



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

Ooh...shell shock

Publisher: Konami
Developer: Konami
MSRP: \$39.99 **ESRB:** Everyone

Donatello may be the brainy turtle, but never accuse him of lacking a sense of humor. After using his bo staff to kick the butt of a Foot Ninja or mouser in *TMNT*, he's known to say things like, "Anyone for stickball? I have the stick, you be the ball!" Funny, yes—but it's not the kind of thing you wanna hear every few times you hit Square.

This may sound like a silly—"Anyone for stickball?"—thing to pick on, but let me assure—"Anyone for stickball? I have"—you that repeat—"An"—edly hearing Donnie and pals say this phrase and—"Anyone for stickball? I—"—ones like—"Any"—it is about as enjoy—"Anyone for stickball? I have the stick, you be"—able as reading this sent—"Anyone for sti"—ence. As you may have guessed, they often don't even feel the need to complete the phrase. And worse yet, *you can't shut them the shell up!*

It's a shame that so many little nuisances like that one have to add up against an otherwise solid beat-em-up. *TMNT* features some great controls. Each hero in a halfshell has a distinct play style based on his weapon of choice and personality. Raphael is all business with his short, quick sai, for example, while party-dude Mikey throws in some breakin' moves with every swing of his nunchaku. Great-looking cel-shaded graphics illustrate the reptilian

brothers as they pull off some cool, well-animated moves in levels designed to mirror the new animated series (and yes, I watch it).

But oh, how the little things disappoint, frustrate, and annoy. For one thing, if you're assuming that four turtles means four players, think again—only two can play at once, and the second is usually weaker because, for some reason, Splinter allows only Player 1 to learn new moves. What?

Also, remember how the 1989 arcade game had you fight a few Foot Ninjas, then move on, then a few more, then move on? The new game forgets that it's this pace—not fighting drove after drove of enemies in one spot—that keeps a beat-em-up interesting. Further, invisible

walls keep you from advancing, and the fact that you can't see them can lead to major damage (much like the ill-placed exploding barrels and the foes who attack from offscreen).

The game gets unreasonably hard near the end, where you really start to hate the archaic continue system. It frustrates me that I haven't beaten Shredder—I can't even get to him. I feel so turtle powerless.

I don't need an in-depth story for a game like this, but c'mon, Konami—this isn't 1993. At least try to animate your characters as they speak in cut-scenes—no, the rhythmic bop they do in unison doesn't count.

All these things just make me wanna stop playing and do something else. Stickball, anyone?

Chris Baker



Bionicle



Bloody Roar 4



Bionicle



Bloody Roar 4

BIONICLE

Publisher: Electronic Arts/Lego Interactive
Developer: Argonaut/Coyote
MSRP: \$39.99 **ESRB:** Everyone

"Use the Suva to hunt for these sons of Makuta." If this tip from a blue robot chick to a green robot dude makes any sense to you, you're likely one of the millions of Lego maniacs who has made the Bionicle toy line one of the company's most successful ever. If not, the only reason for you to play this game is to revel in derivativeness.

Granted, *Bionicle* does have its fun moments, and I really like the variety of gameplay—you're doing something different in each of the eight levels. Thing is, if you've been playing games for at least a few years (and that very well might not be the case with much of this game's target audience), you've played all of these stages before. You want elemental-based levels? Fire, snow, water, and air serve as the basis of several levels. Wanna push stuff (and maybe get a little lost) in adventure areas? You do. Platform-centric stages require lots of double-jumping and collecting glowy things. At other times, you're snowboarding, grinding down tree limbs, and even cruising underground in a mine cart.

A taste of originality does exist when you absorb attacks with your defense shield to power up your own assaults. Ironically, though, this mechanic makes *Bionicle* harder—I can't see your average preteen getting past some of the game's more challenging, genuinely frustrating moments. Then again, the difficulty alone is what takes this game a solid five hours to beat. Even hardcore fans are only looking at rental for this one.

Chris Baker



BLOODY ROAR 4

Publisher: Konami
Developer: Hudson
MSRP: \$39.99 **ESRB:** Mature

I honestly can't think of any reason why you'd want to buy *Bloody Roar 4*, except perhaps that you have some bizarre desire to see a man morph into a six-foot mole and physically abuse a giant chameleon (actually that does sound kinda cool). Given the strides made in fighting-game design over the past couple of years, *BR4* is stuck in the dark ages. Its arenas are cramped, flat, and bland, and its gameplay structure is dated, boring, and laughable. It pretends to be imaginative (there's a "swinging" arena), but it always falls back on safe, boring ideas.

While *Mortal Kombat*, *Virtua Fighter*, and *Soul Calibur* force fighting gamers to really think about their strategy and also provide more-than-adequate game-play incentives, *BR4* lets you mash the buttons to win, with no more satisfaction than seeing which stupid-looking opponent you'll face next. There's a halfhearted attempt at jazzing things up with a "Career mode" that lets you tweak abilities, but it's not on a par with its contemporaries.

Character design in *Bloody Roar* has always been ridiculous, but *BR4*'s raise some unique questions. Why would I want to be a fighter who turns into a bunny, when I have the choice to be one who turns into a demon covered in spikes? If the hook is that you turn into a creature, why does one of the girls do no more than change into a different outfit?

There's little to redeem *BR4*. Just buy *Soul Calibur 2* instead.

John Davison

