By Chris Rasa

Mad Max (1990)

US NES only

Publisher: Mindscape Inc.

Designed: Brian Hoffman, Ray Garcia

Despite the popularity over post-apocalyptic movies dying down in the late eighties, and countless video games already released in imitation of the three *Mad Max* films, it wasn’t until 1990 that the official *Mad Max* game would be released o the NES by Mindscape. In this one year Mindscape attempted to do for the NES what Ocean had done for the Commodore 64: Make a profit of movie fans by churning out as many barely playable adaptations of their favorite movies as possible. In just 1990 Mindscape delivered video game adaptations of *Mad Max*, *Dirty Harry*, *Days of Thunder*, and *The Last Starfighter*. Future games based on *The Terminator* and even *Flight of the Intruder* would follow in the early nineties. None of these games are particularly good, and some like *The Terminator* are almost unplayable. Their earlier attempts like *Mad Max* and *Dirty Harry*, however have a few interesting ideas that make their flaws stand out even more.

*Mad Max* starts out promising. Despite the title screen and cover using logos from the original movie, the cover itself and opening of the game makes it clear that this is a game based mostly on *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*. After a text crawl of that film’s opening narration accompanied by Mindscape regular Nick Eastridge’s take on Brian May’s (no relation to the Brian May of Queen) *Mad Max 2* score. It’s pretty good rendition, which is fortunate because it’s THE ONLY SONG IN THE GAME. There’s a 1.5 second long panicked jingle that loops for way too long whenever you lose a life, receive a password, or enter an Arena level. Whenever you enter a shop or reach the final boss of the game, you just get to hear that theme song again.

This may explain why Eastridge is not actually credited in the manual itself, but the credits of *Mad Max* in general are a bit more convoluted than that. Both *Mad Max*, *Dirty Harry*, and a few other Mindscape games were developed by Chris Gray’s short lived Gray Matter Enterprises (*Space Funky B.O.B.*, *Incredible Crash Test Dummies*). Some confusion comes up here, as Chris Gray made a name for himself designing *Infiltrator* for Mindscape, and its success is what inspired him to create Gray Matter Enterprises in 1986.

Many sources confuse this developer with the unrelated Gray Matter Interactive (*Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, *Call of Duty: United Offensive*) that was formed two years before Gray Matter Enterprises would become defunct in 1996, thinking they are one company. To make matters worse, despite many of their games (such as *Mad Max* and *Dirty Harry* on the NES) clearly stating on the box that they were developed by Gray Matter, they are often not credited properly for their work on many of their late 80s and early 90s games. *Mad Max*’s manual isn’t particularly helpful either, providing a lengthy “Special Thanks To” of various marketing, QA and promotional associates rather than the individuals within Gray Matter who actually made the game.

*Mad Max*’s structure is somewhat ambitious, a more in depth iteration of what LJN completely failed at with *Jaws*. The game consists of three levels. The first half of each level involves you driving Max’s iconic V8 Interceptor through various wasteland areas where you break into gang infested warehouses to steal resources and also stop by shops to repair and refuel your vehicle. When you have enough food and water to barter with, you can buy an Arena pass. This lets you go onto the second part of each stage. Here Doctor Dealgood from *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* announces that “They’re bad, they’re crazy…and only one will leave the Arena!” We also get to see a portrait of Mad Max based on his look in that film along with his rival in the Arena, the infamous Master Blaster!

Then the Arena stage begins, well I guess they couldn’t use the Thunderdome concept as well as the name, since the Arena here is actually a demolition derby with many other cars. This is the fun part of the game, it’s chaotic, many of your opponents will kill themselves off for you by careening off the sides or into each Arena’s many trap doors. They can take some time to complete, however, as you are not allowed to leave until EVERY opposing vehicle is destroyed. The second arena stage uses a portrait of…an unrecognizable guy in a helmet as your nemesis, while the third uses an image of Lord Humongous from *Mad Max 2*.

When you complete this final Arena the game shifts to side view as you engage Humongous in a duel with hand crossbows that is insufferably long. Afterwards, we’re treated to a static image of Max’s car with text asking the player “And where does a man like Max go from here?” Pretty short, basic structure, plenty of liberties are taken with the events in the movies to present a game, there’s only one problem. The entire first half of each level provides some of the most aggravating gaming on the NES. It’s difficult to describe just how bad the controls are here. Turning, braking and accelerating are actually very responsive, but the Interceptor in this game has no speed between parked and rapidly ricocheting off a wall or other car. It works great in the Arenas where that’s how you win, but in this more open environment where you have to explore and scavenge, the endless stream of cars ramming into you and sticks of dynamite being hurled your way slow you down so much that you’ll often find yourself losing a life by running out of fuel rather than from suffering damage.

