

# R: RACING EVOLUTION

It helped launch PS2, but can *Ridge Racer* take on this sophisticated age?



**DETAILS**  
 PUBLISHER EA  
 DEVELOPER NAMCO  
 PRICE £39.99  
 PLAYERS 1-2  
 OUT NOW  
 WEBSITE WWW.NAMCO.COM  
 60HZ MODE NO  
 WIDESCREEN YES  
 SURROUND SOUND YES  
 PERIPHERALS STEERING WHEEL, CHAMOIS LEATHER

**AT A GLANCE**  
 Ridge Racer used to hold the slick, balls to the wind, arcade racer crown but Namco has thrown all that out for *R:RE* and concentrated on Gran Turismo-style simulation. And some foxy chicks.



**T**he year is 1928, and after tireless campaigning by the suffragettes, women get equal voting rights in the UK. 1949, Simone De Beauvoir writes *The Second Sex* and precipitates feminism as a concept. 1960, and the world's first oral contraceptive pill starts a sexual revolution, liberating womankind from the shackles of biology. And now, in 2004, we witness another feminist landmark. After five outings as objectified, track-side eye candy, the *Ridge Racer* women finally graduate to driving the cars they've spent so long strutting alongside. True, they do wear impossibly tight racing leathers and show an alarming amount of chest furniture, but y'know, in an empowering way.

After almost five years, Namco's *Ridge Racer* is back on PS2 and as its new heroine Rena, her story mode and the title suggest, it's all change for the illustrious arcade racer series. Mercifully, the process of evolution has been slow enough that the series hasn't turned into a word processor or RPG. *R:RE* is still about fast cars and tight corners, although we're not nearly as impressed with the new beast as we hoped we might be.

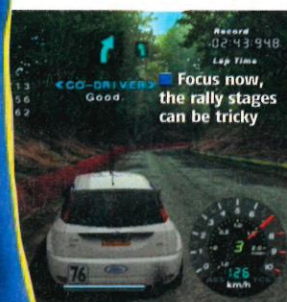
The problem is that for a franchise that always prided itself on its petrol slick, big grin racing, *R:RE* feels and looks like it's lost its nerve. In its place is a *Gran Turismo* lite clone that for all its polish, technical competence and

licensed cars and tracks can't decide whether it wants to embrace utter realism, or its predecessors' legendary arcade handling.

## STORY DRIVEN

This is not to say that the game is bad. It's not. It's likable, even if much of it's been borrowed from other successful racing games. Central to *R:RE* is Racing Life, a story-driven mode that follows the career of Rena, an ambulance driver turned professional petrol head. Over its 14 stages, Racing Life takes in a mixture of racing styles. Alongside NASCAR (yawn) oval track racing in Le Mans class cars you'll find multi-stage rally championships, one-off events in classic collectors' cars, GT tournaments, and even drag racing complete with US muscle cars. Humiliate the opposition and you win a car to add to your collection. You also win points for style, drafting (driving in an opponent's slipstream), powerslides and impact-free driving, which you can use to buy new vehicles, mod existing ones and purchase new challenges and events in the game's bid at longevity, Event Challenge mode.

Context sensitive pit chatter works well, as does an innovation in the form of a meter that appears over opponents' cars as you approach them. The longer you dog their bumpers, the quicker their meter slides towards red. When it flashes you've thoroughly psyched out your opponent, who is then more likely to make



## RENA FAILURE

R:RE's hero is the winsome Rena. Here's her story in all its glory...



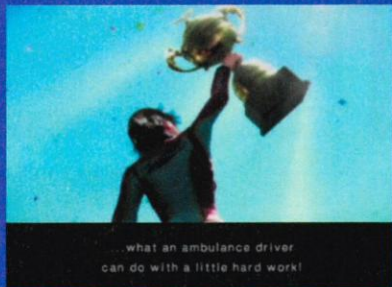
Once upon a time there was an ambulance driver called Rena. One day, after speeding an injured race driver to hospital, his manager was so impressed that he asked her to try out for the his team.



She does, and surprises everyone by winning her very first race. Hooray! And the next one. And the next...



And the next. And the next. And the next. And the next. And the next. And the next. And the next. And the next. And the next. And the next...



...And the next. Wow! Rena was so brilliant she was given her own team and lived happily ever after. The end.

There's bound to be a turn somewhere...

## STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE

Like a desperate lover, R:RE tries really hard to keep the racing flame alive with a variety of race styles. Here's the pick of the bunch



**Rally:** New to R:RE, you can now compete on the dusty rally circuit in a variety of licensed cars, including the Peugeot 206.



**Drag Racing:** Very brief and of questionable appeal, the drag strip at least lets you open up muscle cars, including the Dodge Charger, for other races.



**Retro One Offs:** Entertaining circuit races featuring classic cars from over the years. Our favourite? The stupidly powerful, tweaked Fiat.



**Urban Tournaments:** The closest R:RE gets to old-school Ridge Racing. Although, you can forget any thoughts of those incredible powerslides...



mistakes. As you'd expect from Namco, the cut-scenes are beautifully rendered, but so far as adding depth to the racing experience is concerned, Rena's story is little more than a linking device for the different race styles. It's also surprisingly short, ending as abruptly as it starts after little more than an afternoon's play.

Which leaves Time Trial, Vs, Arcade and the treats in Event Challenge to keep you coming back. In this latter section particularly, the developer has gone to great lengths to provide variety and control. There are single races, one-make races, points-based championships, one-on-one tournaments and even Gran Turismo-style precision-based stop and start challenges. You can customise your display to show as little or as much info as you need. In need of an ego boost? Then why not set up a race that pitches five tiddly Fiat 500s against your behemoth of a Bentley EXP Speed 8? Of course, you may not want to, but Namco has left that and a score of other doors open just in case you ever do.

### RUNNING ON EMPTY?

That's the good news. Less encouraging is the fact that you'll be unleashing all of this variety on the same 14 tracks (including a number of 'reverse' variants). But that's nothing compared to the sadness that committed RR fans will feel when they get to grips with the neutered handling. Maybe it's down to the (admittedly gorgeous looking) licensed cars, but whatever the reason, the gutsy, powerslide hungry handling that underpinned previous Ridge Racers has gone. We suspect the overhauled handling may be more realistic (we've never taken a corner at 178kmph in a Saleen SR7 Mustang so we can't confirm that 100%), but one thing we are sure about is that it's not nearly as much fun in the middle of

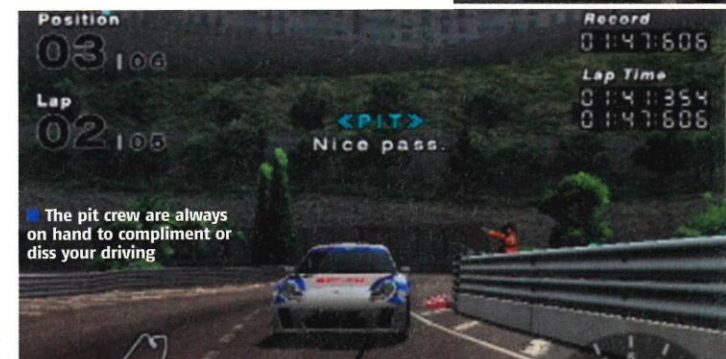
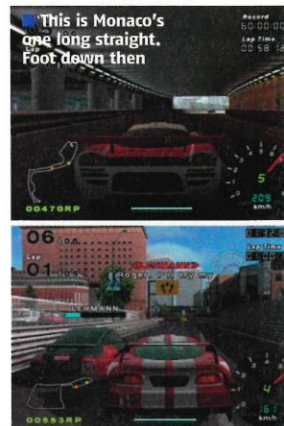
a race. Thing is, sim-wise R:RE can't compete with the depth of GT4. And as for ludicrously irresponsible, insanely fast arcade racing, Need For Speed Underground does that so much better. So if there is a next time Namco, have the courage to be true to the franchise. Gamers will thank you for it. That's a racing certainty. ■ Paul Fitzpatrick

## PETROL SLICK, BIG GRIN RACING? LOOKS LIKE R:RE HAS LOST ITS NERVE

PlayStation 2 VERDICT	
OFFICIAL MAGAZINE-UK	
Graphics	08 Pretty, but is it realism or arcade polish?
Sound	07 Great pit chatter but whiny engine noises
Gameplay	06 Not as grin inducing as we'd hoped
Lifespan	06 Plenty to unlock but enthusiasm will wane

Falls firmly between arcade and sim stools and aces neither category. Sadly, Ridge Racer is no longer the race leader of old

**6** / 10



The pit crew are always on hand to compliment or diss your driving

