

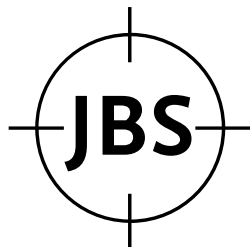
Retro Game, Contemporary Minds

GoldenEye 007 (Nintendo 64, 1997)

PHIL WINTLE, WITH MOLLY EVANS, LEILA FASS, WANLING GU, JAMES LEWIS, LOUISE OWEN-HORNE, AND LEO PERCIVAL

INTRODUCTION: PHIL WINTLE

GoldenEye 007 (1997) has widely been regarded as one of the greatest and most influential video games of all time. I have fond memories from the 1990s and early-2000s of friends gathering around a pitifully small screen to battle in a match of “slappers only” or otherwise conning each other into deathtrap zones full of remote mines – wonderfully controlled with Bond’s watch, just like in the 1995 film on which this game is based. The game, particularly the multiplayer modes, paved the way for future franchises like *Halo* and *Call of Duty* – and the lesser-known, but brilliant, *TimeSplitters* series by former Rare employees. Years later, I purchased my own copy of *GoldenEye 007* and discovered that the single-player modes were also wonderful, if challenging. I was lucky: playing *GoldenEye 007* so young made me have fairly high expectations from video games and probably helped me to develop a lifelong love for everything James Bond. I think that, despite the graphics, the game has aged fairly well, and I have still been known to corral three friends together to play. Clearly, I am not alone: the game was re-mastered and re-released on the Xbox Series X/S in 2022 and released with its original graphics on the Nintendo Switch in 2023. I was tempted to re-play the game via the Switch and review it, but I wanted to know instead how



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well the original game has dated, to explore why the game has such appeal, and to consider where *GoldenEye 007* fits into the James Bond franchise as a whole. I am probably too biased to do this. Therefore, I dusted off my N64 and welcomed six of my students to volunteer their views on the game. Each of the students is aged 16-18 and has never played on an original N64; each played various single-player levels and then multiplayer together – and, of course, all watched *GoldenEye* (1995) to compare. The following review is an amalgamation of their views and writing which I have edited together.

SUBVERTING EXPECTATIONS AND AGING: LEO PERCIVAL AND JAMES LEWIS

GoldenEye 007 in many ways does and does not subvert expectations. We were pleasantly surprised with some of the landscapes and graphics. Specifically, in the “Severnaya: Surface” level, the graphics are genuinely quite pleasing. The snow matched the beautifully coloured sky and snow-covered trees in the distance, making for an immersive experience and providing a nice contrast from the previous metallic, industrious levels. Noticeably, the scale of such maps was also impressive. That said, the graphics do obviously remain dated, and there are mediocre draw distances creating a distant “fog”, making some enemies hard to see as they fire at you. This is particularly noticeable during the final showdown mission, “Cradle”. This mission pushed the hardware, and we sensed some frame rate drops.

The game has slightly awkward controls, as the platform of the Nintendo 64 only has one analogue stick. Modern games use twin sticks to aim vertically and horizontally; in *GoldenEye 007* we can only aim horizontally. There is a “fine aim” toggle button, allowing for more control; however, this trick inhibits your ability to move and is highly sensitive. The feature is used in the shooting of locks and grates, which allows you to progress through the game (here there is a fun challenge in problem-solving as you find your own path). The built-in “aim assist” feature is effective, as it locks your aim onto the nearest enemy (within reason). This mechanic is an essential element of the game and helps create the feeling that you are James Bond. For instance, in the “Facility” level, much like the film, you are sabotaging the Arkangel chemical weapons factory and shooting your way through a horde of guards while the auto-aim system creates an effortless sense of skill, putting you in the shoes of James Bond.

There is a clear sense of the game structure adhering to that of the film, allowing you to re-create iconic moments – from the “Dam” bungee jump to escaping via plane in “Runway”. We enjoyed the film *GoldenEye* because of its brilliant action and suspense, especially in scenes such as the tank chase, where its

combination of action and comedy creates both thrills and humour. However, in *GoldenEye 007*, in the “Streets” level, we found that the action was somewhat anti-climactic. Possibly, this is due to the lack of in-game cutscenes, which means that it is hard to comprehend the danger that the character Natalya is in (she has been kidnapped by a Russian General). The urgency of this scene is gone, which is a limitation of the game’s design. Moreover, as there are no other moving vehicles on the road in this level, there is a large contrast between the busy and chaotic street scenes in the film and the somewhat lacklustre level of the game, where players have a limited time to get from A to B. Players are wounded very easily in this level and so lack the sense of the cinematic Bond’s power. Furthermore, the humorous spirit of the film is absent from this sequence in the game, resulting in a disappointing disconnect between film and game.

However, *GoldenEye 007* did subvert our expectations through its brilliant soundtrack, composed by Graeme Norgate and Grant Kirkhope. It truly enhances the atmosphere of the mission being played. It is not dissimilar from the film itself; the metallic chimes are frequent and help to build a tense ambience. The representations in the game are surprising, too. The opening credit sequence to *GoldenEye* clearly sexualises women, which is somewhat uncomfortable to watch now. However, despite the game’s similarity to the film, there is little sexualisation of female characters in the game. Moreover, much like the film, all the characters in single-player mode are Caucasian. One touch that we enjoyed was the introduction of Black characters such as May Day and Baron Samedi in the multiplayer mode, which brought some diversity to the cast and hinted at the wider James Bond franchise.

