

AUGUST 2026 - ISSUE #5



MAGE

THE MAGAZINE TO DISCOVER SOMETHING NEW



ISSUE COVER

The Adventures of Elliot

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IT'S ALL ABOUT THE GAMES

With hundreds of thousands of titles spanning over multiple decades, it's impossible to play every single game out there. The goal of Mage Magazine is to shine a light on the ones worth playing and to help shape the perceptions of misunderstood games. We work hard to ensure that we're helping everyone enjoy video games to their fullest.

This magazine is another medium for the hosts of The Thirsty Mage Podcast 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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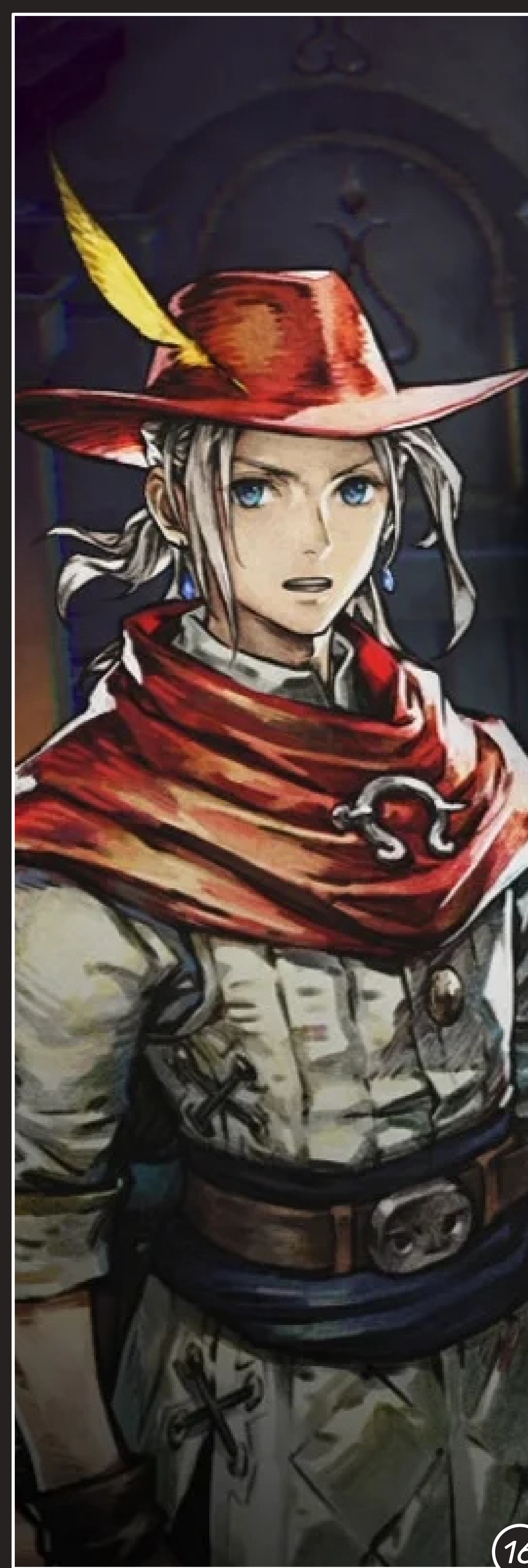
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MINA THE HOLLOWER



HOW LONG TO BEAT
~25 HOURS

DEVELOPER
YACHT CLUB GAMES

RELEASED
2026

BY JORDAN RUDEK

Shovel Knight became an instant favourite of mine when it released in 2014. That it became expanded with three additional campaigns made for an incredible drip feed of NES-inspired content. When it all wrapped up with the King Knight DLC, thoughts turned to what would be next for Yacht Club Games, and it was both a delight but also no surprise at all that their next game would have a similar retro flavour. Enter Mina the Hollower, a top-down adventure Metroidvania in the vein of Game Boy mainstay Link's Awakening. Getting a taste of the game at PAX West a few years ago, I knew Yacht Club had something special on their hands once again. I'm thrilled to say that the long awaited release has finally come, and Mina's journey is all that I could have asked for.

☆☆☆
GOTY
CONTENDER

I have to admit that I ended up rushing through the game, mostly because I played for long sessions and focused on a more critical path. This isn't to say I wasn't enjoying myself or that I didn't want to be thorough; on the contrary, I had a blast the whole time and explored off the beaten path regularly. Seeing folks share their thoughts and screenshots on social media has made me realize how much I missed the first time through, but this mostly makes me excited to eventually replay Mina sometime down the line. My main takeaway from my sub 40% on items collected is that the world of Tenebrous Isle is remarkably dense and thoughtfully curated.

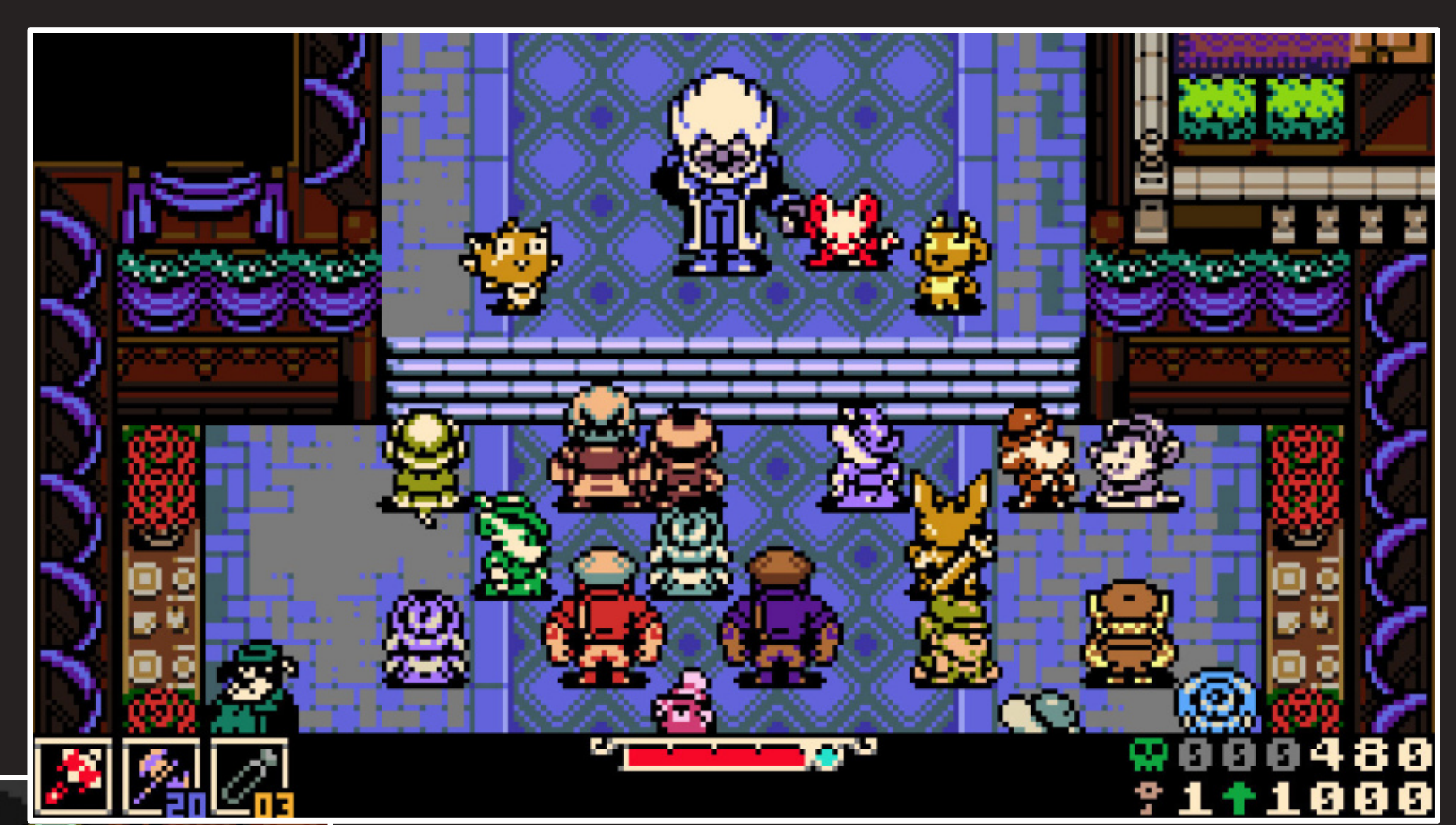
Mina the Hollower has incredible gameplay feel, from the stabbing double daggers and Castlevania-esque whip, to Mina's signature burrowing ability that allows her to speed up, dig beneath danger, and clear hurdles when she springs from the ground. Moving around, especially while burrowed, works so well, but it's a mechanic that keeps encountering new hurdles and situations, keeping mastery at arm's length. Burrowing under glass, ice, and water makes for a slightly different challenge, which forces you to keep learning and upgrading your understanding of how to control Mina. It doesn't hurt that the boss encounters are multifaceted and a total joy to experience, even when some of them are sure to take a few tries or more.



Every section of the map is populated with the game's colourful cast, leading each of the main areas and attached dungeon to have its own distinct flavour. The combination of gameplay and narrative aspects working in tandem to lend each separate physical space of Tenebrous Isle is what ultimately showcases the benefit of Mina's extra development time.

I love how every dungeon is preceded by a town or other exterior space that adds both character and characters, and the subgoal of finding/unlocking the train station fast travel point (not to mention the system itself) serves as another worthwhile divergence from the critical path.

I would be remiss not to shout out the absolutely stellar sound effects and music, which changes with each area of the game and fits them so perfectly. In the week that I spent with Mina the Hollower and the days following, I found myself humming these earworms to myself without even realizing where they had come from; when I figured out this puzzle, the soundtrack on YouTube promptly entered my driving playlist rotation. The way in which the various tunes and sounds both evoke the 8-bit era and reach amazingly modern chiptune highs is a testament to the impact of Mina's audio experience on how deeply enjoyable the whole game is.



One of the moments that stands out for me is the comedown after all the epic bosses you take on, where Mina has to scale a giant generator to repair it. Enter a mini game in which Mina scampers vertically up the screen as a wave of electricity chases you up, not to mention a healthy smattering of enemies intent on halting your ascension. At the top, Mina stops to catch her breath at accomplishing a major mission objective and writes or reads a letter before falling asleep from exhaustion. These events make the character of Mina feel more real and the world more lived in. Mina requires sleep, she reads and writes like we do, and she can take a moment to gauge the heaviness and consequences of her actions. And then just like that, you slip into a pipe or other apparatus and make for the next generator tower and a new biome and new set of challenges.

Mina largely eschews a traditional map like you would see in Link's Awakening or Super Metroid in favour of world design and a light hint system that takes the form of collectable newspapers. After finishing a tower, returning to the hub town of Ossex offers both a chance to shop and upgrade Mina's stats and kit, but also an opportunity to consult the latest newspaper for tips on where to head next. Even without the hint help, the world is largely open to you, and it's really how much punishment you can tolerate that guides your decision-making.

Like some RPGs tend to do, the harder enemies act like sign posts telling you whether to stay or go, but having played the recent demo and earlier builds at two different PAX West events, I found myself not struggling much to make meaningful progress each time I sat down with the game. Normally, I would religiously check a game's map to see what I was missing; never referring to a map in Mina the Hollower meant a much more brisk and deftly paced experience for me. Unbelievably high hopes were had for games like Silksong and Mina the Hollower, and fortunately for us, both of them lived up to—and even exceeded—these lofty expectations. As the former was firmly in my game of the year bracket last year, so too will the latter be in this year's conversation for me. While I expected to spend more time on Tenebrous Isle, I walked away beyond satisfied with my time, and with a profound sense of the love and care that went into the game's design. I can't wait to revisit Mina's story to blaze a new path through it, and to try weapons and trinkets unexplored on my maiden voyage. Just like I could revisit the world of Shovel Knight through its added campaigns, so too can I look forward to pushing over the stones I left unturned when I next boot up Mina the Hollower. The once hollow part of my heart that long awaited this release is now full, and I couldn't be happier.

