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## Sony PlayStation 2

review by Greg Suarez of The Digital Bits



### Performance Ratings - Video Games (Video/Audio): A+/A

The graphics are unbelievable. Period. For game console-heads like myself, this is Eden. Sega's Dreamcast is close to the PS2 in graphics power and smooth animation, but the PS2 steps up the overall presentation and kills the Sega in the versatility contest. Game audio is usually impressive as well, depending on the artistic choices of the programmers.

### Performance Ratings - DVD-Video (Video/Audio): A-/A-

There are a couple of built-in video "tweaks" that can be applied to DVD playback on the PS2, that can both help and hurt the picture. But the default settings seem to be the best trade-off for both anamorphic and non-anamorphic DVDs. Darker scenes seem to be portrayed a bit too dark, with slight smearing, but this is so minor that it will likely not be noticed by most users under most conditions.

### Performance Rating - Music CDs (Audio): C+

Imaging and clarity are very good compared with most budget-priced, mainstream CD players. However, both imaging and clarity break down somewhat when compared to a higher-end Sony ES CD player, for example. The output level from the analog jacks is very low, requiring a higher volume setting than normal.

### Value/Overall Rating: A-/A+

At \$299 a pop, the PS2 isn't cheap, especially considering the now lower \$150 price of the Sega Dreamcast - a system close in gameplay and graphics power. Also, it's inevitable that the \$299 price tag will be cut around this time next year, when Sony feels the heat from the new Microsoft X-Box and Nintendo GameCube consoles. But the bottom line is that for \$299, you're getting the ultimate video game console experience in the solar system today, a DVD player on par with most mass-market units, a decent CD player,

plus Internet connectivity (tentatively in 2001) for surfing and gaming with your best friends thousands of miles away. And the "coolness" factor of this machine is second to none. There's only one word to sum up the PS2, and that is SWEET!

### Specs and Features

**Performance Features:** NTSC, supports PlayStation 2 and PlayStation software, Region-1 DVD-Video playback, Dolby Digital/DTS pass-through, compact disc playback, compatible with broadband Internet service (tentatively in 2001)

**Output Terminals:** Integrated A/V Multi-Out compatible with composite, S-Video or component video (Integrated A/V Multi-Out connections contain 2-channel analog audio outputs), optical digital audio

**Input Terminals:** Two controller pad ports (compatible with DualShock and DualShock 2 controllers), two memory card ports (compatible with PlayStation cards and 8MB PlayStation 2 cards), two USB ports, expansion bay for hard disk drive

**Input/Output Terminal:** S400 i.LINK (IEEE 1394 FireWire) up to 400 Mbps

**Included Accessories:** One DualShock 2 analog controller, integrated composite video/analog audio cable, AC power cord, instruction manual

**Recommended Accessories:** 8MB PlayStation 2 memory card, S-Video or component video cabling, second DualShock 2 analog controller

**Physical Properties:** 12"/3.125"/7.25" (W/H/D), 5 lb. 5 oz.

### "How long you been waiting in line?" (or, Getting your hands on a PS2)

Not many things will get a person up eagerly at 4 AM. But I had no trouble getting up at such an early hour on the morning of the big day - PlayStation 2 Day - October 26, 2000. Some people had been waiting in line all night at the neighborhood Best Buy, but I planned ahead and pre-ordered my brand-spanking new PS2 way back in March. I was pretty confident that I'd have mine at launch despite Sony's shocking announcement in September that, due to parts shortages, the number of units headed to the U.S. on launch day (one million to be exact) would be sliced in half. This, dear readers, is why some of you are banging your heads into the wall in frustration looking for one to call your very own.

You might be wondering why I was so stupid as to pass up sleep when, after all, I was confident of getting my PS2. Well, this was an exciting event and I enjoyed the time I spent in line with my fellow gamers, discussing the system and basking in the thrill and anticipation of the moment Electronics Boutique opened their doors and gave up the goods.

Okay, enough prologue already! You came for a look at the PS2, and that's exactly what you're gonna get...

