

## GEEKED Videogame reviews by Adam Diamond



### ROMANCING SAGA: MINSTREL SONG

**PUBLISHER** | SQUARE ENIX  
**PLATFORM** | PS2  
**PRICE** | \$29.99  
**ESRB RATING** | E 10+ (EVERYONE TEN AND OLDER)

**WHAT'S COOL:** It's a real RPG. The plot can be avoided and even ignored should you, the game player, decide to do so.

**WHAT'S UNCOOL:** The plot is so boring and uninteresting you will want to ignore it.

#### GAMEPLAY



#### GRAPHICS



#### SOUND



There's undoubtedly some OG geek out there right now yelling at his console that Role Playing Games used to be about character, damn it! After all, before they came to video games, role playing games were really more freeform entities, changing on the whim of both the dungeon master and the players. Things changed when the computer processor became the virtual dungeon master, as the electronics could not handle plot deviations well, and RPGs morphed into each character having different experiences and abilities based on what you've done. The ability to change or even ignore the plot was gone, and this was a sad, sad thing. But let's face it, we get used to this limited play, and when a game like *Romancing Saga* comes along, we don't know how to handle it. Choice can be so terrifying when you haven't had it for a while.

*Romancing Saga* is a game where your choices actually matter. You can wander around the world doing whatever you want. Side quests, random battles, whatever. You can keep doing so forever, ignoring the plot as much as you want to. Having played the game, I have a vague idea of the plot, and what I know, I will share with you. One thousand years ago, three powerful creatures fought, and two lost their powers. The third is trapped in a tower by 10 stones and a hero's sacrifice. Since we are told that the stones have been scattered and evil has invaded the land, one's assumption is that you've got to collect the stones and then do something with them which might cost your character his life.

While not the most enthralling or interesting plot, there is no requirement that you follow it. Other RPG's will eventually force you back onto the plot by not allowing any other events to happen. Not so with *Romancing Saga*. Feel free to get distracted or wander around aimlessly without any urgency to get on with your life—sort of like those first two years after college.

Choices abound in this game, and the first one you make—which of eight characters you're going to play—effects the way you'll experience the game. Win a battle, get a power. Lose a battle, lose a power. But you can actually earn a power during a battle and lose that same power by the end of the battle should the battle shift direction. It's unsettling, I know, to have so much choice and change available in a game. We like to have our play scripted better than this. But freedom should not be taken for granted, no matter how annoying it is to actually think for yourself while playing video games.

The graphics and sound are nothing special, nor are they so annoying that you must shoot somebody. It's pretty cartoony and unspectacular, but not unfamiliar to fans of Square's other, more famous RPG, *Final Fantasy*. And while you won't be out downloading the *Romancing Saga* soundtrack from iTunes, you won't be overwhelmed by a constant flow of MIDI music either.

By no means is *Romancing Saga* a great game. It is a good game for those who miss real life RPG's, or who are too old or busy to get together with friends who play. For those who miss real role-playing, this game might be worth a buy. Otherwise, it's at best a rent.

## DISC JUNKIE by Paul Gaita

### A TIP SHEET FOR COMPULSIVE DVD BUYERS



#### FANTASTIC FOUR (Fox)

Critics and comic book heads alike laid out this feature version of the venerable Marvel comic for everything from its meandering script to the casting of Jessica Alba (and they were right on both counts), but the movie is still enjoyable thanks to its abundant special effects and scenery-clobberin' performances from Michael Chiklis as The Thing and Julian (Nip/Tuck) McMahon as Doctor Doom. The widescreen and fullscreen DVDs include commentary from the cast, deleted scenes, casting sessions, and a making-of featurette.



#### NEW YORK DOLLS: ALL DOLLED UP (MVD)

Just in time for the glam gangsters' reunion comes this compilation of live and lethal performances by the original lineup and captured on video by rock photog Bob Gruen. The Dolls tear through 18 songs at legendary haunts like Max's Kansas City and the Whisky; extras include commentary and a photo gallery by Gruen, who's also interviewed by the Dictators' Handsome Dick Manitoba.



#### FOX IN A BOX FEATURING PAM GRIER (MGM)

No self-respecting player will want to be caught without this silky set, which brings together three of the '70s soul sister's best starring roles—*Coffy* ("She'll cream ya!"), *Foxy Brown* ("She's the meanest chick in town!") and *Sheba, Baby* ("Hotter than Coffy! Meaner than Foxy Brown!"). Director Jack Hill (*Switchblade Sisters*) contributes commentary on *Coffy* and *Foxy*, but the real special feature is Ms. Grier herself, who remains super-fine till the end of time.



