



MAG

THE MAGAZINE TO DISCOVER SOMETHING NEW

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IT'S ALL ABOUT THE GAMES

For eight years, The Thirsty Mage Podcast has been devoted to the idea of sharing personal experiences within the community in an effort to enhance everyone's appreciation of video games. Whether it's shining a light on lesser known titles, or helping to shape the perceptions on misunderstood games, the podcast works towards helping everyone enjoy video games to their fullest.

With hundreds of thousands of titles spanning over multiple decades, it's impossible to play every single game out there. This magazine is another medium for the hosts of the podcasts to share their experiences to either point those towards good experiences, or maybe even warn against not-so-great ones.

No stone goes unturned in our pursuit of fun video game experiences. From the early days of Atari, all the way to modern releases on the Nintendo Switch 2, our writers share the good, the bad, and the ugly as they set out on a journey to document every great experience they come across.

As a small indie magazine, word of mouth is key. Our only ask of all our readers is that if you enjoy reading about video games, old and new, please share it with a friend. Maybe even post about it on social media.

We hope you enjoy this issue!

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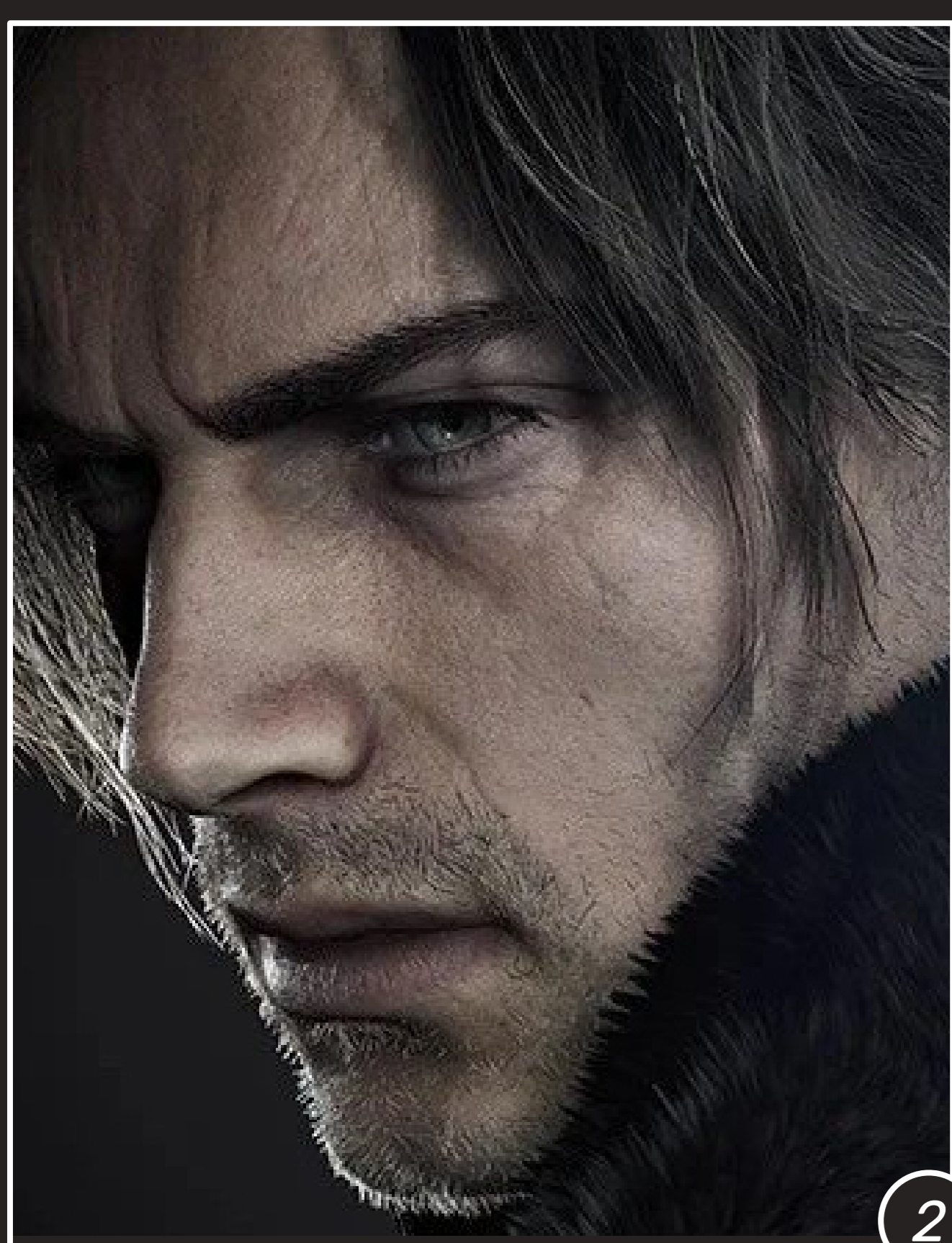
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RESIDENT EVIL: REQUIEM

PLAYSTATION 5



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 12 HOURS

DEVELOPER

CAPCOM

RELEASED

2026

— BY CASEY GIBSON —

Resident Evil has always held a special place in my heart ever since I was a young kid cowering in fear as my neighbors played RE2 on the PS1. Maybe it wasn't exactly my favorite back then, but over the years through a combination of fear and intrigue, it's earned its rank as one of my favourite franchises next to Final Fantasy and the Legend of Zelda. Whenever a new mainline Resident Evil is released, it's a big deal and with Requiem we're seeing some familiar faces back in the fray.

Looking at the Resident Evil franchise as a whole, the games tend to lean in one of two directions. Either hard into the horror aspect with plenty of scares and limited ammo or the opposite with tons of action and firepower at your disposal. Capcom has tried to give players their cake and let 'em eat it too by combining both playstyles with varying degrees of success in the past, but I feel they really hit the mark this time in Requiem. This is done by featuring two protagonists where franchise favorite Leon S Kennedy takes the helm of the action set pieces while newcomer Grace Ashcroft is left to deal with the confined halls of the Rhodes Hill Chronic Care Center.



He's back to kicking ass and taking names

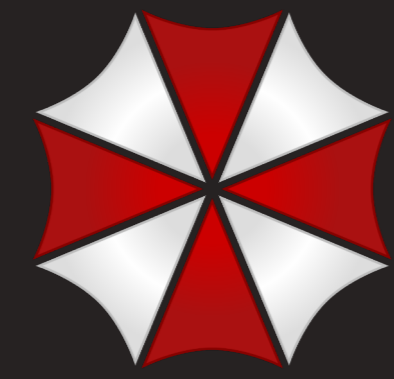


Throughout the campaign you'll bounce between the two, but the adventure starts off with the timid FBI agent Grace who finds herself leaving the comforts of her desk for some in-person investigation. Since she's not a field agent, being thrown into this terrifying situation works out perfectly for the horror survival focused gameplay. Conserving ammo and health items is essential as you creep through the Rhodes Hill Chronic Care Center Mansion. The location gives off massive Spencer Mansion vibes as it's similarly filled with locked passages, puzzles and interesting documents to find along the way.

Leon on the other hand is a battle tested disposer of bioweapons who's managed to elude death on more than one occasion.

For those familiar with the series, we know Leon is a badass, but even if this is your first Resident Evil game, you'll learn that within just a few moments of gameplay. These sections aren't nearly as stress inducing, in fact they almost act as a way to blow off steam after long chunks of time playing as Grace. Leon gets more access to ammo, but more importantly he can utilize melee attacks to deal punishing and lethal damage. Being able to fire a few rounds at a zombie's knee to stagger it and following it up with a crushing head stomp or axe to the skull feels incredibly rewarding and even more so as your ammunition starts to stack.

WRITTEN BY CASEY GIBSON



There are a few main areas we get to explore, however one in particular is sure to drum up some nostalgic feels for any long time RE fan. I'm sure it's already been spoiled for most anyone who watched pre-release coverage, but for the few that haven't seen it I'll keep it out of the review for good measure. That being said, between revisiting historically important areas and exploring new ones, Capcom nails the atmosphere and feeling of dread. Zombies in the Care Center hold onto traits of their living life, giving way for the singer from the bar to roam the halls singing or the chef to wander around, clever in hand, looking for some fresh meat. This is a great addition that not only helps differentiate zombies from one another, but also helps to make the Care Center feel more authentic. In other areas the zombies don't have as much flavor, but I'm never going to be upset about seeing a zombie RPD Officer or two.

Often the best horror games have next level audio design and that's most certainly the case here. Playing on PS5 while wearing headphones and no lights on is peak, but from all accounts it runs well on other consoles, most notably a great Switch 2 version. The voice acting is some of the best performances I can remember from recent history, with Grace in particular being a high note for the series.

