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Want RPGS?

For years, the Super Nintendo was considered the premier console for role playing games. With great games like Final Fantasy 2 and 3, Legend of Zelda: A Link From the Past, Chronotrigger and more, it is easy to see why it gained that reputation. But in recent years, another system has come by and built a much bigger and better collection of RPGs. This newer system has captured the crown as the best system for RPG fans. This system is the Sony Playstation!

I know that RPGs are not the first thing that people think of when they think of the Playstation. Instead, they think of huge lineup of sports games, with Electronic Arts, 989 Sports and others, trying to outdo each other. They think of the great selection of racing games, like the Grand Turismo series. They may even think of the wealth of fighters with the Tekken series battling it out with the Battle Arena series as well as the numerous other series. But RPGs is not something that comes to mind. But it should!

The biggest advantage that the Playstation has is that it features many great games from other systems as well as plenty of new series. If you are a fan of Final Fantasy, the king of the RPGs, then the Playstation offers a ton of choices! From the multi-million selling Final Fantasy 7, 8 and 9, to the well revered Final Fantasy Tactics, you have tons of options. Add in the two Final Fantasy Anthology, one of which brings two previously unreleased in the United States games. There are also a handful of Chocobo games, some of which are RPGs.

While the wealth of Final Fantasy games is enough for some gamers, there is a ton more of worthwhile RPGs. If you are old school, you can play the Lunar series, with updated graphics and cut scenes. The very popular and very expensive Chronotrigger from the Super Nintendo is available on one of the Final Fantasy Chronicles compilations, along with Final Fantasy 2. The sequel to Chronotrigger, Chrono Cross, is also available on the Playstation.

If these games are not enough, you have the Suikoden series, Legend of Dragoon, Legend of Mana, Vandal Hearts and a ton more! Whether you like turn based RPGs, real time ones, classic or new, there is something for you on the Playstation!

Third Party Support, A Necessity

There was a time in video games when third party support did not mean a whole lot. Sure it helped a system, but a company could have a successful system without a ton of 3rd party support. Of course, this was before the "Video Game Crash". Since then, 3rd party support can be the difference between success and failure.

I know what you are thinking, the Nintendo 64 did not have alot of 3rd party support and it did pretty good. Well, it did do good, but it could have done great with some support. The Playstation smoked it, with 3rd party support being the big difference. So, you can do all right without alot of support, but if you really want to be a market leader, you need the support.

The biggest reason for importance of third party support is for the revenue it generates. Unlike the past, most video game companies lose money on their systems. There are rumors that Microsoft will lose over \$100.00 on each X-Box sold. Hard to make money that way. But with enough systems sold, they will get the software and make their money off licensing. Console makers charge anywhere from \$10.00-\$15.00 a game as a fee for publishing on their

platform. Take this and times it over the millions of games they hope to sell and you have some immense profits. The best example is the Sony Playstation. Before they lowered their licensing fees, there were sales of somewhere in the vicinity of a half a billion games for the Playstation. Take that number and times it by the \$15.00 they used to charge for licensing and you get an amazing number, over \$7 billion dollars! That is pure profit for them as they only have to charge a fee and give their OK. This does not even account for the sales of systems, joysticks and memory cards. Now you understand why Microsoft got into the console business.

Besides the large profits generated by third party support, it is also crucial to build the user base. There needs to be a large user base to get the third party support, but you cannot generate the large user base without third party support. Sounds like a catch 22, but it really isn't. If you build a very good product and give it alot of support, the third party companies will come.

As the industry has become much bigger and the players that much stronger, the battle to get third party support, specifically exclusive games, the stakes are going to get even bigger. Look for companies like Sony and Microsoft to not only buy up companies, but also sign companies to exclusive contracts for certain titles. `They can offer perks like reduced or no licensing fees for certain titles, cash payments or other incentives. Imagine if Microsoft could secure the rights to the next Final Fantasy or Metal Gear game? What if Madden only showed up on the Playstation 2? This could really change the video game landscape and none of these are out of the realm of possibility.

It should be quite obvious the importance of third party developers. They have come a long way from when Activision, the first third party developer, was sued by Atari for releasing games on their system. They have gone full circle, from despised to embraced and courted.

