



Soul Blade

At last the PAL version of this massive arcade hit arrives on PlayStation, lethal weapons intact. We join the quest of the mythical *Soul Blade* to see how it performs against its *Tekken* pacesetters



People familiar with the arcade scene will be well aware of the latest fighting game from Namco. Taking a break from bare fists, the Japanese developers have chosen to release the weapons-based scrapfest *Soul Edge* for UK PlayStation owners gagging for a good fight.

The intro – which has to be the finest rendered sequence we’ve seen – tells the tale of the legendary sword, Soul Edge, before leading you darkly into the action. According to myth, to hold the sword is to possess true power; many have tried to harness this power and many have perished.

Like all of Namco’s previous fighting games, *Soul Blade* has a great range of characters, from the timid-but-dangerous Sophitia to the big-but-dim Rock, and each character has their own story. Li Long, for example, is a political assassin who was ordered by his Emperor to kill a pirate leader while secretly trying to find the precious Blade and avenge the murder of his love, Chie.

One wonderful addition to the Namco school of fighting is the sidestep... you can neatly dodge your opponent’s attack... leaving him/her open to a quick counter



[1] Li Long is one of the best fighters in the game. **[2]** Here he is about to knock off Rock’s head with one of his stunning kicks.

So, following on from the intro you become increasingly immersed in the whole thing before even a punch is thrown. Wait for it... we’ll get to the action soon.

When the game loads you’re greeted by the familiar Options screen, except here there are even more choices than there were for *Tekken 2*. As well as the usual Arcade and Versus modes, there are Battle, Team Battle and Time Attack modes. But most impressive is the Practice option. One of the (few) faults in *Tekken 2* was the limited moves that the practice dummy could

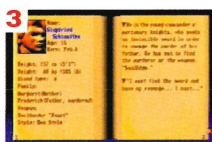
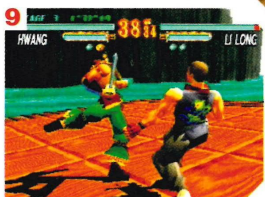


Soul Blade features one of the best intros we’ve ever seen. It starts off impressively and just gets better as you’re introduced to all of the fighters.



■ PUBLISHER:	SCEE	■ DEVELOPER:	Namco
■ RELEASE DATE:	May	■ ORIGIN:	Japan
■ PRICE:	£39.99	■ STYLE:	Beat 'em up

(1) Hwang performs a flashy special move on himself. **(2)** A map. **(3)** Each character has their own story. **(4)** Beat a fighter and steal their weapon. **(5)** More brutal violence as Li Long gets a pasting. **(6)** Siegfried vs Sophitia. **(7)** Sophitia proves size doesn't matter. **(8)** Messing about on the river. **(9)** Another lethal kick from Hwang. **(10)** Li Long really ought to give in now.



The Practice mode is much more comprehensive than in *Tekken 2*, with your opponent being able to jump, sidestep, attack...

including some splendid pugilists and a couple of duff ones, to boot. Taki and Li Long are good for the novice – they can both offer a great range of kicks and attacks. But what about those attacks?

In general the controls are more traditional than in *Tekken*. The Triangle and the Square buttons perform horizontal and vertical attacks with your weapon, while the Circle button performs a variety of kicks. The other addition comes by way of a defence key: instead of stepping backwards to block your opponent, you now have to press the X button to raise your weapon in a defensive stance.

It must be said, this system of operating your character doesn't work particularly well. After the intuitive controls in *Tekken*, *Soul Blade's* seem rather confused. And there's a bigger problem when you have to block an attack: when your fighter is in the guard ►

make. In *Soul Blade* the Practice mode is much more comprehensive, with your opponent being able to jump, sidestep, attack, in fact do more or less anything. It's the best Practice mode we've ever seen. Spend a few hours experimenting with it, and you'll be on your way to mastering the game.

Most people, however, will choose to go straight to the Arcade option, where you are greeted with the 10 fighters



Our favourite scenes include the cornfield fight between Mitsurugi and three assassins, and Siegfried escaping the crumbling tower on horseback.

