TEKKA

EyeToy — Update: Groove.

http://www.tekka.net/05/?Groove

After the surprise hit *EyeToy: Play* — over a million units sold in Europe between its release in June, and October 2003 — Sony have published a follow-up: *Groove*. *Groove* will be on the shelves in the US when you read this, but it came out in Europe in time for Christmas, so we can give you a quick preview-review. (For an extended review of EyeToy: Play see **TEKKA Vol. 1 No 3**.)

Basically, *Groove* is an extended version of *Beat Freak* and *Boogie Down*, two of the minigames already included in the *Play* bundle. The core idea — move in time with the music and hit flashing elements at the margin of the screen — has been vamped up with psychedelic colors and a whole new graphic style. *Play* had a cell-shaded, cartoony look and lowered the adaptation threshold and the learning curve through being generally cute and non-threatening. The Groove interface is more complex and cluttered; on-screen elements appear three-dimensional and contact feedback is colorful, mobile and loud.

Play has been marketed as a family game — the online manual even works with a generic grandma character — but judging from the majority of reviews (as well as my own experience), it's really a party game for slightly intoxicated adults. Groove's design seems to have been made for a thirty-something, club-going target group. The 70s disco style might well double as out-of-the-box party atmosphere.

But the fuller, flashier screen layout is also more bug-prone than the two-dimensional *Play*-worlds of *Kung Foo*, *Boxing Chump* and *Wishi Washi*. For example, the "next" button that scrolls through the selection of songs or game modes lies on the way to the "accept" button. It's almost impossible to confirm a selection without changing it — unless, of course, you start twisting right here.

Twist Again

And twisting is what *Groove* is all about. But how good can a dance game be without a dance map: a game that relies on the player moving her arms, not her legs? If you ask me — pretty good! The first reason for this is that you won't get much further than the "easy" or training level if you stick to moving only your arms. Beyond that, you have to move your whole body to keep up with the complex and quick-paced moves. *Beat Freak* and *Boogie Down* relied on pretty linear wave-and-slap patterns. *Groove* requires asynchronous moves — punch with left fist while waving right arm.

Groove, with its rhythmic quality, also measures timing: it's not enough to hit a hotspot — you have to hit it right on the beat. Slight variations will result in lower scores. Higher levels of synchronization, on the other hand, will result in more enjoyable gameplay. Sports psychology has already discovered the connection between music and the flow state, game theory's currently favorite metric for gameplay. *Groove* is like playing a drum-set — or sweating through an hour of Step Aerobics: the world dissolves into rhythmic patterns, time falls into halves, quarters and eighths. I won't say this mix is addictive, but it certainly makes Groove infinitely replayable.

However, the choice of music is what I'd call problematic. In a dance game that relies significantly on arm movement, I would expect songs that I've seen performed with a lot of hand actions: tunes from *Saturday Night Fever*, *Footloose* or *Pulp Fiction*, for example. For a game like*Groove*, Jamiroquai, Fatboy Slim or Apollo 440 are not really the best choice. But not surprisingly, all these artistes are under contract with some Sony-owned label. Instead of providing free video clips with all the songs included in the game, it would probably have been a better idea to have offered a larger choice of titles.

Played with a bunch of friends in advanced party mode, *Groove* rocks. Yet, I'm still waiting for my first camera-controlled adventure game. The *EyeToy*-integrated Skateboarding game demoed at GDC may turn out to be just the thing the keep me happy while I wait.

(c) Anja Rau