

■ Stealth attacks are crucial and improved in Eidos' latest.

Hitman: Contracts

Shoot on the dotted line

PUBLISHER **EIDOS** | DEVELOPER **IO INTERACTIVE** | RELEASE DATE **SPRING 2004**

Eidos hit quite a nerve when it released *Hitman: Codename 47* for the PC to an unsuspecting market a few years ago. Games had grown increasingly dark in tone, and the idea of playing as a contract killer was a risky

undertaking. But fans loved it, and what was once a single game is now a full-fledged franchise, with 2002's follow-up, *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin*, grabbing much success on Xbox.

Now for the series' third outing, *Hitman: Contracts* once again puts players in the role of Agent 47 in what is shaping up to be his biggest and baddest title yet. Things start off pretty poorly for 47; the game opens with him in a rather dire situation in Paris. But 47 is a resourceful man, and after employing some new environmental weapons — like using a pool cue to crush an opponent's windpipe — he's back in action and is quickly armed to the teeth. *Contracts* will also expand the more elaborate missions of past titles, like killing someone during open-heart surgery. Accordingly, 47 will carry even more detailed disguises. Not satisfied with its previous creations, Eidos is

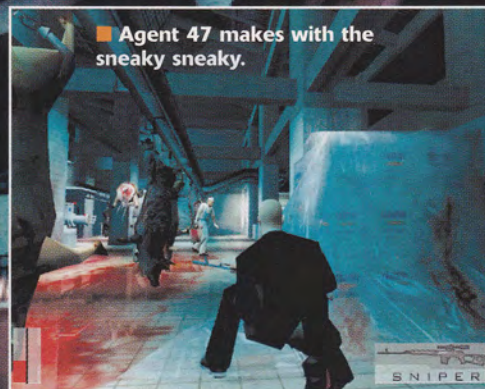
making *Contracts* a much more immersive game than its predecessors. The physics model has been greatly improved, allowing for more realistic kills — after all, what hitman doesn't want to admire his work? A new graphics engine allows enhanced particle effects such as sparks from bullets smashing into walls, higher polygon counts, more detailed texture maps, and even reflection-mapping.

The developers have listened to the their fans and have greatly refined the interface, making it far more intuitive than previous iterations. Controls can be custom-mapped, and there will

even be a left-handed control scheme. Furthermore, *Contracts* will feature open-ended gameplay to avoid the steep learning curve of the past. In other words, if you're not able to sneak in the back door, you can enter with guns blazing in the front. If that's still not enough, IO Interactive has added an Easy mode. Though it's not confirmed, Eidos is playing with the idea of adding voice recognition. All of this is coming to Xbox rather soon this spring, so expect more coverage in the coming months before *Hitman: Contracts* releases.

— Doug Trueman

■ Agent 47 makes with the sneaky sneaky.



GAME POTENTIAL

LOOKS GOOD

- Skillful use of melee weapons instead of mere smashing and bashing
- Different approaches within a level require different tactics

NEEDS WORK

- We wouldn't mind seeing a training mode on all the different weapons
- Surely 47 knows a thousand ways to kill a man with his bare hands

FINAL THOUGHTS

Hitman 2 was a huge seller on Xbox and if they can deliver on the promise of *Hitman: Contracts* it could be brilliant.

Alias

DEVELOPER **ACCLAIM**, PUBLISHER **ACCLAIM**WEBSITE **WWW.ALIASGAME.COM** MULTIPLAYER **NONE**

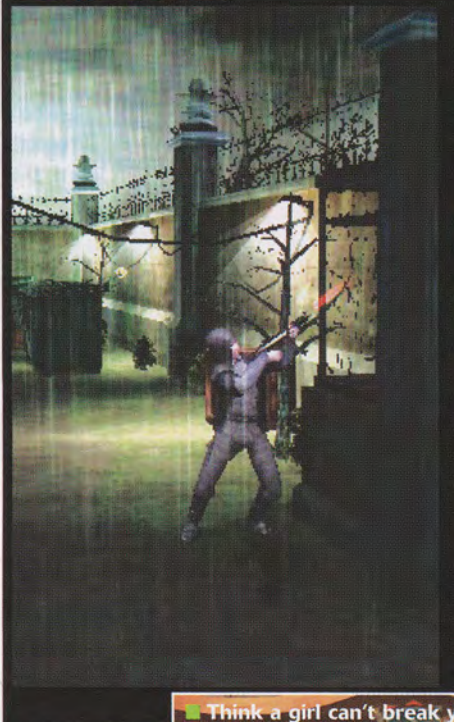
Very few licensed properties make a quality-laden leap to videogames, either because the developers think their license will carry the title, or acquiring it swallows almost their entire budget. Unfortunately, *Alias* is another to fall into this trap. While it looks great, it's all sizzle and no steak.