★★★★★



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~3 HOURS

DEVELOPER

ITAMAE STUDIO

RELEASED

2026

If I had a nickel for every game I've played this year where getting eaten is a possibility I'd have two nickels.

BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN



WabiSabi Sushi Derby is a simple cheap bite wherein you raise sushi (after choosing their topping) for no more than a few days to take part in races to earn cash and rank. They are trained in a few stats, chosen by purchasing a pack of cards each day, but as each day turns over the sushi's stats lower a bit. In the races, you don't really control your rice greyhound asides from a boost stuck on a timer. You'll mostly want to save that to avoid being eaten as after all, you are racing across bars and restaurants and people are ordering sushi to go. The training packs can also give you other abilities such as the rat bastard who threw a shrimp backwards at me right after I narrowly boosted to avoid the chopsticks and pushed me right back into them, thus ending the life of my Tuna Sushi who was two days from retirement.

Failure means not much unless you get particularly attached as you'll never run broke and you unlock various sushi toppings with different base stats just by playing. Plus, they die after five days even if they don't get eaten. I mean they go to live on the farm. The pixel art style is utterly adorable, the music is appropriately Japanese and the track design is reminiscent of micromachines. It's also a game anyone named Alex should definitely play.

Five dollars for a pack of sushi ain't too bad after all.

FINAL FANTASY VII



Version Played: Switch 1 on a Switch 2

HOW LONG TO BEAT

~30 HOURS

DEVELOPER

SQUARE

RELEASED

1997

BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

Final Fantasy VII is a good game, as you may have heard. It is a turn based Japanese role playing game filled with many surprises even for those who probably know the main spoiler. Combat runs on an active timer meaning you have to wait until you can input your commands and use them before your next turn will load. It was my first time actually playing through something with an active time battle system and I found it wasn't nearly as intimidating as I had expected.

That said, I've never heard anyone call this a difficult game. I got used to using different strategies such as timing a heal before or after an expected big hitting attack. It did occasionally cause friction as certain bosses might have a phase where you don't want to hit them so I'd just wait them out or do other things. A few boss fights had other unique gimmicks such as avoiding hitting certain parts or you'd get a game over because one party member was dead and two others were trapped by it. The encounter rate was also lower than my expectations for an older rpg, I got jumpscared on one floor of Shinra tower as I'd been running around for ages and didn't think there were any enemies on that part.



Take a shot every time I say materia

Another mechanic I'm a big fan of is the materia system. Basically all your skills and passive effects are items you have to equip onto your weapon and armor slots. This allows any character to function pretty much however you want although they will have innate stats making them more suited to particular roles. I liked to keep the different elements split among my team to target weaknesses and made sure everyone had some measure of healing on them. One thing to keep in mind is that materia comes at a stat cost and attack types in particular brings down your HP. It might be best not to keep more than one summon on a character so they can survive attacks at the end point. My favourite summon in the game was Hades who was super helpful for some late game enemies with large attacks, and Tonberries.

Certain materia are particularly helpful, like enemy skill which lets you learn attacks you have been hit with, many of which are unique to particular enemies. This can be combined with a materia that lets you control a monster to deliberately hit you until you learn the skill you want.

Some materia slots have pairs that let you combine effects such as applying all to fire which will then make the fire attack hit every enemy (for a few turns). Materia also have levels based on use making them both more effective or able to be used more like the all materia.

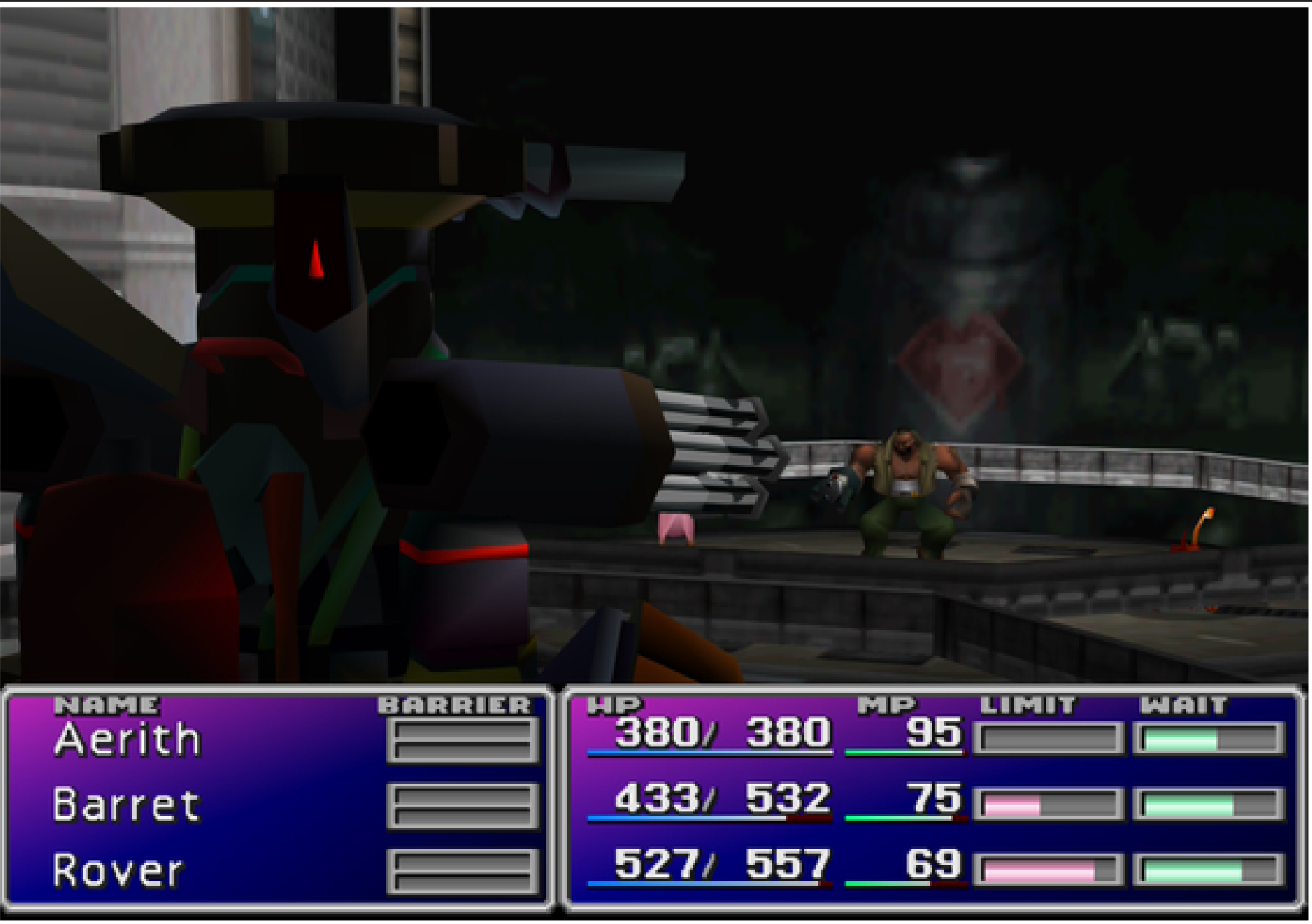
Asides from your usual attacks, as you take damage you'll build up a limit break meter. Make sure to look at the limit break section in the main menu unless you want to play through the whole game with only the base limit breaks like I did (totally do-able). These are usually hard hitting attacks but might also be party wide heals that come with unique animations. I love one of Cid's where he lights a stick of dynamite with his cigarette and then throws it. I was less enthused about Vincent's being something you can't turn off so I had to switch healing duties onto Yuffie. One annoying aspect is that limit break takes away your normal attack option until you use it.



For my experience, I generally didn't look things up, besides how to get recruitable characters or with some very early puzzles and late game advice. Which is to say, there is a lot of content I didn't do, but you really don't need it because the game is pretty easy. The hardest parts for me were the ones when I could only play as one character, and maybe that bit in Wutai. Progress in the game is fairly signposted and you're usually told where to go next. I was only particularly lost when I got out of Midgar and onto the world map but I just bumbled my way into the correct direction. I liked the freedom of movement that I eventually earned. I had a grand time stalking around a mountain I didn't need to do at that exact moment and taking out a somewhat tough boss, then I didn't have to worry about it when I actually needed to make my way through.

There's tutorial rooms at the start of the game which I ignored because it's the "you're forced to do a thing slowly" kind. A tip for Final Fantasy games in general is to use the d-pad more in the menus than you think as options may be entirely hidden to the cursor being slightly more to the left. The general design of the areas you go to are all super cool, I wish we got more like the horror hotel, and I loved one particular dungeon that got pretty strange with it. There's a lot of little details everywhere and simple things like just getting to order some food or bother people that makes it just that little bit more fun.

As I've said elsewhere, if you want a game where you don't know what to expect and get all sorts of crazy little scenarios then Final Fantasy VII is the place. You go from stealthing your way around a corporate building to just trying to escape via the elevators and having a large robot with machine guns get in the other elevator and shooting through the glass to get at you. Then shortly after you leave the city, you're protecting a girl and her dolphin friend from a monster and argue about giving her CPR instead of just doing it which the game makes into a weird mini-game. This game really knows how to do a tonal change. You'll get really chilling moments leading into epic ones and then silly segments before a very serious fight and it really knows how to get creepy.



Based on what I'd heard about the second part of the remake project I'd assumed there was going to be a lot of tedious mini-games but in this version they're all pretty easy. Even then, you don't have to beat most of them. The only one I can remember that is mandatory is winning a chocobo race but my second time around I wasted all my boost and spent half the race slowly trundling towards the end and I still won.

Heck, I got stuck in a wall during a submarine segment and then I still beat it in two out of ten minutes. The only struggle I really had was the safe in the manor. I hate all the Gold Saucer mini-games because I suck at them and much prefer the ones in Final Fantasy XIV. Apparently some gameplay segments will have an impact on whether or not things are available but at least me pushing the wrong barrel every single time in the church had no bearing. Would it really be a 3D JRPG without some nonsensical mini-games forced in? I guess Fort Condor is a bit of a low point but you can also just give up and handle the fight personally which is the far more sensible option. The shake-ups to gameplay really just help add to the sense of adventure.



I'm not one to care about replayability but especially with the newer versions of the game having 3x speed (which I used regularly) it is both easier to go through and you have reasons to do so. I didn't know until watching things about this game that you could get a different date at the Gold Saucer besides Aerith because it really flowed with what had been presented before. There's other things like how I chose not to fight the Turks towards the end of the game and I feel like I might've missed out on something (other than the fight) but I just didn't want to because they're cool (minus the mass murder). I definitely feel like I will play this at least once if not more in my lifetime and that doesn't happen much with games that are more than two hours long.

I do have some complaints about the Nintendo Switch version which is present in all the modern ports, the save point near the pillar in Sector 7 is a fake liar and is why I didn't play the game some years earlier because it didn't save and I didn't want to start the game again. Plus there's some other game locking bugs early on that I thankfully didn't get.

On the other hand, we get the 3x speed which sometimes meant I almost missed out on some cool things mid combat, but I found it super handy for regular joe schmoe enemies. As well as other features I didn't touch like: eliminating encounters or making everything super easy.



I am endeared to the darling little low polygonal figures that are present everywhere besides combat and am meanwhile thoroughly impressed with how nice the battle models are. Having the blind box figures sitting on my desk for almost a year before I played this game probably helped with it. The overworld certainly is quite bland and chunky but at least I have a map. Meanwhile, the backgrounds are absolutely stunning. Unfortunately, we don't have high resolution versions of them, only the player models but even with crunch they are absolutely amazing. I feel like some of these shots can't possibly hit the same in the remake series.



Although they'll at least be easier to navigate, I had quite the trouble early on with figuring out where I could and couldn't walk with the highlight option really not helping me at all but that seemed to be less of a problem out of Midgar.

