



Soul Reaver

Think vampires are all about high-school drama, tight T-shirts, and beautiful friends? Think again...

You shouldn't care, you really shouldn't. But if you're not a great fan of Sony's little grey box, the prospect of yet another PlayStation 'cast-off' might annoy you. Last month it was *Resident Evil 2* and now we have Crystal Dynamic's dark-as-hell adventure, *Soul Reaver*. We say, "Open your mind" – when a game's this good, it could come from the CD-i for all we care.

But before we get carried away yabbering on about game mechanics, warpgates and divided realms, take a glance at the visuals. As you can see,

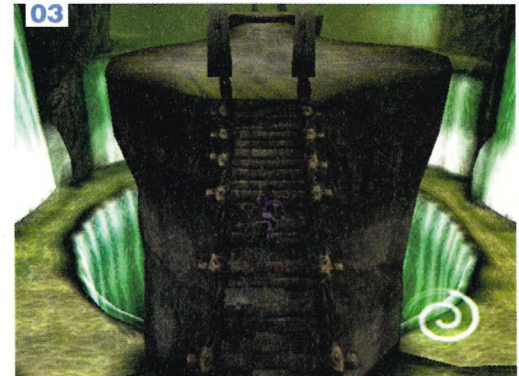
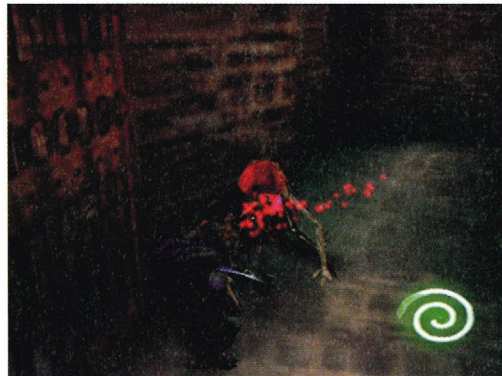
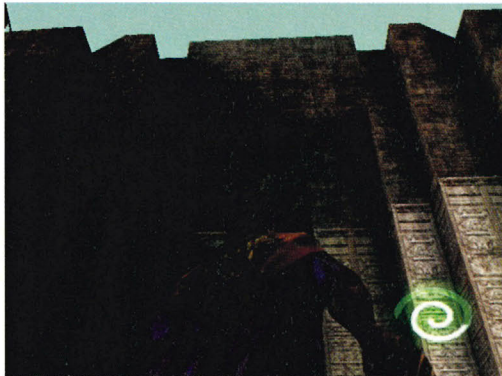
this is a game that fell out of the ugly tree and *missed* every branch on its way down. Indeed, were it not for a certain Namco slash 'em up, we'd be awarding *Soul Reaver* the title of best-looking Dreamcast game. From the very beginning, when you're introduced to Raziel, it's incredible – look closely through his ribs and you can see his shredded wings flapping in the breeze. Play the game for a couple of hours and you'll have witnessed some truly impressive vistas – walking into the main hall of the human settlement is an early highlight. It's not just the

quality of the graphics that impress, it's the whole feel, the ambience, that sucks you into the game. If vampires really were to take over a planet, you just know the result would be identical to Nosgoth: the mythical world in which *Soul Reaver* takes place. It's a crazy, decrepit medieval hell, mixing awesome gothic architecture with steampunk machinery to staggering effect. One moment you could be racing through the dank, deep bowels of the underworld, the next you'll be slaughtering humans as you ravage their archaic city... There's no way you can fail to be hooked by *Soul Reaver's* creepy atmosphere.

Initially, the action plays like any other 3D adventure of recent times, but after an hour of vampiric exploits you come across something which shatters this conception completely: the Realms system. Essentially, the game has two planes. The Physical Realm is where most of the action takes place because here, Raziel is able to make contact with items – for example, he can pick up

"Take a walk through the world of Nosgoth and you get the impression that **this is what a real vampire's world would look like"**

- Publisher: Eidos Interactive
- Developer: Crystal Dynamics
- Price: £39.99
- Release date: Out now
- Players: One
- **For:** Truly magnificent visuals. Fangtastic design. You can't die. Zero loading times
- **Against:** Lots of running around. A bit samey at times. Eats VM slots