#### KISS OF DEATH/THE DARK CORNER/WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS (Fox)

Three fine *film noir* titles from the Fox vaults. *Kiss* pits reformed hood Victor Mature against giggling sadist Richard Widmark (who gained screen infamy here for shoving a wheelchair-bound woman down a flight of stairs) on the real streets of New York. *Dark Corner* stars Lucille Ball as a secretary helping her boss beat a trumped-up murder charge, while *Sidewalk* has rogue cop Dana Andrews hunting a killer while covering up a homicide of his own. All are perfect viewing for

just after dusk, preferably with the dame or lug of your choice.



#### SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER (Criterion)

Francois Truffaut's wry and adventurous tribute to the American genre pictures that influenced him stars French crooner Charles Aznavour as a heart-heavy concert pianist who gets tangled up with gangsters and upwardly mobile dames. A joy for arthouse habitués and Late Night Movie hounds alike, Criterion's two-disc set includes new interviews with Aznavour, documentary excerpts on Truffaut and the film's source novel by David Goodis, and commentary by a flotilla of critics.



#### FORBIDDEN GAMES (Criterion)

Beautiful fantasy/drama from Rene Clement about two abandoned children in post-war France who conduct elaborate rituals as a means of coping with the horror around them. The film earned the 1952 Oscar for best foreign film; Criterion's DVD includes an alternate opening and ending, and interview with Clement and star Brigitte Fossey.



#### KONGA (MGM)

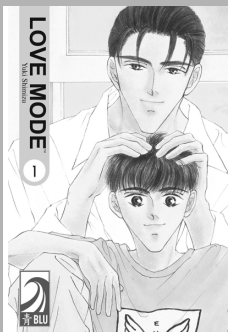
*King Kong*, grindhouse style: Michael Gough stars as a barking mad scientist who injects a chimp with growth serum and sends the pumped-up monkey (a guy in a ratty ape suit) to kill his critics. Konga eventually grows King-sized and tears up London. Delirious junkfood horror-chiller, with an unrestrained performance by Gough and some cool, man-eating plants.



#### THE WEST WING: THE COMPLETE FIFTH SEASON (Warner Bros.)

My wife, a diehard Aaron Sorkin fan, says that this season marked the beginning of the long-running series' decline, and I'm inclined to agree. The dominant plotlines (battles with a contentious House Speaker, the fallout from a sanctioned assassination) are talky and dull, and the stories' balance between politics and personal drama is often off-kilter. But great turns from Joshua Malina and Mary-Louise Parker offer a reminder of the heights the show could hit when its creative engines were on blaze. Six discs, commentary on three episodes.

## MANGA by Lyn Jensen



### GAY ANGELS IN LOVE, FINALLY!

TokyoPop/BLU releases Earthian Manga.

"Are those guys making out?" fans wondered when the anime *Earthian* was released in the '90s. Actually the two locked in embrace were angels from another planet (obviously), but the video was what first introduced Americans to the Japanese series about gay angels who watch over the Earthian (us) while concealing what they are—in more ways than one.

Now TokyoPop, through its BLU imprint, is releasing an English translation of the manga—the print series—by Yun Kouga. It's one of three current titles for BLU that specialize in a genre called "yaoi" or "shonen ai" in English and "Boys' Love" in Japan. "We use the Japanese, they use the English," Alexis Kirsch of TokyoPop explained.

"The series was originally published in the eighties and rereleased in a special edition format [in Asia] in 2002. Ours is the English version of the special edition with only minor differences. Our *Earthian* releases will be four books long, though the main story concludes in book 3. Book 4 has some side stories including chapters that

were drawn in 2002 especially for the book. Book 2 will come out in February," said Kirsch.

BLU is currently offering two other titles, *Love Mode* by Yuki Shimizu and *Shinobu Kokoro: Hidden Heart* by Temori Matsumoto. "We see the market is out there for these things," said Kirsch, following the surprising success of *Fake* and *Gravitation*, the yaoi series in TokyoPop's back catalog.

*Earthian* is for fans 16 and up but the other two are more explicit, for adults 18 and over. Kirsch calls *Hidden Heart* "a little hardcore." It's not a single series but a collection of stories where the plots are thin and the gay sex explicit. *Love Mode* has more in common with *Fake*, having been originally published in 1998 by *Be X Boy*, the Japanese magazine that brought *Fake* to the world.

As Kirsch described *Love Mode*, "No big plot, starts with a case of mistaken identity, a high school boy thinks he's going on a date with a girl, but it's a guy." The guy, meanwhile, thinks the innocent schoolboy's a male hooker by the same name. Over the next three years, BLU will distribute subsequent volumes of *Love Mode* focusing more on the nightclub owner who set the two up. And a look at [www.blumanga.com](http://www.blumanga.com) shows five more series coming up in 2006.