It seems like a completely backwards decision to put such a tight fuel limit in place that you effectively have to map out these areas like you’re playing *Legend of Zelda* to track places you can enter and where the Arena entrance is. Doing this while playing would mean stopping the game every two seconds to take out your trusty graph paper, as you run out of gas and die in five minutes flat if you’re not destroyed by oncoming vehicles. Knowing this, Mindscape kindly provides a map of the first area in the manual, but for the rest of the Arenas and outdoor areas you’re on your own. Mindscape crafted a game based on movies where the primary draw is fantastic usage of cars and high speed crashes, and then designed it in such a way where you have to constantly come to a full stop.

To refuel your car and afford that arena pass, there are entrances to mineshafts scattered throughout each level. When you enter these, the action is viewed from overhead but you get to control Max himself and navigate through some very boring mazes seeking out keys to get access to the rooms with extra food, fuel and medical supplies. While walking around you’ll annoying marauders that attack you by clinging to you like in *Kung Fu* or *Vigilante*, but you have a rapid firing shotgun to deal with them. While it’s easy enough to stop them (causing them to melt in a bloody heap that is somewhat impressive for an NES game), it makes their presence more of an annoying waste of time that pads out your exploration rather than adding a fun challenge to it.

This is especially frustrating since while the Arena matches you’re saving your resources for are a blast in short bursts, they’re too simple to base an entire game around, and aren’t really worth the many deaths you’ll suffer to learn the layout of each of level. The manual for the game talks this up in terms of having to be very careful with your resources, like you’re playing a survival simulator, but the “survival” part of made of pure tedium rather than anything enjoyable of challenging as you slowly make your way to each mine to get food to sell for more fuel so you can get to the next one, hopefully not making a wrong turn along the way so that you actually have enough fuel to make it.

In general *Mad Max* is boring and frustrating to play, and the nature of the film franchise’s distribution and production companies (Mad Max itself was produced by MGM, while future films were funded by Warner Bros.) results in a game to lacks personality, even compared to other movie tie in games of the time. You get Warner Bros.’s photographic cover for *Mad Max 2* as the game’s cover, but portraits of both *Mad Max 2* and *Thunderdome* characters make an appearance. No one is mentioned by name except for Max himself. This was a bizarre combination of elements since *Mad Max 2* had been originally released in the US under the title *The Road Warrior* (and went on to be far more popular than its predecessor). It would have been easier to just call it that and focus on that movie for a more coherent and possibly less frustrating game.

While calling it *Mad Max* would make for easier international appeal, the game was never released outside of the US. Yet licensing was clearly enough of a mess that outside of the box cover and the title screen, the game almost feels like it’s trying to hide what it is with its minimal in-game text and indistinct graphics (though for an NES game, the sound effects are in fact excellent). This would become more apparent in Mindscape’s next “*Mad Max*” game, *Outlander*.

Outlander

1992 (US, Sega Genesis), 1993 (US and EU SNES)

Publisher: Mindscape Inc.

Designer: Jeff Gamon

As the Sega Genesis became more popular in the early 90s, Mindscape tried their hand at a *Mad Max* game again. Ditching the exploration, players would now drive from a first person view down a windy but linear road, able to get out of the car at any time to explore a basic side scrolling level in which one can shoot marauders and collect numerous helpful items like food and replacement tires. Graphics are of course much better than the NES take, and while it can get choppy, the game has a decent amount of action with lots of high speed collisions as you ram into and run over various bikers.

In an especially inspired touch, when a motorcycle tries to pull up next to you a view of your side mirror pops up in the left or right corner, allowing you to cleanly blow an oncoming biker’s head off with your shotgun while driving and firing the car’s front mounted machineguns at the same time. It’s very simple, but you can tell Mindscape learned their lesson from the NES *Mad Max* game and made a solid effort here. It also helped that Mindscape got a more talented team to develop the game, with many members still working in the game industry today.

Most notable is probably Ken George, who started out doing Q&A for EA but would, after producing *Outlander* would go on to produce several games for Sony’s 989 Studios throughout the 90s. Sound effects were handled by Mark Knight, who would has since worked on audio design for Codemasters’ *F1* series. Interestingly, much of the team would end up working together on an eclectic series of games like *Warhammer: Shadow of the Horned Rat*, *CyberSpeed*, and installments in the *Fable* series as well as several *Harry Potter* games. Finally, one of the designers, Steve Leney, was previously responsible for the graphics found in Amiga games like *Moonstone*, *D/Generation*, and the particularly beautiful *Darkmere*. Unfortunately what Mindscape learned in game publishing, they forgot in licensing ability, and failed to renew the *Mad Max* license itself. Enter *Outlander*.