01 Surely the most satisfying of videogame deaths: impaling an enemy on your big, sharp, pointy stick. Aaagh...

02 ...You can also attack with your claws when unarmed – another excellent touch

03 The Abyss into which Raziel was thrown by his jealous lord Kain, thus losing his true vampire status and wings

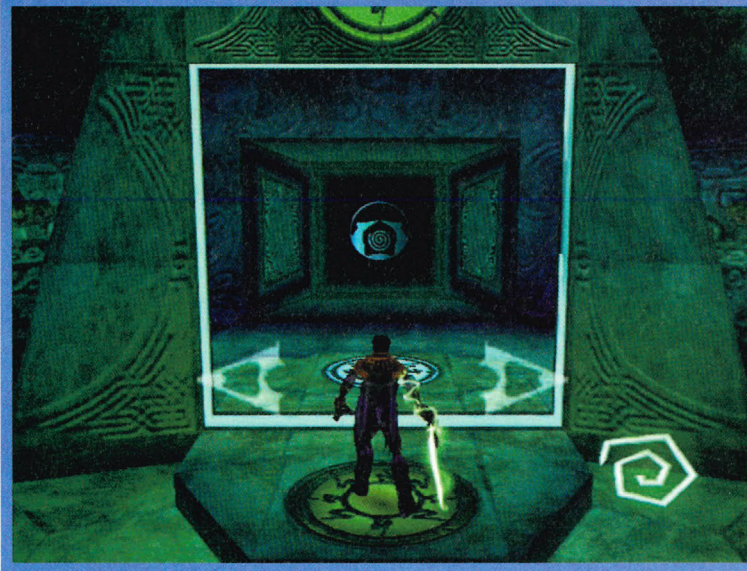
weapons for attacking enemies (whose souls you can then devour – thereby filling up on energy). The Spectral Realm is a dark, warped version of the secular world which Raziel can return to at will (he is also forced to return if his energy reaches zero). Getting back to life, however, is just a case of recharging his energy by slicing and sucking the gimp-like characters that wander this rank domain.

Shifting between the two realms is a vital part of the game as some areas can only be reached in this way. A good example occurs at the top of the Silent Cathedral. In the physical world a row of pipes forms a gate to halt your progress, yet shift to the Spectral Realm and they bend drastically making a whole new area accessible. Of all the innovative concepts apparent in *Soul Reaver*, this has to take the crown.

As in most adventure games, *Soul Reaver* also offers you a variety of secondary skills such as swimming and climbing. Here, though, you don't simply learn the whole bunch in one ▶

The Stargate... sort of

This is a massive game. Fortunately, the designers have utilised a 'gate' system to allow you to warp between clan areas in the quickest time possible (there are several vampire clans in Nosgoth). When you find a door with a blue circular symbol on it, go through and stand on the floor plate. Activate the gate and it will be connected to the other accessible areas, allowing you to cross the game world in ultra-quick time.



Soul power



One of the most original aspects of *Soul Reaver* is the fact that when Raziel dies he simply returns to the spirit realm for a while. You don't get a three lives limit. There's no 'Game Over'. This quasi-spiritual theme is a burgeoning one. *Messiah* puts you in control of an angel who inhabits bodies, uses them, and then escapes if said body is killed. *Omikron*, too, deals with body-swapping. Are religious games next? It's possibly the only mass human activity this industry hasn't exploited...



2nd opinion

With the release of *Shadow Man* and the forthcoming *Code: Veronica* and *Tomb Raider: Last Revelation*, Dreamcast's action/adventure market has developed an extremely healthy glow. *Soul Reaver* is the finest example of the genre yet to appear on DC and although the game's content remains the same as on other platforms, this version is definitely the best in terms of visuals. With hours of absorbing gameplay, a superb atmosphere and the innovative use of two diverse 'Realms', this is a must for adventure fans.

Lee Hart

► specially designed area (à la *Tomb Raider*). Instead, you are given a new ability each time you kill a clan leader (or 'end-of-level boss'), and these are spread throughout the game. In our first weekend of play, for example, we spent five hours before finally learning the ability to pass through solid gates. This ensures that the process of experimentation and discovery continues throughout the whole quest. Which is simply great design.

