# god hand

blasting from the past

FRANKLIN GROOMES

## part one

# the kamiya curse.

Resident Evil has had a curse laid upon it ever since Hideki Kamiya's first being told he would direct the first sequel in the series. Continually growing more action-packed after that first true taste of the forbidden fruit, future games continuously grappled with this seemingly inevitable, carcinization-esque transformation into high-octane supernatural action. Resident Evil 4 wound up suffering a fast-acting, time-looping form of this curse to an unprecedented level - action gameplay growing so intense that it became its own game, Devil May Cry, is just as famous a tale from its rocky development as the mystique of its so-called "Hookman" demo.

The final game, as virtually any hardcore gamer can tell you, is more action-packed than any prior game in the series and brings with it a host of additions that changed the landscape of triple-A gaming forever. The over-the-shoulder camera angle, a refinement on *Winback's* clumsy attempts, instantly was reflected the industry over, as was its implementation of quick-time-events - itself an inclusion clearly inspired by SEGA's turn-of-the-century offerings such as Shenmue or Die Hard Arcade. And the core of Resident Evil 4's combat, carefully positioning yourself while using and abusing the invincibility frames granted from context-sensitive moves against crowds of enemies, is as rooted in Final Fight as it is the winding halls of the Spencer estate.

Mikami had clearly been experimenting with arcadey action from an over-the-shoulder perspective even before *RE4* - any Capcom fanboi or grrl owes it to themselves to play P.N.03 for at least half an hour, but he went further than ever before with his almost-immediate follow-up to one of the most critically acclaimed games in history and one of Capcom's best-sellers.

God Hand almost needs no introduction, least of all such a belabored one. To discuss God Hand's proper context, however, requires knowledge of both this slice of history from the creator as well as the beat-em-up genre. God Hand's combat is the final form of what Mikami had been working towards over the last three years of game development: over-the-shoulder action that uses its up-close camera to emphasize mechanics focused on area control and positioning with tank controls, non-traditional defensive maneuvers, and mechanics that, while allowing for oodles of player expression, are just as interested in manipulating enemies and rewarding a savvy player with cool context-sensitive strikes.

It's a style that's immediately distinctive of that three-game run by that particular director - pretty much every game ever made afterwards, whether by Mikami or not, has similar notes but precious few have a similarly encompassing design. Resident Evil 4 is the most influential of the three by far, but even RE4's most immediate derivatives go in different directions outside of camera angle and pacing - there's not a suplex in Dead Space, and Gears of War's cover shooting makes the push-and-pull space control play out very differently.

P.N.03 made the arcade flow most apparent: it's got a short runtime, and the game's Energy Drive system provides special moves performed on simple motion inputs that consume meter - as much a Capcom beat-em-up tradition as it is a Capcom fighting game one. Uppercuts, backflips, and the ever-powerful "Mega Crush" that consumed your health bar all done by tapping two to three inputs are present in the majority of the company's 1990s beat-em-up output, providing a more

GULLWING
Buttons: Left-Right + A
Description: Vanessa does the same thin[g]
fire out an energy ball, [w]
smaller balls home into ot[her]
amounts of damage.
Pro: It simply becomes a stronger attac[k]
Pro Buttons: Right-Left-Right + A
Best Effect: I'd say a small group of e[nemies]
spaces, but it's still goo[d]

HARRIER
Buttons: Down-Left + A
Description: One of may favourites; Van[essa]
sticking one leg right up,
then swings them out in o[ne]

straightforward and more evocative version of moves generally associated with the fighting game realm. P.N.03 also deserves some kudos for an extremely early take on a defense system that may be familiar to action diehards - you see, Vanessa is given the ability to dodge attacks by ducking or dodging, dropping beneath overhead attacks or rolling to the side of vertical ones. Unfortunately, its position on a face button and some stiff animations make this feel incredibly clunky and unsatisfying, which is probably why Mikami changed his focus entirely for his attempt at Resident Evil 4.

