

ReviewSpotting Issue #13 - Something for Everyone

February 13th, 2006


If I have to read one more Metroid Prime review....

We've got platformers-a-plenty, first person shooters, adventure games, an RPG, and even a title that doesn't really qualify as a game at all. There's something for everyone in this issue of ReviewSpotting. The entries are increasing in both number (41 this time!) and length (sometimes *too* long), so we've enstated a few new rules for submission. Be sure to check those out on the Community Contributions forum. We also encourage everyone to approve (or disapprove, should you see fit) of GameSpot's Player Reviews. We all have complaints about those Top Reviewer emblems going to the wrong people, right? So help us do something about it! Give the top reviewers credit where credit is due. And enjoy the issue!

-DrFish62



Featured ReviewSpotter: buccaneers445

 GameSpot's newly renamed "Player Reviews" have a tendency to exaggerate their scores. Even some of the better-written efforts suffer from score inflation and the occasional rambling. But not buccaneers445's review of Killzone for the PS2. It's not the best review ever written, but it flows nicely, is fun to read, takes an interesting approach and style, and isn't afraid to show a little sarcasm. Congratulations, buccaneers, on an entirely entertaining entry. (There's three words that all start with the letters E-N-T. Isn't that special?)

buccaneers445 - Killzone (PS2)

Mixed reactions - 7.2

"Will you choose to save planet Vetka in a completely unoriginal FPS that is technically impressive?"

amlabella - Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves (PS2)

Best in series - 9.0

"...One of the best platformers available..."

darkskyer - Metroid Prime (GCN)

Amazing - 9.6

"Metroid has been finally realized in 3D, providing one of the most atmospheric and satisfying experiences ever."

glassesgeek - Shadow of the Colossus (PS2)

Worth playing - 8.6

"...Intense, memorable, and rewarding."

Robbie_IV - Kirby & the Amazing Mirror (GBA)

Just plain fun - 8.7

"...A platformer that's recommendable to anyone with a GBA."

NeonNinja - Metroid Prime 2: Echoes (GCN)

Immersive - 9.3

"...The single most atmospheric game ever."

zwulith - Ninja Gaiden (Xbox)

Masterpiece - 9.4

"...Overflowing with fast, fluid action..."



Fresh ReviewSpotting - Fit For a Demo Disk

swazonek - Mega Man Maverick Hunter X (PSP)

Old-school - 7.5

"Mega Man fan's can't go wrong."

Madskillz999 - Tales of Legendia (PS2)

Amazing - 9.0

"The Tales series has been in good hands lately."

koomaster - Electroplankton (DS)

Innovative - 9.0

"...All the bells and whistles thrown in... and a few other sounds too!"

Vyse86 - Castlevania Double Pack (GBA)

Worth playing - 9.1

"A great value for anyone who missed Aria of Sorrow."

buccaneers445 – Killzone (PS2)

"Mixed reactions"

7.2 - Good

Gameplay	8	Difficulty: Just Right Learning Curve: 1 to 2 Hours Time Spent: 20 to 40 Hours
Graphics	8	
Sound	6	
Value	8	
Tilt	6	

Will you choose to save planet Vetka in a completely unoriginal FPS that is technically impressive?

To our finest commander,

Our home planet of Vetka is being invaded by the evil Helghastians. Vetka is being torn to shreds by these menaces, and you my good friend, are our last hope. We need you to lead a squadron of three of our best veteran soldiers into enemy lines, annihilate them, and save our planet. Tight aiming, a good control scheme, and intelligent teammates will be at your disposal.

You will face countless perils while trying to reach the enemy base, including boring sound effects, repetitive level designs, and uninspired weaponry. You will be able to spot a Helghastian right away, as they have bright orange eyes that seem to burn a hole right through you. Do not be alarmed however, the Helghastians are incredibly stupid; they make a blown out light bulb seem bright. This does not mean that the battles will not be chaotic, as Helghastians tend to move in packs of five to ten.

We are arming you with top-of-the-line weaponry, including shotguns, grenades, AK-47s, and rocket launchers. Even though we live around 500 years in the future, the "devices of pain" are virtually identical to that of c2005. The Helghastians will not be the only ones you will be fighting; there is corruption, treachery, and betrayal even in our own government.

As you make your way around, you may notice that even though each of the 11 missions take place in different environments including mountains, a city, and the jungle, rooms and hallways tend to look identical after a few minutes, and it feels like you are going through the same circle five to ten times. Note: Watch out for special obstacles that the Helghastians have created to halt your progress, they are called collision-detection issues, glitches, and worst of all lag. Lag is a terrible device that locks up your system while you are in your online training programs.

Speaking of that, we have provided you with an online training program where you may choose to battle against 15 other simulations in death matches and other various situations that improve your all around skill level.

Try not to be distracted by your comrades Templar and Lugar who share a romantic past and aren't afraid to share it. Try to tune them out with some of the hard-rock/ metal music that we have flooded everywhere from the complex menu system to the poorly executed stealth sequences.

Knowing how skillful you are in past missions out in the field and in the training facilities, we feel that you will be able to blow through and save Vetka from the Helghastian menaces after only 8 hours. You probably won't even realize that you're done; the ending is very abrupt and anti-climatic. In conclusion, we sincerely hope that you say yes and try to save our planet Vetka, even though it may not be as fun as when you saved Earth from The Covenant, Master Chief.

-The Council of Elders

(Note: you do not actually play as MC, I was just trying to make a reference to the game that it was supposed to overpass. Sorry for any confusion.)

amlabella – Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves (PS2)

"Mixed reactions"

9.0 - Good

Gameplay	9	Difficulty: Easy Learning Curve: 0 to 30 Minutes Time Spent: 10 to 20 Hours
Graphics	9	
Sound	9	
Value	9	
Tilt	9	

Sly 3 is one of the best platformers available, and is definitely the best in the series.

The Jak and Daxter and Ratchet and Clank series come to mind when most gamers think of the best platformers over the last few years. Along the way, the Sly Cooper series somehow didn't get as much attention. The original Sly Cooper was a fun concept that was executed well, with a good story and some engaging characters. The sequel came along and added to the formula to make it much better. With the latest installment in the series, Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves, the developers at Sucker Punch have outdone themselves again. Everything that people loved about the series is back, along with some new and original game modes, characters, and the addition of multiplayer. Put all of that together, and you've got one of the most original and entertaining games on the PS2.

Sly 3 picks up where the previous game left off. The Cooper Gang consists of Sly, Bentley, and Murray, expert thieves who are highly skilled in pulling off some tricky heists. Bentley, a turtle who is the brains of the Cooper Gang trio, is in a wheelchair after a crippling accident. Sly and Bentley's companion, Murray, a hippo with brute strength, has blamed himself for Bentley's accident. For this, he has left the group for a more peaceful path in life. Then there's the key man, actually the key raccoon, Sly Cooper. Sly is the head of the Cooper Gang, and has always been the one whose forte is stealth and acrobatics. He comes from a long line of Coopers, and is trying to fulfill his legacy as one of the great thieves of the family. An evil man named Dr. M is trying to open the Cooper vault, which holds all of the treasures of the Cooper family. He has set up a fortress around the island which holds this vault, and has dedicated himself to opening it. Of course, the only person who can open it is Sly Cooper, who holds the key: his cane. It's now up to Sly Cooper to open this vault, but it will not be easy. Sly and Bentley will need the aid of some fellow companions, including an old friend.

Sly 3 incorporates many characters into the story. The way these characters interact with each other is great in that you really get a feel for each of their relationships with one another, although the dialogue can drag on a little long at times. Sometimes Sly 3 takes up too much time establishing the story rather than just letting you play. But the different companions and enemies are so well developed through unique personalities and looks that this can be easily ignored.

The game is presented kind of like a comic book or movie. During the game, each level or sequence is presented like an episode starring the Cooper gang. Also, you'll witness slide-shows presented by Bentley that explain your objectives, which really makes you feel like you're pulling some kind of famous heist. The presentation in the game is top notch, and sets itself apart from other games.

Sly 3 has to have some of the most varied gameplay that you'll ever see. You never really feel like you're doing the same thing over and over again. Throughout the game there are various missions that you must complete with different characters. Each one of these characters have special abilities, which mixes things up. One moment you may be hacking through a computer with Bentley, and later you'll find yourself blowing things up with rockets with the Panda King. Best of all is that there are all kinds of mini-games spread throughout the game. All of them are fun and original. Many games are one dimensional, but Sly 3 always finds a way to add something new and fresh. It's a nice change of pace from your average platformer.

Gold coins can be attained by crushing boxes and crates, pick-pocketing enemies, or just by beating up the bad guys, who range from bulky thugs with Italian accents to jumpy kangaroos ready to pounce on you. With these gold coins, you can purchase various upgrades via Thiefnet. Thiefnet is similar to a website which you can access in your safehouse. Here you can buy new gadgets and gizmos, some of which may be required for certain missions. You can get by without buying any of these upgrades, but it's a nice little feature.

The game is a bit on the easy side. Most experienced gamers will probably be able to breeze through the game. To some people there may be a few challenging missions, but for the most part you won't have much trouble with the game. Some of this is due to the excellent controls. With so many different things to do in the game, there's sure to be some problems with the controls, right? Wrong. Completing jumps or driving vehicles is very simple. All of the buttons on the PS2 controller are used, but it's not to the point where you'll become confused with all of the different actions. When a game is easier because of controls, you can't complain about that.

Included in the manual are 3-D glasses. During each level there'll be a sequence where you can use these. The best part is that it's optional, because they're more of an annoyance than anything else. All it really does is make a few things pop out, which doesn't help the gameplay. And if you're like me, 3-D glasses can give you a bit of a headache. The 3-D element could have been done without, but you can always choose whether you want to use them or not.