Another massive highlight is the enemy design. Outside of summons, you rarely see the typical Final Fantasy enemies with a lot of them relegated to the final dungeon. Instead, we get all kinds of crazy things even just at the start with this odd saw fish, then later on there's a triceratops half on tank treads, and a boat with the spot where a mermaid statue usually sits being a skeleton half centaured onto it just rowing the boat like he's baba yaga. This whacky design also translates to the gameplay where one monster is the top half of a body swinging on a chain from the roof who's got like a one in three chance to fall when attacked and then takes forever to get back up.



Plus, there was just one boss who kept taunting me by smacking his butt. The FMV cutscenes still hold up pretty well, they do like to have a mix of that and using the actual game models too.

As for the soundtrack, good Lord! It is good. I've obviously heard the battle theme before but almost all these tracks are completely amazing, especially the atmospheric tracks and everything's always got something perfect for the mood. My favourite track for sure is definitely Jenova.

I did have some of the main plot points spoiled as a natural part of being online. That and SOMEONE who hasn't played the original and not even finished Rebirth just spoiling all sorts of things for no good reason. Regardless of those factors there were tons of moments that surprised me to both my delight and shock.



Seeing how the things I knew about played out was also interesting and I'm glad I poked around in some areas before I beat the game to get some extra scenes that gave me more context. For those who haven't played it, I don't want to say too much because like most games the less you know the better, but even if you know a lot it's still worth playing. I love almost all of the party members and their character progression together and while obviously some get less than others the story is focused on Cloud (and Tifa) and Sephiroth primarily. I do like how some things are a bit vague and people still argue about them too.



It's not flawless, especially with some port specific issues, but it is damn near perfect and I can see why it was hard for people to enjoy later games (not that I've played them) with such a banger as this. I forgive Cloud Strife for appearing in Super Smash Brothers before his proper game came onto a Nintendo console. At least now you can play it on a cartridge. I don't consider most games must-plays but if you like JRPGs and you haven't come around to playing this, you owe yourself the experience. I'm still waiting on my overpriced buster sword necklace to come in the mail.

★★★★★



EPISODE #337

SECRET SPOILER-CAST

On a recent episode, Paige surprises the team with news that she finished Final Fantasy VII. The team shares what they enjoyed about the game and what they makes it so special.

MYTHOLOGICAL INSPO
THE PRESENCE OF BAKU IN VIDEO GAMES

BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

The Baku is a type of mythological creature in Japan not unlike a Tapir that eats dreams. With the tale coming around from China, although the Chinese creature Mo is considered more of a chimera with an elephant trunk, rhino eyes, ox tail and tiger paws. Which is why in a lot of these designs you'll see more of a cow like tail than a short stubby rump. They are depicted in various video games most popularly in monster collecting types and even feature in anime. Sometimes they are more literally depicted to be true to the original creature and others are a more subtle reference that anyone unfamiliar with the creature wouldn't pick up on. There are a couple instances of games being named after a Baku or featuring play as one but these are the depictions that came to me.

YOKAI WATCH

In the Yo-Kai watch series, you can befriend a Baku and have them fight on your team. True to the inspiration, they eat dreams, but this one can make people fall asleep in order to get access to those dreams. While there's no dream eating present in battle, you can at least inspirit them to sleep with this friend. They're depicted as purple creatures with long snouts, sharp teeth and a lighter colour on the back to imitate the Malayan tapir's colouring. In the first game, Baku is required for a quest with the ability to drain all tiredness from the player character's body, and take their form to lie in your bed so you can sneak out at night.



DIGIMON

In Digimon, Bakumon is a creature you can collect in various games and has the unique move Nightmare Syndrome whereupon it will release all the nightmares it has collected onto its opponent. It is a Vaccine type Digimon meaning it is effective against Virus types and can cleanse nightmares.

This creature is depicted to be tapir-like in shape but with some more beast and angelic like traits having a holy bangle, head armor, feathery ears and the later half of the body turning into a cloudy mist. According a transcription from a Digimon reference book, this Digimon was generated from a computer made to detect brain waves. It uses the data from REM sleep as nourishment making it not too unlike a real Baku.



POKEMON

In the Pokemon series, we have two contenders for Pokemon that are inspired by the Baku, despite their difference in appearance they have quite the similarity in their Pokedex entries. Drowzee is a bipedal creature featuring a lower half colouration change and a long snout imitating a tapir.



It is a psychic type Pokemon and as with all Pokemon, there are many different Pokedex entries, but the one for Pokemon Stadium outright states the connection saying: It puts its enemy to sleep and eats the victims dreams. Said to have descended from the legendary beast, Baku.

Meanwhile the first Pokemon that came to mind for me was another psychic Pokemon, Munna. A small round creature with tiny legs and no tail. It looks more like a piggy bank with the pink skin and floral pattern on it. Depending on which Pokedex you'll access, you get different information but Pokemon Shield gives the best lowdown saying: It eats dreams and releases mist. The mist is pink when it's eating a good dream, and black when it's eating a nightmare.

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI

Not seen for a very long time, the Baku was depicted in only a handful of games with their last appearance being on the GameBoy Advance Devil Children entries. With its transition into the Devil Children subseries, the Baku took on a cuter appearance looking a little more like the Mo creature having tiger paws with stripes leading to them. This version would make use of the sleep spell Dormina but in earlier games it was assigned different elements.



ANIMAL CROSSING

In the Animal Crossing series, from Animal Crossing New Leaf on we have a special NPC tapir character named Luna. She dresses a bit like a spa attendant and in New Leaf she is the proprietress of the Dream Suite. Players can load "dream" versions of towns that have been uploaded online. You can't keep anything you find in the dream and the changes don't save but it is a great way for people to share and experience their towns and later islands in New Horizons.



In Animal Crossing New Horizons Luna will speak to any player laying on a bed asking if they wish to dream, and will be present in the dream town.

CRISIS CORE

FINAL FANTASY VII REUNION



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~20 HOURS

DEVELOPER

SQUARESOFT

RELEASED

2022

BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

Crisis Core Reunion is a remaster of a PSP action rpg that serves as a prequel to Final Fantasy VII and gives us the story of one Zack Fair.

The game takes place through story chapters (with some optional free time) that aren't terribly long due to the original game being for the PlayStation Portable. I do have to say running around and getting random encounters in an action based game was a jarring experience at first.

A neat hint is that they tend to be tied to certain spots on the map and you can avoid many by just sticking to the walls, but I wouldn't recommend doing it regularly. I mostly just found it hard at the start because I hadn't played an action game that wasn't using mmo style indicators in..well I don't even remember how long. I simply adapted a strategy of two hits before a dodge and was fine before I got better materia. Zack has some basic attacks and can equip materia for more skills. Magic based ones use MP with a longer cast time, and attack focused ones use AP. You can choose to equip passive materia but that will reduce the amount of moves at your disposal. I found it helpful to have skills that enemies were weak to but you won't really know ahead of time which ones you're expecting. Further into the game you'll unlock materia fusion that lets you combine the plethora of materia you pick up into each other and try to get some extra stat bonuses or create entirely new moves. I made Death Blade which is an insta kill attack that some enemies are especially weak to (very helpful for the Shinra "training exercises") but otherwise appears to deal heavy or critical damage. Stronger moves like this will use significantly more of your pool but replenishing items are available and partway into the game money will be largely no object. Overall, the balance of this game is tipped mostly in the front, certain choices you make can really ease it up but a lot of it comes down to feature unlocks. I especially enjoyed getting rewards for beating an encounter by taking no damage which would give me refills on my bars and came quite handy on missions (and reminded me of 3D Mana games).



The Digital Mind Wave (DMW) is basically Zack's state of mind filled with emotions, connections and memories. In practice, it's an ever rolling slot machine that will activate certain conditions in battle when matching numbers line up.

These might be a temporary buff that allows you to spam AP abilities without actually using your points or increasing your defense. If both pictures and numbers line up you'll get a memory that plays (you can skip them) and these will usually give you a limit break style attack such as calling Tseng to send in an air raid or getting Sephiroth's Octoslash. The many summons you can use are also tied to this system. I think it's actually a pretty fun way to keep things spiced up and the action never really slows down. That said, having unique cutscenes many of which take place during the events of the game locked to this is pretty crazy. Leveling up can only happen through the DMW but I've heard they may have fixed it for this version a little bit and I never had any problem, heck sometimes I'd level up twice in a mission. I only grinded a touch at the end using some missions because there was a small jump in the toughness of enemies.



During a story level there will be a sub condition that you only need to beat for a trophy or to feel cool. Such as making sure no enemies get past a certain point or doing something within a short time limit (at least for one for one of those the timer paused in combat which made it very easy). I am mad about a timed segment where I had to pick up things because I got too close to the story-progressing-door and missed it by one, and when it came to the stealth objective I completely gave up. These levels culminate in boss fights which were kind of unbalanced. The first Bahamut I encountered required some forethought of saving my magic with a long distance range to attack him when I couldn't reach and then hit hard when he got close. Whereas Bahamut Fury kinda just stood there and got dark blizzard'd to death.

As much as I loved seeing Aerith and Zack's relationship develop, I found the chapters focused on her to be kind of a slog. Something I want to praise is I had a segment that I thought was going to be an escort mission but basically let me rush ahead and do the combat encounters which would then jump the escortee further along the path and you didn't have to wait for them to catch up to the next loading zone. A neat little touch is that in game you can receive emails from your friends on your handy dandy flip phone but unfortunately can't respond.



As a member of Shinra's SOLDIER you can take on missions at designated save points. Some missions are hidden or tied to specific side quests you can pick up in the small amount of free time you'll get to roam segments of Midgar between some chapters. It reminds me a bit of something they've been doing in newer Warriors' games (though this precedes it) by reusing parts of maps to have very short missions with basic objectives of mostly just killing a specific enemy. Most of these reuse different parts of the map, I got confused by one mission introducing a boat all of a sudden, which I didn't encounter in the main story and never encountered in the thirty or so percent of the missions I completed before and after that one. It's a nice feature and a good way to get around the weird levelling system so I played most of them up to a certain point. It can trivialise the difficulty by even doing a small percent of these so avoiding them is also a choice. Plenty of unlocks like different shops or summons are found exclusively through these mission chains. If you care about not missing out on things but not 100%ing you should look it up, as you'll hit the point of no returning to Midgar a while before the end.

Story wise it was pretty whatever, while it was fun to see and constantly tease Yuffie in the side content, the only new character I particularly liked was Angeal. I enjoyed being able to see him and Aerith together, and to learn how much of a dweeb Cloud was.

They did have to add something else for Zack to do besides just be a generic SOLDIER and then everything involving Nibelheim. I'm just not sure the whole plot involving Genesis in particular was the best. Partly I think that everything involving him really should have wrapped up before the Nibelheim incident and not after. I felt like I was getting beaten with a log by the overt religious theming this time around.



I like the soundtrack even though most of the songs don't really stand out as much in comparison to the original Final Fantasy VII. They were good and unobtrusive. Listening to them on their own, I like the battle themes which definitely originate in the original era this game is from. Really a lot of the background tracks such as the ones for when you're roaming around or in cutscenes are pretty great.

I also love the sound design. Thankfully, I didn't play the original version so I'm not attached to the prior voice acting but I definitely felt times where Zack's voice worked perfectly and others have a bit sillier, wheezy american comedian style to them. Part of this is the script work which well, I don't know for sure if it's actually the case but it seems like it might have been a fairly literal translation. Of course, anytime Genesis was speaking that was entirely because of him quoting this worlds' equivalent of a Shakespeare play. Furthermore, there's just some general stiffness and weird pacing in most dialogue that really flattens it. A lot of the optional conversations comparatively are intentionally funny.

This was my first proper experience playing something with the Final Fantasy 7 Remake assets and getting to compare locations with the original Final Fantasy VII which I'd only beaten shortly before playing this. It was cool to run around and fight on upper Junon. Other things were weirdly different like the Nibelheim reactor being way cleaner and sleek, half the rooms looking totally different turning what I thought was a wide pipe into a proper bridge.

