

HARDCORE GAMING 101 DIGEST VOL. 1:
STRIDER AND BIONIC COMMANDO

Hardcore Gaming 101 Digest Vol. 1: Strider and Bionic Commando
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Introduction

Welcome to the first HG101 digest! This series is smaller than our other books, covering a variety of different topics rather than focusing on one large one. However, we are still aiming to keep some connection between them. In this edition, we're examining *Strider* and *Bionic Commando*, two of Capcom's most beloved franchises. To complement these, we're also looking at a handful of *Strider* clones, and other games with grappling hooks and swinging, particularly the oddball *Umihara Kawase* series. There will also be two recurring columns: an Inventory focusing on Western-developed computer games that were ported to the Famicom but not re-imported back to America, and capsule reviews of 80 Japanese PlayStation games. Future releases will have similar Inventory columns, and cover more import games for various systems. Anyway, please enjoy this issue!



-Kurt Kalata
 June 2015

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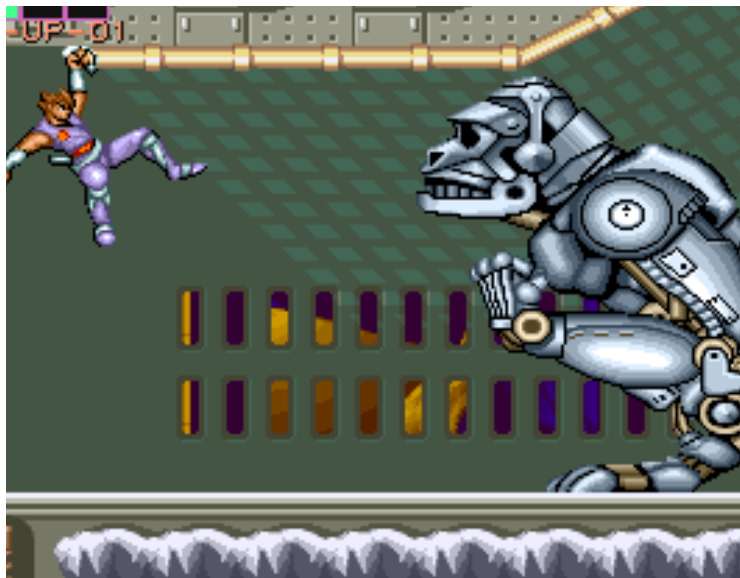
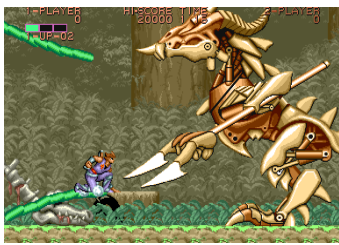
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Strider

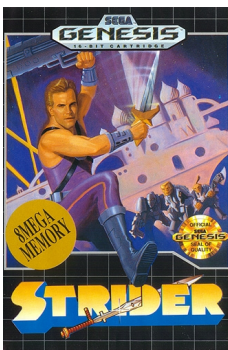


Strider

AKA: **Strider Hiryu** (JP)

Original Release: 1990

Platforms: ARC, GEN, SMS, C64, X68, AMI, AST, CPC, ZX, IBM, PCE ACD, PS1, PS2, XB, PSP, WII



Capcom's *Strider* series is set in the future, a time of the Striders, an elite group of counter-terrorists working to fight the evils of the world. The series chronicles the adventures of Hiryu, the greatest of all the Striders, who traverses the land with his cypher, Falchion. Cyphers are the standard issue weapons for Striders, which are the child of a tonfa stick and a light-saber. While Hiryu is skilled with his weapon and he's extremely acrobatic, he faces many antagonists, ranging from mechanical gorillas to reanimated mastodons.

Strider was initially conceived as a multimedia project, with an arcade game, a Famicom / NES game, and a manga published around the same time. While the arcade game has little to do with the manga, the storyline of the NES game ties in directly with it. The proposed name for the English version was "*Falcon*". The arcade game was directed by Kouichi "Isuke" Yotsui.

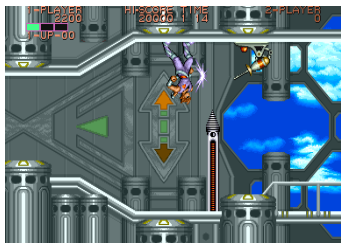
All appearances of Strider Hiryu credit "Moto Kikaku" as the character designer. Moto Kikaku is not the name of a specific person, but rather a group of artists that share the copyright. While Hiryu wears a flowing red mask in the original artwork and in cutscenes, he's never actually shown wearing it during gameplay, at least not until his appearances in *Marvel vs. Capcom* and *Strider 2*.

The original arcade game takes place in the distant future. A small

European nation known as Kafazu (a misromanization of Kazakh) is ravaged and obliterated by a mysterious army. This army then goes on to take out all of Europe and several other continents before their leader is revealed, an enigmatic figure known as Grandmaster Meio (who bears a suspicious resemblance to Emperor Palpatine). Hiryu is called upon to perform the task of reaching and terminating Meio.

This makes a concealed fact rather obvious – like the Baddis in *Bionic Commando* who were really supposed to be the Nazis, Kafazu is a futuristic version of Russia, making *Strider* a Cold War-themed game. It seems ironic that the Berlin Wall was taken down the same year as *Strider* was released.

Hiryu's voyage begins in Kafazu, the city where the chaos all began. He rides in on his glider, then jumps off as an alarm sounds, and suddenly the whole Kafazu army is after him. The action starts right away, with soldiers rushing the hero, but they're not that skilled. Hiryu, on the other hand, swings his cypher extremely quickly. Players with itchy trigger fingers can cackle with glee as they move through the poor schmucks, slicing their torsos clean in half. Beyond Kafazu is the brutal icy hell of Siberia, the perilous airborne battleship Balrog, the savage fury of the Amazon jungle, and finally, Meio's main base of operations, the Third Moon.



Possibly the most impressive stage is the third one, the battleship Balrog. After tearing through a turret that provides an entry point for Hiryu, he has to navigate his way through many platforms revolving on conveyor belts, climb up a pair of moving walls before he gets squished, deal with an improbability of physics when the ship changes gravity, destroy the ship's core, (which is apparently responsible for switching the gravity) and then hightail it out onto an escape ship to not go down with the exploding Balrog. This was beyond impressive for 1989, and it still manages to hold up today.

The Amazon level is also extremely well done. It's filled with vines, which adhere to weird physics as they flip and jounce about, launching Hiryu all over the place. Then he gets to ride on dinosaurs. The finale, the Third Moon, combines elements and enemies from the previous four stages to make a difficult final challenge. If Hiryu can pass all that, he is granted an audience with Meio for the final battle.

Strider only has five levels, but each of them are considerably lengthy. What's even better about these stages are the impressive environments. For 1989, and for the CPS1 system, this game had a lot of visual appeal.

Hiryu himself is nicely animated, as is every enemy sprite, all of which contain many frames of animation. There are some impressive environments for the time, and they really helped bring gamers into a whole new



world. For example, Hiryu has to slide under spikes and climb a big spire before jumping down the other side in the first stage. In Siberia, he has to work his way around platforms on gigantic moving gears. After a battle with one of the mid-bosses, he has to run down a huge icy mountain, quickly gaining speed on his descent, and the player has to time the jump to avoid plunging off the bottom of the screen.

In between the stages are cutscenes that mostly consist of Meio taunting Hiryu and the hero learning about Meio's evil plans. These cutscenes have digitized voices, and the characters speak in different languages. Meio and his henchman, the bounty hunter Solo, speak English, Hiryu speaks Japanese, Meio's other henchman speaks Russian, and so on.

From regular human soldiers, to ravenous wolves, to robots bearing a strong resemblance to *Robocop*'s ED-209, to Amazon women, the young Strider has a diverse cast to face off against. The bosses are nothing short of astonishing, and new players could take many continues to finally beat them. The first boss, Ouroboros, represents a big hurdle. In a room with enemy officers sitting down in chairs, the commander, who stands in front of his troops, gives a signal, jumps into the air, and one by one, each officer jumps right in and transforms into a section of the entire boss! The end result is a giant mechanical centipede with two arms, wielding a hammer and sickle. Ouroboros then roves all

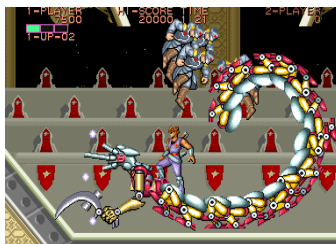


about the room, shooting bullets from its mouth. Hiryu has to ride on its back and slash away at its head to defeat the beast.

Other bosses include Mecha Pon, the giant mechanical gorilla, the aforementioned bounty hunter Solo (who despite being named after Han Solo seems inspired by Boba Fett) that Hiryu has to fight before running down the icy mountain in Siberia, the Kuniang M.A. Team (a trio of Chinese female martial artists), the core of the battleship Balrog, Captain Beard, the owner of Balrog (and definitely the weakest boss in this game), the huge mechanical T-Rex Lago (in contrast to Beard, the hardest boss) – and they have to be faced all over again in the Third Moon before the final battle.

The controls are tight and easy to learn. Hiryu can scale any of the walls and ceilings thanks to the assistance of a grappling hook. Holding the hook in one hand cuts down on his speed to swing Falchion, but man was not meant to both climb and fight on walls.

At least he still can defend himself. Holding Down while pressing the Jump button allows Hiryu to slide under any dangers that may befall him, and he can still use the Falchion, even in mid-slide. He can't change directions while jumping, but he can attack in midair, and he makes a nice somersault when jumping left or right. An interesting aspect of physics here is that he moves slowly up steep inclines, but speeds up when going down. He can also jump farther if he's moving fast.



Strider



Still, *Strider* cannot be mastered overnight. The dense enemy forces, combined with the fact that Hiryu can only take three hits before dying (with a cool death animation and sound effect – he seemingly teleports away) make the challenge of this game pretty high nonetheless. Thankfully, Hiryu has some power-ups to help him, which include a cypher extension, max health expansions, robot helpers that fire energy rings, a robot hawk, and a mechanical panther that tears through most enemies in just a single attack.

The sound and the music is also excellent. The Falchion makes a nice clean "SHING!" effect each time it slices through the air. The explosions sound muddled, but there are other great effects, such as clanging steel, sirens, and the chatter of the Amazon women in stage four. The music also changes constantly – the first stage has five different pieces of music alone, alternating between atmospheric and dramatic.

The luscious graphics, the powerful sound, the fluid mechanics, the astounding enemies – *Strider* is a fantastic game, evidence that Capcom was one of the best of the era.

There are but minor discrepancies between the

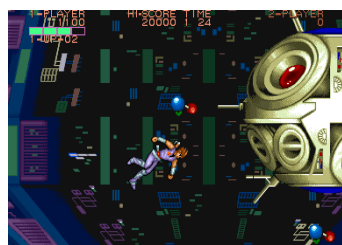


Japanese and America/European versions. The Japanese game is called *Strider Hiryu*, while it is shortened to just *Strider* for the rest of the world (although the kanji is still in the logo). The Japanese versions also have voice samples of Hiryu yelling when he slashes his sword, which are absent from all other versions.

Strider naturally saw several ports to home systems and computers. One of the best is the X68000 version, which is practically arcade perfect, outside of some minor missing details.

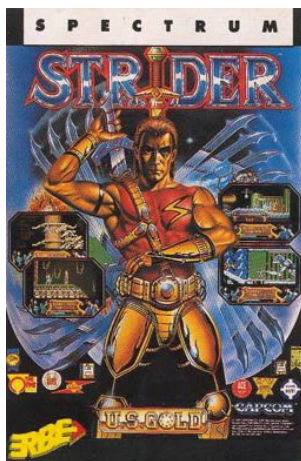
The most popular is the Genesis version, developed and published by Sega. While certain concessions had to be made – the color palette was slightly reduced, some background scrolling eliminated, all of the cutscene voices removed, and a solid black bar was put over the status bar – it otherwise looks and plays very close to the arcade. This version appears on the Wii Virtual Console. For some reason, the iconic Russian-style domes in the first level have been redrawn.

The Sega Master System port, unreleased in Japan, needed to be scaled down, and it's a terrible port. It's choppy, and it slows down horribly every time Hiryu slashes his sword, making it very hard to enjoy.



The PC Engine also saw a release of *Strider Hiryu* in Japan, ported by NEC Avenue. It's one of the few games that requires the Arcade Card, but in spite of the extra RAM, this version didn't turn out quite as well. The visuals are worse than the Genesis version, nearly all of the multi plane scrolling was removed, and there's quite a bit of flicker. There are, however, some minor additions. Every level has a cutscene with different art and voices than the arcade version, plus boss characters give short speeches, complete with portraits, before each fight. All of the music has been remixed in redbook audio, as well. The biggest addition is an entirely new level. Right after the first stage, Hiryu runs through the desert, fighting against antlions, sandworms and tanks – it shares the same exuberant creativity as the rest of the game.

Strider was also ported to the PlayStation and included along with *Strider 2* on a separate disc (although a printing error in the North American release mislabeled the two). It's almost arcade perfect, but the music sounds a little off. Capcom included an "arranged" version that upgrades the synth beyond FM bleeps, but the choice of instruments is terrible, and it sounds pretty bad.



Above: *Strider* (ARC)
Below Left-to-Right: The English arcade flyer, European computer cover, and PC Engine cover



The computer ports were all handled by Tiertex, all of which have a status bar that takes up a large chunk of the screen. The 8-bit computer ports are simplified, with less enemies and redesigned stages. The ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC versions are similar, though the former has black and white graphics and runs smoothly, while the latter has simple colors and runs poorly. The Commodore 64 version looks better but runs slowly. It's also missing some bosses – rather than facing off against Ouroboros at the end of the first stage, you destroy the laser turret before you descend into the lair and the level ends.

The IBM PC version is another slight step up graphically, though still confined to 16 colors, with terrible sound. The Amiga and Atari ST versions are the best of the lot, with the best color and actual backgrounds, whereas the others remove them almost entirely. All of the computer versions with sound cut out most of the music – the Amiga one sounds the best. The 16-bit computer ports are playable, but they're a little slow and choppy, and pale vastly compared to the Genesis port.

There are different endings in the various ports. In the arcade version, Hiryu jumps on a whale and rides off while the credits roll.

In the Genesis version, Hiryu views the destruction of the fortress, then takes off on his hang glider. In the computer ports and the SMS version, there's a text scroll starting that the "simulation" has been completed, implying that the game was just a virtual reality training exercise.

Emulations of the arcade version are also found on *Capcom Classics Collection Volume 2* for the PlayStation 2 and Xbox, and *Capcom Classics Collection Remixed* for the PSP. These are no frills collections, with no support for true low-res on the console versions.

Below: The extra level in *Strider* (PCE)



Screenshot Comparisons



Arcade



Genesis



Genesis (Virtual Console)



PC Engine



Sega Master System



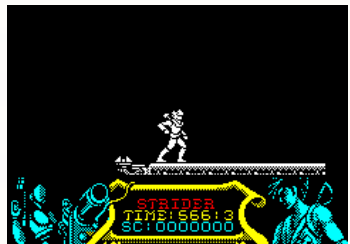
IBM PC



Amiga

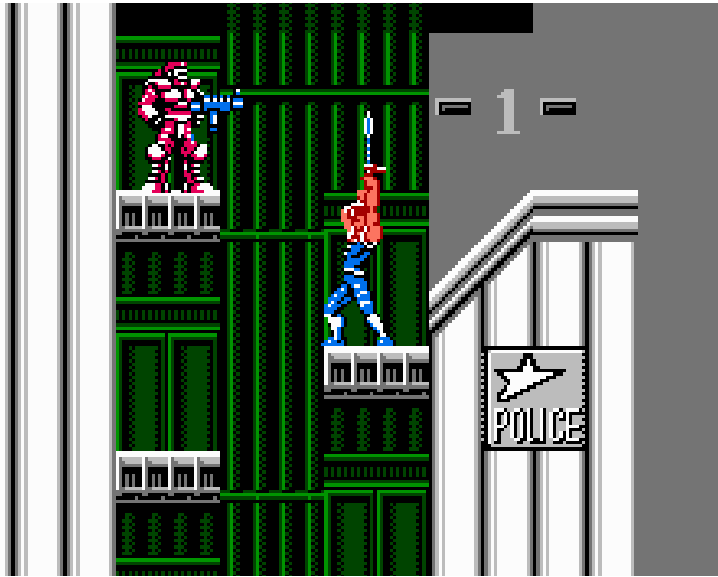
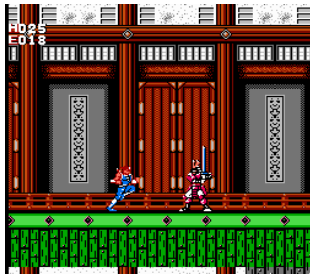
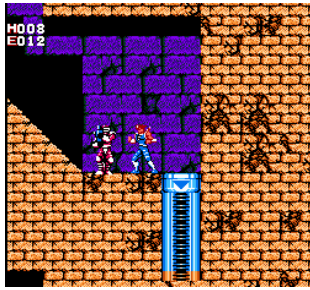


Commodore 64



ZX Spectrum

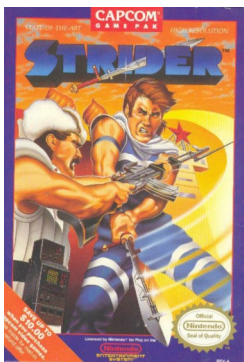
Strider (NES)



Strider

Original Release: 1989

Platforms: NES, GBA



The NES version of *Strider* was developed simultaneously with the more famous arcade version, but it's a huge departure from the style of the arcade game. It was one of the many high-quality titles released for the NES amongst the tidal wave of great games made for it in the late 80s and the early 90s. It was directed by Masahiko Kurokawa, who also worked on other famous games like *Ghosts 'n Goblins* and *Resident Evil*.

First off, the pure frenetic action of the arcade title is not found here. What will be found is an action/adventure quest that actually has a developed plotline. At the Strider headquarters, the space station Blue Dragon, Hiryu receives a rather disturbing message from Strider vice director Matic. Fellow Strider Kain has been captured by Kafazu forces, and Hiryu expects a rescue mission. Quite the contrary, he is instructed to find and kill him.

Hiryu hunts him down, but he does not kill his comrade. Instead, he extracts information out of him, and our hero learns of the mysterious "Zain" project. When Hiryu hears that this is a super-weapon to brainwash, hypnotize, and make zombies out of the world's population, he knows he must stop the project and eliminate those responsible.

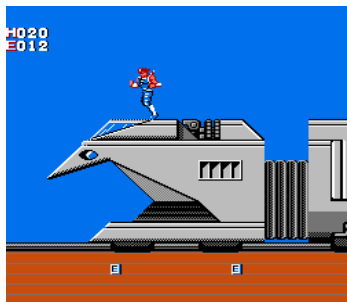
As enterprising a plot as that sounds, the translation is really quite poor. To quote: "You'll be sent to your grave by me

Mr. Kain." Yes, that's actually said in the American release, those exact words with the same lack of punctuation.

The game starts with going to Kafazu through the means of the Blue Dragon's transportation system. After exploring the level and finding a couple of useful files, Hiryu has to go back to where he began and jump back up to the Blue Dragon. After analyzing the files at the base, he is able to travel all around the world to Egypt, Australia, Japan, China, Africa, and even Los Angeles. It all ends at the enemy leader's base, the Red Dragon, and Hiryu must eliminate him and his evil once and forever.

Each stage is non-linear to an extent, and some of them even have to be returned to more than once to explore everything that can possibly be found. It may get tedious when trekking through Kafazu several times, but it has to be done. Many levels feature pneumatic tubes that allow for quick and easy travel between destinations. Additionally, by performing certain feats such as capturing enemy officers and destroying Zain machines, Hiryu gains levels, and with them, more energy and special abilities, which can be selected by going into the Select menu.

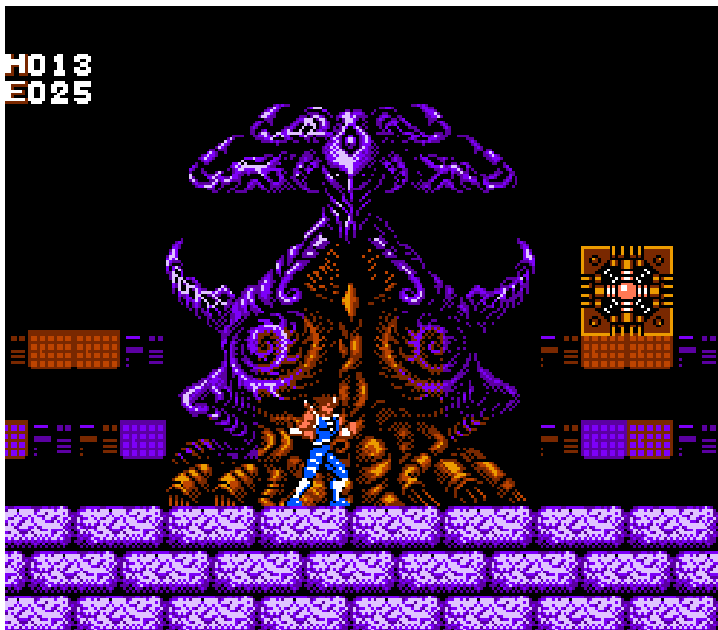
The graphics are nothing special, but they get the job done. The character faces that pop up on the monitor at the Blue Dragon are quite detailed, and while they don't



move, the Zain machines are huge and have a rather eerie appearance to them. Hiryu's two frame running animation looks pretty odd, though.

The music is awesome. Right when the game opens up, the loud background music sounds somewhat like muffled explosions are going off in the background. Kafazu's music gives the feeling of infiltrating a highly protected Russian base. China's BGM also feels like invading a secret base, Bond-style. The sound effects, on the other hand, are not that stellar. Most other sounds are drowned out by the slashing of Hiryu's cypher, which tends to get annoying after repeated use, and sounds lame compared to the arcade game.

As developed and meticulous as everything is in this game, it just has this unfinished feel that's hard to shake. It's not that the game isn't long enough, but things can become incredibly glitchy at times.



One of the most notable problems involves jumping, which is an incredible pain due to the awkward physics. Wall jumps, which are used to bounce off vertical surfaces, are frustrating to perform, as Hiryu inexplicably plummets when he touches a wall in mid-jump, and the whole process of scaling a wall is very irritating. Like the arcade game, there are also several high jumps that require running down a slope to gain momentum, but the physics are so wonky that it becomes a huge pain.

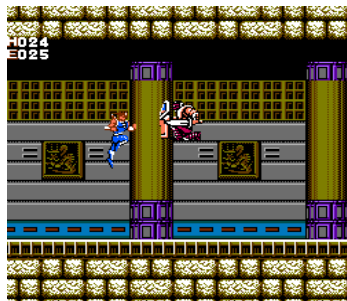
There are more issues, too. Enemies drop out of the sky and can suddenly appear out of nowhere. Hiryu doesn't have any invincibility time when getting hit, resulting in many unfortunate deaths. There are a few "boss" fighters outside of the encounters with the Zain machines, but some of them are so quickly disposed of that they pose no real threat.

Still, as it stands, *Strider* is an incredible action-adventure title.

While it's not everything fans of the arcade game expected it to be, it's highly recommended for Capcom fans and NES lovers alike.

Beyond the NES release, *Strider* appeared on the *Capcom Classics Mini Mix* collection for the Game Boy Advance. It's just an emulation, with a squished screen and slowed down, glitchy music.

Interestingly, this game was only released in the West and never saw a Japanese release, even though the game had been advertised. In 2014, a prototype of the unreleased Famicom version was found. It is clearly incomplete, as it is substantially glitchier than the (already bug-filled) North American release. There are some minor differences in stage layouts and enemy attack patterns. Text is displayed vertically on the side of the screen, like a manga. The coolest revelation is that the intro has song lyrics displayed at the bottom of the screen. It's meant to be like a dramatic anime intro.



Strider Returns

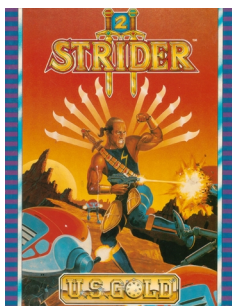
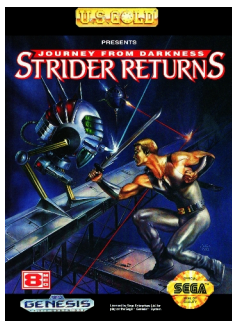


Strider Returns: Journey from Darkness

AKA: **Strider II** (EU)

Original Release: 1991

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



First things first – this game is not considered canon in the *Strider* franchise. It was not developed by Capcom Japan, and is largely regarded to be an incredibly poor title. It was developed by Tiertex, who had created the home computer ports of the first *Strider*. Building on that same technology, they created a completely new game, using the *Strider* name under license from Capcom. It was not originally conceived as a sequel to *Strider*, but rather an original game called *T.O.R.* (“Transforming Overland Robot”). According to employees of Tiertex, the artists used sprites from *Strider* as placeholders during development, but management eventually decided to turn it into an official *Strider* game. It was originally known as *Strider II* – however, the game was significantly revamped when it was ported to the Genesis and Sega 8-bit platforms. This version was released in North America under the name *Strider Returns: Journey from Darkness*. All versions were published in America and Europe by U.S. Gold.

The story takes place after the original game, as Strider is summoned to the planet Magenta in order to rescue Princess Lexia. Considering the Cold War themes of the original games, the swerve into sci-fi territory is very odd.

Also, due to rights concern, you are not technically playing as Strider Hiryu. Since the character is still owned by Moto Kikaku, the

protagonist is known simply as “The Hero” in the original computer versions, and renamed Strider Hinjo for the Sega versions. However, he looks identical, except for a white outfit instead of a blue one.

Out of the home computer versions, the “best” is the Amiga release, while the Atari ST release is very similar. It looks and feels like their respective computer ports of the first game, right down to the gigantic status bar. However, the game runs much more smoothly.

However, everything else is substandard. All of the sound and music are straight from the port of the first game. The level design isn’t a patch on the original, consisting largely of bland maze-like environments. In fact, the non-linear stages prove to be a problem, considering the tight time limit.

The only reason why you might want to explore is to find energy power-ups scattered about. You see, when you meet each boss, Strider will transform into a robot. Yes, a robot. On the plus side, it wields a laser that’s more powerful than his sword. On the downside, it can’t jump, which is extremely dumb considering some of the bosses are airborne. As a robot, getting hit will deplete your energy rather than your life meter, which does give you some advantage, at least until you run out and turn back into human form.

There are five levels in total – a jungle, a castle, an H. R. Gigeresque alien fortress, an exterior sky



stage, and the final lair. The bosses, for the most part, are boring – tanks, helicopters, cybernetic men, and so forth. The only unique one is a flying robotic head with an exposed brain.

Most of the power-ups from the original *Strider*, save for a spinning orb, are missing. To compensate, you now wield a gun, which is strange.

As for the other computer ports, the Commodore 64 version is uglier, as the hero is now completely blue, with a whole new soundtrack by Mark Tull. The Amstrad CPC and ZX Spectrum versions are more simplified – the former runs terribly but has more colorful graphics, while the latter has few colors but runs fairly well.

The Genesis port, released two years after the original computer versions, has some substantial changes. The graphics have been redone in order to more closely replicate the original Genesis *Strider*. It's a step up from the computer versions, though still quite a bad game. The visuals are bland, and the animation is still choppy.

The tempo has been drastically toned down from the original *Strider*, partially due to all of the slowdown that occurs through the simplest of actions. Even compared to the Amiga *Strider II*, it feels slow. There are some changes though, as you can now slide, and toss shurikens instead of using a gun.

The level themes are the same (though the third and fourth levels are swapped), and for the most part, they have been entirely redesigned. However, they are still rather poor.

For example, right at the beginning of the game, you need to climb upwards through some trees. There are mechanical eagles floating above, and at that point an upwards attack really would come in handy. That never seemed necessary in the original *Strider*, but in this game, the enemies are cheap and annoying from the very beginning.

There are dangerous plants that are hard to see and spawn just next to Hinjo and explode, and stationary posts which launch so many bombs that the only way to

avoid pain is to destroy them immediately. This is only the first level. The second area, featuring a maddening maze of purple lasers, is insane enough to drive a person to kill. Hinjo can only take three hits by default, and with only three continues, the difficulty is more than unreasonable.

The music is all new, but extraordinarily bland and primitive sounding. There are also cutscenes between levels, like the original *Strider*, replete with cheesy speech samples.

The boss battles have been revamped from the computer release. The robot transformation is gone, plus Solo and Meio from the first game return. There are a few new enemies too, that are more inspired than the rest, like the zombie dinosaur.

