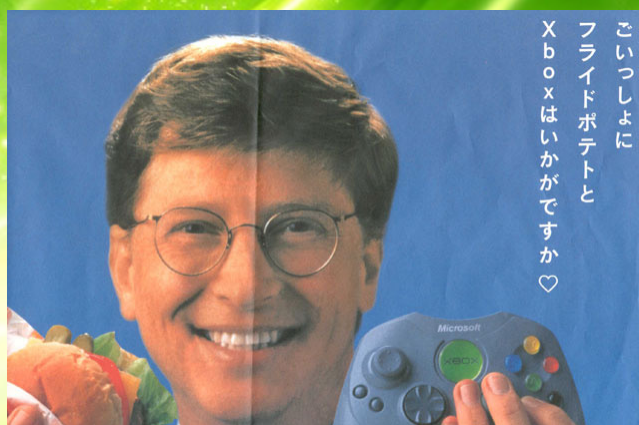


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フライドポテトと
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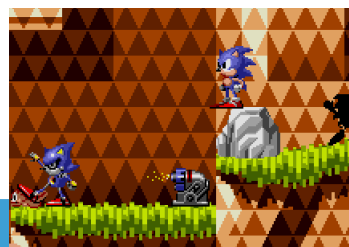


• PRESSING REPEAT •

This winter, we get the return of a *Sonic the Hedgehog* game that has received a consistent, if equal amount of lofty praise and burning criticism, and it's being put in a package fans previously only dreamt of. Since its release in 1993, *Sonic CD* has had a rough time trying to escape the shackles of the system it originated on. Sega's reliance on an old, less-than-perfect PC port just rubbed salt on the wound the last time they said they were bringing it back. But now the situation has changed, and a fanmade-turned-official port gives *Sonic CD* the white-glove treatment it deserves, letting a new generation and vastly larger audience give it a go, and to hopefully find an answer—as this piece does—to the most common question about it: Just what is the big deal about *Sonic CD*, anyway?

What makes *Sonic CD* memorable is not the obvious stuff. The average internet argument about a *Sonic* game tends to focus on its gameplay, like the difficulty or the level design or the physics (urgh). *Sonic CD* gets roped into that, too, but its greatest feature isn't actually that granular. It's the thing many folks like to bring up when talking about today's games: the *world*. When Sonic runs up onto the Little Planet, you see it's not like the zones he was dashing through on his home world. The mechanical invasion of the planet is seen gradually reaching across the game's levels, and it's only when you visit them in the past that they're at their purest.

The look of these levels is also not a typical Sonic aesthetic. At the beginning, Palmtree Panic may look like Green Hill Zone, but it's different; more sun-baked, and with that crazy giant ramp at the beginning. It's better. The geometric art of its predecessors is made rougher and somewhat colder, resulting in something pretty bold. But *Sonic CD*'s world is also full of weirdness big and



small: Sonic moves a little loosely. His jumping sound isn't right. Amy barely serves a purpose to the story. The time travel effect looks pretty lame. Much of the game doesn't feel finished, but what was finished is nonetheless admirable.

Levels in early *Sonic* games gained a reputation as speed-heavy jaunts where you keep going straight until you win, but most of them are large and somewhat labyrinthine, encouraging and rewarding exploration—it's not simply alternate paths to the same goalpost. In *Sonic CD*, this is kicked up a notch to make almost every stage wide open in some way, and then adding time travel on top of them, where the past and future versions have slight but noticeable changes—in some cases getting a little clever, like when Sonic zooms through time in the middle of an open half-pipe that's closed off in the past, causing him to comically dash right up into a ceiling. Admittedly, this is *Sonic CD*'s biggest flaw: the levels can feel *too* big, especially when you're looking for the robot generators that need destroying, which usually take some creative platforming to find. This leads to a surprising and disappointing reliance on backtracking and poking around just to make sure you accomplish what you need in order to complete the game instead of just "beating" it.

Sonic CD is also, for better or worse, quite a product of its time. Its graphics are one thing, but its soundtrack(s) are like little time capsules from 1993. The original Japanese/European music is like no other *Sonic* soundtrack: a layering of electronica, groovy rhythms and even



heart-lifting rock that comfortably settles into the levels they're attached to, from the tropical party of Palmtree Panic to the rhythm factory of Wacky Workbench. By comparison, Spencer Nilsen's soundtrack for the American version is like something

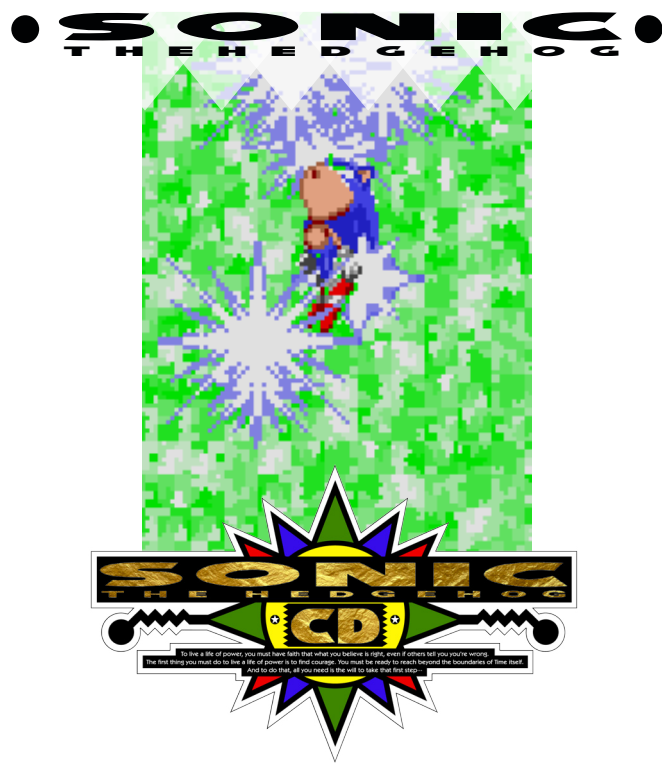
you'd get on the sampler CD that came with your Harman Kardon stereo system, but still managed to fit the mood of the stages well enough, if feeling like remixes of the Japanese version at times. So go the only two sides of the music argument: either the Japanese version is vastly superior, or they're both pretty good. (*SCROLL* goes with the latter.) In addition, everything about *Sonic CD*, from the art to the music, represented the potential of putting "CD" at the end of a big-name sequel. The '90s were the CD-ROM renaissance, and lofty promises about the future of video games came early and often. Favorite characters could be taken to strange new worlds with new friends and levels introducing new ways to explore, backed by pre-recorded music, animated mini-movies, and voice (well, not that there was much talking in *Sonic CD*). This was the time when a CD-ROM system from Nintendo was still a possibility—imagine a *Super Mario* CD game that had levels like no other *Mario* game before it and unorthodox graphics and sound. Unfortunately, it didn't pan out that way for Nintendo, unless you want to count their supremely odd licensed CD-i games. But for Sega, *Sonic CD* had to feel like a premium game on a premium system.



for making 2D games without wrestling too much with APIs and other crap. It also had portability in mind: indeed, the new *Sonic CD* is available on Windows, Windows Phone, Xbox 360, PS3, iOS, and Android. Whitehead originally used his engine for re-creating *Sonic CD* from the ground up, then actively tried to sell it to Sega. After a couple of years, they bit, making for an extremely rare and enviable occurrence: a fan project turned legit product. On top of the original, the new *Sonic CD* has

extra features including a playable Tails, a spin dash that doesn't look half-assed, and the ability to switch between the Japanese and American soundtracks. Though in a mind-boggling legal complication, the American songs had to be removed of their vocal tracks. Not as boggling as Sega pitching the game as a prequel to *Sonic 4*, though. But that's worth the compromise for the opportunity to visit the Little Planet once more.





“Ask not what others can do for you, but what you can do for others.”

• • • Sonic



Microsoft's Xbox was released in Japan on February 22, 2002. In the months and years leading up to that day, there were many hurdles ahead, but the company's goal of getting the Japanese to buy it was less of a hurdle and more like an 18-story brick wall. In other words, it didn't stand a chance. The Xbox was touted as a haven for the hardcore, but in Japan, it was a little too much of one. In a foreign land still governed by the sensibilities of the '80s game market, the Xbox was mocked, dismissed, and just plain misunderstood. After nearly a decade, the dust has settled, the retirement years roll on, and a story can be told.

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a bright blue sky filled with soft, white, puffy clouds. In the upper right corner, there are faint, white, hand-drawn style lines that form concentric arcs, resembling orbital paths or a celestial diagram. Three small 'X' marks are placed at the intersections of these lines.

The Unknown Xbox

The signs were everywhere.

Literally—Xbox signs were all over Tokyo. It was October 2001, on the eve of the autumn Tokyo Game Show, and banners and billboards with the Xbox logo could be found over the entrances of train stations and prominently displayed on the fronts of stores. TGS was the final stage on which Microsoft would show off their first game console before it was released in America a month later. For the company's grand entrance into the console world, a business that was a few shades different than the computer world they were so used to, Microsoft knew that Japan was an important market. It had to be—it was the one that made the Xbox a possibility.

The months leading up to TGS were mostly jubilant for Microsoft. Like a debutante in a new gown floating onto the ballroom, the Xbox console's final form was revealed at the beginning of the year at the Consumer Electronics Show, along with the reaffirmation that yes, this is really happening, and yes, there are games, and yes, it's going to deliver graphics that give a head start—however brief—on PC games. And the Xbox had a doozy of a home field advantage: American gamers love anything that looks like it kicks the ass of what came before it. The Xbox, being born and bred in the homeland, with first-person shooters and cool sports games, could potentially seduce most of the young heterosexual males the industry depended on. But then, a bump in the road: the excitement met some doubt that year at E3, when critics didn't seem too enthused about the launch lineup, including a rough build of Bungie's oft-delayed, recently-retooled *Halo*, but there were still months to go, and in *Halo*'s case, it *had* to come together. The road still stretched into the horizon.

No matter how far Microsoft got on the road, the ride could only get bumpier. As impressive as the Xbox was, Sony had kickstarted that console generation a year earlier with the PlayStation 2, and Nintendo, the old warhorse that everyone still kept an eye on, was shipping their new GameCube in the fall, alongside the Xbox. Sony, having once been the newcomer themselves and subsequently dominating the previous generation, had the least to worry about. Nevertheless, the 21st century's first era of consoles was about to get its first great three-way war.

TGS opened on October 12, and the Xbox booth was the biggest at the show. This showed that Microsoft wasn't just spending money on plastering the city with Xbox ads, but on its huge TGS centerpiece, with several dozen Xbox stations offering playable demos, display cases showing the console and its accessories, a dedicated presentation stage (a commonality among the bigger TGS booths), and an LED canopy that turned the whole thing into a miniature Fremont Street Experience. But something was off: the massive space looked like a black hole trying to suck in all matter that surrounded it. In a way, that was true—if you glanced over at the booth, all you'd see was the harsh green Xbox logo repeated over a black expanse. That works fine for E3, where the level of spectacle is higher (and where Microsoft has home field advantage), but for the company to enter TGS with guns blazing no doubt seemed like a show of force that probably put off more Japanese than it attracted. It was a maneuver that would have been better used later in the war.

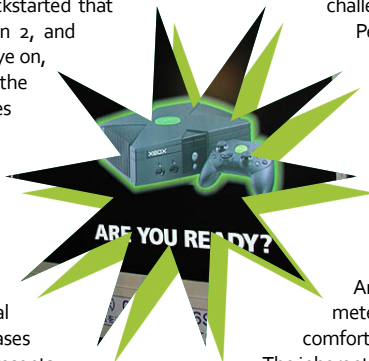
But in some respects, Microsoft didn't exactly have a choice in the matter. Showmanship regardless, their TGS presence was not intended to pitch the Xbox as a 100-percent all-American console, in spite of public perception. They had a few partnerships with Japanese developers, and needed to maintain that they felt Japan was an important market. Therefore, the game selection at TGS tried to focus on Japanese-made titles from partners like Tecmo and Konami, but it was tough to peg a winner in the lineup regardless of the country it came from, especially when Sony's booth was yards away showing off heavy-hitters like *Ico* and *Wild Arms 3*. After the end of TGS, few people, from analysts to journalists to gamers and other casual observers, thought the Xbox had a chance in Japan.

On January 11 2002, Microsoft held a press conference in Japan—more subdued than their TGS booth, to be sure—to announce their finalized Xbox

launch plan. The system would be released the following month, on February 22, at a price of 34,800 yen, celebrating with a launch event that day at a venue in the middle of Shibuya. Being the “new kid,” the Xbox could be excused for being the most expensive of the three new consoles, but it was still quite a leap over the American price tag of \$299. But that was just half the story: the launch would feature a second Xbox model; a translucent gray special-edition system with a component video cable and metal keychain engraved with a serial number and Bill Gates' signature—all for a staggering 50,000 yen. Even today, it takes game systems several months before they're available in a new color, but the Japanese Xbox was going big right from the start. Was it over-compensation, or more proof of inflated self-importance? Whatever it was, it was certainly unorthodox.

On the bright side, a dozen launch titles would be available, and nine of them were made in Japan. This included new, enhanced Xbox versions of Konami's *Silent Hill 2* and Capcom's *Onimusha*, both smash hits on PlayStation 2 (*Onimusha* was the PS2's first million-seller). There were some questionable titles, like Konami's newest *Airforce Delta* game and a couple of other lowlights from the TGS showcase, but the crown jewel was Tecmo's *Dead or Alive 3*, a favorite of the American launch. *Halo*, the darling of the platform, was still a few months away, accounting for its Japanese localization. Aside from that absence, Japan's launch lineup was comparable to America's in terms in breadth. For years, consoles launched in Japan with pitiful game selections, and the Xbox could have easily had it as bad, if not worse. And Microsoft had repeatedly stated that the Japanese market was both important and challenging for them; that they'd be silly to simply ignore it.

People could say that with some of the country's biggest game makers supporting them, they had no choice. But whatever optimism left hanging was being tugged hard by the high prices for the console, so Microsoft wasn't quite off the hook yet.



No matter how good the launch titles were, the Xbox was doubtlessly made with Americans in mind, but Microsoft did have to concede one part of it to Japan: the controller. The original American Xbox controller was designed to fill every last millimeter of the inside of a player's hand, the goal being maximum comfort as thumbs traveled between buttons and analog sticks.

The inherent compromise of that goal was that the size of the controller was beastly, nearly as big as a game console itself (it positively engulfed Sony's diminutive PS One, for example). The final controller made it easy for critics to peg as a classic case of systematic bias in a focus group, where subjects may end up with one result that doesn't exactly reflect the consensus of the real world. But the Xbox team had also deferred to Microsoft's PC hardware team, designers of their Sidewinder line of gaming accessories, to make the Xbox controller. Sidewinder gamepads were not impractical and sold well as a result, but their designs were still a bit unnaturally designed compared to console controllers, and that probably had just as much of a contributing factor to the controller's overdone development.

In fairness, Microsoft made more than a few smart decisions about the outside of the Xbox: the ethernet port; the asymmetrical analog sticks; the long, breakaway controller cords—but not the size of the controller itself. Perhaps it was for gamers, but a marketer's definition of gamer: big, adult men aged 18-35 who eat big sandwiches and swing big hammers. Japan didn't have as many of those. In fact, the number of them who were gamers were counterbalanced by all the kids, parents, and young women who were just as often around video games of all kinds for more than 20 years. Japan was also a classic small-controller country: the Famicom and its competition all had diminutive, rectangular gamepads, a form that the industry kept for a while until the 32-bit era, when the PlayStation controller—itsself constantly iterated in the prototype stage—turned the classic flat controller into an oddly-shaped but more naturally held device. And it didn't need to fill your hand.

Interestingly, the Japanese Xbox controller was almost always intended to be a smaller, friendlier design. Microsoft had the two designs in production at the same time, and the small one was always seen in Japanese promo material. It was still the largest controller of the current consoles—blame the two memory unit ports bulging out of the back—but was pretty sensible compared to its big sibling. The hulking American pad became the butt of many jokes soon after launch, and later in 2002, the Japanese model was sold overseas as a “limited edition” (idle conjecture suggested they were surplus units unsold in Japan). The fact of the matter was that the Japanese controller was just as comfortable as the American one, with the same functionality, and without wasting as much plastic. By the end of the year, Microsoft rechristened it as the Controller S, and it became the new worldwide standard.

The moment of truth finally arrived on February 22. As promised, Microsoft’s Shibuya event kicked in around 6:00 AM at the local QFront store, and despite whatever cynicism preceded it, there were plenty of Japanese gamers lined up to buy an Xbox. Bill Gates was in Shibuya to hand over the first systems sold, just as he did in the US. The nearby Starbucks gave out coffee in Xbox-branded cups. Star game developers like Yuji Naka showed up. Anecdotal evidence from a GameSpot news report said most buyers were walking away with the pricey limited edition console, and in general, few were buying games along with it. As expected, *Dead or Alive 3* was the most popular game in the launch lineup, with many of the others left by the wayside. Any extravagant, orchestrated launch event is going to look like it went off without a hitch, and the debut of the Japanese Xbox was no exception.

Instead, the hitches began to appear in the days that followed. New Xbox owners started complaining on the internet that their systems were defective. They said it was scratching game discs, with the laser mechanism apparently rubbing against the discs’ surface and creating indelible circles. Almost every CD-based console had technical problems up to that point; for years after the PlayStation 2 was out, gamers were contending with its occasional failure to read discs. At the American launch, the Xbox did have assorted technical problems that affected some owners, but the biggest one concerned the hard drive, and it hardly turned into an epidemic.