Jaguar, Everything but the Games

For a moment in the 90's, Atari was back! The stock that once languished at under a dollar, had soared to over \$15.00 a share! The company that was left for dead, suddenly had a powerful, new system that was turning heads. The Atari Jaguar showed all the promise in the world, but it forget one key thing, games.

The Atari Jaguar can be the perfect blueprint for how not to launch a game system. Besides making a good system, they did absolutely nothing else right. It used an obsolete medium, carts, it had almost no third party support and worst of all, it had almost no worthwhile first party games. Talk about trying to win a race with your legs tied together, the Jaguar was doomed from the start.

I still remember the first time I saw a Jaguar in action. After reading articles about it and hearing people talking about it, I was excited to see it in person. When it was finally released, I rushed up to a local game store to check it out and possibly buy one. When I entered the store, I was greeted by the sight of Cybermorph, possibly one of the ugliest games I had seen in a long time. Here is this 64 bit system with all this potential and what do I see? I see what looks like Starfox flying through a bunch of blocks. Needless to say, I did not purchase one.

While one game does not make a system, it was enough to leave a bitter taste in my mouth. I did later look at other games, but I only saw a few games that really captured my interest and none of them were worth the investment. Out of the 50+ games for the Jaguar, there are only about 8 originally released games that were worth owning. Aliens vs Predator, Tempest 2000, Defender 2000, Missile Command 3D, Iron Soldier and a few that I cannot think of right now. Not a very good showing.

Two areas that the Jaguar was seriously lacking in were sports games and fighters. Remember that fighters were very popular at this time and all the Jaguar had to show was some awful game called Fight For Life (very prophetic title). For sports games, you had Troy Aikman Football and Fever Pitch Soccer, two lackluster titles. An NBA Jam game may have come out for the Jaguar, but I am not certain on that. Considering the success of sports games in the USA, I think there was some bad decision making here. While all the old arcade games being remade was nice, I doubt that they sold many systems. A few more sports games, especially some good ones, along with an established fighting game or two, could have done wonders for the Jaguar.

The bottom line of this article is that despite the promise that the Jaguar showed, without the software, it had no chance. It is probably one of the best examples of how a lack of software, especially quality software, will sink a system faster than anything else. Hopefully other systems will learn a lesson from the Jaguar. Make sure to have some very good first party games and especially have some serious third party support. Otherwise, it is a complete waste of time and money to even bother coming out.

The Search for Reality

Ever watch Star Trek: The Next Generation? Know the hologram room or whatever it is called (as you can see, I am not a big Star Trek fan), where they can live out any adventure, during any time period in Earth or any other planet's history? Seems like a bunch of science fiction, right? You may want to think again. While we are quite a way from something that elaborate, it is becoming more and more of a reality.

The ability to create a virtual world is something that almost all programmers strive for. With the fast developing hardware, HDTV, virtual reality gear and greater storage, these virtual worlds are going to really get larger and more intricate than ever before!

If you look at the Playstation, which came out in 1995 and at the X-Box, which comes out later this year, you have an amazing difference. And this is only a 6 year period. If things can continue to change at this rate, imagine what

games will look like, six years from now. Add in the much higher resolution of HDTV and the immense storage capacity of DVDs and you have the ability to make such worlds.

There are still a few things that will hold back this potential. First is the slow acceptance of HDTV. This is really essential as they are nearly tapped out on what they can do with regular television. But when it finally becomes affordable, look out! It is just the high price that is keeping buyers at bay.

The other item that is needed is some peripherals to give you the feeling of being in the game. First thing we need is an affordable VR helmet, with tracking. Too many of the helmets that have been offered, do not come with tracking. For people not familiar with this, tracking allows the user to turn their head and see all around them. Imagine being on an alien planet and being able to turn your head and see the planet's landscape. Think how much this would improve gameplay, especially with stereo sound, to let you know which direction a sound is coming from.

Besides a VR helmet, a controller is needed that is not as non-realistic as a joystick. A suit that tracked your movements and provided force feedback, to let you know where you have been hit and how hard. Also, a voice activated control system that keeps the person in the game. It would be hard to view a joystick, with a VR helmet on.