It follows the plot of the show, putting Sydney Bristow up against the evil Sark and his cronies. Accordingly, Sydney sneaks, punches, kicks, hides, shoots, and occasionally breaks out the jiu-jitsu as she travels across the globe trying to foil a plot that involves a mind-controlling laser.

Though *Alias* is trying to invite comparisons with *Splinter Cell* as a stealth game, very little stealth is required. But who cares when Sydney dresses up in outfits ranging from cocktail waitress to punk rocker, and when the going gets rough – and it often does – the best solution is usually to wale on the buttons and watch her spin kick her way to victory with a pair of legs that would make the WWE's Stacy Keibler jealous.

The biggest frustration with *Alias* is the completely bizarre degree to which it's unbalanced. Levels either have save points every three steps or none at all. Enemies either surround Sydney for unrecoverable beatdowns when she's unarmed, or bring a broom to fight with while she brandishes a machine gun. Sydney's environmental attack move sees her almost teleporting across the screen to grab someone's head and smash it into a countertop or wall, and she apparently has no qualms about

■ A split-screen feature lets you see a sentry's movements, before laying the stealthy smack down.



THE VERDICT

Graphics

Sydney looks fantastic, but the camera occasionally positions itself behind walls and other obstacles.

Immersion

The game borrows heavily from the design and feel of the television show with its elaborate set pieces, voice acting, and detailed cutscenes.

Sound

Composer Michael Giacchino was brought in to score the game, making it sound like a television episode.

Design

Save points abound, giving the title an almost apologetic and unpolished feel.

(+ Good,

(-) Bad,

(?) Perplexing

- + Sydney looks just like Jennifer Garner – hot damn
- + The voice acting and the cutscenes are top notch
- Derivative gameplay with spotty control and camera work
- Fighting involves little more than button mashing
- ? Sydney sprints through levels, but takes staircases on tiptoe

■ Think a girl can't break your neck? Think again, Chachi.



shooting defenseless enemies in the face. (This was approved by Disney?)

On the whole, level designs lack the magic of *Splinter Cell*, the fighting and stealth can't compete with *Everything Or Nothing*, and the story follows its plot progression by the numbers. The only innovation of any note is the use of a split screen camera that shows a sentry's position from a different point of view as he approaches Sydney, and while

this works most of the time, it occasionally confuses the already unstable gameplay.

Fans of Jennifer Garner would be better off spending their money on the *Alias* DVD box set or a big poster. Or – dare we say it? – renting *Daredevil*.

– Doug Trueman

Official Xbox
magazine
verdict

6.5
10.0

Red dawn rising

Shadow Ops: Red Mercury

DEV ZOMBIE STUDIOS | PUB ATARI | MULTIPLAYER SPLIT-SCREEN CO-OP MODE, 1-4 OFFLINE, 1-12 VIA XBOX LIVE AND SYSTEM LINK
EXTRAS 5.1, THX-CERTIFIED | WEBSITE WWW.ATARI.COM/SHADOWOPS/ | ESRB T

Despite the wealth of shooters on the Xbox ranging from the creative (*Max Payne*) to the dull (*Brute Force*) there's always room for more takes on the genre...like *Shadow Ops: Red Mercury*.

In the military-issue boots of Frank Hayden, the captain of a U.S. Delta Forces squad, you play out a story ripped straight from the trashcan of any Hollywood executive's office. One of Hayden's former allies has gone rogue and become a double agent, taking a briefcase nuke with him. It's up to Hayden and his operatives to track down the bomb before a thriving metropolis becomes center stage of a nuclear urban renewal program. The chase takes Hayden and his troops to humid jungles, destroyed desert towns, and Russian laboratories.

Shadow Ops is a straightforward run-and-gun first-person shooter. Though the usual weapon loadout is present (sniper rifles, grenades, pistols), gadgets that you'd expect to be available are not (thermal vision, night vision, etc). While you spend



■ In the jungle, the mighty jungle, a dead dude swings upside down from a tree. Eww.

much of the game traveling in a squad, you don't interact with other members aside from merely following orders to provide cover fire, plant demolition charges, or take out embedded snipers. *Shadow Ops* also borrows from Namco's *kill.switch* and features enemy soldiers hiding behind cover and shooting blindly.

