



It's no secret that R: Racing Evolution is a bit of a departure for the Ridge Racer series. More sim-oriented than arcade, it attempts to meld the hardcore racing action of Ridge Racer with the challenge structure and car-centric philosophy of Gran Turismo. It sounds great on paper, and in execution it is indeed great, but I'll be damned if I didn't long for the Ridge Racer of old.

Don't get me wrong, however. I really like this game. Its execution is of the highest quality, with superb physics and control, and on Xbox, truly sparkling graphics (GameCube suffers from a lower resolution, the PS2 version remains untested). The ingenious Pressure Meter, which allows you to fluster your opponent into making a mistake, is a fantastic gameplay device, so simple and yet so satisfying. As you tuck in behind an opponent, you can cause their pressure gauge to rise, and once it's full, they will make a mistake at the next braking zone, allowing you to slip past. It looks awesome and it feels awesome.

As for the game surrounding the dynamics, the much talked-about Racing Life mode is but a small portion of the experience, but it's fun to play through, and the game's scads of racing challenges give you far more to do than in any previous Ridge Racer. There are also more tracks on offer here, even if some are real racing circuits.

Which rather conveniently brings me to the point where I talk about what I miss from the previous Ridge Racers.

:Racing Evolution

Don't expect a classic Ridge Racer game, and you will love it



What are these real cars doing in my Ridge Racer game?

"I would be a fool to call this game anything other than great."



As I mentioned, there are real racing circuits in this game, meaning there is less of the gleaming metropolitan futurism that I used to love so much. Indeed, this is even reflected in the interface, which is much more Moto GP-like and less stylized. I miss the cities and coastal towns that used to be so exhilarating to race through. By including tracks like Suzuka, R: Racing loses some of the originality, some of the fantasy, that existed in previous Ridge Racers. But the real issue to me is that Ridge Racer has always existed in its own sort of hardcore niche, and by taking the series closer to Gran Turismo by adding rally racing and making the game more expansive, I think it's lost something. The intimacy, the almost Zen-like relationship with the track, is not here. Even so, I would be a fool to call this game anything other than great. Feel free to disregard my personal issues unless you are like-minded.

Michael Hobbs B+

System: Xbox, Playstation 2, GameCube
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: December



INTERVIEW

Now that we've played it, we've gone back and asked a few more questions of R: Racing Evolution's director, Hideo Teramoto

play: This is a very different game from the previous Ridge Racers in terms of its structure. Were you nervous about taking this new approach?

Hideo Teramoto: "R" is not just a sequel to the previous Ridge Racer games. The purpose of producing "R" was to provide a totally new experience, encompassing various racing styles from around the world. This was our objective from the beginning of the project, so I had no hesitation.

It's a much more expansive game, isn't it? You have given the player a lot more to do, making the appeal of the game more broad. Was this your intention?

We researched many driving games from both the U.S. and European markets, with the assistance of our U.S. and UK staff. One of the directions that we decided to pursue as a result of this market research was to make a game that caters to as broad an audience as possible.

Personally, I would have been satisfied with a straight sequel to Ridge Racer V, but I was surprised by the new ideas, especially the pressure gauge. It adds a lot of life and excitement to the CPU racing. When did you first think of this idea?

I'm glad that you liked the idea. I had this idea in my head from the beginning of the project. It was a simple idea born from the answer to the question, "How do we create a racing game with battles among characters?" Since this was a very simple idea, it is very strange that we didn't come up with this idea long time ago.

Were you able to use track data from MotoGP courses like Suzuka directly, or does that game run under a different engine?

We had the basic know-how and some course data from the development of the MotoGP series, however, as the game

engine is new, we had to modify and create new course data.

How did you recreate so well the sound of the cars racing past the camera in the replays?

Our in-house sound staff and programmers recorded all of the actual vehicle sound effects. There is no special technique or shortcut that we used.

Speaking of the replays, they are fantastic. The cameras are very well placed along the circuits. This is something that lesser games always get wrong. Is there a team or a person dedicated to getting them to look so dramatic?

We have a specialized technical team that handles all of our replays. Some of these guys have years of experience, having handled the replays and camera work from our MotoGP series. I'm very happy with the quality of the replays.

Do you have proprietary software that assists you in creating the racing courses? In other words, do you have a way for someone who is not a programmer to easily lay out the courses in rough form and test them?

We have our own proprietary tools to create racing circuits. However, more importantly, the skills and knowledge of our experienced staff, who are well acquainted with cars, circuits and the data structure, was vital in creating enjoyable courses. They weren't actually programmers, but they had enough basic knowledge of programming to do their jobs.

How do you see racing games evolving over the next few years? Apart from online play, isn't it a question of just adding more and more detail to the cars and environments?

I believe there is more that we will be able to do. There are many different elements involved in the experience of actually driving cars. It is not a case of just improving the quality of visuals or sounds. Similar to the "Pressure Meter," the new feature we added to R, I believe that our job is to continue to add innovative new features.

Do you think that the increased CPU strength of the next generation of systems (PS3, etc.) will allow you to do things that you cannot do now in terms of gameplay?

Yes, I already have some ideas, but for obvious reasons I can't share them with you at this time. Sorry.

What kind of car do you drive?

I have '91 VW Golf 2 (A2 Golf). I bought it six months ago. I'm currently at the stage of fixing and exchanging old parts, but am very excited with how I can tune up my new baby!

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