Just like the two previous games, the graphics in Sly 3 are cell-shaded, and just like before, it works perfectly with the game. The style and look of the game makes it seem like you're playing in a comic book. You can clearly see the effort put into the character design. Every character looks very detailed right down to the facial expressions. Probably the best part about the graphics are the different levels. During the game you'll be traveling all around the globe, so you're always going to find yourself with new scenery. At one point in the game you'll be roaming the streets of Venice, and then you'll find yourself flying the skies of Holland. The only problem is there's a frame rate issue. At any given time the frame-rate may get a little choppy, especially during the in-game cut-scenes. It does hold the visuals back from being the best they can be, but it's not too big of a problem.

The game is also superb in the sound department. The voice-overs are some of the best you'll hear. Every character has their own style and way of acting, which is translated through the way each of them talk. You can even recognize how there are accents when traveling to certain places. Some of the voice-overs may seem a bit over the top, but that's how the game is. The music is also very good. It's kind of jazzy and soft, and fits in well with the stealth feel to the game.

The single-player is a good 12 hours, which is pretty good. What's new is the multiplayer. Two players can go head to head in up to four mini-games drawn from the single player campaign. None of the mini-games really stand out, but it's a nice addition to the game, and some

multiplayer is better than none. Also, you can go back and complete the Master Thief Challenges from each level. These are like tasks that are more difficult than the normal ones you completed in the game. And there's always going to be some people out there who will want to play through the game a second time.

Sly 3 is one of the best platformers available, and is definitely the best in the series. It has a compelling storyline which is complimented by some great characters. The look and feel of the game is like no other, and the varied gameplay is what makes the game as good as it is. Add all of this together, and you've got a formula for success. If you own a PS2, and are even slightly interested in platformers, you should definitely consider picking up Sly 3.

Darksyker – Metroid Prime (GCN)

"Amazing"

9.6 - Superb

Gameplay	10	Difficulty: Just Right Learning Curve: 0 to 30 Minutes Time Spent: 20 to 40 Hours
Graphics	9	
Sound	9	
Value	9	
Tilt	10	

Metroid has been finally realized in 3D, providing one of the most atmospheric and satisfying experiences ever.

Metroid Prime, developed by Retro Studios, is easily one of the most detailed and satisfying games ever made under the Nintendo name. Despite the initial (and understandable) criticism the title faced during its early development – few believed a small team of rookies could successfully translate the 2D side-scroller into 3D – the first-person adventure comes through with flying colors, delivering nearly everything you could possibly want from a Metroid adventure. Indeed, Prime is such an immersive and brilliant game that it warrants buying a Nintendo Gamecube just to experience what the title has to offer.

One should not enter Metroid Prime believing it is the Nintendo equivalent of Halo, or any first-person shooter for that matter. The Metroid franchise is founded upon its inclination of urging the player to explore vast alien worlds. Action takes a back-step to the constant journeying and discovery, though that is not to suggest the game lacks adrenaline. As a matter of fact, Metroid Prime contains a large amount of tense and exciting moments – it's just that not all of these instances are fueled by combat. If truth be told, some of the preeminent moments of Metroid Prime contain little action at all.

Metroid Prime pitches you in the suit of interstellar bounty hunter Samus Aran. Upon receiving a distress call from a ship orbiting above the foreign world of Tallon IV, Samus is sent to investigate and discover just what occurred. It is already apparent during these early moments of Prime that you are part of something special: barren, empty hallways dripping with atmosphere provide the perfect glimpse of what's to follow.

Not long after boarding the derelict ship, Samus finds herself traversing the varied environments of Tallon IV in an aim to end the Space Pirates' consequential activities. However, Samus is stripped of her essential powers, forcing her to track them down as she progresses through the game. This is a fundamental aspect of Metroid's gameplay that has been flawlessly carried over from the 2D games, providing incredible satisfaction whenever a new item is discovered. Shooting doors in order to open them is also still here. Conveniently, the game actually loads its rooms during this process. There are a few times where the doors are slow to open due to loading, but it's rarely an issue.

Those expecting a FPS may initially become frustrate with Prime's unique controls. There is no dual analog – instead, the left analog stick is used to move Samus in all directions. Prime further deviates from first-person shooters through its lock-on feature. Whenever Samus encounters an enemy, holding the left trigger allows her to easily target her adversary. Samus can also move the analog stick to move around whilst locked-on, or strafe around her enemy by pressing the B button.

The B button also comes into its own when exploring Tallon IV. Pressing it allows Samus to jump, which is essential for Samus to make her way around numerous obstacles. Amazingly, an aspect that made so many first-person shooters a dog's dinner has been made to look very simple here – you always feel in control when jumping. Finally, holding the right trigger allows Samus to stop and look around. At first you may find this control setup somewhat maladroit, but before long it is difficult to imagine Metroid Prime controlling any other way.

The majority of Metroid Prime takes place in first-person view. By the end of the game Samus will have acquired numerous visors, though two are available from the beginning. All four visors are easily administered by pressing the d-pad in different directions. The default screen is the combat visor, which provides Samus a surprisingly clear and effective view of her surroundings. The other is the scan visor, a unique addition to the Metroid franchise. This item allows Samus to gain knowledge of the environment, the space pirates, and the hideous mutative known as Phazon. Though executed in a subtle fashion, the scan visor is actually responsible for providing the majority of the story in the form of text logs. However, there are drawbacks. Not only can Samus not fire her weapon in this mode; the player, if he/she wishes to learn more about the story, must read a large amount of text. Therefore, some may become daunted by this aspect of the game.

In order to avoid these by-products, Retro Studios implemented color-coded signs to determine whenever the scan visor is needed. As critical objects are easily identified, the player is given the opportunity to ignore the majority of information available. However, it must be said that the scan visor is well implemented and rewarding. Using the visor to its fullest is incredibly worthwhile, as the player is not only provided with well-written accounts about Tallon IV, but also the weaknesses of enemies. Most information is stored in a well-designed logbook which can be read at any time.

Samus will also acquire Thermal and X-Ray visors throughout the game. The Thermal addition detects heat and electrical signals, whilst the latter allows Samus to see through walls. Both are crucial in opening up new paths, allowing Samus to discover even more items and secrets. It cannot be understated how well designed each visor looks and feels. Their incredible level of detail not only highlights the fantastic presentation of Metroid Prime; it helps the game take that step closer to total immersion.

Of course, a Metroid game wouldn't be complete without a variety of beam weapons. Prime's assortment harks back to the days of old, though not entirely in the form you would expect. Though the power, wave, ice and plasma beams all return, they now have their own elemental properties. The beams now allow Samus to progress during specific points in the game; for example, the plasma beam can melt walls of ice. Whilst the varied weapon design may seem like a great aspect of the game, it is also unfortunately home to one of its few flaws. Each beam is mapped to one of the c-stick directions. However, this does not allow Samus to combine her beams, which may disappoint fans of the series. Furthermore, the final beam that Samus acquires is so powerful that the other beams are basically useless at this point of the game. Retro attempted to avoid this problem by creating beam-specific doors and enemies, but this comes off as quite gimmicky and unnecessary, which is certainly disappointing.

Samus also carries missiles which can be easily used through a single press of the Y button. Not only are these critical in defeating numerous enemies within the game, they can also destroy specific types of metal. Whilst the initial number of available missiles is low, Samus will come across missile expansions to assist her. Samus can also combine these missiles with her charge beam to produce massive beam attacks.

Unfortunately, some of these extra missile combinations prove to be nigh of useless, giving these additions a noticeable “tacked on” status.

Like all other Metroid titles, Samus will square off against a massive range of alien foes throughout her journey. Most of these enemies, especially the bosses, are well-designed and strategic in battle. Early on in the game such adversaries will be little more than a push-over. However, later in the game the difficulty ramps up considerably with the bosses providing a great level of challenge. Some enemies are inspired by previous Metroid titles, which is certainly a nice touch. There are also a couple of pleasant surprises as well.

One of most enjoyable aspects of Metroid Prime’s gameplay is the morph ball ability. Through the simple press of the X button, Samus can transform into a sphere of concentrated energy. The camera automatically switches to a third-person view, with the player controlling the ball with the left thumbstick. Never before in the Metroid franchise has the morph ball been so easy and satisfying to maneuver. Like previous Metroid titles, Samus can lay bombs in morph ball mode, which is essential for destroying walls and enemies. Retro also provided new additions to the morph ball: the boost and spider balls. The former allows Samus to propel herself when in morph ball form. This is not only critical for opening locks; it also gives Samus the ability to climb up obstacles that can only be termed as “half-pipes.” This addition blends seamlessly into the gameplay and provides exceptional entertainment. The latter feature allows Samus to navigate walls that contain spider-ball tracks. This is a relatively unknown item drawn from Metroid 2: Return of Samus and its translation into Metroid Prime is undeniably successful, albeit a tad underused.

A large portion of Metroid Prime is spent backtracking. This may indeed warrant groans from newcomers; after all, few games this day force the player to track back to previous areas. However, this has always been a staple of the Metroid franchise and should not be seen as a negative. Because Samus will recover more and more abilities as she makes her way through Tallon IV, revisiting past areas provides new openings and surprises. Indeed, these moments are some of the greatest in Metroid Prime.

Fans of past Metroid titles would be quick to tell you that a key aspect of the franchise is its atmospheric mood and level design. Thankfully, Metroid Prime retains these aspects to an extent. The architecture of the game is simply marvelous, with subtle but effective details that mould together to produce an alien, yet amazingly believable world. Nearly everything, whether it be a bridge, chasm or other structure, blends into the environment incredibly well. The only fault that could prevent complete immersion would be the presence of high-tech doors and save rooms, though this is only a tiny nitpick. From the moist Tallon Overworld, to the endless fiery tarns of the Magmoor Caverns, very few games can compete with the atmospheric environments that are on offer. Except previous Metroid titles, that is.