But in Japan, a smaller country with an even smaller Xbox audience, the

used the same “pu-lay-stay-shun” sound bite since the ‘90s, Microsoft adopted a second-long feedback squeal that the ad agency could have called a “disruption” of gaming norms, but it was just plain disruptive. And without big titles like *Halo* coming after launch, it was the third-parties’ responsibility to promote their own games in non-endemic advertising in the early months. But none of the ads seemed to be boosting sales: at the end of 2002, Xbox sales in Japan were around 850,000 units.

Without a lot they could successfully advertise in the mainstream, Microsoft instead opted for regular launches of internet ad campaigns, either on the official Xbox site or through media partners. In 2003, They had a venerable toy box of ad campaigns that they used to extoll the virtues of Xbox games to the nation’s gamers, but mostly those who had already hopped on the bandwagon. One promotion, the “FPS” campaign, tried to push a handful of then-recent Western-made shooters. Another campaign for a recent spate of arcade ports featured the endorsement of Arashi Ishino, cartoon hero of the campy early ‘80s manga series *Game Center Arashi*, shown making his classic action poses while wearing an Xbox Live headset. Arashi was an amusing pop culture character for the 25-and-up set, but Microsoft really didn’t do much with him—promoting arcade ports was certainly fitting, but the potential to use him as a mascot for the entire brand was either wasted or unattainable. Among this, Microsoft also linked to a number of “official fan sites”—legit Japanese Xbox fans who had slick-looking fan pages dedicated to news and information.

It was this internet-based initiative that showed no matter how hard they tried to deny it, Microsoft had to live with the fact that the Xbox was an “otaku” system. Just as some gamers in the West obsessed over the newest Japanese games that may or may not be sold in their own country, savvy Japanese gamers fascinated with American and European games made sure to have an Xbox around. Meanwhile, Japan’s gaming majority had long since made up their minds. The console was gigantic, expensive, and simply didn’t look as well-designed as the PlayStation 2 or GameCube. And even though not every Japanese home is the size of a shoebox, the impracticality of finding a place for

an Xbox was without a doubt one of the first things that kept consumers from considering owning one. This was, after all, the market that had built quite a cultural legacy in the 8- and 16-bit era, when small and light consoles like the Famicom and

Mega Drive were meant to be pulled out from under the TV and set down in front of you on the floor. Suffice to say, kids probably couldn’t and shouldn’t try lifting an Xbox. Of course, the game library was just as much of a sticking point as the size of the console—there were big-name, big-budget titles coming out, but everything else was fairly inconsequential to the average Joe; more otaku games for game otaku.

The indifference among the public was harmful, but not as actively harmful as how the Xbox was treated at retail. It seemed as though immediately after the launch, Xbox games were shuffled to the far corners of stores to make room for the competition, and anecdotes like that were common. The larger electronics stores were “nicer” in that they were a little more receptive to Microsoft and gave them respectable floor space, but in smaller shops, it was like a family trying to keep visitors from seeing their crazy grandpa.

However, the Xbox flopped in Japan not just because of the consumers, but because of Microsoft themselves. From beginning to end, it seemed like the company’s Japanese branch just didn’t quite “get it” when it came to the game industry. And it all seemed to do with the curious case of an American-made game system trying to do well in Japan; the inventor appealing to the reinventor. It’s a particular culture clash that’s unique to the video game industry, or at least more pronounced.

The reverse of the problem happened just over a decade earlier than the Xbox launch. At the end of the ‘80s, NEC’s American branch, NEC Technologies, was tasked with producing and marketing the PC Engine, the new game system from its Japanese parent. The PCE scored serious cred from hardcore gamers overseas ever since it was released in 1987, and the American version, the TurboGrafx-16, could have had the same cred once it was released. But NEC Technologies wasn’t up to the task. Their knowledge of video game marketing seemed to be based on seeing what the competition was doing and aping it as best they could. The PC Engine was an underdog, but NECT’s failure to latch onto a competent marketing campaign doomed the TG-16 to

No matter how much they denied it, Microsoft had to live with the Xbox as an otaku system

disc-scratching issue became amplified. Microsoft publicly responded to the complaints (nearly 600 by early March), and said that they would offer free repairs or replacements to any Xbox owner that wanted it. That solution allowed the company to stress that this wasn’t a recall, as they found that the scratching was not bad enough to damage the playing of the software, and that the number of systems affected was under one percent of what was out there. Nevertheless, the vitriol spread, and gamers pegged the Xbox as a lemon as soon as it settled itself in the Japanese market. (As if on cue, the exact issue came up years later when the Xbox 360 was first released, but in that case, it was a drop in the bucket compared to its other problems.)

It wasn’t just technical concerns that cropped up in the early months. Microsoft was coy about unit numbers before the launch, but eventually, they revealed that 250,000 Xbox consoles were shipped to Japanese retail. At the end of launch week in February, they had sold through around 105,000. By comparison, shipped units in America had passed one million by the end of 2001. But unfortunately for Japan, games like *Dead or Alive 3* don’t come out every week. Even before the Xbox was released anywhere, it was criticized as a loss leader for Microsoft; a system too state-of-the-art and with too much promotion invested in it to make a profit. And with a system priced at roughly 350 dollars in a country that was never quite clamoring for it, the picture painted was far from rosy.

Besides games, the best line of defense Microsoft could work with in Japan was marketing. The common barb is that Microsoft doesn’t need to innovate, much less advertise, but in Japan, they were simultaneously a computer giant and a gaming tadpole. After launch, the Xbox logo and its black void were no longer relegated to trade shows and city blocks—now they were on television, more prominent in magazines, and probably in a few more train stations they missed the first time around. On TV, Xbox ads were prefaced by the Xbox “sound.” Like Sony’s PlayStation ads, which have



permanent underdog status. With Nintendo, you “played with power.” The Sega Genesis “did what Nintendo’t.” The TurboGrafx... had turbo graphics, and even though it got a lot of ad placement in magazines, that never really put the TurboGrafx on a pedestal. As expected, those same hardcore types who loved the PC Engine also paid a lot of respect to the TG-16, but the rest of the kids playing NES, Super NES and Genesis just weren’t paying attention, due to NEC’s imperfect storm of technically middling hardware and no games really, truly worth treasuring to them.

History was not on the Xbox’s side. No game system made outside of Japan managed to gain a foothold there, from the Atari 2600 on through to the 3DO platform, which had done the best job before the Xbox, in a relative sense—in every case, they entered when larger console wars were being waged. On the other side of the world, it was kind of remarkable what a newcomer like Microsoft had accomplished: in just a few years’ time, they developed and produced a legitimate game console that could compete favorably with the giants of the industry. Yet with the history of American-made failures in Japan, the Xbox’s bumpy road in the land of the rising sun was par for the course.

The “face” of the Xbox in the press did not belong to just one person. Bill Gates, J Allard, Ed Fries, Seamus Blackley, Robbie Bach—everyone but Gates had their hands in the nitty-gritty of making the Xbox, and were all responsible for different approaches to promoting it to the public, whether on stage or in an interview. In the beginning, Microsoft Japan had just one face: Hirohisa “Pat” Ohura, the managing director of their Xbox division. Ohura had commanded the announcements and press conferences, and fielded the questions in interviews as dutifully as he could. Being raised in the US, Ohura could have been a crucial link between the two Microsofts, but in November of 2002, eight months after the Japanese Xbox launch, Ohura stepped down from his post, moving to Microsoft’s headquarters in Seattle to do other work.

It was almost another year before Ohura was officially replaced, but in September of 2003 Microsoft had finally decided. The new face was Yoshihiro Maruyama, who had left Squaresoft just before, where he was senior VP and chief operating officer, altogether working there since 1995. As Square merged with Enix, Maruyama merged with Microsoft, and with more dedicated game industry experience than Ohura, it was understandable why he was hired. He was also a slightly hipper-looking guy, or as much as a Japanese executive could be; he favored wearing shirts without a tie or jacket. He was generally more personable in public, too, not unlike his hoodie-blazer-clad counterparts overseas. His new number two was Mike Fischer, an American previously at Sega, and likely brought on board as another crucial link between East and West who, funnily enough, later went to head up Square Enix USA.

While the faces were new, the hardships were all the same. 2003 was probably the Xbox’s best year in terms of original Japan-made games, but by the end of the year, system sales were still light years away from breaking two million, even after the launch of Xbox Live, the one feature Microsoft could confidently hold over the heads of its competition. Maruyama had stayed with Microsoft up through the launch of the Xbox 360, and though it was fun to think his ties to Square could lead to finally getting their games on Xbox, that wouldn’t happen until the next generation, and long after he was gone.

Not everything about the Xbox in Japan is a sob story. Three Japanese game companies got more out of the Xbox than their competitors did, and all for different reasons.

The first company, Tecmo, had a second chance thanks to Microsoft’s machine. A veteran of the industry since the arcade golden age, Tecmo had stayed around for the Famicom boom, where it created worldwide hits like *Solomon’s Key*, *Ninja Gaiden*, and *Tecmo Bowl*. Their high points were less frequent in the 16-bit generation, and they would have been forgotten in the 32-bit era were it not for a fleeting success with the *Monster Rancher* franchise (and a cult favorite like *Deception* here and there). But it was the slow rise of a little fighting game called *Dead or Alive* that threw them into their second renaissance. Originally, *DOA* looked like a repackaging of Sega’s *Virtua Fighter* games, but as the sequels came along, the series became known

for its own brand of speedy back-and-forth fighting and, yes, the impossibly buoyant boobs of its female cast. Anything to get ahead.

Team Ninja, the internal group responsible for *DOA*, had taken their games to the best hardware available at the time. *DOA1* was originally a Model 2 arcade game; later, *DOA2* utilized Sega’s Naomi arcade system, which made a Dreamcast port relatively easy. But when Microsoft came knocking on Tecmo’s door, Team Ninja and its leader Tomonobu Itagaki went with the Xbox as the sole home for *Dead or Alive 3*, considering all that the console could and would be capable of. In the end, everybody won: Team Ninja made *DOA3* one of the most impressive-looking games of the Xbox launch, which pushed it to the front of Tecmo’s portfolio, and Microsoft got a Japanese showpiece they could trot out as proof of the support they were getting in the East.

Tecmo became a treasured ally to Microsoft in Japan—not only did they dedicate the *Dead or Alive* series to the Xbox, they revived the long-dormant *Ninja Gaiden* franchise on it, creating a super-challenging action game that looked even better than the *DOA* games. Tecmo was also one of only two third-party companies to get a limited edition Xbox: the “Kasumi-chan Blue” set, commemorating the release of *Dead or Alive Ultimate* (well, and its ninja pinup girl Kasumi, of course).

The second company, Sega, was starting a new life. 2001 was not the company’s best year: its Dreamcast system was tanking all around the world, despite a strong start in America in the fall of 1999, with Sega of America’s then-president Peter Moore saying that the launch day would be the “greatest 24 hours in entertainment.” Indeed, those 24 hours made the Dreamcast seem like a killer system in America, as if it were the second coming of the Genesis. It had everything: action, fighting, racing and sports, all with incredible graphics and the promise of live online multiplayer. But one day’s worth of excitement couldn’t prepare Sega for the PlayStation 2, which launched in 2000 and seemed to cause mass hysteria worldwide. Sega saw it coming, but were still gut-punched by Sony. The momentum for the Dreamcast and its games got slower as the PS2 got closer, and by the end of 2000, the Dreamcast, much like the Japanese Xbox, had become the system for extra-nerdy gamers rather than the hip influential ones.

Sega had a few more big releases in 2001, but rather than go into denial about the competition, they decided to cut the suffering short. In June of that year, Sega announced that they were effectively discontinuing the Dreamcast. In fact, they were never going to make another console. Like the old saying

In the summer of 2001, Sega dumped the Dreamcast. By fall, they had three new ones

goes, “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em,” and Sega did just that: they were already making games for the PlayStation 2, GameCube, and Xbox. The company was probably in the best position in its history then, if not ever: for once, they only had to worry about making games and not what you put them in, and that’s what people loved most about them in the first place. While bittersweet for its fans, the transition was sensible and promising. In the summer of 2001, Sega dumped the Dreamcast. By fall, they had three new ones.

However, it was the Xbox that carried the Dreamcast spirit the furthest. At first, that was almost literal—*Shenmue II* was moved to Xbox for America due to the Dreamcast’s exit, and titles like *Jet Set Radio Future*, *Crazy Taxi 3* and *Gunvalkyrie* were no doubt projects that started on Dreamcast before being “upgraded,” but they also signified a creative philosophy that hadn’t yet died out. On the whole, Sega’s core strengths in games on the Dreamcast were in sports and arcade ports, and the Xbox got plenty of those throughout. They even gave it surprising sequels like *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, *House of the Dead III* and *ToeJam & Earl III*.

Sega was so supportive of the Xbox that they adopted it into their arcade division. A new arcade board called “Chhiro” was essentially an Xbox with more memory, and gave way to stunning games like *Ollie King*, *Virtua Cop 3*, *Ghost Squad*, and *OutRun 2*—ironically, only *OutRun* made it to the actual Xbox. In starting their new life, Sega became one of the most prolific Japanese publishers on Xbox, giving their fans a few ways to cope with the death of the Dreamcast, and seeing Microsoft’s system to its end, too.

The third company, From Software, was a proud underdog that found a new part of itself. It already had once before: From started out as a maker of business software in the late ‘80s, and it took until 1994 before they jumped into the game industry, producing one of the first PlayStation games: *King’s Field*, a first-person RPG. After that was *Armored Core*, a mech action game with an emphasis on customization and tuning that appealed to the more obsessive



robot nerds. Neither game was the best ever made, but because they were so interesting, they endured, and became the pillars that the company stood on for the next decade. But endurance didn't always lead to evolution—there was always *something* wrong with a From game that invariably confused or irritated players who didn't know what they were getting into, and on the whole, their games weren't concerned with great graphics. But rather than those flaws burying From Software, they kept them noticed. Discerning gamers caught on to what From was doing, and simply loved them for what they were rather than what they could have been. Whether they really meant to or not, From became a treasured underdog of Japanese game companies.

The arrival of a hardware underdog in the form of the Xbox couldn't have been better timed for From. *King's Field* and *Armored Core* were the biggest slices of the company's pie, but more generally, it was RPGs and giant robot games that they specialized in. Recognizing that Microsoft's system was going to be a smorgasbord of action games, From stuck with those, never once making an RPG (they saved those for the Sony systems). Their first Xbox title was *Murakumo*, where you played a flying mech chasing other flying mechs across cityscapes and trying to shoot them down. It wasn't much more than that, so it didn't really make a splash. However, the tide turned several months later, when From released its next Xbox project: *Otogi: Myth of Demons*, an action game with great graphics, an expected high level of difficulty, and placement as From's most well-realized game to that point. Sega picked up the international publishing rights for *Otogi*, thrusting the game into "cult classic" status. A sequel followed, as well as the interesting RTS *Thousand Land*, and the mech action game *Metal Wolf Chaos*, a game so over the top that the top couldn't even be seen. Thanks to the Xbox, From entered a sort of mini-renaissance in the early 2000s, where they produced a lot of games, several of them brilliant, and most of them on Xbox.

The rest of the big Japanese publishers were, at best, lukewarm towards Microsoft. Namco was the consummate workhorse, providing sure bets like *SoulCalibur II* and *Namco Museum*, but otherwise treating the Xbox as just another console. Their first-person action game *Breakdown* was their sole exclusive, and managed to gain some admiration among the hardcore. Konami worked similarly to Namco, but they barely made any original Xbox games at all, instead concentrating on ports that appeared on the other consoles on or around the same time. While some of those games were better on Microsoft's machine, Konami's overall level of quality in those years meant it hardly made a difference.

Capcom wasn't much better. *Genma Onimusha* was a nice early grab, but whatever exclusive games they brought to Xbox seemed to be the junk they knew wouldn't sell elsewhere, like the dreadfully generic racing game *Group S Challenge* and the franchise-killing *Dino Crisis 3*. *Steel Battalion* and its massive multi-piece control panel gained notoriety, and deservedly so, but it was definitely only something that would fly on Xbox, probably because Capcom thought a small production run on a system with the smallest audience wouldn't be as risky. Japan's other big companies, such as Square Enix, didn't even give Microsoft the time of day. The money train was being driven by Sony, running on tracks laid by Nintendo.

The rest of the Japanese influence on the Xbox came from a bunch of small, obscure companies that had numerous different origin stories: some came from the PC market, or spent most of their history serving as contract or sub-contract developers. The barrier to entry for publishing an Xbox game in Japan

was smaller than it was with the more tight-fisted Sony and Nintendo, so those small companies gave the Xbox game library a unique flavor in Japan. Weird RPGs, arcade shoot-em-ups, visual novels and love adventures, flight sims and more—rarely leaving Japan, and unfortunately relegated to being laughing stocks just like the system they belonged to.

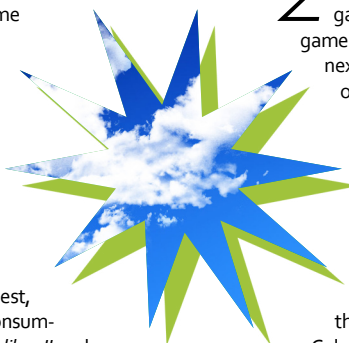
Microsoft themselves had commissioned quite a few games made in Japan, but none of them seemed to adhere to a cohesive vision in the same way that the American HQ had focused on hardcore action games. In other words, they were all over the map: *Jockey's Road*, *Kakuto Chojin*, *Sneakers*, *N.U.D.E.@*, *Magatama* and others—all from disparate genres, and virtually all commercial flops, even in the dismal realm of Japanese Xbox sales. The only Japan-borne game given an equal amount of promotion worldwide was *Blinx the Time Sweeper*, an action-platformer from the somewhat fresh-faced developer Artoon, led by Naoto Oshima, the original character designer of *Sonic the Hedgehog*. Its time-tweaking mechanics were clever, but the game just wasn't good enough to succeed. Shortly afterward, Microsoft bought Rareware, ensuring that Japan needn't worry with making any more cartoony action games for the foreseeable future.

