

WHAT'S UP WITH VIDEO GAMING

J!-ENT FOR GAMERS ONLY

video game events: summer 2004 report

J!-ENT COVERS THIS SUMMER'S HOTTEST VIDEO GAME EVENTS IN AMERICA ON BOTH SIDES OF THE COAST: GAMERS NITE GROOVE IN NEW YORK, EVOLUTION 2004 AND THE G-PHORIA VIDEO GAME AWARDS SHOW IN CALIFORNIA. BY DENNIS A. AMITH AND EDWIN MACARAEG



Over 700 people came to Cal Poly Pomona for "Evolution 2004", the largest video game fighting competition in the country. The four-day event featured competitors from all over the world to compete for money prizes and bragging rights of who is the best in fighting video games such as "Marvel vs. Capcom 2", "Soul Calibur II", "Capcom vs. Street Fighter 2", "Virtua Fighter Evolution", "Street Fighter III", "Tekken 4" and many more. Photo by Tetsuo Harada.

Summer 2004 has proven to be an awesome year for video game events. With the video game industry making sales over \$7 billion last year, the popularity of video gaming is becoming a part of the pop culture for many people. With the growth of video game sales in the United States, video game events are starting to catch the attention of gamers worldwide.

In the past, video game events were typically a trade show, a promotional or marketing event/party for the software developer or an event that was happening at an anime (Japanese animation) convention. Now, we are seeing people behind video game related Web sites and organizations hosting their own video game events and these events are bringing in hundreds of people from all over the world and video game-related companies are starting to take notice by sponsoring these events.

On the last week of July, three video game events were held on both sides of the coast. In New York City, the interactive nightlife event known as GAMERS NITE GROOVE featured Microsoft's "Sudeki" for the XBOX and performances by 8-bit musicians and a DJ. In Pomona, California, the largest video game fighting competition known as EVO2K4 was underway and G-PHORIA, the video game awards show by G4TechTV was held in Los Angeles, California.

GAMERS NITE GROOVE NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK

In July, New York-Tokyo, known for their music and film festivals, featured their latest version of their video game event, GAMERS NITE GROOVE (GNG), to promote Microsoft's new RPG, "Sudeki".

Around a thousand gamers visited Eyebeam (in the Chelsea art mecca) for a chance to experience the free video game night life event and receive a free copy of Microsoft Studios' "Sudeki" and other freebies.

But as many as there were people who came for the free merchandise and to play the video games, many also come to the event to check out the music.

Music? Most definitely.

What nightlife event in New York City would be complete without the music. So, for GAMERS NITE GROOVE, music is one of the unique offerings.

Using July's event as an example, you would find DJs Prozac and Jesse Mann spinning techno and house music and also 8-bit chip musicians, Bitshifter and Nullsleep, were wowing the fans with their ability to play electronic music on their GameBoys.

Also, people can try out FULL BODY GAMES by Jonah Warren which consists of a video camera, projector and a computer.

The event has been described by several attendees as an arcade meets rave party featuring many people playing video games and people who are there to groove to the music which includes the lights blazing around the room.

And because of this experience, New York-Tokyo has managed to attract the attention of companies such as Microsoft, SHARP and FUJI TV who have sponsored the event. Even media such as the music video network, FUSE tv, has covered nearly each event.

On August 26th, will be the latest version of GNG featuring Sammy Studios' new stealth/action title, "SPY FICTION" and NIS America's new tactical RPG "Phantom Brave" and two new Astroboy games.

This month's guests will be Haeyoung Kim a.k.a. Bubblyfish, a GameBoy 8-bit electronic musician and video art by Honeygun Labs, a NYC based motion graphics collective, known for their innovative digital video work.

To learn more about the event, J!-ENT interviewed New York-Tokyo's GNG Gaming



Over a thousand gamers turned out for GAMERS NIGHT GROOVE in New York City to play and receive a free copy of Microsoft's "Sudeki" for the XBOX. Photo credit: New York-Tokyo.

