

SON OF LIBERTY

METAL WOLF CHAOS, MASANORI TAKEUCHI'S LATEST XBOX DESTRUCT-A-THON, IS A MICHAEL MOORE NIGHTMARE COME TRUE

Only in Japan would someone ask the question of our election year candidates: Who would make the better mech warrior—Bush or Kerry? For From Software visionary Masanori Takeuchi, the question, which inspired the theme for his latest project, began as a joke between friends. Personally, he's torn—John Kerry fought in Vietnam, but George Dubya trained as a fighter pilot. Judging by the hero of his hypnotic shooter *Metal Wolf Chaos*, President Michael Wilson—Lone Star gunslinger and son of a former president—Takeuchi obviously envisions George W. Bush at the helm of a deadly power suit. Symbolically speaking, of course.

This is the world of *Chaos*, where in the year 2040, the 47th president of the United States combats terrorism by manning a huge, bright red mech. Full-fledged war has reached every corner of the United States, from New York to San Francisco. Florida is once again—quite literally—a presidential battleground. The game presents America's war on terror through the eyes of a team of Japanese game designers led by Takeuchi. Having

first delved deeply into traditional Japanese art and folktales in the acclaimed *Otogi* series, Takeuchi now paints his version of America 35 years in the future.

Starting with a modified *Otogi 2* engine, Takeuchi's team has done more than replace Japanese lanterns and drum bridges with famous American backdrops for *Chaos*. A strong dose of filtered pop-Americana has been injected into a genre of Eastern obsession—namely, giant robots with big-ass guns. The result is an action game that has all the familiar military trappings of a title you're likely to see on Xbox, yet looks and feels completely foreign.

"The concept for *Metal Wolf Chaos* is something I've had in my head for a number of years," Takeuchi says. "I figured it would be a nice change of pace before I

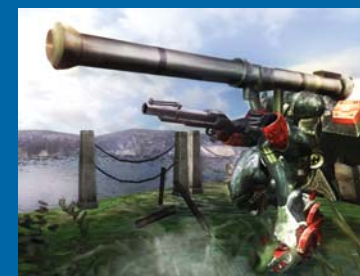
get back into the world of *Otogi*." With *Chaos*, Takeuchi completes a trio of Nippon-powered action opuses on a console that's hopelessly American.

But after disappointing sales for *Otogi: Myth of Demons* and *Otogi 2: Immortal Warriors*, it's downright puzzling how From Software continues to fund Takeuchi's continued devotion to Xbox. The *Otogi* series remains a critical darling but has fallen flat at retail on both sides of the Pacific. Americans showed their disinterest by purchasing fewer than 60,000 copies of the first *Otogi*. Japanese gamers bought 17,000 copies of *Otogi 2*.

"It's a bit of a struggle to continue releasing games on Xbox. Luckily, sales were enough to cover development costs. But only barely," Takeuchi, who wants to focus on game design and not dollars-and-cents-politics, explains. "I support Xbox

When *Metal Wolf Chaos* ships this December in Japan, players can log on to Xbox Live to upload high scores and access downloadable content. As if the game's 100 weapons aren't enough to choose from, new weapons will periodically be made available on Xbox Live, along with new background music. Work will soon be underway to affix 1-on-1 online battles to the North American version when it ships this spring. From Software has yet to reveal the game's U.S. publisher.

METAL WOLF CHAOS PRESENTS AMERICA'S WAR ON TERROR THROUGH THE EYES OF A TEAM OF JAPANESE GAME DESIGNERS.





The presidential battleground in swing-state Florida takes an explosive turn of events.



simply because it's the only hardware powerful enough to handle the games I see in my head."

An action-game designer by trade, Takeuchi dreams in a fragile world where buildings crumble at the touch of a sword or the snap of a stray bullet. The *Otogi* series encapsulates this aesthetic, coloring it with a festival of light and traditional Japanese flavor. Now *Metal Wolf Chaos* brings the spectacle to American soil.

