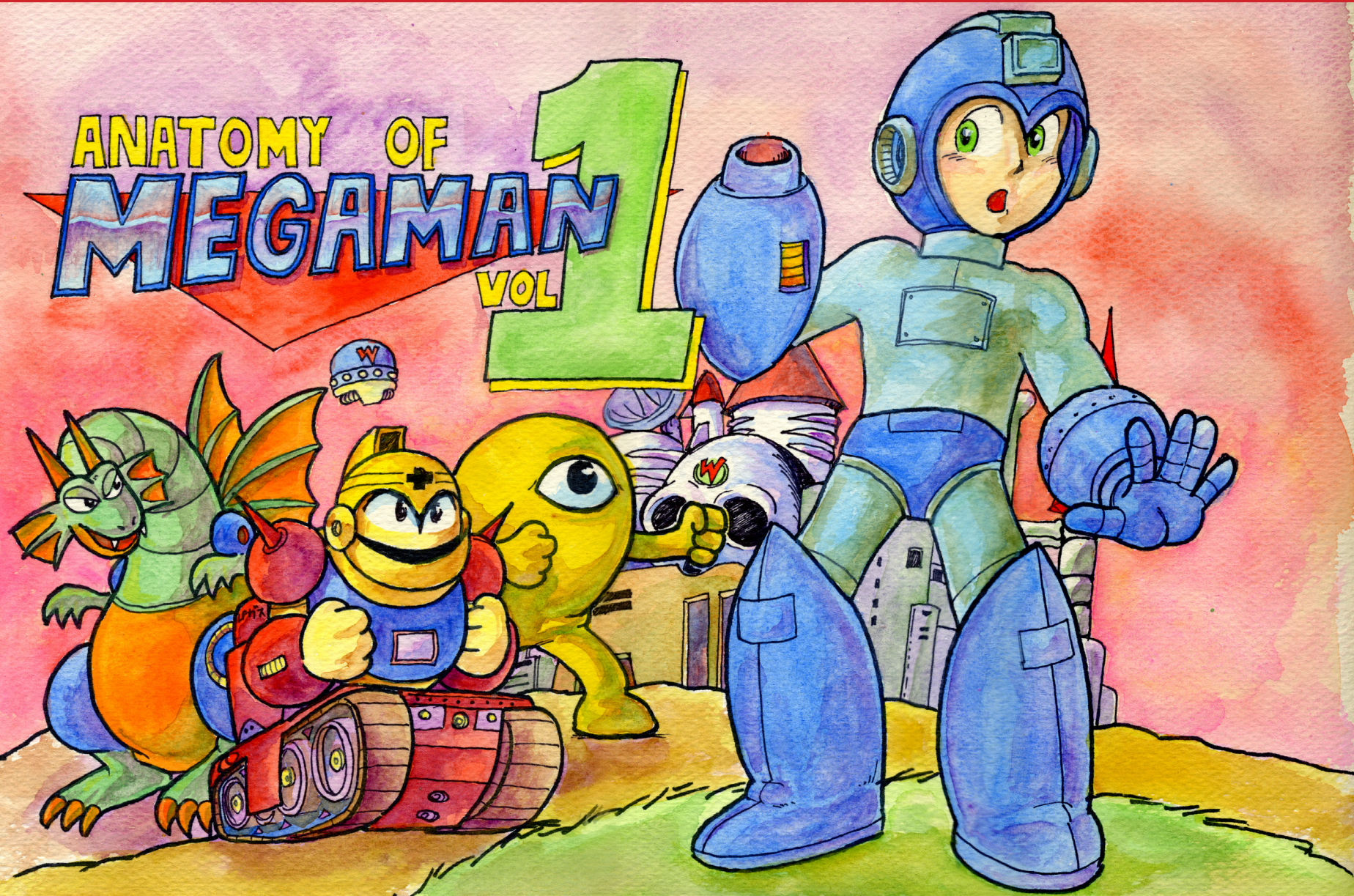
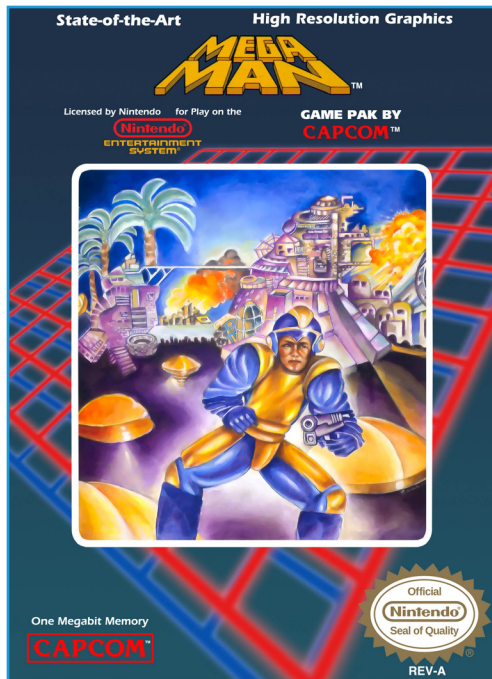


ANATOMY OF MEGAMAN VOL 1



BY JEREMY PARISH



Mega Man represented a major milestone for Capcom as a developer: Their first fully internally developed original home console project. Prior to this release, Capcom had specialized in arcade games and home ports thereof, with their console releases frequently ghost-developed by outside contractors.

Mega Man technically got its start as an arcade game, but it was quickly reassigned to the budding home division, a team consisting of new additions to the company under the stewardship of veterans Tokuro Fujiwara and Akira Kitamura. Designer Keiji Inafune characterizes the game as an indie title in spirit, as its team was unproven and kept separate from Capcom's core staff.

Unfortunately, *Mega Man* failed to make a strong impression in the U.S. Part of that is probably due to its bizarre box art; but equally important, I suspect, is the fact that it fell into a strange time in the promotion of NES games — it slightly predated the arrival of *Nintendo Power*, which would prove to be a kingmaker for new properties... including *Mega Man*'s sequels.

In Japan, *Mega Man* appeared under the name *Rockman*. This was likely changed due to trademark conflicts with electronics manufacturer Rockman. The name *Rockman* was actually a multi-layered pun, referencing both the series rock-paper-scissors mechanics as well as giving birth to an ongoing musical motif in character names: Rock, Roll, Blues, Forte, Gospel, Reggae, Beat, Tango, etc. The change in the series' title has made quite a mess of this in the U.S.

While not a huge financial success, *Mega Man* paved the way for Capcom (and *Mega Man*'s) console domination.

THE ANATOMY OF MEGA MAN

U.S. title: *Mega Man* (Dec. 1987)

Japanese title: *Rockman* (Dec. 1987)

Developer: Capcom

Publisher: Capcom

Platform: Nintendo Entertainment System/Famicom

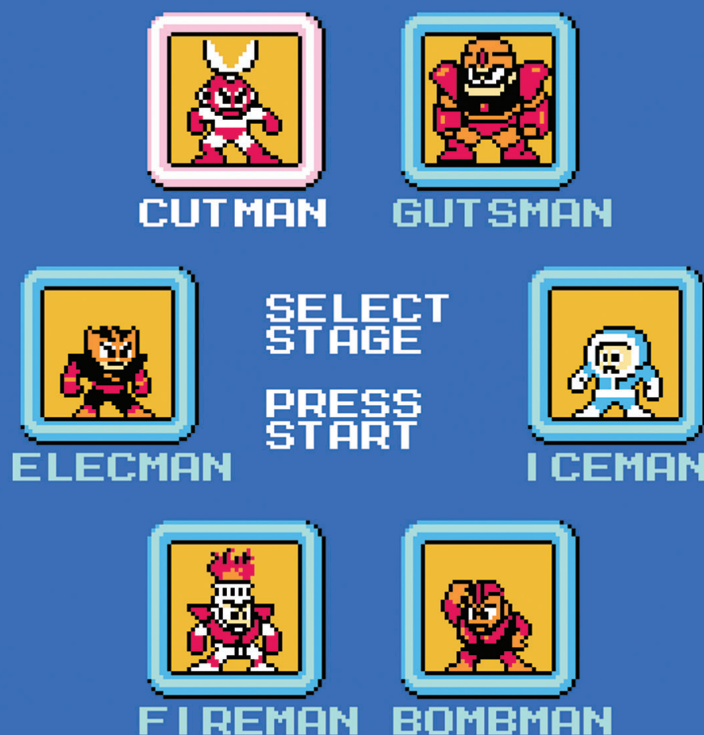
SELECT STAGE

Mega Man was pretty unique in its time for the way it let you start on any one of six stages. There is no single “right” order in which to play *Mega Man*, though certainly some sequences prove to be more advantageous than others. But because you can go about jumping into this game however you like, each of the six Robot Master stages essentially has to work as the game’s first level. In other words, each has to convey the purpose and mechanics of the adventure.

As such, this volume varies a bit from the norm. Instead of going through the game on a level-by-level basis, I’m going to divide it instead into different thematic groupings or topics that span multiple levels. A non-linear anatomy, you could call it. For instance, in this first part, we’re going to look at the first area of each stage (basically, the first sequence until you scroll vertically) and how each reveals the workings of *Mega Man* in a different way... and how they encourage you to follow an ideal route.

When you begin the game, you jump immediately to a level select screen. By default, the cursor sits on Cutman. If you don’t know any better, you’ll simply begin with Cutman, not realizing you can switch around until you finish the stage and your cursor defaults to an empty rectangle. As it happens, Cutman is indeed one of the least difficult levels of the game, so there’s a definite logic at work here. If you don’t “get” *Mega Man*, you’ll begin on a suitably introductory stage by default.

At the beginning of the game, Mega Man has an extraordinarily limited move set. He can run, jump, climb ladders, and shoot in two directions. That’s it. No ducking, no shooting upward, no sliding, no special moves. So in order to begin defeating stages and gain new abilities, you need to be able to best both an entire level and the boss at the end with this extremely basic set of skills.



WITH SIX YOU GET...

The very first screen of the original *Mega Man* introduces you to six different bosses, but allegedly the game was meant to include *eight* different Robot Masters. The ranks were thinned out as a matter of necessity; the available ROM size for *Mega Man* simply wasn’t big enough to store the data for two additional

stages, bosses, and weapons. This would be rectified in 2006’s *Mega Man: Powered Up*, a slick remake of the original *Mega Man* for PlayStation Portable which added in a number of new features — not least of which being the supposedly missing Robot Masters, Oilman and Timeman.

CUTMAN'S STAGE

Cutman is one of the less devastating bosses you can face in this game, and appropriately his level reflects his mild temperament. (It also gives a clue to his weakness right out of the starting gate, but you wouldn't know about that the first time you play the game.) The stage begins with a series of structures whose roofs create a higher tier of platform running parallel to the ground. And, right away, you're made to learn to climb ladders, as the brick blocks here block the path forward. You can't simply run straight ahead; you need to fall back a short distance and climb the long ladder to the roof, using the high ground as a means to bypass the bricks.

Immediately after you begin scrolling the screen forward, a trio of little flying enemies called Bladers appear at varying heights. Generally, they're arranged in such a way that they don't fly at Mega Man's height; in order to destroy them, you need to jump to hit them. If a Blader is below you – likely, given that you need to take to the rooftops here – the only way to take it on is to drop down to ground level and shoot it, or else exploit its movement pattern. Bladers will break from their forward motion in order to home in on Mega Man's location with a quick, sharp movement, and with proper timing



you can shoot them the instant before they dive and smash into him.

Further ahead, you need to leap over pits. These are pleasantly low-stress pits that you can jump easily, but they do demonstrate the reason it's a bad idea to fall into empty holes, in case you were unclear on the concept.

Finally, the end of the first run of Cutman's stage leads you to a dead end where a ladder is guarded by a pair of Beaks, wall-mounted turrets that open their indestructible shells to reveal a gun that fires a stream of five bullets at a gradually depressing angle. One of them is specifically set to hit you as you climb the ladder that leads up to where you can advance to the next area, which will reveal the fact that being injured while climbing causes Mega Man to lose his grip on a ladder and fall. You can also master the timing of hitting temporarily invulnerable foes here, as well as learn to evade weapons that fire at fixed intervals and set angles.

As a small bonus, the leftmost Beak demonstrates the way Mega Man's bullets pass through walls. By climbing the ladder and firing at the Beak, you can safely destroy it from behind.

What you learn here: Ladder-climbing, blocks, leaping to deal with enemies at other heights, tactics for dealing with temporarily invulnerable enemies, firing through walls

What the design says: This ain't so bad. Let's kill Cutman.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE: AKIRA KITAMURA

Keiji Inafune gets the lion's share of credit for creating *Mega Man*, and rightly so; he was with the series from the beginning all the way through its apparent end. But the true father of the series and character is better stated as Akira Kitamura, the original designer on *Mega Man* and *Mega Man 2*. Unlike much of the original Mega Man team, Kitamura wasn't a complete newcomer to the industry in 1987; he'd already worked on the excellent NES conversion of *Section Z*, the first great (not to mention ambitious) console conversion of a Capcom arcade title. Evidently his work on *Section Z* impressed the higher-ups enough to put him in charge of the design for the company's first wholly original console creation. Kitamura only stayed with Capcom for a few years, long enough to lead the first two *Mega Man* games and the totally not-at-all-like-the-arcade-version port of *Willow*. By 1991, he was working with Takeru on the Japan-only Famicom action game *Cocoron*; a couple of years later, he directed *Little Samson*. Beyond that... Kitamura drops off the face of the planet. An otherworldly visitor who came to our benighted reality to bring us happiness and digital perfection before returning to his hallowed home.

GUTSMAN'S STAGE

In contrast to Cutman's stage, Gutsman's level is insanely hard unless you have the proper tools. It's a short level, but intensely difficult. Curiously, though, Gutsman is one of the easiest bosses in the game; you can take him down with Mega Man's default weapon, no trouble. Getting to him, however....

From the very beginning, Gutsman's stage poses some advanced challenges. Here you face, for the first time, *Mega Man's* iconic Metool enemies. These guys hide beneath invulnerable hard hats and briefly emerge from their armor to fire at you. Unlike Beaks, though, Metools expose their weaknesses (their eyes) for about a second before dropping their helmets again – just long enough for you to shoot back, but you'll only be able to hit them if you anticipate their action and fire right before they emerge. And then you need to leap immediately to avoid their bullets.

On the plus side, you can largely use the terrain to your advantage. The Metools are stationed on platforms of varying heights, invariably above you. Since you don't stand directly in front of the, it's not too tough to pass between the safe spots in their projectile spreads. The second Metool, however, is situated just far enough back from the edge of its platform that you have to leap onto its own level in order to trigger its attack – Metools remain hidden until you come within a certain range – forcing you to master the preemptive attack and leap combo.

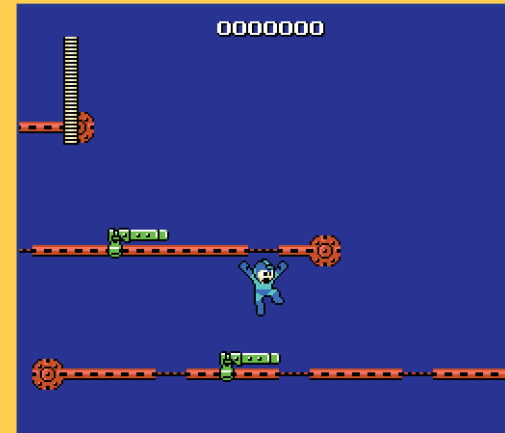
This, however, is cake. The real challenge comes immediately after the small Metool gauntlet: A trio of moving platforms that glide along parallel tracks. You can hop on the first one and it'll move you along safely. But once you drop down to the second one, you're almost certainly going to die. When the left anchor that

connects the platforms to the rail encounters a frayed portion of the track cable, it causes the platform to pitch forward and dump Mega Man into the bottomless pit below. This happens in a split-second, without warning, and it's a total shock the first time it happens.

The middle track has a couple of frayed spots, but the bottom one is practically half-missing. Also, the platforms move out of sync with one another, so it's possible you could be forced to ride the middle platform back and forth several times until you have the opportunity to drop down. Once you get the timing and mechanic here, it's not so hard – but as a first stage, it's utterly harrowing.

Strangely, this isn't teaching you a mechanic you'll use throughout the game; the frayed cable tracks only appear here and in the very final stage.

After all this, the area still isn't through, as next up you encounter a group of Bladers. Then you're forced to face a gauntlet of Picket Men, who stand their ground and chuck picks at Mega Man. You're forced to come to terms with a few factors here: The Picket Men can defend themselves with their shields (and will, if you move too close to them). Their attacks travel in an arc that homes in on Mega Man's location. You need to understand space management to take them on: You can't stand in one spot and attack without taking a few picks to the face, and you don't want to advance on them too quickly or else you'll come face-to-face with them and cause them to raise their shield. Only by moving deliberately toward them can you triumph... though this becomes considerably more difficult when you also have to navigate over a pit (into which you can be knocked by the recoil of taking a pick to the face) in the process.



What you learn here: Metool tactics, using uneven ground to your advantage, maddeningly difficult sliding platforms, leaping to deal with enemies at other heights, managing space against aggressive enemies with high defense values.

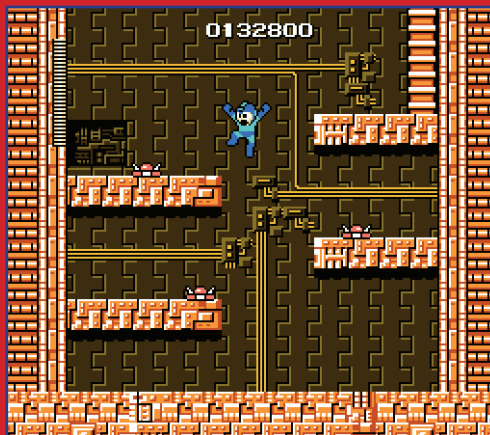
What the design says: Go away.

ELECMAN'S STAGE

Elecman's stage is interesting because it's the only one that begins by making you move vertically. It's quite complex and daunting, which actually works out to be OK; in this case, the difficulty of the level design corresponds to the boss at the end. Elecman is extremely difficult to defeat as the game's first boss, and by making the barrier to reach him quite high, Capcom discourages the unworthy from making the attempt.

Again, though you won't realize it if this is the very first level you've attempted, the design (specifically, the enemy placement) encourages you to tackle this level only after you've acquired the proper weapon from another boss. The enemies here – called Spines – glide slowly back and forth across the floor. However, once you come to stand on the same level as them, they accelerate rapidly. So this small setup of four short platforms, staggered in height and patrolled by Spines, is very difficult to clear unscathed. Once you leap onto the first platform, the first Spine speeds up, giving you about two seconds at most to hop over to the next platform. But that platform is patrolled by another Spine, as is the one above the first ledge, and each time you reach a new platform its tiny guard will race to attack you. You have to jump again almost the instant you land, and the gap between the two columns of platforms is just wide enough that it's easy to fluff a jump.

Spines are too short to shoot while standing on their level – standard bullets fly right over them, and Mega Man can't duck – but if you hop up and fire at just the right height, you can hit them. Standard bullets don't hurt them, though, so this only stuns them. It's possible to hop-shoot-jump, hop-shoot-jump your way to the top, but not easily. This simple-looking screen is devilishly complex and encourages you to perhaps consider an alternate route your first time through the game.



What you learn here: Quick-reflex platforming, dealing with seemingly invulnerable foes

What the design says: You'll probably have better luck elsewhere.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE: TOKURO FUJIWARA

While Kitamura played perhaps the most essential role in *Mega Man*'s initial design, the game also betrays the fingerprints of its director, Tokuro Fujiwara. As seasoned a veteran as Capcom had in 1987 — the company had only been around for about four years by that point — Fujiwara was involved in nearly every great and significant title Capcom produced throughout the '80s. Prior to *Mega Man*, his best-known projects were easily *Ghosts 'N Goblins* and the arcade version of *Bionic Commando*, two games that share a cartoonish vibe and crushing difficulty level in common with the original *Mega Man*.

Fujiwara joined Capcom at the company's inception and worked there until 1996, when he left to establish his own company, Whoopie Camp (of *Tomba!* fame). Shinji Mikami credits Fujiwara for teaching him the philosophy of creating freedom within restrictions, and that perfectly describes *Mega Man*'s design: Despite being a fairly limited character, Mega Man can do remarkable things within those limitations.

ICEMAN'S STAGE

Iceman's stage offers some advanced considerations right away. The icy ground has low friction, which affects Mega Man's inertia; rather than stopping immediately when you cease running, he slides to a halt. This inertia particularly affects his ability to reverse direction – if you try to turn around, he'll run backward, slowly, for a moment. However, you can cancel out the inertia of ice by jumping, which causes you to rise straight into the air as usual. It's not realistic, but it does offer a workaround for a tricky physical mechanic.

As first stage choices go, Iceman is a terrible place to start. Not only do you have to learn the basics of the controls, you have to do so with slightly altered physics. And the game doesn't go easy on you; as soon as you scroll to the right, you encounter one of the more devious standard enemies in the game: The Crazy Razy.

A Crazy Razy is an odd robot with independently operable upper and lower body portions. If you let it come too close to you as it marches forward, it'll split apart. The lower half will keep on marching, but the upper half will hover slightly above you, harassing you with short, dive-bombing attacks. Crazy Razy is somewhat taller than Mega Man, so if you shoot it while running, you'll hit the lower half. It takes a few shots to destroy, but you can kill the lower half... though that still leaves the upper body in play. On the other hand, if you make a short hop and fire, you can destroy the upper half in a single shot. This has the side benefit of also destroying the lower half at the same time.

Which is pretty smart placement for these things. As you puzzle out how to destroy them, you'll also discover the inertia-nulling side effect of jumping. Still, this is better tackled once you have some more experience with the game – and, fittingly, Iceman is pretty tough to beat with your default weapon.

And hey, that's not all. Past the initial wave of foes, the icy ground gives way to water. Mega Man doesn't use the same fluid physics as its sequels, so you can't jump higher than normal here. The action does slow down somewhat, but I've never been able to tell if that's because water is meant to create extra resistance of if something in this portion of the level causes slowdown.

In any case, here you have to deal with multiple enemy types at once – besides Beaks, which patrol short patches of ground, there's also a host of infinitely respawning Pengs, which fly in from the right. Once you shoot one, another immediately spawn to replace its fallen comrade. Pengs are the poor man's Medusa Head, moving in a similar (but flatter) sine wave pattern at a rapid clip, constantly placing pressure on you to react. The terrain works both for and against you here; while the floor underwater isn't slippery and the uneven terrain limits the range of Spines, the constant flow of Pengs adds a dynamic hazard as you're trying to hop over short columns and avoid bumping into Spines. Again, this is sophomore-level stuff, not Platforming 101. And it just gets worse later.



What you learn here: Ice physics, leaping to deal with enemies at other heights, managing unexpected enemy behavior, dealing with multiple threats on complex terrain, water makes you slower (maybe).

What the design says: I hate you and want you dead.

FIREMAN'S STAGE

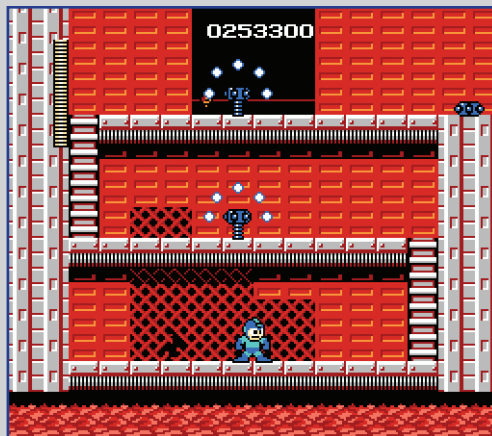
There's an awful lot going on in the first screen of Fireman's stage. Although Mega Man spawns in absolute safety, there are no less than three turrets above him that pop up at regular intervals and fire off arcing sprays of five bullets. They're pretty easy to deal with in reality, but they seem awfully intimidating at first.

You can take away a few handy pointers here. First, if you try to take on the turrets – Screw Bombers – directly, Mega Man can only hit them once they pop up to shoot, which means you're trading bullets. Second, climbing ladders is slower than running or jumping, so you need to learn the timing of your enemies' actions. Third, if you combine these two factors you can actually stop at the top of the ladder, just before dismounting, and fire on the Screw Bomber while it's still retracted, destroying them all safely from a distance.

The second screen is more or less a mirror image of the first, though with one fewer Screw Bomber. However, since the Screw Bombers here start on the same level as or below Mega Man, you can't use the ladder trick to beat them. Instead, you have to learn to avoid their fire while advancing upon and destroying them. It's possible to situate Mega Man into the gap in the lower Screw Bomber's bullet spread easily enough, which means you only really need to worry about leaping over the ground-level bullet that the upper one fires out when it pops up without jumping high enough to smack into the bullet it shoots at a 45-degree angle.

After the turret gauntlet, you have to contend with a rather more harrowing sequence in which you have to clear several gaps by crossing a platform from which a pillar of fire rises at regular intervals. That in itself might not seem

too dangerous, but at the same time a trio of fireballs called Tackle Fire that fly up into the ceiling and descend in a somewhat unpredictable meandering spread. You can shoot the Tackle Fires, but once they're all dealt with, more will appear. They tend to emerge from the top of the screen directly above the jet of flame, making them very likely to bump into you and potentially knock you into the open fire below as you try to avoid the geyser of fire and reach the ladder opposite. On the plus side, there's a health refill above and to the left that you can use to restore whatever energy you lose trying to navigate this hellscapes.



What you learn here: Climbing and descending ladders, dealing with stationary enemies, the danger of pits, non-interactive timed hazards, managing multiple threats despite precarious footing, health refills

What the design says: Maybe try again later.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE: KEIJI INAFUNE

No individual is as closely associated with *Mega Man* as Keiji Inafune, who joined the staff of the first game in the series as a newcomer to Capcom and went on to supervise the franchise for nearly 25 more years. Inafune's original role was that of designer and illustrator; though he didn't come up with the character design for Mega Man, he created most of the Robot Masters and a good many of the lesser robot foes throughout the game. He also provided the original illustrations — that's his handiwork on the Japanese box art, and throughout the manual as well.

As the series developed, Inafune took on more and more of a supervisory role the the games. He also took the lead on the development of *Mega Man*'s first two spinoff series, *Mega Man X* and *Mega Man Legends*. Even so, *Mega Man* was by no means the only series Inafune worked on, and his projects could be quite varied in nature, none more so than the historical horror adventure series *Onimusha*.

Inafune rose through the ranks at Capcom, eventually becoming vice-president, where he took the lead on keeping the company relevant as gaming moved into the HD generation; projects like *Dead Rising* and the MT Framework engine kept Capcom vital while other Japanese developers struggled to catch up with the demands of high-definition development.

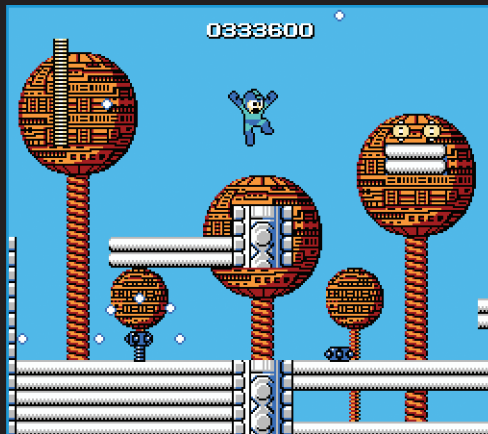
Unfortunately, Inafune was so closely associated with *Mega Man* that when he left the company, Capcom shut down every work-in-progress *Mega Man* title. Whoops.

BOMBMAN'S STAGE

And finally, Bombman. This stage has the most uneven, broken-up terrain, requiring a great deal of basic jumping skills to leap from platform to platform. If you take the high ground, you need to be mindful of the Screw Bombers below, which pop up to fire at you. It can be tricky, but you can position yourself safely into the gaps in their projectiles. On the other hand, you can just drop down and shoot them, too. The high road lets you recharge your energy, though, and if you fall you can't simply hop back up to the upper road as it's too far up to reach.

Beyond the Screw Bombers, you need to navigate a field of pits from which indestructible hazards called Bombombs rise at regular intervals. They fire up into the air and, once they reach their apex, explode into fragments that rain down onto the ground below in a sort of arcing inversion of the Screw Bomber's projectile patterns. These are situated so that, if you time it sensibly, the fragments of the Bombbomb that rises ahead of you will impact harmlessly on the upper peak of the columns you use to cross the pit sequence. But then another will rise behind you, and its debris will hit your safe location. So you need to maintain constant, measured motion across the pits. Cautious movement will take you far; on the other hand, if you don't take care, you'll leave yourself vulnerable to a fragment that almost certainly will knock you into a hole.

This opening sequence isn't really difficult and simply requires a bit of patience and observation. It's a good starting place for the game, and fittingly the boss at the end is probably the easiest in the game.



What you learn here: Dealing with fast-moving enemies, dealing with leaping enemies, dealing with stationary enemies, the importance of caution around bottomless pits

What the design says: Come on in!

DRAMATIS PERSONAE: MANAMI MATSUMAE

Thanks to Capcom's partaking of the habit that many game publishers had during '80s of obscuring their developers behind pseudonyms, Manami Matsumae was largely unknown until recently. *Mega Man* credited her as "Chanchacarin," the composer no one remembered because her nickname was less amusing than "Yuukichan's Papa."

In recent years, however, she's experienced a remarkable surge of popularity and visibility, having composed for a number of major and minor indie titles. While Yacht Club Games' *Shovel Knight* is easily the best and best-known of the games that she's contributed to of late, she's also written tunes for puzzler *rainblocks* and will be composing for the suspiciously *Mega Man*-like *Mighty No. 9* and *Heart Forth, Alicia*.

While her collaborations with IntiCreates would seem to be business as usual, her indie contributions demonstrate an increasing tendency of budding Western designers teaming up with the people who made the games that inspired them to become developers in the first place. And that's great.

Even more important in the equation of how to play *Mega Man* than the cues provided by the level design are the workings of the titular hero himself. While Mega Man does indeed emerge into this world with a terribly minimal move set, that alone doesn't define the limit of his abilities. The entire premise of the entire *Mega Man* franchise, regardless of which series we're talking about here, is that "Mega Man" in every incarnation possesses supposedly limitless potential.

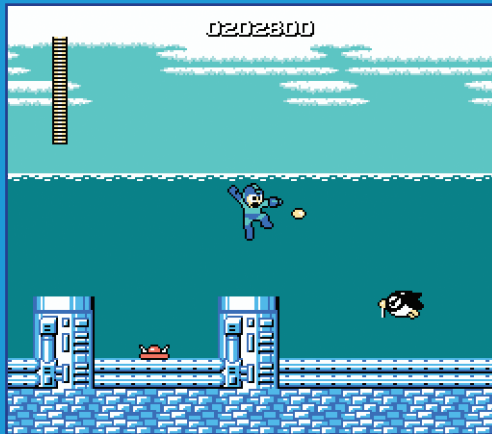
This being a video game, of course, that doesn't mean he has limitless potential as an artist or undertaker or ballerina or politician. Or maybe he does? But all he does with that infinite sense of possibility is blow things up. Mega Man wields the ability to mimic the capabilities of other robots, which in video game terms

means that when you beat one of the six Robot Masters, Mega Man acquires the ability to use their weapon (or at least a variant version of it). Each weapon you add to his repertoire operates on its own energy meter, which can be refilled by collecting a weapon power capsule, completing a stage, continuing, or certain other factors. Some master weapons are more practical in combat than others, and many of them have unique tool-like capabilities.

However, the master weapons possess another important trait: Each of them is super-effective against at least one of the other Robot Masters. The clue is in *Mega Man*'s Japanese title, *Rockman*. The special weapons operate within a rock-paper-scissors circle of weaknesses, though here you have six variables to

deal with instead of three. The principle remains the same, though: Acquire one Robot Master's weapon and you suddenly gain the upper hand against another. A key element of playing a *Mega Man* game comes in figuring out exactly which boss is easiest to defeat with Mega Man's default blaster and the proper sequence in which to tackle subsequent stages from there. By the end of this game, Mega Man can still run, jump, climb, and shoot in two directions. But he can also chuck bombs, belch fire, freeze enemies in midair, toss rocks, and more. While the master weapons mainly come in handy against Robot Masters here, they do have a number of situational uses as well.

"P"



Mega Man's default weapon is the only one that carries infinite energy. As long as Mega Man hasn't been blown up, he can use the cannon built into his arm. In the menu screen, it's designated with the letter P, which means... well, no one knows, actually. Plasma? Projectile? Pitiful? Peashooter?

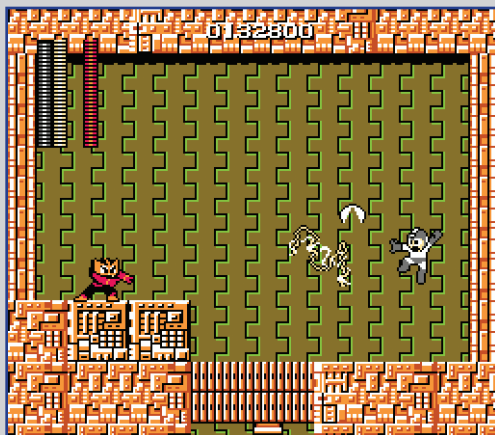
Peashooter is the most fitting moniker, if admittedly the least likely. The arm cannon's default attack consists of a stream of small, oblong pellets with a slightly yellow cast. In a nice touch, weapon energy capsules cycle through colors to reflect Mega Man's current power – he changes colors when he swaps out for different weapons – and the P cannon, which operates off Mega Man's internal battery or whatever, fires projectiles that are the same color as health capsules. Mega Man can fire up to three Ps (peas?) at a time. The projectiles pass through all objects except enemies, which either absorb

the bullets as they take damage or reflect them back at an oblique angle.

There are very few enemies the P cannon can't harm. All Robot Masters are vulnerable to the gun, though some of them deal such disproportionate damage in return that there's no sense in going head-to-head against them without something better, unless you just have something to prove. Armored or shell-covered foes are completely safe from Mega Man's basic cannon fire until they expose their weaknesses.

While not a powerful weapon, the P cannon proves to be extremely versatile. As is fitting for the game's basic weapon, it's useful in nearly any situation, though not always optimal. Much of the strategy of the game boils down to determining when a different weapon has more utility, and balancing energy usage for those alternate tools.

ROLLING CUTTER



Essentially a boomerang that looks like Pac-Man, you acquire the Rolling Cutter from Cutman. While moderately more powerful than the P cannon, Rolling Cutter has two advantages: First, Elecman is almost impossible to defeat without it. Second, the Rolling's path describes an arc when you throw it. It rises up, curves back downward, makes a sharp U-turn while continuing to drop, and finally twists back upward as it returns to Mega Man. Or rather, returns to its starting position; if you move after firing a Rolling Cutter, it will return to the point from which it was thrown instead of tracking Mega Man's movement like, say, the boomerang in *Zelda*.

The looping movement of the Rolling Cutter makes it situationally useful, primarily for hitting low enemies. Because the blade's hit box is much, much larger than those (P)uny little

bullets the default weapon fires, it covers quite a wide swath of screen as it flies. It may swing wide of small enemies directly in front of Mega Man, but it has a remarkably large effective area. Really, where it comes in handiest is in dealing with small enemies who are too low for Mega Man's standard attack to hit – basically, the Spines that show up early in Elecman and Ice-man's stages.

By no small coincidence, Rolling Cutters are the one weapon that works against them rather than simply stunning them. Also not a coincidence: Elecman is weak to Rolling Cutter, and his stage begins with a throng of Spines, which can be destroyed with Rolling Cutter. This is a conspicuous tip. If you can clear out the first screen of the stage, you're properly equipped to take out the boss.

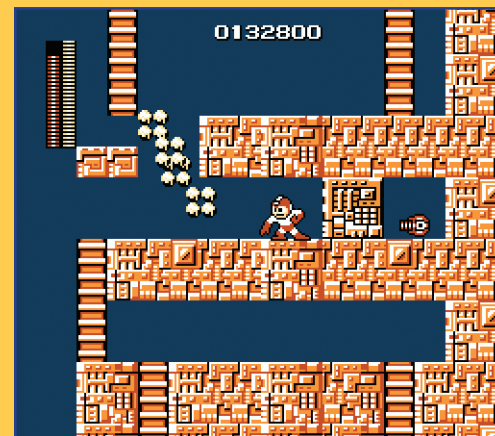
SUPER ARM

The Super Arm, acquired from Gutsman, is the most situational weapon in the game. It does not allow Mega Man to perform any sort of direct attack by its own nature. It has no ammunition, and it doesn't let you punch dudes. Instead, the Super Arm only allows you to lift and throw certain objects – special boxes located in specific places throughout the game. Without those boxes present, the Super Arm is 100% useless.

Even when you do find the requisite boxes, the Super Arm comes with severe limitations. Once you lift a box, all you can do is stand in place or throw it. You can only throw

it straight ahead, which will cause it to shatter into multiple fragments that fly forward in a predetermined and (somewhat) wide spread. But that's about it. Once you run out of boxes, you're pretty much back to being helpless. Gutsman, of course, doesn't have to deal with this limitation. So maybe Mega Man doesn't command quite as many infinite possibilities as the rumors suggest.

The Super Arm does come in very useful in two locations where boxes form deliberate obstructions. However, you can also use the Thunder Beam to shatter boxes, so... Super Arm is kind of lame.