Director, Job Stauffer.

Please explain to us what GAMERS NITE GROOVE is all about?

New York-Tokyo was formed in early 2001 with the desire to bring the increasingly popular culture of Japan's digital, musical and theatrical experiences from the greatest city in the east, to the greatest city in the west. After many monthly film screenings, music festivals, and tech expos, NYT was ready to take on the void that was New York City's gaming scene. With the decline of the arcade taking its toll across America, the only social outlet for gamers in the city were LAN centers with a decidedly PC atmosphere that to this day, still don't offer much excitement beyond the gaming monitors themselves. Nothing was alive. What was alive, was New York City's nightlife. DJ's, club halls and the art scene are all staples of that nightlife, and our goal was to marry them all together with, you guessed it, video games.

When did the first GAMERS NITE GROOVE take place?

November 2003 marked the launch of the first GNG. Game Time Nation, a console LAN center, was turned

upside down with flashing lights, slick visuals and digital beats as gamers got a taste of the nightlife, as well as tons of new games ready to hit the store shelves.

Unlike many other video game events, GNG incorporates music such as DJ and 8-bit musicians to your events. How did that come about?

Well, the DJ atmosphere was one element of the NYC nightlife we wanted to marry with the gaming scene. That doesn't mean we could've just brought in any old performer, we needed gamers who could DJ, and DJs who could game. What better DJ's could fit those requirements other than the ones scratching with a D-pad?

GNG has featured games like "Sudeki", "King of Fighters 2000/2001", a "Guilty Gear XX" tournament. How does New York-Tokyo select what games will be promoted at GNG?

Generally, featured games are chosen to sync up with various publishers release forecast. If we see an idea we can build around a particular title we'll be working with, we'll run with it.

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You had a large turnout in July for GNG. How has the growth of attendees been since your first event?

Attendance has steadily risen since the first event in 2003 and has yet to level off as our last event boasted in the 1,000 range. This September, we'll be looking at an audience ten times that amount as we take over the entire lower level of the Hammerstein Ballroom at the iGames Expo.

I was expecting GNG to be a large male dominated event but there are quite a few female gamers at GNG.

It's about a 65% male to 35% female ratio.

So, what does New York-Tokyo want to incorporate into GAMERS NITE GROOVE in the near future?

Without a doubt, we seek to very soon make more room for independent game projects. It's the Indie developer that has total control over their design and art direction. It would be great to get something with a truly underground feel without the word "underground" in the title. ■

THE 411 ON GAMERS NITE GROOVE

So, you missed out on previous GNG events and wondered what was promoted? Here is a list of what was promoted at past events:

GNG NOVEMBER 03: Namco's "Soul Calibur II", "Time Crisis 3" and "kill. switch". Also, "Spawn" and "+Ninja". Music guests: DJ Prozac and Bitshifter.

GNG JANUARY 2004: UBISOFT's "Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Jungle Storm", "Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3", "Prince of Persia", "Beyond Good and Evil" and "Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Pandora's Tomorrow". Music guests: Glomag, DJ Seoul and DJ Prozac.

GNG FEBRUARY 2004: "Dance Dance Revolution" contest and "Anime Toonz 2" CD Release Party.

GNG MARCH 2004: SAMMY STUDIOS "Seven Samurai 20XX" and "Guilty Gear XX".

GNG APRIL 2004: "8-Bit Strikes Back" with popular Nintendo hits like "Mario", "Castlevania", "Double Dragon", "Megaman" and Contra. Plus a film screening of the film "The Wizard".

GNG MAY 2004: SNK's "Metal Slug 3", "King of Fighters 2000/2001" and more. Music guests: Bitshifter, DJ Prozac and Jesse Mann and digital artwork by EBOY.

GNG JUNE 2004: Capcom's "MEGA MAN ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION", Music guests: Glomag, Martin Deosil and DJ Prozac.



