

ASSAULT SUITS LEYNOS

Assault Suits Leynos is remembered as much for what it became as what it actually was. Released in the West as *Target Earth*, it started a remarkable run of five mech action games tenuously grouped together by theme, publisher or the development staff.

But mostly it's remembered for being balls hard. So balls hard that the North American release had a one-button invincibility cheat code so that players had the faintest hope of seeing the far side of its short eight stages.

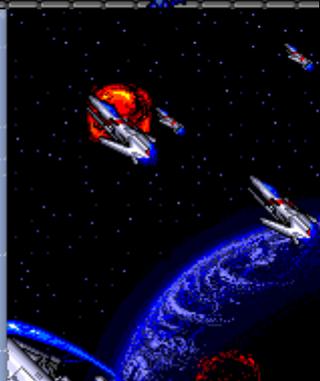


MUSNA

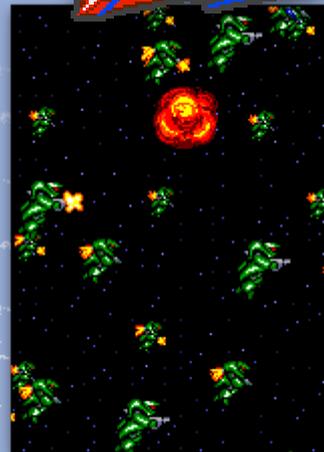
The graphics are textbook examples of first generation 16 bit games. There are few sprites, and many are re-used in every stage. Some of the larger vehicles are very obviously made out of square elements.

Most of the impressive art is reserved for the brief cinema scenes, the actual game is comparatively primitive-looking. The games that followed, however, were anything but.

IT BEGAN WHEN
EARTH'S OUTCASTS
RETURNED IN GREAT
WARSHIPS FROM THE
DARKEST REACHES OF
SPACE.
THEY ATTACKED THE
PLANET AND ALL HER
GALACTIC OUTPOSTS
WITH LIGHTNING
FURY.
THE EARTH DEFENSE
LEAGUE FOUGHT FOR
EARTH'S SURVIVAL
WITH WARRIORS OUT-
FITTED IN GIGANTIC
CYBORG BATTLE
ARMOR.
THE BATTLE BEGAN
ON GANYMEDE...



Target Earth



ASSAULT SUITS

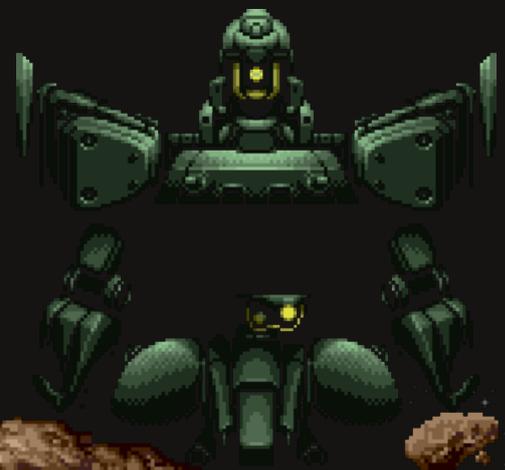
VALKEN

Assault Suits Valken made up for every real and imagined deficiency in the Megadrive *Leynos* thrice over. It was now a tighter, more enjoyable mech platform blaster, polished and awesome.

Valken pounded out the pixels. Rich colours and more and bigger sprites and more parallax and wow. It was lush and extravagant and when Konami published it in the West as *Cybernator* it turned some heads.

Visually *Valken* is clearly the result of sophisticated artistry. The larger ships are no longer made of squares, backgrounds are seamless, and there are more robots, all better articulated and animated.

Valken uses a lot of techniques seen in other games. Some enemy robots are differentiated only by colour to indicate their threat to the player, and sprites are often flipped, recoloured and re-used.



CYBERNATOR



Leynos was 8-bit thinking with a thin coat of 16-bit colour, but *Valken* was everything 16-bit could be.





Flipping was rampant in Valken, mirrored objects can be seen in nearly every screenshot. On the previous page, the two halves of the giant asteroid are identical, but flipped and palette-swapped. Interestingly there are regularly spaced seams of irregular pixels, most noticeable on the left-most point, evidence that the image was resized slightly after its initial creation.

But these are not criticisms, rather a testament to the designers' skill, because these tricks are all but invisible to the player.

Valken's characters were drawn by the legendary Satoshi Urushihara, but most of the art was created by Satoshi Nakai, who also produced the pixels for *Cho Aniki*, *Gynoug* and *Front Mission: Gun Hazard*.



I was drafted into the Marine Corps of the Pacific States when I was 22 years old. By the time I finished my training with the Assault Suits, the war had begun.