This version was also ported to the Master System and Game Gear, which outside of screen resolution, are identical. The levels are completely different than the 16-bit version, but otherwise it's pretty similar. At least they run smoother than the SMS port of the original *Strider*.

Screenshot Comparisons



Amiga



Commodore 64



Amstrad CPC



ZX Spectrum



Genesis



Game Gear

Strider 2



Strider 2

AKA: Strider Hiryu 2 (JP)

Original Release: 1999

Platforms: ARC, PS1



After the awful *Strider Returns* pretty much obliterated the integrity of the franchise, Strider seemed long gone. Loyal Capcom fans who were once cheering for Hiryu moved on to *Street Fighter* as their number one game series from their number one company. After resurrecting the protagonist for the *Marvel vs. Capcom* fighting game, the company realized his popularity, and decided to bring their futuristic ninja back to the video gaming world in full force. The result? *Strider 2*, a completely fantastic action game.

Yes, Strider Hiryu returns, looking even more badass than ever with his awesome, long, red scarf to compliment his dark blue ninja outfit. The story is that Mr. Evil himself, Grandmaster Meio, has somehow returned from his grave and is now about to destroy the world. Not one to refuse the opportunity to slice an old enemy in half yet again, Hiryu takes off, cypher in hand, ready to do some serious damage.

It's really not much of a plot, but that hardly matters when the game itself is just so impressive. Still shot cutscenes with excellent artwork, illustrated by Harumaru, help to augment the story, just like in the original game. The Japanese version – in both the arcade and home versions – has fully voiced dialogue and narration. Unfortunately, Capcom never bothered to dub the game into English, so they cut all of it out.

Like the first game, Hiryu has to brave himself through five stages to get right to kicking Meio's ass. Unlike the first game, Hiryu can actually choose from the first four and pick which order he wants to infiltrate them. These stages include a futuristic cityscape, a technologically advanced castle, an icy outpost where evil experiments happen, and the reprise of the flying battleship Balrog. After beating them, Strider has to return to the reconstructed Third Moon and eliminate the Grandmaster, and any other evils that he may find.

In 1999, polygons were still a relatively new thing in the video game world, but Capcom used them to their greatest extent to create some gorgeous objects and landscapes. The characters themselves are not constructed of polygons, but are rather two-dimensional sprites. The game is displayed from a 2.5D perspective. Hiryu can only move left, right, up, and down like a typical side-scrolling platformer, but the scenery actually revolves around him so gameplay can stay 2D. For example, when climbing to the top of a spire in stage 2, Hiryu sees a cannon in the background that he needs to destroy, but instead of traveling into the background directly, the entire screen turns so Hiryu can face the cannon on the same plane. It allows the game to keep its very unique and beautiful graphics while keeping the

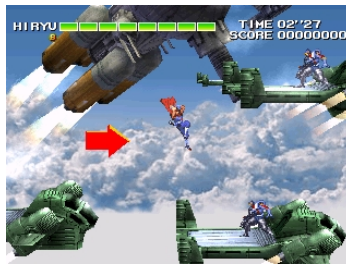


gameplay strictly 2D. However, due to the scaling, the sprites do end up looking splotchy at times.

The sprites are well animated, and would not look out of place in an anime. Hiryu walks with dignity, runs with determination, and slashes with fury. Solo returns, and looks even more badass than ever, what with his giant energy rings that he flings at you. The Grandmaster's face can't be seen, and he just looks like the perfect anime villain. However, the really big bosses are made of polygons, and they look pretty good for 1999. The animation can be a bit wonky at times, but that mechanical hydra in the Herzog Schlange fight is just freaking gorgeous. The bosses are even more exciting than they were in the original *Strider*, although the final battle is way too cheap.

Each BGM is extremely appropriate for its corresponding stage, especially the incredible music of the city stage, which captures the feel of a nighttime city under siege. The opening music to the castle stage is ominous yet dramatic, and the tune that plays while Hiryu is flying around the Balrog's airspace sounds perfect for such aerodynamic action. As for the sound effects, they are very well done, with all sorts of Japanese yells from numerous characters.

The action is extremely fast-paced, and Hiryu slashes immediately upon a press of the attack button. He runs with a double-tap of the control pad, can



double-jump to reach new heights, climb walls as he did in the first game, and he even has a multi-slash attack that he can perform in midair. Besides the Attack and Jump commands, there are also Slide and Boost buttons. Obviously, the Slide allows Hiryu to perform a low dashing slide that he can combine with slashes to quickly decimate enemies. It's not as useful as it could be, though.

When things get iffy, pressing the Boost button causes homing energy blasts to fly out of Hiryu's weapon, that can obliterate surrounding enemies in a matter of seconds. That's good, as the screen is often filled with several enemies to dispatch. Other times, the challenge comes from some tricky jumping, obstacle dodging, or boss fighting.

Each stage has at least three mid-bosses to get through before the end boss, and many of them provide a great challenge. Especially fun is level four's ending battle against Admiral Wilhelm, an experienced swordfighter who challenges you while on an escape ship speeding away from a burning Balrog. There's just something awesome about a one-on-one duel taking place on a remote ship floating several miles above the Earth's atmosphere. Amazing.

At times, these battles can be just a little bit too challenging, and Hiryu isn't endowed with a high number of bars in his life meter. The fast pace of the action can be overwhelming, and as a result, it's



easy to get obliterated in a matter of seconds in some of the game's rougher situations. However, it's possible to continue infinitely in the same place where Hiryu died. Since this was an arcade game, this made sense in order to keep the players pumping in quarters, but it was never rebalanced for the PlayStation home conversion. This makes it a bit too easy to get through the game, but on the other hand, it may just be too overwhelming to beat without having to use a single continue. The biggest issue of *Strider 2*, then, is the difficulty balance.

The PlayStation port of *Strider 2* is highly recommended. The arcade game runs on the Sony ZN-2 board, which is almost identical to the PlayStation hardware. Additionally, it also contains a bonus disc with a port of the original arcade *Strider*. Also, there are a few bonuses for *Strider 2*, such as an extra jungle level (unlockable if played with a memory card with a completed save file of the original *Strider*) with a ton of bosses, and the ability (unlockable after beating the game once) to play as Hiryu's rival, Strider Hien.

Hien does not have a conventional slashing cypher, but two homing cyphers which he throws out at enemies that do all the killing for him. He cannot use Boosts, but why would he have to with the homing cyphers? It's considerably easier to beat the game with Hien, and also incredibly fun.



Strider (2014)



Strider

AKA: **Strider Hiryu** (JP)

Original Release: 2014

Platforms: PS3, PS4, 360, XB1, WIN



Strider was basically dead again after the release of *Strider 2*, and it took more than a decade for Hiryu to return as a character in *Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3*. It was nice to see him back in some action, but it wasn't quite as delicious as a full-on revival. Grin, the developers of the fantastic *Bionic Commando Rearmed* and the less-well received 2009 reboot, were in talks to bring *Strider* back, but the studio was disbanded before this could come to pass.

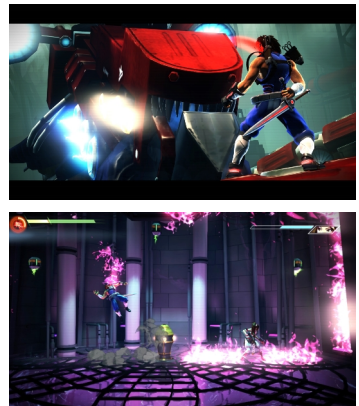
So who would have expected that Double Helix, the makers of several lukewarm games like *Silent Hill: Homecoming* and *Front Mission Evolved*, would team up with Capcom's Osaka studio to resurrect *Strider* for real? Considering the American studio's track record, it would not be unnatural to feel uneasy about how they could make a respectable modern *Strider*. Yet, in spite of the precedent showing what happened the last time a Western developer worked on the series, the end result has turned out to be just about everything longtime fans could have hoped for.

Strider takes the best elements from all three main games: the plot and atmosphere of the arcade original, the free-roaming stage design of the NES game, and the fast-paced gameplay of *Strider 2*. Essentially a self-contained reboot, the story is familiar, where Hiryu infiltrates the city of Kazakh to assassinate

Grandmaster Meio. The action takes place entirely within Kazakh this time instead of traveling around to Egypt or Africa, but the city itself is a massive metropolis full of baddies to slice and goodies to grab. To prevent navigation from ever becoming a chore, an objective arrow tells you where to go for the main events, but you're encouraged to look around for helpful items (like health upgrades) and fun things (like concept art and different costume colors).

Most of what you need to progress can be found on the path, with Hiryu gaining upgrades to make him a better fighter and explorer. An early addition is the charge strike, a mechanic never seen in the series until now that allows Hiryu to break barriers and enemy shields. Not found too long after is the down strike, which enables him to crash through floor grates, and his three Option helpers from the original game return, not only as powerful attackers, but also as keys that allow him to access normally unreachable locations. With other powerups like elemental cyphers and throwable kunai, it's safe to say Hiryu's more badass than ever before.

Of course, you can't just traipse around Kazakh without alerting Meio's imperial armed forces. The basic soldiers serve as fodder for the first few areas, but troops start toting sniper rifles and missile launchers in an effort to up their Strider-killing game. You can't



go anywhere without running into automated propeller guns and stationary turrets, and after being introduced as a midboss, ape-like heavy troopers pop up semi-frequently. While you face a handful more enemy types, you'll be squaring off against soldiers and turrets 80 percent of the time. There could be a little more common enemy variety, but the fantastic boss fights more than make up for the mooks.

The first major fight is against Ouroboros, a massive cyberdragon with the familiar name of the original *Strider*'s first big boss, but the actual fight against it is reminiscent of Emperor Dragon in *Strider 2*, flying through the sky while scaling its body to slash at the tubes on the back of its head. Several familiar faces return to antagonize you, including Solo, the Pooh sisters, and General Mikiel, who now looks more like Zangief than Gorbachev. Each fight is intimidating at first, but you will eventually learn how the bosses operate and crush them with enough observance, and having an itchy cypher finger doesn't hurt.

While *Strider* is much bigger than any of its predecessors, it's also an incredibly simple game to grasp. The mechanics are easy to learn, you'll never get lost with your objective arrow, and you can mow down enemies without mercy or stopping. It's arguable that the game's a bit too easy outside of the boss battles, but you have three difficulties to choose from before starting your game, and you take a fair chunk of damage from enemy fire in hard mode. It's a slight spark more challenging than your typical *Metroidvania*, if not the hardest game of all time, but who cares if it's no sweat for action game veterans? *Strider Hiryu* is back. Those are four satisfying words to shout considering how long he's been in limbo.

Not only is *Strider*'s return fast and fierce, but it also looks fabulous. All character models look quite decent, even though you'll usually be zoomed out far enough to make out the really intricate details. The true eye candy is in the backgrounds, depicting Kazakh as a colossal urban nightmare coated in

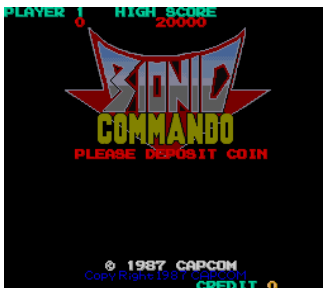
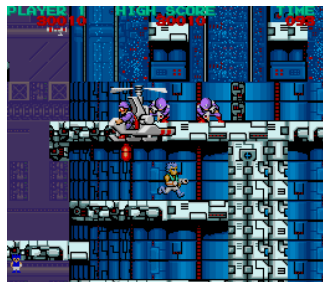
unforgiving snow. When you first land in the main city square, a ghastly statue of Meio looms over all else. The residential district shows fancy quarters with large chandeliers in the main halls, and the construction site exhibits giant girders spanning far into the background. A fitting soundtrack accompanies this atmosphere, remixing several old tunes from the arcade and NES *Striders* as well as tossing in some new jams. While nothing award-winning, the sound design blends in smoothly with the rest of the package.

The only fault is the unfortunate imposition of a "point of no return" that doesn't allow you to keep your save file once you beat the game, which seems counter-intuitive to the explorative nature of most *Metroidvanias*. Still, it's one hell of a ride.

While the release was digital-only in North America and Europe, Japan received a physical edition for the PS3, along with a limited edition with an artbook, soundtrack collection, and other knick knacks. All versions are basically identical, though the PS3 version only runs at 30 FPS.



Bionic Commando (Arcade)



Bionic Commando

AKA: *Top Secret* (JP)

Original Release: 1987

Platforms: ARC, AMI, AST, IBM, CPC, ZX, C64, PS2, XB, PSP



Capcom's *Bionic Commando* is one of the company's best series. It began as a side-scrolling platformer, much like many others, with one important difference – the player cannot jump, requiring the usage of an extended bionic arm in order to travel. It necessitates almost entirely rewiring one's brain in order to successfully play the game, but that's also the reason why it's totally brilliant.

Bionic Commando first hit the arcade gaming scene in the late '80s, placing you in the role of Super Joe (at least, according to the American flyer – he's nameless in the Japanese version), the hero from the original *Commando*, as well as another Capcom game, *The Speed Rumbler*.

The titular Bionic Commando is named as such because of his bionic arm, your main method of getting around. It's rather easy to use. Step 1: Fire it out to a nearby ledge. Step 2: Pull yourself towards the ledge when the arm retracts. Step 3: Hoist your keister up onto the ledge! Or, alternatively, swing on the ledge from left to right like Tarzan on a mechanical vine and drop yourself off below. Plus, if you're so inclined, you can thrust the arm towards oncoming enemies to stun them. Usually, though, you don't do this, as Joe also brought along his own rifle. Don't let the ridiculous, blue spiky hair fool you, he truly is a capable one-man army.

Super Joe has to take on lots of enemies, including but not

limited to, soldiers by the dozen, thick commandos who rush gung-ho at you, very irritating flying bats, and guns everywhere throughout the enemy stronghold.

Bionic Commando takes you through five levels of an enemy-controlled stronghold set sometime in the not-too-distant future. It looks like it could easily take place anywhere in the late 80s to the early 21st century. The graphics are nothing to write home about, but certainly adequate for the time, like many of Capcom's games before they broke ground with *Forgotten Worlds* and the CPS1 hardware. The character sprites look a bit goofy, probably because they seem to have big heads, which gives them something of an SD-type look. The backgrounds are pretty colorful, and in level 3, you'll have to deal with giant red mechs in the background that can crush you rather easily. The music is pretty dang good, too, even if the first level theme sounds a bit too jovial for the infiltration of the enemy base. The background music for stages 2 and 4 would also be used in the NES title, to be released two years later.

Navigating with the bionic arm provides a spin on a regular formula that works without being too gimmicky, though it's not without its faults. The arm has a long reach, but it can't be fired at the same time as the gun, which seems like a minor inconvenience at first. However, the more you

Bionic Commando (Arcade)



play the game, the more the little kinks in the control irk you. Only two shots can be fired at a time, the arm takes a slight while to retract if misfired, and you can't shoot the arm while in midair.

Annoyingly, Joe is killed with a single hit. It just feels that with the unfair assault of enemies, coupled with the muddy control response, this game really could have benefited from at least a lifebar. There are a few power-up guns that can help Joe out, but they turn out to be fairly useless in the long run when a robot crushes him from above. All the rest of the "power-ups" are just point items that do nothing to benefit you in the long run. Granted, the game isn't very long, but expect to continue frequently.

It's not that *Bionic Commando* is a bad game. The Bionic Arm concept was fresh in the day where generic action



games came by the barrelful, and it's still mildly fun to play the game today. It could, however, have been a much better game, with some repairs to the control and more regulated difficulty.

The Japanese version is known as *Top Secret*. All of the enemies look different than the English release, with larger eyes and other small changes. It's also buggier and less refined, allowing you to swing through walls, whereas you bounce off them in *Bionic Commando*.

Until the *Capcom Classics Collection* for the PlayStation 2 and Xbox in 2005, the arcade version of *Bionic Commando* never made an appearance on any home consoles. However, it did make it to home computer platforms

Pacific Dataworks International developed ports for the Commodore 64 and IBM PC for the American market. These

are both quite poor, with slow speed, and the IBM PC version uses flip screens rather than proper scrolling. However, Super Joe wears a pair of shades.

The European ports were developed by Software Designs, and are, in general, much better. This includes a completely different Commodore 64 version, which is probably the best port. It runs at a good speed, while all of the others have awkward push scrolling that requires you to get too close to the edges. The versions with sound include arrangements of the soundtrack by famed musician Tim Follin. Interestingly enough, he manages to combine the level 2 song with the melody from the *Star Wars* theme. The brighter palette of the Amiga version almost looks a little bit better than the arcade original, in fact. The Amstrad CPC and ZX Spectrum ports are similar, with a window that takes up almost half the screen.

Below: English sprites on top, Japanese below



Screenshot Comparisons



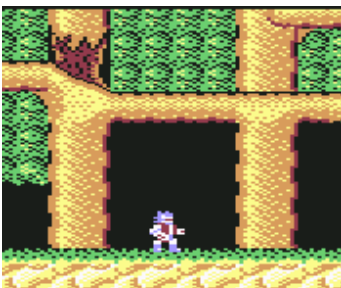
Arcade (English)



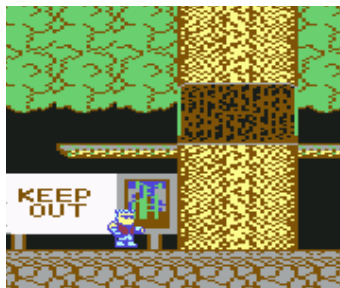
IBM PC



Amiga



Commodore 64 (European)

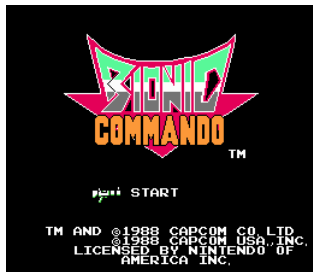
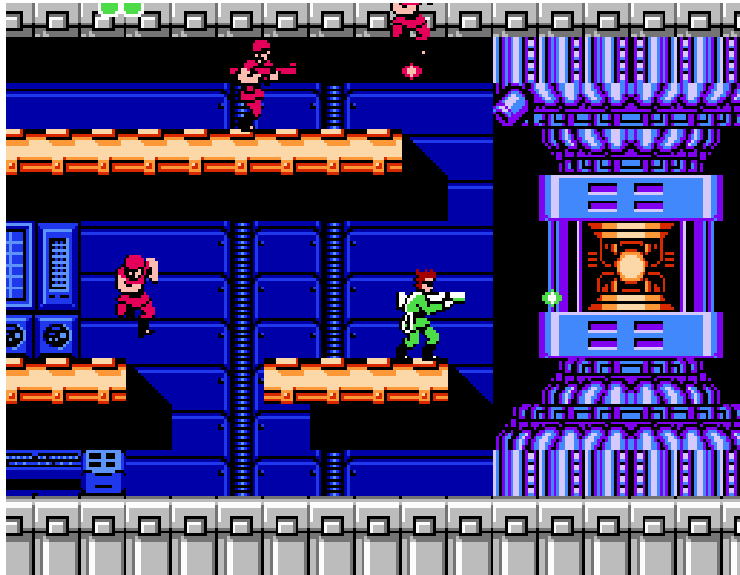
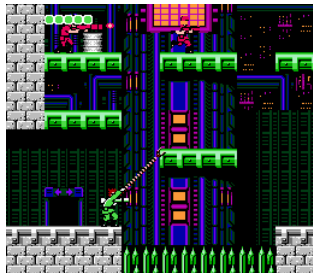


Commodore 64 (American)



Amstrad CPC

Bionic Commando (NES)



Bionic Commando
 AKA: **Top Secret: Hitler no Fukkatsu (JP)**
 Original Release: 1988
 Platforms: NES, GBA



The original arcade *Bionic Commando* had a stellar concept, but the game just wasn't very good, nor was it particularly popular. Rather than porting it directly to the NES, as had been done with the computer versions, Capcom created an entirely new *Bionic Commando* for Nintendo's system, one that took the enterprising arm-swinging concept and reworked into it something much better.

The stage is set sometime around 198X, when the U.S. government learns of a terrifying secret project code named "Albatross". Originally developed by a long defunct faction named the Badds, it's newly resurrected by the Imperial Forces, led by its ruler, Generalissimo Killt. The government sends in one of their best men, Super Joe (the hero of the arcade game), to investigate the cause and put a stop to it, but he goes MIA. You take the role of Rad Spencer to rescue Super Joe and foil the Albatross Project.

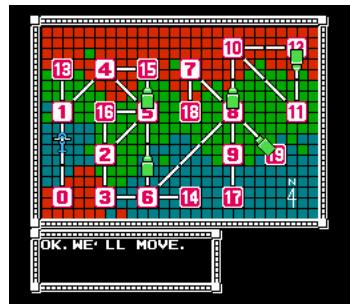
The first thing that you'll notice when beginning is the world map, where the areas are broken down into white (Action areas) and red (Neutral Zones). In the main stages, you must guide Rad around the hostile territory and find the communication area, which is marked by bars above the door. You can choose which areas you want to infiltrate first, although there are some limitations on places where you cannot travel

until you beat others first. Obviously, you should be starting with Area 1.

The controls are similar to the arcade game. The B button shoots the gun, and the A button fires out the bionic arm. No jumping allowed here, folks. Why jump, though, when you can just climb and swing everywhere? The stages are designed to make use of the arm with some rather precise timing. There are quite a few points where you'll have to latch, swing, release, and latch again to another object with damn near split-second timing. Thankfully, the control lag is much improved from the arcade game. The arm is a bit shorter in length, but it extends/retracts much faster, and can be shot again in mid-air.

In order to progress through the stages, you'll need find the communications rooms. Here, you can radio your base to obtain instructions, and you can also wiretap into the enemy's frequency and find out what's going on over at their headquarters. Home base communication is mandatory in a few areas in order to open up the boss door, but should you wiretap, randomly a loud alarm will suddenly blare out as soldiers rush and attack.

Most levels aren't too complex, but unlike most action games, many of the levels scroll in all directions, rather than just left and right. It's hard to get lost though. The main challenge comes from either the difficult "jumps" (or



"swings", rather) to make, which become more difficult with each new area, or the various enemies out to stop you. There are quite a lot of enemies, and at first, Rad can only take one hit before dying, with three lives to back him up. He seems wimpy, but only at first. For every enemy you kill, a bullet drops out. If you collect enough bullets, you gain an additional life bar, allowing you absorb a hit. You can gain several extra life bars over the course of the game.

Your goal in each stage is to infiltrate the reactor core, where each reactor is guarded by a different defense system. Sometimes, it's a platoon of neverending soldiers that constantly bombard you. Or it could be a bearded mook with a large shield and a bionic arm of his own, which he uses to prevent you from swinging over him. The hardest one to deal with is an uber-large super soldier who has three times the bionic arms you

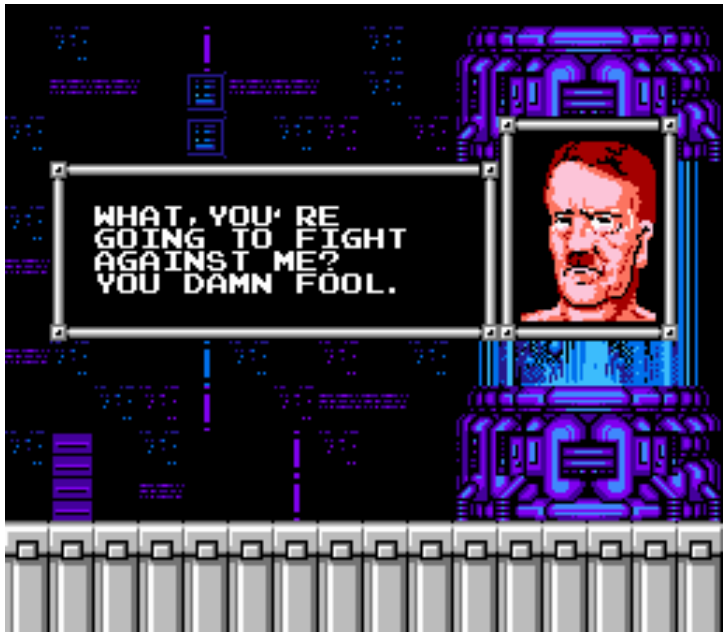
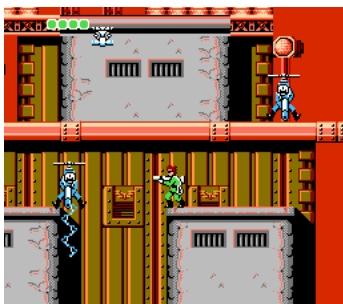
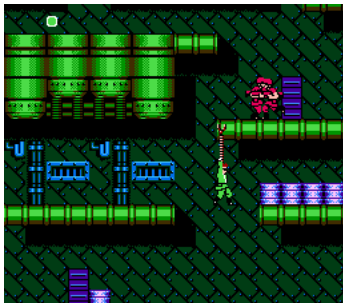
have. However, you do not have to kill all of the enemies, just destroy the core.

All you have at the beginning is your basic rifle. However, beating certain levels endows you with new weapons and items. There's the Wide Rifle, which has a short range but can hit enemies above or below Rad, the Rocket Launcher, which fires a super-strong projectile, and the 3-Way, which sends three fireballs out directly forward, above, and below. There's also Joe's Machinegun, which fires bullets out at a nice constant spray with repeated taps of the B button.

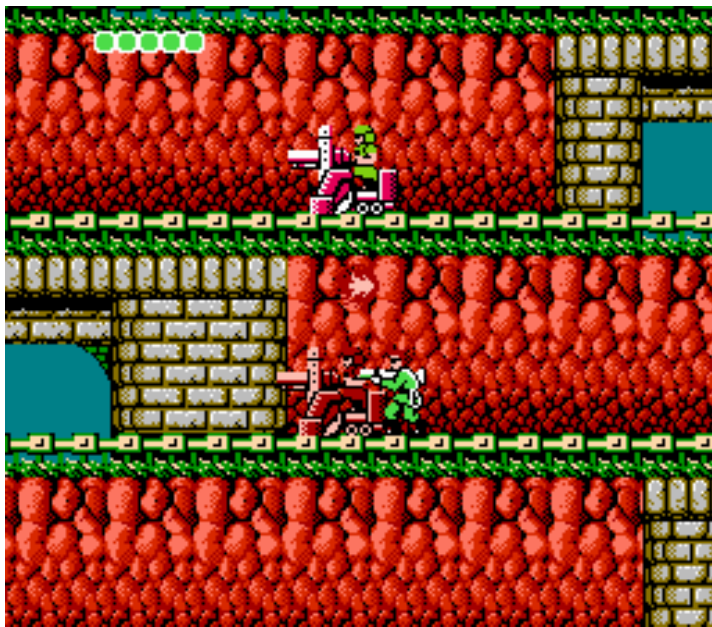
Before beginning a stage, you go through four menus to choose your weapon, your item, your armor, and your communicator. Items each have their specific purpose, but more than likely, you'll reach for the medicine, which resurrects all of your life when used. Armor can deflect enemy bullets for a certain amount

of hits, but not melee attacks or explosives. And finally, only certain communicators work in certain areas. The Alpha communicator that you start out with functions in the first few areas, but you need other communicator for different areas. Just in case you bring the wrong receiver, though, simultaneously pressing Start and Select returns you to the map screen.

The Neutral Zones are certainly one of the more peculiar bits. Ally and enemy soldiers hang out around these areas to take a break from fighting or heal their wounds. You may be surprised to see an enemy accost you when you first step in to a certain Neutral Zone, but instead of attacking, he instead imparts some threatening words: "Get the heck out of here, you nerd!" Aside from some amusing lines of script, the true purpose of the Neutral Zones is to receive information about what to do, where to go, and



Bionic Commando (NES)



what items to bring. However, if you want to cause trouble, just fire a single shot. Watch as everybody disappears, only to have the background flash wildly as white guards jump in to severely penalize you for stirring up trouble in the peaceful area.

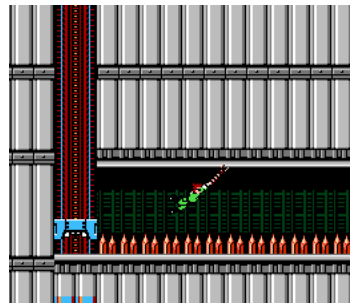
The map screen is also filled with green trucks. If you collide with one, you're tossed into a brief level in an overhead perspective reminiscent of Capcom's *Commando*. These action scenes are straightforward, as you just run forward, shoot, and twirl your arm to deflect bullets. Plus, they're the only way that you can obtain precious extra continues. There are also a couple of hidden tunnels that become open after receiving information on where they are.

