

Max Payne (God Games, PC)

It's been quite some time since the third-person action/shooter genre has been given a kick in the pants—and with *Max Payne*, new for the PC from God Games, the genre has been totally revolutionized. Never has the gaming community been graced with such a fine, if not perfect, adventure: this game has the graphics, the originality, the engrossing storyline (Max is a New York City cop framed for a murder who gets mixed up in the mob and the occult trying to clear his name) and the playability to make it a true classic, one that redefines the standards by which all other third-person games are measured.

What makes *Max Payne* such a mind-blowing experience isn't so much what you have to do in the game (find switches, open doors, kill people... typical fare), but the environments in which it all takes place. There's an unmatched level of realism here, from the changing weather outside to the bullet casings that fall to the floor to the working televisions, toilets, sinks, vending machines, pay phones, elevators, and subways that make up Max's world. Anyone familiar with *Duke Nukem 3D* will appreciate *Max Payne*'s highly interactive and intricate settings (not to mention the adult themes that permeate the game).

What is perhaps *Max Payne*'s most intriguing aspect is a control function called "Shootdodge." By tapping the Shift key during a gunfight, the action slows down *Matrix*-style, allowing Max to roll out of the way of oncoming

bullets (watching them whiz past your head in slo-mo is damn cool). It's a simple trick that gives this game a look and feel all its own. The rest of the controls are fairly typical: walk, jump, crouch, use items, fire, etc.

Max Payne is one of those rare games that has it all, a brilliantly riveting adventure you'll be happy to spend hours attempting to complete. A sure-fire candidate for game of the year.

—Jeff Kitts

Extermination (SCEA, PS2)

From the outside, *Extermination* appears to have all the requirements of a terrific game: It's a third-person survival/action military adventure with cool weapons, intriguing puzzle-solving, and an eerie setting (the South Pole in 2005). In theory, it sounds like a fine PlayStation 2 experience—but in the end, it's a potentially good game marred by bad execution. Here's why: For starters, the controls for Dennis, the young military soldier sent to an Antarctic facility overrun by aliens, are awkward and imprecise. It's too easy to take one false step, slip off a ledge, and die—and in this game, when you die, it's back to the beginning of the level. Also, Dennis only jumps when there's a need to jump—like from one platform to another, but not over a small fence. Another area where *Extermination* fails is in the camera work. The camera, positioned just behind Dennis, does not rotate on its own. If Dennis turns left, the camera merely sees him turn left—it does not spin with

him. The result is that it's very easy for Dennis to be out of position or facing the wrong way—which, as gamers know, often means certain death. The last of the technical blunders in this game is the claustrophobic viewpoint: It's very difficult to see what's around you, and even when you're in an outdoor setting, it feels like the walls are closing in.

To assume that these glitches make *Extermination* a terrible game is a mistake—quite the contrary, actually. The game has much going for it, and is often an enjoyable military-survival adventure. But when your biggest problem is slipping off a ledge and having to start a sequence all over again, you know you've come across something that could have been better.

—Jeff Kitts

City Crisis (Take-Two Interactive, PlayStation 2)

At the core of most games these days is death and destruction—in *City Crisis*, the goal is to save lives. Before you run screaming at the notion of being a do-gooder, wait a sec: *City Crisis* is an excellent PS2 game in which you pilot a rescue helicopter—among your missions are to extinguish fires, rescue helpless citizens, and assist the police in apprehending dangerous fugitives on the run.

Here's some more detail about the game's various modes of play: In Rescue mode, you pilot your chopper across the city skies looking for fires and accidents (using the radar screen to guide you). When you come across

a blaze, you must put out the fire using water cannons and fire-extinguishing missiles and hoist up anyone who needs rescuing and drop them off at the nearest heliport. Your time to complete your tasks is limited—and if you don't put out the fire quickly, sometimes a backdraft or explosion will occur, making your job that much harder.

In Chase mode, again you're flying high above the city streets (this time at night), and now you have to shine your spotlight on a runaway vehicle. By keeping the light on the suspect, cops can find and apprehend the fugitive before he gets away.

