Driver’s Eyes, 1987, Namco. The first ever racing game to use polygons instead of sprites. It wasn’t just a new generation of hardware, it was a whole new paradigm. Like shifting from propellers to jet engines, it was a colossal leap in engineering.

Hardware Engineers had to provide a number crunching machine. Sadly for Driver’s eyes the hardware available at the time wasn’t up to the job so all they could do was cram in as many chips as possible.

Software Engineers had to implement real-time 3D graphics which previously all they had to do was scale and shift sprites. Keeping in mind the rather steep learning curve for software engineers, you would have to say that any attempt in 1987 to use new bespoke hardware with millions of chips (known as the Polygoniser) to make what was then called a CG game (or 3D game, or filled vector, or filled 3D) was very brave.

It’s not surprising their first game of this type wasn’t a success (commercially or otherwise). The cost of the product with that many chips (and three screens) doubtless had something to do with its failure. Certainly it seems not to have left Japanese shores, if indeed this mysterious game was ever released.

Thankfully Final Lap was raking in the profits, so not perturbed at all, Namco went onward in 1989 to re-use the hardware to better effect in a new racing game (this time a single screen ride-in) called Winning Run. No doubt the chips were cheaper and software engineers must have really honed their skills. First shown at the January ATEI trade show, it didn’t get into the UK arcades until Autumn. With its sequels (Winning Run Suzuka and Winning Run 91) it sold globally and successfully.

One of the amazing new phenomena of 3D games was that you could overtake a car but conversely it could overtake you…this never happened before 1989…if you overtook a car, it disappeared for good. This may sound trivial but it did make quite a different game.

Further revising the hardware, Namco created a game looking suspiciously like a Driver’s Eyes cabinet in conjunction with Mazda – the 1989 Eunos Roadster Simulator. And with SimDrive came Namco’s first full-scale ride-in simulator – a predecessor to Ridge Racer full scale…presumably both these Mazda games use a modified version of Winning Run.

Winning Run made a serious impression in magazine editors of the day. C&VG spent nearly two full pages and claimed:

“The graphics are simply stunning, with a Polyriser system used to give the most impressive 3D graphics yet seen. There are tunnels, hills, ancoves—and just about everything you’d expect to find on a real race track. The game ‘feels’ incredibly good, with superb handling and feedback as you skid, countersteer and bump on the kerbs. Winning Run is easily the best racing game yet seen—it’s thoroughly realistic and totally exhilarating.”

But let’s not over-estimate this game. It transcends the fact that this bunch of chips would run a system about 1/4 the speed of the subsequent Ridge Racer. And this explains a lot. Firstly there’s no shading or textures and secondly there’s actually very little going on, other than a race track, some low-poly cars and the tunnels/grandstands. Of course, that wouldn’t have mattered in the day and C&VG summed up the impressions of the day perfectly. I don’t recall seeing this game in the UK at the time (Hard Drivin’, by contrast was in almost every arcade). Perhaps they still couldn’t manufacture at an affordable price.