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Early-admissions application postmark deadline is Nov. 15, 1999. By Dec. 15, 1999, up to five early-admissions winners will be notified. All other entries must be postmarked by March 1, 2000.

To request an application packet, visit our Web site, e-mail us or write:



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Dreamcast, 'Final Fantasy' video game breakthroughs

Game: "Final Fantasy VIII"
System: Playstation
Company: Squaresoft
Grade: A+

On very rare occasions, a game transcends the definition of "video game" and crosses over to the term "art." It's a very rare event, happening perhaps only a dozen times in the history of the genre.

"Final Fantasy VIII" is one of those games.

It ... is art.
At the root of it, the game is the story of two rivals, Squall Lionheart and Seifer Almasy. We follow them from their humble beginnings as students at a mercenary academy to

much higher and more important roles as the game progresses.

Just as important to the game, however, is the romance between Squall and Rinoa Heartily, which slowly develops over the course of this epic adventure.

When I say "epic," I'm not just blowing smoke in your face. The game spans four separate discs.

FFVIII deals with real people and real problems. As much as I liked "Final Fantasy VII," I often felt as if the characters were having problems that simply weren't something real people ever faced.

FFVIII is very different. Squall, the main character, has to deal with problems any one of us might have to go through, from the burden of leadership to when merely to follow orders and when to rebel.

That is, however, almost everything I'm going to say about the plot line. I honestly don't want to spoil it for anyone, because, to be frank, it's that damn good.

In addition to the incredible story line, FFVIII offers amazing graphics. FFVIII pushes the Playstation in ways previously thought impossible. Squaresoft incorporated a lot of some of their previous games to form the core of FFVIII (the greatly-unappreciated "Parasite Eve" and "Xenogears" are prime examples), but some of the innovations are new to FFVIII.

Squaresoft has always been well-known for their beautiful CGI movies, but in FFVIII these movies will often be played as background material while you're doing things in the foreground.

Also, Square introduced a mini-game inside FFVIII where players gather trading cards and play a dominos-like card game that's called "Triple Triad." They might as well have called it "crack," however, because it's addictive as all get out, simple in principle and yet very complex in strategy, like Go.

In addition to all of this, some little changes add up, like getting paid at regular intervals instead of just finding money on monsters (killing a snake and finding money always bothered me - where did it keep its cash?) or the fact that magic isn't learned, it's "drawn" or stolen.

The combat system of FFVII has also been refined and improved and now flows a great deal more naturally.

This isn't to say FFVIII is perfect, but the errors are so minor that they are easily overlooked for the greater good.

Bottom line, if you own a Playstation, you must own FFVIII. If you're a role-playing game fan, and you don't own a Playstation, think long and hard about buying a system just for this.

Yeah, it's that good.

-Cliff Hicks

System: Dreamcast
Producer: Sega
Grade: B+

Let's get the main question out of the way up front - should you buy a Dreamcast? If you're a video gamer in any sense of the word, the answer is yes.

On Thursday, Sega finally got its butt in gear and released a damn fine 128-bit video gaming platform.

The box itself is little, only about half the width of a Playstation, but

inside this box lingers a massive beast of a machine.

Early critics said the graphics didn't look much better than the Playstation's. These critics, to be blunt, were wrong.

When you take your first look at Soul Calibur running on the Dreamcast, you'll know Sega means business. The game's just friggin' beautiful! High-resolution textures, realistic models and vivid colors. Hell, my PC can't perform this well half of the time.

But, as we all know, the proof is in the games. Sega's last system, Saturn, was doomed early on, having few titles and not enough power in the system. Neither of these are a problem this time around, obviously.

At its launch, the Dreamcast had approximately 12 titles available, the most ever for a system on launch day. These range from the good ("Hydro Thunder") to the flat out amazing ("Soul Calibur") and cover almost all the flavors of gaming - sports, racing, flying, shooting, adventure, action and fighting.

Another thing the Dreamcast has that you aren't going to get elsewhere (not yet, anyway) is a modem. While Sega loses a point for not having any games playable over the Internet at launch, they assure gamers that we should be playing people across the country by Christmas. Joy.

The other hesitation I have about the system is the wacky-ass controller. I suspect that it's going to grow on me much in the way the Playstation and the Nintendo64 controllers did, but, for the moment, it feels a little awkward. Anyone who's planning on buying a Capcom fighting game should seriously invest in a joystick as an alternative.

Still, to counter that is the fact that the Virtual Memory Units (VMUs) have little LCD screens on them. The VMUs plug into the controller, not the main system, so you have a little LCD screen peeking out at you. Sounds a little strange, and it is, but imagine playing a football game with a friend and being able to keep your plays secret from him or her until they've been executed!

In the old days of gaming, both players would input their plays on the main screen, and both people knew somewhat what was going to happen. On some of the games for Dreamcast, plays can be entered using the little LCD screen, and your opponent is none the wiser.

Some people are refusing to buy a Dreamcast because Sony plans on having a new system (hopefully) out next year. Their loss. Sure, Sony's system will probably be technologically more powerful, but by Sony's own admittance, the system will not be out here before Sept. 9, 2000, will cost between \$300-\$400 and will not have a modem with it. Can you say "ouch?"

This doesn't mean Sony's out (nor Nintendo, who's also working on a new system), but the term "console war" is juvenile and outdated. There's room for three systems in the market. It means more competition, more games and the people who win out in the end are, ta da, the gamers.

Many gamers now have more than one system in their home, and a Dreamcast will satisfy both the casual gamer and the hardcore.

Go on, buy a Dreamcast now. If you still need convincing, go watch the thing play. Seeing is believing.

-Cliff Hicks

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