Right now, the biggest obstacle for this is cost. Like all electronic devices, it takes a lot of sales for a product to reach a impulse price. The few thousand that it would cost for such a device, not to mention the game system, is enough to keep most gamers away. But if they can make something that is so absorbing, so incredible that it becomes a must have item, then the sales can be reached that would bring it to a reasonable price.

While we are probably a good 10 years or more from such a setup, it is nice to think about it. Unlike the humorous attempts at Virtual Reality that they push at arcades, the graphics and speed are finally getting to a point where it is nearing believable. Let us hope and maybe one day we will be enjoying such games.

Another Overlooked Gem

A while back, I spoke of Championship Manager, a great soccer management program that most people probably never heard of. I praised it and told everyone what an amazing game it was. Well, here is another game that was mostly overlooked and deserves much more recognition.

The game this time is Daggerfall, a 1st person dungeon romp that gave us the ability to really forge our own story. Unlike most RPGs (that stands for Role Playing Game, the general term for dungeon and dragon inspired games), Daggerfall did not follow a set story. You did not have to find the green key to the emerald door to proceed in the story. You could take on whatever mission you wanted and do whatever you wanted. It allowed freedom that until recently, was unavailable in video games.

To give you an idea of the freedom of the game, you could be good or bad. You could join numerous guilds. You could come down with lycanthropy (where you turn into a werewolf) or even vampirism. You could buy a house, rob people, the possibilities were overwhelming. While it did suffer from pixelated graphics, it was a great game and still remains as one of the best ever! How many 6 year old games still have a newsgroup going that is dedicated to just one game?

Don't believe me about how deep the game is, check out this great FAQ about Daggerfall and you will see how much there is to this amazing game:

<http://members.aol.com/georgethe4/faq.htm>

For people who want to experience Daggerfall, but are looking for a more modern version, fear not! Bethesda, the publisher are doing an updated version called Morrowind: The Elder Scrolls for the Microsoft X-Box and PC. It is due out sometime next year. Some reports say it is due in the spring of 2002 and others say the fall of 2002. Knowing Bethesda, expect it in the fall. The game is supposed to have the same openness of Daggerfall.

Forget a Console War, This is Just a Skirmish

The one article that will not die is the one that I wrote about the upcoming console war between the X-Box, Gamecube, PS2 and Dreamcast (when I wrote it, the Dreamcast was still alive and kicking). Well, since then I have seen and heard all kind of stuff about this big console war that will happen this Christmas season. Guess what, it is not a console war, it is a skirmish. Nothing more, nothing less. Confused? Well, read on and find out why.

Let us go back in time, to last holiday season. A certain game system named Playstation 2 came out and was a huge hit. Remember that? You may also remember a few other things, like a shortage of systems? How about scalpers selling systems on eBay for over \$1,000, or more than 3 times the retail price. I see a light coming on in your head, you do remember. Guess what? All those scalpers and people who were forced to pay high prices (I still laugh at those idiots, just wait a few months and save a lot of jack), will be back again. Know those limited number of X-Boxes and Gamecubes that are coming? They will sell out immediately. Is this because these systems are going to be the best? Is it because the games coming are the best ever and every true gamer must have them? No, it is pure greed. Whatever systems do not get bought up by real consumers, will be scarfed up by profiteers, who want to line their pockets on the dashed hopes of the consumers who did not preorder in the spring or decided to not wait out all night in hopes of getting one for that screaming little brat in your life (of course that screaming little brat may be you).

As you can see, the true champion of the latest video game war cannot be determined by this holiday season. Both the X-Box and Gamecube will sell all of their limited quantities, regardless of how good their systems and software truly are. Also, the Playstation 2 will sell a ton of systems because they have the games and the other two will sell out. So when Mom comes looking for a system and the Playstation 2 is the only choice, guess which one she will buy? Plus, when the sales clerk shows her the 200+ games that are available, the 1,000+ Playstation 1 games that are compatible and the DVD feature, it will be an easy sell.

