CUTE!

03 SEPTEMBER 2011

BLITTER

COVER

The Cute Masterclass
They made the cutest games ever.

SCANLINE

CLOSING TEXT

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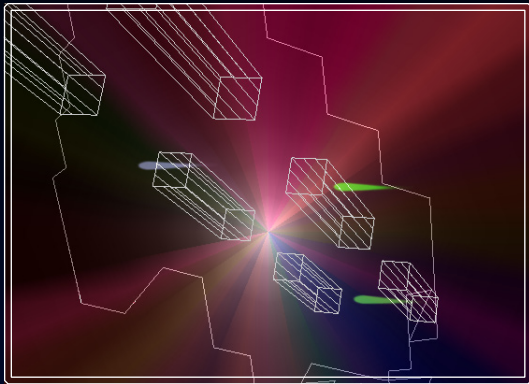
A TRIP OF THE LIGHT

Taito's *Groove Coaster* is just what a music game should be: different


For a while there, music games were getting *crazy* creative. *PaRappa the Rapper* led the charge of music-infused titles that may have all used the same concept of hitting buttons in time with rhythm and moving icons, but were twisting that around by adding some personality, as opposed to *Beatmania* and other games that were colder, more obvious tests of skill. And even when they were kind of bad, they were at least worth seeing.

But then came the invasion of the microphones and plastic instruments, along with their music delivery platforms and superstar tie-ins. "Invasion" though it may have been, in reality those games are all still quite fun, and gave a lot more people something to do in what might otherwise be a regular "karaoke night." Plus you get to irritate your neighbors. But after a few years of increasingly large boxes of fake instruments and incremental gameplay changes, the popularity bottomed out. And during this music game hurricane, the cooler stuff barely stood a chance.

I'm glad to see that some people aren't willing to take it as a total failure. Taito's Reisuke Ishida is one of them; his short list of directed projects are all greatly influenced by music: *Trance Pinball*, *Space Invaders Infinity Gene*, and now *Groove Coaster*, his latest iOS game produced in assocation with Matrix Software. Ishida has a strong desire to marry music and visuals in games in ways that few have bothered to attempt, and this seems to be the next big step towards an ideal relationship.

Infinity Gene got its fair share of positive impressions once it hit the App Store, but the sheer speed at which everyone took to—and ultimately loved—*Groove Coaster* was pleasantly surprising and much of it may have been from people who were jaded about music
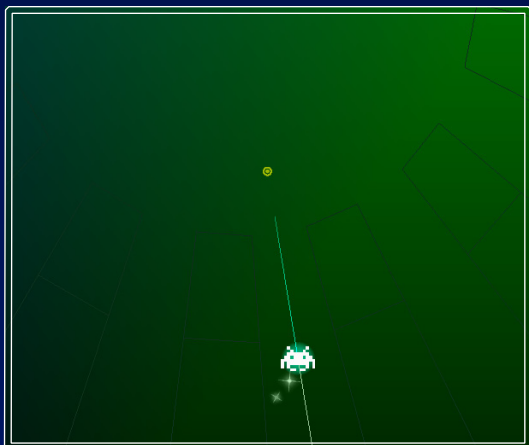

games before it.

But what's the big deal, exactly? Admittedly, *Groove Coaster* does nothing new with its actual gameplay: as your little avatar travels along a predetermined path, it passes over nodes that you activate by tapping (and/or holding or squiggling on) the screen at the right moment to keep the music going, and if you don't, you get an ugly gap of silence in the music. Again, that's standard; a fundamental part of music game interactivity. But *Groove Coaster* is simply more absolute, to the point where the music can sound and feel ruined if you didn't hit that node with the desired timing. Practice makes perfect, and perfection has a lot going for it here.

Of course, the music itself helps with wanting to be good in playing it. Some of it is original, and some of it borrowed from other games, but all of it comes from Taito's Zuntata group, which has seen some especially talented musicians walk through its doors. In the '80s and '90s, Zuntata provided the hardcore rock for the games that needed it, like shooters such as *Darius* and *Metal Black*, and that put them on the map. (They made the music for the less-hardcore stuff, too, of course.)

Zuntata still produces their own special sound for Taito games, except now it's done with the same equipment the big boys use. Shohei Tsuchiya is pretty much the figurehead of the group these
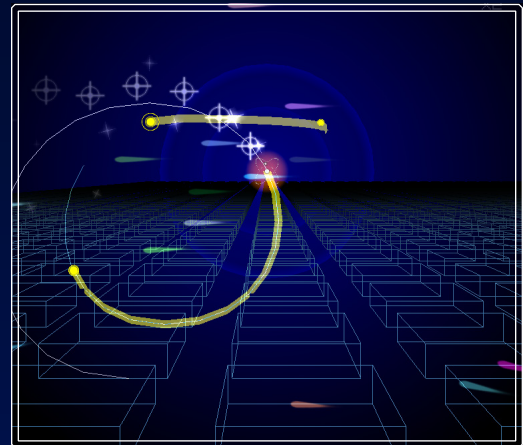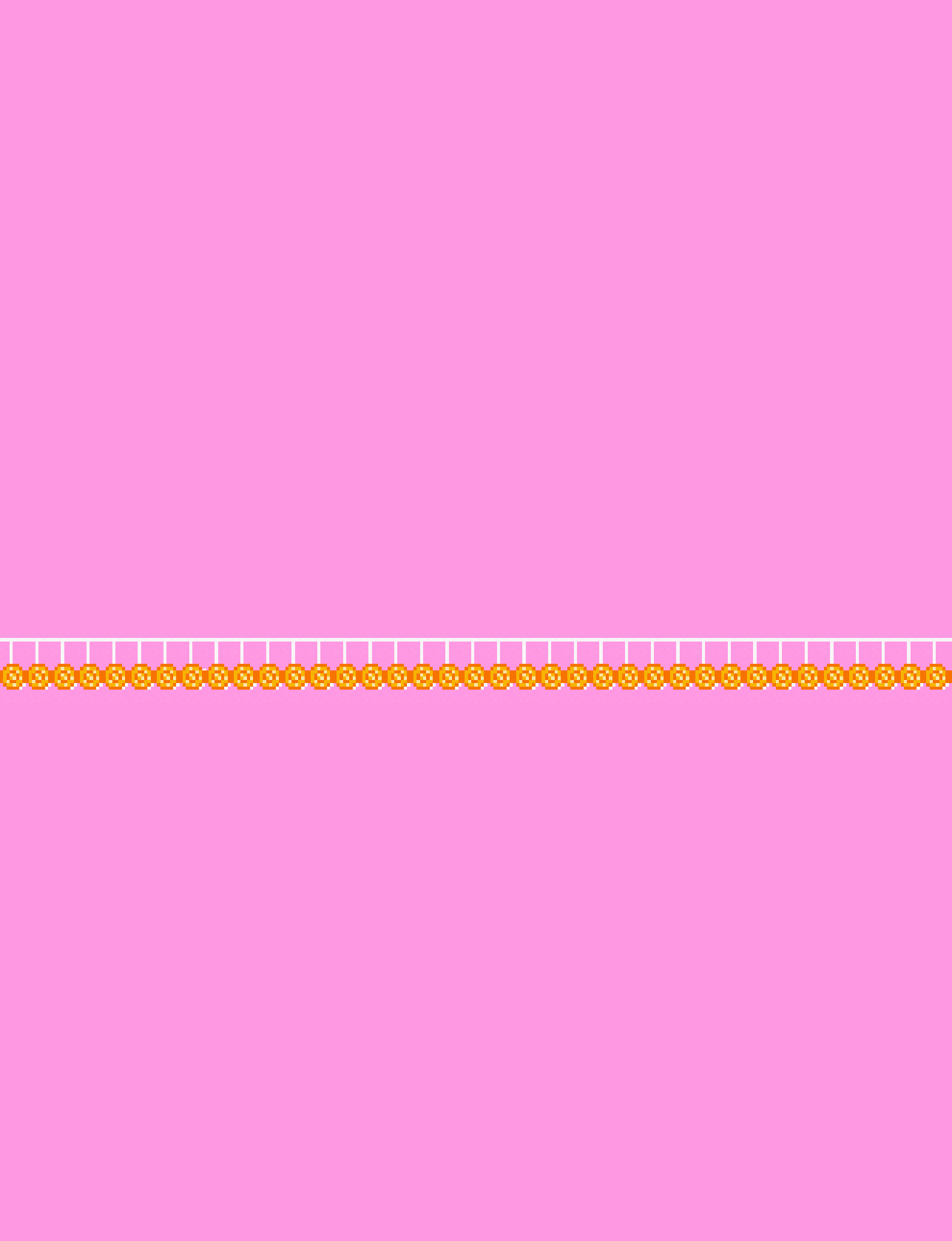

days, and most of *Groove Coaster* sources his tracks. Other contributions from Zuntata artists include remixes from *Arkanoid DS* and tracks unique to *Coaster*, from the experimental to the poppy.

Music games thrive not just when they're active, but *re*active. You can only fudge a note on "Born to Run" so many times until you get numb to it. It's failure, but it's not pain. Something else needs to be happening besides a little colored dot graying out. In *Groove Coaster*, your character travels along a line in abstract space, but that line twists and turns, bends up and down, and the camera takes positions both plain and dramatic that makes *Rock Band* look like a zoetrope in comparison. And yet these graphics are so simple; the same vector style used in *Infinity Gene*, but they show w hat a difference a little creative camera work makes.

A game like *Groove Coaster* shows that you can still make a music game that's simple to understand, includes legitimately good music, and still uses some visual tricks and techniques that make the players wanting to keep coming back to it, instead of it just being there. It's in video games where "audiovisual" is not a compound of two things, but one consistent concept. And that's where the genre should be going: not necessarily to a new frontier, just the one it was headed towards in the beginning. *(groovecoaster.com/en)*

You're about to read about some of the cutest games ever made. The fluffy ones, the pink ones, the "girly" ones, the bubbly ones, and any combinations of those. While they all have their own special reasons for being cute, nearly all of them share one thing in common: an element of surreal familiarity.

It's an element that could be part of an unwritten cuteness credo, wherein the non-cute real world is enhanced through the creation of a cuter cartoon world. Doe-eyed animals (including does); bountiful pastries; stubby household appliances; crayon-and-markers aesthetics—such simple things can transform an ordinary game into an explosion of cute; fluffy, pink, girly, bubbly, but always fun.

These games were created by four companies who made "cute" part and parcel of their output for years, and were duly recognized for it. We present them and their work as leading examples of excessive cuteness in the early days of video game history.

THE
CUTE
# MASTERCLASS

THE
FAIRYLAND
STORY

The Alfalfa kingdom is in crisis. All sorts of monsters and other ne'er-do-wells are running amok, whether it's orc soldiers or sinister wizards or pudgy little dragons. Princess Ptolemy, a good little witch, takes on the job to get rid of this menace by infiltrating the sieged Alfalfa castle and dispatching the enemies the only way she knows how: by turning them into big chocolate-topped cakes.

Unlike Bub and Bob blowing bubbles, though, enemies won't stay in cake form forever if you leave them unattended, and it's there where **The Fairyland Story** feels like a mix of *Bubble Bobble* with *Dig Dug*'s brand of multitasking. You can either keep shooting enemies to keep them as cake until they just collapse, or push them off edges, where they'll instantly crumble. This can lead to some fun tricks, like shooting enemies when they're in midair and then watching the cake plummet, or dropping a cake onto a group of active enemies, which kills the whole gang. All in the same progressively complex stage designs that *Bubble Bobble* is known for.

There may be many similarities to Taito's bubble-based saga, but the funny thing is that *Fairyland Story* comes before *Bubble Bobble* chronologically. They look and play very much the same, but *Fairyland* does have actual background graphics, and with the more stressful gameplay of the, uh, cake management, it comes off as a more complete game (not to mention it has two more stages). Perhaps they were made concurrently, or *Bubble Bobble* was done first but pushed back. Whatever the case, *Fairyland Story* is ostensibly
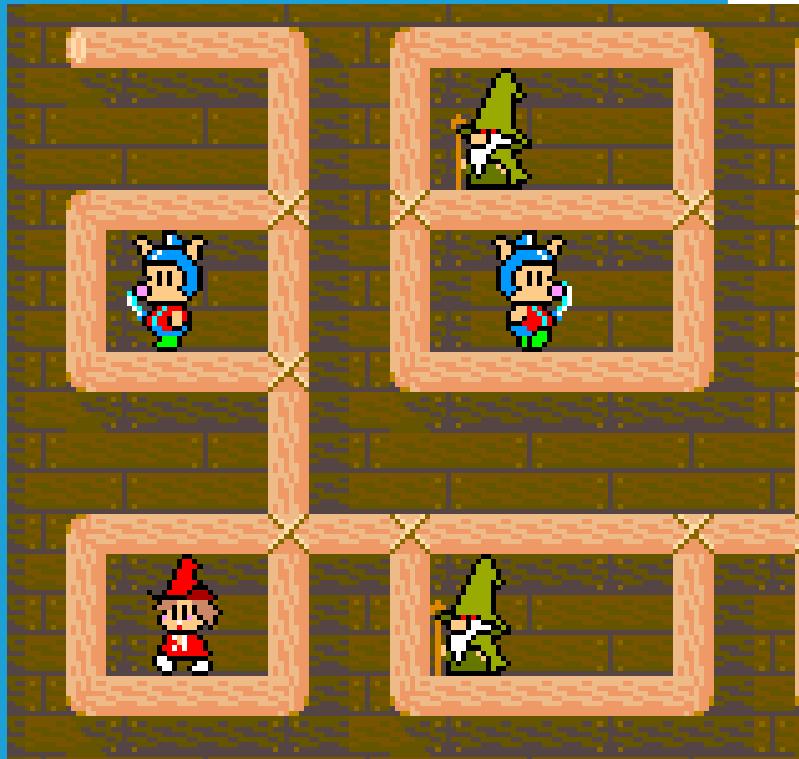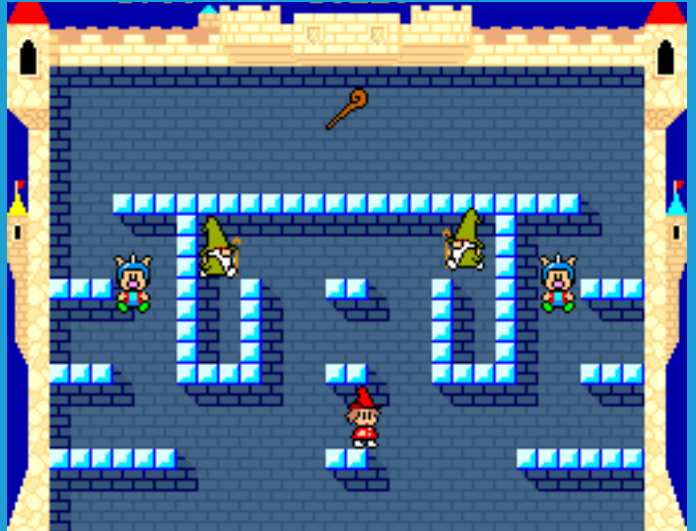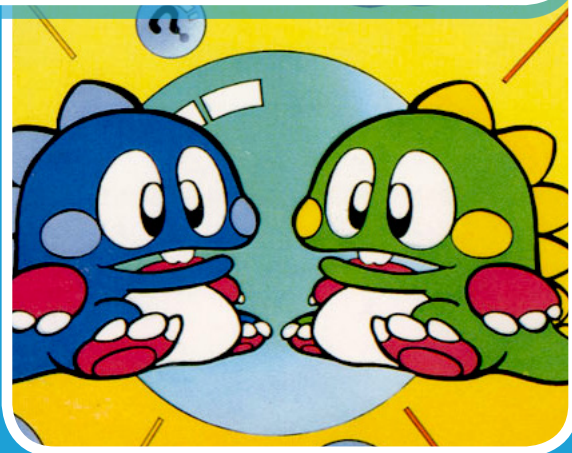