2005 was the Xbox's last year of relevance. New games in Japan were almost all Western games or various arcade game ports. And after five years of making a loss-leading game console, Microsoft needed everybody on board for the next generation, as the Xbox 360 was revealed in the middle of the year and heading to stores in November. As such, the original Xbox was quickly abandoned everywhere, not just Japan, as room was cleared for the Xbox 360. It was a clean start for everybody, and the Japan branch probably needed it more than anyone.

In 2006, Japan's Xbox general manager Yoshihiro Maruyama left Microsoft, replaced by his right-hand man Takashi Sensui, then the overall marketing manager. Tall and handsome, Sensui had the right qualifications for the job: a Princeton grad who went on to business school at Columbia. He remains there today, continuing to be the public face of Xbox as the brand increasingly stands for all-inclusive entertainment and not just shooting games for hardcore gamers.

It's impossible to narrow the Xbox's failure in Japan to just one reason—there was just so much craziness going on in those four short years. Some of the reasons *sound* like they should be the one: that the console was too big; that the games were too serious; that Microsoft only cared about America anyway. Certainly, the console was huge and ugly; a consequence of its designers trying to fit everything in it while simultaneously showing it couldn't contain it. And it makes sense that to Japanese gamers, Xbox games weren't as appealing as those on the PlayStation 2, and they still carried a stigma even if they were.

Shades of this carried over immediately into the launch of the Xbox 360, where its Japanese sales have been proportionally worse than its predecessor, while at the same time receiving astronomically better support from Japanese game developers, thanks to an early push for RPGs and a general acknowledgement of the importance of the Western game industry. And yet in Japan, it remains an otaku system, and Microsoft continues to push and push and push it in every conceivable avenue to get the mainstream consumer to care. All things considered, it's possible that Microsoft will forever be unknown in Japan, predicated on the fumbles and foibles that resulted when they first stepped into the game industry there 10 years ago. Maybe they don't need to try anymore. Or maybe next time they'll just cut back on the signage.



THE WORLD COLLECTION



If Microsoft wanted to convince Japan's Xbox otaku that they were working hard to satisfy them, this was a rather unorthodox way of going about it. The "World Collection," introduced in the middle of 2003, took existing Western Xbox releases, reprinted them with Japanese Xbox region coding and brief Japanese-language manuals, and called it a day. The rationale was that they eliminated the wait for localized versions when hardcore enthusiasts just wanted interesting American games ASAP (and was ostensibly a boon to expats), but who's to say those same enthusiasts didn't already own imported American Xboxes? And because the required level of effort was so low, the World Collection grew fast, with a truckload of games that couldn't all fit in this box. Silly as it all sounds, the World Collection was a fascinating experiment in official importing that hasn't really been repeated since—barely with current games, and certainly not at retail.



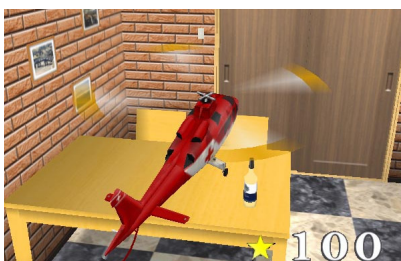


The Xbox may have received a tepid response in Japan, but many games were made for it there, and some even crossed the ocean. Not just *Dead or Alive* and *Ninja Gaiden*, but also *Jet Set Radio Future*, *Breakdown*, *Otogi*, and a few ports of PS2 favorites. If they weren't graphically impressive, they were at least incredibly unique, and attractive to hardcore gamers ever-interested in something new.

These aren't those games. These are the games that barely got out of the gate in their own country. While most of the big Japanese publishers saw the Xbox as a "might as well" sort of thing, several smaller companies took to it like a child with finger paints. There, they played to the strengths of the system: a cutting-edge platform with familiar architecture, an eager (if not desperate) manufacturer, and a small audience that may not have been *loyal* per se, but was willing to pay attention. From 2002 to 2005, these companies gave us different and crazy ideas. Not all of them pulled it off, mind you—in fact, some of the games you'll read about are downright awful—but they all have a story behind them, and that makes them just that much more special in the Xbox's history.



Aqua System
5.30.2002



Even before the Xbox was official, the rumor mill ran on the assumption that many games from the PC would be brought over to the console often and easily. Well, that certainly did happen, and Japan was quick to oblige. What most people probably didn't expect is that they weren't all going to be *top-tier* PC games.

Which brings us to *Petit Copter*. It was a rather simple PC game that was ported—also rather simply—to Xbox. Either way, it looks like a tech demo. Everything about it is sparse, rickety, and seemingly built from existing development libraries (a theory supported by the hilarious whip crack sound when choosing menu options). Not one part of this game justifies it being sold as a full-price retail Xbox game—and yes, it was. It's kind of the opposite of what Microsoft wanted the Xbox to stand for.

But it's also a little brilliant. The radio-controlled helicopter never really got its big chance to shine in video games, and it so obviously should. Granted, many people remember Shiny's *R/C Stunt Copter* on PS1, but that was a sleeper hit at best that also used a cartoony look and feel to ease players in to the world of toy

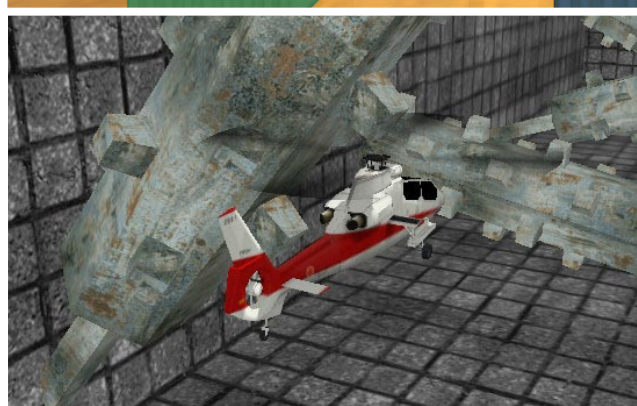
'coptering. Aside from a couple of absurdist touches, *Petit Copter* is all business, and the business is learning how to fly one of those R/C 'copters without going insane.

In *Petit Copter*, you have a smorgasbord of ways to test that sanity. In Challenge mode, you're given a suite of missions that test your skill in basic, but not always boring ways. Most of them require you to lift off from the helipad, perform the main objective—like destroying a few blocks with targets painted on them—then land safely on the helipad, and that last step is often the hardest. In Adventure mode, you can choose from a few large household areas that have stars precariously placed in their nooks and crannies, and sometimes are so hidden you need to go hunting for hotspots. Most of the time, though, it's just a pain in the butt: the first Adventure stage has a star placed right in between the seat of a chair and the underside of a desk, making it quite hard to reach without using surgical precision. Fun, right? Well, eventually those stages move out of the house and into veritable torture chambers where you have to navigate your 'copter through literal gauntlets of spiked clubs or humongous fan blades. It's then that you discover that *Petit Copter* has more charm than it was letting on.

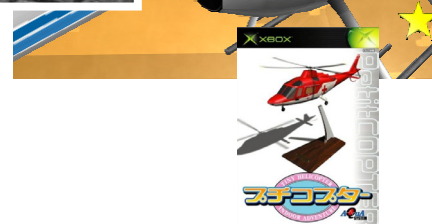
Helicopters can be tricky things to fly, though, whether or real or miniature. To the R/C enthusiasts, it's a worthy challenge, since it takes steady hands to maintain control of the resistive joysticks and keep the aircraft from flopping around in the air. Thanks to the two analog sticks on the Xbox controller, approximating that challenge is pulled off well in *Petit Copter*: the left stick pitches you back and forth, and the right stick controls altitude. Additional controls are RT for aiming and firing projectiles, plus LT as the "hover" button that immediately locks the 'copter in a position parallel to the ground. You can use that to be extra careful, though it's a start-and-stop method that can just screw you up just as much as trying to fly regularly.

The controls are simple, but the physics of the helicopters are not. However, beginners are not quite up the creek. The game defaults to the "easy" control style, that reduces the sensitivity of the 'copters and to make them a little less prone to winging in one direction until they hit a wall and clip their propellers off. Switch the controls to "real" or "radio control" mode (apparently realer than "real"), though, and you can feel the full brunt of what *Petit Copter* can do to you. The accuracy in these modes uses the full spectrum of analog input, so even a slight push can have the 'copter going willy-nilly, sending you in a panic until it smashes into something. You'll have to be incredibly careful to keep yourself airborne, but it's never going to be easy. This may be one failing of *Petit Copter* that's actually the failing of the hardware: sticks on a game controller are more like bulbs, and you realize why the sticks on an R/C box are so slender; you need to feel the resistance as close as possible. Nudging an Xbox stick by the decimal just isn't the same.

That said, *Petit Copter* may be one of the greatest party games no one's heard of, and that's its true brilliance. If you ever get ahold of it, try gathering a bunch of drunk friends and see who can clear the most missions. When that's over, you switch the controls to "radio control" mode, try again, and listen to the screams. And unlike playing with the real thing, no one is at risk of losing an eye.



Petit Copter lived on, though, with a sequel on PC and PlayStation 2, and then a transference of rights to Sonic Powered and Arc System Works, which resulted in the Wii revival *Petit Copter: Adventure Flight*, a friendlier installment that was released in America as *MiniCopter: Adventure Flight*.





Takuyo
7.4.2002



This is what happens when a maker of visual novels tries to step out of their comfort zone. Takuyo has published all sorts of VNs, love adventures, and generally story-heavy games since 1998, but other than a couple of puzzle games—only slightly easier to make than visual novels—the company hasn’t branched out much. Present tense there, because they’re still in business. However, when it came time to produce something for the Xbox, Takuyo went against type and thought up an action game, because the Xbox certainly wasn’t the home for their girly little adventures, right? Well, it couldn’t have hurt. At least no more than this game.

Magideath Fight! is an arena-based game with a multiplayer focus. Every stage in the game is an arena viewed from the top-down perspective, and peppered with small magical, colored balls. The cartoony participants in the Magideath (“magical deathmatch”) fights run around and grab the balls—they can hold a few at once—which can then be thrown towards enemy monsters or opponent characters to damage them, kill them, or toss them out of the arena. It’s like *Bomberman* mixed with

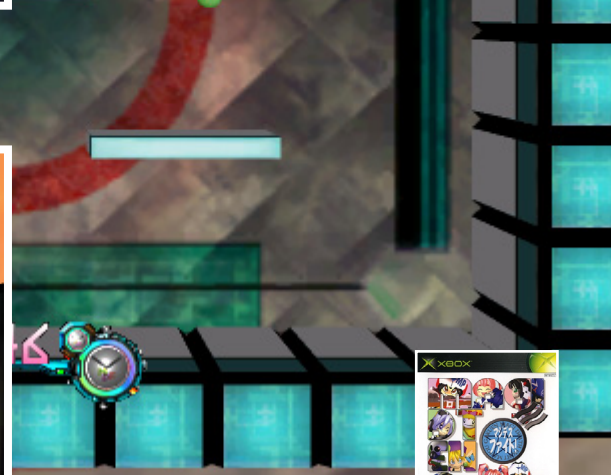
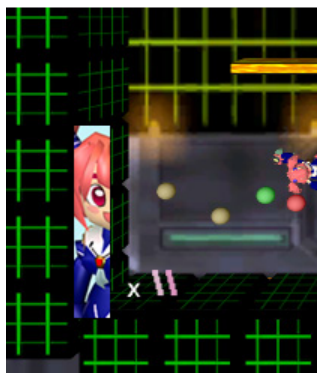
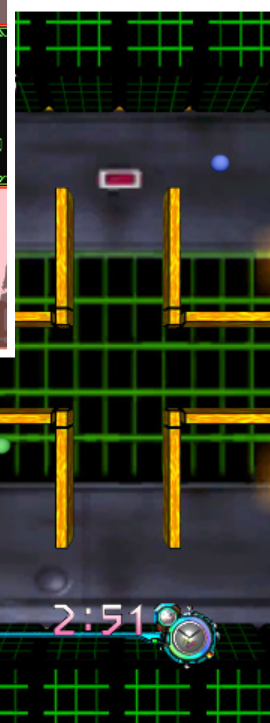
handball and new-fashioned Japanese cuteness, though maybe that still wouldn't be appealing even if this game was good.

The biggest problem with *Magideath Fight!* is that it's just so dreadfully *slow*. The characters truck along the arena floors as if they're going against an invisible conveyor belt, and there's lots of stopping and starting as you pick up the balls, then making sure you're aiming the balls correctly, and hoping the balls hit the target (or any target) before they miss. The balls can ricochet off walls, but aren't made any more dangerous. Magideath's lackadaisical style extends to the arena designs: a bunch of basic maze formations that seem made for creative ball-bouncing, but it's not like anyone would bother with advanced techniques.

The second-biggest problem with the game is that you don't even need to play it to see is that it's just ridiculously ugly. Polygon counts that might barely hit 900 *per screen*; terrible textures stretched out along the entire arenas; boring monster designs that you could have plucked from anything; inconsistent animation (a dragon boss moves like a Harryhausen creation), and, well, again, just *look* at it.

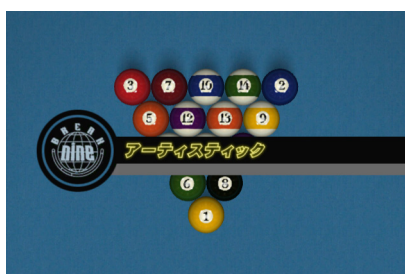
As unremarkable as it is, *Magideath Fight!* is still an interesting specimen of failure. The first year of games for a new system is rarely spectacular, but this game easily cemented itself in the doldrums of the Xbox library, and this was when the thing wasn't even out in Japan for five whole months. It's also representative of how some Japanese developers didn't really know what to do with the system. Perhaps Takuyo really was convinced that the Xbox was to be the place for action games and nothing but. On the other hand, they might have seen the Xbox as an opportunity to diversify their creative portfolio, but if that was the case, they probably should have put a little more heart into it, rather than push out something that looks like a student project. And this one wasn't going to get valedictorian.

マジデスファイト!





ASK
7.25.2002



Ever since the 2D days, billiards in video games has usually been presented as what we *think* billiards is about: seedy bars, dark lighting, sultry women, and guys in vests. Even games that are focused on public tournaments are like this to some degree. Truth is, real, televised pool can be just as sterile-looking as any other “fringe” sport. And these days, poker has stolen all the mystique anyway. On the other hand, if video pool games aren’t trying to pull off an atmosphere, then they’re usually pretty simple. Early versions of *Side Pocket* could only afford to show you the table, and though *Bankshot Billiards 2* is an Xbox 360 game, it purposefully gives you nothing but a table, cue, and floor. *Break Nine: World Billiards Tournament* straddles the line between extravagant and simple, going for a look that’s hip rather than swarthy, and gameplay that can work for novices or the hardcore.

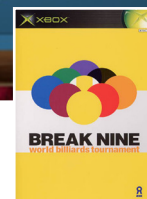
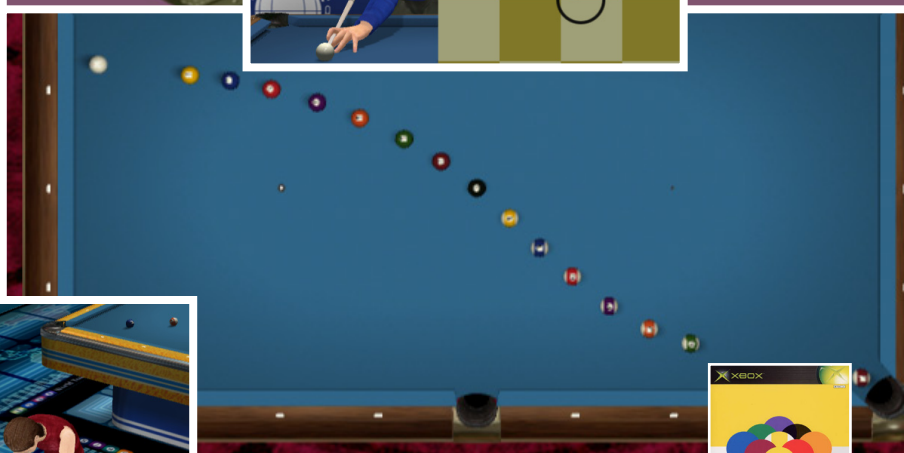
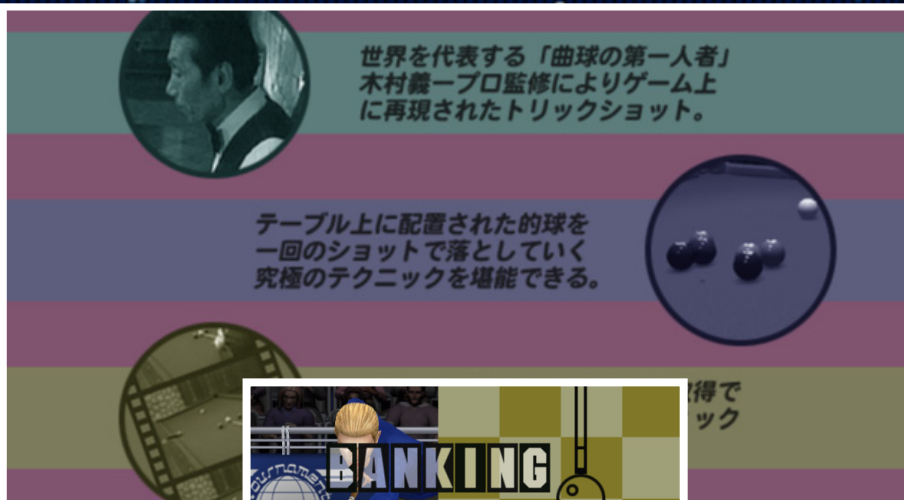
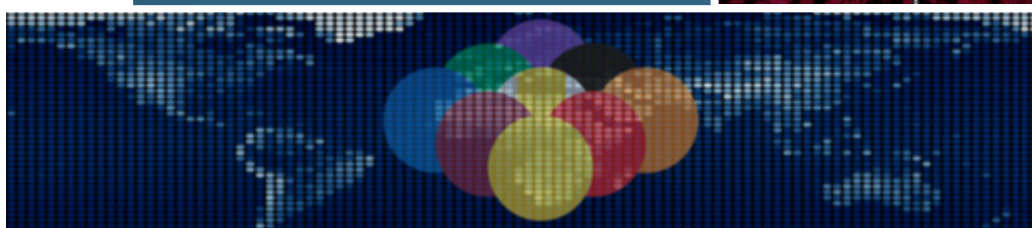
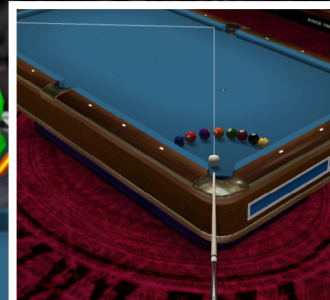
But first, that look. ASK had curated some pretty unique games in the few years prior to 2002; you may know them best as the publisher of *Slap Happy Rhythm Busters*. They also published several billiards games developed by Ornith, including *Break Nine*.