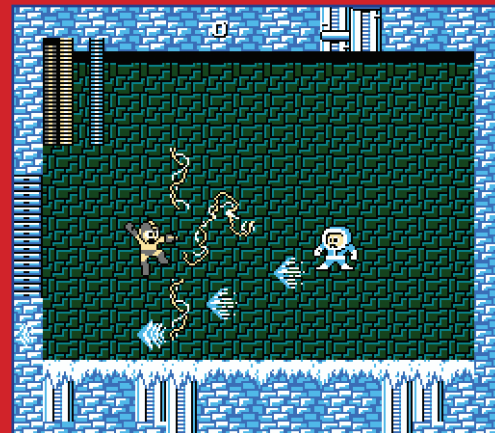
THUNDER BEAM

Speaking of the Thunder Beam, it is by far the most ludicrously powerful weapon in the game. It's as devastating as Super Arm is worthless. And you know this to be true as soon as you acquire it, because Elecman can destroy you in three shots, which he fires in rapid succession.

But unlike Super Arm, Thunder Beam is even more amazing in your hands than in its original owner's. While Elecman can blast you with rapid bolts of electricity, when you use Thunder Beam it shoots in three directions at once. Mega Man doesn't have many options for vertical attacks in this game, so the tripartite capabilities of the Thunder Beam prove to be extremely valuable – especially in stages where you're climbing ladders (though admittedly the first of the two big instances of this comes at the

beginning of Elecman's stage, which obviously means you won't have acquired his weapon yet). It's both powerful and versatile, capable of hitting foes that would otherwise be unreachable.

Not only does the Thunder Beam pass through walls, it also passes through enemies rather than being absorbed. This ties in with the game's most infamous exploit, which takes advantage of the Thunder Beam's persistence, long length, and the fact that damage against foes is registered anew each time you unpause the game to allow you to destroy any enemy that takes damage from the Thunder Beam in a single shot by rapidly pausing and unpausing the game. But, honestly, even without this particular cheat, it's still the most devastating item in Mega Man's arsenal.



ICE SLASHER

Easily the most misleading weapon name in the game, the Ice Slasher does not in fact slash. Unless you use it against Fireman, who is weak to its icy stylings, the Ice Slasher inflicts no damage whatsoever on foes. Instead, this tool – and I stress tool, because it really doesn't constitute a weapon in any real sense of the world outside of two limited situations in the course of the game – clearly takes its cues from *Metroid's* Ice Beam. Which would make sense; if you were designing a Famicom platform shooter in mid-to-late 1987, where else would you look but the meatiest, most intricate, most revolutionary expression of the genre to date? Like Samus' Ice Beam, the Ice Slasher freezes foes in mid-action. It's less about turning something cold than inflicting a zero-point stasis on that object, rendering it complete immobile for a brief time regardless of where it

may be at the moment. Stationary, running, falling, leaping, whatever – it arrests an enemy, including its inertia, until the effect wears off. Unlike the Ice Beam, however, this weapon doesn't work like a toggle; shooting a foe a second time once it's frozen has no effect. The second shot doesn't render damage, and it doesn't unfreeze the enemy. However, Mega Man can switch to a different weapon during the freeze duration to pump a frozen foe full of plasma (or peas?), making this device functionally different from, say, *Mega Man 2's* Time Stopper.

Ice Slasher also has the ability to freeze the fire columns that appear early in Fireman's stage (and Dr. Wily's lair), which once again repeats the motif of Mega Man tipping you off to a boss' weakness with the sandbox elements that appear throughout a stage.



FIRE STORM

Really the game's only weapon to offer a reasonable go-to alternative to the P shooter, the Fire Storm combines reasonable offensive, a low cost for use, a basic movement pattern (the projectile flies straight ahead at a rapid clip), and a moderate defensive element to be quite a helpful device. While expensive enough to use that you can't make it your new basic weapon in every stage, the Fire Storm works well in most situations.

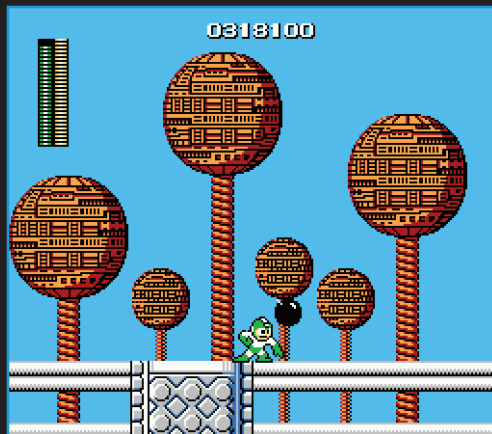
It's particularly useful against small, speedy robots with erratic patterns, such as Fleas: The projectiles move quickly and have

a wider hit box than standard arm cannon bullets, so they cover a reasonable swath of screen quite nicely. Meanwhile, every time you activate the Fire Storm, a small circular projectile spins rapidly around Mega Man, inflicting damage on anything it touches during its brief orbit. If a quick enemy slips past your cannon fire, the shield bit is likely to take it out.

The Fire Storm is most powerful against Bombman. And where do Fleas appear more frequently? That's right, toward the beginning of Bombman's stage. Honestly, the game is its own strategy guide.



HYPER BOMB



At the other end of the utility spectrum from Fire Storm is the Hyper Bomb, which offers devastating power in a package that practically guarantees you won't be able to connect with it.

When you "fire" Hyper Bomb, you actually produce a gigantic bomb out of thin air and chuck it in a short, low arc. It's very cartoon-like. It's also very impractical, as the bomb doesn't explode on impact; it'll pass right through an enemy, bouncing slightly as it burns up the momentum of your toss and comes to a rest. Once it's stopped moving, it explodes.

The explosion is admittedly powerful and the splash effect is quite wide, so if you manage to time it right the Hyper Bomb just shreds bad guys. The problem is in the timing, though. Few enemies in this game are stationary, and those that remain fixed to a single spot tend to pour bullets onto the screen (such as

Screw Turrets) or else spend most of their time securely buckled down beneath some kind of shield (Metool helmets, Sniper Joe shields, etc.). Throwing a Hyper Bomb leaves you vulnerable to the former type's attacks as you can't switch between weapons while a bomb is on the screen, and it forces you to try and time your attacks against the latter type to fall within their vanishingly brief windows of opportunity.

The Hyper Bomb can be situationally useful; it's the only device other than Rolling Cutter capable of destroying a Spine, so in areas where Spines patrol narrow ledges or wells, the wide splash effect of the bombs and the sluggish default movement of the Spines works to your advantage. Otherwise, though, you'll probably only whip this stupid thing out to fight Gutsman, who is weak to its explosions.

MAGNET BEAM

Bafflingly, the Hyper Bomb doesn't even shatter destructible walls the way the Thunder Beam does. Which means, idiotically, you can't use it to get the final "weapon" in the game: The Magnet Beam.

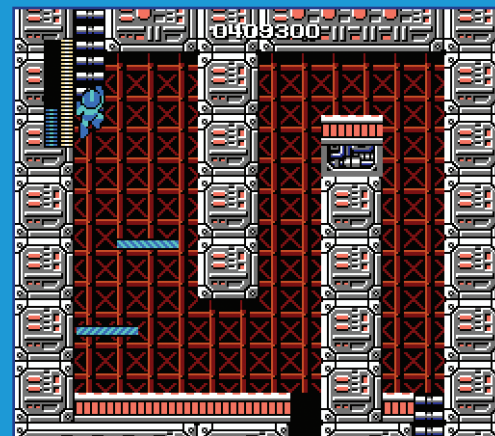
The Magnet Beam is weird. It's clearly a precursor to *Mega Man 2*'s Items 1 through 3 and *Mega Man 3*'s Rush devices, but its presence in the game feels haphazard. It appears in a seemingly random location during the climb up the middle portion of Elecman's stage, hidden behind a few blocks that can only be cleared away with the Thunder Beam (which obviously you won't have during your first fight through Elecman's area) or the Guts Arm (which you're not likely to have if you take the "default" order of bosses and take on Cutman first and Gutsman last). In fact, until you get really good at the drop lifts at the beginning of Gutsman's stage, you probably can't even clear that level until you acquire the Magnet Beam!

Worse, once you reach Dr. Wily's lair, the area above requires you to have the Magnet Beam in hand – there's no other way to reach the latter high in the ceiling. But once you get to the Dr. Wily phase of the game, you can't exit out of his stage, even at the Game Over screen. So if you pass up the Magnet Beam, you render the game unwinnable. Whoops.

As tools go, though, it's worth acquiring as quickly as possible. The Magnet Beam

fires out a harmless line of persistent beams that allow Mega Man to hop aboard and use them as platforms. The rays only stay on screen for a few seconds, and it can be tough to gauge their presence thanks to the NES' hardware quirks (the console had very limited capabilities when it came to rendering multiple sprites on the same line, so the beams flicker to the point of near-invisibility while they're active). But despite these drawbacks, the ability to create your own platform is invaluable in certain areas. The drop lifts in Gutsman's stage, for example. Or the vast gulfs of empty space with those stupid glitchy attack platforms in Iceman's level. Or the vanishing block mazes.

In fact, that's the saving grace for the Magnet Beam/Dr. Wily design oversight: The tool is so useful in certain annoying stages that any sane player will prioritize its acquisition to avoid having to deal with the game's more annoying platforming sequences. Despite its flaws, the Magnet is an interesting element that echoes the influence of arcade-style action adventure games like *Tower of Druaga* and *The Goonies*, giving the player an extra tool for ease of play that exists outside their standard arsenal. Unfortunately, it's not optional, even though it's kind of presented that way... but the team learned from their design mistakes for future games. And isn't that what sequels are all about?



POWERED UP: MAGNET MADNESS

Mega Man: Powered Up existed to rectify the failings of the original NES game, incorporating new additions like the two bosses who supposedly were culled for reasons of space and memory. But perhaps the most significant change wasn't the insertion of two new bosses into the mix but rather the removal of the Magnet Beam.

This means that infamous sticking points, like the area above and the horrible floating platforms in Iceman's stage, were reworked for the PSP game to be playable without the Magnet Beam. To make up for their removal, each stage had secret areas accessible only with various special powers.

In short, it was a near-flawless victory in almost every way... except, unfortunately, where vanishing blocks were concerned. No more shortcuts to get past those in the remake, I'm afraid.

STAGE BREAKDOWN 1

As noted before, Gutsman's stage is a terrible place to begin playing *Mega Man* if you're a first-time player. It's a great starting point for an experienced pro, because it's a good jumping-in point on the rock-paper-scissors ring of enemy weaknesses. I also like it because of the tricky lifts in the opening area – if I can make it past them without any trouble, I'm in the right "zone" to play *Mega Man*. If not, I should play a

baby game instead. Like, say, *Mega Man 2* on Normal difficulty.

Part of what makes the Gutsman level so poor for newcomers comes from the difficulty level of the lifts and enemies here, but really there's a more fundamental design problem at work: Mechanically, Gutsman's level doesn't reflect the character.

Conceptually, Gutsman is meant to be a construction labor robot, clearing away heavy rubble, lifting debris, carrying materials. And, aesthetically, his level reflects this concept – it seems incomplete, a

rocky canyon in which rough trestles hold up broken bridges and belt lifts drop their contents due to damage along their tracks. But in terms of hazards, nothing really mirrors Gutsman's skills or style.

Gutsman attacks by leaping at you with such seismic force that Mega Man is stunned and helpless by the impact, leaving you immobile as the tremors cause a boulder to fall into Gutsman's hands for him to toss at you. Even if you manage to avoid the tiny quakes' effects, the boulder projectiles shatter upon impact with the floor, disintegrating into a spray of debris that covers the back half of the room – a tricky hazard to leap. He's not tremendously difficult to fight once you get the timing and pattern of his jumps down, but unlike many of the other bosses in *Mega Man*, nothing he does has precedent in his stage.

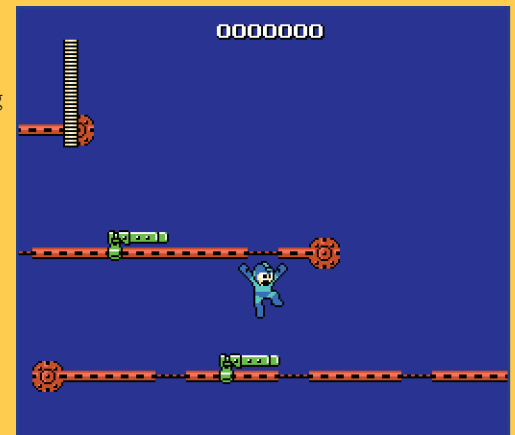
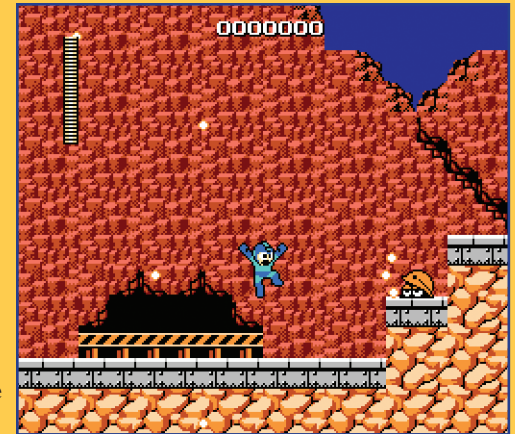
More crucially, there's no tipoff whatsoever to his r-p-s weakness, Bombman. Sure, it makes sense from a logistical standpoint that the construction robot would be vulnerable to the demolition robot's weapon (albeit nihilistically slavish to the concepts of entropy, suggesting that it's easier to destroy than to build). However, nowhere in Gutsman's level does the Hyper Bomb feel like a more efficacious solution than just shooting as fast as possible with the default P beam.

For instance, if the Hyper Bomb could crack a Metool's shell, you'd have all the info you needed right away as your first encounter puts you up against a stack of these guys. But because of the delay on the bombs' fuse and the very slim timing of the Metool's vulnerability, it's not a particularly effective combo. While the placement and behavior of these guys do convey some valuable strategic data, it falls more into the category of general gameplay mechanics than stage-specific rules.

Likewise, the most infamous element of Gutsman's stage – the broken trundles – in no way relate to the specifics of Gutsman or his weakness.

On the contrary, the most effective way past these devices (short of learning their quirks and timing) is to use the Magnet Beam to create a series of platforms and bypass the chasm altogether. But to wield the Magnet Beam, you need to have either (1) beaten this stage and Elecman's or (2) beaten Elecman's stage twice. Neither of these strategies is particularly helpful if you're making your way along a fresh playthrough, and the former strategy is utterly idiotic since anyone who can beat Gutsman's stage without the Magnet Beam doesn't need to come back once they have the Magnet Beam. Needless to say, the Hyper Bomb accomplishes nothing whatsoever here.

The Piket Men are the closest this stage comes to giving any



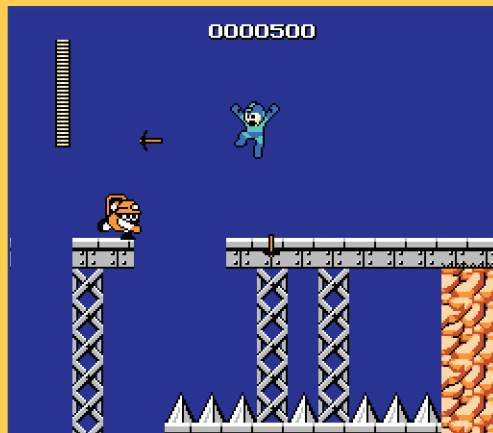
GUTSMAN'S STAGE

kind of tip-off to the boss. They bear a vague visual resemblance to Gutsman, combining Metools' hard hats with an anthropomorphic body, and they toss projectiles, kind of like Gutsman. Narratively, they're a nice touch – mining and excavation robots gone berserk – and they pose an interesting challenge since their steady stream of pickaxes homes in on Mega Man's position and forces you to remain in motion while firing and dealing with passive hazards like pits.

Additionally, the Hyper Bomb can take out these guys in a single hit. So there is a touch of hint-through-design happening here, but not in a particularly accessible way. The Hyper Bomb leaves you fairly helpless while you wait for it to explode, meaning that all the while you wait, you're dealing with a fusillade of picks. The arc of the Hyper Bomb limits its range, so you have to get in close to a Picket Man in order to toss one in the first place, and in most cases the presence of pits surrounding a Picket Man means you need to be precise with your throw and double-back once you make the toss. Unfortunately, the rapid speed of the pickaxes and Mega Man's slight inertia when he reverses direction leaves you likely to take a hit once you turn around. Ultimately, it's far more effective to use your basic weapon and inch forward while pumping projectiles into these guys, and you may never even think to try a Hyper Bomb here. Oh well.

Beyond the Picket Men, the level offers mostly passive hazards: A drop down a shaft lined with spikes.

You face only one last enemy before entering the antechamber before the boss: A Big Eye, which jumps at you. Big Eyes appear in several stages, and they're the most dangerous and durable enemies outside of bosses. They can soak up a ton of damage, and three hits will do in Mega Man. Their only offensive maneuver is to jump toward Mega Man; they can't shoot, and they operate on a



very consistent timer. That's enough to be tremendously dangerous, though; a few collisions will bring the action to a skidding halt.

Big Eyes have no special vulnerabilities, and they have only a single reactive behavior based on the player's actions: If you jump right before a Big Eye does, it'll perform a higher jump than usual – high enough to allow you to run beneath it safely. If you have the Ice Slasher, you can freeze it at the peak of a high jump to breeze past it (or just freeze it to pour a ton of bullets into it while it stands motionless).

In this case, the design of the level combines with the behavior of the Big Eye to create an extremely difficult situation. In fact, this is easily the trickiest Big Eye encounter with the game (another reason Gutsman's stage sucks for newcomers). Because the Big Eye jumps upward as it advances on you, there's very little room on these small steps to run beneath it. It's possible to make it through this encounter without taking damage, but it requires finesse and a touch of nerve.

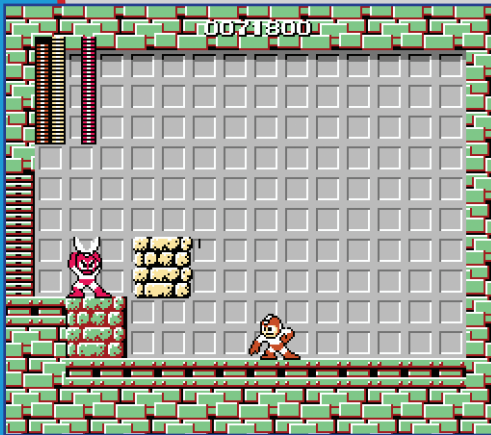
Beyond the Big Eye you'll find the short connective anteroom that precedes each boss room. Unlike in later *Mega Man* games, these usually span more than a single screen and contain enemies. If you die against the boss, you begin at the entrance to the anteroom, so it's functionally a checkpoint.

The Gutsman battle unfolds as described above, and defeating him earns you the Super Arm... for whatever that's worth.



STAGE BREAKDOWN 2

About all Cutman's stage has in common with Gutsman's stage is assonance. In terms of design – and particularly as a starting point for a newcomer to *Mega Man* – it proves to be far more effective. It doesn't front-load unreasonably difficult platforming challenges, it offers a variety of hazards, and it offers several strong hints about how you should go about defeating the boss at the end of the level.



Cutman himself may not be quite as simple to defeat as the game's first boss as Gutsman or Bombman, but he definitely belongs in the easier half of the Robot Masters. His strategy essentially consists of running back and forth while pausing at the edges of the room to toss his enormous blade, which behaves like a cartoon boomerang: It flies away from him, loops back, and returns to his hand regardless of where he may be at the moment.

Interestingly, Cutman's blade is integral. Unlike the Rolling Cutter you earn from him, which you can fire off in rapid success, he wields only a single blade, which he wears atop his head. This limitation arguably means Mega Man is better at using Cutman's weapon than Cutman is – but it also makes the battle against him fairly reasonable. While the blade is aloft, Cutman's only offensive maneuver is to tackle you (as always, collisions damage you but not your enemies). He's easy enough to leap, but the real trick of evading him comes from the fact that the blade is zeroing in on his location while he tries to plow into you. It's imperative to learn the blade's flight pattern so that you won't jump heedlessly into the thing as you try to evade his aggressive jogging.

Cutman is weak to Super Arm. Conveniently, Dr. Wily housed Cutman in room with two blocks that you can lift and chuck at him. This is excellent strategic thinking, along the lines of Wart from *Super Mario Bros. 2* installing a vegetable dispenser in his throne room despite being fatally allergic to vegetables. Damage values are all over the place in the original *Mega Man*; just as certain Robot Masters can end you in three hits, these two blocks will take down Cutman. The sequels would rebalance weapon

attack values considerably, but for the first game the team was still getting the hang of things – and, remember, they came from an arcade background, which means the idea of fair game balance was utterly foreign to them.

Still, this isn't amateur hour. Cutman's stage begins with a series of small buildings blocked up by those rock cubes that only the Super Arm can lift. You can't get through this blockade without the Super Arm (or Elec Beam, but trying to beat Elecman without the Rolling Cutter is one of the game's most difficult tasks, so...), which means that you need to take the more laborious ladder route up and down if you haven't defeated Gutsman.

On the other hand, if you do have the Super Arm, this stage opens with a perfect training ground. Not only can you create a shortcut by picking up the blocks that obstruct the way, you can easily take out the flying enemies who swoop down at you in a triangle formation by hucking the rocks at them. The blocks disintegrate in midair, creating a shrapnel spread that extends upward as it flies forward, essentially pelting everything within a 30-degree arc ahead and up. That's precisely the correct angle of attack to wipe out the flying enemy formations. It's a perfect opportunity to learn how this weapon works, not only demonstrating the advantage of using the right tool for the job but also prepping you for your fight against Cutman.

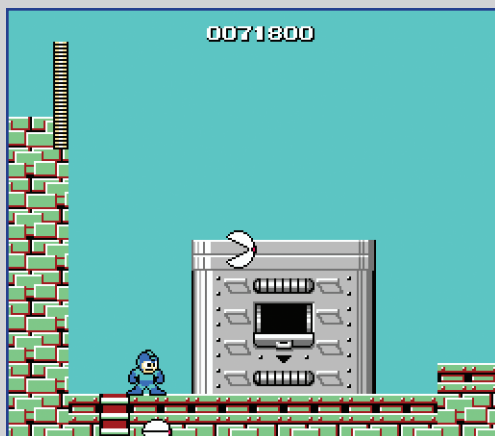


Otherwise, this sequence teaches you how to jump and shoot enemies, because these guys keep circling back and forth and dive-bombing you until you die.

Ladders factor prominently into Cutman's stage, as much of the level involves an ascent. It's not as aggressive about ladders as Elecman's stage, though; your ascent is broken up into different platforming tasks as you climb. Many of these enemies you face are predictable, pattern-based foes such as the turrets that emerge

CUTMAN'S STAGE

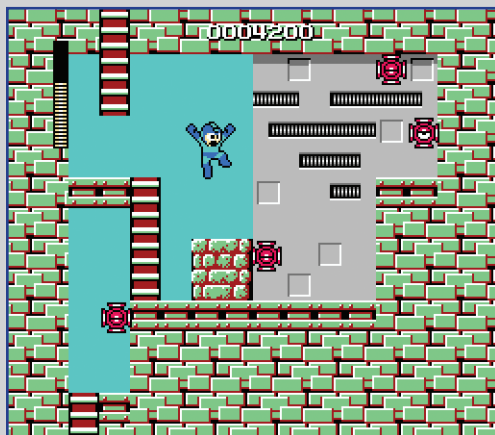
from their indestructible shells to fire at you and the red, lantern-like robots that move back and forth along a single track (either horizontal or vertical) at regular intervals. Amidst these



foes, which can be beaten easily with patience, you also have more unpredictable threats like the blue Fleas that hop around erratically. A simple screen like this makes use of several of Mega Man's basic skills and teaches players when to be aggressive and quick and when to be more patient – a simple but effective bit of level

design and enemy placement.

Interestingly, you'll occasionally come across these devices: Rolling Cutter dispensers. Blades fly out of the open slot, arcing upward toward Mega Man's location. They have a fairly limited horizontal range, but they also spill out at a fairly rapid clip, so you need to time your movements to squeeze between blades, and keep moving once you commit to the action. Aside from the flame pillars in Fireman's stage, these blades mark the only instance of a Robot



Master's weapon appearing mid-stage as an environmental hazards unconnected with any particular enemy. They're strange yet interesting.

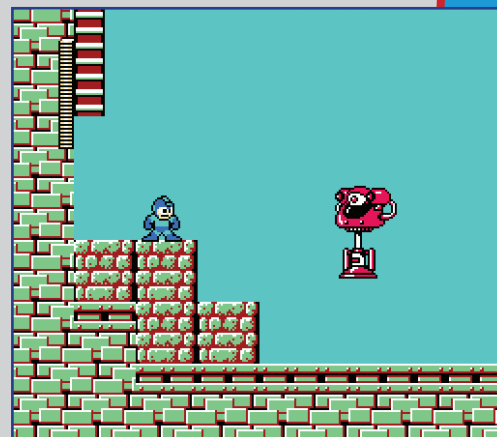
This screen is another example of really great level design: It seems utterly overwhelming at first, with four moving enemies that can span the entire screen. But again, they move in a regular, pre-

dictable, limited, consistent pattern. You're completely safe where you enter the screen, at the lower left, and will be in no danger until you take action. You can take out three of the enemies in a single action by tossing the brick in the center of the room with the Super Arm, though of course you need to make sure the robots are all in the proper places before you make the throw.

There's a tradeoff involved in using the Super Arm, too. The brick is blocking the center robot and limiting its movement, keeping Mega Man safe if he sticks to the left. If you remove the block, it can traverse the entire screen, leaving you potentially vulnerable if you don't destroy the robot immediately.

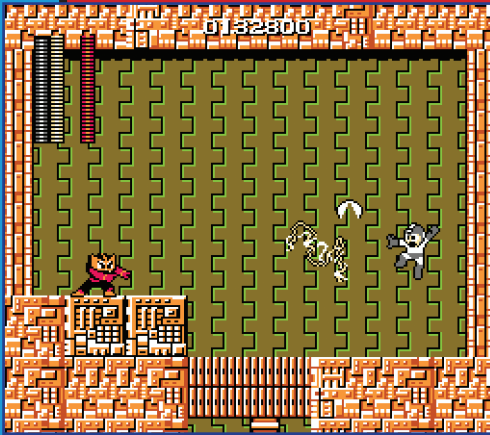
And finally, the obligatory Big Eye encounter. While this setup bears some similarity to the one at the end of Gutsman's stage, with Mega Man dropping from above left and facing a big stompy robot approaching from the right, it stands apart thanks to the fact that you can chuck bricks at it. They do heavy damage to the Big Eye and make this encounter much less harrowing than the other.

In short, you can definitely see why *Mega Man's* creators placed Cutman's stage as the default cursor position on the level select screen. It presents first-time players with a number of diverse challenges, yet none that feel insurmountable. With the P cannon, Cutman proves difficult but not impossible. Meanwhile, the abundance of interactive bricks that can be heaved with the Super Arm gives the player ample opportunity to practice with the weapon to which the stage boss is vulnerable. It works both as a first stage and a challenge to be dealt with further into the stage progression chain, and the experience varies considerably depending on whether or not you've beaten Gutsman. In a lot of ways, Cutman's stage is the gold standard for *Mega Man* level design, and the series would gravitate more toward this approach discipline than to the style seen in Gutsman's stage.



STAGE BREAKDOWN 3

The chain of weapon effectiveness versus bosses can be a tricky thing in *Mega Man* games. Sometimes it makes perfect, logical sense; other times, not so much. For example, *Mega Man 6*. How do you determine what the Yamato Spear is good against?



It's basically a pointy stick that embodies ancient Japan, which isn't really a weak point, thematically speaking, against any of the bosses that appear in the game... so they arbitrarily decided to make it effective against Knight Man. Well, I hope it was arbitrary. Otherwise there's a little cultural snobbery happening there.

Mega Man does its best, within its limited means. The entire chain of weaknesses draws its inspiration from rock-paper-scissors, so of course Gutsman's Super Arm – which allows you

to heave rocks at enemies – is good against Cutman's boomerang-like scissors. Alas, *Mega Man* lacks a Paper Man; and even Wood Man (who could theoretically be pulped into paper) doesn't appear until *Mega Man 2*. So who does the Rolling Cutter work against? Elecman.

“But why would scissors – which are probably made of metal! – be good against electricity?” you wonder. Well, most likely they're not. But electricity is conducted by cables, and indeed the backgrounds of Elecman's stage frequently depict cables, wires, and other electrical conduits running between the various mechanical devices embedded in the walls. You're not cutting Elecman's electricity; you're cutting his cables. Tokuro Fujiwara, Keiji Inafune, and Akira Kitamura (and their team) put some thought into how the game's mechanics fit together, and if you stop and think logically about it, you can actually puzzle out at least some portions of the ideal level sequence without the need to experiment.

As for Elecman himself, he holds the crown for being the single most difficult Robot Master in the game. The only other boss who hits as hard as he does is Iceman – three hits of their weapons will shatter Mega Man – but Elecman's behavior makes him nearly

impossible to defeat unless you have the Rolling Cutter. Air Man has nothing on this guy.

The challenge that Elecman poses comes from his erratic movements. He runs quickly back and forth in his room, pausing only to toss bolts of electricity at you. The Thunder Beam travels in a dense sine wave pattern that effectively makes its hit box about 50% taller than Mega Man and twice as wide. You can jump over it with perfect timing, but it moves quickly and Elecman likes to throw them in rapid succession. Worse, he also likes to get right up in your face, which introduces the hazard of possible collisions while also greatly reducing the amount of time you have to react to his attacks.

Elecman's level reflects the boss' high difficulty level. It's a grueling, dangerous stage from start to finish. Top that off with a boss who can destroy you in seconds and you have a stage that clearly communicates the fact that it's meant for experienced players, not as a first-time venture.

That being said, Elecman's stage still does a pretty respectable job of cluing you in to the tool you'll need for victory. As noted before, the first screen you face places you at the bottom of a shaft lined by staggered platforms patrolled by Spines. The most effective weapon against Spines? The Rolling Cutter.

You can get through here without the Rolling Cutter, but the only other weapon that kills Spines is the Hyper Bomb. Otherwise, the most you can do is stun them for a few seconds – basically long enough to hop up to the platform, perform a tiny half-jump to bring you high enough to shoot the next Spine, then jump across to the next platform. The low height of the ceilings here requires perfect control so that you don't bump your head and fall when you make the leap.

Without the Spines, though, the pressure disappears. The Rolling Cutter transforms this screen from nerve-wracking to breezy.

Likewise, the Rolling Cutter proves invaluable against these guys, too. They appear from the top left and bottom right in two packs of three and drift vertically toward the opposite end of the screen. When they pull even with Mega Man, they unleash a pair of electrical beams above and below him. If you have very, very good nerves, you can wait these out, but the slightest movement brings disaster – and sometimes the beams will hit you even if you think you're situated safely (*Mega Man* is a bit glitchy).

Should one of those energy beams hit you, you'll lose

ELECMAN'S STAGE



your grip on the ladder and plummet to the screen below. Given that Elecman's entire stage is one long ascent (with only two short interstices that scroll horizontally for a short ways), you definitely want to avoid losing that progress. Handily, the Rolling Cutter's relatively slow movement and vertical drift make it great for taking out these guys. The Thunder

Beam is even better, but obviously you won't have that your first time through the stage.

At the pinnacle of the first leg of the ascent, past the enemies and ladders and beam emitters, you'll reach *Mega Man's* indigenous, trademark act of hatred: Vanishing blocks.

Vanishing blocks – or perhaps more correctly, reappearing blocks – are single-block platforms that materialize and disappear in a regular, consistent patterns. Their predictability is your only advantage when dealing with them. If you can get the timing down and figure out how and where you should be jumping to, you can generally make it through these gauntlets with little trouble.

Unfortunately, they require excellent timing on your part,



especially for instances in which you have to leap upward through the space a block will materialize in as it's about to appear. If you mistime it, the block will phase in as you pass through its space, pushing you to one side or the other. This happens quickly and leaves little time for correcting your leap, and in a worst-case scenario

(such as here, at the top of a tall shaft) it can push you into a pit, either killing you instantly in a vertically scrolling situation or just plain killing you if it's a bottomless pit. Disappearing blocks are the worst.

The first instance isn't so bad, but the second screen (which appears immediately above this one) forces you to dash across the blocks as they appear side-by-side (and quickly phase out) above a gaping chasm.

Eventually – once you reach the top of the first shaft and survive a tense gauntlet of tiny platforms leading to the second half of Elecman's level – you'll reach the infamous Magnet Beam.

The Magnet Beam appears locked in behind a trio of rocks. The only way to reach it is to toss the rocks aside with the Super Arm or evaporate them with the Thunder Beam. Of course, what makes this tricky is that the first time through Elecman's stage, you won't have the Thunder Beam. And those early trundles over the pits in Gutsman's stage require a deft touch and good timing, and are far more easily bypassed with the Magnet Beam. So, the conundrum here: The Magnet Beam is extremely valuable, but in order to claim it you need to clear a high barrier to difficulty.

This isn't quite on par with certain RPGs that give you an ultimate super weapon only after you defeat the most powerful enemy in the game (thereby negating the need for your prize), but it definitely comes from the same school of cruelty. That being said, the situation isn't as backward as it would seem.

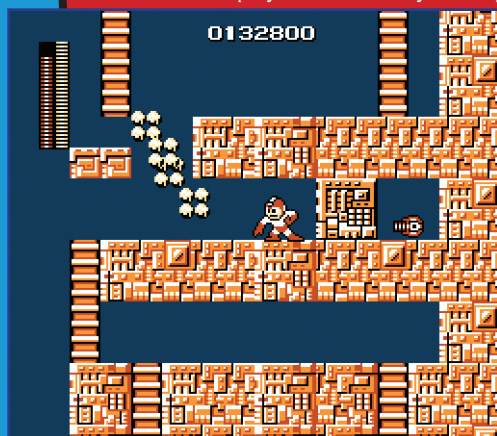
Experienced *Mega Man* fans tend to view the games in terms of simply clearing stages as efficiently as possible, then moving along to the next. And that's fine. But your first time through any *Mega Man* game generally involves a fair amount of trial-and-error – not in a bad, obtuse way, but rather in an exploratory sense as you get a feel for the new mechanics, the unique hazards of each stage, and try to see which Robot Master you can fell without exploring the weakness chain. That fact held doubly true back in 1987, when *Mega Man's* any-stage-you-like approach was new and unfamiliar. Games that played like this were still fresh to the world, and certainly one that combined platform shooting mechanics and semi-nonlinearity demanded a great deal of experimentation from players.

Mega Man lacks a password feature or any persistence once you shut down the system. You weren't meant to complete the game your first time through. As with nearly all games of this era, the idea behind *Mega Man* was that you'd play it a bit at a time,

STAGE BREAKDOWNS 3 & 4

and as you went you'd familiarize yourself with its rules, the level layouts, and the behavior of enemies. Each time you played, you'd do a little better than the last until you could finally finish the game.

In that context, the Magnet Beam was there to intrigue. A first-time player wasn't likely to simply sail on past it and reach Dr.



Wily's lair without it, because you would have played through Elecman's stage many, many times as you became familiar with the game. Every time you passed the Magnet Beam, you'd see it and wonder about it. Eventually, you'd experiment with the weapons that could break the walls barricading it and figure out how to claim it as your own. To that point, *Mega Man* is the only entry in the original NES *Mega Man* trilogy to allow you to return to completed stages. In

the course of playing, you'd have eventually claimed the Thunder Beam and, in using it, noticed that it could break the blocks that the Super Arm lifts. Or you'd have mastered the trundles in Gutsman's stage and figured out the mysterious Super Arm. At some point, one way or another, you'd have unlocked the Magnet Beam. And once you'd done so, you'd have realized its value and made a point of claiming it in subsequent plays.

At least, speaking as someone who played through *Mega Man* when it was still the only game in the series, that was my experience.

The Magnet Beam setup isn't without its failings – it can be missed – but I think those issues are more pronounced in the age of save states, where even official reissues of the game don't require as much experimentation and dedication as the old NES cart did. Still, it's important to keep in mind the era into which *Mega Man* came into the world. Its contemporaries were things like *Milon's Secret Castle*, *Castlevania II*, *Zelda II*, and *The Goonies*, games where secrets were completely invisible and hidden and required pure luck or stubborn persistence to solve. Even *Super Mario Bros. 2 (USA)* demanded memorization and luck to find all the hidden Mushrooms

and Warp Zones. By contrast, this is the solitary hidden secret in *Mega Man* – and it's not even hidden, just blocked off!

Mega Man feels like a standard-bearer for transparent game design. While it wasn't perfect (seriously, the Super Arm took me ages to figure out), the nuances of *Mega Man*'s action came from the interactions of powers with the game world and the enemies within it. Nothing was tucked away or demanded chance or blind luck. While it wasn't perfect, it was part of an important late-'80s trend of giving action games greater depth without compromising the integrity and fairness of their design.

Whether or not you pick up the Magnet Beam, you still have to deal with this guy, who proves that the developers hadn't entirely ironed out the random luck from the game. While you have just enough time to scramble up the ladder at the lower left and fake the Big Eye out with a short hop (causing it to jump high enough that you can run beneath it), if you don't know that trick you're likely to just cling to the ladder and hope he goes sailing over your head as he jumps off the edge. And sometimes he does! But the ladder doesn't register as solid for enemies, so if he passes through the ladder, he'll smack into your head as he falls, damaging Mega Man and knocking you to the previous screen... which means you have to climb up and deal with him again.

And it doesn't get easier once you enter the final antechamber to Elecman's room. You continue ascending – the only antechambers in the entire game in which you have to move upward – climbing a two-screen-high ladder surrounded by beam emitters that operate at close quarters on tight timing. You can make it to the top (and the deadly battle with Elecman) if you move patiently... but if you screw up, you'll plummet and have to make the climb again. Definitely not a stage for beginners.