cuter, which you can see when Ptolemy rides her trusty dragon on the attract screen, and makes pastry of the first adorable orc she comes across.
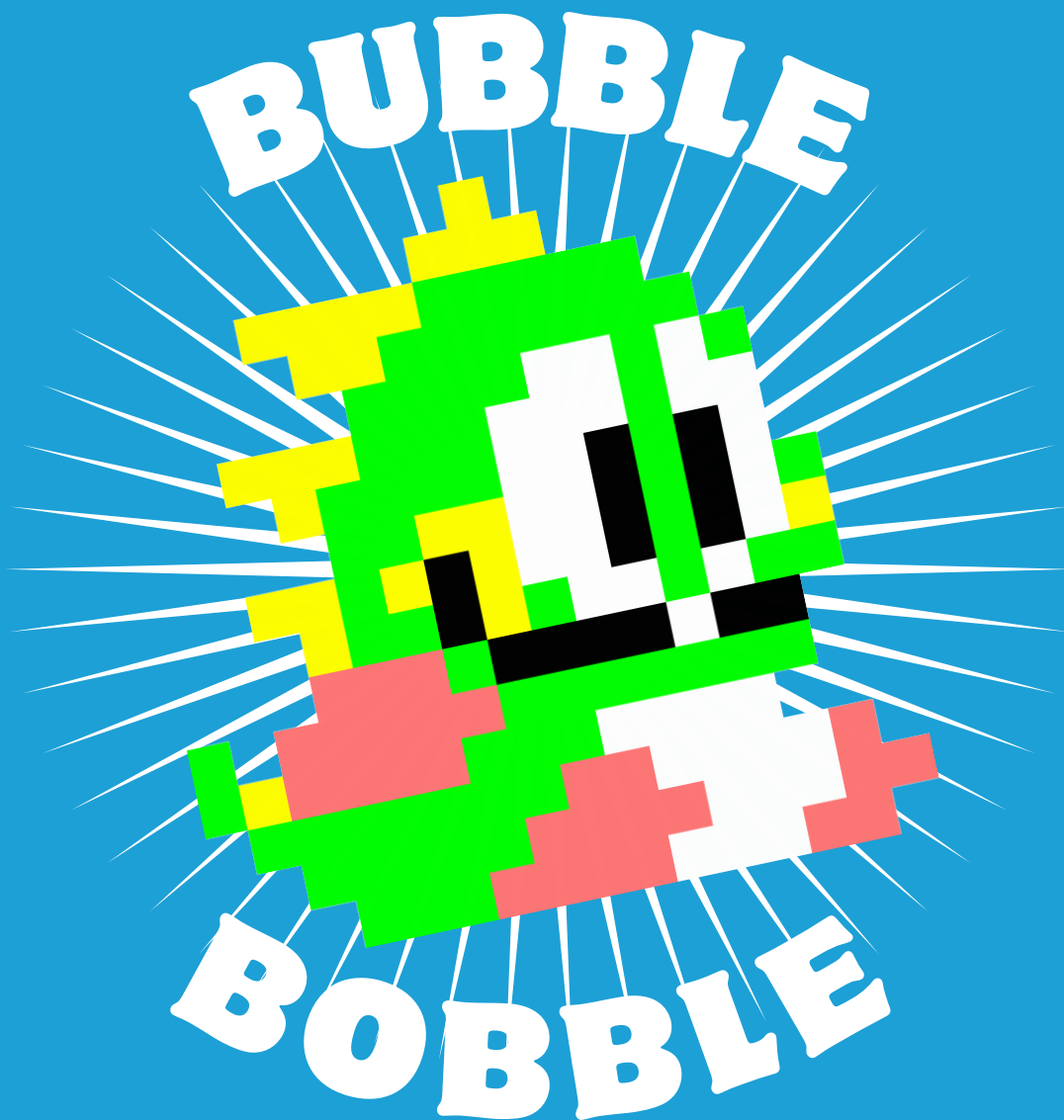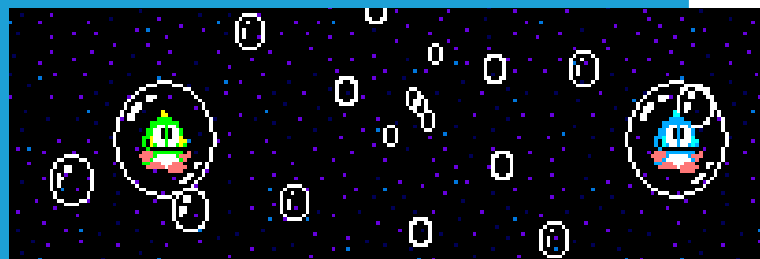
BUBBLE
BOBBLE

Bubble Bobble. It hardly needs intro-duction. Despite not being as overt with its cuteness as *Fairyland Story*, *Bubble Bobble* still may well be the undisputed king of cute games. How? Well, chalk it up to mere prominence: *Bubble Bobble* somehow struck gold where *Fairyland* didn't, and was ported to pretty much anything that resembled a computer from 1986 to 1989, and a few hundred more times after that. As such, more people remember it, and fondly. For some, it was the cutest game they ever played. And for Taito, that's quite a coup.

Not that it isn't super cute otherwise. Bub and Bob are two pudgy little dinosaurs that can appeal to anybody, and the enemies they fight are just "monstery" enough to be both appealing and menacing; easily identifiable as monsters, and not anthropomorphic sundaes or something. And compared to *Fairyland*, the difficulty curve is much more gradual, letting you get a grasp of the game and (hopefully) have it mastered by the end, when you face off against the villain Super Drunk and rescue your girlfriends—plural, because you need a buddy to get the Happy End, after all!

But why was *Bubble Bobble* so prominent? Was it *because* of that gradual difficulty and minimal graphics? Maybe it had more to do with the simulta-neous multiplayer, making it an easy win for kids with parents who bought games "only if your [brother/sister] can play with you." Whatever the reason, it was a game that got stuck in the heads of NES-playing boys and girls alike, and is still planted in their memories today. Which may explain all the ports and shoddy remakes, then.

THE MENTOR
CHACK'N POP
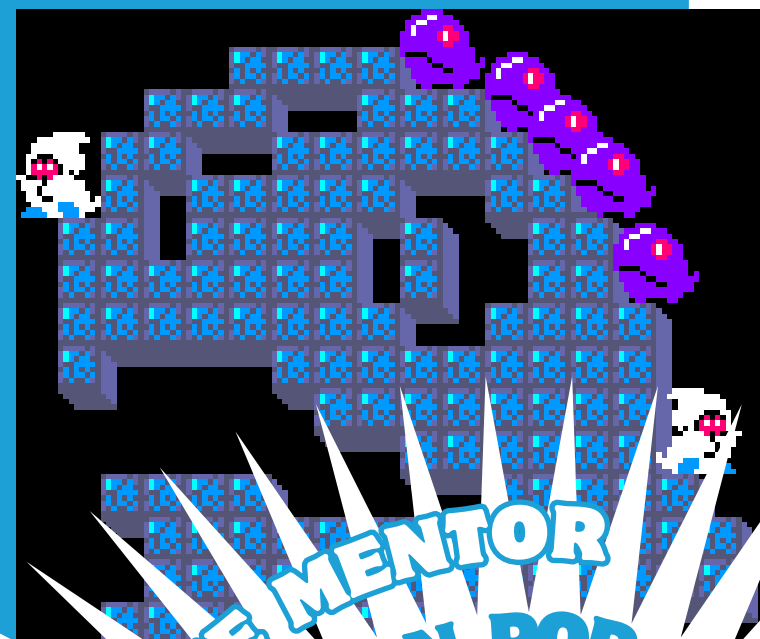
(1983) The origin point for all of Taito's cuteness was this clever maze game. As the chicken-like Chack'n, you try to get from one end of the screen to another using his (its?) gravity-switching legs while trying to avoid the enemy Monstas, who, by the way, soon defected to the *Bubble Bobble* camp.
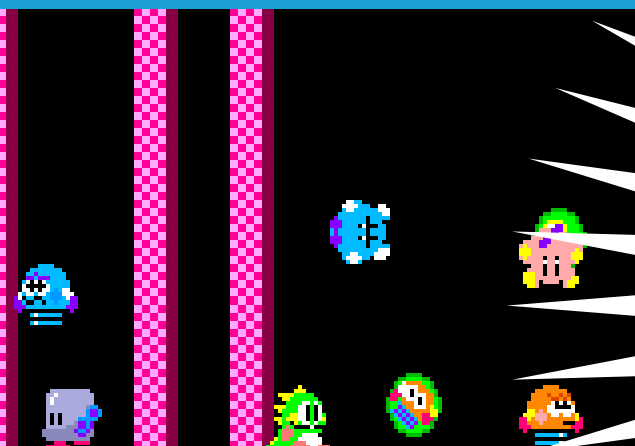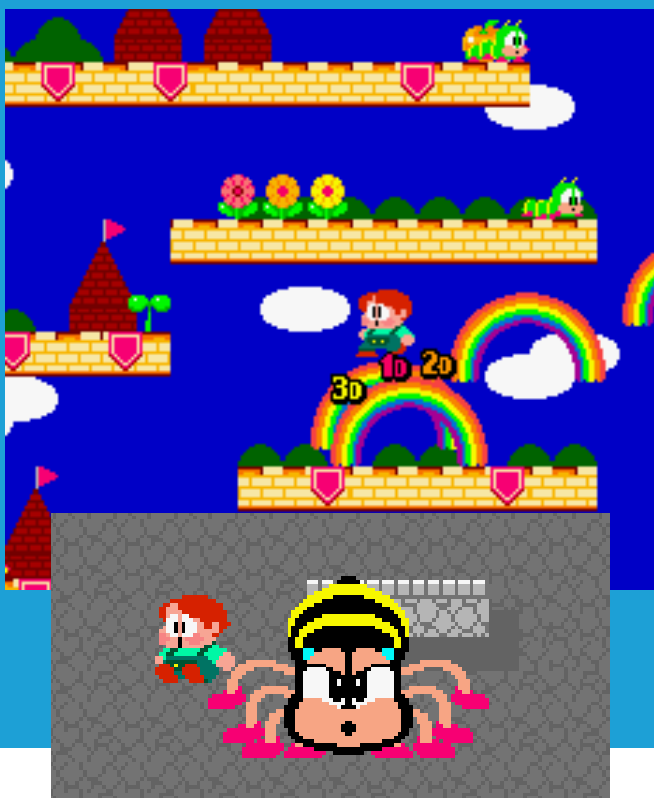
RAINBOW
ISLANDS

Why talk about another game in a series of games that all play similarly? Because **Rainbow Islands** is just different enough; just enough of a step up on the cuteness ladder to really count. Bub and Bob are their human selves and out of Super Drunk's nondescript chambers. Now they must save the eponymous Rainbow Islands from a bunch of creatures gone mad. Using their powers to create rainbows, the boys climb and climb up through the towers of the islands, fighting bulbous bumblebees, stubby little helicopters, goofy spiders, and more natives of the islands that all want to kill our heroes. Adorable!

Though many other cute games from the company followed, *Rainbow Islands* really is representative of

Taito (and the game's creator, the late Fukio Mitsuji)'s mastery of the form. Bubby and Bobby are doe-eyed dwarfs with innocent expressions on their faces, concentrating on shooting rainbows up through bright primary and secondary-colored skies, while a rendition of "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" plays on infinite loop. When they reach the end of a stage, a treasure chest bursts with treats and treasures; a mini-celebration that feels like you've spread peace and love across the earth over and over again.

But in the *Bubble Bobble* tradition, *Rainbow Islands* only *looks* cute. Like its predecessor, its gameplay is pretty devilish: The bosses are mostly a cinch, but it's the barrier to the good ending that outdoes *Bubble Bobble*. Basically, you need to collect seven diamonds on every world, but they spawn from the regular bonus items that pop out of enemies, and only appear on their own narrow areas of the screen, randomly. Collect them, beat the boss, and you get the "big diamond" that will contribute to unlocking the secret eighth world... if you get the rest of the diamonds, of course. It's the only part of *Rainbow Islands* that isn't pretty.

THE NEW ZEALAND STORY

NOT JUST FOR THE BIRDS
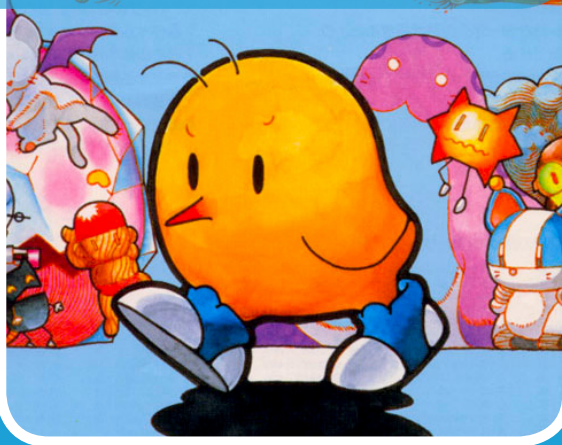
There really aren't enough kiwi games. They're a cute bird in reality, and **The New Zealand Story** proves they're pretty cute in a game, too, especially when they're wearing sneakers. Tiki is the Adidas-wearing bird you control in the game, who's off to save his friends from a big mean walrus and an army of other nasty and insanely annoying enemies in an adventure that will take him all the way across the isles of New Zealand.

New Zealand Story has all the trappings of the previous cute Taito games: one bouncy theme song that will play through eternity, a hero with a blank expression, and a rapid increase in difficulty. To its credit, it's a game that's not quite as hair-pulling as Rainbow Islands; with the larger, more open levels, there's a lot more that the designers would have to shove in each one. But for the most part… they didn't. Well, with all of the enemy respawn points in any given quadrant, they certainly can fake it, but in a lot of cases, that's all fairly easy to manage and get through. It's not the enemies that cause most of the problems, rather the confusing level layouts, which get pretty mazelike and require some creative jumping techniques sometimes.

New Zealand Story is the one game in Taito's repertoire of cuteness that isn't just fun, but *has the most* fun. It's "set" in a real place, there's lots of ways to get through levels, and you never get so overwhelmed that you feel like abandoning it. It also shows us in the intro that while all of Tiki's friends may look adorable, they're just as rambunctious as teenagers. But if you do end up abandoning it, it's like its world will get along just fine without.
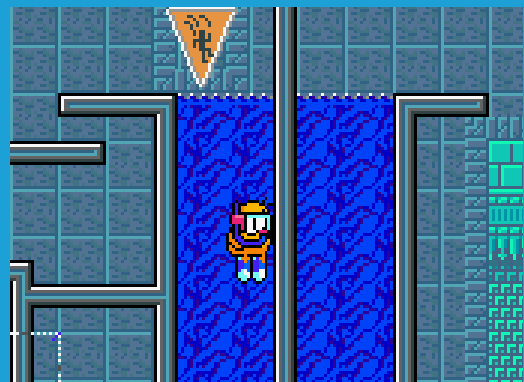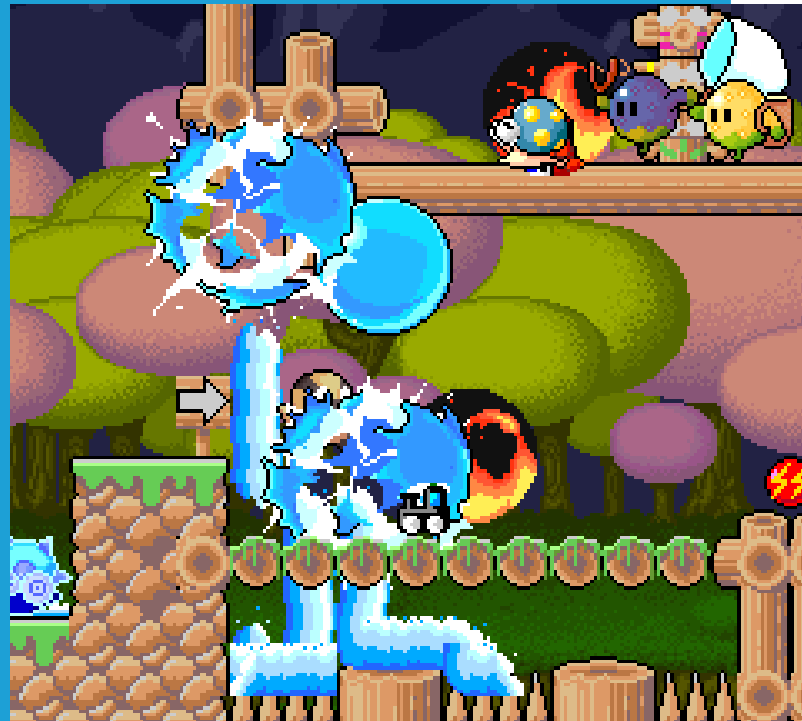
LIQUID

KIDS

Bubble Bobble may be a platformer, but not in the *Mario* sense, of course. However, if you did turn it into a side-scrolling action game, you'd get **Liquid Kids**. Hipopo is our pudgy little main hero who, along with girlfriend Tamasun, must save his home of Woody Lake from the nefarious Fire Devil, who, true to his name, is bathing the land in flames, with the help of his little arsonist henchmen. Hipopo is armed with bubbles filled with water that he can use to douse the flames and just wash away the little jerks that are destroying his home.