Ornith's games are notable for framing pool in ways beyond "the usual," especially with their stylish UI design that's typical of the early 2000s: that kind of "record store mod" look that's heavy on solid, brightly contrasted colors, the occasional polka dot pattern, and smooth music underneath it—again, hip, and seemingly wanting to draw in a young audience. In thinking of a game with a comparable style that most people reading this have at least heard of, I naturally went with Grasshopper's *Flower, Sun, and Rain*, which has an audiovisual design that can be described in practically the same way.

Like other billiards games (or any other non-team sport video game), *Break Nine* has a diverse cast of characters to choose from and take to the table, including but not limited to the blond American Jim Justice, Korean teen prodigy Yun-Ah Hwang, the older pros Roberto from Italy and Dennis from the Philippines, and Scheila, the busty Brazilian, who pretty much only has that going for her, because she kind of looks like an ape. Well, to be fair, no one in this game is a supermodel, and that's the dark side of *Break Nine's* art direction. The characters look *detailed*, being in an Xbox game and all, but their faces aren't modeled all that well, and combined with their stiff animations and lack of facial expressions, it's like watching a bunch of ugly mannequins walk around a billiards table. Though I suppose not every pool player on TV is a looker in real life.

Underneath, though, *Break Nine* is like any other pool game. You carefully use guide lines to angle your shot as perfectly as you need to, set the power of the shot (using a "sticky" power meter rather than an wildly fluctuating one like in a golf game—a welcome touch), and watch as the balls strike each other, bounce off the cushion, or plop into the pockets. It's as beautifully simple as the real thing, but there is one notable down side: it takes an awful long time to get your turn to play, and not simply because your opponent may be on a streak, but because going through the motions of a proper opening break shot, calling and landing pockets, and just *watching* the other person take their time can seem to go on forever, especially when playing against the computer, where there's no way to fast-forward through their turn and focus on strategizing when *you're* up to bat. If *Hot Shots Golf* can let you do that, why can't this?

If anything saves *Break Nine* besides its style, it's "Artistic" mode, a fresh twist on typical pool games that features 20 stages of creatively-placed balls (usually in small clusters positioned at various points on the table) that are essentially pool puzzles: you have to determine the right angle, the right ball to hit, and the right power to hit it with to get all the balls in the pockets, without losing the cue ball, of course. It's a fun challenge that doesn't require any knowledge of the rules of pool, but still tests the mental mettle of those determining the best possible geometric set-up. But where *Break Nine* succeeds is in showing us the pretty side of a game that's sometimes pretty ugly... character models notwithstanding.





Aqua System
8.29.2002



They couldn't leave well enough alone. Flight games were in Aqua System's wheelhouse (winghouse?), and so the Xbox got their next marquee title, *Flight Academy*.

In contrast to *Petit Copter*, *Flight Academy* is a legitimate flight sim featuring legitimate aircraft. It is not, however, a wide-open excursion like a typical flight sim on PC. *Flight Academy* takes place among a group of small islands in Okinawa, and you play a new recruit for the local airline, Japan Jet Link. Throughout the game, you'll take on a large number of missions, from the most basic flight lessons to nerve-wracking runway hopping, as you pilot a similarly large number of planes big and small. Although going between a few neighboring islands shouldn't seem too tough, Okinawa is not always a paradise, as you'll sometimes be dealing with rainstorms or other bad conditions.

And because the titular flight academy is part of an airline, your challenges are all business. If you're familiar with *Tokyo Bus Guide* on the Dreamcast, you should know what you're getting into here. This is not a flight sim; this is a flight *job*, my friend, and your virtual flight instructor will demand nothing but absolute

perfection—or 80 percent perfection, but by god, you better nail that 80 percent. If you don't decelerate during the window of time you're supposed to, or don't bank at the correct angle, or just stand still for too long, you flush away your success. You also have to endure the routine boringness of airport procedures, including contacting the tower, waiting for taxi allowance, and cautiously creeping along the runway before taking off.

Granted, that's not in every mission, but imagine going through the trial and error of competing a mission only to fail when you're just meters away from your last objective, and then having to go through the menus, re-review the objectives, and then start the whole rigamarole all over again, not to mention suffering the shame and humiliation. But by the end of it, you'll feel like you'll know exactly how to fly a real plane from takeoff to landing—provided the instrument panel has an Xbox controller port.

If you look at the screenshots, it's no surprise that *Flight Academy* certainly looks like something a small Japanese company would produce in the early 2000s: a bit unattractive, to put it lightly. On the other hand, any flight game that takes place in an area larger than the living rooms in *Petit Copter* is going to suffer in the detail department. If you're stretching a texture of a satellite photo of the land you're re-creating, it's going to look like the planet is made of algae no matter what year the game was made. It's just that here, the polygonal airports are so insanely contrasted against the murky earth that it's still disappointing, especially considering that these aren't big islands by any means, and you really only see one at a time.

Flight Academy's biggest crutch is not the graphics, though that's still mighty big. Rather, it's that it's further emblematic of the miscalculations of Japanese Xbox publishers, if not Microsoft themselves. One could argue that since the Xbox was always viewed as being for "serious," more adult gamers, they probably would be interested in something more typical of PCs. However, stuff like this did nothing but make for an incredibly odd and awkward launch year, while on the other side of the globe, Xbox games stood for excitement—realism, too, but in anything but a low-rent flight sim, for god's sake. It's hard to tell if Microsoft greenlighting this was due to desperation or ignorance, but it was likely the latter, given the lax minimum-unit publishing requirements of the Japan branch.

Aqua System's love affair with the Xbox lasted for only one more game; the futuristic air combat game *Yukikaze*, based on the anime by Gonzo. It, too, featured the developer's hallmark subpar graphics and gameplay, and might have been an Xbox exclusive only because the sky in the game's world was permanently green. As for *Flight Academy*, its tropical setting made for an apt summer release, but was one of two Japanese Xbox releases in August, and also followed big titles on PS2 and GameCube such as *Ape Escape 2* and *Super Mario Sunshine*. Ah, the whole thing was for the birds, anyway.





Microsoft
10.10.2002



*Believe it or not, this was the Xbox's first Japan-only first-party release (as much as we resisted, America could not escape the wrath of *Sneakers*). And it really could not be more fitting. After flight sims, quiet billiards tournaments, and terrible cutesy action games, the next notable domestic release just had to be a *keiba* (horse racing) game. It made a certain amount of sense: series such as ASCII/Enterbrain's *Derby Stallion* and Tecmo's *Gallop Racer* were hallmarks of the genre at the time, and again, with the Xbox courting mature gamers—and older men being the exact audience of *keiba* games—it no doubt seemed like a smart thing to do. Microsoft couldn't get ASCII or Koei to make one for them, though, so they did what any fan of the genre on a budget would do: go with the cheaper alternative.*

Progress Software entered the game business in 1991 with the *keiba* simulation *Classic Road*, which grew into a long series of games on older PC platforms and the original PlayStation. Considering that they made quite a few, it seemed to be what they were best at among the various other games they were making, so they ended up producing one of the first Japan-bred,

Microsoft-led Xbox games, *Jockey's Road*.

The main character is a young man fresh out of horse racing school who wants nothing more than to be a jockey. He makes his first steps quickly after graduating, getting recruited as an at-will jockey for the Shibusawa riding company and learning the ropes around the stables. As the days go on, he runs into all sorts of characters and situations, punctuated with flashbacks to his childhood when he was still just a little stableboy. What about the girl who was childhood friend for so long? Does the cute reporter lady have an ulterior motive? Is that sinister-looking guy really trying to take down Shibusawa?!

Like other keiba games, *Jockey's Road* features week-by-week gameplay, although time is compressed a little—you usually have a day to get you and your horses prepped for whatever race(s) you've been assigned to next. Yet for the most part, you don't have to do much in this area other than complete some training exercises or boost horses' skills by giving them some of your "jockey points" (JP), earned by doing well in races and the aforementioned exercises. The moment of truth is when the gates swing open on the track, anyway.

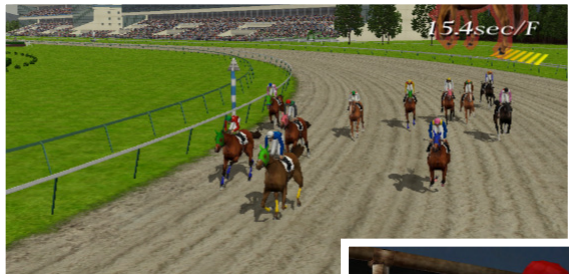
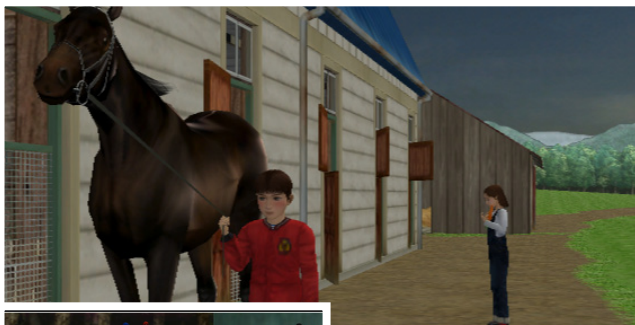
Controlling your horse in *Jockey's Road* is made to be as realistic as possible with a game controller, but that doesn't make it super fun. Once on the track, you consistently push forward on both analog sticks to work the horse, a rhythm that never quite seems to be the same no matter which horse you're on, and so it often feels like you're not making a difference. The other main controls—pulling back on one stick to turn; clicking in the sticks to strike the whip—are more annoying than they are practical, but to the game's credit, the HUD is pretty helpful, telling you exactly how many meters are left in the race, and a decent visual representation of the horse's stamina.

Microsoft classified *Jockey's Road* as an RPG, though there isn't a lot to distinguish the gameplay from other keiba titles. Rather, the reason behind calling it an RPG seems to be because the game is so heavy on story. They managed to get Kenji Terada on script duty, he being the well-traveled scenario writer who everybody credits with *Final Fantasy VII* and little else (he also worked on the *Dirty Pair* anime! Come on!). The setting feels like a bit of a stretch for Terada's creative muscle, but the Shibusawa crew is a healthy cast of characters, and plenty of drama is injected into the cut-scenes that punctuate the game's acts. For better or worse, it's as much about the humans as it is the horses.

The focus on narrative is really all that sets *Jockey's Road* apart—the more interactive racing was a hallmark of Koei's *G1 Jockey* series, and without a big breeding component, it wasn't competing with *Gallop Racer* and its ilk, either. The game's subdued presentation is kind of nice, though, and doesn't have anything like *G1 Jockey's* flashy action, instead opting for a touching air around every menu, backdrop and cut-scene.

Jockey's Road was Progress' only substantial shining moment, sad as it was. They're still around, but have remained floating in the netherworld of Japanese contract developers. They never made another keiba game (or at least not one they were at liberty to say they did), but they almost didn't need to. *Jockey's Road* was a suitable capstone on their history with the genre, because if nothing else, it's not every day you get to be a marquee first-party Xbox game, even for a little bit.

ジョッキーズロード





Highwaystar
11.28.2002



*Hard livin' and hard drinkin' are the two qualities that make up Dank, the excavator dwarf you play as in *Drihoo* (best pronounced "dree-hoe"). The underground world below the desert is rife with treasure, and miners like Dank make a living burrowing through the earth, picking up any artifacts they can to make a buck, and if they luck into a big shiny treasure left by a long-dead pharaoh, all the better.*

Surprisingly, you're not told all that before starting the game. You get an intro movie, but no real preamble about Dank's life—instead, you somewhat abruptly begin in the lightless underground, ready to start making tunnels. At this point, you may think you have *Drihoo's* genre pegged just based on screenshots or its box art: looks like a regular action-adventure with a burly dwarf and a humongous drill, right? Over in a few hours, right? If only.

Though its comic-book art style may lead you to believe such things, *Drihoo* is actually a variety of dungeon RPG. However, it's not a very efficient one. Take a Chunsoft roguelike such as *Torneko: The Last Hope*, where the next dungeon is often just a

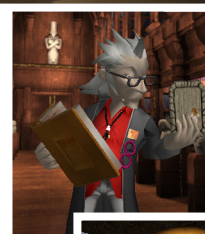
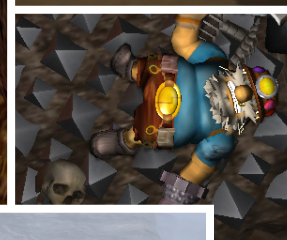
few paces away from the middle of the hub world—in *Drihoo*, you never know where the next dungeon is until you find it, and *boy* do you have to find it. The game's world map is fairly large, and even if you have the best possible drill upgrade in the game, burrowing through the underground is incredibly time-consuming, and you can be at it for quite a while without getting anything but a few scraps of gold, or get konked on the head by falling rock, or have your stuff snatched away by a cave goblin. With danger all around, it's important to stay safe by going back to the nearby town to save your game or replenish supplies.

Drilling can also make a guy thirsty, as Dank's health meter slowly empties the longer you go without sustenance. His health meter is represented by a container of his favorite alcoholic beverage, beev. Yes, "beev," not beer; who knows if that's accidental Engrish or its actual fictional name. Dank can keep going if he's low on beev, but that just means that if he gets hit, he immediately collapses and gets sent back to town without any of his loot. Think of it like the health meter in *Super Mario 64* (with Mario replaced by an aging Wario). If you have at least one container of beev with you, all it takes is holding down LT until Dank chugs as much of it as you want him to. It's an interesting take on the "hunger" stat in other dungeon games, but of course, it also means you'll have to be smart in deciding how much money to spend on extra beev before heading back out to the tunnels.

When you do find and enter a tomb, Dank pulls out a giant mallet, his second most-trusted tool, and uses it to destroy the (randomly-placed) mummies and various other nasties trying to kill him on his quest to find bigger treasures and beat bigger bosses. The tombs only have slightly more light than the tunnels, so it's never not unnerving to creep through the passageways hoping you won't walk straight into an ambush. That's preventable to a degree—you'll know enemies are nearby when their health meters appear on the screen, and the minimap radar can help too—but there's still more than enough opportunities to get yourself killed. Traps, for example, are not easily detectable until it's almost too late: an exclamation mark will flash above Dank's head, and if you keep him there, he'll either fall onto a bed of spikes, or be hit with an arrow, or burned by flamethrowing idol statues, or whatever. Basically, it affirms that the best move in *Drihoo* is to never stop moving.

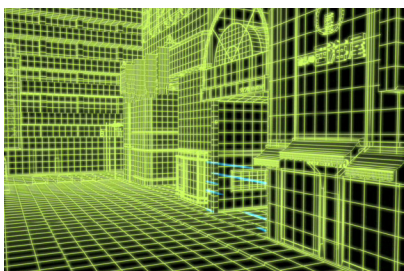
While not the best dungeon game, *Drihoo* is at least the best one on Xbox (though what else is there besides *Metal Dungeon*?). And there are some things to like about it. The JRPG-meets-ancient-Egyptian theme is rather unique, and the soundtrack is surprisingly good and fits the loneliness of the game. The graphics aren't great, but excusable for a first-year Xbox game from a tiny developer. And it's still a mystery why the tunnels and dungeons are so dark, especially when Dank constantly emits light—don't you think it would, y'know, fill the room just a little bit? The Xbox offered the best lighting effects in the market at the time, and with the harshly-shadowed comic art on the *Drihoo* box, it's disappointing that the developers couldn't replicate it in any way.

By this point, things were getting a little more interesting for the Japanese Xbox. As the first year drew to a close, the smaller developers were putting the finishing touches on their funny ideas, and regardless whether they were any good, they were a welcome change from the subpar simulations that dotted the first few months after launch, and if nothing else, more hits from the West were on their way. And so, after the stumbles post-launch, *Drihoo* was a passable way to end the year. It isn't paced very well, but it is cohesive and doesn't take itself too seriously, which is a very welcome thing indeed. It's too bad Highwaystar didn't survive long enough to improve on it.





Atlus
12.5.2002



The Shin Megami Tensei franchise has always been viewed as a “fringe” RPG from a “niche” publisher, but its movement through history looks as familiar as *Dragon Quest*’s or *Final Fantasy*’s, given that Atlus rarely sends it to a system that isn’t already a sure thing. And sometimes that doesn’t even apply to *SMT*; they only ever made two Dreamcast games, after all. So it was (and still is) kind of nuts to see *Shin Megami Tensei Nine*, the first “next-gen” *Megami Tensei* game, show up on Xbox of all things. The flip side is that it was about to be quickly sidelined anyway, so however nuts it was would be just another footnote in the Xbox story.