It's almost like one step back for every step forward. For every

cool element, there's a feature sorely missed in another area. Even the production values are inconsistent: the music score compares favorably with *Metal Gear Solid*, and the explosions and gunfire succeed at being loud and intimidating. But while all of the environments are lush and detailed, enemy animations are unnaturally stiff.

The sense of immersion in the outdoor levels is deep and impressive, but indoor missions are run-of-the-mill. Gameplay difficulty is wildly frustrating and schizophrenic, going from simple levels that can be easily defeated on the first outing to kill zones that take multiple tries to scout enemy locations.

While it doesn't have the style of *Halo* or the myriad of gameplay choices like *Splinter Cell*, *Shadow Ops* is a decent throwback to simpler shooter times when running and gunning was all that is to be expected.

- Doug Trueman

THE VERDICT

Graphics

The framerate is consistent while battling inside, but drops a tad during outdoor firefights.

Immersion

At times, you'll actually feel as though you're in an exotic land, fighting for your lives. At others, it's just another game.

Sound

Some of the best in recent memory. Nearby explosions will jar the controller from your hands.

Design

For almost every cluster of enemies, an explosive barrel waits nearby. How considerate of the developers.

(+) Good,

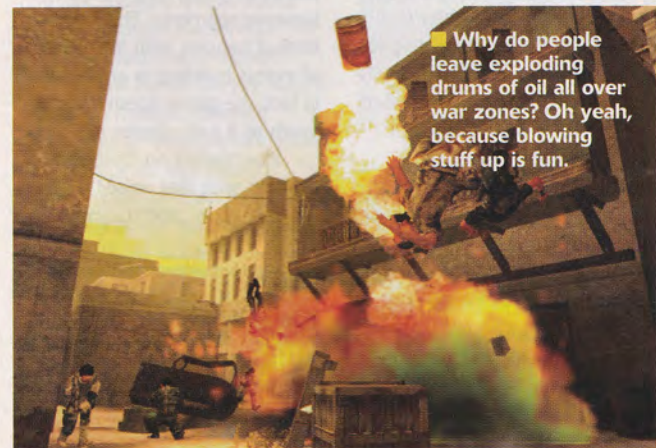
(-) Bad,

(?) Perplexing

- + Seeing and hearing foreign languages during gunplay greatly adds to the sense of realism
- + Not being able to spot enemy troops in the jungle levels is accurate and a tad disturbing
- The zoom on the sniper rifle scope could be a touch more responsive
- The framerate while outside should be smoother
- ? No save game or checkpoint system means each level has to be beaten in a single effort

Official Xbox
Magazine
verdict

7.1
10.0



■ Why do people leave exploding drums of oil all over war zones? Oh yeah, because blowing stuff up is fun.

Shaky, not stirring

SpyHunter 2

DEVELOPER **MIDWAY** | PUBLISHER **MIDWAY** | WEBSITE **WWW.MIDWAY.COM**
 MULTIPLAYER 1-2 VIA SPLITSCREEN VERSUS, SINGLE SCREEN 2-PLAYER CO-OP



■ There's nothing particularly spectacular about *SpyHunter 2*'s often bland graphics.

■ It's all about transforming your vehicle to suit any of your needs, on the fly (left).

THE VERDICT

Graphics

Dull and lacking color. Most collisions with enemy mines occur because they blend into the landscape.

Immersion

High death rates in certain spots and low rates in others give this title a very "videogamey" feel, and counteract its sense of depth.

Sound

The remix of the Peter Gunn theme is all that is memorable.

Design

Given the success of the original arcade title, we were hoping for a deeper experience. Sadly it's a pretty shallow and flawed experience from start to finish.

(+) Good,

(-) Bad,

(?) Perplexing

- + The machine gun fire sounds as though it would tear through steel
- + Creative co-operative two-player mode featuring a driver and gunner
- Lackluster explosions, simple models for enemy vehicles
- More usage of the Weapons Truck would have been appreciated
- ? Boss battles literally go on forever if neither party takes damage

Official Xbox
Magazine
 verdict

6.0
 10.0

Midway's arcade game *SpyHunter* is a classic title, and the remake, which hit store

shelves a year ago, received lackluster reviews. Unfortunately, *SpyHunter 2* bears little resemblance to the original coin-op game other than in name or its use of the *Peter Gunn* theme.

Players control the G8155 Interceptor, the coolest car since K.I.T.T. on *Knight Rider*. There's a paper-thin plot that ties the levels together, but most players won't give it much thought. The classic

weapons are back (machine guns, missiles, oil slicks, smokescreens), but there are now cluster rockets, lasers, shields, and the like.