RE4 puts its focus on accuracy and tension: landing hits rewards you with ammunition drops for your chosen weapon, and an invisible series of adjustments fine-tune the difficulty curve to make things continually stressful - but quite beatable - regardless of skill level. This white-knuckle pushing forward became the basis of its combat's contextual cues, where Leon was granted room-clearing roundhouses or cerebellum-smashing suplexes depending on where he shot a foe and staggered them. This dance of death, weaving between enemies and jumping between long, close, and midrange as a rapidly evolving situation merited, proved critically and commercially successful - and a surprisingly effective transposition of a core beat-em-up concept to a world removed from frenetic fisticuffs (frequently, at least).

For those who haven't played very many of the classics, one core conceit that goes tragically underexplained is the true purpose of grabs: they grant the player a heaping plateful of invincibility frames, knock down the enemy, and do some damage to surrounding foes, usually staggering them. *They are a defensive tool, and they are one of your primary forms of it.* The genre is already built on movement and positioning, and, once grokked, this adds an entertaining risk-reward setup. Enemies need to be by you to punch you. If you touch them when they aren't punching you, you can prevent somebody else from punching you. Similarly, most of RE4's enemies attack through melee: transposing a system akin to beat-em-up grabs encourages up-close-and-personal footwork despite the presence of guns suggesting distance, makes the player feel accomplished, and is kinaesthetically satisfying and grounds it in the 1980s American action that RE4 is drawing from.

As mentioned prior, Resident Evil 4's quick-time-events feel as much an homage to Die Hard Arcade, Dragon's Lair, and other arcade offerings as much as they do to home console predecessors such as Shenmue. Camera angles shift from cinematic and obscuring into intimate and intense, taking the rest of the industry headlong into a new future. Its control scheme forms the basis of almost every single shooter from then on, even as it ranks you on a leaderboard just begging to be optimized. The heart of the game's ethos, it feels, is to have one foot in the past and one in the future.

# good god is in his heaven, good gumbo's in the pot.

So, this is a bit of a digression, but I promise that it's going to cycle back into the essay at large. In Louisiana, gumbo is a point of state pride. It's the state's official dish, it was added to the Senate dining room in the 70s to honor a Louisianan senator, and there's as many ways to cook it as there are people who cook it. It's a stew, and stews need thickeners. Gumbo has three: roux (of French origin), file powder (which is obtained from local sassafras trees), and okra (of which the dish takes its name from: the Congo term for okra is *quingombo,* and the Umbundu and Tshiluba languages have similar pronunciations). Louisiana's culture is highly distinct, and gumbo is the perfect synthesis: ingredients and names and cooking techniques that take Indigenous, African, French, and English terminology with equal abandon. And, despite this synthesis, there's still a divide - you're seldom gonna see a pot of gumbo that uses file *and* okra - and this is often divided along Cajun/Creole cultural lines*. Even if it has a lot of similar constituent parts, and it's made in a place that is (mostly) similar, and even if it has some similar names thrown on it, it's still going to wind up having different things bubble up on the surface based on core philosophical distinctions.

There's a parallel to be made in how Shinji Mikami, meanwhile, had shifted to the strange, nostalgic, and experimental Clover subdivision of Capcom instead of the numbered development teams more central to the company - and he went in with the express purpose of making a game for himself before anybody else. [In his recent interview with Archipel](#), he makes mention of how he was first spurred to make it after seeing what the American-led, three-dimensional take on Final Fight was looking like - in his words, "when I played it, it was shit. [...] I thought that I wanted to make a game like that if I ever had the chance."

The tone of its enemy designs, cutscene direction, and soundtrack is anything but sensical, but there's a sublime tension between anarchic chaos and methodical decision-making that forms the core of God Hand as a set of systems. Randomization is baked into the game's pacing (with trips to the casino between each level serving as a way for less-skilled players to get the money that more-experienced players can rack up through simple skilled play), in the game's aesthetics (with your screen-clearing super attacks being performed on a roulette wheel), and in the endless series of systemic interactions between Gene, enemy, and environment.

Parries and counterattacks occur as unpredictably (and, on higher levels, unreactably) as pickups found in crates change radically based on luck and the game's temperament. Despite this, the game goes to great pains to make Gene super-charged with defensive options, the player eventually developing a quasi-sixth sense about when and where an enemy will attack and ducking smoothly.