Like most of the mainline *SMT* games (note that it’s not a canonical “ninth” sequel), *SMT Nine* takes place in a future Tokyo rocked by an apocalyptic event in the year 202x, and citizens now live in underground bunkers. Things are so hopeless that the pre-catastrophe version of Tokyo exists only as “Idea Space,” an online re-creation based on its ‘90s state that people jack into, which has the added bonus of featuring demon familiars following each and every user. As an additional bonus in the game’s fiction, you also

get parody versions of any landmark or brand name you can find in a Tokyo district, though it's usually the hilariously undercooked Japanese way of just switching the letters in a logo around—for example, "Boskin-Rabbins." Brilliant, guys, really.

The hero of *Nine* is Kei Azuma, a regular youth who can actually be a young man or woman depending on the player's choice (a rare move for the *SMT* series). The game begins with Kei witnessing a particularly nasty demon run amok in Shinjuku, which is promptly eliminated by an on-duty "Debugger," one of many cyber cops who help get rid of such anomalies, also known as Noise. Kei gets wrapped up in things, decides to be a Debugger, and from then on becomes a crucial part of an epic and somewhat existential story as the layers of Idea Space are peeled away one by one. With a story like that, plus the usual demon schmoozing, collecting, and fusing, it's pretty much a regular *Shin Megami Tensei* game. Well, most of the time.

After clearing out the recent outbreak of Noise demons early in the game (they're basically balls of static and remarkable pushovers), you're given your Debugger license and can enter various dungeons through tucked-away alleys, and begin eradicating demons in regular random battles. This is where *Nine* turns figuratively and literally ugly. Battles are largely passive, with your party of you and your collected demons (or just the demons) acting automatically. It's not exactly like choosing "Auto" in another *SMT* game, because you can still use commands to direct the party to use items or abilities when it's their turn. The problem is that it can be incredibly easy to die (and fast) if you're not in a level-appropriate place. That's not exactly a new thing in *SMT* games, but it just feels exacerbated in *Nine*.

What's worse is that the battle screens are laid out with bare, serif text, and often take place against the same boring "cyberspace" backdrop. If this was an attempt to make it really seem like you're fighting inside a mainframe, it doesn't succeed, and in fact contributes to *Nine* being one of the uglier *SMT* games—yes, the outside areas are quite nice, but they're pre-rendered. Fortunately, the series has since proved itself to be a showcase of striking visual design.

Nine has a whole other layer of battles, though they're nothing you'd expect in an RPG. At several points during the game, you'll have to dive deep into Idea Space to get rid of "hacks" that have infiltrated the system. This takes place in slightly more abstract maps where you're represented as the generic person avatar used in all the *SMT* games, and move between neon-colored lines on the network grid. It's basically a strategy game: you must claim nodes on the map and keep them claimed as you proceed to weaken the hack and rescue the at-risk part of the system. And it all happens in real-time, so you can call *Nine* the first *Shin Megami Tensei* that's part-RTS. Bet you won't be hearing that again anytime soon.

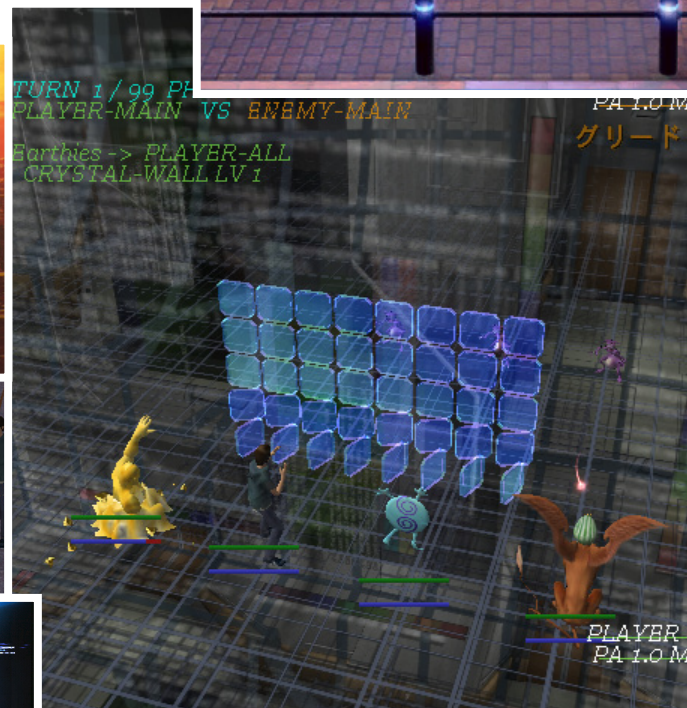
The weaker parts of *SMT Nine* may have something to do with it having a bumpy development process from the get-go. Originally, it was announced as an online-enabled game, but Atlus backpedaled before release, turning it into a single-player product that became the *Nine* we know now. An online semi-sequel was not off the table, though, but in May 2003, an Atlus financial report stated that development of the online version had been put on hold, and in August, the company finally announced

that they stopped development of it completely. On Xbox, anyway—they would instead concentrate on making it for the PC, except that didn't materialize, either. Who knows what was really going on in the interim, but it's safe to say that Atlus thought that continuing to make an online *SMT* game for Xbox was a non-starter, since practically no one in Japan would care in the first place. Plus, Xbox Live had just launched, and online console gaming was still a young development that wouldn't be properly realized until the next generation. And even then, there would be next to no RPGs.

Nine also failed to make a splash because *SMT III: Nocturne*, the honest-to-goodness canonical sequel for PlayStation 2, was two months away from release in Japan (February '03) and had been hyped for a few months before that. It was the real deal, looked gorgeous, and was suitably more epic (you walked around the actual apocalyptic Japan instead of a fake and old version).

And so, Atlus became another medium-to-large Japanese company that dipped their toes in the Xbox pool and quickly decided they'd rather not risk drowning. In the years since, *Shin Megami Tensei* did enter the online world with the MMO *Imagine*, though it's obviously much different from what *Nine* was, or perhaps wanted to be.

真・女神転生 NINE





Atlus
12.12.2002



Most of us know Cave as those guys who make the bullet hell shoot-em-ups, but they have dabbled in other areas of the game industry. In fact, it wouldn't be crazy to think they've stayed alive not because of their niche shooters, but because of their dealings in online games and other ventures that the hardcore fans don't really know or care about.

Cave and Atlus go a ways back, as well. In the arcade market, Atlus distributed Cave's early shooters, but they also worked together on the fairly long-running *Touge* series on the consoles. You may have played the first Saturn installment when it was localized as *High Velocity*, or the first PS1 installment as *Peak Performance*. Every so often they would make a new *Touge*, but the series came to an end after *Touge R*, which would also be Cave's first and last Xbox game. It's no great tragedy, though—it's mostly a rehash of *Touge 3*, released on PS2 a year earlier, and besides, Cave had better things to do.

"Touge" is the Japanese word for a ridge or mountain pass, and in racing parlance describes the general nature of races on those winding, narrow curves that wrap around mountains. In

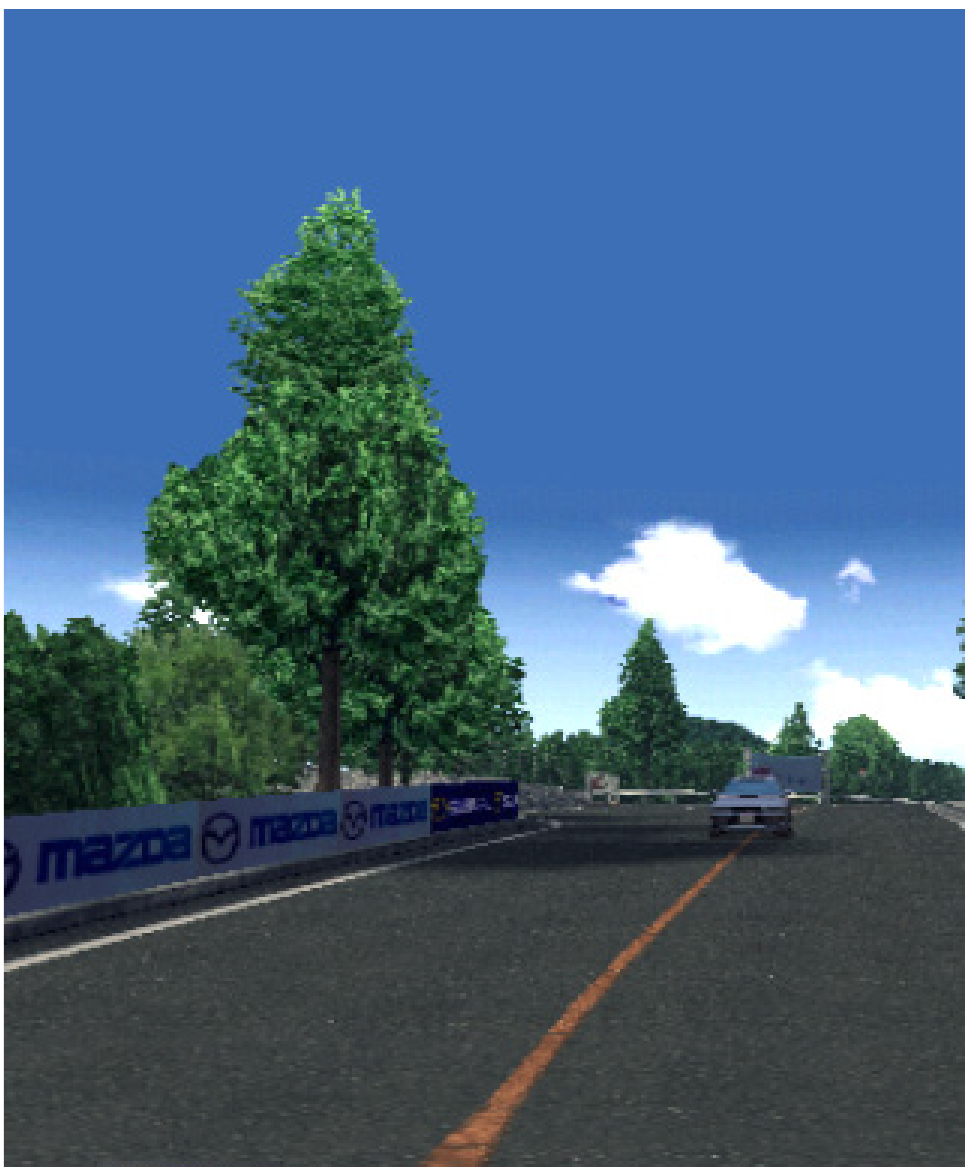
other words, it's *Initial D* stuff, and there are more than enough games that try to re-create that kind of racing (most notably *Auto Modellista*, also on Xbox, and possessing a striking comic book look). But the *Touge* games, and *Touge R* in particular, bring some organization and legitimacy to the sport. In this installment, it's a focus on customization, collection, and frequent event racing in the vein of *Gran Turismo*: start with a cheap car, complete races, get money, get a new car, repeat.

The exclusively Japanese car selection features street racing favorites from Mitsubishi, Subaru, Toyota and others, and the courses you race on include real-world (or at least named-after-real-world) mountain locations like Hakone, Usui, and Mt. Myogi, so if you like a good drive through the forest, you'll get plenty of that here. But to distance itself from the still plenty illegal mountain racing scene, *Touge R* races are bounded off and lined with billboards just like any other good official race.

With the mountain racing theme, *Touge R* naturally encourages drifting, and not the easy arcade kind. Enter into a drift and you really get to hear your tires squeal in agony as you slide around a curve, though you're getting "drift points" added to your evaluation, so it can't be all bad. (If you feel uneasy about giving away part of the control of your car, you can choose to drive with grippy tires, and then enhance that with further handling upgrades.)

There's just one thing missing, and that's any evidence of *Touge R* being good. For starters, despite being a late-2002 Xbox game, it looks like it's from the late-2001 launch, yet that still wouldn't be acceptable in the same year that *Gran Turismo 3* was released. And as much as it leans toward the "sim" side, the cars just don't move realistically. Sure, this is a drift-happy street racing game, but even at low speeds, the cars tend to swing and slide around a little too much. If you're going to put all the effort into constructing a career mode with customizing cars of several real-world manufacturers, a little more realism in the physics couldn't hurt.

However, the biggest negative for *Touge R* wasn't even totally its fault; it was simply the fact it was on Xbox. A week before it came out, Atlus had put out *SMT Nine*, a game they didn't seem to want to promote all that much, yet was in within their flagship brand, so imagine how much mindshare was gained with a low-rent racing game from Cave on Japan's most-avoided game system. Yeah. But it has nice sunsets.





Aquaplayer
1.30.2003



Cuteness isn't exactly what you'd expect from a Japanese Xbox game, as Takuyo and *Magideath Fight!* showed us. But in the case of *Tenezza*, it pulls through mostly by being one of the better games of its kind on the system. And though it's the opposite of *Magideath* in that way, it does share one interesting quality—it, too, was made by a frequent maker of love adventure games. Aquaplayer has made its bank on the *To Heart* series, and at the time had rarely stepped out of that zone. *Tenezza* changed things: it was a much more interactive action RPG, and being that Aquaplayer generally maintains a high level of quality, it turned out much better than Takuyo's work.

Our eponymous heroine Tenerezza (Tene for short) looks like your everyday cute little Japanese cartoon girl, but she's no shrinking violet—she's loud, jokey, and all-around tomboyish. She's also the self-proclaimed number-one magic user in her home village of Esperanza, and as such gets called on for acts of derring-do. A recent surge in monster attacks spurs the president of the town (yeah that's right) to ask Tenerezza to head out to the nearby Magical Forest and see if she can't nuke some of those creatures

away. In the middle of it all, she crosses paths with Lolo, a fairy sprite who's a formidable match for Tenerezza in terms of attitude. She joins Tene on her adventure, and the two essentially become a comedy duo with Tenerezza as the "straight man," but with both getting upset with each other often. From there, the quest to vanquish evil continues, with our heroes hopping all over the continent (I assume it's a continent), exploring desert ruins, volcanoes, and whatever else fits in a fantasy game.

Tenerezza looks like a friendly, accessible action RPG, but it also came from a small developer with a PC background, so it's more devious than it lets on. For starters, the Magic Forest that Tene heads to in the beginning quickly becomes a directional maze, where you must run through similar-looking areas that need to be traveled in a certain pattern for you to end up where you need to be, and not only is that what keeps you meeting Lolo, but it keeps you from finding the boss, as well. Granted, the rest of the game's areas keep the puzzles to a minimum, but to throw that forest maze in the beginning of the game is a clear indicator of what to expect from *Tenerezza* as a game.

If you enjoy roguelikes for their punishment, marvel at these bullet points: a 20-slot inventory limit, four of those taken up by your equipment; super-expensive weapons that need to be crafted first; the best health items being meals that need to be cooked from ingredients; losing half of your money upon death; Tene being randomly dizzied from enemy attacks; save "services" in dungeons that cost 500 gold, and long areas that will sometimes require backtracking.

And that's just the intentional stuff. *Tenerezza*'s biggest annoyance is an automatically-moving camera that has a tendency to zoom out when you don't need it, and get too close when you don't need it, making it easy for enemies to surprise you when they approach from offscreen. In fairness, there is some good stuff in the game to balance things out. Leveling up grants you skill points to spend on upping max HP or the strength of Tene's magic attacks—fireballs, wind slicers, "earth" bombs, and ice daggers—and strengthening the magic even by one point has immediate results once you use it. Although enemies can be strong against certain elements, you could theoretically concentrate on maxing one of the spells and mow down anything in the game. And the graphics, though pretty repetitive in dungeons, are nice and well-composed throughout the rest of the game, yet the lower-res-than-you'd-think textures keep *Tenerezza* from being an Xbox showpiece.

Roughness and toughness aside, *Tenerezza* is pretty innocuous. Honestly, it's not even that *bad*—it makes for a nice, decent, albeit hardcore action RPG experience on the Xbox (or PC). It seems that Aquaplus took some cues from the book of Falcom for this one, managing to create something that comes close to *Ys* or *Zwei*!! By no means *super* close, but closer than most.





Victor
2.27.2003



Introducing the most American of the Japanese Xbox games, *Muzzle Flash*. It's not so much "American" in a tongue-in-cheek sense (*those* games are several pages ahead), but more in the sense that it clearly wanted to fool you into thinking it's a third-person military shooter from the exciting land of the West. Perhaps even more than that, Victor seemed like they wanted *Muzzle Flash* to be a premier Japanese Xbox shooter; a homegrown *Halo*. Well, OK, maybe a homegrown *Brothers in Arms*. Um, *Conflict: Desert Storm*? Y'know what, let's settle for *Brute Force*.

Leon Spencer was the best that ever was; a steel-faced super soldier that paid his dues and retired to a cabin in the woods (just *the* woods). His peace is excessively disturbed when an extraction team ambushes his home, and is placed under arrest for—wait for it—being an illegal immigrant. But it's actually just an ulterior motive for an army colonel who wants Spencer back on the job for one last mission: to neutralize a terrorist organization choking the nation of Gamera, Spencer's homeland. And it just so happens that Gamera "stretches from north to south,"

so it has everything from snowy peaks to jungles to deserts, and of course there's bad guys on every inch of it. Spencer's missions involve searching out and destroying enemy bases from the inside, though it's rarely that easy, as there's some mishap to throw things off the rails for a little while. All part of the job, I guess.