For an action title, *Bionic Commando* is on the long side (taking a bit over an hour to beat on average), and there is no password feature, but the game isn't overly hard once you've got

the controls down. Plus you can run into as many enemies you want to on the map and collect all the continues you need.

The graphics are damn good. Detailed character portraits pop up when somebody speaks, and Rad himself looks infinitely more badass than Super Joe did in the arcade. And the scenery itself, while mostly static, is vibrant with color and picturesque. From craggy mountain cliffs to a tower beneath a crimson sky, no two levels look the same, except the Neutral Zones.

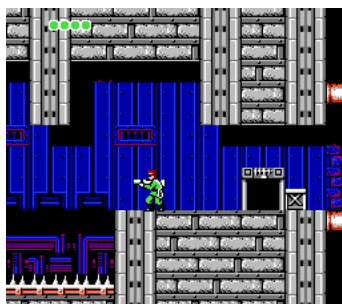
The music, composed by Junko Tamiya, is top-notch. A couple of tunes (specifically, the ones that play in Areas 1 and 8) are taken from the arcade version, and manage to sound better on the NES sound chip. Everything else is original, and very fitting for whatever area you traverse. If there's only one setback, it's that there isn't much variety and BGMs are reused in two, sometimes even three stages. The sound effects

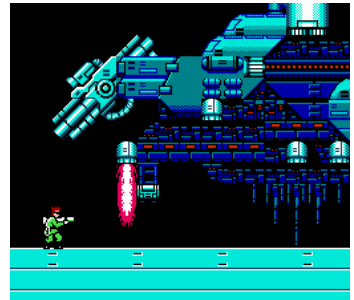
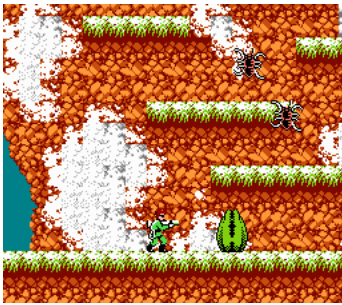
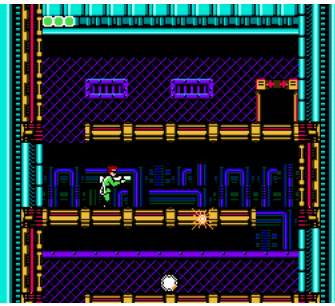


are neat, though anything sounds neat compared to the arcade version. And you just gotta love the metallic clank of the bionic arm as it grips cold steel.

Bionic Commando is remembered fondly for many reasons, the most infamous being the storyline. It's pretty clear that the Baddos were not named that in Japan, but were actually the Nazis. And yes, where the Albatross stands as the symbol of the Baddos in the Western versions, the Swastika is instead prevalent in the Japanese version. With Nintendo's strict censorship laws in the late 80's, it's easy to see why they wouldn't be called Nazis, yet ironically enough, this game displays one of the most graphic examples of unreserved violence ever caught on 8-bit.

First off, Imperial commander Generalissimo Kilit is attempting to resurrect an enigmatic figure titled "Master-D." You'll face off against Master-D very late in the game, and when his character portrait





appears, it becomes blatantly obvious that Master-D is Adolf Hitler. The game is called *Top Secret: Hitler no Fukkatsu* ("Hitler's Resurrection") in Japan – it certainly wears its controversial plot on its sleeves. Hilariously, Capcom redid some of the arcade artwork by giving Hitler glasses, a hat and scribbling on a beard, turning him into...Not Hitler, apparently. And what he says to you was highly shocking for 1989 – "What, you're going to fight against me? You damn fool." A swear word in an NES game! Unheard of back then, and you can imagine the shock of gamers who have come this far, only to be insulted by Hitler! After you've scrapped the Albatross, you get only one shot to obliterate Hitler's getaway chopper. Doing so brings up his character portrait, which then explodes in a really disturbing and gory mess. The flying eyeball is a nice touch. One can only

wonder how the hell this sneaked under the radar of censorship.

After killing Hitler (again), you need to escape from the base within a short time limit. Here the game dishes out another classic bit of English, informing you that the "base will explod in 60 seconds". It's a high paced cap to a fantastic game.

Bionic Commando has it all – unique action, substantial adventure, amusing dialogue, and a big fat exploding head to top it all off. The arcade game had some good concepts that weren't quite executed gracefully, but it's great that Capcom gave it a second chance and made one of the greatest NES games of all time.

Other than the removal of the Nazi references, there are a few other minor changes between the NES and Famicom versions. Some of the items and enemies have been moved around certain levels,

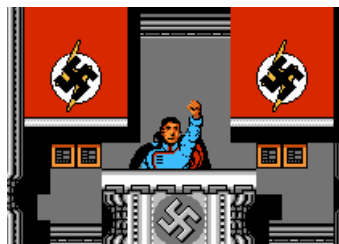
making various instances easier or harder. Other than that, it's just some name changes – Generalissimo Kilt is named "Wiseman" in Japan, and Hal, the guy who helps you get some weapons, is known as "Schwarzenegger".

Other than the initial NES release, *Bionic Commando* also showed up on the *Capcom Classics Mini-Mix* compilation for the Game Boy Advance, along with *Mighty Final Fight* and *Strider*. The resolution has been squashed, but otherwise it's a decent port. It would've been nice to have some kind of save capability though.

Screenshot Comparisons

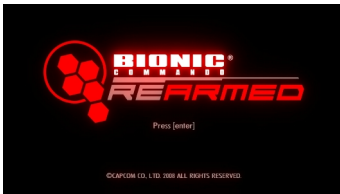


American



Japanese

Bionic Commando Rearmed



Bionic Commando Rearmed
AKA: **Bionic Commando: Master D no Fukkatsu Keikaku** (JP)
Original Release: 2008
Platforms: X360, PS3, PC, MOB



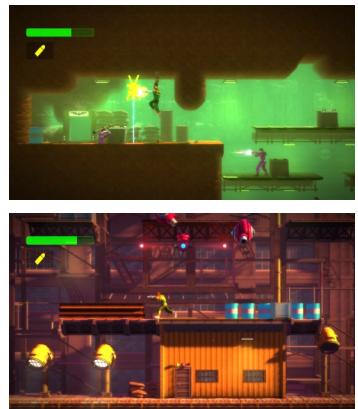
With the series languishing for nearly a decade after the somewhat flat *Elite Forces*, Capcom focused on their more popular series and explored new projects in the meantime. Then, in 2008, Capcom decided to bring their action classics back into the light again for a new generation to enjoy. *Bionic Commando* would officially be resurrected with a brand new entry, fully in 3D on the PS3 and Xbox 360.

In order to cater to older fans who might not be onboard with a new 3D game, Swedish development team GRIN and Capcom of Japan producer Ben Judd treated longtime fans of the original with *Bionic Commando Rearmed*, a fantastic revival of a treasured NES favorite. Unlike the GB *Bionic Commando*, which had all new stages and a few new bosses but kept all of the items the same, *Rearmed* does the opposite – it keeps the basic structure of the NES original, but adds all new weapons, alters the gameplay significantly, includes many new features to appeal to gamers both old and new, and delivers one of the most impressive 2D packages ever developed.

The basic premise is unchanged from the NES game, but the story has been expanded by a great deal. On paper, it's the same as the original, with the Federation (now known as the FSA: The Federal States of America) fighting against the

Imperials, who have discovered the Albatross project from the original Badd architects. However, by simply revising the text and building on the dialogue, the story feels as different as it does familiar. Spencer has far more of a personality now, coming off as the awesomely typical action hero who talks smack to his enemies and playfully chats with his helicopter pilot, Haley. For example, a delightful exchange against a war machine pisses Spencer off to issue the ultimatum: "Next stop: The Junkyard. Population: You!" Communications with allies are less riddled with typos, and wire-tapped talk sessions with the enemies are simply hilarious, even making in-jokes to please longtime fans, including appearances of the "get out of here, you nerd!" and "about to explod" lines. One area even warns the player to wear hard hats, and includes a pixelated image of a Met, the ubiquitous hard hat wearing bad guys from *Mega Man*.

The gameplay is kept in 2D, but every single thing modeled in the game is 3D, running at a silky smooth 60 frames per second. There are amusing little details, such as Rad nodding his head towards the camera after he lands from his parachute, or enemy soldiers' bodies hanging around for several seconds before plummeting off the screen. The move to a widescreen presentation allows for a zoomed out field of view, which



makes it easier to see what you're supposed to be swinging towards. Shinkiro, the legendary artist known for his work on SNK games like Fatal Fury and The King of Fighters, has provided character portraits for the dialogue scenes. Even more than before, Kilt looks like a lot like M. Bison.

All of the game's original music has been remixed, and the project's director, Simon Viklund, arranged them in a style that can best be described as steady techno beats with a definite old-school flavor. The general pace of each piece is decidedly slower than their originals, with the percussive beats heavily emphasized.

The overhead enemy assault phases have a different piece of music though, based on the original *Commando* theme from Rob Hubbard's Commodore 64 rendition. Even cooler, there are some "prelude" areas – like the opening screen before you enter a base, or when you're entering into a boss' room – where you can hear the thumping bass of the music, but not the actual melody. It makes it sound like you're at the

doorway of the most awesome dance rave.

Beyond the graphics and music, the basics have not changed, but there are tweaks to the controls that make it feel a little faster. This time around, the arm mechanics are more fluid and easier to control. It is very possible to fire the arm straight out horizontally in midair. This makes it easier to attach to platforms where a little more distance is required to make it a safe grab. Additionally, the arm is now more of an offensive and defensive tool, as you can use it to pick up barrels, use them to block, and toss them for what is often an instant kill if they happen to hit an enemy soldier.

Many of the game's items have been updated, and the arsenal is far more balanced than in the original. The bullets that you can collect from enemies in order to extend your lifebar are now gone in place of a simpler health system. Rad kicks off his mission with a well-developed health bar that takes varying amounts of life loss depending on the type of attack. Enemies randomly drop

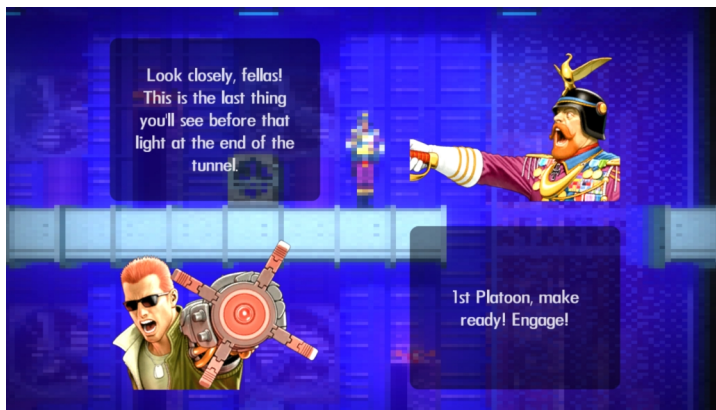
small or large green spheres that recover health, as well as blue spheres that increase the player's score. Unlike the NES game, continues are unlimited and do not need to be picked up from the overhead stages. You can now bring all weapons into each stage, and the game won't let you enter a stage if you don't have the right chip, which is the remake's equivalent of the communicators.

The wiretapping has changed too, as you need to play a brief hacking minigame by guiding a ball through a 3D cube. If you fail the game, enemies don't paratroop into the room, but instead you set off alarms throughout the stage where seemingly decorative doors reside. The doors keep opening to dog you with a constant flow of soldiers, which is indeed good motivation to try and not blow hacking jobs.

The arsenal is very different from the original game – the Bazooka fires explosive missiles, and the Machinegun fires bullets at an obscenely high rate. New weapons include Grenades, which can be tossed over enemy cover; a Plasma Rifle, which is similar to



Bionic Commando Rearmed



the default Revolver, with a quicker rate of fire but weaker; the Shotgun, which is useful for close quarters combat; and the Vector Cannon, which fires reflecting lasers. Bullet weapons do more damage to humans, while laser weapons are more effective against machines. Each of these can be made better through upgrades, which are hidden off of the beaten path in some levels. There's also the Power Claw, which makes the arm into a more deadly machine than ever before. Without it, Rad can still pick up barrels and throw them at enemies as previously mentioned. With the Power Claw's addition, Rad can pick up enemy soldiers and throw them at enemies, or use their unfortunate bodies as human shields!

All of these new weapons will be very useful indeed, as while Rad's learned some new tricks, so have the Imperials. This is some of the best programmed artificial intelligence in a 2D action title. For starters, most of them can take much more damage. For example, the basic soldiers in the game slowly pace around until you get near them, then they go into combat mode, retreat from you, and take shots from afar.

There are a few enemies from the original that did not make it into the remake (such as the mutant spiders and moths from Area 3, plus the giant Venus fly traps have been replaced with standard bear traps), but their omission can be forgiven, seeing how the boss battles have been greatly improved. You can't run past them anymore and just destroy the core, as they need to be dealt with. Some bosses have

returned, while others are entirely new and rather impressive to behold in action. All bosses require many uses out of your bionic arm, like grabbing barrels and then chucking them at the boss to deal damage. The concept of the Giant Soldier (the hulking bionic boss that would slam you into him with his three bionic arms) has been entirely redesigned to make him a bit less giant and a lot more cunning. Named Gottfried Groeder, the Imperial Champion, he only has one bionic arm and puts it to as good use, swinging around the room and blasting you with energy shots.

In regards to the end of the game, Master-D is known as "The Leader". (In Japan, however, his name is still "Master D" – the translated title is "The Resurrection Plan of Master-D.") He's still clearly Hitler though, and he actually looks more menacing than the original, seeing how his skin tone seems a lot more fitting for a long-dead man. He talks smack, calls you a "damn fool," and threatens you with the power of the Albatross. Then the Albatross rises and takes its place in the sky; not as a giant laser cannon, but as a titanic floating fortress of death.

The developers probably took a cue from the Game Boy *Bionic Commando* for this one, in which the Albatross was the entire final level from there. However, this level is entirely new, creating an original final challenge that will daunt the best of gamers. While it spares the ungodly "swing below the jet thrusters" bit, it's still really evil in its own right.

In the final battle, Haley shows up to see how you're doing

when her chopper is unceremoniously blown up. She dies, but not before giving you the Bazooka upgrade, which allows you to control your rockets manually. Note Haley's first three letters of her name, her situation, and what she gives you. She is *Rearmed's* rendition of Hal, the dying soldier who gave you the Hyper Bazooka needed to ultimately kill Hitler/Master-D/The Leader in the original game.

Instead of the confrontation against the chopper being a "hit or miss" situation, it's now a full-fledged boss fight, where you have to guide a controlled rocket into the cockpit window. You need to do this a certain amount of times, and the last shot that ultimately finishes him off leads to... the explosion. The camera shows a close-up of his cranium bursting (and splattering on the camera), then zooming in and repeating it twice, with artwork detailing the event in its gory glory. This game received an M-rating, and it's here that it justifies itself. It's sad that this scene was censored for the Japanese and certain European releases, because it makes the brutal final level all worthwhile.

Rearmed offers four different difficulty levels: Easy, Normal, Hard, and once you've beaten the game once on any difficulty, Super Hard becomes unlocked. Strangely, several months after the game was release, GRIN published a patch which totally screwed with the game's difficulty levels. The Easy and Normal modes now totally omit the most difficult segments of the final level, you respawn close to where you die, and lives are infinite. You

also have more control over the arm, as you can begin swinging again after coming to a stop. Most of this was entirely unnecessary.

The game can be a massive challenge for any lone gamers, so if you're looking for any assistance, bring along a friend and run through with the two player cooperative mode! A second Bionic Commando can join alongside you and take on the Imperials as an army of two. Both players have their own lifebar and three lives each, and if either dies, they respawn almost instantly. Both players act independently of each other, and the screen splits when the two move too far apart. The enemies are more numerous and the bosses more tenacious, sometimes altering their attack patterns to require that players work together.

There are other modes to round out the main game. This includes a competitive multiplayer mode, similar to *Super Smash Bros.*, as up to four players are put in an enclosed arena and must blast the hell out of each other. There are four playable characters: Rad, Super Joe, Generalissimo Killt

and Gottfried Groeder, each with different attributes. There are also Challenge Rooms, over 50 in total unlocked over the course of the main game, which challenge your arm swinging skills even more than the main game.

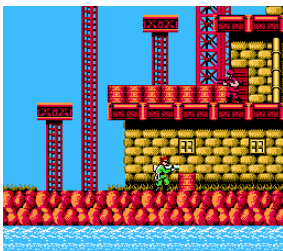
There is so much awesomeness in this remake. It embodies the spirit of old-school gaming, still alive and bursting with exuberance in the modern era of video games. It feels as new as it does familiar, expanding upon everything that made the original one of the best games of the era.

Rearmed was released for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and PC, with all three being basically identical, though the PC version has extra challenge rooms. There's also a Java mobile phone version that's just a slightly stripped down port of the NES game with some slightly enhanced graphics, some of the character art of *Rearmed*, and some awkward controls.

Right-Top-to-Bottom: *Rearmed's* multiplayer mode, the revised (and even gorier) image of Adolf Hitler's exploding head, and the mobile port.

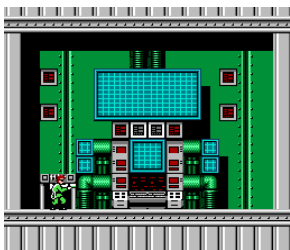


Area 1 – Oil Refinery



The first area is peppered with posters of Killt, but otherwise little has changed.

Communication Rooms



The new communication rooms look slick. You have to play a minigame now if you want to hack the computer.

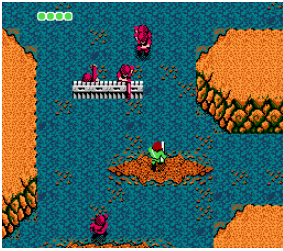
Bionic Commando Rearmed

Neutral Zone



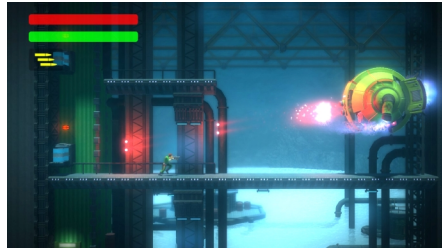
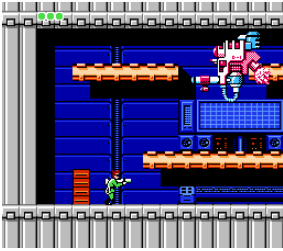
Each of the Neutral Zones look a little bit different in *Rearmed*, though they're uniform in the NES game. You also find Challenge Rooms here.

Overhead Area – Swamp



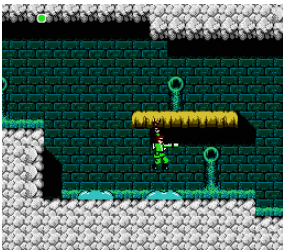
These are mostly identical, though since *Rearmed* offers unlimited continues, you gain extra lives instead.

Boss – D-1 Beetle



All of the boss battles have been completely revamped in *Rearmed*. In the NES game, this guard robot ship (“Pi pi pi”) was only found later in the game, while a variation is now the first boss (and reappears later too).

Area 2 – Sewer Station



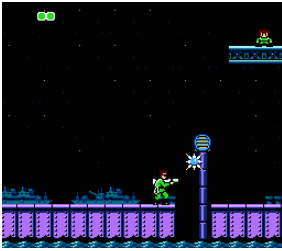
The sewer has a nasty green haze in *Rearmed*. The blobs are also purple rather than light blue.

Area 5 – Construction Site



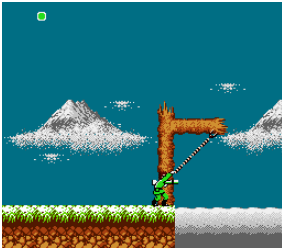
This level is mostly a straight shot up. Its color scheme is an orange-red, indicating that it takes place at dusk.

Area 6 – The Docks



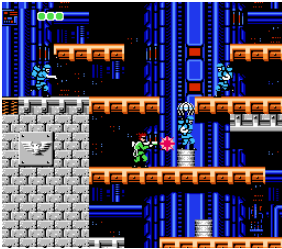
This level takes place at night. The extra details in the background in *Rearmed* are a nice touch.

Area 3 – Secret Mountain Base Pass



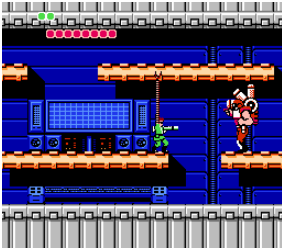
This area begins in a snowy mountain pass. The man-eating plants in the NES version have been replaced by bear traps in *Rearmed*, though they work similarly. The giant spiders are gone too.

Area 8 – Hi-Tech Factory



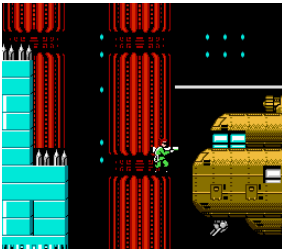
This level requires a little more exploration. The blue color scheme is maintained in *Rearmed*.

Boss – Gottfried Groeder



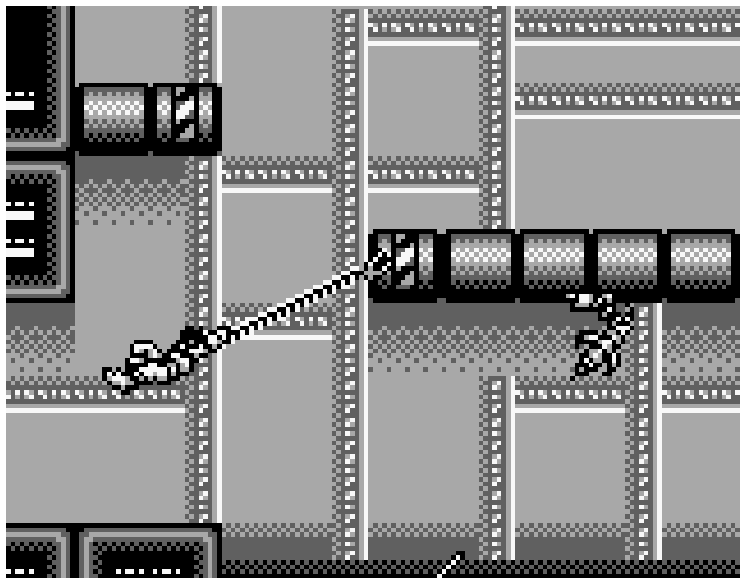
This bionic arm cyborg was originally nameless, but has been promoted and given an actual name in *Rearmed* – Gottfried Groeder. He even appears in the 2009 game.

Hitler's Helicopter



In the NES game, you need to drop and shoot the helicopter window precisely; miss and you die. It's a proper boss battle in *Rearmed*, atop the Albatross. You need to control a rocket right into the cockpit.

Bionic Commando (GB)



Bionic Commando
Original Release: 1992
Platforms: GB, 3DS



The NES *Bionic Commando* certainly had enough popularity to warrant a version on the Game Boy. However, it's not really a port, but more of a retelling of the NES game's story than an actual sequel. This is certainly not a bad thing, though, as it retains the swinging gameplay of the original, accurately translated to portable size.

Although the plot is much the same as the "rescue Super Joe and foil the Albatross project" premise, you are no longer fighting the Nazis... or Badds, as the case may warrant. The opposition is the Doraize Army, led by Director Wiseman, who are growing in power and intend to control the Albatross in order to take over the world.

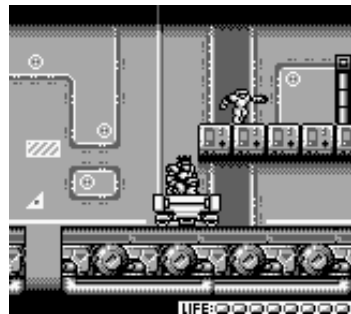
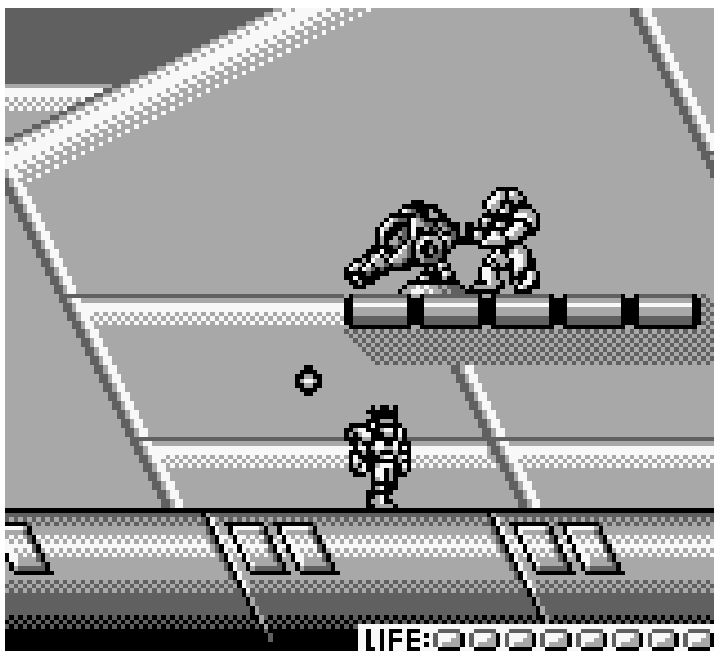
Although there are many similarities to the NES release, it has enough original flavor to avoid the dubious label of "rehash." (Strangely, this game is also known as *Bionic Commando* in Japan, rather than *Top Secret*.) For one thing, the setting is more futuristic and cybernetic. Instead of traditional military fatigues, up-close visuals of characters reveal them to be fitted in cyberpunk-ish armor and helmets. The overall feel is less dark and has some anime overtones to it, but this new style works out quite well. To compensate for the lack of color, more artistic detail has been placed into the sprites and backgrounds, and they look quite good. As for the sound, some of the music is borrowed from the NES game and

sounds surprisingly great on the lesser GB sound processor. The original music is also very fitting for the game, and the first level theme rocks in all sorts of manners. It does tend to get a little repetitive as in the NES title, though, with several tunes repeated in the later stages.

There aren't any drastic changes in gameplay, but there are some things to note. The basic format is very familiar, what with the overhead map screen and the mobile enemy vehicles. Like the NES game, there are Action Zones and Neutral Zones. And, again, every item is exactly as it is in the NES game, which is just a tad bit disappointing – maybe at least one extra weapon would have been pretty cool.

The Action Zones are in a semi-linear format that's not too difficult to figure out, and like its big brother, you will never get lost in any of them. Some stages are reminiscent of the original game, with some changes – for example, the first level of the NES game was split up into two separate levels here. There's still a sewer level, complete with blobs, though the design is somewhat different. As the game goes on, the levels become a little more unique.

A number of minor elements have been changed. In the communication rooms, there's also an option that the rooms in the NES version didn't have – the ability to switch weapons and



communicators, just in case you brought the wrong one. There are enemy trucks roving around, and a fight will break out if your path collides with theirs, but the perspective is just the standard side scrolling one, as opposed to the overhead *Commando*-esque shooting scenes. Still, if you destroy the strongest enemy units, you still accrue continues. Instead of starting out with only one hit to sustain before dying, Rad has three life points in the beginning, which makes the difficulty seem easier at first.

Many Game Boy games, especially conversions of NES titles, have a problem where the sprites are too large in comparison to the small screen, making the action feel cramped. That's not a problem here, as the sprites have been redrawn and are well-proportioned. The GB game is quite a bit more fast-paced compared to its predecessors, as Rad moves at a brisker running

speed. The only downside is that the scrolling is a little choppy.

The controls manage to improve a bit on the fluidity of the NES game, as using the bionic arm feels even easier. Gravity seems to be a bit more lenient on Rad, as he drops rather slowly after releasing his arm from a ledge above, and can fire it again almost immediately in midair. If he grabs the ceiling straight up, it is possible to pull him up, let go, and in a veritable millisecond, shoot the arm out diagonally and swing off to the left or right. The tradeoff is that the arm seems a bit shorter this time around, but its potency has not lost a step.

