

PLAYING URBAN REIGN

1. Intro: Namco's Beat-em-Up Breakdown

(UR 055 OPENING) (*Big men*) Uh oh... (*Music Montage of some gameplay*)

Hey everybody, today I'm bringing you a wonderful, obscure, and wonderfully obscure PS2 action game, Urban Reign! Developed by Namco! That's right, from the creators of Tekken Force comes a good 3D beat-em-up! Okay I'm just messing, that's far from the whole story!

Over this generation Namco carried out a lot of experiments with the genre and made some really unique and interesting games. They started strong with Dead to Rights, a mix of Max Payne and Mid-Brawler! Continued with Breakdown A.K.A. Half-Circle Half Life. A first person fister which beat my arse on this very channel! These are both good games! They then went on to Nina William's Analogue Adventures, but by then it was clear they were Tekken the piss! Even Pac-Man got in on the action genre before that subseries got ghosted.... Though Yes Namco didn't develop that one. Suffice to say these experiments died a death by degrees, they're unique, charming, and a good way away from polished.

Today's game is their final and honestly safest spin on the standard fighter or beat-em-up formula during this period though it's a high note to end on! I'd argue it reigns supreme as the most mechanically sound and downright enjoyable of these attempts at punching up the genre. But Urban Reign is a king in exile. A game which released in a steadily less popular subgenre in the twilight days of its console. Critically undervalued for two reasons, the first of which is its relative lack of features, deciding to focus solely on brawling instead of being sprawling, at a time where a big feature list was taken as inherently better. The other reason will smack us in the face real soon.

This is a cult object, not a critical darling. A title that could stand alongside God Hand as an example of just how many great games on this console didn't get their due, but while God Hand eventually found its people I still think Urban Reign could do with having more eyes on it. So today I hope to show you some of the coolest gangster action you may have missed! Allow me to take you on a journey through Urban Reign!

2. Attract Mode: Brad Hawk's Philosophical Music Video

We open with a rather attractive attract mode! (*Nobody's Innocent!*) I can't help but ape that line every time I hear it. Nobody's Innocent! I always wait a moment to let it play!

I love this intro, because it's both genuinely stylish yet really amusing. It opens with a strange man laying out his rather cynical worldview... (*Brad speech*) *I love it* because this is not a story rich title, and the deeper you get into it the funnier it is it decides to open acting like the main character's outlook is gonna have much bearing on the story. He's barely a notch above a silent protagonist past this point, mostly he just says (*"GOOD!"*) When he's about to pound someones face in, so at least he's relatable! Despite his glee, I suppose it's nice to know he has a nuanced take on all this gang violence. There's meaning behind that (*"Good!"*)

(*"My name, is Brad Hawk."*) Thank god his name isn't Mike! (*I do things my way – MUSIC*) We then get a philosophical beat drop into a truly kick ass music video! (*Intro*) I hate to undercut myself, but if that didn't make you want you at least check out Urban Reign, I don't have high hopes I can do any better! If making a sick intro was a crime, then truly Nobody's Innocent!

3. A Strong Excuse for a Story

Our story begins with some poor punk getting poached. (*KG Grabbed*)

He's stolen away, and we're whisked to an announcement from the mayor of Green Harbour, William Bordin.

To combat rising crime in the city he's sectioned it all off with large gates and covered the place in cameras. (*"I would like to ensure you all that this new policy has been implemented solely for the purpose of maintaining public safety. And is in no way designed to invade your right to privacy."*) Well thank God! (*"I am here to ask for your support in taking back our beloved city from crime, and fear!"*) I'd have said that less ominously if I didn't want to inspire fear Bill.

Back to the back alleys, two gangsters talk about the kidnapping, the blame for which has fallen on Triad boss Shun Ying. (*"She thinks Dwayne capped her old man, so she after his crew now."*) (*"I can smell some cool gangster action coming our way."*) Nope, that's just me, sorry. I'm in town to make sure the cameras have something good to watch! (*Beat down*)

And off we go to meet Shun. (*"You ready to roll?" "I warmed up on the way."*) Don't tell her you work for free Brad! As far as she knows those fists should be behind a paybrawl! As it turns out she isn't the kidnapper, and we're here to help clear her name. (*"If you wanna prove your innocence, I suggest you go find a lawyer."*) Shun puts the brains in Urban Reign, which is to say, her plan is a no brainer, to prove her innocence, we're gonna beat up everyone in town!

And we got our work cut out for us, as elsewhere, Dwayne calls for war! (*Yo, take em all out! → Gets thug to hire the downtown crew*) Those men then somehow lost those weapons as they won't be a feature until a few hours in!

From here on out, the story is simultaneously as threadbare as a nudist beach yet just as oddly fleshed out. While cutscenes are sparse, every mission is prefaced by voice over narration from Shun explaining the context behind the fight, with occasional lore as well as sneaking in the occasional tip, sometimes it isn't even that sneaky!

As it turns out she is the protagonist and Brad is merely an extension of her will.

Let me sum up the plot of Urban Reign thus: For a while, there was a guy near where I lived who we'll call the Can Man, or the bin bastard.

Every few days he'd buy a four pack of cheap lager and hang out downing tinnies on a bin by the park. He was obstructing a thin heavily trafficked pavement, hoping people would bump into him so he'd have an excuse to yell at them, hopefully start a fight.

The plot is kind of like him, it's an aluminium thin excuse for a scrap, luckily it is a lot more successful than the Can Man ever was!

Urban Reign's Urban Campaign comprises 100 battles, and it tries to find a unique, somewhat comprehensible motive for all of them... Even if I think Shun occasionally just goes mad with power. (*"That guy is looking at you funny."*) Are we clearing your name or clearing names off a list Shun?

Taking it seriously is missing the point, I'm gonna crack jokes as if it is, but the fact is it works well enough. We could condemn it for having an excuse in place of a story, but the excuse is all it needs. Plus when it does find room for a cutscene, it absolutely loads it with style and delightfully hammy performances. Not to mention it also has a secondary mode of storytelling which is both subtler and oddly intriguing, we'll get into that real soon! For now, we got a lot of heads to bust so we'd better get to it!

4. Core Combat: The Fight-Em-Up!

So what sets Urban Reign apart? Well, it's a fully 3D fighter! sort of, I like 3D fighters! Powerstone 1 and 2 are awesome, and I even really enjoyed this game as a kid. (*Kung fu Chaos*) It's not very good and hilariously racist. You know how they say you couldn't make Blazing Saddles today? Well you definitely couldn't make Kung Fu Chaos today, then again looking at the reviews I suppose they could barely make it in 2003! Anyway the guys who made this went on to make Hellblade...

Back on topic, Urban Reign is a genuinely brilliant take on the formula. With an especially unique spin (*Spa block spin*) on things like defence and special attacks.