The levels in *Liquid Kids* are the most lovely ones Taito had produced to that point. The backgrounds are detailed but never too busy to clash with the moving characters, and the maps themselves start of small but soon become quite lengthy. And then there's the little details, like the way Hipopo and Tamasun waddle, the crazy bosses like the out-of-control alarm clock, and no matter where you're headed, you're always going to be greeted by enemies appearing out of what appear to be portals to hell (well, you are going up against the Fire Devil…).

Obvious *Bubble Bobble* parallels aside, *Liquid Kids* is really more a spiritual sequel to *New Zealand Story*, given its level designs, Hipopo's slow pace, and the frequency with which you'll die. But if you want to split hairs, Hipopo doesn't have the cool weapons and vehicles that Tiki acquires. Nevertheless, *Liquid Kids* brings to the table what *Rainbow Islands* did, but better: larger sprites and overall better art quality that make its whole adorable world feel more alive. It's also a satisfying feeling to just toss those bubbles everywhere and watch the water flow around you, the miniature tides displacing the enemies, with Hipopo giving his same straight face the entire time. Ah, the heck with it—whether you want to call it part of *Bubble Bobble* or *New Zealand Story*, it's really the best of both worlds.

SPACE INVADERS

'95

THE ATTACK OF LUNAR LOONIES

TAITO

THE CUTE MASTERCLASS
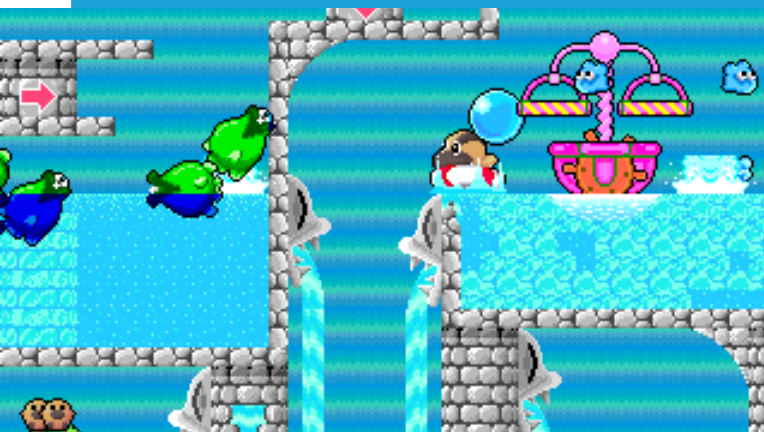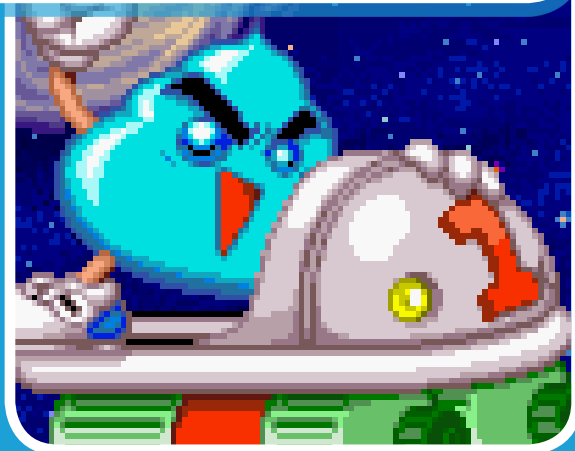
Talk about late to the party; it seemed like everybody but Taito had a parody shooter in the '90s. Granted, the company was never too prolific with "cute-em-ups," but as the makers of the most famous shooter in history, it semed they were asleep at the wheel when it came to joining the likes of *Parodius*, *Star Parojier*, or *Cosmo Gang the Video*. Finally, Taito took *Space Invaders* and came up with **Space Invaders '95: The Attack of Lunar Loonies**, their own goofy crossover shooter that, surprisingly, doesn't feel like much of a copycat.

At first glance, it certainly does. Oh, look, there's the cute version of the ship from their next-famous shooter, *Darius*. Yep, there's Sayo, the cute little shrine maiden from *Pocky & Rocky*, including her anthropomorphic shrine gate. And there's the non-sequitor characters of the Toilet twins and a dog in a trash can. But what Taito lacked in an original wrapping, it made up for with the gameplay. Like *Parodius*, it took the framework of the game it was based on and spiced it up a little. In *Lunar Loonies*, this is most obviously the charge laser, which can blow through an entire line of enemies if timed right, but it also includes the invaders themselves, a regularly-rotating cast of completely bizarre creatures that have their own tricky movement patterns or other gimmicks, like splitting off into smaller monsters once shot. It's a type of enemy variety used more than a decade later in the much less serious *Space Invaders Extreme*.

Like its cute-em-up colleagues, *Lunar Loonies* deserves to be enjoyed and appreciated just as much as the game it's poking fun at. Some of it may skew more towards "wacky" than actual "cute," but it's largely kept at the same level of quality, with lots of animation, goofy sounds, and just a smattering of flying poop.
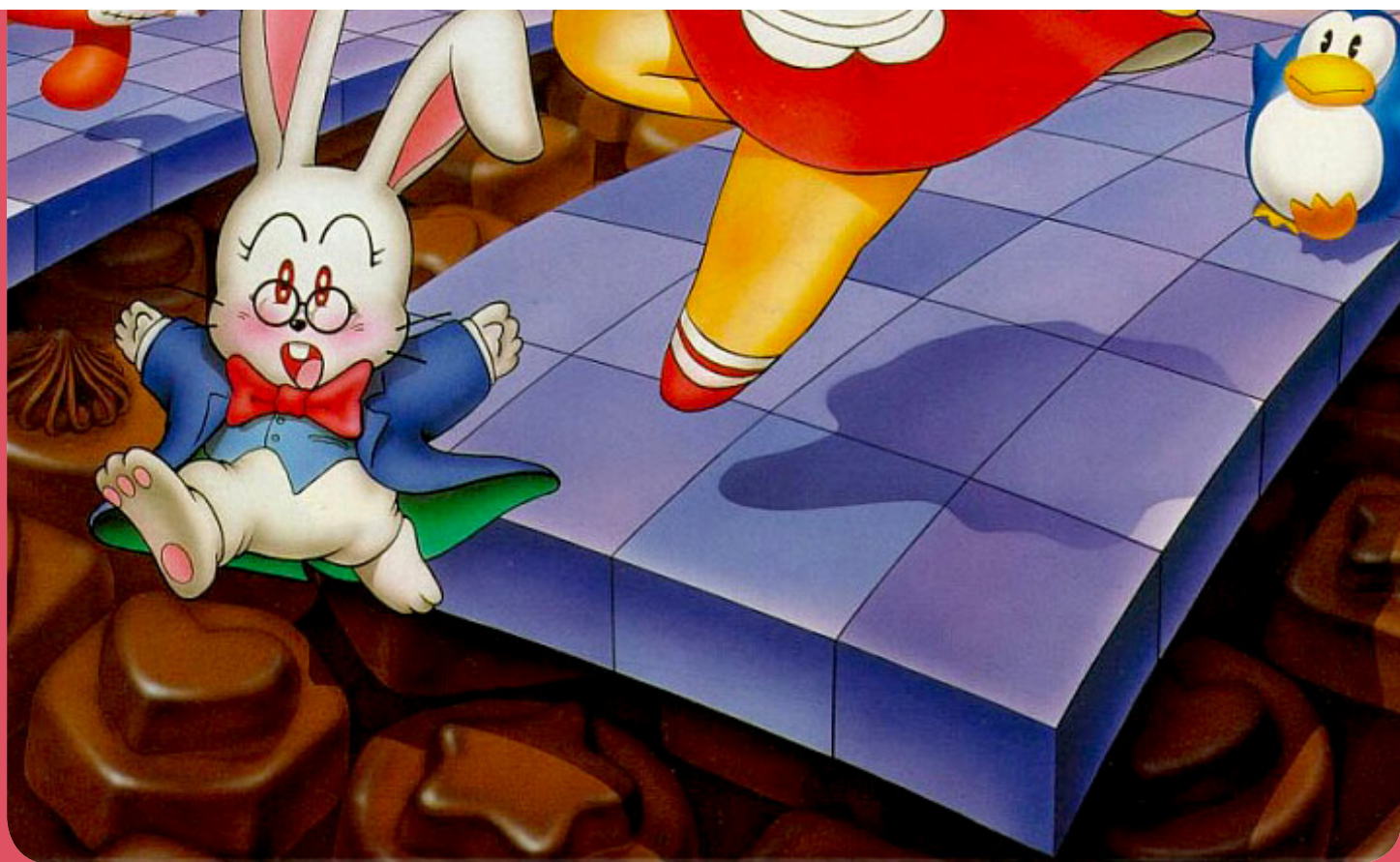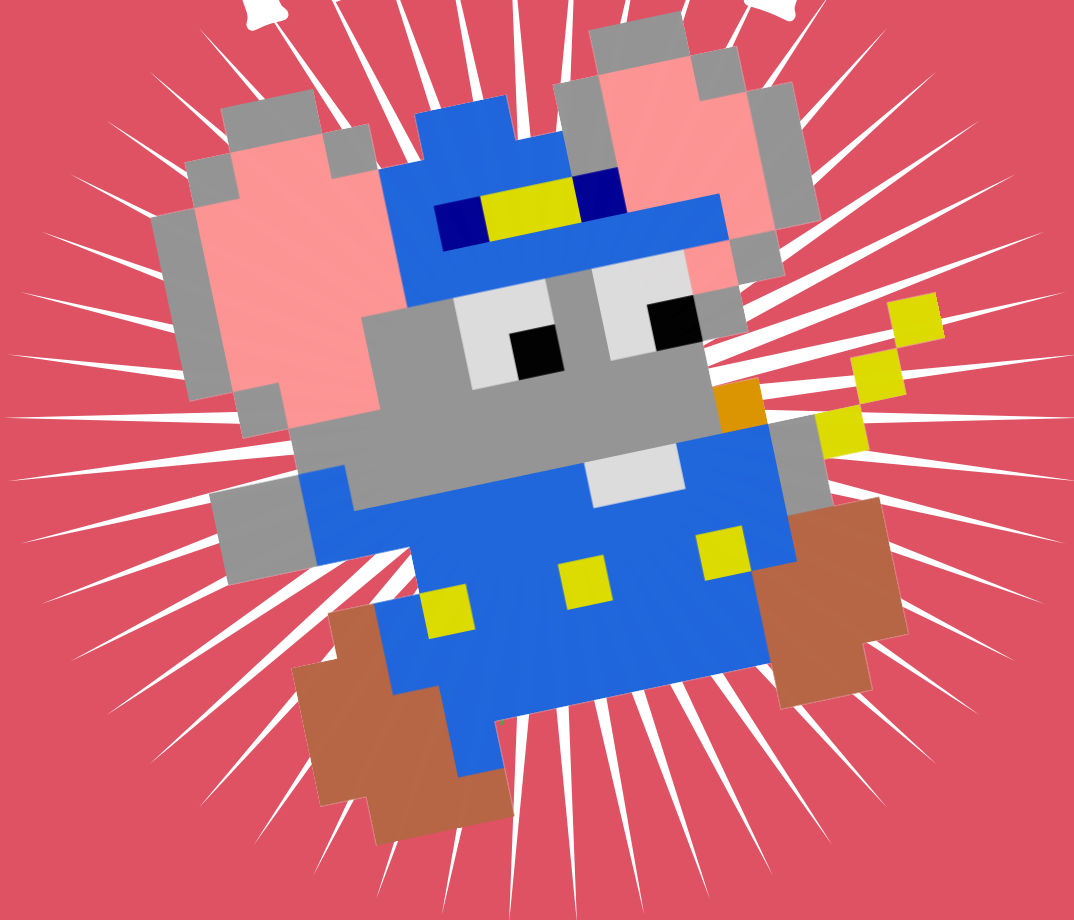
THE CUTE MASTERCLASS

namco

MAPPY

Having capitalized on maze chase games and shooters for a few years prior, Namco pushed ahead with *Mappy*, a game much cuter than *Xevious* and with a unique transportation method—trampolines—that are as useful as they are dangerous. Mappy's mission to retrieve all of the household items being guarded by Nyamco and the Mewkies is one of literal and figurative bounciness, from the solid, bright colors against the black background, the determined if bumbling cats, the soundtrack that could have come from a gramaphone, and of course the trampolines, which make cute "bwoing" noises each time Mappy connects with them.

The role reversal of the genuine "cat-and-mouse" cliche is also pretty notable. Mappy, as the rotund police officer, is out to thwart the plans of the Mewkies mafia, though their back-and-forth is as traditional as any given *Tom & Jerry* story. The mouse is always the cuter of the two, anyway, which makes a much easier choice for the hero, right?

Before *Mappy*, Namco had only dabbled in cute. You could say that *Pac-Man* started it—it was made to appeal to girls, after all—but it's not quite a shining example. For one thing, that character's seen more interpretations than *Hamlet*, and some are just freaky; look at any American-made merchandise or arcade cabinet art to tell you that. The Mappy character is inherently more defined, and stayed as such: he's a cute mouse, with a cute name, dressed in a cute police uniform. Plus he bounces on trampolines the entire time. What else do you want?
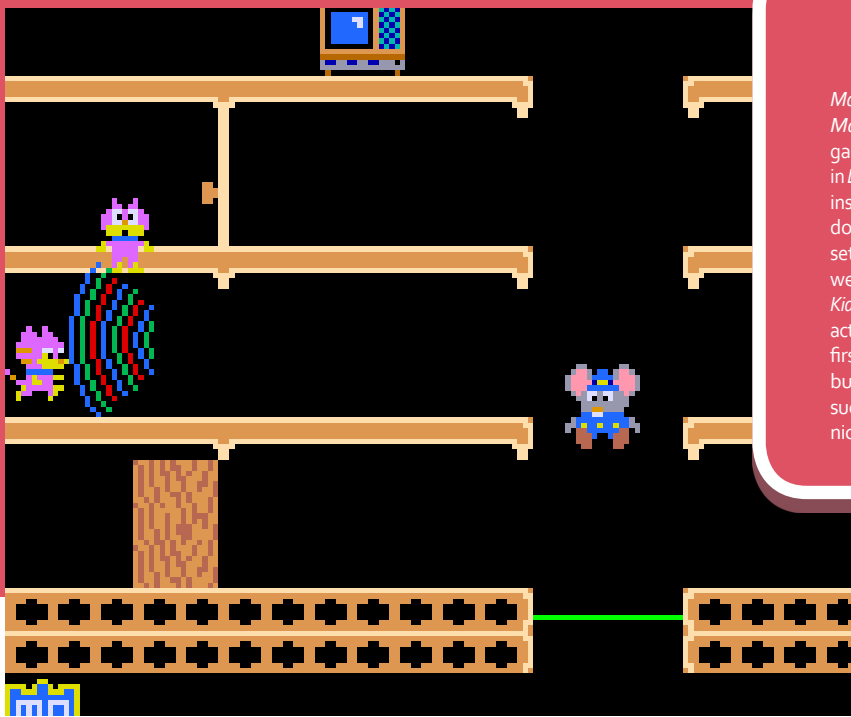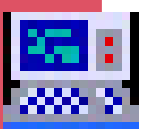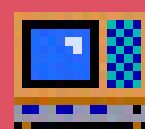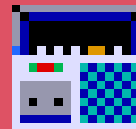
"MEH"PY

Mappy received a few sequels, including the arcade-only *Hopping Mappy*, an overhead-view action game (sort of like the approach used in *Dig Dug II*) that involved pogo sticks instead of trampolines, but not really doing much else with the original's set-up. On the NES/Famicom, there were **Mappy Land** and *Mappy Kids*, the latter being a rather standard action-platformer. It seemed that the first game was a tough act to follow, but *Mappy Land* is easily the best successor to the original, as it was a nice horizontal expansion of the formula, literally and figuratively.
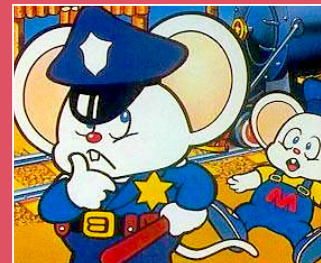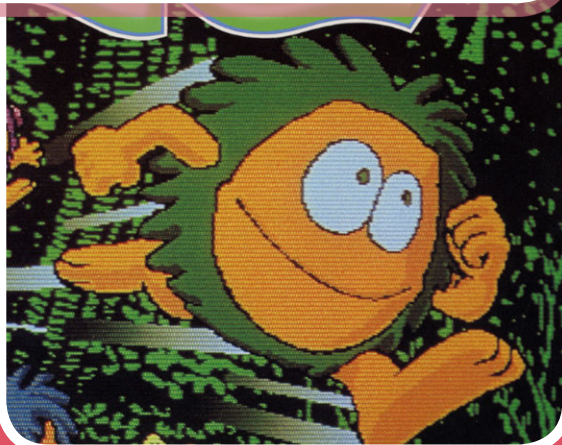
LIBBLE

RABBLE

Namco produced plenty of cute games before and after this, but **Libble Rabble** holds the distinction of being the cutest Namco game that is, on the surface, lacking in spectacle. It's like this, y'see: the game is basically played on a flat green screen, and you control two arrows that only represent the player character. The game is fun nonetheless: using two joysticks, you move the arrows to wrap the string between them (the actual "Libble Rabble") around the pegs on the field in order to simultaneously capture the ghastly Hoblins and rescue the little mushroom people that are being terrorized. Capture all the mushrooms and you can move on.

