

Soul Blade

Namco return with another 3D fighting game that looks to better than it's arcade predecessor. DAN TOOSE grips his rapier and takes on Soul Blade.



A QUEST TO TEST THE BEST

Tobal No.1 gave us our first real taste of a quest mode in a 3D fighting game, but Namco have done it a little bit better than Squaresoft. Rather than go for the 3D, running through corridors, picking up various items kind of approach, Namco just stuck to fighting... with a plot, and called it Edge Master Mode. Instead of a string of conventional bouts, you can take each of the characters through a series of episodes, where they fight for the right to earn extra weapons (which you can use in the standard game once you've unlocked them here). The fights might have special twists to them, like you must win by ring out, or your opponent may be immune to all damage when in contact with the ground, or they only take damage from throws, or you must win within a certain time limit, your opponent is constantly healing, etc. Some of the various bouts are extremely challenging, and will put a smile on the faces of all the fighting game freaks out there without fail.



A KNIFE COLLECTORS DREAM...



Okay, so the idea has been done before with Toshinden, but having a bunch of guys and gals with ridiculous names, ridiculous hair styles, ridiculous weapons and even more ridiculous physical proportions seems to make for a decent fighting game, and Namco have now ventured into the realm of 3D weapon-fighting games with Soul Blade. In the typical Namco way, Soul Blade is better than its arcade predecessor, Soul Edge, having all that was there in the arcade, and a little bit more.

The gist of Soul Blade is that there's this legendary pair of swords known as Soul Blade, which is currently in the possession of one Cervantes de Leon, a Spanish pirate. You play one of ten characters whom attempt to battle their way through the others to claim the swords for yourself.

A Flash of the Blade

Soul Blade proves the constant improvements that Namco are making with their visuals in 3D fighting games. Tekken 2 was very good, but Soul Blade just makes it look ugly... with great use of camera angles, lens flares, and those mesmerising translucent trails of light that follow your weapons as they carve up your opponent (or vice versa if you suck). The texture mapping is a lot more detailed than any other 3D fighting game on a console thus far, and the whole thing is in a decent resolution, and a high frame rate... it just looks very impressive. The backgrounds are just as impressive, being true 3D environments, with superb light sourcing, and even changes between night and day.

To complete the whole audio-visual experience, Namco have also got the sound effects down perfectly, with that lovely metal-on-metal sound ringing away as you go into some intense fencing duels. The music is, erm... okay. It sort of catches the air of combat, but not quite as polished as the visuals.



HWANG EXECUTING THE VASECTOMY ATTACK



TAKI... PERFORMING THE ARC WELDING STRIKE OF DEATH...

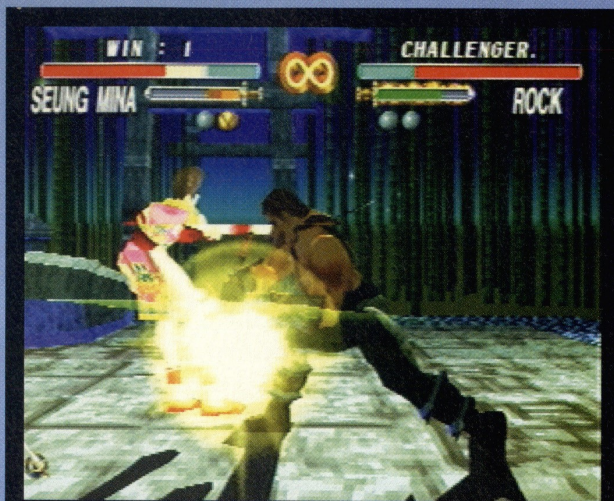
There can be only one...

Well you didn't expect the combatants to shake hands at the end of the day and call it a draw did you? Soul Blade is a fighting game that is more similar to Toshinden than anything else we've seen, with a button for weak attack, strong attack, kick, and block. There's also the ability to dodge, which you can do with the direction pad, or by assigning it to a shoulder button. Unlike the Tekken games, Soul Blade is not a game of killer combos, with more emphasis being put upon correct choice of moves as opposed to an ability to master a long, rapid sequence of button pressing. An emphasis of "One hit wonders" is absent in Soul Blade, with the unblockable attacks being slow to the point of near uselessness, and the desperation moves being quite easy to block... which of course promotes tactical battles, which is a good thing.

A very funky feature is the inclusion of the sword meter, which represents how much more punishment your weapon can take before it gets blasted from your hand. It's a bit like Samurai Shodown, except that you can't regain your weapon till after the bout is over. The characters are all quite evenly matched, with no characters being so good or bad to the point where it detracts from the game.

All standard fighting game features are there, like Practice Mode, Vs Mode, Survival Mode, Team Battle Mode, etc... but the addition of Edge Master mode really helps add some depth to the whole thing, giving you a chance to earn extra weapons, and provide a challenge with a plot.

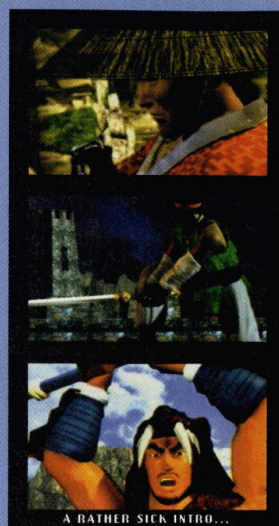
Soul Blade is essentially another 3D fighting game, with a couple of extra features that help give it the edge. It's biggest draw card is its visuals, and Edge Master mode, which should help provide a bit more longterm appeal for those that are sick of simply beating someone up without a sense of reward.



ROCK USING THE FLASHLIGHT OF DOOM!



NOW, YOU'LL JUST FEEL A LITTLE PRICK...



A RATHER SICK INTRO...



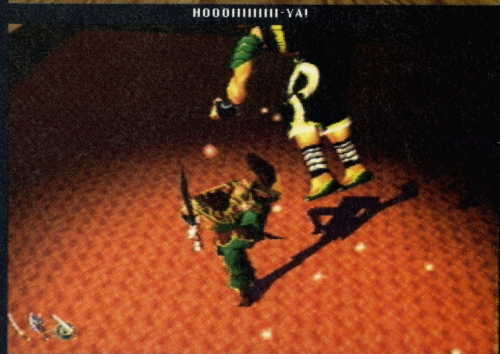
WRITE YOUR NAME IN THE AIR...



HOOOIIIIIIII YAI



GREEK GIRL VS THE GIMP



BETTER THAN ERIC CANTONAI

AVAILABLE: APRIL
CATEGORY: 3D FIGHTING
PLAYERS: 1-2
PUBLISHER: NAMCO
PRICE: \$89.95
RATING: TBA

VISUALS
92
 Trust Namco to ensure that their latest fighting game is the prettiest one yet.

SOUND
80
 Fantastic sound effects, but the music is a bit average...

GAMEPLAY
90
 A bunch of evenly matched characters and the added bonus of Edge Master mode make Soul Blade a great game.

OVERALL
90%
 A predictable result from the top fighting game developers for the PlayStation.

FREAKOMETER

Visually impressive enough to draw gamers in, but Edge Master mode is really for the freaks.