In creating *Soul Reaver's* battle system, Crystal Dynamics has obviously spent time studying other games, as this has one of the finest attack modes yet seen on Dreamcast – *Resident Evil* and *Zelda* should both be top of Crystal's Christmas card list. By holding down the right shoulder button, Raziel locks on to his closest opponent, allowing an impressive combination of dodge, attack and impale moves. Strike enough blows and your ugly assailant will be knocked semi-conscious and left open to your final move. Delay too long and they'll start attacking again. Enemies

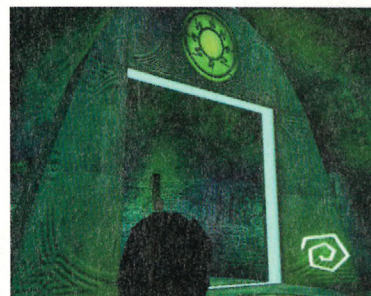
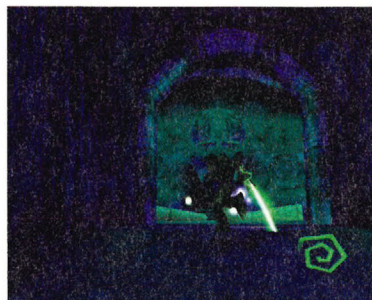
can be killed in a variety of ways, from setting them on fire (pull a torch off the wall then throw it at them) to chucking them into a pool of water. Our favourite modus operandi is to throw a staff at your antagonists. Normally one shot should be enough to make them dizzy, so all that remains for you to do is pick up the projectile again and slam it straight through their hearts. Apart from looking cool, this is the quickest way to get rid of an enemy before his mate gets a chance to attack you (they nearly always come in pairs). Just make sure you've chowed down on their soul before retrieving the staff from their still-warm corpse, otherwise reanimation is a very real prospect.

The further you progress through the game the more firepower becomes available to you. Initially you're stuck with torches, but soon you'll be

casting spells while wielding the Fire Reaver or, eventually, blowing enemies to bits with the all-powerful *Soul Reaver* – a magical sword that wraps itself around your inner Spirit.

This is also an immense game. You could spend days exploring and still have the feeling that there's much more you haven't touched (a *Soul Reaver* walk-through would run at 20 pages). But will you actually want to keep going? Admittedly, when the gameplay is pared down to its essentials, there really is too much running around from one arena to another. The developers have tried to make this as interesting as possible, providing a liberal sprinkling of enemies who do their damndest to halt your progress, but they soon become all too easy to blast past. You learn that the best way to deal with a

“This is a damn **fine adventure**. . . If you're sick of quick-burst, multiplayer games then ***Soul Reaver*** should be **the next game you buy**”



01 You should think twice about slaying humans. If you leave them be, it isn't difficult too stalk up on them and drink life from their necks

02 The architecture is wonderfully gothic and the scale of many scenes will leave you breathless

03 Vampire hunters won't think twice about attacking you with their strangely anachronistic flame-throwers

single enemy is to lock on and press X two or three times, while multiple assailants need to be split up and the soul sucking left until they're all dead. Every so often things get a bit tougher, such as when you face the end-of-level bosses, but they're never overly tough – even Kain, with his 100 per cent accurate Soul Reaver, can be bettered in a few minutes once you work out his weakness. It's not your trigger finger that's being tested here, it's your mental dexterity.

To attack this game for its few faults, though, would be churlish. *Soul Reaver* is a damn fine adventure and a welcome addition to a genre still in its Dreamcast infancy. If you're sick of the quick-burst coin-ops that have made DC their home, then Eidos' latest offering should be the next game you buy. Just don't expect to be doing anything else for a while ■

Andrew Collins

Horror story

Unlike the majority of videogame plots, *Soul Reaver's* storyline has enough credibility to draw you into the game. As *Soul Reaver* is a follow-up to the PlayStation's *Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain*, the saga continues where the original game left off. You are Raziel, a vampire in league with Kain, the lord of all the undead, and not a very nice chap. When Raziel's spooky vampiric power allows him to evolve and grow wings, Kain is overcome with jealousy and casts him into the local abyss. Awaking in the bottom of the pit, you are greeted by a disembodied voice, known as the Elder, who guides you on your way to Kain and vengeance.