But cute isn't just a visual thing, after all, nor does it have to be all about *you*. *Libble Rabble* has an ongoing theme song that's overlaid in every stage, a thoroughly bouncy little ditty, and the sound effects have a certain squawk to them, as if they're the actual sounds these characters and actions make. In a way, they add to the music, providing a nice beat here and there as if you're helping make a remix. And that's exactly what Haruomi Hosono did in his seminal Namco cover album *Video Game Music*.

Besides that, *Libble Rabble* does have plenty of onscreen characters, including the aforementioned Hoblins and mushrooms. If you can wrap the Libble Rabble line around a hidden treasure chest, it bursts open and a gang of furballs escapes to the edges of the screen—capturing them nets big points. Plus, clearing stages can sometimes get you extra scenes of cuteness if you clear enough consecutively. One of the early ones is the "bridal" scene where the game inexplicably starts playing the Wedding March while a bride and groom dot the screen. In other words, it knows when to let loose with the spectacle.
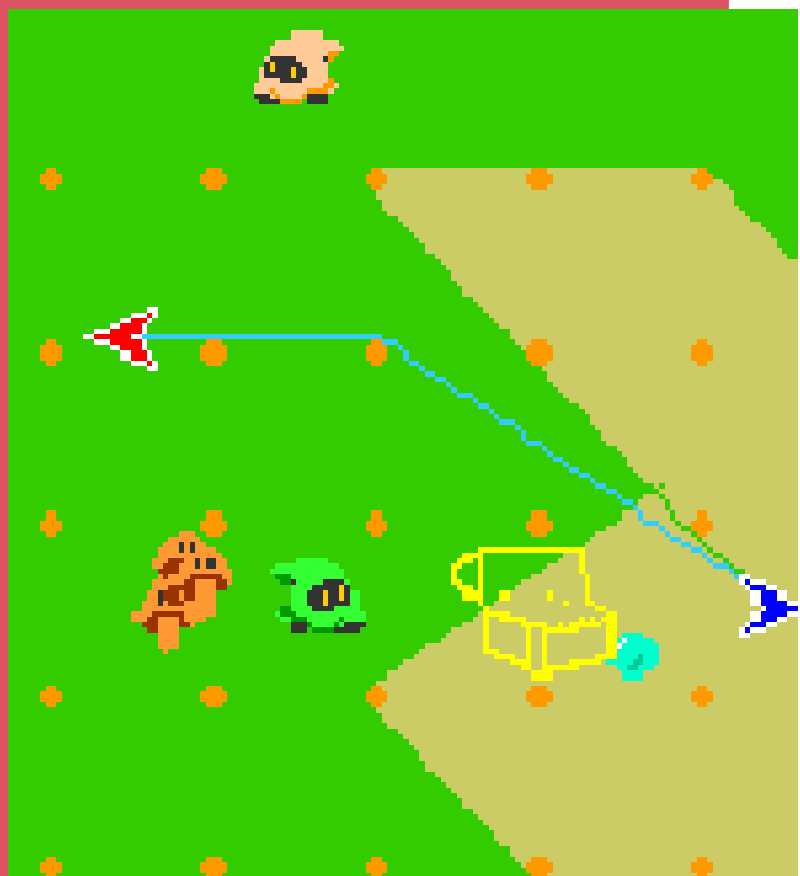
TOY POP

The smoothest road to cuteness?

Just use a "living toy" concept. And to sweeten it, take a page from a celebrated work such as and *Raggedy Ann & Andy*. That more than competently describes **Toy Pop**, especially the two player characters, Pino and Acha. Their romp through a toy world infested with rogue cars and wind-up soldiers is definitely out of a storybook.

   Toy Pop plays like Sega's *Pengo*, another cute game, in that you're running around the screen destroying blocks trying to survive, although in this game, you're also looking for a key to open the exit door while trying not to get killed by the enemy toys wandering aimlessly in your general area. That little quirk in the gameplay has more to do with *The Tower of Druaga* than anything, but in *Toy Pop*, you can get the help of a second player if you need it, and thankfully the difficulty doesn't quite get as insane as needing to rub up against certain walls just to get a treasure.

   Based on its release year, *Toy Pop* has a look and feel that comes off rudimentary, as the sprites are tiny, not very detailed, and never have more than two frames of animation (maybe you could call that a representation of the limited movement of toys, but... nah). But it bursts with color, and its unabashed cuteness excels further thanks to the theme, its characters, and the best ragtime in a video game.

PINO AND ACHA ARE GOING TO MAJYO'S CASTLE TO SAVE FRIEND.

MARCHEN

MAZE
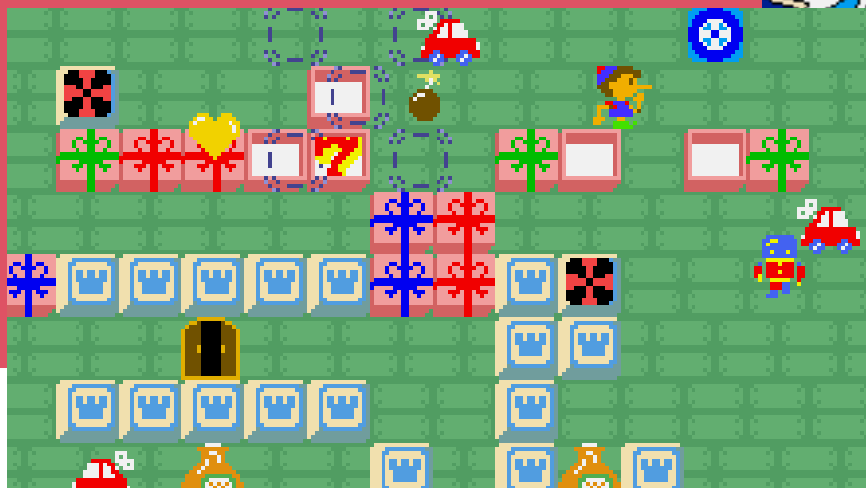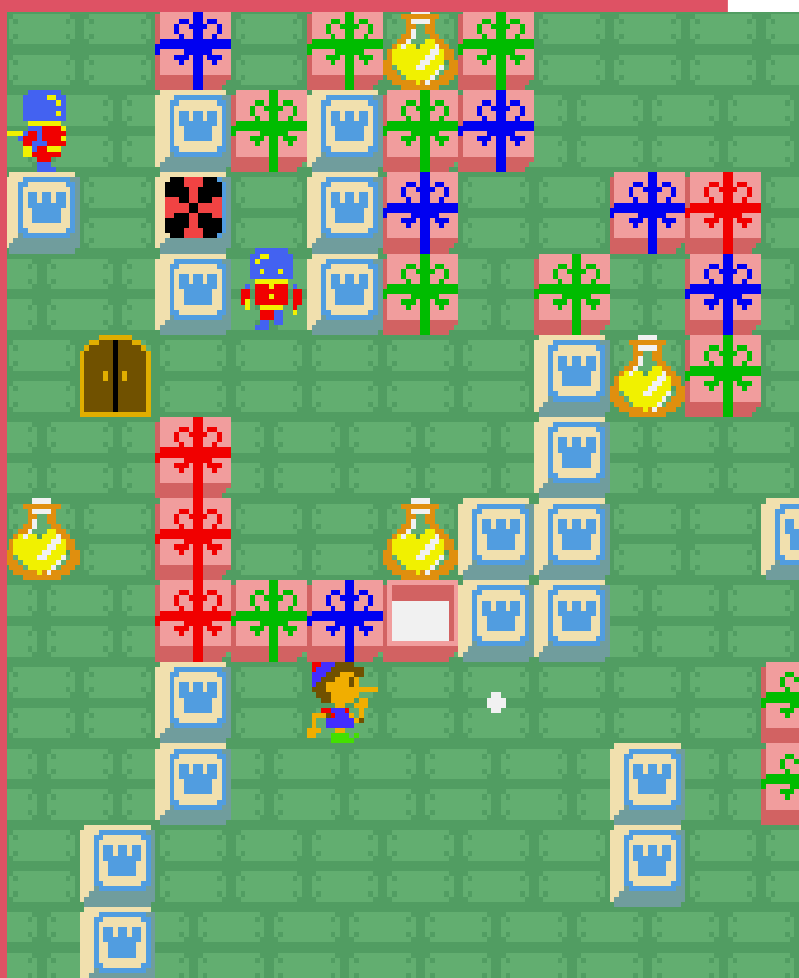
Video game adaptations of *Alice in Wonderland* seem like they'd be a regularly-occuring foregone conclusion given the fantastical source material, but it's one of those things that has been… lacking. If *Alice* games aren't going down the "insanity" route, then they're just lame tie-ins with the Disney movie. **Marchen Maze** is mostly different—and better—as a game, but as a take on *Alice*, it's more on the "Disney" side of the spectrum. Nevertheless, that only makes it another one of Namco's cutest games.

For starters, though, putting "Maze" in this game's title isn't very honest. This is a straightforward action title taking place on stages that appear to be large platforms floating high above the ground, with no boundaries—definitely no mazes here. It's forgivable, though, because it's still fun. The setup is familiar: Alice is greeted at night by the White Rabbit, and this time he explicitly asks for her help in saving the various lands within Wonderland, and so he takes her

(through a mirror rather than a hole) into the surreal world. From there, it's a regular run-'n'-jump affair across those platforms , wide and narrow, usually with a two-minute time limit in every stage, including the boss fights at the end. And throughout the journey, below those platforms, the imagery of pastries, melting clocks, or anything else remotely evocative of *Alice in Wonderland* can be seen.

Marchen Maze remains somewhat shrouded in obscurity; another casualty of Namco's highly creative yet seemingly directionless period of the late '80s. In 1988, its only home version was for the X68000, but came to consoles in 1990 on the PC Engine. And that version is a questionable port that essentially rotates the game 90 degrees to the left to undo the isometric view. Surely the PCE could have handled it the authentic way?

MARVEL
LAND

Nothing says nutty like a kingdom that's like one big theme park! And guess what, there's a princess that needs saving! As the dragon-boy Prince Talmit, it's your job to run through **Marvel Land**, defeat as many bosses as you can among the stages—though they're more like minigames where you need to rescue captured fairies, and you need all the fairies to get the best ending—save the princess, and finally become awesome.

Given the amusement park theme, *Marvel Land* is a damn jovial game, and its backgrounds are fairly busy with scenes of rides, floats, fireworks and other such aesthetics (including more than a few Namco references, like the neon character floats in the bonus stage).

The thing about *Marvel Land* is that it's kind of slow for a platform game. Talmit has a weighty feel to him; he trots rather than runs, and bounces off most things like trampolines. It's that kind of bounciness that makes *Marvel Land* not just cute-looking but also cute-feeling. Yet it's not completely light in either respect; in fact, things get heart-pounding at the climax, when Talmit takes the princess Wondra and together they escape from the crumbling cave of the Mole King. But, y'know, if Marvel Land is supposed to be a rather enclosed space, why can't you just head straight to the bad guy's castle?

THE MENTOR
PAC-LAND
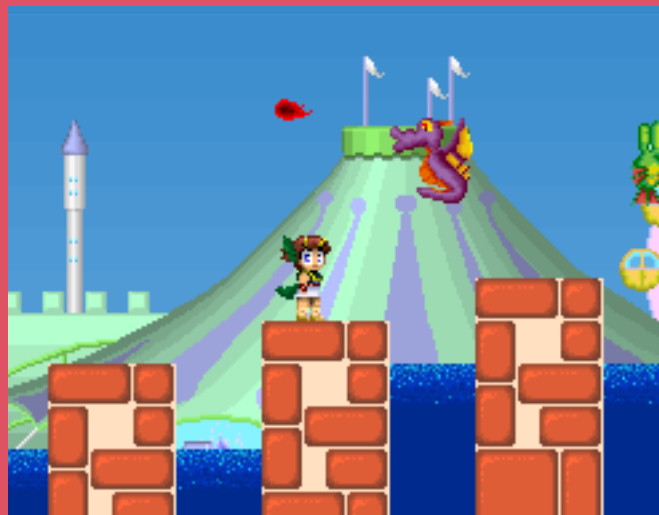
(1984) Granted, *Pac-Land* was the launching point for a lot of Namco cuteness; not just *Marvel Land*. However, Pac's platformer is similarly slow-paced and jovial, and it's the only one that has ghosts driving cars. You gotta love it.

There's "cute" as a style, there's "cute" as a function, and then there's "cute" as antithesis. *Splatterhouse* was not a game you would have ever thought to use that word with—especially now, in comparison to its over-the-top reboot last year. Even back in the day, it was a series that was particularly gory and scary. It was also a game that could only be done on 16-bit, due to the greater range of color allowing for more gruesome detail.

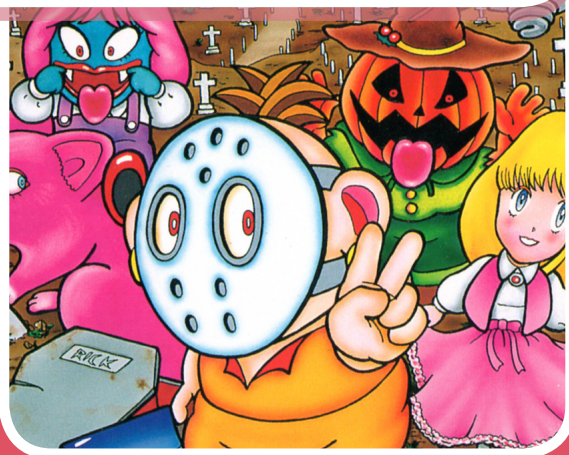And so, rather than try to recapture the magic of the original *Splatterhouse* on the underpowered Famicom, Namco used the relative strengths of the platform to craft **Splatterhouse: Wanpaku Graffiti**, a *Splatterhouse* game that even Mom can love. It's also in a class by itself; one of few games outside of *Kid Dracula* and some *Addams Family* titles to do cutesy send-ups of movie monsters and horror cliches. You'll see levels that look familiar but given some cute element, like a boss fight with chickens popping out of the oven next to the knives flying at you. In another battle, you walk in on a young woman whose midsection is about to burst with creepy crawlies, and once you finish killing all of them, she gets up and happily yawns it off.

Some of those humorous touches are based on the tropes of the original *Splatterhouse*, like the chest-deep slog through the sewer, but *Wanpaku Graffiti* makes its own identity. However, while this not-so-splattery *Splatterhouse* is notable for its cuteness, it's not so notable as a game. Nearly all of the boss and midboss fights consist of dodging things that are raining down on you, and only a few levels are anything but flat, straight shots from one end to the other. It becomes increasingly obvious that no one from the original *Splatterhouse* actually worked on *Wanpaku Graffiti*, but I suppose it could be a blessing in disguise—it's not like those guys could conceivably pull a 180 and create *this*, right?

THE CUTE MASTERCLASS

DEVIL

WORLD
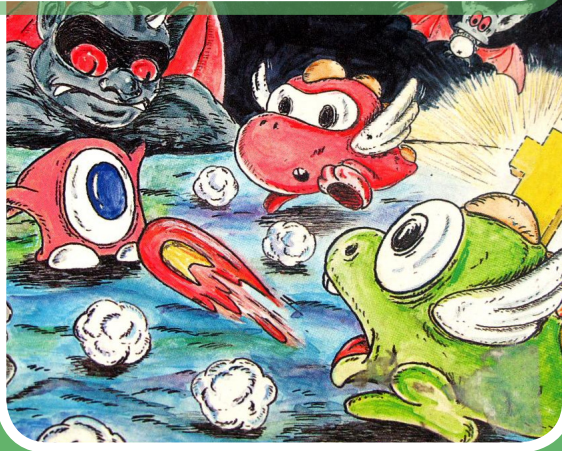
Nintendo's early years in games were not exactly enviable. Like a lot of Japanese companies, they were basically copying whatever was working in the market and went with it. Even when it came to cute games, they were slow on the uptake. Probably their first cute, original game for the Famicom was **Devil World**, which is just the slightest bit ironic considering its name and imagery, and yet is just as unoriginal as their earliest stuff. *Devil World* is *Pac-Man* with a blasphemous edge.