The true battle will be the holiday of 2002. This is when all three systems will have plenty of time to get production up and have plenty of games and systems available. That is when the games that the third and first party software companies have been working on, will see the light of day. One thing to remember about launches is that many games get pushed out, most of the time before they are really ready. Publishers usually want at least a game out for launch and even if it is not fully ready, they still push them out. Ditto for Christmas (don't believe me, look at Legends of Wrestling, Simpsons Road Rage, both of which would have greatly benefited from a few extra months), where a publisher will push out games to make the important holiday season and to hell with whether or not they are totally ready.

The final note here is that the Christmas season of 2001 was merely a skirmish in the Great Console Battle. The real battle will wage throughout 2002 and come to a head in the holiday season of 2002. By then, we will be able to see what the games will really look like on each system. All their strengths and weaknesses will be more visible. And the most important of all, we will have a better idea of where they stand in both total sales of systems as well as how well the software sells. Add in a few nagging questions like will the Gamecube sell better in Japan in 2002, than it did in its lackluster debut? How well will the X-Box sell in 2002, both in the USA and also in the more fickle Japanese market, as well as the European market? Who will be the first to embrace online gaming (and don't say Dreamcast, I am talking about the remaining companies)? Lastly, will the X-Box and the Gamecube continue to get good third party support and will many companies abandon the Playstation 2?

Here is a quick breakdown of which system you should get. Look at what kind of gamer you are and decide. You may find yourself wanting more than one, and if you can afford it, go for it!

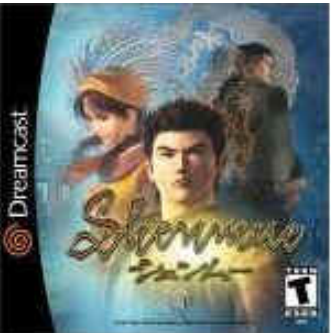
1. Are you the kind of person who likes a sure bet? Do you want a safe choice? If so, buy the Playstation 2. With over 20 million systems sold, worldwide, a library of over 200 titles and growing fast and with backwards compatibility of over 1,000 PS1 games, you have as safe a bet as possible.
2. Are you a risk taker? Do you like the dark horse, with the big odds? If so, the X-Box is the system for you. It has the most power, the most potential. With the built-in hard drive and online capability, it offers the most for the money. But it is also a long shot. Sure, it has sold well at launch, but so did the Dreamcast. It does have good third party support now, but most of the titles are ports. Can you say Tony Hawks 2X, when the PS2 and Gamecube received Tony Hawks 3? It will be interesting to see how many of these third party companies bring their big titles in 2002. But with Microsoft's money and determination, they have a great chance. Remember that Sony was once a dark horse.
3. Are you a loyalist? Do you remain faithful to one company? Odds are you are a Nintendo fan and the Gamecube is for you. While the systems may end up in third place (with a weak launch lineup, two or three games worth owning, depending on who you talk to), they will be the home of the hottest game franchises, with Mario, Zelda and Pokemon. While Nintendo says they are more dedicated to having third party support, I will believe it when I see it. They know that their titles can and will carry a system. Do you know anyone who bought a Nintendo 64 because of a third party game? Didn't think so. But there were quite a few Playstations sold because of Final Fantasy. So the Gamecube may be in third place now, but that can easily change when the next Mario game ships.]

A Taste of Freedom!

One major problem with video games is they have been very linear. You have been given a set path to follow and it is up to you to go from Point A to Point B. While this is fine for most games, there comes a time when you wish you could go further. Ever wish you could race that car into the stands? Have you ever wanted to run your quarterback off the field and go into the stands? These may seem a bit extreme, but you know where I am coming from. No matter how big the worlds look that they create, there are still barriers that you cannot go past. Play Crazy Taxi and see how many well placed fences and walls are there to limit where you can go. Wouldn't you like to be able to drive wherever you want? Wouldn't you like to stop and shop at the stores you pass?

Wish no more! The days of games offering more freedom are coming! With games like Shenmue, Grand Theft Auto 3 and the upcoming Morrowind and Project Ego, the days of wishing may be a thing of the past. Finally the gamer is getting some much deserved freedom and it will be interesting to see what they do with it.

There were games in the past that did offer some freedom (see the review of Daggerfall in this very issue), but they were as rare as hen's teeth. But in the past year, we saw two games that pushed the boundaries and offer more freedom to the gamer. While neither one offered complete freedom, they both took a positive step forward.