### Nuts n' Bolts of the PlayStation 2

With the ever-maddening pace of development and popularity in the high-tech world of PCs, the Internet, video games and home theater, the word "convergence" has actually started to mean something. A one-box solution to all your entertainment needs (DVD,

Internet, video games, CDs) is Sony's aim for the PlayStation 2 (PS2). Riding on the staggering success of their first generation gaming system, PlayStation (PSX), Sony decided to evolve their CD-ROM based system many steps further. Graphics/gameplay power has been dramatically elevated, DVD-Video playback capability is now on-board (the games are, in fact, DVD-based), CD playback returns and, eventually, PS2 owners will be able to enjoy broadband Internet connectivity for both surfing the Net and playing games with friends on-line. Sony is on the right track with the PS2 to succeed in the monumental task of achieving convergence while leaving both high-tech entertainment geeks (like yours truly) and casual video gamers begging for more.

Packed in an unassuming (but beautiful) electric blue box, the PS2 is a sleek, black, industrial-looking contraption that seems more like something Q would supply James Bond with than the next generation entertainment machine. However, the laser-sharp, purple-blue PS2 logo and stylishly embossed Compact Disc, DVD-Video, DVD-ROM, Dolby Digital and DTS logos on the top panel assure you that this an entertainment device of some power and not a briefcase-sized nuclear weapon. The unit seems heavier than any of its competitors and feels much more solid than its predecessor. The PSX had a flip-up door to load discs, while the PS2 has a sturdy motorized drawer. Also new for the PS2 are two USB ports (for connecting peripherals like a keyboard or a mouse) and an IEEE 1394 (aka FireWire) input/output connection for broadband Internet connectivity - Sony calls this i.LINK. This feature will allow for Internet surfing and the ability to play games with other PS2 owners on Sony's network once it's up and working. Sony hopes to have its network on-line sometime in 2001, and will require a monthly subscription fee to access it. An expansion port, located on the rear of the unit, will accept a future accessory hard disk, which has an unknown release date as of now. What all this means, dear readers, is that the PS2 is quite a versatile machine that is designed to allow for even greater versatility in the future.



Connection to your television can be done by either composite, S-Video, or component video cabling. Video output and analog audio outputs are integrated into one bundle via an A/V Multi-Out. On tap for both video gaming and DVD playback is an optical digital output that can pass Dolby Digital and DTS bit-streams from corresponding discs. Included with the PS2 is a set of composite video/analog audio cables. But if you have the ability to take advantage of S-Video or component video connections, do it! The extra

amount of detail afforded by the latter connections is worth every penny that the cables will cost you.

On the gaming front, control pad jockeys can plug into one of two control pad ports, which support both the first-gen DualShock controller and the new DualShock 2 controller. If you're into role playing games, or setting up a season in **Madden NFL 2001**, there's also room on-board for two memory cards. Keep in mind that original PSX games can only be saved on first-gen memory cards, and PS2 games can only be saved on the new 8MB memory cards, so keep one of each handy if you just can't bear to let go of **Medal of Honor** or **Tomb Raider**.



Speaking of accessories, make sure you snag that new 8MB memory card because a lot of PS2 games have staggering levels of customization that you will want to take advantage of - not having a card will prove to be very frustrating. If you get lonely, don't hesitate to invite some friends over to join you in a little madcap, beer-greased PS2 gaming mayhem. Many PS2 games have extensive multi-player modes, so make sure you have an extra controller around (or have your friends bring their own controllers along).

So there you have it, the nuts and bolts of the snazzy PlayStation 2. In a few minutes, we'll take a look at a few of the early games available for the PS2. But first, let's see how the system handles DVD movies. So take a break from pummeling quarterbacks and wide receivers in **Madden NFL 2001** and watch Brad Pitt pummel emotionally repressed yuppies in **Fight Club**. After all, this is **The Digital Bits**, and DVD is what we're all about.

"New Shimmer's a floor wax AND a desert topping!" (or, How does a video game machine do as a DVD player?)

No more excuses. No more whining. You have no reason not to own a DVD player now. At \$299, the PlayStation 2 might be a little more expensive than a comparably equipped mainstream DVD player from Sony, but you also get killer video gaming and eventual Internet access all in one box! But you ask, "C'mon Greg, how effective can the PS2 be as a DVD player when it does all that other stuff too?" Well, there's good news and bad news.

