

GEEKED Videogame reviews by Adam Diamond



GAUNTLET: SEVEN SORROWS

PUBLISHER | MIDWAY
PLATFORM | PS2, XBOX
PRICE | \$49.99
ESRB RATING | T (TEEN)

WHAT'S COOL: Original hack-n-slash action, funky new attacks for each character and, once again, the return of the deep, "Blue Wizard is about to die" voice.

WHAT'S UNCOOL: Bad camera angles abound; way too many cut scenes.

GAMEPLAY ▲▲▲▲▲

GRAPHICS ▲▲▲▲▲

SOUND ▲▲▲▲▲

GAUNTLET FIRST made its debut back when coin-op was king, apes (and not their Italian plumber foes) were the stars and playing with friends tended to involve taking turns with the same joystick. *Gauntlet* was the first game that let you play four at a time, a revolutionary concept that helped ensure that it became a hit. When the designers added that booming voice of God, that told you when you needed food and how close the grim reaper was, that hit became a classic that spawned a few updates and eventually ported for modern consoles. *Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows* remembers all of that and tries to add a plot, turning a great game into merely a good one.

Ironically, the plot is by far the worst and most useless part of any *Gauntlet* game. In this case there was an emperor who was jealous of four Immortals: the Warrior, the Wizard, the Elf, and the Valkyrie. Wanting to steal their immortality, he enlisted the help of some bad guys to capture the Immortals so he could steal what made them special. Surprise of surprises, the bad guys trap the Immortals as asked, but then enslave the world. Forced to admit he screwed up, the emperor goes back to get the Immortals (now no longer immortal) and somehow gets them to help save the world. To do so, they must fight their way through level after level of minions before facing, one by one, the bad guys who caused all this trauma. Based on what happened, one has to wonder why they bother.

Of course, if they did nothing there'd be no game, so we're glad at least for the opportunity to fight our way through *Gauntlet* again. Yes, the gameplay is repetitive, but that's *Gauntlet*. You know this going in. Still, Midway, aware of all this, added a few neat new tricks anyway. For instance, the annoying process of having to collect keys to open treasure chests and the periodic door, no longer hangs over your head. A simple R1 (or right trigger) will open most closed things, with keys only needed for special doors. Then again, each magical key is now guarded by death, who can only be dispelled by shooting your mystical wad, so conservation of magic is key. Saving your magic isn't all that easy, though, now that you can cast specific spells or make specific moves depending on which character you've chosen. And instead of using your loot to buy the same things available to all characters, each character has new attacks of their own to buy.

Don't let all this talk of character and individual stats fool you into thinking you've got an RPG on your hands, however. The path through each level is fairly linear and there is no character interaction whatsoever. That's OK, though—*Gauntlet* fans aren't here for character development—which kind of begs the question, "Why, oh why, did Midway tack on so much plot?" After each level, we suffer through a cut scene telling us more irrelevant story—a tale, I might add, that does nothing at all in aiding you to play the game. Had the designers eliminated or reduced the story, they could have spent the time developing more levels. Or maybe they could have just built a game engine that doesn't periodically change the camera angle so that your enemies can attack you from behind with almost no warning.

Yo, even girls can shoot a mystical wad now and again in *Gauntlet*.

DISC JUNKIE by Paul Gaita

A TIP SHEET FOR COMPULSIVE DVD BUYERS



SO RECENTLY, my mother asks me, "Oh, have you seen *The Aristocrats*? I hear it's *very* funny." And "very" is said in the same tone she uses to describe Charlie Rose as "very flirty with his female guests," or HBO's *Rome* as "very dramatic," which translates as, "I'm okay with adult themes, but really, do they have to swear so much?" Well, Ma, in regard to *The Aristocrats* (on DVD from TH!NKFilm), the answer is yes—in fact, the Who's Who of comedians on display in Paul Provenza and Penn Jillette's documentary might have created some new curses in their telling of a very depraved backstage in-joke that's been passed down through generations of stand-up. But what separates *The Aristocrats* from, say, the gross-a-thon humor of Robert Schimmel, is the fact that the film is as much about comedians—their thought processes, their relationships—as it is about the joke, which serves as a sort of secret fraternal password. It's hard to list a standout among the participants—Sarah Silverman knocks it out of the park with her berserk childhood "remembrance," and Bob Saget lives up to his reputation as one of the filthiest in the business. But the real surprise is some of the older comics, especially Chuck McCann and Larry Storch (yeah, from *F-Troop*), who sail through the gag with the kind of showbiz polish you don't see much of anymore. The DVD includes contributions from Hank Azaria, Lewis Black and others that were edited from the theatrical release, as well as commentary from the filmmakers.



