



#### MRY/JUNE

### 6 10 Play These Already! 14

### Cover Story

### Quests

Dungeons, Dragons & Dots	16
Dragon Quest Complete Series Review	20
Other Realms of DQ	42

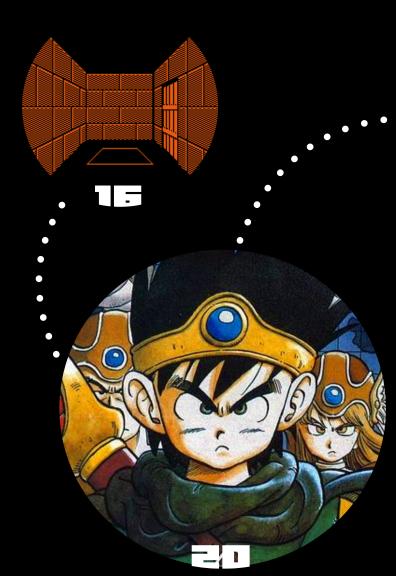
# Scanline

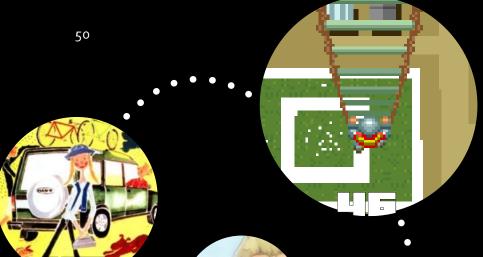
The Island of Misfit Hardware	45
Fullscreen	46

48

# **Closing Text**

### Next Issue

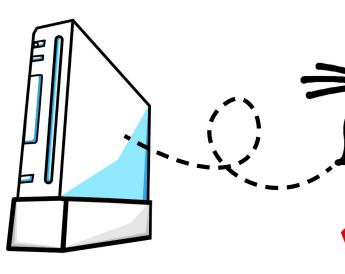








# FRAME DNE



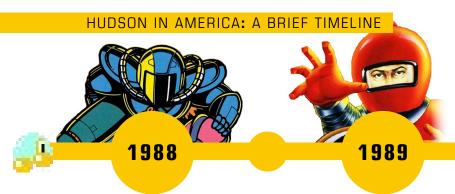
# Bee Migration

After Hudson closed the door to their US office, another opened—but will old fans bother following them through it?

When Konami became the majority shareholder of Hudson Soft in 2001, it may have appeared to be a bad omen. But then again, if they had entered into a big merger, it would just be par for the course for the post-internet bubble days. In truth, some things changed, but not much. Konami published many Hudson games outside Japan, and the two companies' stable of memorable characters even got a crossover fighting game (along with Takara's) in 2003. It sucked, but it represented the kind of mutual benefits the two companies could receive in the future.

Hudson, though, wasn't doing well even before Konami came in. The quality of their games had plateaued since the 32/64-bit era, and they simply weren't the same Hudson that became a humongous player in the previous generations. A reliance on *Bomberman* and *Momotaro Dentetsu* games kept them alive, but arguably in a vegetative state.

After nearly ten years, in January 2011, Konami totally



Hudson Soft USA opens in the Bay Area. The company immediately begins bringing over its bigger 8-bit hits from Japan, including Bomberman and Adventure Island, which earn them a respectable American fan base. Dino Riki and Milon's Secret Castle, not so much

NEC launches the PC Engine in America as the TurboGrafx-16, but the Hudson-designed system is devoid of their name on the hardware or software boxes, possibly due in part to Nintendo's hard-line exclusivity in the U.S. That eventually changes, but either way, some of Hudson's best work can be found on the platform



Hudson puts just a few too many chips on the table with Bill Laimbeer's Combat Basketball, a futuristic basketball game featuring the former Detroit Piston. Cheesy sci-fi trappings and a fixed top-down view are the least of its problems. Unsurprisingly, Hudson sticks to Bomberman and Adventure Island for the next few years



absorbed Hudson and made them a full subsidiary. For those who had no idea of Konami's majority ownership from before, this was seen as the end of Hudson, and the message board memorials came swiftly and often. But, again, Hudson was to be a subsidiary, and would keep their people, their brand name, and their game properties for the foreseeable future.

Regardless of whether or not Konami was keeping Hudson's Japanese employees, redundancies existed elsewhere. Hudson Entertainment, the American branch, was shut down just a little over a month after the merger. HE had good people, but once they began publishing Hudson's console games on their own, the branch clearly struggled to make the best of their parent's below-average output, especially when they briefly focused on the universally neglected WiiWare. On top of HE closing, some of Hudson's 3DS projects went MIA

after the acquisition, and once the ones that are still coming out are released, it's unclear if Hudson will continue on the mainstream consoles at all.

That because Konami's plan for Hudson, as expressed during the news of the merger, was to leverage their expertise in the mobile gaming space. Indeed, Hudson was prolific with cell phone games in Japan, and Hudson Entertainment mirrored those efforts for their first few years, including an amusing partnership with hip-hop mag *The Source*. The first new *Bonk* game in years was a cell phone game from the American side, and ports of select Japanese games were tossed out to the American mobile carriers every so often. But cell phone gaming just didn't penetrate the American lifestyle as it did in Japan, at least not until the iPhone arrived and suddenly freed game developers from the shackles of both Java and the carriers.

Hudson reacted to the iPhone in record time,

supporting it even before the App Store launched, thanks to a handful of web apps people could use with an iPod Touch. Unfortunately, when Hudson started making real iPhone apps, it was the Japanese side that was publishing most of them.

But now, even with many obvious changes in digital markets, things can still be hard for Hudson. If Konami wants them to focus on the social space, the big barrier is the different hubs for social, browser-based games in Japan and the West.

It goes without saying that the people who remembered Hudson best as the maker of Adventure Island, Bonk, Star Soldier and other classics weren't rushing out to buy Deca Sports, and keeping the brand relevant among younger users will be a great challenge. It's sad to think that a once-great game maker probably won't have their logo on a box again, but for many other former kings of the 8-bit days, it's become a natural sign of old age.



2003

Nearly 10 years after closing their first American branch, Hudson opens a new U.S. office, Hudson Entertainment, which focuses its efforts on cell phone games for most of its early days



2006

In spite of the warning signs,
Hudson (via Konami) still
publishes Bomberman Act:Zero
for Xbox 36o, with cute lil'
Bomberman re-imagined as
a cybernetic super-slave. The
Japan office thought it was
what Americans would like,
but they underestimated our
capacity for good taste



The first Deca Sports is released, and turns out to break even (and then some) for Hudson, in every territory. Its sequels would also perform well, while Bomberman and other old friends would flounder in the digital distribution markets



# History Up Close... and Personal

### GDC 2011's postmortems of the classics offer respectable crash courses in the most notable old games

This year's Game Developers Conference is long gone by now (oh man, March? How young were we?), but it was as unmissable as ever. Sure, in the grand scheme of things, it can't compare to E3—but that's only because it's better. For those who attend GDC and aren't actual game developers, there's still plenty of good stuff to learn, especially if a designer, producer, composer or other key employee describes if not demonstrates their process.

This year, for GDC's 25th anniversary, the conference collected a series of "Classic Game Postmortems," bringing in several legendary game makers to go back and give us the story of how their biggest hits were made. And how can anyone say no to packing into a room to see David Braben giving them the impetus behind *Elite*; Eric Chahi on his one-man quest to rethink the actionadventure with *Out of This World*; David Crane explaining the ins and outs of *Pitfall!*, or Toru Iwatani speaking about technical and superficial parts of *Pac-Man* like the affable university professor he is.

And if you weren't at GDC but wanted to see the postmortems, you can watch the recorded video and look at the presentation slides online. GDC typically puts most of their archived content behind a paywall, but the Classic Game Postmortems are all provided for free, so it's just like being there! ...If you were

standing above everyone else at the rear of the room, anyway.

Not all of the presentations are exactly mindblowing, moreso if you're even partly aware of the games' history (John Romero and Tom Hall's recount of the making of *Doom* is light on detail and interesting mostly to see footage of the various alpha and beta versions of the game). But most of the speakers' stories provide a decent primer on the timelines of their games before, during and after development, and are made more valuable by the fact that it's the creators that are the ones telling them.

For some creators, they played to their personalities, like Will Wright taking a break from a rote recap of *Raid on Bungeling Bay* to give us the history of the first Russian cosmonaut to reach space, and the incredible strides the country made in creating a space program. Perhaps if you pay attention, you might find some hints about Wright's struggles in making *Raid*. That, or he just is that goofy.

For anyone wanting a sampler of what really makes GDC so great compared to those *other* video game summits, expos, conferences, mixers and so on, now's the time to point your browser to the GDC Vault site. Though the postmortem series was a perk for GDC's 25th anniversary, it sure wouldn't hurt to see it turn into a regular thing. *(gdcvault.com/free/gdc-11)* 



Eric Chahi rotoscoped himself to portray *Out of This World* protagonist Lester Chaykin, but found it creepy to see his virtual avatar lost in the game's dangerous alien world. One little tweak made Lester the redhead we know and love.



# DOWNLOAD GRMES

of the Moment



#### Fast Striker

The NeoGeo-borne manic shooter from the German brothers of NG:DEV.TEAM finally goes portable with this iPhone version. It's good clean arcade fun, but don't entirely expect Blazing Star—the repetitive graphics put this more on par with ChoRenSha. Its debut version was a little clunky, but has since been updated to offer a vertical-orientation mode and instant resuming—y'know, like every other app. (iOS • \$2.99)



#### Pac'N-Jump

Pac-Man meets Doodle Jump? Yes, it's not the proudest turn on Pac-Man's career path, but for a shameless clone, it's surprisingly competent. Pac-Man's iconic head bounces up platforms and avoids enemies in a flashy game that just feels better than the App Store juggernaut. Extra stages based on Dig Dug, Rally-X and more will rub Namco fans the right way. (iOS • \$1.99)



#### **Inchworm Animation**

To hell with Mario Paint—Inchworm Animation is the most feature-packed image suite you can find on a game system. Tons of tools let you not just create animations (that export as Flash) but edit photos or just plain draw, and save it all to the SD card for easy transportation. (DSiWare • 500 Pts.)