NEW YORK - TOKYO PRESENTS ADVANCED INTERACTIVE NIGHTLIFE
GAMERS NITE GROOVE
THE FIRST MONTHLY VIDEO GAME EVENT IN NYC !!
GNG is your best way to play test brand-new game releases, check out fresh gaming innovations by independent developers, groove to live electronic music performances and meet other gamers in the city!
<http://game.newyork-tokyo.com>

photo: GNG JULY @ Eyebeam

GNG JULY, 27th - 8PM-12AM @ Eyebeam
GNG feature title last month was Microsoft's new Action/RPG, Sudeki; beautifully displayed on Sharp's Aquos flat panels, Sudeki proved that Microsoft does have something to offer RPG gamers. Alongside Sudeki were a number of visually stunning, style based games to fit in with July's theme, The Art of Gaming. These titles included Panzer Dragoon Orta, Ikaruga, Viewtiful Joe, and Gitaroo man, among others. Also on display was independent developer Jonah Warren's Full Body Games, in which the playing the game is entirely dependent on the movement of your body. DJ's Prozac and Jesse Mann played devastating techno and house sets, followed by performances by chiptune professionals Bitshifter and Nullsleep, the frontrunners of the GameBoy music scene.

Microsoft game studios XBOX SUDEKI

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Images from EVO2K4: (Left photo): On Saturday, July 30th, many players and spectators wait for their turn to compete and watch other players battle it out in "Marvel vs. Capcom 2". (Right photo): Daigo "The Beast" Umehara battling his opponent in "Guilty Gear X2". Photo credit: Tetsuo Harada.

EVOLUTION 2004 (EVO2K4) POMONA, CALIFORNIA

As GAMERS NITE GROOVE had their video game event in the East Coast, in the West Coast, EVO2K4 (Evolution 2004) in California is the video game event that competitive gamers from all over the world have been preparing for.

The largest competitive fighting video game event in the country took place at Cal Poly University of Pomona on July 29 through August 1st pitting competitors all over the world to compete in popular fighting video games in console versions of "Soul Calibur II", "Tekken 4", "Tekken Tag", "Marvel vs. Capcom 2", "Capcom vs. SNK 2", "Guilty Gear XX", "Street Fighter III: 3rd STRIKE", "Street Fighter II: Turbo" and "Virtua Fighter 4" Evolution.

The event going on its fourth year is a result from a partnership between the VGO Network and leaders from worldwide fighting game communities from Web sites such as Shoryuken.com, TekkenZaibatsu.com and GuardImpact.com.

The event brought in over 700 hundred competitors and spectators who filled one large room where the competitions took place and another room where gamers are able to bring in their own consoles and video games and play with other gamers. The second room

also featured a video game dealer.

Another attraction at EVO2K4 was the premiere of Namco's "Tekken 5" which many fans of the series are highly anticipating.

To learn more more about EVO2K4, we had the opportunity to interview Tom Cannon, who is one of the people responsible for producing the event.

What is the main goal that you and your team are trying to accomplish with Evolution 2004?

To promote competitive gaming and social gaming, Our roots are in the arcade, where you don't play games in your house or sitting on your couch. You go out and meet people to play games. I wanted to bring that environment to console gaming through video games like "Tekken", "Street Fighter", etc. and build a community. That's what we're trying to do.

I noticed that you mentioned competitive gaming, will Evolution's primary focus be on fighting video games or do you plan to introduce other type of video games in the near future?

Right now are focused is on fighting video games but are core demographics are competitive console game players.

So, we switched to console. So, if people are into "Halo 2" and play that competitively and there are Halo competitions going on across the country, that is something we would consider doing.

One thing we noticed when spoke to many competitors is how they wished the game featured the arcade version, rather than the console version which EVO2K4 focused 100 percent on this year. Why the switch to all console gaming at this year's event?

