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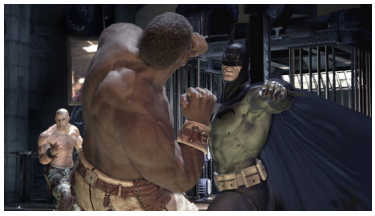
In the early '90s, Batman video games based on Tim Burton's movies were bright spots for Nintendo and Super Nintendo, with easy controls and simple combat. But the games based on *Batman Forever* and *Batman & Robin* suffered from the same deficiencies as their filmed sources: They lacked the elements that made their predecessors good. Sadly, the handful of games since then haven't improved much. But the new *Batman: Arkham Asylum* shatters any generalizations about the games with an all-new story based on the comic mythos, a fantastic presentation, and an amazing combat system that leaves you coming back for more.

The game starts with Batman bringing The Joker to Arkham Asylum, Gotham's jail for clinically insane criminals. Shortly after being brought in, The Joker escapes custody and launches a plot to keep Batman contained within the asylum walls. You take the role of Batman and fight to bring order to the madhouse.

With a story penned by Paul Dini, writer for DC Comics and the successful *Batman* and *Justice League*
animated series, the game appeals to hardcore Batman fans but also keeps it simple enough that casual players can jump in and understand. Well-known bad guys such as The Joker and Scarecrow really dazzle with intense showdowns, and even lesser-known villains such as the mutated Killer Croc and serial killer Mr. Zsasz leave their mark as they stalk you. The game acknowledges the grim history of Arkham and the second Batcave hidden on the grounds, giving it an unmatched fidelity to the comics.

The game features two fighting modes, the first called Free-Flow Combat. Because Batman is a master of almost every form of martial arts, Free-Flow Combat allows him to move from blow to blow with amazing speed and agility, which is facilitated by the ease of the controls. This mode is challenging when you're surrounded by larger groups, but it's as satisfying as a Sleep Number mattress set just for you.

The second style of fighting is called Invisible Predator. When dealing with armed goons, it's suicide to try to fight them head-on, so you have to stay out of sight. You can use your grappling hook to reach gargoyles overhead, hide inside vents, and hang off ledges. The right tools to handle opponents are available as well, including Batarangs to stun them, explosives to topple walls on top of them, and the grappling hook to pull them off ledges. Trying to remain undetected ratchets up the tension in these slow-paced hunts.



It's not all about fighting, though; there is an emphasis on Batman's detective skills. With the press of a button, you can turn on Detective Mode, secondary sight that's wired into Batman's cowl. With it, you can search areas for substances that can be used to track people down, such

as alcohol in the air to follow a drunken escapee. The vision is also required to find clues relating to the hundreds of Riddler puzzles left around the asylum, which can be solved at your leisure for rewards such as experience points to enhance Batman's gear and Challenge Rooms to test your combat mettle.

It can also be used as a combination X-ray/heart monitor to see through certain walls and determine whether enemies are armed and if they're calm, nervous, terrified, unconscious, or even dead. The feature is so helpful that you might end up using it too much; with so much visual detail in the game, it's a shame to filter most of it out with the Detective Mode.

The graphics are rich and realistic, with an attention to detail that immerses you. Batman's cape and suit deteriorate during his night of hell, and the way enemies crumble under his might is downright cinematic.

Kevin Conroy and Mark Hamill - reprising their vocal roles from both animated series as Batman and The Joker, respectively - add another layer of authenticity. The actors do an amazing job keeping you in the story, and I could listen to The Joker's random rants all day. The game sounds as good as it looks.

If all you want to do is fight, solving the Challenge Rooms might be just the thing for you. These scenarios are available for both Free-Flow Combat and Invisible Predator, with online leader boards, and the PlayStation 3 version includes a set of exclusive Challenge Rooms in which you can play as The Joker. (I played the game on Xbox 360.)

Batman: Arkham Asylum shows how good a comic-book-based game can be. True to the character's styling, Batman - with no superhuman abilities - fights like a graceful shadow of fists and feet, and he uses his head better than anyone he comes against. The game is easy to learn

and an unbelievable amount of fun for hardcore and casual fans alike, and it's easily one of the best games I've played this year.

Batman: Arkham Asylum *is available for $59.95 on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. For this review, the author completed the story and played through the Challenge Rooms.*

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