### Threads of Fate

The PlayStation Store ought to be back on its feet by the time you read this, so there's no better time to risk your credit card again and pick up this classic PS1 action-RPG from good ol' Squaresoft. (PS3/PSP • \$5.99)





### **NEW GAME MUSIC**

THE EARS HAVE IT



### **Space Invaders Infinity Gene: Evolutional Theory**

The thump-heavy soundtrack from the iOS/XBLA/PSN hit is now available as a physical soundtrack (it's also on iTunes without the fancy name), and it comes with stickers, too. It's Darwintastic! (¥2,800)



### **Darius Burst Another** Chronicle OST

As nice as *Infinity Gene* is, Zuntata has really shined with their work on Darius Burst. Expect more high-energy tracks with ethereal chanting taken from the four-player superwide shooter. (¥1,890)



### Rom Cassette Disc in Jaleco Remix

The Jaleco compilation from last issue returns as a remix album, with twelve notable Jaleco themes (City Connection? Bashi Bazook? You betcha) re-cut with today's electronic sound technology, and surprisingly well, at that. (¥1,890)



### **Biohazard Sound** Chronicle II

For the discerning (insane) Resident Evil fan, there's the new Sound Chronicle set, a follow-up from the 2005 edition, with a big ol' box of soundtracks from RE5, the Chronicles series, and Mercenaries 3D. (¥8,190)



# Ripples

### The Tohoku earthquake may have caused games to be delayed or cancelled, but it was a reminder of the importance of the industry that got us here

Whether we were near or far, we all felt something from the March 11 earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan. While the noise has lessened, the work continues on repairing the lives and locations affected. And while unimportant in the big picture, the disaster nevertheless caused many games in development to be delayed or killed entirely for reasons both directly and indirectly related.

Many gamers were disappointed, for sure. And to the average person, it might seem like a silly way to react to the event. But it proves that the disaster affected us in ways other international tragedies simply haven't. How many of us would even be here, reading this, if it weren't for Japanese video games? Some of us criticize Japan's video games for falling behind the rest of the world's, but to see the country's entire industry and all its creators deal with news worse than middling development or economic downturn—well, it isn't exactly worth celebrating.

Indeed, putting so much emotion into the fate of a business that many

of us don't have a vested interest in can also seem kind of narrow-minded when the real distress is in the daily lives of the thousands of people who had their lives tossed asunder by the disaster.

But nobody's thinking this way on purpose. It may come out as worrying only about games, but the real concern is in there; it all comes from the heart, and we all realize that real people were affected all over Japan—and yes, some of them make video games. When we look for a way to relate, it's not always going to be the most sensible thing.

The game that unfortunately symbolized the disaster in more than one way was Irem's Zettai Zetsumei Toshi 4: Summer Memories, the latest in the series of action-adventures where regular people are thrust into survival when an unfathomably massive earthquake hits "Japan," and survival becomes top priority. (You likely know them better as Disaster Report or Raw Danger.) Mere days after the earthquake, Irem announced they had cancelled the game, just after it was already delayed from its March 10



release (another unfortunate fact). With the game being so far along, some wondered what the heck Irem was thinking, and felt this was the beginning of the end for the company. But if you try to imagine things from Irem's perspective, they really had little choice: Whether the game came out now or a year from now, its content would have earned it criticism; it'd be entirely possible that average people would think Irem was being insensitive if not insulting to treat a catastrophic earthquake as a game. Irem may be jokesters sometimes, but they're not insensitive, and the Zettai Zetsumei series is meant to be serious. Still, for them, it was likely seen as the path of least resistance, and until we hear otherwise, Irem will continue to make interesting games.

More delays and cancelations followed, such as Sega pushing back the release of Ryu ga Gotoku OfThe End, which also took place in a destroyed Japan, but because of zombies and other monsters; certainly nothing real. Because of that, and because it was far more complete than Irem's game and relatively more anticipated, the game was bumped slightly to early June.

The way we've interpreted the disaster says that, despite previous criticism, a lot of us still care about the Japanese game industry. Again, it's how many of us ended up liking games in the first place, thanks either to the NES boom or Space Invaders and Pac-Man. Few people scoff when a new Legend of Zelda game is announced, after all, and a steady stream of games from Japan continue to be released on every platform, regardless of the research that says Joe Average plays Halo or Call of Duty more than he talks to his kids. It's a safe bet that even he has a nostalgic link to the Japanese classics.

And it seems that the rest of the gaming world agrees that Japan still has a place. Supporting relief efforts through games has never been easier thanks to the downloadable sector: some iOS games on the App Store quickly declared that parts of their proceeds would go to the Red Cross or elsewhere, and the already-established hits like Capcom's Street Fighter IV unsurprisingly saw a significant amount of money going towards relief, despite being sold for 99 cents. In the retail space, the aforementioned Ryu ga Gotoku Of The End will also give part of its list price to the Japanese Red Cross.

But the industry is helping out in other ways, as well. Play For Japan (www. playforjapan.org) was an initiative set up by a group of games writers and other friends in the industry, with a blog providing info on all sorts of online auctions for game-related collectibles, making sure that their complete proceeds would be going straight to the Red Cross. Contributions came—and continue to come—from all around the world, from other writers who had memorabilia from long ago, to actual game developers themselves submitting artifacts from their history. The group has also put together a tribute album organized by Grasshoper's Akira Yamaoka, featuring a selection of game music composers from around the world.

As entertainment, video games have the power to heal, but it's not every day that gamers and game makers can know when and how they're making a difference. While being inspired to help with the disaster because of games may seem odd, it's an opportunity worth seizing, because for the forseeable future, we'll continue to play for Japan.



# A Kacho Who Cares

# The Game Center CX charity event piles on the DS games and brings fans together for the cause

If anybody can get Japanese game nerds together, it's Shinya Arino, the gaming marathon man on *Game Center CX*. He can get them for a good cause, too, which was proven in early May when fans came together for a *Game Center CX* "Charity Event" organized by the show's staff.

Fans came to Bandai Namco's headquarters in Tokyo to get together for what was as much of a regular fan event as it was a charity event. Arino was there, of course, along with several of the show's beloved ADs and other staff members joining in to help, including cooperation from Indies Zero, developers of the GCCX:

Arino no Chousenjou (Retro Game Challenge) series.

Besides collecting money for donation to the Red Cross, the fans attending brought any Nintendo DS games they didn't want—they were encouraged beforehand to bring the games and donate them as part of a communal exchange program; they were later given "mystery" games to take home.

Besides a game, they got the added incentive of a special card with Arino's drawings, messages from the other staff, a stamp card from the Indies Zero crew, and hopefully, some good vibes.



THIS SHIT IS ¥10,479



# Sure as Shaddai

As Ignition's interpretive action-adventure hits stores, we look back on a year that offered an interesting study in the unpredictable art of the pre-meme

E3 2010 was an exciting week for news, at it always is, but it's also when Ignition dotted the LA Convention Center with promotion for El Shaddai: Ascencion of the Metatron—a cool-looking game, to the say the least, but with not much to look at for the time being, except a teaser trailer that only hinted at what the game would play like. Given that, El Shaddai stayed in our minds, but wasn't worth the hype bandwidth yet; there were more notable highlights at the show, some of which would make a predictably big splash at the end of the year.

But then the trailer hit Japan. At first, it got the usual throngs of Japanese "LOL"s and sarcastic comments, but as months went by, the mocking of the trailer went deeper into non-sequiturville. Protagonist Enoch's simple declaration that "everything's fine" was an oftrepeated line—likely because the trailer shows him getting walloped in battle soon afterward.

What took it all to the next level was a live-action, shot-for-shot remake of the trailer that hit NicoNico Douga last October. It looked far from professional, but that's part of the magic—it's a group of guys dressing up in hastily put-together costumes and flying around thanks to the power of insanely cheap CG effects. Clearly they were in on the joke, and otherwise knew what they were doing: they broke down the trailer into a storyboard to help them pull off the choreography for the incredibly short fight scenes. The payoff? Creesting a million views and 66,000 comments on NicoNico

alone, and a load of coal thrown into the engine of the *El Shaddai* meme train. Enoch became the poster boy; his slightly smug face inserted into all sorts of batty pictures, becoming the de facto ambassador of Japan's game nerds and their senses of humor.

Many games get trailers that are obsessed over, but the jokes usually come after the game's out. But *El Shaddai*, which all but submerged after E3, got a second lease on life (and mindshare) months before it was released. Though Ignition did their own weird marketing for the game (the official *El Shaddai* jeans; the "El Shaddai Cafe" that briefly took over a Tokyo restaurant), a cursory Google image search for the game in Japanese returns goofy Enoch pictures and other funny business, and not so many actual screenshots of the game.

It's possible this all may have twisted the public's perception of the game, but there's no such thing as bad publicity, right? Not to mention that *El Shaddai* is a game that wants you to be aware that it's different; it's not an epic sequel to a favorite RPG or FPS franchise. And for Ignition, they probably couldn't have asked for anything better than a bunch of people ironically loving their game before they even had a chance to touch it.

El Shaddai lived up to both official and unofficial hype upon its release in Japan, earning high review scores. it has no release date outside Japan yet, but it will be interesting to see what angle Ignition will take with it in America or Europe, short of getting the Mega 64 guys to remake the trailer, too.



