Resident Evil: A Survival Horror Game from Capcom

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Bestsellers on a video game console tend to be born out of new genres, or at least radically different from all other games in the current market. From the fast-beyond-belief Sonic the Hedgehog on Sega Genesis, the globally phenomenal Street Fighter 2: The World Warriors on Super Nintendo, to the system-selling espionage game of Metal Gear Solid on Sony PlayStation, these video games all exhibit creative innovation from their respective designers that inspire awe from players worldwide.

Resident Evil, a single-player PlayStation game developed and produced by Capcom in Japan, is no exception. Unlike most designed-in-Japan games that first get released in the land of the rising sun, Resident Evil was simultaneously released in March 1996 in both Japan and the US, and five months later in Europe. Created and produced by Shinji Mikami, it has sparked a series of sequels on PlayStation as well as other game platforms, including the PC, Nintendo 64 and Sega Dreamcast. Resident Evil is sold under the name of Bio Hazard in Japan; the name change is to give the game a darker and more menacing appeal in the US. In fact, its animated gore and violent content earned the game an ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) rating of *Mature* for players of age 17 and up. The storyline involves the mass creation of bio-monsters by the biotech company Umbrella, and S.T.A.R.S., a SWAT team, is dispatched to investigate. Unfortunately, S.T.A.R.S. members are trapped in a mansion, and with the player's help, have to figure out a way out to safety while fighting hordes of monsters lurking around.

While Sony PlayStation enjoys a vast library of excellent games, certainly enough to secure its No. 1 position in the home consoles in its era, Sony lacks something that its competitors Nintendo and Sega have excelled for years—creating stellar first-party games that

brand loyalty on their respective video gamers. Sony, therefore, always has to rely on third-party

software companies to come up with these so-called AAA titles. Resident Evil by Capcom is

certainly one of these, and has without doubt helped sell many PlayStations. It combines strong

elements of action, shooting, puzzle, and adventure, but it does not fit into any one of these

genres. Capcom considers Resident Evil a genre-breaker, and coined the term *survival horror* to

describe the game.

Graphically what sets Resident Evil from other games is its use of prerendered

background, each screen of which is realistically and beautifully drawn by the graphics artists.

The player and all other characters and monsters are 3-D polygonal figures, who can roam

around freely, as well as climb stairs and descend ladders. The prerendered background screens

mean that the designers have absolute freedom to come up with innovative and interesting

camera angles, which are fixed within any one screen. It is not difficult to imagine some of these

angles are intended to induce feelings of claustrophobia in a small room, or impending doom

right around an upcoming corner. The use of prerendered background translates to a massive

amount of graphics data to be stored. Technologically speaking, Resident Evil is a game that

truly takes advantage of the much expanded memory available for the CD medium. Resident

Evil 2 did come out in the cartridge form for Nintendo 64 a few years later under the

development of Angel Studios, but both the graphics and audio take an expected hit to be able to

fit into the limited expensive space of ROM inside a cartridge.

The control scheme is a little unconventional for an action/adventure game. Pressing

right or left rotates the character in place, and up or down moves the character forward or

backward. So pressing left, for example, will *not* move the character on screen to the left. This

apparently frustrates many players who are not used to this control scheme, which is usually

reserved for first-person shooters. However, in later parts of the game, bio-monsters called *hunters* will chase the player down hallways and around corners at the same speed as the player can run. With the change of the camera angle at every new screen, this control scheme adopted by Resident Evil ensures that pushing up on the joypad always guarantees that one's character will be running straight ahead between screens.

All this chasing through the realistic-looking terrain, coupled with limited ammunition to prevent this game from turning into a huge shooting fest, is certain to give rise to many adrenaline rushes. In the audio department, the music complements the mood perfectly. Sometimes eerie, sometimes ominous, sometimes just plain silence except for the player's own footsteps. Between gameplay, cut scenes are presented to further the storyline. Some of these scenes are prerendered FMV (Full-Motion Video), some use the in-game engine with polygonal characters, and the rest of them even employ live actors. Whether intentional or not, these cut scenes tend to be very campy filled with bad acting, exaggerated gestures, and poorly written dialogue.

Interestingly, many people compare the experience of playing Resident Evil to watching a horror movie, albeit more like a B-movie. There are quite a few shocking moments, when monsters jump at you from nowhere in the midst of silence. The dialogue is laughably bad, and unless the designers intended to create this feel of a B-movie, it is obvious that the Japanese scriptwriters have a poor grasp of normal conversational English. The arguably most infamous line in PlayStation's history comes from a character in the game called Barry who discovers a lockpick and decides to give it to the female protagonist because she is "the master of unlocking." Curiously, the Japanese version also has the same voice-acting in English, accompanied by Japanese subtitles.

Capcom sprinkles the game with many goodies. Bosses are frightening huge, from a snake that meanders across an entire room, a highly intelligent plant that spreads its vines through the whole house, to the final well-animated boss Tyrant that towers over the player. During the game, the player assumes control of different S.T.A.R.S. team members to accomplish various missions. To increase the replay value, right before the game begins there are two characters to choose from, and their weapons and plots differ even though the terrain to navigate remains the same. Multiple endings await the player depending on her decisions during the game. Once the player is familiar with the layout of items and monsters in the game, he can go for the challenge to finish the game from start to finish under three hours. Success grants the player an invincible rocker launcher with unlimited ammo. With the rocker launcher, one can replay the game approaching it just like a shooter, blasting everything in sight. This is a nice way to extend the life of a game by changing the setting in which it is originally meant to be played.

Resident Evil is not without faults of course. The script and the control scheme are controversial in whether they add to or take away from the game. Many puzzles in the game are obscure and so out of place that they distract from the realistic feel of the adventure. It is too arbitrary to limit the player to carrying six items at any time. Certainly a key is easier to take along than a rocket launcher. A technological obstacle comes from the meager two megabytes of RAM for the main memory of PlayStation, due to the use of the data-intensive prerendered background in Resident Evil. Constant loading from the CD drive is needed, and Capcom puts in a loading screen showing a door opening slowly every time the player enters or exits a room. This can be very annoying, but Capcom insists that it adds to the atmosphere, which builds up as the player anticipates what is behind each door.

Resident Evil is often referred to as a copycat of Alone in the Dark, a PC game with similar premises. Resident Evil, however, displays such a huge leap in presentation and technology that the comparison is moot, and the game is indeed regarded in the industry as the pioneer of the *survival horror* genre. It is surprising to some that people are actually eager to buy a game to get frightened at home, but it is in fact not much different from paying to watch a horror movie to feel scared, except that in the case of Resident Evil, the player is in control of the character on the TV screen.