SpyHunter 2, simply put, is a generic vehicular battle title with dull graphics, trial-and-error gameplay, and little that seems inspired. The game is very "high impact" – either the player or the CPU vehicles are on the verge of exploding at any given time. Enemy weapons do extreme damage, and the various car modes do little to break up the monotonous gameplay.

What makes matters worse is the bizarre targeting scheme: there is none. Players merely steer their car in the right direction and hope their reticules cross over an enemy. It's even possible to have foes cruise directly in front of the Interceptor unharmed because the gun's aim only really moves left to right with very little up or down, except in coop mode. A second player can join in as a gunner or for split-screen combat, but this adds little to *SpyHunter 2*'s overall experience.

– Doug Trueman

Tony's got a brand-new bag

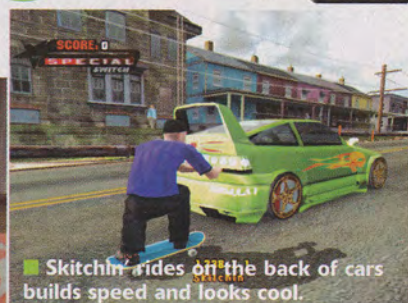
Tony Hawk's Underground

DEVELOPER **NEVERSOFT** | PUBLISHER **ACTIVISION** | MULTIPLAYER **1-2 SPLITSCREEN**
WEBSITE **WWW.THUGONLINE.COM**



■ Does this grind make my butt look big?

763 X 2
Kickflip + BS Lipslide



■ Skitchin' rides on the back of cars builds speed and looks cool.



■ As ever, huge combos are possible and essential.

THE VERDICT

Graphics

Much the same as before: clean, clear, crisp. Make a new board and the CPU trashes the bottom as you grind it.

Immersion

Activision has outdone itself. The characters ooze skating authenticity and make you feel that you're actually one of them.

Sound

Nothing has changed from the previous titles other than the soundtrack. Rip your own. We suggest Avril Lavigne's "Sk8r Boi" for maximum cheese.

Design

It's hard to imagine how they're going to beat this one.

(+) Good.

(-) Bad.

(?) Perplexing

- + A huge, dynamic world to skate. If you can imagine it, you can do it.
- + The Create a Trick mode will have players messing around for hours.
- The last task in the RPG mode is practically impossible.
- A t times the game moves a tad too quickly. Sharpen your skills.
- ? Why isn't it raining in the Vancouver level?

Official Xbox Magazine verdict

9.0
10.0

Tony Hawk has dominated skateboarding his entire life. He started crushing the competition while still in high school, and he bought his first house with prize money when he was only seventeen. The *Tony Hawk* line of videogames has been much the same.

Tony Hawk's Underground, the fourth in the series, adds an RPG element to the classic gameplay. After choosing a character (or creating your own) players start off in New Jersey learning how to skate. There's a detailed quest for sponsorship, competition, and even a brand of clothing. But it doesn't come easily. Some of the

people you meet are only interested in themselves, and will double-cross you faster than you can bail.

Along with new animations, new tricks, new skateparks and new challenges comes the much anticipated "Get Off Your Board" mode, which literally lets players hop on and off their wheels with a single touch of a button. It's possible to dismount, climb a ladder to the roof of a building, then take a flying leap of faith. While in midair you can whip your board back under your feet and land grinding a telephone line. There are rather odd tasks to perform while on foot — like driving a leaf blower — but you can ignore them if you want.

Where the game really shines is in the creativity it gives the player. It's possible to create goals to challenge a buddy like collecting letters, crossing gaps, or pulling off insane high scores. The "Create a Trick" mode works like an audio file editor, letting players create their own moves (like combining an Indy with a 360 Backflip). New moves can be used during the game, and *THUG* calculates the appropriate score based on the trick's difficulty. It's a cinch to use, too.

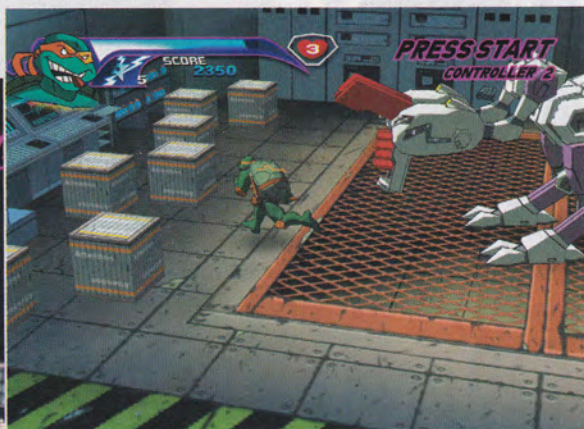
We didn't get the "face in the game" feature that the PS2 has, which admittedly sucks, but this is still the best out there and it keeps getting better.