For just around \$230, you can pick up the "White Premium Box" edition of Black Rock Shooter the Game, the PSP RPG based on the OVA based on the drawing that includes an exquisite figure. And the game, too; at least that

### IT'S ON AMAZON (CO.IP)

IF YOU COULD CLICK PAPER YOU CAN BET THIS WOULD HAVE AFFILIATE LINKS



### Our Namco '8os Tribute Comics

Several lesser-known manga authors contributed to this anthology of stories about anything and everything related to old Namco games. Namco made quite the imprint on the youth of the day, so you get a few personal recollections, as well as some straight-up fan fiction based on games like Legend of Valkyrie and, funnily enough, Battle City. (Book • ¥998)



### Spelunker Sensei

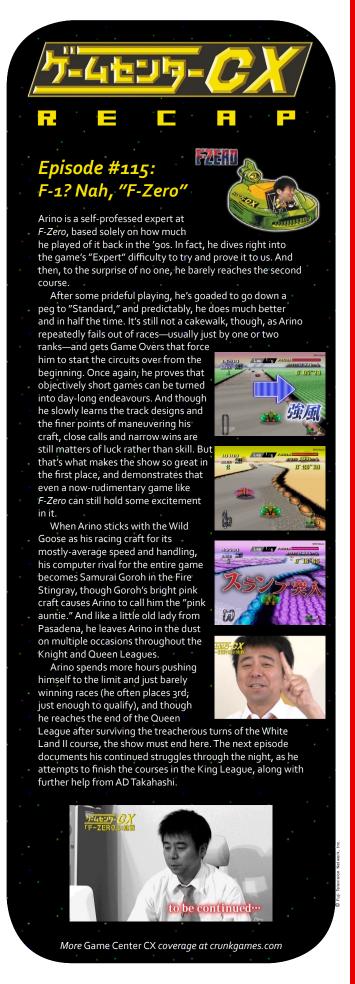
Irem's ridiculous Spelunker Sensei webcomic was collected in a book last year, and now it's been turned into a lowbudget anime feature. The young Spelunker is a hapless gym teacher whose proximity to flying balls and other P.E. equipment causes him to get hit and easily knocked out, just like in his game adventures. Highly recommended for Takenobu Mitsuyoshi's (Daytona USA) lyrical take on the renowned theme song. (DVD • ¥2,400)



### The Urawaza: Famicom Disk System & PC Engine

The second set of *The Urawaza* series covers the Famicom Disk System and PC Engine libraries. The series chronicles and demonstrates the the various urawaza (codes/secrets) in a number of retro hits, and interview segments with designers and programmers add some extra context to it all. Still, this is more archival than it is entertaining. (DVD • ¥5,180 [2-pack])

Prices based on Amazon.co.jp listings as of 5/15/11



# DLAY THESE ALREADY!





### NIN<sup>2</sup>-JUMP

Cave briefly steps away from the shoot-em-up realm for Nin²-Jump ("Nin-Nin Jump"), an endurance-focused platformer on Xbox Live Arcade in the vein of N+ or Super Meat Boy. Though it's much narrower in scale—only 50 not-so-huge stages—the puppet show aesthetic, along with a row of exciteable Japanese kids cheering on the hero Nin-Ja still makes this game stand out.



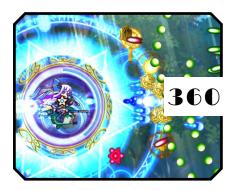
### **ARCANA HEART 3**

Knowing that a retail release would only hurt them, Aksys has released *Arcana Heart 3* as a PlayStation Store-only release, much like their PS3 version of *Battle Fantasia*. The all-girl fighting game has previously proven itself as a worthy game, though, and the advent of (semi-)HD graphics alone make it a worthy purchase for fighting games. The only downside to being online-only? No body pillow.



### TRAILS IN THE SKY

The Falcom flood from XSEED keeps going with *Trails in the Sky*, part of Falcom's long-standing *Legend of Heroes* series. The quest features an epic scale that includes an eclectic cast of characters, an untraditional grid-based battle system, and several metric tons worth of text both integral to the story and, well, not—but if you want to know what people in the game's world are doing, just pick up the local newspaper. If you haven't picked up the game yet, it should make a nice summer excursion for PSP-owning JRPG nuts.



### **TROUBLE WITCHES NEO!**

Doujin fighting games like *Melty Blood* broke into the big leagues with arcade releases, but you can't always say the same for the shooters. *Trouble Witches* bucked the trend, and has now gone international with an upgraded version of XBLA. The game stays true to other "witch" shooters like *Cotton* and *Magical Chase*, but with much more pomp and circumstance in the game's multiple levels. Think of it as the *Melty Blood* of shooters. OK, maybe that's a stretch, but the point is, it's pretty good.



# D U N G E O N S & D O T S D R A G O N S

PEOPLE OFTEN THINK THE "JRPG" BEGAN WITH DRAGON QUEST, BUT SUB-GENRES AREN'T EXACTLY CREATED OUT OF THIN AIR. WHEN THE COMPUTER RPG BECAME BIG IN THE 1980s AND SPREAD ACROSS THE WORLD, THREATENING THE SENSIBILITIES OF PEN-AND-PAPER PURISTS, ENRAPTURED JAPANESE PROGRAMMERS WORKED TO ADAPT D&D'S TYPICAL HIGH FANTASY THEMES INTO THEIR OWN GAMES, THROWING A BIT OF THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH ART, MUSIC, AND ACTION DESIGN INTO THE MIX. HERE WE TRACE THE JRPG'S QUEST FOR PROMINENCE, PAYING HEED TO THE GAMES THAT MADE DRAGON QUEST'S ASCENCION THROUGH JAPANESE POP CULTURE SEEM EVEN EASIER THAN IT LOOKED.

# Fan-translated RPGs were not a new thing in the late '90s.

They weren't on consoles, nor were they English. In fact, they weren't even electronic.

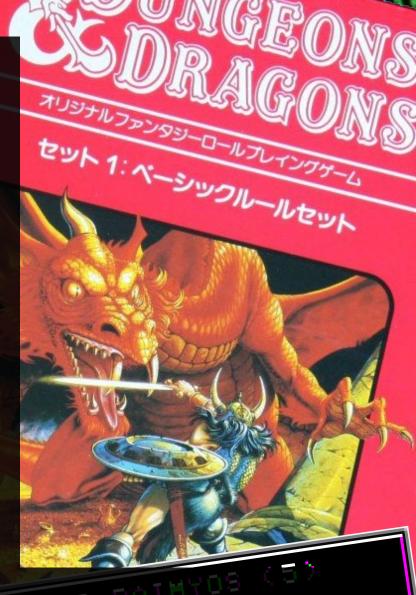
After the creation of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974 and its subsequent rise in popularity among America's nerdier youth, the game quickly spread around the globe, or as quickly as possible in those days. European players probably didn't have much trouble making sense of the rulebooks, but you couldn't say the same for Asia. Japanese wargame enthusiasts were introduced to *D&D* in a variety of ways, most likely by word of mouth via someone who picked up the game during a trip overseas or in hobby shops that imported it, but the language barrier was tall and rigid. *D&D*, entrenched in the stylings of a fantasy novel, was not a game that adhered to dictionary English.

Rather than find a way around that barrier, Japanese players bruteforced their way through. They sat down with the books, cracked their knuckles, and began playing it by ear, understanding enough of what was going on to still have fun with it. It wasn't perfect, though, and before long, independently-translated reproductions of *D&D* rulebooks were being created and distributed among the pockets of players around the country (and anyone who could be their potential questmates).

For the rest of the '70s and stretching well into the '80s, Japanese RPG fans were running campaigns based on the fan-translated *D&D* materials, basing everything on rules and basic scenarios that were authentic, but not official—this was nothing but people incredibly interested and enthralled with its organized form of storytelling; this method of putting yourself in a fantasy land that no novel could do. As *Dungeons & Dragons* grew in the English-speaking world, the first official Japanese editions of *D&D* finally showed up in 1985, although the work of the publisher, Shinwa, wasn't much better than the amateurs', with infamous typos such as the mangling of "leather armor" into "reggae armor."

The official Japanese *D&D* had taken its sweet time to arrive, and by then, role-playing games had long since reached out beyond pen and paper. The personal computer boom of the 1980s had seen all sorts of revolutionary software introduced, not the least of them being games. And like many computer games, the computer RPG got its start on university mainframes, created by pen-and-paper RPG players experimenting with better organization, if not automation of their favorite games. As the computers got smaller and the number of people using them got bigger, hobbyist programmers were making serious money on their creations, and the kids that were crafting their own RPGs, like Richard Garriott and his pre-*Ultima* adventure *Akalabeth*, were slowly but surely making history.





But the game that had the longest-term effect was Wizardry. Sir-Tech's groundbreaking adventure from Andrew Greenberg and Robert Woodhead was a basic implementation of D&D elements, but had more than enough to be an adequate replacement (for a single player, anyway): character creation, virtual dice rolls, long dungeons, and enemies when you least expect and want them. Aside from the basic plot thread, the story was still going on your mind, which the rudimentary graphics helped enhance. Wizardry may have ripped out of much of the middleman from D&D, but it still left a good chunk of imagination behind.

Wizardry was a big deal at the time, but much like with D&D, most of Japan wasn't going to experience it for a while. PC formats were different in that country, and of course there was all the translation to do. Wizardry debuted officially in Japan in 1985 when it arrived on native PCs—the same year as D&D. But it's possible that just like the pen-and-paper game, the hardcore enthusiasts were finding ways to get ahold of Wizardry in the years before. To pile on the similarities, Wizardry also got an iffy translation into Japanese, as much of the game's original cheekiness was taken with a straight face when translated by people who had no concept of American referential humor. Nevertheless, the game gained a foothold.

Before it came to Japan, Wizardry had been around the block a few times, and it's not like it was in a rush. Japan had not quite caught on to the whole computer RPG thing, so many video games were of the action or graphic adventure variety. With D&D hardly the phenomenon it was elsewhere, no one in Japan was really getting inspired to make a computer game basedon it. But two years before Wizardry would show up, Japan did get its first original RPG, though from an unlikely source.

