



HARDCORE GAMING 101 PRESENTS

SEGA ARCADE CLASSICS

VOLUME 1

Hardcore Gaming 101 Presents: Sega Arcade Classics Vol. 1 (Kindle Edition)
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Introduction

When I was five years old, I received a Sega Master System from a relative, and I became a fan for life. In first grade composition class, I wrote an eight page story on the further adventures of Alex Kidd. Every assignment I wrote was tied to Sega in some way – there were stories about *Penguin Land* and *Wonder Boy*, and I somehow even connected *Double Dragon* to St. Patrick's Day.

In the twenty five-odd years since my days at elementary school, my obsession hasn't really died down all that much, as this volume can attest to. But it's not due only to mere nostalgia – look over Sega's arcade output during the 1980s and 1990s and you'll find that it reads like a "best of" compilation from the era. Many of the games are most definitely artifacts of the time, with themes based off popular movies like *Aliens*, *Top Gun*, and *Conan the Barbarian*, yet that in no way lessens their impact, or even their quality.

This volume seeks to explore what makes these games so fascinating. Games like *Space Harrier*, *After Burner*, and *OutRun* pushed the boundaries of technology with Sega's "super scaler" technology. *Shinobi* and *Golden Axe* took ideas from other popular games – Namco's *Rolling Thunder* and Technos' *Double Dragon*, respectively – and refined them into substantially better games. *Fantasy Zone* featured some of the most colorful, imaginative graphics of the time, while *Altered Beast*, the polar opposite on the "cute" spectrum, begged console gamers to upgrade to Sega's 16-bit Genesis system.

The criteria for the games selected in this volume revolved mostly around how prolific the games were, based on how many sequels or ports they received. All of their offshoots are also covered in great detail, including obscure mobile releases and fan games. All of these were born in the arcades, with the exception of *Alex Kidd*, which began on the Master System (though his arcade game was released shortly afterward). Obviously, this book only scratches the surface of Sega's games. There are many fantastic titles from the company that will be covered in future volumes, including its earlier arcade games, its lesser known titles and, of course, its home consoles.

At any rate, thank you for purchasing this volume, and please look forward to more volumes from Hardcore Gaming 101 in the future!

Kurt Kalata
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Hardcore Gaming 101: Sega Arcade Classics Vol. 1

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System Key

32X - Sega 32X
360 - Xbox 360
AMI - Amiga
ARC - Arcade
AST - Atari ST
AT8 - Atari 400/800/XL
C64 - Commodore 64
CPC - Amstrad CPC
DC - Dreamcast
FC - Famicom
FM7 - Fujitsu FM-7
FMT - FM Towns
GBA - Game Boy Advance

GEN - Genesis
GG - Game Gear
IBM - IBM PC (DOS)
IOS - iPhone/iPad/iPod Touch
MD - Mega Drive
MKIII - Sega Mark III
MOB - Mobile
NES - Nintendo Entertainment System
MZ - Sharp MZ
PC88 - PC-8801
PCE - PC Engine
PS2 - PlayStation 2

PS3 - PlayStation 3
PSP - PlayStation Portable
SCD - Sega CD / Mega CD
SG1 - SG-1000
SMS - Sega Master System
TG16 - TurboGrafx-16
WII - Wii
WIN - Windows
WS - Wonderswan
X1 - Sharp X1
X68 - Sharp X68000
XB - Xbox
ZX - ZX Spectrum

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Space Harrier



Space Harrier

Original Release: 1985

Platforms: ARC, SMS, TG16, FC, GG, IBM, AMI, AST, AT8, ZX, X68, PC88, PC60, MZ, X1, FM7, C64, 32X, SAT, GBA, DC, XB, PS2, MOB, 360, PS3, WII, WIN, 3DS



Released by Sega into the arcades in 1985, and designed by the legendary Yu Suzuki, *Space Harrier* is a shoot-em-up that ditched the horizontal or vertical views of most games at the time, and put the viewpoint right behind the player. Featuring a flight stick to emulate piloting a jet fighter, players take control of the "Harrier", a blond guy wearing a red shirt and blue pants.

Through means left entirely unexplained, the Harrier can fly over the landscape at incredible speed. Armed only with a huge cannon, he rushes forward, destroying the bizarre, dangerous creatures of Dragon Land. It wasn't the first game to use this technology – *Space Harrier* is predated by Sega's own 1982 3D shooter *Buck Rogers: Planet of Zoom* – but it's a huge technological improvement, and manages to look extremely impressive even today.

The action is remarkably simple: just fly, dodge, and shoot back. Even though there's no targeting crosshair, aiming is remarkably easy, as you only need to shoot in the general vicinity of a foe to hit them. Bad guys also shoot directly at the Harrier, so as long as you keep moving and don't backtrack over your previous position, you won't get hit. All the while, you'll be maneuvering the Harrier between stone columns, stationary poles, and various kinds of plants. While you'll usually only trip over bushes and rocks,

smacking into a tree spells certain death (the original arcade release also has a glitch where you'll shoot right through bushes, though most later ports fix this).

The trippy backgrounds are a trademark of *Space Harrier*. The ground consists of a flat checkerboard which changes color every stage. The sky switches between from bright blue to the yellow of dusk, to the pink atmosphere of some otherworldly planet. Across the horizons are alien buildings and landscapes which fall and rise after the completion of each stage. A few levels even feature a ceiling, giving a hallucinatory feeling of claustrophobia. There are 18 stages total.

Creatures of the Land

The enemies in Dragon Land are extremely creative and distinctive. The Harrier fights one-eyed mammoths, bulbous yellow squids, stone heads, and orbs that resemble cybernetic peanuts. Amidst all of the bizarre enemies are more standard types, like jets and flying mecha (which are basically the Doms from *Mobile Suit Gundam*), although even these designs are still incredibly cool looking. But the most impressive foes are the dragons, usually taking the role of the level boss. Each of these consists of a head and several segments which, in motion, gives the appearance of long, floating Chinese dragons.



Their visage is reminiscent of Falkor the Luck Dragon from the movie *The Neverending Story*.

Keeping control over the Harrier, all while dodging and firing amidst the wild colors, is the kind of glorious chaos that is representative of the best in 1980s arcade gaming. The stages have strange names like Moot, Geeza, Minia, Parm and Absymbel, that help create a distinctive and thoroughly memorable game world. There are also a few bonus stages, where the Harrier hops on the back of a white dragon named Uriah. Although he's hard to control, Uriah is invincible, and the goal is simply to smash as much of the landscape as possible.

Space Harrier's theme song is incredible, composed by famed Sega musician Hiroshi Kawaguchi, and easily ranks as one of the most memorable in gaming. It only fades out during boss fights or special stages, but it's long enough that it never gets tiring. There's also the encouraging voice over, which yells "Welcome to the Fantasy Zone! Get Ready!" or proclaims "You're doing great!" after the end of each level. Even after dying, as your Harrier screams in agony and falls to the ground, a friendly message pops up that says "Many more battle scenes will soon be available!" as he picks himself off the ground and returns to battle.

Given its popularity, it's natural that *Space Harrier* would be ported to every possible platform. Unfortunately, given the advanced hardware of Sega's bespoke *Space Harrier* arcade board, there was no home system at the time that could pull off the scaling effects necessary to replicate the sense of speed found in the original. Not only that, but the analog control needed to be ditched in favor of digital, which greatly alters the gameplay.

The first console port was to Sega's own Master System. The pace had to be stifled quite a bit for the 8-bit machine to keep up, and the scrolling is much choppy. Still, the huge enemies manage to impress. For the most part, the enemies and levels are comparable to the arcade version. Sega added an additional final boss named Haya-Oh (named after Hayao Nakayama, the then-president of Sega) and a real ending – which is much better than the arcade version, which simply showed up a huge "The End" sign. Also hidden is the ability to play as a jet fighter and a secret message that urges players to write to Sega giving their opinions.

The Game Gear port is based on the Master System release. Due to the smaller screen size some of the proportions had to be changed, so the Harrier is much bigger. The enemy sprites have been altered to appear more organic. Some of the level names have been changed as well, and there are only 12 stages in total. A password function also allows players to skip to later levels. Despite running on the same hardware as the Master System, the music has been rearranged.

Takara ported *Space Harrier* to the Famicom. While the scrolling is smoother than the SMS port, the Harrier moves incredibly slowly. There's a whole bunch of flicker, and all of the sprites are smaller. They couldn't even fit any of the voices in. The enemy arrangement is based on the



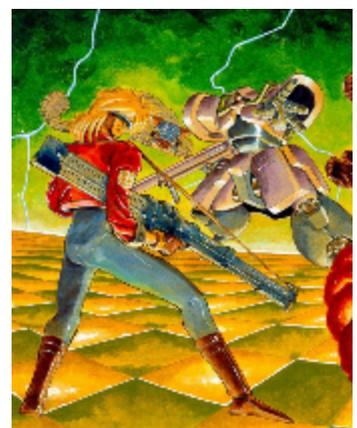
Master System version, so it has the additional final boss.

NEC Avenue and Dempa brought *Space Harrier* to the TurboGrafx-16. It's smoother than the other 8-bit console ports, but it still doesn't feel quite right, and it both looks and sounds ugly. The checkerboard floor is also gone.

Dempa also took care of the computer ports in Japan. The versions on the PC-6001 and the PC-8801 are the worst looking iterations out there. While the Harrier is a low-color sprite (as are the enemies in the latter version), everything else, including the clouds, trees and bullets, are just featureless colored rectangles. And yet despite how awful it looks (or perhaps because of this), it keeps up the speed, and actually plays more smoothly than most of the European computer ports.

The Sharp MZ-700 and X1 conversions are slight steps up, though most everything still looks like colored blotches. The Fujitsu FM-7 version looks decent and plays alright. The X68000 port is by far the best of these, with smooth animation and almost completely faithful gameplay, though the checkerboard floor has been removed in favor of scrolling bars. All of these computer versions have slightly different but excellent soundtracks. The X68000 version features Haya-Oh, the SMS ending, and a new credits sequence, along with two new music tracks.

Top row: [ARC] The bonus stage with Uriah the dragon, and the beginning of stage 10
 Bottom-middle: [SMS] Haya-Oh, the final boss
 Bottom-right: Artwork for the Japanese Game Gear release



Space Harrier



Elite handled the home computer ports for Europe and North America. The version for the Commodore 64 is too fast and choppy, though the music is decent. The European version is slightly better, being that the floor has a scrolling effect, whereas it's just a solid color in the American release. The ZX Spectrum version is sluggish and hideously colored. The Amstrad version looks nicer, though while the Harrier is a detailed sprite, the enemies and objects are simple wireframes.

The IBM PC version looks alright, but the animation is still very choppy, and the speed feels off. The Amiga and Atari ST versions are the best of these, with faithful graphics and good animation which isn't quite as smooth as the arcade version, but far more playable than its brethren. However, due to the size, it had to be split into two separate games – *Space Harrier* and *Space Harrier: Return to the Fantasy Zone*.

It wasn't until the 32X in 1992 that *Space Harrier* finally came home in nearly arcade perfect form, but it only runs at 30 FPS. The Saturn version was released five years later as part of the *Sega Ages* line, and is very nearly arcade perfect. It came out on a single disc in Japan, and was bundled together with *OutRun* and *After Burner II* for the Western release. It includes true analog control to mimic the original arcade game.

Space Harrier is also playable in both *Shenmue* titles for the Dreamcast and Xbox. It's missing some of the customization options of the other ports, but if you can beat the game in one credit, you get a certificate from the arcade owner in the first *Shenmue*.

The Game Boy Advance version was featured as part of the *Sega Arcade Gallery* collection, ported by Bits Studio. Although it looks fine on the outset, it's badly programmed, and just doesn't feel right.

Space Harrier saw a remake on the PlayStation 2 under the *Sega Ages 2500* series. The entire game has been redone with polygons, but the whole makeover looks rather cheap, with jaggy visuals and low resolution textures. The redesigned look of the Harrier is lousy, with his silly goggles and spiky blond hair. The graphics lose much of the bright color that made the original so attractive, but since the objects here are actual 3D objects instead of 2D sprites, it gives a better impression of depth and scale. In the original game, all of the boss dragons were made out of individual segments that scrolled in unison, giving the illusion of a flying beast. Here, they actually look like dragons. There's no option for analog control, sadly.

The remixed music tracks are quite good, and the new announcer spouts more ridiculous phrases, like "Get busy, Harrier! Dragon Land is screaming!" There's also now a lock-on laser similar to *Panzer Dragoon*, along with a limited-use rapid fire button. You can also get bombs to clear the screen, but these make the boss battles far too easy.

The new "Fractal Mode" turns off the classic checkerboard pattern and replaces it with a texture map, which looks pretty ugly. It also changes certain parts of the level so you can't run on them and need to fly. Additionally, there are a few extra tunnel stages, where you zoom through an enclosed tube. These would have been cooler had they not pasted the same low-res textures on the walls. Both the PS2 and the Japan-only Sonic Cafe mobile releases change the robots to look less like Doms.

There are also arcade-perfect ports available on the *Space Harrier II Complete Collection* for the PS2, and on the Wii Virtual Console, the latter of which features analog control by tilting

Top left: The sit-down arcade cabinet
Bottom right: [PS2] The new tunnel areas, plus the revised design for the Harrier

the nunchuck. It's also unlockable in *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, but the scaling effects are dodgy, and the audio is too high pitched.

In 2011, a hobbyist programmer named Chris Hutt ported *Space Harrier* to the Atari 8-bit computers. It's a true work of art, because it's better than the official computer ports that came out in the 1980s, with excellent visuals, fast action, and smooth gameplay. It is free to download.

In 2012, *3D Space Harrier* was released for the 3DS. Ported by M2, it features outstanding 3D visuals and widescreen. There's a mode to simulate the moving cabinet of the arcade game that tilts the screen back and forth, complete with simulated gear noises. Also included is a stage select and Haya-Oh as a hidden final boss, along with a new track by Manabu Namiki for the final battle. The Dom enemy has also been renamed Varel, but their design has not changed.



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



32X



X68000



Sega Master System



Game Gear



TurboGrafx-16



PlayStation 2



Game Boy Advance



Famicom



ZX Spectrum



Amstrad



Commodore 64 (US)



Atari 8-bit



Amiga



IBM PC



PC-88



Sharp MZ



Fujitsu FM-7

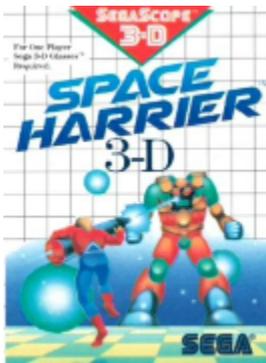
Space Harrier 3D



Space Harrier 3D

Original Release: 1988

Platforms: SMS, PS2, 3DS



Space Harrier 3D is not merely a remake of *Space Harrier* with 3D effects, rather it's a new title created to take advantage of the Master System's 3D shutter glasses. The effect is pretty remarkable – although nothing flies out of the screen, it gives the playing field a sense of depth that is incredibly cool.

The unfortunate tradeoff is that the scrolling and movement is even choppy than it was in the Master System version of the first game. Since it's harder to judge enemy and projectile motion, it's also far more difficult than the original, and not in a good way.

Subtle Difference

Still, it is an interesting experience, even if the fundamental gameplay hasn't changed all that much. There's a whole new array of monsters, including gigantic mechs and ferocious flying samurai. There are a few more obstacles to avoid, like indestructible bouncing balls and rods that seem small at a distance but grow to full length as you approach them. Some of the

color schemes used in the later levels (especially the dark red and pitch black) are a far cry from the pastels of the original, leading to an atmosphere that feels more oppressive than fantastical.

The plot is that Uriah, the good dragon from the first game, has been kidnapped, and it's up to you to save him. This accounts for why the bonus stages are gone. The *Space Harrier* main theme is back, along with a handful of new songs. The Japanese version also supports FM synth.

There is an option to turn off the 3D functionality, although it requires that you play the game to get a high score, then enter a code to enable the selection. Both the PlayStation 2 port and certain emulators allow you to turn off the 3D effect from the beginning, in addition to viewing the game with the traditional red-blue glasses used in other media for years.

A port of *Space Harrier 3D* is also included in the retail version of the *Sega 3D Fukkoku Archives* for the 3DS. Due to the hardware, the effects from the SMS version are replicated accurately.





Space Harrier II was one of the first titles for both the Mega Drive and Sega Genesis when released in their respective territories. The game was planned by Kotaro Hayashida (creator of *Alex Kidd*) rather than Yu Suzuki.

Not much has changed from its predecessor, other than offering 13 new stages, along with a handful of new enemies. The coolest of these are a three-headed turtle, a winged tiger, and the penultimate foe, the Dark Harrier. Boss fights are heralded with a darkened playing field and some lightning cracks in the distance – one of the few new special effects. You can choose your starting level at the outset, although you still need to conquer all of the stages to beat it.

The dragon bonus stages are gone, and are instead replaced with levels where you ride on top of a jet. It's pretty much like a regular level (except you're invincible), which is underwhelming. The new main theme, composed by Tokuhiko Uwabo, is actually pretty catchy, even though it doesn't quite hold a candle to the original. Some of the

sound effects are also a bit odd, as if the programmers hadn't quite mastered the Genesis' sound chip.

Although the 16-bit hardware was able to replicate other arcade titles like *Altered Beast*, the lack of any scaling meant that it still wasn't quite capable of delivering an arcade-like experience. The scrolling is definitely smoother than the 8-bit ports of the first game, and the horizon view actually changes as you move up and down, but it's still choppy and ultimately somewhat clumsy. When it was released, this was acceptable, but with the numerous quality ports of its predecessor now available, *Space Harrier II* is really not up to par.

Space Harrier II was originally released on the Mega Drive, was ported to numerous computer platforms in Europe. The quality of these ports is about the same as the ones developed for the original game. The Amstrad version has filled-in sprites but the speed is slower. The Atari ST and Amiga ports are very close to the Mega Drive version. The music conversions by Matt Furniss are quite excellent.



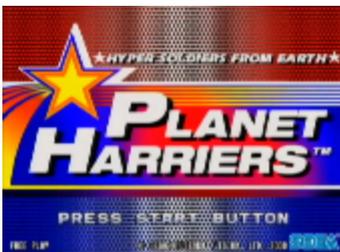
Space Harrier II

Original Release: 1988

Platforms: GEN, C64, AMI, AST, ZX, WIN, PS2, WII, IOS



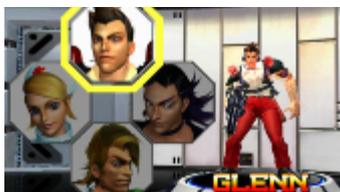
Planet Harriers



Planet Harriers

Original Release: 2000

Platforms: ARC



In 2000 Sega resurrected *Space Harrier* with a completely new arcade game, *Planet Harriers*. This update plays much more similarly to *Panzer Dragoon* than any of the old *Space Harrier* titles.

The stages are fully defined, rather than blank landscapes, through the scrolling is rather slow. The jet-equipped main character can dash and spin around the screen, all while aiming a targeting reticule. Weapons include both a regular shot and a lock-on laser. You can earn gold to buy life replenishments, lock-on fuel (to increase the number of enemies you can target at once), barriers, and additional power bombs. The game was also distributed in two-player sit-down cabinets. If playing with another person the two players can share energy and increase each other's life meter.

Untapped Potential

Due to technical restraints the original *Space Harrier* was reduced to checkerboard patterns. Now with more powerful hardware, *Planet Harriers* expands extensively on the universe. The graphic designs mix futuristic sci-fi landscapes with gorgeous and luscious environments, including forested canyons and ice caverns. The final stage takes place in hyperspace, against the backdrop of several colorful galaxies. It's never quite as trippy as the old games, but it's still classy.

Unfortunately there are only five stages in total.

It also has a rather strange sense of humor, which manifests in the playable characters. The new Harriers include Cory, a nurse with a gigantic syringe; Nick, a baseball player; X, a rock star with a guitar; and Glenn, the "normal" guy. Opa-Opa from *Fantasy Zone* is available as a hidden character, and he also shows up during gameplay to resurrect players when continuing. The exaggerated running animations while on the ground are also quite comical.

It's all rather weird, but it keeps some elements from the older games, seeing as the first-level boss is a multi-headed dragon. The final boss is also incredibly cool, as it's composed from a series of cubes that take on different forms, similar to Seven Force in *Gunstar Heroes*. In addition to shapes like guns and grenades, it'll occasionally turn into the Dreamcast logo.

Planet Harriers runs on Sega's Hikaru board, which also ran *Cyber Troopers Virtual On 4* and *Star Wars Racer Arcade*. Most of the music is, unfortunately, largely forgettable electronica. It's a pretty cool game which, alas, never saw a home release. There were rumors of Dreamcast and Gamecube ports, but unfortunately nothing ever came to fruition.

Thankfully, the emulator DEMUL supports the Hikaru board, making this the only way to play the game anymore.

Typing Space Harrier
 Original Release: 2002
 Platforms: PC

Following Sega's masterpiece *Typing of the Dead*, itself a spin-off from *House of the Dead*, someone decided it would be cool to combine *Space Harrier* with a

typing tutor. So it's much like watching someone play a game of *Space Harrier*, except when enemies pop onto the screen, you need to type some Japanese words (in Romaji) to shoot them down. Type too slowly and you'll get killed. Quick single letters will also occasionally pop up.



Space Harrier in Bayonetta

The 2010 Xbox 360 / PlayStation 3 title *Bayonetta*, developed by Platinum Games and published by Sega, is filled with all manner of classic Sega fan service throughout.

During an early cutscene in a car, one of the songs from *OutRun* is played on the radio.

Chapter 08 has a section on a motorcycle, which is tangentially similar to *Hang-On*, and also plays a song from *After Burner*.

In Chapter 14, Bayonetta and her crew hop onto a missile, where you then proceed to play a minigame which is exactly like *Space Harrier*. In the cutscene that introduces this segment, Bayonetta proclaims, "Welcome to my fantasy zone. Get ready!", before taking off over the sea. The enemy sound effects and patterns should be familiar, and the music is, of course, an arrangement of the original *Space Harrier* theme song. One of the boss creatures you fight in this section is even a long-bodied dragon.



Space Harrier Hacks

The X68000 version of *Space Harrier* was easily hacked by amateur gamers, resulting in a number of variations with different sprites and sound effects.

Some of these include (clockwise from top-left): *Rumic Harrier*, with characters from Rumiko Takahashi manga like *Urusei Yatsura* and *Ranma 1/2*; *Otaku Harrier*, where all sprites are now mecha from famous anime; *Street Harrier*, starring Ryu from the first *Street Fighter* but also featuring lots of other Sega icons (during bonus stages Ryu does a handstand on the *After Burner* jet, and the spinning diamonds are now tumbling *OutRun* cars); and *Harrier Desse*, which stars a flying squirrel, steals many enemies from *Dragon Quest*, and is otherwise cartoonishly bizarre.





OutRun

Original Release: 1986

Platforms: ARC, SMS, GEN, GG, AMI, C64, AST, IBM, ZX, CPC, MSX, SAT, PCE, GBA, PS2, DC, XB, MOB



OutRun is known as one of the finest arcade racing games ever made. Created by Yu Suzuki and Sega-AM2, it utilizes the "super scaler" technology seen in *Hang-On*, *After Burner* and *Space Harrier*. It runs on a board built specifically for the game called the Sega OutRun Hardware, which is based on the System 16 board. The blazing fast scaling of the sprites and slick 3D motion of the road created an experience far smoother than most other arcade titles around at the time.

According to Yu Suzuki, *OutRun* was inspired by the 1981 movie *The Cannonball Run*, which featured a huge race across Europe in a variety of fancy cars. In transferring that concept into a game, Suzuki put you in the seat of an expensive sports car, which looks suspiciously like a Ferrari Testarossa, as you speed through a variety of exotic locations. The race begins on the beach, but spreads to deserts, canyons, forests and a diverse selection of other scenic routes.

The game itself is uncomplicated – there are no laps around circuits, no sponsors, no pit stops, no ramming, and no high speed chases. Just weaving through turns, dodging cars, and shifting gears when appropriate. If you run off the road and hit an obstacle you may flip over, but within a few seconds you're back on the road completely unharmed. The whole experience has a very laid back feeling; just cruising

along, sunglasses on and hot blonde girlfriend by your side, relaxing, and looking forward to whatever new sights the next stage will bring.

At the end of each stage the road forks in two directions, each leading to a different area. A single game from start to finish only comprises five stages, but with all of the branching paths, there are a total of 15 unique tracks. The map, laid out like a sideways pyramid, is displayed at the end of the game and charts your progress. There are minor differences between the circuit layouts of the "Overseas" and "Japanese" versions.

The graphics have that fresh, clean and bright AM2 style, and the music tracks, supplied by Hiroshi Kawaguchi, are classics. There are three different in-game songs ("Magical Sound Shower", "Splash Wave" and "Passing Breeze"), selected via a radio at the start of the game, and each has a catchy Latin/Caribbean influenced melody. Each song also lasts approximately the duration of the entire game, about six minutes or so. Even the game over / high score theme, entitled "Last Wave", relaxes you while you stare at the sunset and listen to the sound of waves breaking.

OutRun hit the arcades in 1986 in four different cabinets: two upright ones, a standard sit-down one, and a deluxe sit-down cabinet, the latter being equipped with hydraulics that move the seat



to the sides when you turn. These cabinets are also equipped with force feedback motors which shake the steering wheel as you turn or crash.

System Ports

Since none of the 8- or 16-bit systems were as powerful as the arcade hardware, everything had to be scaled back. Some of the computer ports shipped with a soundtrack tape as a bonus.

The Master System is of reasonable quality given the technical constraints. The scrolling is relatively good for an 8-bit system and the music sounds decent. Many of the roadside details are missing, though, along with the horizon backgrounds.

Despite running on nearly identical hardware, the Game Gear version, ported by SIMS, is completely different from the Master System release. The sprites are smaller (and uglier) to compensate for the smaller screen, but some of the missing details have returned, like the backgrounds on the horizon and various other sprites. However, the roads feel cramped, and it's more difficult. There's also a versus mode where you can race against a CPU opponent or link up to another player with a Game Gear and copy of the game.

The Genesis version was ported by Hertz. While not

powerful enough to handle scaling, but it definitely looks nicer than any previous version. It also has an exclusive fourth selectable song called "Step on Beat". There's an extra ending screen, as well as cameos from the *After Burner* and *Galaxy Force* ships, if you manage to meet certain conditions. The PC Engine version was only released in Japan, and was ported by NEC Avenue. It's not as nice looking as the Genesis version, but it plays just fine.

US Gold published the ports for various home computers, and most were programmed by Probe Software. The Atari ST and Amiga ports are essentially identical, though the Amiga has the edge on music. The graphics are more colorful than the 8-bit ports, but they still look fairly bad, and the framerate is not very good.

The Commodore 64 version, ported by Amazing Products, is a decent conversion, though the roads are the same color as the rest of the ground. It can't handle the forked paths either, so instead you pick from one of five courses before you begin the game. The music is decent, but "Passing Breeze" is missing. The IBM PC version was ported by Unlimited Software, and while it's stuck with 16 color EGA graphics and PC speaker sound, it plays well.

The Amstrad version is terrible. Like the Commodore 64 version, the road is the same color as the rest of the ground, but it's so incredibly slow that it's a wonder anyone allowed it to be published. The ZX Spectrum version is only slightly better, in that the speed is slightly faster, though not by much. The MSX version is practically identical to the Spectrum port. An MSX2 version, released in Japan and

ported by Pony Canyon, is roughly on par with the SMS version.

The first arcade perfect port arrived in 1996 on the Saturn as part of the *Sega Ages* collection (which was compiled with two other games and published by Working Designs in North America and Sega in Europe). Ported by Rutubo Games, it includes a hidden option to make the game run at 60 FPS (the arcade original only ran at 30 FPS). The Japanese version also has newly arranged tracks, but these were excised from the overseas releases.

OutRun also appeared on the Dreamcast, compiled in the *Yu Suzuki Game Works Vol. 1* disc, as well as appearing as playable minigames in both *Shenmue* titles. It runs at a higher resolution than the arcade game, so there is slightly more detail in the sprites, though it's hard to tell. The music also sounds a little different. Perhaps there were also legal concerns at one point, because the car has been redrawn to look less like a Testarossa. It is also missing the niceties of the Saturn version. A straight emulation of the arcade game is available in the Xbox version of *OutRun 2*.

OutRun is also included in the *Sega Arcade Gallery* for the GBA, developed by Bits Studios. While most games on this compilation suffer from shoddy programming, *OutRun* turned out pretty well, with 60 FPS speed like the Saturn version, though the roadside objects are missing some details.

Sega also released the game as part of their *3D Ages* collection, redoing the entire game in 3D. While the gameplay feels faithful, the car is too large, and positioned too far up on the screen, making it difficult to see into the distance. The graphics are ugly, with grainy textures and interlacing artifacts, though at least it runs at 60 FPS.



Top: [ARC] The road map, along with some of the gorgeous views
Bottom left: The deluxe sit-down cabinet

There's a new "Arrange Mode" which is almost a brand new game, adding in a whole bunch of new courses that take advantage of the shift to true 3D. Whereas the levels in the original *OutRun* were mostly flat with some hills and curves, this mode adds more mountainous terrain. The circuit layout is completely different, and there are now rival

cars to beat. There are also more brand new remixes of the songs. This version made it to *America and Europe* on the *Sega Classics Collection* for the PS2.

Also of note is *Cannonball*, a homebrew engine that uses the original arcade ROMs and adds several enhancements, including 60 FPS speed, widescreen view, bug fixes, time trial modes, and

support for homemade tracks from a program called *LayOut*.

3D OutRun includes widescreen view and 60 FPS, as well as several color variations and unlockable mods to tweak your car. There are also two new songs: "Camino a Mi Amor" and "Cruising Line". Unfortunately, like the DC release, the car sprite is changed due to licensing issues.

Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Dreamcast



Genesis



PC Engine



Sega Master System



Game Gear



Game Boy Advance



Amiga



PlayStation 2



ZX Spectrum



Commodore 64



Amstrad CPC



MSX2



IBM PC



The arcade version of *Turbo OutRun* was basically an upgrade kit; a set of stickers and decals for the old cabinet plus a circuit board that could be plugged into the expansion slot of the original 1986 *OutRun*, making it cheap and easy to install. It looks very similar to the original, although the graphics are brighter and it throws a lot more crazy visual effects at you.

As the name suggests, *Turbo OutRun* comes with a new addition: a boost button that you can activate at practically any time, but overheats the engine if used too often. Cops will chase after you occasionally, although they don't appear to have any interest in pulling you over, as they just try to knock you around a little bit. A white car will be your opponent to beat to the finish line, and at every checkpoint your girlfriend will leave you and hop into it if you fail to stay ahead.

Magical Shower

There are a few additions, such as dynamic weather conditions (rain, snow, and dust storms), and certain areas have puddles of water or ice-coated portions of the road that can make driving difficult. There are also oil slicks on the road that catch fire when the burning exhaust from the turbo boost touches them, in addition to obstacles like traffic barriers, all of which can slow you down. The car now looks more like an F40 than a Testarossa, and it also allows you

to choose between manual or automatic transmission.

Turbo OutRun's greatest flaw is that it ditches the multiple routes, so every time you play it's the same trip across the United States over and over again. There are 16 stages, beginning in New York City and ending up in Los Angeles. Most of the locations have only tenuous relations to the area they're based on, if at all – Atlanta is nothing but a bunch of sand dunes, and Pittsburgh is little more than a long, rainy field. At least there are a few cool levels, as you drive through the city streets of Chicago at night and the fields of Indianapolis at dusk.

To break up the pace, there are three checkpoints, each appearing after four stages. Here, you get to tune up your car with either more turbo power, a more powerful engine, or high grip tires. It's a nice touch but it tends to ruin both the pace and simplicity that the original is known for.

You no longer get to choose your music, as instead it changes automatically after each checkpoint. The four tracks composed by Hiroshi Kawaguchi and Yasuhiro Takagi – "Rush A Difficulty", "Keep Your Heart", "Shake The Street", and "Who Are You?" – are decent, but they lack the smooth, laid-back feeling of the original music.

Turbo OutRun was ported to the Mega Drive. It's fast and it plays well, but for some reason, looks much worse than the port of



Turbo OutRun

Original Release: 1989

Platforms: ARC, GEN, FMT, AMI, AST, IBM, C64, CPC, ZX



Turbo OutRun

the original *OutRun*. Nearly all of the spiffy graphical effects from the arcade version have been wiped out entirely, and as a result, it doesn't feel like there's any difference between any of the levels other than palette swaps. Two new songs have been added, but overall the quality of the music has dropped even further. It's a passable port, but not to the level it should be. This is one of the few Mega Drive games that was released in Japan and Europe, but not America.

The best port was released for the FM Towns, and was converted by CRI. Though it's still missing some background details and it's not quite as smooth as the arcade game, it's a big step up from the Mega Drive version. The brand new, redbook audio, arranged soundtrack is the best part of the package, greatly improving on the songs from the arcade original.

US Gold once again published the computer ports, with Probe handling the Amiga, Atari ST and Commodore 64 versions. The

quality of these are about the same as the conversions of the original game.

The Amiga and Atari ST releases are by far the nicest looking, keeping many of the background details that were missing in the Mega Drive and FM Towns ports, but the animation and speed is embarrassingly choppy. The Commodore 64 game isn't as visually attractive as either of these, but it maintains a good sense of speed, the scrolling is far smoother and, overall, this version is the best of the computer ports. The IBM PC version has a large display window that takes up a sizeable chunk of the screen. It's smooth but totally missing the speed of the other versions, plus

there is no in-game music. The Amstrad and Spectrum versions are both slow and choppy to the point of being unplayable.

The Amiga, Atari ST, and Amstrad soundtracks have completely new music composed by David Lowe, which is generally pretty decent. The Commodore 64 soundtrack was composed by Jeroen Tel, whose work is a fantastic rendition of the original arcade songs. The title theme is a brand new piece of music which remixes parts of "Magical Sound Shower" from the first *OutRun*, in a style consistent with his other excellent works found in *Cybernoid*. The shop theme from *Fantasy Zone* also appears during the tune-up sequences.



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



FM Towns



Mega Drive



Amiga



IBM PC



Amstrad CPC



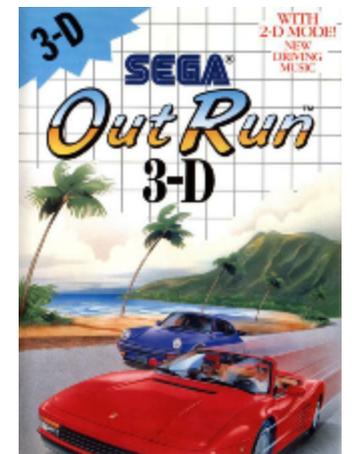
Commodore 64



ZX Spectrum



OutRun 3D
Original Release: 1989
Platforms: SMS, 3DS



After *OutRun*'s success, Sega released a number of spin-offs for the home market, created entirely for Westerners. *OutRun 3D* is one of the first of such efforts, which takes advantage of the shutter effects of the Sega 3D Glasses. The game itself is based on the original Master System version of *OutRun*, though the course layouts have changed, and a few of the levels are different.

A Little Bit Extra

Additionally, some effects that the previous release couldn't replicate are present, like the ocean on the side of the road on the shore tracks, or the overhead clouds in the plains stage. At a few points, you even drive into tunnels and must race in darkness. The radio allows you to pick from four songs. "Magical Sound Shower" makes a return, along with three new songs: "Midnight Highway", "Color Ocean" and "Shining Wind", the last of which sounds a little bit like the *Space Harrier* theme. There are also three difficulty levels to choose from,

which fill the road with more cars and even slightly change the layouts of the courses.

While these extra effects are nice, the animation is choppy than before, and the sense of speed is totally gone. Plus, the 3D effect isn't too bad, but it's really nothing more than a gimmick, and it doesn't justify this sloppy piece of coding. Being one of the later Master System games, it wasn't officially released in North America or Japan. It also supports FM synth.

A port of *OutRun 3D* is also included in the retail version of the *Sega 3D Fukkoku Archives* for the 3DS. This is technically the first time the game was released officially in Japan.



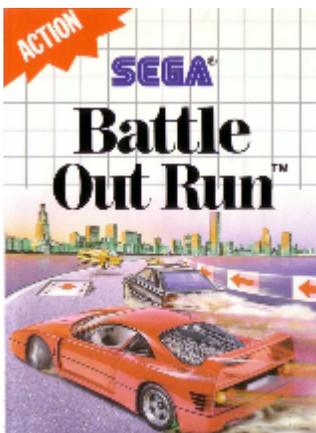
Battle OutRun



Battle OutRun

Original Release: 1989

Platforms: SMS



Classic arcade gamers are most likely familiar with *Chase HQ* by Taito, a good old police-chase game in which you drive a fast black Porsche, ramming into delinquents to take them off the road. Well, Sega went and copied that formula and ended up with *Battle OutRun*.

There's really none of the classic *OutRun* elements here, other than the game seeming like it was built on top of the Master System port of the original game. Visually it's very similar, although the design of the car is different. At the outset, you're given a map of the United States, with seven different levels to conquer. Most of the stage is spent dodging cars, weaving through turns, while avoiding oil slicks and blockades. There are also jump ramps, although functionally they are completely useless.

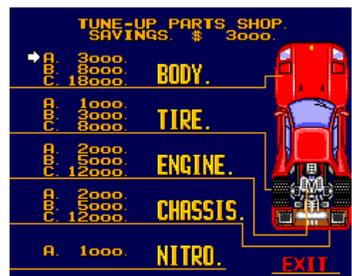
Assuming you don't waste too much time, after a few minutes you'll come across the perpetrator, who you must smash several times until you can pull them over. You're then given a monetary bonus based on your

performance, and then progress to the next stage. The money can be put towards purchasing a number of upgrades, which are bought from truck-trailers that pop up halfway through each stage. In addition to upgrading tires, the chassis and the engine, you can also purchase nitro boosts for extra bursts of speed.

Not Much There

Battle OutRun still has bright and vibrant graphics, the Ferrari still controls well, and the scrolling is smooth. There are four brand new pieces of music, although none of them are named. Unfortunately the long boring levels, poor music and backgrounds, plus extremely annoying CPU cars, make this rip-off of a game a five minute curiosity at best. In fact, Taito's own SMS ports of *Chase HQ* and its sequel *Special Criminal Investigation* weren't fantastic, but they're still better than this.

It's also relatively rare for a Master System game, having only been officially released in Europe and Brazil.





OutRun Europa was licensed by Sega to US Gold and developed by Probe, the same folks behind the computer ports of *OutRun* and *Turbo OutRun*. It was never officially released in Japan. Out of all the spin-offs, this one has fallen the farthest from the tree. You chase criminals through Europe, switching vehicles at every stage. On the first you ride a motorcycle, then hop onto a jet ski, a Porsche, a motorboat, and finally you get to drive the classic *OutRun* Ferrari.

There's substantially more car combat than even *Battle OutRun*. In addition to a timer, you also have a "Shield" meter that indicates how much damage has been done to your vehicle. There are also numerous "Boost" items to obtain.

The motorcycle levels play like some bad *Road Rash* clone, in that you can punch other bikers and cause them to explode (!) and the cops will try to pull you over. The jet ski scenes are even more action packed, as you attempt to fight helicopters with rockets. And then the driving stages are about what you'd expect, though you do get involved in a shootout with the

main criminal at the end. It's quite long compared to the old games – a single stage is substantially longer than the entirety of a game of *OutRun*.

Surprisingly Good

Perhaps since *OutRun Europa* originated on home computers, the quality of the product is far better than the ports of the previous games. Even the Spectrum and Amstrad versions, while choppy, are playable, while the Amiga (pictured above) is by far the best looking. The Master System (pictured below right) and Game Gear games are identical to each other outside of screen size, with the latter being the only version released in North America.

The 8-bit computer ports are missing the mid-level branching paths, where you could choose a longer but easier path, or a shorter but harder one. The Commodore 64 version (pictured below left) has music by Jeroen Tel, while the Amiga, Master System and Game Gear ports have a completely different soundtrack by Matt Furniss. Both are excellent.



OutRun Europa

Original Release: 1991

Platforms: AMI, AST, C64, CPC, ZX, SMS, GG



OutRunners



OutRunners

Original Release: 1992

Platforms: ARC, GEN



After a whole slew of disappointing semi-sequels, AM2 got behind the wheel again and brought back the graphics, the music and their characteristic style. *OutRunners* was presented most often in its sitting cabinet form, usually linked to multiple machines for a maximum of eight players. There are eight cars you can choose from, each with different attributes and resembling real life cars like the red sprinter in the original *OutRun*. The drivers of the various cars are also different, making for additional unique ending variations.

While the previous games covered North America and Europe, *OutRunners* has stages that cover the entire world. The game route still has the same "pyramid" pattern it did back in the early days, but there are two completely different maps. There's now an east side and a west side map, and the very first fork in the road (right after you start the game) will let you choose which of these two layouts you want to play through. This technically means there are about 30 stages total, but a few levels are duplicated on each side.

The game plays pretty much the same as the original *OutRun*, as it loses the turbo button, weather effects and rivals of *Turbo OutRun*. The turning animation for the cars is more pronounced than before, but otherwise the game controls about the same. However, the game greatly benefits from

Sega's Multi 32 board, which allows for even faster driving action and smooth-as-hell sprite scaling. For the first time, the road is actually textured, instead of the cycling greys of the earlier games. The backgrounds are incredible and have a lot more detail than any other game, as well as huge hills, which makes the tracks feel less flat. It always keeps up the pace, because even if you hit an obstacle and the drivers fall out, there's some comical animation as they somehow fly or jump back into the car without it stopping. It's accompanied by a laugh track and is quite silly.

The stages become increasingly more gorgeous as you drive over bridges, near waterfalls, through dense forests, and even underwater. Compared to the lame levels of *Turbo OutRun*, each stage has a distinct background, and you'll drive past many famous landmarks. Some of the vehicles even change depending on the stage, as you zoom by covered wagons in the Grand Canyon, blaze past (or through) cyclists in China, or weave between double decker tour buses in Hong Kong.

There's now an in-game radio station select. You can choose from the remixes of the four classic tunes ("Last Wave" included!), as well as several new songs. These aren't quite as good as the originals, but there's some decent stuff, like "Looking for the Rainbow". The voice effects are particularly notable as well,

especially Jake Elwood (possibly a reference to *The Blues Brothers*?) as a radio announcer on the car select screen.

OutRunners is an absolutely brilliant game, and a fantastic update of a classic. But sadly, it never remotely reached the same level of popularity. Its only home port was on the Genesis, and it's rather badly done. The system couldn't handle the special effects of the original *OutRun*, let alone this powerful sequel. The arcade version featured a fairly impressive rendition of the Golden Gate bridge, but in the Genesis version it looks like any old bridge. Consequently, the game feels very

scaled back, worse than the Genesis version of *OutRun*.

The game tries to include a multiplayer mode by dividing the screen into two halves, but it looks so bad it's just silly. Worse still is that you always have to play split-screen, even in single-player mode, making the view extremely cramped. This in itself introduces a number of illogical technical conundrums. If the CPU player advances to another level before the human player (or vice versa), the entire backdrop changes for both players, even if the other is in a totally different stage. This bizarre situation is presumably because the system couldn't handle two different sets of graphics on screen simultaneously.

In addition to the regular "Arcade Mode", there's also an "Original Mode", which lets you pick any of the levels and race against either another player or a

computer controlled opponent. The Japanese version included a cheat code where you could play as the Virtua Formula, the car from *Virtua Racing*, but this was strangely missing from the American release. Sega didn't even bother to publish the game outside of Japan themselves, leaving the duties to Data East.



Right: [GEN] The *Virtua Racing* car in the Japanese version
Left-Bottom: [ARC] See the sights of the world



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Genesis

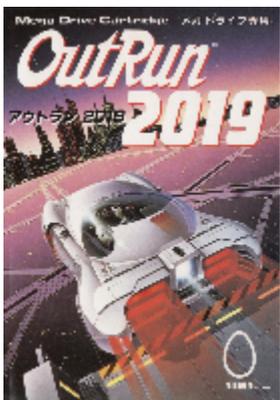
OutRun 2019



OutRun 2019

Original Release: 1993

Platforms: GEN



OutRun 2019's roots are probably the most curious in the franchise. The project was originally conceived in the early 1990s as a Mega CD racing title under the name of *Cyber Road*. Hertz, its creator, transferred the development to the Genesis while at the same time renaming the game *Junker's High*. Sega then granted them the *OutRun* brand, most likely to give Sims' work the extra marketing push, resulting in this Genesis-exclusive futuristic take on the franchise.

Like *Turbo OutRun*, there's a boost option which lets you go extremely fast. Rather than triggering it manually, it will instead activate automatically when you reach a certain high speed. The general feel of the game is a little more somber and darker than its predecessor's breezy worldwide jaunts, making the tracks rather dull to look at. The redesigned car isn't quite as attractive as the Ferraris of old, but its design is fairly cool, at least. The music is a collection of bad techno songs, composed by



"real" bands like "Dual Noise" and "Hyper Sonic Gang", which are likely pseudonyms.

Despite feeling more like a depressing version of *F-Zero* than *OutRun*, at least *OutRun 2019* still succeeds on a technical level. There are four stages, each divided into many tracks, which makes the game slightly longer than the original. Each stage section has its own background, and there are ramps you can use to jump to other sections of the road. There are also some nice graphical effects, like tunnels and overpasses. It's extremely easy to fall off if you're not paying attention. Also new (and unwelcome) is the big tech-y dashboard on the bottom of the screen. So while the core of *OutRun* games is largely missing, the game controls well and has a respectable sense of speed, making it a decent racing game in its own right.

The regional releases have different top speeds – 241 km/h in Japan, 682 km/h in Europe, and 682 mph in America. This only affects the speedometer, as the actual speed is identical for all.

OutRun 2019 was also released in 2005 as a standalone game system that hooks directly up to the TV, complete with an analog "steering wheel". Why they went with this game and not the original *OutRun* is unknown, though it may have had to do with the license (or lack of) for the original Ferrari car.



Nearly 10 years after the release of *OutRunners*, Sega released *OutRun 2*, a marvel of a game. *OutRun 2* looks and sounds so good, yet in spite of the vastly upgraded graphics it's unbelievable how close to its roots it feels. The Sega Chihiro board is the new platform, and it includes a 733MHz Intel Pentium III and nVidia graphics processor, approximately the same as the Xbox, which in turn makes for an excellent home conversion.

Sega offered three different cabinets for *OutRun 2*, the "Twin" cabinet being the most popular for linked racing. But the real surprise is Ferrari finally licensing their brand to Sega, so in this version there are eight classic sports cars from the Italian manufacturer, which all look fantastic and drive like a dream.

The biggest addition is the new drift technique. While at a high speed, by turning the wheel and tapping the brake, you'll activate a drift, which allows you to take rough corners with ease. Mastering this ability is the key to getting the best times.

Included are three single-player modes. "OutRun Mode" is the standard arcade mode, as you race through five out of 15 possible stages. "Heart Attack Mode" lets you show off your driving skills to the lady in the front seat by performing different tricks and tasks, while "Time Attack Mode" is self explanatory. There's also a linked "Multiplayer

Mode" for linked cabinets like in *OutRunners*.

Breathtaking stages, a silky smooth 3D engine, and the stars of the game: the shiny, expensive Ferraris. Each of the real-world locations look stunning, as you drive past the Eiffel Tower at night, speed along the pyramids of Egypt, blaze through the flower gardens of Holland, and along the classic beachfront just like the original title. It's also the only game to make a rundown industrial complex look gorgeous. The five different goofy endings make an appearance too, depending on which course you take, just like old times. There are three different girls to sit next to you, depending on which mode you're playing.

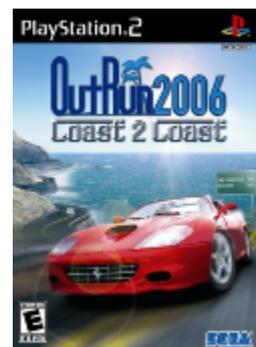
In the audio department, the three classic *OutRun* tunes return, again remixed, plus four new songs – "Risky Ride", "Shiny World", "Night Flight" and "Life Was a Bore" – that are actually pretty good. The cool radio announcer and roaring of the crowd from *OutRunners* is now gone. Sega added plenty of fan service too: the horizon and sideline details morph when you change levels, and the voice that yells out "Checkpoint!" sounds nearly identical.

Sega put United Kingdom-based company Sumo Digital in charge of porting the game to the Xbox, and they did a spectacular job. They also added plenty of hidden cars and stages, most notably some from other Sega



www.sega.com

OutRun 2 / OutRun 2 SP / OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast / OutRun Online Arcade
 Original Release: 2004 / 2006
 Platforms: ARC, XBOX, PS2, PS3, X360, PC, PSP, MOB



OutRun 2

racing games like *Daytona USA 2* and *SCUD Race*. There's an expansive mission mode that puts you through various parts of each level and has you attempting to fulfill certain goals like in the Heart Attack mode. Plus plenty of additional new tunes, notably some nice remixes courtesy of Richard Jacques (known for his work on *Sonic 3D Blast* and *Jet Grind Radio*), online head-to-head for up to eight players through Xbox Live, and finally, the 1986 original arcade gem to unlock.

In 2004, Sega released a new version called *OutRun SP*. However, calling it a mere "upgrade" isn't doing the game any justice. This new entry includes 15 totally new stages, tweaked physics, and more tunes, which is way more than your average upgrade. In the new levels you'll drive across the Golden Gate bridge, through gigantic sequoia trees, past an arctic oil refinery, see the Moai heads of Easter Island, zoom through a Las Vegas-style city, and under a starry night sky next to a space shuttle launch.

New to this edition is the use of the "slipstream" technique during racing, in which you position yourself right behind an opponent's car to reduce wind resistance and go above your top speed. Another added feature is the increased ease of play, as players receive less speed reduction when they crash their



car. This makes the experience extremely easy for regulars, but friendlier to newcomers. The cameos between stages have returned too, including the jet from *After Burner* and the dragon from *Panzer Dragoon*.