The black outline surrounding every sprite in *Leynos* has been removed in *Valken*. Perhaps a style choice, or an indication of the artists' confidence that colour and animation would suffice to separate sprites from the background.

These sprites look very good considering the limitations of the Super NES: each one has 16 colours or fewer.



IN THE YEAR 2102 THE UNITED EARTH GOVERNMENT IS UNDER A STATE OF SIEGE FROM THE FORCES OF THE DARK AXIS.

LED BY THE EVIL DICTATOR VENKAR AMON THE AXIS FORCES HAVE WAGED A BLOODY THREE YEAR WAR AGAINST EARTH.

NOW ONLY A HANDFUL OF WARRIORS REMAIN IN DEFENSE OF FREE EARTH.

EQUIPPED WITH ADVANCED ROBOTIC COMBAT SUITS THESE VALIANT FEW ARE KNOWN AS THE ...

METAL WARRIORS

Metal Warriors is not actually part of the Assault Suits series, but it plays the same, looks the same and was published by Konami (who released *Valken/Cybernator* in the West).

It's the only game in the series to be created in America, instead of Japan, and perhaps it shows in the graphics.

The sprites are well animated, though don't look as appealing as *Valken* or *Gun Hazard*. Each of the player sprites uses only 11 colours, and they tend to look a little faded.

Despite being a sixteen megabit game, the backgrounds in every stage look very much like they were created from 16 x 16 pixel squares. When held next to *Valken* or *Gun Hazard*, it looks sloppy and unpolished.

Whatever *Metal Warriors* lacked in sophistication it more than made up in enthusiasm, it's a fantastic game with tons of energy. Each stage is different from the last, and few elements are re-used from one to the next.



Metal Warriors
eschews the damage
gauge, indicating damage
by the appearance of the
mech itself. Each mech decays,
becoming greyer and eventually
giving off sparks before losing
the ability to fire and
finally exploding.



FRONT MISSION GUN HAZARD

Front Mission: Gun Hazard is not part of the Assault Suits series, but it shared many of the same production staff: Toshiro Tsuchida produced both games, and Satoshi Nakai placed the pixels. The main player sprite looks similar, and *Gun Hazard* plays almost exactly the same as *Valken*, right down to the default button layout.

The sprites have improved upon the last game, showing a very similar style while keeping within the game's more realistic theme. The SuperNES hardware is given a more thorough workout this time, with plenty of extra effects, and some sprites are enormous - particularly bosses and vehicles in story scenes.

Very clever re-use of graphics allowed a wide variety of levels requiring surprisingly few unique elements. It seems like every level is entirely unlike the rest, and there are more than one hundred stages.



Like many series' that span a long enough timeframe, the march of technology can be clearly seen in successive releases.

Assault Suits Leynos was four megabits (512 kilobytes) in 1990. *Valken* was an eight megabit monster two years later, *Metal Warriors* doubled that again in 1995, and by 1996 the restrictions of the first game were laughable: *Gun Hazard* was a ridiculous twenty four megabits - six times the size of *Leynos*.

This boost in storage capacity allowed the designers to pack in a ferociously ambitious amount of variety. The number of different robot sprites in *Leynos* barely cracked the double digits. *Valken* was very generous with the variety, *Metal Warriors* no less so, but *Gun Hazard* was overflowing.

There were dozens of different mechs and bosses, and the player was not limited to a single unit from start to finish - five mechs were issued as the game progressed.



What's especially interesting about *Gun Hazard's* robots is that each animation frame was drawn by hand. It was common, especially on newer hardware, to draw each component once and simply rotate it into the required position. But each rotated part in *Gun Hazard* was re-drawn, as you can see in the highlights on the legs of this helicopter boss:



There were just so many awesome robots! Each one is distinct, but still mostly similar in style and form, and once again, each uses only 16 colours.



Assault Suit Leynos 2 is the last 2D Assault Suits game. Released in Japan for the Sega Saturn, it continues the core series' penchant for scattered brilliance coupled with punishing difficulty.

It's filled with some beautiful graphics and sprites you'll never clearly see. The developers were so intent on making use of the Saturn's hardware that the game never stops rotating things and zooming in and out so that everything on the screen is a hard-scaled mess of pixels.

It seems that the sprites were drawn to minimize sharp details and high-contrast areas, in order to make the Saturn's unfiltered scaling and rotation more pleasing.

The Saturn wasn't powerful enough to smooth out pixels while scaling them, so using more subtly shaded sprites would reduce the harshness of the final image.

Ultimately all seven (short) stages look a little haphazardly assembled, as if the developers were hoping the constant visual barrage would mask the game's shortcomings.

ASSAULT SUIT LEYNOS 2



Above: in-game sprites.
Below: sprites used in menus



GAME OVER