Resident Evil is in a bit of a golden era with Capcom delivering high quality remakes and new installments seemingly every couple years or so. With Requiem, they've once again raised the bar, wonderfully blending horror and action segments allowing tension to build up and giving players a release in the form of some skull crushing fun.



— BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN —

It is I, big Nintendo fan, who buys silly things like the Hatchin' Yoshi toy to give you a totally objective review of the new Mario movie.

The Super Mario Galaxy Movie takes place not too long after the Super Mario Bros movie. Starting off with Rosalina getting kidnapped because one of her kids wouldn't go to bed on time #relatable. Shortly after, Princess Peach heads out to rescue her at request from one of the Lumas, whilst Mario and Luigi promise to take care of the Mushroom Kingdom. From there, the action hops from place to place and all the characters end up joining together partway through anyway.

I've never played Super Mario Galaxy (well not all the way anyway), so I don't have a major attachment to the story present in the Wii game. That said, I thought it was a very odd decision to use Galaxy scenes and characters and not adapt a story that they've just put to hard print alongside a re-release of the game and two new amiibo. I understand that they wanted to continue Peach's story lead from the last movie, but there was definitely an easy way to make that an extension of Rosalina's story. I like that Princess Peach gets to be a part of the action. It's just very funny that we still need to have a damsel in distress so the role simply gets given to someone else.

I didn't think the pacing was too bad, especially upon a second watch. Plenty of the cameos were super good like the R.O.B. one. The inclusion of Star Fox's Fox McCloud was an interesting one as he got a decent amount of speaking lines but didn't really connect with the characters on anything more than the superficial level.

There were other shallower moments such as Toad being a bit bothered by the sudden presence of Yoshi in the friend group that only got resolved basically in the background. Comparatively, the character growth of Bowser facing the consequences his actions have brought leads to him having to choose between his newfound morals and his family, and is a fun "twist" on villain redemption.

The soundtrack is fantastic, featuring plenty of flares and remixed tracks. It seems perhaps the one criticism of the first movie they actually took into account, with few licensed tracks featured. The visuals are of course stunning and well detailed; it's probably the most detailed 3D animation I've seen. That said, I personally do not like how Princess Peach and now Fox McCloud look with the style.

The Super Mario Galaxy Movie was very fun to watch in the cinema and I did catch it one more time. I definitely think I like it more than the first as I've hit the point where I don't particularly want to rewatch the first Illumination Mario movie anytime soon, if ever again. If we don't get a Super Mario Maker 3 in the next twelve months, I'll be confused, but if that isn't what Nintendo likes to do, what is?

My three year old said her favourite part of the movie was "everything" and her favourite characters were "everyone". I got her a McDonald's meal and she got the Bowser Jr toy and called him Junior so she definitely retained something from it. Oh, well that and when we got home from the movie she was using a food cover as an "umbrella to beat the monsters".





TAITO 90'S ARCADE GEMS

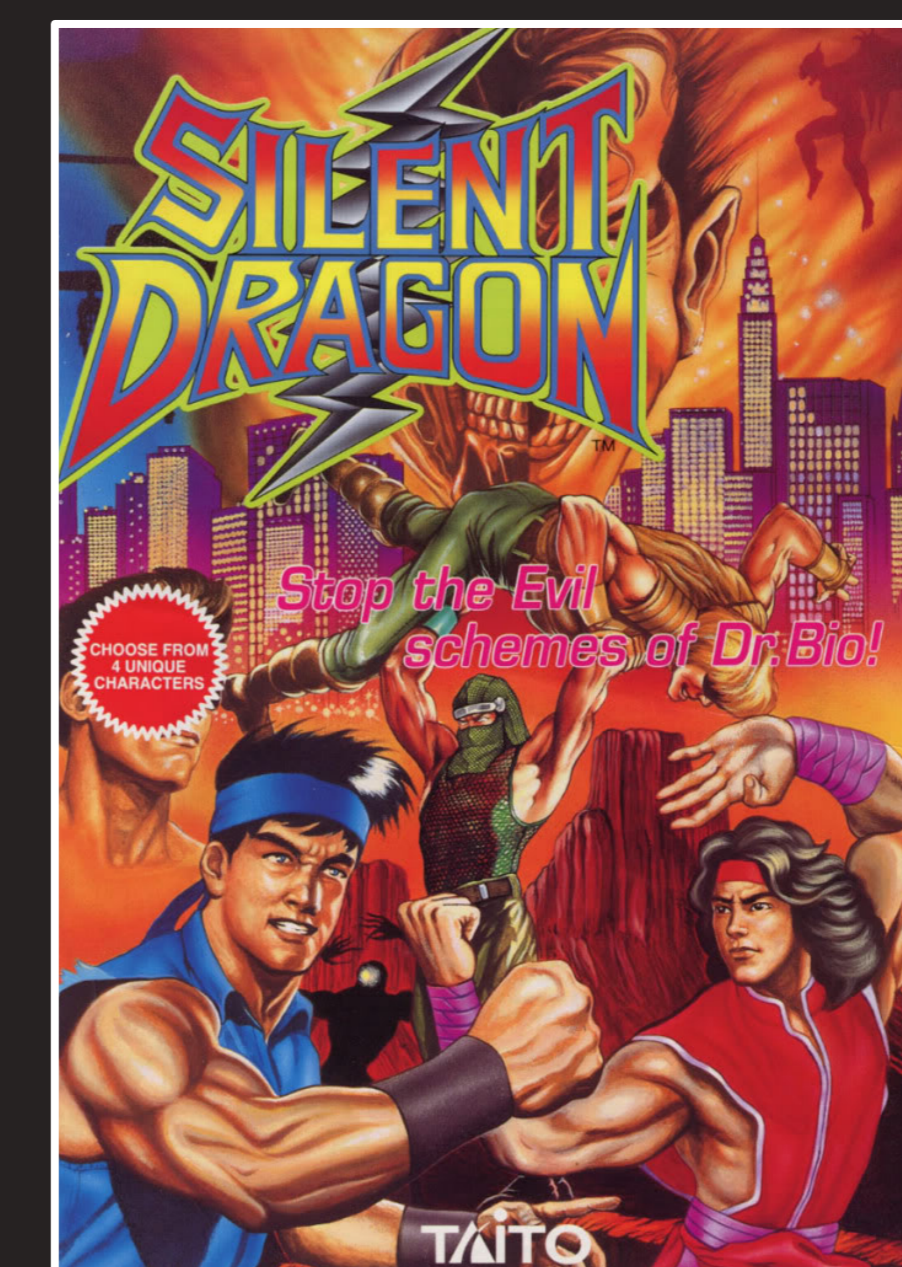
During a recent cold winters night, I began randomly searching through my game catalogue looking for something to end the night on. Without realizing it, I started up a game that I have no recollection even adding to my backlog. Before I knew it, the title sequence of Dead Connection, a Taito arcade from 1992, had my complete attention. What began as a night of trying to pass the time quickly became a adrenaline pumping session of arcade bliss that went well past my bedtime. With half a century worth of video game history, It's easy to forget that the early 90's were a treasure trove of brilliant arcade games.



Taito founder Michael Kogan. Source: 40th History of Taito Corporation: Four Decades of Playful Innovation (Keisuke Hasegawa & Taito Corporation, 1993), p. 5.

Taito Corporation has an interesting history, (Gaming Alexandria has a wonderful article on the topic) but the short version is that a Ukrainian businessman named Michael Kogan, established the Taito Trading Company with lawyer and retired newspaperman Akio Nakatani in 1953. Beginning as a vodka distillery, Taito began importing vending machines and jukeboxes through the 60s until it began manufacturing electro-mechanical games. Seeing the potential, the company developed a number of different arcade cabinets, striking it big in 1978 with the introduction of Space Invaders. The cultural phenomom helped kick off a golden age of arcade titles, and made Taito a whole lot of money in the process. The company would go on to publish hundreds of games until it was eventually purchased by Square Enix in 2005.

Any video game fan with a birth year starting with nineteen has likely played some version of Taito's most popular and most important video game, Space Invaders.



HOW LONG TO BEAT
~ 1 HOUR
DEVELOPER
EAST TECHNOLOGY
RELEASED
1992

No self-respecting beat-'em-up of the arcade generation starts with anything less than the kidnapping of the protagonist's girlfriend. In this case, Joe Fighter and three of his pals battle their way through five levels of increasingly eccentric bosses in search of the classic damsel in distress. While Silent Dragon doesn't necessarily reinvent the wheel, adhering strictly to the side-scrolling formula, the full package is a consistent and polished experience.

The pixel work is a standout. Every character and backdrop is rendered with exquisite detail and vibrant color. While the early stages linger on rather generic city streets, the environments become more fantastical with each passing level. Unfortunately, the weakest link is the soundtrack; it's a forgettably generic score that fails to match the energy of the visuals.