— Doug Trueman

Beauty is only shell deep

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

DEVELOPER **MIRAGE STUDIOS** | PUBLISHER **KONAMI**
 MULTIPLAYER 1-2 | WEBSITE WWW.KONAMI.COM/TMNT/



■ Enemies are identical, other than a slight color change.

■ The game looks absolutely amazing... too bad the gameplay doesn't deliver.

THE VERDICT

Graphics

The visuals and animations are superb. Michaelangelo gives Maxi from *Soul Calibur II* a run for his money.

Immersion

From the cartoon cutscenes to the slick fighting and visual sound effects, *TMNT* looks like a comic book come to life.

Sound

True to the genre, but after the first level you'll want to disable your turtle's witticisms. You can't.

Design

Boring. Konami's 1992 *Turtles in Time* for the SNES had far more innovation, a ton of moves, and is a superior game.

(+) Good.

(-) Bad.

(?) Perplexing

- + Great graphics; interesting evil "Darth Maul" turtle
- + Inventive "clang" effect when an enemy strikes a shell by accident
- + Two-player action is nostalgic while it lasts
- Repetitive. Repetitive. Repetitive. Repetitive. Repetitive...
- Not enough ninja stars to go around
- No post-stage save feature
- ? Only two players in a four-turtle game?

Official Xbox
 Magazine
 verdict

5.0
 10.0

Had this been a four-player arcade coin-op released about 10 years ago, it would have made Konami millions. But it's a title that's a decade out of date.

Players choose Leonardo, Michaelangelo, Donatello, or Raphael and slice, bash, jump, and slash their way through six levels broken into multiple stages. The graphics are beautifully animated: Watching Donatello perform staff-assisted cartwheels into scores of enemies is quite a sight, as are the classic comic book audio descriptions like "Smash!" and "Thok!" that appear during battle. Enemies can be juggled Capcom style, but no skill bonus is awarded.

Unfortunately, the game falls prey to the traps that eventually led to the degradation of the side-scrolling beat-'em-up: There's nothing more to do. Palette-swapped enemies attack by the thousands, and after a trip down memory lane on the first level, the second becomes a tad boring. By the third, you're wondering how late Domino's delivers.

That's not to say that the game is poor: It's just that the style is totally obsolete. Each stage is broken down into multiple levels, some of which require fifteen minutes to complete. Progress can only be saved after the final stage of a given level, so if you play for an hour then choke on a boss, you

have to start from scratch. *TMNT* picks up the pace when a second player comes along to spice up the action. The usual tropes are in place: Players share a collection of continues and when they're out, the game is over.

Though the turtles are known for their happy-go-lucky commentary as they fight, Konami went, like, way way over the top. Hearing Leonardo shout, "Slice and dice!" fifty times on a single level will make you want to switch characters. Unfortunately, you're stuck with the same turtle in the game's story mode until you finish it, so even the fun of experimenting with new moves is denied unless you have the staying power to try it all again.

— Doug Trueman

A clash of titans

Wrath Unleashed

DEVELOPER **THE COLLECTIVE** | PUBLISHER **LUCASARTS** | MULTIPLAYER **1-4 PLAYERS CONSECUTIVE**
 WEBSITE **WWW.LUCASARTS.COM/PRODUCTS/WRATH**

ON THE
GAME
DISC
demo

Want to see if you've got what it takes to command unicorns and dragons? Well, check it out for yourself with a full playable demo!



■ The slow Blaze Dragon has a hard time avoiding the hammer of the Giantess.

■ (left) The sinister Durlock orders a Spirit Armor into battle.

Wrath Unleashed is quite simply a cross between a fighting game and a real-time strategy. Much of the gameplay comes from an old PC game called *Archon*: players control various mythic creatures in a battle on a type of chessboard. Strategy, piece movement, and typical elements of board games all figure prominently, but when two pieces occupy the same square, a real-time battle breaks out. Each piece is armed with two melee attacks and two magic attacks, plus a special move.

Teams are based on the four elements (fire, water, etc.), and there are 36 creatures including unicorns, juggernauts, summoned elementals, and demigods. Every creature has different rankings in terms of offense, defense, physical attributes, and magic. Creatures gain or lose advantages based on the terrain they fight

on, and random environmental hazards like spikes mean that any creature has at least a chance at winning, but attacking a frost dragon with a centaur is generally a bad idea. The game's wildcards are demigods who can cast spells like Resurrect, Heal, Bind, and Wrath (which, when cast, usually results in instant character death).