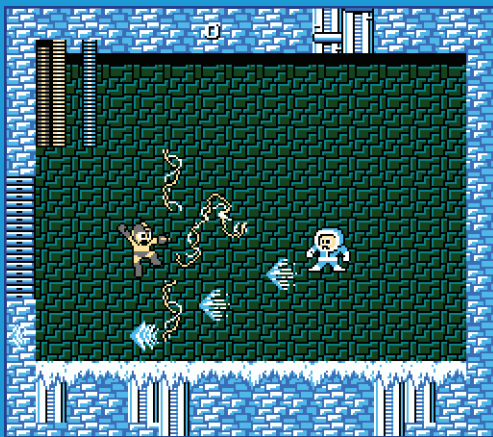


ELECMAN & ICEMAN'S STAGES

While I will defend the honor of the Magnet Beam to the death, there is really no justification for Iceman's level. It is not a good or fun level. It combines one of the infamous worst things about platformers – low-friction iced surfaces – with the game's two most irritating unique mechanics. By far, it represents the low point of *Mega Man*. Everything that is terrible or simply not fun about *Mega Man* has been quarantined in this stage.

If each level is meant to teach newcomers a lesson about the game, the Iceman stage's teachings amount to, "You should go play something else instead."

But first things first. Iceman himself waits at the end of his self-titled stage, and he's one of the heaviest hitters in the game;



his weapon, Ice Slasher, tears into you with the same force as Elecman's Thunder Beam. Thankfully, the reverse is true as well: The Thunder Beam utterly shreds Iceman, hitting him every bit as hard as it does you. Three hits and he's down.

Iceman's use of the Ice Slasher differs noticeably from Mega Man's. Where you fire off a single blast that

tears across the screen as quickly as a P bullet, Iceman fires three at a time in a stair-stepped configuration. However, these projectiles move at what I can only refer to as glacial speed, inching across the screen and offering a deft player just enough leeway to jump between them safely.

Iceman himself is similarly sluggish. Of all the game's bosses, he's easily the least mobile. He generally sticks to the back half of the room rather than bum-rushing Mega Man. Rather than going for the melee strike, he prefers to use his weapon and kindly offers enough room to maneuver around his attacks. What a swell guy. Aside from moving back and forth in his preferred quarter of the screen, he also leaps up and drifts slowly to the ground while firing ice daggers in groups of three – first in an ascending staircase pattern, then descending. Repeat ad nauseum.

Since you need to stay busy dodging his projectiles (and remember that in the original *Mega Man*, a boss' on-screen attacks continue to follow their path and remain a hazard even after you destroy the boss himself), the Thunder Wave proves quite handy here. Its wide sine wave pattern guarantees that you'll hit Iceman regardless of his position provided you point in the right direction when you shoot.

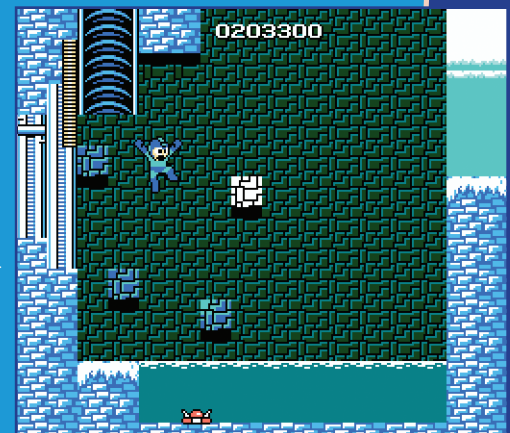
Fittingly, the Thunder Beam comes in handy throughout the stage. For instance, the Crazy Razies early in the stage can be a headache if you don't destroy their upper bodies first... but the Thunder Wave hits them square in the face, trivializing the threat. Likewise, the Pengs that attack in the second half of the first portion of the stage fly in a sine wave pattern, and the Thunder Beam's huge hit box means it's practically guaranteed to take out a Peng provided you attack from the center point of its wave pattern.

Thunder Beam doesn't do jack to help out with the slippery ice that covers all the dry (that is, not immersed in water) surfaces of this stage.

Thunder Beam don't do jack in the entirety of the second half of the level, which makes you pine for the slippery-ice portion of the level.

Welcome to *Mega Man*'s most irritating indigenous mechanic: Disappearing blocks. Yes, they also appear in Elecman's stage, but those instances are considerably more mild than what you

encounter here. First, those blocks appeared in neat, tidy formations, whereas in Iceman's stage they seem somewhat scattershot, forcing you to master six to eight consecutive leaps that involve multiple heights as well as a slight bit of backtracking – sometimes you need to leap backward in order to find purchase. Secondly, Elecman's disappearing blocks appeared on screens without any hazards besides falling, whereas here the ground beneath the blocks is patrolled by Spines. And, finally, these jump sequences are considerably more protracted than the ones in Elecman's stage.



STAGE BREAKDOWNS 4 & 5

No, the Thunder Beam won't help here... but the two-part disappearing blocks sequence definitely makes the case that Elecman's stage is meant to be one of the last you tackle in the your *Mega Man* playthrough. If you start with Cutman (or earlier up the proper chain of progression) and follow the path of least resistance, you'll come to Iceman's stage with the Rolling Cutter and, quite possibly, the Magnet Beam. The former takes care of the Spines, while the latter lets you completely skip past the disappearing blocks. The blocks phase in as platformers that take you up over high walls obstructing your way, but you can just lay down



up over high walls obstructing your way, but you can just lay down a couple of successive Magnet Beam shots and not have to worry about the vanishing blocks.

The Magnet Beam is almost incalculably essential in the area that appears next: A wide expanse of gaping pits linked by a series of floating platforms. Alas, this is the single worst part of the game thanks to a collision of poor design decisions as well as crummy programming. A double whammy!

The eyes on these orange platforms denote the fact that they are, in fact, enemies. They drift in floaty circles, occasionally moving close enough to one another that you can hop across them to advance. But because they're enemies, this causes two

complications. One, those little pipes on their flanks occasionally fire bullets across the screen. This poses no threat if the one you're standing on fires, but if a platform opposite shoots while it's drifting near your level... not only do you take a hit, the massive knock-back that comes with damage (seriously, Mega Man slides back a whole tile and seems to be in a hit stun animation forever) means you're probably going to reel right off the platform and into the pit.

Even if you manage to avoid these projectiles, the platforms themselves pose a terrible hazard. Thanks to their flaky hit detection, their neutral upper decks sometimes will unintentionally just sort of stop registering as ground, causing you to fall through to hit the dangerous robot below. Or else you'll inexplicably take a hit and go sliding off from hitstun. They're especially dangerous when they rise, since *Mega Man* doesn't treat them as ground, and sometimes you'll clip through the top as it climbs and die.

And to make matters worse, the entire time an endless stream of Pengs approaches from the right, forcing you to keep alert from an additional hazard.

It's possible to get through this sequence without the Magnet Beam, but doing so feels like a stunt to prove how cool you are, like playing a naked run of *Dark Souls* or something. This part of *Mega Man* legitimately demonstrates poor design and programming, and the one reason this is even slightly tolerable is that you can just lay down a bunch of Magnet Beams to completely bypass it. This is entirely by design; the column in the center of the pits contains a large weapon energy capsule to refill your Magnet Beam midway through.

Still, the presence of an out doesn't redeem this portion of the level. Like Elecman, Iceman's stage is not for beginners.

ICEMAN & FIREMAN'S STAGES

The traditional vision of Hell involves flames and burning. But Mega Man goes with the Dante Alighieri version, in which the deepest pits of Hell appear as frozen wastes, an icy tomb for Satan himself. Compared to Iceman's brutal level, Fireman's seems comparatively pleasant. Despite being set in a blazing furnace crammed with open pits of molten matter and impassable geysers of flame, the design of this stage embraces newcomers and pros alike with smart design and relatively few unreasonable challenges.

Fireman himself, however, doesn't really make an ideal starting point for a fresh playthrough of the game. He doesn't hit nearly as hard as Elecman or Iceman, which befits the not-

necessarily-for-experts design of his level, but he can be maddeningly difficult to best. Fireman plays it aggro, getting right up in your face and pelting you with his weapon, the Fire Storm.

As is often the case in this game, the Robot Master's version of his weapon differs considerably from the way it works for Mega Man. The player's ver-

sion of the Fire Storm blasts small fireballs while a second ball rapidly circles Mega Man to function as a sort of shield; for Fireman, though, it takes the form of a wide wave about the height of Mega Man which flies straight ahead at a rapid clip. Meanwhile, a flame ignites on the ground beneath Mega Man and burns momentarily. To evade Fireman, you need to stay on the move to avoid being caught by the pilot light while making high jumps over his horizontal attacks and dodging his tackles.

This is more easily said than done, and despite not being as strong an attacker as some of his peers, Fireman can make short work of you. After all, you have to take shots at him between all that evasion, and even his weakness – the Ice Slasher – doesn't do nearly as much damage as some super-effective weapons do to their opposite numbers. That pilot light in particular is especially hard to avoid, since it bursts up beneath Mega Man every time

Fireman's direct attack crosses his path.

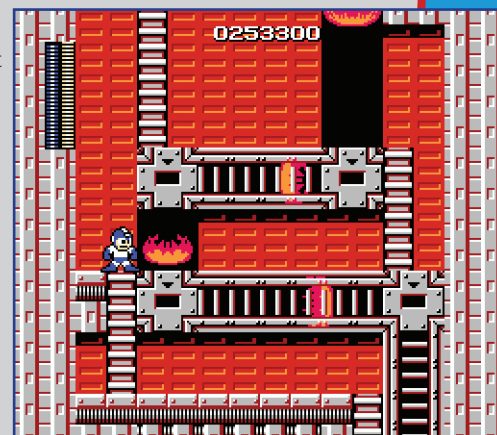
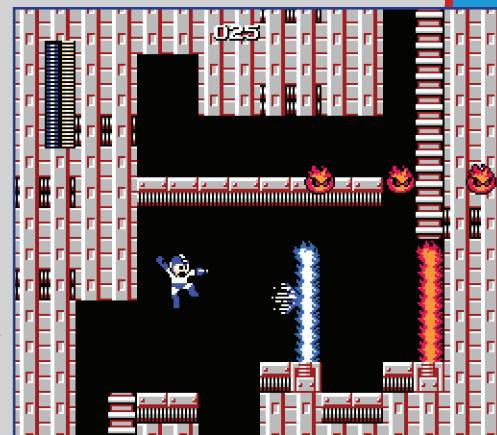
So, yes, Ice Slasher is your key weapon here, and it does a great job throughout the stage. On the starting screen, you can use it to freeze these pop-up turrets while they're exposed and plink them with P bullets as they're immobilized.

It's also incredibly valuable against these flame pillars, which rise and fall at regular intervals. Nothing can damage or destroy the columns of fire, but the Ice Slasher can freeze them and immobilize them.

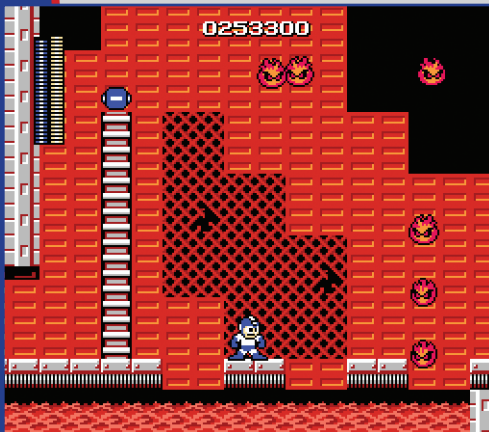
"Waves" seems to be the theme of this entire stage. Not only are you avoiding waves of fire, but the stage design itself follows a wave-like design, constantly undulating. You're moving up and down, left and right, constantly doubling back and forth on many of the stage's screens. It betrays the vintage of *Mega Man* – a game released in the early days of the platformer genre being a thing that involved scrolling. In single-screen platformers, every inch of real estate is precious; think back to *Donkey Kong* and Mario's left-and-right movements across the girders of the first stage. Fireman's stage calls back to that era with a twisting layout that I don't think is seen anywhere else in the series. As such, you get a lot more mileage out of the stage without it feeling padded, as every nook of the level is designed to make the most of the threats you face here.

At the high point of the stage, the vertical fire vents are complemented by fiery red variants on the beams in Elecman's stage. Yeah, they're palette swaps, but it works.

Less successful is this sequence, where a series of



STAGE BREAKDOWNS 5 & 6



(twisting, sinuous, wave-like) ducts conduct flames across the main path. These are the same bursts of fire that Fireman throws at you, which makes for both economy of cartridge storage space and a nice touch of thematic consistency, but unfortunately they also travel at high speeds. It's extremely difficult – possibly impossible? – to duck through these spaces without taking a hit.

You can, however, breeze through with the Magnet Beam. I question the design of a

sequence that's impossible to clear without the use of an optional

tool, but on the other hand this area is a lot less hateful than the pits in Iceman's stage. I suppose it's all relative.

The other feature that defines Fireman's stage is a preponderance of small platforms over seas of molten fluid or empty pits. While none of these create as tense a sensation as the tiny single-block platforms in Elecman's stage, they test your evasion and preemptive attacks. The Tackle Fires above rise from the flames in every area dotted with narrow footholds, descending again from the ceiling toward your current position. While the platforms themselves aren't particularly dangerous, the hazards from above approach at oblique angles and can potentially bump you into the flames – that excessive damage knockback at work.

Fittingly, the Ice Slasher makes a helpful weapon against the Tackle Fires, too, capable of freezing them mid-air. And there's even a massive energy refill right before the Robot Master chamber to encourage use of the Ice Slasher throughout. Cheap-hit ducts aside, a strong level.

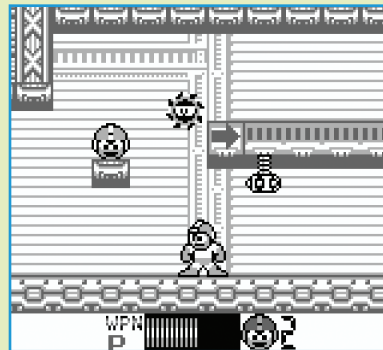
REMADE: ROCKMAN WORLD, AKA MEGA MAN IN DR. WILY'S REVENGE

Given *Mega Man*'s success on NES, it was inevitable that the game would eventually come to Game Boy, which effectively existed as the handheld counterpart to Nintendo's blockbuster console. Where some developers created legitimate NES sequels on Game Boy and others went for completely new spinoff titles, Capcom took a slightly different approach and remixed the NES games instead.

Mega Man in Dr. Wily's Revenge (called *Rockman World* in Japan) wasn't a straight remake — more like a remix, really. It took four of the original stages from *Mega Man* (skipping Gutsman and Bombman), and once those were complete sent players into entirely new Dr. Wily levels where several foes from *Mega Man 2* awaited. Additionally, a never-before-seen boss named Enker lurked in Wily's Castle as well.

The end results definitely were not an unqualified success. While the source material was solid, and in many ways the

remake patched over some of the original *Mega Man*'s flaws, it also suffered somewhat in its conversion to the handheld format.



The screen dimensions proved fairly cramped for the chunky sprites, which made their way from NES unaltered.

Some areas of the game became artificially difficult as a result of the reduced line of sight available to players, and the defects of the Game Boy's screen — its low contrast, limited colors, and laggy blur — only worsened these issues.

Boss fights in particular became a hair-pulling exercise, with horribly unbalanced damage levels.

Simply finding a boss that could actually be defeated with the standard weapon might actually have been the most difficult thing about *Dr. Wily's Revenge*, and the lack of a continue feature felt like a giant "screw you" to players. The Game Boy titles would eventually improve, but they got off to a lousy start.

FIREMAN & BOMBMAN'S STAGE

While I've saved it for last, Bombman's stage – the sixth and (in this listing) final of the stages in which you can kick off your odyssey in this very first *Mega Man* game – actually serves as an ideal stage in which to begin the game. It offers the fairest level designs, a diverse but not unreasonable set of enemies, and a boss at the end who can be destroyed with a reasonable amount of skill even

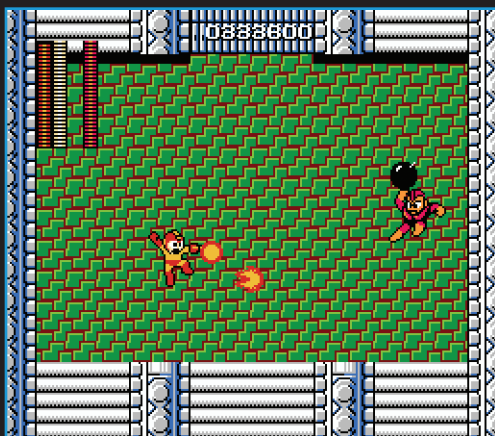
if you don't have access to the weapon to which he's weak. In short, it's a perfect introduction for someone learning the ropes of *Mega Man*'s mechanics.

The main downside, of course, being that Bombman's weapon is as horrible and ineffectual for you as it is for him. The very feature that makes this Robot Master such a pushover means you won't get much use out

of the weapon you collect through defeating him. I consider that a small downside to having such a sensible and approachable point in which to insert yourself into the Robot Master chain of weaknesses, though.

Bombman's pattern can seem intimidating to a newcomer, but it's actually quite simple and easy to work around. He attacks primarily by leaping across the screen and tossing bombs while making the jump. Generally, he makes a couple of small leaps toward Mega Man before making a larger bound across the screen. Once he lands, he tosses a couple of bombs before repeating the pattern.

While he's aggressive, he seems to move slowly enough that you can easily dodge his attacks. In truth, he doesn't really move slowly, but he does make use of his weapon much less frequently than most of the other Robot Masters, so you have fewer moving elements to worry about. Whereas Fireman moves constantly and fires constantly, Bombman takes and either/or approach: He's either jumping at you or tossing bombs at you, but never both.



This doesn't mean Bombman's a shoo-in. His smaller leaps target Mega Man, and his movements describe an arc that uses Mega Man's position when the jump beings as its landing point. And whereas Hyper Bombs have a delay fuse when Mega Man throws them, for Bombman they explode on impact – whether that impact is with the ground, or with Mega Man. There's a moderate splash effect when Hyper Bombs explode, increasing their utility for the player but also increasing the threat they pose.

On the other hand, Fireman's weapon works really well against Bombman. Not only does it have extra-effective attack power against him, but the orbiting fire shield means you don't even have to connect with your attacks to do damage. Because Bombman likes to get in close and hop over Mega Man with small, arcing leaps, he naturally intersects the path of the shield bit. It's a great example of logic at work in the weapon/boss pairing – even if it doesn't necessarily make sense to use fire to destroy a bomb, the mechanics of the Fire Storm subtly encourage you to employ it against him.

The hazards in Bombman's stage echo the boss' attack patterns. There are enemies who attack by shooting at Mega Man, but they tend to be stationary. And those who attack by leaping at him don't use projectiles and usually appear separately from the ones that employ projectiles.

Bombman is a very pattern-driven enemy, and patterns play heavily into his stage. The screw turrets from other stages (e.g. Fireman) appear here, attacking with a five-point radial spray of bullets, but later you also face the shielded gun emplacements from Cutman's stage, which fire off several bullets in an arc as well – but in this case they do it one at a time, posing a less direct hazard than the turrets that pop up from the floor but forcing you to recognize the pattern of their bullet spray and avoid stepping into an empty space that's about to see a bullet pass through it. Timing and spatial management are paramount here.



STAGE BREAKDOWN 6

You need to master a similar tactic around the pits that appear in the middle of the stage. Each pit appears adjacent to a two-tier platform (one low portion to the platform, one high) and disgorges small exploding football-like objects every few seconds. The footballs explode in mid-air, sending down yet another spray of bullets at regular angles (these falling in a shallow arc). The projectiles have a tendency to knock you into the pit if they connect, so it's imperative to time your jumps over the pits carefully in order to avoid both the footballs and their shrapnel.

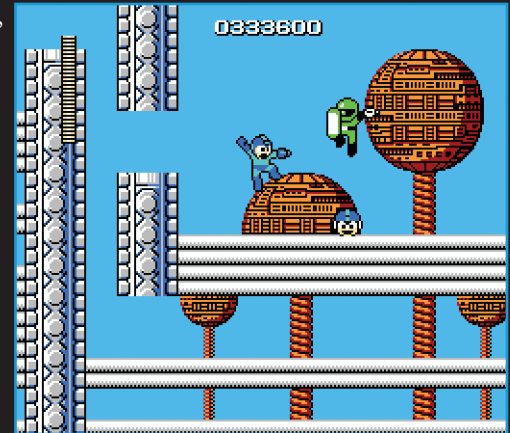
In contrast to the predictable regularity of the turrets and bombs throughout the stage, though, you have Sniper Joe. Fundamentally, he works like a Mega Man-sized Metool, basically. His shield protects him from all attacks, and you can only hit him when he lowers the shield to fire at you. That's more easily said than done, however, as his shield comes down just long enough for him to let loose three bullets in rapid succession, and each projectile moves at about the same clip as Mega Man's own default bullets. You have only a split second to dodge the bullets and return fire... though, handily, the Fire Storm works its indirect damage magic on him as well as it does most of the enemies in this stage.

Still, the similarity between Sniper Joe and Mega Man is one of the most interesting unspoken story elements in the game. Along with the Picket Men in Gutsman's stage, Sniper Joe is the

only humanoid, human-sized foe in the entire game that isn't a Robot Master, and Joe seems a lot cannier than Picket Men. Where the latter simply chuck picks at you ceaselessly, Joe shoots, stands, and hops in place unpredictably. He uses multiple tactics and seems to respond to Mega Man's actions, to a small degree. And then there's the way he basically wields Mega Man's own "P" arm cannon.

All in all, Sniper Joe makes for one of the game's more intriguing enemies – and clearly Capcom

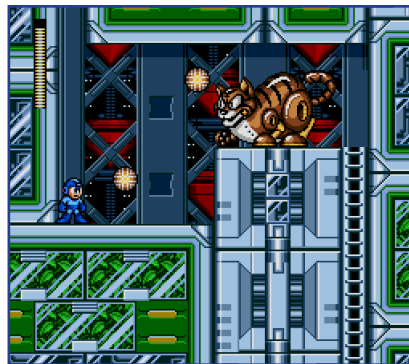
agreed, as Bombman's stage happens to be the only Robot Master level in which Sniper Joe appears... and the only Robot Master stage that lacks a Big Eye. Instead, you face off against another Sniper Joe at the end of the stage.



REMADE: THE WILY WARS

One of the stranger entries in the *Mega Man* series came in the form of *The Wily Wars*, a Sega Genesis remake-slash-compilation of the first three NES titles. Combining all 16 bosses into a consecutive free-for-all, *The Wily Wars* made some modest level design changes and gave the old 8-bit titles a decent but hardly jaw-dropping visual overhaul to bring them up to Genesis standards, more or less.

With the Robot Masters bested, the adventure moved into Dr. Wily's Castle. Not unlike the Game Boy remakes, these



castles stages featured a fair amount of new content, including a trio of new Robot Masters patterned after the Monkey King legend.

The Wily Wars only saw retail release in Japan and Europe (and even then in modest numbers), coming to America strictly as a download for the Sega Channel, which has long since ceased to exist. This scarcity makes it one of the rarest and most sought-after entries in the *Mega Man* series, though it's definitely a case of the product not living up to its legacy.



CUT MAN



GUTSMAN



ELECMAN



Dr.WILY



ICE MAN



FIREMAN



BOMBMAN

STAGE BREAKDOWN 7

With the six Robot Masters down, regardless of the order in which you tackled them, the game's final stage — or rather, set of stages — opens up to you: Dr. Wily's castle. At this point, you have a choice of where to go next; you can dive right into Wily's lair, or you can revisit the stages you've conquered. The game doesn't tell you this, though, and it doesn't lock Wily's levels away if you haven't collected the optional Magnet Beam, even though you can't complete these final stages without it.

That annoyance aside, Dr. Wily's stages bring the full fury of *Mega Man* to bear. These four stages are (mostly) the most difficult in the game, incorporating tricks from every other level and mixing them up into new configurations. Every level you've played until now has showed you the ropes of the game and honed your skills, and Capcom isn't afraid to stop pulling punches now. Thankfully, the difficulty here is far more fair than that of Iceman's stage — no vanishing blocks, no slippery ice, and much briefer floating platform sequences.

In a lot of ways, the difficulty of Wily's stages is heavily front-loaded. If you can make it past Wily Stage 1, the rest of the game shouldn't pose too much of a challenge. In particular, the boss of this level stands athwart your progress and demands top-level play with exactly no quarter whatsoever given.

The stage begins with a trio of Big Eyes, the massive stomping robots that appear at the end of five out of the six Robot

Master levels. That should be your tip-off that things have become serious indeed: What normally serves as a boss' last final line of defense is treated as mere warmup here. The Big Eyes appear on largely flat ground, with only one showing up on uneven turf that you can use for strategy. Nevertheless, you're well-armed to deal with them at this point.

You may have figured out the fact that jumping provokes a Big Eye into making a large leap with its next action, allowing you to run safely beneath. And

even if not, you can simply use the

at ground level before switching to another weapon to destroy it. So in that regard, the Big Eyes don't just show how serious things have gotten; they also afford you the opportunity to demonstrate how much more capable you've become through the ease with which you render the things ineffectual.

Beyond here, much of the level is obstructed by blocks that can be shattered with the Elec Beam or tossed with the Super Arm. That's accomplished easily enough, of course. The Elec Beam proves extremely effective in many situations here, in fact, since many enemies attack on the vertical or spawn in blocked-off areas above or below Mega Man. The real trick is rationing the Elec Beam's energy, since energy refills tend to drop somewhat unreliably, and there are no opportunities to recharge your power completely until the very end of these four stage. Well, unless you have to continue. But that's a lame way to go about it.

Beyond the Big Eyes and "super" blocks, you encounter a handful of the flame pillars from Fireman's stage, located in narrow passages that require masterful jumping to pass unscathed. Of course, you can use the Ice Slasher to freeze the fire jets and use them as temporary platforms, but it takes really excellent timing to do it just right. The three pillars appear on the same horizontal plane and emerge on staggered cycles, so if you don't shoot them precisely at the perfect instant, you can end up freezing some of them while they're extended, blocking your path forward.

The next devious challenge comes in the form of the bullets that fly in a sine wave and explode on contact, as seen in Bombman's stage. Thick swaths of deadly spikes appear, too, also as in Bombman's stage. Here, though, the spikes line narrow pits beneath a low ceiling, requiring precise leaps even as you avoid the bullets. It's tough to dodge the infinitely spawning enemies in such a perilous situation, but you need to either evade them or

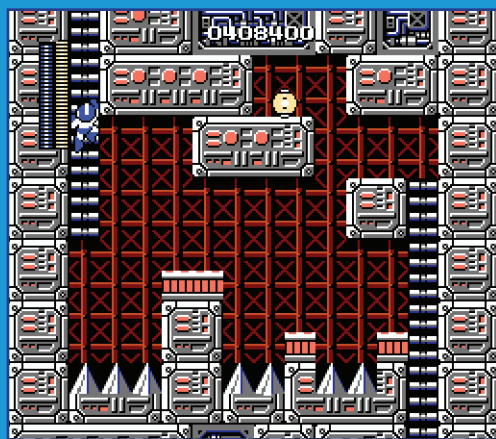


ENDGAME 1

shoot them while they've just emerged at the far end of the screen lest they knock you into the spikes. Unlike other hazards in the game, spikes will kill you instantly even if you touch them during the couple seconds of "mercy invincibility" you receive after taking damage knockback. In a sense, touching spikes amounts to falling into a pit, though spikes can appear anywhere on screen.

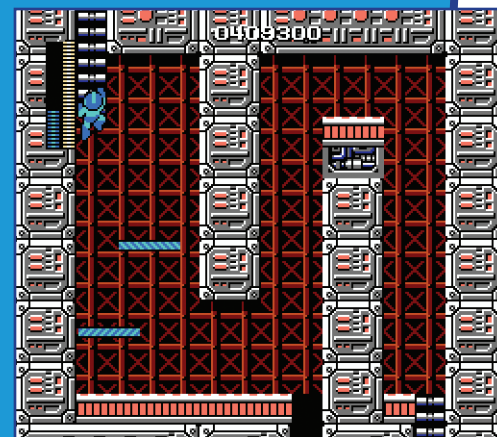
In fact, they don't even have been oriented beneath Mega Man; they can even appear above, as they do in Wily 1's reprise of Iceman's stage. Here, as there, you have to navigate a span of those damnable floating platforms with the side guns; however, the hazard beneath you in this scenario comes in the form of spikes. The spikes also line the ceiling above. It's a fairly high ceiling, and the platforms don't really drift terribly close to them; instead, what's above you is more likely to become a threat if you choose to use the Magnet Beam to cross the pit. Because Mega Man emits the Magnet Beam at chest height, the same as any other weapon, the beams create a stair-step effect when use them consecutively, bumping you higher by about one-half of Mega Man's height with each step.

What that means here is that you need to be mindful of the point at which you begin your Magnet Beam path lest you climb to a point where Mega Man can't avoid hitting the spikes on the ceiling when he jumps.



here: If you find yourself drawing too near to the ceiling, you can stand directly above a gun platform and wait for the beam to fade so that you drop onto the platform and shave some height off your progress.

The final challenge before you reach Wily 1's boss isn't really a direct hazard so much as a test of whether or not you bothered to acquire the Magnet Beam. While every tricky jump sequence of the game to this point — both the gun platforms and the vanishing blocks — can technically be cleared on Mega Man's own steam, this final screen is impossible without the Magnet Beam. The tall vertical shaft to the right requires a few alternating Magnet Beams to create a staircase, as does the wider gap leading to the ladder above left. Without the Magnet Beam, you have no choice but to return to the previous screen and die repeatedly until you can choose to return to the level select at the continue screen.



Almost as annoying is the lack of weapon energy re-charges here; if you use too much Magnet Beam power throughout this stage (say, in the room full of gun platforms), it's not impossible to run out of Magnet Beam juice before completing this sequence, leaving you almost as helpless as not having possession of the Magnet Beam at all.

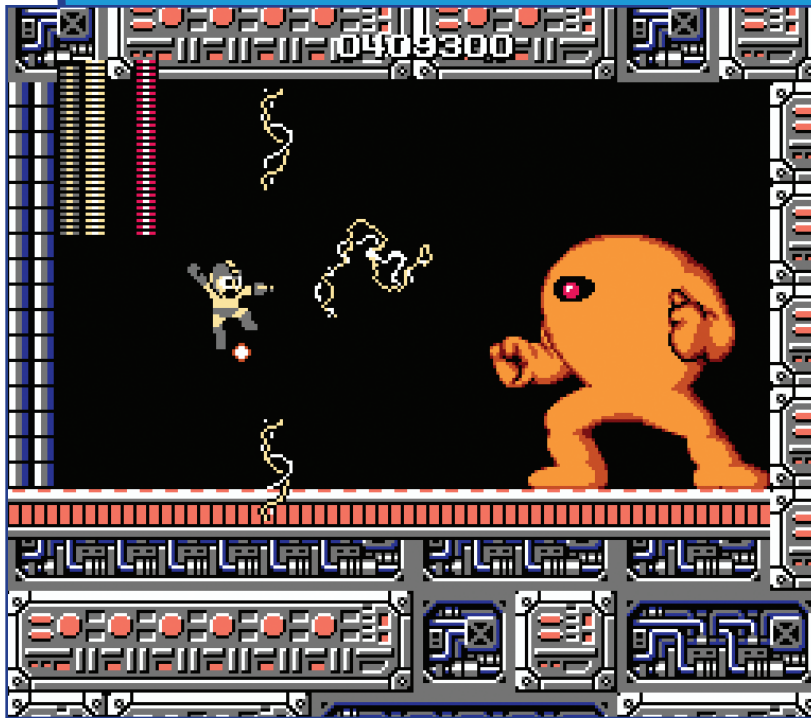
This scene is a real pile of hell: Gratingly unfriendly design in action. The only defense I can weakly offer is that Capcom was forging new ground with *Mega Man*, and some screwups were probably inevitable. And the designers learned from their mistakes; *Mega Man 2* makes a conspicuous reference to this screen in its own Wily 1 stage, but there you can't possibly fail to have the requisite tools to clear the sequence. If you don't make the jump, it's because you lack skill, not because you didn't jump through the proper hoops.

To really rub salt in the wound, all this grueling ground is followed immediately by an absolutely brutal boss, the infamous Yellow Devil.

Several factors conspire to make the Yellow Devil notoriously nasty. For one, the odds are severely stacked against you. The Yellow Devil moves back and forth across the screen in a deadly pattern of components, posing a serious hazard for the entirety of

STAGE BREAKDOWN 7 & 8

its transition. Once it comes to a rest, its vulnerable point appears for approximately one second. When its eye (its sole weak point) is exposed, the golem fires a bullet toward Mega Man's current position. It then immediately closes its eye and repeats its pattern in a mirror image. The eye appears well above Mega Man's height, meaning you have to leap to shoot it while timing your jump to avoid its return fire. Sometimes, the eye appears all the way at the



top of its head, above Mega Man's ability to reach.

If you make contact with any part of the Yellow Devil or take a hit from its bullets, Mega Man loses a significant chunk of health. Meanwhile, your own weapons do about half as much damage to the Yellow Devil as it does to you. The creature has no special vulnerabilities or weaknesses; there are no easy exploits or tricks with the tools you've collected. And worst of all, it initiates combat by flying into the room from off-screen, an unseen hazard that immediately pummels Mega Man with a tricky pattern. There is realistically no way to beat the Yellow Devil on your first attempt unless you're just some kind of idiot savant with the ability to translate eidetic memory into twitch reflex.

That being said, the Yellow Devil isn't impossible to beat. It obeys a strict pattern that never changes, and you need only react to the pieces at the height of Mega Man's head or legs. Jump, hop, jump, long forward jump, jump, jump high and fire. Repeat.

You can stack the odds slightly in your favor by using the Thunder Beam, which doesn't hit the Yellow Devil any harder than the P shooter but does have the advantage of a wide hit box. Elecman's weapon covers a large area that reduces the need to aim carefully and will allow you to connect with the eye even if it cheats and shows up at the top of the monster's head.

Of course, the Thunder Beam also plays part in the infamous pause cheat: By rapidly tapping the pause button as the Thunder Beam connects with the monster's eye, you'll cause the weapon to register a new hit each time the game unpauses. Because the Thunder Beam is so large and moves so slowly, you can completely destroy the Yellow Devil with a single shot if you're fast enough on the pause button. There's no shame in doing this your first time through the game — this is a nasty fight at the end of a brutal level — but the beauty of it is that with a little practice, you can ace this boss battle every time.

ENDGAME 1 & 2

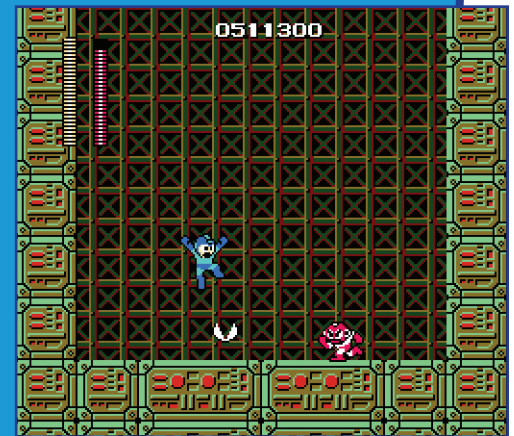


The second Wily stage eases up the pressure somewhat, but it's only relatively gentle to what has come immediately before. It's a shorter stage, with fewer minor hazards... but it also houses two major hazards that must be surmounted in sequence before you can reach a checkpoint.

Specifically, those hazards take the form of two returning bosses, Cutman and Elecman. Each has been rebuilt and appears in a room along the route to the end, and each remains as dangerous and powerful as in your first encounter. In fact, they're more dangerous, in a sense; the destructible blocks that appeared in their lairs in their home stages are absent. In Elecman's case, that mean you're immediately at the boss's level rather than safely

beneath him. For Cutman, it means you have to take him in a straight fight, because his weakness — Super Arm — is completely useless without any blocks to heave.

The two bosses are bookended by short action sequences that feature some light platforming and different sets of enemies. Small footholds in the

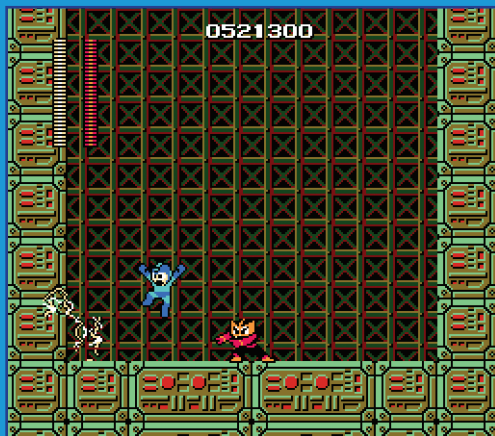


gaps between platforms often contain energy refills, but there's danger in collecting them thanks to the awkward inertia of Mega Man; he tends to have a "sticky" feel when moving from a dead halt. It's fine when you're moving into a dead run or jumping while maintaining momentum, but it can make small, precise movements dangerous. Also, collecting power-ups causes the action to freeze for a split-second, and the stutter in the action can have a strange effect on Mega Man's movement.