I think the layout of Shinra manor is different but it wouldn't let me go through all the doors. It still is a remaster of a PSP game to some extent, I remember thinking that a mountain range I was on was beautiful until I looked to my left. Character models look great so it's funny so see they didn't redo the original PSP FMV cutscenes. I do wish having a phoenix down enabled didn't keep a floating feather constantly circling above his head in combat. A little touch I really liked was the end of chapter cards.



Crisis Core Reunion is a very fun short action rpg made for fans of Final Fantasy VII. I definitely don't think it's for anyone else, especially because it's a prequel which will massively spoil some things. Despite some oddities in design choice and dialogue, I really enjoyed my time with the game and wouldn't mind something else like this. Not sure how I'm going to adapt to trying to play Remake which will only let me use skills with significantly less frequency than this.

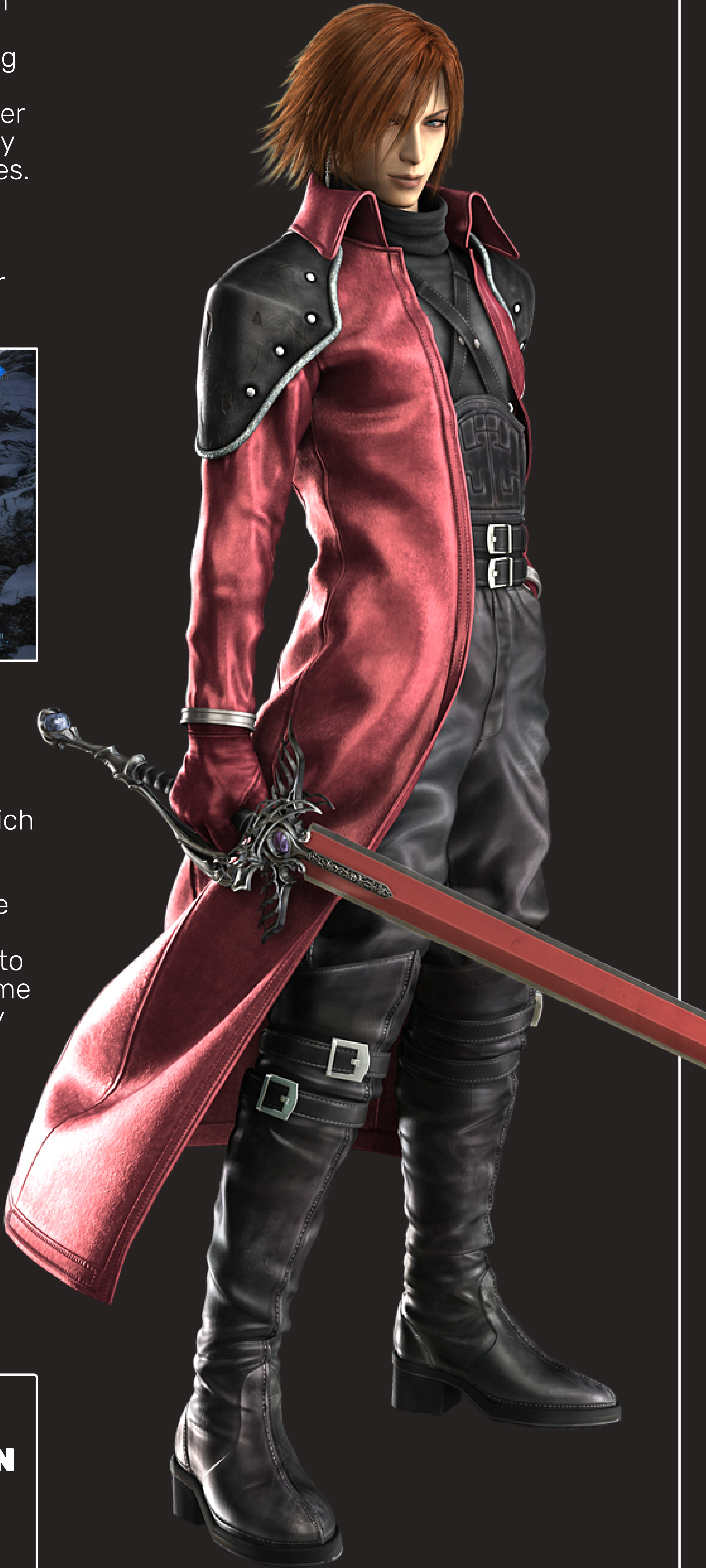


EPISODE #195

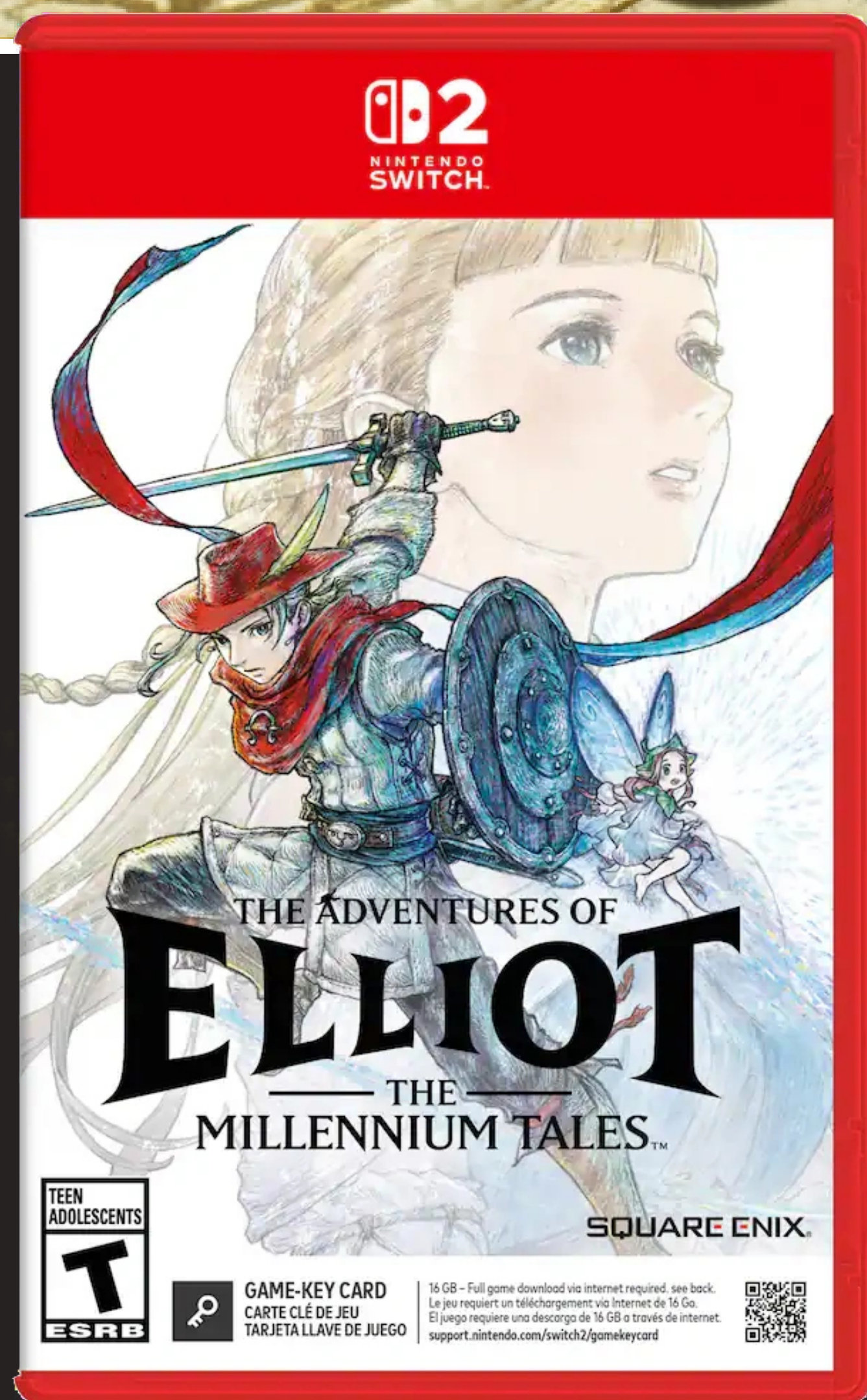
A REMASTERED REVELATION

Looking for a podcast about this fantastic game?

In 2023, David and Paige discuss Final Fantasy VII Crisis Core Reunion.



THE ADVENTURES OF ELLIOT — THE — MILLENNIUM TALES™



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 25 HOURS

DEVELOPER

SQUARE ENIX

RELEASED

2026



**GOTY
CONTENDER**

BY DAVID LLOYD

The newest golden era of pixel graphics is in full swing as Square Enix continues to develop stunning masterpieces one after another. Having firmly found their niche with HD-2D graphics, the team lead by Tomoya Asano seems completely incapable of making a bad game. After conquering the turn-based RPG with the Octopath Traveler franchise, Team Asano proved the same look and sensibility could be applied to an action RPG with the release of The Adventures of Elliot: The Millennium Tales. At a quick glance, you could mistake the game for a Zelda clone. However, The Adventures of Elliot quickly shows its unique character with a highly customizable combat system and a cast of characters that you'll immediately fall in love with.

The adventure begins with the discovery of ancient ruins near a small kingdom. Having assessed the dangerous task of exploring the area, the King asks a young adventurer by the name of Elliot to brave the wilds in search of ancient relics held within. Unbeknownst to Elliot, the greatest danger in his task is a power hungry minister in search of a legendary sword. Elliot comes face to face to death at the hands of the minister, only to be resurrected by a young fairy named Faie. With a new lease on life, Elliot and Faie join forces to take on the threats to the kingdom and try to find a way to everlasting peace.

The premise of the story is fairly standard RPG fair but the writing and execution are top tier. Each of the characters are full of personality and are given enough time for the player to develop an attachment to each one. Helping this point, the voice acting is superb, with Elliot in particular standing out. The only real weakness in the voice acting is that Faie may be a little too helpful with her constant chit chat. In the default setting, the young fairy is quick to point out hidden items and solutions to riddles before you really get a chance to assess the situation. Thankfully, Square Enix has heard the complaints and added a post launch update to add a toggle to reduce the amount of fairy banter.



The gameplay is very much in line with the tried and tested formula of overworld to dungeon exploration made famous by the Legend of Zelda franchise. In fact, much of the DNA found in the SNES classic, A Link to the Past, is present in Elliot. A large overworld is filled with dozens of dungeons and hidden locations for players to discover. The main dungeons all feature some form of environmental puzzle to work through but even without the help of Faie, none are all that difficult. The dungeons are just large enough to feel important, but lack many visual details to feel unique and distinct from each other. A time travel mechanic, again very reminiscent of the Dark World from Link to the Past, provides four different versions of the overworld to explore.

The overworld of each era of time feels distinct from the others and are packed with plenty of stories and secrets to uncover.



After years of developing some of the best turn-based RPGs in the genre, the folks on Team Asano flex their muscles by making an incredibly well designed and highly customizable combat system. Elliot is able to wield a large variety of weapons that range from your standard sword and shield to the much more unique Scythe on a chain. With so many different weapons to choose from (Hammer, Boomerang, Spear, Arrows, Bombs) you could go through an entire playthrough having not used a couple of them. It wasn't until having come across an upgrade to the spear did I even remember having the option to use it. Elliot can equip any two items at any given time while also having the ability to swap items in a radial menu on the fly. This allows Elliot to become quite adaptable to any situation based on the threat at hand. Add in a magicite system that provides additional upgrades and abilities and you Elliot can become a one-man wrecking crew. My personal favourite weapon throughout the majority of the game was the Scythe. By the end of the game, I had added an ability to shoot fireballs from the chain as it spun three hundred and sixty degrees over my head. My version of Elliot had become so powerful that I completely forgot that Elliot could reflect attacks by parrying with his shield, a technique that would eventually need to be mastered before the end of the game.





