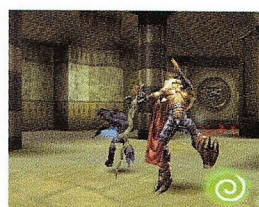


# SOUL REAVER



Objects such as spears and torches can be picked up and used as weapons against the 20 or so monsters. Combat is quick, intuitive and extremely brutal



The gothic tombs, carved stone walls and shadowy archways make an imposing backdrop to the game, adding to the eerie atmosphere

**A**lthough E3 more or less revealed an industry bereft of creative experimentation, there are a few developers taking risks out there. Crystal Dynamics, for example, could easily have gone into *Gex* overdrive by now, creating nothing but multiple sequels to the 'hilarious' platform romp. But no, now the studio has succumbed to the dark side, resurrecting a shadowy 1996 title

There are also seven spells and the **eponymous Soul Reaver sword to collect**, providing a **powerful arsenal** with which to confront the game's many, **beautifully realised monsters**

and turning it on its head. Or rather – in keeping with the dark atmosphere of the game – ripped its limb from limb and cast it into the pit of hell. *Soul Reaver* is the interesting and compelling result.

Interesting and compelling, perhaps, but not blessed with the tightest of storylines. Raziel is a vampire, once the key henchman to lord of the undead, Kain. After an

argument involving a pair of wings, Raziel is cast into the Lake of the Dead by his jealous and paranoid master, and there he languishes for a thousand years. He's finally rescued by The Elder, a sort of pagan god who enlists the fallen anti-hero in a quest to topple Kain. The action then takes place in Nosgoth, a kingdom savaged by Kain's millennium-long rule of darkness which is on the brink of

apocalyptic collapse. It's like every straight-to-video 'Hellraiser' wannabe rolled into one.

Beneath the overly complex storyline is a game which takes gothic themes and concepts and expertly weaves them into a familiar genre: the 3D arcade adventure. Like Lara Croft and the dozens of thirdperson heroes that have followed her, Raziel can run, jump, climb, swim and battle with his foe – anything to get him through the vast complex environment. He also has puzzles to work through (another familiar staple of the arcade adventure ilk). Levers, locks, dials and traps all have to be contended with,

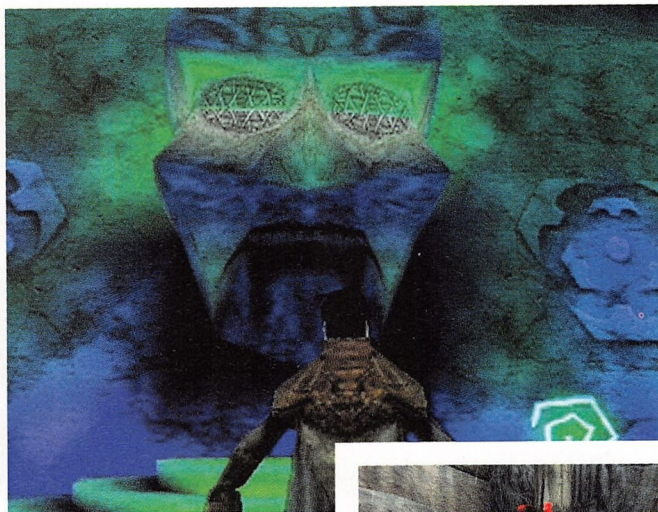




The epic landscape (top) is complemented by small-scale effects, such as burning zombies

and the designers have been ruthless at times, often placing pieces of a conundrum rooms apart to keep the player's lateral thinking challenged – there's a great section near the beginning where a series of huge stone blocks have to be dragged through a multilevel dungeon to open a series of gates. Players unable to manipulate objects in their minds while picturing several rooms at once need not apply.

Even more interesting is the fact that Raziel cannot die. When his energy runs out, or when he chants the relevant spell, he simply transfers from the material realm to the spectral realm – a sort of shadowy, warped copy of reality. Far from being a punishment, this transference between the realms is an essential aspect of the game, often giving the player access to previously unreachable platforms and rooms. This is a brave, complex and inspired piece of design, not only visually stunning (the rooms twist and distort as you transfer into the ghost world – a great effect), but also ripe with gameplay possibilities. You're forced to think on different levels throughout *Soul Reaver*, always considering each room as two rooms, the answer to a



Raziel cuts an imposing figure with masked face and tattered clothing. An undead superhero

puzzle possibly existing in either.

Also impressive is the carefully layered progression of the lead character. To begin with he can't swim or climb, but whenever he defeats an end-of-level boss he gains a new ability, giving access to new areas. There are also seven spells and the eponymous Soul Reaver sword to collect, providing a powerful arsenal with which to confront the game's many, beautifully realised monsters. Armed combat, incidentally, is also possible. Spears and torches can be picked up throughout the game and thrust or thrown at baddies in a simple, intuitive combat system.

As for the game environment itself, Crystal Dynamics has constructed a nightmarish, gothic world of epic (and non-linear) proportions. Huge citadels carved into sheer rock faces, mammoth columns spiralling into infinite space above you, hideous monsters shuffling in the shadows, tattered flags hanging from

castle balconies – they're all crisply defined, intricately detailed and hugely evocative. In the larger areas there can be a problem with intrusive fogging, making it difficult to get your bearings, but that's the price you pay for visual opulence on the PlayStation, and here it's a price worth paying.

There are other downsides. The gameplay, essentially based on puzzle-solving and accurate jumping, isn't really far removed from other arcade adventure fare (Raziel can glide, though, which is a nice effect borrowed from *MDK*). The save system is also flawed, sometimes forcing you to replay large sections of the game to get to new areas. However, if you want a darker, more fiendish alternative to *Tomb Raider et al*, with some new gameplay slants and breathtaking visuals, *Soul Reaver* will hit the spot.



Edge rating:

Eight out of ten

Format: PlayStation/PC

Publisher: Eidos

Developer: Crystal Dynamics

Price: £45

Release: Out now



End-of-level baddies are suitably imposing, and beating them isn't simply a case of exploiting a weakness – you need to employ puzzle-solving skills