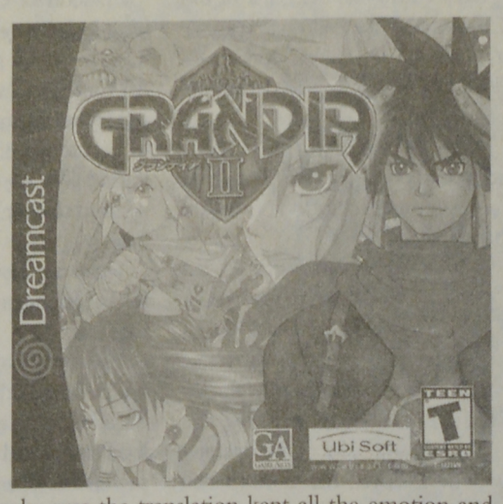
HURRY UP AND DIE SO I CAN PLAY

video game views

Dreamcast

Grandia II

Ubi Soft



Many people had written off the Sega Dreamcast not long after it was released. After all, Sega has messed up in the past with their Saturn, plus the news of new consoles from Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft didn't help either.

Somehow, however, the Dreamcast hung on. In fact, it didn't just hang on, it went from strength to strength - there have been some absolutely wonderful titles and it was no surprise that according to most major magazines, the Sega Dreamcast was the top console of 2000.

Even now the Dreamcast is still being blessed with some of the top games around and that is particularly true of the wonderful *Grandia II*.

The first *Grandia* was one of those games which didn't sell a lot of copies yet managed to develop the kind of cult following that made the release of the second game in the series almost inevitable. Fortunately, Ubi Soft didn't rush the North American release and took the time to make sure the translation kept all the emotion and humour of the original. Using some of the voice actors from *Metal Gear Solid* didn't hurt either.

Grandia II is an old-fashioned adventure game. The story focuses on that classic battle between good and evil and the gameplay progresses in a very linear fashion. You play Ryudo, a mercenary who lives his life with no moral conscience. He is hired to accompany Elena, a kind of nun-type figure, to a religious ceremony. Ryudo is pulled into a rather complex tale where everyone's perception of good and evil becomes confused and nothing is quite what it seems.

Near the end there is an additional quest you can try your hand at but apart from that, you have to go where the story takes you. It can be sort of confining at times, especially when the action goes on autopilot and you simply have to sit back and watch (at times for up to 20 minutes), but by that point you will be fully immersed in the story and won't really mind (unless, of course, it is 4:00 a.m. and you have to get up to go to work in three hours...).

The graphics are stunning. It looks like the game every *Final Fantasy* game on the PlayStation wanted to be. Everything is incredibly detailed, from the backgrounds to the actual characters. There are also some CG movies from time to time where the graphic quality increases slightly, but you will have absolutely no complaints about how the game looks. Plus there's suitably atmospheric music to pull you into the game.

The system of magic and special skills have a touch of innovation too. After each encounter you are rewarded with a number of Magic Coins and Special Coins which are used to select new skills and spells or increase the power of existing ones. That way you can use many different approaches and even change mid-game if something isn't working out for you. Most spells are gained by finding eggs, while other skills (and a few spells too) are governed by books which are normally discovered after defeating a boss.

Combat is relatively typical - it is turn-based but there are also some real-time elements which come into play too. Every character has some special attacks too, which are the key to the game - some of them have a cancel effect which can stop enemies from hitting you. Those attacks become particularly important when facing one of the many bosses - some of whom can have attacks powerful enough to wipe out your party in one fell swoop.

Grandia II isn't the toughest RPG you'll ever play but it is one of the most enjoyable ones. It doesn't take itself too seriously and there are even occasions when you'll laugh. There are the inevitable touching moments too; nothing too mushy although it gets pretty close at times.

The whole game clocks in at about 30 hours if you are hurrying along, but you'll want to take the extra time to savour the tale of Ryudo, Elena and Millenia. This could very well end up as the finest RPG for the Dreamcast.

★★★★★

PlayStation

MTV Sports Skateboarding

THQ

It's no wonder multiple game companies are jumping on the bandwagon and going with the flow (i.e. with skateboarding games.) Can you blame them? With games like *Tony Hawk Pro Skater*, skateboarding games have been revived. The only problem is that Tony Hawk games are the criterion for this genre and games like *MTV Sports Skateboarding* are just wannabes.

I'll have to admit that this game is not bad but it borrows elements from other skateboarding games here and there and blends them all together, hoping to get good results. Since many of the ideas are borrowed, gamers will soon realize there just isn't much novelty in this game. One thing is certain: the game boasts a kick-ass soundtrack. This makes sense as it's sponsored by MTV. (For those of you who own the *MTV Snowboarding* game you get the same songs that are on that soundtrack).

Gameplay is nothing that will stand up to the ages. You have the typical game modes included: Freeplay, Lifestyle (career), High Score, MTV Hunt (looking for MTV icons), and Survival and Stunt Mode. There is also a multiplayer option but it's not even worth playing because it just doesn't deliver.

Pulling off tricks and combos is no easy feat but it's not impossible either; you just need practice. At times, button-mashing will often result in the best combo, so it's an easy solution to a simple problem.

The controls are another story though; they are much too sensitive and unforgiving. There's just no room for error in this game and everything has to be timed perfectly. The skate parks are well laid out, with lots of variety but nothing stands out on its own. There's not much in this game that makes it stand out among the many other skateboarding titles.