Speaking of raw and uncensored, there are several notable DVDs hitting the shelves this week devoted to the '70s and '80s punk scene. Though *God Save the Queen* (MVD) seems like it should be strictly UK-centric, the 75-minute clip compilation offers live and studio footage of bands from both sides of the Atlantic, from the Stooges and

Dead Boys to the Buzzcocks and Generation X. Meanwhile, Iggy, the Ramones, Elvis Costello and John Lydon come face to face with the smug, chain-smoking Tom Snyder in *The Tomorrow Show: Punk and New Wave* (Shout! Factory), a collection of interviews and performances culled from the late night talk show's library. Highlights include an inevitable spat between Johnny and Snyder and Kim Fowley (peddling the Runaways) and Snyder, and the Plasmatics unleashing holy hell with "Master Plan." On top of all that, Rhino finally reissues *Velvet Redux*, a hit-and-miss live show from Europe featuring the Velvet Underground's original line-up in 1993. Oh, and if you already own the four previous DVD releases of *Repo Man*, pick up the new one from MCA and give it to that neighborhood kid who loves Good Charlotte. It'll put him on the right path, and not a moment too soon.



Also vying for your paycheck this week: *The Virgin Spring* (Criterion), Ingmar Bergman's dark meditation on revenge that later served as inspiration for both Akira Kurosawa and Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left*; *Don't Play Us Cheap* and *Story of a Three-Day Pass* (both from Xenon), two little-seen features from Melvin Van Peebles—the former a supernatural fantasy-musical, the latter a stark drama about race; the gritty *Cisco Pike* (Sony), with Kris Kristofferson as a musician/dealer and Gene Hackman as the cop on his trail; *Educating Rita* (Sony), a winning comedy with Michael Caine as a dissolute professor and Julie Walters as his free-spirited student; three fun trash titles from Retro Seduction/Shock-O-Rama: *Abigail Leslie is Back in Town*, Joe Sarno's sexy dissection of middle class America, and *Lust for Frankenstein/Tender Flesh*, latter-day horror-and-kink-fests from Europe's most prolific smut peddler, Jess Franco. The latter's two-disc set includes U.S. and international versions.

MANGA by Lyn Jensen



KITTY MEDIA JOINS THE YAOI CRAZE

AS A GAY genre, yaoi manga is so hot it's even showing up in a subplot on NBC's *The Book of Daniel*. Kitty Media, a familiar source for adult anime DVDs, is contributing to the yaoi craze with two 18-and-over manga titles. One is the six-volume series, *Level C*, and the other, a one-shot graphic novel, *Skyscrapers of Oz*. Fans of hardcore yaoi will consider both essential.

Skyscrapers of Oz, by Yoshino Somei and Row Takakura, is a graphic version of a popular Japanese yaoi novel with gangster overtones. Fans of Mateno Tatenos *Yellow* will find a similar plot in *Oz*. Like in *Yellow*, two shady but trendy characters will do just about anything for a price (although they're not hit-men, despite what the book-jacket blurb suggests). Again, like *Yellow*, one guy's in a torrid gay relationship with a teenager, while the other has a past with women. *Oz*, however, takes a more serious tone than the witty *Yellow*. It's the straighter (straighter, anyway) guy who gets the assign-

ment to humiliate (rape) a cute teenage boy involved with a CEO. He'll violate him for money, but not for love, and therein lies the problem with this story: There are a few plot holes. But perhaps that's to be expected from erotica.

Level C, by Aoi Futaba and Kurenai Mitsuba, is an extreme "adult romance" about the faithful, loving relationship between a teenage male model and a handsome young executive at a Tokyo fashion firm called Level C. In volume 4, the latest published in the US, an author's note reads, "We just wanted to create lots of sex scenes, so now we're struggling to create a story." Indeed, fans consider the series more about hardcore gay sex than any plot of consequence, but it's definitely about love, not just sex. Volume 4 even touches on realism, as the schoolboy model's stepmother discovers his relationship with the slightly older man. Volume 5 is due in February and the final volume in May.

Kitty Media and its parent company, Media Blasters, have a wide selection of anime, including *Level C* on DVD and (even) VHS, but manga offerings are sparse. Kitty will offer another Row Takakura yaoi manga, *But I'm Your Teacher*, in April. Media Blasters has several mainstream manga titles, including the sci-fi *Baron Gong* and the adult manga, *Apocalypse Zero*, the anime reputed to be the most violent ever made.