The nail in the coffin to make this decision was because of Capcom Coin-Op was closing in the United States. So, "Street Fighter" games was half of our tournaments and with Capcom closing, that means no new Capcom games in the U.S. and with their future in the U.S. is on console. So, it made no sense to us to stay with the arcade version of the games.

A few comments from attendees was that they really don't want to see Evolution turn into a convention but I'm guessing due to the large turnout for the event that it must be challenging to find-

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ing things for people to do when they aren't competing. Will the event expand to include anything new for future events?

Well, convention means different things to different people. The focus of Evolution for the near future is to stay focused on the tournaments. That's our primary focus and what we do best. That's what makes our event so unique to an anime event. With that said, we do want to give people things to do when they are not competing. That's why we added a separate room with dealers and companies to show off their video games. Also, a room for people to bring in their consoles to play any game they want. So, we would continue to move towards that direction but not like conventions that involve guest speakers or screenings. That's not what we are getting into. But we had a representative from Namco who gave a marketing presentation to players on how they can get "Tekken" into their arcades at this year's event.

What games do you foresee including at Evolution 2005?

For next year's roster, "Tekken 5" and possibly "Capcom Fighting Jam". We are also looking into seeing how we can slowly expand to the games that we have. Like "Super Smash Bros." is a game that keeps coming up. It's not a true fighting game but it's in the same flavor. Also, some of the first person shooter games like "Halo 2" or "Unreal Tournament".

Nearly every competitor it seems brought their own arcade stick and convertors to use the arcade stick on different consoles but can these convertors hinder the schedule for players because of incompatibility?

Definitely, it does. With the Sega Dreamcast, which we run some of the Capcom fighting games tournaments on, it's really flakely in that regard.

Is there a reason why you chose to use the Dreamcast version of "Marvel vs. Capcom 2" instead of the versions on the other



TALKING WITH

DAIGO UMEHARA

Daigo Umehara known to many fighting video game competitors as "The Beast" (mainly because he is known to unleash a thrashing to many opponents who go against him) and has gained the respect of many fighting video players.

The major highlight of EVO2K4 featured Daigo Umehara versus Justin Wong in the "Street Fighter III: Third Strike" finals. The video clip which can be found on the Web site, shoryuken.com which featured Ken (played by Daigo Umehara) with almost a zero health gauge and Chun Li (Justin Wong) with nearly a full health gauge. At the matches end, Daigo pulls off one of the most incredible comebacks ever. Tom Cannon of Evolution and shoryuken.com described this match as "the greatest Street Fighter tournament ever in this country".

We had a brief moment to talk to Daigo Umehara.

J!-ENT: How do you feel about your chances at Evolution this year?

DAIGO: I feel I could do well.

J!-ENT: This "Guilty Gear X2" match that you just won had the crowd cheering for your competitor. How did that make you feel?

DAIGO: He was very good! I could tell by the crowd reaction that my opponent was very good.

J!-ENT: Do you compete in other countries aside from Japan and the U.S.?

DAIGO: I was at a tournament like Evolution in England recently and participated in four different tournaments.

J!-ENT: So, since you are here in the U.S. Is it all just business or will you have the time to have fun and go sight seeing?

DAIGO: I have only one day for sight seeing.

J!-ENT: So, as you go sight seeing, you'll have many American women to see. Which do you like better? Blondes or brunettes?

DAIGO: BLONDES!!!

consoles?

Yes, because the Dreamcast version is the closest to the arcade version. It's a legacy thing that we have to bridge the gap between arcade and console. Also, Capcom made some balance changes to the characters for the later versions. That is bad because we have a tradition of playing on the arcade version and if you switch, people have to adjust.

I noticed so many out of state players, as well as many players from overseas. What is the incentive for them to travel far distances to EVO2K4? Are there cash prizes or is it all

about bragging rights?

There is money involved. But the money isn't the draw because only a small number of people have a chance to win that money. Mostly it's bragging rights.