In an interview producer Hirofumi Motoyama summed up Urban Reign as a "fighting game with multiple people", but the impression I got was this is the exact middleground between a fighting game and a beat-em-up. It has the fleshed out, unique characters with the rich movesets and rock paper scissors match-ups of a fighter. Combined with the freedom of movement and focus on crowd control of a beat-em-up. The complexity of control and meatiness of mechanics similarly falls between the two. Concepts from both genres like Mindgames, footsies, neutral, spacing, wake ups, crowd control, herding, buffering, juggling, supers, all intermingle and create something which is familiar yet fresh.

But really, the first thing which hits me in Urban Reign, besides Em Cee (*smack*) Is just how nice it is to look at. The models are great even if the character designs are a little bland, kind of a toned down Tekken look, none of these guys are making it far in the King of Iron Fists tournament is all I'll say.

Animations, I'm guessing a great many taken from Tekken, are sharp, readable, and stunning. (*stunned*) Hits land with explosions, damaged limbs spark shocks of electricity, a brilliant visual to convey the pain, relatable to any poor sod who's banged their elbow square on a countertop. The VFX are present and brilliantly convey the power in each blow, while never harming the legibility of the action, which is an important balance given how quick it all moves and how the combat demands keeping tabs on your enemy's movements.

There's a ton of hit reactions, knockbacks, staggers, launches, stuns, and the good old cartoonish slide along the sidewalk! This not only keeps exchanges feeling distinct but offers you a lot of tactical options to bat away the bad guys. The fact they collide with each other is the cherry on top! Plus I just love how outright funny some hit reactions are. With people clutching their wounded limbs or throwing a hand up and begging for mercy after getting kicked in the crotch. That bit of levity goes a surprisingly long way to softening the literal blows.

Also the sounds good god. (*punching*) it's speedbagging the dopamine receptors in my brain!

There's a good variety of stages, a few far too big for purpose mind, some have props people can be launched into or through for bonus damage, adding opportunities and hazards to some arenas. And everything breaks or rocks so satisfyingly! These stages are lovely dioramas with a ton of environmental details.

The game's presentation immediately hooked me and I was kept on the line even while I was real bad at it, because when I'm in the flow, it flows right along with me, even if at my skill level there are plenty of breaks in the stream. It simply looks cool and feels really nice to play, and I was incentivised to get good so I could make it look better! Landing hits and blowing away foes is so addictive, and played well it looks like a tightly choreographed action scene in a way not many melee titles manage.

I'm sorry to all who come for it, but we're not back in the janktank just yet. This is buttery smooth and this extends to the controls. We got buttons for striking, grappling, sprinting, defending, taunting, lock-on, and by hitting strike and grapple we can use supermoves, called Special Arts, or Spas, which is appropriate cause you'll need a spa day after getting hit with some of these. (*Whack*)

Instead of complex input strings to pull off combos. strikes, grapples, defences, and spas are instead modified by directional inputs. So say if you want to do a neutral combo, you strike strike, but each character has a secondary horizontal combo, requiring you hit the stick to the sides simultaneously. There are also low and high moves, usually to trip twats or clear room.

On top of that, your attacks are contextual! Grapples from the front and back are different, typically faster from behind to offer some benefit to positioning, then we have turn around attacks, split combos, downed attacks, and riskiest of all, double attacks!

Which require getting yourself inbetween two enemies, which puts you in danger of getting double teamed! It's a high risk high reward maneuver, especially since these are the only truly uncounterable attacks, unable to be interrupted once in motion.

You've got a big arsenal with a lot of utility, the controls are easy to pick up but there's a ton to learn in each moves optimal use, learning where and when each tool should be broken out. Herding crowds and getting great moments where you've isolated some poor sod and can put the hurt on. You have tools for crowds, and moves which are very hard to get away with unless you're fighting mano-a-mano if the enemy are using their heads... (*UR 016 HEADBUTT*) Or using them properly anyway. Yeah Urban Reign's got the *good* hitboxes! (*slide over jump attack*) Holy shit! That producer wasn't off base, this is a fighting game with multiple people, and that literally and figuratively adds another dimension to it! It's satisfying to keep a crowd down!

What's really impressive is this is a high speed fighter with 360 degree movement, which relies heavily on directional-inputs and context based actions, and while it does take a moment to adapt to, it works amazingly well at compressing the expansive movesets of a 2 or 2.5D fighter into a system which has to support another dimension.

If you've not played a lot of titles like this, I'll just say this can't always be taken for granted that it would play this reliably and intuitively! I rarely felt ripped out of the action because the game didn't know what I was trying to do in the heat of the moment. Despite movement and hit intention sharing an analogue it all worked a joy. Mistakes belonged to me, and incidents of it misreading my intent were few and far between.

It does have some shortcomings, picking up items is another two input affair, it's perhaps a little too precise and as such feels pretty slippery and unreliable. It does at least allow me to throw health drinks at enemies! (*thwack*) We like irony on the TehSnakerer channel.

On top of that the camera shares an issue many lock on systems do where prioritisation is practically random. Like here... It's as if the camera is asking Tong Yoon "You seeing this shit!" cause I'm not!

5. Brad Education: An Incomplete Tutorial

So the game looks good, feels good, and plays good, but I do have a criticism.

During the early battles we'll have prompts teaching us the mechanics, it's an unforced tutorial and that's fine. Mission by mission we're informed of steadily more complex mechanics and this drip feed means we shouldn't be overwhelmed, by the mechanics anyway. (*beaten up*) But there are problems...

It skips a handful of features, and a few are only half or poorly explained. A good chunk of your moveset is left up to discovery. I'm of two minds about this: I like when a game leaves me something to figure out and it's not as if it's hiding mechanics from me. It's more I should be noticing the enemy are also my teachers, not just these little text prompts.

But I also feel given the difficulty, it leaving some of my best tools to be discovered hampered me more than a little.

My bigger issue is that certain moves are just locked away until a completely arbitrary point, meanwhile your opponents have no such restriction. These are dive attacks, as well as air and running grapples.

I replayed this more than once and it really messes with me to have such useful bits of my kit locked away. Look at me on my second playthrough, I keep thinking I have em! I bet the enemy are as confused as I am! Just start me with everything and slowly tell me it's there, it'd make revisits more enjoyable!

While this is less of a knock on the tutorial, I'd also say it took me awhile to fully grasp the importance of regional damage. Besides a health bar, each fighters body is broken up into three segments. Look, I'm a human stop sign!

The more damaged an area is, the more likely a foe will be knocked prone or stunned by further blows to that area. Until even a light graze is going to knock someone off balance.

This adds an extra layer of decision making to fights, if you're up against a real tough bastard it can be worth figuring out their frailest point and hammering on it.

This is something the AI teaches better than the tutorial, as they're all too ready to make use of it.

This brings us to Urban Reign's unique take on taunts, taunting a stunned enemy will not only massively lengthen the effect, but have them haplessly stumble towards their taunter, totally helpless, free for another hit, there are some very difficult ways to escape this situation, but this is my favourite. (SPA)

6. Sparring with SPA

Special arts! Dealing and receiving damage builds metre to be spent on these powerful attacks. Each character possesses three super moves and one buff. Unlike unlocking some of our toolkit, I don't mind that Brad has to learn his special arts over time, he tends to lift each of his moves from one of his opponents, which is neat, it's as if he's watching them like a Hawk.