You play Tamagon, a delightful little dragon who's trying to get out of Devil World, but the devil is not keen on letting him live. Tamagon must eat all the dots around the devil's mazes while avoiding his minions and trying not to get squashed in between maze walls and the giant moving walls that the devil is controlling.
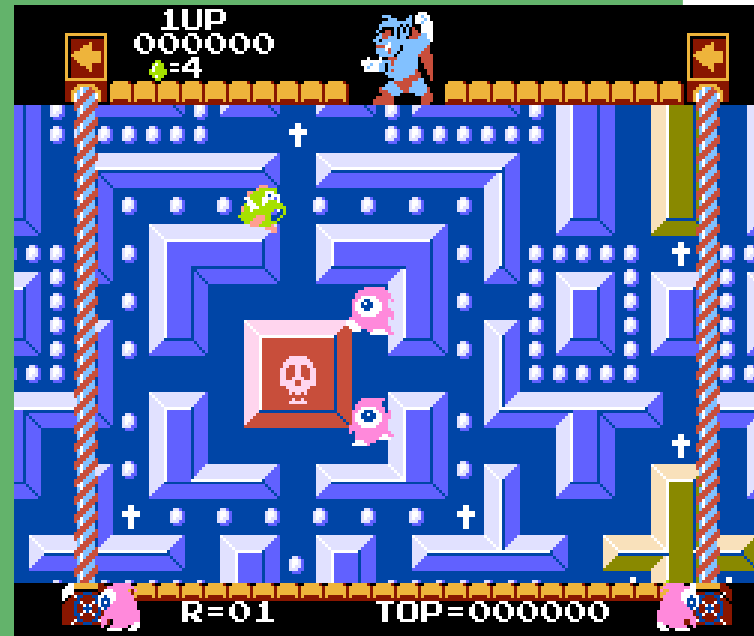
As a maze chase game, *Devil World* doesn't change itself much beyond the third stage, but to its credit, it's no*t just* another clone of *Pac-Man*. Tamagon can't do a damn thing unless he picks up a cross first, which lets him get rid of the dots as well as shoot fireballs to destroy the minions. Then, in the second levels of each area, you collect bibles to insert into four sides of a "devil hole" in the middle of the maze in order to blow it up and continue. I guess that's why they call it the Good Book.

Devil World plays loose with religious symbolism, as the Japanese are wont to do, but it's harmless. Tamagon is cuddly, the minions aren't even that threatening, and attacking them with fire turns them into fried eggs. Plus, it's positive: you're trying to outsmart the devil, not celebrate him. It's not some great hidden gem, but for Nintendo (and especially a young Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka), it was an important step forward.
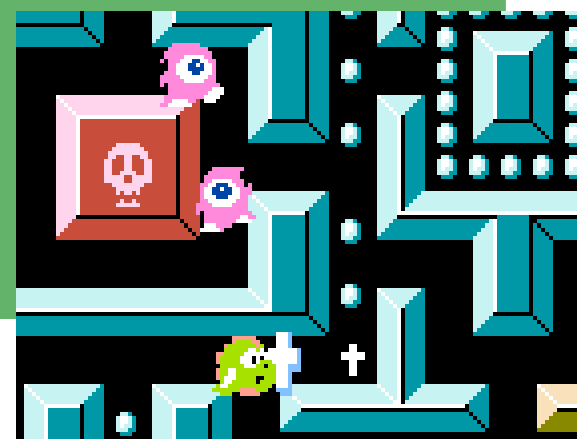
BALLOON

KID

99 GRAY BALLOONS
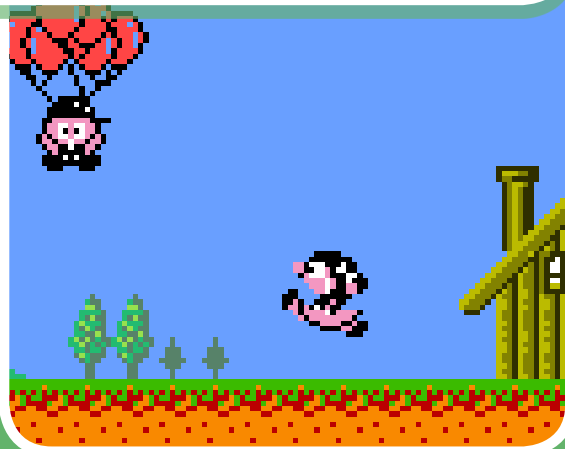
Pencilvania. That's the name of the first stage in **Balloon Kid**, and that's almost all you need in order to know how cute it is. *Devil World* was a cute if imperfect game in the first year of the Famicom, and *Balloon Kid* carried the tradition (without the slight religious insensitivity). And it's one of the true highlights of the early Game Boy library in spite of that.

Even the story is cute: Alice and Jim were siblings that loved balloons, and one day Jim gets the idea to fashion a balloon rainbow. But he gets tangled up and blown away by a gust of wind, and now Alice must float through the air to save her little brother. As the nice remixes of *Balloon Fight*'s music play on, you guide Alice through the treacherous obstacle courses of each stage; all very distinct areas such as the forest, an arctic wonderland, a steamy factory, and so on.
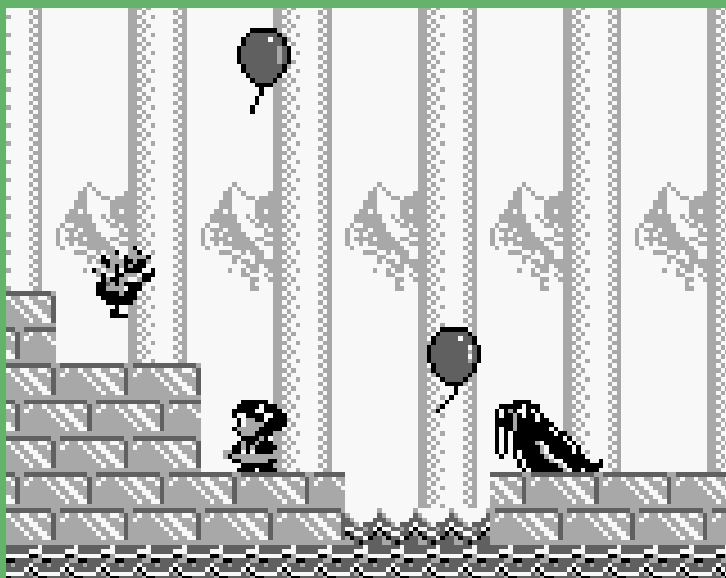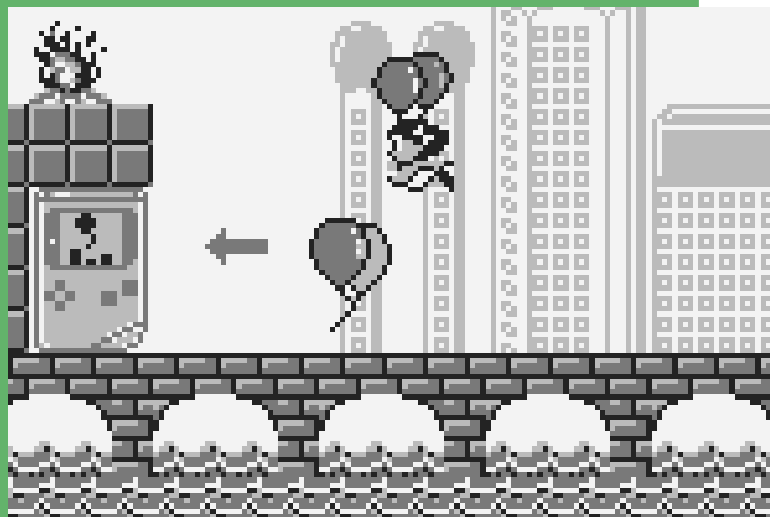
Balloon Kid may not seem like a hallmark of cuteness—provided you could see it on the awful Game Boy screen—but as they say, it's in the details. Even for an early Game Boy game, *Balloon Kid* has 'em, usually in the form of the enemies: the spiders in the forest; the crawfish jumping around inside the whale; the anthropomorphic fireballs in the factory. It's adorable from beginning to end, and seeing that it's easier than most of the other games featured so far, that practically makes it comfortable, too.

HELLO, KIDDY

Balloon Kid was not released in Japan until the year 2000, when it became the enhanced Game Boy Color game *Balloon Fight GB*. Wait, scratch that—it was actually released there in 1992, except it was for the Famicom, and it was turned into **Hello Kitty World**. Yes, Alice was replaced with Sanrio's iconic feline, but besides the larger screen, full color, and added strawberry imagery, nothing else was changed—hell, even the *Ballon Fight*-tinged music is the same. Mario Co., a short-lived Nintendo subsidiary, was responsible for developing the game under the watchful eyes of Character Soft, who was publishing most of the Sanrio games back then.

KIRBY'S ADVENTURE

Now, it's not that this *Kirby* game is any cuter than the other *Kirby* games—they all are, for goodness sake—but **Kirby's Adventure** was where the whole crazy ride really got going. The original Game Boy game was a fine romp, but this one gave us many more levels and the debut of Kirby's ability-copying power... and it was in color, of course. It's the *Kirby* game that all the other ones were based on. (The platformers, that is.)

The twilight years of the NES were a prime time for Kirby to mosey on in, because the system's graphics capability was at its peak, and many other NES games in the same timeframe—*Wario's Woods*, *Mr. Gimmick*, *Panic Restaurant*, *Joy Mecha Fight*—were making the system a dominating force in cuteness. For those who didn't forsake the NES early to get the Super NES (or were stuck with it for a while longer), *Kirby's Adventure* instantly became a must-have, mostly because it was one of the last well-rounded, true action games for the system.

Kirby's Adventure is also where we got confirmation that Kirby is pink, and proudly so. Few notable game characters, even the extra-cutesy female ones, are really *bathed* in pink. Kirby was aggressively cute
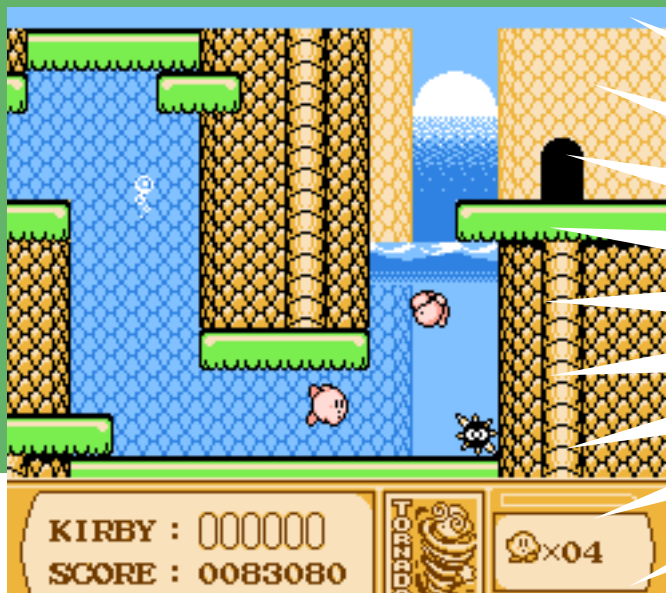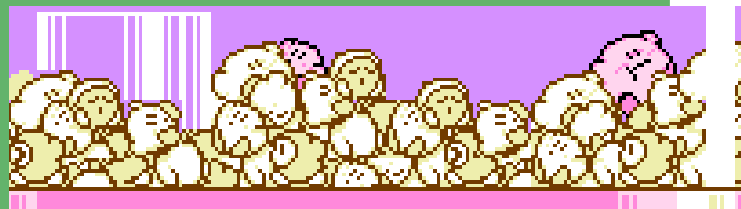
in that regard, and he was basically a circle with four lumps sticking out of him, with two big beads for eyes. By no means should the average game-playing boy want anything to do with him, but then you see he packs a punch, and can be pretty powerful without much effort. He (and should we even say "he?") is less a leading game character and more a basic plush toy design you could find at Ikea.

We use the word "antihero" to often describe snarky assholes we're forced to play as, but what would Kirby be otherwise? He *is* the cute masterclass. He's our ambassador to all of it. And it's too bad for Taito that they didn't think of him first.
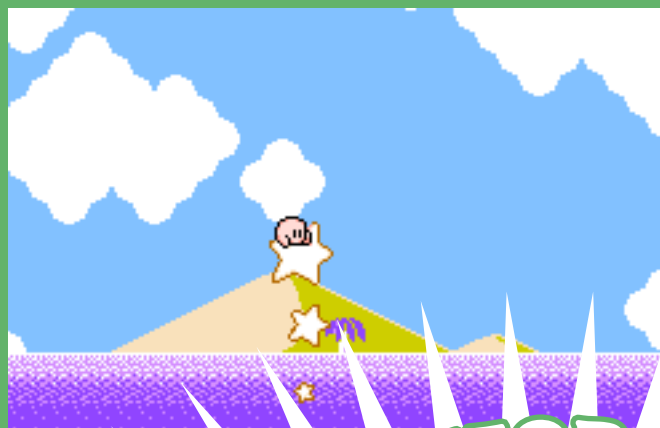
THE MENTOR: ADVENTURES OF LOLO

(1989) Kirby owes a ton to Lolo, HAL's original cute hero who spearheaded a series of excellent puzzle adventure games. He and his girl Lala joined Kirby's crew in the first *Dream Land* and even got a permanent spot in the *Kirby* cartoon series.

KIRBY : 000000
SCORE : 0083080
×04

YOSHI'S ISLAND

It's possible that this was the zenith. If you think about it, the tip of the point on Nintendo's tower of cuteness may well have reached full strength once **Yoshi's Island** was completed. Is that a bad thing? Not at all, though it would give any future cute Nintendo games quite a challenge (even Kirby—after all, *Dream Land 3* mimicked its art style). It's also the anti-*Donkey Kong Country*, showing that brilliant hand-drawn graphics could convey things that pre-rendered games couldn't yet. As a result, it remains one of the most striking—and strikingly cute—Super NES games.

Yoshi's Island is a story about babies, and so it employs an infantile aesthetic, with the jagged crayons-and-pastels lines on virtually every (non-character) pixel. It's brilliant, but because it's a *Mario* game at its core, it's not *for* babies. Baby Mario might be the cutest thing about *Yoshi's Island*, and yet he's also not. He's adorable and pretty behaved most of the time, but god help you if you get hit, because he'll be flying off and crying like a rooster in a fifth of a second. As the game progresses, the levels get trickier and trickier, and you'll run into more obstacles that threaten to knock the little guy away from you. This is "cute," but more like when you say "these designers think they're so goddamn cute."

Regardless, it's the characters that put *Yoshi's Island* out in front of the pack. The enemies, for instance, all have individual personalities. The most obvious example is the cast of Shyguys that waddle around

the levels, and within a minute from beginning the game, you're introduced to the ones riding stilts. It turns out to be a kind of defense mechanism against Yoshi's eggs, but there's little other reason why they'd be on stilts in the first place. There's the annoying monkeys in the marsh levels, the crows, the Lunge Fish, the Goonie gulls, and so many more.

The cuteness of *Yoshi's Island* also spread to *Tetris Attack*, which was previously *Panel De Pon*, and that was even *cuter* thanks to a decidedly girlier look. And then there was the sequel *Yoshi's Story*, which is objectively cuter thanks to its fluffy pre-rendered graphics and lullaby-ish theme song, but didn't set the same precedent. Nintendo may have cornered cuteness throughout the years, but *Yoshi's Island* is their best example of it not being simply an art style, but a language. A language that speaks great games.

POKÉMON

Is there any other choice? Oh, sure, **Pokémon** tries to hide its cuteness by putting the big scary legendary ones on the front of the box, but it will always go back to Pikachu and Jigglypuff. It's a franchise that capitalizes on cute on multiple levels, and that's how they get ya, because before you know it, you're sucked into its RPG trap, going after whatever slate of 151 monsters they've got this time.

Pokémon was always cute, and because of that, at the beginning it was relegated to being a game for babies, girls, or baby girls. If you were in middle or high school and dared to play it in public, you know that all too well. Perhaps if all we had was the game, there wouldn't be as much of a problem, but the Pokémon anime was part-and-parcel of the franchise's American launch, and got the whole enterprise much more exposure and derision as a result.

Yes, there are indeed hundreds of very adorable little monsters to collect and train that all make annoying noises, but there's no denying that there's plenty more about Pokémon that isn't very cute. In fact, most of it is kind of normal. Besides the aforementioned bigger, scarier Pokémon, you have the staid towns and other locations that serve their function as nodes on the world map and little else. That changed in the DS series, when there was more characteristic features to add to the towns, but it's not like you were walking into Candyland at any point.