If one could make a reasonable gripe about the milieus on offer, it would be that they are too generic and not nearly “alien” enough. Admirers of Super Metroid would remember the dense caverns of Lower Brinstar and the glowing bubbles in Norfair. Very few of these traits can be found in Metroid Prime. Instead, Prime provides beautiful scenes of cascading snow and flowing waterfalls. Whilst the vistas are pleasant to navigate, the game would have benefited from being more eerie.

Naturally, this captivation could never have been fully achieved without a realistic graphics engine. Fortunately, Metroid Prime features some of the best visuals ever on the Gamecube. Though the primary features in Metroid Prime aren’t always jaw-dropping, it is the delicate details that make Metroid Prime so enjoyable to be part of. For instance, alien blood and water streak down Samus’ visor, while bright flashes cause reflections of Samus’s face. Even more impressive are the weather effects. Metroid Prime features some of the best rain and snow ever to be found on a home console. All of these fine details add up to make Metroid Prime feel incredibly real. Unsurprisingly, Samus and her enemies also looks very impressive in 3D. The crisp, clean details on Samus scream with style and dedication. If a finger can be pointed at Metroid Prime’s graphical package, it would have to be the omission of bump mapping. Whilst Prime’s surfaces do look smooth and realistic, it is obvious that it would have benefited from some form of bump mapping. Furthermore, some details tend to look quite ugly up close. However, these faults are easily overshadowed by the game’s illustrious visuals.

Past Metroid titles, especially the original and Super Metroid, are fondly remembered for their immersive soundtracks. While Metroid Prime’s audio fails to reach the prodigious heights of its predecessors, it still manages to capture the essence of the atmosphere and tone of the game. Epic scores combined with scintillating ambience make Prime a pleasure to listen to – in most cases, that is. Whilst most tracks exemplify the game’s locations and mood, others fail to immerse the player. Several tracks contain synth and techno beats that sound noticeably awkward in comparison to the other songs in the game, which is disappointing. The majority of the game’s sound effects are of high quality, with explosion and enemy sounds being particularly impressive. However, Samus’s beams could have sounded more powerful – they sound distinctly subdued in the midst of gameplay. Be assured though that these are all minor nitpicks, as Metroid Prime delivers a superb audio package.

Though Metroid titles are quite short in nature, Metroid Prime manages to alter this trend by providing a lengthy adventure. A normal game will take around 20 hours, though it is recommended that players take their time to appreciate all the qualities that Prime has on offer. Along with a large amount of upgrades and secrets, Metroid Prime also offers a Hard Mode which further complements the title. The game also supports Gameboy Advance connectivity, which will provide a nice surprise to those who take advantage of this feature.

Metroid Prime is a success in so many ways. Despite all the doubts and criticism, Retro Studios managed to deliver an adventure that reaches the standards set by previous Metroid games. Almost all of the characteristics that made the Metroid franchise so endearing combine to produce one of the most engaging titles released in the past decade. It’s not perfect, yet the few flaws within the title are instantly overshadowed by the sheer excitement that is offered. Metroid has been finally realized in 3D, providing one of the most atmospheric and satisfying experiences ever. You owe it to yourself to experience what this incredible game has to offer.

glassesgeek – Shadow of the Colossus (PS2)

"Worth playing"

8.6 - Great

Gameplay	10	Difficulty: Just Right
Graphics	9	Learning Curve: 0 to 30 Minutes
Sound	9	Time Spent: 10 Hours or Less
Value	8	
Tilt	7	

While it takes 10 hours to get a story and the camera can be cruel, the game is very intense, memorable and rewarding.

"Pick on someone your own size," seemed to be the most repeated phrase I used in my childhood (apparently video games are not for "cool" people). Fumito Ueda's unrelated follow-up to the artistically beautiful "Ico" of 2001, "Shadow of the Colossus," finally proved to me that perhaps people the size of Peter Dinklage could possibly withstand the wrath of Chuck Norris. As you might expect, "Shadow of the Colossus" involves several colossi, most of which are far greater in size than any other being to ever grace the PS2. The game redefines the meaning of "epic" in video games and pits players against seemingly impossible odds that ultimately create unforgettable experiences. While the game's story is only told at the end of the game and the camera is certainly not perfect, "Shadow of the Colossus" is a small, short game that stands tall amidst the many blockbuster titles of 2005.

Anyone seeking another brilliant story similar to "Ico" might as well turn around now. "Shadow of the Colossus" cares more about creating the most memorable boss fights than making another "Ico" story. The only background you are given before the 10 hours of colossi-stabbing fun begins is that you are a teenager trying to resurrect your female companion. Is the girl your sister or your girlfriend? How did she die? Where did you get that cool sword? Who are these ambiguous gods that can apparently resurrect people if you defeat 16 colossi for them? None of these questions matter really. Fumito Ueda must have figured that players would simply use their imagination while practically platforming for hours. Unfortunately, this doesn't work as well as Ueda probably expected and without a story to motivate you to continue, the game can have its dry spells. Regardless, the game knows how accomplish its main purpose and it does it far better than any other game in the colossus-riding genre.

"Shadow of the Colossus" is, at its core, the ultimate boss fighting game. Each "level" consists of you riding your horse throughout a rather large world in search of anything that is large, hairy, disgruntled and stereotypically labeled "colossus." Your magical and apparently "forbidden" sword acts as a guide when you raise it up to the sun creating a beam of light pointing in the direction you are supposed to go. The beam of light, which is accompanied by a sound that should be in a sci-fi movie, can be deceiving at times and can also cause a lot of wasteful traveling. Traveling is also a burden considering that the camera is constantly moving the direction that it wishes to go and the fact that there is yet to be a video game that correctly implements horseback riding. The outdoor environments are certainly impressive to behold thanks to the amount of visible land around you, but the scenery is nowhere near polished enough to make 10 to 20 minutes of mindless traveling worthwhile.

When you finally meet up with a colossus and finish the usual "icebreakers," your first job, and usually the hardest job, is to figure out how to get onto the massive mountain of stone and hair. This usually involves using the various environments to force the hulking beasts to bend over allowing you to jump on and hold on tight. Aside from the standard "giant stone creature in a temple" colossus, there are also aerial and aqueous colossi that bring entirely different "jump on" strategies.

As the colossus flails all of its body parts about like a rabid monkey, it's up to you to find its multiple weak points and ultimately bring it shattering to the ground. A casual stroll about the colossus's body will reveal its shiny and glowing weak points that you then incessantly stab with your sword. Making a simple stab can be quite difficult, however, since a colossus is far tougher than you think. You might even wonder if Fumito Ueda invented the phrase "Hold on for dear life," when you are grasping onto the thick hair of a two hundred foot tall colossus. To make matters worse, you can't hold on forever and you will eventually let go if you don't find time to rest. While sometimes this process can seem rather easy, it can also make for an extremely rigorous and rewarding experience that even the most cinematic of World War II games can't capture. There's nothing more exhilarating than trying to get one last powerful stab in on a colossus flailing its head about like a model in a shampoo commercial. Slap an elegant and epic soundtrack that practically tells its own story on top of this entire masterful boss fighting gameplay, and all that's left to be said is, "Astonishing."

Unfortunately, that's not entirely the case. For those that become easily ignited in anger from camera issues, "Shadow of the Colossus" may not seem all that attractive. With some of the more unordinary colossi, fighting with who is in control of the camera can be more frustrating than simply finding a way to defeat it. It may sound odd that the game can create a memorable experience with a shoddy camera. This is mainly because the camera only becomes a severe problem during either traveling or while on an aqueous/aerial colossus. For the most part, "Shadow of the Colossus" tries to keep the camera in a steady spot that won't cause too many problems.

"Shadow of the Colossus" also doesn't exactly cater to those that rely on a story to help keep their interest and lead them through the game. The story is only important at the beginning and end of the game and totals about 40 minutes of storytelling altogether. Unless you are a fan of artistic stories with interpretative meanings, "Shadow of the Colossus" will look like a black wall lacking any purpose or point but to hunt down huge bosses.

Although "Shadow of the Colossus" has some faults hanging onto its back, what makes the game a far more notable game than many others in 2005 is its visual presentation that truly pushes the PS2 hardware. At first glance, the game's visuals look like no more than that of an artistic third-person adventure game. Then you see a colossus. No matter how many screenshots you may have seen, laying your own eyes upon one of these towers is like the first time you look at the graphics for a next-gen console. It's simply unmatched. Every texture that may have been toned down in the environment is absolutely worth sacrificing to include the sheer magnitude of what you must face in "Shadow of the Colossus." The fact that riding your horse is ridiculous hard or that the camera really isn't your friend seems to fade away when you behold the magnificent appearance of each colossus. It may seem like a Jedi mind trick, but when it comes down to it, the game simply reminds you why you love to play games.

While most games of 2005 tried to kill my inner child, "Shadow of the Colossus" gave me a sword and let me resurrect it after I brought 16 massive colossi crumbling to the ground. "Shadow of the Colossus" is one of those games that you have to play to truly understand any critic's numbers or witty remarks. With that said, go find a sword and a horse and hunt down "Shadow of the Colossus." You won't regret it.

Robbie_IV – Kirby & The Amazing Mirror (GBA)

"Just plain fun"

8.7 - Great

Gameplay	9	Difficulty: Just Right
Graphics	10	Learning Curve: 0 to 30 Minutes
Sound	9	Time Spent: 10 to 20 Hours
Value	8	
Tilt	8	

Kirby & the Amazing Mirror is a platformer that's recommendable to anyone with a GBA.