The big boss

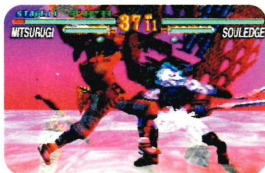


Soul Edge

If you beat all of the other fighters you'll be paired up to take on the top dog.

Bad trip

The psychedelic background has to be one of the strangest we've ever seen.



Spectacular moves

Soul Edge has some of the nastiest special moves to be found in many a beat 'em up.

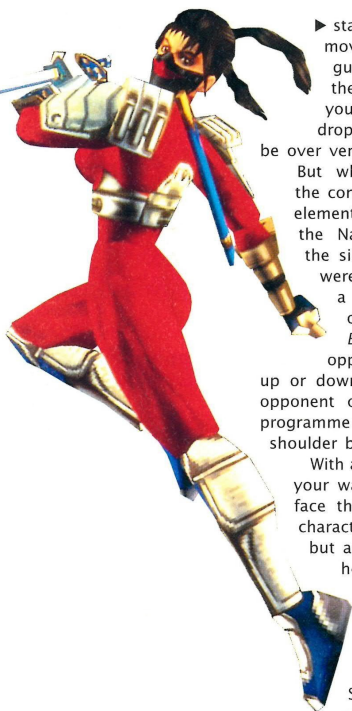
Skill and cunning

It takes a lot of craft to avoid Soul Edge when he launches his attacks.



Not another Perfect!

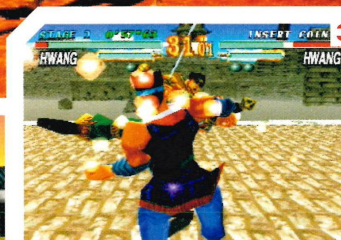
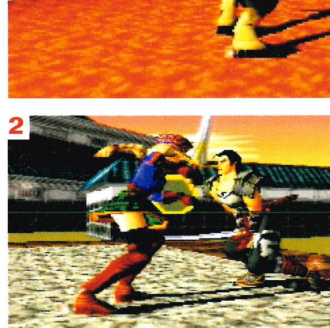
Expect to see this a lot. Soul takes a lot of beating and even more practice.



stance he's rooted to the spot. If you have to move backwards then you have to drop your guard and leg it - not good when you've got the likes of Cervantes or Soul Edge attacking you, as speed is of the essence. Take too long dropping your guard, and the game will be over very soon.

But while there are problems with the controls, there are some positive elements. One wonderful addition to the Namco school of fighting is the sidestep. In both *Tekkens* you were firmly routed on 2D with only a brief hint of 3D from the occasional characters. In *Soul Blade* you can neatly sidestep your opponent's attack by pushing the joystick up or down twice in quick succession, leaving your opponent open to a quick counter. You can even programme the controls so that a quick press of the shoulder buttons performs said sidestep. Excellent.

With all of these moves mastered, you must fight your way through the nine opponents and finally face the mighty Cervantes. When you play this character he seems a rather unwieldy, slow fellow but as soon as the computer gets hold of him, he becomes a fighter to fear. His double-sword technique proves very difficult to break down and using your own weapon to guard against his attacks soon leaves you with a worn-out blade. If you do beat him, his bones dissemble into the spirit of Soul Edge and become another challenge altogether. Once you've beaten this skeletal swordsman you can sit back and watch the ending. Unfortunately, Namco have opted to use polygons instead of the usual CGI endings which gives them a rather basic look, but it somehow works.



[1] Li Long gives Voldo a good crack with his nunchuks. [2] Sophitia has an uncanny knack of aiming for the nether regions [3] That's gotta hurt!

The in-game graphics are quite wonderful. Each character is beautifully drawn and magnificently animated, the effects of sword meeting sword being especially praiseworthy. The backdrops are also much improved - we particularly enjoyed Li Long's arena where you fight on a raft, cascading down a flooded gully. In another change of direction, Namco have placed the action in an arena environment where pugilists can be thrown or kicked out but can never fall out, as happens in more frustrating arena-based fighting titles.