Yet those monsters are still cute at the end of the day, and they're what keeps Pokémon on top. It's a kind of cuteness that give you a framework, but leaves it up to you to decide how cute it should be. Think about it: once they introduced breeding to the game, all bets were off, because now you can imagine making adorable Pokémon couples with extra-adorable babies and raise them to prime performance (if you're not the enterprising type that's just looking for good trades). And if that's not enough for you, you can still watch the cartoon, or play the card game, or read the comics, or play Smash Bros. as Jigglypuff, or...

SUTTE

HAKKUN

You gotta hand it to Nintendo, really—only they (via developer Indieszero) could take the concept of a drinky bird toy and transform it into an adorable character for a previously unheard-of puzzle game. Hakkun is unique that way: he's clear, so he looks like a simple vessel, but what you do in the game turns out to show off his true character.

Originally a Satellaview game brought to cartridge in 1998, **Sutte Hakkun** offers up several worlds' worth of puzzling stages where the main point is to get Hakkun to the exit pad. Typically, a few brick blocks, also clear, are laid around the area. Hakkun can suck in the blocks and then expel them, letting the player put them wherever they want. In addition, there will often be small jars with colored liquids. When Hakkun sucks up the liquid, he's filled with it; literally ballooning into a sphere, and when that liquid is injected into a block, the different colors activate different behaviors—red moves horizontally, blue vertically, and yellow diagonally.

In many stages, Hakkun is joined by his friend Makkun, a walrus-faced guy who is similarly affected by the liquids when Hakkun injects them, walking in the direction the colors dictate. And, as a matter of fact, even the jars and blocks are characters: Tsubokun and Blockun, respectively. When Hakkun turns into a block because he inhaled a Blockun, or when Makkun starts pirouetting in place just because, you smile, even a tiny bit. It's cute, after all, and if the game is a rather straightforward puzzle game, Nintendo knows that even an "idle animation" shouldn't always mean a blank stare, and an empty character can still be filled with personality.
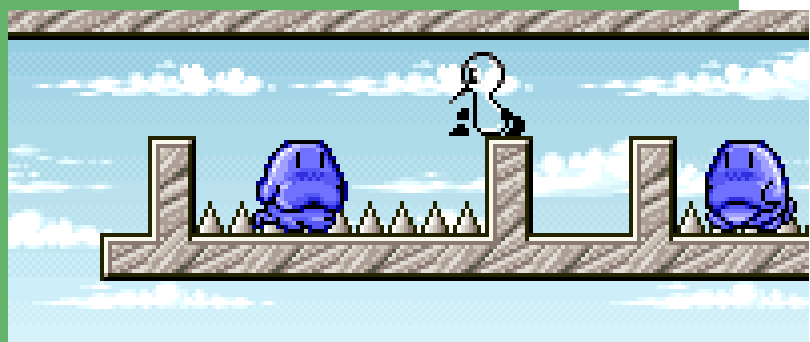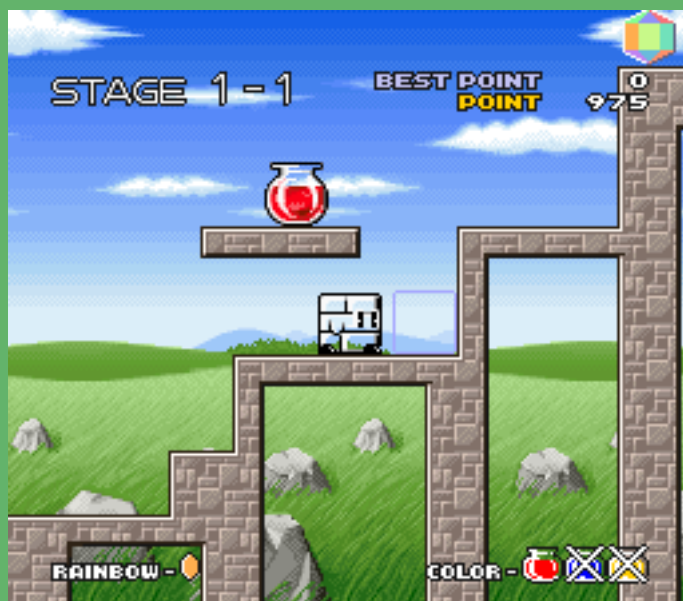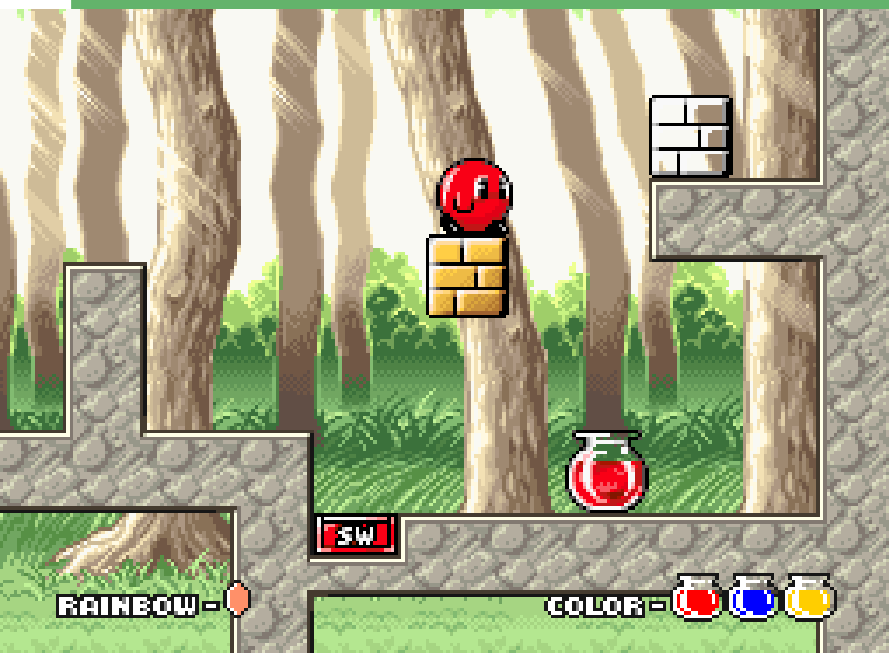
THE CUTE MASTERCLASS

SEGA®
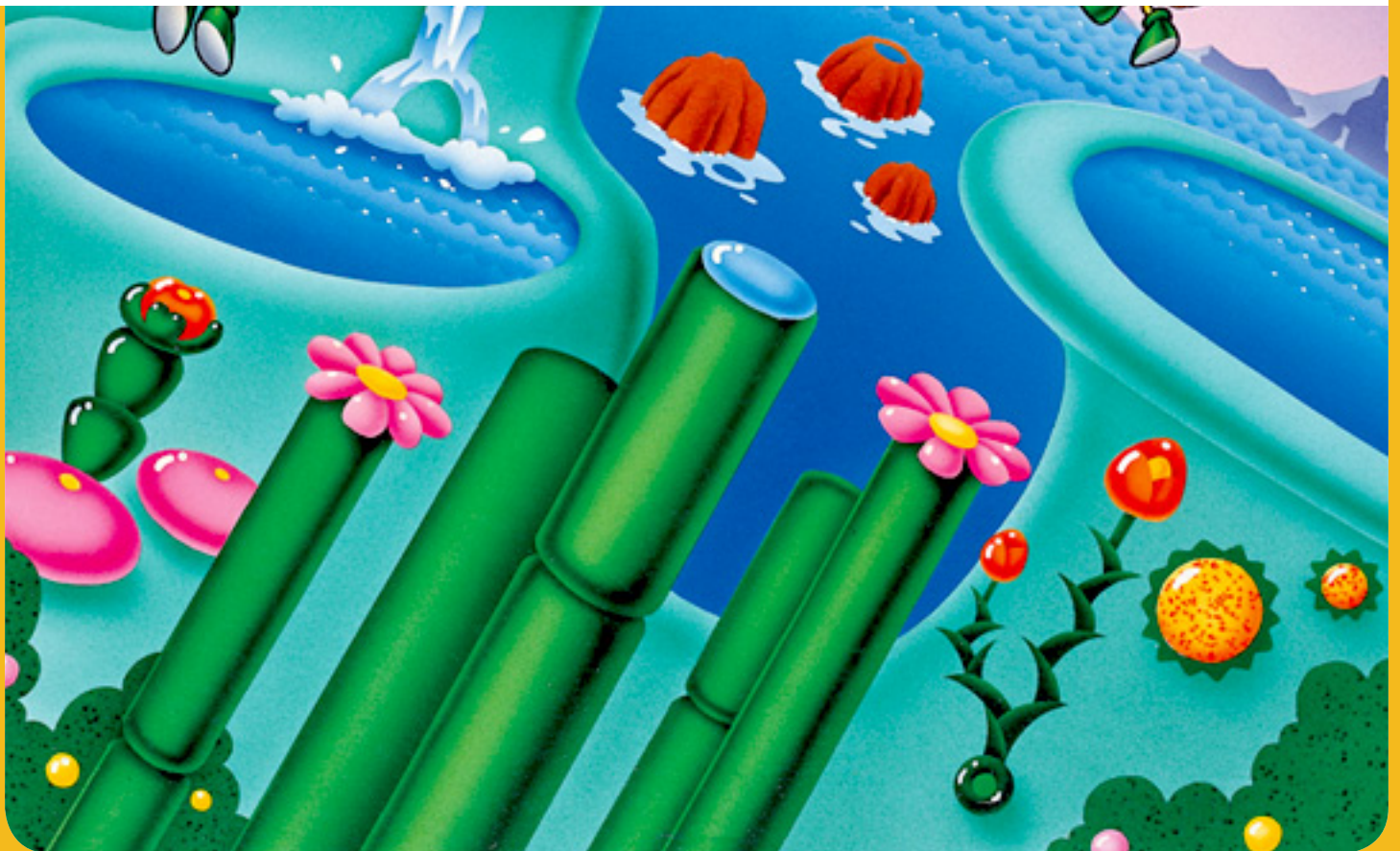
FLICKY
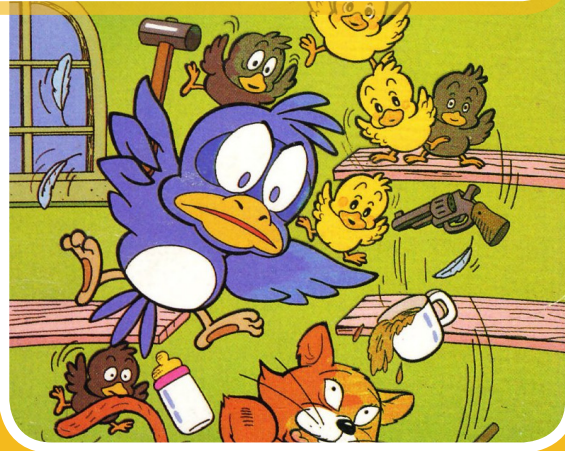
Much like a certain other game from several pages back, **Flicky** is a game that involves cats terrorizing one of its natural enemies—and joining forces with lizards, no less. Here, you play as Flicky, a loving, caring bird who's trying to get a room full of chicks rounded up and shuffled into the exit without them getting nipped by the predators that roam the halls. You can take as many chicks as you want to the exit, but if you save them all in one go, you get more points.

It's a simple game with a downright adorable theme, but just like the rest of the cute arcade games we've talked about, this one is only cute on the outside. In the first couple of stages, you'll be shuttling chicks to and fro with plenty of finesse, but soon enough, the game seems to know you've got the hang of things, and as the rooms change, the platform formations get more complex, and the enemies start coming in greater numbers. And you're dealing with birds; birds that tend to glide a bit instead of just falling to the ground, so trying to make floaty turns to avoid a run-in with a cat at the last second probably won't work too well when you're in a mild panic.

So far, a lot has been said (if not implied) about "details" in cute games, but the interesting thing about Flicky is that there aren't a lot of details: it's birds against cats most of the time. A tale as old as time, in other words, and cute on a basic level because it's a bunch of adorable animals! Don't groan; it's worked for centuries. And the bonus stage in Flicky boils down the entire game to Flicky trying to catch the chicks in a net as they're catapulted from see-saws. It feels like it was the original idea for the whole game, because it's still so basic, and still so enjoyable.
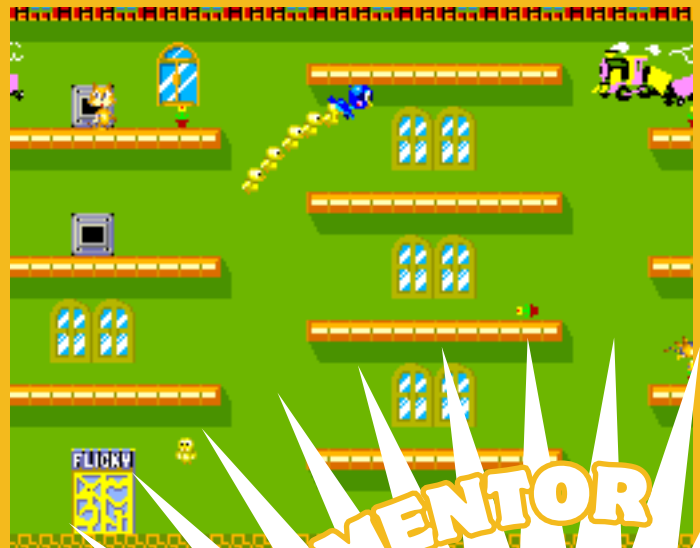
THE MENTOR
PENGO

(1982) Sega's other adorable beaked hero had less crap to deal with than Flicky, but still had a heck of a time trying to crush enemies with well-timed shoves of ice blocks. Birds of a feather...

FANTASY

ZONE
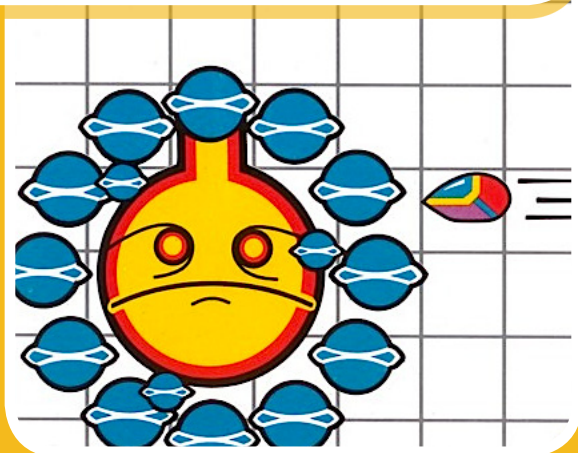
Space is no place for Opa-Opa—he'd rather leave that whole scene up to the better-equipped fighter ships, the ones that can take a beating and don't care about how they look when they get back home. Opa-Opa is a living, breathing thing, after all, and he has to watch out for himself. There's better things to do than save the entire planet, and besides, look at the sky! It's gorgeous out! It always is! Because this is one of the cutest games ever!

Yes, **Fantasy Zone** is an early cute masterpiece for Sega, when just a couple of years prior they seemed to be barely getting the hang of things. Here, everything is well-realized: The colors, the characters, the sounds, and every little gameplay detail. It's even trippy, which is what any good cute game needs. On the inside, it's also a very different shoot-em-up for the time: essentially a slower-paced *Defender*, *Fantasy Zone*'s look and feel was a total 180 from the rest of the genre with its angled spaceships and icky bio-monstrosities—it was the shooter for everyone else, and the baby brother to Sega's own *Space Harrier*. Nevertheless, it quickly became a headlining game in Sega's history.

As a result, *Fantasy Zone* reached almost every console of the late '80s (including two different Nintendo versions), and its canonical sequels showed

up on the Master System and Genesis, with the Master System and Game Gear getting a handful of spin-offs. Heck, even the remake of the original in the first *Sega Ages 2500* series is the best one among that pile of sub-standard 3D crap. Pretty good for a plucky spaceship with legs.

ALEX KIDD
IN MIRACLE WORLD

Oh, Alex... y'know, you're lucky you're still cute. The hedgehog's off the deep end these days, and you're like a Kewpie doll compared to him. You had promise; oh, you had tons of it. Sega was the only company brave enough to create a character to go directly against Mario, and there you were with **Alex Kidd in Miracle World**, a debut game that was surprisingly well-done.

