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Twisted Metal: Head-On

The portable highway to hell

I got my first Playstation in 1995 and it came with several games that instantly turned into blockbusters, at least in my universe. One of them was the acclaimed Destruction Derby, one of the best racing and smashing games ever. Things changed and the producers that were making such games created a new genre: car combat games. I'm sure you've heard about Twisted Metal, as the second installment of this game was a real hit and car combat games nowadays must bow to it. **Story**I wouldn't need any reason to wreck my car, if this was what I did for a living. Nascar is kissing compared to this fierce competition and you really don't need much of an intuition to figure out what are a couple of guys doing in an arena destroying each other's car. You can, however, find out each character's motivation by finishing the game and watching the cutscenes. Any game that has a tournament must have some players with all sorts of reasons like avenging the dead father, son, daughter or friend. Reduce all of it to compete and destroy and you won't feel any need for a storyline. Till the next champion appears, let's enjoy the sequel of the best console car combat game ever. **Concept**Welcome to the world of arcade physics! Sir Isaac Newton must hate this game so much, as he can witness cars flying around like freebies or vehicles that jump without a bit of acceleration. I'm not even talking about the wall-smashing action and the tumbles from the Eiffel Tower. What's a car doing on top of the beautiful French monument? That's a good question and you'll find out the answer by playing the Paris level and that will also be a good way to realize the length of Twisted Metal's tracks. Let's call them arenas rather than tracks, because they have boundaries that you must not cross, while racing and blasting the foes to death. The game becomes fairly easy once you've mastered the art of firing an ice bolt that freezes the enemy and destroying him with a single blast while he's frozen. The "car combat" term would do no one justice, as motorcycles and even excavators are involved in this rampage. Pick a ride from the 15 vehicles available in the game, well not right from the start, but I'm sure that you'll unlock them in no time. Each ride has a special attack that comes in handy, mostly when taking on more opponents at the same time. I can't say that there's a set of rules to obey while chasing a car to blow it to hell and I bet that no one can argue with a man that has some rocket launchers attached to his car. After the first cutscene, you'll find yourself in the main menu where you can select a single or multiplayer game or tweak the options a bit. The single player has 3 play modes: story, challenge and endurance. While the story mode is pretty obvious and I've talked about it before, the challenge is somehow the same thing with less opponents and no purpose at all. The player will just have to select a ride and 5 enemy cars, also choosing a place to race and those are quite a few, ranging from the crowded streets of L.A. to some sort of big football field. Endurance mode is some kind of "running and gunning" game with lots of one-on-one action. Your car meets only one enemy car and they must duel to death, chase each other and collect the bonuses. Once the foe has been vanquished, a new enemy car will come along and you'd better use health power-ups, because this is going to be one bumpy ride. PSP means lots of analog control and Twisted Metal uses too much the sensitivity of this control system. The vehicle is a bit difficult to handle, but if you've had extensive training with the same genre games, you'll master it in no time. While driving at high speed, targeting becomes a real pain, but the producers thought of that and implemented a pretty precise weapon auto-locking system. Sometimes, it tends to work a bit too well, making the whole shootout phenomenon a button mashing affair. You can only die twice per level and your health will go down considerably faster in endurance mode, when the other cars will hunt you down fiercely. It's not all about preset power-ups spinning