The board game aspect is relatively simple. Players try to control temples and citadels, with the winner usually being whoever reaches a set number first. But a team's demigod can also be set up to play like a king in chess: if he or she dies, the game's over. The single-player campaign is a little too simple and short, which hurts the game's longevity, but the game really takes off in its multiplayer capability. Unfortunately, there's no Xbox Live support, which is a huge oversight for a game of this

nature. For gamers who would rather just brawl instead of adhering to the context of having to move pieces beforehand, the developers have included a pure fighting mode too.

There are a few other problems with *Wrath Unleashed* – for instance, there are significant load times before and after battles, and fights between CPU-based characters cannot be skipped. The inclusion of so many creatures turns fighting into a button-mashing affair as it's difficult to know which techniques take priority over others and what others actually do. What's in the game is pretty compelling for the right type of gamer who knows exactly what they're in for and has buddies well versed in the same type of gameplay. Too bad, because with a little Live play this could've been a contenda.

– Doug Trueman

THE VERDICT

Graphics

Detailed and well-animated, but rely too much on the color scheme of each team. We understand that "red" equals "fire."

Immersion

The occasional battle feels mythic, but too often you're just waiting for your Xbox to load, even between rounds.

Sound

The music is somewhat repetitive, but the voice acting is solid. And if you listen carefully you can hear the trademark LucasArts lightsaber effect.

Design

Actual battling isn't all that deep, but the nature of the board game requires some thought and strategy.

(+) Good.

(-) Bad.

(?) Perplexing

- + Huge variety of characters to choose from
- + Simple interface on the board screen
- It's difficult to know exactly what characters are capable of
- A greater variety of spells couldn't hurt
- ? Lack of Xbox Live is sad and makes us weepy. Why?

Official Xbox

Magazine

verdict

7.0
10.0

At play with a pooch made of clay

Wallace and Gromit in **Project Zoo**

DEVELOPER **FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS** PUBLISHER **BAM! ENTERTAINMENT**

MULTIPLAYER **NONE** WEBSITE **WWW.BAM4FUN.COM/GAMES/WALLACE_GROMIT/INDEX.HTML**

Frontier Development has had the difficult task of taking one of Europe's most beloved franchises and turning it into a videogame, and for the most part, they've succeeded.

Project Zoo features Wallace and Gromit out for a trip to their local zoo, only to find out that it's been taken over by the sinister

Feathers McGraw, a penguin who's one of the most amusing villains in gaming history.

The game borrows elements from many different titles: There's the complex jumping of *Mario*, a nuts-and-bolts collection of virtually every platformer ever made, and the puzzles and gadgets of *Ratchet and Clank*.

The characters in Wallace and

Gromit are very well-animated (aside from Gromit's basic jump), and the worlds are as detailed as any of the films in the series. Players who enjoy the movies will instantly fall in love with *Project Zoo*, but hardcore gamers might find the control a touch lacking. Definitely worth trying, and legitimately funny in places.

— Doug Trueman



Familiar gameplay mixed with some odd characters.

THE VERDICT

Official Xbox
Magazine
verdict

7.5
10.0

More combos than Tony Hawk...

Alter Echo

DEVELOPER **OUTRAGE GAMES** | PUBLISHER **THQ** | WEBSITE **WWW.ALTERECHO.COM**

MULTIPLAYER **NONE**

Q uick story: Evil guy wants to overthrow the universe by using animated Plasticine to do his dirty work. Though the premise is something we've seen a thousand times, *Alter Echo* is rather unique. As Nevin, players can instantly morph into any of three forms: cool swordsman, destructive gun-toter, and creepy

stealth bug thing. There's no end to the action in *Alter Echo*, and the game succeeds in its deep fighting system. It's possible to link moves from different forms together, giving the game almost infinite replay value for gamers who want to come up with new and improved ways of smashing drones. There's even an overdrive mode that allows players to

instantly kill foes by slipping through time.

Unfortunately, the game stumbles with PS2-style graphics as well as repetitive and linear play. After you've slashed, shot, and snuck around a seemingly endless number of enemies, you'll want something with more substance.