Combat is fluid and feels reminiscent of Double Dragon, though each character possesses a distinct sense of weight and speed. You'll utilize the standard kit, attacks, jumps, and combos, alongside the classic health-draining special move to help clear the screen. Getting through the game now is easy, given this is an arcade game where you're expected to die plenty so it can eat those coins.

Silent Dragon is a perfectly fine way to spend an evening. The boss designs are worth the time investment, and the button-mashing isn't intense enough to cause early-onset arthritis. It's a fun hour of Taito history that remains a decent play decades later.



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 1 HOUR

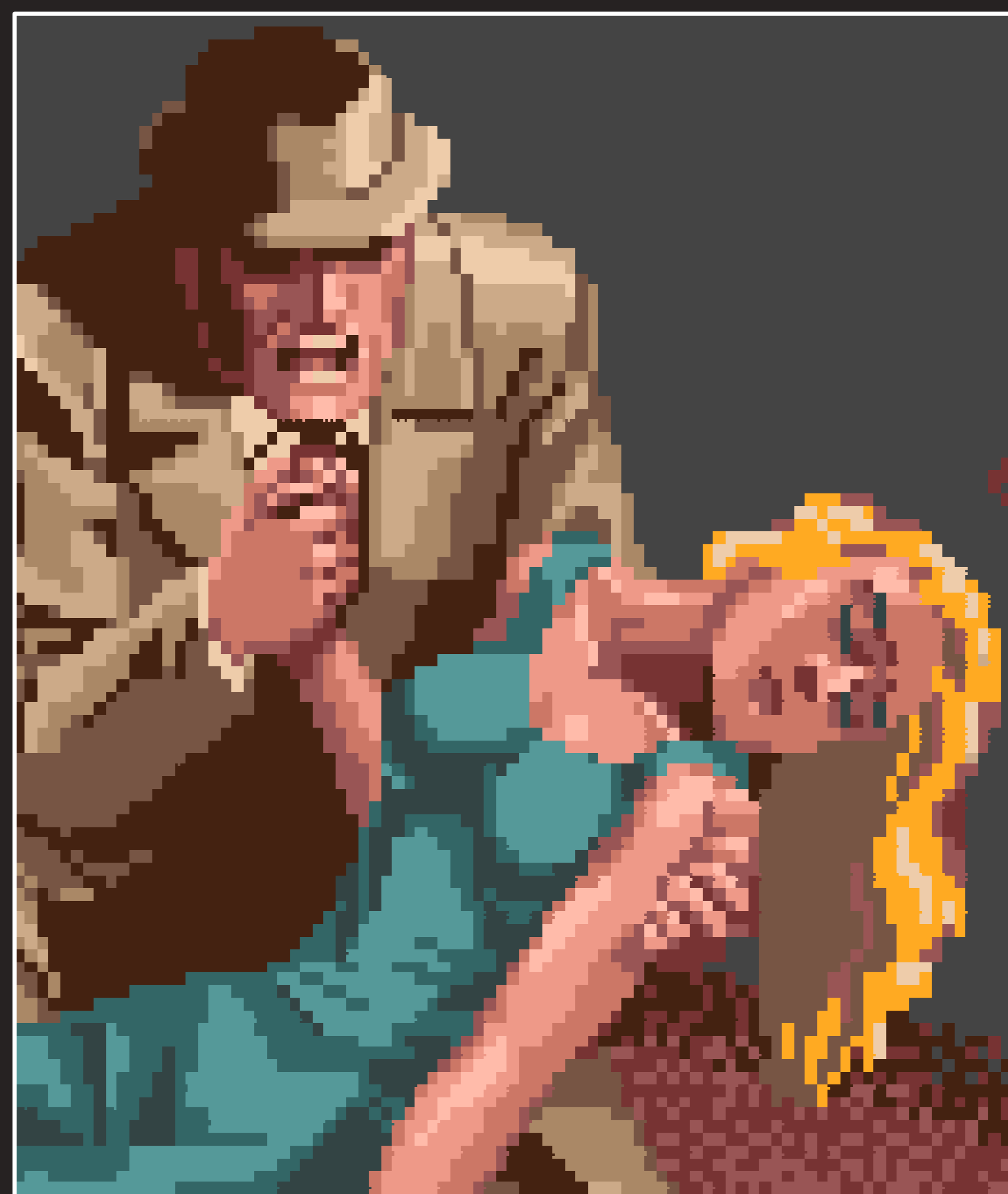
DEVELOPER

TAITO

RELEASED

1992

Released in 1992, the game offers a cinematic experience for the arcade-goer with plenty of coins to spare. Using expository title cards and animated scenes, the story follows a group of men "making a stand against a gigantic crime." The crime in question is the gruesome murder of a woman connected to one of the detectives taking on the Mafia. Between each of the ten stages, the plot thickens as the group travels to various Mafia-run locations to essentially clear out every gunman in sight.



Each stage is a single screen with a fixed perspective, functioning like a violent, highly detailed diorama or a dollhouse filled with furniture and hidden weapons. The first stage, for instance, takes place in a hotel lobby teeming with tables, chairs, and a receptionist who wisely takes cover behind a desk. Enemies flood the field from off-screen, either charging directly at you or lurking at the edges to take potshots. The environment isn't just for show; objects can be used as cover, but once they are blasted apart, they often leave behind helpful items like better guns or health. This creates a constant risk-vs-reward decision: do you keep your cover, or destroy it for the upgrade? After thinning out the mobsters, a stage boss arrives with underlings to finish the fight, leading to a cutscene where the boss is shaken down for the next location on your revenge tour.

The combat is quite entertaining and feels surprisingly close to a modern-day twin-stick shooter. The character sprites are small compared to the overall stage, emphasizing the scale of the environment. You move your detective around an isometric playing field, shooting in whichever direction you face. To survive the hail of gunfire, you can dive-roll in the direction you're running, a mechanic that feels remarkably fluid. Older gamers may recall this style of play from Smash TV, while younger players might compare it to titles released by 10tons in the early years of the Nintendo Switch. The chaotic nature of the gameplay is a blast; there is a pure, simple bliss in dodging behind statues and crates as the world around you splinters into pixels.

BY DAVID LLOYD

The seemingly apocalyptic future of the video game industry has me feeling real nostalgic for the simpler times of my youth, when a high-selling arcade game moved only a few thousand cabinets. Growing up in a fairly small city, my access to arcade machines was limited, so I now have the pleasure of sorting through an extensive digital catalogue to experience the greats I previously missed. Looking back at the '90s arcade scene, the money was almost exclusively in fighting; Beat 'Em Ups and PvP fighters dominated the floor. Leave it to a quirky company like Taito to look at that trend and say "nah," proceeding instead to drop a fixed-screen shooter featuring a 1950s film noir aesthetic. Dead Connection may not have made a massive splash culturally or monetarily upon its release, but it stands out as a very playable curiosity 30+ years later.