LONE WOLF AND CHAOS

The game begins at the doorstep of the White House. Tanks, helicopters, and foot soldiers form a phalanx in protection of their leader, a sinister vice president of the United States, Richard Hawk, who's now a dictator through a coup attempt in conjunction with the U.S. Army. Desperate to regain control (and bring back liberty for all), the president mans a secretly developed power suit and takes this "terrorist" faction head-on. The game's B-movie plot, complete with cheesy

dialogue, and ridiculous cast of characters (including a sexy female mission correspondent) are so over-the-top that *Chaos* actually ventures into the realm of overt political satire. The game is 100 percent ridiculous and 100 percent old school.

But as in *Otogi*, the game's story takes a backseat to something far more important—the moment-to-moment action of your onscreen avatar. The president's agile power suit keeps the gameplay moving at a furious pace. Players can fire off a variety of satisfying payloads (chain gun, shotgun, rockets, grenades, missiles, and much more) by using both L and R triggers, all while zigzagging around opponents *Otogi* style, racking up a string of attack combos and millions of dollars in property damage.

"Blowing up stuff is fun. It's universal," Takeuchi responds when he's asked about the highly destructible environments in his games. "Destruction is a main theme simply because it's something players enjoy regardless of their nationality."



The president makes an executive decision to demolish a tank in Times Square, New York.



In *Metal Wolf Chaos*, the president's mech stores his weapons in two large barrel-like containers on his back. When he needs to swap out weapons, these pentagonal containers spread open like wings, allowing him to pick his weapon of choice.

In *Chaos*, the 14 stages it takes to win back America's liberty read like a guidebook of U.S. landmarks for tourists—settings include Miami Beach, Beverly Hills, Times Square, and San Francisco's Chinatown. While the levels themselves are relatively short, they pack plenty of replay value.

As in the *Otogi* games, an elaborate ranking system encourages perfect level runs and exploration for secrets. Xbox Live will play host to player rankings that are based on a variety of statistics, from the number of buildings leveled to the highest chain combos (which can be greater than 300 hits, according to one From Software tester).

POLITICAL MINEFIELDS

Early in the game, the battle moves to Alcatraz. The former prison is a playground of havoc as the player encircles the island destroying its defenses, gradually

tightening the noose on the army's makeshift base. The story takes a profound turn when the army fakes a mass suicide while television cameras roll and the public is led to believe that the true terrorist is actually the president. In post-September 11 America, these are heavy themes to present, no matter how tongue-in-cheek the dialogue may be.

"One of the reasons we added humor to the game was to soften the theme of America being tricked and overrun by terrorists," Takeuchi says. "But we don't want to come off as if we are making fun of America. I don't want people writing off the story, saying it came from an ignorant Japanese perspective."

But he clearly is no fool when it comes to American politics. "I certainly have opinions on America, but I'm no politician. I can't even vote [in this year's election]," Takeuchi says. "So I use the game to insert a little bit of my personal opinion to get a

message across." One point Takeuchi hopes to get across is his outlook on the modern American presidency.

"The current model of the U.S. presidency really hasn't evolved," Takeuchi explains. "Back during the Cold War, I think it was appropriate for nations like America to flex their muscles. But now I just wonder why the U.S. government is willing to do anything to be No. 1 and how so few Americans question this."

Takeuchi's team will have little time to rest once development on the Japanese version of *Chaos* concludes this winter. Although a Stateside publisher has yet to be announced, Takeuchi is absolutely confident that *Chaos* will see a U.S. release in spring 2005. At that time, additional game content will be created in preparation for *Chaos*' American debut.

"You might be surprised to hear this, but development of *Chaos* began in April of 2004," Takeuchi says proudly, meaning the game will have taken just eight months to finish when it ships this December in Japan. Drawing from past experiences with the *Armored Core* series, he says his team has learned a lot. "But the truth is," he begins, "I know other developers work really hard on their games; it's just that we work harder." //



Arizona's historic Old Towne, the flickering neon signs of San Francisco's Chinatown, and Chicago's financial district can be laid to waste with a few well-placed missiles, each collapsing on enemies and scoring big combos as a reward. The Lincoln Memorial, however, remains thankfully invulnerable.