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Brutal Charm for Both Players and Spectators

By MARC SPIEGLER

Despite the pyrotechnics that today's video game programmers can muster, the basic concept of the one-on-one fighting game has not changed since the mid-80's era of the arcade machine called Karate Champ: two characters battle, one survives.

What has changed is the production values of games. When it comes to ramping up the spectacle of gladiatorial combat, Soul Calibur represents the state of the art. Produced by Namco for Sega's Dreamcast platform, the game offers unparalleled beauty and speed, making it perhaps the first game to be as much fun for spectators as for players.

The combat is between characters with different strengths and skills. It takes place in unenclosed fighting rings shaped like hexagons or semicircles, and ends instantly if a player steps outside the boundaries. The graphics are stunning. The characters are smoothly rendered (without the visible polygonal structure that make most video game fighters resemble the Thing from "Fantastic 4" comic books), and they move around the fighting arena with a mercurylike fluidity, performing complex moves seamlessly.

The game's lusciously detailed fighting arenas mostly span the expected array of locations: a snake-cult temple with frothing lava, a Buddhist monastery, the ruins of a medieval castle, a Russian riverfront with minarets in the background.

Like most one-on-one combat games, Soul Calibur is a third-person game - your point of view is that of a spectator, not that of your character. But rather than standing still, the game's "camera" tracks the fight, panning around the characters. Mostly, that makes for interesting perspectives and enhances the game's resemblance to televised sporting events. At times during game play, however, that camera movement seems a little too uncontrolled, coming in so close that you lose track of exactly where both characters stand in the ring.

Painstaking effort has gone into creating real-world physics. When the swordswoman Sophitia soars high over an opponent, for instance, her skirt does not stay stuck to her haunches like a plastic lampshade but flutters in a Marilyn-atop-the-subway-grate way. (If, that is, one can imagine Marilyn Monroe cracking someone's neck between her knees, then giggling.) When a hapless character is knocked over the edge of the ring, he hangs for a microsecond before falling, as if clinging to the edge, fighting gravity.

One major flaw: despite its impressive game engine, all of Soul Calibur's rings are flat. The game's main competitor, Virtua Fighter 3tb (produced by Sega itself) offers the more interesting possibilities of characters fighting up and down two sets of stairs or on an inclined surface. In fairness, at the more advanced stages of Soul Calibur's single-player modules, one encounters obstacles like gale-force

winds, biting rats and tiny rings. But given the rendering power and speed of the Dreamcast, it seems tragic not to include some more challenging environments for two-person battles.

The cast of characters initially available ranges from the predictable to the perverse. Ivy, with her peroxide hair and vampish outfit, for instance, comes from the same Goth cyberaesthetic (rapidly becoming outdated) that gave us "The Matrix," while Maxi's open vest and Elvis pompadour do not hide the fact that he is just Nunchaku Twirler No. 439 in the history of fighting games.

Soul Calibur's less human characters are more interesting. Wielding weapons as large as their opponents' entire bodies, Asteroth and Nightmare look like linebackers at a chess convention. However impressive their reach and damage, these monsters move slowly, so they are hardly invincible. Rather, they offer characters made for the sort of player who would have preferred Sonny Liston to Muhammad Ali, or Shaquille O'Neal to Michael Jordan.

Yet these behemoths pale by comparison with Voldo, perhaps the oddest character ever to appear in this genre. He moves like a go-go dancer, churning his hips in tap pants that sport a homed-skull codpiece. His uniform involves the sort of restraint devices one might find in a mail-order S & M catalog, leaving bare his back and chest, which are covered in huge tribal-style tattoos.

Three blades make up each of Voldo's "hands," a visual homage, perhaps, to the title character of "Edward Scissorhands." In short, the character is a pastiche of every Satanist stereotype imaginable.

Though this game lacks the flying giblets and spewing blood of many adult-oriented titles, it is certainly violent enough to get on the censor's radar. Soul Calibur's basics are quickly mastered, allowing the player to unleash a furious flurry of kicks, punches and attacks with weapons. Even moves that appear dauntingly complex prove quite easy to initiate; simply pressing two buttons while close to your opponent will generally deliver an acrobatic assault, and more studious gamers can use a training ground to learn such tricks systematically.

Those who find that process too methodical can hone their skills through the game's mission modules, a series of challenges wrapped around a larger quest. You can read the plot to the quest, but I stopped after the first few screens, having had enough of the hackneyed prose and story line, and just scrolled to the bottom to get my next briefing.

Somewhere in all that revenge-epic gobbledygook no doubt lies the hidden meaning of the game's odd name, a word play on Excalibur, the sword of Arthurian myth. Trust me on this one, though: the nomenclature's not a grail worth chasing. Soul Calibur offers perhaps the finest showcase for the Dreamcast platform so far. This game needs no plot to justify its brutal grace.

Soul Calibur, from Namco; \$39.99; for Sega Dreamcast; for teenagers.