Who hasn’t read a piece of classic literature and thought, “Hey, this would make a great video game?” I think back to countless boring hours spent in college, listening to someone drone on about symbolism while thinking, “I wish I could see the bloodshed of MACBETH laid out in a gory platformer.” Luckily, the good people at Visceral Games share such sentiments, and have re-interpreted the first third of Dante Aligheri’s THE DIVINE COMEDY with DANTE’S INFERNO (Xbox 360, PlayStation 3).

This review comes in the form of what the corporate world calls “a compliment sandwich,” masking an insult with two passages of soft praise. DANTE’S INFERNO may graphically be one of the most beautiful and intricately designed platformer/hack-’n’-slash games on the market. The painstaking care given to the backgrounds alone truly does justice to Aligheri’s horrific poem. Climbing walls made of wailing souls and jumping between ledges as their arms grasp frantically for release of their suffering creates a real sense of urgency and anxiety. The intricate detail given to such backdrops as the River Styx and the Wood of Suicides may incite enough fear in gamers to reacquaint themselves with their local holy clerics. The elaborate and hauntingly accurate depictions of characters such as King Minos, Charon and Cerberus result in some of the best boss-style characters seen in the genre.

That said, DANTE’S INFERNO suffers one vast drawback that truly overshadows the care that seeps through the level design: This game is a blatant ripoff of the GOD OF WAR series. Not a homage, but a duplication, as if they took the same engine and just swapped out characters and story. From the combat styling to the magic-control layout to the minigames to the combination of gory combat and classic literature, INFERNO borrows more than excessively from what was considered to be a unique, standout franchise. Also unfortunately, this game’s story falls somewhat flat toward the end, leaving a glaring comparison between the two. Playing this game is like going to see a new epic space movie highlighted by a duel between Garth Nader and Juke Highstalker wielding their mightsabers while Ron Bolo and Princess Heya lead a revolt

against the Dormtroopers.

In the video-game world, a homage generally exists in some small form of reference, such as a game-within-the-game, a puzzle laid out like its predecessor or a battle sequence that resembles one done on an earlier-gen release. Yet even given all the sponging it does from the GOD OF WAR series, DANTE’S INFERNO does get something right that has yet to surface after three installments of WAR: an actually expandable combat system. Dante collects “souls” just as Kratos does from his fallen victims, and these souls work as in-game currency to build up combat styles and strengths. In WAR, the only benefit to maximizing your weapons is to see the expandable moves, as they are not entirely necessary to progress and you can simply button-mash your way to victory. Dante, however, actually benefits from collecting souls and building up his two weapons, the Holy Cross and Death’s Scythe. As those are enhanced, so is Dante’s fighting technique, amplifying the ease with which he disposes of hell’s denizens. Mastering the combination of the two weapons can lead to some pretty gruesome attacks as Dante lays waste to the onslaught of demons.

As a game, DANTE’S INFERNO is not without its charm. It’s a solid hack-’n’-slasher set amidst a beautifully frightening, literary-inspired backdrop, and delivers enough fright and violence to make you repent after playing. It’s just a shame the game’s standout qualities fall under the shadow of glaring comparisons and tremendous pilfering from a well-known franchise. Regardless, DANTE’S INFERNO will not disappoint fans of the genre, especially any soured 360 owners who can’t get their hands on the next-gen installments of the WAR franchise and need an outlet to satiate their demon-punishing and soul-absolving desires.

**1/2

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