Two special-edition cabinets saw a limited release under the

denomination of "deluxe" (DX) and "super deluxe" (SDX), the first one supporting four players and the second up to eight. Strangely, the exclusive cooperative mode the SDX cabinet was created for, allows up to four teams of two players each to alternate control of the car throughout a race. These





special cabinets house bigger screens with resolutions of 800 x 480 (using Sega's Lindbergh hardware instead of the former Chihiro), plus an electronic billboard indicating real-time ranking and CCD cameras pointed at the players' faces,

The North American and European console versions of *OutRun 2 SP* are called *OutRun 2006: Coast to Coast*, and were released for the PC, PS2, Xbox and PSP. Not only do these releases feature tracks from both games (for a total of 30), but they include a mission mode that

manages to outclass the original: you now earn points when you play, which lets you buy different tracks, cars, songs and other bonuses. Unlockable music includes the whole soundtrack from both the *OutRun* and *Turbo OutRun* arcade games, as well as more arranged tracks. The Xbox version has support for custom soundtracks.

The PC version, which can run at higher resolutions, is the best of these, while the Xbox version is considered the best console port. The PS2 release is still an outstanding port, even if

you need to connect to the PSP version to unlock certain stuff. The PSP iteration is no slouch either, but it runs at a lower framerate. Unfortunately *OutRun 2006* is missing a few features from the original release, like the *Daytona USA 2* and *SCUD Race* tracks.

A version of *OutRun 2 SP* also appeared on XBLA and PSN as *OutRun Online Arcade*. This new port ditches all the extras of the former console versions, so it only has the 15 tracks from *OutRun 2 SP*, and is missing the challenge modes and extra music remixes. However, since Sega's license with Ferrari expired, both *OutRun SP* and the PC version of *OutRun 2006* are no longer available for purchase.

A mobile version of *OutRun 2* was also released. Known as *OutRun Mobile*, it uses some graphical assets of the original arcade game, like the radio, but otherwise is entirely in 3D. As one might gather, since this predated capable gaming phones like the iPhone, it's incredibly ugly, choppy, and not at all faithful to the original.



After Burner



After Burner / After Burner II

Original Release: 1987

Platforms: ARC, SMS, NES, ZX, GEN, PCE, 32X, SAT, GBA, DC, XB, MSX, C64, IBM, AMI, MOB, X68



Sega's *After Burner*, an aerial combat game released in 1987, ditches complexity in favor of straightforward action. Prior to this, 3D airplane games were all mind numbing computer flight-sims and ran at a crappy framerate. Running on Sega's "super scaler" technology, *After Burner* uses incredibly smooth pseudo-3D effects to propel arcade gamers into the cockpit of a jet similar to the F-14 Tomcat. The sole goal is to blow up as many bad guys as possible while trying to stay in one piece, all set to gloriously cheesy synth rock music. It's undoubtedly inspired by *Top Gun*, just minus Tom Cruise and all of the homoerotic undertones (also far better than any of the actual *Top Gun* games, of which there are far, far too many).

After Burner and *After Burner II* are both powered by the Sega System X board, which is an improvement over the boards that ran previous "super scaler" games like *OutRun* and *Space Harrier*, all directed by Yu Suzuki. The controls in the first game are fairly limited: you can climb, descend, and rotate your plane. Turning back and forth rapidly will send your plane spinning dizzily, which looks cool but ultimately doesn't do much. It's impossible to crash into the ground, and for the most part, you don't need to worry about anything but dodging enemy fire. Your primary weapon is heat-seeking missiles – just line up an incoming enemy fighter with your

crosshairs, wait for the "lock-on" to appear (usually accompanied by a frantic voice yelling "Fire!") and hit the fire button. Unfortunately, missiles are in limited supply, so you'll need to rely on your Vulcan cannons for easier enemies. Trying to hit anything with bullets is nearly impossible unless your target's at close range, so conserving your missiles is extremely important. Thankfully, every few stages, a friendly plane comes by and replenishes your stock.

There's very little variety; there are a few stages set in a canyon, where you need to weave between the walls, but these are really just bonus stages. Other than the color of the sky and the changing landscapes, the core game never changes, but that's not really important, because *After Burner* excels at throwing all kinds of crazy stuff in your face. At its best moments, you need to keep enemy fighters in your targets, dodge incoming missiles, and attempt to keep track of your own airplane amidst the explosions and smoke trails, all while the scenery is rocketing by, rotating completely out of control. The sense of speed is still unrivaled by most video games even today.

There are also some damn nice explosions – get hit by enemy fire and your engines will smoke as you careen downwards, creating a line of fire and destruction as you hit the ground. Later games in the series had even more impressive

death sequences, with plenty of seizure-inducing screen flashing. The soundtrack, per usual protocol during the mid-1980s, is absolutely brilliant. The FM synth of Sega's arcade boards manages to produce some incredibly rocking tunes, and while there are only a handful of songs, all composed by Hiroshi Kawaguchi, they are all quite memorable.

Too Crazy to Handle

Alas, *After Burner*'s greatest asset is also its biggest flaw – it's ridiculously crazy to play. Since your movement range is so limited, and the screen can get very crowded, it becomes incredibly difficult to make your way through later stages without crashing and burning every few seconds. Still, this was originally an arcade game, designed to provide some impressive thrills for a few coins, and nowhere was this more apparent than the cabinet design.

The first release had a replica of a flight stick, and the second game had a model throttle that let you control your speed. Many sit-down cabinets even tilted as you rotated your plane. In this respect, *After Burner* is really more of a ride than a legitimate game, which is maybe why it doesn't quite hold up compared to other Sega arcade games around the same time. But taken as what it is, it's nice, flashy fun.

Strangely enough, there are very few differences between *After Burner* and *After Burner II* – in fact, the latter isn't so much a sequel as it is a minor upgrade. *After Burner II* has a fancier intro



(featuring a series of rotating spheres), some new enemies, and a handful of extra levels, increasing the total number from 18 to 21 missions.

Sega also added little intermissions where your plane lands to rearm, which include cameos by the motorcycle from *Hang-On* and the Ferrari from *OutRun*. The biggest addition is the throttle control that lets you speed up or slow down. Enemy planes will occasionally pop up on your tail, and using the throttle can either help blow past them or have them overshoot you so you can deliver a killing shot.

The only other noticeable difference is that you're granted more missiles, both when you start and when you refuel. This makes the game easier, and overall less frustrating.

There are also some minor differences in the instrumentation of the music, although the soundtracks are essentially

Top: [ARC] *After Burner* in action
Bottom: An ad for the computer version, the (SMS) cover, and the deluxe arcade cabinet

identical. Furthermore, there are also "melody" versions of three of the songs – "Maximum Power", the title theme, plus "After Burner" and "Final Take Off". These versions feature an extra melody track during most of the song, and greatly enhance them, to the point that the original compositions feel rather empty. While these are not used in-game for the arcade version, they were featured on various soundtrack CDs, and were used as a basis for some of the console version soundtracks, including the SMS, PCE and FM Towns ports.

The Sega Master System was the first console to be graced with a port of *After Burner*, but given the limitations of the system, it wasn't particularly good. It looked great at the time – Sega hyped it up as being one of the first "Four Mega" cartridges (4 megabits or 512kb). The choppy graphics made it far too difficult to see what you were supposed to be dodging, which essentially ruins the experience. There's also a bug that lets you stay in one corner and dodge all enemy fire until about halfway through the game. On the plus side, you have unlimited missiles, since hitting anything with your guns is nearly impossible. As such, the refueling segments have been repurposed into bonus stages, where you try to hook up with the larger jet's fueling hose for extra points. While the canyon levels have been



After Burner



removed, Sega added in a final boss to destroy, which is a flying fortress that feels somewhat out of place.

An NES version was ported by Tengen for American release, but it's substantially worse than the Master System version. The sprites are smaller and there's tons of flickering, making it borderline unplayable. Sunsoft cleaned up the game to remove the flicker, enhanced the music, and changed the color palette around to release it on the Famicom under the name *After Burner II*.

When the 16-bit era rolled around, *After Burner II* was ported to the Genesis by the third-party developer Dempa. The system still wasn't strong enough to handle the scaling effects, and while it looks relatively decent, many of the backgrounds have lost a lot of detail, and the pace isn't quite as fast. The horizontal controls also don't snap back to a center position, which makes it hard to keep the plane level, undoubtedly a concession to the digital control pad. By default, the machine gun is also set to auto-fire, as the three buttons are used to fire missiles, speed up and slow down. There's plenty of flicker, though the music is decent enough.



Oddly enough, the PC Engine version – ported by NEC Avenue – has brighter graphics and smoother gameplay, though the background detail has been reduced even further, and there is a substantial amount of flicker. It uses an odd sprite stretching technique in order to replicate the scaling effect. It also controls better than the Genesis version, and the music, rearranged for the PC Engine synth, is excellent.

The 32X version – dubbed *After Burner Complete*, even though it's really just *After Burner II* – is nearly arcade perfect, complete with smooth scaling and faithful music. It even offers support for the six button pad, so you can more easily change speed or even roll. The only noticeable difference is that it runs at 30 FPS rather than 60 FPS like the original arcade version.

The Saturn rendition of *After Burner II* is even better than the 32X version, offering both analog and digital control options, as well as a smooth 60 FPS framerate. It was released in the *Sega Ages* package along with *Space Harrier* and *OutRun* in America and Europe, though it was a standalone disc in Japan. The Japanese release also includes the



Top: [ARC] The carrier you take off from at the beginning is called the Sega Enterprise
Bottom: [ARC] No matter the time of day, there is always something to shoot down!

“melody” versions in addition to the standard music.

After Burner also appears in emulated form in *Shenmue II* for the Dreamcast and Xbox. It plays well, but lacks options, plus the upscaled graphics are a bit on the blurry side.

In 2003, Sega published the *Sega Arcade Gallery*, which offered four arcade classics, ported by Bits Studios, for the Game Boy Advance. *After Burner* is one of the four included, though it's an absolutely terrible port. While the scrolling is smooth, the sprites are tiny, the background detail is worse than the Genesis version, and the controls are remarkably poor. The Vulcan cannon in particular has completely changed, and the whole game just feels off. Oddly enough, this version is based on the original *After Burner*, rather than *After Burner II*.

After Burner appeared on practically every major computer in the late 1980s. Activision published many of these versions in Europe for the Amiga, Atari ST, Commodore 64, IBM PC, MSX, ZX



Spectrum and Amstrad CPC. None of these ports are particularly good – they’re all framed in the same ugly window, the graphic details are poor, and the action is choppy.

These problems are understandable with the ZX Spectrum and MSX ports, which are largely identical to each other. Both feature black outlines for sprites and incredibly choppy scrolling. The MSX has a slight advantage in that it has music, but neither are particularly good. The Amstrad CPC release is more colorful, while the C64 version has an excellent soundtrack courtesy of Adam Gilmore.

The crappiness, however, is far more evident in the Amiga and Atari ST releases. The sprites look decent, but it’s lacking in both speed and smoothness. The IBM PC version, despite running with 16 colors, is the best looking of the computer versions, relatively speaking, though it’s stuck with awful sound.

In North America, though, the C64 and Amiga versions were completely redone, and are, generally, far better efforts. The C64 version is now full screen, and while it’s still slow and choppy it’s not nearly as awful, and is roughly on the level of the Sega Master System port. The only downer is the lack of in-game music. Similarly, the Amiga version is comparable to the Genesis release. There’s a bit more scenery in the Amiga version, but the music hasn’t been terribly well converted.

There were two home computer ports in Japan, for the FM Towns and Sharp X68000. The FM Towns conversion was handled by CRI, who also ported a number of other Sega games to Fujitsu’s platform. While the scaling isn’t quite as smooth as the arcade version, it is still better than any of the 8- or 16-bit console ports, and also includes an excellent arranged soundtrack, exclusive to this version of the game. The Sharp X68000 was ported by Dempa, who had also developed the Genesis version. The scrolling is fairly smooth, although the number of sprites have been reduced, and the music is a close approximation of the arcade original.

After Burner II was also ported to the PlayStation 2 in 2004 as part of the *Sega Ages 2500* series, which replaced the sprite-based graphics with polygonal models. A lot of the graphical luster displayed by the original was lost in the translation to 3D, so much of the game looks rather ugly. Despite technically running at a higher resolution and with more advanced polygonal models, the overall look is worse than *Sky Target*, and that game is on the Saturn.

Still, the gameplay has held up almost perfectly, and the sense of speed is still intact, so it’s not a complete waste. Unfortunately, none of the music is arranged, and just uses tracks straight from the arcade. There’s also an “Arrange Mode” that lets you pilot three other aircraft, including an AV-8B Harrier II, the A-10A Thunderbolt II (a bomber), and the F-117 Nighthawk (a stealth jet), although the differences between them are pretty minor. Oddly enough, this release was excluded from the *Sega Classics Collection* that was brought over to America and Europe, so the only way to play it is to snag the Japanese version.

That accounts for all of the official releases but, in 2003, an Italian development team called Brodaroda developed their own homebrew version for Windows and released it for free. As to be expected from an amateur endeavor, it’s not particularly good, with untextured graphics that are even worse than the PlayStation 2 effort, numerous control glitches, and plane movement that doesn’t feel right.

The 3DS version was released in 2013 and includes numerous enhancements, including widescreen view, translucent smoke effects, and simulated cabinet motions like the other 3DS Sega ports. Melody versions of the music tracks are present. Also new is a “Special Mode” that includes rebalanced gameplay, as well as a Burst gauge similar to the later *After Burner Climax* that lets you slow down time. Additional enhancements include a goofy story mode, “rival” dogfights that replace the canyon stages, and a silly credits sequence.



Top: [SMS] The exclusive “flying fortress”
Bottom: [PS2] The *Sega Ages* version is ugly, but plays well



After Burner

Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



32X



Genesis



FM Towns



X68000



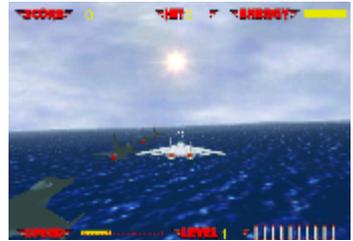
Game Boy Advance



PC Engine



PlayStation 2



Windows (fan remake)



Sega Master System



Nintendo Entertainment System



Famicom



Amiga (US)



Amiga (EU)



Commodore 64 (US)



IBM PC



Amstrad CPC



ZX Spectrum



Despite the name change, *G-LOC* (which stands for “Gravity-induced Loss of Consciousness”) is pretty obviously part of the *After Burner* series. However, now each level has a certain goal, usually being “shoot down X number of enemies”. You’re also timed, and clearing each stage will add some extra seconds to the clock. You can die as often as you want, but this naturally wastes a bit of precious time. The graphics have improved substantially, as the landscape is now comprised of scrolling textures rather than dozens of scaling sprites pasted together. The improvements are due to running on Sega’s System Y board, which also powered *Galaxy Force* and *Power Drift*.

The viewpoint has been changed to a first-person cockpit view, although it zooms out whenever an enemy is on your tail. The game now focuses less on dodging enemy fire and more on shooting enemy planes that saunter up behind you. You have greater control over your plane’s rotation, so you can also fly completely upside down. There are also ground based missions, where you fly low to the ground and dodge enemy fire as you blow up installations. There’s now a “damage” meter, so you can survive a bit of gunfire or bumps against other fighters, but getting hit by missiles or slamming into bad guys will still kill you instantly. Unfortunately, the game is much slower, both due to its rather

lackadaisical pacing and sluggish controls. While the original *After Burners* were a little too insanely fast, *G-LOC* is more relaxed almost to the point of sedation.

But fast paced action wasn’t necessarily *G-LOC*’s goal to begin with. In the arcades, certain cabinets (dubbed the R360) featured a seat that could physically turn back and forth and even upside down, greatly enhancing the immersion. A safety bar keeps the player in place (like amusement park rides) and an emergency stop button would turn the cockpit to its upright position. There’s even an option to just sit back and let the game play itself, making *G-LOC* feel more like a ride. Naturally, this was an incredibly expensive machine, so it didn’t see widespread distribution.

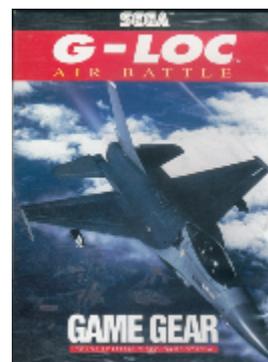
Since this gimmick was the big draw for *G-LOC*, all of it was lost in the home translations, which weren’t even powerful enough to recreate the game itself. The Genesis version, once again, can’t handle all of the graphics, but most of the gameplay still holds up. It’s a longer but easier game, which makes it less frustrating too. There’s a bit of extra window dressing, like the mission maps between levels and the wingman who issues your orders. Also, some levels alternate between first- and third-person views. The third-person stages are a bit strange, since the horizon doesn’t rotate and your fighter seems to move along a parabola.



G-LOC: Air Battle

Original Release: 1990

Platforms: ARC, GEN, SMS, GG, AMI, AST, C64, CPC, 3DS, ZX



G-LOC

The Sega Master System version completely alters all of the levels. Half of the screen is taken up by a HUD and the landscapes are now rolling colors, but while the game looks worse than the SMS *After Burner* it plays a little bit better. In addition to the time limit, you can only die a certain number of times before needing to continue. Additionally, since the after burners are gone, the chase sequences – done in third-person like the Genesis version – are simple annoying sections where you need to dodge enemy fire for

a certain period of time. Sega also added strange boss fights to certain stages. While the original *After Burner* titles have some grasp on reality, these bosses look like things you'd fight in an outerspace shoot-em-up and feel really out of place.

The Game Gear version (available on the 3DS Virtual Console) goes off in a completely different direction. You're given a choice between several missions, with the usual goals of blowing up a certain number of planes or sinking a certain number of tankers. Depending on how well

you do, you'll get points which can be used to upgrade your plane. You actually control a cursor with only limited control over your plane, making it feel like a static shooting gallery. The graphics are worse than the SMS version, and it doesn't run smoothly either. Your fuel meter also acts as a life gauge, and when you get blown up it's game over. An interesting experiment.

The European computer ports, published by US Gold, are all based on the arcade version. The Amiga and ST ports look much worse than the Genesis version, since the landscape is completely barren, but technically they play alright, and the plane controls well with the mouse.

The other versions, on 8-bit computers, are wretched – they're slow, choppy and ugly. The Commodore 64 port was so bad that British magazine *Zzap! 64* surmised that *G-LOC* actually stood for "Great Load Of Crap".



Left: The R360 rotating cabinet
Below: [SMS] One of the strange bosses exclusive to this version



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Genesis



Sega Master System



Game Gear



Amiga



Commodore 64



Amstrad CPC



ZX Spectrum



Strike Fighter is essentially a variation on *G-LOC*, except it's more faithful to the original *After Burner*. The pace is much faster, there's no time limit to worry about, and the level-based structure has returned. You also have unlimited missiles now, which is quite an improvement. The graphics engine is practically the same as *G-LOC*'s, and the first-person cockpit view returns, except for when enemies get on your tail. There's a greater visual variety in levels, and some of them are excellent, especially the stage that takes place over lava. While the gameplay is faster, it still suffers from the slow turning speed of *G-LOC*, and the music is still fairly forgettable. While it's a pretty decent game, it lacks the intensity of the original *After Burner* and its sequel. *Strike Fighter* only saw release in Japanese arcades.

After Burner III is a bastardized port of *Strike Fighter*, ported by CRI. It was originally released on the FM Towns computer, before being ported to the Sega CD. Despite the relative strengths of both platforms, *After Burner III* looks noticeably worse

than the Genesis ports of *After Burner II* and *G-LOC*.

There's barely any detail to the landscape other than a handful of tiny sprites which are spread sparsely throughout, and it's totally lacking the energy that made the previous entries so chaotically compelling. There are a couple of impressive visual tricks, however, like the take-off sequence and the transitions from first- to third-person views, both of which are exactly like the arcade version of *Strike Fighter*. Plus, some of the animation is quite nice, and the landscape rotation is the smoothest of any of the 16-bit versions.

The Sega CD release (below) adds an optional third-person view to make it feel like the older games. However, your plane is gigantic and blocks too much of the screen. The only real advantage of the CD format is the opening cutscene, wherein some professional announcer rants about how awesome the F-14 Tomcat is. The soundtrack to the FM Towns version is a strange combination of jazz and electronica, and is far too laid back for a game about jet fighters. While the Sega CD



Strike Fighter / After Burner III
Original Release: 1991
Platforms: ARC, FMT, SCD



Strike Fighter / After Burner III

version uses some of these tracks, most of the in-game music has been replaced with music from the FM Towns ports of *After Burner II*, which is far, far superior.

Although the Sega CD version is the better of the two ports, *After Burner III* is still an awful game. After this somewhat embarrassing release, it's easy to see why the public didn't exactly have confidence in the power of the Sega CD.



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



FM Towns



Sega CD



Sega Strike Fighter

Original Release: 2000
Platforms: ARC

Released only in the arcades on the Naomi hardware, *Sega Strike Fighter* is only listed here by virtue of including "Strike Fighter" in its title. It actually bears little resemblance in theme to the older *After Burner* games, and instead plays much closer to a game like

Air Combat – which is to say, slower and slightly more realistic. The game is set up similarly to *G-LOC*, in that you have a time limit to destroy a certain number of bad guys before you can move on. You can choose your missions as well. Once again there is a life bar, but it's all too easy to turn upside down, bang into the ground and severely damage your hi-tech fighter.

In addition to the standard controls, there's also a pedal that lets your fighter strafe, although it's still rather hard to keep your plane under control. *Sega Strike Fighter's* big gimmick is the three screen sit-down cabinet, which creates a greater sense of immersion. It's an okay game, but taken in the context of *After Burner*, it's clear that the apple has fallen pretty far from the tree.



Once again, Sega masks its lineage by giving a completely new name to what's obviously a new installment in the *After Burner* series. *Sky Target* is the first fully polygonal game in the series, courtesy of the Model 2 hardware. While the Vulcan/lock-on missile set up is the same, the pace is a bit slower, and the handling is more comparable to *Star Fox 64*. There are four different planes to pick from: the F-14D, the RAFALE M, the F-16C, and the F-15S/MTD. Each has slightly different movement capabilities and missile loadouts. Unfortunately the throttle controls, from previous games, have been removed.

After the first few levels the game branches off and lets you take different paths to the final stage. There are only a few alternate stages, and there are only 12 levels in total, but it does add to the replayability. At the end of each stage you'll encounter some kind of boss – they range from gigantic planes to deadly blimps. These make it feel a bit more like a *Panzer Dragoon* game, especially with the multiple weak spots you need to hit to take them down. While these battles are unlike what you'd find in most of the other *After Burner* titles, they're less silly than the foes in the Master System version of *G-LOC*. You only get one life per credit, although now your plane has a lifebar and can absorb a fair amount of damage. Unfortunately the music is the worst kind of

generic butt rock, all done with very cheesy synth, though the composers tossed in a (rather limp) arrangement of the "After Burner" theme song.

Skies of Saturn

Beyond the arcade release, *Sky Target* was also ported to the Saturn and Windows PCs. The Windows version is a faithful port, but the Saturn version (pictured) isn't quite as good looking, running at a lower resolution with worse models. The Saturn version also has a "Ranking Mode", which lets you replay any missions you've beaten in "Arcade Mode" in order to get high scores.

Sky Target isn't bad, but much like earlier efforts, the lack of speed makes the action feel slightly dull. It doesn't help that the Saturn port runs at an inconsistent speed, constantly shifting gears depending on the action. Plus, the textures are painfully low-res and the draw-in is quite noticeable. The missile trails also don't look right. On some level, it's actually more playable than the original arcade *After Burner* games, since you can see what's going on, but it's also not quite as fun.

The manual also elucidates on the silly plot, where you play as a pilot from Mad Dog, a secret military organization, fighting against the Deldine Corporation, which has stolen a top-secret weapon from the military.



Sky Target

Original Release: 1995

Platforms: ARC, SAT, PC



After Burner Climax



After Burner Climax

Original Release: 2006

Platforms: ARC, 360, PS3, iOS



Even though *After Burner* technically had many follow-ups, none really captured the style of the original arcade release. *After Burner Climax*, released in arcades in 2006, is as close to a proper sequel as possible. Much like *OutRun 2*, it takes the basic concept of its predecessor, and revamps it for the 21st century, both from a visual and gameplay perspective, while still keeping it faithful in spirit. The result is a totally brilliant experience.

After Burner Climax runs on the Sega Lindbergh board, which is essentially a Pentium 4 computer with a NVIDIA GeForce 6800 video card. It looks absolutely gorgeous, totally outclassing the *After Burner* PS2 remake and *After Burner Black Falcon*, not only in technical force but artistry. Many of the levels are the same types seen in the original arcade game – oceans, cities, deserts – but now meticulously rendered with high definition textures. Several new areas are immensely impressive as well, with one taking place over volcanic islands, and another flying underneath the aurora borealis.

There are a few canyon stages, and naturally these have much more detail than the simple ones found in the original arcade game, as you dodge between mountains or underneath rock formations. Additionally, there are even a couple of interior levels, where you fly through factories and need to avoid smashing into the walls or scenery – these feel

akin to if *Star Fox 64* stabbed itself in the heart with some adrenaline. The sense of speed is perhaps even faster than before, and maintains 60 frames per second consistently.

The music is, unfortunately, rather grating, though the original (and superior) *After Burner II* soundtrack is available to listen to as well. There's also quite a bit of radio chatter throughout, mostly discussing your attempts to attack the ambiguous nation of Z and its nuclear arsenal. Most of it is indecipherable and drowned out by the music.

Like Before But Better

The core gameplay is much the same as it was in *After Burner II*, though some elements have been borrowed from *Sky Target*. You now have an armor meter allowing you to take a few hits before crashing, and missiles slowly regenerate on their own, so technically you can never run out.

There are three different jet fighters – F-14D Super Tomcat, F/A-18E Super Hornet and F-15E Strike Eagle – though there's not much of a difference between them. The stage route has a few branching paths, plus a handful of "secret missions" that require you to destroy specific enemies and can also open up different levels. There are also three different endings, based on the route you take as well as how successful you are with secondary objectives.

There's also the "Climax" gauge, as referenced in the title. As you destroy enemies, it quickly fills up – when maxed out, you can use it to slow down time and target an unlimited amount of enemies with an infinite supply of missiles, making it quite handy for those moments when dozens of bad guys appear on the horizon.

In the arcades, *After Burner Climax* was released using the same sort of hydraulic motion cabinets as its predecessors. Four years after its launch, it was released on the Xbox Live Arcade and PlayStation Network as a downloadable title. It's a brilliant port, because not only does it perfectly replicate the high definition visuals, but it also introduces a series of bonuses called "EX Options".

When reaching certain milestones (such as shooting down enough enemies, playing through all of the routes, and so forth), it opens up some in-game element to tinker with, including the number of credits, the size of the lock-on reticule, the armor on your jet fighter, and so forth. Beyond posting scores on the online leaderboards, this provides an incentive to continually replay the game, which is especially nice for a title originally developed for the arcades.

The iOS version was released in 2013. While the visuals don't even come close to its bigger brother, it controls surprisingly well with the touch screen, and the score attack-style gameplay works well for quick mobile gaming.

Unfortunately as of the end of 2014, the XBLA and PSN versions have been delisted.



Screenshot Comparison



Xbox 360



iOS

After Burner: Black Falcon



After Burner: Black Falcon

Original Release: 2007

Platforms: PSP



This PSP title is often mistaken for a port of *After Burner Climax*, but it's actually a completely different game developed by Planet Moon Studios, previously known for goofy shooters like *Giants: Citizen Kabuto* and *Armed and Dangerous*. It's also technically the first *After Burner* title developed specifically for a home audience.

Instead of a 21-stage marathon, *After Burner Black Falcon* is broken down into a huge number of short missions lasting roughly five minutes each, where the goal is simply to get to the end while destroying as much stuff as possible along the way. The graphics aren't particularly special, but they move fast and there's plenty of variety. Fortunately, the mechanics feel just about spot on, with quick movement and smooth controls. The soundtrack is supplied by American rock group Trans Am, most of which lacks the appeal of the old music.

In addition to the standard Vulcan cannons and heat-seeking missiles, you also have an air-to-ground cannon to destroy land based targets. If you destroy multiple enemies simultaneously you'll get a combo bonus, which spawns a bonus crate containing health or ammo replenishments. You also execute a 360 roll by pressing the triangle button, which is practically required to dodge projectiles. It takes some getting used to, because it's hard to see incoming missiles with all of the action going on, and trying to

dodge bullets is unnecessarily difficult. Although you have a damage meter and multiple lives per stage, it's easy to burn through all of that if you're not paying attention. If it becomes too frustrating, you can always set the game to Easy, because you can take plenty of hits.

There are usually multiple objectives in each stage, which involve killing a certain number of enemies or completing the missions quickly. Higher scores will give you more cash to buy new aircraft and upgrade your weapons. There are tons of licensed craft from Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin and Boeing, and unlike the extra ships in the Sega Ages *After Burner*, there are huge differences in their power, speed and handling.

The mission structure and customization add greatly to the replay value, and allows for convenient quick play, since the missions are pretty short. Unfortunately, the landscapes usually repeat at least twice over the course of the level – some kind of variety would've been nice. Still, the package is pretty good overall, considering it's taken an inherently shallow game and given it some lasting value.





Master Burner isn't an official After Burner game, but rather a Japanese doujin title. Created by DNA Softwares and released in a package spoofing the Sega Ages 2500 line (dubbed "Touhou Ages" here), Master Burner replaces the F-14 Tomcat with Marisa Kirisame, the yellow-haired witch from a variety of Touhou shooters. Many of the landscapes are similar, although some take place in unique locales like libraries. All of the enemies have been replaced with fairies and little comets which have that goofy little grimacing face that are prevalent on Japanese message boards.

The graphics are almost a spot-on copy of the style used in the original arcade After Burner, although some of the spritework looks a bit off by comparison. All of the music consists of modified versions of the FM tunes from the arcade game.

Things seem to control just a little bit differently – the controls are somewhat twitchier, and the landscape seems to zoom by slightly faster than it did in After Burner. While you'll still rely heavily on missiles, the standard Vulcan cannon is far more useful than it ever was before. Your missile supply is still limited, although it partially recharges after each stage and is fully replenished every few stages by Reimu Hakurei, one of the stars from several Touhou games. There are also boss battles with assorted other Touhou characters.

In 2009, three developers – Shooting Area, Aquaelie, Hexaflange – came together to create Master Burner Climax (below). Named and based loosely on After Burner Climax, this entry is entirely in 3D. However, it is much less of a blatant clone than the original Master Burner.



Master Burner / Master Burner Climax
Original Release: 2005 / 2009
Platforms: PC



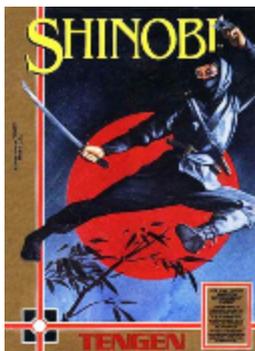
Shinobi



Shinobi

Original Release: 1987

Platforms: ARC, SMS, PCE, NES, AMI, AST, CPC, ZX, C64, MSX, IBM, MOB, PS3, 360, WII



Ninjas were a huge thing, worldwide, in pop culture media in the 1980s. Their popularity can be seen in any number of imported karate flicks, but perhaps their biggest influence can be seen on video games from the time. Although Sega's *Shinobi* (a word that's basically a synonym for "ninja"), initially released in 1987, was not the first ninja game, it was one of the most popular ones. The hero, Joe Musashi, started slicing up terrorists and created the path for scores of other cloaked assassins.

Birth of the Ninja

Beginning life in the arcades, *Shinobi's* gameplay style changed quite a lot as sequels appears on consoles and portables. Despite these alterations, there are common threads throughout the games. Taking place in a near futuristic setting, you'll fight against army men and ancient Japanese demons, as well as biological monsters and robots. Almost all of the games arm your character(s) with swords and shurikens, as well as ninjitsu magic to clear the screen of enemies or grant temporary invulnerability. Regardless of the style of each game, most of them range from good to excellent, with only two real below par efforts.

The original *Shinobi*, released on the Sega System 16 board, is a pretty straightforward arcade affair, putting you in the shoes of

ace ninja Joe Musashi (who, lacking a cool mask, doesn't look as cool as the iconic title screen suggests). An evil organization called Zeed has begun terrorizing the Oboro ninja clan by kidnapping their children. The goal of each level is to find all of the hostages and escape to the end, although the kids are never hidden and finding them is pretty easy. The basic mechanics borrows heavily from Namco's *Rolling Thunder* games, mixing strategic gameplay with fast action. Like *Rolling Thunder*, you jump between planes by holding up or down and hitting jump. Joe can leap between rooftops, or behind fences, in dual-plane level designs that were pretty original for 1987.

Of course, the relentless stream of bad guys makes the trek difficult – some of them mindlessly charge at you, but others hide behind boxes or block your attacks with shields. Even more deadly are the ninjas, who appear out of nowhere in large numbers and will surround Joe if they're not dealt with quickly. Sure, you'll be hammering that fire button to toss out as many shurikens as possible, but you'll also have to properly time your assault, hopping on enemies while they've dropped their defenses. While your primary weapon is an unlimited supply of throwing shurikens, getting close to an enemy and attacking will unleash a melee attack – either a karate punch or a sword slash, depending on your power-up –

that will usually break through their defenses. Joe's a fragile ninja and one bullet or stab wound will kill him, sending him back to the beginning of the level, but he can still ram into enemies as long as no weapons touch him. This is actually one of the finer strategies of the game, as it allows you to stun enemies and deliver a quick killing blow.

There are plenty of memorable boss battles too, plus they will usually make an appearance in the stages, to taunt you or get off a few quick shots. Each boss is introduced with a document prefacing every level, showing the route of your attack, and their portrait, which is stamped when they are killed. The first is a hulking armor-clad warrior named Ken-Oh, who tosses fireballs from his fists and can only be damaged with a shuriken right in the face. The second is Black Turtle, an entire helicopter, which sends a flood of soldiers out of its bay doors until you, a mere human ninja, can take it down.

The third level has a strange mechanical face called Mandara, which is attached to the wall and shoots bounding fireballs from its mouth. It's guarded by a series of rotating statues that slowly creep forward and try to crush you against the wall. The fourth boss,



Lobster, is a large sword-wielding samurai that, again, can only be attacked in the head. Finally, the fifth and ultimate enemy, the Masked Ninja known as Nakahara, who is also Joe's former mentor, wields the power of lightning.

The game can be tough, but you get ninja magic to use once each level, which clears the screen of enemies or does some cheap and easy damage to bosses. There are bonus stages are first-person shooting galleries, where you chuck shurikens at an approaching horse of ninjas. If you miss too many and they get too close, you lose. These scenes are extremely tough but reward the skillful ninja with extra lives. The arcade game was originally slated to use a shuriken-shaped controller, which was said to work great for the bonus levels, but since it hindered the rest of the game it was changed to a standard joystick.

Overall, *Shinobi* is still a damn fine game. It's tough but fair, and meticulously designed, creating a true classic that's aged very well.

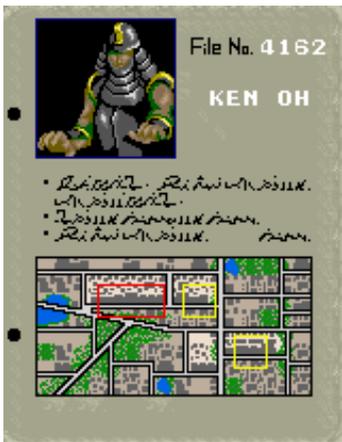
Ninja In My House!

The first home port of *Shinobi* was the Master System version. While

significantly slower paced than the arcade game, it maintains the methodical feel of the gameplay, and is still excellent. There are noticeable additions too, including a life bar and several new weapons you get for rescuing hostages, including guns, whips and bombs. Rescuing the hostages is also no longer mandatory, although given the power-ups, is a worthwhile thing to do. However, the importance of ninja magic is downplayed, as you only get to use it after beating one of the incredibly difficult bonus stages.

Much of the music is gone and replaced with a single tune, but the huge bosses still remain, although they don't taunt you during the stages anymore. Despite being a very different game, it's still one of the Sega Master System's better action titles, even if they cut the ending: upon beating Nakahara you get the same "Game Over" as you would if you'd run out of lives.

Tengen's Nintendo Entertainment System port is based on the Sega Master System game, although it suffers from terrible graphics and shaky gameplay, like all of their conversions. The additional close-ranged weapons are gone, the



Shinobi



vertically scrolling stages have been redesigned into horizontal stages, and Joe can only toss a single projectile at a time. The ninja on the title screen is also amusingly cross-eyed.

The PC Engine version, converted by Asmik, is closer to the arcade game, with decent (if somewhat darker) graphics and similar gameplay. However, all of the close-up melee attacks are gone, severely altering the way the game is played. It's also missing the second stage from the original, and the bonus levels are completely gone.

There are also a couple of home computer versions, mostly for European markets. The Amiga and Atari ST deliver the most faithful ports, which only differ from the arcade version in resolution, colors and HUD, as well as some different mechanics. Since most of these computers only support 1-button joysticks, Joe now jumps by pressing up, while holding the attack button and tapping either up or down switches between the planes. All the 8-bit computers have to live with even more compromises: the graphics are redrawn for all, and

they lose the boss title-cards that used to be shown before each stage. Because of the not-so-smooth controls, they're also a bit harder than the original.

The C64 also loses the music, as well as some *Spider-Man* look-a-like enemies in the second level. The same goes for the IBM PC version, which seems to be based on the C64 release, but is a rather shoddy port altogether, with terrible controls and broken enemy patterns. The laziest is the MSX "port" though, which is just a conversion from the Spectrum with the same yellow-dominated four-color graphics.

The only other nearly-perfect ports of *Shinobi* are found as an unlockable on *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, or as a separate download on the Xbox Live Arcade. The latter version has the Marilyn Monroe pictures that used to decorate stage 1-2 removed, and the Spider-Man enemy is now painted green.

Shinobi for mobile phones appeared in China, dubbed *Guiying Renzhe* ("Ghost Ninja Shinobi"). Western sources refer to it as "Shinobi Tolerance". This is a

complete remake rather than a port, with entirely new graphics (the hero now looks like Hotsuma from the PS2 game and rescues hot ninja chicks) and a second character to unlock. Joe (or Hotsuma?) also gets a health bar with three hit points and three different ninja spells.

This is no doubt the best looking version of the game, but the controls are terrible, as is typical for mobile phone games. Planes are switched by holding up (which is also jump) or down (duck) for a while, and probably for that reason every movement has a very annoying delay. You can save the game after each level, but it also keeps track of extra lives and score so it cannot be exploited. At least you're not forced to always start from the first stage.

The Marilyn Monroe pictures are gone here as well, and the Spidemen are turned into gooninjas similar to the ones in *Shinobi II* on the Game Gear.

Top: [SMS] Various shots from the 8-bit port
Bottom: [ARC] Precise timing is essential





Above: [MOB] The obscure Chinese remake

Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Sega Master System



Nintendo Entertainment System



PC Engine



Atari ST



Amiga



Amstrad CPC



ZX Spectrum



Commodore 64



IBM PC



Mobile

Shadow Dancer



Shadow Dancer

Original Release: 1989

Platforms: ARC, SMS, AMI, AST, C64, CPC, ZX



While there were many follow-ups that came out in quick succession on various platforms, *Shadow Dancer* is the only true sequel to the original arcade *Shinobi*, as the gameplay is pretty much the same. It runs on Sega's System 18 board; the major difference is a considerable graphical upgrade from its predecessor. This is especially noticeable for the main character, who has undergone a drastic overhaul and now wears a cool white costume similar to the one in *The Revenge of Shinobi*. This time you play as Hayate, Joe's son, as it's set several years down the line.

New for this game is Hayate's canine companion named Yamato, who follows him throughout the game and will periodically incapacitate foes, thus allowing for an easy takedown. Another visual treat is that casting ninja magic shows a cool cinematic close up of Hayate, with a background of colored burning flames behind him. Other than the dog friend, the changes are minor. The enemy organization this time is known as Asian Dawn, who has commandeered the Space Shuttle Olympia, and has planned to use it to launch an attack via satellites. In order to distract the hero, they have planted bombs everywhere, so these need to be defused in every stage before proceeding.

The levels include an airport, a junkyard, a cave, and final base at the foot of the space shuttle. The bonus stages are similar to the

previous game, although now you toss shurikens upward at ninjas that are slowly descending a building. The bosses are not quite as inspired, though it does include a slightly silly "man vs. train" fight – fundamentally it's not that much more ridiculous than the helicopter from the previous game. While *Shadow Dancer* is sometimes viewed as a step backwards compared to the advances made by the almost-simultaneously released Genesis title, *The Revenge of Shinobi*, it still recaptures the knife-flicking intensity of its arcade predecessor and is a fine sequel.

Since the Genesis game is entirely different from the arcade original, "true" ports of *Shadow Dancer* were mostly available in Europe. The Sega Master System version was only released in PAL territories and Brazil, and the hero has been renamed Takashi. While it admirably captures the huge character graphics, it's simply too much for the 8-bit system to handle, as it controls and plays horribly. The graphics are inconsistent, ranging from decent to awful (many of the bad guys have green skin) and it flickers with the intensity of hell. Your dog friend doesn't follow you anymore, but he can be summoned to bite enemies. It's missing several levels too. The soundtrack is all new, since the system couldn't handle the percussion heavy sound arcade game, so the replacement songs are more "video game-y".

Shadow Dancer

The home computer platforms received several ports, with roughly the same differences as *Shinobi*, only MSX and IBM versions were not made. The 8-bit computer versions lack music, but otherwise they're more complete than the Master System port.



Top: [ARC] The cutscenes from when Hayate uses magic, and of Yamato in the intro
 Bottom: [ARC] More shots from the arcade version, including the bonus round



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Master System



Amiga



Commodore 64

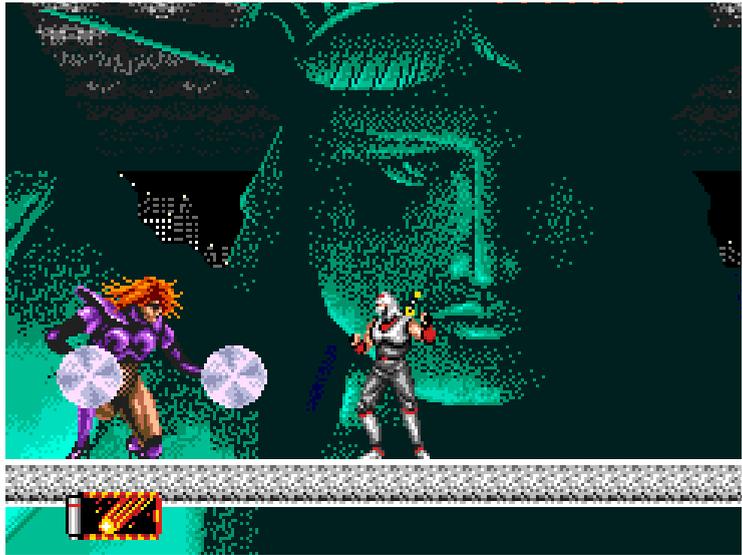
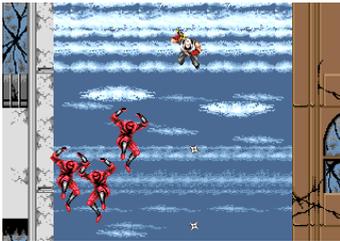


Amstrad CPC



ZX Spectrum

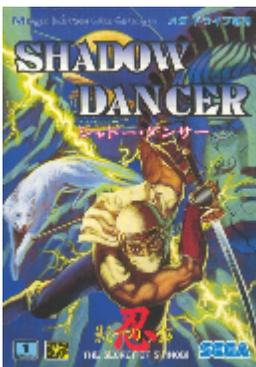
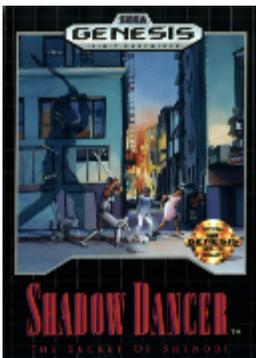
Shadow Dancer (Genesis)



Shadow Dancer: The Secret of Shinobi

Original Release: 1990

Platforms: GEN, PS2, PSP, WII, WIN



Much like *ESWAT*, another Sega arcade-to-home conversion, the Genesis version of *Shadow Dancer* is completely different from the arcade game. The story depends on which version of the game you're playing: in Japan, the hero is Hayate, Joe Musashi's son, while in the English version you're playing as Joe Musashi himself. His goal this time is to take down the absurdly named terrorist organization Union Lizard.

While the basic mechanics remain the same as before, the game consists of five mostly new levels, though some of them are reminiscent of stages in the arcade version. The most memorable new levels include a burning town (complete with waving flame effects and bursts of fire shooting from the sewers), an urban district in the midst of an earthquake, and a battle at the top of the Statue of Liberty. The soundtrack is also completely different.

The boss battles are a little unimpressive compared to the arcade version (no battles with trains, unfortunately), but they're still well designed. The graphics are comparable despite the limited palette of the Genesis, although the magic attacks are missing the cool close-ups. The soundtrack is also new, and more reminiscent of *The Revenge of Shinobi*.

You're still accompanied by your faithful dog, and this time you can even directly command him to attack by holding down the attack button. The dog can jump

over boxes and otherwise leap up at enemies that would normally be out of your range.

There are a few other minor changes as well – you're back to rescuing hostages as opposed to disarming bombs. The bonus stages have changed drastically and steer away from the first-person shooting galleries of the other games. Instead, the hero leaps off a gigantic building and you are instructed to "SHOOT ALL NINJAS!" as he hurtles towards the pavement.

While *Shadow Dancer* is a bit easier compared to the other games, there are several difficulty levels, including an option to play without shurikens. Overall, it stands up respectably to the arcade version.

This version of *Shadow Dancer* is featured on the PS2 and PSP *Sega Genesis Collection*, but is missing from *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* for the PS3 and X360. Why? The game is on Germany's index of "youth-endangering media", and thus cannot be sold there. Being too cheap to apply for it to be taken off, as is done with other games that used to be considered as violent in their time, Sega removed the game from all regions.





One of the first titles released in America for the Genesis, *The Revenge of Shinobi* was one of the strongest Sega had to offer. The reigns of the series were handed to a completely different team than the arcade games, led by Noriyoshi Ohba, who would later direct the *Streets of Rage* series. In a departure from the rather straightforward arcade action of its predecessor, *Revenge* ditches the concept of saving hostages and introduces larger, more open levels (and eliminates the need to hold up-and-jump to leap to different levels). The result are levels and bosses that aren't as tightly designed as before, but at the same time everything feels less rigid. Now Joe Musashi must trek through eight stages to eliminate the evil Neo Zeed terrorist organization. He also gets a life bar, although the amount of shurikens is limited in return.

Thankfully, power-up boxes are strewn throughout each stage, granting weapon power-ups and shuriken refills. Many of them are filled with bombs though, so it's wise to be careful. One particularly cool move is a midair spinning somersault, which allows you to double-jump higher and throw a powerful barrage of shurikens at once. You also have a selection of four different ninja spells which you can use at any time, including a screen-clearing fire attack (*Karyu*), a lightning barrier (*Ikazuchi*), a high jump spell (*Fushin*), and a ninjitsu that will

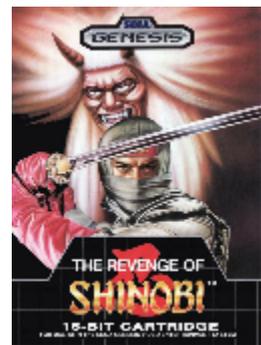
cause Joe to explode (*Mijin*), taking away one of his lives, but doing massive damage to everything on the screen. The latter is quite useful, because it also refills your health after using it, thereby skirting the level checkpoint you normally get sent back to when you die.

Otherwise the most valuable power-up, the POW icon, grants fiery shurikens, which deal twice as much damage and gives Joe a new sword with a longer range, which he also uses to protect himself against projectiles when walking forward. Take one hit and it's gone, though. Keeping with its lineage, *The Revenge of Shinobi* is incredibly difficult, although Easy Mode grants nine lives.

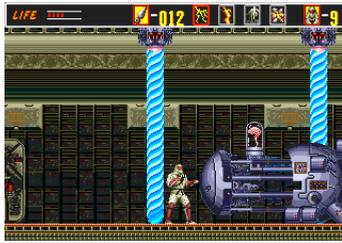
While almost quaint now, the huge character sprites were remarkable for the time, especially compared to pretty much any NES game. Granted, the pacing is a little bit on the slow side, as Joe just kind of saunters through each stage, but the imaginative designs still hold up well. There are some spectacularly cool boss battles – one early battle is against a room of lasers controlled by a human brain that's locked in a machine. Another is fought in a disco. Some other particularly memorable levels include an airborne jet plane (be careful not to get sucked out the doors) and battles against fake nuns, who throw off their habits to reveal psycho stripper ninja babes. The entire last level is a huge maze in a Japanese castle, and the final



The Revenge of Shinobi
 AKA: **The Super Shinobi** (JP)
 Original Release: 1989
 Platforms: GEN, SCD, DC, PS2, PSP, 360, PS3, WII, WIN



Revenge of Shinobi



boss battle is a race against time – you fight an evil kabuki master while your fiancée Naoko is trapped in a cage, threatened by the rock ceiling about to crush her if you're not fast enough. Depending on how well you do there are two endings; rescuing your girl and getting the good ending is tough.

The Revenge of Shinobi is also renowned for its soundtrack, created by video game music legend Yuzo Koshiro. While the music is possibly a bit overrated compared to Koshiro's other works of the era, like *Streets of Rage* and *Actraiser*, there are a number of decent tunes, especially the boss battle "Terrible Beat".

The designers were also clearly comic book fans. You not

only fight against a musclemán who lobs cars at you and slowly turns green as he takes damage, but later bosses include a dinosaur that looks suspiciously like Godzilla, while the most controversial is a battle against famous super heroes Spider-Man and Batman. There are also regular enemies with military outfits and Rambo-style bandanas.

It seems that at some point the copyright holders stepped in and regulated. Even on the Genesis, alterations have been made at least twice. In the second version of the ROM, Batman and Rambo were changed: the former was replaced by a more bestial bat-monster, while the latter all had their heads shaved. The third version includes a copyright by Marvel, indicating that Spider-Man is an official cameo. The fourth version strips Godzilla of its skin, leaving only a skeleton and the internal organs. Unfortunately, it is impossible to distinguish the version by looking at the carts. The first, unaltered version seems to be rather rare, and possibly

does not even exist outside of Japan.