Shenmue, the epic game from Sega, offered the gamer more freedom than any game in recent memory. For the first time, you could waste your money on stuff that normally only was there for decoration. Want to buy a soda and drink it? Now you could! Ever wish you could walk into a virtual arcade and play games? It was now possible. Plus, the NPC (non player characters) now followed routines. They responded to questions based on what you asked them. As you learned more, you could ask different questions and get different responses than from previous conversations. Also, they went about their lives. They went to work, went home and lived their lives. They didn't just stand there all day, every day as they did in the past. That man who you talked to in the afternoon, would be gone in the evening. Stores opened and closed at certain times. Seasons changed. The world really came alive!

But there were still limitations in Shenmue. While the conversations changed, you did not have any control over what you said. There was a preset phrase that was based on where you were in the game. Also, most store could be entered, but that was it. You could not eat at the restaurant. The clothes at the clothing store were not for sale (at least not to you). That motorcycle you saw, could not be taken. While there was more interactivity, there were still plenty of limitations, ones that let you know that it was still a video game, one that was still on rails, only the rails got bigger and there were more turns in the track.



The other big game to offer freedom is Grand Theft Auto 3, possibly one of the most ambitious games ever created! While very adult in its nature, any real gamer owes it to themselves to try this game. It is by far one of the best games that I have ever played (and I have been playing games since Pong)! It is that good!

The game offered tons of freedom! First off, there are missions you can complete, but you can do them in the order you want. Some need to be done first to open others, but there is still alot of freedom to how many and when you want to complete them. Also, many of the missions can be completed in many different ways. One mission in particular, involves destroying three laundry trucks. You can smash into them with a car and destroy them that way. You can throw grenades at them and try to destroy them or you can hijack them and destroy them that way. The game is really open ended like this! The city is huge and you can search to your heart's content. Steal any car you want, beat anyone up or just ride the subway. There is so much that you can do, it is mind boggling. You can also play the role of a police officer, taxi driver, fireman or ambulance driver. Each one offers its own challenges and are fun diversions! You can drive pretty much anywhere you want! The game is so deep and offers so much that you can easily get 100 hours of gameplay out of it!

But once again, there are limitations to this large world. While there are a ton of buildings, all but a few are closed off. You can walk up to the gas station, but you cannot enter it. Want to spend your hard earned loot? You can buy guns and that is about it. There is no eating, drinking or any other necessities of life. While the artificial intelligence is quite good, there are still signs that it is truly artificial. Police only come after you for big crimes. You can speed past them and run the red lights and they ignore you. But if you run into them, it is a different story. You can punch someone and they will get up and sometime they just walk away, no problem (of course, some will run or will turn around and beat you up). You can steal a cab and switch to cabbie mode and usually your first fare will be the person you just kicked out of the cab, when you stole it. The funny thing is they are usually headed to the gun store. Another big problem is that you can cause all the damage you want and it will be cleaned right up. I have never seen workers on the city payroll work this fast! Guess it would be too taxing on the system to keep track of all the damage (especially after a midnight run with a semi truck).

So while both games took major steps forward in player interactivity and in the development of more realistic and interactive worlds, they are still just steps. Let us hope that future games like Morrowind, Project Ego and even the next Rockstar game, State of Emergency, will offer even more options for the player. I do not know about you, but I have tasted freedom and it has only made me hungrier for more. I do not want the closed confinements of the past, but rather the wide open spaces of the future!

Conclusion

I must start off with an apology. Someone sent me a very good article on the 3DO, but with some computer problems that I have experienced, it was lost as well as his name and email address. I do apologize for not publishing it.

With that said, a new issue has finally been released! As you can see, Bit Age Times does not follow a set release date. I am hoping to do it more often in 2002, but I cannot guarantee it. I do plan on doing more coverage of the new systems as I am greatly enjoying them and this will make it easier for me to write the issue.

Have yourself a great New Years and I look forward to 2002, which is shaping up to possibly be the greatest year in video game history! With three systems vying for first place, it will be the gamers who benefit the most!

-Tom Zjaba