In addition to all the weapons at Elliot's disposal, Faie herself provides a number of additional powers to aid in both combat and exploration. With a couple button presses, Faie can teleport Elliot a short distance, provide a boost of speed, and even provide a clone of Elliot that mimics his actions. Again, you could go through much of the game without using many of these powers, though you are encouraged to use them to solve many of the riddles of the numerous dungeons. The speed boost was far and away my most utilized ability. Not only did I use it when fighting enemies, but also whenever I needed to get somewhere quickly on the map. The boost also provided the unintentional byproduct of being comedy fodder as Elliot would always run into an object while using the boost, resulting in an audible groan of pain that may draw stares if you happen to be playing in a public area.

My greatest fear prior to dropping over one hundred Canadian dollars to purchase The Adventures of Elliot was that it would simply be an inferior 2D adventure game destined to live in the shadow of the Legend of Zelda franchise. To my delight, Elliot proved not only to be a fabulous game, but that there is still plenty to innovate on the Zelda-like formula. My hope is that with the subtitle, we can expect to see the same cast of characters appear in a sequel.

However, unless Square Enix finds some way of cloning the fine developers of Team Asano, we may need to wait. We still need a sequel to Triangle Strategy, another entry in the Octopath saga, and I also wouldn't mind a return to form for Bravely Default. No matter what they decide to develop next, they've got my money.

★★★★☆



EPISODE #338

ADVENTURES OF ELLIOT SPOILER-CAST

David and Jordan share their personal experience of playing through the Adventures of Elliot on the Nintendo Switch 2. In this episode, they share their favourite moments, preferred weapon loadouts, and all the things that make this such a special game. Be warned, this episode is full of spoilers so only listen if you've already played through the game.



BY JORDAN RUDEK

HOW LONG TO BEAT

~13 HOURS

DEVELOPER

NINTENDO

RELEASED

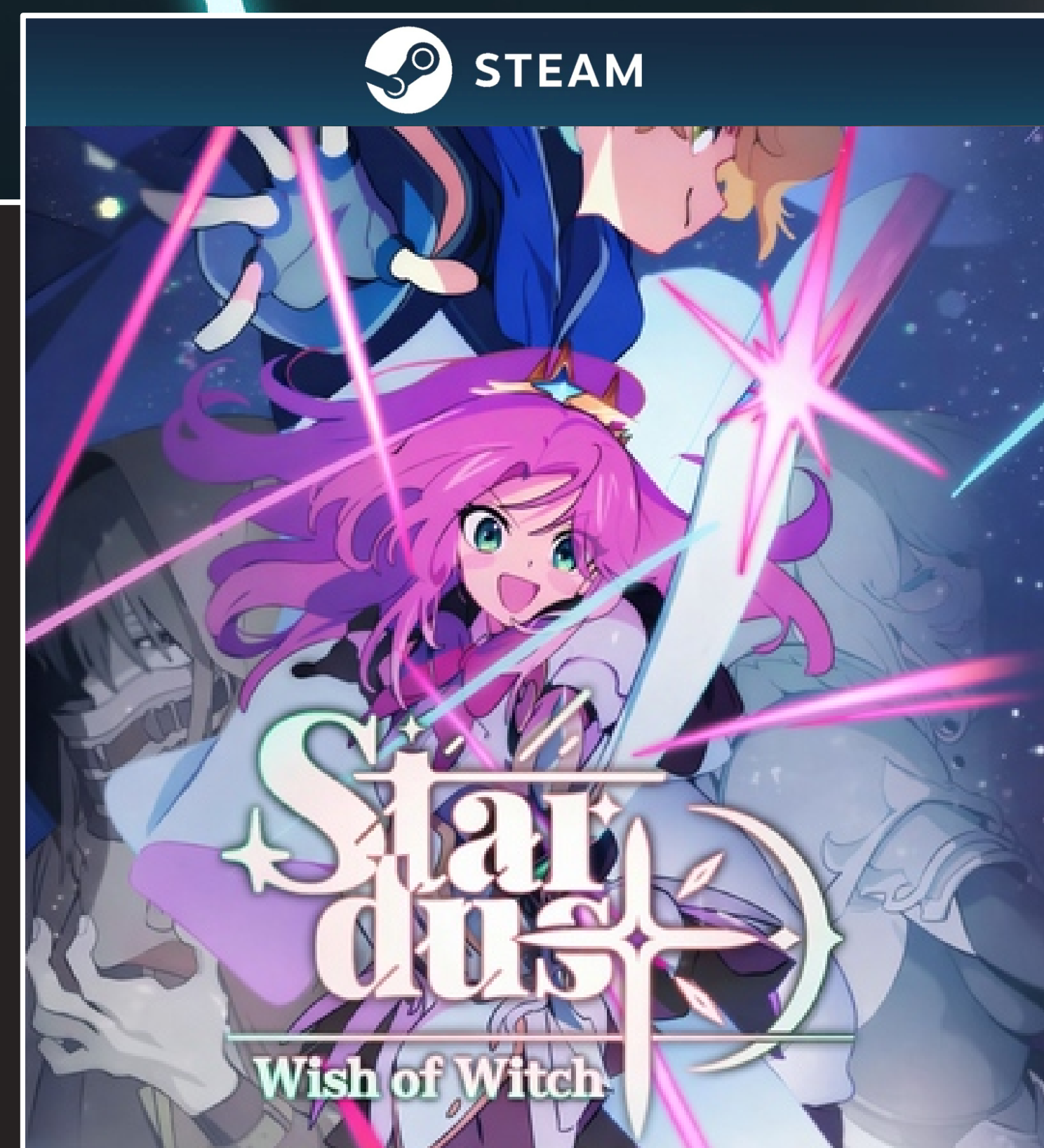
2010

At some point in the last 12 months, I made a promise to myself (and others) that I would play Super Mario Galaxy 2, since it is now available on Nintendo Switch. With the two pack of Galaxy 1 and 2 in hand post Christmas 2025, it only took me until the end of the following July to finally boot it up. Now I can see why the game is held in such high regard, with some claiming it to be the greatest Mario game of all time. While I wouldn't go that far, it's certainly in my own personal top 5, and I'm astounded by just how creative its world design is.

To focus on the good right upfront, every new galaxy feels like its own small playground, and I love how each space is utilized in multiple ways towards separate objectives. Earning a star often feels like a genuine achievement, and I'm still working my way towards the first 120 of them (it remains to be seen how much further I go over and above that). There are clever throwbacks to worlds like Whomp's Fortress from Super Mario 64, and fun power-ups with Cloud Mario and Rock Mario. It's also a genuinely challenging game, and as a Mario veteran, I'm pleased by how Galaxy 2 has tasked my brain and my hands with putting into practice my years of platforming.

I'm less pleased with the motion controls that were forced into the game with it originally being a Nintendo Wii release. I hate the aiming in general and despise having to awkwardly rotate my Pro Controller around to get through the labyrinth-like stages. Fortunately the motion segments make up only a minority of the overall content, but for me they do play a sour note in what is otherwise a nearly flawless Mario melody. The hub world is also a bit less interesting than in the first Galaxy game, but that's more window dressing anyways.

Nonetheless, I'm having a blast flying from galaxy to galaxy to collect all of the stars before making my way to the end game. It's not too surprising that Super Mario Galaxy 2 is so enjoyable to me; I love all of the 3D Mario games and fall decidedly on that side of the debate when comparing them with the 2D titles. Recent patches have made the Switch 2 a wonderful home for the game, especially for those who are waggle averse like yours truly. Two thumbs straight up for Mario's return trip to this whimsical outer space.



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~15 HOURS

DEVELOPER

KNIV STUDIO

RELEASED

2026

BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

Stardust: Wish of Witch is an utterly adorable indie grid-based strategy rpg. In it, you play as the titular Star and her allies on her quest to become a hero. This game has a unique set up for how it approaches strategic combat as your equipped skills require different amounts of mana to be used. On turn one, you only have one mana point, but on turn two you get two, and so on. The further you get into a fight, the stronger the attacks you (and your enemies) can then utilise. The combat is quick and snappy (with the fast forward on) which is good as you can get a LOT of enemies on a map.

Movement and attacks are easily cancelled until you commit to ending the characters' turn. Area of effect and positioning are extremely important as many moves might require you to move to a specific spot to enact it and if there's something in the way or nowhere to stand, you won't be able to use that attack which often prevented me from using my counter skills (they also need leftover mana to use). Enemies themselves are quite likely to use their counter skills to completely destroy your combo set-up, but you will only lose the first attack while the additional cards and mana will be waiting for your next turn. Luckily, clicking on enemies will let you see their entire skill list so you'll know what you are dealing with. Some cards have a combo label which means a setup card must first be used to start a chain. The combat is very well designed but I kind of wish we got a bonus for overkilling an enemy.

I keep using the term "cards" but this is really just a way to present and equip your skills as they're all technically available from the get go. Once in combat, each card has a mana cost, so some skills are available right away while others need the mana to build up first. All skills can be reused in battle after a cooldown period, including ultimate skills. These ultimate skills are near screen wipes early on and the proper way to really hurt a boss, but they are the only moves that mandate a waiting period from the get-go, no instant wins for you or Yu.

Further on into the game you get a gacha like mechanic where you can spend a currency (earned in game only!!) to pull for more cards which are repeats of ones you already have but deal more damage perhaps at a greater equip cost, or function the same but have a lower cost. Thankfully, the required item to pull is easily gained and I had many many turns left upon finishing the game. There is both a limit on the number of skills you can equip and their strength to give some balance to the game and it's definitely something you'll need to do in the later chapters. Other ways to tip the balance in your favour is to get mission long buffs from the cafe that felt useful for side missions early on but by the end of the game, I ignored it as I started to run out of money. Another aspect I thought was largely unbalanced and superfluous are the items, I never used the throwing ones at all. The economy overall is a bit unbalanced with the cost of healing and similar items being so much I often preferred to leave my characters to die.

The blacksmith won't let you even access his shop until around the third chapter but I'd suggest just waiting a bit longer as you'll unlock character exclusive artifacts. The artifacts are equips that may give stat bonuses or better ones like temporary extra mana for the first turn and can be crafted with items earned on quests. I found it fairly annoying that so many features were closed off to me until around halfway through the game, especially since I could go up to the stores and just be turned away.



As an adventurer at the guild, aside from story quests, there are side missions (about half are repeatable) some of which were significantly more difficult than the main story and often with far more enemies. It got to the point where I decided to just progress the story instead and had a much easier time. Almost painfully easy actually, especially for the last few stages. Later maps initially placed me way too far from the enemies to the extent that it almost felt like it was to help me set up and prepare. Speaking of maps, the game certainly could've used more map variety. I think a few more boss fights wouldn't hurt too, as it gives you the different strategy of needing to save your combo attacks to prevent a fatal move from being unleashed unto your units. Fortunately, there's not really any consequence to losing or even dying in a fight unless everyone dies. Although I did close out the game and reload just to avoid the unnecessary day counter from rolling over.



When it comes to story progression and some side quests, I'd get annoyed that characters were locked into certain spots that determine turn order as the combat is based on a character turn basis. I preferred to have my tank character Charlotte, followed up by some magic users and to finish, my heavy hitter Star. The cast is relatively small but they're all fairly unique with mechanics and set-ups particular to them, though the later two mages do both focus on field effects. I didn't really bother to experiment with different characters except for swapping one of the main party members because I found the gap between levels a bit too much. While levels aren't everything compared to having better cards, I did find the weaker members to be a lot more squishy. Sometimes story wise a character might be literally somewhere else but it still lets me use them in battle which is handy.

You spend time between missions in the town of Tranya where there's a lot of NPCs that unfortunately almost all have no story progression. This feels like a missed opportunity especially as there's some fantastic character designs just sitting there only to say one line the whole game. Especially given that the game features a story quest that centers around community and cooperation, it would have been nice to see those elements more deeply integrated into the gameplay. Personally, I started to prefer having the story quests that chained battles together but let me access the usual town features via a menu rather than walking all around the city.