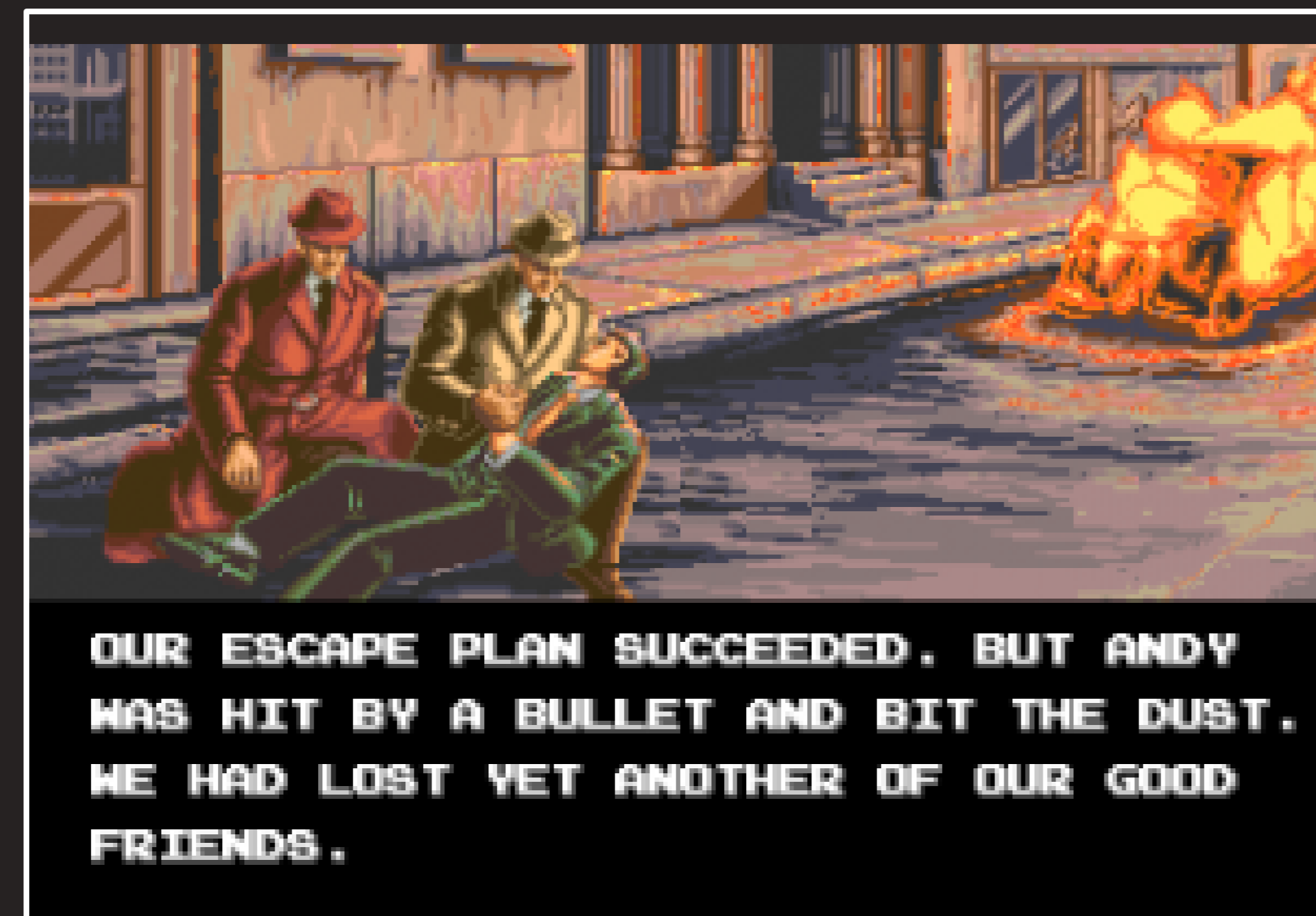
HONOURABLE MENTIONS



RayForce went by a number of different names depending on the region you lived in: Layer Section, Galactic Attack, and Gunlock. Released in early 1994, the game came out to tepid reviews based on the fact that the public had become fatigued with traditional vertically scrolling shooters. Reviews didn't improve after the game was ported to a number of different platforms including PlayStation, Sega Saturn and even Xbox 360.



What I appreciate most about playing Dead Connection in the 21st century is the level of craft visible in every frame. The character sprites may be small, but the detail on the clothing, traditional trench coats for the heroes and sharp three-piece suits for the villains, is pulled straight from a classic crime flick. The backgrounds are equally meticulous, featuring cracks in warehouse walls or a hidden wall safe behind a hotel reception desk. I may not have specific childhood nostalgia for this title, but playing it brings back that same visceral feeling of tackling Contra or Super C on the NES.



Ultimately, Dead Connection is a terrific title to have in your rotation whenever you have 30 minutes and need a quick break from the world. The run-and-gun action requires little time commitment and serves as a perfect pick-me-up of nostalgic goodness. It is a timeless classic that seems to only get finer with age. Finding the game on modern platforms is incredibly easy thanks to the port developed by Hamster, a company with a sterling reputation for preserving these arcade treasures.



Released in the latter half of 1994, Puzzle Bobble would go on to become Japan's second highest-grossing arcade software of 1995. The game takes the concept from the original Bubble Bobble from 1986. Reviewers of the time praised its addictive gameplay and two player mode. As with RayForce, the sprite based graphics were considered "retro" by the mid ninties.

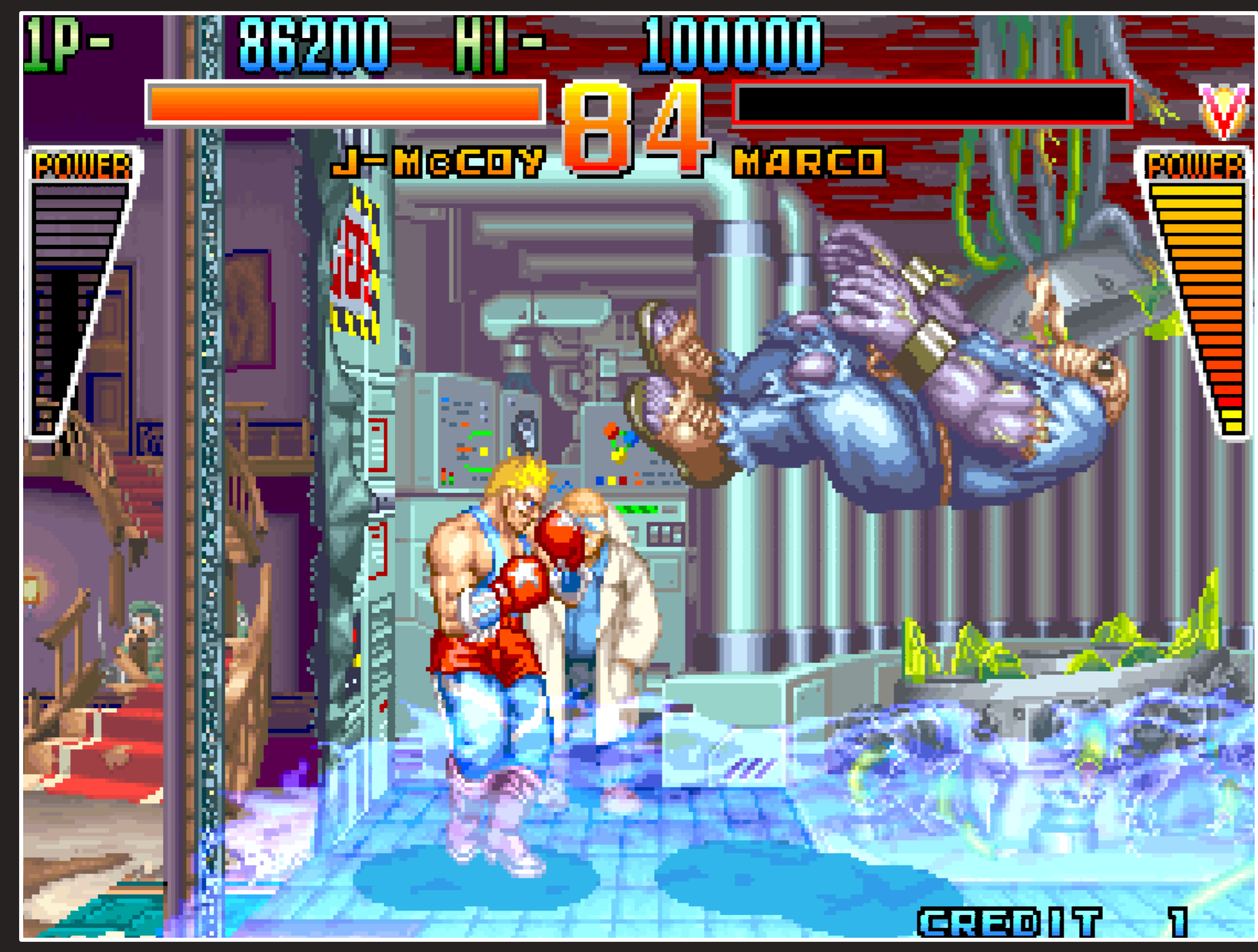
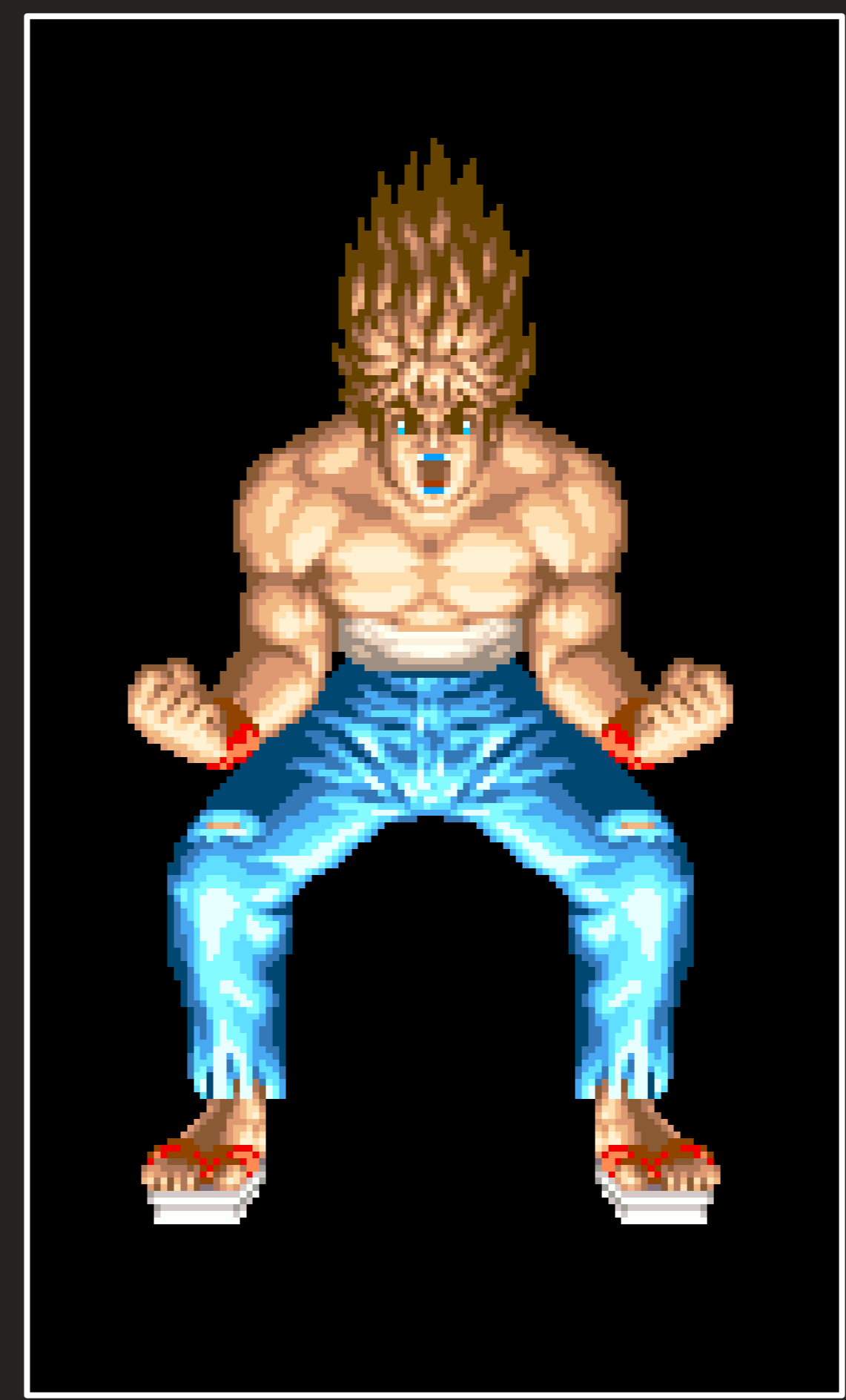


