

Goddard Is Victorious

By John Tannaci

When I was in middle school, Capcom developed a game that sucked kids into arcades almost as fast as it sucked up their quarters. This game was Street Fighter 2, and I still smell Golfland and taste pizza every time I think about it. With flashy, 2-D graphics, rich backgrounds, and simple play control it was addictive for button-mashers, experts, and the entire range of players in between. It single-handedly kick-started the genre of fighting games, and hordes of similar attempts quickly followed. Most copies failed, but the ones who succeeded did so by adding creative twists that were not envisioned in Street Fighter 2. Mortal Kombat piled on the blood and guts amid cheers of “Finish Him!” across the nation, driving fighting games in a more violent direction. Samurai Showdown gave the characters weapons to battle with. Well, not exactly. The weapons were pretty much a simple extension of the combatants. They were rarely knocked away, and the play control was not designed to feel like careful manipulation of a dangerous object, but it was still a valiant venture. And so the games went. Each success added a new element to the original Street Fighter 2 formula, and each failure played Darwin, eliminating those trends which were not fit to survive.

During this evolution, a 16-bit game emerged that many consider a turning point, a creative discontinuity in the fighting genre. This game was Weaponlord, and being a Nintendo diehard, I purchased and experienced it on my Super NES for several months during my sophomore year of high school. Although it wasn't a monster hit, Weaponlord paved the way for current smashes such as the popular Tekken series, Soul Blade, and Soul Caliber. It served as an effective testing ground for designers, allowing them to experiment with the limits of play control while the improvement of graphics caught up to their genius.

Weaponlord was developed by Visual Concepts and published by Namco in fall of 1995. I'm very proud to declare that I have seen the list of people who worked on it a few hundred times (the credits are displayed after beating the entire game), but James Goddard is the only real name worth mentioning. In the archives of Electric Playground (<http://old.elecplay.com/arch95/weaplord.shtml>), Victor Lucas had the following to say about him:

James Goddard, the producer and overall creator of Weaponlord, and I had a brief chance to speak about his game at last May's E3. I could see in his eyes that he was exhausted. His dream had been keeping him up nights and he was anxious to get it out there.

Interestingly enough, Goddard was on the team that converted the original Street Fighter 2 to the Super NES, and Namco is the publisher that currently produces the Tekken series, Soul Blade, and Soul Caliber. These are more than just coincidences. Weaponlord was a key intermediate in the process that generated modern fighting games.

As such a transition, Weaponlord is rooted to Street Fighter 2 through its story-line and overall game-play. Like most games in the fighting genre, a player selects a

character and uses him to compete one-on-one against an opponent. In Vs. Mode that opponent is human. Otherwise, rage and frustration are directed against the computer. Matches are two or three rounds, first to two, where the winner keeps playing and the loser has to cope with shame. Just as Street Fighter 2 focused on the combat, Arcade Mode cuts out most of the story and character development. Fortunately, that is where the ties to Street Fighter 2 end.

The story-line and characters in Weaponlord are modeled after James Goddard's love for Conan, giving a fantastic comic-book feel to the game. The characters are larger than life, unrealistically muscular, grainy, and detailed. Their names, weapons, and stories fit into recognizable cubbyholes. Korr is a burly, high-flying barbarian with an immense broad sword and a strong sense of tradition. Divada is a sorceress with a wicked staff and a bodacious body. The demon Zarak is the representation of evil in the game, but he also has an honorable side. The same formula can be applied to the other 4 characters. This is distinct from Street Fighter 2, lending to a Story Mode, a greater connection with players, and an overall deeper game.

The backgrounds in Weaponlord also improve off Street Fighter 2, thus adding more depth to the game. The environments are portrayed in heightened 2-D and therefore pull the player further into the fantasy. What exactly does heightened 2-D imply? Well, the backgrounds are drawn with a sense of perspective, and they employ Mode 7 scrolling, the technological buzz-phrase when it comes to the Super NES. Basically, as the characters battle in the foreground, the scenery shifts accordingly. For example, a walkway leading out of an open gate in Evil Sands bends away from view as the fighters move across the screen. Combine this with fogging and lighting effects, and it's pretty solid for a 16-bit game.

Unfortunately, the animation in Weaponlord is not so solid, one of the major reasons it wasn't a smash hit. The graphics are pixilated and rough, and they're sometimes stricken with slowdown and choppiness. It's not unbearable, it just doesn't live up to the rest of the game, and it especially doesn't live up to Killer Instinct, one of Weaponlord's biggest competitors. However, graphics were not the focus of this game because the technology wasn't fully developed yet. Weaponlord was intended to stretch other facets of the fighting genre, a hypothesis which is made concrete by the intricate play control.