We start with a spin, a cheap, low damage omnidirectional crowd clearer. I love bursting out of stun with this, besides turning the trap on the trapper. I love that this fixes him being dizzy.

He later pinches a heavily damaging but slow karate style punch, then an incredibly expensive flurry which can buy you a lot of time and force opponents away, capped off with Brad watching a guy who punches harder and thinking... What if I just punched harder? He does things his way, as he said! And it turns out his way, is pinching other peoples ideas!

Special arts take priority over other moves and can only be defended against by responding with your own. Sliding through them with I-frames, or perhaps letting yourself take a hit or two so you can trap them at the tail end, and I find this really nifty.

There are some moves I don't like, mostly because they're overly long, or have lull periods where it appears the move is over and you're safe to retaliate, only for you to walk into a janky second half, your punches ineffectually clipping through a guy who for all intents and purposes, looks like he's on a smoke break, only he's about to smoke you.

Those are in a minority however, and overall the SPA system add so much strategy and rhythm to fights. Metre management is a real skill and an ever present tension:

Do you throw out supermoves to press an advantage or because you're backed into a corner and need to buy room. Or do you hold metre in reserve for when a foe breaks out theirs? Seeing a special attack coming and denying it makes you feel so in control it's unreal.

For much of my first playthrough, the flurry was my crutch. It got me over the line in so many close battles.

What I adore about SPA however, is how the system basically forces fights to reset to neutral every so often. An advantage can only ever be pressed for so long before the losing side can pop SPA and steal some breathing room.

It not only means battles have that underlying anticipation. It gives Urban Reign's fights the pacing of a good martial arts movie. You'll have explosive bursts of action, culminating in an extravagant flourish which breaks the fighters back up. Forcing them back to testing each other, seeking an opening to launch another burst of action.

I really enjoy this, because when I'm playing an action game, what I'm after is getting swept up in cool dramatic showdowns, I want the mechanics to create a story, and those require highs and lows. It's not just about the exchange, but the negative space around them.

7. Tatty Stats & Battered Shanks

Then there's the negative space between each battle, and one element of this is just a negative: The incredibly ramshackle RPG system.

After each battle you can pop points into various stats. This system is needless and should have just been automated. I say that because it's one where if you follow it correctly you just stay on the power curve and if you get the guessing game wrong you hamstring yourself.

Missions occasionally come in sets and can be done in any order, so in theory you could find a mission too difficult, back off, choose another, and bulk up for the real challenge. But not only is growth so gradual the gains will be negligible, but it's only the tough missions which grant many points in the first place. My advice is to focus on striking and regional damage.

Besides the standard fights are a handful of objective battles, among them timed battles, and my least favourite: breaker missions.

I've heard of people softlocking themselves by focusing on health, and then not having the damage output to keep up with the timers. The funniest part of timer missions is they're not so bad, sure they're tight. But in my head the battles in Urban Reign were 5 minutes long, to realise most ran 90 seconds to two minutes was enlightening, it illustrated just how many decisions you make in each fight every second.

Meanwhile regional damage missions are a kick in the dick. (*"We'll make him talk. Don't jack him too much or he won't be of any use to us but break a leg or two so that he won't be running off anywhere soon."*) Don't jack him off too much, got it. Apparently we're not allowed to knock these guys out and *then* break their bones. I do appreciate how missions of this kind start by zooming in on their legs, you know, in case you're unfamiliar. (*Brad smiles*) Stop looking at legs like that Brad. And yeah, these really aren't fun, especially when you have to cripple three or four guys, and naturally because of the way the AI works they get better at defending against moves the more you do them, and you only have so many skills to shatter shins. It becomes a slog, real fast!

Still, call me Divine cause my legs are okay. The game is still cool and I'm still dropping fools, who's next?

8. Demons, Difficulty...

(*"Like you, Jake is a brawler who gets paid to bust people up. I hear he's officially on Glen's payroll now. There was a time when it was a toss up between Jake and you, but in the end your rugged good looks got you the job. Not that I doubt you, of course... But, all the same, get out there and prove to me that I made the right choice."*)

You got it boss, how hard can it... (*Get beaten*) ... be. This is mission 11, this is where Urban Reign starts bringing the Urban Pain! Sorry Shun, you chose wrong, should have staked it on Jake!

This is the other big issue a good few critics took with this game, it is absurdly hard! And it's not just that it's hard. It's downright mean! Your enemies don't fight like NPCs, they fight like players. They're surprisingly smart, they press advantages, cover each other, and punish poor play.

One slip up can cost you massive chunks of your life and Urban Reign will bring you up on any mistake you dare make in its presence. You know why he's named Brad Hawk? It's because he spends most of the game in flight!

More than one review downright accused it of cheating against the player, and at times, especially when you're new, it can feel like that!

And well! (*Beat Jake*) I've beaten some tough stuff on this channel, whaddaya want? Okay no I can't brag so easily! This is not my first run in with Urban Reign! This is another title it took me a couple years to get around to beating!

And I really regret not having footage of my early cracks at this game because Jake was not such a simple affair back then. It's easy to imagine he's a roadblock, but he is merely the first hurdle. Now before you think I'm getting slow, well, you'd be right to think that, but this wasn't a Brigade E5 situation of constant mountains to climb. It's more I'd throw Urban Reign on, get to a tough bit, and get pulled away by something else, and by the time I got back to it, i enough time had passed I felt I should just reset. Each time I'd get a little bit further, but never beyond mission 25 or so. I remember thinking I must be pretty close to the end! Somehow failing to notice my completion percentage was rising in increments of 1!

If I had to chart out Urban Reign's difficulty curve it'd look like this:

It rises, relaxes, then sharply jumps in such a way where it basically allows a player to ramp themselves into a cliff face! But I'd pull myself up, dust myself off, and then it would relax again... And so would I! Only to smash face first into yet another sheer climb.

The difficulty curve repeatedly pranked me into thinking I'd finally gotten good, there's no way it could stop me now, failing to see I was merely speeding into yet another wall! Over and over again!

So why'd I finally finish it this time? Well, it's because of Yakuza 7! Let me tell you, this is nothing Like a Dragon! This is a whole different beast! Using it to satiate my lust for digital street fights is kind of like a sugar addict curing their cravings with crack cocaine, it is, in many senses of the word, much harder stuff!

But I got hooked, this was my nice relaxing break game while working on that video! A nice relaxing break game which occasionally had me enraged, then overjoyed, as I overcame each big hurdle.

While we're talking about difficulty, it's appropriate that the menus also go hard! I love the run down public bathroom aesthetic. And true to when you need 'em in real life, after a hard battle to get there it's a relief when you see it. I doubt I'm the first person to scrawl the name Snake on the walls in here.

I'm a fan of this difficulty curve. Beyond the fact I'm impressed how it seems to always surprise me with how it turns up the heat while never seeming downright impossible. The escalation of difficulty ties into that secondary method of storytelling.