KAISER KNUCKLE

HOW LONG TO BEAT
~ 1 HOUR

DEVELOPER
TAITO

RELEASED
1994



The success of Street Fighter 2 was so great that nearly every big video game developer of the early 90s had their own 1v1 fighting game. For Taito, that game was Kaiser Knuckle, a notoriously difficult title that was unapologetic about taking quarters. The final boss was so difficult, it took 20 years before anyone officially defeated them. Unfair AI aside, Kaiser Knuckle is a visually stunning game. The sprites for each character are beautifully drawn and the backgrounds have incredibly intricate details. My personal favourite is a picture of what I assume is Marco before he was turned into a large purple monster.

In my playthrough, I got my butt handed to me in pretty much every single match even when trying every character. I may not have won many matches, but I at least really enjoyed looking at the scenery.



POKEMON POKOPIA

NINTENDO SWITCH 2



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 30 HOURS

DEVELOPER

OMEGA FORCE

RELEASED

2026

— BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

When it comes to “cosy” games I find that any time I put past the seventy hour mark is usually when I should’ve stopped playing...with Pokemon Pokopia I have now passed that time and am nearly-almost-sort-of-kinda done with the game.

Pokemon Pokopia is a sandbox decoration and monster collecting game with some life simulation elements. There is no combat, but you do have a story to progress that will give you access to further areas, abilities, recipes and of course, Pokemon.

It starts out with you waking up and shaping yourself to resemble your trainer before running into an old Tangrowth in a cave who says he’s seen neither human nor Pokemon for a long time. Upon leaving the cave you find an exhausted squirtle and you use your innate ditto powers of mimicry to copy the water gun ability and give him some hydration. From there you resolve to restore the natural environment, as the first area is rather dry—not only through your own restoration efforts but by creating habitats to attract new Pokemon who may have quests or abilities to help. These habitats start out as simple patches of grass but later on might require a near complete set of furniture or piecing together a fossil. Just as you have your own job skills, there will be some you’ll need to ask other Pokemon to help you with, such as heating up furnaces to smelt ore, or temporarily generating electricity for an object.

Ditto, on the other hand, will learn a variety of abilities such as being able to water soil and crops, till land, break apart blocks and so on. Some of these abilities will actually give you a full body transformation and I have to note the Graveler one is super useful, especially with the right cooking. The world isn’t quite a voxel one but any piece of land or water (and some walls and flooring) comes in the form of blocks that can easily be restored back into place. Some structures will require you to enlist the help of other Pokemon to build them which can be power sources, homes that you could make yourself with blocks, or more specific prefab buildings that have a separate load zone for their interior.

Of course these towns or biomes you visit (separated via gates and weirdly misleading boundaries) are finite in resources so you can ask Drifloon to take you to a randomly generated island once a day to acquire more blocks (and pinch some random items). There are far, far too many types of blocks: I know the different biomes get their own grasses but do they also need several other rock and sand types as well? My storage is all BLOCKS.

The writing is quite cute and can be funny at times, and while most Pokemon have set personality groups, they do get some unique dialogue and even specific interactions with each other and are rather fun to run into. Duskull must be punished for his crimes. Each area will have a main objective to get through once you develop the town a bit from bringing back rain or just having a good old shindig. A neat feature heavily advertised was the unique Pokemon such as Mosslox or Smearguru; these Pokemon are variations on regular ones and have a story reason for being different. I was a bit disappointed that there was only one extra one besides what they had already revealed, and three of them are strictly from the same town. One thing to keep in mind (with the exception of Mosslox probably, he’s kinda stuck there) is that you can get any Pokemon to follow you and move them somewhere else including another town. A major task you’ll need to do is to raise the environmental levels, which is merely done by asking Pokemon about their comfort levels and giving them what they require. The only Pokemon I really bothered with giving housing were those who wanted somewhere dark or dry.



WRITTEN BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

The story around this setting is mostly told via random notes you'll find scattered in the world (which Ditto can't read, although you may find photos to emulate and get new looks to try on). I won't spoil too much in case you don't know but it definitely has an environmental focus, which is very funny when I'm building furnaces to generate an entire town's worth of electricity or deliberately polluting areas for certain Pokemon. I managed to get through the main story in a swift twenty five hours, as any time I spent playing around usually ended up contributing to the main goals. That said, the game has plenty more content in the form of sheer number of recipes and Pokemon to collect.

This is really only one of the major downsides to the game. The RNG in Pokopia is utterly terrible; for example, the fossil pieces are required to get certain Pokemon and these come from glowing blocks that need to be broken, but you may also get artefacts that need to be appraised instead, and it is mostly random which fossil piece you get so you might find yourself getting almost ten right wings before the game finally gives you a left one.

However, when it comes to the mysterious slabs, you will get a unique one each time until you make the complete set. Any recipes that aren't tied to quests or the environment level can be found through sparkling ripples, except sometimes you only get an item you might already have instead. You can also buy a couple of recipes from the daily rotation in the store, although as you get further into the game you may find yourself running rather low on money. The only way to get money in this game is through challenges and you might start running out of those as you get further on in hours. There is also the weekly stamp card that cashes in but I still have so many expensive recipes I can't unlock and I feel like I'm nowhere close to getting them all. This is especially egregious in a game about creating and decorating to your heart's content. Fortunately, there is one handy-dandy way to get around these issues: as you rebuild Pokemon centres you'll find on the inside a 3D printer that works as you might expect.

You can take object photos with your camera and use regular or rare Pokemetal ingots to print these items, and you can go to dream islands of other players and take photos of things they have that you do not, which I HAD to do to get the final type of berry tree.

Pokemon Pokopia also has online multiplayer (and gameshare and adhoc play) including Cloud Islands which act as mini-servers that don't require any particular user to be online for others to access it. While it is a super neat feature, you cannot transfer items between your main game and the cloud islands, making getting the required resources to make what you want (or spawn your favourite Pokemon) a lot harder than it has any right to be. They even prevent you from using the 3D printer with photos you've taken elsewhere.



You can visit your own friends' worlds but are only allowed to impact the environment in Pallet Town which is a large area with no set features or quests (besides helping Eevee find her friends). You can play a few mini-games with either friends or other Pokemon such as jump-rope and prop-hunt hide and seek.

I did expect the run time of the game to last a bit longer, which is how I finished it in four days, and I don't think it would have killed them to create at least one more biome, such as a snowy one; given the game is about living in a post multi-environmental disasters world, there probably just aren't any. Pokopia does have a live service aspect with a few minor events having already occurred. The first involved a new resource spawning in the dream islands that could be exchanged for unique event furniture and flowers, which then in turn was used to create habitats for new Pokemon. Whereas the April Fool's event merely rewarded a fake Sudowoodo item.

