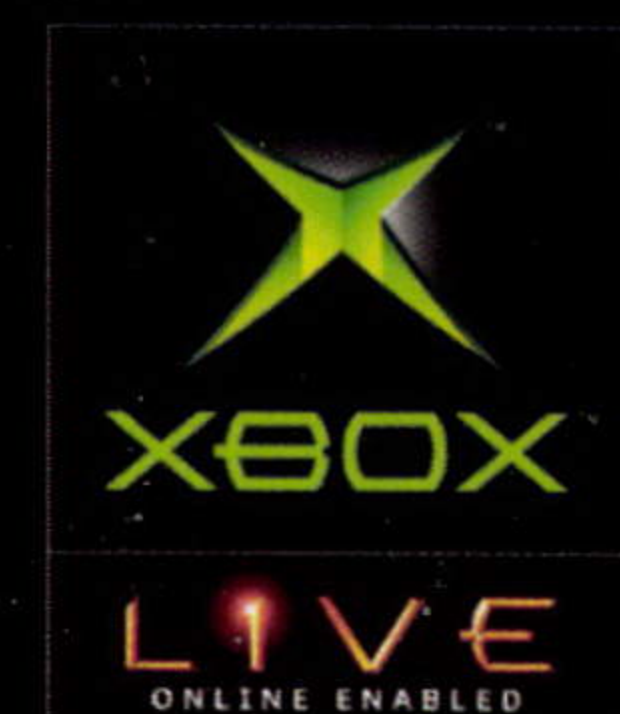
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Best Xbox Live Game: Unreal Championship