Despite the removal of direct references to the *Mad Max* series, this game impressively looks and plays like something closer what we see in the opening of *Mad Max 2* than anything in Mindscape’s half-baked NES game. All of the enemies are clearly based on characters scene in *Mad Max 2* even after this last minute identity crisis. While the more linear layout is initially disappointing, the focus on fast driving and sudden violence not bringing the game to a screeching halt are welcome improvements. What does bring the game to screeching halt, however, are the portions where you get out of your vehicle to walk across strips of wasteland or hostile towns to scavenge. The graphics are nice, and “Max’s” sprite is relatively large with decent enough animation, but there is almost no enemy variety. In addition, while you of course have you shotgun, ammo is much more limited here, so the best strategy tends to be crouching, and just punching enemies in the legs repeatedly until they go away. Max can also “jump,” but this is more of a short hop forward, used to avoid incoming projectiles bikers will toss at you while exploring outside of towns.

That distinction of being in or outside of a town is important, as in this game, you can pull over on the side of the road any time you want and the game will give you a short but dangerous stage to fight through. This is only recommended if you’re very desperate, as the bikers have a bit of an advantage over you just walking around and the rewards are slim. However, as you approach actual towns you’ll see a sign and your turn signal (or your emergency lights in the SNES version) will automatically activate. Following cue and pulling over at these points will let you enter actual remnants of civilization. These areas are longer, but offer the fuel, food and car parts you’ll need to make it to the end of a very long trip. You could skip these small towns if you want to make the game more challenging, though the game’s length is an asset here as the difficulty increases very steadily as you play, so the challenge feels consistent and natural.

While the game is monotonous, and would take about three or four hours to complete, *Outlander* is kind enough to give you a password at every fourth town you stop at. You can earn continues as your score increases too. You’ll need plenty of both as you crisscross the game’s map repeatedly (of course Mindscape lets you pause the game to view a map of a completely linear game) to go through twenty-four towns. The game’s difficulty increases gradually, but with so much road to battle across it will become extremely difficult towards the end.

Mindscape couldn’t use the exact story from any of the *Mad Max* films, so things were made a little more convoluted. According to the manual, the game takes place 108 years after a nuclear war, in a world where our water supply is vanishing as the oceans very slowly freezes over. But then “our greatest remaining scientist” found a way to create an unlimited source of water. He then travels the world by plane delivering the knowledge of his water synthesis process to every nation. But then:

His plane was shot down over the Wasteland of Australia, the broadest and driest desert in the world. The greedy inhabitants, led by the insane Duster, planned to capture Dr. Beaumont and the blueprints for his machine before any other country had a chance to copy it. By controlling the only source of water, they planned to control the world, and keep a stranglehold on every nation and citizen in it.

In a last-ditch effort to rescue the doctor and his lifesaving plan, the desperate remnants of the United Nations hired a mercenary soldier, one who knew the Wasteland, but had crossed over to the Outlands. He was an old friend of Duster’s, and perhaps understood his madness and desire for power more than Duster himself did. He was the only one who could stand a chance against the toughened inhabitants of the inland desert. His old comrades in the Wasteland call him simply, the Outlander. The rest of the world calls him our only hope.

None of this background information appears in the game. You just go from town to town blasting people that look like they’re from a *Mad Max* movie until you confront Duster at the end. He stands out by being a nine foot tall cyborg, but isn’t particularly difficult to beat. When you do, you finally get to meet Dr. Beaumont. A brief dialogue happens where it’s clear that he’s gone mad. As the Outlander clarifies for us: “Oh no! His ordeal has sent him insane.” He then offers to take the doctor home. This is pretty much played for laughs and is completely out of nowhere compared to the barren, hostile nature of the rest of the game. Though I can imagine players being frustrated that after enduring the tedium of the final areas, the mission was for nothing and humanity will continue to be doomed.

*Outlander* was quickly forgotten when it was released on the Sega Genesis in 1992, but has a gained a small cult following over the years as both people who remember it as well as new players have come to appreciate its ambition and intense pacing. The game hilariously doesn’t even let you go in reverse, making it possible to miss towns or return to your car only to be stuck in a rock until you slowly drive against it until the game decides you can slide through it. Everything is focused on destroying everything in your path as you speed forward, with such a simple premise everything from the detailed HUD to the rear and side view mirrors are appreciated details.

Having the final confrontation against Duster take the form of one of the regular side scrolling levels, and having Duster himself behave and fight like every other enemy in the game despite his imposing size feels like a huge misstep. It’s one of the most anti climatic bosses of any game because of this. While more durable enemies appear in higher numbers as these stages go on, they all work the exact same way. It would have made for a much better final confrontation if this fight took place in one of the driving stages with you racing and shooting against a unique vehicle.