During the 1990s, *The Revenge of Shinobi* saw several more re-releases. Other than the budget *Sega Classics* release, it was stuck on the *4-in-1 Arcade Classics* disc that came bundled with the Sega CD, and later packed in a 5-in-1 cartridge. It was also included on the *Sega Smash Pack Vol. 1* for Dreamcast.

After the deal with Marvel ended, *The Revenge of Shinobi* was left out of many Sega compilations, until it was edited again for digital download on the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and Wii, which recolor the Spider-Man boss to be pink. These version also change the look of the iconic digitized face on the title screen to make it look less like Sonny Chiba, the famous Japanese actor who originally modeled for the shot.



Screenshot Comparisons



Rambo



Batman



Godzilla



Spider-Man





Widely regarded as the best in the series, *Shinobi III: Return of the Ninja Master* takes everything that made *The Revenge of Shinobi* awesome and gives it a karate kick in the pants. Four long years had passed since the launch of the Genesis, and plenty of graphical evolution had taken place since then – so *Shinobi III* looks damn good. The story is the usual, with Joe Musashi taking on the newly resurrected Neo Zeed organization once more. With the addition of a dash maneuver (and a running slash), the gameplay has gotten quite a bit faster, which was one of the only real shortcomings of its predecessor.

There are a few new moves as well, including a block maneuver you can use at any time (as opposed to when powered up like in *The Revenge of Shinobi*), and a jump kick to strike from midair. As before, melee attacks are executed when enemies are closed enough, and blocking is done by holding down the button. There is a hidden cheat code that allows you to map the block, melee and shuriken attacks to different buttons.

In general Joe Musashi has become much more agile, and he can now wall-jump and grapple along ceilings. The difficulty has also been tuned a bit, although it's still no walk in the park, especially in the final stage, where you need to put all of your acrobatic skills to the test to leap between narrow electrified walls and ceilings.

Shinobi III continues the series tradition of excellent boss designs, but the design also seems influenced by the *Contra* games, featuring “vehicle” stages and some really cool set-pieces. One level takes place in a huge cave of biological goop, with some strange creature in the background visibly targeting your ninja. Naturally, you face this thing at the end, and he's one of the most gruesome looking creations seen on the Genesis.

Other notable boss fights include a mecha-Godzilla type robot, and a final battle in a colorful, spacey virtual field, similar to a battle in *Contra: Hard Corps*. One level occurs on horseback while another takes a radical page from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* by giving Joe Musashi a surfboard. A later level has you climbing a long vertical mountain by jumping from falling bits of debris, although badly timing your double jumps can send you to your death. The penultimate stage is also a tribute to the maze-like castle in *The Revenge of Shinobi*, as well as a variation of its final boss (though there's no time limit this time, thankfully). The level design isn't as tight as some similar Konami titles, but it's still one of the best action games on the Genesis.

The music is no longer supplied by Koshiro, and is instead provided by Hirofumi Murasaki, Morihiko Akiyama and Masayuki Nagao. It's an excellent soundtrack, providing more

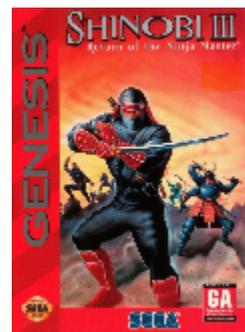


Shinobi III: Return of the Ninja Master

AKA: **The Super Shinobi II (JP)**

Original Release: 1993

Platforms: GEN, PS2, PS3, 360, IOS, WII, WIN, 3DS



Shinobi III



complex compositions than typically seen in video game music. While generally not as melodic or immediately memorable as Koshiro's tracks, it utilizes digitized samples much better than most titles on the system, and is generally in a class of its own.

What is rather confusing is the naming convention. In Japan, the title is *The Super Shinobi II*, clearly showing that it is the sequel to the first Mega Drive / Genesis game, and that the gameplay should be different to the arcade titles. However, the Western releases deemed it *Shinobi III*. So which was supposed to be "*Shinobi II*" then? *The Revenge of Shinobi*? *Shadow Dancer*? Or perhaps the atrocious *The Cyber Shinobi*? Who knows.

While it was a Genesis exclusive in its time, *Shinobi III* has since been included in both the *Sega Genesis Collection* (PS2, PSP) and *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* (PS3, X360). It is also available on Steam for Windows PCs, and as an iOS app – like this is the kind of game you would want to play with touch-screen controls only!

When *Shinobi III* was originally previewed in magazines, it featured screenshots of areas and enemies that were totally different from the final release. Two beta ROMs have leaked onto the internet showing many of the elements that were altered.

The first beta is almost entirely different, showing off a huge number of stages that are completely unlike the final release.

Unused areas include a night-time stage in a Japanese castle, a canyon, and a refinery. Previously unseen enemies include a mid-boss with a gigantic machine gun, a muscular dude with an extending arm and some kind of mutated tiger. There's also a fifth ninjitsu power called *Hakuiru*, which uses the power of ice and freezes everything on the screen, thereby making all special attacks analogous to the ninjas in the Game Gear games. There's also a strange hidden puzzle game.

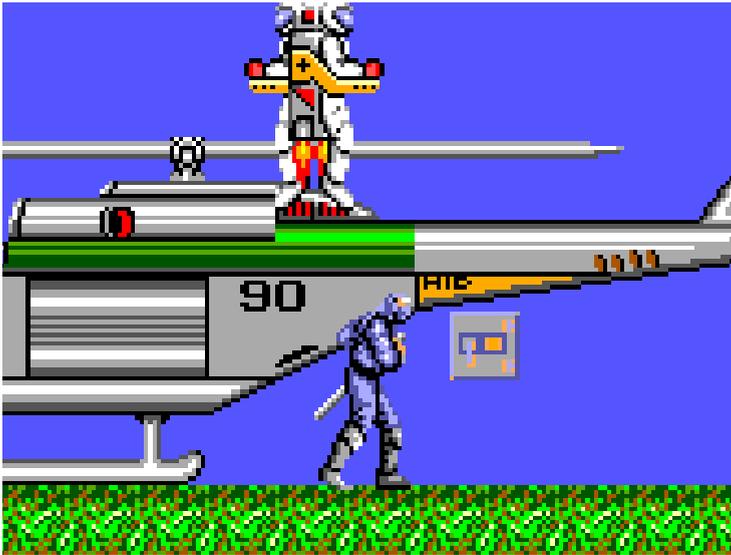
The second beta ROM is much closer to the final game, but with several subtle changes (including enemies which appear to be riding *Return of the Jedi*-style speeders), and a variation on the labyrinth level that removes the maze elements.

Top: *Shinobi III* has some familiar scenarios
 Right: Shots of the beta version
 Bottom: Godzilla returns in robot form

The 3DS version has sleek 3D effects, as well as a stage select and an "Expert Ninja" mode which lets you remap the melee, shuriken and block commands to different buttons without having to put in a cheat code.



The Cyber Shinobi



The Cyber Shinobi (or as noted on the title screen, *Shinobi Part 2*) sounds like it should be an amazing game, since it combines two popular subjects, cyborgs and ninjas, which should result in pure awesomeness. Yet despite the great premise, it misses the mark completely and falls flat on its face. It doesn't play anything like any of the other games in the series, except inasmuch as it's a depressingly pale imitation of *The Revenge of Shinobi*.

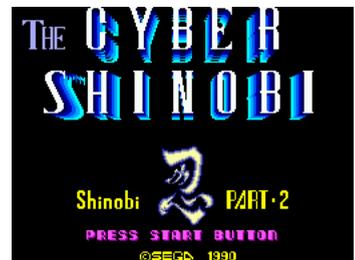
Through six overly long, boring stages, you take on screen after screen of mooks working for Cyber Zeed, the new criminal organization to be defeated. All of the enemies in the area must be killed before you can continue, similar to beat-em-ups like *Double Dragon*. Your cyber ninja, ostensibly a descendent of Joe Musashi, can only attack with a weak upward thrust that has almost no range, but it doesn't really matter all that much, because the developers failed to program anything fancy like "competent hit detection", so you can execute crouching attacks and hit enemies despite not actually being next to them.

Boxes hold extra items, like shirikens, machine guns (one of the only true "cyber" parts on your ninja) and grenades, all in very limited quantities and activated by pressing the up button and attack. The ninjitsu magic fills the screen with gigantic, pixelated scrolling text announcing the attack you are

using. You can actually stock up to eight magic points (though each use takes two of them), with the higher levels offering more powerful attacks.

The game looks and controls terribly. The animation is choppy, as is the scrolling. A full third of the screen is taken up by an oversized status bar. The mechanics are clumsy, and the best you can hope for is to get near to a bad guy and mash the attack button until they die, and hope that maybe your sluggish jumping is enough to dodge enemy bullets. It's not that terribly difficult, although health items only restore a single bar, and the innocuous-seeming platforms that collapse without warning immediately grow tiresome.

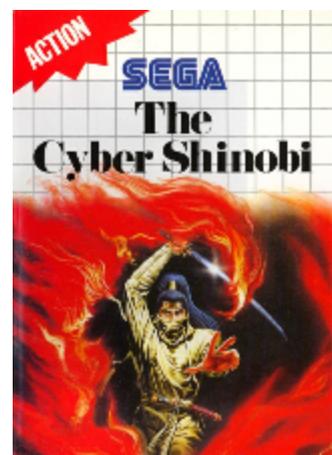
The good aspects include the enemy deaths, where they either shrivel into nothingness or burn to a crisp. Also, many of the bosses are large vehicles that channel some of the more memorable battles in other game, like bulldozers, helicopters and submarines. But otherwise it's a wretched game, one of the worst on the platform and undoubtedly the lowest point in the whole *Shinobi* series. It was only officially released in PAL territories (Europe, Australia and Brazil), so it falls outside the *Shinobi* canon.



The Cyber Shinobi

Original Release: 1990

Platforms: SMS



Shinobi (Game Gear)

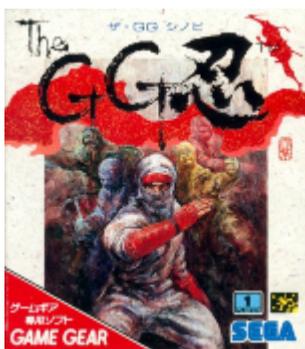


Shinobi

AKA: **The GG Shinobi (JP)**

Original Release: 1991

Platforms: GG, 3DS



The GG Shinobi (simply referred to as *Shinobi* for American and European releases) is a decent miniaturization of the *Shinobi* series, with gameplay similar to *The Revenge of Shinobi*, but with some new elements to make up for the inferior tech. The graphics are still excellent, and the soundtrack features music from Yuzo Koshiro, along with a few chiptune renditions of songs from *The Revenge of Shinobi*. Sega didn't cut any corners with regards to presentation, as noted by the impressive parallax scrolling backgrounds in some stages.

Taking a hint from *sentai* shows, *The GG Shinobi* lets you play as a group of five ninjas, each with a different colored uniform. Each also has a unique weapon, ninjitsu and skill. You begin with only the sword-wielding Red Ninja, whose magic can damage everything on the screen, but you choose your levels in a *Mega Man* style stage select. There are five in total: Highway, which has you jumping between moving cars; Harbor, with ships and crates;



Wood, which has you swinging between trees; and Valley, with a river running through it. Once you've beaten the four main stages, you can head to Neo City for the final battle.

When you finish a level, you rescue one of your compatriots and can switch to them at any time. Pink Ninja tosses bombs, can freeze all enemies on the screen and can climb on the ceiling; Yellow Ninja attacks with energy blasts, can walk on water and can make himself invincible; Blue Ninja has a grappling hook that can be used to swing on certain pegs and can turn himself into a tornado allowing limited flight; and the Green Ninja wields shurikens, can double jump and has a suicide attack much like the *Mijin* attack from *The Revenge of Shinobi*. Spreading out the abilities with the ninjas makes this play somewhat differently to its bigger brothers.

The ninja selection is a great idea, and it really adds variety to the gameplay. Unfortunately at the start of the game, when you've only got the Red Ninja with his pathetically short attack against enemies that take two or more hits, the game can be very tough. Your short life meter doesn't help either, as you can take between two and four hits before biting the dust. Other than the cramped portable display, *The GG Shinobi* is still quite enjoyable.

Shinobi II: The Silent Fury



The Game Gear sequel pretty much follows in its predecessor's footsteps, but refines some elements to make it an even better game. You've got to rescue the same four ninjas, each with the same abilities as before. There are four stages here too – Castle, Building, Canyon and Factory.

In addition there's a crystal hidden in each of the stages. You'll need to find all of these crystals before advancing to the final stage, but many require special abilities to reach, meaning you'll go through some areas a second time after rescuing your uniquely attributed allies.

Bosses are spectacular; you get to fight a giant armadillo that

shoots out the spikes on his back, and of course rolls into a ball and all across the screen, plus a giant worm that bores out of the floor and ceiling to attack you. The rest of the game looks equally excellent. While the predecessor took the style of *The Revenge of Shinobi*, here the backgrounds look a bit closer to the later *Shinobi III*, with a greater emphasis on biological and mechanical designs.

The difficulty has been adjusted – enemies take less hits to kill, so the earlier stages of the game aren't as frustratingly difficult. With the addition of a password system, *Shinobi II* makes for one of the best 8-bit portable action games out there.



Shinobi II: The Silent Fury
AKA: **The GG Shinobi II (JP)**
Original Release: 1992
Platforms: GG



Shinobi Legions

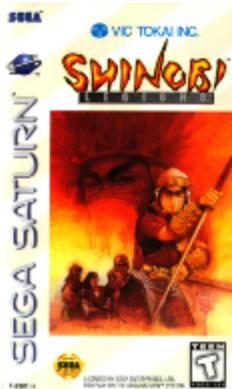


Shinobi Legions

AKA: **Shin Shinobiden** (JP),
Shinobi X (EU)

Original Release: 1995

Platforms: SAT



Shin Shinobiden ("New Shinobi Story"), also known as *Shinobi Legions* in North America and *Shinobi X* in Europe, is an early Saturn release that uses digitized graphics for all of the characters. It was developed by a different team to the *Super Shinobi* games. Taking control of a new ninja named Sho, the controls and mechanics are very similar to *Shinobi III*, although a little more sluggish and clumsy.

For the first time there are separate buttons to use a sword and throw shurikens. Compared to the other games there's a far bigger emphasis on swordplay, since the shurikens are slow, even more limited in number and fairly weak – though you can now throw them upwards. You'll also spend much more time blocking and parrying enemy attacks. New melee moves include a spinning sword slash, a downward thrust maneuver, and the ability to reflect enemy projectiles back with your sword, though this move is hard to time effectively. The magic skills have changed a bit too. The only one you can store up and use at any time is the Fire Dragon, which attacks everything on the screen. The POW icon has been replaced with the Bushido Blade, which is immediately activated and summons gigantic shadowy warrior statues every time you slash. There are also glowing orbs, which will grant an extra life when you collect 10 of them. Boxes are much rarer than before, as most

items are dropped by enemies. Unfortunately they also drop bombs, which are even more numerous and annoying than they usually are.

Even though the core mechanics are familiar, there's something not quite right about everything. Sho doesn't control as tightly as before, and has a tendency to make extra movements when executing sword combos. While the level designs in the previous Genesis *Shinobi* games weren't exactly the best, they were at least competent – here they're just long and boring, as each stage is only comprised of a single elongated area, rather than two or three smaller areas, before the boss fight. Many areas are similar to the ones seen in previous games: medieval-style Japanese towns, biological laboratories, caves (complete with a mine cart ride), forests, and so forth. Bosses, meanwhile, are drearily unremarkable. All in all, *Shinobi Legions* can't help but feel somewhat uninspired.

The worst of it, though, is the graphics. All of the sprites are digitized actors in rather goofy looking costumes. This was at least a few years after *Mortal Kombat* came around, so theoretically this fascination with live actor sprites should have worn off, but apparently the designers were still enamored with characters that looked "like real people". Except that, in execution, everything comes off as

remarkably silly, especially the animation. The backgrounds look photorealistic (albeit at a low resolution), but realism is boring compared to the near-futuristic levels in the 16-bit titles. Forget fearsome monsters and mechanical robots – mostly you're fighting other ninjas, birds, and the occasional supernatural creature, like the big dinosaur thing, which looks like a ridiculous toy model.

It's bloodier than before and it is cool to slice bad guys in half, with a spurt of blood as their torso falls off. If that wasn't laughable enough, after each level there's an FMV cutscene telling the story of ninja Sho and his quest to rescue his woman Aya. It's unclear whether the developers were paying homage to cheesy Saturday afternoon ninja serials, or they just didn't have a decent budget, but this is a C-grade production with cheap locations, terrible acting, awful lighting and some dated 1980s-styled synthesized music. In the English versions, the spoken dialogue is left in Japanese and subtitled.

While not an outright terrible game, *Shinobi Legions* looks painfully dated, and the core game is sloppy and uninspired.

Apparently Sega of America felt the same way, and opted not to publish it in America, instead licensing it to Vic Tokai. Sega of Europe did publish it in Europe, but apparently wasn't happy with the soundtrack, which is fairly standard, boring, and completely unbecoming the *Shinobi* name. To fix this, they pulled a situation similar to what Sega of America did with *Sonic CD*, where they replaced the soundtrack with music by a Western composer.

The new tunes are provided by Richard Jacques, also known for his work on *Sonic 3D Blast* for the Saturn and *Sonic R*. While not quite up to par with the Genesis games, it's still leaps and bounds better than the Japanese /



American soundtrack, making it the superior version overall.



Revenge of Shinobi (GBA)



The Revenge of Shinobi

Original Release: 2002

Platforms: GBA



Despite sharing a title with the Genesis game, *The Revenge of Shinobi* for the Game Boy Advance is a totally different bag of shurikens. Developed by an American company called 3d6 Games, which also worked on the GBA *Altered Beast* title before going out of business, and published by THQ, this hackjob totally misses the point of the *Shinobi* series.

Taking place in feudal Japan, the story focuses on a ninja named Shinobi. His master tells him the story of a warlord named Ashira-o, who was destroyed by five shogun and sealed within five swords. Those swords eventually corrupted all of the shogun, each of which is associated with an element: fire, wind, water, earth and darkness. As such, Shinobi must take them all down.

By Any Other Name

Disregarding nearly every element of the series that came before it, the title could very easily have been "Generic Ninja Action Game", and it both looks and feels like a shoddy Amiga release.

In order to complete each of the many sprawling, non-linear levels, you need to explore the stages while rummaging through all of the nearly identical looking houses and caverns, in order to find keys or switches to open up the exit. You end up doing far more running around than actual fighting or platforming.

The combat is basic and shallow, and can be reduced to two techniques: either slash mindlessly, or slash, wait a second, then slash again. It's a little sad that the enemy AI of a 1986 arcade game outshines that of a 2002 portable game. In addition to your sword, you can chuck shurikens, but they are so few in number as to be near useless. Similarly, there are a number of magic spells, each associated with various elements, but their use is also limited.

The animation is bad, the scrolling is jarring, and the controls are terrible. The mere act of walking down steps is incredibly difficult to execute on the GBA pad. The background graphics are colorful, if repetitive, but the computer rendered sprites are blurry, indistinct and ugly. The music, which is comprised of traditional Japanese instruments, is a far stretch from the rest of the series, but the sound quality is decent for the system, at least.

The Revenge of Shinobi for the Game Boy Advance isn't entirely unplayable, like *The Cyber Shinobi* on the Sega Master System is, but it is still shockingly dull. Instead, try Hudson's superior *Ninja Five-O* on the GBA, which does a far better job of capturing the spirit of the series than this sub-par product.





Shinobi, devoid of any numerals or subtitles, finally hit the third dimension with a PlayStation 2 release. Developed by Overworks, it stars a new ninja named Hotsuma, who has a wickedly cool mask and a fancy red scarf that drifts in the wind as you run. There is plenty of time wasted on the plot – something about evil denizens coming from another world – and there’s some brotherly dramatics regarding Hotsuma’s sibling Moritsune, but it all just gets in the way of the action.

And it’s some damn good action. This one of the smoothest controlling 3D games ever made – Hotsuma runs, jumps, and attacks swiftly and gracefully, making the mere act of moving around an absolute joy. There’s a variety of standard ninja moves at your disposal, including the traditional double jump, although you now have the ability to grab onto almost any wall and run across it, completely giving the middle finger to that nonsense theory of gravity. Although you’ll do most of your fighting with a sword, you have a small arsenal of shirikens to stun enemies, and some ninja magic to use when needed. A handy lock-on maneuver makes it easy to spot any oncoming foes, although it’s sometimes too easy to misdirect your jumps when you’ve targeted an enemy, usually ending with a drop into a pit. Getting the hang of the controls takes awhile – you have to constantly use both analog sticks, the shoulder buttons to

lock-on, and other buttons to dash, jump and attack, but once you get into the rhythm, simply playing the game is like an acrobatic ballet for your fingers.

One of the most important elements to your victory is learning how to “*tate*” (pronounced in Japanese like “tah-tay”, not “tate” like “taters”). If you kill enemies quickly and build up combos, your sword gradually becomes more powerful. It’s necessary to form huge combos in order to bring down many of the bosses, but it’s also fun to do because it looks badass – kill all of the enemies in the area quickly enough, and you’re granted a short cutscene of Hotsuma posing before all of them, in a frozen state of death, falling apart and collapsing in a mess of blood and otherworldly goo.

Of course, *Shinobi* is damn hard. Not just “kind of” difficult, or “really” difficult, but rather “face punchingly” difficult. The first two stages are a breeze – then things go awry when you face enemies that block frontal attacks, most notably some damn ninja dogs. You’re also expected to make some pretty crazy platforming maneuvers in the later levels, and one mistaken button press will send you falling to your doom. Additionally, there are no midlevel checkpoints either, so dying means starting each level – some of which are approximately 10 minutes long – from scratch. You do have unlimited lives, and the game is generous enough to let



Shinobi

Original Release: 2002

Platforms: PS2, PS3



Shinobi (PS2)

you restart at the beginning of boss battles, but it's still incredibly tough. Also, since Hotsuma is wielding a cursed blade named Akujiki, it slowly sucks life away from him unless he's constantly killing enemies, so dawdling will result in a sad, pathetic death.

The bosses, like the rest of the game, start off simple but quickly ramp up in difficulty. In an allusion to the original game, one of the first bosses is a helicopter. Later on you fight a blind ninja in a pool of water – stay off the ground or he'll slash you to bits – and a gigantic four-armed statue that shoots lightning bolts and will happily pound you into submission if you're not careful.

But worst of all is the final boss, Hiroko, who floats in the air out of your reach, and floods the playing field with so many difficult enemies that it's nearly impossible to get a *tate* combo to beat him. He is one of the most infuriating final bosses in history, and if you can kill him, hats off to you. While *Shinobi* was released first in America, the later released Japanese and European editions included an easy difficulty setting,

although it doesn't make too much of a difference.

If you're actually skilled enough to play through the game multiple times to find the hidden bonus coins, and on harder difficulty levels, you can unlock Hotsuma's brother (and nemesis) Moritsune as a playable character. The older sibling is stronger than Hotsuma, but his life is drained even more quickly. The final playable character, the legendary Joe Musashi, doesn't suffer from a cursed blade and thus playing as him the game is much more forgiving – though you can only get him after finishing most of the game with Hotsuma before. The highest reward for finding all the coins are additional missions in a white "VR" environment, which just throws the most insane

combat and platforming challenges at you. There's also a gallery of artwork and a cinema mode for the FMV cutscenes.

It's not just the difficulty that turned so many people off the PlayStation 2 update of *Shinobi* – the graphics, while running at a smooth frame rate, are rather drab, and the level designs are fairly boring, filled with the same hallways and large rooms, all pasted with the same textures. The hyper-smooth action mostly makes up for these flaws, but many people found it to be a rather plain yet infuriating game. In spite of its many problems, *Shinobi* has the foundations for one of the best action games of the PS2 era; a flawed but underappreciated classic that's absolutely worth checking out.





The PS2 *Shinobi* was off-putting to many people, but it found its niche despite not being nearly as popular as other action games like *Devil May Cry*. Its sequel *Kunoichi* (cryptically renamed *Nightshade* for overseas release) features a ninja chick named Hibana, clad in a tight white-and-red sentai-style outfit, with a cool mask a la Hotsuma. She's missing the snazzy scarf and instead has a long bandana that trails pink shadows as she runs. Her goal is to fight against the evil Nakatomi Corporation, which has unleashed demons across Tokyo to find the shards of Akujiki, the sword from the previous *Shinobi* game.

The gameplay has been given a slight tune-up, fixing some of the flaws of its predecessor but also introducing new ones. Most of the changes revolve around making it substantially easier; there are several difficulty levels to choose from, including a "beginner control method" for newbies. There are also now quite a few mid-level checkpoints. These make dying less of an annoyance, but the stages feel disjointed as a result, since the game is constantly fading in and out to load. Since

Hibana does not wield Akujiki, her health does not deplete like in the previous game.

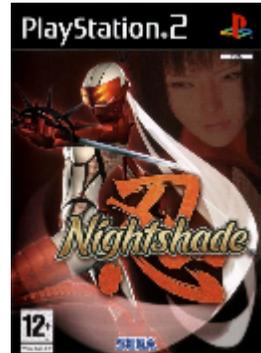
Tates are handled a little bit different now – every time you finish a combo (or grab power-ups), a *tate* meter fills up with energy. When filled sufficiently, it allows Hibana to send out a projectile image of herself, doing lots of damage when following on from a high combo. This makes boss battles much less of a headache than in the previous game, as it's much easier to *tate* them. Also new is a jump kick maneuver, which breaks down enemy shields and allows for even more crazy midair dashing action.

In spite of the improvements, *Nightshade* still carries its fair share of aggravations. With the jump kick attack there's even more emphasis on floating above empty space, and thus more opportunities to fall into pits. The graphics are still dull and repetitive, arguably looking worse in spots. And while the level design has improved, most areas still consist of the same tunnels and open rooms as before. There are a few levels that take place on vehicles, maintaining a *Shinobi* tradition. In the first

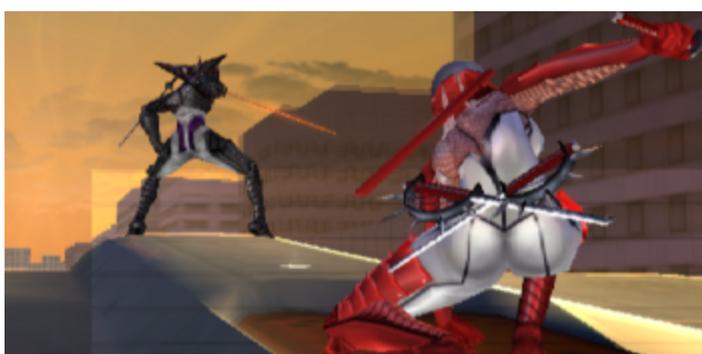
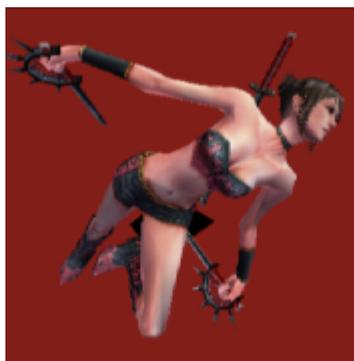


Nightshade

AKA: *Kunoichi* (JP)
Original Release: 2004
Platforms: PS2



Nightshade



stage Hibana rides on top of a jet, flying through a cityscape while attacking enemies and deflecting missiles. And while it's kinda cool to jump from boat to boat as they're being sunk by torpedoes, these stages last far too long and lack any checkpoints.

It features even more unlockables than *Shinobi* did. There are now four playable characters; the first to unlock is Hisui, another lady ninja and Hibana's rival in the story mode, who fights with an umbrella. Furthermore, Hotsuma and Joe Musashi make their return, both with their individual strengths and weaknesses from the former game. The girls also get several different costumes.



Nightshade is definitely a more refined game, but it still feels low budget. The edges that needed to be smoothed out are still pretty jagged. Also, *Nightshade* came out just a few weeks before Tecmo's 3D *Ninja Gaiden* for the Xbox, which trounced it in pretty much every way. In spite of this schooling, *Nightshade* is still rather decent.



While you can't tell from the in-game screenshots, Hibana's character design seems inspired by Chiaki Kuriyama, most well known for her role of schoolgirl Go Go Yubari in *Kill Bill Vol. 1*, but also acting in other famous Japanese movies such as *Battle Royale* and *Shikoku*.



The world of Chinese cell phone games is a curious one, filled with offshoots of popular properties, both legitimate and bootlegged. *Shinobi 2* is an officially licensed Sega product, though its ties to the *Shinobi* series proper are tenuous. The title indicates that this is probably meant to be the sequel to the mobile port of the arcade game released a few years prior, though it is a wholly original game. The Chinese title is *Meiying Renzhe: Yanpiao Xiang*, which translates to "Phantom Ninja: Flame Fragrance".

The game stars a female ninja named Honoka, both a member of the Oboro Ninja clan and a CIA agent. Her mask is a little more revealing than Hibana's. Her main weapon includes three swords with different abilities: fire, ice, and poison. Each enemy is also associated with a different colored symbol. If they are killed with the matching sword color, they'll drop orbs to strengthen that weapon. Although Honoka does not wield shurikens, the swords have projectile attacks, and she also brings out a gun for when she's hanging on ledges. She can also run straight up walls and bounce back and forth, though these abilities are rarely tested.

Some levels simply require that you get to the exit, others feature certain tasks, like obtaining a certain number of key cards, finding objects to unlock doors, or just killing all of the enemies. A few stages are simple shooting

segments, where you control Honoka on a glider. Every few stages there are also bonus levels where Honoka automatically runs forward, and you must press colored buttons to defeat oncoming bad guys.

In spite of the setting and general theme, the game doesn't play like any of the other *Shinobi* games, and feels more like a generic action-platformer. The graphical style is much brighter and more manga influenced than the previous games. The pixel artwork is generally attractive, though the quality of the animation is inconsistent. The game's music is also negligible.

As typical of most mobile titles, the game falters with its controls. The hit detection never feels right, and enemies take far too many hits to kill. Even though you can double jump, it's still difficult to land on platforms, which is troublesome considering that you take damage from long falls. A few areas take place on a moving train, and the physics make absolutely no sense.

Shinobi 2 is not particularly good but, like most of these obscure Chinese offshoots, it is amusing for fans purely from a trivia standpoint.



Shinobi 2

AKA: **Meiying Renzhe: Yanpiao Xiang** (CH)

Original Release: 2011

Platforms: MOB



Shinobi (3DS)



Shinobi

AKA: **Shinobi 3D** (JP)

Original Release: 2011

Platforms: 3DS



Seven years after the last proper installment on the PS2, *Shinobi* returned in 2011 on the 3DS. In Japan appropriately titled *Shinobi 3D*, Sega's Western divisions apparently decided to compete with *Ninja Gaiden* in naming confusion, so it's now the fourth game in the series that's just called *Shinobi* (after the original, the first Game Gear game and the PS2 release). This entry was outsourced to American company Griptonite, mostly known for licensed titles on various handhelds and download services. The team later went on to create the excellent *Volgarrr the Viking*.

Griptonite decided to use *Shinobi III* as their role model. Aside from similar gameplay, you'll also see a lot of enemies and set-pieces taken from both *Super Shinobi* games. Like those two, the new *Shinobi* opens with a stage seemingly set in feudal Japan, before it switches to more futuristic stuff; only this time, it's really set in the 13th century, and Jiro Musashi is then teleported through time into the future for unknown reasons.

Longtime fans will feel right at home from the start, as all the abilities from *Shinobi III* are back. Walking / running is now conveniently executed with the analog nub instead of double-tapping, making the game feel faster paced.

There are separate buttons for the sword and shurikens, and the throwing daggers are now drawn

from an infinite pool, although Jiro can only throw five at a time. Afterwards they recharge slowly, making their use tactical rather than a question of resource management. The four ninja magic techniques add additional shuriken-strengthening traits; the suicide bomb has been replaced by temporary invincibility and super strength, which leaves the hero with just one speck of health.

But Jiro also has a couple of entirely new tricks up his sleeve, like a grappling hook that can be shot straight upward to cling onto ceilings, and he can also slide to pass under low passages (unlike Joe Musashi, Jiro can't walk in a crouched position). The rest of the abilities are all related to sword fighting: the right shoulder button can be used to deflect attacks (similar to *Shinobi Legions*), although the timing has to be spot-on. When an enemy is unaware of his presence, Jiro can take him out silently, *Tenchu*-style. Finally, melee attacks are now chained into strings of combos, and there are several new moves, like a sliding attack, a slash that lifts enemies into the air, and a guard-breaking charge attack.

But don't worry, *Shinobi* doesn't turn into a *Devil May Cry* combo fest. The basic enemies still go down with a single stroke and even tougher ones don't last long either, but they can be juggled further to maximize scoring. Blocking an entire machine gun salvo with your sword and then



destroying your foe with a fluid counterattack just feels great, and when things go wrong you'll always know it's your fault.

The system to determine your score is quite elaborate. Striking and killing enemies will grant points, of course. Blocking attacks will also raise the score, but getting hit is punished with a deduction. A special meter can be built up with combos for even higher scores. Each additional level raises the score multiplier and makes Jiro's weapon glow brighter, but take one hit and it all goes back to zero immediately. Finally, at the end of each stage you are penalized for running over the par time or using magic.

Faithful Successor

What makes the new *Shinobi* a worthy follow-up to the classics is the brilliant stage design. The once again awesome bosses range from old favorites like the helicopter, to a huge robotic shark. The only downside is that the levels do tend to be a bit on the long side. Unlike the previous games this one is saved after each stage, and you also get unlimited credits. However, lose your last life in the boss fight and you're tossed back the beginning of the stage – unless you're playing on the easiest of the four difficulty levels, which not only makes the enemies weaker but also grants unlimited lives. "Hard" and especially "Very Hard", on the other hand, make even the original games look like child's play.

Griptonite even brought back the cool shuriken shooting-range bonus stage from the 1987 classic, although it's a bit easier to win here. Only the parts where Jiro rides various vehicles in an angled perspective are a bit dull, but nowhere near as long or boring as in *Nightshade*. In a desperate attempt to use more functions of the 3DS hardware, the surfing sequence is controlled

by tilting the handheld. By far the best is the ride on the *After Burner* jet, if only for the awesome use of that game's theme music.

Otherwise the music consists of a much more usual modern action-game rock / techno soundtrack, ditching the jazzy vibe of *Shinobi III* and the many different styles from *Revenge*. Composed by Norihiko Hibino, mostly known for his work on the *Metal Gear Solid* games, it contains plenty of "oriental style" melodies and Chinese flutes, straight out of martial arts movies.

Unfortunately, the 3D is simply not very good. There is no angle you can hold the 3DS at to prevent some object creating faint duplicate images, and most of the time one of those is Jiro himself. In 2D the game looks decent despite PSOne-era detail levels, and every area has a particularly dominant color. So you've got orange stages and blue stages and white stages, but when a stage is orange, it's very orange.

The main adventure is only about as long as *Shinobi III*, but

Griptonite packed their game with a ton of replay value, and then some. Besides the excellent scoring system, there are dozens of "achievements", which unlock a variety of different extras. There's the obligatory artwork and movie galleries, as well as a music test, with every single item hidden behind requirements ranging from "complete level X" to "beat the final boss without taking any damage". A neat little extra is the "history" menu, which spills trivia about all the previous games. But you also get different costumes and weapon replacements (including a golden axe, a chainsaw and a chicken!), and even cheats for Jiro. All beaten levels can thankfully be selected separately to hunt for missed achievements and higher scores.

There are few other classic game re-imaginings that do such a great job at modernizing a franchise while still capturing the original's spirit as effectively as the 3DS *Shinobi*. It plays in the same league as *Bionic Commando Rearmed* and *Contra 4*.



Altered Beast



Altered Beast

AKA: *Jyuuouki* (JP)

Original Release: 1988

Platforms: ARC, SMS, FC, GEN, PCE, DC, MSX, C64, AMI, C64, AST, CPC, ZX, PS2, PSP, 360, PS3, WII, IOS, 3DS



Altered Beast – or *Jyuuouki* (“Chronicles of the Beast King” in Japan) – is something of a Sega classic, owing mostly to being the original pack-in for the Genesis. Ironically the game is one of their weaker titles, though given the strength of its visuals, it’s easy to see why Sega picked it as a demonstration of the 16-bit console’s power. The game was directed by Makoto Uchida and developed by Team Shinobi, who worked on several other Sega brawler games, including *Golden Axe* and *Alien Storm*.

At the beginning of *Altered Beast* the Greek god Zeus resurrects a fallen warrior and commands him to travel through the underworld – it seems Zeus’ daughter Athena needs rescuing from the evil lord Neff (why they chose to make up their own Greek-like god rather than using Hades is unclear). It’s up to you, and potentially a friend in two-player simultaneous mode, to bash your way through hordes of demons, wolves and monsters.

The game is basically a beat-em-up, though unlike *Double Dragon* or the later *Golden Axe*, the action only takes place on a single plane. The screen slowly autoscrolls as enemies lumber forth, whom you can dismantle piece-by-piece by smashing them with your gigantic fists.

Throughout the game you’ll see white wolves, which drop power orbs when killed. When you

get one you’ll bulk up slightly, an omniscient voice will announce “POWER UP”, and your punches and kicks will be a bit more powerful. Grab another orb and your muscles will bulge even further, completely tearing your shirt. Get a third and you’re treated to a thoroughly impressive full screen transformation sequence of your human turning into their beast form.

The Beast Within

Each of the five levels features a different monster. The Wolf can throw fireballs and execute a cool flaming jump kick. The Dragon can fly, shoot lightning bolts from its mouth, and surround itself with blasts of electricity. The Bear blows petrifying breath and does a crazy spinning jumping roll. The Tiger also has fireballs, as well as a vertical jump kick. In the final level, you turn into the Gold Wolf, which is exactly the same as the first transformation but a little bit more powerful.

One of the most annoying issues is that it’s far too easy to let one of the white wolves slip by, so you lose out on a power-up. The first few times you run into Neff, he’s polite enough to refuse combat if you’re not transformed, so you get to continue with the stage for another cycle. If you mess up too often though, he’ll fight you anyway, which is a

recipe for guaranteed death if you're still a human.

The difficulty is also incredibly high. Enemies approach in droves and attack quickly, and it's far too easy to get surrounded or bombarded by cheap hits. There's almost no invincibility time after taking a blow either, which just results in even more damage. Your character is so huge that it's extremely difficult to dodge attacks during boss battles without getting hit. Unfortunately *Altered Beast* was originally designed as something of a credit feeder, so when translated to the home consoles, where you're given limited continues, it just becomes obnoxious.

Long in the Tooth

Altered Beast hasn't aged quite as well as other Sega properties – it really is all about the visuals. But from a certain mindset, it's still rather impressive, because the presentation is damn good. Various body parts fly out of the screen when you kill bad guys. Kill a gargoyle, and its body falls to the ground while its wings fly back off into the sky. Kill a Cyclops and its flesh literally falls off. It's almost humorously grotesque, especially considering there really isn't any blood or similar effects.

The voices – whether it be the opening cry to “Rise from your grave” or the nefarious “Welcome to your doom” spoken before each boss – are iconic. The monster designs are also pretty awesome, especially the early bosses, like the huge demon who rips off his



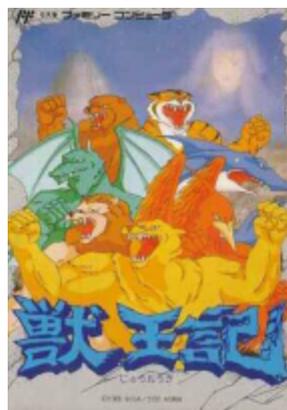
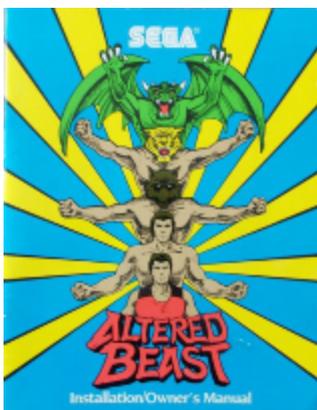
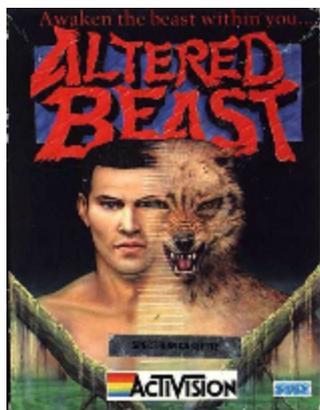
heads and showers his screaming visages down on the player, or the plant-thing which attacks with its innumerable eyes. The Chicken Leg monsters, also known as Chicken Stingers, show up in *Golden Axe* too. Even though *Altered Beast* is somewhat lacking as a game, it maintains the joyous excess of 1980s arcade titles which made them so appealing.

Sega also had an incredibly weird meta thing going on with the endings of some of their arcade releases. In *Altered Beast*, after the game shows you all of the beast forms, it reveals that everyone in the game are merely actors “filming” a “movie”, who all

take off their costumes and then share a drink.

The Genesis port is the closest to the arcade version. Some of the minor graphical effects have been toned down, particularly the scaling effects, though parallax scrolling has been added. In general it's a bit easier, though the music isn't quite as powerful. The wacky ending is also gone. Otherwise it looks and plays almost exactly the same. There's also a cheat code that lets you choose which beast to play in each level. This version is found

Above: [ARC] The transformation screen, along with some of the bosses battles
Below: Artwork from the [ZX], [ARC] and [FC] versions



Altered Beast



on the *Sega Smash Pack Vol. 1* for the Dreamcast, though it suffers from some unfortunate sound degradation. It is also available on the *Sega Genesis Collection* for the PS2 and PSP, and *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* for the PS3 and Xbox 360, all of which feature near perfect emulation. The arcade version is included as an unlockable bonus. The arcade version is also available on the Wii Virtual Console.

The Sega Master System version isn't nearly as impressive – it looks okay for the system, but the movement is extremely choppy, and there's plenty of flickering, resulting in a game that's practically unplayable. It's also missing a whole level. Additionally, this and all other console ports suffer because they lack the proper number of buttons, so you need to press up to jump, which is lame.

The PC Engine port has redrawn backgrounds that look significantly worse, and ditches all of the multi-plane scrolling. Additionally, the controls (especially the jumping) are less responsive than before, making the game considerably more frustrating. A PC Engine CD version was also released early in the system's life, but is quite a cheap port job. There's a new intro, featuring a narration over music from the arcade game.

The pictures are merely stills from the game, combined with some terribly grainy artwork, and it goes on for several boring minutes. The actual game is exactly the same as the HuCard version – they didn't even bother to improve the music. It's also incompatible with the System Card 2.0 and 3.0 requiring the



obsolete 1.0 card to function properly. What a wreck.

The Famicom version was produced by Asmik, as opposed to Sunsoft, who handled most of the Sega-to-Famicom ports. The game looks awful, with tiny sprites and ugly colors, but it's smoother than the Master System version, even though the gameplay is still atrocious. However, Asmik added three whole new levels, with three new beast forms (a lion, a shark and a phoenix), along with some cool new bosses that actually look fairly decent. The ending in this version is even stranger than the arcade version. After the staff roll, the curtain goes down, revealing the screen to be in a movie theater and... the beast and the princess are in the audience? How meta.

Beast of a Computer

There are also a variety of computer ports. The Amiga and Atari ST versions, ported by Software Studios, look and sound the most faithful, although a quarter of the screen is taken up by a status bar, and the graphics are quite dark. It's also rather choppy and the collision detection is somewhat dodgy. The Commodore 64 version, also ported by the same company and rather similar, starts off incredibly cool, with an excellent replication of the title screen and decent



rendition of the main theme. But in-game it's terrible, with sparse enemies, regrettably awful collision detection, and no music. The PC version, ported by Unlimited Software Inc, suffers from low-color graphics even in VGA mode. The main character moves too quickly compared to the enemies, and the animation is laughable, but in spite of these issues it plays acceptably. The AdLib music conversion is okay, though all of the voices are obviously gone.

All of the above computer ports pale next to the arcade or Genesis ports, but they're still miles beyond the rest. The Amstrad version looks okay, but it's impossibly slow, incredibly choppy, and basically unplayable, although the 8-bit chiptune rendition of the music isn't all that

Top-row: [FC] The new stages and beasts in the Nintendo port
Top-right: [ARC] One of the ending photos
Bottom-row: [PCE] The terrible intro from the PC Engine CD version

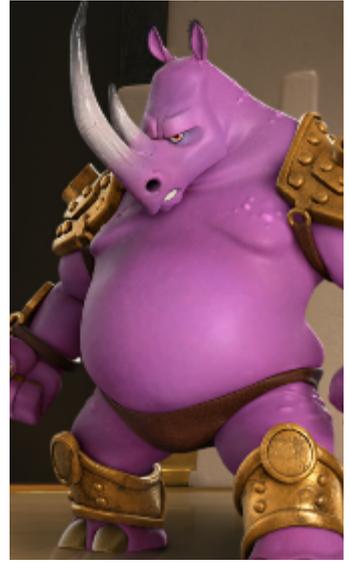


bad. The ZX Spectrum version is essentially identical play-wise, but suffers from the usual brightly miscolored graphics, while the MSX version is a port of the Spectrum version.

The 3DS version is based on the Genesis port. This was chosen over the arcade version since it featured parallax scrolling. It includes a "Random Form" mode

which randomly selects a beast when you grab an orb.

Although *Altered Beast* is hardly Sega's most well known property, it is referenced in the 2012 Disney animated movie *Wreck-It Ralph*. In the early scene where Ralph meets with other video game villains, Neff is present, in his final rhinoceros form. He does not speak though.



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Genesis



Amiga



Master System



PC Engine



IBM PC



Famicom



Commodore 64



ZX Spectrum



Amstrad CPC

Altered Beast: Guardians of the Realms



Altered Beast: Guardian of the Realms

Original Release: 2002
Platforms: GBA



Sega entered into a devil's pact with THQ regarding their Game Boy Advance games. A few of their classic properties were given to Western developers to "update" them for the portable format.

The GBA version of *The Revenge of Shinobi* turned out nothing like the game it was based on. *Altered Beast: Guardian of the Realms* ended up a little bit better – at least the developers, a small company called 3d6 Games, seemed to be familiar with the original title, even including recreations of many famous sound clips. The result is a game that's maybe a little too close to its source material.

Once again, you're a fallen soldier who's been resurrected to fight evil. This time a dark reaper named Arcanon has stolen the keys to "Realm Gates" in an attempt to command an undead army to take over Olympus. The gameplay is just like the arcade version, except there are a couple more power-ups to find, including health restoratives, power waves, earthquakes, and a strange item that temporarily sets your character ablaze.

The biggest change – and ultimate downfall – is that the levels are way too long. Each stage feels like it takes forever, with the same repetitive scenery scrolling over and over again, and there's no way to cut them short like the arcade game. Plus, there are 15 stages altogether, though you can save between them.

Admittedly, the backgrounds are pretty cool, and the levels run the gamut from Ancient Greece and Egypt to a volcanic land, underwater stage and some kind of weird cosmic outerspace level. Even so, it's hard for the visuals to have the same impact as the arcade original when it's running on a tiny screen.

The same compliments can't be paid to the sprites, which all have a crappy computer rendered appearance to them. Many of the monster forms look really bad, although there are some interesting transformations.

The returning forms have been granted new names – the werewolf is now Canis, the dragon is now Draco, and the tiger is now Smilodon. The new ones include Naga, a serpent; Terapis, a spiked turtle; Carcharodon, a shark, borrowing from the Famicom version perhaps; Cerathos, a rhinoceros; Avion, an eagle; Scorpios, a scorpion; and Chimera, a chimera of course. You can upgrade each of these forms by replaying levels to find special artifacts.

Overall, it's far from being a remarkable game, but it's good, cheap, stupid fun, as long as you play it in spurts.





Around 2003, Sega started re-imagining many of their old arcade games using 3D graphics, and publishing them on the PS2. The company decided that *Altered Beast* was worthy of a new game, and so it received a full blown sequel. It also just so happens to be one of the worst action games on the system.

The story has moved from ancient Greece to modern day America, where a weird "genome mist" is polluting the air. Only you can save the day – a "Genome-Cyborg" super soldier named Luke Custer, who is able to morph into all kinds of beasts using the power of science. In the beginning you can only turn into a werewolf (with a dash attack and a spinning jump). Later in the game you gain the power of the merman, which results in way too many tedious underwater segments. In addition there's Wendigo, a glorified yeti; Garuda, an eagle-like being said to be the mount of Vishnu; Minotaur, which is self explanatory; U.W.H., an alien or "Unidentified Weightless Human", that lets you flip gravity; plus a Dragon, Grizzly, and Weretiger.

When you're in human form, you're practically defenseless, so it's in your best interest to keep the green power meter up so you can stay transformed. Luckily, the energy it needs can be harvested from every enemy, either by killing them or jamming your fist into their body and sucking the goo out. This is all easier said than

done, because *Project Altered Beast* has a terribly designed brawling system. You can't lock-on to enemies, and the process of merely hitting an enemy is far more difficult than it should be. Sure, you can upgrade your monsters and gain more combos, but you're mostly just jamming buttons and hoping they don't drain too much of your health. Even the camera is nearly impossible to tame.

The graphics are dark and murky, and while they set the mood, they're still horrendously ugly. The only semi-remarkable aspect of the game is the overly grotesque transformation scenes. Every time you transform, you're "treated" to a movie scene of your character's limbs twisting and his flesh falling off, while his eyes burst and head practically explodes, as the body of the chosen beast takes him over completely. In addition to this, there's an extreme amount of violence, as blood flies and stains itself on the screen – which, combined with the English voice acting, makes it seem like *Project Altered Beast* was intended for a Western audience. While it was released in Japan and Europe, someone sensible decided not to bring the game to America.



Project Altered Beast
Original Release: 2005
Platforms: PS2



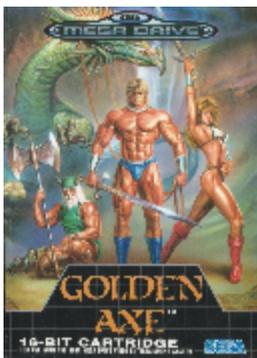
Golden Axe



Golden Axe

Original Release: 1989

Platforms: ARC, GEN, SMS, SCD, PCE, IBM, AML, CPC, C64, AST, ZX, WS, GBA, PS2, 360, PS2, PS3, PSP, WII, WIN, IOS



The *Golden Axe* series was created by Makoto Uchida (*Altered Beast*, *Dynamite Cop*). It's a barbarian themed beat-em-up that's heavily inspired by the *Conan the Barbarian* stories, featuring buff warriors in tights and *Red Sonja*-style warrior goddesses in bikinis. The series is also known for its fantastic artwork which resembles classic *Conan the Barbarian* and Frank Frazetta work, though a lot of other fantasy action games borrow from these as well.