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November 2002

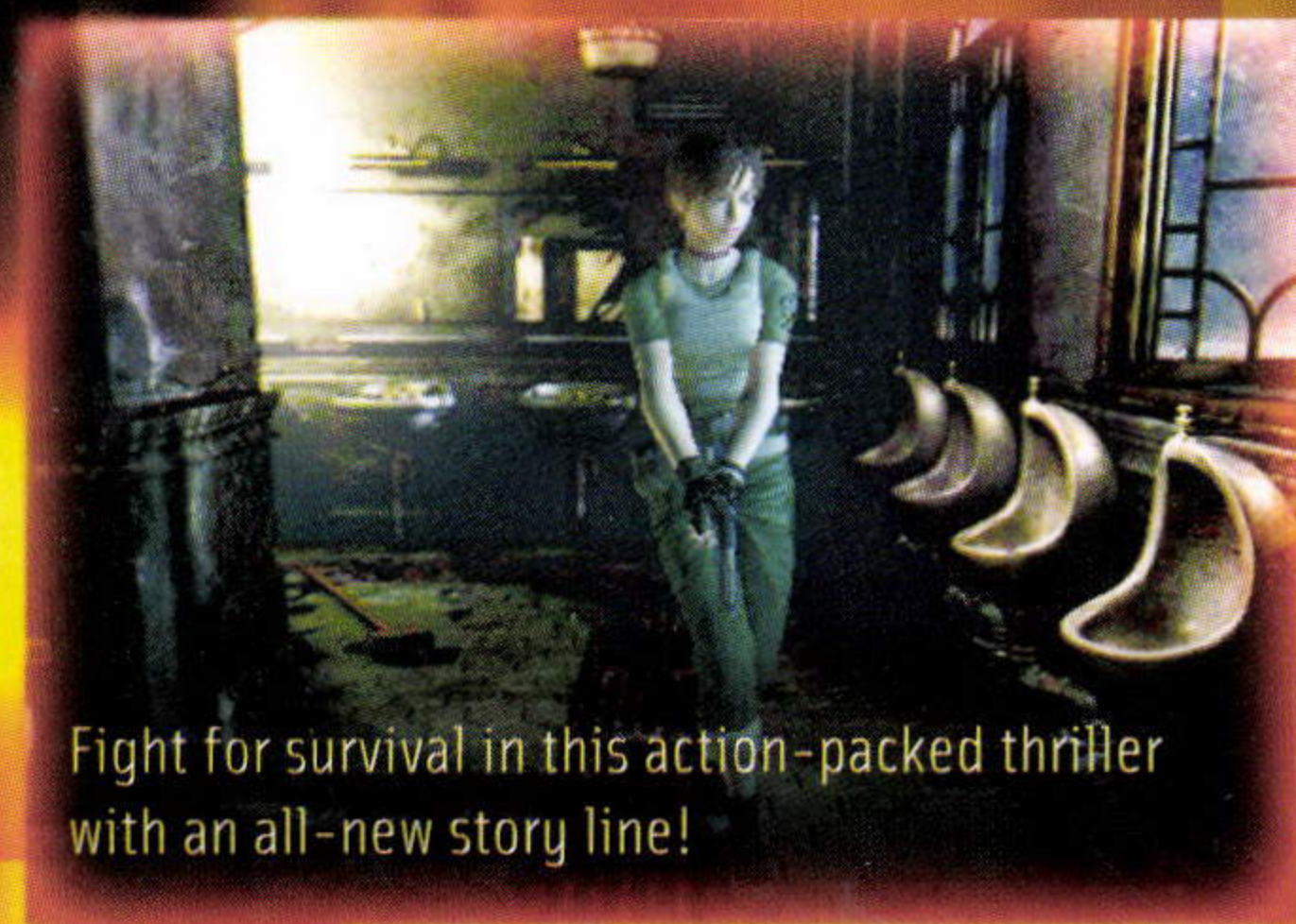
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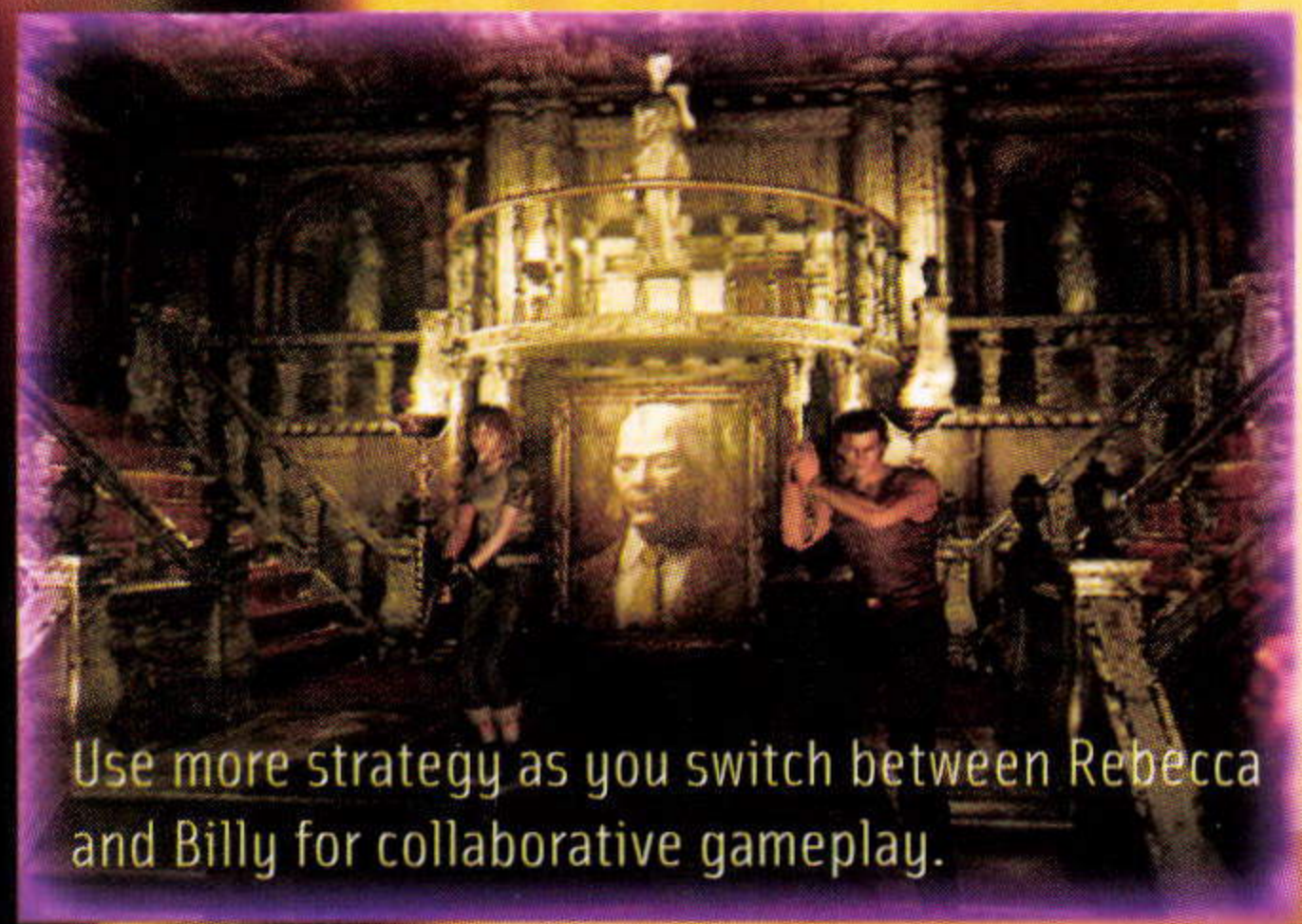