MULTIPLAYER VS. SINGLE-PLAYER: LOUISE OWEN-HORNE AND WANLING GU

We were surprised to see how closely the narrative aligned with the film, allowing players to assume the role of the iconic James Bond. There are aspects of the game design that are particularly interesting; for example, even if you do not complete all of the objectives in a mission, the game will not fail automatically; this was far more encouraging than recent games in which you would be forced to restart levels quite often. As a result, *GoldenEye 007* has a better flow than many contemporary games. Although some elements can take you out of the game – for instance, though the controls of the games are fairly simple, the aiming is very sensitive and, at times, frustrating – the single-player narrative does offer a diverse range of environments and scenarios that keeps the player engaged throughout.

The graphics are quite limited when compared to modern games, but it is apparent to modern gamers that they would have been considered effective at the time. Each level is filled with unique and immersive details, ranging from crumbling walls to flickering lights, which enhances the player's sense of immersion. The game also showcases a variety of particle effects – such as explosions, smoke, and sparks – which contribute to the overall cinematic experience. One can see how modern first-person shooters have drawn inspiration from *GoldenEye 007*.

For those less *au fait* with James Bond or the *GoldenEye* narrative, the multiplayer mode is more suitable. Though the single-player missions do follow the plot of *GoldenEye* quite closely, if the gamer has not watched the film before playing there are aspects of the game that are hard to follow. Nevertheless, multiplayer mode can still engage the unfamiliar gamer, particularly through its range of maps and weapons. Although action-packed, fast, and chaotic fun, the multiplayer mode does feel somewhat disconnected from the James Bond franchise; players could treat this mode as any other first-person shooter. Though gamers are afforded the choice to pick their favourite characters from *GoldenEye* to play as in multiplayer mode, there is a lack of coherent plot or development. The multiplayer maps also take some time to get used to, and the choice of modes, weapons, and maps sometimes feels a little overwhelming. Interestingly, though the game made its name through its multiplayer mode, we both preferred or at least recommend playing the single-player mode first. The two modes feel very different, offering either quick-paced, simple fun (multiplayer), or a more challenging and detailed dive into the world of James Bond (single player).

GOLDENEYE 007 AND THE BOND FRANCHISE: MOLLY EVANS AND LEILA FASS

We two have slightly differing opinions as to the effectiveness of *GoldenEye 007* in promoting the Bond franchise. As others have said, the game does allow players to play out scenes from the film and you do feel part of the world of James Bond. The different difficulty modes (which added extra tasks) give the game a lot of replay value, as well. The Bond characters are recognisable and the soundtrack draws the game and film together. Although we feel that there would be more enjoyment for the player if they have recently watched the film, *GoldenEye 007* does work fairly well as a standalone product, even after several decades; it helps that multiplayer moves away from the tighter narrative of the film and game, allowing for greater accessibility and a wider audience.

However, we both feel that the game is rather confusing at times, as without clear objective markers it is very easy to get lost – noticeably, in our case, in the “Facility” level, where we could not find a very small entry pass located somewhere in near identical rooms. This takes the player out of the action and tone of the game (getting lost does not feel very Bondian). Moreover, in comparison to the film, levels like “Street” (where the player controls a large military tank) feel anticlimactic and do not adapt well from film to video game. However, while neither of us is the biggest fan of James Bond, *GoldenEye 007* has had a different effect on the two of us. Leila, who does not game often, felt that the game did a good job of creating excitement, and she enjoyed the connections to the film, which has sparked her interest in the franchise and has led her to feel greater investment in the James Bond character as a whole. By contrast, Molly felt that the game simplified the film’s plot by converting many of its scenes into action sequences. While these sequences are naturally the most fun to play, Molly was less engaged with the Bond character (and with the franchise itself) as this simplification gave the impression that the film is a rather generic action film and that it lacks subtlety. As such, for non-Bond fans, playing *GoldenEye 007* could very well result in an adverse view of the wider franchise.

CONCLUSION: PHIL WINTLE

Many things have surprised me while watching my students play *GoldenEye 007*. I am pleased to see that the graphic limitations have not held many back from playing and enjoying the game. Perhaps there is a greater acceptance of this in an age where indie games often have a “retro” look and older games are more easily accessible. This said, I will say there was a certain level of acclimatisation needed to adjust to the hardware; with its bizarre controller and quick movements, many of the students noted a faint sense of motion sickness after a few levels of the game. As the group played multiplayer together, it was like years had been stripped away as they crowded around the screen, jesting, gloating, and laughing – this was exactly how *GoldenEye 007* made its name. I was therefore surprised to see how well the single-player mode was received in comparison, and, after reading the above reviews and replaying the game myself, my students were right to note such strong connections between the game’s narrative and the film. There truly is a great effort in the game to make the player feel part of the franchise, which is, perhaps, why the game has aged relatively well.