When one thinks of Nintendo platformers, Kirby isn't always the first character that comes to mind. This is a bit of a shame, as he's been on more than half a dozen spectacular adventures in the last fifteen years or so. This trend continues with Kirby & the Amazing Mirror, his second adventure on the GBA. It's a standard platformer at heart, but it comes with enough worthy twists on the regular Kirby formula to make it a new experience for anyone already familiar with the series.

The game begins when Kirby's home world of Dream Land becomes threatened by a cursed magical mirror floating above it. Kirby runs into an evil version of local swordsman Meta Knight, who promptly splits him into four different versions of himself. The four new Kirbys set off into the mirror in the sky in an attempt to set things straight by removing the curse. Once on the other side, the mirror is broken, and they need to collect the pieces of it scattered across the new land so that they can put it back together and make things right again.

At first, the game appears to play exactly like a standard Kirby platformer. Kirby has a life bar, and can move by either running or flying. He's able to swallow his enemies by inhaling them, and then either spit them out again at his foes, or swallow them and potentially copy their abilities. Things are altered a bit though by the fact that everything takes place in one single, mazelike world. Unlike in other Kirby games, each stage is not a simple straight-ahead course. There are no over world screens in this game, instead you need to find your way around by learning how each world connects to the next. There is a map screen however, and a central area that connects to each of the surrounding areas. Each area is separated as it's own stage on the map screen, so that even though there may be multiple ways to enter and exit it at any time, you'll be able to group it's different areas together as one specific stage when looking at it on the map. This can all be a bit disorienting at first, as the paths through the different stages branch off into different routes and often intersect at various times, making it easy to get turned around on yourself. But eventually, especially after creating shortcuts back to the hub area by locating giant switches, it becomes easier to find your way around the game.

The other big twist is the three other Kirbys that can be found your world at any time during the game. It's possible to have them controlled by human players instead of the computer, but chances are that this won't happen for you. Instead you'll have to rely on the computer AI for help, which isn't always such a good thing as it usually prefers to wander out in three separate directions instead of helping you. There are a few separate puzzles that require teamwork to be completed. This is where your ability to summon the other Kirbys through the magic of cellular technology comes in handy, as you'll be able to bring them in to assist with whatever problem you are having. However, the AI isn't terribly bright even when it's with you, and this means that the characters may or may not provide much help with whatever problem you're having. Still, they don't usually get in the way whenever they're around, so they won't cause any problems otherwise.

Also available are three mini-games that are accessible from the main menu screen. They all involve four participants, and it's possible to play them with multiple players on multiple systems. They're all basically tests of the player's reaction speeds, although they're in the guise of surfboard races in tests of strength. They're fun to play though, alone or otherwise.

The game is absolutely gorgeous from a graphics standpoint. Everything has a vibrant, incredibly colorful look to it. The cartoony look of the characters themselves and the areas they take place on is supported by the incredibly colorful and highly detailed backgrounds that are placed behind them. It won't seem foreign to anyone who's played a Kirby game before, but it appears as a superb evolution from the visuals in previous Kirby games. There are no flaws with the visuals to speak of either. There are never any issues with hit detection, and you never see any characters overlapping with things they shouldn't, or getting stuck on anything. Everything combines to make this one of the best-looking games that a portable platform has ever seen.

The game's audio is also very strong. All of the songs are very well-written, and fairly catch at that. There don't seem to be any songs from older Kirby games though, which is a bit of a disappointment given Nintendo's taste for nostalgia, but that's forgivable. The sound effects are also very well done, as they match the rather cartoonish mood set by the game's graphics.

Kirby & the Amazing Mirror is a platformer that's recommendable to anyone with a GBA. It's got enough staying power with it to keep almost anyone who picks it up entertained until the end. It is sad that the end in question comes a bit too soon, as this is a rather short game, but it's fun while it lasts. The mini-games give it a bit more staying power, and people who just have to do it all will be able to challenge themselves to find every last item hidden in the game's different areas. This is a game that anyone with a Game Boy Advance or a Nintendo DS should own.

NeonNinja – Metroid Prime 2: Echoes (GCN)

"Immersive"

9.3 - Superb

Gameplay	9	Difficulty: Just Right Learning Curve: 0 to 30 Minutes Time Spent: 40 to 100 Hours
Graphics	10	
Sound	8	
Value	9	
Tilt	10	

Metroid Prime 2: Echoes is the single most atmospheric game ever.

It's hard to imagine that only a few years ago gamers and critics alike all cried out in frustration and anger when they heard of Metroid Prime. Many believed that creating a Metroid game in a first-person mode was the wrong thing to do, that it wasn't the way to recreate an adventure game. How wrong they all were. Metroid Prime became an unexpected success when released and many applauded this once unknown Texas development studio, because they set out to do the impossible, recreate one of gaming's classic adventure series, and they succeeded. Metroid Prime will always be remembered as one of gaming's finest, and will never be forgotten by Metroid fans and video gamers alike.

Two years later, Retro set out to create a sequel to their original masterpiece. The framework was set; they proved that Metroid could be done in 3D, now they wanted to create another Metroid title, one with even more ingenious ideas and puzzles than the first. They succeeded yet again.

Metroid Prime had one of the best intros ever, it truly created the mood for the entire game and started everything off with a bang, it was especially notable that you played through the intro, rather than watching it. Echoes on the other hand starts off by having a short cut scene that shows Samus crash landing on an alien planet yet again, not exactly the first impression many were hoping for. However, the tension builds as you move along through the game, and very early on you can tell that Echoes is just as atmospheric if not more so than the original Metroid Prime.

Echoes' story begins with everyone's favorite bounty hunter, Samus Aran, being given a mission by the Galactic Federation to search for some lost soldiers, who crashed on an alien planet, known as Aether; chasing after the nefarious Space Pirates. However, after finding out that all the Galactic Federation troops are dead, Samus soon finds herself in the middle of a war of light and darkness between the noble, moth-like Luminoth and the vile, hellish Ing horde. The Ing themselves live in an alternate dimension, an almost carbon copy of Aether known as Dark Aether, not exactly the most original name but it will suffice.

You will use portals to teleport between the two worlds, and when doing so you will notice that the beauty of Aether is lost in Dark Aether: The lush plant life, the breathtaking environments you find yourself in, from a wasteland to a swamp and even a fortress of the Luminoth, all are replaced by darkness and a sense of corruption through out the world. Dark Aether is a hellish place and even the very atmosphere within it hurts you, taking your health down very quickly. The only way to not lose health in Dark Aether is to stay in bubbles of light left by the Luminoth warriors; and you will fight hard against the mutated, vile denizens of Dark Aether to enter those bubbles of light.

Those that played Metroid Prime will feel right at home with Echoes, it has the same control scheme as the first, so Prime veterans will be doing just fine in this game. The HUD is identical to that of Metroid Prime, the controls are also quite similar. The lock-on button is still present as is the scan visor. However those that didn't play Metroid Prime before will have a hard time with Echoes, it is not as forgiving as the original Prime, which tried to ease players into the experience, since no one had played anything like it before, newcomers will have a hard time getting through Echoes, the difficulty starts off somewhere similar to that of the half-way mark in the first Prime.

You start off with the usual equipment: Varia Suit, the Morphball, Power Beam, Scan Visor, missiles and so on, but many of the series mainstays are missing, most notably the Wave Beam and Ice Beam, and the Thermal and X-ray visors. However you will find plenty of new toys to keep you entertained, from the Dark Visor and Echo Visor, to the Dark and Light beams. All these items come in handy throughout the entire game, helping you solve the game's many puzzles. You will use the Dark Visor to see things that are not visible to you and the Echo Visor to see sound waves. The beams are also quite useful as many of the enemies are either light or dark oriented so one beam will work better than the other for just about every enemy you meet. In general, the Dark Beam should work extremely well in the light world, where as the Light Beam should be a rather potent weapon in the dark world. You will also find other weapons like the Annihilator Beam which uses a mix of light and dark energy, the Seeker Missile, which lets you lock on to up to five different targets at once and fire missiles at it.

One of the most notable returning Metroid items that wasn't present in Metroid Prime but has made a comeback in Echoes is the Screw Attack. It is a wonderful looking attack, however it isn't very well implemented into the game, it lets you leap across great, open chasms and wall jump on specific walls, you can also kill some of the weaker enemies with it, but you won't use it very often in Echoes.

You will also receive some new suits in the game, as stated before you start out with the Varia Suit, it protects you from heavy water pressure and intense heat but you will find some other ones that help you survive in Dark Aether's atmosphere. The Dark Suit is the first you will find, it gives you better protection from Dark Aether's poisonous atmosphere. You will notice that your health drops very slowly when wearing the Dark Suit. The other suit you get is given to you later on in the game: The Light suit. It gives you absolute protection from Dark Aether's atmosphere letting you explore at your own free will.

Echoes wouldn't be a Metroid game, if you didn't lose your equipment somewhere near the beginning of the game. In Metroid Prime it was a suit malfunction, in Echoes your items are stolen by the Ing, you will spend the majority of the game recovering your items and finding new ones as well. The more items you have, the more areas you can explore. You will notice many areas are inaccessible at first even in the beginning, but then again, Echoes wouldn't be a Metroid game if it didn't have you backtrack through the game.

The gameplay of Metroid Prime was shockingly new and refreshing, Metroid Prime 2 is more of the same gameplay, except now you get to utilize all these new items in the game's wonderfully created areas. The puzzles are exceptionally difficult especially when compared to that of the first Prime, you will use your head as much as your equipment as you travel through both worlds to solve these puzzles. You will fight a host of creatures that will test your mettle, throughout the game, increasing in difficulty as you progress through Echoes.

The creatures are all unique to their own environments, many are brand new, however some have been recycled from Metroid Prime and

brought back for Echoes. The Bombus for example are now robots. Others like the Grenchler are identical to the Baby Sheegoth, give or take a few differences. However, killing these beasts is still a lot of fun even if you use some of the same tactics as the first Prime. Other creatures will be taken over by the Ing making them substantially more powerful than they were before.