The whole series tells a tale about a mythical weapon called Golden Axe that can grant its user great power (the Japanese characters in the *Golden Axe* logo roughly translate to "Battle Axe" – there's a sword, a hammer, and an axe hidden inside the stylized kanji). The main antagonist is an evil lord called Death Adder, a towering monstrosity of a man who wears a frightening mask just to let the player know he's evil. It started as an arcade game, which later spawned two sequels for the Genesis, and another sequel for the arcade. There are also several spin-offs outside of the main series, including two role-playing games and a 2D fighter.

There are three characters to play as: Ax Battler is a typical super muscular barbarian, and an all-round average fighter; Tyriss Flare is the bikini armor-clad Amazon, the resident hot chick, princess of the kingdom, and fantastic magic user; and Gilius

Thunderhead is a dwarf. Despite his diminutive stature he's the strongest, but has the weakest magic power. Gilius Thunderhead's initial attack is also the slowest of the three characters.

Busting Heads

The gameplay of *Golden Axe* is fast paced and typical of most beat-em-ups. There's a single attack button, a jump button, and a magic button. Repeatedly hitting an enemy using the attack button will begin a combo that the player can end by either throwing the enemy away from them, or by hitting them with the blunt end of their weapon for extra damage. It's a particularly brutal animation (for the time) that keeps the game true to its barbarian inspiration.

Pressing attack and jump at the same time lets you attack behind you. You can also dash forward by double tapping the joystick. Finally, if you run, jump, and press attack at the peak of your ascent you'll do a downward stab. This is very difficult to hit anything with, but will kill most non-boss enemies with a single strike. The striking nature of the animation is helped by the fact that, unlike almost every other beat-em-up you'll find, enemy bodies remain on the screen forever after being defeated.

Each level is also filled with little gnomes, which drop magical pots when they're hit. Although the type of magic depends on the

character, the number of pots you have determines which level of spell you can cast. All of them will attack every enemy on the screen, but the spell level will determine how much damage it'll do.

Naturally, the stronger the spell, the cooler the effect. On a low level, Tyris Flare will summon flaming ghosts to wail around the screen. At a higher level, she'll summon a dragon to breath fire on everything. It's a quick and easy way to damage bosses, and keep the crowds of enemies under control. Between each level, a bonus round is initiated, where these same gnomes come and steal your magic while you're camping for the night. You have the opportunity to get back more magic than you lost though, by efficiently beating up the gnomes for their trouble.

After these bonus rounds, each new level begins with one of the characters writing in a journal, describing their adventure into the lair of Death Adder. The game world itself is pretty cool and remarkably well developed – one village is on the back of a giant turtle, and at another point you actually board the back of a gigantic bird. The stages are filled with various kinds of barbarians, including a pair of fat bald-headed dudes with hammers known as the Bad Brothers. There are also animated Ray Harryhausen-style skeletons, who are some of the toughest foes in the game.

Most beat-em-ups grant you power-ups in the form of weapons, effectively doubling your strength. Since all of the players in

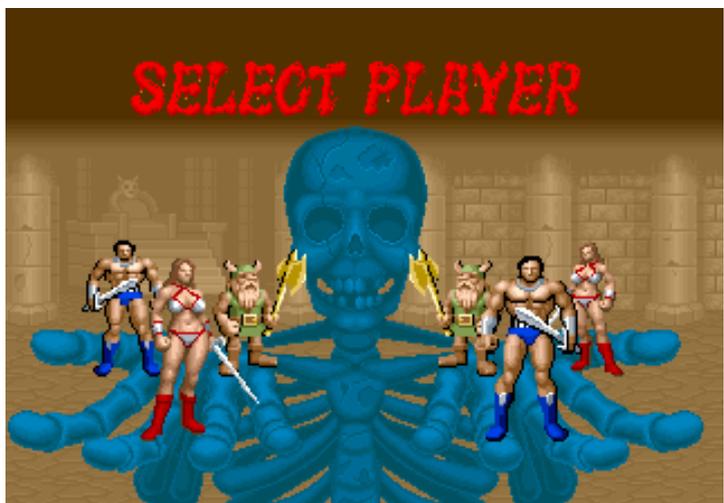


Golden Axe already have weapons, the game goes one step further and lets you ride on a variety of beasts known as Bizarrians. These include a cockatrice-like creature (known as "Chicken Leg") that whips enemies with its tail (taken from *Altered Beast*), as well as two different types of dragons. The first breathes a fiery jet of flame, the second type only appears at the beginning of level three and

attacks by spitting a fireball clear across the screen.

At the end of the game, you're also ranked via an obscure scoring system. The easiest way to obtain a high score, other than reducing the number of deaths, is by slaying an enemy, then repeatedly killing them with magic attacks before they hit the ground.

Above: Cover artwork for the Commodore 64
Bottom-row: [ARC] Tyris' highest fire magic, the entrance to Turtle Village, and the player select screen



Golden Axe



The color palette is a bit dull, mostly consisting of brown, shades of brown, and more brown. That's not to say it looks bland though – the backgrounds are well detailed, and the enemies look pretty cool, even though they're limited in number.

The music is composed by Tohru Nakabayashi (*Thunder Blade*) and resembles *Conan The Barbarian* in almost every way. There are also a ton of cool, cheesy digitized screams lifted from movies like *First Blood* and *Conan*. The most memorable one is the "OH GAWD!" sound clip from when David Caruso's character is attacked in *First Blood*. Compare this to *Final Fight*, which just had generic grunts and groans. The Japanese version has blood dripping from the letters on the "PLAYER SELECT" menu, and a brief demo where Ax Battler decapitates an enemy and sends his head flying towards the screen, which were both removed from overseas releases.

The arcade version has a totally awesome ending: it begins with the Golden Axe flying out of Death Adder's hands and then landing in his gut, causing a bloody shower. After releasing the King and Queen the scene then changes to the cast of *Golden Axe* busting out of the arcade game and into the real world. Such strange endings were not out of place in some of Sega's older arcade games – *Altered Beast* had a similarly light-hearted finale.

Far and away the best port was released as part of the *Sega Vintage Collection* in 2012, which

is an arcade perfect translation with numerous graphics options and tweaks, along with online play. This version replaces the earlier XBLA release, which suffered from muddy upscaled and filtered graphics.

The Genesis port is well regarded. Everything is scaled down (immediately noticeable is that now the bodies disappear and several voice samples are missing), but its controls are very close to the original. An extra final level has also been added after defeating Death Adder, which culminates in a battle against an extremely aggravating foe known as Doom Bringer. In addition to being far more powerful than any previous boss, he also has two (nearly) invincible skeletons assisting him. Furthermore, every time you get knocked down, Doom Bringer performs one of several magical attacks just as powerful as your own.

Some parts are censored. The intro where you see Alex die was removed and replaced by the hero explaining the story, while the "Sega Beer Barn" in Turtle Village was also removed. The few instances of blood were cut, and the ending has been changed to something significantly more generic. It also adds a mode called "The Duel", where you either fight through stages of increasingly difficult groups of foes, or engage another player in one-on-one combat. This port is two-player and was re-released on the Genesis in a package called *Sega 6 Pack*. The Genesis port also appears in emulated form on the

Windows and Dreamcast versions of the *Sega Smash Pack*, on the PS2 and PSP releases of the *Sega Genesis Collection*, and on *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* for the PS3 and Xbox 360. The Dreamcast port, like most of the games on the disc, suffers from terrible sound emulation.

Golden Axe was also released on the Sega CD, in a compilation that came packaged with the original release of the unit. It's basically just like the Genesis version, except most of the voice samples have changed, and the sound effect quality in general is worse. However, all of the music is redbook audio that streams from the disc, the only game on the compilation to do so. Oddly enough, this version is only single-player even though the version of *Streets of Rage* on the disc has two-player support.

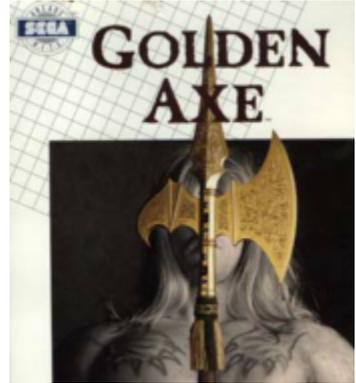
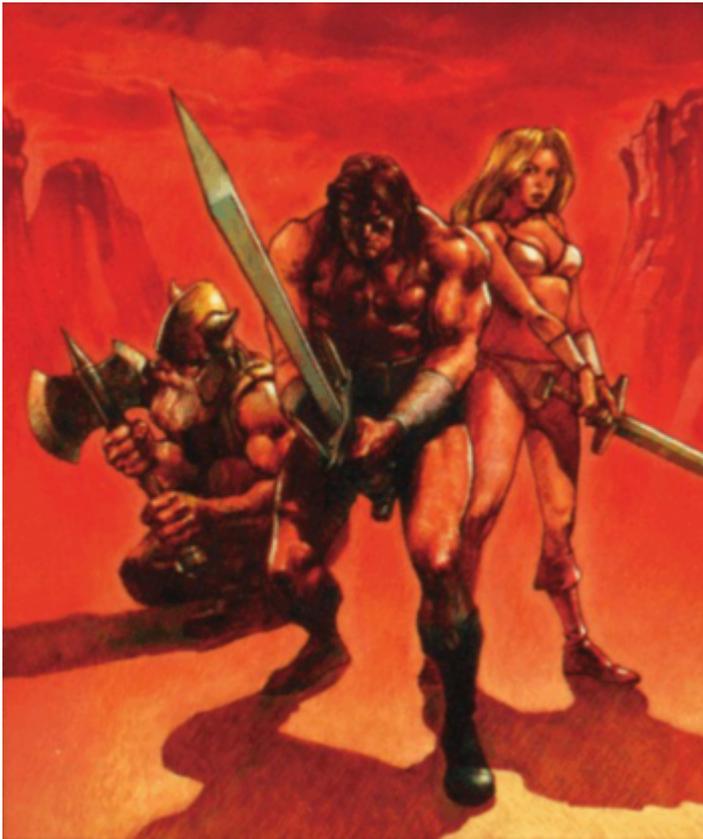
The Sega Master System version is more or less a tragedy. You can only play as Ax Battler, renamed here as Tarik, though you can choose to use the type of magic attacks during the game. Pretty much everything is pathetic – it has ugly graphics, terribly choppy animation, and awful control. It also removes the two-player option. It does have a new intro and ending not found in any other version, at least.

The PC Engine port is a shame, and another disc full of broken dreams and mediocrity



Top row: [GEN] The new areas and ending in the Genesis port

Bottom row: [ARC] The original crazy ending in the arcade version, plus the decapitation cinema removed from the world release



Pack compilation (along with *Sonic Spinball* and *Ecco the Dolphin*). This version is very poorly coded, with muddy sound and only two songs that alternate from the start to the end. The hit detection is also very inconsistent, and the proportions for the characters were changed to fit the smaller screen, so it's quite cramped. It's also missing two player mode for the main game.

Golden Axe was also one of the first games to be remade as part of the *Sega Ages* line for the PS2. The initial goal of this series was to produce budget versions of classic Sega games, but with 3D graphics. The series received a lot of flack in its early years, and most of that is due to the *Golden Axe* remake, which is a total embarrassment. The character models are terrible and the backgrounds look worse than the original game. Even if you don't mind the visuals, the game just doesn't feel right. Each sword strike gives off a huge explosion, which looks cool at first, but also obscures the action. While being able to attack vertically is nice, the combos don't feel right either. Plus, the enemies are absurdly stupid, often just walking around

from the masters at Telenet. It's completely horrendous, and almost as bad as the Master System version – miscolored graphics, a lack of background details, plus awful animation and controls. There are some poorly animated cutscenes that introduce each character's backstory, along with some terrible remixed tunes. It's only single-player too.

The WonderSwan Color version is fairly reasonable, given the limited hardware, but it's more difficult. Enemies only attack in pairs but are much, much more aggressive than in any other version of the game. It has some very colorful graphics and okay sound. Many of the moves look different cosmetically but are the same from a gameplay standpoint.

You can still run (and therefore do the running attack and running jump attack), but you can now only attack once in mid-air.

The home computer versions are of varying quality. The graphics on the Amstrad are especially blocky and the character animations are off too. The Commodore 64 version does have some excellent music provided by Jeroen Tel. The IBM PC version changes the health icons into gems for some reason, and also the character icons. The Amiga and Atari ST versions have excellent music and graphics that are roughly on the same level as the Genesis version.

Golden Axe was also released on the Game Boy Advance as one of three games on a *Sega Smash*

Top: Wonderswan and US C64 artwork
Bottom left and middle: [SMS] The character select and ending screens, with "Tarik"
Bottom right: [PCE] The anime-style artwork in the character select screen



Golden Axe



aimlessly and giving you plenty of time to damage them.

There are now cutscenes, which mostly just show how ugly the characters are, while replacing the little drawn maps and journals of the original. You still get magic bottles from beating up thieves, but you also regenerate magic

automatically by pounding on bad guys. Enemies also have names and life bars now, for all the good that does. Many of the levels have been expanded, but it mostly just results in padded, pointlessly long areas. There are nine levels in total, with a few extra locations, including a river area and a

Top row: [PS2] The *Sega Ages* version has new areas but ugly character models

basement underneath Death Adder's castle similar to the one in the Genesis version, filled with lava pits and teleporting magicians. The only real plus to this version is the arranged soundtrack, which is quite good.

Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Genesis



PlayStation 2



IBM PC



PC Engine



Sega Master System



Amiga



Commodore 64



Amstrad CPC



ZX Spectrum



Game Boy Advance



Wonderswan Color



Golden Axe II was developed solely for the Genesis, bypassing any arcade release. It's perhaps a bit *too* much like the original in practically all aspects. Gilius, Tyris and Ax Battler are back this time around, to defeat the evil Dark Guld. The sprites are new, with Tyris getting a revamped, slightly less revealing outfit, and some of the spell effects have been modified too. Most of the enemies are the same, though, with a few additions and changes.

Some of the new enemies are lizardmen, headless knights, and other man-beasts. The little thieves have been changed into midget wizards, who drop spell books instead of magic potions. The backgrounds aren't quite as interesting as in the first game, mostly castles and dungeons and such, though the hall where you fight Dark Guld is rather cool looking. However, in general, the visuals have improved a bit over the Genesis port of the original *Golden Axe*.

The movement and combos are similar to the original, though they feel a little quicker. The magic works slightly differently too. Instead of just blowing all your

spell books to cast whatever level of magic they equate to, you hold down the magic button. How long you hold it down determines how much power you use up and therefore the level of the spell which is activated. The difficulty is quite easy compared to the first arcade game; if you put this game on hard, it approximately matches up to the previous arcade release on easy mode.

The music is composed by Naofumi Hataya, who later went on to more lighthearted fare with *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* and *Nights: Into Dreams*. "Ravaged City", the first level track, is fantastic, and in general the soundtrack is catchier than the original. On the other hand, the track "Enemy Headquarters" sounds too much like a *Sonic the Hedgehog* song. The awesome digitized screams are no longer as cool, as most enemies perish with the same pitiful "Ugh!".

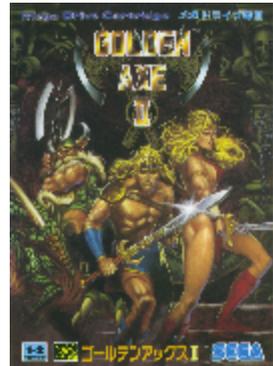
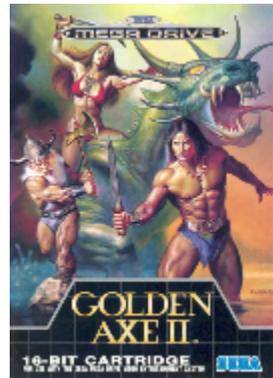
Overall, *Golden Axe II* is a decent game, but it feels uninspired and ultimately rather redundant. Some new playable characters, or at least some new Bizarrians, would've made this a more worthwhile endeavor.



Golden Axe II

Original Release: 1991

Platforms: GEN, PS2, PSP, PS3, X360, WII, WIN, IOS



Golden Axe: The Revenge of Death Adder



Golden Axe: The Revenge of Death Adder

Original Release: 1992
Platforms: ARC



Golden Axe: The Revenge of Death Adder is undoubtedly the pinnacle of the series. Released in 1992 in the arcades for Sega's System 32 hardware, it improves on the original in every way, but apparently was so good they didn't even try to port it, which is truly disappointing.

The story is typical: Death Adder has been revived, and he's again trying to enslave the world. However, there are four completely new playable characters this time, allowing up to four people to play together simultaneously, depending on the type of cabinet.

Heroes of the Axe

Stern Blade is essentially an Ax Battler clone, who has fire magic that incinerates foes. Little Trix is an imp with a trident. He uses some sort of plant magic that makes trees grow. This is awesome because it causes apples to fall to the ground that refill your life if you collect them.

Dora is a female centaur who uses earth magic, and has the lowest magic cost in the game. Her attacks are faster than everyone else's too, except for Trix, while doing almost as much damage as Stern Blade. She's probably the best character to use if you're playing through the game by yourself. Finally, Dora somehow grows human legs for the purpose of riding beasts and pulling switches.

Goah is a giant who is ridden by Gilius Thunderhead. Gilius wields the magic of death and entropy. Together they form the most powerful character, both in strength and magic, which more than makes up for their low speed.

You can now switch characters when you continue, which is a very welcome addition. There are tons of new enemies too, which include tribal men, giant squids, Grim Reaper type enemies, death knights, and ogres. The graphics and artwork are fantastic, and completely blow any other arcade competitors out of the water. The characters are huge, and everything is much more detailed, due to the System 32 hardware. There are gorgeous waterfalls, giant mushroom forests, even some scaling effects in certain segments of the game.

There are plenty of cool animations for characters being slain, staggered, and knocked away, which gives the game a lot of personality. The best is how when fighting tree men, a well-timed heavy strike will cause them to immediately shatter, their splinters flying into the screen.

There are quite a few changes since the previous games. First of all there are branching paths, which increases the replay value. There's also a diverse variety of rideable creatures which all control a little bit differently. The two highlights are a giant mantis that snaps an enemy's neck as a finisher, and an undead dragon



that's stunningly animated. There's another giant mantis that breaths fire, and a scorpion that creates an arc of electricity with its claws.

One cool factor is that you can use mini catapults and ballistae, which can be mounted on your rideable creatures and fired while moving. You can also destroy projectiles when they are fired at you. Magic works differently in this game, as instead of having different levels, you have just one awesome spell that uses a pre-set number of potions. However, you can collect many more potions than this cap. When certain character use their magic, it cuts to an extremely ruthless close-up of the faces of your enemies being incinerated or turned to stone.

Sharpening the Axe

The basic fighting mechanics are the same with a few original additions, such as a new kick attack which stuns characters. The awesome running jump followed by a downwards stab attack returns, except this time it can be done even while riding a beast. There are also crates to smash that reveal power-ups, and



switches that can be used to free captured slaves.

The hit detection has also improved a great deal. Enemies seem to deal a lot more damage though, and can stun you with almost every hit. This can be frustrating, but thankfully the game lets you continue as many times as you want, as long as you keep pumping in the credits.

The music is composed by Masanori Takeuchi (*After Burner Climax*) and Tomoyuki Kawamura (*Sega Rally 2*) and is yet again inspired by the *Conan* movies. Still, despite the higher sound quality, the overall soundtrack lacks the punch of the original. The sound effects are still cheesy and the "Oh Gawd!!" sound effect is still present.

The game's only flaw is that it's just too damn long. There are only a handful of bosses that you fight over and over again, and



while their palette changes each time, they're not even all that different from each other. They all utilize the same pattern, though each has a unique move to differentiate it from the others. There's one boss type that's especially interesting, an armored scarecrow with a scythe, but even his act gets old after a while.

Regardless, this is still one of the best arcade beat-em-ups made, and certainly shows Sega at the top of their game. It's extremely unfortunate that *Golden Axe: The Revenge of Death Adder* has never been ported outside of arcades and thus largely forgotten.

There are some minor regional changes. The Japanese version is shorter, since you skip over the path not taken when they branch, but you need to play all levels in the English version. There are also some balance changes in regards to lives and energy.



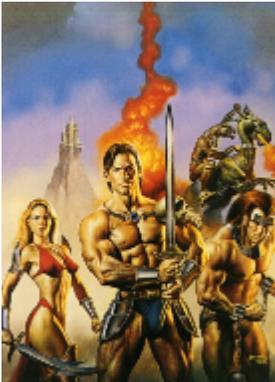
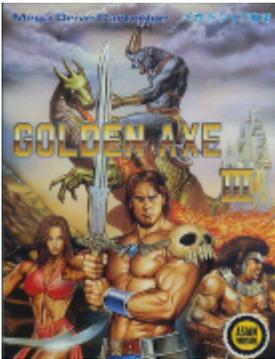
Golden Axe III



Golden Axe III

Original Release: 1993

Platforms: MD, PS2, PS3, X360, PS3, WII, WIN, IOS



The third console *Golden Axe* is largely considered to be a disappointment. The biggest reason is that gamers wanted a home port of *The Revenge of Death Adder*, and they got this instead. It's not a terrible game, but it's not quite up to par either.

Whereas *Golden Axe II* was too similar to the original game, *Golden Axe III* is too different. Technically, Gilius Thunderhead is the only returning hero yet again, although you don't play as him. Instead, he sends a handful of new characters into battle against the forces of evil. Kain Grinder is this game's Ax Battler clone, while Sarah Barn is a dancer out for revenge. Braoude Cragger is an impossibly strong man descended from giants, while Chronos "Evil" Lait is a cursed panther man. The antagonist is the improbably named Damned Hellstrike, who is also referred to as the Prince of Darkness.

The biggest change is that Sega changed the controls to make it play like every other console beat-em-up, instead of like *Golden Axe*. The weapon ranges are shorter, and it's a bit faster and smoother, but it's also lacking in distinction.

The graphics are much more washed out than any of the previous *Golden Axe* games. There's better use of color, but the artwork is less defined, giving it a grainy feel. There's some very nice backgrounds, in concept, but the brightness kills the atmosphere.

It has inherited some of the better aspects from *The Revenge of Death Adder* though, such as the branching paths through the game. Additionally, you can now double jump, and each character has two special moves.

The magic attacks are back to the original *Golden Axe* method wherein you get potions, and use them to cast spells of a certain level depending on how many potions you have. You can now dismount beasts at any time instead of having to be hit off them or completing a level. You can also gain an extra life by rescuing slaves scattered about the levels.

The music is pretty amazing. Songs like "Ancient Mound" and "Ride the Whirlwind" sound like they are for a different system. The music was once again supplied by Naofumi Hataya, along with Tatsuyuki Maeda (*Dragon Force*). The screams are similar to the arcade version, but thanks to the scratchy sound of the Genesis, they're not quite as good.

Golden Axe III only saw a retail release in Japan. It was translated and published briefly on the Sega Channel in America, although it later showed up on assorted compilations. Famed fantasy artist Boris Vallejo, who illustrated the American covers for several other *Golden Axe* titles, drafted a cover, which is similar to the Japanese one. However, of course, since the game was not released, it was not used.



Outside of the regular series of beat-em-ups, Sega also released a handful of *Golden Axe* spinoffs. For the Game Gear, there's *Ax Battler: A Legend of Golden Axe*, a strange action-RPG hybrid. The opening text tells us that the gods created the Golden Axe to bring prosperity to the land, but all it does is cause squabbles between various factions, resulting in war and death.

In order to stop this chaos, a wise king locks the Golden Axe away, hoping that no further evil will come of it. Naturally, some bad guys break in and steal the axe anyway. Apparently, the only person who can save the day is Ax Battler, who you will remember as one of the heroes from the original arcade game. Except now he resembles the sprite from *Dragon Quest* and has a stupid looking winged helmet. Other than the name dropping and occasional appearance of familiar enemies, there's little to tie this in with the arcade game.

Much of the game rips from Enix's longstanding RPG series. You walk around the overworld, looking for towns and dungeons to progress. It features the same clunky tile-based movement and awkward menu system, although there's no real equipment or statistics to speak of. While venturing across the land random encounters will pop up, whisking you to a side-view battle segment. Here, Ax Battler grows to more realistic proportions and needs to

take down a single foe. Although all enemies take multiple strikes to kill, receiving a single hit will end the fight for you, removing some of the life meter and denying you any victory spoils.

There are no experience points, but you do get magic vases, which act as a form of currency. You can find towns and enter training centers, which will teach you new skills for the combat segments and dungeons – the latter of which usually produce some kind of item allowing progress through the story. The dungeons are also side-scrolling, although they're much longer than a single screen and feature multiple enemies at once. Plus, you're not kicked out immediately when hit; lose all your life and you'll wake up at the local inn.

It's a novel concept, but it falls rather short, mostly because the side-scrolling segments are so crummy. The characters move awkwardly and attack sluggishly, with sometimes questionable hit detection. Some of the enemies pounce erratically, making it nearly impossible to dodge their attacks. The dungeon sections are worse, playing out like an inferior version of *Rastan*. And the music is absolutely appalling. Sega gets points for trying with this one, but it's far from ideal.



Ax Battler: A Legend of Golden Axe

Original Release: 1991

Platforms: GG



Golden Axe Warrior



Golden Axe Warrior
Original Release: 1991
Platforms: SMS, PS3, X360



Golden Axe Warrior is a shockingly blatant clone of the original *The Legend of Zelda*. The graphics are all extremely similar, although the expanded color palette makes for a slightly better looking game. You'll fight similar monsters, enter familiar dungeons, and solve the same types of puzzles. There are minor tweaks here and there, of course. There are 10 dungeons in total, and the first five must be completed before the second half of the map is opened up, allowing access to the remaining five.

The status screen is brought up with Button 2, with attacking mapped to Button 1. This is annoying, since you need to interrupt play to switch to a secondary weapon, but it's preferable to hitting the Pause Button on the SMS console itself. You also no longer shoot laser blades at full health – perhaps that would have been going too far. The music is similar in nature, and quite catchy, although not quite as heroically endearing.

Improving a Classic

There are now multiple save points hidden around the overworld, in addition to actual towns, inns, shops, and people to talk to, which is a nice step up from the crazy hermits in *Zelda*. There's a separate magic meter, so spells and other special attacks won't drain your money. Perhaps most importantly, you also have an axe with a wider attack range than

your sword, which can chop down trees – much better than using a candle to slowly burn everything in sight. This really could be like an alternate *Zelda II* that adhered closer to the original.

Just like the subsequent *Ax Battler*, there's very little to tie this with the *Golden Axe* series. You play as some generic little warrior who looks like a beefy dude on the title screen, but more closely resembles the protagonist from *Dragon Quest*. You'll run into familiar faces in a few spots, like Gilius Thunderhead (misspelled here as "Gillian"), who grants you his thunder magic if you give up a certain item. These events feature the classic *Golden Axe* theme, which is a nice touch. But other than the appearance of a handful of familiar enemies, like some of the Bizarrians and those huge bald guys who were prevalent in the original *Golden Axe*, these connections are very loose.

Still, it ranks next to *Power Strike II* and *Ninja Gaiden* as one of the best later SMS releases – like these, it only received a retail release in PAL territories, with limited release in North America – and it's worth checking out despite its shamelessness. The game is ununlockable on *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection*.





With the looming release of the 32-bit Saturn, Sega fans were expecting a new *Golden Axe* game with even better graphics, or at least a port of *The Revenge of Death Adder*. Instead, Sega released *Golden Axe: The Duel*, a 2D versus fighter featuring some of the characters and themes from the earlier beat-em-ups.

The character selection is an odd one. You don't actually get to play as the protagonists from the old *Golden Axe* game, instead you get to play as their relatives or one of their descendants.

The hero is ostensibly Kain Blade, a standard barbarian and a descendent of Stern Blade from *The Revenge of Death Adder*. Meanwhile, Milan Flare is a female warrior who's the relative of Tyriss Flare from the first *Golden Axe*. And Gilius Rockhead is an axe-wielding dwarf who comes from the same tribe as Gilius Thunderhead from the original.

The rest of the cast is generally rather boring too. Zoma is a creepy green-skinned wizard, and Keel is a wizard thief who kills passersby when they come near the land where he lives. Jamm is a girl who was apparently raised in the wilderness by a beast spirit, and attacks with her giant claws. Green is the last of a race that's part plant and animal, and plays like your typical heavyweight. Panchos is an inventor who is looking for the Golden Axe for unexplained reasons. He is a typical heavyweight and fights

with bombs, and seems to be vaguely patterned after the laughing bald fat dudes from the first *Golden Axe*. Finally Doc is a ninja with a katana, who otherwise seems a little out of place compared to the rest of the barbarian tropes.

The coolest aspect is the chance to play as Death Adder. He's bad and he's back as one of the better characters, mostly due to the long range of his axe. He also has a fire breathing shield which will shatter if it takes too many hits.

The action is fairly typical of versus fighters and it uses a six button setup similar to *Street Fighter II*. This being a weapons-based fighter, one might be apt to compare it to *Samurai Shodown*, especially since it uses a similar zooming camera. But it's actually pretty fast paced, and it's much closer to being "*Street Fighter Alpha* with swords". The gimmick here is that thieves periodically run around the arena, much like the older games. Hitting thieves will cause them to drop magic potions – once your magic meter is maxed out, you can enter a "super" mode, buffing your strength and allowing you to execute your character's special move for a limited amount of time. Contrary to their name, these moves aren't actually anything special and pale when compared to the awesome screen-clearing magic spells of the older games. Little green dwarves will also produce legs of meat,



Golden Axe: The Duel
Original Release: 1994
Platforms: ARC, SAT



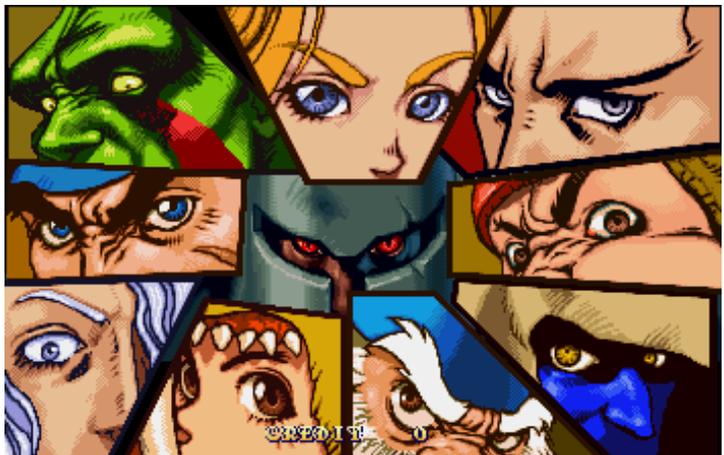
Golden Axe: The Duel

which will heal you a bit. The computer AI for the single-player mode is unfortunately quite obnoxious, even on the easiest difficulty setting.

The art is brighter than the previous games, and looks like a cross between *Conan* and anime. The backgrounds occasionally have some interesting details – Gilius' stage has singing dwarfs, Panchos' stage has a robot that is ironing some clothes, and Doc's stage has one of those bird-like Bizarrrians in the background. The music is generally pretty awful and completely forgettable, while the announcer sounds like Sega hired the same lousy voiceover guy from *Super Street Fighter II*.

Overall, it's not a complete disaster – it's just that it was designed like *Street Fighter II* or *Power Instinct*, when at the time people wanted something more. It didn't help that it's completely generic compared to the harder hitters from SNK and Capcom. Furthermore, it alienated *Golden Axe* fans, who just wanted another beat-em-up, so it pleased no one and failed big time. As such, it's often regarded as Sega's short-sighted attempt to cash in on the *Street Fighter* craze using a classic property.

Given that the arcade version ran on the ST-V hardware, the Saturn version is, for all intents and purposes, identical. There are some load times but it has enhanced music – pretty typical of Saturn releases. It was also one of the few titles that received a North American release before the Saturn died. Just note that it doesn't work at all with the analog controller – it won't even boot up.





In 2008 Sega resurrected the *Golden Axe* license for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, giving it to developer Secret Level. Their track record was not great, given that they created the ghastly-but-best-selling *Iron Man* movie tie-in game, and fans panicked that yet another Western developer would screw up a classic Japanese franchise.

As it turns out, their fears were not unfounded. *Golden Axe: Beast Rider* is a sub-par hack-and-slash sharing only the most basic of elements with its predecessors. The biggest disappointment is a complete lack of cooperative play. The second biggest disappointment is that only Tyris Flare is available as a playable character, though the others take part in the story. Gilius Thunderhead (whose best line of dialogue is: "By my balls, girl, I thought you were dead!") and Ax Battler (officially named "Tarik", perhaps in a nod to the Master System conversion) are only present in cutscenes.

Other elements from the 16-bit games are also present. Death Adder is the penultimate foe, and many of the enemies are similar to the old games. The gnomes also appear in certain areas, giving up magic and meat when attacked, but also poison in later segments. Enemies also turn stone grey after being slain, although they disappear shortly thereafter. The classic "coin insert" sound effect even shows up. But outside of these references, and some vague

attempts to weave together the storylines of the previous games – the main goal is to assemble the broken Golden Axe – the connections to the older games are fairly sparse.

The game is divided into several chapters, most of which are subdivided into several "challenges", which act as checkpoints. As expected, the side-scrolling viewpoint has been replaced with fully 3D action, putting it more in line with contemporary games. But unlike conceptually similar titles such as *Devil May Cry* and *God of War*, which use fixed camera angles, *Beast Rider* primarily relies on a user-controlled camera, which never quite feels right. This is a problem because there's no ability to lock on to foes. Tyris simply chooses a nearby enemy and attempts to follow it, although even this is clumsily implemented.

The fighting is fairly simple: in addition to weak and strong attacks, there is a "knock back" attack executed by pressing both buttons. The strikes lack impact, and everything just feels flimsy. There are approximately a dozen weapons, each of which acts the same way but has different properties. These are unlocked by finding "tribute" throughout the stages. In addition to Death Adder's weapon, dubbed the "Death Reaver", you can also obtain the Golden Axe itself in the later stages of the game. However, your weapon can only



Golden Axe: Beast Rider

Original Release: 2008

Platforms: 360, PS3



Golden Axe: Beast Rider



be switched between the levels. You also unlock various costumes for Tyris, including the classic red/white bikini get-up.

The only decent aspect of the combat is the block/parry system. Most enemy attacks give off a faint glow. Orange attacks can be parried with L1/LB, while blue attacks can be blocked with R1/RB. Green attacks can be either parried or blocked. After defending against an attack, you can counterattack with a powerful blow. This allows for a strong defensive game, one that's actually rather fun when it works. However, it can also be chaotic, especially when you're stuck in a huge crowd. The window for blocking is also way too short, making it hard to execute effectively, particularly when your view is hindered by other enemies.

As the title suggests, a big focus is placed on the variety of beasts you can ride. These include dragons and other steeds similar to the Bizarrians from the arcade game. Sadly, the famous bird beast Chicken Leg is missing, and its supposed equivalent looks almost nothing like it. Some

beasts are found being ridden by enemies, and others spawn at summon points, which can be revisited at any time. There are only five types, although each has special powers. One can, for example, breathe fire, while others can turn invisible. The problem is, all of the cool attacks drain the beasts' health, so you really can't use them too often. And while it's fun to run around and stampee over enemies, trying to control them in close quarters combat is incredibly awkward.

While *Beast Rider* has some excellent concept artwork, very little of it transfers well into the actual game. The character models are alright, but Tyris' running animation is a bit off. The environments look good from a distance, but the level design is dull. The backgrounds not only lack detail, but repeat themselves over and over. Despite this low quality, the game struggles to keep up 60 frames per second. It is, however, far gorier than the original games ever were.

The original arcade game had some incredibly stirring music given the tinny FM synth, and it

would've been awesome to see it given the full orchestral treatment. Instead, we're given boring background music. The arcade game had some of the best sound effects in a beat-em-up, from the head clunks to the wailing screams. Here, everything is dry and unmemorable. Although there are two fire-based magic spells (and one ability to summon the Golden Axe and chuck it around), they completely pale compared to the amazing graphical effects in the days of old. Forget the flame demons and fire-breathing dragons from before – here, you just shoot some fire around yourself.

But most importantly, wailing on bad guys and knocking their skulls in was straightforward but enjoyable fun. *Golden Axe: Beast Rider* can't even handle that properly. It's even outclassed by second string action games like *Conan* and *Heavenly Sword*, although, to be fair, it's a bit better than the PS2 *Altered Beast* revival, which is damning it with faint praise. The game also hints at a sequel, but after the abysmal performance of this title, it's highly unlikely.



Developed by a small team of fans from Argentina, *Golden Axe Myth* is a fan-made prequel runs on the open-source *Beats of Rage* engine, the foundation of many homebrew beat-em-ups. There have been other fan-made *Golden Axe* games using the engine, but this is the only one to feature totally original art. In addition to the usual three heroes from the arcade game, you can also play as Death Adder, before his transformation. He's slow, wields a huge mace, and casts dark magic.

There's quite a lot of content here – there are brief story scenes, branching paths, bonus unlockable characters and hidden areas. In addition to magic jars, you can also obtain symbols to increase your strength or defense, and money to purchase items in the few areas that have shops.

The mechanics have been expanded to allow vertical rolls, blocking, and additional special movies. After beating up enough enemies, you can also activate "Rage Mode", which increases your damage.

Maybe it has something to do with the huge range of your

attacks, or the cheesy blood splatters, or just the way the enemies react, but the gameplay doesn't feel much like *Golden Axe*. This is hardly a huge sin, considering *Golden Axe III* didn't even feel much like *Golden Axe*, but it's a constant reminder that this was built using a general purpose beat-em-up tool.

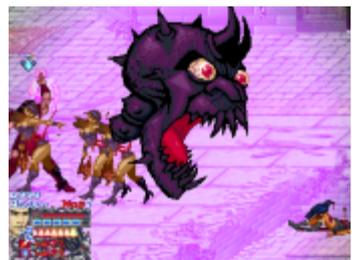
The visuals more closely resemble a late SNK release, like *The King of Fighters*, rather than the original arcade games. They're much brighter and draw more from manga than *Conan the Barbarian*, even more so than *Golden Axe The Duel* – who knew Death Adder was secretly a long haired bishounen? The music mostly consists of remixes of old songs, many of which are decent, though their modern sound doesn't quite instill the same atmosphere as the original games.

Due to the change in style and mechanics, *Golden Axe Myth* definitely feels like a fan game. Still, a decent effort.

Since the *Beats of Rage* engine was ported to the Dreamcast, you can burn an ISO for a true console experience.



Golden Axe Myth
Original Release: 2011
Platforms: WIN, DC



Fantasy Zone



Fantasy Zone

Original Release: 1986

Platforms: ARC, SMS, MSX, NES, MZ, TG16, SAT, WIN, X68, PS2, MOB, PS3, 360, WII



Sega's *Fantasy Zone*, designed by Yuji Ishii (*Flicky*, *Teddy Boy*, *Spatter*), released in 1986 for the Sega System 16 board, is heavily inspired by Eugene Jarvis' *Defender*, although it provides a unique Japanese take on the formula, one which not only refines the controls and mechanics, but adds a thick layer of overtly pastel cuteness.

The hero of the *Fantasy Zone* series is Opa-Opa, a rotund egg-shaped ship that appears to be sentient. He has a pair of wings for flying, and sprouts feet when necessary. Opa-Opa's design shares a lot with Konami's *Twinbee*, and both series helped define the subgenre affectionately known as the "cute-em-up".

Unlike many side-scrolling shooters with auto-scrolling, Opa-Opa can fly in any direction, and the stages loop horizontally. The goal is to fly back and forth destroying all the enemy generators. Once you do, you'll fight some huge boss character, then move on to the next stage. There are eight levels in total, each with adorably cutesy names: Plaleaf, Tabas, La Dune, Dolimicca, Polaria, Mockstar, Pocarius, and Salfar. The final stage is a boss rush, which culminates in the battle against the final enemy.

The controls are initially a bit tricky to get the hang of, since your ship has a sense of inertia and continues to move even after you take your hand off the

joystick. The camera often has trouble keeping up, making it difficult to see what's in front of you. Once you get over this initial hurdle, *Fantasy Zone* becomes an absolute blast to play.

Rather than simply collecting power-ups like most shooters, *Fantasy Zone* lets you buy them. Opa-Opa initially only has a simple twin gun and bombs, which are lobbed at a low arc. Every bad guy drops coins when defeated, which can be used at a shop, accessed by flying into a large red balloon. Inside, you can purchase wings and engines (speed ups), an assortment of lasers and spread guns, more powerful bombs, and even extra lives.

The primary weapons have time limits, after which they disappear, while certain bombs, like the 16-ton weights, can only be used a single time. However, the special bombs are activated with the regular bomb button, so they replace other bombs until it's used. You'll also lose all of your equipped items when you die, which is a huge pain when fighting bosses, since you can't re-equip yourself after perishing, leaving you underpowered.

There's a lot of economic strategy that comes into this. You can buy the fastest engine so you can swipe up all of the coins dropped by bosses, but doing so will often make the boss battle more difficult, since your super fast speed makes it hard to dodge with precision the many projectiles



spewed out. It's actually a good idea to buy multiple weapons – once you run out of one, a little “Select” balloon will pop out, allowing you to switch to another weapon. It's also handy for a breather, since the later stages can become filled with enemies and their numerous projectiles.

Furthermore, each time you buy something, the price of the item increases for the next time. This means you can either blow your money on weapons all throughout the game to make everything easier, or save up your cash for the final stages, in case you need it to buy extra lives. You'll want to do this, because there's no way to continue.

Beyond its unique mechanics, *Fantasy Zone* creates one of the most beautiful game worlds ever known. Its levels are filled with green meadows, shining rainbows, bright waterfalls, and enemies with big goofy grins that only seem slightly annoyed when they pelt them out of existence with your laser guns. Its huge boss characters possess their own strange looks and personalities. The first boss is a giant block of wood that vomits leaves; the second can only be described as a



frowning yellow gourd, surrounded by orbs, which pops out deadly sprouts from its top. Later enemies include a legion of deadly snowmen and a maliciously grinning brick which disassembles and reassembles itself around the screen. At the end, the final enemy, a gigantic ship similar to Opa-Opa, is revealed to be his father, a strangely tragic twist in the otherwise impossibly peppy game world.

The music, reflecting the colorful visuals, is a selection of warm, bouncy tracks with a distinctive Latin flavor. Aesthetically, it's almost impossible to play *Fantasy Zone* without feeling a sense of incredible happiness, which ironically contrasts against its rather high difficulty.

Fantasy Zone was quite popular in Japan, though never quite garnered the same amount of respect overseas, with its bright colors perhaps being too off-putting. The regional versions are practically identical – the intro and ending text is in English in both releases – though the overseas release has a different arrangement of the song “Hot Snow”.



Above: [ARC] The shop screen, and the sixth and seventh stages.

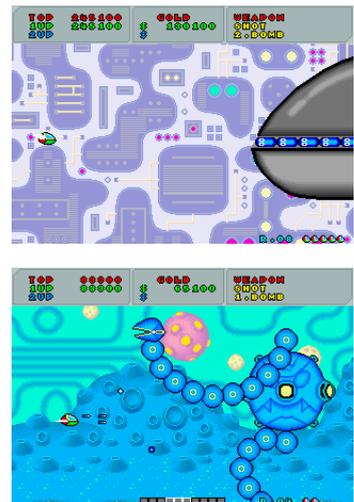
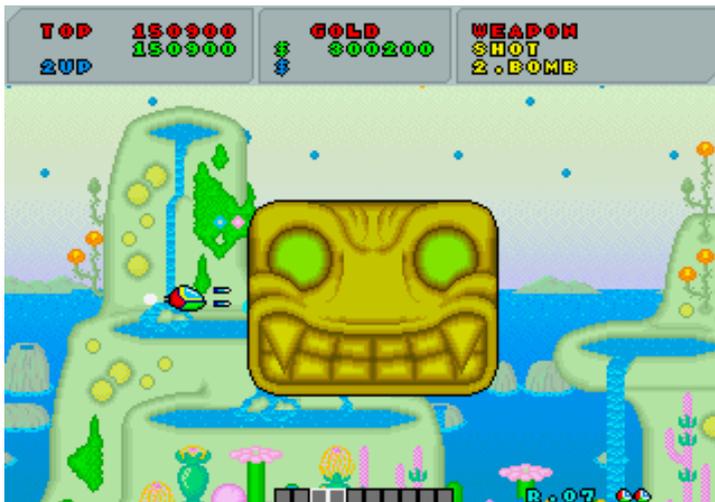
Below: [SMS] 8-bit exclusive boss battles

System Ports

The Master System port can't quite match the arcade graphics, since it can only handle 32 colors, rather than the 256 colors of the arcade version. The parallax background scrolling is gone, as is the in-game radar, plus the music is converted poorly. And yet, it captures the gameplay fairly well. Some of the bosses were too much for the machine to handle; two of them are changed completely, including the gigantic fish and evil turtle. The background also disappears for each boss encounter. There are only six enemy generators in each level, instead of 10 like in the arcade version, plus they no longer change color to reflect their health.

There are two *Fantasy Zone* adaptations for the Nintendo 8-bit systems. The Japanese Famicom version, ported by Sunsoft, is comparative to the Master System version, and still succeeds in looking decent despite being limited to 16 colors, plus it even manages to keep the radar. A few years later, Tengen released their own version for the Nintendo Entertainment System. This version has completely different graphics to the Famicom game and not only looks substantially worse, but has funky controls and lots of flickering. The version on the TurboGrafx-16 comes the closest to the arcade, but the

Fantasy Zone



parallax scrolling is also absent, and the music is pretty bad.

There were also a few computer ports in Japan. The MSX home computer version has terrible graphics and unbearably choppy scrolling. The Sharp MZ version is even cruder, with colored squares and triangles used as graphics, though it's cool in an abstract art kind of way.

The X68000 version, released in 1989 by Dempa, is practically arcade perfect, along with a few bonuses. There's a totally new, hidden level based on *Space Harrier* called Dragon Land.

To reach it, you need to break the radar down into numbers. Starting at the right side, count 1, 2, 3, etc. In each level, the first pod you need to destroy corresponds to that numbered pod on the radar. For the first level, you have to destroy the #1 pod first, second level destroy the #2 pod first, etc. Instead of just dropping a regular coin, they'll drop a letter. If you collect all seven, it'll spell out HARRIER. When you beat the seventh stage, you'll be taken to Dragon Land. There's also a hidden options screen, which lets you set "Arrange" music and uses the computer's MIDI instruments instead of the arcade synth.

The first console arcade perfect port was for the Sega Saturn, released only in Japan under the *Sega Ages* label. It includes the original soundtrack as redbook audio, in addition to a vocal song (along with a karaoke mode), and a replay mode with an

expert playthrough. There are also hidden options, including the ability to continue.

The PlayStation 2 version of *Fantasy Zone*, released in 2003 as part of the initial run of the *Sega Ages 2500* budget line (as *Vol. 3*), is fairly decent. Opa-Opa, the enemies and the bosses are polygonal models, while the backgrounds are still flat 2D albeit with some effects to make them seem 3D. The style faithfully emulates the 2D original, but the ugly interlacing artifacts diminish the appeal. Thankfully, the game plays almost perfectly regardless. The music tracks are straight from the arcade game. In addition to a fairly faithful "Arcade Mode", there's also an "Original Mode". This includes fancy camera pans at the beginning of each level to show off the polygonal models, as well as new post-boss bonus stages, where the view switches to a behind-the-back perspective. Here, the boss explodes and vomits out bonus coins, which you try to collect. Each scene lasts 30 seconds though, so they quickly grow tiresome.

By far the most interesting addition is the "Challenge Mode". This lets you play individual stages at your leisure, but allows you to keep any additional money to buy an assortment of bonus goodies, many of which affect the "Original Mode". These unlockables include a variety of super-powered weapons like the Wild Beam and 14-Way Shot, the ability to continue from the stage where you died, an option to enable rapid

Above: [ARC] More boss battles

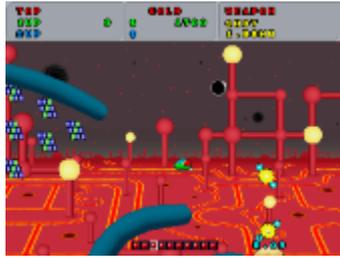
Below: [X68] The Dragon Land stage

fire, another to disable shop inflation, a Barrier like in *Super Fantasy Zone* and, most excitedly, four brand new stages: Dawndusk, Apochal, Cavian and Depooble. These all contain new enemies, new bosses, and new music, in a style consistent with the original arcade version. Unlocking these stages is mandatory if you want to get the good ending – if you play through the game normally you're treated to a real hummer of a finale.

The best way to play the original *Fantasy Zone* is on the *Fantasy Zone Complete Collection*, released for the PlayStation 2 in 2007, again as part of the *Sega Ages 2500* line. This includes perfect ports of both the original arcade version and the SMS port. The arcade version is also featured as an unlockable on *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* for the PS3 and Xbox 360.

As an additional bonus on the *Fantasy Zone Complete Collection*, the disc includes a game called *Fantasy Zone Neo Classic* (unlocked by opening the menu screen for the game, selecting the "Mark III" version, then holding





Above: [PS2] Two of the new levels, and the 3D bonus stages

right on the d-pad). It's an enhanced version of the Famicom port, but with slightly different (and better) graphics, different music synth, and some altered enemy patterns.

Fantasy Zone was also a hidden game in *Arnold Palmer's Tournament Golf* for the Genesis. After hitting the ball 100 times on the first hole without landing on the green, input the code: Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right, B, A, and you'll get to play a level of *Fantasy Zone*. The screen is cramped, and it's only a single stage, but it's a nifty diversion if you're bored of golf.