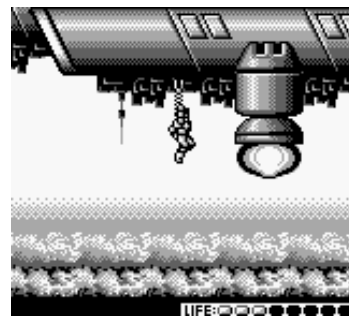
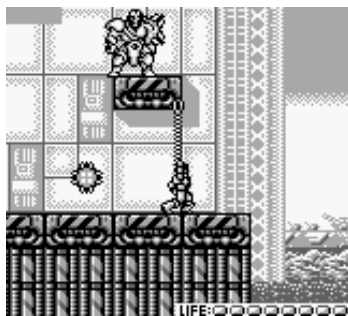
At the end of every stage is a reactor core and a guardian to destroy. Usually, you can just blow up the core and pay no attention to the enemies, but a few stages require that you destroy the boss this time around. Some of them are from the NES game (like the soldier with a shield

and a mechanical arm of his own), but others, like the dastardly General Rile, are completely original to the GB game.

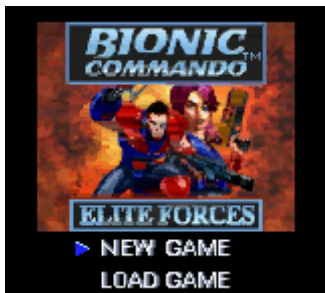
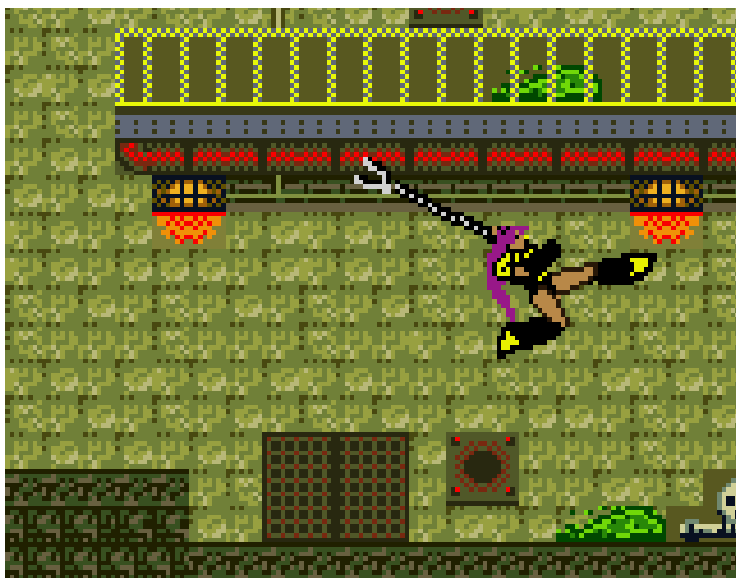
There is, however, one fairly significant change. In the NES game, the battle against the Albatross was a boss fight. In the GB game, it's been expanded to an entire level, and is quite hard. The most challenging section is where you have to swing outside the Albatross, grappling from its wings and avoiding the flames from its thrusters. There's nothing but pure air below you for many of these areas, so there's almost no room for error.

It also has something that the previous title did not – a password feature. After beating an area, you are given a sequence of squares, triangles, and circles that make up a password. This system is somewhat reminiscent of the *Mega Man* games, which comes as no surprise because, of course, it was published by the same company.

Save for the Albatross bit, *Bionic Commando* on the Game Boy tends to be a bit easier overall than its NES relative. The lack of overhead scenes is also a bit disappointing. Aside from all that, though, this is still a shockingly solid title that has translated very well to the small screen.



Bionic Commando: Elite Forces



Bionic Commando: Elite Forces
 Original Release: 2000
 Platforms: GBC, 3DS



Bionic Commando: Elite Forces was supposedly released on December 31, 1999 (the supposed final hour before Y2K was apparently about to doom mankind), but the copyright screen claims it was released 2000. It wasn't actually a product of Capcom, but was instead published by Nintendo. It was developed by their internal team NST, an American studio who had previously ported SNK's NES action-RPG *Crystalis* to the Game Boy Color. Rather than converting another company's code, however, they created a completely new game. It was initially only released in North America and Australia, but has since received wider distribution on the 3DS Virtual Console.

The story is pretty familiar by this point. The land of Karinia is under siege by the Avar army, their leader Arturus found the Albatross Project, Commander Joe (What? He's not so Super anymore?) is sent in to stop it, he fails, and in comes the Bionic Commando to rescue him. This time, Rad Spencer is not the protagonist, but you get to name the hero... or heroine. Yep, you get the choice of a male or female character to take into the field. Their differences are mostly aesthetic, but there are a couple of stages that differ depending on which commando you choose.

After making your choice, you appear on the familiar map screen with the familiar layout, familiar helicopter, and familiar enemy

trucks. Yes, it looks just like a *Bionic Commando* game should. You may notice, though, that the colors of all stage squares are the same, as opposed to there being one color for Action Zones and another for Neutral. That's because they've abolished the Neutral Zones entirely. Although they served little more purpose than containing integral items, it's a shame to see them absent.

The graphics are something of a mixed bag. The colors are put to use quite well, but then again, it is a Game Boy Color game. In some areas, they appear bright and vivid, but can also be dark and murky. It all depends on the area you're in, be it an urban cityscape or a mysterious forest. On the other hand, the artistry is quite ugly. The color scheme was likely used to stand out on the non-backlit Game Boy Color screen, but outside of that it looks very garish. Compared to its predecessors (even the original GB title), it just doesn't look as appealing. The areas tend to get monotonous as well. Back in the NES game, no levels looked the same. Here, you'll often find three areas sharing a very similar look before moving onto new terrain. At least the sprites are animated quite well.

The sound also brings some good and bad, with some of the compositions being rather catchy. The soundtrack is mostly original, with only one of the tunes being carried over from the GB title.



Although compositionally it holds up fairly well, the chiptune instruments are chirpy. It sounds like a first-generation GB game, and considering that even the 1992 release sounded much better, the programmers must be chided for not making full use of the sound chip. The effects themselves sound rather muddled, and the digitized voice samples are laughable, sounding very crackly and indistinct.

The presentation certainly could have been better, but the action is definitely adequate. The control doesn't feel as tight as it did in the Game Boy title, but it's still relatively easy to control. You can even drop down from ledges by pressing Down twice, which is a good addition. At the communication rooms, you can contact your home base or tap into the enemy frequency to receive inside information. Unfortunately, the element of suspense is diminished, as there

are only a few set stages where wire-tapping results in an enemy assault. All you get are a couple of standard soldiers, instead of knife guys rushing in while paratroopers fall in until you escape. It just doesn't feel the same. Still, you can switch weapons and decoders at the communication rooms, and even save.

Bionic Commando: Elite Forces runs on a battery backup, allowing you to swing, shoot, rest, and pick up right where you left off. There are also a couple of hidden comm rooms that lead to secret levels, which are real challenging and truly test your prowess with the bionic arm. They don't really offer anything grand for a reward, just a change of your character's color and bragging rights.

There are a few sniper sections where the view changes to a first person perspective and you need to shoot some stuff. These seem weirdly out of place,

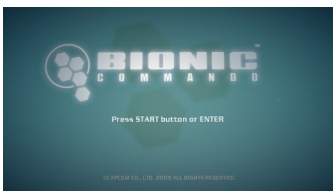
but at least they're brief. Meeting with an enemy truck puts you into an overhead scene, just like the NES game. Instead of moving strictly forward, you'll have to move left and right to get to the end of these scenes. Destroying the powerful enemy vehicles nets you a bonus life. The existence of the save feature makes continues obsolete, so you get lives instead.

You just might need those lives, too, as you can expect to die quite a bit. It's not so much that the levels are hyper-difficult, but they do tend to frustrate quite a bit. On more than one occasion, you will more than likely swing right into an enemy soldier and take a hit. You can hold Up and Down to get a better vertical look of the terrain, but not much can be done horizontally. It can get a bit infuriating to swing forth into unknown territory and only have a millisecond to grasp onto the next ledge, or risk plunging into the abyss below.

There's just something with *Elite Forces* that doesn't sit right. The graphics are garish, the sound is grating, and the gameplay is diminished by the somewhat cheap deaths. It's still a *Bionic Commando* title and it has most of the same shooting and swinging moments that fans know and love. However, it is rather a far cry from the NES game, or even the GB title.



Bionic Commando (2009)



Bionic Commando

Original Release: 2009

Platforms: WIN, X360, PS3



One year after the spectacular *Bionic Commando Rearmed*, the long-anticipated build-up to an actual all-new game in the series finally came to fruition. *Rearmed* was awesome enough to stand on its own and not merely feel like a gigantic plug for the upcoming game, but it's obvious that the game's plot was designated to set the backstory for what was due to come. Grin has done a fine job of bringing a new dimension to the adventures of "Rad" Spencer.

First off, the setting is likely to turn off devoted fans right away due to the "darker and edgier" tone given to the plot and the protagonist. Soon after the destruction of the Albatross, Nathan "Rad" Spencer and Joseph "Super Joe" Gibson were hailed as heroes, and bionics became high in demand for military use. However, over the years, public opinion of bionic appendages began to turn, and the populace decided they had too much power, beginning the "Great Bionic Purge". Pro-bionic extremists, former bionic soldiers, and even remnants of the defunct Imperials founded the terrorist group BioReign and declared war against the Federal States of America. During this time, Spencer had been imprisoned for failing to follow military orders, but he is busted out of jail by his old friend Joe to take down the terrorists.

There's an incredible amount of backstory for what appears to be a standard

action plot. It's undeniably darker and edgier than the straightforward story of the original NES game. Furthermore, the graphic style is sure to test the loyalty of longtime fans, primarily due to the redesign of Spencer. Ten years have changed the freedom fighter from a vaguely Duke Nukem-esque patriot to a gruff dreadlocked ex-convict. The change is jarring, though he fits the game's darker atmosphere. For those who prefer the old look, there's a secret code that gives him his classic character model.

The scenery is fantastic. Ascension City looks the part of a New York-style skyscraper graveyard with crumbled buildings, scorched earth, broken highways, and corporate billboards to boot. You see all sorts of ads for Pepsi, Nvidia, and other logos for various wares, which is a bit annoying and cheapens the game's validity. The background music is just about what you would expect for a game of this scale; a fine mix of orchestral and electronic sounds that comes off as dramatic and adds a lot to the overall atmosphere. When it comes time to kick ass, the volume inflates and the tempo flares up to match the action. If you keep an ear out, you will even hear several remixes of old *Bionic Commando* music that are done beautifully.

The voice work also deserves some recognition. Mike Patton, the eclectic vocalist of Faith No More, Mr. Bungle, and Fantomas provides



the incredibly angry voice of Spencer. He deliberately makes Spencer into a cocky, sarcastic, rage-filled son of a bitch who goes over the top with yelling at the enemies he kills.

Veteran voice actor Steve Blum is Super Joe. Even if he pretty much uses the same voice for 98% of all his characters, it fits the gruff, middle-aged Joe. The most insane voice among the main cast is that of returning villain Gottfried Groeder (Scott MacDonald), who hams up his role to high hell every time he pipes in with his wacky "totally not an ex-Nazi" tone.

The aesthetics hold up well enough, but the bread-and-butter of the game centers on the bionic arm. All control of the arm is handled by the L-trigger/L2, where the simplest application is to point your aiming cursor at the nearest

surface and hold onto the button to fire your arm. While swinging forward, two blue lines appear to indicate the optimal time to swing for maximum distance. You simply let go of the swing button, and either land or hold the swing button again in midair to latch onto your next target. No precise button press is required to attach to the next object. Swinging from point A to point B is relatively easy, not to mention damn fun.

If you do screw up a swing, you will not be penalized if you find solid ground beneath you. There are a scant few voids that will engulf you, but these are fleeting concerns compared to the blue clouds of radiation that float around everywhere. When the biohazard sign pops up on the screen, your prerogative is to turn tail and flee before the screen becomes crimson. You don't die

immediately if you swing into a blue cloud, but sometimes, death can't be helped if you swing too far into bad air. The radiation clouds are a means for restricting free roam around each level, killing the curious spirit of the avid adventurer. The game was deliberately intended to be linear, and radiation was what they decided to place to guide the player. Still, one can't help but think there could've been a more natural solution fixed through better level design.

Aside from these hazards, you will also have to deal with BioReign troops everywhere you swing. There's no health bar to indicate your amount of punishment, only an increasing red tint, complete with a danger beep if you get close to death. Retreating to a safe place will regenerate your health, so always



Bionic Commando (2009)



have an escape plan if things get hairy, which is bound to happen against Biomechs and Polycraft, two robotic foes that can deal (and absorb) quite a bit of damage.

The best part about the game is all of the different methods you're granted to impose havoc upon enemy forces, via your appendage. You don't have all of your abilities right away, but you recall them at key points in the game. To start, you can attach the arm to an enemy and perform a zip kick, where you catapult yourself towards the target, feet first. Then there's the "death from above," where Spencer smashes the ground with a powerful shockwave.

The "rip" is where you pull off walls and drag down heavy objects, sometimes onto a group of enemies. You can "punch up"

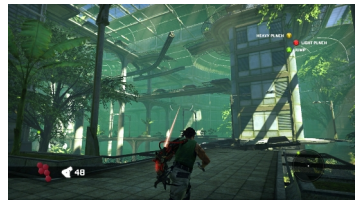
either heavy objects or enemies with a metal uppercut and spike them down into groups of baddies like a volleyball. The coolest ability is to "throw" objects arm-first, acting somewhat like the "punch up" but at longer distances. Finally, you gain an adrenaline meter that allows you to pull off a devastating wire spin attack to blow off soldiers around you, enhance your "death from above," or instantly obliterate most of the tougher foes.

Spencer's default weapon is the Tungsten, a pistol that's weak, but fires quickly. Then there are the obligatory grenades, which have spikes for no good reason other than to look cool. The special weapons include the Hiker, a gigantic shotgun that obliterates anything up close, the Yelena, a sniper rifle which generally isn't too useful but helpful for those

pesky snipers, the Bulldog, a grenade launcher which is good for any range except for point blank, the Tarantula, a homing rocket launcher which is very helpful for mechanical enemies, and even good ol' Super Joe's Machine Gun, more powerful than it's ever been before. In spite of the cool sounding weapons, the gun combat is not all that impressive. Enemies take a lot of hits before dying, and you usually need to use your arm skills to weaken them, or else you might find yourself unloading an entire mag on a single enemy. This game is all about using the arm, and that's very clear.

This blandness in weaponry carries over to the rest of the game. By the end of the first act, you've fought pretty much every basic enemy type there is, aside from some variations later on. It





doesn't help that the same scenery is repeated over and over – destroyed city, underground cavern, an industrial area, another underground cavern, and so forth.

One of the biggest gripes is the lack of boss fights; there are only three legitimate bosses, not including the final confrontation. What's there is fantastic, like the battle against a giant helicopter amidst a halfway constructed building. There's some spectacular gymnastics you can pull off here – dangle off a girder, quickly lock on, fire away, let go, and whirl around to grab onto another platform before you fall. The second battle is against a robotic worm called the Mohole, wherein you need to lob cars and other bits of debris right at its mouth.

There are a few technical issues too, primarily the long load times. The checkpoints are reasonably placed, but every death requires an approximately 20 second reload. Of the console versions, the PS3 release performs slightly better, with a more consistent framerate and minimal screen tearing, while the PC version runs the smoothest, and

mostly negates the loading time annoyance. Certain versions also have the advertising billboards patched out.

For those who grow weary of the single-player campaign, there is also some multiplayer on hand. There are three modes, allowing up to eight players, and covering the usual standards of Deathmatch, Team Deathmatch, and Capture the Flag.

The last beef is with the plot, which is really... well, it's outright stupid. Partway through the game, you learn that Joe is actually the terrorist leader. The "you've been working for the bad guy all along" cliché is slightly annoying, but the fact that Joe is now evil, without even an insane explanation, is just depressing. It's easy to feel betrayed, especially since the name "Super Joe" has been around since the golden age of Capcom arcade games.

Then there's the shockingly awful final twist, that Spencer's missing wife is actually...his bionic arm! This bad plot could have been mostly redeemed if a sequel would be released, explaining why Joe went maverick, and the deal

with the mysterious white-clad sniper that pops up near the end. He's named as "Thomas Clarke" in the credits, the name of player three from *Mercs*. Let's also not forget that Joe's full name, Joseph Gibson, was his billing as player one from the same game, so it seems like the writers were trying to tie all of Capcom's classic arcade games together.

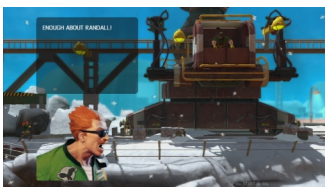
Sadly, *Grin* was shut down shortly after this project, partially due to the game's poor sales, alongside the failures of their movie tie-ins *Wanted: Weapons of Fate* and *Terminator: Salvation*. More than anything, it yearns for a sequel which could improve on the first with better gun combat, more enemy variety and boss fights, and less stringent level design, all covered in a plot that could answer the questions left behind by this game's Gainax ending.



Bionic Commando Rearmed 2



Bionic Commando Rearmed 2
Original Release: 2011
Platforms: PS3, 360



While *Bionic Commando Rearmed* was initially created to tie-in with the 2009 reimagining, it ended up being substantially more popular than the game it was meant to promote. In light of this, Capcom commissioned a sequel from Swedish development team Fatshark, since GRIN had since closed down.

Taking place after the first *Rearmed* but before the post-apocalyptic landscape of the revamp, this sequel sends our heroes to the island nation of Papagaya (obviously a stand-in for Cuba) to square off against the dictator Sabio (clearly meant to be Castro). As before, you're trailing after a group of soldiers that was previously sent to infiltrate the island, led by one Colonel Brubaker, who have since gone missing. Rad Spencer is the leader of this mission, and he is joined with several other bionic commandos, who don't really do much other than delivering bits of exposition and getting killed. Rad now has an amazing '80s-style mustache, and while the character artwork is no longer provided by the legendary Shinkiro, it looks similar enough.

The most controversial new addition is the jump button, the first time one has been seen in a 2D *Bionic Commando* game. While this very concept is likely to be despised by hardcore fans, it's really not that big of a deal – it's a short leap executed mostly to climb

over barrels or hop over small gaps. The stages are primarily designed around the use of jumping, although they're still conquerable without it – there's even an unlockable Retro Mode that prevents you from jumping entirely.

The bigger change is the alteration to the swinging mechanics. Swinging now has more momentum, and it feels much heavier. You can reel out your arm now (which you could only do in *Rearmed* after it was patched), and even begin swinging from a standstill without having to dig out your shotgun to provide momentum. You also have to press the arm button to release your grip, instead of just holding in a direction. It will almost definitely feel weird to anyone who's played any of the previous games before, and it initially seems like the change is totally unnecessary. However, in the last few levels, the increased versatility requires you to pull off some moves that you would never be able to use in the previous games, most of which involve climbing vertical shafts. It also borrows the "death from above" move from the 2009 game.

You now have a scanner called Bio Vision, which lets you pause the screen and examine various objects, similar to the *Metrod Prime* games. Other than giving the occasional hint, it's largely useless. There is, however, a whole lot of goofy writing here. ("If the use of an explosive barrel



needs to be pointed out, you are probably in way over your head.") The intro to one boss fight begins with a discussion on breakfast food. Another continually confuses you with a friend named Randall. Sabio rides around in a silly little golf cart. The map icon for the prison is a bar of soap.

The weaponry system has also been totally overhauled. In addition to your standard gun, there are half a dozen secondary weapons. Some are familiar, like the shotgun, but others are a bit more unusual. The Goliath Launcher is a short range explosive weapon where the projectile will return like a boomerang. The WASP Bazooka lets you lock onto a target, and shoots several homing missiles. The Napalm Launcher launches bombs at an arc, while the Yoro Viper sends a jolt of electricity along the floor. The usage of each of these weapons is limited, but ammo pickups are generous. There are also two secondary types of equipment. Passive upgrades include useful abilities like regenerating health, or treasure radars. Active upgrades provide additional weaponry that are also limited in usage, but replenish over time. These include grenades, like in the first game, as well as powerful uppercuts, and an electro claw to shock enemies.

In general the game is far, far easier. For example, the enemy AI is very poor compared to its predecessor. Each level has an extra life, which permanently raises the amount of lives in reserve when you start the stage. The penalty for death is incredibly light, as you resurrect very close to where you were killed. Also, as

mentioned, most of the really hard grapples are confined to the Challenge rooms, making most of the core game a breeze.

The original *Rearmed* kept most of its levels extremely faithful to the NES game. Given the opportunity to create levels from scratch, the stages here are more coherent, although still not entirely linear. There are usually upper and lower routes through the stages, and since there's a ton of hidden stuff, you're encouraged to explore them thoroughly. Some areas are also blocked off on the initial playthrough, and require revisiting once you've found some equipment from a later stage.

Alas, some of the more unique aspects of the original game have been removed. The neutral zones are nowhere to be seen. The overhead *Commando*-esque battles are gone. There is no more pre-level equipment screen, because you can just change weapons at any time. The communication rooms are also entirely absent. The map screen is still around, but there's only one linear path. There is still cooperative play, but it's missing the splitscreen, it's still confined to local play only, and the other multiplayer modes are gone. There are no longer bosses at the end of each level, but are rather dispersed over the map. There are only about five, with a couple of them being recycled. The coolest one is probably the fight against a gigantic robotic gorilla. Sadly, Sabio isn't nearly as amusing as, well, Hitler, and there's no parallel to the gory exploding head.

While it makes sense to clean up some of the vestigial remains of the original design, the biggest

issue with *Rearmed 2* is that it doesn't really replace it with much of anything. There are sniper stations in some levels, which let you pick off surrounding enemies, as well as scenes where you pilot a helicopter and shoot down surrounding threats, but these are shallow and don't add much.

The graphics have improved a bit. The first level begins with Rad landing on the docks of the island, with an explosion that rocks the night sky in the background. The town is filled with neon lights for locales like Club Explod and The Life Bar. It uses its tropical locale to great effect, as you explore lush jungles and temple ruins. It's an attractive game, although it runs at a lower frame rate than the original, and there's not PC port. If you set your console to 480p, it will run smoother.

The music is once again composed by Simon Viklund, and while there are a number of remixes, there's also a substantial amount of new material. The music has the distinct sound of the SID chip mixed in with more modern electronic instrumentation. The first level theme is almost as good as the original's, and the remixes in the staff credits are high-quality.

Bionic Commando Rearmed 2 makes terrible first impressions. The change to the control system are annoying, the game is stripped of numerous features, and it comes on the heels of an unpopular entry. There's a lot working against it, and even in its best moments, it's never quite as good as the original *Rearmed*. Still, the core mechanics are brilliant, and some of the changes to the level structure are for the better.

Strider Manga

The *Strider* manga was serialized in six parts throughout 1988 in the magazine *Comic Computique*. These were collected into a single tankouban volume. There was also a prelude “gaiden” chapter published separately, which is not included in the tankouban. The series was written and drawn by Tatsumi Wada.

The story ties in heavily with the NES *Strider*, as it uses the same characters and plotline. The first chapter details how Kain was kidnapped by the Kafazu forces, and how ex-Strider Hiryu was talked out of retirement in Mongolia to find him. Upon rescuing Kain, they learn of the mind controlling Zain Project, and set off to destroy it.

The manga features other characters from the game, including female Strider Sheena, Strider vice director Matic, and Syndicate leader Faceas Clay. The character profiles in the video game intro are taken directly from stills in the manga. Certain lines from the video game, like Strider’s background with his sister, are also slightly fleshed out. Reading the manga in tandem with the

game certainly helps it make a lot more sense.

However there are still some pretty substantial differences. Sheena is killed fairly early on by a mind-controlled Kain, where she doesn’t bite the dust until later on in the game. The globe trotting aspect is not present, and many side plots are only in the video game. The Blue Dragon space station is also only found in the NES game.

While the manga was never officially localized, a partial English fan translation, pictured here, can be downloaded from the long running *Strider* fan site The Light Sword Cypher Mainframe.



Bionic Commando Worlds of Power

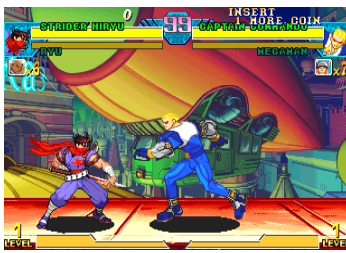
Worlds of Power was a book series published by Scholastic based on NES games. One was made for *Bionic Commando*, and it’s one of the better releases, largely because the video game had a relatively decent story.

However, there have still been liberties taken. The main character’s name is Jack Markson rather than Radd Spencer. The beginning tells the story of how he got his bionic arm, falling out of a building after a botched mission. Additional characters include

Heather, Super Joe’s girlfriend; Tiger, a child refugee, and The Hand, a terrorist who built the Albatross, and is identified as the giant soldier boss that became Gottfried in *Rearmed*. Master-D also now stands for Master-Destructo, who was not previously killed, so there’s nothing about being resurrected.

All of the Worlds of Power books sanitized the violence – the gun is even airbrushed out of the hero’s hand on the cover – plus the bionic arm has other odd uses, like a heat conductive finger, the ability to easily pick locks or disable bombs, and a truth device that works on radio frequencies.





Marvel vs. Capcom

In Capcom's Versus 2D fighting series, Capcom characters face off against Marvel superheroes. While the first two games only features *Street Fighter* characters, the third, *Marvel vs. Capcom*, brought in characters from other Capcom franchises. It stars favorites like Mega Man, and features cameos by Arthur from *Ghosts 'n Goblins*, and the Unknown Soldier from *Forgotten Worlds*.

One of the best characters is Strider Hiryu. He can double jump, hang on the side of the screen, and use his cipher. His special attacks call upon power-ups – the rotating orbs, the bomb-dropping birds, the ravenous mechanical tigers – to attack foes.

Strider's theme music starts with the "Stage 1" intro from the arcade *Strider* before breaking into an original synth guitar rock piece. His ending is the same as the arcade game – he takes his hang-glider, flies out to the ocean, and lands on a whale, with the music from the Amazon level playing. One of his win quotes, "Take me to your boss!", is also straight from the original. Tong Pooh, one the Chinese acrobats, also shows up as a helper character.



Hiryu was meant to appear in *Capcom Fighting All-Stars*, a 3D game featuring a whole slew of other Capcom characters, but the game was canceled, and morphed into the mediocre 2D title *Capcom Fighting Evolution*, sans Strider.

The initial release of *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* is missing Strider Hiryu. However, he returns for the updated version, *Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3*. Rad Spencer also makes his fighting game debut in *Marvel vs. Capcom 3*. By default, he appears using the same design as the 2009 reboot, with the dreadlocks and grimy green wifebeater, however, his *Bionic Commando Rearmed* design is available as an alternate costume. His theme music is a remix of the Area 1 song from the NES game. Most of his special moves revolve around the use of his bionic arm, as can he grab his opponents and then link them to other moves. Oddly, there's no swing attack.

There are also action figures for both based on their *Marvel vs. Capcom* appearances – Strider



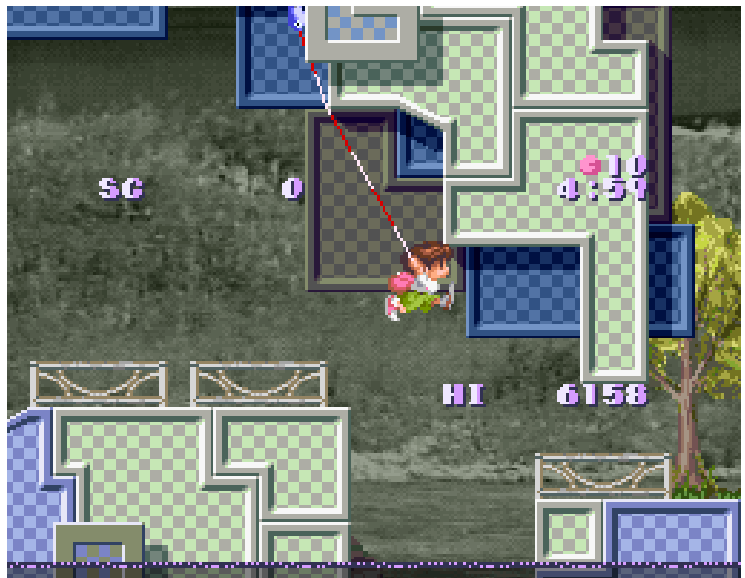
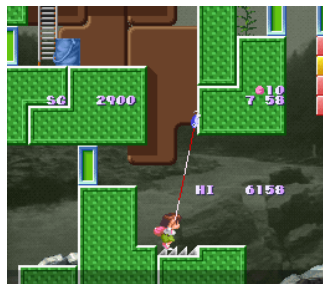
Top Row: *Marvel vs. Capcom*
 2nd Row: *Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom*
 3rd Row: *Capcom Fighting All Stars*, *Street Fighter Alpha 2*, *Capcom World 2*, action figure, *Namco x Capcom*
 4th Row: Action figures, *Card Fighters Clash*

was packaged with Spider-Man, and Spencer received both a figure from Neca, and a Minimates figurine packed with Taskmaster.