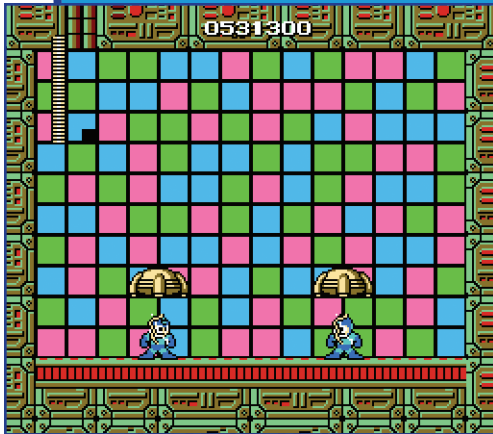
The fights against the Robot Masters redux can take a toll on Mega Man's health, and you need to defeat both of them and clear the subsequent area (which features the "football" bombs from Bombman's stage) before you reach the stage's checkpoint.

Beyond the bosses, you reach the heart of Dr. Wily's fortress, whose exterior walls are lined with deadly spikes. Mega Man can't actually interact with the spikes here, since they're on the opposite side of the exterior wall. They simply serve as a neat detail to visually communicate the severity of this area. You're in the inner sanctum now.

At the end of the stage, you face another



STAGE BREAKDOWN 8 & 9



intensely deadly boss: Mega Man. A small machine descends and surrounds Mega Man, duplicating him on an identical platform on the opposite side of the room. The imitator literally copies Mega Man, wielding his full suite of skills. If you switch to an alternate weapon, the copy Mega Man instantly switches as well, making use of your own hard-stolen abilities with deadly force. Naturally, if you bump into the copy Mega Man, you suffer damage from the

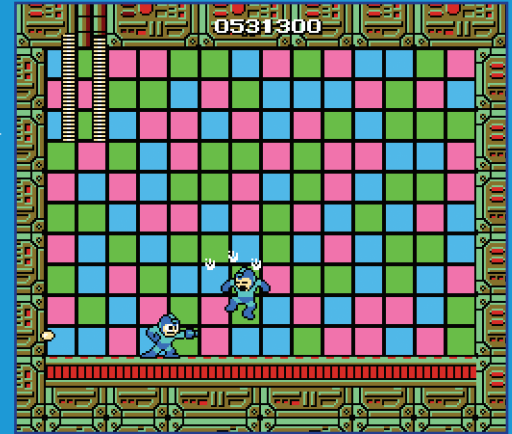
collision, and the clone doesn't. Also, he does a lot more damage to you than the reverse.

With the deck stacked so badly against you — facing off against your near-exact match, whose only tangible difference is that he happens to be twice as strong and twice as durable as you — this would seem an impossible fight. Thankfully, there is one difference: Copy Mega Man is really dumb and uses a very simple pattern. He occasionally fires at you while running along the ground, but generally his preference is to leap toward you re-

peatedly while firing at the peak of his arc. He suffers from the same damage knockback as you, so landing successful hits can push him backward and slow his approach. And since he generally only fires at the peak of his jump, he tends to be vulnerable while landing.

The smartest tactic here is to treat Copy Mega Man like Bombman, who

demonstrated a somewhat similar pattern of leaps toward you. The Fire Storm works wonders here, since its broad projectile means you can be a little less precise with firing than if you keep the P gun equipped. And, of course, he jumps right into the orbiting fire bit more often than not when he moves in close. Again, Copy Mega Man prefers to fire in midair, which means his own bit will usually have dissipated by the time he lands. While it's definitely a tricky, challenging encounter, once you fall into the correct pattern, you can ace Copy Mega Man with relative ease.



POWERED UP: COPY MEGA MAN

The third Wily stage of PSP remake *Mega Man: Powered Up* saw a pretty massive overhaul from the original NES version of the game. While shorter than the NES game's equivalent sequence, it was considerably harder thanks to the inclusion of redux encounters with all eight Robot Masters. Rather than spreading the bosses across several levels, or placing them right before Dr. Wily, *Powered Up* took an unconventional approach and stuck the robots a full stage before the Wily showdown.

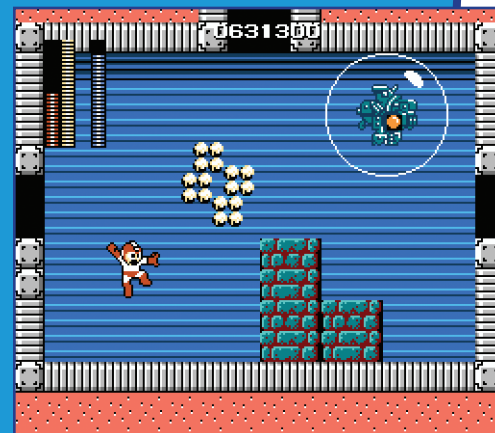
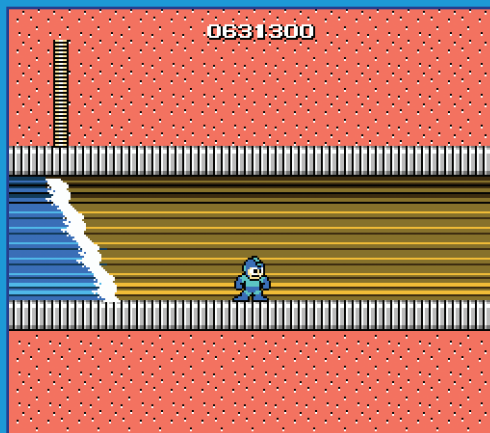
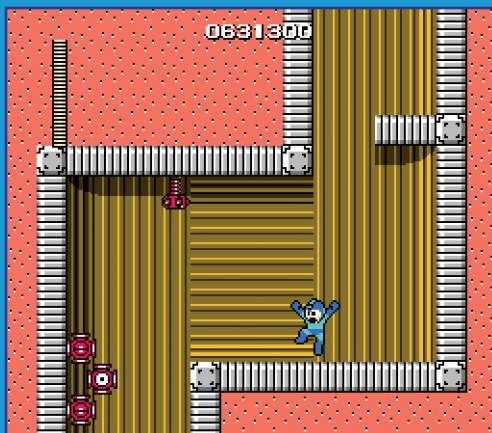
And once they were destroyed, there was still more to the stage; players then had to destroy the ninth Robot Master, the Mega Man clone.

Thankfully, *Powered Up*'s clone proved to be far easier

and more predictable than his NES counterpart. While he retained a very similar pattern to the 8-bit rendition, up to and including his kamikaze body-checks, he gained a new feature that greatly reduced the threat he posed to players: The ability to swap to Robot Master weapons at will rather than only when the real Mega Man equipped those powers himself.

While this would seem disadvantageous, it was anything but. The clone gained the same weaknesses as the equivalent Robot Master while wielding a special weapon, meaning the player could easily swap over to the weapon strong against that boss to deal extra damage. Well, unless it switched to Cutman. Gutsman's power was useless in the remake, too.

ENDGAME 2 & 3



As if to make up for the past few stages, the next-to-last sequence of Dr. Wily's lair is far easier. The first few screens contain familiar threats from elsewhere in the game — mainly swarms of the lanterns best known from Cutman's stage, whose timed, pattern-based movements are exceptionally easy to deal with at this point.

The second half of the stage consists of a simple horizontal tube, which floods with water once you step into it. The force of the water pushes you forward to the right, and if you run you can breeze through the stage in record time thanks to the extra bump of speed provided by the current.

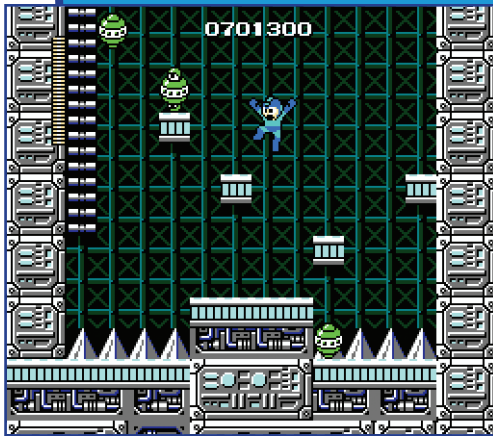
It's much smarter to simply take your thumb off the D-pad and let the water whisk you to your goal, though. In the first half of the tube, an endless stream of flying penguins attacks from the right — easily dealt with. But after the halfway point, the penguins change to bullets. While both foes move in the same sine wave pattern, the bullets explode messily when they go out... so if you rush forward, you'll constantly hit the edge of the explosions and take heavy damage. On the other hand, by taking your time and keeping

up a slow, steady stream of fire, you'll clear out the hazards and remain safely removed from the bullet bursts.

And the penultimate boss, Bubble Boy, appears here and poses similarly little challenge. The boss consists of six large spherical robots with a mechanical core, which emerge from three different hatches in the walls and ceiling, one at a time. Once a robot emerges, it circles the room in a clockwise motion until destroyed. Each Bubble Boy is faster than the one before it, and the last two are practically impossible to destroy before they plow into Mega Man at least once.

Thankfully, this room demonstrates Dr. Wily's defeatist approach to architecture in action again. Four rock cubes sit in the center of the room, just begging to be flung with the Super Arm — and, wouldn't you know it, a single hit with the Super Arm will take out a Bubble Boy. If you take out the first two robots with the standard P cannon and use the Super Arm on the remainder, you can breeze through this fight without a scratch. It's a welcome breather between the threats of the first two Wily stages and the hellish gauntlet ahead in the last level of the game.

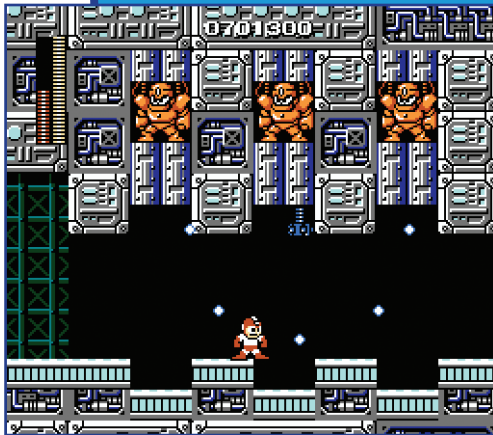
STAGE BREAKDOWN 10



Dr. Wily's fourth and final stage doesn't offer many threats, but the ones it does contain mean business. The opening screens feature those floating guys from early in Elecman's stage, who attack with the same pincher maneuvers of two sets of three hovering in from both above and below. Here, though, they attack while you're climbing a long, long ladder with no safe platform to count on as you could when you dealt with them in Elecman's lair. You need to clear them out quickly and efficiently,

or else they'll knock you loose from the ladder and drop you to the beginning of the stage.

The level moves into a horizontal layout after the initial ascent, a long hallway dotted with alcoves in which pop-up turrets have been set. Because of the physical design of the recesses, you can't easily shoot the turrets from the side, while they're positioned perfectly to hit you from oblique angles. Your best bet is to hit them with the Thunder Beam's vertical elements — though the final pair of turrets, which appear one above the other and operate on the same timing, are almost impossible to take out without soaking up a hit yourself — and quickly advance to the next.



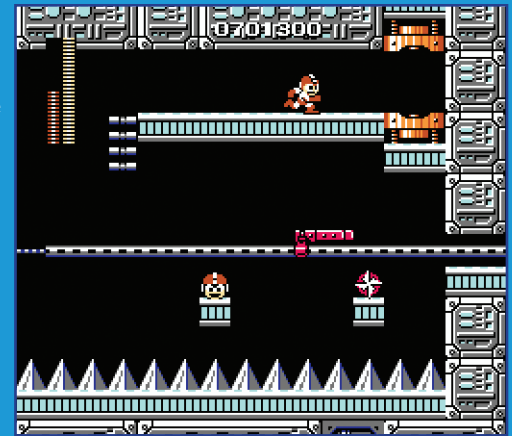
In a nice bit of storytelling through level design, this final gauntlet reveals Dr. Wily's ultimate scheme: Mass production of the Robot Masters. Inert Gutsmen stand in capsules that line the ceiling, ready to march upon humankind and conquer the world by throwing cubes of rock that fall mysteriously from the sky. This explains where the duplicates of Elecman and Cutman in Wily Stage 2 came from... not to mention the other four Robot Master clones you're about to

face off against.

But first, one final platforming challenge: One of those flipping platforms on a damaged tansom, as seen at the beginning of Gutsman's stage. If you happened to begin the game by taking on Gutsman (like I frequently do), these things neatly bookend *Mega Man*. The frayed portion is extremely wide here, so it's much easier to simply travel the Magnet Beam highway to the safe platform above the middle portion of the cable, then jump down onto the platform as it passes beneath you to the right before letting it deposit you on the platforms where you can collect a Yashichi symbol (which refills all of Mega Man's energy — not just his health, but his weapons as well) and a 1UP.

On the platform above the Yashichi stands a teleporter that takes you to the final challenge of the game: Clones of the other four Robot Masters you haven't yet faced in Wily's stages, and the mad doctor himself. You have to survive all four of the bosses without a break or a health refill in order to reach Dr. Wily, and it can be pretty rough.

The sequence begins with Bombman, then moves to Fireman, Iceman, and finally Gutsman. Your chances of making it through all four fights unscathed is roughly zero thanks to Fireman's spammy attacks, but with smart play it's theoretically possible. Since you've already fought these



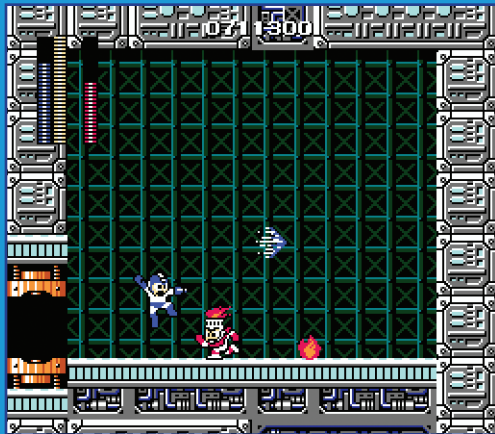
ENDGAME 4

guys, you know their tricks, tactics, and weaknesses. And unlike the previous redux encounters, you aren't limited by the placement of objects in the room.

The big danger here comes from the teleporters that connect the rooms. You materialize on the left side of the screen in a teleport pod, which has a low ceiling. If you don't run immediately to the right once you enter a room, it's frustratingly easy to become trapped in the teleporter while a boss pummels you with attacks.

Bombman, the first foe you face, demonstrates this danger quite clearly. He jumps toward you and tosses bombs whose explosive radius pushes you backward, forcing you to box yourself into the teleporter. The only safe tactic is actually to rush Bombman and move as close to him as possible, which will cause him to jump backward to put some distance between you — after all, he doesn't want to catch himself with his own splash damage, right? It's a tiny but wholly logical detail that works to your advantage.

Fireman is more difficult, since he blasts you with a rapid barrage of fire that ignites under your feet even as it flies across the



room. Getting in close and trading blows is the safest solution. On the other hand, if you deal with Iceman correctly, hitting him with three blasts of Thunder Beam as efficiently as possible, you don't even need to move from the teleport pad. You'll take him out before his Ice Slasher attacks crawl across the room, and if you're still standing in the teleporter, you'll be

whisked instantly to Gutsman redux the instant Iceman explodes. From there it's a simple matter of jumping over the rocks Gutsman heaves and hoping he doesn't decide to make a stand in the same spot where you're standing.

In the end, all that remains is Dr. Wily, who putters onto the screen in the UFO he hailed when you picked his icon on the stage select screen. A large and vaguely humanoid mechanical

creation materializes beneath the saucer — Wily Machine 1 — and immediately begins spewing bullets at you.

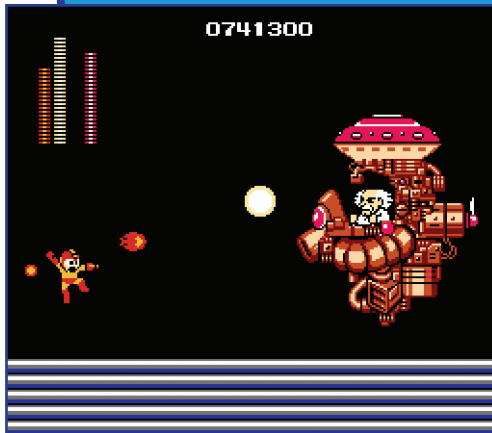
Wily Machine 1 appears in two phases (one of the earliest examples of this hoary video game cliché in action), each with its own health meter; once you destroy the first phase, its health regenerates as the doctor's control chamber in the machine's "chest" is exposed. While this sounds daunting, especially coming off the awful boss gauntlet, it's not so bad. Each form of the Wily Machine uses only a single attack pattern, and those projectiles are easily avoided.

If you fall to the Wily Machine, you begin immediately outside the final chamber where a large weapon energy refill always appears. Not only that, but the 1UP you can pick up immediately before entering the boss gauntlet every time you take it on should ensure that no matter how many times you fell to the Robot Masters redux, you're going to have maximum lives (and possibly more) once you reach Wily. In other words, the designers have made every effort to ensure that when you get to this climactic final moment of the game, you'll be able to take several consecutive cracks at beating the game. While other portions of the game have been considerably less thoughtful than this — that Magnet Beam bit in Wily 1 comes to mind — here in the final moments we see the vindictive and abusive game design habits of old beginning to melt away toward a more considerate mindset.

Wily Machine 1 drifts back and forth across the screen in both of its phases. Its initial tactic is to wield a rounded turret that rotates to take aim at Mega Man with plasma balls similar to the one Mega Man's P cannon fires. The difference is that they don't fire directly at Mega Man; instead, they fire up in a short arc before descending toward the spot at which Mega Man stood at the instant they were disgorged. The pellets fire in rapid succession, but it's not unreasonably difficult to evade the bullets while jumping up to hit the machine in its weak point... which, here, happens to be the turret itself.



STAGE BREAKDOWN 10



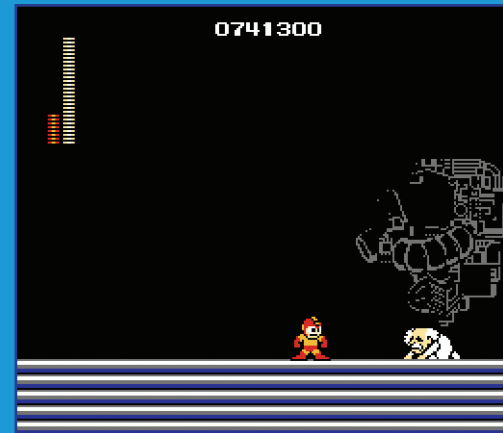
At this point, the game fully expects you to have figured out the fine art of experimenting with weapons in a combat situation. Obviously, certain of Mega Man's arsenal will be utterly useless here; the turret is situated well above the Hyper Bomb's blast radius, and the lack of blocks in the room puts the "superficial" in "Super Arm." The Fire Storm, however, doesn't simply hit the turret for respectable damage, it also has the benefit of that orbiting bit. When your evasion pattern brings you

close to Wily Machine 1, you can score double damage with the proper timing. In short order, you should break away the machine's protective shell... and if you don't make it out of the next phase alive, the Fire Storm is efficient enough here that the energy refill capsule you pick up after you respawn will nearly top it off.

The second form, unfortunately, lacks a real weakness. There's really nothing to be done for it but to evade its attacks and return fire by jumping and firing. Once Wily's control chamber becomes exposed, Wily Machine 1 emits a large beam that somewhat resembles the Fire Storm's orbiting bit. Only here, rather than revolving around the Wily Machine, the beam flies toward Mega

Man's position in a circular wave, spinning counter-clockwise. The corkscrew motion of the beam actually works against it, though; if you move to the right once the machine fires the weapon, the beam pattern sends the projectile spinning away from Mega Man. Moving closer every time it attacks is, counterintuitively, the safest move here.

Once you whittle down Wily Machine 1's armor and health, it explodes and Dr. Wily surrenders. You've beaten one of the most complex console action games ever designed as of 1987: A game that offered unprecedented freedom for tackling its challenges and a complex mix of skills. While it wasn't perfect, *Mega Man* really demonstrated some smart design choices that nudged the player toward learning optimal patterns and sequences through experimentation... and the parts that didn't work would be smoothed over considerably in its superlative sequel.



CHARACTER DESIGNER
YASUKI CHI



CHARACTER DESIGNER
I NAFK I NG



PRESENTED BY
CAPCOM U. S. A. ,



While *Mega Man* failed to make a splash, the same can't be said for its sequel. If the first title was the *In Utero* of the series, *Mega Man 2* was its *Nevermind*. (That's a Nirvana reference, in keeping with the series' musical motifs.)

Mega Man 2 benefitted from several advantages over its predecessor. For one, it was a much bigger, more ambitious, more polished game. Thanks to the advancement of NES chip technology between the two releases, *Mega Man 2* was able to feature bolder visuals with more detail and greater variety. This in turn earned it extra attention from the press, who were eager to show off its cutting-edge graphics. *Mega Man 2* enjoyed cover story status for *Nintendo Power*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *VG&CE*, and more.

When the game launched at last, it more than lived up to the hype. Capcom had improved on the first *Mega Man* in almost every imaginable way; not only were the graphics more impressive, the controls were tighter, the music more memorable, the levels more creative, and the challenges more interesting (and more fair). It became an instant hit for the system, and its success would guarantee *Mega Man* an unrivaled number of sequels on NES alone — by the time the system took its bow in 1994, the series had made it all the way up to *Mega Man 6*.

That's not too shabby for a sequel Capcom didn't even particularly want to make. The middling performance of the original *Mega Man* gave the company cold feet about building a sequel, but its team went ahead and followed it up anyway, putting it together in extra time while developing a completely different game. Ultimately, their passion showed through, and *Mega Man 2* has rightly gone down in the books as a classic.



THE ANATOMY OF MEGA MAN 2

U.S. title: *Mega Man 2* (June 1989)

Japanese title: *Rockman 2: The Mystery of Dr. Wily* (Dec. 1988)

Developer: Capcom

Publisher: Capcom

Platform: Nintendo Entertainment System/Famicom

First sequels on NES have a reputation for going wildly off the rails and taking a budding series in strange directions — into a new genre, sometimes. In truth, this reputation comes from a few high-profile titles, mostly from Nintendo; two of them (*Simon's Quest* and *Zelda II*) have spent time under the Anatomy of Games microscope. The majority of NES sequels simply tried to beef up their predecessors' audio-visual oomph, refine the game mechanics, and embrace a larger and more ambitious sense of scope.

Mega Man 2 falls into the latter category. It carries forward the rules, feel, and structure of its predecessor. But it looks better. Sounds better. Plays better. There's more purpose to it, more structure. It is better in every possible way than the original game.

Make no mistake, *Mega Man* was hardly a dud. For its time, it was a pretty fantastic game; it followed directly in the style of Capcom's own *Ghosts 'N Goblins* and *Bionic Commando*, perhaps not surprisingly given that both arcade games had been helmed by *Mega Man* producer Tokuro Fujiwara. Like Arthur and Super Joe, Mega Man could run, jump, and shoot while navigating harrowing hazards and tricky platforms.

But in moving from arcades to consoles, Fujiwara and company explored a format better suited for the home, where players could return to the game at their leisure. They broke down the progression of levels into a nonlinear form, allowing players to leap into any of the game's first six stages in any order. They rewarded players for completing stages by giving them an additional weapon that could be used to solve certain problems or situations within various stages, and which granted them a strategic advantage over the game's bosses.

Still, *Mega Man* wasn't perfect. The physics weren't always cooperative. It featured some needlessly difficult platforming sequences.

Bosses were wildly unbalanced, and there was no consistency in the strength of your supplementary weapons. Many of the special powers you earned were utterly situational, resulting in their being neglected throughout most of the game. And the one "weapon" that wasn't earned by defeating a boss could be completely missed, allowing you to reach a late-game sequence where it was required without having acquired it and forcing you to retrace your steps. *Mega Man 2* fixed all of these shortcomings.

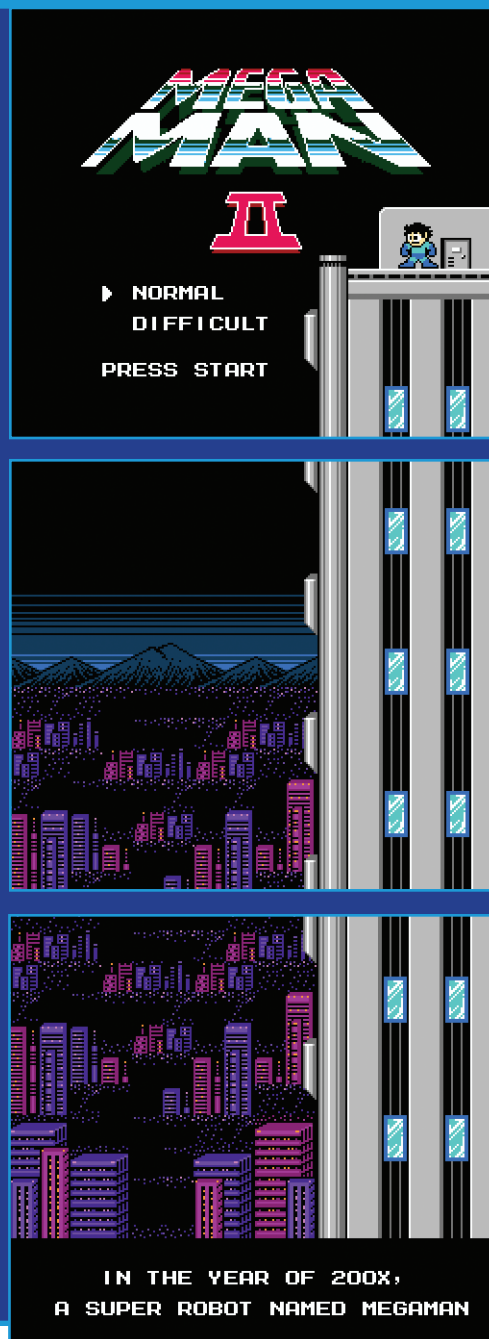
The game begins on the title screen, which riffs on the first game's ending: You get a close-up view of the futuristic city that scrolled past in the background as Mega Man ran back home to Dr. Light's lab, and the ending theme to *Mega Man* plays. A slow drip-feed of text recaps the plot of *Mega Man* and sets up the new scenario: Upon the defeat of his plan to take over the world by corrupting Light's six Robot Masters, Dr. Wily created eight new masters of his own and declared his mad ambition to take on the world anew.

The music rises to a crescendo... but instead of rolling into the upbeat credit scroll passage from *Mega Man*, it's overtaken by a new melody that fades in and takes the lead. The screen begins to scroll upward along the length of the skyscraper in the foreground, and the cityscape recedes, giving way to night. The melody ascends in time with the camera until we reach the building's peak, where Mega Man stands alone looking out over the city, his robot hair waving in the breeze.

An intense musical theme kicks in and continues playing until you press Start, at which point Mega Man's helmet materializes to cover his hair and he warps into action.

Welcome to *Mega Man 2*.

As soon as the game begins, you can already see the first major improvement over the original *Mega Man*. Two, really. Not only does



the game look much nicer than its predecessor, it also includes a password feature. Now you no longer need complete the game in a single sitting; you can complete a few stages and return to the game later. This turns out to be a handy feature, given what you see on the stage select screen upon beginning a new game. The six Robot Master levels of *Mega Man* have now become eight, making for more content to complete and more weapons. That means more strategic options once equipped with gear, and more need to experiment with skills and weaknesses.

Once you venture into the game, you'll notice a few significant changes. First, the scoring feature is gone; *Mega Man 2* drops *Mega Man*'s scoreboard, which honestly was vestigial to begin with. This means vanquished enemies no longer drop those little pellets that you could collect for points. Robot Masters no longer have random-but-not-really point values. *Mega Man 2* gives you a single purpose, a single mission: Defeat Dr. Wily and his robots.

In the U.S. version, you're given a choice of difficulty settings: "Normal" or "Hard." For the purposes of this series, we'll be dealing with Hard, as it was the standard difficulty in the original Japanese release. The much easier "Normal" mode was added for the U.S. version, because *Mega Man 2* predates the advent of widespread video rentals. Once the rental market took off, the U.S. versions of



games were usually re-tuned to be harder, diminishing the likelihood of people completing them on a weekend rental and deciding not to buy it.

Another major change in *Mega Man 2* over the original comes in the non-weapon supplemental tools. The Magnet Beam is out, replaced by three different items that Dr. Light gives you as you complete different stages. You cannot complete *Mega Man 2* without Item-1, -2, and -3, but at the same time you can't get to the points where they're required without having collected them. In this and many other respects, *Mega Man 2* greatly reduces the amount of

trial-and-error required to complete the game and places more emphasis on experimentation and skillful use of Mega Man's arsenal.

And, all in all, the game just feels better. Mega Man looks the same as before, but he moves more responsively than before. Even little details, like the new design of health pickups, makes the game feel sleeker... crisper. Mega Man spends less time reeling and doesn't fall back as far when he takes a hit; his behavior when you return from the weapon select menu while climbing a ladder is different, too. There's less likelihood that when you die it was because the game treated you unfairly. Capcom also removed the pause button altogether; now, you

go to the weapon sub-screen to pause the game, preventing exploits like the Thunder Wave multi-hit trick. Then again, there are no unreasonably difficult bosses this time around to create the need for that exploit; *Mega Man 2* is a far better balanced game than the first, with only two unreasonably difficult sequences to contend with — and even those can be skipped over or otherwise nullified quite easily.

With this sequel, a perfectly solid game gave rise to a genuine masterpiece.

Mega Man 2 maintains many of the first game's mechanics and design choices, including what would go on to be the essence of practically every *Mega Man* series save *Legends*: Fighting robots, then claiming their weapons as your own. And, as before, every Robot Master proves to be extremely weak to one of their comrade's powers, and often suffers a secondary, though less severe, weakness to at least one other weapon.

Furthermore, every Robot Master

completely resists at least one weapon, and — totally new to *Mega Man 2* — there's also a better-than-even chance that a Robot Master will be completely healed if you try to use his own weapon on him. So don't try it.

The weapon weaknesses in *Mega Man 2* (with a handful of exceptions) tend to be less variable than in the first game. On the other hand, as noted before, every single power-up you collect in the game is vastly more usable in the course of normal gameplay than the fickle

arsenal of the original game. There are times when your extra weapons have obvious strategic value in a given situations, but you'll also find advantages in breaking out your accumulated powers against a variety of mundane minor robots. A lazy player can probably get along with nothing but the Metal Blade for much of the game, but a smart player will swap equipment at every possible opportunity to breeze through the game. Experimentation yields great results in *Mega Man 2*.

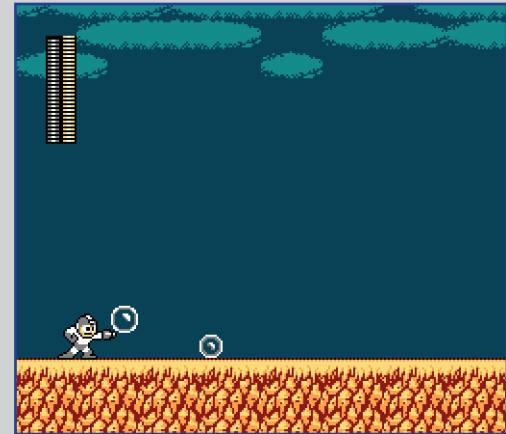
BUBBLE LEAD

Bubble Man's weapon seems weirdly impractical at first glance: You fire large bubbles that rise up slightly before dropping to the floor and rolling along the surface. They do have the minor advantage of rolling straight up walls, but few enemies cling to walls... and even more annoyingly, some of the enemies that are too short to hit with your standard cannon, who would seem ideal candidates to take out with the Bubble Lead, are completely immune to its projectiles. The bubbles bounce right off.

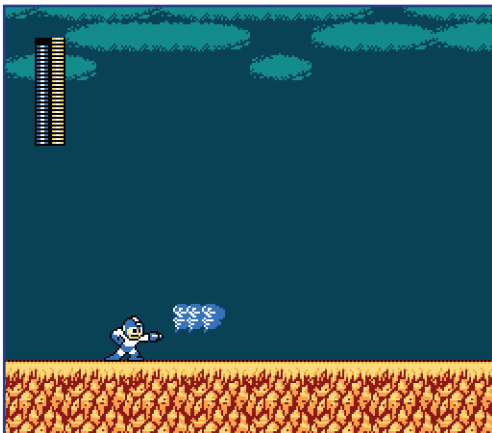
So what's the point, aside from using it against Heat Man, the one boss who can't withstand its power? Well, the answer resides in the

weapon's name. The "lead" in Bubble Lead is pronounced with a long E, not a short one — as in "to show the path forward," not "a dense and toxic metal." And the Bubble Lead is great for leading the way in tricky or uncertain ground; for example, in one area that features hidden pit traps, the Bubble Lead can reveal the invisible holes you need to leap to safety.

It's also the only weapon that works at all against the very final boss, kicking off a longstanding tradition of final *Mega Man* battles that have to be won with the most inconvenient possible power-up.



AIR SHOOTER



The Air Shooter's utility is somewhat undermined by the versatility of the Metal Blade, which is a shame. The weapon addresses a significant shortcoming in the original *Mega Man*'s arsenal: No efficient way to hit enemies above you. In the previous game, only the Thunder Wave could hit enemies up high, and you had to stand directly beneath them to do so. The limitations of that power really showed in the final leg of Dr. Wily's stage, when you had to stand and try to hit the pop-out cannons that lined the ceiling and floor without taking a hit in return.

The Air Shooter neatly rectifies that limitation by giving you a weapon that fires upward. While it doesn't travel directly up, it

instead does something that in its own way proves to be better: The three blasts of wind it fires (represented as blue tornadoes) drift apart as they move forward and upward, resulting in a wide spread that covers a respectable chunk of the ceiling. It's great for dealing with threats above you quickly — you can fire and forget, so long as you aimed in roughly the right direction. The Air Shooter's projectiles also tend to have a piercing effect, passing through any enemy they destroy to hit whatever lies beyond. In some of the more vertically oriented stages, it proves to be a massive boon... even if, again, Metal Blade outclasses it in terms of practicality.

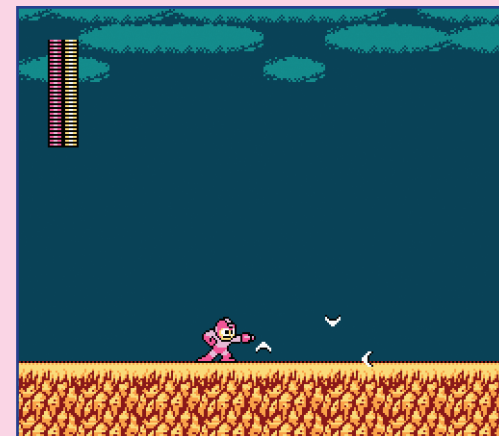
QUICK BOOMERANG

The secret of MVP of *Mega Man 2*, the Quick Boomerang doesn't initially seem to have much value. It's like a Rolling Cutter with less range and lacking that device's piercing effect. So, who cares?

The trick to Quick Boomerang's value is in its rapid-fire ability. Hold down the fire button and Mega Man will emit a flurry of Quick Boomerangs; you won't be able to run or jump as you're firing, but it doesn't matter. You blast out so many projectiles in a stream that practically anything in their path will be vaporized in an instant. The Quick Boomerang isn't particu-

larly powerful (though it's surprisingly effective in situations you might not expect), but its rate of fire and low cost of use make it a great go-to weapon — a much better moment-to-moment weapon choice in most cases than the trusty P shooter, in fact.

Every weapon in *Mega Man 2* languishes in the shadow of the almighty Metal Blade, but Quick Boomerang has charms enough that you might just find it becoming a common go-to... especially if you feel guilty about breezing through the game with Metal Man's overpowered weapon.



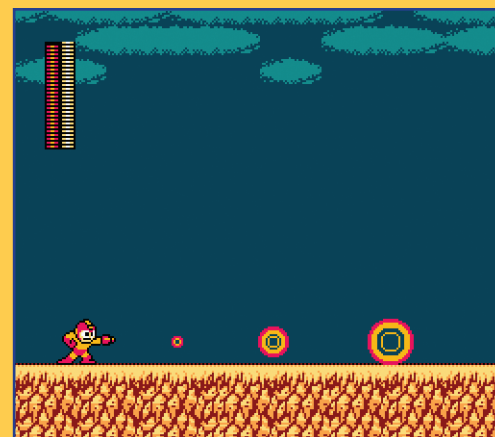
ATOMIC FIRE

The most complex weapon in *Mega Man 2*, Atomic Fire is only worth using if you're willing to take advantage of its special feature: The ability to charge it up and launch super-powered fire attacks. If you simply tap the fire button while equipped with the Atomic Fire, Mega Man will attack with small rings of fire — slightly wider than his normal attacks, but not really any more powerful. Hold down the fire button, however, and Mega Man will begin charging the Atomic Fire, humming and shimmering to indicate his stored-up attack power. After a couple of seconds, the charging sound will change pitch. At that point, releasing the fire button will unleash a much larger torus of flame that hits roughly three times as hard as the default attack.

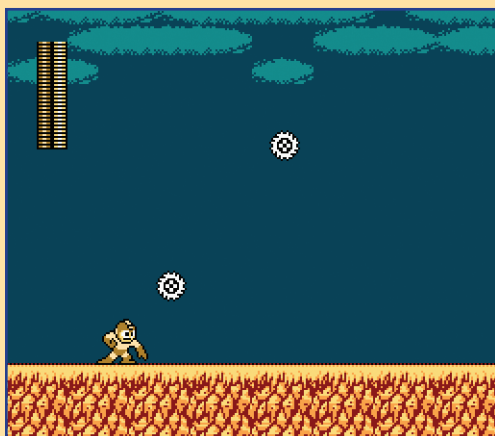
But if you wait for the humming to oscillate to its highest pitch, a few seconds lon-

ger, Mega Man's attack will take the form of an absolutely massive fireball, the height of Mega Man himself, capable of incinerating just about everything in its path. Several bosses in the game will fall to two hits of the fully-charged Atomic Fire, making it the game's most powerful weapon (the only similarly potent combinations are the Flash Stopper against Quick Man and the Metal Blade against its own owner).