The story focuses largely on the pair of Star and Yu, childhood friends who get embroiled in a strange conflict. While there's a lot of behind the scenes talk about the world at large and these changes it very much is about the "star" of the show and how the adults in their life come to support them. I found it was neither superb nor subpar and was what it wanted to be.



One absolute highlight of this game is the chibi pixel art style which is not only adorable with a mostly pastel tone but is paired with fantastic animations and expressions. It really brings the characters to life and adds a lot of charm. That said some animations were a bit off as I had some lizardmen do a forward animation to shoot at someone placed well behind their back.

Unfortunately, the game is only voiced in Korean, which only bothers me in the sense that I have to look at the words to understand what they're saying which takes my eyes away from the adorable expressions the characters are making. The only aspect of the art style I didn't really jive with was how Star looked in her full body art and that the ultimate animations which cut to an animated scene looked a bit low resolution. The music in this game is fantastic and wait a minute I need to go purchase the soundtrack. I love the saxophone that plays in the town theme after a while, and a few other songs feel like they belong in an earlier Super Smash Bros game, particularly the track titled "Combat Instinct".

Stardust: Wish of Witch is a lovely little strategy rpg that combines an interesting new way to play with stellar visuals and flair. Certain elements were a bit unbalanced and felt unnecessary, I especially wish the town was developed to make it more worth traversing. I do have to emphasize the fact that I did really enjoy it a lot ...outside of Monster Ecology Survey 2. I definitely recommend it for anyone who wants a colourful cute short SRPG with some fun mechanics and a story focused on community. As I am finishing up this review they are about to release some free post game DLC to boot.



BY BRIAN

Those of you who read our February issue know that Mother/Earthbound Beginnings is a game that means a lot to me. I think it is one of the finest examples of a video game's ability to weave its themes into all aspects of its narrative, mechanics, and presentation in a manner unique to the medium. The NES original will always have a place among my most beloved games. Earlier this month, a group of dedicated romhackers released a project nineteen years in the making: a full conversion hack, remaking Earthbound Beginnings for the Super Nintendo using Earthbound as basis. This remake is playable on the SNES emulator of your choice, or even on original hardware should you have the means to do so.

I am, admittedly, a bit of a snob when it comes to modern spins on retro gaming. I'm of the firm belief that everyone should feel free to enjoy their games in whatever style or with whatever additions they like; this does not make it a lesser experience. When it comes to my own relationship with classic games, however, I prefer to keep things as close to the original as is reasonable. I tend to ignore quality of life additions (and take issue with the term, but that's another conversation) and resolution upscaling. Give me an untouched ROM (save for a translation patch for those games not officially localized) played on a 4:3 screen with a CRT effect and I'll happily wile away the hours, taking the game on its own terms.

When I first heard about the project, I was a little worried that the remake would go too far in sanding down the rough edges I fell in love with in the original game. What reassured me was their design philosophy: the goal of Earthbound Beginnings was not to modernize the game, but to answer the question, "what if Ape Inc. was tasked with remaking Mother in the mid-90s?"

I found their answer to be splendid. Earthbound Beginnings Remake preserves everything I loved about the original and provides a new lens through which to examine it. The remake adopts the mechanical trappings of its sequel (visible enemies rather than random encounters, rolling HP meters, Escargo Express for inventory management) while mostly retaining the original balance and difficulty. Lloyd is perhaps a bit sturdier here and Teddy felt more vulnerable to PSI attacks, but these are minor adjustments that I found didn't interfere with the expression of these characters' personalities through combat that was so strong in the original game. The remake is still challenging and game over states are common (but not punished harshly), although perhaps a touch gentler this go-around. The new visuals are beautiful: characters are able to be more expressive and environments more varied. The soundtrack was clearly arranged with an extra dose of love, with some songs matching the vocal album more closely. All in all, it's a wonderful way to experience what I consider to be one of the genre's all-time greats.



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 30 HOURS

DEVELOPER

CAMELOT SOFTWARE PLANNING

RELEASED

1998

BY BRIAN H

The Synbios army, desperately navigating a war between their economically collapsing Aspinian republic and the Destonian empire, from which they had so recently been liberated, as well as the sinister machinations of the Bulzome cult, have finally reached their next target: a railway switching station. Stowing aboard a train is their only hope of traveling quickly enough to unravel the conspiracy that started the war. Their journey is never allowed to be that simple, however. A group of refugees, including a small child, flees the empire for what they believe to be safety in Aspinia, are caught between the sadistic imperial border guards and the remnants of another republic force. That force's leader, General Varlant, has suffered severe losses and in his grief has sworn to burn the empire to the ground.

Synbios must guide the refugees to safety as two trains chug along the switching station tracks, changing the battlefield and creating new barriers every turn. Only by swiftly and carefully positioning his troops, as well as the refugees, to manipulate the trains and avoid the attentions of the border guards, can Synbios both complete his mission and ensure the protection of these innocent lives.



I play a lot of strategy roleplaying games (SRPGs). I'm not a hardcore expert or LTC (least turn count) optimizer, but I consider myself fairly versed in the genre, having cleared through about half of the Fire Emblem franchise, Final Fantasy Tactics, Tactics Ogre, and pattered around half-starting a handful of others. Hell, I'm even voicing a character in an upcoming indie SRPG (more on that to come in future issues, I assure you). Needless to say, I've seen a lot of video game stories about war, stories about war being a pretext for summoning an evil god, battlefield maps of varying sizes and complexity, twists, turns, betrayals, politics, the whole nine yards. Or nine squares, I suppose. Except when the squares are hexagons. Some of these games get clever with their grids that way. There's a few clear formulas at work in this genre, and I'm not complaining. I love that formula. But it does set certain expectations in my head, and I'm always delighted to see those expectations broken in interesting ways. Shining Force has, until now, been a gaping blank spot in my SRPG repertoire. I am happy to say that Shining Force 3 Scenario 1 has made a series fan out of me. SF3S1 (what a mouthful: an acronym like that needs its own acronym) is easily the most ambitious SRPG I've seen in terms of its map design and story structure.

The fifth generation of game consoles, cleanly dominated by the PlayStation and Nintendo 64, was all about treading new grounds in the third dimension. Almost every popular series had to at least try making that leap, with many groundbreaking successes, just as many mixed bags, and the occasional outright fumble. What could be done on the Saturn with Camelot's Shining series, which had found acclaim in the 2D space thanks to its gorgeous visuals and tightly-tuned mechanics? The first swing was the action-adventure game Shining Wisdom. Wisdom was unfortunately panned by critics for its visuals, which at the time were labeled "outdated," and in America and Europe for its less than stellar localization (another victim of Working Designs). Camelot's next attempt, 1996's Shining the Holy Ark, resonated better with critics and audiences. Holy Ark returned to the series' roots as a first-person dungeon crawler and featured full 3D visuals, a stronger translation, and well-received combat mechanics. Camelot had finally found their footing.



Shining Wisdom - Sega Saturn (1995)

Only a year later, Camelot released the first part of their sprawling next project: a massive three-part followup to the "Force" sub-series of the Shining franchise, which had built a passionate fanbase across multiples games on the Genesis/Megadrive, Game Gear, and Sega CD. SF3 is comprised of three interconnected games: "Scenario 1: the Titan of Aspia," "Scenario 2: Target: Godchild," and "Scenario 3: Bulzome Rising." These scenarios are not merely a single story clumsily hacked into chunks to sell more discs. Each one tells a complete story spread across six chapters, with each chapter consisting of five battles interspersed with explorable towns, castles, and other environments.

Completing a scenario takes about as long as finishing an average Fire Emblem game. As you play through a scenario, you shape your future adventures. Your decisions and your success or failure in accomplishing optional objectives in your battles can have consequences in the next game. Scenarios 2 and 3 were sadly never officially localized, but the efforts of dedicated fan translators have enabled these games to be playable in English, with full save file transfer compatibility. That premise promises a lot. I'm happy to say SF3S1 is a powerful opening salvo of delivery on those promises. It serves beautifully as the opening act to what is now my favorite strategy game.



Battle mechanics, map design, story, and presentation are the four humors of any SRPG. The first principles, the natural elements, the building blocks, the mix of seasonings that make these games what they are. SF3S1 impressed me on every front, particularly in its map design. While I am champing at the bit to gush about this game's maps, it's important to lay out how battles and character building work for context. Like most SRPGs, your army in Shining Force moves in a grid pattern around each map, battling enemies, casting spells, protecting allies, and so on. Turn order is determined by each character's agility stat, rather than having dedicated player and enemy phases. Characters gain experience points for attacking enemies, with additional EXP and gold given as a reward for defeating them. If your characters run out of HP, they'll be removed from the battle but won't die permanently. Defeated party members can be revived at churches for a small fee.



Your party members can level up, learn spells and special attacks, be equipped with weapons, accessories, and items, promote to a stronger class when they're reached a high enough level, all fairly familiar ground to SRPG fans. Combat is approachable and very little information is hidden from the player. Characters feel varied without being pigeonholed; in a pinch, your mages and healers can be serviceable physical attackers (after all, getting walloped by an ornate staff or metal ankh is a painful affair) and your warriors can learn the occasional spell. You can further customize your army through their equipment, with options to focus on power, range, special abilities, etc. Importantly, you'll be deploying your entire team on the majority of missions (at least until you recruit more characters than can fit in one squad, but at times you'll be tasked with deploying a split force). You won't need to bench anyone permanently, and in my experience no character felt egregiously weak or not worth the effort to train. I'll extend some personal thanks to Hayward the archer and Masquirin the mage for their incredible combat performance though!

Something that separates Shining Force from a game like Fire Emblem or Final Fantasy Tactics, however, is the ability to retreat from battle at no cost and restart it from the beginning, keeping any experience and/or treasures found on previous attempts. Retreating will simply send you back to the last town you visited, allowing you a chance to revive your team, upgrade your equipment, buy healing items, poke around for secrets, or just talk to the locals, which is often worth your while. The option to retreat at almost any time (either by casting the egress spell or using an angel wing item) helps ease a lot of the pressures this genre of game often carries. Mistakes and experimentation aren't punished, at least not in a severe or permanent way. Weaker characters can be brought up to speed by repeating the current battle a few times. Many of this game's missions are quite difficult (particularly that train yard battle I mentioned above if you're aiming to save all the refugees) and the ability to restart from a slightly better position (or even grind, if you're so inclined) goes a long way towards mitigating frustration. It also enables you to use and grow all your party members without worrying about one stealing EXP from another. Enemy units often won't approach you as quickly as they can, forcing you to advance and extend rather than form and hold a defensive position. At times the AI can be cheesed or make strange misplays, but other times it can be surprisingly smart and aggressive.

I found myself using a retreat spell when I missed some optional objective or treasure, or if I had overextended my forces and placed myself in an unworkable position. I tried not to grind overmuch so I could preserve a good level of tension, but I was glad the option was there in case things became overwhelming.

SF3S1 has some of the most inventive and exciting map designs I've seen across this genre. Full advantage is taken of the 3D play space, from simple terrain and elevation advantages to complex shifting obstacles. The train trundles along to block your path. The earth cracks and rumbles, rising and falling as the magma beneath it shifts. An enormous tower holds an important ally, forcing you to clamber up its spiraling walls. Not every map is quite so daring in these respects, but the incredible highlights will beg the question, "why aren't more games as cool as Shining Force?"



Verticality, breadth, and discovery are the watchwords here. The most impressive maps to me were those with moving and interactive elements, but even the more subdued environments are littered with secrets to reward the inquiring nose-poker. Those fields are often wide and sprawling, with areas that may seem pointless to send a character over towards. Try it though! An inconspicuous rock may hide a valuable item, or that map you found back in town by talking to the right citizen or checking the right barrel may lead you to a hidden tomb, putting any characters you send to investigate into a pitched race against thieves out to nab the treasures within first. Destroying an innocuous barrel in battle may open a hidden path behind in after the fighting quiets down. If there's a corner, there's likely something around it. This is true of battle maps, towns, dungeons, and rest spots. Explore! Prod! Talk to people! You'll be rewarded, either mechanically or with a bit of worldbuilding, which the game is rich in.