Other Cameos

Strider Hiryu appears in the Capcom arcade quiz game *Capcom World 2*. He can be found in Ken's background in *Street Fighter Alpha 2*, which is a costume ball featuring Capcom characters. He is also a playable character in Namco's strategy RPG *Namco X Capcom*, and appears on cards in both *SNK vs. Capcom: Card Fighters' Clash* games.

Umihara Kawase



Umihara Kawase

Original Release: 1994

Platforms: SFC, DS, VITA



Umihara Kawase is a strange little game series about a girl and her fishing pole. It's a puzzle platformer revolved almost entirely around using her bouncing wire to navigate through obstacles and avoid enemies. The series has a very low budget, surreal feel to it, but the bizarre aesthetics combined with the unique mechanics and crushing difficulty have earned it a high level of cult popularity over the years.

The series is largely the brainchild of Kiyoshi Sakai, the designer and programmer, with artwork by Toshinobu Kondo. The heroine, a sushi chef, is also named Umihara Kawase, an abbreviation of a Japanese idiom, "Sea fishes are fat in the belly, river fishes are fat in the back."

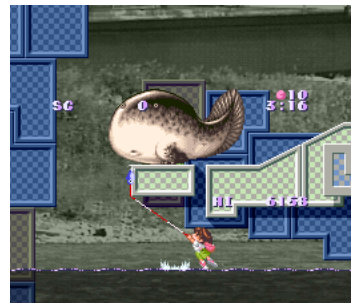
The crux of the game relies on the swinging mechanics, similar to *Super Metroid* or *Bionic Commando*. However, the physics don't really work the same way, particularly because of the bouncy, rubber-like nature of the fishing wire, allowing you to swing and propel yourself in crazy directions. Don't question why she has it or how it works. The play control is the true reason why everyone shows it so much love – it's spring-pendulum physics, for anyone familiar with Lagrangian mechanics. You can attach to nearly any surface and solve each level in your own way. There are a lot of different tricks that evolve out of this: hooking ground for momentum, scaling a straight

surface, hooking around ledges, balancing your weight against a giant fish, the list goes on. Some people call it a "rubbering action" game, and it fits.

In addition to the platforming, there are also enemies roaming about, usually giant walking fish. These can be stunned with your wire, and can also be reeled in and shoved into Umihara's backpack, permanently killing them. They tend to be a nuisance, especially since they respawn randomly, seemingly at the worst times. There are boss "fights", which usually just involve avoiding some gigantic enemy for a few minutes until it leaves.

The game is also draconian in difficulty. Everything kills you in one hit, bottomless pits haunt your existence, and the game demands incredibly crazy stunts just to barely survive. There's no continue or save game function, so once you're out of lives, you need to start from scratch. Yet, it's very manageable with some practice; veterans can make this game look really easy, which seems unfair to the rest of us amateurs, and it's a favorite amongst speed runners.

The presentation is certainly thin to the bone. It uses badly pixelated black and white photos for backgrounds, simplistic tilesets, and cheerfully dull music, which is immediately obvious to anyone who has played a Korean MMO. The surreal landscape, backgrounds aside, is also quite charming. You're a cute schoolgirl surrounded



by gigantic vegetables and school supplies as you look for doors and dodge flying fish, oversized eels, walking salmon, and who knows what else. It's the very essence of "Cute on LSD". There's no real story or much of anything, not even an ending. You just walk through some door that looks like any other level exit, and then the credits roll.

Many levels in the game feature branching paths, allowing you to follow an entirely different set of levels. Certain fields are accessible only through hard-to-reach secret doors. This, coupled with a never-ending learning curve to the physics, gives *Umihara Kawase* tremendous replay value.

Umihara Kawase is something of a fluke in the industry. It was

produced out of thin air by a small, unknown studio named TNN, and published by NHK, a Japanese television station of all things. In the end, the game never sold that well. The studio itself quickly dried up after coughing out a boring soccer simulator. That's where the tale of *Umihara Kawase* should have ended, too, if it weren't for its cult popularity.



Manga

A manga based on *Umihara Kawase* was published around the time of its release. It was drawn and written by Shouma Yamabuki, and published in Comic Burger. Eight chapters were compiled in

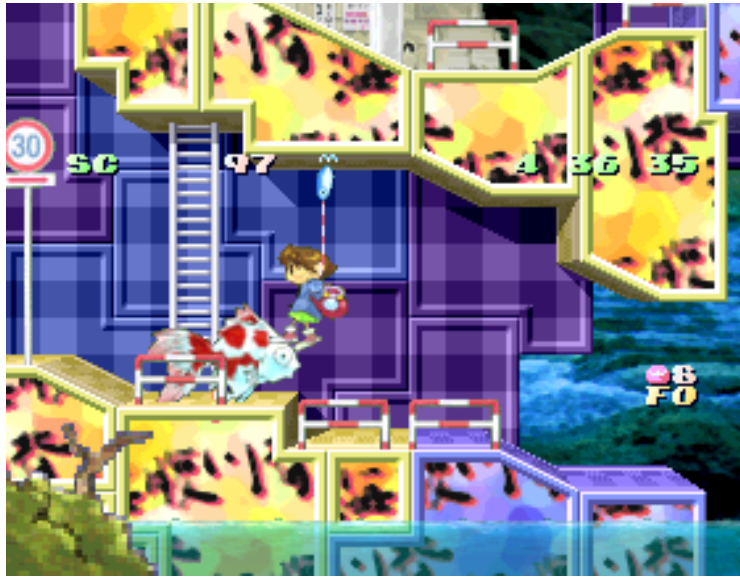
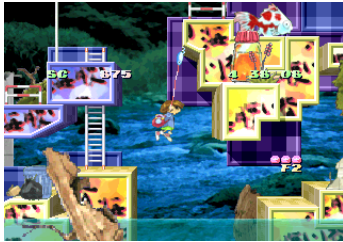


tankouban format in 1995, though the two final chapters are missing.

Obviously, this was a strange choice for a manga, since the game barely has any plot. The protagonist, Umihara (whose name is spelled with different kanji than in the game) is a young stowaway on a cruise liner, who comes to its defense when it's attacked by a mysterious organization. Of course, she attacks using a long fishing wire. The surreal nature of the games is not represented at all. In fact, outside of the main character, it has nothing to do with the property it's based on. Like any comic aimed towards boys, it also has awkward fan service nudity.



Umihara Kawase Shun



Umihara Kawase Shun
Original Release: 1997
Platforms: PS1, DS



Three years passed by quietly after the release of *Umihara Kawase*. TNN didn't last. They were eventually bought out by Japan Clary Business and changed their name to Jack Pot. With little money left, they decided to revisit *Umihara Kawase* with the support of their new publisher Xing. At first, they planned on a simple remake. That's certainly not how it went. *Umihara Kawase Shun* ("Shun" meaning "in season") is a completely different game, and a fitting sequel.

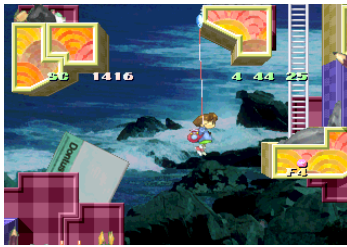
Shun has brand-new levels which completely refocus the idea of the game. Instead of worrying constantly about enemies, the game has shifted to be much more of a puzzle platformer. Your worries don't come from a fear of fishy murderers, but rather "how the heck am I gonna get over there?" Don't think for a second this makes it any easier.

The physics in the sequel have changed. They're much tighter and springier, with a shorter line. Once again, you must trust in your fishing pole to spring, bounce, pull, and swing you around every deadly corner. This game has more bottomless pits, more spikes, more stunts, and less mercy. In other words, the perfect update for fans of the original. The new gameplay challenges you to learn every old trick in a new way. Fortunately, once mastered, this game is actually easier for pulling off stunts. That's a good thing too,

because this sequel has no shortage of crazy challenges, especially if you take the more obscure paths.

The presentation is more polished now that it's on the PlayStation. The graphics look as if they've been hand-painted, featuring much brighter animated sprites and intricate foregrounds. The floors consist of polygons rather than sprites, for a subtle 3D look, though the game is still entirely in 2D. The slight shift in perspective does make platforming feel a little less precise, though. Umihara, in particular, looks quite a bit different. She's lost the baby fat and has certainly grown quite a few years since we last met her. The silly, photo-realistic backgrounds are still here, although they look a little less out-of-place, and aren't nearly as distracting as the giant fruits, vegetables, and school supplies that still permeate levels. The music is still as cute as the first one, but it sounds a little less "canned", which is nice. The ending song even has Umihara's voice actress singing along!

There are some minor drawbacks, however. The graphics are kind of repetitive. There isn't as much variety in the enemies. In the original release of the game, it's also a bit strange seeing the blatant product placement from Mitchell, a company that develops fishing supplies. Seriously, there are actually commercials in this game, with Umihara's voice actress



gleefully pushing sales in the most ridiculous voice imaginable. It's jarring to say the least.

Fortunately, there are some cool new features to offset any bad feelings. You can replay any field you've finished using Practice Mode. You can also record and replay your efforts with a memory card. The boss fights are also much more interesting, like a giant bucket with legs or a floating pufferfish.

A few years later, Jack Pot released *Umihara Kawase Shun: Second Edition*. It was the start of the Maruan series, a collaboration between studios for a series of indie Japanese games. It adds three new levels, fixes a few glitches, and deletes the voice work. The biggest difference, fortunately, is the removal of Mitchell's commercials, and replaces them with some much preferred artwork. The influence of Toshinobu Kondo is felt far more in *Second Edition*; the player receives full pictures of Umihara

as a reward for unlocking certain paths and completing certain levels. This version can be found on the Game Archives section of the Japanese PSN, for play on the PS3, PSP, and Vita. There was also a Japanese magazine, TECH PlayStation Extra, which featured three new fields on an enclosed bonus disc.

After eight long years, a studio by the name of Rocket remade the game for the PSP and published it through Marvelous Entertainment. Made without involvement of any of the original staff, this port is, frankly, terrible. The view is in true widescreen, better than the stretched visuals that usually appear on the PSP. There aren't any new levels or obstacles at all, though. That's not so bad by itself, but it doesn't help that the game is so full of bugs that it's nearly unplayable. It seems okay from the outset, but upon playing it for any semblance of time, it's very noticeably that the physics have been

changed. When the game was released, fans of the PlayStation game posted videos of all of the wonky ways the wire worked, giving it a bad reputation immediately. The game flopped.

Thankfully, Kiyoshi Sakai stepped back in to produce *Umihara Kawase Shun ~second edition ~ Kanzenban* for the Nintendo DS. It includes ports of both *Umihara Kawase Shun* and the original SFC *Umihara Kawase*. For *Shun*, the visuals are a little blocky due to the lower resolution, but the stages have been slightly reworked to fit in the small screen space. The physics are reproduced perfectly, and there are even a few extra levels. For the original game, it's identical, other than losing a tiny bit of vertical screen space due to the lower resolution (224 on the SNES vs. 192 on the DS). It doesn't feature a map screen, though, instead featuring various art on the bottom screen. It's easily the ultimate *Umihara Kawase* package.

Screenshot Comparisons



PlayStation



PlayStation Portable

Sayonara Umihara Kawase



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Sayonara Umihara Kawase

AKA: Yumi's Odd Odyssey (NA 3DS)

Original Release: 2013

Platforms: 3DS, VITA



After another few years, and a positive response to the DS re-release of the previous two games, a proper third title in the series was released for the Nintendo 3DS. *Sayonara Umihara Kawase* (or "Farewell Umihara Kawase", if you will) was developed by Agatsuma Entertainment, though series creator Kiyoshi Sakai was still heavily involved in its design. It retains much of the core platforming mechanics of the previous games, but updates the overall design of to something a little more modern.

The biggest change is that limited lives are no longer a factor in the main scenario. Instead, progressing through the game simply unlocks new levels on a map grid. Multiple exits are still present in certain stages, meaning that pathways from one end of the map to the other are sometimes a bit knotted and hard to follow. The different paths eventually lead to one of five endings, each of which closes out with a boss fight. Hidden backpacks can still be found along the way, though these are treated merely as collectibles. Once at least one ending has been reached (the path from stage 0 to stage 9 is pretty quick and easy), you unlock Survival Challenge, which starts the player off in stage 0 with three lives, as in the previous games.

Another noteworthy change is that there are more playable characters this time around.

Umihara (AKA Yumi in the North American release) is the main character of the previous games, and has no special abilities. There is also a childhood version of the main character, who can restart each stage from a checkpoint, but only once per try. Emiko is a childhood friend of Umihara's, and has the same checkpoint ability as childhood Umihara. Noko Yokoyama is a future descendant of Umihara's, who is a time travelling police officer. She has the ability to move in slow motion.

Levels still consist of pretty much the same basic elements as the previous games, but it feels like a lot more thought and care was put into level design this time around. Enemies no longer spawn freely (outside of some specific stage gimmicks) and their placement is generally fair and logical. Much like *Shun*, much of the challenge here involves figuring out how to navigate some truly vicious platforming. There's no shortage of spikes and icy surfaces to be found, as well as the newly added trampolines, which have their own springy physics and are often placed at odd angles. You can press the left shoulder button to temporarily freeze time in order to get a read on your situation, as well as bringing up a diagram showing which direction you're currently pressing on the d-pad. If you're playing as Noko, this ability is replaced with temporary slow-mo, which is far more useful.



The bosses will surely look familiar to series veterans, like the first fight against a giant tadpole, but they've been reworked to feel a lot more like an actual boss fight, so you need to figure out a way to get them to injure themselves while avoiding them. Unfortunately, they're kind of the weak link in the chain, as the limits placed on your abilities means you still end up fighting by somewhat indirect means.

One last notable improvement is how good a job this game does at tracking stats. A profile screen keeps track of how many stages you've cleared, how many exits you've reached, and how many backpacks you've found. Each individual stage keeps track of how many times you've succeeded and died in that stage (which can lead to some pretty embarrassing ratios, especially for new players just learning the ropes), as well as your best time for each exit on that stage. Best times are also uploaded onto a leaderboard, and since playing as alternate characters can make clearing certain stages easier, there's an option in the settings to filter out times wherein those characters were used.

Gone, sadly, is the hand-drawn sprite art, replaced with 3D character models. The enemies manage to survive the transition

pretty well, but Umihara and the other human characters end up looking pretty strange. Being polygonal just seems to emphasize their odd proportions, particularly the large hands and pencil-thin arms and legs.

Backgrounds and graphics in general are underwhelming, and the camera has this strange way of shifting around very slightly as you move around. It's likely intended to emphasize the 3D effect, though it just ends up being distracting. The framerate is also capped at 30 FPS in the 3DS version, and the game feels slightly slower and more sluggish than its purely 2D predecessors. The music is as cheesy as ever, though many of the tracks seem to revolve around similar motifs, so the soundtrack as a whole feels a little more cohesive. The lack of a map on the bottom screen, like in the DS game, is also a bummer.

About a half-year after its release in Japan, *Sayonara Umihara Kawase* became the first game in the series to officially cross the pond, when Natsume released the game as a download only title in North America. It was released as *Yumi's Odd Odyssey*, a name they'd planned to use for the PSP port of *Shun* before the stateside release of that game fell through. Umihara's name was changed to Yumi, which is at least

easier to pronounce in English, and while there's no mention of her original name, the game's text doesn't try to cover up references to previous games in the series. The only other change that's immediately apparent is that the North American leaderboards are separated from the Japanese ones. The European version is the same, but keeps the original title.

A Vita port was also released in 2015. This version was published directly by Agatsuma worldwide, and keeps its original moniker, though it's known as *Sayonara Umihara Kawase+*. It looks nicer, as it's displayed at a higher resolution and runs at 60 FPS. It includes several new levels and rebalanced enemy placement, as well as a port of the original Super Famicom game, complete with a practice mode, making it the first time that the original title was released outside of Japan.



Fausseté Amour



Fausseté Amour
Original Release: 1993
Platforms: PCE



Naxat's PC Engine title *Fausseté Amour* seems promising. The main character attacks with a multi-directional whip, recalling shades of *Castlevania*, and can swing on practically any ceiling a la *Bionic Commando*. It fetches a high price on the aftermarket, so one might assume that it's an under-appreciated gem that combines elements from two of the best NES games in existence.

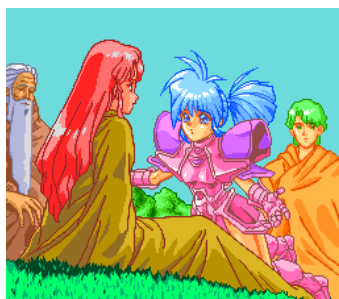
Sadly, that's not the case at all. In this game you play as a scantily clad chick in power armor. When you die, all of your clothes disintegrate and you lie as a naked assemblage of pixels on the floor before restarting your next life. It's one of those types of games that focuses more on the attractiveness of the heroine than the quality of the actual gameplay.

Fausseté Amour seems to be riding on the popularity of Telenet's questionably venerable *Valis* series, which proved (to absolutely no one's surprise) that gamers tend to like girls with swords in skimpy clothing. The title is technically mangled nonsense (in what's described to be as Franponais, or French and Japanese) for "False Love". (The proper French title would be "Le Faux Amour".) The heroine is a blue-haired lass named Kolk Lance, who wears a fancy piece of pink armor that does well at covering her upper torso, but sort of runs out when it reaches the waist, where it turns into a crystalline thong of some kind. All

the angles in the cutscenes are positioned to highlight this fact. Nearly all of the boss characters are spry anime females that have somehow been cursed into the form of gruesome monsters, who all transform back into their original cutesy form after being defeated and give a totally unnecessary speech during the post battle cutscene. Even the final boss – the only real male character in the game – morphs into a goat-like monster with supple breasts that seem suspiciously enhanced.

Taking a note from *Ghosts 'n Goblins*, Kolk loses her armor after taking a hit from an enemy. (It doesn't shatter or fall off, it just flies into the sky, as if were being summoned by a perverted God or something.) Her undergarments consist of a surprisingly conservative one-piece white swimsuit. If King Arthur can run around and fight the undead in his boxers, then it's just a matter of gender equality that Kolk can do the same. At least this is about as risqué as it gets, seeing that it's not an out-and-out porn game like *Steam Hearts*.

Kolk wields a metallic extendable baton that can be swung in any direction. Compared to the whips in the *Castlevania* games, it's a bit too quick, and can be hard to hit enemies with in spite of its versatility. There are also three different magic spells, which are obtained through power-ups dropped by little fairies, including a



straightforward fire attack, a homing lightning attack, and a useless air based attack that shoots straight upward. Due to the lack of buttons on the Turbo controller (and that fact that pressing Up and Attack, a standard to use special weapons in NES games, actually causes Kolk to attack upward), you need to jump and then pretty Down and Attack to cast your magic. You can use this magic as often as you want, but trying to hit anything with the air or fire attacks can prove to be an exercise in futility. On the other hand, the lightning is so overpowered that very few enemies pose much of a threat.

By pressing Jump twice, Kolk will extend her weapon diagonally, which will grapple onto a nearby horizontal surface, leaving her swinging Indiana Jones-style. Unfortunately, the mechanics here aren't nearly as refined as *Bionic Commando*. Double tapping the Jump button to grab onto things isn't exactly intuitive, and you can't extend or retract your weapon all – you just sit there, swinging slowly. The only reliable way to climb up is by pressing the Attack button, which will cause Kolk to somersault into the sky. This is pretty fun, especially since she's invulnerable during this period and can buzzsaw straight into enemies.

The most frustrating issue is that the level design rarely uses

these mechanics for anything interesting. In the first few stages, you can swing up to higher ground and explore different parts of the stages, but there aren't any obstacles or challenges that require mastering it. The only level that pressures you to swing with skill is the fifth stage, where you need to climb a vertical tower that's slowly flooding with lava.

The rest of the stage designs are boring, consisting of haphazardly placed platforms and enemies. There are way too many instances where you need to make blind jumps and end up either falling into a pit or slamming into an enemy. There are seven stages altogether, ranging from a forest stage, to a cave stage, to an ice stage, to a fire stage, and so on.

The action itself is too slow to be very interesting. Not all games need to be fast paced to be exciting – see, again, *Castlevania* – but the Belmont clan traipsed through its quest with a sense of urgency, whereas Kolk just saunters slowly, gently disposing of any bad guys that may wander into her path.

Fausseté Amour is one of those games that doesn't really seem difficult, but somehow ends up proving frustrating. The fact that you can only take two hits contributes to this, but it has more to do with sloppy design. Many of the bosses attack with tiny projectiles that scatter

haphazardly, and are difficult to dodge effectively. You get sent back to a checkpoint when you respawn, meaning you'll need to meander slowly through the same areas over and over.

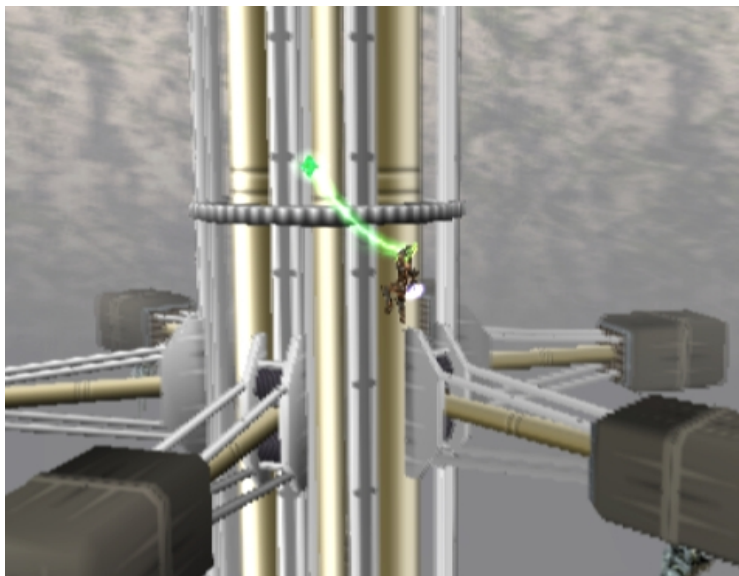
The graphics aren't particularly impressive, and the music is mostly forgettable, except for one theme that sounds a lot like Michael Jackson's "Thriller". The title screen opens with screeching guitars that may imply a rocking *Lords of Thunder* style affair, but it goes nowhere.

At least the cutscenes look nice. They're almost all poorly animated, with each usually consisting of only two screens, but the artwork is attractive, with each of the female cast members sporting the wildly colored locks that seem to be representative of PC Engine-style character designs. They're more interesting than the *Valis* crew, even though they lack that nebulous 80s charm. The designs were done by Ryuichi Makino, who later did character designs for *Battle Athletes* (the video game) and *Girls Bravo* (the ecchi themed anime).

There are several expensive PC Engine titles of varying quality, ranging from "awesome" (*Dracula X*) to "decent but overpriced" (*Sapphire, Kaze Kiri*). *Fausseté Amour* doesn't even approach that level, and seems content to be a thoroughly mediocre action game and little more.



ChainDive



ChainDive

Original Release: 2003

Platforms: PS2



Until the 2009 reboot of *Bionic Commando*, Capcom's acrobatic wire swinging series lay solely in the realm of 2D. For those that wanted something similar, the closest anyone could get was the vaguely obscure PlayStation 2 title *ChainDive*. Released only in Japan in 2003, it gained a small word-of-mouth following due to its inclusion on a demo disc for the Official PlayStation Magazine (issue 79), but despite being published by Sony, was not chosen for localization.

The hero is a warrior named Shark, who wields a sword called Unbreakable, and carries a grappling hook called the plasma chain. He must defend the planet of Elm from invaders, protecting their many princesses.

Despite being a 3D game, all of the action takes place along a 2D axis. The plasma chain works a little different than other games, though. All throughout the stages are little green orbs that act as grappling points. As long as you're vaguely in the vicinity of one of those orbs, the hook will automatically shoot towards it as long as you're pressing the button, even if it's not visible on screen. The physics also work a little differently than other games with grappling hooks. Since your plasma chain acts like a slingshot, it's important to keep up the momentum and travel quickly. You can also hang on the orbs and twirl around in 360 degree circles, which

is good for taking a stand against large numbers of enemies.

In most stages, these orbs are scattered around liberally, making it easy to fling yourself around the stage. However, it's not always consistent, and it's truly annoying when you try to send yourself in some direction and expect to latch onto something, only to flounder helplessly and fall to the ground.

You are equipped with a sword, although this does not directly harm enemies. Instead, it freezes them, which then turns them into grappling points you can latch onto. You can then swing around and pummel them until they shatter. Destroying multiple enemies in quick succession will build up a combo – high combos will restore a portion of your life meter based on your performance. This is especially important to note, because the game moves so quickly, it can often be difficult to tell when something is going to damage you. Thankfully, you have a long life bar, and it's usually possible to fully regain your health if you're adept at chaining kills.

Each of the game's levels have different goals. Sometimes you simply have to make it to the end; other times you need to hunt down and destroy a certain number of items. Some areas are developed on a circular track, making them easy to explore without having to double back. Some levels consist of boss battles, or in one case, a race against a boss. The variety helps



things from getting too stale, but certain types of missions are more aggravating than others, especially the ones where you need to protect friendly aircraft for a certain amount of time. Given the perspective and lack of a map, it's hard to tell where enemies are attacking and where you need to go, which is especially frustrating when you're on a time limit.

In screenshots, *ChainDive* is not pretty, but visuals are kept intentionally sparse in order to keep the game running at a 60 FPS. There are typically numerous tiny enemies on screen at the same time, and the game usually keeps up the pace in spite of being inundated. It's one of those games that looks far, far better in motion, as you fling through the sky, spin around grapple points, and smash up enemies, in some sort of mid-air ballet of destruction. There's a

sense of dizzying excitement in watching this, let alone playing it – few others can provoke a similar sensation, outside of the *Zone of the Enders* series and maybe the two PS2 *Shinobi* games.

Yet, at times it can look attractive. There's a lot of visual variety to the game, ranging from post-apocalyptic cities, to alien landscapes, to mountain ranges to ancient, floating, Roman-esque ruins. Easily the most impressive stage is where you're riding on top of an airplane as you protect it from smaller creatures. The chaos regularly sends it tilting back and forth, as you scramble for something to hold on to. The boss battles are equally as impressive due to their sheer size and scale. The design of the setpieces most definitely overshadows any technical deficiencies the game might otherwise have.

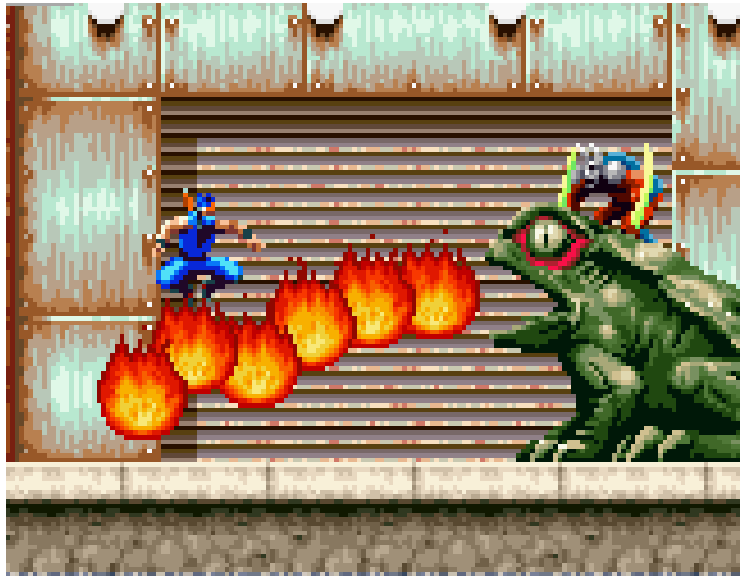
ChainDive isn't particularly long, and while some missions may frustrate while you figure out the trick to beating them, it really isn't all that difficult either, and can be completed within a few hours. There are time trials and combo trials unlockable after completing the game, giving it some replay value. This way you can also skip around and concentrate on replaying the better or more impressive levels, without having to worry about the annoying ones.

The inconsistency in its stage design is really the only major issue about *ChainDive* though, and the simple joy of spinning around wildly and smashing stuff is gratifying enough that it's never truly a problem.