The downside? Each level of charge power doesn't simply take a couple of seconds to build up to, they also exact a significant cost on the Atomic Fire's battery. Mega Man only has the juice to fire a couple of level three Atomic Fires before needing to find a recharge. The time and energy cost make the Atomic Fire an extremely powerful weapon, but an extremely situational one.



METAL BLADE



Of course, Atomic Fire has nothing on the weapon you earn from the game's easiest boss, Metal Man. The Metal Blade is so powerful, so effective, so easy to get ahold of that its presence in the game almost constitutes a design flaw. It's greatly empowering, but to such a degree that it discourages players from experimenting with the other parts of the game's excellent arsenal. Considering how useful and balanced the weapons in Mega Man 2 prove to be, that's unfortunate.

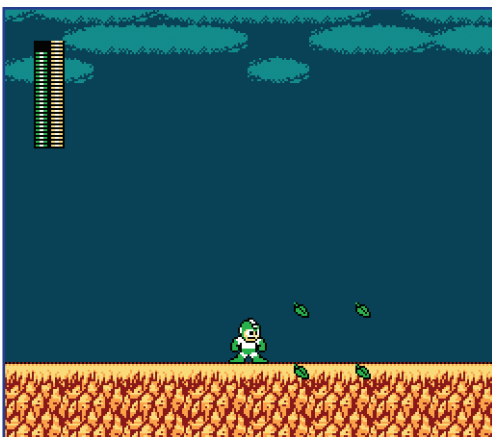
Simply put, Metal Blade is the single best weapon in the entire Mega Man series. It's cheap, powerful, and effective. You can throw several blades for a single point of energy. It's as effective as, and usually more so than, Mega Man's default weapon. Only a tiny handful of enemies have resistance to it. And most importantly, you can throw it in eight directions.

Yes, the Metal Blade addresses one

of the key failings of the original Mega Man's weapons in that you couldn't really aim them. Only the Thunder Wave attacked on the vertical, and that was limited and imprecise. The Metal Blade doesn't fire in three directions at once, but it does fire left, right, up, or down, as well as at angles in between.

In short, there is very little in Mega Man 2's world that is safe from Mega Man when he's equipped with the Metal Blade. It can reach anything on the screen with a rapid flurry of deadly discs. It even has a piercing effect like several of the other weapons that allows it to blast through a cluster of enemies in a single shot. There's is literally no reason not to use this weapon for 90% of the game, aside from the intangible loss of experiencing the team's hard work in creating a collection of weapons that are worth a crap.

LEAF SHIELD



Not every Robot Master weapon in Mega Man 2 takes the form of a gun, but even the unconventional armaments are more useful than their equivalent from the first game. The Leaf Shield comes with significant downsides — like the fact that it causes Mega Man to become completely immobilized while it's equipped — but despite its disadvantages, you'll find several areas in which it can be a real life-saver.

The Leaf Shield, per its name, creates a rotating shield of curiously indestructible leaves that surrounds Mega Man. You can't run while the Leaf Shield is active, but there's a good reason for this: When you press the controller in any of the cardinal directions, the shield goes rolling in that direction, destroying everything in its path. Until you move, though, the Leaf Shield completely protects Mega Man from almost all hazards; the leaves have a piercing effect, meaning that they aren't "absorbed" and don't disappear when they null a projectile or strike an enemy. The only things that can break the shield

are the few enemies or objects in the game which are completely immune to Leaf Shield. Those hazards break the shield with a metallic "tink" and cause it to drift slowly down, off the screen. Likewise, when you throw the shield, it will be completely deactivated if it comes into contact with something it can't affect.

Fortunately, there are very few things that can withstand the Leaf Shield, and its wide area of effect and piercing effect combine to make it one of the most devastating weapons in the game. Throw it at a group of enemies and watch it render them all into power-ups — so many power-ups in certain areas that they blink themselves out of existence to prevent overloading the NES, in fact. The Leaf Shield also comes in very handy when Mega Man finds himself surrounded by foes in tight situations where he can't evade or aim effectively, such as riding moving platforms or climbing ladders. Leaf Shield burns energy per activation, not by time. It's quite potent, if you know how to use it.

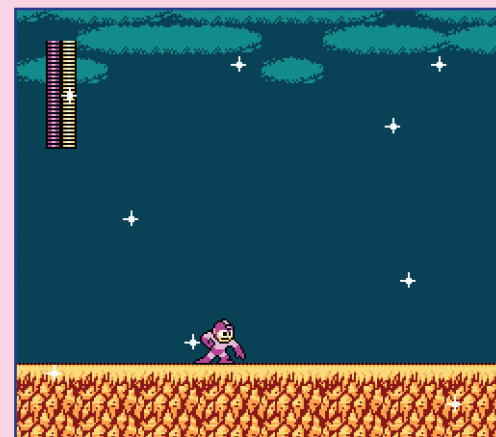
TIME STOPPER

At the other end of the spectrum, you have the Time Stopper. Capable of stopping most enemies and hazards in their tracks, the Time Stopper has a single critical shortcoming that reduces its value: Once you activate it, the only way to switch it off is to let it run out of time.

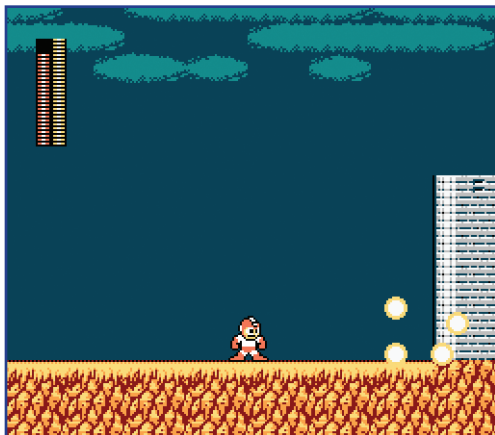
That one design flaw greatly diminishes the value of the weapon. You basically have one shot per stage to use it, so you need to make it count. Worse, if you use it in a situation where you're up against enemies that aren't affected by the Time Stopper, you're totally vulnerable. You can't switch out to another weapon as Time Stopper runs down, so you have to run around as a totally unfrozen enemy has its way with you... and usually, the enemies unaffected by the freeze are the big, dangerous ones, like the

Sniper Armors. Have fun getting stopped by those jerks while you're powerless to retaliate.

Since you can't switch weapons while the Time Stopper is frozen, that means it also has minimal strategic advantage — you can't switch to another weapon while you've immobilized your foes and destroy them in safety. So, what's the point? Well, Time Stopper has value against one boss and in freezing certain environmental hazards... but that's about it. Ironically, while Mega Man 4 is a worse game than Mega Man 2 in practically every way imaginable, its time-freezing weapon (confusingly called the Flash Stopper, though it has nothing to do with Flash Man) rectifies all the Time Stopper's flaws and actually proves to be a pretty useful power-up.



CRASH BOMBER



And finally, last but not least (though also not best), the Crash Bomber. Crash Man (or Clash Man, or Crush Man — katakana, y'all!) wields a powerful weapon, and it's equally potent in Mega Man's hands. While you can't aim it freely like Crash Man can, it works just as well for you as for him. The Crash Bomber fires a large timed charge that pierces practically every enemy in the game and continues flying until it hits a wall, at which point it clamps on and begins a brief (we're talking like three seconds) countdown, then detonates. The resulting explosion has a sizable splash effect and causes heavy damage to anything caught in the blast.

In the rare case that the Crash Bomber doesn't pierce an enemy, it still hits hard: The grenade detonates on contact, with the same explosive splash. The shortcomings of this weapon come from its limited utility. The bombs are costly, with a full energy charge equalling a mere four shots. And while a fired charge is active (either clamped or exploding), you can't fire another one, which leaves you somewhat vulnerable. Still, it's handy for its ability to blast open certain walls and pierce seemingly invulnerable barriers, like Wood Man's shield. On the other hand, it's a key element of the crappiest boss battle in the game, so that's a strike against it.

THE ITEMS

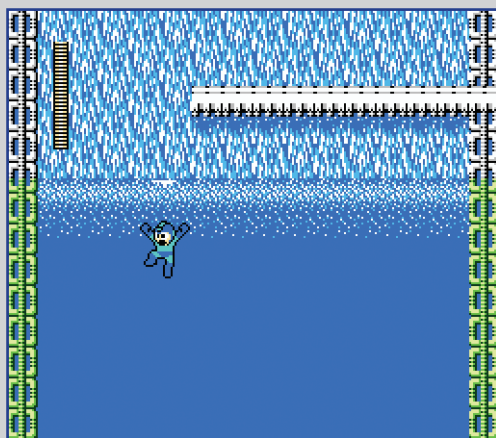
Mega Man 2 replaces the first game's sometimes frustrating Magnet Beam with three items: Item-1, Item-2, and Item-3. The first works as a floating platform that rises a short distance and can be used three at a time; the second is a jet sled that flies straight ahead until it runs out of energy; and the third adheres to the nearest wall and climbs until Mega Man dismounts, at which point it descends the wall. Each one has its own power meter, which depletes according to that item's specific parameters, and each gives a clear indication that it's about to deactivate. An improvement in every way over the Magnet Beam.



If we assume that most newcomers to *Mega Man* 2 will attempt to play through the eight stages in the order in which they're displayed (not realizing you can pick and choose your sequence at will), that means the game kicks off with Bubble Man. We also have to assume Capcom's dev team had observed player behavior from the original when it arranged the new Robot Master select screen. Which raises the question: Why make Bubble Man the "default" stage?

Bubble Man's stage incorporates a lot of advanced game mechanics, features that never appeared in the original *Mega Man*. One one hand, you can understand the creators' eagerness to show off all the new stuff they invented for *Mega Man* 2. Pursuing Bubble Man gives you a pretty nice introduction for all that this sequel does new, if you're a veteran player.

On the other hand, for a total novice, it's not really the best representation of the core *Mega Man* mechanics. It's like learning to drive in a particularly unfriendly downtown area of a large city, forcing you to deal with unique traffic



rules and uncommon situations when you should be getting a feel for the nuts and bolts of things. Your first time with a *Mega Man* game involves a lot of getting a handle on the jumpy-shooty action, so all the extra features in Bubble Man's stage would make it pretty intimidating for a novice.

Right away, Mega Man begins not with a stretch of flat ground but rather with staggered platforms in front of a waterfall. While this is not the only stage to open without a decently sized stretch of flat ground, the uneven footing combined with the constant motion of the background waterfall can feel rather intimidating.



It doesn't get any easier once you encounter your first enemies. These large frogs take multiple hits of Mega Man's standard blaster (once again denoted in the menu with a P), all while discharging a spread of three tiny frog robots. The tiny frogs are particularly tricky, hopping in a large arc toward Mega Man every few seconds. These jumps are the only

times they're vulnerable, as otherwise they're so tiny they actually lurk beneath Mega Man's line of fire. While there was one enemy too short for Mega Man to hit with his basic blaster in the first game, they appeared in smaller numbers and moved more predictably. Well, not that the tiny frogs are particularly unpredictable, per se, but because you have to deal with several at a time, they can seem somewhat overwhelming.

You can't even clear them out to make matters easier — once you've destroyed all three tiny frogs (or they've jumped off the ledges to their doom), the big frog spits another batch of them immediately. In other words, you're forced to dispatch the big frogs while avoiding the small ones. Thankfully, the tiny spawn do very little damage on contact, but their abundance, movements, evasiveness, and regenerative traits make for a pretty complex beginning to the stage.

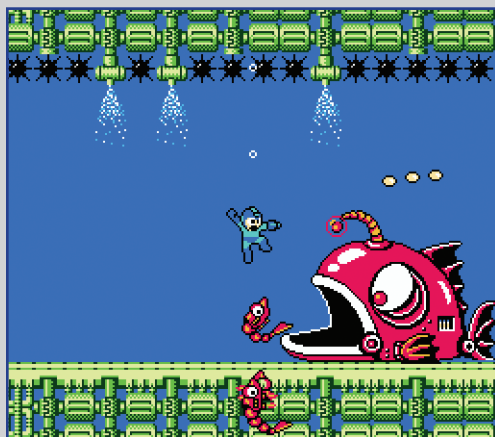
Beyond the large frogs, Mega Man has to traverse a series of platforms to drop quickly off-screen if he stands on them for more than a split-second. These aren't like the mushroom lifts in *Super Mario Bros.*; once they come loose, they fall so fast there's no way to gain purchase and jump at the last second to safety. You need to traverse the falling platforms without hesitation.

At the right edge of the waterfall, Mega Man drops down into the water. This completely changes the physics of the game. A few screens into the action and already the game has rewritten the rules.

The enemies in this area are decidedly difficult to kill, too. They're giant snails, whose shells fly off when struck. The exposed robomollusk, like the baby frog-bots, are too low to be shot with Mega Man's standard weapon.

Unlike in the first game, where the only

effect water had on the action was the forced forward motion of Wily Stage 3, here it gives Mega Man added buoyancy. Underwater, he can jump nearly the height of the entire screen, though if he breaks the water's surface his upward momentum reverts to normal. While Mega Man doesn't move any more slowly underwater, his added hang time gives the game a sort of "moon gravity" feel that can screw with your timing...



...especially given the way most of the lower portion of Bubble Man's stage is lined with deadly mines that destroy Mega Man on contact, similar to the spikes in the first game. The floatiness of your jumps while under the sea leaves you more likely to oversteer and drift into the spiked mines.

Oh, but that's not what you noticed about this screenshot, right? The mines fade into the background here, because Bubble Man's stage has a couple of visually arresting enemies to deal with: These giant angler fish, which (in keeping with what appears to be the stage's theme of big enemies disgorging smaller foes) belch trios of shrimp, which rocket about in pat-

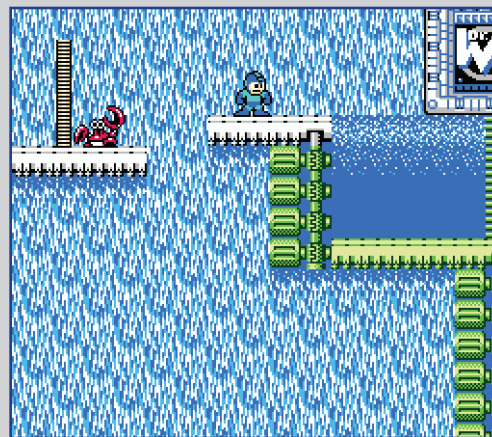
terns similar to those of Bloopers in Super Mario Bros. This could well be one of the main reasons Bubble Man occupies that upper-left stage select slot: These things look cool. It's the dev team showing off. There was nothing like this in the original *Mega Man*, and these aren't even end-game bosses! They're just minor mid-bosses.

And they do behave like bosses, interestingly. They're only vulnerable in their lanterns. And, should you die in the second half of Bubble Man's stage, any of the angler fish you've destroyed remain cleared away when you make your second pass. You'll have to deal with a batch of the shrimp, which spawn from nowhere, but the fish themselves are one-time kills.

Beyond the angler fish you'll find a series of staggered platforms beneath a spike-lined ceiling, which puts your fine control of underwater jumping and falling physics to the test. You need a steady hand to avoid plowing into the explosives above. Complicating matters, you're constantly beset by these robotic jellyfish that descend from above and home in on Mega Man. They're kind of like a hybrid of metroids and the



"bubble boy" boss from *Mega Man* (a deliberate design choice, given how many backward references show up in *Mega Man 2*; its name even seems similar to that of the older boss). That connection also makes this a symbolically fitting open in level, tying the sequel into the final run of the previous game.



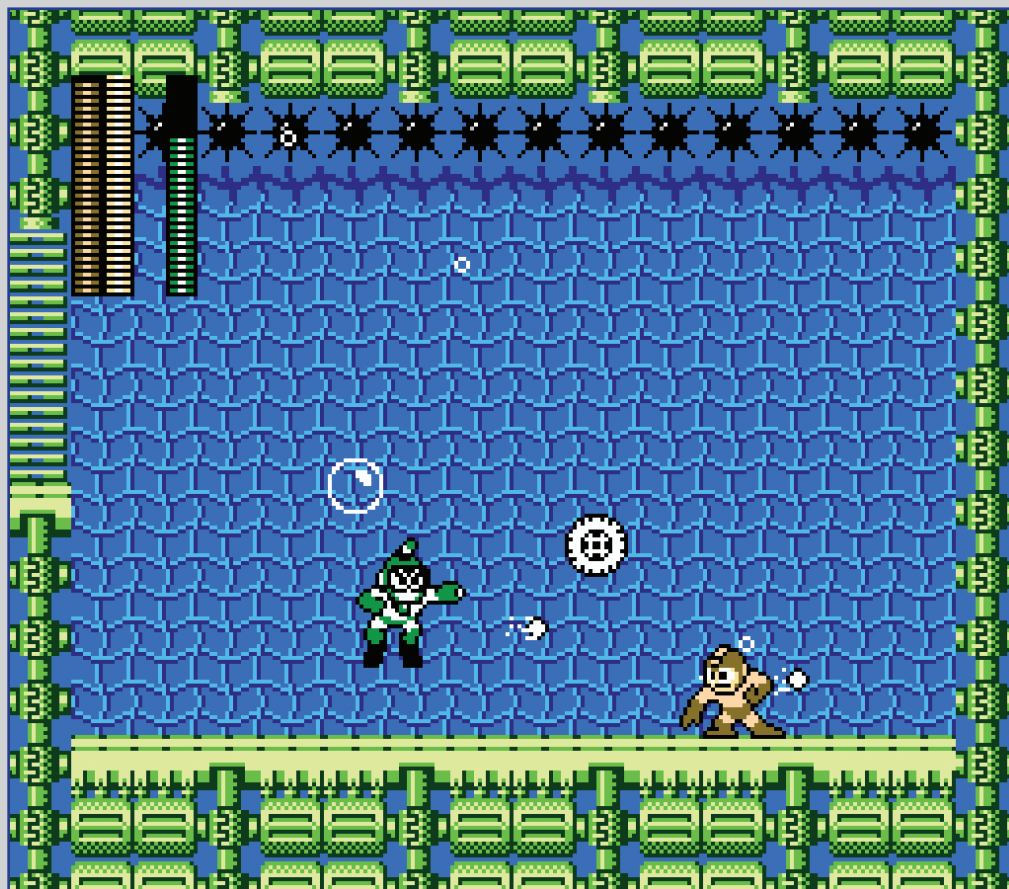
The final leg of the stage returns Mega Man to the staggered platforms in front of the waterfall, though this time around you face crabs rather than frogs. The crabs attack in a set pattern: One descends from ahead of you, then one from behind, repeat infinitely. The ones ahead can be tricky, potentially knocking you into a pit if you jump carelessly ahead. They're easily dealt with once you sort out the pattern, but until then they make for an effective challenge on this uneven terrain.

And finally, Bubble Man. You can see the new Robot Master design philosophy for this game at work here; Bubble Man behaves much less erratically than his predecessors, and his attacks are far less devastating. While he deals more damage to Mega Man per attack than vice versa, his movements are more restrained and

he feels more pattern-driven — as a threat, he's closer in difficulty to Bombman than, say, Elecman, and makes a challenging but not overwhelming first boss... provided you could make it through the stage.

Bubble Man largely sticks to the edges of the room, firing off a series of bubbles that bounce slowly toward Mega Man before rising toward the ceiling, then descending while firing a blaster similar to Mega Man's default cannon. It's not too difficult a task to evade his two different projectiles and return fire with several hits in between.

Bubble Man's weakness is the Metal Blade, which hits him extra hard and excels at striking him while he's lurking in the upper portions of the room. As in the previous game, the stage design is meant to clue you in to the boss' weakness: The enemies that attack from above, or that slink so low they can slide right beneath the basic arm cannon, fall easily to the Metal Blade, which covers a wide angle and can be aimed upward. Unfortunately, the Metal Blade is so effective in every stage that this clue doesn't particularly stand out. Oh well!



After taking the novice approach to *Mega Man 2* — that is, starting in the left corner on the level select screen and working my way across and down — I think I have a better understanding of what “Airman ga taosenai” is all about. You start with Bubble Man, and it’s a kind of tough stage followed by a fairly straightforward boss; and then you move along to Air Man, which gives you a pretty manageable stage followed by an absolute bastard of a Robot Master.

Air Man’s stage feels different than anything that’s appeared so far in the *Mega Man* series. The platforms, like those in Bubble Man’s stage, tend to be fairly small and demand quite a bit of jumping. And you spend a lot of time hopping on interactive objects, as you did in Iceman’s stage in the previous game. Yet the finished product doesn’t feel like either of those levels.



The stage begins with these massive oni-like robots, which you have to scramble across in order to advance. They’re completely

stationary, fading into existence as you draw near. Despite remaining motionless in the sky, they require good timing. Their horns extend and quickly retract on a short cycle, allowing you just enough time to dash across and leap to the platform opposite if you make your initial jump the split second before the horns retract.

Note to the confused: The white hexagonal detail beneath its eyes is its nose, not its mouth. The mouth is the wide line across the bottommost portion of its base. It’s meant to resemble a Japanese ogre, not an octopus. You’re basically running across Lum’s dad’s head here.

If you stand too long on the oni, it will begin to disgorge smaller oni from the ports on the side of its head. Yes, *Mega Man 2* enemies really like spitting out tinier versions of themselves, for some reason. The tiny oni fly upward and then begin slowly drifting toward Mega Man, homing in on him. They have little circular mouths that pulsate as they float, which doesn’t help resolve the ambiguity of the larger oni’s face, but I swear to god the round thing on the big guy is its nose. Seriously.

This is a solid start to the level — a test of timing with consequences for dawdling, but nothing too severe. As long as you take your time, there’s little danger of being knocked clear into the sky and dying here. But at the same time, the more you delay, the more hassles you have to contend with. So speed behooves you. Although, if you do have the Time Stopper here, you can freeze their horns and the mini-goblins alike.

Once you clear the first two oni, *Mega Man 2* apologizes for that crappy floating platform sequence in *Mega Man*. This portion bears a strong resemblance to that infamously

wretched chunk of Iceman’s stage, but here it’s not a flaky, frustrating mess; it’s a clever, interesting, and challenging-in-a-fun-way test of timing and dexterity.

This expanse of sky is filled with five cloud platforms that rotate in a circular motion. You can jump onto the black portion peeping above the cloud portion — a small but clear hint of where it’s safe to land — and wait for your current platform to rotate back up to a high vantage point before hopping down to the next.

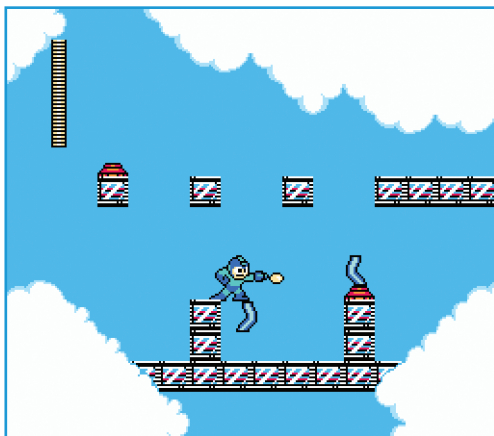
Ah, but you can see the challenge element in the screenshot above: Most of the platforms are already occupied. These robotic effigies of the thunder god Raiden ride the clouds around and toss lightning bolts at Mega Man. The bolts fly in a lazy arc that is only a threat if you happen to be below the enemy when he



chucks it, but it’s easy in that situation to jump up and take a few shots at him first. Being struck by the lightning bolt can potentially knock you

off a platform, so it's wise to avoid giving these guys a chance to attack.

The rock-solid footing of the platforms and the destructibility of the threats attached to said platforms makes for a much more reasonable challenge than the aerial gauntlet in Iceman's stage. Just as well, because the easiest means to skip this portion altogether — the closest analog to the Magnet Beam — isn't even accessible until after you defeat this level. Apology accepted, Capcom. Let's never speak of those stupid gun platforms again.

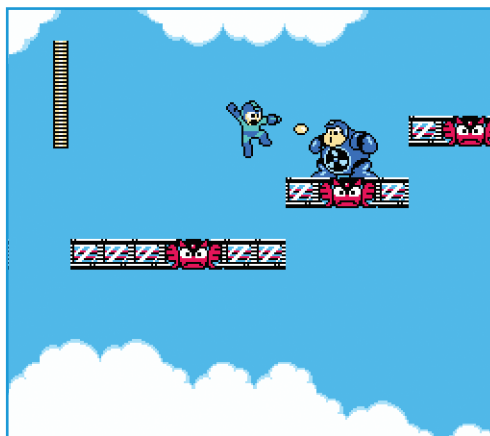


One of the interesting details of this stage concerns the clouds in the foreground. Mega Man actually runs behind them at several points, which has the side effect of obscuring the action slightly. The cloud cover is very slight, blocking your view of Mega Man for just a brief instant — but generally instants where enemies appear and attack. You always get a clear view of the enemies' approach, so there are no gotchas lurking behind cover. Instead, it simply

demands an understanding of their movements and your control over Mega Man to avoid or destroy these briefly hidden foes.

At the end of the first half of the level, the screen stops scrolling and you run behind a cloud bank... only to drop down to the screen below. This is an admirable example of restraint. A lesser game might have put a few pits behind the clouds throughout the stage, forcing you to trial-and-error your way along. But *Mega Man 2* continues the trend of smarter, more considerate, more ethical level design; with this game we've left behind the cruel days of hidden traps and untelegraphed dangers. Level designers use tricks sparingly and with ample forewarning. *Mega Man 2* is an exceptionally well-designed game, and it is above all exceptionally fair (with maybe one or two small exceptions).

The final sequence takes you past multiple oni — this time consecutive to one another, forcing you to time your jumps from one to the next and essentially forcing you to wait as you hop from one demon to the next. Which

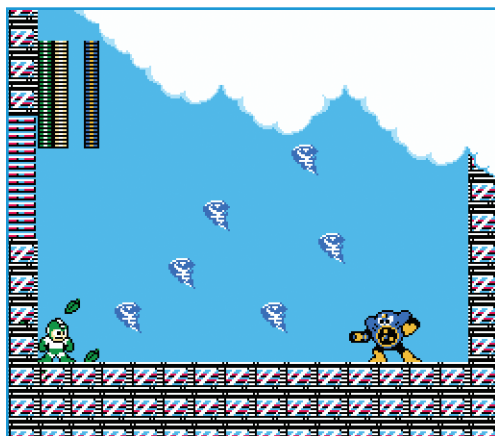


is to say, increasing the likelihood that the mini-goblins will come after you while you wait, increasing the difficulty of the already tricky jumps. This is actually the first time in a single *Mega Man* stage we've seen a solid example of iterative design, of an early challenge teaching the ropes for a more complex variant of the task later in the level.

The chubby Air Man clone you face next brings about a second instance of Air Man's stage building upon a previous challenge in short order. Earlier in the level, a series of birds flew past across the top of the screen, dropping eggs a short distance in front of Mega Man. Their behavior was remarkably similar to that of the hunchback-dropping eagles in the courtyard of Castlevania, except that the eggs don't hop about madly upon landing; instead, they burst, unleashing a swarm of tiny birds that homes in on Mega Man.

The same hazard appears here as well, but this time with the added element of the fan guys, whose bodies generate a constant blast of air that pushes Mega Man back. The birds are tricky enough to evade or destroy as it is, but here you have to do it while fighting against backwards drag. The fanboys soak up several hits, and thanks to the weird relationship between scrolling and enemy spawns in *Mega Man 2*, letting them push you back far enough that they scroll off-screen causes them to essentially spawn anew. In other words, their hit points regenerate. So you need to balance the fight against the birds with the need to manage your distance from the junior Air Men, not letting them move too far out of your sight. It's not hard, but it definitely demands a deft touch.

After all of this, Air Man can be



incredibly tough for the newcomer. His attack consists of blasting six small tornadoes into the air, which spread across the room in one of several different patterns, hover momentarily, then drift forward off the screen. After doing this a few times, he leaps across the room and repeats the process.

The sheer number of projectiles he emits, and their odd way of moving, can be a little overwhelming. To make matters worse, the tornadoes block your own shots; they are invincible. You can't simply stand and pump Air Man full of bullets, because his projectiles will deflect them harmlessly. The trick, of course, is to slip past his tornadoes and stand in close, pouring fire into Air Man from close range. Even this isn't a slam dunk strategy, as Air Man is constantly blasting a stream of air that pushes Mega Man away (hence the movement of his little tornadoes). But if you can get in close — and

veteran players will find leaping his projectiles somewhat similar to avoiding the chunks flying across the room during *Mega Man's* Yellow Devil battle — your basic attacks will outpace the damage he can cause.

The trick, in other words, is to be aggressive. Even Air Man's weakness — the Leaf Shield — requires you to move in close. The constant flood of tornadoes makes it essentially impossible to get a clear shot at Air Man from across the room; used as a projectile, the Leaf Shield has such a wide spread that it will inevitably strike a whirlwind and drift harmlessly to the ground. You need to close the gap in order to make your Leaf Shield strikes count.

And yes, Air Man's stage offers some broad hints for the utility of the Leaf Shield against the boss. Those birds that drop the baby-making eggs are rendered almost preposterously harmless by the Leaf Shield; not only will the flock of babies explode harmlessly against the shield, they'll usually drop a ton of power-ups in the process. They have a curious tendency to drop a huge number of 1UPs, for some reason... the only downside being that so many power-ups drop at once that most of them vanish before hitting the ground. There's something a little heartbreaking about seeing a 1UP materialize then evaporate a split second later.

Air Man is also vulnerable to the maxed-out Atomic Fire, though the Leaf Shield caveat applies: The full Atomic Fire takes the form of a huge projectile that is easily blocked by the tornadoes.

Defeating Air Man doesn't just earn



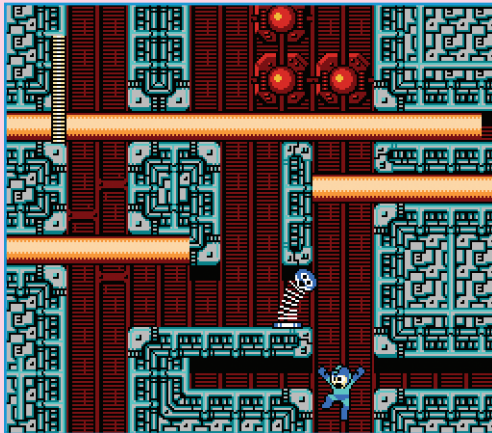
you the Air Shooter, it also gets you equipped with Item-2. The Items are a trio of tools that take the place of the Magnet Beam, filling similar roles. But they have the advantage of being unmissable — you can't reach Wily's lair without the requisite Items in hand, because you gain them automatically after completing certain Robot Master stages. Again, apology accepted.

Item-2 is a small sled that flies forward horizontally across the screen until it runs out of juice. Like the way any sane person uses the Magnet Beam in Iceman's stage, this helps you traverse wide horizontal expanses... which would have made it really handy in Air Man's stage. Oh well! It has plenty of other uses, though. And since it flies straight forward, it doesn't have the Magnet Beam's tendency to force you to rise as you advance forward. A superior choice all around.

Mega Man 2 is an advanced platformer at every turn! There is really no such thing in this game as a stage without some sort of high-level mechanic that adds an extra layer of complexity to the basic run-and-gun style of the original *Mega Man*. I guess the closest thing would be Wood Man's level, which not coincidentally several people have mentioned in the comments as being their choice of beginning stages.

But consider: Bubble Man has water and falling platforms. Heat Man has intricate disappearing block patterns. Flash Man has a slippery floor. Crash Man is mostly about climbing. Metal Man has conveyor belts. And then there's Quick Man.

Quick Man, and those evil, evil lasers.



Yes, the main gimmick in this stage is possibly the most memorably nasty stage mechanic in the entirety of the *Mega Man* franchise: Security lasers. As you drop through several screens of Quick Man's level, powerful beams emerge quickly from the walls. If you touch them, Mega Man will die instantly. They do not disappear once they've begun transmitting. You need to outrace them, or it's back to the start for

you.

Now, if you've acquired the Time Stopper from Flash Man's stage, you can freeze the beams for just about long enough to pass through them all. But there are two sets of beams, so you need to gather energy drops to refill Time Stopper in between... and then again before facing Quick Man, because Time Stopper is his weakness. The enemies in this stage aren't terribly conducive to grinding for pick-ups, though. And most of the level consists of free fall — it's an extremely vertical layout, clogged with those lasers.

Even if you're equipped with the boss' weakness here, this design poses a difficult question. Do you burn through your weapon energy to survive the laser gauntlet, or do you save it up and hope you can make it to the end and destroy the boss? It's not a design flaw, in my opinion; it's a choice. Which obstacle do you feel more comfortable challenging?

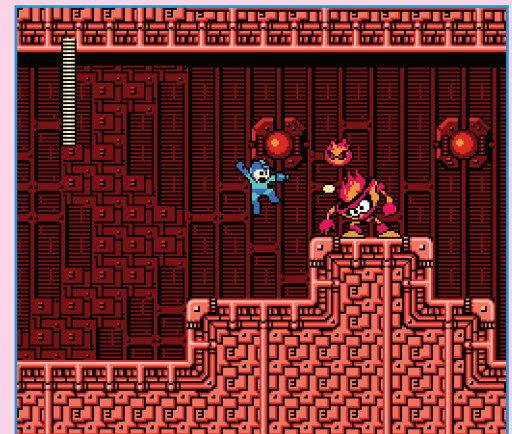
In its defense, Quick Man's stage offers a fair amount of mercy. There are no less than three 1UPs here, one on the very first screen. In other words, you can keep slamming your head against the initial laser gauntlet until you pass and never run out of lives... provided, of course, you have one of Dr. Light's Items in order to reach that initial 1UP. That right there is your first clue that maybe this isn't the best stage to start out with; if you can't collect the first 1UP, maybe you should find an alternate stage to challenge. You're given ample opportunity to learn with no real loss no matter how many times you die (at least until you run out of Item energy).

Once you do clear the first set of lasers, another 1UP awaits you, along with a large weapon power-up capsule that you can apply toward replenishing Time Stopper juice if you used it. Additionally, this set of power-ups

includes a completely new feature for *Mega Man 2*, the E-Tank.

An E-Tank works as a collectible energy refill. You grab it and rather than restoring your energy right away, the E-Tank sits in your inventory until you use it. Once used, the tank will replenish the entirety of Mega Man's health — a major boon. They're hard to come by (appearing in only about half the game's stages), and you can only carry four at a time, so knowing when to use them and where to collect them proves to be of utmost strategic value. It doesn't do you any good against the lasers in this stage, since those are instant-kill hazards, but it can be a real boon against Quick Man himself. And if you die in the second half of the stage without using the E-Tank, it'll be there again to collect once you continue. You can stock up, gaining new powers in death. Like *Dark Souls*! (Note: Not actually like *Dark Souls*.)

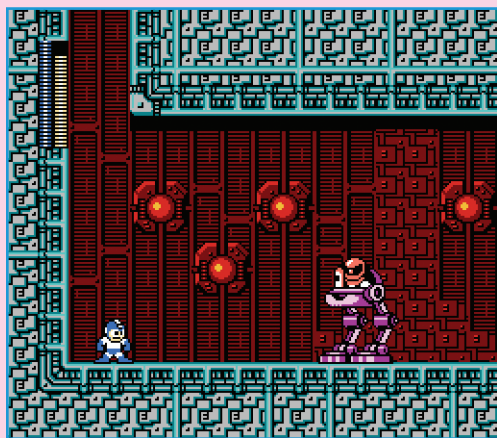
Once you complete the first laser gauntlet, you encounter yet another unique mechanic: Darkness. These mechanical fire pots don't simply stand and chuck little balls of flame (which you may remember seeing in Fireman's stage in the first game) at you; they



also illuminate the corridor between the level's two laser gauntlets. When you destroy a Hot Head, you also destroy the only thing lighting the level, plunging the stage into darkness. Since you're advancing over uneven ground, the lack of illumination forces you to stumble your way ahead, leaping repeatedly to clear obstructions you can't see.

As in Air Man's stage, the game plays fair when you're robbed of your ability to see your footing; the dark sections are extremely low-threat in nature. The only enemies you encounter are Hot Heads, so every time you face an active threat you also have the benefit of light to guide your way. This sequence seems more dangerous than it actually is — and it also shows how the first few *Mega Man* games build on their predecessors, as there's a similar sequence in Shadow Man's stage of *Mega Man 3* in which the darkness is accompanied by moving threats.

Beyond the connecting corridor, you face the stage's second laser sequence. While the first one was fairly manageable once you came to understand the threat the beams pose, this one requires deft precision and, yes, a bit of memorization. You can definitely clear it without



using the Time Stopper — I've done it — but it's a task that requires some effort. Alternately, if you freeze time, the freeze effect won't quite get you to the end of the gauntlet... but there's a large energy pick-up midway through that will help you make the final push. And a third 1UP!

The final leg beyond the lasers confronts you with two Sniper Joes riding huge, bipedal mechs. These things are incredibly intimidating — a sort of redux of the Big Eyes from *Mega Man*, though used less frequently. (They also appear in both Flash Man's stage, which offers a subtle hint toward those boss' place in the chain of weapon weaknesses.) Unlike Big Eyes, they're a double threat: Even after you've destroyed the mech, the Sniper Joe drops to the ground and fights you like the ones in the original game, minus the random leaps.

There's actually an easy way to destroy the mechs, though. The Quick Boomerang will take them out in a few rapid shots. Oh, but wait. You don't get the Quick Boomerang until you've beaten this stage, and unlike in the first game you can't return to a completed stage, and one of the only other two of the first eight levels to feature Joe mechs is Flash Man, whose stage you reaaaaally want to finish before coming here. The irony!

