

Game Review: Wipeout

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The Sport of the Future

In 2052, anti-gravity racing is all the rage. The F3600 Race League boasts the best anti-grav race craft, the finest pilots, and the fastest action. This is the world Psygnosis created for Wipeout, one of the first games available for the Playstation after the console's 1995 launch.

In the first half of the twenty-first century, scientists were developing anti-grav technology. However, due to corporate greed and political maneuvering, government support of this research disappeared, and the researchers ridiculed. Despite this, anti-grav was a total success, solving the world's fuel and transportation problems, and giving rise to what would become the most popular sport of all time.

To be honest, the story line for Wipeout is thin, supplied in two pages of "quotes" in the game manual. However, it doesn't matter: it's simply a pretext for high speed racing. Once you start the game, all that matters is flying faster than the other 7 racers, and finishing the three-lap race in first place. This is no mean feat: every race, you start in last place, and need to speed your way to the front of the pack. They apparently don't believe in pole position in 2052.

[Full credits and publication information](#) are also available.

Gameplay Basics

The game offers three modes: single race, time trial, and championship race. Single race allows you to play against computer controlled opponents on any of the tracks, while time trial allows you to fly solo against the clock. The main event is the championship, where for every race you must place in the top three to advance to the next track. After all six tracks, if you've got the best overall record, you've won the championship and have earned the right to race the advanced circuit, which consists of the same tracks at higher speeds and with different art.

Of course, that's not to say the first circuit isn't fast enough. The entire game is designed for speed. The vehicles themselves move quite fast, and can get temporary speed bursts from arrows liberally placed on the track. The twists, turns, hills, and dips greatly increase the sense of speed. This speed is the key to winning: you need to hit every arrow, corner quickly, avoid the walls, and edge past the other racers in order to come out in front.

You do get one other help on your way to the front of the pack: weapons recharges. Whenever you pass over an active weapons recharge (they become inactive for a little while after any racer flies over them), you get the weapon corresponding to whatever color it was when you picked it up. Three of the weapons slow down enemy craft; one disrupts his controls; one protects you from the effects of other weapons; and one gives you a temporary turbo boost, faster than anything else in the game.

The Technology Behind the Game

The first things you'll notice about Wipeout is the sound. Even in the opening pre-rendered video, you hear the pulsing techno music which you'll have throughout the game. There are eight tracks by famous bands such as Orbital, Chemical Brothers, and Leftfield. The music selection fits well with the futuristic, high speed theme of the game. The Playstation is the first game console that could feature such rich

music because it used CDs to store game data, and Wipeout was one of the first games to take advantage of it by offering something more than the stereotypical "video game music" that could be easily described and synthesized within very small storage constraints.

The in game sound effects complement the music well. The techno pulse sets a rhythm to the game, almost as if it's intended to put you a focused trance, and the sound effects are subtle, loathe to break you out of the trance, while still providing information and richness to the game. For example, the anti-grav vehicles are almost eerily quiet, with only a faint hum to remind you of the vehicle you are driving. It fits well: with such slickly designed vehicles, loud engines would be out of place. Even the explosions, collisions, and the sounds of other vehicles rushing by are no more than a soft thump, thud, and whoosh.

The next thing you'll notice after the sound is the beautiful graphics and art. As with the sound, part of the quality of the graphics has to do with the hardware: the Playstation was one of the first consoles to feature true 3D graphics. As one of the first Playstation titles, Wipeout took the opportunity to show off something totally new. The vehicles themselves have a crisp look to them: brightly colored and decorated (with logos for the driver and the racing team), they look like a cross between snow speeders from the Star Wars movies and modern jet fighters. These vehicles move through true three dimensional environments: the tracks curve and twist in all directions, while rushing past are spectator stands, billboards featuring advertisements for the various racing teams and made up products, and overpasses with banners bearing the same sorts of ads. In the background, landscapes establish a unique sense of location for each track. All this is in stark contrast to older racing games: games before used flat race courses and flatter sprites to achieve two dimensional effects.

There's one flaw with the graphics, however: pop up. Objects that come into view from the background sometimes pop into view abruptly rather than gradually. At the time Wipeout was made, nobody had the experience programming on the Playstation to avoid this problem, but more modern games have since been able to eliminate it.

After the initial amazement at the look and sound of the game wears off, the most important part of the game is the feel: the controls will determine whether you will enjoy the game. Psygnosis invented anti-grav racing with Wipeout. They decided from scratch how the vehicles would accelerate, brake, turn, slide, bounce, and jump. The end result is that there is a bit of a learning curve while you discover the physics of the system. For example, the anti-grav racers slide a lot when cornering in a manner different from most racing games. However, the physics feel right for floating racers flying at high speeds. It takes a good deal of practice, but the controls are tight and responsive, so once you get used to how the craft moves, they always respond appropriately to your actions; you never blame the controller or the game for not going where you told it to.

Multiplayer capability exists in Wipeout, but requires two Playstations linked with a cable (and therefore two televisions and copies of the game). The awkwardness of such an arrangement means that it's rarely used. Split screen is now the norm for two player racing games on the Playstation, but at the time, it probably was too big a technical challenge. Besides, the link on the Playstation was new, and it's likely they were experimenting with it.