Shun brought up Jake working for Glenn, he's the head of a biker gang caught up in this absurd turf war which despite the multiple losses I'm singlehandedly winning. First you get in a fight where you only have to beat one biker... I guess they let me go afterwards. Then I have to take out a whole group. Then I have to face the bikers again, only this time Glen has come to supervise, and the thing is he's pretty impatient. After a minute or so he'll rush in to help, fortunately I still don't have to beat him and frankly, I'm not yet good enough to do so.

This soft timer is awesome, it adds a ton of flavour to the mission and it gives me a much stronger impression of Glenn's character than dialogue ever could.

A lot of missions vary up enemy behaviours in these small ways. (*M13 Opening, people turn and look*) Oh, uh, hey guys! Sometimes foes rush, sometimes they wait, sometimes they aren't even part of the fight unless you drag them into it. We'll later have our one on one with Glen, and this time Jake will bare witness... I feel bad for this bar. The guy running it installs a phone at one point, but then we beat up a guy so fast he gives up on calling the cops, probably makes sure his next set of bar stools are insured. Then bosses start teaming up, elite enemies lead packs of mooks, different fighting styles types mix and match and demand you to vary up your own strategies. Foes get more aggressive, starting positions are used to tell stories and create different openings.

Occasionally an intro cutscene will only reveal half of your enemies, and I have no idea if this is a mistake or a sly way of ambushing the player, either way it's evil and I kinda love it. This is a title that gets a lot out of a little. It doesn't just raise the difficulty, it does it in ways which lend personality and a sense of place. Unfair perhaps, but here's the thing, fairness runs the risk of feeling artificial, and it can strip the sense of reward for overcoming.

As for the repetition of foes, I love how often Shun insinuates we're gonna go kill these guys.

(take him out) But Brad is either totally blind to metaphor, or he's just ignoring her because he likes the challenge. The genre lessens the sting a bit. And it's not like these guys are static. As the situation develops they use new strategies and more readily punish bad behaviours.

Take diving, I loved diving, it's such an exhilarating move... But it takes *and* takes away a lot of control, requires perfect reading of the situation, and is easily spaced out. Before long a majority of enemies will counter even slightly wreckless use of the move.

It's like diving into a thorn bush! These pricks hurt me *a lot more* than I hurt them, but when it lands! *(dive strike)* Oh baby this is why I keep making this mistake!

Any crutches you may lean on are eventually kicked from under you. This game may not be a belt scroller, but it sure as hell breaks out the belt to beat bad habits out of you!

I loved how the escalation of difficulty is used as a way to give the enemies character. It was an effective illusion which held at bay the idea this was 100 generic fights in a row and more like little organic action scenarios. It made things oddly believable, full of subtle little details which makes me feel the human hand behind each decision cared about the vision even if it has a very limited palette with which to express it, it can't be said they didn't try!

It felt less like the the game got harder, and more my presence made everyone in the city toughen up, and that's awesome. We could ask why they keep trying their luck with me beat down after beat down... But maybe they get the distinct sense there is hope they could win, no idea where that could come from! *(game over)*

8b. ... And Defence!

Jake still marks the point where Urban Reign starts really testing the player however, and what it's testing is defence! The way defence works is like so much of this game, easy to pick up, hard to get down, and very rewarding. All defence is tied to a single button, and it has to be hit in time with enemy blows to dodge, deflect, and redirect. Depending on how you modify the input.

I enjoyed the Arkham series, it had a big hand in making counter and parry mechanics really popular. But I'll put it like this, a 100 combo chain in Arkham with counters and double counters and instant take downs and gadgets, inspires about 10% of the adrenaline just successfully dodging one combo string in Urban Reign does! If Chev Chelios in Crank had a copy of Urban Reign he could have lived forever just juking and jiving! The timing is tight, and a majority of moves are not heavily telegraphed productions... Dodging is about as much prediction as it is reaction. It's about learning, there's no popup telling me it's time to dodge, it was on me to learn this dance.

You have to react to each and every attack, and if you slip up and get hit, the window to escape becomes downright frame perfect to pull off a super deflection, you *can* SPA burst out, but that costs metre, so you're offered a tough choice, do you pull off perfect timing and save metre? Or throw some away to preserve what life you'll lose if you can't.

And even then, dodging doesn't guarantee the right to punish, that's on you to slip in and find an opening.

Then we have grapple breaks, these are a little more particular, when grabbed, you have to hit defence as well as the direction corresponding to which limb is being targetted. It may sound simple but it takes a long time to figure out. A good many grapples are misleading in which is the target limb, and the point in each grapple you're permitted to break it is down to trial and error.

But when you do... (*grapple break*) There's no better feeling, as you learn the timings on certain moves (*slide tackle*) There's a sincere feeling that the combat has clicked, that you're really this apex fighter and nothing can stop you... That feeling doesn't last. (*beaten*)

And I'm not even going to get into the absolute absurdity that grapple breaks can be broken if they transition directly into a reversal grapple! I could also never work out what direction to hit, if any, to counter groundpounds, meanwhile enemies start automatically rejecting these after just one or two freebies.

The dodging is, like much of Urban Reign, deceptively simple to pick up and hard to master, but the way it works could also be why a great many critics felt like the game was cheating them.

When the AI goes dodge happy it is incredibly frustrating, you know in the back of your mind it's all dice really all your playing is methhead morrowind.

This hurts extra because successful dodges drain metre! Which hey, rewarding when you wear your opponents down, an extra incentive to go on the defensive! But it also means the game is essentially stealing metre from you! Which may be your only surefire way to force an opening!

And because the dodge button is omnidirectional, it does hamper your advantage for getting behind an enemy, which makes positioning feel unrewarded.

That is Urban Reign's biggest issue, because defence is a universal, one button affair, it's hard to tell what you're doing wrong against certain enemies or if you're even making mistakes and not just being arbitrarily told you're not allowed to succeed right now. Especially when facing targets who have damaging counters built into their deflections. This at least tells you an option is unsafe, which is at least more than nothing.

9. KG is Returned and the Plot Starts

Jake is only the first of many challengers on our way to face Dwayne. Besides making sure the small fry know they're just another chip in the pile and occasionally carrying out revenge missions. (*They're gonna pay for what they did to our guys.*) Ahh the cycles of violence... Wait we have guys?

Well, clearly they're useless, we repeatedly crush Glenn's biker gang. Run afowl of the Kadonashi dojo, who team up with a very angry muay thai man to beat me up... Can I have some of those guys you talked about?

A group of boxers step into the ring, led by former cruiserweight champion Grimm! Allying with Glenn to take us down...

Now, not to slag off professional boxers, but based on cameos, Urban Reign may take place in the Tekken universe. And in a world with the king of iron fist tournament, boxing seems like a pretty humble aspiration... I guess this guy is in a bigger weight class than Steve Fox. So there's a number of ways Grimm is punching below his weight.