The only problem was that it wasn't on a Nintendo system, but to be fair, that would do a number on anybody in the mid-'80s. Still, despite you having some objective advantages over the competition (including additional cuteness), you couldn't quite survive. But really, Alex, why would you let them switch the jump button from the *Mario* standard? Let's get back to the point: Miracle World is a darling place to be, even when under the oppression of Janken the Great. It's bright and colorful, the oceans are clear (and full of hamburgers apparently), and the
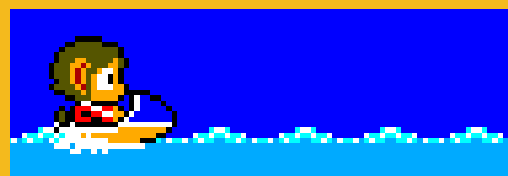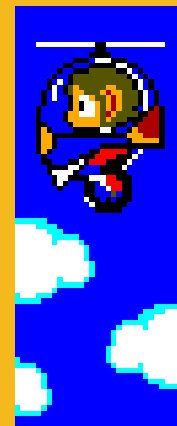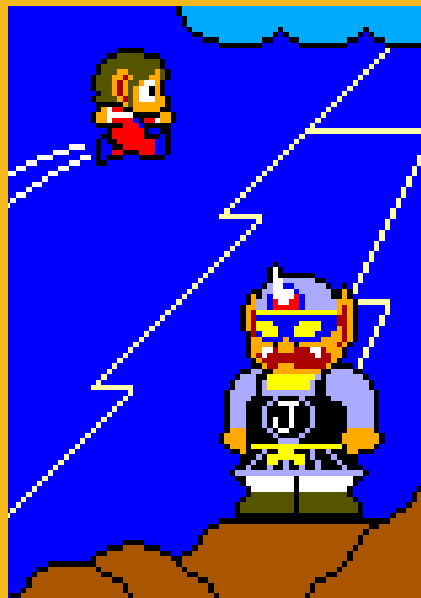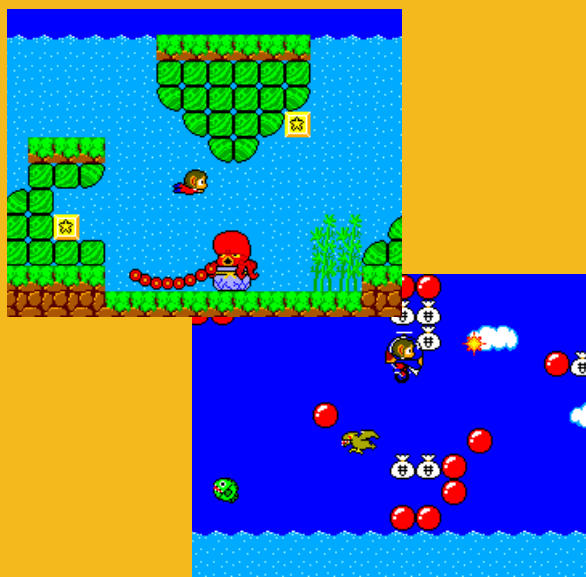
sun doesn't ever seem to set.

In all honesty, Sega didn't fail at making Alex Kidd cute—he's a little prince with big eyes, big monkey ears, and a big head of hair; all features that Mario didn't have because of the limits imposed on his creator. Given that, Alex's design was a great stepping stone towards Sonic, who challenged Mario not by being a copycat, but by trying to be something actually different. It was an important lesson (however obvious it may have been) that eventually worked out well.

But it doesn't change the boy's story. Sadly, while Alex was as cute as he could be, he also tried to be a versatile action game star—jack of all trades, master of none. He did a lot in *Miracle World*, from traversing the ocean to riding bikes and pedalcopters to playing janken, but as his short career went on, it got progressively weirder, ending with him as a ninja in "*Shinobi World*." Regardless, he started out on a high note, one that was also harmonious with the fundamentals of cute.

MONSTER WORLD

IV

MONSTER OF THE FORM

This is a mighty special game, this one. It comes from a legacy of great action-adventures that are great at being cute. Sega and Westone's *Wonder Boy/Monster World* series was all over the map in terms of genres and numbering schemes, but mostly settled into the niche of platformer-style action-RPGs, almost like if every *Zelda* game was like *Zelda II*. In 1994, Westone produced the last *Monster World* game, and ended up with one of the cutest games on the Mega Drive, if not one of the best ones on the platform. **Monster World IV** is the story of Asha, a girl who leaves her family behind to go on a quest that acts of a rite of passage, but ends up saving more than herself.

The surreal familiarity of some of the other cute games up till now have mostly just shoved stuff we've all experienced before into some sort of wacky world without being insanely clever about it (but hey, cute is cute). In *Monster World IV*, the creators were creative enough to infuse the game with visual elements and other small aspects of Arabian mythology and culture. One look at Asha makes that clear, but so does a look at the game's worlds, some of which are in elaborate palaces. And a perk of the ear towards its music says it, too. Granted, many of the game's areas are typical caves or other action game landscapes, but the unique mixing of Middle East with Far East is something to take notice of.

Early in the game, Asha finds a cute little blue thing who joins her on her adventure; a "peperogu" she names Pepe. Pepe is literally a rare breed, as he's the only surviving blue peperogu (the rest are yellow), but he and Asha become fast friends. In fact, he's practically a power-up, used as everything from a stepping stone to a parachute. If *Monster World IV* wasn't so cute to begin with, Pepe would have already put it over the top.

But, honestly, the female hero helps too. If you look at the other girls on the previous pages, you'll find that the only one who really gets to "show off" is Asha, who slings a sword and travels through treacherous lands on a genuine adventure. She's independent, and the story even begins that way. Not that the others can't handle themselves, but Asha goes out of her way to prove it. Yet she's still cute with or without a weapon—she has lots of different animations for certain contexts, whether it's a basic jump or holding out a shield to protect herself. Pepe, too, who does downright adorable things like shake off water after being tossed in the drink. Though Westone quit while they were ahead with *Monster World IV*, they went out with an incredible climax to an incredibly cute series.

DYNAMITE

HEADDY

IN THE RIGHT HEAD SPACE

Treasure has always straddled the line between the cute and the non-cute. *Gunstar Heroes* featured cartoony characters in high-tension battles, which was released in Japan just about a week apart from their next game, *McDonald's Treasure Land Adventure*. It was hard to tell where they could be headed after those two, but then **Dynamite Headdy** appeared, and it represents the best cuteness Treasure had to offer at a time when they were still young and firing on all cylinders.

Dynamite Headdy's real cuteness is not in its character design or its color scheme, but in its unabashed absurdity: Headdy, being part of a race of puppets, has his adventure presented like a stage play, and while this motif isn't shoved in your face all the time (it's usually done subtly as part of the general art design), it is used when needed, often in the just-plain-bonkers boss fights like the giant baby head that eventually turns into an old man's, or the feminine android gone berserk. All of those fights are filled with spectacle in the form of tattered backdrops that might break or fall, or a fight backstage with the orchestra in the back, and so on. It also gets fantastical, like in the epic final boss fight, but it's a game with a respectably tight grip on its theme.

Then there's Headdy himself, too: a hero with a big feather sticking out of his head, attacking *with* his head, and his power-ups are other heads that let him hit harder or suck up all the enemies and trinkets in the vicinity. Not too different from Kirby, sure, but they're still in a league (of cuteness) of their own. And like Sonic, Headdy isn't very jovial, but he is reactive. He'll grow bored if you let him stand around too long; he gets freaked out at the huge bosses, and he responds to victory with an almost lackadasical "yes!" Headdy wasn't Treasure's last venture into cute, either—fans will just as soon point out *Mischief Makers* as a fine example of cuteness, but *Headdy* was the first real proof that Treasure could retain their expertise at making amazing arcade-quality games without them all being hardcore shooters. And that they could do it without Ronald McDonald's help.
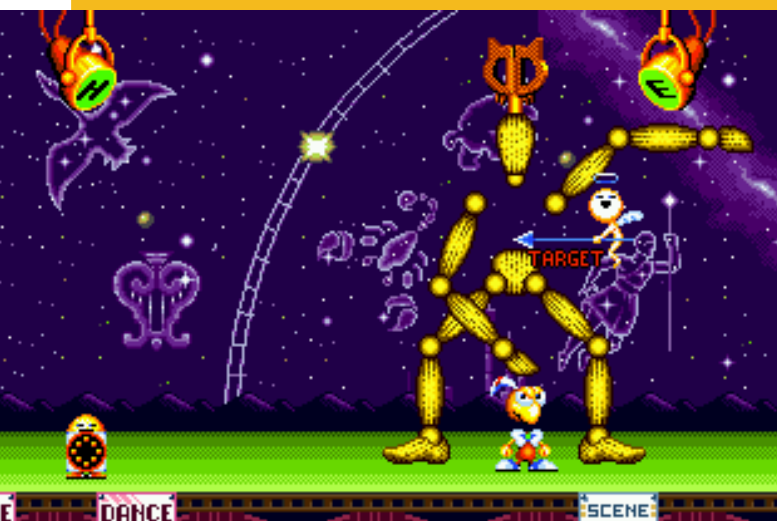
RISTAR

Sega learned a lot about cute games up through the release of **Ristar**, the main thing being that the character drives a hell of a lot. It's not the most important thing to cute games in general (*Devil World* probably doesn't need Tamagon to be a capable game) but in platformers, it's obvious that an appealing character is going to get the attention you want. Alex Kidd was a nice first draft, and Sonic was nearly pitch-perfect if he'd have just lightened up a bit more. And suddenly, in 1995, Sega had unleashed a relative flurry of mascot and mascot-like characters on all their systems: the 32X got Tempo and the Chaotix team; the Saturn got Astal and Bug, and the Genesis got Ristar, who—pardon the pun—came to outshine all of them.

Essentially, Ristar makes up for some of Sonic's flaws. With his stretchy arms, he's more versatile at getting around levels, and with his slower pace, Ristar can actually take some time to check out the sights. (Sonic could, but few of us made him.) Ristar's more cheerful, too—well, in Japan, anyway; the grin on his face was changed to a pronounced frown for the American version, despite him smiling on the box art anyway. That's a big indicator of something that happened with Kirby later on: the selective unwillingness of American publishers to fully admit a game

actually *is* cute, for fear that... well, who knows? That a boy might actually think it's not for him? Ristar doesn't need to be mad to be cool.

As a game, *Ristar* is certainly cute, but maybe "gorgeous" would be more fitting. As a late-era Genesis game, it perfectly represents a heightened understanding of the system and what some talented artists could do with it even if it was all downhill for the system from there. A lot of the game feels like a *Sonic* game in the types of levels and how they look, but the game is as un-*Sonic* as it possibly could be, partly for the character reasons above, but sometimes it gets carried away with trying to be different, like an escort mission that requires you to keep lugging around a metronome through the puzzling level to get rid of large parrots that block your path. Well, at least they're cute parrots, and *Ristar* is still a highlight of Sega's cuteness, something that wasn't quite as strong in the years afterward.

STAR REGISTRY

We know that settling on Sonic the Hedgehog was a constant process of trial and error for Sega, but in that case, the mascot ideas were mostly different kinds of animals. Ristar, on the other hand, had at least two similar designs and *four* different names. When the game first showed up in magazines, the screenshots showed Ristar as "Feel," the same basic character but with less of a star shaped-body and more of a nightmarish face. As time passed, he was known as "Volt the Voltage" (good lord!) and "Dexstar" (better!), the latter being the leading candidate until all parties agreed on "Ristar" and they could finally release the goddamn game. No wonder they just stuck with Sonic afterward.

UNDERSTUDIES

SUNSOFT

Sunsoft has such a unique history in cute games that it's more or less a success story. Their humble beginnings were dotted with games like *Ikki*, *Route 16*, and *Super Arabian*—cute only in their rudimentary graphics and failure to become substantial products. To think in the mid-'80s that Sunsoft would ever become as well-regarded as Taito or Namco would be folly. They were the second-stringers, and history would likely show them as such.

And then a shock; the infamous Sunsoft turn where, suddenly, they were operating at a level higher than most. *Blaster Master* and *Journey to Silius*! Amazing licensed games like *Batman* and *Gremlins 2*! An evolution was happening right before our eyes as Sunsoft became a powerhouse in NES development, and before long the majority of their games were worth playing rather than ignoring.

But of course, those games didn't symbolize Sunsoft's catalyst of cute. No, that would happen when they decided on a mascot to represent the company, and in 1991, they gave him his first game. Hebe was the pudgy albino penguin who debuted in his own bizarre Famicom action-adventure, *Hebereke* (localized as **Ufouria** for Europe but canned in America) along with his equally pudgy friends who he had to rescue.
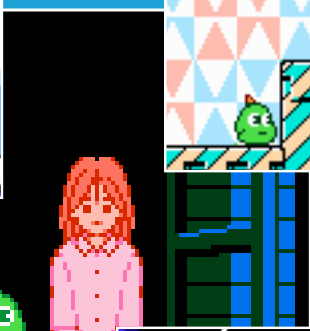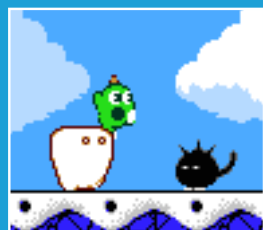
It all came to a spectacular head in 1992 when Sunsoft released their last notable Famicom game, **Gimmick!** (that's *Mr. Gimmick* to you). Bright, colorful, extremely challenging and possessing a masterful soundtrack, *Gimmick!* was like a pupil becoming the teacher. It was a tribute not just to cute games, but to the action genre, the Famicom hardware, and everyone who stuck by it. And Sunsoft didn't stop on the Famicom—*Gimmick!* has a cousin of sorts for Game Boy, *Trip World*, a similarly impressive platformer released around the same time.

Unfortunately, those two years in 8-bit were the longest period that Sunsoft would rule the realm of cuteness. In the 16-bit world, they had an incredible stumble, and the appealing doe-eyed characters of old were replaced by Bugs Bunny, a bat that worked for a circus, and a Kamikaze Squirrel. In fairness, they did justice to *Lemmings*, but it just wasn't the same. And as for Hebe? Well, he was kept around in Japan, but he mostly featured only in puzzle games up through the PlayStation era. It wasn't the most graceful fall, but for a moment or two, Sunsoft catered cuteness like they were doing it for decades.

SNK & ADK

It's as though SNK never really saw a "market" for cute. In the '80s, they dabbled in it with *Marvin's Maze*, an isometric puzzle game starring a little blue sprite with humongous eyes. After that, it was hardcore action games like *Ikari Warriors* and *Guerilla War*. *Psycho Soldier* was kind of a midpoint between cartoony and manly, and so they took heroine Athena and gave her her own game, which was as girly as it was sexist, as she now traversed a few adorable worlds while wearing a skimpy two-piece. The situation changed when the NeoGeo arrived along with the '90s, because one of the first games for the system was also one of its very cutest: **Blue's Journey** by ADK. With the supercharged 2D graphics that the NG could pump out, Blue's Journey was like a cute supernova, opening up in a gorgeous fairy forest and eventually taking our hero to lands of giant candy canes and big ol' friendly clouds.

ADK was joined at the hip with SNK for the entire run of the NG, but didn't have nearly the same output of games. For their swan song, they circled back around and created another cute game, and a true masterpiece: **Twinkle Star Sprites**, the shooter with the mechanics of a puzzle game's versus mode, and oh-so saccharine to boot. It's nice that ADK ended with their magnum opus, and when SNK bought their assets, they remade *Twinkle Star* for the PlayStation 2 with a hipper—and certainly cuter—art style.

JALECO

The average American gamer isn't going to think of Jaleco as harboring cuteness, unless they're poking fun at the outdated graphics in *Bases Loaded*. But in the rest of the world, it's a different story. Jaleco's better known in Japan for the **Ninja Jajamaru** games, starring the thumb-sized Jajamaru and his adventures in jumping vertically a lot. He was the best mascot they had, so he was used in a long series of action games (and at least two RPGs).

Elsewhere, Jaleco tried to capture some of Taito's essence with the arcade game **Rod Land**, a dandy little game featuring two adorable fairies zapping the crap out of a bunch of adorable enemies. It became a fan favorite in the UK thanks to competent ports on Amiga and the rest of the microcomputer scene.

CAPCOM

Capcom usually keeps the cuteness to a minimum, probably because they've dealt with mostly serious action games from the get-go. Sure, Mega Man may be cute to a degree, but he's usually a business-first kind of guy. It was in arcade games like *SonSon* and **Chiki Chiki Boys** (*Mega Twins*) where the cute shone through, however briefly. Their 8-bit Disney renaissance helped, but those didn't star original characters. Fortunately, Capcom got their cute groove back later with *Super Puzzle Fighter II*. Nowadays, it's pretty much all manner of fighting for the company, whether it's with fists, swords, guns, or Servbot heads, but every once in a while you'll get something like *Okamiden*, too. And for what it's worth, Capcom published the NES port of Toaplan's *Snow Bros.*, an effective *Bubble Bobble* pastiche.