The other weak aspect of the gameplay is the AI. Every race, you start at the back of the pack and need to beat all the other vehicles. This feels like an artificial way to give the computer players a lead, to make up for their otherwise sub-par driving. Their maneuvering mostly consists of getting in your way, even when doing so does nothing to advance their own standing. In short, the computer opponents don't

always feel like convincing drivers, just obstacles.

Design Analysis

Overall, much of the design for a racing game is tied to the technology. The game is mostly about look and sound, solid controls, and so on. However, two things add to Wipeout's depth: vehicle design, and track design.

There are four different racing teams in Wipeout, and each team uses a vehicle with unique characteristics. They vary in acceleration, top speed, turning speed, and mass (which affects collisions, jumps, and bounces). No vehicle is strictly better than any other; for example, one has the best acceleration but poor top speed, while another has the best speed but poor handling. This brings depth to the play and replay: you can choose different vehicles to suit your mood, to give yourself a different challenge, or to try a new strategy. It also means that before you can claim to have "finished" the game, you'll need to win the championship four times.

Adding to the complexity of the game is the variety in track designs. Like the vehicles, each of the six tracks have distinct features and challenges. As some examples: the second track is mostly flat, emphasizing speed with some hard turns; the third track has the two hardest jumps in the game; and the last track has an extremely slippery "surface" (as little sense as that might make for frictionless racing), making handling difficult. In order to navigate all the tracks, the player must learn the track layouts so they hit each turn, speed boost, and weapon, and also have the skill to execute the race perfectly. Furthermore, in championship mode, you must use the same vehicle for all the tracks, even though you might want the speedy, slow turning one for the second track and the slower, faster turning one for the last track.

A third aspect of Wipeout's design adds to the fun, but not much to its depth. Each racing team has two pilots, each with a different logo, vehicle color, backstory, and pictures displayed at the end of a race (happy after a victory, dejected after a loss). While not adding real depth to the gameplay, this sort of thing has been a part of past racing games, and brings a sense of identity and character to the pilots.

Wipeout's Success and Context

One easy way to verify that Wipeout had a successful design is to note the sequels and obvious derived games. There are to date at least two more Wipeout games (Wipeout XL and Wipeout 3), both of which take the basic formula from the original. Also, Psygnosis's four titles in the Colony Wars series and the G-Police series show a reasonable amount of influence from Wipeout's controls, look, and feel. Indeed, these titles are largely the ones that have secured Psygnosis's reputation in the industry at large.

The music and graphics have had remarkable influence on later games. It is now standard practice for racing games and to a lesser extent many other sorts of games to have soundtracks featuring prominent artists (for example, Gran Turismo has, among others, a track from the hit band Garbage). Likewise, the attention to detail in the cosmetic aspects of the track and landscape is now fairly standard. Gran Turismo is again an example, but most new titles tout large amounts of detail to flesh out their worlds. Wipeout is not solely responsible for this trend, but it certainly was a pioneer.

The notion of different vehicles, and different personalities in your drivers, stems from at least the Super NES and MarioKart, where various characters had different Karts and speed, power, and handling characteristics. Today, we have games like Star Wars: Episode I Racer, which continues this tradition of associating different driving capabilities with different driver/vehicle combinations.

In summary, Wipeout was one of the first of a modern generation of racing games. It borrowed design ideas from earlier games, but due to a fundamental change in technology that it was part of, it necessarily helped re-invent much of the genre and establish new ideas in games, both racing and otherwise.

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Wipeout: Basic Information

Developer: Psygnosis, Ltd.

Publisher: Psygnosis, Ltd.

Platform: Playstation

Genre: Racing

Release Date: 21 November 1995

Credits: (as listed in the game manual)

Managing Directors: Ian Hetherington and Jonathan Ellis

Director of Development: John White

Producer: Dominic Mallinson

Product Manager: Sue Campbell

Product Assistant: Claire Garvie

Team Leader: Nicky Carus-Westcott

Game Designer: Nick Burcombe

Programmers: Jason Denton, Dave Rose, Rob Smith, Stuart Sockett

3D & 2D Artists: Nicky Carus-Westcott, Darren Douglas, Laura Grieve, Pol Sigerson, Lousie Smith

Additional Game Graphics and PR/Marketing Graphics: Lee Carus-Westcott

Conceptual Artist: Jim Bowers

Additional Graphic Design: The Designers Republic

Music: CoLD SToRAGE

Sound Effects: Tim Wright

Public Relations: Glen O'Connell (UK), Mark Day (USA), Catherine Jaymond (France), Ingo Zaborowski (Germany)

Manual Written by: Damon Fairclough, Nick Burcombe

Packaging Design & Direction: The Designers Republic, Keith Hopewood, Anthony Roberts

Technical Assistant: Paul Charsley

Development Secretary: Jennifer Rees

Quality Assurance: Mark Inman, Mark O'Connor, Paul Tweedle

Special Thanks To: Softimage, SGI, Bars & Pipes Professional, Cluffy, Paul McGarvey, Rob Holden, Paul Hartnoll, Joanne Galvin, Michele Raulin, Caroline Dupuy, Chris Meredith, & everyone at Psygnosis (too many to name)

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