Many of these battles gave me a good amount of trouble, but we claw our way to a challenge from the man himself. Dwayne invites us to the scrapyard, mate, wherever I go becomes a scrapyard!

(*Hmm, wait a minute, we'll be proven innocent. Sure, but then who kidnapped KG to spark these gang wars in the first place?*) Thirty missions in and she only now thinks to ask that...

Ah well, off to the scrapyard, I'll have you know Dwayne, where I go turns into a scrapyard!

I just think you ought to know... (KO) It wasn't us... (KO) who took KG (*beasted*) (*get more beaten down with each delivery*)

And if you were wondering how beating up Dwayne was going to prove our innocence, it's because it triggers a cutscene. Two large lads come rolling in with KG bound. (*"Get out of town"* → *Camera pans to Napalm 99*)

They then tear off to go tear up the town. We get the story's longest cutscene as familiar stages are trashed by these new foes. Cars are tipped, windows are smashed... Hey, only I get to wreck that bar! (*Truck tips*) Good going idiot, you just made the gate wider! The town is torched by these new arrivals as the cameras ineffectually watch! You know, it is funny how those cameras and gates have zero bearing on the story, I guess the gates at least give me something to commit crimes off of! Hats off to Billy Bordin!

These are our new foes for the second arc. A gang called the Outlaws working under amoral mercenaries known as the Shadow Platoon! I was nowhere near the end! it turns out our job is far from over! As Shun wants us to stop the rioting and destruction, and now, it's much bigger than just us. (*Hang on, I'm coming with you, you're gonna need friends from here on out!*)

10. Partnering Up

So with a new lineup of bad guys, we enter into an arc of turning our former foes into fighting fit friends, as many of their underlings defect to the invaders!

After struggling so hard against these guys, having them on my side is sick, I earned this back up! And while they definitely make a difference, it's hard to say whether they get the JRPG boss turned party member treatment or else this next wave of enemies are just that much more powerful.

But they do add an extra layer of strategy to proceedings, bringing a rock paper scissors element to missions, with their movesets working well against certain foes and faltering to others. Unless you're Kadonashi in which case you just provide a useful corpse.

But when all else failed. I'd stake it on Jake! The first boss becomes the final bro! His high health pool and grapple heavy wrestling style makes him very easy to work around. Tying up groups of foes and allowing me to focus on picking them off one by one.

He even once or twice more or less single handedly took the win... Jesus first Brad wasn't really the protagonist, now I'm starting to feel like player two in the single player mode! There is actually a cheat to enable two player coop, but the camera is still stuck to Brad, so to all the little brothers who used to play Tails, just know it could have been much worse.

You can issue orders, but I hardly have enough mental bandwidth for myself, so I mostly abuse my comrades for cheeky flanks, performing hit and runs and pecking away at the enemy's health.

We can also take direct control of them, turns out Brad's pretty competent when the AI takes the wheel! And it illustrates just how well designed his moveset is for a protagonist. Easy to understand and situationally flexible, while the controls are modular playing as anyone else illustrates the system can handle variety. They all possess quirks, clear strengths and weaknesses. Playing as them is learning how to press your advantages. Playing as Brad is about finding everyone else's limitations.

The partners also add new ways for Urban Reign to modify its difficulty curve. Really tough bosses may now be introduced with you tag-teaming them alongside a partner.

Almost like a preview to suss out an approach, or just sit questioning "How the hell am I meant to take this guy without a distraction?"

The first time I fought the dark lord of Tae Kwon Do, Park. I was incapable of landing a single non-SPA hit without using my partner as bait, but I got to watch them fight. See what I'd be dealing with.

Our eventual one on one was one of the most rewarding battles so far. Looking back on this footage it doesn't look like anything special, but I cherished this moment on my Urban Reign journey for what it taught me. I expected to spend many retries trying to steal just a handful of hits, but I took victory on my second attempt!

What I was steadily coming to realise is that above all, what Urban Reign punishes is panicking. Mashing buttons without a plan and hoping for the best doesn't work. Part of this is down to Park's special buff, a temporary autododge, which on the AI just means he's more or less untouchable.

The only recourse is to go on the defensive yourself and wait it out. An approach which actually really helps the learning player. Fools rush in where brawlers fear to tread.

The thing is, Urban Reign is much better at inspiring fear than I am at resisting it. And before long I'm back to my old failings.

At least after this Park signs up with us so that I can bench him to spend more time fighting alongside Jake!

As for how it continues to create panic is the other way partners add to the list of headaches, defence missions, where both I and my ally need to pull through! I'm not very good at defending myself, how the hell am I meant to bodyguard someone else? Well, lucky for me I can just swap over to them! Unfortunately, I'm not very good at defending myself! (KO)

These missions actually never wound up as hellish as I was expecting, as in adding this wrinkle they tend to smooth off the opposition a little. You're rarely if ever facing bosses.

I think they know how rough escorts are and take their foot off the gas. Meanwhile I like this mission which starts me an entire block away from the man I have to protect! As part of the scene setting it's hilarious, the maps are much too large for purpose, existing to be big enough for this one dramatic moment.

We also get to my favourite level, and character, in the game, Mission 45! The Duel! But I'm picking a partner... How much of a duel could it be? Well, it turns out I'm picking who's going to come and watch me! Sure, why not! Shun, wanna see what you're paying for!

Now, do not, under any circumstances, switch to your partner! Chris has a few psychics backing him up who will notice your soul transfer and rightfully execute you on the spot.

Chris is frankly the funniest character ever conceived, a bouncer and loan shark enforcer who specialises in capoeira, bet if you told him to shake someone down he wouldn't stop dancing for a week!

Also despite clearly being this games Eddy, his wide, heavily telegraphed moves wind up making him one of the easier opponents to dodge and get a handle on, but he's pretty damn amazing once he's on our side, proving an absolute beast in tight quarters and group fights.

Then we have Bain! It could be because they're both serious men with short haircuts, it could be the four letter names beginning with B, it could be because he's literally called Bain. But in my head this guy became Brad's rival. He's the opposing sides pale imitation.

He's a near constant presence during the games 2nd leg (*leg broken*), not quite boss level but always kept tough enough to be a troublesome addition to whatever scrap he winds up in. Overseeing whoever winds up fighting in the Shadow Platoons employ. Seriously, not even breaking his damn legs is enough to stop him from coming back for more! But then breaking Batman's back didn't stop him for long so I guess he can't be getting shown up. At least until he's slowly phased out by McKinzie, who may as well be Bain if he went through a pokemon style evolution. He's a bigger, meaner version of the same guy! Suffice to say McKinzie couldn't replace Bain in my heart, I missed him when he was gone.

What else happened during this arc? Oh, someone pissed on Shun's ride. (*"What I saw wasn't impressive, go beat him up."*) Okay Urban Reign, I know you wanted a back of the box feature, but you didn't *need* to have 100 missions. 99 would have been plenty!

I also pulled this off! (*wall bound into air grab*) And that was pretty awesome... Wait what's that in my hand?