Harabagan I







QUEST DRAGON QU ON QUEST DRAGON QUI AGON QUEST DRAGON QUEST DRAGON QUEST, (2) (2) DRAGON QUEST DRAGO GON QUEST

# Dragon Quest

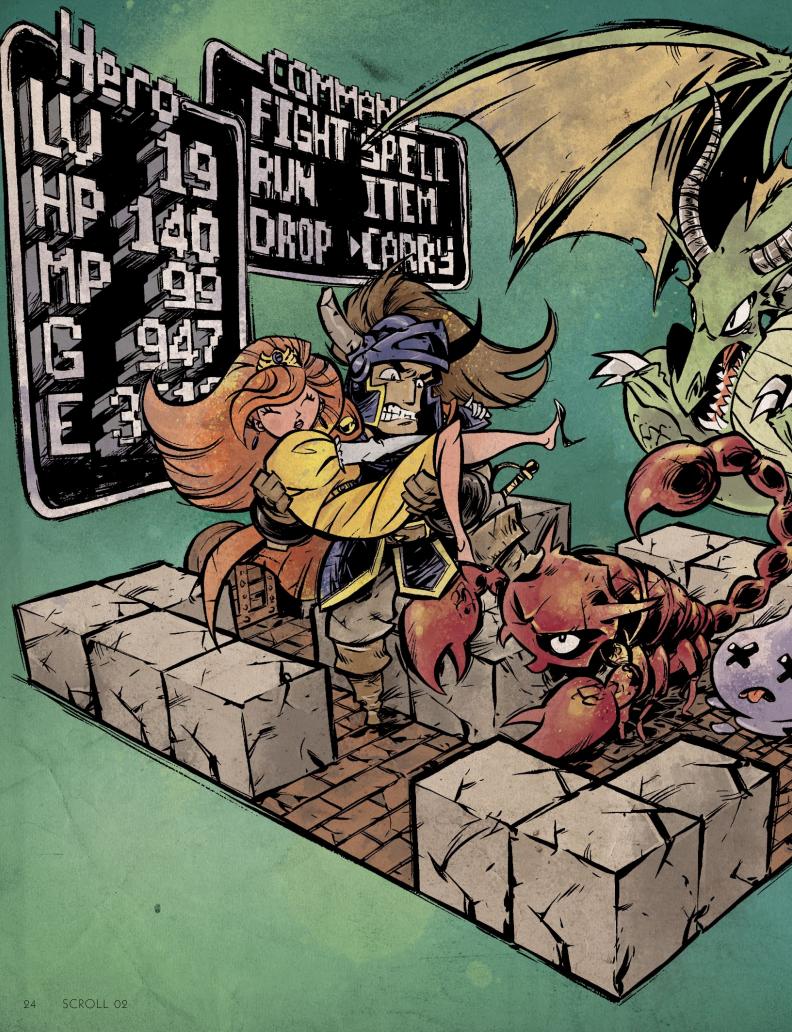
# THE COMPLETE SERIES REVIEW

his year, *Dragon Quest* celebrates its 25th birthday. What began as a rudimentary but undeniably fresh take on RPGs in the middle of 1986 has since become a genuine video game institution. But the common man can't learn that from just playing the games—they're pretty good, but you also have to see the people lining up at stores just to pre-order them, and reading the news stories about how each sequel sold so many millions in their first days. You have to see the forum posts, look at the fan art, and listen to world-famous orchestras play the music. That will help to understand the impact *Dragon Quest* makes on what is now multiple generations of fans that stretch across the globe. It's not just one thing.

Dragon Quest is more than just nine RPGs. Ostensibly, they're not much different from the pioneers of the early '80s, but Dragon Quest had somehow struck a perfect balance that got everybody and their dad—seriously—giving it a try. Sure, in 1986, most Famicom kids bought any new game that came along, so Dragon Quest wasn't a proven momentous event, but when people started blanketing city blocks to get the next eight of them, there was something more there besides people who just thought Slimes and Drackies were cute.

Of course,  $Dragon\ Quest$  wasn't nearly as loved in the rest of the world as it was in Japan. Europe was deprived of most of the series, and Americans were flush with RPG options, be they  $Final\ Fantasy$ ,  $Phantasy\ Star$ , or even a tried-and-true PC Gold Box epic. It wasn't until recently that DQ, reunited with Nintendo's help, finally became something worth playing, talking about, and anticipating among gamers across the world. Hopefully  $DQ\ X$  keeps the momentum.

Whether you're a *Dragon Quest* veteran or an eager neophyte, turn the page and enjoy our nine little essays about these nine RPGs, along with illustrations from some of the most talented artists on the internet. Because thou must.





### DRAGON QUEST

f any word best encapsulates the *Dragon Quest* series, it's "humble." And the first *Dragon Quest* certainly didn't look like the sort of revolution many consider it to be. The original Famicom version was famously worked on for months and months, but seeing it now is pretty funny: the characters are just a few steps removed from stick figures, always looking forward regardless of the direction they move in. The menus still have one foot in the CRPG pool, both in their plain black-and-white looks and the ridiculous "Stairs" command. The world map is a little rough around the edges, too, especially in the water tiles. The battle screens are a pleasant contrast, though, with the pretty background graphics and detailed enemy sprites. But there's only one place to save, you can't be any stronger than level 30, and you have to walk everywhere.

And the story could not have been more standard: The princess has been captured by the big evil Dragonlord, and you have to find the best way there, which just happens to be an adventure around the world, visiting all sorts of towns and going after all sorts of special items so that you're properly prepared for the big showdown. But some genuinely original things were included. Like the fact that you actually do have to *rescue* the princess, and carry her all the way back home before going back to defeat the Dragonlord. When Mario finds the princess, he just stands there.

For the English version a few years later, *Dragon Quest* became *Dragon Warrior*, and everything was retouched and brought closer to *DQ II* and *III*'s level of quality, with new sprites that could look in all four directions, and the abolishing of the lengthy password system (sugar-coated as a "spell of restoration") in favor of battery backup. But it was still humble. No one who's played *Dragon Warrior* forgets the dialogue, done up in a Middle English tongue that had most kids asking Mom or Dad who "Thou" was. The writing was overwrought, but kind of cute, and perhaps even indispensable in helping the game stand out. And the rest of *DQ*'s indelible moments remained, like the first time you explore a cave with a proper light source, or the first time you're mauled by the Golem, or when you first step out of Tantegel castle and hear the somber world map music.

Nintendo tried valiantly to get *Dragon Warrior* to a level of popularity close to *Dragon Quest*'s. However, even by 1989, the NES was light on RPGs, and not without reason. Thanks to the industry's pre-NES hiatus, non-PC video games were considered to be more or less shoot-em-ups, while RPGs continued to thrive on the computer, where adults and "big kids" played their more sophisticated games. The NES was big, but it had to eat away at that stigma. Sure, *Zelda* had successfully attracted the young and old for a few years, but Nintendo had to spend more than the usual amount of time to communicate that *Dragon Warrior* looked like *Zelda*, but had a lot more to it. Naturally, older Nintendo fans were drawn to a game that had little to no twitch action, but the younger ones had a certain expectation of Nintendo games, and there's no doubt that to many of them, *Dragon Warrior* just looked boring.

To no surprise, the game was covered regularly in *Nintendo Power* to bookend the game's release, and new subscribers to *NP* around that time would get a brand-new copy of *DW* free in the mail. The story goes that those were essentially all the copies Nintendo couldn't sell, or leftovers from a zealous production run, but the promotion came awfully close to the magazine coverage. *NP* explained what an RPG was, contributed map upon map, gave tips about the importance of leveling up and learning new spells, and collected it all in a handbook.

And it's not like it was all for naught. *Dragon Warrior* did get out there and gain a foothold, however strong. Not every little kid hated it, and when Nintendo really struck oil a year later with *Final Fantasy*, there's no question players went back to *DW*. Enix opened an American branch and swiftly translated the next three *Dragon Quests*, and the idea of console RPGs in America got a little bit more legit with each one. But in the 16-bit era, Enix seemed to flagrantly dismiss *Dragon Quest* and focus on publishing games under a smaller spotlight, while *Dragon Quest V, VI*, and soon another round of *I, II* and *III* would fly past, as we could only stand by and watch the series submerge, humbly, into obscurity.









### DRAGON QUEST

### THE PANTHEON OF EVIL

n the growing timeline of the series, *Dragon Quest II* is viewed as an odd one out, if not *the* odd one out. And that's kind of funny, because it set in motion more standard features and assorted tropes for the series than the first game did. (And it had the peppiest music of all of them.) Above all, it was the first one to have a multi-member party, but also had greatly improved graphics, a raised level cap, and gave you a longer story to finish. And all of that within a year of Enix releasing *DQ I*. It's by no means a departure; *Dragon Quest II* succeeded at giving fans exactly what they wanted, which was more of the same. But it was still weird, and to some, it leans toward "disappointing." Of course, it wasn't nearly as weird as, say, *Final Fantasy II* was, but *DQ II* still isn't what will pop into a fan's mind first.

The story, at least, was fresh. Yuji Horii and crew could have just started the game with all three characters from the get-go, but no. Instead, you, as the prince of a quaint kingdom, have to search for and persuade your cousins, also royal heirs, to join you, because you're all descendants of Loto and there's a great evil wizard who's laid ruin to the kingdom of Moonbrooke, and needs vanquishing before his evil magic overtakes the world. Maybe that last part wasn't so fresh, but the fixed party further distanced *Dragon Quest* from Western RPG notions, settling quite nicely into its niche.

Besides "weird," *Dragon Quest II* is also called one of the hardest ones in the series, mostly because enemies in new areas are typically pretty resistant to any new weapons you may get from that area, so some concentrated grinding is necessary if you don't want to feel hobbled for the entire game. But even then, the return on the investment kind of plateaus—when you finally get the princess to join and complete the trio, she starts at level 1 just like the prince did, only now you're farther along in the game and it's even more ludicrous to try to keep her alive. Even when you get her up to snuff, she remains underpowered compared to the boys. Couple that with some other harsh realities of *Dragon Quest* games, like only being able to hit multiple enemies if they're in a like group, and frustration comes early and often.

Another contributor to the frustration is that the game feels too big for its britches; as if the designers were tossing too much in and started to let things slip their mind. Consider the quest itself: the entire world of DQ II was expanded from the original, and seemed to have a lot of effort put into it, but maybe not so much care. As you gather the cousins and subsequently seek the five crests that will form the Charm of Rubiss, there's a lot of stuff to do and a lot of places to go, with a lot of distance between them. Sounds par for the course, but in this case, you're not so easily nudged along, even if you do follow the instruction manual and talk to everybody in town. In the first  $Dragon\ Quest$ , the overworld was small enough that you could find your way back home fairly easily, but not so much here. When you're not walking, you're in a ship, and the open sea just compounds the problem. Without a walkthrough to read, you're frequently left to your own devices. Hope you keep a travel journal!

In the real world, *DQ II* still sold gangbusters, and outside Japan, *Dragon Warrior II* was handled by Enix's new American division, and the haughty speech was toned down, along with being refreshed with a new title screen where the three heroes slowly march towards the front of the screen until the triumphant overture plays. Unfortunately, the lag between *Dragon Quest* and *Dragon Warrior* proved more harmful for the sequel than the original. In 1990, Nintendo went full steam ahead with publishing and promoting the first *Final Fantasy*. *FF* had only an easier time (however slight) convincing NES gamers that RPGs were cool, but by then, other competitors in the genre began making their way out of Japan as well—a turn of fate that would not work out in *Dragon Quest*'s favor. Enix followed through with the NES tetralogy, but after that, America wasn't so lucky.