around and waiting for you to come, as there's also a set of minigames and teleporters that make things spicier. While some teleporters take you to places filled with power-ups or just enemy cars, others will take you to bonus areas where minigames are triggered. They will involve doing easy things like shooting down 5 taxis in one minute and will award you with extra bonuses like secret weapons and upgrades. Twisted Metal: Head-On is a challenging and fun game even when it's set on the super easy difficulty option. You can go up to medium or hard if you want to, but unleashing a car rampage hell will take the fun away. Vehicles deserve a little talk and, as mentioned before, there will be a certain Mister Grimm that will be driving a motorcycle and his flaming skull attack really reminds me of the comic book superhero Ghost Rider. You'll also be able to toy around with muscle cars, an ice cream van, an army buggy, a tweaked formula one car with a chick as a driver or an excavator. While selecting your ride, take a look at the details, if you're interested to find out your character's age or height or maybe the handling, armor and super weapon of his vehicle. After all this selection is done, it would really help if loading times were not that big and we could play the game right away, but loading has always been a problem of the portable console. **Gameplay** Twisted Metal is a twisted game all the way as you'll rather rely on weapon pickups than health. Boosting your health is pretty tough when the blue pickups we want are pretty scarce and hard to reach. Enemies are no sitting ducks and they will be fleeing, especially when their life is almost depleted. Enemy vehicles won't be the only ones troubling you, as there is traffic in the way and those pesky cars have the bad habit of going slow. They can be easily dispatched by firing at them, not by ramming into them, because that will have the same effect as ramming into a wall. White men may not be able to jump, as the famous phrase states, but cars sure can, at least in Twisted Metal, by pressing the X button. Once you'll get upgrades, the jumping part becomes hilarious, I mean, let's imagine a formula one car hopping around like a volleyball. When you're driving around at the beginning of each level, still far from your enemies, you'd better watch the radar for the colored triangles to spot them and watch your surroundings, because the foes have blue triangles above their vehicles. Each bullet or rocket that hits its target will provide you with points, and sometimes even smashing into an enemy vehicle will do that. You may even perform surprise attacks by teleporting to areas crawling with pickups and enemies, especially when you think that the AI has the bad habit of teleporting over and over again to the same locations. Pickups vary a lot, from rockets, to ice bolts, shields, napalm and various other "cookies" you'll find out on your own. The AI cars are pretty average in the story mode, but you'll feel some real pain when fighting the boss vehicles that are pretty large and pack some serious firepower. After an AI car becomes a pile of scrap metal, the player will have the chance to collect upgrades from it. Those will usually be jump, turbo or energy upgrades, granting you more powerful attacks or higher jumps, not to mention crazy speed bursts. Check out the status upgrades from the menu, there is a specific option with that name. The standard firing is done with the R button and involves the use of the machine guns that each car has by default. Once you'll have collected pickups, the story changes and you can select the desired weapon by pressing the triangle button. Pick your rocket and fire it by pressing the L button and get ready to see some beautiful fireworks. **Video** The huge loading times will show you that the loading bar is in fact a fuel tank. It goes from empty to full in enough time to make you sufficiently angry as to pop a couple of rockets in the first seconds of the game. When an enemy car or an innocent vehicle has been destroyed, it will catch fire, explode and vanish. This and the rotating pick-ups sure make this look like an arcade game, but I was never implying that this was a simulator. The cutscenes are very cartoonish and the first one doesn't show much, but each game ending will give a final FMV that shows each competitor's motivation and story. There are effects that please the eye, like the trails you'll leave on the sand while playing the Egypt level or the many breakable items: statues, walls, poles, boxes etc. Changing weapons will be very visual, considering that a new gadget will be attached to your car each time you select a new weapon power-up. Backgrounds look very nice although more variety would have hurt

no one, and about ten levels is not much to choose from. Shooting is boring, but firing rockets will light up the sky as well as using any of the pick-ups available. You'll see fire, sparks, tires flying around and tons of explosions and beautiful effects, but the walls will let the critic gamer down. There are mountains of pixels, but you'll get over that while storming Tokyo with some powerful napalm attack. **Sound** Twisted Metal is not just the name of the game, it's also the name of the type of music you'll hear in this car-blasting affair. I was an aggressive driver even in the simulators, so imagine my wrath now that a rock soundtrack rings in my ears and everyone is shooting towards my car. And if I see a single scratch... There was a fun part in the Blue Stadium level when I smashed a wall and behind it, I found the band playing the song that I could hear in the background. They were just animation, but still, the idea was nice. Each time you'll lock on a target, you'll hear the specific lock-on sound that makes the bell toll for your enemies. Also, there will be tons of booms and tire screeching to hear as you take turns and fire your guns at the same time. Each weapon sounds differently and so does each engine, depending on the size and type of the vehicle. If you're playing with the headphones on, I bet you won't be able to hear your thoughts while the excavator engine is roaring like a mad lion. Oh, and please start strafing around when you hear a whistling sound, because that's usually the sound made by rockets when they're headed your way. **Multiplayer** If you crashed a couple of cars in two minutes, you will be arrested before you even know what hit you. What about smashing 5 cars at the same time, and smashing the owners as well? That can be easily done through the infrastructure mode that allows you to play an online game from your living room against a guy that's sunbathing in Hawaii. You might be ruining his tan, so you'd better use the ad-hoc mode that requires a couple of PSP communicating directly without an access point. For the less fortunate gamers, you'll be able to host game sharing, that's an ad-hoc mode that allows another system to play a demo version of your game without having their own copy of Twisted Metal. 6 players can compete in a deathmatch or team deathmatch and crash the cars of players from all over the globe. The multiplayer sessions can be set to everyone's liking and options like unlimited ammo or the use of only one specific weapon will be enabled.

Conclusion Twisted Metal: Head-On is beyond any doubt a fun game to play, the kind of production that keeps you busy for a couple of hours. The problem is that, once you'll have finished it, the charm will go away. A couple of multiplayer matches might prolong its lifespan, but nothing lasts forever and the gameplay will soon show its flaws. Can't really compare Head-On to its predecessors without feeling the lack of something new and groundbreaking, but we must however remember the limitations of the PSP console and the genre, as well.