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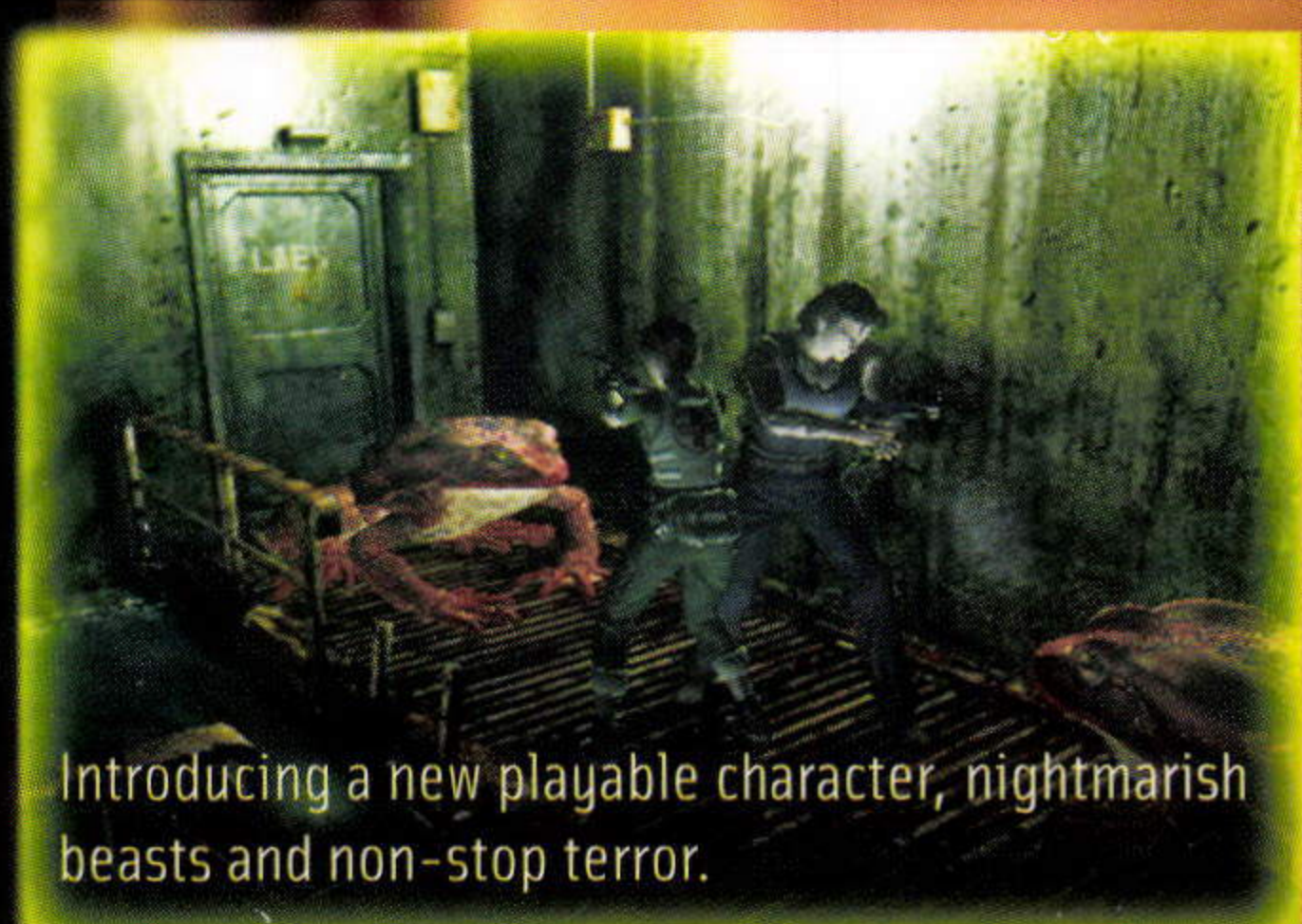
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