SF3 spins a tale of war, deception, class inequality, corruption, poverty, desperation, ambition, greed, political scheming, and a goblin riding a mech suit who can fire rocket fists out of it. It may not be high literature, but it's damn good pulp fantasy. The game drops into a failed peace conference leading to a war orchestrated by the clandestine activities of an evil cult. This concept isn't exactly new for SRPGs, but there's a fantastic push and pull between all involved parties. At any time, one side's plan may be usurped and used against them by their enemies or an opportunistic third party.

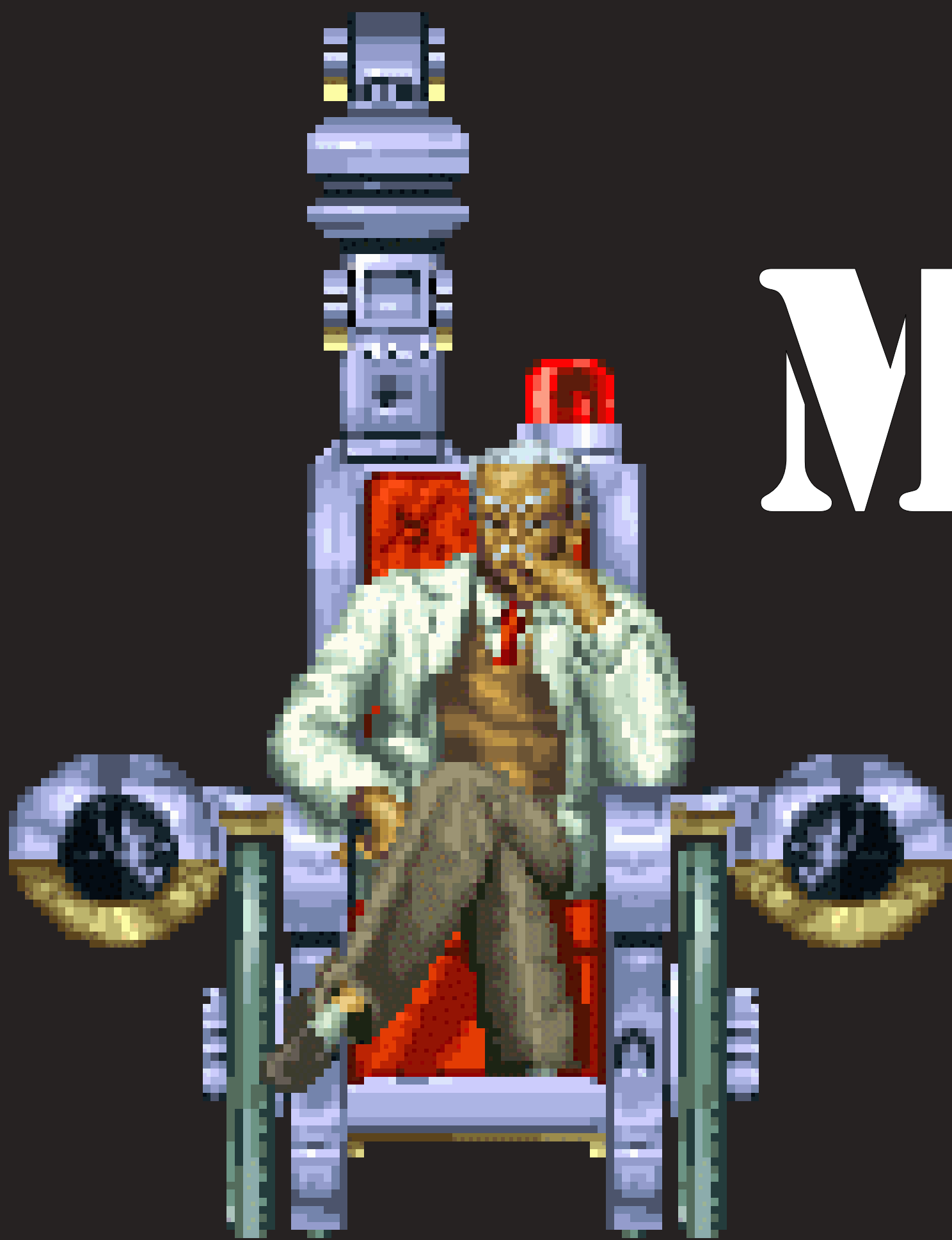


There's history between many of these characters we don't see directly but can infer from their dialogue and relationships, or hunt down details by speaking with townsfolk to get their perspective on events. The Republic, the Empire, and even the cult all face the kinds of economic and logistical problems, as well as internal strife among their major players, that keeps the characters feeling grounded and human rather than stock archetypes. Compelling is how I'd describe it. I feel compelled to follow the story to its conclusion and gather as much context as I can find as I do. This story doesn't feel like a flimsy excuse to pit one army against another. Instead the battles are natural conclusions to circumstances that force the hands of those swept up in them. Character writing is solid enough that I got a clear sense of everyone's personality and motivations, but I would have appreciated a little more banter between missions (you are able to speak to your party members at your temporary HQ in each town, but dialogue there is limited and focused on the immediate situation). Oddly, the protagonist Synbios, as the player stand-in, is silent while the heroes of Scenarios 2 and 3, Medion and Julian, have plenty to say. In turn, Synbios gets to speak up during the events of their games while they fall silent. I wasn't a fan of this choice but it didn't break my interest in the narrative.

Presentation is that final ingredient I'd like to touch on. SF3S1 is gorgeous. Not "good looking for its time," or "they did what they could with the technology they had." I don't believe in those kinds of statements. It looks good for any time. Right now, for example. I look at it right now and I'm still amazed. Battle animations are dynamic and exciting, environments are vibrant (just look at the waterfall and the haunted mansion maps!), the character designs are stylish and unique, and even the text and dialogue boxes are expressive! Letters will shake, grow, or change colors depending on how the speaker is feeling. Dialogue boxes themselves spin away or suddenly expand to fill the screen. All this breathtaking visual splendor is backed by an enchanting soundtrack. "Dignity and Pride," the track often played in castles, is a personal favorite. Battle themes are exciting while towns range from peaceful to jaunty. The whole game is filled with music that sells the moment perfectly, whether that's thrilling battles, tense escapes, tragic loss, or silly shenanigans.



At time of writing, I've finished Scenarios 1 and 2 and have just begun Scenario 3. My feelings could easily apply to any or all three games, as I've seen similar excellence in battle and narrative design in the whole trilogy. It's even got me excited to try the original Genesis games, the Game Gear/Sega CD followups, and the various dungeon crawlers. I want to spend more time in this world. If you're a lover of SRPGs, give yourself a treat and let this one shine for you.



MULTIPLAYER MAYHEM

BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN



The Outfoxies is a Japanese arcade game from the glorious year of 1995. Thankfully, last year we were blessed by a port from the gods at Hamster and can finally enjoy it. The story goes that you are one of a cast of assassins being hired to take each other out.

It is a 2D fighting platformer game taking place in strange stages. These stages will go through a multi-progressing system over time such as a museum with a concerning number of sharks and piranhas in tanks. Eventually, there is flooding and the only place left to stand will be a whale display that suddenly has mass quantities of grenades dropping onto it. Other hazards are plentiful and you should be mindful of them lest you get caught in a kitchen fire before you can pie someone in the face. Certain stages are a bit of a nuisance, particularly the large ship which will rock back and forth on the waves making it hard to land on the platforms you want.

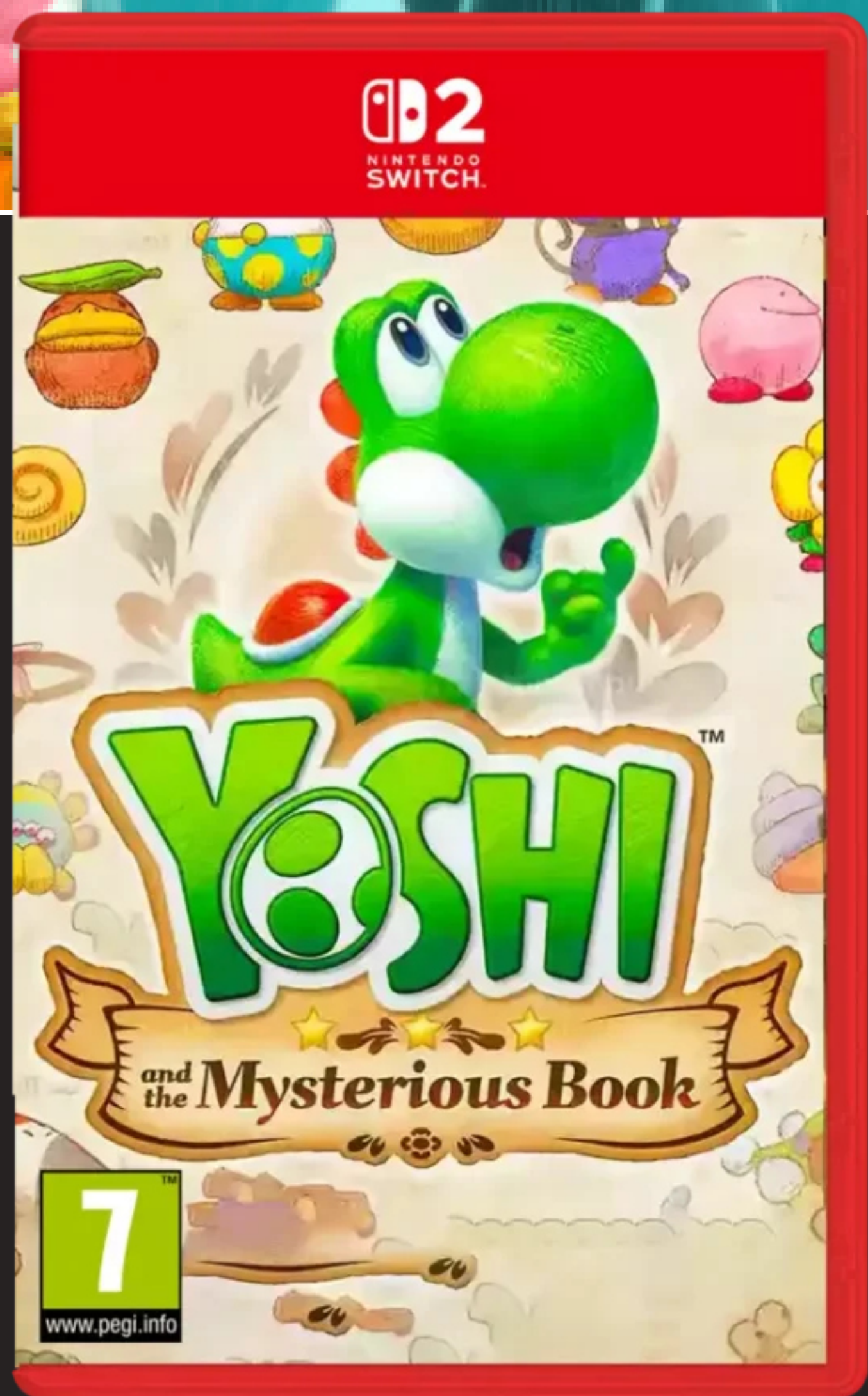
While you have a "normal" attack, it is largely based on picking up various weapons. Just expect plenty of instances of actually hitting yourself in the face with your own projectile because you closed the door on your own face. All the assassins have unique attributes such as the mecha wheelchair bound Professor Ching being unable to take shots in the back because of said wheelchair.

There's a single player campaign where you play as one assassin and fighting game style compete against every opponent to eliminate them and reach the final boss. Which is probably why in two player you have to go back to the character selection for the loser each fight.