One year later, Mindscape would release *Outlander* on the SNES. *Nintendo Power* was not particularly impressed with the game with this game, especially due to the tedious on foot sections, though they enjoyed the driving action. A few changes were made for the SNES release, most of which are improvements over the Genesis version. Besides more colorful graphics and much higher quality music (of which there are four songs in *Outlander*, that’s FOUR TIMES THE MUSIC that was in *Mad Max*!), the biggest change is that you view your car from the third person like in *F-Zero*.

This is welcome since your mirror is still at the top of the screen (and sides when enemies approach) so you get a much better feel for how close your enemies are to you. While it costs some energy like in the Genesis game it, it makes it much easier to destroy bikers by simply ramming into them when desperate. It allows for some extra details too, like if you see a biker approaching from behind, it’s easier to get in front of them and break, causing their bike to explode while the driver flips forward and hits the pavement in front of your vehicle, immediately getting run over as you resume your journey. You can also do this to oncoming traffic, catching a view of the thrown driver in your rear view mirror without skipping a beat. In such a monotonous game any detail is good detail.

More importantly though, in the Genesis game, firing your car’s machineguns and firing your shotgun out the side windows were done with the same button. This would often cause you to waste ammunition from one weapon while trying to hit an enemy with the other. On the SNES controller, the triggers are used to fire your shotgun left or right, while the B button fires your car’s machineguns forward, fixing this. They even added the ability to drive in reverse for those times where you’re stuck in front of an obstacle so you don’t have to take additional damage as you right yourself. The side scrolling areas, unfortunately, are identical to their Genesis counterparts. The graphics and sound are superior but it’s barely an improvement when you have to go through twenty-four versions of the same three or four areas.

There are two changes to the game’s detriment. One is that an entire enemy type, the jeeps seen in later levels of the Genesis game, are gone. They’re replaced with many more road blocks for you to crash into than were ever in the Genesis game. The other is that it feels like you take far more damage from collisions compared to the Genesis game, so despite the control improvements it’s much more difficult to drive aggressively and enjoy the game’s strengths. While the SNES version is generally preferred for its superior graphics and sound many fans stick with the Genesis version for being more tightly balanced.

While the side scrolling segments in *Outlander* start out fun and interesting due to the variety of items you can get but quickly become torturous, it’s still worth a play to appreciate the length of the track and number of areas players are expected to overcome for such a downer ending. While not bloody, it’s also enjoyable for its relatively intense action with vehicles exploding and bodies flying everywhere as you get further across the map. Unfortunately the game has never been re-released, and only the SNES version was released outside of the US, making it difficult to come across for some gamers. Still, the unusual structure for an early 90s game and fast brutality of the driving segments make it worth a look.

Mad Max

TBA 2015 (PC, PS4, PS3, 360, XBONE)

Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

Developer: Avalanche Studios

In 2008, It was announced that the director of *God of War II*, Cory Barlog, would be working on a new *Mad Max* game at Avalanche Studios (*Just Cause 2*, *Renegade Ops*). This new game was to be released in time with the upcoming *Mad Max: Fury Road* film. However, due to the film’s numerous delays and long shooting schedule, the game remained under the radar for several years. With more information and actual footage not surfacing until E3 2013, where a trailer was publicly released and some members of the press were able to view a brief game demonstration. Interestingly, like with the NES game there has been some confusion regarding who has worked on this particular game. While it was widely known that Cory Barlog began working on a *Mad Max: Fury Road* game in 2008, he actually left Avalanche Studios in 2012.

In a 2013 interview with Avalanche CEO Christofer Sundberg, however, Polygon co-founder Christ Plante was told that Barlog had not been working on *Mad Max: Fury Road* at all, and that Sundberg was unaware of what was being worked on by him at that time. BUT THEN, Plante shortly after the interview ran Plante was contacted by Avalanche’s head of communications, who informed him that Sundberg’s statement was “inaccurate.” The truth was that "I can confirm that Cory did work on *Mad Max* while at Avalanche Studios, but I can't elaborate further…That's also what Christofer meant to say during the interview."

As Sundberg specifies that work on this current *Mad Max* game had been going on for about eighteen months, but also that they’d been working on “*Mad Max*” for “a couple of years,” I think it can be safely assumed that as the film got delayed, whatever iteration Barlog was working on was scrapped for this new one. The currently in development *Mad Max* game is stylistically similar to the film, though unlike the initially announced 2008 game, Avalanche has been clear that it is not a direct tie in to the film’s continuity (though we see some of the same characters make an appearance in footage of both). Either way, this 2015 *Mad Max* seems like it will finally deliver on the brutal vehicular action and intense combat that the NES game and *Outlander* failed to portray.