As I mentioned earlier, the soundtrack is the strongest suit of this game. You can hear bands such as the Deftones, Cypress Hill, Pennywise, Goldfinger, Pilfers, Flashpoint, and a few others. You have the ability to select the track to which you want to listen as the game loads.

Pretty innovative - too bad the soundtrack gets more attention than the game.

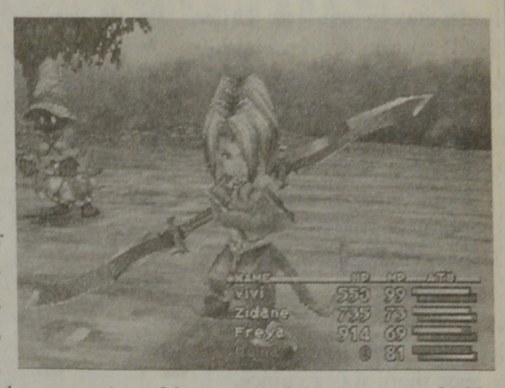
- Marc Hostetler

★★½

PlayStation

Final Fantasy IX

Squaresoft



This is the last game for the original PlayStation console in the *Final Fantasy* series - how can a gamer judge if it's a good RPG or not what with all the Squaresoft hype and the *FF* drones clamoring to get their hands on anything with the *FF* logo?

Final Fantasy IX accomplishes everything *FF8* tried to do and does it correctly. Graphically, it looks like it took tips from *Legend Of Dragoon* - the pre-rendered backgrounds have perfect depth perception and allow for exploration and finding of hidden items amidst clearly detailed and well defined interior and exterior scenes. Gone are the numerous - and pointless - CG cutscenes to go from one place to another. There are also no generic interior or exterior screens and no scene recycling.

The FMV and in-game cutscenes blend wonderfully with the progression of the game and do not waste valuable play time. They are used sparingly for effect, not for filler. The world is also standard *Final Fantasy* issue, however, the majority of the main continent where the game starts is covered with mist, reminiscent of *Legend Of Legaia*, to keep the suspense high and exploration to a minimum.

The story is extremely well developed, as are the characters whom you encounter who will eventually join the party. Everything starts out innocently enough - a gang of thieving actors going into the main city of an eastern nation to kidnap the young princess – however, things get interesting very quickly.

There are lots of mini-games in this *Final Fantasy*. There is another card game and there is a mini-auction where you can buy special accessories and items from previous *Final Fantasies*. Chocobos are back too with their own fun mini-game - Chocobo Hot and Cold. It isn't really an optional game because by playing it, you can upgrade your Chocobo and even discover important items.

The battle system is virtually unchanged from the past games; the erratic cinematic views of *FF8* are gone, replaced with the steadier angles of *FF7*. Also, you don't have to sit through minutes of animations every time you use one of the more powerful spells (known in this game as 'Eidolons.')

As with all games, there are some drawbacks. One of them is Squaresoft's obsession with making the acquisition of abilities as difficult as possible. *FFIX* has abilities and spells embedded in various weapons armor and accessories, and you need to build up AP in order to permanently learn these abilities - if not, you can only use them if you are wearing specific equipment.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment is the lack of a strong evil presence. Unlike the two previous Final Fantasies where your missions are driven while pursuing Sephiroth or Ultimecia, *FFIX* constantly shifts who you think is the evil mastermind. This continues right up until the end of the game, when suddenly the story seems to weaken and collapse beneath your characters feet.

Despite a few bumps though, this game is definitely in my top three RPGs of last year.

- Cassandra Rafuse

★★★★½

PlayStation

Driver 2

Infogrames



In the second installment of *Driver* you reprise the role of Tanner, an undercover cop hired to drive for gangsters and criminals. Only this time you have the help of Tobias Jones. Your objectives are to bring a stop to a deal between an American crime lord and a Brazilian mobster. As you progress through the game you get to tail criminals, chase witnesses, steal cars, search for clues, and just plain drive the hell out of some cool cars from the 70s.

I have never been more disappointed in a sequel. I was anxiously waiting for *Driver 2* to come out - I figured since the first one was so good, the next one would be even better. Well, I was in for a bitter surprise.

Driver 2 is a mere update of the first game. You get new cars, new levels, a few new features, and there you have it. Don't get me wrong - the game is still fun - but it's just more of the same, which doesn't cut it for this type of game.

You have the ability to get out of your car this time, but the controls on foot are just horrendous. Walking does not compose much of the game but when you do need to get of your car, time is often an issue so you want to be able to get to where you want to go - fast. That just doesn't happen. Even getting in and out of cars tends to get a little tedious and can be frustrating at times.

Gameplay is much the same, except the story is linear this time, though more developed than in the first game. The cut-scenes are much nicer and the story has more following this time around.

The graphics are virtually unchanged which is surprising, given the amount of time they had to put out this sequel. There is the addition of curved roads and on and off-ramps to highways, for added realism.

There are also secret areas to unlock by flipping switches throughout the different cities, and new cars become available as you progress through the game. The cars then become available to drive in the Take A Ride mode of the game. The limited multiplayer games though, are very disappointing.

It isn't an awful game but it lacks ambition - maybe *Driver 3* will rectify that.

- Marc Hostetler

★★★

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