You had people from over 30 nations complete at EVO2K4. How do the American players compare to fighting video game players around the world?

In most cases, the Japanese have dominated but recently, the U.S. players have been catching up. For instance, two years ago, the Japanese players were the top players in the game placing first through fourth place and the American players were after.

EVO2K4 RESULTS

This year's EVO2K4 produced several exciting finals and in the end, the following players reigned supreme.

Capcom vs. SNK 2

Kindebu (A-Sakura/Bison/Blanka) (W)
vs. Ricky Ortiz (A-Vega/Sakura/
Blanka)

Guilty Gear X2

Kindevu (Eddie) vs. Daigo Umehara
(Sol) (W)

Marvel vs. Capcom 2

Justin Wong (Sentinel/Storm/Captain
Commando) (W) vs. David Lee
(Magneto/Cable/Sentinel)

Soul Calibur II

Rob "RTD" Combs (W) vs. Marquette
"Mick" Yarbrough

Super Street Fighter II Turbo

John Choi (O-Sagat) vs. Daigo
Umehara (Balrog) (W)

Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike

KO (Yun 3) (W) vs. Daigo Umehara
(Ken 3)

Tekken 4

Anthony "Jackie Tran" Tran (Jin) (W)
vs. Joshua "JinKid" Molinaro (Jin)

Tekken Tag Tournament

Ryan Hart (Jin/Kazuya) (W)
vs. Shaun "Unconkable" Rivera
(Devil/Armor King)

Virtua Fighter 4: Evolution

Itabashi (Shun Di) (W) vs. Eric
"Shoutime" Chung (Sarah)



Evolution had players competing on all sides of the room. Two big projector screens were on site at EVO2K4. Photo credit: Tetsuo Harada

But now Americans are starting to place in the top three. The difference is that, as we do more of these International tournaments and the U.S. players get exposed to the Japanese style... the first time we played them, there was a small but noticeable gap but we haven't seen this style of play before and we were unprepared for it and we were crushed. Now, after all these years of taking in their style and adapting to it, now the gap is much narrower.

With most of the Japanese player coming from an arcade background, was it difficult for them to compete on consoles?

There was no drop off. Last year, when we were in the arcade format, Daigo won several tournaments and placed similarly this year.

We noticed that there were a few female competitors this year at EVO2K4. How have they fared in the competition?

There are a few female competitors. The few that were there and there was one player, who is the girlfriend of one of the top Japanese players and she competed in "Virtua Fighter 4: Evolution". She was predicted to make it into the top eight but she didn't do it, but she is a

very good player.

Will you guys plan to have the event in Pomona every year or will you plan to bring it to a larger venue? Perhaps in Los Angeles for easier accessibility for your attendees and your guests traveling from a foreign country?

That is something we are thinking about a lot. Cal Poly Pomona, the size is fine but the area is remote. Food is always an issue because we are in a university campus but yeah, we are looking for other locations but if we can't find one, Cal Poly Pomona is adequate.

What was your impression of EVO2K4?

This was a big success for us because we weren't sure about the jump from arcade to console. There was a question if these were real tournaments because they were console. And the answers we got were "yeah". We needed that validation and players validated that for us.

There are rumors on the forums that there will be no more Evolution. Will there be an EVO2K5?

They always say that. Nothing is a hundred percent but we are planning for an event next year. ■

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Our last video game event we covered was G4TechTV's "G-Phoria: The Award Show 4 Gamers" which took place on July 30th at the Shrine Expo Center near the University of Southern California. And aired on television on Aug. 6.

The award show was a star-studded event as celebrities and G4TechTV hosts walked on the orange carpet.

Inside the Shrine Expo Center were a lot of G4TechTV employees, industry members and media. Of course, not to forget about the excited audience in front of the stage.

Although, we were not sure if they were excited for the event or because of Anna Nicole Smith's behind-the-scenes fan service.

