

Soul Edge



Though impressive, *Soul Edge's* repertoire of throws and floor moves is also limited. You'll have seen almost all within a week



The conversion actually blends elements of the version I & II arcade boards, adding a few generic moves such as the upward blade sweep



An improved practice mode allows players to fight indefinitely against different computer attack types

To describe *Soul Edge* as a fighting game 'from the makers of *Tekken*' is, ironically, a double-edged sword that both promotes interest and inflates expectation. Given the success of its siblings, comparisons are inevitable.

The supra-historical premise draws armoured knights, samurai, spear maidens and axe-men from all corners of time in a quest for the eponymous demon swords. This has spawned traditional but engaging character designs, from the nunchaka-twirling Li Long to the classic ronin Mitsurugi. If their polygon representations aren't the finest ever seen, they do at least boast a fluidity and responsiveness lacking in Capcom's highly derivative clone *Star Gladiator*.

Of course, it's taken such a long time for *Soul Edge* to make the transition from coin-op to console that *Star Gladiator* has actually beaten it to the shelves. It's easy to see why the delays occurred. More than a straight conversion, *Soul Edge* includes all of *Tekken 2's* home options (Arcade, Survival, Time Attack, Team Battle and Practice) and improves upon them. The most praiseworthy innovation – though hardly enough to revitalise a tired genre, admittedly – is the Edge Master Mode. It's essentially a thoughtful reworking of the unfashionable 'Story Mode', once de rigeur for every self-respecting beat 'em up conversion. While playing through with one particular character, your progress from stage to stage becomes an heroic narrative through the device of an illustrated storybook. However, each episode has different conditions for winning and presents a variety of challenges. Some opponents are invulnerable to

everything but air juggles, for instance, while others must be beaten with a Ring Out. A dose of poison may leave your character with scant seconds to grasp victory, or you might have to defeat several consecutive foes with only one energy bar. In reward, your character accumulates an armoury of specialist weapons that can be saved and used in other modes.



A raft adrift on a river canyon adds incentive for a Ring Out on Li Long's stage (top left and right). Such touches, married with semi-authentic 'action movie' swordplay, greatly increases the satisfaction of Soul Edge's simplistic combat engine. It's not enough to create a Tekken beater, however



The game's 'Weapon Room' is the place to check the effectiveness of various modes of offence

These weapons carry their own statistics and differ in qualities such as range, fighting speed and damage. It may not take too long for accomplished players to find all 70 items (plus some hidden treasures with magical properties) but such dedication to the needs and habits of a home audience merits admiration.

Unlike many games of its ilk, Soul Edge's emphasis on weaponry makes a genuine difference to the style of combat. It is occasionally possible to deflect an attack with a simultaneous counter-attack, though this often results in both fighters locking swords: players then engage in competitive button hammering, à la Samurai Shodown. There's no disarming as such, but weapons have their own energy bars and will break if used to parry too often, leaving your character to fight on with punches, kicks and throws (an effective prescription against turtling). The counter system is similar to that of Namco USA's SNES title Weaponlord, using directional blocking to interrupt an oncoming attack, and if you finish your opponent with a special auto combo then a Killer Instinct 'Ultra'-style fatality

ensues. This pack of borrowed ideas holds together reasonably well under Namco's direction, although it doesn't make for the deepest of game engines. There's little freedom to discover your own combos or tagging attacks, limiting its longevity, and where Tekken 2's reversals eventually made the game, the speed of attacks in Soul Edge renders them suicidal.

Once again, CD access is almost invisible, thanks to intelligent design as much as competent coding (why reload data if the player elects to continue on the same stage?) and exploits the medium to good effect. The two-minute prerendered intro even surpasses Namco's previous efforts, although the largely forgettable soundtrack of orchestral themes, soft rock and jazz fusion is unlikely to win fans outside of Japan. Some compromised, uncharismatic backgrounds are most prone to criticism, but the genuine 3D arenas are largely successful, and supported with numerous animated touches and lighting effects to rival Capcom's achievements in Star Gladiator. The only obvious glitching occurs when replays are shown from an unintelligible close-up.

In the long term, Soul Edge is unlikely to find as wide an audience as the next Tekken. Its strait-laced and sombre mood lacks the welcome humour and occasional excess of Tekken 2, while the VF-style moves are neither as accessible nor as intuitive. Nevertheless, Namco's lavish efforts have added considerable lustre to a decent title that aficionados should find very appealing.

Edge rating:

Eight out of ten



Agreeably, only certain moves or throws (not sidesteps) can Ring Out

Format: PlayStation	Publisher: Namco	EDGE
Developer: In-house	Price: ¥5,800 (£30)	