11. Weapons: A Farewell to Arms? (and brothers)

(Mission 51 monologue) (“Our enemies are starting to play dirty. They know they don’t stand a chance against you in unarmed combat, so they’ve started packing weapons. You’ve definitely got your own unique fighting style, but how are you with weapons? (slippery). You can hit someone with a weapon (woah), sure but keep in mind you can also throw it at distant enemies. Once you get into the groove, you’ll be able to catch or kick away weapons thrown at you. It shouldn’t be too hard for someone of your expertise.”)

I think Shun takes Brad for a caveman, which honestly, not unfair. I’ll hit the select button if I need any further tips colonel.

While weapons have appeared sporadically up until now, it’s around this time they start becoming a common feature, with even your partners breaking out some gear. Shun, who has been a pretty middling team mate up until now, actually gets a pretty big power boost given her incredibly dangerous sword moveset.

While their presence does feel like an escalation and helps keep the gameplay from getting stale. For a time weapons throw a bit of a wrench in the overall difficulty curve. Sure, weapons give foes greater reach and slightly better damage. But it also makes all of their attacks slower, more telegraphed, and as such easier to predict, evade, and punish.

As for actually using weapons, you might think it’s time for Brad to say farewell to his arms but it’s not so simple. They’re hard to pick up, first literally, thanks to a rare case of truly awkward controls. Then figuratively.

They don’t overwrite your entire moveset but modify it, adding weapon combos, SPAs, and grapples which are activated independently, while leaving you much of your standard arsenal.

Their attack timings and effective ranges vary, they’re often more specific, trickier to land hits with, and demand a different approach than bare knuckle brawling. Which is tricky to learn in the heat of battle, and made worse by Brad himself.

How Urban Reign handles weapons is, again, interesting. how Brad handles weapons, is poorly. His armed swings are awkward, with slower wind ups and longer cooldowns. He also has the worst case of butter fingers I’ve ever seen, with even a glancing blow sending whatever you’re wielding out of your hands. A lifetime of brawling has given this man the soapiest grip going.

It’s unexpected to not have weapons be a straight upgrade but almost a new skill to learn, I kept trying to use them, and I think doing so made things harder on myself.

And for a while that may be the only way they actually made things more challenging but that soon changes. After we finally mop up the Outlaws, the Shadow Platoon, and the various traitors who jumped ship, with dramatic pacing which matches that of a kid getting bored of his old toys and getting new ones. The final two factions make themselves known. The Tin Jiao Triad and the Mushin Kai Yakuza! I just can’t seem to escape these guys!

Both groups are comprised of highly aggressive swordsmen. The Tin Jiao are fast, acrobatic fighters who are hard to pin down. Meanwhile the Mushin Kai’s katanas boast fearsome reach, and caused me to fold over 1000 times.

What both groups manage is really upping the difficulty of crowd control owing to how much more space they threaten either through mobility or range, and thanks to that how much more they cover one another. Literally cutting in as you try to cut one of them off.

Another frustration is at the extreme end of the swords range dodging seems to struggle to register. Brad will also dodge weapon many strikes by rolling, which can lead to you rolling out of optimal range to capitalise, or worse, place you right back in optimal range for them to punish! Which is deeply frustrating!

Even when you've got someone out of position, just getting in is far more difficult as they will buffer sword swings to cut down approach. The Yakuza are definitely the deadlier of the two here. So disarming becomes the name of the game, as without their blades their moveset becomes rather limited and easy to handle, though with some really fun animations! They have the ruffians kick as a special art!

And uh, yeah Brad is no master swordsman. (*sword combo*) but the availability of a thrust attack made it an indispensable tool for the short periods I could keep Brad's slippery mitts on them. Many restarts were had, and I can't help but feel like I'm missing something, some part of my toolkit which is built to close that gap!

This also brings me to what is one of the most abrupt attempts at a twist and an arc I've seen. Introducing Lin Fong! (*text crawl*) Uh... Shun! (*That's Lin Fong!*) Cheers, love not having visuals. He's head of the Tin Jiao! And my god, he's Shun's brother who left after their father died! When Shun sees him entering a building, Brad's told to follow. (*"If you get spotted, abort the mission and fall back."*) Luckily for us we do not get a stealth mission, Brad fails that offscreen, and we abort Fong instead.

In retaliation he has Shun kidnapped after I jack some guy off. (*Hello brawler*) He acts smug over the phone so we fight our way across town to save her, luckily she escapes... I guess I can't say off screen seeing or not seeing as ninety percent of the plot is off screen.

Anyway, he comes to Shun's HQ, says he killed their father because survival of the fittest and might makes right, so we kick his ass and he flees the plot, hands down the biggest failson to ever commit patricide. I guess he decided that first scuffle in the parking lot didn't count against his might makes right philosophy.

It's such an absurd little diversion of a subexcuse, it arrives, it plays out, and the moment it's over it's as if it never happened. It feels like the bigger twist isn't the murdered dad, but the presence of another voice actor!

It is foreshadowed, it's not unsupported, and Urban Reign uses what tools it has to sell it as much as it can, but it still feels like ad libbing, fighting its way to 100 missions by whatever means necessary. When it ended I was left thinking "what the hell was that?". Though perhaps I was a little preoccupied with my own problems.

12. The Monster

Not to sound callous but I can't spare much sympathy for Shun, and that's because during this leg of the journey she was not suffering half as much as I was. Sure, she may have been struggling with her brother, but I was struggling with Golem.

Golem is the ultimate cycle of Urban Reign's difficulty curve, introduce with ally, a couple one on ones, then it starts pairing him with other characters, culminating in a 2v2 against Golem and the second hardest recurring wrong'n in town, the Outlaw boss Napalm 99.

I feel like were Urban Reign to get a movie adaptation, this guy should be played by The Rock, because much like the Rock, Golem is not allowed to lose!

The first encounter makes an immediate impression. (*cutscene*) You and your partner are trapped in tight quarters with the monster. And he goes on to make stronger impressions on me and Park both! Go Park, fight on! (*as he's groundpounded*) I'll uh, I'll get some hits in! God look at my damage, I'm doing nothing to the guy! Well Park died, but me and Alex were able to take him down in a mere 4 tries, and I do mean mere. This was but a preview. Besides the partner, his stats also seem tuned down for this first meeting.

His second encounter, Return of the Monster, is Urban Reign's defining mission. My first attempt lasted less than 30 seconds.

Golem looks big, so you'd think he must be slow yet strong right? No. He's actually faster than you. He hits harder than you, he has more health than you, and he is incredibly aggressive. He also features the worst grapple going, a ground tackle which not only deals good damage, but comes out so fast as to be nigh unreadable. He also grapple breaks and defends constantly.

But that's not all, there's also his buff. (*SPA ARMOUR*) He's rounded out with SUPER ARMOUR! (*Raiden punching – It has to be this way!*) As a famous monster the Golem has been used to denote, among other things, war and despair. Urban Reign's Golem definitely fits that bill. He may not be made of clay, he's made of game overs and demands to improve. You don't shape him, he reshapes you into a much deader, angrier person. Fighting him feels downright unfair, he's statistically stronger than you, makes seemingly no mistakes, and doesn't so much punish yours as punish you for existing.