One very noticeable creature is Dark Samus, you meet her quite a few times and battle her many times throughout the game. She is a rather formidable opponent, but many of the bosses are tougher than she is.

The boss fights are absolutely amazing, and many of them have you using your equipment in many ingenious ways. One of the boss fights is fought in Morphball form the entire time, another has you grappling across platforms floating in poisonous water, as you fire at the boss, while another has you shooting at a boss until it becomes dazed and then you use your Morphball to latch onto its head and plant a bomb. The gigantic Guardians, the bosses are called Guardians in Echoes, take up almost the entire TV screen and are extremely fun to fight, more so than the sub-guardians, the mini bosses of the game.

One thing that must be pointed out about Echoes is its little key hunt that takes place near the end. It sticks out from the rest of the game and isn't very fun at all. Aside from this little oddity the gameplay is near perfect.

The atmospheric mood of Echoes is absolutely spectacular; many claimed that despite the wonderful atmosphere of Metroid Prime, it didn't feel alien enough for them. Rest assured to those that thought Prime didn't feel alien enough, that Echoes delivers a true feeling of solitude on an alien planet in spades. Metroid Prime 2: Echoes is the single most atmospheric game ever.

The areas in Echoes are absolutely wonderful, where as Metroid Prime had to use standard adventure environments like an ice world, lava world and so on, Echoes uses completely original areas, like a wasteland and a swamp, including Dark world variants of those areas.

Echoes is one of the most visually intoxicating games ever created. The light world shows its pristine beauty, with creatures and plant-life, and Dark Aether looks like a twisted version of the light world, with its hellish creatures screeching through its poisonous atmosphere. One thing noticeable in the Dark world is its mainly purple hue, it could have benefited from some other dark colors aside from the purple.

The sound in Echoes is more or less the same as Metroid Prime; the sound effects once again are very weak. The weapons don't pack the punch I expect from them. It never sounds like you're firing actual missiles, or planting a bomb. The Power Bomb should sound extremely powerful, but it sounds very weak much like your other weapons. Don't be fooled by names like Super Missile, Annihilator Beam, or Sonic Boom, because these weapons do not sound powerful at all.

The creatures themselves do not sound imposing or powerful at all. Many were created to seem like an enemy you would fear, such as the Warrior Ing, but they do not sound powerful or frightening at all. This is rather disappointing during the boss fights. Despite their gigantic, screen-filling size, these monsters do not sound that great. It's a bit disappointing, especially when you consider how high the quality of Echoes is in all the other areas of the game.

Like Metroid Prime, Echoes doesn't have any voice-overs. This wasn't a problem in Metroid Prime where there was no one speaking in the game. However in Echoes there are characters that have dialogue, but no voices. The game would have seemed far more dramatic had these warriors any voices to speak with Samus. Unfortunately we have to read the dialogue, bringing down the dramatic tension we could have had.

The musical score on the other hand is absolutely spectacular, every single song will suck you into the game. The tense songs that accompany each boss fight really builds up the tension in the game. Each area has a song that will suck you into the world of Aether and further immerse you into the game, and the dramatic song that comes up when you meet a fallen Luminoth warrior is absolutely stunning. The song during the start screen is absolutely epic. The music is half of the experience in Echoes.

There is also a multiplayer component in Echoes, and it isn't very fun at all. There are two modes Deathmatch, obviously when you kill your opponent, there is another mode where you kill your opponent to collect the coins he bleeds; however, it doesn't feel any different from the Deathmatch. There are six levels to play on, and not many options to choose from. Echoes should not be bought for its tacked on multiplayer, it should be bought for its epic single player campaign.

The game is quite long, a twenty hour-long adventure, and it will take longer than that to complete if you choose to find all the items. Echoes is adventure gaming at its finest; so don't be surprised if you play through the game more than once.

Metroid Prime 2: Echoes is one of the best reasons to own a Gamecube, it has rewarding gameplay, is a visually stunning game, and has a long meaty adventure. It is one of the finest games on the Gamecube, and is far more atmospheric than the first Prime. This is a game that shouldn't be missed by anyone who enjoyed Metroid Prime. A classic.

zwulith – Ninja Gaiden (XBOX)

"Masterpiece"

9.4 - Superb

Gameplay	9	Difficulty: Hard Learning Curve: 1 to 2 Hours Time Spent: 20 to 40 Hours
Graphics	10	
Sound	10	
Value	8	
Tilt	10	

Ninja Gaiden is overflowing with fast, fluid action and the lengthy campaign with superior graphics and audio makes it all the better.

Ninja gaiden is a remake of the classic 8-bit NES games that were some of the most difficult action games you could play. They were also rich with fluid action and quite lengthy for it's days and the remake for the Xbox is every bit the same as the 8-bit NES games. There's no denying it, this is one tough game, this game is going to show you who's boss and the AI of the enemies are ruthless, don't expect any mercy from them, they will kill you and kill you again. Be ready to learn your moves right and play the game respectfully, not just running around pressing the X button from start to finish, or you'll be restarting from your last save point. The graphics are virtually unmatched along with the catchy techno/rock music that accompanies you from start to finish. This is a video game that everyone needs to check out, as it's lengthy campaign is better suited for a purchase than a rental.

In Ninja gaiden, you take the role of Ryu Hyabusa, a young, troubled Ninja who starts out in his village, but quickly finds that it has been overrun by an unknown enemy. As you keep going, you find out that the village gets destroyed by the Vigoor empire, and it's your job to take a blimp ride to the imperial city to take them out, and stop the Vigoor empire from taking the Dark dragon blade, a somewhat sister weapon to what Ryu wields. The story can get a bit confusing at times, especially since the game's lengthy and you only have about half a dozen story elemented cutscenes throughout the entire game, so the story leaves a bit to be desired.

The good news is that the combat more than makes up for that. The fluid and fast paced fighting that never stops is what makes this game so highly recommended. You have to constantly block, roll, get out of the way, take a few satisfying slashes at enemies, and repeat. The enemies are so insanely smart they will backflip out of the way, work together, and even try to surround you. It's highly thrilling to take on a group of smart enemies that's trying to take you out, just to find out that the enemies are dodging everything while your dodging it all, and I seriously felt at times that I was taking on other players from around the world.

You also get to wield lots of weapons. Although you start off with the Dragon blade, be ready to wield lots more throughout the game. From a huge warhammer to a huge, 100 pound sword that rips enemies to pieces, you get almost a dozen weapons, along with just as much throwing weapons. From longbows to exploding shurikens, you get a huge amount of weaponry that is a must, although I felt myself relying on the Dragon sword and later the Diablahro more than anything. The good news is, is that all the weapons have a nice feel to them, so there is no weak weapon, and each weapon works better for a different situation.

Making combos in this game is pretty easy. You have a list, but you can also try them out for fun. Each weapon has their own unique abilities, and the unique combos is perfect for getting karma. Karma is basically cash in this game. The bigger combos you get, the more karma you get and then you get to purchase items, such as health and Ninpo items that will replenish this. You can also find golden scarabs that you can turn in for special items, such as an armet that replenishes your health over time or a new sword. You can also look for chests that contain health items, Ninpo items, and even blue orbs that increases your health, either by getting a life of the gods, which you need 9 to get more health or a life of the thousand gods, which is just one item to get more health instantly. The Ninpo is also great, as when you get spells, you can cast these to help you out, as all of them do different things. The good news is that you can also upgrade these, but they don't come in much use until later in the game when you can cast a really huge lightning spell that comes in more use than you could imagine. You can even upgrade weapons, by collecting enough Karma, although you'll spend most of your money on items, especially in the healing department. All of it is worth looking in every corner of the game, although beware, as enemies can respawn in some places.

In case you haven't figured it out yet, this game is really tough. There is no weak enemy, even the bats that you fight in this game are hard to kill. Even these sluggish bugs that just claw around slowly will work in groups and jump at you when you least expect it. So don't expect any mercy from these guys, if you don't block a move, be ready for a tough hit that will knock off lots of health, so if you mess up, don't get mad and try to slash at yo ur foes quickly, get right back to blocking and try better.

The big problem is that the camera gets in the way. This is an incredibly big problem in the game, although you can switch the camera by pulling the right trigger so that it's behind Ryu, but it still doesn't help all that much, even though you can go into first person mode. There aren't many flaws to Ninja gaiden, besides the story and the controls, but there 2 big ones at that, and you can even die easily because of the camera. There are some platforming puzzles and they are incredible difficult because the camera gets in the way, even some boss fights can be tough at times.

The controls might be clumsy, but the moves you get is phenomenal. You can loop off walls, flip all around, run on walls, do all these flips, and it's al highly thrilling, although your enemies have lots of moves, you also have your own list of huge moves to pull off. Just pressing the A button results in Ryu doing some frontflip and jumping off walls and maybe even wall climbing and flipping, just by pressing the jump button! It's incredibly fun and I really loved how easy and fluid the game felt.

As you play, the game actually get easier, mainly because your going to be learning the ropes of the game, and even the bosses seem to get easier as you advance, as you figure out how to kill them and your health gets larger and larger. Although if you die, you have to restart from the last place you saved, even if you finish a level, once you get the lightning ninpo, true dragon sword, and the Dabiahlo, the game becomes tremendously easier, but at first, it does start off rough. This is the kind of game that your going to have to play for a few games to get the feel, but after you do, you'll have a blas, period.

The ruthless enemies are only matched by the ruthless boss fights. The bosses come in all shapes and sizes, especially in how they all fit their environments. The huge dinosaur that you face in the tomb level to the huge dragon you face in the volcano level just makes the game feel right with each boss fitting their environment. The games boss fights may seem overwhelming, but I guarantee that there's always a way out, and the game isn't impossible by any means.