For a cheap retro multiplayer game I really can't complain much, other than in the large stages its a bit hard to see what's going on. This isn't going to get as much play as its gameplay successors in the form of Super Smash Brothers, Powerstone and Duck Game but part of that is just because its two players max. Honestly, it's amazing to play and see just how much of this game is in others, and the overall whacky tone.

THE OUTFOXIES





HOW LONG TO BEAT

~15 HOURS

DEVELOPER

NINTENDO

RELEASED

2026

BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

Yoshi and the Mysterious Book has been besmirched and smacktalked by those of pedestrian and plebian tastes and in this essay I will...

Unfortunately, Yoshi and The Mysterious Book falls flat as a baby game as my three year old can't comprehend moving and platforming in a 2D environment. Lack of hazards be damned. It is somewhat of a puzzle platformer but more importantly it is a unique experience. As someone who hasn't finished literally any other Yoshi games, I get to enjoy it entirely on its own merits, but also I did the basic job of watching the overview trailers and thinking about whether or not I'd like it before I bought it, which is apparently too hard for some people.

In each pretty short stage, Yoshi will interact with a specific creature within the environment through various means. You might taste them, carry them or experience unique features by interacting with the world. One of the earliest creatures you find routinely spits bubbles from its mouth and you can platform on the bubbles. I then accidentally fed it a fruit which changed the shape and properties of the bubbles. Every time a discovery is made it will be stamped against the level and earn some stars needed to unlock later levels. In order to actually succeed on a certain page you need to beat some unknown but not hard to discern objective. Typically, following the natural path that flows will get your there. After you make that big discovery you can choose to continue on and make as many discoveries as you can be bothered to.



What's most fun about this system is that you can earn lots of stars early on and skip chunks of levels to play later ones and do it partially out of order. I managed to beat the surfing level without surfing because I went in the wrong direction and assumed it would eventually loop around despite no other stages doing this. Worlds in this game are chapters and you won't be able to play with most creatures until you've finished the level for another one, because it will make something change on the chapter pages to make some other critters appear.

Doing things out of order may make it hard to understand what you need to do as you'll have to use other creatures to interact with the yet to be eponymous one of the level. Occasionally you get variant stages of levels where another creature appears so you get to play around with the bubble creatures interacting with the bee-like creatures. A cute little feature is the ability to name the creatures you find, or you can let Mr. E handle that if you're creatively challenged.

Unlike Tomodachi Life there is a filter for this so no you can't name the creature that jets water out of its center "Big Pisser" at least not without asterisks. I really liked a lot of the levels and maybe my only real gripe is that some of them felt too short and I didn't get to enjoy them more. If you're really having trouble making discoveries you can spend your gold to get a hint with more money spelling it out for you more.



A particularly contentious point for some is that in this game you can't really die, and honestly it wouldn't make any sense for this game to randomly boot you out. Some levels would be a little too hard if you could get hurt with how aggressive some of these creatures get. However, there is one level where if you get caught (and presumably chopped in half) you do have to start all over and maybe I haven't finished it. It was quite funny to play around with boss fights where I couldn't get hurt so the only time I "struggled" was when one boss flies around and getting hit meant I'd be pushed back to the ground and have to get back again. There's a facet of gameplay you get only a handful of times in the game where you can call upon whatever creatures you've unlocked, so as someone who skipped levels before going back to them I did actually have to circle back to one that flies to beat a level. It definitely made the proper final boss more challenging for me. I don't think this feature needed to be much more prevalent than it was in the game. As much as having a Yoshi game that takes after more recent Zelda titles puzzle solving freedom sounds enticing, I prefer it being something for dedicated levels.



We have a gacha so that you have a reason to collect smiley flowers that give you mostly useless UI aspects. Then you can make a superbly funny overloaded screen with nonsense but you don't get that until you beat the game and are likely almost done with the entire thing. Gacha elements that more faithfully mimic gashapon machines are a Nintendo wide trend (even third parties like Good Feel and HAL Labs do it) that I wish weren't present to be perfectly honest even if they aren't taking my real money past the initial purchase.

The soundtrack does seem a bit short with repeated themes across similar levels. I won't deign to belittle it by comparing it to its immediate predecessor but actually I will because that's an awfully short bar to clear and they managed to do it. It does still have a soft and gentle tone to most tracks but they aren't grating. It seems the team was quite fond of woodwind and percussion with this game. I think it's fine, but not one I'd listen to anywhere else.



Initially, I was put off by the visuals of this game particularly as the Yoshi model seems to be using a low framerate to be stylish and I just don't like it. Rather than going for a crafted look, the world has a book aesthetic with the ends of levels showing the ends of the page. Backgrounds are simply illustrated with flatter colours, while the level models have sketchy lines all around them. The use of colour is fantastic and vibrant, if you look closely you'll see that the creatures are all made to look like they've been coloured in with pencils. There are plenty of classic Yoshi and Mario enemies but since this is a game all about discovering creatures we get a bevy of new ones. While some are bigger favourites than others, part of that is just because a few are particularly obnoxious more than anything, like the damn hugging leaf I named Redead.

Because I haven't beaten the one level that you can die in, I haven't gotten around to the final challenge levels.

I did get through both lots of credits though. It has been a weird Nintendo trend to have credits at the halfway point of a game. They did it with Pikmin 4 too and I won't say I beat that after the first credits, that game didn't even give you a "final" boss before that. At least earlier with Kirby Star Allies it was after the first lot of stages as a throwback and I don't know why they did early credits with Captain Toad.



Yoshi and the Mysterious Book is a really fun, and fairly relaxing game with great level variety even if you'll be using the same tricks on a lot of these dogs. If it sounds like it appeals to you then you should definitely play it but for those wanting an old school experience save the rest of us the grief and don't play it.

As we all know review scores are objective and mean the same thing no matter any difference in game style, release year or other contexts so yes I am saying Yoshi and The Mysterious Book is on equal footing with Final Fantasy VII. At least until I rank all my finished games of the year. Sure maybe this one doesn't have as much replayability to me but that's also not a factor I care about.



As the fourth entry in Atelier's Mysterious sub-series I found it weird there weren't any cameos at least.



BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

After being besieged by the crossover content in Go-Go Town! I finally decided to take the plunge and picked up a copy of Dinkum for the Nintendo Switch at my local store. I wouldn't want to miss out on the Switch exclusive PUBG outfit after all. Plus the Nintendo Switch 2 upgrade is free.

As much as the taking place in Australia was a big point to me, I initially just thought the game was too ugly back when it started early access on PC. However, I was able to make a good looking character. I think the colouring suits the outback atmosphere and the somewhat simple look allows things to keep in focus and run good. At least on the Switch 2 it looks pretty nice. Occasionally some music plays, but it's quite simple and oftentimes there is nothing but the sounds of nature.

I don't like to overdo the comparisons even though I have been, but Dinkum wears its Animal Crossing inspiration right on the tin. From developing a new land starting in tents, collecting and paying town debts, a museum curator with an argyle vest and even the way the characters speak and emote it's just plain obvious. One of the key differences is that the time is not tied to real life time although I do wish that was a mode.

I found this a perfect relaxing game for when I only had a short amount of time to play. Usually playing one day per real day. Do keep in mind you can only save at the end of the day so that usually kept me from pushing too far forward.

While it seems survival-structured with a health and stamina meter you only need to eat to keep your stamina up enough to effectively do tasks like mining and chopping down trees. You do have to watch out for crocs and cassowaries but most other animals mind their business.

I've only had to look up things here and there like when I've acquired items that don't enter my inventory. Apparently they go in front of the store on a scale. There's some level of relationship building although despite everybody blushing when they refuse to hang out with me there is allegedly no romance.

Of course this game can be played online, but I don't think anyone will be joining Paige Land anytime soon. Splitscreen would have been nice just so I could save myself having to reset the day after giving my daughter a turn but hey at least she can chop trees for me. So far I'm just getting started but I'm looking forward to getting that ride on mower.



Disney VILLAINS CURSED & CAFÉ



HOW LONG TO BEAT

~ 4 HOURS

DEVELOPER

BLOOM DIGITAL MEDIA

RELEASED

2025

BY PAIGE CHAMBERLAIN

Disney Villains Cursed Cafe is another Disney venture into the “cosy” genre, this time going for the “make drinks and get to know your clients in a visual novel esque way” subgenre. Straight off the bat, if you’re not interested in “millennial” style writing and modern references, well then you best be leaving, you can’t really not expect it. I mean look at how they dressed Captain Hook. Not that I’m complaining on that end.

In this game you take on a job at a cafe that has brought a handful of Disney villains into the modern world and they come to you to order potions to solve their problems. You might give Maleficent a forgetting potion so she forgets about smiling at a child, or a teleporting potion for Cruella to get to a fashion show in time. Even though your boss never showed up, you have a magic book that gives you the right potion recipes whenever you need them though potion mixing is extraordinarily basic.



You simply add two of the right ingredients and the potion brews up, easy as that. The game is quite formulaic; you’ll get the gossip on how your main choice from the day before went, then serve two basic potions before having to make a choice for the story tonic. For example, Ursula wants to turn her eels into evil cats to eat her opponent’s pets and win the reality show she’s in, but you can try to sneak around her and make them simply into nice cats. If you make the wrong choice, you’ll find out the next day and basically break their story from being able to be completed. You can mess this up by not getting the exclusive ingredients by asking for the wrong one which is something that happened a couple of times due to the the game being a bit finicky about letting you actually look at the recipe book when you need to. I don’t feel bad for screwing up Jafar’s story due to the wrong dialogue choice. Knowing he’s trying to pass off chocolate coins as a cryptocurrency is certainly more interesting than whatever self fulfillment or success I could’ve given him.



Besides, once you’ve successfully finished four character stories, you’re locked into the ending and would have to start from the beginning to see the others. You don’t have to worry about missing out on the minor potion stories. Thanks to the one “Do-Over Doppio” I did have to take from Yzma, I know that they will appear another day to fulfill that dialogue. These “Do-Over Doppios” reset your day and can only be taken at the end, no earlier or later. Make sure to use the d-pad when selecting potion ingredients. My only other failures and the reason I even took a single one of Yzma’s potions was because of messed inputs. Not being able to go back more than one day could be troublesome for those inclined to make bad decisions as you don’t get to see whether your choice broke their story path until the following day. Personally, I found you needed to make the right blend of evil and seemingly righteous choices.

My major complaint is how you can’t pause things to look at the book freely, such as to check a recipe, especially the story ones and see what it was you wanted. It’s also the only time you’ll have to actually think about what potion you are giving someone. And you know maybe I just want to read what’s in there like the character profiles but it’s a bit touchy about when I can look and won’t even let me at the unnecessary end of day scenes.



The illustrative art style is nice and suits that whimsical Disney feel, but some villain’s modern designs are better than others. I definitely have new feelings about Captain Hook I think I haven’t had before or maybe I did? There are a few moments when they cheap out on the visuals partly as a gag, I didn’t appreciate such as covering up fights or a few potions having the same glass shape. I didn’t really notice the music at all but did have one day where the brewing sound effect didn’t go away. The dialogue is not voiced but each character does have a couple of voice lines you may faintly hear.

Gaston’s tendency to display his chest hair might be a bit too provocative for family viewing but I think the game could be enjoyed from at least pre-teen age. After all, the villainous cast allows more interesting stories to be told than could be found in the likes of other modern Disney games and just the ability to be actually evil. And as I said a dash of evil choices here and there helps you give them happy endings as you need to discern when to give them what they want and when not too.

Perhaps it’s just because I’m feeling villainous but I give this game just a passing grade. Also, I won’t entirely grade a game on its price to play time as factors like the visual design are important but I’m glad I waited for sale on this. The basic gameplay has put me in the mood for a more potent elixir crafting game.



NEXT ISSUE*



BACKLOGS ARE MADE TO BE IGNORED

Please Understand... We make plans and intend to stick with them, but then, a playthrough of the original Final Fantasy turns into a playthrough of the entire NES trilogy, 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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