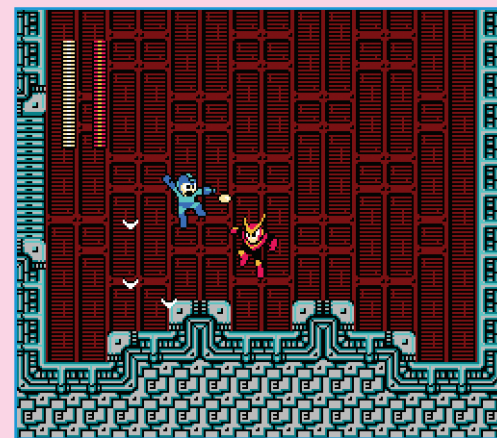
Not only can these enemies take a beating, they also are extremely poor choices for farming weapon energy drops. If you went ahead and used the Time Stopper while dropping through the lasers, you're probably not going to have any energy to use it against Quick Man. Your weapon energy still doesn't recharge if you die in *Mega Man 2*, only if you continue. Which puts you back at the start of the laser gauntlet. Tough luck, man.

Quick Man is the most directly aggressive of the game's bosses. He's kind of a combination of Cutman and Elecman from the first game, but much faster. He charges back and

forth across the room, and the uneven terrain of his chamber causes him to jump somewhat unpredictably. While his melee collisions are enough to put a serious hurt on Mega Man, he backs up the impact hazard by tossing trios of boomerangs that fly out in a spread pattern before pausing and changing direction, centering in on Mega Man's location. Both the Robot Master and his weapons are difficult to evade.

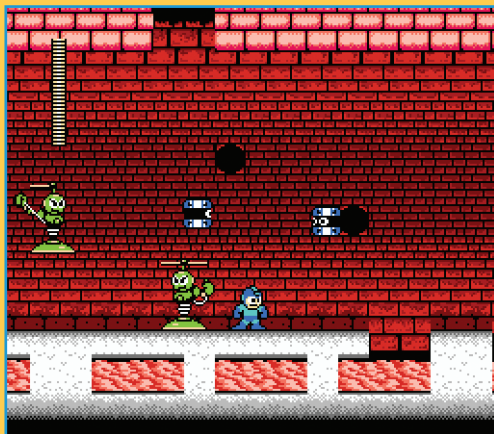
Your saving grace here is the Time Stopper, provided you have any juice left for it. Quick Man is the only Robot Master to be affected by the time freeze, which brings him to a dead halt and drains his energy — one block of health for every two points of energy that tick from the Time Stopper. That means a full Time Stopper charge can deplete half his health, putting you on much more even footing.

Even if you don't have a Time Stopper charge, though, the E-Tank near the start of the stage can effectively provide the same effect as a full Time Stopper. It doubles Mega Man's health rather than halving Quick Man's, but the net result is essentially the same. And with Quick Man defeated, perhaps the most stressful and difficult of the game's levels is complete. Whew.



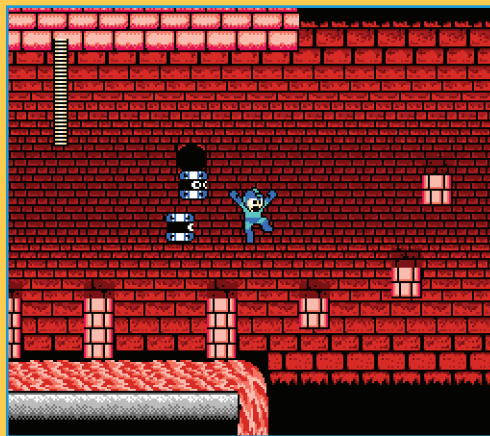
I keep referring to Bubble Man's stage as the "default," but that's only slightly true. Unlike *Mega Man*, the *Mega Man 2* stage select screen actually begins with the cursor in a neutral position (centered on Mega Man's portrait in the middle square). You really aren't pushed toward any particular selection; I call Bubble Man's upper-left position the default simply because that's how the eye reads, left to right. I suppose Quick Man could just as easily be the default, though, since Japanese is generally read right to left. So really, any stage is truly fair game for starting. I pity whoever picks Heat Man for their first go, though.

Can you tell Heat Man was designed in a culture which has a much more enthusiastic attitude about smoking than America? He looks like a Zippo lighter. As a boss, he's not the worst in the game... but his stage more than makes up for it. While not the most visually diverse stage in the game, Heat Man's level does a great job of using the NES's minimal color capabilities to create the impression of a tunnel through which a channel of lava flows. The floor beneath which the lava runs throws a shadow up against the walls, which appear to curve into the back-



ground. It's a simple effect, but it makes for a great example of smart graphic design on the system. Four colors can go a long way!

Heat Man's stage is fairly straightforward in terms of the basic ground it covers, at least at first. It's more or less a straight run through the action until you reach the end section, but I wouldn't describe it as easy. The enemies here differ from the norm in that near every one you face respawns infinitely. The green propeller guys drop from holes in the ceiling, land on the ground, sit for a moment, then "jump" at you. Technically they're flying, but it's a short arcing motion. It's a jump. These guys will continue to pour out of their hatches every few seconds, whether or not you've already destroyed the previous ones.



Likewise, the blue barrel-shaped robots emerge from small hatches in the wall and drift slowly in a homing pattern toward Mega Man's position, constantly changing direction to track his movement. Up to three can appear on-screen at once, and while they may not seem like much of a threat here, they serve a similar role to the mini-goblins in Air Man's stage: They're slow, persistent, omnipresent threats that interfere

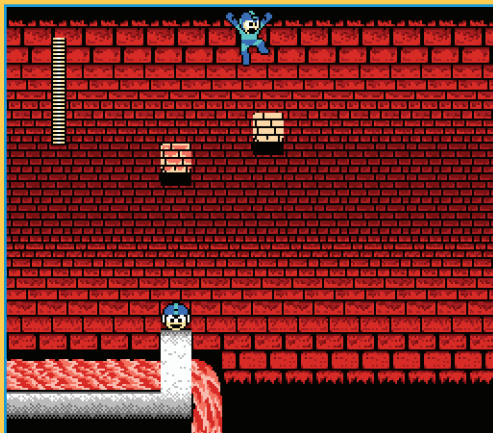
with your carefully timed movements as you're navigating more active environmental hazards.

Interestingly, the best weapon to have for Heat Man's stage isn't the boss' weakness, the Bubble Lead. No, it's the Metal Blade, because most enemies approach from above. The Air Shooter works, too, I suppose, but it's much hungrier for weapon energy and goes quickly against so many infinitely respawning foes. The Metal Blade is much more economical, and it allows you to hit enemies anywhere on the screen. Plus, because it can kill both types of enemies you see here in one hit, its piercing effect allows it to destroy multiple foes in a single shot.

It doesn't take long for Heat Man's stage to take off the gloves. Still, you have to give it points for rolling out its threats progressively. Even ground with robots. Broken ground with robots and exposed flumes of lava. Completely open lava flow with narrow columns to leap on, and also robots. Wide yawning chasms with tiny little platforms scattered across its length... and robots, of course.

The previously unthreatening drifters become more dangerous here, as you're forced to navigate slippery footholds above instant-kill scenarios while they materialize out of the scenery and home in on you. They will happily knock you into a pit as you stand and work up the nerve to jump... and they will just as happily obstruct a leap from one platform to another, destroying your aerial momentum and, yes, knocking you into a pit.

However, that's not the worst of it. Amidst all of these increasingly complex platforming scenarios, you'll encounter a handful of tall columns that can only be leapt by making use of the vanishing platforms that appear next to them. Yes, *Mega Man*'s second most hateful mechanic makes a return here and officially becomes a franchise standard. The *most*-hateful mechanic in the original *Mega Man* was those



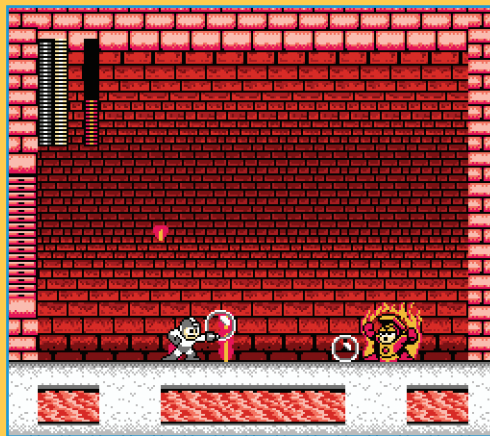
stupid floating platforms in Iceman's stage with the glitchy collision detection and an annoying tendency to shoot players while they dangled precariously over a fatal chasm. Those were fixed for *Mega Man 2* with the Kaminari Gorou platforms in Air Man's stage — while dangerous, their improved programming, consistent movements, and the ability of the player to gun down the threat riding atop them made for a fun and interesting challenge, not a frustrating one.

Alas, nothing about disappearing blocks has changed in the least here. In fact, Capcom doubled down on them. A massive stretch of Heat Man's stage consists of either fire or chasm (both equally fatal) which can be navigated only by traversing the lengthiest sequence of vanishing platforms in any *Mega Man* game ever. The way this element is scaled back in future entries, I think, shows that the developers recognized they maybe went a little too far here.

The block sequence is absolutely doable; I've complete it a few times. But it is insanely challenging, requires extended pattern memorization, and forces you to play precisely without becoming rattled by the intensity of the situation. That is no small demand!

On the other hand, if you've completed Air Man's stage, you can completely skip this part by hopping on Item-2 and riding it across the gulf. There's just enough weapon energy for Item-2 to fly you to safety... though someone in the level design department got a little nasty here by sticking a 1UP on a ledge in the middle of nowhere to tempt you into jumping off. If you do, you won't have enough juice for Item-2 to reach the other side. You can use the blocks, of course, but if you're using Item-2 it's a safe bet you don't have the nerve to try.

By comparison, the stage's epilogue — a face-off against a walker — seems almost like a relief. This is a straightforward threat. One you can kill. As for Heat Man, he goes down pretty quickly to the Bubble Lead. While the weapon is basically useless in the stage itself, the connection between “guy made of fire” and “weapon made of water” should be pretty intuitive.



Interestingly, Heat Man's attack style bears some small resemblance to that of his predecessor, Fireman. While he doesn't fire a weapon forward, he does fling a trio of napalm-like embers that fly in a triple arc and burst into

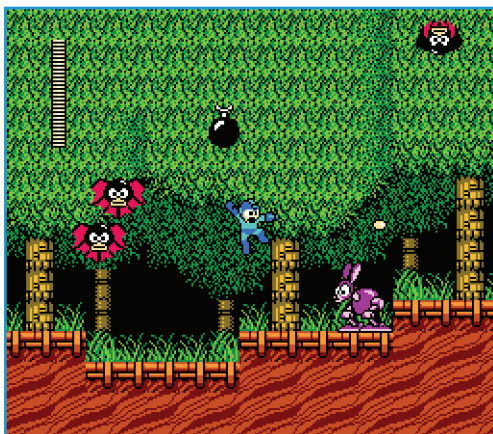
a tall fire column once they land, reminiscent of Fireman's tendency to create a persistent burst of flame on the ground wherever his flame cannon struck Mega Man.

And Heat Man does possess a powerful horizontal attack: Himself. After flinging his napalm blots, he flares up and dashes across the screen as a geyser of indestructible flame, aiming for Mega Man's current position. This actually works to his detriment, though; you can fairly easily jump over him as he jets, land, turn, and hit him in the face with the Bubble Lead. This will also cause him to toss his triple-flame attack in a shallow arc, which is easy to evade. While powerful, Heat Man isn't as unrelentingly aggressive as many of his fellow Robot Masters, so learning his patterns will take you far.

Besides the powerful but limited Atomic Fire, your second reward for besting Heat Man is Item-1, which works as Item-2's opposite number. While Item-2 sends you cruising straight ahead, Item-1 is a tiny propeller-driven platform that rises slowly. You can lay down up to three at a time to create a stair step effect and reach extremely high, out-of-the way platforms and ladders — essential in the final stages.



Wood Man's avatar appears off to the right of the center default position of *Mega Man 2*'s title screen, making it a not-particularly-inviting place to kick off the game. Yet several commenters have already noted that this is where they prefer to begin their *Mega Man 2* odyssey, and for good reason: It's perhaps the most nuts-and-bolts stage of the game, featuring no mechanical gimmicks to speak of. Just lots of running, jumping, climbing, and shooting, with a small sequence of mild platforming hazards to contend with toward the middle. The boss is unreasonably difficult in my opinion, thanks to his more or less unavoidable attack pattern, but everything else about Wood Man's stage really does make for a good starting point in the game.

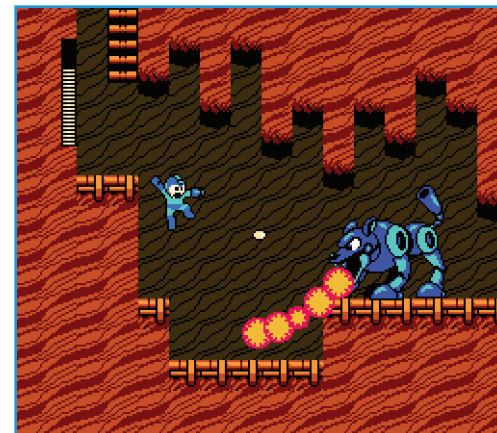


Set in a dark, dense forested area, Wood Man's level reflects a pretty straightforward nature theme. It's hard to tell if the ground is meant to be stone or wood — the pattern suggests wood, as do the multiple ascents and descents as if traveling through hollowed out trees. The color palette helps set this stage apart while tying into the boss' theme, a discipline increasingly lost in this game's sequels.

The opening portion of the stage greets you with slightly uneven ground and two types of enemies that attack from different directions. The purple rabbits hop toward you, pause, and fire off tiny missiles that look like carrots, because Dr. Wily may be a madman bent on world conquest but he also likes cute things and cartoonish themes. You face several bunnies in the intro area, and each poses slightly more threat than the last — the first appears on a path of ground slightly higher than where you're running, putting its feet directly in the line of Mega Man's arm cannon. You can stand and open fire and easily take it out before it can attack. The second is slightly below Mega Man, so its head is in your line of fire, and you can easily jump over its tiny rockets. And the third attacks you on even footing, causing its missiles to fly at a height that blocks your line of fire. It's a small detail, but shows the level designers taking consideration of how to effectively evolve a single hazard by putting the environment to use.

Complicating the ultimately rather unthreatening rabbit mechs, you also have to deal with dozens of the Bubble Bats that hang from the trees and descend toward you. These have become an iconic enemy throughout the *Mega Man* series (including a memorable cameo in *Mega Man X*). Just pretend its mouth is a beak and not misguided minstrel-style blackface...

Bubble Bats wrap themselves in their indestructible wings as they hang from the trees, only becoming vulnerable once they descend and flap toward Mega Man. Their behavior is similar to the endlessly spawning capsule guys in Heat Man's stage, with the obvious difference that the bats don't respawn. They also move a little more quickly. But they do approach from above, like the capsules, and as there you really want the Metal Blade. No coincidence, really; Metal Blade is one of Wood Man's weaknesses.



Once past the initial forest segment, you descend into a tree or cave or whatever and face these memorable foes: Giant dogs that block the way forward. The dogs emit arcing blasts of fire from their mouths, and while each of the three dogs occupies a differently configured room, the fire's movement always passes through the spot at which Mega Man needs to stand in order to gun down his opponent.

In this first room, the fire's simple enough to evade. It passes through the platform directly opposite the dog, but because of the large open space between that vantage point and the dog, you can jump forward easily to pass over the flames. The second and third chambers, however, give you progressively less room to maneuver. The final room has a jagged, uneven ceiling that greatly hampers your ability to dodge and limits where you can jump up and shoot at the enemy. In *Mega Man 3*, it would be easy enough to slide to safety, but the slide move doesn't exist yet. So you have to play cautiously. These impressive-looking mid-bosses clearly made a massive impression on fans, because cool-looking and largely stationary mid-stage foes would become a standard for the series.



Beyond the dogs and back up the trunk, you come to a small clearing which visually reads as traversing the space between two large trees at the foliage level. In a nice touch, the platforms here appear to be made of bamboo, continuing the natural elements motif.

Here you have to deal with a threat from above, those egg-dropping birds that also appear in Air Man and Crash Man's stages, while mechanical monkeys attack from below — they leap up to hang from the bamboo, then pounce onto the platforms once you draw near. Normally you'd want to handle the birds with the Leaf Shield, but of course you don't have access to that until after you complete this stage and defeat Wood Man. Instead, you need to be more preemptive, destroying the birds (or at least their eggs) before they hit the ground and explode into a flock of babies.

Again, the Metal Blade makes the best choice for this scenario. The freedom to toss it at 45-degree angles allows you to take out the gorillas before they pull themselves up from below the bamboo planks while also making

egg disposal much easier. Even if an egg hits the ground, the width of the Metal Blade combined with its piercing attribute ensure you can clear out most of the resulting baby birds with a single shot.

The descent down the second tree brings the rabbit robots back into the picture in increasingly complex ways. The most interesting comes in the form of a full-screen stair step formation in which you discover that having the high ground isn't always an advantage. It's not too much trouble to toss Metal Blades down at the rabbit below, but without that weapon you'll find it difficult to avoid taking damage from the carrot missiles it lobes your way (the Bubble Lead, ostensibly perfect for that situation, tends to be deflected harmlessly by the missiles).

The final leg of the stage introduces an interesting test of skill and reflexes: Giant chickens that run straight at you and leap. They soak up a ton of damage, making it difficult to shoot them down before they reach you. And you can't jump over them, because they jump once they reach you.

Instead, the solution to making it safely past the chicken gauntlet is sublime in its counterintuitive simplicity: Rather than trying to shoot or evade the chickens, you simply stop moving before they reach you. They make their leaps shortly before reaching you, so all you have to do to avoid taking a hit is to stand motionless. They're chickens, right? So... you play a game of chicken, and they're the ones who'll flinch.

As for Wood Man, he's kind of an annoying boss. He surrounds himself with the Leaf Shield, which deflects all attacks... well, all but one. After a few seconds, he sends the shield flying toward Mega Man. The projectile is

easy enough to avoid by leaping, but the instant he loses the shield he also causes four leaves to begin drifting from the ceiling in a zig-zag pattern. It is possible to avoid taking a hit, but very very difficult. Difficult enough to border on feeling cheap, in fact.

On the plus side, Wood Man is weak to



an unprecedented three Robot Master weapons. The Atomic Fire, when fully charged, will destroy him in two hits. The Metal Blade does a number on him, too. And finally, if you hit his raised shield with Crash Bomber, it'll detonate against the shield and score multiple hits at once. So he's easy enough if you have the proper weapons... but if not, he can be quite challenging.

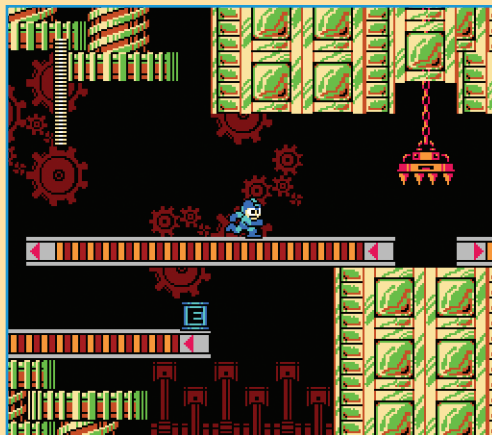
Handily, his weaknesses are all intuitive; he's a robot made of wood, so of course he's weak to a cutting blade or fire. And the explosive splash of Crash Bomber reaching through his shield makes sense, too. Not necessarily the easiest battle to begin the game with, but strong on the whole.

It's taken us quite a while to get to Metal Man's stage in the left-to-right, top-to-bottom approach to exploring *Mega Man 2*'s stages. In practice, though, Metal Man is almost always my first stop, for several reasons.

First, Metal Man's stage is surprisingly easy, despite having a dominant mechanical gimmick in the form of conveyor belts. While not without its challenges, it follows its tricky environmental and combat threats with opportunities to restock your health. It features an E-Tank that's almost too easy to collect. And most of all, the Robot Master at the end of the level is actually quite easy to beat with just Mega Man's standard weapon yet yields the absolute most versatile weapon in the entirety of the franchise in the Metal Blade. By stopping off at Metal Man's stage first, you basically grant yourself the easy mode approach to the rest of the game. And that is OK.

Metal Man's stage consists of gears and clockwork to the point that I've always wondered if this wasn't meant to be the home for Flash Man, a Robot Master whose power centers on time. There's a bit of a *Castlevania* vibe going on here, between the clock tower look of the backgrounds to the plunging spike crushers here. It's not a bad reference to make, honestly; *Mega Man* and *Castlevania* were the two breakout stars for original third-party NES creations, so the connection seems apt.

The thick, striped platforms here represent the central trick of Metal Man's stage: Moving floors. Mega Man's footing here moves in the direction indicated by the small red arrows, and if simply stand still the conveyors will slide you along either forward or back, depending. If you run in the direction of the arrow, you'll move at double speed; run opposite its motion and you'll struggle to make forward progress.



The first belt walk — the flooring you start out on — pushes you forward, immediately prompting you to take action. If you let Mega Man simply stand in his default position, he'll eventually be whisked right off the forward edge of the platform and into a pit. From there you jump across to the walk seen in the lower-left corner of the screen above, pushing you in the opposite direction. The moving platforms don't have much impact on your jumps aside from determining your initial velocity, so you can move much more quickly on the conveyors by leaping forward instead of running. To get the E-Tank, you need to make numerous quick hops to scoot forward since the ceiling above is so low.

The process of navigating the moving floors is almost immediately complicated by the spiked plungers that appear in the recesses between the conveyors. They drop once Mega Man draws near them, plummeting quickly from the ceiling to the floor before slowly retracting only to do it all over again a couple of seconds later. These would be fairly easy to avoid under normal circumstances, but the added complexity of the constant motion adds a wrinkle of challenge as you're forced to nudge Mega Man

left or right to hold a steady position as you wait for the plungers to retract. You also need to jump precisely to land on the narrow spaces between them without sliding into the (surprisingly wide) hit boxes of the subsequent traps.

In an example of seemingly backward stage design, you have to deal with a couple of conveyor/plunger combos before you face the plungers surrounded by motionless floor. You'd think it would be the other way around, to ease you into the challenge. It's not a crucial flaw, but it does seem unusually unfriendly for such an otherwise well-considered game.

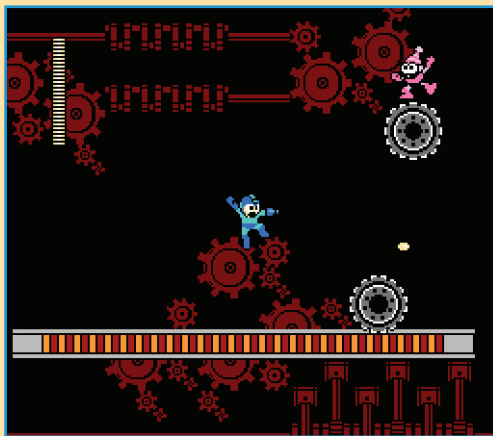
Even if you take a few hits in the plunger gauntlet, you'll be fine once you cross the gap beyond the moving floor to reach stable ground patrolled by enemies called Moles. Probably the most simplistic opponents in the game, Moles simply burrow in one direction, either up or down, and change speed once they break free from the ceiling or floor. They take several shots to destroy, but they appear in massive quantities and tend to be generous with their drops. By the time you work your way slowly through this area, you should easily have restocked your life and potentially snagged a few 1UPs, too.



The Mole sequence can be fairly tedious, though, so you can also speed your way through by either tossing and dashing after Leaf Shields, whose wide area of impact and piercing effect will wipe out everything in front of you and litter the ground with power-ups; or by using the Time Stopper to completely freeze them in their tracks. Once you clear the area, you can then turn around and mop up Moles for a few minutes to refill the Time Stopper, if you like.

Unlike the plungers, the Mole sequence does reflect more progression in complexity of level design: You begin on steady ground before facing off against the Moles on conveyor belts — initially moving you forward, but then pushing backward. The latter can be tricky, because it's easy to get so caught up shooting the swarms of Moles that you fail to make forward progress as you slide backward.

Beyond the Moles, a 1UP appears high on a ledge, accessible only with Items. If Metal

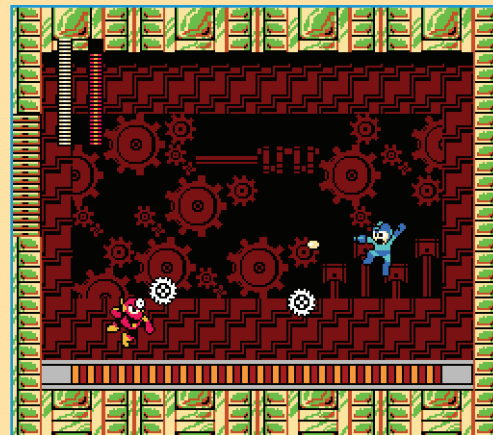


Man is your first stop, you can't reach the extra life... though for first-timers, it does serve as a clear indication that the game's tools can help you acquire goodies in out-of-the-way spots.

The back half of Metal Man's stage presents a weird melange of random enemy concepts atop a string of conveyor belts. What do clowns have to do with clockwork, you may wonder. Who knows! But these guys cause the gears they ride to drop to the floor and begin rolling toward Mega Man, working almost as a variant on the first game's Crazy Razies in the sense that there are essentially two targets here and the uppermost one is the easier one to destroy. A single shot will take out the clown robots, while the gears soak up more damage.

Further along you face enemies who explode toward Mega Man when shot, forcing you to learn to use uneven ground to your advantage. There's also a second E-Tank, though it's only worth getting if you've already earned one of Dr. Light's Item devices; the gap next to the E-Tank is too wide to clear by simply jumping, so you either need to create a temporary platform to advance or else sacrifice a life to claim the power-up.

As for Metal Man himself, well... he's an odd one. At first blush, he seems almost impossible to deal with. The floor in his lair constantly moves and changes directions every few seconds (signified with a quick screen flash), so you're always on your toes. And the Robot Master himself tends to leap repeatedly and toss a trio of Metal Blades in a tough-to-dodge pattern that homes in on Mega Man's actual location in space. Between the movement and the flurry of

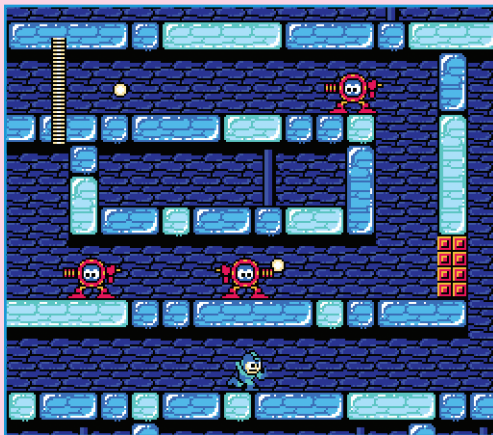


blades, it's a super tough.

At least, until you learn the trick. Metal Man is a curiously passive boss, one who mostly just responds to Mega Man's actions. If you stay in place and don't shoot at him, he'll do likewise. Every once in a while he seems to get bored and tosses a Metal Blade, but for the most part he only attacks in response to your actions. If you shoot, he'll pelt you with a trio of blades. If you stop shooting, so will he. If you move close to him, he'll leap to the other side of the room. If you don't, he won't.

So the trick to this fight is to stop and observe, and attack methodically. Metal Man tends to jump when he attacks, so you need to plan for his motion while predicting the timing of his blades. It takes a little getting used to, but once you have the timing in hand he proves to be surprisingly easy to take down. And you, my friend, have just earned yourself a super fancy weapon.

In case there was ever any doubt that *Mega Man 2*'s designers took the failures of the original game to heart, let Flash Man's stage put those uncertainties to rest. Flash Man makes use of the icy, slippery floor mechanic that appeared in Iceman's stage — but here, it's used far less abusively.



Even though the icy surface literally comprises 100% of the flooring in this level (whereas it accounted for only about half of Iceman's stage), you'll almost certainly find less frustration in this mission. *Mega Man 2* is much better about focusing in on a single primary feature or challenge per stage than the original game was; Iceman's level, for example, didn't just throw ice at you; it also included vanishing blocks and a challenging, unpredictable platform ride across a massive chasm. While there's something to be said for variety, there's also something to be said for not punching players in the face at every opportunity.

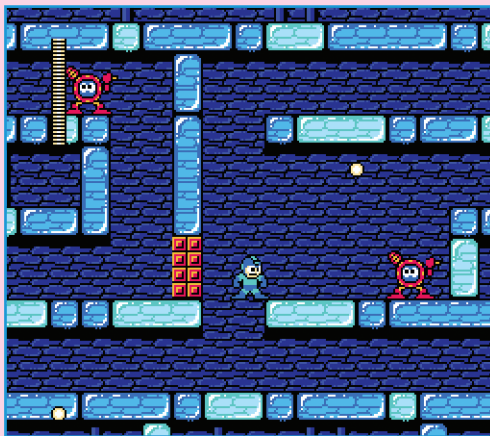
Flash Man's stage centers in on the ice element, creating complexity and challenge around that one concept. It works quite well.

Rather than unfolding as the straight-

forward run-and-gun romp of other *Mega Man* and *Mega Man 2* stages, Flash Man's level has a denser, more intricate feel. Its opening section essentially turns into a maze of sorts, with multiple tiers and levels. The enemies here have a unique attack style: They shoot a stream of bullets, then ratchet their guns to a higher angle and fire a second stream. Unlike other projectiles we've seen, these bullets have a rapid decay to them, so they drop quickly and arc off the screen. The higher angle of fire actually causes those bullets to drop a shorter distance from their bodies.

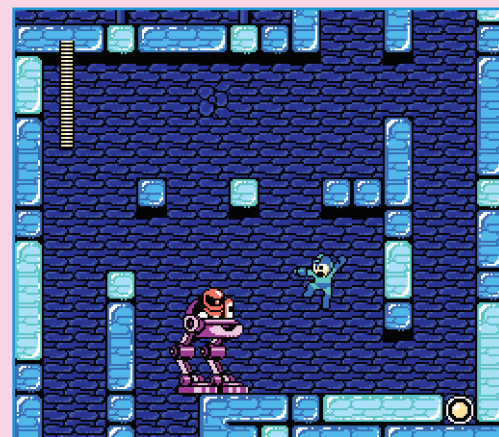
Because you're zipping along on slippery ground, it can be difficult to avoid those streams of fire. And because icy floors have low friction, it's difficult to change speed and direction, so dodging the alternating angles is also tough. Here we see a simple but unique enemy pattern combine with environmental factors to create an interesting challenge — great design.

Even better, *Mega Man 2* allows you the option of destroying these guys, but it only works if you're properly equipped. You can jump up to their level and shoot them head-on — quite safely, since the decay of their ballistics



causes those bullets to drop quickly below you — but the way forward is blocked by a partition that can only be destroyed by a Crash Bomber explosion. If you don't have Crash Bomber, you have to backtrack and take the lower route anyway... and when you backtrack, the robots will respawn, completely wasting the effort you expended to destroy them in the first place.

Of course, you could just use the Metal Blade to destroy them safely from below. Metal Blade, you spoil all the best-laid plans.



Further along, the branching paths are set apart enough that the highest route demands the use of one of Dr. Light's items — though the reward, a 1UP, is well worth it. The high route continues along even as the stage changes directions; if you can reach the upper platform at the end of the initial gauntlet, and if you have the Crash Bomber and three charges, you can clear the way to a low-hazard descend to the lower reaches of the stage. The other route, on the other hand, poses numerous challenges, including those walker mech guys, who prove to be especially tricky on the slippery floor.

The criss-crossing paths work sur-

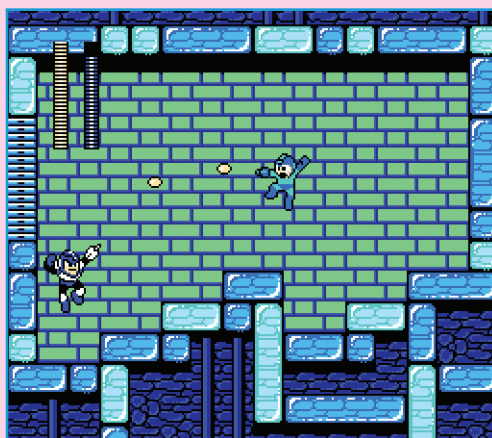
prisingly well here; despite the easy-to-reach “lower” route intersecting several times with the more difficult-to-reach “upper” route, it’s difficult to switch tracks. The combination of low ceilings and treacherous footing creates adds more complexity to the simple act of jumping to a distant platform and reaching the alternate track. And the one time in which the routes do merge significantly, the low-hazard route is blocked off by another Crash Bomber wall. There’s definitely an ideal route through this downward passage, but actually taking it poses something of a challenge, making the route the reward for expert play in and of itself.

Once you do reach the end of the descent, shown here, the game throws you for a loop. Here, the more difficult platforms above the walker actually lead to a less advantageous path — if you drop down the far left side, you end up on the floor of the final passage, where you’re forced to content with several more walkers. It’s much better in practice to risk dealing with the first walker and drop into the pit he guards. This leads you to a series of platforms high above the walkers patrolling the run-up to Flash Man’s stage...

...though once again, this route becomes its own reward through the challenge it poses. The high road consists of tiny one-block platforms that require incredibly precise jumps to navigate. These would be only moderately stressful under normal circumstances, but because these blocks are ice-coated like the rest of the stage, it becomes much trickier; the low-friction surfaces are likely to send you skidding right off the other side. Combined with the menacing walker below, hopping back and forth beneath you as you move, navigating this sequence requires steady nerves.

Or Item-2.

At the end of the upper passage, you’ll find an E-Tank — but also one last instance of the Crash Bomber walls. If you don’t have the explosives necessary to crack through the passage, you’ll be forced to backtrack and drop down, putting yourself in harm’s way with those walkers. Worse, reaching Flash Man’s room



requires traversing a raised platform patrolled by one last mech. Well, unless you use an Item.

And that’s basically Flash Man’s stage in a nutshell right there: A challenge of reflexes and dealing with an adverse environment whose worst perils can all be circumnavigated with the proper tools. You can tackle this stage from the outset and survive it, or you can come along once you’ve powered up a bit and just breeze through it. All in all, some excellent design.

As for Flash Man himself, he can be either a breeze or a beast depending on how frequently he elects to use his special weapon. The Time Stopper will completely freeze Mega Man in place, and unlike the way Time Stopper works

for you, for Flash Man it only functions briefly and doesn’t make other weapons inaccessible. While you’re frozen in place, Flash Man can still use his arm cannon to blast you.

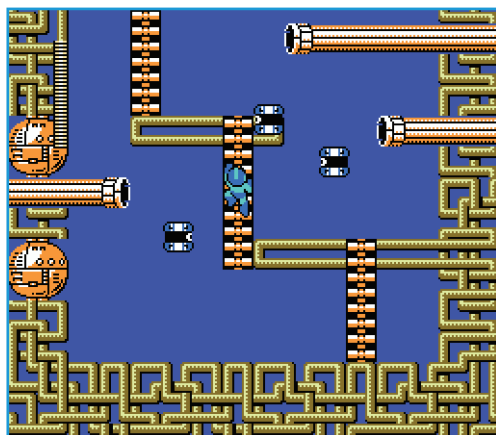
Thankfully, he doesn’t seem terribly fond of using his power to freeze time, instead preferring to advance steadily toward Mega Man at a leisurely pace. He marches slowly back and forth across the room, and the uneven terrain trips him up quite a bit. It’s not too difficult to keep your distance and pick away at him as he plods along, winning a war of attrition.

Like so many Robot Masters, Flash Man is weak to Metal Blade; with them you can easily take him out before he ever uses the Time Stopper. Crash Bombers are also fairly effective, provided you didn’t burn through them all on the way to the showdown. In short, a fairly manageable first stage and first boss; they require some skill, but none of the threats they pose together are totally overwhelming.

Your extra reward for destroying Flash Man is the last of the Dr. Light Items, Item-3. This Item would have come in super handy in this stage, naturally. Item-3 bounces along the floor until it hits a wall, at which point it begins crawling upward. Once it reaches the top or you jump off, it begins crawling back down again.

It’s a slightly redundant tool given the existence of Item-1, but it has its uses. It works in much closer quarters than Item-3, and if you need to make a lengthy ascent you can simply lay down Item-3 once instead of using multiple Item-1s. On the other hand, the fact that it crawls all the way back down to the ground before disappearing means it wastes a fair amount of energy, so it’s best to be strategic in its use. A somewhat limited device, but like everything in *Mega Man 2* it has its place.

And finally — last and least — it's Crash Man's stage. Or Clash Man. Or Crush Man. There was some confusion back in the day.



Maybe “least” isn't entirely fair; it's not an awful stage in terms of layout or mechanics by any means. However, it's by far the most visually unexciting level in the entirety of *Mega Man 2*, consisting entirely of a tangle of mustard-yellow pipes punctuated by larger orange pipes and what appear to be boilers. It just feels very flat and repetitive.

It's also not a particularly friendly stage with which to make your entrée into the game's cycle. It's by far the most vertical stage in the game, even more so than Elecman's stage was in the original *Mega Man*. And, unlike in Elecman's level, most of the hazards you encounter here appear toward the top of the screen rather than confronting you on your own level. Since Mega Man can't fire upward by default, this makes for something of a dangerous scenario if all you have to rely on is the P shooter.

You'll get a taste of this dynamic in the very first screen: You begin at the bottom of the screen with a cascade of ladders to climb.