Revolutionary play control is the technology that classifies Weaponlord as a great game. For instance, most fighting games are to this day entrenched in the standard commands of Street Fighter 2. In games of this nature, actions are directed through button pressing and specific movements of the joystick or directional pad. Furthermore, the joystick maneuvering is almost completely unrelated to what transpires on the screen. As an illustration, several characters in Street Fighter 2 could throw fireballs by moving the joystick in a quarter-circle from down to forward and pressing a punch button. In fact, many people still refer to this motion as "doing a fireball" when teaching beginners how to play other games. Weaponlord was the first game to break strongly from this tradition. Buttons do not have to be pressed, instead they are sometimes held for better timing. Actions on the screen are directed by revolutionary control of the joystick or directional pad, where the player's fingers actually mirror the character's response. To elaborate, Korr performs a two-handed baseball swing with his broad sword. This is accomplished by holding down the fore-thrust button (no simple punches and kicks here,

each button corresponds to a weapon technique) and completing a half-circle from back to down to forward. Korr also does a special move where he brings the blade low across his body to the left, then back across to the right. A player initiates this by holding the back-thrust button while rolling down to forward and then returning to down. The list of complicated, non-traditional moves goes on and on, and the majority reflect a smooth and related interaction between human and fictitious character. Some gamers cannot adapt to this style and find it to be the major downfall of Weaponlord. On the other hand, diehards believe this intricacy and innovation is why the game is a true gem. Since no other game since Weaponlord has matched this system, it must indicate that either the public has spoken, or the developers are unwilling to take great risks.

Weaponlord also contains many smaller inventions that have directly affected current games. One of these is the parry and counter system with weapons. Blocking and attacking is no longer enough, a player must understand how to counter or perform specific moves which leave the opponent on their heels, unable to block. Soul Caliber is a currently successful game on Dreamcast that picked up this idea. Other improvements include a detailed combo system that is directly linked to finishing moves. Unlike Mortal Kombat, where a player can pull out the opponent's spinal cord as they stand in a daze, fatalities in Weaponlord only occur if damaging actions are connected to a combo at the moment of victory. This demands composure and skill, is open to a large variety of possibilities, and sucks the player into a deeper fantasy.

Speaking of depth, it is tremendous in Weaponlord. James Goddard and the design team removed the focus on graphics to drastically influence the genre of fighting games. In the process, they created a game that is a diehard player's dream. The play control and counter system discourage button-mashing, leading to hours of time perfecting combos. The artificial intelligence is excessively difficult, forcing the discovery of unfortunate gaps in the computer's adaptability or an overall mastery of the game. Passwords and multiple endings based on fatalities and other factors induce replay, not to mention the sheer joy of the perfect finishing combo that leaves the opponent's brain and guts lying on the ground. Even on an interactive level, the comic-book characters, stories, and backgrounds immerse the player in a fantastic environment. In terms of depth and expert design, Weaponlord is a masterpiece for those who truly understand and appreciate games.

Unfortunately, the market and timing did not agree with diehard gamers. Weaponlord arrived as the Super NES was on its way out, giving way to the Nintendo 64 and other next-generation systems. Because it did not focus on graphics, it could not compete on this level and did not become a smash hit. Also, impatient players could not deal with the complexity of Weaponlord, tossing it aside to return to Mario, Zelda, and new fighting games like the Tekken series.

And so, reviewers like J. M. Vargas and I are left with a deserted classic. We secretly cling to our knowledge of Weaponlord's place in gaming history, a feeling Vargas sums up nicely in his web review of Soul Caliber

(<http://www.dcswirl.com/reviews/readerreviews/screader6.shtml>):

Most gamers probably do not remember the game that started it all. Back in the mid-1990's, when Sega's "Virtua Fighter" and Capcom's "Street Fighter II" series commanded arcade revenues and before Namco's "Tekken" became the

blockbuster series it has become, Namco Hometek released a 16-bit brawler called "Weaponlord" in which 2D sprites (representing barbarian characters) fought with metal weapons and a combination of parry and counter moves (sound familiar?). It received mixed reviews and vanished into the bargain bins, since everyone with a Genesis or SNES was too busy at the time with the "Donkey Kong Country" series, "Vectorman", "Killer Instinct" and the PlayStation/Saturn hype to notice that "Weaponlord" had one of the deepest and more complex fighting engines I have ever seen on a cartridge game. I'd strongly suggest that, should you happen to be shopping for an affordable used game in the 16-bit bargain bin, you keep an eye out for this one and snap it if you get a chance; its depth and variety more than makes up for its small number of characters and choppy sprite animation ("Street Fighter II" this ain't).

I'd like to believe that both "Soul Blade/Edge" (arcade and PlayStation) and "Soul Calibur" (arcade and Dreamcast) are direct descendents of the forgotten "Weaponlord", the result of the programmers at Namco of Japan picking up the slack where the American folks who created that 16-bit game left off. But I do not have proof of that connection, aside from the cast of brutes and hand-to-hand weapon combat, so we'll have to settle for analyzing Namco's "Soul Calibur" for what it is on its own merits and without association with its alleged "Tekken" or "Weaponlord" heritage.