First, the bad news. There's only one forward and reverse search speed, which looks to be approximately 2x to 8x. If you watch a lot of DVDs from Universal Studios (which tends to conserve chapter stops like rare elements), the lack of a 30x speed might be a bit annoying. The other gripe I have is that the PS2 does not have a built-in remote control receiver... and, subsequently, does not come with a remote control in the box. While there are several third-party remote controls on the market for the PS2's DVD facilities, I have yet to come across one that is either ergonomic or attractive. Plus, whichever one you choose, the remote's receiving device plugs into one of the controller ports, so if your PS2 does equal duty as a gaming machine and a DVD player, switching back and forth could get rather annoying. However, if you can't (or won't) spend the money for a third-party remote, the DualShock 2 controller included with the PS2 can be used to navigate your DVDs. An icon-based menu will show up on-screen to assist you with set up of the DVD portion of the unit, as well as chapter selection, audio track selection, subtitles, etc. The buttons on the controller are also assigned functions similar to a traditional DVD player remote, but are less intuitive. Using a controller for a DVD remote is doable, but can prove cumbersome.

Now the good news. The PlayStation 2 provides DVD playback on par with most mainstream DVD-only players on the market. Sony has built in two video enhancement options that can have both positive and adverse effects on picture quality. The first option is Digital Noise Reduction (DNR), designed to reduce noise and interference (this is the same basic process sometimes done in post production to your favorite DVD movies - you've heard us call it Digital Video Noise Reduction or DVNR). DNR has two levels of strength (DNR1 and DNR2), or can be turned off altogether. I found very little, if any, difference in video quality with the sample discs I viewed while switching between the various DNR settings. The other tweak available is Outline Sharpening (aka the dreaded edge enhancement). The function of this feature (which has five different settings between sharpest and softest) is pretty self-explanatory. The +2 setting sharpens edges to the point of causing serious noise problems, while the -2 setting turns the picture so soft that objects lose definition. I recommend leaving both DNR and Outline Sharpening set to their default positions - "Off" for DNR, and "0" for Outline Sharpening - especially for the non-videophiles out there, who might harm the picture quality more than help it with these adjustments. To my eyes, the default settings provided the best trade-off of noise and edge enhancement for anamorphic, non-anamorphic and full-frame presentations.

To give the PS2 a workout with anamorphic video on DVD, I popped in the super-hip, bone-crunching flick, **Fight Club**. Compared with a standard DVD-Video player, I found the PS2 to display almost all of the detail and smoothness that I'm used to seeing, without any MPEG decoding or artifacting problems. Two small problems did appear, however. Very dark scenes such (as the nighttime scenes behind the bar where Tyler and Jack first trade blows) appear a bit too dark, with fine detail blurring somewhat. And I felt that colors were a little over-saturated - they had a little too much pop. But these are fairly minor issues for most people, and a vast majority of viewers will likely never notice them without doing back-to-back comparisons with another player.

The non-anamorphic demo was provided by Criterion's 2-disc release of **Armageddon**. Again, colors had a bit more bite than I'm used to, but everything else about the video

was as good as I'm used to seeing it. The vast cityscape shots of New York in this film prove to be problematic no matter what kind of system you have. Lacking an anamorphic transfer, the outlines of buildings and bridges can appear very jagged, looking like the edge of a serrated knife. Hoping that the PS2's Outline Sharpening feature might alleviate this problem somewhat, I commenced tweaking. But no matter what setting I used, jaggies always remained (the Outline Sharpening softened the jaggies ever so slightly, but at the trade-off of picture detail). Again, my recommendation is to leave Outline Sharpening set to the default position.

Rounding out the DVD examination, I wanted to test the full-frame capability of the PS2, because I know some of you out there still have not come to grips with the idea of letterboxing. So I used the side B, full-screen version of Luc Besson's **The Fifth Element** from Columbia TriStar. Again, except for slightly too intense colors, all picture aspects were on par with my normal player, including a nice level of detail and good shadow delineation.

