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seem that much more poignant when they occur. Resident Evil 4 is an action adventure game with an emphasis on action. There's rarely any question about where you're supposed to go next or what you're supposed to do, even some of the environments are quite open-ended. The game is so action-packed that even some of the seemingly noninteractive cinematic cutscenes require fast reflexes on your part (so don't you dare put down the controller). A quick button press will cause you to make Leon avoid certain death, while a lack thereof...well, you'll see. Deviously, the button presses are randomized so that even if you memorize the circumstances of when you need to react, you'll still need to be careful. And this simple, subtle bit of gameplay turns out to be great, probably because it's used sparingly. At other times, reactive, timing-based button presses or rapid button presses will be demanded of you in the context of the game's numerous and universally amazing battles against major enemy foes; these moments help instill boss battles with real dramatic flair. One can't easily describe just how incredible and frightening some of these battles are, so we'll put it this way: It's no exaggeration to say that Resident Evil 4 has some of the greatest boss fights of any game. Meanwhile, a convenient map is always available to helpfully point you in the right direction, but it's rarely necessary, because the game is paced so well, and because it's not difficult to orient yourself within environments that are as detailed as these. Some great cinematic cutscenes will keep you on the edge of your seat. The game's occasional puzzle elements seem almost like concessions to diehard fans of the series, since they're rather simplistic and definitely take a backseat to all the fighting. They're fortunately rare enough to where you'll appreciate them for letting you catch your breath, and they're easy enough to figure out that you probably won't find yourself feeling stuck. But despite the downplaying of the puzzle elements, this is no mindless shooter, so you'll really need to think on your feet and take advantage of the environment to defeat some of your enemies. Some of the combat is definitely difficult, especially since many of your foes' attacks will rightfully inflict grievous damage or even kill you outright if you don't successfully avoid them. Yet while Resident Evil 4 offers a stiff challenge, it's a level of difficulty that feels just right in a game whose many dangers certainly don't seem like they should be easy to overcome. The difficulty also scales up seemingly in perfect harmony with your growing comfort level with the weapons and foes on offer, so it feels like there's always going to be some new and unique challenge awaiting you around every corner. You might also notice how even though the game is fairly liberal about giving you ammunition for your weapons, it gradually tightens the leash, compelling you to make your shots count. At any rate, should Leon get killed, the game almost never sets you back too far, so it doesn't get frustrating. Save points are also liberally interspersed throughout, which is good, since not everyone will prefer taking this sort of concentrated action in large doses, because most every enemy encounter will leave you breathless. There's one aspect of play that sometimes interrupts Resident Evil 4's exquisite pacing, and that's the necessity of having to fumble around in your inventory. Though you can readily switch between a gun and your trusty knife at the touch of a button, switching between different guns (or using healing items) requires you to go in to the inventory screen. A more streamlined means of weapon switching would have been convenient, especially since many situations will require you to use multiple weapons for their unique properties. Inventory space is limited, too, so you'll sometimes need to shuffle the contents around to make room for new items. This is mildly annoying at times, but it's a small price to pay for a system that infuses Resident Evil 4 with sort of a role-playing-game feel, which really helps lend a sense of cohesion and character development to the adventure. You'll both earn money and gradually increase your maximum health as you progress, and you'll be able to purchase new weapons as well as weapon upgrades from a mysterious shopkeeper whom you'll encounter in the strangest places throughout the game. Leon can pack a lot of heat, but you'll need to think carefully about which weapons to bring to bear. The shopping portion of Resident Evil 4 is well designed, insofar as you'll need to make some tough, interesting decisions about whether to purchase new weapons or upgrade the ones you've got. And if you decide to upgrade them, then how? You can improve their power, ammo capacity, rate of fire, and more. All told, there's a great variety of excellent weapons in the game, which helps keep the action feeling fresh for the solid 25-or-so hours it takes to reach the end of the story. Resident Evil 4 is a single-player game, but don't let that stop you from inviting your friends over to gawk at it. It's also loaded with secrets and extras that can be found both during the course of the adventure and after unlocking them following the completion of the game. There's definitely a lot of lasting value here beyond the initial play-through, and not just because it would naturally be fun to play through multiple times, but because there are clear incentives to go back through at least once again, as well as to explore some of the other extras. The bonus content serves to reinforce how much effort must have gone into this game. Of course, effort alone isn't enough to make a game like Resident Evil 4. This is the result of an extreme level of talent on multiple fronts, and you need look no further than the presentation--as demonstrated by the graphics and sound--for proof. Resident Evil 4 perfectly and constantly evokes a suffocating, scary atmosphere, yet it's one that's rich with intrigue. Environments aren't highly interactive, but you'll probably love just looking around in them even if you can't pick up and examine every single object in every single room. The various characters are also meticulously detailed and distinctively stylized, and they move and interact in their environments with such a level of lifelike authenticity that you just might never look at games the same way again after seeing some of the stuff here. Visual effects are also universally superb, especially the fire, which looks completely real. The game does have maybe a couple of unsightly blemishes in the form of clipping issues, as you'll sometimes see enemies' limbs and weapons jutting through solid doors, but it's not nearly enough to knock Resident Evil 4 from its perch as one of the best-looking games ever made. Resident Evil 4 looks best when viewed on a great big progressive scan display, but it looks amazing no matter what, and by any standard. It's also technically impressive in less-apparent ways, such as in how there are virtually no discernable loading times at any point in the game, which helps to keep you immersed in the experience. Do yourself a big favor. Play this game. Any horror movie aficionado can tell you that audio is one of the most important factors in evoking a sense of dread and suspense, and Resident Evil 4 is an excellent example of this. The game's generally good voice acting is undermined somewhat by a goofy script, but all other aspects of the audio, from the chilling ambient noises you'll frequently hear to the roar of your various weapons to the occasional and perfectly placed musical cues, are terrific. Here's a game for which it might just be worth springing for a Pro Logic II-enabled surround sound system if you don't already have one. That way, even if you don't know Spanish, you'll instinctively reel around to face your foes when they announce their attacks from behind you. At any rate, rest assured that much of the audio in Resident Evil 4 will be just as memorable as many of the atrocious-in-a-good-way things you'll see. It's difficult to decide whether the audio is even better than the visuals, but there's no question these elements work extremely well together to create an incredibly atmospheric experience. You'll surely find from playing or even just watching Resident Evil 4 that all this sort of high praise is warranted, though it's worth reiterating that this is one of those games that you ought to approach with as few preconceived notions as possible. Essentially, if you've been entertained by any other mature-rated action game recently, then chances are you'll be blown away by this one. It's that good.