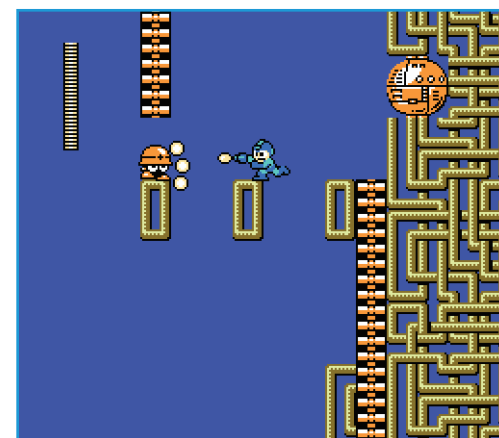
Meanwhile, the Tellies that spawn throughout Heat Man's stage pour infinitely from the larger conduits flanking the screen. Up to three can appear on screen at a time, and as soon as you gun down one another appears.

This is one of the few stages in which the Air Shooter proves to be incredibly valuable — its upward motion and wide spread can clear big swaths of enemies as you ascend. And that's fitting, because Air Shooter just absolutely annihilates Crash Man. *Mega Man 2* once again nudges you toward the boss weakness through the design of the stage... in fact, this may well be the best example of this design philosophy we've seen to date.

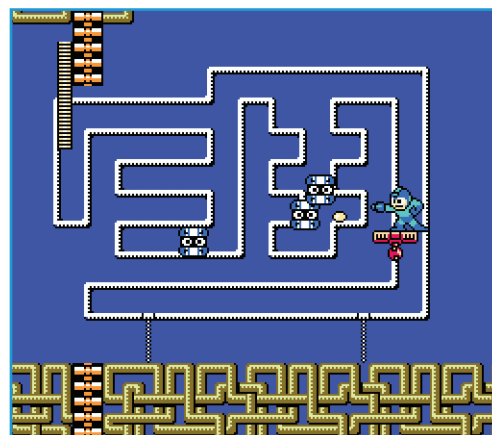
Alas that it's somewhat undermined by, yes, the Metal Blade. With its low cost, 8-directional targeting, and high stopping power, the Metal Blade actually works slightly better than the Air Shooter here. Metal Blade, you ruin everything.

The other weapon that comes in super handy as you advance on Crash Man? Leaf Shield. It's useless against the Robot Master himself (the explosive effect of the Crash Bomber being good against Wood Man, not the

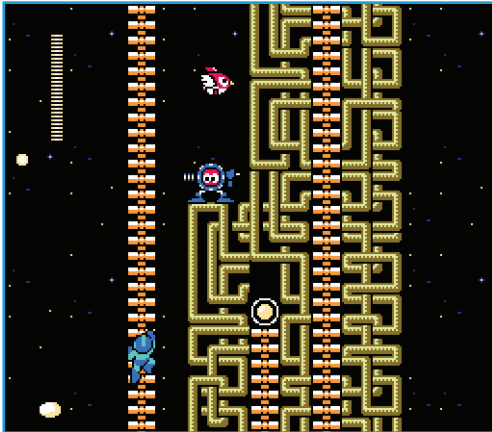
other way around), but several scenarios here make the Leaf Shield surprisingly effective. These rail-based platforms send you zigging all around the screen at high speeds while flocks of Tellies mill about. You can gun them down, sure, but the easiest thing to do here is simply stand still as the Leaf Shield annihilates everything in your sinuous path. You can't move under your own locomotion while using the Shield... but you can move under some other device's steam. Even better, the enemies you pop while skidding around are pretty likely to drop energy refills that will drop in your path, so you'll come out ahead.



The stage offers a few tricky platforming sequences, with mildly annoying but not really frustrating penalties. This little spot in particular is a nice little puzzle. The Metool here sits in your way, but you can't shoot it from a distance; it defends itself until you come near, at which point it pops open and fires at you. Its response threshold works out to be right about where you land on the middle platform, giving you a tiny window of opportunity to fire at it before it shoots bullets that are almost guaranteed to hit you. The knock back will send you



skidding off the platform to drop into the pit below... but thankfully, that simply sends you back a screen to climb again. It's a nuisance, but at least it's not an instant kill. A chance to master a deliberately tricky sequence with a modest punishment for failure that gives you incentive to sort it out without being nasty about it.



The one nice visual effect of this stage is that the background transitions from day to night as you ascend. The blue sky deepens; then it turns pitch black; then stars begin to twinkle in the background.

The second part of the stage mostly consists of a lengthy climb up multiple screens. It's very Snake Eater, except here you have to contend with enemy attacks as you climb. Those gun dudes from Flash Man's stage pelt you with bullets, while the birds fly past and drop eggs that explode into a swarm of chicks.

The enemies here aren't particularly

dangerous, but as with the Metool they can be very annoying. If Mega Man suffers damage while climbing, he'll lose his grip and plummet a screen or three. So while you probably won't die in this area, chances are good that unless you play cautiously you'll be forced to retrace your steps repeatedly.



At the very top, you'll finally hit an expanse of horizontal ground that spans more than a screen or two. It's patrolled by the propeller guys from Heat Man's stage, who much like the Tellies before will continue to spawn infinitely. And as with the Tellies, Air Shooter works wonders here... but Metal Blade is even better. Ho hum.

As for Crash Man himself, he can be extremely difficult to defeat without the Air Shooter. With the Air Shooter, he's a cinch; he leaps about the room, putting himself directly in the path of the weapon's projectiles, and a mere

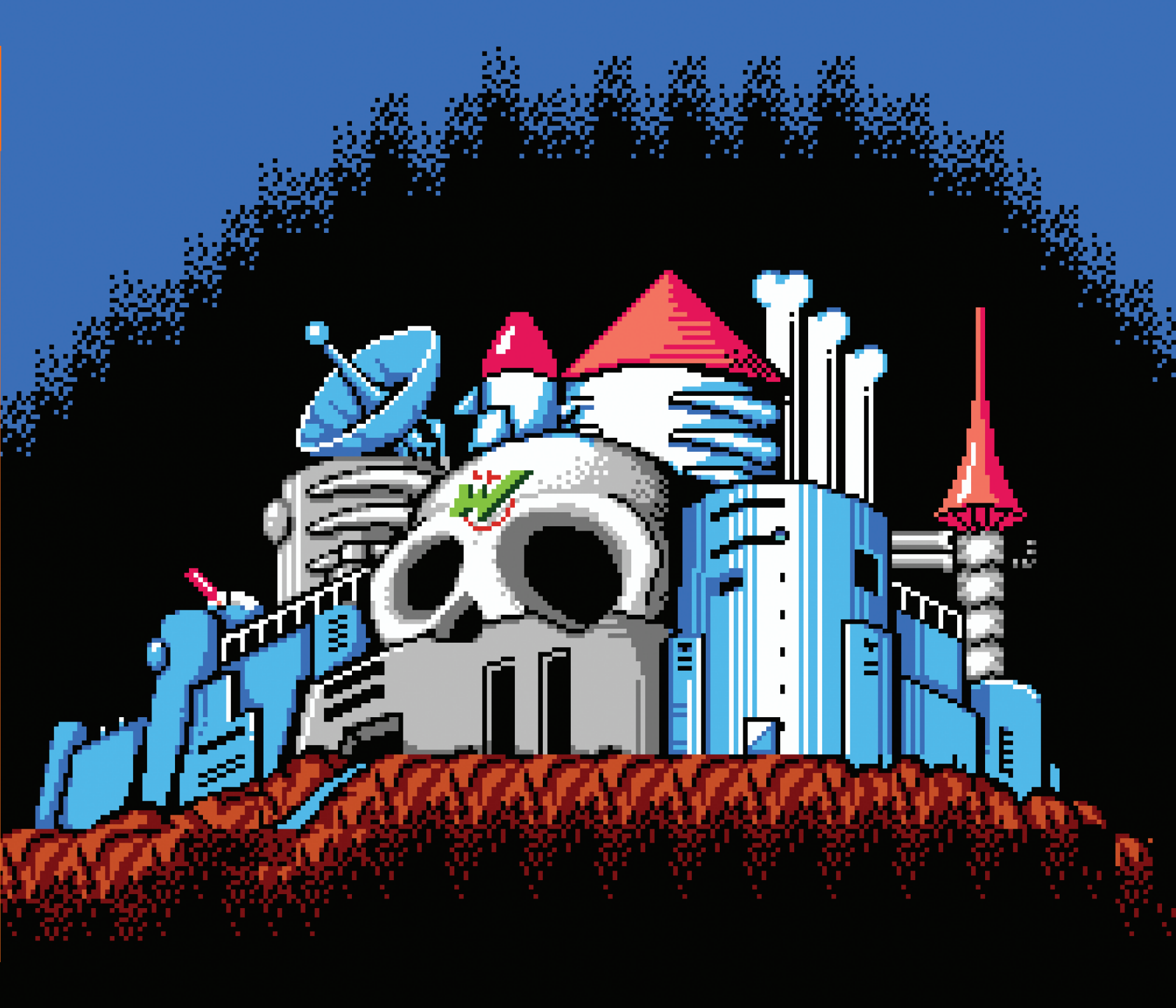
three shots will take him out. Without the correct weapon, though, his aggressive movements, hurtling jumps, and deadly projectiles can prove tough to counter.

The Crash Bomber works a little differently when used by its proper owner than when players control it. While Mega Man can only fire



the projectile straight ahead, Crash Man can fire it freely at any angle. He tends to target it toward Mega Man's feet so that the projectile itself will pierce Mega Man, then clamp onto the ground and explode. The resulting explosion comes with just an extensive residual blast effect that it can easily score two hits against Mega Man... and given how powerfully it hits, that can make for a short battle indeed.

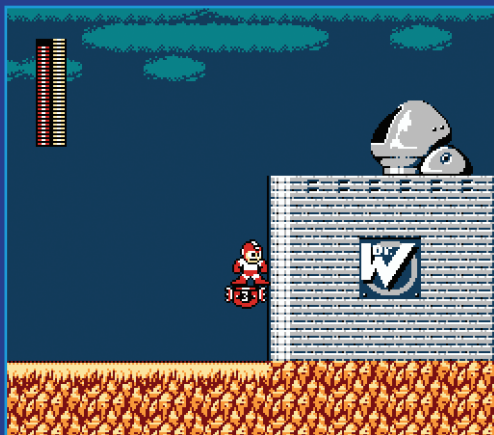
All in all, a stage that plays more interestingly than it looks. But you probably don't want to tackle it first.



Once Mega Man destroys all eight of the Robot Masters in his tireless, violent fight for everlasting peace, Dr. Wily makes his appearance, hailing his usual flying saucer to spirit him away to his evil lair. Said evil lair got a very stylish upgrade this time around.

You have to respect a man so dedicated to the cause of tyranny that he took the time to construct his ultimate fortress with a dedicated skeleton theme. It's not just the skull, but also femur-shaped towers and sky bridges, and also ribcage detailing around the central structures, and also a tower in the shape of a spine. Meanwhile, there's a massive rocket, possibly a huge missile, in the center of the structure. The message is clear: All or nothing.

The bone motif doesn't actually carry over into the interior areas, though. However, this first area does communicate the concept of a defensive structure pretty clearly. You begin by traversing a flat expanse of rock, mount a pair of bunkers, climb the outer fortress wall, and face off against a rather impressive security system once inside.



In keeping with the precedent established in *Mega Man*, Dr. Wily's stages incorpo-

rate elements of all the Robot Master levels. In their own way, they served as a sort of training ground for the challenges in these final sequences; the reprised mechanics appear in more challenging, complex configurations here, and you'll find opportunities to make use of every special weapon in turn. In fact, nearly every tool in your arsenal is required at some point; the game expects you to have figured out their use and utility as you face the final gauntlet.

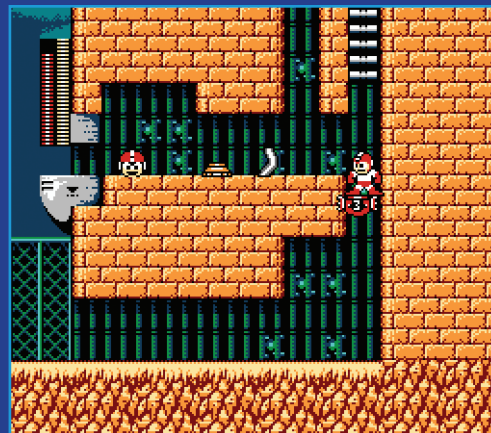
There's also a sort of endurance element at work here. Whether you attempt to clear all these final stages in a single go or accept defeat and have to press Continue, you'll face different forms of challenge here. Mega Man's weapons don't refill after you complete each stage, so over time the attacks you expend take their toll on your weapon stock. By the time you reach the final boss gauntlet, you may not have enough gun juice to take on the Robot Masters again — to say nothing of Dr. Wily himself.

On the other hand, if you die and continue, you'll get a weapon recharge... but all the E-Tanks you've collected will be lost. Which can make some of the nastier bosses a real drag.

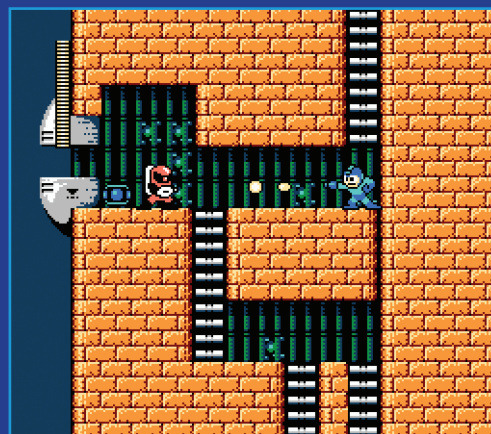
The initial run-up to the fortress pits you against bird bombers, which of course are a cinch to clear out with the Leaf Shield. It's not the fastest way to progress, but it's incredibly effective... and efficient in terms of energy use, given the generosity with which those little baby birds drop power capsules.

Items 1 and 3 come in handy here, as you need to scale walls. Item-1 becomes a requirement later in the stage, so an experienced player will probably alternate between 1 and 3 to balance their power drain, but Item-3 proves to be much more practical at the outer fortress wall, with its narrow spaces.

The wall ascent resembles previous climbing sections of the game in that you're forced to climb toward some sort of threat or



hazard. In this case, rather than confronting you with infinitely spawning enemies designed to knock loose your grip on the ladders, the game pits you against a couple of Sniper Joes. The first stands directly adjacent to the ladder, which means you can easily take him out with several of the weapons in your arsenal. You can climb to the very top of the ladder and hit him with Quick Boomerangs while remaining below his line of fire; or you can blast him with the air shooter (which is marvelously effectively against Sniper



Joese); or you can just do the diagonal Metal Blade thing.

The second Joe, however, stands much further back from the ladder, which makes him much harder to hit. It's the same threat arranged in a different way to require a different strategy for each scenario.

The final stretch of the stage reprises one of *Mega Man*'s most infamous sticking points: The point where you need to reach a ladder to the far upper left by means of one of your non-weapon tools. In the original *Mega Man*, you could reach this point without having found the Magnet Beam, forcing you to exit out of the stage and go hunting for the thing. Here, that's literally impossible: You can't exit out of Dr. Wily's stages, because all Robot Master levels lock down once you conquer them; and you can't get to Dr. Wily's stages without having acquired all the extra Items as they're bundled into three of the levels you have to conquer to reach this point. I wouldn't be surprised but what the frustrations surrounding the Magnet Beam helped shape these mechanics in *Mega Man 2*.

Since the challenge here isn't, "Hey, I hope you collected the item you need" but rather, "Let's see if you can make this jump," it's a long gap you need to clear. Item-1 is the only means you have of making the connection, laying down one and immediately hopping on to it to activate the next. You'll create a stair-step effect that allows you to just barely reach that last ladder. Three should be enough to do it if you make the jumps just right, though it may be necessary to plant a fourth. A fifth? That's impossible, because of the rising stair steps; you'll hit the ceiling.

A small oversight in graphic design: The Items use mirrored sprites depending on your orientation when you place them, with their "proper" direction being left to right. In the one



place in the game where Item-1 is absolutely mandatory, however, you'll be facing left. So the one time in the game you'll definitely see Item-1, its label is backward. This of course is an utterly trivial detail that doesn't matter in the least, but it's always bugged me a little. Which is probably why I grew up to write nitpicky analyses like these.

At the very end of the stage, you enter the fortress' darkened interior, and something unusual happens: The screen begins to scroll forward automatically. Generally speaking, I have very little patience for auto-scrolling sequences, but it works here because it's used so sparingly and builds up tension for what's about to come: The battle with Dr. Wily's Mecha-dragon.

The switchover to auto-scrolling is subtle and surprising. It happens while you're still on a flat expanse of floor, running ahead with no impediments, so you might not notice that the screen is moving differently until you start to drift from your centered position. Or maybe if you pause to calculate your jump across the gap in the floor.

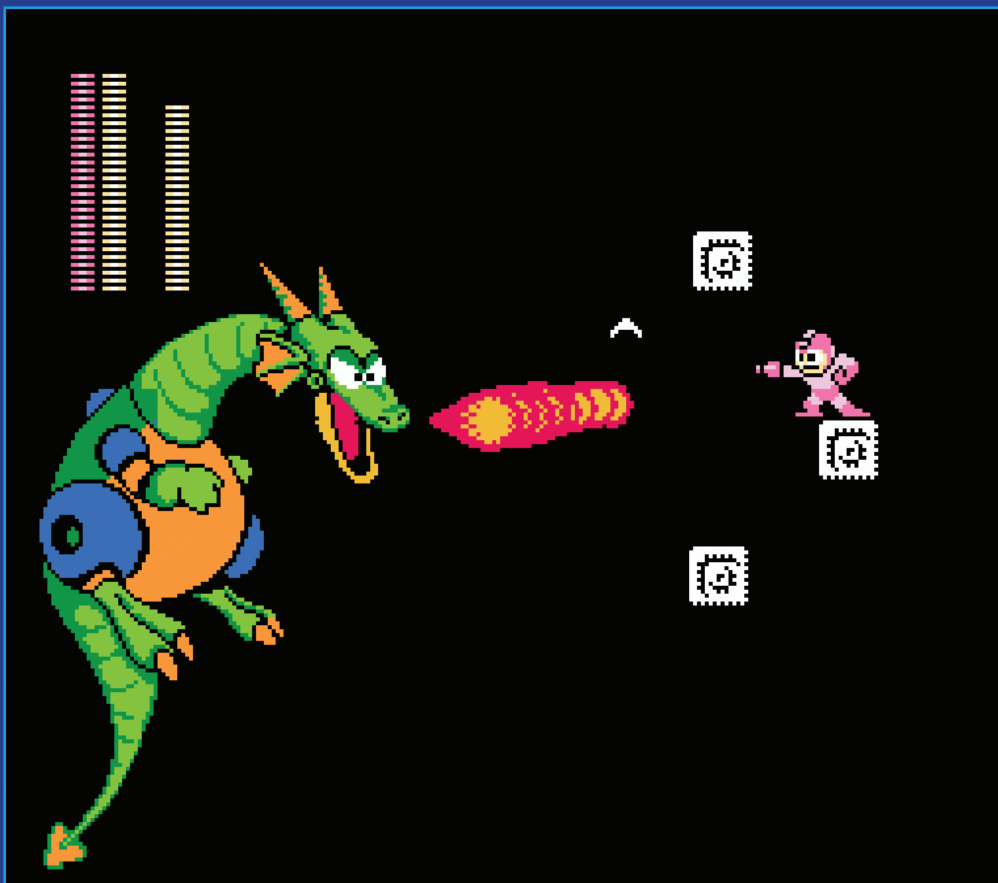
After a moment, though, the screen pushes ahead, forcing you off of steady ground

and onto a series of individual blocks over a black chasm. It's a nerve-wracking bit of platforming, but it becomes even more distressing once the massive robotic dragon materializes in behind you and begins giving chase. There's little doubt the dragon is deadly to the touch; as it flies forward, it actually knocks aside the platforms it touches. It literally destroys the level in a way not yet seen in *Mega Man*. Sure, you can break special blocks with the right weapon, but the Mecha-dragon is so powerful it smashes all it touches.

Eventually, the scrolling stops and the Mecha-dragon battle begins. As with standard bosses, the appearance and completion of its health bar serves as your indicator that the fight has begun. Unlike other bosses, you don't have a lot of options in this fight; only three bits of footing remain for you to jump around on. The dragon hovers on the left side of the screen, drifting up and down, left and right, and occasionally belching massive blasts of flame at you. Given the tenuous footing, it's wise to avoid staying still lest the fire knock you into the pit. You're also wise to avoid the top platform, as it leaves you vulnerable to an instantly fatal collision with the dragon's head when it drifts to the upper right.

It's a vexing battle until you figure out the dragon is weak to Quick Boomerang; once you sort that out, you can fire off a rapid string of them and take it down pretty quickly. But the discovery process is tense, leaving you incredibly vulnerable as you experiment with different weapons and try to figure out how to damage the Mecha-dragon. It's a fight quite unlike any other in the series to date, a tense and high-stakes encounter that announces your transition into the highly difficult endgame...

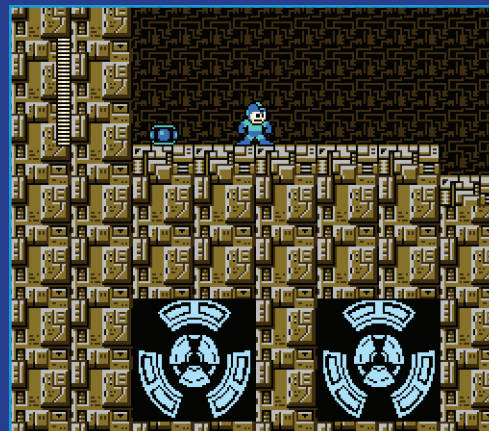
...but it does so in a much less unreasonably difficult manner than the Yellow Devil of the original *Mega Man*. The Mecha-dragon



serves the same purpose as the Yellow Devil, being a tough first “final” boss that throws you into the most dangerous scenario yet seen in the game. However, its difficulty comes less from unfairly stacking the odds against you with high damage output and a narrow window of attack and instead relies on rattling your nerves with a sequence that seems far deadlier than it actually is. You can get through the auto-scrolling sequence here on your first try if you keep calm, something that can’t reasonably be said of the

Yellow Devil’s pattern for any but the most savant of idiots. And once the battle begins in earnest, damaging the Mecha-dragon isn’t a matter of patience and steady performance as much as it is a test of your willingness to experiment.

Capcom used the Mecha-dragon scene for promotional photos back in the day, because it looked like nothing else on the system. But it’s totally in keeping with *Mega Man 2*’s overall excellence that it plays as impressively as it looks.



If the Dr. Wily stages exist to recompile elements of the Robot Master stages into more devious configurations, *Mega Man 2*’s second Wily sequence consists primarily of Flash Man and Metal Man’s levels. Taste them again, for the first time, and all that.

Aesthetically, the interior of Wily’s fortress has a much more austere, utilitarian look than the outside did. Where the run-up to the fortress involved an interesting transition between wasteland and man-made construct, now that you’re inside it’s far bleaker and more oppressive. Wily evidently blew his decorating budget on the big skull out front, because all you’ll find within is dull grey metal paneling and massive industrial fans — all in a gloomy greenish color scheme.

The initial leg of this stage sends you slowly stair-stepping downward — a theme for the remainder of the game. You made your climb up the fortress wall in the previous stage, but here you’re constantly descending further into his lair, further away from things like reinforcements, an escape route, the earth’s surface, sunlight, etc. etc. The majestic theme music from the previous stage continues playing here, so

the game hasn't totally given itself over to total misery just yet... but it's getting there.

As you drop down the stairs, those propeller-headed robots (Fly Boys) from Crash Man and Heat Man's stages drop onto you from three different hatches in the ceiling. As before, they continue to drop infinitely, which makes them somewhat convenient if you need to farm weapon energy but otherwise a nuisance.

In this case, what makes them troubling is the fact that you need to cruise past a massive expanse of spikes immediately after passing the Fly Boy hatches. Item-2 is absolutely mandatory here — the spikes extend so far that your flight burns through very nearly the entirety of Item-2's energy, so there's no way Item-1 can get you to the other side — but of course switching over to Item-2 leaves you momentarily defenseless from the Fly Boy that drops from the rightmost hatch, which remains on-screen as you reach the lip of the floor adjacent to the spikes. The transitional moment where you switch from whatever weapon you're using against the Fly Boys to Item-2 can be touchy, because dropping the tool and leaping onto it to launch forward takes a couple of seconds. Poorly timed, these seconds can leave you open to being struck by a Fly Boy, potentially fouling your flight and wasting precious energy.

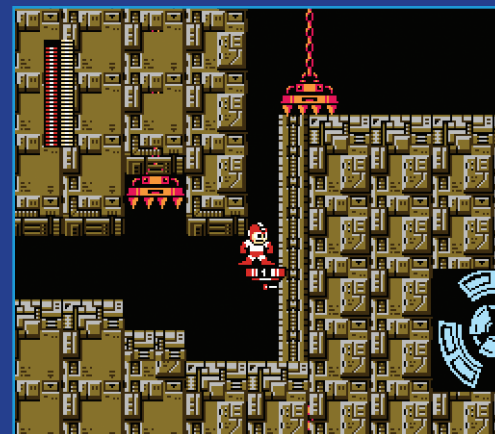
At the end of the Item-2 trip, you need to make a split-second jump onto a ladder as you pass beneath it. Or rather, you need to make a split-second decision as to which ladder you're going to jump up to. The first ladder appears far enough from the second that you may not realize there even is another route — and in any case, the second ladder doesn't come down as far as the first, so reaching it requires greater precision and better timing if you decide to go for it.

As in Flash Man's stage, though, beyond this split decision you'll find a divided path heading down, and the easier to select of the



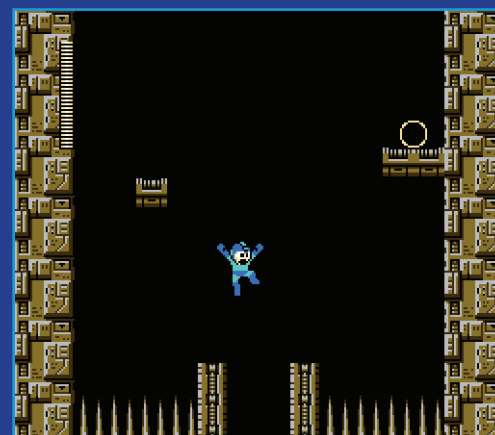
two routes is by far the more dangerous of the two. The first ladder forces you to burn through three precious Crash Bomber shots and face off against two Shotmen (those rotating cannon guys who fire the arcing shots) with no pick-ups to collect for your trouble. The second ladder, however, rewards you amply with two E-Tanks, two 1UPs, and a ton of weapon energy capsules. It also puts you on better footing against the Shotmen. And to top it all off, it deposits you over a tiny row of spikes that you can easily avoid as you fall, whereas the other path drops you atop a wide patch of spikes with only a tiny safe foothold to aim for. In other words, don't take the first ladder.

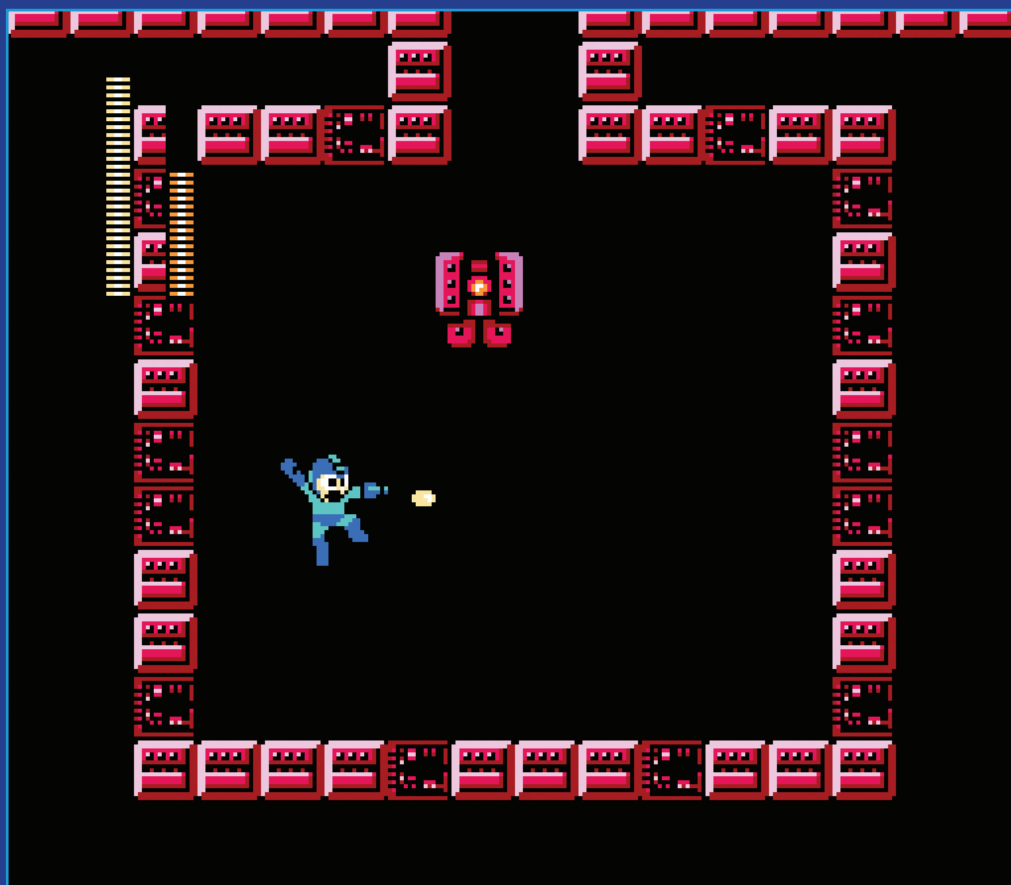
Once you drop down into the second half of the stage, it becomes less Flash Man and more Metal Man. You're immediately confronted with a hallway full of Moles, drilling through the ceiling and floor to pass from one to the other. This is a much more narrow space than the Mole sequence in Metal Man's level, and you don't have the benefit of a conveyor belt to allow you to glide through the Moles without any real effort. Because the gap here between floor and ceiling is so narrow, you have a much smaller window of time in which to shoot the Moles if



you hope to farm power-ups from them. This isn't a challenging sequence, per se, but it proves to be slow going and makes reaping the benefits of the swarming bad guys into a bit of a task.

Once you clear the Moles, it's up a narrow shaft (using either Item-1 or, ideally, Item-3) to a series of those plunging crusher things that also appeared in Metal Man's stage. While you don't have to navigate them while contending with a moving floor as you did there, the plungers appear in more difficult configurations, leav-





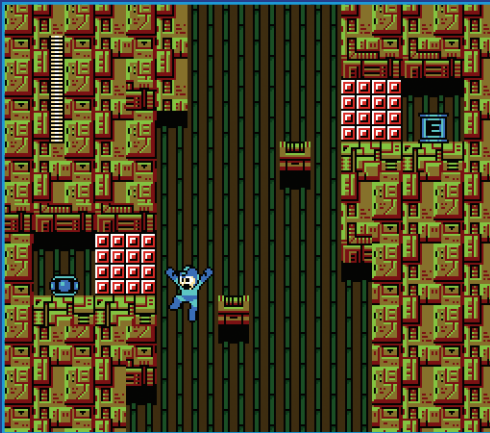
ing very little space between them; it's difficult to get past them without taking some damage. There's a large health capsule in the chamber directly before the boss... but to reach it, you have

to land on the lip of a narrow platform next to a bunch of spikes and use Item-1 to climb to the capsule. We're at the point of the game where you have to work for the slightest advantage.

The boss of this stage establishes a sort of pattern in Wily stages: Big, elaborate bosses alternating with smaller, almost environmental challenges. In this case, you face off against Picopico-kun, which is basically a living room. Different sections of the room you're standing in separate from the wall, ceiling, or floor; they converge; and, once united, they home in on Mega Man's position. While they initially seem quite easy to fight off, given how slowly they move, the more you pick off the faster the remainder move.

There's an element of unfairness to this battle for a first-timer; the boss gives no indication of which portion of the walls or floor will be activating next. If you happen to be standing on a chunk of the floor when that tile kicks into motion, you'll take an unavoidable, untelegraphed hit. Making this doubly irritating is the fact that most of the Picopico-kuns embedded in the floor come to life only toward the end of the battle, when they move more rapidly and you're already quite likely hurting. It's pretty tough not to take a few hits here until you can memorize the patterns — not exactly standout game design.

While Metal Blade isn't the most powerful weapon against this boss, it's by far the most effective tool here since so many of the Picopico-kuns join up above you and make a beeline toward your position. The Metal Blade lets you pour fire into them, and for once you don't have to feel like you're getting an unfair advantage. The game kind of plays cheaply here; why shouldn't you?



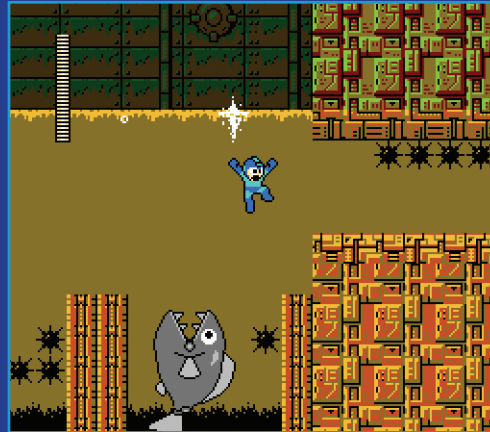
The background music changes for the third leg of Dr. Wily's castle, from the majestic theme of the previous two stages to a more muted loop that constantly builds to a crescendo, rising in pitch and intensity, but never quite breaks. Instead, it drops right as it seems like it's reaching a climax and begins the loop anew. It help builds the tension and anxiety of this stage... which, honestly, doesn't need much help.

Wily's third stage represents a turning point in level design. There's no more hand-holding, no easy way through. At this point, the game has officially become mean and nasty.

Case in point: You begin the level by immediately dropping into a shaft with some power-ups... but if you want them, you have to burn through a bunch of precious Crash Bombers. You can refill on the next screen (if you land in the right spot and don't plunge down to the bottom instead), but this represents a hefty outlay of energy for a weapon that, if you've played the game before, you know you should conserve with all desperation. If you don't know what lay ahead, well, you could very easily screw yourself over right here.

This area is light on enemies, and

this initial drop features only a single one: One of those snails from Bubble Man's stage. That should give you a clue for what's next...



Water! But not refreshing clean natural water as you saw at Bubble Man's waterfall. No, this is a gunky green reservoir that reeks of stagnation (quite possibly literally, assuming Dr. Light built olfactory sensors into Mega Man). Sewage? Runoff? Some kind of lubricant reservoir for all of Wily's machines? In any case, the hideous color scheme makes you feel almost as unwelcome in this area as the mine lining nearly every visible surface of the underwater area. And to say nothing of that giant fish.

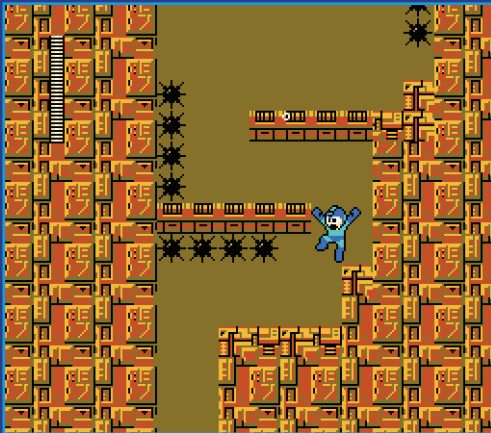
Said fish appears in duplicate here, a nasty surprise to waylay you as you leap across the two deadly pits in this area. The designers were nice enough to add a transition from flat greenish background to murky black at the bottom of the pits to denote quite clearly that you shouldn't try dropping into these pits — a sensibly consideration, given the way water changes the physics and rules of *Mega Man's* control scheme — but there's no hint at the horror lurking below the dark until you take a running jump to clear the watery expanses. Once you step off

the surrounding ledge, this massive thing darts upward and tries to take a massive bite of Mega Man. Should it hit Mega Man, it can easily stall his momentum and send him dropping into the pit from which the fish leapt.

The Big Fish may be the strangest enemies in the game. There are only two of them, and they don't quite fit the overall design aesthetic of *Mega Man 2*. They present an oddly flat appearance, lacking the highlights and shading that even tiny Wily robots possess — and they definitely lack the cartoonish grandeur of the game's bigger robot foes. In a way, though, that works to their benefit. It helps convey the alien sensation of this leg of the stage; you weren't meant to be here, in this foul sewer where only Wily's incomplete and imperfect creations dwell.

Ostensibly, the Big Fish are invincible — everything simply bounces off their skin. Right? Well, almost; everything bounces off their skin except Quick Boomerangs and Crash Bombers. hilariously, the weakest weapon in the game will utterly destroy a Big Fish in a single shot, causing it to vanish with a tiny little explosion like you'd expect from one of the minor robots you face in other stages. Apparently this vulnerability was removed for the *Mega Man 2* portion of *The Wily Wars*, which only goes to convey the idea that this is a sort of oubliette for Wily's rejects and that you're infiltrating the castle through an unintended route. One imagines Wily watching this sequence on his security monitors and fuming because Mega Man totally bypassed all the cool, colorful, fun defenses designed for the main route. Sorry, Wily. Like Robert Plant, Mega Man likes to be a back-door man.

Once you make your way past the Big Fish, the remainder of the stage consists almost entirely of passive threats: Namely, narrow passages lined by a seemingly endless array of mines. This here is the original 1001 Spikes, my friends.