Audio from the optical digital output - which can pass both Dolby Digital and DTS bit-streams - is pretty much identical to all other DVD players I have heard (note that the PS2 does not have a built-in Dolby Digital or DTS decoder). It's important to remember that the quality of the Dolby Digital or DTS decoder and digital-to-analog converter(s) in your receiver or processor will have more of an effect on the sound than the DVD player, which simply passes a digital bit-stream. For a brief discussion about the PS2's built-in digital-to-analog converters, see my critique of the PS2's playback of compact discs (on the second page of this report).

So, what have we learned? The PlayStation 2 makes an excellent DVD player, despite some extremely trifling video anomalies and a couple of ergonomic flaws. If you were afraid that the PS2 would be a second rate DVD spinner, think again. When you're finished impressing your friends with some amazing video games, impress them even further with some reference caliber DVDs.

Lock n' load... feel the power... rev your engines (or whatever you need to do to get hyped), 'cuz we're about to shoot some bad guys, lob some 40 yard touchdown passes and outrun the cops when we turn our attention to the PS2's video game personality of the hyperactive PlayStation 2.

#### "We Got Game!" (or, A look at PS2 software)

Boy, oh boy! Everything from playability and graphics power, to the packaging and appearance of the game discs has changed with the PS2... and changed for the better. The first thing you'll notice is that the PS2 games are packaged in Amaray/Alpha-style keep cases, just like DVDs from studios such as Columbia TriStar and Universal. Original PSX games come in standard CD jewel cases, so this new packaging means that PS2 games can be easily distinguished from their cousins. Opening the PS2 game case, you'll see that the instruction manual is the size of a DVD insert, allowing for a larger, more flexible layout to the manual. The biggest surprise I got was opening my first PS2 game, **Madden NFL 2001**, and flipping the disc to its data side. The surface is a brilliant blue-purple color instead of the dead black of PSX games. What that excited me I don't know, but it did. PS2 is all about the visceral experience I guess.

One of Sony's biggest selling features of the PS2, is that the new console is backwards compatible. In other words, it can read first generation PSX games too. And, buried in the set-up menu that's found whenever the system is booted up without a disc, the user can adjust two settings within the PSX driver: Disc Speed and Texture Smoothing. Disc

Speed will increase load times of PSX games, while Texture Smoothing attempts to smooth out some of the jaggies and rough graphics of PSX games. Both features don't work with every game and, when they do work, I found that the improvements were minor. Still, it's nice to be able to squeeze every last bit of fun from your old software. Actually, the biggest boost in picture quality to your old PSX games is not so much from the Texture Smoothing feature, as it is in the simple upgrade from composite video to S-Video or component video cabling. Trust me - the better connections and cables do make a difference.

Out of the 27 PS2 titles available at launch, I decided to pick up the five that interested me the most. So, on the next page, you'll find brief reviews of **Madden NFL 2001**, **Midnight Club Street Racing**, **Smuggler's Run**, **TimeSplitters** and **Unreal Tournament**. Before reading each review, keep in mind that what these games offer in terms of graphics power, visual depth, fluidity of action and quality audio presentation downright slays almost anything you can get on a gaming console today (although, as I said, the Sega Dreamcast comes close). These are not meant to be definitive reviews of these games, but rather the idea is to give you a straightforward, layman's look at some of what the PS2 has to offer. So... on to the games!

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Site designed for 800 x 600 resolution, using 16M colors and .gif 89a animation.  
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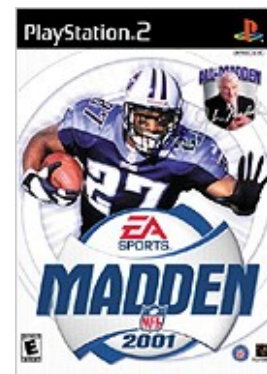
## Sony PlayStation 2 (continued)

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### *Madden NFL 2001*

2000 - (EA Sports)

Rated: Everyone



I have been nothing but faithful to John Madden over the last six years. Starting with

**Madden NFL 95**, I have bought EA Sports' NFL football game every year, and each year it gets better little bit by bit. But playing Madden football on the PSX, then switching to the PS2 version is like going from VHS to DVD.