I think these minor events are a good way to keep players coming back to the game and soon might be the only reason I clock back in, unless any friends or family want to play with me. I'm not a super creative builder although I have adored looking at people's doll house builds and have tried my hand at making a 5x5 diorama. Still, I got a decent amount of enjoyment out of the game even if I have no desire to properly restore the towns I encountered.

I'm currently trying to "catch 'em all" and have less than ten to go. I did give up and look up what habitats I still need to make since the hints weren't spawning as much. The spawning itself could be an issue with players who aren't willing to mess with their console's time as certain Pokemon are nocturnal and will only initially appear in the night or vice versa. Thankfully, there are no seasons but there is rain which does also impact the spawn conditions and comfort levels of some Pokemon.



I adore the art style of this game, even the freakish faux human ditto is endearing so long as I keep its eyes covered up. The boxy style isn't too harsh as all the items and nature keep their form. As a Pokemon fan I also love the soundtrack, especially as you can collect CDs and play alternate arrangements of different tracks.



The game controls pretty great too as long as you swap the jump and run buttons but then I didn't realise I could run when transformed as the changing back button was the same one (you just have to hold it).



As numerous and serious as my complaints are, make no mistake, I've had an absolute blast playing this game and gaining a new found love for Girafarig. Even in the more grindy stages as I am now, I got completely sidelined from writing this review trying to create the last few habitats and it helped me wind down from work completely. The attention to detail in regards to the world of Pokemon is top notch and the game is clearly made with love for the series as a whole, right down to every thing you learn technically being a named move from the main games. There are many other little details I have neglected to mention for the sake of seeing it yourself. Pokopia is a must play for anyone looking for a relaxing time in the Pokemon world with the occasional bump going down the blocks.



7.8 - Too many blocks



CRAWL

MULTIPLAYER MAYHEM

BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

Crawl is a multiplayer (couch co-op only) 2D roguelike game where only one of you gets to be alive at a time. Actually before you start, you pick a deity to worship that each gives you your monster pool and different buffs such as a starting item or more trap damage. Then you fight to the death in a one-hit-kill scenario. From there, the victor makes their way through rooms to level up and to find the next floors. Meanwhile, the other players are ghosts that can possess different objects to fling at their opponent or traps to try to deal damage. Whoever kills the current human player regains their humanity and so on, it will often swap. In every other room there will be spawn points so the monster players will possess a monster (randomly picked from a pool of three) and engage in direct combat. Both human and monster have a standard attack and special one that builds up unique to the monster type, or in the heroes case - bought. Additionally, the ghost players can build up a meter to spawn additional enemy slimes even in other rooms. This will prevent the player from going through a door until they are slain, much to their chagrin. Occasionally the living player gets access to a shop to either change their weapon, mess around with their stats or get a spell instead of a dodge roll.

Between floors, all players have a chance to turn their earned wrath into upgrades for their different monsters, even choosing between different types for various tiers.

Upon reaching character level ten, if the hero finds a specific room they can attempt to beat the boss, which will be partly controlled by other players. If the other players defeat the human, the game goes on for up to three attempts. Either the human player wins or the ghost players win as a team, damning the other player's soul for all eternity (and unleashing a terrible monster into the world, good job). Because I actually won this time we got to unlock some new monsters for the upgrade paths.

While the game can be played with two players, I personally recommend at least three in order to enjoy a proper party chaos dynamic. We first tried playing it at least a year ago and it took a while to get a hang of, even with a tutorial, but I think that might be because the tutorial is single player. The second time around we got the hang of the game almost instantly even though it had been some time purely because we had prior experience.

The art style is certainly not my jam but it's readable and works fine for this particular game. Everyone is colour coded even down to the text to minimise confusion. For a roguelike game, it's probably lacking a bit of variety compared to some similarly aged games but for the purpose of some multiplayer fun, it can't be missed.



GALE OF DARKNESS XD

NINTENDO SWITCH 2 ONLINE

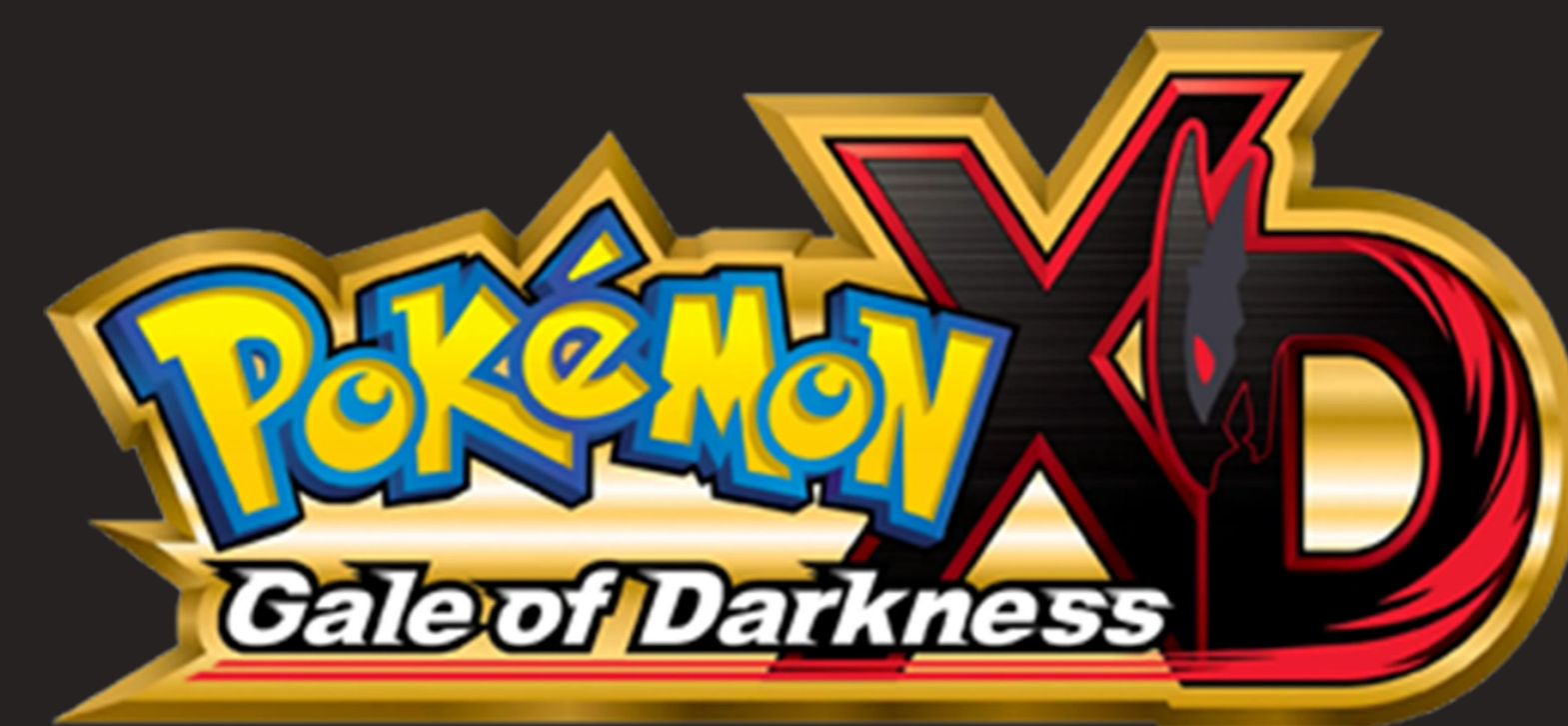


RELEASED	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	HOW LONG TO BEAT
2005	GENIUS SONORITY	NINTENDO	~ 30 HOURS

Hello Gale of Darkness, My Old Friend.

The Nintendo GameCube is largely a blindspot for me, with many interesting entries from its lineup eluding my personal gaming history. Pokémon XD: Gale of Darkness is one such video game, which I may have spent only a couple hours with as a rental from a local video store. Its appearance on the GameCube Nintendo Switch Online Service, a service exclusive to Switch 2, offered a perfect opportunity to put the Pokemon spinoff through its paces. I'm not thrilled that it dragged me away from Pokemon Pokopia for 20-plus hours, but I am happy to have satisfied a long burning curiosity in rolling credits on it.

One of the most hilarious things about Gale of Darkness is the ridiculous character names, which makes remembering any of them a nigh impossible task. Fortunately, it's not the plot, which involves a group named Cipher pursuing the requisite world domination, or the characters involved in it that make this adventure worthwhile.



WRITTEN BY JORDAN RUDEK

No, it's the challenging Pokemon battles and adjusted Pokemon-style gameplay that add such a unique flavour I couldn't help but regularly feel impressed by what the game was throwing at me. The differences between Pokemon XD and the mainline series are stark but memorable, and I kept thinking that I was perhaps playing a Pokemon game better enjoyed in the hands of a veteran RPG fan than a youthful Pokemaniac.