Gene's defensive options, much akin to Tekken's, are strange to casual players but serve to make two major differentiation points from other beat-em-ups and fighting games that might serve as a point of reference: firstly, there's no blocking, only dodging or using moves with

unique properties (Tekken 5 introduced the extremely similar Crush system a year prior, and a brief glance at that mechanic's page on the Tekken wiki can fill you in better than I ever could). Second, the 2D fighting game mainstay** high/low dichotomy, in keeping with the adoption of Tekken's sidesteps and backdashes, has been shifted towards a high/vertical/horizontal system that lets Gene jump sideways, backflip away, or weave and dodge as needed.

Most attacks in the game are high attacks - and I think all of the unreactable jabs and counterattacks are in this number - so the boxer's weave quickly becomes the player's default defensive technique, aided further by extremely generous windows that let the player stop *most* attack animations partway through and dodge instantly. Not every attack can be dodge-cancelled, but that's for the player to decide - after all, the game's most significant selling point is the hundred-twenty-odd techniques at your disposal, and if you want to avoid moves that leave you wide open? It's your call.

However, Mikami was making a Capcom beat-em-up. For better and for worse, he was going to include even more from the genre's storied past - including hidden moves, performed with simple motion inputs, that have endlessly practical combat applications once mastered. If you watch any high-level play of God Hand, there's one move in particular you're probably going to see a lot of.

# megacrush and rising dragon.

The presence of the rising uppercut in God Hand is one that fills a unique role in the shoryukens I've seen in my time: most of them serve as an anti-air attack or launcher, and most of them have hitboxes or invincibility frames on them that grant them counterattacking properties - the definition of defense through offense. Even in Capcom's non-fighting game offerings, they served as a launching anti-air with invincibility, balanced somewhat by requiring an up-down motion that prevented positioning during its input. In God Hand, however, it's actually the closest thing the player gets to a beat-em-up grab - a canned move that leaves you invincible, targets one enemy while ensnaring others in its path, and is generally contextual. However, unlike the two-dimensional genre's grabs, and even unlike the brother it shares in Devil May Cry's juggling, Gene's aerial dominance comes with a bevy of requirements and conditions*** that makes it as much a reward for skillful play as it is a valuable tool.

There's a similar sense of mutation and recombination of two-dimensional touchstones in other aspects of the game's systems as well: the roulette system feels a clear evolution of the Streets of Rage method for special attacks, giving you far more choice in the matter while still having very lean resource management. On top of this, there's also a Devil May Cry-esque gauge that, when filled, turns you invincible and makes your attacks ludicrously speedy - but, unlike Devil Trigger, the player is unable to turn it off at their leisure, forcing it to be used with some consideration and some commitment.

Overwhelming foes with roulette attacks or by unleashing the power of the God Hand are particularly flashy ways to get enemies into a stun state, granting you furthermore options, but the home-grown method that doesn't take any resources is one that's taken straight from fighting games as well: see, in God Hand, if you counterattack an enemy, a lot of moves get extra properties. Launchers might launch higher, sweeps might knock down, and kicks might send an enemy into a wallsplat. These mechanical bonuses to the moves are also paired with an endlessly satisfying shattering glass sound effect, a sound effect like a gunshot, an enemy comically flailing back, and them growing redder and redder as you make fools of them. If you keep breaking their blocks (did I even mention that mechanic? Enemies auto-block, and if you break it with a guard-breaking move, you get cool stuff, too!) on top of this, enemies are going to start seeing stars very quickly.

And this may be where an exceptionally experienced reader may wish to interject, "but aren't you able to perform context-sensitive attacks on stunned enemies? You mentioned them some two thousand-odd words ago, and they proffer invincibility frames, generous meter gain, and oftentimes stagger nearby enemies - why aren't you mentioning them in the same use cases as Resident Evil 4's context-sensitive attacks or beat-em-up grabs?"