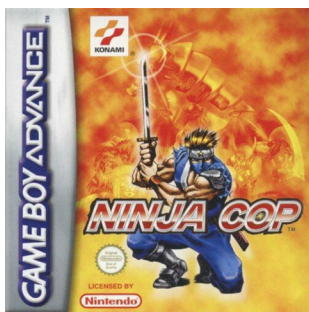
The development team, Alvion, went on to develop *Malicious* for the PlayStation 3 and Vita, which is also worth checking out. They also aided Platinum Games with other fast-paced action titles, like the *Bayonetta* series and *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*. The soundtrack was composed by Yuji Takenouchi, who hails from the old school Konami sound team, having worked on *Metal Gear 2*.



Ninja Five-O



Ninja Five-O
 AKA: **Ninja Cop** (EU)
 Original Release: 2003
 Platforms: GBA



Sega's *Shinobi* and Capcom's *Bionic Commando* are both names that draw a great deal of love from retro game fans. One offers fast paced ninja action, while the other has incredible swinging acrobatics. Put them together and you get the excellent Game Boy Advance game *Ninja Five-O*.

Developed by Hudson and released by Konami in mid-2003, *Ninja Five-O* went entirely unnoticed by pretty much everyone, and disappeared from store shelves almost immediately. It was also released in Europe under the slightly better name *Ninja Cop*, though strangely it did not receive a Japanese release.

As for the plot, various bad guys are committing crimes and taking hostages all over town. The police are scared witless, and all of the ninjas are busy crying to their mamas. As Joe Osugi, specialized anti-terrorist ninja, you're the only man for the job. In the beginning, you can choose from three stages (each with three sublevels and a boss), with more opening up when you complete those. You make your way through classic terrorist situations like banks, airports, harbors, caves, and finally the enemy's secret base.

Instead of being a strictly linear affair, *Ninja Five-O* puts you in a series of gigantic, interlocked rooms. In each level, not only do you need to rescue all of the hostages but also find the colored keys to unlock the various doors

scattered throughout. Don't worry about going on long hunts to find these things, though; despite the nature of the game, you won't get lost or end up going in circles, and there are always plenty of bad guys around, so it never gets dull.

Like most video game ninjas, Joe is equipped with an unlimited supply of shurikens. Finding power ups will let him shoot fire (!!) and lasers (!?!), but getting hit will decrease your weapon level. You also have a sword (used with the R button), which lets you slice through enemy defenses. Toss in two kinds of ninja magic – one to become invulnerable and one to kill all of the enemies on screen – and you've got a pretty complete arsenal. There's even a pair of binoculars that lets you scope the surrounding area for bad guys.

Joe's most useful item is a grappling hook that lets you swing from platforms to platform. It actually feels quite a bit like the grappling laser from *Super Metroid*, in that you can latch on hooks and swing in circles, until the dizziness forces you to stop screwing around and play the game properly. You can't use it to climb through ceilings like in *Bionic Commando* – rather, you have to go to the edge of the platform and flip around. It takes a little bit of getting used to, as it's easy to misjudge what direction you'll fly in when you let go, but once you get the hang of it it's insanely fun, and makes the game feel unique.



Enemies are rarely placed where they're easy to kill, as they like to hide behind crates or attack from an unreachable platform. Flying through the air, leaping up behind these goons, and silencing them with a spinning sword flip – these are the joys of *Ninja Five-O*.

Visually, for the most part, there are better looking Game Boy Advance games, although the animation is very well done. Further, while there are only a few songs in the entire game, the main theme that plays in the first few levels is quite catchy.

Like any decent action game, there's a fair level of challenge beyond the first stage. As you progress through the levels, you'll need to not only find the best way to approach enemies without getting slashed, roasted, or otherwise slaughtered, but also complete a large variety of timing-based challenges, including leaping off walls, crawling through ducts,

jumping over spiked platforms, and sliding past flamethrowers. The bosses are all specialized with slightly ridiculous magic – the toad boss is especially silly – and require quite a bit of strategy and tenacity to defeat.

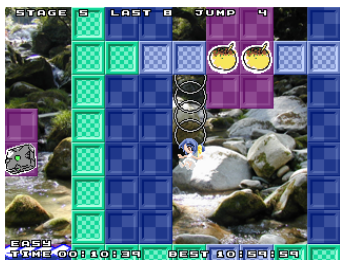
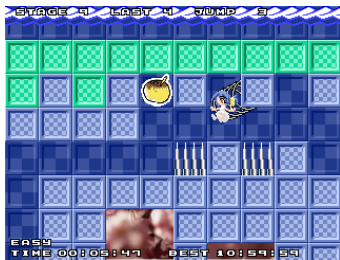
Joe can usually only take a few hits before giving up the ninja ghost, and there aren't any midlevel checkpoints, so be sure to practice for a bit first. Still, it never reaches the upper levels of frustration of, say, *Ninja Gaiden*, so you don't need to worry for the safety of your Game Boy or controller.

Technically these are the same age-old conventions we've seen thousands of times before. However, rarely are they executed so well. Although the 15 levels make for a fair amount of playing time, all one can think about after finishing them is how great it would be for more games to be like this one.

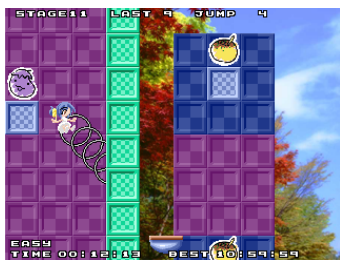
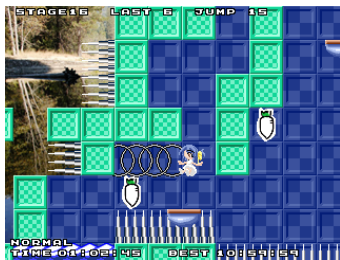
If *Ninja Five-O* had come out during the 16-bit era, it undoubtedly would've won Game of the Year awards all over the place. Unfortunately, in the casual portable gaming marketplace, where Nickelodeon games will sell better than most titles of quality, *Ninja Five-O* remains one of the most overlooked titles in the GBA library. Due to its rarity, obtaining a copy of either the American or European version can prove to be expensive.



Ganbare Natsuki-san



Ganbare Natsuki-san
Original Release: 2006
Platforms: WIN, X360



Ganbare Natsuki-san is a puzzle platformer released by doujin Japanese developer Alpha Secret Base. It's obviously inspired by *Umihara Kawase*, but stands pretty well on its own.

Rather than carrying a fishing wire, the heroine Natsuki has a claw device, which can be fired in eight directions. When it connects to a block, she can use it as a point to rotate around 360 degrees, and then jump off. It doesn't exactly follow the rules of physics – you can, for example, jump up and fire the claw straight down, which will connect it to the floor and suspend Natsuki in mid-air. You can then use this added length to jump up to a higher surface.

One of the main things to remember is that once the claw is connected, it cannot be lengthened or retracted. It's important to get the timing right – a long connection is vital to jump greater distances, while a short connection is required to squeeze into small spaces.

There are no enemies, but there are a whole lot of spikes. You have unlimited lives, at least, and can restart up to any completed floor. The goal is not to find an exit, but rather to collect all of the items scattered about the stage, including fruit, desserts, and Xboxes.

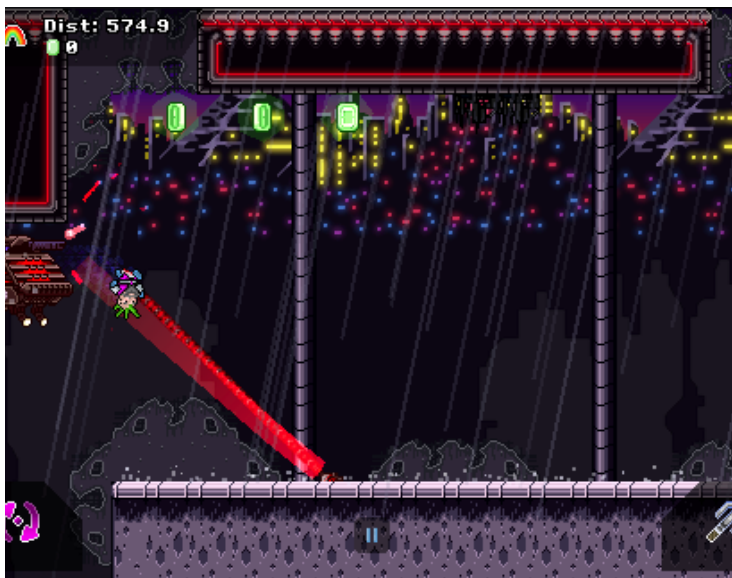
Without the pressure of a time limit or enemies, *Ganbare Natsuki-san* is a lot more relaxing than *Umihara Kawase*, since you can take your time to plan your moves.

It's also less reliant on reflexes in general, since hooking at the right length and judging distance is more important than playing with physics. Unfortunately the collision detection for the hook isn't always the best, occasionally resulting in missed grapples, and typically deaths to go along with it.

Aesthetically, though, the influence is obvious. Beyond the cutesy heroine, the backgrounds consist of serene digitized pictures of nature, which change every few levels, while the foreground features colorful blocks. It is missing some of *Umihara Kawase's* surrealness, though, especially since it's lacking enemies or some of the random background details. The music style is also similarly laid back and relaxing.

For a freeware Windows game, *Ganbare Natsuki-san* is quite a bit of fun, and there's a decent amount of content too. It was also ported to the Xbox 360 and released for a low price on the Xbox Live Indie Games marketplace.





RocketCat Games developed a couple of side-scrolling grappling hook titles for the iOS, *Hook Champ* and *Super QuickHook*. The games were well made, but they suffered the same problem as everything else on the platform – trying to move and jump with a touch screen is just a gigantic pain.

With their third game, *Hook Worlds*, they shifted their series into something more appropriate for mobile play – an infinite runner, similar to the likes of *Canabalt*. Your goal is to run, jump, and swing across a randomly generated landscape, surviving as long as you can, until the pace becomes too fast and you die. Swinging is much faster than plain old running, so it's to your advantage to stay airborne as much as possible. Other than making sure you stay in the air, swinging also builds up momentum to crash through obstacles.

There are four different modes, each with different characters, backgrounds, and play mechanics. As Indiana Jones-esque treasure hunter Theodore "Gramps" Hooker, you are being chased through the jungle by a flying monster. If you don't keep up the pace, you'll be toasted. In addition to the hook, there's also a boost jump button, which will rocket you up into the sky, useful for the cases when you hit a wall and have nothing to latch onto. It needs time to charge, however, and you can only do it twice in succession, so it can't be abused too often.

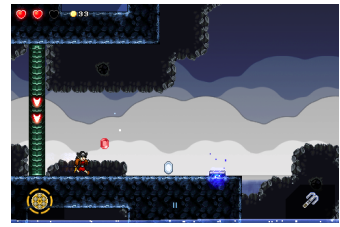
As female bounty hunter Zelle, the level is populated with ghost pirate enemies, and you're given a gun rather than a boost jump. You can take three hits before getting killed, and rather than being scored on the distance traveled like Gramps, you obtain points by grabbing colored gems.

As CyberGnome 202X, you are also being chased, though the main difference between him and Gramps is that you can flip gravity. There are also pits (or, rather, holes in the sky, if you've flipped gravity), and you can fall down them a few times before failing.

There is also a fourth mode, *Hook Champ 1000*, rendered in retro-style graphics. Functionally, it's the same as Gramps' mode, though at a higher difficulty level.

The swinging mechanics, essentially identical to the earlier titles, feel really great, and there's a wide enough variety of modes that keeps things addictive without wearing out their welcome. High scores will give you coins to buy outfits and decorate your grappling hook, but provide no other major bonuses. As typical for these types of mobile games, there are also in-app purchases.

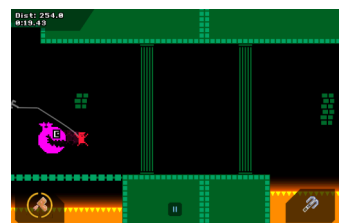
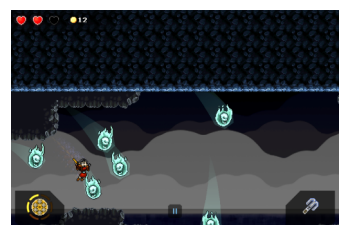
As usual with these type of infinite runners with procedurally generated levels, success often feels like it depends on whether the random generator gives you a stage that isn't too difficult. Still, it's addictive in the same way that all of these types of games are.



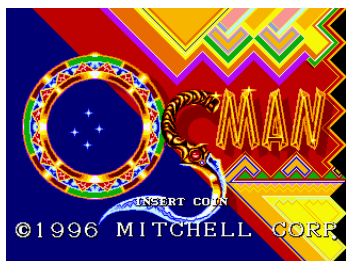
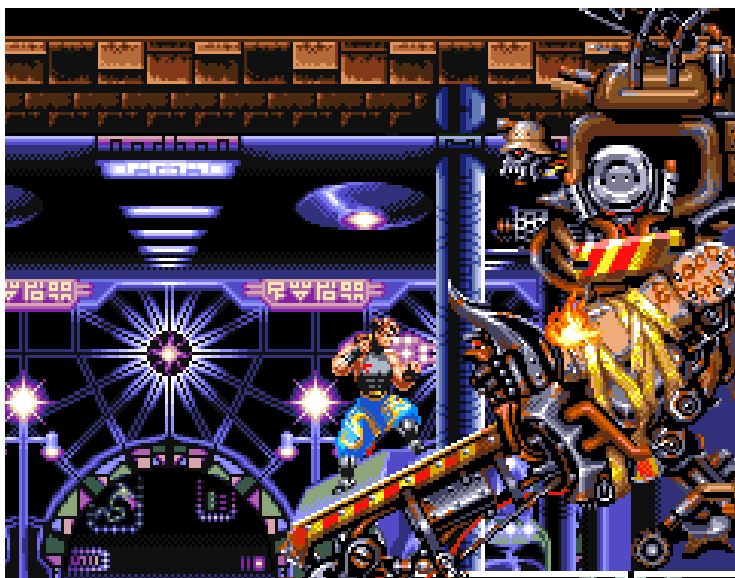
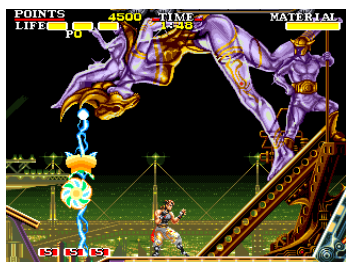
Hook Worlds

Original Release: 2011

Platforms: iOS



Osman



Osman

AKA: Cannon Dancer (JP)
 Original Release: 1996
 Platforms: ARC



Game companies seldom keep all of their founding members on the team. After his tenure at Capcom, *Strider* director Kouichi Yotsui (usually credited as Iyuke) moved on to Mitchell Corporation, where he developed *Osman* (known in Japan as *Cannon Dancer*), one of the most obscure and excellent platformers to be released in arcades.

The game centers around a strong young man known as Osman (named Kirin in *Cannon Dancer*). Not unlike *Strider* Hiryu, he presumably works for some organization that destroys criminals for the protection of the world. The plot is so ridiculous and confusing that it's hard to tell what's going on. Osman's boss, Jack Layzon (who only wears shorts to show off his muscular form in the opening cutscene for no adequately explored reason), assigns Osman to assassinate Abdullah the Slaver, an evil female sorceress who wants to take control of the world. He does a pretty good job of kicking enemy ass for a while, until Jack betrays him for reasons unknown, and then he has to fight his way through all sorts of soldiers and beasts, as well as a creepy goddess statue. Osman seems to have some connection with her, who apparently commands him to kill and... yeah, it's all rather confusing.

Osman is even more colorful than *Strider*, with vibrant shades of various hues. The visual design is excellent, ranging from a fortified

cityscape to a harsh desert, from the high seas to a mysterious forest, and even the city of Prague, all ending with a fierce battle within ominous crimson skies. The character designers were no slouches either, as Osman is very well animated, and the enemies look beautiful, too. Early in the game, there's one soldier trapped between Osman and a pit, and the wuss puts his arms up as he cowardly winces away from the wrath the hero is about to bring to him. Besides soldiers, Osman also has to deal with tigers, statues, robots, and sandworms.

The music is less than spectacular, though. It's not bad, but it just doesn't seem quite adequate enough for this kind of game. The main reason for that is because the background music is rather subdued. Compare it to the tunes of *Strider*, which are practically booming out through the speakers. The instrumentation is pretty weird, too, with one of them sounding like there's a chainsaw going off in the recording studio every few seconds. There's one truly bizarre piece of music, which involves Gregorian Monk-style chanting that often pops up when a giant statue appears.

The fast-paced gameplay is the primary subject of comparison of *Osman* to *Strider*, as the way Osman moves could cause anybody to mistake him for Hiryu's long lost brother. He's able to run down steep slopes extremely quickly, and



climb walls with the greatest of ease. Holding down while pressing the jump button causes him to slide, just like Hiryu. Osman's jump does one thing better than Strider, as he can control himself in mid-air, whereas Hiryu suffers from jumping inertia, where he cannot fly backwards once he jumps forth.

Osman isn't a total rip-off, as he doesn't carry any weapons. Instead, he has toned his body to be a weapon in itself. He mainly uses wind-fast kicks (and mixes a few punches in now and then) to crush his opposition, and can cause robots to explode with his bare legs alone. There's even a slam attack that he can perform on some enemies by pressing the jump button again while he's already in midair.

When all else fails, there's a special attack performed by tapping forward twice and pressing the attack button (*Cannon Dancer* has a third button devoted to the special). He creates multiple clones to obliterate everything on screen a la Joe Musashi from the original *Shinobi*.

Osman can take a maximum of four hits before losing a life, and he receives three special attacks per life. There are power-up containers (gray capsules with a P on them) that contain either a red, green, yellow, or blue power-up. Most of these will restore hit points, but red ones will change the color of Osman's pants and create a shadow duplicate. These doubles stay in place when the

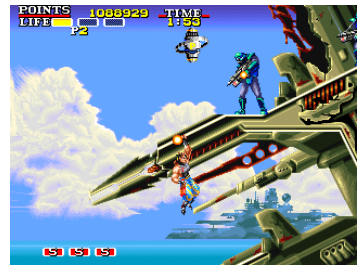


attack button is pressed, and they remain in that location for approximately three seconds, before returning to Osman. Additional red capsules will grant a second shadow duplicate, and then increase your strength.

Unfortunately, despite all these power boosts, the difficulty can be punishing at times, even when not dealing with the bosses. Sometimes the amount of regular enemies can be overwhelming, which especially becomes apparent in the forest level, where jetpack guards swoop about erratically while letting loose with their machine guns. What's worse is that Osman loses a power level each time he is hit.

The most incredible parts of *Osman* are the bosses – there's Gamran, a huge robot armed with a buzzsaw and flamethrowers. Speaking of flame, there's Herio, a man made entirely out of fire who floats about while dumping flames, and has green hands floating about looking to grab Osman.

The next three bosses are fought in random order over the third, fourth, and fifth stages. There's Tianon, the bombshell who can kick as fiercely as Osman and throw him about, not to mention the ability to create explosions. The ridiculously-named Willf looks a bit like Zamza from *Streets of Rage 2* and utilizes his sharp claws to shred Osman, and if that fails, he can always toss the floating platform he rides on. The most dishonorable of the



three is Cannons, who just teleports around the arena while his gigantic helper mech in the background sends various body parts flying to smash the hero.

The difficulty can be really rough at times, but that's essentially nullified by the ability to resurrect right in the same spot after dying, not unlike *Strider 2*. As a matter of fact, this game suffers from the same difficulty balance issues as the official *Strider* sequel, where the challenge doesn't matter much to those who just want to finish the game, while those who want to beat it on one continue will find it very hard.

There are actually a few points in the game that require you to go back to a certain point after dying, and the last level actually disallows continuing on the spot, but Osman's extremely strong special attack is the one thing that ruins the challenge of the boss battles. Just one can slap off 80% of a big baddie's life, and Osman gets three of them per life. He almost becomes dependent on them to get through the final level, which makes the last battles seem anticlimactic.

The broken challenge curve shouldn't put anyone off, though. *Osman* definitely deserves more recognition than it has ever received, which isn't much, considering that the arcade machine is incredibly rare, and unfortunately no home ports have ever been released, leaving this a MAME-only title.



Run Saber



Run Saber

Original Release: 1993

Platforms: SNES



A little known platformer for the Super Nintendo known as *Run Saber* went under the radar when it was released. It was developed by Horisoft and published by Atlus. *Run Saber* plays a lot like the *Strider* games, which probably explains why it's such a fine game.

In *Run Saber*, crazy scientist Gordon Bruford mutates himself with a big load of radiation and creates an army of mutant minions. Other scientists team up for the *Run Saber* project in order to create super soldiers to foil Bruford's plan for world domination. One of the Sabers, Kurtz, becomes defective and runs off in a state of homicidal insanity. The remaining Sabers, Allen and Sheena, are sent into the fray to stop Kurtz and Bruford.

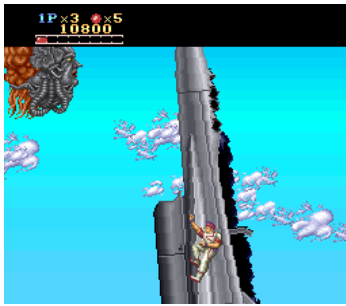
The flow and control of the gameplay is very similar to the first *Strider* game. As a matter of fact, not unlike Hiryu's arcade debut, *Run Saber* pits the player against five stages of action. They're all a bit longer than the average *Strider* stage, and the game does not end as quickly. The first level is fought at the Taj Base, a military stronghold overrun by Bruford's mutants. Tong City is next on the map, a futuristic-type Chinatown area that sets the stage for the first battle against Kurtz. Taking a break from the industrial overtones of the game, stage three is set in Jod Valley, where the wrath of nature (and the occasional giant missile) ravages the heroes. After that is the oddly-titled Grey Fac, where

falling gears and conveyor belts await, as well as a rematch with Kurtz. Finally, the player stumbles upon the mysterious hideout of Bruford, which is a very typical Giger-esque final stage that wouldn't look too out of place in a *Contra* game.

The graphics are reasonably good for a Super Nintendo game released around the middle of its lifespan. The use of colors in this game are a bit dull at times, but that compliments the atmosphere, which is that of a bleak, post-apocalyptic, industrialized Earth.

A fine example of Mode 7 is displayed in the first boss fight, which takes place on a stealth jet that has baddies popping out of it. In the middle of the battle, it flies upside down, forcing the heroes to hold on for dear life. After destroying the last beast on the jet, it twists around in the background before exploding. Sadly, Mode 7 is only displayed here, on the third stage boss, and the map sequences in between stages. The graphics overall could have been better, but they're good enough for the SNES.

The sound isn't too shabby, either, even though like the graphics, it's nothing special. The first level music sets the tone for the rest of the game with a fast-paced beat that gears up for butt kicking. Another great tune plays in Jod Valley, which is a primal rhythm that suits the jungle atmosphere given by the stage design. The sound effects are

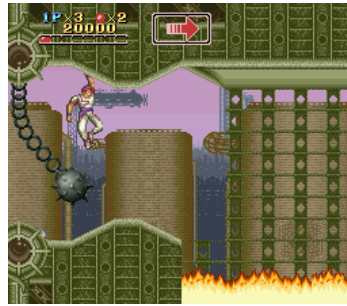


pretty good too, with typical slashes and explosions, as well as the yells and growls from enemies.

The gameplay is a dead ringer for the arcade *Strider*, but it improves on the original in several areas. For starters, there's the choice to play as either Allen (who has the horizontally-slashing Thunder Saber), or Sheena (who has the vertically-slicing Ice Saber). They both walk at a decent pace and can run by tapping the control pad twice quickly. They slash with their sabers as fast as the attack button is tapped, and they can jump fairly high. They can even climb on walls and ceilings, and by pressing a separate button, can slide along the ground.

Allen and Sheena have a few abilities that the Strider does not possess, such as a rolling jump that surrounds them with energy in order to take out aerial enemies, a diving kick which allows them to bounce off the heads of antagonists, and a separate button can destroy everything on-screen with a special attack. Allen sends out a menacing green dragon to rove the screen and consume all enemies, and Sheena sends out a blizzard of painful ice crystals.

Since there's two Sabers for play, that also means two-player simultaneous action! Any *Contra* fan should give *Run Saber* a try for the ability to tear through



Bruford's army with both Allen and Sheena at the same time. The game's challenge remains more or less the same, nor matter if it's one player or two. *Run Saber* is not overly difficult, either way.

There are a few moments of frustration (such as the aforementioned falling gears in Grey Fac) and continues are limited, but on normal difficulty settings, it's never overwhelming. While they start out only able to take three hits, the Sabers can extend their life bar by two points (up to a maximum of eight) with blue medkits, and restore one unit of life with white ones. Blue saber powerups increase the range and power of their weapons, pink spheres give them an additional special attack, and icons of their heads give them a bonus life.

The level designs are good; full of enemies, traps, tricks, twists, and turns. Above all else, the bosses of *Run Saber* are the dominant feature of the game – every stage has at least three of them. One starts out as a mere hawk, which is a pest to get rid of but can be easily taken out. However, after defeating the bird, its severed head remains on screen, as a robotic body snatches it and flies away. Later, the hawk's head returns, grafted onto the robotic body, and now the heroes have to deal with a kung-fu fighting robot-hawk-bird-cyborg



thingy. Allen's right there on the box art doing battle with the bionic bird. Some bosses are more challenging than others, but there are many innovative designs among the rogues gallery. Sadly, the powerful special attacks can make things a bit too easy at times, and the final battle against Bruford, as awesome as he looks, is a bit disappointing.

Despite the shortcomings in the challenge department, *Run Saber* is nonetheless a solid action title. It certainly makes a better *Strider* game than *Strider Returns*.

When *Run Saber* was originally revealed, it showed one of the bosses as a large reclining woman. She was changed into a zombie monster in the final release, purportedly at the request of Nintendo of America. The game was, oddly enough, not released in Japan, so there is no uncensored version available. There is a ROM available marked "Beta", but does not contain the original boss.



Screenshot Comparisons



Release



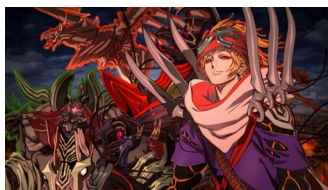
Beta

Moon Diver



Moon Diver

Original Release: 2011
Platforms: PS3, 360



The *Strider* franchise has gone through long periods of dormancy. There were 10 years between the original arcade game and the 1999 *Strider 2* arcade game, and 15 between that and the 2014 *Strider* from Double Helix. In the period between the second and third games, Square-Enix released *Moon Diver*, a digital download for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. It's a multiplayer take on *Strider*, directed by Kouichi Yotsui, the man behind the original arcade game. It was developed by the now-defunct feelplus, who also worked on the RPG *Lost Odyssey*, the large scale action game *Ninety Nine Nights II*, and the subpar *Mindjack*. The working title of this game was *Necromachina*.

The story is basically incomprehensible, at least as it's presented in-game. In the 22nd century, a young boy named Faust has ravaged the earth with animated machines, and will not stop until humanity is destroyed. Four trained soldiers, named as Moondivers, assemble to put an end to his madness. Seyfert is a Swedish high school student; Hitori is a Japanese girl with fairy blood; Tolby is a young boy from Naples; and Ourion, a young man from Mozambique. (Some downloadable content enables a fifth character, Silence, who is initially an enemy.) Each are color coded for your convenience.

When you first start, the game certainly feels like a classic *Strider*.

The heroes run and act the same way, with the ability to scale walls and climb on ceilings. The quick sword slashes feel a lot like *Strider 2* as well. The first few minutes of the game feel very satisfying.

However, there are a handful of oddities that seem jarring. Even though the visuals are rather drab, the game only runs at 30 FPS, so it's missing the sense of speed that typifies the *Strider* games. For some reason, despite being a 2.5D game, you can only move your character with the analog stick, as the digital pad is used for selecting special attacks. Standard abilities like ducking and sliding are mapped to the shoulder triggers, instead of pressing Down, which will instead drop you below the floor.

The cracks begin to show the more you play. The levels are huge, but they're also pretty boring, completely lacking the pacing found in *Strider* titles (though there are a few direct nods to the arcade *Strider*, like a series of lasers that shoot in the exact pattern as the turrets near the end of the first stage, right before you fight the first boss). The mid-bosses, when they appear, are reused several times throughout the game. There are tons of enemies that spawn regularly, usually a dozen at time or more. You can run past most of them, except for the cases when you're trapped between barriers and need to kill all of the enemies before you can proceed.