Whiff a hit? Get punished. Miss a grab? Get punished. Mistime a dodge? Get punished. Poor use of SPA? Get punished. Land a hit? Get punished. Successful grab? Get punished. Dodge? Get Punished. SPA? Get Punished. What are you meant to do against that? Does he even have a weakness?

He actually has a few but they're obscured by just how overwhelming he is. The first one I found was the one he'd so graciously brought with him. His axe. If you are able wrench it off of him, which is a struggle in itself, your literally stolen reach advantage can see you take the fight chop by desperate chop. Hoping to time my swings to match his charge. I feel like a bullfighter, which is strange because I'm the one seeing red! I actually felt like I was cheesing the game, I didn't like playing it this way, to the confusion of one person on twitter. Yeah my brain is weird, it can't enjoy victory unless it feels earned, even against fake opponents. I think the only way to get across how this fight made me feel is to just let you hear my live reactions. Take it away past me!

(live clip)

And all that took was 8 game overs and 23 restarts. Granted I get a little restart happy after the first. Turns out once I get popped I can easily be stopped!

But then, the next time we met? (*POP SPA BUFF*) (*beat his ass*) Second... Attempt! Yeah you ain't so bad Golem! (*tackle grapple deny*) Fuck your tackle! The tree remembers and the axe gets another notch! And from there, yeah he's scary when paired up, but this is the thing. Even as each rematch stacks the deck more in his favour, his hand matters less than your backhand. He is never as daunting again. The repetition of foes is satisfying because you're continually seeing how much you've grown, as an enemy I couldn't even scratch on my first try becomes someone I can not only consistently overcome, but downright style on.

Golem's other big weakness, the one which is so rewarding to understand, is that he's actually incredibly predictable. Hidden beneath his sheer ferocity is the boss design equivalent of a trick question, the solution is, much like him, deceptively simple. What he's really testing is something the whole game has been asking, do you still panic? Because if you mentally slow down and just keep an eye on your opponent, they'll break themselves against you.

While that final encounter with Golem and Napalm 99 was far from easy, I went in fully equipped to enjoy the challenge, to meet it head on, and to face the final climb.

13. The Ultimate Challenge, The Other Half of the Moveset, and Free Mode

Mopping up the Mushin Kai is all that's left on the agenda, and after Shun gets word their boss Shinkai has been seen entering the Bordin Building, she gives the order to raid the place.

This brings us to our ending sequence, through Urban Reign's heavily compartmentalised, stop and start structure missions 94-99 try to evoke an extended action sequence. With us leading an all out assault on the civic centre, starting outside, to the interior, and up to the roof to confront the apparent source of all this madness. And it is delightfully ramshackle.

Missions 94 and 95 even take place on the same map, just starting on different sides in an attempt to give the impression we're advancing to the parking lot.

This is before missions 97 and 98 suggests we're battling through waves of foes before we can advance to face Shinkai alone. The furniture fortunately repaired between rounds.

It can only suggest the energy it wants to capture, a slapdash attempt at a hit and run. And it's charming even if I find it strange. This is a game which can, and has on more than one occasion, gone right from one mission to the next where dramatically appropriate. This doesn't prevent the player from saving, stepping away and returning later. So I'm unsure why it didn't use this to at least tie these missions together into one continuous sequence, I guess we lose Shun's monologue between missions, and given the difficulty of these fights perhaps they felt enforcing breaks was the way to go, all it does is deflate what the action is trying to convey.

All this leaves is Shinkai (*opening cutscene*) I don't even know where to begin with this guy, which is a problem because he knows exactly how to end me.

He's an old geezer, with a big sword, in a small arena. He threatens a lot of available space. Closing the gap is hard and he has an easy time opening them in Brad if you mess up your approach, something which isn't hard to do (*GAME OVER*)

Once we get in, the dangers are far from over! Shinkai is not only highly aggressive, he has many new traps for an unwitting player to fall into.

Any bad behaviours you have left are on the chopping block. He has a fast and wide sword style, and as with most swords, it feels like there's a sweet spot you need to maintain for dodging to be reliable, and bad luck if you dodge roll at the wrong angle and put yourself deep into cut country, because you're not leaving in one piece!

He's not only got amazing defence, but many of his counters are damage dealers, including his deflection on standard combos. That's right, just punching him, your basic damage dealer, is unsafe! Even if you've got him mid-combo he can super deflect at will and get off free damage!

He also starts with a full special metre, rebuilds it faster, and I think our own growth is slowed. So he can more often just force you *back out at will!* Essentially you have to depend on rock solid fundamentals to win, you can't spam specials, meanwhile to him, this is a special occasion!

In fact, after a game of it being a trustworthy companion, lets break out the flurry! (*standing here – get launched*) It's a trap! Unless you manage to launch him first and catch him in a juggle, he will always counter it.

And his specials are even worse. Amongst his host of powerful specials is a pseudo-grapple which deals a whopping 99% damage! If you've even been grazed, you're at risk of being instantly killed!

Suffice to say, I die a lot, but the biggest problem goes right back to how wide his reach is. I'm taking most of my damage with no hope of retaliation. (*KOs*)

I'm trying to figure out if there's something I missed, (*KO*) something in my arsenal which was meant for this exact scenario. (*KO*) I went through my memories, how have enemies battered me? and I had a thought. (*Slide tackle!*)

There it is! Red card to Brad Hawk! This is what the tutorial never taught me! But is it fair to judge Urban Reign for that? I'd been on the receiving end of this so many times! I absolutely cannot claim it has been hiding the slide tackle from me! I've triggered sprint attacks so many times by accident before now while failing to grasp what I had just done!

This did not make the fight easy, not at all, I still had many deaths left to go, but it now meant the fight could happen! There it was, my gap closer! And I had gone the whole game without it!

Now, putting aside how big an idiot I am, let's talk difficulty again for a moment. Yes, this game is hard. Yes, it feels unfair. But I had beaten 99% of the story with roughly half of my moveset! And these sprint moves are no joke, they are incredibly useful! possessing a ton of utility. But it is not unfair, demanding maybe, but not uncompromising. If you meet the demand, if you figure out what it's asking of you. You will find all the tools you need to win, and it will meet you, fair and square.

There's an approach with character action games where the first playthrough is merely a long tutorial, a dress rehearsal for subsequent runs on harder difficulties where the player goes from learning the ropes to playing the enemies like puppets. Getting high scores and making everything look stylish.

After I cleared Shinkai, I returned right back to the start. Making much fuller use of my moveset, not just the sprint moves. I now had the mental bandwidth in fight to work in stun taunts. I caught more air grapples and thanks to a stream worked out how running grapples worked, one of the strongest options going! I dodged so much more successfully and grapple breaks stopped feeling like gambles.