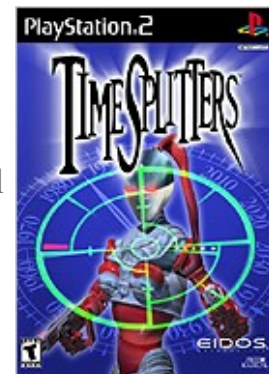
There's nothing like using a big cornerback to slam Keyshawn Johnson into the ground and stuff his big mouth full of turf. It's even better when it looks so realistic. The computerized players actually have personalities. They blink, grimace, talk with teammates, and react to the outcome of plays by either throwing their hands up in disgust, or performing their own personal end-zone dance. Between downs, you get to see players pull themselves up, fix their helmets, and high-five teammates. Gameplay action contains silky-smooth, fluid body motion without clunkiness or awkward slowdowns. The depth of the detail is unlike anything you've ever seen in a console football game. The helmets accurately reflect stadium lighting, players' muscles and skin are well textured, coaches lurk on the sideline getting involved in the game, uniforms get progressively dirtier as the game goes on and bits of turf get stuck in helmets after punishing tackles.

Gameplay is not too tricky to become comfortable with, since there are several varying difficulty settings and a defeat-able computerized play assistant. The audio is, unfortunately, the real weak link in this otherwise monumental game. The commentary by Madden is repetitive and boring, and it really pains me to say that since I respect the guy so much. Hey, EA... how about retiring Madden and Summerall and hiring Al Michaels for play-by-play and including a vast library of Dennis Miller quips? Next year I want **Miller NFL 2002!** Anyhow, Madden's comments and the crowd chants are so generic that it hardly seems worth the effort. There are no team-specific fight songs (anyone want to join me in a rendition of **Hail to the Redskins?**) and player trash-talking and the coaches' complaints are barely audible.

Despite the aural shortcomings of **Madden NFL 2001**, this is THE launch title to have. For die-hard football video gamers, EA Sports' PS2 NFL title is the Holy Grail, and for those who don't appreciate the finer points of the sport, the sheer level of detail and graphics power will blow you away. Highly recommended.

## *Time Splitters*

2000 - (Eidos Interactive/Free Radical Design)  
Rated: Teen





Trigger-happy gamers, who live and breathe first-person-shooters (FPS), will want to make **Time Splitters** a major priority. Why? Two reasons: **GoldenEye 007** and **Perfect Dark**. These games are widely considered to be two of the best FPS that have ever been written. And the core of the Rare Ware team that created those classic titles split from the company and formed Free Radical Design. **Time Splitters** is their gift to new PS2 owners, and this adventure feels and plays like its siblings. That's a good thing.

Unfortunately, **Time Splitters** lacks the engrossing story that both of its siblings have, but there are enough game modes, adjustments and customization options to keep you busy for a long time. There is a Story mode that will have you completing nine missions (with three difficulty levels) - by completing these missions you unlock new players, enemies and levels that can be used in arcade modes such as Deathmatch. After completing the Story mode, a Challenge mode is unlocked that lets the player compete in numerous mini-games that will then unlock other secrets when completed. 2-4 people can play at once, either cooperatively or against each other, and there is even a map editor included that allows you to build your own customized boards (up to eight levels high), and scatter enemies and weapons throughout. Surface textures and lighting effects can also be fully customized in the map editor, and your maps can be saved on the 8MB PS2 memory card - a cool touch.

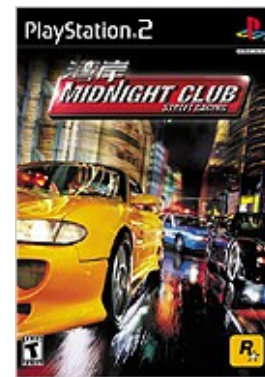
Since the story takes place between the years 1935 and 2035, characters and weapons reflect the appropriate time period, and there are dozens of playable characters and usable killing machines from blunderbusses to laser guns. Graphics and detail are unbelievable - razor sharp and highly palpable. Pinpoint lighting and shadow effects give a three-dimensional look to the texture of the presentation. Never have I seen so much fine detail and subtle visuals on a console FPS as I do with **Time Splitters**. Shell casings eject from weapons, stray bullets cause sparks and smoke and can ricochet and hit enemies (or you). Enemies react differently when hit and will take cover if they fear danger. The game plays incredibly smoothly (at 60 frames per second) without a hint of slowdown no matter how many characters are on-screen at once. The audio portion of the game is first-rate. Different weapons have their own distinguishing muzzle reports, and the music is absolutely awesome. Each time period is represented by a fitting theme portraying that era, further enhanced with a funky over-score. The music is almost as much fun as the gameplay. Game control is very difficult to master, as the three preset control layouts aren't very intuitive. However, you're able to fully customize the button assignments on your control pad, so spend some time finding the best fit for you.