Dragon Quest II may be weird, but there's no use denying that it was an important step forward for the series, albeit not a painless one. At any rate, Enix makes sure nobody forgets it in spite of its shortcomings, as it's been consistently paired with DQI in remakes ever since. That may also illustrate that though they belong to the same trilogy, the first two Dragon Quests were mere rehearsals for the main event.

1987 1990









# DRAGON QUEST

### INTO THE LEGEND

o, the Japanese Diet did not pass a law outlawing the release of *Dragon Quest* games on school days. That was Enix's policy, introduced after the madness of the *Dragon Quest III* launch. It was a perfect encapsulation of Japanese gaming in the late '80s—RPGs were experiencing a meteoric rise in popularity, and *DQ III* did a lot to stand out among other titles of the time. Well, maybe it was a perfect encapsulation of the business, and not so perfect for the kids whose copies were stolen from them in broad daylight.

Dragon Quest III introduced many firsts to the series. The day-and-night cycle, a four-character party, and access to air travel are a few examples that have remained with the sequels, but none of them are taken for granted more than the battery backup. Fans outside of Japan may be unfamiliar with the "spell of restoration" used in the first two games, as battery backup had become more common when Dragon Warrior was released. Instead of saving its own data, DQ I issued a password (in the form of a rough haiku-style poem) to the player that included every value for that particular spot in the game: level, money, equipment, and so on. DQ III's ability to save to the cartridge brought with it the practice of holding the Reset button while turning off the console, advice that Enix even printed under the "Hints for Heroes" page at the back of the manual.

Technological achievements aside, *Dragon Quest III* is the narrative lynchpin of the Loto trilogy. Whereas *DQ II* served as a direct sequel to the original, their connection to *DQ III* is kept well and truly hidden until the last quarter of the game. The story opens on the 16th birthday of the hero, whose father has disappeared while on a journey to defeat the archfiend Baramos. Fans who followed the continuity of the first two games probably felt alienated by the new story being presented here, with no mention of the legendary hero Loto, the slaying of the Dragonlord, or any of the events of *DQ II*.

However, apprehension is cast away as the player slowly gets into the meat of the game. The freedom of the job system allows you to create parties to suit your playing style, an aspect of the original *Final Fantasy* that works just as well here. Perhaps most interesting, the cities in DQ III's world correspond to a real world country in both name and geography: There's Romaly (Italy), Isis (Egypt), Portoga (Portugal), Jipang (Japan), and the bazaar town of Ashalom representing the Middle East, its name taken from the Arabic greeting "As-Salāmu 'Alaykum;" tragically localized as "Assaram." And at one point, players must use a Merchant character to settle on a landmass representing North America before completing the game—the colonists of "New Town" eventually revolt against the merchant-turned-tyrant.

It's only after the fall of Baramos that you learn that the hero of legend and the hero of *DQ III* are one and the same, and that the events of the game explain the endless praise showered on him in the previous games. Loto's storied past no longer needed to be extrapolated from a wandering townsperson's idle talk, for the player has lived it all firsthand, bringing everything back full circle and lending a new perspective to the first two games and many things within them. The origins of recurring key items become clear, like the Orb of Light (mentioned only as having been stolen by the Dragonlord in the first game) and The Sword of Kings (forged by a Jipangese blacksmith from Orichalcum ore found in a horse pasture, eventually known as "Loto's Sword").

Of course, there are several signs earlier on that the Alefgard in this game predates the original. The wizened old man known for lifting curses is a young boy here, publicly expressing his desire to enter the curse-breaking field; the golem built to guard the fortress town of Mercado is but a gleam in an engineer's eye; the tunnel connecting the upper and lower continents is only partially dug, and the town of Domdora is alive and bustling, unaware that by the time of DQI, it will have been razed by the Dragonlord and infested with monsters standing guard over the indestructible Loto Armor.

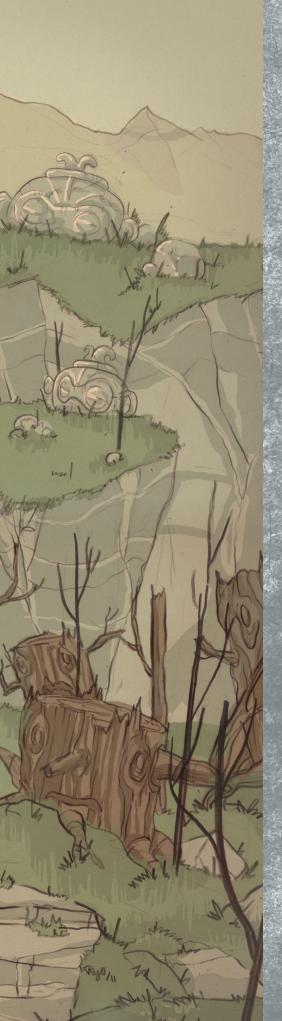
DQ III unequivocally showed to its players that a cohesive and satisfying fairy tale spread over a trilogy of video games could be every bit as engaging and rewarding as a book or movie. But hey, if you don't buy that, you can't argue it's not just a damn fun RPG.



1991







# Dragon quest V

CHAPTERS OF THE CHOSEN

ith the Loto trilogy wrapped up spectacularly, expectations were high for Dragon Quest IV. At the same time, feelings were mixed. By its debut in 1990, the 16-bit generation was already underway, so why begin a new Dragon Quest timeline with—tch!—an 8-bit game? The obvious thing to do would have been to wrap up Dragon Quest's time on the Famicom and soldier on to the next generation, but as is now typical of the series, it stuck with the machine that had the biggest audience at the time, not the one that might.

To its credit, the series didn't sit still for this sequel. The inarguable defining characteristic of *Dragon Quest IV* is its story, deliberately split up into "chapters" that give players a few hours of gameplay in the shoes of four different groups of people from all around the game's world, with the final chapter wrapping around and introducing the main hero, who eventually joins up with everybody else and journeys onward to defeat the evil Psaro, *DQ IV*'s bete noire. (The remakes added a prologue featuring the hero, perhaps to give players some upfront familiarity with the guy/gal on the front of the box.)

It was quite a shift to take for *Dragon Quest*'s 8-bit swan song, but after the Loto games, it was exactly what the series needed. To this day, few RPGs, Japanese or otherwise, bother going with that kind of portioned narrative structure (except, funnily enough, *Final Fantasy XIII*), which also proves that that tweaking of the framework is something you can only pull off in an established series these days. Players may want something fresh from a brand-new property in their favorite genre, but if it's flipping too many scripts, the risk of alienation shoots up.

Fortunately, *DQ IV* didn't change much else. It was still inviting, familar, and only made incremental changes to the actual gameplay. The addition of the "tactics" command made nonessential battles a breeze, if not the whole game (hey, some people want that), and having more than four party members is extra nice when one in the "reserve" runs in to replace a fallen ally. The Mini Medals made their debut as well, to offer some sort of collectible items to the adventure that aren't necessarily required to finish the game. Isn't it weird when you think you only have a few of them, but then you check and you have like, 30?

The characters had the most actual *character* to them than previous *Dragon Quests*, that's for sure—the overly stoic knight; the rebellious princess; the belly-dancing sisters—though they didn't have many distinguishing abilities in battle, so you have the usual attackers and casters like always. Even though Torneko was a merchant whose quest was simply to make more money, he ended up fighting and exploring just as any other *Dragon Quest* hero.

In the 2000s, *Dragon Quest IV* resurfaced with a PlayStation remake and a port of that on Nintendo DS, the latter being when it returned to America. In the new English translation, the characters, including everybody else in the game, were rewritten with ridiculous yet impressively thick dialects. It's a point of contention with many people who've played it, and while it was a natural progression from *DQ VIII's* British foundation, the sheer thickness of the accents does tend to make your eyes glaze—why should we struggle to enjoy this otherwise enjoyable, well-tuned dialogue? But by the final chapter, the craziness of the language(s) balances out, and playing *DQ IV* on DS is still the best way to go.

Dragon Quest IV was released several months before the Super Famicom debuted, but in America, Dragon Warrior IV's release in 1992, along with every other NES game at the time, was pre-overshadowed by 16-bit mania. Hell, Final Fantasy II (IV) was already out, so who else but the hardest-core RPG fans would even give the time of day to a simple-looking game for the "old Nintendo?"

The bad luck had reached its peak—Dragon Warrior IV had a low print run and barely registered a blip on gamers' radars. Not to mention that Enix America was already concentrating their energy on the Super NES, releasing everything for it but a new Dragon Quest, while Squaresoft slowly but surely came to dominate the genre. Of course, it all managed to work itself out in the end, but after IV, it would be quite a while before anyone outside Japan would see Dragon Quest again.

1990 1992









# dragon quest V

HAND OF THE HEAVENLY BRIDE

t its core, *Dragon Quest V* adheres to the series template no worse than the 8-bit sequels did: A great evil is growing in power, and only a cunning band of adventurers can topple it. And as is the case with most *DQ* games, *DQV* takes that rudimentary framework and fleshes it out with endearing characters in its troubled world, further illustrating things for the player through the various quests and vignettes found in each town.

However, more than most of the other sequels, DQ V shifts a large amount of the burdens onto the protagonists themselves, who are affected by the wrath of the villain just as much, if not moreso than the average townsperson is. This installment is often considered the most emotionally engaging Dragon Quest, combining love, marriage, birth and death on a level that never comes off as hackneyed or pandering. Our heroes are more resolute than sullen, even at their lowest lows. Given the sheer number of horrible things that happen to the main character along the way, this might be considered a rare occurrence of the typical "mute JRPG hero" cliché working out pretty well, if you go for that sort of thing.

As part of the game's journey through the circle of life, eventually the hero must choose to marry one of two women (three in the DS version), a decision that has some weight put on it, but in play, it really only affects the extra abilities given to each couple's children. Though preceded by *Phantasy Star III*'s multi-generational story, *DQ V* intimately focuses on a smaller cast with more emphasis on the journey and less on the overall outcome. Nothing leads to branching storylines or multiple endings regardless of who becomes the bride, but on a sentimental level, the game pulls for the protagonist's childhood friend Bianca, who sheds her earlier tomboyish attitude and becomes a strong, responsible young woman. Opting to marry another woman elicits no overt anger or jealousy from Bianca, but instead a sort of resigned, outwardly cheerful support for the man it has been decided she cannot have. (As an aside, this sentimental sap finished four different versions of the game and never not married Bianca—what am I, made of stone?!)