Five levels of play make up the game - simple, normal, hard, very hard and stupidly hard. At least with

The Edge Master mode, in which

you choose a character and guide

them through a story... helps

to give the game extra longevity



The intro sets up all of the characters wonderfully. Li Long sails down the river, searching for the swine who killed his girlfriend, the beautiful Chic.

Soul Blade

(1) The swords have lovely lighting effects. (2) Sophitia gets cracked in the ribs from Sueng Mi Na. (3) The sliding tackle works a treat. (4) Sophitia has a nice line in head locks



Each character is beautifully drawn and magnificently animated, the effects of sword meeting sword being especially praiseworthy

Tekken you felt you had a chance of beating some of the later characters, but with *Soul Edge* you'll be throwing the joystick at the screen, cursing.

One final addition worth a mention is the Edge Master mode in which you choose a character and guide them through a story. For instance, with Sophitia you start the game in your home town in Greece, where the God of the Forge gives you a sword to help you battle for the Gods. Rather than simply fight as they do in Arcade mode, each fighter has to be defeated in a certain way - Voldo must be beaten by a continual stream of kicks and stabs, otherwise his energy is replenished. On other occasions you have to fight three fighters in succession with only one energy bar. This gives the game a real boost.

Soul Blade is a classy beat 'em up which unfortunately suffers from comparisons with *Tekken 2*. It doesn't quite have the depth of the *Tekken* series but the Edge Master mode helps to give it extra longevity. You can't fail to have fun with this game and it's heartily recommended to any beat 'em up fan who needs a fix until they get hold of *Tekken 3*.



Alternatively...

<i>Tekken 2</i>	10/10	PSM11
<i>Soul Blade</i>	8/10	PSM19
<i>Total No 1</i>	8/10	PSM16
<i>Star Gladiator</i>	8/10	PSM14
<i>Street Fighter Alpha 2</i>	8/10	PSM13
<i>BA Toshinden 2</i>	7/10	PSM7



(1) Li Long lets loose with his nunchuks to great effect. (2) Sophitia knocks out her alter ego with one of her sword combos.



Siegfried

The tragedy of Siegfried is legendary. He slew his own father in battle and has sworn to avenge his death by finding Soul Edge and making him pay for his trickery.



Rock

Born in England, he was bound for the New World when his ship was attacked by pirates. Fending for himself on a strange island he dreams of avenging his parents' murder.



Mitsurugi

Known as 'The Great Swordsman of the Age' the farmer's son has had enough of his lands being ravaged and has decided it is better to raid than be raided. One of the best fighters.



Seung Mina

A Korean patriot who yearns for peace, yet is unable to fight for her country because of her sex. She sets off to find the Soul Blade in order to win the war for Korea.



Cervantes

The great pirate was feared by all who sailed the Atlantic Ocean. Cervantes left on a voyage to find the Soul Blade but was attacked and disappeared, never to be seen again.



Voldo

Enclosed alive inside the treasure vault of his psychotic master, the Italian merchant Vercci. Voldo has been driven insane and has become blind through years in the darkness.



Hwang

Born into a poor family, he began to study the martial arts after his parents died. Under the tuition of a great master, Hwang became a great warrior and set out to find Soul Edge.



Li Long

During a secret mission for the Emperor, Li Long heard his love, Chie, had been murdered by a mystery man and now lives for revenge and the hope of being reunited with her.



Sophitia

Having received an oracle from the gods, Sophitia was chosen to rid the world of the evil Soul Blade which sucks the pain and hatred from its victims to increase its power and evil.



Taki

Known as the Demon Hunter. Blessed with supernatural, she travels through Japan purging the lands of evil demons, looking for the Soul Blade to aid her in her challenge.

VERDICT

■ GRAPHICS:

Lovely 9

■ GAMEPLAY:

Very satisfying 8

■ SOUND:

Clashtastic 8

■ PRESENTATION:

All you need 8

■ LIFESPAN:

Can be very hard 7

■ ORIGINALITY:

Some nice touches 6

An exciting, if not too original fighting game. It shows what *Toshinden* could have been. If you like fighting with weapons you can't go wrong with *Soul Blade*.

8
out of 10

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