Outside of these cases, the only other reason to kill enemies is to get experience points. When you earn enough, you gain a level, which then allows you to enhance your attack strength, health, or special power gauge. While some enemies can be killed by a single sword strike, many more of them require several hits before dying. You have a charge attack, which is roughly similar in size to Strider's sword in the original arcade game. Taking down every foe with a single sword slice is satisfying, but you also get less experience when doing this, thereby promoting the more tedious method of enemy disposal.

The leveling system is supposed to reward you for repeatedly playing the game, but due to the unbalanced damage output, it implies that grinding is mandatory. However, since the enhancements are so incremental, it's hard to tell that they make a difference anyway, at least in the short run. Obviously a level 90 character can stroll through areas where a level 1 character won't, but it takes many, many hours to get a character that strong.

Hidden throughout each level are orbs that grant skills called MoonSault Combinations. You can equip four at once and can switch between them on the fly, and they include a variety of attack and defensive capabilities. Many levels have branching paths, and there's no backtracking once you move to a new area, so you'll need to play a level a couple times in order to find everything.

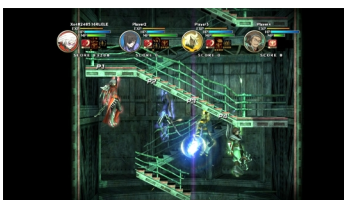
Even more aggravating is that certain enemies will detonate in a gigantic cross-shaped explosion. It will take out surrounding enemies, which is great, but it will also damage your character, which isn't. It's not always possible to dodge, and it's consistently annoying to have to worry about leaping out of the way.

Due to the vague animation and cluttered screen, it's nearly impossible to tell when an enemy is actually damaging you. Your health meter is technically very small, but most regular enemies aren't too powerful, and health restoratives are extremely common, anyway. However, many bosses and certain enemies, like the laser cannons, cause such a

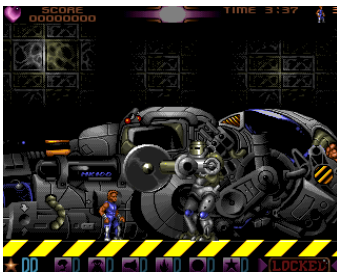


high level of damage that they can kill you almost immediately. You only have a single life and there are no checkpoints, so getting killed means being sent back to the beginning to restart the tedious slog.

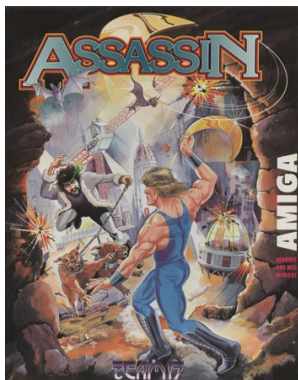
In short, *Moon Diver* is basically *Strider* with grinding and bad level design. Many of the issues seem to stem from the fact that the game assumes you'll be playing in multiplayer, where the force of the multiple player characters can flat out overwhelm everything, even though it turns the screen into even more of a chaotic mess, especially if one player lags behind the rest. Moreover, other players can resurrect fallen characters, who also auto-resurrect after a short period of time, giving them more of a fighting chance. Single player mode is a waste of time, though, especially since the online community is gone so many years after its release. It does at least support local co-op, but then you need to grind up all of the characters individually. Due to the time investment required, it's not remotely worth it.



Assassin



Assassin
Original Release: 1992
Platforms: AMI



British development studio Team 17 made a name for themselves developing Japanese-style games for the Amiga. Their titles included works like *Project-X* and *Apidya* (both inspired by shooters like *Gradius*), as well as *Body Blows*, which was a decent *Street Fighter II* clone. *Assassin* was their attempt to create their own *Strider*.

The main character seems based on the rendition of Strider found on the European and American cover artwork, rather than his Japanese design – that is to say, with a blue suit with blond hair. He’s animated similarly, right down to the way he jumps, and can climb walls and grapple onto ceilings. Beyond that, however, the similarities end.

For starters, the game is fast – almost too fast. The hero runs and builds up speed almost like Sonic the Hedgehog, which means you’ll constantly be running straight into enemies unless you trudge along at a deliberate pace. Instead of wielding an equivalent to Strider’s iconic sword, you have an incredibly weak boomerang. Even

the easiest enemies take a few hits to kill with it, and the range is absolutely terrible. The stages are expansive and rather boring. The visuals are typically dull, with the exception of some of the bosses. The main theme song, composed by Allister Brimble, is decent, but is only played on the title screen. During the game, the audio is only comprised of sound effects.

In 1994, Team 17 released *Assassin: Special Edition*. This version has a redesigned hero with a bionic look, which also replaces the lousy boomerang with a long range gun. This alone makes the game much easier, and at least somewhat more playable. It also removes the first level entirely.

Even though *Assassin* was well regarded by Amiga fans at the time of its release, it’s definitely a poor counterpart to Capcom’s arcade *Strider*. From a technical standpoint, it is substantially better than Tiertex’s *Strider* games – it certainly looks nicer and runs better – even though the frustratingly high level of difficulty makes it even less playable.



Famicom Ports of Western Computer Games

Japanese Famicom Ports of Western Computer Games

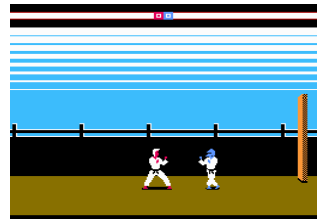
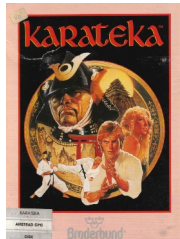
The NES saw many ports of games that originated on Western home computers. Many were developed in Japan, like Pony Canyon's *Ultima III* and *IV* and Kemco's *Shadowgate*, *Deja Vu*, and *Uninvited*. However, there are a number of cases where Western computer games were ported to the Famicom, but then never released back in their home territory on the NES. These are those games



English Title: **Knight Lore**

Japanese Title: **Knight Lore**

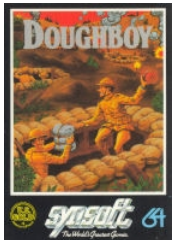
Ultimate Play the Game's revolutionary 1984 isometric adventure game appeared on the FDS courtesy of Jaleco in 1986. It's much more faithful than their "port" of *Monty on the Run*. The game stars Sabreman, an explorer who changes into a werewolf whenever the moon sets. The mechanics are the same, though the stage design is completely different, and Sabreman has been redesigned to look like a little kid.



English Title: **Karateka**

Japanese Title: **Karateka**

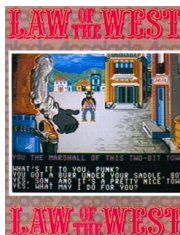
The predecessor to *Prince of Persia*, Jordan Mechner first learned the ropes of rotoscoped animation with this kung fu movie-inspired fighter. The Famicom port was published shortly after, handled by Soft Pro. It's pretty decent, too, better than the Atari 7800 version released a few years later, making it the best console port. A Game Boy version was also released exclusively in Japan under the name *Master Karateka*.



English Title: **Doughboy**

Japanese Title: **Dough Boy**

This military action game originated on the Commodore 64, developed by Ken Coates and published by Synapse Software. Kemco converted the game to the Famicom in 1985, making it one of their first games on the platform. It's shakily programmed, plus the levels are slightly larger, causing the screen to scroll, but otherwise, it's a relatively faithful conversion.

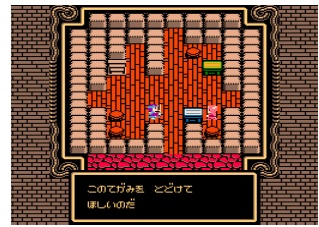
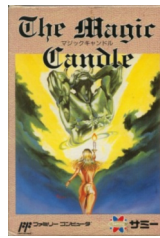
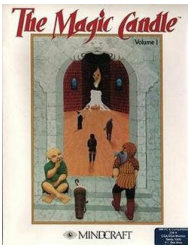


English Title: **Law of the West**

Japanese Title: **Law of the West**

Developed by Accolade, this Commodore 64 and Apple II game put you in the role of a Wild West-era sheriff, featuring both dialogue trees and shooting gallery action. The game was ported to the Famicom (and PC88) for the Japanese audience and published by Pony Canyon. It's very similar, though the Famicom version features more shooting elements.

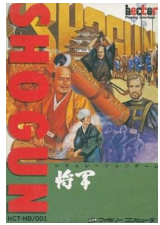
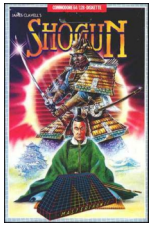
Famicom Ports of Western Computer Games



English Title: **The Magic Candle**

Japanese Title: **The Magic Candle**

Most of the computer RPG Nintendo ports – *Wizardry*, *Ultima III* and *IV*, *Might and Magic*, *The Bard's Tale*, *Times of Lore* – received English releases. Mindcraft's *The Magic Candle* was one of the few that stayed in Japan. The original release was very similar to *Ultima*; meanwhile, the FC version is completely, 100% different, and is instead a *Dragon Quest* clone. The only possible thing they share beyond the very basic concept of a magic candle is a day/night cycle, though the FC version is missing the hard time limit.



English Title: **Shogun**

Japanese Title: **Shogun**

Very loosely based on the 1975 James Clavell novel, this is an unusual action-adventure hybrid from Virgin, where you play as one of 40 characters in order to obtain the rank of Shogun. You do this by persuading people to join you, finding items, and beating up opponents. The original computer version is a side-scrolling game which frankly looks bizarre, as you walk around screens and through the sky. The Famicom version, published by Hect, is a completely different game remodeled into an overhead RPG, using the same concepts.



English Title: **Maniac Mansion**

Japanese Title: **Maniac Mansion**

LucasArts' classic adventure game *Maniac Mansion* was released on the NES in 1991...but a totally different, earlier version of the game was released in Japan about a year before, published by Jaleco. It's a much worse port, with strange, super deformed character graphics, a clumsy interface, and incredibly long passwords. Meanwhile, the American version looks, plays, and sounds better than the computer versions, has battery save backup, and would be the definitive release, if it weren't for the censorship.

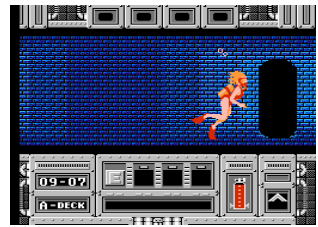


English Title: **Shufflepuck Cafe**

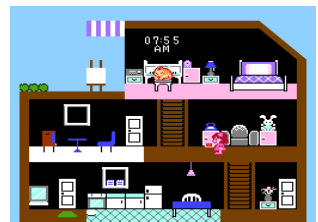
Japanese Title: **Shufflepuck Cafe**

This is a rather unique air hockey game that takes place in an intergalactic bar, as you face off against different aliens. It was originally published by Broderbund in 1989 for the Macintosh and was ported to several home computers, then brought to Japan and converted to several of their platforms, including the Famicom. It was published by Pony Canyon and is a very faithful port, outside of the slightly goofy redrawn graphics. The front artwork cover is even identical.

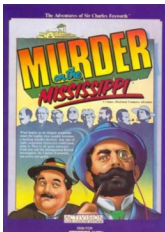
Famicom Ports of Western Computer Games



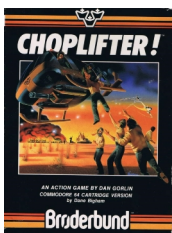
English Title: **Titanic: The Recovery Mission** Japanese Title: **Titanic Mystery: Ao no Senritsu**
 Originally developed by Oxford Digital Enterprises, this game casts you as the head of the Titanic Salvage Company. Part of the game involves managing the company by talking with investors and giving interviews. The other involves scavenging the sunken Titanic. In the C64 version, the whole game is viewed from a first person perspective, and the scavenging is done by a robot. The main difference of the FDS version, published by Gakken, is that the viewpoint is changed to third person, and you control a female diver in both segments.



English Title: **Little Computer People** Japanese Title: **Appletown Monogatari**
 Activision's *Little Computer People* was first released in 1985. It's viewed as the predecessor to *The Sims* and other life simulations, in that you have some vague control over an AI-controlled human doing various activities in their house. The human is always male, but is different in each copy. The FDS version, published by DOG/Square, maintains the same basic concept, but changes the man into a young girl (who's the same in all copies) and also changes the dog into a cat. It's also more limited due to the controller interface.

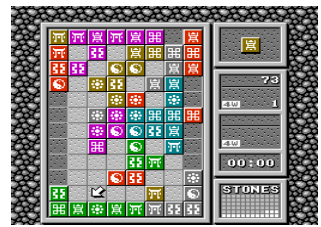
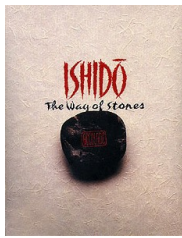


English Title: **Murder on the Mississippi** Japanese Title: **Mississippi Satsujin Jiken**
 The Famicom was inundated with murder mystery games thanks to the success of Yuji Hori's *Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken*. Most of these clones were home grown in Japan, but Jaleco licensed Activision's Commodore 64 adventure game *Murder on the Mississippi* for the Famicom and MSX2. In the initial release, the characters were clearly patterned after Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, though were named Sir Charles Foxworth and Regis. The Famicom version makes their relation more explicit by renaming Regis to Watson.



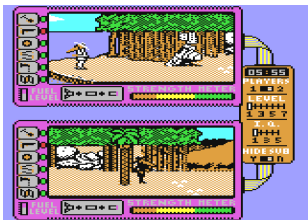
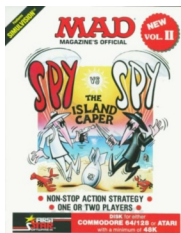
English Title: **Choplifter** Japanese Title: **Choplifter**
 Dan Gorlin's 1982 Apple II game about a rescue helicopter is probably most well known amongst retro gamers for its ports to Sega, initially released in the arcades, then shortly after for the Sega Master System. Jaleco also ported the game to the Famicom, which in turn was based off Sega's arcade game rather than the computer original. This version is terrible, but does feature a level that was cut from the SMS release. The FC version was not released in America; alternatively, the SMS version was not released in Japan.

Famicom Ports of Western Computer Games



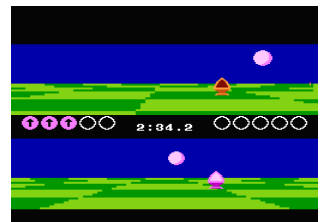
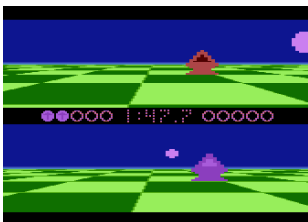
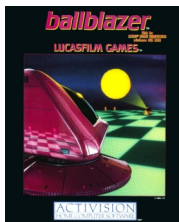
English Title: **Ishido: The Way of Stones** Japanese Title: **Ishido**

This puzzle game was originally published by Accolade and designed by Michael Feinberg (Amiga version pictured). In Japan, it was ported to the Famicom Disk System by a company called Hiro. Other than a few unique music tracks, it's not really all that different from the other versions. It does not appear to have received a boxed release, and may have only been released at copiers. There were also ports to the PC88/98 (box art pictured), MSX, and X68000. The Game Boy and Genesis versions were released in North America.



English Title: **Spy vs. Spy: The Island Caper** Japanese Title: **Nangoku Shirei! Spy vs. Spy**

Based on the Mad Magazine comic book strips, *Spy vs. Spy* is a competitive two player split screen game where each player tries to outwit the other by setting traps around the level. Originally released on the Commodore 64, it was ported to the Sega Master System and Nintendo Entertainment System, by Sega and Kemco respectively. The sequel, which changes locales to a tropical island, was ported to the Famicom, again by Kemco. It's nicer looking than the C64 and Atari 8-bit versions, but less so than the Amiga version.



English Title: **Ballblazer** Japanese Title: **Ballblazer**

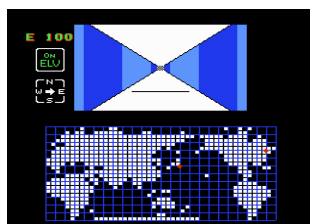
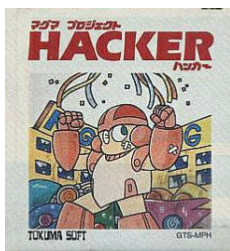
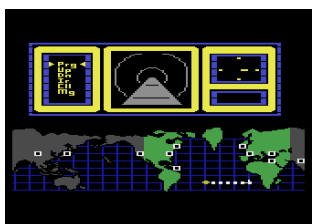
One of the first games by Lucasfilm, developed in 1984 and published by Activision on many platforms. *Ballblazer* is a first person sports game where two droids compete to grab a floating ball and score goals. The 3D checkerboard landscapes were a huge technical achievement for the time. The Famicom release was ported by Pony Canyon. The field is more pixellated and the sprite movement is a little choppy compared to the Atari 8-bit or Commodore 64 versions, but it's better than the Apple II or ZX Spectrum ports.



English Title: **Dragon Wars** Japanese Title: **Dragon Wars**

Dragon Wars is a first person dungeon crawler and the follow-up to *The Bard's Tale* series, developed and published by Interplay. It was ported to the Famicom by Kemco, with a style similar to their adventure game ports like *Shadowgate*. Here, the battle sequences take place on a separate screen, with an interface similar to *Dragon Quest*. There's a new intro sequence, plus a new soundtrack, though the character animation effect is odd. A decent port overall. It was planned for localization – an incomplete English ROM was found.

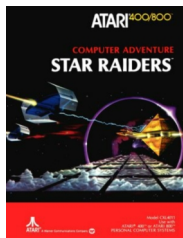
Famicom Ports of Western Computer Games



English Title: **Hacker**

Japanese Title: **Magma Project: Hacker**

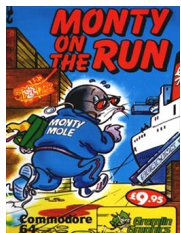
Activision's 1985 game *Hacker* begins at the log-in prompt to a security system of a major company. After decoding the password, you control a robot that travels through tunnels under the Earth, uncovering evidence to take down the evil Magma Ltd. In the FDS version, released by Tokuma Shoten, the "hacking" is gone due to the lack of a keyboard, instead replaced by RPG elements. The robot, which originally looked like a trash can with a camera and wheels, is much cuter. You can explore towns, where you can talk and buy things; you still explore underground tunnels, but there are now other robots to fight in turn based combat.



English Title: **Star Raiders**

Japanese Title: **Star Luster**

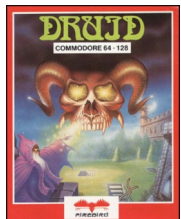
This is an odd case. Namco's *Star Luster* is very, very clearly a clone of Atari's 1979 strategy/space-combat shooter *Star Raiders*. There doesn't appear to have been any cases where this game was localized for the Japanese market. However, Atari and Namco had a close relationship in the 80s, with Atari distributing many of their arcade games like *Rolling Thunder*, and even publishing some of their titles on the NES under the Tengen label. The Japanese Wikipedia entry for the game indicates that *Star Luster* was based off plans provided to Namco by Atari, so it may be some kind of quasi-official port.



English Title: **Monty on the Run**

Japanese Title: **Monty no Doki Doki Daisassou**

Gremlin Graphics' *Monty on the Run* was changed to a completely different game by Jaleco for the FDS port. Monty has been altered from a mole into a scruffy human in a jail uniform, and the setting has been changed from a house to a series of temples. In the C64 game, you pick a number of items from "Monty's Freedom Kit", some of which are required to beat the game. In the FDS game, this determines your weapon – in the original game, you couldn't attack at all. Small things are similar, like the protagonist's spinning jump. The only surviving relation is the theme song on the title screen, which sounds awful.



English Title: **Druid**

Japanese Title: **Druid: Kyoufu no Tobira**

Developed by Firebird Software, *Druid* is an overhead action game with light RPG elements. You control a druid as you walk around, look for spells and keys, and delve to the next level. The FDS version, published by Jaleco, is fairly faithful. It adds a "Destroy" gauge that restores your health when you kill enough foes. Some item locations are switched, and there is an added final boss battle. The Japanese subtitle means "The Door of Terror". There was also an inferior MSX2 port by Dexter Soft.

80 Japanese PlayStation Games



King of Fighters Kyo

SNK's fighting games have an enormous amount of backstory, so an RPG based on them makes sense. In this PS1 exclusive game, you control Kyo Kusanagi as he researches his family's connection to the Orochi power. Conversation options help build relationships with other characters. Battles are fought by reducing the basics of the one-on-one fighting system to a turn-based, menu-driven system, which is neat in theory but slow and boring in practice.



Cooking Fighter Hao

Developed by Nippon Ichi, this is a competitive cooking game, probably inspired by *Iron Chef*. This takes the form of an overhead 2D action game in a small arena, where you track down ingredients (including animals), beat them senseless, then decide how to cook them. Your opponent is doing the same thing, and you can attack each other. The concept is hilarious, as is the over-the-top shounen anime aesthetic, but the game itself is limited and repetitive.



Speed Power Gunbike

An anime inspired mecha-racing game from Inticreates (*Mega Man Zero*) featuring a transforming robot. "Bike" mode is good for speed, "Rally" mode is for maneuverability, and "Robot" is for attacking and smashing into stuff. Many race tracks aren't entirely linear, but run out of "Anergy" and it's all over. A great idea with a cool style, marred by some incredibly difficult controls and camera issues.



Kaisoku Tenshi: The Rapid Angel

This "high tension comical action game" from Techno Solei is a hybrid beat-em-up/platformer. The characters are very quick and can leap great lengths, as you're even graded on air time, with the screen scaling in and out appropriately. There are three heroines at the outset, though the villains are unlockable. Dialogue choices also alter the course of the game. It feels rough around the edges, particularly due to the art, but that adds to the charm.



Gaia Seed

A 2D horizontal shooter from Techno Solei with some cool sprite rotational and scaling effects. Also one of the few shooters to feature a regenerating health bar. Solid, but outside of some cool visual setpieces and an excellent Zuntata-esque soundtrack, it's very run of the mill. Expensive, but digital versions are available.



Slap Happy Rhythm Busters

Imagine *Jet Set Radio* as a fighting game, and you'd have this hip, offbeat title. Through the visuals are bright, cel-shaded 3D, it's a 2D fighter, with tight, snappy controls. Super moves are executed by whacking an opponent and playing a brief rhythm mini-game, though the soundtrack is disappointingly bland. Developed by Polygon Magic, they made a few other fighters (*Vs.*, *Lord of Fist*), but this is by far their best.



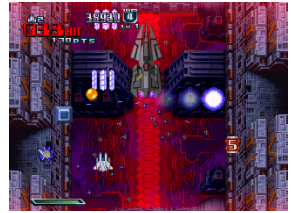
Little Princess

In Nippon Ichi's musical RPG *Rhapsody*, young girl Cornett found her knight-in-shining-armor and became queen of the Marl Kingdom. In this sequel, you control her 12-year old daughter Kururu as she adventures beyond the castle walls. The grid-based battle system of the original is replaced with something more straightforward. It's a very easy game that seem like it's targeted at kids, with plenty of charming, catchy songs. A +1 re-release includes a bonus disc.



Zanic x Zanic

The last shooter to come from veteran computer game outfit Compile, this is an update of *Zanic*, one of their first shooters. The main draw is the huge number of unique weapons, which are different across all three ships, as well as the "AI" which adjusts enemy patterns based on your equipment. A bit plain compared to the company's other shooters, like *Spriggan* or *MUSHA*, but decent. Includes ports of the original FC/NES *Zanic*.

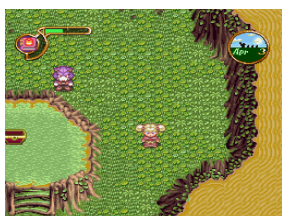


80 Japanese PlayStation Games



Community Pom

A race of adorable rabbit-like creatures known as Poms have descended upon the world, but their presence is met with hostility. A pig-tailed girl named Luru is tasked with creating a community to protect them. Most of the game is an action-RPG/sim hybrid, where you explore dungeons, find items, and rescue Poms. Then you can strengthen them, build their village, and defend against enemy attacks. The 2D graphics are simple, but it's a cute game.



Neko Zamurai

The title means "cat samurai". This adventure game takes place in feudal Japan, where anthropomorphic felines and humans coexist. The game is spent exploring the city of Edo and reading dialogue, with the occasional fight displayed with prerendered videos and fought via quicktime inputs. Over 100 NPCs with dozens of branching stories and an in-game calendar spread over three CDs. Developed by Hifumi Kono, who also made the first two *Clock Tower* games.



Milano no Arubaito Collection

A series of minigames featuring a cutesy girl in a small town. You take on assorted jobs (the best: milking flying cows), then use the money to purchase stuff for your house. After work, you can also do chores, read books, and lounge around. Simple, but soothing. Developed by Westone, the 2D animation is gorgeous, and it begs one to wonder what a *Wonder Boy/Monster World* title would've looked like on 32-bit systems.



Segare Ijiri

In this surreal title, you control a walking arrow on a quest to find love. It's less of a game and more of a gag simulator, as you stumble around environments, play word games, and see what inexplicable stuff gets thrown at you. (Why is the arrow's mother a giraffe head?) It was designed to be intentionally terrible – its commercial catch copy was "The Worst Gift". Nonetheless it was a success and received a PS2 sequel.



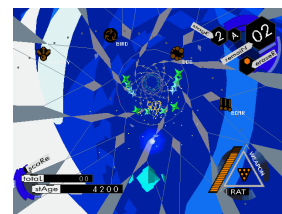
Planet Laika

An RPG where you join a squad of dog-people on an expedition to Mars. The hero has multiple personalities, which aids in getting past various roadblocks. Named after the first dog in space, it fashions itself as a serious "psycho drama", with lots of surreal flashbacks, but has an oddball B-movie feel to it. Combat is sparse, and involves reflecting bouncing energy bullets back your opponent. Developed by Quintet (*Actraiser*) and Zeque.



Is: Internal Section

A tube shooter in the vein of *Tempest*, constructed via colorful, flat shaded polygons and accompanied by techno music. You have 12 weapons based on an animal from the Chinese zodiac, each suitable for specific enemy patterns. It's simple, but the real delight lay in its dizzying, entrancing visuals. As such, it's often regarded as the spiritual predecessor to *Rez*. Levels are generated by the music, and you can use your own CDs.



Love and Destroy

Inspired by *Evangelion*, you control a mecha in large scale battles against bizarre creatures, all while blowing up the scenery. You can choose one of three female companions called Q-TRONS, who command the mechas and advise you during battle. There are some dating sim elements where you can develop a relationship with them. As a "love action" game, neither aspect fully satisfies. Full of cutscenes, with designs by artist Katsura Masazaku (*Video Girl Ai*).



Hokuto no Ken – Seikimatsu Kyuuseishu Densetsu

Fist of the North Star is the legendary combination of *Mad Max* meets Bruce Lee. Most of the tie-ins games are terrible, but this PS1 brawler is one of the few exceptions, which retells the main story arc, rendered via the in-game 3D engine and using the anime voice actors. Outside of the cutscenes, it's a simplistic beat-em-up, but its controls are snappy. Includes a bonus mode which lets you alter the dialogue of the cutscenes with any other character's lines.



80 Japanese PlayStation Games



Sexy Parodius

The ultimate *Parodius* game, this title features 16 playable characters, including series mainstays like flying penguins and angelic pigs. Don't let you name fool you – it's not particularly adult, just a bit cheesecake in parts. Each stage has a goal, and success or failure will send you on different paths to the finale, with multiple endings. Rarely is a shooter this full of energy, with bouncy level designs, goofy bosses and impossibly peppy music.



Jikkyo Oshaberi Parodius

A conversion of a Super Famicom game, this *Parodius* title, the fourth in the series, features the voice of famed seiyuu Jouji Yanami, who gives running commentary on the action. Also features levels based on other Konami properties, including *Ganbare Goemon*, *Tokimeki Memorial*, and *Lethal Enforcers*. The graphics and music are slightly improved over the 16-bit original, with changes in the stage designs. The PS1 version includes brief stages with polygonal enemies.



Gradius Gaiden

Released after the third *Gradius* game but before the fourth, this 32-bit installment is the ultimate culmination of the series, with beautiful 2D graphics, a fantastic soundtrack, two-player simultaneous play and some excellent levels. The standouts are the snowstorm level, complete with aurora borealis and a gigantic snow worm, the spinning laser spewing Moai head chamber, and the stage dismantled by a black hole. Released on the *Gradius Collection* for the PSP.



Panzer Bandit

This 2D brawler from Fill In Cafe is very heavily inspired by Treasure's *Guardian Heroes*, right down to the plane switching mechanics. Even though it lacks that title's RPG elements and massive multiplayer tournaments, its fighting mechanics are just as enjoyably punchy. It never floods the screen with enemies in the same way, either. The music is great, and both the spritework and the 3D backgrounds are arguably better than its inspiration.