**Time Splitters** is a game that, visually and aurally, will leave you screaming for more. Thankfully, Free Radical included many different play modes, and a simple map editor so you can create your own levels. Make sure this title is on your list of PS2 games to get, because it will mercilessly chuck you into the action and never let go.

## *Midnight Club Street Racing*

2000 - (Rockstar Games/Angel Studios)

Rated: Teen



Driving games - especially those in which you can be as reckless as possible - are more popular than ever. Hmm... maybe it's that whole road rage thing. Rockstar Games has filled this niche on the PS2 with two drive anywhere, do anything racers - **Smuggler's Run** (see the review below) and the superior **Midnight Club Street Racing**. **Midnight Club** plays very similarly to last year's smash PSX hit **Driver**, except **Midnight Club** is a traditional racer without **Driver's** involving story line.

As an upstart racer-wannabe, your job is to challenge members of the **Midnight Club** - a band of lawless drivers who compete against each other on the crowded streets of New York and London. As you claim victories, you win the vehicles of your opponents until the final challenge, when you go head-to-head with the world champion. **Midnight Club** is loads of fun for driving enthusiasts, as you get to tear through busy streets and, if you're not careful, collide with cars, busses, FedEx trucks, pedestrians, mailboxes, light poles - almost anything in the environment. And, adding to the excitement, you have to elude cops who are hell-bent on taking you down. The races can be quite challenging, but that's all part of the fun. If you get bored challenging the pro drivers in Career mode, **Midnight Club** offers other types of gameplay, including Head-2-Head, Capture the Flag or you can simply cruise the cities with no particular objective to complete. These gameplay options can also be enjoyed with a friend in multi-player mode.

Graphics and gameplay are first-rate. The cars exhibit spectacular lighting and reflection effects that lend a real sense of dimension to the vehicles. Headlights on the cars can only be described as photo-realistic, collision effects are acceptable and the vehicles take convincing amounts of damage the more you abuse them. The big city environments of New York and London are very realistic, containing many real life locations and details (but no Ed Sullivan Theater... I was hoping to see a **Late Show With David Letterman** marquee). The only gripe about **Midnight Club's** graphics is that, as good as the cities look, they appear almost too clean and pretty without that griminess or grittiness that parts of big cities have. The audio in this game is a lot of fun. Your opponents taunt you, while pedestrians scream at your terrible driving. The sounds of vehicle engines are also well represented. **Midnight Club's** soundtrack contains mostly repetitive and sterile "industrial" dance music. I guess this is a matter of taste. Typically I can't stand this music, while a good deal of my brother's CD collection contains this genre - he thinks **Midnight Club's** soundtrack is cool.

After all is said and done, **Midnight Club Street Racing** is THE driving game to have for the PS2 - right now. As good as this title is, I can't wait to see what other developers do with the driving genre, or even what Rockstar has up their sleeve for the sequel. **Midnight Club** is challenging, yet gobs of fun.

## *Unreal Tournament*

2000 - (Infogrames/Epic Games)  
Rated: Mature



Wildly popular to PC gamers across the globe, **Unreal Tournament** is basically a direct port of the PC version to the PS2 (save for a few new PS2-specific levels). **Unreal Tournament** is a lightning-quick, first-person-shooter, full of blood and gore. For the uninitiated, think of **Unreal Tournament** as the ever-popular **Doom** hopped-up on crack-cocaine.