Many people we talked to that night felt their highlights of this year's show were the playing the new video games in the lobby or the "Special Achievement Award. An award" which was given to Hideo Kojima for his beautiful work on the Metal Gear series.

So, while many industry people were excited to be at G-Phoria to play "Doom 3" or "Halo 2", the other group of attendees were happy to be a part of a star-studded event.

Celebrities definitely played a big part at this year's G-Phoria. Attending the event were Aisha Tyler, Bai Ling, Mekhi Phifer, Samaire Armstrong, Jenna Jameson, John Cho & Kal Penn, Stan Lee and many more.

As for the actual event itself, what looked



really great on television, was definitely a challenge for event organizers who were kept busy by constant glitches.

Thankfully, there were no acceptance speeches in this awards show.

The show started at 6:00 p.m. and ended around 10:00 p.m. During those four hours were quite a few technical glitches and 15-20 minute breaks.

Not everyone was thrilled to be sitting on the bleacher type seats or to stand around, therefore many people went upstairs to the lobby and see why everyone else was going up there.

In the lobby, many people took the opportunity to play video games such as the highly anticipated "Halo 2", "Metroid Prime 2: Echoes", "Resident Evil

4", "Grand Turismo 4", "Need for Speed Underground 2" and "Doom 3", to name a few.

Because many people were having a lot of fun in the lobby, many of them didn't return back to their seats or the stage area for the awards show. Quite a few of them didn't stick around and left.

We also wondered if many of the people watching the awards show near the front stage were gamers at all.

Several of the people we talked to were not even familiar with the video games that were nominated or won. Some told us that they are not really into video games but they came with their friend who either works in the video game industry or plays a lot of video games.

Despite the glitches that existed during the taping, we did talk to many people who did enjoy the G-Phoria experience and can see the potential of the event.

G-Phoria is truly a unique award show. Whether or not the industry takes it serious or not, G4TechTV does. Because G-Phoria is all about the gamers and their viewers who appreciate video games and giving them the opportunity to vote on which game will win.

It may not be the Academy Awards of video games at this time but because of their dedication to their viewers, G-Phoria succeeds in being the definitive award show for gamers. ■

G-PHORIA 2004 AWARD RESULTS

So, you are wondering who won at this year's G-Phoria? Of course, if you don't like the results, don't blame us.

Alt Sports Award Powered by Mountain Dew
Tony Hawk's Underground (Activision)

Best Adaptation
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (LucasArts)

Best Cinematic
Final Fantasy X-2 (Square Enix USA)

Best Easter Egg
True Crime: Streets of L.A. - Snoop Dogg Cheat (special missions) (Activision)

Best Graphics
Ninja Gaiden (Tecmo)

Best Handheld Game
Final Fantasy Tactics Advance (Nintendo)

Best Innovation
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow (Multi-player mode) (Ubisoft)

Best Mobile Phone Game
Bejeweled Multiplayer (JAMDAT)

Best Multiplayer Game
Unreal Tournament 2004 (Atari)

Best New Franchise
Viewtiful Joe (Capcom)

Best Racing Game
Need for Speed Underground (Electronic Arts)

Best RPG
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (LucasArts)

Best Sound Design
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (Electronic Arts)

Best Soundtrack
Tony Hawk's Underground (Activision)

Best Traditional Sports Game
Madden NFL 2004 (Electronic Arts)

Best Voice Performance - Female
Enter the Matrix - Jada Pinkett-Smith (likeness) (Atari)

Best Voice Performance - Male
James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing - Pierce Brosnan (likeness) (Electronic Arts)

Favorite Character
Ninja Gaiden - Ryu Hayabusa (Tecmo)

Game of the Year
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (LucasArts)

Hottest Character
Final Fantasy X-2 - Rikku (Square Enix USA)

EB Gamers Choice
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (LucasArts)

* Special Achievement Award - Hideo Kojima