— Doug Trueman



■ **Nothin' like a plasma rifle in the midst of melee attacks.**

THE VERDICT

Official Xbox
Magazine
verdict

7.5
10.0

A Samurai showdown

Dynasty Warriors 4

DEVELOPER **OMEGA FORCE** | PUBLISHER **KOEI** | MULTIPLAYER **1-2** | WEBSITE **WWW.KOEI.COM/GAMES/DYNASTY.CFM**

The latest in Koei's hack 'n' slash series builds on the solid foundation set by the previous three. Players choose a clan from the Tokugawa era in

feudal Japan, then set about routing their enemies in a hybrid of *Final Fight 3-D* and chess. After choosing a character, players explore massive battlefields that hold upwards of

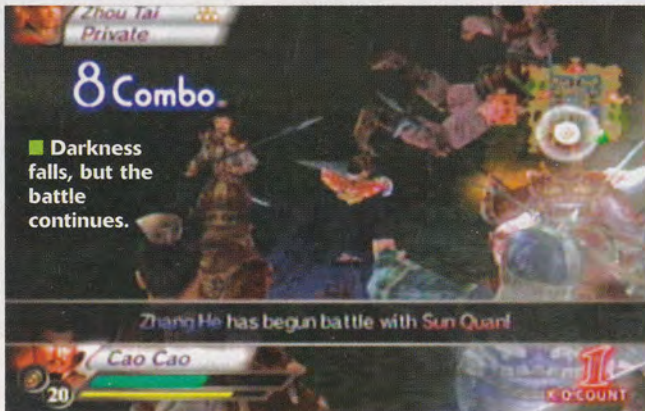
five hundred enemies, all while dealing with blitz attacks, siege weapons, ambushes, mounted infantry, and elemental magic.

The battles in *Dynasty Warriors 4* are epic, some taking more than an hour to complete, but there's more to victory than simple killing. Players must escort key figures to safety, assassinate officers, and seal strongholds, and there's something uniquely satisfying about razing a battalion of archers from atop a moving horse. Though the gameplay tends to be somewhat repetitive, there are scores of characters, techniques, and magical items to choose from. War has never looked so good.

— Doug Trueman



■ **Xiahou Dun summons the power of fire to dispense with unruly guards.**



■ **Darkness falls, but the battle continues.**

We're on the highway to hell

Maximum Chase

DEVELOPER **GENKI** PUBLISHER **MAJESCO** WEBSITE **WWW.MAXIMUM-CHASE.COM**

MULTIPLAYER **NONE**



Maximum Chase has two modes of play: gamers either flee from gun-toting baddies, or ride shotgun and blast incoming vehicles. It's that simple.

But in the end, the game doesn't know what it wants to be. The driving levels house a few stages that are compelling in their

open-ended surprise factor. Picture turning a corner with no idea what's on the other side. But sadly, most of the time you'll be racing on boring, linear highways.

The bland gun levels have you blasting away at carbon copy vehicles – like *Time Crisis* on wheels – although players can't control the vehicle while driving.

The game's story unfolds via badly-acted FMVs, the kind that appeared in the late 1990s when developers speculated that Silicon Valley and Hollywood would merge. Players simply watch the drama unfold with no interaction at all, making *Maximum Chase* a boring plod at best.

— Doug Trueman



■ **Graduates from the Bill Gates School of Acting strut their stuff.**

THE
VERDICT

Official Xbox
magazine
verdict

4.0
10.0

It's a cold day in hell

Spawn: Armageddon

DEVELOPER **POINT OF VIEW** PUBLISHER **NAMCO**

WEBSITE **WWW.SPAWNARMAGEDDON.COM** MULTIPLAYER **NONE**

There's a saying in the creative community that goes something like, "Good artists borrow. Great artists steal." If that's true, then the developers of *Spawn: Armageddon* are pure

masterminds. For those with a PS2, *Spawn* is an absolute carbon copy in many ways of Capcom's *Devil May Cry*. The game's interface, moves, powerup system, and even the sound effects take bits from Capcom's

action-shooter, but fail to supercede it in any way.

You control Spawn on his quest for vengeance. You can double jump, glide with his cape, switch between a

giant axe and various sidearms on the fly, use Necroplasm to blast baddies, slip through time, and literally tear enemies apart with Spawn's chains (why do they sound like compressed air?).