Sticking to first playthrough footage for this video has been limiting, it's hard watching yourself and seeing all the mistakes you're making, but the growth is to me the best part of the journey, and the fact even a moron like me can beat this game while unintentionally handicapping myself. With a total of 120 game overs and 221 restarts! Ouch, but the second go around told a different story, as did the third, both more skilled, both a lot smoother, but they were their own kind of fun.

Missions which once stopped me in my tracks were blown through like I was a runaway freight train. Jake? Staked. Golem? Go home! I don't even need the axe anymore! Shinkai, sorry, this is a whole new story, he's so much fun once you understand him, once you have your kit, he's a joyously stylish foe. I said at the start what immediately grabbed me was how good the game looks, this is my reward, I can now look good in it... In short bursts.

So, let me show you this attempt, this is not my "best" run against Shinkai, but it is the most fun to watch. (*Shinkai good fight*) SPA dodging his sword is going to sit with me as perhaps the coolest thing I've ever done in a game. No cutscene or QTE required to look good.

My first time facing him took 45 minutes, 20 game overs, and over one hundred restarts, many in clusters as I messed up the first approach mind. To go from there to downright clowning on him was so gratifying.

But Shinkai it turns out, is not the ultimate challenge. After clearing the game we're given access to Free Mode! We can replay any mission, as any unlocked character, and this time we're scored on time, combo, and damage taken!

It's also here I learn, I've been playing on normal! Urban Reign has difficulty options! And yes it tells you this right away but I am startlingly unobservant! It goes from very easy to very hard! S-ranks get incredibly tight, incredibly quick, and you know where it started getting really difficult? Mission 11. Jake retakes his spot as the first roadblock all over again!

There's a light puzzle element to this I really enjoy, while it may be possible to S-Rank it all as Brad, on normal, I mean not for me but there's room to grow. It requires absolutely perfect play. No room for errors whatsoever.

But your score is modified by difficulty and character selection. So by playing a weaker character on a harder setting you actually get more room to breathe. Winning gets tougher, but scoring gets easier. Finding the perfect mix of difficulty and character for each challenge is not only interesting, it's a good way to get me to try out the whole roster. Where a three star boxer may struggle is where a two star karate-ka shines! Only not, Kadonashi is an awful master.

It's a lot of fun, and adds a lot of longevity to the game. Even if very hard opponents *blatantly cheat*. I know they've always technically read inputs but now they're just reading out loud. I am far from S-ranking this whole thing. There's still a mountain to climb and many walls to crash into.

My mum has a few series she absolutely loves where she refuses to watch the endings, because then it's over. I'm not quite as sentimental, but I'm happy there's still more Urban Reign to go, more growth to be had, but for this video... I can at least finish the story, and I'm going to offer a spoiler warning for a fantastic conclusion.

As it turns out, Shinkai is not only not the ultimate challenge. He's not even the final boss! (*envelope!*)

14. The Final Boss

Mission 100: The mastermind! Shun gives us the skinny! (*text crawl*) Okay that ain't the skinny that's rotund. Long text crawl short the scary mayor from the intro is running for governor. He orchestrated this crime wave so he could clean it up and look like a hero.

That envelope we found is our smoking gun, he brought in the Yakuza to bring things to a close. But he never expected us. (*"Of course, you were the X factor. Guess what? The mayor wants to cut you a deal. A limo just arrived to pick you up. He's expecting you in his office."*)

So here's our villain! The guy from the intro! (*"So you're that guy I've been hearing so much about."* → *"I've actually called you here to, shall we say... recruit your services."* → *"You want me to replace your dogs?"*)

What do you know, he's not blind to metaphor! We spared all those guys for fun! (*"Not interested"* → *"Piece of paper with your signature on it?"*) Brad is definitely the kind of guy to have not made a backup of that. (*"You... You Lousy piece of scum!"*) And get ready for the greatest final boss in beat-em-up history! (*Shot!*) A guy with a gun!

That's right! It's just a guy with a gun! (*shot*) But as we know, the only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun, is a good guy with two! (*kick him into wall*) Or uh... two legs and a wall!

(*"Your reputation's well deserved."* → *"That's why I don't make any friends."*) Oh Brad, you're so mysterious! I think you don't have friends because you drop lines like that and look like a frog who saw the beaches of Normandy. (*"But this is how I do my job."*) With infinite retries

And so Brad makes his exit, we saved the city cause I guess he's not such a bad guy after all, just sort of an awkward bugger.

15. Conclusion

And so ends Urban Reign!

This is blow for blow, beat for beat-em-up, pound for pounding. One of the best brawlers I've ever played! Endlessly satisfying, endlessly rearding. Offering something which is unique, simple to pick up, but with a room for mastery where I feel like even as good as I've gotten I've still got a ways to go. It will beat you into the skill floor, and a shoryuken wouldn't even graze the ceiling!

I've mentioned it here and there, and I promise I'm not trying to win an argument with game reviews from 20 years ago, even if the presence of an easy mode could have likely assuaged some issues, I guess they missed it like I did.

It's just I feel what many get wrong about Urban Reign is calling it unfair, when it is at most demanding. And it will actually give those it is made for so much more than it appears. This is an experience built on a more classical idea of re-playability over longevity via more content.

A high, ever escalating difficulty is pretty self selective, but for those who get into it, it's a game which offers so much because it allows so much room for improvement, and improvement can only be felt by resistance. The issue is there are so many nuances in the mechanics which are not going to matter one iota to the casual observer.

I do think a majority of tough games with a singular focus suffer critically perhaps a little unfairly. Getting into all the reasons why would take ages and I know we'd have a lot of splitting of hairs. I understand critics are under time pressure, trying to size up an experience for mass appeal, likely are into more popular products instead of niche ones. And frankly, Urban Reign is a great title at the wrong time.

Unlike my favourite Hedgehog the beat-em-up genre had a rough transition to 3D, you know, if we ignore the good ones, even the 2D side of the equation waned in popularity around this time. Seen as archaic. Urban Reign feels like an attempt to rework and breathe life into a dying genre, and it's a shame that it failed.

3D Beat-Em-Ups mutated, the stock form splitting off into hack and slashers, character action games, and far more tragically though arguably most similar, Arena Fighters. Leaving groundedness, and often the ground, behind. Which is a shame as I like gritty fist fighting but it's always been a tough genre to pull off well, it was rife with experimentation, and while a great many worked, not many paid off, financially anyway.

Classical 3D brawlers are making a slow comeback in the indie scene today and I'd be happy to see more, I could always do with more scrappy fighting! Make it happen! And check out Urban Reign!

That's all for today, and remember, Nobody's Innocent!

Thank you all for joining me, if you want to support me please spread this video around. If you want to support me more directly I have a patreon. Everyone gets credited, I want to say thank you to everyone. \$3 patrons get access to scripts and notes. Which is about 150 pages, because I can't help but panic I'll forget something, and I think if I starve my brain of entertainment I'll make it come up with something good to entertain itself, hopefully that worked! \$5 patrons get access to follow up videos with things that didn't quite make it in, as well as me answering questions.

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