For a long time, Opa-Opa was an official mascot for Sega. He

showed up in the anime *Zillion* (along with his brother Upa-Upa), and ended up in the Sega Master System game as a power-up item. He also makes an appearance in *Alex Kidd: The Lost Stars* as one of the treasured items you pursue, as well as a Mag (a flying robot helper) in *Phantasia Star Online*. The *Fantasy Zone* theme song, "Opa Opa", is featured in the Dreamcast version of Sega's maraca shaking rhythm game, *Samba de Amigo*, and as a cheer song in the soccer game *Virtua Striker 4*. He even makes a cameo appearance in *Sonic Riders*, and is a character in *Sonic & Sega All Stars Racing*. He is a downloadable character for the

racing minigame in *Sonic Adventure 2* and appears as a caddy in the Japanese PC game *Sega Splash Golf*.

The 3DS version, called *3D Fantasy Zone: Opa-Opa Brothers*, includes the usual widescreen and 3D options. Gathering coins during the game unlocks various options. The extra bosses from the SMS version have been added. There is a new "Upa-Upa Mode" where you play as Opa-Opa's brother. Here, you can switch between weapons with the touch screen, although each shot will deplete coins, and the final boss is their mother rather than their father.

Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



PlayStation 2 (Neo Classic)



PlayStation 2



TurboGrafx-16



Nintendo Entertainment System



Famicom



Sega Master System



MSX



Sharp MZ

Fantasy Zone II The Tears of Opa-Opa



Fantasy Zone II: The Tears of Opa-Opa

Original Release: 1987

Platforms: SMS, ARC, FC, MSX2, PS2, Wii



Fantasy Zone II was designed specifically for the 8-bit Master System, and shakes up the formula in a few ways (its subtitle, *The Tears of Opa-Opa*, was dropped in the Western releases). There are, once again, eight stages: Pastaria, Sarcand, Hiyarika, Bow Bow, Chaprun, Fuwareak, Sbardian and Wolfin.

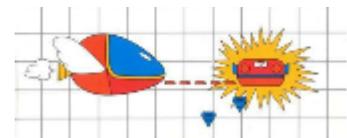
Each level is broken down into several subsections that you switch between by running into warp points. Once you've cleared all of the bases in the level, you need to track down the special red warp point to encounter the boss. This is all extremely aggravating, because there's no radar, so you tend to wander around until you find some enemy generators to kill, and hopefully remember where the red warp point is to finish off the level.

The shop balloons are gone too, replaced with stationary "shop clouds" located at specific points in each level. Each shop also carries different items, with a few power-ups new to this game, like the Shield. The upside is that you can visit the shops any time. However, when you respawn from a death, you'll be extremely underpowered until you find them. Some special power-ups are also hidden in the scenery. Additionally, there's a Power Meter, allowing you to absorb more than one bullet before dying; directly colliding with foes will still kill you instantly though, until you find some items to extend it.

The background designs are even crazier than before, and show off some of the most colorful graphics on the Master System. Still, while the graphics are great for the system, it's a huge step down from the arcade version of the first game. Furthermore, the music is a chirpy, terrible mess, which is especially a shame after the original's catchy tunes. The FM synth soundtrack in the Japanese release is easier on the ear, but still isn't very good.

Fantasy Zone II was also released in the arcades on the System E board, although it's practically identical to the SMS version, with a few changes. It replaces the "Power" meter with a radar. However, even though it shows the locations of the pods, it doesn't highlight where you are. Each level is also timed, with a little "life" indicator that slowly counts down to zero. You can only take a single hit before dying, though any seconds left when completing a level will generate extra gold.

Fantasy Zone II was also ported to the Famicom and MSX2. Both are quite inferior to the SMS version, with terrible graphics, even worse music, constant slowdown, and in the case of the MSX2 version, choppy scrolling.



Fantasy Zone II DX

charged for about a second before they can be dropped. All of the bosses are taken from the original *Fantasy Zone II*; they're not exactly new, but their attacks have been changed so they're like older siblings of the bosses from the first *Fantasy Zone*. Each stage opens with a unique English-y introduction text, similar to the one that displayed in the first level of the first game.

The soundtrack technically consists of updated music from *Fantasy Zone II*, but it's all been so heavily rearranged you can barely tell. It uses the same FM synth as the first game, and is provided by veteran shooter soundtrack composer Manabu Namiki (*Metal Slug 6*, *Dodonpachi Daioujou*, the Konami *ReBirth* series, many Cave games). There are more weapons this time around too, including the eponymous "Drop Tears", which are required for the best ending. You even get the option to buy speed enhancements after getting killed by a boss, fixing one of the most aggravating aspects of the series. This might actually be the best *Fantasy Zone* yet.

The 3DS version, released in 2014 under the name *Fantasy Zone II DX Double*, includes the same widescreen view and 3D effects as the first game. It also includes a new score attack mode called Link Loop Land.



Screenshot Comparisons



Sega Master System



Famicom



PlayStation 2



MSX2



Fantasy Zone: The Maze is a strange amalgamation of *Fantasy Zone* and *Pac-Man*. It's a concept that actually works out quite well. Each of the game's seven levels are patterned after stages from the original *Fantasy Zone*, and each consists of a small number of single screen mazes.

Instead of dots, Opa-Opa gobbles up coins, which can be used to purchase items in the shops littered about. Although Opa-Opa is initially defenseless, you can grab an assortment of guns and lasers, as well as items similar to *Pac-Man*'s power pellets that make Opa-Opa invulnerable for a limited amount of time.

Endless Waves

At the center of the screen is an enemy generator, which will continuously pump out enemies to replace any that you kill. Although these generators cannot be destroyed, you can glide over to reset their energy, thereby preventing further small enemies from appearing. Various score power-ups also occasionally

appear, including *Flicky*, the bird from the Sega arcade game of the same name.

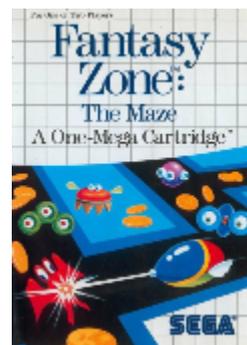
The Maze is an interesting game, but isn't quite as fun as the proper entries in the series. The action isn't nearly as hectic, and the panic felt in *Pac-Man* is mostly allayed thanks to the prevalence of weapons. Purely as a score attack game, though, it's rather fun to challenge yourself to beat boards faster and get more points. The simultaneous two-player mode is a welcome addition too. And the renditions of the famous *Fantasy Zone* themes are much better than the original SMS port.

Arcade Port

Like *Fantasy Zone II*, this game was developed for the Master System, but also released in Japan for the Sega System E arcade board. Again, since this hardware is similar to the SMS, other than some slightly enhanced graphics and music, and altered stage layouts (the arcade version fits double the amount of coins in each level), they're mostly the same.



Fantasy Zone: The Maze
AKA: Opa Opa (JP)
Original Release: 1987
Platforms: SMS, ARC, PS2



Galactic Protector



Galactic Protector
Original Release: 1988
Platforms: SMS, PS2



Galactic Protector is another spin-off that has little to do with *Fantasy Zone*, but features Opa-Opa in the starring role.

Your task is to spin around the planet in the middle of the screen, firing at the pieces of debris that come floating across the screen. It's a tough job, but two players can play as once, with the second player taking on the role of Opa-Opa's blue colored brother Upa-Upa.

Your ships can only take one hit before being destroyed, but you need to make sure to protect the planet too. It can only take so many hits before blowing up, which instantly ends the game. The most amusing aspect is the range of facial expressions on the planets, which express emotions from "jolly" to "angry" to "extremely worried".

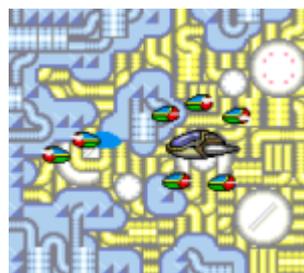
It's a bit simplistic, and some additional weapons would've greatly added to the variety. It's also pretty difficult, especially in single-player mode, so expect to

see Earth blown up over and over again. It's also very light on content. Even though there are 25 stages, there are only three different planet graphics. The shattered wreckage of Opa-Opa on the Game Over screen is also quite depressing, though the picture of him enjoying a tropical vacation at the victory finale almost negates this dark image.

This game was only released in Japan and requires the use of the analog paddle controller. Some believe that this was meant to be released overseas under the name *Cube Zone*, given that the description on some Sega sales fliers seems to match the description of this game, but no other solid evidence has been found. Perhaps, like *Woody Pop*, it was planned but canceled when Sega decided not to release the paddle controller outside of Japan.

Other than hunting down the extremely rare paddle controller and buying a Mark III, the best way to play it is on the *Fantasy Zone Complete Collection* for the PS2. However, the analog control is still pretty fidgety and not quite the same thing.





Unlike most Game Gear ports, *Fantasy Zone Gear* isn't just a miniaturized version of the arcade/SMS game. Rather, it's a completely new game. It was developed by outside company Sanritsu, who collaborated with Sega on many other projects during the era.

Little Things Lost

Since the game was developed from the tiny Game Gear screen, *Fantasy Zone Gear* removes the status bar from the playing field, which means there's no radar, or even any indicator of your weapon ammunition. In spite of this, the game still feels rather cramped. From a technical standpoint, it feels poorly programmed, as the animation and movement is distressingly choppy. The controls are also a bit floatier than the other games, so it's way too easy to accidentally stumble straight into an enemy.

There are a handful of new weapons, like the homing shot, as well as an auto-fire option. You can also pause the game and

select between your power-ups, which is handy. There are seven levels total, including the usual final boss rush, though none of them are named.

The visuals are fantastic too. While not as full of pastel colors as its predecessors, the backgrounds are much more detailed than the Sega Master System games. Additionally, the soundtrack is also relatively well done.

For what it is – a way to play a *Fantasy Zone* game on the go – *Fantasy Zone Gear* is decent enough, but its awkward controls and cramped screen reduce it to being one of the lesser titles of Sega's series.

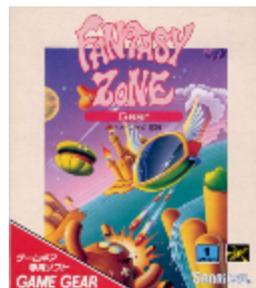


Fantasy Zone

AKA: **Fantasy Zone Gear: Opa-Opa Jr. No Bouken** (JP)

Original Release: 1991

Platforms: GG, PS2



Super Fantasy Zone



Super Fantasy Zone
Original Release: 1992
Platforms: MD, PS2, Wii



Fantasy Zone II and *Fantasy Zone Gear* weren't bad by any means, but they both ran on hardware quite inferior to the original arcade game. Released in 1992, *Super Fantasy Zone* for the Genesis is the first true sequel that not only matches, but surpasses its predecessor in aesthetics, with gorgeous graphics and an insanely catchy soundtrack. It was developed by Sunsoft, who had previously worked on the Famicom port of the first game.

During the entire time that you play, you forget about the Genesis' limited 64-color palette and marvel at the pastel glory. The music is some of the best composed for the Genesis. The opening cinematic story tells a traumatic story, as Opa-Opa sets off to destroy the Menon empire to avenge his father's death.

For the most part, the game is exactly the same as the original *Fantasy Zone*, just with new enemies and levels. These include Picknica, Kazarne, Niagro, Risscave, Grandiuss, Le-Picker, Aflouricious and Menone. There are a fair bit more weapons to buy this time around, including the incredibly useful four-way homing missiles. Also, special weapons (like the classic megaton weight)



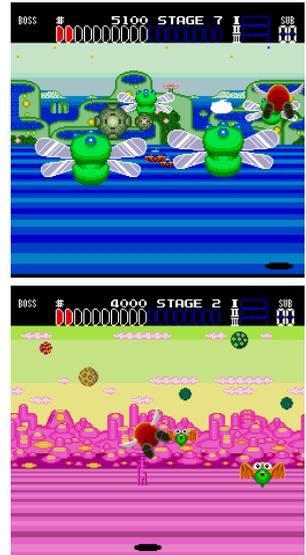
now have their own button, so you can save them for the right moment. There are certain "gimmick" items you can purchase for some stages. One level is completely cloaked in darkness, so you'll have a much easier time if you buy the headlights. Another has electrified floors, requiring that you purchase boots if you want to land on the ground.

Since this was developed specifically as a home console release, the difficulty is tuned so it's challenging without being frustrating, and the rapid fire option is most definitely welcome. Even the scrolling has been fixed so it's easier to see what's in front of your ship.

One of the coolest parts of the game is the tie-in with one of its Sega arcade brethren – the final stage has a checkerboard pattern on the floors and ceilings, an homage to *Space Harrier*. You can also enter a secret code that lets you play the game with the soundtrack from the original *Fantasy Zone*.

Unfortunately, the biggest travesty of *Super Fantasy Zone* is that it was never released in America, only in Japan and Europe.





Space Harrier and *Fantasy Zone* were always sort of related – both had cracked out character designs, both referenced the same world (the “Fantasy Zone”, of course), even the high-score themes are similar. So someone took the natural step and combined them into one mega game, *Space Fantasy Zone*. All of the levels and bad guys are favorites taken from both games, and some of the *Space Harrier* baddies have been given cutesy makeovers.

The gameplay is exactly like *Space Harrier*, although you have a shield meter and only one life. Shooting enemies will give you gold, while taking out whole waves yields even more money. In between stages you can buy tons of different power-ups at a store cleverly named “Weponalds”, including several kinds of speed-ups, power shots, extra weapons, shields, bombs, and options. You can also spend your time poking the chest of the store clerk, if you feel so inclined, or order a smile.

The graphics capture the pastels of the original game, although since the PC Engine can’t handle scaling, the movement isn’t

as smooth as it could be – it’s about on par with *Space Harrier II* for the Genesis. The main theme is a combination of the famous songs from both games, although the rest of the music, alas, is disappointingly banal.

Not For Consumption

It’s fun, although a somewhat short game (only nine short stages, compared to the 18 of the *Space Harrier*). Which makes sense, considering that the game may be incomplete. The biggest tragedy is that *Space Fantasy Zone* never saw an official release. It was on release lists, it was advertised, with designs by famous artist Satoshi Urushihara (*Plastic Little*, *Ragnarock City*, *Legend of Lemnear*), but it was ultimately canned. No one knows why for sure. Thankfully, a beta version was leaked to the internet, so it can easily be played.

However, be careful of bootlegs being sold online. Some fans have created replications of what the package should have looked like had they been released, but these are not authentic.



Space Fantasy Zone

Original Release: unreleased
Platforms: PCE



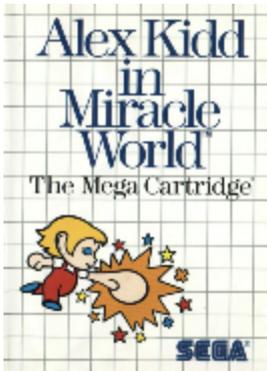
Alex Kidd in Miracle World



Alex Kidd in Miracle World

Original Release: 1986

Platforms: SMS, PS3, X360, Wii



Sega was a rather pitiable entity when it came to the Master System. They had no market share, their advertising was almost non-existent, and everyone was busy neglecting homework to play Nintendo instead. However, those who stuck with the underdog console found solace in a few key franchises. One of these was *Alex Kidd*, the closest Sega came to having a Mario-style mascot until *Sonic the Hedgehog* showed up, years later.

Sega credits *Alex Kidd* to an individual name Osahru (Ossale) Kohta, although that's actually a pseudonym for Kotaro Hayashida, who also worked as a scenario writer for *Phantasy Star* and the *Phantasy Star II Text Adventure* games, as well as other Master System titles like *Fushigi no Oshiro Pit-Pot*, *Woody Pop*, *Zillion*, and *Fantasy Zone*.

Alex's most prominent features are his large ears, red jumpsuit and gigantically enormous sideburns. He is, in some ways, designed to look sort of like a monkey. Although he looked appealingly cutesy in the original Japanese artwork, all of the Western boxes seemed to make him look like an obnoxious, fat, freckled third grader, which probably played a role in dooming him to obscurity.

Though there are six *Alex Kidd* games, they're almost all entirely different from each other – only *Miracle World*, the first Master System game, and

Enchanted Castle, the first (and only) Genesis game, share similar designs and gameplay.

Alex Kidd is often compared to Mario, since he was the competitor's only mascot at the time, but their games couldn't be more different. While Nintendo's game is a straight-up platformer that could feel right at home in the arcades, *Alex Kidd in Miracle World* is a much more ambitious game. Whereas *Super Mario Bros.* was simply about running from left to right, jumping over things and occasionally looking out for secret stuff, *Miracle World* feels like a much fuller adventure.

Alex's first adventure takes place on the planet of Aries where, as the hero and the lost member of the Radaxian royal family, he has spent many years on the top of Mt. Eternal honing his block-breaking skills. He halts his studies to save his brother Egul, who has been captured by the evil king Janken. (Alex's brother shares his name with the hero of *Pit-Pot*, one of Hayashida's previous games, and is sometimes spelled Egle or Iglul.)

There's actually quite a bit of backstory laid out with a number of secondary characters mentioned in the manual; they only appear briefly in the game, and are mostly members of the Radaxian royal family. There is a surprising amount of text compared to other games of the time, certainly much more than "Your Princess is in Another Castle", at least.

For starters, it breaks free from the repetitive four-level cycle of *Super Mario Bros.* to create a much more organic experience. Most levels scroll horizontally, as is typical, but a handful scroll vertically downwards, and the few castle stages actually flip-scroll in all four directions. Throughout the adventure you play through mountains, forests, oceans, towns and other varied locales. A map screen at the beginning of each stage and on the pause screen shows your progress through the game's 17 levels.

Alex's trademark power is the ability to break rocks with his enormous fists (dubbed the "Shellcore" technique). There are many "star" blocks spread within each stage, most of which contain bags of money. Cash is not directly for extra lives, but instead acts as currency to buy a variety of power-ups in shops found around each stage. Certain blocks marked with question marks also give specific items, one of the most important being a bracelet that lets you shoot power waves. This is extremely useful, because Alex's punches are rather short ranged and leave him susceptible to danger. However, these same blocks can also spawn deadly magicians, who ruthlessly hunt Alex down unless he can outwit or outrun them.

Several stages also allow you to purchase vehicles to make life a bit easier. These include a "sukopako" motorcycle, which can plow straight through rock; a "pedicopter", a small personal helicopter activated by pedaling; and a "suisui" speedboat. Unfortunately, these will explode if you either take a hit or run into an obstacle, forcing you to play the rest of the stage on foot.

Eat Paper, Rock Head!

Major boss battles don't occur normally like in other games. Instead, the big showdown sport of *Miracle World* is a match of rock-paper-scissors (known as *janken* in Japan). The ridiculous looking enemies actually have hands for heads – their names are Rock Head, Paper Head and Scissor Head, obviously. Win, and you proceed. Lose, and you die. Actually, even if the bad guys



lose, they're very sore about it and tend to attack anyway. When you first play, winning these battles is a matter of luck. However, if you manage to find a certain hidden item, you can read their minds. They still try to trick you, of course, and naturally if you don't find this hidden item, you're kinda screwed for the remainder of the game. There are set patterns for all of them, but they change unpredictably if you lose, which can drastically screw you up.

While it's a remarkably constructed game, *Alex Kidd in Miracle World* is brutally difficult. Alex can only take a single hit before dying, but that's the least of his worries. Some of the later levels are filled with particularly nasty platforming challenges, requiring intense precision to dash or swim through narrow corridors without bumping your head on a bed of spikes. The slippery controls don't help matters either. Thankfully, as long as you have spare cash, you can continue through the use of a code. Plus, the left Button 1 on the controller jumps, and the right Button 2 attacks, making it the opposite of the later established norms. Still,

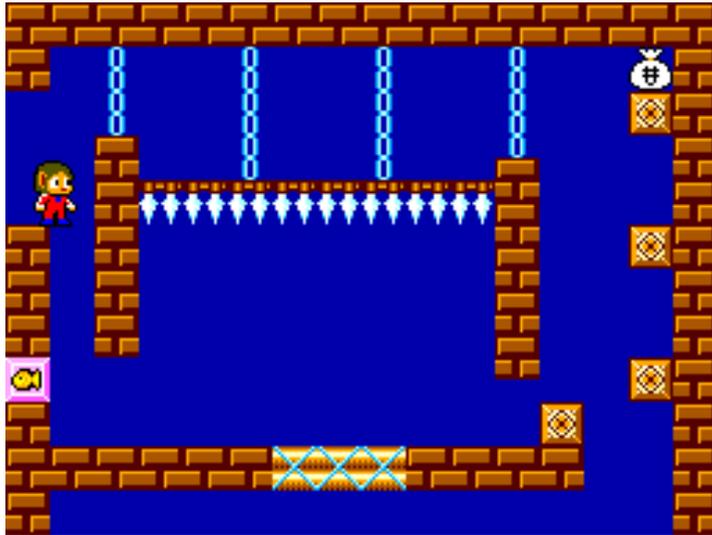
the graphics are colorful and distinct, and the main theme is catchy (composed by 1980s Sega mainstay Tokuhiko Uwabo), even though it certainly could've used more songs throughout the rather long adventure. It has all the makings of a classic, though lacks the straightforward "pick up and play" feel of Nintendo's more famous games, making it harder to get into if the player has little patience for *Alex Kidd's* quirks.

Want Rice With That?

There are minimal differences between regional versions. At the end of each level is a rice ball, which Alex then eats as the map screen pops up. Also known as "onigiri" in Japan, these are bits of rice clumped together and wrapped in seaweed, usually with some kind of fish or other filling. Later revisions of *Miracle World*, built into the Sega Master System II, actually have Alex eating a hamburger instead. This version also swaps the buttons to a normal configuration. On another note, the currency used in *Miracle World* is a U with two lines through it, called a Baum. The



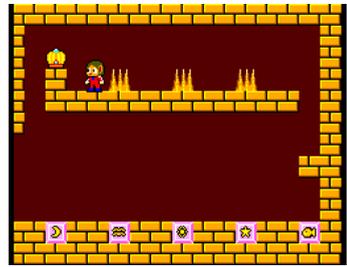
Alex Kidd in Miracle World



symbol for Japanese yen is a ¥, or a Y with two lines in it. This symbol also shows up the Master System game *Zillion*.

Despite the numerous Sega compilations and remakes, *Alex Kidd* has barely been featured in any of them. Outside of a handful of Virtual Console releases for the Wii, the only major package comes in the form of the *Sega Vintage Collection*, named *Alex Kidd & Co.* The only game in the collection starring Alex Kidd is the first one, *Miracle World*, as the other two games are *Super Hang-On* and *Revenge of Shinobi*. They're all just ROM dumps, but the emulation, developed by M2, is excellent, and it includes versions from all territories.

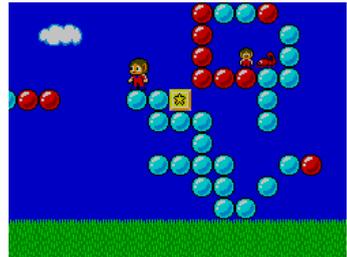
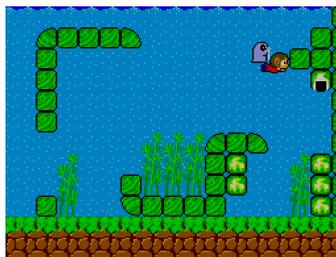
When you meet him, he details the tragic story of his fall from grace – at first, he was strong competition for Nintendo and Mario (both names bleeped out), but was later forgotten in favor of Sonic the Hedgehog. Instead of starring in video games, he's now forced to work retail at one of Sega's shops. He gives the player character an inspirational speech about moving forward. He also laments that he's 38 years old and still looks like a kid. A very sad, but hilariously tongue-in-cheek look at Alex Kidd.



The Tragic Downfall

Segagaga is a brilliant Japanese Dreamcast game where you get to take control of Sega to help it win the video game war (naturally, this was before they bowed out of the console race back in 2001). At one point, you run into Alex Kidd.

Above & Below: [SMS] *Miracle World* has a diverse variety of stages
Right: [DC] Alex Kidd in *Segagaga*





Alex Kidd: The Lost Stars is a bit of a departure from *Miracle World*. Many of the more unique elements have been ditched in favor of a more straightforward move-right-and-jump-over-stuff approach. As a result, it feels even closer to *Super Mario Bros.* than the original. The game originated in the arcades on the Sega System 16 board (and was released very shortly after *Miracle World* in Japan) but was later ported to the Master System.

The goal this time is collect the 12 Zodiac signs. You can no longer punch anything, and there are no rocks to be broken, nor any cash to grab. It's actually quite similar to Westone's *Wonder Boy*, particularly in that there's a timer on the screen.

The arcade version keeps track of lives, making it quite a bit more difficult compared to the Master System port. On the Master System you receive unlimited lives, but getting hit or falling down a pit will reduce the timer or send you back a few screens. The toughest bits in both versions are the end-of-level encounters, requiring that you make it through a single screen while various enemies attempt to screw you up. To make things easier you'll find power-ups which let you jump higher, restore your timer, or give you a limited amount of "shadow" shots to destroy most enemies with.

The graphics are bright, colorful, and full of detail, while

the music, provided by another relatively famous Sega composer, Hiroshi Kawaguchi, is extremely catchy. Despite the smaller color palette, the Master System version is actually brighter and more attractive overall.

Other than the issue with the lives, the biggest difference between the arcade and Master System release is that the arcade version offers two-player simultaneous play, with the second player taking on a girl named Stella, who is otherwise never seen in any other game in the series.

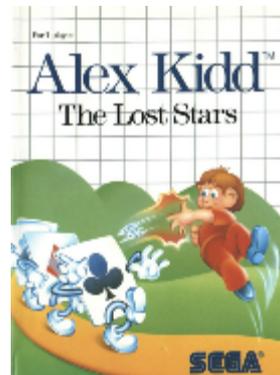
The first stage is a land of toys, set up to look like a kid's stage play, complete with a background that appears to have been painted on a hanging banner. Dogs attack by barking out the letters "BOW WOW", evil *Alice In Wonderland*-style playing cards march forth, and the landscape is built of bright play blocks.

The rest of the levels include a robotics factory, an odd horror-themed level, a prehistoric area, an outer space stage, and the innards of some gigantic creature. It's a creative bunch of levels, to say the least. The single genuine pitfall is that the game is really only seven stages long. You have to play through each of these levels twice to beat the game entirely, although the second time things are a bit more difficult. Compared to the 17 stages of its predecessor though, it's kind of a bummer.

Alex Kidd in Miracle World



Alex Kidd: The Lost Stars
Original Release: 1986
Platforms: ARC, SMS, Wii



Alex Kidd: The Lost Stars



had some crazy enemies, especially with the bad guys shaped like hands, but *Lost Stars* actually one-ups it. One of the bosses is a disembodied bear head with a party hat, who attacks you with musical notes from his trumpet. In the Halloween level there's a punk rocker who shoots skulls out of his ass. If these things weren't creepy enough, Alex lets out a terrible blood-curdling digitized scream whenever he gets hit. There's other bits of neat digitized speech too, like the disembodied voice that starts off each stage saying "FIND THE MIRACLE BALL" (one of the Miracle Balls is actually Opa-Opa from *Fantasy Zone*). The arcade version even welcomes players with "THE CUSTOMER IS KING!" when a credit is entered.

The Lost Stars gets a bad rap because it's such a huge step back from the ambitious *Miracle World*, but consider it in its original arcade setting, and its being positioned as a straight-up platformer makes perfect sense. *The Lost Stars* is full of enough weird enemies and memorable landscapes to be quite likeable.

Above: [ARC] Swimming!
Right: [SMS] The home port actually has more colorful graphics



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Sega Master System



Sega obviously has no shame in whoring itself out. The plot of *Alex Kidd: High Tech World* is to guide Alex to an arcade called High Tech World, named after their own real-life chain, to play the latest Sega games.

This game, the third released in North America and Europe, is again entirely different from its predecessors, being half puzzle-solving adventure and half action. It's also very odd, given that events take place in a Japanese-style castle, featuring a totally different cast of characters (besides Alex) from before.

Throughout the whole game you're also on a time limit – if you don't reach High Tech World by 17:00, you lose. Alex spends the first level exploring the castle, following vague clues to find eight map pieces. There is absolutely no action in these segments, as you cannot jump or attack, and can only walk around the castle, exploring the rooms and solving puzzles. Some of the map pieces are easy to find, while others require obtuse solutions. At one point you need to take a test given by your tutor, who quizzes you about the levels in *Space Harrier*, along with history and math questions. Another map piece requires that you pay attention to the in-game clock and visit specific rooms at specific times.

Although there are no enemies in the castle, per say, there are a number of incredibly stupid ways to end the game. If

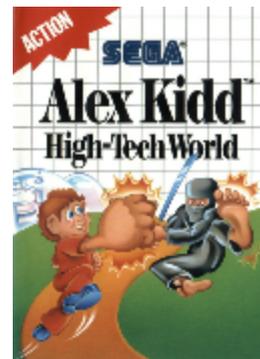
you try on a cool looking piece of armor, you'll become immobilized and lose. One map piece you find is burnt – if you grab it without first spraying on some "restorer powder", it'll crumble and, again, the game will end. There's one particular set of stairs that looks innocuous, but if you walk down you quickly discover that it's broken, so you'll fall and, once again, game over. Although there are passwords, they only save progress between the four major areas, so if you perish in the first castle segment – by far the longest part of the game – you need to restart the whole thing.

The second level is a very poorly implemented action scene. Ninjas pop up everywhere and you need to defend yourself with throwing stars. A single hit will kill you, but at least this segment is short. Also useful are gold coins found throughout, which are used in the next area.

The third level is an adventure scene similar to the first area, except much shorter. The ultimate goal is to get past the gate guard and leave the town. There are three ways to accomplish this – either run a few errands to raise enough money to bribe the guard; pray at a temple 100 times (!!) to get a travel pass, which takes several minutes and is a very aggravating solution; or simply happen to be at the right place at the right time for a random citizen to lend you their pass. Though there are many



Alex Kidd: High-Tech World
 AKA: **Anmitsu Hime** (JP SMS)
 Original Release: 1988
 Platforms: SMS



Alex Kidd: High Tech World

shops and many people to talk to, they are mostly pointless.

The game over sequences here are even more hilarious than in the castle. You can actually find a weapon in town, only to get arrested as a criminal if you try to leave. You can try to forge a travel pass but get busted for counterfeiting. Or most brilliantly, you can eat too many hot dogs and become "dizzy".

Once you've finished up all of that, you're in for another ninja-filled action stage, which is just as bad as the previous one, except this has some annoying snake and tanuki enemies.

Although it's cool that Sega tried to blend genres with this entry, both segments are so poorly done that it's disappointing.

There's a reason why this is so completely different (and terrible) compared to the others – it wasn't originally an *Alex Kidd* game. In Japan, it's known as *Anmitsu Hime*, and is based on a mid-1980s anime, which in turn was based on a manga dating back to 1949, about a tomboy princess in feudal Japan. This makes sense, given that the castle and town levels are distinctly Japanese, as are all of the secondary characters.

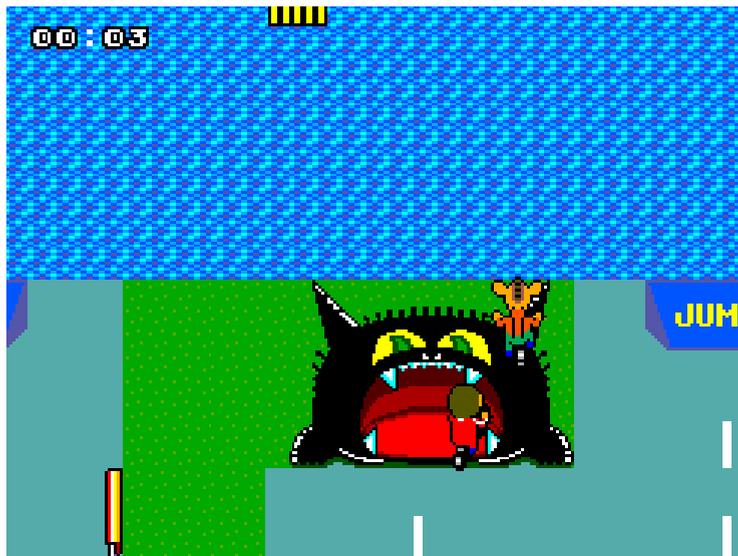
Instead of adventuring to find an arcade, Anmitsu is trying to visit a new bakery. All of the sprites have been replaced in *Alex Kidd: High Tech World*, and some dialogue rewritten, though the attempts to westernize it are sloppy at best. The ramen stall

from *Anmitsu Hime* has been changed to a hotdog stall, while the samurai sword is now the gun Alex can find. Despite these changes, *High Tech World* still has signs which were left in Japanese. Apart from these changes, the games are otherwise identical.



Screenshot Comparisons





Released between *Miracle World* and the Master System version of *The Lost Stars*, *Alex Kidd BMX Trial* is the only title in the series to remain exclusively in Japan, probably because it requires the Master System's analog paddle controller, which was not released in other territories.

Alex Kidd shifts genres once again, with this one being a bike racing game. However, it is rather unusual, since there's no ranking and the only time limit involves reaching the end within 24 in-game hours. The goal of each race is simply to find the exit. Though the screen scrolls vertically, each stage is several screens wide, and loops continuously until you've found a tunnel to the next area. Most levels have several exits, each of which will take you to a different level from the others.

There are five stages in total, and the ultimate goal is to make it to Radaxian Castle. If you know what you're doing, you can accomplish this in a couple of minutes. Until you memorize the proper path, you'll probably just end up biking in circles.

The stages are filled with rocks, trees, cactuses, and other obstacles that will cause Alex to fall off his bike and lose a little bit of life. The exception is one level that takes place atop the ocean

waves, where you ride on some kind of flotation device and need to avoid whirlpools.

There are several opponents in the race, but they only exist to knock Alex out of the way. Unfortunately they are quite aggressive, and there's no direct way to fight back against them. When you run out of health you lose the game. Scattered throughout the stages are wheelie ramps, which will grant Alex invincibility for about a second as he pops a wheelie, and jump ramps, allowing Alex to leap briefly into the sky. Power-ups include onigiri to restore health, clocks to reset the timer, and jet packs that allow you to fly.

Alex looks the same as he did in *Miracle World*, though the enemies – including tigers and kappa imps – are all new. The background details are amusing, like the colorful faces on the trees, and the goofy looking exits.

Finding a physical copy of the game and the controller is expensive, while playing the game on emulators, either using an analog controller or a mouse, makes it very difficult to control.



Alex Kidd: BMX Trial
Original Release: 1987
Platforms: SMS



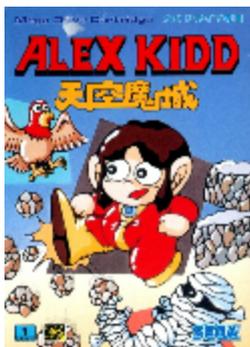
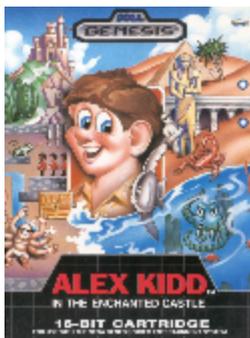
Alex Kidd in the Enchanted Castle



Alex Kidd in the Enchanted Castle AKA: **Alex Kidd Tenkuu Majou** (JP)

Original Release: 1989

Platforms: GEN, PS2, PSP, PS3, 360, WII, WIN



After so many departures, Alex's first (and only) Genesis outing goes back to its roots, with gameplay similar to *Miracle World*. The graphics are more colorful, although since this was a launch title for the Genesis it's still not too impressive.

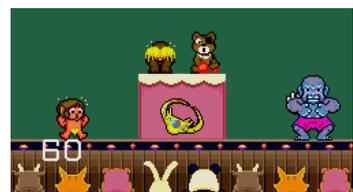
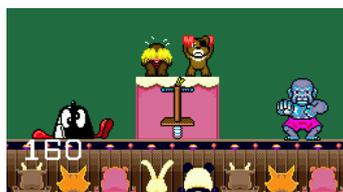
Alex's father Thor has been found alive on the planet of Paperrock, so Alex attempts to save him from the evil Ashra. There are only 11 levels, compared to the 17 in *Miracle World*, but most of them are a bit more expansive, allowing you to find alternate routes in the sky, or in hidden underground areas. The types of levels are similar to the original game, although there are now a few Egyptian influenced stages. Most of the items and vehicles are the same, although there is a new pogo stick.

Unlike the original, which required that you use most items as soon as you bought them, you can now access an inventory screen to use them whenever you want. Also, when you hit blocks hovering in midair, it won't destroy them, but instead send them flying across the screen squashing anything in their path. If the blocks are next to a solid wall, they'll break like normal.

Most of these improvements are for the better, but there have been some questionable changes. You can't just walk into stores and buy things anymore, you need to play rock-paper-scissors with the shopkeepers to get anything, in addition to paying money. Again, you can't see the other character's moves unless you have a special item, which proves most annoying when your life depends on it.

The controls are also even more slippery than they were in *Miracle World*. Not only are Alex's punches rather slow, but you can't punch in midair. Rather, you'll automatically jump kick after reaching the apex of your jump, and you need to position him so his foot makes contact with the enemy. Trying to hit anything like this without inadvertently getting killed is extremely frustrating. It's a shame, because *Enchanted Castle* comes up the poorer game compared to *Miracle World*.

There's some censorship between regions. At the end of a rock-paper-scissors battle in the English release, a large weight falls on the loser's head. In the Japanese version, the loser is stripped of their clothes, with, in Alex's case, a tiny elephant covering his naughty bits.





For Alex's last adventure, Sega tossed him back to the 8-bit Master System and decided to fuse him with one of their other franchises – *Shinobi*. This game was only released in North America and PAL territories (with the former being quite rare) and was never released in Japan. In an opening that seems suspiciously reminiscent of Sega's *Dynamite Dux*, Alex's girlfriend is kidnapped by a demon named Hanzo, and Alex himself is turned into a ninja by a deity known as the White Ninja, in order to go save her.

Several of the stages are reminiscent of levels from *Shinobi*, and the bosses take vague inspiration from them too. Even the main theme music is derived from *Shinobi*, just played at a faster tempo. However, some aspects from the *Alex Kidd* games remain, like the destructible blocks, the slippery controls and the swimming stages.

Even though it draws from both franchises, it's very much its own game. Alex attacks with a sword, which can be strengthened with a certain power-up. You can also find ninja throwing knives to attack foes at a distance, in addition to ninja magic to turn temporarily into a whirlwind.

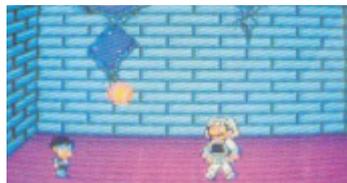


You can climb up ropes, bounce off walls *Ninja Gaiden*-style, or grapple onto pipes and spin until you become a fireball, flinging yourself at foes.

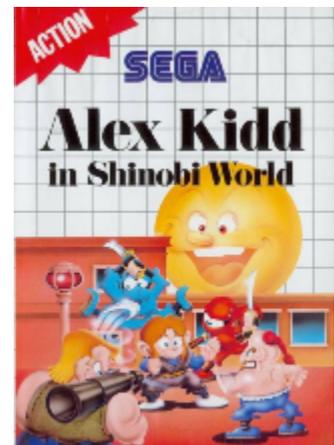
This is also the only game in the series where you have a life meter. You can take three hits, but there are numerous health restoration items, so it's not too difficult. You only get a single continue, but there are only eight brief stages (plus four boss battles) so it's a pretty short game.

What's interesting is that this was not always intended to be an *Alex Kidd* title. A few magazines revealed an early version of the game titled *Shinobi Kid*, starring some generic boy instead of Alex. It also reveals, amusingly, that the first boss was meant to be named "Mari-Oh", to make fun of Nintendo's famous mascot (he resembles the first boss of *Shinobi*, who is named "Ken-Oh").

Even though the sprite was slightly redrawn for the released game, it's easy to see the resemblance – he shoots fireballs that bounce like they do in *Super Mario Bros.*, and once you deplete his life meter he shrinks and continues to attack. Pretty clever. The image below is from *Electronic Gaming Monthly*.



Alex Kidd in Shinobi World
Original Release: 1990
Platforms: SMS, Wii



Wonder Boy

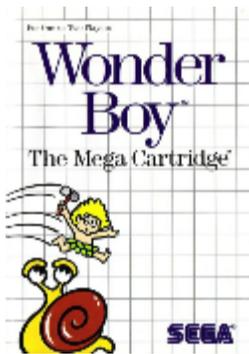


Wonder Boy

AKA: **Super Wonder Boy** (JP)

Original Release: 1986

Platforms: AC, SMS, GG, NES, C64, SG1, CPC, ZX, PS2, MOB, Wii



Created by a development house named Escape (later renamed Westone Bit Entertainment), *Wonder Boy* was one of Sega's mascot games in the mid-to-late 1980s, alongside Sega favorites like *Alex Kidd*. Starting off in the arcades, its history is actually one of the most complicated and baffling in all of video gaming, involving numerous spin-offs, sub-series, and licensed variations.

The first game, known simply as *Wonder Boy*, is a fast paced side-scrolling platformer, and was published and distributed by Sega. Hudson then obtained the rights to port *Wonder Boy*, but decided to replace the main character with a goofy version of Takahashi Meijin, a real-life spokesperson for the company. They rounded out his face, stuck on a baseball cap, and gave him the same grass skirt as Wonder Boy. Developed for the Famicom and NES, it was known as *Takahashi Meijin no Boukenjima* in Japanese, and *Adventure Island* in America.

For the sequel, Escape (now having changed its name to Westone), took the character of *Wonder Boy* and stuck him in a totally new game. Beginning a new series dubbed *Monster World*, it ditches the prehistoric setting of the original game for a medieval world, and introduces some light RPG elements. There are a total of four games in the *Monster World* series: *Wonder Boy in Monster Land*, *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap* (known as *Monster*

World II in Japan), *Wonder Boy in Monster World* (known as *Wonder Boy V: Monster World III*), and *Monster World IV* (which ditched the *Wonder Boy* title, since it stars a female protagonist).

Between the release of the second and third games in the *Monster World* series, Westone developed a unique shooter-platformer called *Wonder Boy III: Monster Lair* (this is unrelated to *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap*, which was not released in Japan under that title).

Hudson published many of these games on other platforms, but much like the *Takahashi Meijin* games, Hudson elected to replace *Wonder Boy* with different characters in each installment. Furthermore, when the *Monster World* games were published in Brazil, all of the characters were replaced with cast members from the Portuguese cartoon series *Turma da Mônica*.

Finally, Hudson took the original *Wonder Boy / Takahashi Meijin / Adventure Island* game and created its own separate franchise. Many of these titles were mostly similar to the first game, thereby making them more faithful to the original *Wonder Boy* than any of Westone's later games. But a few of the entries, namely the fourth Famicom game and the second SNES game, cross-pollinate the series' DNA even further by utilizing a non-linear, exploratory structure similar to *Monster World*.

The original *Wonder Boy* was initially released in the arcades, for the Sega System 2 board. As caveboy Tom-Tom (named Boy or Bocke in Japan), the goal is to rescue your green haired girlfriend Tanya (Tina in Japan) from the evil lord Drancon ("Kings" in Japan). The gameplay is patterned after the ever popular *Super Mario Bros.* – you run forward, jump over bad guys, and leap across moving platforms. There are seven worlds, each containing four stages, and each ending with a brief boss battle against Drancon.

The main difference to *Super Mario Bros.* is that *Wonder Boy* is even faster paced. There is a power bar at the top of the screen, but it's not a life bar. Rather, it acts as a timer, one that counts down remarkably quickly. The only way to refill it is by grabbing the pieces of fruit that are sprinkled liberally throughout each stage.

Taking a single hit will kill you, though most levels are also littered with stones. These cause you to trip and, technically, while they won't kill you they will deplete your power meter, and can potentially send you into a bad guy or right into a pit.

While you are normally defenseless against bad guys, you can crack open eggs to grant power-ups. Hatchets are your primary weapon, and are thrown at an arc, making it good at long range but difficult to use up close. You can also find skateboards, which will let you move faster and can absorb a single hit, though its forward momentum makes it hard to control. Fairies can also grant invincibility for a limited time. There are also spotted, rotten eggs that unleash a little Grim Reaper, which drains your stamina more quickly.



While the controls are slippery, the constant checkpoints ensure the game doesn't get too frustrating. There are also wooden dolls located in each stage – if you manage to uncover all of them by the end, you unlock a hidden eighth and final world.

While *Wonder Boy* is a solid game, the level designs are never quite as clever as the Nintendo game it's patterned after. And although it's quite attractive, with lush jungle scenery, and spooky caverns made of ice or dank rock, the levels are quite repetitive. There are only about eight environments, and many levels are simply more difficult variations of previous stages. The fourth stage of each area is practically identical, right up to the boss battles, where you fight the same fireball-tossing bad guy, albeit with different faces.

The first port of *Wonder Boy* was for the SG-1000. This system was not built with scrolling backgrounds in mind, so the action is incredibly choppy, and the graphics are extraordinarily simplistic. Many power-ups, including the skateboard, are missing, but there is a new weapon.

The levels have also been cut back and simplified. There are only five levels in total with no

repeating areas, but there is brand new final stage that seems to take place in outer space. The music is also completely different. A homebrew port exists for the Mattel Colecovision.

The most well known version is the Sega Master System port, which is enhanced in a number of ways. It looks excellent, especially since the status bar has been removed, with only the vitality meter remaining at the top. The controls have been slightly messed with though. You can only do a high jump when you hold down the run button, which makes certain jumps chaotic. On the positive side, Tom-Tom is a bit less slippery and easier to keep under control.

There are two additional worlds on the SMS, making for nine in the main game, as well as the tenth hidden world for collecting all of the dolls. There are also a handful of brand new sub-stages, including a desert, a waterfall, and an area that takes place in the clouds. Along with this is a brand new boss who throws lightning rather than fireballs. It has unlimited continues, too. This version was used as the basis for a Game Gear port, which was released in North America under the name *Revenge of Drancon*.

In Europe, *Wonder Boy* was ported to several home computer platforms, courtesy of Activision. On the lower end of the ports is the ZX Spectrum version, which is stuck with green monochrome graphics, choppy scrolling and slow action. The Amstrad CPC and Commodore 64 versions are visually almost identical to each other, though the C64 version has a leg-up on speed. However, these versions only have four stages

Above: [ARC] The best looking version
 Left: The [SG1] cover
 Below: [SMS] One of the extra levels



Wonder Boy

that repeat, getting slightly more difficult each time.

The NES port by Hudson, under the name *Takahashi Meijin no Boukenjima* in Japan and *Adventure Island* in America, is fairly faithful, though not nearly as graphically attractive. In North America and Europe the character's name is changed to Master Higgins. The other character names are inconsistent depending on what you read – in some versions the female captive is named Tina, and the antagonist is King Quiller, while some advertising copy claims that you are rescuing Princess Leilani from the evil Witch Doctor.

Since *Adventure Island* is based on the original arcade game, it's missing the stages added to the Master System and Game Gear releases. The dolls have been replaced with goofy looking pots, and while they give bonus points, they are no longer required to reach the eighth stage, which you will always play no matter how well you do.

You technically have unlimited continues, but only if you manage to find the Hudson Bee mascot in the first level. There's also a new fireball weapon, which acts much like the hatchets but can destroy rocks and other previously invincible obstacles. The fairies are the same, but the devils are now evil flying eggplants.

The MSX port by Hudson is based off the FC/NES *Adventure Island*. It's mostly the same, though while the FC/NES version has a new soundtrack, the MSX version uses the same music as the arcade game.

Adventure Island was also ported to cellphones. The revised graphics are pleasant, though the

bug-eyed Takahashi Meijin looks quite silly.

While *Wonder Boy* was not officially ported to the Amiga, there is a ripoff called *Thunder Boy*. It's a poorly programmed piece of software, with bad controls and collision detection. There are a few new backgrounds, like villages and volcanoes.

There is also a terrible knockoff for the Commodore 64 known as *The Equalizer* (AKA *Toddler*). While the game does not play like *Wonder Boy* at all – the levels are non-linear and the protagonist shoots fire – the graphics are all plagiarized (and badly redrawn) from arcade game.

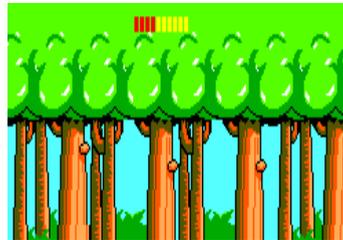
Below-Left: The clone *Thunder Boy* [AMI]
Below: [C64] This strange *Wonder Boy* ripoff known as both *The Equalizer* and *Toddler*



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Sega Master System



NES



SG-1000



Commodore 64



MSX



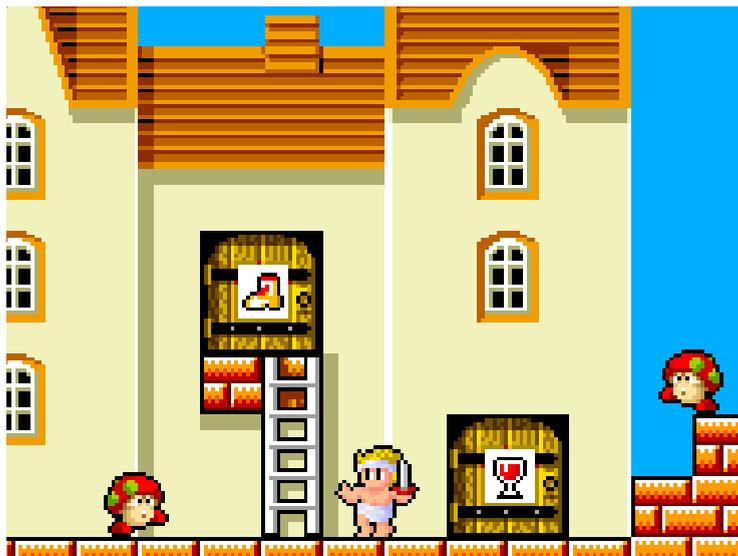
ZX Spectrum



Mobile



Amiga (ripoff)



A drastic departure from the original, *Wonder Boy in Monster Land* thrusts our hero into a medieval world, and replaces the tomahawks and grass skirts with swords and shields. You now have a single life and a heart meter, though at the beginning you are granted a single-use resurrection potion. Rather embarrassingly, you spend the first few levels in the arcade version fighting monsters while wearing only underwear. The hero is nicknamed Book (full name: Bocke Lee Temjin), though he only called this in the SMS manual and arcade ending credits, and usually just referred to as Wonder Boy.