The main problem with *Spawn* is that it's simply dull. Whereas other games give players unlimited ammo and a demonic army to slaughter, *Spawn* limits its anti-hero's actions to strictly run-of-the-mill environments, excessive handholding tutorials, and bosses easy enough to be defeated by a small child. Despite Spawn's incredible mythology, the main goal of the game is apparently to find a control console, smash it,

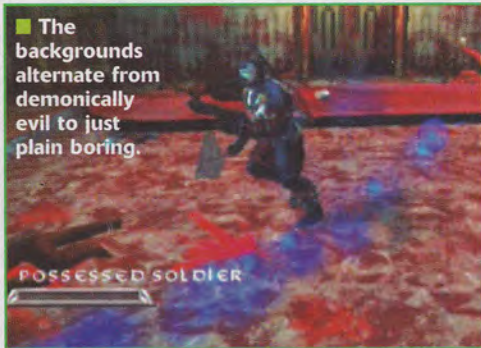
■ **Spawn and Violator square off in an all-too-easy boss fight.**



defeat enemies, and then move to the next level. Given the abilities Spawn has with his Necroplasm, his cape, his chains, and his serious attitude problem, Namco could have made an absolutely killer title. Instead the entire game feels as though it was just phoned in.

— Doug Trueman

■ **The backgrounds alternate from demonically evil to just plain boring.**



**THE
VERDICT**

Official Xbox
magazine
verdict

6.5
10.0

Captain's Log, Star Date 200312.3

Star Trek: Shattered Universe

DEVELOPER **STARSPHERE INTERACTIVE** PUBLISHER **TDK** MULTIPLAYER **NONE**

WEBSITE **WWW.TDKM.COM/GAMES/STARTREK**

The U.S.S. Excelsior has ventured into a mirrored universe where good and evil are reversed. We are under attack from all sides. We are crippled and must call upon Federation, Orion, Klingon, and Romulan fighters to explore and engage in combat. But fear not: controlling fighters is so rudimentary, an Ensign could

do it. Each ship has three different weapon loadouts and standard Starship fundamentals: when shields are depleted, the hull takes damage. If the hull is breached, the ship is lost. The engineers have outdone themselves: inertial dampers prevent a sense of speed, and our comm link forces pilots to endure commands repeated endlessly in battle.

Though our foes have strength in numbers, their offense consists merely of sending wave after wave of fighters to destroy us. They perform maneuvers such as flying directly into our line of fire and are easily defeated. I must speak with Starfleet about these dangerous new tactics.

— Captain Hikaru Sulu
(aka Doug Trueman)



■ **Who knew that fighting the Federation would be this easy?**

THE VERDICT

Official Xbox
Magazine
verdict

6.0
10.0

The fastest racing game ever?

XGRA

DEVELOPER **ACCLAIM** | PUBLISHER **ACCLAIM CHELTENHAM** | WEBSITE **WWW.EXTREMEG.COM**
MULTIPLAYER **1-4 SAME SCREEN**

Accclaim's *XGRA* features motorcycles of the future racing across fourteen tracks that take them through deserts, forests, under the ocean, and even into the void of outer space. The courses have multiple levels and paths, but essentially there's only one way through each. As is to be expected, players can choose different riders and bikes, each of which has varying attributes pertaining to acceleration, top speed, handling, and the like.

Where *XGRA* literally leaves the competition in the dust is in its absolutely unrivaled sense of speed. The track screams by in

the third-person mode – words and screenshots can't come close to conveying this – but in the cockpit view the game blisters by so quickly that saying it's a "twitch" game isn't right either:



■ **The scenery is beautiful, but forget about photographs.**

You have to react on an almost subconscious level. When you exceed 700 miles per hour, the game enters a racing Zen mode. A massive sonic boom sweeps away all sound effects, and the bikes blur as if traveling through hyperspace until they slow down. Negotiating the tracks at such a velocity is difficult, but with practice it can be mastered.

Ironically, the experience *XGRA* offers is over almost too quickly. The entire career mode can be beaten in a single sitting, and the AI offers little or no threat from its racing skills or its use of the game's fifteen weapons.

— Doug Trueman

THE VERDICT

Graphics

Visually stunning. The game never drops a frame despite showing eight vehicles all racing past Mach 1.

Immersion

XGRA offers and demands nothing less than total captivation. Blink once and you live. Blink twice and you're dead.

Sound

There's nothing particularly innovative on the audio front, aside from the sonic boom that nullifies all sound effects.

Design

The tracks are inventive and the control is tight, but besting the AI requires little skill.

(+) Good.

(-) Bad.

(?) Perplexing

- + Drop-offs so sudden and fast they bring up your lunch
- + A sandstorm on one level almost blinds you
- + The frame-rate remains consistent amid total chaos
- No Xbox Live or System Link support
- Experienced racers will find it too easy
- Weapons are pretty much ineffective
- ? "Congratulations, you won the game!" is all you get

Official Xbox
magazine
verdict

7.8
10.0