For one thing, the acquisition of Pokemon goes through some changes here. You catch the Pokemon of other trainers when those Pokemon are shadow versions of themselves, which is almost like a curse that needs to be exorcised. Shadow Pokemon have special shadow abilities and can go into a state called Reverse Mode where any action they take damages them until you call out to them. Each Shadow Pokemon you capture has a meter that has to be reduced to zero before it can level up and learn its normal moves, which are painfully few and far between. You can purchase and use scent items, use the Shadow Pokemon in battle, and call to them when they go Reverse to lower their Shadow meter and then purify them. I wish the process were a lot faster, but you do eventually gain a way to reduce Shadow for multiple Pokemon at a time, a process akin to the Daycare Center mechanic. There are 83 Shadow Pokemon in total, and I diligently caught about half of them before deciding to just push through to the game's conclusion.

You start with an Eevee and get offered your choice of evolution stone fairly early on; this pleased me greatly as it meant I could choose you, Vaporeon, a personal fave, and a Pokemon I was happy to ride to victory, especially after purchasing a Blizzard TM. What's annoying is that TMs are still one use only in this generation, there aren't that many of them, and some of the better ways are harder (more time consuming) to obtain. What's neat is that basically every fight in the game is a double battle, with each trainer throwing out two Pokemon at a time. It makes for a new level of strategy, especially when combined with the regular encounters of Shadow Pokemon.

I'll add that I hope you enjoy battling, because Gale of Darkness focuses HEAVILY on these two vs two encounters. In the handful of dungeons you progress through, you can expect to find a Cipher grunt around nearly every corner, and you won't always have access to a Pokemon Center-style healing machine.



The focus on battles and team composition strategy means catching, evolving, and training take on added meaning. I know I'm not alone in wanting a tougher Pokemon experience, and I was glad to find Gale of Darkness offering exactly that. The NSO release comes with save states, and you better believe I took advantage of those to capture Shadow Pokemon, in particular. There are eventually ways of capturing wild Pokemon as well, but you need to visit one of three spots, leave behind one or more pieces of bait, and then play the game until you get a notification that something has taken said bait. It's tedious and essentially avoidable unless you want to catch 'em all.

Pokemon XD: Gale of Darkness is a genuinely interesting game that might entice long-time Pokemon fans looking for a slightly different experience with a number of familiar mechanics. It plays like a more typical turn-based RPG in terms of the plot and the way the world opens up, but if you're more of a Pokemon battler than a Pokemon-catching trainer, I think you'll find this GameCube spinoff a refreshing departure for the series. While it's far from the best non-mainline game, Gale of Darkness is worth a look and did well to hold my attention across its 20 to 25-hour campaign. For those who really get into it, there's even more battles to be fought in the post-game. For me, though, I'm ready to get back to running errands for my Pokemon pals back in Pokopia.



MONSTER HUNTER STORIES 3

TWISTED REFLECTION

PLAYSTATION 5



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 40 HOURS

DEVELOPER

CAPCOM

RELEASED

2026

— BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN —

I'm continuing my pattern of finally beating a game in a series via the newest entry rather than any other games I've put time into. With that said I only played like ¾ of the first game and like none of the second so if some of the stuff I'm praising was in the last one you're just going to have to cope. If you'd like a version of this review with a lot less structure check out our episode on the game in the podcast.

Monster Hunter Stories is a spin-off of the mainline Monster Hunter series but instead of action-based constant boss fights to make new vests, you instead engage in turn-based battles side by side with your "monsties". In the third entry of the series you get to play as a member of royalty who is also captain of the rangers, a group of riders that focus on preservation of the natural ecosystem. Unfortunately, getting in the way of that is an impending war as your neighbouring country is demanding they break a covenant that the continent is bound to and explore a forbidden area. In short work you gain an extra party member as a political hostage and not long after that, end up breaking the law yourself. Soon finding out more about the world and why you were forbidden from leaving in the first place.

The combat system in this game is really fun. You have yourself, your monstie, a battle ally, and their monstie for a party of four. Although, you can only control yourself and your monstie if you so choose. This meant I often had to choose my party member based on their patterns of attack, such as not picking the gunlance user Kora who often taunted if I wanted to use counterattacks, or not picking Gaul when fighting regular monsters batches as he'd waste time on a unique skill that'd do mere chip damage to debuff a monster he could've killed in one swing.

Outside of the typical turn-based RPG trappings, the main feature in the Stories series is the paper-scissors-rock system of power-technical-speed attacks. Monsties default attacks are whatever their attack type is, although they can learn or be equipped with alternate attack types. Before you initiate your turn, you can see who the enemy is aiming at and if for example it's at you. You can do one of those three attack types (instead of a neutral move) and you'll enter a head-to-head with the winner (based the triangle of speed beating power beating technical beating speed) getting to actually use their attack whilst the loser misses their turn and gets hurt. Draws will result in both combatants taking a bit of damage. Most monsters seem to go with an attack type that suits them such as Velocidromes initially starting with speed attacks but whenever they are agitated they'll switch it up. It can be hard to learn which attack types you need to go for but it can be super handy as you'll prevent damage from happening, although there seem to be a lot more neutral attacks at least from the enemy so it's not every single turn.

If you and a monstie on your team both do the same type of attack aimed at the same part of the same monster you'll do a double attack for extra damage that also contributes to the kinship gauge. The kinship gauge fills up as you successfully attack and once at level 1 you can hop onto your monster to either immediately use your unique kinship attack (which can be doubled up if your battle ally is also mounted) or bring it up to level 3 by successfully attacking and not taking too much damage so that your special attack will be all the greater.



Your own character can equip three weapons at once and switch between them at will. Slashing, blunt, or piercing damage is aimed at different body parts to break them apart, which might be necessary to temporarily stun them or to weaken skills. The handful of weapons also come with their own unique traits such as gunlances having shells that need to be reloaded or hunting horns providing buffs as well as damage. Monsters often rotate through phases and some will get a lot stronger but can be temporarily beaten out of that phase if you break the new parts that show as attackable. Another system is the wyvern soul gauge which are these red gems below the enemies health bar that get beaten down more easily with part breaking. Once depleted, the monster will get toppled and you can do what is essentially an all out attack. Unfortunately, if there are multiple monsters you're fighting against even if you topple them all in the same turn you don't get to do the special beat up attack. Different monsters have unique gimmicks, whether it's particular bosses, repelling the invasive monsters or having to guess which dirt pile the Nibelsnarf is hiding in. Dying has very little consequences in this game unless you are making your way through one of the more linear areas and have to push back through to get to where you were until you find the next catavand stand (save and fast travel points), or carrying an egg as you'll be sent out of the den sans-egg and can't return. I do sort of miss not having any set-piece fights like with cannonballs or dragonators but I suppose that would veer too much into the mainline's action territory. The game has plenty of hype moments but maybe not so much aura.

Another important part of team building is the rite of channeling which lets you transfer genes from one monstie's 3x3 grid to the other's. These can create bingos if they share the same trait or element to increase the damage or give other benefits. Later on in the game, this can become essential or at least often easier than recruiting an entirely new monster (which I only had to do a couple of times).



Just like the mainline series, your weapons and equipment can be swapped around, upgraded, or given extra benefits which becomes a lot more important against bosses as you won't want to be weak to your attacks. Thankfully, creating the perfect outfit is a lot easier in this game as the fights are much quicker than the mainline games. I do have a bit of a hang-up over what armor made it to the game as I fought the Odogaron and was looking forward to wearing awesome gear until I realised it was the uglier alpha ones, for shame.