Monster Land is a unique game because it combines linear level-based gameplay with RPG elements. Each of the 11 stages is fairly brief, although they are heavily populated with shops, bars, and other folks.

Conversations are shown in a first-person view, with the denizens of *Monster Land* ranging from bartender lizards and demonic fortune tellers to cuddly teddy bears. You can buy new equipment – armor to reduce damage, shields to deflect projectiles, and boots to run faster and jump farther – while more powerful swords are found through optional boss battles. You can also spend your hard earned cash on some booze as well, which both restores health and offers some helpful hints. Getting higher scores will increase the maximum number of hearts.

Certain enemies also drop a variety of magic spells, each with a limited number of uses, which include fireballs, tornados, and lightning zaps. However, they are placed in a queue and automatically cast by pressing down on the joystick, so you can't choose which one to use. Items like gauntlets and helmets also temporarily increase your offense and defense.

Gathering cash is also a bit unusual. As expected, fallen enemies yield gold, but only the first time you kill them – after respawning, they simply give score items. This means you can't just stand in one place and grind for money. Instead, most cash is found in hidden caches sprinkled throughout each stage (once you find them, there's an exploitable glitch where you can wiggle the joystick and milk them for substantially more cash than you would normally get). Yet the game actively discourages such exploration, due to a constantly ticking timer, which will deplete one heart from your life meter unless you can find hourglasses to reset it.

There's also a fair amount of hidden and optional stuff. One of the major stages is a spiked-filled pyramid. At the end is the Sphinx, who asks you a randomized question (some of these are characteristically silly – he likes salad and his favorite Sega game is apparently *After Burner*). If you don't know these already, you



Wonder Boy in Monster Land
 AKA: **Super Wonder Boy**
Monster World (JP MK III), etc.
 Original Release: 1987
 Platforms: AC, SMS, FC, C64, AMI, AST, PCE, ZX, MOB, WII



Wonder Boy in Monster Land



need to visit a specific bar earlier in the stage and obtain the info from the barkeeper. If you guess correctly you'll win the fight automatically, otherwise it's quite a tough battle.

Furthermore, if you want to be properly equipped for the final battle, you'd best uncover as much of the game as possible. The ultimate goal is to find all of the Legendary equipment. Throughout the game, there's a running subquest as you play messenger for various people, most in secret locations. If you successfully complete it, you'll be given the option to pick from two secret items: a bell and a ruby.

The bell will help you navigate the labyrinthine final stage; the ruby will make the incredibly difficult final battle a little bit easier. But again, the speedy "rush rush" feeling of the action makes it too easy to miss these quasi-essential items, because it's impossible to go back to completed levels if you miss a step. Essentially, the game expects you to have played it

several times, have all of the secrets and quests memorized, and have an optimal route planned beforehand. It's also an incredibly tough game. Your sword attacks are short-ranged and not particularly fast, while most enemies are much more agile than your character and can easily gang up on you.

There are some slightly silly things, like the ability to explore underwater areas, walking on the sea floor, while wearing a full suit of armor. The finale also takes a turn for the bizarre. After completing the final dungeon, you discover that the penultimate boss is actually an entity from outer space: the nefarious robot being, Meka Dragon. This sudden change from fantasy to sci-fi became a hallmark of many of the later *Wonder Boy* games.

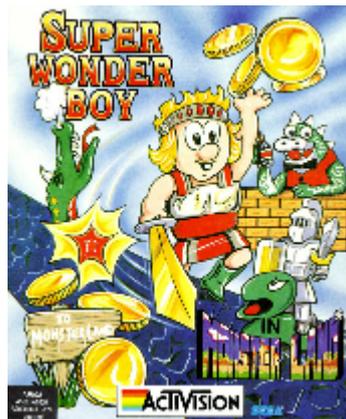
The graphics are repetitive, which is to be expected in an arcade game from 1987, but colorful. Changing pieces of equipment will affect the look of your character's sprite, which is a nice touch. Many enemies, like the

Above: [ARC] The first boss, the Meka Dragon, and a rather jolly bartender
Below: Artwork of a cutesy version of Bocke, plus a new boss in the [SMS] port

snakes and octopi, bear some resemblance to their forms from the first game, but otherwise the visual style is entirely new. The enemies have rather comical expressions on their faces, with bulging eyes or contorted features, which is an amusing recurring element in the series. Annoyingly, in the arcade version, a huge chunk of the screen is taken up by the status window, which makes the action feel cramped.

The arcade version of *Wonder Boy in Monster Land* was officially only published in Japan, for the Sega System 2 board. However, there are two bootleg versions translated into English that were distributed around the world. An English version was originally made by Westone back in 1987, but Sega chose not to release it. This only became available in 2012, when it appeared on the Wii Virtual Console, XBLA and





PSN as a downloadable title. The translation is the same one used in the European computer ports.

Due to the awkward distribution of the arcade game, *Monster Land* is mostly known for its Sega Master System port. Like most SMS ports, it keeps much of the original's gameplay, downgrades the graphics only slightly, and even gets rid of the obnoxious status window. All vital data is now at the top of the screen, with all equipment located in the pause menu. The artists were nice enough to give the hero some clothes at the beginning of the game.

The physics have changed slightly, especially in regards to taking damage – in the arcade game, if you are hit multiple times in succession, it resets the invulnerability period and allows you to be juggled, though without taking any damage. This is not present in the Master System version. The multidirectional screen scrolling in larger levels is also gone, replaced by flip-screen movement.

In the arcade game, any enemy that took multiple hits had a life indicator, but in the SMS version this is reserved for boss monsters. Most of the pop-up text, like the windows describing enemy names or item pick-ups, has been removed. However, unlike so many video games that



Above: [ARC] Further adventures of Wonder Boy

Right: The goofy [AMI] cover

Below: [FC] Unfortunately *Saiyuuki World* is not a good conversion

have been censored to remove references to alcohol, you can still buy pints of ale or mead. The level order has changed slightly, and there's one totally brand new stage featuring a largely abandoned town, inhabited by a couple of new bosses, including a Wizard and Medusa. Roughly half of the soundtrack is missing, with the same two songs used in multiple areas.

The game is technically a bit easier since there are less enemies throughout the stages, and the boss patterns are substantially simplified, but ultimately it's more frustrating because, unlike the arcade game, you can't continue. At all. You get a single revival potion, and can buy replacements, but death comes too easily.

Born From Stickers?

The PC Engine version, released by Hudson only in Japan, is a pretty faithful port from the arcade. It was tied in with the popular 1980s property *Bikkuriman*, which was a "sticker collection" series. The hero is now known as "Head Rococo", and all of the sprites and shopkeeper graphics have changed to tie in with *Bikkuriman*. Otherwise it is very close to the arcade game, missing only minor details, like the door opening animations and the post-level bonus screens. You can also continue through use of a code. There are several other *Bikkuriman* games (ranging from the Famicom to the Game Boy Color), although none of them are related to the *Wonder Boy* or *Monster World* series.

Wonder Boy in Monster Land was also ported to the Famicom,

though with a totally different title and altered characters, under the name *Saiyuuki World* and published by Jaleco. Based on the old Chinese legend, you are the monkey king Goku, off to save ancient China.

While the graphics and music are entirely different, the gameplay is almost exactly the same. Most of the enemies are similar, including the mushrooms and snakes, though the bosses are entirely new, and the crabs are replaced with alligators for some reason. After many boss battles you also free a prisoner, who congratulates you for your efforts. Some of the level designs have changed a bit, shortening many of the areas and adding more shops.

Unfortunately, it's hard to shake the feeling that it's a sloppy, hacked together product. The new music is atrocious, and enemies can juggle you infinitely while still dealing damage, making one hit kills from bosses frustratingly common.

There was a *Saiyuuki World II* released as well, which was released in America by Jaleco as *Whomp 'Em*. In the localized version the main character was changed from Goku to an Indian, and other graphics were altered to fit the Native American theme.

Activision published a number of computer ports in Europe. All of these were based on the arcade version, rather than the Master System release. The ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC versions are practically identical, suffering from slow action and the usual limited palette. The C64 version is a definite step up, although it's still a bit slow. However, the Atari ST and Amiga versions are pretty

Wonder Boy in Monster Land

decent. The colors are a bit off, the action is slightly slow, the scrolling is a bit choppy and the load times are awful.

Perhaps the most bizarre version out of all of this is the mobile version, first developed in 2006 by Hudson in English under the name *Super Adventure Island* (no relation to the SNES game of the same name), and later released in Japan in 2010 under the name

Shin Takahashi-Meijin no Boukenjima (not to be confused with *Takahashi-Meijin no Shin Boukenjima*, the PC Engine semi-sequel to the original Famicom game). This version replaces Wonder Boy with Master Higgins/Takahashi Meijin. The graphics are all new and pretty decent too. The swords are now hammers, though they act the same, and while the standard

monsters are the same as before, all of the bosses are brand new, at least from a visual standpoint. The shopkeepers are different as well.



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



PC Engine



Sega Master System



Amiga



Commodore 64



ZX Spectrum



Famicom



Mobile



Sega Master System (Brazil)



In Brazil, many Master System games were tied in with children's programs to make them more appealing to the masses - some of these games include *Teddy Boy*, *Ghost House*, and *Kung Fu Kid*. Brazilian software publisher TecToy took three of the *Wonder Boy* games - *Monster Land*, *The Dragon's Trap* and *Monster World* - and added in characters of a massively popular (in Brazil) comic/cartoon series called *Turma da Mônica*. Each game remained exactly the same, except for *Mônica* characters playing the role of the hero. *Mônica* uses a blue

rabbit as a sword, which is somewhat amusing. In *Dragon's Trap*, instead of taking on different animal forms, you save your friends, who would then lend you different powers. The dragon form has been changed into a guy with a shotgun. The mouse form has been changed into a dog. The bird form has been changed into a superhero-esque character who can fly. All of these look like amateur ROM hacks but they were commercially released, and entirely legal.



Wonder Boy III: Monster Lair is a departure from both the previous games, but like *Monster Land*, blends two seemingly disparate genres: the platformer and the shooter. The basic set up is similar to the first *Wonder Boy*, in that you can only take a single hit, there's a timer at the top of the screen, and there's plenty of fruit to collect in order to refill it. However, the screen auto-scrolls all of the time, similar to certain stages in *Super Mario Bros. 3*.

The main characters have swords, but use them to fire projectiles. Weapon power-ups are common, including shurikens that rotate around your character, lasers, spread bullets and explosive rockets. The invincibility fairies and stamina-sapping reapers from the first *Wonder Boy* are also back. The second part of each level, where you fight the boss, also grants you a flying dragon, making the game feel more like a traditional shooter. Many of the enemy's projectiles in these segments are beach balls, which drain stamina rather than killing you outright.

This is the only *Wonder Boy* game that offers two-player simultaneous gameplay. The first player controls the green-haired warrior Leo, and the second controls the pink haired princess Purapril. Despite the change in genre, there are plenty of references to the previous two titles to maintain some consistency between them.

The first level is a tropical stage, similar to the ones found in the other games, and the tenth stage looks like the towns in *Monster Land*, complete with the walking mushrooms. The later stages also veer into sci-fi territory, with the last area taking place in outer space as you fight against UFOs. The final enemy appears to be the hero from *Monster Land*, but is actually revealed to be an alien entity that stole the Legendary equipment from those games and used its power for evil.

While conceptually *Monster Lair* is unlike anything else out there, it's also really just a slightly above average game. At 14 stages it's too long, and the levels don't vary much outside of changing scenery. At least the game looks pretty, especially the ridiculous boss fights, like the giant mushroom/slot machine mutation.

Monster Lair was initially released in the arcades for the Sega System 16 board. There were two home versions of the game. The PC Engine/TurboGrafx-16 release is almost an exact port of the arcade game, with the usual CD soundtrack tossed in. The graphics are basically identical, although the parallax scrolling was removed. This is the only time that the *Wonder Boy* name was attached to a game that wasn't on a Sega platform. The port to the TurboGrafx-16 was also the only version of this game released on a console in North America, although



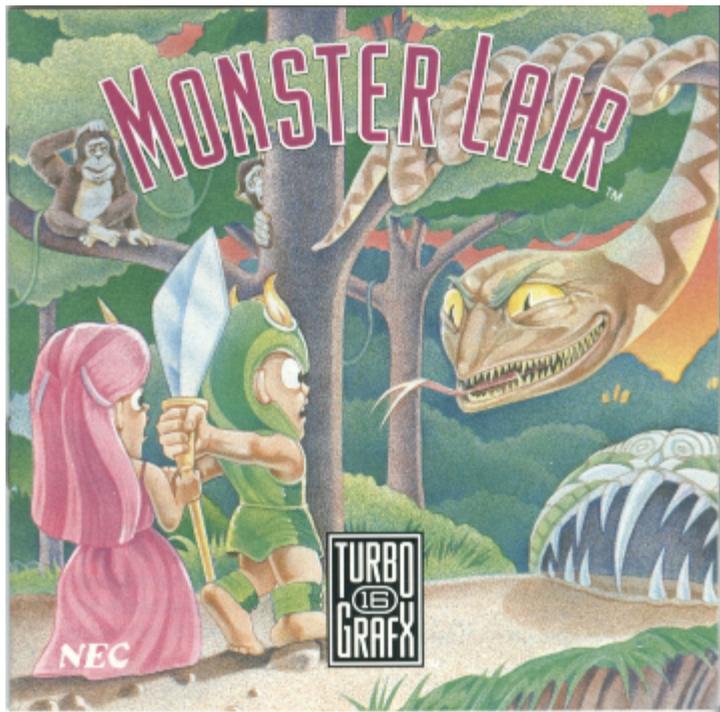
Wonder Boy III: Monster Lair
 AKA: **Monster Lair** (US TG16)
 Original Release: 1988
 Platforms: AC, TG16CD, MD, PS2, WII, WIN



Wonder Boy III: Monster Lair

the *Wonder Boy* name was dropped and the game simply titled *Monster Lair*.

Sega also ported it to the Mega Drive for Japan and Europe. Although the background graphics look comparable, most of the sprites had to be redrawn, and all of them look pretty dorky in comparison. It's also missing two levels. The home ports only offer limited continues. Both are available on the Wii Virtual Console, while the Mega Drive version has been featured on various PC compilations.



Right: The [TG16] cover art, one of the launch games for the system

Below: [ARC] Leo and Purapuril as shown on the character select screen

Far right-middle: [ARC] A shot of the final battle, against the warrior with the Legendary equipment atop a dragon



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Mega Drive



TurboGrafx-16

Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap



The first *Wonder Boy* game created strictly for consoles, *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap* focuses on solid action-adventuring, and the result stands right next to *Phantasy Star* as one of the best games on the Sega Master System.

In a move that perhaps inspired the intro to *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, *Wonder Boy III* actually begins at the end of *Wonder Boy in Monster Land*, as you traipse through the castle (thankfully simplified from the original maze) and fight the final boss, the Meka Dragon.

Unfortunately, as you deal the killing blow, the monster curses you, turning you into a dragon humanoid. Once you escape the collapsing castle you must venture through the land to find the Salamander Cross, the only item that can rid you of this curse.

While you begin the game as Lizard Man, you will change forms every time you kill a boss. At the beginning you're stuck in your current form, but as you progress you can find special rooms that let you transform at will. Each form has different skills and attributes.

Lizard Man is the initial form, and is actually quite powerful. Rather than wielding a sword, you shoot out fireballs (though you still equip swords for attack power boosts). Though this form lacks a shield, you can use said fireballs to block projectiles. You can also swim harmlessly through lava without the use of the Dragon

Armor. He is also the only form that can duck.

Mouse Man is difficult to use because his sword is so tiny. However, he can fit through small openings and climb on checkerboard bricks. Meanwhile, Piranha Man lets you swim – being underwater in most other forms just slows you down.

Lion/Tiger Man (the form depends on the version of the game) is the most physically powerful. He swings his sword at an arc, allowing you to attack above and below. He can also break bricks without equipping the Thunder Saber sword. Finally, as expected, Hawk Man can fly. However, he is the most physically fragile, and is actually damaged by water.

Several different dragons must be killed throughout your adventure, each with some sort of theme: the Egyptian stage has a mummy dragon, the jungle stage has a zombie dragon, the underwater pirate ship level has a pirate dragon, the Japanese level has a samurai dragon and so forth.

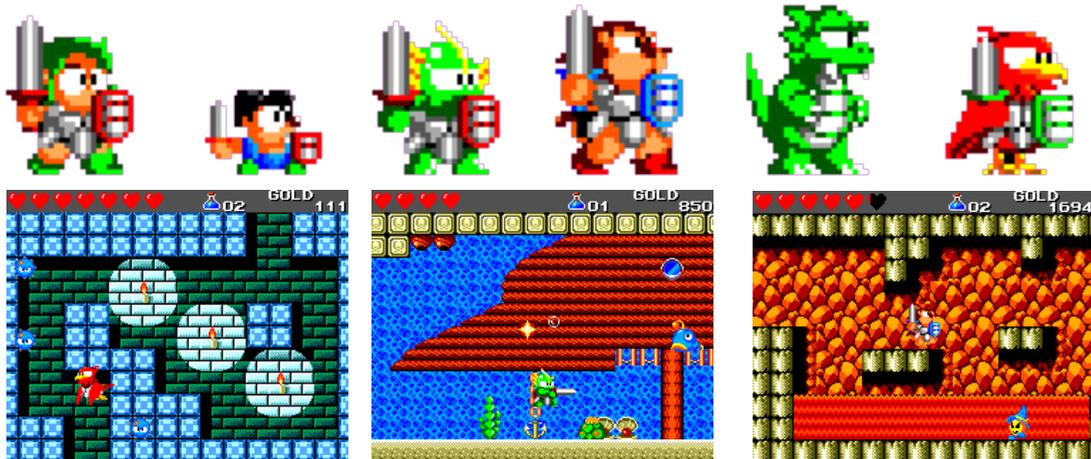
Wonder Boy III ditches the level-by-level structure in favor of a more open world you can freely explore. The hub is a single central town, which splinters off in multiple directions. Much like *Metroid*, good chunks are off limits until you gain the proper animal form to reach them. While the route through the game is pretty explicit – you won't get lost for too long – you can explore at your



Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap AKA: **Monster World II: Dragon no Wana** (JP GG), etc
Original Release: 1989
Platforms: SMS, GG, TG16, PS2, Wii



Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap



leisure, revisiting areas with new skills to find hidden heart containers and extra equipment.

The world structure though is largely nonsensical. If you fall down the well, you'll somehow end up on a tropical beach, while if you fly into the sky, you'll find the game's equivalent to Egypt. It's one of those "video gamey" aspects that lends it a surreal nature. Magic works in much the same way as in *Monster Land*, with fallen monsters randomly dropping limited use items, though now you can select them from the pause screen, and they're cast by holding down and jump.

Most of the annoying bits from *Monster Land* have been dealt with: the timer is gone, as is the score, and you can now save your progress with passwords. However, some of the new RPG mechanics don't quite work. The biggest issue has to do with your Charm Points, or CP. This is basically the equivalent of the Charisma stat in tabletop RPGs, and determines what items the shopkeepers will sell you. However, you're never told what the requirements are – if your CP is too low, potential items are simply shown as inaccessible question marks.

Your CP is determined by your equipment, your current form, and by rare items called

charm stones. The logic behind this is probably that a shopkeeper wouldn't want to sell anything to a grotesque fish/man thing with ugly armor, but would be more willing to part with their goods to something more adorable with fancier goods.

You can sort of cheat the game to find these, but it's still needless grinding. The game doesn't keep track of opened treasure chests, so you can find a hidden cache, get a password, reset and hunt down the same chest, repeating this until you're powered up.

The only other major issue is with the rather straightforward level design. Many stages are just long, linear paths and repeated environments, albeit with enemy variations. Dying on a boss battle and having to repeat the same endless corridors quickly grows tedious. And later levels are hectic, as the game tosses tons of bad guys on the screen.

Projectiles inflict a huge amount of damage regardless of your defensive stats, so learning to block them is essential for survival, but there are many times where dealing with it all at once is practically impossible without taking some damage. The post-damage invincibility period is implemented like in the arcade version of *Monster Land*,

thankfully, so you can absorb multiple attacks while only taking a single hit's worth of damage.

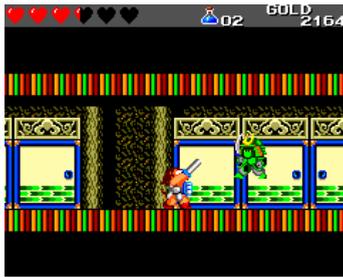
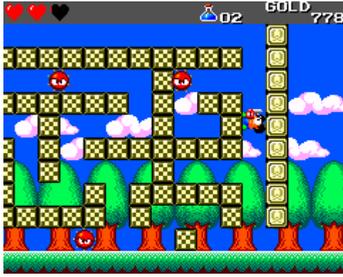
Still, outside of these issues, *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap* is an utterly brilliant game. The graphics are substantially improved over even the arcade version of *Monster Land*, taking a cue from the cutesy goofiness found in *Monster Lair*. The characters are large, distinctive, and strangely adorable, the monsters actually seem to have personality, while the locales are colorful and lively. The music is also completely fantastic, even if some themes (particularly the main dungeon song) get repeated too often. It's one of the crowning jewels of the Sega Master System for a reason.

The Master System version of the game was not released in Japan, remaining a North American and European exclusive. Instead, the first version to reach Japan was Hudson's PC Engine/TurboGrafx-16 release, known (confusingly) as *Adventure Island* in Japan and *Dragon's Curse* in North America. In any case, it's largely identical to the Master System release.

What little text there is differs quite a bit from the SMS version (the opening warns you of bad guys that can turn you into a "totally disgusting creature") and



Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap



some of the character sprites have been changed. The human form has blond hair, like the previous games, instead of green hair like the Sega version's hero. The Lizard Man form looks different, and the lion has been changed into a tiger. The frame rate is also smoother. Otherwise, the improvements are minor. If you have a Turbo Booster or CD-ROM system, you can also save your game, although the password system is still available.

In Japan, Sega released the game in 1992 for the Game Gear under the name *Monster World II: Dragon no Wana*. It's mostly the same as the Master System

version, through since the view is zoomed in to make up for the smaller resolution, many of the areas have been slightly redesigned, and some of the larger rooms have simply been removed. You can also transport back to the hub town by using charm stones. In general the game is slightly easier too. There's also a new, much cooler, title screen and a new song to go with it.

Wonder Boy in Monster Land was filled with weird looking shopkeepers, but the wackiest one is the password guy from *The Dragon's Trap*. It's not clear why he is also in charge of the church, but obviously the religious folk in



Above: The [SMS] pirate pig, and the [GG] equivalent, a human fortune teller
Top-middle & Bottom-left: [SMS] The Japanese and Egyptian levels

Monster Land have no problem with a purple chain smoking pirate pig running their establishments. Also note how the cigarette and the crosses of the church shows Sega's apathetic nature towards censorship, compared to Nintendo's fervent policies of protecting American youths during the olden days. Unfortunately, he was taken out of the Game Gear version, replaced by more normal looking humans.

The Master System version also has an item called the Hades Armor, which revives you to full health when you die. It's supposed to be a consumable item, but due to some glitches, it's possible to keep it after regeneration, thereby basically making you immortal. This glitch was removed from the other versions.



Screenshot Comparisons



Master System



TurboGrafx-16



Game Gear

Wonder Boy in Monster World



Wonder Boy in Monster World
AKA: **Wonder Boy V: Monster World III** (JP MD), **The Dynastic Hero** (TG16)

Original Release: 1991

Platforms: GEN, TG16, SMS, 360, PS3, WII, WIN



The fifth *Wonder Boy* title (and third *Monster World* game) leaves behind the tale of Book, and instead concentrates on a new hero, a blue-haired boy named Shion. It's another action-RPG, similar in structure to *The Dragon's Trap*, but keeping some elements closer to the first *Monster Land*.

Most disappointingly, there are no longer multiple forms to change into, as Shion is a human throughout. He can wield two types of weapons: swords, which are short-ranged but can be used in conjunction with shields, and spears, which are longer but lack proper protection. However, many items let you obtain skills similar to the ones in the previous game, like the Poseidon Spear, which lets you swim, and the pygmy transformation, which lets you squeeze into small places.

Instead of multiple forms, in different parts of the game you are accompanied by a tiny familiar, a reference to the fairies from the original *Wonder Boy*. Priscilla is a fairy who can heal; Hotta is a dwarf child who can dig for gold; Shabo is a tiny Grim Reaper who can attack with his scythe; and Rotto is a young dragon child. They're adorable, but their use is limited to specific dungeons.

The magic system has been improved, as you now learn spells rather than gathering individually used items. These spells have limited stocks, but are expanded as you discover more, and

regenerate when you visit an inn. You can assign two spells at once, activated by pressing the A button and hitting either left or right.

The dungeons also feel like dungeons now, instead of just long, linear paths, and the world design is slightly more cohesive. There are many more hidden items compared to *The Dragon's Trap*, where most of the heart containers were fairly easy to find. The Charm Points system has been abolished, and there are multiple towns rather than just a single central hub city. The password system is gone, replaced by a battery save.

Unfortunately, the action itself isn't nearly as exciting as *The Dragon's Trap*. Like *Monster Land*, your speed is based on the type of boots you have, but even at the fastest speed, you move relatively slowly. Combined with the short range of both weapon types, it's a much more leisurely paced game, and one that doesn't feel as fun to play.

The visuals are nice, but not drastically improved over its Master System predecessor. Once again, the status bar is a little too large, though the life bars for all enemies are rather handy. The close-ups of the shopkeepers are gone, and instead the exterior of the house becomes transparent when Shion enters. The music, while decent, is also a little too low key in many areas.

There are also plenty of references to the older *Wonder*

Boy games. The second screen is practically identical to the opening of *Monster Land*. Right at the beginning, Shion rescues Princess Purapril, the descendant of the second player character in *Monster Lair*, who in turn gives her name to the town. Some of the enemies, like the colorful fish in Poseidon's Realm, are taken from *Monster Lair* as well.

There's another encounter with the Sphinx. She actually looks like the statue found in *The Dragon's Trap*, and her quiz questions are now about specific things from earlier in the game. Even the finale, where the fantasy trappings give way to futuristic technology, is largely the same.

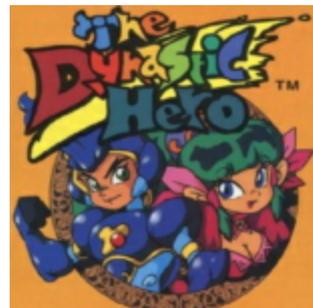
There are a few difficulty tweaks between the regional versions. In the Japanese release, dying sends you back to an inn with some reduced cash, while the English versions will send you to a Game Over screen, requiring the reloading of a save game. The final boss is also more difficult in the English release, with buzz saws having been added to the floor.

Initially released on the Genesis, *Wonder Boy in Monster World* was also ported to the Master System and released in Europe. While graphically it looks gorgeous, some technical problems keep it back. Your sword has an even shorter range, you can't buy spears anymore, and the hit detection is awfully shady. The save feature is also gone, replaced with some very long passwords.



The TurboGrafx-16 CD version, published once again by Hudson, is known as *The Dynastic Hero*. As with the previous games, the plotline and characters have been changed completely, as the hero, now named Dyna, wears an extremely dorky blue suit of armor and a beetle shaped helmet. The rest of the characters follow the insect theme too, with completely new familiars and bosses, though the standard enemies are unchanged. The dragon village (and its accompanying familiar) has also been changed into a bee village.

The CD audio soundtrack is entirely different to the music in the Genesis version, and frankly, not nearly as good. The background graphics are pretty much the same, although there's a nifty animated intro complete with an incredibly cheesy vocal song. The translation is also slightly different, with a bit more character. The difficulty was not changed for the localized version, so it's easier than the English release of *Monster World*.



Screenshot Comparisons



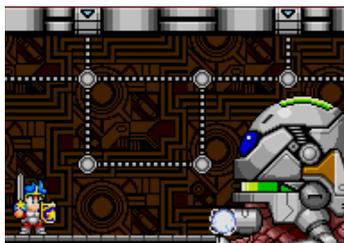
Genesis



TurboGrafx-16



Master System



Genesis



TurboGrafx-16

Monster World IV



Monster World IV

Original Release: 1994

Platforms: MD, 360, PS3, Wii



Monster World IV is the only mainline entry in the series without the “Wonder Boy” moniker. This actually makes total sense, considering the protagonists is now a green-haired Arabian girl named Asha. The vaguely generic fantasy settings of the previous *Monster World* games have been replaced with a fanciful Arabian setting, making it feel a bit like Disney’s *Aladdin* from around the same era, albeit with a cutesy, manga flair. The story really hasn’t changed much though, with Asha being chosen to leave her village to rescue some missing spirits and save the world in the process.

With this final entry in the series, the RPG elements have been scaled down considerably. There is only a single city, Rapadagna, which as usual acts as the hub for the four sub-worlds, which take the form of different temples. However, there’s no real overworld to explore, as you are immediately transported to each of the four sub-worlds through a central temple in the city. In turn, these areas are almost entirely linear, although you can still grab gold to buy equipment in town, as well as health replenishments from the various vending machines found throughout.

While *Monster World IV* barely qualifies as an action-RPG any more, as a trade-off, the platforming is easily the best it’s ever been. To aid you in your quest, Asha finds a cute flying blob called a Pepelooog. She can

grab onto it to float, use it to double jump, or throw it at switches. It’s also resistant to fire, so she can carry it on her head as a shield or toss it on flaming lava to use as a platform.

The dungeon designs are far more elaborate than the previous games, largely because they rely on using your Pepelooog to traverse the terrain. Alas, the tasks presented can only vaguely be called “puzzles”, as most are quite simplistic. Perhaps in order to make up for the lack of exploration the dungeons are also long, really long, usually with multiple boss battles. Unfortunately the game doesn’t think up enough interesting things to do to justify their length, so dungeons begin to grow tiresome after awhile.

Other than slightly hidden chests and the usual caches of money, the only optional items to find are crystal tears spread throughout each stage. Collect 10 of these and you’ll gain an extra heart on your second life meter. This acts as a backup to the main life meter, which in turn is expanded by purchasing new armor. However, very few of these are actually hidden, so the number of secrets compared to previous games is reduced.

The combat has been changed a bit too. Unlike the previous heroes, who kept their shield out at all times, Asha needs to press down to pull out her shield. Magic spells are also gone, forcing you into melee combat

against everything. You can, however, jump and thrust downward, and even bounce on enemy heads, expanding your combat strategy slightly.

Even though it's largely a step back for the series, it's hard not to like *Monster World IV*. Asha is one of the most adorable heroines to appear in a video game, largely thanks to her expressive and fluid animations. She runs like a proper little lady, arms swaying to her side, and wiggles her butt when opening up treasure chests. When she jumps, you can see the wind against her baggy pants. The rest of the visuals are similarly gorgeous, taking advantage of the 16-bit hardware in ways that *Wonder Boy in Monster World* didn't even attempt. Every screen is bursting with vibrant color, side-stepping the grainy graphics usually seen in Genesis titles.

This is also the only *Monster World* game not composed by Shinichi Sakamoto, with the duties passed onto Jin Watanabe. The title screen theme acts as an overture, with many of the later songs offering variations on the same melody. The entirety of the soundtrack is definitely quite catchy, though due to the recurring motifs, they do tend to grow a bit repetitive.

Despite the change in setting, the aesthetics are clearly in line with the other *Monster World*



games. Furthermore, the four spirits to be rescued are the same as the familiars from the previous game and there's even a reference to the fate of Shion.

Even though *Monster World IV* has gorgeous graphics and solid gameplay, Sega elected not to localize it when it was initially released. Although it was fan translated by DemiForce and

DeJap in 2002, the game was officially localized nearly 20 years after release, in 2012, available via digital distribution for the Wii, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. The official translation is more faithful than the fan translation, and also uses a nicer font.

Above: Artwork for the Complete Collection
Bottom: [IMD] *Monster World IV* is one of the most gorgeous games on the platform



Interview with Ryuichi Nishizawa



Ryuichi Nishizawa is one of the founders of Westone Bit Entertainment – the name of the company is derived from his last name (“nishi” = “west”), as well as fellow founder Michishito Ishizuka (“ishi” = “stone”). He is one of the major figures behind the *Wonder Boy / Monster World* franchise, having directed, programmed and designed nearly all of them. Nishizawa-san graciously accepted our request for an interview to discuss their development, as well as to elaborate on some of the more confusing points of the series.

What was your role in the *Wonder Boy / Monster World* series?

Wonder Boy (ARC): Direction, Game Design, Level Design, Sound
Wonder Boy in Monster Land (ARC): Direction, Game Design, Level Design, Co-Programmer
Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap (SMS): Direction, Game Design, Level Design, Main-Programmer
Wonder Boy III: Monster Lair (ARC): Direction, Game Design, Level Design
Wonder Boy in Monster World (GEN): I did not work on this
Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap (GG): Direction, Level Design, Main-Program (Game Design was not needed)
Monster World IV (MD): Direction, Game Design, Level Design

Sega or Hudson developed all of the other ports. The only version we ported was the Game Gear version of *Monster World II*. We made it more fun, too.

How was the original *Wonder Boy* conceived?

I wanted to make an action game with the feeling of pressure. Therefore I made a horizontal scrolling platformer where the player could not stop moving. It was too difficult, and I was unable to play it, so I regretfully had to change it. That became *Wonder Boy*. The skateboarding item is a remnant of the initial plan.



Was this auto-scrolling idea from the first *Wonder Boy* the inspiration for *Wonder Boy III: Monster Lair*?

Your inference is not bad. But, the answer is no. Because *Monster Lair* had two players at the same time, it was easier to play an automatically scrolling game.



Can you elaborate on the relationship between Westone and Hudson? Did Sega actually own the *Wonder Boy* character? Many of the *Wonder Boy* games were released on non-Sega platforms by Hudson, but starring different characters, like Takahashi Meijin, Bikkuriman and the beetle guy in *Dynastic Hero*.

“*Wonder Boy*” is only a trademark that Sega owns. My company owns all of the copyrights.

Therefore, there is no problem in letting the *Wonder Boy* character appear in any game that Hudson releases. However, Hudson almost always changed the character... Why was that? I once politely asked the staff at Hudson, but they would not tell me.



Was there any communication between the Hudson team that made Takahashi Meijin and Westone? The later games in that series (the fourth for the Famicom series, the second for the Super Famicom) seem to borrow heavily from the *Monster World* structure.

My company was not involved with the game design for the *Adventure Island* series at all. I'm not really familiar with *Adventure Island 4* and *Super Adventure Island 2* either. Of course, my company still approves the license. I did, however, supervise the first *Super Adventure Island*. But otherwise, the staff at Hudson developed them on their own.

What prompted the switch from the straight-up platforming of *Wonder Boy* to the action-RPG mechanics of *Monster Land*?

It's because I got absorbed in *Wizardry*. After *Wonder Boy* was released we played that legendary game every day while avoiding work. Therefore, I wanted to combine RPG elements with an action game.

Is the character from *Wonder Boy* (Tom-Tom), supposed to be the same character from *Wonder Boy*

in *Monster Land* (Bocke)?

I'll leave it your imagination whether they are the same character. By the way, Tom-Tom and Tanya are not the names that I originally gave them. They were initially called Bocke and Tina. Tom-Tom may be the name given by Sega for the overseas editions.

What were *Monster Land's* biggest influences? I thought maybe *Tower of Druaga* or *Dragon Buster*, since they both combine action and RPG elements in an arcade setting.

I often played *Tower of Druaga* and *Dragon Buster*, but I don't like either of them very much. They made me irritated, maybe because in both there is no one to talk to in the stages. On the other hand, there was no one to talk to in *Wizardry* either. Haha! But, I love the music of *Dragon Buster*.



Have you seen the European console ports? They have some... interesting artwork. Personally, it looks more like *Wonder Boy* is wearing a diaper than a loincloth.

I did not know there was a version of *Monster Land* for the Amiga. I tried looking at Youtube in order to verify its quality. It looks like the real thing. I was not aware of its existence. That costume was also known as a diaper even in Japan. Because it was so amusing, I was quite fond of it. I even used it as my icon on Twitter. On the Amiga, I must've played *F1 World Championship* a million times. Game software back then, that was the most realistic game on the Amiga, with beautiful graphics. Those were the good old days.

The original *Monster Land* didn't seem to have an official English arcade release, but there was a (badly translated into English) bootleg. Are you familiar with this,

or is there any story behind it that you're aware of?

Yes, I am aware of it. It's in MAME, isn't it? Hardware is always evolving. When I want to check on a game I developed in the past, I use MAME. It is a very convenient program. :-) At that time, I knew there was an English version. I did not know whether it was a pirated edition. Because I am interested in making new products, I do not mind these things from the past.



The recent Virtual Console / XBLA / PSN versions of *Monster Land* use the same English translation as the European 8-bit computer ports from many years before. Do you know why this was? Was there originally an official English translation that just wasn't released?

I developed the English version of *Monster Land* in 1987. When the staff of Sega was in charge of the English translation, I kept a record of it. In other words, the English (computer) versions were based off this translation. But I do not know whether Sega sold the English (arcade) version abroad. The English version delivered this time is based on the master ROM from 1987. The producer of this project found the ROM looking in a Sega warehouse. Therefore this is a completely genuine article.

Is there any particular story behind that smoking, eye-patch wearing pig in *Monster World II* who runs a shop? He's such a silly character!

One of the designers drew that on their own. The instructions I gave her was to create "a character like an animal but not an animal". Thank you for liking the "one-eyed pig".

In Japan, *Monster World III* for the Mega Drive was technically released before *Monster World II*

for the Game Gear. How did this come to be?

When we were working on *Monster World III* and the Game Gear was released, Sega wanted to port *Monster World II* from the SMS to the GG. However, the GG is a portable game machine with a tiny LCD screen, so it was difficult to port without compromising the game. It was necessary to remake the game because of the small screen. I then decided to develop the remake myself. This was the only port developed in-house. Since I made *Monster World II* twice, I was able to perfect it.

Do you know why *Monster World IV* was not released outside of Japan until recently? It's such a beautiful game, that it seems odd Sega would not localize it when it was initially published.

I do not know the reason. At that time, Sega of America and Sega of Europe just decided not to sell it. They may have thought it would not have been commercially successful. Alternatively, there may have been other big titles at the time, and they may just have been too busy.

Was there a specific reason for moving away from "Wonder Boy" and putting in Asha, the female hero, in *Monster World IV*?

Because of the constantly changing nature of the series, it was necessary to come up with something new and different from *MW3*. With good intentions, I wanted to betray the expectations of the fans, but in a good way. About the protagonist becoming female, there were some pros and cons, some from within the team, but I was glad to change it to a girl. Asha's running animation is incredibly adorable.



Interview with Ryuichi Nishizawa



Was Westone involved in the recent *Sega Vintage Monster World* collection? If so, did Westone or Sega handle the new translation of *Monster World IV*?

My company was not involved in the development of the *Monster World Vintage Collection*, we only granted the license. We left it to Yosuke Okunari, a producer at Sega. He has the nickname "Game Archaeologist", as he is a big fan of retro games. His passion for retro games is second to none. It's no exaggeration to say that the *Monster World Vintage Collection* was born from his obsession. If you play some of the *Sega Vintage* series that have been released, you will be able to understand his passion.

The translation of *MW4*, under his supervision, was a brand new product. We have heard that his translation was completely redone. His uncompromised enthusiasm is amazing. I am very grateful to him. Because of him, you are able to play the *MW* series on big screen televisions.



Have you played *Shantae*, which feels to many like a spiritual successor of *Monster World IV*? If so, what are your thoughts on it?

I only found out about *Shantae* just recently. It was never released in Japan. Recently, I downloaded

Shantae: Risky's Revenge for the iPhone and played it. There is indeed a similarity to *MW4*. The heroine and the world are all drawn with beautiful 2D graphics, and the excellent controls are all aspects it has in common with the *MW* series. My impression is that *Shantae* is a very high quality game. WayForward's staff are very talented. In Japan, 2D graphics designers are becoming rare. I would like to release 2D games on a regular basis from now on.



What is your favorite *Monster World* game?

Monster World II. I loved it so much I made it twice.

Are you familiar with how the series was handled in Brazil? The games now star characters from the *Monica's Gang* series.

Yes, I am familiar with it. Because of the popularity of *Monica* in Brazil, *Wonder Boy* was able to draw fans over there. There is



even a fan page for it on Facebook, but unfortunately I cannot read Portuguese. :-(

Is there any chance for a new *Monster World* or *Wonder Boy* installment in the future?

Yes, I'd like to make one if I have the opportunity. I have ideas for both *Wonder Boy* and *Monster World* already in my head. Of course, I want to make both in 3D. I want to start from creating an image of the world, but where to find a good 3D artist?

Where do you think a new *Monster World* game would work best; digital distribution platforms (such as WiiWare, XBLA and PSN), handheld consoles or television consoles?

It is a very puzzling problem. Because I want the world of *Monster World* to be filled with deep emotion slowly and carefully, a console game may be better. But, as for me, a handheld game may be better because I want children to play. Please tell me which game platform is appropriate for *MW*.

How do you feel about so many independent Western developers taking inspiration from Japanese games of the 1980s and 1990s?

I was a boy who loved movies. I was very impressed when watching *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Star Wars* in the movie theaters. It was an opportunity and I came to think that I wanted to do creative work such as filmmaking. My production activity is always affected by movies, from Hollywood in particular. In other words, I get inspiration from Western creators, too. The game industry has become huge. Therefore game developers must make products for a global market. In the near future, the developer of various countries will combine teams and will come to develop a game.

The PC Engine game *Blood Gear* is referred to as "*Aurail Scenario 2*" in the credits. Is it meant to be a sequel to the Sega arcade game? How did this development come about? It seems to parallel *Wonder Boy*, in that it started out as an arcade game, then became an action-RPG for consoles.

That's an extremely geeky question (laughs). I didn't even think *Blood Gear* or *Aurail* were released in foreign countries. I

don't even think there's anyone in Japan who can answer this question! (laughs)



I think that calling it "Aurail Scenario 2" was a joke from the younger staff members developing *Blood Gear*. *Aurail* was produced for and known by hardcore gamers. Did you enjoy it?

In 2006, a soundtrack was published for an unreleased Westone game called *Tokei Jikake no Aquario*. Unfortunately information about this game is scarce. Do you remember anything about it, or why it was not released? There's only one screenshot currently out there (pictured right), and it looks like it has a really cool visual style similar to the *Monster World* games. (On a side note, you wouldn't happen to have any more screenshots or art still remaining from this game, would you?)

Aquario of the Clockwork was the last arcade game developed by my company. I had been working and suffering for a long time to complete it, but the location test results were poor. It was an eccentric action game with three-player simultaneous play. The graphics were quite excellent, but it was not released, unfortunately. The program is located in the archives of my company, so I do not have any screenshots. If *Aquario of the Clockwork* were released as part of the *Sega Vintage Collection*, would people be interested in buying it? I would be very interested to know. :-)



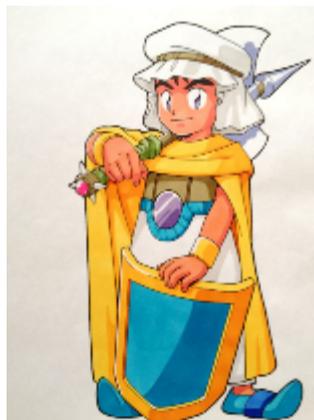
After our interview, Nishizawa searched the company archives to uncover *Aquario of the Clockwork* and attempt to restore it into a playable state. He was able to extract the below image of the player characters, with the

message "*Hajimemashite*", or "Nice to meet you". The source code was able to be salvaged, but unfortunately the sound data was missing, so currently it does not boot in any emulators.

Nishizawa also set up a page on Facebook to communicate with fans. It can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/MW-FAN/465366220145115>

If the URL is a bit long, you can search for it by typing "MW FAN" into the Facebook search box.

He has posted previously unseen artwork, including a male player character originally slated for *Monster World IV* that had to be removed due to ROM constraints.



■ Quartet



Quartet

AKA: Double Target: Cynthia no Nemuri (JP MKIII)

Original Release: 1986

Platforms: ARC, SMS, C64, CPC, ZX, PS2



Quartet seems to have come about by taking Midway's *Gauntlet* and turning it into a side-scrolling shooter. While the basics – the four player simultaneous action, the draining life-meter, the monster generators – are all clearly inspired by it, *Quartet* drastically reworks all of these concepts into something unique.

A Party of Four

There are four different characters, each with a distinctive weapon – Lee, clad in blue and sporting a conspicuously 1980s mustache, has a wide beam; Joe, wearing yellow and being the generic good guy, has a “speed gun”; Mary, the sole lady and clad in red, has a bazooka; and Edger, with a bald head and keen visor, wearing green, wields the “miracle gun”.

The quartet of warriors has been sent to a space colony named Zero-6, which has been taken over by space pirates. The goal in each stage is to find the boss monster, kill it to obtain a key and unlock the door to the next area. In the first few stages, the boss can easily be found hanging out right by the exit, but in later areas it usually takes a bit of searching before you can find the monster. The levels are fairly small though, and only scroll horizontally, so if you stumble across the exit before the boss, it's just a matter of doubling back.

The stages are also littered with power-ups. The most

common allow you to jump higher, walk faster, or even grant you a jet pack to fly, but you'll also routinely see bouncing colored balls of energy. As you shoot them, they'll cycle through four colors – if you grab it when it corresponds to the color of your player, then your weapon will be strengthened. It's best not to get too attached to these powers, though, seeing as you'll drop most of them any time you take damage, and you lose them when you go to the next stage anyway.

Beyond the four player simultaneous action, there are numerous other traces of *Gauntlet's* inspiration, although they've been tampered with. The stages are filled with enemy generators, which constantly pump out bad guys, but there's no way to destroy or even damage them. Your characters' health is determined by a numerical gauge, starting at 9000, and depletes slowly over time, as well as when taking damage. However, the counter is actually quite slow, and since *Quartet* is never as relenting with its bad guys as *Gauntlet*, it doesn't feel like it was cynically designed to gobble your quarters as fast as possible. Ultimately it's made redundant because there's an invisible timer anyway, which will send a grim reaper after your characters if you take too long.

As a single-player game *Quartet* is only barely interesting. Apart from the amount of time it takes you to recover from a hit

and the need to retrieve any dropped items, both of which are annoyances, the game feels rather rote. On the other hand, these mechanics make sense when put in a multiplayer perspective.

The dynamic changes completely when played with two or more people which, as the name implies, is the way it was meant to be played. There's a unique cooperative/competitive dynamic that's constantly changing, because while all of the players have the same goal in common, they're also all competing for score; throughout each stage there are score items and multipliers. Furthermore, at the end of the stage, everyone is ranked according to performance, with the player who opened the door gaining the most points. While you can't directly harm other players, you can bounce off their heads, potentially screwing them up just enough so they can get hit by an enemy and drop their key, allowing you to grab the glory for yourself.

Visually, *Quartet* is decent looking, though the handful of environments – outer space, cave, ruins, ducts, and base – are recycled throughout. The sprites are small and a bit dorky, but some of the boss designs are amusing, especially the one-eyed, banana-hammock-clad bat creature. Similarly, the music is catchy, although with only four or so tracks played during the whole game, they can get repetitive. The punchy FM synth of the *Quartet* main theme is on par with other Sega arcade tracks of the time. Also notable is the rap theme, where static voice samples stutter out “S-S-S-S-SEGA!” It's not pleasant to listen to, but remains amusing in that 1980s “what on earth were they thinking” sort of way. A few of these tracks were also carried over to Sega's *Spider-Man* arcade



game. The soundtrack was provided by Katsuhiro Hayashi, who also did the music to *SDI*, *Gain Ground*, *Ashura (Rambo First Blood Part II / Secret Command)*, and *Hokuto no Ken (Black Belt)* for the Sega Master System.

Without the arcade (or online multiplayer with MAMEHub) experience, it might be hard to see what's so interesting about *Quartet*. Four-player games eventually exploded in popularity thanks to Konami's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, but the game and its descendants were all

beat-em-ups as opposed to action-platformers, and none really had the same competitive thing going for it. Even now there's nothing quite like it; a sort of evolutionary dead-end that remains an interesting experiment in multiplayer gaming.

There is also technically a *Quartet 2*. In the grand Sega tradition of releasing “sequels” that are only minor variations, this is a conversion kit which is basically the same, but instead only allows for two players rather than four, and each player can pick their character, as opposed to being assigned based on which joystick you pick.

Quartet was released on the Commodore 64, Amstrad and ZX Spectrum, published by Activision and ported by Core Design. The Amstrad and ZX Spectrum versions are similar, but the ZX release is more colorful.



■ Quartet

The Commodore 64 version is rather slow, and the levels still suffer from the same rather boring design. The music is a hacked up and drastically shortened version of the theme song, which had the potential to be decent if it weren't so repetitive. Despite the presence of four status indicators at the top of the screen, all versions are simultaneous two-player only. There are also only fifteen levels in total. Needless to say, none of these home computer ports are particularly worth playing.

Quartet was also kinda-sorta ported to the Sega Master System, although it's really more of a sequel / spinoff than anything remotely faithful to the arcade. Four-player simultaneous play is impossible on the platform, so the game's been scaled back to two players at the same time. Lee and Joe are gone, leaving only Mary (now with a ponytail and a miniskirt) and Edger. The Japanese version is known as

Double Target: The Sleeping Cynthia, with the subtitle referring to the sleeping-in-stasis space princess your characters are rescuing. The American and European versions keep the name *Quartet*, making its ties to the original arcade game more evident, even though that name doesn't suit the conversion at all.

There are only six levels, a massive step back from the 32 of the arcade game, though most stages consist of two or three areas with different background tiles, as well as unique bosses. However, you need to find the five (not quite hidden) stars if you want to access the final area. There's also an actual ending now, compared to the arcade game, which looped infinitely. You now have three lives as opposed to one, and your energy starts at 10,000, though it counts down much more quickly. There are also bottomless pits, which of course mean instant death. Though there



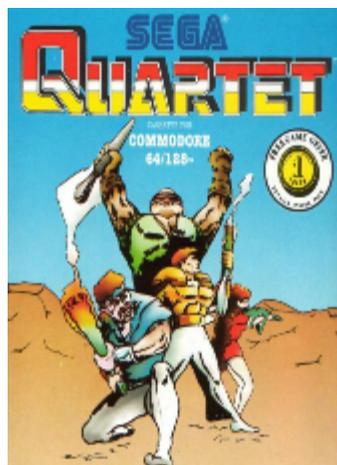
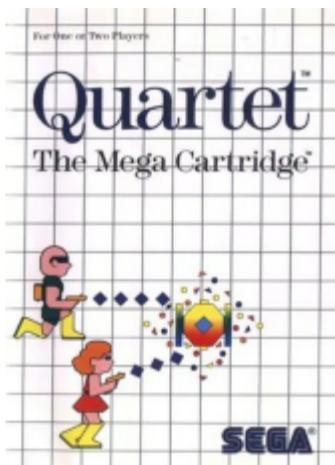
are a few different weapons, the bouncing colored power-up orbs are gone, and many power-ups have been removed. The monster generators are also missing, since now enemies respawn randomly around the screen.