As you start to finish the game, you'll quickly notice the environments get horribly repeated. Pretty much your entire journey is in just the city, but you'll visit the aqueduct system, downtown and city part, military base, all surrounding areas, and even the VIgoor emperor's estate later on. The good news is that you can pretty much visit any part of the game you want, although there is a distinct place on where to go, what items to pick up and such, the game is very non-linear and you can travel between worlds without hesitation, but just be ready for enemies to respawn. This is incredible cool, since you can backtrack to some places and pick up what you want without worrying about messing up later on, although some places get closed off as you advance, such as the temple you visit later in the game, after the boss fight, you can't return until later on, but it's still a nice novelty that I wish other games would pick up on.

Your enemies are just as diverse, all of them are really cool and smart looking. From pink fiends to undead to some cool looking ninjas that act a lot like you, you get to meet pretty much everything, even military troops and tanks. So you really don't know what year this game is in. It kind of feels like the olden days at first, with the Ninja fortress and such, but after a while, once you get to the imperial city, you get to see how modernized the rest of the game is. With military tanks and helicopters, electricity, and even trains, you start to realize that maybe this is a world that Ryu is in that is old-fashioned, but outside of the Ninja fortress and town, it's all modern. It's a really interesting and intriguing twist on the game, it's too bad that it doesn't get explained well, since the story is somewhat stale.

The extras you get after completing this lengthy adventure, is decent. Although I didn't feel inclined to really come back a second time, I was amazed by the extras, from some cool looking costumes, tougher difficulties, and even the classic NES games. This is some nice extras, but overall, this is somewhat like a recently reviewed game I've done: Shadow of the Colossus, you just don't feel inclined to come back again, but it's a phenomenal experience the first time around.

The outstanding graphics only add to this. Enemies rip apart at an incredible degree, while the lighting effects and level of detail will make you stand up and kiss your TV. I really loved how the light bloom was perfect for all occasions, and how the animations of every character, even the huge bosses was always spot on. The textures are absolutely state-of-the-art and the level of detail on everything only adds to the experience. But hey, this is exactly what you'd expect from the Xbox, the most advanced system of the 3.

The audio department is equally impressive. The looping techno/rock beats this is not. Instead, a game that I truly wish there was an exclusive soundtrack I could have, just to listen to the beats over and over again, it's always catchy and right up there with Katamari Damacy. Each level has its own type of music, while you re-visit these places, the same music that accompanied you earlier in that level will return. The voice acting is also superb. From the brilliant voice of Doku to even Ryu himself, who has that same young, almost cocky voice. Even the enemies being ripped apart sounds just as cool as it looks, and that's one strong statement. The audio is every bit as impressive as the graphics, definitely no complaints here.

Ninja Gaiden has only 3 real flaws: camera, replay value, and story. These 3 things are small, the camera can be fixed most of the time, the game is quite lengthy, and the story can be impressive at times, especially the huge twist at the end. So even the 3 flaws to this game can be covered up, and with all the rest of the game's features, the amazing graphics and sound, to the relentless boss/enemy fights, to even the pure jumping sequences that can be entertaining, this is as good and fun as gaming gets. If you own an Xbox, you owe it yourself to check out this game.

swazonek – Mega Man Maverick Hunter X (PSP)

"Old-school"

7.5 - Good

Gameplay	8	Difficulty: Just Right Learning Curve: 0 to 30 Minutes Time Spent: 10 to 20 Hours
Graphics	8	
Sound	6	
Value	6	
Tilt	8	

Megaman fans cant go wrong with Mega Man Maverick Hunter X.

Megaman was huge back in the early 90's. He was easily just as cool as Sonic or Mario and now there are tons of video games featuring him. Many true Megaman fans know that the past few games have been terrible. Capcom has now taken one of their best games in the series and put it on the PSP with enhanced 3d graphics and remixed music among many other changes. This game shows just how awesome Megaman games were back in the day. Newcomers and old-timers both will be able to have fun with it and there are plenty of good reasons to make it a good game to purchase.

Maverick Hunter X is a remake of the 1993 SNES game. Megaman X was different than the original series of games. It introduced an edgy storyline and characters, great visuals, rocking tunes, a wall kick ability, and brand new inventive bosses based on animals called mavericks. Megaman X was one of the best platformers ever made and Capcom has made a wise choice by porting it to the PSP with enhanced upgrades.

Maverick Hunter X has the same story as the original but it's told with anime cut-scenes unlike the original. The basic story here is that an evil robot named Sigma has lead a group of replugins in a revolt against mankind and X and Zero must stop him to protect the world from ruin. X is pretty much the same thing as Megaman from the original series but he looks cooler and has a better variety of moves. Zero is a powerful red robot with blonde hair who always looks out for X and helps him carry out his tasks. While Zero is not playable, he still is cool and is an important part of the X series universe. Anime cut-scenes help tell the story in a great way so you always know what is going on.

Maverick Hunter X stays true to it's roots. It's still a side-scroller platformer with plenty of shooting action but there are many upgrades to be found in the gameplay department. Maverick Hunter X has the same great gameplay found in most Megaman side-scrolling games. You choose from 8 mavericks and complete their levels. Once you defeat them, you gain a power which works on another maverick. Once all of the mavericks are destroyed, you go into Sigma's fortress and make your way to him. Destroy Sigma and you have beaten the game.

X can acquire many upgrades to help him complete his mission. In four of the maverick levels, there are capsules which supply X with a body piece.

The head part allows X to smash through certain blocks. The body part gives X extra defense. The arms part gives X an extra charge move. The legs part allows X to dash and do a super jump. Life-up hearts are scattered throughout all the levels and they increase X's maximum health. The final pick-up is called a sub-tank. They fill up with energy which translates to health. They can be used at anytime and are filled up by collecting health raisers when your already at full health.

Like every X game, Maverick Hunter X is a side-scrolling shooting game. X can shoot normal bullets and he can also charge up to release powerful blasts. X can dash under obstacles and use a maverick power with ease. X can also wall kick which allows him to climb up walls in the game with his legs. Besides some tricky and unique platforming elements, Maverick Hunter X is all about shooting enemies. There are no puzzles to be found which is great because they don't fit Megaman games. Most of the levels are brilliantly designed with a lot of cool moments and interesting fights. Megaman X still holds up well after so many years and it's awesome having it on a portable.

There are many differences in gameplay between the original and Maverick Hunter X. The first being the level designs. All of the capsules have been placed at different areas in the levels which is bad for people who want the same experience they had while playing the original. The Sigma fortress has been changed almost completely and does not even feel the same as it used to. Enemy placements are different for some areas as well. Besides all that, this is pretty much the same game you played so many years ago.

There are two difficulty levels being Normal and Hard. The Normal mode is perfect in challenge as it's not too easy and not too hard. The Hard mode is almost impossible but it's perfect for Megaman X veterans.

Upon completion of the game, you unlock two new features- "Vile Mode" and an anime movie called The Day Of Sigma. The anime movie shows how Sigma became evil and it runs at around 25 minutes in length. The animation on it is superb and it makes you wish for a Megaman X television show. Vile Mode is somewhat of a treat for fans of the character.

Vile Mode of course puts you in the boots of Vile who is a Boba-Fett rip-off with a badass attitude. He plays differently than X. He has a machine gun shot, grenade attacks, and a directional rocket cannon. He dies extremely quickly and he cannot dash making the mode insanely difficult. Even so, this mode is fun and the levels are completely different making it add a lot of replay value to the game. The final extra in Maverick Hunter X is a playable demo for Megaman Powered Up.

Between the X mode, Vile Mode, difficulty levels, and other stuff, Maverick Hunter X lasts at around 20 hours of gameplay. The game is extremely short but the fun to be had while playing it is awesome. The changes to the gameplay are for the best and not the worst which is good for fans of the original. Value is not something Maverick Hunter X really has but the gameplay is so good that it's easy to replay the game many times.

If there is one huge difference between the original and this game, it's the graphics. Instead of 2d sprites and backgrounds, Capcom has made the game have 3d graphics and effects. It's amazing how well the levels and mavericks look with neat 3d visuals. It's almost like playing an entirely different game. The many different perspectives in the levels are simply awesome. The anime cut-scenes all have excellent animations and details. The interface has been changed to look something more like Megaman X8. The character models and environments all have great detail and textures. The colors in the game are bright and vibrant. Since Maverick Hunter X is a side-scrolling game, the 3d visuals are not fully realized and it still feels like a 2d game. The framerate can get extremely slow when there are lots of enemies on-screen which can lead to unexpected deaths.

The audio in Maverick Hunter X is average. All of the tunes from the original have been remixed and sadly, every one of the remixed tunes

sounds worse than the originals with terrible techno stylings. The volume of the sound effects almost always goes over the volume of the music which is strange. The sound effects are nice -sounding and there is a good variety of explosion and weapon sounds. Every maverick in the game now has a voice. X, Zero, Vile, and Sigma also now have voices. All of the voice -acting in the game is pretty weak and embarrassing except for X's voice which fits his character nicely.

Maverick Hunter X has great controls. Moving X around is easy, the dashing is handled excellently, wall kicking is perfect, and shooting enemies is simple. Switching weapons is made easy by using the shoulder buttons. Controls can be customized to your liking which is great. Sometimes in the levels, you cant tell if a certain part of the environment is passable or not leading to frustration. Some of the plaforming parts can be tricky beacuse of how loose X's jumps are.

Mega Man Maverick Hunter X is a good port of the classic original. It's got great challenge to it, it's fun, and the enhancements to it are amazing. Even newcomers to the series might be able to get a kick out of it. The only major downfalls the game has is it's overall value and audio. In the end, Megaman fans cant go wrong with Mega Man Maverick Hunter X and anyone else should give it a rent first.