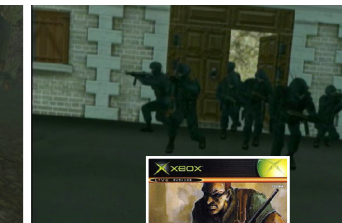
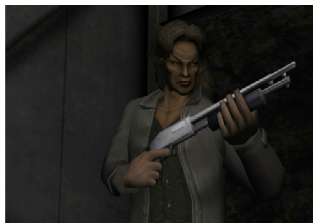
The other big "American" part of *Muzzle Flash* is that with a simple switch of the system language, the game can be played completely in English, all but confirming that there was an intent to sell it outside Japan, though that never materialized. It's possible the quality of the game sidelined that intent, and the English within is far from an expert localization. The low-rent voice actors aren't quite as bad as *House of the Dead II* or something, but it's still hard to take seriously—for example, Spencer sounds about 10 years younger than he looks. The writer(s) clearly tried hard to be legit, but it's the kind of English that comes from a high-level understanding of the language yet isn't native, and is a little too concerned with sounding natural. This results in Spencer's occasional quips falling completely flat, and hilariously noncommittal mission objectives and hints that pop up in text boxes.

Muzzle Flash is also insanely punishing, and for purely stupid reasons. Mission 2, for example, is a three-stage adventure, but if you die during any of them, you're forced back to the start of the first. And this is a game about exercising caution, so it's never quite a quick jaunt back to where you left off—it *hurts*. There's also the fact that new weapons are somewhat detrimental to your progress. A crazy thought, but extra ammo for Spencer's default sniper rifle is hard to find, while the enemies will leave behind machine guns and assault rifles, so while sniping your way through the game is the path of least resistance, you barely get to use it, meaning you're more often than not stuck resorting to on-site procurement for weapons that always create a commotion and send enemies swarming towards you—the very dumb, trigger-happy enemies. It's a game that has no idea what it wants from the player, and as a result, everybody loses.

While *Muzzle Flash* may be terrible, it shines brightest as a pastiche of '80s action movies. That starts with the utterly worn "retired soldier pulled back into action" cliché and just keeps going as Spencer's world-hopping missions become more varied, principal characters become dumber, and the cut-scene dialogue becomes cheesier. It even has bad action movie music: that odd blend of drums and synth that will forever be equated with beefy short-haired dudes sneaking around enemy territory. It's ridiculous every step of the way, but will require a high tolerance for awful gameplay to appreciate it.

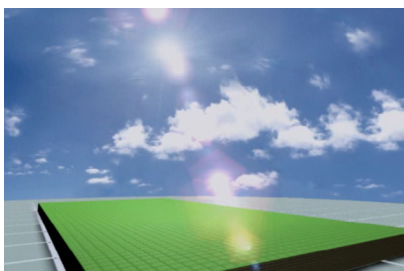
When it first came out, *Muzzle Flash*'s online multiplayer was the only real bullet point Victor used to promote it, but obviously that's not something you can try anymore. Xbox Live launched in Japan about a month before the game, so Victor likely wanted something out there that would become a featured title in Microsoft's own XBL promotions.

As for the developer, Beyond Interactive, they veered far away from any sort of action game after *Muzzle Flash* was released—mostly DS puzzle games and lifestyle software, including a field guide to flowers for iOS. Maybe what they say about old soldiers is true.





From Software
3.20.2003



*This is a Japanese Xbox real-time strategy game. Very little about that sentence makes sense, and the game in question is kind of weird, too, but *Thousand Land* is nonetheless very real, and is the greatest example of From Software doing on Xbox what they couldn't do anywhere else. And in the end, the system was only better for it.*

The world of *Thousand Land* takes place in an apparent digital environment known as the Geo Slate, where users each have their own "slates" of land with which to create a makeshift continent peppered with weapons and resources, and then face off against up to a thousand other Geo Slate users in one-on-one skirmishes. Land on the Geo Slate is inhabited by curious little creatures called APOs, which resemble anthropomorphic flan, and serve as your army. They're spawned out of "cores," magic vessels that look just like trees, yet more like trees through the goggles of a bad acid trip. Whenever an APO dies, another one immediately comes out of the core to replace them. As such, destroying your opponent's core is what decides victory, though it's possible to have more than one core if you have the cash for them.

As the APOs drop from the core, they walk aimlessly around the land until you give them something to do, and that typically means directing them to build things that will help fend off the impending enemies. Every match starts with a build phase that transitions to a battle phase, and during building, your opponent's land is seen on the opposite side, slowly rising from the ocean until the timer ticks down to the start of the battle. In the meantime, you have several minutes to construct barricades, traps, various cannons and guns, resource depots, and other such things to properly fortify your land. It's a teensy bit like *Battleship* in that the two sides don't know what their opponent has or where they put it, until the battle begins, that is.



Thousand Land also lets you do something that few other RTS games do... unless you consider *SimCity* an RTS. That something is the ability to form your map however you want in the build phase. The game gives you a number of tools to do things like "pull" the land up or "press" it down, dig isolated holes, create shallow pools of water, or just flatten an area out to the same level. You'll need an ample amount of "Land Power" to spend to get things the way you want, but one shouldn't go wild with peaks and valleys, because it's crucial to have good amount of flat space to fit your structures, and APOs take longer to get over hills depending on how steep they are. On the other hand, a good, varied map design along with smartly-placed weapons and barriers makes it easy for your APOs to get around while making it hard for opposing APOs to reach your core, so maps are figuratively and literally the foundation of victory in *Thousand Land*.

As a console RTS, *Thousand Land* could have just adapted the bounding box method of unit selection like many PC-to-console ports, but its delineation of phases lets it use something else entirely. APOs can come in three types: builders, harvesters, or learners, and by using the right stick, you can divide them between those roles however and whenever you want. Need to build stuff faster? Push up on the stick and make all the APOs builders. Made some space for a couple of plants? Shift a couple of APOs to the harvester wedge and get them planting.

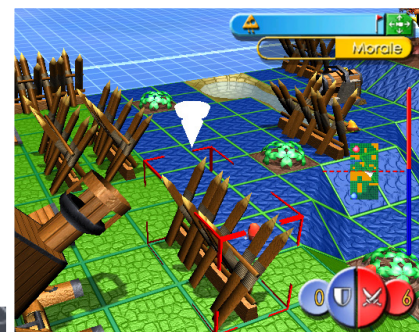
When the battle begins, your opponent's land is shown in all its glory, and at that point you'll either be glad that you have an easy path ahead of you, or that the other guy doesn't have a lot of artillery, or you'll be cursing the fact that your big cannon is set right up against one of their fences. Either way, you gotta make it work. Your APOs will once again be spawning from the cores, except now they can only be split up between attackers and defenders. Attackers simply make a beeline for the nearest core and beat up anything in its way (and also whack on the enemy's land tiles to change their color to yours). Defenders are the ones that can jump onto

the cannons and turrets and fire them regularly, and again, you can change their numbers whenever you want (a typical core spawns 10 APOs at a time, so early battles encourage you to be really resourceful).

As your APOs are doing their work, so are your opponents', and they can be kept at bay by your hopefully-smartly-placed fences and traps (the first one you get inflates unlucky APOs until they pop like balloons; too fun). Things that appear innocuous can also slow down enemies—APOs can't swim; at best dogpaddle, and certain plants can be used to cloak cores or weapons from the still pretty dim soldiers.

In a dire situation or in a moment of high confidence, you can summon a

obviously can't sell structures you've already placed, so if you need a bit of extra cash for that big new weapon, you either sell what's in your stock, or you try really hard to win a carefully-considered battle.



TELA, a giant autonomous monster that lays waste to the land and stomps out any APOs in its path, yours included. Their time on the land is finite, but if they manage to reach a core, a TELA can destroy it in about two hits. The problem is that they take their time shambling around, and are easily

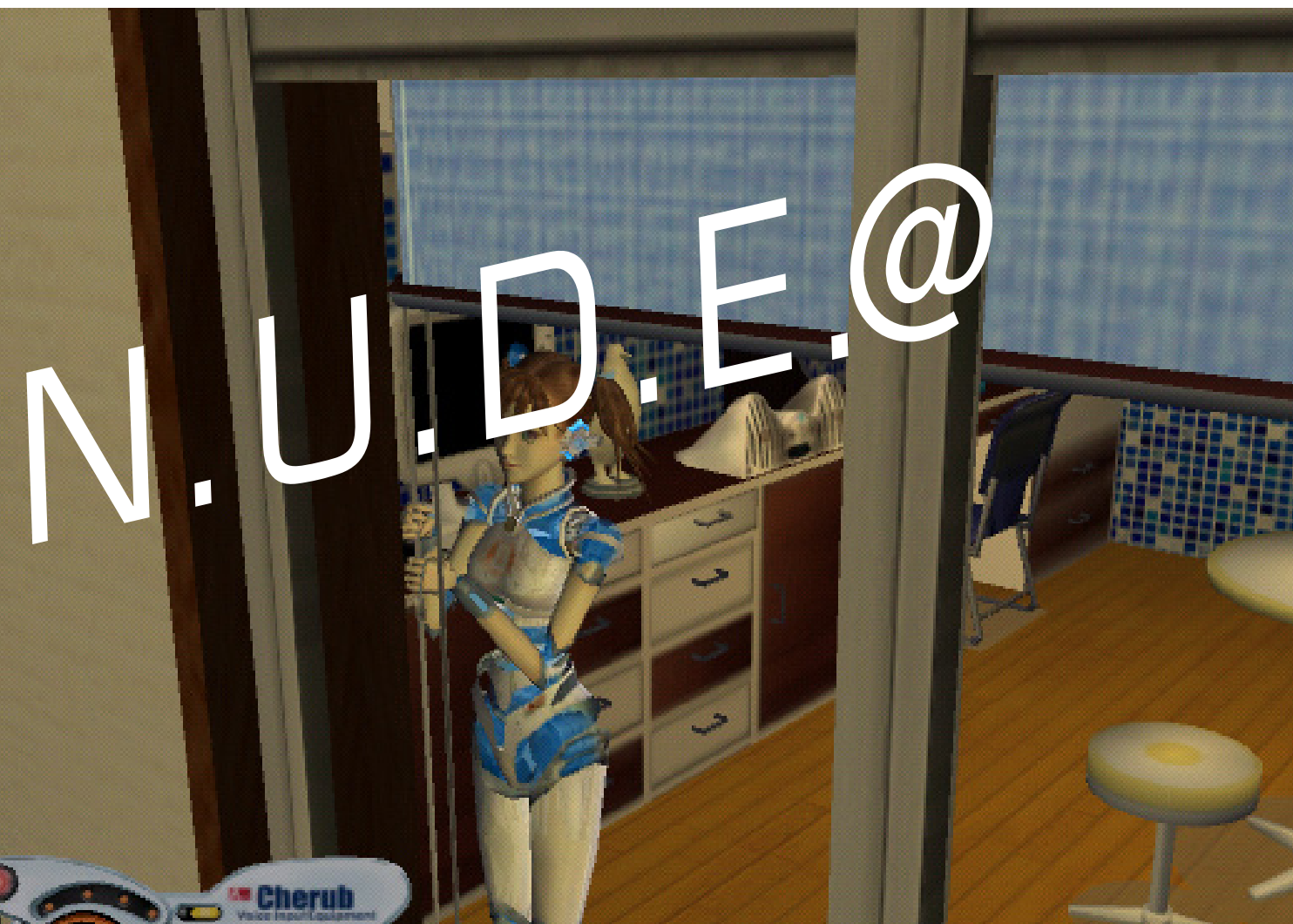
distracted on their journey to the core, because they really love to kill things. It also takes a long time for them to be available again after they disappear, even between matches, so taking a few extra minutes after a battle to recharge a TELA is smart.

Some things about *Thousand Land* are needlessly annoying, though. Rather than acquire resources to build extra units, you buy your stock from the in-game shop, then place them on the map where they stay unless you move them around, delete them, or are destroyed by enemies. Given that, you

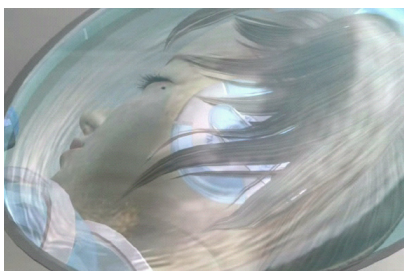


For the Xbox, a platform that wasn't party to a lot of super-innovative games, *Thousand Land* was a relative breath of fresh air. Not only does it happily twist a well-known genre, it's happy all around, including a crazy banjo-infused soundtrack. From Software wasn't messing around here, and that's why it's one of the best Japan-only Xbox games.





Microsoft
4.24.2003



*The dream of the domestic robot is still far from realization. Big steps have been taken over the years, but the ideal vision remains a fantasy of 1950s futurism that thought we'd all have androids in the house to do the cooking, cleaning, or more uh, uncouth things, depending on what you read. However, such an android would be considered an appliance; an electronic product like your computer or cell phone, and so you'd have to deal with the same stuff you would with any other device: taking time to get it set up, adding your data so it learns about you, dealing with periodic firmware updates, what to do in the event of a malfunction, and so on. It's this harsh reality that forms the basis of *N.U.D.E.@: Natural Ultimate Digital Experiment*, an A.I. interaction game that may be one of the most mundane ones ever devised.*

You, the player, are a regular member of society with a modest apartment, and you're given a chance to be part of a pilot program for the Ark Corporation, which has developed a super-advanced android formally known as a P.A.S.S. (Personal Assist Secretary System), which takes the form of a young



Sega
9.04.2003



*This is a bit of a rule-bender: not only was this game not an Xbox exclusive, it technically wasn't Japan-exclusive, either. Originally on Dreamcast, the Xbox version of *Rent-A-Hero No. 1* was part of a quickly-abandoned plan by Sega and a company called Coolnet to bring some DC favorites over to Microsoft's system, and was almost immediately given an English localization by small-time American publisher AIA, but that release was delayed repeatedly and ultimately canceled before it could find retail placement. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding it, *Rent-A-Hero No. 1* is an odd specimen no matter what system it's for.*

The hardcore Sega fan already knows what *Rent-A-Hero* is. The original game was a Mega Drive RPG, and the main character appeared in *Fighters Megamix* for Saturn, but it was *RAH No. 1* that brought it back to Dreamcast as a remake/reboot/re-whatever. Our eponymous rentable hero is John Doe (or the equally plain Taro Yamada in the Japanese version), a regular Caucasian kid in a sort-of regular family who's recently moved to a town called Hangover Park. During the family's welcoming party (where the

dad puts on a monster costume halfway through to further entertain the guests), John gets a mysterious package that contains a special suit that can transform him into a superhero. It's the invention of one Dr. Trouble, a kindly old man who runs an advanced lab called SECA underneath the café he uses as a front. He wants John to be the first Rent-A-Hero, a vigilante who works like a taxi driver: his earnings are all his, but if he wants to go for the job and keep at it, he has to pay for rental of the suit.

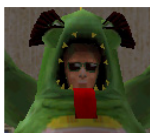
Once people know about the Rent-A-Hero—thanks to John handing out fliers to whoever will take them—it's not long before the whole county wants his help, from the owner of the Chinese restaurant to a kid at the park to the CEO of the local pharmaceutical company. And by using a SECA-supplied Creamcast console, John can receive emails and new job opportunities each and every day. So off he goes, as the player tries to complete the numerous missions and odd jobs to build a reputation. Most of the objectives don't get much more complicated than making deliveries (i.e., fetch quests) or searching out and then walloping a small group of bad guys to earn your pay, but ones more crucial to the story are naturally peppered with cut-scenes featuring new characters and revelations. It's an action RPG, after all, so there's still a plot. Dr. Trouble wants to grow the Rent-A-Hero business, and it's not long before other ordinary citizens don similar-looking suits and become John's colleagues.

Like the 16-bit original, *Rent-A-Hero No. 1* is one part adventure, one part fighting game. When some gangbangers make an ambush, the screen turns into a small free-roam battle not unlike Sega's own *Spikeout* games, but that's not to imply there's much depth to it. You can learn and use numerous combo attacks, but grappling and throwing enemies usually does the trick the best and fastest, and if the enemy happens to have a gun, well, just zigzag towards them. But *Rent-A-Hero No. 1* is not just about being a badass superhero; it's about experiencing all there is in this incredibly nutty country. Every location and business has a silly name; usually a flat pun in the English localization ("Shoddy Construction;" "Jewels4Fools") and even the sensible-looking folks have a crazy streak. Well, John's dad proved that from the outset. *RAH* goes far with its "American" setting, which is more like a warped America underneath a Japanese veneer, plus British telephone boxes.

Rent-A-Hero No. 1 isn't worth outright hate, but it didn't have a ton going for it, either. It was, after all, a virtually unchanged three year-old game that still felt really janky, with most of the blame resting on the fact that it doesn't even support analog control. Given that, it's no great mystery why AIA couldn't get it reviewed by the press, with Ziff Davis's game magazines printing reviews a short while before the game's release, but no one rated it above average. Not every Xbox game needed to be *Halo* or *Madden*, but they should've at least been *Xbox* games.

As mentioned at the start, Coolnet's plan to continue the Dreamcast ports petered out right after this. Along with *RAH*, they originally announced that *Dynamite Cop* and Crazy Games' *Illbleed* and *Blue Stinger* would make it to Xbox, but a stream of complications borked the whole endeavor, including the tragic death of *Blue Stinger* and *Illbleed*'s creator in 2004. Considering that those games had elements of charming wackiness just like in *Rent-A-Hero*, they would have made a nice little "theater of weird" for the Xbox. But as John Doe found out, a new opportunity isn't always what it's made out to be.

レンタヒーローNO.1





Microsoft
9.18.2003



It does exactly what it says on the tin. *Dinosaur Hunting* is an action game about dinosaurs and the hunting of them, yet for something that conjures up thrilling *Jurassic Park*-ish images, it's more of an exercise in reaching perfection in a game that is far from it. It was the first Xbox project from Scarab, the old name of the company that would a few years later become Feelplus and continue to support Microsoft by helping develop *Lost Odyssey*.