Technically it's decent enough. The arcade game just couldn't be duplicated given the hardware, and this just sort of does its own thing based on the template of the original. It's not an amazing game by any standards – even as a two-player game it pales next to something like *Contra* on the NES, its closest equivalent – but it's more fun as a single-player game than the arcade version.

Other than the name change, there's one other curious alteration between the regions. In the Japanese release, Mary looks similar to the arcade version, having black hair with bangs, tied in a ponytail. In the American and European versions, she has wavy, medium length brown hair. Presumably this change was to make her look more Caucasian, although even following that line of logic it's a bit nonsensical, because everyone looks like manga characters anyway.



Above & Left: [ARC] More four-player action
Below: The arcade instruction sheet, the SMS cover, and the C64 cover



The SMS version also includes a secret screen with cameos from other Sega characters, including Opa-Opa, Teddy Boy, Alex Kidd, and Egul (from *Pit Pot*).

The only arcade perfect version of *Quartet* was released in 2005 for the PlayStation 2, as the 21st volume in the *Sega Ages* line. Dubbed the *Sega System 16 Collection*, it's an extremely accurate emulation, with numerous screen display options to run at 240p, 480p or 480i, with the ability to add in scanlines. By default it uses the *Quartet 2* ROM set, but if it detects a four-player adapter, it will run the original *Quartet*. Also included is a bunch of supplemental material, including a short instruction manual, as well as both regional versions of the Master System port. It's a nice package, though some sort of online functionality would've been nice. The disc also includes *SDI* (more widely known for its Master System port, *Global Defense*), with all of the same options as *Quartet*.



Compared to other compilations which feature multiple games, this one features scant by only having two, especially since these two weren't particularly popular. Their selection was the result of an online poll held by Sega. Around the same time, a soundtrack CD was also released containing the music to both games.

Quartet has not been entirely forgotten by Sega – the theme song was remixed, titled *Quartet of Multiple Futures*, and included in the 2010 release *Hatsune Miku Project DIVA Arcade*, complete with Vocaloid lyrics.

Above-Right: [SMS] Sega's home port is almost a totally different game



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Master System



Amstrad CPC



Commodore 64



ZX Spectrum



Master System (English)



Master System (Japanese)

Thunder Blade



Thunder Blade

AKA: **Super Thunder Blade** (GEN)

Original Release: 1987

Platforms: ARC, SMS, GEN, PCE, IBM, C64, AMI, AST, X68, CPC, ZX, PS2, PSP, PS3, 360, Wii, WIN, 3DS



Thunder Blade is one of those mid-to-late 1980s Sega arcade games that gets a bad rap. Like many of its brethren, this was because the home systems at the time weren't nearly powerful enough for faithful arcade ports. But while *After Burner*, *Space Harrier*, and even *Galaxy Force* reaped the benefits of re-release on 32-bit and later platforms, *Thunder Blade* never got the same treatment.

It's a shame, of course, because the original arcade game is actually pretty cool. The concept was obviously born from one of Sega's developers catching Roy Schneider's *Blue Thunder* on TV late one night and decided to make a video game loosely based on helicopters shooting stuff (the title screen is even a digitized still from the movie). It runs on the classic Sega X Board, and uses Sega's popular "super scaler" technique for some pretty impressive effects. There are two distinct camera angles: an overhead, and an over-the-shoulder viewpoint.

The overhead sequences are impressive; since your helicopter is angled towards the ground the view is slightly tilted, which is unique. Your arsenal includes both a machine gun and missiles, both of which have unlimited ammo – the only difference is their attack range. In addition to moving left and right, you can also raise or lower your altitude, scaling the ground back and forth with some impressively smooth animation. Just watching it in action is

incredibly cool, especially after you've been shot down and take off back into the skies. The helicopter has constant momentum going forward - although technically you can't move forwards and backwards within the visible playing field, you can alter your speed, which includes a super fast turbo mode.

There are a number of cool effects at work here. Other Sega "super scaler" games like *OutRun* pulled off a bit of visual trickery by layering several identical tiles one after another, each positioned and scaled slightly different from the last. This gave the impression of a solid object like, say, a canyon wall. Obviously the technique looks a bit cheesy in retrospect, but it's remarkable for the time. Due to its unique perspective, *Thunder Blade* does something different. The buildings and mountains found throughout the game are all layered tiles, but each tile moves at a different speed as you fly past, which gives the illusion of depth in a strictly 2D game, without any fancy use of polygons. Pretty clever!

A distance meter highlights your progress through the level. Partway through the stage the viewpoint changes to a more familiar over-the-shoulder perspective. They're pretty much just like the bonus stages of *After Burner*, in that it's possible to crash into the scenery if you're not careful. Here, the machine gun is used to take out airborne



Above: A flyer for the arcade version in Japan, inspired by the Bond flick *For Your Eyes Only*, plus the (SMS) artwork, and the Japanese cover for *Super Thunder Blade*
 Below: [ARC] The visuals are easily on the level of other Sega "super scaler" games

targets, while missiles travel along the ground.

When you reach the end, the perspective once again switches to an overhead view, except now you can't change your altitude. Your goal is to conduct a bombing run on a gigantic tank and/or jet, taking apart its turrets piece by piece. The only exception is the final stage, which ends in the over-the-shoulder perspective against a different variety of gigantic tank.

It's a short game with only four rounds, consisting of flights through a city, the wilderness (complete with a harrowing trip through some caverns, where you skillfully need to dodge rock pillars), a canyon, and an oil refinery. It's pretty standard stuff, but like most Sega games of the era, the brightly colored pixel art is attractive, and it can't be overemphasized that the scaling still looks incredible, even decades

later. The music is appropriate 1980s action fare, with a significant if not overwhelming amount of cowbell. It's rather unmemorable, since the explosions tend to drown it out, but it works well enough. Of course, like many other Sega games, the big draw of the arcade version was the sit-down arcade cabinet – the home versions just don't have quite the same appeal.

The Master System port obviously can't even come close, and doesn't even try for the most part. The overhead scenes have been changed entirely to 2D, without the ability to change altitude or alter your speed, while all of the 3D effects have been totally removed. As such it feels like a really standard, really boring shooter, especially since your firepower is so weak and there aren't any extra weapons. Strangely, most of the helicopters you fight don't fire any guns, and

are content to fly in the same handful of formations, ramming straight through your copter in countless kamikaze attacks.

The over-the-shoulder segments aren't much better. Naturally, they're pretty choppy, but the first stage is remarkably boring because half of the enemies can't even damage you – they're just there for target practice. It gets more difficult by the second stage, where the choppy scrolling makes flying through the cave and maneuvering quite difficult. The levels are essentially the same as the arcade game, although the order of the bosses has been changed. The only positive aspect is the image of the burning, wrecked helicopter when you lose all of your lives. Otherwise, it's a total wash. Interestingly enough, the Japanese version uses a few different sound effects to the American/European version, which is a little less harsh on the ears.



Thunder Blade



There are numerous other ports, available for home computers. One of the best is the X68000 version, ported by SPS and published by Sharp in 1990. It's close to arcade perfect, though the sprites are smaller and less numerous. But since this version was only released in Japan, Western gamers had to do with one of the many conversions published by US Gold.

Most of these, for the Commodore 64, Amiga, Amstrad and PC, are notably impressive, because they actually contain the scaling in the overhead stages, which the console ports never bothered with. They're obviously not quite as smooth, and the tiles aren't as detailed – they're usually just a single color or two, depending on the version – but it's not bad, despite the huge border on the top of the screen.

The Amiga and Atari ST versions look the best, while the IBM PC release has some notably downgraded visuals. The problem lies with the controls – in most of these, you need to adjust your speed manually, otherwise you'll just hover in midair. In the Amiga version, for example, you need to hold down the fire button and press up to increase speed, then



press down to take off. It's rather unintuitive, and can lead to a lot of cheap deaths. The only version spared from this is the Commodore 64 version, which despite being one of the worst looking of the bunch, handles fairly well. The ZX Spectrum version is monochrome, choppy, and the worst of the bunch, while the MSX version is just a quicky port of the ZX Spectrum version.

There are two 16-bit console ports. The Genesis version was released around the launch of the system and is called *Super Thunder Blade*, despite there being nothing "super" about it. The first overhead section of each level has been cut out entirely. Instead, each stage starts off in the over-the-shoulder segment. To make up for this, these stages are longer and have a new mid-boss, similar to the one fought at the end of the arcade version. After defeating this, you go into an overhead view, but there's no scaling at all. You couldn't change altitude in these scenes in the arcade game either, so they play similarly. Once again there are only four stages, with the first, second and fourth being roughly identical to the arcade game, and the third being a brand new level that takes place over the ocean. There's also a new final boss, fought in the overhead perspective. The



Above: [SMS] The home ports are weak, but the flaming wreckage is cool
Below: The arcade cabinet and [PCE] cover

targeting is also simplified, as missiles now home in on enemies.

Regrettably, the hardware still chokes on the game. The 3D scrolling is better than any of the other ports save the X68000 version, but it's still a far cry from the arcade game. The multi-layered buildings are now just a single layer, and some areas look embarrassingly bad, like the caverns in the second stage. Additionally, there's a split second of lag before every movement, which makes maneuvering through anything a massive bout of frustration. You can stop and hover but otherwise can't change speed. Overall, it's a terrible port.

The PC Engine version, ported by NEC Avenue, actually keeps all of the overhead sections. It removes the scaling, but as a compromise, allows the helicopter to move up and down the screen, which you couldn't do in *Super Thunder Blade*. The scrolling is slow and choppy, but it's better than just hacking out these segments altogether.

The animation in the over-the-shoulder stages is smoother than the Master System version, but not quite as good as *Super Thunder Blade*. The distance meter is present – it's absent from the other console versions – but you still can't change speed. All things considered, it's a better port than any of Sega's own attempts, though that's not saying much.

The 2014 3DS port includes the usual widescreen and 3D enhancements. Also new is a "Special Mode" with rebalanced gameplay, altered levels, boss introduction text, and an extra level featuring a new final boss, based on the Grantanoff flying fortress, taken from the SMS version of *After Burner*.

Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Sega Master System



PC Engine



X68000



Amiga



Commodore 64



IBM PC



ZX Spectrum



Arcade



Sega Master System



PC Engine



X68000



Amiga



Commodore 64



IBM PC



ZX Spectrum



Genesis

Galaxy Force



Galaxy Force / Galaxy Force II

Original Release: 1988

Platforms: ARC, FMT, GEN, SMS, C64, AMI, AST, CPC, ZX, SAT, PS2, WII, WIN, 3DS



Galaxy Force is the ultimate culmination of Sega's "super scaler" series, developed for their System Y board in 1988. While the practice of using 2D bitmaps to simulate 3D has long become passe, this game manages to impress even decades after its initial release.

Not only is *Galaxy Force* essentially "*After Burner* in space", but it also bridges the gap between Sega's older "super scaler" games and later, fully 3D rail-shooters like *Panzer Dragoon* and *Rez*. Taking control of the spaceship Try-Z through six levels, as you fight against an organization known as The Fourth Empire, you have two primary weapons: a rapid fire Vulcan cannon of limited use, and much more powerful homing missiles, which can lock on to enemies if you target them with your cursor.

Beyond that are several other tweaks to the formula. In *After Burner*, your range of motion was limited to a fairly small box, but in *Galaxy Force* your movement is much less constrained. You're still flying forward on a set of rails, but you can veer off the sides a bit, plus it's much easier to dodge. It feels like you're more involved with the piloting of the ship, instead of just watching scenery fly by. It's also paced significantly slower, so it's a fair bit less chaotic. The missiles work differently too, in that you can lock onto multiple enemies, and fire at them all at once. You also

have an unlimited supply of missiles, making them the go-to weapon in most cases.

Rather than flying over largely empty expanses of terrain, there's also a great focus on level design. Most stages are divided into two areas: an outside area, and an interior "fortress" stage. In the latter you fly through caves and tunnels, an evolution of the canyon areas from *After Burner*. Each stage climaxes with a brief siege on a central core, which go down without any major fight. It's clear from the first stage that *Galaxy Force* was heavily inspired by the final battle against the Death Star in *Return of the Jedi*.

The Force Is With You

There are other subtle *Star Wars* references too, which highlight how impressive this game looked, especially back in 1988. Shortly after you're launched out of your carrier for the first mission, a gigantic, long length cruiser sneaks up from behind. Like everything else in the "super scaler" universe, it's just the same image stacked over itself multiple times, but due to some impressive visual trickery, it actually looks something like an Imperial Star Destroyer, albeit on a smaller scale. Similarly, when you fly through an asteroid field, the sprites are layered in a way that it actually looks like a fully 3D object, even though it isn't.

The visual design, as you'd expect from Sega, never fails to



impress. Each stage has a unique theme, ranging from the asteroid belt in the first stage, the lava and solar flares in the second, the jungles and waterfalls of the third, and the numerous devastating tornadoes of the fourth. The final level also gets trippy, with tunnels featuring weaving expanses of color and other bits of visual craziness that are meant to represent hyperspace. The music, as expected of Sega, is quite classy. The melodies of most of the songs aren't terribly notable, but they all have really awesome bass lines, courtesy of some very high quality guitar samples, which gives the soundtrack a funkier texture than most other Sega arcade games. It was composed by Funky K.H. (Katsuhiko Hayashi) and Pretty K.N. (Kouichi Namaki), who also worked on *Thunder Blade*, which has some similarities to this soundtrack.

You can choose which of the five planets to begin your sortie, although they play out in a determined order from there. After conquering all of them, you can play the sixth and final stage. There are no power-ups, except for an attachment which will automatically merge with your fighter partway through the stage, allowing you to shoot more missiles at once.

Galaxy Force's biggest fault, more than most of Sega's other arcade games, is that it presents itself more as an amusement ride than a game. Many of the company's games featured cabinets that would sway back and forth as you pilot the ship, and *Galaxy Force* is no different. However, it is also much more transparent about milking as much money from the player as possible,

due to the "ENERGY" meter at the bottom of the screen. You begin with 1200 points, which quickly counts down from the moment you launch. Additionally, although you begin with a shield, it'll disappear after a few hits, with all further damage deducting from the energy total.

There are ways to mitigate the loss: accelerating in order to reach the end quicker, or killing as many enemies as possible to get a higher energy bonus, rewarded at various points throughout the stages. But unless you play a nearly perfect game, the countdown is so quick that it's incredibly difficult to recoup your losses, and the net result is a game that's limited to a few minutes of play per credit. In the overseas release, you can easily continue from where you left off by pumping in more credits – at least, up until the last level – but the Japanese version forbids continuing at all. Regardless of this problem, and even divorced from the motion-control cabinet it was meant to be played in, *Galaxy Force* is still an incredibly impressive feat of programming, a work of art in its own way.

Most instances of the game are known as *Galaxy Force II*.

Much like *After Burner*, the numeral indicates an enhanced version, rather than a true sequel – it's more like *Galaxy Force 2.0* than anything, thereby making the original version redundant. The first *Galaxy Force* was only on the market in Japan for two months before being superseded by this conversion kit. The number of levels was expanded from four to six, and each level was expanded and rebalanced. It also lets you fire all four missiles in a single button press, rather than firing individually like *After Burner*.

There are three different types of cabinet: a standard upright cabinet, and two full sit-down cabinets that tilt side-to-side, known as the Deluxe Edition and Super Deluxe Edition. They are mightily impressive, especially the Super Deluxe version, which could rotate up to 335 degrees left and right, and tip forwards and backwards at 15 degrees. The Super Deluxe cabinets also had headphone jacks so the player could get lost in the sights and sounds of *Galaxy Force*.

Alas, most games are likely to be more well known for their

Top: Cover artwork for the Commodore 64
Bottom: [ARC] The Star Destroyer homage, and what could be a reference to Cloud City



Galaxy Force

home ports rather than arcade originals, which tends to reflect badly on *Galaxy Force*. The System Y was simply far too powerful to be even remotely replicated on any console at the time, resulting in ports that were at best heavily compromised and at worst largely terrible. A major factor in all of the home versions though – since they're naturally less dependent on squeezing money from the player – is that the energy drainage is not as quick, and you regain substantially more after each level.

System Ports

For a long time the best version was the FM Towns computer release, which was also compatible with the Marty console. Both systems were only available in Japan. Ported by CRI, it looks and feels reasonably close to the arcade version, since the system was much more powerful than any other console at the time, but it's not without some downgrades. It runs in a window that takes up about 75% of the screen, plus the action isn't quite as smooth, often slowing down or causing sprite flickering. Some bits of detail have been scaled back too, like the number of robots found in the second part of the first stage, which has been greatly reduced. The branching paths in the tunnels are also gone. Still, it's far better than the other versions at the time, and includes a redbook audio soundtrack with some cool remixed music.

CRI also developed the Genesis version, which is far more regrettable. The system couldn't even replicate other "super scaler" games like *Space Harrier* or *OutRun*, so what hope could it have for *Galaxy Force II*? Since the system doesn't support sprite scaling, it instead uses a set of sprites, each drawn at specific distances, which is incredibly

choppy in motion. Most of the obstacles and enemies have been removed. The tunnel stages are done entirely with rolling colors, and it looks really, really awful. Due to the lack of buttons, the guns are on auto-fire by default, with the remaining buttons used to control speed and fire missiles. About the only thing that survived intact is the soundtrack, otherwise the game is barely playable.

The Master System, being an 8-bit system, obviously had even less of a chance to replicate the game, so the developers at Sega made a wise decision and redesigned everything to make it more suitable to the platform. It was released under the title *Galaxy Force*, ditching the numeral from most other home ports. It did not receive a Japanese release – Sega published it in Europe while Activision handled the duties in North America.

In many ways, this port is similar to Konami's 1988 Famicom Disk System game *Falsion*. In general, the game controls a little more like *Space Harrier* than *After Burner*. Most of the obstacles have been changed into waves of enemies that recur through the stage, until you reach the tunnel areas. The action is actually quite fast though the animation is predictably very choppy. The interior segments are much more difficult, since it's hard to make turns properly without under- or over-steering.

There are some other changes and niceties – the pre-level launch sequences are now brief cutscenes, which actually look nicer than most of the other home ports. The energy meter is completely gone, meaning there's no more timer, and instead your ship's integrity is based entirely on your shield. The speed controls are gone too, with the two main buttons used for the gun and missiles. It is also missing the fifth stage.



Top: The Super Deluxe arcade cabinet
Bottom: [ARC] The many impressive, otherworldly landscapes

The various home computer ports generally don't stack up to the console versions. In addition to being slower and choppier, they are played in a small window, with large status bars taking up most of the screen. The ZX Spectrum plays alright, but since the sprites are all transparent outlines, everything ends up blending together. The landscapes are also rendered as checkerboards, similar to *Space Harrier*.

The Amstrad version is similar but much more colorful, and uses rolling color bands. However, there's no music, and enemies have a nasty tendency to bump right into your back. The C64 version moves way too quickly, leaving everything as an incomprehensible mess of color. The music is decent though, and the "PENETRATE FORTRESS" and "POWER-UP" messages in gigantic letters are amusing.

The Amiga and Atari ST ports are comparable to the Genesis port, except for smaller sprites, and a window that takes up roughly 30% of the screen. They run a little bit faster but are still fairly choppy. While the floors and ceilings of the fortresses are rolling color bands, the walls are displayed using a sprite stretching effect, so these areas look a little less barren. Unfortunately, your ship controls too slowly, and you





Above-Left and Middle: The [SMS] port
Above-Right [C64] The text is comical

really need to pay attention to the speed of your ship in order to make turns.

Galaxy Force II got another shot on home consoles in 1998, for the Saturn in Japan. Ported by Appaloosa Entertainment, it's better than any of the other previous conversions, but the frame rate is capped at 30 FPS (rather than the 60 FPS of the arcade) and it still slows down on occasion. The only extras are in the form of some background story (in Japanese) and the option to watch a pre-recorded play-through. The music is all from the arcade version.

In 2007, *Galaxy Force II* was ported yet again, this time to the PlayStation 2 as part of the *Sega Ages 2500* line. Its full title is *Galaxy Force II: Special Extended Edition*. Developed by emulation wizards M2, this compilation includes a perfect port of the original arcade game, in addition to the Genesis and Master System ports. More importantly, M2 went above and beyond the call of duty by adding a new "Neo Classic" mode, which features smoothed out graphics, transparencies, and other graphical effects. These don't seem to be completely redrawn, and they're again pixelated, but it's still superior to the arcade version, even though it

suffers from the same pop up due to its erratic draw distance.

The best addition is the widescreen mode, which makes the original game seem horribly cramped by comparison. You're also given the option of listening to the original soundtrack or the arranged FM Towns music. There's also a brand new arrangement of the main theme, as well as a new ending song. "Neo Classic" also has a built-in cheat menu that lets you tinker with the amount of energy you start with, thereby sidestepping any issues with the difficulty.

The 3DS version features the same graphical enhancements and options as "Neo Classic", but is missing the arranged music. It includes simulated motion cabinet effects and some truly remarkable 3D, making it a real showcase.

Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



FM Towns



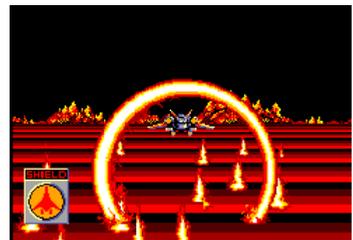
PlayStation 2



Genesis



Amiga



Sega Master System



Commodore 64



Amstrad CPC



ZX Spectrum

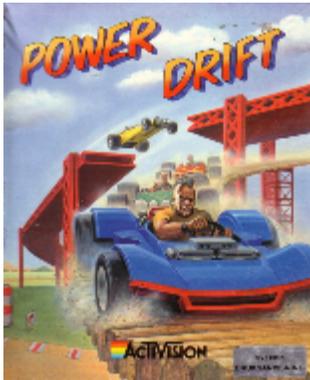
Power Drift



Power Drift

Original Release: 1988

Platforms: ARC, PCE, C64, CPC, ZX, AMI, AST, IBM, SAT, DC



Power Drift is a go-kart racing game, and one of many Sega titles that emulated 3D effects through the use of 2D sprites. It was directed by Yu Suzuki, and it's powered by the System Y Board, which also ran *Galaxy Force*.

What sets *Power Drift* apart from the pack is the way it uses those sprites. Most other arcade racing games used flat-shaded colors to simulate scrolling on the road. In contrast *Power Drift* constructs all of its track layouts using flat bitmaps, which makes it look like you're driving over a series of Lincoln Logs.

While initially this seems a bit silly, it allows the tracks to feel like mini roller coasters, with sharp inclines, dives, curves, and occasionally even jumps. There aren't any guard rails on the courses either, making it extremely easy to fall off the edges. And compared to most other similar games, which only stuck the camera right behind you, *Power Drift* introduces each course with a fly-by, and spins around wildly whenever you go out of control. The whole screen also tilts left and right as you steer, which adds to the dizzying experience. Like most games of this type, it's fascinating to see how Sega tried to emulate a wholly 3D space using strictly 2D technology. Certain cabinets were sit-down models with hydraulics that tilted the player left and right up to 20 degrees.

There are 25 tracks in total, divided into five sets of five. Each

is short and requires four laps to complete. If you manage to place high enough in the given set of tracks, you get to play a bonus track, where your car morphs into either the motorcycle from *Hang On* or the jet from *After Burner*. The music is upbeat and catchy, but it tends to get drowned out by the tire squeals.

A Bit Awkward

While impressive to a certain degree, the controls are too touchy, and the action is too chaotic, especially with all of the disjointed terrain sprites flying around. In addition, there are a dozen drivers, each categorized with a unique, super deformed face at the top of the screen, which makes the races feel remarkably crowded. There's also technically no "drifting" in the game, at least in how it's been defined in modern racing games.

There was a networked release of *Power Drift* which allowed up to eight cabinets to be linked together. Known as *Power Drift: Tsuushin Taisen* ("Network Versus Battle"), it lets you play the first level as a practice run, and changes up the finishing requirements. The course layout is also slightly different.

Power Drift has a fairly decent reputation in Europe due to the quality of the home computer ports. None of them are particularly faithful to the arcade version, since the graphical tricks



used by the System Y Board are totally missing. The roads are gray or colorless, the screen doesn't tilt, and most of the details on the side of the road are missing.

The most well regarded version is the Commodore 64 release, which runs quite fast and even keeps most of the roadside decorations, including the tunnels. It also has some excellent music, though only one song is used during gameplay.

The Amstrad, MSX and ZX Spectrum versions are essentially identical outside of their color schemes, though they're all much slower and visually more sparse. The IBM PC version is displayed in VGA so it's the most colorful, and it runs very



smoothly, but the amount of detail on the courses is pathetic.

The Amiga and Atari ST versions try to replicate the scaled sprite look of the arcade, and even have the camera panning/rotating intro. These versions use sprites of different sizes rather than actually scaling them – so it's not nearly as smooth – but this allows for mostly accurate courses. However, the gaps between the road blocks are more evident, plus it's incredibly choppy and glitchy.

There were plans for Dempa to port the game to the Mega Drive, but the project was ultimately canceled. The only console port around the time of release was for the PC Engine, ported by Copya System and

published by Asmik Ace. The PC Engine also could not scale sprites, so it uses a technique similar to the Amiga/Atari version. However, it's smoother and much more playable. Unfortunately there is plenty of flicker, plus there are only six racers at once, half that of the arcade. It's also missing quite a bit of content, with only a single set of 10 courses.

The two best ports were released for the Saturn and Dreamcast. The Saturn version was ported by Phant and published in 1996. It's an excellent port and includes a "Grand Prix" mode, as well as the option for arranged or arcade music. The only downside is that the game runs at 30 frames per second rather than 60.

The Dreamcast version was included as a compilation disc featured in the *Yu Suzuki Game Works Vol. 1* book, released in 2001. It's a straight port of the arcade version, so it lacks the extra tournament mode and arranged music, but it does run at a smooth 60 FPS.

Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



PC Engine



Amiga



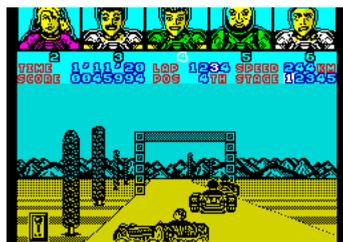
Commodore 64



Amstrad CPC



IBM PC



ZX Spectrum

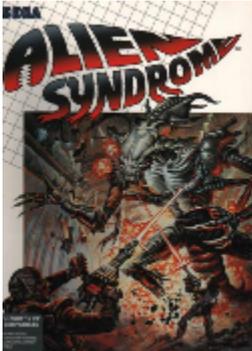
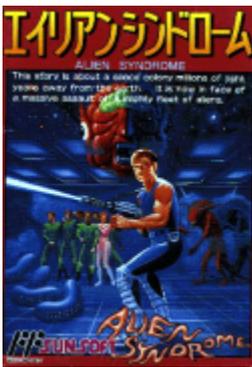
Alien Syndrome



Alien Syndrome

Original Release: 1987

Platforms: ARC, SMS, NES, C64, X68, AMI, AST, IBM, PS2, PS3, 360



Alien Syndrome is pretty clearly a rip off of the movie *Aliens*, since Konami had the actual license to the movie (and made their own suitable arcade entry).

Although it looks like a typical overhead, character-based shooter, *Alien Syndrome* is a rather far stretch from linear games like *Commando*. Players can take control of either Ricky or Mary (outer space commandos who are absolutely in no way related to Michael Biehn or Sigourney Weaver), or both during simultaneous two-player action. Each of the stages takes place on one of seven invaded colonies, where the aliens have trapped the humans in cocoons and biologically contaminated most of the structures.

As an insurance plan in case Ricky and Mary can't save the day, each of the colonies is set to explode after a certain amount of time. You're therefore working against the clock to find enough hostages, get to the exit, and kill the boss. The stages aren't particularly complex, but there are maps posted around that will clue you in on the locations of your comrades. In addition to your clumsy little pea shooter, you can also find new weapons like lasers and two different kinds of flamethrower, in addition to options that shoot behind your character. With the constantly spawning enemies, *Alien Syndrome* manages to emulate the feel of *Gauntlet* without all

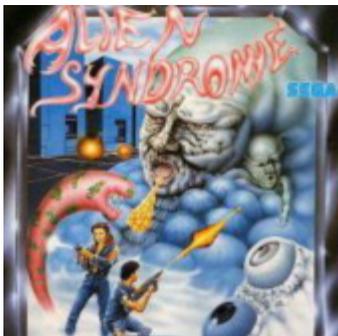
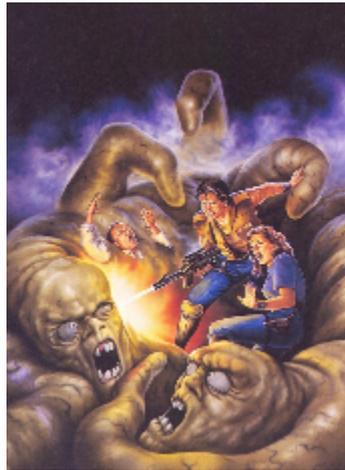
of the clumsiness.

Alien Syndrome has no tolerance for screw-ups. You cannot continue, at all. While the levels don't pose too much of a challenge, some of the boss encounters can be quite difficult, especially if you get killed and revert to the default cannon. You're even forced to use it during the final confrontation, regardless of how well you've done.

Absolute Terror

The high difficulty level adds to an atmosphere of complete terror. The music is tense, low-key, and incredibly creepy. A single tap from an enemy and your player will cry out a blood-curdling scream before collapsing. It's all rather unnerving.

But what really makes the game memorable are the awesomely grotesque boss designs. The first boss is a gigantic rotund ball with a little green dude sticking out from whatever would be classed as its shoulder. After taking enough hits the body explodes, leaving behind a head which morphs into some kind of twisted thing with an extended jaw and ugly horns when it attacks. The second boss appears to be a pulsating heart surrounded by blobs. The third boss is a strange, lumbering, multi-legged creature with eyes that detach and float around the screen, which looks both goofy and horrific. The sixth boss is an



Tengen in America – is relatively faithful to the arcade version, even offering two-player simultaneous play and a new intro cinema. The characters walk much slower, though, and you must rescue every single prisoner before you can fight the boss. The bosses are also pretty similar, although some of their attacks had to be scaled down.

More of a Remake

The Sega Master System version is practically a whole new game. The scrolling is gone, and instead it flips screen-by-screen like the original *The Legend of Zelda*. All of the levels are completely different (although the first stage is patterned after the second level of the arcade game), and each feels more maze-like. Some of the enemies are the same, but the vast majority are unique to this version. On that note, while a few

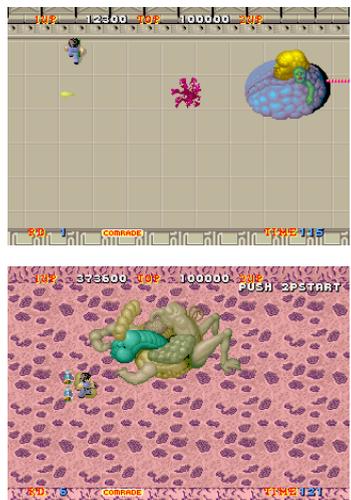
of the bosses have been carried over (although slightly altered), most of them are entirely new, and manage to be just as awesome as the arcade bosses, despite the lower color palette. The weapons have been cut down, so there's only flamethrower and laser power-ups. Sadly, there's no map at all.

However, the game is even more difficult than the arcade version, impossibly so. Each room starts out empty and foes slowly blink onto the screen. It's way too easy to accidentally have an enemy appear beneath you for a cheap kill. Most of the weapons have a slow firing rate, so if you fire before an enemy has completely appeared it'll pass harmlessly through them. This leaves you defenseless for a

alien grasshopper with what appears to be a baby's head. The final boss, which hijacks itself onto your ship *a la* the finale of the original *Alien*, looks like half of a human face stripped of its skin, leaving another head dangling from its nose, and huge distended ears that fire bullets. The "body horror" aspect is still the best part of this classic.

The Famicom / NES version – published by Sunsoft in Japan and

Top: Covers from the [NES] and home computers versions, and an arcade flyer
Bottom: [ARC] Some of the more gruesome boss encounters





second, which can be the difference between life and death.

Fight For Your Life

The boss fights are even more unforgiving, since they have a tendency to back you into a corner and use a simple three-way bullet pattern that's nearly impossible to dodge, given the close quarters. Furthermore, the hit detection is quite sloppy and striking the enemy's weak point seems like a matter of chance. Again, there are no continues, and the standard weapon is useless, so if you get killed you may as well give up. The only real high point is the tremendously scary death screams, which are even louder and more disturbing than the arcade version.

The Game Gear release is, oddly enough, the best of the 8-bit home ports. According to the

intro, this version is actually a sequel set five years after the original *Alien Syndrome*. The gameplay is much like the arcade version, with many of the same bosses, although there are four (mostly) new levels. You can now access the map screen at any time, and can power up weapons by grabbing the same kind twice. It still suffers from a bit of slowdown and flicker, but it's surprisingly cool, and has some awesome cover artwork.

As far as computer ports go, all of are based on the arcade version. The Commodore 64 release is pretty decent, barring some slow screen-scrolling. The Amiga, Atari ST and PC versions are almost graphically identical, and feature some redesigned, brighter visuals. All of these versions suffer from some jerky scrolling; the Amiga has the upper hand for sound but is missing a

few levels. In spite of this, they all play fairly well.

The X68000 version, ported by Dempa, is practically arcade-perfect. The only other nearly-perfect port is found on *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* for PS3 and Xbox 360.

After disappearing for approximately 15 years, Sega resurrected *Alien Syndrome* for their *Sega Ages 2500* series, which appeared in the US in the *Sega Classics Collection*, but was absent from the European release. The 3D graphics aren't pretty, and they're way too dark, but they do a decent job of emulating the feel of the *Alien* movies.

The biggest change is the addition of dual analog movement,

Top: Ricky and Mary in the [NES] and [ARC] intros, plus the [NES] intro, and screens of the slightly different [SMS] port
Bottom: [PS2] The Sega Ages remake is cheap looking but still has some good art





so you can move with one stick and fire with the other as in *Robotron 2084* and *Smash TV*.

There are a few new weapons, including some useless grenades and a spread shot. The pacing is a bit slower, but feels more chaotic, with more being thrown at you at once. However, you also now have a life bar, along with unlimited continues, so it's not nearly as tense as the original arcade game, losing some of its appeal. Sega also increased the gore quotient by making bad guys explode in a mess of blood.



Top & Right: [GG] The Game Gear version is an original game, with a nice cover

Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Game Gear



Sega Master System



Amiga



Amstrad CPC



ZX Spectrum



Commodore 64

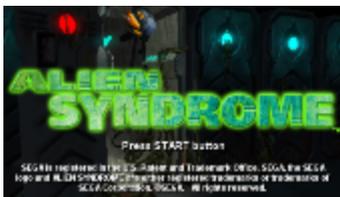


Nintendo Entertainment System



PlayStation 2

Alien Syndrome (2007)



Alien Syndrome

Original Release: 2007

Platforms: PSP, Wii



Despite the arguable lack of quality in the GBA versions of *The Revenge of Shinobi* and *Altered Beast: Guardian of the Realms*, Sega allowed yet another of their classic properties to be handled by a completely unrelated company.

In this case, however, the developer is Totally Games. The same company was responsible for creating each installment of the venerable *X-Wing* and *TIE Fighter* PC/Mac series as well as the WWII dogfighter, *Secret Weapons Over Normandy*.

With this *Alien Syndrome* update, available on both the Wii and PSP, Totally Games set out to bring the franchise back in the form of a dungeon hack not unlike *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*. Up to four players can cooperate to traverse a massive interstellar installation infested with the "Alien Syndrome".

The game is set 100 years after the original and follows the adventures of a military officer named Aileen Harding. She's sent to investigate an isolated space colony whose communications have been cut off. Obviously the Alien Syndrome is to blame.

Where the game deviates from the norm is that right from the outset you need to select a character class. This determines what type of weapon you're most efficient with as well as what attribute bonuses you can earn as you progress.

Earn bonuses? Attributes? Character classes? Yes, the 2007

iteration of *Alien Syndrome* will often have the player spending more time in a menu distributing points and crafting weapons than they will blasting alien creatures. While it's a successful hack 'n slash, it is less successful at merging dungeon crawling with the deliberately paced action of classic *Alien Syndrome*.

The controls are very smooth. It's especially effective on the Wii because you can move your character with the nunchuk while selecting, aiming and firing your chosen weapon with the remote. This takes some getting used to, but in the end does a great job of letting you navigate crowds of aliens while still being able to slay them efficiently, as you can easily move in one direction while firing in another. Otherwise, in the PSP version, you can hold down a button to fire and strafe.

You have a wide variety of weapons that fall into categories based on the original *Alien Syndrome's* weapons (flame-throwers, lasers, explosives, and so on) in addition to various types of stat-altering armor to equip as needed. These are equipped on one of many menus you must cycle through to manage your stats, inventory, arms and armor.

The controls on the Wii version are also great because you use the remote as a pointer on all of the menus as well as using motions from the remote as shortcuts for your various melee techniques. You can also use the

nunchuk to tilt the camera slightly, something required far too often due to the amount of overhead piping and wreckage the designers have placed between your eyes and the action.

The Wii version also has a few other additions. There are capsules scattered throughout the area which let you play a mini-game that can also improve your character. The mini-games represent different types of research and genetic manipulation, but their rules and structure make them feel pointless and brazenly tacked on. The game's quality would not change if they were excised completely.

The crafting aspect is handled by a robotic buddy reminiscent of a Mag from *Phantasy Star Online*. The drone that follows you around is called a SCARAB: *Sentient Combat And Recycling Assembly Bot*. The recycling part involves you scrapping unneeded weapons and items to gain resource points, which are then used to purchase newer weapons, armor and items. There is a constantly expanding array of goods for you to purchase as you gain more experience through combat.

The SCARAB makes multiplayer pretty interesting. Since you can drop any item on the ground at any time, it's very easy for players to coordinate who should manufacture what item, so as to most efficiently equip each other. This is where the game's class and stat system really shines, as you can work together to build very different characters that complement each other.

These elements are all intriguing, but their implementation in this game is somewhat unpolished. The biggest offense is that multiplayer sessions have terrible pacing, degenerating into alternating between 10 minute bursts of action and each player assigning resource points in their own set of menus. As a final reminder of the lack of polish the cooperative side has received, each player controls a differently colored Aileen Harding. *Alien Syndrome* is already a dark game, and while different character classes do have cosmetically different appearances, it was a bad move not to throw in a couple of extra low-polygon models to keep players from losing track of their character.

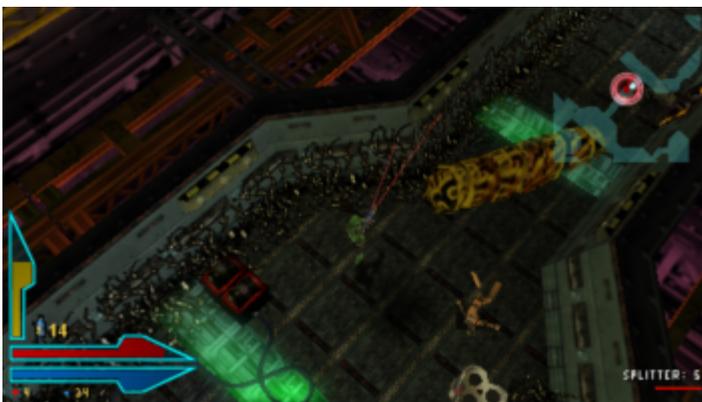
Graphically, while the game is very effective on the PSP, it's embarrassing on the Wii. The textures used and the polygon counts for each object are not irredeemable, but the lighting and other effects are garish and make the entire package ugly to behold.

The easiest way to see this is to play a game with four people at once. There are so many blinking reticules, jagged shadows and small separate explosions everywhere that it's almost impossible to follow the action. The sound design is totally unremarkable. The voice acting is above average but every other aspect of the sound design is forgettable and workmanlike.

Artistically the game is a mixed bag. You could criticize the game for having a bunch of gray corridors and the same biological terrors we've seen in games and movies for years, but this IS *Alien Syndrome*. On the up side, the cutscenes are told via very nice static artwork that's reminiscent of the Dark Horse *Aliens* comics from the late 1980s while still having an original style.

The real letdown is that while many of the stock enemy designs are clearly inspired by the original game, the horror vibe is completely gone. Bosses are simply bigger aliens rather than the shambling, gruesome horrors of the original. This removes one of the things that set the original apart from the crowd when it was new.

The verdict? *Alien Syndrome* is a good game, but it will probably appeal more to fans of action RPGs than to fans of the original *Alien Syndrome*. It's also best enjoyed with multiple players to keep it from getting too dull.



Gain Ground



Gain Ground

Original Release: 1988

Platforms: ARC, GEN, SMS, PSP
PCE, PS2, PS3, 360, WII, WIN



People love to lament about how unoriginal the gaming landscape is, and how everything is a clone of a clone. Even though these same people love to dream about how much better games were in the old days, the fact is, there was plenty of crappy, derivative junk, created mostly to wow arcade-goers with some impressive graphics, all while sucking quarters out of them.

Sega's *Gain Ground* stood in opposition to this. There's some ridiculous plot about humanity finally reaching a state of world peace, but they begin to worry that they may lose their fighting instinct. To quell this instinctive urge, they create a super computer that simulates warfare from throughout Earth's history. Naturally, the computer goes crazy and starts killing things for real, so it's up to you to put a stop to this digital insurgence.

You play as an army of commandos, Vikings, valkyries, samurai, Native Americans, knights and robots, as you travel through different time periods, ranging from prehistory to the medieval times to the distant future, killing anything that tries to kill you. Tossing all of the anachronisms into a huge pot and stirring is an intriguing idea – sort of a takeoff on Alpha Denshi's *Time Soldiers* – and it's completely different to anything on the market, then or now, even though it's hard to see at first.

Gain Ground may look like a standard overhead action game,

but it's not a shooter – the pacing is completely different to a standard overhead *Mercs*-style game. Some people call it a strategy title, which isn't accurate either; it's absolutely nothing like *Fire Emblem* or *Command and Conquer*-style games. Sega themselves call *Gain Ground* an "algorithm action" game, and while that's easy to write off as some kind of crazy English, it almost kind of fits.

Algorithm Action

In *Gain Ground* you are given a single screen, filled with enemies and obstacles. The arcade game runs on Sega's System 24 board, which results in some incredibly high-resolution graphics and a huge playing field. The characters are tiny, but it gives a lot of room to move around. In the beginning, there are three selectable characters, each with different abilities. In order to complete each of the stages, you either have to kill all of the enemies, or guide your heroes to the huge block that says EXIT.

When you first play *Gain Ground*, you may feel that something is horribly amiss. None of the characters move at a quick pace. Instead, they just kind of waddle around, strolling through a battlefield as carnage unfolds around them. Their weapons are slow, awkward, and often hard to use properly. There are no screen clearing bombs. If you play this



like any other run-and-gun shooter, you'll get demolished pretty quickly.

But therein lies the puzzle aspect of *Gain Ground*, as it becomes imperative to study enemy patterns and figure out the best way to beat them. Some enemies will only charge at you when you come close to them – in which case, lure them out, run back, and repeat. Most enemies shoot directly at you, so as long as you're fast enough, you can keep running without getting hit. Most enemies have behaviors that are less scripted, but can be analyzed and exploited. This is where the "algorithm" part fits in.

Most importantly, you need to look at your characters and figure out the best, most efficient way to utilize their unique roles. Each of the 20 characters has a variety of strengths and weaknesses – some are slow but powerful, while others are needed to hit enemies at different heights.

You begin the game with just three characters at your disposal, but pick up more as you go along. On the battlefield you'll often come across little icons of disabled

soldiers. If you pick them up and reach the exit they'll become playable in the next round.

Defying Convention

On a similar note, there are no real "lives" in *Gain Ground*. If your character dies, they show up as disabled on the battlefield. If the dead character can be picked up and escorted to the next stage, they'll be resurrected, good as new. However, if your next character dies, or you finish the level without them, then they'll be lost for good. In other words, building up your ranks and keeping them alive is one of the biggest challenges in *Gain Ground*.

This is primarily because the game is brutally difficult and unforgiving. It's all too common that you'll start off a level with a new character, get them killed before you can figure out what their strengths are, and never see them again. Additionally, there are way too many situations where you can screw yourself over if you don't have the right character. What if there are enemies on the rooftops and you don't have any

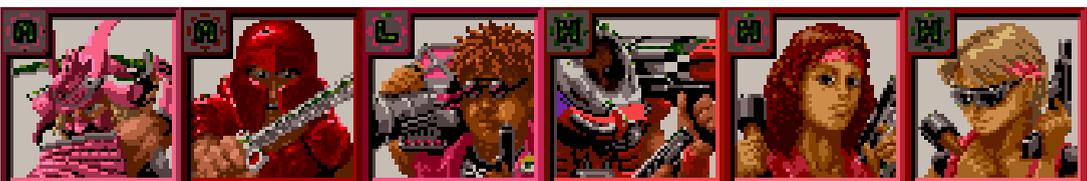
characters that can hit them? Well, ha ha, tough luck. It's not always impossible, and it forces you to improvise if you're ill-equipped, but more often than not, it just leads to some incredibly cheap deaths.

Sometimes the game just gets too overwhelming for its own good. The most obnoxious group of enemies are wizards that transport to various places around the screen, toss out some fireballs directly at your character, and then disappear to some other location. None of your characters are fast enough, nor are your weapons versatile enough, to deal with them properly, especially when they throw some wizards in a level with no maneuvering room.

There are at least a few levels that seem completely counter intuitive to the game's slow-and-steady mechanics. Oh, and you've got a time limit to beat each level, so you'd better hurry up.

There's also another quirk to keep in mind. Most of your characters are either left or right

Below: [ARC] The arcade version has huge battlefields due to the high resolution
Top & Bottom: [ARC] Some of the warriors



Gain Ground

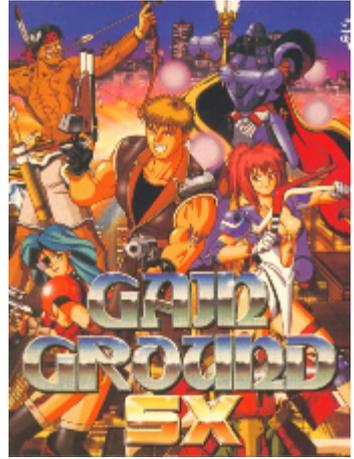
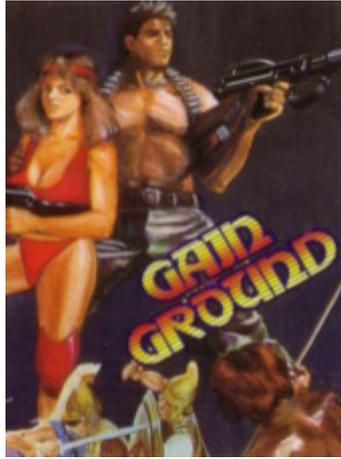
handed. This means that they'll shoot off center each time they fire. This may add realism, and occasionally lends to the strategy, but when you're getting chased in circles by some bad guy, the last thing you want to worry about is adjusting your aim.

The developers have stated that their original inspiration was *Gauntlet*. Visually, it's easy to see the comparison. Plus, both games are about sending multiple players to fight against hordes of bad guys, finding order amongst chaos, and using a character's skills as efficiently as possible.

Beyond those aspects, however, *Gain Ground* is a completely different animal, adding a bit of brainwork to a genre mostly known for pure brawn. Sure, there are more than a few irritating aspects in it, and it's almost shameful that there was never a true sequel to fix any of them up. But it certainly gets points for traveling on the path less taken, and most dedicated gamers should be forgiving enough to put up with some issues in order to experience something genuinely unique.

System Ports

There were several ports of *Gain Ground*, naturally. The Genesis version was published in America by Renovation. Since there was no way to accurately scale the playing fields from the arcade version, this port shrinks the battlefield considerably. Even though it feels cramped compared to the arcade version, it actually helps the pace of the game quite a bit, especially when you need to move multiple characters to the exit. There are also 10 completely new levels in the Genesis version – the added Modern Epoch takes place in the streets of the city, with one stage being inside of an



arcade. There is also a "Hard Mode" which starts you off with all twenty characters. The Genesis version is also included on the *Sega Genesis Collection* for the PS2 and PSP, and *Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection* for the PS3 and Xbox 360.

Sega also released a port for the Master System, which obviously has some vastly scaled back graphics and some choppy animations. However, many of the levels are unique, and some of the character abilities have been changed around, so it's worth playing just to see something new.

NEC Avenue also ported *Gain Ground* to the PC Engine Super CD under the title *Gain Ground SX*. Other than the excellent redbook audio soundtrack, there's really nothing that takes advantage of the CD format. In spite of this, it's probably one of the best ports of *Gain Ground*. In order to faithfully

recreate the levels, the action has been zoomed in, and the screen now scrolls up and down.

Additionally, all of the characters seem to move and fire slightly faster, plus many of the enemies are a bit easier. While one can argue that it takes a lot of the challenge out of the game, it's also much more playable – and fun – than any other version. It also has some nice sound effects, which normally isn't very important, but they're very noticeably considering all of the other versions sound pretty lame. Unfortunately, most of the home ports (except for the PS2 version) are missing the goofy "end of level" messages, like "NOW YOU LOOK OUT", "YOU ARE BRAVE ONE", and "NEXT

Top-middle, Top-right: Arcade flyer artwork and the PC Engine cover artwork
Below: [GEN] The Modern Epoch
Bottom row: [PCE] The zoomed-in view of *Gain Ground SX*





Top : [PS2] The 3D graphics in the *Sega Ages* remake



different graphics tile sets and altered character abilities. Unfortunately, accessing this requires beating the game on the default difficulty settings (normal level, 120 seconds time limit). *Gain Ground* is 40 stages long, and gives you unlimited continues right up until the last stage. But if you haven't saved the right characters, the final boss is incredibly difficult, so unlocking this mode is only for the most hardcore players.