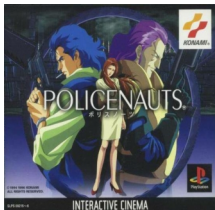
Gunner's Heaven

Developed by Media Vision, this early 2D action game is patterned heavily after Treasure's *Gunstar Heroes*, with fast action, memorable boss fights, and lots of explosions. It offers two heroes – Axel Sonics and Ruka Hetfield – with four unique weapons each, and also gives them a grappling hook. Unfortunately your weapons lose strength if you don't grab power crystals quickly enough. Otherwise, a great game. Released in Europe as *Rapid Reload*.



Crime Crackers

One of the few first person shooters to be developed in Japan, *Crime Crackers* lets you switch between three characters, each with different weapons. However, the level design is extremely simplistic, with narrow corridors and large angular rooms that look embarrassing next to *Wolfenstein 3D*. Furthermore, you need to stop walking before you can shoot. With the limited ammunition, it makes the experience frustrating. The sequel is slightly improved.



Policenauts

An adventure game by Hideo Kojima, this follow-up to *Snatcher* borrows its heroes from *Lethal Weapon*, then sends them into a space station named Beyond Coast to investigate a huge conspiracy. Contains the extraordinary amount of sci-fi world building that Kojima is known for, but the story lacks the emotional hooks that made *Snatcher* so compelling. Sadly ignored by Konami, the English fan translation is one of the best of its type.



Baroque

A first person action-RPG dungeon crawler where you explore the randomly generated levels of the freakish Nerve Tower. The imagery is a combination of the post apocalyptic religious iconography of *Shin Megami Tensei* with the nightmarish grittiness of *Silent Hill*. Clumsy, but the moody industrial electronic soundtrack is top tier. A remake was released on the Wii and PS2 which changes to a third person perspective, but the music is totally different (and worse).

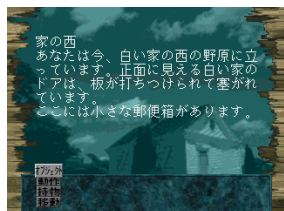


80 Japanese PlayStation Games



"Butagee" de lin Janai?

A comical take on the ever-popular horse racing sims (the title means "Is a 'Pig Game' Okay?"), here you raise a pig by training them, feeding them, and making them listen to the radio. Then, you send them off to the racetrack, as you watch them compete against other colorful swine. A simple simulation, but the wacky cast of pigs – particularly the smoking one with the sunglasses and the one who looks like an accountant – is fairly amusing.



Zork I: The Great Underground Empire

The first installment of Infocom's seminal text adventure is given an overhaul with this port. Without a keyboard, you need to construct (Japanese) sentences out of assorted verbs and nouns. The visuals are minimalist, with text over darkened graphics, similar to Chunsoft's sound novels. The big plus is a soundtrack from Yuzo Koshiro. Feels cheap that it's missing the subsequent *Zorks*, but the more modern *Return to Zork* did receive a PS1 release in Japan.



Real Bout Garou Densetsu Special: Dominated Mind

A revised port of the Neo Geo 2D fighter *Real Bout Fatal Fury Special*, this version removes the plane-switching mechanics for tighter matches, and adds two extra characters: the pilot, Alfred and *Clockwork Orange*-inspired boss, White. There's also a new animated intro, and a 2nd bonus disc includes a wealth of supplementary material. Outside of the load times, this is the best of the classic *Fatal Fury* series, until *Mark of the Wolves* was released.



Lightning Legend: Daigo no Daibouken

Konami created a number of versus fighters – *Martial Champions*, *Battle Tryst*, *Fighting Bujitsu* and *Kensei: Sacred Fist* – but none of them were really successful. *Lightning Legend* was their first attempt at a 3D fighter, released exclusively for the PS1. The only thing that separates it from others is its cutesy, lighthearted cast, including a purple haired, magic wielding female elf, a ninja named Adolf, and a gigantic, rotund, bunny rabbit. Fluffy but forgettable.



Gungage

In this 3D sci-fi action game, you control soldier Wakle Slade through nine levels, killing bugs and picking hidden flowers. There are three other playable characters, though they need to be unlocked. Like most 3D games before the advent of dual analog, the controls are very clumsy, though not insurmountable, thanks to a generous lock-on. The music is provided by *Castlevania* contributors Michiru Yamane and Sota Fujimori. Localized in English in Europe.



Cyberorg

A 3D action game published by Squaresoft and developed by Fuzzybox, you control three warriors exploring an infested spaceship. The stages are set up with tight corridors leading into larger rooms. The camera controls are difficult to work with, and the level designs grow repetitive quickly. The character designs channel American comic books, and much of the voiced dialogue is in English. The hard rocking soundtrack is excellent, and the saving grace of this title.



Genso Suikogaiden Vol. 1 & 2

Two visual novel sidestories that expand the universe of the *Suikoden* games. Released after *Suikoden II*, the hero is a swordsman named Nash, who later showed up in the third game. The stories also include other fan favorite characters like Sierra the vampire. Nice artwork and music, as typical of the early games of the series, and thankfully a fan translation is available for both games.



Star Ixiom

A remake of Namco's Famicom title *Star Luster*, which in turn was a clone of Atari's *Star Raiders*. You warp around a star system and protect your base by engaging in first person space combat. In this more modern version, you can walk around your base to talk to people or customize your ship. A little simple when compared to *Colony Wars*, but fun. The story ties together with other Namco shooters (*Galaga*, etc.) Available in Europe.

80 Japanese PlayStation Games



Hermie Hopperhead: Scrap Panic

An early attempt at a mascot platformer by Sony, you control a cute little kid with red dreadlocks as he hops and bops over anthropomorphic garbage. You can grab eggs, who eventually hatch into animals, and help you attack enemies. Tons of content with over 100 levels, but the basics of any 2D title – the physics, the hit detection – fell off, plus it's just a bland game with a cute veneer. Developed by Yuke's.



Nekketsu Oyako

2D beat-em-ups were waning in popularity during the PS1 era, but that didn't stop Technosoft with this game, whose titles translates to "Hot Blooded Family". It's not much different from the typical Final Fight clone, though it has a slightly more comical tone, including pink-Cadillac driving bad guys, and a level that takes place inside of a whale's stomach. There's also a Saturn version with some improvements, like revised mechanics and better music.



Ore no Ryouri

In America, Sony tried to sell the Dual Shock controller with the platformer *Ape Escape*. In Japan, they also had *Ore no Ryouri* ("My Cooking"), putting you in the role of a line cook. A far cry from the simple, gimmicky games that came later like *Cooking Mama*, *Ore no Ryouri* is fast and intense, requiring multitasking skills and effective use of both analog sticks to cook food, serves drinks, keep customers happy, and face off against rival chefs.



Pepsiman

Pepsiman is the Japanese mascot of the soda, featured in many commercials, and appearing in Sega's *Fighting Vipers*. This PS1 advertisement/game stars the hero in a 3D auto-running game as he dodges everyday obstacles to deliver Pepsi to thirsty individuals. The live action cutscenes are done with terrible American actors. The game itself is brief but playable, and the whole thing is so crazy, particularly the theme song, that the hilarity transcends its shallowness.



Pop'n Tanks

A one-on-one tank battle game with cute, super deformed vehicles and lots of bright anime cutscenes. Similar in concept to *Virtual On*, and while it uses a different control scheme, it's still tough to get right. Driving the tanks around is fun, but the AI opponents are brutal, so the difficulty ends up overwhelming the "blue sky" feeling. Includes a single player tournament where you can upgrade your tank, as well as a fighting game-style story mode.



Rockman: Battle & Chase

A Megaman-themed kart racer featuring 10 robots, friend and foe, from Capcom's series. Each robot has a special ability, but if you beat them in Grand Prix mode, you can take it for your own. Fast and fun, though the action takes place in a window 2/3rds the size of the screen. Released in Europe, but the voiced dialogue of the announcers was removed; this English version was included on the *Megaman X Collection* for the GC/PS2.



Super Adventure Rockman

An FMV adventure, *Super Adventure Rockman* features three "episodes" of Rockman's adventures exploring Amazon-like ruins. Most of it consists of quicktime events, but there are some simple first person gallery shooting scenes and branching paths, too. A life bar dwindles if you screw up too much. The FMV is grainy and in a small window, but of the two versions, the PS1 release wins over the Saturn. This would've been better as an anime OVA.



Time Bokan Series: Bokan to Ippatsu! Doronjo

A vertical 2D shooter starring the villain trio – Doronjo, Boyacko and Tonzura – from the classic anime *Yatterman*. There are six oddball tanks with various powers, and you fight off against heroes from the anime. Lots of amusing bits; if your tank is destroyed, you all fight on a three seated bicycle. Grab enough skull icons and you'll turn into a huge mech. Not for serious shooter fans, but amusing nonetheless. Received a sequel called *Bokan Desu Yo*.



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Tobal 2

The sequel to Squaresoft/Dream Factory's *Virtua Fighter*-esque 3D fighter is a huge improvement over the original, with high quality Gouraud shaded models. Akira Toriyama's character designs are as weird as ever, especially the gigantic chicken man. The main claim to fame is the Quest mode, which repurposes the game as a dungeon crawler with light RPG elements. It's tough to control, but fun, and the idea was refined with its spiritual successor, *Ehrgeiz*.



Summon Night 1 & 2

The first in a long-running series of RPGs from Flight Plan, the core *Summon Night* series are basically just simplified versions of *Tactics Ogre*, right down to the isometric 2D graphics. The main draw are the bright characters and script-heavy storylines, obviously lost on non-Japanese speakers. The main SRPG series received four entries, up until the PS2 era. A few of the action-centric spin-off titles were released in English for the GBA and DS.



TearRing Saga

Around the turn of the century, *Fire Emblem* creator Shozo Kaga left Nintendo to form a company named Tirnanog. Their first publication was a shameless *Fire Emblem* clone, a strategy RPG using the same interface, graphic, and musical style. Nintendo was none too happy and sued, but they lost. As an unofficial sequel, it's solid but uninspired, though the graphics are better than Nintendo's 2D entries. The PS2 sequel, *Berwick Saga*, is substantially different.



Gekisou Tomarunner

A 3D on-foot racing game that pits you against an opponent as you run around a small course. Tapping the button makes you run, though it's not really a button masher – success comes from mastering how to take corners, usually involving grabbing a pole and swinging around. You can whack your opponent, too. The sequel includes members of the J-rock band L'Arc-en-Ciel as playable characters.



Namco Anthology 1 & 2

A collection of Namco ports: Vol. 1 has *Star Luster*, *Tower of Babel*, *Wrestleball* and *Conqueror's Continent*, while Vol. 2 has *Pac-Attack*, *Valkyrie no Bouken*, *Namco Classic II*, and *King of Kings*. In addition to the original versions, there are also complete remakes, the standout of which is *Valkyrie no Bouken*, which takes the kludgy Famicom game, originally a sub-par *Zelda* clone, and re-imagines it on the level of its arcade sequel, *The Legend of Valkyrie*.



Suzuki Bakuhatsu

Suzuki is a young woman who discovers bombs all over the place in ordinary objects ("bakuhatsu" means "explosion"). With tools like a screwdriver and wire cutter, you rotate the item, disassemble it, and disarm the bomb before it explodes. The story is told through digitized stills of live actors, with music and a bit of dialogue. The surreal visuals and disjointed narrative makes it feel like an absolutely bonkers art film. Directed by Kouichi Yostui (*Strider*).



LSD: Dream Emulator

Directed by artist Osamu Sato, *LSD* is not really a game so much as an experience. From a first person perspective, you explore an assortment of surreal locales, based off a dream journal made by one of the staff members. You're constantly being transported to different areas – the "goal" is to see as much as possible. Has a very slapsdash, first year Computer Science project feel to it, but that's arguably the point. Very expensive.



Cho Aniki: Kyuukyoku Muteki Ginga Saikyou Otoko

This campy shoot-em-up series began on the PC Engine as a bizarre shooter featuring large, musclebound men, which eventually became its focus. The most infamous entry is the 32-bit release, which features digitized images of tons of bald, goofy looking Japanese dudes, often melded onto mechanical creations. As a shooter it's subpar, but worth playing just to see what kind of bizarre creations the game throws at you. A cult classic.



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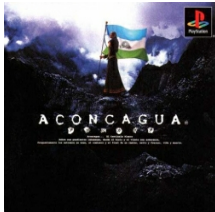
Ore no Shikabane Koete Yuke

In this RPG known as "Over My Dead Body", you control a family cursed by oni with extremely limited life spans. You mate with gods to produce children, exacting revenge over many generations. Stats can be passed to offspring, and your village can be improved to purchase new items. Taking place in Heian-era Japan, the battle graphics recall sumi-e drawings; the PSP port adds a watercolor look. The Vita sequel was translated as *Oreshika: Tainted Bloodlines*.



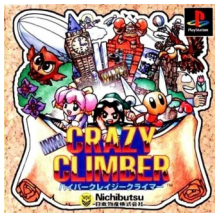
Chippoke Ralph no Daibouken

Also known as *The Adventure of Little Ralph*, this game looks and feels like a lost SNES title, but that's not a disparagement. The hero wields a sword that can knock enemies around like a baseball bat, as well as a furry pet to throw bombs. The single-hit deaths, tough platforming, and emphasis on collecting fruit for scoring recall the best type of arcade games. Tough but well balanced, with great boss battles, hidden areas, and branching paths. Quite expensive.



Aconcagua

A point-and-click survival adventure game where a plane crash leaves you and an important political figure stranded in the snowy South American mountains. Very cinematic, with some high quality visuals that rival *Metal Gear Solid*, and lots of voice acting in both English and Spanish. However, the unvoiced text is in Japanese.



Hyper Crazy Climber

A sequel to the 1980 arcade game by Nichibutsu, the goal is to climb to the top of a tower while avoiding obstacles. Like the arcade game, the control scheme is a little odd, with the directional pad and the buttons each controlling a hand, but a simplified scheme makes things easier. There are three characters and an assortment of towers to climb, beyond the urban setting of the original. A sequel, *Crazy Climber 2000*, features 3D graphics and a port of the arcade original.



Soukaigi

A cataclysmic event has devastated the country, leaving seven warriors to fight through the post-apocalyptic land, a melding of ancient and modern Japan. A 3D action game with RPG elements, the tank controls prove troublesome. Lots of fog and low polygon models, but the frame rate is solid and the action is fast. The outstanding music by Hiroki Kikuta (*Secret of Mana*) benefits from live instrumentation. Developed by Yuke's and published by Squaresoft.



Machi: Unmei no Kousaten

The third sound novel from Chunsoft (*Kamaitachi no Yoru*), consisting of text imposed over live action stills. The story is very elaborate, with eight main scenarios taking place in Shibuya, Tokyo, and numerous branching paths. The huge cast of characters cross over between scenarios, and you can "zap" between them to follow their perspective. Regarded as one of the best of its kind. Also on PSP. A successor, *428 Shibuya De*, was released for the Wii.



Rakugaki Showtime

An arena fighter similar to Konami's *Poy Poy* and Capcom's later *Power Stone*, this Treasure game casts you as an animated scribble – "rakugaki" or "graffiti" – then commands you to beat up everyone else on the screen. The main goal is to charge up a bouncing smiley face, then capture it to unleash super powers. Alternatively, you can chuck missiles and blow each other up. Ridiculously chaotic fun, and best in multiplayer.



Mizzurna Falls

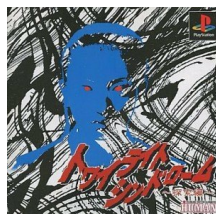
A young girl has been murdered in a snowy town in Colorado, and her friend must investigate in this adventure game from Human. Shades of *Twin Peaks*, though without the overt weirdness. Events unfold in real time, with NPCs acting on their own schedules. Admirably recreates a small American town in 3D, though it pushes the PS1 beyond its limits, with numerous glitches. Still, impressive considering it predates other open world titles.

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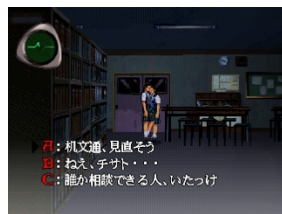
Veldeeselba Senki: Tsubasa no Kunshou

A hotshot pilot finds himself caught in the middle of a war in this high flying hybrid inspired by Ghibli movies like *Castle in the Sky*. You explore towns like a 2D RPG, but hop in your ship and it turns into a 3D flight combat simulator. The ship can be upgraded and party members assigned to different weapons. Neat idea, saddled by awkward controls – the analog stick handles the camera and the targeting cursor, but the plane is steered with the shoulder triggers.



Twilight Syndrome

A side-scrolling horror adventure game by Human where three girls explore their town to investigate urban legends. Instead of a life bar, there's a heart meter to indicate the character's emotional state. Each chapter features branching paths with multiple endings. There are two releases: *Tansakuhen* ("Search") and *Kyuumeihen* ("Investigation"). A spinoff called *Moonlight Syndrome* was also created. Featured in the PSP/Vita adventure game *Danganronpa 2*.



The Silver Jiken

The first game from Grasshopper Manufacture, this adventure game contains two scenarios focusing on a series of bizarre murders: one from the point of view of the detectives, and the other from the press. Simple puzzles, with first person exploration and grid-based movement. Has a similar surreal style as Suda 51's later games like *Flower, Sun and Rain* and *Killer7*, plus music by Masafumi Takada. A DS port was developed but not released.



Yuuyami Douri Tankentai

A side-scrolling horror adventure from Spike, you control three middle school children as they investigate the legend of a mythical bird. During the day you attend school and talk with classmates to uncover rumors; later, you walk your dog and explore the neighborhood. The digitized actors and backgrounds do a fantastic job of replicating the feel of Japanese suburbia. The occasional first person panorama adds to the creepy atmosphere. Very pricey.



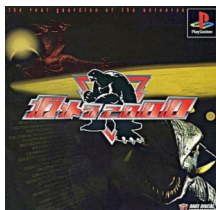
Yellow Brick Road

A *Myst*-style first person adventure game taking place in the land of Oz. You reunite with the Tinman and Cowardly Lion to save the Scarecrow. Includes command-based battle scenes where you fight enemies like jack o'lanterns. Worth it for the terrible CG rendered graphics and the opportunity to see the Tinman beat up gnomes with a buzzsaw. Designed by Synergy (*Gadget: Past and Future*). Released in English for PCs; a sequel was also released on PCs only in Japan.



Cowboy Bebop

A 3D rail shooter reminiscent of *Star Fox 64* based on the 90s sci-fi action anime. Not bad, but the controls are dodgy and the camera has trouble keeping up with your ship. Plus, the visuals are generic; if it weren't for the design of your ship and the occasional chattering portrait of Faye or Jet, then it would be hard to connect to *Cowboy Bebop*. At least the soundtrack by Yoko Kanno is excellent. The PS2 follow-up is a 3D character action game.



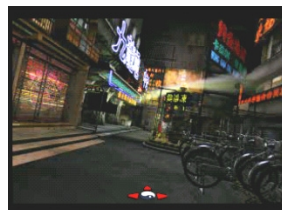
Gamera 2000

This surprisingly decent rail shooter plays almost identically to *Panzer Dragoon*. You pilot a spaceship fighting off an alien menace, but flying turtle Gamera acts as your wingman, firing homing missiles and spinning around as a special attack. It looks fantastic for a PS1 game and runs at a smooth frame rate. The live action cutscenes feel a lot like *Wing Commander III*, though with exceedingly poor English language acting, adding to the overall cheese value.



Kowloon's Gate

In this multi-disc, cult classic adventure game, you control a Super Feng Shui Practitioner who explores a warped version of the Kowloon Walled City, which has mysteriously appeared from a parallel world. Many areas are explored in full motion CGI video, which are navigated similar to *The 7th Guest*, but other areas are presented as a real time first person dungeon crawler, with battles based off of feng shui. The mystical/cyberpunk art style has aged surprisingly well.

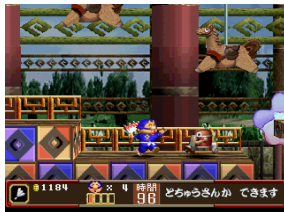


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Ganbare Goemon: Uchukaizoku Akogingu

The first PS1 *Goemon* is patterned after the third SFC game, an action-RPG similar to *The Legend of Zelda*, with half overhead exploratory sections and half side-scrolling action scenes. It's an early release and the 2D graphics are only okay, but it's fun and goofy; the enemy is an evil clown from space, after all. Notable for a cool *Gradius*-style minigame where you ride a turtle, and 3D *Goemon Impact* scenes, fought from the perspective of a giant robot.



Ganbare Goemon: Ohedo Daikaiten

The third PS1 *Goemon* hails back to the second SFC game, with straightforward platforming levels, a *Super Mario World*-style map, and an occasional town to explore. The graphics are 2.5D, with sprites as characters and polygonal backgrounds, though they're simplistic compared to the N64 games. The enemy this time is Ecorori, the Recycling King. It's alright, but feels uninspired and lazy, especially since the music is straight from the N64 *Goemon's Great Adventure*.



Ganbare Goemon: Kuru Nara Koi

Subtitled *Ayashigeikka no Kuroi Kage*, this is the lone PS1 *Goemon* game to use 3D graphics. It's a gigantic mess, with sluggish controls and buggy visuals. Compared to the open world *Zelda*-esque first N64 game, this is an action-platformer with boring, repetitive stages. The only stand outs are the *Goemon Impact* battles, where you can roam around the field freely, compared to the *Punch Out*-style fights of the other games. Decent music too.



Ganbare Goemon: Shin Sedai Shuumei

The fourth and last PS1 *Goemon* is part of a "New Age" offshoot which recasts the series with a futuristic makeover. The characters are now kiddie, focus tested drive, with *Goemon* looking like a *Digimon* hero, chubby thief *Ebisumaru* changed to a cutesy girl, and ninja girl *Yae* redrawn with a skimpier outfit. Gameplay wise, it's a standard 2D platformer. Competent but embarrassing. A GBA port strips things back even more.



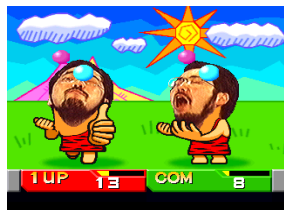
Night Raid

A vertical shooter by Takumi (*Giga Wing*, *Mars Matrix*), it feels similar to these games apart from a few differences: a scoring temperature meter which grants multipliers for grabbing items but detracts points if too many fall off the screen; and the "Hug Launcher" weapon, where you lock onto enemies and send your ship bouncing around the screen, destroying things. Cool hard rock soundtrack and weird, abstract polygonal graphics.



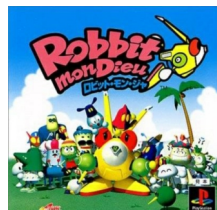
Kyuuin

A silly side-scrolling shooter from Media Entertainment where two kids ride on flying vacuum cleaners. The hose can be used to suck up foes and power your super attack; the extension cord is also used for rear attacks. The scoring system livens things up, as the method of attack determines the point value. The background are kinda dull and it lacks the attention to detail of other PS1 cute-em-ups, but there's still plenty of charming weirdness (demon nuns!)



Bishi Bashi Special

Believed to have influenced the *WarioWare* series, *Bishi Bashi Special* presents dozens of brief minigames with an assortment of crazy themes, including shaking a soda can to send it rocketing into space and having a salaryman dodge boulders and missiles. Others include racing, rhythm, button mashing games, and more. Best in multiplayer, as the games are competitive. There are three PS1 games; the European release contains the first two. The third uses the dance mat.



Robbit Mon Dieu

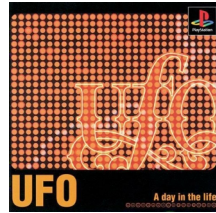
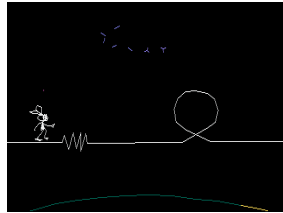
The *Jumping Flash* games, first person 3D platformers, put you at the helm of a *Robbit*, a high jumping robo rabbit. This, the final game in the series, ditches the large open stages in favor of tinier levels and mission-based gameplay. Sometimes you need to play errand boy, other times you need to kill everything, or just reach the goal without falling off a ledge. Lots of weird characters, but the disjointed structure and simplistic goals make it feel inconsequential.

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Vib Ribbon

Affectionately starring a creature referred to by the Gaming Intelligence Agency website as that "singing crack rabbit", the graphics in this rhythm game are made entirely of vectors. The levels are procedurally generated via redbook audio tracks – the game includes a number of weirdly endearing tunes, but you can use any CD you want. Certain kinds of music are better than others, though. Received a European release in English, though there's very little text.



UFO: A Day in the Life

This title from Love-de-Lic defies genre classification. A UFO has crashed in an apartment complex, and you are part of the alien rescue team to find them. Unfortunately, they're also invisible to the naked eye. You can visit the apartments at different times of day to watch for unique activity, take pictures of what might be the hidden aliens, then bring them back to your base for review. Delightfully weird, especially the eccentric "Mother" alien that analyzes your pictures.



Moon Remix RPG Adventure

Developed by Love-de-Lic, *Moon* begins with a young boy playing a *Dragon Quest*-style RPG, who is sucked inside of its world. Inside is a living universe where the generic NPCs have their own personalities, and the "hero" avatar is more concerned with gaining levels than saving the world. Most of the game is spent running quests, like helping the citizens (and dead monsters) to get "love points". One of the few games that, like *Earthbound*, lovingly pokes at JRPG tropes.



Mad Stalker: Full Metal Force

A single plane beat-em-up featuring giant mechas. A remake of an X68000/PC Engine game, it was developed by Fill In Cafe, and the action feels similar to their PS1 brawler *Panzer Bandit*. Weapons include swords and rifles, plus snatching tinier foes and chucking them at other bad guys is fun. Missing some aspects of earlier releases, like cutscenes, plus it feels a little slower, and you need to unlock other playable robots.



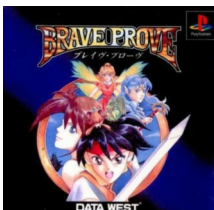
Remote Control Dandy

Gigantic robots are attacking! A young rich kid is tasked with fighting by using a robot of his own, manipulated via a remote control. You play as the kid from a first person perspective, acting as the camera, while the robot is controlled with the trigger and face buttons. Tough to get a hang of, but that's the point. The visuals have incredible weight for a PS1 game. Developed by Sandlot, this spawned a PS2 successor (*Robot Alchemic Drive*), then a true sequel.



Gokuu Densetsu: Magic Beast Warriors

This early PS1 title from Allumer reimagines the story of the Monkey King and his Journey West as a tokusatsu-style 2D fighter. Most of the characters are digitizations of actors wearing rubber suits; the few "human" characters forego suits in favor of outlandish outfits. Full of absurd FMV cutscenes, abhorrently colored animated backgrounds, and hilariously cheesy buttrock, it's far from a great fighting game, but it's not unplayable, and it's great for a laugh.



Brave Prove

A 2D action-RPG from Data West where you play as a young man named Ars, who lives in a mining town. Looks and feels like a 16-bit game, particularly Sega/Ancient's *Beyond Oasis*, with a similar theme (fighting elemental spirits) and combo-based fighting system. The dungeon design is a little boring and the storytelling isn't anywhere near Quintet's SNES games like *Terranigma*. It's unambitious, but the core mechanics still make it a decent title.



Brightis

A 3D action-RPG by Arc Entertainment, co-developed by Shade, which also created *The Granstream Saga* and shared some staff with famed SNES RPG developer Quintet. The key aspect of this game is that most dungeons are shrouded in darkness, so you need to use light giving crystal elements to provide a light source and solve puzzles. A decent concept, but the combat and platforming is very awkward and slippery.



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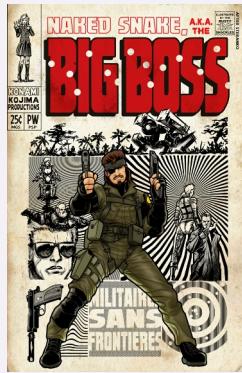
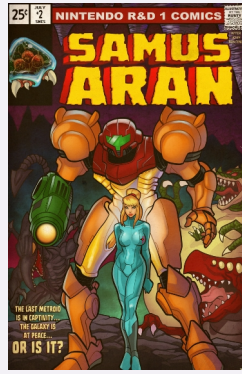
Shoot the core! Explore Konami's many contributions to the shoot-em-up pantheon, including *Gradius*, *Parodius*, *TwinBee*, and more!

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