UNDERSTUDIES

KONAMI

When you talk about Konami and cute, there's no avoiding *TwinBee*. Their jolly shooter series practically invented the "cute-em-up," and we're all the better for it. It's a pastel wonderland where bells aren't just harmonious instruments but keepers of powerful abilities, and it takes a bit of skill to juggle them in the air to change their colors and score the power-up you desire. *TwinBee*'s lengthy lineage put it in Konami's shooter pantheon right next to *Gradius*, which is why *Gradius* caught some of *TwinBee*'s cooties and gave us **Parodius**, the prototypical parody shoot-em-up.

Konami was plenty cute outside of the shooter realm, too. Their surprisingly smash-hit *Powerful Pro Baseball* series shrinks down real baseball players into saucer-eyed Weeble-style imps, something that's never changed since its debut in the '90s. And of course, there's *Bio Miracle Bokutte Upa*, the Famicom platformer starring a baby crawling (sometimes eating) his way through all manner of pastel landscapes. Konami knew what was up: there's nothing cuter than a baby.

For today's Konami, the long-standing *Frogger* series is pretty much the last bastion for cute games from the company, though it's hard to really care when it seems like there's five of them every year. And *Otomedius*, while good, isn't exactly what *Parodius* fans were clamoring for. Indeed, finding Konami cuteness in the 21st century requires a bit of digging—for the best example, try the bouncy and clever *WireWay* on DS or iOS.

HUDSON

In their heyday, Hudson was never short on mascots. Between their official bee mascot Hachisuke, Takahashi Meijin, Bomberman, Milon, Bonk, Zonk, and Momotaro, they had ample opportunities for cute games. Bomberman is an easy choice for the one that ruled over the rest, but he took a while to fully embody cute (the *Bomberman Land* series was where he nailed it). The one who had palpable cuteness out of the gate was Milon, and *Milon's Secret Castle* delivered a music-based action-adventure was was suitably light on its feet and highly infuriating at the same time.

Milon was relegated to the shadows almost immediately after that, but came back in a big way in 1996 with the Super Famicom platformer **DoReMi Fantasy**. It was a late addition to the SFC library, and a simple one at that, but with few flaws and tons of delightful imagery.

And though the *Adventure Island* series started off as a *Wonder Boy* port, it went in its own direction, introducing friendly dinosaur pals for *Adventure Island II* and *III*, and going extra-cute when Master Higgins got a little pudgier for the TurboGrafx spin-off *New Adventure Island*.

Other than that, Hudson has some great cute one-offs, like *Princess Tomato in the Salad Kingdom*; parody shooter *Star Parojier*; *Crystal Beans*, a cuteification of *Dungeon Explorer* for Super Famicom; *Jackie Chan's Action Kung Fu*, and a few more gems of cute-osity throughout their history.

GAME FREAK

The makers of *Pokémon* didn't just strike oil at their first go with that game, oh no sir. In fact, Game Freak is the only company in this entire feature whose output is closest to 100 percent cute. And that's nothing to sneeze at.

It started innocently (cutely?) enough: after Satoshi Tajiri and Ken Sugimori leapt from making game zines to actual games, they hit the jackpot when they got Namco to publish their first game, **Quinty** (*Mendel Palace*), an arcadey action game for the Famicom. And then the hits kept on coming: Game Freak's next title was *Yoshi*, the NES/Game Boy puzzle game starring the then-newest member of the Mario family. Around the same time, they moved to the 16-bit systems, producing **Jerry Boy** (*SmartBall*) under Sony for the Super Famicom, a licensed puzzle game based on childrens' character Nontan, and another Nintendo score: **Mario & Wario**, the SNES mouse-based puzzle game
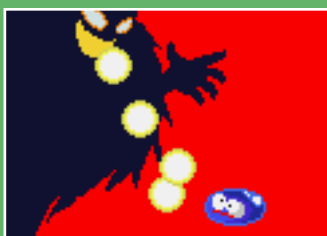
Aside from a couple of exceptions—a literal couple—Game Freak's games have mostly been cute in one way or another, packed with pastels, cuddly characters, and jaunty music.

Even **Pulseman**, their Mega Drive action game for Sega, has a bit of cuteness to it. Not quite *enough*, but Sugimori's character design rarely steps out of bounds, and you can see that even the usually-serious Pulseman can be charming once in a while.

Game Freak closed out their 16-bit work with one of the aforementioned not-so-cute exceptions, *Bushi Seiryuuden*, a lavish and somewhat serious action game. In 1999, mere years after *Pokémon*, they developed a single PlayStation game: *Click Medic*, an unremarkable medical adventure.

After that, it was full steam ahead with what they knew best: *Pokémon*, and lots of them. The creature-catching series remains the focus of Game Freak's operations, as it has for a long time now and likely will until the world ends. However, they took a short break from the monster mayhem in 2005 when they released **Drill Dozer**, a unique platformer with a young team behind it and a slightly edgier visual style, and ultimately one of the last great games for the Game Boy Advance. It was a rare sight, but even if Game Freak never branches out again, they'll remain a strong, sturdy pillar that lifts up the rest of the cute masterclass.
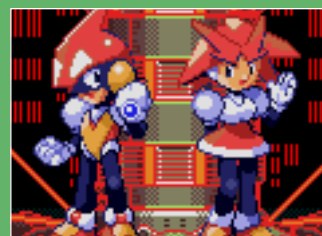
THE ISLAND OF MISFIT HARDWARE

Aladdin Deck Enhancer

The add-on you didn't know you wanted... because you didn't even know **of** it

Much like its fictional namesake, Aladdin couldn't catch a break. This funky-looking cartridge was the ambitious product of Camerica, makers of the Canada-endorsed Game Genie and the North American publisher of unlicensed NES games developed by British game house Codemasters. Since the start of the '90s, Camerica had tried to steal away as many gamers as they could through a business of subverting (or trying to subvert)Nintendo's authority at every turn.

Maybe that was the *real* point behind the Aladdin, but Camerica nevertheless presented it as a great way to get games on the cheap. Why pay 40 or 50 dollars for a new game when you could buy the Aladdin base cartridge, which had three-quarters of the circuitry needed to talk to an NES, and then buy the smaller, cheaper games, which only encased the actual game ROM? The Aladdin starter kit had an MSRP of $39, with separate games going for about $19, the latter undercutting the average NES game price by about half. Ideally. The so-called "Deck Enhancer" truthfully only enhanced the number of cartridges you'd be plugging into your NES, though Codemasters did tout that the Aladdin would offer supercharged graphics, the implication being that their engineers could unleash the beast anytime they wanted with one new mini-cart.

For some vague but probably not-too-difficult-to-figure-out reasons, Camerica barely got a foothold with the Aladdin. It's possible their business practice may have gotten the best of them, with Nintendo likely still looking down, way down, on retailers who dared stock any unlicensed NES software, especially anything made by the company behind the dreaded Game Genie. And the extra carts that were released—all six of them—were reissues of games Camerica already published as full cartridges, and they weren't exactly Codemasters' best work (no, not you, *Micro Machines*).

But the biggest problem: it was 1992, the last substantial year for NES software. Releases were becoming less frequent and less expensive, meaning the Aladdin and its games were actually close to parity with the rest of the NES market, with the classics going for $30 or cheaper already. Who would go for Dizzy's Adventures in Whatever the Hell over the nice shiny new re-release of *Zelda* that they may have missed out on? Or the $10 used copy of *Super C* languishing at the Kroger video rental? As you might guess, the Aladdin became Camerica's last gasp in the market before becoming another foolish Nintendo casualty.

To Camerica and Codemasters' credit, there was nothing inherently wrong with the Aladdin concept. Odd, sure, but also clever and appealing, perhaps even successful if it was in the right hands. The idea was later aped in Japan when Bandai produced the Sufami Turbo, a two-slot megacart for the Super Famicom that did the same thing, but, well, we can save that for another time.

SONIC 3D BLAST

SEGA • GENESIS / SATURN • 1996

Sonic really is the perfect mascot for Sega. He embodies all of the ups and downs of their history, not just his own. Both rode high in the Genesis era, had fleeting promise with the Sega CD, were asleep at the wheel for the 32X, and seemed lost and confused when the Saturn arrived. So in true form, *Sonic 3D Blast* represents the first real downturn for Sonic and Sega, when Yuji Naka and his team were busy trying something new for the 32-bit age, while Sonic was trying to find his footing again, being reinvented a few times over, albeit in ways that weren't very significant. The ultimately canned *Sonic X-Treme* was supposed to be the next "real" Sonic game after *Sonic 3*, plus his grand Saturn debut, but instead it was Traveller's Tales' Sonic game that would be thrown out to the dogs, when it probably wasn't even meant to be that way.

3D Blast was part of a campaign called "Project Sonic," joining *Sonic R* and *Sonic Jam* in a series of Sonic games that were stopgap titles in the 32-bit

transition, as Sonic Team felt they had better things to work on—*Nights*, for example. Traveller's Tales, meanwhile, had recently scored some lucrative licenses and set about making the best of the end of 16-bit with *Toy Story* and, of course, *3D Blast*. As the developer that would go on to make the disappointingly safe fourth *Crash Bandicoot*, their moving away from a "normal" *Sonic* game is interesting in hindsight.

It's just that calling it "3D" was stupid, especially for something that was also the same thing on Saturn (improved 2D detail nonwithstanding). But that was inevitable for an isometric game that also starred a famous mascot; this was his move into the next dimension, folks! Really! Ironically, the Special Stages in the Saturn version of *3D Blast* actually *were* 3D, and made one of the three fleeting times Sonic Team actually used Sonic on the Saturn. "Salt in the wound" doesn't begin to describe it.

Had *Sonic X-Treme* made it out on time and was actually any good; had this incredibly bad timing not

soured the entire Saturn situation, Traveller's Tales might have pulled through. *Sonic 3D Blast* is dinged as a bad game, but take Sonic himself out of the picture, and it's a pretty competent action game, and the highlight of 1996's Genesis games by default. It's futile to try to retcon feelings, though—no matter what, *3D Blast* was an ersatz Sonic game, because it was nothing we really asked for. The Saturn version looked much better, but it really had no place being there; this should've been Sonic's 16-bit swan song, not his simultaneous and super awkward 32-bit debut. And "awkward" aptly describes the whole situation: a game that was forced into the spotlight by a publisher that was suffering extreme (x-treme?) growing pains as its competitors were poised to walk right past them.

Sonic didn't save Sega this time around, but they remained a part of each other. And at least Traveller's Tales made out fine. But there's a reason why *Sonic Generations* doesn't explore the middle of his career.

Cute is as cute does

When I first saw *Kirby's Dream Land* in a little "Next Issue" preview in *Nintendo Power*, I didn't react positively. It was only a few screenshots, but I couldn't believe NIntendo was making such a "little kids' game," though I was conveniently ignoring that I was *eight* at the time. It wasn't much longer until the game was released, and I ended up getting it anyway. I don't remember exactly why, but it probably had to do with actually reading up on the game in the next *NP*, and learning about Kirby's ability to swallow enemies, and fly whenever he wanted. That was kind of cool to think about, and it turned out the game was fun anyway. Yes, it was short and easy, but that was expected of Game Boy games at the time.

That experience encapsulates how I approach games—not just cute or girly ones, but any of them. If it's fun, it's fun. After all, it's interactivity that defines video games. We can take control of a character and make it run, jump, or fire, and if it feels nice, the brain won't exactly give a shit what it all looks like. And as you can see from this issue, it's not a recent phenomenon. I've bought and played nearly every *Kirby* game since that first once, because they were all pretty good. Same with *Animal Crossing*, *Katamari Damacy*, *Samba De Amigo*, and on and on. Many other adults my age still play *Pokémon*, and they also have adult lives. And do I even have to mention the months-old financial empires built on sickeningly adorable iPhone games? While cute might not make a game better, it can do more than a bit to help.

And because of that interactivity, cute games have a huge advantage over other "cute" entertainment. You hear about the new *My Little Pony* cartoon and how many adult men are becoming fans of it, though they're also getting laughed at despite their reasons for watching what they think is a genuinely good show. Perhaps it is smartly-written and worth following, but it's also a thing that everybody consumes passively, and it becomes easier to judge those who watch it and don't fit our image of those who should. Meanwhile, you can get a group of men and women together to trade Pokémon and no one says biff. (This is not a defense of "bronies.")

It's easier to pigeonhole games that are quite obviously made for little kids, like a *Sesame Street* or *Barbie* title. But like those, the easy targets are licensed and unoriginal anyway, based on things that were always meant to appeal to little girls and boys. But you take something from this issue, like *Mappy*, see it's a brilliantly simple game that just happens to be cute, and realize it's not the aesthetics entirely driving the product. It's an ideology that's more consistent in games than any other medium.

Despite my optimism, even I can't help but be insecure sometimes. Because, you know, I still kind of want to try *Style Savvy*...

rdb

SCROLL

The SCROLL web site is **scroll.vg.** Find out about old (or new!) issues there, and check out whatever things I find on the internet that are germane to the whole SCROLL… thing.
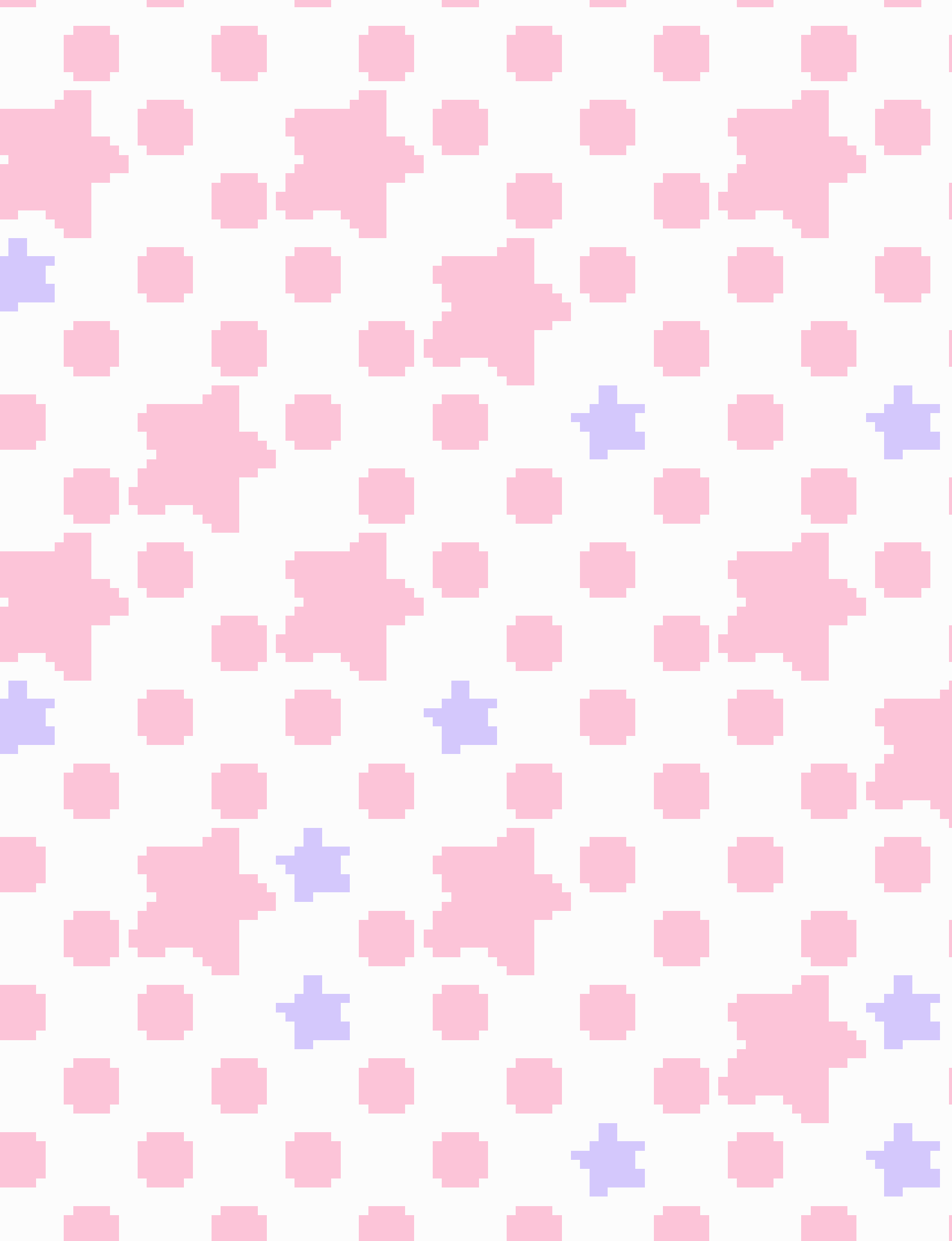
You can also follow the SCROLL Twitter account, @scroll_vg, but it's not too thrilling. You can, however, use it as an instaneous alert as to when something new is published.

BIPEDAL DOG