Madskillz999 – Tales of Legendia (PS2)

"Amazing"

9.0 - Superb

Gameplay	9		Difficulty: Just Right
Graphics	9		Learning Curve: 30 to 60 Minutes
Sound	9		Time Spent: 20 to 40 Hours
Value	9		
Tilt	9		

Absolutely Amazing.

The Tales series has been in good hands lately. Tales of Symphonia, which was a masterful game, was grand. Tales of Legendia is even better and more fleshed out. From start to finish, the game shines.

The game begins with Senel Coolidge and his sister Shirly fleeing from enemies aboard their ship. Soon another ship called the Legacy comes by and over takes them. The Legacy, we discover, is an ancient artifact from the Kingdom of Terises. When Senel and Shirly board the legacy we discover Shirly has the ability to breathe underwater which means she may be of a race called Ferines. But that's not all, because locals think she is a Merines, she might also be able to pilot the Legacy. Unfortunately she also gets kidnapped by bandits within the first five minutes or so. It's a lot to swallow, but you'll find out all the answers as the story progresses.

The Tales series is known for having well-developed characters, and Tales of Legendia is no exception. Each character that joins your party is neatly fleshed out to the point where they are their own self. What helps the character development (besides the well crafted dialogue), is how they will react and interact with one another in battle. Each character has his or her own attitude and way of thinking. You'll easily fall in love with these characters.

The biggest strength of Tales of Legendia though is without a doubt, the battle system. It's real time battling, mixed with a sort of Action/Adventure appeal. That is to say, you actually run up to an enemy and start attacking as if it really were an action/adventure title. It's fun, intense and well executed. You can only control one character at a time. The other characters in battle are controlled strictly by AI. AI usually has a bad reputation in RPGs. Not in Tales of Legendia. Your AI characters are actually smart, and they stick around for a while. You'll actually come to see that they're good at keeping themselves alive. It easily works out to the point where you don't have to babysit a weak character.

Each character also has Eres. Magic abilities that cost magic points to use. These attacks are devastating and beautiful. Your characters have several kinds of Eres they can perform on enemies, and they'll get more and more. And each one is more beautiful and more devastating than the last.

You can take advantage of the battle system by the combos as well. As you and your allies take on the monsters you'll be able to get some pretty high combos. Not only do combos work to cancel or slow down enemies, but the higher your combo, the bigger bonus experience you'll get. If you're really good, you'll get several experience points just off combos alone.

There are a lot of battles in Tales of Legendia. This is good because battling is fun, but it's also bad because they're random battles. Dungeons tend to be long and drawn out (with a lot of backtracking) and the encounter rate is high. You'll have lots of fun battling, but you'll be begging for a break. It might've been best to stick with contact based battles like in Tales of Symphonia.

The Random Encounter rate also doesn't help when moving around on the world map, either. Since you move rather sluggish on the world map, you're just asking for a lot of battles. Walking across the world map is simple, but using the map provided can be tough sometimes. Towns don't make themselves that well known. So if you're traveling to a town, you might find yourself walking on the wrong side of a mountain range and not know it because it wasn't clearly pointed out on the world map. This is a minor problem, though, and probably won't frustrate you. Although the random encounter rate might start to eat at even the most patient gamers.

Tales of Legendia is a beautiful game. Every area shines with beautiful detail. You'll be in awe with these graphics from the moment the game opens up. Everything is bright and colorful, and the game doesn't suffer from any framerate issues. The characters are also detailed, and some of the story plays out in animated cutscenes. The music is also really good. One of the most beautiful soundtracks you'll hear in an RPG. The characters voices are also well performed. This is some of the best voice acting in a video game.

Tales of Legendia is worth it. With an incredible story, remarkable characters, engaging battle system and astounding beauty, the casual RPGer should be awe-struck throughout.

The Good

- +Beautiful Graphics
- +Great Soundtrack
- +Engaging story
- +Beautifully developed characters
- +Top-notch voice acting
- +Tons of extras and secrets
- +Incredible Battle System, I've never had more fun with an RPG

The Bad

- There's only one con that sticks out. When you mix the high random encounter rate with the length of these dungeons and sluggish movement on the world map, even the most patient RPGers will lose it... but it's easily resolved with a FUN battle system!

koomaster – Electroplankton (NDS)

"Innovative"

9.0 - Superb

Gameplay	9	Difficulty: Easy Learning Curve: 30 to 60 Minutes Time Spent: 20 to 40 Hours
Graphics	9	
Sound	10	
Value	8	
Tilt	10	

Electroplankton has all the bells and whistles thrown in... and a few other sounds too!

Let me point out that this is a review of the Japanese Import Electroplankton. If the game sees a US release at some point, some of this info might be different. This is to help those who are thinking of importing.

To start with, you need not worry about the language barrier. The game's main screen is the only one that uses language, and the menus are already translated into English. What doesn't help however is that you'll find with the game a thick manual - all in Japanese, which explains what the various 10 types of Electroplankton do.

The good news, is that with the Japanese text in the manual, there are little pictures/diagrams which are pretty self explanatory. They demonstrate various ways to interact with the Electroplankton. In addition, I quickly found out that with a little experimenting, and some intuitive thinking, I found myself delving into Electroplankton like a champ. The point being - the game is very user friendly.

The Main Menu breaks down into "Performance", "Audience", and "Sound". Performance is where you choose which electroplankton to play with, and create your own music with them. Audience lets you sit back and have the electroplankton randomly play tunes for you. Finally Sound lets you toggle between the DS speakers, and headphones.

Performance mode is the real meat of Electroplankton where you get to experiment to your hearts desire. Some basic controls to remember: The X button has the DS topscreen zoom in on the electroplankton, while the Y button zooms out. The B button will take you back to the previous screen. And you can press the Start button to take an "intermission" from play.

Now let's break down the types of Electroplankton you'll find...

1. Tracy: Like the name implies, you'll be tracing lines, shapes, patterns and paths for the 6 Tracys at your disposal. Each makes a Harp like sound as they move through the paths you draw for them, and will change tone/tempo depending on where you draw the path on the screen, how shapely the path is, and how fast/slow you draw it. You can also increase/decrease the tempo of all the Tracys by pushing Right (increase) or Left (decrease) on the D-pad. Finally, you can erase all the patterns you've drawn by pressing the Select button.

2. Hanenbow: The name implies nothing to English speakers. I really couldn't tell you if it implies anything in Japanese - I can only assume so. The Hanenbow are little tadpoles which jump from a leaf sticking out of the water toward a plant (with multiple leaves) sticking up from the water. Each time they hit a leaf, they make high scale piano sounds. Your involvement comes from being able to position the leaves around to create whatever melody you choose. You are even able to position the leaf they jump off of so they are angled toward certain other leaves.

Pushing the D-Pad here will increase/decrease the rate of Hanenbow that get released depending if you push Right (Increase) or Left (Decrease). Also what I found was a nice surprise was the use of the A button to bring up numbers connecting to each leaf. These numbers represent the angle each leaf is pointing toward. Math is interesting; who knew?

Also, should staring at the same plant not interest you, you can push the Select button to change between 4 different plant screens, with plants of varying heights, or more than one plant to shoot the Hanenbow toward. It should also be of note, that the more times a leaf gets hit in succession, it turns from green, to a yellow, to an orange, and finally red. If you're Hanenbow make all the leaves on the screen red, you get a little surprise. Visual art folks!

3. Luminaria: The 4 Luminaria live in a puzzle-esq world where they are compelled to follow the direction of arrows. Everytime they hit an arrow, they resound their tune. Some move fast, some move slow, and depending on where they are on the screen, and how fast they are hitting an arrow changes their tone. The fun part is making paths with the arrows for them, each of the 36 arrows can point in 8 directions, just tap the arrow of your choice to change where it points. Or if you are feeling frisky, try holding your stylus to an arrow, and watch as it becomes a spinning arrow which will send the Luminaria in a random direction when it crosses paths with it.

With Luminaria, the D-pad uses all four directions to change all the arrows on the screen to some preset patterns. Feel free to let your Luminaria loose, then just keep changing the patterns and listening to the music they create. If you want to start over fresh, pressing the Select button will reset Luminaria to the way you found it.

4. Sun-Animalcule: This weird electropankton is sun shaped... except when it's not. When you initially choose Sun-Animalcule all you'll see is a colorful screen, with bubbles floating to the top. Not so interesting. However, upon touching the screen, you cause a Sun-Animalcule to be born. In fact, keep touching the screen and many many will be born, and depending on where they are on the screen, determines the tone of their steel drum-like sounds. Each will continue to ring out it's dulcet tone and continue to grow larger and larger till they pop. No more Sun-Animalcule.

It would end there except for the very fact that sometimes a Sun-Animalcule can best be described as a Crescent-Animalcule. Notice that colorful screen? Look closer, and you'll notice it cycling ever so slowly through reds/oranges and blues/black. When it's in the red - Sun-Animalcule is born. If it's in the blues, Crescent-Animalcule are brought to life. Note, that you can have both on the screen at the same time - highly recommended.

The D-pad allows you to cycle the colors faster to create the Animalcule of your choice, while the Select button pops all Animalcule on screen.

5. Rec-Rec: This one could get a little crazy depending on what sounds you have at your disposal. But basically you get 4 Rec-Rec who move along the screen to the beat. Touch one, and on it's next cycle through the screen, it starts recording whatever the DS Mic picks up. Repeat 3 more times, and you've got a bit of a weird hip-hop vibe going on. You can even do your own rap for the Rec-Rec to Rec-ord.

Pushing Up or Down on the D-pad will cycle through the beat you can use. Or you can increase/decrease the beat by pressing either Right (increase) or Left (decrease). Pushing Select of course will erase all your hard recording work.