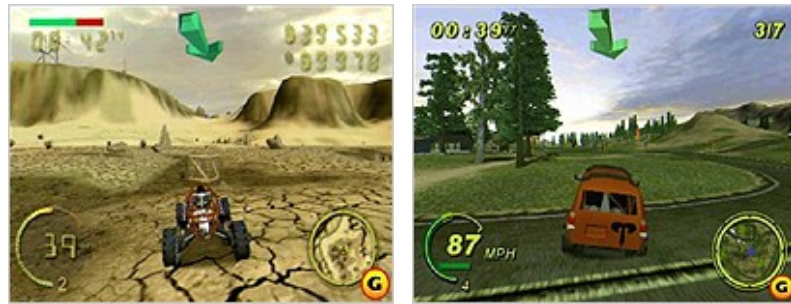
There's neither a story nor a plot. **Unreal Tournament** is all about graphically mutilating opponents in approximately 50 Deathmatch arenas, and gameplay is ultra-fast and ultra-furious. Play against your friends, or play against the CPU to see who can score the most kills first. And if you get bored with the Deathmatch, try out a game of Domination or Capture the Flag. You have access to a large arsenal of out-of-this-world weaponry, including bio-sludge guns, rocket launchers, flack cannons, Gatling guns and more. Did I mention this game is bloody? After several kills have been notched in an arena, you'll see pools of blood on the floor and spattering on the walls. A couple of the weapons will even explode opponents into a bouncing mess of what the game designers call "gibs". Sweet! Gameplay is similar to **Time Splitters**, and will take some time to get used to. The frame rate is not as fast, nor is the action as smooth and the graphics fall a very obvious notch below its PS2 competitor as well. That said though, **Unreal Tournament** contains the most realistic water effects I have ever seen in a video game, and when rockets are zooming to their target, they leave an amazing smoke trail. Make sure you have the volume cranked, because game audio is very en-"grossing" (get it?). The sounds of weapons are pulse pounding and hearing an opponent explode is almost as gruesome as seeing it happen.

If you have the extra dough, check out **Unreal Tournament**. But if funds are limited, get **Time Splitters** first. **Unreal Tournament** offers plenty of furious FPS action, but its graphics and style fall a bit short of the best PS2 games.

## *Smuggler's Run*

2000 - (Rockstar Games/Angel Studios)  
Rated: Teen





With a name like **Smuggler's Run**, I was hoping for a new **Star Wars**-based game starring Han Solo. Oh, well. What you do get is a decent driving game, with a bit of a twist. Instead of simply racing opponents, you must pick up and deliver a variety of smuggled goods from point A to point B, all the while avoiding the police, the CIA and border patrol agents that will try to smash you into submission. Here's the twist: You drive in three huge environments including mountainous, desert and "snow-covered". The operative word here is "huge", as each environment is approximately five miles by five miles, and you can drive anywhere and interact with almost anything. Sounds cool, huh? Well it is, except the missions are all basically the same and the game quickly becomes quite monotonous. You get to helm a dune buggy, SUV, pick-up truck, rally car or a military vehicle, all with different levels of strength, handling and speed. Feel free to plow down pedestrians, animals (PETA must LOVE this game), vegetation, signs, fences, other cars and more. There's that road rage again.

Graphically, **Smuggler's Run** is a nice looking PS2 title. Detail and smoothness or animation are all impressive, but the automobile physics are more impressive than the graphics, and provide plenty of adrenaline boosts when you bounce over sand dunes, or catch some serious air over the landscape. Vehicles can take serious damage, losing body panels and spare tires along the mission. Shadow and smoke effects are nice and worth mentioning. As you approach the horizon, landmarks subtly become closer and closer until you find yourself zooming by them. Gameplay is easy to master and each vehicle feels entirely different than the others. Game audio is atrocious, not because fidelity is bad, but because the music and voice-overs are more grating than a room full of jackhammers and barking dogs - especially the voice-overs. The police will yell laughable, idiotic, cheese-ball phrases at you and the woman you're partnered with, who's supposed to be coaching you over the radio, is the epitome of annoyance. She is annoyance personified. She calls you "baby" about 10,000 times a mission, and will spout out relatively stupid and obvious phrases at you (i.e., "This ain't pizza delivery, you know!"). While playing this game, I wanted nothing more than to find this woman and repeatedly drive over her. Fortunately, you can turn her off in the audio menu.