DQV is subtle in its humor, like when the hero is told "congratulations, you're going to be a father," it's immediately followed by the series' classic Yes/No prompt, in a way communicating the surprise that some new dads might experience in real life. The "party talk" option is also available in later versions of the game, offering some insight into the minds of your fellow adventurers, and often delivering some cute or amusing lines from the monsters travelling with you. (Party talk also debuted in English alongside the rest of DQV—diehard fans in the West were disappointed when it was cut from the DS DQIV.)

Though monster recruits were introduced in the last game, V allowed for the first beast-heavy roster. It wasn't the same as having a full-fledged job system, but ultimately afforded the same level of party customization: monsters of all stripes and specialities can be trained and equipped to suit any play style—even some metal monsters, with their sky-high defense and single-digit HP, can be recruited with enough patience. The depth of the system and the challenge to find and collect every monster was but one motivator that led Enix to create the Dragon Ouest Monsters series.

Dragon Quest V would not receive an official English translation for 17 years, thanks to Enix passing on the game and then closing its US office in 1995, leaving a gulf between Dragon Warrior IV and VII. The franchise was rebooted outside Japan with Dragon Quest VIII, which more or less set off an avalanche of releases, not the least of which being the neglected installments from the '90s.

Three versions of the game have been released to date: the original Super Famicom release, PlayStation 2 remake, and the recent DS version. The PS2 remake of the game is the best-looking and sounding of the bunch, though it lacks some of the perks of the DS version, notably the inventory icons, third potential wife, and the novelty of being portable. Though only available in Japanese, it comes highly recommended for its beautiful orchestral soundtrack, similar to the treatment received by non-Japanese releases of *DQ VIII*.









# dragon quest **V**

REALMS OF REVELATION

ike *Dragon Quest II*, *Dragon Quest VI* is also kind of a black sheep. It, too, is lengthy and challenging, but it's also the product of everything learned from its predecessors, and by extension, it's ultimately more rewarding than *DQ II*. By any measure, this should have been as big as *DQ III*, as it closed another trilogy (granted, the "Zenithia" games aren't as tied together as the Loto series) and would be the last *Dragon Quest* of the 16-bit days. Unfortunately, it didn't quite make the same splash, and even now, shortly after its first remake, *DQ VI* has again fallen by the wayside.

But let's pause the crying over spilt milk. *Dragon Quest VI* is no slouch. It's the finest-looking original entry of the 2D *Dragon Quests* ("original" because the remake of *DQ III* was mighty purdy), and despite its rough edges, this is as much of a *Dragon Quest* game as the others. The battles felt the same, the music sounded the same (besides the disappointing main battle theme), and the enemies still looked goofy. And if you're complaining about that at this point, you're just not a *Dragon Quest* fan.

The marquee feature for this *Dragon Quest* was the job system, something not seen since *DQ III* (more or less), but now much more in line with what was going on in *Final Fantasy V*, in that the characters' classes could be freely swapped around after finding Alltrades Abbey, rather than shuffling out pre-packaged party members. It was a great way to enhance the customization angle while keeping the story side of the equation on track. Couple that with the return of the monster caravan, and you got more than a few ways to become properly kitted out for any difficult battle that came you came across.

As mentioned,  $DQ\ VI$  was gorgeous, and that helped it along a lot. At the time, it came out after Final Fantasy VI, which had upgraded the size of its character sprites and brought a lot more fine detail to the graphics, setting the stage for the rest of Squaresoft's 16-bit work (though a lot of gray and brown kept it from being super impressive). Compare that to  $DQ\ VI$ , which had a similar amount of detail in its pixel art, but with the brighter color scheme  $Dragon\ Quest$  is known for, and you got a much more visually appealing game, not to mention (again) the best-looking DQ at that point.

More than any other installment, *DQ VI* really typified that period of the Super Famicom's life and the improved grasp that developers and artists had of the system. The characters, though, aren't so appealing, superficially or otherwise. After years of direct or indirect subjection to *Dragon Ball*, the look of the hero comes off as lazy. And yes, Carver is a beefy guy with a heart of gold. We know. At least Terry and Milly got starring roles later in *Dragon Quest Monsters*, because they at least deserved it.

Without the clever plot structure of *DQ IV* or the touching tale of *DQ V*, the story in this sixth *Dragon Quest* just feels like another group of kids wandering around rescuing towns, which is what the entire series could be boiled down to, but it felt more pronounced in *DQ VI*. That probably has a lot to do with the whole "dual worlds" concept, which was neither original for *Dragon Quest (DQ III*, again) nor RPGs in general. And really, there just isn't much done with it—the dream world isn't dramatically different than the real world, and you'll be exploring both of them extensively, plus a little more, by the last third of the game. It seemed as though *Dragon Quest* was trying to match *Final Fantasy* not just in looks but in size, a move that made *DQ VI* feel like a drag on top of its less original parts, and something that would reach a breaking point in the next sequel.

RPGs were the biggest they ever were on the Super Famicom by 1995, so *DQ VI*'s competition seemed stiff even compared to what the 8-bit games went up against. Not just *FFVI*, but everything else from Square, including *Romancing SaGa 3* and *Chrono Trigger*, the latter coming out before *DQ VI* and being the long-awaited product of the combined forces of the fathers of *DQ* and *FF*. That alone might have affected *DQ VI*'s reception with fans who expected something a bit more epic. Though, of course, it still managed to sell.

Is *Dragon Quest VI* memorable? Not exactly, but we should remember that in this series, the distinction between "memorable" and "forgettable" is incredibly important, and this isn't a sequel that deserves to be forgotten.

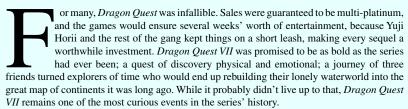






# dragon quest **V**

EMISSARRIES OF EDEN



The 32-bit era had shaken up the game industry a bit, but many companies adapted sooner or later. Whether for that reason or something else, DQVII took about five years to come out, which was unheard of. Originally meant for 1997, the game was supposed to be the biggest weapon Sony would have to combat Nintendo, along with Square's catalog. When it was finally released in Japan in August 2000, it followed *Final Fantasy IX* and the first few months of the PlayStation 2, when seismic shifts were already occurring. But it was still *Dragon Quest*, so it managed to sell more than a million copies on day one. Better late than never.

The worlds of *Dragon Quest* games had not evolved much since 1986. They effectively start you at zero and then push you along from there, but *DQ VII* set itself apart by starting the world at zero. Lonely Estard is known to be the only landmass in the world, though that changes when the protagonists uncover time portals that show that their world was a lot less lonely, and magic seals have kept neighboring continents underwater. What's notable is that the hero doesn't seem so lonely as the other games': he looks meek, but he has established friends, and they join him on the adventure, bringing a nice air of familiarity to a genre that's still overrun with fish-out-of-water stories.

Dragon Quest VII once again used a class system and simplified things by needing only eight levels before a class is mastered, and requiring a fixed number of battles to be fought to raise the levels of the class, rather than relying on experience points alone. You'll still need to do quite a bit of work to unlock the advanced classes you want, but it's nice that DQ VII took the path of least resistance.

For *Dragon Quest*'s grand PlayStation debut, it probably could have looked a little better. Obviously, three *Final Fantasy* games were already out, and had essentially set the course of JRPGs for the next decade. *Dragon Quest VII*, on the other hand, definitely looked like it came from 1996, and was understandably dinged for that. But for what it's worth, its look became a template for the remakes of *DQ IV*, *V*, and *VI* that came later. And to be honest, the biggest sticking point of *DQ VII* is not the graphics, it's a number. The plot's glacial pace and the number of quests and other activities required to wrap up the story will put an average play-through at or around an unavoidable 100 hours. Even with the simplistic graphics, that's enough content to be put on two discs—downright efficient compared to *FF IX*, but still, triple digits can be kind of scary.

For America, this was the return of *Dragon Warrior*, and *DW VII* was made a key title for the recently-resurrected Enix America. But 2000 seemed to be a lot like 1990, and for a fifth time, fate was not in their favor. *DW VII*'s release was smack-dab in the middle of the PlayStation 2's first great year, and having it share space with *Final Fantasy X* was like deciding to drink a fine microbrew or a can of Diet Shasta. Reviews from the media were positive yet iffy, appreciating that good ol? *Dragon Warrior* gameplay was back while having to point out its obvious flaws. Once again, it was left to the hardcore fans to buy the game and support it. And Enix's plans to localize the PS1 remake of *DQ IV* fell through when *VII*'s development company went on indefinite hiatus. As one last dollop of B.S., a mild controversy brewed when it was learned that part of the staff of fan site RPGamer did some of *DW VII*'s copy editing without public disclosure beforehand.

All things considered (including the massive sales), *DQ VII* was the lowest point for the franchise, but it was such an anomaly that it's worth discussing for as long as it takes to finish. And on the bright side, it only took four years for *Dragon Quest* to rocket right back to the top.

2000 200









# Dragon quest **V**

JOURNEY OF THE CURSED KING

n *Dragon Quest*, tension increases and you get stronger, right? It was like that." These were not the words of a JRPG fan describing his first date; it was professional baseball player Ichiro Suzuki, fresh off of an astonishing 14-2 victory against rival Korea at the 2009 World Baseball Classic. Japan's team had been defeated by Korea in the 2008 Olympics and entered the WBC with a renewed vigor, one that its star player succintly summed up with a nerdy analogy.

Dragon Quest VIII was the perfect comeback for the series after the disappointment many felt with VII. Though not quite "returning to its roots" (it is Dragon Quest, after all), the gameplay is decidedly simpler than VII in several ways. The story is straightforward and less complex, and the previous "grinder's delight" job system has been replaced with skill points awarded whenever one of the four characters levels up.

Yep, just four: You've got your mute hero, cockney bruiser, dauntless heroine, and womanizing templar, each with their own strengths and weaknessess. Though the cast is smaller than usual, each character has their share of quests and backstory, and the group never feels contrived. The game even subtly introduces a plot point—the hero's immunity to curses—through random battles. Even though it's not acknowledged and explained until much later, attentive players will notice the immunity before the characters do.