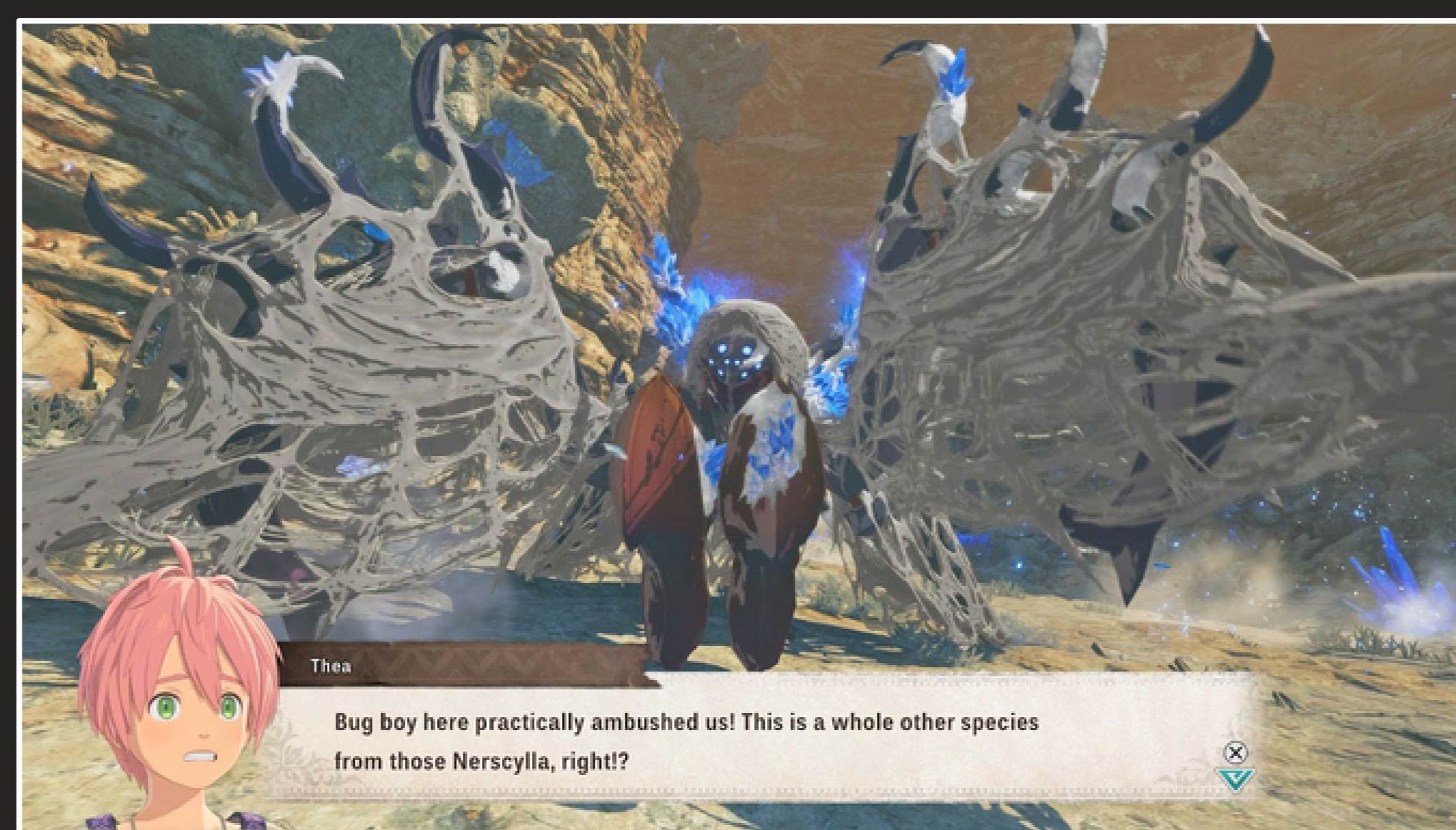
Outside of direct combat, you have expansive areas with verticality making the traversal traits of climbing and flying (really just gliding) essential with some other skills such as digging or swimming only sometimes needed. I stuck with my rank C Tobi-Kadachi (nicknamed Tobi-Wan Kenobi) through the whole game since he could both climb and glide making getting around much easier without having to swap another monstie in. Littered around these maps are several enemies (some of which you might need to avoid due the difference in strength), side quests and dens. Said enemies may occasionally get the jump on you from behind (as you may do to them) or by simply emerging from the ground before you can get out of the way. If you want any real dungeon type environments those are all but exclusive to the side stories with Kora. There are regular style sidequests, and poogies to find, but all your party members have a few side stories that continue throughout the main plot, getting you both closer to these characters but also giving benefits such as making your allies stronger or getting a new recipe to cook for timed buffs. It's here you learn that Monster Hunter Stories 3 is a true blue JRPG down to the details of including a janky minigame if you want to befriend Thea with the poogie races. I didn't actually have any trouble with them until the last one whereupon I learned the controls are truly different from the main areas as you can't turn around and had to reset the race a couple of times.

You carry with you a part of six monsties that can be swapped out at any time both in and out of battle, except for the series-tradition-mandatory Rathalos named Ratha who can never be removed from the party.

WRITTEN BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

The dens are how you can get more monsties as you approach a nest and select from a small pool of eggs and painstakingly carry it old-school style whilst your companions stare at you and offer no assistance. The dens are often empty but may have monsters, possibly awake or sleeping. Many times a monster will return part way through your egg search and once spotted you won't be allowed to search for more. Sometimes you can squeeze out without having to fight, but if you do get caught you can keep the egg so long as you win. From there you take the egg back to the stables to hatch before lamenting it didn't have the skill you wanted to transfer over to a monstie you actually plan on keeping in your team. There are a decent number of hatchable monsters including some from Rise and Wilds since this is the first Stories game since their release which is always a nice touch. It definitely includes plenty of my favourites.

Unique to this game is the habitat restoration feature. First, you'll have to beat a feral monster who is partially crystallised and has a nasty counterattack to establish a camping base and that will let you re-release hatched monsters back into the nearby area in order to increase their population. This will not only actually make particular monsters show up in the world but give you the benefit of higher quality eggs which can not only lead to better genetics but mutations. These mutations are not only natural variants that occur in the mainline games like a Blue Yian-Kit-Ku or a Dreadqueen Rathian but also general colour changes such as a black "Purple" Ludroth and alternate element types. There are invasive monsters which are super strong, you'll have to change the time to night and pick up tracks to learn what the requirements to repel them are and try not to get caught beforehand as they are way too tough to beat when you first encounter them. Thankfully, you only have to do this twice, but there are plenty more you can optionally tackle, some of which gave me trouble such as the Black Khezu or the monster that needed a mud attack but only Almudron counted, not Barroth. Once they retreat you can sneak into their den and get an endangered egg so that you can reintroduce a species into the wild and immediately regret doing so as was the case with Zinogre.



If you want even more of a challenge, fighting at night will spawn an extra tough Elder Dragon, most of which are basically post-game level unless you really know what you're doing, and those too can be released back into the wild which feels perhaps a bit more unrealistic but hey, dogs can hatch from eggs in this game so who cares about upsetting the balance of the ecosystem with life sucking monsters.

The story isn't super special and those who watched the trailers might be disappointed at how little the brewing war part of the story seems to matter or create any setpieces. The story focuses more on a typical adventure with a light touch on environmentalism and hey that's the second monster collecting game that came out in March that focused on restoring habitats. I got to know the party members fairly well and liked them except for Kora who would say "useless" whenever I lost a fight so she can go to h-take me on another dungeon run. There is a returning character from 2 who vaguely speaks of past events to compare you and Rudy to the previous characters, but the story itself doesn't require playthroughs of other games. Although if you do, you get some costume save data bonuses. The gameplay is the real star of the show but the story is by no means bad; it just didn't quite go where I'd hoped it might have.

Once again I didn't pay too much attention to the music although it did get rather dramatic for basic encounters in the final area. They do know when to use their important leitmotifs though. Graphically speaking this game is utterly gorgeous and is quite the glow-up for the series now completely going for more realistic proportions, this does come with the sacrifice of monsters now not looking quite as cute as they did in previous entries. The human (and wyverian) characters all look lovely and are well animated (as of course are the monsters with their different attacks). There is unfortunately plenty of pop-in in these areas but otherwise it runs quite smoothly on a base PS5. Actually I'm underselling the visuals, the areas are vast with soft colouring and utterly stunning assets such as a petrified Lao-Shan Lung that you can climb and the smaller towns are filled with insane levels of detail.

I did lose my mind at one of the places being called Sheperden. Furthermore, I would really like a photo mode to be added.

The voice acting is present for most of the game although you might miss some party chats that pop-up in the left of the screen since those aren't voiced. I do have to admit that I probably would not have stuck with the Monster Hunter language if they included it as it does add a lot to the cutscenes and even your purrhaps less annoying felyne companion Rudy's voice isn't too unbearable.

It took me roughly forty hours to beat as I mostly followed the story path and only did a few optional things. Although the game appears to not suspend or let you pause cut-scenes which is terribly inconvenient and sloppy for such a prolific company. The only major complaints I have with this game is that the gliding does not feel very good, aaaand the toppling thing. I do also have many nitpicks such as the choice of armor pieces but it doesn't ruin the entire game for me. It was super fun to play through Monster Hunter Stories 3 and I wish I could give the game a hug. The only time I didn't have much fun was towards the end trying to get a particular gene to spawn so that I could get past the final boss. The many systems of the game feel rewarding and the combat is super enjoyable once you get a handle on it and there are plenty of ways to extend your run time if you so choose.



NEXT ISSUE*



BACKLOGS ARE MADE TO BE IGNORED

Please Understand... We make plans and intend to stick with them, but then, Square Enix shadows drops a Paranormasight sequel. Stuff happens. No matter what, next issue we'll have a lot of games to share with something interesting to say about them.

In the meantime, if you made it this far, maybe let a friend or two know about this great new magazine. Or if you really enjoyed it and want to ensure more get made, consider supporting us at Patreon.com/TheThirstyMage.

See you next issue!
- David

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