**Smuggler's Run** is a fun game for a short period of time. If you rent this game for a few days, that's probably all you'll need... and you'll be saving yourself about \$46.

So those are the games I picked up with my PS2. It's time to rest our thumbs for a while. Since the game manuals suggest a 10-minute break for every hour of play, this is the perfect time to see how the PS2 handles music CDs.

#### Cue the Music (or, Listening to CDs on PS2)

Rounding out the ability to play a plethora of different optical disc formats, the PlayStation 2 can also perform duty as a compact disc player. Excited to run the PS2's

digital-to-analog converter through the paces, I decided to spin one of the most beautiful, mesmerizing and ingeniously engineered albums of the last decade, Roger Water's **Amused to Death**. Recorded with the often-overlooked Q-Sound enhancement, 1992's **Amused to Death** is full of rich texturing and spellbinding sonic imagery that begs for nothing but the most exacting and transparent presentation possible. The point is, if you don't have very precise digital-to-analog conversion, there is quite a bit you will be missing from this CD. That's what it's my choice for testing the cojones of compact disc players.

The first thing I noticed is that the output level from the PS2's analog audio out is lower than normal. I had to increase the stereo system volume higher than usual in order to achieve the normal output level from my speakers. Once the overall volume had been adjusted, it was time to see if the PS2 could cut the mustard with complex material. Compared with most mainstream, budget-priced CD players on the market, the PS2 portrays great clarity and imaging. But directly compared with a higher-end Sony ES player, imaging and clarity seem to break down somewhat, and there's a modicum of graininess to the sound that's absent from the ES playback. The many subtle nuances and directional sounds contained in **Amused** don't seem to be as strongly rendered with the PS2. Sound effects and vocals are not as effectively anchored in their place with the PS2 as they are with the ES. The PS2's sonic shortcomings in this respect lend a feel of crumbling or poor structure to the soundscape, which should be solid and exact, as sound placement is important to the artistic vision of the album. Low-end representation with the PS2 was good, but notably softer and not as tight as with the ES.

But all this is to be expected. The bottom line is the PS2 makes a decent CD player for casual music listeners. Couple this with the all-in-one-box convenience of the PS2, and that might help sell it as a primary CD player for most people. If you consider yourself an audiophile, and continually strive for impressive aural experiences, I would suggest looking somewhere else for a CD player.

### Conclusion

Any self-respecting video game nut should be plotting and scheming to find a PlayStation 2 of their own. Graphics, texture detail, gameplay and fluidity of action are all superior to any game console today. Those more frugal than I will want to remember that next year Microsoft will be releasing their X-Box console, and Nintendo will be brushing aside the N64 with the GameCube. The PS2's price might be reduced about this time next year, since both of these new for 2001 consoles will have technical specs that beat the Sony. But keep in mind that it remains to be seen what kind of software support Nintendo and especially Microsoft will have. Since Sony owns approximately 60% of the video game market, software support for the PS2 should be healthy and strong for a long time to come.

For those of you waiting for the right time to buy a DVD player, your time has come. Aside from two incredibly minor picture anomalies, and a couple of ergonomic flaws, the PS2 doubles as a nice DVD player. However, audiophiles will want to think twice before making the PS2 their primary CD player as the unit suffers from mediocre digital-to-analog conversion. For serious gamers, \$299 never looked better. Casual gamers will probably have a harder time spending that kind of money right now, and are likely to turn to the Sega Dreamcast. However, these folks should remember the versatility of the PS2 (think DVD player and broadband Internet connectivity).

While I have your attention, don't forget to pick up these accessories: an 8MB memory card for those customizable games, **Madden NFL 2001** (a must for any PS2 library), an

extra controller for your buddy and, for Heaven's sake, S-Video or component video connections.

Now I'm off to defeat the Dallas Cowboys (with my beloved Washington Redskins, of course), and then tear-ass through New York and win a race against that pesky Emilio. Perhaps I'll cap off the evening by taking in **American Beauty** on DVD, or relaxing to the sweet sound of Eric Clapton's blues guitar riffs on the **From the Cradle** CD. Did I mention that I'll be doing it all on one box? Sony's PlayStation 2 was definitely worth the wait.



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