In a series where change comes small, *DQ VIII* adapted well to contemporary standards. The most obvious change was visual, for the first time, a *Dragon Quest* game put its players in a beautiful 3D environment populated with proportional cartoon characters and monsters. Character growth is a bit more customizable then before thanks to the skill point system, a more modern alternative to simply being granted a specific spell or ability upon leveling up. By choosing the "Tension" command in battle, a character can store energy for that round up to four times, resulting in a state of "super high tension." This can then be used to deal massive damage, supercharge a curative spell, or knock a dinger right out of the park.

And what would a *Dragon Quest* game be without monsters on your side? Though not promoted to the level of full-fledged party members, the beasts you capture in *DQ VIII* can be assembled in pairs of three-member teams (with reserve monsters always available to be swapped into the roster, of course) that can be summoned by the hero to fight in place of the party for up to three turns. Mixing and matching certain families and styles of monsters can result in unique team names ("My Three Golems;" guess what you need for that) and special attacks.

The alchemy system makes its first appearance here, adding another possible level of grinding for the patient (if not insane) player. Do you stick around farming money or materials to synth a powerful piece of equipment, or just wait two towns and buy it? When rare materials enter the equation, you might opt to make a crazy ax instead of a scythe, depending on how you doled out Yangus's skill points. It's not quite Fable, but the level of choice inherent in alchemy and skill acquisition was new to DQ, eventually becoming the core of DQ IX.

In selling this stylish new DQ to audiences for whom nostalgia may not play such a large role, Square Enix added a few perks for non-Japanese audiences. Most of the soundtrack was replaced with the orchestral arrangements from the DQ VIII Symphonic Suite album, and the menu system was revamped with colored menus and equipment icons à la the DS remakes. More superfluously, the hero got a new Dragon Ball-style haircut when he reached high tension, no doubt to play on the international popularity of Akira Toriyama's other famous work. Some monster drops were tweaked, perhaps over concern of foreigners' presumed hate of grinding. And it certainly didn't hurt that the game came packaged with a playable Final Fantasy XII demo disc.

Equipped weapons, shields, and certain body armors (specifically Jessica's more alluring outfits and the hero's postgame Dragovian Mail) are also shown in use in battle, something *DQ IX* would take to an extreme by showing almost everything equipped on a given character at all times, right down to their heroic tighty whities (or purplies). But many things that were par for the course in the sequel were, for *DQ VIII*, a big step in bringing the series up to date.

2004 2005









# Dragon Quest **X**

SENTINELS OF THE STARRY SKIES

Ithough *DQ VIII* and its life-sized world had finally brought the series up to speed with the rest of the game industry, it was kind of inevitable, wasn't it? Depending on who you ask, the most radical change to the series was either *DQ IV*'s story chapters or other sequels' class systems. For *DQ VIII* to be large and gorgeous was necessary; anything less would be stupid. *Dragon Quest IX* was set to be the craziest sequel yet: A multiplayer-infused adventure with new character customization, and of course, a bold shift to the Nintendo DS, the most popular system in Japan, but an obvious technical downgrade. This time, it wasn't about necessity; it was about credibility.

The hero of *Dragon Quest IX* is "you," as usual, but even more of "you" than before. You can choose a boy or a girl with distinct hair and features who could later form a varied party of an unending stream of randomized characters and dress themselves any which way. Essentially, this was *Dragon Quest III* on steroids. Taken another way, it was the biggest indicator that *Dragon Quest* no longer existed in a bubble, and was drawing inspiration from outside sources. Thanks to *Monster Hunter* and online games, RPGs had a renewed focus on making a character your own, and taking that character and grouping with up to three of your friends just seemed to be where things were going. And for *Dragon Quest*, of all series, to follow in those footsteps was surprising.

While many parts of the gameplay were similar to what came before, what wasn't so similar was your hero's origin story. You're not some kid from some village who ends up fighting some big bad monster; you're a Celestrian, a literal guardian angel who is a newly-designated guardian of a small village, but who then has their celestial status taken away by an unknown force, later revealed to be Corvus, a rogue Celestrian who must be stopped. But first you have to gain back your powers, collect seven enchanted figs, and work through any other B.S. that comes your way.

Multiplayer wasn't too revolutionary in the context of handheld games, but for *Dragon Quest*, it is kind of a big deal. It's also simple: the players' heroes are transported to the "world" of the host, immediately join the party, and from there can either stick together or go off and do their own thing. Battles are fought just like they are with one player, but class balance becomes crucial later on—like an online RPG, healers and tanks are practically required for victory, but everyone always gets a good share of experience points regardless of level disparity.

Ultimately, multiplayer was more of an option than a must-play. Instead, another social part of DQIX got more of a workout. The use of passive communication ("tag mode," "StreetPass," whatever) made it easy for players to share their characters and accomplishments without even acknowledging others. The selling point was the dungeon ("grotto") maps; randomly-generated caves that typically housed strong enemies and bosses, but offered sizeable rewards for completing them. You find the first map naturally through your questing, and completing its dungeon gives you a new map, which starts extending the chain. In Japan, organized map trading quickly became a weekly ritual, and infamous high-payoff grottoes like the "Masayuki map" kept tag activity going strong more than a year after DQIX's release. It's also comparable to DQIII in that it made the series a cultural phenomenon all over again, mainly by using modern technology.

Being the first canonical *Dragon Quest* on a Nintendo system in a while, Nintendo returned to publish *DQ IX* outside of Japan, publicly expressing a desire to make it the game that would finally bring *Dragon Quest* to a similar level of popularity as in Japan. A noble goal, but it would never be easy—not in countries that are much more spread out than Japan and have a lot less people who give a damn about *Dragon Quest*. It wasn't a failure, though—*DQ IX* was *the* DS game to play during the summer of 2010, with plenty of fans talking about it online and finding ways to meet up.

Without a clear idea of where *Dragon Quest* will go in the future, *DQ IX* is a great example that change for this series needs to come naturally. Nearly every sequel answers the issues of the previous one, and finds a way to make the best of the system it's on. Like the quests themselves, it's about pushing forward without stopping, slowly but surely leveling up.

2009 2010





# OTHER REALMS OF DQ



The first *Dragon Quest* spin-off appeared early in the life of the Super Famicom—a year after *DQ V*—and was definitely a different kind of experience. *DQ IV*'s portly merchant got his own little story in that game, but here, developer Chun Soft gave him an entire adventure to star in. As before, Torneko's original goal was to go out collecting treasure to sell in order to grow his business, once again leaving his concerned wife.

TORNEKO'S BIG ADVENTURE

For the developer, it was also the first in their Fushigi no Dungeon series, the  $Rogu\epsilon$ -inspired randomized dungeon adventures that would be adapted for other RPG mascots like Square's Chocobo and the innumerable Pokémor, and unofficially mimicked by other characters, such as Doraemon. But for Torneko, the loot-heavy gameplay was a natural fit for the character.

Second and third installments reached the PlayStation systems and the Game Boy Advance, along with the series' own spin-off, *Young Yangus and the Mysterious Dungeon*, which featured Torneko in a small role, playing elder mentor to the would-be *DQ VIII* hero. The second game reached America as *Torneko: The Last Hope*, but few players got the point of it at the time, letting it languish as another miscalculation on Enix America's part.

#### DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS

The advent of monster recruiting in *Dragon Quest* predated *Pokémon* by some time, so it wasn't so crazy that the concept would be given its own series as an alternative to Nintendo's juggernaut. And just like in that game, the humans don't do the fighting, but the cadre of monsters you capture, level up and send into danger. With lots of Pok  $\epsilon$ -clones on the 8-bit Game Boy, though, DQM didn't get too big, even after three games.

Years later, *DQM* returned with *Dragon Quest Monsters Joker*, a 3D upgrade that would revitalize the series, and for some, would make a decent holdover until the release of *DQ IX. Joker 2* was popular enough to get an expanded second edition that continually topped Japanese sales charts.



### SLIME MORIMORI DRAGON QUEST (ROCKET SLIME)

Slime Morimori may be the first DQ splinter series that got its own established house of feverous hype. The utterly bonkers adventures of a single slime, his other monster companions, and their engagements in slime tank warfare cultivated a fan base that loved the comedy and the absurd tank battles, and it was better than whatever that Chocobo was doing—sure, magic storybook, OK, great.

Slime Morimori 2 on DS managed to make it out of Japan as Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime, where it once again became a cult hit, thanks in part to an English localization that had an impressively high WPM (wordplay per millisecond) rate.



#### DRAGON QUEST MONSTER BATTLE ROAD

If anything can keep the popularity of *Dragon Quest* holding steady between its canonical sequels, it's *Monster Battle Road*. The somewhat passive arcade game series is based on a regularly updated line of trading cards that represent pretty much any character (and equipment) in a *Dragon Quest* game you can think of. Pit your cards against the computer or a friend, and watch as the characters face off in excessively flashy fight scenes. Two action buttons can be slapped to help strengthen moves, and a life-size Zenithian Sword in the center of the cabinet can be grabbed and pushed down into its base to perform special attacks that may or may not turn the tide of battle.

MBR was ported to Wii last year, fleshed out with single-player quest modes in an approach not unlike the *Pokémon Stadium* series and its ilk. Oh, and a \$150 replica of the sword controller. MBR's winning formula is simple, really: combine *Dragon Quest* with the trading card arcade games that have captured a large percentage of Japan's kids and other young people, and and you're sure as hell going to have a massive hit (and pile of money) on your hands.



### KENSHIN DRAGON QUEST / DRAGON QUEST SWORDS

It's a safe bet that any kid who was and is a *Dragon Quest* fan has often fantasized about being a hero in one of the game's worlds, hoofing across unsettled landscapes and recruiting a slime army. *Kenshin Dragon Quest* sort of capitalized on that, with a singlegame console not unlike the "TV games" that flooded Walmart in the early 2000s, based on cheap-and-easy motion control technology developed by XaviX. The game is essentially a retelling of *DQ I*, with the same basic plot points and areas to visit, but as a first-person, arcade-style experience.

The concept came back for *Dragon Quest Swords: The Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors*, doubtlessly because the Wii was the logical step up from the XaviX tech. But despite obviously better graphics and unique character designs for any *Dragon Quest* installment, the game wasn't a whole lot deeper than the 2D one, and the Wii remote controls didn't really improve the accuracy issues, making for one annoying, if not tedious 20-hour quest.