The year is 1913. But an alternate-timeline 1913. Of course. The hero is the unfortunately-named Malone Stein, young and dashing hunter under employ of the Ark Foundation (no relation to the Ark in *N.U.D.E.*), joined by his trusty dog Algo. Deep in Guyana, explorers have found a pocket of land teeming with endangered dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures, and they're about to be extra-endangered thanks to a bubbling volcano nearby. Ark's goal is to subdue, capture and relocate as many dinosaurs as they can, and give guys like Malone a chance to make some serious cash in doing so. Armed with his wits, three guns, and a bunch of different tranquilizer rounds, he heads out

to the jungle to begin the adventure.

Indeed, this is all about nonlethal hunting. No matter what dinos you come across, your best bet for getting them off your back is to fire tranq rounds at them until they collapse, or throwing down a flash grenade. This works fine when trying to escape from a raptor ambush (which is *incredibly* often), but with the bigger targets, regular shots won't fell them in one hit, and it's not smart to be emptying your rifle rounds in a battle that could be much shorter. This is where a big part of *Dinosaur Hunting* comes into play: using your supply of red, green and blue "ingredients," you can develop specialty tranq darts that match the chemistry of the dinosaur, which can stun them in one hit, or at best give you ample time to try and pump more regular darts into them.

But it's not an easy process: to make darts with the correct dosages, you need the exact milligram levels for each din, like the 8-26-20 mixture to down the stegosaurus early on. And usually, that can be found by searching the dinosaurs' droppings. Betcha never played a game where examining giant turds was a winning strategy.

That's the most enjoyable part; the rest of *Dinosaur Hunting* is utterly frustrating. It's not quite as demanding as *Muzzle Flash*, but it gets there. The big problem is that everything you need to survive a mission is both limited and very expensive when you go shopping at the base camp. Therefore, if you run out of anything on the field—especially ammo and specialty darts, of which you can only carry five at a time—you're pretty much boned, and dying in the field will send you right back to zero.

The conundrum is that you need to bag dinosaurs to earn money, but without ammo to do so (or enough ingredients to make the right specialty darts), you can't get money, and thus can't get *anywhere*. And what if you miss a shot because you hesitated too long and the dino shifted to the left? Too bad; you're just not a good hunter, so try not to get ambushed again on your way back to camp.

If *Dinosaur Hunting* looks and sounds a little too similar to Capcom's *Monster Hunter* series, you're not alone. However, the original *Monster Hunter* was released a year later, so it's unlikely any ripping-off was going on. And despite its complications, *Dinosaur Hunting* wants to make sure you see and engage the big game early and often, as opposed to *Monster Hunter*'s RPG structure where you need to put in time to build your character through a few dozen quests before going after the Big Scaly Thing of the Moment. Nevertheless, being smart and careful is important in both games. But at least gear in *Monster Hunter* is affordable.

In a funny coincidence with *Rent-A-Hero No. 1*, *Dinosaur Hunting* also got an English version, and was raring to go for an American release until it was canceled just before hitting retail. This time the publisher was Metro3D, a company that failed to gain a foothold throughout the early 2000s thanks to a string of subpar titles, and eventually went bankrupt in 2004, right around the time *Dinosaur Hunting* was supposed to come out. Before that, it was business as usual: aside from the localization, the game got new box art, PR supplied screenshots, web sites posted previews, and like *Rent-A-Hero*, the game got reviews by at least a couple of outlets. The difference was that this game had no pre-existing hardcore fans that cared about it either way, and so *Dinosaur Hunting* remained a Japan exclusive.





Microsoft
11.20.2003



On a system dominated by action games of all kinds, you need a couple of things to get noticed: a good hook, and a good publisher. In the case of *Magatama*, it did have a good publisher—can't complain with Microsoft, can you?—but it didn't quite have the hook.

In Japan, a magatama is the teardrop-shaped bead that was mostly used to adorn the dead in ancient times and now represents religious charms of all sorts (and a bit over-fictionalized, if you've played a *Phoenix Wright* game), but *Magatama* the game only shares a pronunciation—it's spelled with three kanji that represent "demon," "fang" and "spirit," which actually says all you need to know about this game's world; firmly rooted in the dark side of Japanese mythology.

In an undefinable point of time in ancient Japan, a terrible war is breaking out. The Yamato clan, led by a sorcerer named Monkan, is using magic to summon demons and use their power to take over the land. A young warrior named Shinato has stepped forward to help the Bakufu side of the war, and he's so good, he can work alone. When you use two swords at once, you'd better

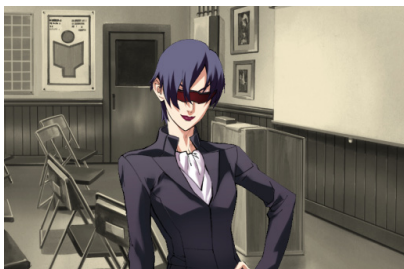
While Shinato *can* work alone, he's joined by Orochi, a jellyfish-like spirit that's always floating by his side, and also serves as a second weapon. If an enemy is kept in view long enough, Orochi's "eye target" will appear over it, and that's when you push the X button to send him flying towards the target. Because Orochi is independent, he can still be used to attack while Shinato is knocked down or otherwise inactive, which can be very helpful. As Orochi kills more enemies and collects their power, his energy reserve will fill to the brim, letting Shinato activate a super attack where the screen turns solarized, Orochi swirls around the immediate area for half a minute, and then slams down in front of Shinato like a bomb that blows away nearby enemies. Unfortunately, it's slow to build up the meter, and you can't just stock the attack for later, because it will go away after the meter pulses at full capacity for a few seconds.

A collage of 15 screenshots from the video game Onimusha: Warlords. The images are arranged in a grid-like fashion with some overlapping. The top row includes a close-up of a green mask with a red eye, a character in a red and white outfit using a glowing orange energy attack, a character in a red and white outfit in a dark environment, a close-up of a woman with black hair and red markings on her face, and a traditional Japanese building at night. The middle row features a character in a red and white outfit in a dark environment, a close-up of a woman with brown hair and red markings on her face, and a character in a red and white outfit in a dark environment. The bottom row shows a character in a red and white outfit in a dark environment, a character in a red and white outfit in a dark environment, a character in a red and white outfit in a dark environment, a character in a red and white outfit in a dark environment, and a character in a red and white outfit in a dark environment. The screenshots depict various combat scenes, character portraits, and environmental details from the game.

It's a good bet that if From Software's *Otogi* didn't exist, *Magatama* may have reached its full potential. But in the end, only one creepy Japanese-mythology action game was victorious, and by that I mean *Otogi* left Japan and got a sequel. Curiously, *Magatama* is also the only Japan-exclusive Xbox game available for download on Japan's Xbox Live right now, in case you wanted a small indicator of how much faith Microsoft had in it. It's a centerpiece, not the main course.



Kiki
12.18.2003



"Shouldn't it be 'exoskeleton?'"

I can hear you say. Nope, it's *Exaskeleton*, the name given to the towering mechs you pilot in this game, and is short for "Exact Exoskeleton." OK, so you're half right. Mech games were fairly common on Xbox and came from all sides of the globe, but *Exaskeleton* showed that, for some reason, it's really easy to screw up a game about piloting giant badass walking robots.

Exaskeleton is notable (or was *supposed* to be notable) for being co-designed by Production I.G., the renowned anime studio. They contributed character and mech designs, and likely had something to do with there being a real plot to the game, told through visual novel-like 2D cut-scenes. Set in the year 2022, the story centers around the IG-1 competition, a "survival game" that's used to find the best *Exaskeleton* pilots out there. You play Joe Graham, a guy just looking to make his mark on the scene, and being that he's still a little green at the start of the story, he's thrown into sparring matches against other mechs, where your objective as the player is to run and jump around small arenas trying not to get destroyed before you empty all your ammo.

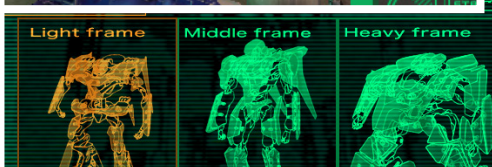
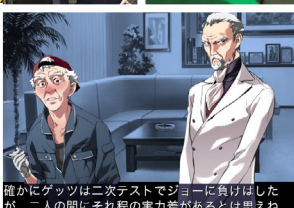
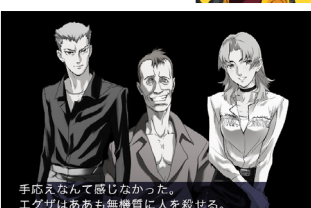
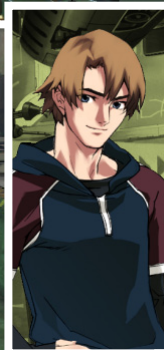
And it's here, right at the start of the game, where it all falls apart. Sure, your mechs are tall 'n' powerful 'n' all, and have cool looks to them, but it doesn't matter if they resemble a hulking tank or a lithe mantis, because they walk and turn and jump so slowly that you wonder why they're being militarized. That might be manageable if that was all that was wrong with the controls, but it only gets more confusing and frustrating, like firing with the left trigger (!), or only being able to cycle through weapons in one direction, then watching in agony as your mech carefully changes guns. And opponents are so stupid they make you seem stupid: if they have rockets, they will use them immediately, and they seem to have infinite ammo to begin with, so you can get worn down and killed easily even if you're putting in the effort to stay alive. There were three years of great Xbox shooters to pluck inspiration from, but the developers of *Exaskeleton* didn't seem to notice.

Painful as that proverbial entrance exam is, it's just filler, because after a few of those one-on-ones, the game finally gets going by giving you real missions, ones that take place outdoors and everything! Joe and the rest of the Exaskeletons join up in an ongoing war and start going on infiltration and rescue missions, where the enemies are in greater numbers yet generally weaker than the dudes you fought in the arenas, and if they're not, you still have support from your new partners, who are pretty good in helping clean up messes. That still doesn't prevent the missions from being incredibly unoriginal and straightforward: feel like you're in a dead end? You probably just didn't kill every single enemy in the map. Do that, and maybe a gate will open somewhere.

Every time a mission is about to begin, you can choose from the type of mech you want and then customize its weapon loadout. The Light, Medium, and Heavy types will naturally give you various degrees of speed balanced with strength, but, as mentioned, they all seem to move at or around the same level of "slow." In most cases, piloting a Heavy is the best bet, since it also has access to the full array of weapons, including powerful exclusive ones.

Sadly, *Exaskeleton* was as slapdash as they come, and no amount of expensive mech designs can hide the ugliness of this third-person dud. Heck, even the cut-scenes could be better—the characters just keep talking and talking, and their portraits have so few changes in their poses that it rapidly becomes clear that no one wanted to spend their time making this game the best it could be.

And as for the publisher, the insanely obscure Kiki, this would be their second and final game, the first being *Triangle Again 2*, a typical lovey-dovey visual novel that was the polar opposite of *Exaskeleton*. Bit of a shame they couldn't quite strike a middle ground, but they were just another casualty of the early 2000s game market, one that wouldn't even see the Xbox through to the end.





From Software
12.22.2004



This is it. The one everybody talks about when they think of the most outstanding Japan-only Xbox games. By no means are they ignorant—*Metal Wolf Chaos* is certainly a cornerstone in the system's history, and it was brought to us by none other than the mavericks at From.

When an unthinkable coup d'état threatens the future of the United States, the only man in the administration left standing is the president, Michael Wilson. Vice-president Richard Hawk moved to try and usurp the office, managing to get the entire armed forces turned squarely on Wilson while also clamping down on society. Not one to go calmly, Wilson jumps into his mechanized super suit Metal Wolf, literally flies out of the White House, and begins striking back.

Wilson jets across the country to the west coast to fight the coup before doubling back to the east for Part 2, where he'll also get rid of Richard, who's already spreading propaganda about Wilson and, by the way, has his own mech suit. With practically no outside help, Wilson uses Metal Wolf to shoot, blow up, and run over every last element of the coup, from soldiers to battleships.



Bunkasha Games
8.4.2005



*With only a scant few months to go until the launch of the Xbox 360, its predecessor's final Japanese exclusive was a fitting callback to the beginning of its life: *Double S.T.E.A.L.: The Second Clash*, or "Wreckless 2," as we could have known it.*

In *Second Clash*, we reunite with Mei and Madoka, two of Hong Kong's worst-dressed finest. This time, they've been transferred across the world to work in Chicago, supervising the transportation of yakuza boss Tiger Takagi. Being flushed out of Hong Kong wasn't enough, apparently, because his network is just as active as he was before, and there's plenty of new opportunities for our heroes to chase after Takagi's henchmen across every corner of the Windy City.

Though the setting has changed in this sequel, the core gameplay barely has, and that's just fine: The main game is a series of missions with different end goals, though they usually amount to ramming into enemy cars enough to empty their health meters and then instantly win the mission. Granted, some missions tweak things slightly, like chasing a getaway boat along

the shore while avoiding getting hit by oncoming thug cars, but in general, it's all about using cars and trucks of various sizes and ridiculousness that can blow through any vehicle big or small without regard—who knew that CTA buses were so light? In fact, the biggest change for *Second Clash* is a boost meter that gives every vehicle a temporary surge of nitro that can offer a nice assist when you need one. But unlike *Burnout* or some similar game, the meter fills automatically and slowly, so you don't fill it by crashing into things, but just by waiting.

When *Wreckless* was first released, it missed the original Xbox launch, but when it hit a few months later, it still managed to wow people thanks to some clever uses of lighting and depth-of-field effects that made the game look like some crazy tech demo... in a good way. *Second Clash* has all of that and then some, with even more crazy lighting, more detailed player vehicles, and an emphasis on using funky filters during replays. It still looks shockingly good, but by 2005 (and with the addition of 720p support), it doesn't quite look like it was a generation ahead. That's doubly evident when you see close-ups of the low-poly humans in cut-scenes, or when citizen vehicles fly up and explode a little too unrealistically, to say nothing, again, of the magical styrofoam buses.

A lot of the Hong Kong map in *Wreckless* took you through narrow roads that just piled on the annoyances as you tried to keep from crashing, but Chicago is naturally wider, and the streets lead out of downtown and towards the freeways by the water, giving you long stretches of innocent cars to violently pluck from the pavement. On top of that, *Second Clash* has a "Free" mode, which allows you to explore Chicago at your leisure. But this hardly turns the game into *Burnout Paradise*, because without the mission structure, there isn't a ton to actually do in the city except find areas that unlock a few minigames, like a short race around a dirt track or a simple timed run for checkpoints. There are obvious ramps, and you can climb through the train station and up onto the track, but there's little in the city that's purposefully designed to let you catch major air and have you go "whooooaaAAAH" all the time (I guess that's what glitches are for). And with the same slow crawl of the dash meter, the fun in Free mode just doesn't last that long. But it's good for a lark.

Like *Muzzle Flash* before it, *Second Clash* was totally ready to go in English via a simple system language switch, once more lending an assumption that the game was heading to the West sooner or later. And why not, right? *Wreckless* made a great first impression three years prior; it was the rare game in the first wave that, despite its rougher edges, did its best to stand out next to *Halo* or, more appropriately, *Project Gotham Racing*, so for it to return for the end of the party made a lot of sense.

But unfortunately, the Xbox was no longer a buyer's market. With a 2004 copyright on the game, Bunkasha apparently wanted *Second Clash* to be out a year earlier, when the Xbox was at its peak rather than in its twilight. And by then, Activision had given up publishing Japanese games, so that left out "Wreckless 2" from the company that brought the original here. Who knows if Bunkasha shopped it around, but with no recourse, they were left to keep *Second Clash* in Japan, and that sadly wasn't enough to keep the company around for the next generation. But with a fun exclusive game, they put a nice little capstone on the troubled life of the original Xbox.

ダブルスティール ザ・セカンド・クラッシュ



KNOWN JAPANESE XBOX FAVORITES THAT MADE IT TO AMERICA UNKNOWN



To the hardcore, the Dreamcast represented games with new, crazy, stylish ideas. In 2000, *Jet Grind Radio* hit all three of those elements, and though fans wanted more, a standard sequel probably wouldn't have been enough. Hence *JSRF: Jet Set Radio Future*, which serves as sort of a reboot that gives the game's world a futuristic edge while still retaining its key components: funky, music-driven graffiti taggin' on the streets. The Tokyo-inspired levels are more detailed, a little less saturated, yet not a whole lot bigger than the original's, but there is a larger emphasis on staying up in the air, be it by grinding along power lines or hopping across rooftops. *JGR*'s defining feature—finding designated spots to tag in order to complete objectives—was simplified in *JSRF* to just a couple of trigger taps rather than a series of control stick swirls, which some fans see as a regression. But the rest of *JSRF* is a big step forward, even in the soundtrack, which still has plenty of fun electronica but also takes a further walk on the wild side. "Birthday Cake" is awesome, c'mahhhhn.



Like *JSRF*, *Gunvalkyrie* was a project that began on Dreamcast but quickly moved over to Xbox, which was likely a better choice. As one of the first of Sega's Xbox games that weren't sequels of some sort, it easily stood out in the system's first calendar year, because it was also an action-shooter where a lot of shit was going on at the same time. The pretense is almost negligible—evil scientist turns planetary colonists into mutant bugs, blah blah blah—because the only thing that matters is surviving the waves of enemies that appear oh so very often. This is where *Gunvalkyrie*'s key complaint arrives; the controls involve using LT to jump and clicking LS to boost and other similar combinations, which can be an extreme pain when you're also trying to move and shoot correctly. A simple facsimile of *Halo*'s controls would have solved a lot of problems, but then I guess the game would be only 99 percent hardcore. An apt comparison these days would be "*Lost Planet* with a jet pack." The big alien bugs are there, and the encroaching difficulty, but the cachet isn't.



