



COMING SOON

Panzer Dragoon Saga



In 1997, a crack programming unit are putting the finishing touches to their latest creation - Team Andromeda is the unit's name, and they've been locked in a disused garage with only a Saturn, a pick-up truck and a welding machine for company. GARY CUTLACK promptly escapes to see what they've come up with...



(Above) Game graphics or FMV sequence? It's tough to tell with visuals of this quality!

Team Andromeda's plan to create the best RPG of all time seems to be coming together in quite spectacular style, as this latest and virtually complete version of Panzer Dragoon Saga clearly shows. But there's one tiny problem - it's all in Japanese. Now for me, the idea of having to play an RPG is daunting enough, but one that's in a foreign language? Impossible! However, Team Andromeda have tried to do something a bit different with Panzer Dragoon Saga, and the result is, amazingly, one of the most fun and entertaining games we've ever played. Regular readers will be expecting an intense RPG with the odd shoot 'em up battle sequence, but there's much more fun than just that. Much more...



OH MY GOD, IT'S HUGE!

This is an epic game, make no mistake about that. Starting an adventure of this size is a rather daunting experience at first, especially when there seems to be so much to learn. But it's also obvious from the outset that Team Andromeda have tried to make this game the most accessible RPG experience yet. Yes, the game does have the traditional fantasy elements like hit points and experience points, but thanks to the 'almost' turn-based combat (more on that later) Panzer Dragoon Saga is definitely the most instantly playable RPG I've ever encountered. Just think about how tough it would be playing a 'traditional' adventure game if it was all in Japanese! No such problem with Panzer Dragoon Saga. Of course, players expecting another shoot 'em up in the style of previous Panzers will be disappointed, but wipe away those tears - there's still plenty to shoot in Team Andromeda's big adventure.

MIND AND SENSES PURIFIED

There's now a rendered intro in place, and in typical Panzer style, it's completely incomprehensible! What is clear though, is that several new characters are being introduced to the Panzer legend, and things have definitely taken a turn towards the weird side. For starters there's a rather foxy alien girl who seems to be a central character in this new adventure, and Azel has a >>



(Right) That's Azel sans Dragoon, in real time!

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The intro sequence is stunning. The plot of the game seems to have nothing in common with the previous Panzer games, and the intro does absolutely nothing whatsoever to clarify things! Still, feast your eyes on the quality of the FMV, and believe me, all the characters move beautifully. If you can figure out what's happening, send your answer on a postcard to the usual address.



(To be continued...)



Sports commentator **David Coleman** would no-doubt come to the conclusion that the **gameplay really is "Quite extraordinary."** We agree!

fair few flashbacks regarding her during the game as well. Readers who have been following our cool Panzer Dragoon Saga coverage will already know that the finished game will cover a mammoth four CDs, and there's a good reason for that - the game is packed throughout with this super-cool FMV! But it's not just the FMV that tells the huge story.

In a similar way to Panzer Zwei, much of the between level narration and scene-setting is achieved simply by using some clever camera angles and direction of the in-game graphics. This gives Panzer Dragoon Saga a seamless and incredibly high level of presentation.

SO TAKE ME BY THE HAND

New to the latest version we've received is a handy training feature that pops up after a while, and guides players through the range of different attacks that the friendly Dragoon has at its disposal. The first hour or so of playing



Spectacular water effects are in, but then most of PDS is spectacular!



Sometimes there are as many as ten separate alien monsters on screen...

focuses on exploration and scene-setting action, but once the first rather simple puzzle has been solved, Azel leaps right into the action!

A menu appears, allowing the player to pick from six or seven different attack scenarios, each with a different attacking enemy, and each requiring a different tactic and weapon to defeat it. They're not all offensive weapons either - one option allows Azel to sacrifice an attack opportunity to boost his hit-points up to a safer level if he's been taking a bit of a hammering. Once you're at ease with the controls and weapons, it's time to party with the big boys!

HAPPY PLASTIC - IT'S FANTASTIC!

The huge enemies are stunning. It's not just Azel and his pet Dragoon that are beautifully animated and light-sourced, but all of the fantastic beasts that players face along the journey are dripping with polish and special effects. Actually, they're probably dripping with slime and stinking alien puss, but thanks to the huge amount of detail, slime and alien puss has never looked this good before!

The game's presentation has been polished up as well, to such an extent that it's genuinely difficult to tell the difference between some of the gorgeous in-game footage and the FMV - the graphics really are that good!

Panzer Dragoon Saga may have looked cool in earlier versions we've received but now it looks even better! The weapon select and battle screens have been revamped as well, and the whole game is now presented in the super-cool style that we've come to expect from the A-Team's super-classy Panzer games.



...but one of them is usually enough to give poor Azel a major headache!

(Right) A nice collection of pictures of the various monsters Azel has to face in Panzer Saga. The weak-point of each alien is helpfully pointed out as well.

(Below) "What are you looking at?" This awesome mountain-crushing alien may look mean, but he's pretty easy to despatch, thanks to his weak bottom!



JAPANESE TURNING

Now then, remember the issue of the 'almost' turns-based combat system? Well, the best way to look at the hit-point system Panzer Dagoon Saga uses is to think of it as an energy bar in a beat 'em up.

The fights do take place in real time, with Azel and his trusty Dagoon trading shots with the enemy, and players also need to position themselves out of danger while the battle is taking place (some enemies fire forwards, some fire sideways and have specific attacks), and wait for the right moment to strike. When the fire button is pressed, a target sight appears. This is used to target a specific enemy or find one of their weak spots, but, and this is the important bit, the longer players wait before pressing the fire button a second time to unleash the shot, the more the power gauge builds up and the more powerful the shot fired. This is where the 'almost' turns-based bit comes in, because waiting longer to unleash a more damaging attack obviously leaves the player open to a counter-strike from the enemy! Clever, eh?

BABY I'M READY TO GO!

I'll be honest with you - I'm not a big fan of RPGs. Even the mighty Shining the Holy Ark completely failed to capture my imagination, and the thought of having to play Panzer Dagoon



The display has been smartened up since we saw the last version. Smart, eh?

Even super-brainy TV presenter **Carol Vorderman** would find it **hard to explain** exactly how the Saturn is **producing graphics of this quality!**

Saga didn't really appeal to me - until now! Even this hard-to-understand Japanese version shows the kind of attention to detail and amazing depth that even puts Shining the Holy Ark to shame, and the 'almost' turns-based fighting system is certainly the easiest I've ever come across in an RPG.

Combine this with some outstanding in-game visuals and presentation, mix in some of the best and most detailed FMV that we've ever seen, and add just a dash of an incredibly complex and inventive storyline, and it looks like Panzer Dagoon Saga will really be an incredible title. Don't you just love it when a plan comes together? Stay tuned for more coverage of the fully translated European version, before the game's planned January UK release.



The aliens are all incredible, and 100% glitch-free as well. Panzer Dagoon Saga WILL be an amazing game!



As in Panzer Zwei, many of the cut-scenes are represented by the in-game graphics, such is the incredible power of the Panzer engine. Check out this sequence: (1) This poor character is being chased by (2) this massive monster, which smashes through the mountain to get at him! Fortunately for him, Azel arrives and lets rip with his laser (3), and we then go into a standard battle scene (4) between Azel and this awesome creature. The monster isn't too bright though, and manages to get its head stuck in the rock when lunging for Azel (5), exposing the weak-spot on its butt! Take him from behind Azel! (6) Our new mate is grateful for the help, and no-doubt tells Azel something dead useful, but it's all in Japanese. Arggh!