STAGE IS NOT EASY".

Gain Ground was also resurrected in 2004 as part of the *Sega Ages* series for the Japanese PlayStation 2. The gameplay is the same, but it uses all new polygonal graphics. While some of the screenshots seem rather ugly, the game looks decent in motion. The only real advantage to the 3D graphics is that you can choose between three viewpoints – overhead, slightly skewed, and a low angle viewpoint, the last of which looks cool but is actually rather useless.

Each character has brand new artwork, most of which is pretty cool, and for the first time it displays their name in English (they were relegated to instruction

manuals before). The characters themselves look slightly super deformed, and the goofy egg-shaped renditions of the captured units are pretty amusing.

Like the other home ports, the levels have been shrunken so everything fits on one screen, and the three-player mode has been reduced to two. But otherwise this is pretty accurate to the arcade original. There's even an option to disable an annoying bug in stage 4-8, which otherwise made it very difficult to clear. It is, however, lacking the extra stages from the Genesis version and the rebalanced difficulty from the PC Engine CD version.

There's also an "Extra Mode" which features some slightly

On the plus side, it opens up what is probably this releases' greatest asset – the music. The entire soundtrack has been provided courtesy of awesome music artist Saitama Saisyu Heiki (also known as S.S.H.), who does some damn amazing stuff with his synth guitars. All of the arcade music has been rearranged in this style, but the Extra Mode features a whole ton of brand new tracks, which are all fantastic and totally makes this version worthwhile.

Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Genesis



PC Engine

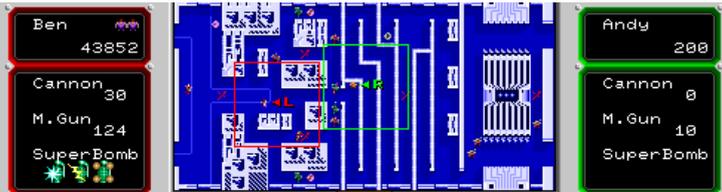


Sega Master System



PlayStation 2

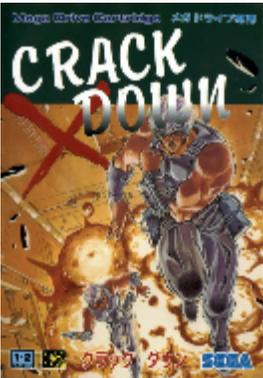
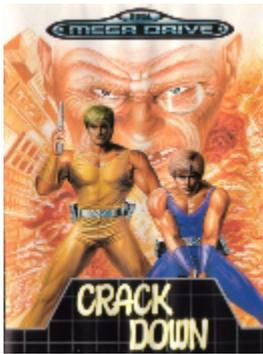
Crack Down



Crack Down

Original Release: 1989

Platforms: ARC, GEN, AMI, C64, IBM, CPC, AST, WII, WIN



Crack Down (no relation to the 2007 Xbox 360 game) is essentially an overhead version of *Shinobi* and runs on Sega's System 24 board, utilizing high-res graphics. It's a unique two player action game that emphasizes strategy and cooperation.

Your job, as one of two secret agents named Ben Breaker and Andy Attacker, is to infiltrate the headquarters of a mad scientist, who has created a huge cybernetic goat demon. Each stage is sort of a mini-maze, where you need to plant a number of bombs, marked with large red Xs, and then hightail it to the exit. Although there's a time limit in each stage, all of the Xs are clearly marked on the onscreen map, and you're given more than enough time to plant the bombs and escape.

One of the oddest design choices is making the map take up the entire top half of the screen, while the bottom half is divided even further – player one in the lower-left window, player two in the lower-right. In other words, the action really only takes place in a quarter of the screen's real estate, which makes the game feel incredibly claustrophobic.

And yet, once you get used to it, this actually works, since the map also shows the exact location of every enemy, as well as any weapon power-ups. It's pretty clear that the game is designed for two-player co-op, since the separate screens allow each player to cover the levels individually,

instead of being confined to the same screen.

This in turn creates a whole bunch of new strategies. *Crack Down* is less of a run-and-gun, and more of a stalk-and-gun. It's not exactly a stealth game like *Metal Gear*, since the emphasis is clearly on killing bad guys instead of avoiding them, but you're rewarded for playing it smart, especially because you don't get any hugely powerful weapons.

The obvious strategy is to try to sneak up on stationary bad guys to avoid their fire, or simply avoid enemy patrols, but you can also use a door to block enemy shots, then return fire as the door opens. Most of the action takes place in narrow corridors, and your characters can lean against the wall to dodge bullets, then pop back out and fire return shots. If you can manage to get the enemies to shoot each other, you'll be awarded double points. These tactics obviously work much better when you're playing with another person.

There are two types of guns – a standard pistol, and rockets, which can take out a whole row of enemies. Although your ammo is limited, you can use melee attacks at close range, and there are several types of bomb to kill all of the enemies on the screen. Ammo restocks are heavily distributed throughout each stage. Most enemies are simple drones wielding guns, but eventually you come across some nasty guys with

flamethrowers, and in one level, crazed baboons.

There aren't technically any bosses, but there are a few "special" rooms. One includes endlessly spawning enemies; another is an electric grid. The final stage is a series of obstacles controlled by the mad professor. This sequence is frustrating because it requires that you've stockpiled enough ammo.

On the surface it might be hard to appreciate the visuals, but there are a variety of subtle (and not so subtle) touches, especially the awesome intro. The attract screen is a close up of a hand spraying the *Crack Down* logo in graffiti against a decaying brick wall. The cinematic when the game begins, viewed from a security camera as our heroes make an explosive entrance, is equally impressive, even though the brightly colored spandex worn by them looks rather lame.

At the end of the game your characters set explosives around the gigantic goat demon seen in the intro, and displayed prominently on some of the artwork. The thing looks cool, but it's disappointing that you don't actually get to fight it.

The graphics in-game might be small, but the tilesets are completely different for each of the 16 stages, and each stage has a unifying look and feel. Some locations include warehouses, furnaces, junkyards and

laboratories. The close ups whenever you place a bomb, complete with the ticking counter, are remarkably cool. There are some neat details like the billboard advertising for "Prayboy", which seems like a Engrish until you see it's a religious magazine.

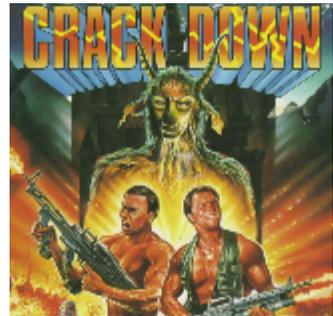
And while there are only a few songs that repeat over and over, what's there is fantastic. Master maestro Yuzo Koshiro contributed to the soundtrack, and the FM synth organs add a particular sense of foreboding.

The Genesis port, released in North America by Sage's Creation, is pretty faithful to the arcade game, at least from the gameplay perspective. However, since the resolution needed to be downgraded, most of the sprites end up looking cheap, and everything is even smaller. At least the second player window is now used to detail all of the enemies in the level when you're playing alone, so the space is no longer wasted.

The characters move faster, but there's so much slowdown, even in single-player, that it negates any of the benefits. Whenever you place a bomb you just get a close up of the ticking timer, without the animation of the hand putting it in place. The map only shows the level layout and the Xs, while the enemies are reduced to blips, so you can't see which direction they're facing, and you can't see items either.



The IBM PC, Amiga, and Atari ST ports are all pretty similar. The graphics, while not as colorful nor as detailed, are closer to the arcade game, and they play a bit faster too. The sound isn't quite as good as the arcade or Genesis versions (especially the IBM PC one), and the cinemas are no longer animated, but otherwise these are probably the best of the bunch. The Commodore 64 version lacks music, and has some really awkward scrolling making it hard to see what's in front of you. The Amstrad version is a slight improvement – it's more colorful although still ugly, but the excessive slowdown and iffy collision detection really hurt it.



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Genesis



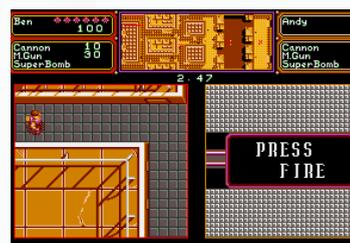
Amiga



Commodore 64



Amstrad CPC

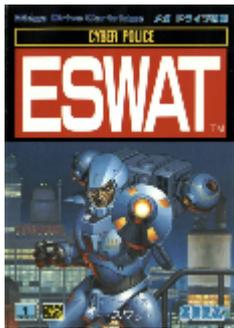
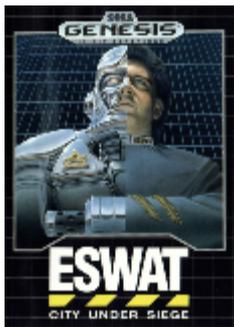


IBM PC



Cyber Police: ESWAT
 AKA: **ESWAT: City Under Siege**
 (NA/EU GEN)

Original Release: 1989
 Platforms: ARC, GEN, SMS,
 AST, C64, AMI, CPC, ZX, PS3,
 360, WII, WIN



ESWAT is obviously heavily influenced by the 1987 action movie *RoboCop*. You play as a police officer who wears a cybernetic suit dubbed "ICE". The game itself is patterned closely after Sega's own *Shinobi*. While *Shinobi* was methodical, forcing you to hide from enemies before launching a counterattack, *ESWAT* encourages faster actions – you can take several hits before dying, and there aren't as many places to take cover anyway.

Your ammo is limited, forcing you to resort to kicking criminals if you run out, but it's generally in rich supply. It's also two-player, so you can gun down criminals with a buddy. There are a total of 15 fairly brief stages, each ending with a quick boss fight. The best stage is where you fight through Chinatown and have a showoff against a gigantic gorilla.

Alas, *ESWAT* never lives up to its potential. For starters, the robotic suit, at least in the arcade version, is rather bulky and silly looking. Sure, your character might be armed with machine guns, but ultimately it doesn't look all that threatening. (Amusingly, according to the diagrams of the suit in the intro, the thing has a karaoke mic!)

Furthermore, you don't even get to control the robot suit in the first couple of stages. No, you begin playing as a regular boring cop. It's only after completing the first two stages that you're "promoted" into the cybersuit. When you do finally get it, it's not

all that impressive. You get a machine gun instead of your regular pistol and there are also a handful of special weapons which are fired from a cannon in the back of the suit. But these are in extremely short supply, look a bit silly, and are way too slow to be used effectively. Also, your life meter doesn't increase at all – you can take four hits before you die, with or without the suit. When you take damage, little bits of the suit fly off, exposing the human underneath, which looks cool.

The concept is really the only halfway remarkable thing about the arcade release of *ESWAT* – otherwise, it's just another middle-of-the-line arcade shooter.

The Master System port, released only in North America and Europe, is pretty bad. The graphics are worse than most first generation titles for the system, with tiny sprites and terrible animation. The bosses fall somewhere between being badly designed and stupidly hard, often littering the screen with unavoidable projectiles.

The levels are all brief and barely have any obstacles. The first two stages are more or less replications of the arcade game, but it goes in an entirely different direction after that. The game does get slightly better once you get the suit, due to the rapid fire gun, but it's still poorly designed. This is also the only version where you can lose your suit if you take enough damage. Unlike the other



ports you only have a single life, but also a much longer life bar. At least the redesigned suit looks cool. There's no more gorilla, but you do get to fight a loincloth-bearing barbarian who looks like he wandered out of *Golden Axe*.

The Genesis version is a completely different entity, almost to the point where it feels like a sequel. All of the levels and most of the bosses are brand new – the cyborg duo at the end of the arcade game are now present in the second stage of the Genesis version, but that's the extent of the crossover. Most weapons have unlimited ammo, and there's quite a bit more platforming. The levels are also much longer than the arcade version, but the two-player mode is gone.

Similarly, the first two stages are played as a regular human cop, now given the name Duke Oda. By the third stage you finally get your cybersuit, and it's substantially cooler this time around. You no longer have a machine gun as a default weapon, and instead you can collect a total of four extra weapons which can be switched between at any time. These

include a machine gun, a plasma cannon, and a rocket launcher. Even cooler is the Burner, which allows you to fly.

The suit also allows you to take a few more hits, although the pieces no longer break off as you take damage. The FIRE special weapon damages everything on the screen, but it can only be used once, and it completely drains your Burner meter.

The graphics of the Genesis port, while grainy compared to the arcade game, are generally better designed with much more variety and style. While some minor issues are aggravating, such as an underpowered default weapon, it's actually one of the better early Genesis action titles, and it totally outclasses the arcade game.

ESWAT was also released on several computer platforms, all of which are relatively faithful to the arcade game, courtesy of US Gold and Creative Materials. The Amiga one is the best looking of the bunch, although it's rife with slowdown, with the Atari ST version looking just a bit worse, and the Amstrad CPC port a step down from that. The C64 port is



Top-left [ARC, SMS] Comparisons of the suit
Top-middle, Top-right: [GEN] The superior Genesis version in action
Below: [DC] The cybersuits in *Segagaga*

okay, but the number of enemies has been cut down drastically, so it's not quite as action packed, and the collision detection is a bit dodgy. The same goes for the Spectrum version, while its large sprites also look awkward on the small screen.

The cybersuits from *ESWAT* (the Genesis variation with the Burners) also makes a cameo in the Dreamcast game *Segagaga*, where you'll encounter them worn by enemy soldiers.



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Atari ST



Sega Master System



Amstrad CPC



Commodore 64



ZX Spectrum

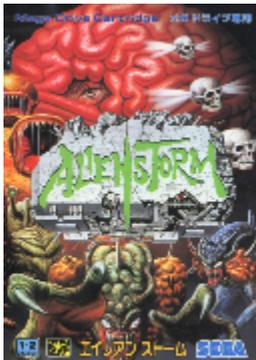
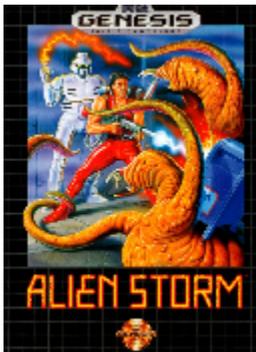
Alien Storm



Alien Storm

Original Release: 1990

Platforms: ARC, GEN, SMS AMI, AST, CPC, C64, ZX, 360, PS3, WII, WIN



Alien Storm is essentially the spiritual successor to *Golden Axe*. Also directed by Makoto Uchida, Sega's expert on scrolling beat-em-ups, the game switches from the land of fantasy, swords and barbarians to one of science-fiction, lasers and aliens.

Mechanically, *Alien Storm* is quite similar to its forebear, to the point where the controls and combos feel practically identical. There are three characters: Gordon is the male who wields a lightning gun, Karla is a female with a flamethrower, and Scooter is a robot with a lightning whip. (They are named Garth, Karen and Slammer, respectively, in some versions.) Similar to magic spells there is a screen clearing attack, which eats up a sizeable portion of the player's "Energy" bar. Gordon summons a helicopter, Karla calls in a miniature nuke, and Scooter detonates himself. Also, rather than a jump button there is a roll maneuver. In certain versions, three players can also fight aliens simultaneously. There are minor differences between the two- and three-player versions – Gordon and Karla wear either red and yellow, or blue and red, respectively, and the levels are in a different order.

At times the action switches to a first-person shooting gallery, where the camera moves back and forth as you control a targeting reticule. Most of the scenery can be destroyed, which in turn reveals energy charging power-ups. While mowing down bad guys and

scorching shelves of garbage is fun, your cursor moves too slowly to keep up with the enemies. There are also a few auto-scrolling running scenes, where your character charges forward and shoots bad guys.

While as functionally solid as any other beat-em-up at the time, *Alien Storm* is still a lesser game than *Golden Axe* in just about every aspect. There are no other landscapes other than drably ruined suburbs, cities and laboratories. The alien designs are cool, although not on the level of *Alien Syndrome*. Though it runs on the slightly more powerful System 18, the graphics are only marginally improved. The music is unusual, though the "Bad breath, man!" speech clip is amusing.

Each of your characters has several weapons, including grenades and bazookas, but these cannot be used individually. Instead, they're just part of pre-canned combo animations. Your guns only shoot projectiles in the auto-run segments, for example, and the grenades are only used to dispose of enemies which are lying on the ground.

Outside of its initial arcade release, Sega ported *Alien Storm* to the Genesis and Master System, though the latter was only released in Europe and Brazil. While the fundamentals are the same in all, the level breakdowns and backgrounds are different across all three. The arcade and SMS versions begin in a city block,

while the Genesis release starts out on a farm. The SMS port has an exclusive segment where you run through the subway, while the Genesis version also has an additional level in a laboratory. Outside of the final boss (a gigantic brain with a single eye), there is only one other boss in the Genesis version, which has three different forms. These were broken out into separate enemies for the other versions.

While the Genesis release looks almost identical to the arcade version, it's missing numerous details. The arcade game opens with our three heroes working a food truck called "Alien Burgers". When the attack begins, the sign flips over to reveal their true name as "Alien Busters", before they launch into action. A handful of enemies, including the slime pools, are missing on the Genesis. The scaling effects are gone, and only two players can play simultaneously.

The ending is a bizarre 1980s music video, complete with flashing colored lights, quick flashes of random sprites, and the

three characters in the center of the screen, goofily marching in rhythm. In the arcade version, when your game is over, you are assigned a rank by a panel of judges, including Gilius Thunderhead from *Golden Axe*. You are still ranked in the Genesis version, but the cameos are missing. If you pay attention, you can also see references to other Sega games on the TVs in the electronics store.

The SMS version plays very differently from the others. It's slower paced, enemies are killed in one hit and characters can no longer use combo attacks. There are also only five levels in total, multiplayer is absent, and Karla/Karen is nowhere to be seen.

None of the home computer ports are particularly good. The Amiga and Atari ST versions look the best of the bunch, though still worse than the Genesis iteration, with less colors and lousy animation. All of them have choppy, awkward gameplay, but the Amstrad port is the pits, with the 3D scenes being so sluggish that they are essentially

unplayable. All of these versions have a simultaneous two-player mode, at least.



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Genesis



Sega Master System



Amiga



Amstrad CPC



Commodore 64



ZX Spectrum

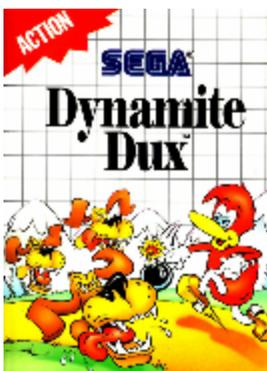
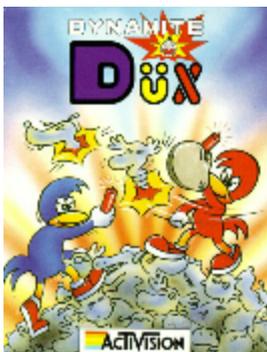
Dynamite Dux



Dynamite Dux

Original Release: 1989

Platforms: ARC, AMI, AST, CPC, C64, ZX, SMS



Belt-scrolling beat-em-ups are typically serious business. The likes of *Double Dragon*, *Final Fight*, *Golden Axe*, *Streets of Rage* and many others are all dark and gritty rampages of violence through decaying landscapes. Despite this, there are a few that take things in a much sillier direction, including Sega's *Dynamite Dux* (sometimes spelled *Dynamite Dūx*, with an umlaut over the 'u'). To make an analogy, *Dynamite Dux* is to *Double Dragon* as *Twinbee* is to *Xevious*.

The "men fight to save kidnapped woman" theme is still present, although here, the men are actually pet ducks named Bin and Pin, who are trying to save their owner Lucy from the evil Achacha. The intro, where the ducks and the girl are playing around in a meadow before the main bad guy appears out of nowhere, was also borrowed for *Alex Kidd in Shinobi World* (where the question of who owns ducks as pets is never fully addressed).

The stages are a hodgepodge of barely cohesive themes, starting off in a city, before warping to ancient Japan, a jungle, off to Brooklyn and Texas, and then to the final lair of Achacha, which is vaguely Egyptian.

It's all an impossibly colorful and silly game. Bin and Pin are bright blue and red, respectively. The major enemies are dogs with gigantic jaws that take up approximately 80% of their body mass. Also present are cross-eyed

coyotes decked in army gear and manning artillery cannons, as well as rhinoceroses in American football uniforms. Also running around are penguins in the middle of a desert, displaying not only a total lack of understanding of American geography, but also climate zones.

Colonel Sanders, he of Kentucky Fried Chicken, makes an appearance right at the beginning, and makes it his purpose to act as a referee in the boxing match bonus rounds. It's a weird and wonderfully detailed game, meshing Warner Bros.-style slapstick with the randomness of Japanese humor, rendered in beautiful late-1980s pixel artwork. The only major disappointments are the bosses, which consist of generic things like rock monsters and gigantic flames, and are reused throughout.

Feathered Combat

The mechanics are a bit different from typical beat-em-ups, in that most enemies perish after a single hit, and the game never stops and waits for you to clear the enemies before moving on. Most stages also have a branching path somewhere near the middle.

Also, since the ducks have super-deformed proportions, their limbs barely have any reach, and combined with the occasionally erratic movements and attacks of the enemies, the hit detection feel rather dodgy. You have a super

attack where you hold down the attack button to wind up your arm and deliver a knock-out uppercut, with a super-sized fist, although it too is slightly awkward to use. There are numerous weapons throughout each stage though, and nearly all of them fire projectiles, ranging from simple rocks all the way up to flamethrowers and bazookas.

On a fundamental level *Dynamite Dux* isn't really all that special, but it's an attractive game with catchy music and a generally goofy atmosphere, so it's worth a play through. It was designed by Sega AM2, which was headed by Yu Suzuki, although he doesn't appear to have actively worked on this game. The bouncy main theme was composed by Hiroshi Kawaguchi, also well known for composing the *Space Harrier* theme and other Sega classics.

System Ports

The original arcade release was developed for the Sega System 16 board, but *Dynamite Dux* was also ported to a number of other platforms, mostly home computers. The most visually faithful are the Amiga and Atari ST ports, although the speed is a bit too slow and there are graphical tiles missing. While the music made an acceptable transition, there are no sound effects. The Amstrad CPC, Commodore 64, and ZX Spectrum



have descending graphical quality in that order, with no music whatsoever bar the title screen in the C64 version; they all play fairly well, bar the scaling down of the graphics and lack of two-player modes. All of these were developed by Core Design in the UK and published by Activision. The Commodore 64 version also renames the main character Ben.

The only port handled by Sega themselves is the Master System version, which was primarily released in PAL territories and Brazil. Obviously a scaled down 8-bit version of a 16-bit game isn't going to look as pretty, and it especially hurts a game whose appeal relies heavily on its visuals. Still, it looks decent enough for a Master System game and plays a bit better than any of the computer ports. Unfortunately it's missing the jungle stage. The plot has also been altered so Bin is Lucy's human boyfriend, who has been transformed into a duck. Pin is not present since the two-player mode is gone.

Sega hasn't been too keen to remember *Dynamite Dux*, having

never ported it anywhere else outside of its initial releases. However, Sega created a tribute character in the 1996 3D fighting game *Sonic the Fighters* named Bean the Dynamite, who also appears in *Fighters Megamix*.

Although he's green rather than blue (or red), he has the same distinctive cowlick. Plus, "Bean" is close to the Japanese pronunciation of "Bin", and his nickname "The Dynamite" clarifies that the relation to *Dynamite Dux* was definitely intentional.

Top-right: [ARC] The Egyptian lair of Achacha, plus Colonel Sanders referees the bonus round
Bottom-right: Bean in *Sonic Championship*



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Atari ST



Sega Master System



Commodore 64



Amstrad CPC



ZX Spectrum

Compilations / Soundtracks



Many of the games covered in this volume have been rereleased on assorted compilations. What follows is a listing of these compilations, their featured games, and a short note about their quality.

Western Collections

Sega Ages Vol. 1 [SAT, NA/EU]
Compiles the Saturn ports of *OutRun*, *Space Harrier* and *After Burner II*, which were individual releases in Japan. *OutRun* is missing the extra arranged music, *After Burner II* is missing the extra "melody" versions of a few tracks, and *Space Harrier* is missing a mostly pointless medley track.

Sega Arcade Gallery [GBA, NA]
Compiles ports of the arcade versions of *Hang-On*, *Space Harrier*, *After Burner* and *OutRun*. Developed by Bits Studio. The quality of the ports is generally sub par.

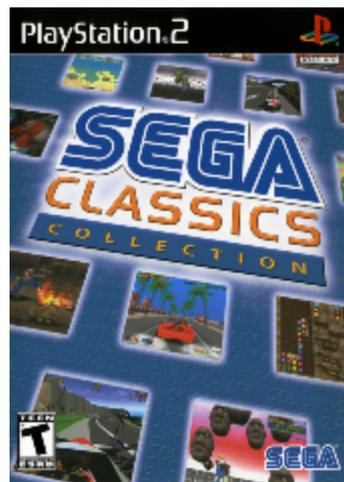


Sega Smash Pack [GBA, NA]
Compiles ports of the Genesis versions of *Golden Axe*, *Sonic Spinball* and *Ecco the Dolphin*. Developed by Codefire. Also not very good.

Sega Smash Pack Vol. 1 [PC, NA]
Features emulations of the Genesis versions of *Altered Beast*, *Golden Axe*, *OutRun* and *The Revenge of Shinobi*, plus *Columns*, *Phantasy Star II*, *Sonic Spinball* and *Vectorman*.

Sega Smash Pack Vol. 2 [PC, NA]
Features emulations of the Genesis versions of *Comix Zone*, *Flicky*, *Kid Chameleon*, *Shining Force*, *Sonic the Hedgehog 2*, *Super Hang-On* and *Vectorman 2*. Also includes *Sega Swirl*.

Sega Smash Pack Vol. 1 [DC, NA]
Features emulations of the Genesis versions of *Altered Beast*, *Columns*, and *Golden Axe*. Also includes *Phantasy Star II*, *Shining Force*, *Vectorman*, *Sonic the*

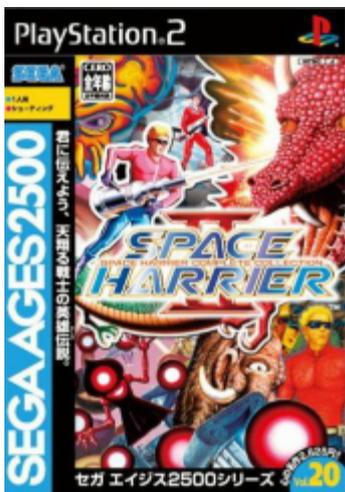


Hedgehog, *Streets of Rage 2*, *Wrestle War*, *Virtua Cop 2* and *Sega Swirl*. The sound emulation is remarkably poor.

Sega Genesis Classics Collection Gold Edition [PC, NA/EU]
Features emulations of the Genesis versions of *Alex Kidd in the Enchanted Castle*, *Alien Storm*, *Altered Beast*, *Crack Down*, *ESWAT: City Under Siege*, *Gain Ground*, *Galaxy Force II*, *Golden Axe*, *Golden Axe II*, *Shinobi III: Return of the Ninja Master*, *Space Harrier II*, *Super Thunder Blade*, and *Wonder Boy III: Monster Lair*. These are also purchasable individually on Steam and other digital services.

Western Sega Genesis Collections

Created specifically for the Western market and ported by Backbone, these compilations include more games than their Japanese counterparts, but the





features are not as complete. Only the North American versions are included and the galleries are not nearly as extensive, though there are several unlockable video interviews. While you can turn off the filters or enable progressive scan, the display options are paltry compared to M2's ports, plus the sound effects can be glitchy. The music sounds better, however, due to the audio being streamed rather than emulated.

Sega Genesis Collection [PS2 / PSP, NA/EU]

Includes Genesis versions of *Alex Kidd in the Enchanted Castle*, *Altered Beast*, *Gain Ground*, *Golden Axe I - III*, *Shadow Dancer*, *Shinobi III*, and *Super Thunder Blade*, as well as several other titles. The PS2 version also includes the arcade version of *Altered Beast*. *Shadow Dancer* is missing from the EU release.

Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection | Sega Mega Drive Ultimate Collection [PS3 / 360, NA/EU]

Includes Genesis versions of all games in the prior collection (except *Shadow Dancer*), plus several other titles. *Fantasy Zone* (ARC), *Space Harrier* (ARC), *Altered Beast* (ARC), *Alien Syndrome* (ARC) and *Golden Axe Warrior* (SMS) are unlockables.

Sega Classics Collection [PS2, NA/EU]

Includes the 3D *Sega Ages 2500* remakes of *Space Harrier*, *OutRun*, *Golden Axe*, and *Alien Syndrome* (NA only). Also includes *Columns*, *Bonanza Bros.*, *Monaco GP* and *Virtua Racing*. Does not include the original versions of any games.

Sega Ages 2500 Compilations

Many of the later releases of the *Sega Ages 2500* budget line are compilations of older Sega games. These are quite extensive, usually containing multiple platform versions of each game, regional variations, scanned manuals and assorted documents, plus other material. There are numerous display options, including

progressive scan and scanlines. The emulators, developed by M2, are generally excellent, though the music emulation for the Genesis is slightly off. The Sega Master System versions let you choose between PSG and FM synth, if the option is available.

Sega Ages Vol 20: Space Harrier II Complete Collection [PS2, JP]

Includes *Space Harrier* (ARC, SMS, GG), *Space Harrier 3D* (SMS), and *Space Harrier II* (GEN).

Sega Ages Vol 21: Sega System 16 Collection: SDI & Quartet [PS2, JP]

Includes *Quartet* (ARC, SMS) and *SDI/Missile Defense* (ARC, SMS).

Sega Ages Vol 29: Monster World Complete Collection [PS2, JP]

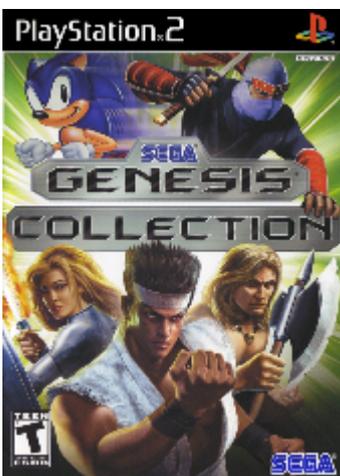
Includes *Wonder Boy* (ARC, SMS, GG, SG-1000), *Wonder Boy in Monster Land* (ARC, SMS), *Wonder Boy III: Monster Lair* (ARC, GEN), *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap* (SMS, GG), *Wonder Boy in Monster World* (GEN, SMS), and *Monster World IV* (MD). *Wonder Boy in Monster Land* and *Monster World IV* only have the Japanese versions.

Sega Ages Vol 30: Galaxy Force II Extended Edition [PS2, JP]

Includes *Galaxy Force II* (ARC, GEN, SMS), along with an updated version of *Galaxy Force II* with improved visuals.

Sega Ages Vol 33: Fantasy Zone [PS2, JP]

Includes *Fantasy Zone* (ARC, SMS, and *Neo-Classic*, based off the FC version), *Fantasy Zone II*



Compilations / Soundtracks



(SMS, ARC), *Fantasy Zone* (GG), *Galactic Protector* (SMS), *Fantasy Zone II DX* (a new remake of FZII), and *Super Fantasy Zone* (GEN).

Sega Vintage Collections

Like the Japanese *Sega Ages* collections for the PS2, these were all ported by M2. Again, there are a variety of display options included, as well as several wallpapers. While you can pick regional variations, it only has a single platform rather than multiple ports. However, each game also has a brand new menu song done in the style of the original game.

Sega Vintage Collection: Alex Kidd & Co [PS3 / X360, NA/EU/JP]

Includes *Alex Kidd in Miracle World* (SMS) and *The Revenge of Shinobi* (GEN), along with *Super Hang-On* (ARC). *Super Hang-On* also has an option for 3D display.

Sega Vintage Collection: Golden Axe [PS3 / X360, NA/EU/JP]

Includes *Golden Axe* (ARC), *Golden Axe II* (GEN) and *Golden Axe III* (GEN).

Sega Vintage Collection: Monster World [PS3 / Xbox 360, NA/EU/JP]



Includes *Wonder Boy in Monster Land* (ARC), *Wonder Boy in Monster World* (GEN), and *Monster World IV* (GEN). The versions of *Monster Land* and *Monster World IV* are the first time either have been officially released in English.

Sega 3D Fukkoku Archives

Retail release of several 3DS downloadable games, including *Space Harrier* (ARC), *Fantasy Zone* (ARC), *OutRun* (ARC), *Bare Knuckle* (MD), *The Super Shinobi II* (MD) and *Ecco the Dolphin* (MD). Also includes *Space Harrier 3D* (SMS) and *OutRun 3D* (SMS). Box art by Ken Sugimori, the character designer of *Pokémon*.

Soundtracks

Sega published numerous soundtrack compilations throughout the years.

Space Harrier II – Space Harrier Complete Collection OST

Single disc compilation with music from *Space Harrier* (ARC, SMS), *Space Harrier 3D* (SMS FM), and *Space Harrier II* (GEN) along with a bonus track.

Golden Axe The Music

Three disc compilation with music from *Golden Axe* (ARC, GEN),



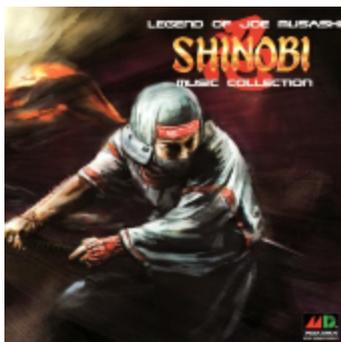
Golden Axe II & III (GEN), *Golden Axe: The Revenge of Death Adder* (ARC), and *Golden Axe: The Duel* (ARC, SAT). It includes two bonus music tracks.

Monster World Complete Collection Original Soundtrack

Two disc compilation with music from *Wonder Boy in Monster Land* (ARC), *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap* (SMS, FM & PSG versions), *Monster Boy in Monster World* (GEN) and *Monster World IV* (GEN). Also includes arranged song for the ending of *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap*.

Alex Kidd Complete Album

Two disc compilation with music from *Alex Kidd in Miracle World* (SMS), *Alex Kidd: The Lost Stars* (ARC, SMS FM & SMS PSG), *Alex Kidd BMX Trial* (SMS FM & PSG), *Alex Kidd in the Enchanted Castle*, and *Alex Kidd in Shinobi World*. Also includes a vocal arrangement of the *Alex Kidd* theme song with goofy lyrics in Japanese, as well as the soundtrack to the Mark III game *Fushigi no Oshiro Pit Pot*. The cover art includes Alex, along with Stella (from *The Lost Stars*) and Princess Lora (from *Miracle World*), as well as Sega-san, an original character from a four-panel gag manga *P.S. Surii-san*, drawn by illustrator Ikao Haneda.





Legend of Joe Musashi: Shinobi Music Collection

Four disc compilation with music from *Shinobi* (ARC, SMS FM & SMS PSG), *Alex Kidd in Shinobi World* (SMS), *Shinobi* (GG), *Shinobi II: The Silent Fury* (GG), *The Cyber Shinobi* (SMS), *The Revenge of Shinobi* (GEN), *Shinobi III* (GEN), and *Shadow Dancer* (ARC, SMS, GEN). Sadly missing *Shinobi Legions* and the PlayStation 2 games.

Fantasy Zone: Ultra Super Big Maximum Great Strong Complete Album

Four disc compilation with music from *Fantasy Zone* (ARC, SMS) along with the bonus tracks from the X68000 and PlayStation 2 versions, as well the Neo Classic version, *Fantasy Zone II* (SMS PSG & FM), *Fantasy Zone II DX* (PS2), *Fantasy Zone III: The Maze* (ARC, SMS PSG & FM), *Fantasy Zone Gear* (GG), *Super Fantasy Zone* (MD), and *Galactic Protector* (SMS PSG & FM). Includes a few bonus tracks from *Black Jack* (a medal game), *Virtua Striker 4* (where the theme is used as a cheer song), and a newly composed vocal medley.

After Burner 20th Anniversary Box

Six disc compilation with music from *After Burner* (ARC, SMS PSG & FM, FC, PCE, GBA, 32X, FMT, GEN, DC, X68, MOB) and *After Burner Climax*, along with various "cameo" tracks from other Sega games, including *Segagaga*, *Rent-A-Hero No. 1*, *Daytona USA*, and the one *After Burner* track from *Sky Target*, as well as several arranged versions.

OutRun 20th Anniversary Box

Eleven disc compilation (plus a bonus DVD) with music from

OutRun (ARC, SMS PSG & FM, GG, MD, PCE, DC, MOB, GBA, & the SAT and PS2 arranged tracks), *Turbo OutRun* (ARC, MD, FMT), *OutRunners* (ARC, MD), *Battle OutRun*, *OutRun 3D*, all of the permutations of *OutRun 2*, cameo tracks and arranged tracks.

Sega System 16 Complete Soundtrack Vol. 1

Three disc compilation with music from *Sega Yakyuu League*, *Fantasy Zone*, *Quartet*, *Sega Joshi Pro Wrestling*, *Action Fighter*, *Alex Kidd: The Lost Stars*, *Dunk Shoot*, *Time Scanner*, *Alien Syndrome*, *SDI/Global Defense*, and *Bullet*.

Sega System 16 Complete Soundtrack Vol. 2

Three disc compilation with music from *Super League*, *Excite League*, *Heavy Weight Champ*, *Shinobi*, *Sonic Boom*, *Ace Attacker*, *Altered Beast*, *Passing Shot*, *Wonder Boy III: Monster Lair*, *Tetris*, *Dynamite Dux*, and *Tough Turf*. The cover depicts the animals of *Altered Beast* as cutesy girls in furry outfits.

Sega System 16 Complete Soundtrack Vol. 3

Three disc compilation with music from *Wrestle War*, *Bay Route*, *Golden Axe*, *Cyber Police ESWAT*, *M.V.P.*, *Ryu Kyu*, *Aurail*, *Cotton*, *Flashpoint* and *Bloxxed*.

Galaxy Force II and Thunder Blade Original Soundtrack

Single disc compilation with music from *Galaxy Force* (ARC, GEN and SMS FM) in addition to *Thunder Blade* (ARC).

Sega Music Vol. 1

Single disc compilation with music from *OutRun*, *Space Harrier* and *Alex Kidd in Miracle World*.

Sega Music Vol. 2

Single disc compilation with music from *Fantasy Zone*, as well as medleys of *Hang-On*, *Enduro Racer* and *Quartet*.

Sega Music Vol. 3 After Burner

Single disc compilation with music from *After Burner*, *Alien Syndrome*, *SDI* and *Dunk Shot*.

Segacon: The Best of Sega Game Music Vol. 1 and Vol. 2

Two three-disc compilations of favorite tracks from over 30 Sega games. The first album focuses on SMS, GEN and ARC soundtracks, while the second focuses on SAT and DC soundtracks.

SDI & Quartet - Sega System 16 Collection Original Soundtrack

Single disc compilation with music from *Quartet* and *SDI/Global Defense*. Also includes an excellent remix of the *Quartet*.

Crack Down / Gain Ground

Single disc compilation with music from *Crack Down* (ARC) and *Gain Ground* (ARC).

Power Drift Original Soundtrack

Single disc with music from *Power Drift* (ARC, SAT).

Planet Harriers Original Soundtrack

Single disc with music from *Planet Harriers* (ARC).

Yu-Suzuki produce G-LOC / R360 / Virtua Racing

Single disc compilation with music from *G-LOC* (ARC) and *Virtua Racing* (ARC).

Shinobi 3D Original Soundtrack

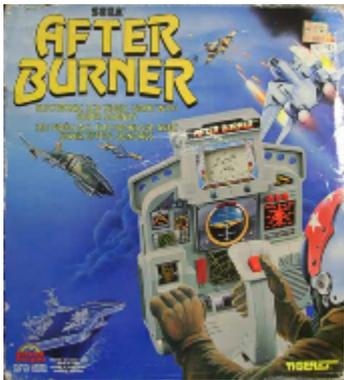
Single disc with music from *Shinobi 3D* (3DS).

Miscellaneous

Tiger Electronics

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Tiger Electronics was a prolific toy company that sold many handheld games. While simplistic compared to Nintendo's Game Boy (and roughly on the same technological level as their Game & Watch series), Tiger's games were cheaper, since they did not require the purchase of a whole console, and featured many properties unavailable on Nintendo's platform. While there were a good number of generic releases, Tiger published several based on Sega properties, including *After Burner*, *Thunder Blade*, *Altered Beast*, *Golden Axe*, *Space Harrier II*, *Shinobi*, and *OutRun*. *Altered Beast* and *Golden Axe* were also released as miniature wristwatches.

Additionally, *After Burner* and *OutRun* were released as much larger toys. *After Burner's* model is shaped like a cockpit, with a throttle and a flight stick (which only moves left and right). *OutRun* is shaped after a car dashboard and includes a steering wheel. The *After Burner* model is fairly common and therefore relatively cheap, but the *OutRun* toy is much harder to find.



Alex Kidd the Board Game

A board game based on the first *Alex Kidd* title was also released in Japan. Dubbed *Alex Kidd in Miracle World Daibouken*, it includes a roulette wheel device that blurs out a small handful of digitized speech samples.



Sonic the Comic and Others

Sonic the Comic was a series of comic books published by Fleetway in the United Kingdom between 1993 and 2002. Though the series obviously focused on Sonic, throughout the years there were also stories based on other Sega properties. The stories were spread over multiple issues, so each month a given series only had a small handful of pages devoted to it.

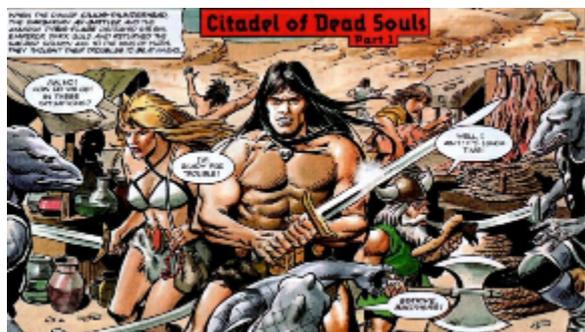
There are two stories based on *Wonder Boy in Monster World* – “*Wonder Boy in Demon World*” and “*Wonder Boy in Ghost World*”. They were written by Mark Eyles and drawn by M DJ Boyann (for *Demon World*) and Bojan Djukac (for *Ghost World*). The story and characters are based off of *Wonder Boy in Monster World*, however loosely. They are meant to be sequels to the Genesis game, and have Shion taking off on new adventures. The Western-style artwork doesn't really do justice to the games, being far grittier than the bright and colorful Japanese style, and the blue-haired protagonist looks rather out of place.



Shinobi was one of the most prolific, with five different stories based on the games – “*The Dark Circle*”, “*Fear Pavilion*”, “*The Art of War*”, “*Way of the Warrior*” and “*Power of the Elements*”. They were written by Alan McKenzie and drawn by Jon Haward. The story and characters are based off of *The Revenge of Shinobi* on the Sega Genesis.



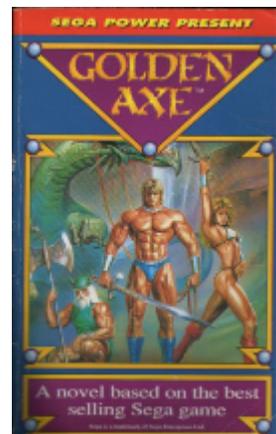
There are two different stories based on *Golden Axe* – “*Citadel of Dead Souls*” and “*Plague of Serpents*”. They were written by Mark Eyles and drawn by Mike White. The storyline takes place after the end of *Golden Axe II*. “*Plague of Serpents*” focuses almost entirely on Gilius Thunderhead.



Other series covered in *Sonic the Comic* include *Decap Attack*, *Kid Chameleon*, *Shining Force*, *Rocket Knight Adventures*, *Eternal Champions*, and *Streets of Rage*.

Unrelated to *Sonic the Comic*, there was also a single issue comic published by Dark Horse Comics based on the PS2 *Shinobi*, which acted as a prologue to that game.

There is also a *Golden Axe* “novel”. Technically it's just an 85 page book that was included in an issue of the British magazine *Sega Power*. It was written by Andy Smith, the editor of *Sega Power*. It's sort of like FX Nine's *Worlds of Power* books, narrating the story and events while offering hints on how to play the game.



Miscellaneous

TV Shows

The classic cartoon *Muppet Babies* features a surprisingly obscure Sega reference. In the episode "It's Only Pretendo", Gonzo gets a video game system and imagines himself and the rest of his friends inside a variety of games. Amongst more popular titles like *Donkey Kong* and *Frogger*, they also end up piloting Opa-Opa in *Fantasy Zone*. Even more strangely, they are playing the TurboGrafx-16 version of the game. The episode even features other relatively obscure games like *Keith Courage in Alpha Zones*. Unfortunately due to assorted rights issues, the series has not been released on DVD.

The Spanish show *Que Vida Mas Triste* is done in the style of a video blog, starring a young man named Borja who talks to the camera. He lives a rather nerdy life, so the show is full of silly references to video games. In one episode, he discusses *Alex Kidd* for the Master System, talking about how it was one of the most difficult games of his childhood and how he could never beat it. He finally overcomes this hurdle and completes the game, which grants him Alex Kidd's powers, including super strength, telekinesis, and teleportation. It's a little weird, because these are skills which Alex doesn't have.



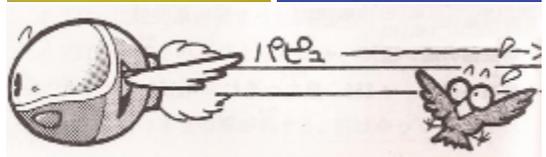
Famicom Bouken Game Books

In the early 1990s, Scholastic published a series of books called "Worlds of Power", which were novelizations of various Nintendo games. There were similar publications in Japan, going under the label "Famicom Bouken Game Book", published by Futabasha. Though most of these titles were based on games for Nintendo systems, there were two based on *Fantasy Zone*, and one on *Space Harrier*.

The books are similar to the *Fighting Fantasy* book series, where the reader makes decisions at certain points, which tells them to turn to different pages. There is also a simple role-playing system where each of the story's protagonists have different skills, and dice rolls are used to resolve conflicts with enemies or other similar scenarios.

The *Fantasy Zone* books are subtitled "Invader from Another Planet" and "Journey to Outer Space", and are obviously not canon. They star a young boy named Akira, from Pleaef, who is joined by Opa-Opa, the dragon Lavender, and a young girl named Lilith. During the adventures, they travel to the planets of the game and encounter the same enemies. There are numerous illustrations, which are amusing because, unlike the games, Opa-Opa is drawn with facial features.

The *Space Harrier* one is subtitled "The White Dragon Hero", presumably referring to Uriah. The hero looks a bit like J.J. from *Zillion*.



Other Cameos

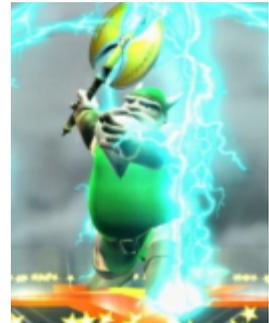
In 2008 Sega released *Sega Superstars Tennis*, developed by Sumo Digital, the same team behind the home ports of *OutRun 2*. Much like *Mario Tennis*, it's a goofy, lighthearted game loosely based on the sport, whose main appeal lies in all of the Sega cameos. Most of the characters and courts are based on *Sonic the Hedgehog*, as well as other assorted post-Genesis properties like *NIGHTS into Dreams*, *Super Monkey Ball*, *Samba de Amigo*, and *Jet Set Radio*.

There are a few references to older games though – Gilius Thunderhead from *Golden Axe*, and Alex Kidd from... well, the *Alex Kidd* games, both appear as playable characters. However, their character models are a bit lame – Gilius seems to have put on some weight and looks remarkably lumpy, while Alex has a hugely malformed head. There is also a bonus minigame based on *Space Harrier*, where you need to swat baseballs at famous enemies from the original arcade game, including stone heads, bouncing mushrooms, and spaceships.

In 2010, Sumo developed *Sonic and Sega All-Stars Racing* which, like *Super Mario Kart*, assembles various Sega mascots into a racing game. Again, many of the characters are based on more recent properties, but a few older characters snuck in as well. Alex Kidd (now looking much less stupid than his *Sega Superstars Tennis* alter ego) rides on his Sukopako Motorcycle, while Opa-Opa from *Fantasy Zone* can fly. Mobo and Robo from *Bonanza Bros.* round out the classic Sega roster. The achievements and trophies are also references to various Sega games, and include Shadow Dancing, Gaining Ground, Death Adder, Magical Sound Shower (a song from *OutRun*) and Red Out (a song from *After Burner*).

Gilius Thunderhead was planned for inclusion, and was meant to ride the Chicken Leg Bizarrian, although he didn't make the final cut. However, he was later included in the 2012 sequel, *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed*. Joe Musashi from *Shinobi* also appears. There are tracks based on *Golden Axe* (featuring the skeleton from the player select screen), *After Burner*, and *OutRun*, as well as numerous remixes of songs by Richard Jacques.

Gunstar Super Heroes, developed by Treasure and published in 2005 for the Game Boy Advance, has quite a bit of Sega fan service as well. In one segment, you ride on top of a ship, wildly rotating the screen to dodge enemy fire, a reference to super scaler games like *After Burner*. It's mightily impressive because it's so smooth, but there's also plenty of flicker. Another stage is similar to *Thunder Blade*, though without the forced scrolling. Hidden data within the game ROM indicates that there were supposed to be battle with the beasts from *Altered Beast* and the robot suit from *ESWAT*.



Miscellaneous

Segagaga

Segagaga is a late-generation Dreamcast game released only in Japan that's filled with Sega fan service. While previous sections in this book, including *Alex Kidd* (pg. 98) and *ESWAT* (pg. 154) reference some cameos in this game, there are tons of other references to Sega's classic properties. The most amusing is the section at the end, where the hero, Tarou Sega, must fly into space while being joined by other Sega characters. He pilots a ship called the R720, an advanced version of the R360 arcade cabinet used for *G-LOC*. The Bad Brothers from *Golden Axe* also rise up from beneath a building, similar to the mechs in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. The ultimate battle is a machine that transforms into several different Sega machines, including the SG-1000, Mega Drive, and Saturn, while it lobs assorted character sprites at you.



GET READY !!