Phantom Crash is far from being one of the best Xbox games—it's fairly ugly, low on content and high on repetition—but it's nevertheless one of the most special. What would otherwise be a run-of-the-mill mech-based arena shooter is helped along by a neotokyan backdrop, some insanely quirky characters (some just insane), and the varying degrees of artificial intelligence that run their mobile suits. But one of the game's biggest bullet points is its soundtrack. No joke—it has a pile of music from an incredibly eclectic selection of Japanese indie artists that can be mixed and matched however you like to make your perfect battle playlist, so you can waste opponents to the sounds of the Kuricorder Quartet if you want. A sequel, *S.L.A.I.*, hit the PlayStation 2 in 2005, but only made detrimental changes to the gameplay, and the music wasn't as crazy, either. If you want an idea of what *Phantom Crash* could be like with an extra 10 years in development, check out the stunning PC mech shooter *Hawken*.

PANZER DRAGON ORTA



Sega's M.O. on Xbox seemed to be about giving us sequels we wanted—or didn't, in the case of *ToeJam & Earl III*—so it's easy to imagine the sonic boom of excitement that resulted in the reveal of *Panzer Dragoon Orta*. It wasn't another RPG like *PD Saga*, but a shooter was just as acceptable, and the fact it was on Xbox gave it a look and speed that the Saturn originals could only aspire to. Very little was different about the gameplay, except that the dragon our hero Orta rides can transform into three different forms (Base, Heavy, Glide) that work better in certain skirmishes. And it's also surprisingly packed with content—besides the 10 or so levels, you get the entire "Pandora's Box" collection of unlockables, including a somber side story about a young boy in the game's universe and, of course, the original *Panzer Dragoon* game. *Orta* is also utterly gorgeous at times, with flights through lush grasslands to the more desolate areas typical of a *PD* game. It's more than faithful to the legacy.

OTOGI



From Software's *Otogi* (and *Otogi 2*) are simply the most underrated action games on the Xbox. Why? Well, they get plenty of respect from those in the know, but as for the games themselves, they're well-executed enough that it's hard to put them down. *Onimusha* and *Magatama* play with Japanese demons and mythology, but they're still kind of glossy and smoothed-over in more ways than one—*Otogi* is dark, harsh, spooky and arduous, which is probably what a day in the realm of spirits would be like. Its emphasis on destructible environments also makes for some early "wow" moments as you make hero Raikoh dart across levels, sometimes in midair, and slash everything in sight. But, being a From game, it's not without flaws: sometimes it's hard to time jumps correctly, and some particularly difficult stages get "dark" versions later on that are even more upsetting. However, the *Otogi* games showed that even after a disappointing start on the system with *Murakumo*, From meant business on Xbox.

BREAKDOWN



Japanese developers are routinely criticized for not grasping the first-person shooter, so what does Namco do? Make a game that's *extremely* first-person! People find it impossible to mention *Breakdown* without also referring to the goofy first-person vomiting and the labored (for the player) first-person soda drinking, but that's all in the first few minutes, and after that, it's mostly a regular first-person action game. The funny part is that it was clear the creators were avoiding using guns too often, as *Breakdown* is more of a beat-em-up: amnesiac hero Derrick is injected with an otherworldly substance that gives him superhuman strength, letting him punch a hole in anything and anybody... except the hulking Dr. Manhattan types that come from that other world. Despite some nitpicks in the gameplay (no, really, you don't get to use guns that much, and they're really quite helpful), *Breakdown* was fairly polished, using not just vomiting and other minor motions but also a crazy sci-fi plot with cut-scenes that never leave the viewpoint of Derrick in order to immerse the player as best as possible.

PHANTOM DUST



Whereas *Breakdown* tried to reinvent first-person shooters, *Phantom Dust* went third-person with an FPS characteristic the whole world can agree on: deathmatches. Its intense arena battles use a card-based system to build "decks" of attacks that you append to each of the Xbox face buttons, making for quick, unpredictable, and strangely addictive play (moreso when you could play online). The odd visual kei-like character designs are part of a general aesthetic that's kind of like a marriage between *Panzer Dragoon Orta* and *PowerStone*. The former is no surprise considering that producer Yuko Futatsugi was one of the original creators of the *Panzer Dragoon* franchise, and that he really likes giving his games the initials "PD"—in fact, he's back at it with *Project Draco*, the dragon-flying action game being developed for Kinect.



The of Misfit Hardware



ARTIFACT #F87N

Famicom Network Adapter

A Horse in the Race

Nintendo and the internet have been known to have a tumultuous relationship, but it wasn't always that way—in fact, Nintendo was gunning for an online network before any of their competitors. In 1987, the company's lead hardware designer Masaki Uemura was tasked by president Hiroshi Yamauchi to look into the development of a network system for the Family Computer, in conjunction with Nomura Securities, the powerful investment firm. By that time, the Famicom was in its prime, and common knowledge was that more homes had one than a personal computer, so by widening the software possibilities of the system with things that would be more interesting to practical adults, Nintendo could start rolling out one sweet trojan horse.

The result was the Famicom Network Adapter, essentially a big, black modem that made the Famicom look like a space toilet, and included a custom controller with a numeric keypad shoved in between the d-pad and action buttons. The adapter itself wasn't *just* a modem: the pod that sat on the Famicom housed its own RAM and ROM chips, plus a slot for a memory card; a thin slab similar to a PCMCIA card that stored user data. The deal with Nomura gave way to the Famicom Trade service, which allowed customers to do their banking, trading and investing via a primitive but usable visual interface. Numerous Japanese banks supported the service, making it easy for anyone to get started.

The second big application for the Network Adapter was a more obvious form of gambling: horse races. The Japan Racing Association had maintained a phone-based betting system since the 1970s, and extending that service to the Famicom was a natural move, thanks to the advantages a GUI provided. Their Personal Access Terminal (PAT) system was then adopted for the FC Network Adapter, offering the same basic tracking and bet-placing functions as the old phone service, but with cartoon horses and the constant blaring of “Camptown Races.” (JRA PAT was later introduced for the Super Famicom using a similar keypad controller and a third-party modem.) Support for the Network Adapter continued long enough for Nintendo to turn it into a makeshift console: the Dataship 1200 was a standalone unit released in 1990 that just had a slot for the data cards and a port for the controller, not to mention it looked way sexier than the Gobot style of the regular Famicom.

Unfortunately, the key concept of the Famicom Network Adapter was the one that likely held back greater success: It was never meant for games. That doesn't mean Nintendo didn't experiment—they prototyped and subsequently abandoned a go game, determining that families might not like online games hogging the phone line. Therefore, applications for the Network



The Network Adapter simultaneously tried to broaden the Famicom's horizons and shed its kiddie image, but its uses were much too specialized to make Nintendo a leader in online services.

Adapter were short-use and limited to Mom and Dad, and keeping it that way seemed understandable: the whole idea of using your phone in tandem with a computer, much less a Famicom, was still pretty novel in the '80s, and could easily be abused by unsupervised kids. The closest the network got to gaming was the *Super Mario Club* service, which mainly provided a database of Famicom software; a precursor to the Wii's Nintendo Channel.

In the years that followed, Sega would launch its own modem for the Mega Drive that had a gaming advantage—no multiplayer, but plenty of downloadable software—and NEC and Hudson nearly released one for the PC Engine. After the petering out of the Famicom network, Nintendo kept from getting too active in the online space. They did, however, toy with network systems with virtually all their systems since: the Satellaview on Super Famicom (a project also led by Uemura); the modem in the 64DD set; the cell phone adapter for the Game Boy Color; the dual modems for the GameCube, and the relatively better-realized online connectivity of the Nintendo DS, Wii, and onward.

STREET FIGHTER II

NINTENDO • GAME BOY • 1995

Nintendo of America went through an odd phase in the Game Boy's twilight years. From 1995 to '97, they published several fighting games for the system. *Street Fighter II* was the one that led the charge; the most popular fighting game of the decade shrunk down to the least powerful system of the decade. It was not a match in heaven.

It makes sense why they'd reach out for something to liven things up, though. The Game Boy was in its twilight years, still a little bit away from being reborn as the Game Boy Pocket and a few more years away from *Pokémon* (in America, anyway). Nintendo needed some late-era punch-ups, and that year they launched their "Play It Loud" series of colored Game Boys that tried oh-so hard to be hip, but were still the same fat brick from six years before. Apparently, they thought *Street Fighter II* was the punch-up it needed.

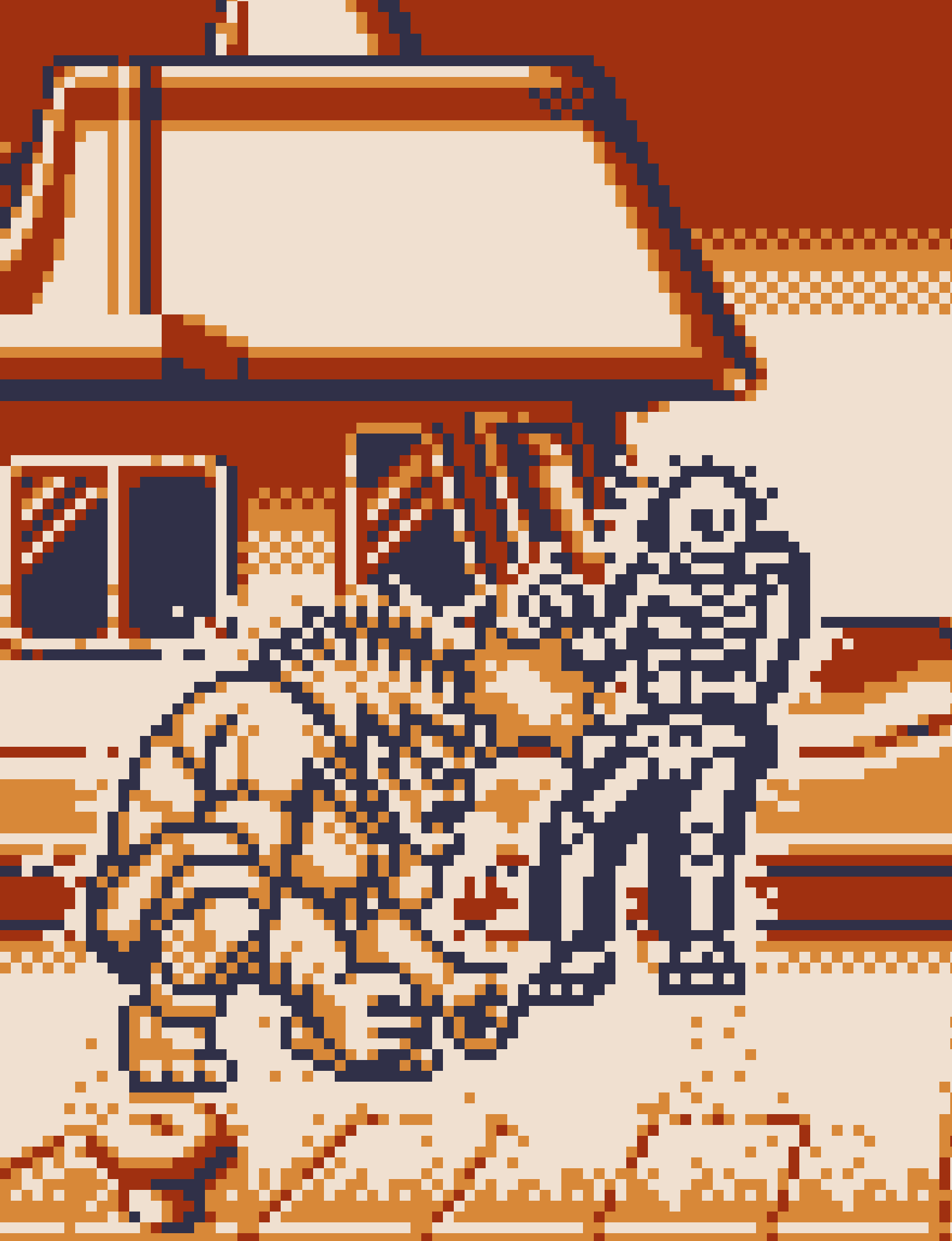
But *SF II* had its fair share of batty ports, both licensed and unlicensed. In the game's heyday, a Chinese-made port for the Famicom

was well-traveled (*Master Fighter II* was one of its many names), and despite its shoddy quality, it nonetheless showed that the original game could have worked on NES if Capcom wanted to give it the proper treatment. Yet in an apparent attempt to out-crazy the bootlegs, Capcom went with the Game Boy instead, and we may never know why. At a time when *SF II* was in its own twilight years, with fans flocking to the all-new *Street Fighter Alpha*, which debuted in arcades in the summer of '95, Capcom published the Game Boy *SF II* in Japan, but handed it to NOA for a release around the same time.

Being so late to the party, this version of *SF II* is partly based on *Super SF II*. Yet not the important parts—it has none of *Super's* new characters, and the total roster of nine makes no earthly sense (three are the bosses), but it does have the updated character portraits. And of course, it plays terribly, but not solely because it only has two buttons to work with—fighting games *can* work on a two-button handheld, but

one needs more than just a workable control scheme. The glaring problem is that the game is needlessly choppy: characters blit around the screen to such a degree that it makes it seem like a guessing game when you want to properly time a special move. It's a poor approach to dealing with the Game Boy's even poorer refresh rate, especially when Konami's *Raging Fighter* moves as smoothly as any other "real" fighting game, and came out two years prior.

As mentioned, Nintendo followed their release of *SF II* with a handful of other fighters; some Takara ports like *Battle Arena Toshinden* and *The King of Fighters '95*. But they also got Rare to make a Game Boy version of *Killer Instinct*, which was released a couple of months after *SF II*, and was obviously just as insane as the idea of *Street Fighter* on Game Boy—moreso when the Super NES version of *KI* wasn't exactly a carbon copy itself. And then Nintendo published the SNES version of *Street Fighter Alpha 2* the following year, so perhaps this kooky deal with Capcom worked out. Just not to *our* benefit.



2001: A game odyssey

I personally didn't get an Xbox until the end of 2002, when it finally became relevant to my interests: it was bundled with *JSRF* and a Controller S, and *Shenmue II* was almost out. So yeah, it's no surprise that I would take time in this issue to imply it was the second Dreamcast. But the fact the Xbox got anything close to a Dreamcast-type game at *all* is just a testament to the supreme oddness of the game market early in the century.

The era of the PlayStation 2, GameCube, and Xbox was one of the biggest transitions in the industry, for better or worse. The makers of those systems had all honed in on the same basic promise—the greatest graphics which would beget the greatest games—but none of them knew exactly how it would all turn out. Only one of them generally stayed on message, and that was the Xbox, and as has been explained in the cover feature already, it went in with guns blazing, and practically came *out* guns blazing. Xbox games were easily stereotyped, whereas the PS2 was getting some really classy stuff, and the GameCube was getting... GameCube games. Some real good ones, though!

Regardless, from 2001 to 2004, we got games that played around with all manner of conventions and gave us products never before seen until then. For the PS2, part of that was natural evolution: the first PlayStation harbored some super interesting games, too—it had nearly 2,000 of them, how could it not? But we still speak highly of *Ico* or *Katamari Damacy*, both PS2 games, and that says it all. If you thought the Xbox had some weird games in Japan, the stuff that stayed there on the other systems is just as surprising (track down Sony's *Kuma Uta*, the enka-singing bear). Some games didn't need to be brand-new to feel new, though: I love *F-Zero GX* on GameCube simply for the way it took the interpretation of the *F-Zero* universe to the next level.

The unfortunate flip side to the last generation is that it gave way to the next, which is when budgets got bigger, along with game prices, game add-ons, and the making of every big game release into an elaborate launch event. Those who predicted the marriage of video games and Hollywood have pretty much seen that come true, and the weird, wild, wacky games that were somewhat marginalized are just further marginalized.

It's a bit sad we rarely see anything so varied at retail anymore, but obviously, the rise of digital distribution, and specifically indie games, are keeping the spirit of creativity alive. And in the case of Japan, we've seen a string of well-known creators go rogue to do their own crazy things. We may never see anything like *Metal Wolf Chaos* in a box ever again, but who knows—history has a way of repeating itself.

rdb

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Ray Barnholt

(I did everything this time! Ack!)

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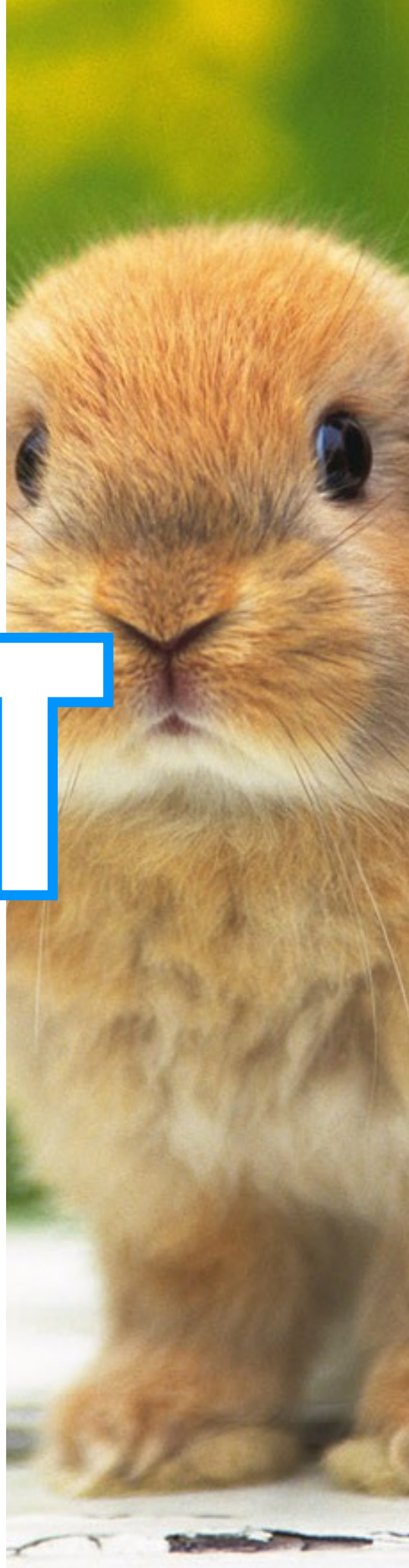
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