Once you drop into the depths beyond the Big Fish, you're forced to navigate the trickiest jump in the entire game: A plunge into a shaft four screens high with no platforms, no stops, just a continuous fall through a twisting tube whose every surface will destroy Mega Man on contact. You have one chance to get it right...

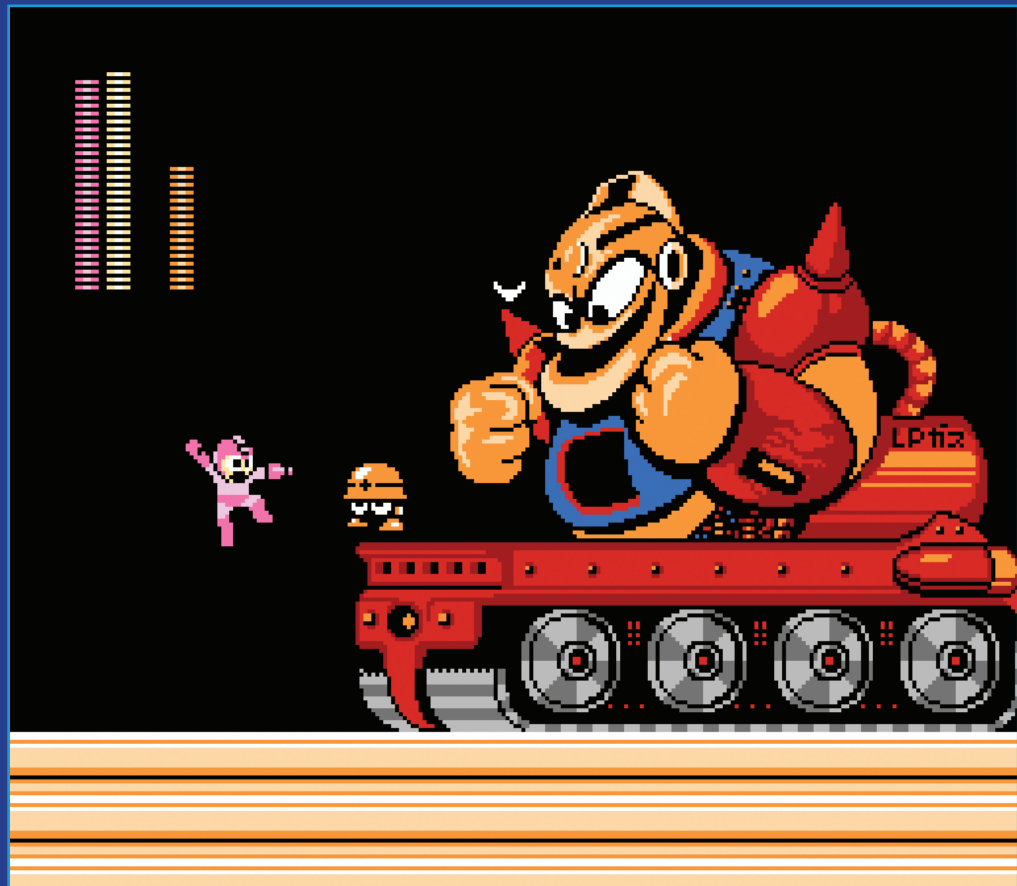
And yet, this jump is neither unreasonable nor unfair. The mouth of the passage at the top is rimmed by mines, so you know exactly what you're getting into and will instinctively aim for the center of the shaft as you leap, to keep you as far away from the instant-kill hazards as possible. Once you drop to the next screen, the tunnel bends to the left in such a way that you'll hit the mines if you drop into the center of the shaft; you have just a split-second to steer Mega Man to the safety at the left side. You need great reflexes here, not to mention a light touch to prevent oversteering.

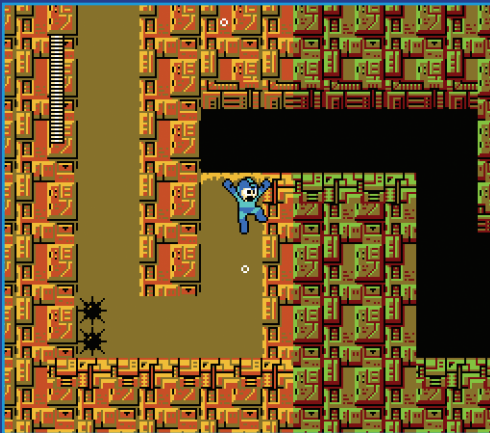
The saving grace, however, is in one of the game's fundamental mechanics — when you make a vertical transition between two screens,

the game freezes momentarily and slides slowly from one screen to the next, similar to the screen transitions in *The Legend of Zelda*. In this case, that two seconds of inactivity gives you a preview of sorts of the hazards that lay below as you slide to the next screen. You're meant to use the brief pause as an opportunity to scout the passage and plan your next move, then execute

that plan the instant you resume control. The designers use what appears to be a technical limitation of the *Mega Man 2* game engine to create a tricky, nerve-wracking challenge — a brilliant bit of game design.

Eventually, you'll land on a platform, at which point the remainder of the mine gauntlet is a breeze. There's an amusing final touch,





though: These two mines at the very bottom left of the shaft. Just in case you got cocky or sloppy when you ran left to drop into the final descent from the platform above and pushed all the way left. But, if you can avoid those, you're done with the water and can leap to dry land at the top of the lower airlock. A trio of Shotmen await you here, though after completing such a tense drop you can cheerfully laugh at them for representing such a trivial threat.

Finally, the boss, a rather familiar-looking fellow on quite a grand scale. Yes, it's Gutsman from the original *Mega Man*, but somewhat larger than you're likely to remember him. Apparently Dr. Wily abandoned the scheme to mass manufacture Gutsman (hinted at in the background graphics of the final Wily stage in *Mega Man*) and decided instead to go for scale rather than numbers. Gutsman has been redesigned into a massive battle tank.

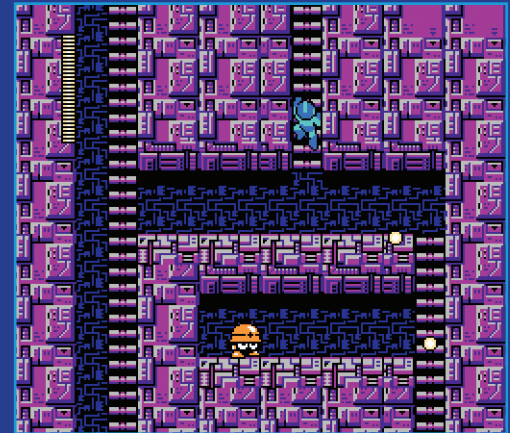
Though maybe not a very good one. That cylinder on the back side of the tank reads "LP gas," so basically it's full of highly volatile liquid propane. Since this is a 2D platformer, of course, Mega Man can't simply run around

behind Guts Dozer to fire a Crash Bomber at the gas tank. Look at those spikes on the shoulders! Instant death, right there. No, instead you have to take on Guts Dozer from the front.

Naturally, the construct is only vulnerable in its face, and it's invulnerable to your weapons that have the ability to fire upward (Metal Blade and Air Shooter). In fact, just to be nasty, one of the few weapons that works against Guts Dozer is the Bubble Lead, which is easily the single most disadvantageous weapon you could possibly use here. In any case, you have to climb up to attack, even as Guts Dozer disgorges an endless stream of hopping Metools from its chest — they move forward rapidly in small, bounding arcs.

While the Metools present the main challenge here, they also hint at the solution to this battle. When Guts Dozer releases one, it hops along the top edge of the tank's lower platform: Your clue that it is, in fact, a platform in the design sense of the word as well. You can safely stand on the front edge of the tank to use as your staging ground for jumping and shooting Guts Dozer's massive face. This does make you somewhat vulnerable to the Metools, but the tank has a tell for that attack. It raises its left (well, its right, your left) fist to create a path for the Metools. This is its only attack — it doesn't attempt to punch or crush you, just rolls back and forth while spitting out little hardhat dudes — so once you figure out the secret and the timing, it's a pretty easy fight. In fact, it goes really fast once you realize its weakness is Quick Boomerang and that, unlike Robot Masters, Guts Dozer doesn't enjoy any post-damage invincibility. You can pump him full of projectiles and win this fight in a remarkably short amount of time.

So ultimately, Guts Dozer is pretty underwhelming. But he sure looks cool.



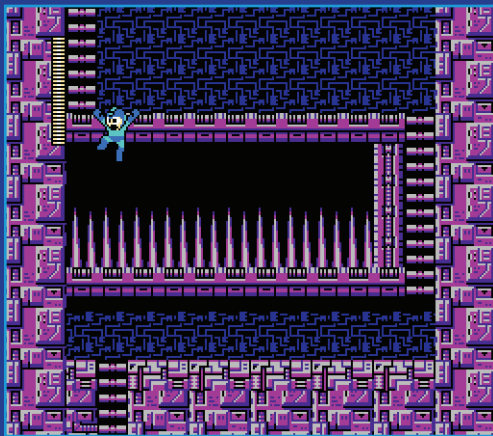
Several people have complained in the comments of this series (and elsewhere) about the repetitive nature of the Wily stages in *Mega Man 2*. Specifically, the fact that the levels are constructed of the same bulkhead panel tile, repeated over and over again in different color schemes.

Interestingly, I never hear those criticisms voiced for the original *Mega Man*, even though that was the case there as well.

I think we can attribute this to a couple of factors. One, The first *Mega Man* just isn't as visually interesting as its sequel — a smaller, more limited game. Some shortcuts seem inevitable in an older game like that, really. Also, the one different Wily stage came in the middle (stage three) in the first game instead of at the beginning (*Mega Man 2*'s Wily 1, the fortress exterior, with its multiple mixed surfaces). Secondly, though, despite the smaller ROM size of the older game, the Wily stages do more to mix up the look of the scenery. *Mega Man 2*'s final three levels consist of nothing but walls and walls of these same background tiles, with no other machinery or imagery to break things up.

The effect does pair nicely with the background music to create a kind of suffocating atmosphere... but a little variety never hurt anyone. That being said, for all the Wily stages' visual monotony, each one incorporates its own unique mechanics. We've seen hints of Metal Man's stage, Bubble Man's, Flash Man's, and more. For the final leg of the journey, we thankfully don't have to deal with Quick Man redux. Instead, it's more a reprise of Crash Man's level, with some new mechanics as well.

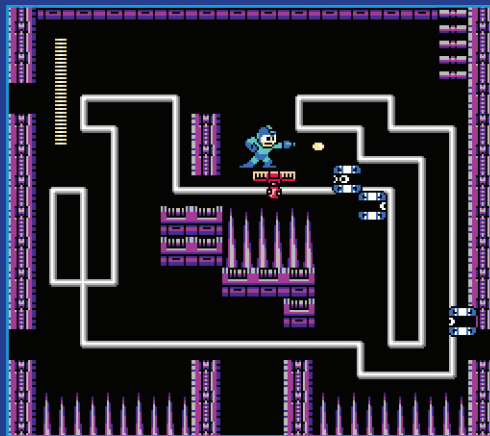
Despite its dense, claustrophobic feel, Wily 4 revisits the ascent element of Crash Man's stage. You're navigating a series of ladders here, with strategically placed Metools eager to knock you back down to the previous screen. Those jerks. What makes this area different, however, is the presence of....



...false, holographic floors. Certain panels of floor simply don't exist, despite the visuals telling you otherwise. Nasty. But not unfair. The spike trap here isn't the first you'll see of the fall-through flooring. The initial ascent with the bulkheads populated by Metools ease you into this new mechanic in a relatively safe environment. You can't reach this spike pit

without first traversing a series of holographic bulkheads, and the game actively entices you to learn more about them by strategically placing a 1UP in a corner that can only be reached by correctly navigating these takeout pits. The worst that can happen here is to fall and hit a Metool — no big deal. So by the time you get to the spikes, you've just spent a few minutes plummeting in unexpected places and riding Item-3 past surprise pitfalls. You should expect a trick here.

The solution to this bit of environmental nastiness is right in your arsenal: The Bubble Lead, which clings to the ground and tenacious keeps on clinging even when the ground takes a downward dip, has the ability to roll along safe ground and drop where the pits appear. You still can't see the pits, but you can deduce their location by watching the behavior of the Bubble Lead.



And when you do reach pits, you can either jump over them or, when the ceiling is too low for you to clear that much horizontal space without bumping your head and taking a fall, using Item-3 to stick to the inner lip of one of the pits and create a makeshift platform for you. Alternately, you could ride Item-1 from below the

pit. *Mega Man 2* revels in its wealth of strategic options.

Once you make your way to the top of the pitfall zone, you double back down again for another Crash Man reprise. This time, it's the on-rails platforms from his stage surrounded by endless swarms of Tellies. In their first appearance, the challenge of these platforms came from the fact that you had to ride them upward to reach ladders at the top of the screen; here, you're advancing downward. No sweat, right? Gravity's working in your favor. Alas, it's not that simple.

For four solid screens, you're riding the platforms over floors consisting of nothing but spikes. There is very little safe ground here, and many of the rails are surrounded by narrow walls that create far too small a space for Mega Man to ride through. While you can still employ the tactic of riding about while the Leaf Shield protects you, this sequence doesn't offer any slam dunks like in Crash Man's stage. You're forced repeatedly to jump to small stable outcroppings as you wait for the platform to trundle its way through the narrow gaps, and of course every time you jump you're forced to send the Leaf Shield flying, wasting some of its ammo. There's a distinct possibility of running out of ammo here, which means you'll be zipping around the room at high speeds and approaching Tellies from oblique angles, increasingly the likelihood of being knocked into spikes. No one wants that.

The final stretch of the stage consists of two Returning Sniper Joes on foot and two in mechs. It's a pretty annoying final gauntlet, since those enemy types tend to be woefully parsimonious with weapon power-up drops... and god knows you need them for the boss ahead.

I suppose every *Mega Man* has to have at least one boss you utterly and completely hate, and the Boobeams here are *Mega Man 2*'s universally loathed showdown. It's an interest-

ing battle, because it was designed explicitly to screw you over.

The wall-mounted cannons here are a mostly passive threat. They sit on the wall, doing nothing, and every 10 seconds or so they change up and all fire an energy bullet simultaneously that zeroes in on Mega Man's current position. It's difficult to dodge the converging shots initially, since they move quickly and from almost every angle. Once you start picking off the cannons, however, you can more easily dodge the shots with a well-timed jump.

The problem is that the only way to destroy the cannons is to hit them with a Crash Bomber. Fully energized, you have seven shots with the Crash Bomber, and there are five cannons. Easy, right? Hold on, there, bucko. Two of the cannons are housed behind destructible walls that, again, can only be destroyed with Crash Bombers. Five plus two is seven, which means you need to pull this encounter off without a wasted shot. Well, you can be clever and put a well-placed Crash Bomber on the tile shown here, which will destroy a turret and a key wall in a single shot, but it's tricky and not intuitive.

Also not intuitive is the fact that you need to conserve your ammo for the essential targets. Your first instinct in entering this room is almost certainly to blow out the destructible wall immediately to the right of the starting area... but once you open fire on the turret in the bottom right corner, you'll discover it can only be destroyed with the ammo you just wasted. Rather than blow out the wall to the right, the proper approach is to use Item-1 to ride up to the platform above... which isn't exactly intuitive, either, since taking that ride is likely to leave you vulnerable in the center of the room where the energy beams converge. This encounter appears to be consciously designed to screw over a first-time player by putting them into a

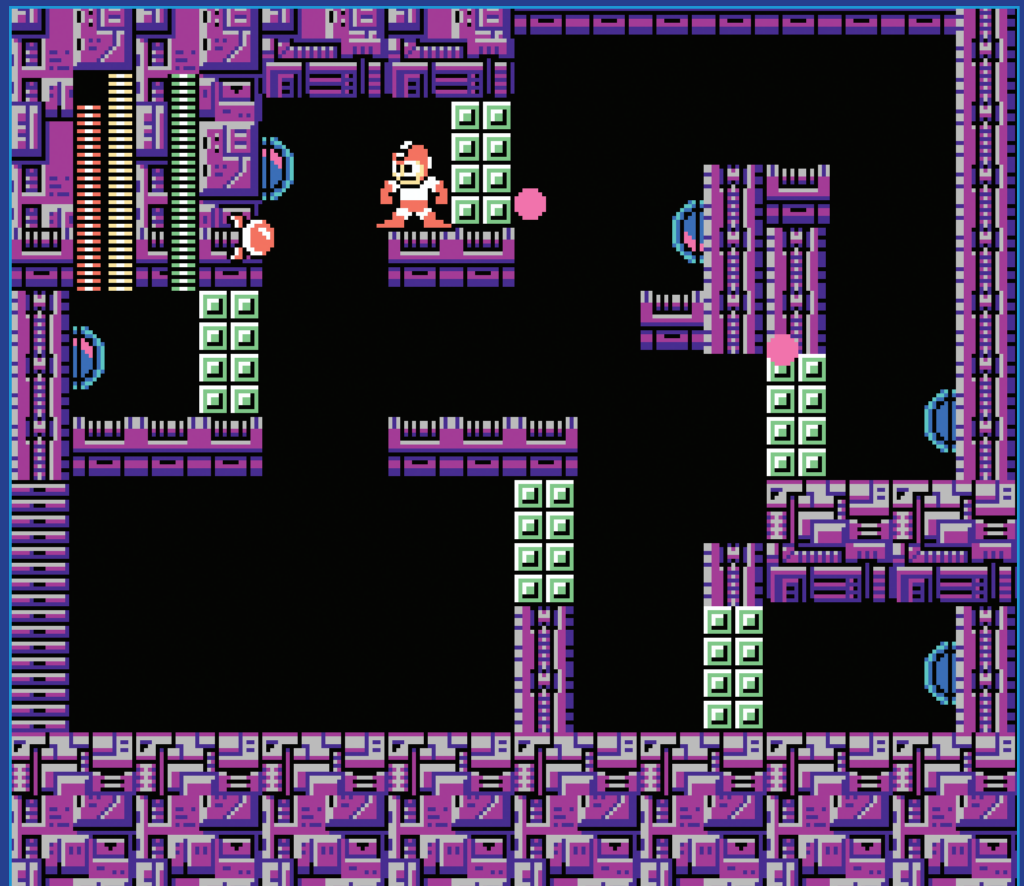
situation where they almost invariably won't be able to finish the fight.

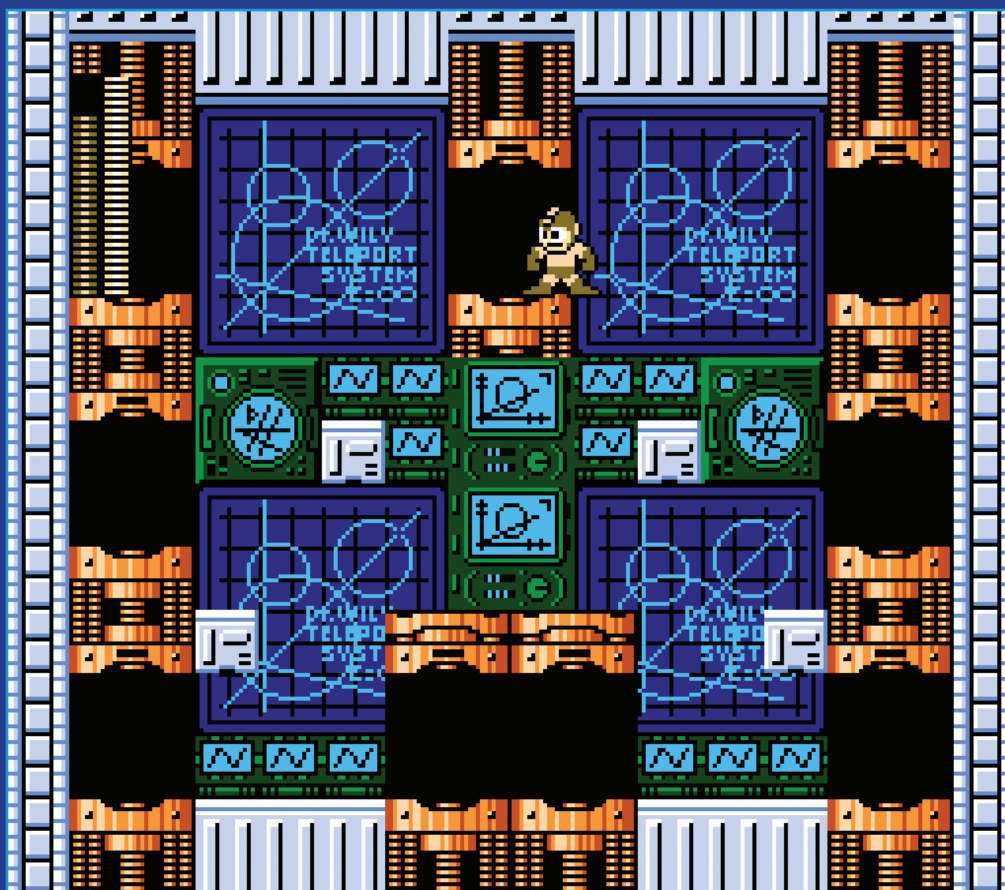
This wouldn't be so bad if not for the fact that when you die and start again, you'll be completely drained of Crash Bomber ammo and will have to recharge your reserves — a scenario almost guaranteed to cost you a ton of health or other weapon reserves in a slow, grindy attempt to top off your Crash Bomber ammo.

The one saving grace of this battle is that walls destroyed with Crash Bomber don't

regenerate until you run out of lives and hit Continue, so as long as you have some Mega Mans in reserve you won't have to clear out any of the barriers you've taken down.

One possible strategy here is to blast out all the walls in the room, die, grind for ammo, and quickly take out the Boobees. But that's a graceless tactic, and the fact that *Mega Man 2* railroads you into it makes this final fortress boss a black mark in an otherwise beautifully designed game.





Whatever crimes of redundant visual representations the interior of Wily's castle may have committed, you can levy no such complaints against this final chamber, in which you face off one last time against the game's bosses. I mean, check this out.

Those screens! In case you ever doubted *Mega Man*'s anime influence, here are some straight-up Macross computer aesthetics for you to enjoy. I almost expect to see a fusillade of Crash Bombers flying along windy paths

or something.

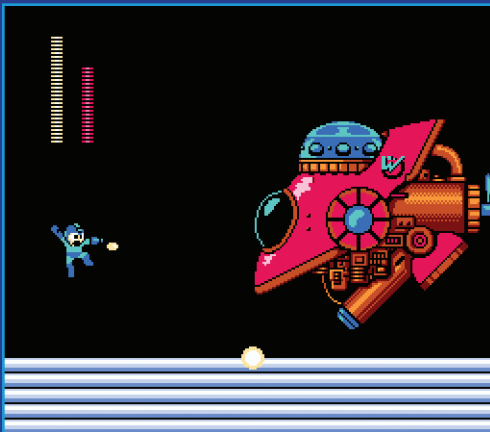
This, of course, is the end game: A showdown with rebuilt versions of Wily's eight Robot Masters. *Mega Man 2* handles this boss rush very differently than the first game did, establishing a fairly permanent standard for the franchise. Rather than spread out the bosses across multiple levels and put the rush at the end of a fairly tricky stage, you fight all eight bosses at once (or rather, one at a time, in rapid succession) in a stage designed specifically to contain

the fights.

The basic premise of the rematches remains the same — you warp into a room housing a single boss, defeat it, then exit again to take on the next — but it's much friendlier this time. The warp chambers are no longer consecutive, so instead of jumping immediately to the next battle you return here to the hub. Even better, each defeated boss drops a large health capsule, so it's no longer quite such a matter of endurance as in the original. If you die in the process, any bosses you've defeated — denoted by the absence of blinking lights on that Robot Master's telepod — remained destroyed until you hit continue. And, if you've made it this far while toting E-Tanks, you'll still have those going for you until you continue, too. On the other hand, without continuing you also won't be able to refill your weapons, meaning you won't be able to use any Crash Bombers here. Not after that Boobeam fight.

And finally, each boss redux battle happens in a plain ol' empty chamber. No conveyor belt in Metal Man's room, no uneven flooring in Quick Man and Flash Man's level. The one exception is that Bubble Man's room is still flooded, but even then you no longer have to worry about mines lining the ceiling. Unlike in *Mega Man*, where the lack of Super Arm-compatible boxes in the redxes could work against you, here the even flooring works more or less universally in your favor. You can stand and pour fire into Flash Man and Quick Man without having to fuss over their unpredictable responses to the varied terrain, and Metal Man... well, now that you have your complete arsenal in hand, you can destroy him in a hilarious two shots of his own weapon. (Or one shot, if you're playing easy mode.)

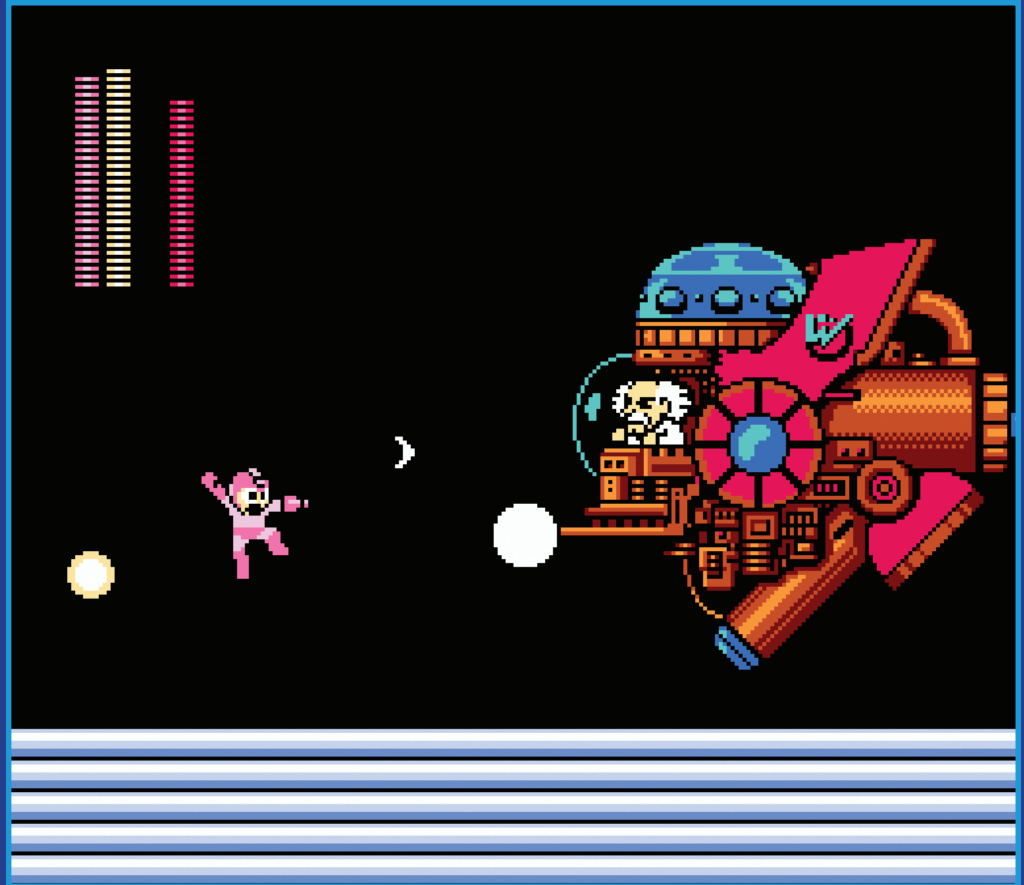
There's a bit of potluck to the enemy order here; the teleporters don't use the same layout they did in the stage select screen. Heat



Man occupies the upper-left corner, not Bubble Man, and there seems to be no correlation between the stage select arrangement and the order of these warp pads. But given how incredibly powerful you've become by this point, the fights are enough of a cake walk that it shouldn't matter; until you learn the layout, you'll always be on your toes just a bit.

Once the eight Robot Masters are once again reduced to a burst of pulsating circles, a final pad appears.

This, of course, takes you directly to Dr. Wily's latest personal war machine. This time it's less like some bizarre upright human torso and more like, I dunno. Slave-1. Wily Machine 2 feels like a deliberate inversion of the previous game's final machine; its first phase fires beams of energy that travel downward and then curve upward in a parabolic motion, a mirror image of the first machine's bullets that followed a decaying upward path before plunging down, off-screen. The second phase, once you take down the outer armor and expose Wily's inner capsule, is much trickier. It fires beams of energy that travel in a tightly arcing sine wave and can be very difficult to evade. It becomes a battle of



attrition, most likely, and if you die against either form of the machine you're sent back to the first phase on your next attempt.

Wily Machine 2 has two weaknesses, and they seem specifically tailored as a sort of "screw you" from the developers. Atomic Fire, fully charged, will destroy the outer armor in two shots. And both phases are weak to Crash Bomber, with the second form susceptible to taking multiple hits from the sustained explo-

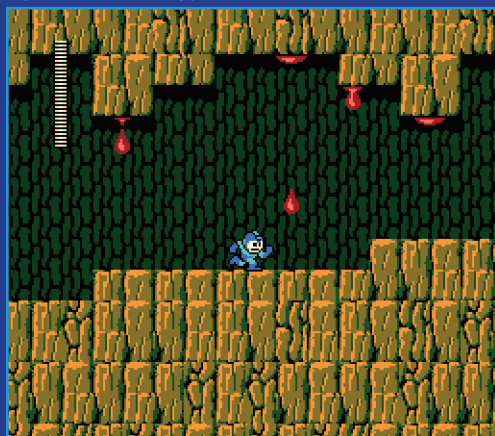
sion. The problem, of course, is that you only really get one chance with these weapons; since the teleportation chamber doesn't offer you any energy refills when you respawn and the Atomic Fire can only discharge two full-force blasts without needing a refill, the pressure is on not to screw up the second round. And of course you almost certainly have zero Crash Bombers after the Boobeam trap, so the only way to breeze through the battle is to accept a game over and

the subsequent energy refill.

But when you do at last destroy Wily Machine 2, the game... isn't over? Instead, the floor explodes beneath Mega Man and he plunges into an entirely new stage.



In contrast to the rest of the game, there's an eerie feel to this sequence. No music plays in the background, and you run through a tunnel bored through pure rock. There are no signs of technology here; no man-made struc-



tures, no robots, only silence punctuated by the rhythmic dripping of some sort of caustic fluid.

Finally, you reach a darkened room that appears to be a portal to an alternate dimension, or something. The surreality of this post-Wily sequence reaches its peak as you step into outer space and Wily flies into the room via flying saucer, leaps into the air, and levitates in place as he morphs into his true form...

ful projectiles targeting his location. This fight can only be survived if you keep on the move, avoiding the alien's flight path and leaping its bullets. You also need to experiment with your weapons, because everything you throw at the alien seems to bounce right off. The only power capable of putting a dent in the alien's life bar is, almost certainly by design, the last one you'd think to use here: The Bubble Lead.



...an alien!?

The instant he transforms, Wily immediately presses the attack, swooping around the room and firing at Mega Man with single power-

After all, the alien constantly flies above you, and while the Bubble Lead follows a small upward arc its upward movement is extremely small and ends at about arm's length

before plummeting to the ground. So this introduces an element of risk and space management to an already tense fight; not only do you have to dodge the creature and its deadly fire, you have to do so while daredevil-ing your way up close to it to fire a Bubble Lead as it reaches one of the low points of its figure-8 movement.

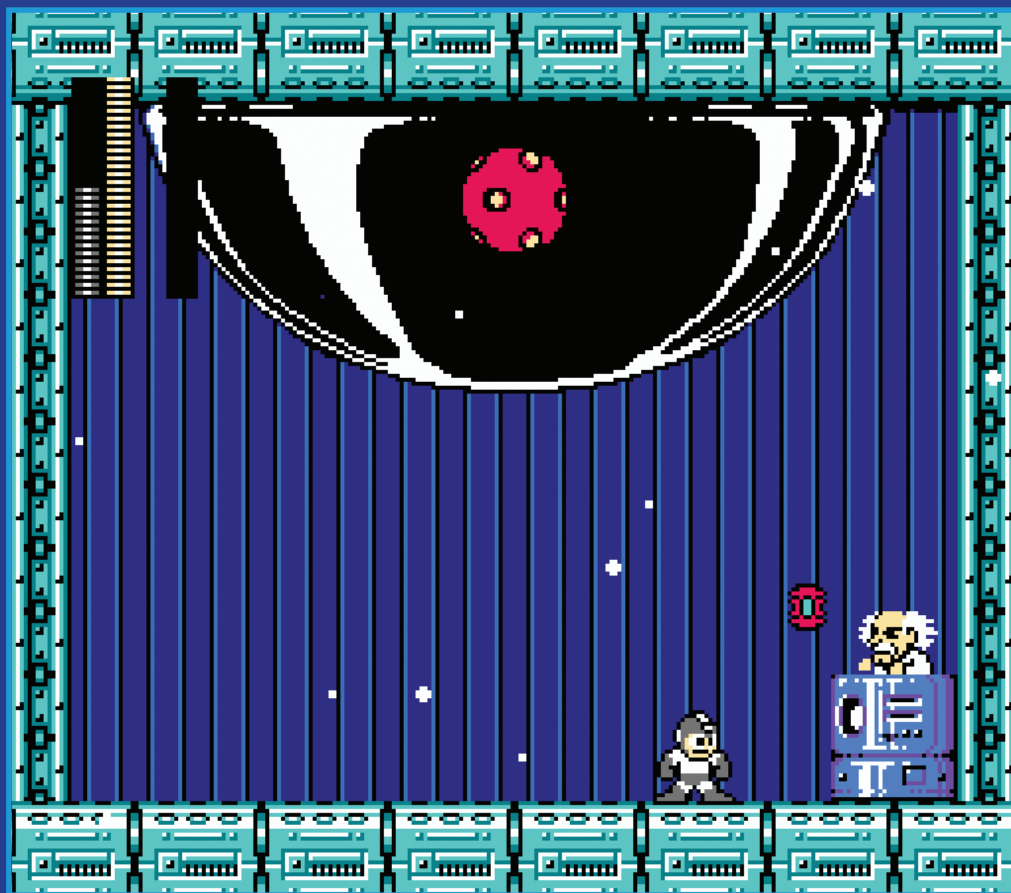
Once you shake off the shock of discovering the truth of Wily's extraterrestrial origins, the battle turns into an exercise in learning the alien's pattern and sorting out exactly how you can damage it. Thankfully it follows a consistent pattern of movements and attacks — that Wily, always stuck in the same old patterns and habits — so eventually it just comes down to developing a rhythm and sticking to it long enough to whittle down the alien's health meter. Naturally, its attacks hit you much harder than yours hit it. On the other hand, you'll always continue at the beginning of the acid run, so you don't have to weather the Robot Master/Wily Machine gauntlet again.

And, once the alien is defeated, you discover that you've actually been in a sort of planetarium with a projector in the ceiling, and that the "alien" was just a holographic device Wily was directing from a control panel in the corner. Evidently he fully expected all his Robot Masters and his war machines to be defeated and created this weird ruse as a last-ditch measure. Evil geniuses, man. Who even knows.

Cornered, he surrenders, and the game ends for real as the planetarium projector closes up. Love the way it reflects (refracts?) the pattern on the walls.

And Mega Man goes for a walk, cycling through his powers as he marches forward.

I love the fascinating ambiguity of this sequence. It lacks the sort of triumphant fanfare you'd expect in a game ending, a melancholy tune playing as Mega Man cycles through his



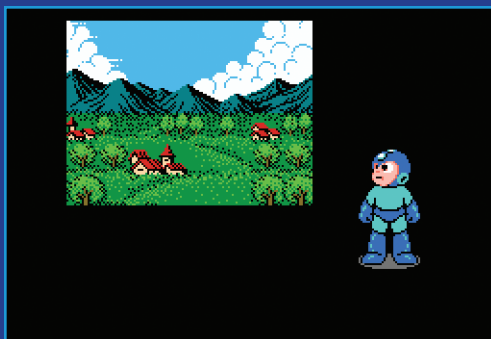
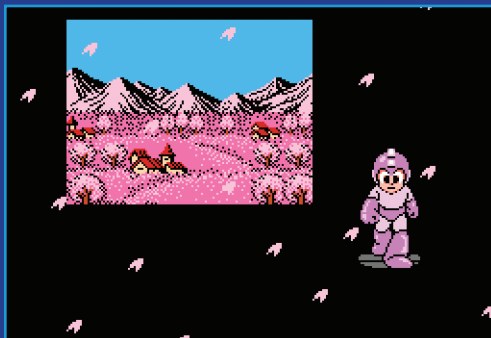
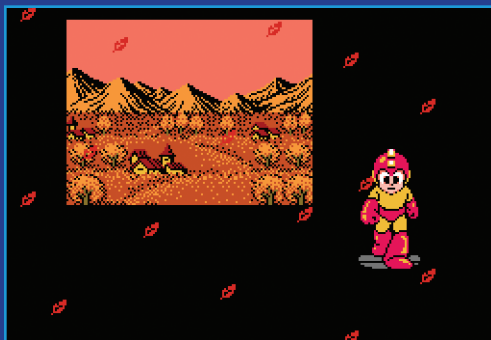
powers and the seasons change to reflect his current color scheme. Finally, he reverts to his usual form, and the scene returns to fair weather as well.

He warps out, and the scene expands to reveal that he's left his helmet behind.

At the time, I took this to represent the end of the series — Mega Man realized he didn't belong in this world or something and vanished forever. Of course, dozens upon dozens of

sequels followed, so I suppose the point was that he realized his newly acquired skills made him too powerful, too dangerous, and this sequence is meant to explain why he always abandons the powers he copies before each new adventure.

It doesn't matter. The important thing is that it's a marvelously unique conclusion to a brilliant game, one that improved on its predecessor in every way imaginable and set a new standard for NES software design.



The Anatomy of Mega Man, Vol. I

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