6. Nanocarp: These little guys are more responsive to sound than through touch. The Nanocarp will wander around the screen on their own, or you can press the Select button to line them up. If you touch the screen you can send out little ripples which will make them ring out. Or by tapping a direction on the D-pad you can send waves through the water. But you get the most out of using the mic.

I've found blowing, talking, humming, clapping, and yes, even singing into the mic will get them to respond. They will make varying shapes and then you can tap the screen or D-pad to get them to ring out in that pattern. The most interesting thing I noticed is when I tried clapping. I would clap once, and they would form a circle for me - which, neat, but what else. I noticed if I clapped at a medium pace, over and over, the circle would contract, move around the screen, and expand. The real fun of Nanocarp doesn't come from their sounds, but from what your own sounds make them do. They are fun to experiment with.

7. Lumiloop: These 5 donut shaped electroplankton are good for spinning and spinning. The faster you spin them, the more noise they make - which can best be described as sort of a humming, almost like chants - very soothing. Their tones change depending on if you spin them clockwise, or counter-clockwise. Pressing the Select button will allow you cycle between a black background, a white background, and a background that changes color. Along with the background changes, the Lumiloop will change their pitch.

8. Marine-Snow: Who knew random piano keys could be both fun, and harmonize? As you tap the Marine-Snow (which yes, does look like snowflakes) each will play out a piano note, and exchange places with the last Marine-Snow you tapped. It continues this way to where they get pretty mixed up cycling around the screen. Amazingly enough, they make a nice harmony. This is not a 5 year old banging away keys on a piano noise. Feel free to not only tap each Marine-Snow with the stylus - but drag it across and all over the screen to get several playing at once.

What's really interesting with Marine-Snow is pressing the Select button will cycle through different shapes, and Piano/Xylophone notes/types - like what you would find on an electric keyboard. After you cycle through the first 3 types, it seems to be random which combination of snow-shapes and notes you'll get. But it amplifies the point that experimenting is fun. Something fun to try is dragging the stylus in patterns through the Marine-Snow for some interesting sound combos.

9. Beatnes: The 5 Beatnes sway along with pre-programed tunes (you'll recognize the first instantly as a classic Mario number) while you press them, or any links in their chain to add extra notes, and sounds to the mix. As the song cycles through it repeats the presses you've made as you can add more. It's sort of a free-flowing music mix. At any time you can press the A button to stop the playback of your notes. Or you can increase/decrease the speed of music/playback by pressing the D-pad, either Right (increase) or Left (decrease).

Also with Beatnes, you can press the Select button to cycle through 3 other tunes. You'll have to forgive me that I'm unsure of where they come from, although one sounds like a Donkey Kong theme, and another a Tetris tune. In any case, each Beatnes will play a different variety of sounds/notes depending on which song you are playing.

10. Volvoice: These electroplankton are a fun little experiment. Simply tap the Volvoice in the middle (or press the A button) to start recording. You can record about 15+ seconds of your own voice, some music, sounds, and what have you. You can either record the maximum time, or if you only want to record a few seconds, just tap the Volvoice (or press the A button) again to have it stop recording. Then the fun begins...

You have 16 of these electroplankton to select from. You can either select them using the stylus, or cycle through them with the Left/Right D-pad. Each Volvoice will then distort in it's own way whatever you've recorded. They can, speed it up, slow it down, break it up, lower/raise the pitch/tone, play it backwards, or just generally make it wacky. No longer do you have to spend long hours figuring out the backwards lyrics to your favorite underground albums - Volvoice is here to help - Record the backward track into Volvoice, then play it backwards... which will sound forwards... confused yet? But it's all fun... and did I mention wacky? I honestly got quite a few laughs out of what Volvoice is capable of doing to my own voice.

When you wanna try something new, you can either start recording again, or press the Select button to erase the recording.

And that is what you can do with Electroplankton on the DS. But why stop there? One of the neat things is that by using a male/male cord, you can plug one end into the DS headphone jack, and another into the Line In (mic) on your computer. Then you can record your Electroplankton tracks for the world to hear... or just your friends... save the embarrassing Electroplankton rap album for yourself.

But in essence it opens up alot of possibilities as you can buy/download programs which allow you to mix your own music. You can combine your electroplankton into whole symphonies if you choose. Electroplankton carries alot of potential as a musical device; and is fun to play around with on top of that.

Now on to my scoring...

Gameplay is a tricky subject as Electroplankton isn't a game. But if you're talking about interactive - it meets the criteria, and is fun as well.

Graphics are top notch for Electroplankton. Plus each of the art styles for the different types of electroplankton flow well together and create a nice package. I only took off because the top DS screen is only used to zoom in and out, and I pretty much ignored the top screen all together.

Sound was of course excellent for a game relying on sound. Very crystal clear, and the stereo vs. headphone option showed noticeable difference and increased optimum performance. Also the first copies of the game come with free headphones. They aren't much - just exposed ear buds in a translucent blue color. But it was a nice touch and are easily portable. I didn't really figure them into the score though because eventually Electroplankton will be sold without the headphones. But like I said, they aren't much so don't feel you have to import right now just to get them. I much prefer larger earphones myself.

Value can be subjective. Some people will just play with Electroplankton on their DS, others will be using it to record whole albums. Electroplankton is truly what you make of it.

Reviewer Tilt? I loved Electroplankton, and cannot stop experimenting with it, and am just getting into recording my own tracks on the computer and mixing them. It's truly a great experience. Overall, I'm having fun with it, and it's a unique innovative title if I ever saw one. I'm sure many people will get a lot of joy from what Electroplankton has to offer. It can really draw out the musician in you.

Vyse86 – Castlevania Double Pack (GBA)

"Worth Playing"

9.1 - Superb

Gameplay	9	Difficulty: Just Right
Graphics	10	Learning Curve: 0 to 30 Minutes
Sound	8	Time Spent: 10 Hours or Less
Value	9	
Tilt	9	

A great value for anyone who missed Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow.

For one reason or another both Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance and Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow disappeared from store shelves between May of 2003 and December 2005. This was especially odd considering the renewed interest in the franchise provided by the release of Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow for the Nintendo DS and the 3D entries in the franchise on the Playstation 2. Konami must have realized this as they have taken both HoD and AoS and put them onto one cartridge in the Castlevania Double Pack.

Now I was a big fan of Castlevania: Circle of the Moon and had been hearing great things about these further games in the series. I played a bit of Harmony of Dissonance and I have to say that it is a pretty solid game but is really somewhat inferior to Circle of the Moon. Your main character, Juste Belmont, has this incredibly annoying ghost effect following him wherever he goes. The game plays fine but it just seems inferior when compared to Aria of Sorrow.

I spent most of my time with the Castlevania Double Pack on Aria of Sorrow and I was not disappointed. Your main character is named Soma Cruz, a college student who is visiting a shrine in Tokyo when he is trapped in Dracula's castle during a solar eclipse. It seems that Dracula's castle appears during each eclipse and both Soma and his friend Mina Hakuba are now trapped in the castle. Soma sets off to fight through the castle so he and Mina can return home. This all takes place in the year 2035. The story is pretty weird and cheesy but it does have a cool twist as the game goes on and it does set up a fun game.

Now, Castlevania has always been similar to Metroid in some ways as you explore a large area and obtain new items and powers that enable you to reach new areas you couldn't access before. However, Aria of Sorrow introduces a great magic system that is the main reason this Castlevania is probably the best of those on the GBA. Soma has the ability to obtain the souls of his enemies and use their abilities. He can equip three different types of souls at any one time and there are tons of souls in the game. There are many types of enemies in the game and each type has a soul you can obtain. However, you won't get the soul each time you kill that type of enemy. The odds of getting a soul are actually pretty slim but this does balance the game in some respects as some of the souls are really powerful and it makes sense to limit your access to them. However, each time you use the souls needed to attack it drains a magic meter found under your life bar. This refills over time but it limits your use of some of the more powerful souls.

Another great aspect of the gameplay is the massive variety of weapons. Soma does not use a whip as he is not a Belmont but he has a bunch of weapons at his disposal. He primarily uses swords but also has access to axes, spears and even a handgun. This adds some variety to how you play the game as some of the stronger weapons may have a powerful attack but take a long time to use (swinging a heavy axe or sword) whereas some of the weak weapons may attack really quickly. Some of the weapons are extremely powerful but these often require some searching to acquire. There is also a shop in this game, which allows you to purchase weapons, armour, accessories and healing items. Money is obtained by defeating enemies and smashing torches and vases in the castle.

The graphics in Aria of Sorrow are some of the best on the Gameboy Advance. Everything animates very smoothly including the giant bosses you'll often encounter. The slow-down found in Circle of the Moon is gone which is a major asset. All of the weapons look great and Soma animates very smoothly. The ghost-effect found in Harmony of Dissonance is much less annoying in this game. Also, the environments look really good overall and really add to the experience.

The music in Aria of Sorrow is pretty good but it is not quite as catchy as that found in Circle of the Moon. The sound effects for the weapons and enemies are great, however, so it all balances out in the end. The music in Harmony of Dissonance isn't as good as that in Aria of Sorrow but the other sound effects are done quite well.

Overall, Castlevania Double Pack is worth buying simply if you missed Aria of Sorrow and are looking for a great action-adventure. Harmony of Dissonance isn't really a bad game so it makes a nice extra if you still want to play more Castlevania. Aria of Sorrow includes an alternate game mode upon beating the game, which adds to the somewhat short 7-8 hours (or so) the main game provides. One problem I had with game was regarding Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow for the DS. With the original Aria of Sorrow cartridge you apparently could unlock a special item in Dawn of Sorrow if you completed the game. This either isn't true of the Double Pack cartridge or you need to get the alternate ending in Aria of Sorrow. If anyone has information regarding that please PM me.