Where the game runs into trouble is in the controls. It's very difficult to judge the height and width of many of the buildings in the city—which means you're constantly doinking your chopper (this is not only annoying, but dangerous—the helicopter can withstand only so much damage). In addition, *City Crisis* uses just about every button and stick on the PS2 controller, which takes time to get used to.

City Crisis is a fun, refreshing, change-of-pace experience, if marred a bit by some funky control issues.

—Jeff Kitts

Final Fantasy Chronicles (Square Electronic Arts/PlayStation)

For restless RPG fanatics, there's always room for another adventure. Luckily for them, Square has re-released two classic SNES games, *Chrono*

Trigger and *Final Fantasy IV* (FF II in the U.S.), in one well-rounded RPG collection called *Final Fantasy Chronicles*. Needless to say, RPG fans will have a tough time resisting this goodie-laden package.

Final Fantasy IV introduces players to Cecil, a dark knight who must overthrow the corrupted kingdom of Baron in order to save the world. Boasting a clearer storyline (thanks to the re-translated text), new combat commands, and other features omitted from its original U.S. release in 1991, this “director's cut” version of *FFIV* is sure to entice hardcore *Final Fantasy* fans. *FFC*'s second game, *Chrono Trigger*, is not technically an entry in the *Final Fantasy* series; its immense popularity prompted Square to include it in the collection anyway. Boasting an elaborate storyline and well-developed characters, *Chrono Trigger*'s time-traveling adventure should satisfy even jaded RPG junkies. From the lush new in-game cinemas to the secret-laden “extras” mode, patient players will find plenty of new toys to play with.

Despite its understandably lackluster visuals, *FFC* offers two classic adventures for the price of one—a tough deal to beat. If nothing else, just consider it a warm-up for *Final Fantasy X*.

—*Sid Shuman*

Gran Turismo 3: A-Spec (SCEA/PlayStation 2)

After months of frustrating delays, Sony's *Gran Turismo 3: A-Spec* finally roars onto the crowded PS2 lot. Series followers already know what to

expect: high-speed racing, painstakingly detailed courses, and a bevy of licensed sportscars (more than 150 in all). From the breathtaking new PS2-enhanced graphics to the advanced new driving techniques, *GT3* is much more than just a slick new paintjob.

Under the hood, *GT3* offers numerous gameplay tweaks and improvements. Thanks to the refined physics engine, players must now compensate for oversteering, brake locking, wheel spin, and other realistic driving nuances. Better yet, *GT3*'s pressure-sensitive button scheme gives players intuitive control over braking and acceleration. As always, the career-based Simulation mode is the main attraction, allowing players to amass a fleet of custom-tuned autos. Casual players, however, will likely prefer the fast-paced, simpler Arcade mode.

Sporting absurdly lavish graphics, an all-star soundtrack (courtesy of Papa Roach, Snoop Dogg, Lenny Kravitz and others), and an unparalleled Simulation mode, *GT3* leaves every other console racer in the dust. *GT3* truly is the total package—what else could you possibly ask for?

—*Sid Shuman*

Rune: Viking Warlord (Take-2 Interactive/PlayStation 2)

In *Rune: Viking Warlord*, PS2 owners can experience a mediocre translation of a mediocre PC game. As Ragnar, Viking warrior and all-around tough guy, players must overthrow Loki, the god of mischief, and restore peace to the

Viking kingdom. For starters, *Rune's* forgettable 3D environments—limited to dingy sewers and gloomy caves—succumb to every boring genre convention in the book. On the plus side, *Rune's* pounding soundtrack and atmospheric voice acting add some much-needed sonic pizzazz.

Though *Rune's* uninspired visuals are tolerable, its clunky gameplay isn't. Since Ragnar's dimwitted foes usually rely on bum-rushing tactics, button-mashing melee combat is the game's sole action tempo. And forget about pulling any fancy evasive maneuvers—Ragnar is a brawny Viking, not Lara Croft. Adding insult to injury, players must also solve asinine puzzles and hunt for hidden switches between battles. *Rune's* frequent, lengthy load times merely compound its gameplay woes.

Nearly identical to every other third-person action game on the market, *Rune* is a hopelessly boring experience—even the slapdash multiplayer mode is utterly unremarkable. Unless you're a glutton for punishment, leave *Rune* on the road to ruin.

—*Sid Shuman*