And, dear reader, I must confess, you're partially right. The biggest differentiator, to me, is their role in the game's combat pacing and structure. In RE4 and in most beat-em-ups, stun states and grabs are generally reasonably easy to come by against trash mobs that populate most encounters. In God Hand, however, stun states require some thoughtful resource management or play that requires skillful consideration: you have to soften the enemy up first, and when you finally do, you get a canned animation that gives you some breathing room, satisfies that most

base and visceral aesthetic urge, and greatly replenishes meters that are vitally important to the flow of combat. I don't know about you, but it feels much more like a "push-forward" style mechanic in the vein of Doom 2016 and Doom Eternal's glory kills than it does anything like a highly spammable defensive maneuver.

However, even Doom (and Doom's probable *actual* predecessors when it comes to what they took notes on for this style of mechanic, Duke Nukem Forever and Warhammer 40k: Space Marine) saw fit to make this a core part of the combat loop: tying it to health fits a shooter for sure, and it being integral to health values means that it occurs frequently. God Hand's approach is much more parsimonious - both much more rewarding to pull off and much less of a frequent presence.

Strangely, this tenuous link is the closest thing I can actually find when it comes to any real remote influence of this game's mechanics. Few fighting games tried its innovative right-stick dodging, beat-em-ups generally followed either Devil May Cry's lead or River City Ransom's, and critics savaged it so badly alongside lacking sales that there will never be a follow-up in any official capacity. The only games to try its moveset system I'm aware of are Remember Me and Absolver, both of which... did not have God Hand's other best qualities in their combat systems. God Hand's existence is an anomaly. When making it, Mikami didn't care about mass audiences, he didn't care about sales, and he didn't give a whit about compromising his vision.

So, one of the things about gumbo: even though okra is actually what it's named after, and despite its historic role in the dish, file recipes are actually overtaking it as time goes on. It's a new epoch, and as consumer palates shift, the hearty, grassy, sometimes bitter okra is left to the wayside. But if your *memere* makes okra gumbo, you're damn well going to eat it. Market factors do not matter in that level of intimacy. Shinji Mikami, coming off the heels of one of the most highly-regarded, influential, best-selling games in his company's history, made a game for himself and one other person - a junior programmer named Dai.

I've had jobs where I made food for people I don't care about, and I've slaved away at the countertops in my house to make food for people I care about. A lot of the time, at those jobs, I'm using the same ingredients that I would at home - maybe less specialized, sure, but not too far off. However, when I'm at home, it comes with an understanding that I'm not making it for everybody - I'm making it for somebody. You learn all of the ways that the dish is supposed to be made, but in the end, it's just as ruled by their idiosyncrasies, their little incomprehensible preferences that fly in the face of reason or logic... as much as anything, home cooking is a display of love as much as it is experimenting with worldly methods and forms of thought.

The act of creation is wildly different based on time, place, and mindset. One extremely personal dream game project is another's sellout nightmare. God Hand is the rarest of all: a gem of surpassing polish and excellence on the mechanical front, smartly paying homage to its forebears while also knowing what rules to break, while also offering a clear and profound journey into a world made for just two people.

I'd never describe this game as 'intimate,' per se, but it's impossible to not see the sheer love that went into its making. It's a weird, ugly, wondrous game that has a diehard fanbase of all stripes. It's a game where, if just for that year of its development, love finally won and the forces that tried to stop it couldn't.

It's better than Imagine Party Babyz for the Wii, at least.

# the end.

footnotes:

\* there's ten quadrillion bazillion variations of the dish, and it'll change up massively between cooks, let alone between subculture, let alone cultures. please tell me about your file-thickened gumbo or your okra-thickened gumbo! i don't know very much about gumbo. if you do, please tell me more over social media! give me memere's recipes!!!!

\*\* at minimum taito's *the ninja warriors* experimented with adding a fighting game-esque blocking system with highs and lows in a beat-em-up space, and i'm sure there's others as well, but they are outliers in the genre as a whole and if you think about ninja warriors' blocking system before you do street fighter's, you know as well as i do that you're a little bit crazy as hell and a lot a bit based as fuck.

\*\*\* enemies have to be sent flying to a height at least over your head, which requires either a counter hit on a juggle move or a fully charged juggle move. neither are particularly easy to pull off, especially to newcomers.