#### MANGA & ANIME

If you managed to flip to the right local TV channel at the right time on the right day in 1991, you may have caught the *Dragon Warrior* cartoon series, the heavily-edited version of Japan's first *Dragon Quest* anime, *Legend of the Hero Abel*. Abel isn't a Loto descendant—he's a regular village kid thrust into adventure when his childhood friend Tiala is captured by Baramos because she posesses the Red Dragon Jewel, and 42 episodes of adventure ensue.

In the manga world, *DQ* was represented by *Dai's Big Adventure*, which got its own animated series soon after its debut. Dai was a younger kid driven to avenge the death of his mentor by the demon king Hadlar. Other than *Dai*, *Dragon Quest* manga has been quite abundant, whether it's 4-koma (gag) collections, or the most recent (and more mature) series, *Dragon Quest Gaiden: The Emblem of Loto*. Several more series have been published over the years, some directly based on the games, others telling their own stories in the familiar universe.

# AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

hither Dragon Quest X? The momentous double-digit sequel has been confirmed (and re-confirmed) for release on Wii some time around 2012. The shift to Wii definitely doesn't seem as surprising as when DO IX moved to DS, because most of us are aware the Wii reached insane levels of popularity, and if "everyone" owns one, it stands to reason that "everyone" is going to get the new Dragon Quest for it. But once again, DQ faces a high potential for failure outside Japan. And this time, it's not just the fact that the franchise isn't as popular, it's also the fact that the Wii's decline is gradually accelerating as the benefits for third-party publishers bottoms out, and average Wii owners more or less stopped the Wii Sports parties after a year or so. While hardcore-friendly games like Donkey Kong Country Returns have retained some relevance for the system, Nintendo and Square Enix face an ever steeper uphill battle with an English release of DQ X—if they even bother.

The Wii's successor probably won't be out until the end of 2012 at best, and Nintendo isn't one to pull a plug prematurely, so DQX has a brief window in which to shine. And if it's a great game, well, who would ever deny playing it, anyway?



#### **ILLUSTRATIONS**

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## Car Marty MVP-1

GPS Plus Fun! (Sorta)



Fujitsu's FM Towns Marty console had next to no chance of making it big in the 'gos game market, especially at a time when the bubble was affecting even the heavy hitters of the Japanese industry. Part of it was the failed overall execution of the system. The FM Towns computer platform that the Marty was based on was a respectable player, but the Marty was comparitively misguided, and Fujitsu was apparently looking for somewhere else to take the system.

Enter the Car Marty. At its core, it's nothing but a compact Marty, a concept not unlike the Genesis CDX. And of course, you can use it in the car if you have the setup for it. And you damn well should have, because its main function was a GPS navigation system.

Today's GPS systems are just one little handheld device that you don't even need a car to use, but in the early 'gos, when such systems started gaining prominence in Japan, you at least needed a screen installed in your car that would then be used with a navigation receiver, usually made by Sony, Pioneer or already-established car gear manufacturers. While the Car Marty still needed a monitor, its relative portability made it easier to take out of the car and use in the home.

Being part Marty, the Car Marty had the advantage of doing more than just GPS, as you might gather from its "MULTI MEDIA PLAYER" moniker. The Marty BIOS (with its lovely "lite FM" boot music) and CD-ROM drive supported all Marty software, including its above-average arcade game ports, as well as the navigation software that came with the unit, with all the local maps and audio direction that we now take for granted. Today's game consoles play all sorts of audio and video, but how many have you seen that also do GPS?! Yeah, I know, the Car Marty is on this page for a reason, but still



#### GAMES IN THE BIG PICTURE

# PILOTWINGS NINTENDO • SNES • 1991

If I were to ask you which Super NES games made you really want the system back in 1991, what would they be? I'm talking before you even knew Zelda existed. Likely it was Super Mario World, but you were getting that one by default. F-Zero was pretty hot; certainly the most rock-influenced game Nintendo produced at the time. And then there was Pilotwings, a fairly innocuous game, but one that demonstrated the system's faux-3D capabilities even better than F-Zero, and was another of Shigeru Miyamoto's pet projects.

If you wanted *Pilotwings* the most, congratulations—you're special. It was the original Super NES showcase game, ever since it was a tech demo called *Dragonfly*, and quickly became one of those Nintendo properties that didn't come back nearly as often as people wanted.

Unlike today's game industry, where innovation is promised, sometimes realized, but more often comes up short, the 16-bit era didn't need to prove a whole lot. It gave us what we wanted, because we didn't know what else we could want. The games had better graphics, and could deliver a level of quality closer to contemporary arcade games. And console games were joined at the hip with arcade games, which were always primarily known for action—running, jumping, shooting, slashing.

In that sense, *Pilotwings* sat in a very odd spot in the Super NES launch lineup. It was nonviolent (not counting the climactic chopper mission, and just a skosh morbid when you crash in a skydiving event), nonthreatening, and it was a Japanese take on flight sims, for god's sake. At the same time, it had some arcade influence: it was challenging; downright demanding, in fact, once you completed the second rung of events and moved up through the ranks, your flight instructors becoming more expectant of perfection.

Pilotwings had a great chance at success,

though, simply because it was a Nintendo game. At the beginning of the life of the Super NES, they were the ones who knew the system the best, and already had two games that were pumping out scaling and Mode 7 effects like nobody's business. By being a showcase, *Pilotwings* became a desired item, and once it was played, you realized you got something that may not be as exciting as *ActRaiser*, but was pretty neat regardless.

Compare that situation to that of this year's *Pilotwings Resort* on 3DS: a sort of half-*Pilotwings* game that was ridiculed for its short length, when in fact it didn't have any less events than the original. It was just as difficult, remixed some classic music, and most importantly, still captured that feeling of jetting just above the ground or floating freely in the breeze. And now, when innovation is pitched hand-in-hand with new technology, yet has a way to go before making every new game a revolution, it's still special to have a *Pilotwings*.

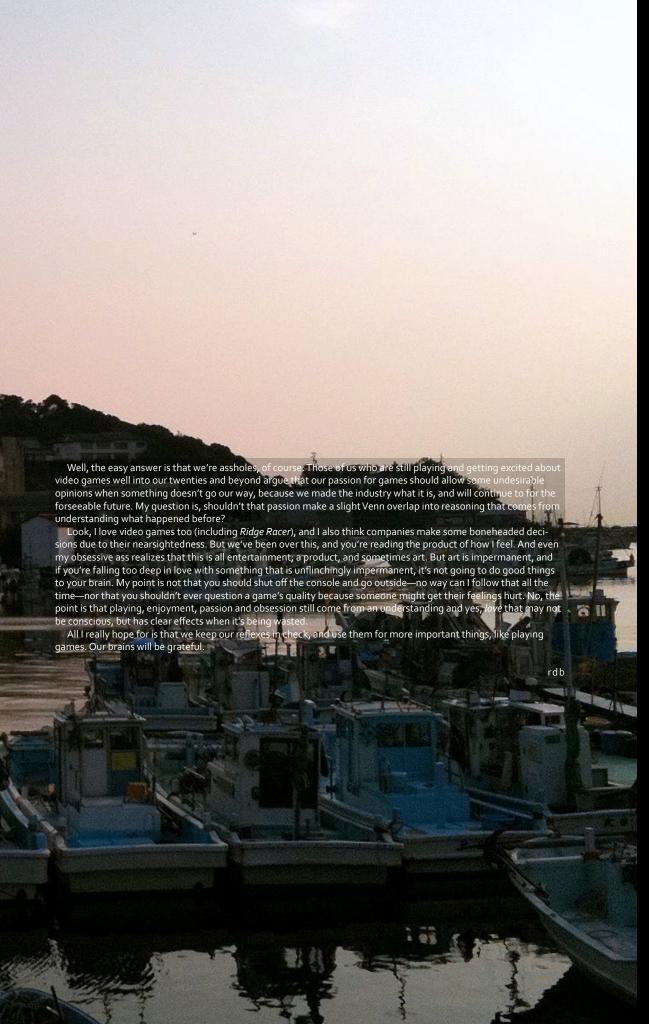


# Passion doesn't mean being kneejerk.

I'm sure I'm not blowing your mind when I say there are a lot of assholes on the internet. We all love to say what we wouldn't always say out loud, even when we're not anonymous; just look at the dregs of Facebook for proof of that. A quick dash of sarcasm, snark or hate posted to a web site can be a nice little release. But when it comes to nerdy pursuits like video games, people seem to get offended more often than not, and to a pointless extreme, especially when a familiar franchise veers a little left of center.

The most flagrant recent example—and my favorite to laugh at—concerns *Ridge Racer Unbounded*, Namco Bandai's destruction-heavy, *Burnout*-esque take on the otherwise grounded *Ridge Racer* series. It's developed by Bugbear, who despite not being Japanese, have proven themselves to be competent with the not-too-awful *Flatout* games, which were also similar to Burnout, but capitalized on the goofier side of arcade racing. But that's not enough for some people. As if on cue, internet commenters hocked a virtual loogie in Namco's direction, decrying the game, the company, and their future as a business. Right. Now, I'm not a blind follower; if I had my druthers, *Ridge Racer* would stick to its roots, or at worst fade away slowly, but can't we take a step back and see things from the other side? Why do you *think* Namco would do this? Is *Ridge Racer* a franchise that's been on an upswing lately? Can we not agree that if this wasn't going to happen now, it would eventually? And what's wrong with giving a chance to a new arcade racing game that clearly isn't being labeled as or intending to be "Ridge Racer 8?"

You see this everywhere, not just with racing games. Nostalgia is the biggest emotional force behind our continued love of games, and because of that, many of us forget that our beloved industry is an *industry* and not a free-floating art movement. As a result, common sense is thrown out of the window in favor of whatever sounds right to us. Double standards run wild, too: *Ridge Racer* hasn't shown up since 2006, but no one complains when a new *Super Mario* game comes eight years after the last, and is markedly different in style and gameplay (or on the flipside, remarkably similar, in *Galaxy 2*'s case). Why do we care so much about some games as opposed to others, assuming that they're all of an equal high quality? Is it about feeling threatened; that Franchise X never got its due, so why would its creators want to change it so soon?



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